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BEYOND SYRIA AND IRAQ

EXAMINING ISLAMIC STATE PROVINCES

KATHERINE BAUER, EDITOR

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THE WASHINGTON INSTITUTE FOR NEAR EAST POLICY
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Katherine Bauer
November 2016

About the Workshop

The crusaders and their apostate clients are under the illusion that, by expanding the scope of their military campaign to include, in addition to the provinces of Iraq and Sham, the provinces of Khorasan, the Sinai, and West Africa, as well as the Libyan provinces, they will be able to eliminate all of the Islamic State's provinces at once, such that it will be completely wiped out and no trace of it will be left. In this, they are neglecting an important fact, which is that the whole world after the announcement of the Caliphate's return has changed from how it was before its return, and that by building plans and developing strategies in view of a previous reality, they are making plans for a world that no longer exists at present, and will not exist in the future, God willing.

—al-Naba, *The Crusaders' Illusions in the Age of the Caliphate*

IN NOVEMBER 2014, the Islamic State (IS) announced the addition of new provinces outside its core territory in Syria and Iraq. Over the next year and a half, the fortunes of these affiliated groups—some preexisting, others not—varied considerably. The international community became greatly concerned that IS would be able to replicate the strengths of its “core” in Libya—perhaps the most “successful” province, based on a steady stream of seasoned jihadists from Syria and Iraq and access to substantial resources—and to undermine stability in North Africa.

On June 9, 2016, The Washington Institute convened a group of scholars and practitioners focused on the Islamic State and its global affiliates for a one-day workshop to discuss the rise of these so-called IS provinces. The Chatham House Rule event gave scholars and practitioners an opportunity to compare and contrast IS provinces, both within the Arab world (in Libya, Yemen, Sinai, and the Hejaz) and beyond (Caucasus, Afghanistan/Pakistan, and Nigeria).

The event was organized thematically around three key questions:

1. What is the relationship between these groups and the IS core in Iraq and Syria?
2. What makes these groups tick, with respect to foreign fighters, finances, and ideology?
3. What is their relationship to the local population, and how much popular support do they have?

In addition to panel discussions on these topics, the workshop featured the delivery of opening, luncheon, and closing remarks by senior U.S. administration officials from the Department of State, the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC), and the National Security Council. The following presents background information to the daylong discussion and a summary of its conclusions, followed by selected speaker statements. Since some presenters participated with the understanding that their statements would not be published, a number of topics addressed in the summary are not included in the compilation.

Contributors

Positions listed were those held at the time of the workshop.

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■ KATHERINE BAUER

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■ COLE BUNZEL

Cole Bunzel is a PhD candidate in Near Eastern Studies at Princeton University. His research investigates the history of Wahhabi movements in Saudi Arabia. Bunzel is an expert in jihadi ideology, the Islamic State, and al-Qaeda.

■ MOHAMED ELJARH

Mohamed Eljarh is a nonresident fellow at the Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East, where he is an expert on Libya. He works as a political analyst on Libyan issues and his research serves to provide crucial information and insight on Libyan politics and security. He currently lives in Libya.

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Jack Gaines currently works as a communication strategist and campaign manager for the U.S. Africa Command within the Department of Defense. He focuses on managing communication, engagements, and influences to support U.S. military efforts in Africa. He delivers strategic assessments on the region and manages outreach for national priorities to include counter-ISIL efforts in North Africa.

■ DAVEED GARENSTEIN-ROSS

Daveed Garenstein-Ross, a senior fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, is a specialist on jihadist movements, including detailed research into al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia, Boko Haram, and ISIS's Wilayat Sinai. His focus is on understanding how violent nonstate actors are transforming the world and how states, in turn, are trying to adapt to this challenge.

■ MATTHEW LEVITT

Matthew Levitt is the Fromer-Wexler Fellow and director of the Stein Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence at The Washington Institute. A former deputy assistant secretary for intelligence and analysis at the U.S. Department of the Treasury, he went on to serve as a State Department counterterrorism advisor to the special envoy for Middle East regional secu-

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■ JEAN-FRANCOIS PACTET

Jean-Francois Pactet is a member of the French diplomatic corps and currently serves as a counselor at the Embassy of France in Washington DC. He previously served as advisor for foreign affairs in the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Development, and was a visiting fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. His areas of expertise include foreign policy, international security, and international relations.

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David Pollock, the Kaufman Fellow at The Washington Institute, focuses on the political dynamics of Middle East countries. He is the director of Project Fikra, a program of research, publication, and network building designed to generate policy ideas for promoting positive change and countering the spread of extremism in the Middle East.

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Muhamed Sabry is an Egyptian journalist based in Egypt's Sinai Peninsula. After studying at the International Center for Journalists in Washington DC, he returned to Egypt in early 2011 to document the January revolution.

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Katherine Zimmerman is a research fellow at the American Enterprise Institute and the research manager for AEI's Critical Threats Project. As senior analyst on al-Qaeda, she studies how the terrorist network operates globally, including AQ affiliates in the Gulf of Aden region and in western and northern Africa.

Executive Summary

IN EARLY JUNE 2016, the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL had built considerable momentum in the fight against the IS “core” in Syria and Iraq. Since its height in 2014, IS had lost almost half the territory it had previously controlled in Iraq and 20 percent of its holdings in Syria. During the week of June 9, coalition military forces began isolating Mosul by advancing into nearby villages. In Syria, fighting reached the Mari line, and a two-line offensive—Sunni opposition and the Kurdish People’s Defense Units (YPG)—began to encircle Manbij.

In addition to coalition advances in Iraq and Syria, early June 2016 saw increased activity against some Islamic State provinces. In particular, great concern had arisen about the ability of Islamic State Libya to replicate the strengths of IS core, based on a steady stream of seasoned jihadists from Syria and Iraq, access to substantial resources, and the presence of a large, ungoverned space. As a result, IS Libya came under military pressure from forces loyal to the Government of National Accord. Having lost Darnah in late 2015, it was attacked in its stronghold of Sirte by brigades made up primarily of fighters from Misratah, who drove back IS militants and captured crucial points along the city’s edge.

Provinces elsewhere were also under pressure. In Egypt, the military continued its campaign against IS in Sinai. In the Lake Chad basin, Boko Haram lost a considerable amount of the territory it controlled as a result of operations by the Multinational Joint Task Force. Ideological rifts emerged within the leadership of the IS provinces in Yemen and sandbagged state-building efforts, and the Saudi and Algeria provinces existed only on paper and as a terrorist threat.

SPEAKER STATEMENTS

Matthew Levitt provided an introduction to the day's discussion, outlining both the evolution of groups aligned with the Islamic State and the way the United States views them. The speaker statements presented below begin with his introduction, with the rest organized into four groups that address the subjects of, respectively, the IS provinces' ties to the core; the operations of the IS provinces (answering the question "What makes them tick?"); popular support for IS rule in the provinces; and IS provinces outside the Middle East.

■ *Ties of the Islamic State Provinces to the Core*

Mohamed Eljarh explains the strategic importance of the Libyan provinces to the Islamic State's overall project, which prompted it to dispatch seasoned operatives from Iraq and Syria to oversee their development. He also discusses how IS effectively exploited fissures between local groups to ensure it did not face unified opposition and the quick introduction of IS administrative control to subdue the local population.

Mohktar Awad argues that the Islamic State has effectively subsumed its local affiliate in the Egyptian Sinai, previously known as Ansar Beit al-Maqdis, in the Caliphate's operational command, although without the need for constant communication implicit in al-Qaeda's operational model. He also discusses IS aspirations to spread to the Egyptian mainland and Western Desert, as well as Sinai Province connections with IS Libya.

Aaron Zelin points to historical connections between Tunisian jihadists and the Zarqawi network, a predecessor to al-Qaeda in Iraq and later the Islamic State, to explain the presence of a large number of Tunisian foreign fighters both in the "core" and Libya, as well as IS's focus on conducting spectacular attacks in Tunisia.

Katherine Zimmerman asserts that, although the Islamic State views Yemen as an essential front, given its position on the Arabian Peninsula—the birthplace of Islam—IS's violence against civilians, its use of non-Yemini political party leaders, and its extreme tactics in war have "splintered its supporters" in the country. Zimmerman views al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula as the real threat from Yemen and believes U.S. policymakers should focus on eradicating it rather than IS there.

■ *Operations of the IS Provinces*

Aymenn al Tamimi asserts that, with the exception of its province in Sirte, the Islamic State's ability to realize governance outside of Iraq and Syria has

been very limited. These limitations have implications for IS's credibility on the global stage, particularly in appealing to the wider jihadist movement for support.

Cole Bunzel argues that since both IS and the kingdom of Saudi Arabia claim to be “authentically” Islamic, according to the doctrines of Wahhabism, IS constitutes an ideological as well as a physical threat to the kingdom. As Bunzel explains, although Wahhabism, as Saudis understand it, does not promote apocalyptic views, IS uses Wahhabi texts to support its apocalyptic narrative.

Jean-Francois Pactet observes that fighting in Iraq and Syria has a greater allure for foreign fighters than fighting in the provinces, and he argues that the provinces have been largely ineffective in securing resources and accommodating local interests. Weakening IS core will, therefore, weaken the provinces.

Katherine Bauer argues that the conditions that enabled IS to enrich itself quickly after taking territory in Syria and Iraq in 2014 will not be easily recreated in the provinces. Rather, a number of provinces were motivated, at least in part, to give allegiance to the Islamic State based on their belief that they would get resources in return.

■ *Popular Support for IS Rule in the Provinces*

While cautioning against overreliance on such sources, Daveed Gartenstein-Ross looks at IS media rollouts in Libya and Yemen to assess what can be learned about IS local popular support by examining its social media presence.

David Pollock proposes that, while IS rules primarily by intimidation and not through active popular support, populations under IS control are unlikely to rise up against the terrorist group as long as they see no viable alternative. He uses polling data to support his argument that IS needs very little support to occupy a population but enjoys greater support where the alternatives are even worse.

Muhammed Sabry discusses the composition, motivation, and sources of funding of the IS-allied Ansar Beit al-Maqdis fighters in Sinai. He depicts a group whose ideology and tactics are grounded in a desire for revenge more than religious zeal, and that uses its homegrown smuggling methods and allegiance to IS to recruit and raise funds.

■ *IS Alliances outside the Middle East*

Jack Gaines emphasizes Boko Haram's staying power compared to that of other IS provinces, noting that it enjoys strong local support and would only be marginally affected by losses to IS core. Separately, he argues that suc-

cesses against IS in Libya would have a significant impact on the IS brand and posits that some IS provinces might disassociate themselves from the group in case of a defeat in Sirte.

Anna Borshchevskaya explains that sizable popular support for the Islamic State, coupled with Russian government efforts before the Sochi Olympics to quell rebellion in the North Caucasus, has sent thousands of foreign fighters from the Caucasus Emirate to fight in Syria in Iraq. She notes, however, that the nature of the relationship between IS core and the fighters who remain in the Caucasus is unclear.

SUMMARY OF CONCLUSIONS

The three leading questions for the daylong workshop gave rise to many more: Is the rise of the provinces a game changer? Does it signify “the age of IS”? How much staying power do the provinces have? What happens to them if the Islamic State is deprived of territory in Iraq or Syria or both? What would be the impact on IS core if one of the provinces were defeated or broke with IS? The answers have tangible policy implications for the Counter-ISIL Coalition’s next steps.

Three key conclusions emerged from the discussions of these questions:

1. The Islamic State provinces are not equal; they vary widely in operational circumstances and capabilities.
2. The myth of success may be more important to the provinces than any actual success; the provinces play an important role in IS ideology but provide little tangible benefit to the core.
3. The physical staying power of the provinces depends on the resources they receive from the core.

■ *IS Provinces Are Not Equal*

The eight recognized IS provinces vary widely in operational circumstances and capabilities.¹ Most, though not all, are preexisting organizations that offered a new oath of allegiance to IS “caliph” Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Some operate in under- or ungoverned spaces—effectively, safe havens—while others are constrained by the efforts of state security forces or challenges from nonstate actors. A minority controls territory, and some, such as those in Algeria and Saudi Arabia, exist only on paper. Some provinces stage frequent small-scale attacks on civilians and local security forces, while others have mounted a number of major attacks on local or Western interests; these

include the bombing of the Russian Metrojet airliner in November 2015, claimed by IS's Sinai Province, and the spring 2015 shootings in Tunisia, in the Bardo National Museum and at a tourist resort in Sousse, which together left sixty dead. IS provinces also differ in their respective motivations for pledging allegiance to the IS global enterprise and in how they balance fulfillment of their preexisting commitments to resolve local grievances with the adoption of practices of the Caliphate.

Such variations can work either for or against the aims of each province, depending on the circumstances. Those in ungoverned spaces, for example, are more likely to be able to take and hold territory. In contrast, where groups face pressure from nonstate actors as opposed to state security or military organs, questions of sectarianism and the accommodation of local tribes or other means of securing a degree of local support become more relevant.

Such variation in circumstances can also affect the question of a group's staying power, which is discussed in more detail below. In the event of the defeat of IS core in Syria and Iraq, for instance, the provinces that did not grow out of preexisting groups—such as those in Libya—would presumably be more likely to remain loyal to the Islamic State, even as resources diminish and the group comes under pressure from state, nonstate, or international actors. On the flipside, groups that only “rebranded” themselves as Islamic State provinces may be quicker to revert to a focus on their original—typically local—grievances, support mechanisms, and targets.

Islamic State Libya is an outlier in that it was developed under the direction of IS leadership in Syria and Iraq. Although it has drawn fighters from the Tunisian group Ansar al-Sharia (AAS), which operated in eastern Libya before IS's appearance on the scene, AAS has not pledged an oath to Baghdad. In fact, some IS Libya fighters are reported to have returned to fight for AAS after IS Libya lost its safe haven in Darnah. Aaron Zelin explained that Tunisian jihadists have historically played a role in IS founder Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's networks in the Levant, and a number of them returned to Libya in 2013 to establish a presence there. The experiences gained by these jihadists during their time in the Levant are important and point to closer ties to IS core than exist for other provinces.

Operational ties between the Egypt-based Sinai Province, or *Wilayat Sinai*, and the core are less apparent. Despite many jihadist ideological roots in Egypt, Zarqawi had few preestablished ties with Sinai, according to

Mohktar Awad. The Egyptian group Ansar Beit al-Maqdis (ABM)—which previously was primarily focused on fighting Israel—offered its allegiance to the Islamic State, possibly as early as the summer of 2014. This oath not only brought new, more deadly capabilities; it resulted in a greater focus of these attacks on the Egyptian military and possibly led to the bombing of the Russian commercial airliner.² The Sinai Province does not control territory outright but operates relatively unimpeded by the local population because of its accommodation of local Bedouin tribal interests. That being said, Aymenn al Tamimi explained that the group has tried to implement limited *hisbah* (Islamic police) activity, such as burning narcotics.

Both IS and its predecessor, al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), have effectively exploited sectarian divisions to gain support. A number of Islamic State provinces operate in areas with sizable Shiite populations, such as Yemen and Saudi Arabia, but in other areas, such as Libya and Egypt, sectarianism does not play a significant role for local IS affiliates. So while Islamic State Yemen could potentially exploit the instability wrought by the Yemeni civil war to make advances there, internal disputes have weakened the organization. Likewise, the “Nejd Province” of the Islamic State has targeted Shiite interests in the kingdom, but it has also inspired attacks against Saudi security services as the IS fights to take on the mantle of Islamic Wahhabism.

Fissures also appear to have opened within some preexisting groups over whether or not to become IS provinces. This seems to be the case within the Afghan Taliban, of whom some have made the shift to Islamic State Khorasan while others have not. It also seems to be the case with Boko Haram, with the Islamic State issuing a statement in August 2016 that it had replaced the group’s leader, Abubakr Shekau, because of his brutality against Muslims. Although Shekau subsequently asserted that he retained the role of “leader,” referring to Baghdadi as “caliph,” divisions within the organization likely will grow.

Other groups, such as those in the Philippines and Bangladesh, remain unrecognized by IS core as official provinces, despite having pledged an oath of allegiance to the Islamic State. IS has issued criteria for prospective affiliates and appears to be savvy to maintaining the value of its brand by not, so to speak, “compromising its standards” or expanding “too quickly.” While the recognition of new provinces is a clear demonstration of the Islamic State slogan of “remaining and expanding,” IS also appears to be implementing a strategy of managed growth, especially as it comes under pressure in Syria and Iraq.

■ *Are Affiliates the Key to Success?*

The Islamic State provinces support the IS ideology of “remaining and expanding,” although former IS spokesman Sheikh Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, who was killed in August 2015, moved away from the slogan and began to prepare followers rhetorically for the possibility that the group would revert to an insurgency as the Caliphate faced mounting territorial losses in the core. Nonetheless, the myth of success is perhaps more important than success itself. Similar to the question of whether attacks are inspired or directed by the Islamic State, the group can derive benefits from claiming a presence in eight countries globally, despite the existence of some only on paper. Defeat of or renunciation by a province, however, would undoubtedly have an impact on the IS brand.

As explained by Jean-Francois Pactet, foreign terrorist fighters have been primarily attracted to the core. Anna Borshchevskaya noted that, unlike other provinces, the Caucasus Emirate has sent thousands of fighters to Syria and Iraq. As foreign terrorist fighters find it increasingly difficult to travel to those countries, Adnani called on them to stay where they are and conduct attacks there. Movement of IS members between provinces appears to be centrally directed for operational support purposes. A network of fishing and small boats described by Mohktar Awad, for example, connects northern Sinai to Sirte and may be used to move Islamic State Sinai leaders to Libya, possibly to consult with IS leadership there, as well as to move weapons and money to IS Sinai.

In addition to IS Libya’s role in facilitation and coordination with IS elements in sub-Saharan and North Africa, IS could possibly exploit human trafficking from Libya to smuggle IS operatives into Europe. It seems more likely, however, that IS will continue to rely on European passport holders, at least for facilitation of its European networks. Despite the uptick in attacks in Europe, none appears to have ties to IS provinces, although provinces have claimed attacks in Yemen and Saudi Arabia against Shiite interests and Saudi security forces, including by terrorists against their own family members; the sabotaging of the Russian Metrojet in the Sinai; and the January 2015 Corinthia Hotel attack in Tripoli, Libya, which resulted in the death of five foreigners and five Libyans.

■ *Staying Power of Affiliates*

A caliphate on the decline has a harder time directing resources to its periphery. Although there are limited signs that substantial funds, fighters, and other material support are flowing from IS core to several provinces, some groups

were likely motivated to pledge allegiance to the Islamic State based on at least the perception that IS wealth and experience would be shared, if not made part of a formal *quid pro quo*. Therefore, some provinces may only retain their affiliation as long as resources are made available to support them.

Sinai, for example, is likely in need of funding, and a number of other provinces, such as Boko Haram, benefit from media production centered in the core. Fighters who were recruited by provinces that presented themselves as alternatives to groups such as al-Qaeda's affiliate in Yemen (al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, or AQAP) or the Taliban in the Khorasan region of Afghanistan and Pakistan might revert to their original groups. When other alternatives are presented, buyer's remorse may take hold, as evidenced by the public rift within IS Yemen and those leaving IS Libya to rejoin Ansar al-Sharia.

A renunciation of any of the eight declared provinces of its oath to the core would likely have a significant impact on the IS brand and organizational morale. In particular, the loss of its safe haven in Libya would be most devastating, as Libya has been viewed as a potential fallback were IS to lose its territory in Iraq and Syria. At the least, the number of seasoned facilitators in Libya points to its being a hub for IS core financial, technical, and operational support to provinces in North (Algeria, Egypt) and sub-Saharan Africa (Boko Haram), as well as coordination among them.

Most provinces, as well as the core, have benefited from the breakdown of political systems to exploit ungoverned territory. IS's state-building project is also dependent on control of territory. The group has seen the most success outside of Syria and Iraq in Sirte, Libya, where, according to Aymenn al Tamimi, it was able to coopt some services and personnel structure from Ansar al-Sharia. In Yemen, however, where the ongoing civil war would seemingly create "ideal" conditions for state building, IS Yemen has been unable to overcome infighting to present a challenge to AQAP, which has been integrated with some parts of the local population for more than a decade.

Nonetheless, local popular support does not appear to be a major factor in a province's ability to take and hold territory. Controlling territory is more about aspirations to be a caliphate than to rule people. The Islamic State provides services so that it will resemble a state and will control, rather than coopt, the local population; and since submission to its rule is implemented by brute force, IS only needs the margin to support them. The percentages of people expressing support exceed single digits only in areas where things are so bad that anyone looking to impose order could gain control. A negative correlation between law and order and Islamic State popularity reinforces the

notion that the Islamic State is most successful where there is a vacuum of power. Furthermore, the less the organization prioritizes local grievances over carrying the banner of IS, the more it is about brutality than popular support.

■ *Looking Ahead*

Jihadism will remain a global phenomenon regardless of the disposition of the Islamic State. Even as coalition forces work to deprive IS of territory in Syria and Iraq, successes in Yemen and the quiet movement of personnel into Syria and Iraq suggest al-Qaeda is resurgent. The Islamic State is more attractive than al-Qaeda to some because it has a less rigid hierarchy; it calls on supporters to act on their own, presumably giving provinces operational independence.

Because they require little direction, the Islamic State provinces could possibly continue to exist—even if the Islamic State were deprived of territory in Syria and Iraq—by looking to a “virtual core” and an active insurgency. IS’s predecessor, AQI, continued to operate as an insurgency for eight years after it declared its intention to establish a caliphate. While the expenses for the organization in the core would fall once they no longer controlled territory, however, provinces such as those in Libya and Egypt—even Yemen and Saudi Arabia—would likely need to find a way to generate additional revenue, either from local resources or outside donors.

NOTES

1. Although only eight provinces have been recognized by IS, the organization now operates in eighteen countries. White House, leaked briefing document, cited by Homeland Security News Wire, August 3, 2016, <http://www.homelandsecuritynewswire.com/dr20160803-isis-now-operates-in-18-countries-wh-briefing-document>.
2. This latter attack killed more civilians than had been killed by ABM in the previous two years, but whether or not it was undertaken at the direction of IS core is unclear.

Introduction

■ MATTHEW LEVITT

AS AN IDEA, the Islamic State has, indeed, gone global. It has already attracted far more foreign terrorist fighters than all previous jihadist conflict zones combined. But as a so-called Islamic state, or a self-described caliphate, how successful has IS really been at expanding its global footprint through the establishment of provinces, or *wilayat*, around the world?

By some accounts, as many as fifty-five organizations have pledged either allegiance or some level of support to IS. Most are located outside the Middle East, and some 60 percent reside in U.S.-allied countries. But not all supporters, and not even all accepted provinces, are equal.

This inequality begs the question of how to formulate a response to each IS province—whether, for example, to deal differently with the more established provinces in Libya and Sinai than with those in the Persian Gulf, where the latter don't control territory and are, in several cases, entities in name only. Should the response to IS outside the Middle East, such as in West Africa or the Caucasus, take a different shape? Is Boko Haram, which is responsible for more terrorist operations than any other group, truly an IS province, or is it more of a local organization loosely operating under the black flag of IS?

National security and diplomacy goals are also implicated in the phenomenon of IS provinces. Does the phenomenon represent a permanent change in the strategic threat? Is it a tactical and local issue, secondary to the primary issue of dealing with IS core in Syria and Iraq? If and when the Islamic State is defeated in Iraq and Syria, will its provinces become the group's new centers of gravity? Or will the fall of IS core in Syria and Iraq significantly degrade the provinces because of the connective tissue between them?

EVOLVING PERCEPTION OF IS PROVINCES

The problem of IS provinces has quickly evolved over the past eighteen months or so, along with our perception of the threat. In February 2015, Lt. Gen. Vincent R. Stewart, the director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, said in an assessment that the Islamic State was “beginning to assemble a growing international footprint.”¹ The following month, the U.S. secretary of defense, Ash Carter, posited that the American military campaign against IS might extend to the terrorist group’s affiliates in countries such as Libya and Nigeria.²

By the summer of 2015, the Obama administration had publicly acknowledged its deepening concerns over the establishment of IS provinces beyond the group’s core operations in Syria and Iraq. President Obama noted a “growing ISIL presence in Libya and attempts to establish footholds across North Africa, the Middle East, the Caucasus, and Southeast Asia” and pledged to “work day and night with allies and partners to disrupt terrorist networks and thwart attacks, and to smother nascent ISIL cells that may be trying to develop in other parts of the world.”³

The preoccupation of Western states with IS provinces deepened toward the end of 2015. In September, the U.S. State Department designated IS Caucasus a Foreign Terrorist Organization. In November, British prime minister David Cameron declared that IS “poses a significant threat to the stability of the region,” and its “offshoots and affiliates are spreading instability and conflict” beyond the Levant.⁴ In late November, Western intelligence agencies warned that, in the face of setbacks in Iraq and Syria, the Islamic State might use the Libyan province as a new base for jihad—part of its “contingency planning.”⁵

The new year brought increasingly distressed rhetoric from the international community. In January 2016, UN secretary-general Ban Ki-moon cautioned that IS posed “an unprecedented threat” because of its ability to persuade other groups around the world to join its cause. According to the secretary-general, “The recent expansion of the [ISIL] sphere of influence across west and north Africa, the Middle East and south and southeast Asia demonstrates the speed and scale at which the gravity of the threat has evolved in just 18 months.”⁶ Later that same month, the U.S. State Department designated IS Khorasan as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO). In February, Secretary of State John Kerry conceded, “We are still not at the victory that we want to achieve, and will achieve, in either Syria or Iraq and we have seen Daesh⁷ playing a game of metastasizing out to other countries, particularly Libya.”⁸

With this growing concern came heightened determination by the administration to counter the province phenomenon. Obama assured in April that,

“beyond Syria and Iraq, we continue to go after ISIL wherever it tries to rear its ugly head” by “helping partners strengthen their security forces, from Africa to Afghanistan.” He also noted the strategic benefit of the provinces to IS core, citing “an uptick in the number of ISIL fighters heading to Libya” when their paths to joining the fight in Iraq and Syria were blocked. Obama pledged the United States would “use the full range of tools to roll ISIL back from Libya while assisting the new and nascent Libyan government as it works to secure their country.”⁹ In May 2016, the State Department designated IS in Libya, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen as FTOs.

EVOLUTION OF IS PROVINCES

This intensified rhetoric matches the time line along which IS-aligned groups have established branches in parts of the Middle East, North Africa, West Africa, Russia’s North Caucasus, and South Asia. Most of these branches comprise preexisting terrorist networks, many with their own local goals. According to the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, the geographical reach of attacks by IS and its affiliates has expanded as several existing groups have pledged allegiance to IS. In addition to Boko Haram in West Africa, the most active IS branches are located in Afghanistan/Pakistan, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen.

Although IS remains the greatest terrorism threat globally, it sustained considerable losses in 2015. After reaching a high point in the spring, its territorial control began to diminish, and it did not have a significant battlefield victory in Iraq after May. By the end of 2015, 40 percent¹⁰ of the territory IS once controlled in Iraq had been liberated—a figure that has increased in 2016.

Since IS’s territory is a major source of income for the group, this loss in IS core pushes it, and by extension its provinces, toward financial distress. According to the State Department’s 2015 Country Reports on Terrorism,¹¹ IS relies heavily on extortion in the levying of taxes on local populations under its control, and it has also accumulated wealth through exploitation of the natural resources in its territory, along with profiting from other criminal enterprises and foreign donations. Loss of territory and coalition airstrikes targeting its energy infrastructure have weakened IS financially, limiting its ability to send money to the provinces.

Nevertheless, IS in Libya grew amid the country’s instability and is considered among the Islamic State’s most robust strongholds. IS Libya was estimated to have up to five thousand terrorist fighters in 2015, according to the State Department. It made most of its territorial gains in Sirte and its sur-

rounding coastline. IS also conducted operations in Libya's oil crescent and in Sabratha, near the Tunisian border. IS Libya also suffered losses at the hands of militia groups, however, particularly in the eastern city of Darnah.¹²

Meanwhile, IS in Egypt's Sinai Peninsula became more lethal and sophisticated, according to the State Department.¹³ The most prominent indicators of its development were its multipronged attack in the North Sinai town of Sheikh Zuwaid in July 2015 and the downing of Russian Metrojet 9286 in October 2015 that killed 224 passengers and 7 crew members.

Beyond these two significant offshoots, the IS-aligned groups that have popped up in other parts of the Middle East and all over the world vary widely in their relationships to IS core, their capabilities, their motivations, and their connections to the local communities. The most prominent IS affiliate outside the Middle East is the Nigeria-based terrorist group Boko Haram, which declared its affiliation to IS in March 2015. Boko Haram is responsible for thousands of deaths and a burgeoning displaced-persons crisis in the Lake Chad basin region of Africa. This most destructive of IS's affiliates has a questionable relationship with IS core, however, despite its *baya* (oath of allegiance) to IS over a year ago.

ANALYSIS OF THE THREAT, AND LOOKING AHEAD

In light of the rise of IS provinces over the past eighteen months, it is high time to address the many questions they raise.

What are their future prospects? IS core is hurting financially. How long will IS in Sinai last, should IS be unable to continue providing funds?

Its significant loss of territory in Iraq and Syria means the Islamic State is no longer "remaining and expanding." With statehood and expansion as central aspects of its identity, how long will IS be seen as a "caliphate," the most attractive Sunni jihadist group? These defeats in IS core bring the potential for the group to lash out abroad in an attempt to assert its relevance. Will territorial and financial setbacks prompt IS to press for its provinces to do more to remain relevant and project power? Will it press for more terrorist attacks abroad?

What impact would military success against IS in Iraq have on the remaining IS core in Syria and on IS provinces? What impact would diplomatic success in Syria have on IS provinces? Will IS periphery get more lethal and ultraviolent as the core collapses or less so, because it is no longer receiving weapons, money, and, in some cases, leaders, from Iraq and Syria? Will infighting increase as fighters return from Syria and Iraq, with the status that comes with having fought in those locations, and challenge local leaders for power?

The purpose of this conference and the products emerging from it are to explore three issue areas along thematic—not geographical—lines. The first of these is an analysis of the connective tissue, if any, between IS provinces and IS core. Its presence and nature might be indicated most clearly by financial support, but the inquiry also extends to the direction of attacks, control of social media presence, presence of key IS leadership (i.e., in Libya), and ideological influences. Was the downing of the Russian Metrojet in October 2015, for example, an IS-directed attack, an indication of an independent shift in the ideology of the preexisting Ansar Beit al-Maqdis terrorist organization in the Sinai, or something else?

Second, we aim to take a close look at various IS provinces and ask, “What makes them tick?” Where do they get their funding and weapons, what is the source of their ideological underpinning, and what drives them?

Third, we will delve into the degree of local and popular support for IS provinces. How much staying power do IS provinces have? Do they represent a permanent change to the jihadist landscape, or does their success largely depend on that of IS core in Syria and Iraq? Can an understanding of popular support help us understand the makeup of each province—that is, whether it is more IS or more local?

Finally, we will take a concerted look beyond the Middle East to examine more Islamic State provinces that are geographically peripheral, including IS Caucasus, IS’s affiliation with Boko Haram, and IS Khorasan in Afghanistan. How successful are these groups, so distant from IS core?

As we consider these questions, several themes are worth keeping in mind. Territorial control is one of the most important factors behind a viable and successful IS province. Additionally, a preexisting organization that has rebranded itself as an IS province has a foundation on which it can build without starting from scratch; it can also revert to that foundation in the event the so-called Caliphate collapses. IS provinces clearly enjoy greater chances of success if they take the place of failed or undergoverned states. Charismatic leadership also often plays a role in developing successful provinces. Clearly, access to money and weapons is important, but so is the impact of IS direction on a province’s social media platforms and digital footprint. Finally, the ability to attract foreign fighters has become an important aspect of the Islamic State core, and already signs indicate some recruits have been directed to IS provinces in Libya.

The Stein Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence at The Washington Institute is very pleased to be hosting this event. It is a testament to the

Institute as a center of excellence on these issues, and to the timeliness of the questions we are posing, that we have been able to convene such a high-level group of experts to spend a day considering them. And so I ask this question of us all: how successful has IS been at expanding the footprint of its so-called Islamic state beyond Syria and Iraq?

NOTES

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12. See *ibid.* for various claims in this paragraph.
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Islamic State in Libya

■ MOHAMED ELJARH

PREPARED STATEMENT

ON JUNE 29, 2014, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of the Islamic State, declared the establishment of a caliphate, a state that spanned parts of Syria and Iraq. He was speaking in the city of Mosul, which IS forces had taken from the Iraqi army a few weeks earlier.

The first province or stronghold for IS outside of Syria and Iraq was the city of Darnah in eastern Libya. On October 3, 2014, a local group known as Shabab Jaish al-Islam (Islamic Army Youth) declared its allegiance to IS and its leader in Syria and Iraq, although signs of this allegiance were evident as early as June 2014. IS in Darnah was initiated, however, by a local group of fighters and returnees from the war in Syria—fighters from the al-Battar Brigade (*Katibat al-Battar al-Libiyah*) who chose to reside either in Darnah or Benghazi in eastern Libya.

The 2014 establishment of IS in Libya benefited from the outcomes of earlier events. Following the overthrow of the regime of Muammar Qadhafi in 2011, Libya's new leaders were determined to support the Syrian revolution against the Assad regime. This resulted in financial support to the Syrian opposition, as well as other forms of support that included weapons and fighters. Notable figures in the armed uprising against Qadhafi, such as Mahdi al-Harati and Abdul Hakim Belhaj, in coordination with important regional players, such as Turkey and Qatar, played a key role in facilitating the transfer of weapons and fighters to Syria. In addition, training camps were set up in various parts of Libya, where foreign fighters who intended to go to Syria would be trained and then transferred to Syria to join the fighting there. Many of these weapons and fighters became an asset for the establishment of IS in 2014. Furthermore, some of the jihadists who joined

the fighting in Syria returned to Libya and helped set up IS in Darnah and Benghazi.

Following the initial pledging of allegiance to IS and its leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, and after much speculation about IS's intentions for Libya, it became evident that IS's leadership recognized the strategic importance of Libya to its overall project. Its wealth, location, and the immense amount of weaponry still present there following the overthrow of Qadhafi made it a source of great potential, as did the fragile state of the country, which suffered from polarization and infighting among various groups. A document circulated among IS supporters in January 2015 was proof of IS's ambitions for Libya as a strategic gateway for its project, or at least as a fallback option.

The link between IS's central leadership in Syria and Iraq and its newly established province became more evident in early 2015. The leadership dispatched some of its most senior fighters to Libya to help strengthen the group's presence there and establish its first strongholds outside of Syria and Iraq:

- Abu Nabil al-Anbari (Wissam Najem Abdul Zayed Zubaidi), an Iraqi national, was one of the military commanders who led the group's expansion in Iraq. He was reportedly killed in a U.S. airstrike on Darnah on November 14, 2015.
- Abu Habib al-Jazrawi, a Saudi national, reportedly filled the role of the *wali* in the city of Darnah very early on.
- Abu al-Bara al-Azadi, a Yemeni national, was reportedly killed in an Egyptian airstrike in February 2015.
- Turki al-Binali (Abu Sufyan al-Salami), a Bahraini national, was considered the spiritual leader of the group. He was active in Syria and Iraq, delivering lectures and lessons in IS-held territory. He was also spotted in Darnah and later on in Sirte.

Both in Darnah and Sirte, IS's new strongholds were quick to establish sharia courts, police (*hisba*), and other administrative departments to oversee the radical social reengineering of local communities that fall under IS's control, not only through mandatory religious programs, but by instilling fear in them through public punishments, including execution and crucifixion. Furthermore, the link between IS's central authority and its followers in the Libyan province is evident in the propaganda material disseminated by the group; this was clearly demonstrated by the report in IS's online magazine, *Dabiq*, on the killing of the twenty-one Egyptian Copts in Sirte on

February 12, 2015. Similarities between the group's warfare style and tactics in Libya and those we see in Syria and Iraq also attest to the connection.

LOCALIZED NATURE OF THE IS BRANCHES IN LIBYA

Although the link between IS in Libya and its core leadership back in Syria and Iraq is very evident, the establishment of IS branches in various parts of Libya differs from one city to another. These differences are briefly summarized below.

■ *IS in Darnah and Benghazi*

The Islamic State in Darnah and parts of Benghazi was established mainly by returning jihadist fighters from the al-Battar Brigade. They were joined by factions from Ansar al-Sharia, for whom IS effectively represented a more appealing means of jihad as compared to a localized Ansar al-Sharia movement. However, some Ansar al-Sharia members decided to stay neutral in Darnah. That continued to be the case even when the Mujahedin Shura Council of Darnah and Its Suburbs (MSCDS) and IS started fighting each other in June 2015.

For a while in Benghazi, IS and fighters from the Shura Council of Benghazi Revolutionaries fought alongside each other against forces loyal to Gen. Khalifa Haftar, but their relationship was not always smooth. In December 2015, both groups issued statements criticizing each other, but they never fought in Benghazi.

Following IS's defeat in Darnah, many of the group's leaders were killed or detained, while others escaped. Local sources with access to the MSCDS leadership in Darnah, however, confirmed that some IS fighters decided to join Ansar al-Sharia in the city, upon which Ansar al-Sharia's numbers there rose from around two hundred to more than five hundred fighters. Although Ansar al-Sharia has ideological disagreements and differences with MSCDS, it has until now managed to maintain a truce with the group there. Such defections or changes in loyalty by some IS fighters are reportedly due to the realization that the central IS leadership in Iraq and Syria could not support its provinces outside Syria and Iraq, which made the local option—Ansar al-Sharia—a safer bet. Given the imminent defeat of IS in Sirte, some of its fighters there might choose to return and join Ansar al-Sharia in Darnah or join other jihadist groups across Libya's southern borders. Such a journey will not be easy, however, given the heavy presence of army forces around the city.

■ *IS in Sirte*

The origin of IS in Sirte is linked to the Farouq Brigade from the city of Misratah. The brigade evolved into Ansar al-Sharia for a while and then pledged allegiance to IS. Some of IS's key figures in Benghazi, such as Hassan al-Karami, decided to relocate to Sirte, where they led a campaign against the Salafist movement in the city until they killed its leader, Khaled bin Rajab Ferjani. IS was able to coexist in Sirte with Misratah's Fajr 166 Brigade for a time, as the core of IS in the city was the Farouq Brigade, which had fought alongside the 166 Brigade in the war against the Qadhafi regime.

Following its defeat elsewhere in Libya, IS in Sirte provides fighters from Ajdabiya, Benghazi, and Darnah with a destination. Sirte has also become the destination for most of the foreign fighters who wanted to join IS in Libya. As pressure continues to mount on IS in Sirte, reports have emerged about a feud and fighting between Libyan and foreign IS fighters—an outgrowth of long-standing tensions stemming from feelings of marginalization by local fighters, who have believed they are being sidelined in favor of the foreigners.

■ *IS in Sabratha*

Although the Islamic State presence in Sabratha had links to some ex-Libyan jihadists, it was made up mostly of Tunisian fighters belonging to the Tunisian branch of Ansar al-Sharia, and its main aim was to train and provide a base for IS's activities in Tunisia. In February 2016, a U.S. airstrike that targeted an IS training camp in the city served a huge blow to IS's plans in Sabratha. Less than a month later, in apparent retaliation, IS fighters launched an attack on the town of Ben Gardane, on the Tunisian border with Libya, in an attempt to capture the city. That was the plan of IS for Tunisia all along until it was disrupted by the airstrike on its main camp in Sabratha.

IS APPROACH IN LIBYA

Despite the lack of popular support for IS in Libya, the group was able to find a foothold there. While its approach to doing so included the use of violence and terrorist tactics to force local communities into submission, as was the case in Darnah and Sirte, it also used more pragmatic tactics, such as negotiating agreements with local communities and key actors, as in the Sabratha, al-Nawfalayah, Bin Jawad, and Harawa areas. IS also effectively played on Libyan rivalries and historical fissures to ensure no united military operation against

it could take place, and for a while that strategy had been relatively successful. Given the deep divisions and significant polarization in Libya today, the defeat of IS in Sirte, for example, could bring a new phase of instability and conflict if not managed carefully by the UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA) and the international community. Such instability would only serve as a chance for IS to regroup and hit again in Libya.

What is more worrying is that not everyone in Libya is celebrating the gains against IS in Sirte. Some, including supporters of the eastern Libyan government, rival to the GNA, and the Libyan National Army (LNA), led by Gen. Khalifa Haftar, are talking instead about a “Western-led conspiracy” to undermine the LNA’s position and leadership in favor of UN-backed forces. They base such reasoning on the fact that the GNA declared its war against IS in Sirte only after the LNA had already mobilized its forces to liberate the city, a charge also applied to the U.S. air campaign against IS in Sirte. Indeed, since April, the LNA has deployed more than six thousand fighters to the Sirte basin area. Haftar’s opponents and critics claim the LNA’s military moves are only meant to undermine the newly appointed GNA by expanding his military presence and control over the strategically important Sirte basin region. Also in question is the soundness of mobilizing toward Sirte, given that no decisive victory has yet to be achieved in Benghazi. That a major armed actor in Libya such as the LNA considers these important and significant advances against IS to be a “conspiracy” is a warning sign of the near-certain failure of unity efforts led by the United Nations and should raise alarm bells within the GNA and the international community. Furthermore, this evident disconnect in the fight against IS in Libya is an early indication of further instability in Libya given the potential for armed conflict between GNA-loyal forces from the city of Misratah and LNA forces loyal to the rival Eastern-based government.

Even so, forces loyal to the GNA claimed that IS controls an area no more than five square kilometers and that the delay in achieving a decisive and complete victory to capture Sirte is due to IS tactics including the use of land mines, snipers, and families and hostages as human shields. Sirte is the last stronghold of the so-called Islamic State in Libya. Although the defeat of IS in Sirte would be a significant development in the war against the group in Libya, it would not mean its end there, with IS reportedly building a presence in Libya’s southern region of Fezzan; and despite the huge boost this would represent for the legitimacy of the GNA, enormous challenges and threats in the fight against IS in Libya and the region would remain.

IS in the Sinai

■ MOKHTAR AWAD

PREPARED STATEMENT

THE ISLAMIC STATE'S so-called Sinai Province, or Wilayat Sinai, has been the most active affiliate outside the group's base in Libya, thus posing a threat to both Egypt's and Israel's security. This local affiliate, formerly called Ansar Beit al-Maqdis (ABM), witnessed a remarkable improvement in capability since it pledged allegiance to IS in November 2014. Its attacks have been far more frequent and lethal, and have utilized increasingly advanced weapons and tactics.

The group's enhanced capabilities, coupled with a shift in tactics to increased targeting of civilians and carrying out operations that advance the interests of core IS—such as the downing of a Russian airliner in October 2015—suggest a strong connection to the core leadership. I argue that core IS has succeeded in “subsuming” the local Sinai affiliate. This means a successful “integration,” wherein local leaders operate as subordinate lieutenants serving IS interests without the need for constant communication with or direction from core IS.

Despite the obvious shifts in the group's behavior, however, from which we can intelligently infer a strong connection, information in the public domain about direct connections between Sinai and IS core and how they take place is lacking. Such communications have, indeed, taken place and still do, and this paper will shed light on such contacts.

Also to be considered here is the success the Islamic State has had in utilizing its Sinai host to help it spread into the Egyptian mainland and Western Desert, the latter with help also from its Libya base. Although the extent to which IS core centrally directs such operations isn't known, the nature of mainland and Western Desert operations strongly suggests a strategic direction that advances its interests.

EVOLUTION OF ANSAR BEIT AL-MAQDIS INTO IS SINAI

Perhaps the strongest evidence of the extent of the Sinai affiliate's connection to core IS leadership is how it evolved in both ideology and strategy.

ABM was a localized jihadist movement born out of its local context. Like its predecessor group, al-Tawhid wal-Jihad, it had focused almost exclusively on targeting Israel, the Egypt-Israel relationship, and Egyptian tourism in areas visited by large numbers of Israeli tourists. Some may assume insurgency in the Sinai is the direct result of "local grievances," like government neglect, or the product of separatist or political motives; but it has always simply been focused on Israel.

The Sinai offered an unparalleled environment in which to wage every jihadist's dream of attacking Israel. Beyond the obvious role played by borders, a historically weak state presence and a thriving contraband economy helped make it an ideal training ground and launching pad for attacks. While local grievances do fuel the insurgency, they are largely the result of scorched-earth tactics the Egyptian government deployed to crack down on the Israel-focused terrorists in the early 2000s and, later, after the January 2011 revolution.

INFLUENCE ON IDEOLOGY

The early pioneers of jihad in the Sinai were all natives who had been influenced by the Nile valley jihadists of the 1980s and 1990s and their unsuccessful insurgency to topple Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak. This experience taught Egyptian jihadists a major lesson in the importance of avoiding mass civilian casualties, Egyptian or otherwise, if they were to secure a base of popular support. Jihadists couldn't allow themselves simply to be caricatured as bloodthirsty brutes who kill ordinary Muslims and devastate locals' livelihoods while achieving nothing tangible in battle and avoiding the Muslims' greatest enemy: Israel. This is the image Mubarak and his media largely achieved in projecting for them. To dispel it, the jihadists had to appear as the Muslims' knights in shining armor and actively avoid killing Muslim civilians while focusing their aggression exclusively on Israelis or Egyptian security services.

This was largely the approach of the group before its pledge to IS. The group carried out most major bombings early on weekend mornings to avoid civilian casualties, like those that had resulted from the December 2013 Mansoura and January 2014 Cairo Security Directorate bombings. It conducted

no Mumbai-style attacks, where gunmen indiscriminately opened fire on tourists, and, most important, it used no improvised explosive devices (IEDs) in major population areas. At the same time, the group invested resources in executing cross-border attacks against Israel and firing rockets at Israel, and it repeatedly blew up the Egypt-Israel gas pipeline. This strategy was so successful that the “masked men” whom authorities blamed for the pipeline bombings had become a popular meme in 2011 before ABM revealed its responsibility. Only one notable attack against tourists took place, in February 2014, on a tourist bus headed to Israel.

This approach changed, however, in late 2014, as the group grew closer to pledging allegiance to the Islamic State and became “IS Sinai.” Although some indications suggest an ideological affinity between the group and IS existed since at least early 2014, nothing indicated the former was going to wholeheartedly mimic the latter’s tactics. The group had always killed and sometimes beheaded alleged spies and informants, but now the frequency and brutality of such killings increased. In the first Hijri calendar year following the pledge, the group chillingly said it killed 130-“plus” such spies, while offering otherwise precise numbers.

Furthermore, reports multiplied of the group’s targeting of specific families and clans. Most notably, relations deteriorated with some clans in the powerful Tarabin tribe in Sinai. The group was now in open hostility toward a segment of a major Sinai tribe, a far cry from its carefully polished image as the protector of the population. However, it was really the downing of the Russian airliner that marked the clearest departure yet from the group’s *modus operandi*, killing hundreds of civilians in an attack that specifically advanced the interests of core IS.

In another demonstration of IS influence on what was now IS Sinai, the latter has invested resources in an attempt at *hisba* and pretensions of governance structures that are trademarks of the former. This, too, is not only a departure from how IS Sinai used to operate, but also a largely impractical step, since IS Sinai does not control any population centers and has limited resources to spend on *hisba* activities. For pure propaganda purposes, for example, the group has posted photos of its men handing out cash envelopes or small bags of food. While some media outlets have, unfortunately, conflated this with serious services provision, no evidence of any sort shows IS Sinai provides services that can rival what ordinary Egyptian charities or even the Egyptian military give to Egypt’s poor.

Nevertheless, the pretensions of “*wilayat-hood*” suggest how the group

appears to have adopted fully IS ideology and tactics. Regardless of whether or not these activities are carried out at the behest of core IS leadership or to please the leadership, at some point an IS affiliate can begin to mimic the organization in all respects to the point where it becomes a bona fide franchise in no need of “micromanagement” from core IS.

INFLUENCE ON MILITARY STRATEGY AND TACTICS

Most important, IS influence on its Sinai affiliate appears to have resulted in a strategic misfire in the latter’s July 2015 attempt to take over briefly some parts of Sheikh Zuwaid. IS Sinai had greatly overestimated its power, at significant cost to its personnel and organization from a losing twelve-odd-hour battle with Egyptian forces. This clearly disadvantageous and unprecedented assault likely stemmed from IS pressure on the affiliate to hold population centers as did its counterparts.

The group’s other new military tactics or intensification of older ones also strongly suggests a connection to IS core and influence by their tactics. For instance, there is increased use and possession of advanced weapons, like Kornet antitank missiles and more powerful IEDs.

Finally, IS Sinai has methodically focused on demoralization and infiltration through tactics strongly reminiscent of those used by core IS in Iraq in preparation for the 2014 conquests. The group has consistently assassinated both senior and low-ranking officers, increased the use of sniper attacks on troops, and blown up officers’ homes to try to get them to flee. In some villages that have been all but cleared of civilians, IS Sinai sweeps in and mines the empty buildings to create no-go zones for the Egyptian military and use them in battle, as core IS does against advancing forces. This tactic has helped IS Sinai create the impression of having control over several villages when, in fact, it has managed only to mine buildings and areas the Egyptian military has yet to bomb. Sure enough, when core IS released a dozen-odd videos promoting the IS Sinai affiliate, one in particular emphasized how the topography of Sinai and Iraq are similar, and how much core IS believes IS Sinai is learning from them.

ISLAMIC STATE PROXY ON THE EGYPTIAN MAINLAND

According to Egyptian State Security investigations, IS Sinai is also the primary proxy between core IS and mainland-based cells, another indicator of the extent of the influence IS core has over the group. The local affiliate had

operated mainland networks that were all but destroyed in 2014; in 2015, these networks were reactivated, and they attempted and carried out attacks that mainly targeted tourists, foreign nationals, and Western interests. In late 2015, IS-affiliated cells operating in Greater Cairo began to launch armed assaults and IED attacks in populated areas and against tourists. Thankfully, due to the operatives' amateur capabilities, fatalities have been low. They have demonstrated, nevertheless, an interest in planting IEDs on Cairo's beltway, which shows a most certain disregard for potential civilian casualties. This, too, is a radical departure from the focus of mainland-based militants before the IS intervention. At minimum, the nature of the attacks shows how these operatives have fully accepted the IS ideology and tactics; or perhaps it is an indication of greater direction by IS core leadership, which has less interest in nurturing the base of popular support for mainland militants and more in taking advantage of Egypt as another theater into which to project its terror.

IS Sinai and IS Libya have also facilitated increased activity in the Egyptian Western Desert. In fact, the first-ever attack there, which took place in July 2014, appears to have been connected to the group's discussions with IS, which were ongoing at the time. It was carried out by an expeditionary force that struck the Farafra checkpoint before moving up to Marsa Matruh, then back east on the way to Sinai, suggesting the group had no sustained operational presence then in the Western Desert. The purpose was, perhaps, to show the group's ability to hit well outside the Sinai or, more likely, to show it could operate in an area of strategic significance for IS. Since then, smuggling activity has increased, as well as reports of small jihadist encampments. Securing the smuggling routes between Libya and Sinai and having strategic depth into the Western Desert may benefit IS Sinai, but it serves the interests of core IS more.

ACTUAL LINKAGES

The full extent of core IS direct operational control over IS Sinai activities remains unknown. Travel to and from the Sinai remains rather difficult, and Egyptian authorities have yet to capture any senior non-Egyptian IS leaders there. What is known is that sometime in fall 2014, some of the local group's leaders traveled to meet core IS leaders in Syria and Iraq, something confirmed by Egypt's General Intelligence. There are also indications that the connection between Sinai and core IS grew as Egyptians who fought alongside IS began to return, some of them perhaps carrying messages and orders from senior IS leaders.

Some data points also exist from which such a relationship can be inferred, and they help evolve our understanding of it. Egyptian intelligence officials speak in detail about a network of fishing and small boats that connects North Sinai's coast to Sirte, Libya. Boats carrying fuel depart from areas like Marsa Matruh to refuel those that make the journey. The Egyptian navy cannot detect all of these boats, as they often do not appear on radar and can only be spotted with the naked eye. Egyptian intelligence believes that the routes are used not only to smuggle weapons and money but also to help transport IS Sinai leaders to and from Libya, where there is the closest concentration of IS leaders with the strongest connection to core IS in Syria and Iraq.

Other indications also may exist of IS elements from other countries being dispatched specifically to help carry out operations. This is not in the "foreign fighter" sense, but rather in the sense that a central organizer may have made strategic decisions on how to use different assets from nearby countries to carry out operations. According to State Security Investigations, an attempted attack on the Karnak Temple in Luxor in June 2015 was such an incident. The local IS operative connected Upper Egypt-based recruits with a Tunisian and a Sudanese who were sent to carry out a suicide operation. The use of non-Egyptians would have helped compensate for a lack of Egyptians willing to carry out such an operation against tourists and, most likely, innocent Muslim civilians.

CONCLUSION

The evolution of Ansar Beit al-Maqdis into IS Sinai, or Wilayat Sinai, by adopting that group's tactics and ideology, as well as data points that map what could possibly be the physical network connecting IS Sinai with Libya and IS core, suggests a very strong relationship between IS Sinai and IS core. If anything, IS Sinai may be one of the most obvious examples of how the Islamic State has succeeded in completely subsuming a heretofore largely independent and local jihadist organization.

The Role of Tunisians

■ AARON Y. ZELIN

PREPARED STATEMENT

ALTHOUGH THE ISLAMIC STATE has never claimed Tunisia or parts of it as one of its provinces, Tunisia has been important as a target for attacks and attempts to take its territory. As with its expansion outside of Iraq and Syria, IS began to focus on Tunisia in late 2014. In mid-December that year, a video message from Raqqa, Syria, featured Abu Bakr al-Hakim (who went by Abu al-Muqatil in the video), a notorious individual who had been involved within the broader jihadist movement going back to 2003.¹ In the video, Hakim claimed responsibility for the assassination of Tunisia's secular leftist politicians in 2013—"Yes, tyrants, we're the ones who killed Chokri Belaid and Mohamed Brahmi"—thus confirming the Ennahda-led government's suspicions that he was involved.² Beyond calling for more violence and for Tunisians to remember its imprisoned brothers and sisters, Hakim also called upon the Tunisian people to pledge allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, to raise the banner of *tawhid* (pure monotheism), and to rip down the flags of Charles de Gaulle and Napoleon (alluding to the historically close relations between France and Tunisia).

Since then, IS has been involved in a number of attacks in Tunisia, and in spring of 2016 it attempted to set up a new territorial base near the border between Tunisia and Libya. Its purpose is to create an environment that allows for greater recruitment and sympathy and the undermining of the state. Attacks against the military and the security establishment are carried out to create chaos and strike fear, as well as to make citizens question the ability of their government to protect them. Attacks against tourism infrastructure hurt the economy, which creates grievances against the state. This, IS hopes, will in the long term delegitimize the Tunisian state and provide

new opportunities to gain adherents and then set up a province within Tunisia. Thus far, IS has failed in the last step, but that is not for lack of trying. The Tunisian state and security apparatus, as well as society, have so far been relatively resistant to IS's aims.

HISTORICAL CONNECTIONS

Tunisian jihadists have deep connections to IS godfather Abu Musab al-Zarqawi that go back more than a decade. In fact, some of the first foreign fighters to travel from outside the Levant to Zarqawi's then base in Kurdistan—before the U.S. invasion of Iraq—were Tunisians. Although Tunisian jihadists have also been affiliated with al-Qaeda historically, those who joined the Islamic State have reached more senior positions. For example, Abu Usama al-Tunisi headed the foreign fighter facilitation network in the Islamic State in Iraq.

Much like al-Qaeda's branch in the Arabian Peninsula, the Islamic State's provinces in Libya are an in-house creation, meaning that by definition they have closer ties to IS's leadership in Syria and Iraq than other provinces. Both the historical connections between Tunisian jihadists and IS's predecessor organizations and the geographical proximity support the greater presence of Tunisians with IS in Libya, as well as the focus of IS Libya on conducting attacks in Tunisia.

SECURITY OPERATIONS

While most are familiar with IS's large-scale and spectacular attacks in Tunisia, the group has also conducted lower-level, insurgent-type attacks against Tunisia's security establishment. The first known operation took place on April 8, 2015, in Jabal al-Meghila near the town of Sbeitla, where IS conducted an ambush that killed four and injured twelve Tunisian soldiers.³ A couple of weeks later, on April 22, IS claimed responsibility for an attack on the Tunisian military in Jabal Salloum, southeast of Kasserine city, which led to the death of one of its fighters from Algeria; this illustrated that others besides Tunisians were in the ranks of the Islamic State in Tunisia.⁴ IS also claimed responsibility for an attack on Tunisia's special forces in Jabal Salloum on May 2.⁵

Later that month, IS began mounting attacks on security personnel within the major cities. On May 25, at the Bouchoucha barracks in Tunis, a soldier in the Tunisian military who was secretly a member of IS stabbed a fellow soldier and then took his weapon and opened fire, killing seven and injuring ten.⁶ About five months later, on November 26, an IS member rushed

toward a bus carrying members of Tunisia's presidential guard in the capital and killed twelve people in a suicide attack.⁷

IS also targeted a few smaller-scale attacks on the security establishment in the interior. On June 15, 2015, an attack in Bir El Hafey (Sidi Bouzid governorate) killed three police officers;⁸ on August 21, a staff sergeant and a corporal in the engineering division were killed and two others were wounded by an improvised explosive device in Jabal al-Meghila;⁹ and on May 16, 2016, an IED attack in Jabal al-Meghila injured some soldiers.¹⁰ Notably, however, the pace has dropped off significantly since the spring and summer of 2015, indicating that, over time, Tunisia has degraded IS's ability to conduct such insurgent-type attacks.

TERRORIST ATTACKS AND THE LIBYAN CONNECTION

Unlike its smaller attacks on the security infrastructure of Tunisia, IS has been better known for its spectacular, larger-scale attacks in the country, the purpose of which has been to destroy Tunisia's tourism industry and thereby bankrupt its economy. The first happened on March 15, 2015, when IS operatives Yassine Labidi and Jaber Khachnaoui attacked the Bardo National Museum in Tunis, killing twenty tourists and two Tunisians and injuring fifty other individuals. A second occurred on June 26, 2015, when lone IS operative Seifeddine Rezgui Yacoubi began shooting individuals on the beach of the Riu Imperial Marhaba hotel in Sousse, killing thirty-eight beachgoers and injuring thirty-nine others.

Both large-scale attacks were connected with the Islamic State's infrastructure in Libya, in particular the town of Sabratha, which is about sixty-two miles east of the Tunisian border.¹¹ While it is true that Tunisian foreign fighters have been going to Libya since the beginning of the uprising against Qadhafi in 2011, once IS established itself in Libya in a more concrete manner between the spring and fall of 2014, the infrastructure to export terrorism back into Tunisia became more sophisticated and formalized. Before then, most Tunisians who went to Libya were more involved in facilitation and logistics activities for the Syrian jihad, primarily engaged in providing training to Tunisians and other foreign fighters headed to Syria, as well as assisting in the trafficking of weapons there.¹²

While Tunisian leaders and foot soldiers certainly took part in IS's operation in Darnah, Benghazi, and Sirte, much of the Tunisian contingent had its own network of activities based in Sabratha and, to a lesser extent, in Zuwarah, Libya, both of which are close to the Tunisian border. Those

involved included Tunisians who had returned from Syria with IS's Libya front, *Katibat al-Battar* (al-Battar Brigade); Tunisians already in Libya who decided to switch allegiances from Ansar al-Sharia in Libya to IS; and Tunisian foreign fighters who were newcomers to Libya.

Regarding the last group, the first public call by IS for Tunisians to join up in Libya went out on April 7, 2015. In a video released by its Wilayat Tarabulus, an Abu Yahya al-Tunisi urged Tunisians to come join the IS Libya to gain training and knowledge, so they might return to Tunisia to establish and extend the writ of the IS there.¹³ Such plans were being thought through by a brain trust of Tunisian IS leaders in Sabratha, in particular Moez Fezzani, Noureddine Chouchane, Miftah Manita, Adel Gandhri, and Choukri Abdelkaoui. The first two also played a key role as supervisors and planners of the Bardo and Sousse attacks.¹⁴

FAILED TAKEOVER OF BEN GARDANE

In early March 2016, the Islamic State attempted to conquer the Tunisian border town of Ben Gardane, as well as some smaller villages in the surrounding area. The purpose was to extend the arm of IS across the Tunisia-Libya border so that it could, as in Iraq and Syria, say it had broken yet another border. According to a local Tunisian journalist, Naji al-Zairi, the planning for this takeover allegedly began in late December 2015¹⁵ and is believed to have taken place largely at Ghandri's house in Sabratha.¹⁶ Manita was to be the proto-provinces leader, Abdelkaoui its sharia judge, and Gandhri its treasurer.¹⁷ Also similar to the way it operated in Iraq and Syria, IS would attempt to coopt local tribes and marry into their families.¹⁸ Economically, it would mainly rely on the robust smuggling business between the two borderlands. Chouchane and Fezzani would remain in Libya to continue acting as overseers of the broader Tunisian contingent and plan activities and attacks inside Tunisia.

On the day of the attack, March 7, IS activated sleeper cells, while other cells crossed the border from Libya and began an assault on the gendarmerie and army barracks in Ben Gardane. A group also took to loudspeakers to explain to the locals what was going on.¹⁹ According to a local witness, IS said, "Don't worry. We are the Islamic State. We are here to protect you from this non-believer government."²⁰ Moreover, IS fighters created a checkpoint and started questioning people in passing cars and checking individuals' IDs. IS even killed a customs official at one of these stops.²¹

Although it was highly thought out and organized, this plan failed, because the local population pushed back against IS. Their resistance also provided

more space and legitimacy for the Tunisian military to kill and flush out the remaining IS elements from the city. Allegedly, residents even began throwing stones at IS fighters.²² This was a shock to IS, since Ben Gardane was infamous for the number of foreign fighters who had joined up with IS and its predecessors there in the past. Abu Musab al-Zarqawi even supposedly stated that, “if Ben Gardane had been located next to Fallujah, we would have liberated Iraq.” But the failed takeover of Ben Gardane was a surprise and disappointment, which further degraded IS’s network in Tunisia and its support command in Libya. Afterward, Manita and Chouchane were dead, Abdelkaoui and Fezzani had been arrested, and Gandhri was on the run.

CONCLUSION

Tunisia has been in the crosshairs of the Islamic State. Not only has IS conducted operations against its security infrastructure and terrorist attacks on tourists to cripple its economy; it has also sought to take over Tunisian sovereign territory. While Tunisia has degraded IS’s ability to conduct terrorist attacks and thwarted its attempted takeover of Ben Gardane, the jihadist group is very adaptive. Furthermore, many Tunisians are still within IS’s ranks in Libya. What happens now that IS’s territory in Libya has dissipated will provide answers to the questions of how this could affect the trajectory of the Tunisian contingent and what it hopes to accomplish back in its home country. This is likely not the last we have heard from IS in Tunisia.

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Islamic State in Yemen

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PREPARED STATEMENT

THE ISLAMIC STATE is present in Yemen and will likely remain so for the foreseeable future. That reality may well lead U.S. policymakers to see Yemen as a front in the counter-Islamic State fight. That would be a mistake. Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) remains the real threat in Yemen, and international counterterrorism efforts ought to focus on that group, despite its skillful efforts to stay below the radar.

The Islamic State needs a footprint in Yemen so that it can claim to be a global Salafi-jihadist movement. The group's assertion that it is the legitimate authority over Muslims requires that it actively develop a presence across the Muslim-majority world. Yemen is critical terrain for the Islamic State because of its position on the Arabian Peninsula—the birthplace of Islam—and the al-Qaeda presence there. While the Islamic State is unlikely to be able to establish a solid base in Yemen, it will retain a meaningful presence there that will support its narrative and compete with al-Qaeda for leadership of the global Salafi-jihadist movement. It will almost certainly lose that competition in the long run, however.

YEMENI BATTLEFIELD

Yemen is a central front for the Salafi-jihadist movement because of its appearance in early Islamic literature and its physical location. One of the hadiths—reports describing the words or actions of the Prophet Muhammed—prophesies that an army of twelve thousand will rise from the Aden-Abyan region in southern Yemen and give victory to the forces of Allah. Transnational Salafi-jihadist groups like al-Qaeda, therefore, have sought to set con-

ditions for the rise of this army in Yemen. The country itself sits on a nexus of trade and smuggling routes from the Horn of Africa and through the Gulf of Aden. It also borders Saudi Arabia, which makes it a staging ground for Salafi-jihadist terrorist attacks against the kingdom.

Al-Qaeda has had sanctuary in Yemen for decades. It began supporting Yemeni Islamist groups in the early 1990s, backing mujahedin who returned from Afghanistan in a fight against the socialist South Yemen government. Osama bin Laden and other al-Qaeda leaders cultivated relationships with leading Salafi-jihadist Yemenis that grew into a base for al-Qaeda, whose operatives used the country as a logistics and planning hub to move between Afghanistan and East Africa. AQAP, the group's Yemen-based affiliate, has established safe havens inside Yemen and is now a leading node within the al-Qaeda network.

The Islamic State core group in Iraq and Syria has identified Yemen as a space for expansion since the declaration of the Caliphate in June 2014. The late IS military commander Omar al-Shishani mentioned Yemen among eight other fields of jihad in the group's celebratory video that month calling for the end of borders that separate Muslims.¹ Yemen was also one of the first Islamic State branches that IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi recognized in November 2014.² The announcement that IS was in Yemen seemed premature at the time, though its victories in Iraq and Syria had driven support globally for the group.

RISE OF THE ISLAMIC STATE IN YEMEN

The conditions in Yemen grew increasingly favorable for the Islamic State in fall 2014 and spring 2015. The United States, partnered with the Yemeni military, had sustained military pressure on AQAP since 2012. U.S. airstrikes also degraded AQAP's leadership in winter and spring 2015, removing key al-Qaeda voices from the battlefield.

The dynamics of Yemen's civil war have opened the possibility of a sectarian schism of the sort that benefits the Islamic State. A Zaidi Shiite group, the Houthis, seized power in the capital and targeted its political enemies, who were largely Sunni and included prominent Salafi voices. Many Salafi religious leaders fled the country in the wake of this successful uprising, creating a gap in local religious leadership. The Houthis' political ally, Yemen's former president Ali Abdullah Saleh, is also Zaidi, as is a portion of his support base. The factions opposed to the Houthis are Sunni and are supported by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. The civil war remains based on local power dynamics, but it has opened a possible sectarian fault line that could expand, playing in the Islamic State's favor.

IS leadership in Iraq and Syria directed and supported the effort to expand into Yemen in this period. It commissioned a Saudi Arabian national, Bilal al-Harbi, to gather pledges of allegiance to the Islamic State.³ Harbi was in direct communication with the core leadership by September 2014 and was probably behind the new Yemeni group's decision to pledge allegiance to IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi that month.⁴ He would become the leader of the Yemeni branch. It is quite probable that the core group deployed additional individuals from Iraq and Syria to Yemen, similar to the way in which it built the Libyan branch.

The Islamic State made its initial inroads into Yemen through Salafi-jihadist clerics and defections from AQAP. A prominent AQAP-affiliated cleric, Mamun Hatim, was one such cleric who displayed support for IS.⁵ He probably facilitated an Ibb-based recruiting network for the group, though he remained connected to AQAP as well.⁶ The Islamic State's appeal produced a preliminary surge of support. It offered more money than AQAP, held the narrative of victory based on its success in Iraq, and offered membership in a global community.⁷ The group's call to immediate action differed from AQAP's cautious and tempered approach.⁸ The Islamic State grew primarily where AQAP was recruiting and not attacking, possibly drawing on the frustrations of AQAP supporters who wanted to get in on the action.⁹ Some of its cells (*wilayat*, or provinces) also split from AQAP.¹⁰

The group brought its usual playbook to Yemen: driving sectarian warfare to break the state and mobilize the Sunni behind the Islamic State. Its first major attacks in Yemen struck two "Houthi" mosques in Sana, Yemen's capital,¹¹ its militants attacked Zaydi targets throughout spring and summer 2015. The group shifted its main effort from sectarian attacks to targeting the Saudi-led coalition forces and the Yemeni government and military forces as they began to rebuild the central Yemeni state in south Yemen. It launched four simultaneous suicide car bombs against coalition and government sites in Aden on October 6, 2015.¹²

PROSPECTS OF THE ISLAMIC STATE IN YEMEN

Despite these initial successes, the Islamic State's strategy is failing. It uses violence at levels outside of Yemeni norms, has a foreign leadership body in Yemen, and refuses to work within local customs. Its targeting of noncombatants, particularly through the mosque bombings, is far outside the acceptable norms in Yemen, generating backlash. AQAP, by contrast, avoids civilian casualties and has issued formal apologies when its attacks, such as a May

2012 suicide bombing at a military cadet parade, have provoked a public outcry. The Islamic State's leadership and leadership style are also alienating to Yemenis. The Islamic State, unlike AQAP, does not have a local Yemeni face. Top leaders are Saudis, who have refused to work through local channels or within tribal customs, creating friction with local leaders.

The group's approach to Yemen has splintered its supporters. In December 2015, Yemeni members issued a public denouncement of the Yemeni leadership in two letters rejecting Bilal al-Harbi and his inner circle.¹³ The 101 Yemeni members, among them senior leaders, reaffirmed their allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi but cited the leadership's "wrongful" dismissal of Islamic State soldiers, its failure to provide resources for a battle, and its overruling of a sharia decision about a regional commander. The challenge to the command failed, but its impact on IS operations is clear. The Islamic State had eight active cells in Yemen at its peak in 2015. Only two—one in Aden-Abyan and the other in Hadramawt—have claimed attacks in 2016.

The Islamic State will not displace AQAP or gain wide support in Yemen without a fundamental change in its manner of operations or in Yemeni society. Its efforts to drive sectarianism have largely failed, though the rhetoric of Yemeni political and military leaders is increasingly along sectarian lines. Complete government collapse in both Sana and Aden might not be sufficient for IS to gain strength because of the local authorities' resilience. While the defeat of AQAP would drive Salafi-jihadist support to the Islamic State, current counterterrorism operations are unlikely to defeat AQAP.

THE THREAT FROM YEMEN

Yemen is vital—but not to the global fight against the Islamic State. The group will, of course, continue to claim victory and validation, even from retaining its current footprint in Yemen. The Yemeni branch does not, however, provide vital resources or capabilities to the core group, nor is it likely to become a key front even should AQAP be defeated. Removing AQAP from the battlefield will probably require eliminating those conditions in which the Islamic State would flourish in Yemen as well.

The real enemy to the United States in Yemen is AQAP. It operates with sensitivity to the local environment that has enabled it to build a support base. It has the capabilities to conduct mass-casualty attacks, both within Yemen and against the U.S. homeland—the Islamic State's bomb-making cells initially belonged to AQAP. In short, U.S. policymakers must focus on the challenge from AQAP and avoid being drawn into a counter-Islamic State fight in Yemen.

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Zaidi Shia movement. Islamic State cells sustained regular small-scale attacks against Houthis during the spring of 2015 and a June 17, 2015, coordinated suicide attack in Sana that the Islamic State claimed struck four Houthi targets in the capital. See the following reports by Alexis Knutsen: "ISIS in Yemen: Fueling the Sectarian Fire," AEI Critical Threats Project (American Enterprise Institute, March 20, 2015), <http://www.criticalthreats.org/yemen/knutsen-isis-yemen-fueling-sectarian-fire-march-20-2015>; "2015 Yemen Crisis Situation Report: March 22," AEI Critical Threats Project (American Enterprise Institute, March 22, 2015), <http://www.criticalthreats.org/yemen/yemen-crisis-situation-reports-march-22-2015>; "Ramadan Bombings in Yemen: Part of ISIS's Global Strategy?" AEI Critical Threats Project (American Enterprise Institute, June 17, 2015), <http://www.criticalthreats.org/yemen/knutsen-ramadan-bombings-part-isis-global-strategy-june-17-2015>. See also Joshua Koontz, "Desknote: The Growing Threat of ISIS in Yemen," AEI Critical Threats Project (American Enterprise Institute, May 6, 2015), <http://www.criticalthreats.org/yemen/koontz-desknote-growing-threat-isis-in-yemen-may-6-2015>; Tasnim News Agency, "Yemenis Injured in Sana'a Terrorist Attacks Transferred to Iran for Treatment," March 23, 2015, <http://www.tasnimnews.com/english/Home/Single/693138>; and "Saudi Foreign Minister Warns of Saudi Intervention in Yemen if Peaceful Solution Is Not Reached," Almasdar Online, March 23, 2015, <http://almasdaronline.com/article/69894>.

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13. For analysis of the letters' contents, see Bill Roggio and Thomas Joscelyn, "Divisions Emerge within the Islamic State's Yemen 'Province,'" *Long War Journal*, December 23, 2015, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/12/divisions-emerge-within-the-islamic-states-yemen-province.php>.

Governance

■ AYMENN AL-TAMIMI

PREPARED STATEMENT

THAT THE ISLAMIC STATE presents itself as a state project should by now be a familiar notion, and within the “central” provinces (*wilayat*) of IS in Iraq and Syria, the project has achieved its most sophisticated stage in the realization of a governance system foremost embodied by *diwans* (“departments”), responsible for various aspects of administration, which emerged following the announcement of the Caliphate on June 29, 2014. The Diwan al-Taalim, for instance, is responsible for the education system, managing schools and devising the curriculum to be taught. It also oversees the provision of public services, such as water supplies and road maintenance, while the Diwan al-Hisba takes on a variety of other interesting functions, including the enforcement of Islamic morality in public, consumer protection, and even the granting of permits for people to leave IS territory temporarily.

The functions of *diwans* may overlap at times; thus, regulation of Internet use may fall to both the Diwan al-Hisba and Diwan al-Amn. That said, not every bureaucratic body is known as a *diwan*. The Hijra Committee, for example, oversees the arrival of new migrants to IS—even providing financial assistance for those who cannot meet expenses but know someone within IS who can vouch for them—as well as managing IS border crossings, such as in the northern Aleppo countryside village of Dabiq, through which businessmen and drivers can visit IS territory for a limited time. Dabiq is better known for being featured in apocalyptic Islamic State propaganda as a show-down site between IS and the West, and has an IS magazine named for it.

The existence of the IS administrative bodies is hardly unprecedented,

at least on paper. The first incarnation of IS's predecessors who claimed to be a state—the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), declared in October 2006—had two cabinets of government ministries, the first announced in 2007 and the second in 2009. These cabinets included some ministries overlapping with the present-day *diwans*, such as ministries for oil, health, and public security. In practice, however, these ISI ministries amounted to little in terms of governance, even though documentary evidence emerging from the period shows a developed internal bureaucracy and criminal organization adept at generating revenue within areas of operation, as well as limited dependence on foreign donors. Indeed, the limitations in governance were acknowledged by ISI itself, in a treatise the group published by Sharia Committees head Abu Othman al-Tamimi, titled “Informing the People about the Birth of the Islamic State of Iraq,” which invoked the precedent of the Prophet, whose enemies far exceeded him in knowledge and capabilities when he set up his first state entity following the *hijra* to Medina.

As part of its claim to be the Caliphate, demanding the allegiance of the world's Muslims and desiring the conquest of the entire world, IS has sought to expand beyond Iraq and Syria, giving an impression of territorial control. This impression is most apparent in the declaration of official affiliates in the form of new *wilayat*, deriving from declarations of allegiance to IS from the areas in question. The Middle East and North Africa region was the target of the first major wave of IS expansion announced in November 2014, with *wilayat* declared in Sinai, Libya, Algeria, Bilad al-Haramayn (Saudi Arabia), and Yemen. As the sites of official provinces of IS, one might expect these areas to display signs of IS governance, mimicking the system in Iraq and Syria. In fact, the picture suggests realization of IS governance in these provinces is limited; the most successful initiative so far has been in Libya, but, even there, IS's fortunes have varied over time.

Generally speaking, a significant obstacle to the realization of IS governance in the provinces beyond Iraq and Syria has been the lack of real and contiguous territorial control. For comparison, note that IS governance in Iraq and Syria gradually became more complex. With the development in Syria of a network of strongholds and contiguous territory over the first half of 2014, centered on the city of Raqqa, and then with the seizure of Mosul and other cities in Iraq in June 2014, the territory came to span the borders and served as an important basis for the caliphate declaration. In at least two of the IS provinces, however—the Algeria province (*Wilayat al-Jazair*) and Bilad al-Haramayn (*Wilayat Nejd*, *Wilayat al-Hejaz*, and *Wilayat al-*

Bahrain)—one cannot seriously speak of any real territorial control, and it is doubtful the original motivation behind accepting allegiance pledges to form these provinces could be seen as achieving territorial control and implementing governance. Rather, the Algeria province primarily seems to have symbolic value as a renowned historic arena of jihad, besides presenting a chance to poach affiliates of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Only very sporadic reports emerge of IS activity in Algeria, mostly relating to attacks on the Algerian army. The importance of Bilad al-Haramayn, of course, lies in its being home to the two holiest sites in Islam at Mecca and Medina. While IS has carried out a number of attacks in Saudi Arabia and expanded the scope of operations into Kuwait, claiming a suicide bombing there targeting Shiites, this points only to the existence of terrorist cells, not territorial control or governance.

A more developed case, though not approaching a meaningful level of governance comparable to Iraq and Syria, is that of IS Sinai, which evolved from the pledge of allegiance of Ansar Beit al-Maqdis (Supporters of the Holy House). The Sinai affiliate has been able to conduct a number of hard-hitting attacks targeting the Egyptian security forces, and it placed the bomb that downed a Russian airliner taking off from the Sharm al-Sheikh resort. The Sinai affiliate controls no major strongholds or significant contiguous territory in the peninsula, however. Documentary evidence mainly points to its distributing statements to the local population, such as warnings against cooperation with the Sisi regime or such-and-such individual on the grounds that he works with the regime, rather than administrative documents such as one sees from Iraq and Syria. Meanwhile, the Sinai media wing mostly advertises military operations and executions of spies, only occasionally featuring governance in what might be deemed proto-*hisba* activity, with the Hisba Department and Islamic police confiscating and destroying illicit goods like cigarettes and drugs. A more recent photo series also featured a medical clinic, but the exact location was not given, and it seems probable it is a facility set up to provide treatment for the Sinai affiliate's own fighters.

The situation in Yemen arguably provided an ideal environment for the growth of IS, with the chaotic conditions of a civil war and Sunni-Shiite sectarian tensions culminating in the takeover of the capital, Sana, by the Zaidi Shiite Ansar Allah (Houthi) movement, which is supported by Iran. In addition, one could read an October 2014 statement by al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) as sympathetic to IS in its denunciation of the idea that the latter was a movement of *khawarij* (Kharijites, referring to a sect

in early Islamic history renowned for extremism) and its call for solidarity in the face of the coalition alliance against IS. This statement might have led IS to believe it could win over elements within AQAP to develop affiliates in Yemen. For at least three months after the official declaration of Yemen as part of the IS provinces, however, there was no evidence of IS activity there; then statements began to be distributed in the name of various IS provinces within Yemen, primarily making clear the intent to target Houthis with mass attacks. This was also a theme in the IS *nashid* (hymn), “Oh Son of Yemen.”

The evidence for IS governance in Yemen is limited, and it appears the fortunes of the IS affiliates in this regard were likely hurt considerably by internal dissent that came to light in December 2015, when dozens of members, including several high-ranking officials, rejected the overall *wali* appointed by IS over Yemen. This ultimately led to an intervention by the IS Distant Provinces Administration, which expelled from the ranks those perceived to be the ringleaders of the conspiracy, with a further statement expelling those who persisted in their dissent. How many abandoned their dissent is not clear. As with the Sinai affiliate, the advertised material mainly points to military operations—which have also targeted the Persian Gulf–led coalition forces, particularly in the southern port city of Aden. From Aden, documentary evidence also points to attempts by IS members to impose Islamic law, but the evidence is poorly crafted and amateurish. Also as in the Sinai, a photo series emerged of a medical clinic, supposedly under the Diwan al-Siha, but this clinic actually appears to be meant for the treatment of IS fighters. Thus, IS administrative structures that exist in Yemen mainly seem directed toward internal management of the ranks, rather than governance over the population.

The remaining case to consider is that of Libya, which has seen much more successful IS governance develop than the other affiliates in the Middle East and North Africa. Originally, IS governance in Libya was concentrated in the city of Darnah in eastern Libya, which, to be sure, was never controlled entirely by IS. This administration developed out of a pledge of allegiance to IS by a local jihadist group called Majlis Shura Shabab al-Islam, which moved quickly in October 2014 to set up institutions in Darnah mimicking the IS bureaucratic system in Iraq and Syria, such as an Islamic court and Diwan al-Hisba, under the moniker of “Cyrenaica province.” A Diwan al-Taalim branch also emerged in the area, and documentary evidence attests to the existence of a Diwan al-Dawa wa al-Masajid (responsible for religious outreach and control of the affairs of mosques). This presence in Darnah city

was destroyed, however, in June 2015 by the Mujahedin Shura Council of Darnah and Its Suburbs, which is linked to al-Qaeda; and since then, IS has been unable to reclaim a foothold in the city.

Further out to the west, IS has been able to consolidate territory on the Mediterranean coastline based around the city of Sirte, which, unlike Darnah, is a true stronghold of IS, falling under its Wilayat Tarabulus (Tripoli province), while the easternmost towns on that stretch of territory are defined as part of Cyrenaica province. In part, the dominance of IS in the Sirte area originated in the defection to it of local Libya Ansar al-Sharia networks that had already been involved heavily in governance, going as far back as June 2013.

Considerable documentary evidence points to a sophisticated governance system in the Sirte area along the lines of what is observed in Syria and Iraq, including a functioning judiciary (Diwan al-Qada wa al-Mazalim) that deals with matters ranging from marriage contracts to real estate; an Islamic police force; a Dawa and Masajid branch responsible for outreach to the population and control of the affairs of the mosques; repentance programs and sharia sessions as part of a cooptation of local personnel structures; conciliation initiatives; and the introduction of the *zakat* taxation system (falling under the Diwan al-Zakat wa al-Sadaqat). The Sirte area, therefore, represents the most developed IS governance project outside of Iraq and Syria; it is thus hardly surprising that Adnani mentioned the city alongside Mosul and Raqqa in a speech released in late May 2016 that partly attempted to hit back at the coalition's claims of progress against IS on account of territorial losses. Indeed, IS control of the Sirte area is coming into doubt in the face of rival local forces beginning to direct their efforts against it.

Elsewhere in Libya, IS has found itself a military combatant in Benghazi against forces loyal to Khalifa al-Haftar, while a more covert presence was maintained in Sabratha, to the west of Tripoli city, as part of the running of a suspected training camp for militants, only to be targeted by U.S. airstrikes in February 2016. Meanwhile, the Fezzan province that represents Libya's third major region has shown no sign of governance projects, and, as with Algeria province, information has been very sporadic.

In short, IS's ability to realize governance (*tamkin*) has been very limited thus far in the wider region beyond Iraq and Syria—an observation that has implications for IS's credibility on the global stage, particularly in appealing for support from the wider jihadist movement. Since IS puts such great emphasis on being a state, the lack of success in replicating elsewhere its

administration in Iraq and Syria may hurt its appeal in the long run. This absence of effective governing initiatives may also have affected the central leadership's calculations in terms of willingness to declare new *wilayat*. Although operations have been officially claimed in both Somalia and Tunisia, for instance, IS notably has not declared a province in either of these places, perhaps because the central leadership realizes a failure to show its development as a state rather than just a terrorist threat will make the declaration of new provinces seem like little more than cheap propaganda ploys.

Ideology

■ COLE BUNZEL

RAPPORTEUR'S SUMMARY

AS MANY HAVE OBSERVED, a special relationship exists between the ideology of the Islamic State and the founding ideology of Saudi Arabia—Wahhabism. The relationship is most evident, and most acute, in the Islamic State's declared provinces in Saudi Arabia. The group's leaders describe the country as “the land of God's oneness” and “the land of association and dissociation,” in reference to some of the key concepts of Wahhabi doctrine. They would never describe it as “Saudi Arabia,” which refers to the Al-Saud family, whom they reject as apostate unbelievers. In the Islamic State's imagery, the Al-Saud are the “al-Salul,” a name referring to an early opponent of the Prophet Muhammad who pretended to be a Muslim.

THE ISLAMIC STATE IN SAUDI ARABIA

The Islamic State's official presence in Saudi Arabia goes back to November 2014, when Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announced the establishment of new “provinces” in several countries. Since then, the Islamic State has carried out attacks in the name of three distinct Arabian provinces: Nejd, in central Arabia; Hejaz, in western Arabia; and Bahrain, in eastern Arabia (not the island country by that name). In his announcement, Baghdadi outlined a strategy for Islamic State attacks in the kingdom. The plan called for attacking, first, the Shiites, who make up about 10 percent of the population; second, the Saudi regime and security forces; and third, Westerners. The ultimate goal of the three-tiered approach was, of course, to topple the Saudi regime and transform the aspirational Arabian provinces into a

reality. This is the near opposite of the strategy followed by al-Qaeda in its failed uprising in Saudi Arabia between 2003 and 2006, which focused on Western targets.

The Islamic State's campaign has adhered to Baghdadi's strategy, with the Shiites and Saudi security forces suffering the brunt of its attacks. Since November 2014, five major attacks have been carried out on Shiite mosques in the Eastern Province, in the form of either suicide bombings or shootings, and one suicide bombing has taken place against an Ismaili Shiite mosque in the southern region of Najran.

As for the government, one very deadly suicide bombing was carried out against a security forces mosque in the Asir region, in August 2015, as well as numerous drive-by shootings against police stations and security patrols and several targeted assassinations of security forces personnel. Many of the targeted assassinations have been carried out by family members of the victims—usually cousins killing cousins. One such murder took place in September 2015 outside the northern city of Ha'il, where two militants filmed themselves killing their cousin. Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, the official spokesperson of the Islamic State, celebrated this murder in a public statement delivered the following month, describing the act as "more dear to us than tens of car bombings."¹

Thus far, Baghdadi's strategy has yielded mixed results. The attacks have been persistent but limited in effect. As of June 2016, the overall pace of attacks has not slowed. In April 2016, the Islamic State released its first official video from Saudi Arabia, in the name of the province of Nejd, which depicted the targeted assassination of a military official in al-Dawadimi, near Riyadh. In May 2016, the semiofficial Saudi press reported that over the past year the kingdom had suffered an average of one Islamic State attack every twelve days.

Meanwhile, a security crackdown has undermined the Islamic State's capabilities in the country and put its networks in Saudi Arabia on the defensive. Despite the frequency of attacks, the press has also reported promising news: many of the Islamic State's networks in the country have been disrupted, and many attacks have been thwarted. Back in May, for example, police raided two Islamic State safe houses near Taif, and the leader of the al-Dawadimi attack was arrested. The Saudis hailed the arrest as particularly significant, as the captive is considered to have been the main go-between with the Islamic State leadership in Syria and Iraq. But just how significant this arrest truly is has yet to be seen. For the time being, the Islamic State threat to the Saudi regime remains persistent, but it is by no means existential.

ISLAMIC STATE IDEOLOGY AND SAUDI ARABIA

While the Islamic State's ideology is informed by a variety of influences, the most prominent and significant is that of Wahhabism, the historically severe form of Sunni Islam indigenous to Saudi Arabia. Founded by a preacher named Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahhab, it emerged in central Arabia during the mid-eighteenth century. Ibn Abdul Wahhab and the Al-Saud family formed a state that eventually went on to conquer most of the Arabian Peninsula.

Wahhabism, as its enemies have long called it, is a purist movement that emphasized the "proper" worship of God. While Wahhabis generally do not use the term Wahhabi to describe themselves, preferring "Salafi" or "Muslim," they do recognize that their movement is distinct. They describe it with such terms as "the mission of the Sheikh Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahhab" and "the Nejd mission."

Historically, the Wahhabi movement, however one calls it, was exclusionary and aggressive: all Muslims professing a different version of Islam were considered unbelievers who deserved to be shunned, hated, and fought. Wahhabism was seen by the majority of the Islamic world of the eighteenth century as a terrible heresy, in much the same way as the Islamic State is seen by the Islamic world today.

The official religious establishment in Saudi Arabia espouses a much softer form of Wahhabism than before and refuses to acknowledge the Islamic State's appeals to the more radical Wahhabi heritage. The kingdom's scholars strongly repudiate the group, declaring its members to be "Kharijites," a reference to an early radical Muslim sect that excommunicated and fought fellow Muslims. Yet since the Kharijites were, according to many Wahhabi scholars, still Muslims, the accusation of Kharijism does not rise to the level of excommunication. Only a few Saudi religious scholars have declared the group to be apostates. The Saudi scholars have further distanced the kingdom's own interpretation of Islam from that of the Islamic State by arguing a foreign agenda motivates the actions of the latter group. The scholars emphasize the purported influence of Muslim Brotherhood ideology, for example, or allude to some supposed Israeli support. In general, the scholars, along with the government, have sought to downplay the link between the kingdom's Wahhabi history and the Islamic State's current ideology.

THE ISLAMIC STATE AS HEIR TO THE WAHHABI MISSION

Yet the doctrines of Wahhabism, along with the early state Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahhab helped build, are revered by jihadists today. In fact, many of the Islamic State's printed texts are simply the foundational texts of Wahhabism. This appropriation of textual resources is a clear challenge to the Saudi kingdom for the title of true heir to the Wahhabi mission.

Sometimes the Islamic State stakes its claim to Wahhabism explicitly. A recent essay by an Islamic State supporter, for example, claims it is "the true continuation of the mission of God's oneness, the mission . . . of Sheikh al-Islam Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahhab." The supporter goes on to say, "It has become clear who is the true heir of the mission of Sheikh al-Islam Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahhab."² Many such comments also appear in the group's official literature.

In many other cases, the Islamic State claims the rights to Wahhabism in less direct terms. This is the norm in the speeches of its leaders. In October 2015, for example, the group's official spokesman, Abu Muhammad al-Adani, posed a question to the Saudi people: "Has association and dissociation died?" "Association and dissociation," or *al-wala wa al-bara*, is one of the key doctrinal concepts of Wahhabism. It enjoins Muslims to associate exclusively with fellow Muslims and dissociate entirely from all others, including those deemed false Muslims. Adnani was alluding to the abandonment by modern Saudi Arabia of the traditionally harsh form of association and dissociation characteristic of earlier Wahhabism. In the jihadist view, the Saudis preach a corrupt form of Wahhabism that allows for alliances with Western countries, is tolerant of the Shiites, and does not dare wage jihad to expand the ambit of true Islam.

The notion that the Saudi regime has betrayed Wahhabism in favor of a more flexible and tolerant version of Islam is a prominent feature of the Islamic State's propaganda directed at Saudi Arabia. The message is meant to appeal to Saudis of a more radical Wahhabi bent. The Islamic State accuses the rulers of Saudi Arabia of being insufficiently Wahhabi.

ISLAMIC STATE WAHHABISM AND SAUDI WAHHABISM

While the Islamic State's ideology depends heavily on Wahhabism, it also departs from traditional Wahhabism in several important respects. Most important, the majority of Saudi Arabia's Wahhabis have never aspired to

establish a global caliphate or expressed apocalyptic fervor. Saudi Wahhabis have also been stalwart supporters of the Al-Saud family, whom the Islamic State considers heretics.

The contrasts with modern Saudi Wahhabism are even more pronounced. It is often assumed that Saudi preaching of Wahhabism worldwide has directly contributed to the growth of jihadist ideology. While to some extent this is probably true, the relationship between jihadism and Wahhabism is more complex. Saudi funding and outreach efforts serve to promote the modern Saudi version of Wahhabism, which, while highly intolerant of other forms of Islam, does not typically lead to violence. In fact, most Wahhabis, or Salafists, are politically quietest. The Islamic State's appeal to Wahhabism is important, providing the group with historical and theological depth. Yet the promulgation of Wahhabism does not necessarily lead to the growth of jihadism.

Rapporteur's summary prepared by Nour Aburish.

NOTES

1. Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, "Qul lilladhina kafaru sa-tughlabun," *Muassast al-Furqan*, October 13, 2015.
2. Gharib al-Sururiyya, "Muhammad ibn Salmam wa-awdat al-wathaniyya li-Jazirat al-Arab," *Muassasat al-Battar*, April 30, 2016, p. 5, <http://up.top4top.net/downloadf-120jdskl-rar.html>.

Foreign Terrorist Fighters

■ JEAN-FRANCOIS PACTET

RAPPORTEUR'S SUMMARY

THE TOPIC OF FOREIGN fighter activity in the provinces is becoming increasingly relevant as the Islamic State core continues to experience major territorial setbacks. Three areas of interest must be highlighted when framing the issue of foreign fighters in the provinces. The first is the various emerging trends of foreign fighters coming from France; the second is the timing of this discussion and the potential ramifications of a secured Turkish border on the foreign fighter presence in the provinces; and the third is the policy implications that the foreign fighters in the provinces pose for the French and for the world at large.

It is helpful to frame the French foreign fighter issue with some basic figures. Since the declaration of the Caliphate, France has begun surveillance of close to 9,300 of its citizens. Two-thirds of those under surveillance are under age twenty-five, and 40 percent are women; and nearly half have been individuals reported by family members using the hotline system instituted by the government. Two thousand have been confirmed as having had active links to IS, and many have fought and died in core IS territory. Six hundred are confirmed as still operating in core IS territory. These last are clearly the ones attracting the most attention from French authorities.

Where the picture becomes more obscure regarding these French foreign fighters is with regard to their different backgrounds. A significant portion of the French citizens fighting with IS come from impoverished backgrounds with stark experiences of disenfranchisement from society. Many, on the other hand, have come from more privileged backgrounds and seem to have been rigorously engaged with society. What is worrying is that there is no simple type of box into which these foreign fighters fit.

Officials have, however, been able to distinguish two specific trends among the French foreign fighters. The first is that most are not interested in the provinces but are, rather, obsessively focused on IS core. A significant majority travel to Syria and Iraq, and even those who do go to the provinces generally do so after going to core IS territory; direct travel to the provinces from Europe is rare. The second major—and quite alarming—trend is the accelerated radicalization of the foreign fighters preceding departure. The evolution from mainstream, to extreme, to departure was expected to take close to a year. The growing distribution of technological propaganda, however, has caused the time this evolution takes increasingly to shrink.

Overall, the kinds of individuals who are leaving France to fight on behalf of IS are difficult to classify. But the predominant focus on the core by those who do leave, with the provinces playing only a marginal role, begs the question of what will happen as the core continues to experience setbacks and travel to it becomes drastically more difficult. Success by the coalition in securing the Manbij crossing could significantly alter the way the provinces are used by IS core and the foreign fighters. The question that then arises is twofold: will IS core likely adopt the strategy of shifting focus from the core to the provinces, and will foreign fighters feel induced to travel to and fight in the provinces if this shift happens?

IS's strategy in the provinces has not worked well so far. The access to oil and resources has proved quite limited. Its management decisions in the provinces, as well as its relationship-building efforts with tribes, have yielded poor results. With so much of the allure for the foreign fighters centralized on the idea of a core "caliphate," recruiting them to the provinces would presumably be much more difficult than recruiting them to the core territories.

By weakening IS core, therefore, the international community will be weakening the provinces. France has already observed fewer foreign fighters traveling to Syria and Iraq as a result of the weakening of the core. The proposition that as one gap closes another one will open does not seem to pertain here. It is worth mentioning, however, that from the French perspective Libya remains a serious concern because of the massive number of Tunisian foreign fighters who constitute IS's force there.

The third and final point to consider when discussing the foreign fighter phenomenon and its relationship to the provinces has to do with policy.

Five key policy implications are worth considering in greater detail:

1. The international community should continue to put pressure on IS core territory because, as stated earlier, hurting the core helps combat the IS presence in the provinces.
2. The coalition should be aware of the symbolic dimension of the core IS territory, specifically Raqqa. Letting the regime or Russian forces retake Raqqa would send the wrong message.
3. France has already begun to pass laws regarding foreign fighters, but the most effective ones come out of on-the-ground intelligence, like that gathered through the hotline program in France.
4. If IS takes advantage of the migrations of these foreign fighters, it could be very dangerous for the world. So far, the group apparently hasn't done the best job of doing so.
5. The international community should not forget about al-Qaeda.

Rapporteur's summary prepared by Evan Charney.

Financing

■ KATHERINE BAUER

PREPARED STATEMENT

IT IS NOW WELL KNOWN that the Islamic State has effectively exploited local resources as well as the people under its control to become one of the best-financed terrorist organizations of all time. With the announcement that the Islamic State was recognizing franchises in eight countries across the Middle East, Africa, and Asia has come concern that the so-called IS core in Syria and Iraq would share both this wealth and its fundraising expertise with its new affiliates. Evidence of such transfers exists, but it is limited.

Nonetheless, some of the IS provinces were partially motivated to affiliate themselves with the Islamic State based on the perception (and sometimes the promise) of additional resources. Furthermore, the provinces are unlikely to be able to recreate the dynamics that allowed the Islamic State to enrich itself so quickly after taking territory. Their potential reliance on support from the core is an additional liability for an organization that is already experiencing financial constraints.

ISLAMIC STATE CORE FINANCING

Since the Islamic State took over vast swaths of territory in Syria and Iraq in the spring and summer of 2014, it has posed an unprecedented and nontraditional counterterrorist financing challenge, due both to the size of its budget—reportedly close to \$2 billion in 2014¹—and its ability to derive the vast majority of its revenues from the territory it controls. Traditional counterterrorist financing tools, such as targeted financial sanctions, are important for shaping the counter-IS financing narrative and for exposing support networks, but they have been largely ineffective against the Islamic State’s territory-based financing

methodology. In the decade following 9/11, an international regime was developed to counter al-Qaeda-style financing, disrupting international transfers by deep-pocket donors and setting standards for transparency in charities to guard against the diversion of funds to terrorist organizations.

In Iraq and Syria, IS effectively took advantage of multiple preexisting dynamics to enrich itself quickly after taking territory. These included a high concentration of natural resources and established smuggling networks needed to monetize them; a sizable population and sufficient economic activity to tax and extort; and opportunities to loot valuable goods, including machinery and weapons, as well as bank branches, from which it is reported to have taken as much as \$1 billion.

The Islamic State did not develop this expertise overnight. For more than a decade, its predecessors, al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and the Islamic State in Iraq, had acted according to the strategic decision to derive revenues locally to avoid foreign dependence and direction. According to a RAND Corporation assessment of recovered financial documents,² these practices included sales of stolen goods, black-market fuel sales, and large-scale extortion, closely resembling an organized-crime operation engaged initially in petty criminality and later in extortion of the oil sector and contracting. The same review suggests AQI revenue sources were volatile, and funds were expended mostly at the local level, with little surplus made available to the organization. This is likely because of the emphasis on rapid expansion; functioning as a terrorist organization and an insurgency with aspirations of statehood is expensive.

Likewise, despite its prosperity in 2014, IS's considerable expenses created vulnerabilities that the government of Iraq, along with the U.S.-led Counter-ISIL Coalition, has effectively exploited. One well-known example is the August 2015 cutoff of Iraqi federal government salaries to employees in IS-controlled territories, which hindered the Islamic State's ability to derive revenue from them through extortion. Previously, employees could collect their salaries just outside IS-controlled territory, and IS would tax the funds at a rate of 10–50 percent once they reentered. Additionally, a change in military tactics beginning in November 2015 allowed greater use of coalition airstrikes to target oil wells and refineries, as well as oil convoys, reducing the Islamic State's oil revenue by an estimated 30 percent.³ Finally, perhaps the greatest impact on IS's bottom line has been the territorial losses: as of mid-2016, the Islamic State had lost nearly half the territory it had once controlled in Iraq and 20 percent in Syria, meaning fewer local resources—including people—to extort.

To date, financial countermeasures have been successful enough that the Islamic State's ability to maintain its objective of "the Caliphate" and finance its provinces has been called into question—an important development, although much work still needs to be done. Even with reports of cuts in salaries, benefits, and more-restricted access to financial institutions, the Islamic State clearly has not yet been economically defeated.

PROVINCE FINANCING

Given the unique dynamics in Syria and Iraq, the provinces are unlikely to replicate the financial success of the core. Nonetheless, provinces that control, or aim to control, territory will face the same challenges. The groups that pledged allegiance to the Islamic State, most of which were preexisting organizations, already had funding mechanisms. The provinces' forerunners were primarily locally financed through crime, smuggling, extortion, and kidnapping for ransom. They generated significant revenue but were unable to support and sustain a state-building project like that of the Islamic State.

For groups like IS Khorasan and Ansar Beit al-Maqdis/IS Sinai, the perceived wealth of the Islamic State played a significant role in their decisions to ally themselves with the organization. In fact, Taliban members are reported to have been enticed to join IS Khorasan based on the belief that IS bestows on their fighters laptops, pickup trucks, and ample salaries sufficient to support their families. Other organizations are swayed by a supposed *quid pro quo*, in which they pledge *baya* in exchange for financial support. Ansar Beit al-Maqdis, for example, demanded funding and weapons from the Islamic State before pledging allegiance to the organization in November 2014.⁴

We know some of these promises have been realized: in February 2016, Special Presidential Envoy for the Counter-ISIL Coalition Brett McGurk testified that IS has, indeed, provided financial support from its base in Iraq and Syria to its branches in Libya, Sinai, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia.⁵ In May, the U.S. Treasury Department designated Libya-based Salmi Salama Salim Sulayman Ammar, IS Sinai's representative in Libya, under counterterrorism sanctions for transferring hundreds of thousands of dollars from Libya to the Sinai Province.⁶

LIBYA AND SINAI PROVINCES

Previous to its designation of Ammar, the Treasury had acted against other seasoned facilitators operating in Libya. Hassan al-Shaari, a high-profile IS member who was trained by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, was designated in Septem-

ber 2015 for providing financial support to the organization. From late 2012, after being released from an Iraqi prison and returning to his home country of Libya, Shaari provided hundreds of thousands of dollars to several individuals, including senior IS member Tariq al-Harzi (aka Abu Umar al-Tunisi).⁷ Harzi, himself a designee, arranged for IS to receive approximately \$2 million from a Qatar-based IS financial facilitator, according to the Treasury.⁸

In fact, based on the large presence of seasoned facilitators in Libya, many assert the current province there could function as a fallback option for the Islamic State if the group were pushed out of Iraq and Syria. Geographic and demographic challenges make it unlikely, however, that the province could take and hold territory without financial support from the core. Rather, Libya seems better suited as a regional hub than a strategic fallback, as evidenced by the growing ties between Libya provinces and the Sinai Province.

With regard to oil resources and overland smuggling networks, those in Libya are unlikely to be as profitable as those in Syria. Although established smuggling routes are in place, Libyan geography does not facilitate the same access to commercial buyers as in the Levant. Overland routes are possible, but they are unlikely to be significantly profitable because of the greater land area that needs to be covered and the higher costs and risks associated with overland smuggling.⁹ Recent indications that the Libya and Sinai provinces are in the process of developing a sea route are troubling, as it could facilitate highly profitable smuggling in the region. Recognizing these challenges, IS Libya has been more focused on targeting Libyan oil infrastructure, some of which has been controlled by competing militias, rather than taking it over.

As for demographic limitations, the population under IS control in Libya remains small in comparison to that under the core, which means the number of people available to tax and extort is relatively small. Nonetheless, taxation methods similar to those used in Iraq and Syria were deployed in Sirte.¹⁰ Furthermore, kidnapping for ransom, which served as an important source of funding for IS Libya predecessors, is unlikely to produce any significant funds, as the opportunities to kidnap high-value targets are diminishing. As the security situation continues to deteriorate, Westerners and other potentially high-value personnel are less likely to travel to the region—a phenomenon that occurred in Iraq as well.

The Sinai Province has been perhaps the most eager affiliate to receive funding from IS core in Syria and Iraq and is likely the most dependent, especially since the Egyptian government crackdown along the Egypt-Israel/Gaza border has significantly decreased the smuggling activity in the

area from which the province and its predecessors profited. It is important to note that, despite Sinai's reliance on core funding, its funding needs are relatively small. Sinai Province does not control territory and only boasts about a thousand fighters. Its financial demands are small enough that the core should be able to sustain it without putting heavy strains on its own finances.

CONCLUSION

While coalition efforts have yielded tangible successes, continued efforts to detect and disrupt Islamic State financing will be crucial in the ongoing fight. Three areas in particular will determine the coalition's success on the financial front.

The first is the Islamic State's use of banks and exchange houses just outside IS-controlled territory to get access to the formal financial sector. U.S. officials have said exchange houses are likely important points for such access. In December 2015, the Central Bank of Iraq banned from its currency auctions more than one hundred exchange houses suspected of being used by the Islamic State. Regional regulators can take similar action by identifying and taking out of commission both formal and informal financial institutions that are being exploited by the Islamic State.

The second area is the detection and disruption of funds transfers to Islamic State provinces outside Syria and Iraq. Although the provinces have preexisting methods of financing themselves, identifying external funding streams serves as a valuable source of intelligence for mapping out ties between the core and provinces, while exposing them will make it harder to send and receive funds.

The last area important to the coalition's success on the financial front is the ongoing targeting of oil infrastructure under IS control and attempts to rebuild it. This would not only help to contain the Islamic State; it would also pressure the Assad regime, IS's primary external partner for oil sales.

NOTES

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6. U.S. Department of the Treasury, “Treasury Designates al-Qaida, al-Nusrah Front, and ISIL Fundraisers and Facilitators,” press release, May 19, 2016, <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl0462.aspx>.
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9. Extractive industry expert Geoff Porter has written extensively about the challenges for jihadist groups looking to monetize Libyan natural resources, as compared to such IS efforts in Syria and Iraq. See, e.g., his “Terrorist Targeting of the Libyan Oil and Gas Sector,” *CTC Sentinel*, February 27, 2015, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/terrorist-targeting-of-the-libyan-oil-and-gas-sector>, and “How Realistic Is Libya as an Islamic State ‘Fallback?’” *CTC Sentinel*, March 17, 2016, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/how-realistic-is-libya-as-an-islamic-state-fallback>.
10. The *Washington Post* reported that as Sirte was being liberated from IS control, black stamps with the words “Office of General Services” in English and in Arabic were found on the walls of shops and businesses, indicating a business was registered with Islamic State tax authorities. Sudarsan Raghavan, “Inside the Brutal but Bizarrely Bureaucratic World of the Islamic State in Libya,” *Washington Post*, August 23, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/murders-taxes-and-a-dmv-how-isis-ruled-its-libyan-stronghold/2016/08/22/2ce3b8f4-5e60-11e6-84c1-6d27287896b5_story.html.

Social Media

■ DAVEED GARTENSTEIN-ROSS

PREPARED STATEMENT

ANALYSTS HAVE INCREASINGLY sought to understand what social media can tell us about militant groups' strengths and capabilities. The use of social media as a tool to gain a better understanding of violent nonstate actors (VNSAs) is still in its infancy, and methodologies and best practices are still being developed. While social media-based analysis has yielded at times great insight into the Islamic State, it has also led to some analytical pitfalls, as IS has determinedly exaggerated its successes and skillfully disguised many of its setbacks. This article focuses on using social media as a tool for assessing local support for IS.

Social media cannot be the sole lens through which analysts seek to understand militant groups, and, indeed, analysts should be cautious of overreliance on it as an explanatory tool. The natural habitat of most VNSAs is in the shadows rather than the limelight. When IS began to loudly advertise its campaign to pry away al-Qaeda's affiliates, many analysts interpreted the latter's relatively muted response and dearth of social media support as signs that IS was highly likely to gobble up al-Qaeda's network. This has not occurred, and, in fact, al-Qaeda has been highly effective at clamping down on nascent IS support within its ranks. Al-Qaeda and its allies have militarily punished groups that had the temerity to break away and join IS.¹ The early overestimation of IS's likely ability to break up al-Qaeda's network should serve as a cautionary tale, and it is one reason social media-based analysis should always be cross-checked against all other available sources of information, including local/regional press reporting, academic analyses, and on-the-ground sources.

Since, as mentioned, the use of social media as an analytical tool for

understanding VNSAs is still in an early developmental stage, the methodological notes I provide here should be understood as a building block other researchers can further develop, and one I also intend to improve upon. I assess seven distinct analytical metrics relevant to how social media can speak to local support for IS:

1. ***IS's claims of local control and local support.*** In contrast to al-Qaeda's strategy of making itself appear to be an organic extension of local Islamic movements, IS's strategy uniquely depends on militarily dominating other groups.² Consequently, for IS, claims of local control and support are often synonymous. At the least, these IS claims provide an indication of where the group intends to stake out a new presence, and they signal what it believes to be its key local strengths.³ IS's claims of local control often do not match the reality, however. For example, as this paper discusses, its claim of control over the Libyan city of Darnah proved to be a fabrication.
2. ***The credibility of IS's leadership.*** Local support for IS often depends on how robust and credible the local/regional leadership cadre is. Analysts should look for signs of the relative competence of this cadre. Often when local leadership has deficiencies, signs will appear on social media. Well over 10 percent of the fighters in IS's Yemen branches, for example, have defected while leveling complaints about their leadership. These defections were posted to social media, with al-Qaeda pushing many of the exposés about IS's Yemen branches.
3. ***Support for IS in local/regional jihadist organizations.*** Some of IS's crucial regional expansion has come by enticing entire organizations (e.g., Boko Haram and Ansar Beit al-Maqdis) or splinters from existing groups (al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb's central division) to join it. Thus, measuring support for IS within existing regional groups can help to project future IS expansion. This support is often expressed on social media, as was the case for pro-IS voices embedded in al-Qaeda-aligned organizations in places like Tunisia and Somalia. Before pledging allegiance to IS, Boko Haram clearly telegraphed on social media the existence of pro-IS sentiments within the group.⁴
4. ***IS kinetic actions.*** While al-Qaeda-affiliated organizations might spend an extended period focusing on *dawa* and low-level *hisba* violence, as was the case for Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia, IS tends to prioritize announcing

itself through attacks.⁵ Thus, claims of a growing IS presence should be cross-checked against kinetic actions undertaken by militants.

5. **Local resistance to IS's presence or rule.** Anti-IS uprisings can be monitored on social media and are highly relevant to determining the group's level of overall local support.
6. **Local sentiment.** Both Internet and social media penetration are often quite low in areas where IS has a strong presence. For example, Internet penetration is about 42.7 percent in Nigeria, 31.7 percent in Egypt, 28.1 percent in Syria, 17.8 percent in Libya, 11.3 percent in Iraq, and 1.6 percent in Somalia.⁶ Low Internet and social media penetration can make it difficult to assess local sentiment, which is highly relevant but one of the more difficult categories to measure through social media.
7. **Local history.** As previously noted, the shadows are the natural habitat of most VNSAs. The history of a locality can help analysts understand when other militant groups could block or impede IS's inroads, even if these groups don't naturally protest its presence at the outset.

I now detail how social media analysis can shed light on support for IS in several theaters, and how IS has sometimes used social media to manipulate perceptions of its strength. I will examine the case studies of IS's branches in Yemen and the Libyan city of Darnah before turning to concluding thoughts.

YEMEN

IS's expansion into Yemen has come against a backdrop of civil conflict and growing chaos. In 2014, tensions intensified between President Abdu Rabu Mansour Hadi's government and the Houthis, a movement based in northern Yemen that follows the Zaidi school of Shia Islam. In September 2014, Houthi militants moved into the capital of Sana. In February 2015, the Houthis, backed by forces loyal to deposed president Ali Abdullah Saleh, dissolved the parliament and raided the presidential palace, placing Hadi under house arrest. (Hadi managed to flee to Saudi Arabia in March 2015.) As the Houthis, backed in part by Iran, pushed toward the last major pro-Hadi bastion in the coastal city of Aden, Saudi Arabia and Sunni government partners from the Gulf Cooperation Council launched a military offensive aimed at driving back the Houthis and restoring Hadi's government.

At the outset, the Yemen conflict appeared to play to IS's strengths, as the group has experienced inflaming tensions with Shiites while portraying itself as

the defender of the Sunni population. The group's toxic leadership, however—which can be discerned from social media coverage of the conflict—has made it unable thus far to take full advantage of the apparent opportunity.

In October 2014, a group calling itself Supporters of the Caliphate in the Arabian Peninsula released a statement pledging *baya* to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. The group vowed to confront the Houthis with a “fierce, brutal, and crushing response beyond limits” and threatened to behead and burn all Houthis.⁷ In November 2014, Baghdadi accepted the pledge of allegiance from IS's supporters in Yemen.⁸

IS's Yemen branch created an official media wing soon after its creation.⁹ IS supporters created an Arabic-language hashtag on Twitter to promote the group's new Yemen presence. IS members in Yemen quickly faced pressure from outside supporters to mobilize to action in the country (see metric number 4, above, regarding IS kinetic action). In a statement posted to a jihadist forum in January 2015, an IS media operative urged IS to “seize this opportunity” and defend Yemen's Sunnis “before it becomes too late.”¹⁰ The operative said Yemen's Sunni tribes would soon be defeated if IS did not come to their rescue.

In March 2015, IS announced the creation of separate administrative units in Yemen. On March 2, it released a statement announcing the establishment of Wilayat Lahij, a territory that encompasses southwestern Yemen. IS vowed the Houthis' actions would “not go without accountability and punishment,” and said it would carry out attacks against the Houthis “in the upcoming days.”¹¹ Masked IS gunmen distributed leaflets of the statement in the governorates of Lahij, Hadramawt, Ibb, Shabwa, and Sana.¹² After distributing the statement in Lahij, IS deployed dozens of gunmen who patrolled the streets with rocket-propelled grenade launchers and machine guns.¹³ These actions were designed to advertise IS's presence through a show of force.

Soon after the leaflets were distributed, IS made good on its threats against the Houthis. On March 20, 2015, suicide bombers attacked two mosques frequented by Houthis in Sana, killing 137 in the deadliest terrorist attack in Yemen's history. The group followed this attack with a barrage of propaganda highlighting its expansion into Yemen.¹⁴ Since then, IS has claimed several additional operations against Houthi mosques.¹⁵

But despite this audacious entry into Yemen, IS's poor local leadership and a more powerful regional jihadist group would constrain its growth. Al-Qaeda's network in Yemen—in the form of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Penin-

sula (AQAP)—dwarfs that of IS. Much of IS’s propaganda and social media output has focused on convincing observers it could challenge and eclipse AQAP. On April 24, 2015, for example, the group announced the creation of Wilayat Sana, releasing a nine-minute video entitled “Soldiers of the Caliphate in the Land of Yemen.”¹⁶ The polished video portrayed IS in Yemen as a cohesive military organization, with some twenty members in matching camouflage conducting training exercises in synchrony.

But despite a handful of high-profile defections from AQAP to IS, there is no sign that the Islamic State is eclipsing AQAP’s strength in Yemen, and, in fact, al-Qaeda has been able to help publicly air much of IS’s dirty laundry in the country. The most prominent defector to IS was Mamun Hatim, who held a leadership position in Ibb province and served on AQAP’s shura council and sharia committee. Unfortunately for IS, Hatim—who became a significant figure in IS’s Yemen propaganda—was killed in a May 2015 U.S. drone strike.¹⁷ Another heavily publicized defection came in October 2014, when Supporters of the Caliphate in the Arabian Peninsula, believed to be composed of AQAP defectors, announced their shift in loyalty from AQAP to IS.¹⁸ Immediately after the group pledged to Baghdadi, hundreds of journalists based in Yemen received an email from an unknown sender informing them of the IS group’s existence. The email featured AQAP’s logo, along with the name of the new group, in an apparent attempt to foster the perception that a significant portion of AQAP had defected to IS.¹⁹

But the roster of defectors to IS was relatively thin, something that was readily discernible to analysts who looked beyond IS’s claims and examined the local history (see metric number 7) showing who the biggest regional jihadist players are. IS’s problems became apparent in December 2015, when seventy members and several senior leaders released a statement on Twitter announcing they were defecting from the group’s local governorate.²⁰ The statement did not renounce IS as an organization, but the defectors explained that their former governor (*wali*) had committed sharia violations and accused the *wali* of committing “injustice against the weak” and expelling foreign fighters.

This statement opened the floodgates and revealed the extent of discontent in IS’s Yemen ranks. Immediately after the statement came out, another defector released an article on Twitter outlining his reasons for leaving the group and calling on the seventy defectors to renounce their pledge of allegiance to Baghdadi entirely. IS adopted a pugnacious response, with IS sharia council member Abu Ubaydah Abdul Hakim al-Iraqi condemning the defectors. This

warning did little to curb the flood of defections. On December 24, more than thirty militants, including three senior officials, declared they would no longer obey the Yemen *wali*, and several days later, a former IS sharia official in Yemen released a thirty-minute video outlining numerous transgressions committed by the group, comparing IS's operations in Yemen to the "work of children who have not reached puberty and who have not participated in any jihadist work." Days after that, another twenty-four militants announced they were breaking away from IS's Yemen leadership. In all, since mid-December 2015, more than one hundred fighters have defected from the Yemen affiliate—a striking number, considering the Islamic State is believed to have fewer than a thousand fighters in the country.²¹

DARNAH, LIBYA

The case of IS in Darnah is a cautionary tale, revealing how the group's outsized propaganda apparatus can be used to inflate perceptions of its strength. This is one reason for the approach advocated here of examining multiple metrics to assess local support for IS.

In the spring of 2014, several hundred members of the Libyan-led al-Battar Brigade, which had been fighting on IS's side in the Syria-Iraq theater, redeployed to Darnah, long a hotbed of jihadist activity. There, they set up a group known as the Islamic Youth Shura Council (IYSC). At the time of IYSC's arrival in Darnah, several other jihadist factions, including Ansar al-Sharia and the Abu Salim Martyrs Brigade, already had firm roots in the city, and some perceived IYSC as an unwelcome newcomer.

IYSC immediately sought to demonstrate it was superior to other jihadist groups, militarily and religiously. The group introduced itself to Darnah residents in April 2014 by holding an ostentatious military parade in which militants toting rocket-propelled grenades and other weapons drove through the city's streets.²² Pictures of the parade were soon uploaded to IYSC's Facebook page, illustrating how the group integrated social media into its early messaging efforts in Darnah.

After announcing its presence in the city, IYSC took advantage of its messaging apparatus to draw attention to its growing influence. One tactic it used was to highlight individuals who had joined the group. From July to September 2014, IYSC posted lists of repentance statements on its Twitter and Facebook pages from former members of the Libyan security services who had "come voluntarily" to IYSC to atone for their sins.²³ These repentance statements were widely circulated on social media, receiving as many

as five hundred retweets in some instances. They left the impression that city residents were flocking to the group in droves.

IYSC also showcased its implementation of *hudud* punishments. The most prominent example came in August 2014, when the group released photos and video of an execution it had carried out in a Darnah stadium.²⁴ Other pictures posted to IYSC's social media accounts showed militants lashing residents of the city for consuming alcohol.²⁵ By circulating them, IYSC projected an image of power.

IYSC's messaging in the summer of 2014 set the stage for the group's pledge of allegiance to IS. In early October, IYSC posted videos and photos on social media of armed militants parading down the streets of Darnah, waving IS flags and chanting IS slogans.²⁶ In late October, Darnah residents gathered in public and pledged allegiance to IS, with IS online supporters circulating pictures and video of the event.²⁷ In this way, IS propagated claims of local control (see metric number 1), designed to foster the perception it had seized control of the city. The reporting by mainstream press outlets of IS's control of Darnah as fact demonstrates the danger of overreliance on social media reports.²⁸ In fact, an examination of Darnah's history (metric number 7) would reveal the city as divided among a variety of militant factions, including an umbrella group known as the Mujahedin Shura Council of Darnah and Its Suburbs, and the Abu Salim Martyrs Brigade, which was a major player in MSCDS.

These other militant groups would ultimately be IS's undoing in Darnah. Even before it pledged allegiance to IS, IYSC began launching attacks against fighters from the other factions and mounted a messaging campaign against them.²⁹ Tensions between IYSC and MSCDS escalated early in 2015 and came to a head in May, when an IYSC-affiliated preacher in a Darnah mosque said in a sermon that IS was the only legitimate force in the city. In response, MSCDS issued a "final warning" to IYSC,³⁰ which answered by killing a key MSCDS leader, triggering a bout of intense conflict. But IYSC's bark was more potent than its bite: just two weeks after the clashes erupted, IYSC militants were forced to withdraw from Darnah to the suburbs. The fact that MSCDS did not need to call in reinforcements to drive out IYSC shows the media had vastly overestimated the IS-affiliated group's control over Darnah. Social media now provided some indication of true levels of local support for IS, as Twitter was flooded with photos of locals replacing IS flags with the Libyan national flag and burning down the building where IYSC had housed its sharia court.³¹ In April 2016, the remaining IS forces in and around Darnah withdrew from the city.³²

CONCLUSION

The two case studies examined in this piece demonstrate both the potential and perils of using social media to assess IS's local support. IS social media propaganda cannot be relied upon in isolation; doing so is akin to relying on the Korean Central News Agency to understand developments in the Korean Peninsula. That is why I argue for analysis based on multiple metrics, incorporating evidentiary sources that indicate where social media alone can be misleading, as well as where it is revelatory.

Social media is not going away, nor are efforts by analysts to use it as a filter for understanding militant groups. This article proposes metrics for doing so. Over time, the methods and metrics for social media-based analysis of local support for militant organizations such as IS will surely be further refined and improved.

NOTES

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9. Observation by BBC Monitoring, December 10, 2014.

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13. “Da’esh Yu’lin An Thuhurihi al-Awwal fi al-Yaman (Wathiqah),” *Sanaa al-Taghyir*, March 2, 2015.
14. See, for example, Wilayah Sana, “Bayan Tabani al-Amaliyaat al-Istishhadiyya Dud Awkar al-Houtha,” March 20, 2015, <http://washin.st/2dOS6Fg>.
15. See, for example, Wilayah Sana, “Detonating a Parked Car Bomb against a House of Worship Belonging to the Polytheist Rejectionists, the Qubba al-Mahdi Husayniyah” (in Arabic), June 20, 2015.
16. Wilayah Sana, “Junud al-Khilafa fi Ard al-Yaman,” April 23, 2015, <http://washin.st/2ej7aO2>.
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Public Polling

■ DAVID POLLOCK

PREPARED STATEMENT

POPULAR SUPPORT IS LIKELY not the determinant of how the Islamic State gains or maintains power, but it is almost certainly a factor in that equation. Active support, passive sympathy, or at least prevailing acceptance from local populations would all intuitively make an IS takeover and subsequent control of a given territory more feasible and sustainable. Conversely, the loss of such popular backing or acquiescence, or the active hostility of a local population, would probably make it harder for IS to hang onto power in certain specific locations. Arguably, IS could then find it more difficult to extract revenues and recruits and perhaps be compelled to divert attention and resources from jihad to internal patrols. Such a situation might even, especially in combination with outside pressure, help overthrow or expel IS from at least some portions of its far-flung provinces.

Whatever the degree of validity ascribed to the preceding commonsense preamble, trying to decipher the precise role of popular support or opposition in the rise or fall of IS provinces begs a first question: how can we even know how much, or how little, popular support IS in fact enjoys? From a methodological standpoint, two quite different cases present themselves. One is the measurement of popular attitudes in areas either already under IS rule or violently contested by the group. The second is the measurement of those attitudes in areas outside IS rule but potentially vulnerable to its encroachment—in general, predominantly Muslim territories, often, though not always, near some established IS foothold.

In the first instance—that of IS-ruled or actively disputed areas—any attempt to measure local public opinion empirically faces obvious, very

tough challenges. Insecurity, intimidation, and outright mortal danger are the plausible if not predictable risks to would-be researchers, and to any willing informants, in such inhospitable terrain. As a result, while anecdotes about life under IS proliferate, precious little reliable or useful hard data is available about it.

But not zero data. In fact, some notable efforts have been made to surmount these daunting obstacles, chiefly in the major original IS strongholds of Syria or Iraq. A few intrepid experts have actually conducted long-distance—admittedly imperfect, yet intriguing—surveys in Mosul and parts of Syria, using cellphones, Facebook, or other relatively anonymous means to contact respondents. Usually the samples are not textbook random ones but referral (also known as “snowball” or “chain-link”) samples, in which a few selected and trusted interviewers solicit information from an expanding network of contacts suggested by previous participants.

To be sure, controls must be applied to reduce the unavoidably incestuous or self-selected nature and the built-in biases of such techniques—for example, degrees of separation, demographic quotas, and, most of all, explicit acknowledgement of their limitations. Frequently, given the practical difficulties, the samples are not only nonrandom but also small, typically comprising a few hundred, although online surveys may attract thousands of responses.

The results of such IS-frontline field research in Syria and Iraq probably give some hints about local support or opposition to that organization in other provinces. Surveys conducted in Mosul by Iraqi pollster Munqith al-Dagher, who freely concedes their methodological limitations, suggest that many ordinary Sunni Arabs forced to live under IS rule are still opposed to anti-IS bombing raids by the coalition and fearful of “liberation” by Shiite or Kurdish militias. The point is that even if they do not support their IS overlords, some may prefer “the devil they know” to the danger and uncertainty of either urban warfare or conquest by another contending faction.

Similarly, in Syria, small-scale private surveys of anti-IS Arab communities on the front lines also indicate widespread opposition to Kurdish militias, which are fighting against IS, too, but are nevertheless broadly distrusted. Less than a third of those Arab respondents support any alignment with the Kurds against the common IS foe. A slightly larger minority, but still less than half, recognize that the dominant Kurdish party must play some role in a post-IS Syrian political configuration. In other words, the enemy of their IS enemy is mostly not their friend.

The anecdotal evidence is also mixed. Civilians fleeing besieged Tikrit,

Ramadi, or Fallujah offer varying accounts of their previous lives under IS and of their reasons for escaping. They are as likely to focus on the fear of getting caught in the crossfire as on the brutality or deprivation of IS rule. The prisons and mass graves IS leaves behind are grim mementos of the coercive aspect of its control. Yet some people reportedly continue to come and go from Mosul nearly every day, venturing out from IS territory and then, more-or-less voluntarily, returning to it.

The lessons for other IS provinces appear to be as follows: the Islamic State rules mainly by intimidation or acquiescence, not by active popular support. But even if many residents are not active IS supporters, they are unlikely to rise up in active opposition. And a crucial issue for these subjugated populations is the classic “compared to what” question: is the plausible local alternative to IS likely to be any better for them?

Solid anecdotal reporting from analogous but non-IS areas, especially African al-Qaeda or similar jihadist-contested zones, tends to support this intimidation interpretation. In February 2016, the author heard convincing testimony to this effect from other participants in the Marrakech Security Forum on “Countering Jihad in Africa.” Rahma Dualeh, the Somali Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) coordinator for the European Union mission in Nairobi, noted that even now in Mogadishu, where al-Shabab has been largely pushed out, many residents obey its declared school or other holidays rather than the official ones—just in case those jihadists return with a vengeance. Similarly, the senior Chadian police commander asserted that nearly 100 percent of all the cigarettes sold in the Sahel are smuggled—and that al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) or related groups control the smuggling routes. Without another option, all the smokers in the region are almost literally addicted to accepting at least some jihadist presence in their lives.

Fortunately, and very surprisingly, the picture is much brighter in many neighboring areas that have not fallen under IS control. Here, substantial survey data is available, especially from polls supervised by the author in September 2014 and September 2015, along with other polls conducted by Pew, Gallup, Zogby, and several other polling organizations in the past two years. Without exception, these polls show that in key Arab Sunni societies like Egypt, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Kuwait, or the United Arab Emirates, a mere 5 percent or less voice any approval for IS. Significantly, this is as true for the youth cohort as for its elders. Moreover, this tiny proportion of popular sympathy for IS has actually decreased rather than increased during the past two years.

These findings clearly belie the notion that IS somehow represents the wave of the future for Sunni Arabs. One would never know it from the headlines about sensational terrorist incidents, but a popular uprising on behalf of the Islamic State is just plain implausible in any Arab country. If a power vacuum opens in a particular location, IS may try to fill it. But it will not be able to do so on the strength of public support.

That's the good news. The other news is that the marginal popular support for IS contrasts sharply with the substantial backing for certain other jihadist groups in many of the same Arab societies. This does not include al-Qaeda, whose support has plummeted from the 40–50 percent range in the early 2000s to the 10–20 percent range today. But the Muslim Brotherhood, for example, still registers around 25–35 percent popular approval—even in places like Egypt or Saudi Arabia, or the UAE, where it has recently been outlawed as a terrorist organization. Nor does the minimal appeal of IS mean many Arab Muslims want to “interpret Islam in a more moderate, modern, or tolerant way.” That question garners just 20 percent or less support in most Arab societies polled. Popular support for sharia, conversely, tends to be around 80 percent.

The unmistakable inference is that one must measure support levels for particular groups, IS or otherwise, rather than for some abstract concept of Islamic fundamentalism or reform. And one should certainly not assume IS can trade on any underlying Salafi, sectarian, or similar sympathies to attract and maintain wide popular support. Among Arabs, at least, such an assumption would fly in the face of all the available hard data.

Turning to the non-Arab large majority of Muslims, the picture is again surprising, but in a less pleasant way. As measured in a handful of 2014–16 surveys, approval of the Islamic State is somewhat higher in several of these other societies, especially outside the Middle East. In Turkey, for instance, Pew polls show 8 percent expressing some sympathy with IS—a small minority, to be sure, but twice as large as in Arab polls, and representing several million Turks. In Pakistan, the situation is typically murkier. While very few there voice support for IS, the majority (62 percent) say they “don't know” about it. From past experience with Pakistani polls, this probably means many would simply prefer not to answer such a politically charged question.

Further east, in the equally large Muslim societies of Bangladesh or Indonesia, or in the small but active Muslim enclaves in the Philippines, polling data on this very timely question is, sadly, very scarce. Impressionistic yet

reasoned analysis by Assaf Moghaddam and others suggests potential for IS to recruit supporters in that wide region may well be nontrivial. Firm conclusions, though, will have to await further evidence.

But it is in Muslim West Africa that polls show the highest percentages of popular sympathy for IS, although only a few surveys from a few places have been reported: in Senegal, 8 percent express support for the group; in Burkina Faso, 10 percent; and in Nigeria, among the roughly half of the population who are Muslims, an unsettling 20 percent. The local IS affiliate in Nigeria, Boko Haram, is notorious for mass atrocities, including kidnapping, rape, and murder, so that number must give pause. A compelling explanation for it is beyond the author's expertise; but an educated guess is that the deep sectarian cleavage in that country (in this case, Muslim/Christian instead of Sunni/Shiite) may have something to do with the relatively high popular appeal of such an extreme movement.

Last and least in this geographical overview, in terms of sheer numbers, are the Muslim communities of Europe or the Western Hemisphere. Here, it must first be said that no truly reliable polls are really available, if only because sampling frames are so indeterminate. No one even knows with any confidence or precision how many Muslims reside in most of these places. Still, based on the author's review of many such purported polls, a very rough estimate is that the proportion of Muslims harboring some sympathy for IS may be in the same range in Europe as in Nigeria: as high as 20 percent.

This very soft "statistic" is also quite surprising, yet it seems to have a real-world reference. The per capita flow of foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) to IS from various European countries suggests active IS supporters are a higher proportion of Muslims there than in any other locales. And perhaps not just in Europe; a recent conference paper pointed out that among the countries with the very highest ratios of FTFs per capita is tiny Trinidad and Tobago, with 84 known cases out of barely 1 million people. That island nation shares this dubious distinction with Kosovo, whose numbers on both counts are in the same ballpark—but Kosovo's population, unlike Trinidad and Tobago's, is overwhelmingly at least nominally Muslim.

This brief excursion into far-flung Muslim minority communities should serve as a reminder that the FTF recruitment issue is distinct from that of local popular support in IS provinces, where IS maintains a physical, territorial presence. And it is also distinct from the issue of popular support in neighboring, mostly Muslim, societies that may or may not be ripe for IS intervention. To take but one striking example, Tunisia has the highest per

capita FTF ratio of any Arab country. But this does not necessarily mean Tunisia has the highest overall proportion of IS sympathizers in its total population. On the contrary; it may even mean that proportionally more Tunisians go off on jihad abroad precisely because they feel unwelcome in their own country. The fact is that, as with many other related questions, we just don't know the answer to this conundrum.

What general conclusions can we draw from this overview? First, of course, much more research is required. Second, one big thing we should already understand, but too often don't, is that IS has precious little popular support in any Arab society polled and probably only a little more among the non-Arab Muslim majority worldwide or Muslim minority communities in the West. Third, this means two important, contrarian, and encouraging other things: the Islamic State is not in any position to capture new territory by winning hearts and minds. Nor is it likely to incite or inspire mass violence anywhere.

And where IS does rule today, either in its core or remote provinces, that almost certainly does not reflect legitimacy or public support. Rather, its control comes from either pure coercion or passive acquiescence, in the absence of any practical alternative options for the local population. We should not expect any popular uprisings against existing IS domination. At the same time, we should not fear a popular push to put IS in power anywhere—or a major popular backlash against our continuing efforts to uproot it.

Sinai Province

■ MUHAMED SABRY

PREPARED STATEMENT

THE MILITANT ORGANIZATION Ansar Beit al-Maqdis (ABM) currently refers to itself as Sinai Province and has declared its subservience to the core Islamic State, based in Iraq and Syria. Nevertheless, the two do not have close ties. This is partially demonstrated by the group's late declaration of allegiance to IS, which only occurred after the so-called Islamic State had already existed for several years. In reality, ABM's Bedouin members, who represent the vast majority of the organization, ultimately reject the principle of operating in a subsidiary role to any entity. The group is in large part motivated by its experiences of subordination to the Egyptian state, whose relations with the Bedouin community were characterized by decades of neglect, marginalization, ignorance, and racism. Thus, ABM is unlikely to so easily leave itself open to a reiteration of this experience.

ABM's major attacks before joining IS emphasize the group's motivating belief that it is resisting oppression, and that its views stem from traditional Bedouin values that prioritize freedom from restriction by any authority outside the community. ABM's repeated attacks on the Israel-Egypt border, most notably the 2011 attack near Eilat, and major operations against the Egyptian security forces that killed dozens demonstrated a desire for operational independence in the Sinai Peninsula.

HISTORY OF ANSAR BEIT AL-MAQDIS

The lawlessness following Egypt's January 25 revolution in 2011 allowed ABM to reach a new level of effectiveness. During this period, it obtained arms and economic capital, and most of its current or future members smuggled goods, fuel, and arms to the Gaza Strip, which created a strong smuggling economy.

In the aftermath of President Mohamed Morsi's fall in 2013, the military government cracked down on these smuggling operations, cutting off a vital economic pipeline for the community and inspiring ABM to exact revenge. With the uptick in Egyptian military operations and strikes on many IS-held areas, ABM decided to pledge allegiance to the group as an Egyptian province.

This move provided a large burst of publicity, pushing ABM into the international media. The new IS contacts also increased the professionalism of the organization's online media content; these materials carried the IS slogan and were published on the central IS website. This rebranding has extended into the field; even as the alliance seems more strategic than ideological in nature, Sinai fighters have begun to carry IS banners during their operations.

Even so, many of those who joined the ABM after its pledge of allegiance to IS did so not on ideological or intellectual grounds, but to enact revenge on the Egyptian system. Many new recruits' businesses had suffered from losses, whether legal, such as agriculture, or illegal, such as smuggling.

That being said, a good number of Sinai youths have joined the ranks of foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq. Some have been killed in combat, while others continue to operate there. Meanwhile, ABM has gained its own foreign fighters, from a variety of countries, who have come to Sinai motivated by their ideology. Security forces have confirmed having found foreign fighters among dead and captured militants.

Nevertheless, this move toward rebranding as IS was not unanimously approved by the ABM leadership. Internal disputes have broken out within the group in Sinai, and its members have been divided between supporters and opponents of the pledge of allegiance to the parent organization in Syria and Iraq.

BASES OF STRENGTH

The geography of Sinai, a region on the Egyptian border characterized by mountainous desert, is one of the most important factors contributing to the strength of the rebranded IS. Sinai has remained relatively undeveloped for decades, and the current conflict zone features sand dunes and rugged desert areas. One of the most dangerous nests of IS insurgency is located in the south of the area, in Mount Halal in central Sinai. The rough terrain and lack of roads have made this a common area in which to concentrate forces.

To the north, the required absence of the Egyptian army from Area C, based on its peace agreement with Israel, has made this terrain similarly dangerous, as militants hide in agricultural fields spread across battle zones. The

army's previous lack of familiarity with Area C has caused major difficulties in pursuing gunmen because they are better aware of the terrain. In general, Ansar Beit al-Maqdis has used the geography of the Sinai Peninsula to considerable advantage.

GROUP IDEOLOGY

The core driver for IS in Sinai is a spirit of revenge, which is closely linked with Bedouin cultural feelings of neglect and oppression in their past dealings with the Egyptian regime. Bedouin culture requires a sense of revenge, even if it involves multiple generations. It is also very protective of land, homes, women, and property. Whenever police storm Bedouin houses, it is considered a violation of these sanctities, feeding back into the narrative of retaliation and revenge.

Muslim Brotherhood rule after the January revolution was considered the golden era for jihadist groups in Sinai with regard to their ability to spread and grow in both economic and armed strength. Religion-based extremist ideologies have arrived through foreign fighters to add to the mixture, leading to more violence in Sinai. As Egyptian authorities turned a blind eye to Sinai, sharia courts spread.

FOREIGN FIGHTERS

Besides the majority local Bedouin contingent, Ansar Beit al-Maqdis has drawn foreign fighters. These men are primarily motivated by ideology rather than revenge or economic issues. The Sinai smuggling networks have also played a major role in their induction into the fighting force, however.

Foreign fighters come from a variety of geographical locations and backgrounds. Africans, predominantly from Sudan, Somalia, and Eritrea, make up one of the most important contingents, although most originally arrived in Sinai as part of a human trafficking network to smuggle them across the Egypt-Israel border into Israel to look for jobs. Human trafficking is one of the most important types of smuggling conducted in Sinai.

While some do find work in Israel, many never reach the country, instead becoming targets for ransoming schemes. Individuals are shackled, tortured with electric shocks, beaten, and burned to death in attempts to force their parents to pay huge ransoms—as high as tens of thousands of dollars. Once the kidnappers receive the ransom money, the victims are sold to others, and the torture begins again. Others attempting to cross the border have died or been captured by Egyptian security.

This route has become increasingly restricted. Once military operations began near them, the borders became better controlled. Israel built an electronic barrier wall with cameras on the border in an attempt to crack down on human traffickers, and security forces have captured many of these smugglers, destroying the stores and homes they used to imprison and torture migrants.

Nevertheless, the remaining migrants have fallen into the trap of joining IS militants in Sinai, who claim to have freed them from the clutches of human traffickers by force of arms. IS members give them money and training and brainwash them with extremist ideology to wage jihad against infidels so they can enter heaven. The recruits are then featured in IS's video recordings posted online, announcing their intention to carry out attacks or suicide bombings against the army and police forces in Sinai. These migrants feel they have no alternatives; they are wanted in Egypt for illegally entering the country, and they can no longer enter Israel.

Because of its proximity to Gaza, IS in Sinai has also drawn a number of Palestinians. After Hamas cracked down on jihadist groups and adherents of *takfiri* thought (accusing other Muslims of heresy) in Gaza—most prominently, at the Ibn Taymiyyah Mosque—many of those implicated fled to Sinai through tunnels, aided by the freedom of movement permitted by the mountainous and desert terrain.

A lack of education, decaying sense of culture, decline of tribal elders' roles, and the high number of adherents to their *takfiri* ideology following the Taba attacks in 2004 drew followers to the views of these extremists. This new nucleus for their ideas included both Egyptians and Palestinians, who were fueled by the Arab-Israeli conflict, the Egyptian security forces' dealings in Sinai, and the relatively lawless environment after 2011. The extremists trained groups of Sinai Bedouin in new tactics and weapons use, such as how to carry out hit-and-run operations and how to exhaust regular military forces.

This group also brought in large quantities of weapons and cars smuggled from Libya and Sudan into Sinai and the Gaza Strip to sell, which earned it a lot of money. From time to time, security forces arrest Palestinians from various cities of northern Sinai who have illegally entered the country through tunnels or whose stay has expired without their returning to the Gaza Strip.

FUNDING

Islamist militants in Sinai rely on multiple sources of funding. Smuggling operations in Sinai provided a major source of income before the January

revolution and thrived afterward because of the subsequent chaos and lack of security. Most militants smuggled weapons to the Gaza Strip, in part as a religious duty to help their brothers in Gaza confront Israel. These acts also generated large sums of money from smuggling arms, fuel, and goods through the tunnels. Others participated in the human trafficking circles that generated ransom money.

Profits from these ventures buy the arms and ammunition used to confront the Egyptian security forces. They are often bought from neutral Bedouin, who, while not adhering to extremist ideologies, resent the Egyptian security forces' having destroying their smuggling businesses. Because gun ownership is part of life in the rugged landscape of Sinai, the presence of government forces actively attempting to dismantle the already arduous Bedouin lifestyle only reifies this perceived need for armed protection. Some of the top Bedouin smugglers are among the main elements funding the Sinai's militant groups because their business dried up after the destruction of tunnels, repeated raids on smugglers, and the demolition of their villas in the desert. Some smugglers have even fled to the Gaza Strip for fear of being arrested in Sinai. Besides incurring fear, this potential threat has caused severe resentment and indignation among otherwise neutral Bedouin against security forces, giving them incentive to facilitate the missions of radical militant and terrorist organizations with money and weapons.

These organizations also receive funding from the main IS organization in Syria and Iraq in return for their allegiance. Egyptian security forces have broadcast a recording of an armed element in Sinai discussing funding with one of the elements in Syria. The latter individual asked for recent news and commended the province's operations—most notably, the killing of twenty-five soldiers from the central security forces. He offered to facilitate travel to Syria by sending the Sinai-based affiliate a Syrian passport. The core IS member also claimed he had met Emir Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and told him about the effort of the brothers in Sinai, so Baghdadi gave him \$10,000 to pay for a video declaring allegiance from the land of Egypt to IS and its caliph, Baghdadi himself.

This phone call potentially marked the beginning of IS's financial assistance to Ansar Beit al-Maqdis after the pledge of allegiance. The influx of cash has been clearly visible in the strength and number of weapons used following the announcement, as well as the antitank and antiarmor launchers, anti-aircraft weapons, IED manufacturing workshops, and dozens of SUVs now in play.

Boko Haram

■ JACK GAINES

RAPPORTEUR'S SUMMARY

THE TERRITORY HELD BY Boko Haram is shrinking, yet the group's influence in the Lake Chad basin region is still strong. Despite losing ground, the group is not expected to disappear. Because this is its core territory where it originated, it will maintain significant local support. When the Islamic State is ultimately defeated, Boko Haram will probably drop any real support for it, but some members may maintain a token association, like a badge of pride.

The diminishment of Boko Haram's territorial control has been brought about mostly by the Multinational Joint Task Force, an organization consisting of troops from Benin, Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Nigeria. The task force manages the tri-nation area around Lake Chad in which Boko Haram operates. Its relative success in defending these border territories has been largely due to increased training, cross-border coordination, and better intelligence and oversight. Coordinating security and border management is vital because Boko Haram uses the borders to restrict its enemies' movements and conduct cross-border attacks.

The real concern is the Nigerian government's ability to balance forces among factions in the North and South. If the current pressure on Boko Haram continues, it will shrink down to a small, localized, criminal group that could then become manageable by local security forces. The struggle, though, is dealing with the factions in the Niger delta as well. Nigeria has to balance between the two; allow foreign forces to operate in its territory; or increase the size of its military. The third option is the least likely: Nigerian political elite prefer the military small because it has a history of overthrowing the government.

Keeping the military anemic, though, causes situations like that prevailing in the Nile delta, where piracy is increasing and groups like the Delta Avengers¹ push for their own rights, advantages, and money. This overextends the military as it deals with separate threats, keeping it and the country in a precarious spot. The gap in territory and security control allows criminal networks and terrorist groups, like al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), able to operate.

Since pledging allegiance to IS, Boko Haram has not increased its level of violence; the group was already more violent than IS. Rather, Boko Haram has increased the lethality of its attacks. The attacks are more coordinated, for example; the group has better bombs and suicide vests; and it has accomplished one thing IS wants to figure out: the use of female suicide bombers. In fact, its methods of convincing women to volunteer for suicide missions are seemingly beyond what the Islamic State is currently capable of or willing to do. This highlights the violent nature of Boko Haram, as compared to other groups.

LIBYA

For the Islamic State, I believe we have a strategic opportunity in Libya. Sirte is a symbol of IS's expansion; the group uses the territory for building alliances and spreading cells throughout North Africa and the Sahel. When Libyans take back Sirte and remove IS from the nation, it will be a major loss to the group—one that will be globally visible and undeniable from all sides of the conflict. Counter-ISIL communicators see the prospective liberation of Sirte as a major disruption to the group's "winner" narrative. Counter-ISIL communicators also see the loss as an opportunity to drive away potential recruits and support from the IS core in Syria and Iraq. Separately, IS has suffered a major document leak, exposing its networks for recruitment and its support networks for "lone-wolf attacks," foreign fighter routes, training, and more. So, we have a military defeat that stops IS expansion into Africa and an extensive document compromise that exposes the group's operations. The math in my head says this is a major strategic defeat that will help collapse the IS physical presence and damage its virtual outreach.

I believe the collapse of IS core will be sparked by the fall of Sirte in Libya. Within four months, the core will be in severe danger of total loss. Proxies like Boko Haram will separate or dissociate from it; IS will lose needed support; and the lack of money and recruits will prevent the core from sustaining itself.

The long-term follow-on challenge, as stated by Paul Cobaugh of Narrative Strategies, is the prospect that even if we defeat IS militarily, we'll still lose the war against extremist Islamic ideology because its adherents view the conflict as a holy war; in this jihadist ideology, we are killing Muslims defending their faith. If we don't employ our own narrative that explains the fight in our own, credible terms, we leave the narrative battlefield with the extremists uncontested.

Dr. Ajit Maan, the president of Narrative Strategies, recently stated that if we do not plan for the defeat of IS and, physically and ideologically, for the transition to stability, one extremist organization will replace another until the population's legitimate problems are addressed; but that will take time, and we have to be able to seize opportunities when they arise. Our narrative shouldn't "counter" a particular group but should offer an alternative future and vision that can be touched, seen, and heard simultaneously on the ground.

So, for the Islamic State overall, the challenge for strategists and policy writers is to plan and coordinate the strategic win, encourage people to envision an end to IS, and plan a replacement reality so that a new group does not fill the gap. This will help strategists and narrative managers visualize the group as a temporary thing, as opposed to a problem we will struggle with forever. Seeing an end to IS ensures we do not build a dependence on the terrorist group's long-term existence that will translate to a future lack of response when a more nimble, more deadly group emerges.

For the future, I recommend three actions, detailed below. The first is for intelligence, the second is for security, and the third involves ideology:

- **Expansion of intelligence-community research into both single threat indicators and cluster indicators for mapping networks and spotting potential threats.**
- **Expansion of security forces from observation and interdiction to include outreach and direct negotiation with at-risk people or groups.** German security forces exemplify this approach by contacting a person before he or she becomes a threat to the public. Through this outreach, potential perpetrators learn that they are under watch for possible terrorism involvement and concomitantly learn their options. Such outreach by security forces drives away the threat before it can culminate in an actual strike.

- **Development of education programs that help youth, starting at ages ten to thirteen, to spot, understand, and avoid recruitment and indoctrination by cult, gang, and violent extremist groups.**² Additionally, as extrapolated from the work of Columbia University professor Scott Atran, we must create more opportunities for youth to associate risk and glorification with causes that are not cult- or violent-extremist-oriented (e.g., fighting forest fires, working in foreign development, or engaging in crisis response to disasters). This would help shift those aggressive urges to fight for a greater cause toward society-building efforts.

Rapporteur's summary prepared by Omar Mukhlis.

NOTES

1. See the group's website, <http://www.nigerdeltaavengers.org/>.
2. Described in detail by Jack Gaines, "Communication Strategy for Countering Violent Extremism," http://www.academia.edu/6852253/Communication_Strategy_for_Countering_Violent_Extremism_v1.2.

The Caucasus

■ ANNA BORSHCHEVSKAYA

PREPARED STATEMENT

ON JUNE 23, 2015, official Islamic State spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani declared the formation of a new *wilayah* in Russia's North Caucasus. Never before had IS claimed territory inside Russia.

Adnani's announcement came just days after reports that thousands of Islamic militants from the Caucasus Emirate (also known as Imarat Kavkaz, or IK, Russia's main jihadist group) had formally pledged allegiance to IS. Imarat Kavkaz, or IS Caucasus in its post-allegiance status, had historically targeted primarily Russian officials, but it also took credit for a number of major attacks on civilians inside Russia, including in Moscow. The group existed primarily underground and financed itself through criminal activities. In May 2011, the U.S. secretary of state designated Imarat Kavkaz as a terrorist organization under Presidential Executive Order 13224. "Imarat Kavkaz uses bombings, shootings and attempted assassinations to provoke a revolution and expel the Russian government from the North Caucasus region," the State Department said.

Only two months before Adnani's declaration, in April 2015, Russian Special Forces killed Aliaskhab Kebekov, then the newest leader of Caucasus Emirate. Kebekov had reportedly sought to avoid suicide bombings and keep civilian casualties to a minimum. His death signaled a fundamental change in the North Caucasus, according to experts who travel to the region. Adnani's statement, coupled with Caucasus militants pledging allegiance to IS, signaled the decline of Imarat Kavkaz as an organization. IK's pledge to IS was all the more a departure for the group because, historically, IK had aligned itself more closely with the Taliban and al-Qaeda than with IS.

THE CAUCASUS AND THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR

Terrorist attacks within Russia have decreased in recent years. While Russia's Special Forces credit their efforts for this outcome, other analysts point to the fact that militants have simply left the region for Syria. Indeed, evidence exists that Russia's local Interior Ministry officials actively encouraged militants to go to Syria, especially in the run-up to the 2014 Sochi Olympics.

More recently, the International Crisis Group notes in a March 2016 report,¹ the Russian authorities have made some changes, and now, officially at least, they consider it a failure to allow someone to escape to Syria. According to the letter of the Russian law, it is illegal for individuals to participate in terrorist activities anywhere in the world where they endanger Russian citizens. To what extent the law is followed, however, is unclear. By some personal accounts, special services also sometimes offer individuals a choice between going to jail or joining IS to spy on their behalf, and some choose IS over a Russian jail.

RUSSIA'S HISTORY IN THE NORTH CAUCASUS AND THE RISE OF IMARAT KAVKAZ

Dokka Umarov, then president of the separatist Chechen Republic of Ichkeria (CRI), officially announced the establishment of Imarat Kavkaz in 2007. According to a 2014 IHS Jane's report on the subject,² Umarov's announcement "marked the culmination of the transition of the insurgency in Chechnya from a local separatist movement to a regional Islamist one." As expressed in an International Crisis Group report from two years earlier, "[T]he failure of [the separatists'] state-building project and the ruthless manner in which Moscow fought transformed the nationalist cause into an Islamist one, with a jihadi component."³ Indeed, the Caucasus Emirate is rooted in the sectarian conflict that has raged in Russia's North Caucasus over the past two decades. This conflict is a product of the collapse of the Soviet Union and of Moscow's efforts to assert control over this region. Moreover, in the larger sweep of Russia's history in this region, these efforts are hardly new.

Russia's long and complicated history in the Caucasus continues to influence the Russian government today. The Kremlin came to this strategically important region in the 1800s, with the goal of conquering it for the Russian empire. The resistance of the fiercely independent tribes and clans that dominated the North Caucasus became legendary, and it was significantly more difficult for Moscow to conquer them than other peoples at the time. The

chieftain Imam Shamil, the third imam of the Caucasus Imamate, which roughly spanned present-day southern Chechnya and part of Dagestan, featured prominently in the stories and legends of the resistance. Although Moscow finally won, North Caucasians never fully acquiesced to being part of the Russian empire and periodically rebelled when the state was relatively weak or distracted by other issues. Such rebellions occurred, to one degree or another, after the 1917 revolution, which briefly plunged the country into a civil war, during Stalin's brutal collectivization program of the 1930s, and during World War II. In fact, the Chechens declared independence under President Boris Yeltsin, when the Russian state was again at a weak point. The Kremlin always feared instability from this region.

Moscow historically controlled it through forcible relocations and expulsions. One critical example was Stalin's horrific deportations in late February 1944—during a period when the region's people were attempting to assert independence—under the false pretext of Nazi collaboration of approximately a dozen nationalities, including, predominantly, the Chechens, followed by the Ingush. An estimated one-third of all deportees died along the way. The deportations were vital to the very formation of the Chechen identity—before them, Chechens thought of themselves as belonging only to a particular clan, a *teip*.

As the Soviet Union was crumbling in October 1991, former Soviet air force general Dzhokhar Dudayev proclaimed Chechnya's independence from Russia. The Kremlin felt allowing Chechnya to separate would threaten Russia's territorial integrity. Moreover, it thought a military victory would be easy and quick and would bolster Boris Yeltsin's failing presidency. Nothing was further from the truth. In the years that followed, Moscow fought two brutal wars in Chechnya (1994–96 under Boris Yeltsin; 1999–2000 under Vladimir Putin) and carried out a long military occupation that ended in 2009. The first war, marked by Russia's gross human rights abuses, transformed the secular struggle into a radical Islamist one. Moreover, the wars were highly unpopular in Russia. Then governor of Nizhny Novgorod, Boris Nemtsov, who would eventually rise to become what some described as the heart of Russia's democratic opposition, gathered a million signatures in 1996 on a petition to end the war.

Most recently, Russian president Vladimir Putin chose the Black Sea resort town of Sochi as the site of the 2014 Winter Olympics. It is impossible to overstate the scale of the symbolism of this event to North Caucasians. Putin held the games on the 150th anniversary of the czarist war, massacre,

and deportations of Circassians that occurred on this very site. Furthermore, during the Olympics, the Russian government for the first time banned the commemoration of Stalin's deportations of the Chechens. The commemoration date notably fell on the last day of the Sochi Olympics, February 23, and the Russian authorities wanted nothing to dampen the festivities of the games. Earlier, the Chechen government, headed by Putin-installed warlord Ramzan Kadyrov, ordered a demolition of a memorial to the deportations. It is easy to see why these actions only encouraged radicalization.

FOREIGN FIGHTERS AND MOSCOW'S FAILED POLICIES

Anecdotal evidence suggests the main contribution of the Caucasus to IS core is foreign fighters. Beyond this, the relationship between the two is unclear. IS recently took credit for several small-scale attacks within Russia. Yet IS core does not appear to provide direct orders to the Caucasus *wilayah* nor any funding.

Exactly how many individuals from the North Caucasus have joined IS also remains somewhat unclear—experts cite numbers between two thousand and five thousand but add that some come from the Chechen diaspora in Europe, and that not all who left for Syria necessarily have joined IS. Putin claimed in the fall of 2015 that as many as seven thousand joined. Precise counts aside, the trend is clearly one of steep increase in the number of Muslims from the North Caucasus joining IS. Chechens in particular are surrounded by an aura of legends of their being the fiercest fighters. While several have, indeed, held senior positions within IS, many come from the European diaspora. They are young and inexperienced, and, unlike the Chechens from the region who have been hardened by years of resistance to Moscow, they do not know war.

IS utilizes several recruitment tactics inside Russia—indeed, Russian has emerged as the third most popular language for IS propaganda and the third most spoken language within the Islamic State. IS now publishes a magazine in Russian, *Istok* (The Source), and to date it has put out four issues. Most recruiters are outside the region, and much recruitment happens in real time through YouTube videos (many of which quickly get taken down) and social media.

Yet experts suggest that, particularly when it comes to Muslims in the North Caucasus, recruitment efforts play a far smaller part than the Russian government's harsh, repressive measures in ultimately driving Muslims in the Caucasus to seek out IS. It is unclear, for example, how many people even read *Istok*.

IS, unlike the Caucasus Emirate, is a kind of a “political project,” as the International Crisis Group recently described it in its report,⁴ where Muslims feel they can belong. IK lived underground, but IS seeks to establish a state. In Russia, Muslims are isolated and treated as second-class citizens. They have poor job prospects, little education—including Islamic education—and are subjected to harassment, false accusations, and humiliation, if not torture, by Russian officials. In September 2015, when Putin intervened in Syria, the Russian government began registering thousands of Muslims in the region as “extremists” and put them on terrorism watch lists. According to some experts who follow the region, this is because the North Caucasus, especially Dagestan, has been relatively quiet, and the local security officials are looking to create a perception of problems to get credit for averting alleged acts of terror.

The definition of extremism under Russian law is vague. For example, simply “liking” something on Facebook could be enough to be considered an extremist. Russian security can, at any time, stop anyone on the extremist list. The individual may be subjected to a search of his or her person or home, interrogated, and forced to provide DNA samples. The authorities also consider all Salafists extremists, even though far from all are violent, even if they are conservative. In fact, anecdotal accounts suggest the authorities tend to go after individuals who are sources of moderation rather than extremism. One such example is the arrest of Muhammad Nabi Magomedov, a Salafi imam who publicly spoke out against IS and was even threatened by extremists, according to the *Economist* and *Novaya Gazeta*.⁵

The Russian authorities consistently target the mosques and shut them down, but some analysts have found Islamic education helps prevent young men from joining IS. And, as mentioned previously, most recruiters are outside of Russia, so targeting the mosques makes little sense. Even if there are recruiters within it, shutting down a mosque entirely alienates many moderates.

POPULAR SUPPORT AND FUTURE PROSPECTS

While it is not possible to conduct a poll in the North Caucasus, anecdotal accounts suggest popular support for the Islamic State is sizable. The very fact that so many people are choosing to join IS—without being recruited—testifies to this claim.

In Chechnya, for example, by some accounts, people think the Islamic State is better than Kadyrov, whom the local Muslims consider a traitor.

They feel he was unable to build a real Islamic state and instead created a fundamentally corrupt and abusive one—and this is objectively correct. Feelings of revenge against the Russian authorities run strong in the region. And since the locals have little access to information, they easily come to believe IS offers a real alternative as a state. As one Russian patrol police officer in Dagestan said, according to a recent *Foreign Policy* report, “You can see people are tired of us. You go into the village and you will find lots of angry widows and sons without fathers. It’s a matter of time before the sons grow up into fighters.”⁶

Until the Russian government fundamentally changes its approach toward its own citizens, IS, and other radical groups that may come after it, will continue to enjoy popular support and a pool of recruits to choose from. Moscow’s harsh measures, more than IS recruitment efforts, are Russia’s real terrorism problem. It is difficult to see how Putin’s increasingly repressive government will make any such changes. Russia’s future prospects when it comes to terrorism are bleak.

NOTES

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AS AN IDEA, THE ISLAMIC STATE HAS, INDEED, GONE GLOBAL. IT HAS ALREADY ATTRACTED FAR MORE FOREIGN TERRORIST FIGHTERS THAN ALL PREVIOUS JIHADIST CONFLICT ZONES COMBINED. BUT AS A SO-CALLED ISLAMIC STATE, OR A SELF-DESCRIBED CALIPHATE, HOW SUCCESSFUL HAS IT REALLY BEEN AT EXPANDING ITS GLOBAL FOOTPRINT THROUGH THE ESTABLISHMENT OF PROVINCES, OR *WILAYAT*, AROUND THE WORLD?

