



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.

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# Bay`a Remorse? Wilayat Sinai and the Nile Valley



A policeman guards the Italian Consulate in Cairo after a powerful bomb attack.

MOHAMED EL-SHAHED/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

By Mokhtar Awad and Samuel Tadros

IT WAS EARLY MORNING on Saturday, July 11, 2015 when Cairo awoke to the sound of a huge explosion. Coming just 12 days after the assassination of Prosecutor General Hesham Barakat, and ten days after a massive assault on the city of Sheikh Zuwaid by Wilayat Sinai, the Islamic State's local affiliate, residents feared the country's widening terrorist insurgency had claimed another high-ranking official in the heart of mainland Egypt.<sup>1</sup> It soon

became apparent that the attack had instead targeted the Italian consulate, a rather soft diplomatic target. More significant than the target, however, was the quickly released statement claiming responsibility. Instead of a claim by Wilayat Sinai, the Islamic State mother organization itself took the credit.<sup>2</sup>

The following month in the early hours of August 20 residents in north

1 The so-called Wilayat Sinai has proven itself to be the sole and uncontested jihadi actor in North Sinai. The group has steadily evolved in both its capacity and focus since 2011—from blowing up gas pipelines leading to Israel to large-scale assaults aimed at degrading the Egyptian Army's grip over the Peninsula. About 40 percent of all security force deaths in North Sinai since the Muslim Brotherhood's ouster from power in July 2013 occurred after Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis's pledge of allegiance to Islamic State in November 2014. Since then, the group has carried out increasingly lethal attacks with the latest assault on Sheikh Zuwaid being the most daring with its apparent attempt to hold sections of the

city. More sophisticated weapons like Russian Kornet antitank missiles are also increasingly in use since the pledge with one likely used in hitting a naval vessel off the coast of Rafah. There remains no reliable numbers on the size of the group but its large-scale attacks suggest at least 500 fighters. See Omar Ashour, "Wilayat Sinai: the military rise and the political implications," Al Jazeera Center for Studies, July 29, 2015; Yasmin Faruki, Jenna Gowell, and Laura Hoffman, "ISIS's Wilayat Sinai launches major offensive in Sheikh Zuwaid," Institute for the Study of War, July 2, 2015; Bill Roggio, "Islamic State strikes Egyptian naval vessel off Sinai coast," Long War Journal, July 16, 2015.

2 Caleb Weiss, "Islamic State detonates car bomb

Cairo awoke once again to a terrifying explosion. This time the target was a State Security building on the northernmost edge of the Cairo metropolis, and once again Islamic State took responsibility for the attack not Wilayat Sinai.<sup>3</sup>

This raises significant questions regarding why the Islamic State would directly claim, and presumably conduct this attack and whether something was amiss in the relationship between the Islamic State in Raqqa and its Egyptian affiliate? Reports had after all indicated back in November 2014, when Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis (ABM), or Supporters of Jerusalem, gave its allegiance to self-proclaimed Caliph, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, that not all of its members were enthusiastic about becoming the organization's Wilayat Sinai. Perhaps these fissures had widened and the group would return to the al-Qa`ida umbrella. Or perhaps this meant that a new branch was about to be announced in mainland Egypt by the Islamic State. The Egyptian press had been abuzz in previous months with news of the awaited announcement of Islamic State Wilayat el Sa'eed (Egypt's southern governorates).<sup>4</sup> It was hardly a coincidence that the Islamic State had only granted ABM the title of Wilayat Sinai and not Wilayat Ard el-Kinana (Egypt) indicating the potential for more than one affiliate in Egypt.<sup>5</sup>

Tracing the growth of Wilayat Sinai from its obscure origins to its emergence as the main jihadi threat to Egypt sheds light on its continued struggle to balance its local environment in Sinai with its aim of transcending Sinai and dominating the Egyptian jihadi scene, all while linking to transnational

jihadism in its most radical form: the Islamic State.

Understanding the complex dynamics that first allowed ABM to grow into a national-level actor, the reality of a fragmented and diverse jihadi landscape in the Nile Valley, and the possibility of growing competition in Egypt between the Islamic State and al-Qa`ida helps explain the state of affairs today both inside the Wilayat Sinai and the overall Egyptian jihadi landscape. This article argues that early assumptions about Wilayat Sinai need to be corrected and that by declaring allegiance to the Islamic State, the jihadi group has complicated its ability to maintain and extend its operations in the Nile Valley and "go national."

Rather than making a "leap" from the Sinai desert by dispatching operatives west of the Suez after the July 2013 coup that ousted the Muslim Brotherhood-led government, the group became involved in "mainland" Egypt by cooperating with Nile Valley-based operatives and groups, who reached out to them as early as 2011. The jihadism of the mainland, even under the banner of ABM, was and still is largely carried out by cells indigenous to the Egyptian heartlands, who are struggling to resurrect the lost jihad of the 1990s.

#### Origins

From 2004 to 2006, a series of attacks targeting Red Sea tourist resorts in south Sinai left at least 145 people dead. Terrorism was back in Egypt following seven years of relative quiet after the notorious 1997 Luxor massacre and the subsequent renunciation of violence by Egypt's then leading terrorist group Gama'a Islamiya. The Sinai Peninsula, long isolated from jihadi developments in the mainland, was now at the forefront of the jihadi revival.

Despite being a part of Egypt since the time of the Pharaohs, the Sinai Peninsula had always felt closer to Gaza, Jaffa, Acre, and the Negev desert than Cairo. Trade, and tribal ties, held Sinai's gaze to the north east. Sinai had been too scarcely populated and its Bedouin population too distinct from that of the Nile Valley to merit any attention from Cairo throughout ancient and medieval

history beyond the required defenses of Egypt's eastern gate to the Levant.

Modern Egypt would prove no different. The Suez Canal created a geographic barrier to cement the psychological one. Egypt proper ended at the shores of the Canal; what was beyond was of little interest. Four wars with Israel in the Sinai left its imprint in the Egyptian collective imagination as a place of national honor— but also a land of war and trouble, its Bedouins suspected of dissimilarity at best, treason at worst. Sinai's return to Egyptian sovereignty in 1982 changed little. Though the peninsula's south quickly proved lucrative for a growing tourism industry, the north remained neglected with the worst of the civil service and teachers sent there as a form of punishment.

It was in the north that a jihadi cell formed at the turn of the century. Prior to 2004, the only terrorist attacks in the Sinai were directed against Israelis and carried out by men like Suleiman Khater and Ayman Hassan, renegade Egyptian military officers originally from the Nile Valley who had once served in the Sinai. This time was different. Early members belonged to the tribal mosaic of al-Arish and Sheikh Zuwaid. Salafi tenets and jihadi discourses imported from the Nile Valley had been carried by the train of modernization. Teachers sent from the mainland carrying the radical ideology were supplemented by native sons who had crossed the Suez Canal to study at its universities.

The North Sinai cell was called al-Tawhid wa al-Jihad (Monotheism and Jihad). Three men emerged as its early leaders. Khaled Mosa'id, from al-Sawarka tribe graduated from Zagazig University in 1999 and worked as a dentist in al-Arish where he gave religious lessons at al-Malayha mosque. In Zagazig he had befriended the half Bedouin Nasr Khamis el-Malahy who was studying law and would later move to al-Arish and give religious lessons at al-Tawfik mosque. The third was Salem Khedr el-Shanoub who became the group's military commander, providing members with training on weapons and bomb making. Recruitment was limited to trusted members of the family and along tribal lines. Altogether, the group

outside Italian consulate in Cairo," Long War Journal, July 12, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> "Egyptian security building in Cairo rocked by bomb blast," BBC, August 20, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Lutfi Salman, "Da'esh members announce the approaching of the formation of wilayet el Sa'eed," El Watan, April 29, 2015.

<sup>5</sup> For more on ABM's oath of allegiance to the Islamic State see Nelly Lahoud, "The Province of Sinai: Why Bother with Palestine If You Can Be Part of the 'Islamic State?'" *CTC Sentinel* 8:3 (March 2015).

recruited around a hundred people with its presence outside of Sinai limited to a cell in the neighboring Ismailia governorate across the canal.<sup>6</sup>

The group's success was short lived. The ruthless crackdown by the regime crushed the jihadis. Khalid was killed in September 2005, Salem in November 2005, and Nasr in May 2006.<sup>7</sup> Scattered and leaderless, the remaining members of al-Tawhid wa al-Jihad either hid or made their way to Gaza. For the next seven years relative calm returned to the peninsula as things seemed to go back to normal.

It proved to be a temporary illusion. Gaza at the time was witnessing a flourishing of Salafi-jihadi groups. Hamas's control of the strip had failed to bring about the promised Islamist utopia and the group had disappointed true believers with its ceasefires with Israel. In 2009, Hamas cracked down on Jund Ansar Allah (Soldiers of the Supporters of Allah) after its declaration of an Islamic Emirate.<sup>8</sup> There was only one gate open for Palestinian jihadis to escape: through the tunnels to Sinai. In Sinai, veterans of Palestinian and Sinai jihadi groups morphed together exchanging experiences.<sup>9</sup>

The security collapse following the Egyptian revolution provided Sinai

jihadis with a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Upheaval throughout the country created a security vacuum in the peninsula. While the tribes were always well armed, the wave of advanced weapons from Libya was unprecedented. Most importantly however, international jihadi networks and individual Egyptian jihadis were beginning to eye the peninsula with great interest.

Though hiding in Afghanistan/Pakistan, Ayman al-Zawahiri had never forgotten his homeland. Prior to joining al-Qa`ida, al-Zawahiri had attempted to revive cells inside Egypt through Tala'e' el-Fat'h (The Vanguard of the Return), only for the whole apparatus to fall into the hands of Egyptian authorities including the leaders Ahmed Ashoush and Ayman's brother, Mohamed al-Zawahiri. Released from prison following the revolution, the two quickly attempted to recruit and rebuild jihadi groups, but with a focus on the Sinai.<sup>10</sup> Many factors contributed to this development. The peninsula provided a natural safe haven for jihadis and with Israel across the border, there were abundant opportunities for spectacular attacks that would help al-Qa`ida regain the momentum after its heavy losses in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region. Moreover, Sinai was the site of numerous jihadi attacks against the gas pipeline to Israel. Seeking to connect with those jihadis was natural.

The two years of rebirth for jihadism in Sinai from 2011 to 2013 were filled with great confusion. At least half a dozen groups claimed attacks and a new group seemed to spring up every month. Some of the new groups were the Shura Council of the Mujahideen of Jerusalem, Supporters of Jihad in the

Sinai Peninsula, Salah el-Din Brigades, the Umma's Army, Allah's Soldiers, Ansar al Jihad, and Ansar al-Shari'a.<sup>11</sup>

The period of confusion would soon end with the ascendance of ABM. The leader, Tawfik Ferrij, had been a veteran of al-Tawhid wa al-Jihad and a close companion of Khaled Mosa'id and Nasr el-Malahy. It had been his idea for jihadis to target the gas pipeline and he masterminded the August 20<sup>11</sup> operation targeting southern Israel, which left eight Israelis dead.<sup>12</sup> A year before his death in March 2014, he had traveled to mainland Egypt in order to supervise cells.<sup>13</sup> Another key ABM leader was Shady el-Mane'i. Born to a Sinai father and a Palestinian mother, he had been detained for a year and a half in 2005 for suspicion of involvement in al-Tawhid wa al-Jihad.<sup>14</sup> ABM's unique strength was its coalition of operatives sympathetic to al-Qa`ida, jihadis with local grievances, and radical Gazan elements still focused to a significant degree on Israel.

#### From Sinai to the Valley

ABM's true rise to prominence came after the 2013 military coup, when it commenced a vengeful jihad against the state. Jihadis had never been enthusiastic about the Muslim Brotherhood and what they saw as the apostasy of democracy, but the Islamists' stint in power had provided them with a golden opportunity to rebuild their networks.<sup>15</sup> Now, with the Brotherhood hunted down and its supporters massacred in Rabaa, ABM declared the Egyptian army and police apostates that must be killed. To date,

6 Riad Hassan Mehrem, "Khaled Mosa'id: the founder of the first jihadi organization in Sinai," Al Hewar Al Motamaden, August, 27, 2013; Saber Mashhour, "Ahmed Salam the commander of the Ismailia cell: Salem El Shanoub gave a fatwa on the apostasy of Arab rulers," *Al Masry Al Youm*, April 4, 2006; Abdel Moneim Moneeb, "Islamist Movements in Egypt Map," The Arab Network for Human Rights Information, April 21, 2009.

7 "Death of Nasr El Malahy: mastermind and the main accused in the Dahab bombings," *Al Masry Al Youm*, May 10, 2005.

8 Ali Abdel Aal, "The Soldiers of Ansar Allah: The Road to the Islamic Emirate," Arab Times Blog; For more see: Samar Batrawi, "Islamic State Affiliates Press Hamas," *CTC Sentinel* 8:8 (August 2015).

9 Ahmed El Shorbagy, "The Revisions of Jihadi Groups and the Future of Initiative," *Jihadis in Egypt: Revisions - 30 June - Syria*. (UAE: Al Mesbar Studies and Research Centre, 2014); Nageh Ibrahim, "Al Qaeda: The Branches and the Doctrinal and Strategic Flaw," *Jihadis in Egypt: Revisions - 30 June - Syria*. (UAE: Al Mesbar Studies and Research Centre, 2014); Maher Farghaly,

"Jihadi Organizations: A New Map and Multiple Faces of Violence," *Jihadis in Egypt: Revisions - 30 June - Syria*. (UAE: Al Mesbar Studies and Research Centre, 2014).

10 Salah El Din Hassan. "The Brotherhood and Jihadis between Divergence and Convergence," *Jihadis in Egypt: Revisions - 30 June - Syria*. Al Mesbar Studies and Research Centre, 2014; Hany El Sherief, "A Salafi Jihadi leader: The movement in Sinai is blessed and reasonable," El Balad, May 27, 2013; "Salafiyya Jihadiyya Sheikh Ahmad Ashoush delivers Friday sermon in Sheikh Zuwaid," Sinai News Blog, December 26, 2012.

11 Ahmed El Shorbagy, "The Revisions of Jihadi Groups and the Future of Initiative."

12 Hesham Srouj, "Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis Leader Died in Bombing," Al-Mayqia, 15 March 2014; Maha Salem, "Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis Commander Proposed the Bombing of Gas Pipelines," Al Ahram, 15 March 2014.

13 Obituary published by ABM, March 14, 2014.

14 "Shady Al Mane'i," Al Jazeera.net/encyclopedia

15 The reign of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) was also critical since directly following the revolution there was a security vacuum and SCAF pardoned many former jihadis along with other political detainees while some escaped from jail. However, during the rule of the Brotherhood restrictions on travel to Syria were eased and supporters of Salafi jihadism had greater freedoms to move and speak freely.

various armed groups have killed about 700 members of the security forces across Egypt, with at least 60 percent of those fatalities in North Sinai alone.<sup>16</sup> This is a level of carnage greater than their jihadi predecessors previously inflicted in nearly two decades of insurgency.

The perception that ABM only turned its attention to the Egyptian mainland following the Brotherhood's fall from power is, however, baseless. In April 2005, three small attacks took place in Cairo, which were probably spontaneous with terrorists choosing to attack instead of being caught, but the Sinai link was never properly investigated. Two similar incidents took place in February 2009.

ABM's involvement in the mainland can be traced back to 2011 when a series of prison breaks and pardons issued by the then ruling Supreme Council of the Armed Forces let loose dozens of jihadis.<sup>17</sup>

One of them was Mohamed Ali Afifi, who hailed from the mainland, and was the emir of ABM's mainland cells. Like many of this new generation of Egyptian jihadis his first call to jihad was to fight in Iraq. Starting in 2004, after failing to reach Iraq, the then 24-year-old resided in Yemen for three years before Yemeni intelligence deported him. When he returned to Egypt, authorities detained him on suspicion of links to al-Qa`ida. In jail, he made more jihadi connections and after his release in April 2011, immediately resumed militant activities. He connected with old prison mates Mohamed Bakry Haroun and Mohamed el-Said Mansour who shared his interest in again travelling to wage jihad overseas.<sup>18 19</sup>

When that plan didn't work out the trio looked inward and made contact with

ABM leader Ferrij. This illustrated that even if ABM had no interest in the Nile Valley initially, the valley was certainly interested in them, giving ABM an attractive opportunity to make use of eager young jihadis and expand their base.<sup>20</sup>

According to State Security Prosecution investigations,<sup>21</sup> based on the suspects' testimony,<sup>22</sup> Afifi and the valley trio agreed to found an arm of ABM in the Nile Valley by creating a number of compartmentalized cells supervised by Afifi. The network's goal would be to relieve pressure on the Sinai jihadis by attacking security forces when needed and most importantly to logistically support ABM's operations by providing safe houses as well as financing.<sup>23</sup>

Afifi and his crew worked quickly. A number of cells were initially formed across mainland governorates, including: Dakhalia (2011), Kafr al-Sheikh (2012), Sharkiya (2012), Sixth of October (2012), Giza (2013), Fayyoun (2013), Qena (2013), and Mattariyah district of Cairo (2013).<sup>24</sup> Financing such an expansion was not easy. At one point, a supporter in Saudi Arabia wired money totaling roughly \$220,000 as start-up cash.<sup>25</sup> Jihadis also carried out multiple armed robberies of government buildings where cash was stored, hijacked money delivery trucks, and stole Christians' cars to

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ABM's operations in the Nile Valley are based on part of the original investigation by the Supreme State Security Prosecution, of which the authors have obtained an original copy, specifically the testimony of Afifi. Information also relied on summaries published in al-Yawm al-Sabi' on February 20, 2015 *El Shorouk* on May 12, 2014, and Al Bawabah News on February 14, 2015 for summaries and highlights from the estimated 20,000 case files not released to the public. Confessions obtained by Egyptian authorities are in general unreliable. Confessions detailed in these special investigations were checked against news reports when possible and using the authors' own judgement. Information cited from these sources will be referenced as "State Security Prosecution investigations" in subsequent citations.

20 State Security Prosecution investigations.

21 Ibid.

22 Afifi and Haroun were executed in May 2015 along with other ABM mainland cell operatives.

23 State Security Prosecution investigations.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

use in attacks.<sup>26</sup> They used a farm in Sharkiya governorate to store weapons, build car bombs, and hide out from authorities. New recruits travelled to Sinai to receive weapons and explosives training, while a few others briefly joined the Syrian jihad before returning with urban combat skills and experience that bolstered the capabilities of ABM in the Nile Valley.<sup>27</sup>

This clandestine network seems to have not been born out of pre-planned expansion, but rather a combination of fate and the smart exploitation of the Nile Valley for its pool of recruits and financing potential. It remains unclear to what extent these new cells were coordinating with other al-Qai`da-linked operations that were also taking advantage of Egypt's lax security at the time. Mohamed al-Zawahiri, brother of al-Qa`ida's current head, had allegedly sent dozens of men to Syria in early 2013 to prepare for a potential military coup.<sup>28</sup> Eventually, some of these al-Qai`da linked elements ended up coordinating with the more established ABM. For instance, an al-Qa`ida-linked operative, Mohamed Fathy Abdel Aziz, who was in contact with the Mohamed Jamal Network<sup>29</sup> as well as al-Zawahiri's burgeoning operation,

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26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.

28 In 2013 and 2014, investigations alleged that various jihadi groups were operating on the orders of al-Qa`ida and namely al-Zawahiri, accusations which the latter denied. Many older jihadis formerly charged in the "Returnees from Albania case," in the early 2000s have been subsequently either detained or accused of taking part of these alleged networks. Most of these operations seem to have been focused on using Egypt as a base of operations against Western targets and helping facilitate the travel of recruits to receive training overseas for potential use in the mainland. See Ahmad al-Sharkawy, "El Shorouq reveals the secrets of El Zawahiri's secret group to assassinate police and army men," *El Shorouq*, May 19, 2014; "Secrets of Zawahiri's group the returnees from Syria plan jihadi operations in Egypt," *El Shorouq*, May 20, 2014; "Confessions of Al Qaeda's member in State Prosecution reveals the group's cells in Egypt," *El Shorouq*, August 18, 2014.

29 For more information on the network see: Thomas Joscelyn, "More al Qaeda links to Cairo terror cell reportedly found," *Long War Journal*, November 9, 2012; Tomas Joscelyn, "Egyptian interior minister: Al Qaeda cell plotted suicide attack against Western embassy," *Long War Journal*, May 11, 2013.

16 Mokhtar Awad Database on Attacks; "Tenth Annual Report 2013/2014," National Council for Human Rights, July 31, 2015. P. 23.

17 Hossam Bahgat, "Who let the jihadis out?" *Mada Masr*, February 16, 2014.

18 Afifi was arrested in November 2013. He along with Haroun were executed in May 2015. Mansour died during an operation.

19 Information for this and subsequent details about

owned the Sharkiya farm ABM's valley operatives used to use to stage their early mainland attacks and he received money to buy weapons and supplies.<sup>30</sup>

Prior to the military coup, ABM Nile Valley operatives patiently gathered intelligence that proved crucial for the post-coup attacks that catapulted them to prominence as national-level actors. This task was facilitated by the recruitment of at least two radicalized police officers. One of them—police lieutenant Mohamed Eweis—provided information making possible the assassination of senior state security officer Mahmoud Mabrouk near his Cairo home in November 2013.<sup>31</sup> Similarly the perfectly executed bombings of the Mansura and Cairo security directorates—in which all checkpoints were evaded—were made possible through information provided by police colonel Sameh el-Azizi.<sup>32</sup> This level of penetration extended to even active duty members of the armed forces: a signals unit conscript in the Air Defense branch tipped off ABM of impending strikes during the military's Sinai operations in 2012,<sup>33</sup> and a radicalized Navy officer was allegedly involved in the hijacking by unknown assailants of a guided missile vessel off the coast of Damietta in November 2014.<sup>34</sup>

But for ABM to truly operate at the national level it needed to collaborate

with other rising groups in the mainland to expand its geographic reach.<sup>35</sup> The earliest example of such collaboration was between ABM and al-Furqan Brigades, a jihadi group which had begun organizing and built up cells in the Suez Canal area, Cairo, and Sinai.<sup>36</sup> Al-Furqan's first major attack targeted a cargo vessel in the Suez Canal in September 2013. The group had also previously engaged in a number of drive-by shootings and in early October 2013 fired an RPG at a satellite dish in Cairo. They were soon in contact with ABM. In exchange for fealty and a place on ABM's Shura Council, ABM asked al-Furqan to provide men and equipment to help carry out one of ABM's first major attacks outside North Sinai: the October 19, 2013 bombing of a military intelligence building in Ismailia.<sup>37</sup>

Another major mainland attack that projected ABM's national-level reach was the attempted assassination of former Minister of Interior Mohamed Ibrahim in September 2013. This attack was the brainchild of ex-special forces officer turned jihadi "freelancer" Hisham Ashmawy who worked with a crew of other former officers: Walid Badr (the suicide bomber), Youssef Suleiman, and Emaddin Ahmed.<sup>38</sup>

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*Youn*, November 15, 2014.

35 ABM had earlier absorbed many Sinai jihadis as the government crackdown intensified. Some Sinai groups were operating almost exclusively in name and not much beyond an idea and a few statements (Salaftiyya Jihadiyya), while others like Majlis Shura al-Mujahidin remained primarily focused on Israel, see: Mohamed Ismail, "Mapping third generation violent groups in Egypt," *Al-Siyyasa al-Dawliya* 198:1, October 2014.

36 Al Furqan's exact origins remain unknown but according to investigations a group of Salafis—including disgruntled supporters of disqualified Salafi presidential candidate Hazem Salah Abu Ismail—began to organize in 2012. Realizing much earlier than their Islamist brethren that Sharia was unlikely to be established, some members allegedly travelled to Gaza to receive training. They later formed cells in Al-Arish, Ismailia, and Cairo. Details of the State Security Prosecution Investigations were published in *El Shorouq* on May 15, 2014 and February 21, 2015.

37 Ibid. Also see: David Barnett, "Ansar Jerusalem claims responsibility for car bombing in Ismailia," *Long War Journal*, October 21, 2013.

38 Mahmoud Nasr, "Three discharged officers behind terrorist attacks in Sinai," *Al-Yawm Al-Sabi*, February 6, 2015.

Like the al-Furqan operation, ABM in Sinai took credit for an operation largely devised and executed by existing Nile Valley operatives. Yet again, what appeared to be the Sinai group expanding further west into the valley was in fact the result of mergers and cooperation with jihadis on the mainland.

For ABM's Sinai leadership, the Nile Valley experiment proved to be worth the investment. The groundwork forming clandestine cells in 2011 allowed the Sinai group to emerge as a national-level actor and project power. The group's statements following the Rabaa dispersal began to speak to the challenges, realities, and dynamics that were affecting the majority of the Islamist population outside Sinai. The group appeared to be transcending its localism and poised to monopolize the Egyptian jihadi scene.

#### The Limitations of Transnationalism

ABM's ability to project force in the mainland likely played a hand in attracting the attention of the Islamic State, ushering in the next chapter in the group's transformation.<sup>39</sup> But its move toward the Islamic State orbit, and its eventual pledge of allegiance in November 2014, may prove to be a poisoned chalice. Because the group has always had to rely on Nile Valley groups to project force outside Sinai and because those groups remain largely pro-al-Qa`ida, the Islamic State pledge has complicated its ability to monopolize the Egyptian jihad. Instead of marking ABM's evolution into a transnational jihadi group, its pledge of allegiance to the Islamic State has created the specter of competition with al-Qa`ida and alienated a significant number of jihadis on the Egyptian mainland. The pledge sent shockwaves through the fragile coalition of jihadis with which ABM had cooperated with to carry out national-level attacks and led to criticism from other jihadi groups. For

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39 For more on ABM's pledge of allegiance to the group and factors behind it see: Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, "ISIL's International Expansion: What does Ansar Bayt al Maqdis Oath of Allegiance Mean?" *War on the Rocks*, February 25, 2015; Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, "Ansar Bayt Al-Maqdis's Oath of Allegiance to the Islamic State," *Wikistrat*, February 2015.

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30 Nazeema El Barhaway, "Security forces continue to be on alert in Adliya, Belbis after finding weapons cache owned by jihadi," *El Watan*, October 30, 2013; Mahmoud Nasser, "Evidence in Al-Zawahiri cell case," *al-Yawm al-Sabi*, April 8, 2014.

31 Ahmed al-Sharkawy and Ahmad Gamal, "Mohamed Ewiss, from the president of the judge's club traffic division to accused of killing his colleague Mohamed Mabrouk," *El Shorouq*, February 21, 2015.

32 Ahmed Al Sharkawy and Ahmad Gamal, "We publish the investigations into the biggest radicalization case since Sadat's assassination 'Ansar Bayt Al Maqdis,'" *El Shorouq*, February 20, 2015; Ahmad Al Sharkawy, "Investigations: Bayt al Maqdis officer gave information on checkpoints," *El Shorouq*, July 22, 2014.

33 Ahmad Yehiya, "Confessions of terrorist Ibrahim Abdel Halim," *Al Bawabah News*, May 12, 2014.

34 "Al-Modon reveals secrets of Damietta operation: How did ISIS infiltrate the Egyptian Navy?" *Al Modon*, November 14, 2014. and Hamdy Gomaa, "Interrogation with crew of ship near Damietta attack," *Al Masry Al*

instance, a statement by a group calling itself al-Ribat emphasized that not all jihadis in Sinai had pledged allegiance to the Islamic State and therefore there was no legitimate “province.”<sup>40</sup>

Contrary to conventional wisdom, Wilayat Sinai is arguably in a weaker position in the Nile Valley now than it was a year ago. Multiple arrests and shootouts by authorities since late 2013 had degraded the Nile Valley network even before ABM formally pledged to the Islamic State. The jihadis were now operating on the security services’ home turf. Although jihadis operating in major population centers presented some challenges to the security services, the likelihood of intercepting cells became higher. After ABM’s rebranding and the blows delivered by security forces it appears that only one cell in northern Cairo remained active and loyal to Wilayat Sinai. The “Abu Obaida al-Masry Martyr Company,” allegedly named after the man responsible for executing the January 2014 Cairo directorate bombing, killed three soldiers and one officer in drive-by shootings north of Cairo in November 2014. The attack aimed to show Wilayat Sinai’s relevance by “participating” in the Muslim Youth Intifada called for by radical revolutionary Salafis—but perhaps also to show that it still had a presence in the valley following the Islamic State *bay`a*.<sup>41</sup> It is possible the

north Cairo cell had a hand in the major Cairo bombings in August and may now be directly working with the Islamic State rather than with Wilayat Sinai.

Wilayat Sinai’s apparent beheading in August 2015 of a Croatian worker abducted outside Cairo should be understood in a similar vein, and should not in and of itself be seen as evidence of a Wilayat Sinai operational presence in the greater Cairo area. The kidnapping itself was not carried out by the group. The worker was allegedly abducted by a criminal gang who demanded a ransom and then handed him over to Wilayat Sinai.<sup>42</sup> Regardless of the specific circumstances of how he ended up in the jihadis’ hands, the operation is at best an indication of a sleeper cell.

As well as the cell operating in northern Cairo, Wilayat Sinai also likely has a residual presence somewhere in the north of the eastern desert mountain range near Ain el-Sokhna where a shootout with security took place in September 2014.<sup>43</sup> In July 2015 Wilayat Sinai attempted to blow up an army installation on a nearby road to take “revenge,” for fallen comrades but the details of the attack remain unclear.<sup>44</sup>

For the Sinai group the most damaging fallout from linking up with the Islamic State was undoubtedly the loss of ex-special forces officer, Hisham Ashmawy, whose allegiance to al-Qa`ida and leadership of a new group called al-Mourabitoun was confirmed in a July 2015 audio recording.<sup>45</sup> Ashmawy

had previously been a key operative for ABM.<sup>46</sup>

Egyptian authorities allege that Ashmawy’s new al-Qai`da-linked group may have been behind some of the major attacks left unclaimed by Wilayat Sinai this past year, like the attempted suicide bombing at Karnak Temple in Luxor in June.<sup>47</sup> Ashmawy may have started feeling estranged by ABM’s increasing affinity toward the Islamic State as early as the summer of 2014, the same time he appears to have been responsible for the July 2014 Farafra checkpoint attack in the western desert that killed at least 21 soldiers and in which he may have been injured.<sup>48</sup>

State Security alleges Ashmawy has since based himself in eastern Libya, perhaps to receive treatment and regroup.<sup>49</sup> It further alleges that from this new base he has intensified contact with al-Qa`ida operatives in North Africa.<sup>50</sup> Egypt’s adjoining western desert remains an entry point for both al-Qa`ida- and Islamic State-linked operatives as both groups have a strong presence in Libya. In August 2015 the Egyptian military said it destroyed four trucks and captured five allegedly used by jihadis south of the western oasis of Siwa near Libya.<sup>51</sup>

By May 2015, dissent caused by the pledge to al-Baghdadi had taken its toll as Wilayat Sinai finally addressed

40 “Al-Bayal al-Awl li-Katibat al-Ribat al-Jihadiyya bi-ard Sinaa’ al-Mubarakaa,” *Shabakat al-Jihad*, December 2014. Although it is not clear if al-Ribat is linked with al-Mourabitoun, the group itself has not publicly declared any operations inside Sinai. An al-Qa`ida aligned group named Jund al-Islam posted two videos online in the summer of 2015 after nearly two years of inactivity. The group carried out a double suicide bombing in Rafah, North Sinai targeting a military intelligence building in September 2013. One of the recently released videos included for the first time footage of the preparation for this attack. The other video showed Jund al-Islam operatives staging a rocket attack against Israel, but the video did not show the launch nor was one reported at the time, indicating either failure to launch or that the rocket did not reach its target. The online activity is likely designed for the propaganda value of indicating that Wilayat Sinai is not the only jihadi actor in the Sinai despite Jund al-Islam barely existing as a force on the ground as of now.

41 Rachel Levy and Gilad Shiloach, “ISIS Claims Responsibility for Terror Attacks in Cairo,” *Vocativ*,

November 30, 2014.

42 Aida Cerkez, “Croatia says 2 groups were involved in Egypt abduction,” *Associated Press*, August 13, 2015.

43 Ahmad Shalaby and Amal Abbas, “Secrets of the Ain El Sokhna battle,” *Al Masry Al Youm*, September 13, 2014.

44 “Egypt’s Islamic State affiliate claims responsibility for attack on Suez road checkpoint,” *Aswat Masriya*, July 15, 2015.

45 Al-Mourabitoun, “Statement by Mujhid Brother Abu Umar al-Muhajir Emir of Jamaat Al Murabitoun: On That Day Believers Rejoice,” *The Internet Archive*, July 22, 2015.

46 Not only did he have special knowledge of military installations in both the eastern and western deserts but he had also helped train the group’s operatives. Hisham Ashmay, “The Defected Officer that upset the balance of extremist groups in the Sinai,” *Sassa Post*, July 26, 2015.

47 Maher Farghaly, “Al Murabitoun behind Karnak attack,” *Al Bawabah News*, June 18, 2015.

48 “Hisham Ashmay, the defected officer that upset the balance of extremist groups in the Sinai,” *Sassa Post*, July 26, 2015.

49 On August 18, the Islamic State appears to have released over social media a “wanted dead” poster for Ashmawy due to his allegiance to al-Qa`ida and fighting the Islamic State. It stated that Ashmawy arrived in Derna, Libya in 2014.

50 Abdel Rahman Youssef, “Ashmawy’s recording...,” *Al Modon*, July 24, 2015.

51 In their pursuit, the military said a technical error caused a helicopter to crash killing four officers. Statement posted on official Facebook page of Egyptian Army’s Spokesperson, August 13, 2015.

the fallout publicly by appealing to “Brothers in [mainland] Egypt of the al-Qa`ida creed.”<sup>52</sup> The statement had a starkly different tone from the usual vitriol between the Islamic State and al-Qa`ida. It was instead an emotional appeal to let bygones be bygones and for the pro-al-Qa`ida jihadis in Egypt to reconsider their position. Wilayat Sinai, hoping to rebuild its presence in the valley, clearly had no interest in starting a conflict with al-Qa`ida.

Instead of emerging as the uncontested jihadi leader in Egypt, Wilayat Sinai’s *bay`a* distanced it from the very same mainland jihadis that had been essential to its expansion into the Nile Valley.

The fallout from the pledge has additionally meant that operatives in mainland Egypt supportive of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi have less of a reason to be loyal to Wilayat Sinai, reasoning that they may as well work directly with the core leadership of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. This seems to have been the case for the pro-Islamic State elements in greater Cairo responsible for the attacks on the Italian consulate and a state security building in the summer.

### Conclusion

In many parts of the world, the Islamic State appears to be winning out against al-Qa`ida, but that is not true in the Nile Valley, where the evolution of ABM into the Islamic State’s Wilayat Sinai led to defections to pro-al-Qa`ida groups. What will become of a potential rivalry between the two competing global jihadi rivals in the Egyptian heartland remains to be seen, but much will depend on the strength of indigenous pro-Islamic State groups operating in the Nile Valley who appear to be positioning themselves to eventually create a mainland Egypt province of the Islamic State.

Although the Wilayat Sinai may be getting stronger in its own locale it is not certain it can truly become a national-level actor. In its attempts to link up with transnational jihadism in the form of the Islamic State, Wilayat

Sinai has only solidified its identity as a hyper-local North Sinai group in al-Baghdadi’s enterprise. This is a far more limiting identity than that of the previous “Supporters of Jerusalem,” which had captured the imaginations of many young Islamists who, despite being fixated on Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, still see Israel as a legitimate target. It is no coincidence that Ashmawy’s July 2015 call to jihad against Sisi ended with images of Jerusalem with a *nasheed* in the background crying “Jerusalem is calling,” and the video answering it “we are coming O’ Jerusalem.”<sup>53</sup>

No jihad can be won in Egypt without winning the Nile Valley. Like Gama`a Islamiya before it, which struggled and build support outside the sugar cane fields and mountains of Egypt’s south, Wilayat Sinai is confronting the same tensions as it navigates the competing pressures of being a local, national, and transnational group. It is also worth recalling that when Egyptian Islamic Jihad forsook its local base and merged with al-Qa`ida, it could not sustain its base of popular support—a fate that may await the Wilayat Sinai.

The Egyptian jihadi landscape is continuously evolving with most groups and individuals largely disinterested in transnationalism and instead focused on the very local issues of retribution against the military regime. Yet, the ever entrepreneurial al-Qa`ida and the “core” leadership of the Islamic State are unlikely to overlook Egypt—the fountainhead of Islamism and the most populous Arab country—when it holds so much promise in advancing both groups’ global projects.

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## A View from the CT Foxhole: An Interview with Alain Grignard, Brussels Federal Police

By Paul Cruickshank

*Alain Grignard is a senior member of the counterterrorism unit in the Brussels Federal Police and a lecturer on political Islam at the University of Liege. Ever since becoming the first team leader of the newly founded counterterrorism unit of the Belgian gendarmerie in 1985, he has been at the heart of Belgium’s efforts to tackle Islamist extremism, including investigations into Algerian terrorist networks linked to the 1995 Paris metro bombing, the dismantling of the network behind the assassination of Ahmad Shah Massoud, the dismantling of al-Qa`ida and Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group cells operating in Belgium, as well as a network linked to Muriel Degauque, a Belgian woman who carried out a suicide bombing in Iraq in 2005. More recently he has been part of the investigations into the attack on a Jewish museum in Brussels in May 2014, and an Islamic State cell plotting to attack Belgium in January 2015. Nicknamed the “professor” by police colleagues, he was described shortly after 9/11 by the Wall Street Journal as Belgium’s “secret weapon” against terrorism.*

**CTC:** What is the level of terrorist threat in Belgium?

**Grignard:** It’s never been higher in all the years I’ve been working on counterterrorism. It boils down to mathematics and it’s all linked to the Syria dynamic. A high number of Belgian extremists have traveled to join jihadi groups in Syria and Iraq. Wannabe Belgian jihadis are still leaving every month. There’s no way of knowing the exact numbers but I can tell you with certainty that at least 300 have traveled—that’s the number we have sufficient evidence to bring charges against. At least 100 have returned to Belgium, but we are under no illusions that there aren’t more we don’t know about. It’s impossible to do surveillance on everybody.

To give you an idea of the scale of the challenge, in the past two years we’ve charged more people with terrorism offences than in the 30 years before that.

<sup>52</sup> “Condolences and Messages,” by Abu Usama al-Masri, transcript through Al-Bitar Media Institute, May 2015.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

There's been an exponential rise in the numbers being put on trial in Belgium, with dozens of convictions of individuals involved in Syria recruitment networks already this year and verdicts expected in the cases of dozens of others by year's end. Our approach in Belgium is to detain everybody suspected of fighting with terrorist groups in Syria when they return to Belgium. We interrogate them and charge them if we have evidence. But in lots of cases we do not have enough evidence.

The danger of these travel flows was brought home when we thwarted attack plans by Belgian Islamic State recruits in a gun battle in the eastern town of Verviers in January. Additionally, in May 2014, a French extremist who had allegedly fought with the Islamic State in Syria killed four at the Jewish museum here in Brussels. Since the Verviers operation we've made a significant number of arrests, not all of them publicized, and we remain on high alert.

**CTC:** Which terrorist groups are you most concerned about?

**Grignard:** There are several threat streams we are worried about. As the civil war in Syria progressed, we were initially more worried about al-Qa`ida, given the deep pool of Belgian and European extremists who had traveled there. This provided a historic opportunity for the terrorist group. From 2012 to 2013 onwards we saw indications al-Qa`ida operatives were trying to talent spot Western extremists fighting in Syria for potential operations against the West. The Islamic State initially appeared to be preoccupied with building its Islamic Caliphate, but that changed a year ago after the initiation of the U.S.-led air campaign against it. The concern is the Islamic State is now moving toward directly targeting the Western countries, including Belgium, carrying out strikes against it. And the worry is that competition between al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State will see both groups try to outdo each other with attacks in the West.

We are also worried about attacks by homegrown radicals inspired by al-Qa`ida or the Islamic State. There's a dynamic in which radicals unable to

travel feel frustrated and may turn to plotting something at home. Over the last year we've seen Belgian jihadis in Syria message their friends over social media to encourage them to launch attacks. It's worth pointing out that these extremists are hardly ever lone wolves in the literal sense of the word. In my whole career I'm only aware of two true terrorist loners: the Unabomber and Anders Breivik. This at least gives us some chance to identify them.

**CTC:** Was the Verviers cell directed by the leadership of the Islamic State to return to Belgium in order to carry out an attack?

**Grignard:** That's our impression. There's a limit to what I can say because investigations are ongoing. But as has now been widely reported we found a very significant stash of weapons in their safe house along with the chemicals necessary to make the high explosive TATP. We also found police uniforms. All this indicates they were preparing a terrorist campaign in Belgium rather than a one-off attack on police. We don't yet have all the details on what they were planning.

**CTC:** What else concerned you about the Verviers cell?

**Grignard:** Their profile was of great concern to us: men in their early twenties mostly from the Molenbeek district of Brussels moving in circles with a track record of delinquency and petty crime. They were radicalized very quickly, and when they came back from Syria they had no fear of death. When our commandos launched their raid it took the suspected terrorists one second to switch from chatting between themselves to opening fire. These guys had maybe more experience in gun battles than our own commandos. Here in Belgium and across Europe we are now reviewing how we do these kind of raids.

**CTC:** We've seen that same profile in several other cases in Europe in recent years. Are we seeing the emergence of a new breed of jihadi in the West?

**Grignard:** There's no doubt there has been a shift. The travel flow we are seeing to Syria is to a significant

degree an extension of the "inner-city" gang phenomenon. Young Muslim men with a history of social and criminal delinquency are joining up with the Islamic State as part of a sort of "super-gang."

Previously we were mostly dealing with "radical Islamists"—individuals radicalized toward violence by an extremist interpretation of Islam—but now we're increasingly dealing with what are best described as "Islamized radicals." The young Muslims from "inner-city" areas of Belgium, France, and other European countries joining up with the Islamic State were radical before they were religious. Their revolt from society manifested itself through petty crime and delinquency. Many are essentially part of street gangs. What the Islamic State brought in its wake was a new strain of Islam which legitimized their radical approach. These youngsters are getting quickly and completely sucked in. The next thing they know they're in Syria and in a real video game. The environment they find themselves in over there is attractive to them. Just like in gangs in Europe, respect is equated with fear. They feel like somebody when they're over in Syria. If someone crosses you there, you put a bullet in his head. The Islamic State has legitimized their violent street credo. The gang dimension, and the group loyalty that it creates, make the social media messages by Belgian fighters in Syria in their circle back home encouraging attacks especially concerning.

**CTC:** Are you seeing any links between organized crime and Islamist terror cells?

**Grignard:** So far the links we've uncovered are almost all to unorganized crime rather than organized crime. The link between petty crime and Islamic terror is not of course a new phenomenon. For some time we've seen so-called *takfiris* operating in Europe who justified criminality through their radical interpretation of Islam. Additionally, we saw some young Belgians with a history of delinquency joining up with al-Qa`ida in the tribal areas of Pakistan in the late 2000s. But it has now become a much bigger phenomenon. Islamic State propaganda

distributed over social media has had a big accelerating effect.

As we saw with the Brussels Jewish museum shooting and the Paris kosher market attack it's all too easy for young men with a history of criminality to get access to weapons. And petty criminality has been the main source of funding for terrorist plots since 9/11 in Europe, whether it's stolen cars, stolen credit cards, or fraudulently applying for bank loans.

Prison radicalization is a big factor in all of this. The message of radical recruiters inside jail to Muslim inmates goes something like this: "You had no choice but to carry out criminal actions because you were part of a discriminated against community. You were only defending yourself. And if you now put yourself in service of the cause by supplying false papers and weapons, not only are these actions legitimate but they will win you redemption and reward in paradise." It's a message that is unfortunately resonating.

**CTC:** Are police in Belgium and Europe receiving the resources they need to confront the unprecedented threat?

**Grignard:** We don't have the same resources as U.S. law enforcement agencies but it's important to point out you can never provide 100 percent security. You could pour limitless funds into counterterrorism and still not stop a terrorist attack getting through. In these challenging economic times in Europe there are other competing spending priorities for governments, so it's a question of finding the right balance. It's important for the general public to understand the challenges we are facing. I think there's been a lot of unfair criticism of French security services with regard to the Paris attacks. Even though the attackers were on the radar screen you cannot put more than a very limited number of people under 24/7 surveillance. To tail just a few suspects you need agents in several cars. And you're talking about three different shifts through the day. You also need teams back in the operational center to coordinate wiretaps and file paperwork. All this amounts to hundreds of people being assigned to

just one operation. Very quickly the expense becomes prohibitive.

Let me outline a scenario to explain all this. If we have, say, three extremists we are worried about, we'll apply to a judge for wiretaps. The legal bar for this is generally higher than in the United States. For using informants it is higher still. But if we get the green light we may have to prioritize one of the three. If you're unlucky you pick the wrong one. That's what happened in

**“[The Verviers cell] had maybe more experience in gun battles than our own commandos.”**

France. They were unlucky. There are dozens of radicals on their radar screen who had the same profile as the Kouachi brothers. Belgium counterterrorism agencies were praised for thwarting the Verviers plot, but luck played its role. Tomorrow we might not be so lucky.

One factor in our favor here in Belgium is excellent cooperation between the Federal Police and our small domestic intelligence service (Sûreté de l'État). This has been vital in dismantling terrorist networks.

**CTC:** The Islamic State has taken propaganda to a whole new level, using a wide variety of social media outlets to quickly get their message out. What challenges does this pose?

**Grignard:** It's having a powerful radicalizing effect. The number of youngsters in Belgium consuming it all day long is worrying. Thanks to the internet and social media, information now is so abundant that it becomes almost unmanageable. It is becoming steadily more difficult to map out the threat landscape. We were lucky when we started on this in the 1980s because

there was no internet. We were dealing with books and pamphlets.

**CTC:** What challenges do you face in tracking terrorist communications?

**Grignard:** This is growing increasingly challenging. It's not uncommon for a suspected member of a terrorist cell we are monitoring in Belgium to have a dozen cell phones and 40 SIM cards. And many have moved away from using the phone altogether, shifting to communicating over Skype and various VoIP's, WhatsApp, Twitter, and online games played through video consoles. Given the fast changing technologies, it's difficult for the police to keep up. An additional complication is that when it comes to internet communications we generally have to enlist the help of our American friends. Managing information sharing between an intelligence service of one country and a police service of another can be challenging on several fronts, including from a legal dimension, but these are the problems of friends.

**CTC:** Belgian officials have said up to 10 percent of Belgian foreign fighters in Syria were recruited by one group Sharia4Belgium—an offshoot of the British extremist group al-Muhajiroun. Earlier this year 45 of its members were convicted of terror-related offences in a trial in Antwerp.<sup>1</sup> How concerned are Belgian authorities about this group?

**Grignard:** Many dismiss groups like Sharia4Belgium because they appear to be buffoons. But we shouldn't underestimate their recruiting ability. They may speak nonsense, but they are skilled in telling their audience exactly what they want to hear. It was the same with Abu Qatada and Abu Hamza in the UK. In justifying the behavior of the Islamic State there's always a way groups like Sharia4Belgium can twist the Islamic texts. We're now seeing

<sup>1</sup> "Sharia4Belgium trial: Belgian court jails members," BBC, February 11, 2015.

the emergence of other recruitment networks in Belgium.

**CTC:** Are you seeing any drop off in the numbers traveling to Syria?

**Grignard:** It's difficult to tell. There are more controls on the Turkish frontier than there used to be, which has made it somewhat more difficult to reach Syria. We have started to see fighters coming back with negative accounts, but it's not clear how big an impact this will have.

**CTC:** What keeps you up at night?

**Grignard:** Extremists launching attacks with little warning—going out and buying a Kalashnikov and shooting up a shopping center and then disappearing into the crowd before we can find them. What I've long dreaded is starting to materialize. The Chattanooga attack on U.S. military personnel in July appears to fit this pattern. Previously we had weeks and months to intercept terrorist plots because terrorists would spend months planning an attack, buying components for a bomb and so on. It's so much more difficult to stop this new form of terrorism.

## Wilayat West Africa Reboots for the Caliphate

By Jacob Zenn

AFTER A NEARLY one-year-long “courtship process”<sup>1</sup> that began when Boko Haram<sup>2</sup> leader Abu Bakr Shekau claimed the Chibok kidnapping in May 2014, on March 7, 2015, Shekau pledged *baya`a*<sup>3</sup> to Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Al-Baghdadi via his spokesman accepted Shekau's *baya`a* and renamed the group as the Islamic State's Wilayat<sup>4</sup> West Africa, thereby rendering “Boko Haram” obsolete. In the next two months, ten other Islamic State wilayat in Algeria, Libya, Yemen, Syria and Iraq issued videos praising Shekau's *baya`a*.<sup>5</sup> Wilayat West Africa became the most significant of the

1 The first visible signal that the “courtship process” began was on May 5, 2014, when in the prologue of the first of two videos where Shekau claimed the kidnapping of 250 schoolgirls from Chibok on behalf of Boko Haram, he shot a gun up in the air in the model of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and chanted multiple times “Dawlat al-Islam baqiya... Dawlat al-Islam qamat (The Islamic State remains...The Islamic State is established)”, which are distinct slogans of the Islamic State. Shekau also held up his index finger (an Islamic State symbol for monotheism (*tawheed*)), while his followers in the video, who also hold up their index fingers, repeated the chants after Shekau. Islamic State leader al-Baghdadi (a successor of al-Zarqawi) declared the “Caliphate” in June 2014. Between then and November 2014 Islamic State praised the “Nigerian mujahidin” for the Chibok kidnapping.

2 The actual name of Boko Haram was “Jama`atu Ahl Sunnah Liddaawati Wal Jihad.” It means “Sunni (Muslim) Group for Preaching and Jihad” in Arabic. “Boko Haram” means “Western Education (or Civilization) is Blasphemous” in the Hausa language, and was a name used by the media to describe the group, but not the group itself.

3 The *baya`a* is a pledge that leaders of militant groups give to Abubakr al-Baghdadi signifying that (at least in theory) the territory under their control belongs to al-Baghdadi's Caliphate, the Islamic State.

4 *Wilayat* is an Arabic word that translates to “province” in English. The Islamic State refers to the militant groups whose leaders pledge to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi by the wilayat, or territory, that they (in theory) control. As of mid-August 2015, there were 39 claimed Islamic State wilayat around the world, with the highest concentration in Syria and Iraq.

5 Among Islamic State supporters, Shekau's *baya`a* was the most hyped in advance and praised post-facto of all *baya`as* to al-Baghdadi from militant leaders since al-Baghdadi declared a Caliphate in June 2014.

Islamic State's more than 30 claimed wilayat in terms of number of militants, territory controlled, and operational capacity.<sup>6</sup>

However, in early February 2015, as the courtship process between Boko Haram and the Islamic State was in the final stage, the Nigerian and neighboring country militaries launched a large-scale offensive against Boko Haram in the “Islamic State” in northeastern Nigeria that Shekau had declared in 2014.<sup>7</sup> Together, they expelled the new Wilayat West Africa from almost all of the more than 25 towns that the militants had occupied.

Boko Haram over-extended in its bid to follow the model of the Islamic State's “core” leadership and hold territory and engage in conventional warfare. In declaring Boko Haram's own “Islamic State” and announcing his “support” for al-Baghdadi, Shekau had shown his admiration of the Islamic State's territorial conquests in Syria and Iraq. Thus, from the beginning of the courtship process in May 2014, Boko Haram had shifted tactics by trying to hold territory for the first time since the start of the insurgency in 2010.

But the new Wilayat West Africa that was announced in March 2015 was shrinking not expanding. The militants fled from most of the territory Boko Haram had held. One of the side-effects of the military offensive, however, was that some militants appear to have responded to the military pressure by strengthening relationships with Islamic State wilayat in Libya.

Wilayat West Africa is a far from finished force, however, and can still engage in asymmetric warfare. The next phase of the insurgency in Nigeria and the Lake Chad sub-region<sup>8</sup> will

6 Terrorism scholar Daveed Gartenstein-Ross discussed how Shekau's *baya`a* was “significant” in a series of tweets released on March 15, 2015.

7 In Boko Haram's “Islamic State” the militants commonly occupied government buildings and emirs' palaces, carried out violent sharia punishments, destroyed churches, looted armories and other goods, and forced young boys and girls to join their ranks.

8 The Lake Chad sub-region refers to Boko Haram's and now Wilayat West Africa's main area of operations

likely feature a Wilayat West Africa determined to re-establish enough territorial control to support the narrative that it has a “state”. However, Nigeria’s new President Muhammed Buhari will also prioritize cross-border military and political cooperation with Cameroon, Chad, and Niger as well as anti-corruption and soft measures to “encircle” Wilayat West Africa and prevent the militants from reclaiming their lost “Islamic State” in the Nigeria-Cameroon border region.

This article will discuss how Wilayat West Africa militants responded to the military offensive and analyze the extent to which the militants were able to withstand the offensive tactically, strategically, and in terms of morale. The article also examines Wilayat West Africa’s attacks in Chad after the military offensive, which for the first time showed signs of cooperation from the Islamic State’s “core” leadership. Finally, the article assesses reports of Wilayat West Africa militants mixing with other Islamic State wilayat in Libya and whether an operational or command-and-control relationship exists.

Each section of the article also highlights the role of “post-Ansaru”

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and includes northeastern Nigeria, northern Cameroon, southwestern Chad, and Diffa in southeastern Niger. Benin is also often categorized with these countries in terms of counterinsurgency efforts, although it does not border Lake Chad.

9 As described in the article: Jacob Zenn, “A Biography of Boko Haram and the Baya`a to al-Baghdadi” *CTC Sentinel*, 8:3 (March 2013), the faction Ansaru, which consisted of three GSPC, al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), and Middle Belt streams, became nearly defunct in 2013, and some of its militants reintegrated with Shekau in Boko Haram. Some “post-Ansaru” militants became part of Harakat al-Muhajirin, which focused on trafficking and kidnappings in Cameroon and Chad but still cooperated with Boko Haram before fusing with Boko Haram in Wilayat West Africa. The longstanding contacts that Ansaru networks maintained with North African former AQIM militants who abandoned AQIM in favor of the Islamic State in Syria and Libya may have facilitated the dialogue that was necessary to establish Shekau’s *baya`a* to al-Baghdadi. “Post-Ansaru” networks include Harakat al-Muhajirin and al-Urhwa al-Wutqha Media Foundation, which was likely developed by former Ansaru militants in Boko Haram and in coordination with the Islamic State. The name Harakat

networks (militants formerly in the faction Ansaru, who reintegrated with Boko Haram and played the lead role in managing Boko Haram’s courtship process) in enabling Boko Haram’s evolution into Wilayat West Africa today.

The article challenges the notion that Shekau’s *baya`a* “changed nothing” and suggests that while the Islamic State’s impact on Wilayat West Africa is thus far most easily seen in media and propaganda (and, of course, Boko Haram’s new name), an operational relationship already exists.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, there have been suggestions from a source with a record of inside knowledge that in the Islamic State hierarchy Shekau now reports to a new overall emir of Wilayat West Africa, who is a Libyan and former Mali-based militant in Mokhtar Belmokhtar’s al-Mourabitoun.<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless, the Islamic State still recognizes Shekau as the titular head, or *wali*, of Wilayat West Africa.<sup>12</sup>

#### Reorganizing After the Military Offensive

The military offensive led to immediate battlefield losses for Wilayat West Africa. An estimated 30 percent of its 10,000 to 20,000 militants were killed. Among those militants killed were several key members of the new Wilayat West Africa Media Foundation, who previously were part of Boko Haram’s “post-Ansaru” network and collaborated with the Islamic State media operative Shaybah al-Hamad and Tunisia-based Africa Media<sup>13</sup> to

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al-Muhajirin was first introduced by Fulan Nasrallah.

10 Adelani Adepega, “Shekau’s allegiance to ISIS changes nothing – Nigerian Army,” *Punch*, March 9, 2015.

11 Fulan Nasrallah, “August 5th 2015 SITREP,” Fulan’s Sitrep Blog, August 5, 2015.

12 Credible Islamic State twitter accounts released an audio recording of Shekau on August 16, 2015, which identified Shekau as the *wali* of Wilayat West Africa.

13 Africa Media is an officially non-partisan but admittedly pro-Islamic State Tunisia-founded media outlet with a record of reliability and predicting Islamic State attacks (because of inside knowledge) in North Africa. Its hybrid militant-administrators published reports of Boko Haram’s “General Command” before Shekau’s *baya`a* to al-Baghdadi. Subsequently one of its militant-administrators, who claimed to have been in Ansar al-Sharia Tunisia but defected and became pro-Islamic State, wrote an article explaining how Africa Media

run the “al-Urhwa al-Wutqha”<sup>14</sup> twitter account. This account served as the public platform for the final phase of the courtship process, including the audio recording of Shekau’s *baya`a*. The deaths of members of the media team likely led to a downturn in Wilayat West Africa media output for nearly two months after Shekau’s *baya`a*, while the Wilayat West Africa’s battlefield losses upset the intended plan of the militants to advertise the territory they had controlled.<sup>15</sup>

As a result of the military offensive, many militants had also abandoned

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was a liaison between Boko Haram and the Islamic State; however, according to the writer, the *baya`a* was delayed because of the “fanaticism of some individuals toward their old companions” (presumably “post-Ansaru” network militants, who were hesitantly leaving the al-Qa`ida fold). Africa Media also claimed to have been the liaison to the leader of MUJAO for his *baya`a* to al-Baghdadi.

14 Al-Urhwa al-Wutqha (The Indissoluble Link), which refers to a verse in the Qur’an, was the name of the twitter account that Boko Haram adopted from January to March 2015 as the public platform for viewing videos, statements and messages from Boko Haram that hinted at Shekau’s forthcoming pledge of *baya`a* to al-Baghdadi. Thus, in the context of Boko Haram, al-Urhwa al-Wutqha refers to both the twitter account and the media foundation also called al-Urhwa al-Wutqha that distributed the videos, statements and messages. Al-Urhwa al-Wutqha, according to primary sources, was created by Africa Media, and its producers in Nigeria were likely part of the “post-Ansaru” network. Al-Urhwa al-Wutqha Media Foundation likely transformed into Wilayat West Africa Media Foundation and adopted a logo which was modeled after other Islamic State ‘provincial’ media foundations. See the section “2014-2015: Former AQIM Network Sets Stage for the Boko Haram-Islamic State Merger” in Zenn, “A Biography of Boko Haram and the Bay`a to al-Baghdadi.”

15 Wilayat West Africa Media Foundation may not have issued statements for six weeks after Shekau’s *baya`a* because of the deaths of key members of its “Media Office.” After Shekau’s *baya`a*, Islamic State supporters on social media claimed that Wilayat West Africa repelled the military offensive of the “crusader African alliance” and that “#IS fighters” recaptured towns in northeastern Nigeria, but no formal statement from Wilayat West Africa Media Foundation emerged until April 22. That statement acknowledged that “soldiers of the Caliphate” were “martyred” while engaging in “*ribat*” in northeastern Nigeria. The statement showed a photo-list of the “martyrs” in a display style that—consistent with the courtship process—was identical to Islamic State media statements from Syria, Iraq, Libya, and other wilayat.

bases in northeastern Nigeria, where they had previously stored weapons, trained, and held captive hundreds of female “servants”, cooks, and porters (but apparently none of the more than 250 kidnapped Chibok schoolgirls). The militants were seen leaving Nigerian border towns near Cameroon and, in one case, even walked across a bridge into Cameroon. Aerial footage also showed dozens of militants escaping in convoys from Boko Haram’s main “armory” in the Sambisa Forest of Borno State.<sup>16</sup>

Despite these setbacks, when Wilayat West Africa Media Foundation became active again in June 2015, it incorporated into its messaging strategy the most prevalent narrative of the Islamic State: that it is “always winning” and “in control of territory” that constitutes a state.<sup>17</sup> Nonetheless, the reduction in Wilayat West Africa attacks after the military offensive, the dispersal of militants, and the non-appearance of Shekau after his *baya`a* (which may have been for strategic reasons) led to an impression that “Boko Haram” was “defeated” and that the *baya`a* was a “desperate attempt” to “distract attention” (even though the *baya`a* was in process for nearly a year before the offensive).<sup>18</sup>

But the loss of territory did not destroy the resolve of Wilayat West Africa. In

16 “Boko Haram Fighters Fleeing NAF Aerial Bombardment In Sambisa Forest,” Sahara Reporters, May 3, 2015.

17 Thus, Wilayat West Africa Media Foundation released a video on June 2 of a militant alleging that Wilayat West Africa still controlled Sambisa and other towns in Borno; on July 22, it released a video showing more than 500 militants and civilians praying together in Sambisa on Eid al-Fitr; and on August 2, it released a video of attacks in Yobe and Borno States. The June 2 and August 2 videos, however, included no ‘visual time-stamps’ to verify they were actually filmed after the military offensive. Jola Sutobo, “Terrorist caught spying on Yobe IDP camp,” Pulse, June 26, 2015; Ola Audu, “Boko Haram militants seize Damaturu-Maiduguri road,” Premium Times, July 11, 2015; “Cameroun - Espionnage: Deux présumés Boko Haram arrêtés à Minawou,” Mutations, August 15, 2014.

18 Several factors can explain Shekau’s absence: 1) Islamic State ‘provincial’ leaders generally do not have public media roles to avoid upstaging al-Baghdadi or going off-narrative, including dying and showing weakness, and for operational security reasons; 2) Shekau

an Islamic State-styled April 22, 2015 statement, militants appeared to accept that they had suffered losses to the “crusader African alliance” knowing they were preparing for a new phase of asymmetric warfare once military pressure returned to regular levels. Boko Haram had after all bounced back after military offensives in July 2009 and May 2013. In addition, the Islamic State-supported “upgrade” of Wilayat West Africa’s media enabled the militants to portray to followers that they still controlled a “state” even if it was not true.

**“Militants appeared to accept that they had suffered losses to the ‘crusader African alliance’ knowing they were preparing for a new phase of asymmetric warfare.”**

Thus, the military offensive and President Buhari’s renewed commitment to countering the insurgency did not deal to the militants the decisive blow that leaders in the outgoing administration anticipated. However, it did eliminate Wilayat West Africa’s capacity to engage in conventional warfare and hold territory.<sup>19</sup>

**Tactics, Strategy and Morale**

On the tactical level, with Wilayat West Africa forced from its bases and under

may have been an “actor” (there was likely at least one fake Shekau) so he is no longer “cast”; 3) Shekau may be in Libya or in deep hiding outside of Nigeria and separated from his media team, which explains why his *baya`a* to al-Baghdadi and his one other media appearance since then have both been audio recordings. See “Over 600 Terrorists Killed in One Month,” ThisDayLive, July 5, 2015; Adelani Adepegba, “Shekau’s allegiance to ISIS changes nothing—Nigerian Army,” *Punch*, March 9, 2015; James Schneider, “Boko Haram: fearsome yet reliant on exploited children,” *NewAfrica Magazine*, July 22, 2015.

19 Some of President Buhari’s new measures include

pressure, the militants increased suicide attacks on soft targets, with a focus on deploying young girls.<sup>20</sup> The more than 60 females (some were elderly women) who attempted suicide attacks in Borno State and Cameroon from early February 2015 through August 2015 likely sustained that unprecedented frequency because elements of the “post-Ansaru” network in Cameroon, who have been largely immune to the Borno-focused offensive, masterminded some of the attacks.<sup>21</sup>

“Post-Ansaru” networks were also likely involved in the expansion of female suicide attacks to the Lake Chad “sub-region,” including from Borno State to Diffa, Niger. Two girls carried out suicide attacks in Diffa on February 8 and two girls again on February 11 just as Niger and Chad were preparing to launch offensives against Boko Haram in Nigerian territory. Those attacks in Diffa followed a threat to attack Niger and Chad that was written in the name of both Boko Haram and al-Urhwa al-Wutqha, but likely drafted by pro-Islamic State Africa Media, which cooperated with the “post-

shifting the army command to Maiduguri, the capital of Borno State in Nigeria. He also updated the army rules of engagement, met with neighboring leaders of Chad, Niger, Cameroon, and Benin and international partners to discuss regional collaboration, expressed confidence in the ‘soft approach’ to countering violent extremism, and encouraged investment to rebuild northeastern Nigeria. “We’ll crush Boko Haram in 6 weeks—Dasuki,” Vanguard, February 10, 2015; “Month till Boko Haram defeat,” *Daily Star*, March 21, 2015.

20 Their gender, long clothing, and youth made it less likely that security officers would detect them before attacks. On a cultural level, the passivity encouraged of young girls in some parts of northeastern Nigeria may have made them less likely to decline the demands of male militants to carry out such attacks or deliver packages that unbeknownst to the girls had remotely detonable bombs in them. Author interview with government official from Maroua, Yaounde, Cameroon, July 2015.

21 The role of the “post-Ansaru” networks can be deduced from the fact that almost all of the first 15 attempted female suicide attacks in Nigeria in 2014 were in northwestern Nigeria, where Boko Haram rarely operated but Ansaru only operated from between 2011 and 2013—and Ansaru militants had transferred other tactics, such as kidnappings, to the northwest, and been the first to pioneer suicide bombings and other innovative asymmetric warfare tactics in Nigeria.

Ansaru” network to run the al-Urhwa al-Wutqha twitter account that posted the threat.<sup>22</sup> The expansion of this tactic into Cameroon, which saw two tandem female suicide attacks in Fotokol and then one tandem female suicide attack in Maroua and another solo attack in Maroua all in July 2015, may also have been the result of a pre-existing “post-Ansaru”-Boko Haram nexus between Borno State and Cameroon.<sup>23</sup>

The spate of these five female suicide bombings in Cameroon (as well as several failed attempts) coincided with an increase in overall attacks in Nigeria. By July 2015—five months after the start of the military offensive—the militants were no longer pinned down in towns they occupied, and expanded

<sup>22</sup> The back-to-back tandem female suicide attacks in Diffa in February 2015 and subsequent raids on islands of Niger and Chad on Lake Chad, which commenced a new phase of the Boko Haram insurgency beyond Nigeria’s borders, were preceded by a Boko Haram threat to attack Niger, Chad, and Cameroon on al-Urhwa al-Wutqha with a newly amended Boko Haram logo. The new logo, for the first time with Boko Haram’s name spelled out in Arabic script (probably to show Arabic-speaking militants that Boko Haram’s name was not “Boko Haram”), had only previously appeared in a posting by an Ansar al-Sharia Tunisia defector who became pro-Islamic State and worked for Africa Media and claimed in detail to have facilitated Shekau’s *baya`a*. This suggests that the Islamic State likely had advanced knowledge of the expansion to Niger and Chad. The Islamic State may have encouraged the expansion of the insurgency with the attacks in Niger, Chad, and Cameroon and had the aspirations to launch attacks in Benin, which is why Shekau began to mention Benin for the first time in his scripted speech on al-Urhwa al-Wutqha.

<sup>23</sup> The female suicide attacks included one by two girls in burqas at a joint Cameroonian-Chadian special forces compound in Fotokol on July 13, an attack by two girls in Maroua on July 22 and another attack by a girl in Maroua on July 26. They all took place in areas of Cameroon where the “post-Ansaru” network had previously kidnapped foreigners and then transferred them to Boko Haram camps across the border in Nigeria. All of these female suicide attacks in Cameroon saw the girls cross the border from Nigeria into Cameroon along similar routes the “post-Ansaru” had previously used to transport their captives into Nigeria from Cameroon. It therefore makes it more likely that the “post-Ansaru” network was involved in masterminding these female suicide attacks than any other militant network. “Boko Haram suspected after suicide attacks in Chad, NE Nigeria,” AFP, July 11, 2015; “At Least 11 Dead In Twin Suicide Bombing In Cameroon,” AFP, July 13, 2015.

the geographic range of their attacks to northwestern Nigeria for the first time since Boko Haram began to hold territory in June 2014.<sup>24</sup> They launched attacks not only in strongholds in Borno and neighboring Yobe State, but also in Jos, Zaria, and Gombe in the “Middle Belt” and northern Nigeria’s largest city of Kano.<sup>25</sup>

Like the female suicide attacks, the attacks outside of Borno and Yobe States were probably the result of Shekau’s alliances with “post-Ansaru” networks, whose operational range since the start of the insurgency in 2009 encompassed parts of the “Middle Belt” and Kano. These areas are outside of the majority Kanuri parts of Yobe and Borno and Lake Chad where Shekau’s influence is strongest. The intended strategic effect of attacks in northwestern Nigeria was likely to force the Nigerian military to redeploy troops from Borno State to other parts of the country, weaken the intensity of military offensive in Borno, and provide an opportunity for Wilayat West Africa to regain control of enough territory to be able to portray a narrative that it is a “state.” But the inability of Wilayat West Africa to sustain the attacks in northwest Nigeria after the arrest in Gombe (a base of the “post-Ansaru” network) of a mastermind of these attacks in July suggests that the militant network in the “Middle Belt” and Kano was not strong.<sup>26</sup>

A final reason why Wilayat West Africa sustained its capabilities after the military offensive was that few of its leaders were eliminated, especially

<sup>24</sup> The militants, for example, killed up to 200 people in a 48-hour period in Borno State on July 1, 2015.

<sup>25</sup> Wilayat West Africa carried out female suicide attacks on churches in Yobe State’s two largest cities of Damatru and Potiskum in May and July, 2015; raided the towns of Fika and Babangida, also in Yobe State, in May and June; failed in carrying out a female suicide attack at a major mosque in Kano on July 6; launched mass-casualty attacks in Jos, also on July 6, involving a suicide car-bombing at a church, a suicide attack at a popular restaurant and a rocket-propelled grenade attack on a mosque; and carried out a suicide attack at a university in Zaria, Kaduna State, also on July 7. “Suspected Mastermind Of Jos, Zaria Bombings Arrested In Gombe,” Informationng.com, July 9, 2015.

<sup>26</sup> “Suspected Mastermind Of Jos, Zaria Bombings Arrested In Gombe,” informationng.com, July 9, 2015.

the key traffickers who are based in Cameroon and Chad in relative safety (one exception, however, was Chad’s arrest of Bana Fanaye<sup>27</sup> in N’djamena on June 29, 2015).<sup>28</sup> Shekau himself has likely adopted a lower profile now that he is a *wali* of an Islamic State “province,” but his first post-*baya`a* appearance—an audio message on August 16, 2015—was likely necessary to affirm to his followers that he was alive.<sup>29</sup> The fact that there were relatively few defections or surrenders immediately after the military offensive suggests that foot soldiers’ morale remained high enough to continue waging an insurgency, even if Shekau’s *baya`a* may have alienated an influential minority of militants who opposed the decision.<sup>30</sup>

### Convergence in Chad

Prior to the military offensive, the “post-Ansaru” network ran weapons trafficking operations from Libya through Chad and Cameroon to supply Boko Haram in Nigeria.<sup>31</sup> But its most significant operations were in

<sup>27</sup> Fanaye had been part of the “post-Ansaru” network known as Harakat al-Muhajirin and a trafficker of heavy weaponry from Chad via northern Cameroon to Nigeria. He had hand-written letters in Arabic language from Shekau on his person at the time of his arrest. Shekau communicates with other commanders with hand-written letters or documents on USB devices. “Chad Arrests Boko Haram Leader In N’Djamena,” PM News, June 30, 2015.

<sup>28</sup> Author’s Interviews with Chadian religious leaders, journalists, and professors. N’djamena, July 2015.

<sup>29</sup> “Shekau no longer leads Boko Haram, says Chad’s President,” Premium Times, August 12, 2015.

<sup>30</sup> “Nigeria Decides: Strategic Post Election Threats,” Peccaviconsulting.wordpress.com, April 12, 2015.

<sup>31</sup> See Zenn, “A Biography of Boko Haram and the Bay`a to al-Baghdadi.” The former Ansaru leader Khalid Al-Barnawi and Shekau may have come to an agreement while both were in northern Mali in November 2012 for Shekau’s faction to be responsible for most of Yobe and Borno States in Nigeria, while elements of al-Barnawi’s faction, now also comprising of Harakat al-Muhajirin, were to operate in northern Cameroon and towns in northern Borno, such as Monguno, and along the logistics routes from Libya through Niger, Chad, and Cameroon that supplied weapons to Boko Haram in Nigeria. Al-Barnawi likely allowed Shekau to take credit for all his all attacks and kidnappings (or used a fake Shekau to claim its own attacks), which is why Harakat al-Muhajirin did not claim attacks or advertise its presence and instead focused strictly on its operations and maintaining a low profile for operational purposes.

Cameroon, where in coordination with Boko Haram—and using the group’s official name (and probably a “fake Shekau” in its claims)—it kidnapped 22 foreigners and several dozen Cameroonians between 2013 and 2014.<sup>32</sup> Niger and Chad only became consistent targets for Boko Haram in February 2015, when Boko Haram threatened on the al-Urhwa al-Wutqha twitter account to launch attacks in those two countries and carried out the back-to-back tandem female suicide bombings in Diffa on February 8 and February 11. Boko Haram then carried out and claimed on the same twitter account cross-border attacks on islands of Niger and Chad on Lake Chad.<sup>33</sup>

After Shekau’s *baya`a* in March 2015, with the majority of Boko Haram and other “post-Ansaru” networks united under Wilayat West Africa, the militants further expanded their attacks in Cameroon, Niger and Chad.<sup>34</sup> However, the four suicide attacks in N’djamena, Chad in June 2015, including two simultaneous ones at the police academy and police headquarters, were most significant because of the role that the Islamic State’s “core” media team played in propagandizing them.<sup>35</sup>

32 Jacob Zenn, “Boko Haram Leader Abu Bakr Shekau: Dead, Deposed Or Duplicated?” *Militant Leadership Monitor*, 5:5, May 2014.

33 The claim was made on the al-Urhwa al-Wutqha twitter account.

34 Ansaru, if it exists at all as a surviving independent militant group, may only be in a small pocket of Bauchi State. For more see “Boko Haram kills 40 in Diffa, southeast Niger,” *al-bawaba.com*, June 19, 2015; Boko Haram attacks prison in Niger, four killed,” *Reuters*, July 12.

35 Wilayat West Africa’s first major attack in Chad was on June 15, 2015, when two purportedly Chadian militants simultaneously launched suicide bombings at the police academy and police headquarters in N’djamena, killing more than 30 people. For the first time, the Islamic State’s “core” media team claimed these suicide attacks on its official Al-Bayan Radio News Bulletin and on Twitter, where it showed “martyrdom” photos of the two suicide bombers. The Islamic State’s “core” media team also claimed on Twitter a separate “martyrdom” operation in N’djamena on June 29 in which a purportedly Chadian suicide bomber killed five security officers (and six fellow militants collaterally) at a house where weapons were stored. The Islamic State’s “core” media also claimed two other suicide bombings in N’djamena and Maiduguri on July 11, which killed

They were also a way for Wilayat West Africa to retaliate against Chad for participating in the regional coalition in Nigeria. Like the female suicide attacks and bombings in northwestern Nigeria, the attacks in Chad were facilitated by the “post-Ansaru” network, such as Bana Fanaye (the trafficker mentioned above), whose cell shifted its operations from logistics, recruitment, and trafficking to also include suicide bombings in N’djamena.<sup>36</sup>

### **“Like the female suicide attacks and bombings in northwestern Nigeria, the attacks in Chad were facilitated by the “post-Ansaru” network.”**

#### **Wilayat West Africa in Libya**

As Islamic State claims of Wilayat West Africa operations in Chad were released in July 2015, there were also reports in north and west Africa that Wilayat West Africa militants were mixing with Islamic State militants in Libya. By August 2015 a trend started to become apparent from information gleaned via reports from diverse sources and

“dozens.” The claims were originally posted on Islamic State twitter accounts, such as @FzdsdD of “Abu al-Waleed al-Jazrawi,” on July 11, 2015. There was also a suicide attack at the Grand Marché in N’djamena on June 11 that went unclaimed but is believed to be the work of Wilayat West Africa. Since the attacker was a man wearing a burqa, it is possible that the masterminds did not claim it for the same reasons they do not claim female suicide attacks.

36 Chad’s investigation of the Islamic State-claimed June 29 operation in N’djamena led to the arrest of Bana Fanaye. This suggests that there was a direct connection between the Islamic State’s “core” media team and Bana Fanaye’s cell and therefore also to Shekau via Bana Fanaye. It may also suggest that Islamic State’s “core” media team is connected to other “post-Ansaru” leaders, such as Alhaji Abdalla, who, like Fanaye, communicated with Shekau via couriers, but also had business relations in parts of the Middle East and North Africa where Islamic State also has wilayat. “Cameroon: La Boko Haram connection,” *camer.be*, June 2, 2014.

countries.<sup>37</sup> This would be a major development: growing interactions and greater trust between Wilayat West Africa and Islamic State wilayat in Libya beyond their mutual loyalty to al-Baghdadi would further integrate the new Wilayat West Africa into the broader Islamic State system.

There were, for example, several Islamic State supporters in Barqa, who wrote on twitter that “Shekau’s followers” traveled to Darna (a city near Barqa in eastern Libya) to support the Islamic State in its battles with rival factions and pro-al-Qa`ida militants.<sup>38</sup> These reports were consistent with other reports from Libya that 80 to 200 Wilayat West Africa militants were in the Islamic State’s “third capital” of Sirte (after al-Raqqa, Syria and Mosul, Iraq). Nigerian media also reported that the country’s military intelligence believes Shekau fled to North Africa and that Wilayat West Africa now reports to Syria or Iraq in the Islamic State hierarchy.<sup>39</sup> Algerian

37 This is similar to how the first news and intelligence reports of financial and training relations between AQ-IM and Boko Haram emerged after five simultaneous bombs exploded in a Boko Haram-claimed attack in Jos, Plateau State on Christmas Day, 2010.

38 According to one of the leading Islamic State social media promoters, Abu Malik Shaybah al-Hamad, who is a former AQIM poet and defector to the Islamic State, Libya is the “gateway to Africa” and, like Nigeria post-Shekau’s *baya`a*, it is an acceptable destination for militants to “migrate” if they cannot reach Syria or Iraq. On June 16, 2015, an Islamic State supporter whose *nisba* suggests he is from Barqa (the Islamist name for eastern Libya) wrote on twitter that “Shekau’s followers” and “descendants of Bilal ibn Rabah (the first African muazzin)” entered Darna, which is a city near Barqa in eastern Libya that the Mujahidin Shura Council (MSC) seized from the Islamic State that month. Two days earlier, on June 14, an Islamic State militant whose *nisba* also suggests he is from Barqa said that Wilayat West Africa “reinforcements” arrived from Wilayat Fezzan in southern Libya to fight the MSC in Darna.

39 Specifically, the report said that Wilayat West Africa “headquarters” was relocated to the “Middle East.” This would suggest that the Islamic State leadership hierarchy mandates a system for Wilayat West Africa—and likely all other “provinces”—to report to the Islamic State “core” leadership in Syria and Iraq. “He was trained by ISIS in Sirte for two years,” *Alchorouk.com*, June 29, 2015; “The leadership of the ‘state’ get orders directly from the Syrian Al-Raqqaqah,” *Alchorouk.com*, May 15, 2015; “Boko Haram leader Shekau flees Nigeria,” *Afri-*

security forces also believe Wilayat West Africa is active in northern Niger, which borders Libya, together with 200 militants from MUJAO (MUJAO'S leader pledged *baya`a* to al-Baghdadi in July 2015 against Belmokhtar's wishes, thus leading to the break-up of al-Mourabitoun).<sup>40</sup> The openness of migration routes from Nigeria through eastern Niger to Libya makes travel between the two wilayat fairly straightforward, and the Islamic State can easily afford to pay smugglers to carry militants (and weapons) along that route.

The movement of Wilayat West Africa militants to Libya has the potential to transform the "Islamic State landscape" in northwest Africa in at least three ways.

First, it could allow Wilayat West Africa to forge deeper and more operational ties with the Islamic State beyond the media relationship it already forged with Shaybah al-Hamad and Africa Media. For example, Wilayat West Africa's ties to Islamic State's "core" were likely strengthened when leading Islamic State militants and ideologues traveled to Libya, including the Bahraini Turki bin Ali, who arrived from Syria to Sirte as early as 2013.<sup>41</sup> Bin Ali reportedly

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can Spotlight, May 9, 2015.

<sup>40</sup> This would be consistent with the precedent set when Shekau and Khalid al-Barnawi, who is a leading militant in the "post-Ansaru" network, formed an alliance under MUJAO's auspices in Mali in 2012 that resulted in joint operations, particularly kidnappings and weapons trafficking in Cameroon. In addition, it is consistent with the role of Ansaru's founders fighting alongside MUJAO militants in Niger, Mali, Mauritania, and Algeria when they were in the GSPC in the mid-2000s and the shift in the loyalty of both the "post-Ansaru" network and MUJAO from al-Qa`ida to the Islamic State in 2014. "Gaid Salah warns against Islamic State in the Sahel," *El-Watan*, July 3, 2015.

<sup>41</sup> The relationship between Islamic State wilayat in Libya and Wilayat West Africa can also be seen in context of the Islamic State's "core" media team promoting Boko Haram and "migration" to the soon-to-be Wilayat West Africa alongside tweets with the hashtag "#Migration\_to\_IS\_in\_Libya". This hashtag, notably, was first popularized at the same time—January 14, 2015—that the al-Urhwa al-Wutqha twitter account was launched. "Islamic State Militants Find A Foothold In Chaotic Libya," AP, February 20, 2015; Fulan Nasrullah, "An Interesting Twist," Fulan's SITREP, August 13, 2015;

opened "communication channels" with Wilayat West Africa through a southern Libya-based Malian militant.<sup>42</sup> Islamic State media operative Shaybah al-Hamad argued that this outreach helped prevent al-Qa`ida—presumably referring to Mokhtar Belmokhtar's al-Mourabitoun, which in August 2015 affirmed it was al-Qa`ida—from "winning the favor of the mujahidin of Nigeria".<sup>43</sup>

Second, Wilayat West Africa could acquire new militant training and skills from Islamic State militants whose insurgent experience dates to the start of the Iraq War in 2003 or earlier in the case of North African insurgencies. Videos uncovered from captured or killed Wilayat West Africa militants show that they are viewing weapons manufacturing and training video manuals from the Islamic State.<sup>44</sup> Negotiators who have been in Wilayat West Africa camps also say that Chadians who were formerly mercenaries for Muammar Qaddafi in Libya joined forces with Wilayat West Africa and operate its complex machinery, such as tanks stolen from the Nigerian army. "Light-skinned" (referring to North Africans) militants have also overseen hostages and been reported in camps for training female suicide bombers.<sup>45</sup>

Third, Wilayat West Africa and the Islamic State's Libyan wilayat can coordinate attacks in Nigeria and the Lake Chad sub-region. Several attacks since Africa Media and Boko Haram launched the al-Urhwa al-Wutqha

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Kevin Casey, Stacey Pollard, "The Islamic State's Strategy in Libya," Carnegie, March 25, 2015.

<sup>42</sup> "A tour of the Concentration of Fundamentalist Groups in Libya," al-Sharq al-Awsat, February 23, 2015.

<sup>43</sup> Aaron Y. Zelin, "The Islamic State's Burgeoning Capital in Sirte, Libya," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, August 6, 2015; Abdel Sattar Hatitah; Fulan Nasrullah, "An Interesting Twist," Fulan's SITREP, August 13, 2015; Tweet of @shaiba\_ha (now suspended), January 20, 2015.

<sup>44</sup> Authors interview of Cameroonian journalist with video taken from Boko Haram militants, Yaounde, Cameroon, July 2015.

<sup>45</sup> Author's Interview of Cameroonian security officer, Yaounde, Cameroon, July 2015; "Troops forced to retreat from mined Boko Haram stronghold," Vanguard, April 23, 2015.

twitter account in January 2015 have indicated this, including the back-to-back female suicide attacks in Diffa in February 2015 and the five suicide bombings in N'djamena in June 2015.<sup>46</sup> The Islamic State will likely also continue to encourage Wilayat West Africa to carry out attacks throughout the Lake Chad sub-region to demonstrate that it is a "West African" and not a "Nigerian" movement. Nonetheless, an attack on a high-profile foreign target in Nigeria would garner the most international media attention. The Islamic State's need to rival Belmokhtar's al-Mourabitoun, whose area of operations is still mostly in Mali and Niger but potentially could reach Nigeria, will likely accelerate Wilayat West Africa's importance in the context of the overall Islamic State versus al-Qa`ida global rivalry.

### Conclusion

This article showed that after Shekau's *baya`a* Wilayat West Africa encountered setbacks but withstood and adapted to the military offensive. After a courtship process that began as early as the Chibok kidnapping in April 2014, Wilayat West Africa also merged its media team into the Islamic State's "centrally decentralized" propaganda structure.<sup>47</sup> Other effects of Shekau's *baya`a* included Shekau taking a less visible role in Wilayat West Africa.

However, the most important impact of Shekau's *baya`a* is that it furthered the message that the Islamic State is "expanding" (*tatamadad*), which is one of the two main components of the Islamic State's master narrative (the other being "remaining" in Syria and Iraq, or *baqiya*). As a result of Shekau's *baya`a*, the Islamic State now has a much stronger position in Africa.<sup>48</sup> Thus, the prospect for the

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<sup>46</sup> The first attacks in Diffa, Niger, and Chad in February 2015 were preceded by a Boko Haram threat to both countries in a statement that was likely drafted by Africa Media and then posted on al-Urhwa al-Wutqha.

<sup>47</sup> Aaron Y. Zelin, "Picture Or It Didn't Happen: A Snapshot of the Islamic State's Official Media Output," Perspectives on Terrorism, 9:4 (2015).

<sup>48</sup> After Shekau's *baya`a*, MUJAO's leader Abu Walid al-Sahraoui and some former AQIM factions in Algeria also pledged *baya`a* to al-Baghdadi, while al-Shabab militants appeared to be becoming closer to considering

Islamic State to supersede al-Qa`ida on the African continent is foreseeable, although Belmokhtar's al-Mourabitoun could become al-Qa`ida's answer to Wilayat West Africa. Nonetheless, the legitimacy that Wilayat West Africa affords the Islamic State will continue to make it worthwhile for the Islamic State to continue to invest in Wilayat West Africa's sustainability.

One trend to watch out for is how Wilayat West Africa manages its identity as a "West African"—as opposed to ostensibly a Nigerian—militant group. The Malians, Mauritians, and Algerians in MUJAO will presumably follow the Islamic State's "IMU model"<sup>49</sup> and merge into Wilayat West Africa (possibly with MUJAO's leader responsible for the Sahel and Shekau responsible for the Lake Chad sub-region). Furthermore, Wilayat West Africa's overall leadership in Libya that reports to Syria will further dilute its Nigerian-ness. This may be a cause for dissent from former Boko Haram militants, who desire an "Islamic State" and seek the redress of perceived Nigerian government injustices but do not want to submit to the command of al-Baghdadi.<sup>50</sup>

Given the apparent unity of Boko Haram behind Shekau's *baya`a*, however, it appears that dissenting militants are likely small in number but may retain outsized influence, especially if Belmokhtar's former comrade and

Ansaru founder Khalid al-Barnawi is among them. Moreover, al-Mourabitoun could present a viable alternative to Wilayat West Africa if Belmokhtar "empowers" Nigerian militants to take leading roles like he did with al-Barnawi in the GSPC<sup>51</sup> in the 2000s. Belmokhtar could convince "post-Ansaru" network militants to leave Shekau and return to the al-Qa`ida fold and offer an

**“The legitimacy that Wilayat West Africa affords the Islamic State will continue to make it worthwhile for the Islamic State to continue to invest in Wilayat West Africa.”**

opportunity for Boko Haram militants who refuse to follow Shekau's lead to receive external support and re-build their ranks.<sup>52</sup>

One final way Shekau's *baya`a* and the re-branding of Boko Haram as

a "West African" movement could prove instrumental—and clever—is if the Nigerian military succeeds in the military offensive and wins the war against "Boko Haram." In such a case, Wilayat West Africa could attempt to hold territory in Nigeria's weaker neighbors, such as Diffa, Niger, northern Cameroon, or an increasingly insecure northern Mali. The brand "Wilayat West Africa" may then serve Boko Haram in the same way that the brand "Islamic State" can serve al-Baghdadi's militants if, for example, Islamic State is defeated in Syria and Iraq and its "core" relocates to the "third capital"—Sirte, Libya. Then the "core" would be able to maintain the master narrative of "remaining" and "expanding" to Libya, while also becoming a closer neighbor of its Wilayat West Africa brethren.

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a *baya`a* to al-Baghdadi but the organization ultimately remained loyal to al-Qa`ida. See Aymenn J. Tamimi, "Al-Shabaab's Threat to Mall of America in Minnesota," Middle East Forum, March 9, 2015.

49 The "IMU model" refers to how after the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) leader Usman Ghazi pledged *baya`a* to al-Baghdadi. Al-Baghdadi did not formally accept the *baya`a*. Rather, the IMU was merged into Wilayat Khurasan since that Wilayat was already responsible for Afghanistan and Central Asia (including Uzbekistan). Similarly, al-Baghdadi may not accept the MUJAO leader's *baya`a* to al-Baghdadi because Wilayat West Africa is already responsible for MUJAO's areas of operation in Cote d'Ivoire, Mali, Mauritania, Senegal, Burkina Faso, Nigeria, Chad, Niger, Cameroon, and Benin.

50 To these Wilayat West Africa dissenters, the Islamic teachings of late "Boko Haram" founder Muhammed Yusuf—unlike the *takfiri* ideology of Shekau (and al-Baghdadi and Turki bin Ali)—are sufficient.

51 GSPC is the French acronym for the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat, whose successor organization was AQIM.

52 According to former strategic intelligence analyst Fulan Nasrallah, who has a track record of inside information, several hundred Boko Haram militants broke away from Shekau after his *baya`a* to al-Baghdadi and will retain the name Boko Haram. These militants, led by one Mahamat Daud, reportedly have approached Nigeria and Chad about negotiations with the demand for at least a semi-autonomous "Islamic State" in north-eastern Nigeria in the model of Aceh, Indonesia or Iraqi Kurdistan, threatening otherwise that the militants will continue the insurgency in the name of Muhammed Yusuf—not Shekau or al-Baghdadi. Daud was reportedly a follower of Muhammed Yusuf, but did not support the Shekau-led clashes with the security forces in July 2009 that led to Yusuf's death during a security forces interrogation. Daud later commanded Boko Haram operations in Maiduguri, including suicide attacks, intelligence and internal security (Amniyah), and extorting money from elites and government officials. See Fulan Nasrallah, "An Interesting Twist," Fulan's SITREP, August 13, 2015; "An Interesting Twist II: A Failed Coup," Fulan's SITREP, August 17, 2015

## Governing The Caliphate: the Islamic State Picture

By Laith Alkhouri and Alex Kassirer

MORE THAN A year after declaring the Caliphate the Islamic State has control over large swaths of territory in Syria, Iraq, and Libya, where millions of people live under its ironclad rule. As the group has dominated headlines around the world with scenes of its unmatched brutality and military exploits, it has acquired a reputation as a bloodthirsty gang surviving and thriving off of its savagery alone. While the Islamic State's barbarity is undeniable, its life force stems from a side that, although less publicized, accounts for the majority of the group's activities: a system of governance entailing institutional services, judicial processes, infrastructure work, essential consumer products, recreational activities, and more. These activities are transforming the 12-year-old terrorist group into a de facto governing body.

This article builds a picture of Islamic State governance based on a review of thousands of the group's videos and communiqués, released by its so-called ministry of media via the group's official online channels. The propaganda's reliability as a reflection of reality is always under question, so it is important to consider the material in a critical manner. Residents of Syrian and Iraqi towns under Islamic State control have been quoted in several media reports speaking of deteriorating services, rising prices, and shortages of medicines.<sup>1</sup> Islamic State releases often paint a rosy picture, but are often the sole source of information as the group prohibits opposing views or narratives, and they provide a glimpse into the group's real attempts to govern and provide services, efforts which are likely to be more advanced in Islamic State strongholds such as Mosul and

Raqqa than other areas controlled by the group.

### Assessing the Islamic State's Claims

In assessing the Islamic State's claim to have set up a system of governance the key question is not whether services have improved or deteriorated, so much as the degree to which the Islamic State has been able to win acceptance by delivering them at tolerable levels to populations whose expectations have been dampened by years of violence and corruption. The fact that the Islamic State is delivering them at all, and in many areas has a monopoly of delivering them, buttresses its claims to have created a de facto state. It would be far-fetched to believe that all the hundreds of Syrians and Iraqis featured in its videos boasting of enforcement of security measures and provision of services are making such claims under duress.

Recent research, drawing on Islamic State documents not published by the group's media arms, has pointed to growing sophistication in the group's governance structures. For example, a research paper published earlier this month by Aymenn al-Tamimi found that Islamic State documents obtained privately from pro- and anti-Islamic State sources, pointed to a "bureaucratic system [with] a level of complexity and professionalism that probably makes the Islamic State sustainable, even under containment."<sup>2</sup>

### Statebuilding in the Caliphate

By capitalizing on the population's social and political insecurities, the Islamic State has transformed itself into a seemingly indispensable governing entity, providing goods and services, consequently making it more difficult to uproot. With significant funds from the banks and private properties it has

seized, the taxes it is collecting, and the oil it is selling, the Islamic State transformed the way jihadi terrorist groups operate, setting its sights higher than just overthrowing local governments, instead becoming one of them.

The Islamic State's provision of services not only reinforced the group's territorial expansion in the Middle East, it also facilitated the group's recruitment of Westerners, thousands of whom have flocked to join its ranks. The appeal to join is founded in more than just the romanticized rise of an Islamic fighting force. The true attraction lies in the idea of a novel Islamic society, offering a sense of belonging and "citizenship." This has been explicitly communicated by the Islamic State's many foreign fighters. André Poulin, a Canadian national better known as "Abu Muslim al-Canadi," expressed this notion in a September 2014 Islamic State video release:

You know, there's a role for everybody. Every person can contribute something to the Islamic State...If you cannot fight, then you give money, if you cannot give money then you can assist in technology, and if you can't assist in technology you can use some other skills.<sup>3</sup>

One of the driving forces behind the Islamic State's success and mass appeal has been its ability to provide basic services at a tolerable level. The Islamic State has done this by merging preexisting structures and institutions with newly imported skills and talents. It has restructured local markets by permitting locals and foreign recruits with relevant skill sets to renovate and manage important elements of the service and medical industry. Rather than launch an overhaul, the Islamic State has grafted itself onto pre-existing structures, by compelling employees to stay in their jobs. Hospitals have kept many of their doctors and nurses and utility providers have kept many

<sup>2</sup> According to al-Tamimi, "the sheer range of documents that has emerged over the past year covers a broad range of domains, including regulations on fishing, tax forms for electricity services, licenses for excavations of antiquities, phone subscriptions, fees for sanitation services, agricultural crop plants, unified Friday sermons, vaccination programs, and fixing rent rates for property." See Aymenn Al-Tamimi, "The Evolution in Islamic State Administration: The Documentary Evidence," *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 9:4, July 9, 2015.

<sup>1</sup> Liz Sly, "The Islamic State is Failing at Being a State," *Washington Post*, December 25, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> The Islamic State, "Al-Hayat Media Presents: Al-Ghuraba The Chosen Few of Different Lands: Abu Muslim from Canada," distributed via archive.org, July 12, 2014, p. 4.

of their engineers. In Iraq, as others have noted, the Islamic State's ability to keep employees in their jobs has been assisted considerably by the fact that the government in Baghdad has continued to pay the salaries of public employees in areas controlled by the Islamic State.<sup>4</sup>

Simultaneously the Islamic State has helped build up new businesses, such as grocery stores, encouraged locals to reopen factories<sup>5</sup> and purportedly even instituted banking services.<sup>6</sup> The Islamic State's status as a governing entity has also been bolstered by their monitoring of public behavior and daily routines because this provides a constant reminder to the local population that the Islamic State has a monopoly of power.

The Islamic State's large fighting force, expansive territory, and implementation of Sharia has legitimized its declaration of statehood among the global jihadi community. In Syria and Iraq the group's provision of medical, social, policing, and rescue services has appealed to locals and driven recruitment, bridging the gap between hardliners and those on the brink of succumbing to the Islamic State's ideology.

With the Islamic State cementing its position in Sirte, Libya, this model of state-building is now being implemented beyond the borders of Iraq and Syria.<sup>7</sup>

The Islamic State provides services to the populace from local law enforcement to market places. Each division, or department, has an office in every "province," which is a reference to the group's operational territories and strongholds. All provinces, which are governed by Caliph-appointed rulers,

are broken into districts, and districts into cities and villages. Its Zakat Department, for instance, which is responsible for collecting a mandatory fee (or tax), runs offices across Iraq and Syria, where locals are shown in Islamic State propaganda receiving money, food products, and clothing.<sup>8</sup> Thousands of families who lack viable sources of income rely on these handouts.

The fortunes of the local populations have in many areas become intertwined with the Islamic State. The chaotic situation in the region and the lack of alternatives mean that the Islamic State

### **“The fortunes of the local populations have in many areas become intertwined with the Islamic State.”**

is the only provider of vital services in many areas. The group has asphalted roads, filled grain silos, renovated bridges, built traffic circles, and offered medical services (with the exception of sophisticated surgeries).<sup>9</sup> These projects have primarily been documented in Islamic State releases. And some unofficial reports have filtered out from those living under the group's control, most notably via personal social media accounts.<sup>10</sup>

The hospitals it captured in Raqqa and Deir al-Zour have purportedly been cleaned and renovated. They look like they are staffed by medical teams on a 24/7 basis and have functioning equipment.<sup>11</sup> Again, it should be stressed

these services are featured in the Islamic State's official media releases, and verifying the information is difficult. Additionally, it is impossible to be sure if the Islamic State provides the same services to each and every town and district it rules. The likelihood is that it does not, focusing largely on its two main strongholds, Mosul and Raqqa.

This article next discusses a number of the Islamic State's advertised governance and services through the lens of its own propaganda, including its court system, law enforcement, financial and food aid, water and electricity, and education.

#### *Sharia Justice*

By basing its legislation on radical interpretations of Sharia law, the Islamic State is able to instill fear as a means of garnering obedience. Despite its brutality, the Islamic State's legal system claims to be succeeding in punishing thieves, murderers, rapists, extortionists, and corrupt officials.<sup>12</sup> The group's Sharia Council establishes and runs courts where individuals face charges and, if convicted, are sentenced to severe punishments. Many stories from Islamic State territory in Syria detail such verdicts.<sup>13</sup> Thieves lose their hands and murderers are publicly executed, while extortionists often lose a hand and a foot. All this makes locals nervous about conducting business in

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drive.google.com, June 02, 2015; The Islamic State, "Health services in the Islamic State," distributed via Archive.org, April 24, 2015; The Islamic State, The Media Office in Raqqa, "Video Featuring Maternity Hospital," distributed via Alplatformmedia.com, January 1, 2015; The Islamic State, The Media Office in Kirkuk, "Images of 'Aaasha Mother of the Faithful' Maternity Hospital," distributed via Twitter, November 11, 2014.

<sup>12</sup> The Islamic State, The Media Office in Saladin, "The Application of God's Rule to Cut Off the Hand of a Thief," distributed via Shamikh.info, May 4, 2015.

<sup>13</sup> The Islamic State, The Media Office in Falluja, "Images of the Execution of Homosexuals," distributed via Shamikh.info, July 1, 2015; The Islamic State, The Media Office in Nineveh, "Images Featuring the Punishment of Thieves," distributed via isdarat.org, February 11, 2015; The Islamic State, The Media Office in Nineveh, "Images Featuring Execution of Alleged Murderers," distributed via justpaste.it, April 30, 2015; The Islamic State, The Media Office in Homs, "Images Featuring Execution of Spies by Machine Gun," distributed via nasher.me, March 19, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Al-Tamimi

<sup>5</sup> The Islamic State, "The Media Office in Falluja Province: Construction of Shops," distributed via Shamikh.info, July 6, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> The Islamic State, "A Year of Conquest," Accessed via justpaste.it, June 12, 2015.

<sup>7</sup> The Islamic State. Media Office in Tripoli Presents Images of Islamic State Guards on Duty in Sirte. distributed via shamikh.info, April 29, 2015; Aaron Zelin, "The Islamic State's Burgeoning Capital in Sirte, Libya," *Policy Watch* 2462, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, August 6, 2015.

<sup>8</sup> The Islamic State, The Media Office in Nineveh, "The Distribution of Zakat," distributed via Nasher.me, February 21, 2015; The Islamic State, The Media Office in Euphrates, "The Distribution of Zakat," distributed via Nasher.me, February 17, 2015.

<sup>9</sup> The Islamic State, The Media Office in Aleppo, "Part of the Wheat Harvest," distributed via Shamikh.info, May 26, 2015.

<sup>10</sup> The Islamic State, The Media Office in Nineveh, "Images of Mosul City," Accessed via Twitter, August 10, 2015.

<sup>11</sup> The Islamic State, The Media Office in Aleppo, "Video Featuring Elderly Turkestani Fighter," Accessed via

Islamic State territory in any ways that might upset the group's officials.

Fulfilling its role as governing body, the group enforces traffic laws, runs correctional facilities, and empowers its al-Hesbah Police Force (also known as the morality police) to detain individuals who commit various offenses.<sup>14</sup> The Sharia Court is essentially the final word in law enforcement. Each town and district under the Islamic State's control has its own black-painted court building, where people can file charges, even, allegedly, against Islamic State officials themselves.

#### *Al-Hesbah Police*

Al-Hesbah's motto, "enjoining the good and forbidding the evil," is a standard that is determined according to Sharia law.<sup>15</sup> Hesbah is derived from the Arabic verb "*hasaba*," which means "calculated." As a noun, *hesbah* means "accountability," one of the Caliph's main duties—to command the good deeds and forbid the malicious ones, subsequently punishing wrongdoers. Essentially, it is an executive doctrine that provides al-Hesbah with significant power, even over senior commanders or emirs. The Islamic State was reported to have executed a number of its commanders who abused their positions. In November 2014, for instance, the group beheaded and crucified a commander who engaged in extortion, demanding fines from individuals he accused of apostasy.<sup>16</sup>

As its guiding principles are derived from ultraorthodox Sharia laws, many actions that are acceptable in the West are prohibited under the group's rule, including smoking cigarettes, drinking alcohol, having premarital sex, and public indecency—which could lead to a man's public flogging if his wife

is not covered with the full niqab.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, adulterers are sentenced to death by stoning and homosexuals are thrown from the roofs of buildings as punishment.<sup>18</sup> Many of the Islamic State's verdicts are so grisly, they serve as deterrents against potential rebellions and criminals alike. In one incident, the group sentenced two people to death by crushing their skulls with a brick because they allegedly killed a relative in the same manner.<sup>19</sup>

The group's videos have featured interviews with locals who apparently rejoice in being able to leave their businesses unlocked and sleep with

### **“Many of the Islamic State’s verdicts are so grisly, they serve as deterrents against potential rebellions and criminals alike.”**

their doors open. This is presumably an attempt to boost recruitment by highlighting claimed security improvements.

#### *The Rundown on Zakat*

Zakat is a primary pillar of Islam. Under Sharia law, it obligates financially capable Muslims to pay a sum of their money and assets to the Caliph's treasury; a centuries-old practice revived by the Islamic State. Business owners are the primary subjects in the collection process; shop-owners, jewelers, shepherds, landlords, and others must pay. The Islamic State

claims it in turn provides money, food, and clothing to the impoverished.<sup>20</sup>

By providing children and their families with the much-needed aid, the group is able to present itself as a hero of sorts, and potentially even recruit the recipients. Media reports primarily highlight attacks carried out by the group's foreign fighters in Syria, creating the impression that foreigners are the group's keystone. The reality, however, is that Syrian and Iraqi youth play a critical role in the Islamic State's advancement. In Syria, for example, local youth conduct suicide attacks against Kurdish forces, regime soldiers, and rival rebel groups. On July 6, for instance, the group claimed credit for a suicide attack near Ras al'Ayn, purportedly killing more than 50 Kurdish fighters, launched by a child identified as "Abu Khattab al-Ansari," who was allegedly 14 years old.<sup>21</sup> Although some youth have likely joined the group's ranks willingly, many of them were left with no alternative, joining due to their dependence on Islamic State-provided aid, which motivates families to place their children in the Islamic State's custody. The Islamic State purportedly provides salaries to many of its fighters, an attractive proposition for impoverished youngsters in Syria and Iraq alike.

#### *Health and Food Safety*

One of al-Hesbah's duties is guaranteeing that food products are safe for consumption, essentially assuming the role of a health and safety department. Its inspectors regularly check businesses such as butchers and groceries, and evaluate the products' safety, from checking expiration dates to testing items.<sup>22</sup> Al-Hesbah also cracks down on business owners who manipulate prices, especially those who cheat the scale when selling fruits

14 The Islamic State, The Media Office in Nineveh, "A Message from Who Excused to Those Not Excused," distributed via archive.org, March 08, 2015.

15 The Islamic State, The Media Office in Nineveh, "Images of Islamic State Police," distributed via Alplatform-media.com, September 18, 2014.

16 The Islamic State, "[The Islamic State] executed a Commander on Charges of Embezzling Funds from the Financial House of the Islamic State," distributed via thenewkhalij.com, November 16, 2014.

17 The Islamic State, The Media Office in Barqa Province, "Images of Flogging," distributed via manbar.me, February 12, 2015.

18 The Islamic State, The Media Office in Falluja, "Images of Execution of Homosexuals," distributed via Shamikh.info, July 01, 2015.

19 The Islamic State, The Media Office in Nineveh, "Images Featuring Execution of Murderers," distributed via justpaste.it, April 30, 2015.

20 The Islamic State, The Media Office in Anbar, "Images of the Office of Zakat," distributed via ebadalrh-man.net, April 06, 2015.

21 The Islamic State, The Media Office in Raqqa, "Images and Statement of Suicide Attack Using Child Soldier," distributed via Twitter, July 06, 2015.

22 The Islamic State, The Media Office in Aleppo, "Images Featuring Spoiling of Non-Halal Chicken," distributed via Mdown.me, April 01, 2015.

and vegetables.<sup>23</sup> Al-Hesbah is also responsible for butchers where cattle are slaughtered for consumption. The cattle must be slaughtered in accordance with strict religious standards; otherwise, it is considered *haram* (forbidden) to eat. The meat received from Islamic State factories is guaranteed, and stamped with its name and price regulated.<sup>24</sup>

The Islamic State claims it has also begun offering polio vaccines, among others, to children at hospitals and makeshift, or external, clinics.<sup>25</sup> The apparent delivery of such services and their marketing bolster the standing of the Islamic State at the local level, offering services that would otherwise be neglected but are nonetheless vital to the population's well-being.

#### *Education Department*

Demonstrating its apparently comprehensive approach to social services, the Islamic State media releases show it reopening classrooms, hiring teachers, and establishing a department for education affairs. The group offers classes in Sharia studies, Arabic literature, history, geography, math, chemistry, physics, biology, and physical education, in addition to professional and technical schools that offer classes in business, industrial studies, and agriculture.<sup>26</sup> It also appears to run nursing and business administration schools.<sup>27</sup>

The Islamic State recently launched a hiring campaign in its Iraqi stronghold Mosul requiring teachers to be qualified in the subject matter and pass the group's mandatory examination, which

is partly religious.<sup>28</sup> As most teachers under its rule are not loyal adherents to its ideology, let alone learned in religious jurisprudence, the Islamic State offers teachers, as well as other professionals, religious courses prior to reinstating them.

#### *Water and Electricity*

Capitalizing on the need for water and electricity, which are now considered luxuries in some Syrian areas, the Islamic State has taken control of these utilities in its territory.<sup>29</sup> The picture that emerges in Islamic State media releases is of the group managing distribution to locals who cannot afford to lose access. As electrical generators and water supplies have been degraded during the ongoing conflict—often because of strikes by Assad regime barrel bombs—the Islamic State claims that construction teams have repaired critical infrastructure that locals now depend on.<sup>30</sup> These claims are difficult to assess. While there have been reports of improved electricity supply in some areas controlled by the Islamic State, there are significant question marks about its sustainability. These concerns also apply to water supply improvements, particularly given depleted water levels in Lake Assad in northern Syria.<sup>31</sup>

#### *Transportation*

In some areas, the Islamic State offers free bus transportation. In al Zab area between Mosul and Erbil, for instance, there is allegedly a free Islamic State-run bus service for locals, who travel between the group's strongholds in the same province.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, in Raqqa Province, the Islamic State's main Syrian stronghold, modern buses have

been apparently provided for locals travelling in the area between Tal Abyad and Tabqa. The group's supply routes between Deir al-Zour and Homs are now open for locals, who can, for the first time since the Islamic State captured territory in Syria, travel by bus between two different provinces.<sup>33</sup>

#### **Conclusion**

The Islamic State has provided a semblance of governance over large swaths of territory and millions of people, while facing sustained aerial campaigns. This has bolstered the confidence of its fighters and administrators, further feeding its growth.

The Islamic State's provisions of services are imperfect, but they help many Syrians and Iraqis survive amid the conflicts, and thus ultimately bolster the Islamic State's recruitment. This has been one of the primary drivers behind the group's growth and global following, despite its savagery. In their desperation for sustenance and struggle for survival, much of the population in areas controlled by the Islamic State accepts its largesse even as its agents publicly mutilate, flog, and execute people. Ultimately, the Islamic State's survival as a governing body depends on its continued efforts to provide locals with tolerable levels of security, shelter, and comestibles.

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<sup>23</sup> The Islamic State, The Media Office in Raqqa, "Video Featuring Office of Monitoring and Investigation," distributed via archive.org, April 02, 2015.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid

<sup>25</sup> The Islamic State, The Media Office in Al-Khair, "Images of Vaccination Campaign," distributed via dawaalhaq.com, May 23, 2015.

The Islamic State, The Media Office in Damascus, "Images of Vaccination Campaign," distributed via nasher.me, February 22, 2015.

<sup>26</sup> The Islamic State, Forum Posting Featuring Image of Islamic State Textbook," distributed via fidaa.info, July 15, 2015.

<sup>27</sup> Raqqa-SI. "ISIS Nurses Told They Must Speak ENGLISH Under Rules Stricter than NHS," September 4, 2015.

<sup>28</sup> The Islamic State, The Media Office in Raqqa, "Images of Teacher Qualification Exam," distributed via Shamikh.info, August 09, 2015.

<sup>29</sup> The Islamic State, The Media Office in Al-Khair, "Images of Power and Electric Plant," distributed via Shamikh.info, May 28, 2015.

<sup>30</sup> The Islamic State, The Media Office in Al-Khair, "Images of Water Infrastructure Repairs," distributed via Shamikh.info, August 03, 2015.

<sup>31</sup> For more see Danya Chudacoff, "'Water War' Threatens Syria Lifeline," al-Jazeera, July 7, 2014.

<sup>32</sup> The Islamic State, The Media Office in Dijlah, "Image of Public Transportation," distributed via Shabakataljahad, July 20, 2015.

<sup>33</sup> Travelers from outside Islamic State territory who want to visit end up at one of the group's garages, where they are questioned about their visit. Once they pass, they know that the only authorities they will face are Islamic State officials.

## Al-Muhajiroun's European Recruiting Pipeline

By Raffaello Pantucci

ON AUGUST 5, 2015 Anjem Choudary and Mizanur Rahman appeared in court to be charged and detained without bail. Initially arrested September 24, 2014, the men had been free on bail as investigators dug into their histories.<sup>1</sup> When the decision to formally arrest and charge was made, the Crown Prosecution Service charged the men with inviting "support for a proscribed terrorist organization, namely ISIL, also known as ISIS or the Islamic State, contrary to section 12 Terrorism Act 2000."<sup>2</sup> The specific charges seemed to crystallize a reality that was increasingly observable across Europe that the various groups associated with the al-Muhajiroun (ALM) constellation of organizations were at the heart of current European recruitment networks sending radicals to fight in Syria and Iraq.

A long-standing feature of Europe's extremist landscape, the al-Muhajiroun family of organizations is one that has been linked to a variety of terrorist organizations. One survey of plots linked to the group in the UK concluded that of 51 incidents and plots emanating from the UK from the late 1990s until 2013, 23 were linked to the group.<sup>3</sup> Britain's first known suicide bomber in Syria, Abdul Waheed Majid, had been a feature at group events since the 1990s.<sup>4</sup> A similar French organization Forsane Alizza was disbanded after Mohammed Merah's murderous rampage in 2012, while one of their associates Oumar Diaby ended up heading a French brigade in Syria.<sup>5</sup> The group's tentacles and links reach across the continent

and are increasingly showing up at the sharper end of the terrorist threat that Europe is facing.

### Al-Muhajiroun's European History

Al-Muhajiroun (the emigrants) was born in Europe in February 1996 when Omar Bakri Mohammed Fostok (hereon Omar Bakri) was ejected from the organization Hizb ut Tahrir (HuT) in the UK. A long-term HuT activist, Omar Bakri arrived in the United Kingdom in 1984 having fled Saudi Arabia where his activities as an Islamist activist clashed with the state. In the UK he sought political asylum and soon rose to public prominence through his willingness to make provocative statements at any opportunity to any available media outlet.<sup>6</sup> The birth of ALM in 1996 was likely the product of this style of leadership and media management clashing with the traditionally low-key and secretive HuT. The founding of ALM unleashed Omar Bakri, with the group ramping up its provocative actions and organizing an International Islamic Conference on September 8, 1996 to which Osama bin Laden, Abdullah Azzam, and many other jihadi leaders were purportedly invited. The event was cancelled at the last minute, though the publicity it generated in terms of media coverage and a documentary about Omar Bakri entitled "Tottenham Ayatollah" likely served the organization's initial intent to attract attention.<sup>7</sup>

Present in the background of the documentary is Anjem Choudary, at the time a lawyer who was working as Omar Bakri's assistant. Over time, his role evolved and in the wake of the London bombings of 2005, when Omar Bakri chose to flee the country,<sup>8</sup> Choudary took over as UK leader for the group. A few months prior to Omar Bakri's

departure, the group announced its dissolution in an attempt to get ahead of security services, with a series of sub-groups emerging largely reflecting the same ideology as ALM with Choudary effectively at the helm. In the wake of the attacks, British authorities focused on the group, adding the sub-groups to the proscribed terror list at various points and seeking greater powers to restrict their ability to operate. The group, however, has continued to operate with the leadership remaining fairly constant. This became most prominently visible in around 2009 when the group adopted the name Islam4Uk, which was proscribed a year or so later.

This style of nomenclature was soon seen replicated across Europe with Shariah4Belgium, Shariah4Holland, Shariah4Denmark, Shariah4Italy, Shariah4Finland, and even briefly Shariah4Poland. In France a group called Forsane Alizza (Knights of Pride) emerged as the local clone of the group (sometimes using Shariah4France) and in Germany Millatu Ibrahim (the religious community of Ibrahim, a name drawing on the title of a book by Muhammad al Maqdisi) took on the mantle. Millatu Ibrahim is a name that has since appeared in Norway, Holland, and Denmark as well). In Scandinavia, Profetens Ummah (the Umma of the Prophet) represents the ideology in Norway and Kadet til Islam (Call to Islam) is the lead group in Denmark.

All of these groups adopted a narrative and approach clearly modeled on ALM, and in many cases this was allegedly the product of direct contact and training by Choudary. For example, in March 2013, he visited Helsinki, Finland where he spoke alongside Awat Hamasalih, a British national of Kurdish origin from Birmingham, at an event organized by Shariah4Finland to celebrate the tenth anniversary of local Iraqi radical leader Mullah Krekar's incarceration.<sup>9</sup> Choudary reciprocated this generous

1 In March 2014, Choudary and other ALM activists had been identified in a set of protests in London clearly inspired by the Islamic State. Dipesh Gadhur, "Preacher Anjem Choudary investigated over 'road show' linked to jihadists," *Sunday Times*, March 9, 2014.

2 Statement by Metropolitan Police, August 5, 2015.

3 Dominic Kennedy, "Radical al-Muhajiroun group is behind most UK terror plots," *Times*, March 21, 2015.

4 Morten Storm, Paul Cruickshank and Tim Lister, *Agent Storm: A Spy Inside al-Qaeda*, (London: Penguin, March 2015), p. 334.

5 Olivier Tocser, "Les Secrets d'un Emir," *Le Nouvel Observateur*, March 20, 2014.

6 Memorably on November 12, 1991 he told *The Mail on Sunday*: "John Major [then Prime Minister] is a legitimate target. If anyone gets the opportunity to assassinate him, I don't think they should save it. It is our Islamic duty and we will celebrate his death."

7 The documentary is available online, and was recounted in a chapter in Jon Ronson, *Them* (London: Picador, 2001). Ronson was also the director of the documentary.

8 "Cleric Bakri 'will return' to UK," BBC News, August 9, 2005.

9 Mullah Krekar, the founder of the Ansar al Islam movement that was involved in fighting in Iraq, is an infamous radical preacher with whom Choudary has developed a link. Laura Helminen, "Radical Muslim Preacher Spoke in Helsinki," *Helsingin Sanomat*, March 13, March 28, 2013.

hosting, inviting Hamasalih to speak when he was back in the UK.<sup>10</sup>

This example of travel is representative of Choudary's contacts with affiliate groups, and there are reports that he and other key ALM members travelled around Europe to support their events.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, there are reports that key individuals from regional affiliates have come to London. And there are multiple reports of Choudary (and Omar Bakri) preaching to supporters in Europe over PalTalk using web cameras and interactive online messaging.<sup>12</sup> Both Choudary and Mizanur Rahman have also communicated extensively with supporters over Twitter.<sup>13</sup>

In terms of how Choudary sees his role with these groups, some clarity is provided in his supportive comments towards his Norwegian clone Profetens Ummah:

I have regular contact with Hussain and Ibraheem (two group leaders). There are no administrative links between us, but I am a mentor and adviser for them. There are many people who claim they represent Islam, but I see the Prophet's *Umma*

as one of the few voices in Europe that speak the truth about Islam without compromise.<sup>14</sup>

Choudary helped Profetens publish videos and develop a style to preach and call people to their radical brand of Islam.<sup>15</sup>

In other contexts people reached out to Choudary having heard about him in the press. Anas el-Abboubi was a young man born in Morocco who moved

**“There increasingly appears to be a consensus across European security agencies that Choudary’s group plays a role in networks that provide new recruits to fight in Syria and Iraq.”**

to Italy when he was young. An up-and-coming rapper, he was featured on MTV Italia as one to watch under his rap nom-de-music MC Khalif. This lifestyle, however, seemed unappealing to him and instead he was drawn to violent Islamist ideas and began an online conversation with Choudary over social media in which he asked for his advice about how he could advance radical ideas in Italy. El-Abboubi also participated in PalTalk sessions led by the group's creator Omar Bakri and he bought plane tickets to visit the Shariah4Belgium group who he had also connected with online.

Soon after this, el-Abboubi established Shariah4Italy, a short-lived organization that seemed to flourish and shrink with its founder.<sup>16</sup> By

October 2013 he fled Italy to join the Islamic State along a route that took him through Albania. The degree of influence that Choudary had over his decision-making process is unclear from the public domain, but it is clear that he and ALM had some influence over the young man, something exemplified by his establishing of Shariah4Italy despite a background in Italy that was largely detached from extremist ideologies and groups.

#### The Current Picture

There increasingly appears to be a consensus across European security agencies that Choudary's group plays a role in networks that provide new recruits to fight in Syria and Iraq. In both the 2013 and 2014 TE-SAT Terrorism Situation and Trends report issued by Europol, the agency depicted “al-Muhajiroun and its latest incarnation the Sharia4 movement” as being a driver for people to go and fight in Syria and Iraq.<sup>17</sup> Watching a pan-European trend, Europol observed:

some salafist individuals and groups in the EU, such as the Sharia4 movement, seem to have heeded the advice of prominent jihadist ideologues to stop their controversial public appearances in Europe...instead, they have been encouraged to participate in what these ideologues describe as a ‘jihad’ against un-Islamic rule in Muslim countries.<sup>18</sup>

There is further evidence of Omar Bakri playing an active role in helping people go fight in Syria. This is evident in the case of Shariah4Belgium,<sup>19</sup> a clone established in 2010 after Fouad Belkacem, a Moroccan-Belgian who had served some time in prison for theft and fraud, came to the UK to learn about how “to start something in Belgium.” Drawn to the bright light of Choudary's celebrity, Belkacem

10 In January 2015, authorities in Finland sought to eject Hamasalih. According to coverage around this time, Hamasalih, in contrast to most Kurds, was not seeking nationhood with his activity, but instead “his goal [was] jihad, an Islamic caliphate, and sharia, the law of Islam” as the local newspaper said. Anu Nousiainen: “Finland Expelled Radical Extremist From Turku to UK - ‘Serious Threat to Public Security,’” *Helsingin Sanomat*, January 15, 2015.

11 See Ben Taub, “Journey to Jihad,” *New Yorker*, June 1, 2015.

12 Shortly prior to their arrest, Rahman and Choudary (alongside others), made a PalTalk video in which they answered questions from an American audience. Similar videos have been made for European audiences.

13 There has been no comprehensive mapping of ALM's online links and contacts, but almost all of the prominent members (in Syria and Iraq or back in Europe) have accounts and numerous others who aspire to be involved in these groups' proselytization create accounts that are very similar. The best sense of outreach and effectiveness of this online contact is suggested in the fact that Choudary has 32.9K followers on Twitter, while Rahman has 29K. Of course, number of followers does not equate to contact and influence, but both are very active online and respond to people's questions and contacts.

14 Andreas Bakke Foss, “British Extremist Calls Himself a Mentor for Norwegian Islamists,” *Aftenposten*, March 3, 2013.

15 Ibid.

16 Lorenzo Vidino, *Home-Grown Jihadism in Italy: Birth, Development and Radicalization Dynamics*, (Milan:

Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale, 2015), pp. 63-67.

17 European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2014, (The Hague: Europol, 2014), p. 21.

18 Ibid, p.23.

19 Paul Cruickshank, “A View from the CT Foxhole: Interview with Alain Grignard,” *CTC Sentinel*, 8:8 (August, 2015).

listened as the established Briton “went through the history of ALM, how we set it up.”<sup>20</sup> The Belgian took the lessons to heart and returned to establish a similarly confrontational organization back home. Choudary and others were occasional visitors and both Choudary and ALM “godfather” Omar Bakri would provide online classes for the group in Belgium.<sup>21</sup>

In 2011, one of Shariah4Belgium’s core members left Belgium to seek out their mentor Omar Bakri in Lebanon. Now formally excluded from the United Kingdom by the Home Secretary, Omar Bakri continued to draw journalists and radicals from across the world. Nabil Kasmi was one of these young men, arriving in Lebanon as the conflict in Syria was catching fire. He returned to Belgium a few months later, but then in March 2012 headed off to the Levant again, this time going through Lebanon to Syria.<sup>22</sup>

At around the same time, another group associated with Shariah4Belgium were intercepted traveling to Yemen on suspicion of trying to join a terrorist group. Nabil Kasmi’s success, however, highlighted the options offered by the conflict in Syria.<sup>23</sup> In August he returned to Europe, only to leave again on August 20, this time followed days later by a cluster of some five members from the group who all ended up fighting with the Islamic State in Syria.<sup>24</sup> Over time, more and more of the group went to Syria, drawing on their Belgian and other European contacts from the broad ALM family of organizations. The exact numbers are unclear, but it is believed that at least 50 Belgian fighters in Syria and Iraq have roots in Shariah4Belgium.<sup>25</sup>

One of the few who failed to travel to Syria or Iraq was Fouad Belkacem, who was instead jailed in February 2015 for 12 years for recruiting and radicalizing people to go fight in Syria and Iraq.<sup>26</sup>

On trial with another 47 people (the majority of which failed to appear in court as they were believed to be fighting or dead in the Levant), Belkacem’s trial seemed to be the capstone in the story of ALM’s European links to the battlefield in Syria and Iraq.

## “It is believed that at least 50 Belgian fighters in Syria and Iraq have roots in Shariah4Belgium.”

### European Plotting?

What is not yet completely clear is the degree to which these networks are ones that are producing terrorist plots back in Europe. There are growing numbers of plots being disrupted in Europe with links to the battlefield in Syria and Iraq, though it remains uncertain whether these are being directed by the Islamic State or other groups from their safe haven in Syria and Iraq. Some plots, like that in Verviers, Belgium and at least one of those in the UK, are reported by authorities to show clear evidence of connections to the battlefield, but the nature of these links remains somewhat opaque.<sup>27</sup>

Looking to the ALM-associated networks across Europe, it remains unclear the degree to which they have thus far been credibly associated with attack planning. Reports around the January raid in Verviers, suggested some possible linkages (especially given the timing near Fouad Belkacem’s trial), but they have yet to be confirmed publicly.<sup>28</sup>

What has been seen, however, is the emergence of lone actor-style terrorism on the periphery of the group’s networks. A case in point is that of

Brusthom Ziamani in the UK. Ziamani was a troubled teenager who sought out Anjem Choudary and his friends as a surrogate family. Having tried to ingratiate himself with the group and even considering travel to Syria, Ziamani instead decided to emulate his heroes Michael Adebolajo and Michael Adebowale and their murder of British soldier Lee Rigby in 2013. Taking a knife, axe, and Islamist flag, Ziamani was planning on butchering a member of the security forces before police intercepted him.<sup>29</sup> He was convicted of attempted murder and plotting to commit a terrorist act, and sentenced to 27 years incarceration.<sup>30</sup> There is no clear evidence that Ziamani told Choudary what he was going to do, but Ziamani’s case has been championed by ALM-associated Twitter accounts in the UK.<sup>31</sup>

In contrast, on the battlefield, individuals associated with ALM-related organizations appear in a number of both prominent and less high-profile roles. Reflecting their preference for noisy self-promotion and in-your-face *dawa* (proselytization), many are active on social media. One particularly prominent figure in this regard was Rahin Aziz, who fled to Syria after being sought in conjunction with an assault on a football fan in the UK. In Syria he quickly aligned himself with the Islamic State, and started to actively post across social media platforms. Among images to emerge were ones of him posing with weapons with Denis Cuspert, a prominent member of the German al-Mujahiroun linked group Millatu Ibrahim.<sup>32</sup>

For Aziz, the connection to ALM was instrumental in helping him build his

20 Taub.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

26 J. La. Avec Belga, “Sharia4Belgium qualifie de groupe

terroriste, 12 ans de prison pour Fouad Belkacem,” *La Libre*, February 11, 2015.

27 Paul Cruickshank, Steve Almasy, and Deborah Feyerick, “Source: Belgium terror cell has links to ISIS, some members still at large,” CNN, January 17, 2015.

28 “Aantal radicalen in Wallonie wordt onderschat,” *Het Laatste Nieuws*, January 16, 2015.

29 Tom Whitehead, “Brusthom Ziamani: the former Jehovah’s Witness who was radicalised within weeks,” *Telegraph*, February 19, 2015; Prosecution Opening Note, Regina vs. Brusthom Ziamani, Central Criminal Court, February 9, 2015.

30 Regina vs Brusthom Ziamani, Sentencing Remarks of HHJ Pontius, Central Criminal Court, March 20, 2015.

31 Tweet from @muslimprisoners, January 5, 2015 3:06pm

32 Also known as Deso Dogg or Abu Talha al-Almani, Cuspert was a prominent German former rap star turned jihadi and activist for German ALM equivalent

networks in Syria and Iraq, as well as highlighting how interconnected the community across Europe was. In a conversation over Twitter he reported:

when I came to sham the amount of brothers from other countries who recognized me and agreed n even said were by us....what we did with demos etc aided the jihad, global awareness etc which motivated many to go fight jihad.<sup>33</sup>

Prior to going to the Levant, he reported going to:

Belgium many times, delivered lectures and me met from Europe there....many 3-4 times....France twice....Holland where we took part in a conference about khilafah...I knew the brothers from Germany.... Their ameer abu usama al Ghareeb contacted me when he came out of prison....he asked me to do some videos for them....met Denmark

guys in Belgium even in UK they came to visit us.<sup>34</sup>

It was a network fostered in Europe maturing and re-networking on the battlefield in the Levant.

Others seem to have taken to the battlefield to undertake activities largely similar to those they were carrying out previously in the United Kingdom. For example, Siddhartha Dhar, a Hindu convert also known as Abu Rumaysah, was arrested alongside Anjem Choudary in September 2014. However, unlike his teacher, he took his passport and jumped on a bus to Paris with his pregnant wife and family, the first leg in a journey that ended with him living under the Islamic State a month later. In typical ALM style, Dhar decided to alert authorities to his presence through the posting of a photo of himself holding an AK-47 in one hand and his newborn baby in the other. Since then, Dhar has periodically re-emerged on Twitter and other social media, and in May 2015 became prominent once again when a book was published under his *kunya* (jihadi name) about life under the Islamic State.<sup>35</sup>

These are only a few of the men and women to have gone to join the Islamic State from the ALM networks. Exact numbers are difficult to know, but certainly from the UK alone, more than a dozen prominent individuals from these networks have gone over, while others have attempted to go. What remains worrying is that there continues to be a community of activists associated with these groups who are seeking to go fight in Syria and Iraq, and also that the pool of support in Europe remains fairly constant.

One illustration of this is that in the wake of the reports of Rahin Aziz's death in a U.S. strike, a sweet shop in East London issued candies celebrating his martyrdom and a vigil was held for him that appeared to show a few dozen people praying in his honor.<sup>36</sup> A few

days later, three men were arrested in the Luton area.<sup>37</sup> One was released while the other two (an uncle and nephew) were charged with plotting to carry out a terrorist attack in the UK intended to attack and kill military personnel.<sup>38</sup> Some reports suggested the plot was an attempted beheading of a U.S. serviceperson in revenge for Aziz's death.<sup>39</sup> Details are unclear, though the men were allegedly also attempting to go to the Islamic State, and the case is working its way through the courts and is likely to come to trial in 2016.<sup>40</sup>

### Conclusion

The arrest and charging of Anjem Choudary and his principal acolyte Mizanur Rahman is a significant moment in ALM's history. The group has developed from its early days when London was a center of jihadist thinking with ALM at its core, drawing in radicals from across Europe and around the world. Since the prominence ALM achieved in the late 2000s, it has now become a net exporter organization around Europe, still drawing people to London, but then also watching as they return home to establish affiliate networks and communities. This European generation of ALM supporters is increasingly proving to be at the heart of Europe's radical Islamist community connected with Islamic State and the conflict in Syria and Iraq. Given the volumes of plots that have emerged from these networks in the past in the United Kingdom in particular, it seems likely that similar problems are likely to emerge from the European ALM networks.

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Millatu Ibrahim. He was one of several Millatu Ibrahim figures to travel Syria. The Austrian founder of the group Mohammed Mahmoud was one of Cuspert's close contacts. Mahmmoud left home aged 17 in 2002 to train in an Ansar al-Islam camp in Iraq. After his return to Europe he played a major role in the Global Islamic Media Front (GIMF), a source for non-Arabic language translations of jihadi material. In 2007 he was arrested by authorities, leading to a four year jail sentence. On his release he moved to Berlin and founded Millatu Ibrahim, which rapidly became the center of Germany's Salafi scene. In 2012 he fled to Egypt before becoming a senior figure in the insurgency in Syria. He is now considered one of the most senior figures in the German and European foreign fighter contingent, helping produce the Islamic State propaganda magazine *Dabiq* and al-Hayat media center releases. He is believed to continue to draw on his ALM-linked European contacts to recruit. See "In Search of 'True' Islam: Salafists Abandon Germany for Egypt," *Der Spiegel*, August 13, 2002; Souad Mekhennet, "Austrian Returns, Unrepentant, to Online Jihad," *New York Times*, November 15, 2011; Petra Ramsauer, "Mohamed Mahmoud: A Holy Warrior's Book," *Profil*, August 17, 2015.

<sup>33</sup> Author archive: Twitter conversation between Secunder Kermani and Rahin Aziz.

<sup>34</sup> Author archive: Twitter conversation between Secunder Kermani and Rahin Aziz.

<sup>35</sup> "New Brit propaganda guide by Brit sells 'Costa' caliphate," Channel 4, May 19, 2015.

<sup>36</sup> Tweet with pictures by @TawheedNetwrk July 8,

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2015 4:41pm

<sup>37</sup> "Three in terror-related arrests in Luton and Letchworth," BBC News, July 14, 2015.

<sup>38</sup> "Man charged with US military terrorist plot," Sky News, July 21, 2015.

<sup>39</sup> Mike Sullivan, "Foiled: British terror attacks in days," *Sun*, July 14, 2015.

<sup>40</sup> "Man charged with US military terrorist plot," Sky News, July 21, 2015.

## Islamic State Affiliates Press Hamas

By Samar Batrawi

This article explores the apparent emergence of Islamic State-affiliated Salafi-jihadi groups in the Gaza Strip, which in the spring and summer of 2015 clashed with Hamas and claimed a number of rocket attacks on Israel.<sup>1</sup> While Salafi-jihadi groups<sup>2</sup> already had a fragmented presence in Gaza before the onset of the Arab Spring, this article draws on primary source material to outline how the emergence of the Islamic State seems to have catalyzed an increase in the activity of these factions.<sup>3</sup>

Salafi-jihadi factions in Gaza have gained international attention in the past months amid reports of clashes between them and Hamas, which has held power in Gaza since 2007. These clashes came to international attention in May 2015 when Hamas was targeted by Salafi-jihadis challenging its authority in the territory.<sup>4</sup> The clashes continued into the summer. In mid-July

a number of explosives were detonated near vehicles belonging to the military wings of Hamas and Islamic Jihad in Gaza.<sup>5</sup> Rumors placed the responsibility for this attack with Islamic State-linked militants, though official responsibility has yet to be claimed. The episode illustrated the growing degree to which the Hamas-dominated political establishment in Gaza had become contested by forces at the more radical fringe of the Islamist spectrum that are dissatisfied with its politics and ideology.

Frustration with Hamas, along with exasperation over the political deadlock in Gaza, also contributed to Salafi-jihadi groups launching rocket attacks into Israel. There were at least six rocket launches between June and the beginning of August, all targeting the southern city of Ashkelon, though there were no casualties.<sup>6</sup> Though the rocket attacks rarely claim lives, they are used to convey a message of resistance and endurance by the groups responsible for them—both against Israel and Hamas, because Palestinians in Gaza increasingly blame the political deadlock on Hamas's incompetent rule.

**What We Know About Salafi-jihadism in Gaza** Salafism and jihadism in Gaza is difficult to map because of a large degree of overlap between the semi-clandestine groups that claim that label. The task is made more difficult by the evolution of groups, which sometimes merge or dismantle to be replaced by allegedly new groups that are essentially merely a continuation of the old ones. There is no single Salafi-jihadi group that monopolizes the Gaza arena. Neither is there any significant reliable quantitative data regarding the number of active members or supporters of different groups.<sup>7</sup> Reports

by various factions are difficult to rely on, as Hamas seems to have a vested interest in downplaying the magnitude of this opposition.<sup>8</sup> Salafi-jihadis in turn seem to inflate the numbers to several thousands for obvious reasons.<sup>9</sup> In June 2015 an International Crisis Group analyst estimated that the ranks of Salafi-jihadis had grown from several hundreds to a few thousand in a few years—but this should be seen as a best guess based on an apparent increase in activity.<sup>10</sup>

It is also unclear to what degree Salafi-jihadi groups in Gaza have become more militarized. And they are far from united in their approach. For example, the Salafi-jihadi group Jaysh al-Umma released a statement shortly after the mid-July bombings in which it condemned intra-Palestinian violence and emphasized the need to unify jihadi factions for the sake of combating their “true enemy,” suggesting that even among Salafi-jihadis there is ambiguity as to how problems in Gaza should be approached.<sup>11</sup> What can be stated with more certainty, is that the rise of the Islamic State and the political turmoil caused by the Arab Spring has significantly boosted the confidence and appeal of the transnational Salafi-jihadi movement, which will undoubtedly have also affected the Gaza Strip.

This growing appeal builds on an already complex historical relationship between Salafism and Palestinian grievances, as well as a considerable presence of Palestinian refugees and factions in Syria before the onset of the Syrian crisis.<sup>12</sup> Today there is a

1 This article does not discuss Salafi-jihadism in the West Bank, as it is important to distinguish between Gaza and the West Bank. Salafism has thrived on and promoted socio-religious conservatism in Gaza, something that is more difficult to achieve under the internationally backed, Fatah-led Palestinian Authority, whose policy of strict control of not only the political and military arena but also social spaces of intellectual and religious expression make it more difficult for Salafi-jihadis to organize and mobilize

2 The Combating Terrorism Center generally uses the term “jihadi” rather than “Salafi-jihadi” to describe such groups. But the term “Salafi-jihadi” is used in this article by the author to help distinguish these groups from Hamas.

3 This article builds upon previous analysis of Salafi-jihadi activism in Gaza in the *CTC Sentinel*, including an article profiling groups active in 2010. See Benedetta Berti, “Salafi-Jihadi Activism in Gaza,” *CTC Sentinel*, 3: 5 (2010): pp. 5-9. For the selection of sources used in this article, the author wishes to acknowledge the courageous investigative journalism by Palestinians living in Gaza and reporting on Salafism such as Asmaa al-Ghoul, and the indispensable collection of primary data on Salafi-jihadism by researchers such as Aaron Y. Zelin and Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi.

4 Diaa Hadid and Majd al Waheidi, “ISIS Allies Target Hamas and Energize Gaza Extremists,” *New York Times*, July 1, 2015.

5 Jack Khoury, “ISIS Suspected in Car Bombing of Hamas, Islamic Jihad Men in Gaza,” *Ha'aretz*, July 19, 2015.

6 For a full list of rocket attacks, see the Israel Security Agency's monthly reports of attacks, which include all rocket attacks from Gaza. “Monthly Summary – June 2015,” Israel Security Agency, June, 2015; “Israel Strikes Gaza Targets after Rocket Fired at Ashkelon Area,” *Ha'aretz*, 16 July, 2015; “Two Rockets Fired from Gaza towards Israel,” *Ha'aretz*, August 2, 2015.

7 Analysts have emphasized that Islamic State-affili-

ated groups make up a very small proportion of the total population of Gaza, see Benedetta Berti, “Hamas' Islamic State Woes,” *Sada Journal*, May 28, 2015; John Reed, “Hamas Seeks to Stamp out ISIS in Gaza,” *Financial Times*, June 1, 2015.

8 “Hamas Says Islamic State has no Foothold in Gaza Strip,” Reuters, May 14, 2015.

9 “Al Qaida-Inspired Jihadi Movement Growing in Gaza, Says Group Leader,” *Ha'aretz*, March 10, 2014.

10 Hadid and al Waheidi.

11 Jaysh Al-Ummah, “About the Car Bombings that Targeted the Resistance Factions in Gaza,” *Jihadology*, June 20, 2015.

12 For an excellent background see Thomas Hegghammer and Joas Wagemakers, “The Palestine Effect: The Role of Palestinians in the Transnational Jihad Move-

strong Palestinian contingent among Islamic State fighters in Syria and Iraq. An estimated 120 foreign fighters have travelled there from Israel and Palestine.<sup>13</sup> This has created a salient connection between the Islamic State and their homelands, making the community they left behind more aware of the activities of the Islamic State and its promise of assistance to the Palestinian cause, and also enhancing the empathy for Palestinian grievances among the Islamic State and its affiliates.<sup>14</sup>

In June the Islamic State released a video featuring Palestinian fighters calling for the support of Palestinians, blaming their suffering on the enemies of Islam and urging them to wage jihad. They urged Palestinians back home to be patient, promising the Islamic State and Sharia law would be coming to Gaza shortly. The message specifically criticized the government of Hamas. It also included a reference to the Yarmouk refugee camp, which has become the main symbol for Palestinian suffering in Syria.<sup>15</sup>

In addition to such video messages, there appears to be more direct communication. One recruit to the Islamic State from Gaza has reportedly acted as a bridge between the Islamic State leadership and sympathizers in Gaza. The Islamic State has also reportedly sent money to sympathizers in Gaza to fund their travel to Syria.<sup>16</sup>

Recent social media releases attest to a growing Islamic State influence among Salafi-jihadis in Gaza. These include a video released by an Islamic State-linked group in Gaza-Sinai, a statement by the Islamic State about appropriate

attire for women in Gaza<sup>17</sup>, and pictures of supporters handing out copies of the Islamic State nasheed *Salil al-Sawarim* (*Clashing of the Swords*) in Gaza.<sup>18</sup>

Other indicators of Islamic State influence in Gaza include a pro-Islamic State rally in Gaza,<sup>19</sup> reported threats to Gaza-based journalists and academics by the Islamic State,<sup>20</sup> and a protest by Islamic State supporters near the French Cultural Center in Gaza after the Charlie Hedbo attacks.<sup>21</sup> However, these indicators tend to be linked to the movement in general rather than a specific Salafi-jihadi group, underlining the fragmented nature of the movement in Gaza.

### Growing Tensions

In the immediate aftermath of the Hamas takeover of Gaza in 2007, attacks by Salafi-jihadi groups were largely aimed at manifestations of Western culture in Gaza, such as internet cafes and hair salons. But recent attacks inside Gaza have been aimed more directly at undermining Hamas.

The charge of hypocrisy has damaged Hamas legitimacy in Gaza, and provided an opening to Salafi-jihadis. Hamas rose up against Fatah claiming it would represent the Palestinian people and fight against occupation, but now stands accused of the same corruption and restraint Hamas once decried in Fatah. Mounting frustration among Palestinians in Gaza with Israeli policies and military campaigns is perhaps where Salafi-jihadis have silently profited the most, as it has given them the opportunity to criticize, and to accuse anyone who stands in the way of their armed struggle of “protecting Israel.”<sup>22</sup> Salafi-jihadis have scored further points against Hamas through online campaigns showing

solidarity with Salafi prisoners held in confinement in Hamas jails.<sup>23</sup>

A key driver of the tension is fundamental ideological difference between Salafi-jihadis and the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated Hamas. As one observer recently put it, the Hamas and Muslim Brotherhood focus is:

*daawa* [calling people to Islam]. They spring from the center of society, which they wish to occupy. In order to achieve this, they must necessarily be moderate. Al-Qa`ida [and today's Islamic State] is the opposite. It wishes to distance itself from society—to create a counter-society—in order to attack it.<sup>24</sup>

For Hamas, participation in democratic elections can be a pathway, but for the Salafi-jihadis such votes are inherently blasphemous. Another distinction is that whereas Hamas is an Islamist group that fights for a Palestinian state within certain national boundaries, Salafi-jihadis reject these boundaries. Therefore even though Salafi-jihadis may empathize and identify with Palestinian grievances, they are uninterested in establishing a Palestinian national entity. With the apparent regional marginalization of the Muslim Brotherhood, the disillusionment of many of its previous members and supporters, and the growing current of Salafi-jihadism after 2011, the rising tensions between Hamas and Salafi-jihadis were inevitable.

Salafi-jihadis are aware of Hamas's precarious position as it finds itself caught between Israel, its competition with Fatah, and the recent isolation from Egypt. The importance of this last point cannot be overstated, as Hamas has not only lost political support from the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, but it now also faces the economic

ment,” *Die Welt Des Islams*, 53 (2013): pp. 281-314.

13 This number is from a report in January 2015 by Peter Neumann, “Foreign Fighter Total in Syria/Iraq not Exceeds 20,000; Surpasses Afghanistan Conflict in the 1980s,” International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation, January 26, 2015.

14 See this collection of pictures on the pro-Islamic State contingent in Gaza from 2014: Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, “Muhajireen Battalions in Syria (Part Three),” Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi's Blog, June 23, 2014.

15 Islamic State, “Message to Our People in Jerusalem,” Jihadology, June 30, 2015.

16 Hadid and al Waheidi.

17 “Ghazza: Da'ish Yad'u al-Nisa' Lil-Iltizam Bil-Hijab al-Shar'i,” Al-Masdar, November 30, 2014.

18 See <https://instagram.com/p/xrTCwaMAPO/>

19 See [https://instagram.com/p/yE8JA2sAG\\_/](https://instagram.com/p/yE8JA2sAG_/)

20 Adnan Abu Amer, “Tensions Renew Between Hamas, IS in Gaza,” Al-Monitor, April 15, 2015

21 See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eWS7t83rLRE>

22 “Al-Salafiyya Al-Jihadiyya Fi Ghazza Tatahim Hamas Bi-Tasfiyat A'da'iha Jasadiya Li-Himayat Isra'il,” El Watan, May 8, 2013.

23 See <https://www.facebook.com/asragazalffy?fref=photo>

24 Senior adviser to the head of the Israeli Security Agency quoted in “Radical Islam in Gaza,” International Crisis Group, March 29, 2011, p. 6.

repercussions<sup>25</sup> of the Egyptian government's new policy of isolation.<sup>26</sup>

Hamas has long been wary of Salafi-jihadi groups in Gaza and there are good grounds for its current anxiety. It has failed on various levels to carry out its promises. It is accused of becoming what it once so vehemently opposed in Fatah: an elitist and corrupt group that has largely abandoned an effective and active struggle against Israel. A significant source of its current troubles is that it alienated several Islamist factions and especially Salafi-jihadis when it participated in the elections in 2006.

The challenge of Salafi-jihadis comes not from the military threat they pose to Hamas, but their challenge to Hamas on the ideological and political level. Salafi-jihadis have offered both a diagnosis of the problem and a religious solution for it, creating substantial pressure for "more militancy and Islamisation."<sup>27</sup> All this means that tackling current Salafi-jihadi threats solely on a military level is a symptom-based and unsustainable approach to the problems Hamas faces in Gaza. What Salafi-jihadis are achieving is far more pertinent than most military campaigns would be.

Hamas is acutely aware of the challenge posed by Salafi-jihadis and this has resulted in a schizophrenic approach to other Islamist groups, tolerating the existence of Hizb ut Tahrir (allowing it, for example, to organize an event commemorating the 94th anniversary of the fall of the Islamic Caliphate earlier this year<sup>28</sup>) while actively fighting the presence of more militant groups such as the Salafi-jihadi Jund Ansar Allah<sup>29</sup>

<sup>25</sup> "Hamas Civil Servants go on Strike in Gaza," Ma'an News Agency, May 12, 2015.

<sup>26</sup> Most recently, Egypt announced its decision to evacuate 10,000 homes in the expansion of its Gaza buffer zone, see "Egypt to Evacuate 10,000 Homes in Gaza Buffer Zone Expansion," Ma'an News Agency June 6, 2015.

<sup>27</sup> "Radical Islam in Gaza," International Crisis Group, March 29, 2011, p. 5.

<sup>28</sup> "Hizb al-Tahrir fi Ghazza Yuhya al-Thikra 94 li-Ilgha' al-Khilafa," Al-Bawaba, May 17, 2015.

<sup>29</sup> Jund Ansar Allah was allegedly responsible for the very first Salafi-jihadi attack in Gaza in 2001 and was led by ex-Hamas militants (mostly low-level Qassam

(Soldiers of God's Supporters) after its leader declared Gaza an Islamic Emirate during a sermon in the Ibn Taymiyyah mosque in 2009.<sup>30</sup> This led to the eventual destruction of the mosque by Hamas, an event Salafi-jihadis still brood about and which was included in the Islamic State message to Palestinians in June as one of their main criticisms of Hamas' rule.<sup>31</sup>

Hamas has reserved its greatest ire for Salafi-jihadi groups that have openly criticized it for its participation in elections and its alleged restraint in taking the battle to Israel. But rather than a full authoritarian-style oppression of any form of expression of opposition, Hamas has silently allowed a certain degree of semi-clandestine mobilization against Israel by a number of groups, several of which are Salafi-jihadi. Hamas's rationale is that this shields it from multiple forms of criticism. Hamas's decision allows it to shift international blame for rocket attacks on Israel to these small groups. Hamas is also able to counter domestic critics who accuse it of entrenching itself as the dominant force in Gaza at the expense of the struggle against Israel.<sup>32</sup>

#### Jama'at Ansar

One group Hamas has shown little tolerance for is the Gaza-based Salafi-jihadi group Jama'at Ansar al-Dawla al-Islamiyya fi Bayt al-Maqdis (Partisans of the Islamic State in Jerusalem). In April, following a number of unclaimed

Brigades members) disillusioned by the group's policies. It practically ceased to exist after the Ibn Taymiyyah mosque clashes. Jaysh al-Islam is another Salafi-jihadi group that similarly consists of former Hamas affiliates, and is perhaps most notorious for its involvement in the abduction of Gilad Shalit. For more background on Jaysh al-Islam see "Radical Islam in Gaza," International Crisis Group, March 29, 2011, pp. 8-11.

<sup>30</sup> For more on Jund Ansar Allah see "Jund Ansar Allah Profile," BBC, August 15, 2009.

<sup>31</sup> Islamic State, "Message to Our People in Jerusalem," Jihadology, June 30, 2015.

<sup>32</sup> For an excellent background study on the Fatah-Hamas rivalry and how it has affected the security sectors in the West Bank and Gaza, see Yezid Sayigh, "Policing the People, Building the State: Authoritarian Transformation in the West Bank and Gaza," Carnegie Endowment, February 2011.

attacks blamed on Salafi-jihadis,<sup>33</sup> Hamas launched a major security crackdown against Jama'at Ansar. In May Hamas destroyed the al-Mutahibin Mosque<sup>34</sup>, where the group allegedly held sermons, arresting Sheikh Yasser Abu Houly. Earlier in April, Hamas arrested prominent Salafi-jihadi activist Sheikh Adnan Mayt.<sup>35</sup>

In late 2014 Jama'at Ansar had allegedly declared allegiance to the Islamic State, an allegiance that remains unclear in nature.<sup>36</sup> There is currently no substantive independent reporting that allows an assessment of the group's operational activity, its practical capabilities, and its ideological discourse, which means that much of what is known about the group is speculative at best.

Much of what is known about Jama'at Ansar stems from its own statements. The group has released several ultimatums directed at Hamas, including one delivered in May after Hamas cracked down on the group, in which it gave Hamas 72 hours to release Salafi detainees.<sup>37</sup> In May, the group also claimed responsibility for the assassination of a member of the Hamas security forces,<sup>38</sup> for an attack against a shop owner in Khan Younis for his support of Hamas,<sup>39</sup> and for

<sup>33</sup> Asmaa Al-Ghoul, "Hamas Cracks Down on Salafists in Gaza Strip," Al-Monitor, May 10, 2015.

<sup>34</sup> "Qiyadi Salafi Yattahim Hamas Bi Hadm Masjid Wasat al-Qita'," Quds Net News Agency, May 3, 2015.

<sup>35</sup> Al-Ghoul, "Hamas Cracks Down on Salafists in Gaza Strip," Al-Monitor, May 10, 2015.

<sup>36</sup> For a substantive discussion of the pledge of allegiance and possible links to the Islamic State, see Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, "Jihadi Debate over Jamaat Ansar a;-Dawla al-Islamiya fi Bayt al-Maqdis," Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi's Blog, January 2, 2015.

<sup>37</sup> "Jama'at Ansar al-Dawla al-Islamiyya Fi Bayt al-Maqdis al-Salafiyya Tuhaddid Hamas Bi-Istikhdam al-Quwwa Min Ajl al-Ifraj 'An 'Unsarha," *Al-Quds Al-Arabi*, May 4, 2015, and Asmaa Al-Ghoul, "Hamas Cracks Down on Salafists in Gaza Strip," Al-Monitor, May 10, 2015.

<sup>38</sup> A copy of the statement (in Arabic) can be found here <https://pbs.twimg.com/media/CGSt6nAWoAAT67Z.jpg>

<sup>39</sup> Jama'at Ansar al-Dawla al-Islamiyya fi Bayt al-Maqdis, "Targeting an Officer from the Apostate Government in Gaza Inside his Shop," Jihadology, May 30, 2015.

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The views expressed in this report are those of

targeting the Egyptian military “with 107 missiles.”<sup>40</sup> In the same month, it also claimed to have targeted a military site of the al-Qassam Brigades in Khan Younis “with 82mm mortar shells.”<sup>41</sup>

Jama'at Ansar is not the only Salafi-jihadi group that has been linked to violence. Other groups that have operated in Gaza include Jaysh al-Islam, Takfir wa al-Hijra, and the Mujahideen Shura Council. A group called Jaljalat is sometimes mentioned as a Salafi-jihadi group in Gaza. However, it refers to a popular song among militants and is a term used by Hamas to describe all Salafi-jihadis in Gaza. Salafi-jihadis have also denied the existence of a distinct group carrying that name. In June 2015, a new Salafi-jihadi group called the Sheikh Omar Hadid Brigade announced its establishment,<sup>42</sup> and claimed responsibility for several rocket attacks on southern Israel, although it has shown no signs of activity since.<sup>43</sup> These events make clear that overall there is a lot of energy in the Salafi-jihadi system in Gaza, even if it is not linked to one clear group.

### Conclusion

Even if Salafi-jihadi groups in Gaza do not have a formal organizational affiliation with the Islamic State, it is unsurprising that they feel a connection to it simply because the Islamic State is a cause that has thus far persisted against all odds—and many Palestinians in Gaza feel they need a win. As long as there is no alternative to Hamas in Gaza and to the current political establishment in the Palestinian context more generally, the ideological influence of the Islamic State will likely linger.

Whether the appeal will grow significantly in Gaza will depend on regional developments as well, with the growing number of attacks by

the Islamic State's Egyptian affiliate in the Sinai Peninsula being acutely worrying due to its proximity to Gaza. Wilayat Sinai claimed responsibility for three rockets that hit the Israeli town of Eshkol in July of this year. Although formal connections have not (yet) developed between Islamic State affiliates in Gaza and the Sinai, they both share both a broad ideology as well as an immediate, proximate target.<sup>44</sup>

Hamas has a vested interest in preventing this potential alliance or any other escalation from taking place. However, it is unlikely that this will lead to any form of security coordination with Israel, as doing so would unquestionably predicate Hamas's loss of the ideological battle for the representation of both Islam and Palestine. Hamas's relative silence on the matter in the past weeks seems indicative of its precarious position, as it received a lot of criticism from different Palestinian groups, including Fatah, for its crackdown on Salafi-jihadis earlier this spring and summer. It seems that Hamas does not want to be lured into responding to these groups with force again unless absolutely necessary, fearing it will damage its position among Palestinians.

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40 Jama'at Ansar al-Dawla al-Islamiyya fi Bayt al-Maqdis, “Targeting the Apostate Egyptian Military with 107 Missiles,” *Jihadology*, May 17, 2015.

41 Jama'at Ansar al-Dawla al-Islamiyya fi Bayt al-Maqdis, “Targeting the Military Site of al-Qassam Brigades West of Khan Younis,” *Jihadology*, May 7, 2015.

42 Sarayyah Sheikh Umar al-Haddid Bayt al-Maqdis, “Ashdod First, and Next Worse Orders,” *Jihadology*, June, 2015.

43 “Salafists Claim Responsibility for Rocket, Israel Launches Strikes,” *Ma'an News Agency*, June 7, 2015.

44 “IS Affiliate in Egypt Claims Rocket Attack on Israel,” *BBC News*, July 4, 2015.