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Subject:

**Specialist Security Report**

**Capabilities & Characteristics  
of IS in Saudi Arabia**

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For:

**Saudi Arabia**

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**International experience. Local knowledge.**

## Capabilities and Characteristics of Islamic State in Saudi Arabia

**Key Points:** Although IS activity has increased from 2015 to present day, the militant group’s level of success has declined, as indicated by the increased proportion of attacks that were thwarted, the significant reduction in total number of killed and injured caused by successful attacks, and a diminished ability to recruit Saudi nationals. This shift can be attributed to improved physical security based on an understanding of preferred targets and recognition of suspicious behaviour, increased arrests, and recruitment of operatives with less training and experience. In addition, the connections between various cells and attacks allow for pre-emptive security operations with each plot thwarted, cell uncovered, and arrest made. At the same time, the radicalization of citizens and legal expatriates remains one of Saudi Arabia’s most serious threats, particularly given real difficulties in identifying self-radicalized individuals and foiling less sophisticated attacks.

### Overview

In November 2014, less than a half-year after IS declared the “Caliphate”, the first IS-linked attack occurred in Saudi Arabia’s Eastern Province. The following year was the country’s deadliest since the al-Qaeda attacks of the 2000s. However, by October 2016, improved security and intelligence measures and capabilities placed increased obstacles in front of IS, causing changes in attack targets, recruitment, and success. This shift will be the focus of this report, which combines quantitative and qualitative data in order to present a comprehensive and reliable analysis. The data presented was retrieved from open source material, with an emphasis placed on official statements whenever possible. However, this also means that the data could be incomplete, as information not released by authorities is by its nature unavailable.

**Figure 1: Success parameters for IS activity**

	2016	2015
<b>Total attacks</b>	24	18
<b>Number thwarted</b>	10	4
<b>Proportion thwarted</b>	41.7%	22.2%
<b>Number of deaths</b>	17	56
<b>Number of injuries</b>	30	182

From 2015 to 2016, IS success saw an overall decline based on the proportion of thwarted attacks (rising to 41.7% in 2016 from 22.2% in 2015) and casualty numbers (declining to 47 in 2016 from 238 in 2015) (see Figure 1). This change is despite a reduction in security raids to at least eight announced operations in 2016 from at least 19 the year before, which included including a series announced in July 2015 that saw 431 people arrested. Although it can be argued that lower casualty numbers does not necessarily indicate lack of success, global IS behaviour demonstrates their preference for sensational attacks that garner substantial media attention. The thwarted attacks also indicate such a preference, particularly those involving explosives, which certainly aim to kill high numbers of people.<sup>1</sup> Thus, despite the media attention that surrounds IS attacks, the militant group has been notably less successful in 2016 as compared to the prior year.

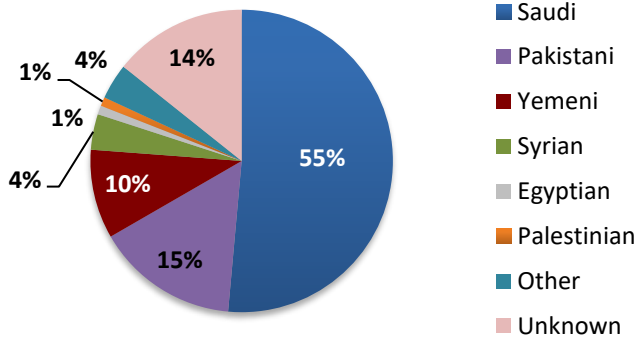
IS has also seen diminished success in recruiting Saudi nationals and an increased ability to attract foreigners: The proportion of IS-affiliated individuals of Saudi nationality declined by more than 30% from 87.2% in 2015 to 51.4% in 2016.<sup>2</sup> This is even without the inclusion of [431 arrests announced in July 2015](#), “most of them citizens”.<sup>3</sup> See Figures 2 and 3 below.

<sup>1</sup> It can be argued, for example, that the death of one army officer or government employee is seen as more valuable than civilian casualties. This, however, contradicts IS activity across the globe, their interest in using sensational attacks, and continued efforts to use explosives.

<sup>2</sup> 2016 saw 105 IS-affiliated individuals either arrested or killed, while 2015 saw 588 (149 if the 431 arrests in July is not included).

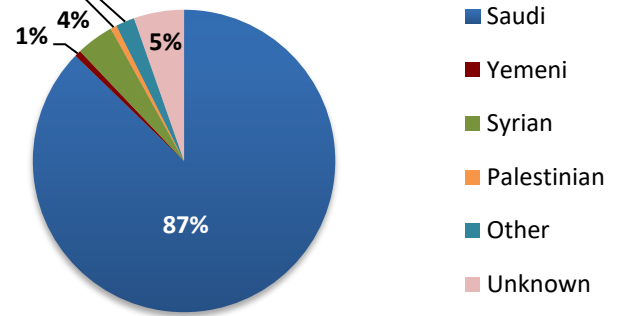
<sup>3</sup> The 431 arrests are not included because the Saudi Ministry of Interior did not break this number down into specific nationalities. Rather, the statement only explained that a majority are Saudi nationals.

**Figure 2: Nationalities 2016\***



\*No. of IS-affiliated individuals: 105

**Figure 3: Nationalities 2015\***

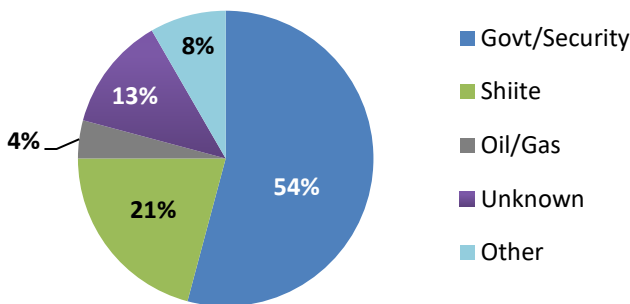


\*No. of IS-affiliated individuals: 149 (see Footnote 3)

When it comes to targets of IS attacks, locations affiliated to the Shiite population or government/security remain the most preferred in 2015 and 2016. In both years, the latter government/security targets were involved in just over 50% of attacks. However, the proportion affiliated to the Shiite population slightly declined from 27.8% in 2015 to 20.8% in 2016. In addition, attacks targeting foreigners or foreign locations are notably absent thus far in 2016. See Figures 4 and 5 below.

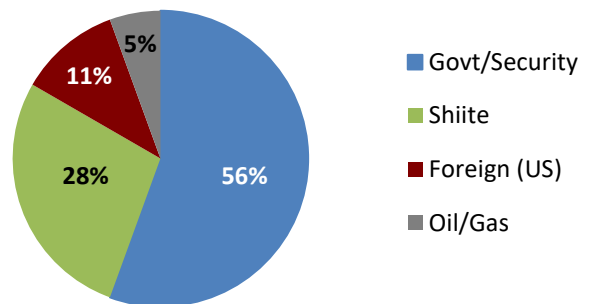
Another fact that remained consistent from 2015 to 2016 is that the Riyadh Province saw the majority of IS-related incidents (successful and thwarted attacks, as well as security operations) at 32.4% and 25%, respectively. The Eastern Province came second at 21.6% in 2015 and 18.8% in 2016. For 2016, the Mecca Province also tied for second place. See [Appendix A](#) for a comparison of locations across these two years.

**Figure 4: Targets of Successful and Thwarted Attacks 2016\***



\*No. of reported attacks: 24

**Figure 5: Targets of Successful and Thwarted Attacks 2015\***



\*No. of reported attacks: 18

### Analysis

**Success of Attacks:** Although the total number of attacks (successful and thwarted) rose in the initial ten months of 2016 as compared to 2015, a higher proportion were thwarted and numbers of casualties saw a drastic decline. This indicates that physical security and intelligence measures and capabilities rose alongside a likely reduction in the training and experience of IS recruits.

Examples are the three suicide attacks in Jeddah, Medina, and al-Qatif during Ramadan on 4 July 2016. These involved sophisticated methods (suicide belts) and three perpetrators conducted the al-Qatif attack. Despite this, a total of four people were killed and seven were wounded. In Jeddah, two security officers were injured after identifying the perpetrator. In Medina, four people were killed and

five wounded at a security checkpoint near the al-Masjid an-Nabawi Mosque. If the checkpoint was not the planned target, the casualties would have been higher given the number of people in Medina for Ramadan. In al-Qatif, despite the three attackers, there were no casualties.

Another contributing factor is the number of security operations and arrests made in 2015 (at least 19 compared to at least eight in 2016). These likely degraded operational capabilities of IS cells and supporters in the country, including available recruits and their level of training and experience. As a result, improved physical security measures and targeted security operations based on intel will continue to degrade capabilities, thwart attacks, and limit casualties from any attacks that are successfully executed. Alongside these measures, Saudi authorities will continue to combat IS ideology through counter-radicalization efforts, although progress here remains difficult to measure.

**Nationalities:** The notable decline of IS-linked individuals who are Saudi nationals (87.2% in 2015 to 51.4% thus far in 2016) indicates that foreigners residing in the country are becoming more susceptible to IS recruitment and radicalization. This change is likely connected to rising difficulties in recruiting Saudi citizens due to high numbers of arrests and the dismantling of major or central cells (see **Links between cells** below). This is in addition to increased anti-IS messages and rhetoric from the Saudi government and official religious establishment in an effort to reduce local radicalization. This decline may also be connected to opposition among citizens as to the spread of anti-Saudi rhetoric by IS and increasingly unpopular attacks. This includes the July 2016 suicide bombing in the holy city of Medina and the June 2016 attack against Istanbul's airport, both of which occurred during Ramadan. These are widely considered to be perpetrated by IS, with the lack of official claims of responsibility likely due to the attacks' controversial natures and extensive backlash.

That said, the fact that Saudi nationals still comprise just over 50% of perpetrators and detainees in 2016 indicates that one of the major domestic threats remains IS's ability to radicalize and recruit citizens. In addition to its overall recruitment drives, IS likely understands that it is more difficult to monitor a threat that comes from within than one which requires crossing borders.

**Sophistication and modus operandi:** While more sophisticated attacks<sup>4</sup> can be more destructive, their two main components—explosives and calibre of the operative—are facing difficulties in Saudi Arabia. Attacks using explosives involve materials that can and have been more easily discovered through quality intelligence than simpler methods like the use of small arms. As a result, all thwarted attacks in both 2015 and 2016 involved explosives (IEDs, car bombs, or suicide attacks) with the exception of one in 2015 in which the modus operandi of the thwarted incident was not revealed. With regard to the second component, the calibre of the operative, there are indications of diminished experience and training levels. Some planned attacks in 2016 were thwarted due to clearly suspicious behaviour of perpetrators, such as the July 4 suicide bombing in Jeddah and the August 16 thwarted attack against a restaurant on the Shiite majority Tarout Island.

Therefore, less sophisticated attacks, particularly those involving small arms and/or lone-wolf attackers<sup>5</sup>, have become and may continue to be more dangerous and deadly. This is because their characteristics (often online and swift radicalization), as well as methods (small arms or everyday items like knives) are significantly more difficult to uncover.

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<sup>4</sup> Sophisticated attacks involve established cells with strong links to and support from IS outside of the country. Perpetrators also tend to be more experienced, including from training abroad, and involve the use of more sophisticated means, such as explosive belts or vest and car bombs.

<sup>5</sup> Unsophisticated and lone-wolf attacks involve crude methods that require minimal, if any training and limited or no direct contact with IS. Rather, radicalization is often achieved online and can occur quite swiftly. Prime examples are a vehicular and stabbing attack carried out in Riyadh by a Yemeni national in August 2016 and the June 2016 stabbings of family members in Riyadh by two twin brothers.

Figure 6: Type of Attacks 2016

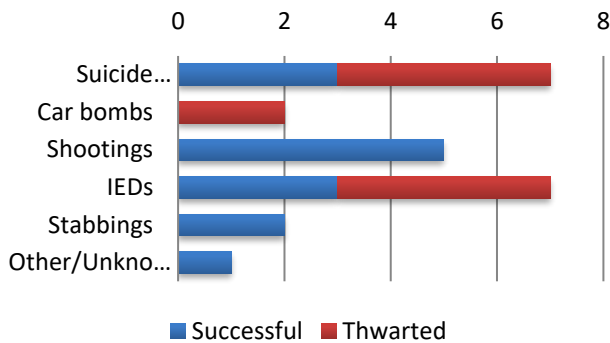
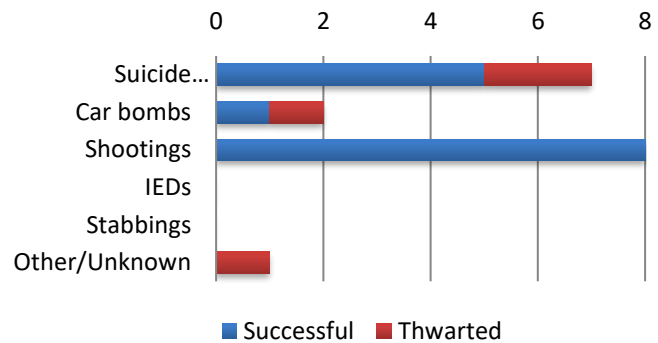


Figure 7: Type of Attacks 2015



**Targets of Attack:** Although small, 2016's percentage decline in attacks targeting Shiite-affiliated locations can be attributed to increased physical security measures. This includes across the country (contributing to the rise in the proportion of thwarted attacks) and in Shiite areas, particularly around preferred times for attack, such as mosques on Fridays and surrounding holidays. This also emphasizes the necessity and success of focused physical security measures. Moreover, there is heightened suspicion of lone Sunni individuals traveling in Shiite areas. On 29 September 2016, for example, a Sunni man accused of IS affiliation [was assaulted](#) in al-Qatif's al-Bahari, neighbourhood.

With regard to foreign targets, the limited number in 2015 and their absence in the first ten months of 2016 is not tied to a lack of interest but, rather, limited capability. Western compounds and facilities, including foreign operated oil and gas installations, tend to be more secure, while Shiite and Saudi government or security targets are more common and accessible. Given that this situation is not liable to change, IS-affiliated elements in Saudi Arabia should be expected to main their attention on Shiite and government/security targets, especially in the current security atmosphere.

**Locations:** Provinces that see a higher number of security operations and attacks (thwarted and successful) tend to have populations more easily susceptible to recruitment and/or with greater numbers of preferred targets. Riyadh, for instance, is located in the Najd, the traditional name for central Saudi Arabia that is historically more conservative. The increased number of incidents in the Mecca and Medina Provinces in 2016 may similarly be linked to religious conservatism given their status as Islam's holy cities. However, it may also be linked to nationality: Out of eight events in these two provinces, seven involved only foreign nationals or those whose nationality is unknown. It is possible, therefore, that when it comes to the radicalization of foreigners in Saudi Arabia, IS is finding those in Mecca and Medina to be more susceptible. This could be because of the number of foreign nationals: The region is notorious for seeing travellers arrive for pilgrimage and then stay illegally. As a result, their status (both economic and religious) may make them more open to indoctrination.

Riyadh, meanwhile, is also the capital, which means a large supply of government, security, and foreign targets. The Eastern Province likewise has foreign targets (due to oil operations) and the majority of the Shiite population. With this in mind, the Riyadh and Eastern Provinces will continue to be two of the main foci for planned IS attacks, as will the Mecca Province, which has seen the same number of events as the Eastern Province and which appears to have a foreign population more susceptible to radicalization.

**Links between attacks and cells:** Based on information from the Saudi Ministry of Interior, there are relatively extensive links between the various cells that have been dismantled and the multiple attacks that were either successful or thwarted. At the centre is the 5 May 2016 security operation just east

of Mecca in Wadi Numan, which can not only be linked to various attacks, but also both the February 2016 cell (announced September 2016) and the September 2015 cell uncovered in Dhurma, west of Riyadh city. To see the various relationships, see [Appendix B](#).

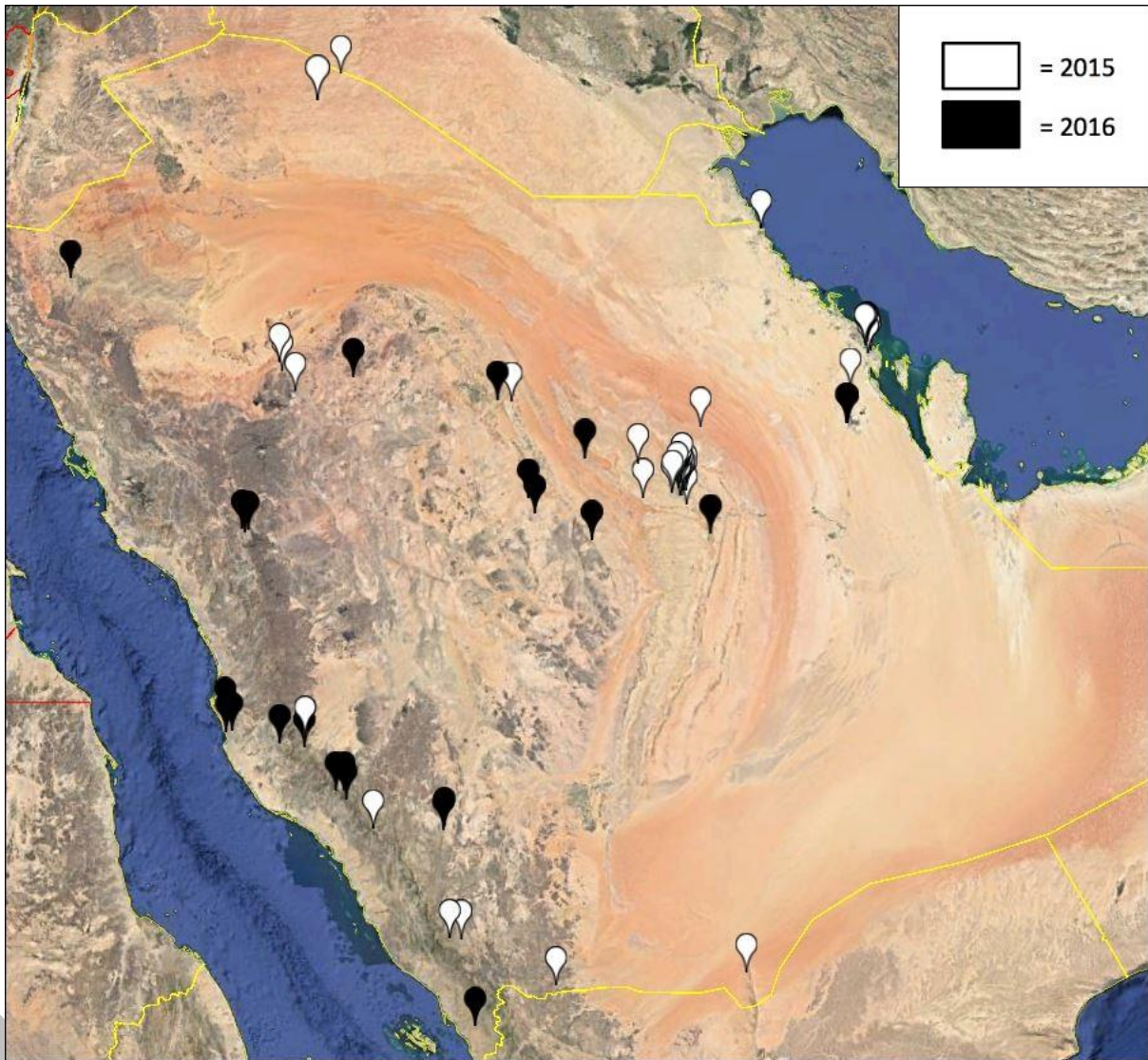
This means that, with good intelligence capabilities, the dismantling of one cell, an investigation into one thwarted or successful attack, or the arrest of even a few number of IS suspects create leads to other cells and affiliated individuals. The various links also suggest that the arrest of even a limited number of individuals can negatively impact an existing cell or attacks still in the planning stages. This helps explain the significantly higher percentage of thwarted attacks in 2016 as compared to 2015 and indicates that this trend should continue.<sup>6</sup>

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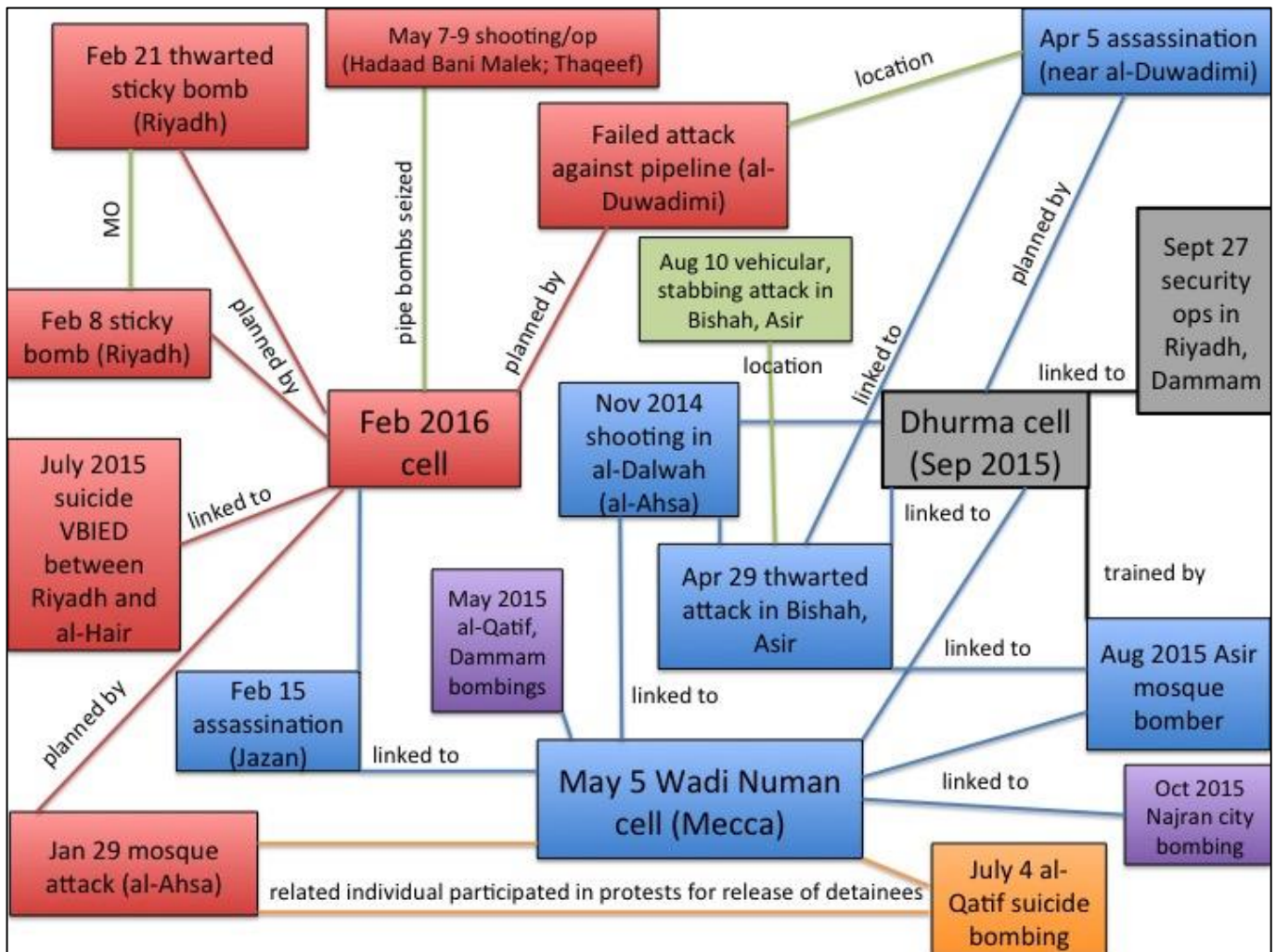
<sup>6</sup> Note that the information in this report was retrieved from open source materials and there may be incidents that were not announced and are, therefore, not included.



**Appendix A: Locations of attacks, thwarted attacks, and security operations 2015-2016**



**Appendix B: Connections between known IS cells and attacks<sup>7</sup>**



<sup>7</sup> This does not represent all possible links between attacks and cells. Some individuals, for example, are linked to various attacks, which would therefore link those attacks together. However, for the purposes of keeping the diagram understandable, some of these were left out. Other connections that were not included are: Those who trained abroad, which IS “provinces” claimed responsibility, nationalities, some locations (like the various attacks and operations in Riyadh city), and some materials (like suicide vests or belts and small arms).