AQAP: Paradigm Shifts and Lessons Learned
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By Scott Stewart

On the evening of Aug. 28, Prince Mohammed bin Nayef, the Saudi Deputy Interior Minister — and the man in charge of the kingdom’s counterterrorism efforts — was receiving members of the public in connection with the celebration of Ramadan, the Islamic month of fasting. As part of the Ramadan celebration, it is customary for members of the Saudi royal family to hold public gatherings where citizens can seek to settle disputes or offer Ramadan greetings.

One of the highlights of the Friday gathering was supposed to be the prince’s meeting with Abdullah Hassan Taleh al-Asiri, a Saudi man who was a wanted militant from al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). Al-Asiri had allegedly renounced terrorism and had requested to meet the prince in order to repent and then be accepted into the kingdom’s amnesty program. Such surrenders are not unprecedented — and they serve as great press events for the kingdom’s ideological battle against jihadists. Prince Mohammed, who is responsible for the Saudi rehabilitation program for militants, is a key figure in that ideological battle.

In February, a man who appeared with al-Asiri on Saudi Arabia’s list of most-wanted militants — former Guantanamo Bay inmate Mohammed al-Awfi — surrendered in Yemen and was transported to Saudi Arabia where he renounced terrorism and entered into the kingdom’s amnesty program. Al-Awfi, who had appeared in a January 2009 video issued by the newly created AQAP after the merger of the Saudi and Yemeni nodes of the global jihadist network, was a senior AQAP leader, and his renouncement was a major blow against AQAP.

But the al-Asiri case ended very differently from the al-Awfi case. Unlike al-Awfi, al-Asiri was not a genuine repentant — he was a human Trojan horse. After al-Asiri entered a small room to speak with Prince Mohammed, he activated a small improvised explosive device (IED) he had been carrying inside his anal cavity. The resulting explosion ripped al-Asiri to shreds but only lightly injured the shocked prince — the target of al-Asiri’s unsuccessful assassination attempt.

While the assassination proved unsuccessful, AQAP had been able to shift the operational paradigm in a manner that allowed them to achieve tactical surprise. The surprise was complete and the Saudis did not see the attack coming — the operation could have succeeded had it been better executed.

The kind of paradigm shift evident in this attack has far-reaching implications from a protective-intelligence standpoint, and security services will have to adapt in order to counter the new tactics employed. The attack also allows some important conclusions to be drawn about AQAP’s ability to operate inside Saudi Arabia.

Paradigm Shifts
Militants conducting terrorist attacks and the security services attempting to guard against such attacks have long engaged in a tactical game of cat and mouse. As militants adopt new tactics, security measures are then implemented to counter those tactics. The security changes then cause the militants to change in response and the cycle begins again. These changes can include using different weapons, employing weapons in a new way or changing the type of targets selected.

Sometimes, militants will implement a new tactic or series of tactics that is so revolutionary that it completely changes the framework of assumptions — or the paradigm — under which the security forces operate. Historically, al Qaeda and its jihadist progeny have proved to be very good at understanding the security paradigm and then developing tactics intended to exploit vulnerabilities in that paradigm in order to launch surprise attacks. For example:

- Prior to the 9/11 attacks, it was inconceivable that a large passenger aircraft would be used as a manually operated cruise missile. Hence, security screeners allowed box cutters to be carried onto aircraft, which were then used by the hijackers to take over the planes.
- The use of faux journalists to assassinate Ahmed Shah Masood with suicide IEDs hidden in their camera gear was also quite inventive.
- Had Richard Reid been able to light the fuse on his shoe bomb, we might still be wondering what happened to American Airlines Flight 63.
- The boat bomb employed against the USS Cole in October 2000 was another example of a paradigm shift that resulted in tactical surprise.

Once the element of tactical surprise is lost, however, the new tactics can be countered.

- When the crew and passengers on United Airlines Flight 93 learned what had happened to the other flights hijacked and flown to New York and Washington on Sept. 11, 2001, they stormed the cockpit and stopped the hijackers from using their aircraft in an attack. Aircraft cockpit doors have also been hardened and other procedural measures have been put in place to make 9/11-style suicide hijackings harder to pull off.
- Following the Masood assassination, journalists have been given very close scrutiny before being allowed into the proximity of a VIP.
- The traveling public has felt the impact of the Reid shoe-bombing attempt by being forced to remove their shoes every time they pass through airport security. And the thwarted 2006 Heathrow plot has resulted in limits on the size of liquid containers travelers can take aboard aircraft.
- The U.S. Navy is now very careful to guard against small craft pulling up alongside its warships.

Let’s now take a look at the paradigm shift marked by the Prince Mohammed assassination attempt.

AQAP’s Tactical Innovations

First, using a repentant militant was a brilliant move, especially when combined with the timing of Ramadan. For Muslims, Ramadan is a time for introspection, sacrifice, reconciliation and repentance — it is a time to exercise self-restraint and practice good deeds. Additionally, as
previously mentioned, Ramadan is a time when the Saudi royal family customarily makes itself more accessible to the people than at other times of the year. By using a repentant militant who appears on Saudi Arabia’s list of most-wanted militants, AQAP was playing to the ego of the Saudis, who very much want to crush AQAP, and who also want to use AQAP members who have renounced terrorism and the group as part of their ideological campaign against jihadists. The surrender of an AQAP member offered the Saudi government a prize and a useful tool — it was an attractive offer and, as anticipated, Prince Mohammed took the bait. (Another side benefit of this tactic from the perspective of AQAP is that it will make the Saudis far more careful when they are dealing with surrendered militants in the future.)

The second tactical innovation in this case was the direct targeting of a senior member of the Saudi royal family and the member of the family specifically charged with leading the campaign against AQAP. In the past, jihadist militants in Saudi Arabia have targeted foreign interests and energy infrastructure in the kingdom. While jihadists have long derided and threatened the Saudi royal family in public statements, including AQAP statements released this year, they had not, prior to the Prince Mohammed assassination attempt, ever tried to follow through on any of their threats. Nor has the group staged any successful attack inside the kingdom since the February 2007 attack that killed four French citizens, and it has not attempted a major attack in Saudi Arabia since the failed February 2006 attack against a major oil-processing facility in the city of Abqaiq. Certainly the group had never before attempted a specifically targeted assassination against any member of the very large Saudi royal family — much less a senior member. Therefore the attack against Prince Mohammed came as a complete surprise. There are many less senior members of the royal family who would have been far more vulnerable to attack, but they would not have carried the rank or symbolism that Mohammed does.

But aside from his rank, Mohammed was the logical target to select for this operation because of his office and how he conducts his duties. Mohammed has long served as the primary contact between jihadists and the Saudi government, and he is the person Saudi militants go to in order to surrender. He has literally met with hundreds of repentant jihadists in person and had experienced no known security issues prior to the Aug. 28 incident. This explains why Mohammed personally spoke on the phone with al-Asiri prior to the surrender and why he did not express much concern over meeting with someone who appeared on his government’s list of most-wanted militants. He met with such men regularly.

Since it is well known that Mohammed has made it his personal mission to handle surrendering militants, AQAP didn’t have to do much intelligence work to realize that Mohammed was vulnerable to an attack or to arrange for a booby-trapped al-Asiri to meet with Mohammed. They merely had to adapt their tactics in order to exploit vulnerabilities in the security paradigm.

The third tactical shift is perhaps the most interesting, and that is the use of an IED hidden in the anal cavity of the bomber. Suicide bombers have long been creative when it comes to hiding their devices. In addition to the above-mentioned IED in the camera gear used in the Masood assassination, female suicide bombers with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam have hidden IEDs inside brassieres, and female suicide bombers with the Kurdistan Workers’ Party have worn IEDs designed to make them look pregnant. However, this is the first instance we are aware of where a suicide bomber has hidden an IED inside a body cavity.
It is fairly common practice around the world for people to smuggle contraband such as drugs inside their body cavities. This is done not only to get items across international borders but also to get contraband into prisons. It is not unusual for people to smuggle narcotics and even cell phones into prisons inside their body cavities (the prison slang for this practice is “keistering”). It is also not at all uncommon for inmates to keister weapons such as knives or improvised stabbing devices known as “shanks.” Such keistered items can be very difficult to detect using standard search methods, especially if they do not contain much metal.

In the case of al-Asiri, he turned himself in to authorities on the afternoon of Aug. 27 and did not meet with Mohammed until the evening of Aug. 28. By the time al-Asiri detonated his explosive device, he had been in custody for some 30 hours and had been subjected to several security searches, though it is unlikely that any of them included a body cavity search. While it is possible that there was some type of internal collusion, it is more likely that the device had been hidden inside of al-Asiri the entire time.

AQAP’s claim of responsibility for the attack included the following statement: “…Abdullah Hassan Taleh al-Asiri, who was on the list of 85 wanted persons, was able, with the help of God, to enter Nayef’s palace as he was among his guards and detonate an explosive device. No one will be able to know the type of this device or the way it was detonated. Al-Asiri managed to pass all the security checkpoints in Najran and Jeddah airports and was transported on board Mohammed bin Nayef’s private plane.”

AQAP also threatened additional surprise attacks in the “near future,” but now that the type of device al-Asiri used is known, security measures can — and almost certainly will — be implemented to prevent similar attacks in the future.

While keistering an IED is a novel tactic, it does present operational planners with some limitations. For one thing, the amount of explosive material that can be hidden inside a person is far less than the amount that can be placed inside a backpack or is typically used in a suicide belt or vest. For another, the body of the bomber will tend to absorb much of the blast wave and most of any fragmentation from the device. This means that the bomber would have to get in very close proximity to an intended target in order to kill him or her. Such a device would not be very useful for a mass-casualty attack like the July 17 Jakarta hotel bombings and instead would be more useful in assassination attempts against targeted individuals.

We have not been able to determine exactly how the device was triggered, but it likely employed a command-detonated remote device of some kind. Having wires protruding from the bomber’s body would be a sure giveaway. The use of a wireless remote means that the device would be susceptible to radio frequency countermeasures.

One other concern about such a device is that it would likely have a catastrophic result if employed on an aircraft, especially if it were removed from the bomber’s body and placed in a strategic location on board the aircraft. Richard Reid’s shoe IED only contained about four ounces of explosives, an amount that could conceivably be smuggled inside a human.

What the Attack Says About AQAP
While the Aug. 28 attack highlighted AQAP’s operational creativity, it also demonstrated that the group failed to effectively execute the attack after gaining the element of surprise. Quite simply, the bomber detonated his device too far away from the intended target. It is quite likely that the group failed to do adequate testing with the device and did not know what its effective kill radius was. AQAP will almost certainly attempt to remedy that error before it tries to employ such a device again.

In the larger picture, this attempt shows that AQAP does not have the resources inside the kingdom to plan and execute an attack on a figure like Prince Mohammed. That it would try a nuanced and highly targeted strike against Mohammed rather than a more brazen armed assault or vehicle-borne IED attack demonstrates that the group is very weak inside Saudi Arabia. It even needed to rely on operatives and planners who were in Yemen to execute the attack.

When the formation of AQAP was announced in January, STRATFOR noted that it would be important to watch for indications of whether the merger of the Saudi and Yemeni groups was a sign of desperation by a declining group or an indication that it had new blood and was on the rise. AQAP’s assassination attempt on Prince Mohammed has clearly demonstrated that the group is weak and in decline.

AQAP has not given up the struggle, but the group will be hard-pressed to weather the storm that is about to befall it as the Saudis retaliate for the plot. It will be very surprising if it is able to carry through with its threat to attack other members of the Saudi royal family in the near future. Indeed, the very fact that AQAP has threatened more attacks on the royal family likely indicates that the threats are empty; if the group truly did have other plots in the works, it would not want to risk jeopardizing those plots by prompting the Saudis to increase security in response to a threat.

Lacking the strength to conduct large, aggressive attacks, the weakened AQAP will need to continue innovating in order to pose a threat to the Saudi monarchy. But, as seen in the Aug. 28 case, tactical innovation requires more than just a novel idea — militants must also carefully develop and test new concepts before they can use them to effectively conduct a terrorist attack.

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