

Combating Terrorism Center at West Point



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FEATURE ARTICLE

## The Islamic State in Libya

Could Libya become the Islamic State's "fallback"?

Geoff D. Porter

A VIEW FROM THE CT FOXHOLE

John J. Miller

Deputy Commissioner,  
Intelligence &  
Counterterrorism, NYPD

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### FROM THE EDITOR

Our March issue features a conversation between John Miller, NYPD Deputy Commissioner for Intelligence & Counterterrorism, and Ambassador Michael Sheehan, Distinguished Chair of the Combating Terrorism Center, who himself served as NYPD's Deputy Commissioner for Counterterrorism between 2003 and 2006. Miller reflects on the significant changes over the intervening decade in both the nature of the terrorist threat and the operating environment for law enforcement agencies, and outlines some of the recent measures taken to protect New York City. With the Islamic State losing ground in Iraq and Syria, our feature article by Geoff Porter examines whether Libya is a realistic fallback option for the group. He argues that the Islamic State's momentum in Libya is slowing and a number of factors, including a shortage of manpower, competition with other militia groups, and a lack of exploitable sectarian tension, will make it difficult for the group to seize control of additional territory. After recently returning from a trip to the region, Peter Chalk examines the current militant landscape in the Philippines and finds that, despite pledges of allegiance to the Islamic State from some jihadi groupings, the country is “unlikely to emerge as a new beachhead for fostering the Islamic State's regional extremism.” Andrew Watkins explores why there may be a strong correlation between territorial losses inflicted on the Islamic State and the group's increasingly global campaign of terrorism, and warns further setbacks for the group could lead to a surge in international attacks, at least in the short-term. Raffaello Pantucci draws on trial documents from recent terrorism cases in the United Kingdom to paint a picture of the threat faced by the country. While recent trials have not shown clear evidence of Islamic State direction, he argues that could change as the group pivots toward international terror. Finally, Ari Weisfuse profiles Saif al-`Adl, a veteran al-Qa`ida operative who several prominent Western news organizations reported was released by Iran last year. While not confirmed, his release would be a boon to the terrorist group.

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*Cover: Islamic State fighters are pictured near Sirte, Libya, in 2015.*

# How Realistic Is Libya as an Islamic State “Fallback”?

By Geoff D. Porter

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**As the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria comes under pressure from the international anti-Islamic State coalition, there are increasing expectations that it is trying to develop its affiliate in Libya as a “fallback” option. The particular characteristics of the Libyan landscape and the Islamic State’s limitations there make this unlikely. Nonetheless, the Islamic State in Libya will still be a dangerous threat to North Africa and beyond, including across the Mediterranean.**

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In the September 2015 issue of *Dabiq*, the Islamic State’s monthly English-language propaganda publication, the editors interviewed Abu al-Mughirah al-Qahtani, the leader of the Islamic State’s provinces (*wilayat*) in Libya.<sup>1</sup> In the interview, al-Qahtani emphasized the importance of the Islamic State’s Libyan provinces and recounted the group’s vanquishing of other jihadi organizations there. In addition, he broadcasted the Islamic State in Libya’s need for personnel, including doctors, legal specialists, bureaucrats, and fighters, and encouraged them to make *hijrah* (to immigrate) to Libya.<sup>2</sup>

The timing of the *Dabiq* interview was not happenstance. The Islamic State had established a beachhead in Libya less than a year earlier, and by 2015 it controlled Sirte, a small Libyan city, and a long stretch of surrounding coastline. As pressure from the anti-Islamic State coalition in Iraq and Syria intensified,<sup>3</sup> it appeared that Islamic State leadership in Mosul was attempting to develop its Libyan territory as a “fallback” option.<sup>4</sup> The dominant media narrative is that the Islamic State is expanding quickly in Libya, a view reinforced by a United Nations report last month that stated that “the relative ease with which groups such as ISIL have expanded their spheres of control and influence over the past few months is a matter of grave concern.”<sup>5</sup>

But the Islamic State in Libya’s momentum is slowing, including setbacks in Derna, Benghazi, and Sabratha. Moreover, recent attempts to expand the territory under its control have failed as it runs up against territory controlled by powerful, violent non-state actors. Libya also lacks many of the attributes that the Islamic State has exploited in Iraq and Syria. The Islamic State’s slowing momentum, its inability to expand, and the differences between the Iraqi/Syrian and Libyan landscape all beg the question of just how feasible it would be for the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria to shift to

Libya. While there is no doubt that the Islamic State would remain a violent threat in Libya and elsewhere were it to be degraded in Iraq and Syria, it would be a poorer and more constrained organization, deprived of personnel, revenue, and the fundamental narrative tropes of governance and sectarianism that it has used to “remain and expand” (*bâqîya wa tatamaddad*) in Iraq and Syria.<sup>6</sup>

## Evolution of the Islamic State in Libya

In the immediate aftermath of Libya’s 2011 revolution and even before Libya’s full-blown civil war broke out in 2014, a multitude of jihadi organizations started to emerge. Some, like the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, had historical antecedents that pre-dated the fall of Muammar Qadhafi’s government. Others like the Islamic State were mash-ups of local jihadi groups and ideologues and fighters tied to the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria’s first forays into Libya came shortly after its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, announced the formation of the group. As early as 2013, al-Baghdadi sent an emissary to evaluate the possibility of exploiting the accommodating jihadi environment in Derna, an eastern Libyan city that had been associated with jihadi fighters for at least the last decade.<sup>7</sup> Less than a year later, the Shura Council of Islamic Youth, composed of members of disparate jihadi organizations, pledged allegiance to the Islamic State.<sup>8</sup> Al-Baghdadi signaled the importance of Derna by sending senior Islamic State leadership from Iraq and Syria to manage the newly allied group, who then tried to govern the city in the same way they had in cities in Syria and Iraq.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, the Islamic State was expanding elsewhere in Libya, most notably in the central coastal city of Sirte, which it controlled by June 2015. It also managed to gain a foothold in some neighborhoods in Benghazi, Libya’s second-largest city, as well as secure an outpost in the western city of Sabratha.<sup>10</sup>

The Islamic State’s ideology and methods, however, provoked a backlash from other jihadi organizations in Derna, and in June 2015, a group of jihadis united under the Shura Council of Mujahideen in Derna and launched a campaign against the Islamic State that ultimately led to its withdrawal from the city.<sup>11</sup> More recently, a combination of forces under the leadership of General Khalifa Haftar with alleged support from French Special Forces drove the Islamic State from some neighborhoods in Benghazi<sup>12</sup> and a U.S. airstrike followed by a Libyan militia offensive squeezed the Islamic State in Sabratha.<sup>13</sup> The center of the group’s presence in Libya, then, has been reduced to Sirte and some smaller nearby towns.

## How Big Is the Islamic State in Libya?

Assessing the size of the Islamic State in Libya is difficult. When the group first appeared in Libya, it was allegedly composed of fewer than 800 fighters.<sup>14</sup> In December 2014, General David Rodriguez, commander of United States Africa Command (AFRICOM), said there could be “a couple of hundred” Islamic State fighters in training camps in Libya, implying that these were in addition to fighters

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already on the battlefield.<sup>15</sup> Estimates from February 2015 put the number between 1,000 and 3,000.<sup>16</sup> The United Nations maintained in November 2015 that the Islamic State in Libya had 2,000 to 3,000 fighters.<sup>17</sup> But by January 2016, some U.S. assessments suggested that it had grown to between 5,000 and 6,000 fighters.<sup>18</sup> French sources believe that the group is much stronger, with as many as 12,000 members.<sup>19</sup>

Even at the upper end of the range, the Islamic State in Libya still has fewer fighters than the most conservative estimates of the number of Islamic State fighters in Iraq and Syria, which is around 18,000 fighters.<sup>20</sup> Late 2014 CIA estimates put the number between 20,000 and 31,500.<sup>21</sup> More sensationalist analysts have argued that it probably has nearly 100,000 fighters in Iraq and Syria.<sup>22</sup>

Thus, the average assessment of the number of Islamic State fighters in Libya is roughly 30 percent of the average assessment of the number of Islamic State fighters in Iraq and Syria. And this is in a country four times the size of Iraq (and three times the size of Iraq and Syria combined). While the concentration of Islamic State fighters in Libya is undeniably large, its size in comparison to the size of the organization in Iraq and Syria and relative to the enormity of Libya casts doubt on the group's ability to expand without additional manpower, a point that was highlighted by the U.N. in a recent report and which is precisely what al-Qahtani was calling for.<sup>23</sup>

Where the Islamic State in Libya's fighters come from differs as well. The first Islamic State fighters in Libya were Libyans returning from Iraq and Syria.<sup>24</sup> That core group was placed under the command of non-Libyans from the Middle East and has been augmented by fighters coming from other North African and sub-Saharan countries. One report indicated that approximately 70 percent of the Islamic State's fighters in Libya were non-Libyans, with the majority coming from Tunisia and the remainder from Algeria, Chad, Egypt, Morocco, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, and Sudan.<sup>25</sup> An overtly anti-Islamic State TV channel based in Jordan claims the Islamic State had 3,000 fighters in Sirte alone in December 2015, of which only 12 percent were Libyans and 20 percent came from non-Maghreb nationalities.<sup>26</sup> It remains unclear whether sub-Saharan fighters were members of Boko Haram or Islamic State sympathizers from elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>27</sup> By February 2016, the Islamic State in Libya had begun to attract new European recruits, including some 70 men and women from France and Belgium.<sup>28</sup> Importantly, according to one report, the Islamic State in Libya is paying fighters, particularly sub-Saharan Africans, to come, which would indicate that al-Qahtani's call may be falling on deaf ears and that it is missing its recruitment targets despite reports that the number of Islamic State fighters in Libya may be increasing.<sup>29</sup>

This is in marked contrast to the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. Not only are there more foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria, but they have distinctly different backgrounds. For example, while there are hardly any Europeans fighting alongside the Islamic State in Libya, there were as many as 4,000 Western Europeans among a range of jihadi groups in Syria and Iraq, including the Islamic State.<sup>30</sup> In addition, there were roughly 3,000 from countries of the former Soviet Union and a further 1,200 from South and Southeast Asia.<sup>31</sup> Lastly, there were almost 10,000 fighters from throughout the Arab world, including Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Tunisia, and Yemen.<sup>32</sup> One source indicated that there were only 100 Sudanese fighters in Iraq and

## **“While the concentration of Islamic State fighters in Libya is undeniably large, its size ... relative to the enormity of Libya casts doubts on the group's ability to expand without additional manpower.”**

Syria. It did not identify any other sub-Saharan fighters who had joined the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.<sup>33</sup>

### **Three Libyan Provinces?**

Not only does the Islamic State in Libya have significantly fewer fighters than the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria but the Islamic State in Libya controls less territory than the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.

To be sure, Libya and its current state of affairs shares some characteristics with Iraq and Syria and affords the Islamic State a fertile environment in which to grow. Since 2014, the country has been embroiled in a simmering civil war, with militias allied with one or the other of Libya's two rival governments in Tobruk and Tripoli fighting each other and other non-Islamic State jihadi groups like Ansar al-Sharia, constellations of militias allied with the old Libyan Islamic Fighting Group or al-Qa`ida, or the salafi Special Deterrent Forces.<sup>3</sup> As in Iraq and Syria, though, these groups have been overwhelmingly preoccupied with fighting each other rather than confronting the Islamic State. This created an opening in Libya into which the Islamic State has inserted itself. Ironically, the existence of the very forces whose tit-for-tat struggle for power allowed for the arrival of the Islamic State will ultimately limit the extent to which the Islamic State can expand in Libya.

Shortly after pledging allegiance to al-Baghdadi, the Islamic State announced the creation of three provinces in Libya: Wilaya Barqa (Cyrenaica), Wilaya Tarabulus (Tripolitania), and Wilaya Fezzan. These, however, are provinces in name only and the Islamic State in Libya is constrained to a thin coastal strip on either side of Sirte totaling under 200 miles.<sup>34</sup>

While Wilaya Barqa was the Islamic State's first hub in Libya, Wilaya Tarabulus is now the group's epicenter and Wilaya Fezzan appears to be more aspirational than actual. As noted above, the Islamic State in Libya was pushed out of Derna, its initial foothold in the country, and is now sporadically active in small pockets in the city and in its surrounding hills, but unable to capture and hold territory, let alone govern.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, it has been pushed out of its strongholds in Benghazi and while it is still trying to counter the recent offensive, it does not hold territory there either. In short, although the Islamic State in Libya is still fighting in what it calls Wilaya Barqa, it does not control, hold, or administer any territory or population there. The Islamic State may also have some members in Wilaya Fezzan in southern Libya where it may have access to a smuggling chokepoint outside of Sabha,<sup>36</sup> but it neither controls

a The Special Deterrent Forces is a Tripoli-based radical salafi militia, but it is not a salafi jihadi militia.

nor governs any cities or towns there. In fact, the only territory it holds and administers is on the eastern edge of what it calls Wilaya Tarabulus. Its territory here consists of Sirte and the neighboring towns of Harawa, al-Nawfaliyah, and Bin Jawad to the east and up to the outskirts of Abu Qrayn to the west. In addition, it had maintained some operations in Sabratha, 40 miles to the west of Tripoli, but it did not control or administer territory there.

In total then, the Islamic State in Libya may be able to maneuver within roughly 4,550 square miles, and it imposes some form of control, though not complete governance, over approximately 110,000 people (the estimated combined populations of Sirte, Harawa, al-Nawfaliyah, and Bin Jawad). This is in comparison with the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, which at its peak controlled as much as 35,000 square miles, exerting uncontested authority over roughly 12,000 square miles. Some 6.2 million people lived under some degree of Islamic State influence in Iraq and Syria, about the size of the entire Libyan population.

Several factors limit the Islamic State's expansion in Libya. The simplest is geography. Libya is an enormous country—equal in size to Mongolia—and much of it beyond the littoral is open desert. Deserts, in Libya and elsewhere, present violent non-state actors with a paradox. On the one hand, they are relatively navigable and sparsely populated, making territory easy to capture. On the other hand, they offer violent actors no refuge and the same characteristics that make territory easy to capture make it difficult to hold. This is not to say that Libya's southern deserts are undesirable for the Islamic State—after all, some of Libya's larger oil fields are located there as are many lucrative smuggling routes—but it is simply hard for the Islamic State to do much in them beyond episodic attacks.

Second, Libyans have strong municipal and tribal affiliations. These affiliations most clearly manifested themselves in the uprising against the Qadhafi government in 2011 when militias representing different regions like the Nafusa Mountains, or cities, like Misrata, or even neighborhoods, like Souq al-Jumaa in Tripoli arose. Libya's tribes are also important, with tribal affiliations bleeding into politics and violent conflict alike. For example, the Awlad Suleiman have had violent turf wars with the Tebu in south-

ern Libya and the U.N.-brokered Government of National Accord is loosely structured along tribal lines.<sup>37</sup>

This is not to overemphasize the role that these affiliations can play. Tribal loyalties do not always count. For example, the head of the Petroleum Facilities Guard, a member of the Magharba tribe, refused to follow the Magharba tribal leaders' demands that he end his blockade of Libyan oil terminals in 2013.<sup>38</sup> Likewise, being from Misrata or Benghazi or Tripoli does not prevent one from living in other cities or towns. Many families in Tripoli claim origins in other Libyan towns and do not have allegiance to them above anywhere else in Libya.

But Libya's open spaces and its intensely contested landscape leave little room for the Islamic State. In fact, the Islamic State was only able to establish itself in Sirte because the city was largely unwanted by other groups.<sup>39</sup> Sirte was Qadhafi's hometown and was consequently vilified by many Libyans after the 2011 revolution. Libya's most powerful militias did not lay claim to it and focused their efforts on Libya's bigger prizes like Tripoli or Benghazi or the nearby oil-rich regions. When the Islamic State has tried to expand beyond Sirte to the east and to the west, it has run into towns that are controlled by other militias that rebuff them, such as Abu Qrayn in the west and Ajdabiya in the east. In a recent interview, the Islamic State's new leader in Libya, identified as Abdul Qadr al-Naa-jdi, acknowledged as much, saying that "the number of factions [in Libya] and their disputes" had prevented the Islamic State from expanding its control beyond Sirte.<sup>40</sup>

### Libya: A Ward of the [Islamic] State

The inability to control territory and govern populations has limited the Islamic State in Libya's independent financial viability. The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria's wealth and diverse revenue streams have been widely reported. The group has robbed banks of a reported total of US\$1 billion. It engages in oil sales (both crude smuggled outside the Islamic State's territory and retail sales of refined products within the area it controls) that allegedly earned it as much as US\$500 million. It has trafficked in antiquities. It has raised almost an additional US\$1 billion by taxing the population under its control and imposing tariffs on goods entering or leaving its territory. It also engages in extortion and kidnap-for-ransom operations to generate funds, totaling between US\$35 million and US\$45 million. And finally, it has relied heavily on donations from abroad.<sup>41</sup>

The Islamic State in Libya's finances are less well-documented, but even by rough estimates they are nowhere near the levels of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. Like the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, it has attempted to impose sharia-compliant taxes in Sirte and, according to Islamic State propaganda, all shops in Sirte were paying taxes by the end of August 2015.<sup>42</sup> In addition, it is allegedly collecting tariffs on goods and vehicles on the coastal highway that runs east and west of the Sirte as well as on the highway heading out of town to the south.<sup>43</sup> It is also involved in smuggling, including potentially human trafficking, selling antiquities, and the resale of the "spoils of war (*al-anfāl*)."<sup>44</sup> Lastly, the Islamic State in Libya may be able to make money from small amounts of oil that it is able to bunker from nearby pipelines, but it is in no way involved in high-volume oil sales.<sup>45</sup>

There are several reasons why the Islamic State in Libya has been unable to exploit Libya's hydrocarbons resources. First, other powerful groups laid claim to different parts of the sector before the arrival of the Islamic State, and it is difficult for the Islamic State to



The Islamic State's three self-proclaimed provinces in Libya: Wilaya Barqa, Wilaya Tarabulus, and Wilaya Fezzan

oust them. Second, Libya's oil infrastructure is spread out over an enormous area with terminals and storage facilities often hundreds of miles from the wellhead. While crude could be bunkered from pipelines, Libya does not have mom-and-pop teapot refineries that could refine crude into retail products.<sup>46</sup> Neither does Libya have a history of smuggling networks that could transport crude to markets outside the country.<sup>47</sup> Although these may develop in time, with crude trucked across the border into Egypt or Tunisia, this has not happened yet, and it is unlikely that the Islamic State would be the first beneficiary of them.

Ultimately, a November 2015 U.N. report concluded that "[Islamic State] operations in Libya do not generate revenue, nor are they currently organized, to the same extent as its operations in Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic."<sup>48</sup> In short, were the Islamic State to lose ground in Iraq and Syria, it seems unlikely that it would be able to replace lost Iraqi and Syrian revenue with revenue from Libya, nor would a sole Libyan Islamic State be able to support itself.

### The Narrative's Collapse

The significance of the Islamic State in Libya's shortcomings in comparison with the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria—fewer fighters, less territory, not much governance, and little revenue – is greater than the sum of their parts. A fundamental Islamic State narrative is that unlike its other jihadi rivals—and most importantly, al-Qa`ida—the Islamic State walks the walk. It governs.<sup>49</sup> While al-Qa`ida is engaged in a Trotsky-esque permanent jihad, the Islamic State is building the caliphate, and instead of just talking about social justice in Islam, it is implementing it.<sup>50</sup> But in Libya, it barely governs. Worse, contrary to its mantra of "remain and expand" (*bâqîya wa tatamaddad*), it has begun to lose ground and is shrinking in the face of counter-offensives from disparate Libyan armed groups that surround it, including other jihadi groups. It has lost its beachhead in Derna, and it recently lost its strongholds in Benghazi to forces grouped under the banner of Operation Dignity and its outpost in Sabratha to militias allied with the city-state of Misrata. Its inability to govern and to live up to its own slogan poses existential challenges for the Islamic State in Libya.

In addition to being unable to leverage its claims to govern, the Islamic State in Libya is also unable to exploit a second narrative that is central to the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, namely Islam's sectarian divide. The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria has framed its fight as a sectarian struggle. It is not fighting just to advance its own salafi jihadi interpretation of Sunni Islam, but more importantly, it is fighting to eliminate adherents to Shi`a interpretations of Islam. In fact, for the Islamic State, Shi`a interpretations of Islam are not Islam at all and the Islamic State's struggle should be the struggle of all Muslims.<sup>51</sup>

There are, however, no Shi`a in Libya. Consequently, the Islamic State in Libya is unable to prey upon sectarian divisions in order to rally support. In lieu of the Shi`a, it has turned its ire toward Sufi interpretations of Islam, which are widespread throughout Libya.<sup>52</sup> Jihadis are hostile to Sufi practices, but Libya's Sufis are nonetheless Sunni. In addition, unlike the Middle East's Shi`a, Libya's Sufis are not supported by any state and cannot be easily depicted as proxies for those states. As a result, it is more difficult to frame the fight in Libya around them than it is around the Shi`a of Iraq and Syria.

Alternately, the Islamic State in Libya has tried to frame its fight as one against injustice. But there are already plenty of groups in Libya claiming to wage the same battle, including other jihadi

## “Were the Islamic State to lose ground in Iraq and Syria, it seems unlikely that it would be able to replace lost Iraqi and Syrian revenue with revenue from Libya.”

groups and salafi Islamist groups, and some of them are confronting the Islamic State directly, like the Shura Council of Mujahideen in Derna. The battlespace for “commanding the right and forbidding the wrong” (*al-`amr bi al-ma`rûf wa al-nahî `an al-munkar*) is crowded and the Islamic State has to compete with other groups not only for supporters but for its very *raison d'être*.

### Conclusion

Minus sufficient manpower, revenue, and its two fundamental narrative tropes—governance and sectarianism—the ability of Libya to be a “fallback” for the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria is doubtful. Thus far, the Islamic State in Libya has only demonstrated a limited capacity to capture and hold territory, and it cannot fund itself. If large enough numbers heed al-Qahtani's call, this could change, with new fighters allowing the Islamic State in Libya to launch new offensives that could restore its ability to seize cities and thereby restore its ability to generate revenue and one of its central narratives. But with al-Qahtani's *hijrah* invitation now some six months old and the Islamic State in Libya's numbers increasing only incrementally, this does not appear to be the most likely outcome.

But the Islamic State in Libya does not have to be a replica of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria to be dangerous and disruptive for Libya and its neighbors. In early February, clashes between the Islamic State and the Shura Council of Mujahideen in Derna resulted in at least two deaths. Islamic State members murdered 17 police officers in the aftermath of the U.S. airstrike in Sabratha, and it is still in control of Sirte where it is meting out unconscionable violence on the city's inhabitants.<sup>53</sup> And even though it is unlikely that Islamic State leadership in Iraq and Syria will be able to transplant its Middle Eastern project to the shores of the Mediterranean, the Islamic State in Libya is still al-Baghdadi's most potent affiliate.

Even though the Islamic State has been unable to hold territory that it has captured with the exception of Sirte, the reach of its attacks throughout the country is expanding. In addition, it has already demonstrated the capacity to use Libya to strike other countries, having undertaken two devastating attacks in Tunisia in 2015 and mounted an assault on the Tunisian border town of Ben Gardane in March 2016 that resulted in the death of 12 army and security officers and seven civilians.<sup>54</sup> In the aftermath of the latter attack, several large arms caches allegedly belonging to the Islamic State were found in the town, indicating that the Islamic State had a long-standing presence there and was able to move freely across the border to Libya.<sup>54</sup>

b The Islamic State-linked gunmen who carried out the attacks on the Bardo museum in March 2015 and a beach in Sousse in June 2015 trained together in Sabratha, Libya. Greg Botelho and Barbara Starr, “49 killed in U.S. airstrike targeting terrorists in Libya,” CNN, February 20, 2016.



There also remains the very real possibility that the Islamic State in Libya could serve as a springboard for attacking Europe. The November 2015 Paris attacks showed that Islamic State in Iraq and Syria is able to move its supporters back and forth from its territory to Europe, and it will likely attempt the same thing in Libya. In February, French Minister of Defense Jean-Yves Le Drian warned of

just such an eventuality. As summer months bring warmer weather and calmer seas, crossing the Mediterranean by boat becomes easier, and Le Drian fears that jihadis from Libya are likely to try to blend in with the increased refugee flows departing Libya's shores.<sup>55</sup> And the Islamic State does not need to have three *wilayat* to do that. **CTC**

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# A View from the CT Foxhole: John J. Miller, NYPD Deputy Commissioner for Intelligence & Counterterrorism, with Ambassador Michael Sheehan

By Maria Southard

**John J. Miller is the New York Police Department's Deputy Commissioner for Intelligence & Counterterrorism. He is former Deputy Director of the Intelligence Analysis Division at the Office of the Director of National Intelligence and served as Assistant Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. He was also the Commanding Officer, Counter Terrorism & Criminal Intelligence Bureau of the Los Angeles Police Department. During his previous work as a journalist, Deputy Commissioner Miller interviewed Usama bin Ladin for ABC News.**

**Ambassador Michael Sheehan serves as Distinguished Chair of the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point. A 1977 graduate of the United States Military Academy, he was the former Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict. From 2003 to 2006, Ambassador Sheehan served as the New York Police Department's Deputy Commissioner for Counterterrorism.**

**Sheehan: You have a unique background and historical perspective on the evolution of the terrorist threat. Walk us through how things have changed.**

**Miller:** There's a pre-9/11 world and there's a post-9/11 world. In the pre-9/11 world, there was a faster drumbeat of attacks in New York and the United States than there is today. Then in the 1990s we had the first World Trade Center bombing, which was hatched by Islamist terrorist overseas and some other plots linked to Islamists. But we believed that this was the normal cadence of terrorism, that some would appear in the U.S. that would be domestic in nature, and when it was foreign-influenced we could absorb it. We could handle it. And we could still catch them anywhere in the world.

In the post-9/11 world every terrorist attack is measured by the idea that it is a crack in the glass, a chink in the armor following an attack that left 3,000 people dead in multiple locations on a single day on U.S. soil. So today, a shooting attack in San Bernardino that kills 14 people has far more of an emotional impact than it would have had pre-9/11 because the emotions and fears that were stirred by 9/11 will come rushing back. It's why the Brits can say that 7/7 was their 9/11 even though the death toll there was only 50 some-

odd, or the Spaniards can say that March 11th was their 9/11 even though the death toll was under 200. I think the game-changer today is that every attack is larger in scope than it would be if it were something other than terrorism.

**Sheehan: I think that's right. It's that connection to 9/11 and a potential for another one that creates the anxiety and the focus. Al-Qa`ida, of course, has struggled to replicate a 9/11 attack on our soil, though not for lack of trying. What do you think about al-Qa`ida in terms of their failures juxtaposed against the success of the U.S. in preventing another 9/11?**  
**Miller:** After 9/11, people like you did things that denied them sanctuary. Once they were denied open, effective sanctuary, they spent more time hiding from either Special Forces or drones than they did plotting. When your business model turns upside down and more of your investment is based on survival than it is an attack, you're not going to be an effective offensive player, and they weren't.

I think al-Qa`ida made two major organizational mistakes, driven by the inflexibility of al-Qa`ida senior leadership, particularly Usama bin Ladin, that drove the organization out of relevancy. The first one was a misjudgment on what the follow-up to 9/11 should have been. Bin Ladin believed that 9/11 was such a perfectly executed attack, he measured every future action along the idea that it had to be as good as 9/11 or exceed 9/11 to be effective. Having been a student of the dark art of terrorism, he didn't want al-Qa`ida to fall into the hole that Hamas had, which is you blow up a bus and kill six or 12 people every week and still come out of it having gained nothing and only have brought more trouble upon yourself. That was his calculus.

After 9/11, had al-Qa`ida pivoted to get followers to do a suicide bombing in a mall and then another one in a movie theater and an active shooter in a crowded train station, it would have caused continued fear and panic and would have achieved the goal of terrorism, which is the daily questioning of the government's authority, the government's ability to protect people, the government's motives in its decisions on Middle East policy, and all that comes with that. By putting all their eggs in one basket that the next one had to be as spectacular as 9/11, they really lost time. They allowed us in the intelligence community to detect and stop plots that would have been the next 9/11, like the 2006 transatlantic planes plot.

The second mistake is purely generational. After bin Ladin sat down and did the interview with me [*Editor's note: for ABC News in 1998*], they never had to do that again because they discovered YouTube and could control their own video destiny, and they put out a series of videos and communiqués. But al-Qa`ida's videos were all about bin Ladin or Zawahiri or Anwar al-Awlaki. By contrast, ISIS' videos are all about the person who wants to join ISIS—what *you* could be, *you* clothed in valor, *you* as someone who now belongs. They are all over social media, and you can get in direct communication with them and take the conversations offline. They're ex-

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tremely tangible and reachable and real, and for a generation that actually tweets what they had for breakfast, a terrorist organization that reflects that level of communication and starts talking to them directly is going to be a real factor. Al-Qa`ida was all about “Me, Usama bin Ladin.” And that just didn’t sell.

**Sheehan: How has the Islamic State’s skill at communicating translated into a threat here in the United States?**

**Miller:** The thing that ISIS does is they really understand their audience. They have some very convincing material, for example putting out compelling videos glorifying fighters from the West killed in battle. That’s to get you into the tent. What they do after that goes from brilliant to genius. They start to talk to you personally. If you look at the postings of Junaid Hussain,<sup>a</sup> who was a British individual who went by the Twitter handle Abu Hussain-al-Britani, he would post such things as, “You no longer need to go to a training camp to learn everything you need to know; you can get it all online.” And people would respond with questions or comments, and he would say, “Meet me on my Kik account.” Then he would talk to them directly.

The power of this ISIS instigation became fully apparent in the run up to the July 4 holiday last summer. In the course of the period from April 1 to July 4 in New York City, and from Boston to Morgantown, North Carolina, we had a dozen arrests in three or four plots, two of which targeted New York City directly, and this was all based on ISIS meeting people on Twitter and talking to them on encrypted apps. What we were seeing was a pace of cases and arrests and plotters that we hadn’t seen before. We were seeing that

<sup>a</sup> Junaid Hussain, a British Islamic State operative, was killed by a U.S. drone strike in Syria in August 2015 and has been linked to several terrorist plots in the West. One of the gunmen who planned to attack an event in Garland, Texas, in May 2015 exchanged more than 100 messages with Hussain the morning of the attempted attack. See reporting by Evan Perez, “Situation Room,” CNN, December 17, 2015.



*Deputy Commissioner John J. Miller (center) during a recent press encounter*

## “The mass marketing of terrorism was starting to be more effective than we had ever seen with any other kind of messaging before, including the messaging of Anwar al-Awlaki.”

the mass marketing of terrorism was starting to be more effective than we had ever seen with any other kind of messaging before, including the messaging of Anwar al-Awlaki. But this was happening in rapid succession.

**Sheehan: What have you been able to glean from recent cases about the radicalization process?**

**Miller:** If you look at the 85 or so cases involving ISIL recruits or attempted terrorists or plotters nationwide, you start to identify three general categories. The first category is the loser category. This is the individual who is not making it at home with their families; they’re not making it at work professionally, or they’re not making it educationally. When they find their way to this propaganda that promises valor, belonging, and empowerment, they say, “Well, I don’t have to be a loser.”

The second category is those who seek adventure. And while it may be wrapped in a narrative of religion, these are people who want to travel to the Islamic State, to the Caliphate, to Syria and join ISIL because they’ve seen all the propaganda on how they can be a part of something bigger than themselves and escape their lives in America and live in this utopian society as it is depicted in the videos.

The third category is the one that’s the hardest to understand. When you look at people like the San Bernardino shooters, these are not losers. We have an individual who has a government job that’s very secure, a wife and a new baby, and who lives in a nice condo in a good neighborhood. [Attempted Times Square bomber] Faisal Shahzad is another case in point—a guy who had a job in the tech and finance world, who had a house in Connecticut and a wife and kids. It’s a different question you have to pose with these individuals. It’s not what they were running *from* but what they were running *to* and what pulled them. When Shahzad was interviewed by the FBI he said words to the effect of, “When I listened to the tapes of Anwar al-Awlaki, I thought he was talking to me.”

**Sheehan: I want to turn to a challenge faced by U.S. law enforcement communities. I think we need to realize that after San Bernardino and Chattanooga, the terrorists are not necessarily targeting New York or Boston or LA. I think that ISIS and even al-Qa`ida now have changed their model. Small towns and cities are now just as vulnerable, but I’m concerned that some of the smaller police forces are dedicating very few people to the JTTFs. Should local police forces be doing more?**

**Miller:** You pose an interesting question. The instruction from ISIS is attack with what you have where you are, so it’s clear the threat has become more geographically dispersed.

If you look at the communications in al-Qa`ida in Yemen’s *Inspire* magazine after the Boston marathon bombing, they acknowl-

edge that these guys were smart to do it outside of what they referred to as the enemy's main area of focus, meaning not New York, because they have become painfully aware of the level of successes in detection and prevention here in New York.

Before the bombings, if I'm the police department in Watertown, where the Boston Marathon bombers lived, I've got to ask myself, "We're a small town outside of Boston. We don't have iconic locations or targets. Do I really want to take somebody from my small detective squad and lose that person to the FBI?"

On the other hand, in the post-9/11 world, almost every agency should consider having at least one person on the JTTF because you want to know what's going on in the environment around you, and that's the best way to have access to that information.

It's not just the numbers you have deployed on the JTTFs. When I was in LAPD, we only had 15 people on the JTTF out of a 10,000-person police force. But I had one person on every squad of the JTTF. When I called my team together at the end of every week, they could tell me everything that was going on in my threat environment as far as the JTTF knew, and that was of great value to me.

**Sheehan: You talked about the Islamic State and their incredible capability in using social media to reach out to people. Talk to me about how you see their use of encryption creating challenges for the Bureau and NYPD. How bad is the problem?**

**Miller:** This is the problem we refer to as going dark, and we're getting darker all the time. This is technology where the aperture on law enforcement's ability to look in on criminal and terrorist activities is getting smaller and smaller. Companies like Telegram and Wickr offer end-to-end encryption, which means a message will be encrypted when it goes up into the air, and it'll be encrypted when it's received. Telegram offers the option of making messages self-destruct. I can walk into one of these companies today with a federal search warrant and say I need the communications between Terrorist A and Terrorist B, and they can turn to me say, "Not only won't I give it to you, but I *can't* give it to you because it's encrypted so we can't retrieve it, save it, or decrypt it." The more that aperture closes on being able to access communications in progress, the more you're going to have to rely on human informants and to intervene earlier on in investigations.

On the other hand, not being able to access those devices is going to not just impede our ability to prevent events but also impede our ability to look back on events that have already happened, to understand who was behind it, and how to prevent the next one. This is an extraordinarily serious problem, and this is the great law of unintended consequences. Many of these apps were developed to help kids communicate securely. But soon terrorist groups, criminal networks, gangs, narcotics cartels looked at these apps and said, "This is sheer genius. This is what we've always been waiting for."

Then when you have a company like Apple say it's going to lock the device so it's not available even under a court order and you have Google saying the same, then you have to ask how many crimes are not going to be solved or prevented because law enforcement can't get legal access. And then you ask the hardest question of all, which is how much do we care as a society that we are going to create communication networks that are impenetrable not just for regular people but for criminal groups. Is that OK with everybody?

**Sheehan: Last year, months before the November Paris attacks, the NYPD set up a major new command to respond to a poten-**

**"In the post-9/11 world, almost every agency should consider having at least one person on the JTTF because you want to know what's going on in the environment around you."**

**tial terrorist mass shootings. Can you outline why the police commissioner took this decision and what the new organization is up to?**

**Miller:** We were seeing the convergence of a couple of bad themes. One is the steady, nationwide increase in the number and lethality of active shooter incidences. The second was a greater adaptation by organized terrorist groups like AQ-network affiliates and particularly ISIS of the active shooter tactic as low-tech, low-cost, and extraordinarily high-impact. So we sent teams on fact-finding missions—to Paris, Sydney, Australia, and Tunisia. The tactical conclusions were that in all of these incidents, you have multiple attackers with multiple long rifles and multiple magazines with high capacity attacking places in attacks that went between four and nine minutes with sustained shooting.

We had to reflect on our model. The program we had at the time was the Critical Response Vehicles, where cops were borrowed from every precinct in the city and placed in front of high-profile locations as a visible deterrent against terrorism. But they had no particular special training or special equipment in confronting a terrorist attack.

So we developed a new 600-strong Critical Response Command on the idea that if we were borrowing the same people every day, year after year, we might as well make them a permanent force. Each of these people is hand-picked for their individual qualities and experience. They are trained on the M4 rifles. They are equipped. And they are given a daily intelligence briefing not just on the target they're sitting in front of but about what went on over the last 24 hours in the world as it relates to tactics used in recent terrorist attacks.

When we saw the Paris attacks in November, it really validated our thinking that the rapid deployment of people who are properly trained, equipped, and armed would have made a difference had that happened in New York City.

**Sheehan: Former Commissioner Ray Kelly initiated the Lower Manhattan Security Initiative, including using cutting-edge technologies to defend the World Trade Center. I know this is something you've continued to develop. What can you tell us about the latest?**

**Miller:** The Lower Manhattan Security Initiative started with a network of cameras to protect the Financial District, but it has expanded out up through midtown. The genius of what was developed under Commissioner Kelly was the mixing of imagery from video with layers of data. If you take arrest data, DMV information, and so on, you're able to add or take out layers to give you as rich a picture as you need. It's not so much about getting new information as being able to marshal and empower the information you already have to make connections that would take a police officer or an analyst perhaps weeks or months to otherwise find.

Previously, all of that information was facing inward to the counterterrorism bureau, to police headquarters, to the command staff, but the average cop in the street couldn't really access immediately. What [NYPD Deputy Commissioner for Information and Technology] Jessica Tisch did, on orders from Commissioner Bratton, was to use forfeiture money from the Manhattan District Attorney's Office with funds from the city to buy 20,000—soon to be 36,000—smartphones for all of the police officers in the field. So now they can check everything from the 911 calls to license plate data and criminal records.

From a counterterrorism standpoint, this is completely invaluable. If we got a tip in NYC that a known individual was coming in to execute a suicide bombing operation in Times Square, only six months ago we would have had to call all the cops in, broadcast the description over the police radio, read it to them at roll call, hold up a picture, or try to make copies to pass out. Now we can trace that out to everybody with the click of a mouse, so that's really moved us forward in terms of turning every single officer of the NYPD out in the field, no matter what their assignment is, into a counterterrorism resource. **CTC**



# The Islamic State in the Philippines: A Looming Shadow in Southeast Asia?

By Peter Chalk

**With the Philippines' long history as a source of Islamist extremism in Southeast Asia, there are indications that the Islamic State is now seeking to extend its presence in the country. While the group has received pledges of support from certain local militant entities, none represents a viable vehicle for furthering sustained attacks outside of Mindanao. Arguably a more relevant threat relates to the large Filipino expatriate community in the Middle East that could either be co-opted as recruits or targeted in attacks.**

**T**he Philippines has long been a significant source of Islamist extremism in Southeast Asia. Although the largest and most prominent militant group, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), appears set to sign a peace deal with Manila, two other established entities remain active and new ones have emerged. There are also disturbing indications that the so-called Islamic State is seeking to extend its presence in the country by co-opting elements in Mindanao and its surrounding islands. This article examines the current militant landscape in the Philippines and assesses the prospects that it will emerge as a new regional beachhead for Islamic State terrorism.

## Main Islamist Militant Entities in the Philippines

Three main militant entities operate in the Philippines: MILF, the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), and the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF). While the former is in the midst of peace negotiations with the government, the latter two remain on an operational footing.

### MILF

MILF is the largest and best-equipped Islamist militant group in the Philippines. The organization was initially founded under the leadership of Hashim Salamat with the aim of establishing an independent Islamic state in all areas of the southern Philippines where Muslims have traditionally been the majority. Following Salamat's death in 2003, his more pragmatic successor, al-Haj Murad Ebrahim, moderated the objective over time. He felt a guarantee of

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comprehensive autonomy rather than outright independence was the most realistic concession that could be extracted from Manila.<sup>1</sup> To this end he signed a cessation of hostilities agreement in 2003 and has since participated in Malaysian-sponsored talks aimed at resolving an array of concerns about a future self-governing Moro homeland.

At the time of writing, most of these issues had been worked out, and despite a serious clash between MILF and the elite Filipino Special Action Force in January 2015 that left 43 police officers dead,<sup>2</sup> the expectation is that a final peace deal will be signed in the near future.<sup>3</sup> This should pave the way for the formal institution of a so-called Bangsamoro Judicial Entity (BJE), an autonomous region for Muslims under the constitutional control of the Philippine state.<sup>3</sup>

### ASG

ASG was established in 1991 by Abdurajak Janjalini, a veteran of the Afghan mujahideen campaign against the Soviet Union during the 1980s. Its stated goals are the purge of all Christian influence in the southern Philippines and the establishment of an independent Islamic State of Mindanao (MIS).<sup>4</sup> From the outset this agenda was tied to larger, transnational extremist plans, mostly rhetorically but occasionally substantively.<sup>b</sup>

In its early years ASG operated as a cohesive and explicitly religious organization. The loss of several senior commanders, however, has progressively seen the group degenerate into a fractured and criminalized entity. Today, the organization, which numbers no more than 100 members, is split between roving kidnap-for-ransom bands operating on the islands of Basilan and Jolo.<sup>5</sup> Isnilon Hapilon, an elderly cleric who now goes by the name of Sheikh Mujahideen Abdullah al-Philippine, leads the largest and most active of these factions, which is based on the island of Basilan.

### BIFF

BIFF is a spin-off of MILF formed in December 2010 by Ustadz Ameril Umbra Kato, a scholar and former leader of the Front's 105th Command.<sup>6</sup> Among other things, he contended that MILF had strayed from the Bangsamoro's original goals and undermined the Moro Islamic cause by negotiating only for Mindanao's autonomy and not full independence.<sup>7</sup> After Kato died from pneumonia in April 2015, BIFF's command passed to Ismael Abu Bakar, a somewhat more radical leader who also goes by "Bonmgos."<sup>8</sup> BIFF

a President Benigno Aquino III has urged legislators to pass the proposed law establishing the BJE in time for the end of his six-year term in mid-2016. "Manila Mourns Slaughtered Police," *Bangkok Post*, January 30, 2015.

b ASG has been linked to several transnational terrorist plots. For further details, see Peter Chalk, *Black Flag Rising: ISIL in Southeast and Australia* (Canberra: ASPI, 2015).

is larger and better equipped than ASG, although its influence remains highly localized largely within two *barangays* (hamlets) in Maguindanao.<sup>9</sup>

### Other Groups

Besides MILF, ASG, and BIFF, there are at least three smaller groups that have emerged in the Philippines in the last few years: Jamaal al-Tawhid Wal Jihad Philippines, Ansar Khalifah Sarangani (AKS, or Supporters of the Caliphate), and Khilafa Islamiyah Mindanao (KIM). While information on these entities is scant, none is believed to number more than a handful of followers.

Jamaal al-Tawhid Wal Jihad Philippines (JaTWJP, sometimes also referred to as Tawhid and Jihad Group in the Land of the Philippines and Pride) emerged sometime in 2012. The organization espouses a jihadist ideology, and it has taken responsibility for a number of sporadic assaults against the military. Abu 'Atikah al Mujahir is thought to lead the group although it is not known how many members he oversees.<sup>10</sup>

AKS surfaced in 2014 under the leadership of Abdul Basit Usman, one of the most wanted men in the Philippines with a US\$1 million bounty on his head under the United States' Rewards for Justice Program.<sup>11</sup> It is essentially a bomb-making outfit but has lost much of its relevance largely due to the death of Usman who was killed by elements of MILF on May 3, 2015. Many of the remaining members have since migrated to KIM.<sup>12</sup>

KIM, the largest of the three, is a dedicated jihadi organization that seeks the creation of an independent religious state in Mindanao. It is led by an Afghan-trained Islamic cleric known as Humam Abdul Najid, who is believed to have carried out twin bombings against the al-Imam mosque and Rural Bus Transit station in Zamboanga City on August 16, 2012.<sup>13</sup> KIM has occasionally been referred to as an umbrella movement that links Islamists from ASG, BIFF, and rump local elements from the now-defunct Jemaah Islamiyya (JI) network, though it is still unclear whether the group acts as a collective entity rather than a stand-alone in its own right.<sup>14</sup>

### Islamic State Influence in the Philippines

During the last several years there has been growing concern over the Islamic State's spreading ideological and operational influence in Southeast Asia. Thus far, most attention has centered on Muslim majority states such as Malaysia and especially Indonesia. While these two countries do warrant a cause for worry, there are indications that the group has also sought to extend its reach into the Philippines. In a 24-minute audio narration that the al-Furqan Media Foundation aired on December 26, 2015, for instance, al-Baghdadi specifically included the Bangsamoro struggle as one of several campaigns that Muslims from around the world should support.<sup>15</sup> The speech came on the heels of a purported Islamic State-produced video that featured militants performing physical exercises at a "boot camp" in the jungles of Mindanao.<sup>16</sup> There has also been at least some speculation that the bomb attacks in Jakarta on January 14, 2016, were a response to the activities of pro-Islamic State Filipino supporters who were seen as competing with Indonesian jihadis as the recognized standard bearers for al-Baghdadi's group in Southeast Asia.<sup>17</sup>

None of the above provides definitive evidence that the Islamic State has managed to establish a concerted operational presence in the Philippines. To date, most of the group's activities appear to have been directed toward two ends: proselytism and recruitment.



*An image from a purported Islamic State-produced video featuring a "boot camp" in the jungles of Mindanao, released December 2015.*

It is known that the Islamic State has used social media tools in an attempt to co-opt potential followers and sympathizers from schools and universities in Mindanao.<sup>18</sup> In addition, elements widely suspected of being directly connected to the organization have purportedly tried to enlist fighters to join al-Baghdadi's self-defined jihad in Syria and Iraq (allegedly offering 7,000PHP/US\$147 as a joining bonus).<sup>19</sup> These latter activities first came to light in July 2014 when Musa Ceratino—an Australian-born Christian convert to Islam and regular attendee of the now-closed radical al-Risalah Salafist center in Sydney, Australia<sup>c</sup>—was arrested in Cebu City for inciting terrorism on the internet and exhorting Filipinos to go fight for the Islamic State in the Middle East.<sup>20</sup>

It is not clear how successful the Islamic State's recruitment efforts have been and/or the extent to which it has been able to sway popular sentiments among radically prone Muslims in Mindanao. One organization that has certainly not been influenced is MILF, the dominant rebel group in the area. The Front has not only vociferously denounced the "savagery and barbarism" of al-Baghdadi and his movement, it has also stressed a ready willingness to work with Manila to prevent the latent spread of Islamic State ideology.<sup>21</sup>

MILF's firm rejection of the Islamic State notwithstanding, at least some Filipinos are thought to have left the country to fight for the movement's cause. In August 2014, leaked government documents claimed that as many as 200 nationals had infiltrated Iraq to undergo militant training with the Islamic State, further warning that many of these volunteers intended to return to the Philippines to wage a jihad war as hardened and experienced Islamists.<sup>22</sup> It is not apparent, however, on what basis this estimate was made, and, indeed, the Foreign Ministry quickly put out a statement that the postulated figures were entirely hypothetical.<sup>23</sup> Two months later, the government announced it was creating a centralized database to document the identities of citizens suspected of joining the Islamic State overseas. This would strongly suggest that there is intelligence confirming the presence of Filipino militants in the Middle East,

c The al-Risalah center was part of the Australian al-Qa`ida-inspired Ahlus Sunnah Wal Jamaa'ah network. It ostensibly served as community drop-in facility-turned-prayer group but was also the main hub for extremist teaching in Sydney and was a regular venue for local and visiting radical preachers. It was closed following a major police raid that was part of Operation Appleby (which also targeted the iQraa Salafist center in Brisbane) in September 2014. See Greg Barton, "Islamic State, Radicalisation and the Recruitment of Foreign Fighters in Australia: The Pull to Make the Hijrah from the Lucky Country to God's Nation," *From the Desert to World Cities: The New Terrorism* (Singapore: Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2015), pp. 112-113.

although estimates of how many—even in rough terms—have been notably absent. At the time of this writing, the official military line was only that there was no indication that any Islamic State-linked nationals had returned home to operate in the country.<sup>24</sup>

Irrespective of the number of Filipinos who may have gone to fight with the Islamic State, it is clear that the group has enjoyed at least a degree of verbal support in the Philippines. This first became apparent on June 25, 2014, when the leader of ASG's largest faction, Isnilon Hapilon, pledged full "loyalty and obedience" to the Islamic State and al-Baghdadi. The *bay`a* (oath of allegiance) was made on an uploaded YouTube video that also featured more than a dozen men who were praying with him in a forest clearing while shouting "Allah Akbar."<sup>25</sup>

More recently in January 2016, Hapilon put out a second video announcing his support of the Islamic State. The seven-minute taping, which also featured a pair of militants claiming to represent the previously unheard of Ansar al-Shariah Battalion and the Ma'arakat al-Ansar Battalion,<sup>d</sup> was distributed on Twitter, Telegram, and the Deep Web forum Shumukh al-Islam. In it, Hapilon declares "a pledge of allegiance to the Caliph, Sheikh Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi Ibrahim bin 'Awwad ibn Ibrahim al-Qurashi al-Husseini al-Hashimi," and exhorts Allah to "preserve him, to listen and obey... and not to dispute about rule with those in power."<sup>26</sup>

In common with ASG, BIFF has also affirmed its backing for the Islamic State, this time in an amateur visual recording that was aired on August 13, 2014. Although not as strong as Hapilon's twin *bay`a*—in the sense of articulating full obedience to al-Baghdadi—the video nevertheless made clear that a mutually beneficial alliance had been made. Abu Misry Mama, a spokesman for BIFF, later confirmed the authenticity of the recording, declaring that while his group did not intend to impose the Islamic State's highly radical brand of Sunni Islam in the Philippines, assistance to the movement would be proffered should such a request be made.<sup>27</sup>

The various smaller groups that have emerged in the Philippines have similarly expressed support for the Islamic State. In November 2012 Jamaal al-Tawhid Wal Jihad Philippines posted a film urging Muslims in Mindanao to back the group's jihad.<sup>28</sup> Just under two years later, AKS produced its own video pledging allegiance to the Islamic State while also threatening to deploy suicide bombers in the Philippines and make the country a graveyard for American soldiers.<sup>29</sup> And KIM, which uses the black flag as a backdrop on its Twitter and Facebook accounts, has made no secret either of its admiration for al-Baghdadi or its own self-defined role as the leading force of the so-called Black Flag Movement in the Philippines (BFMP).<sup>30</sup>

## Conclusion

The various pledges of allegiance that al-Baghdadi has managed to solicit from militant groups in Mindanao have generated growing fears that his group has now found a new operational base in the heart of Southeast Asia. Hapilon's *bay`a* in January 2016 caused particular concern as it seemed to suggest that ASG had moved to coalesce its own backing for the Islamic State with other additional jihadi outfits, possibly presenting a new unified extremist front against Manila that could be further buttressed by returning

**“Irrespective of the number of Filipinos who may have gone to fight with the Islamic State, it is clear that the group has enjoyed at least a degree of verbal support in the Philippines.”**

fighters from the Middle East.<sup>31</sup> While such a scenario cannot be dismissed outright, the Philippines is unlikely to emerge as a new beachhead for fostering the Islamic State's regional extremism. Five factors account for this.

First, Jamaal al-Tawhid Wal Jihad Philippines, AKS, and KIM are all very small entities and none appears to enjoy a defined organizational structure for carrying out sustained acts of violence. Second, prospects of an Islamic State-inspired and -directed umbrella movement emerging in the Philippines are low. Thus far, only the January 2016 video has hinted at such a development possibly occurring. As noted, however, neither the Ansar al-Shariah Battalion nor the Ma'arakat al-Ansar Battalion has a proven operational history, and it is certainly not apparent what, if any, threat potential they represent. Equally, rebel groups in Mindanao have long been riven with tribalism and common banditry, which work against the genesis of a dedicated and effective unified jihadist fighting force.

Third, ASG and BIFF have both suffered at the hands of sustained military onslaughts, and neither represents a viable vehicle for furthering attacks beyond purely local theaters in Mindanao (where they also confront the far larger and powerful MILF), much less to the central and northern regions of the Visayas and Luzon. Fourth, there is currently no evidence that Filipinos who may have gone to fight for the Islamic State in the Middle East have returned and are now playing an active role in radicalizing Islamist sympathizers at home. Finally, while much of northern and central Philippines remains very much networked on the "grid," many Muslims in the south lack the type of concerted online presence that the Islamic State can usefully exploit. Moreover, given strong family, clan, and cultural ties that exist in this part of the country, it is unlikely that they would be swayed by the group's missives in the first place.<sup>32</sup>

Arguably more relevant for the Philippines are threat contingencies that relate to the estimated 2.5 million expatriates who live and work in the Middle East.<sup>e</sup> This large and highly visible overseas community could easily be singled out, either as a vehicle for jihadi recruitment (in the case of Muslims) or as a target for direct attacks (in the case of Christians). How to adequately monitor and protect the Filipino diaspora in this part of the world could very well turn out to be the most immediate national security challenge confronting the governing administration in Manila.<sup>33</sup> **CTC**

d Abu Anas al-Muhajr represented the Ansar al-Shariah Battalion; Abu Harith al-Filipini, the Ma'arakat al-Ansar Battalion.

e The Philippine Diaspora in the Middle East is mainly concentrated in Saudi Arabia (1,550, 572), the UAE (679,859), and Qatar (342,442).



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# Losing Territory and Lashing Out: The Islamic State and International Terror

By Andrew Watkins

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**There appears to be a strong correlation between territorial losses inflicted on the Islamic State by an international coalition and the group's increasingly global campaign of terrorism. Two reasons likely explain why the group is shifting toward international terrorism. The first is a top-down decision by Islamic State leaders to prioritize international attack plotting as a strategy to safeguard their self-declared caliphate. The second is a bottom-up dynamic in which foreign fighters and satellite groups are retaliating on their own initiative on behalf of the caliphate, a function of the group's fluid command and control structures. As the Islamic State continues to lose ground, the international community should brace for a surge in international terror.**

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A string of recent international terrorist attacks believed to have been carried out by the Islamic State and its affiliates and allies, including in Ankara, the Sinai, Beirut, Paris, Istanbul, and Jakarta, has captured global headlines and spurred discussions about a shift in the group's strategy. Reflecting this trend, Europol recently stated that the Paris attacks indicated a shift toward a more global strategy by the Islamic State.<sup>1</sup>

Prior to its bombing of the Russian airliner in the Sinai last October, and aside from a January 2015 gun-and-bomb plot thwarted in Verviers, Belgium, and attacks on Western tourists in Tunisia that it claimed the same year, the Islamic State appeared to be focused on consolidating control of territory in western Iraq and eastern Syria. While the group's leadership encouraged "lone-wolf" attacks in Western countries through its impressive media operations, it was not thought to be directly plotting attacks.<sup>2</sup>

This piece argues that the recent international attacks should be understood as an evolution rather than a transformation in Islamic State strategy. This evolution has been precipitated most directly by two factors. The first is the group's continued loss of territory, especially in western Iraq. The second is the fluid nature of the group's command and control structure, particularly pertaining to its members and supporters abroad. Changes in both these domains may help explain why the Islamic State and its affiliates have launched

international terrorist attacks and why they may continue to do so more frequently.

## Territorial Losses

The Islamic State's early territorial gains caught the West and the U.S. government on the back foot. The Islamic State took full control of the Syrian town of Raqqa from an assortment of rebel groups in January 2014 and named the city its capital before next taking Fallujah and areas outside Ramadi in Iraq's Anbar province.<sup>3</sup> The group then swept across eastern Syria and western Iraq, building on the June 2014 capture of Mosul with victories over Iraqi army units in Tikrit and Tal Afar. The successes built up a narrative that the Islamic State was simply better able to fight the fluid, fast-paced ground war that was developing. In the spring of 2015, the Islamic State took control of Palmyra in Syria and all of Ramadi in Iraq, bolstering the success narrative further.

The tide has since begun to turn. In Iraq, the Islamic State faces a number of cohesive forces, including the Iraqi military and the al-Hashid al-Shabi (Popular Mobilization) units—a diverse collection of mostly Shi'a militias that operate under their own command and control structures though ostensibly fighting in the name of the Iraqi state.<sup>4</sup> Iraq's Kurdish peshmerga and irregular Kurdish fighting groups, including the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), have increasingly taken the fight to the Islamic State, regaining key areas in Ninewa province.<sup>5</sup>

There has been tension between and among these groups and the Iraqi government, but they have nonetheless rolled back Islamic State territorial gains.<sup>6</sup> As of March 2016, according to an independent assessment, the Islamic State had lost roughly 22 percent of the territory in Iraq and Syria it controlled in January 2015, with over one-third of those losses coming over the past three months.<sup>7</sup> The losses in Iraq include Tikrit, Mosul Dam, the destroyed Baiji oil refinery complex, all of Ramadi, the ethnically mixed areas of Jalula and Sadiyah in Iraq's disputed territories, and a number of other strategic areas abutting the Tigris and Euphrates corridors.<sup>8</sup> The Rabia border crossing linking northern Iraq's Ninewa province with northeastern Syria was taken by the Islamic State in August 2014 before being promptly retaken by Kurdish and Sunni Arab forces just two months later.<sup>9</sup>

To the West, Syria remains a chaotic battle space with the Islamic State facing pressure from a number of competing forces. The group maintains firm control of Raqqa, but Kurdish forces have made gains in northern Syria, taking control of areas south along the Turkish border.<sup>10</sup> In June 2015, Kurdish YPG militia units and Free Syrian Army forces succeeded in retaking Tal Abyad, a key Syrian-Turkish border town.<sup>11</sup> Offensives by Iraq's Kurdish peshmerga to the east retook Sinjar in November 2015, disrupting the Islamic State's ability to transfer fighters and weapons across the border with Syria over Highway 47.<sup>12</sup> In part a response to these territorial losses, the Islamic State intensified a nearly yearlong offensive

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against Deir al-Zour in eastern Syria.<sup>13</sup> Pressing in the east has not led to gains in the west; the Syrian army, backed by Russian air support and an assortment of militia forces, has tallied a number of recent victories against militant groups around Aleppo, south of Islamic State-controlled al-Bab.<sup>14</sup>

While airstrikes will not cripple the Islamic State, they have caused significant damage. As of the end of January 2016, the United States claims its forces have conducted 9,782 airstrikes against Islamic State positions—6,516 in Iraq and 3,266 in Syria.<sup>15</sup> The Pentagon estimates that upwards of 26,000 Islamic State fighters have been killed since airstrikes began.<sup>16</sup> More recently, coalition aircraft have increasingly targeted Islamic State financial resources, including oil tankers and cash storage facilities.<sup>17</sup> The airstrikes have also provided crucial air cover for Iraqi military, the PMUs, and Kurdish peshmerga forces. Despite the losses documented above, the Islamic State remains a powerful force capable of taking and holding large urban areas, staging rapid assaults on Iraqi and Syrian security forces, and launching attacks against soft targets in both countries. It has also created a new territorial base on the coastline around Sirte in Libya. Yet, while the continued progress of the ground forces fighting the Islamic State is by no means assured, the group's ability to take and hold terrain has been reduced.

As the caliphate shrinks, the group's leaders must be keenly aware of the setbacks suffered by al-Qa`ida once it lost its own safe haven in Afghanistan. Given this history, the Islamic State may be calculating that an increase in headline-grabbing terrorist attacks abroad will draw attention away from its territorial losses, provide renewed incentive for fighters to join its cause, and force its adversaries to concentrate their security resources at home.

### Losing Territory, Expanding Attacks: Precedents

There are several precedents for jihadi groups retaliating after losing territory by waging transnational terror. In 2010, al-Shabaab, al-Qa`ida's Somalia affiliate, controlled large swathes of the country, including areas around Mogadishu, much of the area along the southern coast, and the port of Kismaayo.<sup>18</sup> By late 2013, a combination of internal divisions and concerted military intervention by Somali, Kenyan, and Ethiopian forces reduced al-Shabaab's territory to a fraction of what it was. In response, the group first carried out a number of large-scale terrorist attacks in Somalia. Amniyat, al-Shabaab's intelligence unit, targeted Somalia's presidential compound, parliament, national intelligence headquarters, and AMISOM's largest military compound.<sup>19</sup> From local attacks, the group expanded abroad, primarily into Kenya. In 2013, al-Shabaab attacked Nairobi's Westgate shopping mall, killing 67. In 2014 the group carried out mass casualty attacks on a quarry and bus in northern Kenya.<sup>20</sup> In the largest attack to date, al-Shabaab fighters attacked a college in Garissa, Kenya in April 2015, killing 147.<sup>21</sup>

A similar progression took place across the continent in Nigeria with Islamic State affiliate Boko Haram. As with al-Shabaab, Boko Haram has been pressed in its home area of operations by a coalition of regional forces, and has responded by staging mass-casualty

## “The Islamic State may be calculating that an increase in headline-grabbing terrorist attacks abroad will draw attention away from its territorial losses.”

attacks in rural areas and neighboring countries. For example, in September 2015, Boko Haram fighters attacked a crowded market in Kerawa, Cameroon, killing 30 and wounding 145 others.<sup>22</sup> Then in October, the group staged a string of five suicide attacks in a market in Baga Sola, Chad, killing 36.<sup>23</sup> This was followed over a month later by an attack on a village in southeastern Niger that killed 18.<sup>24</sup> All three countries are part of a Nigerian-led coalition aimed at combating Boko Haram.

In Pakistan, Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) has responded to recent offensives by the Pakistani military that have dislodged it from its strongholds in the tribal areas of Pakistan by targeting a range of civilian targets in settled areas of the country, including a school in Peshawar in December 2014 and a university in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province in January 2016. Although these attacks were not technically transnational terrorism, jihadi groups in the tribal areas of Pakistan see the Pakistani army as essentially a foreign invading force.<sup>25</sup>

Despite these precedents, there are also counter-examples. In the late 2000s the surge of American ground forces and the Sunni Awakening succeeded in pushing AQI (by then renamed the Islamic State of Iraq, or ISI) from most of the areas it controlled. Rather than responding with international terror attacks, ISI developed a domestic campaign, dubbed “Breaking the Walls,” launched in 2012 with an aim to rebuild capacity and retake territory.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) did not increase international terror attacks after losing ground in Yemen's tribal areas in 2012. Instead, it strategically withdrew from towns in southern Yemen,<sup>27</sup> regrouped and took advantage of civil war to gradually retake territory.<sup>27</sup>

### Why the Caliphate Matters

While not all jihadi groups have responded to territorial losses inflicted by outside enemies by initiating transnational terrorist campaigns, the Islamic State appears to be taking this course. Arguably one of the key reasons for this is that by declaring a caliphate, the Islamic State created a religious imperative to defend its territory with all means at its disposal. While AQAP may have felt able to strategically withdraw from areas of Yemen under its control

a More recently, in January 2016, the group killed a significant number of Kenyan troops in an attack on an AMISOM base near the Kenyan border and in February 2016 attacked a hotel in Mogadishu. See Conor Gaffey, “Al Shabab killed 180 Kenyan troops in el Adde: Somali President,” *Newsweek*, February 25, 2016; “Police: 14 Dead as Al-Shabab Gunmen Attack Hotel in Somalia,” *Associated Press*, February 26, 2016.

b Al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) emir Nasir al-Wuhayshi presented this as a strategic withdrawal in a letter to AQIM emir Drukdal in August 2002, stating that “after four months of fighting we were forced to withdraw. The offensive was very tough and it could hardly be stopped before achieving all its targets. The whole world was against us, after the victories we had secured. ... Had we insisted on resisting, the campaign would have been long and would have exhausted us both in terms of casualties and money.” Nasir al-Wuhayshi letter to Abu Musab Abdull Wadud, August 6, 2012. This letter was discovered by Associated Press. For the original texts and translations, see [hosted.ap.org/interactives/2012/al-qaida](http://hosted.ap.org/interactives/2012/al-qaida).



in 2012 and fight another day, the stakes are much higher for the Islamic State. Uniquely the Islamic State has explicitly developed its identity around a state-building enterprise through the declaration of the caliphate. By creating what no other Salafist group has achieved on the same scale, the Islamic State has set itself apart and largely stayed true to its motto, *baqia wa tatamadad* (Remaining and Expanding). This message comes through in the group's social media presence, in its publication *Dabiq*, and in statements by its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, encouraging Muslims to emigrate to Islamic State territory.

However, this narrative is increasingly threatened by territorial losses, which destabilize the foundations of the caliphate. At the same time, the loss of oil production facilities, transportation links, and a taxable population threaten the group's finances.<sup>28</sup> In 2015, leaked administrative documents from Islamic State headquarters in Raqqa announced the group would be cutting the salaries of all fighters by 50 percent.<sup>29</sup> The publicity from these losses undercuts the Islamic State's claims of functioning as a state, instead making it seem more like other jihadi groups, albeit an exceptionally violent one. The loss of prestige may also hurt the group's ability to recruit foreign and domestic fighters.

The loss of territory also hurts the group by undercutting a prophecy—attributed to the prophet Muhammad and utilized by the Islamic State—that a final battle between infidels and Muslims will take place in the Syrian towns of al-Amaq or Dabiq prior to the Day of Judgment.<sup>30</sup> Losing ground to non-Western forces undermines the Islamic State's narrative and, by extension, the validity of the prophecy on which it is based.

Narratives about what the Islamic State is fighting for—the creation of a legitimate state with control over a defined territory or the precipitation of a Western ground invasion as part of an imminent apocalypse—have been difficult to harmonize, especially given



Islamic State propaganda following the Paris attacks

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public statements made by the group's leaders both touting the caliphate's strength and heralding apocalyptic prophecies. Whichever narrative dominates at the highest echelons of the Islamic State leadership, the end result is likely an increase in terrorist attacks abroad.

Some analysts have argued that one reason the Islamic State has only now chosen to launch large-scale attacks abroad is to deter continued airstrikes in Syria and Iraq by the United States, Russia, Turkey, and others; this is certainly a possibility.<sup>31</sup> *Dabiq* clarified as much on the last page of its most recent issue with its headline "Just Terror: Let Paris Be A Lesson For Those Nations That Wish To Take Heed."<sup>32</sup> Recent statements by al-Baghdadi also underscore a desire to internationalize the conflict—"the entire world is fighting us right now." In a likely attempt to garner further support, al-Baghdadi linked the fight waged by the Islamic State to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. "The Israelis will soon see us in Palestine," al-Baghdadi said in a recording released last December.<sup>33</sup>

Another likely reason for the Islamic State's switch to international terrorism is the simple fact that it is in a strong position to do so. The group is arguably better placed than any other jihadi group in history to wage a campaign of international terrorism because of the recruitment of unprecedented numbers of foreign fighters, deep financial pockets, and its significant support base around the world. It is possible that the Islamic State's predecessor group ISI would itself have launched an international terrorist campaign in the late 2000s if it had had the same opportunities.

### Weak Command and Control

A second likely explanation for the Islamic State's shift toward international terrorism is to be found in its fluid command and control structures and limits in its ability to direct the actions of far-flung affiliates and allies. Put another way, the tail to some degree is now wagging the dog. The Islamic State leadership is not fully in control of the international terrorism being carried out in its name. Having called for retaliatory attacks overseas, it was natural for fighters and satellites to respond, and the leadership of the Islamic State may now find it difficult to rein them in. The implication is that the international terror unleashed in recent months may have a momentum of its own rather than being a function of any continuing cost-benefit analysis.

When it comes to command and control, there is a generational divide to consider when comparing al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State. For al-Qa`ida, well-organized, mass-impact attacks were crucial and were deemed most successful when they were centrally planned, a time-consuming process for a terrorist group in Afghanistan looking to hit targets in the United States or Europe. By contrast, the Islamic State has empowered its members, organizational affiliates, and supporters around the world to carry out attacks at will.<sup>34 c</sup>

There is debate in the counterterrorism community on the degree to which the Islamic State has orchestrated recent internation-

c It should be noted that the Islamic State was not the first to call for lone-wolf attacks on soft targets in the West. It was an approach first advocated by AQAP and was also expressly encouraged by al-Qa`ida leader Ayman al-Zawahiri after U.S. operations against al-Qa`ida in the tribal areas of Pakistan made international attack plotting difficult.

al attacks.<sup>d</sup> Are the attacks being directly planned and supported by Islamic State leadership in Syria and Iraq? Are they being undertaken as a loose grouping—a network—of fighters who developed ties abroad and stayed together after returning to Europe and elsewhere? Or are they simply being inspired by the Islamic State from afar?<sup>35</sup> Islamic State senior leadership is likely not in control of many of the plots hatched by its fighters and satellite groups, instead giving them the operational latitude to strike at will and on their own initiative.

Given the fact that the Islamic State has dozens of affiliates and allies from Mali to the Philippines and Somalia to Chechnya, broad strategic objectives can be communicated and then carried out internally by the satellite groups themselves, knowledgeable as they are of local conditions and security weaknesses. Recent attacks in Jakarta serve as a case in point.<sup>36</sup>

However, in the Paris attacks, Islamic State leadership appears to have had a stronger role than in previous plots. And the group appears to have recently moved toward taking greater command and control over international attack plotting by reportedly setting up a unit dedicated to planning and carrying out attacks in Europe

and the United States.<sup>37 e</sup>

## Conclusion

The Islamic State is increasingly likely to lash out with international terrorism as it loses territory in Syria and Iraq. It is unique from other Salafist terror groups due to its seizure of large swaths of territory and its recruitment of a large number of foreign fighters. These successes have been mutually reinforcing and rely heavily on the ability of the Islamic State to showcase the caliphate as “remaining and expanding.” As the caliphate comes under strain, Islamic State leaders, with unprecedented potential muscle to carry out attacks, will likely feel a religious imperative to take action against outside enemies. They may also calculate that an increase in headline-grabbing attacks abroad will draw attention away from its territorial losses. There is already evidence that the Islamic State has set up a unit dedicated to international attack plotting. Islamic State leaders have also ratcheted up their calls for retaliatory strikes, and given the fluid nature of the group’s command and control structures, this is likely to result in a rise in plots launched on their own steam by Islamic State affiliates, loosely organized supporters, or those inspired online. This dynamic means that international Islamic State terror may have a momentum all its own, not fully under the control of the group’s top leadership. **CTC**

d Investigations into the Islamic State attacks in Ankara, the Sinai, Beirut, Paris, and Istanbul are in the early stages so it is difficult to assess the relative importance of top-down direction and bottom-up initiative in each of these plots.

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# The Islamic State Threat to Britain: Evidence from Recent Terror Trials

By Raffaello Pantucci

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**While clearly at the top of the Islamic State's targeting list, the United Kingdom so far has been spared from any major terrorist atrocities at home with direct links to the Islamic State. A review of the trials of those accused of terrorist plotting in the country between 2013 and 2015 reveals that the violent Islamist threat picture has instead been dominated by lone-actor plots, with some demonstrating connections of some sort to individuals on the battlefield in Syria or Iraq. Going forward, however, the threat is likely to become more acute as the Islamic State pivots toward international terror.**

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In the wake of November's terrorist attack in Paris, a series of Islamic State videos suggested the United Kingdom was next on the target list.<sup>1</sup> For British officials, the threat was not new. As British Prime Minister David Cameron put it days after the Paris attack, "Our security services have stopped seven attacks in the last six months, albeit on a smaller scale."<sup>2</sup> Earlier this month, Assistant Commissioner Mark Rowley, who oversees counterterrorism efforts for the London Metropolitan Police, warned, "In recent months we've seen a broadening of that—much more plans to attack Western lifestyle, going from that narrow focus on police and military as symbols of the state to something much broader. And you see a terrorist group which has big ambitions for enormous and spectacular attacks, not just the types that we've seen foiled to date."<sup>3</sup>

This article takes stock of the threat to the United Kingdom, drawing on court documents of recent British terror trials of those accused of plotting between 2013 and 2015. Currently, most of the cases that have passed through Britain's courts have not shown clear evidence of Islamic State direction, though the plots covered in these cases for the most part predate the group's active surge of international plotting last year that culminated in the Paris attacks in November. Up to this point, most plotting seen in the United Kingdom appears to demonstrate an ideological affinity to the Islamic State, with most plots fitting the lone-actor model and having no clear command and control from Islamic State operatives in Syria and Iraq. Going forward, however, security officials see a growing, direct threat from the Islamic State, with Richard Wal-

ton, the former head of the Metropolitan Police's Counter-terrorism Command, stating in January, "We are concerned about Daesh's external ambitions to project their terror overseas rather than them just trying to consolidate their so-called caliphate."<sup>4a</sup>

## Alleged Instigation Overseas: The Erol Incedal Case

In October 2013, as part of a series of coordinated arrests, four men were detained for allegedly plotting to launch a "Mumbai-style" attack in London. Two men were released soon afterward while Erol Incedal, a British passport holder of Turkish-Alawite descent, and Mounir Rarmoul-Bouhadjar, a British-Algerian were brought to trial. Rarmoul-Bouhadjar pleaded guilty to possession of a bomb-making manual and was sentenced to three years in prison while Incedal instead chose to fight the charges against him. In a first for the British judicial system, the trial was held partially under secret circumstances for reasons that were not publicly revealed.

The public part of this trial shed light on the accused's travels and contacts. In late 2012 the two men tried to reach Syria through Turkey. Rather than getting across the border, however, they ended up in a safe house in Hatay full of people "engaged somewhat in the resistance against Assad."<sup>5</sup> Here they met "Ahmed," a British-Yemeni extremist who would become a key figure in the prosecution's case. Ahmed had spent time in France, and he claimed to have fled to the Syrian-Turkish border area as he felt under pressure from security services in the United Kingdom. In court, Incedal described him as having "sympathies with the global jihad"<sup>6</sup> though Incedal was also quick to highlight that he was angry at the West since some of his family members had reportedly been killed in drone strikes in Yemen.

By early March Incedal and Rarmoul-Bouhadjar were bored of the inactivity at the safe house and told Ahmed they were going to head back to the United Kingdom. According to Incedal, Ahmed told them, "'Bruv, you know, you are going back, I wish, you know, you could do something in the UK' do some - he actually said 'shit,' 'do some shit in the UK, blow these guys up' and, you know, basically do an attack in the UK."<sup>7</sup> In court Incedal stated that Ahmed's view was not shared by all in the safe house. "The majority of the people there were thinking more specific to Syria and not worried about the West," he testified. Nevertheless, Ahmed apparently saw value in the men back in the United Kingdom, telling them, "It would be nice to keep in touch and maybe you can help us in this global cause in the U.K."<sup>8</sup>

Once back in the United Kingdom, the men entered into a world of semi-criminal activity and partying. An Azerbaijani friend named Ruslan who was connected to wealthy Azeris provided them with an entrée into London's high life. Incedal appears to have been close to the sons of the Egyptian extremist cleric Abu Hamza, who, accord-

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a The British government refers to the Islamic State as Daesh.

ing to Incedal, were now involved in post office robberies “because their father [had] given them the right to do it.”<sup>9</sup> Incedal appears to have considered ways of working with them and of raising money to buy guns for protection during drug deals.<sup>10</sup> During this time, Incedal appears to have maintained contact with Ahmed (who was either in Turkey or Syria) through Skype conversations during which they discussed sourcing weapon “straps,” getting detonators sent to the United Kingdom from Syria, and whether Rarmoul-Bouhadjar still remembered any bomb-making training he had received at the safe house.<sup>11</sup>

In the end the jury cleared Incedal of the charges of plotting a terrorist attack, he was found guilty of possessing a bomb-making manual and sentenced to three-and-a-half years in prison.<sup>12</sup> Rarmoul-Bouhadjar, who had pleaded guilty to the same charge, served some time in prison and was discharged on restrictive release.

In the second half of 2014, British authorities disrupted several separate plots involving attack planning. The missing element from this cluster of cells, however, was clear direction from the Islamic State, though there were clear sympathies.

### Stay-at-Home Jihadi: The Brusthom Ziamani Case

The first of these cases was that of Brusthom Ziamani, an 18-year-old extremist known as Mujahid Karim, from Peckham in south London. Raised a Jehovah’s Witness, Ziamani was thrown out of his family’s home after converting to Islam. He subsequently moved (or moved deeper) into the orbit of al Muhajiroun, a British extremist grouping supportive of the Islamic State. In June 2014 he was arrested on an unrelated charge, and during a search of his belongings police found a letter addressed to his parents in which he declared:

“Because I have no means of getting there [Syria and Iraq] I will wage war against the British government on this soil the British government will have a taste of their own medicine they will be humiliated this is ISIB Islamic States of Ireland and Britain.”<sup>13</sup>

Under interview he confirmed that the letter was his but denied he was planning an attack in the United Kingdom. He praised Michael Adebolajo and Michael Adebawale, the murderers of the British soldier Lee Rigby in Woolwich in May 2013, and stated that the letters were “written in case he went abroad and died fighting there, or if the U.K. became an Islamic state, in which case he would join in the uprising.”<sup>14</sup> He was bailed, and officials working in the British government’s deradicalization program “Prevent” repeatedly tried to engage him to see if he could be moved off a path of violent extremism. These efforts failed, and Ziamani continued to seek out radical material online. On the morning of August 19 he appeared at his ex-girlfriend’s house with a black backpack in which he showed her he had a large knife, a hammer, and an Islamic flag. He told her, “Me and the brothers are planning a terrorist attack,” though not a bombing. “No, not like that, basically to kill soldiers.”<sup>15</sup>

Later that afternoon police stopped him as he was walking in the street in East London. Searching his belongings, they found his weapons and took him into custody, charging him with terrorist offenses. Months later he told a security officer in prison that he “loved” Michael Adebolajo and had handed out leaflets with him. He also confessed, “I was on my way to kill a British Soldier at an army barracks. I was going to behead the soldier and hold his head in the air so my friend could take a photograph.”<sup>16</sup> There was no evidence provided that Ziamani had any co-conspirators, though in passing a 22-year sentence, Justice Pontius stated that “he had

little doubt that, like Adebolajo and Adebawale before him, he fell under the malign influence of al-Muhajiroun fanatics who were considerably older, and had been immersed in extremist ideology far longer, than him but he was, nevertheless, a willing student and all too ready to absorb and adopt their teaching.”<sup>17</sup>

### The Power of the Fatwa: The Tarik Hassane Case

In the second plot disrupted, police arrested a cluster of young men in West London in late September and early October 2014. Over a year later in January 2016, the trial began for four of the men arrested for planning to shoot a security officer with a Baikal gun and silencer that they had procured. The plot was alleged to have started on July 9, 2014, when one of the alleged co-conspirators—Tarik Hassane, then based in Sudan—announced to a Telegram group that some of the men were part of that he had made *bay`a* to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.<sup>b</sup>

Soon after this, Hassane came back to the United Kingdom via Jordan, and planning for an attack appears to have intensified. The group started to discuss obtaining something from “Umar,” later identified as Nyall Hamlett, a man currently on trial who was identified as being involved in London’s criminal fraternities and had access to weaponry. Using all sorts of coded references, Hassane, Suhaid Majeed (an accused co-conspirator also still being tried who was studying physics at King’s College in London), and others discussed trying to obtain “straps” or “creps.” They looked for a garage in Shepherd’s Bush using an online rental manager.<sup>18</sup> They also sought to obtain a moped.<sup>19</sup> By September 21, with Hassane still in Sudan, the group appears to have finally been close to obtaining a gun. Majeed told the group to “make serious dua [prayer] for me,” which the prosecution suggested was the moment at which the group knew they were obtaining their weapon.<sup>20</sup>

A day after senior Islamic State figure Muhammad al Adnani released his infamous fatwa calling on followers around the world who had pledged *bay`a* to kill disbelievers “in any manner” wherever they can find them, Majeed went through an elaborate transaction to obtain a Baikal gun, ammunition, and a silencer.<sup>21</sup> Once home, he searched for videos about how to handle the weapon on YouTube and spoke to his friends abroad. Not wanting to take any chances, British police moved in to arrest all of the individuals under surveillance. As Majeed’s parent’s property was being searched by armed police a gun and equipment were tossed out of the window.<sup>22</sup> During the search of co-defendant Nathan Cuffy’s premises they found a series of four different guns and ammunition.<sup>23</sup>

All of this activity was taking place as Hassane was still abroad. On September 30 he returned home and was arrested soon afterward. Hassane pleaded guilty to the charges against him, while the other three continue to fight their charges.<sup>24</sup>

### Frustrated Travelers: The Nadir Syed Case

The al-Adnani fatwa also provided an inflection point for a third plot disrupted in the second half of 2014. The alleged co-conspira-

b Hassane went on to post his pledge in full: statement that showed “that I, poor servant of Allah, Tariq Hassan (sic), swear allegiance to the Amir of [leader] of the faithful, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, Abullah Ibrahim ibn Awad al-Quraishi al-Husseini, Caliph of the Muslims, he owes me to listen and obey him through thick and thin as much as I can.” Regina vs Tarik Hassane et al, January 15, 2016, p. 26.

tors, Haseeb Hamayoun and cousins Nadir Syed<sup>c</sup> and Yousaf Syed, were all from London and of Pakistani origin. The story of their plot begins in December 2013 when Nadir Syed was arrested for public order incidents and released under strict bail conditions.<sup>25</sup> In breach of these, on January 19, 2014, he was stopped from boarding a plane trying to travel to Turkey, alongside his cousin Yousaf and a third man, Luqman Warsame. While Nadir was prevented from traveling, Yousaf and Warsame continued their journey. Yousaf Syed returned after spending some time in Turkey, but Warsame joined the Islamic State in Syria, from where he remained in contact with the two Syeds.<sup>26</sup> Warsame's current status is unclear. Yousaf Syed was stripped of his freedom to travel in April 2014. Nadir Syed also remained stuck in the United Kingdom, but in October 2014 he applied for a new passport from the Home Office.<sup>27</sup>

Like Ziamani, the group appears to have had a fixation with the murder of Lee Rigby and knives. Evidence was introduced at trial of Nadir Syed talking to others about the two Woolwich killers in 2013. Also introduced into evidence were the trio's September 2014 WhatsApp conversations in which they shared images of the Woolwich attackers and their activity.<sup>28</sup> In the wake of an attack in Australia on September 23, 2014, in which Numan Haider, a Melbourne teenager tried to stab a pair of policemen after his passport was canceled and was instead shot by the officers,<sup>29</sup> the men praised the attempt and compared it to Michael Adebolajo, praising Adebolajo as a "diamond geezer" in their discussions.<sup>30</sup> After a court appearance by Nadir Syed on November 6, 2014, for his public order offense charges, Haseeb Hamayoun met him outside the courtroom and the men seem to have gone straight to a kitchen shop.<sup>31</sup> Soon after this, authorities decided to intervene, and all three men were arrested separately later that same day.

In the end, the court was unable to reach a conclusion about Hamayoun and Yousaf Syed, though Nadir was found guilty of planning to murder a security official around Remembrance Day with a knife.<sup>32</sup> Hamayoun and Yousaf Syed face a retrial.<sup>33</sup> The reasoning behind Nadir Syed's plot is best discerned from Nadir's online commentary after Adnani's September 2013 fatwa: "These governments need to rethink their policy...esp after Adnani's speech, why the hell would you let an ISIS supporter stay here...in other words the muslim in the west is left with two choices, either turn back from your deen or end up in jail," he stated.<sup>34</sup>

### Other Cases: The Disconnected, the Very Young, and the Isolated

The fourth plot thwarted in the second half of 2014 was that of Kazi Islam, the nephew of Kazi Rahman, a former jailed terrorist linked to the 7/7 cell. Arrested in November 2014, Islam was jailed in May 2015 for "grooming" another young man to try to build a bomb or conduct a terrorist attack. An apparent attendee of al Muhajiroun lectures, Islam was undone when the 18-year-old he was spurring on to launch an attack failed to get the right materials to build a bomb and told friends about the plan.<sup>35</sup> Although the exact nature of the plot is not entirely clear, Islam appears to have been pushing

## "In late March 2015 police in northwest England arrested a 14-year-old after he threatened to behead his teachers, accusing him of instigating a terrorist plot in Australia linked to attacking a security official on Australia's day of remembrance."

the boy to build bombs, obtain knives, and think about targeting security officials.<sup>36</sup>

In late March 2015 police in northwest England arrested a 14-year-old boy from Blackburn after he threatened to behead his teachers, accusing him of being involved in instigating a terrorist plot in Australia linked to attacking a security official on Australia's day of remembrance, Anzac Day. The boy was accused of talking to Australian Sevdet Besim, a radicalized teenager who was part of a larger community of concern in Australia and spurring him on "to run a cop over or the anzac parade & then continue to kill a cop then take ghanimah and run to shahadah?"<sup>37</sup> Besim was further connected to Numan Haider, the Melbourne teen shot by police in September 2014.<sup>38</sup> While the exact role of Islamic State behind this network is unclear, the group was all connected to the now-deceased<sup>39</sup> Neil Prakash, a notorious Australian jihadi fighting alongside the group in Syria also known as Abu Khaled al Kambodi.<sup>40</sup> The boy was found guilty, becoming the youngest convicted terrorist in the United Kingdom.<sup>41</sup>

The shambolic nature of Kazi Islam's November 2014 "grooming" plot was matched in May 2015 when police arrested the married couple Mohammed Rehman and Sana Ahmed Khan after Mohammed Rehman tweeted from his Twitter account,<sup>e</sup> "Silent Bomber," the question "Westfield shopping center of London underground? Any advice would be greatly appreciated."<sup>41</sup> The question—seeking suggestions about which target he should attempt to attack—caught the attention of authorities. Investigators uncovered Mohammed Rehman, an unemployed drug addict still living with his family. His wife, Sana Khan, also lived at home with her parents who disapproved of Rehman. The two decided that they wanted to launch a terrorist attack against the London Underground or a shopping center, with Rehman seeking chemicals online to detonate a bomb while Khan provided the funding. The couple discussed bomb tests, and Rehman eventually tested a bomb in his backyard. Two weeks after they were detected online, the couple was arrested, and after a short trial, they were given life sentences.<sup>42</sup>

In neither case was there any clear evidence of direction by a terrorist group overseas or links to any other plots. Both appear to

c Nadir Syed was part of the broader community around the al Muhajiroun community in the U.K., most clearly as part of a WhatsApp group called 'the lads' with prominent figures Abu Waleed and Abu Haleema. See Lisa O'Carroll, "Man convicted of planning Isis-inspired Remembrance Sunday attack," *Guardian*, December 14, 2015.

d He received a life sentence with a review in five years to see if he had been de-radicalized prior to him ascending into the adult prison population. "Anzac Day terror plot: Blackburn boy sentenced to life," BBC News, October 2, 2015.

e His Twitter account profile photo was an image of Islamic State executioner "Jihadi John."





RAF Lakenheath

U.S. AIR FORCE

be fairly classic, disconnected lone-actor plots with the only clear connections to the Islamic State being either through consumption of radical material (magazines like *Dabiq*), statements of intent to join the group (which apparently Kazi Islam made to his friends), or a letter that Rehman left pledging his allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.<sup>43</sup>

### Alleged Communication with the Islamic State: The Junead and Shazib Khan Case

An alleged plot targeting the RAF Lakenheath airbase, home of the U.S. Air Force 48<sup>th</sup> fighter wing, disrupted in July 2015 was more clearly linked to external networks, though any degree of external direction is unclear and the trials are ongoing.<sup>44</sup> Junead Khan and his uncle Shazib Khan (the two were so close in age, they referred to each other as cousins) from Luton are currently standing trial for planning to join the Islamic State, with Junead also accused of wanting to launch an attack in the United Kingdom against “military personnel” at military bases in Lakenheath or Molesworth.<sup>45</sup> Junead apparently knew and admired another local Luton man who had gone to fight (and was subsequently killed) named Rahin Aziz.<sup>46</sup> The men were allegedly in contact with a number of fighters in Syria, including the notorious British Islamic State operative Junaid Hussain who allegedly told Junead via the encrypted messag-

ing app Surespot that “I can get u addresses but of British soldiers” and that “I can tell u how to make a bomb.”<sup>47</sup> There was further evidence presented at trial from his computer and phone that he was seeking instructions on how to make explosives. The case is ongoing and is due to conclude next month.

### Conclusion

Since the emergence of the Islamic State as a major terrorist force in the Middle East, there has not been clear-cut evidence presented at trial of plots being directed by the leadership of the Islamic State against the United Kingdom. The cases formally prosecuted through the courts all suggest a threat picture that remains dominated by lone-actor terrorism, in some cases inspired by the Islamic State. The United Kingdom has also seen plots by extremists blocked from traveling to join the Islamic State, something also seen in Australia and Canada.<sup>f</sup>

The trials have not yet revealed clear direction by the group against the United Kingdom. There have been reports that Islamic State recruiters are seeking out Europeans with links to Germany or the United Kingdom to help facilitate attacks there,<sup>48</sup> but thus far, the evidence offered in courts is not as clear cut. Security authorities certainly see an escalating threat, something reflected in Assistant Commissioner Rowley’s warning that British authorities fear a spectacular Paris-style attack.

While the nature of the threat in the United Kingdom is different than in France in certain respects—for example, there is easier access to heavy weaponry and ammunition on the European continent—the Islamic State itself has made clear that the United Kingdom is a priority target. Until now the public threat picture has been dominated by lone-actor plots. Going forward, however, with the Islamic State appearing to pivot toward international terrorism and around 1000 British extremists having traveled to Syria and Iraq, half of whom are still there,<sup>49</sup> there is a growing danger of Islamic State-directed plots against the British homeland. **CTC**

f The Australian case was the aforementioned case of Numan Haider. In Canada, Quebec attacker Martin Couture-Rouleau was blocked from traveling to join the Islamic State, and Ottawa shooter Michael Zehaf-Bibeau was blocked from traveling to the region. See Allan Woods, “How Martin Couture-Rouleau became an aspiring Islamic State fighter,” *Star*, October 26, 2015; “How Michael Zehaf-Bibeau went from petty criminal to the face of homegrown terrorism,” *National Post*, November 7, 2014.

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# The Last Hope for the al-Qa`ida Old Guard? A Profile of Saif al-`Adl

By Ari R. Weisfuse

**Saif al-`Adl has been described as one of al-Qa`ida's most effective operatives and one of the few remaining leaders from the pre-9/11 era with the stature to take over from current al-Qa`ida leader Ayman al-Zawahiri. There has been renewed focus on al-`Adl since unconfirmed reports surfaced last year of his release from Iranian imprisonment, but his current status remains unclear. This profile provides a brief biographical sketch of al-`Adl and examines the impact he might have on al-Qa`ida operations and strategy if his release is confirmed.**

**S**aif al-`Adl (Muhamad Silah Al din Al Halim Zeidan) was born on April 11 in 1960 or 1963 in Monufia Governorate, Egypt.<sup>1a</sup> Little is known about the Egyptian's upbringing, however, it is likely that he grew up secular.<sup>b</sup> According to an unconfirmed jihadist account, the Egyptian operative studied business at Shibin el Kom University. At some point during young adulthood, al-`Adl frequented the Fajr al Islam in Shibin el-Kom mosque where he may have become radicalized.<sup>2</sup> The circumstances of his radicalization and decision to join the Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ) are unclear.

## Egyptian Jihad

By the mid-1980s, al-`Adl was a lieutenant colonel in the Egyptian

a For years, al-`Adl was confused with Muhammad Ibrahim Makkawi. According to Yassir al Siri, al-`Adl's true name is Muhamad Silah al din al-Halim Zeidan and is known within the jihadist community by the alias "*al madani*" (of Medina or Medinan). Islamic Media Observatory, "Sayf al`Adl is not Muhammad Makawi," posted May 24, 2011, accessed via jihadology.net.

b In his 2005 biography of Abu Mus`ab al-Zarqawi, al-`Adl specifically stipulated that he "was guided by God to understand the right Islam in the early 1980s." In other words, he presumably did not grow up devout until his radicalization sometime in the early 1980s. Saif al-`Adl, "Jihadist Biography of the Slaughtering Leader Abu Mus`ab al-Zarqawi." The biography was first posted on jihadi forums by the Global Islamic Media Front in 2005 and obtained and translated by the Open Source Center in August 2009. The Egyptian operative's brother Hasan Zeidan asserted that al-`Adl was not involved with any sheikhs nor did he show any animosity toward non-Muslims. Ali Zalat, "Sayf al`Adl`al haqiqi": shaqiqhu yutabaruhu mtawfi wa adilhu `muatigal fi Iran," *Al Masri al Yawm*, February 29, 2012.

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Special Forces and concurrently involved in Islamist activity aimed at overthrowing the Mubarak regime. On May 6, 1987, he was arrested, along with 6,000 other militants, after an attempted assassination of Interior Minister Hasan Abu Basha. Due to a paucity of evidence against him, al-`Adl was released and promptly demoted.<sup>3</sup> The event precipitated his travel to Afghanistan via Saudi Arabia and, in turn, his decision to join Usama bin Ladin's nascent Arab Afghan organization.

Al-`Adl gleaned certain lessons from his time in EIJ, shaping his strategic outlook. He later recounted that the jihadi movement in Egypt failed in large part due to "over-enthusiasm that resulted in hasty action or recklessness at the time," a theme he would return to in his criticism of the 9/11 operation years later.<sup>4</sup> The Islamist movement, he wrote, "lacked the necessary expertise" as well as the "seasoned leadership" to ensure its own survival.<sup>5</sup>

In 1989, al-`Adl told his brother Hasan that he was traveling to Saudi Arabia to seek work. Hasan drove his brother to the airport, never to hear from him again.<sup>6</sup> According to one jihadist account, al-`Adl made the *umrah* between Mecca and Medina and met Usama bin Ladin in the process, an anecdote that has not been confirmed.<sup>7c</sup>

## Al-`Adl and al-Qa`ida

Although al-`Adl was not a founding father of al-Qa`ida (established in August 1988), he played an instrumental role in building the organization's operational capabilities from the ground up. He joined the organization sometime in 1989,<sup>d</sup> where his expertise in military tactics made him an invaluable recruit. During those early years, the former commando served as an instructor in al-Qa`ida training camps in Afghanistan, including Jihad Wahl.<sup>8</sup> He conducted a "security offensive" course, teaching militants how to carry out abductions and assassinations. According to Nasser al-Bahri, a former bodyguard of Usama bin Ladin, the Egyptian operative directed his students to spend days "studying [their] target's routine: when they ate, where the mosque and canteen were located, how many people were left on guard during prayers and meals, how they organized their rotas."<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, al-`Adl helped al-Qa`ida

c Shortly after the *umrah*, the Zeidan family was informed that al-`Adl had died along the journey, an assertion that could be interpreted as some form of obfuscation either by al-`Adl or his family. Zalat.

d Based on an exchange between Abu Walid al Masri (al-`Adl's father-in-law) and Abir Sabil (aka al-`Adl), the Egyptian operative joined al-Qa`ida in 1989. Abu Walid al Masri documented the exchange in his blog at www.mustafahamed.com, however, the site was recently wiped. The exchange should still be accessible through other jihadist forums. See "Bein yadi risala al qaeda ila mawqih mafa al siyasi," muslim.org; see also Ari Weisfuse, "Negotiating Oblivion. Sayf al`Adl: Al Qaeda's Top Operative," senior thesis presented to the faculty of the School of Arts and Sciences of Brandeis University, p. 23.



formulate doctrines in target assessment and intelligence collection that strengthened the organization's operational capabilities.<sup>10</sup>

Given the Egyptian operative's in-demand skill sets, he quickly ascended the al-Qa`ida hierarchy. By the mid-1990s, al-`Adl became the head of al-Qa`ida's security committee, part of the security detail for bin Ladin and Muhammad Atef's (Abu Hafs al Masri) right-hand man in the military committee.<sup>11</sup>

Al-`Adl played an important role in the establishment of al-Qa`ida's infrastructure in the Horn of Africa, particularly Somalia. In 1993, he traveled, along with senior Egyptian al-Qa`ida operative Abu Muhammad al Masri, via Kenya to Ras Kambooni in Somalia to establish a training camp.<sup>12</sup> There, al-`Adl developed good relations with the Ogadan tribe, aligned with Somali warlord Farah Aidede's faction.<sup>13</sup> The infrastructure in Ras Kambooni was subsequently utilized as a base to conduct raids on peacekeeping forces in the region. As Abu Walid al Masri, al-`Adl's father-in-law, put it in a letter to him and other al-Qa`ida operatives at the time, "The American bald eagle has landed within range of our rifles. You can kill it or leave it permanently disfigured," an ominous turn of phrase indicating al-Qa`ida's willingness to take on American forces in the region.<sup>14</sup>

### Interlocutor between bin Ladin and al-Zarqawi

In 1999, al-`Adl met with Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who had just been released from Jordanian imprisonment for his role in an attempt on the life of an American diplomat in Amman.<sup>15</sup> After hearing reports of al-Zarqawi's arrival in Kandahar, Afghanistan, and conferring with the radical preacher Abu Qatada al Falistini, al-`Adl along with a colleague met al-Zarqawi in a guesthouse there.<sup>16</sup> The Egyptian operative found that he had a great deal in common with al-Zarqawi, including an "uncompromising" nature.<sup>17</sup> The following morning, al-`Adl convinced bin Ladin, despite his reservations over the Jordanian operative's refusal to swear *bay`a*, to invest in al-Zarqawi's nascent *Tawhid* organization.<sup>18</sup> By providing seed money, al-Zarqawi was able to establish a training camp in Herat, near the Afghanistan-Iran border.<sup>19</sup>

The decision to establish a training camp and smuggling routes proved to be fortuitous. It was becoming increasingly more arduous for militants to travel to Afghanistan via Pakistan because of a Pakistani crackdown on Arab Afghan activity. Two al-Qa`ida stations in Tehran and Mashad were established to facilitate travel to and from Afghanistan.<sup>20</sup> In the aftermath of 9/11, al-`Adl likely used the same routes to smuggle al-Qa`ida operatives into Iran.

### Global Terror

According to testimony provided to the U.S. government by Khaled Sheikh Muhammad, lead planner of the 9/11 attacks, in the spring of 1999 Usama bin Ladin and Muhammad Atef approved the attack plans that evolved into the 9/11 attacks.<sup>21</sup> Al-`Adl was informed of the plot sometime in April 2001.<sup>22</sup> According to the 9/11 Commission, al-`Adl was part of a faction within al-Qa`ida that had reservations about the plot because they feared it could endanger the position of the Taliban.<sup>23</sup>

On June 13, 2002, al-`Adl wrote in a private communiqué to Khalid Sheikh Muhammad to "stop rushing into action and take time out to consider all the fatal and successive disasters that have afflicted us during a period of no more than six months."<sup>24</sup> He went on to disparage bin Ladin as an ineffective leader who did not accept dissent. "If someone opposes him, he immediately puts for-



Saif al-`Adl

FBI

ward another person to render an opinion in his support, clinging to his opinion and totally disregarding those around him."<sup>25</sup> In his treatise on Security and Intelligence, al-`Adl made a similar point. He argued that when an enemy continues to inflict heavy losses on a jihadist organization, it is necessary for the *shabaab* (youth) to refrain from action and regroup.<sup>26</sup> In short he was critical of any rush to action devoid of careful cost-benefit analysis.

Despite his private dissatisfaction with the results of the 9/11 attacks, publicly al-`Adl towed the party line. He claimed in his 2005 biography of al-Zarqawi that the "ultimate objective" of the planes operation "against the head of the snake was to prompt it to come out of its burrow," and this had been partially achieved.<sup>27</sup> In other words, the aim of the operation was to provoke imperial overreach on the part of the United States, by instigating an invasion of Afghanistan and subsequently Iraq. It is possible that al-Qa`ida's restored fortunes and growing presence in Iraq had made him reconsider his previous position.

### Smuggling Operatives to Iran

Al-`Adl argued that the American bombardment of al-Qa`ida installations in Afghanistan during Operation Enduring Freedom served two principal aims: to put an end to the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan and eliminate the al-Qa`ida hierarchy.<sup>28</sup> In recognition of American aims, he outlined how al-Qa`ida evacuated its personnel and did its utmost to salvage what remained of its network in Afghanistan.<sup>29</sup> In the aftermath of the fall of Kandahar in December 2001, al-`Adl led a cohort of al-Qa`ida operatives to Iran transiting via a network of safe houses.<sup>30</sup> He later recounted:

*We began to flock to Iran one after the other. The brothers in the Arab Peninsula, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates who were outside Afghanistan had already arrived. They possessed abundant funds. We set up a central leadership circle and subordinate circles. We began to rent apartments for the brothers and some of their families.<sup>31</sup>*

When he and Abu Muhammad al Masri arrived in Iran, al-`Adl reestablished contact with al-Qa`ida's senior leadership in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region and sent operatives to Afghanistan to

carry out operations.<sup>e</sup> He may have played an operational role in the May 2003 Riyadh compound bombings, albeit a circumscribed one because of his imprisonment, which began a month earlier.<sup>32</sup> Saudi and American pressure had led Tehran to imprison al-`Adl along with Abu Muhammad al-Masri.<sup>33</sup> Thereafter, al-`Adl's operational involvement diminished precipitously,<sup>f</sup> though he remained able to publish articles online occasionally.<sup>34</sup>

### Fallout between al-Qa`ida Central and al-Zarqawi

By the mid-2000s, al-Qa`ida Central was infuriated by al-Zarqawi's sectarian campaign against Iraqi Shiites, creating a public relations quagmire for the organization.<sup>35</sup> In December 2005, Attiyat Abdul Rahman al-Libi reprimanded al-Zarqawi in a scathing letter, which suggested his brutal and unrestrained targeting of the Shia was endangering the entire brand.<sup>36</sup>

It is unclear where al-`Adl stood on the schism between bin Ladin and al-Zarqawi due to a lack of primary source documentation on the subject. Given he had been an early champion al-Zarqawi and praised him in the 2005 biography, the growing tension must have been awkward for al-`Adl. Interestingly, al-`Adl raised ideas that the Islamic State would later champion. In contrast to bin Ladin's more methodical approach to an Islamic caliphate, al-`Adl wrote that he had advised al-Zarqawi that circumstances were appropriate for the declaration of an Islamic state.<sup>37</sup>

### Operational Atrophy

Al-Qa`ida leaders were still holding out hope that al-`Adl might be released but recognized that even under the best of circumstances, it would take time for him to return to the fray. After bin Ladin's death there were reports al-`Adl took over in a caretaker capacity before Ayman al-Zawahiri was appointed leader, but this was not confirmed by the terrorist organization.<sup>38</sup> Al-Qa`ida's own correspondence suggests he had stopped playing any operational role by then. On July 17, 2010, (Sha`ban 5, 1431 al hijri), Attiyah wrote to bin Ladin:

*I ask God to release our brothers from prison so they can come to help us carry the load. They are qualified. Abu-Muhammad al-Zayyat, Abu-al-Kayr, Saif al-`Adl, and others. However, if God facilitates their release they will really need to spend at least six months (and maybe a year) relearning how things work, refreshing their knowledge, their activity and vitality. During this period, they would be relatively nearby and we would gradually seek their advice in the matters, then maybe we could turn things over to them.*<sup>39</sup>

e In 2005 al-`Adl wrote, "We reestablished contact with the leadership. We began to support it again. This was one of our objectives from leaving Afghanistan. We began to form some groups of fighters to return to Afghanistan to carry out well-prepared missions there." Al-`Adl, "Jihadist Biography of the Slaughtering Leader Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi," 2005.

f In 2005 al-`Adl wrote, "The Americans felt that Iranians were shutting their eyes to our activity in Iran. Thus, they began to launch a concentrated media campaign against Iran. They accused Iran of helping the al-Qa`ida and global terrorism. The Iranians responded by pursuing the young men and arresting them. The steps that the Iranians took against us confused us and foiled 75 percent of our plan." Al-`Adl, "Jihadist Biography of the Slaughtering Leader Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi."

## "Few operatives in al-Qa`ida Central elicit as much concern within the intelligence community as al-`Adl. The Egyptian has served several roles within the organization, including head of al-Qa`ida's security committee."

Around the same time, al-`Adl's writings appear to have become less focused on improving al-Qa`ida's operational capabilities and far more philosophical in nature, addressing political developments in the region. In 2011, al-`Adl utilized his father-in-law Abu Walid al-Masri's former blog, Mafa Asia, to publish a series of essays on the Arab Spring, the semantics of terrorism, and differences of opinion with al-Masri himself regarding al-Qa`ida's failures.<sup>40</sup> Al-Masri argued that the organization should be disbanded due to its monumental failures.<sup>41</sup> Al-`Adl respectfully disagreed, alleging that al-Qa`ida's actions, particularly the 9/11 hijackings, precipitated imperial overreach on the part of the U.S. military and would be studied at military colleges for years to come.<sup>42</sup>

### Future Role

Few operatives in al-Qa`ida Central elicit as much concern within the intelligence community as al-`Adl.<sup>h</sup> The Egyptian operative has served several roles within the organization, including military trainer, head of Usama bin Ladin's security detail, and head of al-Qa`ida's security committee. Al-`Adl has demonstrated an uncanny capacity to adapt to changing circumstances, for example not only surviving over a decade of imprisonment in Iran but using it to lengthen his career.

If unconfirmed recent reports of his release are accurate,<sup>i</sup> al-`Adl would provide much needed operational expertise to al-Qa`ida. And he would be one of very few pre-9/11 al-Qa`ida leaders still in circulation with the gravitas to take over leadership from al-Zawahiri one day. A review of his writings since 9/11 suggest he would

g In August 2015, a series of articles attributed to al-`Adl were published on justpaste.it, including two on guerilla warfare and revolutionary warfare and a quasi-eulogy on Abu Khalid al Suri, who al-`Adl referred to as a lion of jihad. The tone al-`Adl used suggested they had known each other in Afghanistan. Al-`Adl also published "The Series of Conflicts and the Wind of Change: Guerilla Warfare and Revolutionary Warfare," which he dedicated to al-Qa`ida's martyrs, his wife, two daughters, and sons.

h Richard Barrett, former head of MI6 Counterterrorism, stated that al-`Adl "is operationally about the smartest senior leader that the organization has [...and] possibly the only chance that the central al-Qa`ida leadership has to survive beyond al-Zawahiri." Personal interview, Richard Barrett, January 2, 2014.

i The reports stated that al-`Adl and four other al-Qa`ida operatives were released by Iran in March 2015 as part of a prisoner swap with al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula, which had captured an Iranian diplomat. Iran denied the reports. "Terror Fears As Iran Frees Al Qaeda Members," Sky News, September 14, 2015; Rukmini Callimachi and Eric Schmitt, "Iran Released Top Members of Al Qaeda in a Trade," *New York Times*, September 17, 2015. Some analysts are skeptical that Iran would take the risk of releasing al-`Adl given Iran and al-Qa`ida are fighting on different sides of the civil war in Syria.

likely encourage the movement to pursue limited (actionable) objectives and avoid instigating overwhelming retaliation by the United States. Al-`Adl views violence as a “military professional” would, eschewing the opportunism of bin Ladin and Khalid Sheikh Muhammad and pursuing a meticulous cost-benefit analysis before

taking action.<sup>43</sup> The return of the shrewd Egyptian strategist would strengthen al-Qa`ida at a time when it is facing increasing competition from the Islamic State, particularly in East Africa because of his wealth of experience operating in the region. **CTC**

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