

Combating Terrorism Center at West Point



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FEATURE ARTICLE

Al-Qa`ida Versus the Islamic State

How the nature of their competition will impact global security

CLINT WATTS

A VIEW FROM THE CT FOXHOLE

Hazim Fouad and Behnam Said

ANALYSTS, BREMEN & HAMBURG
BRANCHES OF THE OFFICE FOR THE
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FROM THE EDITOR

On July 21 al-Qa`ida issued arguably its strongest rebuke ever to the Islamic State, warning that a pledge to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi meant being a "partner in every curse upon the Muslims" including "killing thousands of mujahideen." Our cover story by Clint Watts outlines how despite such rhetoric, competition between the two global jihadist powerhouses and their satellite groups has moved from a "destructive" phase in which they clashed with each other in Syria in the first half of 2014 to an "escalating" phase resulting in a surge in attacks worldwide. He argues that with the Islamic State weakening at its center, escalating competition will be a strong feature of an increasingly fractured and "multi-polar" jihadist landscape in the future and assesses strategies available to get jihadist groups to turn their guns on each other. William McCants explores how the Islamic State's aggressive campaign to obliterate all jihadist rivals has seen some jihadist groups around the world bandwagon to its cause but has also antagonized powerful local rivals. He argues the Islamic State's lack of jihadist diplomacy will leave it with few allies if and when the caliphate collapses, potentially accelerating its demise.

This issue also focuses on Germany, which this month has endured two attacks by extremists claiming to act on behalf of the Islamic State. Our interview is with Hazim Fouad and Behnam Said, analysts at the Bremen and Hamburg branches of the Verfassungsschutz, the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution. Florian Flade outlines how recent investigations have revealed that Germany is increasingly in the crosshairs of the Islamic State. As we approach the fifth anniversary of the death of American terrorist cleric Anwar al-Awlaki, Scott Shane examines his enduring appeal in the Islamic State era. Finally, Metin Gurcan profiles the Kurdistan Freedom Falcons (TAK), a semi-autonomous terrorist "proxy" for the PKK responsible for a string of recent attacks in Turkey's major cities.

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Cover: Al-Qa`ida leader Ayman al-Zawahiri and Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi

Deciphering Competition Between al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State

By Clint Watts

Fractures between jihadist groups like al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State have ushered in periods of both destructive competition and escalating competition. Destructive competition, when terror groups attack each other, arises predominately from internal splits when terrorist factions occupy the same terrain. It can be amplified by younger extremists seeking a more violent direction than older members, the presence of foreign fighter contingents with divergent interests, and the existence of terrorist ‘Pretorian Guards’ lacking a stake in a post-conflict settlement. On the other hand, escalating competition, when terror groups attempt to outpace each other through expansive competition, occurs when competing terror organizations separate geographically and the perpetration of successful attacks leads to gains in notoriety and subsequent increases in resources. In the near term, international counterterrorism coalitions facing escalating competition from an assortment of al-Qa`ida and Islamic State affiliates might look to broker an end to the Syrian conflict and target shared sources of strength between competing groups as methods for returning competition to a destructive context.

The first month of 2014 brought what initially appeared to be a positive development. Al-Qa`ida’s leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, and its local Syrian affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra—rebuffed the previous summer by a belligerent subordinate then called the Islamic State in Iraq and al Sham (ISIS)—hatched efforts along with other Syrian Islamist groups to attack the defiant and ascendant Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.¹ Throughout the spring of 2014, terrorists lamented and counterterrorists rejoiced as open fighting between once-aligned jihadis brought destructive competition to the landscape, a blessing for Western countries who had no viable or palatable method to counter the rising jihadist tide in Syria.

Tides shifted again by the summer of 2014, however, when ISIS proved victorious over al-Qa`ida, making a run across the Iraqi desert and capturing town after town. In June 2014, ISIS took Mosul, declared a caliphate, and rebranded itself as the Islamic State. Within months, significant parts of the once-vaunted al-Qa`ida

global terror network fractured and transformed into a more virulent form. Affiliates across the globe splintered from al-Qa`ida or arose anew, inspired by the Islamic State. Disgruntled al-Qa`ida factions in Algeria, Pakistan, and Yemen formed new Islamic State *wilayat* as previously al-Qa`ida-pledged affiliates Boko Haram and Ansar Beit al Maqdisi switched alliances. The appeal of Islamic State branding has mobilized allegiance or support from more than three dozen affiliates and emerging terrorist organizations stretching from Morocco to Indonesia.² Today, the jihadist landscape is both larger and more diverse than at any time in world history. Initially, al-Qa`ida and Islamic State groups destructively competed. Since the declaration of a caliphate, however, competition between al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State has shifted from destructive to escalating with both groups’ franchises aggressively pursuing attacks in an attempt to one up each other. Counterterrorists now suffer the detriments rather than the benefits of al-Qa`ida and Islamic State competition, straining to keep up with the scale and pace of terrorist attacks globally.

The international coalition that is confronting the Islamic State and other terrorist groups must learn how to tamp down this escalating competition and return jihadis to pitched battles against one another. Those terrorists surviving Syria and Iraq’s battlefields will empower the more than three dozen al-Qa`ida and Islamic State affiliates and associated terror groups, each of which seeks ‘glory’ to inspire their ranks and refill their coffers.³

Destructive Terrorist Competition

Throughout history, terrorist groups and their movements have suffered many periods of destructive competition, predominately in the form of internal splits. Splits over strategic direction resulting in destructive competition between factions often mask more important currents fomenting dissent. Generational divergence is a consistent feature during fracturing.^a

In Egypt during the 1990s, the Muslim Brotherhood faced off against younger, more violent jihadist groups. Similarly, Algeria in the 1990s witnessed the emergence of the FIS (Islamic Salvation Front) in opposition to the Muslim Brotherhood. FIS leaders were then assassinated in mid-1993 by the more junior and violent Armed Islamic Group (GIA), which ultimately declared war on the FIS and Islamic Salvation Army (AIS) and killed hundreds of Islamists.⁴ Internal fractures and splintering among Palestinian extremists, whether the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Hamas, or Fatah, show a persistent trend

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a Martin Marty and Scott Appleby noted this as a persistent trend in extremist breakups where Islamist movements stall and then become challenged by younger upstarts. Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby, *Accounting For Fundamentalisms: The Dynamic Character of Movements*, (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2004), pp. 364-366.

of the young breaking away from their older forefathers. In all of these cases, younger extremists—detecting a pause, moderation, or shortcomings of the older generation—believe a new strategic direction incorporating greater violence will bring about the ultimate victory.⁵ Al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State's modern global jihad follows a similar pattern, where each generation of foreign fighters has splintered from their forefathers and become increasingly violent and aggressive.

When times get tough and terror groups fail, international foreign fighter legions appear as a second ingredient of destructive competition. A hallmark of recent jihads has been the mobilization of an international force blending fighters of many nations and ethnicities. Al-Qa`ida, the Islamic State, and even the PLO before them showcased the foreign fighter phenomenon to advocate the broad appeal for their cause and sustain their manpower. But international volunteers join extremist ranks for reasons that quite often diverge from their local 'brothers.'⁶ Disenfranchised locals tend to participate for better wages and services or in the absence of a political alternative. Meanwhile, foreign volunteers take up arms more for the groups' pronounced ideological visions. When victories are plenty, local fighters and international volunteers tend to get along, as seen recently in the Islamic State's strong unity during its late 2014 and early 2015 expansion.

Both Algeria and Somalia provide relevant examples of foreign fighter versus local fighter fracturing. Disenchanted with failed political solutions, the GIA emerged in 1992, bringing together frustrated local Algerian militants of the Islamic Armed Movement (MIA) with international jihadist foreign fighters returning from Afghanistan. 'Afghan Algerians,' notably Djafar al-Afghani and Cherif Gousmi, initially led the GIA to its zenith through escalating violence precisely focused on political objectives, namely the assassination of politicians and those connected to the regime. GIA gains brought more local manpower under the jihadist tent and forced its Islamist rival FIS to create the militant wing AIS to accelerate violence against the regime.⁶

Algerian leadership decapitation of the GIA led to the rise of local Algerian leaders who alienated both their local Algerian base of support and their foreign backers in al-Qa`ida. Gousmi's death led to the mysterious appointment of a young, religious novice, Djamel Zitouni, who led a terrorist campaign against France. GIA terrorism against France in late 1994 and 1995 brought renewed French support for the Algerian regime. This strategic misstep brought further challenge from the FIS and Algerian government as well as dissent within the GIA's ranks. In mid-1995, Zitouni, gripping tight to power, began declaring other jihadist leaders apostates and even killed GIA challengers. Zitouni's internal violence led to mass GIA defections and the London-based al-Qa`ida magazine *Al-Ansar* withdrawing its support for the GIA. Zitouni, in return, banned foreign jihadis in his organization and declared bin Ladin and al-Qa`ida "soft."⁷ Zitouni was assassinated within a year and an even younger Algerian replacement, 26-year-old Antar Zouabri, continued the GIA's disastrous trend, advocating further violence, declaring the Algerian population apostates, and inciting widespread violence against civilians. Younger Algerians Zitouni and Zouabri fractured

“When defeats outnumber victories and objectives appear unattainable, fractures routinely form between local and foreign fighters. Locals with a post-conflict stake in the region rapidly break with foreign volunteers who lack local alternatives.”

the GIA along several seams: local versus foreign, young against old, poor and disenfranchised opposing elites. The GIA's expansive, violent decline crumbled the jihad in Algeria and opened the way for a more peaceful political settlement.⁸

When defeats outnumber victories and objectives appear unattainable, fractures routinely form between local and foreign fighters. Locals with a post-conflict stake in the region or in need of resources to sustain their families and clans rapidly break with foreign volunteers who are more fully committed to the cause and lack local alternatives. Omar Hammami, the infamous American foreign fighter with al-Shabaab, wrote frequently during 2012 and 2013 of the growing separation between local Somalis (*Ansar*) and foreign fighters (*Muhajir*). The split became more pronounced when al-Shabaab's local clansmen defected in the face of advancing African Union forces from Mogadishu. Hammami and some of his foreign fighter associates pushed al-Shabaab's emir, Ahmed Godane, to pursue an integrative sharia governance model while other international volunteers sought a closer relationship with al-Qa`ida. Ultimately, Godane and al-Shabaab assassinated Hammami and warred with former al-Shabaab emir Mukhtar Robow.⁹ Fratricide and fracturing characterize al-Shabaab's bloody descent into regional terrorism in Kenya and Uganda.¹⁰ A breakaway Islamic State faction now challenges al-Shabaab.¹¹ Al-Shabaab's remaining global-minded, al-Qa`ida-linked foreign fighters and Somali clansmen stand separate from an Islamic State affiliate manned by locals and East Africans.¹² Al-Qa`ida's foreign legions in Pakistan 15 years earlier, in comparison, avoided this destructive rivalry through inter-marrying in local communities, preying on the local custom of *Pashtunwali*, and paying sizeable sums to secure the loyalty of their Taliban hosts.¹³

Destructive terrorist competition can also be heightened when extremist organizations employ an internal security organization that amplifies divisive demographic forces in the ranks. Many international forces employ a Pretorian Guard-like group to protect the organization and its leaders from infiltration by spies. As the group's success declines, this internal security apparatus increasingly becomes the protectorate of the ruler against legitimate criticism and emerging challengers. These internal security services, regardless of their time period and location, share many qualities. Their ranks often consist of international volunteers^c who lack local ties in the communities with which they fight. They also pursue violence against any potential rivals to ward off threats.

b An excellent reference for the dynamics occurring with international foreign fighter migrations is David Malet, *Foreign Fighters: Transnational Identity in Civil Conflicts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

c As well as the Palestinian example discussed here, this has also been the case for al-Shabaab and the Islamic State.

One example of this extremist phenomenon is Yasser Arafat's Force 17 from the early 1970s through the 1990s. He created the internal security force to sustain his authority over the PLO as conflict waned and political settlements began. Staffed primarily with Tunisians who joined the ranks during Arafat's exile, Force 17 had no ties to the West Bank or Gaza and found little incentive in pursuing a political solution. When no longer needed to guard Arafat and left out of the Palestinian Authority, Force 17 became Amn al-Ri'asah, pursuing deadly attacks to protect its place among a crowded extremist landscape. Force 17 killed Palestinians undertaking business with Israelis and intimidated and tortured members of the Preventative Security Force. Hamas claimed Force 17 attempted to kill the Palestinian Authority's Prime Minister Ismael Haniyeh, leading to a series of retaliatory attacks between the groups.¹⁴

More recently in the jihadist context, al-Shabaab has exerted harsh violence and strict sharia through its violent internal security forces. Al-Shabaab's now deceased emir Ahmed Godane deployed his internal security force, the Amniyat, to locate, imprison, and often kill "spies" and dissenters in the ranks. Many Amniyat, like Godane himself (an Isaaq clansman), come from Somalia's lesser clans and stand to lose should the terror group crumble. Those with al-Qa`ida connections and more ideologically committed foreign fighters reinforce the Amniyat's ranks. The Amniyat's violence seeks the unity of al-Shabaab's fragile collective. Under the reign of Godane, the Amniyat went so far as to kill his once top advisor Ibrahim al-Afghani. The Amniyat's harsh justice and unfair imprisonments, however, have emboldened defectors and rivals, leading to sustained destructive competition from a new breed of Islamic State-minded jihadis.¹⁵

Obtaining financial resources and control over manpower can also be a key component of destructive competition amongst terror organizations.¹⁶ Whether it involves the opening or closing of a conflict zone, terror groups bound to specific geographies must compete for fighters and money or fade from power. Hamas and Fatah, two Palestinian powerhouses, clashed in 2006 and 2007 as they sought a larger stake in a future Palestinian state and the subsequent resources and authority over security forces that would follow.¹⁷ Despite the ideological differences and egomaniacal battles between al-Baghdadi and al-Zawahiri, initial fighting between ISIS and al-Qa`ida's Jabhat al-Nusra focused on the financial lifeline of Syria's eastern oilfields and control over foreign fighter flows. ISIS won both and secured the upper hand by paying higher wages and offering better benefits than any other Syrian competitors.¹⁸

Escalating Global Terrorist Competition

Mounting concern quickly replaced the momentary satisfaction counterterrorists enjoyed when terrorists killed each other in Syria. By 2015, the Islamic State proved dominant, and fighting with Jabhat al-Nusra lessened as both groups reached a steady state. Having separated geographically and no longer occupying the same terrain in Syria or even globally, affiliates of both networks swiveled their weapons outward, attacking local and international targets at a quickening pace on an unprecedented scale. Rather than pointing their guns inward to stave off competitors, jihadist competition rapidly shifted from internal splintering and fratricide to extremist groups on three continents solidifying their stake in a crowded global jihadist landscape. The last year has ushered in a confusing, complex terror picture. The Islamic State and its affiliates and supporters raced to execute ever more spectacular attacks,

“As opposed to the destructive competition found when groups occupy the same territory, escalating terrorist competition naturally arises when terrorists have operational space, freedom of maneuver, and a need to garner resources.”

and freelancing, al-Qa`ida-connected jihadis matched them with a string of hotel attacks in West Africa while al-Zawahiri instructed his promising Syrian affiliate, Jabhat al-Nusra, to hold back from launching attacks on the West.¹⁹

As opposed to the destructive competition found when groups occupy the same territory, escalating terrorist competition naturally arises when terrorists have operational space, freedom of maneuver, and a need to garner resources. Terror groups lacking local competitors and facing minimal counterterrorism pressure do not waste time, manpower, or money freeing the space they occupy from rivals. Likewise, these same groups, lacking human and financial resource pipelines from a higher headquarters, will need to execute successful, escalating attacks to draw media attention in order to bring in manpower and money.

Two relevant examples of this escalating terrorism competition are Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). LeT, Pakistan's go-to extremist group against India prior to September 11, 2001, found itself losing recruits to the Taliban and al-Qa`ida as those groups engaged in active combat against the United States in Afghanistan. Rather than pursuing violence against its Taliban extremist brothers, LeT deployed operatives to Afghanistan to fight the United States simply to maintain the local recruits in its ranks.²⁰ More recently, Mokhtar Belmokhtar, a former AQIM commander known for disobeying his superiors, rapidly increased his attacks against international targets via his splinter group al-Murabitun. Immediately following the French intervention in Mali, Belmokhtar seized the In Amenas gas facility in Algeria. Having watched the Islamic State's prowess and its growing affinity among locals for its brand, Belmokhtar initiated a sustained terrorism campaign throughout West Africa, hitting hotels in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Ivory Coast.²¹

Most importantly, by escalating the pace and scale of their attacks, those terrorist groups perceived as winners become agenda-setters. The more aggressive executors of violence not only win the men and the money, but they also set the future direction for all that follows and seek to adopt the most successful strategy and supporting structure. Hamas violence during the second intifada influenced the PLO to pursue a more Islamist discourse. Islamic Jihad's accelerated violence pushed Hamas to move from peaceful activism toward violence.²² The failure of Algeria's political movements created space for violent Islamic groups to emerge.²³ Today, al-Qa`ida, which long urged patience in creating a caliphate, has aggressively shifted toward governance after seeing the Islamic State successfully attract international jihadist admiration for executing governance for more than two years in Syria and Iraq. After bin Ladin's death, al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)

flirted with governance during its brief rise in Yemen in 2012, and today Jabhat al-Nusra has followed in the Islamic State's footsteps in pursuing governance in Idlib, Syria.

Implications of Terrorist Competition

Destructive competition proves doubly useful for counterterrorists. Terrorists in combat with each other deplete their ranks and resources, while souring their global supporters and donors and diminishing their supply of future foreign fighters. The benefits to the West when terrorists fight become exponential rather than additive. In contrast, escalating terrorist competition spells danger. With an unprecedented number of foreign fighters available to power terror affiliates, al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State seem poised to outpace each other via violence on several continents. Counterterrorism efforts moving forward should focus on decelerating escalating competition and pursuing methods to identify and replicate those conditions where terrorists undertake destructive competition.

Recognizing Tectonic Shifts and Ideological Aftermath

Internal fractures arise for many reasons, but they predominately develop during transformational periods brought on by jihadist success or failure. The likely eventual collapse of the Islamic State suggests another transformation, and splinters will soon follow. Bickering over strategic direction, future objectives, and violent methods naturally becomes the principal argument for splinter group formation. With each generation of fighters serving together on jihadist battlefields, from the Afghan mujahideen to al-Qa`ida to the Islamic State, the tendency has been for ideology to evolve to incorporate new goals and justify increasing violence.

Abdullah Azzam and bin Ladin agreed on expelling communists from Afghanistan but sought different directions upon departure of the Soviets, the former preferring to focus on Palestine and the latter on global jihad ultimately shifting to targeting the 'Far Enemy'—the West. Bin Ladin, al-Zawahiri, and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, leader of al-Qa`ida in Iraq from 2004 to 2006, saw the need for jihad in Iraq but did not see eye to eye on killing Shi`a. Bin Ladin, al-Zawahiri, and al-Baghdadi all agreed on the need to develop an Islamic State but differed considerably on when and how to implement one. It is highly unlikely that any of jihad's forefathers—Azzam, bin Ladin, Abu Musab al-Suri, or al-Zawahiri—would approve of the Islamic State's current justifications for violence. Notably, each of these ideological derivations has occurred at a quickening pace with the opening of new battlefields. Each fractious evolution has resulted in younger, more zealous fighters parting with their less aggressive, older elites. As has been noted, groups stressing jihad ultimately push toward destructive splits as they lose control of the violence that is so enticing to the younger generation.²⁴

Some policymakers have repeatedly called for countering the Islamic State's ideology as a counterterrorism silver bullet.²⁵ Thirty years of jihadist competitive history suggests that such an approach would stand little chance of success. Jihadist ideology over the past three generations has repeatedly evolved based on battlefield successes and failures and local conditions precipitating conflict. The Islamic State's or al-Qa`ida's ideology is not static, but rather it is a current shaped by the survivors of the last jihadist conflict as well as emerging global issues. Much like a virus, defeating one ideological strain will ultimately precipitate another that shares some original jihadist tenets and justifications for violence while incorporating components of emerging conflicts. Even if an international coa-

“With an unprecedented number of foreign fighters available to power terror affiliates, al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State seem poised to outpace each other via violence on several continents.”

lition could clearly identify those ideological tenets appealing to young jihadist recruits, they would likely change again before any counterterrorism effort could be implemented.

Ending the Syrian Conflict

Ending the Syrian conflict could help usher in a new period of destructive terrorism competition by again bounding territory and resources. Brokering negotiations to end the conflict would not only stunt foreign fighter inflows and donations but reorient Jabhat al-Nusra, the Islamic State, and their allies toward their stake in a post-conflict Syria, increasing the likelihood of a return to conflict with each other. With Palestinian terror groups, simply discussing negotiations focused groups on fighting each other rather than collectively attacking Israel.²⁶ Jabhat al-Nusra, in particular, has strategically integrated with several combinations of Islamist groups to secure parts of northern Syria. These local Islamist groups, however, consist predominately of Syrians who seek local goals rather than al-Qa`ida's global agenda. Putting forth brokered negotiations will incentivize Syrian members of this coalition to seek their own local stake and shed their alliance with the more globalist Jabhat al-Nusra.

Amplifying Destructive Competitive Currents

Both Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State embody contingents of foreign fighters with global ambitions. A Syrian settlement might push al-Nusra allies filled with local Syrian elements to seek more turf and power. They may distance themselves and compete with those al-Nusra members tied to al-Qa`ida's global agenda. In the Islamic State's case, witnessing the end of the Syrian civil war as they lose ground in Iraq, local Iraqi leadership will be further inclined to defect and seize any available local turf and resources before the caliphate completely crumbles. A wedge will likely emerge between local Islamic State members and the group's international cadres who have far less stake in a post-caliphate Syria and Iraq. This will trigger a secondary thread of destructive competition: the Islamic State's internal security.

The Islamic State, like al-Shabaab in Somalia, relies on its state security, Amn al-Dawla, to maintain control over its crumbling caliphate. Members of al-Dawla, like Pretorian Guards centuries ago, receive more compensation, live in better quarters, and deliver the harshest punishments. During an interview with Michael Weiss, an Islamic State defector who served in al-Dawla, Abu Khaled, noted the masked men of the amniyeen sit separately from the military. Amn al-Dawla's chiefs, unlike the Islamic State's Iraqi-dominated leadership, “tend to be Palestinians from Gaza”—a security force naturally well versed in internal intelligence from an early age and also lacking a stake in a post-caliphate Syria or Iraq.²⁷ As airstrikes have repeatedly killed Islamic State leaders, the amniyeen have

been hard at work executing “dozens of fighters on charges of giving information to the coalition or putting (GPS) chips in order for the aircraft to strike at a specific target.”²⁸ As the Islamic State continues to lose ground and if a potential Syrian settlement looms, the amniyeen will pursue even harsher punishments to maintain power, increasing the chances of destructive competition.

Containing Escalating Terrorist Competition

Outside of Syria and Iraq, Islamic State and al-Qa`ida competition appears more likely to be escalating than destructive as terror groups from both strains of jihad project freely throughout a range of weak and failing states. For counterterrorism forces, reversing this escalating trend in Yemen, the Sahel, Afghanistan, and Pakistan will be essential to stopping the current spate of terrorist attacks. First, the West may look to contain terrorist groups geographically, such as AQIM and al Murabitoon that currently roam with relative ease of movement. Geographic containment will impede the pace and breadth of terrorist attacks. Intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets would likely need to be doubled or tripled in all regions where today’s Islamic State affiliates continue to expand.

Within current zones of escalating competition, international counterterrorism forces should aggressively identify centers of gravity—those sources of strength that power a group—shared by competing terrorist factions. In Yemen, a shared center of gravity between the Islamic State and AQAP may be turf or manpower. In Afghanistan, counterterrorism forces could seek to manipulate rather than destroy shared economic lifelines powering the Taliban and the Islamic State’s Khorasan *wilayat*. In Nigeria, Boko Haram has sustained its bloody campaign since 2009 through unity of leadership and command. However, recent military pressure may have certain segments of Boko Haram reconsidering the group’s shift from al-Qa`ida to the Islamic State. In this case, counterterrorists may have an opening for seeding mistrust within the group’s leadership.²⁹ Whatever the “center of gravity,” an international counterterrorism coalition shaping the terrorist resource picture will be essential to fomenting destructive competition. Again, in select cases, pushing regional conflicts toward brokered peace agreements may orient terror groups toward destructive competition.

Broadcasting and amplifying the atrocities committed by competing terror groups, such as the killing of women, children, and fellow Muslims, can also diminish the incentives for aggressive attacks. As seen by the decline of al-Zawahiri’s Islamic Jihad, which competed with other Egyptian jihadist factions, senseless killing of civilians will erode popular support and blunt escalating competition.³⁰ Counterterrorists should identify jihadist Muslim-on-Muslim violence and amplify accounts of these atrocities in fertile recruiting grounds. Citizen journalism programs offering local accounts of these atrocities provide effective means for credibly undermining jihadist groups.³¹ Finally, assessing and selecting a range of proxies incentivized to repel terror group affiliates and fractious upstarts will be key to squelching escalating terrorist competition.

Conclusion

Successfully managing terrorist violence moving forward requires a nuanced understanding of how groups compete. The Islamic State has already begun to fracture, and the enduring narrative of al-Qa-

`ida versus the Islamic State oversimplifies what the future holds. The two to three dozen terror groups currently spread across several regional nodes are more diffuse than ever. With the headquarters of both al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State under stiff counterterrorism pressure, affiliates for both groups will likely choose their own objectives as much or more than the jihadist strain with which they currently identify.

Terrorist competition over the horizon will likely look more like the fragmented jihadist landscape found during the 1990s. Contrary to popular notions of a singular, dominant al-Qa`ida, the 1990s saw a plurality of terrorist groups all seeking their own space. The diaries of Abu Zubaydah, a senior al-Qa`ida leader operating logistics in Pakistan, reveal that he saw himself as a peer rather than a subordinate of bin Ladin.³² The same might be said for other prominent jihadist leaders like Abu Musab al-Suri, who at one point in 1999 chastised bin Ladin for not abiding by his pledge to Mullah Omar and putting their Afghanistan safe haven at risk.³³

Examining this earlier multi-polar jihadist period and its rivalries may be instructive for policymakers and counterterrorism practitioners moving forward. The Islamic State’s decline has seen the diffusion of foreign fighters and inspired supporters in a host of regions. These disparate groups coordinate to varying degrees, but should the Islamic State’s headquarters collapse completely or go underground similarly to al-Zawahiri, bonds between them will weaken and their interests will diverge.³⁴ As seen with al-Qa`ida after bin Laden’s death, those groups only lightly communicating with al-Baghdadi and not receiving manpower or money from Islamic State “Central” and its brand will need to seek out their own path for survival and growth. Peripheral Islamic State affiliates, resurgent al-Qa`ida proxies, and fresh upstarts loosely connected to both jihadist networks will be highly incentivized to accelerate their own attacks, seeking publicity and new lifelines from resulting successes. Terror groups have learned from the Islamic State’s meteoric rise that those who go bold and big stand to gain more support than others, and attacks on Westerners have proven time and again to reap the greatest benefit for those seeking notoriety and new bases of support. Many, if not most, of jihad’s next generation have ample operational room to maneuver and few counterterrorism impediments, and they will be highly inclined to make their mark with a noteworthy local, regional, or international attack against the West.

Finally, policymakers should be wary of two situations predicated on terrorist mobilizations. First, harnessing destructive terrorist competition and mitigating escalating competition will be best achieved by minimizing new jihadist opportunities within civil wars and failing states. Afghanistan, Iraq, and now Syria have all triggered massive foreign fighter mobilizations that have ultimately brought jihadist guns to bear on international targets. In the future, preventing the opening of new jihadist battlefields will be the best way to disrupt emerging foreign fighter flows and mitigate the growth of jihadist groups that ultimately lead to a second compounding problem—military interventions. Regardless of the current state of terrorist competition, large-scale military interventions unify divisive jihadist groups more than any other single factor. International coalitions can avoid demands to intervene by ending conflicts where jihadis flourish. **CTC**

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A View from the CT Foxhole: Hazim Fouad and Behnam Said, Analysts at the Bremen and Hamburg Verfassungsschutz

By Paul Cruickshank

Hazim Fouad is an analyst for the Bremen branch of Germany's Office of the Protection of the Constitution (Verfassungsschutz) where he focuses on the threat from Islamist extremism. He is writing a Ph.D. thesis on contemporary Muslim criticism of salafism at the University of Kiel. Dr. Behnam Said is an analyst for the Hamburg branch of the Verfassungsschutz where he focuses on the threat from Islamist extremism. He has a Ph.D. in jihadist nash-eeds from the University of Jena. In 2014 Said and Fouad published the first German anthology on salafism, Salafismus: Auf der Suche nach dem wahren Islam. Also in 2014 Said published the first German book on the Islamic State, Islamischer Staat – IS-Miliz, al-Qaida und die deutschen Brigaden.

CTC: You both have a unique vantage point of the terror threat today—on the one hand working on the frontlines of counterterrorism in Bremen and Hamburg and on the other conducting academic research into Islamist extremism. From where you sit, how has the terrorist threat to Germany evolved?

Said: Germany has been in the crosshairs of jihadi-minded terrorists since it contributed troops to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan after 9/11. One of the first signs of increasing jihadi mobilization in Germany was the establishment of the German branch of the Global Islamic Media Front (GIMF) in 2006, which translated al-Qa`ida propaganda—mainly videos by al-Qaida in Iraq—into German. Its founder, Muhammad Mahmoud, an Austrian citizen with Egyptian roots, was later critical for the jihadi mobilization for Syria in Germany. In 2007 GIMF produced a video message in which they demanded the withdrawal of Austrian and German troops from Afghanistan and threatened Germany and Austria with “Mujahidin operations.” After that, radicalization and recruitment accelerated. We saw German Mujahidin groups emerge in the Pakistani-Afghan border region, link up with al-Qa`ida-affiliated groups, and plot attacks back home. The jihadi message also resonated inside Germany. In 2011 we suffered our first jihadi terrorist attack when a lone-actor extremist killed two American servicemen at Frankfurt airport, claiming he wanted to take revenge for western “atrocities” committed in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Fouad: While there has not been a deadly jihadi terrorist attack since the Frankfurt attack, the large number of German residents who have traveled to Syria and Iraq has created a significant potential threat. Germany is the second biggest exporter (after France) of foreign fighters in Europe by absolute numbers. Eight hundred and twenty people have left Germany to join jihadi groups there, first and foremost the so-called Islamic State. The majority of those who left are under 30 years old and 20 percent are female. One hundred and forty persons have most probably died, and about 270 have already returned to Germany. Of these, about 70 have been

involved in fighting or have received military training. These are the highest numbers in jihadi activity Germany has ever been forced to deal with. It seems that for some segments of the salafi movement in Germany, especially the youngsters, militant jihad has become more attractive than peaceful *dawa* (preaching) activities.

This is why the threat of an attack by the Islamic State or by its local supporters has been growing over the past year, although it seems to be not as high as in Great Britain or France. In February a 15-year-old girl, who had previously attempted to go to Syria but was stopped in Turkey, attacked a federal police officer in Hannover, injuring him critically. In April this year there was an attack by two young extremists on a Sikh temple in Essen. Fortunately, nobody was killed. Earlier this month, a young refugee with an Afghan background attacked passengers in a regional train in Würzburg with an ax, injuring five people. He was later shot dead by the police. The Islamic State claimed that the attacker was one of its soldiers, but the investigations are ongoing so this cannot be verified yet. Just a few days ago, an asylum-seeker from Syria carried out a suicide bomb attack, killing himself but fortunately nobody else, outside a bar in Ansbach after recording a cell phone video pledging allegiance to the Islamic State's leader. So we have all three scenarios here: returnees, home-grown radicalized persons, and refugees.

CTC: To what degree are German counterterrorism agencies equipped to deal with the threat posed by the Islamic State?

Fouad: During the past few years, a wave of foreign fighters, a general increase in the salafi movement as well as a sky-rocketing of right-wing-motivated criminal offenses stretched security agencies up to and beyond their limits. This is why the various agencies have increased their numbers of employees with the Federal Agency for the Protection of the Constitution offering 500 new jobs in 2015. But it will take some time until these new colleagues are able to contribute to some load relief. At the moment they need to be trained by those already under stress, which is very challenging.

CTC: Mohammed Atta and other residents of Hamburg played key roles in the 9/11 attacks. What is the threat picture today in the city? And how does Bremen compare?

Said: I think former U.S. Ambassador in Germany Daniel Coats was right when he pointed out that the 9/11 attacks were prepared in Germany but also in many other countries, even the United States. The history of jihadism in Hamburg started off mainly as a phenomenon associated with foreign residents in Germany. We saw that with the 9/11 cell and radical preachers in the al-Quds mosque, which was shut down by securities in 2010. But over time more local residents became involved as seen with the 11-person “travel” group that left Hamburg in March 2009 for the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region, where several connected with the al-Qa`ida-affiliated Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan.

When it comes to radicalization and foreign fighter mobilization

the situation today in Hamburg is pretty much the same as in other major cities in Germany. As we know from the last analysis of the federal police agency (BKA) half of all German jihadis who left for Syria came from just 11 cities. Those are also the cities from which double digits left. Jihadi mobilization in Germany is a mainly urban phenomenon. Ninety percent of those who traveled to Syria or attempted to do so had lived in an urban center before they set off. Hamburg in this sense is no exception. Out of a population of 1.7 million our security agency estimates the local salafi scene to number around 580 of which 305 are viewed as jihadi-orientated. As of July (since 2012) around 70 people from Hamburg and the outskirts have set out to support or participate in the war in Syria and Iraq. Around a third of them came back to Germany and around 20 Hamburg residents have supposedly died in Syria or Iraq.

Fouad: Bremen also has a very active salafi scene. In comparison to the other “Bundesländer,” Bremen has both the largest number of salafis (360) and people leaving to Syria (26) compared to the total number of inhabitants (just under 700,000). But again, one has to be very careful here. Bremen is a city state, and when compared to other cities in Germany the numbers look quite different. To paint you a picture we have a mainstream salafi mosque that hosts up to 450 people for Friday sermons. It is very much ideologically oriented toward Saudi Arabia, and Saudi preachers visit the mosque every now and then. In 2007 a radical splinter group broke with the mosque and established its own. These people generally belonged to the *takfiri* stream within salafism (i.e. they considered everybody outside their group to be an unbeliever). The establishment of the “caliphate” led to a split within the group, with some regarding global jihad now to be legitimate and the others still clinging to the traditional *takfiri* mindset, which does not even recognize the Islamic State as sufficiently “Islamic.” After 20 people who had relations with the mosque had left for Syria, the authorities outlawed the association supporting the mosque, and it was closed in December 2014.

CTC: You joined forces a few years ago to co-author a major study on salafism. To what degree has it been spreading in Ger-



Hazim Fouad

many? What is the link between salafism and violent Islamist extremism?

Fouad: There has been a steep rise in number of salafis in Germany. In 2011 there were about 3,800 while in 2016 there are 9,000, about 1,000 of whom are considered to be violent. Salafi activities in Germany are regarded as unconstitutional since core elements of its doctrine run counter to the human rights guaranteed under our constitution. Freedom of speech allows people to be against democracy but the moment somebody engages in activities that aim to abolish the existing legal and political system, they will be monitored by the intelligence services, including our agency, which has a mandate to protect the constitution. In Germany the intelligence services have no executive powers and are therefore separated from the police. If these activities turn out to run against a specific law, especially if they are violent, they are considered a criminal offense and the matter is handed over by the intelligence services to the police.

The growth of the movement is due to a mix of pull and push factors. On the pull side, German salafi websites are dominating the discourse on Islam on the internet, which is a major problem. Their appeal is also increasing because of their free dissemination of the Qur’an in German cities, open-air sermons by popular preachers, and their seminars in mosques tailored for young people. Many imams in the traditional mosques do not even speak German, let alone know what challenges the third generation of immigrants face and what matters to them. On the other hand there are “push” factors. The public discourse on Islam and Muslims in Germany is largely negative and often highly superficial, and this is contributing to the alienation of some Muslims from mainstream society. Salafism offers them a new identity.

Said: The links between salafism and violent Islamist extremism are complex. Salafis are vulnerable to the pull of jihadism because both refer to the same authorities of Islamic legal and doctrinal knowledge. Jihadis are in many cases salafis who have come to the conclusion that society is waging war against Islam and has to be combated by every means. It is important to stress only a minority of salafis have adopted this jihadi mindset, as the numbers quoted by Hazim indicate. The salafi scene in Germany is quite diverse and at the moment also quarreling about several critical points, most importantly the stance toward the Islamic State and toward violence and the legitimacy of certain jihadi groups in general. As a rough scheme you could say that there is a small minority of Islamic State supporters, but they are aggressive and speaking with a loud voice. There is also a network open toward al-Qa`ida and its positions. And then you have “mainstream” salafis who are not supportive of either the Islamic State or al-Qa`ida, with some even outspoken opponents of the jihadi trend. But the main problem is, as Hazim mentioned, that all salafi trends share a framework that has a perspective toward society that is at odds with basic values of our constitution.

I find a useful analytical framework for understanding the rise of salafism is “strict church theory.” Back in the 1970s, Dean Kelley was one of the first scholars who pointed to factors like complete loyalty, unwavering belief, and rigid adherence to a distinctive lifestyle to explain why small sects, cults, and ultra-conservative churches have grown in the U.S. since the 1950s, whereas liberal denominations have lost members.



Behnam Said

CTC: You are both of Muslim background. How has this helped you to understand the challenges faced by violent Islamist extremism? How important is it to have people of Muslim faith or people with deep cultural understanding working on counter-terrorism in the West?

Fouad: Being a Muslim does not make you an expert in terrorism studies. What security agencies and other governmental bodies dealing with these issues need are professionals with an academic background who can help them assess the phenomenon better and also in some cases prevent overreactions. Cultural sensitivities are useful when engaging in a dialogue with Muslim communities in order to avoid being stigmatized and put under general suspicion. Having the Muslim communities as partners is crucial, but it should be clear that jihadist radicalization is a threat involving all segments of civil society (schools, social workers, prisons, etc.) and not a “Muslim problem” to be solved by the communities alone.

Said: I totally agree with Hazim. But of course, knowing religious or local traditions from within makes it easier to assess and understand certain behavior and situations intuitively. This in turn is helpful when it comes to build trust with your Muslim interlocutor, Muslim community representatives, or if you have to analyze some information about personal behavior of a person of interest. More fundamentally in a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society it is desirable to have state employees with different backgrounds.

CTC: There has been extensive media coverage of Harry Sarfo,^a an Islamic State recruit from Bremen who provided details of his time in Syria after he returned to Germany in July 2015. What light has Sarfo shed on Islamic State attempts to attack Germany and Europe?

Fouad: The testimony of Harry Sarfo has been a watershed moment in understanding the structures of the Islamic State and its plans with regard to Europe. I was one of the officials who inter-

rogated him. It was striking, for example, that he told us that just after having entered Islamic State territory he was asked if he would like to return to Germany in order to conduct an attack, which he declined. He also said that the Islamic State facilitates an institution whose sole task is to coordinate attacks outside its borders. This external operations unit wanted to build up a capacity to attack Germany.

With regard to France, Sarfo was told there were already enough cells that had been dispatched from the so-called caliphate to France, and they just needed to be activated. One month after he told us this, the Paris attacks happened. Sarfo indicated the threat to Germany was less acute than to France, since, according to him, the majority of German foreign fighters have no ambitions to return in order to commit attacks. At least according to his description, they do not seem to hate their country of origin to the degree the French do.

CTC: Sarfo has said that some of the foreign fighters he encountered in Syria and Iraq have become disillusioned with the Islamic State. Have you detected a decline in the numbers of German Islamist extremists traveling to Syria and Iraq?

Said: There’s no doubt the Islamic State, as it loses territory, is also starting to lose its appeal. The number of foreign fighters who have left Germany this year so far is also considerably lower compared to 2014 and 2015. As a consequence of Islamic State losses on the one hand and barbaric behavior on the other hand, divisions have deepened between jihadis all over the globe, including Germany, and this has led to a crisis within jihadism. In Germany, and elsewhere, many adherents of jihad have become preoccupied with discussions about the legitimacy of the Islamic State or al-Qa`ida and are in a wait-and-see mode when it comes to traveling overseas to join a jihadi group. We’ve seen significant divisions emerge here in Germany. For example, Pierre Vogel, a popular mainstream salafi preacher who has often been in the media spotlight, has repudiated the Islamic State and was recently declared an apostate who deserved to die by the Islamic State in Dabiq magazine. This led to a heated debate between supporters of al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State in Germany, which is continuing to this day.

Fouad: The violence committed by the Islamic State as well as the crude rhetoric of its supporters in Germany seems to have alienated a significant number of those within the salafi scene who might otherwise have been sympathetic. What we see to some extent is that the Islamic State tends to attract another profile of people than al-Qa`ida. The first wave of German jihadis who traveled to the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region had at least some ideological grounding. Many of those going to the Islamic State do not seem to know much more than some basic tenets of its ideology, sometimes just some slogans. They represent more a kind of Rambo or gang-image, which obviously lacks any profound theological grounding and has an extremely aggressive and often simplistic rhetoric toward anybody who disagrees with them, including those supportive of jihad.

CTC: Several members of the Paris and Brussels attack cell transited through Germany, including through a refugee center in Ulm. To what degree has the migrant crisis produced a security threat to Europe?

Said: There has been a public outcry bringing together the two

^a Sarfo was recently sentenced to three years in prison for joining the Islamic State.

big current issues of terrorism and migration. And of course Paris, Brussels, and also Würzburg and Ansbach showed us there has been a link between the two in some particular cases. But paranoia and hysteria are at risk of overshadowing the actual facts. Since 2015 more than one million refugees have come to Germany, but the federal police office (BKA) has so far received terrorism tips on 400 individuals and has undertaken 40 investigations in this context. The majority of the hints turned out to be unsubstantiated. So when it comes to refugees, you can speak of a very small and dwindling number of suspicious persons who are subject to investigations. Of course there is the danger that persons whom security authorities are not aware of might be involved in plots. But this was also the case before the exodus of Syrian and Iraqi people began, and it should be noted we also had a history of failed or foiled plots in Germany by German citizens or residents well before the recent migrant flows. All in all you can say that the migration wave is an additional challenge for the security apparatus, but it is not the cause for the unprecedented terror threat. The cause for that is the Islamic State and its global supporters.

Fouad: Exactly. Ironically, what we have to deal with in many cases is recruiting and radicalization efforts among refugees by radical Islamists already living in Germany. These activities include the provision of clothing and food as well as logistical help when dealing with the authorities and administrative bodies of the state. Since many of the German salafis speak both German and Arabic, they often work as interpreters and take refugees by car to the places where they may have official appointments. The primary aim of these activities is not so much to help the people but to lure them into the salafi scene by making them thankful for and dependent on their benefactors.

CTC: How have you worked to build partnerships with local communities to counter violent Islamist extremism?

Fouad: In Bremen we've taken the approach that collecting infor-

mation, while important, is not an end in itself. We've reached out to other governmental agencies such as the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Social and Youth Affairs as well as the Ministry of Justice. We have also established contacts with different civil society organizations and the Muslim community. The aim was not to motivate them to send us every single piece of information or even worse to spy on their fellow colleagues, neighbors, students, or whomever. On the contrary, our aim was to raise awareness of radicalization and motivate the institutions to develop internal procedures to deal with the issue in an effective and independent way, without necessarily involving the security agencies. I believe such capacity building is the only way we can face the challenge of an increased jihadist threat because the security agencies, no matter how many employees they have, will never be able to deal with this issue on their own.

Said: Hamburg has established a local network for prevention. Our approach, and that of all relevant German agencies, is to tackle the problem as early as possible and long before radical mindsets can lead to the legitimization or use of violence, understanding that low-level civil society organizations are key. Our local network puts several authorities (social affairs, prison, school, police, intelligence) in touch with each other and helps to exchange information. On the other hand there are also non-state actors included, for example social work organizations and Muslim communities. And as a further feature the network has its own counseling service for family members of radicalized people and for those who want to leave the radical movement. The value for us as a security agency is that the network and the counseling service are targeting the soft edges while allowing us to focus more on our core tasks. **CTC**

The Islamic State Threat to Germany: Evidence from the Investigations

By Florian Flade

Security officials are concerned Germany is increasingly in the crosshairs of the Islamic State. German Islamic State recruits interrogated on their return home have made clear the group is seeking to launch attacks on German soil, but their testimonies suggest it has proven difficult for the group to enlist German nationals and residents to hit their home country. German officials are concerned the group is trying to exploit migrant flows to infiltrate non-European operatives into Germany, but so far there is little evidence of such operatives being involved in attack plans on German soil.

When Harry Sarfo arrived in Bremen on a Turkish Airlines flight from Izmir on July 20, 2015, the police were already waiting to arrest him. The son of Ghanaian immigrants who grew up in the Bremen neighborhood of Osterholz-Tenever, Sarfo had left Germany three months earlier. He had traveled through Bulgaria and Romania and then to Turkey, where he crossed into Syria and joined the Islamic State.

Back in Germany, Sarfo refused at first to talk to investigators about his time in Syria. Then, in October, he finally agreed to tell his story. He was visited three times in prison by the German domestic intelligence agency, the Verfassungsschutz.^a The transcript of the interrogations and several court documents, reviewed by the author, fill several hundred pages.

Sarfo recalled in detail how he was registered as an Islamic State fighter at a safe house of the terrorist group in the city of Tal Abyad in northern Syria.^b By his own account, he was then sent to Raqqa where he received the usual four-week, military-style training on AK-47 and various other weapons, which was followed by a “special course” training at a camp near At-Thawra and on an island in the Euphrates River.¹ The main goal of this training, which included swimming and diving courses as well as camouflaging exercises, was to prepare to serve in a special Islamic State unit tasked to support fighting forces in “difficult terrain” like Kobane.

Sarfo described how he was then sent on missions in Syria and

a Sarfo was interrogated by the Bremen branch of the Verfassungsschutz, the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution.

b The details on Harry Sarfo's time in Syria are from the transcript of his interrogation seen by the author.

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Iraq and even witnessed executions of captured Assad soldiers in the ancient city of Palmyra. He also appeared in an Islamic State propaganda video carrying the flag of the terrorist group before he was diagnosed with hepatitis and allegedly fled the so-called caliphate after hospital treatment, crossed into Turkey, and returned to Germany.²

What most worried the Verfassungsschutz agents was what Sarfo told them happened on the second day he was in Syria. A black SUV stopped next to him, he said. Masked French fighters from the Islamic State's internal security service Amniyat approached him and asked him if he would be willing to carry out an attack in Europe. Sarfo refused, he told the interrogators. “They wanted to know if I knew anyone in Germany who would be willing to carry out an attack. I also declined.”³ The previous German recruits tasked with carrying out attacks “had gotten cold feet,”⁴ the Islamic State members told him. Now there was a lack of willing candidates from among the German Islamic State contingent, but there were many Frenchmen and Belgians committed to attack, they said.

One month after Sarfo told the intelligence agency about the Islamic State's plans for Europe attacks, Islamic State operatives did indeed strike at the heart of the continent. A terrorist cell led by Belgian Abdelhamid Abaaoud killed 130 people in Paris. Carnage had come to the streets of Europe—planned in Syria and organized by terrorists who had been able to build up a sophisticated network of support.

In Germany the security agencies watched with great concern the attack in Paris. The question immediately arose—how big is the Islamic State threat to Germany? Were there any Islamic State terrorists in the country ready to strike? What was the role of German jihadis within the terrorist organization? Was there a terrorist cell on its way to Germany?⁵ This article examines the Islamic State threat to Germany by drawing on hundreds of pages of interrogation reports and court documents, German government studies on German foreign fighters, and interviews with German counterterrorism officials.

Target: Germany

According to security officials, Germany is in the crosshairs of the Islamic State, even though the country is not involved in the bombing campaign against terrorist targets in Syria and Iraq. This has been evidenced by several propaganda videos calling for attacks in Germany and even threatening Chancellor Angela Merkel. Numerous German militants have been trained in terrorist camps of the so-called caliphate.⁶

Around 820 Islamists from Germany have traveled to Syria and Iraq in recent years. Most of them have joined the Islamic State. At least 140 are said to have been killed; about 14 of them carried out suicide bombings. Of those who went to the war zone around a third have already returned to Germany, with some in custody while others are under intense surveillance.⁷

The German Federal Police (Bundeskriminalamt BKA) has analyzed the biography of 677 of these jihadist travelers.⁸ The results show that 79 percent of those who traveled to Syria and Iraq were males and 21 percent female. The youngest traveler was 15 years old, the oldest was 62. The vast majority were between 22 and 25 years old. Sixty-one percent of the jihadis were born in Germany, 6 percent in Turkey, 5 percent in Syria, 5 percent in Russia, and 3 percent in Afghanistan. In total, 64 percent had German citizenship, followed by Turkish, Moroccan, Russian, Syrian, Tunisian, and Afghan nationality. One-hundred and nineteen of the 677 jihadis analyzed by the BKA were converts to Islam. All except 22 were seen as followers of salafism. Two out of three jihadist travelers had ties to known Islamist extremists. Before their departure, many took part in salafist missionary work like the nationwide Qur'an distribution campaign entitled "Lies!" (read).

The Germans of the Islamic State

Of those jihadis who have returned from Syria and Iraq, only a few have been willing to speak about their time with the Islamic State.⁹ Nevertheless, over the years, more and more information about the role of German jihadis within the Islamic State has been accumulated, and some of this was revealed during the first trials of returnees from Syria. It became clear that Germans have served in the Islamic State's media wing, in its internal intelligence agency, and even in special forces groups tasked to carry out difficult missions.

German intelligence now knows of "German villages" in northern Syria, towns or neighborhoods where foreign fighters and their families have settled. Some of them were located near the cities of al-Bab, others in Minbij or Jarabulus.¹⁰ Investigations also uncovered that many former members of the salafist group "Millatu Ibrahim," which was banned by the German interior ministry in 2012, ended up with the Islamic State. Their number included former rap musician Denis Cuspert ("Deso Dogg"), who took on the jihadist name "Abu Talha al-Almani," Michael Noack from Gladbeck, and Silvio Koblitz from Essen.¹¹

Reda Seyam, a German-Egyptian labeled by some investigators as a "veteran of jihad," is most likely the highest-ranking German member of the Islamic State.¹² He was present in Bosnia during the civil war there and later was arrested in Indonesia where he was suspected of having played a key role in the al-Qa`ida Bali nightclub bombing in October 2002. Later, Seyam was sent back to Germany and became an influential figure within the salafist community before he left for Syria.

Today, Seyam is said to be the "emir for education" in the "Wilayat Nineveh," the Islamic State governance in northern Iraq where he allegedly is responsible for "education reform" in the region.¹³ Also known as "Dhul al-Qarnain," Seyam has appeared in propaganda videos (titled "Education in the Shadows of the Caliphate") and in pictures taken inside Islamic State-occupied Mosul University.¹⁴

While most German jihadis seem to play a rather low-level role in the organization, serving as guards and supplying fighters with food, weapons, and ammunition, a few apparently took up the position as "commanders."¹⁵ One of them is a German convert to Islam named Konrad Schmitz (*kunya*: Abdulwahid al-Almani) who was known as "Konny" back in his hometown of Mönchengladbach and is allegedly still operating with the Islamic State. According to the account of an Islamic State defector, he served as the "emir" of a German Islamic State brigade.¹⁶

Another German Islamic State member, Samy W. from

Walshut-Tiengen,¹⁷ ended up with the Islamic State's "Anwar al-Awlaki Brigade,"¹⁸ a unit of English-speaking foreign fighters,¹⁹ some of whom are allegedly tasked to plan operations in Europe and North America.²⁰

At least two jihadis from Germany worked in the media sector of the Islamic State, translating statements, video files, and audio tapes. One of them, Usman Altaf (*kunya*: Abu Jandal al-Almani), was a salafi of Pakistani origin from the city of Mannheim. The Islamic State hailed his death in Iraq with a poem that described him as an important figure in propaganda work.²¹ The other, Christian Emde, is a convert to Islam from Solingen and is described by German intelligence as an important recruiter responsible for media work who communicated with salafis in Germany via WhatsApp chat groups.²² He was even interviewed on camera in Mosul by German journalist Jürgen Todenhöfer, who was allowed to travel through Islamic State territory to shoot a documentary.

According to intelligence sources, numerous Islamic State jihadis from Germany have taken part in active fighting in Syria or Iraq.²³ Most have done this as "foot soldiers" or suicide bombers. Others served as guards in Islamic State prisons or questioned newly arrived recruits. The German Federal Prosecution Office (Bundesanwaltschaft) has also started investigations against some foreign fighters for crimes beyond joining a terrorist group or attending a terrorist training camp. Some like German-Algerian Fared Saal (*kunya*: Abu Luqman al-Almani) from Bonn are being investigated for war crimes and crimes against humanity.²⁴

But only one German Islamic State recruit has ever appeared on camera committing an execution. Yamin Abou-Zand, aka "Abu Omar al-Almani" from Königswinter and a former employee at the Telekom company, is seen in a Wilayat Hims clip entitled "Der Tourismus dieser Ummah" ("The Tourism of this Ummah") next to Austrian Islamic State recruit Mohamed Mahmoud (*kunya*: Abu Usamah al-Gharib) shooting two alleged Syrian soldiers in Palmyra. In the video, released in August 2015, Abou-Zand also called on Muslims in Germany to join the Islamic State or carry out terrorist attacks in their homeland.²⁵

Just a few days after the Charlie Hebdo attack in Paris in January 2015, Nils Donath,²⁶ a former Islamic State member from Dinslaken in North Rhine-Westphalia, was arrested by German police.⁶ After he came back from Syria, Donath had been under constant surveillance. His car had been wiretapped, and police were listening when he told a friend that while in Syria he had been part of an Islamic State unit responsible for hunting down, torturing, and executing alleged spies and traitors. During around 40 interrogations, Donath, who had been an Islamic State member from October 2013 to November 2014 and whose cousin had carried out a suicide bombing for the group, outlined how he had joined the Amniyat, which the prosecution described as the Sturmtrupp or "Gestapo of the IS."²⁷ He had been given a car, a special permit to travel around Islamic State territory, an AK-47, and a golden Browning pistol.²⁸

Donath told interrogators not only about horrific torture methods and public executions by the Islamic State but also that foreign

c At first there was not enough evidence to arrest him, but after the Charlie Hebdo attack, the decision was made to take him into custody. "Festnahme eines mutmaßlichen Mitglieds der ausländischen terroristischen Vereinigung Islamischer Staat Irak und Großsyrien," Bundesanwaltschaft, January 10, 2015.

fighters have the option of enlisting themselves for “external operations,” meaning terrorist attacks in Europe or North America.²⁹ And he claimed that he met Belgian and French jihadis, including Abaaoud.³⁰

Donath’s account and those of Harry Sarfo and other Islamic State defectors create a threat picture that remains very concerning to German security services, one in which the Islamic State is apparently working extensively on trying to set in motion attacks in the West, including Germany.³¹ “They want something that happens on several locations simultaneously,” Sarfo stated during his interrogation.³²

After the Paris attacks in November 2015, German counterterrorism officials wanted to find out if there were any connections between the cell commanded by Abaaoud and German jihadis or if there were any helpers or supporters in Germany. They looked particularly at the situation in Syria itself. Was there any information about a Belgian-French-German connection?

The BKA came to the conclusion that German jihadis, especially a group of salafis from Lohberg (District of Dinslaken in Northrhine-Westphalia) that became known as the “Lohberger Brigade,” had most likely befriended several Belgians and French terrorists.³³ They even shared housing—at least for some time in 2013 and 2014—in the Syrian villages of Kafr Hamra or Azaz.³⁴ Pictures obtained by German intelligence show French jihadi Salahuddin Ghaitun alongside Hassan Diler, a Turkish national from Dinslaken, and David Gäble, a convert from Kempten. One picture most likely taken in Raqqa even shows Abaaoud next to Hüseyin Diler, Hassan’s 43-year-old brother, also from Dinslaken.³⁵ Despite these linkages, German security officials have found it difficult to ascertain whether jihadis from Germany were also involved in terrorist plots. Nevertheless, Hüseyin Diler was put on a most wanted list.³⁶

Infiltration by Foreign Operatives

While it seems the Islamic State has not been able to successfully recruit German nationals or jihadis from Germany to carry out attacks in Europe, the security services are on high alert regarding another potential threat—non-European terrorists being smuggled into Europe hidden among refugees, a tactic already used by the Islamic State in the Paris attacks. With hundreds of thousands of refugees coming to Germany from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, and other regions since 2015, the concern is that the Islamic State might have already moved terrorists into the country. The BKA has received hundreds of tips regarding possible jihadis hiding in refugee shelters in Germany. In a few cases, arrests have been made. In Brandenburg and North Rhine-Westphalia, two terror suspects, Syrian Shaas E. M.³⁷ and Tajik national Mukhamadsaid S.,³⁸ were arrested in recent months. In another case, Farid A., an Algerian Islamic State member, lied when he applied for asylum. He pretended to be a Syrian refugee and was living in a shelter in Attendorn. Pictures allegedly taken in Syria and obtained by German police show him in military gear holding weapons.³⁹

Another possible case of an Islamic State operative smuggled into Germany is that of 20-year-old Algerian Bilal C., who was arrested in Aachen in April for petty crimes. While in custody, German security services received information that he had been a member of Islamic State before he came to Germany as a refugee in the summer of 2015. Further investigation revealed that Bilal C. had scouted the Balkan route and other ways of entering Europe and had been tasked with that mission by Abaaoud. Bilal C. allegedly



Hüseyin Diler, an Islamic State recruit from North Rhine-Westphalia (right), with Paris attack team leader Abdelhamid Abaaoud in Syria in 2015. (Retrieved by Guy Van Vlierden from Islamic State social media)

also helped Thalys train attacker Ayoub el-Khazzani secretly enter Europe.⁴⁰

In February, a Syrian refugee named Saleh A. traveled from Düsseldorf to Paris and walked into a police station. There he told investigators about an Islamic State terror plot to carry out attacks in Düsseldorf using suicide bombers and assault rifles. Saleh A. said he had been tasked by the Islamic State leadership in Raqqa to form a terror cell. While being questioned by French police, he named three co-conspirators living as refugees in Germany.⁴¹ After several months of investigation, German prosecution decided to move in. The three Syrians that Saleh A. had named were arrested in June.⁴² Despite the case attracting significant global media attention, there is no proof of any real terrorist plot. No weapons or explosives were found, and no charges have been filed yet. German security sources say the case could very likely turn out to be a false alarm.⁴³

Islamic State-Inspired Attacks

Even though the Islamic State has set its sights on Germany as a potential target, the terrorist group has not been able to carry out a sophisticated attack in the country. German security officials meanwhile see a high-threat level for the country, especially coming from lone attackers inspired or motivated by the Islamic State. Such cases already exist. In February, 15-year-old Safia S. attacked a policeman at the main train station in Hanover with a kitchen knife. Prior to the attack, the teenage girl had traveled to Turkey possibly to cross into Syria and join the Islamic State. The general prosecutor has labeled the knife attack a “terrorist act” and has confirmed that Safia S. had been in contact with people close to Islamic State.⁴⁴ Just two months later, two 16-year-old salafis, Yusuf T. and Mohamed B., attacked a Sikh temple in Essen using a homemade explosive device they had built. Both had been active members of a WhatsApp chat group named “Ansaar Al Khalifat Al Islamiyya” in which at least a dozen young salafis of Turkish-German origin communicated about jihadism.

And on July 18, a 17-year-old refugee named Riaz Khan Ahmadzai, who allegedly was born in Afghanistan, carried out an attack on a train near Würzburg in Bavaria, Southern Germany. Ahmadzai attacked train passengers, including a group of Chinese tourists with a cleaver and a knife, seriously injuring at least four

people. After the train was stopped, he left the wagon and attacked a nearby woman walking her dog. The victim was also seriously wounded. The attacker was finally shot by the police.⁴⁵ Only a few hours after his attack, the Islamic State-linked Amaq Agency released a video message Ahmadzai had recorded in Pashto in which he said he wanted to carry out a martyrdom operation on behalf of the Islamic State and threatened that “IS will attack you anywhere.” Police later found a hand-written farewell letter to his father and a drawing of an Islamic State flag.⁴⁶ On July 24, Germany suffered its first ever jihadist suicide bombing. In the Bavarian town of Ansbach, 27-year-old Syrian refugee Mohammad Daleel detonated a homemade bomb close to a music festival. Fifteen people were injured in the attack. In a video message later released by Islamic State-linked Amaq news agency, Daleel said he was renewing his pledge of allegiance to Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and wanted to carry out a “martyrdom operation in Ansbach” as revenge for the killing of Muslims by Germans.⁴⁷

Conclusion

Whether the source is a lone attacker such as Ahmadzai or Safia S.

or a potential large-scale plot, the terrorist threat to Germany remains high. Hans-Georg Maassen, head of Verfassungsschutz, said in May that the threat is “higher than it ever was” with around 260 Islamic State fighters who have returned to Germany and around 90 radical mosques under surveillance.⁴⁸ According to German security sources, Islamic State operatives in Syria and Iraq are increasingly reaching out directly to supporters in Germany and Europe to urge them to carry out attacks.⁴⁹ It is possible this is because the Islamic State is finding it more difficult to send operatives back to Western Europe after governments there took steps to seal off the Turkey-Greece-Balkan migrant corridor, sharply reducing travel flows and making it more difficult for Islamic State operatives to pose as Syrian refugees.⁵⁰

As jihadist defectors Donath and Sarfo told police and intelligence services, the Islamic State is probably still on the lookout for German terrorist recruits. The Bundeswehr deployment to northern Iraq, the training and support for Kurdish peshmerga forces, and the German Air Force reconnaissance missions over Syria mean that Germany is regarded by the Islamic State as just another “crusader nation”⁵¹ that has to be attacked. **CTC**

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The Enduring Influence of Anwar al-Awlaki in the Age of the Islamic State

By Scott Shane

Yemeni-American cleric Anwar al-Awlaki, the leading English-language propagandist for al-Qa`ida, was killed in an American drone strike in 2011. But his influence has lived on into the Islamic State era, enhanced by his status as a martyr for Islam in the eyes of his admirers. His massive internet presence has turned up as a factor in several attacks since his death, including most recently the San Bernardino shootings and the Orlando nightclub attack as well as a significant number of terrorism cases on both sides of the Atlantic. Despite his long association with al-Qa`ida and that network's rivalry with the upstart Islamic State, al-Awlaki has been embraced by the Islamic State and its followers, and he continues to inspire terrorism from beyond the grave.

After Omar Mateen's shooting rampage in a gay nightclub in Orlando, Florida, in June, an older acquaintance from his mosque revealed that he had called the FBI about the troubled young man in 2014.¹ Mateen had told Mohammed Malik he had been watching a lot of videos of the deceased Yemeni-American cleric Anwar al-Awlaki and found them "very powerful," and the older man was concerned. Malik knew that another Muslim man from the same community had become a suicide bomber in Syria, leaving behind a videotaped interview in which he recounted how al-Awlaki's messages had encouraged him on his path to violent jihad.^a

After getting Malik's tip, the FBI looked into Mateen, found no threat, and closed the case. In retrospect, his fascination with al-Awlaki appears to be a significant milepost on the path that ended with 49 killed at the Pulse nightclub, the deadliest shooting by a single gunman in U.S. history. Nor was the influence of al-Awlaki, a charismatic American preacher who became al-Qa`ida's most effective English-language recruiter, a surprise. For years, when an

a The suicide bomber, Moner Abu Salha, had followed al-Awlaki's advice to young Western Muslims to choose between *hijrah*, or immigration to the Muslim world, or jihad at home. See Robert Windrem, "American Suicide Bomber Says He Was Watched by FBI, Inspired by Awlaki," NBC News, August 27, 2014.

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American or a Canadian or a Briton has turned up in jihadist terrorism, investigators have routinely discovered a long trail of al-Awlaki material on his computer.

The fifth anniversary of al-Awlaki's death at the age of 40 in an American drone strike in northern Yemen on September 30, 2011, is approaching. Ordered by President Barack Obama after a secret legal review, the volley of missiles that killed al-Awlaki marked an historic moment. Whether applauded or condemned, it was the first deliberate killing of a U.S. citizen by his own government on presidential orders and without criminal charges or trial since the Civil War.

In a major speech on the drone campaign at the National Defense University in 2013, Obama compared his decision to target al-Awlaki to a justified police shooting. "When a U.S. citizen goes abroad to wage war against America, and is actively plotting to kill U.S. citizens, and when neither the United States nor our partners are in a position to capture him before he carries out a plot," the president said, "his citizenship should no more serve as a shield than a sniper shooting down on an innocent crowd should be protected from a SWAT team. That's who Anwar Awlaki was—he was continuously trying to kill people."²

In the years since his death, new evidence has emerged to underscore Obama's central point that al-Awlaki was putting his considerable talent and energy into trying to kill Americans and other Western non-Muslims. In late May in Manhattan, a Vietnamese-British convert to Islam, Minh Quang Pham, was sentenced to 30 years in prison after describing how al-Awlaki had taught him how to make a bomb and instructed him to blow himself up at London's Heathrow airport, advising him to try to kill Americans and Israelis.³

But what has also become abundantly clear is that killing al-Awlaki did not put an end to his most important role as online recruiter for global jihad. No figure in jihadist propaganda has eclipsed his well-established brand. He remains as relevant to a new generation of American jihadis inspired by the Islamic State as he was to their predecessors whose allegiance was to al-Qa`ida. The author has found evidence of al-Awlaki's influence in more than half of U.S. jihadist terrorism cases in the years since his death.^b Others have also observed al-Awlaki's continued appeal. "I think his continuing popularity has a lot to do with the fact that he died as a martyr," notes Seamus Hughes, who tracks jihadist propaganda at George Washington University's Program on Extremism. "We see these

b There has been no complete study of terrorism cases for al-Awlaki's influence. A 2015 review by Fordham University Law School's Center on National Security found explicit mentions of al-Awlaki in 65 of 287 cases of jihadist terrorism in the United States since 2007, or 23 percent (fact sheet, "By the numbers: The Lasting Influence of Anwar al-Awlaki," July 2015). But as the center's director, Karen J. Greenberg, noted in an email exchange with the author, the actual percentage is probably much higher.

ISIS fighters quote him online and offline.” According to Hughes, in the process of embracing militancy “there’s a level of mood music necessary—people become radicalized before they become violent. And Awlaki provides that mood music.”⁴

That al-Awlaki’s influence would become so ubiquitous years after his demise was no certainty, though some Muslim commentators warned of the possibility. When the Islamic State made its splashy rise, partially eclipsing its venerable parent, al-Qa`ida, it was certainly conceivable that al-Awlaki would be consigned to the has-beens of the jihadist movement. But remarkably, the opposite happened. In the age of the online video, popular figures can live on digitally as they never could before. The number of hits for “Anwar al-Awlaki” on YouTube climbed from 40,000 in 2013 to over 65,000 by late June 2016.^c

Perhaps because al-Awlaki was killed before the emergence of the Islamic State as a bitter global jihadi rival to al-Qa`ida, the Islamic State and its followers saw no obstacle to embracing him despite his track record as an al-Qa`ida preacher. His appeal and influence have transcended divisions between the global jihadist powerhouses and persist in the Islamic State era.

Inspiring a New Generation

This posthumous popularity has had consequences. Since his death, al-Awlaki’s name has surfaced in dozens of minor terrorism cases in the West. More alarmingly, he appears to have had a decisive influence in several of the most lethal attacks. Investigators of the 2013 Boston Marathon bombings found that al-Awlaki had been an important factor in persuading the Tsarnaev brothers of the necessity of violence—and even had provided, via his oversight of Inspire, the English-language magazine of al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), instructions for making pressure-cooker bombs with explosive powder from fireworks.⁵ In January 2015, before French police fatally shot the Kouachi brothers, they had repeatedly made clear that they had attacked the satirical newspaper *Charlie Hebdo* on behalf of AQAP and “Sheikh Anwar al-Awlaki,” whom one brother had visited in Yemen.⁶ Four months later, two men who claimed to be acting on behalf of the Islamic State opened fire at a provocative Prophet Muhammad cartoon contest in Garland, Texas. One attacker, Elton Simpson, used al-Awlaki’s portrait as his profile picture on Twitter; the other, Nadir Soofi, had passed along al-Awlaki CDs to his mother, who later stated that the drone strike that killed the cleric was “a turning point in her son’s radicalization.”⁷ In July 2015, when Mohammad Abdulazeez fatally shot four Marines and a Navy sailor at military recruiting stations in Chattanooga, Tennessee, investigators quickly discovered that he had been watching al-Awlaki material.⁸

There was also a link to al-Awlaki in the San Bernardino shootings. Syed Farook, who shot up a work meeting and killed 14, was a devotee of al-Awlaki. His neighbor Enrique Marquez, who was charged with complicity in the murders, told the FBI that he and Farook had spent many hours watching al-Awlaki videos and had followed the bomb-making instruction in Inspire magazine.⁹



Anwar al-Awlaki (*Inspire magazine*)

Farook, like Orlando shooter Omar Mateen, clearly saw no contradiction in following al-Awlaki and admiring the Islamic State. The internal feud between al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State that sometimes played out on the battlefields of Syria seems not to have carried over to the West. Instead, in these recent cases, al-Awlaki appears to have served as a sort of bridge, carrying fervent young believers from mainstream Islam to the apocalyptic violence of Raqqa. In fact, the caliphate’s canny propagandists have repeatedly borrowed al-Awlaki’s name, words, and tactics.

Embraced by the Islamic State

In December 2013, a new Islamic State video started circulating on the web. It had the group’s usual exciting, martial footage and slick production values—and English narration from Anwar al-Awlaki, whose portrait was displayed in one corner of the screen. Listening to it, one could be momentarily baffled. Some passages sounded up-to-the-minute, as if al-Awlaki had been resurrected to comment on the latest news from Syria and Iraq, praising the creation of the Islamic State and remarking on its importance.

“Now, whether the state survives to expand into the next Muslim caliphate or is destroyed by the immense conspiracy against the rise of any Islamic State, I believe this to be a monumental event,” al-Awlaki said in his usual calm, pedagogical manner. “It represents a move of the idea from the theoretical realm to the real world. The idea of establishing the Islamic rule and establishing khilafah on earth now is not anymore talk—it is action.”¹⁰

It took some research to establish the source of the audio recording: al-Awlaki’s lecture “The Battle of Hearts and Minds” delivered by telephone on May 11, 2008, to a South African conference on surviving as a Muslim in the West.¹¹ He had been referring to the declaration in October 2006 by the Iraqi branch of al-Qa`ida that it was henceforth to be known as the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), but deft editing had made his remarks sound utterly contemporary. Al-Awlaki urged his supporters to travel to fight in Iraq, among other places,¹² and his early support for ISI, which later morphed into the Islamic State, no doubt won him popularity among the group’s leaders.

The Islamic State’s English-language magazine *Dabiq*, a more

c This is based on the author’s own observation. Early in 2016, it became difficult for the first time to find on YouTube al-Awlaki’s most explicit call for attacks, his “Call to Jihad,” recorded in March 2010. This followed a new call from the Counter Extremism Project and other advocates to take down al-Awlaki’s recordings. See Scott Shane, “Internet Firms Urged to Limit Work of Anwar al-Awlaki,” *New York Times*, December 18, 2015.

somber knockoff of Inspire, featured the portrait of “Shaykh Anwar al-Awlaki” in its fourth issue and quoted him to suggest that the enmity of so many countries to the Islamic State was a sort of compliment. “If one wants to know the people of truth, then let him observe where the enemies’ arrows are aimed,” the article said, paraphrasing al-Awlaki.¹³

A still more striking tribute was the Islamic State’s decision to name a contingent of English-speaking foreign fighters the Anwar al-Awlaki Brigade. In April, the U.S. Defense Department announced that Khalid Ostman Timayare, a Swedish citizen of Somali origin killed in a U.S. air strike in Syria, had been the “deputy emir” of the al-Awlaki Brigade, suggesting that it had a command structure and active combat role.¹⁴ The al-Awlaki brand seems to have been chosen to convey a certain nobility to the foreign fighters, much as the name of the much larger Abraham Lincoln Brigade did for British, American, and other volunteers in a very different cause in the Spanish Civil War.

Clearly, Islamic State propagandists, who have found no English-language spokesman with a fraction of al-Awlaki’s broad appeal to frustrated Western Muslims, decided to exploit his popularity. The group likewise lionized the late Usama bin Ladin, while directing only ridicule to his charisma-challenged successor, Ayman al-Zawahiri.

Islamic State leaders have borrowed more than al-Awlaki’s name and materials. After joining AQAP, al-Awlaki recognized that young Westerners leaving the United States, Canada, and Britain to join the fight in Yemen were wasting the huge advantage of their citizenship. Along with his American acolyte Samir Khan, he began to urge young followers to stay at home and mount attacks there, praising the U.S. Army psychiatrist Nidal Hasan as a hero for killing 13 people at Fort Hood, Texas, and loading Inspire with practical instructions for bombing and shooting, under the rubric “Open Source Jihad.” Though Islamic State propagandists began by inviting Westerners to join them in building the caliphate, the message shifted in September of 2014 after the United States and its allies began air strikes against the Islamic State. The group’s spokesman, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, embraced al-Awlaki’s stay-at-home message. “If you can kill a disbelieving American or European—especially the spiteful and filthy French—or an Australian, or a Canadian, or any other disbeliever from the disbelievers waging war, including the citizens of the countries that entered into a coalition against the Islamic State, then rely upon Allah, and kill him in any manner or way however it may be,” al-Adnani said.¹⁵ Echoing other al-Awlaki statements, he added: “Do not ask for anyone’s advice and do not seek anyone’s verdict. Kill the disbeliever whether he is civilian or military, for they have the same ruling. Both of them are disbelievers.”¹⁶ Three weeks before the Orlando shootings, he explicitly instructed Western supporters to stay in their home countries

“Islamic State propagandists, who have found no English-language spokesman with a fraction of al-Awlaki’s broad appeal to frustrated Western Muslims, decided to exploit his popularity.”

and launch attacks.^d

As an established jihadist brand, al-Awlaki has drawn support far beyond his initial base in the English-speaking West. In January, authorities in Singapore arrested 27 Bangladeshi men, alleging that they were part of a “jihadist terrorist cell.” Prosecutors charged that 26 of the 27 had been members of a study group devoted to the work of al-Awlaki and other extremists.¹⁷ It was only the latest evidence of the cleric’s appeal to Bangladeshis. In 2011, a Bangladesh-born Briton who worked for British Airways, Rajib Karim, was convicted of conspiring with al-Awlaki, who had exchanged emails with him about how to smuggle bombs past airport security.¹⁸ And al-Awlaki appears to have been a key inspiration to the leaders and foot soldiers of Ansar al-Islam, a jihadist group that claims to operate as the Bangladeshi wing of al-Qa’ida in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS).¹⁹ Since 2015 the group has carried out a string of attacks against secular bloggers, quoting from al-Awlaki’s online sermons on the duty of Muslims to act against anybody defaming their religion.^e

On a single day in late May, al-Awlaki’s enduring appeal to fans of the Islamic State in the United States was on display in federal courthouses 1,200 miles apart. In New York City, prosecutors unveiled charges against a 22-year-old Bronx man, Sajmir Alimehmeti, accused of repeatedly attempting to travel to Syria to fight for the self-described caliphate.²⁰ Meanwhile, in Minneapolis, Abdurizak Warsame, 21, who had pleaded guilty to conspiring to support Islamic State, testified in the trial of three friends accused of trying to make the same trip.²¹

Alimehmeti is Albanian by heritage; Warsame and his friends are Somali. But both found the Islamic State and its brand of garish

d In the May 21 audiotape al-Adnani stated: “The smallest action you do in the heart of their land is dearer to us than the largest action by us, and more effective and more damaging to them. And if one of you wishes and tries hard to reach the Islamic State, then one of us wishes to be in your place to hurt the Crusaders day and night without sleeping, and terrorize them so that the neighbor fears his neighbor.” See Paul Cruickshank, “Orlando shooting follows ISIS call for U.S. Ramadan attacks,” CNN, June 13, 2016. His language was strikingly similar to language al-Awlaki’s young assistant Samir Khan used in 2011: “I strongly recommend all the brothers and sisters coming from the West to consider attacking America in its own backyard. The effect is much greater, it always embarrasses the enemy, and these type of individual decision-making attacks are nearly impossible for them to contain.” See Samir Khan, “Expectations Full,” Al-Malahem Media, spring 2012.

e For example, in claiming credit for the murder of the blogger Nazimuddin Samad in April 2016, AQIS Bangladesh stated “We remind you the words of Sheikh Anwar al-Awlaki (may Allah accept his martyrdom): ‘If it is part of your freedom of speech to defame Muhammad [Allah’s peace and blessings be upon him], then it is part of our religion to fight you.’” See “Bangladesh Division of AQIS Claims Murder of Blogger Nazimuddin Samad,” Flashpoint Intelligence, April 8, 2016.

violence, prophetic religion, and righteous adventure to be irresistible. And there was something else these recruits had in common: a devotion to al-Awlaki.

“We watched propaganda videos online,” Warsame said in court in Minneapolis when asked to explain how he and his friends came to embrace violent jihad. “Listened to lectures by Anwar al-Awlaki.”²²

The criminal complaint against Alimehmeti said FBI agents had found six audio clips of al-Awlaki lectures on his laptop. The titles alone sounded like a short course in radicalization to violence: “Jihad = Fighting,” “Hellfire and its Life,” “On the Command of Jihad,” “Advice to the Ones who Stay Behind,” “Imam Anwar al-Awlaki on the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham,” and finally, “The Punishment of Those Who Don’t Participate in Jihad.”²³

To be sure, the notoriety of al-Awlaki almost certainly introduces some degree of selection bias into such observations. Police in Bangladesh—or Minneapolis or New York or San Bernardino—may look first for al-Awlaki’s material on the laptop of a malefactor simply because his is the name they know best. But in the world of online extremism, celebrity matters. If police look first for al-Awlaki’s influence, then that is because for years young believers curious about violent jihad have been powerfully drawn by his message.

Enduring Appeal

What explains the appeal of this gangly son of a prominent Yemeni family? He spoke English and Arabic with equal fluency, bringing to Islamic teaching the authority of the Arabic original of the Qur’an and *hadith* and the approachability of colloquial American speech. By contrast with some jihadist preachers, he was not a screamer, adopting instead an earnest, explanatory manner, playing the popular young professor. Not a serious scholar, he was nonetheless an omnivorous consumer of Islamic history and texts and an unequalled popularizer.

He was also prolific. He appears to have lived his entire professional life before audio or video recorders. His early audio lectures on the life of the Prophet Muhammad were sold in a 53-CD box. Critically—and unlike every other prominent extremist—he enjoyed a long, successful career as a mainstream preacher and lecturer before he gradually embraced extremism and violence. And today, all of his material is jumbled together, mixed and remixed and posted online. For a new convert to Islam or a Muslim taking a new interest in the faith, al-Awlaki can provide an inspiring introduction to Islamic history, a grounding in the basics of the faith, and clerical advice on everything from marital strife to overeating. And in other, later material that is equally available, he argues that is always a mistake to trust non-Muslims, that the United States is at war with Islam, and that to be true to his faith, any Muslim has the obligation to fight the United States and the other purported enemies of Islam. A posthumous article in *Inspire* magazine in 2012, plausibly attributed to al-Awlaki, took the argument still further. Citing early Muslim fighters’ use of the catapult to kill enemies regardless of age or gender, the article declared: “The use of poisons

or chemical and biological weapons against population centers is allowed and is strongly recommended due to its great effect on the enemy.”²⁴ There are concerns in Western capitals that the Islamic State may in the future try to deploy such weapons,²⁵ and if they do they will be able to justify their use by drawing on al-Awlaki’s *fatwa*.

In some way the most insidious material comes from al-Awlaki’s middle years, after he had abandoned his early, moderate views but not yet openly embraced violence. Consider, for instance, “The Hereafter,” his lectures on the Islamic view of the afterlife, published in a 22-CD set in 2006 when al-Awlaki was living with his parents in Sana’a. He does not explicitly call for violence, but “The Hereafter” is a decidedly fundamentalist tract, including references to Islamic prophecy that might be unnerving to non-Muslims and to any Muslim determined to live in peace with people of other faiths. In language that would be echoed by Islamic State ideologues, al-Awlaki speaks of the future apocalyptic battle between Muslims and people described in Scripture as “Romans,” which he interprets as a reference to Europeans and Americans. He says that at some future time, there will no *kuffar*, or non-believers. “Islam will rule the world,” al-Awlaki says. “Kuffar will be stamped out.” For non-believers, the choice will be “either Islam or death,” he declares.^f

It is a noxious message that figured in the online education of many jihadis. “Listen to Anwar al-Awlaki’s ... here after series, you will gain an unbelievable amount of knowledge,” Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, the younger of the Boston Marathon bombers brothers, tweeted a few weeks before the attack.^g Syed Farook, the husband in the San Bernardino attack, was another fan of the series, according to his neighbor.²⁶ For those who fall under al-Awlaki’s spell, “The Hereafter” is a crucial way-station along the path from “The Life of the Prophet” to his explicit endorsement of attacks on American civilians in a 2010 recording often labeled “The Call to Jihad.” Its prophetic quality—al-Awlaki’s citations of Scripture to foretell the future—is very much in the spirit of the Islamic State.

It is interesting to ask how al-Awlaki, had he survived, might have reacted to the announcement of the caliphate in June 2014 and the naming of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as caliph. His loyalty to al-Qa’ida was well-established. He was working in Yemen under the leadership of Nasser al-Wuhayshi, a former personal secretary to bin Ladin. Yet al-Awlaki’s devotion to original texts, his excitement about the declaration of the Islamic State of Iraq, and his regular citations of ancient prophecy all would have drawn him to the bold leaders of Raqqa. The same qualities have preserved, even enlarged, his influence in the age of the Islamic State. **CTC**

f Awlaki’s entire series of lectures on “The Hereafter” is available on the Internet Archive at <https://archive.org/details/noor90>.

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The Polarizing Effect of Islamic State Aggression on the Global Jihadist Movement

By William McCants

The Islamic State will struggle to hold onto the governments it builds and the territory it captures outside of Syria and Iraq because it antagonizes local jihadist competitors and powerful non-Muslim states. The Islamic State could soften its antagonism toward these entities for the sake of expediency, but then it would no longer be able to recruit followers as the uncompromising champion of the global jihadist ideal.

Since it announced its caliphate in the summer of 2014, the Islamic State has taken on 17 affiliates or “governorates” that operate in 12 countries outside of Syria and Iraq. Many of the governorates were preexisting jihadist groups or factions that joined the Islamic State because they identified with its antagonism toward local jihadist competitors and its unyielding animosity toward non-Muslim nations. Yet this hostility subsequently limits the group’s ability to build governments or take territory beyond the confines of Syria and Iraq. In most countries where the Islamic State has planted its flag, its aggression prompted powerful local jihadist rivals^a or international foes to check its advances. The Islamic State could soften its antagonism to one or the other for the sake of convenience, but this would compromise its recruiting ability and tarnish its reputation as the uncompromising champion of the global jihadist ideal.

According to its propaganda, the Islamic State accepts all oaths of allegiance from individuals and groups outside Syria and Iraq. Those groups, however, cannot form governorates until they document their oaths, unify with other jihadist groups in the territory, nominate a governor, select members for a regional consultative council, and devise a strategy for taking territory and implementing sharia. They then present “all this to the Islamic State leadership

a As Brynjar Lia has argued, doctrinaire jihadist groups have trouble building alliances because they make enemies on all sides. As a consequence, they are unable to build the popular fronts necessary to achieve their political objectives. Brynjar Lia, “Jihadi Strategists and Doctrinarians,” in Assaf Moghadam and Brian Fishman (eds.) *Self-Inflicted Wounds: Debates and Divisions within al-Qa’ida and its Periphery* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2010), p. 130. Although the author does not agree that a popular front is necessary for jihadis to achieve their goals, failing to prioritize enemies is certainly detrimental to any state-building enterprise.

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for approval,” with the caliph determining who will lead the governorate.¹ Groups in lands that are not designated governorates will be contacted by the Islamic State to “receive information and directives” from the caliph. They are asked to join the governorate closest to them.^{2b}

As of July 2016, the Islamic State officially claimed 39 governorates,^c spanning 14 countries. The 17 governorates outside of Syria and Iraq operate in Libya (Barqah, Fazzan, Tarabulus); Yemen (‘Adan Abyan, al-Bayda, Hadramawt, Sanaa, Shabwah, Liwa’ al-Akhdar); Saudi Arabia (al-Bahrayn, al-Hijaz, Najd); Algeria; Egypt (Sayna’); Afghanistan and Pakistan (Khurasan); Russia (Caucasus); and Nigeria, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon (Gharb Ifriqiyyah). It also claims a presence in Somalia and “covert units” in Turkey, France, Tunisia, Lebanon, Bangladesh, and the Philippines.^d

The Islamic State’s governorates can be divided into three types: statelets, insurgencies, and terrorist organizations. For the purposes of this article, a statelet is a governorate that monopolizes violence in some territory, levies taxes, imposes law, and provides public services. It functions like a government even if it is not recognized as such by other nations. An insurgency is a governorate that often occupies territory but cannot always hold it; it is unable or unwilling to perform the functions of a statelet. A terrorist organization is a governorate that holds no territory and can only operate clandestinely.

Outside Syria and Iraq, only the governorates in Libya and Afghanistan qualify as statelets, the latter barely. The Khurasan Governorate in Afghanistan controls a few villages in Nangarhar province, whereas the Tarabulus Governorate in Libya controls Sirte on the Mediterranean coast and some minor adjacent towns to the west and east. (As of this writing, the group’s hold on Sirte is rapidly weakening.) The Gharb Ifriqiyyah Governorate, aka Boko Haram, is an insurgency. The other governorates in Saudi Arabia, Egypt,

b Each governorate has its own governor (*wali*). If the governorate is the only one in a region, it reports directly to the Islamic State’s leaders in Syria and Iraq. If it is one of several in a region, it may answer to an emir, as they have in Syria, Iraq, Libya, and Yemen.

c “Officially claimed” means they were mentioned in the Islamic State’s Dabiq magazine or in its official Arabic attack reports. In July, the Islamic State issued a video with an organizational chart of the caliphate that listed 35 governorates. Missing were the governorates of Idlib (“The Law of Allah or the Laws of Men,” Dabiq, issue 10, p. 54), Sahil (Islamic State attack announcement, May 23, 2016, <https://justpaste.it/16-8-1437>), Junub Baghdad (“Islamic State Operations,” Dabiq, issue 14, p. 24), and al-Bahrayn (“‘Da’esh Wilayat al-Bahrain’ yatabanna hujoom al-Husseinyya al-Haydariyya sharq al-Sa’udiyya,” Mir’a al-Bahrain, October 17, 2015). The chart gives the name Liwa’ al-Akhdar as a governorate in Yemen but does not mention Lahij governorate, which is sometimes mentioned by Islamic State supporters (@ASI_FI, Twitter, March 23, 2015).

d On the anniversary of the June 29th announcement of the caliphate, the Islamic State issued an infographic on Twitter, “Two Years Since Announcing the Caliphate,” detailing the organization’s reach.

Algeria, Yemen, and Russia are terrorist groups.

Unsurprisingly, all of the governorates, with the exception of Saudi Arabia, are found in countries with recent or ongoing civil wars and revolutions. Weakened states have security vacuums that jihadist groups exploit for operating and gaining territory; obtaining materiel and moving personnel via illicit networks; and recruiting by way of deep political and social grievances. When expanding, the Islamic State has prioritized moving into territory that is hospitable for rapid growth.

Were the Islamic State left unchecked to exploit these factors, it would seize territory quickly. The group is exceptionally good at attracting thousands of foreign fighters to its cause, fundraising locally, and preparing the battlefield through propaganda and subterfuge. It also has a large war chest that it can spend to augment the strength of its affiliates, which it has done in Libya and Afghanistan.

Losing Friends and Alienating Jihadis

But many of the Islamic State's governorates face stiff competition from other jihadist groups, which are often sympathetic to the Islamic State's rival al-Qa`ida. For example, the Islamic State in Libya lost its first base in Darna because it antagonized other jihadist groups that supported al-Qa`ida.³ The governorates in Yemen have struggled to remain relevant against the vastly more powerful al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), whose personnel have operated in Yemen for more than two decades, intermarrying and allying with local tribes.⁴ When Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi signaled that jihadis in Yemen should subordinate themselves to him in a November 2014 audiotape, he needlessly alienated AQAP, which up until then had pointedly not picked sides in the dispute between its mother organization and the Islamic State because of sympathy in its ranks for the latter. Senior AQAP cleric Harith bin Ghazi al-Nadhari responded by calling the caliphate religiously illegitimate. "We did not want to talk about the current dispute and the sedition in Syria... however, our brothers in the Islamic State ... surprised us with several steps, including their announcement of the caliphate [and] they announced the expansion of the caliphate in a number of countries which they have no governance, and considered them to be provinces that belonged to them," he stated.⁵

In Algeria, al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) blunted the Islamic State's recruitment drive by denouncing it and carrying out high-profile attacks there.⁶ The Taliban, which the Islamic State lambasted as a nationalist enterprise,⁷ has confined the Khurasan Governorate to a few villages in Afghanistan.

Competition with other jihadist groups is nearly unavoidable for the Islamic State. As Brynjar Lia observed in 2010, the Islamic State cares more about "doctrinal righteousness" than it does about building a popular front in the Muslim world, which has been the primary strategy of al-Qa`ida. Whereas al-Qa`ida is willing to overlook doctrinal differences for the sake of alliance-building, the Islamic State is less so.⁸ And because the group styles itself an empire, it demands an oath of allegiance from all armed groups wherever it declares its writ. Groups that fail to comply risk being branded apostates, traitors not only to the religion but also to the state and meriting death. As might be expected, jihadis who refuse to join the Islamic State dislike being called apostates, which makes it even harder for the Islamic State to build alliances.

Refusenik jihadist groups also resent the Islamic State because it woos their soldiers, which fosters factionalism and infighting. Sev-

“Jihadist groups that join the Islamic State are not only attracted to its uncompromising policies on ideological grounds. They also find these policies useful for distinguishing themselves from jihadist competitors.”

eral of the Islamic State's governorates were formed by splinters of preexisting groups. In 2014, Hafiz Saeed Khan and five other leaders in the Pakistani Taliban left the group and formed the Khurasan Governorate.⁹ Many of the Islamic State's recruits in Yemen have come from AQAP.¹⁰ The Islamic State's Caucasus Governorate in Russia is a splinter of al-Qa`ida's Caucasus Emirate.¹¹ The governor of the Caucasus Governorate, Abu Muhammad al-Qadari (aka Rustom Asildarov), previously commanded the Dagestan Governorate, a subset of al-Qa`ida's Caucasus Emirate.¹² The Algeria Governorate was first formed by an AQIM splinter group calling itself Army of the Caliphate, which pledged allegiance in September 2014.¹³ Three more AQIM militants¹⁴ and two unknown terrorists¹⁵ followed suit over the next few months.

Bandwagoning

Factions of *refusenik* jihadist groups supported the Islamic State for a variety of reasons. Some wanted more power or wealth. The founders of the Khurasan Governorate joined the Islamic State because the Taliban had passed them over for leadership roles or censored them for graft.¹⁶ Others were excited by the reestablishment of the caliphate. A senior religious leader in AQAP praised al-Baghdadi for declaring the caliphate over the objections of his superiors.¹⁷

Jihadist groups that join the Islamic State are not only attracted to its uncompromising policies on ideological grounds. They also find these policies useful for distinguishing themselves from jihadist competitors, which can give them an edge in fundraising and recruitment. When the Islamic State's leadership broke with al-Qa`ida, it castigated its former commanders for not declaring all Shi`a infidels and not waging jihad on every Muslim government in the Middle East and North Africa.¹⁸ The Islamic State's governorates in Yemen echoed this hardline message to lure soldiers and leaders away from AQAP because they believed the Islamic State was more aggressive in fighting the war against the Shi`a Houthis¹⁹ and AQAP was not doing enough to kill Shi`a civilians.²⁰ In Afghanistan, the Khurasan Governorate's hardline stance lured some Taliban soldiers and commanders when the rank and file were unhappy that its

e Al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State both use the term governorate to designate subdivisions of their states. For al-Qa`ida, governorates are part of emirates or individual states. For the Islamic State, there are no individual states; all are provinces of the caliphate.

leaders were negotiating for peace with the government in Kabul.^{20f}

Although the Islamic State and al-Qa`ida are equally committed to attacking non-Muslim states, the Islamic State has done more recently to make good on its threats. It was the Islamic State, not al-Qa`ida, that brought down a Russian passenger airliner in response to Russia's escalation in Syria. The Islamic State, not al-Qa`ida, has inspired or directed dozens of lethal attacks in the West recently.

The Islamic State is not ideologically required to war with all nations at once. Earlier in its history, it focused on state-building in Iraq and sponsored few external plots against non-Muslim states, deferring to al-Qa`ida Central for that task. The Islamic State has also acknowledged that it can sign truces with "infidel" states.^g But as exemplified by its targets since its caliphate was declared two years ago, the Islamic State has determined that global jihad is important for alleviating pressure on its government in Syria and Iraq and for increasing recruiting.

The Islamic State's war on the world from its base in Syria and Iraq has invited reprisals against its affiliates. The United States has bombed the Islamic State's affiliates in Libya and Afghanistan several times. France increased its troops in the Lake Chad region

f The contrast also benefits the "moderate" jihadist groups because it helps them to present themselves to the public as the reasonable alternative to the zealots. Thus, al-Qa`ida's leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, has decried the Islamic State's tactical and legal excesses to position his group as the moderate jihadist alternative, and al-Qa`ida affiliates in Syria and Yemen have repeatedly drawn contrasts between their behavior and that of the Islamic State. At least in Syria, the strategy has paid off; many in the mainstream opposition to President Assad view al-Qa`ida's affiliate al-Nusra as a respectable member.

g The Islamic State believes it has more latitude to sign truces with non-Muslim states than Muslim states. "The Rafidah: From Ibn Saba' to the Dajjal," *Dabiq*, issue 13, p. 43.

to support the fight against Boko Haram soon after the group joined the Islamic State.²¹ The reprisals limit the governorates' ability to seize and hold territory, a chief priority of the Islamic State.

Obviously, militant Sunni groups that join the Islamic State have determined that the benefits of joining outweigh the costs. And they are not necessarily wrong. If adopting the Islamic State's hardline stance allows groups to attract enough personnel and resources to defy their many enemies and achieve their objective of state building, then the downsides will have been worth it. The Islamic State's resounding past success in Syria and Iraq and its modest success in Libya demonstrate the rationality of the approach and enhance its attractiveness. But the accelerating collapse of those same statelets at the hands of their many enemies highlights the costs and limits of warring with the world as a political strategy.

Conclusion

Without allies, the Islamic State will find it difficult to hold onto the governments it builds and the territory it captures. When the going got tough for al-Qa`ida, it could rely on friends like the Taliban to protect it, thanks to its decades of jihadist diplomacy and coalition-building. The Islamic State will have no one to turn to when its caliphate collapses unless it mends its ways.

The Islamic State is unlikely to do so. The organization would have to stop demanding that other groups recognize it as the caliphate, which would undermine the Islamic State's claim to the office and dull its edge in recruitment. Instead, the Islamic State will likely double down on its hardline stance, gambling that it can attract followers faster than its enemies can kill, capture, or dissuade them. Although there probably will not be enough recruits to compensate for alienating potential allies, there will still be enough to wage a global terror campaign to remain relevant as the baddest jihadis in town. At least until someone worse comes along. **CTC**

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The Kurdistan Freedom Falcons: A Profile of the Arm's-Length Proxy of the Kurdistan Workers' Party

By Metin Gurcan

Since December 2015 an obscure group called the Kurdistan Freedom Falcons (TAK) has launched a string of attacks against civilians in western Turkish cities. It is best understood as a terrorist proxy of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which has tasked it with launching attacks during periods of mounting Turkish military pressure on Kurdish militants in southeast Turkey over the last decade, all without tarnishing the brand of the PKK. The Kurdish majority "Rojava" cantons in Syria have recently emerged as a key launching pad of operations for the TAK and a center of hardline Kurdish militancy.

Over the past year the Kurdistan Freedom Falcons (Teyrebazen Azadiye Kurdistan, TAK) terrorist group^a has carried out a terror campaign against civilians in Turkey's western metropolitan cities. These include the killing of at least 65 people in two separate suicide vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (SVBIED) attacks in Ankara in February and March and a June 7 attack by a 24-year-old female suicide bomber that claimed the lives of 11 people, including six police officers, in the Vezneciler neighborhood of Istanbul.¹ This article outlines the TAK's genesis, assesses the nature of its relationship with the PKK, examines how its operational base over the border in Syria is impacting its terror campaign, and assesses its likely future evolution in the wake of an attempted military coup in Turkey.

While its ties to the PKK remain opaque and subject to debate² among analysts, the TAK is best understood as a semi-autonomous proxy of the PKK that operates at arm's length. It is seen as advancing the interests of the PKK without jeopardizing improvements to the PKK's international reputation since the participation of the YPG (the Syrian branch of the PKK) in fighting the Islamic State in Sinjar, Kobani, and in areas north of Raqqa. Viewed this way,

a The TAK was designated as a terrorist group by the United States in 2008. ¹US labels Kurdish group as terrorist, CNN, January 11, 2008.

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the TAK campaign in western Turkey is an attempt by the PKK to relieve pressure from a heavy-handed, counter-insurgent campaign by the Turkish military in southeastern Turkey^b and undermine the Erdogan government while maintaining an element of plausible deniability.^c

A Proxy for the PKK

Although there is far from full clarity on its origins, the TAK appears to have emerged after the arrest of PKK founder Abdullah Ocalan in 1999. According to inside accounts,^d senior figures in the PKK, despite declaring a unilateral ceasefire following their leader's arrest, took advantage of a surge of urban recruits to create a semi-autonomous "special forces" unit³ within the PKK dedicated to urban operations. Five years later the TAK publicly split from the PKK, accusing it in its 2004 manifesto of being pacifist.^{4 e} On July 17, 2005, the TAK carried out its first attack, detonating a bomb on a minibus that was carrying tourists in Aydın's Kusadası district. To date, the TAK has carried out more than a dozen attacks.

- b In interviews with pro-PKK elites both in Diyarbakir and Istanbul, the author was told that at the beginning of the clashes, the top brass of the PKK did not expect the Turkish security forces would respond so heavy-handedly. "Divisions intensify among senior PKK figures, reports say," *Daily Sabah*, May 21, 2016.
- c The PKK has notably not claimed a single attack on civilians in western Turkey. For more on the PKK-TAK relationship, see Metin Gurcan, "Was the last week's Ankara attack just the beginning?" *Al-Monitor*, February 19, 2016.
- d A member of the PKK's armed wing told Diyarbakir-based, Kurdish journalist Mahmut Bozarslan that after the arrest of its founder Abdullah Ocalan in 1999, the group saw an influx of recruits from urban areas. When the PKK realized in the early 2000s that its struggle in rural areas was not yielding results, it shifted its operations to cities, according to this account. Many of the new recruits were schooled in military ideology and received technical training. "The military council sent these city-born and grown-up youngsters back to their hometowns with orders to sever all contacts with the organization and its legal and illegal wings," the PKK commander said. "They were to have no contact whatsoever with the organization. They were instructed to follow Ocalan and the organization from the news media and act accordingly. They were given unlimited freedom in taking the initiative." Initially, about 150 new militants were given explosives training and sent back, according to this account. As noted by Bozarslan, in the PKK's process of urbanization, there was a need for a proxy that could inspire both enthusiasm and fear and earn new recruits by creating legends particularly among urbanized Kurdish youth. Furthermore, there was a need for a proxy that the PKK could easily deny having organic connections with. See Mahmut Bozarslan, "Who is TAK and why did it attack Ankara?" *Al-Monitor*, February 29, 2016.
- e On its website, the TAK, which has been banned in Turkey, explains: "We fought against the enemy from inside the PKK for a period of time. We found that the political struggle methods of the Kongra-Gel (Kurdistan People's Congress, KGK) and the PKK's armed wing HPG (People's Defense Force) are weak and produce no viable outcomes. It is because of this that we have separated from the organization and formed TAK." Bozarslan.

Almost the entire Turkish security establishment, however, has dismissed this split as a ruse by the PKK. The widespread perception is that the TAK and the PKK are essentially the same organization. Two of the most consequential leaders of the PKK, Duran Kalkan and Cemil Bayık,^f are considered key figures in the founding of the TAK.⁵ While there is little reliable and objective open-source information about the group, a more nuanced view is one of a distinct organization operating semi-autonomously under the patronage but not full control of the PKK. It should be pointed out the PKK has always had dovish and hawkish wings, with the TAK believed to get its strategic marching orders from the latter.⁶

There is strong circumstantial evidence for this. Over the last decade there has been a clear correlation between the timing of attacks by the TAK in the larger cities of western Turkey and Turkish military pressure against the PKK in southeast Turkey. This suggests the PKK has tasked the TAK with transferring the conflict to western Turkey to relieve pressure in its heartlands and deter the Turkish military from intensifying counter-insurgency operations. Both the 2005 and 2010 waves of attacks by the TAK followed a period of intensifying pressure on the PKK in southeast Turkey (see appendix). The July 17, 2005, bombing of a tourist minibus in Aydin was carried out at a time of growing clashes in southeast Turkey.⁸ The June 22, 2010, military bus bombing^h in Istanbul followed just two days after a promise by then Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan to make the PKK “drown in their own blood” following PKK attacks that killed a dozen Turkish soldiers in the country’s southeast.⁷

After a four-year interval in which no attacks were claimed by the TAK, the most recent wave of TAK attacks followed the collapse of the peace process in July 2015 and the substantial escalation of conflict between the Turkish state and the PKK.⁸ In claiming responsibility for the attack on Sabiha Gökçen airport on December 23, 2015,ⁱ the opening attack in the most recent wave, the TAK made clear it was retaliating for Turkish military operations in Kurdish populated cities in the southeast.⁹ “We won’t be responsible for the safety of international airlines that fly to Turkey or for foreign tourists,” the group warned.¹⁰ Tellingly, the biographies¹¹ of the TAK attackers indicate that all were ethnically and politically awakened by pro-PKK organizations; were indoctrinated, supported, and trained by the PKK; and served within the ranks of the group for some time.

f With regard to the roles of Cemil Bayık and Duran Kalkan, the two heavyweights within the PKK, in the foundation of the TAK, it is evident that these two and some other high-profile individuals within the PKK encouraged and actively supported the TAK’s birth. It is incorrect, however, to suggest that these two could have deterministically influenced the evolution of the TAK or fully control the TAK at the moment. Suat Oren, “Nedir bu TAK?” *GUSAM Report*, March 16, 2016.

g In 2005, the author served as the Turkish Special Forces team commander in the southeast and took part in many operations. In the period of May to June 2005 Turkish security forces conducted large-scale rural operations.

h Between April and June 2010, there were a number of operations by Turkish forces in the rural areas around Semdinli. The intensity of these operations cut the connection of PKK units with the ones in northern Iraq and may have contributed to the decision by the TAK to carry out the June 2010 Istanbul bombing.

i December 2015 marked the expansion of the Turkish security forces’ urban operations from Silopi to Cizre, Lice and Sur province of Diyarbakir in the southeast.

It should also be pointed out that the TAK is not the only proxy the PKK has used. Another is the Apoist Youngsters Revenge Brigade (AGIT), which since June 2015 has taken responsibility for carrying out street protests and setting vehicles on fire in some districts of Istanbul.¹²

Turkish security officials assess the TAK as semi-autonomous in the sense that it has full authority to plan and carry out an attack without informing the PKK’s commanding echelons.¹³ Once the PKK has conveyed the need for attacks, the TAK can choose what, when, and how to attack without interference from PKK’s hierarchical structures. The PKK supports the TAK ideologically and provides it with personnel, logistics, financing, and overall strategic direction, but PKK leaders only learn about outcomes from TV reports. This freedom of action granted to a lower-level leadership makes its operations unpredictable and more difficult for security forces to track TAK members down and prevent attacks.¹⁴

By creating the TAK, PKK leaders have tried to have their cake and eat it, too, sometimes condemning the TAK as outside the realm of the Kurdish armed political movement¹⁵ and sometimes speaking sympathetically about the group.^j The PKK response to TAK attacks can be summarized thus: “We disapprove of these attacks, but there’s nothing we can do to stop the TAK run by those angry Kurdish youngsters.”^k

But the PKK is fully aware the Turkish intelligence establishment sees them as having significant influence over the TAK. In a strategic sense, the TAK strengthens the PKK’s position vis-à-vis Ankara by allowing it to assert that if it does not come to terms with the PKK, the PKK will not restrain rogue organizations like the TAK.

The TAK’s attacks over the last decade shed light on its membership and targeting priorities. It is clear the group is an urban organization made up mostly of young recruits. The oldest age of the suicide bombers in the attacks listed is under 30, with the average age around 24 or 25. The young age of the attackers is consistent with the PKK’s growing recruitment of youth.¹⁶ When the types of attacks and their victims are analyzed (see appendix), it suggests that the TAK does not differentiate between military and civilian targets with its terror campaign and that it prefers to carry out suicide bombings.

Growing Links to the Rojava

The third wave of attacks by the TAK has seen a growing operational connection to the Kurdish Rojava, with the attacks being planned and prepared in the Kurdish majority cantons in northern Syria. The perpetrators involved in the February 17¹⁷ and March 13¹⁸ An-

j In an interview with the BBC in northern Iraq in April senior PKK leader Cemil Bayık stated that while the PKK “had nothing to do” with the TAK bombings in western cities and was against the killing of civilians. But given the pain being inflicted on Kurds in southeast Turkey, he added, “If TAK takes action under these conditions people will be sympathetic.” Ian Pannell, “Kurdish PKK warns Turkey of long fight for freedom,” BBC, April 25, 2016.

k See, for example, the remarks of high-profile PKK figures such as Murat Karayılan, Cm’l Bayık, and Duran Kalkan. “TAK’ın eylemlerini onaylamıyoruz, sakıncalı görüyoruz,” T24 News Agency, September 24, 2011.



Aftermath of TAK bombing of military shuttle bus service in Ankara, Turkey, in February (Getty)

kara attacks as well as the April 27 Bursa¹ attacks received military training in camps in northern Syria for lengths of time spanning eight months to two years and participated in clashes in that area. For instance, Abdulbaki Somer, the perpetrator of the February 17 Ankara attack, spent 10 years in northern Iraq and Turkey before joining the TAK in 2014. Later that year he moved to northern Syria and joined the YPG for a year and a half. He then assumed the identity of Syrian refugee Salih Neccar and “legally” entered Turkey in July 2015, thus erasing his incriminating record in Turkey and arming himself with a new identity. After returning to Turkey he kept a low profile and did not even contact members of his own family. Cagla Demir, the female suicide bomber who carried out the March 13 Ankara attack, and Eser Cali, the female suicide bomber who carried out the April 27 Bursa attack, each spent more than six months in Syria.¹⁹

The emergence of the Rojava as a growing military training and logistical support base for the TAK has coincided with the Kurdish majority cantons of northern Syria becoming a new center of Kurdish national liberation efforts. For years the PKK’s military command in Iraq’s Qandil Mountains has dominated the PKK, but that is now changing. The YPG’s (i.e. PKK’s) defense of Kobani and its success in pushing the Islamic State back toward Raqqa have strengthened the capabilities and confidence of Kurdish fighters in Syria and have allowed the region to develop into a safe haven for the PKK. The resulting Turkish military operations against the YPG

in the Rojava has only intensified the TAK’s determination to use the Rojava as a springboard for attacks inside Turkey and increased support for such attacks among the local population.^m

Conclusion

The future evolution of the TAK will depend on two factors. The first is whether Ankara will sustain its will and material capacity to continue large-scale counterterrorism operations in Turkey’s south-east. The second is the increasingly visible power shift within the Kurdish struggle from Qandil to Rojavaⁿ and whether Ankara will maintain its stern attitude toward Kurdish fighters in the Rojava.

The growing relevance of the Rojava to the Kurdish resistance movement also raises the prospect of further cracks emerging within the PKK. As outlined above, there are fundamental differences between the two schools of strategic vision between the ‘integrationist doves’ seeking reconciliation on the one hand and the ‘revolutionary hawks’ seeking continued armed struggle on the other. In principle, the doves are ready to restart the stalled peace process with Ankara and are open to begin a conversation that has Rojava as an item on the agenda. On the other hand, the hawks feel negotiations with Ankara would slow the Rojava revolution. By the same token, they interpret the ‘Rojava experience’ as its current state to be far beyond a matter of bargaining between Ankara and Qandil,

¹ The father of Eser Cali, the female suicide bomber of the Bursa attack, stated his daughter has been missing for almost four years. “Bursadaki canli bombanin babasi konustu,” *Yeni Safak*, May 2, 2016. Security sources emphasized to the author that she spent at least six months in an YPG camp in northern Syria for bomb training. Author interview, Turkish security source, 2016.

^m For example, Turkey shelled YPG positions in northern Syria and launched airstrikes against the PKK in Iraq after the TAK’s February 17, 2016, bombing in Ankara. See “Turkey hits Kurdish targets after Ankara bombing,” *Al-Jazeera*, February 19, 2016. For more on these dynamics, see “Bombaciyi YPG egitmis,” *Gazetevatan*, March 16, 2016.

ⁿ The new Kurdish power center in the Rojava is somewhat influenced by Shiites and Alawites, friendly to Russia, warm with Iran, and fervently anti-Islamic State.

and as such meeting with Ankara is tantamount to treason.⁹ The fact the TAK use northern Syria as a base of operations suggests the more hawkish view, and favoring confrontation with Turkey tends to dominate in the Rojava. This raises a question—if another peace process is initiated between Ankara and Qandil, will the TAK operatives based in northern Syria surrender to the authority of PKK

- o An unnamed, high-profile PYD official told the author on June 9 in Gaziantep that the hawk faction predominantly holds the view that any type of integrationist negotiations is ground for treason against the cause.

leaders in Qandil?

The recent failed coup in Turkey has thrown up more uncertainty about the future course of confrontation between the PKK and the Turkish state. It raises the possibility that armed with emergency powers, Ankara will take an even harder line toward the Kurds, leading to the TAK launching another wave of attacks in western Turkey. So far, however, there has been no evidence of the Turkish military and security services, preoccupied as they are with the fallout from the failed coup, intensifying operations against the PKK in the southeast of Turkey. **CTC**

Appendix: Timeline of TAK Terror²⁰

First Wave

July 17, 2005: An explosion on a minibus that was carrying tourists in Aydın's Kusadası district and a bomb left in a trash can in İzmir's Çesme district a week later injures 34, while killing five tourists and a police officer.

May 23, 2007: An explosion in the Ulus Anafartalar Bazaar in Ankara kills 7 and injures 102.

June 10, 2007: An explosion injures 31 in Istanbul's Bakırköy district.

October 31, 2007: A suicide attack on a police station in Taksim in Istanbul injures 32.

Second Wave

June 22, 2010: A military bus bombing in Halkali district of Istanbul kills 3.

October 31, 2010: A suicide bombing at Taksim Square in Istanbul injures 32 people.

August 28, 2011: Six tourists are injured in explosions on public beaches in Kemer and at Konyaaltı in Antalya.

September 20, 2011: Three people are killed and 34 injured when a bomb explodes in Ankara's Kızılay.

Third Wave

December 23, 2015: A member of the cleaning staff at Sabiha Gökçen airport in Istanbul is killed as the result of a long-distance mortar attack.

February 17, 2016: 29 people are killed after a suicide bombing with VBIED that is directed at a military shuttle service on Ankara's Merasim Street.

March 13, 2016: 37 are killed and 125 injured as the result of a suicide bombing with VBIED in Ankara's Güvenpark.

April 27, 2016: A female suicide bomber kills herself and 13 are injured in a suicide attack at Bursa's historical Grand Mosque.

June 7, 2016: A female suicide bomber kills 11 including 6 police officers in Vezneciler neighborhood of Istanbul.

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