

Combating Terrorism Center at West Point



CTCSENTINEL

Objective • Relevant • Rigorous | October 2015 • Volume 8, Issue 10



FEATURE ARTICLE

The Islamic State Digs In

The Islamic State's defensive efforts have positioned it to exploit Russian airstrikes. *JESSICA LEWIS MCFATE*

A VIEW FROM THE CT FOXHOLE

Pentagon Roundtable

Rear Admiral Michael J. Dumont
Brigadier General Michael E. Kurilla
Colonel Stephen L. A. Michael

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FROM THE EDITOR

Our October issue focuses mostly on the Islamic State. In our interview, Rear Admiral Michael Dumont, Brigadier General Michael Kurilla, and Colonel Stephen Michael weigh in on the military campaign against the group. Our cover story by Jessica Lewis McFate outlines how the Islamic State's defensive efforts in Syria and Iraq have positioned it to exploit Russian airstrikes weakening other groups. J.M. Berger charts how the group has recruited and instigated attacks in the West through "tailored online interventions." As a war of words between al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State escalates, Brian Fishman reveals that al-Qa`ida was warned early on about the Islamic State's apocalyptic obsessions. Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Bridget Moreng examine the evolution of the jihadi threat in Tunisia since the June beach attack in Sousse.

We also debut a section providing briefings on recent major developments. Metin Gurcan writes about the Ankara bombings. Saleem Mehsud explains how the Afghan Taliban's temporary seizure of Kunduz has bolstered the new leader Mullah Mansoor. And Zachary Abuza explains how there are still more questions than answers about the network behind the Bangkok attack.

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CONTACT

Combating Terrorism Center
U.S. Military Academy
607 Cullum Road, Lincoln Hall
West Point, NY 10996
Phone: (845) 938-8495
Email: sentinel@usma.edu
Web: www.ctc.usma.edu/sentinel/

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Cover: In this image taken from an Islamic State video, an Islamic State fighter is seen during fighting near Sukhna in northern Syria in summer 2015.

The Islamic State Digs In

By Jessica Lewis McFate

Russia's recent intervention in Syria will generate more opportunities for the Islamic State than it quells. If the Islamic State's core defenses around major cities in Iraq and Syria hold, the Islamic State will weather Russia's intervention and likely emerge stronger. The Islamic State has an effective defensive strategy, which it employed in the summer and early autumn of 2015. Apart from failing to compromise the Islamic State's defenses, the Russian intervention will fracture the U.S.-led coalition and weaken Syrian rebel groups, giving the Islamic State freedom of action on fronts where it had been constrained previously. Committed opponents of the Islamic State still have opportunities to block and fix the group's forces on multiple fronts, but these efforts will fail if a successful ground counter-offensive does not free the Euphrates valley and Mosul from the Islamic State's control. Russia's attempts to remove the United States from Iraq and Syria will significantly degrade the formulation of such a ground strategy, and the Islamic State will benefit.

The Islamic State's defensive strategy within Iraq and Syria is holding. Russia's intervention in Syria and burgeoning efforts in Iraq may cause the Islamic State to reconsider its next move, but the group's defense will not be easily compromised, especially as Russian strikes have so far focused primarily on Syrian rebel groups in a 9:1 ratio.¹ The Islamic State only needs to maintain the status quo within Iraq and Syria to succeed. Its claim of being a new caliphate remains intact while it still controls major cities. The Islamic State's aims are greater, however, and it wants to do much more, if it can weather the current storm. The group's ultimate goals are to rule all Muslims within an Islamic caliphate and to win an apocalyptic war against the West.² The Islamic State's campaign in Iraq and Syria furthers these goals by allowing it to demonstrate that it can defend its caliphate.³ The Islamic State prospers even while under

fire by broadcasting its ability to endure. The Islamic State also accelerates its expansion under conditions of limited duress, allowing it to counter-balance any losses while also being able to boast of expanding its caliphate. The Islamic State is an adaptive enemy, and its defenses are difficult to break, despite the host of adversaries it currently faces.

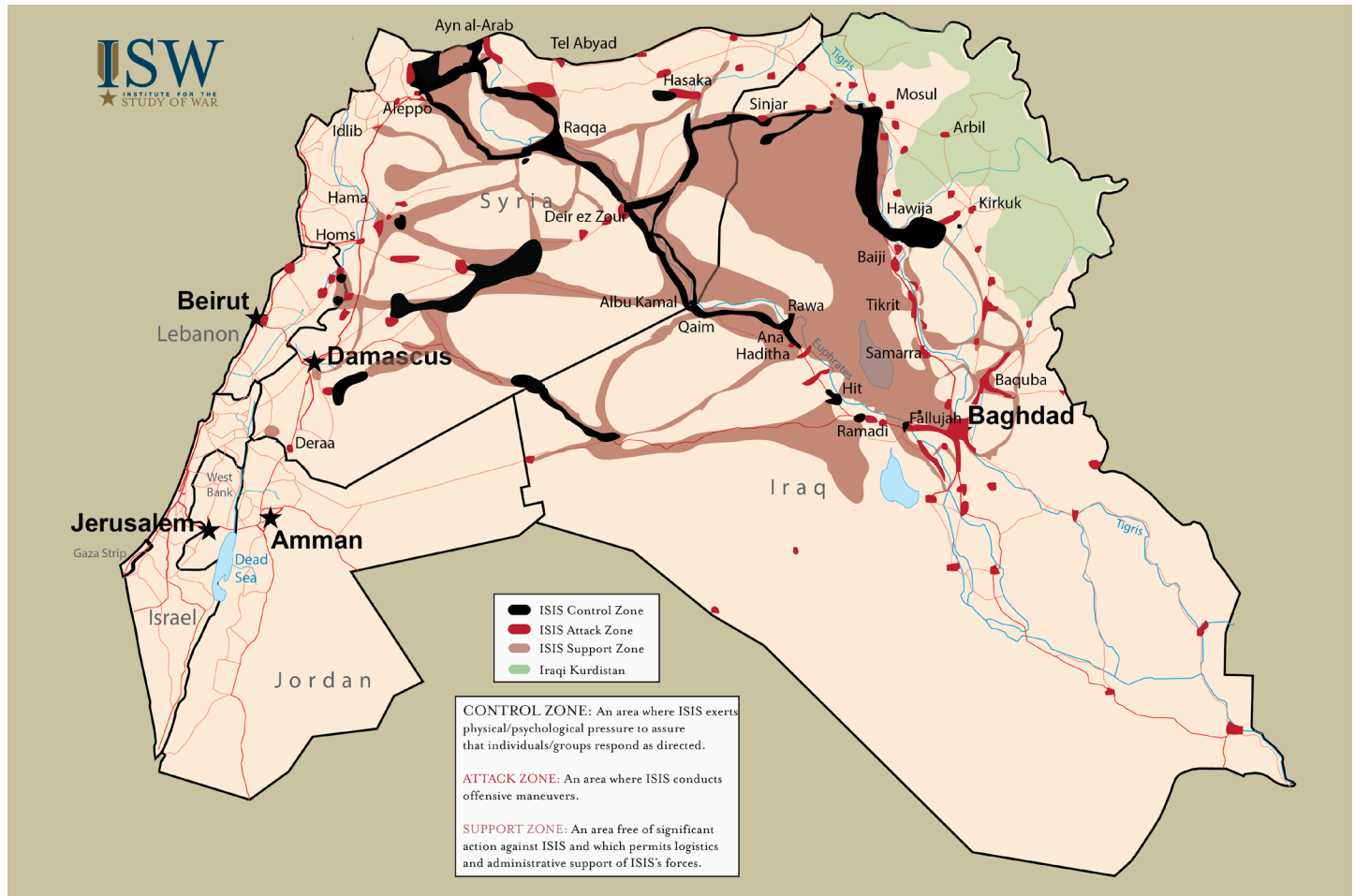
The Islamic State's summer and early autumn 2015 campaign in Iraq and Syria demonstrated that the group can pursue its objectives conservatively, surviving under pressure and holding its own while balancing against its losses. Ultimately, during this campaign the group succeeded in maintaining the status quo within Iraq and Syria. It also used the summer campaign to set conditions to alter the status quo to its advantage in 2016. Before Russia's intervention, it appeared that the Islamic State might launch an offensive against the Syrian regime south of Homs. As of October 2015, the group is likely reconsidering its next move, given Russia's apparent commitment to preserve the Assad regime. The Islamic State may maintain its conservative stance, but opportunities are mounting for the group to exploit competition among local and strategic opponents to stoke greater instability even as its own losses accumulate.

Russia's involvement increases rather than mitigates these opportunities because it is likely to weaken competing rebel groups in Syria in addition to the U.S.-led coalition. The Islamic State launched a major ground offensive against rebels north of Aleppo on October 9 while Russian airstrikes targeted rebels west of Aleppo, taking advantage of the fact that Russia's barrage is not focused on the group.⁴ Russia's air campaign near Turkish air space has also stalled the U.S.-Turkish partnership to establish a "Free Zone," reducing rather than enhancing the pressure placed upon the Islamic State from the air. Failure to break the Islamic State's ground defenses in Iraq and Syria and to block its future exploits will allow the group to emerge stronger in the midst of such opportunities, with a greater claim to endurance and more opportunities to attack. This is an outcome the U.S.-led coalition must prevent in the midst of Russia's actions. Ceding the anti-Islamic State fight to a Russian-Iranian alliance that is less committed to defeating the group will instead drive Syrian rebels toward al-Qa`ida in Syria, reduce opportunities to find a political settlement in Syria, and increase the Islamic State's freedom of action.

The Islamic State's Defense

Defense is the Islamic State's primary objective within Iraq and Syria, a point made by Alexandre Mello and Michael Knights earlier this year.⁵ Defense is not a sign of weakness, but rather an expression of durable control.⁶ The group's control of cities allows it to claim that the caliphate exists. The Islamic State's grand strategy appears to depend upon sustained control of cities, around which all other strategies, including its global messaging campaign, revolve. In order to propagate a claim to lead the caliphate, the Islamic State must hold its claimed territory against aggressors. Its military

Jessica Lewis McFate is the Research Director at the Institute for the Study of War. She is a West Point graduate ('04), and she served on active duty in the United States Army as an intelligence officer with multiple deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan. She has published extensively on the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), including "Al Qaeda in Iraq Resurgent," "The Islamic State: A Counter-Strategy for a Counter-State," and "The ISIS Defense in Iraq and Syria: Countering an Adaptive Enemy."



The Islamic State retains control of a significant portion of both Iraq and Syria.

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defense was most visible in the summer and early autumn of 2015 in Ramadi, Mosul, and Raqqa, though the Islamic State's defensive lines around Raqqa began to fail in July 2015. The group's successes are nevertheless noteworthy, because it will be devastating to Iraq and the region if the Islamic State wins the current battle of Ramadi, while no challengers emerge to contest its claim in Mosul.

The Islamic State successfully defended Ramadi over the summer and into the autumn of 2015. The Islamic State's static defenses in Ramadi likely pale in comparison to the rings of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and trenches around Mosul, as Ramadi did not fall to the Islamic State until May 18, 2015.⁷ The group nevertheless held its ground there under deliberate counter-attack for most of that period.⁸ Effective mobile defenses that used ambushes and vehicle-borne IEDs (VBIEDS)⁹ may account for the Islamic State's success. The Islamic State's accomplishments in Ramadi may also reflect the use of zone defense, in which it launched main attacks in other locations to divert the attention of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF).⁹ The Islamic State persistently targeted Baiji and the

Baiji oil refinery in northern Iraq throughout the summer,^b making it impossible for the ISF to mass forces at that time in Ramadi. The Islamic State also launched an aggressive campaign against ISF positions east of Fallujah^c within a few kilometers of Baghdad's western edge during and after the Islamic State's successful capture of Ramadi.^d

The Islamic State also successfully defended Mosul over the summer and early fall against peripheral incursions by the Peshmerga forces from the Kurdish Democratic Party that were sup-

a The Islamic State detonated a suicide, vehicle-borne IED (SVBIED) north of Ramadi on August 27, 2015, killing the Iraqi Army 10th Division commander and the Deputy Commander of the Anbar operations. "Iraq Conflict: Bomb kills two generals near Ramadi," BBC, August 27, 2015; "Two Senior Officers Killed in a Suicide Explosion in Al-Anbar," Radio Sawa, August 27, 2015.

b The Islamic State attacked Baiji with vigor in May 2015, seizing large parts of the city and claiming to control the Baiji oil refinery. The ISF and Shi'a militias pushed the Islamic State out of the city in June 2015, but the city has been contested since. For more information, see the Iraq Situation Update series at the Institute for the Study of War.

c The Islamic State's attacks east of Fallujah were likely more than the Islamic State required in order to defend Fallujah itself, a city which it has held firmly for 20 months. For more information on how the Islamic State seized Fallujah in January 2014, see Jessica D. Lewis, "Iraq Update 2014 #1: Showdown in Anbar," Institute for the Study of War, January 3, 2013.

d The Islamic State attacked positions ranging from Garma, Camp Mazraa, and Amiriyat at Fallujah before and during its final assault on Ramadi on May 13–15, 2015. The group continued to attack Amiriyat al-Fallujah and Garma thereafter. For more information on the Islamic State's attacks west of Baghdad in June 2015, see the Iraq Situation Update series at the Institute for the Study of War.

ported by coalition airstrikes.¹⁰ These measures did not constitute an existential threat to the Islamic State's stronghold in Mosul, however. The Islamic State's untested static defenses around the city are reportedly robust, including trenches, patrols, IED rings, and human shields.¹¹ The group conducted an area defense in a number of separate campaigns against the Kurdish line, including Sinjar,^e Mount Bashiqa, Gwer, and Makhmour in order to keep Kurdish ground forces engaged at a short distance from Mosul. The attacks may also have been probing attacks with greater implications for future Islamic State offensives. The group launched a mustard gas attack against Kurdish positions southwest of Irbil in August 2015,^f shortly before conducting a similar attack along the Syrian Kurdish line,^g indicating that the Islamic State may either be deterring further Kurdish counter-offensives or that it may be contemplating new offensives against the Kurds in late 2015 and 2016.

The Islamic State's attacks against the Kurdish line may also have been punitive responses to its failed defense of northern Syria over the summer and early autumn. The group had attempted to close a gap in its line between Raqqa and Aleppo provinces by clearing the Kurdish enclave in Kobane, but this operation failed in late 2014.¹² After blocking the Islamic State's operation in Kobane, the Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) exploited this gap and widened the distance between Islamic State-controlled cities in northern Syria. The YPG pushed out from both Kobane and Hasaka provinces to seize the Islamic State's nearby border outpost at Tel Abyad in June 2015,¹³ a major blow to the group. The loss of Tel Abyad cost the Islamic State one of two major border crossings into Turkey. More importantly, it also compromised the Islamic State's area defenses around Raqqa city. Raqqa city has been one of the group's strongest urban positions, and one of its most sophisticated experiments in governance.¹⁴ The loss of Raqqa would set the Islamic State back significantly in terms of its claim to govern within its caliphate.

Raqqa also appears to be one of the weakest fronts of the Islamic State's tested military defenses, and it remains an important opportunity for the U.S.-led coalition. The YPG proceeded from Tel Abyad and Kobane to seize Ayn Issa¹⁵ and Serrin^h by August 2015, nearby towns that effectively isolated the Islamic State from its other positions in northern Syria. The Islamic State responded with a classic

zone defense, attacking Kurdish positions in neighboring Kobane and Hasaka provinces.¹ The Islamic State was at times successful in recapturing towns and villages from the YPG. As of mid-October 2015, however, the Islamic State's defense of Raqqa is failing, with anti-Islamic State forces reportedly within 45 kilometers of Raqqa city.¹⁶ An indication of Islamic State concern were reports the group was conscripting residents of Raqqa as young as 14 into its ranks.¹⁷

Instead of reinforcing this front with assets from elsewhere in Syria, the Islamic State appears to be reinforcing other fronts, such as Deir ez Zour, possibly with the idea of clearing regime forces from the city. De-prioritizing the defense of Raqqa may indicate that the Islamic State regards its northern adversaries as formidable; however, Kurdish and Arab ground forces north of Raqqa have a contentious relationship, and the Islamic State may instead be counting on the likelihood that Arab civilians in Raqqa city would reject a predominantly Kurdish liberation force. Losing control of Raqqa city would constitute the group's greatest loss since its urban campaign began in January 2014. But the Islamic State appears to be considering new offensives despite the potential defeat in Raqqa, and it has set conditions to counter-balance the setback by seizing new territory.

The Islamic State generally held its other positions across Iraq and Syria over the summer and early autumn. The group still boasts strong defenses in northern Aleppo, in the vicinity of Deir ez Zour, in outer Anbar, and in the Zaab triangle north of Hawija. It faced internal resistance in several of these areas, but a coercive approach to maintaining social order appeared to quell opposition in each case. In one instance, citizens of Rutba near the Jordanian border protested the Islamic State's rule in July 2015.¹⁸ The Islamic State put down the demonstration by detaining more than 200 citizens of Rutba, whom some sources claim were killed. In September the group detained and executed religious leaders and 50 "salafis" in Hawija for refusing to pledge allegiance to the Islamic State.¹⁹ An IED attack against an Islamic State financier south of Mosul on June 23 claimed by the "Mosul Independent Youth,"²⁰ however, indicates that the Islamic State's control over its northern strongholds in Iraq has become loose enough that resisters can mobilize isolated attacks. On the whole, the group's coercive power behind its defensive line did not show signs of decay over the summer and early autumn. With the notable exception of Raqqa, the Islamic State's defenses held fast.

The Islamic State Attempts to Maintain Status Quo

The loss of an urban center like Raqqa could be devastating for the Islamic State without a deliberate plan to counter-balance the defeat. The group previously demonstrated its resilience in the face of equivalent setbacks, such as losing control of Tikrit in early 2015. The Islamic State responded to the ISF's counter-attack at Tikrit by targeting Baiji and Ramadi.^j These efforts were more than diver-

e The Islamic State attacked Sinjar multiple times over the summer of 2015. The most recent attack at Sinjar occurred on September 1, 2015. "Peshmerga Repels an Attack and Causes Da'ish to Suffer Huge Losses in Shinkal," PUK Media, September 1, 2015.

f The Islamic State may have used mustard gas against Peshmerga forces in Makhmour on August 11, 2015. Barbara Starr, Jim Scuitto, and Elise Labott, "U.S. investigating 'credible' reports ISIS used chemical weapons," CNN, August 14, 2015; Tom Coghlan, "British troops in Iraq face rockets armed with chlorine gas," UK News, August 14, 2015.

g The Islamic State reportedly shelled the northern Syrian town of Mare'a with mustard gas on September 1, 2015, followed by another attack with mustard gas on Hasaka city on September 2, 2015. Separate alleged mustard gas shellings also occurred on August 21-22, 2015. "Syria Direct: News Update 9-2-15," Syria: Direct, September 2, 2015; "Da'ish Uses Chemical Weapons in Regions Under the YPG Control in Al-Hasakah," Partiya Yekitiya Demokrat, September 1, 2015.

h Syrian YPG forces seized Serrin from the Islamic State on July 27, 2015, isolating its positions in Raqqa and Aleppo along one of two main roads. The Islamic State attempted to recapture the city over the summer. It remained in YPG hands as of September 2015; "Kurds cut key ISIL supply route in northern Syria: Monitor," Agence France Presse, July 27, 2015.

i The Islamic State attacked Kurdish positions in Kobane, Tel Abyad, and Hasaka in response to the loss of Tel Abyad to the Syrian Kurdish YPG in June 2015. For more information, see "Military Situation in Northern Syria: June 25, 2015," Institute for the Study of War, June 25, 2015.

j The Islamic State consistently paired attacks upon Ramadi and Baiji throughout the spring of 2015 while it was under counter-attack in Tikrit. For more information, see Jessica Lewis McFate, "The ISIS Defense in Iraq and Syria: Countering an Adaptive Enemy," Institute for the Study of War, May 2015.

sonary attempts to alleviate pressure on Tikrit; they were separate objectives to gain new cities. Success in capturing one would allow the Islamic State to claim a net neutral outcome if it lost Tikrit, which ultimately occurred in April.²¹ The group likely planned offensives over the summer of 2015 with the expectation that it could lose Raqqa, Ramadi, or its free access to the Turkish border through Syria. The Islamic State also had to compensate for the loss of Tikrit and its nearby oil fields, and its summer and early autumn campaign reflects efforts to preserve the integrity of its caliphate despite potential operational failures.

The Islamic State executed two main offensives over the summer of 2015 in Iraq, both likely designed to counter-balance the potential loss of Ramadi. It persistently attacked Baiji^k and Haditha,^l both cities that the group ultimately desires to control. Both cities contain critical infrastructure, and both are situated closer to the Islamic State's strongholds than to those of the Iraqi state. The Islamic State's attacks there doubled as zone defense for Ramadi, but they are more than diversions. They are targets of the group's future conquest, which the Islamic State modulates in order to enhance its overall defense. The Islamic State also acts to balance and preserve its access to lucrative resources. The group attacked the Ajil and Alas oil fields east of Tikrit repeatedly over the summer.^m The Islamic State had controlled them prior to the loss of Tikrit. The Islamic State may ultimately seek to control the northern oil fields in Kirkuk as a grandiose alternative. The Islamic State also attacked the Jezal oil fieldsⁿ north of Palmyra in September. The Islamic State's access to resources is far from expended, and the group continuously seeks new avenues of sustainment.

The Islamic State's boldest balancing move came in May when its forces attacked and seized the Syrian city of Palmyra, along with its seizure of Ramadi in Iraq.²² The move preemptively counter-balanced the potential loss of Raqqa, which Islamic State leaders likely realized had become vulnerable after the failure of the Kobane campaign in late 2014. Palmyra additionally gave the Islamic State access to Homs, Damascus, and the Syrian central corridor, replete

“The Islamic State’s boldest balancing move came in May when its forces attacked and seized the central Syrian city of Palmyra.”

with new cities and new access to borders. Palmyra also gave the Islamic State the opportunity to claim to be an anti-regime actor in order to set conditions for future engagement of the Syrian opposition and Jabhat al-Nusra, the Syrian al-Qa`ida affiliate.

The Islamic State is also preparing to consolidate along the Euphrates by expelling the Syrian regime from Deir ez Zour.^o This has high stakes because Russian air assets in Syria in September 2015 have the potential to strike in eastern Syria.²³ The Islamic State controls the villages and tribal areas around Deir ez Zour city, and it is positioning forces to attack the airbase and remaining neighborhoods in the downtown area that are still under regime control. Deir ez Zour is the Islamic State's next move to counter-balance further losses in Raqqa province should the YPG assault continue.

The declaration of a U.S.-Turkey partnership in pursuit of a “Free Zone”²⁴ could also disrupt the status quo, isolating the group from its global network by cutting access to the Turkish border. The fate of the Free Zone has been jeopardized by Russia's intervention, but the Islamic State undoubtedly made plans to balance any loss of cross-border access. As of October 2015, the Islamic State appears to be penetrating rebel systems in Aleppo, Idlib, and Dera'a in order to gain new access to Turkey and Jordan. The group has attacked rebel positions north of Aleppo near Mare'a multiple times with ground forces and VBIEDS,^p including an aggressive assault on October 9, and it is likely responsible for a string of assassinations of rebels and Jabhat al-Nusra figures in Idlib^q and Dera'a.^r The Islamic

k The Islamic State attacked and seized much of Baiji beginning in May 2015, contesting the area heavily throughout the summer. The Islamic State's most recent attack into Baiji occurred on September 19, 2015, when it attacked the ISF in the Baiji Oil Refinery with two SVBIEDS, which triggered a large fire. “Two Suicide Explosions and Battles Caused Killing or Injury of Four Security Members and a Huge Fire in Baiji Refinery,” Shafaq News, September 19, 2015.

l The Islamic State attacked Haditha on numerous occasions over the summer of 2015. The Islamic State's most recent attack into Haditha occurred on September 3, 2015, when its forces targeted Barwana south of the city. The Islamic State failed to break the ISF's defenses. “The War Media: 101 Da`ish Die During Military Operations on Thursday,” Shafaq News, September 3, 2015.

m For example, on August 15, 2015, Iraqi Army units conducted operations against Islamic State fighters preparing to attack the Ajil and Alas oil fields with VBIEDs. “67 Da`ish Die in Pre-emptive Operation East of Tikrit,” Al-Mada Press, August 15, 2015.

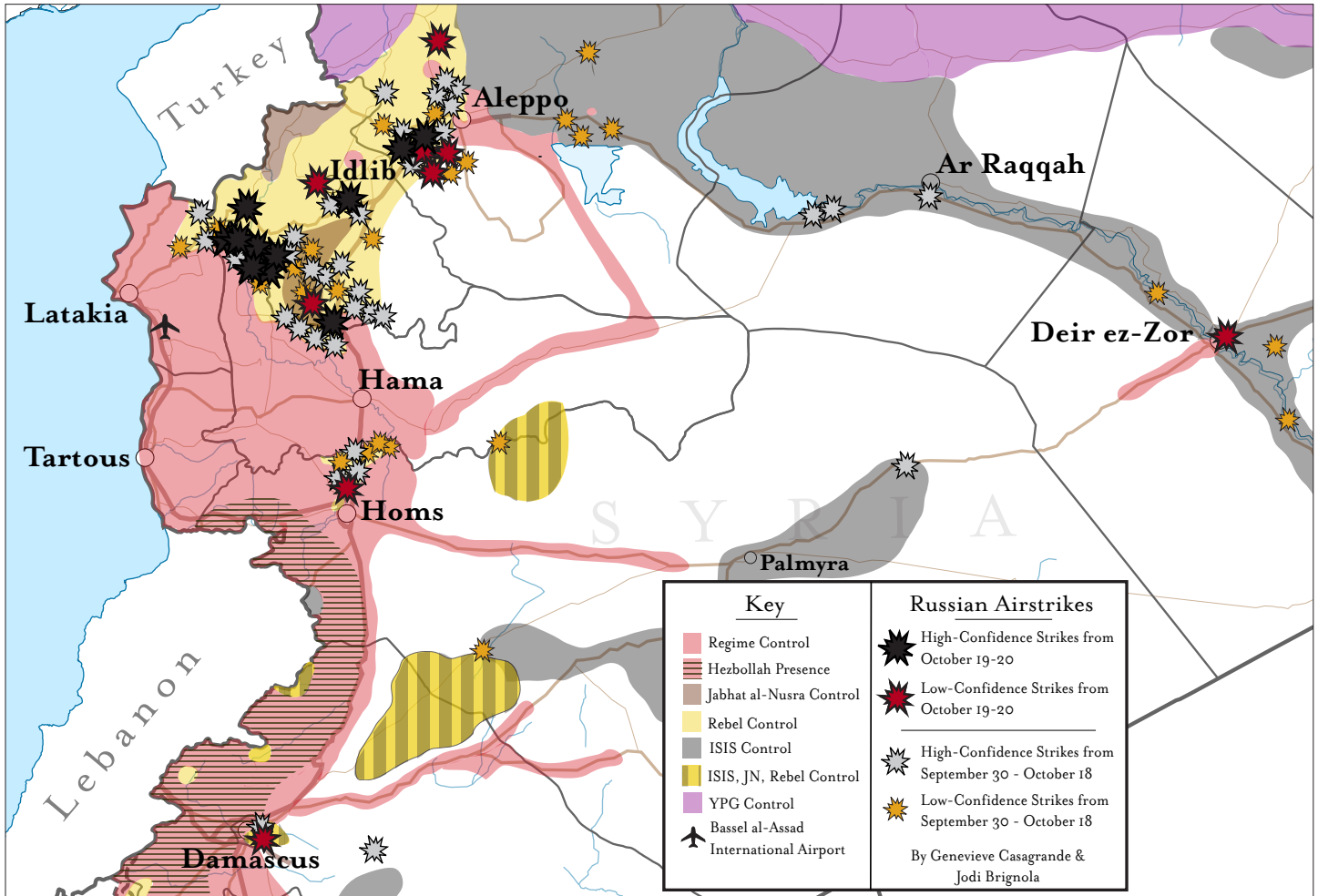
n The Islamic State claimed via social media outlets to have seized the Jezal oil fields north of Palmyra on September 6, 2015, reports that were picked up by several other local sources. The Assad regime reportedly counter-attacked on September 9, 2015. The area is assessed to remain contested as of September 2015. “The [Islamic] State Declares Its Control Over Jezal Village and Continues Besieging Oil Field,” Zaman al-Wasl, September 7, 2015; “Da`ish Controls Jezal and Besieges the Regime's Soldiers in Its Oil Field East Homs,” All4Syria, September 7, 2015.

o The Islamic State deployed many fighters to Deir ez-Zour from eastern Syria and Anbar for an offensive against the regime-held neighborhoods of Jourah and Qasour on September 22-23, 2015. “Military Uses High Level Equipment to Expel the Regime from Dir Al-Zur,” All4Syria, September 23, 2015; “ISIS mobilizes for large Deir Ezzor battle,” NOW, September 23, 2015.

p The Islamic State conducted attacks against Syrian rebel positions north of Aleppo city in late summer, including Mare'a. One rebel commander claimed the Islamic State had conducted up to 23 VBIED attacks against Mare'a in recent weeks. The group is likely attempting to generate new border access west of the Free Zone. “Systematic Islamic State car bombings wreak destruction in north Aleppo,” Syria: Direct, September 14, 2015. For more information, please contact the author.

q Syrian rebels in Idlib reported a series of assassinations over the summer. Attribution is not clear, but the Islamic State may be trying to create conditions intended to help reestablish access to Turkey. The last reported attack against a Dar al-Qada Courthouse affiliated with Jabhat al-Nusra in Salqin, Idlib province was an SVEST (suicide vest) on August 30, 2015. “Suicide attack kills 13 and leaves injuries in Salqin city,” Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, August 30, 2015; “Idlib: Suicide Bomber Kills or Injures 17 Individuals in Salqin,” Zaman al-Wasl, August 30, 2015.

r Unknown gunmen assassinated the vice president of the Dar al-Adel Courthouse, a rebel structure, in Dera'a city on September 2, 2015. The attack is likely the work of the Islamic State. The group's presence in southern Syria has been limited, but Dera'a province is another-border route that the Islamic State may pursue in 2015-2016. “Deputy Chief of Dar Al-`Adel Court is Assassinated in Huran,” All4Syria, September 2, 2015.



The Russian air campaign (starting 09/30/2015) has been concentrated against rebel forces rather than Islamic State positions.

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State had been attacking Hezbollah on both sides of the Qusayr border with northern Lebanon, though the future course of this penetration may be altered by Russia's defense of the Assad regime.^s The Islamic State may additionally seek to open new border access through Iraq to Jordan, Saudi Arabia, or Kuwait. In order to maintain the status quo, the group will pursue these routes in order to outpace measures that block its access to the Turkish border.

Future Goals

The Islamic State has ambitions beyond the status quo. The group likely seeks to claim a former caliphate capital such as Baghdad, in order to assert its legitimacy; to destroy rival militaries in order to preserve its long-term defense; and to leverage Iraq and Syria to destabilize the Middle East in support of broader expansion. Without the Russian intervention, the Islamic State's attacks west of Palmyra

against the T4 Airbase,^t Homs city,^u and Qusayr, for example, could very well have set conditions for an offensive by the Islamic State to break the back of the Syrian regime's military by the end of 2015. Concurrent Syrian rebel offensives against the regime in northern

^s The Islamic State reportedly clashed with Hezbollah and regime soldiers near the Lebanese border crossing with Qusayr in southern Homs province on August 18, 2015. "ISIS attacks Hezbollah near north Lebanon border," NOW, August 18, 2015; "Islamic State 2.5 km from Lebanon," Syria Direct, August 18, 2015.

^t The Islamic State claimed on September 23, 2015 to have seized parts of the highway between Homs city and the T4 airbase, which would isolate the city from both the east and the west. The Islamic State overran Qurayyatayn on August 5, 2015, providing access to the airbase. "The Islamic State Continues its Attack on Al-Qaryatayn City," Syrian Observatory of Human Rights, August 5, 2015; "Da'ish Imposes Its Control on Al-Qaryatayn City," All4Syria, August 5, 2015.

^u A series of explosions in Homs city have been claimed by both Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State. It is unclear if both groups are conducting the attacks. The last blast claimed by one or both groups was an IED that detonated on a civilian bus on September 23, 2015. "For the second consecutive day, explosions rock the city of Homs leaving casualties," Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, September 23, 2015; "Da'ish Announces Attacks on Third Military Airport and VBIEDs Strikes Homs Neighborhood Again," All4Syria, September 23, 2014.

“The establishment of a Russian airbase in Latakia on Syria’s coast in September 2015 may stave off the Syrian regime’s precipitous collapse.”

Latakia,²⁵ Aleppo city,^v and northern Damascus^w forced the Syrian regime to pull troops back by early September 2015, and the Islamic State was ready to compound the impact on the regime by attacking south of Homs.

The establishment of a Russian airbase in Latakia on Syria’s coast in September 2015 may stave off the Syrian regime’s precipitous collapse by preventing both Syrian rebels and the Islamic State from advancing along Syria’s central corridor. The Islamic State nevertheless remains able to launch such an attack while it holds Palmyra and surrounding villages, and Russian airstrikes have not concentrated upon protecting the regime against the group’s position there. The Islamic State may still pursue this course, but as of October 2015, it is likely waiting to see what becomes of Russia’s intervention. If it cannot break the regime, and Russia continues to attack Syrian rebels, the Islamic State may attempt a closer alignment with al-Qa`ida and rebels in Syria in order to advance near Damascus more quietly.

Similarly, the Islamic State’s extremely high casualty attacks^x in Diyala province in Iraq in July–September may draw both the ISF and Iranian-backed militias into a defensive posture along Iran’s border, breaking their defenses in Baiji and west of Baghdad and terminating their current offensives in Ramadi and Fallujah. These shifts will justify more aggressive involvement by the Iranian axis in Diyala, which will constrain the U.S.-led coalition and further inflame regional sectarian tension. The Islamic State may attempt low probability/high impact attacks against Shi’a shrine cities in

Iraq to accomplish the same purpose. The Islamic State attempted at least five attacks on Karbala over the summer from Anbar’s western desert.^y It also repeatedly positioned its forces for attacks into Samarra,^z causing Shi’a militias and the ISF to launch repeated counter-offensives to clear Islamic State forces from the desert west of the city.^{aa}

Offensives by the Islamic State against Syria’s Alawite heartland and Iraq’s Shi’a heartland could be diversionary efforts to support its strategic defenses. But given the degree to which other ground forces in Iraq and Syria are spread thin, it is feasible that the Islamic State could launch low probability/high impact attacks that actually work. Such strikes would be game-changers in the current geopolitical environment if they succeed either in crippling rival militaries or in stoking regional war. Defense within Iraq and Syria may be sufficient to support the Islamic State’s broader goals, but the group is still the most likely actor on the ground in Iraq and Syria to set new terms of battle. Given the opportunity, the Islamic State will seize the initiative, even while Russia proceeds with its new Middle East strategy.

New Constraints and Exogenous Opportunities

The Islamic State’s cross-border access through Aleppo province in Syria has not yet been blocked, and it likely still has sufficient manpower to both defend and launch new operations under current conditions. The Islamic State remains capable of launching new offensives, and it is encouraged to do so as a way to retain the initiative and generate options for its overall defense. Continued separate ground counter-offensives against the group’s positions at Raqqa, Ramadi, and Hawija could alter this balance by fixing the Islamic State in a static defensive posture, a weakness it has not experienced in many years. The U.S.-led coalition is supporting three such efforts as of October 2015: the YPG and Arab rebel groups north of Raqqa; peshmerga from the Popular Union of Kurdistan near Hawija; and the ISF at Ramadi. Such parallel efforts would

v Syrian rebels had been achieving new inroads against the Syrian regime in Aleppo province, before Russian and Iranian assets began to mass for what appeared to be an impending offensive in Aleppo in October 2015. In the summer, rebels had made gains both by cutting regime supply lines south of the city and by seizing regime positions within Aleppo city. Most notably, rebels seized the regime’s base at the Scientific Research Center in northwestern Aleppo city on July 2, 2015. The rebel attack and the regime’s failed attempt to retake the facility were reported by numerous rebel groups via social media. For more information on Syrian rebel social media, contact the author.

w A Syrian rebel group called Jaysh al-Islam claimed to seize more than 20 regime military positions north of Damascus on September 13, 2015, severing a regime supply route north from Damascus. “Conflicts on the Outskirts of Al-Asad Town.” *Zaman al-Wasl*, September 13, 2015.

x The Islamic State conducted an extremely high casualty VBIED in Khan Bani Saad in Diyala province on the last day of Ramadan 2015. The attack killed 120 and injured 140. It was followed by two additional very high casualty VBIEDS in Sadr City in Baghdad the following week. The use of single-truck SVBIEDS with this amount of explosive power is a trend, compared to the previous waves of many small VBIEDS that used to be prevalent in Baghdad. Mohammed Tawfeeq and Steve Almasy, “ISIS claims responsibility for Iraq bombing that killed more than 80,” *CNN*, July 18, 2015; “Islamic State claims car bomb that kills more than 100 in Iraq,” *Reuters*, July 18, 2015.

y The Islamic State launched many attacks over the summer of 2015 upon Karbala and Nukhaib (west of Karbala). The first and most spectacular was a wave of eight VBIEDs that were intercepted in Nukhaib by the ISF on June 10, 2015, a week before Ramadan 2015 began. “Defense [Ministry]: Captures 8 VBIEDs with Their Drivers in Al-Nukhaib and Destroys Trucks Loaded with Barrels Belong to Da`ish in Al-Fallujah,” *Shafaaq News*, June 10, 2015; “Al-Hashd Al-Sha`bi Confirms Capturing 7 VBIEDs West Karbala’ Coming from Al-Anbar,” *Al-Mada Press*, June 10, 2015; “Forces Capture 7 VBIEDs in Karbala That Carry Refugees,” *All Iraq News*, June 10, 2015.

z The Islamic State attempted several attacks against Samarra over the summer of 2015. One recent example was a VBIED, which the ISF and “Popular Mobilization Units” destroyed in al-Hweish, west of Samarra on August 20, 2015. “27 Members of the Security Forces and Hash Were Injured in the Explosion of an Explosive Oil Tanker West Samara,” *Al Sumaria*, August 20, 2015. The Islamic State also claimed through its official social media that it launched an operation called the “Campaign of Shaykh Abu Khattab al-Shayhawi” on August 14, 2015 in Salah ad Din, including references to its attacks in Samarra as well as Tikrit and Baiji. For more information on the Islamic State’s social media operations, contact the author.

aa Shi’a militias guarding Samarra claimed to launch several offensives to clear the Islamic State from the desert west of Samarra over the summer of 2015. Most recently, the ISF announced its own operation to clear the area on September 18, 2015. The area is a historic safe haven for the Islamic State and will likely be difficult to clear permanently. “Forces Clear Al-Tharthar Region and Kill Dozens of Da`ish,” *al-Mada Press*, September 19, 2015.

be greatly enhanced if the Islamic State were also blocked west and south of Palmyra, but neither Russia nor the U.S.-led coalition has done so. The Islamic State's expansion may therefore proceed despite constraints on multiple sides.

None of these efforts will topple the Islamic State's military unless operations fully clear their forces from these cities; or alternately shape decisive operations against the group in Deir ez Zour or Mosul. The Islamic State could lose its ability to defend creatively if it is pinned in multiple corners, but its defenses will not crumble while it can still claim interior strongholds. The Islamic State may have regarded the vulnerability of being fixed on multiple fronts as a serious threat in early October 2015, compounded by the potential for Russia and Iran to focus their attacks upon the Islamic State. The Islamic State may have massed forces in Deir ez Zour to consolidate in a static defensive posture in reaction to this threat. But its leaders are likely learning over the course of the Russian air campaign that the group will not be threatened in this way. The Islamic State is therefore beginning to proceed with its signature defenses and preemptive offensives, most notably against Syrian rebels north of Aleppo.

Meanwhile, obstacles to effective coalition ground partner strategies are mounting. Iraq's political problems are at crisis point. Wide-scale protests across Baghdad and southern Iraq coupled with intra-Shi'a militia competition could generate instability and violence that require Iraq to divert security forces away from the frontline.²⁶ Concurrent moves by Iranian-backed Shi'a militias to undermine Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi's political reforms²⁷ may degrade Baghdad's security. Kata'ib Hezbollah has already clashed with Federal Police in Baghdad and at Iran's behest has kidnapped Turkish workers in Baghdad.²⁸ The creation of a joint Russian-Iranian-Syrian-Iraqi coordination cell in Baghdad will create further opportunities for the Islamic State by limiting the influence and freedom of action of the U.S.-led coalition in Baghdad. The Islamic State may not be in a military position to challenge security forces in Baghdad and southern Iraq on its own, but Iraq's current political crisis may give the Islamic State opportunities to re-ignite its battle in Baghdad, and in Basra, where the group claimed an explosive attack on October 5.²⁹

The Islamic State also seeks opportunities to undermine the U.S.-led coalition against the Islamic State. The Islamic State might have focused its energies upon disrupting the U.S.-Turkey partnership to this end,³⁰ or to provoke greater sectarian response to the Iran deal. Instead, Russia's President Vladimir Putin positioned himself as the leader of a new coalition battling the Islamic State,³¹ putting SU-30 fighter aircraft just south of the Turkish border, and a joint coordination cell in Baghdad, severely undercutting the U.S.-led coalition. It is doubtful that Russia will degrade and defeat the Islamic State from the air more effectively than the United States, though it will certainly inflict greater civilian casualties and drive the Syrian opposition closer to al-Qa`ida in Syria, given that its air campaign is focused upon the Syrian opposition rather than on the Islamic State. If Russia were serious about defeating the Islamic State, it would have focused its air strikes on Palmyra, which would have degraded the group's defensive flexibility in concert with U.S.-led operations elsewhere. But this is not Russia's objective. Instead, there is a high risk that Russia will fracture the U.S.-led coalition and stoke regional escalation against the Iranian axis, outcomes that support the Islamic State's long game in the region. In the long run, Russian intervention will widen the space for anti-Western

“The Islamic State will not be defeated while it can claim control of cities in Iraq, Syria, and elsewhere in the region.”

actors in the Middle East, strengthen the Iranian axis, and polarize the region in ways that the Islamic State will continue to exploit.

Conclusion

Overcoming the Islamic State's defenses remains the basic task necessary to be completed in order to create the conditions needed to expel Islamic State forces from all cities. The Islamic State will not be defeated while it can claim control of cities in Iraq, Syria, and elsewhere in the region. The campaign to defeat the Islamic State has to outpace the group's efforts to generate redundancy and momentum, because they give the Islamic State a means to counter-balance otherwise meaningful gains by their opponents. Developing a ground strategy takes time, but the Islamic State benefits from more time. Fixing the Islamic State in multiple corners of its caliphate could have halted its expansion and limited its defensive options, creating new operational opportunities for the opposing coalition in the coming year. But Russia's intervention has likely blocked the U.S.-led coalition from maximizing this opportunity. Furthermore, the fundamental challenges of retaking interior cities and tribal areas such as Deir ez Zour and Mosul without ground partners positioned nearby remain. The Islamic State's defenses will therefore likely hold well into 2016 unless the U.S.-led coalition regains the initiative in Iraq and Syria quickly.

Meanwhile, the Islamic State will ensure its interior defenses are not compromised because of its pre-positioning throughout the region. The group now controls cities and towns elsewhere in the world, specifically in Sirte, Libya³² and in Afghanistan, where it claimed to control seven district centers as of late September 2015.³³ The more the Islamic State can generate depth outside of Iraq and Syria, the less powerful a centralized geographic campaign to defeat the Islamic State within Iraq and Syria will be. Meanwhile, the Islamic State is scaling its measures to provide for defense, maintain the status quo, and expand to support its global campaign. The Islamic State has already counter-balanced significant losses in Iraq and Syria by opening new fronts, including Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and the Caucasus.³⁴

The strategy to defeat the Islamic State must therefore have bounds as well as hunters, arrayed regionally to prevent it from evading defeat by reaching farther out. The United States is still the global power with the greatest potential to develop such a broad coalition strategy. The Islamic State's global campaign runs the risk of out-pacing coalition efforts, however, resulting in an array of caliphate satellites that the Islamic State could begin to incorporate into a transcontinental military campaign. The longer the group can endure, and the more places in which it is present, the harder it will be to defeat. The Islamic State will therefore remain and likely expand in 2016. **CTC**

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A View from the CT Foxhole: An Interview with RDML Michael Dumont, BG Michael Kurilla, and COL Stephen Michael

By Paul Cruickshank and Brian Dodwell

Rear Admiral Michael J. Dumont is the Deputy Director for Politico-Military Affairs at the Joint Staff, J-5. He has served combat tours in Central America, the Middle East, and Central Asia. His previous assignments have included deputy chief of staff for Stability Operations at the International Security Assistance Force Joint Command in Kabul, Afghanistan. Most recently, he served as the Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-intensity Conflict.

Brigadier General Michael E. Kurilla is the Deputy Director for Special Operations and Counter-Terrorism, J-37 at the Joint Staff. He recently spent time in Erbil for Operation Inherent Resolve and has previously served in Afghanistan and Iraq. He was previously Deputy Commanding General (Maneuver) for the 1st Infantry Division at Fort Riley, Kansas .

Colonel Stephen L. A. Michael is the Deputy Director, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Transregional Threats Coordination Cell at the Joint Staff. He has been deployed in a variety of assignments in Europe, the Middle East, and Africa, as well as serving tours in Iraq. He was deployed for 15 months to al-Doura in Baghdad during the “Surge” and previously helped to liberate Kirkuk.

CTC: How does the Islamic State challenge compare to other military challenges you’ve faced?

Dumont: I don’t think they have a playbook. I think they’re very opportunistic. They’re not constrained by the “rules,” and that can make them respond in unpredictable and dramatic ways. There are a lot of internal dynamics that we don’t understand in groups like this. That complicates our jobs as military professionals—to try to understand them, outthink them, get ahead of them, and outmaneuver them on the battle space. The other thing is they have a large ability to manipulate people on the internet using social media and using online recruiters. We need to understand this and we need to take steps to counteract that. Because that is a source for them of recruitment, revenue, and ideas.

Kurilla: During the Iraq insurgency we all dealt with al-Qa`ida in Iraq [AQI], the father of ISIL, but ISIL is a different creature. Back in the day, AQI operated very much in the shadows. They carried out high-profile attacks, but they would not present themselves as

a fielded force. By contrast, ISIL is a fielded force. ISIL fighters want to go out there and actually engage. If you will, it’s the “Call of Duty” generation that is out there. And that’s part of the recruitment message they convey—that they’re going to go out and fight, whether it’s Americans or Shia or Kurds, etc. This has been part of the lure for recruits. But when ISIL fighters mass, that presents much larger targets. Another challenge they’re going to have is that when they take over cities and villages, they have to govern. ISIL governs through terror and fear, but they’re also going to have to provide basic services for the people. However, remember this is a Sunni-Shia fight. Some Sunnis say they would rather serve under an ISIL government than under Shia leadership. So to maintain some measure of support, ISIL merely has to be better than the alternative. But sustained life under this kind of rule can change one’s point of view.

Michael: Unlike al-Qa`ida, ISIL has seized territory and declared a so-called Caliphate. This is a strength which has helped recruitment. But it has also created vulnerabilities because they have a geographically defined core which can be degraded, even though their command and control provides them with a certain amount of resilience. The other thing that gives them strength is the fact that they’re unconstrained: they don’t have to worry about consequences.

If you look at it narrowly you can say ISIL is doing well. But long-term, if you look at five years from now, ten years from now, I think part of what’s going to defeat them is the fact that they’re holding terrain, the fact that they’re utterly ruthless, and the Sunnis, especially in Iraq are very moderate. During the Iraqi insurgency, they held on to al-Qa`ida because they saw them as protectors against the Shia. But they were looking for an opportunity to throw them off. It’s why they aligned with us during the “Anbar Awakening,” and I think ultimately, ISIL’s heavy-handedness, especially against Arabs and against Sunnis, is going to be their own undoing.

Kurilla: AQI were terrorists. ISIL is a terrorist army. Part of their center of gravity is the Caliphate. That’s what’s driving the recruits. So when you have the second-largest city in Iraq, Mosul, as their Iraqi capital, you have Raqqa in Syria, they control Ramadi, that draws recruits. If you can take that away from them and you break up the idea that they no longer have a Caliphate that can start to break the recruiting. You have to challenge that ideology.

Dumont: The other thing that will help change public perception of them is if the local/regional/provincial/national government—however you want to quantify it—can be just a little bit better at governing than ISIL is. It’ll just be a matter of time before ISIL can’t deliver or goes too far in terrorizing the local population, at which point the local population will throw them out. But to do that, the government’s just got to be a little better than ISIL in governing.



RDML Michael Dumont

ISIL doesn't have anything to back up their governance. Their resources are stolen and pilfered and taken at the end of a gun. So their margins are razor thin, and I think at times they'll be holding on by a thread. Our challenge, as a military, a government, and a coalition, will be identifying where they're vulnerable, and then taking action.

CTC: In the campaign against the Islamic State, what's been the biggest success of the last year, from your perspective? And the biggest challenge?

Kurilla: The biggest success has been keeping the coalition, the strength of the coalition together and then I think the taking of over some 20,000 square kilometers of terrain back from ISIL, both in Iraq-Kurdistan and then northern Syria.

Dumont: The biggest challenge is probably synchronization. We're talking about a huge coalition and in addition to this military effort there are all these other pieces from governance to financing, so it's a very complex problem. It is a challenge to synchronize our efforts to make sure we're complementing each other, maximizing the effects.

CTC: What do you believe are the most important and potentially fruitful aspects of the U.S. military strategy for de-



BG Michael Kurilla



COL Stephen Michael

grading and ultimately destroying the Islamic State?

Dumont: I think first is the partnerships and coordination that we do with international partners. That is probably the most important aspect. I think the second most important aspect is understanding ISIL, what drives them, what motivates them, and how they operate.

Kurilla: Concur. I think the most important piece is really the coalition, which is over 60 nations right now. The other key aspect is the whole-of-government approach.

Michael: If you look at how ISIL started, it's really a political problem, and the military is only one component to the solution. We need to understand that this is not something that can be solved

overnight and most likely is better solved when it's folks in the region that are part of the solution versus us coming in and trying to impose a solution.

CTC: In terms managing a coalition like this, how do you mitigate some of the challenges of command, control, and coordination for military effort across that breadth of different partnerships?

Dumont: Probably one of the first things is making sure everybody involved has the same operational picture, that they're looking through the same lens and that they see the problem set the same way. That ensures that the energy that's being brought to bear against ISIL is appropriately focused, deconflicted, and then complemented by the efforts of some of the other international organizations and even from some of the other parts of the United States government.

Kurilla: I think the command and control is very good. I was up in Erbil, where we had a multi-nation coalition and those that wanted to do certain things did them—for example, on building partner capacity. When you look at the air coalition, everybody's operating off the same command and control lines on that, but each country still has boundaries regarding what they can and can't do and where they can and can't operate, based on what their country is capable of doing militarily and willing to do politically. Coordination would be much more challenging if it involved ground combat, which would cause more friction points. But because the focus is on coordinating air strikes and building partner capacity, it is manageable.

Dumont: And our international partners are very good at sharing with us their own national caveats about what's permissible and not permissible for them. And I think given that we've been a part of combined coalition task forces in other parts of the world, that experience helps us understand the national caveats for these other nations, but it also allows us to build in capabilities and redundancies to make up for any limitations that a country may have. And don't forget, we, the United States, have our own national caveats.

CTC: What are the key challenges in the operating environment when it comes to the campaign against the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq?

Kurilla: Poor governance. Marginalization of the Sunni population in Mosul by the Iraq government results in no support from the people. When you talk about Kurdish forces—whether that's Peshmerga or the YPG in Syria—they move to the sound of the guns. At the same point, remember they were fighting for their own survival up there when ISIL first came in and they were reacting against some of the atrocities that were committed against the Yazidi. In Syria, I think you can see what the YPG has been able to do—their expansion—but they're now approaching a point where they can't go any further. It's the same thing in Iraqi Kurdistan. The Kurds won't go another foot further in Iraq, otherwise they'd be viewed as encroaching into Arab lands.

CTC: Is there a sense of encouragement about the YPG push towards Raqqa?

Dumont: I think there is. But Raqqa is an Arab area. So it can't be a Kurdish force that does anything in Raqqa. It's got to be an Arab coalition of forces that goes into Raqqa.

CTC: Turning to metrics in the campaign against the Islamic State: how do you set benchmarks for progress in this effort?

Kurilla: When we look at progress, one of the worst things you can use is any type of body count. If you're killing 1,000 a month in strikes and they're replacing them at 2,000 a month, that's not good math. When you use metrics like number of strikes or body count, that's just activity, you can't measure that against anything.

The one thing that I think is a very strong metric is terrain re-taking. That is something you physically control and measure. Behind the establishment of the coalition, the second greatest success over there is what you see the Kurds doing in Iraq. They've retaken approximately 4,000 square kilometers of terrain, particularly up at Sinjar Mountain. In addition, the YPG has had success in Syria, both in Kobane and all the way back to the Iraqi border. In the area known as the Kurdish Rojava—western Kurdistan—they've retaken approximately 17,500 to 18,000 square kilometers. The only portion that is not controlled by the Kurds right now is the gap between Jarabulus and Killis, that's the only place that ISIL still has access to the Turkish border for the flow of personnel along with the Afrin pocket up in the northwest. So, to me, terrain retaken is very tangible.

I would also look at population centers and places like the Baiji oil refinery. As long as large population centers like Mosul and Ramadi remain in control of ISIL that goes against the narrative of progress. And it supports the ISIL narrative of a strong caliphate. Those places will need to be taken back by Iraqi forces and the same thing will have to happen over in Syria.

Michael: The other metric is governance. When you look at Iraq specifically, this is why I think the political effort has got to be as hard or even harder than the military effort. The Shia government has to be inclusive. The Iraqis have to feel that they've got a stake because if not, then there will be more room for ISIL. One promising thing here is that some of the local police are actually being integrated into the security services. These are the kind of things that are crucial to long-term success.

CTC: Given our understanding of how the Islamic State is structured, what impact do you think successful leadership targeting will have on the organization's viability?

Kurilla: I think they have a deep bench at the mid-level. At the very top level, you can have more success, as only certain people have the bona fides to be at that top rung. A Haji Mutazz (editor's note: Mutazz's real name was Fadel al-Hiyali. He was Baghdadi's second-in-command and was killed in a U.S. strike near Mosul in August 2015) is very difficult to replace. When you take out that top rung, those are the hard ones to replace.

CTC: How well does the U.S. military understand the Islamic State?

Kurilla: Being that many of them were detainees at some point during their time with AQI, I think we know *some* of them. But I think one of the challenges is that in this conflict we don't have the detention exploitation capabilities that we had at the height of the Iraq War. That gave us tremendous insight into every aspect of their organization, from leadership command and control to communications to ideology to recruitment. We have some of that through our partners, but it's just not at the level which we had back in the day.



The Islamic State still controls the border area between Killis and Jarabulus ADOBE STOCK

CTC: How have our current efforts impacted the foreign fighter flow? Are we able to assess that?

Kurilla: It's widely known we have not stemmed the recruitment.

CTC: Are you able to comment on the impact foreign fighters have on the battlefield, in terms of how are they used militarily. Are they essential to the Islamic State's military composition?

Kurilla: I absolutely think they're essential to ISIL's composition. The number of fighters that are being recruited to come to Iraq or Syria is staggering.

CTC: And they're able to sustain that in terms of replacing those that we have been able to take off the battlefield?

Kurilla: Right now they are.

Dumont: I'm also concerned about ISIL's ability to redirect fighters to other areas. That, in my mind, is a problem that we need to be focused on also, because I think we are going to see over time that they're going to be redirecting people to other areas where they have interests, beyond Iraq and Syria.

CTC: Such as Libya, where reports suggest several senior leaders have gravitated and they've taken control of Sirte.

Kurilla: I think Libya is the strongest external branch of ISIL anywhere in the world. We've seen the people and leadership that have gone down there. That is where they are looking at for their primary expansion.

Dumont: My concern about Libya is that we don't have a government of national unity there yet, and that's not coming together as quickly as we would like. We think that's going to be key for developing public support for a government, a military force, and a police force that will take hold and allow them and us to counteract any effect of ISIL inside Libya. My own view is that it's imperative to quickly stand up some form of national unity government.

CTC: Getting back to Iraq, one of the challenges appears to be getting Iraqi forces to move away from Baghdad in order to take the fight to the Islamic State in Anbar and other provinces.

Kurilla: When you look at the number of Iraqi forces and the number that are right around Baghdad, I think it is a challenge: what they can achieve outside Baghdad as essentially an expeditionary unit in an area they're not predominantly from. When you have a majority Shia army that goes out fighting in a Sunni Arab area against Sunni extremists it presents a whole different challenge from being back in Baghdad defending your Shia stronghold.

Michael: The other dimension of the will to fight is to believe in what you're fighting for. The reason Iraqi forces in the past crumbled under pressure was they weren't willing to fight and die for something they didn't believe in. So, ultimately, when we look at this long term, you have to address the core problem. There's still a challenge with political leadership and still a very sectarian government. This creates risk aversion. Nobody's going to be willing to be the one that pays the price because they don't fundamentally believe in what they're fighting for.

CTC: How has the recent Russian intervention in Syria complicated the challenge?

Kurilla: It has not made it easier. The Russians have not only reached out to help the Syrian regime. They've reached out to the YPG and other entities to offer to arm them, and the YPG have said they will accept that. The appeal for the Kurds is the Russians are not concerned about the Turkish reaction. So that is attractive to them given the larger context of their goal to create an autonomous or semi-autonomous region. Right now, we have shared goals with the Kurds. But that could change when someone else is partnered with them. In terms of our military effort, I think one of the biggest challenges is going to be the de-confliction piece, making sure we truly have de-confliction with the Russians. One errant mishap has strategic consequences.

Dumont: And trying to coordinate with the Russian government is difficult because of the nature of that bureaucracy, and due to the amount of control exercised over the government by its senior leadership; decision-making takes times and permission to de-conflict with anybody takes time. So they wouldn't be as responsive as we would like, no matter what the conditions are.

CTC: One concern about the Russian intervention is that it will create a backlash in the Sunni Arab world and lead to a surge in the number of foreign fighters.

Dumont: It's entirely possible, especially since some take the view that the Russians regard anybody against the Assad regime as a terrorist. For the Russians, that means a free-for-all and a target-rich environment, if you will, and that will just incite even heavier recruiting.

CTC: And some have even talked about how this could be the one thing al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State share some common ground on again, going after the Russians.

Dumont: That's entirely possible.

“The reason Iraqi forces in the past crumbled under pressure was they weren't willing to fight and die for something they didn't believe in.”

— COL Michael

CTC: One of the explanations why the Russians are stepping up their act at this time is because they view the Assad regime as being under a lot of pressure. Was this really a crisis moment these last few months for the Assad regime?

Kurilla: I think the Syrian regime falls if you don't have Iranian and Russian support. That's what keeps them viable.

Dumont: I think with the Russians, it's also a calculation that they want to prop up the Assad regime because of the alliances that they've had with them historically. But it's also a method for the Russians to check, if you will, U.S. presence and U.S. influence in that part of the world. By check I mean attempt to emplace an obstacle or speed bump or make things difficult for the West in the Middle East. I think this is part of a Russian attempt to push back against American and Western influence.

CTC: If you were to speak to the American public regarding the campaign against the Islamic State, what's the one thing you want them to understand about what you're doing?

Michael: The campaign is not perfect, but I think we have the right approach in that it's got to be people from the region coming together to solve it, with our support. If you make it primarily an American problem you change the problem and you make it infinitely worse. So I think that while the problem is complex and challenging, maintaining this regional approach is pushing us in the right direction.

Kurilla: I don't think it can be ignored. You can't just say, "It's a Middle East problem." I think it is absolutely a threat, but it's also a ten-year campaign or more.

Dumont: In my mind, the thing that's important for the American public to understand is that there are no military solutions to the political problems that we are seeing in Iraq, Syria, Libya, and other parts of the Middle East. These are regional issues that need to be resolved regionally and politically. But what the military piece does is allow us to defend our own national security interests. We can buy time for the political process to make headway. But as General Kurilla says, these are not problems that can be ignored, due to the security threats that are involved. But again, it's important to realize that military power alone will not solve the threats that we face. **CTC**

Tunisian Jihadism after the Sousse Massacre

By Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Bridget Moreng

This article assesses the state of Tunisian jihadism after the Sousse massacre. After providing a brief history of jihadism's growth in Tunisia following former President Zine el Abedine Ben Ali's fall, the article explains the serious challenges the beach attack has placed upon the Tunisian state—especially given the strong reliance of Tunisia's economy on the tourism industry. The article goes on to explore the major jihadist players in Tunisia, including those affiliated with both the Islamic State and al-Qa`ida, as well as the state's response to this new phase in its jihadist challenge. The article concludes with a discussion of the possible future of Tunisian jihadism, including the potential for the country to become a theater of increased competition between al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State.

Tunisia's counterterrorism authorities have faced a growing domestic threat since the January 2011 fall of President Zine el Abedine Ben Ali, the gravity of which was underscored by the gruesome March 2015 attack on Tunis's Bardo museum. The country received another shock on June 26, 2015, when a gunman massacred 38 tourists on the beach at the popular destination Port el Kantaoui. About five miles from Sousse, Port el Kantaoui was built in 1979 for the explicit purpose of attracting and hosting tourists. Spectacular attacks on Tunisia's tourism industry, which sits at the heart of the country's economy, pose an existential threat to the state. And the Sousse massacre, perpetrated by a jihadi affiliated with the Islamic State, may signal escalating competition in Tunisia between the Islamic State and al-Qa`ida.

Several factors contributed to the growth in Tunisian jihadism after Ben Ali's fall. One factor was the release of militants imprisoned by the old regime. Abu Iyad al-Tunisi (born Saifallah Ben Hassine), the emir of Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia (AST), was one of the

Daveed Gartenstein-Ross is a senior fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, the chief executive officer of Valens Global, a consulting firm focusing on the challenges posed by violent non-state actors and an adjunct assistant professor in Georgetown University's security studies program. Follow @DaveedGR.

Bridget Moreng is an analyst at Valens Global, and the co-author of a monograph on Tunisian jihadism published by the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism—The Hague. Follow @BridgetMoreng.

key figures released early after the revolution. He had been arrested in Turkey in 2003 and extradited to Tunisia, where Ben Ali's regime sentenced him to 43 years of imprisonment. According to Hassan Ben Brik, who headed AST's *dawa* (evangelism) committee, the founding members of AST had "experiences abroad" prior to their return to Tunisia, meaning that they were involved in transnational jihadism.¹ This group of founders was imprisoned after returning to Tunisia. "We got to know each other in prison, and we began our work from there," said Ben Brik.² AST became the first jihadist organization with a national reach to operate openly in Tunisia after the revolution.

A second factor in the growth of Tunisian jihadism was the permissive environment that initially existed after the revolution, when jihadis were able to conduct *dawa* openly. AST was a major player in such activities. As an unannounced al-Qa`ida affiliate,³ it seems the major reason AST disguised its organizational ties to al-Qa`ida was to allow it to operate openly.

A third factor that allowed jihadism to flourish was that toppling Ben Ali did not resolve the country's deep social problems. Youth unemployment and lack of opportunity were particularly acute,⁴ providing fertile ground for extremism, which often flourishes when problems loom large and society seems unresponsive. It is no coincidence that the bulk of AST's *dawa* efforts focused on areas that were underserved by the Tunisian state—both geographic areas on the country's periphery and also poorer urban areas away from city centers.⁵

Although salafi jihadis were able to operate openly during these early years, they frequently engaged in violence as well. The movement's early attacks in 2011 and 2012 could largely be categorized as *hisba* (vigilante activities designed to enforce religious norms), rather than jihad-related violence.⁶

The clearest inflection point for the growth in jihadist attacks against the state was December 2012, when militants shot and killed Anis Jelassi, an adjutant in the Tunisian National Guard, in the Kasserine governorate.⁷ This incident prompted Tunisian authorities to identify, for the first time, a militant group known as Katibat Uqba ibn Nafi (KUIN), which both Tunisian authorities and the group itself have described as a battalion of al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).⁸ Jelassi's killing prompted intensified police operations in western Tunisia, particularly around Jebel el-Chaambi. These operations resulted in occasional firefights between Tunisian forces and militants running arms and other items across the border. There were several escalations in violence by militants in western Tunisia, including an intensifying use of improvised explosive devices against security forces.⁹

Another escalation was the jihadist assassination of Tunisian politicians. On February 6, 2013, gunmen shot and killed secularist politician Chokri Belaïd outside his home in Tunis. For more than a year prior to his killing, Belaïd had been subjected to a campaign of surveillance and intimidation. Six months after Belaïd's

murder, on July 25, the secularist politician Mohammed Brahmî was gunned down in Tunis, while in a car outside his home. The gunmen reportedly fired 11 shots before fleeing on a motorbike. This second assassination occurred the same week that a jihadist ambush in Jebel el-Chaambi left “eight soldiers dead—five with slit throats.”¹⁰ These two bloody incidents, occurring so close together, represented a point of no return. Tunisia banned AST and launched a full-scale crackdown on domestic jihadist networks.¹¹

After the state’s decision, jihadist attacks were confined for some time mainly to the western part of Tunisia, near the border with Algeria. But by October 2013, their desire to kill tourists in urban centers was made clear. And by 2015, two major attacks on tourist targets had shocked the country and the world.

Tourist Industry as a Terrorist Target

Tourism is essential to Tunisia’s economy. The World Travel and Tourism Council estimates the direct contribution of travel and tourism to Tunisia’s GDP as 7.4 percent, and calculates tourism and travel’s total contribution (including indirect effects) as 15.2 percent of GDP. Similarly, the council estimates that travel and tourism directly supports 6.8 percent of Tunisia’s total employment, and that its total contribution is 13.9 percent of the country’s employment.¹² Thus, it was foreseeable that terrorists would try to kill foreign tourists: Scaring them away could pose an existential threat to the government of Tunisia.

Bardo and Port el Kantaoui were not the first attempted attacks. Jihadists planned a simultaneous bombing in Sousse and Monastir on October 30, 2013. Attentive security guards thwarted a would-be bomber at Sousse’s four-star Riadh Palms Hotel, and his bomb detonated as he was chased onto the beach. Explosives experts later discovered that the bomb had been triggered remotely from a cell phone.¹³ Almost simultaneously with the attempted bombing in Sousse, authorities arrested an 18-year-old named Aymen Sâadi Berchid outside the mausoleum of Habib Bourguiba, the country’s secular-minded first president. Berchid’s backpack was full of explosives. The interior ministry claimed that both attackers belonged to AST.¹⁴ In December of the same year, Tunisian authorities disrupted a plot that was believed to target the island of Djerba, another popular tourist destination.¹⁵

In 2015, jihadists successfully executed two major attacks against tourist targets. In March 2015, an attack at the Bardo National Museum in Tunis left 21 tourists and a Tunisian dead.³ It was followed just three months later by the horrific beach shooting that killed 38. These incidents place the tourist industry in jeopardy, and also fundamentally threaten Tunisia’s future. Tunisian authorities

a On May 19, 2015, Tuil Abdelmajid was arrested in Italy for his alleged involvement in planning the Bardo attack, after arriving in the country by boat with almost 100 migrants. Tunisia had issued an international arrest warrant for Abdelmajid. As of mid-June, Milan’s appellate court refused Abdelmajid’s request to be placed under house arrest as opposed to remaining in custody, deeming the 22-year-old to be a flight risk. “Attentat du Bardo: Détention prolongée de Abdelmajid Tuil,” *Kapitalis*, June 18, 2015. The court held that he should continue to be confined to the San Vittore prison until the Tunisian government provided evidence to support the charges against him. “Strage al Bardo, Tuil resta in carcere: ‘Elevato pericolo di fuga,’” *Repubblica* (Milan), June 16, 2015. As of late August, Abdelmajid continued to maintain his innocence, while fighting extradition. Mark Trevelyn, “Militants Posing as Migrants? Unlikely, Say European Experts,” Reuters, August 28, 2015.

“It was foreseeable that terrorists would try to kill foreign tourists: Scaring them away could pose an existential threat to the government of Tunisia.”

estimate that the Sousse attack alone could cost the tourism sector \$500 million.^{16 b}

Jihadist Players in Tunisia

Al-Qa`ida entered Tunisia soon after the start of the country’s revolution, and its network grew quickly. However, when the Islamic State was expelled from al-Qa`ida in February 2014, Tunisian jihadist organizations faced a dilemma: While the leadership of groups such as AST and KUIN remained loyal to al-Qa`ida, the groups’ foot soldiers instead preferred the Islamic State, in no small part because most of the thousands of Tunisian foreign fighters who went to the Syrian battlefield (more than 4,000 by the majority of estimates) fought for the Islamic State rather than al-Qa`ida’s Syrian affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra.^c There are several possible reasons for Tunisian jihadists’ preference for the Islamic State over Jabhat al-Nusra. Jabhat al-Nusra has been more difficult to join than the Islamic State, administering a strict vetting process for prospective foreign fighters.¹⁷ Some Tunisians have been drawn in by the Islamic State’s superb propaganda efforts, and were convinced that the group “could offer a higher standard of living, a chance to erase arbitrary borders that have divided the Arab world for a century, or perhaps even the fulfillment of Qur’anic prophecies that Armageddon will begin with a battle in Syria.”¹⁸ Further, discussion in online jihadist forums suggests that some Tunisian jihadists believe Jabhat al-Nusra discriminated against them due to their North African origins.

The pattern of jihadist attacks in Tunisia reflects this dynamic of al-Qa`ida dominating the jihadist landscape early, but the Islamic

b The World Travel and Tourism Council assesses that tourism in Tunisia “is likely to suffer well into 2016 and possibly beyond.” World Travel and Tourism Council, “June 2015 Monthly Economic Impact,” June 2015. Tunisia’s agricultural sector has also been hit hard, with prices dropping 35 percent due to the steep reduction in the number of tourists buying food. Michael J. Totten, “How to Destroy a City in Five Minutes,” *World Affairs*, August 25, 2015.

c Confusion about KUIN’s loyalty to al-Qa`ida has been created by Islamic State supporters within the organization who have issued statements designed to augment the Islamic State’s perceived support. For example, a September 2014 statement released by KUIN’s Kairouan branch, which was intended to appear to speak for the whole organization, said that KUIN would “show support, help and aid for the State of the Islamic Caliphate,” and urged “the ranks of the mujahedin” to unite “in every place.” Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, “Bay’ah to Baghdadi: Foreign Support for Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and the Islamic State Part 2,” Syria Comment, September 27, 2014. Despite the confusion sowed by such statements, KUIN leaders later made it clear that their organization was a part of AQIM. See, e.g., Katibat Uqba ibn Nafi, post to Twitter, September 5, 2015 (describing KUIN as a battalion of AQIM); Katibat Uqba ibn Nafi, post to Twitter, April 10, 2015 (pledging bay`a to “the *umma*’s wise man, our ascetic mujahid shaykh Ayman al-Zawahiri”).



A beach at Sousse.

THINKSTOCK

State winning the loyalty of many foot soldiers in the movement. Early attacks were carried out by groups such as AST and KUIN, while lately there has been a rise in violence attributed to the Islamic State. Though the Islamic State has not yet declared an official *wilayat* (province) in Tunisia, recent attacks claimed by the group and other signals point to its expansion into Tunisia.

AST and KUIN

In the 2011 to 2013 period, the most visible Tunisian jihadist organization was AST. The relationship between AST, KUIN, and AQIM was rather cloudy, but in many ways has become clearer.

As previously noted, both Tunisian authorities and KUIN have identified KUIN as one of AQIM's battalions. Tunisian authorities were the first to publicly make this connection, in December 2012, and KUIN did not declare itself part of AQIM until early 2015. AST still has not publicly clarified its position within the al-Qa`ida organization. Instead, the group denies that it is a part of al-Qa`ida, even though it simultaneously affirms that it maintains "loyalty to Qaeda al-Jihad and the jihadi formations."¹⁹ Evidence put forward by Tunisian authorities, however, paints AST as subordinate to AQIM within al-Qa`ida's Africa hierarchy. Tunisian authorities have provided information to the regional press concerning a handwritten "Allegiance Act" between AST emir Abu Iyad al-Tunisi and AQIM leader Abu Musab Abdel Wadoud.²⁰ Regional press reporting suggests that Abu Iyad has pledged *bay`a* (an oath of allegiance) to Abdel Wadoud or another AQIM official.²¹

The relationship that both AST and KUIN have with AQIM is suggestive also of the relationship that they have with each other. The prevalence of AST members in KUIN has long been noted, but it seems that the two are not actually distinct, but rather are different facets of the same organization. It seems that AST was the political front group: It did not participate in elections or the political process, but took advantage of its professed non-violent approach to openly engage in *dawwa*. Meanwhile, it appears that KUIN was the organization's military wing.

This relationship between AST and KUIN has not been announced, but is suggested by four factors: both groups' geographic focus on Tunisia, the subordinate relationship both have with AQIM, the prevalence of AST members in KUIN, and the division of the groups' responsibility into separate functions (with AST handling *dawwa* and KUIN handling military efforts). If this is indeed their relationship, it helps explain AST's marked decline in visibility since the Tunisian state banned it and cracked down. Tunisia's crackdown has no doubt thinned AST's numbers, and the majority of members who were not arrested have gone underground. Even AST's emir, Abu Iyad, has fled the country, and some press reporting suggests that he may have been killed in a U.S. airstrike in Libya.²² If AST's main function was serving as a militant organization's political front group, the fact that space no longer exists for the group to function openly calls its purpose into question. But as the organization's military arm, KUIN's purpose remains clear, and KUIN has continued to claim attacks.

The Islamic State

The Islamic State's potential for growth in Tunisia has long been clear due to the large number of Tunisians who fought under its banner in the Syria-Iraq theater. But this year, the group's claims of responsibility for the Bardo museum attack and Sousse beach massacre have propelled the group further into the spotlight in the country.

The Islamic State is louder and more overt than is al-Qa`ida and, in fact, this is an essential part of the group's expansion strategy.²³ The Islamic State works to foster the perception that it possesses enormous momentum in an effort to attract new recruits, and even entire organizations, into its orbit. The Islamic State established a social media presence before claiming these two major attacks in 2015. In December 2014, Ifriqiyah Media, a well-known media foundation that disseminates propaganda from Africa-based jihadist groups, released a statement pledging *bay`a* to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.²⁴ A week later, a group calling itself "Jund al-Khila-

fa in Tunisia” released an audio recording pledging allegiance to the Islamic State.²⁵ The group—which has a similar name to Algeria’s Jund al-Khilafa, which defected from AQIM to the Islamic State—is believed to be comprised of pro-Islamic State defectors from KUIN. Following Jund al-Khilafa’s pledge, Islamic State propaganda focusing on Tunisia included the December 17, 2014 video, “Message to the People of Tunisia,” which urged Tunisians to pledge *bay`a* to the Islamic State and carry out attacks.²⁶ In April 2015, another pro-Islamic State media outlet, Ajnad al-Khilafa b-Ifriqiya, was established, and soon began claiming Islamic State attacks in Tunisia.²⁷

Jund al-Khilafa’s claims of attention-grabbing attacks in Tunisia are designed to raise the Islamic State’s profile in the country, and may be an attempt to persuade the senior leadership to recognize it as an official *wilayat*. The Islamic State immediately claimed responsibility after the Bardo museum attack, and in a subsequent March 29 audio release, Jund al-Khilafa re-declared its allegiance to the Islamic State. Jund al-Khilafa declared three days before the Bardo attack that “glad tidings of what will bring you joy and bring joy to the Muslims in general” would soon arrive, but KUIN also issued ominous statements before the museum attack that could similarly be interpreted as foreshadowing it. Tunisia’s later investigation attributed the terrorist incident to KUIN, and identified the group’s emir Luqman Abu Saqr as the mastermind. Open source information does not resolve which of the two groups is culpable, but if the Islamic State did indeed exaggerate its role in the Bardo attack, such exaggerations are consistent with its momentum-based strategy for expansion. After all, the Islamic State was able to claim the attack while the carnage of Bardo still dominated the news.

The Islamic State claimed a number of attacks after Bardo, culminating in the extraordinarily bloody shooting spree on the beach at Sousse. The Islamic State’s rising profile in Tunisia has the potential to rally the foot soldiers who are loyal to that organization, and the continuing competition between the Islamic State and al-Qa`ida in that country should be carefully watched.

Tunisia’s Response to the Jihadist Threat

In the wake of the Bardo and Sousse attacks, Tunisia has significantly bolstered its domestic counterterrorism efforts. Tunisia’s immediate response after the attack at Port el Kantaoui involved a mixture of policing measures and attempts to shutter the incubators of extremism. Tunisia claims that it deployed 100,000 members of the security forces, 3,000 of whom were tasked with defending tourist destinations and archaeological sites.²⁸ Within two weeks of the Sousse attack, Tunisian authorities had reportedly carried out more than 700 security operations, arresting at least 127 people.²⁹ The government also announced plans to close 80 mosques thought to be operating illegally or fostering extremism.³⁰

A week after the attack, President Beji Caid Essebsi declared a state of emergency, warning that, “if attacks like Sousse happen again, the country will collapse.”³¹ The state of emergency gave officials the authorization to address potential threats. The temporary law allowed the state to “restrict the right of public assembly,” including protests deemed to be a danger to public safety.³² On October 2, Tunisian state media said the government was lifting the state of emergency.³³ The move to lift the state of emergency was unsurprising. At the end of July 2015, the Tunisian government extended the state of emergency for two months.³⁴ Prime Minister Habib Essid explained in mid-September that the main rationale

“The Islamic State’s rising profile in Tunisia has the potential to rally foot soldiers.”

for lifting the state of emergency would be “improvement of the security situation.”³⁵

But the situation is in many ways beyond Tunisia’s control because the center of gravity for jihadism in North Africa lies outside its borders. The Bardo and Sousse attackers trained in Libya, though it is unclear if they were in the same location. Tunisian interior ministry official Rafik Chelli said in June 2015 that all three attackers trained in Sabratha, a jihadist hub 60 miles from the Tunisian border, while other reports suggest that the Bardo attackers trained in the eastern Libyan city of Derna.³⁶ Further, the failed October 2013 attackers in Sousse and Monastir also trained in Libya before returning to Tunisia.³⁷

While the thousands of Tunisian foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq get the bulk of public attention, an estimated 1,000 to 4,000 have joined the Islamic State or al-Qa`ida in Libya.³⁸ Libya provides a place to flee crackdowns, to train, and to plan future attacks on Tunisian soil. In an effort to address this, the Tunisian government announced plans to seal its border with Libya by building a 100-mile barricade along the frontier, which it will equip with surveillance centers and electric fences, in an effort to stop the flow of militants.³⁹

Tunisia had been working to deal with its flow of foreign fighters even prior to the high-profile attacks. Since 2013, Tunisia has imposed a travel ban that authorities claim has prevented more than 12,000 Tunisians from travelling to militant hubs such as Iraq, Syria and Libya.⁴⁰

In what appears to be an expedited process following the Sousse attack, Tunisia passed a new counterterrorism law on July 24, just one month after the massacre.⁴¹ Tunisia’s new law provided stronger punishments for terrorist-related activity, including the death penalty. Human rights groups criticized the new legislation as overly broad and ambiguous, just as they had voiced concerns about the 2003 law before it.⁴² The concern is that the state may use this legislation to target legitimate forms of expression or dissent.

Conclusion

The jihadist threat to Tunisia has continued to feature prominently following the Sousse attack. On August 19, two gunmen shot a Tunisian policeman in Sousse, who later died in hospital.⁴³ The government has uncovered alleged plots to detonate car bombs in the capital.⁴⁴

Further, Tunisia has continued to experience militant attacks in the Kasserine region. This was one of the first regions in Tunisia to experience a surge in jihadist violence. Since the start of 2015, at least 14 members of the Tunisian security forces have been killed, and eight wounded, in fights with militants in Kasserine. For example, on February 18 militants killed four Tunisian police officers in a pre-dawn attack near the city of Kasserine, shooting them while they were driving.⁴⁵ On April 7, around 30 militants attacked a mil-

itary checkpoint in the town of Sbitla in central Kasserine, killing four soldiers and wounding three.⁴⁶ Some of the attacks in Kasserine have been claimed by KUIN, others by the Islamic State, and others have not been claimed at all.⁴⁷ Kasserine has traditionally been an area of KUIN strength, and one factor adding credence to its claims of responsibility is its release of videos that feature action montages documenting its various attacks.⁴⁸

Overall, Tunisia faces serious challenges, given the collapse of its tourism sector following the Sousse attack. Jihadis recognize the tourist industry's centrality to the country's economy, as well as its vulnerability. While AST has declined in the wake of the state's crackdown, this does not appear to be a counterterrorism success

so much as the political front group's decline once it could no longer operate openly.

Groups like KUIN and the Islamic State will continue to target Tunisia, including tourist destinations, with the aim of crippling the country's economy. Seeing no alternative, the Tunisian government is likely to continue its crackdown. But since jihadist networks have spread beyond Tunisia's borders, the government's efforts can at best contain but not solve the problem.

The Islamic State will continue to attempt to expand into Tunisia, a move that would come at al-Qa`ida's expense, and Tunisia may become a theater for intense competition between the two groups. **CTC**

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Tailored Online Interventions: The Islamic State's Recruitment Strategy

By J.M. Berger

The Islamic State has devoted significant resources to implementing a distinct online recruitment strategy, which follows targets from their introduction to the organization's message, through a careful pruning of their social networks, before culminating in a call to action. The strategy relies on scores of users who maintain a high level of availability online, allowing them to lavish attention on potential recruits, and who provide a drumbeat of incitement to action, such as social media activism, migration to Islamic State territories, or the commission of terrorist attacks.

Thousands of foreign fighters and non-combatant immigrants have traveled to join the Islamic State, including unprecedented numbers of Westerners. Western supporters who cannot travel are urged to carry out attacks in their homelands. So far in 2015, at least 60 people have been arrested in the United States for criminal acts in support of the Islamic State.

In almost every American case, social media played some part in recruitment and/or radicalization, as it has in many other examples. A study of Islamic State Twitter use published by the author in early 2015 found at least 46,000 Twitter accounts that supported the organization that were in use in and around October 2014.¹ Since then, Twitter has suspended the accounts of Islamic State supporters in large numbers, but many users create new accounts and return. Ongoing monitoring suggests there are currently a minimum of around 40,000 accounts that actively support the Islamic State,² with perhaps 2,000 tweeting^a primarily in English.^b

a Despite the Islamic State's success recruiting online, the problem remains an outlier in most meaningful respects. Even the most generous estimate of Islamic State supporters online is still a fraction of one percent of Twitter's overall users, and the number of users actively seeking to radicalize in any region is even smaller. While this issue merits attention from both researchers and policymakers, the problem should be kept in context.

b Except where otherwise stipulated, data in this article was derived from a monitored set of around 1,600 accounts, including known Islamic State supporters, recruiters, and non-supporters who they followed and interacted with. The starting set was defined in July 2015 and updated subsequently due to the suspension of at least 500 accounts in August, with many being recreated by the users.

J.M. Berger is a non-resident fellow with the Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World. He is author of Jihad Joe: Americans Who Go to War in the Name of Islam, and co-author of ISIS: The State of Terror, and The ISIS Twitter Census. Follow @intelwire.

Observers have focused, rightly, on the quality and quantity of Islamic State propaganda as a factor in its success, but passive material can only take the typical radicalization so far. Therefore, the organization deploys a wide variety of tailored online interventions to bring their targets into the fold.

Sometimes referred to as "grooming," these interventions are conducted by small teams of prolific social media users who lavish attention on potential recruits in order to shape their worldview and encourage direct action in support of the Islamic State, ranging from lone wolf-style terrorist attacks to migration to Islamic State territories. Some interveners are more formally affiliated with the Islamic State while others appear to be informal volunteers.^c

Online interventions are more prevalent in countries where the social climate offers few opportunities to safely discuss an interest in the Islamic State in a face-to-face setting, but even in such environments, many cases incorporate activity that crosses over from online to real-world interactions. There are several distinct elements present in these interventions, from which recruiters can select when tailoring an approach. The most common are:

- First contact
 - Islamic State seeks out target
 - Recruiters respond to targets who seek out Islamic State
- Create micro-community
 - Maintain constant contact
 - Encourage target to insulate against outside influences
- Shift to private communications
- Identify and encourage pro-Islamic State action suitable for target
 - Social media activism
 - Travel to Islamic State territories
 - Terrorism

At least dozens of Islamic State supporters use these tactics to target Americans as potential recruits, with considerably more activity focused on France, the United Kingdom, Belgium, and other European countries. Similar activity is found around the world, with the scope of the problem varying widely from one region to the next. In each arena the tactics differ, sometimes substantially, and in areas geographically proximate to Islamic State-controlled territory, the mix can be weighted to offline recruitment. This article will specifically examine the Islamic State's online approach to recruiting Americans and Europeans.

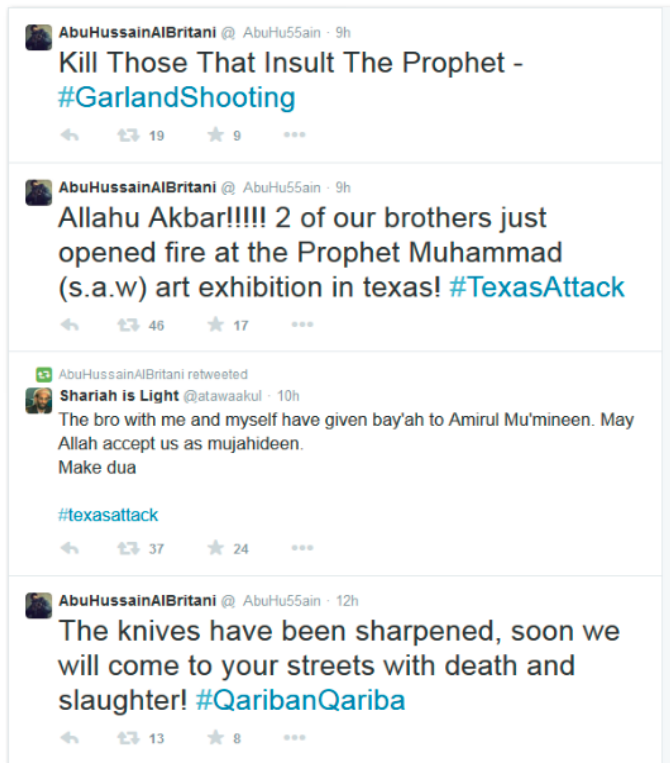
First Contact

Before the Islamic State can groom a potential recruit, it must

c The ratio of formal to informal participation is unclear, but over time the interactions observed on social media that progress past the point of initial contact typically seem to include at least one person formally aligned with the Islamic State, and often as many as four or five.

first make contact. Contact can be initiated by the recruiter or the potential recruit. Recruiters monitor online communities where they believe they can find receptive individuals, but they also make themselves highly available to curiosity seekers.

Islamic State supporters follow both radical and mainstream Muslim networks online, seeking receptive targets. A July 2015 analysis of 1,600 Twitter accounts linked to English-language Islamic State supporters showed that many accounts followed and interacted with Muslim-oriented social media accounts that were radical but not overtly violent, and in some cases, not obviously connected to radicalism at all.^d



Tweets by Junaid Hussain before and after the Garland attack.

Among the most significant of these were accounts associated with the U.K.-based CAGE organization (formerly Cageprisoners), an advocacy group founded by a former Guantanamo detainee Moazzam Begg and focused on Muslim prisoners. CAGE has advocated various controversial views and has been linked to such radicals-turned-terrorists as American al-Qa`ida figure Anwar al-Awlaki and the notorious British national and Islamic State jihadi Mohammed Emwazi, better known as “Jihadi John.”³ Users also followed British accounts associated with the former al-Muhajiroun network⁴ and even more radical variants on the theme of Muslim prisoners (a trend also seen in Arabic language accounts).^e

d Data collected and analyzed by J.M. Berger using metrics described in Berger and Morgan, “The ISIS Twitter Census.”

e Significant accounts included relatively mainstream Muslim *dawah* (evangelical preaching) operations with no overtly radical components, inspirational religious quotes and stories, and accounts discussing Muslim marriage.

“Islamic State supporters follow both radical and mainstream Muslim networks online, seeking receptive targets.”

Overtly radical organizations with specific regional presence or an English-language focus were an important part of the mix. They include Authentic Tauheed, led by prominent English-speaking radical cleric Abdullah Faisal, who has transitioned from supporting al-Qa`ida to an overtly pro-Islamic State orientation;⁵ the Islamic Thinkers Society, a New York-based organization formerly linked to American al-Qa`ida recruits,⁶ now also increasingly sympathetic to Islamic State;⁷ and the Islamic Awakening message board, a forum for a wider range of users with views ranging from conservative to radical, although moderators generally police any talk of violence.

By monitoring activity in these communities, as well as by searching content, Islamic State supporters look for potential recruits, such as individuals expressing anti-Western sentiments. Specifics vary depending on the individuals involved. For instance, Islamic State supporters frequently ask individuals expressing religious sentiments if they have considered *hijra* (emigration) to the Islamic State.^f In other cases, they may respond to more general content posted by targets, such as tweets about pets, meals, or politics.

Through the first half of 2014, it was possible to encounter Islamic State propaganda online without seeking it, thanks to the group’s aggressive use of broadcasting techniques such as bots (automated, high-volume tweeting of content) and hashtag spamming (tweeting content at high volume on unrelated hashtags). However, the suspension of Islamic State social media accounts—by Facebook, YouTube, and, most recently, Twitter—has significantly reduced the reach of such tactics. An estimated half of Islamic State-related arrests in the United States from January to July involved the use of Facebook, despite the platform’s more aggressive suppression tactics.⁹

Initial interest in the Islamic State is often prompted by mainstream media coverage rather than its own social media output.⁸ Media coverage and popular interest spiked dramatically with the Islamic State’s seizure of Mosul in June 2014 and its subsequent claim to have reconstituted the caliphate. While suspensions have limited the ability of Islamic State supporters to broadcast propa-

f Nearly 90 percent of tweets found using a Twitter search for the phrase “make *hijra*” in English were from Islamic State supporters, including several who were previously being monitored. The remaining tweets were sarcastic comments directed at Islamic State supporters. Excluded were retweets and the activity of one bot. Retrieved August 1, 2015. In monitored tweets, for example, “How many will it take that leaves & makes hijrah in front of ur eyes before you realise it’s time to leave too? Preserve ur emaan leave asap” and “All you Somali sisters residing in the west must make hijrah now to your homeland and marry those mujahideen ASAP!!!”

g Estimate based on a review of criminal complaints in 25 out of 49 recorded cases.

ganda, it is still relatively easy to find its supporters online.⁹

Once contact is made, the response varies according to the target. Islamic State supporters, including foreign fighters, will often simply answer questions in a friendly manner, patiently awaiting a more substantial opening to proselytize.

Islamic State supporters and recruiters also seek to communicate with potentially disenfranchised or disaffected people by tweeting, retweeting, and using popular hashtags or hashtags relating to divisive current events, such as the unrest in Ferguson, Missouri and Baltimore, Maryland, or the Dylann Roof white supremacist terrorist attack in Charleston, South Carolina.¹⁰ While Islamic State supporters have employed this tactic aggressively, there is little evidence that it is particularly effective.

Create Micro-Community

Once first contact is established, Islamic State recruiters and supporters quickly seek to create a small community surrounding the target. The recruiters are available in high volume bursts to interact with targets, often publishing 50 or 60 tweets per day, with some prolific users clocking over 250 on given days. Some maintain a presence very similar to ordinary social media addicts, tweeting many links to news stories or images and videos they find amusing.

The hyperactive pace of Islamic State supporter posting ensures that it is easy for a target to find conversation at any hour of the day and night, allowing virtually constant contact as a relationship progresses.

At some point after first contact, Islamic State supporters begin to encourage targets to isolate themselves from non-supporters. This can take the form of general exhortation not to befriend non-Muslims, based on the claim they cannot be trusted. Recruiters sometimes invoke a religious doctrine known as *al walaa wal baraa* (loyalty to Muslims and the disavowal of non-Muslims). “Where is your *Al Walaa wal Baraa*?” one Twitter user asked a conservative Muslim target, in response to a tweet about mainstream issues. The target, who did not visibly support Islamic State, appears to have ignored the recruiter. Another tweet, directed at a cleric, asked “ya sheikh you want to talk about *aqeedah* [belief] and ignore *al wala wal baraa*?”¹¹

Anti-Muslim activists on social media can also play into this dynamic and reinforce the recruiters’ message of alienation. These users often engage directly with people showing an interest in the Islamic State. A particularly noteworthy example occurred in relation to the May 2015 Garland, Texas, in a “Draw Mohammed” contest. Just days before the attack, “troll” tweets (including some apparently specific to the contest) were directed at an account belonging to Elton Simpson, one of the two gunmen, who had expressed unhappiness over the contest.^h¹²

Possible recruits are also encouraged by Islamic State supporters to distrust other Muslims who have mainstream beliefs, arguing

“Islamic State supporters begin to encourage targets to isolate themselves from non-supporters. This can take the form of general exhortation not to befriend non-Muslims.”

they are at best misguided or at worst apostates. Among the English-speaking users monitored for this study, mainstream Muslims are often derided as “coconuts,” a racially connoted term meaning “brown on the outside, white on the inside.” Targets may be specifically discouraged from attending mosques where they could be exposed to moderating influences.^j¹³

Finally, the suspension of targeted users who have only started to overtly support the Islamic State may accelerate the process of isolation. Users who are suspended and come back with a new account often follow fewer accounts than they did previously, and they often stop following mainstream accounts unrelated to the Islamic State. Since suspensions ramped up about one year ago, the ratio of Islamic State supporters to non-supporters in monitored social networks has increased.^k

Shift to Private Communications

Once a relationship begins to develop, some interactions are typically moved to private communication channels where the actual work of recruitment or instigation of a terrorist attack can take place away from prying eyes.

Conversations may take place within the private messaging function on an existing social media platform, such as Twitter or Facebook.

Islamic State recruiters often favor messaging applications with strong encryption. Among the most popular are WhatsApp, Kik, Surespot, and Telegram. Some Islamic State supporters listed their user information for such applications in their Twitter bios, although others discouraged this for security reasons.^l Secure messaging information was more commonly shared in tweets or private messaging.

Islamic State users specifically encouraged targets to send queries regarding *hijra* to Islamic State territories through encrypted

h The troll tweets cited here were directed at a previous account used by Simpson that was subsequently suspended, as a result of which most of Simpson’s original tweets from that period could not be retrieved. Among the troll tweets were the following, posted by three different users on April 24, 2015; April 26, 2015; and May 1, 2015: “you pathetic scumslims talk all that shit and block me,” “Shariah is the darkness of the 7th Century. NO THANK YOU,” “hahaha you idiots get angry over cartoons,” and “We will keep drawing Muhammad.”

i In monitored tweets, for example, “Ppl said “Indonesia is a majority muslims” .. nah ,, they lie ,, most of indonesian ppl are COCONUT !!” and “Coconuts working overtime right now to prove they’re not Muslims. lol”

j In monitored tweets, for example, “Important information for all you coco’s [coconuts] out there - A place that calls to shirk and cursing of the Sahaba is not a *masjid*,” and “Would the Prophet have police recruitment days in his *Masjid* for the sake of the Qureyshi government? How then is this a *masjid* today?!”

k The ratio increased by about 60 percent. Significant caveats attend to this estimate, due to the difficulty of creating a comparable dataset in an environment of massive and frequent suspensions.

l From monitored tweets, for example, “I wish the ukhtis would take their kik & surespot & telegram & whatever else out of their bio, it’s asking 4 trouble.”

channels.^m The shift to such applications has been described by FBI Director James Comey as “going dark”—the point at which continued monitoring by law enforcement becomes problematic.¹⁴ When the shift can be observed in open-source postings, however, the transition itself can be read as an indication of deepening radicalization.

Some recruiters employed Skype for voice or video conversation, although this was infrequently discussed in public tweets. In at least one documented case, recruiters made contact via postal mail.¹⁵

Recruiters have combined social media with offline physical outreach in exchanges observed online and in cases documented in criminal prosecutions. In the United States, online recruiting has eclipsed real-world recruiting, broadly speaking, but the old-school physical approach remains in play with evidence of on-the-ground recruitment activity in the United States, and even more in Europe.¹⁶ In general, the role of offline recruitment becomes more significant the closer one gets to an Islamic State-contested territory.

Encourage Action

At some point in the relationship, an Islamic State recruiter or supporter will attempt to identify the most likely action a target is willing to undertake and encourage it.

This can happen earlier or later in the process, depending on how radical the target may already be around the time of first contact. Some targets appear with relatively new accounts and immediately request private contact with Islamic State recruiters and supporters, often generating suspicion from the latter, although they frequently agree to make contact anyway. Circumstantial evidence suggests that if a recruiter has doubts about the target's sincerity, he or she may recommend solitary action such as a lone wolf attack, which is less likely to expose the Islamic State's support network to risk.^{n 17}

At the most basic level, Islamic State users draw their targets into social media activism as a natural result of the target's increasing engagement with the Islamic State. If a target becomes sufficiently engaged that his or her account is suspended, he or she may create a new account using tools provided by Islamic State supporters. One account, known as Baqiya Shoutout, is particularly important in reuniting English-speaking Islamic State supporters on Twitter. It announces English-language accounts that return from suspension and maintains a list of follow recommendations. The account itself is routinely suspended and reincorporated. Once targeted users start to employ such tools, retweeting and dissemination of Islamic State content become routine.

Beyond social media activism, there are a number of ways users can be drawn into concrete actions in support of the Islamic State, the most important being *hijra*, or emigration to Islamic State territories, and terrorism.

While recruiters allow their targets' expressed preferences to steer the direction of action, to a significant extent the exhortations generally favor *hijra*. The Islamic State sees itself as a generational state-building project with a need not just for fighters, but also for

“In the United States, online recruiting has eclipsed real-world recruiting, broadly speaking, but the old-school physical approach remains in play.”

professionals, whether emigrating as a family unit or singles being matched for matrimony on arrival in Islamic State territory. As a millenarian project, the Islamic State offers a carefully manipulated image of what its propagandists consider to be a utopian society, which is an important part of its sales pitch.¹⁸

Some targets determine that *hijra* is not an option, either stymied by government restrictions on their travel or financial obstacles.^o In such cases, Islamic State recruiters and supporters promote the option of terrorism at home. The most visible and frequent manifestation of this is found in undirected tweets either urging or threatening attacks, such as “Ok so they're talkin so mch abt 7/7. Bidhnillah we'll cont. to hit 'em til every day becomes an event to remeber 1/1,2/2 etc. :) #sevensseven” and “To those who can not make #Hijrah Strike from within, it doesn't matter how you do it. Use a bomb. A gun. A knife. A Car or a big rock #Islamic State” (all tweets are reproduced verbatim, including grammatical and spelling errors).¹⁹

Specific guidance is sometimes available. In the case of Garland shooter Elton Simpson, a number of direct influences were observed, although they were directed at a Twitter account that had been suspended prior to the attack. Tweets from the period leading up to the attack could not be fully retrieved, but tweets directed to the account remained available after the attack, originating from accounts monitored by the author.

Media reports have highlighted the alleged role of Junaid Hussain, a British hacker who joined the Islamic State some time in or after 2013, and who was very active on social media.²⁰ Unnamed government sources have described Hussain as an important recruiter and instigator of attacks.²¹ But while Hussain did interact with Simpson, possibly including via private communications, he was only one of many Islamic State supporters who did so. Among those was a British foreign fighter in Raqqa named Tariq Hamayun, aka Abu Muslim al Britani, under the Twitter handle @Muslim_Sniper_D, an associate of Junaid Hussain.²²

Other users in Simpson's social network had been tweeting about the Garland event for weeks in advance of the attack, and many provided links to its time and location. On April 23, for instance, one user tweeted, “Brothers & Sisters. the *kuffar* [unbelievers] are exercising their free speech 'hate speech' by drawing *Rasulallah* [the Prophet],” with a link to more information. On April 26, 2015, a little more than a week before the attack, an Islamic State supporter responding to an unknown comment by Simpson tweeted, “You really have to do it!” On May 1, two days before the attack, a user

m From monitored tweets, “asalamu aleikum wr wb anyone who wants help in making hijrah this my surespot: [account information removed]” and “[To specific user:] delete ur tweets regarding hijrah and use surespots to contacts brothers.”

n For instance, reporters posing as jihadis.

o Some monitored tweets since August have discouraged *hijra* to Iraq and Syria, indicating that the border crossing had become more difficult in light of recent events in Turkey. Other users continued to encourage *hijra* either generally or specifically, shifting the destination to Libya in some cases.

tweeted, “Kuffar gone crazier, they are making draw Muhammad SAW event !!!!!” and another tweeted, “Brothers in Texas Pls go to there with your weapons, bombs or with knives Defend your prophet, It is your chance now !!”²³ (Interestingly, the user who posted the last tweet was an imposter, an American who convincingly posed as an Islamic State supporter and has since been arrested.²⁴)

Other manipulations may have been more subtle and powerful. Simpson reportedly had a dream about a woman in a hijab looking at him from down the road, which online associates said he interpreted as being associated with martyrdom. At least once prior to the attack, Simpson consulted with an Islamic State supporter known on Twitter as “End of Time Dreams,” who professed to link English-speaking users with Arabic-speaking experts in dream interpretation. According to information posted after the attack by that user, Simpson had at least one other vision involving another man and “the sword.” Simpson consulted “End of Time Dreams” about the vision around April 28.²⁵

However, such direct intervention appears to be relatively rare, based on the information currently available in both open sources and court documentation. Generalized guidance appears to be the rule, specific guidance the exception.

Conclusion

The social media ecosystem created by the Islamic State for use in radicalization offers a number of potential warning signs and

intervention points along the road that leads a targeted user to take concrete action on behalf of the group. Yet there are significant practical obstacles to tackling the problem programmatically. The majority of those who post messages in support of the Islamic State to social media will never act out. There is no consensus on when radical rhetoric signals a move to violence, at what point intervention is appropriate, or what type of intervention is most appropriate.²⁶

One crucial transition point is the move to private communication channels. Once that shift takes place, additional information is protected by the channel’s privacy and/or encryption functions. Not all users who make the jump to private communication will eventually act, but many Islamic State supporters who act will have made the transition.

In addition, the data examined for this article indicates that users who appear to seek and receive extraordinary guidance, such as dream interpretation or physical or financial assistance, may be closer to action than other potential recruits and may be appropriate targets for law enforcement intervention.

To some extent, it is possible to reverse engineer cases of visible radicalization, particularly when it leads to violence or *hijra*, and identify key recruiters and inciters. Monitoring of existing online recruitment networks can also reveal which individuals are more likely to be involved in providing such extraordinary guidance, or otherwise moving a target toward concrete action. **CTC**

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The First Defector: Abu Sulayman al-Utaybi, the Islamic State, and al-Qa`ida

By Brian Fishman

Tensions between the Islamic State and al-Qa`ida have been in the headlines since the Islamic State's feud with its one-time Syrian affiliate, Jabhat al-Nusra, became public in 2013, and particularly since the Islamic State declared itself a caliphate in 2014. The Islamic State's leaders see al-Qa`ida as irrelevant meddlers, while al-Qa`ida's commanders believe their Islamic State counterparts to be so ideologically extreme that they cannot cobble together a coherent strategic plan. Al-Qa`ida's concerns about the Islamic State were heightened in 2007 when a defector disclosed that the Islamic State of Iraq's leaders had declared a state in 2006 because of apocalyptic premonitions. Nearly a decade later the defector's accusations remain part of the war of words between the Islamic State and al-Qa`ida.

On November 23, 2013 a Twitter user with the handle @rakan_77 established the hashtag #qadi_dawlat_al-Baghdadi-yantaqiduha to highlight the contents of a private letter written by Abu Sulayman al-Utaybi to Usama bin Ladin six years earlier.¹ Although the letter excoriated the then-Islamic State of Iraq and its leaders, Abu Umar al-Baghdadi and Abu Hamzah al-Muhajir,^a it might easily have been dismissed as delusional ranting or pure propaganda—in 2007 or 2013—if not for its author. Abu Sulayman was the former Chief Shariah Judge of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). That is why @rakan_77's 2013 hashtag was so provocative; it read, essentially: “chief judge of Baghdadi's state criticizes it.”

Born in Saudi Arabia in 1980, Abu Sulayman studied at the

a “Abu Umar al-Baghdadi” and “Abu Hamzah al-Muhajir” are both nicknames used on the battlefield. Abu Umar's real name is Hamid Dawud Muhammad Khalil al-Zawi; Abu Hamzah's most commonly cited real name is Abu Ayyub al-Masri, but officials in the United States, Jordan, and Egypt also claim that his given name in Egypt was Yusuf al-Dardiri. The two men split duties in managing ISI. Abu Hamzah was the ISI's primary operational manager and interlocutor with al-Qa`ida; Abu Umar grew into a key oversight role for the group's ideological and political efforts.

Brian Fishman is the former Director of Research at the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point. He is a Fellow with the International Studies Program at New America and an Affiliate with the Center for International Security and Cooperation at Stanford University. Follow @brianfishman.

prestigious Islamic University of Imam Muhammad bin al-Sa`ud in Riyadh. Although reportedly a strong student, Abu Sulayman abandoned his studies in 2006 and joined al-Qa`ida in Iraq (AQI).² When U.S. forces raided an ISI outpost near Sinjar in September 2007, Abu Sulayman's name was listed on a roster of foreign fighters that had joined their cause.³

Abu Sulayman's scholarly credentials were not stellar, but he had some religious education and, most critically, had the qualification most valued by the then-leader of AQI, Abu Mus`ab al-Zarqawi: he was willing to put himself in harm's way. A leading jihadi propaganda outlet, the Global Islamic Media Front, emphasized these aspects when it memorialized Abu Sulayman as “a scholar and a mujahid who lived and worked according to Islam.”⁴

Abu Sulayman was named Chief Judge of ISI in March 2007, almost a year after Zarqawi's death. Although he released public sermons in April and June 2007, Abu Sulayman had deep reservations about the Islamic State of Iraq and its leadership.⁵ He worried that Abu Hamzah, the group's military leader, was dangerously divorced from the battlefield, which had allowed lower-level commanders to exploit and oppress the Sunni community they were ostensibly defending.⁶ The problem was familiar to broken bureaucracies in government, companies, and terrorist organizations around the world: a leader dependent on reports produced by subordinates unwilling to deliver bad news. “Mayors and emirs say they only provide accurate news to the state,” Abu Sulayman explained in his letter to Bin Ladin, but in fact “they only report the good news.”⁶ Abu Sulayman charged that this was obscuring a deeply dysfunctional organization—one in which local elements were abusing the population and running petty criminal operations, including prostitution rings.

End of Days

Even more worryingly, explained Abu Sulayman, Abu Hamzah was obsessed with the apocalypse and it was leading him to make irrational strategic decisions. The deposed judge complained that Abu Hamzah expected the imminent return of the *Mahdi*, a heroic figure that Islamic prophecy suggests will return to earth to save good Muslims prior to an apocalyptic showdown with the forces of evil. According to Abu Sulayman, the two leaders had timed the declaration of the Islamic State of Iraq for October 2006 because they thought the *Mahdi* would return within a year.⁷ It was not the first time that jihadi insurrectionists had declared the imminent return of the *Mahdi*; when Juhayman al-Utaybi's raiders seized the Grand

b Abu Sulayman al-Utaybi “Letter to Usama bin Laden.” There are legitimate questions about the validity of the letter attributed to Abu Sulayman al-Utaybi in 2013, but it accords closely with the comments by Ayman al-Zawahiri in a series of letters to Abu Hamzah al-Muhajir written in late 2007 and early 2008. Those letters were declassified and released to the Long War Journal and then subsequently translated by the Foundation for Defense of Democracies.

Mosque in Mecca in 1979, they claimed that Juhayman's brother-in-law Muhammad bin Abdallah al-Qahtani was the *Mahdi*.⁸

Two years later, with no *Mahdi* in sight, the group's purported then-leader Abu Umar al-Baghdadi was retelling eschatological prophecies to motivate followers. In the end-of-days tale, villainous "Romans" camped near the Syrian city of Dabiq would face an army of Muslims from Medina in an apocalyptic confrontation. "One third will run away, and Allah will never forgive them. One third will be killed and they will be the best of martyrs in Allah's site. One third, who will never be subject to trials or tribulations, will win."⁹

If Abu Sulayman's accusations about Abu Hamzah's apocalyptic worldview are accurate, then the ISI leader's views shifted significantly in the coming years—away from eschatology and toward management before he and Abu Umar al-Baghdadi were killed in a joint U.S.-Iraqi raid in April 2010. "The immediacy of the *Mahdi*'s return and the apocalypse to follow was attenuated in favor of building the institution of the caliphate," argues Will McCants. "Messiah gave way to management."¹⁰ Management was never ignored completely, however. Only three months after ISI was declared, the group released a long book outlining its basic governance structure, priorities, and procedures.¹¹ Despite the eschatological rhetoric, they were building the foundation for institution-building from day one.

Still, there are lingering hints suggesting that Abu Sulayman was on to something. The Islamic State in 2014 named its preeminent English language magazine *Dabiq* to honor the apocalyptic prophecy, and leads each issue with a quote from Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi arguing that, "the spark has been lit here in Iraq, and its heat will continue to intensify—by Allah's permission—until it burns the crusader armies in Dabiq."¹²

Legitimate or fabricated, Abu Sulayman's concerns did not stay private for long. On August 25, 2007, only months after being named Chief Judge, ISI unceremoniously announced that Abu Sulayman had been replaced.^c There was no detailed explanation, but the announcement was structured to create doubt about Abu Sulayman's credibility. It read, in part: "this decision is in accord with the commitment to the application of God's law, especially in the matters of theft, fornication, black magic, augury, blood and financial matters, and the worship of idols and tombs instead of God."

Defection

Abu Sulayman responded by defecting; he traveled to Pakistan to take his concerns directly to al-Qa`ida's senior leadership. The document that reappeared on jihadi forums in 2013 thanks to @rakan_77 is a version of the complaint he delivered to Ayman al-Zawahiri and Usama bin Ladin.¹³

It is impossible to know whether Abu Sulayman's concerns were accurate, exaggerated, or manipulated by an intelligence service. Al-Qa`ida's leadership considered all three possibilities.^d In a long, anonymous missive dated December 17, 2007, an al-Qa`ida leader warned that a recent message from a "delegate" was "of suspicious

accuracy."^e The author urged an investigation into the truth of the accusations, explaining that such critics often "have no shame in allowing the apostate state intelligence to lead them."¹⁴

Abu Sulayman's accusations came at a moment of upheaval in the jihadi community about

the declaration of the Islamic State of Iraq. Al-Qa`ida vociferously backed the new group at the time, but a number of leading jihadis, including Hamid al-Ali and Abu Bashir al-Tartusi, did not.¹⁵ ISI's supporters often saw such reservations as evidence of meddling by hostile governments. "Because of them," the anonymous al-Qa`ida author explained, "there is a real threat against the establishment of the Islamic State [of Iraq], and their desire to withdraw from it, and you need to be careful of them."¹⁶

There is no definitive evidence that the anonymous December 2007 letter referred to Abu Sulayman's accusations (as opposed to those made by other delegates). Al-Qa`ida's leadership did, however, follow up on Abu Sulayman's charges in a number of letters to the ISI leadership. The first was dated November 19, 2007; it explained that Abu Sulayman was about to arrive in Pakistan and asked why he had been dismissed.^f

The second was dated January 25, 2008 and repeats Abu Sulayman's detailed accusations about Abu Umar and Abu Hamzah. It requests a swift reply from ISI's leadership, especially regarding "the most important thing and the biggest danger—if true—[which] is the existence of the corrupt influential men who have become leaders in the [Islamic] State."¹⁷ The letter goes on to query Abu Hamzah about his views on the return of the *Mahdi* and the apocalypse, a core accusation of Abu Sulayman.

The third letter, dated March 8, 2008, was signed by Ayman al-Zawahiri and addressed to Abu Umar. It urged the ISI to maximize its human resources by creating a database of jihadis under



An image of Sulayman al-Utaybi taken from an ISI video.

c Abu Sulayman was replaced by an Iraqi named Abu Is-Haq al-Juburi.

d Abu Sulayman left Iraq in August 2007 with Abu Dujanah al-Qahtani, and traveled across Iran with the assistance of Ansar al-Sunnah, the jihadi group that had empowered Zarqawi when he arrived in Iraq but that subsequently objected to the ISI's efforts to control the jihadi effort in Iraq.

e The author of this letter is anonymous, but the best indications suggest it was written by either Usama bin Ladin himself or Sayf al-Adl, who was under house arrest in Iran. The letter insists that communications with al-Qa`ida franchises be signed either "by me or Abu Muhammad," which is a reference to Ayman al-Zawahiri. Clearly very few senior leaders in al-Qa`ida would have such authority, but Bin Ladin was one. Those letters were declassified and released to the Long War Journal and then subsequently translated by the Foundation for Defense of Democracies

f Specifically: "We have a question: about the brother sheikh Abu Sulayman al-Utaybi, for he is on his way to us as we've been informed. He has recently arrived and sent word to us, and perhaps he might arrive to us in the next few days, with God's help, and so we would like to ask you about him: why did he leave you and come [here]? Is it perhaps something bad or some problems? What is your recommendation on the brother? ... What was the reason that you dismissed him from his work?" Bill Roggio, Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, and Tony Badran, "Intercepted Letters Shed Light on State of Network in Iraq," Foundation for Defense of Democracies, September 12, 2008.

its command, including skills and educational background, and offhandedly requested an answer to the queries about Abu Sulayman.

The fourth letter was dated March 10, 2008 and included the previous three as appendices. It assured Abu Hamzah that the entire al-Qa`ida leadership group was aware of the controversy, but that they were still simply investigating his claims. “Details are required, [as is] setting the record straight on all accounts,” it reassured Abu Hamzah, “[Abu Sulayman] may have mixed truth and falsehood, and so it is necessary to provide details and to give whoever is right his due in word, judgment, and action.”¹⁸

The last letter, with its three appendices, arrived in Iraq, but Abu Hamzah or Abu Umar may never have seen it. All four documents were captured when coalition forces killed ISI’s Information Minister, Abu Nizar.¹⁹ Nonetheless, Abu Sulayman’s campaign to discredit Abu Hamzah and Abu Umar ended ignominiously and unceremoniously. Abu Sulayman and his fellow defector, Abu Dujanah al-Qahtani, died in early May 2008, killed by U.S. forces in Afghanistan’s Paktika Province. Al-Qa`ida Central’s primary media outlet, rather than ISI’s, announced his death.²⁰

Conclusion

Ironically, Abu Sulayman’s defection probably had as much influence on the American assessment of ISI as it did on al-Qa`ida Central. Abu Sulayman had never met Abu Umar al-Baghdadi and suggested to al-Qa`ida’s leadership that Abu Hamzah had invented him. Abu Sulayman argued that Abu Hamzah had declared the Islamic State of Iraq before selecting an emir and had told Abu Sulayman that he would remove the first person selected if they failed to perform. The accusation seemed to confirm the U.S. military’s previous position that neither Abu Umar nor ISI were genuine, and that, as a U.S. spokesman had put it, Abu Hamzah had created a

“virtual organization in cyberspace called the Islamic State of Iraq in 2006 as a new Iraqi pseudonym for al-Qa`ida in Iraq.”^{21,9}

In 2006, characterizing ISI as a “virtual organization in cyberspace” was a slur. A decade later the same words suggest innovation rather than weakness.

The origins of the Islamic State of Iraq are the origins of the Islamic State. That is why @rakan_77 brought up Abu Sulayman’s critique of ISI to discredit the Islamic State. There are lessons in this approach. First, despite the overwhelming narrative that the Islamic State is a product of the Syrian civil war, its long history in Iraq before that time offers important insights into the group’s strengths and weaknesses. That tenure points to the Islamic State’s resilience, but it also exposes weaknesses; the Islamic State’s jihadi enemies, like @rakan_77, are exploiting them, so too might others.

Second, the split between al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State was bubbling long before the Islamic State’s declaration of a caliphate or the war in Syria. The intellectual clash between the Islamic State and al-Qa`ida is important, but it has not been and will not be strategically determinative. The Islamic State’s authority is a function of its power on the ground, not the approval of Ayman al-Zawahiri or any jihadi scholar.

Third, a digital afterlife is not limited to just Islamic State-supporting jihadis or propagandists such as Anwar al-Awlaki. Abu Sulayman al-Utaybi has been dead since 2008, but is still in the fight against the Islamic State, operating as a virtual sheikh in cyberspace. **CTC**

g This earlier intelligence came in part from a senior ISI operative captured on July 4, 2007. Dean Yates, “Senior al-Qa`ida Figure in Iraq a Myth: U.S. Military,” Reuters, July 18, 2007.

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The Ankara Bombings and the Islamic State's Turkey Strategy

By Metin Gurcan

Although the investigation is in its early stages, Turkish authorities suspect the Islamic State was responsible for the October 10, 2015 attack in Ankara that killed more than 100 people. The two suicide bombers are believed to be part of a cell responsible for two attacks in Turkey this year. Turkey's decision to join the anti-Islamic State coalition has exposed it to a growing threat from the group because of its significant presence inside the country, its large number of Turkish recruits, and its growing attractiveness to Turkish Islamist extremists of Kurdish descent.

At 10:04am on Saturday, October 10, 2015, thousands were gathering outside Ankara's main railway station to join a peace demonstration when two suicide bombers standing 60 feet apart in the middle of the crowd carried out the worst terrorist attack in Turkey's modern history. Each of the bombers was wearing a suicide vest comprising around 10-15 pounds of TNT mixed with the military-grade explosive RDX and 30-40 pounds of steel balls.¹ The devices proved devastating. 102 were killed and 160 wounded, 63 of them seriously.² No group claimed responsibility.

The rally had been organized by the pro-Kurdish People's Democracy Party (HDP), leading members of the Alevi community, and left-wing parties, including the Socialist Party of the Oppressed (ESP), to protest against the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government's handling of the ongoing fight against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and call for an immediate ceasefire.

Those responsible for the Ankara attack appear to have deliberately aimed at a key fracture point in Turkey's body politic, with the question of responsibility immediately becoming sharply politicized and the subject of angry recriminations between the government and the groups organizing the rally. Investigators nevertheless began to work on the identification of the bombers using data from the crime scene investigation, forensics reports, closed-circuit television tapes, and cell phone records.

The bombing had parallels with unclaimed attacks on pro-Kurdish rallies in Diyarbakir on June 5 and Suruc on July 20, which authorities both blamed on the Islamic State.³ Turkish Deputy Prime

Metin Gurcan is an independent Ankara based security analyst and a columnist for the Al-Monitor news outlet. He previously served in Turkey's special forces, as a liaison officer in Iraq and Afghanistan and with the Turkish General staff. His book What Went Wrong in Afghanistan? Understanding Counter-insurgency in Tribalized Rural Muslim Environments will be published in June 2016. Follow @Metin4020.

Minister Numan Kurtulmus noted similarities in the target, the use of suicide bombers, and the design of the suicide vests (TNT combined with RDX) in both the Suruc and Ankara attacks.⁴

At this early stage, investigators suspect that an Islamic State cell they believe was responsible for the earlier attacks, also carried out the Ankara bombings. Known as the Dokumacı network, the cell consisted of some 15 Kurdish-Turks allegedly recruited in the southern Turkish city of Adıyaman by Mustafa Dokumacı, a Turkish self-styled cleric who ran a tea-shop that served as a gathering point for Salafi extremists.⁴ A security official in Ankara told the author that Dokumacı is believed to have made several trips to Syria between 2013 and 2014 and to have connected with the Islamic State there. At some point after his last trip to Syria in October 2014, Turkish intelligence agencies lost track of him, although they believe there are indications he was captured by Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) forces near Tel Abayad.

On October 19, Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu said Turkish authorities had confirmed the identity of one of the suicide bombers through DNA testing and investigations into the second were continuing. He stated, "we are exploring ties between the attacks on Suruc, Ankara, and Diyarbakir."⁵

The same day, prosecutors publicly named one of suicide bombers as Yunus Emre Alagöz⁶ and said the two attackers entered from a neighboring state, implying they came from Syria.^b Alagöz was one of Dokumacı's recruits in Adıyaman.⁷ According to Turkish media reports, he was identified through DNA analysis and closed circuit television footage from before the attack.^c Prosecutors stated the other suicide bomber may have been a foreigner, who also arrived from Syria.⁸

- a In total, four attacks in Turkey have a suspected links to the Islamic State. On March 20, 2014, Islamic State gunman killed three Turkish security personnel after being stopped at a checkpoint in Nigde. The attack does not appear to have been premeditated. See Semith Idiz, "ISIS emerges as a threat to Turkey," Al-Monitor, March 25, 2014; "Ankara bombing investigation in final stage: Deputy PM Kurtulmus" *Daily Sabah*, October 12, 2015.
- b Yunus Alagöz is believed to have made several trips to Syria, with his last departure from Turkey to Syria in early 2015. After Mustafa Dokumacı arrived in Syria in October 2014, several calls he placed to Yunus Alagöz in Adıyaman for updates on what was going on in Turkey were intercepted by Turkish intelligence. Author interview with Turkish security official, October 2015; Idris Emen, "Polis Alagöz kadesleri dinlemis: Belki son görüşmem!," October 17, 2015.
- c Turkish media, quoting police sources, reported he was identified on closed circuit television footage in the crowd doing reconnaissance just before the attack, and reported that investigators compared his DNA with relatives. See "İkinci intihar bombacısı da listeden," *Radikal*, October 14, 2015; Türker Karapınar, "Canlı bomba 06.45'te kamerada!" *Milliyet*, October 12, 2015; Neset Diskaya, Enis Yıldırım, Mustafa Türk, "Tespitler ISID'i gösteriyor," Haber Turk, October 13, 2015; "Ankara Blasts: Bombers Linked to the Islamic State," BBC, October 14, 2015.

“The Islamic State has had particular success recruiting ethnic Kurds into its ranks.”

On October 18, Turkish police arrested four in relation to the attack and charged them with “fabrication of explosive devices with the intention to kill” and “an attempt to disrupt constitutional order.” One of those arrested reportedly confessed to escorting Yunus Alagöz and a foreigner to Ankara for money. He claimed they had already been equipped with explosive devices and that Yunus Alagöz had said the HDP party was the target for the attack.⁹

Alagöz was a close friend of the now-imprisoned Orhan Gazi Gonder, who allegedly planted the June 5 bomb in Diyarbakir that killed four. One of Alagöz’s younger brothers, Abdurrahman, was the alleged suicide bomber who in July killed 34 left-wing activists, mostly ethnic Kurds, in Suruc. Five days before the Ankara blasts, several Turkish news outlets reported that a group of around 100 Islamic State militants, possibly including Alagöz, had entered Turkey at the end of September to mount attacks.¹⁰ According to a security official in Ankara, Yunus Alagöz had travelled to Syria to join the Islamic State, and until a few days before the bombings was thought likely to still be there.¹¹

In July 2015, Turkish security services intercepted a phone call between Yunus Alagöz and his youngest brother Yusuf in which he tried to recruit him to come to Syria. Later that month, Yusuf was briefly detained. In his interrogation by Turkish police he revealed that Yunus Alagöz had spent time in Afghanistan between 2009 and 2010 and traveled to Syria in early 2015.¹²

The Dokumacı network has been on the radar of Turkish security forces and intelligence since 2013.¹³ In July 2014, both suspected Ankara bombers and Mustafa Dokumacı were included by the Adıyaman police department in a bulletin posted to all security units in Turkey.¹⁴ This raises concerns about whether other cell members could launch attacks in the coming weeks and about why Turkish security services were unable to prevent the attacks.

One possible reason for the apparent misstep is that Turkish security services, who have historically and institutionally focused on the PKK, only began moving aggressively to dismantle Islamic State networks in Turkey in the summer of 2015. For example, on July 9, security officials in Ankara detained 30 suspects who were believed to have facilitated travel to Syria and Iraq for European recruits. Later that month, Turkish authorities arrested another group of militants suspected to have ties to the Islamic State.¹⁵ Another reason for the failure to break up the bombing plot is that the Islamic State has taken advantage of gaps and grey areas in the Turkish legal system, including legal processes applying to detained militants, to continue to move fighters through southern Turkey into Syria.¹⁶

The Islamic State’s Turkish Strategy

Since Turkey’s first airstrikes against the Islamic State in August, there has been growing concern about retaliatory attacks by the group inside Turkey. More than 3,000 Turkish nationals have joined the Islamic State in Syria,¹⁷ and the group has built up a recruitment and facilitation network across Turkey, including safe-houses in several Turkish cities such as Istanbul.¹⁸ The Islamic State has also

been very active in Turkey in raising money for its fight, providing shelter to the families of those fighting in Syria, and the delivery of logistical support to its operations through the use of some charity organizations and NGOs.¹⁹

The Islamic State has had particular success recruiting ethnic Kurds into its ranks. Of its more than 3,000 Turkish recruits, around 65% are ethnic Kurds,^d as are nearly all the members of the Dokumacı network. Given the Islamic State’s atrocities against Kurdish forces in Syria and Iraq, the group’s attractiveness for Kurdish-Turks may surprise some Western observers, but it reflects the fact that many Kurds live in southeast Turkey, the most religious part of the country. In the last 20 years, Salafi Islam has become significantly more popular in south-eastern Turkey. Secular political and militant groups such as the HDP, PKK, and YPG do not have a monopoly over Kurdish support despite dominating much of the literature on the Kurdish cause.

For Kurdish Salafis joining the Islamic State, its religious arguments have trumped the Kurdish nationalist message. The Islamic State claims to be uninterested in ethnic and national differences, and a significant number of Kurdish-Turkish Islamist extremists believe that if the Islamic State extends to Kurdish areas, Kurds will be equal citizens of the caliphate. It is worth noting that Islamic State propaganda has never denigrated Kurds as a people. Some Kurdish supporters of the group appear to have also fused nationalist and religious motivations, hoping that the Islamic State may create a Kurdistan province in Kurdish areas of Iran, Syria, and Turkey.^e

Despite increasingly hostile language toward the Turkish government, the Islamic State’s leaders have not formally declared war against Turkey, nor have they claimed responsibility for any attacks inside Turkey. The first volume of its Turkish propaganda magazine *Konstantiniyye’nin Fethi (The Conquer of Constantinople)*,²⁰ published in June, suggests that the Islamic State does not regard Turkey as a *Dar el Harb* (land of war) in the same way that it views the West. Instead, its leaders apparently view Turkey’s Sunni majority as targets for recruitment through propaganda, and Turkey as a center for recruitment, logistics, and financing.²¹ The Islamic State appears to be following a calibrated strategy in Turkey, in which it carries out, but does not claim responsibility for acts of violence designed to further its aims. With a focus on winning hearts and minds, claiming responsibility for attacks risks alienating potential supporters inside Turkey.

The focus on winning hearts and minds fits with the Islamic State’s interpretation of Islamic prophecies, which has always been

d Author interview with Ankara security source in Ankara on September 13, 2015. Several other reports have noted the high proportion of Kurds joining the Islamic State in Turkey. See: Michael Kaplan, “Kurds joining Islamic State? ISIS finds unlikely supporters among Turkey’s disgruntled Kurds,” *International Business Times*, July 30, 2015. From the Bingol province of Turkey alone, reportedly around 600 Kurds joined the Islamic State. Mahmut Bozaslan, “Kurds fight Kurds in Syria,” *Al-Monitor*, June 25, 2015.

e The Islamic State leadership have tried to maximize Kurdish recruitment by appointing Kurds to senior positions and sending Kurdish imams to northern Syria and Iraq to indoctrinate Kurds. There are also indications the group may reconstitute a Kurdish Islamic Front battalion, which had been dissolved in 2014. Author interviews with Kurdish community leaders in south-eastern Turkey, 2015; “Bagdadi ‘Kürt açılımı’ yaptı!,” *Gazete Vatan*, October 26, 2014. See also Denise Natali “Islamic State infiltrates Iraqi Kurdistan,” *Al-Monitor*, June 4, 2015.

a powerful driving force for the group's actions. The lead article of the first issue of *Konstantiniyye'nin Fethi* states that Istanbul has to be conquered again by the "armies of Islam," but argues that, as foretold in the *hadith* (Mohammed's sayings), it would be conquered "without weapons and bloodshed, only chants of God is Great," after Islamic armies had engaged with Romans in a major war in Aleppo, close to the Day of Judgment.

The group has nonetheless made clear that it regards Erdogan's AKP as apostates, and therefore by implication worthy of attack.^f A video of Turkish fighters in Syria posted online the day after the Ankara bombing encouraged Turkish Sunnis to either join the Islamic State in Syria or remain in Turkey to "revolt and reckon with the infidels," with exactly what that means being left vague.

These publications and the Ankara attack suggest the Islamic State aims to create tensions between conservative Sunnis and other groups through the use of targeted violence at fracture points in Turkish society. The key cleavage lines are religious

differences between conservative Sunnis, Alevis, and secularists; political differences between conservatives and left-wingers; and the differences in economic circumstance between a rising bourgeoisie and marginalized groups angered by wide-spread corruption. The Islamic State strategy for Turkey is not dissimilar to its targeting of Shi'a in the Arab world, which is designed to provoke Sunni-Shi'a tension that it can take advantage of.

The Islamic State's leaders hope that by eventually winning over a sufficient number of Turkish Sunnis, it will be able to discredit the ruling AKP as corrupt and fraudulent, topple the established order in Turkey, and use the country as a base for jihad. Given increasing pressure on the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, expanding its support and presence in Turkey would likely be regarded by the leadership as highly desirable, and something, given their reading of Islamic prophecies, that they believe is their destiny. **CTC**

^f The most recent issue of the English-language magazine *Dabiq* states, "The Turkish government is one that legislates, executes, and judges by manmade laws. Its army is assembled in defense of the Turkish tagut and their crusader allies. This government and army is one of blatant apostasy," *Dabiq* Issue 11, posted by the Islamic State online on September 9, 2015.

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Kunduz Breakthrough Bolsters Mullah Mansoor as Taliban Leader

By Saleem Mehsud*

A major goal of the Taliban assault on Kunduz this autumn was to bolster the leadership of its leader Mullah Mansoor after divisions surfaced following the announcement of his predecessor Mullah Omar's death. The Taliban's temporary capture of the city succeeded in significantly increasing his legitimacy. Mansoor is likely to seek further territorial gains to strengthen the Taliban position ahead of any talks with the Afghan government. But with momentum in the 14 year insurgency shifting toward the Taliban, he is unlikely to accept any outcome other than Taliban supremacy.

The hoisting of the Taliban's white flag in the center of the northern Afghan city of Kunduz in late September 2015 cemented Mullah Akhtar Mansoor's position as the Afghan Taliban's new leader. Even though the Taliban announced their withdrawal from Kunduz in mid-October, Mullah Mansoor had scored a major victory. It was the first provincial capital to fall to the Taliban in 14 years of insurgency.¹

Mansoor, 47, has been in de facto control of the Taliban for at least the last two years, but needed a win. Mullah Omar had been an iconic and unifying figure. By contrast, Mansoor's election as the Taliban's new leader in late July had been met with acrimony from some Taliban factions. Principal among the complaints was that he had covered up the death of Mullah Omar in 2013^a and had issued commands in his name. There was also criticism from some hawks in the Taliban that he was too close to Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and consequently too ready to sit down with the Afghan government for peace talks.

A video released by the Taliban on August 25, a month before it launched the assault on Kunduz, not only telegraphed the offensive, but also linked it to the anointment of Mansoor as leader.²

a According to the Afghan government, Mullah Omar died in a hospital in Karachi in April 2013. See Dawood Azami, "The Afghan Taliban Enter Uncharted Territory," BBC, July 30, 2015.

Saleem Mehsud is a Pakistani journalist based in Islamabad originally from South Waziristan. He currently contributes to CNN's reporting in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Over the last half decade he has also contributed reporting to the Washington Post, Daily Telegraph, Sunday Times (UK) and DPD group of newspapers. Follow @SaleemMehsud.

* This article was written in conjunction with Paul Cruickshank.

The 30-minute video showed more than 100 fighters pledging allegiance to Mansoor in broad daylight outside Kunduz. The gathering was addressed by Mullah Abdul Salam Akhund and his deputy Mullah Mohammad Akhund, the Taliban commanders who led the offensive against the city a month later. Flanked by two fighters holding rocket launchers, Salam pledged his personal allegiance to Mansoor as the new *emir al-mu'minin* (commander of the faithful).

The subsequent assault by these fighters on Kunduz appears to have been designed to bolster Mansoor's position as leader with the August 25 video staged to allow Mansoor to take credit. It is unlikely to be a coincidence that the only footage released by the Taliban was of a large group of fighters inside Afghanistan pledging allegiance to Mansoor.

The temporary seizure of Kunduz cemented Mansoor's position as leader.^b In the previous months he had already maneuvered to silence dissent. Mullah Omar's eldest son, Mullah Yaqoub, and a brother, Mullah Manan, had initially refused to give Mansoor their backing, but the Taliban announced on September 15 that both had pledged allegiance at a "big" Taliban gathering.³ It is unclear what caused them to change their minds, but they were likely offered positions of influence. Mansoor had to win their loyalty at all costs because of the hallowed status within the Taliban of their family name.

A longtime rival—Mullah Abdul Zakir—the onetime military commander of the Taliban, who had been critical of talks initiated with the Afghan government under Mansoor's watch, pledged his allegiance⁴ after reportedly being offered \$14 million.⁵ Mansoor had already relieved Zakir of his command⁶ the previous year, one of many replacements of field commanders with loyalists intended to strengthen Mansoor's position ahead of Omar's death becoming public knowledge.⁷ On assuming the leadership, Mansoor also shored up his position—and ensured unity of Taliban efforts—by naming Sirajuddin Haqqani, the scion of the powerful Haqqani clan, as one of his two top deputies.^c Mansoor also received and acknowledged the allegiance of al-Qa`ida's leader Ayman al-Zawahiri^d and authorized the release of a hagiographic profile.⁸

b On October 13, 2015, Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid released a statement announcing that in the face of an Afghan military onslaught supported by U.S. airpower, Taliban forces had made a tactical withdrawal from Kunduz to outlying rural areas to avoid a "protracted defensive battle" that would cost the Taliban lives and resources. He claimed that Kunduz could again be taken and the operation had "lifted the spirits of the Mujahideen."

c The other was Haibatullah Akhonzada, the former judiciary chief of the Taliban courts, Taliban sources told Saleem Mehsud. See also Daud Qarizadah, "Afghan Taliban: Mullah Mansour's battle to be leader," BBC, September 23, 2015.

d Zawahiri's audio statement was released via pro-al Qaeda twitter accounts on August 13, 2015. In a Taliban statement released the next day, Mansoor accepted the pledge.



Mullah Mansoor, the new Taliban leader, is superimposed over fighters pledging allegiance near Kunduz in a Taliban video.

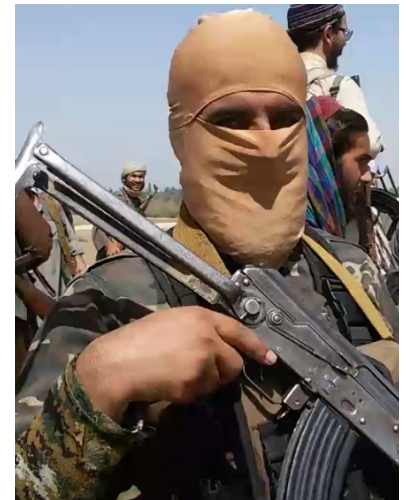
The Kunduz breakthrough has made it more difficult for Mansoor's harshest critics within the wider Taliban movement to land punches. These include Mullah Abdul Manan Niazi, the former Taliban governor of Kabul; Mullah Najibullah,^e the leader of the Fidae Mahaz Taliban splinter faction; and Mullah Agha Mautasem, the former Taliban finance minister. None of these figures commands a powerful enough bloc of fighters to pose any real threat to Mansoor and they have failed to move against his leadership in a unified way.^f

One of Mansoor's sharpest critics has been Mullah Mansoor Dadullah, the younger brother of Mullah Dadullah Akhund, who now commands an independent faction of fighters in Zabul province. Following the revelation of Mullah Omar's death, Dadullah accused Mansoor of being illegitimate, having acted as a ventriloquist, having issued orders in his name, and having refused to allow other mujahideen to try to communicate with him. He also inferred that Taliban leaders like Mansoor who were present on Pakistani soil were under the control of the ISI.^g The younger Dadullah fell out with the Afghan Taliban leadership after his brother was killed in a U.S. and NATO special forces raid in Helmand province in 2007. He spent time in prison in Pakistan and now commands a much

diminished force.^g

The more serious challenge to Mansoor's claims to be *emir al-mu'minin* comes from the Islamic State in Khorasan, which is growing in strength and whose members regard Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, not Mansoor, as the global leader of Muslims. The U.S. military has classified the Islamic State as "operationally emergent" in Afghanistan. It is strongest in the eastern Nangarhar Province and also claims a growing presence in Kunar, Helmand, Kunduz, Badakhshan, Nuristan, Logar, and Kandahar.¹⁰

The Islamic State has been bolstered by the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan's (IMU) pledge of allegiance to al-Baghdadi.¹¹ In recent months hundreds of fighters from the IMU have crossed from the tribal areas of Pakistan into Afghanistan because of Pakistani military operations, providing a bump in support for the Islamic State in Afghanistan.¹¹ Several splinter groups of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) have also pledged allegiance to the Islamic State, as have Afghan Taliban



Taliban video shows a fighter at the Kunduz rally.

^e According to Mullah Najibullah's spokesman Qari Hamza, Najibullah strongly opposes peace talks, calling Mansoor an agent of NATO and accusing him of being appointed without the backing of the majority within the Taliban. Hamza also stated that the Fidae Mahaz group was ready to cooperate with the Islamic State, but would not pledge allegiance. Saleem Mehsud telephone interview with Qari Hamza, July 31, 2015.

^f Mullah Niazi claimed in media interviews that Mullah Jalil (the deputy foreign minister under Taliban rule), Mullah Hassan (the governor of Kandahar during Taliban rule), and Mullah Razzaq (the Interior Minister under Taliban rule) all supported him in rejecting the leadership of Mansoor. However none of these figures publicly confirmed their opposition to Mansoor, illustrating the lack of unity in anti-Mansoor ranks. See "Afghan Taliban Divided as Talks Between Two Factions Fail," Reuters, September 19, 2015.

^g Dadullah is allegedly cooperating with Uzbek fighters loyal to the Islamic State in Zabul and is in contact with the Islamic State in Khorasan. Saleem Mehsud email interview with Taliban commander, Fall 2015.

^h IMU leader Usman Ghazi and fighters formally pledged allegiance to al-Baghdadi in a video released on August 7, 2015. Saleem Mehsud received the video from militant sources.



Militants attend the Kunduz allegiance ceremony in this image from a Taliban video.

commanders who have fallen out with Mansoor's "Quetta Shura."ⁱ

The main TTP faction led by Mullah Fazlullah has yet to recognize Mansoor as the *emir al-mu'minin* but it has indicated it will not pledge *bay`a* (allegiance) to the Islamic State.^j A TTP source says the reason is that many TTP fighters have been forced to flee to Afghanistan from North Waziristan. Pledging *bay`a* to Mansoor would increase the likelihood they would be targeted by Afghan national military forces.¹² An Afghan Taliban representative says they can live with Fazlullah's neutrality.¹³

While the Islamic State will likely continue to expand in Afghan-

i Many of the TTP commanders who defected to the Islamic State were loyal to Hakimullah Mehsud. When Mehsud was killed Mullah Fazlullah, a militant cleric from the Swat valley won the power struggle, alienating several Mehsud loyalists. Most of the defections took place in Orakzai agency. Those who defected from Orakzai included the former TTP commander Sheikh Hafiz Saeed Khan, a former deputy to Hakimullah Mehsud, who is the current leader of the Islamic State in Khorasan. Like most of the other defectors, Saeed is not a Deobandi. He belongs to the Panjipiri strand which is closer to Salafism. Panjipiris follow the teachings of the Darul Quran seminary in the town of Panjpir in the Pakistani province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and have a growing presence in this province and Pakistan's tribal areas. Another prominent Panjipiri is TTP leader Mullah Fazlullah. For more on the links between Panjipiri madrassas and militant activity see Zia Ur Rehman, "Terror ties' of Panjipiri madrassas being probed," *The News* (Pakistan), July 21, 2015. For more on divisions within TTP see Daud Khattak, *Contrasting the Leadership of Mullah Fazlullah and Khan Said Sajna in Pakistan*, CTC Sentinel 7:7, West Point NY, (2014).

j A source in the TTP told Saleem Mehsud that Fazlullah remained close with Afghan Taliban leaders. In May the TTP released a treatise critical of the Islamic State. See Elias Groll, "In Battle of Jihadi Groups, Pakistani Taliban Prefer al Qaeda over ISIS," *Foreign Policy*, May 28, 2015; Abu Uthman al-Salaraza'i, TTP Treatise on the Islamic State, posted on TTP's website on May 26, 2015.

istan, there may be a ceiling to its growth. One factor is the Taliban's continued success on the battlefield. Another is that the majority of the population of southern and eastern Afghanistan identify as Deobandi. Extremist-leaning young men in these areas have naturally gravitated toward the Taliban, which claims to be the modern political manifestation of the Deobandi movement. Relatively few Deobandis have joined the Islamic State because of theological differences with the Islamic State's ultra-hardline Salafi approach and the perception it is a "foreign" construct.^k

Since the beginning of this year, there has been fighting between the Taliban and the Islamic State in Nangarhar.¹⁴ But the threat from the Islamic State even in Nangarhar should be put in context. The Taliban still controls many more districts in the province. Given Mansoor's public criticism of al-Baghdadi and support for Zawahiri—and al-Baghdadi's refusal to recognize his title as *emir*

k Deobandism is a puritanical religious movement that originated in hostile reaction to British rule in south Asia. It follows the Hanafi school of thought and is followed by a majority of the population in southern and eastern Afghanistan and in many parts of Pakistan, including the border region with Afghanistan. The Taliban is a modern political manifestation of the movement. The Islamic State, by contrast, subscribes to an ultra-hardline version of Wahhabi-Salafism that originated in Arabia. The differences should not be seen as black and white. In the last 20 years, Wahhabi teachings have increasingly influenced the Deobandi movement because of the flow of Saudi petro-dollars to madrassas in Afghanistan and Pakistan, but hardline Deobandis and hardline Wahhabi-Salafis view theological difference between the two approaches as insurmountable. All this will likely place a ceiling on Islamic State recruitment in Afghanistan, although theological differences are likely more important at the leadership than foot soldier level. Thus far, most of the Afghan recruits to the Islamic State in Khorasan have been Salafis. In Pakistan, a number of Panjipiris have joined. As a general rule, Deobandis have been reluctant to join the Islamic State because they see the Taliban as the natural leaders of their faith group.

al-mu'minin—there appears to be little prospect of rapprochement between the Islamic State and the Taliban.

Now that his position has been strengthened, Mansoor will likely seek further territorial gains in Afghanistan to strengthen his position and the Taliban position in any future negotiations with the Afghan government. Mansoor favors indirect rather than direct talks because he views the latter as legitimizing the Ashraf Ghani administration and weakening Taliban morale.¹⁵ Although personally committed to the total removal of the current ruling apparatus

in Kabul, Mansoor is likely to follow a pragmatic approach when it comes to the question of entering negotiations, balancing pressure from Islamabad to enter talks on the one hand with the desire not to be outflanked by hawks in his own movement or the Islamic State on the other.¹ But with momentum shifting toward the Taliban after its recent gains in northern Afghanistan, Mansoor is unlikely to countenance a final agreement with the Afghan government that results in anything less than Taliban supremacy in Afghanistan.

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reflected in a new code of Warcraft for Taliban fighters and his pledge to protect civilians following the capture of Kunduz; "Statement by the Leader of Islamic Emirate concerning liberation of Kunduz city," September 28, 2015. For more see Joseph Goldstein, "Taliban's New Leader Strengthens His Hold with Intrigue and Battlefield Victory," *New York Times*, October 4, 2015; Daud Qarizadah, "Afghan Taliban: Mullah Mansour's battle to be leader," BBC, September 23, 2015.

1 Mansoor's preconditions for talks should be seen in this context. In his Eid al Adha message, he stated "if the Kabul administration wants to end the war and establish peace in the country, it is possible through ending the occupation and revoking all military and security treaties with the invaders." Mansoor, who served as minister for aviation under Taliban rule, and is reported to have amassed a fortune through smuggling and business interests in Pakistan, is widely seen as more pragmatic than Mullah Omar. This pragmatism, and his desire to "win hearts and minds" was also

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The Riddle of the Bangkok Bombings

By Zachary Abuza

Although the Thai government claims it has solved the August 17 Bangkok bombing, many questions remain. Two Chinese Uighurs have been arrested and charged, but some 14 other suspects remain at large, while Malaysian authorities hold another eight suspects. Thai authorities claim the attack is retribution for their crackdown on human trafficking, specifically the forced rendition of 109 Uighurs to China in July 2015. The culprits appear to be a transnational network with a strong presence in Turkey. With the wider network still at large there remains the possibility of further attacks, including against Chinese interests around the world.

On September 28, Thailand's Chief of Police Somyot Poompunmuang announced that the August 17 bombing in central Bangkok had been solved¹ and that the police were ready to prosecute two suspects in custody. It was an unconvincing end to an investigation that critics alleged was riddled with incompetence, conflicting press statements, lack of follow through, and political meddling.

On August 17, a 5-kilogram bomb packed with high explosives ripped through the Erawan shrine in Bangkok that is popular with Chinese tourists, killing 20 and wounding more than 120. The next day a similar bomb thrown onto a water taxi pier wounded no one.²

To date, two suspects have been arrested, both ethnic Uighurs from China. Mohammed Bilal, carrying a forged Turkish passport in the name of Adem Karadag, was arrested on August 29 with a large cache of explosive materials in his apartment,³ but Thai authorities did not conclude that he was the bomber until September 25.⁴ On September 1, the Thai army arrested a second suspect, Mieraili Yusufu, carrying a legal Chinese passport.⁵ Thai police allege Bilal planted the bomb at the shrine and Mieraili detonated the device after Bilal left the area. Neither has yet been charged.⁶

a Authorities detained an ethnic Malay days later in connection with the bombing, but no further details were disclosed about him and no charges have been filed. The man was allegedly involved in trafficking illegal migrants, including Uighurs from Thailand into Malaysia. Five other suspects, including two Indians and three Thais, were detained for questioning but released. See "Narathiwat Man Held over Erawan Bomb," *Bangkok Post*, September 2, 2015; Anthony Davis, "Truth behind Bangkok bombing may never be known," *Nikkei Asian Review*, September 10, 2015.

Zachary Abuza is a professor at the National War College, where he specializes in Southeast Asian politics and security issues. Follow @zachabuza.

Thai authorities have issued warrants for more than ten other suspects believed to be overseas, including several Uighurs from China, Thai citizens, and Turkish nationals. One of the warrants was for a Thai woman of Malay descent who had left for Turkey with her Turkish husband, himself a suspect. Thai authorities stated eight of the ten bank accounts related to the attack belonged to her. They said a total 1.4 million Thai baht (about \$40,000) was transferred by Chinese and Turkish nationals between February 2014 and March 2015 to the suspects and others connected to the attack in Thailand.⁷ Thai authorities identified the cell leader, Abudusataer Abudureheman, a 27-year-old ethnic Uighur from China's Xinjiang province, who they claim left Thailand for Turkey via Bangladesh, India, and Abu Dhabi the day before the bombings, but have revealed few other details about him.^b

Despite growing evidence that Chinese Uighurs and Turkish nationals orchestrated the attack, it was not until September 15 that the government officially attributed the bombing to them.⁸ Thai authorities continued to insist that the attack was not an act of international terrorism, but instead an act of vengeance by a group of human traffickers, who had been moving Uighurs through Thailand en route to Turkey before a government crackdown.^c In a case that sparked international condemnation, in July 2015 Thailand acquiesced to Beijing's demand that it render 109 ethnic Uighurs who had fled China and were en route to Turkey. The returned Uighurs were shown hooded, bound, with guards on either side of each during their return to China—ostensibly to "prevent a hijacking."⁹ Since their return they have been detained without charge for "re-education."¹⁰

The targeting of a Hindu shrine popular with Chinese tourists suggested the attackers saw both China and Thailand as their targets. The strongest evidence suggesting a link between the so-called traffickers and the attack was the alleged recovery of 200 false Turkish passports in Bilal's Bangkok safe house.¹¹ Some security analysts have suggested, however, that the sophistication of the devices and triggering mechanisms used in the shrine and water taxi pier attacks, as well as the alleged recovery of a large cache of explosives at Bilal's residence could point to the involvement of an established terrorist outfit that was planning a string of attacks.¹²

Thai officials have simply described the suspects as part of a trafficking network, and have not divulged any further informa-

b In September, Thai authorities said Abudureheman traveled on August 31 to Istanbul, but Turkish authorities denied he had entered the country. "Bangkok Bombing Mastermind 'Fled to Bangladesh,'" *Khaosod English*, September 10, 2015; "Key Bangkok Erawan shrine bomb suspect 'fled to Turkey,'" *BBC*, September 14, 2015.

c While the Uighur and Turkish group were allegedly assisting in the movement of many hundreds of Uighurs to Turkey, the Thai depiction of their activity as "trafficking" is questionable as most had legitimate fears of persecution from China and were trying to get to Turkey.



The Erawan Shrine in Bangkok

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tion about what kind of group the two Uighurs arrested in Thailand belonged to, nor what other kind of groups they might have had links to.

China has been grappling with rising Islamist militancy in Xinjiang province in recent years and officials have become increasingly concerned by the security threat posed by the Turkistan Islamist Party (TIP), which has had a strong presence in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region, and a small but growing one in Syria.^d

Many leads in the investigation were traced back to Turkey and some security analysts have suggested a terrorist group in that country may have played a role in the Bangkok attack.¹³ Turkish ultra-nationalists have started to take up the defense of Chinese Uighurs because of shared pan-Turkic bonds. One group known as the Grey Wolves attacked the Thai consulate in Istanbul after the rendition of the Uighurs.^e

d In September 2014, Indonesian counterterrorism officials arrested four Uighurs in the restive region of Poso, who were trying to link up with Mujiheddin Indonesia Timur (MIT), a splinter of the former al-Qa`ida-affiliate Jemaah Islamiyah. In mid-2014, its leader Sentoso pledged bay`a to the Islamic State. It is currently the most active and lethal terrorist splinter in Indonesia. The four Uighurs were tried and convicted of terrorism in September, though they had never perpetrated any violence in Indonesia. China is currently trying to negotiate their extradition. Zahara Tiba, "Indonesian Court Convicts Three Uyghurs on Terrorism-Related Charges," Benar News, July 13, 2015; Arie Firdaus, "Indonesia Convicts Fourth Uyghur Man in Terror Trial," Benar News, July 29, 2015.

e Bangkok-based security consultant Anthony Davis has suggested the Grey Wolves, an ultra-nationalist Turkish organization formed in the 1960s and implicated in the assassinations of left wing and liberal activists in Turkey and a plot to kill Pope John Paul, may have had a role in the Bangkok bombings because of the attack on the Thai Consulate in Istanbul. See Philip Sherwell, "Bangkok Bombing: Was it The Grey Wolves of Turkey?" Daily Telegraph (U.K.), August 29, 2015; Anthony Davis, "Truth behind Bangkok bombing may never be known; 'Istanbul protesters attack Thai Consulate over Bangkok's deportation of Uighurs to China,'" *Japan Times*, July 10, 2015.

Thai authorities have resisted suggestions of any connection to international terrorism. Their reluctance may be partly from fear of hurting tourism and partly to avoid greater international scrutiny of the tightening relationship with China since the Thai coup. The initial reaction of the military junta was to deny the bombing was the work of international terrorists¹⁴ and to try to pin the attack on radical Red Shirts—supporters of the governments of Thaksin Shinawatra and his sister Yingluck, who both led contested governments that were ousted in coups in 2006 and 2014, respectively. But these initial claims were met with significant skepticism as the attack was well beyond the known technical capacity of dissident political groups, who, to date, have launched only grenade attacks or small pipe bombs symbolically targeting the government.

The two suspects have confessed, but with most suspects still at large, there are many outstanding questions. Malaysia detained three suspects in the case, including two Malays^f and a Pakistani, but senior Thai police officials stated that there was no need to interview them.¹⁵ In all, Malaysia has arrested eight potential suspects, but without providing evidence of whether they were part of the cell or simply involved in human trafficking; and the government has failed to provide updates on their cases.¹⁶ Thailand's deputy police chief traveled to Malaysia without the approval of his superiors to follow up, but there have been no moves to have them extradited.¹⁷

f The detention of two ethnic Malays does not indicate that southern insurgents had anything to do with the attack, but it should give the government pause that outside groups are able to recruit Malays. Southern insurgents have occasionally gone "out of area," such as the April 2015 attack on the Koh Samui, but that attack—in an underground parking lot of a shopping mall at 11pm—was meant to send a signal, not cause a loss of life. Insurgents believe they can go out of area while remaining in the deep south, by targeting tourist venues frequented by Malaysians, not Westerners. Most insurgents view hitting Bangkok as their nuclear option, and something that would ultimately be counterproductive. "Bangkok Bombers Rumored to be in Malaysian Custody," Khaosod English, September 22, 2015.

It is unlikely that much more information about the cell or perpetrators will be brought to light. The two suspects arrested in Thailand will soon be tried, but little new intelligence is likely to emerge because the pair will be subject to an expedited trial in a military court. On October 19, Thai police stated the duo would be charged with murder rather than terrorism, and that the trail of the other suspects had gone cold.⁸ It is unlikely that Thailand will receive the

necessary international cooperation or have the remaining suspects extradited, most importantly from Turkey, which was both critical of the rendition of Uighurs and China's counterterrorism tactics that fueled the violence. To date Turkey, has appeared unwilling to track down suspects and at the same time they have not received a formal extradition request. With Thai authorities apparently reluctant to pursue leads overseas, the worry now is that the wider network still at large may be plotting their next attack. **CTC**

g "Authorities Weigh Military Trial for Bombing Suspect," Khaosod English, September 9, 2015; Teeranai Charuvastra, "Bangkok Bombing Suspects Won't be Tried for Terrorism," Khaosod English, October 19, 2015.

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