

Combating Terrorism Center at West Point



# CTCSENTINEL

Objective • Relevant • Rigorous | September 2017 • Volume 10, Issue 8



FEATURE ARTICLE

## Al-Qa`ida's Leader in Waiting?

Hamza bin Ladin could reunify the global jihadi movement

ALI SOUFAN

A VIEW FROM THE CT FOXHOLE

## Brian Fishman

COUNTERTERRORISM POLICY  
MANAGER, FACEBOOK

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## FROM THE EDITOR

Sixteen years after 9/11, al-Qa`ida has a new figurehead (if not a new face) in the form of Hamza bin Ladin. On September 14, the group released an audio statement from Usama bin Ladin's son calling for jihadis to double down on jihad in Syria and against what he depicted as an American-Russian-Shi`a conspiracy against Islam. It is not clear where Hamza, who is now in his late 20s, is currently based. So protective has al-Qa`ida been that the group has not circulated images of him since he was a child. In our cover article, Ali Soufan tells Hamza's life story based on a wide range of sources, including recently declassified documents from Abbottabad. He argues that Hamza bin Ladin has not only emerged as al-Qa`ida's leader in waiting, but is also the figure best placed to reunify the global jihadi movement as the Islamic State's fortunes wane. Soufan points out Hamza's hardening rhetoric toward Shi`a may represent an effort to attract deflated Islamic State fighters back into the al-Qa`ida fold.

In our interview, Brian Fishman, Facebook's Counterterrorism Policy Manager, provides a detailed description of how Facebook is using artificial intelligence and a dedicated team of counterterrorism specialists to remove terrorism content from its platform. Given the emergence of a new generation of leadership within al-Qa`ida, it is critical to understand the evolving threat from the group in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region. Don Rassler outlines how arrest metrics in the mega-city of Karachi point to an uptick in activity by the resilient group. Colleen McCue, Colonel Joseph Massengill, Commander Dorothy Milbrandt, Lieutenant Colonel John Gaughan, and Major Meghan Cumpston outline how the Islamic State is "weaponizing children." Nicholas Blanford reports from Lebanon on offensives this past summer by the Lebanese Armed Forces and Hezbollah against Sunni militants in the country. Aymenn al-Tamimi draws on newly obtained documents to examine the Islamic State's posture toward Kurds.

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Cover: Al-Qa`ida founder Usama bin Ladin and his son Hamza bin Ladin

# Hamza bin Ladin: From Steadfast Son to al-Qa`ida's Leader in Waiting

By Ali Soufan

**Hamza bin Ladin was among his father's favorite sons, and he has always been among the most consistently fervent of his siblings in his support for violent jihad. Now in his late 20s, Hamza is being prepared for a leadership role in the organization his father founded. As a member of the bin Ladin dynasty, Hamza is likely to be perceived favorably by the jihadi rank-and-file. With the Islamic State's 'caliphate' apparently on the verge of collapse, Hamza is now the figure best placed to reunify the global jihadi movement.**

One day in early November 2001, on a hillside south of Jalalabad, Afghanistan, Usama bin Ladin bade farewell to three of his young sons.<sup>1</sup> In the shade of an olive tree, he handed each boy a *misbaha*—a set of prayer beads symbolizing the 99 names of God in classical Arabic—and instructed them to keep the faith. The scene was an emotional one. “It was as if we pulled out our livers and left them there,” one of the boys would later recall in a letter to his father.<sup>2</sup> Having taken his leave, bin Ladin disappeared into the mountains, bound for a familiar redoubt known as the Black Cave, or Tora Bora in the local Pashto dialect.

The three boys who received the prayer beads that day would face three very different destinies. One, Bakr (also known as Ladin), would distance himself from al-Qa`ida, both geographically and ideologically. Another, Khalid, would die protecting his father at their compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan, in May 2011. The third, Hamza, would vanish for years before reemerging in 2015 as the most likely candidate to reunite a fractured jihadi movement and lead al-Qa`ida to a future still more violent than its past.

## Groomed to Lead

Despite al-Qa`ida's generally dim view of women, it appears that Usama bin Ladin respected and valued each of his wives. But he was surely familiar with the Qur'an's warning that, “Try as you may, you cannot treat all your wives impartially.” It was well known that bin

a This article is adapted in part from the author's most recent book, *Anatomy of Terror: From the Death of Bin Laden to the Rise of the Islamic State*, which was published earlier this year by W. W. Norton & Company.

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Ladin had a favorite. This was Hamza bin Ladin's mother, Khairia Sabar, a child psychologist from the respected al-Hindi family of Saudi Arabia. The pair had been introduced when Saad, one of bin Ladin's sons by his first wife, Najwa al-Ghanem, had attended Khairia's clinic to receive therapy for a mental disorder.<sup>3</sup> Khairia was single, in her mid-30s, and in fragile health—an unpropitious situation for a woman in a conservative kingdom where teenage brides are far from uncommon. Bin Ladin, by contrast, was seven years younger, the son of a billionaire, and already making a name for himself as a fundraiser for the mujahideen struggle against the Soviets in Afghanistan. Moreover, by this time, bin Ladin already had two wives. But Najwa, the first of them, encouraged him to pursue Khairia, believing that having someone with her training permanently on hand would help her son Saad and his brothers and sisters, some of whom also suffered from developmental disorders.<sup>4</sup>

Not surprisingly given Khairia's age and state of health, she and bin Ladin struggled to conceive. Over the first three years of their marriage, as bin Ladin moved back and forth between Saudi Arabia and the theater of war in Afghanistan, she endured miscarriage after miscarriage. During this time, bin Ladin added a fourth wife to the family—another highly educated Saudi woman, Siham Sabar.<sup>5</sup> Then, in 1989, both Siham and Khairia bore him sons. Siham's was called Khalid, a name that in Arabic means “eternal.” Khairia's boy was named Hamza, meaning “steadfast.” Thenceforward, in accordance with ancient Arab custom, Khairia became known by the honorific Umm Hamza, the Mother of Hamza. The boy would remain her only child by bin Ladin, but that fact has by no means diminished either Hamza's importance or Khairia's.

In 1991, reeling from a series of bloody embarrassments in Afghanistan and dismayed by the Saudi government's increasing hostility toward him, bin Ladin moved al-Qa`ida's base of operations to Sudan, just across the Red Sea from his home city of Jeddah. Among bin Ladin's inner circle of top lieutenants and their families, Umm Hamza soon developed a reputation for level-headedness and wise counsel. As bin Ladin's longtime bodyguard Abu Jandal put it, she was “respected by absolutely everyone.”<sup>6</sup> In Sudan, Khairia set up an informal school to teach the wives and children of al-Qa`ida members about Islamic theology, gave advice on religious matters, and from time to time even offered marriage counseling. At a time when al-Qa`ida could easily have disintegrated under the weight of its forced exile and bin Ladin's growing fear of arrest or assassination, Khairia's calm and optimistic influence played an important role in holding the organization together.

Hamza was seven years old when the regime of Omar Bashir finally caved to international pressure and expelled al-Qa`ida from Sudan. Bin Ladin and his entourage decamped to Afghanistan, where they were offered safe haven first by local warlords and subsequently by the Taliban movement, which overran most of the country within a few months of bin Ladin's arrival. Al-Qa`ida's new hosts gave bin Ladin the choice of several desirable residences, in-

cluding a former royal palace. Characteristically, however, he chose instead a base in the mountains near Jalalabad consisting of concrete huts lacking power, water, and in many cases even doors.<sup>7</sup> Bin Ladin eventually moved to Tarnak Farms, a camp complex outside Kandahar with almost as little in the way of creature comforts.<sup>8</sup> Not everyone relishes this kind of austerity; while bin Ladin was still in Sudan, his second wife, Khadija Sharif, had divorced him, citing the hardships of life in a militant camp.<sup>9</sup> His first wife, Najwa, would finally leave him on the eve of 9/11.<sup>10</sup> But Khairia and Siham—the mothers of Hamza and Khalid, respectively—were ready to go through significant privations for their husband, and both would be with him at the very end.

## The Tehran Years

In Afghanistan, Hamza emerged as one of bin Ladin's favorite sons. Still not yet a teenager, he appeared in propaganda videos alongside his father, underwent assault training with al-Qa`ida fighters, and preached fiery sermons in a young boy's helium voice.<sup>11</sup> In December 2000, aged 11, Hamza was chosen to recite a poem at the wedding of his 15-year-old brother, Mohammed.<sup>12</sup> His assured performance transfixed the other guests; bin Ladin family members would talk about it, and even have dreams about it, for years to come.<sup>13</sup>

But already, Hamza's time with his father was drawing to a close. On September 10, 2001, anticipating the backlash that would follow his latest and most outrageous assault on the United States, bin Ladin ordered his wives and their younger children out of his Kandahar compound—a conspicuous target and one that had been bombed before—to seek shelter in Jalalabad, 350 miles northeast. There, al-Qa`ida's propagandists shot one last video featuring Hamza, in which the boy can be seen reciting a poem praising the bravery of Kabul's Taliban defenders and handling wreckage claimed to be from a downed U.S. helicopter.<sup>14</sup>

The video was, of course, a travesty. The Taliban, far from mounting a stalwart defense, were already being routed up and down the country, and the helicopter wreck, certainly not American, was most likely that of a Soviet gunship shot down before Hamza was born, probably with surface-to-air missiles supplied by the United States. As bin Ladin made ready to ride south for his last stand at Tora Bora, he ordered his family east, over the border into Pakistan.<sup>15</sup> This decision made sense. Al-Qa`ida had found shelter there during and immediately after the war against the Soviets, and operatives like Khalid Sheikh Mohammed had long lived with impunity in Pakistani mega-cities like Karachi.

But 9/11 had changed this picture along with everything else. General Pervez Musharraf responded to the attacks by turning Pakistan into an enthusiastic supporter of the United States' efforts against al-Qa`ida and the Taliban. Faced with a rapidly narrowing range of risky options, al-Qa`ida decided that its people, including bin Ladin's family, should leave Pakistan and seek refuge in the neighboring country of Iran.

The world's foremost Shi`a stronghold may seem an odd destination for an organization populated by Sunni extremists, men who pepper their public utterances with slurs against Shi`a Muslims, calling them "rejectionists" and "apostates." But in the fall of 2001, with support for the United States at an all-time high, Iran suddenly became the one place in the Muslim world where America's writ could be counted upon not to run.

Inside Iran, Saif al-`Adl, a wily Egyptian ex-soldier who had been a pivotal figure in al-Qa`ida since its inception, oversaw a

secret network of safe houses.<sup>16</sup> In the beginning, it seemed as if al-Qa`ida had found at least temporary sanctuary. But Hamza nevertheless chafed against the constraints of this life in the shadows. In July 2002, he wrote a poem to his father, bemoaning the "spheres of danger everywhere I look" and asking, "What has happened for us to be chased by danger?"<sup>17</sup> In his response, bin Ladin did not sugar-coat matters for his 12-year-old son. "I can see only a very steep path ahead," he wrote. "A decade has gone by in vagrancy and travel, and here we are in our tragedy... for how long will real men be in short supply?"<sup>18</sup>

Further hardship lurked just over the horizon. For if Hamza and his family thought they had evaded detection, they were wrong. In fact, it seems that Iranian intelligence knew of al-Qa`ida's presence on the Islamic Republic's soil right from the start. Around April 2003, the al-Qa`ida members in Iran realized they were being watched and began to take steps to thwart Tehran's monitoring. Fearing that al-Qa`ida might slip through their fingers, the authorities initiated a dragnet that pulled in practically every al-Qa`ida operative and family member in the country.<sup>19</sup>

For the next few years, Hamza and his mother were held at a succession of military facilities in the Tehran area, some cramped and dingy, others spacious and relatively comfortable, but always separated from the outside world by high walls, razor wire, and surveillance cameras.<sup>20</sup> Despite their tribulations, Khairia remained adamant that her son should receive the best possible education under the circumstances. Her own pedagogic efforts continued, and to supplement these, she solicited a group of bin Ladin's top lieutenants being held in the same facility, including al-`Adl, to educate Hamza in Qur'anic study, Islamic jurisprudence, and the *hadith* (alleged deeds and sayings of the prophet). Hamza is said to have become learned in each of these subjects.<sup>21</sup>

Hamza matured in other ways, too. While still in captivity, he married the daughter of one of his teachers, the longtime al-Qa`ida military commander Abu Mohammed al-Masri.<sup>22</sup> Hamza's new wife soon gave birth to a son and a daughter, whom they named respectively Usama and Khairia.<sup>23</sup> Hamza told the elder bin Ladin that "God created [my children] to serve you." And he longed to rejoin his father. "How many times, from the depths of my heart, I wished to be beside you," Hamza wrote in 2009. "I remember every smile that you smiled at me, every word that you spoke to me, every look that you gave me."<sup>24</sup>

Neither captivity nor fatherhood could dim the desire to follow in his father's footsteps, which Hamza had shown from a precociously early age. On the contrary, as time went on, he grew ever more desperate to re-enter the fray. His greatest frustration, he told his father in a letter smuggled out to Abbottabad, was that "the mujahidin legions have marched and I have not joined them."<sup>25</sup> But bin Ladin was determined to ensure a different destiny for his favorite son.

## Waziristan

With so many senior al-Qa`ida members in custody, Iran possessed huge leverage over bin Ladin's organization. By 2010, however, al-Qa`ida had acquired a bargaining chip of its own in the shape of a captive Iranian diplomat sold to them as a hostage by Pakistani tribal elements.<sup>26</sup> With the Haqqani Network acting as go-between, a prisoner swap was arranged. In August 2010, at the beginning of Ramadan, Hamza was released along with his mother, wife, and children.<sup>27</sup> Two of his older brothers, Uthman and Mohammed,



*This undated photo is widely believed to show Hamza bin Ladin with his father, Usama bin Ladin.*

soon followed along with their own families.<sup>28</sup> All those released made their way to Waziristan, where a sizable al-Qa`ida contingent lived under the protection of various Pakistani militant groups.

The bin Ladin family was spread across several countries. Abdullah, Usama's eldest son, was living a "quiet life" as a businessman in Saudi Arabia.<sup>29</sup> Another son, Ladin, previously imprisoned in Iran, had gone to stay with his grandmother's side of family in Syria.<sup>30</sup> Another, Omar, lived in Qatar for a time before moving to Saudi Arabia.<sup>31</sup> Bin Ladin therefore had a number of possible places to send family members freed from Iran. He wanted his sons Uthman and Mohammed to stay in Pakistan, provided a "safe place" could be found for them.<sup>32</sup> His initial plan on hearing of Hamza's release was to try to have him sent to Qatar.<sup>33</sup> Given that Hamza had been imprisoned in Iran from around the age of 14, it would be "difficult [for the United States or other countries] to indict him and to ask Qatar to extradite him."<sup>34</sup> Moreover, in Qatar, the home of Al-Jazeera, Hamza would enjoy relative freedom of speech, which he could exploit in order to act as a spokesperson for bin Ladin's brand of Islam, to "spread the jihadi doctrine and refute the wrong and the suspicions raised around jihad."<sup>35</sup> But Mahmud, bin Ladin's Libyan chief of staff—also known as Atiyya Abdul Rahman—balked at the idea of Qatar as a destination, on the basis that the small Gulf state, a U.S. ally, would hand Hamza over to the Americans.<sup>36</sup> Ultimately, as will be seen, bin Ladin followed Mahmud's advice; but the suggestion that Hamza should act as a mouthpiece for jihadi dogma indicates that, despite their long separation, the father had more than an inkling of his son's rhetorical abilities.

In Abbottabad, five hundred miles northeast of al-Qa`ida's Waziristan powerbase, bin Ladin already had one grown son with him—Khalid, the son of his fourth wife, Siham, born in the same year as Hamza. Khalid served as the compound's resident handyman and plumber.<sup>37</sup> He also kept a cow he had bought from a local farmer and, like all of the men around bin Ladin, was prepared to defend his father with deadly force. Khalid was useful to have around, to be sure, but hardly suited for leadership. Now, however, three more adult sons hid in Waziristan, awaiting their father's call: Uthman, aged 27, Mohammed, 25, and Hamza, just 21.<sup>38</sup> Bin

Ladin made his choice. He ordered Uthman and Mohammed to go to Peshawar, 100 miles from their father. Khalid was to do the same, having been betrothed to a girl whose family lived there.<sup>39</sup> But Hamza was to come to Abbottabad as soon as he could safely do so. As Khairia told him in a letter, "The father ... asks God that he will benefit from you ... He has prepared a lot of work for you."<sup>40</sup>

For a while, the portents seemed encouraging. Siham, Khalid's mother, told Hamza of a "very good" dream in which "you were conducting Adhan [the Muslim call to prayer] from atop a very high building, in the same voice in which you said, 'Stay strong my father, for heaven awaits us and victory is ours if God permits.'"<sup>41</sup> This was a reference to the poem that Hamza had recited at his brother Mohammed's wedding more than a decade previously.

As ever, security was the overriding factor, and bin Ladin had already lost one son in Waziristan. Saad, a decade older than Hamza, had been imprisoned in Iran alongside his brothers, but by mid-August 2008, he had been set free (or had escaped, depending on which account one believes).<sup>42</sup> Like Hamza, he made his way to Waziristan. Saad, characteristically, grew restless, perhaps as a result of the mental problems treated by Khairia back in Jeddah. Whatever the cause, Saad apparently behaved recklessly, showed his face once too often in public, and sometime in the first half of 2009, was killed by a U.S. missile.<sup>43</sup> Mahmud, bin Ladin's chief of staff, told his commander in a letter that "Saad died—peace be upon him—because he was impatient."<sup>44</sup>

"We pray to God to have mercy on Saad," bin Ladin wrote. "And may He reward us with a substitute."<sup>45</sup>

For Hamza, Mahmud had nothing but praise. "He is very sweet and good," he told bin Ladin. "I see in him wisdom and politeness. He does not want to be treated with favoritism because he is the son of 'someone.'"<sup>46</sup>

Eager as he was for Hamza to join him, bin Ladin was not going to allow the younger son to meet the same fate as the elder. He therefore issued operatives in Waziristan with strict instructions to keep Hamza indoors unless absolutely necessary and insisted on personally vetting the man assigned to guard his son.<sup>47</sup> Under these strictures, which Mahmud likened to a "prison,"<sup>48</sup> Hamza—usually

as patient and level-headed as his mother—began to exhibit some of Saad’s petulance. Bin Ladin relented a little, allowing Hamza to undergo shooting practice.<sup>49</sup>

Bin Ladin agonized over the decision to bring his son to his side. On the one hand, Hamza was the heir presumptive—the son of his favorite wife, charismatic and well-liked. He could be a great help to the organization. On the other hand, bin Ladin’s own security situation, already precarious to begin with, had recently become yet more delicate, for the two Pakistani brothers who protected him and his family were dangerously close to burning out from stress.<sup>50</sup> One of them, Ahmed, had contracted a serious illness that bin Ladin feared might relapse at any time.<sup>51</sup> They could hold out, bin Ladin estimated, at most another few months.<sup>52</sup> Bin Ladin needed to find replacements for the brothers as soon as possible, but his requirements were exacting. In order to blend in, the new protectors would need to be Pakistanis, fluent in local dialects. To avoid raising suspicions about the unusual size of the compound, they would need to have large families. And, of course, they would need to be absolutely trustworthy and relentlessly committed to the cause.

Mahmud would have his work cut out fulfilling such a tall order. In the meantime, however, bin Ladin finally decided, despite the obvious danger, to have Hamza join him. By early April 2011, Mahmud had hatched a plan to make it happen. Hamza, with his wife and children, traveled south, through the badlands of Baluchistan. This was a roundabout route, to be sure, but it was safer than heading directly toward Abbottabad over the Khyber mountain passes. Once in Baluchistan, the plan was for Hamza’s party to rendezvous with Azmarai, one of al-Qa`ida’s most seasoned and trusted fixers. Azmarai would arrange forward passage through Karachi and then by air or train to Peshawar. There, Hamza would meet another al-Qa`ida operative who would send him on to Abbottabad when the time was right. To ease his brother through the inevitable checkpoints along the way, Khalid lent Hamza his fake ID and driver’s license. By late April 2011, plans were afoot, and Hamza waited only for a cloudy sky to speed him on his way. But it was not to be. Within a few weeks, his father was dead.<sup>53 b</sup>

## Heir Apparent

Hamza may have avoided death or capture in Abbottabad by weeks or even days. His brother Khalid was not so lucky; he died wielding an assault weapon in a futile attempt to defend his father against the superior numbers, tactics, and technology of the U.S. Navy SEALs.<sup>54</sup> Hamza’s mother, Khairia, was taken into Pakistani custody in the early hours of May 2, 2011. Around a year later, she, Umm Khalid, and a dozen other bin Ladin family members were deported to Saudi Arabia, where they live to this day in a compound outside Jeddah under what their lawyer describes as “very tight restrictions and security arrangements made by the Kingdom’s authorities,” including a ban on speaking publicly about their time in Pakistan.<sup>55</sup>

Over the next four years, while Ayman al-Zawahiri took over as permanent emir of al-Qa`ida, Syria and Iraq descended into barbarism, and the Islamic State spun out of al-Qa`ida’s orbit, Hamza bin Ladin remained silent. Then, out of the blue, in an audio mes-

sage released in August 2015, al-Zawahiri introduced “a lion from the den of al-Qa`ida”—a play on the name Usama, which means “lion” in Arabic. The next voice on the tape was that of Hamza.<sup>56</sup> He hailed the “martyrdom” of his father and his brother Khalid; praised al-Qa`ida’s leaders in Syria, Yemen, and North Africa; lauded the attacks on Fort Hood and the Boston Marathon; and called for jihadis to “[t]ake the battlefield from Kabul, Baghdad, and Gaza to Washington, London, Paris, and Tel Aviv.”

Further statements appeared in May, July, and August 2016, prompting the U.S. State Department in January 2017 to place Hamza on its list of Specially Designated Global Terrorists.<sup>57</sup> Two more messages then emerged in May 2017.<sup>58</sup>

The theme of encouraging attacks on Jewish and Western interests is one to which Hamza has returned again and again in his messages. For example, the first of his May 2017 statements is entitled “Advice for Martyrdom-Seekers in the West.” Over footage of the aftermath of the Fort Hood massacre, a television reconstruction of events leading up to the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, and images connected with other attacks, Hamza encouraged jihadis all over the world to “Sell your soul cheaply for the pleasure of [God]” and urged them to read *Inspire* magazine, the online publication of al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) that taught the Boston bombers how to turn a pressure cooker into a weapon.<sup>59</sup> A caption in the video montage encourages “stabbing with knives and using vehicles and trucks” as an alternative to guns and bombs.

Strikingly, Hamza directs followers not to travel to theaters of war within the Muslim world, but instead to attack targets in the West and Russia. “Perhaps you are longing for emigration,” he says. “Perhaps you yearn for sacrifice in the battlefields. Know that inflicting punishment on Jews and Crusaders where you are is more vexing and severe for the enemy.” He urges “martyrs” that “the message you intend to convey through your blessed operation must be explained unequivocally in the media” and suggests talking points to align these explanations with al-Qa`ida’s own propaganda.

In the same statement, Hamza sets up a hierarchy of targets to be attacked, starting with those who “transgress” against Islam (such as the editors of the French satirical weekly *Charlie Hebdo*), followed by Jewish interests, the United States, other NATO member states, and, lastly, Russia.<sup>60</sup> It is noteworthy that Hamza accords attacks on Jewish interests a higher priority than those against Americans, whereas Usama bin Ladin in his 1998 *fatwa* relating to “Jihad against Jews and Crusaders” depicted them as coequal targets. This hierarchy may reflect Hamza’s renewed emphasis on the Palestinian cause, dramatically stated in the title of his May 2016 statement, “Jerusalem Is a Bride and Our Blood Is Her Dowry.”<sup>61</sup> However, this should not be taken as evidence that al-Qa`ida is about to begin attacking Israel directly. It should be recalled that Usama bin Ladin himself was quite cynical about the matter, admitting privately to his lieutenants that al-Qa`ida’s rhetoric about Palestine was no more than “noise” designed to drum up popular support in the Arab world.<sup>62</sup>

In two of his statements, Hamza, like his father before him, urges regime change in Saudi Arabia. The first, released in August 2016, bemoans AQAP’s ouster the previous April from Mukalla in Yemen, alleging that it was accomplished “with direct American participation.”<sup>63</sup> (In fact, Mukalla was liberated by a Saudi-led coalition of Arab forces.) The second statement was released during U.S. President Donald Trump’s state visit to Saudi Arabia in May 2017, although Hamza does not mention the trip in the text itself.<sup>64</sup>

b Azmarai (full name: Umar Siddique Kathio Azmarai) was also known as Abdallah al-Sindhi. “Treasury Designates Senior Al-Qa`ida Official and Terrorist Training Center Supporting Lashkar-E Tayyiba and the Taliban,” United States Treasury Department, August 20, 2013.

In the latter statement, Hamza reiterates his call for the overthrow of the Saudi monarchy, claiming that the House of Saud has been doing the bidding of foreigners ever since the Kingdom's founder, Ibn Saud, received British aid during World War I.

Hamza's messages frequently repeat, almost word-for-word, sentences uttered by the elder bin Ladin during al-Qa`ida's heyday in the late 1990s and early 2000s. This tendency can be heard, for example, in Hamza's diatribes on the Palestinian Territories, on what he calls the "occupation" of Saudi Arabia, and on the idea that the United States is "stealing" the wealth of the Muslim world. (President Trump, no doubt unwittingly, played into the last of these narrative strands on his visit to Saudi Arabia, when he thanked King Salman for his "massive investment in America, its industry, and its jobs" and boasted of a new arms deal that would transfer a further \$110 billion to U.S. companies.<sup>65</sup>) Hamza even makes an effort to sound like his father, intoning his words with the same quiet intensity.

In his first statement, Hamza speaks of "following my father" by pledging allegiance to the leader of the Taliban. This is noteworthy in itself; whereas al-Qa`ida's other senior leaders pledge *bayat* to the emir of the organization (currently al-Zawahiri) who then swears fealty to the Taliban on behalf of al-Qa`ida as a whole, Hamza gives his *bayat* directly to the Taliban leader, suggesting that, as the heir to bin Ladin, he belongs to a higher class. Other aspects of the statements confirm the impression that Hamza is being elevated to leadership. In his earlier messages, al-Qa`ida's media arm referred to Hamza as a "Brother Mujahid," a rank-and-file designation. But beginning with his two statements released in May 2017, the organization has started calling him "Sheikh," a title reserved for its topmost brass.

None of Hamza's messages have been accompanied by pictures of the man himself. In fact, the most recent known images are still those of Hamza sifting through helicopter wreckage in the weeks following 9/11, when he was just 12 years old; today, he would be 27 or 28. For a recent episode of 60 Minutes, CBS News commissioned a forensic artist, Stephen Mancusi, to take images of Hamza in his boyhood and subject them to an age-progression technique.<sup>66</sup> The resulting portrait is of a young man who looks unsettlingly like his father around the same age, when he was raising money for the Afghan struggle against the Soviets. Another clue to Hamza's appearance may come from the fact that he seems to have borrowed his half-brother Khalid's Pakistani ID card for the abortive journey from Waziristan to Abbottabad.<sup>67</sup> Khalid, as depicted in grisly photographs of his corpse lying on the stone floor of the Abbottabad house, shared his father's long, thin nose and full lips. If Hamza does indeed resemble his father, and is willing in due time to show his face, no doubt the likeness will prove an asset in rallying jihadi support around al-Qa`ida.

When Hamza's first statement came out in August 2015, confidence in al-Zawahiri had reached an all-time low. It had just emerged that Mullah Omar had died in 2013, a year before al-Zawahiri had renewed al-Qa`ida's *bayat* to the Taliban leader. In other words, either al-Zawahiri had been unaware of Omar's death—in which case he was too far out of the loop to lead—or he had known about it all along and had intentionally sworn allegiance to a dead man—a grave sin in al-Qa`ida's brand of Islam. This revelation brought dismay and ridicule from jihadis all over the world, at a time when the Islamic State was still capturing all the headlines and attracting the lion's share of recruits. Raising the profile of the heir

to bin Ladin was thus an inspired move on the part of al-Zawahiri and the other al-Qa`ida top brass. But Hamza's return will have far broader and longer-term repercussions.

### Future Standard Bearer of Global Jihad?

As the Islamic State continues to crumble, many of its adherents will be looking for new banners under which to fight. They are unlikely to pledge allegiance to al-Zawahiri, whom they see as an interloper unworthy of bin Ladin's legacy. It would be an understatement to say that al-Zawahiri lacks the charisma of his predecessor. Moreover, as an Egyptian, he will always struggle to inspire loyalty among other Arabs, especially those from the Arabian Peninsula. Hamza, by contrast, suffers from none of these handicaps. His family pedigree, not to mention his dynastic marriage to the daughter of an al-Qa`ida charter member, automatically entitles him to respect from every jihadi who follows bin Ladin's ideology, which includes every Islamic State fighter. As a Saudi descended from prominent families on both his father's and his mother's side, he is well-placed to pull in large donations from patrons in the Gulf, particularly at a time when sectarian fervor is running high in Saudi Arabia. It is significant in this regard that Hamza has returned to his father's rhetoric castigating the House of Saud. As with bin Ladin's 1996 declaration of jihad, this is not just a political message; it is designed to inspire potential donors.

One final aspect of Hamza's messages is noteworthy here. Unlike other leading al-Qa`ida figures, he has never once explicitly criticized the Islamic State. True, he bemoans "strife" between the various groups fighting in Iraq and Syria and calls repeatedly for unity among jihadis to face down what he describes as a "unified enemy" of "Crusaders, Jews, Alawites, rejectionists, and apostate mercenaries." But he carefully avoids naming the self-styled caliphate or its leaders. The Islamic State, for its part, reciprocates the favor; even as its propaganda castigates al-Zawahiri as a traitor to the cause, it never directly references Hamza. It is significant, too, that many Islamic State supporters who denounce "al-Zawahiri's al-Qa`ida" nevertheless profess admiration for Usama bin Ladin.<sup>c</sup> This is the best evidence that Hamza could be a unifying figure.

It is true that Hamza has never fought on the frontlines—something of which, as is seen in his letters to his father from captivity, he himself is painfully aware. This distinguishes him from the elder bin Ladin, whose warrior myth was built on his exploits against the Soviets in Afghanistan in the 1980s. But it is not as much of a weakness as might be thought. Hamza is not coming out of thin air; he is the favorite son of the most famous jihadi in history. And in a culture where leadership typically descends through a bloodline, pedigree trumps experience. Moreover, while Hamza has not actually fought, he has been featured in al-Qa`ida propaganda from a very young age, in videos that depict him as having been very close to his father. Perhaps most importantly of all, Hamza clearly has al-Qa`ida's senior leadership behind him. During his Iranian captivity, Hamza received training from some of al-Qa`ida's top operatives, including al-`Adl and al-Masri.<sup>68</sup> Both of these men are

c For example, the Islamic State's English-language propaganda magazine *Dabiq* referred to bin Ladin using the honorific "Sheikh" and included photos of him. *Dabiq*, Issue 4, pp. 43-33. In November 2014, the Islamic State released a video tracing its origins to bin Ladin. Graeme Wood, "What ISIS really wants," *Atlantic*, March 2015.

now reportedly free and presumably available to give Hamza their counsel, something bin Ladin himself lacked during the last nine years of his life.

Hamza's ascendancy comes at a moment when al-Qa`ida affiliates are growing in resources and influence across the Islamic world. Al-Nusra, the Syrian franchise now nominally subsumed into Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, may have more than 20,000 militants under its command.<sup>69</sup> AQAP controls or has a presence in large swathes of Yemen's coastline and highway network. Al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb recently concluded a merger with several other factions, creating a jihadi conglomerate whose constituent groups collectively carried out over 250 attacks in 2016 alone.<sup>70</sup> However, since AQAP's threats against U.S. embassies in 2013, these franchises have apparently not sought to use their power to mount attacks against the West. While al-Zawahiri has mostly limited himself to threatening the United States rhetorically, if Hamza takes the reins, there is reason to think that could change, given that his messages repeatedly call for more attacks on American soil, praising previous atrocities like the Fort Hood massacre and the Boston Marathon bombing. As has been seen, Hamza has turned to his father's well-worn anti-American rhetoric, accusing the United States of "occupying" the Arabian Peninsula and "stealing" Muslim wealth.

Many factors suggest that Hamza could be a highly effective leader: his family pedigree, his dynastic marriage, his longstanding jihadi fervor and obvious charisma, and his closeness to al-Qa`ida's most senior operatives. It remains to be seen how, exactly, the organization will make use of him, but it is clear that his star is on the rise. That should worry policymakers in the West as well as in the Muslim world. **CTC**

*Author's Afterword: Following the early publication of this article on September 7, 2017, al-Qa`ida released a new audio statement from Hamza bin Ladin, commemorating the 16th anniversary of*

*the 9/11 attacks. The statement, which was released by al-Qa`ida's propaganda arm as-Sahab on September 14, was preceded by a "trailer" poster put out a few days earlier featuring Hamza's face (from a picture taken when he was still a preteen) embedded in a burning World Trade Center.*

*Starting with its title, "The Cause of al-Sham is the Cause of Islam," the new statement confirms that al-Qa`ida now regards Syria, and more specifically Idlib Province, as the preeminent theater of jihad—the place where the organization has potentially the most to gain and the most to lose. "This is not an ordeal for al-Sham," Hamza says. "It is an ordeal targeting Islam itself."*

*In a significant rhetorical shift, Hamza warns of "international Crusader-Rafidhi aggression" ("Rafidhi" being a term of abuse for Shi'a Muslims). Usama bin Ladin tried to steer al-Qa`ida in Iraq (AQI) away from such sectarianism, but his efforts met with little success, and AQI's successor, the Islamic State, remains violently anti-Shi'a to this day. Hamza's shift in tone may represent, in part, an effort to attract former Islamic State fighters into the al-Qa`ida fold. At the same time, al-Qa`ida no doubt sees the fundraising potential inherent in the renewed sectarianism in the Gulf generated by Saudi Arabia's ongoing power struggle with Iran.*

*Perhaps most troublingly of all, Hamza urges followers to pay attention to "the oppressed men and women in the refugee camps," an oblique indication that al-Qa`ida is well aware of the history of such camps (particularly in Afghanistan in the 1980s) as fertile recruiting grounds for terrorists.*

*This one statement encapsulates three things the international community must do if it is to make progress in the fight against extremism: defeat al-Qa`ida and its affiliates in Syria; tackle the horrific refugee crisis stemming from that conflict; and end sectarianism across the wider Middle East. It remains to be seen whether any of those will come to pass.*

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# A View from the CT Foxhole: An Interview with Brian Fishman, Counterterrorism Policy Manager, Facebook

By Paul Cruickshank

*Brian Fishman manages Facebook's global counterterrorism policy. He is the author of *The Master Plan: ISIS, al-Qaeda, and the Jihadi Strategy for final Victory* (Yale University Press, 2016) and previously served as the director of research at the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point. Fishman maintains affiliations with the CTC, New America, Stanford University's Center for International Security and Cooperation, and UC Berkeley.*

**CTC:** There's long been concern that extremist content posted and shared on social media is helping to fuel terrorism. As the social media company with the largest user base in the world, what is Facebook doing to counter terrorism?

**Fishman:** The bottom line is that there is no place for terrorism on Facebook—for terrorist actors themselves, terrorist groups, or supporters. This is a long-standing Facebook policy.<sup>a</sup> Our work countering terrorism now is more vital than ever because of the success ISIS [the Islamic State] has had in distributing their message via social media. But our basic policy framework is very clear: There should be no praise, support, or representation of terrorism. We use a pretty standard academic definition of terrorism that is predicated on behavior. It is not bound by ideology or the specific political intent of a group.

The sheer size and diversity of our user base—we have 2 billion users a month speaking more than 100 languages—does create significant challenges, but it also creates opportunities. We're striving to put our community in a position where they can report very easily things on Facebook that they think shouldn't be there.

We currently have more than 4,500 people working in community operations teams around the world reviewing all types of content flagged by users for potential terrorism signals, and we announced several months ago that we are expanding these teams by 3,000.

Every one of those reports gets assessed, regardless of what it was reported for, to see whether there is anything that looks like it might have a nexus with terrorism. If the initial review suggests that there might be a connection, then that report is sent to a team of specialists who will dig deeper to understand if that nexus exists. And if there is support of some kind or someone representing themselves as a terrorist or another indication that they are, then we will remove the content or account from the platform.

**CTC:** Earlier this year, a U.K. parliamentary report on online hate and extremism asserted “the biggest and richest social media companies are shamefully far from taking sufficient action

to tackle illegal and dangerous content, to implement proper community standards or to keep their users safe.”<sup>1</sup> For her part, British Prime Minister Theresa May stated after the June London Bridge terrorist attack, “We cannot allow this ideology the safe space it needs to breed. Yet that is precisely what the internet and the big companies that provide internet-based services provide.”<sup>2</sup> Is the industry as a whole doing too little to combat terrorism content?

**Fishman:** There was once a time where, I think, companies were trying to wrap their heads around what was happening on their platforms. And so there was a learning period. Facebook's policy on this is really clear. Terrorists are not allowed to be on Facebook. So I don't think the suggestion that technology companies must be compelled to care is helpful at this stage. From my vantage point, it's clear technology companies across the industry are treating the problem of terrorist content online seriously. Now we need to work constructively across industry and with external partners to figure out how to do that job better.

**CTC:** You're an alumnus of the Combating Terrorism Center who has long studied and written about terrorism. What's the transition been like to your current role at Facebook?

**Fishman:** It's tremendously gratifying to take my experience at a center of academic expertise and the engagement that I had with cadets and folks in government and translate it to a Facebook environment. I work within a wider product policy team whose job it is to set policy for Facebook broadly, including community standards. We've broken out a dedicated team on counterterrorism that I lead and are growing that team with some really talented people.

I think that the biggest point of learning for me is figuring out how to scale an operation to enforce guidelines consistently and effectively. And in my experience, until you've had to manage the scale that Facebook operates at, even when somebody gives you some of the numbers, you still have to learn to wrap your head around it and understand what that means in terms of language coverage, cultural knowledge, having the right people to be able to do the right things. That's something that I think you can't fully prepare yourself for. You need to get in the trenches and do it.

**CTC:** Given the sheer volume of material constantly being posted on social media by extremist actors, what are some of the strategies you are using to remove such material?

**Fishman:** I mentioned reports from the community earlier, but we are increasingly using automated techniques to find this stuff. We're trying to enable computers to do what they're good at: look at lots of material very quickly, give us a high-level overview. We've also recently started to use artificial intelligence [AI]. But we still think

<sup>a</sup> Editor's note: For more on Facebook's counterterrorism efforts, see <https://newsroom.fb.com/news/2017/06/how-we-counter-terrorism/>.

human beings are critical because computers are not very good yet at understanding nuanced context when it comes to terrorism. For example, there are instances in which people are putting up a piece of ISIS propaganda, but they're condemning ISIS. You've seen this in CVE [countering violent extremism] types of context. We want to allow that counter speech. We want to allow people to play off of the horrible things that an ISIS or al-Qa`ida or whoever it is is distributing and criticize that stuff and reveal its inconsistencies and the hypocrisy that is inherent in so much of it. But we don't want people to be able to share that same image or that same video and use it to try to recruit. Context is everything, so we really need human beings to help us understand and make those decisions.

All this means that the 150 people or so internally at Facebook whose primary job is dealing with terrorism are vital to our counterterrorism efforts. Between them, they have previous experience as academic experts, prosecutors, law enforcement agents and engineers and speak nearly 30 languages.

Our strategy is to blend the processing power of computers with the nuanced understanding provided by humans. In certain black-and-white cases, we can automatically block things entirely from reaching Facebook. For gray areas, we're also beginning to use AI. In these cases, the content hits the platform but is routed immediately for human beings to take a look at and removed if necessary.

Using AI to be able to route that particular piece of content to the right reviewer very quickly is a challenge. I think when people think about what AI means, they tend to think it's, "Well, we want to invent a magic button that gets rid of terrorist content." But in reality, when you're operationalizing something like this, you actually want to use sophisticated tools in a lot of different points in the process to make it as efficient as possible to improve your speed and your accuracy in making a good decision. We're trying to improve the processes all the time. Some of the changes we're making are big, and some of them are small. Some of them, we slap our foreheads and say "why weren't we doing that last week?" And some of them are really insightful and come from some really brilliant engineers that are focused on these issues. When you're trying to build out an operation to get at this stuff at scale, it's not just a question of one algorithm. Instead, it is, how do you use AI and the computer to facilitate good decisions each step of the way.

**CTC: In what ways are you using artificial intelligence to remove terrorist content?**

**Fishman:** One of the key ones we've had a lot of success with lately is photo and video matching. ISIS and al-Qa`ida, in particular, have very formal processes for developing and releasing propaganda. We do everything we can to understand that flow of propaganda so we can quickly put those images and videos into databases. When people upload photos or videos released by terrorist entities, we can match against those databases. There is always room to improve this matching technology, but it doesn't have to be an exact match for the computers to find them. In some cases, this prevents propaganda material from ever hitting Facebook. In other cases, it allows us to route the posts that share this material to the right reviewer very, very quickly.

There are all sorts of complications to implementing this, but overall the technique is effective. This was evidenced by a recent VOX-Pol study, which found Facebook was not in the top 10 platforms ISIS-supporting Twitter accounts were out-linking to.<sup>3</sup> The



*Brian Fishman*

reason it isn't in this top 10 is that if you put a piece of formal propaganda on Facebook, maybe there will be a gap in our enforcement for a short time period, but we'll get to it pretty quickly. Facebook is not a good repository for that kind of material for these guys anymore, and they know it.

There are times when we literally could not be faster. There are certainly times when we are not perfect. We make mistakes. Sometimes we find gaps in process. Sometimes things stick around longer than they should because we've had operational breakdown. We can get faster and have better operational consistency at the scale that we want to do it. It's hard, and there are no easy technical fixes. We're really trying to be frank about the challenges we run into.

It's much more difficult, for example, to use computers to identify text advocating for terrorism. We're in the early stages of using AI to develop text-based signals that content could be terrorist propaganda. We do this by analyzing posts we've already taken down and putting this information into an algorithm that is learning how to detect such posts. The machine learning algorithm works on a feedback loop, which makes it better over time. We're decent at finding content that supports terrorism, but not good enough yet where we would trust the computer to make a decision. We trust the computer to reasonably accurately identify things that we want a human being to take a look at, but we don't yet trust the computer to make a decision in those cases. Not being an engineer, I hesitate to speculate about whether we'll get to the point where the computer is making decisions, but this stuff is really exciting to do—true machine learning. You're trying to find a symbiotic relationship between a skill set of human beings and algorithms that can provide you a leg up on solving these problems.

One other thing we use AI for is to identify clusters of pages,

posts, groups, or profiles with terrorist content. We know from terrorism studies that terrorists tend to concentrate in clusters, and it's no different online. We use algorithms to "fan out" to identify these for possible removal by looking at accounts that are friends with a high number of accounts disabled for terrorism or accounts that share a high number of attributes as a disabled account.

**CTC: In June 2016, an Islamic State-inspired terrorist broadcasted on Facebook Live from the scene of his crime after killing two police officers in Magnanville northwest of Paris,<sup>4</sup> raising concern an actual attack might one day be broadcasted live on the internet. What kind of mechanisms do you have to stop this?**

**Fishman:** It's a scenario we certainly worry about. We have extensive procedures in place to make sure live broadcasts do not violate our terms of service, including specialized enforcement and review teams monitoring Facebook Live. Algorithms, again, play a role in identifying concerning video, but we also work to make sure our operations team has appropriate tooling. All this allows us to keep tabs on Facebook Live and content that is going viral. None of it is perfect, so we will continue to work to improve.

**CTC: How do you stop terrorists suspended from Facebook from just opening new accounts?**

**Fishman:** When we identify somebody that has supported terrorism in the past or if we believe they are a terrorist, they are not allowed on Facebook. And if we can verify that it's the same individual, we will kick them off, even if they created a new, fake account that doesn't actually post terrorist content. We've gotten much faster at detecting new fake accounts created by repeat offenders. Through this work, we've been able to greatly reduce the time period that terrorist recidivist accounts are on Facebook. This work is never finished because it's adversarial. We're constantly identifying new ways that terrorist actors try to circumvent our systems—and we update our tactics accordingly.

**CTC: When real-deal threats, which go beyond rhetoric, pop up on Facebook, what kinds of mechanisms are in place to identify those and to alert authorities as quickly as possible?**

**Fishman:** When we see something anywhere around the world that looks like a real-world threat, we make sure that we alert the authorities. That obviously doesn't happen all that often. It certainly isn't as common as the kind of propaganda that we see. But when it does happen, we take it to authorities as quickly as possible.

**CTC: Let's talk about the debate over encryption. The Facebook-owned messaging application WhatsApp uses end-to-end encryption. In recent months, there have been calls by politicians to introduce so-called backdoors into apps using such encryption, including after a suicide bombing at a music festival in Bavaria in July 2016 by an extremist who authorities said was communicating via WhatsApp with a suspected Islamic State handler based overseas.<sup>5</sup> Aaron Brantly, a cyber policy fellow at the U.S. Army Cyber Institute and non-resident fellow at the Combating Terrorism Center, recently argued in this publication that despite the fact that terrorists were using encrypted messaging apps to plan attacks, introducing backdoors was a**

**"worse than futile exercise" because it would compromise the security of the general public's communications and do little to stop terrorists using encryption, given that the code behind it is already in the public domain.<sup>6</sup> As a counterterrorism specialist now working at a technology company, how do you see this issue?**

**Fishman:** I think Brantly got a lot right in that article. Here's the issue: you can't create a backdoor into WhatsApp without creating a backdoor into every WhatsApp account in the world. And so you'd be creating an extreme vulnerability, and in doing so, you wouldn't actually limit the ability of terrorists to use encryption. You would be driving them to platforms like Telegram and Kik. And as Brantly pointed out, the technology that is used in encryption is open source, so nefarious actors can create their own encrypted messaging platforms. We saw that a decade ago with Mujahideen Secrets, the software tool created by al-Qa`ida. That was jihadis re-skinning open-source encryption software in an effort to try to create conduits for, from their perspective, secure communications. The bottom line is we think that pushes for a backdoor are likely to undermine secure communication and create significant risks without actually providing a lot of benefit.

**CTC: Last month, British Home Secretary Amber Rudd said companies offering encryption apps should give up more metadata about messages being sent by their services.<sup>7</sup> What kind of information was she referring to?**

**Fishman:** Because of the way end-to-end encryption works, we can't read the contents of individual encrypted messages on, say, WhatsApp, but we do respond quickly to appropriate and legal law enforcement requests. We believe that actually puts authorities in a better position than in a situation where this type of technology runs off to mom-and-pop apps scattered all over the globe.

**CTC: When it comes to what can be shared, are you talking about metadata?**

**Fishman:** There is some limited data that's available, and WhatsApp is working to help law enforcement understand how it responds to their requests, especially in emergency situations.

**CTC: Given terrorists can migrate from platform to platform, what is being done at the industry level in terms of cooperation to take down extremist content?**

**Fishman:** At the industry level, we are working with a range of partners to share hashes—that is to say, unique digital fingerprints—of the most egregious terrorist videos and pictures. In practice, this currently focuses on content related to ISIS and al-Qa`ida.

Initially, when we began this 10 months ago,<sup>8</sup> it was Facebook, Microsoft, Twitter, and YouTube, but those partnerships have now been expanded to include Snap and JustPaste.it as well as a range of other companies. This is something that's moving; it's working now. There are certainly improvements we can make—both process improvements and improvements to some of the technology that we're utilizing—but it's a start. When we send something to a hash-sharing database, it provides other companies the opportunity to take down the content if it violates their own community standards.

In conjunction with that same group of companies, we also launched the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT),<sup>9</sup> which serves as a mechanism for information-sharing, technical cooperation like hash-sharing, and shared research initiatives. We launched that in June. This is all new, but we are excited about the direction we're headed.

**CTC: How has Facebook sought to empower voices taking on terrorist content?**

**Fishman:** As a company, we're supporting voices around the world who are challenging those who preach hatred and extremism. We support several counter-speech programs.<sup>10</sup> The broadest is something called "Peer to Peer," or P2P Facebook Global Digital Challenge. EdVenture Partners is an organization we support and advise that develops a curriculum that is implemented by universities around the globe. The curriculum is focused on how you build a social media campaign, how you identify and think about hatred and extremism. Using that knowledge, students actually develop their own messaging campaigns. Some of them are very sophisticated; some of them are not. This operates as a big global competition between those groups of students. So far, P2P has launched more than 500 counter-speech campaigns from students in 68 countries, engaged more than 5,500 students, and reached more than 56 million people.<sup>11 b</sup> I think we've reached somewhere in the range of 60 million people [who] have been touched by one of these campaigns in the last couple years. And I think the most important thing about that program is that it actually reaches scale, which is one of the things that is very, very difficult in developing counter-speech work. We're empowering these local students around the world to identify the kind of extremism and the form that it takes in their communities.

Sometimes this might be pushing back directly on ISIS/al-Qa`ida. Sometimes it's going to be other types of hate organizations. There are a lot of different versions depending on what students in a local context prioritize. We don't get into the business of dictating what the students should focus on. We just want to give them the tools to identify what's going to be relevant in their communities.

b In early 2016, West Point cadets in Combating Terrorism Center Director LTC Bryan Price's "Combating Terrorism" course finished second out of 49 universities in the "P2P: Challenging Extremism" competition. They briefed their proposal at the White House and the U.S. State Department. "Recruiting college students to fight extremists online," PBS Frontline, January 30, 2016; Nike Ching, "US Initiative Enlists International Students for Online Anti-extremism Campaign," VoA, February 4, 2016.

**CTC: How does Facebook promote their message?**

**Fishman:** The best and winning campaigns get Facebook ad credits. We don't actively help them, algorithmically, with promoting their content, but we do give them ad credits that they can use to target their ads, to target folks they want to reach. And those can be very, very effective.

We also have a program called the Online Civil Courage Initiative,<sup>12</sup> which operates in the U.K., Germany, and France. It takes the same basic ethos of finding civil society groups on the ground, giving them this kind of training, providing them ad credits, and trying to give them a leg up but not dictating content. We're trying to support people that understand the local environment, that are more credible messengers, and give them the tools to be more effective messengers. We recognize that when you do these things at scale, some of the campaigns are going to be well-designed, some are not. And we're perfectly comfortable with that.<sup>c</sup>

**CTC: In terms of measuring progress, how do you do that at Facebook? Do you have a system of metrics? How can you know that you're succeeding in taking down terrorist content?**

**Fishman:** That's a really great question and something we're grappling with. But talking about the number of takedowns isn't necessarily meaningful because you don't know the denominator—the baseline amount of nefarious content there in the first place. So if you remove more content and the number goes up, was it because you're doing a better job finding bad content, or is because there was more extremist content to find? And if that number goes down, is it because there's less of it overall, or is it because your folks are doing a better job of circumventing the kinds of things that you're doing?

**CTC: How do you see the challenges ahead?**

**Fishman:** I think dealing with scale will continue to be a challenge. Making sure that we can understand really culturally nuanced activity in a way that is consistent is a constant challenge. And it's something that requires human beings. We really want, as much as possible, to rely on our ability to use algorithms and machine-learning to do as much of this as possible. But we're never going to get away from the necessity of having human beings to make the gray area calls. And when you're dealing with terrorism, which is an inherently political activity but it's a violent political activity, there's going to be gray areas where you need human judgment in the loop. Anytime there is human judgment, trying to write effective policies and drive consistent application of guidelines is a challenge. **CTC**

c Editor's note: More information about Facebook's counter-speech programs is available at <https://counterspeech.fb.com>

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# Al-Qa`ida in Pakistan: A Metric Problem?

By Don Rassler

**Data collected from news reports about al-Qa`ida suspects arrested in the Pakistani mega-city of Karachi since 9/11 suggest that the group's presence in the city has been growing in recent years. The data also points to how the character and make-up of al-Qa`ida in the region is also shifting. Both trends speak to the persistence and diverse nature of the al-Qa`ida threat and how the challenges posed by the group in the region extend well beyond Afghanistan and span across more remote locales, as well as major urban areas in Pakistan—even 16 years after 9/11.**

*"We believe we have constrained al-Qa`ida's effectiveness and its ability to recruit, train, and deploy operatives from its safe haven in South Asia; however, this does not mean that the threat from core al-Qa`ida in the tribal areas of Pakistan or in eastern Afghanistan has been eliminated."*

—Nicholas Rasmussen, NCTC Director, September 2016<sup>1</sup>

Official U.S. government assessments of al-Qa`ida's strength in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region, and the threat posed by the elements of the group based there, typically paint a picture of an organization that has been degraded but that also continues to pose a lingering, or persistent, lower-level threat.<sup>2</sup> The evidence most often used to support this view includes the significant and sustained leadership losses al-Qa`ida has suffered in the region since 9/11; al-Qa`ida core's lack of success in conducting or inspiring operations in the West; the mostly insignificant attacks it has executed locally; and the group's lessened ability to centrally coordinate or lead the activity of its regional affiliates.

In many ways, these are hard data points to argue against, especially if one looks at the two primary metrics—the losses inflicted on al-Qa`ida via drone strikes and other operations and the group's ability to conduct attacks outside the region—that the United States has been using to evaluate the strength of al-Qa`ida based there. These two metrics are critical to any assessment of al-Qa`ida in Afghanistan and Pakistan, as they provide high-level measures of al-Qa`ida's resilience, operational capacity, and ability to project force.

But just as they are necessary, these metrics are also not entirely sufficient, as they only measure specific dimensions of al-Qa`ida's

strength. Indeed, as any good social scientist knows, one's assessment of a problem depends a lot on how that problem is defined and the metrics one uses to evaluate it. A focus on some metrics, and not others, could potentially skew one's evaluation and understanding of a problem. For example, these two metrics say very little about al-Qa`ida's ability to recruit members locally in Pakistan. They also do little to explain the disconnect between al-Qa`ida core's relative failure to conduct attacks outside the region and the group's demonstrated ability to execute a fairly consistent campaign of less significant, but still noteworthy, attacks in specific countries in the region. (The latter is a particularly important point given the number of al-Qa`ida members killed by counterterrorism forces in Afghanistan and Pakistan since 9/11.)

This issue is arguably compounded by the geographic apertures through which the al-Qa`ida problem has been viewed and evaluated. Indeed, despite a series of senior al-Qa`ida arrests occurring in other locations in Pakistan, most assessments of al-Qa`ida in that country focus on Pakistan's tribal areas, a region that sits alongside Afghanistan's long eastern border (where al-Qa`ida has also historically been a consistent problem). This focus is also warranted, but it also only tells part of the story, as a proper assessment of al-Qa`ida in Pakistan would include an evaluation of many variables across different geographic areas.

By taking a different, geographically more scaled-down view and by focusing on an important metric that often is not used to evaluate al-Qa`ida's strength in Pakistan, this article seeks to demonstrate how evaluations of al-Qa`ida in that country might be incomplete. To gain purchase into the issue, this article intentionally looks at al-Qa`ida suspects arrested in one major city in Pakistan (Karachi) since 9/11. Given the narrow view taken, this article is not designed to be a full assessment of al-Qa`ida in Pakistan generally, or even in Karachi specifically. It only seeks to demonstrate what arrest action data can tell us about al-Qa`ida's presence and potential strength in Karachi and how that has changed over the last 16 years. In the process of doing so and in highlighting what can be learned from other, easily collectible data, the author hopes to raise questions about how the United States has approached the issue of counterterrorism metrics and whether current assessments of al-Qa`ida in Pakistan are "right." Such an approach is prudent, as the danger of potential misdiagnosis of the problem is not without its share of consequences; a poor diagnosis could lead to misguided and ineffective solutions to mitigate the threat—or worse, leave the United States more vulnerable to strategic and operational surprise.

## Methodology, Limitations, and Caveats

The data for this report was assembled by culling newspapers for articles containing the search string "Al-Qa`ida AND Karachi AND

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arrest OR detain” between September 12, 2001, and May 31, 2017.<sup>a</sup> Data from relevant articles was then coded to create a database of arrest actions that targeted al-Qa`ida operatives in the Pakistani mega-city of Karachi. The variables that were coded fell into four broad categories: temporal (including day, month, and year), geographic (including district- and neighborhood-level arrest data), arrest details (including number of arrest actions, number of individuals arrested, number killed, arresting unit, violent encounter, plot disrupted, plot target, and materiel recovered), and individual and group dynamics (including names of arrested, role/position, nationalities, prior group affiliation, and names of other group(s) present). While as many of these variables were coded as the data would allow, some fields were more heavily populated than others.

There are a number of limitations associated with this dataset. First, the database is not based on internal police or Pakistani court records, but rather media accounts of arrests. Because this author does not know what the entire population of arrest actions looks like, the author does not know how representative the database is in relation to all al-Qa`ida arrests made in Karachi over the time period studied. Press accounts of arrests certainly provide a reflection of what has transpired, but it is not clear how closely press accounts comport with local Pakistani law enforcement or judicial statistics. Even if law enforcement data were available, Pakistan and its local security forces have, at times, had incentives to either inflate or underreport the number of al-Qa`ida arrests in Karachi and across the country generally. For example, in the immediate months and years after 9/11, Pakistan arguably had an incentive to publicize the arrests of al-Qa`ida members so that it could demonstrate its commitment to the United States and its war on terror. A case can also be made that Pakistani security forces could have also had incentives to underreport arrests, to downplay the local al-Qa`ida threat. An additional factor that needs to be considered is that press reports about al-Qa`ida arrests can contain inaccurate and/or biased information.

Second, even though care was given to only code those incidents the research team identified as being arrests of al-Qa`ida operatives (and not those individuals that were more loosely “linked” to the group), the events were generally coded as they were reported. Given the lack of public data about most al-Qa`ida arrests, especially the arrest of less well-known operatives, and terrorism trials in Pakistan, the research team was not able to follow up on each case to identify how it was resolved (i.e., whether the suspect was convicted/sentenced or acquitted/released). Thus, the data reviewed below only presents the view from initial arrest of al-Qa`ida suspects in Karachi as revealed in public reporting and not the more final view of those who have been legally convicted for their membership in, or direct association with, the group. For these various reasons, the data and findings found in this article should be considered impressionistic.

Finally, there are a number of analytical issues that are also worth keeping in mind. Arrest data, while useful, is only one measure (albeit an important one) of a terrorist organization’s physical presence in a particular location. For example, one unknown is how many al-Qa`ida members were present in Karachi but managed

to evade arrest. Another analytic consideration is that, given the specific geographic focus of this article, the view provided by it is inherently localized. Drone strike and other arrest data show how al-Qa`ida has operated in other areas across Pakistan, and while that data is important to understanding al-Qa`ida’s broader influence and presence in the country, evaluating that material is beyond the scope of this article.

### Why Karachi?

Various factors make Karachi an attractive location for al-Qa`ida to operate in, and as a focus area for this type of study.<sup>b</sup> Karachi is Pakistan’s financial capital and main commercial hub, which likely makes it logistically and financially attractive to the group. Home to more than 18 million people, Karachi is also the largest city in the country. (Given its population and growth rate, *Forbes* magazine identified Karachi as the “World’s Fastest Growing Mega-City” in 2013.<sup>3</sup>) And the size and diversity found in the city likely make it an attractive place to hide and engage in covert activity. Karachi also holds the unfortunate distinction of being Pakistan’s most violent city, and political violence in Karachi can be incredibly complicated, as it can be driven by ethno-political rivalries, sectarian tensions, criminal turf battles, globally oriented agendas, and/or a combination of factors.<sup>4</sup> This means that federal, state, and local security forces likely have their hands full as they deal with a multiplicity of pressing problems orchestrated by a range of different types of actors—with al-Qa`ida being only one dimension of a much more complicated, local security picture.

Historically, Karachi has also been an important base of operations for al-Qa`ida. For example, one early counterterrorism break in 1998 pointed to the role Karachi played as a key transit point for al-Qa`ida members during the late 1990s. On August 7, 1998, the same day al-Qa`ida conducted its successful, coordinated attacks against the United States’ embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, Pakistani authorities arrested Mohammed Sadiq Odeh at the Karachi airport, immediately after he arrived on a flight from Nairobi, Kenya.<sup>5</sup> Odeh was traveling on a false passport, and during his interrogation, he admitted his role in the Embassy attacks.<sup>6</sup> A U.S. court would later sentence him to life in prison for his involvement in the Embassy bombings.<sup>7</sup>

While the arrest of Odeh was an early warning sign about the potential importance of Karachi to al-Qa`ida, other pre-9/11 data points demonstrate how the city functioned as an al-Qa`ida logistics hub. And one that was intimately tied to the operations that al-Qa`ida conducted in New York and Washington, D.C., in September 2001. For example, in the late 1990s, Abu Ahmed al-Kuwaiti, the courier who nearly a decade later unknowingly lead the United States to Usama bin Ladin’s compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan, operated an al-Qa`ida guest house in the city.<sup>8</sup> Some of the 9/11 hijackers stayed at that guest house.<sup>9</sup> Prior to 9/11, and for a period after, Karachi also served as a ‘home base’ and planning hub for Khalid Sheikh Mohammed (KSM), the 9/11 mastermind, and Ramzi bin al-Shibh, the al-Qa`ida operative who coordinated logistics for the operation.<sup>10</sup> It was in Karachi where the 9/11 hijack-

a The author would like to thank former CTC intern Dakota Foster for the excellent coding support that she provided. This project would not have been possible without her assistance.

b It is also worth highlighting that Karachi is not the only city outside of Pakistan’s tribal areas where al-Qa`ida has operated. High-profile al-Qa`ida members have been arrested in Rawalpindi, Faisalabad, Quetta, Lahore, Mardan, and other places since 9/11.



ers received specific training and were informed of their plot,<sup>11</sup> and where KSM and al-Shibh monitored news of the operation after the attacks took place.<sup>12</sup> After fleeing Afghanistan, several of bin Ladin's wives and children also hid out in the city in guest houses that KSM had arranged for them.<sup>13 c</sup>

**Arrests: A Review of the Data**

The database contains information on 102 al-Qa`ida arrest actions<sup>d</sup> between September 12, 2001, and May 31, 2017, in Karachi, Pakistan. According to the data, 300 al-Qa`ida suspects were arrested in the city over that period of time. Across that more than 15-year timeframe, Pakistani law enforcement and security forces conducted more than five al-Qa`ida arrest actions in Karachi every year on average. This roughly equates to Pakistani security forces engaging in at least one, publicly identifiable, al-Qa`ida arrest action in Karachi every other month on average for a 15-year period.

As Figure 1 below illustrates, the frequency of those arrest actions and the number of al-Qa`ida operatives arrested have fluctuated considerably over time. Indeed, Figure 1 shows how the number of incidents and total number of al-Qa`ida suspects arrested were most frequent/highest during the immediate years after 9/11 (2002-2004) and since 2015.<sup>e</sup> A slight, but noticeable, rise in incidents and arrests from 2009-2011 is also apparent in the data.

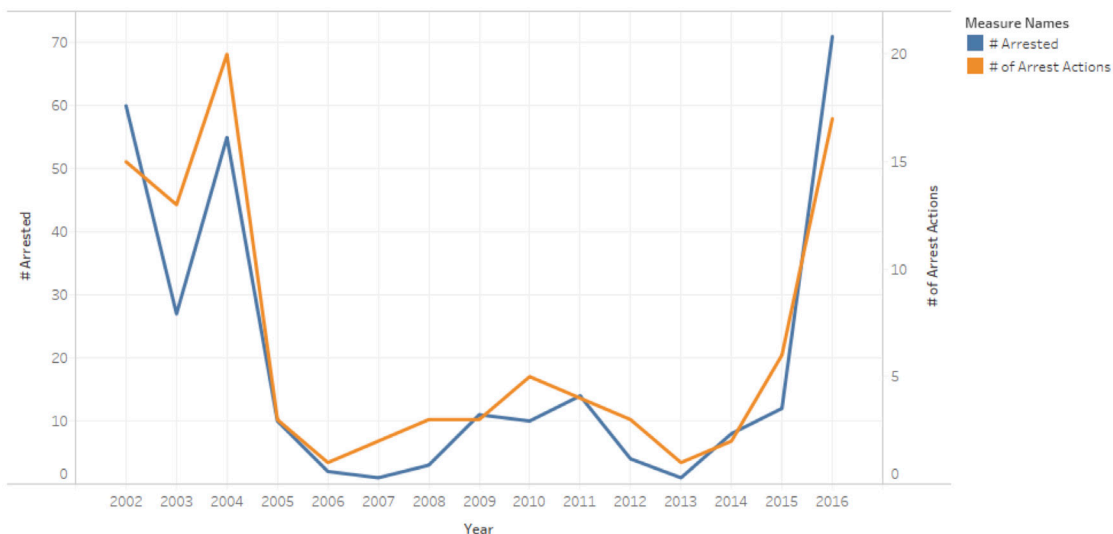
The 'bookending' of the high points of the data tells a mixed and interesting story. On one hand, the lull in incidents and total arrests from 2005-2014 suggests that during that time period al-Qa`ida was less of a problem, or at least had a less visible presence, in Ka-

- c It is also believed that Karachi was going to serve, or did serve, as a transit point for bin Ladin's son Hamza as he traveled from Iran to reunite with his father. For background, see Ali Soufan, "Hamza bin Ladin: From Steadfast Son to al-Qa`ida's Leader in Waiting," *CTC Sentinel* 10:7 (2017).
- d By "arrest action," this author means a successful (resulting in either the arrest or death of at least one individual) arrest operation that law enforcement or security forces conducted. It is not a measure of how many individuals were arrested during that particular operation. The "total number of arrested" field provides details on that particular statistic.
- e Figure 1 includes data up until the end of 2016.

rachi. Absent other contextual data to explain these trends, a case can be made that the rise in incidents and arrests after 9/11 and the eventual decline in al-Qa`ida arrest activity in Karachi until 2014 is a relatively good-news story. This is because the data shows two important trends: 1) how after an initial high period of post-9/11 arrest actions,<sup>f</sup> the number of al-Qa`ida arrests declined significantly,<sup>g</sup> and 2) how the number of al-Qa`ida arrest actions remained relatively low, and did not spike again, for close to a decade. Assuming al-Qa`ida wasn't just lying low in the city during the 2006-2015 time period, this suggests that the group was less active in Karachi during that time as well.<sup>h</sup> On the surface, these trends make sense as al-Qa`ida suffered a number of significant and high-level leadership losses in the years after 9/11 and during much of the 2000s al-Qa`ida in the region was primarily preoccupied with its survival.

Yet, on the other hand, the steady uptick in incidents and the number of al-Qa`ida operatives arrested in Karachi between 2013-2016 is a concerning trend in the data. And the dramatic spike in incidents and arrests from 2015-2016 is potentially even more disturbing. Indeed, the highest number of al-Qa`ida members arrested in Karachi per year, across the entire dataset, was recorded close to 15 years after 9/11; four and a half years after bin Ladin was killed in Abbottabad, Pakistan; and a year and a half after al-Qa`ida core formally established its South Asia chapter—al-Qa`ida in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS)—in September 2014. The number of arrest actions and the number of al-Qa`ida suspects arrested in Karachi from 2015 to 2016 nearly tripled and increased almost six-fold, respectively. Put another way, since the creation of AQIS until the end of 2016 (the last year for which we have complete yearly data), there have been 24 arrest actions resulting in the arrest of 88 individuals. Over that time period, security forces have come close to conducting at least one al-Qa`ida arrest action per month on average,

- f The highest number of arrest actions took place in 2004.
- g According to the dataset, only one al-Qa`ida suspect was arrested in Karachi in 2006.
- h A drop off in public reporting could also explain the noticeable decline in the number of incidents and arrests over that time period.



The trends of # Arrested and # of Arrest Actions for Year. Color shows details about # Arrested and # of Arrest Actions. The view is filtered on Year, which ranges from 2002 to 2016.

*Figure 1: Number of Arrest Actions and Number Arrested over Time*

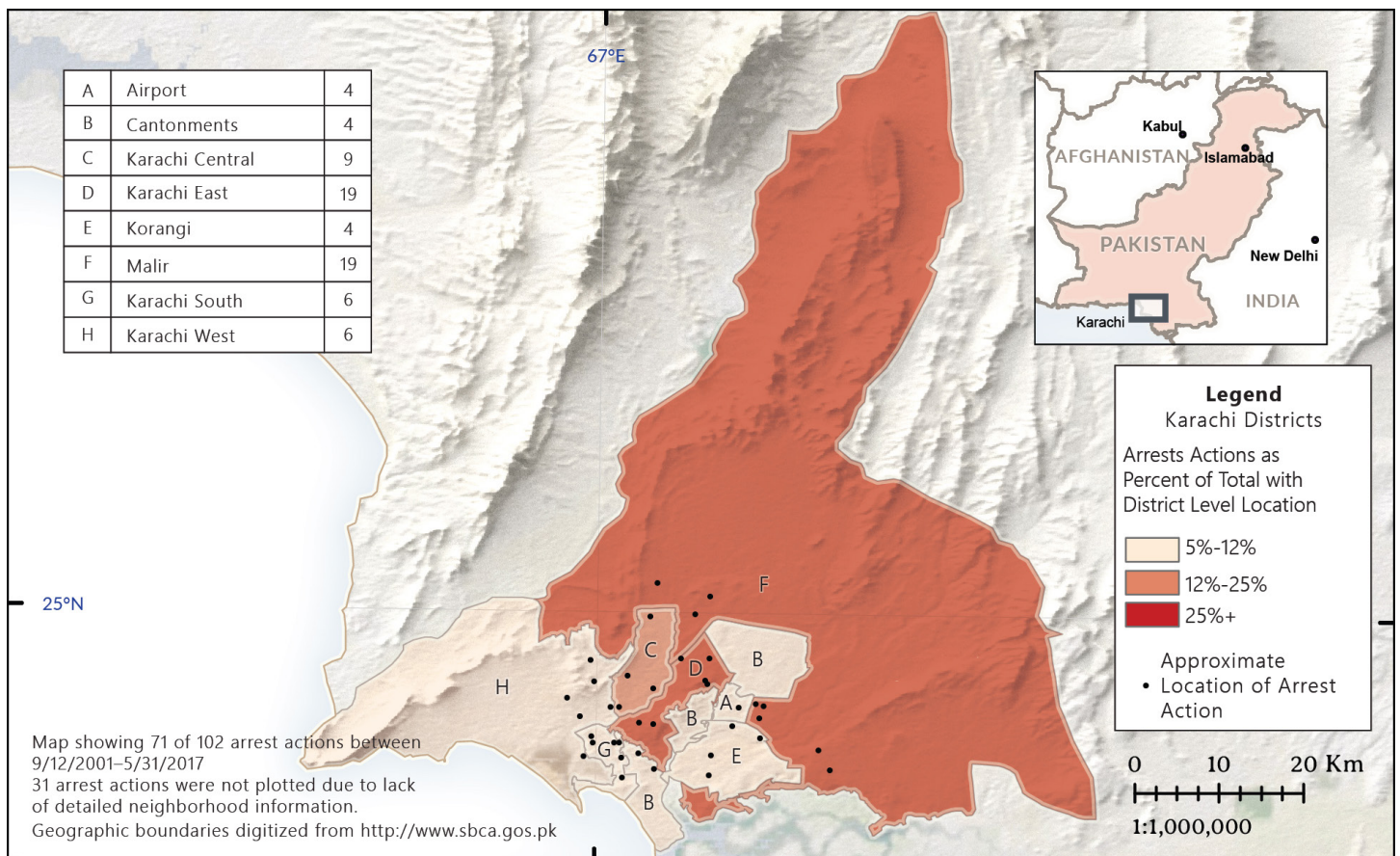
with three al-Qa`ida operatives arrested on average per incident.<sup>i</sup> Counterterrorism officials in Karachi have noticed a similar trend, and they “worry that the organization is regrouping and finding new support here [in Karachi] and in neighboring Afghanistan.”<sup>14</sup> In terms of size, “counterterrorism officials in Karachi have a list of several hundred active al-Qaeda members, which makes them assume there are at least a few thousand on the streets.”<sup>15</sup> While there has been an uptick in al-Qa`ida-related arrests in the city and the group’s presence in the city appears to have grown, the possibility that thousands of al-Qa`ida members are roaming around Karachi should certainly be taken with a grain of salt.

Year	# of Arrest Actions	Total Number Arrested
2014	2	8
2015	6	12
2016	17	71

Table 1: Number of Arrest Actions and Total Number Arrested, 2014-2016

i To be precise, 0.86 arrest actions have occurred on average per month over that time frame.

Three primary explanations exist to explain this trend in the data. First, while al-Qa`ida has long had a presence in Karachi, the uptick in arrests and incidents could be attributed to an expansion, or growth, of al-Qa`ida’s presence in the city in recent years. Indeed, all else being equal, an intensification of al-Qa`ida activity in the city would—at least, in theory—result in an increase in arrests targeting the group. The intensification of al-Qa`ida activity in the area could be tied to renewed or regenerated interest in the group, after it formally established AQIS. A second explanation for this particular trend in the data is that the spike in activity is tied to the performance or posture of the security forces conducting the arrests. Perhaps, security forces—as a result of training or knowledge gained from prior cases—have gained better intelligence or have become more efficient at disrupting local al-Qa`ida cells. The uptick in arrests and incidents could also be explained by security forces having taken a more aggressive posture against al-Qa`ida (which could lead to more arrests) or a more aggressive policing posture generally, as those forces sought to get a better hold of the ‘Karachi al-Qa`ida problem’ after the establishment of AQIS. (One should



Heat Density Map of al-Qa`ida Suspect Arrest Actions per District (Rowan Technology)

remember that AQIS conducted its inaugural attack in Karachi,<sup>j</sup> which could have led to a local crackdown.) Lastly, the increase in incidents and arrests could be tied to media dynamics, with the media potentially reporting on these types of incidents more often in the last several years.

**Where: Karachi District and Micro-Level Break-downs of al-Qa`ida Arrests**

*District-Level Trends*

The administrative management of land in Karachi can be a complex affair.<sup>k</sup> At a general level, Karachi is divided into six administrative districts: Malir, Central, South, West, East, and Korangi—as well as a number of cantonment areas administered by Pakistan’s military.<sup>16</sup> Karachi’s international airport, which is managed by Pakistan’s Civil Aviation Authority, for the purposes of this article was designated as a district with the various cantonments also grouped together as one district. The data was coded accordingly. Seventy-one arrest actions, out of the total 102 that feature in the dataset, provide at least a specific Karachi district-level location. Analysis of this level of geographic arrest data is useful as it allows us to: 1) hone in on areas where al-Qa`ida’s presence in the city has been publicly identified, and 2) track how the group’s geographic presence in the city has shifted over time.

The Karachi areas with the highest number of arrest actions were Malir (19 incidents, 26.7% of total) and East (19 incidents, 26.7% of total), followed by Central (9 incidents, 12.7% of total), West (six incidents, 8.5% of total), South (six incidents, 8.5% of total), Korangi and Cantonment areas (four incidents each, each representing 5.6% of total). Four al-Qa`ida suspects were also arrested at Karachi’s main airport. While al-Qa`ida operatives have been arrested in all six districts of Karachi and in different cantonment areas, Malir and East—the two districts with the highest number of al-Qa`ida arrest actions—together account for 53.4% of all incidents over time. If one then includes the number of arrest actions from Central district, the percentage from Karachi’s top three al-Qa`ida arrest districts jumps to 66% of all al-Qa`ida arrest activity in the city.

An evaluation of district-level arrest actions over time brings these trends into sharper focus. Indeed, despite there being a number of arrest ebbs and flows related to most districts, Figure 2 (page 18) shows how Malir and East have remained relatively consistent al-Qa`ida arrest areas across time.

Figure 2 also shows the decline in number of arrests during the 2000s in East and Central districts and how Central has grown since 2015 as a more frequent al-Qa`ida arrest area (nearly similar

j On September 6, 2014, several days after Ayman al-Zawahiri announced the creation of AQIS, a team of al-Qa`ida operatives penetrated Karachi’s Naval Dockyard and attempted to hijack and commandeer Pakistan naval ship Zulfiqar so it could be used to “attack US Navy patrol vessels in the Indian Ocean.” The attackers were stopped before they could take command of the vessel. Five members of Pakistan’s Navy were given the death penalty for the role they played in the attack. For quote and background, see “PNS Zulfiqar Attack: Five Naval Officers Get Death Penalty,” AFP, May 25, 2016, and Ray Sanchez, “New al Qaeda Branch in South Asia Launches First Assault,” CNN, September 19, 2014.

k For example, as Laurent Gayer noted in 2014, “thirteen public agencies are involved in the control and development of land in the city.” Laurent Gayer, *Karachi: Ordered Disorder and the Struggle for the City* (Oxford University Press: New York, 2014), pp. 261-262.

to the level of arrest activity observed in East during the 2003-2005 timeframe).<sup>l</sup>

*Neighborhood Level*

Sixty-nine of the 102 arrest actions provide both neighborhood and district-level data, allowing us to identify high-density al-Qa`ida arrest areas and other micro-level geographic arrest trends (as reflected in Table 2 below). Measured as a percentage of all arrest actions across all districts, the neighborhood of Gulshan-e-Iqbal—in Karachi’s East District—accounted for 11.5% of all al-Qa`ida arrest actions in the city for which the author has this level of data. The East District, within which this neighborhood is situated, was also home to the highest total number of al-Qa`ida suspects arrested across time. Another interesting takeaway from the data is that three of the four Cantonments’ arrest actions took place in territory managed by the Defense Housing Authority.

And while Malir District had the same number of total arrest actions that took place in East District, arrests in Malir were less concentrated in one neighborhood than in both West and East Districts. Arrest actions in the districts of Korangi, Central, and South were so dispersed across neighborhoods in those districts that neighborhood level patterns could not even be identified.

<i>District</i>	<i># Arrest Actions</i>	<i>Most Frequent Neighborhood</i>	<i># Arrest Actions</i>	<i>% Total Arrest Actions in Area</i>
<i>Malir</i>	19	<i>Sohrab Goth</i>	4	21%
<i>East</i>	19	<i>Gulshan-e-Iqbal</i>	8	42%
<i>Central</i>	9	**		
<i>West</i>	6	<i>Orangi Town</i>	2	33%
<i>South</i>	6	**		
<i>Korangi</i>	4	**		
<i>Cantonments</i>	4	<i>Defense Housing Authority</i>	3	75%
** Records too mixed				

Table 2: Number of al-Qa`ida Arrest Actions per Karachi Neighborhood

This data shows how al-Qa`ida’s presence in Karachi, at least as measured by arrests, has been stronger and more concentrated in some districts—and in some neighborhoods within districts—over time. This data also shows how al-Qa`ida’s presence in other districts has been more geographically dispersed.

l Given the low numbers of overall arrest actions per district per year, the reader should not over-interpret these results as definitively denoting which parts of Karachi are al-Qa`ida “hotzones.” The data only shows which locales al-Qa`ida suspects have been arrested in over time.

### Who: Noteworthy Arrests of al-Qa`ida Members in Karachi and Nationality Data

As mentioned earlier, prior to 9/11, Karachi served as a base of operations for al-Qa`ida and individuals like KSM and al-Shibh. The city remained the primary base of operations for KSM for a year and a half after the 9/11 attacks, until his arrest in Rawalpindi in March 2003.<sup>17</sup> After beheading *Wall Street Journal* reporter Daniel Pearl, who was kidnapped in Karachi in January 2002, KSM even felt comfortable enough with his presence in Karachi that he invited and arranged for an Al Jazeera journalist to interview him and al-Shibh in the city in the spring of 2002 for a special 9/11-focused program.<sup>18</sup> Around that same time, in a not well-publicized operation, Pakistani forces in Karachi reportedly arrested a Libyan, who years later would go on to play a leading role in al-Qa`ida.<sup>19</sup> In jihadi circles, that Libyan was known as Abu Yahya al-Libi.<sup>20</sup>

KSM's bold comfort is what eventually led to his capture, however, as not long after meeting with the Al Jazeera journalist, al-Shibh was arrested in Karachi by U.S. and Pakistani forces.<sup>21</sup> From that point onward, the net continued to close around KSM. Then, one month after KSM was captured in Rawalpindi, Walid bin Attash—a key al-Qa`ida operative involved in the USS Cole bombing—was arrested (along with other al-Qa`ida suspects) in the Karachi district of Korangi.<sup>22</sup> According to former FBI Special Agent Ali Soufan, who tracked and interrogated al-Qa`ida suspects at that time, "Khallad [Walid bin Attash] spent a lot of time in Karachi planning with KSM."<sup>23</sup> Thus, when looked at in aggregate, Karachi served as the place of arrest for senior to mid-level al-Qa`ida operatives who each individually played key operational roles in the group's three most noteworthy international attacks: the 1998 East African embassy bombings, the USS Cole attack, and the 9/11 operation.

The number of high-profile or well-known al-Qa`ida members arrested in Karachi dropped off after the first few years following 9/11. As noted above, the number of al-Qa`ida arrest actions in Karachi—as well as the number of al-Qa`ida individuals arrested there—has picked up since al-Qa`ida formally created AQIS in September 2014. Two noteworthy al-Qa`ida members detained in Karachi since then have included Shahid Usman, al-Qa`ida's Ka-

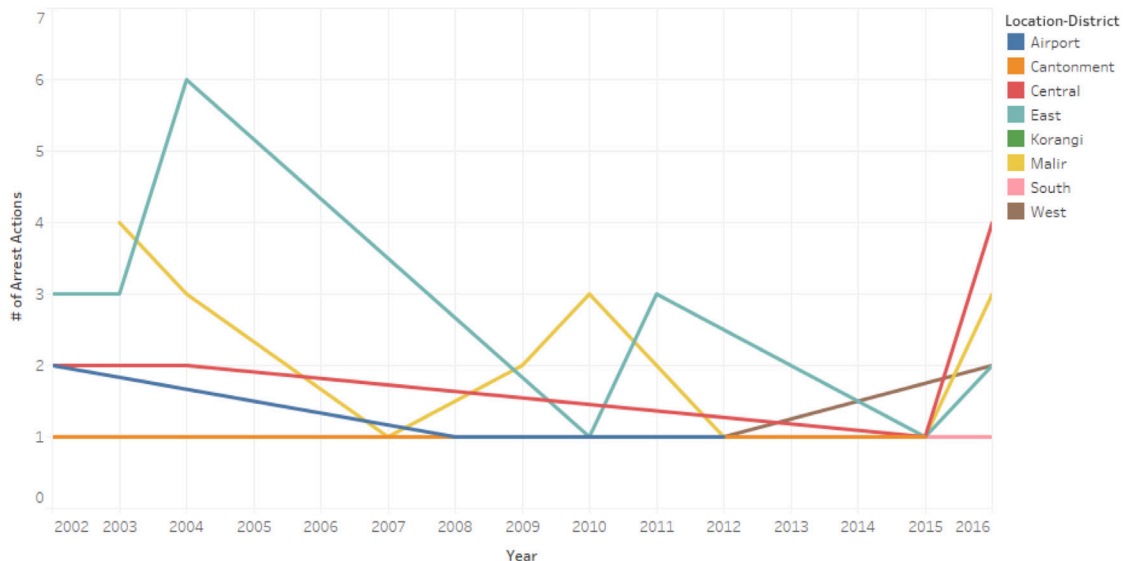
rachi chief who was arrested in December 2014,<sup>24</sup> and Abdul Rehman al-Sindhi, a financier arrested in April 2016 who raised and moved funds for al-Qa`ida, Harakat al-Jihad Islami (HuJI), and Jaish-e-Muhammad.<sup>25</sup>

#### Nationality Dynamics

The nationality of al-Qa`ida suspects arrested in Karachi also hints at how the make-up of al-Qa`ida in Pakistan has changed since 9/11. The nationality field was not a heavily populated category—only 35% of cases (36 total arrest actions) in the database identified the specific nationality of the individual, or some of the individuals, arrested—and so one can only form a general impression based on the data alone. Yet, what is in the data, as well as what does not appear in the data, raises some interesting questions, and when the nationality field is viewed in relation to other evidence, it lends credence to the view that the more time that elapses after 9/11, the less Arab, and more Pakistani al-Qa`ida in Pakistan becomes.<sup>m</sup> This trend, which Pakistani journalist Zaffar Abbas identified and wrote about in August 2004, aligns with the broader localizing of al-Qa`ida's South Asian regional agenda, a long-game of sorts that allows al-Qa`ida to build out its local base and develop capabilities that can be used in the region, and elsewhere.<sup>26</sup>

According to the data, Pakistani citizens were arrested in at least 10 of the 36 cases for which we have specific nationality information. This means that when a nationality was listed in a press report about an al-Qa`ida arrest in Karachi, a Pakistani was arrested in a little more than one-quarter (27%) of all those cases. When viewed in relation to other data, the period for which the author has nationality data suggests that there is a story behind what is not reported or contained in the data, however. For example, the last case for which there is nationality data is an arrest action that occurred in May 2011 (the same month that Usama bin Ladin was killed). Prior

<sup>m</sup> The author recognizes that al-Qa`ida has always been a fairly ethnically diversified organization, and that while its 1990s membership was primarily composed of Arabs, it was never exclusively an Arab organization.



The trend of sum of # of Arrest Actions for Year. Color shows details about Location-District. The view is filtered on Year and Location-District. The Year filter ranges from 2002 to 2016. The Location-District filter excludes Null and Mixed.

Figure 2: District-Level al-Qa`ida Arrests over Time

to that date, the nationality reporting was more specific. This could be due to there having been more foreign, non-Pakistani al-Qa`ida suspects arrested in Pakistan immediately after 9/11 and prior to May 2011. The lack of references to nationalities in reporting after that date could also be explained by there not being a need, or desirable reason, to call attention to specific nationalities post-May 2011. This could be due to the bulk of those arrests being arrests of Pakistani citizens. This theory seems plausible because the bulk of localized al-Qa`ida arrest press coverage came from Pakistani newspapers, which might not feel the need to report such data, especially if the arrest did not involve the capture of foreigners.

If one assumes that the absence of reported nationality data means that the individual(s) arrested were locals, then the data would indicate that all reported al-Qa`ida suspects arrested in Karachi since June 2011 have been Pakistani citizens. While it is not possible to validate this theory without official arrest records, a noticeable uptick in Urdu-language statements and videos released by al-Qa`ida since the mid-to late 2000s shows how the recruitment of Pakistanis by the group has been a key priority. The important roles played by Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, Ilyas Kashmiri, Badr Mansor, and Shahid Usman—all Pakistanis—also speak to the evolving local character of al-Qa`ida, a trend noticed by local security analysts. For example, in a June 2016 interview with *The Washington Post*, Saifullah Mehsud, the director of the FATA Research Center, noted that al-Qa`ida in Pakistan was “making a comeback of sorts.”<sup>27</sup> But, he added, “it’s a different, more localized al-Qaeda.”<sup>28</sup> Ominously, Pakistani investigative journalist Syed Saleem Shahzad was murdered under mysterious circumstances in May 2011 for writing about the connections between al-Qa`ida and members of the Pakistani military.<sup>29</sup> The creation of AQIS, recent attacks conducted in Pakistan by that affiliate, and the operators used by the group also speak to the further localizing of al-Qa`ida’s presence in Pakistan and across the region.

## Conclusion

The trends that are apparent in, and suggested by, the data show how al-Qa`ida has been able to maintain a fairly consistent presence in Karachi since 9/11, a presence that appears to have grown in recent years. An annualized projection of arrest data collected through the end of May 2017 shows a slight drop-off in the number of arrest actions and total number of al-Qa`ida suspects likely to be arrested in 2017.<sup>n</sup> The total number of arrest actions and al-Qa`ida

<sup>n</sup> Annualized projections of data collected through May 2017 suggest that 9.6 al-Qa`ida arrest actions will be conducted in Karachi in 2017, with 26.4 total suspects being arrested during the year.

suspect arrests projected for 2017 is still more than the total figures for 2014 and 2015 combined, however.

The data also speaks to the complex nature of the al-Qa`ida threat and the enduring challenge the group’s presence poses in the region, even 16 years after 9/11. For example, the data highlights the diverse nature of al-Qa`ida’s presence in Pakistan and how the challenges posed by the group in the country have become even more localized and occur across rural and urban, and “settled” and tribal, areas. This article and its findings also take on particular relevance given recent adjustments made to the United States’ Afghanistan policy and on-going debates about the nature of the U.S.-Pakistan partnership—and what that relationship should look like.

The trends discussed here also serve as a useful reminder that just as al-Qa`ida and its approach in Pakistan continue to evolve, the metrics that the United States is using to evaluate the group might also need to change as well. Attacking the United States and the West through operations conducted outside of the South Asia region remains a leading priority for al-Qa`ida.<sup>30</sup> As a result, metrics that speak to al-Qa`ida’s ability to execute and inspire international attacks and to act in strategic ways are as needed as ever.

Yet, the data presented in this article and the localized trajectory of AQIS and al-Qa`ida in Pakistan indicate that it also makes sense to develop, collect systematically, and study metrics that provide more useful gauges of how these local elements of al-Qa`ida are faring. The localization of al-Qa`ida in Pakistan is not a phenomenon unique to Pakistan, but it is a trend that has been observed across all of al-Qa`ida’s regional affiliates.<sup>31</sup> This makes the need for a localized approach to counterterrorism metrics all the more apparent and timely. Developing a set of local and regional capability metrics for the various al-Qa`ida branches will help to ‘benchmark’ the threat each of these entities pose in their respective locales and to track shifts in geographic presence and capabilities over time.

The continued tracking of al-Qa`ida arrest actions in Karachi, for example, could be used to discern whether the recent spike in al-Qa`ida arrests in that city since the creation of AQIS is a unique and more time-limited occurrence, or whether it represents a broader, more sustained pattern of behavior. Data about the nationality of those arrested and their background and positions (i.e., are those arrested low-skilled foot soldiers, or are they more seasoned leaders or individuals with technical skills?) could also aid local security services and be used to better evaluate the nature, character, and evolution of the al-Qa`ida threat. It is also likely to show how al-Qa`ida in Pakistan today represents a diversified threat that poses different types of challenges across local, regional, and global spectrums. **CTC**

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# The Islamic State Long Game: A Tripartite Analysis of Youth Radicalization and Indoctrination

By Colleen McCue, Joseph T. Massengill, Dorothy Milbrandt, John Gaughan, and Meghan Cumpston

**Previous sociocultural research linked conditions in the Iraq conflict zone with factors known to be associated with youth violence and radicalization, supporting predictions of a future cohort of fighters that would be extremely aggressive, violent, and remorseless. The exacerbation of these conditions and intentional efforts by the Islamic State to indoctrinate and radicalize youth has resulted in the weaponization of children, creating a “perfect storm” of consequence and influence. Unless addressed effectively, this will represent a persistent, transgenerational capability in support of the Islamic State’s “long game.”**

**A**s efforts against the Islamic State have been accelerated, associated territorial losses in Syria and Iraq are escalating. Recent reports indicate that approximately 27,000 square miles have been reclaimed from the Islamic State since the height of the group’s control in early 2015; approximately one-third of which has been recovered within the past six months.<sup>1</sup> While the increasing pace of military gain is encouraging, significant tears in the social fabric of the region will take far longer to repair. In particular, lasting and potentially persistent consequence will include damage to children, especially young men and boys living in the Islamic State, as well as the Cubs of the Caliphate; young men and boys indoctrinated and “weaponized” as part of the Islamic State’s “long game.” This multifaceted approach to youth radicalization and indoctrination—the

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weaponization of children—represents a transgenerational, persistent capability designed specifically to sustain the Islamic State, transcend territorial losses, and outlast efforts against the group. As a result, ongoing attention will be required not only in areas where the Islamic State manages to sustain a presence or maintain control, but also in areas they occupied previously, as these children will continue to pose significant risk, even as territory is reclaimed.

Previous sociocultural research correlated conditions in the Iraq conflict zone with factors known to promote youth violence and radicalization,<sup>2</sup> predicting a future cohort of fighters who would be extremely “aggressive, violent and remorseless.”<sup>3</sup> The emergence of the Islamic State in the region has resulted in conditions far more damaging than previously anticipated, however. In combination with the serious developmental consequences of living in an active conflict zone, the Islamic State’s efforts to indoctrinate and radicalize youth are expected to create a sociocultural “perfect storm” of influence that will result in a generation of fighters more violent than previously encountered. Analysis of Islamic State propaganda suggests that this may be intentional, representing a kind of transgenerational “long game” designed to ensure survival of the group.<sup>4</sup> Much of what is known currently about youth radicalization and indoctrination in the Islamic State comes from the media and anecdotal reports. The U.S. military, however, is in a position to inform discussion given access to primary source material, which provides unique understanding and insight. Applying social science research and models to this primary source data can provide deeper understanding of this phenomenon.

Specifically, the primary sources available to the U.S. military include not only Islamic State propaganda and other media available to the broader community, but also direct access to many of the group’s education and training materials and other captured enemy material. Moreover, in contrast to many ad hoc and media reports, the U.S. military has access to the broader corpus of Islamic State material. In many cases, knowledge regarding the sheer volume of material recovered, particularly as relates to specific topics, focus areas, or inferred lines of adversary effort, can provide insight regarding areas of emphasis and importance to the Islamic State. Finally, if “Data + Context = Insight,”<sup>5</sup> then the frequently subtle and nuanced information regarding the location, circumstances, and general human terrain and atmospherics associated with recovered material can play an invaluable role in establishing the context necessary for deeper insight and understanding in the analysis of these primary sources, as well as an informed interpretation of the results.

## Introduction

Ten years ago in this publication, the authors published observations describing conditions in the Iraq conflict zone, particularly as related to the normalization, expectation, and glamorization of violence; diminished collective efficacy,<sup>6</sup> or the inability of a com-

munity to effectively control individual and group behavior, enforce established social norms, and generally support the rule of law; and the emergence of violence as a “spectator sport” in the conflict environment.<sup>7</sup> One especially graphic and noteworthy example cited in the original paper was the murder and public desecration of the remains of the Blackwater contractors in Fallujah. Media reports at the time noted the presence of children in the crowd of spectators. These behaviors were not new to those familiar with the crack cocaine epidemic in the United States from the 1990s where crowds would gather at crime scenes and young children frequently would attend as spectators, regardless of the time of day or location. Highlighting the fact that violence can become a “spectator sport,” youngsters often could be observed consuming food as the crime scene was processed.<sup>8</sup> Many of the adults at these scenes would comment that the victim may have deserved the crime or otherwise engaged in behavior that increased its likelihood, and would decline to participate in the investigation given their belief that the crime was the logical consequence of behavior that went against informal community norms.<sup>9</sup> This behavior visibly and very effectively reinforced the key role that illegal enforcement networks play in upholding social rules and norms, particularly in communities where official enforcement agents of the rule of law are ineffective, diminished, or otherwise lacking. Overall, this behavior indicated an erosion of social rules and norms, particularly as related to the inability of the community to effectively enforce the rule of law, and an associated transfer of the responsibility for enforcement from legal to illegal enforcement networks.<sup>10</sup> These were unhealthy communities with the potential to profoundly alter normal development, especially for boys and young males.

The authors’ original assessment of the impact that conditions in the Iraq conflict zone would have on violence, particularly among young men and boys, was based on social science research describing the erosion in social controls and norms linked to the influx of drugs and violence associated with the U.S. crack cocaine “wars” during the 1990s. The so-called “Tripartite Model” described in detail maternal, familial, and community pathways of negative influence on development, particularly moral and emotional development, that resulted in both qualitative and quantitative increases in violence.

Unfortunately, these authors were correct in a number of their predictions. The anticipated youth bulge<sup>11</sup> has arrived in many Arab states, creating economic and educational challenges that are driving perceptions of diminished opportunity for this demographic cohort and associated attraction to extremist narratives.<sup>12</sup> Children continue to be exposed to acts of intense violence, including public executions.<sup>13</sup> These reports parallel previous observations of the intentional exposure of children to violence as community social events or “entertainment,” as well as a means by which to illustrate the role that illegal enforcement plays in the regulation of social rules and norms.<sup>14</sup> The growing presence of youth combatants, including child executioners and “Cubs of the Caliphate,” embodies the anticipated increase in violence, including marked increases in the nature and brutality of violent acts perpetrated by young people.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, the normalization and expectation of violence noted in the original paper continued to evolve. While the original assessment proved disturbingly prescient, the authors did not anticipate the extent or overt depravity of the Islamic State, to include the creation and promulgation of educational materials promoting its violent agenda, active indoctrination of young males, and the in-

tentional weaponization of children in support of transgenerational capacity development and an associated “long game.”

### Tripartite Model

Qualitative changes in the nature of youth violence during the 1990s resulted in the creation of the Tripartite Model of youth violence in order to provide a theoretical framework for explaining the marked differences in the nature of violence seen on the streets and in juvenile correctional facilities.<sup>16</sup> Specifically, this generation of young males was qualitatively more violent than previous generations. They were “aggressive, violent and remorseless,”<sup>17</sup> unlike anything anyone had seen previously.

The Tripartite Model defines the role that maternal, familial, and community factors may play in shaping behavior during critical periods of development, underscoring the transgenerational nature and consequence of unhealthy communities and the development of violent behavior itself. Exposure to these factors during critical periods of moral and emotional development<sup>18</sup> may profoundly influence the developmental trajectory, particularly related to the child’s perception of the value of human life; value of their own life and associated expectations regarding their own life expectancy and outcomes; their place in society and the role that they will play; and the use of violence to influence behavior and other social rules and norms.<sup>19</sup> Again, the same factors associated with the increase in urban violence—maternal, familial, and community—were noted a decade ago by the authors in the Iraq conflict zone. Young males, in particular, were expected to be most vulnerable.<sup>20</sup>

#### Maternal

Developmentally, maternal influence is powerful and unique. Criminology research is replete with examples of maternal behavior likely to increase risk to dependent children through exposure to unhealthy individuals and environments, however this generally does not appear to be witting or intentional. Initial consideration of maternal influence in the Islamic State similarly focused largely on expectations of diminished influence of females given traditional gender roles in Muslim society and passive exposure to unhealthy environments. Further examination, however, reveals direct enablement of activity likely to cause harm. Maternal influence is assuming a far more significant role than originally anticipated and includes active movement of dependent children to the conflict zone; an increased birth rate in an effort to populate, sustain, and even grow the Islamic State;<sup>21</sup> and active maternal engagement in radicalization, recruitment, and indoctrination. The Islamic State not only encourages active parental participation in the indoctrination and recruiting process, but directly anticipates and proactively counters criticism of maternal involvement, acknowledging that “[t]he mother may hear criticism from some people who would argue that the manner in which she raises her children might kill their childhood and destroy their innocence.”<sup>22</sup>

#### Familial

As noted recently, tens of thousands of Islamic State fighters have been killed in battle.<sup>23</sup> These losses, added to the significant number of male civilians who either fled the region or were killed during the Islamic State’s reign,<sup>24</sup> are likely to have changed the demographics of the region. These changes are expected to be associated with limited access to male role models. The absence of men or appropriate male role models in a child’s life would be expected to lead to poor





Image captured from a video released by Wilayat al-Raqqah on June 15, 2015, entitled “Cubs of the Caliphate”

outcomes for children within the community.

In those areas still under the control of the Islamic State, the challenge is not only the absence of positive male role models, but rather the presence of inappropriate or poor role models, a dynamic similar to that found in earlier analysis of families in communities inundated with violence.<sup>25</sup> Underscoring this point, adult males depicted in propaganda materials are portrayed simultaneously in brutal acts of violence, including executions, while exhibiting tenderness and camaraderie to their peers and young males alike. This influences perceptions of male roles and shapes young male behavior, while creating an attractive image of the bonds and fellowship promised by the Islamic State. In addition to this passive exposure, propaganda films encourage active familial involvement in indoctrination and recruitment, and various scholarly<sup>26</sup> and media<sup>27</sup> reports confirm that parents are sending their young boys to Islamic State military training. Therefore, while kidnapping and forcible conscription play a role, parents also may offer their children to the Islamic State because they support the ideology or for direct monetary compensation, which suggests that familial involvement in the recruiting and indoctrination process is complex and multifaceted.<sup>28</sup> Finally, research on multigenerational involvement in criminal activity<sup>29</sup> suggests perceptions of familial involvement in the Islamic State are likely to normalize violence and increase the likelihood that young people also will choose to join the Islamic State as they develop their own identity and look within the family for cues regarding future vocational options and roles.

#### Community

Again, initial analysis focused largely on passive or otherwise incidental exposure to deleterious environmental factors associated with the conflict environment. The normalization, expectation, and glamorization of violence noted in the original paper has continued to evolve, particularly with the emergence of “jihadi cool” as a recruiting theme for young males<sup>30</sup>—a narrative that depicts the lifestyle, including increased risk, as attractive and glamorous. This parallels the glamorization of violence from both the victim and perpetrator perspective documented in the original urban violence

research, which effectively reinforces a “short-term approach to life” that perpetuates high-risk activity.<sup>31</sup>

Community acceptance of violence, including tacit approval of the use of violence to enforce social rules and norms,<sup>32</sup> can negatively influence development. Similar to the increased brutality and “overkill”<sup>33</sup> associated with urban violence intended to send a message to the community,<sup>34</sup> torture and public executions perpetrated by the Islamic State also are used to send a message of compliance to the community, regulate behavior, and enforce social rules and norms. Direct exposure to this violence can be particularly harmful during critical periods of emotional and moral development when young people are acquiring behaviors and judgments relating to the value of human life, including their own; social responsibility; and the ethics of harming others. Furthermore, accompanying messaging that indicates the victim “deserved” the outcome or that otherwise reinforces the use of street violence further shapes the perception that violence is a normal and acceptable means by which to influence or regulate behavior, negatively influencing the perceptions of the use of violence by children.<sup>35</sup> Finally, the frequently public nature of these violent events reinforces the perception of violence as a “spectator sport.”<sup>36</sup>

The emergence of *hisbah* police as the (illegal) enforcement network in Islamic State-held territory as well as public torture and executions further erode social rules and norms, and associated collective efficacy. Moreover, the belief that neighbors are involved in or support violence and the positive perceptions of individuals involved in violent behavior—including the social elevation of jihadi fighters, caliphate key leaders, and martyrs in the community—underscore the position of these fighters and Islamic State martyrs and leaders as influential role models. This solidifies the tacit approval of jihad and related activities on the part of significant people in the young person’s life (mother, family, community), creating a

particularly attractive image to young males<sup>a</sup> and concurrently reinforcing community norms regarding socially desirable behavior and the preferred life path. Additional normalization, expectation, and glamorization of violence, including references to the glamor associated with dying in support of jihad, complete the array of negative influence.

Finally, with regard to the original “youth bulge”<sup>37</sup> and associated demographic trends, research indicates that high-risk youth, particularly those at increased risk for intentional injury, are associated with an increased prevalence of adolescent parenthood as they adjust their reproductive strategy to accommodate the perception of a diminished life expectancy.<sup>38</sup> This research, in association with the Islamic State’s active encouragement of marriage and procreation, suggests that original estimates regarding the birth rate in the region and associated youth “bulge” may underrepresent actual population increases.

### Active Indoctrination

In addition to the deleterious effects of living in an active conflict zone, increasing evidence shows the Islamic State is intentionally indoctrinating, radicalizing, and recruiting young people as part of a transgenerational “long game.” This active indoctrination represents the weaponization of children and includes at least three lines of effort: intentional exposure to violence, active incorporation of the Islamic State narrative in educational materials, and Cubs of the Caliphate.

Scholarly research<sup>39</sup> as well as Islamic State propaganda<sup>40</sup> document the intentional exposure of children to and forced participation in violence, including executions—factors known to be associated with the development of violent behavior.<sup>41</sup> Analysis of Islamic State-produced educational materials reveals an intentionally created curriculum that weaves themes of radicalization and indoctrination throughout the content in an effort to reinforce preferred narrative themes. “[The Islamic State’s] curriculum is uniquely lethal in the way it teaches other subjects to justify its quartet of interests: the foundation of a caliphate, the building of an “Islamic” state, *the use of merciless violence*, and the perpetuation of an apocalyptic narrative” [emphasis added].<sup>42</sup> The material is professionally produced and sophisticated, paralleling Western academic content in pedagogy and the seamless integration of global narrative themes across disparate subject matter.

Perhaps most concerning, the so-called “Cubs of the Caliphate” represent intentional development of the next generation in fulfillment of the Islamic State’s reference to “an entire [future] generation”<sup>43</sup> that will sustain the fight. As such, the Cubs represent a persistent, transgenerational capability in support of the Islamic State’s long game, a kind of “insurance policy”<sup>44</sup> that represents a continuity plan for the caliphate. The program of incremental exposure to and participation in violence effectively operationalizes

“best practices” known to produce trained killers.<sup>45</sup> The Cubs differ significantly from other child soldiers, however. Unlike other forcibly conscripted child soldiers who “are recruited not for the future but the present,”<sup>46</sup> there appears to be a much greater commitment of time and effort associated with the Cubs as an “investment” on the part of Islamic State leadership. Underscoring their importance to the future of the Islamic State, Cubs training also includes religious, language, and academic training.<sup>47</sup> From a developmental perspective, the Cubs training occurs at a time when the boys are emotionally and morally malleable, underscoring the relatively permanent nature of the behavior change.<sup>48</sup>

### Implications

The Islamic State is weaponizing children. Unless effectively addressed, this will represent a persistent, transgenerational capability, particularly given the increasing use of children for military purposes.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, as Lieutenant General Michael Nagata of the National Counterterrorism Center, recently noted, the threat is growing. “[R]ising and rapidly adapting terrorism” is emerging as a “new normal.”<sup>50</sup> As the authors have asked previously, what happens when “normal” is the problem? Lessons learned from the crack cocaine “wars” confirm that “locking them up and patching them up”<sup>51</sup> is unsatisfactory at best. Similarly, indefinite incarceration of youth combatants is not an acceptable or practical option, and de-radicalization efforts are risky given the lack of proven or reliable methods, particularly considering the large number of youth combatants currently in detention<sup>52</sup> and increasing reports of former Cubs of the Caliphate embedded in migrant flows and refugee camps.<sup>53</sup> Meaningful response likely will require a whole of government and related civil society effort in order to be effective and sustainable. Again, experience during the crack cocaine “wars” revealed urban violence as a challenge that transcended traditional professional boundaries. Many of the most effective, meaningful, and sustainable solutions came from novel, transdisciplinary approaches recognizing that violent crime sat at the intersection of public health, medicine, social services, and public safety—effectively leveraging these seemingly disparate professional domains to get in front of the problem through primary prevention.<sup>54</sup> The military is similarly positioned to inform these efforts, including non-kinetic options for disruption through its unique access, insight, and understanding. Specific options follow below.

*Disrupt the recruiting, radicalizing, and training pipeline.* Research consistently supports primary prevention as the best option. This is especially true for radicalization and recruitment given limited understanding and associated uncertainty regarding the efficacy of various de-radicalization programs and related efforts. Moreover, research suggests that once the developmental trajectory has been influenced, there is very little that can be done to de-radicalize this group given current understanding of child development and behavior change.<sup>55</sup> In other words, it is unlikely that the Cubs can be rendered safe. Again, radicalization and indoctrination during critical periods of moral and emotional development are expected to be highly (if not permanently) resistant to treatment. Therefore, primary prevention that disrupts the recruiting, radicalizing, and training pipeline is likely to offer the best outcomes.

*Protect the force.* Youth combatants represent a physical and emotional threat<sup>56</sup> to the force, as well as the potential for “moral inju-

a While this and the original analysis focused exclusively on boys and young men, evidence is increasingly emerging that females living under the Islamic State also have been impacted significantly, including abuse perpetrated against Yazidi slaves and the increasingly regular Rumiyah articles written for the Islamic State “sisters” outlining appropriate and acceptable behavior. See Rukmini Callimachi, “Freed from ISIS, Yazidi women return in ‘Severe Shock,’” *New York Times*, July 27, 2017, and “The woman is a shepherd in her husbands’ home and responsible for her flock” (2017), respectively.

ry.”<sup>57</sup> Children have freedom of movement not available to adults, affording them unique access to locations where they can inflict maximum damage. Moreover, the potential for emotional harm associated with these youth combatants is significant. Experience with juvenile murderers indicates that the responding professional often needs to suspend everything they know, or think they know, about children in order to effectively investigate seriously violent youth.<sup>58</sup> This experience suggests that it will be very difficult for members of the force, particularly those with children themselves, to view young people as remorseless killers, creating a potential limitation in the U.S. military’s ability to understand and respond effectively to this threat, not to mention possible emotional harm to the individuals who encounter them.

*Review Rules of Engagement (ROE).* The Islamic State is purposefully exploiting Western legal and moral prohibitions against the targeting of “child soldiers,” which is providing it with a competitive advantage. Moreover, criminology research suggests that this new wave of fighters will be expected to have “no hope, no fear, no rules, and no life expectancy.”<sup>59</sup> Traditional assumptions regarding the use of force and ROE will need to be reconciled with realities on the ground as social science research indicates these fighters will have a “short-term approach to life” and act accordingly.<sup>60</sup> Again, these radicalized and indoctrinated youth differ markedly from current models of child soldiers given their intentional development as a sustainable, transgenerational resource. Although altering ROE raises serious ethical questions that need to be properly debated, review of ROE from a legal, emotional, and moral perspective may be merited, particularly as relates to youth combatants.

*Contribute to the knowledge base.* As conflict and associated adversary TTPs<sup>b</sup> evolve, the U.S. military has unique access, insight, and understanding given its proximity to the fight. Capturing this knowledge and sharing it with the broader community positions the military to adapt to the United States’ needs as they grow in response to this increasing threat, enabling the military to inform and advise in support of meaningful, sustainable solutions.

## Conclusion

Analysis of the challenges associated with the current conflict environment indicate that conditions have been set for increased radicalization and qualitative differences in violence, particularly in the boys and young men exposed to the normalization, expectation, and glamorization of violence. Conditions and associated outcomes, however, are far worse than originally envisioned. Caliphate architects are intentionally promulgating a framework for radicalization and indoctrination (e.g., curriculum development, Cubs of the Caliphate) while actively cultivating local environments to further the radicalization process. The Islamic State is weaponizing children. Unless effectively addressed, this will represent a persistent capability that will transcend the careers of most working this problem set today. Meaningful response to youth radicalization and indoctrination likely will require a whole of government approach, as well as active civil society engagement. The military is positioned to inform these efforts through its unique access, insight, and understanding, including non-kinetic opportunities for disruption. **CTC**

b Terrorist tactics, techniques, and procedures.

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# The Lebanese Armed Forces and Hezbollah's Competing Summer Offensives Against Sunni Militants

By Nicholas Blanford

**This past summer, the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) launched an offensive that made significant headway against Islamic State forces in northeast Lebanon. But its counterterrorism efforts have repeatedly run into interference from Hezbollah, which not only launched its own operation against al-Qa`ida-aligned militants in an apparent attempt to upstage the LAF but also undercut the LAF's offensive against the Islamic State by helping to broker safe passage into Syria for a large number of Islamic State fighters. While the defeat and displacement of Sunni jihadis in Lebanon has improved the security outlook for Lebanon (though not Syria and Iraq), Hezbollah's decision to enter the fray—borne out of concern the LAF might otherwise accrue prestige and strengthen its popular standing to the Iran-backed party's detriment—risks raising tensions in Lebanon.**

The war in Syria, which began in 2011, turned the mountainous 'backwater' region of northeast Lebanon into the country's most significant security challenge. The area eventually evolved into a haven for the Islamic State and Hay`at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), formerly al-Qa`ida's representative in Syria. By late 2011, the Sunni-populated town of Arsal, eight miles from the Syrian border, became an important conduit for smuggled weapons to the nascent rebel groups battling the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. In June 2013, Arsal received a major influx of Syrian refugees and rebel fighters, more than 25,000 altogether, following the fall of the rebel-held town of Qusayr, five miles north of the Lebanese border.<sup>1</sup>

In November 2013, Hezbollah and the Assad regime forces of the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) spearheaded an offensive to restore Syrian government control over the Qalamoun region, an expanse of mountainous territory adjacent to the border with northeast Lebanon.<sup>2</sup> The campaign, which lasted until April 2014, coincided with a wave of suicide car bomb attacks claimed by al-Qa`ida- and Islamic State-aligned militants targeting predominantly Shi`a areas

of Lebanon.<sup>a</sup> Many of the car bombs were manufactured in militant-held areas of Qalamoun prior to being driven across the border into Lebanon via Arsal.<sup>3</sup> The conclusion of Hezbollah's Qalamoun offensive left most of the towns of the area in Syrian government hands, but hundreds of Sunni rebel fighters and jihadis moved into the mountainous region straddling the border east of Arsal and Ras Baalbek, a Christian village five miles north of Arsal.

On August 2, 2014, a combined force of some 700 militants, drawn mainly from the Islamic State and the then-named Jabhat al-Nusra (the forerunner of HTS), stormed Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) positions in Arsal, triggering five days of fighting. A ceasefire deal five days later saw the militants retreat back to their mountain redoubts to the east, taking with them large quantities of looted arms and ammunition and 36 captured Lebanese soldiers and policemen. Four of the hostages were executed, and seven others were released. Jabhat al-Nusra freed its 16 hostages for 13 jailed militants held by the Lebanese authorities in a prisoner swap in December 2015.<sup>4</sup> The fate of the nine soldiers held by the Islamic State remained unknown.

In the aftermath of the battle, the LAF increased its deployment in the northeast area, building a series of fortified checkpoints and observation posts to dominate the ground to the east and control access in and out of Arsal.<sup>b</sup>

In early May 2015, Hezbollah launched a second operation against Sunni rebel fighters and jihadis in the Qalamoun area.<sup>5</sup> By the time the operation ended two months later, the Islamic State and HTS militants had been squeezed into a pocket of mountainous territory that ran from southeast of Arsal to northeast of Ras Baalbek and extended across the border into Syria. The LAF manned a defensive line to the west while Hezbollah deployed in a line of mountain-top outposts to the north and south of the militants. The eastern flank, inside Syria, was guarded by a mix of Hezbollah, Syrian Arab Army (SAA), and loyalist paramilitary forces.

In early 2017, sources close to Hezbollah were indicating that the Sunni jihadis "would not see another winter in the mountains," heightening speculation that the Iran-backed group was preparing an assault against either HTS or the Islamic State or both.<sup>6</sup>

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a A log of the attacks compiled by the author at the time shows there were 14 suicide bomb attacks of which 12 were vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices. The attacks were claimed by Jabhat al-Nusra fi Lubnan, the Islamic State, and the Abdullah al-Azzam Brigades, an al-Qa`ida-inspired group based in Lebanon. The bombings killed nearly 100 people and wounded nearly 900.

b The British government provided military assistance to the LAF in the tower construction as well as the raising, training, and equipping of (so far) four Land Border Regiments tasked with securing Lebanon's border with Syria. Nicholas Blanford, "Hezbollah seizing territory along Lebanon's northeastern border," *Arab Weekly*, July 30, 2017.

## Who to Lead?

By the end of June, an offensive to drive out HTS and the Islamic State from Lebanese territory appeared imminent, but it was unclear who would take the lead in the operation. Hezbollah had already chalked up two successful campaigns against the militants in the 2014 and 2015 Qalamoun operations and was well-suited to advance on both HTS and the Islamic State. On the other hand, the LAF was supposed to be the primary security actor in Lebanon, was deemed sufficiently strong to tackle the militants, and had the option of drawing upon U.S. military support if it ran into difficulties.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, the onset of the operation came as the United States was reassessing its level of commitment to the LAF.<sup>c</sup> The U.S. military support for Lebanon was premised in part on the hope that strengthening the LAF would allow it to stand up to Hezbollah and undermine the party's argument that only its doctrine of warfare is suitable to defend the country against external threats.<sup>8</sup> With Hezbollah stronger than ever, questions were increasingly being raised in Washington as to the point of continuing to provide funding to the LAF.<sup>9 d</sup>

For the LAF, the upcoming battle against HTS and the Islamic State represented an opportunity to showcase its new capabilities and armaments to its international backers after a decade of support. On July 18, Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri appeared to endorse the LAF playing the lead role against the militants, saying "the army will carry out a well-planned operation in the outskirts of Arsal, and the government gives it the freedom to deal with this issue."<sup>10</sup>

## Phase One: Hezbollah vs. HTS

Just three days later, however, Hezbollah seized the initiative by formally announcing the start of an operation to attack HTS in its stronghold southeast and east of Arsal and in adjacent areas of Syrian territory in coordination with the SAA.<sup>11</sup> The offensive was accompanied by a blaze of publicity with pro-Hezbollah media publishing extensive photos and video footage of fighters in action. The two main Hezbollah units taking part in the operation were the Radwan Brigade and the Haidar Brigade.<sup>12</sup> The former is one of Hezbollah's SOF (special operation forces) units, and the latter is composed mainly of recruits from the Bekaa Valley.<sup>13</sup> Hezbollah artillery units provided fire support for the infantry forces while D-9

bulldozers were employed to clear tracks of possible Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) and mines. HTS controlled an area of some 35 square miles outside Arsal in Lebanese territory and 13.5 square miles near Flita in Syria.<sup>14</sup> Its fighters, numbering around 400, were dug into fortified hill-top positions and also made use of natural caves and man-made bunkers.<sup>15</sup>

By July 24, Hezbollah claimed to have seized 70 percent of the territory held by HTS in Lebanon and all the terrain held by the group in Syria.<sup>16</sup> Losses amounted to 19 dead Hezbollah fighters and 143 militants.<sup>17</sup> The HTS defensive lines quickly collapsed with some 30 militants, headed by Abu Talha al-Ansari, an HTS commander, fleeing to Islamic State-held territory and others regrouping on the outskirts of Arsal.<sup>18</sup> A Free Syrian Army (FSA) unit, Saraya Ahl ash-Sham, which numbered some 800 fighters, stayed out of the battle, retreating to a refugee camp outside Arsal in preparation for negotiations that would see them and their families granted safe passage to Syria.<sup>19</sup>

Meanwhile, the LAF was left on the sidelines having been upstaged by Hezbollah. The LAF tightened its measures around Arsal, while permitting Syrian refugees from nearby encampments entry into the town. It also shelled HTS militants seen heading toward Arsal to escape Hezbollah's offensive.<sup>20</sup>

The optics of Hezbollah leading the fight against HTS—with the LAF all but marginalized—discouraged the LAF's backers in Washington and London and threatened to derail the foreign assistance programs.<sup>21</sup>

On July 26, 2017, Hezbollah and the HTS agreed to a ceasefire brokered by Major General Abbas Ibrahim, the head of the Directorate of General Security.<sup>22</sup> In subsequent negotiations, it was agreed that 7,777 people, including 1,116 militants and 6,101 civilian refugees, would be transported in buses from Arsal to the rebel-held Idlib province in northern Syria.<sup>e</sup>

With HTS evicted from the Arsal area, attention turned toward Islamic State fighters deployed in the mountains east of Ras Baalbek. On August 4, Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, Hezbollah's secretary-general, said in a speech that the LAF would carry out the offensive against the Islamic State on Lebanese territory while Hezbollah and the SAA would attack from the Syrian side.<sup>23</sup>

"I declare tonight that we, in Hezbollah, are at the service of the Lebanese army," he said, indicating that if the LAF was to run into trouble against the Islamic State, Hezbollah would be available to provide support.<sup>24</sup>

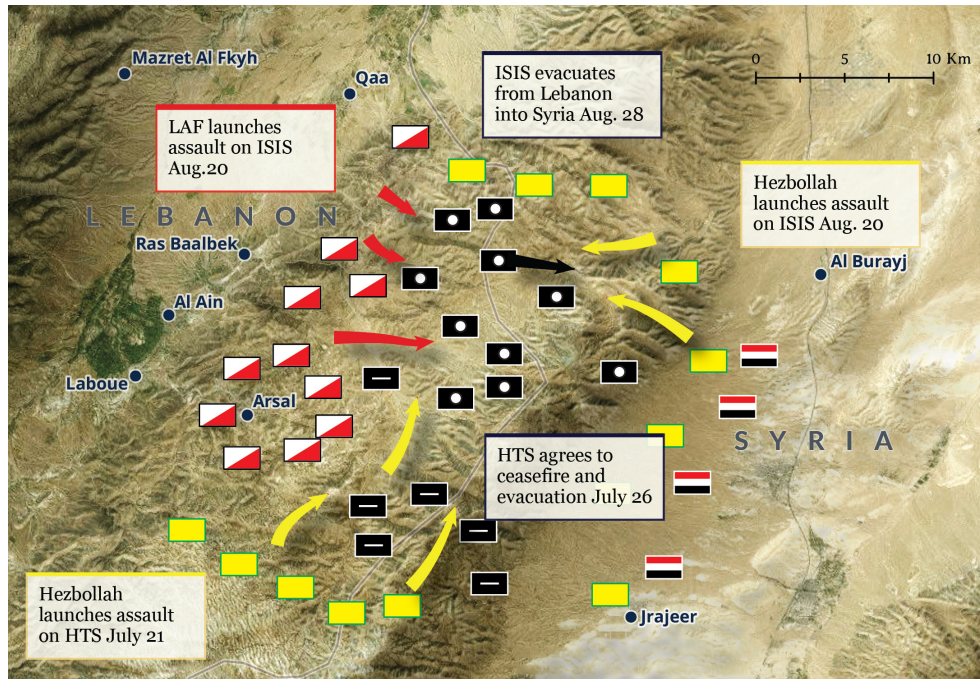
## Phase 2: The LAF vs. the Islamic State

The LAF estimated Islamic State strength in Lebanon in the summer of 2017 at around 600 fighters divided into three groups—the "Bakri" faction in the northern sector, east of the Christian village of Qaa; the "Ali" faction in the central sector, east of Ras Baalbek; and the "Osama" faction in the south.<sup>25</sup> The total area covered by the Islamic State in Lebanon was 46 square miles, according to the LAF.<sup>26</sup> Hezbollah said that the Islamic State was in control of 60 square miles of terrain in Syria in the Qalamoun region.<sup>27</sup>

e In addition, three Hezbollah fighters captured during the battle were released in exchange for three HTS militants held in a Lebanese prison. HTS also released five Hezbollah prisoners who were captured in the Aleppo province in northern Syria, and both groups swapped the remains of several dead fighters. "Militants leave Lebanon in 3<sup>rd</sup> phase of swap deal," *Daily Star*, August 2, 2017.

c Since 2005, the United States has provided the LAF in excess of \$1.5 billion in military assistance, making Lebanon the world's fifth-largest per capita recipient of U.S. military funding. The U.S. State Department cut its Foreign Military Financing (FMF) program for Lebanon from its proposed foreign aid budget for 2018, potentially signaling a tougher approach toward the LAF. In 2016, the FMF budget for Lebanon amounted to \$85.9 million. Nicholas Blanford, "Lebanese army takes over Hizbullah positions on Lebanese border," *Jane's Defence Weekly*, May 30, 2017; Nicholas Blanford, "Why US may slash military aid to an ally it helped build up in Lebanon," *Christian Science Monitor*, July 18, 2017.

d The relationship between the LAF and Hezbollah is extremely complex. On the one hand, Hezbollah has significant support in Lebanon, and some in the LAF endorse the party's anti-Israel credo. Hezbollah wields some influence within the LAF, especially in the Directorate of Military Intelligence (DMI), and as the dominant political power in the country, it has influence over government decisions affecting the LAF. On the other hand, there are officers and soldiers who bristle at Hezbollah's military and political power and are uncomfortable with sharing responsibilities of national defense with a non-state actor. Multiple author interviews, LAF officers and soldiers, 2010-2017.



*The Summer 2017 LAF and Hezbollah Offensives against Sunni Militants (Rowan Technology)*

The LAF deployed some 5,000 troops for the operation against the Islamic State.<sup>f</sup> The LAF's theater commander, Brigadier General Fadi Daoud, the commander of the 6th MIB, devised a pincer movement plan with a blocking force to the north and attacking forces from the west and south with the goal of driving the militants eastward into Syrian territory.<sup>28</sup>

On August 14, the 1st Intervention Regiment (IR) took hills just northeast of Aرسال and southwest of the main Islamic State-held area.<sup>29</sup> Two days later, the 1st IR attacked Islamic State positions in hills on the southern front of the Islamic State Osama faction. The Islamic State militants put up stiff resistance, wounding several LAF troops.<sup>30</sup> The 1st IR was pulled back briefly, and the Islamic State positions were struck with precision munitions—AGM114 Hellfire missiles and 155mm laser-guided “Copperhead” artillery rounds.<sup>31</sup> The “Copperheads” were guided onto target by the AC208 Cessna aircraft and by Mukafaha SOF on the ground.<sup>32</sup>

The Mukafaha also took over several mountaintop outposts that had been manned by Hezbollah along the northern flank of the operational area east of Qaa. The Hezbollah fighters had agreed to a Ministry of Defense request to pull out, and the fighters redeployed on the Syrian side of the border.<sup>33</sup>

On August 19, the LAF announced the formal commencement of Operation Fajr al-Jurd (“Dawn of the Outskirts”) and noted that

the offensive would not be coordinated with the SAA and Hezbollah.<sup>34</sup> Hezbollah immediately followed with its own declaration that it was launching its attack on the Islamic State from Syrian territory. The near simultaneous announcements created an impression that the launch of the offensive had been coordinated between the LAF and Hezbollah. During the next few days, pro-Hezbollah media outlets repeatedly stated that the LAF was coordinating its campaign with Hezbollah and the SAA, statements that were interpreted as attempts to embarrass the LAF in front of its U.S. patron.<sup>35</sup> One report claimed there was “continuous open communications between the Lebanese army operations center and the operations command of Hezbollah and the Syrian army.”<sup>36</sup> The LAF rejected such accusations, and no evidence has emerged to confirm that there was any field coordination during the anti-Islamic State operation.

On August 20, the LAF's Air Assault Regiment launched a frontal attack from the west on the main defensive line of the Bakr and Ali factions. The LAF made extensive use of the “Copperhead” munitions, firing over 140 rounds at Islamic State targets, destroying machine gun nests, mortar pits, and other fixed positions.<sup>37</sup> The synchronicity between the LAF's command post, artillery batteries, and ISR (intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance) assets denied the Islamic State militants the ability to maneuver and kept them trapped in their positions.

On August 22, with the Islamic State focused on the LAF threat to the west, the 6th MIB and a company from the 4th IR advanced from the south toward the main concentration of Islamic State forces near Khirbet Daoud.<sup>38</sup> The LAF column used D9 bulldozers to cut new tracks through the rocky landscape to avoid using existing routes that were laced with IEDs and land mines.<sup>39</sup> The Islamic State militants deployed in Ras al-Kaf, a major stronghold on a 5,200-foot mountain, could see the approaching LAF column to the south and feared they would be cut off from the Syrian border.<sup>40</sup> The militants began retreating to the east, and by August 24, the surviving fighters were bottled up in a valley of some 7.5 square

f The maneuver forces included two mechanized Infantry Brigades, two Intervention Regiments, the Air Assault Regiment and a company of Mukafaha, and a Special Operations Force unit attached to the Directorate of Military Intelligence. Close air support included unmanned aerial vehicles and three AC208 Cessna aircraft fitted with AGM114 Hellfire missiles. Author interview, senior LAF officer, September 2017; author interview, Aram Nerguizian, senior associate, Burke Chair in Strategy, Center for Strategic and International Studies, September 2017. See also Nicholas Blanford, “US operating UAVs in Lebanon,” *Jane's Defence Weekly*, March 26, 2015.



*LAF soldiers on a M113 armored personnel carrier deployed close to the border with Syria on August 28, 2017, a day after a ceasefire was reached with the Islamic State. (Nicholas Blanford)*

miles adjacent to the border.<sup>41</sup>

The LAF operation had proceeded with an efficiency and speed that drew compliments from foreign military officials. One described the offensive as “21st century maneuver warfare by a modern military.”<sup>42</sup> A retired LAF brigadier general who was familiar with the details of the operation told the author, “Two things won the battle—ISR and precision munitions.”

However, the LAF never launched a final assault to oust the Islamic State, as a controversial ceasefire deal emerged on August 27 in which it was revealed that Hezbollah and the Syrian government had agreed to allow the surviving militants safe passage to Boukamal on Syria’s eastern border with Iraq in exchange for information on the nine LAF soldiers who had been captured three years earlier.<sup>43</sup> The bodies of the soldiers were recovered, and on August 28, some 400 Islamic State fighters and their families departed the Qalamoun region in buses (and ambulances for the wounded) for the

journey to Boukamal.<sup>43 h</sup> In mid-September, the convoy reportedly reached Islamic State-held territory in Syria’s Deir ez-Zour province and across the border in the Iraqi town of Qa’im after the U.S. ended overhead surveillance.<sup>44</sup>

## Conclusion

The LAF’s anti-Islamic State campaign was its most proficient CT operation since the end of the 1975-1990 civil war, and it demonstrated the extent of its improved capabilities since its last major counterterrorism engagement in 2007 against a Sunni jihadi group in north Lebanon.<sup>1</sup> But the offensive also exposed the strains that exist between the LAF and Hezbollah, which could pose challenges in the future.

While the Islamic State was defeated and the mission of restoring state control over northeast Lebanon appears to have been accomplished, there is some simmering resentment within LAF ranks at what they perceive to have been Hezbollah’s attempts to undermine the operation from the start.<sup>45</sup> First, Hezbollah had undercut the LAF by mounting its own offensive against HTS, embarrassing the military in front of the United States and United Kingdom. Then, as the LAF prepared to launch its attack against the Islamic State, Hezbollah leader Nasrallah had warned against asking for

g The deal was broadly criticized not just by Hezbollah’s political opponents but also by the families of the dead soldiers as well as Hezbollah’s own support base. Many of them were unhappy that a group that had been responsible for staging rocket attacks on Shi’a villages in the Bekaa and staging suicide car bomb attacks was being allowed to go free. Furthermore, the Lebanese government said it had received information that the nine soldiers were executed by their captors in February 2015 but could not confirm the identities of the victims. However, a political source told the author in September 2017 that the government had received a video of the execution in which the nine captives were tied to trees and beheaded, a fact that has not been made public. Author interviews, Hezbollah supporters in southern Beirut, August 29, 2017; Sami Moubayed, “Outcry but noting more after Hezbollah-ISIS deal,” *Arab Weekly*, September 10, 2017.

h The United States did not acknowledge the deal between two groups regarded as terrorist organizations and blocked passage to Boukamal by destroying a bridge and cratering a road. The Islamic State column was not attacked directly due to the presence of civilians. “Daesh release Hezbollah fighter as convoy arrives in Deir al-Zor,” Reuters, September 14, 2017.

i The LAF fought a 106-day battle against Fatah al-Islam, an al-Qa’ida-inspired group, in the Nahr al-Bared Palestinian refugee camp from May to August 2007. The fighting saw 168 soldiers killed along with more than 200 militants and dozens of civilians. The camp was completely destroyed in the battle. Nicholas Blanford, “Tough homecoming for Lebanon’s refugees,” *Christian Science Monitor*, November 14, 2007.



help from the United States and instead offered his party's support if the LAF should run into difficulties.<sup>46</sup> When the LAF operation advanced more quickly than had been generally expected, Hezbollah had stepped in with a scene-stealing ceasefire deal, which allowed the Islamic State militants to evade capture or death in battle.

On August 31, Hezbollah held a triumphant "victory" parade in Baalbek in the Bekaa Valley to celebrate the defeat of HTS. However, a similar "Victory Festival," scheduled for September 14 in central Beirut, to mark the LAF's win against the Islamic State was postponed two days beforehand. The Lebanese ministries of tourism and defense said in a statement that it was postponed for "purely logistic reasons."<sup>47</sup> But a political source close to Prime Minister Hariri said that Hezbollah had pressured President Aoun, its ally, to drop the parade.<sup>48</sup>

Hezbollah justifies its continued armed status on the basis that its doctrine of warfare, weapons, training, equipment, and tactics is best suited to defend Lebanon against external threats. Until recently, that external threat was limited to Israel. The LAF lacks the capacity to confront the Israel Defense Forces. But the emergence of groups like the Islamic State and HTS, which the LAF is capable of defeating, combined with the improvements to the LAF as a result of U.S. support, has challenged Hezbollah's argument that it is the primary security actor in Lebanon.

Other than simmering LAF-Hezbollah rivalry, the operations against HTS and the Islamic State have helped improve security and stability in Lebanon. Both groups were effectively surrounded by the LAF and Hezbollah in northeast Lebanon from 2014, so their ability to export instability into Lebanon was limited. But their presence continued to serve as a pole of reference, inspiration, and potential support for jihadi militants in Lebanon.

Given the presence of Hezbollah, the proximity to Syria, and the presence of some 1.5 million Syrian refugees, Lebanon has been surprisingly fortunate in not having been subjected to more terrorist attacks by radical Sunni groups. Other than a spate of suicide

car bomb attacks between July 2013 and June 2014 (in part due to the presence of Sunni jihadis in the Qalamoun area), Lebanon has since only suffered a handful of attacks. Part of the reason is due to enhanced coordination and cooperation between Lebanon's sometimes rival intelligence services.<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, Lebanon's small size and tangled sectarian demographics grant little operational space for Sunni militant cells to plot and execute attacks without discovery by Lebanese intelligence services.

With the conflict in Syria showing indications of entering a less intense phase, the likelihood of another extremist group seizing terrain in Lebanon appears remote. But should such a development occur, the LAF has demonstrated that it is capable of confronting and defeating non-state, external threats such as HTS and the Islamic State, validating foreign military assistance programs. Hezbollah, however, has expanded the justification for retaining its weapons from one limited solely to the simmering Israel front to a broader interpretation of national security, one that encroaches upon the LAF's jurisdiction. On September 4, Hezbollah MP Ali Fayyad said, "A few years ago, we used to say that the Resistance [Hezbollah] plays a role in liberating the land and safeguarding Lebanon from the Israeli threat. But today, we can say that the Resistance has a role in liberating the land and confronting anything that threatens this entity, whether Israeli, takfiri, or anything else."<sup>50</sup>

If Hezbollah perceives that a more robust and increasingly confident LAF could undermine its national defense rationale, the current, sometimes uncomfortable relationship with Hezbollah could evolve into a more serious rivalry. The LAF is wary of Hezbollah's sensitivities and does not seek or desire a confrontation with the powerful Shi'a force, which could aggravate sectarian tensions in Lebanon. But the quandary of how to reconcile the tasks, duties, and ambitions of two relatively powerful military forces crammed into Lebanon's tiny land space will continue to bedevil supporters and opponents of both institutions. **CTC**

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# The Islamic State and the Kurds: The Documentary Evidence

By Aymenn al-Tamimi

**Drawing in part on internal Islamic State documents, this article aims to provide a new and more nuanced understanding of how the Islamic State has dealt with Kurds. Though the Islamic State is often characterized as being inherently anti-Kurdish, the organization has recruited Kurds and directed messaging toward Kurdish audiences. At the same time, internal documents in particular show the tensions between realities on the ground for Kurdish communities that lived under Islamic State control and the organization's ideology that is, in theory, blind to ethnicity.**

The controversy over how the Islamic State has treated Kurds is often colored with sensationalist language, with the suggestion that the Islamic State, an entity whose ranks consist primarily of Sunni Arabs, mal-treats Kurds simply on the basis of their ethnicity. This narrative stems partly from conflating Kurdish experiences with the Islamic State with the organization's genocide against the Yazidi religious minority in Iraq, which does not necessarily identify as ethnically Kurdish but speaks the Kurdish language. For example, one article in *The National Interest* claims that with the rise of the Islamic State, "the Kurds also began to make headlines, first as the victims of the barbaric hordes of the self-proclaimed caliphate, then as its most capable and willing adversaries."<sup>1</sup> Similarly, an October 2014 article in *Financial Times* spoke of the Islamic State's "targeting of the Kurds."<sup>2</sup> Ranj Alaaldin, in an opinion piece for *The Guardian*, goes even further in generalization, asserting that "jihadi groups such as ISIS view Kurds ... and other minorities as heretics."<sup>3</sup>

The immediate counterpoint to these claims of Islamic State persecution of Kurds merely for being Kurds is that such behavior conflicts with the organization's ideology. While the Islamic State's main means of functioning and communicating is the Arabic language, the Islamic State's worldview is, in theory, based on the dichotomy of Muslims and non-Muslims. Thus, when it comes to those identified as Muslim, their ethnicity should not matter. This line of thought has been expressed with consistency. For instance, in a speech announcing the establishment of the caliphate, the organization's then spokesman, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, drew attention to the precedent of the acceptance of Islam by the Arabs that supposedly resulted in eliminating distinctions based

on ethnicity. "By God's blessing, they became brothers ... and they united in faith ... not distinguishing between non-Arab and Arab, or between eastern and western, or between white and black."<sup>4</sup>

This article seeks to provide a more nuanced understanding between the narrative of Islamic State persecution of Kurds simply for being Kurdish and the theoretical ideal of no discrimination among Muslims on the basis of ethnicity. This subject will be explored primarily through internal Islamic State documents, though some of the organization's external propaganda will be taken into account as well. As part of the investigation, this article will particularly focus on Islamic State recruitment of Kurds and the policies toward Kurdish communities and Kurds living in its areas.

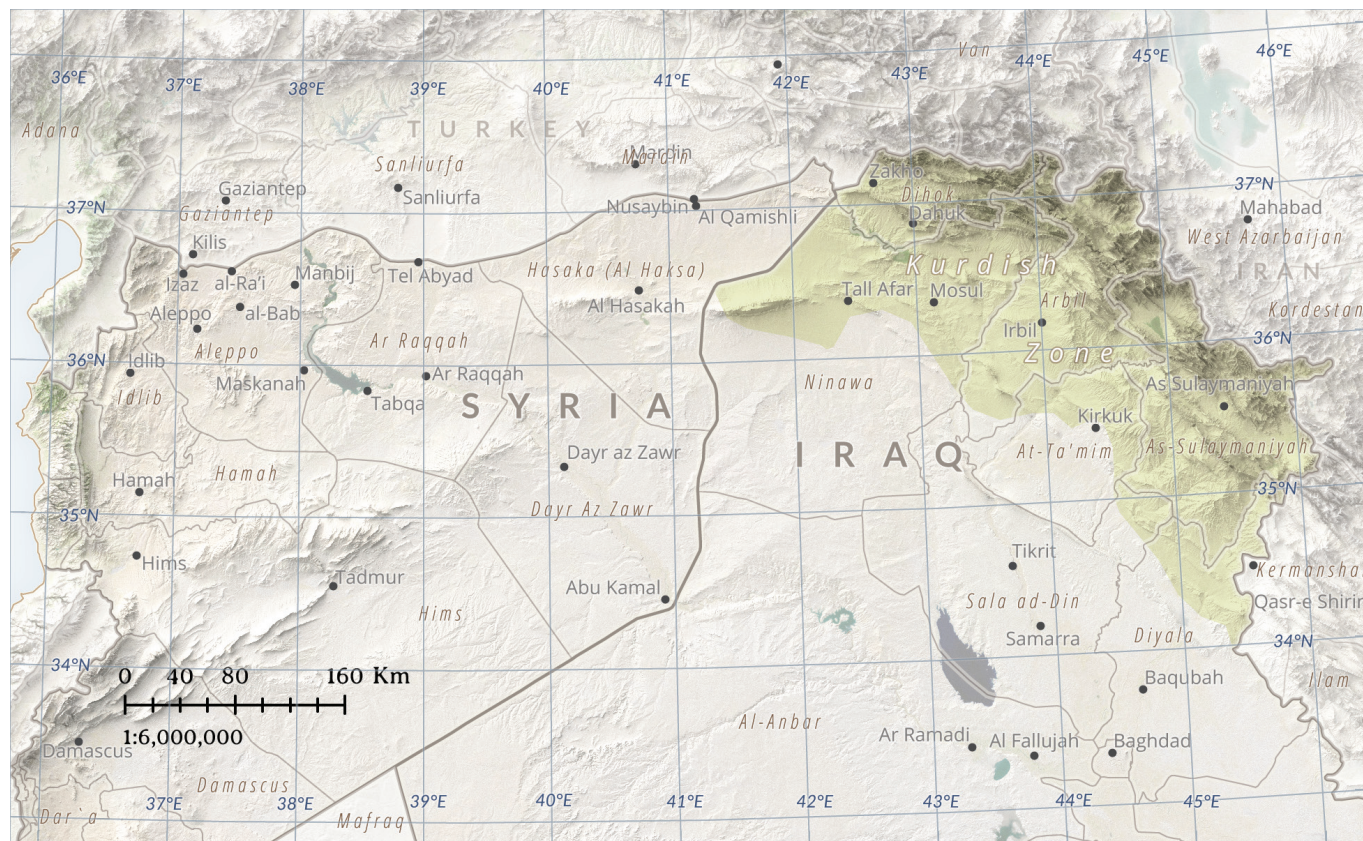
## Islamic State Recruitment of Kurds

The presence of Kurds in jihadi groups is by no means a new phenomenon. Most notably, prior to 2003, the history and background of the jihadi group Ansar al-Islam (Partisans of Islam), which was led by Mullah Krekar, illustrate Kurdish involvement in salafi and jihadi trends in the Iraqi Kurdistan area for decades.<sup>5</sup> Beyond Iraqi Kurdistan, Brian Fishman has highlighted the case of Abu al-Hadi al-Iraqi, a Kurd from Mosul who was a veteran of the Iran-Iraq War.<sup>6</sup> Abu al-Hadi al-Iraqi migrated to the Afghanistan-Pakistan area and became a leading figure in al-Qa`ida by the end of the 1990s. Among the training camps for residents of the al-Qa`ida guesthouse run by Abu al-Hadi al-Iraqi was a 'Kurds Camp,' which, as its name suggests, was intended to train Kurdish jihadi operatives.<sup>7</sup>

Given these precedents, it should not be surprising that the Islamic State would recruit Kurds who are ideologically committed to its cause. In this regard, there have been multiple propaganda items from the Islamic State featuring Kurds in the organization's ranks. Prior to the caliphate announcement, one such item was the 26th video in the series "A Window Upon the Land of Epic Battles," released in November 2013 by what was then the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham's al-Itisam media. The video, entitled "A Message to the Kurds and a Martyrdom Operation," features a Kurdish speaker threatening the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq, vowing that "by God's permission, we will return to Kurdistan with the arms we have placed on our shoulders."<sup>8</sup> The speaker continues, "By God's permission we will defeat you just as we have defeated the apostates of the PKK and the shabiha of Bashar...despite the force of their arms and their large numbers."<sup>9</sup> The speaker is thus making a clear distinction between fighting Kurds merely for being Kurdish and fighting Kurdish political entities that are deemed apostate (i.e., Muslim by origin but having left the fold of Islam) for espousing a heretical, nationalistic outlook.

After the declaration of the caliphate, propaganda appeals to Kurds emerged in productions such as "The Kurds - Between Monotheism and Atheism" from the Raqqa province media office. The video, which has Kurdish subtitles where necessary, features

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*Syria and Northern Iraq (Rowan Technology) (Editor's note: The part of the map shaded in green shows the approximate geographic area of Iraq in which there are significant populations of Kurds. These include Kurdish majority areas and areas in which there is a mix between Kurds and Arabs and other ethnicities. It does not denote the borders of the Iraqi region of Kurdistan. Several areas in the shaded area, including Mosul, have majority Arab populations and a significant number of Kurds live outside the shaded area.)*

Kurdish fighters for the Islamic State while highlighting a contrast between Kurdish forbears portrayed as having performed great services for the Islamic cause—such as Salah al-Din, who fought the Crusaders and brought about the end of the Shi'i Fatimid Caliphate—and modern-day Kurdish nationalist causes, such as Mustafa Barzani and the Kurdistan Democratic Party, portrayed as allies of Israel.<sup>10</sup>

An item from the internal propaganda series *Qisas al-Mujahideen*<sup>a</sup> and some external media reporting point to the existence of a Kurdish-speaking unit within the Islamic State's fighting forces known as the Salah al-Din Battalion.<sup>11</sup> According to *Qisas al-Mujahideen*,<sup>12</sup> the battalion takes its name from a certain Salah al-Din al-Kurdi, who was originally from Halabja and took up arms against the U.S. occupation, forming his own contingents of operatives. Arrested by U.S. forces in 2008, he supposedly spent time in Abu Ghraib prison, but was then released on grounds of ill health. By late 2011 or early 2012, Salah al-Din al-Kurdi had returned to jihadi activity, joining the Islamic State of Iraq and then sent to conduct a suicide operation in the run-up to the Arab League Summit in Baghdad at the end of March 2012. (See Exhibit 1.)

<sup>a</sup> As a source for information, the series needs to be treated with a degree of caution. The stories related are designed to boost the morale of Islamic State fighters, and as such they are open to considerable embellishment and perhaps even total fabrication.

Finally, there is evidence of significant Islamic State recruitment in Turkey among the Kurdish minority. As Metin Gurcan notes, the recruitment “reflects the fact that many Kurds live in south-east Turkey, the most religious part of the country.”<sup>13</sup> Many of these Kurdish jihadis, coming from a historically marginalized minority in Turkey, appear to believe that the Islamic State would grant them equal rights.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, so far as recruitment is concerned, the evidence is clear that the Islamic State willingly accepts fighters and members of Kurdish origin. The criterion of acceptance that matters here is the ideological commitment to the Islamic State.

### **Kurdish Communities Living under the Islamic State**

While the Islamic State has no problem in recruiting Kurds willing to serve and fight for the organization, most people in the various cities, towns, and villages that have fallen under Islamic State control do not become members of the Islamic State. Rather, they remain as civilians. Many of these civilians might have ended up working in various administrative offices and aspects of governance co-opted by the Islamic State (e.g., teachers in schools), but that does not mean that they became members of the Islamic State.

Kurdish communities and populations are known to have existed in many areas that were seized by the Islamic State, including villages in north and east Aleppo countryside, the cities of Raqqa and Tabqa along the Euphrates in central northern Syria, and the city of Mosul. According to Islamic State maxims, the theory is that

the group should deal with these Kurdish communities solely on the basis of their religion. If they are Muslims who outwardly follow the rules and rituals of Islam, then there is no reason to treat them any differently than Sunni Arabs abiding by the dictates of the religion and living under Islamic State control. The principle is well illustrated in a statement distributed by the Islamic State's Ninawa province media office in Mosul in late July 2014, denying the rumors of forcible displacement of Kurds from the province. The statement affirms, "The Sunni Kurds are our brothers in God. What is for them is for us, and what is upon them is upon us. And we will not allow any one of them to be harmed so long as they remain on the principle of Islam."<sup>15</sup> In practice, however, the widespread suspicions and associations of Kurdish communities with Kurdish nationalist parties have led to discriminatory treatment in many areas under Islamic State control.

The evidence for discriminatory treatment of Kurdish communities primarily comes from internal documents from Syria. Close cooperation between the U.S.-led coalition and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which includes the Syrian offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)—the Democratic Union Party and its armed wing the Popular Protection Units (YPG)—has been vital in pushing back the Islamic State in the north and northeast of the country. In June 2015, the Islamic State issued a notification in Raqqa province requiring Kurdish inhabitants to leave for the Palmyra area in Homs province.<sup>16</sup> The decision was justified on the grounds of the "alliance of the Kurdish parties" with the U.S.-led coalition and that there were some among the Kurdish inhabitants under the Islamic State who had "cooperated with the Crusader alliance." Thus, on the grounds of alleviating tension, the stipulation to leave Raqqa province was imposed. At the same time, the Islamic State was careful to emphasize that the properties of those Kurds required to leave but considered to be Muslims would not be confiscated, and the group made arrangements for their property to be registered with the real estate bureaucracy. A subsequent statement was issued by the emir of Raqqa city, warning Islamic State fighters that they could not infringe on those properties.<sup>17</sup> This prohibition was reaffirmed the following month,<sup>18</sup> suggesting that violations had taken place. It is not clear, in the end, how far these stipulations against seizing Kurdish properties were enforced.

The documentary evidence suggests that not all Kurds who were living in Raqqa province under the Islamic State ultimately left these areas. It appears that it subsequently became possible to obtain an exception to the requirement to leave. From the Raqqa province city of Tabqa, a document dated December 2015 emerged from the ruins of the aftermath of the Islamic State's defeat there by the U.S.-backed SDF. The document noted that those Kurds who still wished to reside in Raqqa province had to go to the office of Kurdish affairs.<sup>19</sup> Many Kurds, of course, would have fled Islamic State territory entirely, and the Delegated Committee (a general governing body for the Islamic State) issued a directive in mid-August/mid-September 2015 requiring confiscation of property of Kurds who fled to "the land of kufr" (land governed by those deemed to be non-Muslims).<sup>20</sup> It should be noted, however, that confiscation of property of those who fled the Islamic State was not unique to the Kurds and other ethnic minorities. A similar fate befell the properties of medical professionals who fled the Islamic State,<sup>21</sup> as well as those accused of working with other factions opposed to the Islamic State like the Free Syrian Army.

The suspicion of Kurdish communities in Syria was not limited

to Raqqa province. In Aleppo province, a number of villages with Kurdish communities came under the control of the Islamic State. Internal documents obtained by this author reveal a security report issued by the al-Bab office of the public security department in July 2016 and addressed to the higher public security ministry.<sup>b</sup> (See Exhibit 2.) The report gives a detailed description of "some of the Kurdish villages in the province that represent a danger to the Islamic State because of the loyalty of the majority of their inhabitants to the Syrian Democratic Forces, and their hatred of members of the Dawla [Islamic State]." Among the charges leveled in the al-Bab report are that the Kurdish communities have been deceiving members of the Islamic State about "places of the presence of the atheists" (referring to the Syrian Democratic Forces); "receiving and welcoming the atheists;" videos disseminated on the Internet featuring complaints about impositions of Islamic norms such as payment of zakat taxation and the dress code for women; and informing Kurdish forces in advance of Islamic State raids into their territory. For context, the reference to welcoming the SDF and the displays of rejecting "Islamic" morality are amply attested in reports at the time of the sense of liberation felt by many locals (not necessarily just Kurds) as the Syrian Democratic Forces were capturing the Manbij area in east Aleppo countryside from the Islamic State.<sup>22</sup>

The al-Bab report proceeds to give some specific cases, such as the village of Qibat al-Shih to the north of al-Bab town. According to the report, 99% of the village is Kurdish, with 70% having been with "the atheist party" (presumably referring to the Democratic Union Party/PKK). The Islamic State, the report claims, "killed many of the sons of this village for their loyalty to their Kurdish nationalism, as in the battle of Ayn al-Islam [Kobani], they were going to Turkey and from there to Ayn al-Islam to fight with the PKK." In another case, about a village called Haymar Labadah on the route between Manbij and al-Khafsa with a population of 5,000, the report claims that "the majority of them are from those who hate the Islamic State." More specifically, the report alleges, for example, that by night the people of the village attacked the Hisba [Islamic morality enforcement] base in the village 10 days after it had been opened, stealing 50,000 Syrian pounds (\$90-100), a laptop, and some confiscated cigarettes. Moreover, the report says that there are people from the village who have been participating in the SDF campaign to capture Manbij.

On the basis of the various cases presented, the report concludes with the suggestion to "displace the people of these villages in the present time to avoid the cases of treachery that happened in the similar villages that have now fallen under the control of the PKK."

## Conclusion

Despite the recommendations of the security report, it is not clear whether the suggested policy of displacement was actually imple-

b These documents were obtained through an intermediary via the Syrian rebel group Ahrar al-Sharqiya, which is based in the north Aleppo countryside. Its members, who originate in the eastern Deir ez-Zor province, participated in battles against the Islamic State in Aleppo province and have taken Islamic State members as prisoners. In addition, they continue to maintain connections with contacts in eastern Syria and thus, have multiple avenues for obtaining Islamic State documents. The study obtained reflects a typical function of the Islamic State's security department in the provinces—that is, to investigate anything that may be considered a security threat to the Islamic State.

mented, as opposed to the documents from Raqqa province where the evidence of implementation of forced displacement is unambiguous. At least some Kurdish communities continue to reside in areas of north Aleppo countryside retaken from the Islamic State by Turkish-backed Syrian rebels.<sup>23</sup> However, the fact that recommendations for displacement were put forward at all, taken in combination with the displacement that took place in Raqqa province, illustrates that Islamic State policies toward many Kurdish communities in areas under its control were tainted with suspicion and hostility. As one anti-PKK Kurdish activist currently based in the north Aleppo countryside area of Akhtarín explained to this author,

more fieldwork will be required to track specific village and town cases of displacement, but in the general sense, the “proportion of [Islamic State] oppression on the Kurds was more” than that on the Sunni Arab communities.<sup>24</sup>

From a counterterrorism perspective, highlighting the internal documentary evidence of Islamic State suspicion and hostility toward many Kurdish communities, despite the theoretical ideal of only discriminating among people on the basis of their religion, may be worthwhile in an attempt to split Kurdish fighters from the ranks of the Islamic State, who may have joined the group believing that the Islamic State treats Kurdish Muslims fairly. **CTC**

## Appendix: Previously Unpublished Internal Documents Referenced in This Article

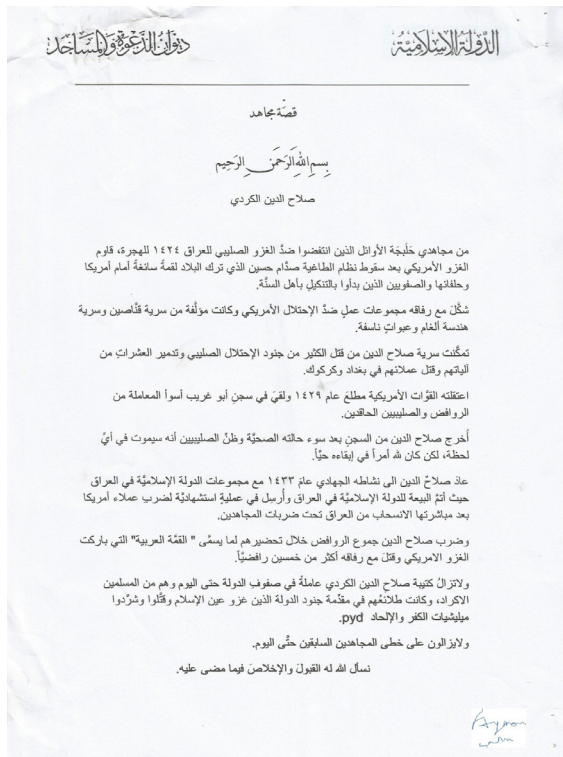


Exhibit 1: Biography of Salah al-Din al-Kurdi from the series Qisas al-Mujahideen

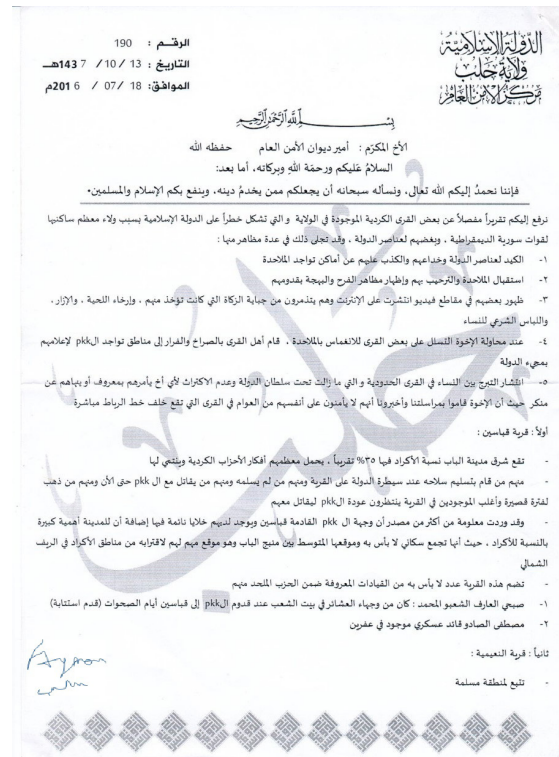


Exhibit 2 (page 1): Security report on Kurdish communities issued by the al-Bab office of the public security department, July 2016

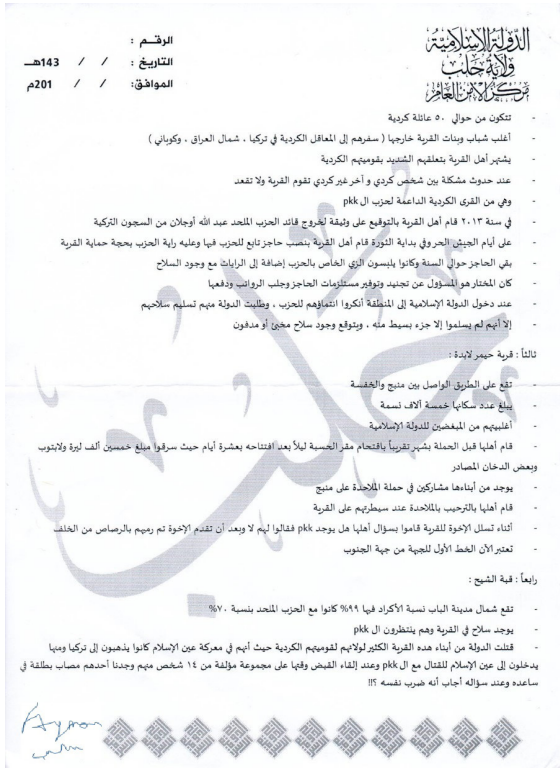


Exhibit 2 cont. (page 2): Security report on Kurdish communities issued by the al-Bab office of the public security department, July 2016

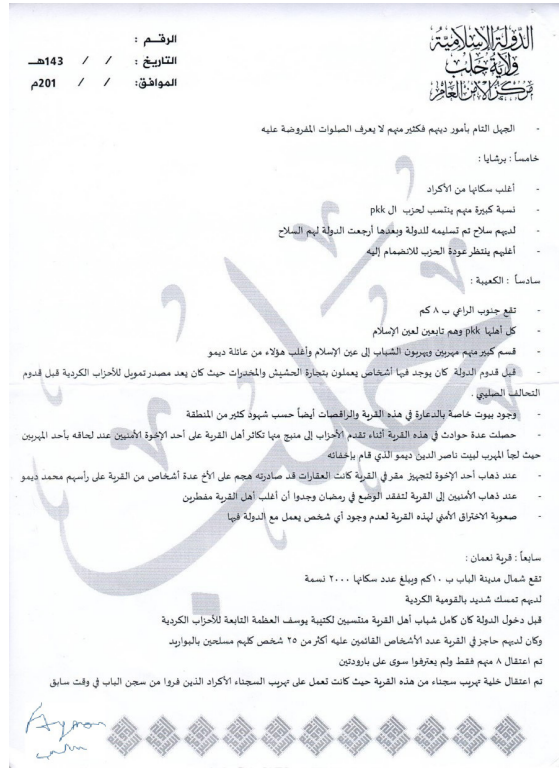


Exhibit 2 cont. (page 3): Security report on Kurdish communities issued by the al-Bab office of the public security department, July 2016



Exhibit 2 cont. (page 4): Security report on Kurdish communities issued by the al-Bab office of the public security department, July 2016

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- 22 For example, Wladimir Van Wilgenburg, "Syrian Arabs around Manbij overjoyed IS vanquished, welcome SDF, Kurds," *Middle East Eye*, June 12, 2016.
- 23 Aymenn al-Tamimi, "#Syria: Shami Front and Ahrar al-Sham visit Kurdish village of Susenbat in north Aleppo countryside: outreach to Kurdish tribal figures," Twitter, May 1, 2017.
- 24 Author interview, Ahmad Masto, anti-PKK Kurdish activist in Syria, September 2017.