



## تعاظم الدور السعودي في الإرهاب منذ هجمات سبتمبر

## The Saudi Terror Problem on the Rise Since September 11



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## Abstract

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*While the Saudi government continues to deny its sponsorship of terrorism, there is overwhelming evidence to the contrary. In the past eight years since 9/11, the Saudi government has not only ignored the rising numbers of extremists in its own population, but also encouraged spreading extremist ideas to Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and other countries around the world. In Iraq, Saudi citizens account for 42% of all foreign fighters. In Afghanistan, they comprise a large portion of Taliban's foreign fighters, who make up 60% of its ranks. Terrorist indoctrination is reaching new heights in the age of the internet, providing terrorists with a new means to communicate, but more importantly, a way to recruit new fighters. Instead of trying to end the prevalence of extremists and despite what it says to the media, the Saudi government has been contributing to the increase in terrorists activities in the years since 9/11.*

## *Introduction*

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The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Al-Qaeda terrorist organization have been synonymous since the September 11 attack against the United States. The fact that fifteen of the hijackers were Saudi focused intense scrutiny on the Kingdom, but so far, this has not resulted in significant declines in the recruitment of, nor funding and ideological support by Saudis to Al-Qaeda and similar groups.

Many expected the Kingdom to be embarrassed by its subjects' heavy culpability in the attacks of September 11 and therefore take a lead in reducing the number of Saudi recruits to violent extremism. On the contrary, the number of Saudis involved in Al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups has risen sharply since 2001 and their operations have extended to new fronts such as Iraq and Lebanon.

Saudi Arabia has failed to curb recruitment networks that provide hundreds of new fighters and millions of dollars to Al-Qaeda and the Taliban, or to prosecute any of its citizens for the recruitment of the September 11 hijackers. Additionally, the Saudis lack a plan to reform their school books, a major source of extremist indoctrination in the country. The monarchy declined to introduce any political reforms or allow for greater personal, religious, and educational rights.

The United States also failed to persuade or pressure the Saudi government to deal with the root causes of terrorism and extremism. Instead, the U.S. gave the Saudi ruling family unconditional support, including training hundreds of its security forces by U.S. trainers, and providing state-of-the-art technology, which is used to silence political and democratic opponents. As a result, eight years after September 11, Saudi Arabia remains a fertile ground for terrorist ideology, funding, and recruitment by Al-Qaeda and similar groups.

This paper will contribute to the body of knowledge surrounding Saudi Arabia's role in the Iraq and Afghanistan insurgencies by examining both the political and social factors that explain why so many Saudis are involved with Al-Qaeda. It will also do this through evaluating recruitment strategies employed by terrorist organizations.

## *Militants in Iraq*

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There has been a variety of reports analyzing the nature of the insurgency in Iraq. Most of them share one consistent finding: a large percentage of the foreign suicide bombers and insurgents attacking coalition forces are from Saudi Arabia. Saudi citizens participating in the Iraqi insurgency amount to between 40 and 60 percent of all foreign fighters in Iraq.<sup>1</sup> Several other studies have focused on where these men came from, how they got into Iraq, and other demographic information. For example, one study provides a detailed analysis of the tribal

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<sup>1</sup> Glasser, Susan B. "Martyrs' in Iraq Mostly Saudis," *Washington Post*, May 15, 2005.  
Hegghammer, Thomas. "Terrorism Recruitment and Radicalization in Saudi Arabia," *Middle East Policy* 15, (2008): 39-60.

breakdowns and the locations from which the captured insurgents originate.<sup>2</sup> However, these reports have placed little emphasis on the methods used to recruit these men and analysis to understand the reason that these methods are successful. All too often, these reports digress into common discussions about unemployment and other economic woes in Saudi society, failing to ask deeper questions about Saudi culture to explain what makes martyrdom in Iraq and Afghanistan such a popular idea.

The Sinjar records, a sample study of what are essentially human resources files on 595 foreign fighters discovered in Iraq, found that a plurality of the foreign fighters were Saudi (250 fighters, 42%). More significantly, this number is double that of the next closest nationality on this list, (Libya). No other country included in this study has more than fifty insurgents linked to it. This is quite ironic when one considers that several of these nations are, or have been, adversarial to U.S. interests. Despite this, the proportion of their population voluntarily entering Iraq with violent intentions is comparatively small. Even more paradoxically, the large majority of these insurgents are entering Iraq via the Syrian border, despite the fact that Syria is not among even the top three countries of origination of foreign insurgents in Iraq. A Senior U.S. military officer told the Los Angeles Times “Nearly half of the 135 foreigners in U.S. detention facilities in Iraq are Saudis.”<sup>3</sup>

The main reason for the high number of Saudi suicide bombers and terrorists in Iraq is the Saudi official policy that supports instability in Iraq. There is a direct relationship between the Saudi foreign policy and the high number of Saudi citizens participating in violence in Iraq and other countries. The nature of relations between the Saudi government and a particular country affects the extent of Saudi citizens’ role in violence against that country. Countries that are seen as friendly by the Saudi government appear to escape violence by Saudi subjects, while countries that are at odds with it appear to bear the brunt of violence by Saudis. Iraq is a clear example of this trend.

The political rise of Iraq’s Shia majority following the U.S. invasion and the collapse of the Sunni regime in Bagdad worried the anti-Shia rulers of Riyadh. The Saudi royal family perceived the emergence of the Shia as the leading force in Iraq as an existential threat to the survival of their regime. First, a Shia-dominated democratic Iraq would encourage citizens in the kingdom to challenge the absolute monarchy of Al-Saud and its Wahhabi-Najdi domination. Second, a stable Iraq would pose a challenge for Saudi Arabia both as an economic power with an educated population and an abundance of oil. Third, the Saudis fear that Iraq might even replace them as the United State’s premier Arab ally. The Saudi government therefore has an interest in weakening Iraq and its government through supporting violence by Sunni insurgents, especially by Al-Qaeda and similar groups.

Saudi religious and political leaders have made their feelings about the post-Saddam government clear, and they have adopted a hostile policy toward the Iraqi government. Unlike many Arab countries, Saudi Arabia has not opened an embassy in Bagdad or received the Iraqi prime

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<sup>2</sup> Felter, Joseph and Brian Fishman, “Al-Qa’ida’s Foreign Fighters in Iraq: A First Look at the Sinjar Records,” (diss., Combating Terrorism Center, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> Parker, Ned. “The Conflict in Iraq: Saudi Role in Insurgency” *The Los Angeles Times*, July 15, 2007. <<http://articles.latimes.com/2007/jul/15/world/fg-saudi15> >

minister or president. It also has not canceled the billions of dollars of debt in loans owed by Iraq since the years of Saddam's rule.

Strong evidence shows that the Saudi government allowed and aided Al-Qaeda fighters and recruits to travel to Iraq. One example is Al-Qaeda leader Abdullah Al-Rashood, who was captured by Saudi forces on March 13, 2004 outside the city of Najran, near the Yemeni border.<sup>4</sup> Al-Rashood was in Saudi captivity and was supposed to appear later in Iraq when he was killed by a U.S. airstrike on June 23, 2005. Another example occurred in December of 2006, when seven suspected Al-Qaeda members easily escaped from AlMalaaz prison in Riyadh, and most ended up in Iraq.<sup>5</sup>



Faris Al-Zahrany, 2004.

Senior members of Al-Qaeda, such as Abdulaziz Al-Muqrin and Sheikh Faris Al-Zahrany, also claimed that the Saudi government was trying to send them to Iraq. Al-Zahrany, who was captured in Saudi Arabia on August 5, 2004, said in a taped statement released prior to his capture that he refused multiple offers by the Saudi Assistant Minister of the Interior Mohamed Bin Naif to pave his way to Iraq to fight the Americans there.<sup>6</sup> Mohamed bin Naif is also the son of the Minister of Interior Naif Bin Abdulaziz, and is in charge of internal security.

A 2004 report claimed that Prince Khalid Al-Faisal, the governor of the southern region of Aseer at the time, told Saudi audience in his palace, "If you wish to wage real jihad, then go to Iraq, there is no jihad here."<sup>7</sup>

Another senior official who is also involved in promoting recruitment and funding of Al-Qaeda and other Sunni insurgents in Iraq is Sheik Saleh Al-Luhaidan, who was the chief justice of Saudi Arabia's Supreme Judicial Council until February 2009, and remains one of the most influential official clerics. Al-Luhaidan urged Saudis to join the Sunni insurgency in Iraq and to contribute financially to its cause.<sup>8</sup> Speaking as the chief justice, Al-Luhaidan advised the audience that none of them would be prosecuted by the Saudi government for their actions in Iraq.



Sheikh Jebreen (R) with Prince Naif (L), Kind Abdullah and other princes, 2008.

In addition to Saudi officials, major Saudi clerics are part of the recruitment and funding of the insurgency in Iraq. Wahhabi clerics, both working for the government or those with close ties with the Saudi ruling family, play a leading

<sup>4</sup> "The Arrest of Abdullah Rashood, 22<sup>nd</sup> on the Wanted List of 26," *Dar AlHayat*, March 15, 2004.

<<http://www.daralhayat.com/archivearticle/43421>> .

<sup>5</sup> Al-Zydan, Khalid. "Seven Omani Detainees Escape... From Melz Prison," *Al-Riyadh*, September 7, 2006.

<<http://www.alriyadh.com/2006/07/09/article169954.html>>

<sup>6</sup> Faris Al-Zahrany, taped statement, July 5, 2005.

<sup>7</sup> M.A., a government official, comment given in a private conversation with Ali Al-Ahmed, 2003.

<sup>8</sup> Myers, Lisa and the NBC Investigative Unit. "More Evidence of Saudi Doubletalk? Judge Caught on Tape Encouraging Saudis to Fight in Iraq," *NBC*, April 26, 2005. <<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/7645118/>>



role in sustaining the flow of hundreds of Saudi suicide bombers to Iraq and in sending millions of dollars to support them.

The late Sheikh Abdullah Bin Jebreen who enjoyed close ties both with King Abdullah, Prince Naif, the influential Minister of the Interior, and other senior members of the ruling family, has issued numerous statements and fatwas in support of recruiting and funding Al-Qaeda in Iraq and Afghanistan. Bin Jebreen also visited the families of Saudis killed in Iraq to offer them support. Bin Jebreen's son-in-law, Naif Abdulaziz Al-Musaad, carried out a suicide bombing attack on the American troops in Fallujah, Iraq in 2007. Bin Jebreen who died on July 20, 2009, was flown by private jet on the order of King Abdullah to Germany for intensive medical care following a heart bypass surgery in Riyadh. He was whisked out of Germany after a German citizen filed a lawsuit against him, accusing him of sponsoring terrorism in Iraq. In addition, Bin Jebreen was eulogized by an official statement from the royal court and his funeral was led by several senior members of the ruling family, including Prince Sattam Bin Abduaziz, a brother of the king and deputy governor of Riyadh, and Prince Sultan Bin Salman Al-Saud, the President and Chairman of the Board of Saudi Commission for Tourism & Antiquities.<sup>9</sup>

Another cleric, Sheikh Naser Al-Omar, is very active in recruiting and encouraging Saudi fighters to go to Iraq. Al-Omer, who receives financial rewards from the Saudi Ministry of Interior, is part of the Saudi reeducation program to rehabilitate Al-Qaeda militants.<sup>10</sup> Al-Omer has explicitly called for suicide bombings against U.S. forces in Iraq and Afghanistan in several television interviews and recorded speeches.

The most influential fatwa, however, came on November 5, 2004. The fatwa of the 26 Saudi Wahhabi clerics, 20 of whom are government officials,<sup>11</sup> made it an Islamic duty for "Sunni" Muslims to join the war against American troops and the Iraqi government. Following the fatwas, hundreds of Saudis and other Sunni Muslim youths heeded the fatwa to become suicide bombers in Iraq.

Sheikh Ahmad Al-Hawashi, described as the godfather of the September 11 hijackers, is the imam of Al-Kabeer mosque in Khamis Mushait city. Al-Hawashi was the recruiter of a half



Prince Majid escorts Sheikh Al-Hawashi to Aseer, 2009.

<sup>9</sup> Al-Hootan, Ahmed. "Prince Sattam Leads Worshipers at Sheikh Ibn Jabreen's Funeral, *Alriyadh*, July 15, 2009. <<http://www.alriyadh.com/2009/07/15/article444783.html>>

<sup>10</sup> "Al-Odeh and Al-Omer Visit Released Guantanamo Detainees," *Islam Today*, December 18, 2006. <<http://www.islamtoday.net/nawafeth/artshow-12-77831.htm>>

<sup>11</sup> The Fatwa of the 26 Clerics: "Open Sermon to the Militant Iraqi People," *Frontline- The House of Saud*, November 5, 2004. <<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/saud/etc/fatwa.html>>

dozen of the September 11 hijackers. These hijackers included Wael Mohamed Al-Shehri and his younger brother Waleed Al-Shehri.<sup>12</sup> His mosque also serves as the starting point for dozens of Al-Qaeda militants. Al-Hawashi is well regarded by members of the ruling family, including King Abdullah who recently sent his son, Prince Majed Bin Abdulla Bin Abdulaziz, to chaperone Al-Hawashi on a private jet.<sup>13</sup>

### *Militants in Afghanistan and Pakistan*

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In the same way that Saudi Arabia has been exporting terrorists to Iraq, it has been sending terrorists to both Afghanistan and Pakistan. Many Saudi clerics voiced their full support of the Taliban in their fatwas and sermons since before the fall of Taliban in 2001. This support translated into millions of dollars and hundreds of new recruits.

The Saudi government's relationship with the Taliban dates back to the early 1990s. Former president of Saudi intelligence Prince Turki Al-Faisal and his aide General Mohamed Al-Otaibi provided tens of millions of dollars to the Taliban before and after its takeover of Kabul in September of 1996. Saudi Arabia was one of a handful of countries that recognized the Taliban government.

The Saudi relationship with the Taliban continued after the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, with Taliban members living or visiting the kingdom, especially during religious seasons, such as Ramadan and Hajj. King Abdullah's guest list for Ramadan last year included members of the Taliban, such as former Taliban ambassador to Pakistan Mullah Abdul Salam Zaeef, who spent a few weeks in Saudi Arabia as a royal guest. Afghan government officials, who were visiting Saudi Arabia during Ramadan, were surprised to find Taliban leaders sitting across the dinner table at King Abdullah's palace in the holiest Muslim city, Makkah, last September.<sup>14</sup>

Privately obtained reports by the Gulf Institute confirm that members of the Afghan and Pakistani expatriate community in Saudi Arabia are raising funds for the Taliban inside the kingdom. Meetings frequently take place in the central and western regions of Saudi Arabia on farms outside Riyadh and other cities.

Al-Qaeda and Taliban recruitment networks in Saudi Arabia remain intact, as indicated by the arrival of dozens of new Saudi fighters who join the fight in Iraq and Afghanistan. The U.S. killed and arrested hundreds of Saudis during the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, but the Saudi supply of fighters has not stopped in the past eight years. The largest nationality of Guantanamo Bay detainees are Saudis, a number amounting to over 150. Mullah Mahmoud, a Taliban commander in Afghanistan, recently told Reuters that more than 60% of the Taliban fighters in

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<sup>12</sup> McGeough, Paul. "Hero of September 11 Hijackers Alive, Well and Still Poisoning Young Minds," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, October 4 2002. <<http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2002/10/03/1033538723198.html>>

<sup>13</sup> Askar, Salman and Masoud Al-Muaid. "Prince Majid Bin Abdullah Visits Aseer With Sheikh Al-Hawashi", *al-Watan*, July 11, 2009. <<http://www.alwatan.com.sa/NEWS/newsdetail.asp?issueno=3207&id=109596>>

<sup>14</sup> Straziuso, Jason. "Taliban, Afghan Officials Met in Saudi Arabia," *Associated Press*, October 6, 2008. <<http://i.abcnews.com/International/wireStory?id=5963344>>

Afghanistan are from Saudi Arabia, Pakistan's Punjab region, and other countries.<sup>15</sup> Of that 60%, Saudis account for the largest nationality.

The trickling of fresh Saudi fighters to Al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan has not stopped since September 11, 2001. Kamal Saleem Al-Hathaly, a 20-year old Saudi from Makkah, was the suicide bomber who drove a car bomb attacking the Danish Embassy in Pakistan on June 3, 2008.<sup>16</sup> The Saudi newspaper Al-Watan published an interview with Fawaz Al-Otaibi, a Saudi militant who recently returned from Afghanistan after joining Al-Qaeda just last year. Al-Otaibi told the newspaper on September 6, 2009 that he first arrived to Afghanistan from Saudi Arabia on September 11, 2008.<sup>17</sup>

In addition to receiving fresh supplies of Saudi fighters, Al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan receive millions of dollars in funds from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Qatar. Saudi Arabia has not merely contributed fighters, it has also contributed financing to the Taliban.

Richard Holbrook, the U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, attributes most of the Taliban's current funding to the Gulf countries.<sup>18</sup> Even though Holbrook refused reporters' requests to name the specific Gulf countries funding the Taliban, it was clear he was referring to Saudi Arabia. Holbrook's refusal to blame Saudi Arabia syncs with the ongoing U.S. policy under Bush and Obama that ignores the Saudi terrorism problem.

### *U.S. Reaction*

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The official U.S. reaction to the Saudi terrorist threat has been problematic. The response can be described as hesitant, uninformed, and counterproductive. The U.S. continues to absolve the Saudi government of any wrongdoings and shortcomings regarding the unrelenting terrorism problem. Instead, the U.S. lays blame squarely on what they call 'rogue Wahhabi clerics.' This policy was reinforced and supported in reports issued by 'Saudi-friendly' think tanks in Washington DC.

The U.S. officials from both the Bush and Obama administrations react timidly to Saudi ties with Al-Qaeda and the Taliban, and continue to shower the Saudi king and government with praise at every occasion.

Senior American officials including former President George Bush and President Barack Obama praised King Abdullah's 'reforms' and his 'championing' religious tolerance. In an ill-placed

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<sup>15</sup> Motevalli, Golnar. "INTERVIEW-Taliban Must Hide Among Afghan Civilians-Commander," *Rueters*, June 14, 2009. <<http://www.alertnet.org/thenews/newsdesk/ISL374113.htm>>

<sup>16</sup> "Al Qaeda Bomber 'Was From Saudi,'" *Gulf Daily News*, July 23, 2008. <<http://www.gulf-daily-news.com/NewsDetails.aspx?storyid=223883>>

<sup>17</sup> Marwi, Musa bin. "The Repentant al-Qaeda Member to Al-Watan: Controlling Donations Weakened Recruitment. The Organization Seeks to Focus on Operations Outside the Country of "The Fighters,'" *Al-Watan*, September 6, 2009. <<http://www.alwatan.com.sa/news/newsdetail.asp?issueno=3264&id=116678&groupID=0>>

<sup>18</sup> Watson, Ivan. "Holbrooke: Persian Gulf Oil Money Fuels Taliban Insurgencies," *CNN*, August 25, 2009. <<http://www.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/asiapcf/08/25/afghanistan.pakistan.holbrooke/#cnnSTCText>>



comment by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton on July 30, 2009, she praised King Abdullah's championing of religious dialogue. In the meantime, the State Department lists Saudi Arabia on its short list of countries that abuse religious freedom.

Other U.S. officials have gone so far as to reach out to known Saudi extremist entities that fund terrorist organizations in several countries. Former U.S. Ambassador Robert Jordan, (October 2001- October 2003), initiated such contacts with extremist entities by hosting Saleh Al-Wohaibi, the head of the World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY), at the U.S. embassy in Riyadh in April of 2003. For over two hours, they conducted a lengthy interview that was published in the anti-American magazine *Al-Mustaqba*, published by WAMY. Other U.S. diplomats attended WAMY functions, including their annual Ramadan Iftar dinners; former U.S. Ambassador James Oberwetter attended the Iftar during two different years.



**U.S. Ambassador James Oberwetter with Saleh AlWohaibi, head of WAMY, 2005.**

WAMY, a Saudi government organization, is known to have provided financial support to the Taliban, Hamas, and Lashkar E-Taiba. WAMY is also an anti-Jewish, anti-Christian group that issues literature that claims the existence of Jewish conspiracies around the world. A WAMY book, *A Handy Encyclopedia of Contemporary Religions and Sects*, says, "The Jews are humanity's enemies; they foment immorality in this world; The Jews are deceitful, they say something but mean the exact opposite."<sup>19</sup> The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) raided WAMY's office in Washington on June 2, 2004.

### *Conclusion*

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Eight years have passed since the attack of September 11 on the United States, but the Saudi government has been unwilling or unsuccessful in dealing with its terrorism problem. The United States has also failed to persuade Saudi Arabia to change its policies. The government of Saudi Arabia has enmeshed itself in a symbiotic relationship with radical clerics and therefore conferred legitimacy to them at the expense of most of its subjects who, like the vast majority of Muslims, want to practice their faith and carry on peaceful lives.

The failure of both Saudi Arabia and the U.S. to effectively deal with the terrorism problem originating from Saudi Arabia and to address its root causes has exacted a tremendous price in blood and treasure; thousands of people have been killed and billions of dollars have been wasted. This failure led to changes in U.S. domestic laws restricting freedoms of travel and association for many Americans – changes that have strained global relations between the U.S. and millions of Muslims around the world.

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<sup>19</sup>Al-Jehani, Manna. *A Handy Encyclopedia of Contemporary Religions and Sects*. The World Assembly of Muslim Youth, 2000, Riyadh. <<http://www.wamy.org/index.cfm?method=home.con&ContentID=2236> >

The threat of terrorism from Saudi Arabia remains a distinct threat to U.S. national security, and there are at present no evident plans to eliminate it from within the American government. The Saudi regime has been a natural host of terrorism and extremism. Until the nature of the terror-friendly Saudi regime is addressed, the waves of terrorists will continue to threaten the security of the Middle East and the world at large.

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