

**Deputy Crown Prince  
Mohammed Bin Salman's**

## **Three-Pronged Approach to Counter-Terrorism**

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After a new administration assumed leadership of the country, Saudi Arabia is now establishing a new comprehensive, locally and internationally coordinated counter-terrorism strategy, which is spearheaded by Deputy Crown Prince and Defense Minister, Prince Mohammed bin Salman.<sup>1</sup>

While the strategy is centered around conventional methods of countering terrorism, such as monitoring, tracking down and eliminating terrorist threats, it will do so by focusing on eradicating any terrorist cyber-presence, combatting extremist ideologies, and establishing a coalition of Muslim countries that will aim to eliminate any form of terrorism that claims to operate under the name of Islam. As the focal points of the Deputy Crown Prince's strategy, these particular aspects are emphasized in order to carry out and implement preemptive measures to not only prevent the occurrence of terrorism on Saudi Arabian soil, which is already surrounded by political turbulence and unrest, but the occurrence of terrorism anywhere in the world as well.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2015/12/15/are-the-saudis-finally-getting-serious-about-the-anti-isis-fight/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.cnn.com/2014/10/09/world/meast/isis-coalition-nations/>

However, even before this new strategy has been put into effect, Saudi Arabia has already been participating in an international coalition to combat terrorist organizations, chief of them being ISIS. In fact, ever since the International Coalition to Combat ISIS was formed under the leadership of the United States, Saudi Arabia has been an active member since day one. Saudi Arabia started out by participating heavily in the coalition's military operations that were launched in September 2014, with air strikes that targeted areas controlled by ISIS within Syrian and Iraqi territories. In fact, the total number of offensive sorties carried out by Saudi Arabia's Air Force up to July 25<sup>th</sup>, 2016 is 254 sorties. Saudi Arabia displayed its commitment to the International Coalition's military air campaign against ISIS even further by sending its Special Operation Forces to assist with the coalition's efforts. Additionally, on April 25<sup>th</sup>, 2016, Saudi Arabia carried out a massive military offensive against Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) that eliminated more than 800 Al-Qaeda militants in Al-Mukalla, paving the way for a legitimate Yemini government to liberate Hadhramaut's capital from Al-Qaeda's grip.<sup>3</sup>

As such, Saudi Arabia's participation in the United States-led global coalition also constitutes a strategic aspect in the battle against ISIS, and that is by taking away every excuse for ISIS to claim that it is engaged in a war exclusively against the West, or what they often refer to as "Christian Crusaders".<sup>4</sup> There are also deeply embedded reasons as to why the Kingdom's contributions makes this global coalition uniquely positioned to defeat ISIS, as Saudi Arabia is home to the two holiest sites in Islam, Mecca and Medina, effectively making Saudi Arabia the de facto leader of the Arab and Islamic world. ISIS has targeted Saudi Arabia more than 20 times in order to discourage them from continuing to be active participants in the global coalition to combat it. This is because ISIS knows for a fact that the Kingdom's inclusion in this coalition greatly reduces the chances of ISIS resuming their recruitment efforts under the pretext of confronting those whom they refer to as "infidels".<sup>5</sup>

Recently, given the significant resources and capabilities that terrorist groups have been able to acquire, the current Saudi administration has recognized the need to adapt to the threats that these terrorist elements represent. It also believes that a new tactical approach must be implemented as part of a strategy that not only aims to encircle terrorist groups and completely impede their movements, but also to thoroughly cut off their sources of financial income. Some of the ways that will be used to monitor their movements include tracking their recruitment strategies that utilize online social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, or by keeping a close eye on extremist groups that encourage Saudis to commit to fundamentalism, which is subsequently used as a gateway to push Saudi youth towards extremism and intolerance.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.cnn.com/2014/10/09/world/meast/isis-coalition-nations/>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.catholic.com/blog/steve-weidenkopf/isis-flogs-the-crusades-myth>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.newsweek.com/yemen-conflict-saudi-arabia-al-qaeda-mukalla-451894>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2015/12/15/are-the-saudis-finally-getting-serious-about-the-anti-isis-fight/>



Mohammad bin Salman

As such, the Deputy Crown Prince pushed for three main directions towards the strategy that focus on tackling terrorism through multiple fronts that include (but are not limited to) digital, ideological and military fronts. Three centers have been established that take on each respective front, which are:

1. The establishment of a specialized center called the "Digital Extremism Observatory" (DEO) that aims to monitor and track every possible online presence created by terrorist groups, whether it's social media accounts, survey sites or webpages created by these groups to promote their ideologies and goals. Even Twitter recognized the importance of keeping terrorists from accessing and abusing social media platforms, as they have shutdown nearly 250,000<sup>7</sup> Twitter accounts associated with terrorist groups and activities.<sup>8</sup>

Some of the center's efforts include frustrating any attempt to exploit any online platform that could be used for either recruitment or spreading extremist ideologies. It does so by enlisting the help of experts in online monitoring and data analysis, in order to develop a detailed map of intelligence information that can be provided to local or international authorities if requested. The center also has a dedicated team of specialists that respond swiftly to any attempt by terrorists to spread their ideology or to employ any of their digital recruitment strategies. This is all done under a framework of cooperation between the Kingdom and the global community for the purpose of collaborating effectively towards thwarting any terrorist operation that could be carried out using these platforms. Examples of such operations that relied

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<sup>7</sup> [http://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/19/technology/twitter-suspends-accounts-extremism.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/19/technology/twitter-suspends-accounts-extremism.html?_r=0)

<sup>8</sup> [http://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/19/technology/twitter-suspends-accounts-extremism.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/19/technology/twitter-suspends-accounts-extremism.html?_r=0)

heavily on online social networking sites include those that occurred in France and Britain. In addition, the terrorist group Al-Qaeda used several online media platforms on February 14<sup>th</sup>, 2003 to broadcast incendiary propaganda against the Kingdom titled "Between the Band of Horsemen". Elements of the terrorist organization consequently used this propaganda piece as one of the steps towards an infamous terrorist operation known as the "Pearl Harbor of Arabia", which occurred on May 2003. It targeted a residential compound in the Saudi capital Riyadh, killing eight Americans, Australians and many Westerners, as well as a number of Saudi security guards.<sup>9</sup>

2. The establishment of an ideology research and advocacy center that aims to not only confront extremist ideologies, but also to promote a more moderate and welcoming version of Islam that is based on the religion's principles of tolerance and coexistence with others, no matter what their religion, belief or nationality. The center has just recently been established, and is currently being led and supervised by the former Minister of Justice and head of the Supreme Judicial Council, Dr. Mohammed Al-Issa. The Deputy Crown Prince assigned this responsibility to Dr. Al-Issa due to his other position as secretary general of the Muslim World League, where he also counters extremist ideologies and promotes a more moderate version of Islam. The league is recognized by the United Nations as an Observer in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). In addition, the league's membership includes 60 Islamic states, and is known for being moderate and open to other cultures. It also utterly rejects all forms of extremism and terrorism.<sup>10</sup>

The center also plays a major role in efforts to quell any extremist religious discourse, as well as in pushing for new blood into some religious institutions in order to suppress and erase any aspect related to extremism and intolerance towards others. This responsibility has been fulfilled by Dr. Al-Issa during his tenure as Minister of Justice, by enforcing laws and regulations that contributed greatly to isolating and excising any extremist element that might hide and operate within these institutions or use them as a means to spread extremism or supporting fundamentalist ideologies.

Dr. Al-Issa also toured the United States in January 2012 as part of his commitment to communicate with the international community, where he emphasized the Kingdom's centrist, moderate approach and its principle of tolerance towards others. Dr. Al-Issa was also keen on stressing the importance of combatting extremist ideologies during meetings with several U.S. officials, as well as his personal concern and goal to refute any excuse or justification for terrorists to conduct attacks in the name of Islam.<sup>11</sup>

3. The establishment of the "Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition", which includes 40 Muslim countries that will work within international conventions and laws in order to complement the regional and international efforts that are already underway for confronting terrorism in all of its manifestations. Additionally, it was recently announced that a joint operations center for the coalition has been created in

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<sup>9</sup>[https://www.saprac.org/uploads/2/4/0/6/24062436/crown\\_prince\\_mohammed\\_bin\\_nayef\\_-\\_man\\_behind\\_counterterrorism\\_strategy\\_final\\_1.pdf](https://www.saprac.org/uploads/2/4/0/6/24062436/crown_prince_mohammed_bin_nayef_-_man_behind_counterterrorism_strategy_final_1.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2015/12/15/are-the-saudis-finally-getting-serious-about-the-anti-isis-fight/>

<sup>11</sup> [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2009\\_2014/documents/afet/dv/20130422\\_cvalissa\\_/20130422\\_cvalissa\\_en.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2009_2014/documents/afet/dv/20130422_cvalissa_/20130422_cvalissa_en.pdf)

Riyadh in order to unify, support and coordinate the efforts of all willing countries that want to offer help and assistance in combatting both physical and digital forms of terrorism.<sup>12</sup>

The Deputy Crown Prince faces what is possibly the most foreboding and relentless form of terrorism that Saudi Arabia and the world has ever seen. While it has been argued that Saudi Arabia hasn't been doing enough to publicize its counter-terrorism efforts to the international media, one can also argue that the country's current administration has formulated a far more comprehensive and methodical approach to fighting terrorism that aims to root out extremism wherever it may manifest by any means possible, whether its digitally, ideologically or militarily.<sup>13</sup>

- Salman Al-Ansari – Founder & President of the Washington DC-based Saudi American Public Relation Affairs Committee (SAPRAC)

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<sup>12</sup> <http://www.cnn.com/2015/12/14/middleeast/islamic-coalition-isis-saudi-arabia/>

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