



Islamic State vs the Gulf

by *Hassan Hassan*

IS fails at recruitment drive in conservative Gulf states

In the last two speeches delivered by Islamic State's (IS) leader, Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, the Gulf states, especially Saudi Arabia, were a central theme. On May 14 last year, Al-Baghdadi attacked the Saudi-led campaign in Yemen as a "storm of illusion" and a "desperate move to turn people away from the Islamic State." During his recent audio message on December 26, he also attacked the "Islamic Coalition," an alliance of around 34 countries formed in Riyadh with a stated objective of fighting terrorist organizations.

Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states joined the United States' air campaign against IS in the summer of 2014 after the group swept through large swathes of Iraq and Syria and threatened the Iraqi Kurdish capital of Erbil. But they substantially

scaled back their involvement in the fight, particularly since the announcement of Operation Decisive Storm in Yemen to strike against Houthi strongholds in support of President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi. So, why does IS's leader seem to focus on the Gulf states in his rare speeches?

IS' interest in the Gulf

Although the Gulf states are frequently criticized for failing to adequately fight IS, there is a constant tug of war between the two sides that deserves a closer look. After Iraq and Syria, IS views the Gulf as its most important battlefield, but it has so far failed to make much progress in this region. Aside from the recruitment of Gulf nationals as fighters in its heartlands in Iraq and Syria or as suicide attackers in their own countries, as happened last year in the bombing of mosques in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, IS's inability to establish itself as a powerful mobilizer in the Gulf region is a spectacular failure.

The number of Gulf citizens who have joined IS remains lower than those coming from other countries: according to the Soufan Group, 2,275 Saudi citizens are fighting with IS, compared to nearly 5,000 from Tunisia. These figures show a dismal performance for IS when it comes to infiltrating the Gulf region, especially if seen against the potential opportunities it has within these nations: the flow of funds to support Islamists in Syria since 2011, the polarized sectarian landscape, and the widespread culture of martyrdom relative to other areas.

However, infiltration of the Gulf region is an unfinished business for IS. The group seeks to appeal to current and former jihadists or jihadist sympathizers and to Islamist-leaning citizens who have seen the involvement of their countries, namely Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, in the crackdown on Islamist movements in the region in the wake of the Arab uprisings.

New wave of jihadists

IS also seeks to lead a new wave of jihadists in the Gulf region after Saudi Arabia succeeded in suppressing a former one, an Al Qaeda-led insurrection from 2003 to 2005. Many of those who fought with or rhetorically supported jihadists against the Saudi government remain in prison, and IS has tried to appeal to them and similar-minded clerics.

Winning over such individuals is not just an issue of manpower. Many of those IS seeks to recruit were part of the so-called Islamic Awakening that existed in Saudi Arabia and, to a lesser degree, in the wider neighborhood from the 1960-1990s, an era that helped formulate much of the thinking and discourse of modern jihadism in the region. IS portrays itself as a continuation of this trend, especially as conveyed by extremist leaders such as Osama bin Laden, Abdullah Azzam and Abu Muhammed Al-Maqdisi, who either influenced or were influenced by this movement.

The religious weight of Saudi Arabia, as the site of Islam's holy sites in Mecca and Medina, is also key for the legitimacy of IS as a self-styled caliphate, particularly if combined with the seats of former Islamic Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties. IS's failure to even project power and strength in the Gulf region is a major flaw in its narrative, but one that it hopes to overcome.

For now, the Gulf states have been spared IS's infiltration despite the multitude of opportunities that the organization has had in this region. But the war is not over, and the question remains whether IS will manage to ride a new wave of disruptive extremist insurrection in the Gulf. The Gulf states should build on their success so far to preempt any such scenario, especially as sectarian tensions in the region appear to be spiraling out of control.

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