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SPECIAL ISSUE: THE GLOBAL THREAT FROM THE ISLAMIC STATE



The Islamic State Goes Global

Why the group is pivoting toward international terrorism **RICHARD BARRETT**

The Paris Attacks

The evolving Islamic State threat to France
JEAN-CHARLES BRISARD

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FROM THE EDITOR

With the attacks in Beirut, the skies above the Sinai, and Paris, history may judge the final months of 2015 as the period during which the Islamic State pivoted toward international terrorism, as Richard Barrett outlines in one of our two cover stories. The other, by Jean-Charles Brisard, provides new information on the Paris plot and the evolving threat to France. Guy van Vlierden profiles the “ringleader” of the Paris attack. Zack Gold argues the Metrojet attack may create a backlash against the Islamic State in the Sinai. Hassan Rabih examines the threat to Lebanon. Our interview is with Zainab Ahmad, a federal prosecutor in New York involved in several Islamic State-linked cases. This December saw the first deadly Islamic State-inspired attack in America. Lorenzo Vidino and Seamus Hughes examine the threat after San Bernardino. We also feature a frontline view of the war on the Islamic State by Tim Lister and a deep dive into the group's operations in southern Syria by Aaron Zelin and Oula Alrifai.

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Cover: The Eiffel Tower is illuminated in tribute to the victims of the November 13 terror attacks in Paris.

The Islamic State Goes Global

By Richard Barrett

Recent terrorist attacks suggest that the Islamic State has both the intent and capacity to strike its enemies outside Iraq and Syria. It may have been developing this capability for more than a year. But while the Islamic State may encourage acts of terrorism and even facilitate them, it is still primarily focused on state building. Nonetheless, with limited opportunity to increase the territory it controls, and being forced to retreat in some areas, the Islamic State's leaders may see advantage in increasing their encouragement of overseas terrorism, even to the point of directing attacks, in order to demonstrate that the group continues to "endure and expand," as its motto holds.

The terrorist assault on Paris on November 13, together with the coordinated suicide attacks in Beirut the previous day and the mid-air explosion that brought down a Russian airliner over the Sinai on October 31 suggest that the Islamic State, which has claimed responsibility for these atrocities,¹ has gone global. The string of recent international attacks raises new questions about the Islamic State's capabilities and intentions as it faces increasing difficulties in the Levant. It also raises questions about the impact of such attacks on its supporters, such as the husband-and-wife team that killed 14 people in San Bernardino, California, on December 2.²

By its very nature, the Islamic State is a global organization, or at least one that does not define itself by geographical boundaries. It claims to represent a faith rather than a people or a territory and to reject political divides, as it so clearly demonstrated when it bulldozed the berm that separated Syria and Iraq in June 2014. It demands the support of all Muslims, wherever they are. And in addition to appealing to their sense of victimhood and other key motivators, it draws on well-established, end-of-times prophecies to present an illusion of historical inevitability.

At the same time, however, the Islamic State must operate in the real world. It faces many enemies and it has begun to knock up against the natural limits of its expansion among Sunni Arabs and within the political, ethnic, and sectarian divides of the Levant.

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These are the areas where a Sunni Arab majority gives way to a Kurdish or non-Sunni Arab majority, or where a competing Sunni Arab group is too strong. Such boundaries present what appear to be firm obstacles to the Islamic State's territorial ambition.

Dependent on Victories

Even though it represents an idea, the Islamic State depends on military victories for its survival. Unless it can demonstrate that it is true to its motto of enduring and expanding,³ it will begin to look like just another failed enterprise, albeit a dramatic one, however much its propaganda urges otherwise. And if its expansion and endurance are constrained in the Levant, it must look elsewhere to keep alive the myth of its unstoppable progress. The desire for vengeance also influences the Islamic State's strategy because the intervention of external powers causes its territory to contract, challenging its narrative of preordained success. Rather than merely lash out at its enemies, however, the Islamic State seeks to present itself as both powerful and deliberate.

In this respect, the Islamic State has two options: persuade other groups around the world to join its ranks on the basis of vaguely shared objectives or demonstrate its reach in other ways. The Islamic State's efforts to expand have seen the accretion of new provinces in West and North Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia, but this has done little to increase its power. The Islamic State Wilayat of West Africa, for example, remains indistinguishable from its predecessor group Boko Haram; Wilayat Khorasan is more an expression of local Taliban rivalries than it is of an Islamic State expansion into South Asia. Only in Libya is there any suggestion of administrative cohesion and strategic cooperation between the province and the capital, and even here, local conditions make the expansion of doubtful endurance.

Demonstrating strength farther afield, in enemy territory, is an easier task than extending the boundaries of the Islamic State and risking their contraction. It may not be a tactic that defeats the enemy, but it is certainly one that helps persuade potential and actual supporters that the Islamic State is enduring. Overseas terrorism is an irresistible option for an organization that regards the whole world as a target and has no qualms about using extreme tactics.³

Before the Paris attacks, there had been warnings from Western officials that the Islamic State had already tried to commit acts of terrorism against overseas targets, and continued to plot.⁴ But despite individual acts that may have been inspired by the Islamic State, none had been demonstrably organized and directed by the group's leadership. Based on the information so far available, Paris would seem to have been more likely to have been directed than inspired, but in either case, it fits a pattern of activity that goes back

a Islamic State supporters customarily shout *baqiya wa tatamaddad* (enduring and expanding) when the Islamic State is mentioned.

“The Islamic State now hovers between being a terrorist organization that runs a state and being a state that sponsors terrorism. For its founder, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, this would be progress.”

to the Islamic State’s earliest days.

The Islamic State now hovers between being a terrorist organization that runs a state and being a state that sponsors terrorism. For its founder, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, this would be progress. Although his immediate aims were local, he had both regional and global ambitions. He wanted to build out from a base in Iraq to declare an Islamic state or emirate that would encompass the Levant, and by doing so accelerate progress towards the global apocalypse.

Zarqawi was a firm believer in Islamic eschatology,⁵ and it is his saying that adorns the masthead of the Islamic State’s English-language magazine *Dabiq*:

The spark has been lit here in Iraq, and its heat will continue to intensify—by Allah’s permission—until it burns the crusader armies in Dabiq.^b

In holding this belief, Zarqawi tapped into widely held views among Muslims. A 2012 Pew survey showed that 55 percent of Iraqi Sunnis believed that they would witness in their lifetimes the return of the Mahdi, an event held to be a precursor to the end of times.⁶ In Tunisia, which has provided the Islamic State with more fighters than any other country outside Iraq and Syria,^c this belief was shared by 67 percent of the population.⁷ Although the Shia tend to believe in apocalyptic prophecy more than do Sunnis, the idea of being in on the end the world, especially on the winning side, appears to be a powerful motivator for Islamic State supporters. Like al-Qa`ida before it, the Islamic State promotes the belief that the sooner Western (infidel) forces can be brought to engage the armies of the faithful in the battles that will lead to the second coming, the sooner the prophecies will be fulfilled. Overseas terrorist attacks can obviously accelerate this process.

Zarqawi’s approach was neatly illustrated, though with tragic consequences, in his first three major attacks in August 2003 on the United Nations offices in Baghdad, the Jordanian Embassy in Baghdad, and the Shia Imam Ali mosque in Najaf. They set the tone of violent sectarianism, emphatic rejection of the current world order, and vengeful confrontation with existing Arab regimes that also characterize the latest iteration of Zarqawi’s organization. They also set the tone for the use of terrorism as a tactic of war. But while Zarqawi was a man in a hurry and wanted as much mayhem as possible to intensify the battle and ensure the continued presence of foreign forces, circumstances have changed since the withdrawal of

U.S. troops from combat operations in Iraq in August 2010.

Focus on State Building

While the Islamic State’s leaders promote the idea of the apocalypse, and would therefore welcome the return of U.S. soldiers back on the ground in large numbers,⁸ it accepts that the timing of the end of the world is uncertain. Accordingly, it must prepare for the event whenever it does occur. In addition, the Caliph has a responsibility to look after his people in the meantime. This explains why, judged both by its actions and its words, the Islamic State has been less interested in committing acts of global terrorism than it has been in building its state. A great deal of its propaganda has emphasized its administrative successes, backed by an efficient and effective military, rather than merely its gruesome brutality.⁹ It argues that it is the duty of all Muslims to migrate to the Caliphate to support these efforts at state building, and it is likely that this remains a prime objective, particularly as anecdotal evidence suggests that the Islamic State remains short of skilled workers.¹⁰

But the tendency to resort to terrorism is deeply rooted in the Islamic State. The group’s ideology regards Islam not as a religion of peace, but of conquest, and jihad is about external violence rather than internal struggle. After its lightning advance across Iraq and the declaration of the caliphate in June 2014, the Islamic State met its first major setback with the loss of the Mosul Dam that August. This marked the first military intervention by outsiders as U.S. aircraft supported the advance of Kurdish *pehmerga* and proved decisive in their victory. It was just a month later that Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, the Islamic State’s spokesperson and a man close to the leadership,¹¹ delivered an impassioned diatribe against the United States and its partners, calling on supporters to attack them wherever they could, “especially the spiteful and filthy French,” in whatever way possible, and without further delay.¹² The United States had got in the way of al-Baghdadi’s state-building project, and so deserved immediate retribution. But state-building remained his first priority.

The decision to punish the West more directly appears to have been made at about the time that the Islamic State began to look into directing terrorist attacks overseas, as well as inspiring them. It set up an overseas operations unit, probably under al-Adnani’s supervision.¹³ This would echo Anwar al-Awlaki’s joint role as both a mouthpiece for al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula and a planner and inspirer of overseas attacks. Abdelhamid Abaaoud, the coordinator of the Paris attack cell, appears to have been an early member of this unit.¹⁴ He was already involved in overseas attack planning by January 2015, when the Belgian police disrupted a cell in Verviers. Judging by the amount of weapons and explosives the police found, the cell must have been preparing for some time, and the ferocity of a shoot-out in the main location that the police raided suggested a degree of training.

Two other failed attacks that have been linked to Abaaoud, one on a church in France in April 2015 and one on a train traveling from Belgium to France in August, involved operatives that had clearly received very little training.^d These episodes raise the question of whether Abaaoud and others were trolling for possible accomplices or whether they were deliberately organizing a glob-

b A village in northern Syria supposedly identified by the Prophet Mohammed as the scene of a future battle between the forces of good and evil.

c Estimated informally at around 6,000 by the Tunisian authorities in September 2014.

d The church attacker shot himself in the leg; the train attacker was overpowered while trying to reload his weapon.

al terrorist capability on behalf of the Islamic State's leadership. Abaaoud, for all his involvement in the Paris attacks, does not seem to have been an obvious candidate for a major role.¹⁵ His value appears to have been in finding and motivating the attackers rather than in designing a global terrorist strategy. At the former, he seems to have been worryingly adept, having recruited at least 15 people in the Verviers plot, and around 20 in connection with the Paris attacks, on top of the two earlier failed attacks.

Other events with an Islamic State link, for example Mehdi Nemmouche's murder of four people outside the Jewish Museum in Brussels in May 2014, do not conclusively demonstrate direction by the Islamic State. Nemmouche had earlier been in Syria where, according to a former hostage, he was a prison guard.¹⁶ Nemmouche was found with an Islamic State-style flag, but his terrorist instincts may well have prompted his joining the Islamic State rather than the other way round. Other lethal attacks, such as that in Copenhagen in February 2015,¹⁷ show still less direct connection, as does the shooting in San Bernardino, California, on December 2, 2015, despite the perpetrators in both attacks declaring allegiance to the Islamic State on their Facebook pages.¹⁸

Abaaoud is not the only Islamic State resident who has promoted terrorist attacks abroad. An Australian, Mohammad Ali Baryalei,¹⁹ killed in territory held by the Islamic State in October 2014, and two Britons, Reyaad Khan²⁰ and Junaid Hussein,²¹ both killed by airstrikes in August 2015, were all reported to have been encouraging terrorist attacks in their home countries. It is likely that there are others. But as far as is known, these initiatives were haphazard and lacked detailed operational planning and adequate security measures. They may have nudged the needle from inspired to encouraged, but their efforts still fell short of being directed by the Islamic State.

Tactical Success

An invaluable study by Thomas Hegghammer and Petter Nesser of violent Islamist attacks in Western countries between January 2011 and June 2015 reveals that there was a marked increase in

“These fresh enlistees represent an unmistakable and irresistible resource for an organization interested in global terrorism....Some...may see glory in copying the Paris attackers.”

the number of attacks following al-Adnani's call for action.²² The authors identified 30 plots with an Islamic State connection, 26 of them in the 12 months between July 2014 and June 2015, but only one of which, the Verviers plot, had clear links to the Islamic State during the planning stage.²³ The Paris attacks also seem to have had clear links, while the San Bernardino attackers do not.

It may not matter much whether attacks are inspired or directed by the Islamic State if they result in the death and injuries seen in Paris or San Bernardino, but one factor makes this particularly important when trying to predict terrorist trends in the future. Most of the attackers in Paris had spent time in Syria, and some, like Abaaoud, had traveled to and from the region more than once. According to a recent tally, there are now at least 6,000 residents or citizens of Western countries who have at some point gone to Iraq or Syria to join the fighting, and in some countries half have already returned.²⁴ This places an inordinate strain on law enforcement and security agencies that need to make some assessment of the threat they pose.

Furthermore, the future intentions of returnees will be unpredictable and hard to assess. They may well be susceptible to approaches for help from ex-comrades who have traveled from Islamic State territory to plan an overseas terrorist attack. Some may even be sent back to await such contact or remotely delivered orders before taking action. In fact, there are many possibilities along the spectrum between inspired and directed attacks.²⁵

The Islamic State, through its propaganda and in the tweeting of its followers, has often boasted of its plans to attack high-profile targets overseas such as Istanbul, London, Paris, Rome, Washington, D.C., and, most recently, New York City.²⁶ It has threatened many other countries with the murder of their citizens, whether or not they are members of the U.S.-led coalition ranged against it, for example, China, Japan, and Norway.²⁷ The Islamic State is as indiscriminate in its choice of enemies as it is in accepting their citizens as new recruits.

Although propaganda videos have shown foreign recruits burning their passports, and



This image from an Islamic State video shows fighters training in Libya.

there is little evidence to suggest that anyone has joined the Islamic State to train as domestic terrorists rather than to seek a new life, or death, in Syria, these fresh enlistees represent an unmistakable and irresistible resource for an organization interested in global terrorism. In any case, not all recruits are able to fight on the battlefield, and those that are unskilled and have poor Arabic are sometimes more hindrance than help. Some recruits, faced with the squalor and discomfort of life in the Islamic State, may see more glory in copying the Paris attackers than dying in meaningless battles such as the failed attempt to capture Kobani, or in attacks on rival rebel groups.

According to the study quoted here, eight returning foreign fighters were involved in six of the 30 plots recorded as having a connection with the Islamic State.²⁸ The Paris attack has added to that number, but as the study points out, this is an exceptionally small number compared to the total of Western foreign fighters who have gone to Syria, and it is still too early to predict how the percentage may grow. One thing is certain, however. The Islamic State will continue to evolve, and its leaders will not hesitate to promote global terrorism if they see advantage in doing so. Indeed, they may have made that decision already. **CTC**

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The Paris Attacks and the Evolving Islamic State Threat to France

By Jean-Charles Brisard

The Paris attacks of November 13, the deadliest terrorist attacks on European soil since the Madrid bombings on March 11, 2004, were the latest indication that the Islamic State has morphed from a regional to a global threat, a threat that could increase if the Islamic State decides to further “weaponize” its Western recruits. After the January 2015 attacks in France, several foiled plots provided evidence of planning and operational connections with Islamic State cadres or militants abroad. The complexity of the latest attacks and the level of planning and preparation required suggest Islamic State fighters are adapting to the law enforcement and security measures arrayed against them, which raises significant concerns and questions about the viability of the status quo in the European security paradigm.

The Paris attacks of November 13 provide all the patterns of a complex plot involving a high level of planning and preparation, which contrasts with all other plots and attacks in the West that have been linked to the Syrian and Iraqi context since 2013.

So far, the investigation has found that at least eight of the plotters, including attackers and facilitators, were foreign fighters returning from Syria. Aside from the ringleader, all of those identified as carrying out the attacks were French nationals. Several were based in the Molenbeek area of Brussels, Belgium. The ringleader was a well-known Belgian foreign fighter, Abdelhamid Abaaoud. He and a childhood friend, French foreign fighter Salah Abdeslam, are believed to have planned, prepared, and coordinated the attacks. Both men had been convicted in February 2011 for their joint involvement in armed robberies in Belgium.

Most of the plotters re-entered Europe in August, three months before the attacks, and at least two of them entered Europe in October via the refugee flow through the Greek island of Leros. Once in Europe, at least one of them, Salah Abdeslam, made frequent roundtrips from Brussels to Paris in September and October. In

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September, he bought detonators outside Paris. In November, he and his brother Brahim rented three cars in Brussels and used online services to book several apartments, hotel rooms, and a house in and around Paris to accommodate the plotters. The weapons used by the perpetrators were bought online or obtained through criminal networks.¹

The plan involved three coordinated teams acting simultaneously in various places in Paris: the iconic Stade de France, where three suicide bombers blew themselves up after failing to enter the stadium; the Bataclan concert hall, where three attackers were killed or blew themselves up after shooting and taking hostages; and central Paris, where a mobile team fired on several restaurants and cafes. The French prosecutor later indicated that Abaaoud and an accomplice, who were killed during the siege of an apartment in Saint-Denis near Paris on November 18, had planned another attack targeting a commercial center and a police station in the Paris business district of La Défense set to take place the same day or the day after.² A witness also stated Abaaoud had spoken of other plans to attack Jewish targets, transportation systems, and schools.³

Salah Abdeslam managed to escape France after he apparently abandoned his suicide vest and was picked up by two accomplices, while Abaaoud remained in France to supervise the outcome of the plot and plan new attacks. The French prosecutor provided striking details on Abaaoud's whereabouts during the attacks in central Paris. He stated that he was caught on videos on the Paris Metro heading to the areas of the shootings where he spent two hours, including near the Bataclan concert hall during the attack, according to data collected about his mobile phone location.⁴

In a new development, the author can reveal that Abaaoud's presence near the Bataclan was confirmed by at least one witness formally interviewed by investigators. The witness, who was parked in a car on a dark street about three short blocks away from the Bataclan shooting, testified that Abaaoud was huddling in the doorway of a residential building where he remained for about one hour. The witness described him as very agitated and shouting into the phone with an earpiece. The witness left and came back to the car several times and each time Abaaoud was still there yelling into his phone. After the assault, the witness returned a final time and came across Abaaoud in full light at the end of the street and was struck by his unusual face with a long nose. The witness later remarked that Abaaoud's head was shaved and that he was wearing layers of unusually large, loose clothing. Having seen his face, the witness immediately recognized Abaaoud days later when pictures of the terrorist emerged in the press. The presence of Abaaoud in the immediate vicinity of the attacks provides an indication of his degree of implication in the supervision and control of the plot and suggests he was giving direct orders and instructions to his team inside the Bataclan during the shootout.⁵

Abaaoud's control in real time over the various phases of the plot was further evidenced by the phone data indicating he was communicating with Bilal Hadfi, one of the three Stade de France suicide bombers, in the minutes leading up to and in the very moment when the first of the three blew himself up.^a

The fact that the November 13 attacks were claimed in the name of the Islamic State in a statement read by Clain, a veteran French foreign fighter, was likely not coincidental. Fabien Clain was a close friend of the Mohammed Merah family in Toulouse before his family settled in Brussels. Clain was also convicted in 2005 for his participation in a network recruiting fighters for Iraq. He finally joined the Islamic State in Syria in 2014 where he is believed to have reached an important rank. More significantly, his name had been associated with a 2009 plot against the Bataclan, the very same target that was hit on November 13. Because of his background, his role in the genesis and planning of the Paris attacks could have been more than just symbolic.^b

In probing links between the Paris attacks and overseas terrorists, other persons of interest to French investigators are Salim Benghalem and Boubaker el-Hakim, who are both believed to be senior operatives of the Islamic State, based in Syria.⁶

The Islamic State Campaign to Attack France

The Paris attacks, which were the deadliest terrorist attacks on European soil since the Madrid bombings on March 11, 2004, did not come as a surprise. If this specific attack was not anticipated, one like it was expected.

For the last 30 years, the involvement of French jihadists in conflicts in Afghanistan, Chechnya, Somalia, and Iraq always had implications for French national security in terms of propaganda, recruitment, support, and terrorist acts. A 2013 study found that among Western foreign fighters, one in nine returned to perpetrate attacks, or a rate of 11 percent.⁷ In France, according to the former leading counterterrorism judge Marc Trevidic, 50 percent of the French jihadis who fought abroad reengaged at some point in terror networks after they returned, and all major terror plots foiled in France since 2000 involved returnees.⁸ Such plots included the Strasbourg Cathedral Plot in 2000, the U.S. embassy bombing plot in 2001, a chemical attack plot in 2002, and plans to bomb the Eiffel Tower and the Notre-Dame Cathedral in 2010.

France currently has the largest contingent of foreign fighters from Europe in Syria and Iraq. More than 2,000 French citizens and residents are involved in Syrian and Iraqi jihadi networks. Among them, 600 are believed to be fighting alongside terrorist organizations abroad and 250 are believed to have returned. France alone accounts for one-third of all Europeans involved (6,500). Sixty percent of European jihadists originate from three countries:

a Their phones were in communication between 2040 and 2121 on the night of November 13 according to the Paris prosecutor. The first explosion at the Stade de France took place at 2120, which indicates that Abaaoud and Hadfi were in communication even as the attacks got underway. Paris Prosecutor Francois Molins, Press Conference, November 24, 2015.

b The fact that Clain in his claim of responsibility wrongly stated one of the areas attacked was the 18th arrondissement also suggests he had foreknowledge of the plans. No attack took place in the 18th arrondissement, but investigators suspect Salah Abdeslam had been tasked with carrying out an attack there, before aborting his mission. Author interviews with French investigators November and December 2015. For more details on Clain see Soren Seelow, "Fabien Clain, la "voix" du massacre de Paris, avait déjà menacé le Bataclan en 2009," *Le Monde*, November 18, 2015.

France, the UK, and Germany. It is estimated that 1,500 of them, or 25 percent of the total European citizens and residents involved, have returned to their home country.⁹

Despite analysis depicting the Islamic State threat to the West as exaggerated,¹⁰ all the warning signs were there that the group would escalate from having primarily a regional focus to becoming a more global threat. These signs were in the group's ideology, the repeated statements by its leaders that it seeks confrontation with the West, and its threats in response to the international coalition air campaign against it. And it was clear that even if the group itself did not embrace a strategy of attacking the West, the thousands of foreign fighters it had recruited could take matters into their own hands.

France has long been a target of modern jihadist organizations, and the Islamic State's determination to target the country, whether by inspiration or direction, was evidenced in many plots conceived since 2013 and even more significantly since January 2015.

This year, France has experienced both simplistic Islamic State-inspired plots and more complex attempts from foreign fighters involving tactics such as multiple attacks, explosives, and suicide attacks intended to cause mass casualties.

Investigations into the January 2015 attacks on the *Charlie Hebdo* satirical magazine and a kosher store in Paris revealed planning and operational connections with Islamic State cadres or militants abroad who assisted in instructing, advising, or directing the plotters. Amedy Coulibaly, the kosher store attacker, received instructions by email from someone overseas who seemed to have knowledge of both coordinated plots, including the *Charlie Hebdo* attack by the Kouachi brothers.¹¹

Since then, similar directional links have been uncovered in most, if not all the foiled plots, including a project to target churches in Villejuif in April,^c a plot against a military base near Perpignan^d on the southern coast in July, a plan targeting a concert hall in August, the foiled Thalys train attack in August, and a planned attack against a naval base in Toulon in October.^e

Since the beginning of the year, security services had knowledge of mounting threats from European fighters, including the suspected ringleader of the November attacks, Abaaoud, whose name had already been associated with several plots against France in 2015, including the church and train plots.¹² Plotters described him as someone obsessed, who wanted, at all costs, to recruit volunteers to carry out attacks in Belgium and France.¹³

The most striking signal was provided in August when a returning French foreign fighter arrested on August 11 told investigators he attended a training camp for a week in al-Raqqa before being "instructed" by Abaaoud to launch an attack in France on a soft target to achieve maximum casualties. The chosen target was a concert hall. Abaaoud had provided him a USB stick containing

c The church plotter is alleged to have met with French Islamic State operatives in Turkey who tasked him to carry out an attack. See Soren Seelow, "Sid Ahmed Ghlam, entre les mailles du filet," *Le Monde* August 8, 2015.

d According to the prosecutor an Islamic State fighter in Syria had asked the youngest of those arrested to carry out an attack in France. "Attentat déjoué au Fort Béar : l'État islamique voulait "frapper" la France," RTL, July 17, 2015.

e During interrogation the Toulon suspect said he had been incited to act by a French Islamic State member in Syria who was communicating with him online. "Un attentat a été déjoué contre des marins de la base navale de Toulon," *Journal du Dimanche*, November 11, 2015.

Table 1: Paris Attack Suspects by Nationality, Residence, and Travel to Syria

SUSPECT	NATIONALITY	RESIDENCE	TRAVEL TO SYRIA
Ringleader			
1-Abdelhamid Abaaoud	Belgian	Molenbeek	Trips between 2013 & 2015
Stade de France			
2-Bilal Hadfi	French	Brussels	2015
3-Unidentified	?	?	Return via Leros 2015
4-Unidentified	?	?	Return via Leros 2015
Bataclan			
5-Ismael Mostefai	French	Paris area	2013–2014
6-Samy Amimour	French	Paris area	2013–2015
7-Foued Mohamed-Aggad	French	Strasbourg	2013–2015
Mobile Team			
8-Brahim Abdeslam	French	Molenbeek	Attempted travel 2015
9-Salah Abdeslam	French	Molenbeek	Some indications of travel

The data in the table is based on French and international media reports and information received by the author from investigators. A tenth unidentified attacker blew himself up during the French commando raid in Saint-Denis on November 18. Several of the plotters were residents at some point of the Molenbeek district of Brussels.

encryption software and €2,000.¹⁴

Abaaoud had been plotting against European targets since the very beginning of the year. An earlier attempt similar to the Paris attack was foiled on January 15, 2015 in Verviers, eastern Belgium, when authorities raided a safe house. The ensuing firefight ended in the deaths of two individuals and a third suspect was arrested. The raid disrupted a plot involving ten operatives, most of them Islamic State foreign fighters, possibly targeting police or the public. The suspected leader of the group, Abaaoud, directed the operation from a safe house in Athens, Greece using a cell phone, while other group members operated in several European countries.¹⁵

Interestingly, at the time Abaaoud was already using deceptive tactics to avoid border controls. He even faked his death to deter efforts by law enforcement officials to track his activities. For that purpose, Abaaoud's family received a call in late 2014 that he had been killed while fighting in Syria.¹⁶ Several members of the group were also able to freely travel across borders. Abaaoud would boast that he was able to return to Syria after the Verviers raid despite international arrest warrants, according to an interview featured in the February issue of the Islamic State's *Dabiq* magazine.¹⁷

The Future Threat

The Paris attacks and the plots uncovered since January provide several important indications of the status and evolution of the threat against France and Europe. The Islamic State's move toward "weaponizing" its Western recruits, if sustained, may likely lead to a major increase in the level and scale of the terrorist threat.

The Islamic State and its operatives have demonstrated their intention and ability to plan complex plots involving a large group of terrorists. This marks a change from previous trends in Europe, where individual terrorist attacks accounted for 12 percent of all attacks between 2001 and 2007, while rising to between 40 and 45 percent of all terrorist attacks since 2010. The indiscriminate

nature of the targeting in the Paris attacks was also a departure from previous trends. Attacks on random targets had decreased since 2008, representing 28 percent of all terrorist attacks in the period since then while discriminate attacks constituted 55 percent of all attacks since then.¹⁸ Despite the emergence of larger-scale plots, the threat represented by individuals or microcells will remain due to the continuous appeals and threats from the Islamic State leaders and militants. But the Islamic State's apparent desire to maximize casualties and the impact of plots against the West may result in it orchestrating more sophisticated plots, involving a high level of planning, preparation, and commitment, and trained fighters instead of inspired sympathizers. One study based on jihadi attacks and serious alleged attack plots in the West from January 2011 through June 2015 found that foreign fighter attacks were far more deadly on average (7.3 deaths per attack) than attacks without foreign fighters (1.2 deaths per attack).¹⁹

Given the scale of the Paris attacks, it is likely that Islamic State-linked plots will increasingly draw on foreign fighters with a criminal background and networks in their native country, especially operatives such as Abdelhamid Abaaoud and Salah Abdeslam, who have the ability to leverage violent extremists in their home countries to boost support and facilitation, as well as the skill-sets to obtain weapons and evade security services.

The fact that, as the Verviers and Paris plots illustrated, Islamic State-linked plots have elements of planning in multiple countries is another pattern creating significant obstacles in their detection and disruption.

The difficulties of preventing Islamic State-linked terrorism have been compounded by the use of varied tactics in such plots initiated against France and Europe this year, including multiple coordinated and synchronized attacks, suicide bombings, hostage taking, and Mumbai- and Kenya-style shootings.

The decision by the Islamic State to launch "dynamic" multi-

hour terrorist operations in Paris instead of a “static” attack of compressed duration was probably intended to delay the ending of the event, which would increase its impact, and potentially allowing additional planning and waves of attacks. In that regard, as mentioned above, Abaaoud and an accomplice had targeted a commercial center and a police station in the Paris business district of La Défense, and also considered targeting the Jewish community, transportation, and schools.

The fact that three of the latest Islamic State-linked plots and attacks in Europe (the concert hall plot and Thalys foiled attack in August, and the November 13 Paris attacks) were intended to inflict indiscriminate mass casualties may signal a shift from previous selective and symbolic targeting by Islamic State-inspired or directed militants targeting high-value targets such as religious communities, police, and military personnel. This shift might be a strategic

move by the Islamic State leadership, but it is more likely temporary and linked to specific planners, including the Abaaoud network. It may also suggest progressive adaptation to law enforcement and security measures by attempting to make the threat less predictable.

The Paris attacks of November 13 have also demonstrated major failures in European border control policy and the exchange of information between European Union-member states. The fact that most of the perpetrators and facilitators of the attacks were able to travel and slip undetected into the heart of Europe, and then travel back and forth between Belgium and France to prepare the attacks raises significant concerns about European law enforcement agencies’ ability to detect and investigate transnational threats, and raises questions about the viability of the status quo in the European security paradigm. **CTC**

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A View From the CT Foxhole: An Interview with Zainab N. Ahmad, Asst. U.S. Attorney

By Paul Cruickshank

Zainab Ahmad is an Assistant United States Attorney in the Eastern District of New York, Criminal Division. She is the Deputy Chief of the National Security & Cybercrime Section. Earlier this year, she prosecuted Abid Naseer, a Pakistani al-Qa`ida operative who was convicted of plotting an attack on a shopping center in the United Kingdom and sentenced in November to 40 years in prison. She has prosecuted several other terrorism cases including US v. Babafemi, where a Nigerian citizen was convicted of providing material support to al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula at the direction of Anwar al-Awlaki. The current cases she is prosecuting relate to al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State and include Muhanad al-Farekh, an American the government alleges provided material support to al-Qa`ida in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region

CTC: Earlier this year, in one of the highest-profile terrorism cases in the United States, you prosecuted Abid Naseer, a Pakistani al-Qa`ida recruit who was the ringleader in the United Kingdom of a plot to launch a bomb attack on a shopping center in Manchester in April 2009 that was thwarted days before it was set to go into motion. He was convicted of the conspiracy by a jury in federal court here in Brooklyn in March. Why was he prosecuted in the United States rather than the United Kingdom?

Ahmad: The short answer is that the American justice system contains legal and evidentiary advantages that rendered a conviction more readily attainable in the United States. It was also a result of what evidence was available at particular points in time. When the Greater Manchester police (GMP) arrested Naseer in April 2009, their evidence consisted principally of coded emails to an individual identified only as being located in Pakistan. The code included references to weddings, marriages, and girls. These references, which had commonly been used by al-Qa`ida to discuss attacks, led the GMP to suspect that there was an attack being planned for Easter weekend in the UK. The GMP, who had only begun the investigation a few weeks prior, decided that while the case had not yet developed—from an evidentiary perspective—to the point they might have liked, they had to make arrests rather than risk the high potential for an attack. Disruption, understandably, had to be the priority. The upshot was the Crown Prosecution Service (the UK equivalent of our office) ultimately made the decision that there was not enough evidence to bring charges against any of those arrested.

Fast forward to September 2009: We, here in the Eastern District of New York, along with the FBI, started to investigate a plot



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to bomb the New York City subway in which one of the suspects, Najibullah Zazi, a Queens resident of Afghan descent, was emailing the same address in Pakistan that Abid Naseer had been communicating with about weddings and girls. Zazi was eventually arrested and agreed to cooperate, meaning to tell the government everything he knew about al-Qa`ida and its operations and to testify against others if required, in exchange for some leniency at sentencing. When Zazi started cooperating, he told us this email address belonged to a courier who reported to the then-head of al-Qa`ida's external operations, Saleh al-Somali, also known as Abdul Hafeez. He also told us that he himself had been instructed by al-Qa`ida to use the word marriage as a code for a bombing attack. All of a sudden, the case against Naseer looked very different.

It later turned out that the same courier who reported to Saleh al-Somali was also in touch with a third cell in Norway that was plotting an attack on a newspaper in Copenhagen. Although we could have made Zazi available to testify in the UK, we collectively came to the decision with our European partners that we were best placed to prosecute the entire three-pronged conspiracy here in the Eastern District of New York, especially as we had indicted the al-Qa`ida masterminds who were still at large, such as Adnan el-Shukrijumah. This is why we sought to extradite Naseer to the United States. Later, even more evidence emerged as a result of the raid on Usama bin Ladin's compound in Abbottabad in May 2011, which demonstrated Naseer's plot was part of a larger al-Qa`ida conspiracy. The documents and correspondence recovered from bin Ladin's compound revealed reports up the leadership chain—ulti-

“Al-Qa`ida prioritized the activities of the external operations directorate above all others. Attacking the United States and Europe was their principal goal, and they were constantly looking for creative ways to achieve it.”

mately all the way to bin Ladin himself—about Saleh al-Somali and al-Qa`ida’s external operations department planning the attacks at issue. The reports included specific reference to the planned attacks in New York, Britain, and Copenhagen, and made specific allusions to Naseer.

CTC: What were the challenges in introducing Abbottabad evidence at trial?

Ahmad: Introducing that evidence required a lot of coordination with the various stakeholders. The FBI, as came out at trial, had embedded an agent with the Department of Defense team that was in Afghanistan for the raid. That meant that from the moment the evidence recovered from bin Ladin’s compound arrived at the U.S. base in Afghanistan, it was already being handled and processed in such a way for it to be available for use in criminal prosecutions. It was the FBI who took custody of it, catalogued and vouchered it, transported it to the United States, and managed the exploitation of those materials. All of this ensured that a proper chain of custody was maintained and hence that the evidence would be available for use in criminal proceedings. So the challenges were less than you might imagine because of the FBI’s foresight.

The Abbottabad evidence has also been used by the German prosecution service in a terrorism trial there.^a I think the materials will continue to be useful from a prosecutorial point of view as long as the al-Qa`ida figures who authored the correspondence or are mentioned in it are still active.

CTC: What strategies can be used to make a jury understand the complexities of a case like Abid Naseer’s?

Ahmad: In every case, the prosecution’s challenge at trial is to persuade the jury that the evidence proves the defendant’s guilt. Particularly in complex cases like Naseer’s, you need to be sure to make your case as clearly and directly as possible. For prosecutors, jury addresses are always a very important part of any trial because they give you the opportunity to pull all the evidence together and present to the jury your view on what inferences should be drawn from that evidence.

In “extra-territorial” cases, where the majority of plotting and activity is happening overseas, you end up introducing a Brooklyn jury to all sorts of unfamiliar names and places, and all sorts of par-

ticularized details about the hierarchy and structure of groups, like al-Qa`ida, whose internal workings they are generally not familiar with. The prosecution’s task in such cases is to avoid overwhelming the jury with those facts. You have to simplify the narrative and keep it focused as much as possible on the alleged actions of the person standing trial. Decisions about the order in which to introduce evidence, the structure of cooperating witnesses’ testimony, and the use of expert witnesses can be crucial here. But sometimes it’s inevitable you will be drawn down tangents. In the Naseer case, for example, the existence of coded emails necessitated our spending a significant amount of time decoding references to weddings and girls, which in turn led to lengthy exchanges on the defendant’s love life, or lack thereof.

CTC: Al-Qa`ida has been degraded in the tribal areas of Pakistan where Abid Naseer was recruited for his plot against the UK, but there is mounting concern the group is rebuilding in Syria. What did you learn about al-Qa`ida priorities from the Naseer case?

Ahmad: The lessons we’ve learned from the Abid Naseer case and from the Bryant Neal Vinas and Najibullah Zazi cases, which we also handled in the Eastern District, is that al-Qa`ida prioritized the activities of the external operations directorate above all others. Attacking the United States and Europe was their principal goal, and they were constantly looking for creative ways to achieve it. Zazi and his co-conspirators traveled to Pakistan in order to train and fight on behalf of jihadist groups in Afghanistan who were attacking U.S. forces; al-Qa`ida convinced them that they could much better support the jihadist cause by conducting an operation in the United States, because attacking Americans in their homeland was the best way to inflict pain and devastation on the country. Similarly, Bryant Vinas also traveled from New York to Pakistan in order to take up arms against U.S. forces in Afghanistan, but was persuaded by al-Qa`ida that an attack within the United States was the surest way to maximize harm to America. He ultimately worked with the external operations group to develop a plan to attack the Long Island Railroad.

In the Naseer case, the evidence presented at trial showed that al-Qa`ida was able to go one step further: to recruit individuals within Pakistan and equip them to infiltrate a Western nation in order to conduct an attack there. The recruits obtained student visas, under false pretenses, to study in the UK; as soon as they arrived in Britain, they each successively dropped out of the courses they had enrolled in.

The evidence at trial showed that Naseer dropped out of Liverpool John Moores University only three days after his arrival, despite the fact that he’d paid in full through the whole semester. Using this infiltration method enabled al-Qa`ida to not simply have to rely on Westerners who took the initiative to travel to Pakistan, but instead to be able to get foreign fighters into the West, and thereby to greatly expand the number of its operatives who were able to conduct attacks in the West.

CTC: What shifts are you seeing with regard to the prosecutions of terrorism cases?

Ahmad: In answering this question it’s useful to make a distinction between those we prosecute who are present in the United States and those we prosecute who are based overseas but targeting the United States. While the latter category has remained generally sta-

^a Abbottabad evidence was introduced in the Dusseldorf trial of Abdeladim el-K and three others who were convicted in November 2014 of being members of or supporting al-Qa`ida. See Paul Cruickshank, Tim Lister, and Nic Robertson, “New al Qaeda document sheds light on Europe, US attack plans,” CNN, March 20, 2013; Matthias Inverardi, German court jails four men in al Qaeda cell for planning attack,” Reuters, November 13, 2014.

ble in terms of number of prosecutions, what you've seen this year is a large uptick in the number of arrests and prosecutions of individuals present in the United States either inspired or encouraged by the Islamic State to carry out attacks here. In the Eastern District of New York we've charged 11 individuals in just the past year with conspiring to provide material support to a terrorist group, and if you compare that arrest statistic to all previous years you will note a significant increase.^b We're seeing individuals responding to ISIL's [Ed.: also known as the Islamic State] call to take up arms against government officials, police, and the military, among other targets. It all suggests the propaganda disseminated by the Islamic State is resonating with its intended audience.

Of course, the growth and success of English-language jihadi propaganda didn't happen overnight. It was prolifically produced by al-Qa`ida's affiliate in Yemen, al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula or AQAP, and the American terrorist cleric Anwar al-Awlaki. I recently led the prosecution of Lawal Olaniyi Babafemi, a Nigerian man who worked on the group's *Inspire* magazine, published online in English. Babafemi pleaded guilty to conspiring to provide and providing material support to AQAP and was sentenced to 22 years imprisonment in August of this year. That investigation and prosecution revealed that English-language propaganda was a priority for AQAP and particularly for the now-deceased al-Awlaki. He taught recruits that AQAP's English-language media operations were the most important thing the group did other than orchestrating violent attacks, because the media expanded the reach of AQAP's destruction by inspiring and equipping people to carry out attacks on the group's behalf wherever they were located, without ever having to get on a plane and travel to Yemen to receive training and tasking.

CTC: During the summer, FBI Director James Comey sounded the alarm about the Islamic State-inspired threat to the United States. Has this created an impetus to make arrests more quickly?

Ahmad: The pace of law enforcement is always going to match the pace of the threat. Arrests of individuals who are inspired by ISIL to commit acts of violence have accelerated because of a quickening in the way that the threats are progressing. We have seen in various instances young people becoming radicalized very quickly and it can be difficult to predict the moment they are going to transition their radical thought into radical action. Overall, this is one of many consequences of the shift in the nature of the terrorist threat away from centrally directed activity. There is less predictability and much less warning when you have one person deliberating whether to go out onto the street and stab a police officer as compared to when you have a group of individuals planning the kind of complex plots al-Qa`ida was putting together in years gone by.

CTC: How has the "going dark" phenomenon created challenges in terrorism investigations in New York?

Ahmad: It's creating a unique problem in our nation's history: there

"The broader American-Muslim community...rejects the distorted version of Islam that terrorist groups use to justify acts of mass violence."

are "lockboxes" that law enforcement has the lawful authority to open, but not the physical ability to open. It's not just terrorism cases that may be negatively affected. If a teenager goes missing from her bed in the middle of the night and leaves her phone on the bedside table, the "going dark" phenomenon means that depending on the phone, the provider, and the circumstances, we might be completely unable to find out what's inside it—despite the fact that most parents will tell you that the best evidence of what their teenage child is up to will be contained in his or her phone. Even when you meet the legal standards to obtain a court order instructing the service provider to unlock the phone, the service provider can say "because we've designed this system so we can't access it, we can't actually comply with this court order." This is a new challenge for law enforcement agencies. The limits being placed on the FBI's lawful ability to monitor communications have the potential to have a particularly strong impact on terrorism investigations; because the primary goal of such investigations is to prevent attacks, they rely much more on electronic monitoring and wiretaps than other criminal investigations.

CTC: How can terrorism prosecutions serve to dissuade Americans from traveling to join the Islamic State?

Ahmad: We hope they have a deterrent effect by making clear the severe consequences that await such actions. In addition, many defendants charged with terrorism offenses agree to cooperate, and their providing us with all relevant information about their crimes significantly expands the body of knowledge that our government has regarding terrorist groups. For example, the cooperation of Najibullah Zazi, his co-conspirator Zarein Ahmedzay, and Bryant Neal Vinas provided the U.S. government with a treasure trove of intelligence regarding al-Qa`ida's activities, whereabouts, and hierarchy. ISIL prosecutions have the potential to yield the same valuable intelligence. In addition, the more publicly available information we develop about the degree of dissatisfaction and disappointment many individuals who have traveled to join ISIL in Iraq and Syria feel with the organization, the more people will be dissuaded from joining the group.

CTC: Abid Naseer was presumably surprised when he found out that the prosecutor in his trial was an American woman of Muslim faith whose parents came to the United States from Pakistan. What made you decide to embark on your career path?

Ahmad: There were several factors that went into my decisions (many of which surprised those who knew me well) to go to law school, to work in criminal law, and to eventually become a prosecutor working on terrorism cases—it's been an unexpected but incredibly rewarding career path for me. In some ways, the primary relevance of my ethnic background to the work I do is its irrelevance. By that I mean that anyone who knows the broader

^b The defendants charged with Islamic State-related crimes in the Eastern District of New York in the past year include Abdurasul Juraboev, Akhror Saidakhmetov, Abror Habibov, Dilkhayot Kasimov, Akmal Zakirov, Munther Saleh, Faeed Mumuni, Noelle Velentzas, Asia Siddiqui, Nathaniel Pugh, and Ali Saleh. The defendants are presumed innocent unless and until proven guilty.

American-Muslim community knows that it rejects the distorted version of Islam that terrorist groups use to justify acts of mass violence. And so it should not be surprising to find members of that community participating in counterterrorism efforts, as you do across many different federal agencies; I'm not unique. It's in keeping with broader values and patriotism of the American-Muslim community. Many American-Muslims feel that it's their own culture and their own community that are being hijacked, which makes it a particularly important goal for them to hold accountable the perpetrators of terrorism.

CTC: How can prosecutors and law enforcement involved in terrorism cases win trust from the Muslim community?

Ahmad: I think the best way for prosecutors to win trust from all communities, including the Muslim community, is to do their job fairly, with an open mind, and with integrity, throughout every stage of the criminal justice process. As prosecutors we are taught over and over that our principal aim is to seek justice, not to achieve any particular subsidiary goal in any particular case. Prosecutors should always be guided by the evidence in decisions related to bail, detention, admission of statements, and what sentences we seek, rather than always seeking the maximum or the most punitive course.

CTC: Many commentators have spoken of the need for “off-ramps” for impressionable youth being brainwashed by radical ideologies. There is a pilot federal program in Minnesota to deepen the engagement between law enforcement agencies and the community, which creates the possibility of off-ramps through early warnings of radicalization. From where you sit as a prosecutor, what can you do to rehabilitate youth being led astray?

Ahmad: Pilot programs like the one in Minnesota certainly show a lot of promise. As I've said, as a prosecutor your primary goal is always to see that justice is done in a particular case. Achievement of that goal can take a variety of forms and I don't think there is any legal tool that is not appropriate to deploy in this context. In all federal criminal cases, the levying of charges does not end the discussion. Efforts can be made to achieve rehabilitation or take into account specific circumstances like youth or vulnerability in fashioning the appropriate resolution to the case. Furthermore, there are legal protections in place for juveniles or individuals whose mental capacity is in question.

“There are many situations where criminal prosecution is the only way to neutralize a terrorist threat, and hence a very important wrench in the U.S. government’s counterterrorism tool kit.”

CTC: Will the Department of Justice and FBI be able to sustain their current intensity of focus on terrorism cases?

Ahmad: I have not in my professional career seen any threat that was not adequately addressed with the proper amount of resources by the Department of Justice, the FBI, and the intelligence community. So I have the utmost confidence that the focus will be sustained.

CTC: What has been the value of criminal prosecutions in U.S. counterterrorism efforts?

Ahmad: I believe criminal terrorism prosecutions have made the country safer by disrupting threats and producing valuable intelligence about the nature of the terrorist threats we face. Obviously, the U.S. government's approach to combating terrorism is multifaceted and is the responsibility of many agencies beyond just the Department of Justice. But it's important to keep in mind that there are many situations where criminal prosecution is the only way to neutralize a terrorist threat, and hence a very important wrench in the U.S. government's counterterrorism tool kit. There are many people whom we've investigated and prosecuted who would still be at large today otherwise. Naseer, for example, had he not been convicted in U.S. court, would be living freely in the West, because he was able to defeat the UK government's efforts to deport him to Pakistan. In addition, the exceptionally valuable intelligence gained from the debriefings of cooperating defendants such as Zazi and Vinas would likely not have been attainable were it not for the negotiated plea agreements made possible by the federal criminal justice system. The success we've had in terrorism prosecutions is a testament to the quality of the work and workers involved across the Department of Justice and law enforcement agencies. **CTC**

A Frontline Report: The Ground War Against the Islamic State

By Tim Lister

A recent journey through northeastern Syria and northern Iraq provided an opportunity to see the multifaceted campaigns against the Islamic State on several fronts, the handicaps and challenges that its adversaries face, and a sense of the real progress being made in degrading the group, compared to a previous visit to the region in February 2015. There are still issues, including notable animosities and deep-seated rivalries that persist among the different states and players that are supposedly on the same side of the conflict. These divisions provide the Islamic State with oxygen in its campaign to endure and expand. They also constrain U.S. and coalition action.

In late October and early November, the author spent two weeks traveling through northern Iraq and northeastern Syria as part of a CNN team reporting on the ground war against the Islamic State. The team went to Hasakah province in Syria and then Nineveh in Iraq. Most of the time it traveled with the dominant Kurdish factions in Iraq and Syria, but it also met Yazidi fighters, some of the internally displaced people of Iraq and Syria, and senior officials in the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq.

The battle against the Islamic State is frequently hobbled by a lack of weaponry and equipment, as well as internal rivalries among the Islamic State's adversaries, all of whom have their own patrons and often diverging priorities. Second, the scale of the Islamic State's defensive preparations complicates the task of forcing the group from towns and villages they have spent a year and more fortifying—let alone from strongholds such as Deir Ezzour and al-Raqqa. Third, U.S. attempts to help prepare partners on the ground remain at best patchy, especially in Syria, and first-hand observation of air strikes around Sinjar tended to confirm that while they can make a critical tactical difference—the team observed one strike take out a truck suicide bomb just outside the town—their strategic effectiveness is limited.

However, there are signs that the Islamic State is under stress in critical areas. Its oil production, refining, and transport opera-

tions are being pummeled. Resupplying its crown jewel, the Iraqi city of Mosul, is becoming more arduous. Nearly 1.5 million people in the city live in deteriorating circumstances; those with relatives trapped there speak of growing paranoia among Islamic State officials, shortages, and price inflation.

The broader political landscape in the region changed beyond recognition in a few short weeks, following the bombing of the Russian Metrojet airliner, terror attacks in Paris on November 13, and the downing of a Russian Su-24 by Turkish planes later in the month. How these events will influence the battlefield and the relationships among key parties will only become apparent in time, but signs of a hardening response are already evident.

France has sharply escalated its airstrikes against al-Raqqa, on the grounds that the plot to carry out the Paris attacks was planned there. It is using its aircraft carrier, the *Charles de Gaulle*, which it moved to the eastern Mediterranean, as well as airbases in Jordan and the United Arab Emirates to stage the campaign. French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius has even suggested coordination of rebel and regime forces against the Islamic State on the ground, a proposal that is a non-starter for factions inside Syria supported by Persian Gulf nations.

In the immediate aftermath of the Metrojet crash, Russia broadened its campaign of airstrikes to include the Islamic State's oil business, claiming to have destroyed 500 fuel tanker trucks in the first few days of strikes.¹

How Russia will respond to the downing of their Su-24 remains to be seen. Economic, visa, and trade restrictions against Turkey were quickly announced, but unless this crisis is defused in the near term, Moscow may seek to retaliate by providing greater support for the Syrian Kurds. There are already signs that the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its military wing—the People's Protection Units (YPG)—are benefiting from Russian airstrikes against other rebel groups (notably Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham) north of Aleppo.²

Turkey regards the YPG as a terrorist organization in league with the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK), which has fought the Turkish state for three decades. This complicates the on-the-ground situation. The YPG is already receiving support from the United States and other coalition partners—mainly through airstrikes—in its battles against the Islamic State. Russian support might encourage the group to defy Ankara and push west beyond the Euphrates River in order to achieve its aim of linking the cantons of its statelet, known as Rojava. Any expansion of Kurdish control across the Syrian border would shrink the Islamic State's access to the outside world and deny valuable routes for its oil, fighters and supplies.³ But Turkey has vowed to prevent such a move. The prospect of almost all its southern border being controlled by Kurds is something it will block, even if it means that the Islamic State remains in control of border towns such as Jarabulus.

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A YPG fighter in Hasakah, Syria

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A Patchwork Battlefield

Among the many parties battling the Islamic State on either side of the colonial-era border between Iraq and Syria are different Kurdish factions (as wary of each other as they are hostile to the Islamic State), Arab tribes, Yazidis, and Assyrian Christians. Government forces—either Syrian or Iraqi—are either absent or quiescent.

The major player among these ground forces is the KRG's peshmerga in Iraq. Its size is estimated at around 180,000, distributed between the Interior and Peshmerga Ministries and local authorities. The formation of the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs and U.S. aid has accelerated the process of integrating peshmerga brigades, but it is far from complete—and many fighters have police functions or are volunteers who rotate through frontline positions.⁴ Even at the front many peshmerga are not of prime military age and must supply their own weapons. During the trip the author saw several fighters over the age of 70 at various frontline positions.

The Iraqi Kurds defend a frontline more than 600 miles long against the Islamic State, from south of Kirkuk to Sinjar near the Syrian border. They are thinly spread, often with small outposts of a dozen or so fighters at intervals of several kilometers. In the summer of 2014, the peshmerga were driven back to within 30 kilometers of the KRG capital Erbil by a lightning Islamic State advance. They were simply outgunned by a better-trained and equipped adversary that was able to field plundered armor, tanks, and mortars. But some Kurdish officials acknowledged privately that their military leadership had become complacent in the decade since the overthrow of the former Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein.⁵

The failure in 2014 caused a refocusing of effort. "This was the first time we saw peshmerga withdraw, and it had a deep impact on all the peshmerga and the whole of Kurdish society," said Halgurd Hikmat, spokesman for The Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs.⁶

A winter offensive, heavily supported by coalition airstrikes, reclaimed some 500 square kilometers around Mosul, and the capture of Sinjar and its environs in November 2015 completed the rec-

lamation of what the KRG considers Kurdish territory, according to multiple KRG officials.⁷ There is no appetite, for example, for evicting Islamic State fighters from Tal Afar, a town that is sandwiched between Sinjar and Mosul and is a bastion of Sunni militancy.

In response to the Islamic State's suicide bomb attacks, some peshmerga frontline units have been equipped with anti-tank missiles. The German government is providing some 500 MILAN missiles along with 30 launchers as part of a new \$77 million military aid package.⁸ The KRG also has U.S. AT4 anti-tank missiles and some 40 of the U.S. mine-resistant ambush-protected vehicles known as MRAPs.⁹ But the vast majority of peshmerga units rely on AK-47s and pick-up trucks mounted with heavy machine-guns.

The KRG mobilized some 7,000 fighters¹⁰ for the operation that freed Sinjar, but the operation's success should be measured against the Islamic State's decision to retreat rather than reinforce. As Denise Natali has observed, "At Sinjar, heavy coalition airstrikes, alongside ground support from Kurdish forces from Turkey and Syria, as well as Yazidi fighters, neutralized ISIL in the months before the actual liberation maneuver was launched. It was this combination of force, and not the presence of any single Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga faction, that led to an ISIL retreat (or, as some say, a mere tactical withdrawal) without a lengthy urban battle."¹¹

The Kurds are still vulnerable to attacks along the frontline, evidenced by the assault on Dibis near Kirkuk, which came within kilometers of severing the main highway between Erbil and Kirkuk.

Complicating the Kurds' effectiveness on the battlefield, the peshmerga are split between the two main political organizations in Kurdish Iraq: the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) (the majority party led by President Massoud Barzani) and the Kurdish Union Party (KUP). The Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs was created to better synchronize the fighting force. But progress has been slow because political rivalries are never far from the surface, and recently turned fatally violent over the postponement of the presidential election in the KRG area.¹²

Intra-Kurdish Woes

The Kurds' battlefield capabilities are further hobbled by rivalry between Iraqi and Syrian Kurds. The YPG, with an estimated 30,000 fighters, is the dominant force in northeastern Syria, though they are poorly equipped and lack training.

The focus of the tension between the KRG and YPG has been the Sinjar region just inside Iraq. The KRG was embarrassed by the sudden Islamic State takeover of the area in August 2014 and widely criticized for its inaction.¹³ In contrast, the YPG fought to create an escape corridor across Mt. Sinjar for thousands of Yazidis fleeing the Islamic State. With the Syrian border just a few kilometers away, the YPG has remained in the area, highlighting its occupation with a base and a massive portrait of PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan painted onto a mountainside. The tension between the KRG peshmerga and Syrian Kurdish fighters was palpable during the author's trip: both sides flew their banners and flags prominently and mounted their own roadblocks.

Ultimately, the operation to take Sinjar was led by KRG peshmerga and supported by Yazidi volunteer units cobbled into an auxiliary force under peshmerga control. The military wing of the PKK complained loudly at being excluded. "We can make no sense out of this unfriendly attitude," was a representative quote from YPG leaders, according to news reports.¹⁴ Similarly, the Sinjar operation was devoid of Arab participation, despite the area being ethnically mixed. "One important excluded group was the Sunni Arab Shammar tribe that controls the Rabia border region with Syria, cooperates with Barzani, has a good relationship with the Yezidi, and had hundreds of fighters ready and willing to help liberate Sinjar," Natali noted.¹⁵

Further complicating the picture in this area are acts of vengeance by Yazidi militia against Arabs and some Kurds whom they regard as having collaborated with the Islamic State during the 16 months its forces occupied the area.¹⁶

The KRG's hard line toward its fellow Kurds is partly because the KDP does not tolerate competition where it is the dominant party.¹⁷ The KRG also has a close relationship with the Turkish state. Iraqi Kurdistan is heavily reliant on Turkey for investment and as a conduit for its oil, which is shipped northward independent of Baghdad and the central Ministry of Oil. KRG President Massoud Barzani cannot afford to alienate Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, newly emboldened by election victory. Amid a multi-pronged offensive against the PKK, which has included months of airstrikes on the group's bases in northern Iraq, Turkey has put pressure on the KRG to interrupt the flow of foreign fighters trying to join the YPG, according to sources in the region.¹⁸

Further evidence of the close relationship between the KRG and Ankara came with the reinforcement of a Turkish military training mission in KRG territory in early December. The Turks are helping to train former Iraqi police and soldiers at a base north of Mosul.^a

Were the YPG and KRG to coordinate their actions against the Islamic State, pressure along crucial axes that connect Islamic State territory in Syria and Iraq might be more effective. The establishment of a U.S. Special Operations Task Force in Erbil may improve

the situation, along with the arrival of small units of U.S. special forces on the ground in northern Syria to help train and coordinate the YPG's efforts. As The Institute for the Study of War puts it: "The deployment of reportedly up to 200 Special Operations Forces (SOF) with authority to engage in raids in both Iraq and across the border in Syria follows an intensification in U.S. activity under advise and assist in support of the peshmerga in Iraq."¹⁹

The U.S. government clearly recognizes the potential offered by Kurdish forces for degrading the Islamic State in this critical theater, but there remain substantial logistical and diplomatic obstacles to exploiting that potential.

The Hasakah Front

Over the past year, the YPG has shown itself (by the relative standards of rebel factions) to be a proven partner against the Islamic State in northern Syria. After saving the border town of Kobani last year with help from coalition airstrikes, it has denied much of the Turkish border region to the Islamic State. The YPG was also able to forge an alliance with some Arab factions in what was known as the Euphrates Volcano operations room.²⁰

The YPG has insisted that before the Syrian regime can be confronted, the Islamic State must be eliminated—a view that's popular in Washington but less so among many Arab rebel groups in Syria. There is significant criticism that the Kurds stood to one side when the uprising against Syria's President Bashar al-Assad began in 2011.

Even so, the YPG is the senior partner in a new coalition that includes Arab factions and Syrian Christians under the umbrella of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Its members include the Sanaidid force (dominated by the Shammar tribe), the Christian Syrian Military Council, the Jazira Brigades, the Turkmen Seljuk Brigade, and Jaysh al-Thuwar, which is made up of moderate Arab factions previously expelled from northeast Syria by Jabhat al-Nusra.^b

The non-Kurdish constituents can, at best, field fighters in the low thousands, and in many instances their training is non-existent. They are more akin to defensive neighborhood militia. After 50 tons of U.S. ammunition was dropped to the new alliance in October, U.S. officials "privately acknowledged that the Arab units it was intended for did not have the logistical capability to move it. So, again, the Kurds were called to help."²¹

Yet to be demonstrated is the degree of cooperation in the field among the SDF factions, whether in Hasakah or further west.

YPG fighters—including the Women's Protection Units (YPJ)—display exceptional determination and courage. Some have been trained by the United States in the use of hand-held GPS devices to call in airstrikes, acting as forward air controllers for the coalition. But a tour of frontline positions suggests that tactically, and in terms of organization, communication, and equipment, the YPG needs further help, especially with demining, transport, and defensive armor.

Its most recent focus has been on pushing Islamic State forces further south, out of Hasakah province altogether. In November,

a The Iraqi government protested the Turkish military presence in KRG territory without Baghdad's consent. The Turkish ambassador to Iraq was summoned to the Foreign Ministry on December 4. "Iraq summons Turkish ambassador to demand withdrawal of troops," Reuters, December 5, 2015.

b The announcement establishing the SDF was made on October 11, 2015, with the preamble stating: "Due to the accelerated conditions in both the political and the military development and the sensitive phases our country has gone through, there must be an establishment of a unified national military force to all Syrians consisting of Kurds, Arabs, Assyrians, and all others living in the geographical locations of Syria."



Northern Iraq and Syria

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the YPG began probing attacks on Islamic State positions closer to Deir Ezzour, a critical supply and communications hub between al-Raqqah and Mosul. Again, airstrikes helped pave the way, with multiple attacks against the Islamic State strongholds of al-Hawl and Ash Shaddadi. At the end of October, heavy plumes of smoke could be seen hanging over the area for days at a time, though that may have been in part due to oil fires used by the Islamic State fighters to obscure their movements.

The YPG offensive made progress despite heavy mining by the Islamic State around its defensive positions.²² The Islamic State abandoned al-Hawl near the Iraqi border toward the end of November. Ash Shaddadi, 46 kilometers south of Hasakah city, is the next key objective because it is on a critical Islamic State resupply route, but it is allegedly encircled by improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and landmines intended to funnel an attacking enemy into a kill zone. According to Kurdish commanders on both sides of the border, the Islamic State has also invested more heavily in conventional defensive fortifications in recent months, including long trenches and networks of tunnels that shield their fighters' movement from the enemy.

YPG commanders do not envisage taking a leading role closer to Deir Ezzour. They regard it as an Arab city where Kurdish fighters would not be welcome and where losses would likely be high. It's unclear what ground forces acceptable to the Western coalition would be capable of such an assault, which would require a force of some 20,000 according to YPG commanders. There is the added complication of regime forces close by, holding out at Deir Ezzour airport.

The Turkish Question

The United States has to walk a tightrope in its relations with the YPG because of Turkish hostility to the group. U.S. officials have

been at pains to insist that the SDF will operate only to the east of the Euphrates.

"They [the YPG] have been effective," said State Department spokesman Mark Toner. "But we also have talked about some of the caveats—that we don't want them developing some kind of semi-autonomous zone."²³

Ankara has been explicit in saying it will prevent the YPG from creating a contiguous zone along the Syrian border by moving beyond the river, even though to do so could deny the Islamic State access to Turkey.

In a CNN interview on November 9, Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu said Turkey would take all measures to stop arms shipments to the YPG. "We will not and we cannot ...tolerate any help to any PKK-related groups in Syria or in Iraq," he said.²⁴

At the end of October, Turkish forces opened fire several times on YPG units that were allegedly trying to cross to the west bank of the Euphrates. The Erdogan administration may have been hoping for return fire to provide a pretext for escalating offensive action, but YPG forces showed restraint. Even so, the desire of the coalition to transform the Syrian Kurds and their allies into a ground force capable of putting pressure on al-Raqqah will likely be constrained by Ankara.

Kurdish forces and their allies hold Tal Abyad, but their ability to apply pressure on Jarabalus, an important border town held by the Islamic State, is hobbled by the de facto Turkish veto. Erdogan has accused the Kurds of a form of ethnic cleansing as they advance. "Who owns that place?" he asked of Tal Abyad. "Ninety-five percent of the people in that town are Arabs and Turkmens, with 5% Kurds. Their goal was to turn that place into a canton, and that is what they did. This is now posing a threat to Turkey."²⁵ Salih Muslim, the leader of the PYD, responded by saying: "[The Islamic State] is slaughtering women and children west of the river, but Ankara

doesn't say anything about that. To say the YPG must not move to Jarabalus only means let [the Islamic State] do what it wants."²⁶ It was a complaint later taken up with gusto by Russia.

Islamic State Under Pressure

Despite the many difficulties in stitching together a workable coalition against the Islamic State in northern Syria, the group is under pressure there and in northern Iraq. There are multiple reports that families of foreign Islamic State fighters have begun leaving al-Raqqa for Mosul since French airstrikes intensified.²⁷ The capture of Sinjar and Route 47 linking al-Raqqa and Mosul has forced the Islamic State to find more circuitous and difficult routes through Ba'aj. Kurdish sources in Iraq say the Islamic State has moved road-building equipment into the area.²⁸

Even so, the capture of Route 47 has exacerbated shortages in Mosul and stoked price inflation for basic goods, according to sources familiar with the situation inside the city.²⁹ The Islamic State's difficulties in the area straddling the Syrian-Iraqi border have been multiplied by a much more concentrated air campaign in support of YPG advances south of Hasakah and against the Islamic State's oil facilities in the area.

The Islamic State has been pumping an estimated 30,000 barrels of oil daily, according to several estimates, of which a significant portion comes from the al-Jabsah and al-Omar fields in northeastern Syria.³⁰ That source of revenue is now under much greater pressure.

In the two months to the beginning of December 2015, U.S., French, British, and (uncoordinated) Russian airstrikes targeted oil refineries, transport, and storage facilities held by the Islamic State around Deir Ezzour. On November 18 alone, U.S. ground attack aircraft struck nearly 300 oil tanker trucks near the town, according to U.S. officials.³¹

It was the second attack of such intensity within a week and may have prompted the Islamic State to change its system for transporting oil. Previously, long lines of trucks would wait for refined products; now they are called one-by-one to collection points, according to sources in the region.³² The Russian Defense Ministry has claimed its jets have also been hunting oil tankers in this area and had attacked fuel dumps north of Deir Ezzour. In early December, British jets targeted the al-Omar oilfield, one of the largest still under the Islamic State's control.

The Islamic State remains a resilient organization with sophisticated military tactics, an extraordinary capacity to produce improvised explosive devices (IEDs), and a complex bureaucracy that manages everything from taxation to the supply of ammunition to frontline positions. It still has thousands of seasoned fighters in the field and has enjoyed success in other parts of Syria in recent months, especially round Aleppo and in the Homs countryside. And while it has lost ground in northern Syria, its main positions remain intact. Several factors could yet derail progress against the Islamic State in the Syrian governorates of Hasakah, Deir Ezzour, and al-Raqqa, especially rivalry among its adversaries.

Even so, there is no denying that the Islamic State has lost territory, access to highways, and control of resources in this area, as well as seeing its access to Turkish soil eroded.

The Next War?

The fractured nature of the battlefields on either side of the Iraqi-Syrian border mean that the Islamic State is neither the only



A Yazidi fighter near Mt. Sinjar, Iraq.

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enemy nor even the most critical enemy for some forces. Amid the kaleidoscope of rivalries, one that could play in favor of the Islamic State is the growing tension between the KRG and Shia militia, which is nibbling at the Kurds' sphere of influence.

One peshmerga general close to KRG President Massoud Barzani said he feared the the Shia Asaib Ahl Haq and Badr militia more than he did the Islamic State.³³

These militia—known as Popular Mobilization Units (PMUs)—have overshadowed Iraqi security forces as the sharpest offensive group in operation against the Islamic State in non-Kurdish parts of Iraq. The weakness of the Iraqi Security Forces has prevented Iraq's Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi from consolidating his authority in the face of the militia, which led the battles to retake Tikrit and Baiji. The Islamic State has worked hard to stoke fear of the PMUs among Sunnis in areas that it controls. According to one source it moved busloads of Sunni civilians from Tikrit to Mosul so they could spread word of the atrocities committed by the militia.³⁴

The Kurds are apprehensive of these militias' ambitions north of Baghdad and around the city of Kirkuk. The city hosts a mix of ethnic and sectarian groups, but its status as part of the KRG is non-negotiable for the Kurds. The peshmerga swept into the city in June 2014 as it was abandoned by Iraqi security forces in order to prevent the oil-rich area falling into the hands of the Islamic State. While Arabs make up much of the police force in Kirkuk, it is the Kurdish militia and police force that carry out almost all security functions.

The Shia militia are the most obvious evidence of Iran's influence in Iraq, and Kurdish commanders say senior officers from the Iranian Qods Force are a regular fixture in the area. The Kurds do not coordinate with the PMU in the fight against the Islamic State, according to the Minister of Peshmerga Affairs, Mustafa Sayid Qadir. "We do not have any cooperation with them and we are not happy to have them closing in on our [KRG] borders," he said earlier this year.³⁵

The KRG, for example, insists that the multi-ethnic town of Tuz Khormato, which lies between Kirkuk and Baghdad, is within its territory. This has led to clashes between the al-Hashd al-Shaabi and peshmerga, with the Turkmen community caught in the middle. In October, 16 people were killed amid Kurdish-Shia clashes in the town, and the road linking Baghdad to Kirkuk was severed for a time. The Islamic State is seeking to exploit these tensions, claiming a car bomb attack in Tuz Khormato at the end of November that killed five people.³⁶

Across the border in the self-proclaimed cantons that make up the Syrian Kurds' self-declared statelet of Rojava, similar resentments are brewing. Some Arab villages around Hasakah have been abandoned; in others the population can barely disguise its sympathy for the Islamic State. The YPG talks constantly of reconciliation, and its communiqués advertise joint actions with other groups in the Syrian Democratic Forces. It has some Arab allies among the tribes of the north, especially the Shammar, who see the Kurds as the lesser of two evils. But Amnesty International has reported human rights violations by the YPG, including the clearance and destruction of villages as its fighters reclaimed territory from the Islamic State this year.³⁷

The Sharabia are one group at odds with the newly dominant Kurds in this area and in the words of one analysis, “many of the Arab belt settlers probably fear that the Kurds will eventually want to evict them and take back their property.”³⁸

There were several days of clashes pitting the YPG and its allies against other Syrian groups around the border town of Azaz and the Aleppo suburb of Sheikh Maqsud. One of those groups, Liwa Ahrar Suriya, accused the YPG of cooperating with Russia in trying to cut rebel supply lines to Aleppo. Each side accused the other of killing civilians. A truce was arranged on December 3 between the YPG and the Aleppo Conquest Operations Room.³⁹

A journey across this region is a painful reminder that even if the Islamic State's control of territory shrivels and disappears, it will likely retain the ability to wage insurgent warfare, thanks in no small part to overlapping territorial, communal, and sectarian disputes among its adversaries, the massive displacement of civilians, and the absence of meaningful reconstruction in areas already wrested from Islamic State control. **CTC**

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Wilayat Sinai Risks Backlash After Metrojet Bombing

By Zack Gold

Although the involvement of the group is not proven, it appears increasingly likely the October 31 downing of a Russian aircraft over Egypt's Sinai was the result of a bomb placed on board by Wilayat Sinai, the Sinai affiliate of the Islamic State that claimed the attack. This article traces the origins of the group and what is known about its leadership, and argues the attack may prove counter-productive to the group. The decision to please the Islamic State by prioritizing an international target may create a backlash against the group because so many Egyptians work in tourism. Any backlash would provide an opportunity for Egyptian security services to degrade the group.

The October 31 crash of Metrojet Flight 9268 in Egypt has focused global attention on the threat posed by the Islamic State's branch in the Sinai Peninsula, which claimed responsibility. Wilayat Sinai emerged only recently, formally pledging *bay`a* (allegiance) to the Islamic State on November 10, 2014. Islamist militancy based in the Sinai Peninsula, however, has a long history.

In 2004, Tawhid wal Jihad, a predecessor group to Wilayat Sinai, targeted tourists with bombings in the South Sinai resort towns of Taba and Nuweiba. One of the motivations appears to have been pay back for the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq. President Hosni Mubarak's regime clamped down harshly on the militancy in the Sinai, where tourism is a major economic driver. But the perceived impunity and abuses by the Interior Ministry during that campaign were part of the recipe that resulted in the 2011 uprising. In the aftermath there has been a post-revolutionary consolidation in the Sinai by a new generation of Islamist militants, who are again turning their sights on tourists and other international interests.

Wilayat Sinai's initial statement made no mention of Egypt or of Moscow's policies toward that country. Instead, the attack was claimed solely as retaliation for Russian military strikes in Syria, and the group threatened that Russian civilians would not be safe anywhere as long as Russia continued its military campaign in support of the regime of Bashar al-Assad and against the Islamic State. The mounting evidence of a terrorist plot behind the Metrojet crash shows that Wilayat Sinai is serious in its threats to take on the Islamic State's enemies.

Background

The conditions in the Sinai have long been ripe for militant activity. The absence of law enforcement throughout Egypt after the January 2011 uprising first allowed remaining and returning followers of Tawhid wal Jihad and other likeminded individuals and groups to consolidate their operations. Militants also benefited greatly from the mass jailbreaks that occurred the same month. Many hardened jihadis with records dating back to Egypt's counterterrorism confrontations of the 1980s and 1990s were joined by foreign and foreign-trained militants. Later waves of detainee releases also brought new recruits.

Regional events allowed the militants to obtain weapons. The revolution in Libya flooded local arms markets. The flow of weapons from Libya helped solidify connections between Sinai's criminal elements and Hamas, which rules Gaza. According to Israeli and Egyptian intelligence assessments, Hamas has provided weapons to militants in Sinai for mutually beneficial operations.¹

Wilayat Sinai directly identifies itself as a successor organization of Tawhid wal Jihad, which had strong connections to several radical groups. Tawhid wal Jihad had links with the Iraq-based group of the same name founded by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, which developed into the Islamic State.² In the Sinai, the ideological links from Tawhid wal Jihad passed from one of its founders, Khaled Mosaid, through a student, Tawfiq Mohamed Freij. In 2012, Freij became the founding leader of Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis ("Supporters of Jerusalem," ABM), which in late 2014 changed its name to Wilayat Sinai.³

ABM also had links to al-Qa`ida before it pledged allegiance to the Islamic State in November 2014. According to the U.S. Department of State, Ramzi Mawafi, an Egyptian al-Qa`ida explosives expert and personal doctor to Usama bin Ladin, fled to Sinai after mass prison breaks in the wake of the Egyptian revolution. As of October 2014, Mawafi was still "believed to be in the Sinai Peninsula coordinating among militant groups and helping to arrange money and weapons to support violent extremist activity."⁴

Another al-Qa`ida-linked militant with likely ties to ABM was Muhammad Jamal, who was released from prison by the Egyptian military government in 2011. He used his connections with al-Qa`ida, including Ayman al-Zawahiri, to establish training camps in Sinai, western Egypt, and Libya. Jamal, who operated publicly, was rearrested in Egypt after U.S. intelligence emerged showing that his network was involved in the September 2012 Benghazi attacks in which the U.S. ambassador and three other Americans died.⁵

Consolidation and Adaptation

ABM demonstrated a clear capacity to evolve and adapt. In the fast changing environment during and after the collapse of the Mubarak regime, ABM was able to consolidate itself as the main group operating openly in Sinai. It developed a consortium-like structure in which smaller organizations became "cells" under ABM's banner.

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The wreckage of Metrojet Flight 9268

EGYPTIAN GOVERNMENT

Unclaimed attacks took place in North Sinai, but it was the rare exception for any group other than ABM to claim credit.

Another adaptation took place in ABM's targeting. From February 2011—before the group even started to use the name Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis—until mid-2013, ABM struck at Israeli interests and the Egyptian-Israeli relationship. It concentrated on cross-border raids and attacks, and sabotage of Egypt's gas pipelines to Israel and Jordan. Following the ouster of President Mohamed Morsi in July 2013, the Egyptian military renewed its counterterrorism campaign in North Sinai. The Sinai offensive, coupled with a perceived crackdown on Muslims following the August breakup of pro-Morsi sit-ins, turned ABM's focus to attacking Egyptian military and police forces in Sinai and across the Suez Canal in "mainland" Egypt.

Between September 2013 and January 2014, ABM carried out a number of high-profile attacks outside North Sinai, included the attempted assassination of the Interior Minister in Cairo. Many of the Sinai-mainland militant links appear to have been disrupted by good Egyptian police work. Others may have been broken by ABM's decision to affiliate with the Islamic State.⁶ And there was likely also a decision by Wilayat Sinai to focus on consolidation, limiting "external" (i.e., outside North Sinai) operations. During Wilayat Sinai's first year of existence, the group only claimed five attacks outside North Sinai even as its operations in North Sinai grew exponentially in frequency, size, and complexity.⁷

Strength through Mystery

One of ABM's operational advantages was its cellular structure and secrecy. Wilayat Sinai has for the most part maintained this approach, except in large-scale attacks, such as the July 1 siege of the North Sinai city of Sheikh Zuweid.⁸ The group's nature means that little definitive information exists about Wilayat Sinai's leadership, and the government has been embarrassed by the reappearance of key militants it claimed to have been killed, such as Shadi al-Menai.⁹

Al-Menai does appear to be important in ABM.¹⁰ He is young, less than 30 years old, and is from the Sawarka tribe based in northeast Sinai, which has provided ABM with solid Bedouin credentials since its founding. Al-Menai reportedly connected with Tawhid wal Jihad in prison while serving a sentence for human trafficking.¹¹ Egyptian sources regularly blamed the military's inability to capture

or kill al-Menai—and another ABM/Wilayat Sinai leader from Tawhid wal Jihad, Kamal Alam—on his ability to escape into Gaza via tunnels. Indeed, there has been no "proof of life" for al-Menai since his claimed death in 2014, but Egyptian and Israeli sources assert he is in Gaza, perhaps under the protection of Hamas, but at least with the group's knowledge. On November 1, 2015, Wilayat Sinai released a short video of what appeared to be al-Menai threatening Israel, though there has been no confirmation of the obscured figure's identity.¹²

The best known representative of Wilayat Sinai is a militant known as Abu Usama al-Masri, though the details are still blurry. Despite being a "person of interest" in the Metrojet bombing, little is known for certain about al-Masri, including his real identity or rank within the organization.¹³ One theory

from Egypt's National Security Agency is that al-Masri's real name is Mohamed Ahmed Ali and that he is from North Sinai's capital al-Arish.¹⁴ However, linguistic analysis suggests al-Masri may not be from the Sinai.¹⁵ Other sources suggest that al-Masri is Abdel Moneim Nofal, a January 2011 prison escapee who led Egyptian militants in the 1980s, but Nofal has since been re-arrested.¹⁶ Al-Masri is believed to be the main link between the Islamic State and Wilayat Sinai. According to Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, al-Masri was one of the ABM leaders who traveled to Syria in the fall of 2014 to arrange the new relationship.¹⁷ Beginning in January 2014, al-Masri began encouraging victory for the Islamic State in his public statements.¹⁸ In a May 2015 video, with Kamal Alam by his side, al-Masri renewed the Sinai group's November 2014 pledge of allegiance to the Islamic State.¹⁹

Notwithstanding his relatively high profile, it is unclear if Abu Usama al-Masri is Wilayat Sinai's leader. The group has never claimed him as leader and, as Nelly Lahoud previously noted, al-Masri referenced another leader in his 2014 Eid al-Fitr address.²⁰ One questionable report from the Gulf claims Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi appointed al-Masri head of Wilayat Sinai—and that perhaps he is not even based in Egypt.²¹ Other Egyptian reports, citing an anonymous security source in North Sinai, claim al-Masri is merely Wilayat Sinai's spokesman.²²

Indeed, in May 2015 what is probably the same anonymous source "revealed" the identities of Wilayat Sinai's leaders to Egyptian and Palestinian news outlets. In addition to telling at least one media organization that al-Masri practices witchcraft, the source claimed the head of Wilayat Sinai was identified as Sulayman Dabshish Abu Malhus.²³ In those reports, Dabshish is stated to be 33 years old, using the noms de guerre Abu Omar and Abu al-Zubeir, and hiding out in the villages of North Sinai's Sheikh Zuweid. However, no further information was provided then, nor has his name been mentioned since.

Wilayat Sinai likely has only a few hundred active fighters, but the group has managed to impede road travel with impunity using improved explosive devices (IEDs), carry out large-scale military raids, and use heavy weapons such as man-portable air-defense systems (MANPADS) and anti-tank missiles. And despite taking significant hits from the Egyptian armed forces, it has managed to

rebound. It has also shown remarkable tactical flexibility being able to produce IEDs and vehicle-borne IEDs (VBIEDs) with a range of explosives (ammonium nitrate, TNT, and military-grade C4, using both remote- and plate-detonation devices.

Since pledging *bay`a*, Wilayat Sinai fighters have received camouflage “Islamic State” uniforms and a number of new vehicles. That has not slowed its acquisition of materiel captured from the Egyptian military, police, and civilians in North Sinai. By the organization’s own count, it has stolen more than 50 vehicles in the past year and a significant amount of arms. The list of captured materiel includes two 25mm anti-aircraft guns with more than 650 rounds of ammunition, six RPGs (with more than 30 rounds), more than 50 AK47s, five DShK heavy machine guns, an unspecified number of sniper rifles, and tens of thousands of rounds of ammunition.²⁴

Indifference to Local Interests

Wilayat Sinai’s decision to target Egypt’s tourism industry is a departure from its focus on attacking Egyptian security services. The attack on Metrojet Flight 9268 builds on the group’s self-declared economic war against the state and continues a year-long trend of rhetorically attacking the local interests of nations working against the Islamic State. The group’s initial statements defiantly refused to provide any evidence of its involvement in the attack, saying this would be revealed at a time of its choosing.²⁵ Almost three weeks later, on November 18, a photo of the alleged IED appeared in the Islamic State’s English-language magazine *Dabiq*. The article claimed less than a kilogram of explosive material, hidden in a can of Schweppes Gold, “was smuggled onto the airplane.”²⁶

One day before *Dabiq* published its story, Russia’s Director of the Federal Security Service Alexander Bortnikov said, “We can say with confidence that this was a terrorist act.”²⁷ Although the Egyptian government continues to deny it, this followed weeks of a building consensus among foreign intelligence officials and policymakers that Wilayat Sinai’s claim of involvement was likely true.

At this point, evidence suggests Wilayat Sinai used either at least one baggage handler at Sharm el-Sheikh International Airport to secrete the device in the Russian airplane’s hold, or someone with access to the cabin, perhaps a member of the catering crew, to place the bomb on board. This type of attack requires little sophistication compared to many of ABM’s and Wilayat Sinai’s previous strikes. As the Sinai expert Mohammad Sabry has noted, there is a vast amount of explosive material in Sinai.²⁸

These changes in Wilayat Sinai’s *modus operandi* have come even as the Egyptian military continues to pound its strongholds, reportedly killing more than 1,000 “terrorists” in Sinai this year.²⁹ The problem, as identified by the Egyptian government, is that Wilayat Sinai is replacing these fighters with Egyptian returnees from Syria, Iraq, and Libya, and with other foreign fighters.³⁰

Egypt has failed to halt an infiltration of Sinai by non-Sinawi militants, who join the Islamic State group yet do not have the same tribal links, loyalties, and interests as existed among the ABM core. This change in the makeup and nature of Wilayat Sinai poses an immediate challenge to the local Sinai population and to international interests in Egypt—especially in Sinai.³¹ Over the course of 2015, the Sinai’s civilians have come under greater assault from Wilayat Sinai. ABM always presented itself as a defender of the Sinai population. Wilayat Sinai, on the other hand, claims to have killed more than 130 locals because of their alleged collaboration with the Egyptian government. Militants have also stepped up their harassment of the

“An attack on a civilian airliner is the surest sign yet that the militant group’s focus is on serving an international agenda.”

Multinational Force & Observers (MFO). The international troops, in Sinai for more than three decades monitoring Egyptian-Israeli peace, have long been a target of political demonstrations; but the direct threats the MFO faces today are unprecedented and growing.³²

An attack on a civilian airliner is the surest sign yet that the militant group’s focus is on serving an international agenda (that of the Islamic State) without regard for that agenda’s impact on the population within which it operates. It is possible Wilayat Sinai operatives thought this attack would please the Islamic State’s leaders and secure more funding and support, as well as an influx of Egyptian recruits. However, the attack led Russia to turn more of its firepower on the Islamic State’s Syrian stronghold.³³

Did Wilayat Sinai Overreach?

All of the Islamic State propaganda regarding the Metrojet crash—the initial claim, another audio statement, and the *Dabiq* article—focus on Russian policies toward and military actions in Syria. Despite being carried out by Wilayat Sinai, and the negative implications for Egypt’s tourism sector, no effort was made to gain sympathy among Egyptians or to use the attack to recruit Egyptian youth that already have anti-government views. Had the Islamic State wanted to use the incident to recruit locally, it could have easily linked Russia to the perceived excesses of the Egyptian regime. There are close ties between Egypt’s President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi and Russia’s President Vladimir Putin, frequent government exchanges, and military sales. The decision to instead focus their propaganda on threats to the international community and those sympathetic to Syrian Sunnis makes it clear that the plotters—and the Islamic State’s media machine—cared little about the local impact.

If Egypt responds carefully, Wilayat Sinai’s decision to attack a civilian aircraft will go down as yet another example of the foreign-influenced group overplaying its hand. The attack was part of “economic warfare” against the Egyptian state, and in the immediate term it can be considered a success. But tourism provides the livelihood for a significant number of Egyptians. Attacks on tourists will boost pressure from Bedouin in South Sinai on their tribal brethren in the peninsula’s center and north. This would parallel the isolation of Egypt’s Islamic Group following its 1997 attack on tourists in Luxor and, more directly, the lack of sympathy among South Sinai tribes for the repercussions in North Sinai following the 2004 Taba bombings. Similarly, the increased threat to the MFO risks the economic interests of North Sinai’s Bedouin, because the international group is the largest employer in the governorate. This combination of factors could leave Wilayat Sinai isolated from the population, which will likely demand protection from Egyptian security forces.

The government can also point to pressure from the international community to justify increased military operations against

Wilayat Sinai. Until recently, the primary vulnerability was seen as the MFO, but Wilayat Sinai's targeting of tourists will likely spur both preemptive operations and—as Russia would demand—retribution. Foreign partners, including the U.S. and U.K. governments, may now be more willing to provide Egypt with intelligence support to confront and disrupt the group.

This combination of local demand and foreign support provides the Egyptian government with an opportunity to expand its oper-

ations against Wilayat Sinai in a strong but smart manner. Wilayat Sinai's international threats may well make fantastic propaganda for the Islamic State, but targeting foreign tourists is likely to secure the jihadi group a great many more enemies with little to show except the gratitude of the Islamic State leaders. **CTC**

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The Islamic State in Southern Syria

By Aaron Y. Zelin and Oula A. Alrifai

Much attention has been given to the Islamic State's military and governance activities in northern and eastern Syria, but there has been less focus on its slow and steady growth in the southern theater. Since July 2013, it has been building a presence in a number of locales around Damascus, with the eventual goal of taking the city. While such aspirations are still far beyond the group's military capabilities, it has actively rolled out soft-power strategies. Focusing on the Islamic State's activities in the north and east of Syria could prevent a complete understanding of what it is attempting to accomplish.

The headlines from the Syrian war have focused for the most part on the north and east of the country. The media has tended to concentrate its attention on, for example, efforts by Kurds to push back against the Islamic State or Russia's air campaign. There are good reasons for this. First, it is difficult for Western reporters to cover the fighting in other areas of the country. In addition, the north and east are where many of factions fighting the regime of President Bashar al-Assad, whether revolutionary, Islamist, or jihadi, have been strongest. It is also where territory was first taken from the regime and where jihadi groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra control parts of Idlib governorate and the Islamic State has set up its self-styled Wilayat al-Raqqa and Wilayat al-Khayr (Dayr al-Zur).

Despite this current focus on the north and east, the southern theater could be more important to the outcome of the Syrian civil war. The regime is based in Damascus, the capital of Syria. Damascus is one of several seats of the former caliphate, and occupying it would provide immense legitimacy. While Damascus is unlikely to fall in the near term, the continued buildup of the Islamic State's assets and presence in the surrounding area could provide a longer-term threat not only to the regime and the rebels fighting it, but

also for Jordan and perhaps Israel.

To better understand the history, evolution, capabilities, and future trajectories of the Islamic State in southern Syria, this article will examine the group's activities in the area starting with its first attempt at building up its network in 2013. We will argue that the ultimate goal is to control Damascus.

Al-Zarqawi's Facilitation Network

The roots of the Islamic State's ability to penetrate southern Syria were in the creation of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's Damascus network. Much as Pakistan served as a staging ground for the anti-Soviet jihad in the 1980s, Syria played this role last decade in relation to the conflict in Iraq. U.S. officials stated that 90 percent of the foreign fighters traveling to Iraq went through Syria.¹ Many of these individuals were put up in safe houses led by al-Zarqawi's man in Syria, the Iraqi Badran Turki Hishan al-Mazidi (better known as Abu Ghadiya).² These networks were also integrated with the Bashar al-Assad regime through bribes and the smuggling networks that lined the pockets of local officials—and the relationship even extended to some training.³ It was also a way for the regime to get intelligence about these networks while also providing some opportunity to shape them to the regime's liking. But, as in the case of Pakistan several decades earlier, these attempts backfired, spurring a long list of attacks and bombings.⁴

The network in Damascus also relied on locals, with the town of al-Hajr al-Aswad and its adjacent al-Yarmuk Refugee Camp just a few kilometers south of the city providing a backdrop for the local growth in Salafi ideas in the late 1990s. One of al-Zarqawi's key operatives there was Shaker al-Absi, who had been based there since 1996. He had been involved with the network that planned and executed the attack on American USAID worker Laurence Foley in Amman, Jordan in 2002 and he would eventually become the leader of Fatah al-Islam in Lebanon in 2006 and 2007.⁵ To illustrate the importance of this base, it was reported that allegedly up to 1,000 Palestinians in al-Yarmuk Refugee Camp signed up to fight in Iraq in 2003.⁶ A lot of the facilitation and logistics for this took place in mosques in the Damascus area, with imams, such as Mohammed Majid (better known as Mullah Fuad), exhorting fighters awaiting approval to continue their journey to Iraq.⁷

When the Islamic State of Iraq (its name at the time) dispatched operatives to create Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria in July 2011, it relied on these same networks and connections to build up a presence in the Damascus area.⁸ Even Jabhat al-Nusra's first two attacks were in that region.⁹ Some of these individuals would then defect to the Islamic State after the split with Jabhat al-Nusra in April 2013, allowing the group to start operating in southern Syria. Until the infighting between the Islamic State, more secular revolutionaries, and Islamist rebels in January 2014, the Islamic State was at a minimum accepted by groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra and Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyyah (HASI). This allowed Islamic State

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Damascus and environs

ROWAN TECHNOLOGY SOLUTIONS

fighters to operate unimpeded, which it would take advantage of.

First Attempt: Jul. 2013–Jun. 2014

During the first few months after the split with Jabhat al-Nusra, the Islamic State built up its sleeper cell networks before kicking off overt operations. The first signs of activity came when pictures surfaced in July 2013 showing its Sheikh Abu Musab al-Zarqawi military training camp in Ghouta.¹⁰ It also set up a training camp for “cubs” (a euphemism for child soldiers) in mid-October 2013.¹¹ Related, the Islamic State joined military operations with other insurgent factions in eastern Ghouta beginning in late-August 2013 as part of the *Burkam al-Tha'ir* (The Volcano of Revenge) campaign, in response to the al-Assad regime’s sarin gas attack.¹²

Starting in mid-September 2013, Islamic State representatives also participated in a massive *dawa* (outreach and missionary activities) campaign to ingratiate itself with the local population. It held forums mainly directed at children and provided them with presents, with one such forum being held in al-Yarmuk Refugee Camp in late June 2014.¹³ Another aspect of the Islamic State’s *dawa* campaign was distribution of religious literature including a prayer guide for the sick in Damascus in September 2013.^a Moreover, it put up *dawa* billboards and visited the sick in eastern Ghouta, provided

food aid in al-Zabadani, and conducted Qur’an classes for children in southern Damascus.¹⁴

The plan also emphasized the concept of jihad for the sake of God. Commentary on the importance of jihad in the Damascus region was produced as early as October 14, 2013 when the Islamic State released its video, “Messages from the Land of Epic Battles #10,” about the journey of a family from Kazakhstan to the Islamic State.¹⁵ The film is a propaganda piece highlighting the daily lives of different individuals. Toward the end, a young jihadi sacrifices himself in a military operation against the al-Assad regime in al-Nabek area, northwest of Damascus.

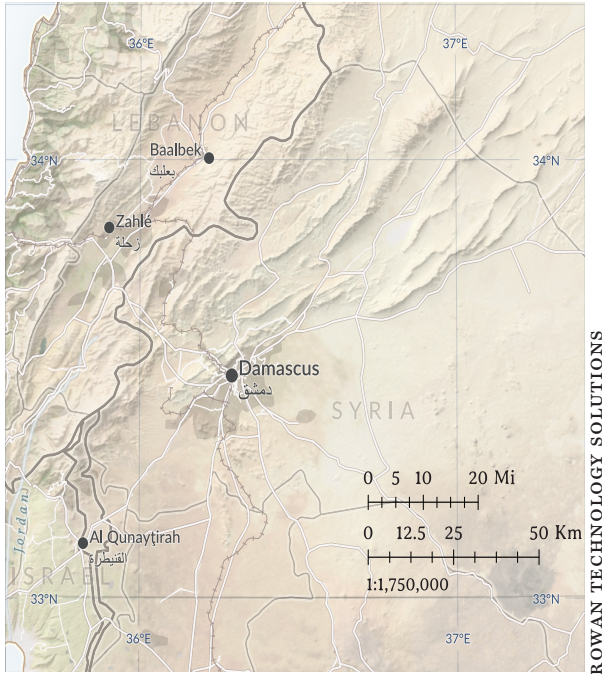
After the Islamic State’s local leaders became comfortable in the local rebel milieu, they began to move against their enemies. Partly this was thanks to new pledges of allegiance, such as the one from Katibat Dhu al-Nurayn of Alwiyat al-Habib al-Mustafa in late January 2014.¹⁶ Tensions between the Islamic State and other factions in the south began to grow at about the same time as such issues began springing up in northern Syria. For instance, on February 20, 2014, the Islamic State reported on fighting west of al-Yarmuk Refugee Camp in Babbila, in which its forces pushed out the Free Syrian Army (FSA).¹⁷

While it appeared that the Islamic State was beginning to make gains, severe fighting in the north and losses in Idlib and Aleppo governorates forced the group to withdraw most of its fighters from Wilayat Dimashq in order to fortify positions in al-Raqqa and Dayr al-Zur against Jabhat al-Nusra and HASI.¹⁸ Therefore, its activities in southern Syria went silent for a couple of months.

In late June 2014, the Islamic State again attempted to take action in southern Damascus, likely because of new pledges of allegiance. For example, on June 22, four members of Jabhat al-Nusra defected to the Islamic State.¹⁹ Jad Bantha, a local resident of Ghouta, reported that in the latter part of June, the group strengthened its membership from 90 to 350 as a result of starvation and desperate need for hard currency.²⁰

The Islamic State’s local leaders took this opportunity to assert

a The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, “How to Pray and Purify the Sickened,” September 12, 2013. Some of the recommendations in this pamphlet included: 1. The sick person must pray standing up and if he/she needs a cane or a wall it’s okay; 2. If they can’t stand up, pray while sitting. Preferably in a cross legged position; 3. If they can’t pray while sitting, then they must pray on their side. Right side preferably; 4. If they can’t pray on the side, they should still pray but raise their head a little; 5. A person who prays must be on his/her knees and bending forward with their heads. If they can’t be on their knees (sick) then they must bend their heads forward. If they can’t bend their heads, then they must be on their knees; 6. If they can’t get on their knees or bend their heads forward, they must close their eyes while they pray; 7. If a person is out of his country for treatment, then they cut down the prayer to noon, evening, and dinner prayers.



Southern Syria

the group's role. On June 23, 2014, an Islamic State court executed a man named Nasir Bahlawan Ibn Taha on charges of sodomy, noting in its statement that it was a lesson.²¹

It did not take long for a backlash to ensue, spurring an Islamic State counter-demonstration and protestations that its enemies were trying to distort the group's reputation, and that it would defend itself against any offenses.²² This did not sit well with the Salafi group Jaysh al-Islam (JI), which would eventually retake the towns of Mesraba, al-Marj, and others in Eastern Ghouta from Islamic State fighters.²³

Tensions between the Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra, along with other insurgents, intensified in late July 2014 when a coalition of forces pushed the Islamic State out of Yalda, east of al-Hajr al-Aswad, after the Islamic State kidnapped some JI and Afnan al-Sham Islamic Union (ASIU) leaders.²⁴

The leader of the Islamic State in Wilayat Dimashq, Abu Sayyah, along with 300 of its members, allegedly fled to its stronghold in al-Hajr al-Aswad, while 80 Islamic State members surrendered to the FSA and other Islamist battalions. Jabhat al-Nusra then investigated and prosecuted the fighters.²⁵ The Islamic State went underground in southern Syria until December 2014.

Rebuilding the Network: Dec. 2014–Apr. 2015

Much as it did during its first attempt, on December 6, 2014 the Islamic State in southern Syria showed off a military training camp for cubs near Damascus, likely at its base in al-Hajr al-Aswad.²⁶ Additionally, on December 14, 2014 it was also able to allegedly procure new pledges of allegiance from groups in the area that have formed the base of its operations until now.

These groups included Liwa Shuhada al-Yarmuk (LSY), Katibat Bayt al-Maqdis, and Katibat Abu Muhammad al-Talawi as well as

individuals in al-Maftarah (northern al-Suwayda governorate).^{27 b} The LSY is of note because there are hints it may be a front for the Islamic State. The Islamic State also set up sleeper cells in these areas, which would culminate in the takeovers of al-Yarmuk Refugee Camp in April 2015, al-Qaryatayn in August 2015, and its current activities.

Prior to its attack on al-Yarmuk Refugee Camp, the Islamic State began conducting activities in the adjacent al-Hajr al-Aswad. For example, in December 2014, Islamic State operatives demolished polytheistic shrines, taught literacy, and its Services Center repainted walls, fixed roads, provided water, cleaned the streets, and did landscaping. The group also imposed penalties on those that smoked hashish.^c It concluded the month by taking over the al-Zayn neighborhood south of al-Hajr al-Aswad, providing it with a buffer against enemies.²⁸ This demonstrated the range of activities that the Islamic State was involved in from military operations to *dawa*, *hisba* (moral policing), and governance, illustrating that the group's leaders created a plan and stuck to it once they decided to reactivate these efforts.^d

More importantly, the group began building a new base in the area between Eastern Ghouta, northeast Dar'a governorate, and north al-Suwayda governorate in towns such as Shanwan, al-Maftarah, Bi'r Qassab, and al-Qasr using many of the same tactics seen in al-Hajr al-Aswad.²⁹ The move also gave the Islamic State an area where it could focus on fighting JI, the dominant power in Eastern Ghouta, and a group that it would increasingly quarrel with over time. For example, the Islamic State executed one of JI's fighters in Bi'r Qassab for spying and providing information that led to the kidnapping of 15 Islamic State members.³⁰

Farther to the west, the Islamic State also activated a cell it had previously cultivated in al-Qunaytirah governorate called Jaysh al-Jihad (JJ). The group comprised up to 300 fighters drawn from locals who had previously fought with Saraya Jihad, Jund al-Islam, Mujahidin al-Sham, and HASI, and who had allegedly joined the Islamic State in January 2015.³¹ On April 27, the Islamic State launched a surprise attack on Ahrar Nawa, a rebel group backed by the Military Operations Command (MOC) that was jointly funded by the United States, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia. The attack was an initial success. JJ captured 20 opposing fighters, and set up checkpoints in al-Qahtaniya, al-Hamidiya, al-Adnaniya, and al-Samdaniyah.³² Before JJ could consolidate its gains, rebels and

b The leader of LSY has disputed that his group is a part of the Islamic State, even though most local actors believe so and much of its public image is very similar to that of the Islamic State. Therefore, if not outright part of the Islamic State, it can best be described, at the very least, as a front for the group

c Islamic State penalties included confiscating and destroying the drugs and flogging the individuals three times.

d In the following months, it would continue similar activities as it prepared to take over al-Yarmuk Refugee Camp in al-Hajr al-Aswad along with repairing sidewalks, building a local media point to spread its online released propaganda locally, restoring a roundabout, and providing polio vaccines to children through its Markaz al-Sihah (Health Center). The Islamic State also began to send fighters to the al-Qalamoun region again to build up a small infrastructure there, even gaining a pledge of allegiance from a regiment in Wadi Barada. For example: The Islamic State, "Repairing the Sidewalk," Wilayat Dimashq, January 24, 2015; The Islamic State, "Watching The Islamic State's Official Media Videos at a Media Point," Wilayat Dimashq, February 18, 2015.

“The largest military achievement for the Islamic State in this period was its takeover of al-Qaryatayn, which allowed it to expand Wilayat Dimashq.”

Jabhat al-Nusra ejected JJ within ten days.³³ The Islamic State would eventually respond indirectly in a video message mocking those fighting for the “infidel MOC.”³⁴ Even though this action was a failure, it illustrates the group’s patience in building up networks and underlines the group’s ability to develop on-the-ground assets. Even if there is no apparent Islamic State activity in a specific area, the group is often able to pounce when the time is right.

The Islamic State’s most important accomplishment during this period was its takeover of al-Yarmuk Refugee Camp in early April 2015.³⁵ Islamic State fighters defeated the Hamas-front group Aknaf Bayt al-Maqdis. According to the Syrian journalist Musa Alomar, the battle started when the Islamic State allegedly assassinated a Hamas leader named Yahya Hourani (Abu Suhayb) and deployed 1,000 fighters to take over the key locales in the camp.³⁶ Alomar also reported that Jabhat al-Nusra, which had a presence in the camp, remained neutral. After taking over the area, the Islamic State released video of its fighters praying in the Palestine Mosque and an interview with a local man who explained how Islamic State representatives had returned goods that Hamas and Aknaf Bayt al-Maqdis had stolen as part of an attempt to show how the Islamic State would provide justice now that it was in charge.³⁷

Consolidation and Expansion: May–Aug. 2015

Islamic State forces in southern Syria were busy for the next few months after the takeover of al-Yarmuk. Wilayat Dimashq began two campaigns: one aimed at gaining control of al-Qaryatayn and the second to build up its presence along the border between northeast Dar’a governorate and northwest al-Suwayda governorate in an area called al-Lajat. It seems that the Islamic State uses the same territorial boundaries for *Jund Dimashq* (Military District of Damascus), which existed during the Rashidun, Umayyad, and Abbasid Caliphates, likely as a tactic to further its legitimacy.

The Islamic State also continued to consolidate its hold on various areas in Wilayat Dimashq through ongoing use of soft-power efforts. In addition to the previously mentioned activities, it also encouraged agriculture, restarted the local markets, distributed *Zakat al-Fitr* at the end of Ramadan, extracted hydrocarbons from plastics, and set up another military training camp for its so-called cubbs. It also started a regular military training camp northeast of Damascus city in al-Qaboun.³⁸

At this point it became clear that the Islamic State was angling to isolate Damascus. It also was able to take over half of al-Qadam neighborhood, west of al-Hajr al-Aswad, by the end of August 2015.³⁹ It then instituted a blockade on the rest of the neighborhood to isolate ASIU.⁴⁰ If the Islamic State is able to control the entire area it might be able to cut off the regime’s supply line along the M5 highway between Damascus and Dar’a. Additionally, the Islamic State began clashes in Jobar and was also fighting Katibat Ababil Houran and Katibat Sham al-Rasul south of Damascus in al-Tada-

mon neighborhood, just north of al-Yarmuk Refugee Camp.⁴¹ One of the reasons that the Islamic State had been able to increase the tempo of fighting was that it raised monthly wages for its fighters to 80,000 Syrian pounds (\$363), spurring a wave of new recruits.⁴²

The Islamic State continued to expand its soft-power activities to the northwest of Damascus in Wadi Barada and al-Zabadani in the al-Qalamoun region. For example, it provided Qur’anic classes for children; passed out *dawa* literature; planted cucumbers, mallow, zucchini, parsley, and corn; reintroduced the *hudud* (fixed Qur’anic punishments) starting with the amputation of a thief’s hand; prepared *Zakat al-Fitr*; and helped with bread production.⁴³ The Islamic State also expanded its operations in the triangle demarcated by Eastern Ghouta, northeast Dar’a governorate, and northwest al-Suwayda governorate. In Bi’r Qassab, Islamic State operatives opened a new medical facility, worked the bread ovens, distributed *Zakat al-Fitr*, and took care of camels.⁴⁴ The group also started doing outreach in adjoining al-Lajat region. Its main project had been cleaning and reopening one of the mosques that had been abandoned two years prior.⁴⁵ This was strategically important because if it is able to control the area, it would choke off the supply lines for rebel factions in southern and northern Syria.⁴⁶

The Islamic State also continued to fight JJ in that area, opening a new training camp in Bi’r Qassab.⁴⁷ During fighting, it captured some JJ members and then later executed them, along with a Tunisian member of Jabhat al-Nusra.⁴⁸ In a video showing the killings, the Islamic State also warned JJ’s leader Zahran Alloush that it would be coming for him.

The largest military achievement for the Islamic State in this period was its takeover of al-Qaryatayn, which allowed it to expand Wilayat Dimashq. As part of its campaign earlier this summer, the Islamic State took control of smaller villages such as Muhassah and al-Nasr, where it implemented its soft power efforts.^e The final push on al-Qaryatayn began in early August 2015. Islamic State forces initiated the attack with artillery and three suicide truck bombings conducted by a Tunisian, Saudi, and Syrian on regime checkpoints successively closer to the city before launching a ground assault.⁴⁹ In the aftermath, the Islamic State kidnapped dozens of Christians who had been living in the city, releasing them about a month later after they had signed the *ahl al-dhimmah* (protected people) pact and paid the *jizya* (a tax on non-Muslims).^f There are now only about 160 Christians left in the town.⁵⁰ The Islamic State was then able to drive farther west into Homs governorate where its fighters may eventually try to block the M5 highway between Damascus and Homs.

e Such as repairing wells, providing sharia lessons for those who abandoned the regime and rebel groups, and taking care of sheep and goats. For example: The Islamic State, “Until Religion Is All For God #1 – Wilayat Dimashq,” June 17, 2015; The Islamic State, “Repairing Water Wells,” Wilayat Dimashq, May 28, 2015;

f Apparently four golden dinars (17 grams of gold) per adult every year. Ben Hubbard and Hwaida Saad, “Dozens of Syrian Christians Missing From Town Attacked by ISIS,” *New York Times*, August 8, 2015; For the *jizya* agreement, see for example Jack Moore, “ISIS Forces Christians To Live Under Its Rules in Syrian Town After Release,” *Newsweek*, September 4, 2015; The Islamic State would later release a video in early October 2015 showing this ceremony and warning all “Crusaders,” that they should give up the fight and either convert to Islam or live under the Islamic State and pay the *jizya*. The Islamic State, “[Fight] Until They Give the *Jizyah* Willingly While They Are Humbled,” Wilayat Dimashq, October 3, 2015.

Recent Developments: Sep.–Dec. 2015

The Islamic State has not had any large-scale victories in the past few months, but it has not really lost ground either. But while its on-the-ground campaign may have slowed, the group's international media campaign run out of Wilayat Dimashq is becoming more important. The first sign of this occurred in late May 2015 when the province directed a message to its brothers in Algeria, calling for individuals to join Wilayat al-Jaza'ir.⁵¹ Several months later, Wilayat Dimashq also released two videos stating that the Islamic State will eventually liberate al-Aqsa mosque in (Jerusalem) from the Jews. The first video, from early September 2015, mainly discusses Hamas' betrayals and alleges it is effectively the same as Israel because the group does not follow sharia.⁵² The second video, from late October, featured a Palestinian directing his message in Hebrew to Israelis claiming that it is *fard al-ayn* (an individual duty) to kill all Jews and associated organizations at every opportunity.⁵² More recently, in the aftermath of the Paris attacks, Wilayat Dimashq released a video featuring a French fighter stating that recent killings were just the beginning and warning President François Hollande that "you have put your people through a war you can't control. Attacking the Islamic State was a huge mistake."⁵³

Other concrete actions from the Islamic State in recent months also underline how the group aims to isolate and occupy Damascus. The group opened yet another training camp in southern Syria named after Abu 'Ubaydah Ibn al-Jarrah, who was one of the companions of the Muslim Prophet Muhammad and was a field commander during the conquest of Damascus in 634 CE.⁵⁴ This is a clear message that the Islamic State intends to occupy the capital, though some observers see this as mere wishful thinking. The group also continued its *dawa* and *hisba* campaign in southern Damascus region, beginning the distribution of a daily newsletter, creating a new medical facility, establishing the *hudud* against unjust killers, continuing its agricultural work, touting the start of the new school year, and gaining more regime and rebel repentances.⁵⁵ The Islamic State's blockade of al-Qadam succeeded in forcing ASIU to make concessions, a tactic similar to that used by the Assad regime.⁵⁶ ASIU were forced to leave their positions in Yalda, Babbila, and Bait Sahem, east of al-Hajr al-Aswad and al-Zayn neighborhoods, and go to al-Madniyya, providing Islamic State fighters with a better opportunity to advance. In return, Islamic State forces will withdraw from al-Assali, inside al-Qadam, and return to al-Hajr al-Aswad.⁵⁷ The Islamic State could also gain new strength thanks to the formation of Jama'at al-Ansar by a Jabhat al-Nusra splinter group which the locals believe is a front for the Islamic State.⁵⁸ It would also help to explain why Jabhat al-Nusra did not intervene during the Islamic State's takeover of al-Yarmuk Refugee Camp earlier in the year and again illustrates how the Islamic State is often able to engineer events.

Islamic State operatives were less active in areas to the northwest and southeast of the Damascus region, though were not invisible. They did open a new Islamic court in Western al-Qalamoun and a new military training camp in Serghaya District near the Lebanese border.⁵⁹ In al-Lajat region the Islamic State opened a new firing range training camp, started working on vehicle maintenance for

"[The Islamic State's] international media campaign run out of Wilayat Dimashq is becoming more important."

residents, and did construction work in rural areas.⁶⁰

More importantly, the Islamic State has been able to use its victory in al-Qaryatayn, parlaying it into a series of smaller, but relevant victories in the past few months. It also consolidated its control over al-Qaryatayn city and starting to pursue its agenda there. For example, it has destroyed a pagan temple, local graves, and the Mar Eliane Monastery.⁶¹ As in other areas it has taken control of, the Islamic State conducted a repentance session for regime members; restarted local agricultural ventures (poultry farm, grape harvest, and raisin industry); subjecting two regime soldiers to the hudud; distributing zakat; and conducted animal breeding (camels, cows, ducks, sheep, goats, and geese) along with the usual activities seen in other locations.⁶²

The Islamic State also continues to pursue its strategic goal of cutting regime access to the M5 highway. For example, on November 1, Islamic State fighters took the town of Mheen, west of al-Qaryatayn.⁶³ Five days later, its fighters also took control of Huwwarin, a village just north of Mheen, which led to the besieging of the town of Sadad, pushing to within 15 kilometers of the highway.⁶⁴ In response, Assad ground forces and Russian air support started a counteroffensive to prevent The Islamic State from advancing further, which led to the retaking of Huwwarin and Mheen.⁶⁵ This did not last long though since once IS knew what was happening it pushed back against this, killing scores of regime soldiers and once again retaking Huwwarin and Mheen from the regime as well as for the first time the town of al-Hadath.⁶⁶ It is once again attempting to control Sadad.

Conclusion

Over the past two and a half years, the Islamic State has had its ups and downs in the southern front of the Syrian war. Currently, it is in a good position to make further advances in southern Damascus and al-Lajat regions. There are still questions about its position in al-Qaryatayn due to the ongoing fighting with the regime, and in the al-Qalamoun region due to the large deployment by Lebanese Hezbollah and issues it has had there with Jaysh al-Fatah (JF), an umbrella force dominated by Jabhat al-Nusra and HASI.⁶⁷ The Islamic State now appears to have three main priorities in southern Syria: cut the M5 highway between Damascus and Homs to separate the regime from the majority Alawite coastal regions; occupy al-Lajat region in order to cut rebels off from their supply routes into northern Syria; and encircle the capital.

None of this is preordained. Time will tell what the Islamic State can bring to bear and whether its enemies can stand up against it. But compared to where it was in December 2013 or December 2014, the group is far stronger and is gaining more steam. The most pressing question regarding the Islamic State's near-term operations is whether the LSY—a group that pledged *bay`a* to the Islamic State a year ago and whose forces have been active in recent

g Wilayat Dimashq also criticizes Hamas for its relations with Iran and indirectly Russia. The Islamic State, "To All the Sincere in the Land of Palestine," Wilayat Dimashq, September 2, 2015.

fighting—will announce that it is in fact openly part of the Islamic State, as had been rumored.^h If that were to occur, it would boost Islamic State efforts to encircle Damascus from the southwest as well as in Dar'a governorate, where LSY forces operate. Another wild card would be if the Islamic State used its southern base as

strategic depth if it became more degraded in the north and east due to the large-scale military campaign against it by various foes. Whatever happens, the Islamic State currently has a base in the south and is looking to build on what it has already accomplished since it restarted its southern push a year ago. **CTC**

h Although LSY's leader was recently killed by JF forces, there are increasing signs that LSY's activities and style parallel those of the Islamic State. For example, LSY used *takfir* (excommunication and therefore legitimizing bloodshed) against a JN-aligned group Harakat al-Muthanna al-Islamiyyah in July 2014 and setting up an Islamic court in late July 2015 that mirrors the Islamic State's internal structures. LSY also appears resilient in the face of leadership loss, since it has continued its operations without issue. Jaysh al-Fatah - Southern Region, "Statement #4," November 15, 2015; Osama Abu Zeid and Joseph Adams, "Alleged Islamic State affiliate in south Syria still viable after Nusra wipes out top leadership," Syria Direct, December 1, 2015.

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Profile: Paris Attack Ringleader Abdelhamid Abaaoud

By Guy van Vlierden*

Abdelhamid Abaaoud, a 28-year-old Belgian-Moroccan Islamic State recruit killed by French commandos in a raid in Saint-Denis on November 18, has been described by authorities as the “ringleader” of the Paris attacks. This profile, based partly on Belgian court documents, examines how a young Belgian who once attended a prestigious Catholic school became involved with petty crime, spent time in prison, was radicalized, joined the Islamic State, and then rose to lead the worst mass casualty attack on French territory in decades.

Overwhelming was the force used by French commandos at a residence in Saint-Denis, just outside Paris, early in the morning of November 18, that it took French authorities more than 24 hours to identify one of the deceased jihadis as the Belgian Abdelhamid Abaaoud. In a stunning development, it confirmed that the presumed ringleader of the Paris attacks had traveled to France to participate in the mission. Analysis of cell phone data indicated he visited the site of the Bataclan concert hall during the attack and several of the key sites in the hours after the attacks.¹

Apparently, French commandos launched their raid just in time. Paris prosecutor François Molins later revealed that Abaaoud and an accomplice also killed in Saint-Denis were supposed to blow themselves up within a day in La Défense shopping² district.³

Abaaoud's trajectory is instructive and traces some familiar patterns on his path from a relatively comfortable childhood to radicalization and a violent death. A dual Belgian-Moroccan national, he was born on April 8, 1987 in the eastern Brussels district of Anderlecht, an area which, like nearby Molenbeek, housed the families of many Moroccan immigrants.

Abaaoud was a third-generation immigrant and the eldest of six children. His grandfather had come to Belgium to work in the coal mines, but his father Omar had climbed the economic ladder by opening his own clothing store near their home in Molenbeek, where Abaaoud helped out when he was young.⁴

His father was by his own account ambitious for his son. In 1999 at the age of 12, Abaaoud was enrolled in the Catholic Collège Saint-

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* This article was written in conjunction with Paul Cruickshank who provided information from his reporting for CNN.

Pierre, a prestigious Brussels school situated in the leafy Uccle district.⁵ He only lasted a year there, however, before he was expelled for disruptive behavior and poor academic performance.⁶

What followed was a spiral into petty gangsterism and criminality. Like a significant number of youngsters living in “inner-city” areas like Molenbeek, Abaaoud fell in with a loosely organized gang of local youths, whose members included several future co-conspirators in the Paris attack, including the brothers Brahim and Salah Abdeslam.⁷

He soon built up a criminal record. In 2006, at the age of 19, Abaaoud received his first conviction for concealment of stolen goods, resulting in mandatory community service. Three years later, he was convicted for violence and resisting police officers.⁸ In December 2010, he and Salah Abdeslam attempted to break into a garage in Ottignies, a town southeast of Brussels.

Fleeing from the police, Abaaoud jumped in a river, where he was found suffering from hypothermia. “Probably they were all a little bit drunk,” his long-time lawyer Alexandre Chateau said about that incident.⁹

In 2011, Abaaoud was convicted for the attempted illegal entry and given a year of probation.¹⁰ Later that year, he was sentenced to 18 months for theft with violence.¹¹

The illegal and violent behavior continued. In 2012 he was convicted for hitting someone in the Flemish town of Dendermonde, which landed him in jail again.¹²

According to his father, it was during this last spell behind bars that he was radicalized.¹³ Despite media speculation it remains unclear how or by whom. It appears, however, that Abaaoud was part of a generation of what the Belgian counterterrorism official and academic Alain Grignard has labeled “Islamized radicals.” These are young men involved in petty crime, who were radical before they were religious, and whose violent respect-through-fear credo was later legitimized by the Islamic State.¹⁴

After his release from Forest prison on September 29, 2012, Abaaoud grew his beard and cut off some of his friendship ties.¹⁵ He fell in with a Molenbeek-based network that had begun recruiting for the Syrian jihad.

The leader was a Moroccan veteran of the Afghan jihad, Khalid Zerkani, who was 42-years-old, known in the circle as Papa Noel because he doled out cash to his favorite acolytes, including €4,500 payments to those traveling to Syria. To assemble that money, Zerkani ordered his followers to commit burglaries and pickpocketing. He was arrested in 2013 and stood trial in July 2015. He was held responsible for sending at least 20 people to the Syrian war—including Abaaoud—for which the court described him as a “cynical guru.”¹⁶

The group also had a kind of mother figure in 55-year-old

Fatima Aberkan.^a She is a protégée of the notorious Belgian female terrorist Malika el Aroud.¹⁷ At the end of 2007, both women were detained on suspicion of plans to liberate the convicted al-Qa`ida terrorist Nizar Trabelsi from prison, although Aberkan was released without being charged.^b

In March 2013, Abaaoud set off for Syria via Egypt with six others from Belgium. Very little is known about his first trip, but it was relatively short, with the consensus being that he returned around September. On January 20, 2014, Abaaoud left for Syria again, on a flight from Cologne to Istanbul, this time with his 13-year-old brother Younes, whom he had abducted at his school gates.¹⁸ Abaaoud was not the only recruit in the Zerkani network who left for Syria more than once. Soufiane Alilou, one of the sons of Fatima Aberkan, did so a stunning five times. He was only intercepted once in Turkey, and only arrested in Belgium when he came back the fifth time. On May 25, 2014, another member of the network came back to Belgium “armed and nervous,” according to a note of State Security issued three weeks later. The man, Ilias Mohammadi, finally was apprehended on June 25 with a large amount of ammunition stashed in his house.¹⁹

Most of the recruits in the Zerkani cell—mainly French-speaking people—had initially joined Katibat al-Muhajireen, a Salafi group dominated by Chechen fighters at that time.^c Early in 2014, when their brigade became a part of the newly established Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, most of the Belgians left for Jabhat al-Nusra—the chapter of al-Qa`ida in Syria—but soon many of them switched back. It is not clear if Abaaoud spent time with Jabhat al-Nusra though. At the end of January 2014, he called *Dawla* (the Arabic abbreviation Islamic State members often use to describe themselves) and Jabhat al-Nusra “our brothers” on his Facebook page^d—indicating that he belonged to neither. In March 2014, however, as infighting increased between the groups, he had made it clear he was part of the Islamic State. By then he had become known by the fighting names Abou Omar al Soussi and Abu Omar al Belgiki.

On March 23, 2014, Abaaoud posted a video on his Facebook

account showing himself on the front lines. He can be heard saying, “It’s not fun seeing blood spilled, but it gives me pleasure from time to time to see blood of the disbelievers run because we grew up watching the blood of Muslims being spilled in the whole world on TV.”²⁰ His most notorious video appearance came to light soon after, when footage emerged of him towing mutilated corpses of Free Syrian Army soldiers behind a pickup truck. “Before, we towed jet skis, motorcycles, and trailers filled with gifts for our vacations in Morocco,” he laughed. “Now, thank God, we are following His path while towing disbelievers who are fighting us.” The video, which was saved on Abaaoud’s mobile phone, fell into the hands of moderate rebels, who sold it to a French journalist in March 2014. Shortly after it was aired on television, Abaaoud vented his anger on Facebook. “Those videos were stolen by an apostate,” he wrote. “You should know that there were no civilians in it. All the dead were apostate rebels, encouraged to fight us by disbelievers in the whole world. They were killed by the anger of Allah.”²¹

It appears Abaaoud fell in with Katibat al-Battar, an Islamic State brigade initially founded by Libyan fighters.²² The first indication he had joined the grouping came in June 2014, when a Frenchman often seen together with him, started using the al-Battar banner as his profile picture on his Facebook page.²³ In October 2014, a prominent Islamic State supporter on Twitter distributed a list in Arabic of al-Battar members who were recently killed.²⁴ Apart from Abaaoud himself—who faked his death apparently to evade security services—it mentioned several names of people clearly associated with him.^e Monitoring of social media postings revealed several other Belgian and French jihadis^f were at least close with members of the brigade, including Bilal Hadfi (fighting name Bilal al Mouhajir) a trainee electrician from Brussels who was one of the suicide bombers at the Stade de France in the November 13 attacks.^g It is possible Hadfi and Abaaoud met while fighting with the group in Syria.

Belgian counterterrorism officials believe that Abaaoud faked his death so he could travel more easily to Europe to coordinate a terrorist plot in Belgium. That terrorist plot was thwarted on January 15, 2015 in the eastern Belgian town of Verviers when Belgian commandos killed two Belgian Islamic State operatives—later named as Sofiane Amghar and Khalid Ben Larbi²⁵—and arrested an apparent logistician in a safe house. According to Belgian counterterrorism officials, Abaaoud had been organizing the plot through cell phone contact with the trio from Greece. Police found AK-47s and the precursors for triacetone triperoxide (TATP), the same explosive used in the Paris attack, along with GoPro cameras and police uniforms, suggesting the group planned to try to gain access

a During the past two years Aberkan has been in Syria at least two times, and she lost one of three sons fighting there. Apart from recruiting, Aberkan’s role seems to have been a logistical one. When she was not in Syria in 2013 and 2014, she often stayed in Turkey, arranging the flow of goods and money to members of the network fighting in Syria. “She often facilitated their travel and she took care of the finances of the little colony of expats that she had created there,” the judgment says. “She was a passionaria of the *hijra* and the *jihad*.” Tribunal de Première Instance Francophone de Bruxelles, “Judgment in the trial against the so-called cell-Zerkani,” July 29, 2015.

b Aberkan at least admitted to being in touch with Trabelsi when he was in prison. Tribunal de Première Instance Francophone de Bruxelles, “Judgment in the trial against the so-called cell-Zerkani,” July 29, 2015. In the end, Zerkani was sentenced to 12 years in jail. Aberkan received eight years, and Abaaoud got 20 years. Abaaoud’s conviction was a consequence of former criminal activity and the abduction of his minor brother to Syria. Wouter Hertogs & Guy Van Vlierden, “Kerstman van jihad stuurde 20 jongeren naar de dood,” *Het Laatste Nieuws*, July 30, 2015.

c They were active near Aleppo and sided with the militia Majlis Shura al-Mujahideen, in which most of the Dutch speaking Belgians recruited by Shariah4Belgium were fighting at that time. Prior to their departure, most of the Zerkani recruits—including Abaaoud—had no connection with Shariah4Belgium. But in Syria, members of the two Belgian groups certainly have met.

d The Facebook account has since disappeared, but a screenshot of the message is archived by the author.

e This includes the Belgian Khalid Hachti Bernan (Abu Qa’qa), seen with Abaaoud and compatriot Zacharia Iddoub (Abu Yahya) in the infamous video showing them while pulling corpses through a field behind a pick-up truck. See here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OrGTY-uVOU>

f Based on the author’s monitoring of social media accounts. At the end of 2014, the social media connections of Europeans who had joined al-Battar showed a remarkable mix of French speaking and Libyan friends.

g Hadfi posted this on his Facebook page from Syria in July 2015: “By Allah, brothers living in the lands of disbelievers. Those dogs attack our civilians in ar-Raqqa, al-Bab, Damascus, Baghdad, Fallujah, and so on. Work within their communities of pigs, so that they never feel safe anymore, even not in their dreams.” The Facebook account has since disappeared, but a screenshot of the message is archived by the author.



Abdelhamid Abaaoud

to a sensitive site.²⁶ High-ranking sources in government circles told the Belgian newspaper *Het Laatste Nieuws* that the plot included the beheading of a police officer that was to be filmed.²⁷

Belgian investigators believed Abaaoud was the ringleader of the cell in Verviers, who communicated with senior Islamic State leaders in Syria. For security reasons, the cell members had an elaborate system to make the phone calls and used coded language. At the time of the attack, Abaaoud was in Greece and communicated by phone. The Belgians brought in U.S. intelligence agencies, including the CIA, to try to locate the cell phone in Greece, but neither the Americans nor Greek police were able to locate him. The Islamic State claimed Abaaoud returned safely to Syria and in February, an interview with him appeared in its English language magazine *Dabiq*. The article included a picture of Abaaoud standing alongside Amghar and Larbi, and in the interview he insinuated that he had been in Belgium himself.²⁸ “I was able to leave and come to Sham despite being chased after by so many intelligence agencies. My name and picture were all over the news yet I was able to stay in their homeland, plan operations against them, and leave safely when doing so became necessary,” Abaaoud claimed.²⁹

Some media outlets continue to describe Abaaoud as the “mastermind” behind the Paris attacks.³⁰ As investigations have pro-

gressed, it has become clear that Abaaoud is better described as the commander in the field of the cell dispatched by senior Islamic State operatives. It appears that he was coordinating the attacks in real-time from his phone the night of November 13, including the stadium and Bataclan teams.³¹ On November 19, the French Interior minister Bernard Cazeneuve declared that the Belgian terrorist also was implicated in four plots in France before the Paris attacks, including a planned attack against a Paris church foiled in April 2015.³² The news site Mediapart reported that there is no proof of that plot, however, after gaining access to the judicial files of that case. The only indication, it says, is a certain Abu Omar giving orders to the terrorist who had to carry out the attack. “There are many Abu Omars in those circles”, a judicial source told Mediapart—while the description that the arrested Sid Ahmed Ghlam provided, did not match Abaaoud.³³

Some analysts, including the French jihadi observer Romain Caillet, believe Abaaoud’s role was limited to recruitment and logistics—which still could be the case in some of the multiple plots. He believes the Belgian simply wasn’t smart enough to be a mastermind.³⁴ Long-time lawyer Alexandre Chateau described Abaaoud as “not a leader type” and “more a kind of scatterbrain.”³⁵ A senior Belgian counterterrorism official told CNN that intelligence services suspected Abaaoud had been working in tandem with French Islamic State operative Fabien Clain in and around al-Raqqa to recruit fresh French and Belgian recruits and send them back to launch attacks after limited training.³⁶ Clain is a veteran French jihadi whose voice was recognized in the audio message claiming the Paris attacks on behalf of the Islamic State and who increasingly is suspected of being an important architect of the Paris attack.^h **CTC**

h As CNN Terrorism Analyst Paul Cruickshank has pointed out, Clain in the audio claim stated that the targets in Paris were meticulously selected, pointing to his involvement. He also spoke of an attack which did not happen in the 18th arrondissement again pointing to his possible knowledge of the targets before the attack. Otherwise he would simply have mirrored what was reported in the media. Based on his movements, Salah Abdeslam may have been going to carry out the attack in the 18th arrondissement before he aborted his attack and dumped his suicide vest. See Tim Lister, “The Mystery of France’s Most Wanted Man,” CNN, November 22, 2015. Also see Christopher Dickey, “Is ISIS’s Voice of Death Hiding in France?,” *The Daily Beast*, November 22, 2015.

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San Bernardino and the Islamic State Footprint in America

By Lorenzo Vidino and Seamus Hughes

While details are still emerging, evidence appears to indicate that the perpetrators of the December 2 San Bernardino shooting had radicalized, supported the Islamic State, and had long been planning an attack. While still at a significantly lower level than seen in most Western European countries, the degree of recent Islamic State-related mobilization in the United States is unprecedented on this country, with more than 70 individuals arrested and 900 open investigations throughout the country.

On December 2, 2015, Syed Rizwan Farook and his wife, Tashfeen Malik, attacked a holiday party at the Inland Regional Center in San Bernardino, California. After the attack, which killed 14 and injured 21, the duo fled the scene before engaging in a fire-fight with police that ended in their death.¹ Information about the Farooks' lives and motives has been slow to emerge, but the FBI labeled it an act of terrorism after combing through the couple's belongings and their digital footprint.

Farook was born in Illinois and raised in California, while his wife, Malik, was born in Pakistan and reportedly had lived in Saudi Arabia for some time.² The couple lived in a modest Redwoods home and pursued a seemingly unremarkable life, Farook working as a health inspector and Malik as a stay-at-home mother.

Initial reports do not seem to point to any direct link between the couple and any jihadist group or network. Yet there are clear indications, as the FBI stated, that "both subjects were radicalized and [had] been for quite some time."³ While many reports initially claimed that Malik radicalized her husband, investigators suggest that Farook held militant views prior to meeting his wife.⁴ It is very difficult to determine who influenced whom or if, as is equally likely, it was a mutual radicalization. It is clear that the couple had been preparing for some kind of operation for an extensive period of time. Investigators believe that Farook "may have discussed an attack as many as three years ago," even before marrying Malik.⁵ At the time of writing, investigators have been exploring the possibility that in 2012 Farook had discussed carrying out attacks together with his friend and neighbor Enrique Martinez. According to the Latino convert, Farook and Martinez abandoned their plans once authorities caught four local men seeking to travel to Afghanistan

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to kill Americans.⁶ Reports suggest that Farook was "in the social circle" of the group's ringleader.⁷

Farook's intentions seemed to have grown stronger once he married. Leading up to the attack, he and his wife⁵ both frequented local gun ranges and made financial arrangements regarding their daughter and Farook's mother. Malik's pledge of allegiance to the Islamic State on behalf of both, reportedly posted on Facebook shortly before the attack, while not necessarily indicating any kind of operational connection with the group, would be the culmination of her and her husband's seemingly quiet and long radicalization trajectory.⁸

The Islamic State Mobilization in America

While the exact details are still emerging, the Farooks' actions appear to follow a trend seen in the United States over the last few years. In 2010, then-Attorney General Eric Holder indicated that the terrorist threat had "changed from simply worrying about foreigners coming here, to worrying about people in the United States, American citizens—raised here, born here—and who for whatever reason, have decided that they are going to become radicalized and take up arms against the nation in which they were born."⁹ Authorities have thwarted most of these domestic plots, many of which were prodded in part by the FBI through sting operations. On other occasions, however, American militants succeeded, as in the cases of Little Rock (2009),¹⁰ Fort Hood (2009),¹¹ and Boston (2013).¹²

These fears have become heightened with the rise of the Islamic State, which has triggered an unprecedented mobilization among U.S.-based jihadist sympathizers. The reasons are multifaceted. As in other countries, small but not insignificant numbers of Americans have been attracted by the emotional and religious appeal of the self-proclaimed caliphate. And the Islamic State has conveyed its powerful message through a masterful social media campaign that has managed to reach countries like the United States that traditionally have not hosted a large jihadist/Salafist network.

While still significantly less dramatic than what has been seen in Western European countries, the degree of recent mobilization in the United States by Islamic State sympathizers shows the magnitude of the phenomenon. Publicly available information confirms a sharp surge in jihadist activities, especially when compared to the relative lull seen after the wave of arrests following 9/11. While U.S. authorities arrested 209 people on terrorism-related charges between 2001 and 2012,¹³ 71 individuals linked to the Islamic State have been charged since March 2014. The number of arrests has spiked in recent months, with 56 arrested since January 2015. In the same period, a handful of attacks have occurred across the country, to include Garland, Texas, and Chattanooga, Tennessee.

In June 2015, the FBI stated that "upwards of 200 Americans have traveled or attempted to travel to Syria to participate in the conflict."¹⁴ A few weeks later, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence estimated that more than 250 individuals from the



INLAND REGIONAL CENTER

Inland Regional Center in San Bernadino, California.

United States had traveled or attempted to travel to the conflict area, while a few dozen had joined the Islamic State and around 20 had died.¹⁵

The number of American foreign fighters is small compared to those who sympathize with and embrace the Islamic State's ideology. U.S. authorities have said consistently that the popularity of the Islamic State's propaganda, driven largely by its savvy social media tactics, wholly overshadows that of al-Qa`ida. Tellingly, in May 2015, FBI Director James Comey spoke of "hundreds, maybe thousands" of Islamic State sympathizers and potential recruits across the country, disclosing that the Bureau had related investigations running in all 50 states.¹⁶ A few months later, in October 2015, Comey revealed that the FBI had 900 active investigations against homegrown violent extremists.¹⁷

The Islamic State Community in the United States

While early reports point to a link, albeit purely inspirational and not operational, between the Farooks and the Islamic State, there has not yet been any public confirmation. While husbands and wives have been implicated before in similar attacks, there is no typical profile for an Islamic State sympathizer in the United States.^a A report by these authors recently released by the George Washington University's Program on Extremism, *ISIS in America: From Retweets to Raqqa*, examined the cases of all 71 individuals charged in the United States in relation to Islamic State activities. The findings clearly indicate that Islamic State supporters are extremely heterogeneous, ranging from grown men who had flirted with jihadist militancy for over a decade to teenagers who have only recently converted to Islam, from the son of a Boston-area police officer to a single mother of two young children, these individuals differ widely in race, age, class, education, and background.

Equally important, Islamic State sympathizers in the United States have different patterns of radicalization and degrees of connectivity to the Islamic State. For many Americans, involvement with the organization is a purely virtual experience. Shannon

Conley^b and Christopher Cornell^c are quintessential examples of individuals whose radicalization was confined to the online space, completely devoid of contact with like-minded individuals in the physical world. The role of social media in recent developments in the jihadist scene in the United States, as elsewhere, is unquestionably central. Indeed, the Islamic State's ability to directly and constantly reach Americans through social media has manifested itself in a number of ways, to include triggering or advancing their radicalization process, helping them leave for Syria, and inciting them to carry out attacks in United States.

It would be wrong, however, to overemphasize the impact of social media by considering it the sole medium of radicalization and mobilization for American supporters of the Islamic State. A close examination reveals a significantly more nuanced reality in the United States where social media, while almost ubiquitous, plays many different roles. In many cases, the role of the internet is not all encompassing, but rather complementary to equally, if not more, important dynamics in the physical world. In these cases, individual Islamic State sympathizers did not begin their radicalization alone in front of a computer screen, but rather via face-to-face interactions with preexisting social contacts who had already embraced jihadist ideology. Over time, these individuals tend to form a cluster, a small, informal knot of like-minded individuals whose group dynamics reinforce the beliefs of its members. Such clusters were identified, for example, in various FBI investigations in Minneapolis, St. Louis, and the greater New York area. Just as the virtual community of Islamic State supporters acts as an echo chamber, these real-life connections reinforce and strengthen individual commitment to the Islamic State.

The diversity of American Islamic State recruits also extends to the roles they take in support of the cause. At one end of the spectrum is the small, yet alarming, number of Americans who have managed to establish deep connections to the Islamic State, in some cases even occupying mid-level leadership positions.^d On the opposite end of the mobilization spectrum, a more common typology are those whose contributions to the Islamic State fail to exceed online declarations of support and personal fantasies of joining the group.

Travel or Stay?

A little more than half (51 percent) of those indicted on Islamic State-related charges in the United States had attempted to travel abroad or successfully left the country for Syria and/or Iraq. Yet, over the last few months, authorities have noted a decline in the number of Americans seeking to travel overseas.¹⁶ It is not clear what has caused this shift. Possible overlapping factors include an aggressive arrest campaign carried out by the FBI over the summer and increased difficulties in reaching Syrian territory. It cannot be

a One notable example is Texas resident Michael Todd Wolfe, who attempted to travel to Syria with his wife and two children.

b Colorado native Shannon Conley is a convert who was arrested in April 2014. She had developed an obsessive infatuation with the Islamic State and had engaged Islamic State sympathizers online but never interacted with any like-minded individual in the physical space.

c Ohio native Christopher Cornell, a loner who lived with his parents, developed an online persona as Raheel Mahrus Ubaydah and a network of online contacts. One of them was an FBI undercover operative and Cornell was arrested in January 2015.

d That is the case, for example, of Bosnian native Abdullah Ramo Pazara, a naturalized U.S. citizen from St. Louis who became the emir of an Islamic State khatiba in Syria and died in Kobani in the fall of 2014.



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ruled out, however, that the Islamic State's exhortation to supporters worldwide to "rise and defend your state [Islamic State] from your place wherever you may be" might have a role in the decline, the implication being that Islamic State sympathizers like the Fa-

rooks might be more inclined to carry out domestic attacks rather than attempt the arduous journey to join the caliphate.¹⁷

The U.S. counterterrorism community is facing a new and unprecedented challenge. The number of U.S.-based individuals who espouse jihadist ideology, while still not comparable to central and northern European dynamics, has boomed over the last three years. Most of the participants in this counter-culture will never make the leap from talk to action, and will never move from the sterile echo chamber of keyboard jihad to actual militancy. But, like their European counterparts, U.S. authorities are struggling with the legal and manpower challenges inherent in attempting to distinguish between who is exercising free speech and who is about to commit acts of terrorism.

The potential threat environment for the United States appears to be multifaceted. Individuals and small clusters who, in one way or the other, have managed to acquire operational skills from radical Islamist groups and who could carry out attacks either independently or under direct operational control are one dimension. Another, perhaps less sophisticated, but, maybe more difficult to detect dimension are those individuals and small clusters (perhaps like the Farooks) who, without any operational links with foreign organizations, can still pose a significant threat. **CTC**

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The Beirut Bombings and the Islamic State's Threat to Lebanon

By Hassan Rabih

The November 12 bombings in a Shia neighborhood in Beirut were an attempt by the Islamic State to destabilize Lebanon and plunge it into deeper sectarian strife, a strategy already seen in similar attacks by the group across the Arab world. Although none of Lebanon's divided communities has an interest in importing the Syrian civil war, the Islamic State is growing in strength by discarding al-Qa`ida's rigid recruitment criteria and welcoming younger recruits attracted to its simple brand of conquest and brutality. The Islamic State now has the capability to unleash significant carnage in several areas of Lebanon if it decides to mount an all-out campaign.

The twin suicide bombings carried out by the Islamic State in southern Beirut on November 12 were yet another indicator the group is pivoting toward international terrorism after its initial focus on building up a so-called caliphate in Syria and Iraq. Recent months have seen attacks in Tunisia, Turkey, and France, as well as in the skies above the Sinai.

The twin suicide bombings that struck Burj al-Barajneh, a Shia suburb in southern Beirut, killed 43 people and injured 239 others.¹ The first suicide bomber detonated his explosive belt in a large crowd and the second bomber targeted people who rushed to aid the wounded.

Unlike previous suicide bombings perpetrated by Lebanese networks, these suicide bombings were entirely carried out and planned by the Islamic State's Syrian base. The investigations revealed that two Palestinians and one Syrian had slipped across Lebanon's border with Syria. Lebanese security services suspect the cell was directed by the Islamic State and that the cell included more than two bombers.² In its first reaction to the attack, the Lebanese security apparatus, including the powerful military intelligence group known as Mukhabarat al-Jaysh, tightened border controls and security protocols at Syrian camps in the Beqaa valley.³

Targeting a Shia neighborhood in southern Beirut where Hezbollah has a strong presence served a dual purpose. On one hand, the Islamic State showed it was able to retaliate against Hezbollah for sending thousands of fighters to Syria to battle opponents of the Assad regime, and therefore boost its standing among Sunni Muslims in the Levant angered by Hezbollah's presence in Syria.

On the other hand it was designed to deepen and take advantage

of sectarian tension in Lebanon, by provoking Hezbollah to lash out against Sunnis in the country. The latter is in line with a blueprint developed in Iraq by the Islamic State's founding father Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who deliberately targeted Shia in a strategy that successfully plunged the country into civil war during the U.S. occupation, and which has provided the rationale for attacks by the Islamic State against Shia in Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and elsewhere this year. The goal is to provoke a regional Sunni-Shia war, which the Islamic State calculates would allow it to thrive. As this article will outline, given this strategic maxim, there are questions why the Islamic State has not yet fully mobilized its growing base of support inside Lebanon to launch a more sustained campaign of attacks.

Sectarian Spiral

Lebanon's radical Islamist history precedes the Syrian revolution. In the 1980s, Tripoli, the country's second-largest city, became a hub for the militant group al-Tawhid, which carried out assassinations against Communist cadres in Tripoli before losing a bloody battle to the Syrian army.⁴ The al-Tawhid movement inaugurated Tripoli's longstanding affiliation with radical Islam. In 2000, returnees from the fighting in Afghanistan clashed with Lebanese government forces in northern Lebanon, resulting in a short-lived conflict known locally as the "al-Dunniyah events" in which hundreds were arrested.⁵

The 2003 Iraq war reinvigorated radical Islamists, and the Syrian regime, which was still a force to be reckoned with in Lebanon, facilitated their movement. Palestinian camps in northern and southern Lebanon became hubs for fighters keen to participate in the fighting in Iraq. Returning jihadis from Iraq actually took over the Nahr al Bared Camp in northern Lebanon, triggering a conflict with the Lebanese army in 2007.⁶ After two months of fighting, the group was defeated and dozens of militants were jailed. While some remain in prison, others have joined Syrian jihadis after their release.⁷

Tensions spiked in 2008, and after a two-year standoff between Hezbollah and the Sunni-led 14 March coalition, Hezbollah was able to defeat poorly armed Sunni militants and won control of western Beirut.⁸ This defeat, coupled with the rise of the Shia, exacerbated grievances among Lebanon's Sunnis, especially in impoverished areas such as Tripoli, where more than half of the population struggles with poverty.⁹ After the Syrian revolution erupted in 2011, Ahmad al-Assir, a Lebanese Sunni sheikh and leading critic of Hezbollah, gained popularity and attracted much media attention. Based in Sidon, al-Assir clashed with the Lebanese army and went into hiding, joining the ranks of Jabhat al-Nusra, while some of his previous supporters became suicide bombers. Security officials arrested al-Assir when he attempted to join contacts in Nigeria's Boko Haram group.¹⁰

In the two years since Hezbollah's armed intervention in Syria's civil war, Jabhat al-Nusra, al-Qa`ida's Syrian branch, and a group

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The entrance to Bourj el-Barajneh camp in southern Beirut.

AL JAZEERA

closely affiliated with it, the Abdullah Azzam Brigades, have conducted a series of suicide and car bombings¹¹ that further heightened sectarian tensions from their earlier peak after the 2005 assassination of Lebanon's former prime minister, the Sunni Rafik Hariri, and the subsequent showdown between Iranian-backed Hezbollah and Hariri's Saudi-backed coalition. Tensions had been climbing even before the Islamic State attack in Tripoli in November. One aggravating factor was that Tripoli in northern Lebanon and Irsal, in the Beqaa Valley, had both become key points on smuggling routes for the Syrian opposition in the early phase of the conflict¹²

Islamized Radicals

Although al-Qa`ida and other Salafist groups dominated Sunni radical movements during the past few decades, the Islamic State has exceeded its competitor's capacity of recruitment. As part of that process it has relaxed al-Qa`ida's rigid criteria of piety and ideology, and supplementing it with gangster-like violence, paving the way for including previously excluded social strata. The emphasis on radical rituals, as an initiation criteria, rather than religious education, guarantees both a more inclusive recruitment and stronger unquestioned loyalty. Such a predatory and ideologically simplistic mode has fed on growing Sunni-Shia tensions.

The Islamic State has been able to attract many different segments of Lebanon's Sunnis, both in Tripoli and other cities and towns. Their recruitment success story is in part based on the sharp differences between the group and al-Qa`ida, with Islamic State's emphasis on conquest and brutality appealing to a younger and less cerebral demographic. While al-Qa`ida had attracted recruits from an older generation of Salafis in northern Lebanon, the Islamic State has attracted support from many of that generation's children. One example that encapsulates this dynamic is Shaker Shahhal, a 22-year-old from Tripoli who is a judge with the Islamic State. His uncle Hassan Shahhal is a high-profile member of Lebanon's tra-

ditionalist Salafi community.¹³ A self-described "non-violent Salafi," Hassan denies any connection to the Islamic State, describing his position on the group as "neutral until I undergo some fact-finding myself."¹⁴ He has described his nephew as a young man in trouble, who fell short of completing higher Islamic education, and travelled to Syria after his plans to marry his fiancée failed.¹⁵

In addition to recruiting young men like Shaker, the Islamic State has also been able to cast a wider net, catching young Lebanese who have returned to Lebanon from Europe and Australia. One example is Arabiy Ibrahim, a Dane of Lebanese descent, who was arrested last year on suspicion of links to the Islamic State.¹⁶ Overall, the Islamic State has recruited from a broader segment of the Sunni society than have groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra. This broader-based appeal has put it into a position where it has the ability to stage shows of force, including potentially occupying and controlling the center of Tripoli.¹⁷ Many of those recruits, particularly those with no criminal record, have joined the fighting in Iraq and Syria after travelling through Turkey. Some of the recruits unable to follow that route because of a criminal record or jihadi links have instead joined the Islamic State's enclave along the border with Syria.

The Islamic State has hundreds of supporters in Tripoli,¹⁸ according to some estimates, which is significantly greater than the al-Qa`ida/Jabhat al-Nusra presence there. In an attempt to explain the group's success, one source¹⁹ said that the Islamic State appeal is its radicalism, not ideology. Al-Qa`ida members are more often laymen who defied traditional imams in their interpretation of Islam. In contrast, the prime prerequisites for an Islamic State recruit are radical or violent leanings, links to organized crime, and loyalty. Such traits are apparent in the story of Yahya al-Hussein and his father Mohammed, who was also the father of the Syrian radical cleric Omar Bakri Mohamed's second wife. After Yahya lured his younger brother and two sisters to Syria to join the Islamic State, Mohammed traveled to Syria to get them back, but was turned on

by his son and executed.²⁰ The dynamics in Lebanon are not dissimilar to those in some European countries. As the Belgian academic and counterterrorism official Alain Grignard has pointed out, the Islamic State has had success recruiting “Islamized radicals” whilst al-Qa`ida has drawn support from “radicalized Islamists.”²¹

The Islamic State’s decision to use a Syrian cell for the suicide bombing in Beirut left many in the security services perplexed. Why hasn’t the Islamic State used its pool of Lebanese supporters to launch a more sustained campaign of attacks? Certain impoverished areas in Tripoli, such as al-Mankubeen, have become a hub for Islamic State supporters.

One possible explanation is that the Islamic State’s leaders are concerned that a string of attacks would hurt the group’s popularity there, unless launched at a time of heightened sectarian tensions.

But given the Islamic State’s apparent determination to plunge Lebanon into sectarian civil war, it may only be a matter of time before a wave of attacks orchestrated and encouraged by the group hits Tripoli and other areas of the country. Much will then depend on the reaction of Hezbollah. So far the group’s leaders have largely held back from retaliating against Sunnis in Lebanon. While memories of Lebanon’s own civil war, as well as the self-interest of leaders of all sides of the sectarian divide who have benefited from the status quo, will make it more difficult for the Islamic State to bring the Syrian civil war to Lebanon, the Burj al-Barajneh bombings have brought Lebanon closer to being sucked into the maelstrom of violence. **CTC**

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