

Combating Terrorism Center at West Point



# CTCSENTINEL

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## CTC SENTINEL 10TH ANNIVERSARY ISSUE



FEATURE ARTICLE

## Insurgents Again

The Islamic State shifts back to a strategy of attrition

HASSAN HASSAN

A VIEW FROM THE CT FOXHOLE

## Joseph Felter

DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY  
OF DEFENSE FOR SOUTH  
AND SOUTHEAST ASIA

# Contents

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## FEATURE ARTICLE

### 1 Insurgents Again: The Islamic State's Calculated Reversion to Attrition in the Syria-Iraq Border Region and Beyond

HASSAN HASSAN

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## INTERVIEW

### 9 A View from the CT Foxhole: Joseph Felter, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for South and Southeast Asia

BRYAN PRICE

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## ANALYSIS

### 14 Violent Extremism among Central Asians: The Istanbul, St. Petersburg, Stockholm, and New York City Attacks

GOKTUG SONMEZ

### 19 The Islamic State's Libyan External Operations Hub: The Picture So Far

JOHANNES SAAL

### 24 A Jihadi Takeover Bid in Nigeria? The Evolving Relationship between Boko Haram and al-Qa`ida

RYAN CUMMINGS

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## FROM THE EDITOR

We're proud to be publishing the 10th anniversary issue of *CTC Sentinel*. In the inaugural December 2007 issue, then Director of the Combating Terrorism Center Joseph Felter introduced the new publication with a favorite phrase of the late General Wayne A. Downing, "Who thinks wins." Felter is now the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for South and Southeast Asia and is the subject of our interview this month. "We wanted *CTC Sentinel* to be a resource to the academic, scholarly, and policy community ... so we designed *CTC Sentinel* to include both high-quality scholarship from leading scholars as well as articles grounded in practitioner insights," he recalls. "[It] has truly met and exceeded our hopes for it." A great deal of credit for this is due to founding editor Erich Marquardt, the journal's editorial board over the years—now led by Colonel Suzanne Nielsen, Lieutenant Colonel Bryan Price, and Brian Dodwell—as well as Brigadier General Cindy Jebb, the Dean of West Point, who has been a longtime champion of the publication.

There are still very significant challenges to think through. Hassan Hassan warns in this month's cover article that the Islamic State is now attempting a resurgence in the border region between Iraq and Syria, having conserved forces for the same kind of attritional insurgency that led to its regeneration after its near-defeat in the late 2000s.

This year has seen four international terror attacks involving ethnic Uzbeks, including a truck attack on New York City's West Side Highway in October. Goktug Sonmez outlines how radicalization among Central Asians is becoming a growing international security concern. Johannes Saal examines what is known about what appears to be a new Islamic State external operations hub in Libya and the spokes connecting it to radical networks in Europe. Ryan Cummings outlines the evolving relationship between Boko Haram and al-Qa`ida and argues there are indications al-Qa`ida is trying to bring the group back into its fold.

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

*Cover: Smoke rises from buildings in the area of Bughayliyah on the northern outskirts of Deir ez-Zor, Syria, on September 13, 2017, as Syrian forces advance during a battle against the Islamic State. (George Ourfalian/AFP/Getty Images)*

# Insurgents Again: The Islamic State's Calculated Reversion to Attrition in the Syria-Iraq Border Region and Beyond

By Hassan Hassan

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**The border region between Iraq and Syria divided by the Euphrates River was long expected to be the Islamic State's last stand, but many of its fighters there melted away instead. The available evidence suggests the withdrawals were part of a calculated strategy by the group after the fall of Mosul to conserve manpower and pivot away from holding territory to pursuing an all-out insurgency. In the border region and beyond, the Islamic State now seeks to mimic the strategy of attrition it so successfully adopted between its near-defeat in the late 2000s and its territorial conquest of Syria and Iraq in 2014.**

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In the fall of 2016, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi called on Islamic State fighters in Mosul to fight to the death to defend the city.<sup>1</sup> They largely heeded his call. Thousands of fighters were killed, and when Mosul was liberated in July 2017, much of the city lay in ruins. Although the battle in the Islamic State's second center of Raqqa was deadly and grinded on for four months, the group made comparably less effort to defend it. The reality is that since losing Mosul, its most sizeable and symbolic territorial possession, the Islamic State has not fought to the last man to maintain control of any other population center.

In August 2017, the group melted away from Tal Afar rather than mount an all-out resistance against advancing Iraqi forces and Shi'a militias.<sup>2</sup> In Raqqa, while foreign fighters fought fiercely against the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), hundreds of Syrian Islamic State fighters ultimately struck a deal in October to be evacuated from the city.<sup>3</sup> In Hawija, hundreds surrendered to nearby Kurdish forces after fleeing advancing government forces.<sup>4</sup>

Even more surprisingly, there was meek resistance in the Euphrates River Valley stretching between towns such as Deir ez-Zor and Mayadin to the border town of al-Qaim and into Anbar Province, which had become an increasingly important base of operations for the group. As it lost territory elsewhere, the organization had built up a significant presence along this stretch of the Euphrates,<sup>5</sup> and many analysts and officials had expected it to dig in and strongly defend towns there under its control.<sup>6</sup> But in recent months, Islamic State forces largely melted away from towns and

villages in the area rather than confront advancing Iraqi and Syrian forces.

While a loss of morale after the fall of Mosul, the desire by less ideologically driven fighters to save themselves, and the degradation of command and control structures all contributed to some Islamic State fighters fleeing on certain fronts,<sup>7</sup> the available evidence suggests the withdrawals were part of calculated strategy by the group to conserve its forces and pivot away from holding territory to pursuing an all-out insurgency. Islamic State leaders were predicting the need for this shift as early as May 2016,<sup>8</sup> and just weeks after the group lost Mosul, it called for this change of approach in its official newspaper.

This article is divided into three sections. The first looks at the Islamic State's strategic retreat since the loss of Mosul. The second examines the group's pivot back to insurgency. The third looks at the group's likely strategy moving forward.

## The Islamic State's Strategic Retreat

In July 2017, the Iraqi government formally announced the liberation of Mosul after nine months of fierce fighting.<sup>9</sup> By then, the battle to expel the militants from the group's second center, Raqqa, was already underway. A month later, the Islamic State lost Tal Afar, an iconic stronghold for the group from which several of the group's top leaders hailed.<sup>10</sup> By mid-October, the militants withdrew from Hawijah, their last stronghold in Kirkuk, and were expelled from Raqqa by the U.S.-backed SDF.

The vast area that the Islamic State had controlled in 2014 had been lost and, with it, the caliphate it created. The Islamic State's continuous territorial presence was now limited to the predominantly rural areas stretching from Haditha to the city of Deir ez-Zor. And even there, both Iraqi and Syrian forces had already begun campaigns to recapture those areas.

On September 9, 2017, the SDF announced the beginning of an offensive to expel the group from Deir ez-Zor Governorate in Syria.<sup>11</sup> The timing of this push was in all likelihood accelerated because Russia-backed Syrian regime forces also started to advance into the governorate and then on September 5 announced the breaking of a three-year siege around Deir ez-Zor's provincial capital.<sup>12</sup> One of the United States' concerns was that Iranian-backed forces could advance toward the Iraqi border,<sup>13</sup> close off the area, and potentially disrupt the SDF's ability to move south, as Iranian-backed groups did near the Iraqi-Jordanian border in May 2017.<sup>14</sup>

Neither of the sides racing to take Deir ez-Zor seemed adequately prepared for the battle. This was evident, for example, in the counteroffensive that the Islamic State conducted shortly after Russia announced both an incursion into the city of Deir ez-Zor<sup>15</sup> and an intention to cross the Euphrates River running up the eastern edge of the city in an apparent effort to forestall any prospective advances by the SDF to control the eastern side of the river.<sup>16</sup> Within hours of the Islamic State's counterattack, several of the areas the

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be key strongholds for the group, such as Mayedin, Abu Kamal, and al-Qa'im. Mayedin, specifically, had for months been regarded as having replaced Raqqa as the group's administrative center in Syria. In April 2017, the International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism published a report indicating that the Islamic State's administrative cadres in Raqqa had left the city and relocated to Mayedin. The report, citing local sources, claimed that financial revenues in Raqqa were transported to Mayedin.<sup>27</sup> *The Financial Times* ran a similar report<sup>28</sup> suggesting that locals in Raqqa noticed that militants suddenly vanished from the city. A month earlier, U.S. officials told *The New York Times* that the group's top commanders and administrative personnel fled Raqqa and gathered in the borderlands in Iraq and Syria.<sup>29</sup> In another report in July 2017, *The New York Times* reported:

*"Many have relocated to Mayadeen, a town 110 miles southeast of Raqqa near oil facilities and with supply lines through the surrounding desert. They have taken with them the group's most important recruiting, financing, propaganda and external operations functions, American officials said. Other leaders have been spirited out of Raqqa by a trusted network of aides to a string of towns from Deir al-Zour to Abu Kamal."*<sup>30</sup>

It was just not Mayedin that had emerged as a key town for the group. A few dozen miles along the Euphrates River, Abu Kamal and al-Qa'im had also long been the center of some of the group's administrative work, even before Mosul and Raqqa came under attack. In these two towns, the Islamic State had created the only *wilayat* (province) that was formed by combining two Iraqi and Syrian cities, dubbed Wilayat al-Furat, or the Euphrates Province.

In this *wilayat*, propaganda content appeared to have been handled more centrally than anywhere else in the fading caliphate. Videos often addressed themes related to the general state of the caliphate, including the first of nearly 20 coordinated videos to show solidarity to Wilayat Sinai in Egypt in May 2016<sup>31</sup> and one featuring Uighur fighters taking a jab at the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), a Uighur jihadi group in Syria aligned with al-Qa'ida.<sup>32</sup> Attesting to its importance to the Islamic State, Wilayat al-Furat was also where the United States and Iraq frequently report airstrikes, which kill senior members.<sup>33</sup>

The Islamic State's presence in that region, combined with aforementioned assertions by local sources and U.S. officials, underscored the significance of these borderlands to the group as hideouts and a potential base for future operations. These areas had become the center of the Islamic State's remaining concentration of forces, including die-hard foreign and local fighters and key commanders preserved from previous battles.<sup>34</sup> By the late summer of 2017, they also featured at least 550 confirmed fighters who were given a free passage and had traveled from Lebanon and Raqqa in deals with Hezbollah<sup>35</sup> and the SDF,<sup>36</sup> respectively.

But despite its supposed significance, Mayedin fell almost abruptly and with little fighting in October 2017. Local sources speaking to Deirzour24,<sup>37</sup> a grassroots organization specializing

in documenting violations by both the regime and jihadis, denied the city was retaken by forces loyal to Assad. The regime, uncharacteristically, produced little footage to prove it recaptured a key city. The local skepticism was an indication that the sudden withdrawal from the city was surprising to locals,<sup>38</sup> who, along with U.S. officials, had reported that the city had become a center for the group after it came under attack in Raqqa.

Islamic State fighters also appear to have melted away in Abu Kamal and al-Qa'im, the border towns facing each other in Syria and Iraq, respectively. After earlier shaping operations by Iraqi forces, the push onto the city of al-Qa'im<sup>39</sup> was relatively swift. Similarly, the Syrian regime and Iranian-backed militias announced they had recaptured Abu Kamal shortly after a campaign to fight the group there was launched.<sup>40</sup>

Finally, after the supposed defeat of the militants in Abu Kamal, which the Islamic State denied, the regime and its allies declared the end of the group in Syria on November 9, 2017.<sup>41</sup>

### The Islamic State's Pivot to All-Out Insurgency

With the fall of Mosul in the summer of 2017, the writing was on the wall for the Islamic State's caliphate. Despite the weakness of the Islamic State, however, many analysts were surprised by the speed of its sudden subsequent retreats in such places as Tal Afar, Hawija, and even Raqqa, despite fierce initial resistance there. Even more surprising was its retreat in areas long perceived to be its strategic base—the borderlands and the Euphrates River Valley, where it had experience fighting or operating in for around a decade and where it reemerged in 2014.

The expectation, even in U.S. government circles, was that it would take another year to expel the Islamic State from areas it still controlled such as Deir ez-Zor and Anbar since the militants were regrouping there. Also, the group had fought fiercely in recent battles such as in Raqqa before it began to withdraw swiftly and almost suddenly from various strongholds with little fighting.

One possible explanation could be found in the Islamic State's own publications. Al-Naba, the weekly newsletter issued by the Islamic State's Central Media Department, hinted at a major change of strategy in a series of articles published between September and October 2017 on the topic of dealing with the U.S. air campaign. In a series of two reports in September 2017,<sup>42</sup> the newsletter explained that Islamic State militants, having suffered heavy losses, especially in Kobane, were debating how to evade the "precision" of U.S. air forces in the face of ground assaults on multiple fronts. These fronts included the disguising of weaponry and engaging in military deception. The article concluded that it would be a mistake for the Islamic State to continue engaging forces that enjoy air support from the United States or Russia because the function of these forces was not to serve as conventional fighting forces, but mainly to provoke the militants and expose their whereabouts and capabilities for drones and aircraft to strike them. In order to prevent the depletion of its forces by air power, the article pushed for the Islamic State to adopt a counter-strategy in which it would refrain from sustained clashes in urban centers with its enemies as it did formerly. Given that the Islamic State quickly retreated from urban areas in places such as Tal Afar and Hawija in the weeks following the liberation of Mosul, it is likely the article reflected a change in strategy by the Islamic State's leadership after the loss of Iraq's second largest city in July 2017.

This change of tactics was also reflected in the early stages of

a U.S. officials told CNN in May 2017 that they believed the Islamic State had moved all of its chemical weapons experts to the area between Mayedin and al-Qaim and that Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and thousands of Islamic State operatives and supporters might be in the area. Ryan Browne and Barbara Starr, "ISIS creating chemical weapons cell in new de facto capital, US official says, CNN, May 17, 2017.

the battle of Raqqa, where, as Al-Naba revealed, the city was divided by the Islamic State into small, self-sustained, and autonomous localities to enable militants to defend their areas with minimal movement and without the need for resupply from other districts.<sup>43</sup> The Islamic State allowed these small groups of fighters in Raqqa to make autonomous decisions dictated by their own circumstances and needs. According to the Al-Naba article,<sup>44</sup> another precaution in Raqqa and more generally was to avoid gathering in large numbers at the entry points of a battlefield, which would be typically bombed to pave the way for ground forces to advance and position themselves in an urban environment. “In modern wars, with precision weapons, everyone tries to avoid direct engagement with his enemy to minimize losses,” stated the article.

In another report, issued in Al-Naba on October 12, 2017,<sup>45</sup> the Islamic State suggested that it had again been forced to switch to insurgency tactics like in the spring of 2008 under the leadership of Abu Omar al-Baghdadi and his war minister Abu Hamza al-Muhajir. The article related how the group’s predecessor, the Islamic State of Iraq, had been forced to dismantle its fighting units in March 2008 and pursue a different strategy to preserve what was left of its manpower. Providing details never before disclosed, it described how the Islamic State of Iraq had become exhausted and depleted after two years of fierce fighting against U.S. and Iraqi troops to the point that it was no longer able to stand and fight for long. “In early 2008, it became clear that it was impossible to continue to engage in conventional fighting. That was when Abu Omar Al Baghdadi said: ‘We now have no place where we could stand for a quarter of an hour.’”<sup>46</sup> The article argued the situation was now comparable and that this justified a switch of approach.

In fact, in its new iteration, well before it lost Mosul, the Islamic State had increasingly transitioned to insurgency tactics. General Joseph Votel, commander of U.S. Central Command, told reporters in May 2016 that the Islamic State “may be reverting in some regards back to their terrorist roots.”<sup>47</sup> As noted at the time by this author, in the early months of 2016, the group stepped up hit-and-run attacks in towns it had lost, without indications that the limited number of militants involved in these operations sought to regain control of the towns.<sup>b</sup> The tactic diverged from the group’s tendency at the height of its expansion in 2014 to engage in conventional attacks, including attacks via convoys and artillery barrage. The new tactics tended to involve small units attacking from behind enemy lines or through hasty raids.<sup>48</sup> The Islamic State at the time could be described as pursuing a hybrid strategy of territorial control and insurgency tactics.

The group also mounted attacks in areas it previously failed to enter as an army, such as in Abu Ghraib<sup>49</sup> just to the west of Baghdad and in the coastal region in western Syria.<sup>50</sup> Reverting back to the old insurgency and terror tactics enabled the Islamic State to

penetrate otherwise well-secured areas. Previous attempts to attack them through conventional fighting units had failed, even while the group was at the height of its power.

By the spring of 2017, these new tactics, combined with its continued control of territory, raised questions among U.S. officials about the versatility and adaptability of allied Iraqi and Syrian forces<sup>51</sup> and the kind of training they received relative to that of the Islamic State. As one senior U.S. official conceded to the author in May 2017, it was not yet possible to focus on dealing with insurgency tactics as the group still controlled significant sanctuaries.<sup>52</sup>

The Islamic State’s reversion to insurgency tactics increased as it lost more territory. Hit-and-run attacks and notable assassinations returned to newly liberated areas, such as in Salah ad-Din, Diyala, Anbar, and Raqqa,<sup>53</sup> although such attacks were rarely accounted for in official and public statements related to progress against the group.

In Iraq, the return of the Islamic State’s activities to liberated areas was recognized long before the group lost Mosul. In October 2016, as Iraqi troops prepared for the battle in Mosul, Iraqi officials told Al Sumaria TV that the group had already begun to recruit new members among displaced civilians in areas secured since late 2014 in Samarra, in Salah ad-Din Province.<sup>54</sup> Officials’ fears were triggered by new findings by local intelligence and a series of suicide attacks in areas between the Balad District and Samaraa,<sup>55</sup> which officials attributed to the inability of security forces to hold and secure the liberated areas, especially near the Tigris River. “We use ambushes, but it is not enough because that requires the support of a whole brigade,” Muhammad Abbas, the commander of the Sixth Brigade of Hashd al-Shaabi, or the Popular Mobilization Units (PMUs), told Al Sumaria. Another official, Hayder Abdulsattar of the Iraqi government’s military intelligence, told the channel that the group’s numbers and activities were growing again and, along with sleeper cells, facilitating the movement of its operatives across the river.

The return of Islamic State’s activities in such areas was also reflected in multiple videos released by the group, focusing on hit-and-run attacks as well as assassinations of key security cadres. For example, Wilayat Salah ad-Din released a video in May 2016 entitled “Craft of War,” in which, seeking to replicate its previous comeback, it addressed how much the group’s new leadership had absorbed skills obtained from founding leaders like Abu Abdulrahman al-Bilawi, who planned the Mosul takeover before he was killed in June 2014.<sup>56</sup> The 30-minute video showed operations targeting “the enemy’s rear lines” in the province, on the Bayji-Haditha road, between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, as well as inside the city of Tikrit.

As in other combat videos posted by the Islamic State in recent months, the video details various attacks, the dispersing of the enemy, and the seizure of arms and vehicles from the bases of enemy forces before withdrawal. The video featured the killing of the Tikrit’s counterterrorism chief along with 31 people, including 14 policeman, after seven Islamic State fighters entered the city’s central Zuhur District wearing suicide vests and police uniforms and riding a police car, before storming the counterterrorism chief’s house.<sup>57</sup> The commentator in the video then claimed the attacks demonstrated the current leadership’s ability to plan and execute attacks as the old guard had done years previously when it brought the group to life after it was thought to be finished.

*“These operations brought to mind the planning of the Islam-*

b In an article on the purpose of hit-and-run attacks a year later, the Islamic State explained such attacks aim to keep the enemy weak and preoccupied as the enemy has to maintain reinforcements along territories to prevent infiltration by the militants. The article further explained that militants involved in hit-and-run attacks, which the group refers to as *sawlat*, typically numbering anywhere between five and 15, should withdraw quickly before airstrikes are called in. “It is a method of attrition, not aimed at winning or holding territory,” the article stated. Al-Naba, edition 100, “Military Sawlat: their conditions and effect on the enemy,” July 31, 2017, p. 14.

*ic State's early leaders. The qualitative operations in Tikrit, Baiji, al-Siniyyah, Samarra, and others ... are an extension of the methodology of the commanders and leaders who had previously led the war of attrition and kept the enemy occupied, and who laid the groundwork for a long war. Men of honesty carried the banner after them to destroy their enemy, and the first sign of glad tidings appeared at their hands (showing) that Salah Ad Din was and remains a deterring place for the apostates."*

As noted earlier this year by Michael Knights in this publication, the Islamic State was already involved in intense insurgent operations in several parts of the country a year after it declared a caliphate, and especially in Diyala Province, with a level of violence in June 2017 around the same level as in 2013. In fact, in Diyala, which was never overrun by the Islamic State, an insurgency against Shi'a militia forces had been gathering pace since 2015.<sup>58</sup> Knights' research pointed to a full-fledged insurgency in the province led from the adjacent ungoverned space of the Islamic State pocket north of the Diyala River. "The insurgency has attained a steady, consistent operational tempo of roadside IED attacks, mortar strikes and raids on PMF outposts, and attacks on electrical and pipeline infrastructure," Knights wrote. He added, "In Diyala, the Islamic State is already engaged in the kind of intimate violence that was seen across northern Iraq in 2013: granular, high-quality targeting of Sunni leaders and tribes working alongside the PMF."<sup>59</sup>

There have been similar patterns of insurgent operations over the past two years in the borderlands straddling Iraq and Syria, where the group benefits from a geographic and social terrain that is difficult for counterinsurgents. In recent months, Islamic State fighters have carried out several hit-and-run attacks on military bases in the area as well as killed several high-ranking Iranian<sup>60</sup> and Russian officers.<sup>61</sup>

### The Islamic State's Post-Caliphate Strategy

The Islamic State's apparent decision to conserve forces for insurgency in the region stretching from Deir ez-Zor Governorate in Syria to Anbar Province in Iraq makes strategic sense given it has frequently highlighted the area as key to its survival and best suited for the base of a guerrilla war. For the Islamic State, rural- and desert-based insurgency is no less important than urban warfare to deplete its enemies, recruit members, and lay the groundwork for a comeback. The geographic and human terrain of the region provides the jihadis with an area in which they can regroup, run sleeper cells, rebuild finances through extortion, and plot attacks.

The Islamic State has repeatedly stressed the need for a desert strategy in the case of the demise of its territorial caliphate.<sup>62</sup> This desert campaign will likely be concentrated in an area extending from Nineveh to Anbar provinces in Iraq to the city of Palmyra in Syria. The group began to articulate its post-caliphate strategy publicly and in earnest in May 2016<sup>63</sup> when its former spokesman, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, gave his last speech before he was killed in Syria in late August. In his remarks, al-Adnani prepared followers for the fall of "all the cities" under the group's control.<sup>64</sup> Throughout the speech, he depicted the rise and fall of his group as part of a historical flow, continuing—as a deliberate process—from the early days of the Iraq War until now.<sup>65</sup> Territorial demise, he made clear, was merely the beginning of a new chapter in which the process of depleting the enemy does not get disrupted but persists in different forms. If and when a new opportunity for another rise

presented itself, his logic went, the process of depletion will have laid the groundwork for a deeper influence than the previous round.

*"Do you think, O America, that victory is achieved by the killing of one commander or more? It is then a false victory ... victory is when the enemy is defeated. Do you think, O America, that defeat is the loss of a city or a land? Were we defeated when we lost cities in Iraq and were left in the desert without a city or a territory? Will we be defeated and you will be victorious if you took Mosul or Sirte or Raqqa or all the cities, and we returned where we were in the first stage? No, defeat is the loss of willpower and desire to fight."<sup>66</sup>*

In the months after the speech, the Islamic State began to talk about the desert as a viable place to launch its post-caliphate insurgency.<sup>6</sup> Its propaganda has since prominently featured desert combat. Through such messages, the group hopes to show it can still inflict damage on government forces in remote areas and on critical highways linking Syria and Jordan to Iraq and to draw parallels to the fact that the last time the organization was deemed defeated in Iraq, in the late 2000s, it came back stronger than ever.

In August 2016, an editorial published in Al-Naba echoed the former spokesman's statements about how the group understands its history. In the editorial, the authors summed up the group's strategy after its expulsion from former strongholds in Iraq in the wake of the U.S. troop surge with the support of Sunni tribesman:

*"In the years that followed the rise of Sahwa<sup>67</sup> [Sunni collaborators] in Iraq, the mujahideen retreated into the desert after leaving behind tens of concealed mujahideen from among the security squads [i.e., sleeper cells], which killed, inflicted pain, drained, and tormented them, and confused their ranks, and exhausted their army, police, and their security apparatus, until God willed that the Knights of the Desert return to storm the apostates inside their fortresses after they had worn them out through kawatim [gun silencers], lawasiq [sticky bombs], and martyrdom operations."*

It appears that a key target for the Islamic State as it reembraces insurgency are Sunnis opposing its worldview. In its recent propaganda, the Islamic State has focused on the role of fellow Sunni collaborators in its demise in the late 2000s and has vowed to keep up the pressure against emerging ones. It is interesting that "Sahwat" was originally restricted to the tribal Awakening Councils<sup>68</sup> established in Iraq to fight al-Qa`ida during the 2007 troop surge,<sup>69</sup> but the group has since broadened the reference to mean opponents and collaborators from within Sunni communities writ large. As the group retreats from its strongholds, its propaganda focuses on targeting Sunni collaborators to prevent the establishment of alternative local structures that appeal to local communities in predominantly tribal and rural areas.

This fear of a Sunni or local alternative shows clearly in the group's rhetoric. "America was defeated and its army fell in ruins, and began to collapse had it not been salvaged by the Sahwat of treason and shame," al-Adnani stated in his May 2016 speech. One article in Al-Naba warned fellow Sunnis that the Islamic State's *mafazir amniyah*, or secret security units, had since become even more skillful in "the methods of deceiving the enemy and thwarting its security plans."<sup>70</sup>

The group's recent rhetoric echoes a strategy it expressed in a

c This is the author's observation.

2010 document entitled the “Strategic Plan for the Consolidation of the Political Standing of the Islamic State of Iraq,”<sup>71</sup> a key attempt at “lessons learned” from its near defeat and how to recover. The analysis and prescription in the document defined the group’s strategy, and the success of that strategy subsequently has come to define how the group perceives its chances of recovery today.

It is worth, therefore, examining the 2010 document in some detail, as it appears the group believes what worked before will work again. It suggested three courses of action for the group’s clandestine campaign. The first focused on targeting Iraqis enrolling in the military and police forces, especially Sunnis, and proposed “nine bullets for the apostates and one bullet for the crusaders,” accompanied by “soft” propaganda to portray enrollment in state agencies as both socially shameful and religiously sinful. The second proposed tactic was to target security bases and gatherings, deplete the government forces, divert their attention, and increase the group’s influence and mobility in as many areas as possible to launch stronger attacks in a wider area. In this context, the authors cited Sun Tzu’s maxim “reduce the hostile chiefs by inflicting damage on them; and make trouble for them, and keep them constantly engaged.” The third proposed course of action was to focus assassination attacks on critical cadres within the security forces, including operationally effective officers, engineers, and trainers. These cadres were critical to Iraqi security forces’ efforts and difficult to replace, the document explained, because of their high skills.

The goal of the proposed strategy was to deplete the enemy and preempt any effort to create security or social structures capable of entrenching the political order established in Baghdad and challenging the presence of jihadis. The campaign of incessant attacks to debilitate the enemy, which Islamic State of Iraq fighters launched inside Iraq, is a process jihadis refer to as *nikayah*, or war of attrition. This has again emerged as the organizing principle of the Islamic State’s insurgent campaign.

In its publications about operations in Anbar and other areas, the Islamic State often makes a reference to the “brittleness” of the defenses inside towns the group previously controlled, as it did in the Salah ad-Din video. In November 2016, Al-Naba ran an article<sup>72</sup> about a hit-and-run attack it had conducted the month before in Rutbah,<sup>73</sup> a strategically located town in western Iraq on the road that connects Baghdad to Amman, Jordan. According to Al-Naba, the militants stormed the city from three sides, with 20 to 30 fighters attacking from each. More than 100 local militiamen and army soldiers were claimed to have been killed after the attackers temporarily took control of the town and seized weaponry and vehicles before they withdrew. The authors wrote, “The operation to control Rutbah showed the brittle state of the areas from which the Islamic State has withdrawn, and the ability of the soldiers of the caliphate to recapture them with ease and with small groups of mujahideen.”

The newsletter claimed that the city’s defenses were concentrated on the outer parts and that most of the town fell after these were overrun, within four hours of clashes. A series of attacks in the previous months had made it easier for the Islamic State to recapture the town temporarily. Al-Naba explained the efforts at depleting the enemy in the following terms:

*“Whole convoys were destroyed in more than one occasion, which caused great depletion of the apostates, the killing of hundreds of their members, the destruction of tens of their vehicles and bases, and disturbed the military presence of the Rafidah in the area, and caused a state of confusion within their ranks, factors that paved the way for the storming and*

*recapturing of the city.”<sup>74</sup>*

## Syraq as the New AfPak

Even though the Islamic State has suggested it could withdraw to the desert, its attacks will still focus on urban centers, with rural areas as pathways allowing mobility between the two terrains. Headquartered in the desert or hidden in populated areas, the Islamic State aims to run a far-reaching and ceaseless insurgency in rural areas and urban centers to deter and stretch thin its opponents and to abrade any emerging governance and security structures in areas it previously controlled. Hit-and-run attacks aim to demonstrate that nothing is out of reach for the militants, even if their ability to control territory plummets.

The border region between Iraq and Syria will likely be central to this strategy. In this region—an archipelago of desert areas, river valleys, rural towns, and small urban centers—jihadis could exploit favorable socio-political conditions that once enabled the Islamic State and its predecessors to take root and reemerge from defeat. It is in this region that recent security gains are most tenuous because Iranian-backed militias were allowed to roll into Sunni heartlands<sup>75</sup> and Shi`a and Kurdish militias were used to push out the Islamic State.

The Islamic State itself, in a number of recent videos, highlighted the centrality of this area to its resurgence in 2014. One video, for example, relayed the story of two local commanders from Anbar who, having learned from founding commanders such as Abdulrahman al-Bilawi, descended from desert camps where they had been based for years to lead operations in Anbar and Nineveh, which led to the capture of several cities and large tracts of territory in the summer of 2014.

In its new insurgent campaign, the Islamic State has both headwinds and tailwinds. The headwinds include the fact that its brutal occupation of large parts of Syria and Iraq will not soon be forgotten by much of the local population. But it still has the tailwind of the continuing Syrian civil war, which provides a broader theater in which it can operate than it had in 2010 when its leaders were mapping out their road to recovery. In Syria today, the group has continued to benefit from political grievances and the anger caused by raging violence. And it still can take advantage of rough terrain extending from the Syrian desert to the deserts near Anbar and Nineveh in its now full pivot to a campaign of terrorism and insurgency.

This contiguous terrain in Iraq and Syria is akin to the region along the Afghan-Pakistani border that previous U.S. administrations dubbed “AfPak” and treated as a single theater requiring an integrated approach. The “Syraq” space, which stretches from the areas near the Euphrates and Tigris river valleys in northern and western Iraq to Raqqa and Palmyra, looks set to be to the Islamic State what AfPak has been to the al-Qa`ida and Taliban factions, providing a hospitable environment and strategic sanctuaries. And by conserving fighters rather than fighting to the death in the battles that followed Mosul, the Islamic State still has significant manpower to sustain a campaign of terrorism and insurgency in the area. Whether the United States and the coalition that took away the Islamic State’s territorial caliphate have a counter strategy that takes into account the local reality in that region will be the difference between success and failure in truly defeating this organization. **CTC**

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# A View from the CT Foxhole: Joseph Felter, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for South and Southeast Asia

By Bryan Price

*Dr. Joseph Felter is Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for South and Southeast Asia. He serves as the principal advisor to senior Department leadership for all policy matters pertaining to development and implementation of defense strategies and plans for the region. Dr. Felter is responsible for managing the bilateral security relationships with nations of the region and guiding DoD engagement with multilateral institutions.*

*Prior to joining the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD), Dr. Felter held teaching and research appointments at Stanford University's Center for International Security and Cooperation, the Hoover Institution, and the Stanford Technology Ventures Program. His previous academic positions include Director of the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, Assistant Professor in the U.S. Military Academy's Department of Social Sciences, and adjunct Associate Professor at Columbia University's School for International and Public Affairs.*

*A former U.S. Army Special Forces and Foreign Area Officer, Dr. Felter served in a variety of special operations and diplomatic assignments. He received a bachelor's degree from the U.S. Military Academy, a master's degree in public administration from the Harvard Kennedy School of Government, and a Ph.D. in political science from Stanford University.*

**CTC:** This month's publication marks the 10th anniversary of *CTC Sentinel*, a product you began when you were the director of the Combating Terrorism Center from 2005 to 2008. In fact, you wrote the first-ever article in the *CTC Sentinel*. Can you share with our readers what you were hoping to accomplish with a monthly publication of counterterrorism research and how this initiative started?

**Felter:** First of all, congratulations on all the great work you and the team at the CTC are doing and the impact you are making in so many important ways. Thank you for the opportunity to share some of my personal thoughts with you on these topics. On this question, *CTC Sentinel* has truly met and exceeded our hopes for it when we published the first volume 10 years ago this month. When I came on board at the CTC in 2005, the country was still smarting from the 9/11 attacks a few years earlier. Al-Qaeda in Iraq was on the rise, violence was up, and many were predicting the U.S. would imminently withdraw in defeat. There was a palpable sense that we desperately needed to do something different to prevail in what we then called the Global War on Terror.

General (Ret) Wayne Downing, the Center's Distinguished Chair and fresh from commanding SOCOM and [serving as] the President's Deputy National Security Advisor, encouraged us to focus on developing a better understanding of the threat we were facing—jihadist extremist ideology—and to educate cadets and the broader community on the nature of this threat. Basically, follow Sun Tzu's

dictum to "Know your enemy." General Downing affectionately called the CTC his "band of insurgents" and gave us the guidance, support, and top cover we needed to take initiative as we strove to build the CTC into the internationally recognized center of excellence we all believed it could—and should—be.

We received rave reviews and great feedback on the value of some of the Center's early publications like "Stealing al-Qaeda's Playbook," which Ayman al-Zawahiri personally commented on in one of his video releases; "Harmony and Disharmony: Exploiting al-Qaeda's Organizational Vulnerabilities," the first publicly released report drawing on internal AQ [al-Qaeda] documents from the Harmony data base; and the "Militant Ideology Atlas," which developed a never-before-published mapping of ideological influence within AQ and other extremist groups. These publications helped establish the CTC's reputation for high-quality, cutting-edge terrorism research across the military, academic, and policy communities. We appreciated that West Point provided us an extraordinary platform and wanted to take full advantage of this to have maximum impact. The idea for a journal published monthly by the CTC came up in a small group meeting we had with the CTC research and faculty team as part of our effort to identify ways to maximize the reach and impact of the center.

We wanted *CTC Sentinel* to be a resource to the academic, scholarly, and policy community, to fill the space between established academic journals that may lean a bit more theoretical and military professional journals that could lack the scholarly rigor to attract top academic contributors and readers. So we designed *CTC Sentinel* to include both high-quality scholarship from leading scholars as well as articles grounded in practitioner insights, such as after action reports from recently returned combat leaders.

We bootstrapped the effort, tapping the center's research faculty including Jarret Brachman, Brian Fishman, and Assaf Moghadam to do the heavy lifting. In a major coup, we were able to convince Erich Marquardt from Jamestown's *Terrorism Focus* and *Terrorism Monitor* to jump ship and join as the *Sentinel's* editor. Our editorial board was also recruited internally and included Social Sciences Department leadership—Mike Meese and Cindy Jebb<sup>a</sup>—and James Forest, our director of terrorism studies. The line from *Field of Dreams*, "If you build the field, they will come," comes to mind as we were thrilled with the interest from contributors when we put together the first issue as well as consumers of *CTC Sentinel* when the issue was published. It's a testament to the West Point brand and growing reputation of the CTC but also to the commitment of the contributors who appreciated the importance of the audience

<sup>a</sup> Editor's note: Brigadier General (Ret) Michael Meese is a former head of the Department of Social Sciences at West Point. Brigadier General Cindy Jebb also served as head of the Department of Social Sciences and currently serves as the 14th Dean of the Academic Board at West Point.

we were targeting and the potential to leverage the unique platform we enjoyed at West Point.

**CTC:** As the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for South and Southeast Asia, can you discuss the value of open-source publications like *CTC Sentinel* in your position and others like it in the broader counterterrorism community?

**Felter:** In my current position, I am blown away by the quality of U.S. intelligence products and the incredible resources and capabilities of our intelligence community. Every morning, I have a briefing from an exceptionally qualified intelligence professional from the Defense Intelligence Agency who compiles and briefs relevant products from across the community. My portfolio is pretty expansive, covering India through Southeast Asia to Australia and the Pacific Islands. Every country and every issue gets attention from our intel community. Prior to any trip I take or event we host, I can get deep-dive briefings and products from a range of intel organizations to help us prepare. It really is a privilege to have access to such information, and it very much supports our mission.

But I think there is a myth that persists in the defense and intelligence communities that classified information is inherently more important than open source. Classification refers primarily to the sources and methods used to acquire the source material and, with a few exceptions, not analytical conclusions. The production of classified analysis has a role to play in making policy, but there are a greater number of very smart and informed people outside that rarefied world than inside. In the DoD and across the government, we need to incorporate the findings and viewpoints of a diverse range of experts from a wide lane of sources and avoid the myopia that comes from staying in the classified bubble. The *CTC Sentinel* and other quality open source publications focusing on counterterrorism issues provide an important opportunity to tap into these broader resources and for some of the best minds to present fresh ideas on our most pressing security challenges. We began publishing *CTC Sentinel* soon after our first reports and resources from the Harmony Project were published, in the same spirit of making some of the best information and analysis available on CT issues accessible to the broadest audience possible. This is not some esoteric academic effort. Folks involved in making decisions read these publications. I know the SecDef [Secretary of Defense] is just as likely to bring up an issue he read in the *Early Bird*<sup>b</sup> that morning as he is to refer to classified material.

**CTC:** You were integral to the development of U.S. Special Operations Force (SOF) operations in the Philippines, which are often positioned as a successful model of how SOF should be done. But the months-long fight for the city of Marawi and President Duterte's relatively cold stance toward the United States have demonstrated that both the hard-fought gains Philippine and U.S. forces made together over the last decade and the strength of the U.S.-Philippine alliance might not be as strong or as lasting as one might hope. In your view, what are the important lessons we should draw from this?

**Felter:** Before coming on board at OSD, I would have described the U.S.-Philippines relationship with the phrase "Yankee go home ... take me with you." What I meant by this is that the Philippines is a proud sovereign nation, charting their own course and understandably sensitive about their U.S. colonial past, but also is extremely close culturally to the United States, based on our long, shared history. They remain one of our closest allies and partners in the region, but we must be careful to respect their sovereignty and appreciate that while our interests overlap, they are not perfectly aligned. We can expect them to pursue policies in their interests, not necessarily our own.

It is very hard, if not impossible, to surge capabilities or trusted relationships in a time of crisis or emergency. We've engaged closely with the Philippine military for over 70 years since their independence and even more closely with their CT forces since 9/11. When the Marawi crisis erupted, our forces were prepared to provide support, when invited, and worked together, as we do through our regular training, along with key allies like Australia to effectively dislodge ISIS [the Islamic State] from Marawi.

Fortunately, I do not believe our decades-long investment in the relationship with the Philippines, and in particular the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP), is being seriously eroded. In fact, it's paying off in many mutually beneficial ways. Nearly every officer in the AFP has received training in the U.S. or by U.S. forces in the Philippines, and the personal bonds established between the members of our militaries cannot be overstated. The U.S. is unequivocally the defense and security partner of choice for the AFP, and we endeavor to continue to earn this through continued investment in the relationship, down to the individual level. We anticipate that our strong institutional defense bonds will ensure we can weather any fleeting storm created by domestic politics on either side of the relationship.

I'm actually upbeat on the U.S.-Philippines relationship. I traveled with [U.S. Defense] Secretary [James Mattis] to Manila in October for an ASEAN event and was with him when he met with President Duterte. They had a great dialogue, and my sense is that President Duterte very much appreciates the importance of our alliance both now and going forward. He thanked Secretary Mattis for the U.S. contributions to the fight in Marawi, and the whole exchange seemed friendly and supportive. I was not with President Trump's delegation on his subsequent visit to Manila in November but am told he too had a very positive meeting with President Duterte as well.

If I had to point to any particular lessons from the Philippines case, I would emphasize the positive, that trusted relationships based on shared values and common interests matter and are worth investing in over the long term. They will pull us through any rocky times we may encounter. But back to my earlier description of the nature of the U.S.-Philippines relationship, the U.S. must be careful to remain in support of its treaty ally and not get ahead of it when pursuing our common interests in their country and the region. The Special Forces mantra of working by, with, and through partners could not be more applicable. A great case of how to do this effectively is the role of our Special Forces advisors from 1st Group that deployed to support AFP CT efforts under the command of Colonel Dave Maxwell in 2002.

**CTC:** To what degree was the jihadi takeover of part of Marawi a wake-up call for the United States, and what role did the United

<sup>b</sup> Editor's note: The *Early Bird* Brief is a daily roundup of military and defense news stories curated by *Military Times* and Defense News.

## States play in pushing them out? Did you detect communication/coordination between the militants who took over Marawi and the Islamic State in Syria/Iraq?

**Felter:** The insurgent takeover of Marawi was a shock, even to those of us who were growing increasingly concerned about the security situation in Mindanao. I think it was a common assessment that as insurgents in Syria and Iraq came under increasing pressure, they would be looking for safe havens, and the southern Philippines was certainly on that list. But I think it is important to note that whatever level of coordination there was between militants in southwestern Mindanao, Basilan, Sulu, and elsewhere, the individuals who attacked Marawi were part of a much older, local confrontation that has, to some extent, been co-opted by the ISIS cause.

I think the more important question to ask is how did that happen, and I think the answer lays more with the pervasive influence of ideas transmitted across the internet, as opposed to a direct command/control relationship between persons in Raqqa and Marawi. Our role was—as it always has been—advisory, to the extent it was asked for. We provided assistance in the form of information and intelligence sharing and ISR<sup>c</sup> platforms along with our Australian allies. Ultimately, this is the Philippines' fight, and any assistance that we provided was at the invitation of the AFP. But the actual hard work was 100 percent theirs.

In hindsight, I believe we may have drawn down our previous Joint Special Operations Task Force in the southern Philippines prematurely. At the time, ASG [Abu Sayyaf Group] and AQ were disrupted to a point that Philippine Security Forces could adequately manage [countering the threats from them]. What was unknowable at that time were the resources and ideological draw that ISIS would have on Philippine terrorist groups.

And yes, we believe ISIS in Marawi was in contact with ISIS Core. Philippine authorities report that militants in Marawi coordinated with ISIS Core to transfer \$1.5 million.

**CTC:** In October, the Philippine military achieved a significant victory against Islamic State-affiliated groups in that country when it killed Abu Sayyaf's leader, Isnilon Hapilon, and the Maute Group's leader and co-founder, Omarkhayan Maute. The previous month, it had killed Omar's brother and the group's other co-founder, Abdullah Maute.<sup>1</sup> Given these developments and the culmination of the Battle of Marawi, what is your assessment of the strength of the Islamic State in the Philippines today? What are your concerns about the group's capability within and from the Philippines moving forward?

**Felter:** When I was at the CTC, I remember Will McCants in public forums effectively answering the question of "how strong is al-Qa'ida" by stressing that it's important to assess this both in terms of the strength of AQ as an organization and the strength of AQ as a "brand." In assessing the strength of ISIS in the Philippines, I believe you have to address these two component parts as well.

The strength of ISIS in the Philippines as an organization was severely degraded in Marawi. The AFP [Armed Forces of the Philippines] reports that over 800 militants were killed and 80 captured. Its leadership was decapitated. The group lost its emir and deputies



*Dr. Joseph Felter (Department of Defense)*

and senior lieutenants. But what the group lost in human capital was balanced in some respects by what has been spun to many as a strategic victory for ISIS, which builds its brand. Think about it, a small group of militants claiming allegiance to ISIS occupied and held portions of Marawi—a major Philippines city—in the face of a full on government offensive for over five months. With only a little spin and propaganda, this was presented by ISIS Core as a strategic victory and one that could end up helping them regenerate their ranks and bolster the group's appeal. Unfortunately, on top of this, while ISIS claimed this strategic victory, I've read in open source reports that the reputation and legitimacy of the Philippine government was eroded in the eyes of many of the citizens in Marawi and the local area, given the vast destruction of the city of Marawi and displacement of several hundred thousand civilians as a result of the operations to clear the city.

Given you can make the case that the ISIS brand in the Philippines was bolstered locally and abroad based on the events of the Marawi siege, we may also expect this to help ISIS to recruit and garner international support for what are largely localized VEOs<sup>d</sup> that have incentives to be "joiners" with ISIS. This "reflagging effect" allows them to knit together previously unaffiliated extremist groups, such as ASG, Maute, KFRGs,<sup>e</sup> and others, and could be a problem down the road in another Marawi-like scenario. The continued strength of the ISIS brand also helps it attract financial support and resources from ISIS Core and other international donors sympathetic to the group's cause.

So let's be clear, the Philippine military ultimately prevailed in a brutal urban fight. Huge credit must go to them for regaining control of the city and degrading ISIS as a coherent and effective organization in the process. Admittedly, it's a bit personal for me

<sup>d</sup> Violent extremist organizations

<sup>e</sup> Kidnap-for-ransom groups

<sup>c</sup> Intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance

as I am still very close to many in the AFP and especially the Scout Rangers and other SOF forces that bore the brunt of the fighting. My concerns about the group's capability going forward hinge more on the ISIS brand in the Philippines and the region and the ability of the Philippine government to erode the strength of ISIS' ideological appeal. I learned in the early days at the CTC that discrediting and delegitimizing an ideology is best achieved from within or just on the margins of these groups, by individuals whose opinions and judgment resonate with the target audience. The Philippine government and certainly Western governments are not well positioned to provide these voices.

One last point I'd like to stress regarding ISIS and militancy in the Philippines is that the factors responsible for ISIS' attack and occupation of Marawi are local, not international in origin. Mao's famous dictum that insurgents are the fish and the population is the sea in which they swim applies in this case. Disenfranchised Filipino Muslims who are dissatisfied with their government's ability or willingness to address their needs are more inclined to provide tacit, and sometimes direct, support to anti-government activities. Some number of residents of Marawi, for example, were surely aware of militants stockpiling arms and munitions in the lead up to the siege, but they opted not to alert authorities. Enduring solutions to [the threat posed by] ISIS and other VEOs in the southern Philippines must include efforts that address root causes of conflict in the region, for example, restarting the stalled peace process and funding programs that help build the legitimacy of the central government.

Going forward, it will be important to maintain pressure on ISIS and other extremists. However, the real challenge for the Philippine government will be addressing the conditions that drove many of these militants to violence and will drive the next generation to similar ends. This must complement [military] efforts, if any enduring solutions are to be achieved.

**CTC: According to an early 2017 United Nations report, the threat from the Islamic State to Southeast Asia is "gaining momentum," with the group increasing its focus on the region as a potential recruiting ground. How many foreign fighters do you believe traveled from the region to fight with jihadi groups in Syria and Iraq, and are you detecting an increase in Islamic State fighters returning to Southeast Asia since the collapse of caliphate? How are the United States and its regional partners working to interdict returning foreign fighters?**

**Felter:** We know some limited number of foreign fighters of Southeast Asian origin traveled to fight for ISIS in Iraq and Syria. Khatiba Nusantara is reportedly an ISIS unit established in Syria composed of militants from Southeast Asian countries including Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, and Singapore. The unit's purpose was to recruit would-be fighters and facilitate their travel to ISIS battlefields in Iraq and Syria. This group is known to recruit fighters through videos, printed materials, and the internet/social media in the Bahasa/Malay language. It's difficult to estimate the number of fighters returning to Southeast Asia from the Middle East, but we are working with partners in the region to do our best.

Open source reporting indicates that during the height of the fighting in Marawi, ISIS recruiters encouraged aspiring fighters from Southeast Asia to avoid the long, costly, and dangerous trip to Iraq and Syria and instead travel to the southern Philippines and join the fight there.

Estimates vary widely, but open source reporting suggests that of the 1,000 or so ISIS-affiliated militants in Marawi, approximately 100 of them were of foreign origin. While the overwhelming majority of these foreign fighters came from neighboring Malaysia and Indonesia, there are also unverified accounts of individual fighters traveling from South Asia, the Middle East, and even northern Africa.

Now that options to fight in Iraq and Syria are becoming increasingly limited, we can expect recruiters to divert recruits to fight locally in places like southwestern Mindanao or the porous islands in the Sulu and Celebes seas.

The U.S. remains in close contact with its allies and partners in the region, expressing our concern for the return of individuals with combat experience and radical ideas. They share our concerns and are making real efforts to identify those persons and to inhibit their movements. Adding to the challenge, in some key countries, domestic laws inhibit their ability to detain and question or arrest individuals suspected of having connections to terrorist organizations. The role of the United States largely falls into the category of intelligence sharing, but we are also focused on augmenting their ability to better secure their borders with training and technological solutions that include ISR as well as advanced biometrics and facial recognition. For many of our regional counterparts, the U.S. is the CT partner of choice, and there is a great interest among our regional counterparts for "lessons learned" discussions from our experience both on the ground in the CT fight as well as in cyberspace and in big data analysis. I think these last two items, in particular, is where there are huge opportunities to leverage our comparative advantage in technology in the CT fight.

**CTC: The last few years have seen a string of plots in which extremists were in communication with Southeast Asian Islamic State "cyber-coaches" inside Syria/Iraq.<sup>3</sup> However, to date, there has not been an Islamic State-directed plot in Southeast Asia by returning foreign fighters from Syria tasked with carrying out attacks. Are you concerned this could change?**

**Felter:** While it is true that we have not seen any ISIS-directed plots in Southeast Asia to date, it's a risk that I believe may be increasing as the fighting draws down in the Middle East. At the height of ISIS' fighting in Iraq and Syria, the hard-core and committed militants were more likely to stay and fight. Those who left were often the disillusioned and less ideologically committed or those that did not succeed in ISIS as fighters and were not welcome to stay on. Now that violence—in Iraq at least—is subsiding and the government is seizing control, some of the returning fighters may be those that would have stayed if there was still a fight to join but opted to return home. This strikes me as a potentially more dangerous demographic and one that we should anticipate will be at greater risk of causing trouble when they get back due to their exposure to hard-core ISIS training and ready-made terror network relationships that could be operationalized.

**CTC: Both al-Qa`ida in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) and the Islamic State have claimed attacks in Bangladesh in recent years, including against secular bloggers and a cafe popular with Westerners in Dhaka in July 2016.<sup>4</sup> What degree of connectivity and coordination do you see between Bangladeshi militants aligned with these groups and senior al-Qa`ida and**

## Islamic State leaders overseas? What are your concerns about the evolving threat in Bangladesh?

**Felter:** AQIS was formed in 2014 as an affiliate organization of al-Qa`ida Central (AQC) by a merger of several jihadist groups operating in South Asia. The self-described goal of the group is to develop an Islamic caliphate in South Asia within Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh. AQIS has attempted in the past to collaborate with other groups and has received verbal endorsement from AQC. AQC was instrumental in the foundation of the group, and AQC leader Ayman al-Zawahiri appointed Asim Umar the emir of AQIS in 2014, when he announced the formation of the affiliate. The association has allowed for increased collaboration between the two groups, which includes safe haven and training. AQIS members have been killed and captured in training camps in Afghanistan, including the emir of the AQIS-Bangladesh group Tariq alias Sohail in April 2017 by a drone strike outside of Kandahar, Afghanistan. While there is an active threat from AQIS in the region, our South Asian partners are effectively targeting the networks of both groups. Neither group has conducted a successful attack in Bangladesh in 2017, and both have experienced significant setbacks as a result of counterterrorism operations. The U.S. and our partners will continue to prioritize CT efforts in the region, with ISIS and AQIS priorities in that effort.

## CTC: There have been reports of Islamic State/Islamic State Khorasan and AQIS activity in Kashmir<sup>f</sup> and an attempt by both

<sup>f</sup> Editor's note: On December 11, 2017, the Telegram channel "al-Qaraar" (the Decision), which claimed to represent the "mujahidin of the Islamic Caliphate in the gateway of India (Jammu & Kashmir)," started posting messages praising the Islamic State, calling for recruits, and threatening the Indian and Pakistani armies. See also Kabir Taneja, "New complexity emerges with ISIS footprint in Kashmir," *Asia Times*, November 29, 2017.

## groups to establish a presence in the region. What is your assessment of the level of threat of either group in Kashmir and the potential effects on the relationship between the two nuclear powers of South Asia: India and Pakistan?

**Felter:** India is doing an effective job of containing ISIS/ISK and AQIS activities in Kashmir. We are, of course, concerned about any potential for destabilizing events between India and Pakistan and the risk of proliferation and watching this closely. On the topic of U.S.-India security relations more broadly, check out the new U.S. National Security Strategy and forthcoming U.S. National Defense Strategy. I think the U.S.-India strategic partnership, based on shared values and common interests, is a game changer in ensuring we maintain a rules-based order in the region and one we plan to invest in.

In closing, let me thank you again for the remarkable contributions of the Center and all you do for all of us. The Long War is living up to its reputation, and we are lucky to have you all in the fight. It's an honor to be a proud CTC alumnus, and I wish you all continued success. **CTC**

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# Violent Extremism among Central Asians: The Istanbul, St. Petersburg, Stockholm, and New York City Attacks

By Goktug Sonmez

**Ethnic Uzbeks carried out terrorist attacks in Istanbul, St. Petersburg, Stockholm, and New York City in 2017, making it clear radicalization in the Uzbek and Central Asian global diaspora is a growing global security concern. There has been an increase in Uzbek-language terrorist propaganda, and terrorist groups dislodged from Uzbekistan have built up significant operations in Syria. These groups are exploiting grievances over autocratic regimes and corruption at home to recruit Central Asians and support global terrorist agendas. Central Asian operatives trained in Syria have already returned back to their home region to plot attacks and may pose a wider threat to international security.**

**R**adicalization in the Uzbek and Central Asian global diaspora is becoming a growing threat to international security. In 2017, there were no fewer than four high-profile international terror attacks carried out by ethnic Uzbeks: the Islamic State-directed attack in the early hours of the new year on a nightclub in Istanbul, the St. Petersburg metro bombing in April, a truck attack in Stockholm later the same month, and a truck attack in Manhattan in September.

This article provides an outline of each of the four attacks before examining the wider context of Islamist militancy in Uzbekistan, where government repression of Islamists has resulted in the region becoming a net exporter of Islamist terrorism. At a time when Uzbek terrorist groups have built up significant operations in Syria, are exploiting grievances caused by autocracy and corruption at home, and are churning out propaganda in Uzbek, there are signs that Uzbeks and Central Asians are becoming the new shock troops of international terror.

## The Four Attacks

### *The Istanbul Nightclub Attack*

Early on New Year's Day of 2017 in Istanbul, a lone gunman killed

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39 revellers in the famous Reina nightclub on the banks of the Bosphorus. The attacker, a 33-year-old Tajik/Uzbek dual national named Abdulkadir Masharipov from a small town in Kyrgyzstan with a predominantly Uzbek population, was captured in the city two weeks later.<sup>1</sup> Masharipov had been directed to launch the attack through the messaging app Telegram by a senior Islamic State operative in Raqqa, Syria.<sup>2</sup> It was reported that he was aided by three other Uzbeks on the day of the attack and in the immediate aftermath.<sup>3</sup> During the investigations leading up to his capture, security forces launched raids in five municipalities of Istanbul against Uzbek networks connected to the Islamic State.<sup>4</sup>

Much remains unknown about Masharipov's path to terrorism. What is known is he attended university in the Uzbek town of Ferghana, at some point became radicalized, and attended an al-Qa`ida training camp in Afghanistan sometime after 2011 before switching allegiance to the Islamic State.<sup>5</sup> At the time of the attack, he was subject to a national arrest warrant in Uzbekistan for terrorism activities, according to information provided to Interpol by Uzbekistan.<sup>6</sup>

### *The St. Petersburg Metro Attack*

On April 3, 2017, a suicide bomber blew himself up in a subway car between the Sennaya Ploshchad and Tekhnologicheskoy Institut metro stations in St. Petersburg, claiming the lives of 14 people. The same day, another bomb device was found by Russian authorities with the DNA of the same perpetrator. Authorities stated the attacker was Akbarzhon Jalilov, 22, an ethnic Uzbek with Russian nationality born in Kyrgyzstan and whose family lived in Uzbekistan's Ferghana valley.<sup>7</sup> Abror Azimov, who authorities accused of training Jalilov, was also a Kyrgyz-born Russian citizen, born in 1990.<sup>8</sup>

The attack took place on the same day Russian President Vladimir Putin was in St. Petersburg to meet the Belarusian president.<sup>9</sup> While no established terrorist group claimed the attack, a mysterious outfit claiming affiliation with al-Qa`ida called the Imam Shamil Battalion claimed it carried out the attacks on the direct orders of Ayman al-Zawahiri, without offering any evidence to corroborate its claim.<sup>10</sup>

### *The Stockholm Truck Attack*

On April, 7, 2017, a hijacked beer truck was driven into a crowd of shoppers in Stockholm, Sweden, killing four.<sup>11</sup> Sweden's public broadcaster SVT reported a bag of undetonated explosives was also found in the truck.<sup>12</sup> Hours later, authorities arrested a 39-year-old Uzbek named Rakhmat Akilov who was born and grew up in the town of Samarkand, Uzbekistan, and had come to Sweden in 2014.<sup>13</sup> Swedish authorities stated that Akilov had been denied asylum in 2016 but had not heeded the order to leave the country.<sup>14</sup> Akilov was active on social media and followed a group on Facebook calling for the removal of the now-late Uzbek president Islam Karimov. Akilov's Facebook page featured at least two propaganda videos linked



*A police officer walks past the wreckage of a Home Depot pickup truck in New York City on November 1, 2017, the day after it was used in a terror attack. (Jewel Samad/AFP/Getty Images)*

to the Islamic State, one reportedly showing the aftermath of the Boston bombing.<sup>15</sup>

Uzbek Foreign Minister Abdulaziz Kamilov subsequently stated Akilov had been on their radar for some time and had been recruited by “emissaries” of the Islamic State whilst away from Uzbekistan. He added that Akilov had been sharing terrorist propaganda videos over the internet with associates back in Uzbekistan “trying to induce them to commit acts of violence against representatives of public authority, leadership and law enforcement of Uzbekistan” as well as trying to recruit Uzbeks to join the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq.<sup>16</sup>

#### *The New York City Pickup Truck Attack*

On October 31, 2017, a pickup truck rammed into pedestrians and cyclists on a bicycle path near the World Trade Center in New York City, killing eight. Sayfullo Saipov, the 29-year-old Uzbek national who allegedly carried out the attack, was taken into custody after being shot by police. He made clear his allegiance to the Islamic State in notes found near the truck. He told interrogators that he had started contemplating an attack the previous year. Saipov was allegedly inspired to carry out the attack by viewing Islamic State videos, including a message by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi asking what Muslims in the United States and elsewhere were doing to respond to Muslims being killed in airstrikes against the Islamic State in Iraq. A large number of Islamic State-related videos and pictures were also found on his phone.<sup>17</sup> He followed almost exactly the instructions on how to launch vehicular attacks published in the Islamic State’s Rumiya magazine the previous year.<sup>18</sup>

Saipov moved to the United States in 2010 from the Uzbek capital of Tashkent through the green card lottery system.<sup>19</sup> He married an Uzbek woman in 2013 and worked for periods as an Uber driver. No evidence has surfaced that Saipov sympathized with extrem-

ist groups before coming to the United States, and acquaintances from Uzbekistan described his family as not particularly religious. Saipov was a college graduate and had worked as an accountant at a hotel before moving to the United States.<sup>20</sup> According to New York Governor Andrew Cuomo, Saipov radicalized after immigrating to the country. Although Saipov was not himself the subject of a counterterrorism investigation, he had some connectivity to individuals subject to investigation, according to U.S. authorities.<sup>21</sup> An Uzbek man who was under scrutiny as part of a terrorism investigation attended the same wedding as Saipov in Florida in 2015.<sup>22</sup>

### **Islamist Militancy in Uzbekistan**

#### *The Context*

No evidence has emerged indicating that any of the ethnic Uzbek attackers profiled above carried out their attacks at the direction of Uzbek terrorist groups. But the attacks took place against a backdrop of a significant militant salafism in Uzbekistan, the presence of powerful Uzbek terrorist groups in Afghanistan and Syria, and the growth of Uzbek-language terrorist propaganda accessible to the country’s diaspora community around the world. As noted above, the alleged Stockholm attacker Akilov was animated by anger against the regime in Uzbekistan and had called for attacks in Uzbekistan over social media. The Istanbul attacker Masharipov appears to have also been radicalized inside Uzbekistan given the fact that he moved from his home country to Afghanistan in order to attend al-Qa`ida training camps.<sup>23</sup> No information has come to light that Saipov, the alleged New York City attacker, had any connections with terrorist groups in Uzbekistan, but given the alleged presence of radicalized Uzbeks in his social circle, there is every chance he viewed Uzbek terrorist propaganda during his apparent radicalization on U.S. soil.<sup>24</sup>

A recent investigation into a cluster of Uzbek extremists in New

York is instructive. In 2014, the FBI launched a major counterterrorism investigation into a group of Uzbek and Central Asian extremists based in Brooklyn who authorities say were planning to travel to join the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. Before their arrest in February 2015, the plotters, who were active on Uzbek-language websites supportive of the Islamic State, discussed launching an attack on Coney Island and shooting U.S. President Barack Obama. Five Uzbeks and a Kazakh national have now been charged in connection with the case, and there have been several guilty pleas.<sup>25</sup>

In the last three decades, repressive tactics by Uzbekistan's authoritarian regime have created a pressure-cooker environment in the country, which has both fueled violent extremists and pushed them out of the country. In the last decade, many thousands of Uzbek and Central Asian terrorists were based in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region and built up ties with terrorist groups there, but it is Syria now that serves as the major hub of Uzbek terrorist activity. According to an assessment by The Soufan Group published in October 2017, upwards of 5,000 Central Asian foreign fighters have traveled to Syria, including at least 1,500 Uzbeks, 1,300 Tajiks, over 500 from Kyrgyzstan, and as many as 400 from Turkmenistan.<sup>4</sup>

Historically, the two major Uzbek terrorist groups have been the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), whose main faction joined the Islamic State in 2014, and the al-Qa`ida-affiliated Islamic Jihad Union.

#### *The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan*

The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) has its roots in an organization formed in 1991 by a former Uzbek paratrooper, Jumaboi Khojaev (Juma Namangani), and a religious scholar named Tahir Yuldashev with the aim of implementing sharia in their hometown of Namangan in the Ferghana Valley. Their Adolat (Justice) Party, which was outlawed by then Uzbek President Islam Karimov in 1992, and its leaders were forced to flee the country. In 1998, the group was renamed the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and started to establish bases in Kazakhstan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Tajikistan.<sup>26</sup> Almost every ethnic group in the Central Asian region was "represented" in the IMU.<sup>27</sup> In the decade after 9/11, the group built up a significant presence in Afghanistan and the tribal areas of Pakistan. It pledged allegiance to Afghan Taliban leader Mullah Omar and cooperated with the group. Failed attempts to overthrow the regime in Uzbekistan forced a large contingent of the group's members to base themselves in Afghanistan. The IMU also cooperated with the Pakistani Taliban (TTP) to launch attacks on Pakistani security forces in the border region.<sup>28</sup>

In 2009, IMU co-founder Yuldashev was killed in a U.S. drone strike in South Waziristan. His successor was also killed. Military operations by U.S., Pakistani, and Afghan militaries progressively degraded the organization and its leadership. By late 2013, the IMU claimed to have some 850 members in Afghanistan and a further 2,000 fighters in Pakistan, as well as others active elsewhere, including Central Asia, the Caucasus, Iran, and Syria. The U.S. De-

partment of State estimated the IMU numbers at 500 or under in the late 2000s and early 2010s.<sup>29 b</sup>

In September 2014, after correctly claiming the Taliban were covering up the death of Mullah Omar,<sup>30</sup> the IMU's new leader, Uthman Ghazi, pledged allegiance to al-Baghdadi, effectively dissolving the group into the Islamic State and its soon-to-be-formed Afghanistan/Pakistan wing, the Islamic State in Khorasan. A large number of IMU fighters who had congregated in Syria were subsumed into the Islamic State. As foreign fighters flooded into Syria, a significant number of IMU fighters relocated from Afghanistan/Pakistan to Syria, where they joined fresh recruits from Uzbekistan, particularly the Ferghana valley, where the IMU continued to recruit.<sup>31</sup>

By the time Ghazi was killed by Taliban fighters in Zabul in southern Afghanistan in December 2015,<sup>32</sup> some of his fighters in Afghanistan/Pakistan had rejoined Taliban ranks after an ultimatum from the Taliban. Disagreements over the switch in bay`a resulted in discontent among clerics within the group.<sup>33</sup> Several key clerics, including Abu Zar al-Burmi, denounced Ghazi's decision to join the Islamic State and renewed their allegiance to the Taliban. They saw realigning with the Taliban and al-Qa`ida as key to the group's survival and regeneration in the region. This spinoff of the IMU called itself as the Imam Bukhari Brigade (IBB) and received backing from al-Qa`ida.<sup>34</sup>

As well as trying to maintain a presence in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region, the IBB built up a growing presence in Syria. As was the case with another IMU spinoff, the Katibat Tawhid wal Jihad (KTJ), the IBB affiliated itself with al-Qa`ida affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra and fought shoulder to shoulder with the Uighur Chinese Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), another group closely aligned with al-Qa`ida.<sup>35</sup> Analyst Jacob Zenn estimated that as of mid-2016 "around 80 percent of all Central Asian fighters in Syria belonged to the KTJ, IBB or other al-Qa`ida-aligned groups." According to Zenn, after Russia launched a major air campaign in Syria, the KTJ and IBB upped their Russian-language propaganda efforts and sought revenge against Russia.<sup>36</sup>

#### *The Islamic Jihad Union*

The Islamic Jihad Union (IJU) broke away from the IMU in 2002 after a faction of IMU leaders, including the IJU's founder Najmiddin Jalolov, disagreed with the group's decision not to resume attacks in Uzbekistan.<sup>37</sup> For years, it has been closely aligned with al-Qa`ida, which has been active in Paktika, Paktia, and Nangarhar in Afghanistan as well as other provinces.<sup>38</sup> In 2004, the IJU carried out a wave of bombing attacks in Uzbekistan, including against the U.S. embassy.<sup>39</sup> The attacks appear to have been coordinated from Kazakhstan by its local leader there, Jakshibek Biymurzayev.<sup>40</sup> During the 2000s, the group built up a presence in the tribal areas of Pakistan, where it trained a group of German recruits and directed them to launch attacks in Germany. In 2007, German police thwarted their plot targeting U.S. servicemen at the Ramstein Air Force base, its first and only major plot to date against the West.<sup>41</sup>

a In 2015, the International Crisis Group estimated around 2,000 Central Asian foreign fighters were in Syria. Richard Barrett, "Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees," The Soufan Center, October 2017; Reid Standish, "Shadow Boxing With the Islamic State in Central Asia," *Foreign Policy*, February 6, 2015.

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Thereafter, the IJU mostly focused on attacks in Afghanistan, for which it cooperated closely with the Haqqani group. It continued to build up Turkish-language propaganda efforts and recruited a number of Turkish nationals into its ranks. Between 2008 and 2011, ISAF (the NATO-led security mission in Afghanistan) conducted raids against IJU in which it killed fighters from Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Pakistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, illustrating the pan-Central Asian nature of the group's recruitment efforts.<sup>42</sup> In March 2008, another German recruit, Cuneyt Çiftçi, carried out a suicide bombing of a U.S. base in Afghanistan.<sup>43</sup> The IJU leader Jalolov was killed in a U.S. drone strike in 2009.<sup>44</sup> In 2014, the U.S. State Department estimated the IJU's numbers as no more than 200.<sup>45</sup>

In the last several years, Afghanistan has remained the main base of IJU operations.<sup>46</sup> Earlier this year, the group released videos showing its militants in the midst of heavy combat with Afghan security forces in the eastern Afghanistan and one particular video showing its "special forces," trained possibly in Afghanistan, in higher visual and audio quality than used in its previous propaganda videos. The group has also built up a presence in Syria, although its existence there is less significant than the IBB. Another active salafi fighting group in Syria, Ansar Jihad is led by Abu Omar al-Turkistani who was a former commander in the ranks of IJU between 2011 and 2015, who traveled to Syria after 2015.<sup>47</sup>

#### *The Threat from Returning Foreign Fighters*

There has already been blowback from the presence of Central Asian fighters in Syria. Kyrgyz authorities reportedly thwarted plots by in 2013 and 2017 by Central Asian returnees from Syria aimed at attacking Independence Day celebrations and in the case of the 2013 plot also the Shangai Cooperation Organization Summit of that year in Bishkek.<sup>48</sup> Both plans involved the use of explosives<sup>49</sup> in order to ensure the highest number of casualties in crowded gatherings. Even though both plots were thwarted, they illustrated how returning foreign fighters could pose serious challenges to the countries in the region. According to authorities, the 2013 plot involved two Kyrgyz nationals and a Kazakh who were members of the IJU.<sup>50</sup> The 2017 plot was thwarted after the cell was exposed with the capture of a returning KTJ militant from Syria. Security officials subsequently learned the names of the other four people in the cell.<sup>51c</sup> There are indications that Central Asian groups based in Syria are cooperating when it comes to overseas attack planning. In August 2016, the Syria-based leadership of the same group was

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#### *The Drivers of Radicalization in Uzbekistan and Central Asia*

The roots of militant salafism in Uzbekistan and Central Asia can be traced back to the Afghan jihad. Uzbek and Central Asian mujahideen traveled to fight in the Afghan jihad and returned home, radicalizing others within their communities. Soviet repression against religious activity fueled salafi movements and drove them underground. Some youngsters were attracted to these salafi groups out of anger against these restrictions and their own lack of a basic religious education. Traditional schools had been shuttered or put under rigid state control, leaving the field open to Salafi clerics returning from their studies in Saudi Arabia and preaching clandestinely.<sup>53</sup>

The growth of fundamentalism was compounded by the dissolution of the Soviet Union, when Central Asian countries experienced significant economic, political, and social difficulties. Distrust of the political system and state mechanisms as well as the lack of equal economic and political opportunities for the people to live a 'decent life' further contributed to a sense of marginalization and radicalization. According to the Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index in 2016 of 176 countries and territories (with the 176th country being the worst), Kazakhstan was ranked 131st, Kyrgyzstan 136th, Tajikistan 151st, Turkmenistan 154th, and Uzbekistan 156th.<sup>54</sup> State repression of dissidents—including Islamists—allegedly involving the use of torture and other improper investigative methods have further fueled radicalization. Therefore, while governments have endeavored to remove Islamists as an existential threat, one consequence has been the export of terrorism out of the country.

## A Look Ahead

Radicalized Central Asians pose a growing international security threat. As the thwarted plots in Kyrgyzstan illustrated, foreign fighters from the region trained in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Syria will continue to pose not just a threat to Central Asian states but also the wider international community.

The attacks in Istanbul, St. Petersburg, Stockholm, and New York City will unlikely be the last manifestation of radicalization in the Uzbek diaspora community. In particular, the recent New York City attack illustrated that there are strong anti-Western feelings among a small portion of Uzbek diaspora communities stoked by coalition airstrikes against the Islamic State in Syria. In the coming months, other issues such as the United States' recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital may also become a factor, as could rising anti-refugee discourse and Islamophobia. **CTC**

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# The Islamic State's Libyan External Operations Hub: The Picture So Far

By Johannes Saal

**The Islamic State has built up an external operations network with a hub on Libyan soil and spokes connecting it to nodes of Islamic State supporters within the Libyan and Tunisian diaspora in Europe. While much is still unknown about the reach of the network, the group has been linked to a series of major terrorist attacks and plots against Westerners in Europe and Tunisia. Despite setbacks for the Islamic State in Libya, international attack planners on Libyan soil continue to pose a threat on both sides of the Mediterranean.**

**O**n May 22, 2017, Salman Abedi, a dual British-Libyan national, killed 22 concert-goers and injured more than 100 others during an Ariana Grande concert at Manchester Arena in the United Kingdom. Abedi detonated a bag filled with acetone peroxide (TATP) and shrapnel—the same explosive used in the Brussels attacks the previous year. His travel to Libya before the attack quickly led investigators to focus on possible links to the Islamic State's Libyan branch. Following the Berlin Christmas market attack by Anis Amri in December 2016, investigators suspect the Manchester bomber may be the second most recent jihadi attacker in Europe to receive directions or support from the Islamic State in Libya.<sup>1</sup>

Jihadi groups, and particularly those close to the Islamic State, gained a foothold in Libya in the aftermath of the revolution there against Muammar Qaddafi in 2011. The Tunisian government's ban of Ansar al-Sharia two years later boosted the influx of jihadis from the neighboring country. An estimated 3,000 Tunisians traveled to Syria and Iraq as foreign fighters.<sup>2</sup> A significant number of them joined the ranks of Jabhat al-Nusra or the Islamic State in Syria after receiving military training in Libya<sup>3</sup> and using contacts to local jihadi groups as gatekeepers.<sup>3</sup>

Libyans also traveled to Syria and joined groups like the Islamic State-affiliated Katibat al-Battar al-Libi (KBL), which was founded by jihadis from Libya. The group recruited a large contingent of

a A 2016 study by the Tunisian Center for Research and Studies on Terrorism examined the records of over 1,000 incarcerated jihadis involved in court cases between 2011 and 2015 and found that 69 percent of the sample underwent military training in Libya. Eighty percent of these trainees traveled to Syria afterward. Ahmed Nadhif, "New Study Explores Tunisia's Jihadi Movement in Numbers," *Al-Monitor*, November 8, 2016.

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Libyan and Tunisian fighters in the early stage of the Syrian civil war. When Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared himself the leader of a new 'caliphate' in Mosul in July 2014, KBL pledged its allegiance, and soon many local KBL fighters were involved in founding the first Libyan Islamic State wilaya in Derna (Barqa). A year later, the Islamic State captured Sirte, where it set up training camps in the vicinity.<sup>4</sup> It also established training camps near Sabratha to the west of Tripoli,<sup>5</sup> a town that serves as a major smuggling hub for refugees on their way to Europe.<sup>6</sup>

These camps and localities have been linked to a series of terrorist attacks and plots in Europe and North Africa, including, as this article will outline, the Bardo, Sousse, Berlin, and Manchester attacks. The open source evidence that has surfaced so far suggests an Islamic State external operations network has been built up with a hub on Libyan soil and spokes connecting it to nodes of Islamic State supporters within North African, and specifically Libyan and Tunisian, diasporas in France, Belgium, Italy, Germany, the United Kingdom, and other European countries.

This article makes some preliminary observations about this network. The picture is blurry because information is still fragmentary and because of difficulties in assessing the reliability of information that has surfaced in the open source. Moreover, media reports sometimes contain assumptions about the nature of the linkages between terrorist actors that are speculative. But despite these limitations, the picture has enough resolution to bring into focus the terrorist threat emanating from Libya.

## The Libya Nexus to Tunisia Terror

The first observation is that the Islamic State built up an external operations attack hub in Sabratha (near the Tunisian border) to facilitate attacks in Tunisia staffed in part by Tunisians with deep connections to extremists in Europe. In March 2015, the Tunisians Yassine Labidi, Saber Khachnaoui, and a third unknown person shot 22 people—mainly Western tourists—at the Bardo National Museum in Tunis. Three months later, 38 people, including 30 British tourists,<sup>7</sup> were shot dead on a beach in Sousse. Investigations of Seifiddine Rezgui, the Tunisian gunman responsible for the attack, revealed he was closely linked to the Islamic State cell responsible for the Bardo attack. Rezgui trained together with one of the Bardo perpetrators in a camp in the vicinity of Sabratha.<sup>8</sup>

Fragmentary information has emerged on the ringleaders behind these attacks. According to confessions by suspects and witness accounts, the cell's "mastermind," Chamseddine al-Sandi, recruited all the attackers, paid them to go to Libya for military training, and gave them orders for the attacks.<sup>9</sup> Authorities allege another senior figure in the external operations cell behind the Sousse and Bardo attacks was the Tunisian Moez Ben Abdelkader Fezzani (jihadi kunya: Abu Nassim), who once lived in Milan and waged jihad in Bosnia and Afghanistan before taking up a leadership role in Sabratha.<sup>10</sup> In March 2016, Fezzani also reportedly

oversaw an Islamic State attack on Tunisian security services in the border town of Ben Gardane, killing 17.<sup>11</sup> Investigators have also focused on another Italian-Tunisian, Nouredine Chouchane, who was a KBL emir in Sabratha before his death in a U.S. airstrike in February 2016.<sup>12</sup> Chouchane, originally from Sousse, lived in Novara, Italy, until 2011, and cultivated contacts with Italian foreign fighters in Syria.<sup>13</sup>

### The Libya Nexus to France-Belgium Terror

The second observation is that the network behind the worst attacks carried out so far in Europe had deep connections to the Libyan and Tunisian contingent of Islamic State fighters in Syria. Pieter Van Ostaeyen, in this publication, raised the possibility that figures inside KBL possibly encouraged Paris attack ringleader Abdelhamid Abaaoud to set in motion a campaign of terror in Europe. Abaaoud joined KBL in the summer 2013, and he presumably became familiar with the group's *inghimasi* operations—suicidal assaults involving gunmen wearing suicide vests.

Van Ostaeyen also noted that Bilal Hadfi, another of the Paris attackers, communicated with KBL members online,<sup>14</sup> and Verviers plotters Soufiane Amghar and Khalid Ben Larbi trained and fought in the ranks of KBL.<sup>15</sup> During the time Abaaoud coordinated the Verviers plot, he reported up to a senior Islamic State operative called 'Padre,' according to court documents. According to social media analysis undertaken by Guy Van Vlieden, there are strong indications 'Padre' was one and the same as a Belgian KBL member from Molenbeek called Dniel Mahi.<sup>16</sup> It should be noted that the KBL-recruited Islamic State fighter Abaaoud was also linked to the March 2014 attack on the Jewish Museum in Brussels by Mehdi Nemmouche, the August 2015 Thalys train attack by Ayoub el-Khazzani, as well as other plots directed against France.<sup>17</sup>

### The Libya Nexus to U.K. Terror

A third observation is Manchester attacker Salman Abedi built up connections to the Islamic State, including in Sabratha where the Bardo and Sousse attacks were staged. Subsequent to Abedi's suicide bombing at Manchester Arena, the Special Deterrence Force, a Tripoli-based militia that reports to the Interior Ministry, arrested his younger brother Hashem in the Libyan capital. According to his purported confession, Hashem Abedi stated that he and Salman were members of the Islamic State, that he was aware of his brother's plot, and that he himself had planned the assassination of a German U.N. envoy in Libya.<sup>18</sup> According to *The New York Times*,



Anis Amri in his video claiming allegiance to the Islamic State (Amaq)

Salman Abedi met with Islamic State KBL members in Tripoli and Sabratha several times and kept up the contact when he returned to Manchester.<sup>19</sup>

In 1993, Salman and Hashem's father, Ramadan Abedi, who denies allegations he was a one-time member of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG), fled the country to settle in Manchester.<sup>20</sup> As Libyan revolutionaries put pressure on Qaddafi in 2011, Ramadan Abedi took his three sons to Tunisia, where he worked providing logistics for rebels in western Libya, and soon relocated to Libya. The senior Abedi joined the Tripoli Revolutionary Brigade<sup>b</sup> under the command of Irish-Libyan (and later mayor of Tripoli) Mahdi al-Harati. Salman and Hashem appear to have received some training by the militia forces and to have fallen in with a contingent known as the "Manchester fighters."<sup>21</sup>

At some point, Salman Abedi allegedly developed links to the radical preacher Abdu Albasset Egwillla, who had previously been based in Ottawa, Canada, but it is unclear what impact the preacher had on him.<sup>22</sup> As part of its investigations following the Manchester attack, the Libyan Special Deterrence Force Rada also reportedly focused on an associate of Egwillla named Abdel-Razzaq Mushaireb, who was arrested in September 2017. The imam of the Ben Nabi mosque in Tripoli's Mansoura district allegedly recruited fighters for the Islamic State in Sirte and Benghazi. Mushaireb was involved with the Islamist youth movement Qudwati, of which Abedi was also reportedly a part. The group is accused of being a recruitment conduit to the Islamic State.<sup>23</sup> Without giving any reason, Rada released Mushaireb earlier this month.<sup>24</sup>

Another potential connection Abedi had to the Islamic State was through the Manchester Libyan Islamic State recruit Mohammed Abdallah. Abdallah, who was arrested after returning to the United Kingdom in September 2016 and convicted of fighting for the Islamic State earlier this month, traveled to Syria in 2014 with the help of his brother who was close friends with Salman Abedi.<sup>25</sup>

### The Libya Nexus to Germany Terror

A fourth observation is there is a strong Libya nexus to attacks and plots by Tunisian Islamic State-aligned jihadis in Germany. According to a study of the December 2016 Berlin truck attack by Georg Heil for this publication, its perpetrator, Anis Amri, was communicating via the messaging app Telegram with two persons using Libyan phone numbers linked to the Islamic State at least until February 2016.<sup>26</sup> German journalist Florian Flade reported that according to German security agencies monitoring these conversations, there was a "high probability" that Amri's interlocutors using the Libyan cell phones were Tunisians who had joined the Islamic State in Libya and that he asked them for help in the course of their conversations with a suicide bombing in Germany.<sup>27</sup> While these conversations, as reported, did not specifically relate to the subsequent Berlin truck attack, they illustrated that Amri was operationally in touch with Islamic State figures in Libya. In January 2017, two U.S. Air Force B-2 bombers struck two Islamic State camps

b The brigade was initially considered to be nationalist. However, soon after it liberated Tripoli from the Qaddafi regime, al-Harati and other Western brigade leaders met with Abdelhakim Belhadj, a former LIFG emir, and made him chief of the Tripoli Military Council. Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, "Abdelhakim Belhadj and Ansar Al-Sharia in Tunisia," Foundation for Defense of Democracy, October 8, 2013; Matthieu Mabin, "The Tripoli Brigade," France 24, September 1, 2011.



Libya (Rowan Technology)

southwest of Sirte after intelligence reportedly indicated the possible presence of external attack plotters there with suspected links to the Berlin attack. Then U.S. Defense Secretary Ash Carter said the strikes were “directed against some of ISIL’s external plotters who were actively planning operations against our allies in Europe ... and may also have been connected with some attacks that have already occurred in Europe.”<sup>28</sup>

The Berlin attacker was connected to a number of Tunisian jihadis inside Germany. Although only fragmentary information has surfaced in the open source on these cases, other investigations have revealed a web of ties between Tunisians jihadis inside Germany and the Islamic State’s external operations outfit in Libya.<sup>29</sup> A case in point was an alleged Islamic State recruiter, Haikel S., wanted by Tunisian authorities for his suspected involvement in the Bardo and Ben Gardane attacks who was arrested in Frankfurt earlier this year. In February 2017, police raided several locations in Frankfurt, Offenbach, and Darmstadt, in the state of Hessen, and arrested 16 suspects. Haikel S., the alleged head of the cell, regularly visited the Bilal mosque where Abu Walaa, an alleged Islamic State recruiter linked to Amri, occasionally held sermons as a guest preacher, but there is no evidence Haikel S. knew Abu Walaa.<sup>30</sup> Investigators be-

lieve Haikel S. plotted terrorist attacks in Germany on behalf of the Islamic State.<sup>31</sup>

### The Libya Nexus to Italian Terror

A fifth observation is there is a significant nexus between terrorist activity in Italy and the Islamic State’s branch in Libya. Several individuals implicated in plots by the group’s external operations branch in Libya have had strong links to extremist networks in Italy.

Ever since Anis Amri was shot by Italian police at the train station of the Milanese suburban town of Sesto San Giovanni on December 23, 2016, it has remained unknown whether he arrived in Milan accidentally or intentionally chose the northern Italian city as the waypoint of his escape route southward because he knew extremists who could help in the city. It was in Italy where Amri first set foot on European soil and eventually radicalized. He lived shortly in Aprilia, as did the Tunisian Ahmed Hannachi who stabbed two women to death in front of the Marseille train station on October 1, 2017, raising the possibility, which has not been confirmed, of a link between the two men.<sup>32</sup>

Moez Fezzani, one of the alleged planners in the cell behind the Bardo and Sousse attacks, grew up in Milan and attended the Is-

lamic Cultural Institute (ICI), a mosque led by the radical preacher and Bosnia jihad recruiter Anwar Shabaan. This “Bosnian network” was linked to a series of plots in Europe.<sup>33</sup> Fezzani eventually traveled to Afghanistan and in 2002 was arrested in Peshawar and imprisoned in Bagram.<sup>34</sup>

He was placed under investigation on his return to Italy and deported to Tunisia in 2012. Like other prominent Tunisian jihadis from Italy, he is said to have immediately joined the Tunisian branch of Ansar al-Sharia.<sup>35</sup> After fighting with Jabhat al-Nusra and later with the Islamic State in Syria, Fezzani relocated to Libya again. As a KBL leader in Sabratha, he continued to exercise influence on Italian jihadis, especially in the Lombardy region.<sup>36</sup>

After the Islamic State lost ground in Libya, Fezzani was detained in Sudan under mysterious circumstances in November 2016 and deported to Tunisia to face trial for sponsoring the Bardo attack.<sup>37</sup> After recapturing Sirte from the Islamic State in August 2016, Libyan agents found documents revealing the existence of an Islamic State-affiliated cell in Milan associated with Fezzani. Italian investigators suspected he had reactivated his network in the area to recruit fighters for the Islamic State.<sup>38</sup>

There have also been terrorism arrests in Italy that appear to have links to the Islamic State’s external operations hub in Libya. In May 2015, Italian police arrested Moroccan Abdel Majid Touil in the Milanese suburb Gaggiano on an international warrant issued by Tunisia over his possible logistical support for the Bardo attack. Authorities stated that Touil entered Italy from Libya illegally by boat only one month before the attack.<sup>39</sup> Due to lack of evidence, however, Touil was released in October of the same year.

### What is Known and Unknown

The post-Qaddafi era has seen a growth and consolidation in jihadi networks in Libya. After civil war broke out in Syria, Libya became a facilitation hub for Tunisian foreign fighters and others on their way to Syria. Many of them were provided paramilitary training in various camps there.

The open source analysis strongly indicates that the Islamic State built up a base in Sabratha for external operations focused on Tunisia. Consisting of a considerable proportion of Tunisian jihadis, this network was responsible for the Ben Gardane raid and the Bardo and Sousse attacks.

Likewise, terrorist activities in Europe were linked to Libyan and Tunisian Islamic State operatives. Firstly, the network behind the Paris and Brussels attack had close connections to the Libyan and Tunisian contingent in Syria. Secondly, Manchester attacker Salman Abedi reportedly built ties to Islamic State members in Libya, including in Sabratha. Thirdly, there exists a strong Libyan nexus to attacks and plots by Tunisian Islamic State-aligned jihadis in Germany. And, finally, several of those involved in plots by the external operations branch in Libya have had strong links to extremist networks in Italy.

However, these are only initial observations and conclusions. The available open source data leaves several important questions unanswered. The specific nature of many of these connections are not yet clear. While apparently significant players such as Moez Fezzani have been identified, there is still only a very thin information in the open source on the identity and role of senior figures in the Islamic State external operations efforts in Libya. The degree of direction by the Islamic State in plots like the Berlin and Manchester attack are not yet clear. And a great deal remains unknown about the connectivity between the Islamic State’s external operations branches in Libya and Syria.

What is clear, however, is there is a significant terrorist threat emanating from Libya. It is hard to forecast trends based on the available data. The Islamic State’s loss of territory in Syria and Iraq will likely result in the decentralization and fragmentation of the Islamic State’s external operations efforts and a greater reliance on terrorist attacks “remote-controlled”<sup>40</sup> by Islamic State cyber-coaches in places where Islamic State operatives can still operate without facing arrest like Libya. One continued concern is the group may try to exploit migrant flows to smuggle operatives from Libya to Europe like the Islamic State did from Syria through Turkey for the Paris and Brussels attacks. Migrant flows to Europe from Libya remain high. Between August 1, and December 1, 2017, over 21,000 migrants arrived in Italy by sea from North Africa.<sup>41</sup>

It should also be noted that the Islamic State has experienced serious setbacks in Libya, which may constrain the group’s ability to recruit, train, and dispatch terrorists for international operations, as well as the group’s ability to communicate with and guide operatives overseas. The group’s 2015 takeover of Sirte, with hindsight, represented the high-water mark of its expansion in Libya.<sup>42</sup> Since 2015, the Islamic State has been forced out of Derna, Benghazi, Sirte, and Sabratha.<sup>43</sup> Under the Obama administration, the U.S. military carried out airstrikes against Islamic State militants, including several training camps near Sabratha, Sirte, and other areas of Libya.<sup>44</sup> U.S. pressure has continued under the Trump administration. In February 2017, Noureddine Chouchane was “likely” killed in a U.S. airstrike in the vicinity of Sabratha.<sup>45</sup> In September 2017, the United States launched airstrikes against an Islamic State desert camp 150 miles southeast of Sirte.<sup>46</sup> These operations appear to have pushed Islamic State operatives deeper into Libya’s southern interior.<sup>46</sup>

However, given that there is no end in sight to the political turmoil in Libya, the continued presence of external plotters in Libya with networks of contacts in Tunisia and Europe, the Libya-Tunisia-European attack networks are likely to pose a threat for some time to come. **CTC**

c By 2016, the Islamic State’s limited capacity to capture and hold territory in Libya had become clear. See Geoff Porter, “How Realistic is Libya as an Islamic State ‘Fallback’?” *CTC Sentinel* 9:3 (2016).

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# A Jihadi Takeover Bid in Nigeria? The Evolving Relationship between Boko Haram and al-Qa`ida

By Ryan Cummings

**Ever since Boko Haram's leader Abubakar Shekau pledged allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in March 2015, the group has been seen as firmly in the Islamic State fold. But as both the Islamic State and Boko Haram weaken, al-Qa`ida, which has a history of cooperation with jihadis in Nigeria, including factions within Boko Haram, may be making a takeover bid.**

Initially formed as a Nigeria-centric, grassroots Islamist extremist organization,<sup>1</sup> Boko Haram has evolved into a militant movement of transnationalist proportions. From a geographical perspective, the Islamist sect has expanded its footprint outside of its strongholds in northeastern Nigeria into the wider Lake Chad region.<sup>2</sup> In doing so, Boko Haram is now seen as exerting an operational presence in Niger's southeastern Diffa and Zinder regions, Cameroon's Extreme-North (Far North) province, and the Lac Region of Chad where it continues to launch attacks against both state and civilian interests. Further reinforcing its status as a transnationalist terrorist organization was the March 2015 pledge of allegiance by Boko Haram's leader, Abubakar Shekau, to the so-called Islamic State in the Levant's caliph, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.<sup>3</sup> In doing so, Boko Haram, renamed Wilayat West Africa, became the Islamic State's most well-known and deadliest wing,<sup>4</sup> with the sect's *dawlah*<sup>b</sup>—an 'Islamic' province declared by Shekau in northeastern Nigeria—briefly serving as the

largest contiguous area of Islamic State-held territory<sup>c</sup> outside of the Levant.

But while investigations are ongoing to uncover the extent of Boko Haram's relationship with the Islamic State—and whether any operational and/or logistical contiguity exists between the two groups—research on the Nigerian sect's relationship with the al-Qa`ida transnationalist network has been limited. Using the significant groundwork laid by Jacob Zenn and other scholars, including in this publication,<sup>4</sup> this article seeks to piece together a chronological narrative of Boko Haram's opaque linkages with al-Qa`ida and why this relationship could endure beyond the Nigerian sect's association with the Islamic State.

## Al-Qa`ida, bin Ladin, and Muhammad Yusuf

Al-Qa`ida's linkages to Boko Haram can be traced to the latter's very beginnings. It is claimed that the sect's founding leader, Muhammad Yusuf<sup>5</sup>—a Maiduguri-born Islamic scholar who gained popularity through his widely disseminated sermons—was an ardent admirer of Usama bin Ladin<sup>6</sup> and may have been inspired by the al-Qa`ida leader in forming Boko Haram. There has even been speculation that in 2000 bin Ladin had made available as much as \$3 million in funding to Islamist political organizations in Nigeria and that some of these funds were allocated to Yusuf and his then-fledgling movement.<sup>7</sup> Yusuf is said to have used these funds, which were eventually distributed following two separate audio messages by bin Ladin in 2002 calling on Nigerian Muslims to wage jihad, to establish a micro-lending scheme for his followers.<sup>8</sup>

Although evidence of bin Ladin's financial assistance to Yusuf is not definitive, the micro-lending plan the al-Qa`ida leader is purported to have facilitated served as one of Boko Haram's most important revenue-generating mechanisms in its near decade-long insurgency against the Nigerian state and its regional allies.<sup>9</sup>

a In 2016, the Institute of Economics and Peace ranked Boko Haram as the deadliest Islamist extremist group in its annual Global Terrorism Index (GTI) report. Boko Haram accounted for more cumulative fatalities in 2015 than any other Islamist extremist movement, overtaking the Islamic State itself. See "Global Terrorism Index 2016," Institute for Economics and Peace, November 2016.

b In August 2014, Shekau released a video in which he announced the Borno State town of Gwoza as the capital of a swath of territory in Nigeria's northeastern Adamawa, Borno, and Yobe states. Many reports suggested that Shekau had declared a caliphate; however, the Arabic term used by Shekau to describe this territory under Boko Haram's command was *dawlah*, which can be translated to mean 'state.' For further reading on this, see Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, "Boko Haram Did Not Declare A Caliphate," Foundation for Defense of Democracies, September 4, 2014.

c At the time of Shekau's *bay`a* (pledge of allegiance) to al-Baghdadi in March 2015, Boko Haram had exerted some form of control over parts of Adamawa, Borno, and Yobe states despite the Nigerian army and the partnered militaries of the Cameroon, Chad, and Niger launching a multi-pronged offensive against the sect as of February 2015. These counterinsurgency operations continued for several months, and only in October 2015 did the Nigerian government claim to have liberated all territory that had previously fallen under the sect's control. At the time of its March 2015 *bay`a*, Boko Haram still exerted control over the town of Gwoza and at least three local government areas, namely that of Abadam, Kala-Balge, and Gwoza, which cumulatively comprised a total land area of more than 8,000 square kilometers, larger than the total area controlled by the Islamic state in Libya at the time.

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Nigeria (Rowan Technology)

### Shekau Courts al-Qa`ida

With Yusuf's killing during the so-called Maiduguri Uprising<sup>d</sup> in July 2009, the leadership reins of Boko Haram were transferred to Shekau. Amid an intensive crackdown on the sect by the Nigerian state security apparatus, it was suggested that Shekau had reached out to al-Qa`ida for assistance. Evidence of this was disclosed earlier this year by the United States' Office of Director of National Intelligence (ODNI), which declassified a portion of the documents recovered during the May 2011 raid on bin Ladin's compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan.<sup>10</sup>

Among the cache of documents were letters between Abdelhamid Abou Zeid, a former commander of al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) who was killed northern Mali in 2013, and the leader of al-Qa`ida's North Africa branch, Abdelmalek Droukdel.<sup>11</sup> In one of the exchanges authored in August 2009, Abou Zeid details how Shekau deployed a three-member group to establish ties and communication between himself and Droukdel.<sup>12</sup> Shekau's chosen emissaries, which included Boko Haram members Abu Muhammad Amir al-Masir, Khalid al-Barnawi, and Abu Rayhanah, were allegedly selected because Abou Zeid knew them from their time in the ranks of the AQIM-affiliated Tariq Ibn Ziyad Battalion.<sup>13</sup> In

addition to connecting its leadership to that of AQIM, Boko Haram also requested assistance with funding, training, and expertise, such as bomb making and waging a tactical asymmetric armed campaign.<sup>e</sup> In March 2016, ODNI declassified another undated letter from the bin Ladin cache that was written by Shekau himself and addressed to al-Qa`ida leadership. In it, the Boko Haram emir requested to speak with bin Ladin's then deputy and current leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, and also sought instruction on how his movement could form part of al-Qa`ida's transnationalist network.<sup>14</sup>

While there is currently no evidence confirming whether bin Ladin ever responded to Shekau's requests, AQIM confirmed that Droukdel had established contact with Shekau around 2009 as per a series of letters AQIM made public in April 2017. These communiqués detailed how Droukdel welcomed the idea of forging a relationship between AQIM and Boko Haram and even pledged to assist the latter with its training and financing. It cannot be said for certain whether links between the two groups were formally solidified. Notably, Shekau never swore fidelity to either bin Ladin or al-Zawahiri—a pledge that would have facilitated Boko Haram's transition to an al-Qa`ida franchise and the provision of training and resources. However, there are suggestions that Boko Haram may have received some form of operational and technical assistance from al-Qa`ida. This was highlighted in August 2011 when a Boko Haram suicide bomber drove his explosive-laden vehicle

<sup>d</sup> The Maiduguri Uprising refers to the events that unfolded July 26-29, 2009, when a police shooting of a group of Boko Haram members attending a funeral of a fellow member led to an outbreak of retaliatory violence in various regions in northeastern Nigeria. At the time of the clashes, Yusuf was remanded into police custody in Maiduguri where he was subjected to an extrajudicial killing. "Boko Haram attacks - timeline," *Guardian*, September 25, 2012.

<sup>e</sup> Headed by Algerian national Abdul Hamid Abu Zayd, the Tariq Ibn Ziyad Battalion is considered as one of AQIM's most radical affiliates and has perpetrated a number of kidnappings targeting foreign expatriates.

into the offices of the United Nations building in the Garki district of Abuja, killing 23 people and wounding 76 others.<sup>15</sup> Nigeria's Department of State Services (DSS) later claimed the car bombing was planned by Boko Haram commander Mamman Nur, who masterminded bomb making while training in Somalia alongside al-Qa`ida's largest African affiliate, al-Shabaab.<sup>16</sup> The Abuja attack may have marked the first instance of an alleged transference of operational expertise from an Africa-based al-Qa`ida affiliate to jihadis in Nigeria. However, it would certainly not be the last.

### Boko Haram's Ties to al-Qa`ida in Mali

While Nur's connections to al-Qa`ida have not been definitively proven, links between the sect and the transnationalist extremist movement became clearer a year later. Coinciding with the March 2012 military coup in Mali, a security vacuum in the country's separatist north was rapidly filling with a variety of Islamist extremist movements.<sup>17</sup> According to a briefing issued at the time by Malian local deputy governor Abu Sidibe,<sup>18</sup> Boko Haram was one of the Islamist groups to occupy the region.<sup>19</sup> Sidibe claimed that an estimated 100 Boko Haram militants had infiltrated Mali's Gao administrative division and aided insurgents of the al-Qa`ida-linked Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO)<sup>f</sup> in securing control of the territory.<sup>20</sup> Malian officials also cited Boko Haram's involvement in the April 2012 abduction of seven diplomats from the Algerian consulate in Gao.<sup>21</sup>

Claims of a Boko Haram presence in northern Mali were also given credence by then French Minister of Foreign Affairs Laurent Fabius. Addressing a conference focusing on security challenges in Mali and the Sahel in November 2013, Fabius claimed that his military had acquired documentary evidence detailing the training of Boko Haram militants within northern Mali.<sup>22</sup> These camps, which were located in the Adrar des Ifoghas mountain range near the Algerian border, were believed to have been operated by AQIM.<sup>23</sup> Months later, Boko Haram was also added to the United Nations Security Council's Al-Qaida Sanctions Committee's sanctions list.<sup>24</sup> One of the factors that led to the sect's designation was findings confirming that Boko Haram "maintained a relationship with" AQIM "for training and material support purposes."<sup>25</sup> In a press release, the committee also affirmed that a "number of Boko Haram members fought alongside Al-Qaida affiliated groups in Mali in 2012 and 2013 before returning to Nigeria with terrorist expertise."<sup>26</sup>

### Al-Qa`ida's Nigerian Proxy

Amid suggestions of synergies between Nigerian Islamists and al-Qa`ida in Malian territory, evidence of a symbiotic relationship between the two groups was also emerging within Nigerian borders. Days before the March 2012 Malian coup, a British national, Chris McManus, and an Italian, Franco Lamolinara, were executed by their kidnapers in the northwestern Nigerian town of Sokoto during a failed joint rescue operation by the British and Nigerian militaries.<sup>27</sup> The pair was initially seized in the town of Birnin Kebbi in May 2011 by militants who identified themselves as al-Qa`ida in the Lands Beyond the Sahel.<sup>28</sup> A similar fate would befall German engineer, Edgar Raupach, who was seized from the city of Kano,

Nigeria, in January 2012.<sup>29</sup> While no group specifically claimed Raupach's kidnapping, the terms for the release for the German hostage were set by AQIM. The terrorist group demanded the release of Felize Gelowicz—a German woman convicted on charges related to her husband's intent to conduct terrorist attacks on German soil—in exchange for the incarcerated engineer.<sup>30</sup> In a grim echo of the McManus and Lamolinara case, Raupach was executed by his captors in Kano in May 2012 amid suspicions that a rescue operation had been launched to secure his release.<sup>31</sup>

Although the identities of the perpetrators of both the Birnin Kebbi and Kano abductions were initially obscure, Nigerian security forces believed that they were members of Boko Haram.<sup>32</sup> Researchers focusing on Boko Haram, such as Jacob Zenn, speculated that al-Qa`ida in the Lands Beyond the Sahel may have been a Boko Haram<sup>33</sup> offshoot that later became known as Jama'at Ansaru al-Muslimin fi Bilad al-Sudan, or Ansaru. Announcing its formation in the city of Kano in February 2012, Ansaru derided Shekau's leadership of the main sect as 'un-Islamic' and chastised him both for his gratuitous violence and killing of Muslim civilians.<sup>34</sup> At the time of its creation and as initially hypothesized by Zenn in this publication, Ansaru was believed to be led by senior members of Boko Haram's governing body, or Shura Council, most notably Khalid al-Barnawi who had fallen out with Shekau over his leadership style and his envisioned trajectory for the movement.<sup>35</sup>

In pledging to limit its insurgent activities to Christian, state, and foreign interests<sup>36</sup>—as Droukdel himself had publicly instructed his AQIM members to do<sup>37</sup>—Ansaru employed a pan-West African narrative similar to the one employed by al-Qa`ida's African affiliates.<sup>38</sup> However, similarities between Ansaru and al-Qa`ida were not only limited to rhetoric. As noted by Zenn, apart from incorporating AQIM symbolism within its branding—denoted by Ansaru's use of the 'setting sun' logo, which was seemingly borrowed from AQIM's predecessor, the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) of which Droukdel and al-Barnawi were members—the militant group also demonstrated operational contiguity with al-Qa`ida's North African branch.<sup>39</sup> Notably, Ansaru continued to target western expatriates in kidnappings in northern Nigeria that were carried out with the same surgical precision as that of AQIM and its affiliates in the Sahel. The most notable of these was the kidnapping and subsequent execution of seven expatriate workers from a construction site in the town of Jama'are in Bauchi state in February 2013.<sup>40</sup> Following his arrest in the Lokoja area of Kogi State in April 2016, Khalid al-Barnawi was charged with the kidnapping and murder of 10 foreign nationals in Nigeria, including that of McManus, Lamolinara, Raupach, and the seven victims of the Jama'are attack.<sup>41</sup> In this regard, al-Barnawi's indictment tied him both to kidnappings claimed by Ansaru and those committed by assailants defining themselves as members of al-Qa`ida, making clear the overlap between the organizations.

Further demonstrating its purported ties to AQIM, Ansaru also claimed responsibility for the January 2013 ambush of a Nigerian military convoy in Kogi State.<sup>42</sup> At the time of the attack, the convoy was en route to Mali where it was set to serve as part of an African Union peacekeeping mission mandated to target al-Qa`ida positions in the country's desert north.<sup>43</sup> Evidence of Ansaru's establishment as a possible al-Qa`ida proxy was further strengthened in 2013 with a complex attack in neighboring Niger. On May 23 that year, two simultaneous militant incursions took place at a military base and French-operated uranium mine in the respective Nigerian

f The Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) was formed as a splinter faction of AQIM following the kidnapping of three humanitarian aid workers from a refugee camp in Tindouf, Algeria, in October 2011.

towns of Agadez and Arlit.<sup>44</sup> The attacks, which killed 36 people, was claimed by MUJAO in accordance with the Signatories in the Blood brigade led by infamous al-Qa`ida commander Mokhtar Belmokhtar, in what it called a reprisal for French interference in Mali. In a pre-recorded video, one of the future attackers identified himself as Abu Ali al-Nigiri and also revealed his membership in Ansaru.<sup>45</sup> Al-Nigiri was killed during the incursions, along with all other militants who took part in the Arlit and Agadez incursions.<sup>45</sup> His death coincided with Ansaru's cessation in launching and claiming attacks.

### Ansaru's Dormancy

Following intensive counterterrorism operations in Mali, there was speculation that Ansaru's Malian-based patronage network had collapsed.<sup>46</sup> Within Nigeria, Ansaru was also facing increasing crackdowns by both the military and Shekau loyalists. These conditions may have prompted Ansaru's leadership to seek rapprochement with Shekau.<sup>47</sup> This hypothesis was reinforced by Boko Haram's November 2013 kidnapping of a French priest near the Nigerian border in northern Cameroon. In claiming the kidnapping, Boko Haram noted that the abduction was carried out with the assistance of Ansaru, suggesting that some form of cooperation between the factions was taking place.<sup>48</sup>

Following the incident, the only other evidence of Ansaru's independence from and opposition to Boko Haram was noted in a January 2015 video release in which two self-proclaimed Ansaru members again distanced the group from Boko Haram and its armed violence against Muslim civilians.<sup>49</sup> Ansaru's operational dormancy as an entity also apparently brought to an end connections between the Nigerian sect and al-Qa`ida, with the former eventually drifting toward the orbit<sup>50</sup> of the Islamic State, to which it eventually pledged allegiance in March 2015.

### Al-Qa`ida Takeover Bid?

Ansaru's, and by extension al-Qa`ida's, dormancy within Nigeria's jihadi theater ended, however, in January 2017. In the fourth edition of al-Qa`ida-aligned Al Risalah magazine,<sup>h</sup> an essay entitled "A Message to Nigeria" was dedicated to tracing the origins and evaluating the current state of jihad in the West African country.<sup>51</sup> Authored by Sheikh Abu Usamatul Ansary—the self-professed

emir of Ansaru<sup>i</sup>—the entry also includes important references to how and why Ansaru was created. Ansary wrote that Ansaru had been established in consultation with "our Algerian brothers in the Sahara," a reference that appears to reinforce Ansaru's ties to Droukdel and the wider AQIM fraternity.<sup>52</sup> Al-Ansary also ascribes Ansaru's formation to Shekau's penchant for gratuitous violence against Muslim civilians, his inability to handle criticism, and most significantly, his un-Islamic actions.<sup>53</sup> The fact that the article was published in an al-Qa`ida-aligned magazine made clear the reconstituted Ansaru group as led by Ansary regarded itself as part of the al-Qa`ida fold.

Interestingly, al-Ansary's critique of Shekau was almost identical to that made by Abu Musab al-Barnawi (the Islamic State recognized emir of its Nigerian wing)<sup>54j</sup> and his closest known associate, Mamman Nur<sup>55</sup> in an audio tape released on August 5, 2016. Both al-Barnawi and Nur have split from Shekau and are believed to lead Wilayat West Africa (ISWAP).<sup>56</sup> This raised the possibility that the new Ansaru emir was trying to lay the groundwork for this affiliate to switch its allegiance to al-Qa`ida.

Apart from sharing distaste for Shekau and severing ties with his movement, there have been a number of other shared characteristics between the al-Qa`ida-aligned Ansaru and the Islamic State-loyal ISWAP over the years. Both groups favor the targeting of state and foreign interests<sup>5k</sup> while sparing Muslim civilians and are seemingly adept at kidnapping operations.<sup>57</sup> The leadership structures of both movements appear to be less Nigeria-centric,<sup>58</sup> while the geographic area of focus is also not constrained to Nigeria's borders.<sup>59</sup>

With al-Qa`ida seemingly strengthening its presence in West and North Africa—as noted by its geographical expansion across the region<sup>60</sup> and the consolidation of its many affiliates into the Ja-

g In the 51-minute video, which was released following the Agadez and Arlit attacks, a MUJAO militant identifies himself as Abu Ali al-Nigiri at approximately 30 minutes and 34 seconds. He then proceeds to state that he is a member of Jama'at Ansar al-Muslimin fi Bilad al-Sudan (Ansaru) from Nigeria.

h First published in July 2015, Al Risalah is an English-language magazine published by the al-Qa`ida-aligned Syrian extremist group Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (formerly known as Jabhat al-Nusra). Al Risalah is geared toward a Western, English-speaking audience and is a direct response to the Islamic State's multilingual publication, Dabiq, which has been used as an effective propaganda mechanism by the group. To date, only four editions of Al Risalah have been published, along with a separate special edition of the publication that featured an exclusive interview with AQIM commander Shaykh al-Mujahid Hisham Abu Akram.

i While many analysts and media outlets speculated that Khalid al-Barnawi was the emir of Ansaru, the fourth issue of Al Risalah confirms that the movement remains led by Sheikh Abu Usamatul Ansary, despite claims that he was either killed in 2013 or that his moniker is merely a pseudonym used by al-Barnawi himself. The latter hypothesis is disputed by Ansary himself, who references al-Barnawi's attempted assassination at the order of Shekau and his arrest and ongoing detention by Nigerian services in his essay.

j Abu Musab al-Barnawi is the son of Muhammed Yusuf. Musab al-Barnawi has no known family relationship to Khalid al-Barnawi. "Al-Barnawi" is a geographical *kunya*, suggesting both are from Nigeria's Borno State. On August 2, the Islamic State formally named Abu Musab al-Barnawi as the *wali*, or governor, of the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP)—the name adopted by Boko Haram after Shekau pledged allegiance to al-Baghdadi—in its Al Naba publication. Shekau responded to al-Barnawi's appointment as ISWAP's leader by releasing an audio message affirming that he remains in charge of the movement. Both al-Barnawi and Nur responded to Shekau's audio message with a communiqué of their own in which Shekau is chastised for his "false ideology." For further reading, see "Boko Haram's Shekau, group's new leader, al-Barnawi, in war of words," Premium Times, August 5, 2016.

k In the first videos released by both Ansaru and ISWAP announcing their respective formations, both groups emphasize the objectives of protecting Muslim civilians against the Nigerian state and its foreign allies. Both groups also stress the important of sparing civilians' lives when waging jihad.

ma'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin' (JNIM)<sup>l</sup>—it is plausible that the recent chapter in Al Risalah dedicated to jihad in Nigeria was an attempt by al-Qa`ida-aligned jihadis to court al-Barnawi and Nur's ISWAP faction to bring them back into the al-Qa`ida fold.

The article was published at a time when the Islamic State's relative strength and influence appears to be waning in Africa as highlighted by its loss of territory along the Libyan coastline<sup>m</sup> and the severe pressure its affiliates are under in the wider Maghreb. In both Nigeria and the wider West African region, the jihadi landscape remains both dynamic and fluid with allegiances broken as often as they are being made.

l Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin' (JNIM) is an al-Qa`ida militant group formed on March 2, 2017, out of the merger between AQIM and the Islamist extremist affiliate groups of al-Mourabitoun, Ansar Dine, and the Macina Liberation Front. For an in-depth profile on the group, see Héni Nsaibia, "Jihadist Groups In The Sahel Region Formalize Merger," *Jihadology*, March 27, 2017.

m After controlling an estimated 120-mile stretch of coastal territory at the height of its insurgency in Libya, the Islamic State lost its final stronghold of Sirte to an offensive spearheaded by Libya's Government of National Accord and allied militias. While the group continues to operate within Libyan territory, it does so as a significantly weakened enterprise. For further reading, see Patrick Wintour, "Isis loses control of Libyan city of Sirte," *Guardian*, December 5, 2016.

## Conclusion

In its near decade-long insurgency, Boko Haram has evolved from a Nigerian-centric grassroots Islamist extremist organization to an affiliate of the Islamic State with an operational footprint spanning an entire region. Throughout Boko Haram's many transitional phases, al-Qa`ida has been in the foreground, assuming the purported roles of financier, interlocutor, and even divider of Nigerian jihadi groups as illustrated by the origin story of Ansaru.

The immediate question is the role that al-Qa`ida might assume in the next chapter of Nigerian jihadism, particularly in a context where the transnationalist network is strengthening its position in West Africa and where its ideological rival and Boko Haram's patron, the Islamic State, has found it difficult to fulfill its axiom of "remaining and expanding."<sup>n</sup> Given Nigeria is home to Africa's largest Muslim population; has social, political, and economic cleavages, which could readily be exploited; and is located not far from al-Qa`ida's strongholds in northern Mali, the country will likely be seen as a prime area of infiltration for al-Qa`ida. With Boko Haram also on the backfoot,<sup>61</sup> it could be incentivized to seek a patron with a more promising trajectory. Al-Qa`ida has a proven track record of developing and working with affiliates<sup>62</sup> and already has deep ties to jihadis in Nigeria. **CTC**

n The slogan *Baqiya wa tatamaddad* (remaining and expanding) was adopted as the official slogan of the Islamic State following its use in a speech by former spokesman Abu Muhamad al-Adhni in June 2014.

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