

## The Saudi Foreign Fighter Presence in Syria

By Aaron Y. Zelin

THE FOREIGN FIGHTER trend currently developing in Syria is unprecedented both due to the quantity of fighters as well as the number of foreign nationals involved. For Saudi foreign fighters, this trend is not new. Saudis have been involved in foreign fighting since the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan in the 1980s. They played one of the most prominent roles in that war, as well as in subsequent conflicts in Chechnya, Bosnia, Afghanistan in the 1990s, Afghanistan post-9/11, and Iraq. Similarly, Saudis are one of the leading foreign national groups in Syria in terms of the total number of individuals fighting, and also among those who have died.

This article offers a brief history of Saudi involvement in past jihadist conflicts, the current statistics on how many Saudis have traveled to Syria, and highlights cases of important Saudis who have joined the war. The article finds that similar to past foreign fighter mobilizations, the Saudis have been one of the largest contingents, with some individuals taking important positions on the ground as clerics or leaders. This development could have far reaching implications. Saudi foreign fighters who join jihadist groups such as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) or al-Qa`ida's Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) will gain tactical experience and further ideological indoctrination in Syria. Once their "tour" in Syria ends, there is a risk that these fighters could adopt al-Qa`ida's targeting patterns and conduct attacks against the Saudi government or Western interests.

### From Khurasan to al-Sham

Scholars consider the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan in the 1980s as the first contemporary case of the modern foreign fighter phenomenon in the context of Sunni militancy. Due to the fact that this influx was, at the time, a new development, researchers did not track the flow of foreigners as they have for Iraq or Syria in the past decade. It should be noted, however, that the foreign fighter trend in the 1980s was far different than now; many who went

in the 1980s were more "tourists" than actual fighters.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, a direct comparison to more recent conflicts may be informative in terms of observing how many left for each warzone, but it does not account for the fact that the situations are from a different time period and context.

Nevertheless, through archival, primary source, and field research, Norwegian academic Thomas Hegghammer believes that "a majority of Arab Afghans were from Saudi Arabia" from 1979-1992.<sup>2</sup> This trend would continue in Chechnya in the 1990s, when the top leaders among the foreign fighters embedded in the insurgency against Russia were from Saudi Arabia—with the most notable being Samir bin Salih bin `Abdullah al-Suwaylim, better known as Umar ibn al-Khattab.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, according to 51 biographies of Arab volunteers to Chechnya that analyst Murad Batal al-Shishani collated, Saudis accounted for 59% of that dataset.<sup>4</sup> In Bosnia, this tendency remained, although not nearly as prevalent. According to Bosnian government intelligence records on the conflict, the Saudis were once again the largest contingent, reportedly making up 25% of the foreign fighters.<sup>5</sup>

Even in the post-9/11 conflicts, Saudis have been the top foreign national group involved in the more significant jihadist wars. In Iraq, for example, Evan

1 Thomas Hegghammer, *Jihad in Saudi Arabia: Violence and Pan-Islamism since 1979* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 47. Tourists can have a number of different meanings in this context. It could either represent those going for thrill and adventure, or could highlight individuals who only go to the front lines to say they have gone, but never actually fight.

2 "Arab Afghan" is a moniker that has been used to describe the contingent of individuals who traveled to Pakistan to fight in Afghanistan against the Soviet Union. See Thomas Hegghammer, "The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters: Islam and the Globalization of Jihad," *International Security* 35:3 (2010/11): p. 71.

3 Cerwyn Moore and Paul Tumelty, "Foreign Fighters and the Case of Chechnya: A Critical Assessment," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 31:5 (2008): p. 428.

4 Murad Batal al-Shishani, *The Rise and Fall of Arab Fighters in Chechnya* (Washington, D.C.: The Jamestown Foundation, 2006), p. 17.

5 These documents were obtained from Bosnian government records by J.M. Berger for research on the documentary *Sarajevo Ricochet* (Febrius Film, 2010). Berger e-mailed this author a picture of a pie chart breakdown on June 3, 2013.

Kohlmann documented the foreigners killed fighting in the insurgency from June 2003 to June 2005. Kohlmann concluded that 55% of those killed were Saudi, with the next highest being Syrians at 12.7%.<sup>6</sup> In October 2007, this would later be affirmed when the U.S. military found a cache of documents in Sinjar from al-Qa`ida in Iraq identifying those who entered Iraq from August 2006 to August 2007. Saudis were the highest percentage, comprising 41% of the individuals where records noted their nationality.<sup>7</sup> This trend has continued in the current conflict in Syria.

#### Current Estimates

In late March 2014, a Saudi official stated that 1,200 Saudis have traveled to fight the Bashar al-Assad regime, placing Saudis at the top of the list of foreign nationals in Syria.<sup>8</sup> More recently, the Saudi Interior Ministry said that 25% of those who had gone have since returned.<sup>9</sup> Based on a database maintained by this author since the fall of 2011 on foreign jihadist "martyrdom" notices, exactly 300 Saudis have died in Syria as of late February 2014, which also is the highest number of fatalities among foreign nationals.<sup>10</sup> This tentatively suggests that there could be close to 600 Saudis in Syria, Iraq (the ISIL uses individuals on both sides of the border) or elsewhere abroad.<sup>11</sup>

While Saudis might currently be the highest foreign national group that has traveled to Syria, this only came to pass around the summer of 2013.<sup>12</sup> In the early days of the conflict, foreign fighters from Syria's neighboring countries (Lebanese, Iraqis, Palestinians, and Jordanians), many of whom previously fought U.S. forces in Iraq, were the first to arrive.<sup>13</sup> A year later, Saudis began increasing in number, although the largest contingents based on percentage were from Libya and Tunisia, two of the countries that successfully deposed their leaders during the original wave of uprisings in 2011. Many went as "tourists" to continue riding the wave of the "Arab Spring," while others went to assist the Syrian rebels militarily.<sup>14</sup> A number of fighters joined more radical forces such as JN and other smaller jihadist factions.<sup>15</sup>

What led to the influx of Saudi foreign fighters? While ease of travel certainly accounts for a portion of the rise in the unprecedented numbers of foreign fighters, it is not the main factor in the Saudi case.<sup>16</sup> First, travel limitations have never been an issue for Saudis, as they have been heavily involved in all prior large-scale jihadist foreign fighter mobilizations. Second, if travel was the main factor, then one would have expected to see a large-scale Saudi mobilization earlier in the conflict.

Instead, the public entrance of Lebanese Hizb Allah into the conflict on the side of the al-Assad regime during the battle of Qusayr in late May 2013 precipitated the sudden increase in Saudi foreign fighters in Syria.<sup>17</sup> Less than a week later, in response, mainstream clerics such as Yusuf al-Qaradawi called upon Sunni Muslims to go fight in Syria: "anyone

### **"Exactly 300 Saudis have died in Syria as of late February 2014, which also is the highest number of fatalities among foreign nationals."**

who has the ability, who is trained to fight...has to go; I call on Muslims to go and support their brothers in Syria."<sup>18</sup> This statement was later praised by Saudi Arabia's Grand Mufti Abdul Aziz al-Shaykh.<sup>19</sup> Two weeks after al-Qaradawi's announcement, Saud al-Shuraym, a Saudi cleric at the Grand Mosque in Mecca, proclaimed that Sunni Muslims had a duty to support the Syrian rebels "by all means."<sup>20</sup> Before Qusayr, Saudi religious scholars supported helping the Syrian rebels through financial means, but were not overt in terms of foreign fighting. Hizb Allah's admission of joining the conflict, the sectarianism that is intertwined in Saudi Arabia's state religion and education,<sup>21</sup> the clerical framing of the conflict as *wajib* (duty), campaigns of support for the rebels, as well as the summer months coinciding with the Muslim holy month of Ramadan all helped catalyze efforts to send Saudi fighters to Syria.

6 Evan Kohlmann, "Foreign Fighters Reported Killed in Iraq: June 2003-June 2005," *Global Terror Alert*, June 2005.

7 Brian Fishman and Joseph Felner, *Al-Qa`ida's Foreign Fighters in Iraq: A First Look at the Sinjar Records* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2008).

8 It is difficult to acquire accurate data from the Tunisian, Jordanian, or Lebanese governments on how many of its citizens have gone to Syria, but based on credible estimates they are just below the numbers from Saudi Arabia. See Peter Bergen, "Why the Saudis Unfriended the U.S.," CNN, March 26, 2014.

9 Fahd al-Dhiyabi, "Saudi Interior Ministry Says 25 Percent of Fighters in Syria Have Returned," *Asharq Alawsat*, March 24, 2014.

10 "Jihadi Martyr Notices," author's personal database, last updated February 25, 2014.

11 Although jihadists have announced 300 martyrdom notices, this number does not include Saudis who died fighting with non-jihadist units in Syria nor does it provide information on unannounced deaths.

12 Based on open source data, the second highest foreign nationals are Jordanians, with an estimated 1,000 Jordanians according to Abu Sayyaf, the top Jordanian Salafist leader in the country. It is possible that higher numbers of Lebanese and Iraqis have gone, but there is not much credible data on either cases due to a lack of government estimates. See "Alf Anasir min al-Tayyar al-Salafi al-Jihadi Bi-l-Urdun yuqatilun fi Suriyya," *al-Quds al-Arabi*, October 19, 2013.

13 Aaron Y. Zelin, "Foreign Fighters Trickle into the Syrian Rebellion," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, June 11, 2012.

14 Aaron Y. Zelin, Evan F. Kohlmann, and Laith al-Khoury, "Convoy of Martyrs in the Levant: A Joint Study Charting the Evolving Role of Sunni Foreign Fighters in the Armed Uprising Against the Assad Regime in Syria," *Jihadology.net* and *Flashpoint Global Partners*, June 2013.

15 Ibid.

16 Thomas Hegghammer, "Syria's Foreign Fighters," *Foreign Policy*, December 9, 2013.

17 Hassan Nasrallah, "Kalimah fi Eid al-Muqawama wa-l-Tahrir," *al-Manar*, May 25, 2013.

18 Yusuf al-Qaradawi, "Khutbah al-Jumu'ah," May 31, 2013.

19 "Mufti al-Sa'udiyya yushid Bi-muwaqf al-Qaradhawi dhid Iran wa-Hizb Allah," *al-Arabiya*, June 6, 2013.

20 "Al-Shuraym yada'u Li-da'im thuar Suriyya wa-mudhaharah Bi-Misr," *al-Jazira*, June 14, 2013.

21 Nona Shea et al., "Saudi Arabia's Curriculum of Intolerance," *Freedom House*, 2006.

### From Where Do the Saudis Hail?

While it is difficult to determine specifics on the origins of all Saudi foreign fighters, the 300 jihadist death notices provide some insights considering that 203 of them detail the individual's origination city in Saudi Arabia.<sup>22</sup> The 203 deceased came from 12 of Saudi Arabia's 13 *minatiq* (regions). Only Jizan, which is the smallest region in Saudi Arabia, is not represented.<sup>23</sup> While one cannot draw too many conclusions from incomplete data, the strongest recruitment networks appear to be based in the center of the country or on the coasts.<sup>24</sup> This could be because the center of the country is more conservative overall, while all the areas have some of the highest population densities in Saudi Arabia.

Since quantitative analysis regarding the foreign fighter phenomenon only provides one aspect of detail, reviewing some cases of important individuals from Saudi Arabia who have joined the Syrian rebels is informative.

### Cases

#### Dr. `Abd Allah bin Muhammad al-Muhaysini

One of the most influential and well-known figures among Saudi foreign fighters in Syria is Dr. `Abd Allah bin Muhammad bin Sulayman al-Muhaysini. According to al-Muhaysini's autobiography, he was born in Buraydah (Qassim region) in north-central Saudi Arabia. He became a *hafiz* (one who has memorized the entire Qur'an) by the age of 15. For his bachelors studies, he majored in Shari`a at the University of Umm al-Qura in Mecca. He later completed his master's and doctorate in comparative *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) at al-Imam Muhammad ibn Saud Islamic University in Riyadh, writing his dissertation on legal provisions affecting war refugees in Islamic *fiqh*. He studied under a number of

shaykhs, including the controversial Shaykh Sulayman al-Ulwan who was arrested by Saudi authorities in 2004 for supporting al-Qa`ida. After his studies, al-Muhaysini was an imam and *da`iya* (missionary) at the Qatar mosque in Mecca, Jami` al-Thani.<sup>25</sup>

Since the Syrian uprising became a civil war, al-Muhaysini has been involved with fundraising to help the rebels procure weapons as well as assisting refugees.<sup>26</sup> Unlike many other high-profile clerics from the Gulf, al-Muhaysini—instead of just traveling to the frontlines for photo opportunities—moved to Syria around 2013. Al-Muhaysini claims no affiliation with any particular group, but he has been seen with Umar al-Shishani, who is now a leader in the ISIL, and Abu al-Walid al-Muhajir of JN.<sup>27</sup> Since the infighting between the ISIL and JN began in January 2014, al-Muhaysini has distanced himself from the ISIL.<sup>28</sup>

While al-Muhaysini has been a presence on social media and has become an important personality, he also is an actual player on the ground in Syria.<sup>29</sup> For one, he has fought and been injured in battle.<sup>30</sup> More importantly, he set up the Da`wa al-Jihad Center in December 2013, which has been involved with Islamic lessons, educating children, and aid.<sup>31</sup> He also set up the al-Faruq training camp in March 2014, potentially as a reference to the infamous one in Afghanistan pre-9/11.<sup>32</sup> Additionally, al-Muhaysini

has been vocal in attempting to broker peace between the ISIL and other rebel factions. Most notably, in late January 2014, al-Muhaysini tried to settle the disputes through *Mubadarat al-Umma* (the Initiative of the Umma).<sup>33</sup> Although the initiative failed because the ISIL did not participate, it highlighted al-Muhaysini's stature since all of the other key groups cooperated.<sup>34</sup>

#### `Abd al-Muhsin `Abd Allah Ibrahim al-Sharikh (Sanafi al-Nasr)

Unlike al-Muhaysini, `Abd al-Muhsin `Abd Allah Ibrahim al-Sharikh (also known by his online moniker Sanafi al-Nasr/@Snafialnasr) was not as well known publicly prior to his "reported" death in Syria on March 21, 2014.<sup>35</sup> On April 18, al-Sharikh said that he had been in a coma since March, and that JN claimed he was dead so that he could recover from injuries sustained while fighting.<sup>36</sup> Al-Sharikh is allegedly an important player within al-Qa`ida and tasked as being the head of its "Victory Committee" in Syria.<sup>37</sup> He is third cousins with Usama bin Ladin, and two of his brothers were detained at Guantanamo Bay, but have since been released.<sup>38</sup> He fought in other jihadist battlefronts from Chechnya to Afghanistan to Pakistan.<sup>39</sup> Before arriving in Syria, he was based in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region.<sup>40</sup>

In 2009, al-Sharikh was placed on Saudi Arabia's 85 "most wanted" list.<sup>41</sup>

tus/443626270199644160; Dr. `Abd Allah Muhammad

al-Muhaysini, "Mu'askr al-Faruq," March 17, 2014, available at [www.justpaste.it/erx4](http://www.justpaste.it/erx4). Al-Muhaysini announced the establishment of the al-Faruq camp on March 17, 2014, and called for people to join for training.

33 Dr. `Abd Allah Muhammad al-Muhaysini, "Mubadarah al-Ummah," Mubadarah al-Ummah Facebook page, January 23, 2014, available at [www.facebook.com/mobadratalomaa/posts/694970217214186](http://www.facebook.com/mobadratalomaa/posts/694970217214186).

34 Al-Muhaysini, "Ila hal ballaghat: 'an mubadarah al-ummah."

35 For details, see [www.twitter.com/alMutasim007/status/447103519695200256](http://www.twitter.com/alMutasim007/status/447103519695200256).

36 See his statement posted at [www.twitter.com/Snafi-alnasr/status/457266856794292225](http://www.twitter.com/Snafi-alnasr/status/457266856794292225).

37 Thomas Joscelyn, "Head of al Qaeda 'Victory Committee' in Syria," *The Long War Journal*, March 6, 2014.

38 Ibid.

39 For details, see [www.twitter.com/1\\_K\\_Z/status/447105984771919872](http://www.twitter.com/1_K_Z/status/447105984771919872).

40 Eric Schmitt, "Qaeda Militants Seek Syria Base, U.S. Officials Say," *New York Times*, March 25, 2014.

41 "Qa'ima al-Matlubin 85," Wizara al-Dakhiliyya,

22 "Jihadi Martyr Notices."

23 This could be due to the small sample size of individuals whose origins are known.

24 Since a number of death notices mention only the region an individual is from and not a city, this article identifies only the region. The following is a list of regions in Saudi Arabia along with the corresponding number of dead jihadists in Syria from those regions: Riyadh: 62; Qassim: 40; Makka: 27; Eastern Region: 22; Tabuk: 11; Jawf: 10; Najran: 9; Medina: 7; Northern Borders: 6; Asir: 4; Ha'il: 4; Bahah: 1.

25 Dr. `Abd Allah Muhammad al-Muhaysini, "Sirah al-dhatiyya," undated, available at [www.mhesne.com](http://www.mhesne.com).

26 Asher Berman, "Saudi Preacher Relocates to Syria," Syria Survey blog, November 17, 2013.

27 See the following Twitter posts at [www.twitter.com/mhesne/status/395283462854569984](http://www.twitter.com/mhesne/status/395283462854569984) and [www.twitter.com/mhesne/status/395984154942504960](http://www.twitter.com/mhesne/status/395984154942504960).

28 Dr. `Abd Allah Muhammad al-Muhaysini, "Ila hal ballaghat: 'an mubadarah al-ummah," February 2, 2014, available at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=sO8\\_Tm\\_Mbyg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sO8_Tm_Mbyg).

29 Miriam Berger, "How One Jihadi in Syria Became a Twitter Sensation," *Buzzfeed*, April 1, 2014.

30 For details, see the YouTube video located at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=WUUY1ckE4qM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WUUY1ckE4qM).

31 See, for example, the following posts: [www.twitter.com/mhesne/status/408331097773473792](http://www.twitter.com/mhesne/status/408331097773473792), [www.youtube.com/watch?v=Swc3i5H5p5k&feature=youtu.be](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Swc3i5H5p5k&feature=youtu.be), and [www.twitter.com/mhesne/status/427549360260648960](http://www.twitter.com/mhesne/status/427549360260648960).

32 See, for example, [www.twitter.com/mhesne/sta](http://www.twitter.com/mhesne/sta)

His listing states that he was born in 1985 and is from Shaqraa in central Saudi Arabia. In September 2011, he wrote for al-Qa`ida's *Vanguards of Khurasan* magazine about Saudi female prisoners.<sup>42</sup> He has kept a low profile during the infighting between the ISIL and the rebels, although he is firmly on JN's and Ahrar al-Sham's side.<sup>43</sup> Prior to the death of a key al-Qa`ida leader in Syria, Abu Khalid al-Suri, who was Ayman al-Zawahiri's emissary for resolving the conflict between the ISIL and JN as well as a founding member and senior leader in Ahrar al-Sham, al-Sharikh stated that Abu Khalid confided in him that he believed the ISIL would send five *inghimasi* (fully committed) fighters to kill him.<sup>44</sup> Following the initial announcement of al-Sharikh's "death," there was a huge outpouring of support through the hashtag in Arabic "#Istishahid\_Sanafi\_alNasr" (Martyrdom of Sanafi al-Nasr), highlighting his career involvement in jihad on a number of fronts.<sup>45</sup>

#### Other Saudi Fighters

On October 20, 2012, Abu `Awn al-Shamali died in Aleppo fighting for JN. He conducted a suicide bombing in an explosives-laden vehicle at the French hospital. JN claimed that the attack killed 300 people, while the Syrian government said it only caused damage to the building.<sup>46</sup> The operation was detailed in JN's official video release, *The Beginning of the End #5*.<sup>47</sup>

`Abd al-`Aziz Jughayman (also known as `Abd al-Malik al-Ahsa'i), who was from al-Ahsa, was killed fighting in Idlib on November 24, 2012.

February 3, 2009.

42 Sanafi al-Nasr, "Hal sayafaji'na al-i'alam al-Sa'udi bi-quwa'im al-matlubat," *Tali'a al-Khurasan*, Issue #19, September 11, 2011.

43 Joscelyn.

44 For details, see [www.twitter.com/Snafialnasr/status/437590454604136448](http://www.twitter.com/Snafialnasr/status/437590454604136448).

45 For the entire archive, search on Twitter for [#Istishahid\\_Sanafi\\_alNasr](https://twitter.com/search?q=%23Istishahid_Sanafi_alNasr).

46 "Beginning of the End #5: Battle of the Commander Abu 'Aisha: Blowing Up the Barracks of the French Hospital in a Vehicle Martyrdom Operation," *Jabhat al-Nusra*, January 10, 2013; "Qa'ima al-sharf: shuhada Bilad al-Haramayn fi Suriyya al-habiba," [almdina55.com](http://almdina55.com), January 31, 2013; "Armed Forces Target Terrorists in Aleppo, Foil Terrorists' Infiltration Attempts from Lebanon," *Syria News Agency*, October 21, 2012.

47 Ibid.

Jughayman was a former professor at King Faisal University in al-Ahsa. A veteran of previous jihadist conflicts in Afghanistan, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Kashmir, he served in at least two jihadist combat tours in Afghanistan, including one immediately after the 9/11 attacks. After fleeing Afghanistan in early 2002, Jughayman was captured by Syrian authorities and imprisoned for almost three years.<sup>48</sup>

Khalid al-Suwayd (also known as Abu Himam) died fighting against the al-Assad regime in Damascus on March 5, 2013.<sup>49</sup> Previously, he fought U.S. troops in Iraq, presumably with al-Qa`ida in Iraq as part of a mortar team and later an artillery team.<sup>50</sup> He was arrested for two years after going to fight in Iraq, and Saudi Arabia suspended his passport.<sup>51</sup> Unknown parties were able to transport him to Syria.<sup>52</sup> He fought in eastern al-Ghuta before joining the fight in Damascus.<sup>53</sup> During a raid on the Ghasula security barrier, he conducted a suicide-style attack with four other foreign nationals from Saudi Arabia, Italy, Germany and Jordan that allegedly killed 50-60 soldiers.<sup>54</sup> Al-Suwayd and the other assailants were all killed in the attack.<sup>55</sup>

Nayif al-Mutayri (also known as Abu Bara' al-Madani), who was from Mecca, died fighting with the ISIL on January 5, 2014. He was also a *munshid* (one who does *anashid*) for the ISIL's official *nashid* media outlet, the Ajnad Foundation for Media Production.<sup>56</sup> Abu Basir al-Murqi died fighting in Azaz for the ISIL also

48 "Sur # Istishahid al-Batal `Abd al-`Aziz," *Ansar al-Mujahidin Forum*, November 24, 2012; "Nazafa lakum Khabar Istishahid al-Batal `Abd al-`Aziz al-Jughayman min al-Ahsa' fi Bilad ash-Sham," *Shamukh al-Islam*, November 24, 2012; "Saudi Man Killed After Three Decades of Jihad," *Saudi Gazette*, November 27, 2012.

49 "Al-Shahid al-Batal (Khalid al-Suwayd) min ardh jazira al-arab - Bilad al-Haramayn - wa-qisa istishahiduhu," *Shamukh al-Islam*, March 21, 2013.

50 Ibid.

51 It is not clear which government arrested him.

52 "Al-Shahid al-Batal (Khalid al-Suwayd) min ardh jazira al-arab - Bilad al-Haramayn - wa-qisa istishahiduhu." 53 Ibid.

54 Ibid.

55 Ibid.

56 For details, see [www.twitter.com/Bttar\\_mohajr/status/419852683122851841](http://www.twitter.com/Bttar_mohajr/status/419852683122851841), [www.twitter.com/AbuSiqr/status/420725642217660416](http://www.twitter.com/AbuSiqr/status/420725642217660416), and [www.twitter.com/zhoofl/status/421255925413187584/photo/1](http://www.twitter.com/zhoofl/status/421255925413187584/photo/1).

on January 5, 2014. Prior to his death, he was the head of the ISIL's Shari`a institute in Azaz.<sup>57</sup>

On January 18, 2014, `Abd Allah Sulayman al-Dhabah (also known as Abu `Ali al-Qasimi), from Qassim, was killed in al-Bab fighting with the ISIL. He was killed by "sahwat," a reference to the tribal uprising against al-Qa`ida in Iraq last decade, which has been used by the ISIL as a rhetorical tool against any of their enemies within the Syrian rebellion. Prior to joining the ISIL, he was a member of JN. Previously, al-Dhabah fought in Afghanistan and Pakistan with Abu al-Layth al-Libi and the Pakistani Taliban's Baitullah Mehsud. The main locations where he fought were Waziristan, Orakzai, and Ghazni. He was also on Twitter: [@mlng4455](https://twitter.com/mlng4455).<sup>58</sup>

#### Conclusion

In the case of Saudi foreign fighters, past large-scale mobilizations have led to a number of consequences: the rise of Bin Ladin and al-Qa`ida after the original anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan in the 1980s, post-9/11 Saudis from the Afghan front returning home and pursuing an insurgency against the Saudi government, and Saudis returning from the Iraqi battlefield to join al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in Yemen, which led to attacks from Yemen into Saudi Arabia.<sup>59</sup> There are already signs that some fighters have gone to Yemen again to join AQAP after fighting in Syria.<sup>60</sup>

57 For details, see [www.twitter.com/nashraljihad/status/419879228067569664](http://www.twitter.com/nashraljihad/status/419879228067569664).

58 For more details, see [www.shaghor.com/index.php?s=26&cat=10&subcat=7&id=1068#.UtrM861-7B3A.facebook](http://www.shaghor.com/index.php?s=26&cat=10&subcat=7&id=1068#.UtrM861-7B3A.facebook), [www.twitter.com/silentweep/status/424564345146593280](http://www.twitter.com/silentweep/status/424564345146593280), [www.twitter.com/silentweep/status/424564543415541761](http://www.twitter.com/silentweep/status/424564543415541761), [www.twitter.com/silentweep/status/424565071692324864](http://www.twitter.com/silentweep/status/424565071692324864). Also see "Wanted Saudi al Qaeda Militant Killed in Syria: SITE," *Reuters*, January 24, 2014.

59 Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006); Thomas Hegghammer, *The Failure of Jihad in Saudi Arabia* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2010); Gregory D. Johnsen, *The Last Refuge: Yemen, al-Qaeda, and America's War in Arabia* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2013).

60 Rania El Gamal, "Saudis Hardened by Wars in Syria, Iraq Join al Qaeda in Yemen," *Reuters*, March 14, 2014.

While the Saudi government did not expend great effort to deter travel to Syria,<sup>61</sup> they have tried to be proactive in preventing violence once these fighters return home.<sup>62</sup> In early February 2014, the Saudi government issued a royal order declaring that any citizen who fights in conflicts abroad will face three to twenty years of jail.<sup>63</sup> A month later, the Saudis released a royal decree designating JN and al-Qa`ida in Iraq (now known as the ISIL) as terrorist organizations.<sup>64</sup>

Furthermore, to deter more recruitment, the Saudis used the television program *Humumana* (Our Concerns) to promote the disillusioned Saudi foreign fighter Sulayman Sa`ud Sbi`i after he returned home from Syria. The fighter described the weaponization of *takfir* (declaring a Muslim an infidel, which in this context then implies that one can kill that person) among the different rebel groups. He also noted how the Syrian jihad is not as glamorous as it is portrayed in the media and online.<sup>65</sup>

At this juncture, due to the sheer number of Saudis who have gone abroad to fight in Syria, there will likely be future ramifications. How and when these ramifications occur remains to be seen.

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61 Early in the conflict, the Saudi government did not appear to actively try to stop individuals from traveling abroad to fight in Syria.

62 It is important to note that not all foreign fighters who have gone to Syria are jihadists. Many in the beginning fought with the Free Syrian Army.

63 "182-184 | Royal Order: A Penalty of Imprisonment To All Those Who Participated In Hostilities Outside the Kingdom or Belonging to the Streams or Religious Groups and Radical Ideas," Wa-Kala al-Anba' al-Sa'udiyya, February 3, 2014.

64 "Full Text of Saudi Interior Ministry Statement Designating Terrorist Organizations," *Asbarq Alawsat*, March 8, 2014.

65 "Al-Halaqa al-Sadisa: tujarib shabab maghrur bi-him," March 5, 2014, available at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=lQ8SS1HmT2o](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lQ8SS1HmT2o).