



COMBATING TERRORISM CENTER AT WEST POINT

# CTC SENTINEL

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## About the CTC Sentinel

The Combating Terrorism Center is an independent educational and research institution based in the Department of Social Sciences at the United States Military Academy, West Point. The CTC Sentinel harnesses the Center's global network of scholars and practitioners to understand and confront contemporary threats posed by terrorism and other forms of political violence.

The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and not of the U.S. Military Academy, the Department of the Army, or any other agency of the U.S. Government.

## A View From the CT Foxhole: An Interview with Michael Morell

By Bryan Price



An image from an al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) video shows fighters being trained at a camp in Yemen.

*MR. MICHAEL MORELL recently retired as deputy director of the Central Intelligence Agency. With 33 years of experience in the intelligence community, he is one of the country's most prominent national security professionals. His recent book, The Great War of Our Time, was published in early May and captures his experiences combating terrorism from the highest levels of government. The CTC is proud to announce Mr. Morell will be joining the Center as a Senior Fellow this summer.*

**CTC:** Congratulations on publishing your book, and thank you for your lifetime of service to the nation, particularly in the fight against terrorism. Few have as much intelligence experience with terrorism as you do, so what have you learned over the past three decades about these organizations that was not apparent to you in the early days?

**Morell:** I think the most important thing one needs to know about these organizations is that they are both fragile and resilient at the same time. I

think we've shown over and over again that when we go after them aggressively from an intelligence/paramilitary/military perspective, we do great damage to them and we do so in quick fashion.

When you take the pressure off, however, these groups bounce back very quickly. That's because they are vulnerable yet agile and resistant organizations. When you keep the pressure on, you keep them on their back foot. They're so worried about their own security that they don't have time to plan, train, and plot. But when you take that pressure off, they have time to do all of these things. They rebuild and reconstitute.

Sometimes after you've put a lot of pressure on a particular group and have succeeded in degrading it, there is the tendency to take that pressure off and to ease up. It is a natural thing. But the lesson for counterterrorism is you have to keep the pressure on.

**CTC:** In your book you warn that our country has a tendency to be too reactive than being proactive. The United States had to endure a tragedy like 9/11 before taking the terrorism threat seriously and devoting the resources necessary to combat it. Have we as a country learned our lesson since 9/11 in this area or do you think we have slid back into our old habits?

**Morell:** I think we are who we are as a people and I think we've slipped back. A great example for me would be the Snowden disclosures of the [Section] 215 program [of the USA PATRIOT Act].<sup>1</sup> If those disclosures had been

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made in 2002, with the attacks of 9/11 very fresh in people’s memory, the public reaction would have been, “I want my government to be doing that. That is exactly the right thing to do.”

But more than ten years after 9/11, the public’s memory has faded, and now the public has a different reaction. People in general are just much less trusting of their government. We have lost that sense after 9/11 that we are vulnerable, that terrorism is a serious threat, and that we need to do what needs to be done.

When I was standing in security lines at airports soon after 9/11, nobody was complaining. Now when I stand in security lines, people are complaining. People have forgotten, even with

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<sup>1</sup> Editors note: For more on Section 215 of the Patriot Act, see Devlin Barrett, “FBI Use of Controversial Patriot Act Section Expands,” *The Wall Street Journal*, May 21, 2015.

the ISIS [also known as the Islamic State] threat in the news. People have forgotten what it was like.

In the book I talk about the sign as you enter the Counterterrorism Center at the CIA that says, “Today is September 12, 2001.” That’s the mindset of my guys at the Agency and that’s the mindset of the Agency when it comes to terrorism. When I used to get in my car and drive away from the Agency, the further I got, the more it felt like September 10, 2001 than September 12, 2001.

**CTC:** Along those lines, if you were to create a new counterterrorism authority that we do not currently have, or enhance one that already exists, which would it be and why?

**Morell:** I’m really worried about [Section] 215. We just had an appellate court say they didn’t think Section 215 of the PATRIOT Act actually allows the government to do what it has been doing. It didn’t say it was unconstitutional; it didn’t say it was constitutional.<sup>2</sup>

The court basically said that Congress didn’t give the administration that authority. It said very clearly, if you want to have that authority, Congress has to be more explicit about it. That was the basic message in that court ruling.

I believe 215 is a very important program. I think it helps fill one of the gaps that existed prior to 9/11. If 215 had been in place before 9/11, there’s a chance, I’m not saying for sure, but there’s a chance we would have seen the communications among the 19 hijackers and might have been able to stop the attack.

I’m concerned that with the opposition among some members of Congress, and with this court ruling, it [Section 215 of the USA PATRIOT Act] may expire and that would be a very, very dangerous thing I think. I really hope that Congress does the right thing and finds a way to keep the program going, even if it would have to change a little to

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<sup>2</sup> Editors note: See Charlie Savage and Jonathan Weisman, “NSA Collection of Bulk Data Is Ruled Illegal,” *New York Times*, May 7, 2015.

satisfy concerns about privacy and civil liberties.

**CTC:** Several elements of your book touch on the dangers of politicizing intelligence, an unnerving feature of national security in the past two decades. Given your 33 years in the intelligence community, serving with administrations and legislatures controlled by both sides of the aisle, how would you evaluate this problem today? Is the problem better or worse than when you first came into the Agency?

**“In political fights and in policy fights—and they are two different things—the CIA often found itself stuck in the middle.”**

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**Morell:** I think that during my career, intelligence has often become the “meat in the sandwich.” In political fights and in policy fights—and they are two different things—the CIA often found itself stuck in the middle. What I mean by stuck in the middle is that both sides would use what we were saying to their advantage. Both sides would take parts of what we were saying to support their agenda, and they would often take it out of context.

On Benghazi, for example, I personally found myself stuck in the middle. I think what changed over the last 30 years, is that more national security issues have been politicized. What’s changed is that more of these issues have become part of the “bare-knuckle” politics that is Washington. I think the challenge for intelligence officers is to always, always, always stay above that, to never become part of that. We have to be seen as objective, totally objective, if people are going to listen to what we say. If we are seen as being in any way political, people are going to read our stuff with deep skepticism and that would be very dangerous for our country.

**CTC:** In your book you devote significant space to this topic, using several examples, the most notable of which include the run-up to the Iraq invasion in 2003 and the Benghazi attack in which Ambassador J. Christopher Stevens and three other Americans were killed. How did you go about educating your intelligence analysts to deal with this problem of politicizing intelligence?

**Morell:** Part of it is training and part of it is basic, day-to-day leadership. I can remember several times in my career managing analysts whose analysis was

**“I’m more concerned that as we focus on ISIS we may lose focus on other Islamic extremist groups out there.”**

being used in a policy fight. I would sit down with them. I would talk with them and explain why it was happening. And I would tell them that their job was to ignore it. Don’t pay attention to it. Pay attention to the analysis you do every day and call it like you see it. In the Iraq/al-Qa`ida story I tell in the book, I talk about the Vice President’s office pushing us, in my view, inappropriately. That’s why it was very important when the President of the United States [President George W. Bush] came and said to us, ignore that, continue to call it like you see it. It was a really important message on his part. That messaging really strengthens our objectivity. It is really important for leaders to have those conversations with analysts about what’s happening and the political dynamics going on around them.

**CTC:** Prior to September 11, there was a lack of consensus in our government regarding the threat posed by al-Qa`ida. There seems to be such a strong focus today on the Islamic State that a similar underestimation would seem unlikely. Are we thinking correctly about the threat posed by the Islamic State?

**Morell:** I think we are properly focused on ISIS and thinking about the threat in the right way.

I’m more concerned that as we focus on ISIS we may lose focus on other Islamic extremist groups out there, the most important of which are AQAP [al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula] in Yemen, AQSL [al-Qa`ida Senior Leadership] in Pakistan, and quite frankly the Khorasan group that is part of Jabhat al-Nusra [in Syria]. All three of those groups have the capability to conduct attacks both in Western Europe and the United States. It is very important that we remain focused on those other threats, which, from a homeland perspective today, are still a greater threat than ISIS.

**CTC:** In the book you provide detailed analyses of the threats posed by some of these groups you just mentioned. I think some of our readers may be interested in hearing why AQAP poses “an even greater threat to the U.S. homeland than does ISIS, at least for now.” Can you discuss why you think this is the case?

**Morell:** If you look back at the last three attempted attacks on the homeland that were directed from overseas—and I’m specifically talking about directed attacks—not lone wolf attacks, not Boston, not Fort Hood, not what just happened in Texas. I’m talking about the last three directed attacks. They were all AQAP-directed attacks. They all used very sophisticated explosives technology, all produced by this one particular bomb maker, Ibrahim al-Asiri.

Al-Asiri’s cooking up new ideas all the time. He’s training other bomb makers. Who knows how many people he has trained now? Even if you took him off the battlefield, I’m not sure it would significantly affect the group because he’s trained so many people. AQAP was the group that sent [Umar Farouk] Abdulmutallab successfully,<sup>3</sup> and they

<sup>3</sup> Editor’s note: Mr. Morell is referring to the so-called underwear bomber who failed to detonate his bomb on a Christmas Day flight over Detroit in 2009. For more, see Peter Finn, “Al-Awlaqi Directed Christmas ‘Underwear Bomber’ Plot, Justice Department Memo Says,” *Wash-*

ington Post, February 10, 2012.

have come close in other ways. As I say in the book, this group could bring down an airliner tomorrow and I would not be surprised, but I believe most Americans would be surprised.

**CTC:** One individual that you raise concern about in the book is an up-and-coming al-Qa`ida leader Farouq al-Qahtani. Many view him as being highly competent and a very charismatic leader, a possible successor to Ayman al-Zawahiri. Can you provide a little background on him for readers who may be unfamiliar with this individual?

**“Al-Asiri’s cooking up new ideas all the time. He’s training other bomb makers. Who knows how many people he has trained now?”**

**Morell:** Sure. Al-Qahtani was sent by the AQ senior leadership to go from Pakistan to the Nuristan/Kunar area [in north-eastern Afghanistan] to create a potential fall-back position should AQ senior leaders have to leave the FATA [Federally Administered Tribal Areas in north-western Pakistan]. He was given some operatives to take with him and he’s built quite a following among the Taliban and other extremists in that area. The terrain he operates in is very challenging—even if you had a strong central Afghan government, they couldn’t do much to go after bad guys in those mountains. He’s very difficult to get to.

As you said, this is a guy with charisma, with leadership capability. This guy is incredibly operationally savvy. I can’t go into any details about what he does that gives me that view of him, but he has great operational tradecraft, great security tradecraft, and so I worry about him. The U.S. military has been aggressively going after him for some

time without a lot of success because he is just so talented.

**CTC:** In your opinion, how does the “great war of our time” end?

**Morell:** Great question. As you read in the book, I think it is going to be a long war. I think my kids’ generation and my grandkids’ generation will still be fighting this fight, but I think it ends when it becomes a law enforcement problem solely, when it no longer is a paramilitary/military problem. I think that’s what we should be shooting for. You’re never going to eliminate it completely, but if you can make it just a law enforcement problem, I think that would be a victory.

**CTC:** When you examine the situation in the Middle East, what are your major concerns? What is your outlook on Iraq, Syria, and our country’s future relationship with Iran?

**Morell:** Let me start with a huge caveat. If you find someone who tells you they know what the Middle East will look like in five years, they are either lying or they don’t know what they are talking about. I don’t think anybody can honestly say what this region is going to look like.

What I can say is that I do have quite a bit of confidence that the Iraqis will be able to take back the territory ISIS took. I saw a great map on the CENTCOM [U.S. Central Command] website a couple weeks ago that showed the territory ISIS controlled at its peak in Iraq and the territory they control today, and they’ve lost approximately 25 percent of what they had, which is a pretty significant number. I think we, the Iraqis, the Shi`a militias, and the Iranians have all done a pretty good job taking back some of that territory.

At the same time that I have this confidence about Iraq, I’ve got little-to-no confidence that we’re going to be able to successfully deal with ISIS in Syria. Basically, they have safe haven in eastern Syria and there isn’t much pressure being put on them there. I think what is scary is that as we squeeze them in Iraq, they will just go back into Syria. So we have a hammer in Iraq, but

we have no anvil in Syria. I haven’t seen a strategy yet that deals with the Syria problem. It’s not like I have one and it’s not like I know the answer. It is very, very difficult.

In terms of the Iranians, they pose a very significant threat to the region that goes well beyond the nuclear issue. There are a lot of things the Iranians do in terms of support for their own terrorists and support for other insurgencies in the region. I think we need a broader strategy with regard to the Iranians. It is really important to focus on the nuclear issue, but it is just as important to focus on the bigger strategic threat.

**“If you can make it a law enforcement problem, I think that would be a victory.”**

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**CTC:** You have done several interviews for your book. What is one question that you wish people would ask about the book but have not? Or what do you think people should be focusing on in the book but have not?

**Morell:** There are a couple things. The first is if you read the book closely, I actually critique myself more than other people. There are a number of places where I said, “I would’ve done this differently. I would’ve done that differently.” And that is really a reflection of what I’ve tried to do in my career. I’ve always tried to self-assess. I’ve always asked myself: how did I do and how could I have done better?

Second, if you read the book closely, I critique what some other people have said and done, but in most cases I don’t attribute intentions to their behaviors, actions and speech. As an intel analyst, you learn pretty quickly that when you speculate about intentions, you’re often wrong.

So I didn’t speculate about some Republicans saying things that weren’t true about Benghazi or why the White

House in my view crossed the line about what it said about Benghazi, or why Scooter Libby did what he did in regards to Iraq and al-Qa`ida. I don’t know what was in their minds.

The last thing I will say in that regard, is that a really important point is that there isn’t anybody who I worked for in government—worked with or worked for—whose heart was not in the right place, who wasn’t trying to do the right thing for the country. I never worked with anybody whose intentions were somehow misguided. Everybody had the objective of protecting the country. There were differences of opinion about how to do that, but everybody was on board with doing everything we could to protect the country.



## Syria's Sunnis and The Regime's Resilience

By Chris Zambelis

SYRIA'S CALAMITOUS CIVIL war is now in its fourth year. Amid the rising body count and destruction, there is little clarity about the viability of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's Ba'athist regime even as the numerous violent insurgent organizations that seek to topple his administration receive ample attention. Social media has enabled observers to scrutinize the armed opposition in almost real-time via their public declarations, battlefield operations, and propaganda.

In contrast, comparatively little attention has been paid to the causes of the regime's resilience. It recently has suffered a string of territorial setbacks, including the loss of Idlib's provincial capital and other territories to radical

**“Little attention has been paid to the causes of the regime's resilience.”**

Islamist advances led by al-Qa`ida's Syrian affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra (Support Front) and aligned insurgents operating under the Jaish al-Fatah (Army of Conquest) banner.<sup>1</sup>

These losses follow the Islamic State's capture of Al-Raqqa Province in 2014 and other parts of eastern Syria,<sup>2</sup> and the seizure of Busra al-Sham and Nassib in Syria's southern Deraa Province by insurgents in March and April, respectively.<sup>3</sup>

A cascade of economic troubles and suggestions of growing attrition within

1 Liz Sly, “Assad's Hold on Power Looks Shakier Than Ever as Rebels Advance in Syria,” *Washington Post*, April 26, 2015.

2 Martin Armstrong, “Islamic State Strengthens Control in Syria,” Al-Jazeera [Doha], August 27, 2014.

3 Donna Abu-Nasr and Dana Khraiche, “Assad Reminds Syrians Who is Leader After Military Setbacks,” Bloomberg, May 6, 2015.

the ranks of the Syrian military have also taken their toll.<sup>4</sup>

Some observers see these developments as signs of the Ba'athist regime's impending collapse but that is an overreach. Despite the losses, the regime is estimated to retain control of around half of Syrian territory and up to three quarters of the country's population.<sup>5</sup> It also continues to contest areas that have fallen out of its reach.<sup>6</sup>

There is a web of factors contributing to the regime's remarkable resilience. Its willingness to employ brutal, scorched-earth military tactics without regard for civilian life and the support—political, economic, military, and moral—that it receives from foreign actors led by Iran, Lebanese Hezbollah, Russia, and Iraq have helped it survive. The inherent disunity of the ranks of the armed opposition, whose most formidable elements are a collection of rival and intersecting radical Islamist currents that include al-Qa`ida-affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra and its offshoots such as

4 Frederick Deknatel, “Syria's Assad Looks Weaker as Currency Slides and Army Fractures,” *World Politics Review*, May 4, 2015.

5 For example, Fabrice Balanche estimates that the Ba'athist regime may control between 55 and 72 percent of the Syrian population. See Aron Lund, “The Political Geography of Syria's Civil War: An Interview with Fabrice Balanche,” *Syria in Crisis* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace), January 30, 2015. Joshua Landis estimates that the Ba'athist regime can claim dominion over around 65 percent of the Syrian population. See Aaron David Miller, “Is Bashar al-Assad Finished, For Real, This Time, Again?,” *Foreign Policy*, May 1, 2015.

6 Sammy Ketz, “Syria Army Pushes Toward Jisr al-Shughur Seeking Morale Boost,” Agence France Presse, May 11, 2015. Also see Christopher Kozak, “An Army in All Corners: Assad's Campaign Strategy in Syria,” Institute for the Study of War, Middle East Security Report 26, April 2015. At the same time, recent reports suggest that the regime may be limiting its engagement to areas it deems most strategically important, including major cities in central western Syria such as Damascus, Homs, and Hama, the coastal northwest, and the territories adjacent to its border with Lebanon. This would result in the de facto partition of the country, as the regime would, in essence, concede territories under the sway of the Islamic State, Jabhat al-Nusra, and other armed opposition factions. See Sammy Ketz, “Syrian regime ‘to accept de facto’ partition of country,” Agence France-Presse, May 24, 2015.

the Islamic State, has also helped the Ba'athist regime hang on.

Still, these elements do not completely explain its ability to endure. The regime's notable cohort of Alawite leaders and the support that it draws from many Alawites and other ethnic and religious minorities as a bulwark against the majority Sunni population that has spearheaded the revolt is also cited as a key factor for its durability. Little has been said, however, of the Ba'athist regime's support among Syria's majority Sunni population.

This article will examine the role of Syria's Sunnis in helping to sustain the Ba'athist regime. It finds that while much of the conventional thinking behind the regime's resilience is valid, a broader explanation is needed. This more expansive approach also considers the regime's ability to draw on segments of the Sunni majority that actively

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support, tolerate, or remain otherwise invested in its survival and which has proved, despite its embattled position, to be vital to its survival.

### The “Alawite Regime”

Syria's demographic composition is a recurring theme in the civil war. The Ba'athist regime and its entrenched power structures are frequently defined through a binary of minoritarian and majoritarian power dynamics.<sup>7</sup> In this reading, an Alawite-Arab clan, led by the heir to the late family patriarch former president Hafez al-Assad, the extended family of relatives, and associates rules over a majority Sunni populace and a mosaic of other ethnic and religious

7 Joshua Landis, “The Syrian Uprising of 2011: Why the Assad Regime is Likely to Survive to 2013,” *Middle East Policy Council*, 19:1, Spring (2012).

minorities. Sunnis make up between 70 and 80 percent of the total population.<sup>8</sup> The al-Assads, according to this view, act on behalf of the Alawite minority that makes up between 8 and 12 percent of the total population. This perspective is encapsulated in references to an Alawite regime, a label that ascribes it with an outwardly apparent Alawite identity and agenda.<sup>9</sup>

## “[The conventional] portrayal of the regime misrepresents the complexity of Syria’s brand of authoritarianism.”

This portrayal of the regime misrepresents the complexity of Syria’s brand of authoritarianism. It also obfuscates the mechanics of its inner workings, centers of authority, and sources of support.<sup>10</sup> Taken together,

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<sup>8</sup> Syria’s Sunni majority population can be further demarcated along ethnic lines. It is generally accepted that Arabs account for approximately between 60 and 65 percent of Syria’s Sunni population while Kurds and Turkmen account for about ten and three percent of the remaining population, respectively. Syria is also home to small community of Sunni Circassians, Christian, Druze, and Shi’a Arabs. Armenians, and Assyrians are also among the balance.

<sup>9</sup> Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, “The Dangerous Illusion of an Alawite Regime,” *Boston Review*, June 11, 2013.

<sup>10</sup> A wide body of multidisciplinary research has shed light on the characteristics of the Ba’athist regime from different perspectives. See Hanna Batatu, *Syria’s Peasantry, the Descendants of Its Lesser Rural Notables, and Their Politics* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1999), Steven Heydemann, *Authoritarianism in Syria: Institutions and Social Conflict, 1946-1970* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), Volker Perthes, *The Political Economy of Syria Under Asad* (London, I.B. Tauris Publishers, 1995), Nikolaos Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria: Politics and Society Under Asad and the Ba’th Party* (London, I.B. Tauris Publishers, 1996), Patrick Seale, *Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1988), Flynt Leverett, *Inheriting Syria: Bashar’s Trial By Fire*. (Washington, D.C., Brookings Institution Press, 2005), Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria* (Chicago, University of Chicago

Press, 1999), David W. Lesch, *The New Lion of Damascus: Bashar al-Asad and Modern Syria* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2005), Bassam Haddad, *Business Networks in Syria: The Political Economy of Authoritarian Resilience* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2012).

these elements transcend religion and ethnicity to encompass identities and affinities such as class and social structure, as well as urban-rural cleavages. The prominence of Alawites in Syrian politics and society is not in question. The elevation of Alawites and their eventual assimilation into the corridors of power and over representation in ranking positions in the Ba’athist bureaucracy and security apparatus is well documented.<sup>11</sup>

The history of tensions between the Alawite minority and Sunni majority is a recurring theme in assessments of the current conflict. The Alawites, a historically marginalized community that occupied a subservient role in Syrian society in relation to the Sunni majority, hailed from Syria’s impoverished rural hinterlands along the coast and in the mountainous northwest.<sup>12</sup> Their empowerment through military service during the French Mandate and later through Ba’athist activism was met with great trepidation by much of the Sunni population. This was especially true for its most conservative segments, in particular the largely Sunni landowning and urban merchant classes that dominated the economy. They viewed Alawites as culturally backward and the secularism, socialism, and nationalism promulgated by Ba’athist ideology as anathema to their worldview and a

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Press, 1999), David W. Lesch, *The New Lion of Damascus: Bashar al-Asad and Modern Syria* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2005), Bassam Haddad, *Business Networks in Syria: The Political Economy of Authoritarian Resilience* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2012).

<sup>11</sup> For an overview of the ascent of Alawites in public and military sectors orchestrated by France during the French Mandate, see Hanna Batatu, *Syria’s Peasantry, the Descendants of Its Lesser Rural Notables, and Their Politics*, pp. 155–158, Patrick Seale, *Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East*, pp 14-23, Nikolaos Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria: Politics and Society Under Asad and the Ba’th Party*, pp 26-27, Nazih N. Ayubi, *Over-Stating the Arab State: Politics and Society in the Middle East* (London, I.B. Tauris Publishers, 1999), pp 90-91, Ayse Tekdal Fildis, “Roots of Alawite-Sunni Rivalry in Syria,” *Middle East Policy Council*, 19:2, Summer (2012): Ayse Tekdal Fildis, “The Troubles in Syria: Spawned by French Divide and Rule,” *Middle East Policy Council*, 18: 4, Winter (2011).

<sup>12</sup> Nir Rosen, “Assad’s Alawites: Guardians of the Throne,” Al-Jazeera [Doha], October 10, 2011.

threat to their economic interests.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, the regime eventually cultivated new networks of support among the very communities that it had sidelined, particularly, the powerful Sunni merchant classes centered in cities such as Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, and Hama. It also lifted up rural-based Alawite and other minority business

## “The Ba’athist regime manufactured an unspoken compact that balanced... minority interests with those of an influential segment of the Sunni majority.”

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interests,<sup>14</sup> solidifying a powerful base of businessmen and other influential notables with a vested stake in regime survival.<sup>15</sup> In doing so, the Ba’athist

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<sup>13</sup> Hanna Batatu, “Syria’s Muslim Brethren,” *Middle East Report*, 12:110, November/December (1982); Sabrina Mervin, “Syria’s Alawites,” *Le Monde Diplomatique* [Paris], January 2013.

<sup>14</sup> Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1999), p 8.

<sup>15</sup> Bassam Haddad, “The Syrian Regime’s Business Backbone,” *Middle East Report*, 42:262, Spring (2012). For a more thorough treatment of the nexus between business networks in Syria and the Ba’athist regime, see Bassam Haddad, *Business Networks in Syria: The Political Economy of Authoritarian Resilience* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2012). Incidentally, segments of the Sunni merchant classes and other conservative segments of society that were most affected by the Ba’athist regime’s social and economic policies would lend their support to the violent insurgency launched by the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood between 1976 and 1982 that led to the destruction wrought on Hama. The business networks cultivated by the Ba’athist regime would remain largely loyal during this period of crisis. For more background, see Nikolaos Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria: Politics and Society Under Asad and the Ba’th Party*, pp 105-110, Fred Lawson, “Social Bases for the Hama Revolt,” *Middle East Report*, 12:110, November/December (1982), Hanna Batatu, “Syria’s Muslim Brethren,” *Middle East Report*, 12:110, Novem-

regime manufactured an unspoken compact that balanced Alawite and other minority interests with those of an influential segment of the Sunni majority.<sup>16</sup>

Interestingly, the prominent role of Alawites has not translated into special privileges for the group in general. This

**“The prominent role of Alawites has not translated into special privileges for the group in general... even as most of them continue to side with the Ba’athists.”**

is the case even as most of them continue to side with the Ba’athists.<sup>17</sup> Alawites have been subjected to the repression, poverty, and disenfranchisement experienced by most Syrians under Ba’athist rule.<sup>18</sup>

Regime elites, including members of the al-Assad clan, have been known to regularly intermarry across confessional lines in an apparent attempt to widen their patronage and client networks in politics, business,

ber/December (1982).

16 A Correspondent in Damascus, “Syria’s Alawites Torn Between Regime, Opposition,” *Al-Monitor*, August 19, 2013.

17 The reasons behind Alawite support for the Ba’athist regime are often framed in a sense of communal affinity shared with Al-Assad. In reality, the reasons behind Alawite support for the Ba’athist regime are diverse. For example, in light of the prevalence of extremist Islamist currents within the armed opposition, including hard-line Salafist elements that continue to single out Alawites as heretics and apostates, many Alawites support the Ba’athist regime for the sake of their own survival. See Aziz Nakash, “The Alawite Dilemma in Homs: Survival, Solidarity, and the Making of a Community,” Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Department for Middle East and North Africa, March 2013, Lauren Williams, “Syria’s Alawites Not Deserting Assad Yet, Despite Crackdown,” *Middle East Eye*, September 11, 2014

18 Hanna Batatu, *Syria’s Peasantry, the Descendants of Its Lesser Rural Notables, and Their Politics*, pp 226-230.

and the security apparatus as well as in more traditional spheres of communal, clan, and tribal affairs. This has helped cultivate a new elite whose loyalties transcend religion and other primordial factors in favor of a shared commitment to the Ba’athist regime.<sup>19</sup> The over representation of Alawites in positions of influence in the political, military, and security apparatus today is largely the result of the legacy of the French Mandate and former Syrian president Hafez al-Assad’s attempt to build a cadre of trusted loyalists bound by family, kinship, clan, and tribal ties rather than any sense of Alawite solidarity.<sup>20</sup>

#### The Sunni Factor

While resentment among Syrians toward the Ba’athist regime may transcend religious affiliation and ideology, the Syrian opposition, especially its armed

19 Yahya Sadowski, “The Evolution of Political Identity in Syria,” in *Identity and Foreign Policy in the Middle East*, (eds) Shibley Telhami and Michael Barnett (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2002), pp 145-147. Bashar al-Assad’s marriage to the British-born and-raised Asma al-Akhras, the daughter of a prominent Sunni family from Homs, is often described as another example of the strengthening ties between the Ba’athist political and military elite and Syria’s influential Sunni business class. See I. Briscoe, F. Janssen, & R. Smits, “Stability and Economic Recovery After Assad: Key Steps for Syria’s Post-Conflict Transition,” *Clingendael-Netherlands Institute for International Affairs*, No. 2, (November 2012).

20 Hanna Batatu, “Some Observations on the Social Roots of Syria’s Ruling, Military Group and the Causes for its Dominance,” *Middle East Journal*, 35:3 (Summer 1981): pp. 331-334. This legacy is apparent in the current Ba’athist hierarchy inherited by Bashar al-Assad, especially the military and security services, where members of the al-Assad clan figure prominently in leadership positions. For example, Bashar’s brother Maher al-Assad commands elite units such as the Republican Guard and the army’s Fourth Armored Division. The role of family networks also extends to the economic sector. Rami Makhoul, Bashar’s maternal cousin, widely reputed as Syria’s richest man, heads a number of strategic business concerns that span the telecommunications, banking, real estate, tourism, and media sectors. The late Hafez al-Assad’s rule has weighed heavily on his successor, especially in earlier considerations of Bashar al-Assad’s potential as a reformer following his assumption of power in 2000. See Flynt Leverett, *Inheriting Syria: Bashar’s Trial By Fire*, (Washington, D.C., Brookings Institution Press, 2005), pp. 22-56.

current, is a Sunni enterprise.<sup>21</sup> The sectarian motivations that are driving large segments of the opposition to the Ba’athist regime cannot be understated.

The influence of radical Sunni Islamist currents, including extremist Salafists who conceive their campaign as part of a greater sectarian struggle to topple

**“Sunnis (and others) who harbor genuine misgivings toward the government may still feel more threatened by the armed opposition.”**

a heretical government, is hugely important within the wider opposition. Salafist militants, for example, perceive Alawites as unbelievers and the Ba’athist administration as an appendage of archenemies Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah.<sup>22</sup> At the same time, notable segments of Syria’s Sunni majority remain supportive of the Ba’athists for a number of reasons.<sup>23</sup> The nature of authoritarian regimes makes it difficult to gauge feelings of approval (or opposition). Nevertheless, it is important to consider the various gradations of support that the present

21 It is important to point out that the Syrian opposition, while overwhelmingly Sunni in its composition and by now dominated by various radical Islamist currents, did at one point reflect a more diverse coalition, especially in the early stages of the uprising prior to its eventual militarization. Moreover, segments of the Alawite community, long regarded as a monolithic bloc of support for the Ba’athist regime, has reflected divergent allegiances and objectives with respect to both the regime and the opposition. See Oula Abdulhamid Alrifai, “Not Alright With Syria’s Alawites: Growing Resentment Splits Assad’s Power Base,” *Foreign Affairs*, December 3, 2014.

22 Guido Steinberg, “Sunni vs. Shi’a: Opposition Fueled By Power Politics,” *German Institute for International and Security Affairs*, August 13, 2013.

23 Michael Pizzy and Nuha Shabaan, “Sunnis Fill Rebel Ranks, but Also Prop Up Assad Regime,” *USA Today*, August 2, 2013.



regime continues to draw from this critical segment of Syrian society.<sup>24</sup>

Sunnis (and others) who harbor genuine misgivings toward the government may still feel more threatened by the armed opposition. These feelings are likely to have crystallized given the prevalence of radical Sunni Islamist currents within the insurgents. These sentiments are reflected in numerous segments of Syria's Sunnis. They are most apparent, however, among urban Sunnis, including the middle- and

### **“The strong Sunni presence in Syria’s military and security apparatus has also been overlooked.”**

upper-class strata and, in particular, the business and merchant classes that were cultivated by the Ba’athist regime over many years.<sup>25</sup> The armed opposition has singled out a number of powerful Sunni businessmen for their purported roles in helping to sustain the Ba’athists, including the organization of irregular militias; and the smuggling of hard currency, arms, and critical goods.<sup>26</sup>

Class-based dynamics have also shaped negative perceptions of the opposition among the many Sunnis who remain loyal to the current regime. The perception of the opposition as a rural-based movement led by religiously conservative, poor, and unsophisticated villagers has alienated wide segments of urban Sunnis, who have little in common socially with their co-religionists.<sup>27</sup>

24 For example, some observers have posited that the incumbent regime is more popular than is commonly accepted. See Musa al-Gharbi, “Syria Contextualized: The Numbers Game,” *Middle East Policy*, 20:1 Spring (2013).

25 Sam Dagher, “Asad’s Not-So-Secret Weapon: Loyal Syrian Businessmen,” *Wall Street Journal*, March 24, 2013.

26 Michael Pizzi and Nuha Shabaan, “Under Sectarian Surface, Sunni Backing Props Up Assad Regime,” *Syria Direct*, June 20, 2013.

27 David Kilcullen and Nate Rosenblatt, “The Rise of

The strong Sunni presence in Syria’s military and security apparatus has also been overlooked. Much of the Ba’athist military and security apparatus is commanded by Alawite officers who are bound by relations to family, kin, clan, or tribe. Many elite squads and sections are led directly by al-Assad’s relatives. Nonetheless, Sunnis and, more specifically, Sunni Arabs, continue to make up the majority of the regular army’s rank-and-file membership.

Estimates indicate that Sunnis account for between 60 and 65 percent of the regular army.<sup>28</sup> Despite mass defections by thousands of mostly Sunni conscripts and mid-level officers and growing reports of recruitment problems,<sup>29</sup> Sunnis continue to be well represented in Syria’s security institutions in various capacities, including leadership and other specialized roles. This is the case even as the reasons behind their continued service—and that of other Syrians—may vary.<sup>30</sup>

The participation of auxiliary elements such as Lebanese Hezbollah<sup>31</sup> and Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds Force<sup>32</sup> in Syria in both kinetic and advisory capacities, combined with the presence of Shi’a militia formations from Iraq,<sup>33</sup> and other Shi’a volunteers

Syria’s Urban Poor: Why the War for Syria’s Future Will Be Fought Over The Country’s New Urban Villages,” *PRISM*, National Defense University, Center for Complex Operations, Vol. 4, Syria Supplemental, (2014): pp. 33-41.

28 Vicken Cheterian, “The Syrian War is More Than Sectarian,” *Al-Hayat*, May 17, 2015.

29 Maya Gebeily, “Pro-Regime Syrians Back Army but Dodge Draft,” *Agence France Presse*, April 20, 2015.

30 For example, many Sunnis and others within the military and security apparatus may be unconvinced of the armed opposition’s capacity to prevail, hence their decision to side with what they believe to be the strongest actor on the ground. See Michael Pizzi and Nuha Shabaan, “Sunni vs. Sunni: Pro-Revolution Sunnis Lament Assad Backers,” *Syria Direct*, June 21, 2013.

31 Amal Saad, “From Classic to Post-Resistance: On Hezbollah’s Transformation,” *Al-Akbar* [Beirut], February 13, 2015.

32 Nabih Bulos, “Commander’s Death in Syria Points to Iranian Role in Civil War,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 1, 2014

33 Aymenn Jawaad Al-Tamimi, “The Return of Iraqi

from as far away as Afghanistan<sup>34</sup> has strengthened the Ba’athist regime.

At the same time, Sunni participation likely mitigated against a catastrophic collapse of the Ba’athist military. Indeed, Sunni participation has not been lost on the opposition.<sup>35</sup>

Nevertheless, there are reports that Sunnis are sometimes assigned to less sensitive positions and have otherwise become the subject of increased attention by commanders.<sup>36</sup> In a manner

### **“Sunni participation likely mitigated against a catastrophic collapse of the Ba’athist military.”**

characteristic of autocratic regimes, the Syrian army and other sections of the security apparatus remain highly politicized institutions.<sup>37</sup>

At the same time, Sunnis are known to have participated in the Popular Committee detachments that preceded the summer 2012 establishment of the National Defense Force (NDF) paramilitary. As an auxiliary to the regular military and security apparatus, the NDF has emerged as a critical component of the Ba’athist military

Shi’I Militias to Syria,” *Middle East Institute*, March 16, 2015.

34 Farahmand Alipour, “Iranian Doc Follows Afghan Fighters in Syria,” *Al-Monitor*, May 4, 2015.

35 This view is encapsulated in the following observation by an opposition activist: “We all know that most of the security forces shooting at us and killing us are Sunnis, not Alawites, this is not about sect” See Phil Sands, “Sectarianism Casts Shadow Over Syria’s Uprising,” *National* [Abu Dhabi], June 21, 2012. Also see Yahya Alous, “Sunnis Against Sunnis,” *Syrian Observer*, April 8, 2015.

36 Zenobie, “How Syria Works,” *Le Monde Diplomatique*, Paris, October 4, 2011.

37 Ibid. and Michael Pizzi and Nuha Shabaan, “Sunni vs. Sunni: Pro-Revolution Sunnis Lament Assad Backers,” *Syria Direct*, June 21, 2013.



machine.<sup>38</sup> The administration is also reported to be leveraging the NDF as a way to co-opt or otherwise neutralize disenchanting insurgent elements.<sup>39</sup>

Participation in the NDF, in lieu of conscription in the regular Syrian army—a prospect that has become increasingly unpopular—also appears to be a way to ensure that Syrians remain loyal to the Ba’athist regime or otherwise neutral.<sup>40</sup>

**“It is likely that significant segments of the regime’s Sunni constituency will remain supportive...for fear of a more dangerous outcome.”**

Sunnis, for example, are well represented in NDF units based in Aleppo and elsewhere.<sup>41</sup> Sunnis have also continued to play a prominent role in other sections of Syria’s vast security apparatus.

The Ba’athist’s mobilization of *shabiha* (ghosts), irregular militia formations that were used to quell displays of popular dissent and perform other acts of repression, has seen notable traction among Sunnis. The participation of the predominantly Sunni Berri clan, a prominent criminal organization based in Aleppo that has close ties to the regime, in the recruitment and

deployment of *shabiha* gangs is an example.<sup>42</sup>

The role and influence of Sunni Arab tribes in the ongoing conflict remain topics of close scrutiny. Syria’s traditional tribal heartlands along the borders with Jordan, Iraq, and Turkey have emerged as bastions for the different ideological currents represented within the armed opposition. Yet the Bagarra tribe, which contains both Sunni and Shi’a members, has remained largely loyal to the al-Assad government.<sup>43</sup>

The Ba’athist regime has also bolstered the NDF’s ranks with loyal Sunni Arab tribesmen who act as crucial proxies for the regime to different degrees in provinces as diverse as Al-Raqqah, Al-Hassakah, Dara’a, and Deir al-Zour.<sup>44</sup>

**Conclusion**

While it is difficult to gauge in quantitative or otherwise precise terms, observers should more carefully weigh the possibility that it is the Ba’athist regime’s support base within the Sunni majority, however narrow and limited it may be relative to the wider community, that has ensured its survival until now.

42 Agence France-Presse, “Syria Rebels Condemn Reported Executions,” August 3, 2012. The *shabiha* networks mobilized during the current conflict have their origins in a network of organized criminals. For more on the origins of the *shabiha*, see Yasin al-Haj Salih, “The Syrian Shabiha and Their State: Statehood and Participation,” *Kalamon Magazine*, March 3, 2014, Winter Edition, No. 5.

43 Dawn Chatty, “Syria’s Bedouin Enter the Fray: How Tribes Could Keep Syria Together,” *Foreign Affairs*, November 13, 2013, Nicholas A. Heras and Carole A. O’Leary, “The Tribal Factor in Syria’s Rebellion: A Survey of Armed Tribal Groups in Syria,” *Terrorism Monitor* (Jamestown Foundation), 11:13.

44 Haian Dukhan, “Tribes and Tribalism in the Syrian Revolution,” *Open Democracy*, December 19, 2012, Haian Dukhan, “Tribes and Tribalism in the Syrian Uprising,” *Syrian Studies*, 6:2, Nicholas A. Heras, “Shaykh Muhammad al-Faris: Assad’s Man in Qamishli,” *Militant Leadership Monitor Briefs* (Jamestown Foundation), 6:3. There are also reports of fluctuating loyalties among Syria’s major tribes with respect to the Ba’athist regime and various armed opposition currents, including the Islamic State. See Aron Lund, “What’s Behind the Kurdish-Arab Clashes in East Syria?,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, January 23, 2015.

The regime’s ability to draw on segments of Syria’s Sunni majority in the face of an intensifying insurrection rooted in the wider Sunni population has far reaching implications that go beyond President al-Assad’s ability to remain in power. Regardless of the outcome, the web of entrenched interests within the Sunni population that remain loyal to, or otherwise invested in the survival of the current regime will have to renegotiate their status in what is likely to be a treacherous political climate. In this context, the deep rifts that have emerged between different segments of the Sunni majority will constitute a new set of political fault lines.

Consequently, it is likely that significant segments of the regime’s Sunni constituency will remain supportive of the regime for fear of a more dangerous outcome, including a protracted civil war that persists well beyond al-Assad’s tenure. Meanwhile, the regime will continue to exploit the ingrained divides within the Sunni majority in an attempt to preserve its position at all costs.

*Chris Zambelis is a Senior Analyst focusing on the Middle East for Helios Global, Inc., a risk management group based in the Washington, D.C. area. The opinions expressed here are the author’s alone and do not necessarily reflect the position of Helios Global, Inc.*

38 For more on the role of informal militias in irregular warfare, including their propensity for engaging in criminality and human rights abuses, see Stathis N. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp 107-110.

39 *Syrian Observer*, “We Defected from FSA Over Siege, Despair: Al-Anfal Commander,” March 24, 2015.

40 Ghaith Abdel Aziz, “With Assad’s Troops Stretched, Fighters Join NDF for Salary and Stability,” *Syria Deeply*, October 8, 2014.

41 Edward Dark, “Pro-Regime Sunni Fighters in Aleppo Defy Sectarian Narrative,” *Al-Monitor*, March 14, 2014.

## Extremist Forums Provide Digital OpSec Training

By Aaron Brantly and Muhammad al-`Ubaydi

THE AVERAGE NETIZEN has terrible digital hygiene. We click on random links, open emails from unknown individuals, use public WiFi hotspots, leave computers and devices unsecured, and often do not even use basic anti-virus packages. Most Chief Information Systems Officers' largest problem is not a talented nation state, but rather lazy or ignorant employees, oblivious to the risk they are exposing themselves, their

**“Instead of calling help desk support, jihadists have formed online technical support communities.”**

networks, and their systems to through simple careless acts.

The majority of individuals, whether using personal or corporate devices, do not have much need for high levels of digital operational security (often shortened to Digital OpSec) beyond the basic ability to protect personal information from malicious actors. When they have trouble with their computers they take them to their local help desk support staff, call remote help hotlines, or ask their children. However, many of the concerns the average person avoids on a daily basis become increasingly important when individuals are engaged in illegal or potentially illegal behavior.

Numerous news stories show how engagement with the Internet or mobile phones can generate a significant leakage of digital breadcrumbs.<sup>1</sup> These clues make it possible (although still quite

1 For a discussion on some aspects of digital tracking see: Aaron Brantly, “You Were Identified as a Participant in a Mass Disturbance,” National Democratic Institute for International Affairs-Tech blog, January 24, 2014

time-consuming and difficult) for law enforcement and intelligence agencies to follow nefarious actors. The average potential foreign fighter or terrorist cannot pick up the phone to call the Geek Squad for help hiding their digital communications. Even as a well trained cybersecurity professional, it remains remarkably difficult to maintain highly robust digital operational security.

Instead of calling help desk support, jihadists have formed online technical support communities. The authors examined a variety of open source data comprising more than 40 forum conversations over the past year in which terrorists and potential terrorists examine, discuss, and ask for assistance in establishing robust digital operational security. We have leveraged forums including al-Minbar al-I`lami al-Jihadi, an open network that does not require registration unless posting content or engaging in personal communications via the platform; Shmukh al-Islam, a password-protected network with limited user access; and Al-Fida', a network similar to Shmukh al-Islam. Each of these networks also suffers from its own issues including hacking, but each contains content related to digital operations security.<sup>2</sup>

This study illustrates a skill gap between those who are capable of hiding their digital tracks and those who are not. The material also highlights the regularity of these conversations, sometimes in response to illegally obtained and disseminated classified documents, including those released by Edward Snowden. These discussions illustrate the role that information leaks can play in the digital environment for terrorist organizations. This analysis of more than 40 forum conversations, each with multiple threads and participants over the past year, presents a robust representative sample of the dynamics and issues facing terrorists in their efforts to achieve digital operational security.

### The Jihadi Help Desk

This analysis indicates that jihadist

2 Muhammad al-`Ubaydi collected dozens of conversations from these forums on issues related to digital operations security.

forum and chat room participants are turning to one another with increasing frequency to learn best practices for digital operational security. Many of the questions are mundane and the answers are easily found either by consulting NGO sites dedicated to providing information about online privacy and security or popular commercial sites dedicated to information security.<sup>3</sup> Yet, despite multiple other avenues of information, questions of security regarding popular platforms such as Skype, Google, Gmail, WhatsApp, Tor Mail, are being posed in jihadi forums. Individuals

**“The level of technical sophistication...indicates a mid-level understanding of digital operational security.”**

with higher levels of technical acumen regularly warn those inquiring about commonly used products, indicating both their fundamental lack of security and the prevalence of surveillance by nation states on these platforms. These low-level questions are quickly and effectively answered. This illustrates a fundamental change in Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures (TTPs) associated with online behavior.

These low-level questions are the tip of an iceberg and demonstrate that even inexperienced users are beginning to recognize the fundamental constraints associated with using digital tools to communicate for jihadist purposes.

3 We will not focus on the NGOs that fund the development of these projects. The development process works in such a way as to include multiple government and privately funded NGOs as well as software development groups who receive government grants and funds. Various aspects of different software packages can be developed independently of one another through multiple funding streams. Often software development requests are in response to perceived and actual threats posed to democracy and human rights activists as well as to civil liberties and privacy.

The level of technical sophistication associated with the average user's question indicates a mid-level understanding of digital operational security often only secured through consistent study or training.

More experienced users providing advice in our sample pointed to other tools, among them were some that are often used to safeguard human and democracy rights activists around the world. Many of these programs or tools were developed with the expressed

**“More experienced users providing advice in our sample pointed to other tools, among them were some that are often used to safeguard human and democracy rights activists.”**

intent of safeguarding individuals working under the threat of states to provide added security for their operations. These same tools, often funded in part by the U.S. Government, NGOs, corporations, and others, are now expressly being used for illicit purposes. Programs such as Tor (an anonymous routing network, also referred to as the Onion Network), Tails, DuckDuckGo, StartPage, PhotoMe Beta, ExifTool, MetaNull, Jitsi, JustPasteIt, Silent Circle, and several others from the Guardian Project are being openly discussed on jihadi forums.<sup>4</sup> They are often accompanied by well-written Arabic documents explaining their implementation and use.<sup>5</sup> There are also numerous discussions on how to bypass

4 We found mentions and discussions of all of these tools and many more in dozens of posts on jihadist forums.

5 We collected 24 unique digital training manuals in Arabic and saw embedded within various forum posts more than a dozen training videos.

security mechanisms such as registered emails and phone numbers so that individuals can take advantage of more popular platforms such as Twitter and Facebook for propaganda purposes.

Each of these tools provide ways to establish or enhance anonymity when communicating online. Combined use of these tools does not fully safeguard the anonymity of individuals online, yet it can significantly enhance the probability of remaining anonymous. Tools such as Tor and Tails facilitate anonymous browsing behavior. Tails can also alter the MAC address of a system, which serves as the computer's identification number while browsing, much like a postal address in the physical world. DuckDuckGo and StartPage enable anonymous or quasi anonymous searches.<sup>6</sup> JustPasteIt enables the quick and largely anonymous sharing of information via HTML links and has become increasingly popular with organizations such as the Islamic State.<sup>7</sup> Silent Circle is an encrypted email platform that has recently worked on the Black Phone project to enable stronger privacy.<sup>8</sup> The Guardian Project applications are designed to enhance privacy and secure communications on mobile devices.<sup>9</sup>

None of the democracy, human rights, or civil liberties organizations want to facilitate terrorist activities. Each of the developers or communities behind these products seeks to encourage privacy and human rights protection.<sup>10</sup> These

6 See: <https://duckduckgo.com/about> and <https://startpage.com/eng/aboutstartpage/>

7 Carmen Fishwick. “How a Polish Student's Website Became an Isis Propaganda Tool.” *The Guardian*, August 15, 2014.

8 See: <https://silentcircle.com>

9 See: <https://guardianproject.info>.

10 Examples of human rights protection include the Tactical Tech Collective's project “security in a box” found at: <https://securityinabox.org/en>, Reporters Without Borders “We fight Censorship” project found at: <https://www.wefightcensorship.org/article/digital-security-basicshtml.html> and the Open Technology Fund, a project that funds projects to help promote human rights and open societies found at: <https://www.opentechfund.org/about-off>. These are just a small sample of dozens of similar projects that work on the

products serve valuable legitimate purposes when civil liberties are under sustained threat. Many of these tools can help protect personal information when traveling, particularly when accessing insecure WiFi networks or when visiting countries that spy on foreign nationals.<sup>11</sup>

Digital security tools ostensibly developed to advance human rights are, however, now being used for terrorist activities. It is important to realize that despite a popular focus on

**“Digital security tools ostensibly developed to advance human rights are, however, now being used for terrorist activities.”**

the battlefields of Iraq, Syria, Libya, and other zones of contention, the infrastructure that goes into supporting the frontline fighters is deep and diverse.<sup>12</sup>

To communicate, transfer funds, plan and organize operations, train, and travel, groups such as the Islamic State and al Qa`ida rely on integrated communications strategies within a complex information environment that is constrained by state intelligence services.

When organizations are small it is conceivable to engage in direct forms of communication. Previous Combating Terrorism Center reports and occasional papers examined how the Islamic

development of platforms in the digital space.

11 One project that was historically very useful was the “security in a box” project that has now been overtaken by more current variants. Yet the trend remains the same, to provide training and resources to facilitate human rights and free and open societies, <http://securityinabox.org>.

12 Sarah Elizabeth Parkinson, “Organizing Rebellion: Rethinking High-Risk Mobilization and Social Networks in War,” *American Political Science Review*, 107:3, (2013): pp. 418–432.

State's administrative processes grew.<sup>13</sup> Everything from reporting structures to finance structure and recruiting processes has to be developed. In constrained geographic areas this process can occur over what can best be described as the "SneakerNet," which describes the ability for complex organizational structures to be built up through direct personal contact facilitated by for example, walking or driving.

As the size and complexity of an insurgency increases so do the challenges of managing a transnational network. The logistical challenges for managing foreign fighters are extensive.

**“Individuals are highly attuned to the security status of popular applications including Skype.”**

The International Center for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence estimates that more than 20,000 individuals have traveled to Syria to fight as of January 2015, a number that exceeds foreign fighter estimates for Afghanistan in the 1980s.<sup>14</sup> Once on the ground, these fighters need to be fed, organized, and often paid, an enormous challenge, which in the case of the Islamic State is made more difficult by external intelligence services seeking to halt foreign fighter flows.

The SneakerNet breaks down as logistical challenges increase. Globalized jihad

13 Danielle F. Jung, Jacob N. Shapiro, Pat Ryan, and Jon Wallace, *Managing a Transnational Insurgency: The Islamic State of Iraq's "Paper Trail,"* 2005-2010, (Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, 2014). Muhammad Al-'Ubaydi, Nelly Lahoud, Daniel Milton, and Bryan Price, *The Group That Calls Itself a State: Understanding the Evolution and Challenges of the Islamic State,* (Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, 2014).

14 Peter Neumann, "Foreign Fighter Total in Syria/Iraq Now Exceeds 20,000; Surpasses Afghanistan Conflict in the 1980s." (ICSR, 2015).

has increasingly gone online to handle communications, monetary transfers, and other supporting and propaganda functions. This movement to global digital communications has increased the urgency associated with what is best described as tech support for jihad.

**Jihadi Techies**

Users like Tiqani al-Islam, who provides detailed analysis of Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) and their legal obligations regarding data retention, add to already robust discussions on secure communications in response to questions posed by community members. By identifying and highlighting which networks should not be used, they are enhancing the aggregate security of the network. By educating users how to use VPNs or the Tor network they are increasing the costs to intelligence and law enforcement in what Hoffman calls the "Technological Treadmill," in which terrorists seek to stay ahead of counterterrorist practitioners.<sup>15</sup>

We also found clear indications in the forums that individuals are highly attuned to the security status of popular applications including Skype. For instance, in response to a question about how to use Skype through Tor, a jihadi with more knowledge responded, "Skype is insecure, and Americans are recording every single call since 2008." Later, another jihadi specifically indicates that Skype cannot be used through Tor. These types of conversations are repeated in the sampled forum traffic for a number of applications. Discussions on the use of Skype, WhatsApp and many others are not of themselves surprising, but the conversations on the forums shift individuals away from using less secure to more secure communication.

The discussions also deal with facilitating secure mobile communications and browsing. A detailed post by Rakan al-Iraqi analyzes the security of several mobile platforms and a number of available communication applications. He begins by highlighting Wickr Software, a multi-platform messaging application that claims a number of

15 Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism,* (New York: Columbia University Press: 2006), pp. 252-253.

highly secure features. He explains that using Wickr, user ID and device communications undergo multiple rounds of salted cryptographic hashing using SHA256, data at rest and in transit are encrypted with AES256, password and password hashes do not leave the device, and lastly that messages and media are subject to auto-deletion upon expiration. The application functions as a peer-to-peer encryption protocol eliminating the storage of encryption keys by a middleman. The program is designed for secure communications between human rights activists, journalists, friends, and individuals requiring high levels of privacy. Rakan al-'Iraqi explains the software's utility

**“With the increasing sophistication of geo-mapping capabilities comes a heightened ability to plan operations.”**

and offers up Wickr's own \$100,000 reward for those able to crack its protocols as a testament to its security.

Rakan al-'Iraqi also discusses Telegram, a Russian-made encrypted communications application. He notes that Telegram does force registration, but provides instructions for how to spoof the process with fake mobile numbers. Al-'Iraqi also demonstrates real technical prowess. A detailed discussion of and instructions on how to Root an Android Device<sup>16</sup> and install Tor shows a high degree of concern for systemic protection of communications. He provides a link to a detailed instruction manual on justpaste.it (in Arabic and with pictures) detailing how to root the device and install Tor. While the technical sophistication is probably too much for the basic user, the simplicity of the instructions opens it up to most moderately skilled users. The relative enhancement of security provided by the rooting of a mobile

16 Rooting a device allows for base level access to the device outside of the normal phone operating system.



phone and the installation of Tor can be significant, it does not provide fool-proof protection. Its consideration, however, demonstrates a level of awareness among the jihadists of the intense level of surveillance that is brought to bear on them.

#### **Cyber Tools for Terrorists**

Terrorists are able to leverage digital tools in other ways. User Abu 'Umbar al-Filistini, writing with the Twitter handle Usayyid al-Madani, provided detailed explanations on how to download and use online mapping programs to plan and coordinate "military operations." This discussion harkens back to the use of Google Earth by Lashkar-i-Tayyiba operatives to conduct the 2008 Mumbai attacks that resulted in approximately 160 civilian fatalities. Al-Filistini provides links to three different mapping services including the Universal Maps Downloader, Global Mapper, and Google Earth. He also included videos explaining how to use the mapping software and how to download maps for on-the-go operations. He closes his post with: "This work is dedicated to mujahideen everywhere, on top of them, the mujahideen of the Islamic State and Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis," illustrating the direct linkage of the online and offline communities.

The use of online mapping services demonstrates an increasing organizational capacity facilitated by the tools many use for normal activities. With the increasing sophistication of geo-mapping capabilities comes a heightened ability to plan operations with a better understanding of local terrain and its tactical advantages and disadvantages. A final case illustrating jihadis' increasing technical acumen comes in a detailed post by one Abu 'Umar al-Misri. In it, he includes links to documentation as well as video tutorials on how to hack into WiFi networks.

The tutorials explain how to manipulate a vulnerability in WiFi Protected Setup (WPS), a feature that is enabled by default runs on most WiFi routers using WPA2 protection. This feature is still enabled on many WiFi routers and poses a security threat because the password can be broken quickly using brute force

(trying a different password over and over until access is granted). Although the absolute technical skill required to exploit this vulnerability is relatively low, the discussion again serves to highlight the use and discussion of technology vulnerabilities.

This article cannot examine all instances where advice and instructions are being disseminated, but the information is both deep and broad. What is frustrating for the privacy and security

### **“Jihadist tech support through online communities is likely to grow in importance in the coming years.”**

community is the realization that the government position on so-called backdoors might have some merit. The burden clearly does not fall entirely on well-intentioned developers.

Many tools are being developed by jihadis. We found conversations indicating jihadis are in the early stages of developing secure communications and browsing programs independent of the efforts by Western privacy advocates. The effectiveness of these tools is likely to be limited in most cases, yet will likely increase the concerns of intelligence and law enforcement individuals as they represent a small first step down the road to developing potential cyber weapons. Requests among the sampled forum traffic for targeted low-level attacks against websites in other countries and information about strategies and techniques to facilitate such attacks also add to concerns about digital security.

#### **Insights into Jihadist Behavior Online**

Our sample provides intriguing insights into an evolving area of operations. The low level of Internet penetration in some Middle Eastern and North African nations (Iraq, Syria, and Yemen having 9.2%, 26.2%, and 20% respectively as of

2014)<sup>17</sup> contrasts with the high levels in Europe and other Western countries. It indicates that the role of jihadist tech support through online communities is likely to grow in importance in the coming years.

Understanding how jihadists establish digital security will become more important. By enhancing their digital hygiene, jihadists are augmenting costs both in time and money for intelligence services and law enforcement.

These jihadist tech support posts were in many ways inevitable and their level of sophistication is likely to grow as does the percentage of the population who qualify as digital natives. As the membership of terrorist/jihadist organizations evolve from technically weaker older generations to younger generations with a far greater comfort and respect for the uses and limits of technology, it is likely that the threat environment will become increasingly complicated. Jihadist tech support for the application of digital tools is quite literally in its infancy and the future offers both opportunities and threats.

*Muhammad al-'Ubaydi is a research associate at the Combating Terrorism Center and monitors Arabic jihadist websites.*

*Aaron F. Brantly is Assistant Professor of International Relations and Cyber in the Department of Social Sciences at the United States Military Academy, Cyber Policy Fellow for the Army Cyber Institute and Cyber Fellow at the Combating Terrorism Center.*

*The views expressed here are those of the authors and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Department of the Army, Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.*

<sup>17</sup> "Middle East Internet Users, Population and Facebook Statistics." Internet World Stats, 2015.

## Terrorist Outbidding: The In Amenas Attack

By Geoff D. Porter

ON JANUARY 16, 2013, a group of men under the leadership of Mokhtar Belmokhtar attacked the Tigantourine Gas Facility at In Amenas, Algeria, and took more than 100 expatriate personnel hostage. More than two years later, the motives for the attack on this remote facility remain in question, despite post-mortems from one of the joint venture partners Statoil, the British government, and even one allegedly produced by the group to which Belmokhtar belonged.

**“Outbidding can especially apply to violent organizations that fracture and then are compelled to compete for support.”**

At the time, Belmokhtar claimed that his group had attacked the facility in retaliation for Algeria having allowed France to use its airspace during military operations against disparate Islamist groups that had taken control of a large portion of northern Mali. Evidence discovered later, showing that Belmokhtar’s group had begun planning the attack several months before France invaded Mali, makes it impossible for this explanation to be the sole cause.

While anger at France’s participation in the Mali campaign may have helped encourage planning, there must have been other motives. Hostage-taking has a long history among terrorist organizations and serves multiple purposes. Hostages can be ransomed for funds. They can be swapped for sympathizers or supporters held by the enemy. They can also be used as a form of outbidding to raise a group’s profile among its competitors.

The last option seems to have been at least one of Belmokhtar’s goals at Tigantourine.

### Outbidding Among Violent Organizations

Violent organizations that occupy the same space and adhere to similar ideologies or pursue similar political goals often compete with one another for finite constituencies. As a consequence, they resort to different means to assert dominance and claim primacy. For groups that have already embraced violence as a means of advancing their causes, escalating the level of violent behavior can serve this purpose, in what has become known as “outbidding.”<sup>18</sup>

One prominent example is Fatah’s embrace of suicide bombing, something which it had historically avoided. Thrust into competition with Hamas and other aggressive non-state actors in Israel and the Palestinian territories that shared some of Fatah’s political objectives, Fatah may have felt compelled to adopt some of the same tactics that had generated populist support for Hamas, in particular, suicide bombing.

In January 2002, Fatah did just that and carried out its first such attack.<sup>19</sup> Support for Fatah rose considerably after this decision and while it did not vanquish Hamas as a result, Fatah’s embrace of suicide bombing demonstrated how outbidding narrowed the growing gap between the two organizations, even though it undermined Fatah’s ability to engage in a negotiated solution to Israel’s occupation of Palestinian territory.<sup>20</sup>

### The Army of Islamic Salvation vs. The Armed Islamic Group

Outbidding can especially apply to

18 Mia Bloom, *Dying to Kill: The Allure of Suicide Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005); Andrew Kydd and Barbara Walter, “The Strategies of Terrorism,” *International Security* 31:1 (Summer 2006), pp. 49-80.

19 Jacob N. Shapiro, *The Terrorist’s Dilemma: Managing Covert Violent Organizations*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), p. 223.

20 Robert A. Pape, *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism* (New York: Random House, 2005); Andrew Kydd and Barbara F. Walter, “Sabotaging the Peace: The Politics of Extremist Violence,” *International Organization* 56 (Spring 2002), pp. 263-296; Mia M. Bloom, “Palestinian Suicide Bombing: Public Support, Market Share, and Outbidding,” *Political Science Quarterly* 119 (Spring 2004), pp. 61-88.

violent organizations that fracture and then are compelled to compete for support from a common constituency.

In 1994, two years into Algeria’s Islamist insurgency of the 1990s, an upstart militant Islamist organization, the Armed Islamic Group (GIA), was jockeying for primacy and power with the original Islamist group fighting the Algerian government, the Army of Islamic Salvation (AIS). In an unprecedented move calculated to upstage the AIS, the GIA hijacked an Air France flight from Algiers to Paris.<sup>21</sup>

**“One prominent example [of outbidding] is Fatah’s embrace of suicide bombing, something which it had historically avoided.”**

The hijacking unfolded over several days, with French Special Forces eventually killing the hijackers in Marseilles, where the plane had stopped to refuel. By 1995, the GIA had become the preeminent militant Islamist organization in Algeria and the AIS had been relegated to irrelevancy.

Belmokhtar had a ringside seat at this struggle for jihadi primacy from within the GIA. By this stage, he already had plenty of experience, allegedly dating back to the anti-Soviet fight in Afghanistan during the 1980s. He eventually quit the GIA, having become frustrated with its indiscriminate violence.<sup>22</sup>

21 Mohammed M. Hafez, *Why Muslims Rebel: Repression and Resistance in the Islamic World* (London: Lynne Rienner, 2003), p.118.

22 Andrew Black, “Mokhtar Belmokhtar: The Algerian Jihad’s Southern Emir” *Jamestown Terrorism Monitor* Vol. 7:12 (2009). Andrew Wojtanik, “Mokhtar Belmokhtar: One-Eyed Firebrand of North Africa and the Sahel,” Jihadi Bios Project, Combating Terrorist Center, West Point, 2014

Belmokhtar subsequently joined the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), which then evolved into al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Significantly, the GIA battalion, or *katiba*, that executed the 1994 Air France hijacking was called Mouaquioun bi-Dimma, the same name as the group that conducted the In Amenas attack.

#### Jabhat al-Nusra vs. The Islamic State

The same dynamics are visible in a more recent episode of competition between terrorist organizations. Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State have competed for legitimacy, supporters, fighters, and funds in Syria over the past few years.

As with the competition between the AIS and the GIA, hostage-taking proved instrumental in the Islamic State's surpassing and, in some instances, displacing Jabhat al-Nusra as the primary jihadi group operating in Syria.

**“Belmokhtar, despite having unassailable jihadi credentials, was increasingly marginalized from AQIM leadership decisions.”**

The Islamic State's differences with al-Qa`ida's leadership and its eventual schism with al-Qa`ida are well known. However, it continued to operate in Syria where Jabhat al-Nusra, which remained allied with al-Qa`ida, also operated.

Although the two organizations differed in their ultimate goals—overthrow of the al-Assad government versus the establishment of a caliphate—they did share the common purpose of combating the government of Syria's President Bashar al-Assad and of promoting a particular interpretation of Islam. As a result, Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State found themselves vying for many of the same recruits and some of the same financial supporters.

One of the decisive events that appear to have clinched the Islamic State's position as the dominant jihadi group in Syria and Iraq was its kidnapping and eventual murder in 2014 of James Foley after 22 months of captivity. This act was followed two weeks later by the murder of another hostage, Steven Sotloff.

The killings of Foley and Sotloff brought unprecedented attention to the Islamic State. During the decade before the Islamic State declared the establishment of the caliphate (i.e., from June 30, 2004 through June 29, 2014), the combined Arabic and English media mentions of the Islamic State or predecessor organizations totaled 7,865.

During the month following Foley's murder and including the weeks immediately after the murder of Sotloff (August 20, 2014 to September 20, 2014) there were more than 24,000 mentions. Mentions of the Islamic State in English and Arabic media from August 20, 2014 until May 1, 2015 increased to more than 200,000, with more than half (118,000) occurring in Arabic.<sup>23</sup> Obviously, many of these mentions can be attributed to further attacks and murders, but the 300% increase in media appearances in the month following Foley's murder is still significant.

#### Media Mentions As Proxy

Compare that to the media mentions for Jabhat al-Nusra during identical time frames. From its creation until June 29, 2014, the combined Arabic and English total of media mentions for Jabhat al-Nusra was 15,128, with 9,974 mentions in Arabic and 5,154 in English. In the month following Foley's murder, Jabhat al-Nusra garnered only 958 mentions in English and 2,047 in Arabic. In the ensuing nine months, there were only 16,971 mentions of Jabhat al-Nusra in Arabic and English, mostly in Arabic.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Statistics regarding press mentions for the Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra, as well as other organizations mentioned below, are derived from Factiva searches. While clearly not comprehensive, they serve as a functional proxy.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

#### In Amenas As An Instance of Outbidding

The Mouaquioun bi-Dimma's attack on the Tigantourine Gas Facility fits a similar pattern. Following a dispute with AQIM's leadership, Belmokhtar broke away and carried out arguably the most spectacular terrorist attack in North African history. The hostage-barricade event resulted in the capture and death of 39 expatriate personnel. After the attack, Belmokhtar's star shone brightly in the jihadi universe.

A series of letters uncovered by the journalist Rukmini Callimachi in February 2013 confirmed long-suspected tensions between AQIM leader Abdelmalek Droukdal and Mokhtar Belmokhtar, the leader of the Moulathimin Brigade, an AQIM brigade operating in the Sahara.<sup>25</sup> The letters show that Belmokhtar, despite having unassailable jihadi credentials, was increasingly marginalized from AQIM leadership decisions.

**“In their own report... Belmokhtar's supporters indicate that the initial planning [for In Amenas] coincided with... increasingly acrimonious letters.”**

The rift, according to the letters, reached a head between September and November 2012.<sup>26</sup> Belmokhtar complained that AQIM's leadership was disconnected from the front and the fight.<sup>27</sup> AQIM's leadership responded, chastising Belmokhtar for not attending leadership meetings and for failing to contribute to weapons procurement.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Rukmini Callimachi, “In Timbuktu, al-Qaida left behind a manifesto,” Associated Press, February 14, 2013.

<sup>26</sup> Mathieu Guidère, “The Timbuktu Letters: New Insights about AQIM” *Res Militaris*, 4:1, Winter-Spring (2014).

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

In their own report documenting the In Amenas attack, Belmokhtar's supporters indicate that the initial planning coincided with the exchange of increasingly acrimonious letters between Belmokhtar and Droukdal.<sup>29</sup>

### The Tigantourine Attack

On January 16, 2013, after two months of planning, 32 men loyal to Belmokhtar launched an attack on the Tigantourine Gas Facility. More than 800 workers were employed at the facility, including 146 expatriate personnel. After breaching the security cordon, the attackers searched housing and the central processing facilities looking for employees. The attackers corralled the foreign personnel in the housing facility's main courtyard and let the Algerian employees go free.<sup>30</sup>

The attackers not only allowed the foreign hostages to use their mobile and satellite phones to call their employers and the media, but actually encouraged them to do so in order to call more attention to the attack. The attackers also spoke with Algerian security forces, communicating a number of demands, including the halting of France's military operations in northern Mali, and the release of both convicted terrorists held in U.S. facilities and terrorists held by Algerian authorities.<sup>31</sup>

On the second day, Algerian forces attacked. In the ensuing violence, 39 hostages, an Algerian security guard, and all 29 attackers died. None of the attackers' demands was considered.

### Mokhtar Belmokhtar Raises His Profile

If the In Amenas hostage-taking was at least in part motivated by Belmokhtar's competition with Droukdal for primacy, then it appears to have worked, at least in generating media attention. Prior to

the attack, Belmokhtar was essentially unknown with just 1,121 media mentions in English, French, and Arabic of his name during the decade before the operation.

In the 17 months after the attack, there were six times as many. From January 16, 2013, the day of the attack, until May 1, 2015, there were 6,881 mentions by name and an additional 900 mentions of "Those who Sign in Blood," the English translation of the name of the brigade that carried out the attack. This is in contrast to fewer than 1,700 media results in Arabic, French, and English for Abdelmalek Droukdal in the decade prior to the Tigantourine attack, and only 1,101 immediately after the attack until May 1, 2015.

## "Hostage-taking succeeded in generating media attention and raising the group's profile."

### What Does Hostage-Taking Achieve?

Hostage-taking as a form of outbidding and asserting dominance in a competitive jihadi landscape is about more than just garnering media attention. It also relates to practical things such as attracting recruits and generating funding, elements that are nonetheless vital in advancing a violent organization's strategic political objectives. These components, though, are harder to measure. It is hard to gauge beyond rough estimates how many fighters have tried to join the Islamic State or Jabhat al-Nusra following the kidnapping and murders of Foley and Sotloff. It is also, for now at least, impossible to disaggregate funding for either organization. Without access to Islamic State or Jabhat al-Nusra bookkeeping, it is impossible to know how much either organizations' finances changed in the wake of the Foley and Sotloff murders.

Analyzing the Tigantourine attack and any likely dispute between Droukdal and Belmokhtar poses similar

challenges. Although Belmokhtar's infamy has now far surpassed that of Droukdal, it is difficult to assess whether the attack resulted in tangible benefits for Belmokhtar.

Viewed through the lens of practical gains, the evidence that Belmokhtar's In Amenas operation was strategically successful is less clear. His organization did absorb another jihadi group, the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) in August 2013, and formed a new group called the Mourabitoun. The new group, though, has not been very active, apart from a deadly attack in Bamako in March 2015. Moreover, MUJAO recently announced that it was splitting with Belmokhtar and allying itself with the Islamic State.<sup>32</sup> The hostage-taking certainly succeeded in generating media attention and raising the group's profile, but it is less clear whether the Mourabitoun has been able to convert that higher profile into meaningful sustained support in terms of money and manpower, which are, after all, the ultimate goals of outbidding.

The hostage-barricade situation at Tigantourine is also an unfortunate instance where tragedy accommodates irony. At the heart of Belmokhtar's dispute with Droukdal was the permissibility of kidnapping and hostage taking. According to Mathieu Guidère, "Belmokhtar did not consider kidnapping and ransom to be part of 'jihad' (holy war) since the hostages were generally non-combatants or civilians. Secondly he believed that such practices would attract unwanted attention from Western countries..."

Belmokhtar's opposition to hostage taking was overruled by Droukdal who argued that "as for the status of hostages, the [AQIM] Legal Committee considers that any Western citizen is an enemy combatant because Western countries have all declared to be engaged in the war on terror and their political and military actions globally target the Islamist and jihadist

29 December 18, 2014, "Dirasa tawthiqiya li-`amaliya "al-muwaqiyun bi-al-dima" al-fida'iyah bi al-jaza'ir.

30 "In Amenas Inquest" U.K. Coroner's Office, Day 12, October 7, 2014, p. 23.

31 "Foreigners seized after deadly Algeria attack" Al Jazeera, January 16, 2013; Bill Roggio, "Belmokhtar claims Algerian raid, slaying hostages for al Qaeda" *The Long War Journal* (January 2013); "Algeria Hostage Deal: Kidnappers Offer to Swap US Hostages for Jailed Militants," Reuters, January 18, 2013.

32 Thomas Joscelyn, "Confusion surrounds West African jihadists' loyalty to Islamic State" *The Long War Journal*, May 14, 2015



groups.”<sup>33</sup> Belmokhtar’s dispute with Droukdal regarding kidnapping and hostage-taking comes as a surprise because Belmokhtar was at the forefront of kidnap for ransom in the Sahara for many years and participated in numerous operations that resulted in substantial revenue for AQIM.<sup>34</sup>

In his bid to supplant Droukdal, Belmokhtar may have revisited their dispute in an attempt to beat the AQIM leader on his own ground. If Droukdal considered kidnapping and hostage-taking to be legal, then Belmokhtar was going to do it on an unprecedented scale. Belmokhtar would walk the walk, while Droukdal simply talked. And Belmokhtar would take the mantle of jihadi dominance in North Africa.

*Dr. Geoff D. Porter is an assistant professor with the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point and president of North Africa Risk Consulting. He specializes in political stability, violent non-state actors, and the extractive industries in North Africa.*

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## Islamic State Operations and Iraqi Fault Lines

By Andrew Watkins

DURING THE OFFENSIVE by Islamic State militants that began in early June 2014, the group parlayed tactical advantages into significant territorial gains. Its use of multidirectional, vehicle-borne assaults made it seem as though Islamic State fighters were ubiquitous.<sup>1</sup> The speed of these attacks threw Iraqi security forces (ISF) on their heels and allowed the militant group to capture land and weapons as state security forces withdrew. The Islamic State also succeeded in slowing the organization of an ISF counteroffensive by planting improvised explosive devices (IEDs) along roads and in houses.<sup>2</sup> While

### “Iraq’s Sunni community has largely been left out of the political and security decision-making process in post-Saddam Iraq.”

these tactical successes have been discussed extensively by a number of Iraq analysts, the broader geopolitical context in which they took place requires further analysis.

The Islamic State’s military achievements have taken place largely along two preexisting, culturally defined fault lines. The first is between the primarily Shia Iraqi security forces and the Sunni majority areas where these forces are now operating in western Iraq. The second is the zone between the central government in Baghdad and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Erbil that demarcates disputed territories between the two levels of government.

1 Sam Jones, “Iraq crisis: sophisticated tactics key to Isis strength,” *Financial Times*, June 26, 2014.

2 Alice Fordham, “Ambushes, Mines, and Booby Traps: Islamic State Militants Change Tack,” NPR, October 21, 2014.

By exploiting gaps in the positioning of security personnel resulting from these twin domestic conflicts, the Islamic State has been able to make significant territorial gains. One consequence of Iraq’s internal divisions is that the Islamic State is not fighting a unified, strong, Iraqi army. Instead, an assortment of localized security forces—including well-trained Peshmerga in the Kurdish region, increasingly powerful Shia militias organized under the al-Hashd al-Shabi (popular mobilization) forces in central Iraq, and Sunni tribal protection forces scattered throughout the country—have taken control of security arrangements at a localized level.<sup>3</sup> This fracturing of the national defense posture as a result of political disputes helps explain the Islamic State’s rapid expansion.

#### Marginalized Sunnis

Iraq’s Sunni community has largely been left out of the political and security decision-making process in post-Saddam Iraq.<sup>4</sup> Iraq’s Sunni heartland, principally in Anbar but with large populations in Salahaddin, Diyala, and Ninewa provinces, has struggled to develop effective, locally-staffed security institutions. One reason for this is a hesitance on the part of the federal government to provide arms or funding for Sunni tribes that could be used to oppose the state.

Though these areas are unquestionably part of federal Iraq, their security arrangements have been a source of considerable tension. This is primarily due to the sectarian composition of the mainly Shia Iraqi national army and the increased power of Shia militias.<sup>5</sup> Local Sunnis, many loath to support the draconian rule of militant groups, still see a threat in the armed forces

3 The House Armed Services Committee in the 2016 National Defense Authorization Act sought to allocate one-quarter of the proposed \$715 million earmarked for Iraq military support to go directly to the Kurdish Peshmerga and Sunni militias. Julian Pecquet, “Defense bill recognizes Iraq’s Kurdish, Sunni militias as a country,” *Al Monitor*, April 27, 2015.

4 Stephen Wicken, “Iraq’s Sunnis in Crisis,” *The Institute for the Study of War*, May 2013.

5 Dexter Filkins, “The Real Problem In Iraq,” *The New Yorker*, May 19, 2015.

33 Ibid.

34 Geoff D. Porter, “AQIM’s objectives in North Africa,” *The CTC Sentinel*, 4:2, (2011).

ostensibly sent there to protect them.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, the Iraqi chain of command has appeared to lack the motivation to assert military power in Sunni areas. Part of this is due to poor training, inadequate supplies, and weak leadership. However, the principle cause is the overtly sectarian nature of the Iraqi state and the Sunni's diminished position within it.<sup>7</sup>

In contrast to disputes between Erbil and Baghdad, the nature of Sunni disputes with the central government has not been defined by territorial ambition. While some in the Sunni community advocate for an autonomous region, the main concern is maintaining a force to protect Sunni areas from Islamic State

**“The Iraqi government’s ad hoc response to the Islamic State’s advances in Mosul and other Sunni areas helped the Islamic State gain momentum along the Euphrates and Tigris corridors.”**

fighters and Shia militias.<sup>8</sup> The Islamic State has been able to capitalize on these localized disputes in Sunni areas and exploit the security weaknesses they engender.

**Islamic State Operations in Sunni Areas**

The Islamic State has exploited the fractious security relationship between the ISF and the Sunni population. The group’s initial conquest of Fallujah in January 2014 and subsequent success in taking Mosul five months later

was in part a result of preexisting tensions in those areas. In some Sunni communities, Islamic State forces were able to bolster their ranks through the recruitment of local Sunnis.<sup>9</sup> Part of this is likely a result of alliances based on expediency rather than ideological agreement.<sup>10</sup>

In combination with local recruitment, the Islamic State graphically promoted the killing of Shia civilians, government employees, and anyone else opposed to the creation of a new caliphate. These terror tactics polarized the local security environment and caused further hesitation among the under resourced, poorly trained Iraqi army forces charged with halting the Islamic State’s advance. That advance took place in the mainly Sunni cities and towns on the banks of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers.<sup>11</sup>

The Iraqi government’s ad hoc response to the Islamic State’s advances in Mosul and other Sunni areas helped the Islamic State gain momentum along the Euphrates and Tigris corridors. The time it took for Baghdad to mobilize a counteroffensive, combined with the extensive road infrastructure along the two rivers, allowed the Islamic State to bolster their local positions rather than be content with hit-and-run attacks reminiscent of al-Qa`ida in Iraq (AQI).

The movements of Islamic State forces in the Sunni heartland did not take place in a vacuum. During the campaign to take Mosul, the Islamic State simultaneously undertook targeted operations in the territories that Baghdad and the KRG were fighting over. In part, this move was a consequence of circumstance due to the generally inchoate nature of the preexisting security arrangements in the disputed territories. It was also a tactical move meant to distract the

Iraqi army, Shia militias, and Kurdish Peshmerga from mounting a serious, coordinated defense of Mosul.

In one particularly destructive attack, the Islamic State targeted the Kurdish Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) office in the contested city of Jalula on June 8, 2014 with a car bomb, killing 18 Kurdish Peshmerga. These types of attacks forced state security forces to focus attention on multiple fronts despite being ill prepared for the one evolving in the west of the country.

**Baghdad, Erbil and the Disputed Territories**

As the Islamic State’s forces pushed into the predominantly Sunni areas of western Iraq, they also expanded

**“The disputed territories... form an arc stretching from northeastern Diyala province on the border with Iran to northwestern Ninewa province on the border with Syria.”**

eastward into the disputed zone between the semi-autonomous Kurdish region to the north and federal Iraq to the south identified in Article 140 of the Iraqi constitution.<sup>12</sup>

The disputed territories fall principally within four governorates: Ninewa, Erbil, Kirkuk, and Diyala. These territories form an arc stretching from northeastern Diyala province on the border with Iran to northwestern Ninewa province on the border with Syria.<sup>13</sup> The contested status of areas within this belt is largely a legacy of former President Saddam Hussein’s

6 Jim Muir, “Fears of Shia muscle in Iraq’s Sunni heartland,” BBC News, May 18, 2015.

7 Ishaan Tharoor, “Why the Iraqi army keeps failing,” *The Washington Post*, May 19, 2015.

8 Joost Hiltermann, Sean Kane, Raad Alkadiri, “Iraq’s Federalism Quandary,” The International Crisis Group, February 28, 2012, pp. 3-4.

9 Mohammed Tawfeeq and Chelsea J. Carter, “Officials: Islamic State recruiting on the rise in Sunni areas of Iraq,” CNN, August 11, 2014.

10 Alice Fordham, “The Other Battle In Iraq: Winning Over Sunni Muslims,” NPR, February 3, 2015.

11 For an updated map of territorial control in Iraq see: “Iraq and Syria: ISIL’s Reduced Operating Areas as of April 2015,” The United States Department of Defense, April, 2015.

12 Full Arabic text of Iraq’s constitution with English translation by Zaid Al-Ali, “Iraq’s final constitution (English),” 2006.

13 Sean Kane, “Iraq’s Disputed Territories: A View of The Political Horizon and Implications for U.S. Policy,” The United States Institute of Peace, 2011, p. 12.

Arabization policies.<sup>14</sup> During the parliamentary discussions of the 2005 draft constitution, all sides agreed to postpone a decision on the disputed territories, especially oil-rich Kirkuk. Instead, they adopted Article 140 as the principle legislative mechanism through which the issue would be settled. The text outlines a series of steps to be taken, including public referendums in each of the disputed territories.

This status quo held even as implementation of Article 140 was postponed initially on December 31, 2007 and then effectively shelved.<sup>15</sup>

**“Tensions [with the KRG] increased somewhat during the government led by Nouri al-Maliki, especially after he deployed forces to the border between Salahaddin and Kirkuk.”**

The arrangement worked for Erbil and Baghdad because both sides could say publicly that they were in control and neither had to make the politically difficult move of ceding territory.

Tensions increased somewhat during the government led by Nouri al-Maliki, especially after he deployed forces to the border between Salahaddin and Kirkuk in a bid to deter the Kurdish Peshmerga from occupying more territory south of Kirkuk City.<sup>16</sup>

Even during this period of heightened

14 John Fawcett and Victor Tanner, “The Internally Displaced People of Iraq,” The Brookings Institution-SAIS Project on Internal Displacement, October 2002, p. 11.

15 Steven Lee Meyers, “Politics Delay and Iraqi Census,” *The New York Times*, December 6, 2010.

16 Karim Abed Zayer, “Maliki Deploys ‘Tigris Force’ to Kirkuk,” *Al Monitor*, November 13, 2012.

tension, the status quo was effectively maintained. Kurdish Peshmerga and Iraqi security forces even jointly exercised control in parts of the contested districts through a combined security mechanism.<sup>17</sup>

**Islamic State in the Disputed Territories**

Beginning in June 2014, the Islamic State was able to exploit gaps in the security cordon in the disputed territories to devastating effect. In these areas, neither the Iraqi army nor Kurdish Peshmerga had solidified their positions and instead relied on a disjointed, but stable arrangement of mixed administrative and territorial control that had developed since 2003.

The Islamic State was able to expand its influence in this environment as the governments in Erbil and Baghdad struggled to craft a coherent response.<sup>18</sup> Tactically, Islamic State operations in the disputed territories allowed the group to draw ISF and Peshmerga attention away from the critical task of retaking Mosul and other areas in the country’s western region.<sup>19</sup>

The extent to which local security forces—Kurdish and Arab alike—were ill prepared for the Islamic State’s actions in the disputed territories can be seen in events that played out in northern Diyala. On June 13, 2014, Islamic State forces entered the disputed towns of Jalula and Sadiyah, approximately 80 kilometers northeast and 60 kilometers north of Baghdad, respectively.<sup>20</sup>

These towns, though formally part of Diyala province, are each home to mixed Kurdish, Arab, and Turkmen

17 Joint Peshmerga-ISF positions in the disputed territories were initially part of the U.S.-administered Combined Security Mechanism (CSM). Larry Hanauer, Jeffery Martin, and Omar al-Shahery, “Managing Arab-Kurd Tensions in Northern Iraq After the Withdrawal of U.S. Troops,” RAND, 2011. pp. 2-3.

18 Harvey Morris, “Islamic State occupation puts territorial dispute into perspective,” *Rudaw*, April 11, 2014.

19 Greg Botelho and Jim Acosta, “U.S. official: Mosul invasion ‘might be some time from now,’” CNN, April 9, 2015.

20 “In Iraq, Islamic militants continue drive, grab 2 towns near Baghdad,” CBS News, June 13, 2014.

populations. In what would become a frequent strategy employed by the Islamic State, the group mounted sustained sorties in the countryside around Jalula and Sadiyah prior to launching a full attack on the cities directly.

The territorial acquisitions were an extension of previous military victories by the Islamic State in Suliman Beg, Amerli, and Hawija.<sup>21</sup> It took nearly five months for a combined force of Iraqi army, Shia militias, and Kurdish Peshmerga to retake Jalula and Sadiyah.<sup>22</sup>

**“The Islamic State was able to exploit gaps in the security cordon in the disputed territories to devastating effect.”**

A similar demonstration of the Islamic State’s exploitation of security weaknesses within the disputed territories took place in early August 2014 in the Ninewa town of Sinjar. The assault on Sinjar was combined with a string of attacks on Peshmerga forces in Gwer, Makhmour, Tal Keif, Qaraqosh, and Bartella.

The closest of these, Gwer, is roughly 25 kilometers from the Kurdish capital in Erbil. The scale of the Islamic State attacks, their speed, and their scope forced a rapid change in the Peshmerga force posture.<sup>23</sup> Consolidating their defensive position to protect Erbil province, the Kurds were initially ill prepared to expand their security cordon in order to mount a sustained defense of Sinjar.

21 “Control of Terrain in Iraq,” The Institute for the Study of War Blog, June 19, 2015.

22 Saif Hameed, “Iraqi forces say retake two towns from Islamic State,” Reuters, November 23, 2014.

23 Dexter Filkins, “The Fight of Their Lives,” *The New Yorker*, September 29, 2014.

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### CONTACT

Combating Terrorism Center  
U.S. Military Academy  
607 Cullum Road, Lincoln Hall  
West Point, NY 10996

Phone: (845) 938-8495

Email: [sentinel@usma.edu](mailto:sentinel@usma.edu)

Web: [www.ctc.usma.edu/sentinel/](http://www.ctc.usma.edu/sentinel/)

\* For Press Inquiries: (845) 938-8495

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The Kurds had long maintained administrative and security control of the area, and the Iraqi army had positioned itself too far south on the Ninewa plain to be of assistance. Even if it had been close by, consistent threats to Ramadi and areas much closer to Baghdad in the Sunni heartland would have likely continued to draw Baghdad's attention to the nearer threat. As the Islamic State was eventually pushed back from Erbil the group had consolidated around Sinjar, taking the city and forcing many of its Yazidi inhabitants to look for shelter on the slopes of nearby Mt. Sinjar.<sup>24</sup>

One of the disputed areas where Kurdish forces have had notable success is in oil-rich Kirkuk province. Islamic State forces launched a series of raids near Kirkuk in early June 2014 prompting Kurdish forces to rapidly expand their line of control south to cover the entire province.<sup>25</sup> This shift south drew a significant number of the Peshmerga force away from the frontlines in Ninewa and Diyala provinces. Iraqi army forces positioned in Kirkuk as part of the joint Arab-Kurdish units fled south toward Baghdad, again illustrating the poor security coordination in the disputed territories.

In contrast to Islamic State operations in the Sunni heartland to the southwest or in the disputed territories to the north and east, the militant group appeared content to harass Kirkuk City with insurgent-style attacks and bombings from its positions in nearby Hawija.

By concentrating its forces on consolidating territorial gains in other areas, particularly recently retaken Ramadi, the Islamic State can continue to utilize its Hawija position as well as its forces throughout the disputed territories to harass Kirkuk and draw the attention of Kurdish Peshmerga away from the group's positions elsewhere.

<sup>24</sup> Mohammed A. Salih and Wladimir van Wilgenburg, "Iraqi Yazidis: 'If we move they will kill us,'" *Al Jazeera*, August 5, 2014.

<sup>25</sup> "Iraqi Kurds 'fully control Kirkuk' as army flees," *BBC News*, June 12, 2014.

### Difficult Days Ahead

The Islamic State has proven adept at mounting rapid attacks across multiple geographic locations simultaneously. This has allowed the group to control huge swaths of Iraq. While a number of factors have contributed to its military success, Iraq's internal divisions have been crucial.

Disputes between the central government and Iraq's Sunni community regarding the composition of security forces and the division of political power have contributed to significant security gaps in western and northern Iraq. At the same time, the continued failure of Baghdad and Erbil to agree on a final status of the disputed

**“The Islamic State has proven adept at mounting rapid attacks across multiple geographic locations simultaneously.”**

territories has fostered the development of vulnerabilities in the local security structure.

The Islamic State's military strategy has parlayed these internal divisions to expand its presence in the country. Its rapid, multi-pronged attacks against a variety of targets are well suited for success against the largely uncoordinated response of the Iraqi army, Shia militias, and Kurdish Peshmerga. Though some successes have been seen, the underlying disputes remain unaddressed and will need to be dealt with if Iraqi and other forces are to have any chance of decisively defeating the Islamic State.

*Andrew Watkins is an energy and security analyst with the Iraq Oil Report. Mr. Watkins has spent more than four years living in and writing about Iraq.*

*The views expressed here are those of the author and do not reflect those of the Iraq Oil Report.*