

Islamist violence and regime stability in Saudi Arabia

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On a quiet evening in May 2003, suicide car bombs ripped through several residential compounds for westerners in the Saudi capital Riyadh, killing dozens of people and wounding scores. It was the opening shot of a campaign of violence waged by a network of militants called 'Al-Qaeda on the Arabian Peninsula' (QAP), which by the end of 2007 had left around 300 people dead.¹ Never before in its modern history had Saudi Arabia experienced violence of this scale and duration. Apart from isolated incidents, such as the 1979 Mecca mosque siege, the 1995 Riyadh bombing and the 1996 Khobar bombing, the Kingdom had largely been spared the Islamist violence which had ravaged Egypt and Algeria in previous decades.² What, then, caused the sudden outbreak of violence? Even more interestingly: why did it happen in 2003 and not before? The near-absence of violence before 2003 is, after all, quite paradoxical in the light of the fact that Saudi militants were so active abroad in the 1990s, either as guerrilla fighters in Afghanistan, Bosnia and Chechnya, or as members of Osama bin Laden's Al-Qaeda organization.³ These questions highlight a deeper problem, namely that we do not really understand what determines the comings and goings of Islamist violence in Saudi Arabia. This is hardly a purely academic issue—it directly concerns our ability to assess the stability of the world's leading oil producer and a pillar of US strategy in the Middle East.

¹ For more on the QAP campaign, see Bruce Riedel and Bilal Y. Saab, 'Al Qaeda's third front: Saudi Arabia', *Washington Quarterly* 31: 2, 2008, pp. 33–46; Madawi al-Rasheed, *Contesting the Saudi state: Islamic voices from a new generation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 134–210; Thomas Hegghammer, 'Terrorist recruitment and radicalisation in Saudi Arabia', *Middle East Policy* 13: 4, 2006, pp. 39–60; Roel Meijer, 'The "cycle of contention" and the limits of terrorism in Saudi Arabia', in Paul Aarts and Gerd Nonneman, eds, *Saudi Arabia in the balance* (London: Hurst, 2005); Joshua Teitelbaum, 'Terrorist challenges to Saudi Arabian internal security', *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 9: 3, 2005, pp. 1–11; Nawaf Obaid and Anthony Cordesman, *Al-Qaeda in Saudi Arabia: asymmetric threats and Islamic extremists* (Washington DC: Center for Strategic Studies and International Studies, 2005).

² On the Mecca incident, see Yaroslav Trofimov, *The siege of Mecca* (New York: Doubleday, 2007). On the 1995 and 1996 bombings, see Joshua Teitelbaum, *Holier than thou: Saudi Arabia's Islamic opposition* (Washington DC: Washington Institute for Near East Studies, 2000). For a detailed chronology of political violence in the Kingdom, see J. E. Peterson, 'Saudi Arabia: internal security incidents since 1979', Arabian Peninsula background note 3 (2005), available at www.jepeterson.net.

³ On the strong Saudi presence in Afghanistan and Bosnia, see Mark Huband, *Warriors of the Prophet: the struggle for Islam* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1999), pp. 2–3; Evan F. Kohlmann, *Al-Qaeda's jihad in Europe: the Afghan–Bosnian network* (London: Berg, 2004), p. 28 and *passim*. Khalid Sheikh Mohammed allegedly told interrogators that in any given Al-Qaeda camp in early 2001, about 70% of the recruits would be Saudi: see *The 9/11 Commission Report* (New York: Norton, 2004), p. 232.

In the existing literature we find three main explanatory paradigms for Islamist violence in Saudi Arabia, each of which has important limitations. First are the ideology-based explanations, which see the violence as a product of the religiosity of Saudi society or the 'inherent extremism' of the Wahhabi religious tradition. This approach cannot explain variations in violence over time or the absence of a sizeable militant Islamist community in the Kingdom before the late 1980s. These explanations also overlook the possibility that religious conservatism may be a force for order more often than for rebellion.⁴

Second is the structural-functionalist approach, which explains violence as the result of structural strain, be it of a political (e.g. regime oppression), economic (e.g. unemployment) or social (e.g. westernization) kind. However, these factors rarely explain the timing of and variation in violent behaviour in the Kingdom. It is difficult to link the violence in 1979, 1995 or 2003 with particular economic conjunctions, regime crackdowns or social crises. As social movement theorists have pointed out, small-scale political violence is rarely the linear expression of structural strain, because violent contestation requires actors who can mobilize followers and translate intentions into action.

A third main approach has consisted of analysing Saudi Islamism as a social movement, whose ebbs and flows can be explained by the agency of, and resources available to, Islamist entrepreneurs. The best of these analyses was offered by Roel Meijer, who argued that the QAP campaign represented the violent phase in a 'cycle of contention' of the Saudi Islamist movement, a phase brought about by state repression of the non-violent Islamist opposition (the Sahwa) of the early 1990s.⁵ Meijer's work brought important new insights into the QAP, but his assumption that there existed a coherent Saudi Islamist movement, the repression of which led to violence after an eight-year lull, is somewhat problematic. He did not adequately explain how the QAP related to the Sahwa or why it emerged at this particular time. In fact, it is not at all clear that the QAP and the Sahwa were part of the same social movement. Their aims, means and social base were different, and no former Sahwists fought in the QAP.

In this article I posit that Saudi Islamism is a heterogeneous phenomenon which needs to be broken down into smaller components, each to be analysed separately. One recent study identified three distinct Islamist currents in the Kingdom: *rejectionism* (or extreme pietism), represented by Juhayman al-Utaybi and the 1979 Mecca incident; *reformism*, which produced the so-called Sahwa movement of the early 1990s; and *jihadism*, associated with the Saudi fighters in foreign conflict zones.⁶ In the following, I will apply the social movement theory perspective specifically to the Saudi jihadist movement. I will trace the evolution of Saudi

⁴ On the stabilizing force of religious networks, see e.g. Guilain Denoeux, *Urban unrest in the Middle East: a comparative study of informal networks in Egypt, Iran and Lebanon* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993).

⁵ Meijer, 'The "cycle of contention"'.

⁶ See Stéphane Lacroix and Thomas Hegghammer, *Saudi Arabia background: who are the Islamists?* (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2004); Thomas Hegghammer and Stéphane Lacroix, 'Rejectionist Islamism in Saudi Arabia: the story of Juhayman al-Utaybi revisited', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 39: 1, 2007, pp. 103–22.

jihadism since the 1980s and try to explain why it ‘came home’ in 2003 and not before. The findings derive from analysis of a large collection of jihadist texts and videos, as well as extensive fieldwork conducted in Saudi Arabia between 2004 and 2007. After outlining the origin and characteristics of the Saudi jihadist movement, I will look at Al-Qaeda’s foothold in, and strategy towards, Saudi Arabia between 1996 and 2001. Finally I will explain why the QAP campaign was launched and why it eventually failed.

The central argument is that Saudi Arabia experienced relatively low levels of Sunni Islamist violence in the 1980s and 1990s because, unlike the Arab republics, Saudi Arabia has never been home to a strong socio-revolutionary Islamist community. Saudi jihadism has been driven primarily not by regime discontent but by extreme pan-Islamism, and has thus been geared towards fighting non-Muslims. I further argue that the violence in 2003 was the result not of structural political or economic strain inside the Kingdom, but rather of a momentary conjunction between high operational capability on the part of the local Al-Qaeda network, boosted in numbers and skills by post-2001 returnees from Afghanistan, and a weak Saudi security apparatus. That gap in capability has now closed, and the QAP campaign has petered out. The Saudi regime is currently stronger—but also less inclined to political reform—than it has been for several years.

The Saudi jihadist movement

Saudi jihadism is a relatively new political phenomenon, linked to the rise of extreme pan-Islamism in Saudi Arabia in the 1980s. Pan-Islamism as an ideology dates back to the late nineteenth century, and is based on the idea that all Muslims constitute one people or nation (*umma*) and should unite to face the challenges of the modern world.⁷ From the late 1970s onwards, a more alarmist and xenophobic form of pan-Islamism emerged in the Muslim world, based on the view that the *umma* is being systematically oppressed by outside forces, and that all Muslims have a responsibility to help other Muslims in need.⁸ This new pan-Islamism represented a macro-nationalism which transcended the nation-states in the Muslim world and shared many of the characteristics of nationalist movements, notably a tendency towards self-victimization and a strong emphasis on the defence of territory.⁹ A Saudi–Yemeni jihadist provided a telling description, based on his own experience, of the rising importance of pan-Islamism in the 1980s and 1990s:

the ideology of the Muslim nation [*umma*] began to evolve in our minds. We realized we were a nation [*umma*] that had a distinguished place among nations. Otherwise, what would make me leave Saudi Arabia—and I am of Yemeni origin—to go and fight in Bosnia? The issue of nationalism [*qawmiyya*] was put out of our minds, and we acquired a wider view than that, namely the issue of the Muslim nation.¹⁰

⁷ See Jacob M. Landau, *The politics of pan-Islam: ideology and organization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

⁸ See William Ochsenwald, ‘Saudi Arabia and the Islamic revival’, *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 13: 3; 1981, pp. 271–86; and Reinhard Schulze, *Islamischer Internationalismus im 20. Jahrhundert* (London: Brill, 1990).

⁹ See Louis L. Snyder, *Macro-nationalisms: a history of the pan movements* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1984).

¹⁰ ‘Interview with Abu Jandal—part 1’, *Al-Quds al-Arabi*, 20 March 2005.

Pan-Islamism had long constituted an important feature of Saudi politics, not least with King Faisal's adoption of a pan-Islamic foreign policy doctrine as a counterweight to Nasser's pan-Arabism in the 1960s.¹¹ However, from the mid-1980s onwards alarmist pan-Islamism came to play a particularly important role in Saudi political culture, for a number of historically specific reasons. One was that the social movement of pan-Islamic activists gained momentum with the jihad in Afghanistan and the entrepreneurship of international Islamic organizations such as the Muslim World League. Moreover, the decline in oil prices in the mid-1980s produced a degree of political dissent in the Kingdom, one manifestation of which was the emboldening of the reformist Islamist movement known as the Sahwa (the Awakening).¹² To deflect domestic political criticism, the Saudi government succumbed to the temptation to promote populist pan-Islamism at home by praising the Afghan jihad in official media and providing support to Saudis who wanted to fight in Afghanistan.¹³ Essentially, the Saudi state used pan-Islamism as opium for the Saudi people; and, briefly, it worked.

The problems began in the early 1990s, after the first Gulf War forced King Fahd to allow a large-scale deployment of US troops on Saudi soil. This happened at a time when the Sahwa movement had grown particularly strong, and the latter soon began confronting the regime by adopting pan-Islamist rhetoric, thus contesting the government's monopoly on pan-Islamism as a source of political legitimacy. Sahwist clerics such as Salman al-Awda and Safar al-Hawali accused the regime of hypocrisy, saying it could not claim to be protecting the Muslim nation while it allowed American soldiers to roam the land of the Prophet Mohammad. At this time, the pan-Islamist credentials of the Saudi state were also challenged internationally by countries like Sudan and Iran, which stepped up their attempts to appear as the champions of the oppressed *umma*.¹⁴

These challenges produced a double process of oneupmanship which was very obvious during the Bosnian war, when the Saudi state tried both to compensate for its problems at home and to outdo its competitors abroad by providing a level of financial and military assistance to the Bosnian Muslims that was completely out of proportion with the size of the conflict or the previous links between the Kingdom and Muslims in the Balkans. To put things in perspective, Saudi Arabia's financial contribution to the Bosnians between 1992 and 1997 was almost twice as large as the total amount given to the Palestinians in the preceding 15 years.¹⁵

¹¹ See Abdullah M. Sindi, 'King Faisal and pan-Islamism', in Willard Beling, ed., *King Faisal and the modernisation of Saudi Arabia* (London: Croom Helm, 1980); Alexei Vassiliev, *The history of Saudi Arabia* (London: Saqi, 2000), pp. 385–7.

¹² For more on the Sahwa, see Stéphane Lacroix, 'Les champs de la discorde: une sociologie politique de l'islamisme en Arabie Saoudite, 1954–2005', PhD diss., Sciences-Po, Paris, 2007; Mamoun Fandy, *Saudi Arabia and the politics of dissent* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001).

¹³ See e.g. *The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's economic and social development aid to the Islamic world* (Riyadh: Ministry of Finance and National Economy, 1991); Basil Muhammad, *Al-ansar al-'arab fi afghanistan* [The Arab supporters in Afghanistan], 2nd edn (Riyadh: Lajnat al-Birr al-Islamiyya, 1991); Steve Coll, *Ghost wars: the secret history of the CIA, Afghanistan and bin Laden, from the Soviet invasion to September 10, 2001* (New York: Penguin, 2004).

¹⁴ Michael Dobbs, 'Saudis funded weapons for Bosnia, official says', *Washington Post*, 2 Feb. 1996.

¹⁵ Between 1993 and 1998, the Saudi High Committee for Fundraising to the Muslims of Bosnia-Herzegovina collected SR1,400 million to support the Bosnian cause (Ziyad Salih al-Hadhilul and Muhammad Abdallah al-Humaydhi, *Al-qissa al-kamila li'l-dawr al-sa'udi fi al-busna wa'l-harsak* [The full story of the Saudi role in

As a former jihadist later noted, 'all of Saudi Arabia, starting with the government, the religious scholars, and the ordinary people, was on the side of driving the youths toward jihad in Bosnia-Herzegovina'.¹⁶ As a result of these political processes, alarmist pan-Islamism became entrenched as a crucial part of Saudi political culture. Practically all forms of support for oppressed Muslims abroad, including private military participation, became socially acceptable among large parts of the population. The distinction between humanitarian aid and military support became blurred, and support for resistance struggles abroad came to be viewed as charity and altruism.¹⁷

For the same reasons, the political ideology of the Saudi jihadist movement has been more pan-Islamist than socio-revolutionary. There is a crucial analytical distinction to be made between socio-revolutionary activism, which focuses on regime change, and pan-Islamism, which focuses on the defence of the *umma* (the Muslim nation).¹⁸ The first is inward-oriented and rationalized as a response to internal oppression and corruption.¹⁹ The latter is outward-oriented and rationalized as a reaction to external aggression and occupation.²⁰ The 'extroversion' of Saudi jihadism is reflected in the record of Sunni Islamist violence in the Kingdom, which shows that most attacks in recent decades have been directed against western targets, supplemented by a few instances of attacks against symbols or perpetrators of moral corruption. What is conspicuously lacking in modern Saudi history is Islamist violence directed against the civilian government. Unlike many of the Arab republics, Saudi Arabia has experienced very little violence directed against the regime. The Kingdom has witnessed moderate regime-critical Islamism; but, unlike the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt or the Front Islamique du Salut (FIS) in Algeria, the Sahwa never produced a significant violent offshoot.

Even the QAP campaign launched in 2003 was fuelled not primarily by discontent with the regime, but rather by extreme anti-Americanism. In both its acts and its discourse, the QAP exhibited a pan-Islamist agenda. Most premeditated attacks struck on western targets, and there was never a single successful attack on a cabinet member, royal palace or civilian government building outside the security apparatus. Admittedly there were attacks on security forces and the Interior Ministry, but only relatively late in the campaign when vengeance had become a factor. In its publications, the QAP consistently justified its violence as a defensive reaction to US aggression in the Muslim world.²¹ The top Al-Qaeda

Bosnia-Herzegovina] (Riyadh: Al-Homaidhi Printing Press, 1998), p. 185). By contrast, the corresponding committee for Palestine collected only SR 850 million between 1978 and 1991: see *The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's economic and social development aid*.

¹⁶ Interview with Abu Jandal—part 1.

¹⁷ See Jonathan Benthall and Jérôme Bellion-Jourdan, *The charitable crescent: politics of aid in the Muslim world* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2003).

¹⁸ See e.g. Peter Waldmann, 'Ethnic and sociorevolutionary terrorism: a comparison of structures', in Donatella della Porta, ed., *Social movements and violence: participation in underground organizations* (Greenwich, CT: JAI, 1992).

¹⁹ See e.g. Johannes Jansen, *The neglected duty* (New York: Macmillan, 1986).

²⁰ See e.g. the statements by Osama bin Laden in Bruce Lawrence, ed., *Messages to the world: the statements of Osama Bin Laden* (London: Verso, 2005).

²¹ For example, the QAP's manifesto, a book entitled *This is how we view the jihad and how we want it*, contains an explicit ranking of enemies, in which the 'Jews and the Christians' figure at the top, followed by the

leadership may have wanted regime change, but it is clear from the QAP literature, in particular the many interviews with and biographies of militants published in the magazine *Sawt al-Jihad* (Voice of Jihad), that most mid- and low-level operatives saw themselves as fighting a pan-Islamist struggle. Saudi jihadism thus seems to have a particularly strong pan-Islamist orientation.

In the mid-1990s, however, the Saudi jihadist movement split into two main branches: the 'classical jihadist' current and the more radical and marginal 'global jihadist' current. The difference between the two was, simply put, that the classical jihadists preferred to wage semi-conventional warfare in confined theatres of war, while the global jihadists were prepared to use all means in all locations. It was this disagreement which separated Ibn Khattab, the Saudi commander of the Arabs in Chechnya, from Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan. Saudi supporters of Khattab always put great emphasis on the fact that he operated only in Chechnya and fought soldiers in uniform, while bin Laden engaged in international terrorism and killed civilians.²² An even more important point for the present analysis is that the two camps disagreed on the legitimacy of fighting inside Saudi Arabia. Classical jihadists were happy to engage in guerrilla warfare in areas sanctioned by senior Saudi clerics as theatres of jihad, but they saw violence inside the Kingdom as illegitimate and undesirable. Global jihadists like bin Laden, on the other hand, wanted to expel the Americans from the Kingdom by force, even if this meant confronting Saudi security forces in the process. This same disagreement would reappear during the QAP campaign in the form of a debate over whether to fight in Saudi Arabia or in Iraq. Given its somewhat less radical agenda, classical jihadism has always enjoyed more legitimacy and support in the Kingdom than bin Laden's global jihad. In what follows, however, I shall focus on the global jihadist current, because it was from here that the QAP would emerge.

The evolution of the global jihadist movement since the mid-1990s is by now well documented.²³ In August 1996 bin Laden declared war on the United States and called for a guerrilla campaign to oust US forces from Saudi Arabia. The statement coincided with bin Laden's move to Afghanistan and the beginning of the 'golden age' of Al-Qaeda. Over the next five years Al-Qaeda would develop a significant operational capability which enabled it to launch large-scale operations across the globe. This prompts two important questions, namely: how strong a foothold did bin Laden have in the Kingdom, and why were there no major Al-Qaeda attacks there until 2003?

'infidel leaders' i.e. the Arab regimes. It further states: 'The [Jews and Christians from the West] constitute the Crusader-Jewish alliance, which its leader America calls "the new world order". This is the enemy against whom we must act at this stage.' In another statement released shortly after the 12 May 2003 attack, Yusuf al-Uyayri declared that 'we have not raised the banner of jihad to kill believers ... our one and only crime is to have waged jihad against the Crusaders': *Ghazwat al-hadi 'ashar min rabi' al-awwal: 'amaliyyat sharq al-riyadh wa-harbuna ma' amrika wa 'umala'iha* [The 12 May raid: the east Riyadh operation and our war with America and its agents], 2003, p. 43, www.qa3edoon.com, accessed 26 June 2008.

²² Interview with Faris bin Huzzam, Dubai, Nov. 2005; interview with Nasir al-Barrak, Dammam, Dec. 2005. For more on Khattab and the Arabs in Chechnya, see Domitilla Sagromoso, 'Violence and conflict in the Russian North Caucasus', *International Affairs* 83: 4, July 2007, pp. 681-705.

²³ See e.g. Anon., *Through our enemies' eyes* (Washington: Brassey's, 2002); Lawrence Wright, *The looming tower: Al Qaeda and the road to 9/11* (New York: Knopf, 2006); Peter Bergen, *The Osama bin Laden I know* (New York: Free Press, 2006).

Al-Qaeda and Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia is widely considered a heartland of Al-Qaeda support, and for good reason: the Kingdom has long been an important provider of money, recruits and ideology to bin Laden's global jihadist enterprise. However, recent historical evidence suggests that the picture is slightly more complex.

First of all, Al-Qaeda's operational infrastructure in the Kingdom seems to have been weaker in the 1990s than is often assumed. There is substantial evidence that until 1999 the Saudi dissident was struggling hard to establish a support base in the Kingdom. There is virtually no record—in open sources at least—of an organized Al-Qaeda presence in Saudi Arabia in the mid-1990s (by all accounts, the 1995 Riyadh bombers represented a local, self-started cell). People who visited bin Laden in Jalalabad in early 1997 noted that most of his companions were north African, and that he was very keen, if not desperate, to recruit more Saudis and Yemenis.²⁴ His attempts to mount operations in Saudi Arabia in 1997 and 1998 failed miserably (see below). A key reason for his recruitment problems was the controversial nature of his political project, namely all-out war against the United States. Classical jihadism may have enjoyed strong support in Saudi Arabia—as evidenced by the strong Saudi presence in Bosnia and Chechnya—but bin Laden's global jihad seemed utopian and too drastic to most Saudi Islamists. Another reason was that bin Laden had lost touch with his native country during his long exile. He had left the Kingdom for good in 1992, and in Sudan there were few Saudis in his entourage. It did not help that many of his sympathizers inside the Kingdom were imprisoned after the Riyadh and Khobar bombings in 1995 and 1996.

Second, Al-Qaeda's fortunes in Saudi Arabia changed over time; a major shift occurred around 1999, when a number of factors coincided to cause an exponential increase in the number of recruits to bin Laden's camps.²⁵ New conflicts involving 'the Muslim nation'—notably the second Chechen war (1999), the Kosovo crisis (1999) and the second Palestinian *intifada* (2000)—caused a resurgence of pan-Islamism in the Kingdom. Another factor was the introduction of the internet into Saudi Arabia in early 1999, which facilitated the spread of jihadist propaganda. Moreover, it was in 1999 that Al-Qaeda's training infrastructure in Afghanistan was streamlined to enable it to receive and educate large numbers of recruits. After the United States retaliated for the East Africa embassy bombings with missile strikes at Al-Qaeda facilities in Afghanistan in August 1998, Al-Qaeda's relations with the Taliban improved considerably. Partly as a result, in May 1999 bin Laden was allowed to establish a set of new camps in Qandahar—including the notorious al-Faruq and Airport camps—which greatly improved the capacity of Al-Qaeda's educational system.²⁶

However, the most important reason for the recruitment spike between 1999 and 2001 was the emergence of a unique social movement entrepreneur loyal to bin

²⁴ 'Interview with Abu Jandal—part 4', *Al-Quds al-Arabi*, 26 March 2006. Abu Jandal's story is corroborated by Abd al-Rahim al-Nashiri's testimony: see *The 9/11 Commission Report*, p. 152.

²⁵ Hegghammer, 'Terrorist recruitment and radicalisation in Saudi Arabia'.

²⁶ Alan Cullison and Andrew Higgins, 'A once-stormy terror alliance was solidified by cruise missiles', *Wall Street Journal*, 2 Aug. 2002.

Laden. Yusuf al-Uyayri was a veteran jihadist who had known bin Laden since the early 1990s.²⁷ He had been arrested after the 1996 Khobar bombing, but was released from Dammam prison in mid-1998, after which he established himself as a prominent supporter of the Arabs in Chechnya. He gradually turned from classical to global jihadism and worked fully in the service of bin Laden after a trip to Afghanistan in mid-2000.²⁸ Al-Uyayri was an extremely valuable resource for Al-Qaeda. He was charismatic, intelligent and, very importantly, a Najdi. Al-Uyayri's family was from the city of Burayda in central Saudi Arabia (the Najd), which gave him access to the influential religious scholars and rich donors of the Qasim province. This is significant, because until 1999 bin Laden's Saudi network was centred in the western region of Hijaz, and accordingly his principal representatives had been Hijazis of Yemeni origin, such as Abd al-Rahim al-Nashiri or Tawfiq bin Attash, who would have had limited access to the aristocratic religious networks in central Saudi Arabia. Al-Uyayri, on the other hand, was not only a Qasimi, he was also the brother-in-law of Sulayman al-Ulwan, an influential radical sheikh in Burayda.²⁹ Moreover, al-Uyayri was a prolific writer and internet entrepreneur who contributed significantly to Al-Qaeda's propaganda efforts between 2000 and 2003.³⁰

The third point to note about Al-Qaeda and Saudi Arabia relates to the group's intentions. After a series of disastrous operational failures in the Kingdom in 1997 and 1998 which threatened to eradicate the already fragile network in the country, bin Laden took a strategic decision in 1998 to postpone indefinitely the jihad on the Arabian Peninsula.³¹ The turning point seems to have been the so-called 'missile plot', in which Al-Qaeda operatives planned to shell the US consulate in Jidda with antitank missiles.³² The plot, which was directed by Abd al-Rahim al-Nashiri, fell apart when Saudi police seized the missile shipment near the Yemeni border in January 1998. The seizure was followed by a vast crackdown on the jihadist community which sent some 900 people to prison.³³ This setback made bin Laden realize that premature operations were counterproductive and that he needed time to build an organization in the Kingdom. In the meantime, he would turn to international operations.

²⁷ See Muhammad al-Salim, 'Yusuf al-'uyayri: shumukh fi zaman al-hawan' [Yusuf al-Uyayri: standing tall in an age of lowliness], *Sawt al-Jihad*, 1, 2003, pp. 15–18.

²⁸ Yusuf al-Uyayri, 'Al-mizan li-harakat taliban' [The Taleban in the balance], www.tawhed.ws, Nov.–Dec. 2001, p. 21, accessed 3 Aug. 2006.

²⁹ Interview with Saud al-Sarhan, Riyadh, Nov. 2005; interview with Sulayman al-Duwaysh, Riyadh, Jan. 2007.

³⁰ Roel Meijer, 'Yusuf al-Uyayri and the making of a revolutionary Salafi praxis', *Die Welt des Islams* 47: 3–4, 2007, pp. 422–59.

³¹ No explicit evidence of such a decision exists in open sources, but the prominent jihadist ideologue Abu Bakr Naji wrote in 2003 that 'the [Al-Qaeda] High Command used to consider the youth of the Arabian Peninsula as their striking force, but it did not select the Peninsula for change due to factors mentioned in previous studies': Abu Bakr Naji, *Idarat al-tawahhush* [The management of savagery], www.tawhed.ws, 2004, p. 29, accessed 3 May 2008. Moreover, in his autobiography, CIA director George Tenet wrote that bin Laden 'prior to 9/11 had imposed a ban on attacks in Saudi Arabia': George Tenet, *At the center of the storm: my years at the CIA* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), p. 248.

³² See *The 9/11 Commission Report*, p. 152; Pervez Musharraf, *In the line of fire: a memoir* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2006), p. 213.

³³ '820 mujahideen imprisoned in Saudi Arabia, March 1998', www.azzam.com, 1998, accessed 23 Feb. 2002; interview with Faris bin Huzzam, Dubai, Nov. 2005.

The absence of major Al-Qaeda operations in the Kingdom before 2003 can thus be explained by organizational factors: before 1998 bin Laden lacked the capability to mount operations, while between 1999 and 2001 he lacked the intention. There is, in other words, no need to resort to the dubious conspiracy theory, espoused by some scholars, that the Saudi regime had literally paid off bin Laden in exchange for security.³⁴ Bin Laden's 1998 decision was wise, because Saudi Arabia would go on to become a very important support base for Al-Qaeda in terms of money, recruits and clerical opinions. Why, then, would the organization compromise all this by launching a terrorist campaign in the Kingdom in 2003?

The QAP campaign

The key to understanding the outbreak of the QAP campaign is the fundamental transformation of Al-Qaeda's strategic environment after the fall of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan in late 2001. From Al-Qaeda's perspective, the loss of a safe haven in Afghanistan and the launch of the 'global war on terror' altered the cost-benefit analysis of preserving Saudi Arabia as a support base. In the post-9/11 environment Saudi Arabia's value as a source of recruits and money was reduced, because recruits had nowhere to train and international wire transfers were scrutinized more closely than before. Conversely, the Kingdom's relative value as a theatre of operations had increased, because in 2002 jihadists were pursued less vigorously in Saudi Arabia than in most other countries in the region, with the possible exception of Yemen.

Thus in early 2002, long before the prospect of a US invasion of Iraq, Al-Qaeda decided to return to its original cause of jihad against the 'crusaders' on the Arabian Peninsula. We know from the jihadist literature that in or around January 2002 bin Laden formally ordered Saudi fighters in Afghanistan to return to the Kingdom and start preparing for a campaign.³⁵ In the first five months of 2002 between 300 and 1,000 Saudi Al-Qaeda recruits made their way home via third countries such as Pakistan, Iran, Syria and the UAE. Many of them would later be found in the QAP's ranks.

In May 2002 US intelligence intercepted messages from the Al-Qaeda leadership instructing operatives in the Kingdom to prepare for operations.³⁶ One of the recipients was probably Abd al-Rahim al-Nashiri, Al-Qaeda's most senior operative on the peninsula. Another was Yusuf al-Uyayri, who oversaw a broad and systematic organization-building effort throughout 2002 and early 2003. Al-Uyayri and his lieutenants collected weapons, rented safe houses, established training camps and recruited members from the Afghan Arab community, a process amply documented in the QAP's own publications and videos.

³⁴ See e.g. Simon Henderson and Matthew Levitt, 'US-Saudi counterterrorism cooperation in the wake of the Riyadh bombing', *Policy Watch*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 23 May 2003; Gerald Posner, *Why America slept: the failure to prevent 9/11* (New York: Ballantine, 2003), p. 45.

³⁵ For example, one biography states that 'the Shaykh [Osama bin Laden] asked Khalid Shaykh [Mohammad] to prepare for the departure of Hazbar and his brothers to strike the Americans' rear bases on the Arabian Peninsula': Fawwaz al-Nashmi, 'Fahd bin samran al-sa'idi', *Sawt al-Jihad*, 15, 2004, pp. 45-6

³⁶ Ron Suskind, *The one percent doctrine* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006), pp. 146-7.

The tactical decision to launch the May 2003 bombings seems to have come from the top Al-Qaeda leadership in March or April 2003.³⁷ The reason for this specific timing remains unclear. It may be that Al-Qaeda wanted to capitalize on the anti-US sentiment generated by the war in Iraq. The leadership may also have been concerned that the al-Uyayri network would be compromised by the arrest in late February 2003 of the key Al-Qaeda leader Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, or by the chance discovery by Saudi police on 18 March of an Al-Qaeda safe house in Riyadh. A third possibility is that they wanted the attack to coincide with the visit of Donald Rumsfeld and Colin Powell to Saudi Arabia in May, which had been announced in late April. Nor can one exclude the possibility that the central leadership sought to coordinate the Riyadh attack with the Casablanca bombings which took place on 17 May 2003. Finally, bin Laden and his deputy Ayman al-Zawahiri may simply have been impatient. Saudi and western security sources have suggested there was a fierce debate in the spring of 2003 between the Afghanistan-based leadership, who wanted immediate action, and Yusuf al-Uyayri, who wanted more preparation time.³⁸

The issue of the specific timing is less crucial than the question of how the 2002 mobilization was possible. In May 2003 there were as many as 300 men in the QAP's extended network.³⁹ Police later discovered weapon stockpiles large enough to equip several thousand men, as well as safe houses in practically every major city of the country.⁴⁰ How had al-Uyayri established such a formidable infrastructure in an authoritarian country at peace—unnoticed?

Four factors explain this puzzle: the first two relate to the political opportunity structure, the third concerns the availability of resources, and the fourth relates to the quality of entrepreneurship. First was the systemic weakness of the Saudi security apparatus. Part of the problem was capability: the Saudis had limited experience in antiterrorism operations and advanced intelligence analysis. Another part of the problem was attitude: key elements of the security establishment simply refused to acknowledge the seriousness of the threat from the jihadist community. This is clear from statements by the Saudi interior minister in 2001 and early 2002, and from the fact that hardly any of the many small attacks on westerners between 2000 and 2003 were properly investigated.⁴¹ However, the biggest problem was the non-confrontational culture of policing. Saudi Arabia did not have the culture

³⁷ Anthony H. Cordesman and Nawaf E. Obaid, *National security in Saudi Arabia: threats, responses, and challenges* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2005), p. 113.

³⁸ Cordesman and Obaid, *National security in Saudi Arabia*, p. 113; Craig Whitlock, 'Al Qaeda shifts its strategy in Saudi Arabia', *Washington Post*, 19 Dec. 2004; author's interviews with western security officials.

³⁹ This is the author's assessment, based on an analysis of the QAP's own publications and interviews with Saudi security officials in Riyadh.

⁴⁰ Interviews with western diplomats in Riyadh, Nov. 2005.

⁴¹ In the three years prior to the QAP campaign there were several small-scale attacks (sniper attacks, letter bombs, etc.) on individual westerners in the Kingdom. Six people were killed and over ten people wounded in this violence, which received limited attention in the West. None of the perpetrators were ever found or brought to justice. On the contrary, Saudi police blamed some of the attacks on alleged western alcohol traders and detained a number of foreign nationals in what was considered by most non-Saudis to be a gross miscarriage of justice. There is considerable circumstantial evidence to suggest that most of the attacks were perpetrated by unidentified Islamists: see Thomas Hegghammer, 'Violent Islamism in Saudi Arabia, 1979–2006: the power and perils of pan-Islamic nationalism', PhD diss., Sciences-Po, Paris, 2007, pp. 128–35.

of confrontational and intrusive policing needed for effective counterterrorism work. This is because, contrary to popular perception in the West, Saudi Arabia has always been less of a police state than many of the Arab republics. A long history of civilian government has prevented the militarization of the state while strict social conservatism has reduced the need for criminal policing. The combination of oil wealth and traditional social structures has created a consensual political culture in which political dissent has been handled with cooptation more often than with coercion. In normal circumstances, this soft approach to policing can be effective in containing political opposition without producing violent counterreactions. For the returning Al-Qaeda operatives, on the other hand, Saudi soft policing represented a formidable political opportunity.

The second factor was the polarization of the Saudi Islamist field in 2002 and the escalation of Islamist rhetoric by a group of radical sheikhs led by Nasir al-Fahd and Ali al-Khudayr. Eager to assert themselves on the Saudi Islamist scene, these scholars articulated an extremely anti-western discourse and launched fierce attacks on the old Sahwists such as Salman al-Awda and Safar al-Hawali on the grounds of the latter's alleged openness to post 9/11-dialogue with the West and a number of other issues.⁴² At the same time, international political developments, such as the opening of the Guantánamo Bay facility in January 2002, the April 2002 battle of Jenin and the late 2002 build-up to the Iraq War, produced powerful new symbols of Muslim suffering which helped the global jihadist ideologues. The rhetorical escalation and growing popularity of the jihadist sheikhs created a very agitated atmosphere, as well as 'intelligence noise' which facilitated the QAP's clandestine activities.

The third factor was the rapid influx in early 2002 of large numbers of well-trained and highly motivated militants. The returnees were numerous enough and radicalized enough to provide the critical mass needed for effective collective action. Moreover, there was a reservoir of veterans from previous jihad zones who were linked by shared experiences and convictions, and often also social bonds. These networks, characterized by a high level of internal loyalty and trust, were ideal for clandestine recruitment. Their long-term weakness, however, was that they were finite, and the QAP later proved unable to recruit outside them.

The fourth explanation for the QAP's remarkable mobilization was Al-Qaeda's clever two-track strategy for Saudi Arabia. Bin Laden had in fact succeeded in implementing two parallel networks in the Kingdom in 2002, one of which drew attention away from the other.⁴³ The first one was headed by Abd al-Rahim was operational from the start. It planned several attacks in late 2002 until its activity was halted by the arrest of al-Nashiri in November.⁴⁴ The other network was that of Yusuf al-Uyayri, which focused on long-term organization-building. While

⁴² Lacroix and Hegghammer, *Saudi Arabia background: who are the Islamists?*.

⁴³ Interview with Saudi security source, Riyadh, Jan. 2007. This hypothesis is confirmed by the fact that neither Abd al-Rahim al-Nashiri nor any of his close associates such as Tawfiq bin Attash feature prominently in the QAP literature, and by the fact that that al-Nashiri's arrest in November 2002 did not seem to affect the al-Uyayri network.

⁴⁴ See the biography of al-Nashiri in 'Biographies of high value terrorist detainees transferred to the US naval base at Guantanamo Bay', press release, Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 6 Sept. 2006.

the attention of US and Saudi intelligence was focused on al-Nashiri, al-Uyayri and his friends were able quietly to build up their organization. So discreet was al-Uyayri that neither the CIA nor Saudi intelligence knew his real identity until about April 2003. Saudi police allegedly arrested and released him in March 2003 without realizing who he was.⁴⁵

The QAP campaign, launched on 12 May 2003, constituted an unprecedented challenge to the Saudi government. While the regime's existence was never under threat, the seemingly endless series of shootouts and attacks in 2003 and 2004 severely undermined outside confidence in the state's ability to protect western interests in the Kingdom.⁴⁶ A series of foiled plots to attack oil targets between 2005 and 2007 also raised doubts about the country's reliability as an oil supplier.⁴⁷ Until late 2004 the militants ran a highly sophisticated internet-based media campaign which projected the image of an organization undamaged and unhindered by the counterterrorism efforts.⁴⁸ Domestically, the violence caused something of a political earthquake by Saudi standards, triggering a sense of societal crisis and a process of collective soul-searching. Terrorism and religious extremism became household terms and topics of conversation in the Kingdom.

The overall atmosphere was at its most tense in June 2004, following a wave of small but spectacular incidents which led many to believe that the situation was spinning out of control.⁴⁹ Yet none of the many prophecies of doom was borne out. On the contrary, and to the surprise of many, the violence subsided in the latter half of 2004. Although shootouts persisted and operations were attempted, the organization was gradually dismantled. As of mid-2008, militants have proved unable to carry out a successful large-scale attack since December 2004. Practically all of the QAP's core members have been killed or arrested, and the organization has a much smaller presence on the internet than before. There are still scattered cells and intermittent signs of activity, but a major resurgence of a nationwide organization seems unlikely in the foreseeable future.⁵⁰

There were three fundamental reasons for the failure of the QAP campaign. First was the lack of popular support. The returnees from Afghanistan had been radicalized and socialized in such a way that they represented an alien element on the local Islamist scene, and they severely misjudged the level of popular support for their cause. The QAP violence immediately met with widespread condemnation,

⁴⁵ Suskind, *The one percent doctrine*, pp. 217–18.

⁴⁶ Ewan MacAskill and Brian Whitaker, 'Shaken expatriates rethink Saudi future', *Guardian*, 2 June 2004.

⁴⁷ Michael Scheuer, Stephen Ulph and John C. K. Daly, *Saudi Arabian oil facilities: the Achilles heel of the western economy* (Washington DC: Jamestown Foundation, 2006).

⁴⁸ For more than a year the QAP published two bimonthly magazines, each 40–50 pages long, entitled *Sawt al-Jihad* [The voice of jihad] and *Mu'askar al-Battar* [Camp of the sabre]. They also produced several feature-length videos documenting their main operations.

⁴⁹ See e.g. Dan Murphy, 'All-out war between Al Qaeda and House of Saud under way', *Christian Science Monitor*, 3 June 2004.

⁵⁰ See e.g. Michael Slackman, 'Saudis arrest 172 in anti-terror sweep', *New York Times*, 27 April 2007; Suleiman Nimr, 'Saudi detains 208 suspects in plot targeting oil facility', *Agence France Presse*, 28 Nov. 2007. The high numbers of militants featuring in recent news reports do not reflect an increase in the size of terrorist networks in the Kingdom, but rather a new communications strategy by the Saudi Interior Ministry. Rather than announcing arrests as they happen, authorities now prefer to announce them in bulk.

not just by the general public, but also by most of the Islamist community. Influential Islamist figures such as Salman al-Awda, Safar al-Hawali and Nasir al-Umar condemned the violence and urged the militants to surrender to the authorities.⁵¹ As a result of the PR backlash, the QAP, which consisted almost exclusively of jihad veterans and their acquaintances, faced significant recruitment problems from the outset of their campaign.

A second main reason for the failure was the parallel insurgency in Iraq, which rekindled the ideological conflict between classical jihadists and global jihadists, and drained crucial human and financial resources away from the QAP campaign. In early 2004 the QAP found itself on the losing side of an ideological battle against prominent jihadist figures such as the Chechnya-based Saudi ideologue Abu Umar al-Sayf, who argued that the violence in Saudi Arabia undermined the more important jihad in Iraq.⁵² To potential recruits and donors, there was no doubt that paramilitary warfare in Iraq represented a politically more legitimate and theologically less controversial enterprise than bombings in the streets of Riyadh.

The third main reason lay in the effective counterterrorism strategy and virtually limitless resources of the Saudi state. The Saudi antiterrorism effort was marred by early technical incompetence, but the overall strategy was targeted, varied and measured. The regime notably avoided the counterproductive overreactions of the Algerian and Egyptian governments in the 1990s. Saudi authorities waged a sophisticated and very effective battle for the hearts and minds of the population. The key to the success of the information campaign was that it portrayed militants as socio-revolutionaries who wanted to topple the government and kill innocent Muslims. By consistently labelling the militants as misguided rebels, and by using the media to highlight the Muslim casualties of the violence, the authorities were able to undercut the pan-Islamic message of the QAP and rally the population against them. For the same reason, the QAP's publications were full of complaints about the fact that their anti-western agenda was being wrongly perceived as a revolutionary one.⁵³ Ultimately, there was no way the QAP could match the formidable resources of the state. The Interior Ministry was given blank cheques to fund its counterterrorist efforts, US intelligence analysts were integrated in Saudi teams, and huge advances were made in

⁵¹ The trio issued two statements to this effect, one just after the 12 May 2003 attacks and another just after the so-called al-Washm bombing on 12 April 2004; see al-Awda's website, www.islamtoday.net, accessed 26 June 2008. The Sahwist stance on the QAP illustrates the growing rift between jihadists and moderate Islamists, as described in Maha Azzam, 'Islamism revisited', *International Affairs* 82: 6, Nov. 2006, pp. 1119–32.

⁵² 'Al-Qa'ida leader calls for attacks on Americans in Iraq rather than on the Saudi government in Saudi Arabia', Middle East Media Research Institute Special Dispatch 635. See also the QAP's attempts to counter their arguments, e.g. Muhammad al-Salim, 'La tadhhabu ila al-'iraq!' [Do not go to Iraq!], *Sawt al-Jihad*, no. 7, Dec. 2003.

⁵³ The QAP often lamented the 'lies' of the official Saudi media, who 'reduced the casualty figures [of Americans] very much ... increased those of Muslims, and mention them on every occasion': *Ghazwat al-hadi 'ashar min rabi' al-awwal*, p. 47. After the 8 November al-Muhayya bombing, an article in the QAP's *Sawt al-Jihad* magazine rhetorically asked: 'If they wanted to kill Arab civilians, why would they choose to attack a guarded compound?'

signals intelligence.⁵⁴ The authorities eventually controlled the roads, the mobile network and the internet, making organized militancy extremely difficult.

Conclusion

Contrary to popular perception, both in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere, the outbreak of the 2003 terrorism campaign in the Kingdom was not the result of a domestic political or socio-economic crisis; nor was it a reaction to the US-led invasion of Iraq. Rather, it reflected organizational changes within Al-Qaeda that had been set in motion by the invasion of Afghanistan in late 2001. The analysis presented here has illustrated the contingency of low-level violence and the limits of grievance-based explanations of terrorism.

Another important finding is that the QAP campaign was a reflection less of discontent with the Saudi regime than of extreme anti-westernism. The QAP directed most of its premeditated operations against westerners and insisted on framing its actions as a fight against the so-called 'far enemy'. This fits a broader historical pattern, in which Saudi Islamists have launched remarkably few attacks directly against the civilian government. This in turn points to an interesting specificity of Saudi Islamism: namely, the lack of a strong socio-revolutionary Islamist current of the Algerian or Egyptian type.

Conversely, the Saudi jihadist movement has had a stronger pan-Islamist orientation than its counterparts in many other countries. The peculiar role of pan-Islamism in Saudi politics has produced relatively strong support in the Kingdom for classical jihadism since the 1980s, which helps explain the disproportionately large Saudi contingents in combat zones in Afghanistan, Bosnia, Chechnya and elsewhere. Saudi support for global jihadism, while always lower than previously assumed by most western observers, decreased with the violence inside the Kingdom between 2003 and 2006. Classical jihadism, however, still enjoys a certain amount of support, as evidenced by the continued flow of Saudi volunteers to Iraq.⁵⁵

The question now is whether future Saudi returnees from Iraq pose a security risk similar to that posed by the returnees from Afghanistan in 2002.⁵⁶ The 'Saudi Iraqis' will be at least as battle-hardened as the 'Saudi Afghans', given the higher level of military activity and the more extreme tactics used by militants in Iraq. Returnees from Iraq will undoubtedly represent a considerable threat and may well succeed in carrying out major ad hoc operations. However, the emergence of

⁵⁴ 'Saudi-US cooperation in war on terror sharply up: official', *Arab News*, 25 Oct. 2003. For more on Saudi counterterrorism, see Abdullah F. Ansary, 'Combating extremism: a brief overview of Saudi Arabia's approach', *Middle East Policy* 15: 2, 2008, pp. 111-42; E. Glass and Y. Yehoshua, 'Saudi Arabia's anti-terror campaign', MEMRI Inquiry and Analysis Series 425, 2008; Christopher Boucek, 'Extremist reeducation and rehabilitation in Saudi Arabia', *Jamestown Terrorism Monitor* 5: 16, 2007, pp. 1-4; Cordesman and Obaid, *National security in Saudi Arabia*.

⁵⁵ Thomas Hegghammer, 'Saudi militants in Iraq: backgrounds and recruitment patterns', FFI Report (Kjeller: Norwegian Defence Research Establishment, 2007).

⁵⁶ See e.g. Michael Knights, 'Saudi terrorist cells await return of jihadists from Iraq', *Jane's Intelligence Review* 17: 12, 2005, pp. 12-15.

a nationwide organized insurgency on the scale of the QAP is highly unlikely—because the returnees will be fewer, because the intelligence services will be better prepared, and because the general population will be more likely to inform on militants than was the case in 2002.

Broadly speaking, the QAP campaign represents an exception which confirms the rule of Saudi Arabia's relative internal stability. The campaign was the result of a unique combination of factors: on the one hand, the very high organizational capability of the 2002 returnees from Afghanistan, and on the other hand, the weakness and non-confrontational attitude of the Saudi security services. The gap between the two is now closed, and mobilization to organize nationwide activism in the Kingdom has become very difficult. The Saudi regime is currently more secure and less challenged from within than it has been in a very long time, and this new self-confidence is manifesting itself in both foreign and domestic policy. Abroad, the Kingdom plays a more assertive regional role.⁵⁷ At home, reform has stalled, and the government seems to have fewer qualms about sending progressive reformists such as Abdallah al-Hamid and Matruk al-Falih to prison without charges. With the political opposition neutralized by the security services and the population pacified by oil-fuelled economic prosperity, the government has few incentives to undertake substantial political reform. Social liberalization and the growth of corporatism will probably continue, but the prospects for democratic reform are currently bleak.⁵⁸ The question, as always, is how long such reforms can be postponed before more serious challenges to the regime emerge.

⁵⁷ May Yamani, 'The two faces of Saudi Arabia', *Survival* 50: 1, 2008, pp. 143–56.

⁵⁸ For good discussions of the record and prospects for reform in Saudi Arabia, see Anoushiravan Ehteshami, 'Reform from above: the politics of participation in the oil monarchies', *International Affairs* 79: 1, Jan. 2003, pp. 53–75; Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Steven Wright, 'Political change in the Arab oil monarchies: from liberalization to enfranchisement', *International Affairs* 83: 5, Sept. 2007, pp. 913–32.