

# The Islamic State in Southern Syria

By Aaron Y. Zelin and Oula A. Alrifai

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

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

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

also for Jordan and perhaps Israel.

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

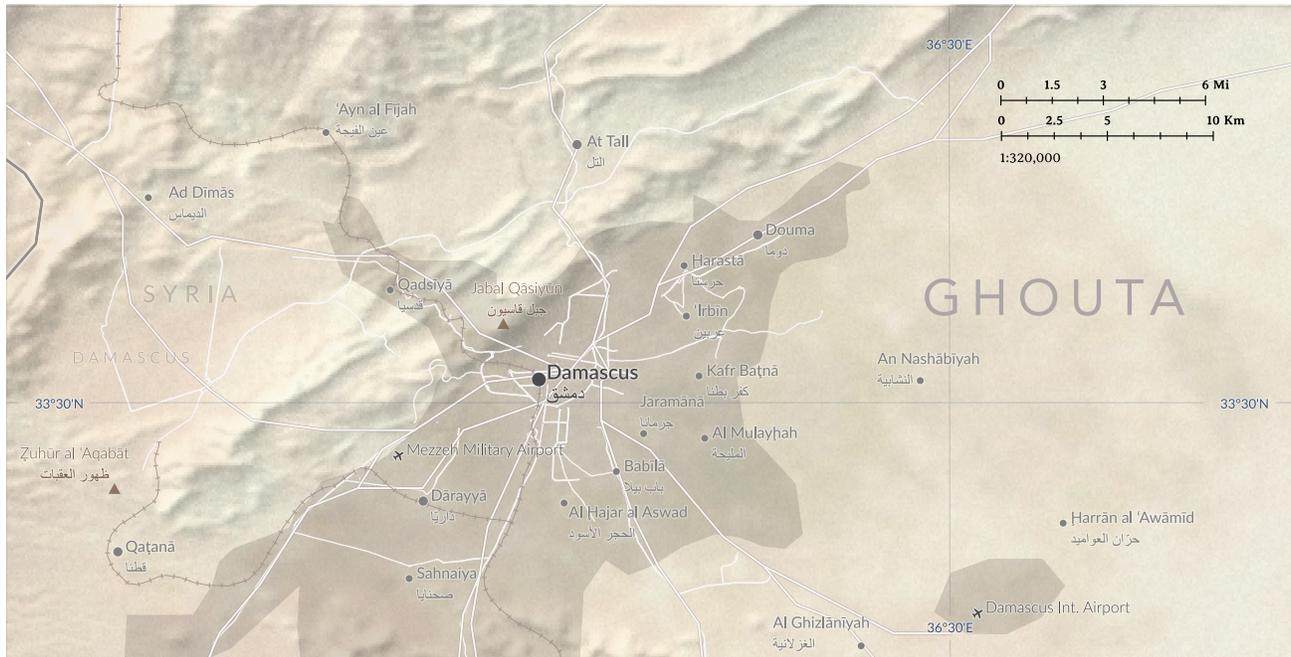
## Al-Zarqawi's Facilitation Network

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

The network in Damascus also relied on locals, with the town of al-Hajr al-Aswad and its adjacent al-Yarmuk Refugee Camp just a few kilometers south of the city providing a backdrop for the local growth in Salafi ideas in the late 1990s. One of al-Zarqawi's key operatives there was Shaker al-Absi, who had been based there since 1996. He had been involved with the network that planned and executed the attack on American USAID worker Laurence Foley in Amman, Jordan in 2002 and he would eventually become the leader of Fatah al-Islam in Lebanon in 2006 and 2007.<sup>5</sup> To illustrate the importance of this base, it was reported that allegedly up to 1,000 Palestinians in al-Yarmuk Refugee Camp signed up to fight in Iraq in 2003.<sup>6</sup> A lot of the facilitation and logistics for this took place in mosques in the Damascus area, with imams, such as Mohammed Majid (better known as Mullah Fuad), exhorting fighters awaiting approval to continue their journey to Iraq.<sup>7</sup>

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

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*Damascus and environs*

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

### First Attempt: Jul. 2013–Jun. 2014

During the first few months after the split with Jabhat al-Nusra, the Islamic State built up its sleeper cell networks before kicking off overt operations. The first signs of activity came when pictures surfaced in July 2013 showing its Sheikh Abu Musab al-Zarqawi military training camp in Ghouta.<sup>10</sup> It also set up a training camp for “cubs” (a euphemism for child soldiers) in mid-October 2013.<sup>11</sup> Related, the Islamic State joined military operations with other insurgent factions in eastern Ghouta beginning in late-August 2013 as part of the *Burkam al-Tha'ir* (The Volcano of Revenge) campaign, in response to the al-Assad regime's sarin gas attack.<sup>12</sup>

Starting in mid-September 2013, Islamic State representatives also participated in a massive *dawa* (outreach and missionary activities) campaign to ingratiate itself with the local population. It held forums mainly directed at children and provided them with presents, with one such forum being held in al-Yarmuk Refugee Camp in late June 2014.<sup>13</sup> Another aspect of the Islamic State's *dawa* campaign was distribution of religious literature including a prayer guide for the sick in Damascus in September 2013.<sup>a</sup> Moreover, it put up *dawa* billboards and visited the sick in eastern Ghouta, provided

food aid in al-Zabadani, and conducted Qur'an classes for children in southern Damascus.<sup>14</sup>

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

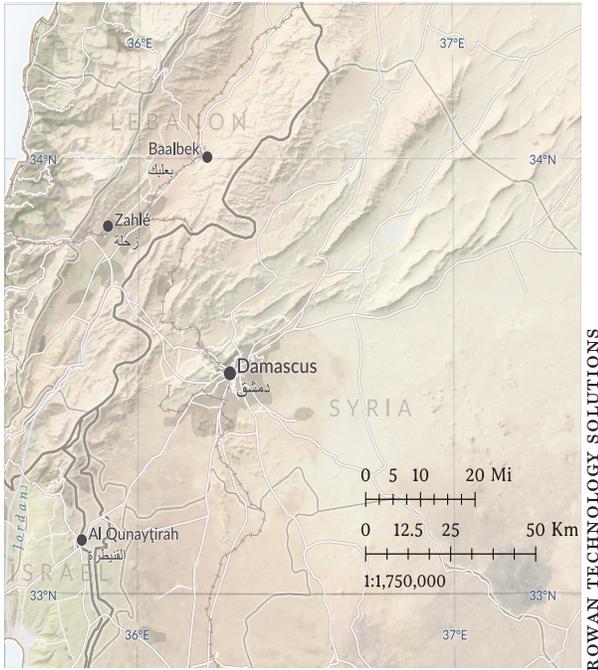
After the Islamic State's local leaders became comfortable in the local rebel milieu, they began to move against their enemies. Partly this was thanks to new pledges of allegiance, such as the one from Katibat Dhu al-Nurayn of Alwiyat al-Habib al-Mustafa in late January 2014.<sup>16</sup> Tensions between the Islamic State and other factions in the south began to grow at about the same time as such issues began springing up in northern Syria. For instance, on February 20, 2014, the Islamic State reported on fighting west of al-Yarmuk Refugee Camp in Babbila, in which its forces pushed out the Free Syrian Army (FSA).<sup>17</sup>

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

### Rebuilding the Network: Dec. 2014–Apr. 2015

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

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

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

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

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

Farther to the west, the Islamic State also activated a cell it had previously cultivated in al-Qunaytirah governorate called Jaysh al-Jihad (JJ). The group comprised up to 300 fighters drawn from locals who had previously fought with Saraya Jihad, Jund al-Islam, Mujahidin al-Sham, and HASI, and who had allegedly joined the Islamic State in January 2015.<sup>31</sup> On April 27, the Islamic State launched a surprise attack on Ahrar Nawa, a rebel group backed by the Military Operations Command (MOC) that was jointly funded by the United States, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia. The attack was an initial success. JJ captured 20 opposing fighters, and set up checkpoints in al-Qahtaniya, al-Hamidiya, al-Adnaniya, and al-Samdaniyah.<sup>32</sup> Before JJ could consolidate its gains, rebels and

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

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

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

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

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

The Islamic State’s most important accomplishment during this period was its takeover of al-Yarmuk Refugee Camp in early April 2015.<sup>35</sup> Islamic State fighters defeated the Hamas-front group Aknaf Bayt al-Maqdis. According to the Syrian journalist Musa Alomar, the battle started when the Islamic State allegedly assassinated a Hamas leader named Yahya Hourani (Abu Suhayb) and deployed 1,000 fighters to take over the key locales in the camp.<sup>36</sup> Alomar also reported that Jabhat al-Nusra, which had a presence in the camp, remained neutral. After taking over the area, the Islamic State released video of its fighters praying in the Palestine Mosque and an interview with a local man who explained how Islamic State representatives had returned goods that Hamas and Aknaf Bayt al-Maqdis had stolen as part of an attempt to show how the Islamic State would provide justice now that it was in charge.<sup>37</sup>

### Consolidation and Expansion: May–Aug. 2015

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

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

At this point it became clear that the Islamic State was angling to isolate Damascus. It also was able to take over half of al-Qadam neighborhood, west of al-Hajr al-Aswad, by the end of August 2015.<sup>39</sup> It then instituted a blockade on the rest of the neighborhood to isolate ASIU.<sup>40</sup> If the Islamic State is able to control the entire area it might be able to cut off the regime’s supply line along the M5 highway between Damascus and Dar’a. Additionally, the Islamic State began clashes in Jobar and was also fighting Katibat Ababil Houran and Katibat Sham al-Rasul south of Damascus in al-Tada-

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Recent Developments: Sep.–Dec. 2015

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

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

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

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residents, and did construction work in rural areas.<sup>60</sup>

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

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

## Conclusion

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

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

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

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

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

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

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