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Saudi Militants in Iraq: Assessment and Kingdom's Response

Washington DC, September 19, 2005—A new report by **Nawaf Obaid**, Adjunct Fellow at CSIS, and **Dr. Anthony H. Cordesman**, who holds the Arleigh A. Burke Chair in Strategy at CSIS, analyzes the foreign militants in Iraq, the role and size of the Saudi contingent in it, and the ways militants are motivated to join the fighting in Iraq.

[SAUDI MILITANTS IN IRAQ: ASSESSMENT AND KINGDOM'S RESPONSE](#)

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The report indicates that foreign elements are estimated to be 4%-10% of the total Iraqi insurgency, which is estimated to be around 30,000. The study concludes "There are strong indications that the largest component of the insurgency is composed of Iraqis." However, Cordesman and Obaid stated that "...no one knows the number of active and part time insurgents, paid agents, and sympathizer."

As for the question of the composition and the size of the foreign volunteers in the Iraqi insurgency, the study estimates that there are 3,000 fighters. Those fighters come from all around the Arab and Islamic worlds. The largest component of these fighters come from Algeria (600 or 20%), followed by Syria (550 or 18%), Yemen (500 or 17%), Sudan (450 or 15%), Saudi Arabia (350 or 12%), Egypt (400 or 5%), and other countries (150 or 5%).

The Saudi involvement in the Iraqi insurgency is overestimated, but does have an impact that goes beyond the number of insurgents involved: "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."

On the question of motivation and public support, the report asserts "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 Sunnis, according to the study, do not necessarily want the return of the days of Saddam Hussein, as much as they are wary of the Shiite-led government. The report also said that Sunni nationalists "are also believed to be less likely to target Iraqi civilians or engage in suicide bombings."

The study said that "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, 74 are presumed in detention (a maximum of 20 in US custody and 3 in Kurdish), and 56 are presumed dead." These militants came from around the Kingdom, they come generally from middle class families, tend to be employed, and all are Sunni.

As for the means of Saudi militants entering Iraq, the study lists three ways:

- **Saudi-Iraqi border:** As of July 2005, the Saudis spent \$1.2 billion on guarding the Saudi-Iraqi border. “There are currently 35,00 troops from the National guard, Ministry of Interior and various military services of the ministry of Defense working to seal the border.” The study asserts that the Saudi authorities detained 682 Iraqi intruders and smugglers and 63 Saudi infiltrators from entering Iraq.
- **Through Iran:** Saudi authorities have arrested some militants who have gone to Iraq through Iran. The study cites the apprehension of four Saudi militants after passing by the UAE on their way back from Iran. The report, however, says that because Iran is non-Sunni non-Arab, there are few reports of Saudi extremists using Iran to go to Iraq.
- **Through Syria:** The country is becoming one of the largest tourist destination in the Middle East (3.8 tourist in 2004), and due “Saudi militants have taken advantage of [the] fact” that it is hard to guard 380-mile border with Iraq and separate legitimate tourist from militants. Others have argued that the Syrian authorities have “been too forceful in their crackdown on Saudis” entering Syria.

The report cites Saudi intelligence analysis, which concludes that 85% of Saudi militants that went Iraq were not on any government watch list, al-Qaeda members, or terrorist sympathizers. Rather, the paper concludes, that they were “radicalized almost exclusively by the Coalition invasion.”

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