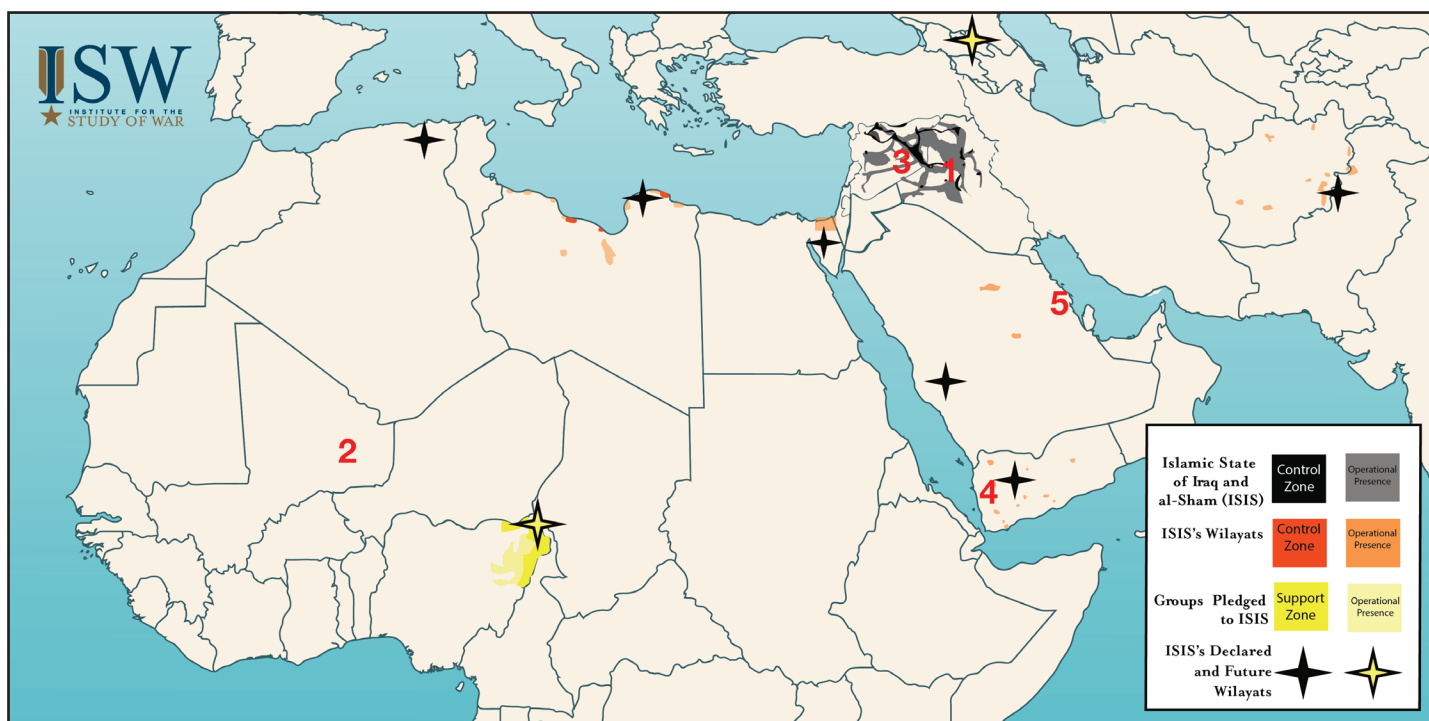


THE ISIS REGIONAL STRATEGY FOR YEMEN AND SAUDI ARABIA

The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham conducted two major bombings on Shia mosques in the Arabian Peninsula today through its affiliates in Yemen and Saudi Arabia. ISIS claimed responsibility for an IED explosion that injured at least 13 Shia worshippers during Friday prayers in the al Sayyah Mosque in Sana'a, Yemen. ISIS also claimed responsibility for a suicide bombing on the Shia Imam Ali mosque in al-Qadeeh in the Shi'a Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia. This latter attack killed at least 20 individuals and wounding dozens more. In statements circulated by ISIS's supporters on Twitter after the attacks, ISIS reportedly asserted that it would "expel all the unbelievers from the Arabian Peninsula."

ISIS's threat to Saudi Arabia is not new. ISIS declared its intent to attack both Saudi Arabia and Yemen in late 2014. Over the course of this year, ISIS has escalated its activities in both countries in order to increase regional disorder and undermine the Saudi-led Arab coalition. Today's two attacks were possibly coordinated, reflecting an acceleration in an ongoing campaign by ISIS to destabilize Saudi Arabia and gain power in Yemen.



- 1) May 17: ISIS captures Ramadi in Iraq's Anbar province.
- 2) May 19: A North African jihadist group reiterates its defection from al-Qaeda to ISIS, and claims to be holding a Romanian citizen hostage.
- 3) May 21: ISIS seizes Palmyra and nearby oil fields in eastern Syria.
- 4) May 22: ISIS's affiliates in Yemen detonate an IED on a Shia mosque in Sana'a.
- 5) May 22: ISIS's affiliates in Saudi Arabia launch a suicide bomb on a Shia mosque in the eastern Qatif province.

ISIS-Linked Regional Activity: May 17-22, 2015

ISIS achieved its most significant territorial gains in Iraq and Syria since its June 2014 takeover of Mosul. Meanwhile ISIS's affiliates launched near-simultaneous attacks in Saudi Arabia and Yemen in order to increase sectarian tension and undermine the Saudi-led Arab coalition.

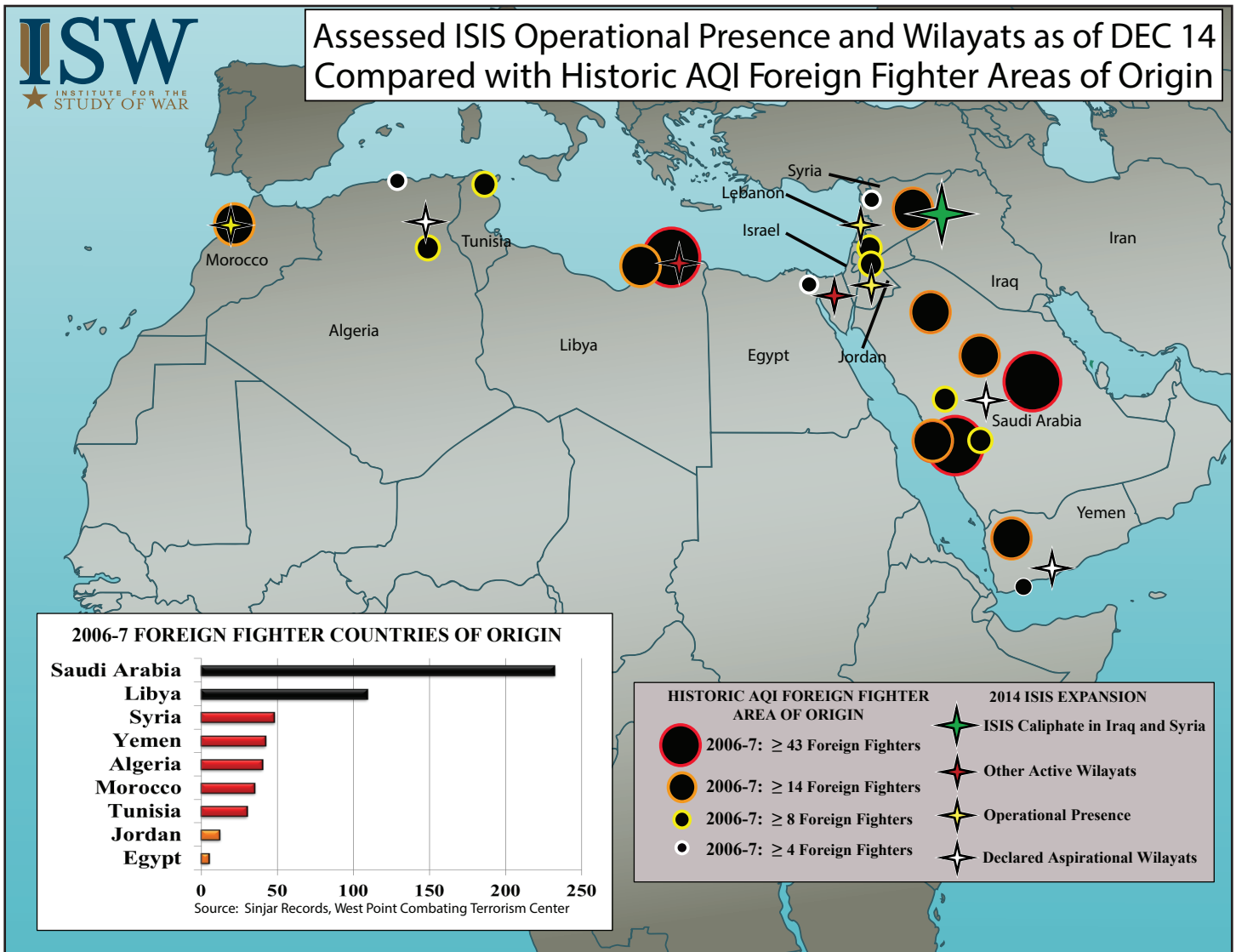
by Harleen Gambhir

ISIS is executing a sophisticated global strategy. It is conducting simultaneous campaigns to defend its existing territory within Iraq and Syria, to foster affiliates in the Middle East and North Africa region, and to launch polarizing attacks in the rest of the world. Saudi Arabia and Yemen have been a part of ISIS's global expansion since ISIS's leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared wilayats, or governorates in both countries in November 2014. ISIS's predecessor, al-Qaeda in Iraq, had cells recruiting foreign fighters in Saudi Arabia which ISIS may have used to establish attack cells. Since November 2014 ISIS's supporters in Saudi Arabia have attempted numerous attacks, including a failed plot to bomb the American embassy in Riyadh in March 2015. ISIS's operatives also have been linked to several drive-by shootings targeting police officers in Riyadh, most recently on May 8. Today's suicide bombing in al-Qadeeh matches ISIS's signature methodology, fueling sectarian tensions by explosively attacking a Shia place of worship. ISIS's claim to the attack is supported by al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula's recent claim

that it does not attack mosques. Yemen expert Alexis Knutsen confirms that attacking mosques "would be a sharp deviation from historical AQAP practice."

Read more about ISIS's plans in "ISIS's Future Global Footprint: A Historical Perspective from the Sinjar Records."

ISIS's affiliates also intensified their activity in Yemen, where the internal war between the al Houthis and anti-al Houthi forces has enabled both AQAP and ISIS to increase their operations. ISIS is attempting to add a sectarian dimension to the Yemeni conflict. ISIS's affiliates first targeted Yemeni Shia mosques in Sana'a on March 20, in one of the largest attacks in Yemen's history. Since then ISIS's affiliates have claimed numerous small attacks against al Houthi forces across the country, most recently in Al Bayda province on May 17.

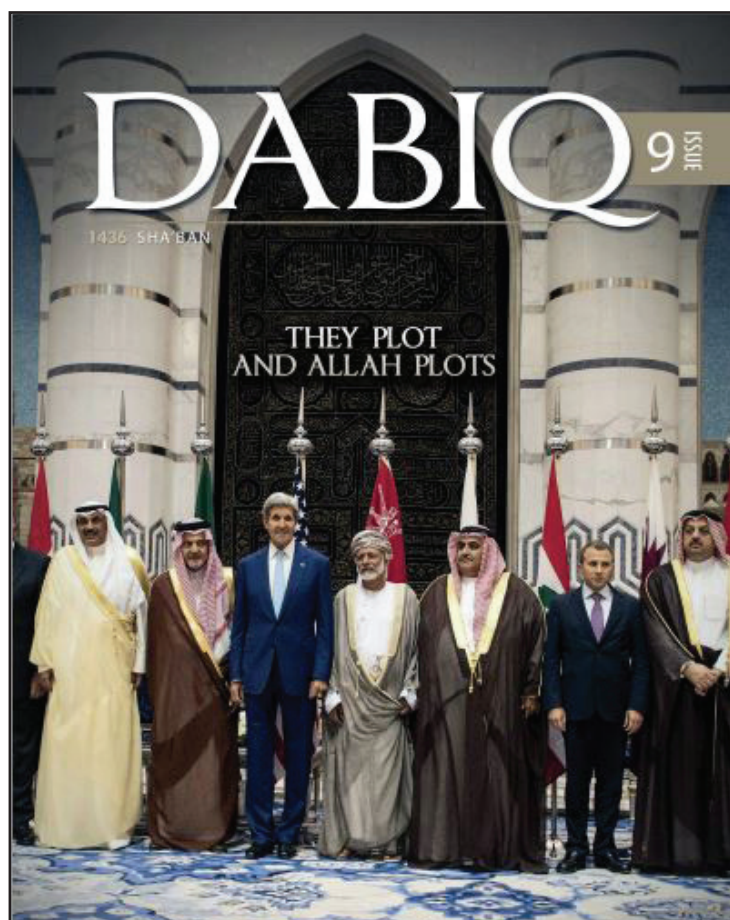


ISIS consistently compares the al-Houthis to Shia militia forces in Iraq, indicating the organization's conceptual linkage between its campaign in Iraq and its efforts in the wider region.

ISIS chose targets in Yemen and Saudi Arabia because it seeks to undermine both the Arab coalition and Iran and its proxies. Over the past week ISIS has released two major publications criticizing Saudi Arabia and its participation in the Yemeni conflict. ISIS's leader al-Baghdadi released a speech on May 14, his first since late 2014, claiming that Saudi rulers, "the slaves of the Crusaders and the allies of the Jews," had lost their legitimacy to lead the Sunni people because of their cooperation with the Shia in Iraq and because of their inaction in Syria and Palestine. ISIS also criticized Saudi Arabia in the latest issue of its English-language magazine Dabiq, released on May 21, further blaming Saudi leaders for supporting rebels allied with al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria.

complicates Saudi Arabia's leadership of an Arab-led coalition working to counter Iranian influence, by forcing Saudi Arabia to protect Shia populations within the kingdom as an internal security effort. It also requires Saudi Arabia to focus its anti-ISIS efforts at home rather than abroad, part of ISIS's strategy to defend its caliphate lands inside Iraq and Syria. Paired with ISIS's attack in Yemen, today's events also highlight the growing possibility that ISIS may launch coordinated attacks using multiple regional affiliates. As we approach the one-year anniversary of ISIS's capture of Mosul and declaration of a caliphate, it appears that the organization is more robust than ever. ISIS is expanding its operations, and exploiting state tensions across the Middle East in order to accelerate disorder and gain power.

Harleen Gambhir is a Counterterrorism Analyst at the Institute for the Study of War



ISIS's strategy to compromise Saudi Arabia has already entailed a complex combination of attacks designed to compromise the Kingdom's regional balance of power against Iran, its integrity as a state, its religious legitimacy, and its western alliances. ISIS's attack in Saudi Arabia thus serves several goals. It undermines Saudi Arabia's claim to internal security and encourages the exacerbation of sectarian tensions within the country. It also