

# Cultures & Conflits

2008

---

## Saudis in Iraq: Patterns of Radicalization and Recruitment

*Combattants saoudiens en Irak : modes de radicalisation et de recrutement*

Thomas Hegghammer



### Electronic version

URL: <http://conflits.revues.org/10042>

ISSN: 1777-5345

### Publisher:

CCLS - Centre d'études sur les conflits  
liberté et sécurité, L'Harmattan

## ELECTRONIC REFERENCE

Thomas Hegghammer, « **SAUDIS IN IRAQ: PATTERNS OF RADICALIZATION AND RECRUITMENT** », **CULTURES & CONFLITS [ONLINE]**, ENGLISH DOCUMENTS, ONLINE SINCE **12 JUNE 2008**, CONNECTION ON **02 FEBRUARY 2017**. URL : **HTTP://CONFLITS.REVUES.ORG/10042**

---

This text was automatically generated on 2 February 2017.

Creative Commons License

---

# Saudis in Iraq: Patterns of Radicalization and Recruitment

*Combattants saoudiens en Irak : modes de radicalisation et de recrutement*

Thomas Hegghammer

---

- 1 In the last issue of *Cultures et Conflits* (<http://www.conflits.org/index2085.html> *The voluntary death of the combatant: sacrifices and strategies*, n°63), eight eminent thinkers explored the complex phenomenon of voluntary death from a variety of angles, all stressing the need to demystify and “de-islamize” the notion of suicide operations and to recognise the multiplicity of processes leading to self-sacrifice in the modern age. One of the few specific cases left unexplored in the debate is that of Iraq, which is the main arena - at least in quantitative terms - for voluntary death and self sacrifice today. This article shall analyse the phenomenon of foreign fighters in Iraq, who may be distinguished from other suicide attackers by the fact that the country they are offering to die for is not their own.
- 2 In order to grasp the immensely complex and evolving picture of insurgency in Iraq most commentators tend to draw a sharp distinction between the foreign fighters on the one hand, and Iraqi nationalists on the other. The foreigners are widely perceived as the least legitimate and the most extreme element of the insurgency. As a result, much has been written about their actions in Iraq, while we know very little about their backgrounds and motivations<sup>1</sup>. It appears that Bruno Etienne’s call for efforts to understand the unacceptable has not been heeded in this case. We shall take a closer look at one of the largest and most poorly understood foreign contingents in Iraq, namely the Saudis. Who are the Saudi fighters? Why do they leave quiet lives of material comfort for war and likely death in a foreign country?
- 3 The Saudi militant is often caricatured as the archetypal suicide bomber, the relentless radical who seeks war for no apparent reason other than to kill and be killed. Much of the literature on militant Islamism presumes the existence of a “Saudi extremism” which ensures a permanent flow of militants to conflict zones and terrorist groups. However,

this ignores the fundamental issue of why some Saudis go to Iraq while other Saudis do not. Such views also strip Saudi militants of their individuality and humanity. Louis-Jean Duclos, Olivier Grojean and Eleanor Pavey showed that within one and the same movement there are different paths to self-sacrifice. There is no reason why Saudis should be different. In order to answer our question we must therefore delve into the life stories of the militants and examine their background, motivations and recruitment patterns.

- 4 Until recently, this type of research was made difficult by the clandestine nature of violent groups and Saudi Arabia's strict visa regulations. With the advent of the Internet – which Saudi and Iraqi militants have warmly embraced – it became possible to study these communities through their own writings and publications. Saudi Arabia has also begun to open up for Western social scientists, and allowed this author to conduct extensive fieldwork in the Kingdom. Using jihadist literature on the Internet combined with secondary sources, I compiled the names and biographies of 205 Saudis who died in Iraq between 2003 and 2005<sup>2</sup>. I shall use these data to address four sub-questions: Who goes to Iraq? Why do they go? How do they go? And what is their role in the insurgency?
- 5 We shall see that the number of Saudis who have gone to Iraq is disputed, but seems not to exceed 1500. Volunteers come from a variety of geographic and socio-economic backgrounds, though the north is overrepresented and the south underrepresented. They are motivated by pan-Islamic nationalism, and inspired by friends and relatives who have gone before them. Some are enlisted by professional recruiters, others seek out “facilitators” on their own initiative. In Iraq, Saudis are overrepresented among suicide bombers. The number of Saudis going to Iraq peaked in late 2004 and continues to fall. Saudi authorities have acted to stem recruitment, but they are restricted politically by public perceptions of the Iraqi resistance as legitimate.
- 6 Saudi participation in foreign conflicts is nothing new. The Saudis who have died fighting in Iraq are but the latest generation in what is known in jihadist terminology as the “Caravan of Martyrs.” Since the mid-1980s, thousands of young Saudi men have fought as *mujahidin* in a variety of countries: Afghanistan, Bosnia, Tajikistan, Chechnya, and Afghanistan again. The Saudis have never been the sole foreign contingent in these conflicts, and they have not always been overrepresented. Nevertheless, there is a widespread perception – though no reliable figures exist – that the level of the Saudi participation in foreign jihad zones has been consistently very high<sup>3</sup>.
- 7 The reasons for this activism are not to be found in the Wahhabi religious tradition as such, or in some inherent Saudi radicalism, but rather in the strength of so-called pan-Islamic nationalism in Saudi Arabia. This nationalism was perfectly illustrated in a Washington Post interview with a random Saudi student in 2005: “Americans can't imagine how a young man living a decent life in Riyadh could feel so much love and passion for a fellow Muslim and feel compelled to go and fight when he sees television footage of Iraqis or Afghans being killed and tortured. But that's a result of the strong Islamic blood ties.”<sup>4</sup> These “blood ties” are of course imagined, and stem from a belief in the inherent unity of the Islamic nation (the *umma*). Like all nationalisms, pan-Islamism is a construct; but why should Saudis feel a deeper sense of pan-Islamic solidarity than Muslims from other countries?
- 8 The reasons are historical and political. In the 1960s, King Faisal emphasised Islamic Solidarity (*al-tadamun al-islami*) as a counterweight to Nasser's Arab nationalism. From the mid-1980s onward, the Saudi state actively promoted pan-Islamic nationalism to boost its

own legitimacy and facilitate mobilisation for the Afghan jihad. This pan-Islamic nationalist discourse emphasised the moral responsibility of Saudis to support oppressed Muslims abroad. In the early 1990s, the moderate Islamist opposition began adopting a similar rhetoric – thus contesting the state’s hold of pan-Islamic nationalism as a source of legitimacy. Hence there emerged a political culture of one-upmanship of declared solidarity with Muslim causes abroad. This in turn produced a relatively high level of social acceptance for financial and military support directed towards Muslim resistance movements in places such as Palestine, Bosnia and Chechnya. The line between charity and armed support became blurred, and jihad participation came to be seen by many as an act of altruism and courage. Taking part in clearly defined territorial resistance struggles – as opposed to international terrorism or domestic militancy – was considered by many religious Saudis as entirely legitimate.

- 9 In the Western scholarship on militant Islamism, the notion of pan-Islamic nationalism is very rarely used. This rather surprising fact may be due to a Western tendency to associate nationalism with the nation-state. Another reason may be that global jihadists are seen as the most extreme – and thus least rational - actors in the militant Islamist landscape. However, viewing global jihadism as an extreme form of pan-Islamic nationalism allows us to explain crucial elements of the activism of al-Qaida-style activists. From this perspective, the Saudis who travel to Iraq are in fact not going abroad to fight for someone else’s territory - they are simply moving to a different part of the Muslim world to defend their common Muslim territory.
- 10 The situation in Iraq after the US-led invasion in March 2003 was seen by many as a textbook case of defensive jihad. Foreign military forces occupied Muslim territory after what was widely perceived to be unjustified aggression. For the pan-Islamic nationalist there was no real difference between the situation in Iraq and, for example, that of 1980s Afghanistan. As a Saudi Intelligence official said: “We encouraged our young men to fight for Islam in Afghanistan. We encouraged our young men to fight for Islam in Bosnia and Chechnya. We encouraged our young men to fight for Islam in Palestine. Now we are telling them you are forbidden to fight for Islam in Iraq, and they are confused.”<sup>5</sup>
- 11 What had changed was of course the political context. In the so-called “war on terrorism”, the distinction between localised guerrilla warfare and international terrorism became irrelevant. Moreover, the campaign of violence launched inside Saudi Arabia in 2003 by veterans from Afghanistan made the Saudi authorities acutely aware of the security risk posed by war veterans. Thus Government-affiliated clerics such as Abd al-Muhsin al-Ubaykan have declared that the insurgency in Iraq amounts to fitna [sedition] and is illegitimate.<sup>6</sup>
- 12 This climate change was perfectly illustrated in November 2004, when a group of prominent Saudi religious scholars released a statement saying armed resistance to the US occupation was legitimate *for the Iraqi people*.<sup>7</sup> It did not encourage Saudis to go to Iraq, and in subsequent statements some signatories even explicitly discouraged young Saudis from joining the Iraqi jihad.<sup>8</sup> Yet the statement was widely condemned by Western and official Saudi media as incitement for terrorism.
- 13 However, the statement had simply reflected the mainstream position in Islamist circles in Saudi Arabia. According to this view, the Iraqi resistance amounts to a legitimate jihad, and represents a collective duty (so-called *fard kifaya*) for the Islamic nation. It is thus permissible – though not necessary – for Saudis to take part.<sup>9</sup> Of course, in more radical Islamist communities, participation in the Iraqi jihad is considered an individual duty (so

called *fard ayn*) for all Muslims, not just Iraqis. The necessity to resist the US-led forces in Iraq became a central theme in the global jihadist literature as early as 2002, and Iraq soon became the pan-Islamic nationalist cause *par excellence*.<sup>10</sup> In pan-Islamist Saudi Arabia, this struck a deep chord.

- 14 The first Saudis militants arrived in northern Iraq in early 2003, before the US-led invasion.<sup>11</sup> From March 2003 onwards, there were regular media reports about foreign fighters, including Saudis, trickling in to Iraq.<sup>12</sup> The first arrests of Saudis occurred in June 2003 and jihadist websites began announcing the deaths of Saudi martyrs in Iraq in the summer of 2003<sup>13</sup>.
- 15 Departure dates in jihadist biographies indicate that the flow of Saudi recruits to Iraq increased considerably over the summer of 2004, peaking around the time of the second siege on Falluja in November 2004. The increase in the second half of 2004 may be explained by a number of factors. In Saudi Arabia, the domestic terrorism campaign was considerably weakened in mid-2004, and the debate in the Saudi jihadist community over whether to fight in Iraq or at home was largely settled over the summer 2004 in favour of Iraq. Inside Iraq, the capture of Saddam Hussein in December 2003 stimulated recruitment, because it removed fears in Islamist communities that fighting in Iraq might benefit the Baath party. The first Falluja siege (April 2004) further galvanized support because it was perceived by jihadists as a victory, and enabled the creation of a stronghold for Zarqawi's group in Falluja. The publicity generated by events such as the Abu Ghraib scandal and the 2004 Iraqi kidnapping campaign also fuelled foreign recruitment to Iraq. Since late 2004, the number of Saudis entering Iraq seems to have decreased somewhat, partly as a result of boosted border security and the dismantling of personnel-smuggling networks.<sup>14</sup> However, there is still a steady flow of Saudis and other foreign militants to Iraq.<sup>15</sup>
- 16 The overall number of Saudis who have gone to Iraq is disputed and may never be known. The Saudi Interior ministry has never produced official figures. The lowest estimates – about 350 by August 2005 – have come from government-affiliated sources.<sup>16</sup> The highest estimates come from Saudi opposition figures such as Muhammad al-Mas'ari, who claimed that there were 5000 Saudis in Baghdad as early as October 2003<sup>17</sup>. The real figure is likely to be somewhere in between. Anonymous Saudi security officials were quoted in mid-2005 as saying the figure was between 2000 and 3000.<sup>18</sup> By collecting open-source references to dead or arrested Saudis in Iraq, this author arrived at a total of 421 individuals (248 named martyrs and detainees and 173 anonymous detainees). This list is no doubt incomplete; some may still be fighting in Iraq, others may have died without being mentioned in the jihadist literature, and anecdotal evidence suggests that a number of people have gone to Iraq and returned quietly to Saudi Arabia.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, this author sees no reason to assume that the figure is much larger than 1500 individuals, particularly given that the total number of foreign fighters in Iraq does not seem to have exceeded 3000 at any given time.<sup>20</sup>
- 17 There is a widespread perception that the Saudis are significantly overrepresented among the foreign fighters in Iraq.<sup>21</sup> Estimates range from 12% to 61%, but it is virtually impossible to provide an authoritative figure.<sup>22</sup> The widely diverging estimates reflect the general lack of information about the insurgency, as well as the highly contentious nature of the debate over the role of Saudis in Iraq. This makes it all the more important to study the Saudi contingent in detail with publicly available information.

- 18 The 205 Saudis martyrs in our sample were young males, who were on average 23 years old in 2003 (the youngest was 18, the oldest 39). This relatively low average indicates that the Saudis in Iraq represent a new generation of *mujahidin*.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, only 9 of the 205 are known to have had previous combat experience from Afghanistan, Bosnia or elsewhere. This shows that the recruitment to Iraq is a distinct and spontaneous phenomenon whose relation to the old al-Qaida networks is only peripheral.
- 19 Although data on their socio-economic background are limited, it points to a very diverse group. Some were very poor, others came from rich and privileged families. Information about their education level is also sparse, but indicates that many were highly educated: 14 of the 16 for whom we know the education level attended higher education, one even had a doctorate. We know the occupation of 26 individuals, which included 14 students, 3 private sector workers, 2 government clerks, 2 nurses, 2 police/military officers, a teacher, a car mechanic and a meteorologist.
- 20 The sample is also very diverse in terms of geographic and tribal origin. Our data on geographic origin show that all regions except Jizan in the far south are represented (see table 1)<sup>24</sup>. When compared to the overall distribution of the population, the most overrepresented regions are the central regions of Riyadh and Qasim, as well as the north-western regions of Tabuk, Jawf and Ha'il.<sup>25</sup> The most underrepresented regions in our sample are in fact in the southern regions of Jizan, Najran, Asir and Baha. This firmly contradicts the widespread perception (which derives from the profiles of the 9/11 hijackers) of the southern regions of Saudi Arabia as the main exporters of Saudi militants.<sup>26</sup>
- 21 The relatively large presence of "northerners" suggests that geographic proximity to the battlefield has affected recruitment to Iraq. Northerners may have been more capable of infiltrating the Saudi-Iraqi border. They may also have been more sensitive to the US military presence which was more visible in the north in early 2003<sup>27</sup>. Tribal loyalties may also have played a role, as a number of tribes are present on both sides of the border. So-called "shared tribes" like the Shammar are prominently represented in our sample (see table 2). It is worth mentioning that the tribal distribution in our sample is very broad and covers most major tribes. With the possible exception of the shared tribes in the north, it is difficult to speak of a tribal factor in the recruitment of Saudis to Iraq.

	Saudis in Iraq	in Overall population	QAP members
Riyadh	36 %	21 %	53 %
Mecca	19 %	23 %	18 %
Qasim	13 %	5 %	7 %
Jawf	9 %	2 %	2 %
Eastern	7 %	15 %	5 %
Ha'il	6 %	3 %	2 %
Tabuk	5 %	3 %	0 %
Baha	2 %	3 %	0 %
Medina	1 %	7 %	4 %
Northern	1 %	1 %	0 %
Asir	1 %	9 %	7 %
Jizan	0 %	6 %	2 %
Najran	0 %	2 %	0 %

Table 1: Geographic origin (by region) of Saudi militants

Saudis in Iraq		QAP members	
Unknown	50,2 %	Unknown	63,8 %
Utayba	7,8 %	Harb	7,5 %
Shammar	6,8 %	Ghamid	4,8 %
Qahtan	6,3 %	Utayba	3,5 %
Ghamid	4,9 %	Shammar	2,6 %
Mutayr	4,4 %	Subay	2,2 %
Harb	3,4 %	Mutayr	2,2 %
Banu Tamim	2,4 %	Qahtan	2,2 %
Banu Shihr	2,4 %	Banu Khalid	2,2 %
Banu Khalid	1,5 %	Anaza	1,7 %
Anaza	1,5 %	Shihr	1,7 %
Dawasir	1,5 %	Dawasir	1,7 %
Banu Harith	1,5 %	Suhul	1,7 %
Subay	1,0 %	Umran	1,3 %
Zahran	1,0 %	Quraysh	0,9 %
Suhul	1,0 %	Fadhil	0,9 %
Sulami	1,0 %	Zahran	0,4 %
Sharif	0,5 %		
Quraysh	0,5 %		
Banu Malik	0,5 %		

Table 2: Tribal background of Saudi militants

- 22 This socio-economic, geographic, and tribal diversity tells us two important things. First, it shows that militancy is not confined to a particular section of Saudi society (the “poor”, the “southerners”, the “Bedouins” etc). Second, it indicates that sympathy for the Iraqi

cause cuts across Saudi society. The significance of this point becomes clearer when we compare the Saudis in Iraq to a sample of 240 domestic militants from the group “al-Qaida on the Arabian Peninsula” (QAP). The Saudis in Iraq represent a more diverse group than the QAP, be it in terms of socio-economic, geographic, or tribal origin (see tables 1 and 2)<sup>28</sup>. This likely reflects the difference in the perceived legitimacy of fighting in Iraq and fighting at home.<sup>29</sup> It was far easier to motivate people to fight the US military in Iraq than to blow up cars in the streets of Riyadh.

- 23 Saudis in Iraq seem to have been driven by composite motivational factors. The declared motivations were of two main kinds. The first was altruistic: to liberate a fellow Muslim people from US occupation. The second was personal: to achieve martyrdom and go to heaven. In the biographies on jihadist websites, these motivations are repeated in standardised phrases, to the extent that one wonders about their sincerity.<sup>30</sup>
- 24 However, when supplemented by additional sources such as interviews with militants and recruiters, it does indeed seem that most Saudi recruits genuinely did hold a deep belief in and desire for martyrdom, at least by the time they entered Iraq.<sup>31</sup> For many, the prospect of going to heaven seems to have been more important than achieving political aims.<sup>32</sup> This obsession with martyrdom may have been partly driven by group dynamics, and partly promoted by leaders and recruiters for operational purposes.
- 25 It is difficult to know whether Saudi recruits were more focused on martyrdom than volunteers from other countries. Many commentators have suggested this, pointing to official US and Iraqi claims that Saudis are overrepresented among suicide bombers. Some jihadist sources speak of Saudis being particularly obsessed with martyrdom, but the evidence remains anecdotal.<sup>33</sup> Perhaps the only reasonably convincing argument in favour of this hypothesis is the ratio of martyred vs captured Saudis in Iraq. There is a large discrepancy between the proportion of Saudis on the lists of Arab martyrs in Iraq on the one hand (ca 60%) and the proportion of Saudis among foreign nationals in US custody in Iraq on the other (ca 10%)<sup>34</sup>. Even if we account for biased reporting, this seems to suggest that the death rate is higher for Saudis than for other groups.<sup>35</sup> There are several possible explanations for this. The Saudis may have been used by insurgent leaders as “cannon fodder”, they may have been less competent fighters, or they may have been more motivated for dangerous or suicidal combat operations.
- 26 It is important to stress that even if it were possible to prove that desire for martyrdom is particularly strong among Saudi jihadists, it would not make politics irrelevant. It is perfectly possible to be motivated by political frustration and extreme religiosity at the same time. In fact the two are linked: if a struggle is not considered a legitimate jihad, then martyrdom is not possible.
- 27 Political factors are indeed frequently cited as motivations for going to Iraq. Beyond the invasion itself, specific events such as the Abu Ghraib scandal and the sieges on Falluja are cited by several recruits as catalysts for their decision to depart for the Iraqi battlefield.<sup>36</sup> Equally important is the effect of such events on *parents*. A number of potential recruits would not go to Iraq without permission from their parents. Some parents who initially refused changed their minds after being outraged by pictures from Iraq.<sup>37</sup>
- 28 However, if we read between the lines of the declared motivations, we find other factors of a more social character which may have also been significant. A number of recruits were clearly inspired by friends or relatives who have gone abroad for jihad before them.

- <sup>38</sup> Some may have wanted to emulate their fathers and uncles, others believed they would meet martyred friends in heaven if they were martyred too, yet others may have felt a form of peer pressure. The news of a young Saudi's martyrdom would spread quickly in that person's family and neighbourhood, particularly since the family would often hold widely publicised condolence ceremonies in their house. In some villages or neighbourhoods, like Riyadh's Suwaydi district or the Thaqba area near Dammam, the high frequency of such news meant that most residents knew someone who had gone to Iraq. This in turn lowered their threshold for activism, a phenomenon known from so-called "assurance games" in rational choice theory.<sup>39</sup> Such social networks were also important for the patterns of recruitment of Saudis to Iraq.
- 29 Saudis were mobilised for combat in Iraq in a number of different ways. Some were subject to classical top-down recruitment. Others followed a bottom-up process whereby they radicalised alone or with friends before seeking out "facilitators" or "gatekeepers" on their own initiative.
- 30 Top down recruitments occurred in a number of different ways and places. Much of this type of recruitment followed pre-existing social links and took place in private gatherings. Another major arena for recruiters and inciters was Mecca, where thousands of young Saudis go during *hajj* or the last ten days of Ramadan. Mecca offers excellent opportunities for recruitment, because pilgrims are more open to new encounters and religious experiences than usual, and because the crowds complicate policing.<sup>40</sup> For many young Saudis, going to Mecca is also way of escaping parental supervision. A number of Saudis decided to go to Iraq after spending time in Mecca.<sup>41</sup>
- 31 Another slightly more indirect form of top-down recruitment is incitement from religious clerics. There are strong indications that both local imams and some senior clerics were encouraging participation in the Iraqi resistance.<sup>42</sup> Some of the Saudis in our sample explicitly said they were inspired to go to Iraq by sermons at a local mosque.<sup>43</sup> One biographer boasted that Abdallah bin Jibrin, one of the Kingdom's most well-known religious scholars, came to the family's house to congratulate them on their son's martyrdom.<sup>44</sup>
- 32 There are also many examples of bottom-up recruitment to Iraq. The Internet has no doubt played a major role in the "self-radicalisation" of many young Saudis. Since the outbreak of the Iraq war, jihadist Internet sites have been flooded with pictures, videos and written propaganda about the suffering of the Iraqi people under US occupation.<sup>45</sup> The Internet has also facilitated communication between interested recruits and so-called "gatekeepers" who can give practical advice on how to get to Iraq. Written instructions on how to join the Iraqi jihad have also circulated online.<sup>46</sup> However, it seems that most cases of bottom up recruitment follow informal social networks. In many Islamist communities the gatekeepers are relatively well known, meaning that potential recruits know who to approach.<sup>47</sup>
- 33 In most cases the bottom-up recruitment process was a group experience. Pairs or groups of friends would decide to go to Iraq together. A majority of the people in our sample travelled to Iraq together with at least one close friend, brother or cousin.<sup>48</sup>
- 34 Many of the biographies of Saudi martyrs in Iraq include the date of arrival in Iraq. This data show that a striking number of people travelled during or around the month of Ramadan, particularly in 2004. The main reason for this increase may be historical, because the second Falluja siege occurred in Ramadan 1425 h, ie November 2004.

However, many of the biographies accord great importance to the fact that an individual travelled to Iraq on or around Ramadan. If a person had been martyred during the last ten days of Ramadan or (even better) on *Laylat al-Qadr* (27 Ramadan), the anniversary for the first Quranic revelation, that too is highlighted in the biography.<sup>49</sup> It would seem that the belief in the special benefits of achieving martyrdom during Ramadan affected the patterns of Saudi recruitment to Iraq.<sup>50</sup>

- 35 Saudis went to Iraq through a number of different routes. The preferred routes varied over time with changes in countermeasures on the various border crossings. Those who went to Kurdistan just before the war travelled through Qatar and Iran. Up until approximately mid-2004, the Saudi-Iraqi border was also porous enough to cross. This was the preferred route for those without travel documents (many well-known radicals had had their passports confiscated by the police). From mid 2004 onward, Saudis tightened border security, and the majority of volunteers travelled to Yemen, from there to Syria and into Iraq. US forces had problems policing the Iraqi-Syrian border area north of the River Euphrates because most forces were stationed on the south bank and there were few bridges strong enough to carry armed vehicles.<sup>51</sup> In mid-2005, the US military conducted a massive operation to gain control of this area, and this reduced the flow of foreign militants across the Syrian-Iraqi border. There have also been cases of Saudis entering Iraq through Jordan and Turkey.
- 36 Once inside Iraq, most Saudi volunteers would go wherever their facilitator sent them.<sup>52</sup> The majority of Saudis in Iraq joined al-Zarqawi's network, which was by far the most multinational of all the militant groups in Iraq.<sup>53</sup> The biographies speak of frequent communications on open telephone lines between Saudi Arabia and Iraq. Some volunteers would call their families regularly from Iraq, other were never heard from again. However, when a person was killed, one of their companions would call the martyr's family to inform and congratulate them. The news of the death of a Saudi martyr in Iraq was often widely announced and even celebrated in the person's neighbourhood and family. The mobile phone number of the martyr's father or brother – together with addresses and directions for the family's house – was posted on the Internet so that anybody could visit or call to congratulate or express condolences.
- 37 The precise role of Saudi contingent in the insurgency is very difficult to determine, because we know so little about the composition and inner workings of the insurgency in general. In the early phases of the insurgency, the role of the foreigners in Iraq tended to be exaggerated. Now the standard (and slightly clichéd) phrase is that they are “numerically small but operationally significant”. The foreigners, who are believed to represent between 5% and 10% of the total number of Sunni insurgents, are said to have introduced new and brutal tactics, ignited sectarian violence and executed the majority of suicide bombings in Iraq.<sup>54</sup>
- 38 The Saudis seem to have operated mainly in the lower echelons of the militant organisations in Iraq.<sup>55</sup> Saudi volunteers have executed a large number of suicide bombings, including some of the most spectacular attacks in the history of the insurgency.<sup>56</sup> At least 33 in our sample of 205 martyrs died in suicide bombings. There are indications that jihadist groups in Iraq have streamlined the recruitment and assignment of Saudis for suicide operations. In early 2005, a Saudi named Ahmad al-Shayea barely survived a suicide bombing in Baghdad. He later told media that the operation had been carried out against his will - he had been told to drive a truck without knowing that it was loaded with explosives.<sup>57</sup> Official Saudi media seized on the story and used it to tell the

public that Saudi recruits were being duped and exploited by Iraqi groups that only wanted Saudis as funders and suicide bombers.<sup>58</sup> The instrumentalisation of Saudis for suicide attacks illustrates that suicide operations must be understood within a broader organisational context, not just as a product of individual choice.

- 39 It would seem that the both the size and the importance of the Saudi contingent in Iraq has been somewhat overestimated by commentators thus far. This may be related to a broader tendency to exaggerate the importance of the external component in order to downplay the local support for the insurgency. Although Saudis have contributed a number of suicide bombings, they seem to have had a limited impact on the overall strategy adopted by insurgent groups in Iraq in recent years. Moreover, the number of Saudis going to Iraq has been on the decrease since early 2005, and the death of al-Zarqawi in June 2006 will not make it easier for foreign fighters to enter Iraq and take a meaningful part in combat.
- 40 Many have warned against the threat to domestic Saudi security posed by returnees from Iraq.<sup>59</sup> In the past, veterans from Afghanistan played a leading role in orchestrating violence inside Saudi Arabia. Brutalised "Iraq veterans" might try the same in the future. While this threat that must be taken seriously, we should also keep in mind some major differences between the "Afghan Arabs" and the "Iraqi Arabs". One is size: the number of Saudis in Iraq may not be higher than a thousand, and many of them will die on the battlefield. Second is the pattern of return: unlike the returnees from Afghanistan in early 2002, the Iraq veterans will return in trickles and can thus be dealt with more effectively. Third is the preparedness of the security services: while the returnees from Afghanistan were not dealt with as a security threat, the returnees from Iraq will be followed very closely.
- 41 In its battle against domestic militancy, Saudi Arabia has adopted a diversified and measured counterterrorism approach which has been very effective. However, in the long term, the fundamental issue is whether the Kingdom is able and willing to counter the extreme pan-Islamic nationalism which drives recruitment to foreign jihad zones and inspires attacks on Western targets inside Saudi Arabia. This is no easy task, for there are a large number of loudmouth populist preachers in the Kingdom, and pan-Islamic nationalism is on the rise worldwide. Moreover, the United States continues to fan the pan-Islamist fire with its foreign policy, most recently in Lebanon. Thus the Saudi fighters currently in Iraq are probably not the last generation of volunteers for combat on foreign territory.

---

## NOTES

1. Exceptions include Nawaf Obaid and Anthony Cordesman, "Saudi Militants in Iraq: Assessment and Kingdom's Response," (Washington: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2005) and Reuven Paz, "Arab Volunteers Killed in Iraq: An Analysis," PRISM Papers 3, no. 1 (2005)

2. There are certainly important source-related problems associated with martyrs' biographies posted on the Internet. Authors are most often anonymous, and the information cannot always

be verified. There are obvious incentives for jihadist propagandists to embellish stories and inflate numbers of martyrs. However, this does not justify the complete dismissal of such biographies as fabrications (Obaid and Cordesman, "Saudi Militants in Iraq: Assessment and Kingdom's Response," 22). Many of the deaths reported online have been corroborated by reports in the Saudi press based on conversations with families of the deceased. A number of the biographies also contain telephone numbers and addresses of the martyrs' families. These lists overreport Saudi martyrs because they are compiled by Saudis, so they tell us little about the relative size of the various foreign contingents. However, if we extract the biographies of Saudis and look at them as a group, there is no reason why it should not be reasonably representative of the Saudis who have gone to Iraq.

3. For example, Al-Qaida leader Khalid Shaykh Muhammad told interrogators that in any given Arab camp in Afghanistan in 2001, 70% of recruits would be Saudis; see The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2004)

4. Faiza Saleh Ambah, "Iraq: Spinning off Arab Terrorists?," Washington Post, 8 February 2005

5. Robert Windrem, "Saudi Arabia's Ambitious al-Qaida Fighter," NBC News, 11 July 2005

6. Abd al-Muhsin al-Ubaykan, "ma yajri fi'l-'iraq laysa jihadan [What Goes on in Iraq is not Jihad]" al-Sharq al-Awsat, 4 November 2004

7. jam' min al-'ulama al-sa'udiyin yuwajjihuna khatiban maftuhan li'l-sha'b al-'iraqi [Group of Saudi Scholars Direct Open Letter to the Iraqi People], www.islamtoday.net, 5 November 2004

8. See Ayidh al-Qarni's statement on al-Jazeera on 14 November 2004, Salman al-Awda's article in al-Riyadh newspaper on 20 November 2004, and Safar al-Hawali's interview with al-Ukaz on 19 May 2005.

9. Scholars affiliated with the Government, like Salih al-Luhaydan, have privately expressed similar views; see Lisa Myers, "More Evidence of Saudi Doubletalk," Newsweek, 26 April 2005

10. Thomas Hegghammer, "Global Jihadism After the Iraq War," Middle East Journal 60, no. 1 (2006)

11. Brynjar Lia, "The Ansar al-Islam Group Revisited," Studies in Conflict and Terrorism 30, no. 3 (2007 [forthcoming])

12. Neil MacFarquhar, "For Arabs, New Jihad is in Iraq," New York Times, 2 April 2003; Mohammad Bazzi, "A New Jihad vs America? Iraq Fight Draws Arab Men," Newsday, 20 July 2003; Mark Huband, "Saudis in Iraq 'Preparing for a Holy War'," Financial Times, 18 August 2003; Shaun Waterman, "US holds Saudi, Arab Fighters in Iraq," United Press International, 27 August 2003; Faiza Saleh Ambah, "Saudi Fighters Cross Border to Kill Infidels," Washington Times, 31 August 2003; "Four Saudi Militants Held Near Border With Iraq: Police," Agence France Presse, 13 October 2003; Stephen Schwartz, "An Unwelcome Saudi Export," Weekly Standard, 2 February 2004.

13. Robin Gedye, "Iraq Becomes a Battleground in War on Infidels," Daily Telegraph, 19 August 2003

14. Craig S. Smith, "U.S. Contends Campaign Has Cut Suicide Attacks," New York Times, 5 August 2005

15. In October 2006, the US military said "between 50 and 70 foreign fighters sneak over the border into Iraq every month", and "most come from Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Egypt, or Syria"; Peter Grier, "Iraq War Draws Foreign Jihadists, But Not in Doves," Christian Science Monitor, 3 October 2006

16. Obaid and Cordesman, "Saudi Militants in Iraq: Assessment and Kingdom's Response,"

17. Shaista Aziz, "Saudi Fighters 'Join Resistance' in Iraq," al-Jazeera English Edition, 28 October 2003. Saad al-Faqih said in August 2003 that there were 3000 Saudis in Iraq; "Bremer Urges Syria to Stop Fighters Entering Iraq," Reuters, 19 August 2003

18. Saud al-Sarhan, "al-qa'ida fi'l-sa'udiyya: min al-tashkik ila al-ghazal [al-Qaida in Saudi Arabia: From Suspicion to Flirtation]," *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 20 May 2005. Mishari al-Dhaidi, "al-irhabiyyun fi'l-'iraq yuridun al-sa'udi imma intihariyyan aw mumawwilan... faqat [The Terrorists in Iraq Want the Saudi Only as a Suicide Bomber or as a Financier]," *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 20 September 2005 2005
19. Ambah, "Saudi Fighters Cross Border to Kill Infidels," ; Author's interviews with Saud al-Sarhan and Yusuf al-Dayni, 2005
20. In October 2005, the Iraqi Interior Minister said foreign Arab militants now numbered less than 1,000 "compared to between 2,500 and 3,000 six months ago"; Suleiman al-Khalidi, "Iraq says Zarqawi sending some militants back home," Reuters, 2 October 2005. The same estimate was given by US officials in late 2005; Michael Eisenstadt and Jeffrey White, "Assessing Iraq's Arab Insurgency," in *Policy Focus* (Washington DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2005). In October 2005, the US military said only 312 of about 10,000 detained insurgents were foreigners; Dexter Filkins, "Foreign Fighters Captured in Iraq Come From 27, Mostly Arab, Lands," *New York Times*, 21 October 2005.
21. Susan B. Glasser, "'Martyrs' In Iraq Mostly Saudis," *Washington Post*, 15 May 2005; Mia Bloom, "Grim Saudi Export - Suicide Bombers," *Los Angeles Times*, 17 July 2005 2005
22. Obaid and Cordesman, "Saudi Militants in Iraq: Assessment and Kingdom's Response,"; Paz, "Arab Volunteers Killed in Iraq: An Analysis," Both estimates are very problematic. The CSIS study refers only to "intelligence sources" for its curiously precise figures on the composition of the insurgency. Paz' study is based on an early version of the jihadist Internet document *Arab Martyrs in Mesopotamia*, which was compiled primarily by Saudis and is thus likely to have paid more attention to Saudi martyrs.
23. This is four years below the average of the domestic Saudi militants in the group known as al-Qaida on the Arabian Peninsula, the majority of whom were veterans from Afghanistan; Thomas Hegghammer, "Terrorist Recruitment and Radicalisation in Saudi Arabia," *Middle East Policy* 13, no. 4 (2006)
24. We know the geographic origin of 151 of the 205 militants.
25. The overall population figures are from Central Department of Statistics, "Demographic Survey Report 1421H-2001," (Saudi Ministry of Planning [<http://www.planning.gov.sa>])
26. This evidence adds to the findings from my study of the backgrounds of 240 domestic Saudi militants, which also shows that the Southern regions are not overrepresented; Hegghammer, "Terrorist Recruitment and Radicalisation in Saudi Arabia,"
27. The US Air Force used facilities in northern Saudi Arabia in the war on Iraq; John R. Bradley, "Saudi Town Sows Seeds of Revolution," *Washington Times*, 26 January 2004
28. Hegghammer, "Terrorist Recruitment and Radicalisation in Saudi Arabia,"
29. Neil MacFarquhar, "Saudis Support Jihad in Iraq, Not Back Home," *New York Times*, 23 April 2004
30. Muhibb al-Jihad, "shuhada' ard al-rafidayn [Martyrs of the Land of the Two Rivers]," (2005)
31. Ghaith Abdul-Ahad, "In Hideout, Foreign Arabs Share Vision of 'Martyrdom,'" *Washington Post*, 9 November 2004
32. A telling example is the biography of Faris al-Badiawi, who allegedly started weeping after surviving his first battle. He told his comrades "If I am not martyred in the next battle I will go home to my family"; see al-Jihad, "shuhada' ard al-rafidayn [Martyrs of the Land of the Two Rivers]," All subsequent biographies are from this source, unless otherwise specified.
33. "Bin Laden's Former Mufti Saudi Cleric Musa Al-Qarni: Saudi Youth are Exceptional in Terms of Sacrifice in Their Love of Jihad & Their Desire to Reach Paradise; Fighting the American Aggressors in Iraq is Jihad & Constitutes a Legitimate & Obligatory Defense," MEMRI Special Dispatch, no. 1124 (2006)

34. Paz, "Arab Volunteers Killed in Iraq: An Analysis," said 94 on a list of 154 martyrs were Saudi. In October 2005, the US military said 32 of its 312 foreign detainees in Iraq were Saudis; Dexter Filkins, "Foreign Fighters Captured in Iraq Come From 27, Mostly Arab, Lands," New York Times, 21 October 2006
35. Egyptians, for example, were absent in Paz' sample but constituted the largest contingent (25%) among the detainees.
36. See for exmple the biography of Abd al-Aziz al-Rashid
37. See for example the biography of Bandar al-Badri
38. For example, Nasir al-Qahtani and Muhammad al-Qahtani, the brother and son of Ayidh al-Qahtani who died in Tajikistan in 1995 – both went to Iraq. Ahmad al- Dhahiri had a father who fought in the first Afghan war. Asim al-Dhahiri went to Iraq after his brother Ahmad. Fawaz al-Zahrani went to Iraq immediately after the death of his friend Salwah al-Fahmi in Baghdad.
39. As a result of similar dynamics, certain towns and communities in the United States provide a disproportionately high number of recruits to the US military in Iraq; Patrik Jonsson, "In small towns, military values a big draw," Christian Science Monitor, 19 October 2005
40. In April 2005, Saudi police dismantled a network of recruiters in Mecca; "masadir amniyya: khaliyat makka kanat mutakhassisa bi-irsal muqatilin li'l-zarqawi 'abr al-yaman wa suria [The Mecca Cell Specialized in Sending Fighters to al-Zarqawi Through Yemen and Syria]," al-Sharq al-Awsat, 23 April 2005
41. See for example the biographies of Majid al-Mutayri and Fahd al-Shihri
42. Scheherezade Faramarzi, "Saudi Clerics Point Militants Toward Iraq," Associated Press, 24 January 2005
43. See for example the biography of Mahir al-Juhani
44. See for example the biography of Faris al-Harbi
45. Hegghammer, "Global Jihadism After the Iraq War,"
46. al-Duktur al-Islami, "hadhihi hiya al-tariq ila al-'iraq [This is the Way to Iraq]," (Muntada al-Hikma, 2005)
47. Author's interviews with anonymous sources in Saudi Arabia, November 2005. See also Donna Abu-Nasr, "Underground Network Helps Saudis go to Iraq for Jihad," Associated Press, 24 February 2005
48. See for example the biography of Ziyad al-Thunayyan
49. See for example the biography of Abu al-Hasan posted on the jihadist Internet forum al-Hikma on 5 June 2005
50. Ghaida Ghantous, "Islamists Militants Urge Increase in Attacks During Ramadan," Reuters, 21 October 2004
51. Smith, "U.S. Contends Campaign Has Cut Suicide Attacks,"
52. Patrick J. McDonnel, "Coalition Gains Insight Into Iraq's Foreign Insurgents," Los Angeles Times, 9 February 2004
53. Zaki Chehab, *Inside the Resistance* (New York: Nation, 2005), 33-67
54. Ahmed S. Hashim, *Insurgency and Counter-Insurgency in Iraq* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 150; Lee Gordon, "Iraqi Insurgents Turn Against 'Out Of Control' Saudi al-Qaeda Fighters," Daily Telegraph, 30 May 2004
55. There are of course exceptions; see for example Samir al-Saadi, "Saudi Bomb Mastermind Killed," Arab News, 28 August 2005;
56. Saudis carried out the bombing of the mess hall inside the US military camp in Mosul in ...
57. P.K. Abdul Ghafour, "Saudi Explains How Al-Qaeda Used Him for Terror Operation," Arab News, 18 September 2005
58. al-Dhaidi, "al-irhabiyyun fi'l-'iraq yuridun al-sa'udi imma intihariyyan aw mumawwilan... faqat [The Terrorists in Iraq Want the Saudi Only as a Suicide Bomber or as a Financier],"
59. Craig Whitlock, "Saudis Facing Return of Radicals," Washington Post, 11 July 2004

---

## ABSTRACTS

Dans cet article, Thomas Hegghammer analyse, au travers d'un échantillon de deux cent cinq « martyrs » saoudiens tués en Irak depuis 2003, les différentes trajectoires ayant conduit de jeunes Saoudiens établis d'embrasser le combat et une mort probable sur le champ de bataille irakien. L'étude de leurs trajectoires individuelles et collectives permet d'avoir une image plus complexe et détaillée de leurs antécédents, de leurs motivations, de leurs modes de recrutement ainsi que de leur rôle dans l'insurrection irakienne. En montrant que leur origine géographique et sociale ne joue pas un rôle déterminant, que des motivations plus généralement sociales et politiques jouent un rôle crucial et qu'il s'agit d'une génération différente de celle des « Arabes afghans » et de l'ancien réseau Al-Qaïda, cet article remet en question nombre de représentations communes du phénomène. Il montre également que, contrairement à ce qui est généralement dit, le « contingent » saoudien ne semble pas jouer un rôle crucial dans l'insurrection en Irak.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** conflicts, Iraq, Islam, Jihadism