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FEATURE ARTICLE

Why Jihadis Lose

Fratricidal jihadis fail to learn from their mistakes

MOHAMMED HAFEZ

A VIEW FROM THE CT FOXHOLE

Dr. Angela Misra

Co-FOUNDER, THE UNITY INITIATIVE

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FROM THE EDITOR

The Islamic State's caliphate project has ended in abject failure, with the group now holding a small vanishing portion of the territory it once controlled in Syria and Iraq. In our cover article, Mohammed Hafez argues the Islamic State is just the latest example of a "fratricidal" jihadi group predestining its own defeat by its absolutism, over-ambition, domineering behavior, and brutality. He argues that the Islamic State's puritanical ideology blinded it to learning lessons from the GIA's defeat in Algeria in the 1990s and al-Qa`ida in Iraq's near defeat in the 2000s. In all three cases, these jihadi groups "managed to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory" because of their innate inability to show restraint and pragmatism.

Our interview is with Angela Misra, the co-founder of The Unity Initiative (TUI), a British Muslim community group widely viewed as one of the most effective in countering violent extremism. Misra describes her increasingly high-stakes efforts to transform the mindset of women convicted of terrorist offenses and recent female returnees from the Islamic State. With the Islamic State recently moving toward embracing combat roles for women, she warns there could be a surge in female terrorism in Western countries.

Colin Clarke and Phillip Smyth document how the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps is working to transform Shi`a foreign fighter networks into transnational proxy forces capable of fighting both asymmetric and conventional wars. Andrew McGregor outlines the security challenges in Libya's southern Fezzan region, warning it could emerge as a major new base for jihadi operations with serious implications for European security. Jason Warner and Caleb Weiss look at why the Islamic State has, so far, failed to pose a significant challenge to al-Shabaab. In the wake of a double-truck bombing last month in Mogadishu that killed over 350, Daisy Muibu and Benjamin Nickels examine the local expertise factor in al-Shabaab's increasingly deadly IED campaign.

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Cover: An Islamic State billboard is seen destroyed in the middle of the road in Qaraqosh, Iraq, on November 8, 2016. (Chris McGrath/Getty Images)

The Curse of Cain: Why Fratricidal Jihadis Fail to Learn from Their Mistakes

By Mohammed Hafez

The rapid and comprehensive demise of the Islamic State is the latest reminder that fratricidal jihadis are destined to lose. Over the last three decades, jihadis have consecutively lost their civil wars in Algeria, Iraq, and Syria because of three strategic errors. They portray their political conflicts as religious wars between Islam and impiety, forcing otherwise neutral parties to choose between repressive autocrats or ardent fanatics. Furthermore, they pursue transformational goals that are too ambitious for other rebel groups with limited political objectives, producing violent ruptures between doctrinaire jihadis and pragmatic Islamists. Lastly, their indiscriminate violence flips their supporters into proponents of law and order, allowing vulnerable regimes to extricate themselves from their legitimacy crises. Worst still, despite clarion warnings from seasoned veterans, jihadis appear incapable of internalizing lessons from their past failures. Their puritanical ideology is a major obstacle to learning and adapting in the crucible of civil wars. These inherent weaknesses offer the international community strategic lessons for fighting future iterations of the Islamic State.

Jihadis keep shooting themselves in the foot. In the past three decades, radical salafis have managed to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory on three major fronts. During the 1990s, the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) saw the Algerian government mired in a legitimacy crisis after a military coup ended an electoral process. Rather than capitalize on the regime's internal vulnerabilities and international isolation, the GIA embarked on a fratricidal war with rival Islamists and alienated its supporters through mass atrocities. It lost the war and took down the entire Islamist project with it.

In the 2000s, al-Qa`ida in Iraq (AQI) and its Sunni nationalist insurgents had the American-led coalition in a bind as it desperately sought to find a way out of a quagmire. Yet, like the GIA, AQI turned its guns on fellow rebels and sought to monopolize power at the expense of unity. After doing so, it was routed by the Sunni communities that had once welcomed it with open arms.

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The author wishes to thank Glenn Robinson, Clark McCauley, Michael Gabbay, Emily Gade, and Craig Whiteside for shaping his thinking on this issue.

The Islamic State is the latest jihadi group to fall victim to its own strategic errors. After rising like a phoenix from the ashes in 2013, it failed to learn the lessons of earlier jihads. Rather than building bridges with Syria's Islamist factions, it went its own way by declaring a caliphate and waging war on fellow rebels. Worst still, it glorified its genocidal violence, practically begging the entire world to form a military coalition against it. Today, it has lost all the territory it once held in Iraq and is all but finished in Syria.

These three movements had perfect opportunities to topple their regimes. Yet, in the crucible of civil wars, they turned their guns on fellow rebels—alienating their supporters, fragmenting their ranks, and driving away external sponsors. In fact, they assisted incumbent elites in crisis by handing them the perfect opportunity to divide-and-conquer their movements. Their fratricide sets them apart from their Islamist movements and the societies they seek to transform. As in the ancient parable of Cain, who killed his brother Abel, they are fugitives destined to wander from one conflict arena to another, unable to establish the utopian order to which they aspire. They cannot reap the fruits of their toil because the land in which they plant their roots is soiled with the blood of innocents.

Unheeded Warnings

What explains this self-destructive behavior on the part of jihadis? Why do they not learn from the mistakes of kindred movements? Why did a group like the Islamic State not absorb the lessons from earlier fratricidal Islamists in Algeria and Iraq, but instead repeated their exact mistakes and ultimately suffered their same fate? More puzzlingly, why did they not heed the warnings of veteran jihadis who communicated their concerns directly and clearly?

Take, for example, how al-Qa`ida leaders sought to warn Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in Iraq, using the case of Algeria as a cautionary tale. Atiyah Abdul Rahman, senior Libyan operational planner within al-Qa`ida's top leadership (killed in Pakistan by a U.S. drone attack in 2011), sent a letter to al-Zarqawi before he was killed by a U.S. airstrike in 2006 in which he wrote: "Ask me whatever you like about Algeria between 1994 and 1995, when [the Islamist movement] was at the height of its power and capabilities, and was on the verge of taking over the government ... I lived through it myself, and I saw firsthand; no one told me about it ... they [GIA militants] destroyed themselves with their own hands, with their lack of reason, delusions, and neglect and alienation of people through oppression, deviance, and harsh conduct ... their enemy did not defeat them, but rather they defeated themselves."¹

A few years later, Usama bin Ladin, concerned with growing infighting between AQI and Sunni insurgents, sent an audiotaped "Message to Our People in Iraq" in which he urged all the insurgents and tribes to reconcile their differences and acknowledge that "errors" have been made.² He advised his followers to avoid "fanatical loyalty to men" and reminded them that what unites Muslims is their adherence to Islam, not their "belonging to a tribe, homeland,



Image captured from a video produced by “Wilayat Damascus” on June 25, 2015, and entitled “Repent before We Overcome You,” which shows the Islamic State executing Jaysh al-Islam fighters.

or organization.” Yet, the future leaders of the Islamic State, the successors of AQI, practiced exactly what he cautioned against.^a What explains this failure to learn from history, and what are the implications for countering similar movements in the future—other than to stand out of the way as they shoot themselves in the foot again?

Three Fatal Flaws

Fratricidal jihadis like the Islamic State share three characteristics that explain their centrifugal dynamics—and why they are destined to lose. First, they frame their civil conflicts along Manichean themes, reducing the complex nature of adversarial camps into clear categories of us versus them, good versus evil, Islam versus impiety.^b By doing so, they wage wars on many fronts, coalescing their otherwise disparate enemies into a single camp united against them.

Fratricidal jihadis also pursue transformative goals that are too ambitious for other rebels with limited political preferences. Their ideologically doctrinarism sacrifices all forms of political realism, and thus they are suspicious of kindred groups that might sell them out in the name of pragmatism. They prefer to wipe out their rivals rather than compete with them through patient political strategies.

Lastly, fratricidal jihadis’ indiscriminate violence against civilians contributes to a permissive moral code that allows for the

killing of their own brothers-in-arms. Those who willfully and wantonly justify the mass killing of innocent civilians will not find it difficult to turn their daggers on fellow rebels who purportedly violate notions of ideological purity.³

Underpinning these three deadly sins is an extremely puritanical ideology that is impervious to accommodation with militant factions that share some of their conflict objectives, but do not embrace their political ideals. They cannot even bring themselves to compromise with groups that share their political ideals, but diverge with them on their degree of pragmatism in pursuit of those objectives.^c Several psychological mechanisms can help explain this failure to accommodate alternative political preferences in rebel movements. Puritanical individuals are much more attuned to the presence of ideological differences, which is to say they have a tendency “to perceive greater distance between competing political alternatives” than those that are less doctrinaire.⁴ Additionally, ideologically extreme individuals, regardless of political content, are more prone to “belief superiority” than centrist ones, which in turn is associated with the tendency toward belief rigidity or “non-corruptibility.”⁵ Relatedly, ideologically extreme individuals have been

a According to analysis of the Abbottabad documents captured during the 2011 operation to kill bin Laden, the latter sought to reconcile jihadi factions with Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi with the help of Ansar al-Islam. See Nelly Lahoud, Stuart Caudill, Liam Collins, Gabriel Koehler-Derrick, Don Rassler, and Muhammad al-`Ubaydi, *Letters from Abbottabad: Bin Laden Sidelined?* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2012), p. 26.

b Generalized *takfir*, which entails the broad categorization of people as infidels, is the principal means by which jihadis draw sharp boundaries between ingroups and outgroups. All three movements discussed here were *takfiris*. For a detailed discussion of extreme *takfir* by the Islamic State, see Hassan Hassan, “The Sectarianism of the Islamic State: Ideological Roots and Political Context,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 2016, and Cole Bunzel, “Caliphate in Disarray: Theological Turmoil in the Islamic State,” *Jihadica*, October 3, 2017.

c One of the most notable detractors of puritanical (i.e., jihadi salafi) groups was Abu Musab al-Suri. Al-Suri was an early critic of infantile jihadism, marked by lack of strategic thought or revolutionary theory. He railed against the “inflexible dogmatism and narrow-mindedness” of salafis. See Brynjar Lia, *Architect of Global Jihad: The Life of Al-Qaeda Strategist Abu Mus’ab al-Suri* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 9. Yet, his prolific and lengthy treatise warning against reckless, self-defeating violence that alienates Muslim masses went unheeded. One may fault his fierce independence and lack of anchoring in traditional salafism for contributing to his failure to influence jihadis, but the same cannot be said of other radical authorities who issued clarion warnings similar to al-Suri’s. For example, Abdelmalek Droukdel, the leader of al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb, articulated in writing the strategic errors that should be avoided by the jihadis who captured vast territory in northeast Mali in 2012. Based on his Algerian experience, he warned against the premature establishment of an Islamic state, extreme application of sharia law, and fighting with other factions. See Pascale Combelles Siegel, “AQIM’s Playbook in Mali,” *CTC Sentinel* 6:3 (2013), pp. 9-11.

shown to be more intolerant of divergent political beliefs than those who are ideologically less extreme.⁶ Individuals with extreme beliefs also exhibit a greater preference for certainty than centrist individuals, and high levels of uncertainty are associated with a high sense of threat.⁷ Lastly, ideologically extreme groups are likely to associate with other extremists, leading to ideological encapsulation that shuts out countervailing voices that are necessary to learning and adapting.⁸

This piece highlights three cases of fratricidal jihadis: GIA (1992-1997), AQI (2003-2011), and the Islamic State (2013-2017). All of these groups were well-positioned to make substantial gains against their ruling regimes. At a minimum, they could have avoided the precipitous defeat they suffered at the hands of their adversaries had they not turned their guns on fellow rebels. In each case, their polarizing narratives, transformative goals, and indiscriminate violence directly contributed to tensions with other Islamist groups, which ultimately led to fratricidal bloodletting within their own movements. More perplexingly, they appear to be incapable of learning from their previous experiences.

The Algerian GIA

During the 1990s, in the midst of a civil war against the Algerian military regime, the GIA and the Islamic Salvation Army (AIS) fiercely clashed with each other, undermining the unity of their rebel movement and extricating a vulnerable regime from its crisis. The AIS ultimately defected to the state, while the GIA splintered and ceased to exist.

In 1989, Algeria had embarked on the path of political liberalization in the aftermath of mass anti-state riots. A new constitution officially ended the one-party system, opening the door for liberal and Islamist opposition groups to directly challenge the historic monopoly of the ruling National Liberation Front (FLN). Islamists took advantage of this opportunity by forming their own party, the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS). The FIS managed to win 188 out of 430 national assembly seats in the first round of voting in December 1991. It was poised to win an overwhelming majority of seats in the second round of voting set for January 1992, but Algeria's generals intervened to halt the electoral process. Thousands of FIS cadres were rounded up and detained, triggering a violent rebellion.

Several Islamist rebel groups emerged in order to topple the military regime. The two biggest factions were the GIA and AIS. The emergence of the GIA in 1992 marked the ascendancy of the hardline revolutionaries who rejected the electoral path and insisted on a total war to establish an Islamic state. Confronted with the possibility of losing leadership, the FIS put forward the AIS as an alternative to the GIA in July 1994.⁹ The FIS wanted to restore the pre-war equilibrium in which radicals were subordinate to the historic leadership of the Islamist movement. It also rejected GIA's indiscriminate violence and sought to compel the military regime to negotiate a political settlement that would free FIS leaders, reverse the ban on their organization, and return to the pre-coup status quo ante.¹⁰

The GIA and AIS advanced diametrically opposed conflict narratives, strategic objectives, and targeting policies. These divergences were rooted in an ideological divide as to the role of democracy in Islam, the permissibility of Islamists joining secular political systems, and the centrality of violence in building an Islamic state.

From the start of the civil war, the GIA portrayed the Algerian state as a tyrannical apostate regime and its supporters and employ-

ees as equally culpable in perpetuating apostasy. It also denied the possibility of neutrality in the conflict, and treated security forces and public workers as part and parcel of the apostate order.¹¹ The GIA framed the conflict as a total war to transform Algeria's polity, not reintegration into the electoral process because democracy was viewed as heresy, and jihad was the only way to remove secular rulers.^d It rejected the possibility of negotiations or reconciliation with moderate regime elements that were interested in ending the crisis, and instead raised the mantra of "no dialogue, no ceasefire, no reconciliation, and no security or guarantees with the apostate regime."^e

In contrast, the AIS insisted that the struggle was between a hawkish faction within the regime that opposed a just political settlement and Islamists who were deprived the fruits of their electoral victories. The AIS did not view the war in terms of apostasy, and rarely averred that all who work with the Algerian state are enemies of the movement. It sought to reintegrate Islamists into the political process and did not insist on the complete transformation of the Algerian state into a theocratic one.^f

The GIA waged a comprehensive campaign to induce regime collapse. Initially, it clashed with security forces and assassinated policemen and military personnel. In 1993, it expanded its targeting to include government officials. Representatives of opposition groups, foreigners, journalists, and intellectuals were next. Beginning in 1995, the GIA's victims were mainly civilians, killed randomly through bombings or deliberately through indiscriminate attacks in villages and at fake check points. It also attacked France for its support of the Algerian regime.¹²

In contrast to expansive violence, the AIS limited its attacks to security forces and government officials. The AIS opposed and denounced attacks on intellectuals, foreigners, and anyone who was not directly involved in the persecution of Islamists because such violence discredited the image of the movement and played into the hands of the "eradicationists" within the regime.¹³

As a result, the GIA struck back by denouncing its critics, demanding they cease their condemnation of the jihad. Open war between the GIA and AIS began on May 4, 1995, when the former issued a communiqué declaring that AIS leaders had one month to get in touch with the GIA to repent and join its ranks.¹⁴ Shortly after, the GIA issued an explicit threat against eight FIS leaders demand-

d According to Umar Chikhi, one of the original nine founders of the GIA, Abdelhaq Layada—the GIA's first general commander—rejected calls for fighting for a political process. Chikhi states, "Differences started to surface between the political leadership of the FIS and the commander of the Group [GIA] over the strategy that they should adopt. The politicians would suggest using political means to overcome the crisis and regarded armed action as a 'pressure tool' ... but Abdelhaq Layada responded by saying the solution can only be achieved by armed action." See Uthman Tazghart, "Interview with Umar Chikhi, Last Surviving Founding Member of the Algerian Armed Islamic Group," *Al-Majallah*, part 1, January 14, 2001.

e Jamal Zitouni, the fifth GIA leader, shined this mantra into GIA's manifesto *The Guidance of the Lord*. It is a 62-page pamphlet carrying the name Abu Abdel Rahman Amin and dated 27 Rabi' al-Thani 1416/1995. The quotation is from p. 27.

f Madani Mezraq, AIS' general commander, explained years later that "we fought on the basis of two principles: a return to the legitimate political process and respect for the choice of the Algerian people." Listen to part one of a three-part radio interview conducted by Nouredine Khababa with Madani Mezraq on March 18, 2012, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oY0Hp2dCBEM>.

ing they cease speaking in the name of the Islamist movement.¹⁵ On June 13, 1995, the GIA issued communiqué #36 in which it permitted “the shedding of the blood of those ‘blood merchants’ inside and outside (Algeria) unless they repent.”¹⁶

The GIA began acting on its threats. There were repeated reports in 1995 of clashes between the GIA and AIS, resulting in the death of approximately 60 militants.¹⁷ When GIA leaders feared that some of the latecomers to their faction were not committed to their salafi worldview and total-war objectives, they began to purge them from the organization. In November 1995, the GIA executed Muhammad Said (a prominent FIS leader, and known preacher, who had joined the GIA in May 1994).¹⁸ These executions were not isolated leadership purges. After a series of warnings and threats, the GIA explicitly declared war on the AIS on January 4, 1996.¹⁹ Later that month, sources close to the FIS Executive Body Abroad accused the GIA of slaying 140 FIS activists, including 40 commanders.¹⁹

By 1996, GIA’s expansive violence against civilians turned public support against the Islamist movement.^h The government took advantage of shifting attitudes by arming pro-government paramilitary militias (officially known as the Groupes de Légitime Défense, commonly referred to as “Patriots”).ⁱ

GIA’s fratricidal violence—against former supporters, rival rebels, and civilian militias—reached stupefying levels in a series of massacres of civilians that began at the end of 1996. At least 76 massacres took place between November 1996 and July 2001, most of which (42) occurred in 1997. Massacres were concentrated in villages around Algiers, Blida and Medea (south of Algiers), Ain Defla (southwest of Algiers), and Relizane (west of Algiers). All these were within the GIA’s areas of operation.²⁰

Ali Benhadjar, the commander of a splinter group calling itself the Islamic League for Preaching and Combat, summarized the fault lines dividing the GIA from his group and the AIS: “We would have preferred political means if our rights had been respected. Our armed struggle was in self-defense. For the GIA, the only true struggle was the armed struggle. Anything else was *haram* [forbidden in Islam].”²¹

By 1997, the Islamist movement was successfully delegitimized in the eyes of many Algerians. Islamists turned their supporters into proponents for law and order—i.e., the military, intelligence, and security services. Faced with a crisis of legitimacy, the AIS defected to the state. It agreed to call for a ceasefire without any substantial concessions from the regime. The civil war effectively came to an end by 1999, but none of the Islamist goals were achieved. Some of the GIA’s fighters populated other radical groups, one of which

evolved into the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat, which in 2007 rebranded again as al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb, a terrorist group that vexes but hardly poses a strategic threat to the Algerian government today.

Al-Qa`ida in Iraq

Less than a decade after the colossal failure of the GIA in Algeria, al-Qa`ida in Iraq (AQI) embarked on a similar path of extremism and strategic errors that led to its near destruction by the late 2000s, largely at the hands of Iraqis who initially welcomed its presence. It did so by triggering a sectarian war that sparked retaliatory violence against ordinary Sunnis it could not defend and by claiming a monopoly over the insurgent movement’s leadership. When confronted with criticism and rejection, it unleashed fratricidal violence against its host communities and fellow Sunni rebels—sealing its fate in the process.

The U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 fostered resistance by nationalists, disenfranchised Baathists, local Islamists, and foreign jihadis. The insurgents in Iraq eventually converged around two political tendencies.²² The majority of insurgent groups were made up of Sunni nationalists with Islamist leanings associated with the Islamic Army in Iraq, Mujahidin Army in Iraq, the 1920 Revolution Brigades, and the Salah al-Din al-Ayubi Brigades. While they harbored Islamist world views, their goal was the reintegration of disenfranchised Sunnis in a future Iraqi regime on equal footing with Shi`a and Kurds. They insisted on a unified Iraq that would share with Sunnis the country’s oil wealth, public employment, ministerial positions, and government patronage. They also demanded that Iraq would remain aligned with the Arab world, and thus distant from Iran’s orbit. Above all, they wanted representation in the security services, which was increasingly dominated by Shi`a parties and militias.

The second dominant faction in the Iraqi insurgency consisted of jihadis associated with AQI and the Ansar al-Sunna Group. This faction represented an extreme form of Islamism that rejected democracy, demonized Shi`a, and aimed to turn Iraq into an Islamic theocracy ruled in accordance with its version of Sunni orthodoxy. Its core cadres were made up of fighters connected with al-Zarqawi, the Jordanian militant with previous connections to jihadis in Afghanistan (but not bin Ladin’s camps). AQI employed expansive violence that targeted coalition occupation forces, Iraq’s economic infrastructure, Iraqi security services, government officials, foreign contractors, Shi`a and Kurdish parties and militias, voters, and Sunnis willing to work with the new order. Its primary strategy, however, was to spark a sectarian war through provocative attacks on Shi`a civilians in markets, mosques, funerals, and religious ceremonies.²³

Both of these factions—Islamist nationalists and jihadis—cooperated based on their shared goal of expelling coalition forces from Iraq and undermining the new Iraqi regime. Their insurgency created a major crisis for the George W. Bush administration, leading to calls for withdrawing American troops and ending the occupation. By 2006, victory was in sight as the United States sought to extricate itself from Iraq.

Yet, ‘victory’ was undermined by AQI’s own strategic errors, which turned Sunni tribes and insurgents against it. AQI made three major mistakes associated with its polarizing conflict narratives, transformative objectives, and indiscriminate violence.

To foster a base of support within the Sunni population, AQI en-

g The GIA sent a two-hour videotaped “confession” of Abdelwahab Lamara and Mahfouz Tajeen (Abu Khalil), both GIA commanders who joined in 1994. In the video, Lamara describes how Said and others sought on several occasions to take over the leadership of the GIA. Both Tajeen and Lamara were executed the following day. The entire taped “confession” is available online at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kB3xN5_Ntqk.

h Abdallah Anas, one of the few Algerian Afghans to remain on FIS’ Executive Committee after 1992, acknowledged that the GIA’s violence had driven up popular support for Algeria’s General Liamine Zeroual during his successful bid for the presidency in the November 1995 elections. See Camil al-Tawil, “Algerian Islamic Salvation Front: Armed Islamic Group Responsible for Sahraoui’s Assassination,” *Al-Hayat*, December 9, 1995.

i By 1997, there were an estimated 150,000 militiamen around the country, including in Islamist strongholds.

flamed sectarianism by portraying the war in Iraq as a fight against Shiism. Sectarian polarization was intended to present AQI as an indispensable defender of the Sunnis. This strategy culminated in the bombing of the golden-domed Askari shrine in Samarra on February 22, 2006. This well-planned attack on one of the four major Shi'a shrines in Iraq struck at the heart of Shi'a symbols and identity. It provoked retaliatory sectarian killings against Sunni communities in and around Baghdad, as well as other mixed sect cities.²⁴ This was AQI's first major mistake. It had overestimated its ability to protect Sunni communities, many of which bore the brunt of sectarian cleansing at the hands of Shi'a militias. This created an opening for the United States to present itself as the only power capable of protecting Sunnis from Iranian-backed militias and security services, setting the stage for the "Surge" strategy.

The second mistake AQI made was in relation to Iraq's Sunni tribes. AQI alienated the tribes of western Iraq by imposing puritanical fundamentalism on them, undermining tribal hierarchies through their strategic marriages, and infringing on their economic turf.²⁵ As early as 2004, it outlawed music and satellite dishes, and demanded that women in public be covered in black from head to toe.²⁶ AQI also killed tribesmen that took contracts from coalition forces.

These killings gave the occupation forces an opening to reach out to the tribes against a common enemy, which became the basis for the Awakening movement. Awakening Councils were established in nearly all provinces and cities in which AQI operated, with the notable exception of Mosul.

AQI's last major mistake related to its transformative strategy. Sensing an impending victory over the United States, AQI sought to position itself as the sole leader of the insurgent movement. Beginning in 2006, it formed an umbrella organization known as the Mujahidin Shura Council. Later that year, it formed the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) and called upon all other groups to join this state. It did not stop there, however. AQI began strong-arming other factions to submit to its leadership (an enormous error that had also been made by the GIA and would be repeated by the Islamic State in Syria less than a decade later). When other rebel groups rejected this call, AQI began clashing with them and killing their commanders. The Islamic Army of Iraq, the 1920 Revolution Brigades, the Mujahidin Army of Iraq, and Ansar al-Sunna have all accused AQI of killing scores of their militants.²⁷

Criticism of the newly formed Islamic state might not have amounted to much had ISI not proceeded with killing several commanders of the insurgent groups who refused to pledge loyalty to the group's leader, Abu Umar al-Baghdadi. In April 2007, the Islamic Army in Iraq (IAI), one of the largest Sunni Islamist group, accused AQI of killing 30 of its members. Here is how a spokesman of IAI described the conflict with AQI:

"Al-Qaeda [in Iraq] claims to be a Salafist movement, but we believe it is far from Salafism, which is more moderate and flexible. In al-Qaeda's view, everything is extreme: people are either Muslims or apostates; all women must wear the niqab [a veil that covers both head and body] even though it is impractical at this time and would draw the enemy's attention. Al-Qaeda's people are ignorant of politics and religion, and this ignorance has direct military implications."²⁸

Even closer to AQI was the Ansar al-Sunna group. Both are ji-

hadi salafi organizations whose ideology is a mere carbon copy of the other. Both rejected negotiations with the United States and the Iraqi government, wanted to establish an Islamic emirate, and did not hesitate to kill Shi'a. Moreover, both AQI and Ansar al-Sunna were incubated by the Kurdistan-based group Ansar al-Islam. Yet, this lineage did not prevent AQI's fratricide against Ansar al-Sunna.

Documents discovered by the U.S. military in September 2007 during a raid on a desert camp near Sinjar, close to the Syrian border, reveal the nature of the rift between AQI and the Ansar al-Sunna.^j At least three broad themes emerged from the exchanges in these documents:

- AQI is arrogant and excessive in its maltreatment of other insurgent groups and their civilian base of support. AQI kills or threatens fellow insurgents with death unless they pledge loyalty to its group, and have killed scores of insurgents often for unknown reasons.
- AQI's insistence that all insurgent groups join the Islamic State of Iraq is the root cause of the rupture between AQI and other insurgent factions, especially al-Ansar.
- AQI is increasingly desperate for allies.

AQI alienated groups that were willing to work with it by making a strong claim for leadership. It overestimated its power and ability to compel others to join its front. In doing so, it created enemies out of former allies and turned the Sunni population against it. The U.S. military and the Iraqi government took advantage of AQI's mistakes by reaching out to insurgents and tribes in a new strategy of Sunni engagement intended to drive a wedge between extremist insurgents and their Sunni supporters.

The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria

The fortunes of Iraq's jihadis turned when the tidal wave of Arab uprisings reached Syria in March 2011. By 2013, AQI (now branded as ISI) took advantage of Iraq's sectarian politics, the civil war in Syria, and the withdrawal of U.S. troops in 2011 to rebuild its ranks and reassert its presence in the region.

However, rather than forge unity with Syrian rebels, the Islamic State split the ranks of Jabhat al-Nusra, one of the most powerful rebel groups to emerge from the Syrian conflict.²⁹ It also shocked the world by vividly exposing its genocidal violence against Shi'a and Yazidis. In the height of arrogance, it declared the formation of a caliphate, the Islamic State, and insisted that all rebel groups in Syria pledge loyalty to its self-declared caliph, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. It went on to attack fellow rebels of all stripes, driving them out of Syria's oil-rich regions of Hasakah and Deir ez-Zor, and took

j The declassified documents include two letters by AQI's leader Abu Hamza al-Muhajir. One is addressed to two unnamed tribal leaders close to Ansar al-Sunna, and the other to Abu Abdullah al-Shafi'i, the leader of their group. Two documents are by unspecified al-Ansar leaders to AQI-ISI outlining the latter's transgressions toward fellow insurgents and explaining the growing rift between their two factions. One document is an agreement between al-Hajji Abu Sa'adi, a leader of an unknown insurgent group, and Dr. Ismael, representing ISI. (Both names are probably aliases.) The agreement outlines a series of steps to be taken by each side to bring about a cessation of hostilities between the two groups. It is not clear to whom these documents belonged, but at least two of them bear the name of AQI's leader Abu Hamza al-Muhajir. Some are typed in Arabic text while others are handwritten. Some bear the official stamps of known insurgent groups, while others are unbranded. These documents are archived in the Harmony Project, which is run by the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point.

complete control of the city of Raqqa and sought to do the same in Aleppo.³⁰

The Islamic State's strategy appeared to bear fruit in 2014-2015, as it became the preeminent radical Islamist organization since bin Laden's al-Qa`ida. It attracted tens of thousands of foreign fighters from around the globe and reigned over territory the size of Britain.³¹ But like its predecessors in the GIA and AQL, it was only a matter of time before its strategic errors caught up with its fate. As of November 2017, the Islamic State has lost almost all of the territory it once held in Iraq and Syria.³²

Like its forerunners, the Islamic State framed the conflict in binary, polarizing terms that left no room for neutrality. As a result, actors in the conflict had to choose sides, either with it or against it. It portrayed all Shi`a and Alawites as mortal enemies, but it did not stop there. The Kurds were equally viewed as a threat to its utopian project, as were secular rebels affiliated with the Free Syrian Army (FSA), Islamists associated with the Muslim Brotherhood, and salafis that insisted on maintaining Syria's territorial integrity, such as Jaysh al-Islam and Ahrar al-Sham. The most nonsensical on the list of enemies was Jabhat al-Nusra, an al-Qa`ida-affiliated group whose leaders fought in Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's group in Iraq.^k The two organizations were similar in many respects, sharing a jihadi salafist orientation with a strong tint of sectarianism. However, Jabhat al-Nusra deemphasized the goal of remaking the Middle East into an Islamic caliphate and prioritized the toppling of the Assad regime, aligning itself with other Islamists in Syria. In contrast, the Islamic State appeared to care less about the Syrian jihad and more about carving territory for its transformative project. The Islamic State lured away many of Jabhat al-Nusra's fighters, especially its contingents of foreign volunteers, and proceeded to accuse the remaining Jabhat al-Nusra loyalists of splitting the ranks of the jihadi movement. More galling, from the point of view of jihadi pragmatists, the Islamic State began to fight and kill Jabhat al-Nusra commanders and fighters under the pretext of unifying jihadi ranks.

The Islamic State also pursued a transformative political project that did not align with the political preferences of Syria's rebels. Rather than toppling the Syrian regime and forming a state where Syria's diverse communities and political factions could compete for post-conflict spoils, it insisted on carving out a state for Sunnis only, one that violated the territorial integrity of both Syria and Iraq. Whereas other rebels were mainly focused on attacking the regime of Bashar al-Assad and its allies, the Islamic State was preoccupied with sectarian and ethnic cleansing and establishing governing institutions based on anachronistic interpretations of sharia laws.

More damaging to rebel unity was the way the Islamic State behaved toward civilian populations and captured regime forces. Mass atrocities, slavery, and rape were supplemented with crucifixions and beheadings. Burning people alive and drowning them as the camera rolled further tainted the image of Arab Spring revolutionaries and focused the world's attention on the bigger threat

that the Islamic State posed in comparison with the Syrian regime. Just as rebels had to choose between the Islamic State and its rivals, the world was forced to choose between fanatical Islamists and the Syrian dictatorship. (The new U.S. administration has suspended aid to anti-Assad forces.³³)

To be sure, Syria's rebels were never united and their political divisions preceded the rise of the Islamic State.³⁴ Yet, despite their fragmentation, their infighting was largely limited to episodic military skirmishes and political squabbling. The rise of the Islamic State shifted the rebels' focus away in many areas from consolidating power and toppling the regime to protecting themselves from predatory attacks by the Islamic State. This centrifugal dynamic was a repeat of the events that tore asunder the Islamist movements in Algeria and Iraq in the preceding decades, and it led to the same outcome: defeat.

Strategic Implications

The recurring errors of fratricidal jihadis—and their failure to learn from their past mistakes—suggests that their predatory behavior may be hardwired in the genetic code of their movements. Their ideological purity, based on the belief that only their interpretation of the inherited Islamic tradition is legitimate, serves as a double-edged sword. The moral vision of an uncompromisingly puritanical Islamic order simplifies the complexity of political life by offering a clear, organizing narrative of right and wrong, good and evil, permissible and forbidden. This narrative attracts militants from around the world and fosters organizational cohesion by pointing the rank-and-file toward a single, incorruptible goal.

Yet, this Manichean framing also inspires a virulent ideology that demonizes enemies, venerates self-sacrifice, and conjures up illusions of a utopian world. Civil wars are messy and require realism, unsavory alliances with strange bedfellows, and the pursuit of achievable objectives based on the balance of forces. Puritanical jihadis find it exceedingly difficult to balance pragmatic considerations with the fanatical doctrine that brings them to the land of jihad in the first place.³⁵ Their impatience regarding the gradual political and social work necessary to build up a mass base that can sustain a movement in the long haul leads to strategic errors. They rely on coercive extraction to meet the needs of their jihad, becoming a heavy burden on their host communities. They are suspicious of pragmatists that might sell them out, preferring to attack them rather than reach a *modus vivendi* for mutual advantage. Their sense of ideological superiority rationalizes extreme violence against friends and foe alike. Their outrageous tactics inspire fear, but not admiration. When communities have an opportunity to turn their back on these fratricidal extremists, they seize it with a vengeance.

What are the strategic implications of dealing with the next iteration of the Islamic State? There are three lessons for the international community. First, the defeat of violent jihadis usually follows from their own mistakes, not from the strategic prowess of the powers that oppose them. It is important to recognize that Islamists (like communists before them) are ideologically divided despite their shared intellectual heritage and goal of building polities anchored in 'Islamic' values and laws. Rather than lump all Islamists into a single category (something jihadis do to their own detriment), it is important to understand the nuances that divide their movement into fractious camps and how those divisions can shape conflict trajectories.

Second, every time a menacing jihadi group emerges, there is a

^k Jabhat al-Nusra was a spinoff of ISI. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi sent his military commander Abu Muhammad al-Jolani to establish a fighting group in Syria as the Arab uprising turned into a protracted civil war. Thus, one can lay blame for the split between the two leaders at the feet of the insubordinate al-Jolani. However, both men presumably answered to al-Qa`ida's leader Aymen al-Zawahiri. The latter ruled in favor of maintaining Jabhat al-Nusra as its preferred affiliate in Syria and confined al-Baghdadi's organization to Iraq, a move that was ultimately rejected by the future "caliph."

tendency for analysts to insist that the only way to fight these groups is to engage in an ideological counternarrative that diminishes their appeal. Yet, in all three cases, the key to defeat was not ‘good ideas’ displacing bad ones, but rather capitalizing on the errors of the adversary by funding and arming the rivals they created by their own hands, and supporting those forces with military might. To be sure, these measures have serious human rights implications and do not obviate the need for long-term strategies to rebuild broken polities and create inclusive and effective governing institutions.

Lastly, while the international community may want to celebrate or even encourage jihadis to fight with other Islamist factions, their

fratricide does not come without a price. Fragmented movements are notorious for their mass atrocities against civilians. Divided rebels may not win their civil wars, but they can act as spoilers in conflict-ending negotiations, prolonging conflicts and fostering opportunities for transnational extremists and illicit traffickers. The defeat of the Islamic State has left behind Stalingrad-like destruction in major population centers. Attending to this humanitarian disaster is an urgent priority. Otherwise, a new breed of extremists will capitalize on mass grievances and failed governance to constitute an untainted version of the Islamic State. **CTC**

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A View from the CT Foxhole: Dr. Angela Misra, Co-Founder, The Unity Initiative

By Paul Cruickshank

Dr. Angela Misra is the deputy chief executive and co-founder of The Unity Initiative (TUI), a specialist intervention consultancy based in the United Kingdom that focuses on rehabilitating individuals convicted of terrorist offenses; training prison, probation, and police staff; tackling absolutist mindsets in the wider community; and advising governments on countering-extremism strategies. Misra works one-to-one rehabilitating female offenders, as well as British women who spent time with the Islamic State in Syria. Misra, a convert to Islam and a registered National Health Service (NHS) doctor, co-founded TUI with her husband, Usman Raja, in 2009 and has worked at the grassroots level, tackling issues such as physical/emotional/sexual/domestic abuse, honor violence, violent extremism, and hate crimes. She has advised the U.K. Department of Education on issues relating to Islamic education.

Editor's note: TUI co-founder Usman Raja was interviewed in the July 2015 issue of CTC Sentinel. Paul Cruickshank advises TUI on counterterrorism issues.

CTC: You co-founded The Unity Initiative (TUI) in 2009, and it is now widely viewed as one of the most effective Muslim community organizations working in the countering violent extremism (CVE) space in the United Kingdom. How do you see this effort evolving?

Misra: We're having to expand significantly because of the demand for the work. We started off with just a handful of people, but our full-time staff and volunteers now number 70 people. Since my husband, Usman Raja, and I founded TUI in 2009, our team has rehabilitated more than 50 men and women convicted of Terrorism Act [TACT] offenses in the U.K. and an additional 180 individuals considered extreme by peers, family, or authorities within the community sphere. When it comes to the cases of convicted terrorist offenders, we've had a 98-percent success rate where we define success as having a rehabilitated perception and transformed world view and the subject of the intervention is now voluntarily speaking against their previously held views, some publicly and others privately within their community. Since 2009, I've done 'interventions' with about a dozen female TACT offenders, which has involved providing them each with many hours of one-to-one Islamic Behavioral Therapy sessions (IBT). IBT is our pioneering rehabilitative ideological therapeutic model that encompasses theological, social, and psychological components.

One of the newer strands of work we are undertaking is working with individuals being investigated for foreign fighter travel to Syria and Iraq. Like with convicted terrorist offenders, this involves working in tandem with British authorities. We've worked on about 20 returnee cases and are taking on a rapidly increasing caseload.

As our credibility at the grassroots level has gained traction, having transformed well-known extremist group leaders,^a we have had unprecedented requests for support from within hard-to-reach 'insular' communities. This has created another evolving area of effort where we are working with people seeking rehabilitation, who are directly approaching us for support.

CTC: The more than 400 foreign fighters who have returned to the United Kingdom¹ are one of the greatest security challenges the country faces. A significant proportion of Islamic State returnees have been women. How do you find ways to engage in such cases?

Misra: I've worked with about a dozen female returnees so far. The foundation for success is building a relationship of mutual trust based on honesty. Let me give you a very recent example. One of the returnee cases I'm working on involves a woman who's been told she's under investigation. During our first session, after just three hours, she admitted to me she had actually gone over to ISIS—i.e., crossed the border to join the group—because of her theological and humanitarian beliefs and had lied to the police. She told me this knowing that I was under obligation to report this to the authorities. It wasn't about trying to trick her into admitting something. It was a case of presenting and explaining to her with complete sincerity and honesty that it was in her best interest to be completely upfront, using the many hints within our conversation that revealed her original intentions and her main concerns. Her main concern after returning was not going to prison but the possibility of losing her child to social services or her child being put into foster care with a non-Muslim family. She was also deeply traumatized by what she had witnessed, often shaking when recounting these specific events. When she was first interrogated for many hours, she was unable to fully explain and answer questions due to this combination of fear, trauma, and tiredness. Our first session was a few days after her interrogation, after she had slept and settled back in the U.K. At the end of the session, she agreed to make a statement for police record, so I didn't have to report her. Honest communication is key because it's the first step toward rehabilitation.

CTC: From her case and others you've dealt with, what have you learned about the reasons why women from the United Kingdom traveled to the Islamic State?

^a One of those rehabilitated by TUI was Ali Beheshti, who was previously the number-two leader in the British extremist group al-Muhajiroun. In 2009, he was convicted of an arson attack on the house of a publisher of a controversial novel about the Prophet Mohammed. After his release and subsequent change in mindset, Beheshti started helping TUI counter the extremist message on the streets. See Paul Cruickshank, "An Interview with: Usman Raja," *CTC Sentinel* 8:7 (2015).

Misra: There are many reasons, and they are as diverse as the age range and the ethnicities of the women who go out there.

For some, it's because they have difficulties within their own lives here, and they see it as a new beginning or as an opportunity for escapism. I've seen cases where there have been young girls that have gone out on the 'romantic' idea of meeting a 'gangster hero' who they could get married to because either they were escaping a forced marriage in this country or they were looking for a 'theologically sanctioned' way to have a relationship of their choosing. Often they were recruited online by guys who were grooming them with promises of adventure, love, and purpose. I've also seen divorced women who went there to find a strong father figure for their children or a husband to help take care of them as they were ostracized from these opportunities in the insular U.K. communities they were part of.

For some, it was adventure. It was a way out of their daily life. I had one case of a woman who was the eldest child of a very large family. As per the cultural norm, she found herself taking care of a number of the younger siblings almost as a surrogate mother and felt trapped. She left to join the Islamic State not because of any particular theological commitment to their worldview, but because it was the only way she could justify to her family setting a life up somewhere else.

There have also been women I've worked with who originally went over to Syria for humanitarian reasons, to volunteer as nurses and aid workers. There are some who found that their original intention of compassion-driven migration mutated into a fixed extremist belief when they were immersed within ISIS rhetoric in the region. The British female returnees I've been dealing with told me that some European women they encountered did not wholeheartedly believe in the ideology, but were satisfied with the position they attained through their husbands' horrendous actions. An example that was recounted to me was an ISIS soldier's beheading of his mother who had asked her son to leave ISIS. It was considered the ultimate act of loyalty, and he accelerated up the ranks. His wife was a 'white' woman from a Western country, and whilst she detested the act, was able to live in more comfortable residence and had a greater quality of life as a result.

While the timeline of women's travel can help indicate their original intention, it isn't clear cut. It is important to note that many simply got stuck and were forced to marry continually as each husband was killed fighting. To avoid being killed for apostasy and maintain the resulting children and not have them removed by ISIS courts, they had to outwardly pretend to be supportive of what ISIS was doing.

For other women, pre-existing theological commitment to ISIS' worldview was the driving factor. One woman I'm working with traveled there with her children to "bring her faith alive." Often, people think that having children would be a protective factor that would stop women from going over. This is a myth for the theologically driven woman. There is a very strong desire for such a woman to protect her children from an environment [in which] they may be exposed to alcohol, drugs, and immorality. Their understanding of immorality is anything outside of [what they see as] the literal sharia rules. Traveling away from such "immoral lands" is, therefore, considered a holy journey. The loss of a child during such a journey would be considered a route to heaven for a mother who suffered this loss patiently.

Another motivating factor for this migration is that the mother



Dr. Angela Misra

wants to physically show her children how to practice their faith by being a warrior and not just talking about her beliefs but actually practicing them.

CTC: You used the term 'warrior.' Until the 'caliphate' began to collapse, the Islamic State cast women as mothers and wives rather than advocating combat roles.^b What do you mean by warrior?

Misra: A case I worked with viewed it as an act of jihad to go abroad. By having as many children as possible, she felt she was sacrificing herself to expand the 'caliphate.' For the woman who wanted to "bring her faith alive," it wasn't enough to be here in the U.K. and support from afar. She felt she needed to demonstrate this support and actively join the group's efforts.

This particular lady was living a very insular life with very little interaction with the outside world other than her children and a small circle of other Muslim women with similar beliefs. In that enclosed echo chamber, the conversation went along the lines of "wouldn't it be great if we were able to get out of the house and be part of society." They felt they couldn't practice the lifestyle they wanted in the U.K. because of the pubs, the 'immorality' present in society, and the men 'eyeing them up.'

Leaving for the caliphate would, in their view, allow them that freedom. Their thought process was that by going over and helping setting up the Islamic State, not only were they setting up something that was pure, they were also setting up a place that could free other women and other people in this country to practice their faith fully without compromise. And in that way, they were warriors be-

^b In October 2017, in what appears to be a significant shift, the Islamic State's al-Naba publication called on women within the group to prepare themselves for potential combat roles. While its predecessor group, founded by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, had deployed female suicide bombers, until the summer of 2017 the Islamic State had cast women as wives and mothers rather than combatants. Rita Katz, "How do we know ISIS is losing? Now it's asking women to fight," *Washington Post*, November 2, 2017. See also Charlie Winter and Devorah Margolin, "The Mujahidat Dilemma: Female Combatants and the Islamic State," *CTC Sentinel* 10:7 (2017).

cause they were pioneers, fighting for the oppressed. In their minds, they were the Muslim equivalents of suffragettes. It was a question of female emancipation.

When ISIS declared a caliphate in June 2014, there was a significant increase in the number of British women departing. One of them explained to me how she'd listened to Anwar al-Awlaki videos when together with other women in the U.K., and they would afterwards discuss his idea of setting up a utopian caliphate and how great it would be to go over there. She and the other women began to question the masculinity of their own husbands for not going over straight away after the caliphate was declared. They started to question whether their husbands were actually Muslim, given their apathy and reluctance to join ISIS, and began to seriously doubt their husbands were the right examples for their children. I know of a case where the wife actually left her husband and took her children to go and join. She didn't want her husband to taint her children's beliefs and therefore decided it was in their children's best interests to travel as their marriage was, in fact, invalid given his 'non-Muslim state.'

In some cases, it's been the wives who have pressured the husbands to migrate.

CTC: And that's an important point to make because there's a stereotype of men always being the ones pressuring women to go.

Misra: That's right. What we're dealing with is a social movement.

CTC: What has been the experience of British women in Islamic State territory?

Misra: Some British women who went over there appear to have embraced the group, whilst some recoiled at what they witnessed. Let me talk about what I've learned from one woman I'm currently working to rehabilitate. I'll give her the pseudonym 'Zaina.' She's a convert, and she traveled to the Islamic State to join her partner, who attained a position of high rank in the group. She says she just wanted to see him again and so traveled out to see him. She was alone with no children at the time of the original journey. It seems she didn't have any theological driver but ended up spending approximately three years with the group in Raqqa. She suffers from post-traumatic stress after witnessing a number of atrocities.

Zaina told me she saw young girls being married off to elder men. She met a pregnant girl of 13 married to a man over 50 years old. She met women who were being injected with fertility drugs because they couldn't get pregnant straight away. She explained that not getting pregnant the night of the wedding was frowned upon. She came across pregnant women who were so severely beaten by their husbands that the ultrasounds showed the complete disintegration of children within their wombs.

While Zaina was out there, she herself had a baby and that strongly triggered her decision to escape. She didn't want her child to grow up there. She says she had to try to pretend she agreed with what was going on around her or she wouldn't have the freedom to leave. Despite knowing the consequences, she found herself at one point not being able to withhold her true feelings. They told her they would kill her after she had the baby, but she managed to convince them she was just being 'hormonal' and continually apologized, increased her outward religious practice as proof of her

“In their minds, they were the Muslim equivalents of suffragettes. It was a question of female emancipation.”

repentance, and after a period of weeks, this proved sufficient.

Zaina spoke of the sheer volume of sex slavery, how Yazidi women were passed around. She said that other woman not only supported the concept, but would violently reprimand women who expressed revulsion over it. She described a situation in which there were 'guard woman' watching and listening to her and the other women. She was extremely cautious in picking the right friends in order to get help to get out.

CTC: It sounds like an even darker version of *The Handmaid's Tale*. There must have been a lot of pressure to conform.

Misra: Yes. One thing the women used to quote to each other was a verse from the Qur'an: "Sometimes you hate that which is good for you."² It was a way for them to rationalize their horror. They would explain to each other it was the result of being brainwashed by Western values, and the feeling of revulsion needed to be ignored for pure values to take hold of them.

CTC: So this should not be understood just as the males of the Islamic State domineering over females. This is women of the Islamic State who believe this and were trying to institute this.

Misra: Yes, and this gets back to the reality that there is a female-driven social movement at work.

CTC: To what degree has the collapse of the 'caliphate' and the chaotic and difficult conditions in Syria and Iraq deflated this social movement?

Misra: To some degree, it has demoralized them because from their perspective, it's revealed that it was not the prophesized caliphate. But many ISIS supporters here in the U.K., including even some of those who witnessed its horrors first-hand, still fervently believe in the concept of an Islamic State-style caliphate and are now awaiting the declaration of another such state elsewhere.

CTC: What is the approach you use to try to transform extremists' mindsets?

Misra: What sets Unity apart generally is we have a theological credibility because of the Islamic scholars that support us, who have millions of followers worldwide and a lineage of learning stretching back to the Prophet Mohammed that predates the writing down of the Qur'an. This lineage is historically verifiable. We believe this oral tradition of how to interpret the Qur'an has primacy over literalist interpretations of the text. We work to convince those who have become radicalized that their previous interpretation of Islam was misguided and to instill in them a humanistic, open-minded, and tolerant understanding of the religion that holds interdependence and symbiosis of the whole of humanity, living beings, and

the environment at its core.

The other aspect is Unity has community credibility because we're engaged heavily at the grassroots [level], and there is wide understanding in Muslim communities in the U.K. that we're here to help. One of the first questions the women I work with often ask is "why are you doing this work when you've got four kids at home and could be working full time as a doctor?" When I explain to them "I'm here because I'm trying to help you, because I believe I can really help you in the situation you're currently facing and we're doing this with a good and clear intention," it means something. It's real. So that sincerity makes a huge difference, because regardless of what methodology you employ, if you're not able to get that rapport or build that trust, you're not going to be able to get anywhere.

Once we build that initial trust, then we move into the realm of perception—understanding what their mindset is, how they're feeling, why are they viewing things a certain way. Slowly, you piece together and then dismantle the factors that have led to this mindset, and you're able to passively guide them to a different understanding. What I've found is that once this dismantling occurs, the motivation to replace this with a correct understanding is one that ignites within the person, and you are there to direct and support this process. It is really important that once this dismantling occurs that the process is not stopped. The deconstructive phase needs to work in parallel with a reconstructive process that is case centered and involves the development of a sustained change in perception. A critical aspect here is helping them develop self-understanding so that they can regulate how they react to particular triggers, for example, racist abuse or anger over current events.

We're training up new staff at the moment—it's generally a two-year process including learning on the job—and one of the things we explain to them is when you're walking in and speaking to someone, you can't drag somebody from this corner of the room to the door. The process often involves going one step forward, two steps back, but that's still progress because you've learned the triggers and the mindset reflexes specific to the case.

One question that can often help these women's thinking is the question "which part of Islam are they not allowed to practice in the U.K.?" The answer by the end of the sessions is that they are fully free to practice their religion here. The other thing I point out is that I myself converted from Hinduism to Islam 15 years ago, but ISIS believes 'disbelievers' can be put to death. Would the women I'm engaging with have wanted me to be put to death?

I hope my example can also make an impact. These women see that I'm a mother of four, an NHS doctor, a Muslim, and very well integrated into British society, and that's a walking contradiction to a lot of what they'd been led to believe. This appeals to the warrior woman movement followers also as there is a clear example of positive activism at work in front of them that is hard for them to refute.

CTC: How much do you focus on theology in these sessions?

Misra: We try to avoid getting bogged down in exclusively theological debates. The problem about taking on specific interpretations is that you're essentially arguing from the same book. And then it comes to a case of "well, you hold onto your understanding, and I'll hold onto mine." I've come into a lot of cases in which a radicalized woman has refused to carry on speaking to another intervention provider from another organization because they've taken this approach. We describe this in our training as throwing rocks at each

"We work to convince those who have become radicalized that their previous interpretation of Islam was misguided and to instill in them a humanistic, open-minded, and tolerant understanding of the religion."

other over a wall. Sessions become about point scoring. There's no connection, there's no need for the other person to consider the other option because you're speaking about the same subject, and there's no middle ground.

The approach we take is to get them to question the deep basis of their understanding. Where are you getting that information from? How is it legitimate? It's well known that *hadith*—the reported sayings of the Prophet Mohammed—are often used by extremists to justify their action. We impress on them that the *hadith* only began to be written down 120 years after the death of the Prophet, and there's an oral tradition that was in place prior to this that is historically verifiable. We then focus on their own past experience. We ask a number of questions that appear basic, but [we] have found a number of people struggling to answer [them]. For example, "Why do you pray five times a day?" There's nothing in the Qur'an or the *hadith* about praying five times a day. It's tradition, based on practices in the community that have been inherited over the ages, just like the oral traditions the scholars who support Unity have inherited. They find the answers very intriguing, and this leads to building that rapport on a theological basis that then can lead to productive discussions that are theological but not in a rock-throwing or point-scoring format.

At this point, we point out something to them that is so obvious that it is earth-shattering. The humanistic, tolerant, open-minded approach to Islam we are advocating is followed by the majority of the 1.5 billion Muslims on the planet. And in a faith centered so strongly on the *Sunnah*—the customs inherited *en masse* down the generations—how is it conceivable that the majority of people practicing Islam would be led astray? When you put that across and you explain that a significant proportion of Muslims today live in the Malay Archipelago in which you see a very spiritual and humanistic interpretation of Islam, you can start to make real progress in dismantling their arguments.

But dismantling theological arguments isn't enough. If you've got somebody who's intrinsically linked to a group or an ideology because they're part of a social community and they have comfort within that, unless you're able to provide an alternative, you're not going to be able to rehabilitate them.

CTC: So because they're being brought away from their previous social circle, they also need a support structure. You become their friend, counselor, and confessor.

Misra: That's right. I become part of these women's lives. I see them at least once a week. I'll answer a call in the middle of the night. I also introduce them to other women so they can start to make friends who are not in those extremist circles. But however import-

“These women see that I’m a mother of four, an NHS doctor, a Muslim, and very well integrated into British society, and that’s a walking contradiction to a lot of what they’d been led to believe.”

ant the emotional support is, again it is not sufficient. You also need to provide them with an alternative, positive activism, something that gives their life purpose. Invariably, what they were searching for—whether it was driven by theological intention, the desire to help suffering people in Syria, or bringing up their children in a more ‘pious’ community—[was] to do something ‘positive.’

CTC: How do you channel them in positive directions?

Misra: A good number of the men Usman has worked with are now helping Unity in its work. That can be incredibly beneficial to them and the people they are now helping still struggling through the process. One of our scholars has this saying, “if you wash the dishes, the dishes are clean but your hands are the cleanest.”

Some of the women I’ve worked with are now helping me to do outreach and help with current cases, but with women there’s often a different dynamic than with the men. I’ve found most of them want to disappear from their former circles and start again in anonymity for the sake of their children. So I focus [on] family matters and their children’s upbringings in trying to give them a sense of positive purpose. One of the ladies who came back from Syria I was working with, she had a young child with her. One of her driving factors for going over was to be a good mom. When she came back, there was a sense of failure. This obviously took time to get out because it’s quite a big admission. But she felt that she failed because she wasn’t able to stay over there. So when she came back, she needed to find another way of being a good mom, and we talked about ways she could do that.

CTC: What can authorities do to help with the process of rehabilitation?

Misra: Where a number of governments are going wrong is in the interrogation that occurs right after these men and women come back. They can be very abrasive and reinforce that us-vs-them perception. It’s incredibly hard to break that down and whilst the prison sentence is a measure that, if required, should absolutely be enforced, this is only a short-term solution. I appreciate there are limited budgets, but if they spent the time and the energy on training interrogators to have more cultural sensitivity or getting intervention providers into the room earlier, there’d be a lot less burden for the justice system.

CTC: A British minister Rory Stewart, referring to foreign fighters who have joined the Islamic State, recently said “these people are a serious danger to us, and unfortunately the only way of dealing with them will be, in almost every case, to kill them [in Syria and Iraq].”³ Your work appears to be a strong

counterargument to that.

Misra: At Unity, we’ve shown that it is possible to rehabilitate people who have been with the Islamic State. Of course, they’ll have to answer for any crimes they’ve committed and pay their debt to society, but their mindsets can be transformed.

We have a number of individuals previously convicted of terrorist crimes now helping Unity in its work.⁴ The international coalition against the Islamic State cannot kill their way out of this problem. The only sustainable way of dismantling this ideology around the world is the path we’re taking, and the focus should be on expanding these kind of efforts.

CTC: How do you aim to expand your efforts?

Misra: I hope in just three years we can bring on board and train 500 to 750 people in IBT that we are hoping to put on a digitalized platform for global impact. We are aiming to achieve U.K.-wide impact, but we want to expand our work to the U.S. and Europe through strategic partnerships. As part of our outreach efforts, another thing we’re planning is a viral video campaign.

CTC: We’ve recently seen radicalized women arrested for plotting jihadi terrorist attacks in various European countries.⁵ In a shift, the Islamic State recently issued guidance that appeared to pave the way for its female followers to play combat roles. How has this changed the stakes?

Misra: I’ve long feared it was only a matter of time before ISIS embrace this form of female jihad. It’s incredibly worrying because there are very few female interventionists like me who can address this challenge. We’re trying to change that at Unity, but many Western countries risk being caught on the back foot. There is a real shortage of female interventionists, and the success rate of male intervention staff with female cases is extremely limited. Given this emphasis by ISIS, it is important that more women are trained to do this work.

The stakes are really high. There is a real risk we’re going to see a surge in female terrorism in Western countries. You’ve got to understand that when you’re looking at the cultural makeup of these radicalized girls, joining or fighting for the Islamic State is a religiously sanctioned form of feminism.

CTC: It’s a dynamic in which these women, because they’ve grown up in the West, have a desire to play more equal roles. The fact the Islamic State is finally giving them equal status as fighters can be incredibly alluring.

Misra: Exactly. And the other challenge we’re facing is that some woman launching attacks in the name of the Islamic State are being celebrated as heroes here in the U.K. I know of one woman who received ten marriage proposals within a few weeks of going to prison after she launched an attack. Although the attack was almost ten years ago, her father is still congratulated within his community with people standing in queues to shake his hand because people

c For example, plots by women in the United Kingdom and France. See Danny Boyle, “Mother and daughter in terror plot case ordered to lift veils by magistrate who demands to see their eyes,” Daily Telegraph, May 11, 2017; Gérard Bon, “Arrested French women, directed by Islamic State, planned Paris attack,” Reuters, September 9, 2016.

want to shake the hand of the father of a female warrior.

CTC: What is the number one thing Western governments can do better in the field of CVE?

Misra: Empower those of us in the Muslim community working at the front line who have a proven record of working directly with people to dismantle this ideology. There's been so much fatalism among government officials and think tanks that extremism is a problem we'll be living with forever. We at TUI, believe it can be decisively tackled.

The strategy of only focusing on increasing security measures and military efforts are short sighted. The breakup of ISIS hasn't made the threat go away. If anything we have seen an acceleration of attacks in the U.K. By focusing on only punitive measures and sending people to prison without effective rehabilitation is short sighted and a missed opportunity. You can't just rely on putting people in prison because the ideology still flourishes in prison. Cases gain notoriety and celebrity status in their insular groups thereby only reinforcing their extremist beliefs which they disperse during this time. Those not serving life-terms will, of course, also eventually come out and therefore the problem only continues.

There needs to be a greater emphasis on allocation of resources to programs that have proven an elimination of this issue with a

greater emphasis placed on true rehabilitation as a measure of success. There's a whole interventions industry that has grown up here in the U.K. built on just 'tick box engagement.'

CTC: You're working in a very challenging environment. Unity has received death threats. Why are you doing the work you do?

Misra: It is difficult, no doubt. Waking up at 4 o'clock in the morning to answer phone calls from cases who need to speak to you because they're feeling suicidal, the verbal abuse you sometimes get in the early stages of an intervention, receiving death threats publicly and privately, and then being told by friends and family that you're insane for giving up the opportunity to work as a private-practice doctor to do this, it can be draining.

However, we have been told by academics and trusted experts in this field that our success is unprecedented and simply not available elsewhere. When I think of that and the number of people we have successfully stopped from following this ideology and therefore carrying out acts of terrorism, I feel very strongly that I would have to answer for not continuing this work despite the above. I feel morally obliged to continue, and the sense of accomplishment and service that you get from being able to facilitate such a change is incredible. **CTC**

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- 4 For more on this, see Paul Cruickshank, "An Interview with: Usman Raja," *CTC Sentinel* 8:7 (2015).

The Implications of Iran's Expanding Shi'a Foreign Fighter Network

By Colin Clarke and Phillip Smyth

Shi'a Iran has been steadily recruiting, training, and equipping Shi'a foreign fighters from Lebanon, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, and their capabilities are growing. Shi'a foreign fighters have participated in conflicts throughout the region, including in Yemen, Syria, and Iraq. There is evidence the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps is providing the training to transform these fighters into a professional transnational militia proxy force modeled after Lebanese Hezbollah. The formalization and expansion of these networks risks exacerbating geopolitical and sectarian tensions throughout the region.

The wars in Syria and Iraq have given Iran the opportunity to formalize and expand networks of Shi'a foreign fighters throughout the region. Units of Shi'a militants from Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq are undergoing a transformation into a "Hezbollah"-style organization that is loyal to Iran and willing to fight alongside Iranian troops and advisers. Meanwhile, Afghan and Pakistani Khomeinist networks have been reformed to supply thousands of fighters who can be used as shock troops on battlefields stretching from the Middle East to South Asia. The program is allegedly overseen by Qaseem Suleimani, commander of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force (IRGC-QF).¹

The Shi'a foreign fighter network is not a new phenomenon. Indeed, to fully comprehend the situation today, it is critical to understand Iran's links to the Lebanese terrorist group Hezbollah, which date back to the early 1980s. Iran has been described as the "principal moving force" behind the group's creation.² In its nascent stages, Hezbollah was little more than an inchoate collection of Shi'a militants who had broken off from similar organizations like AMAL and the Da'wa party.³ Following Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon, 1,500 members of the al-Quds (Jerusalem) Force of the IRGC were redeployed from the Iran-Iraq battlefield to the eastern Bekaa region, mostly in Brital, Nabisheet, and Ba'albek, to provide materiel support and train Shi'a militias in areas of recruitment, ideological inculcation, and military training.⁴ Some scholars have

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gone so far as to label Hezbollah "an equal partner rather than a proxy" of Iran.⁵

The instruction provided by the IRGC also included how to conduct effective reconnaissance, gather intelligence, and deploy suicide-bombing tactics. The training provided to Hezbollah by the IRGC not only drastically improved the group's operational capacity, but it also provided Hezbollah with the expertise to train other terrorist groups, including Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad. This 'train-the-trainer' model is on display today in Syria, where Hezbollah has worked with the IRGC to train Shi'a foreign fighters in a range of guerrilla tactics and asymmetric warfare techniques.⁶ Prized recruits are selected for more rigorous training in an effort to produce highly elite, specialized hybrid units capable of fighting both state and non-state actors.⁷

An Expanding Network

Hezbollah remains at the center of Iran's Shi'a foreign fighter network. Although it has been one of the most effective fighting forces on the ground in Syria, it has suffered significant casualties.⁸ Still, Hezbollah has worked to recruit a significant number of fighters from within Syria⁹ and has played a vital combat role in Syria, helping the Assad regime reclaim territory while defending key villages and cities.¹⁰

But other nodes are being developed, aided by the Syrian civil war, which has served as a veritable testing ground for these emerging groups. Several prominent Iraqi foreign fighter groups have played a significant role in Syria, but are subject to the ebb and flow of the conflict across the border in Iraq. Now that the Islamic State has lost large swaths of its territory and Mosul has been recaptured, Iraqi Shi'a militia leaders are in a position to send fighters to Syria to assist the Assad regime.

Despite signs that there were splits within the leadership elements of some Iraqi Shi'a militia groups, these groups have expanded and continue to cooperate within the network. This was especially the case during the conflict in Syria. In early 2013, the Iraqi Shi'a militia Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada (the Master of Martyrs Brigade) splintered from Kata'ib Hezbollah (KH),¹¹ and Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba (the Hezbollah Movement of the Outstanding) split from Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH).¹² However, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq and KH assisted the new groups and fought alongside both to help defend the Assad regime.¹³

In Syria, the Liwa Abu Fadl al-Abbas (LAFAB) was the Assad regime's first major attempt to create its own Shi'a militia, largely based on the Hezbollah model and received assistance from the Lebanese group.¹⁴ Other primarily Syrian Shi'a groups, such as Quwat al-Imam al-Baqir (the Imam Baqir Forces), were also formed with the assistance of Hezbollah, built on that model, and have fought alongside Iranian-backed Shi'a groups.¹⁵

The Badr Organization's Quwet al-Shahid Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, a moniker the group used between 2013 through 2015 for



A photo taken on August 2, 2017, during a tour guided by the Lebanese Hezbollah group shows a fighter flying the group's flag in the vicinity of the Syrian town of Flita near the border with Lebanon. (Louai Beshara/AFP/Getty Images)

its expeditionary units headed to Syria, consisted of Iraqi Shi`a and deployed throughout Syria in varying capacities.¹⁶ Groups like Badr also helped to train Syrian Shi`a militias, transforming them into mobile rapid response units, modeled on smaller versions of Lebanese Hezbollah.¹⁷

The conflict in Syria forced the Assad regime to look beyond Shi`a within the immediate region and turn to aspiring fighters from South Asia. Iranian linkages to Afghan refugees, especially the thousands of Afghans living as refugees in Iran, facilitated their recruitment. As the conflict in Syria assumed a more sectarian tone, the willingness of Assad and his allies to expand the aperture of potential fighters extended to both Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Besides Lebanese and Iraqis, there are also substantial numbers of Shi`a foreign fighters engaged in the Syria conflict from South Asia, mainly Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Afghan fighters belong to Liwa Fatemiyoun, and according to official Iranian sources, they number between 10,000-12,000 fighters,¹⁸ with some seeing major combat action in Aleppo, Deraa, Damascus, Latakia, and the Qalamoun region. Some reports indicate that hundreds of Afghan Shi`a, many of them Hazaras, have died fighting in Syria.¹⁹ These fighters are motivated by a combination of money and radicalism, with some recruited by the sectarian pitch to protect holy Shi`a shrines in Syria.²⁰ Some reports suggest that Afghan Shi`a are being recruited from refugee camps in Iran, while in other cases the vetting process is less than scrupulous and allows for criminals, considered expendable by the Assad regime, to be deployed to the frontlines to fight and die.²¹

Information from Syria indicates that Pakistani Shi`a foreign fighters are now fighting in their own distinct unit in Syria—the Liwa Zaynabiyoun—instead of being integrated with other units, as they were early on in the conflict.²² Beginning in 2013, Pakistani Shi`a from the Turi tribe of the Kurram tribal region and ethnic Hazaras from Quetta traveled to Syria in large numbers.²³ Urdu-language websites and social media pages have been used by

Liwa Fatemiyoun and Liwa Zaynabiyoun to recruit Pakistani Shi`a to join the growing network of foreign fighters in Syria in order to defend their co-religionists against onslaught from the Islamic State and other hostile actors.^a

Battle Tested

From battlefields spanning the marshlands separating Iran and Iraq to the hills of southern Lebanon, throughout their three-decade long history, Iranian-controlled proxy units have been improving their asymmetric and more recently, conventional battle tactics.

In Lebanon, it was through asymmetric warfare that Hezbollah first made an impact. From the early 1980s until the Israeli pullout from south Lebanon in 2000, the group often targeted with deadly effect Israeli forces and their local proxy militia, the South Lebanon Army (SLA). Prior to Hezbollah's official 1985 declaration of existence, the group was linked to a massive car bomb that leveled an Israeli military and intelligence headquarters in Tyre.²⁴ Other attacks included roadside bombings, the assassination of the second most senior SLA commander, and rocket attacks.²⁵ There were also, however, many failures. As Eitan Azani has noted, in the mid-1980s Hezbollah suffered "a series of humiliating defeats in attacking IDF posts ... during which dozens of the movement's activists became casualties."²⁶ Nevertheless, the group quickly bounced back, learning from its errors and establishing new strategies.²⁷

The situation was similar in Iraq. From the mid-1980s and 1990s, Iraqi Shi`a dissidents, captured Iraqi Shi`a who had been conscripted into Saddam Hussein's army in the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War, and other smaller groups of Iraqi Shi`a insurgents spon-

a Social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter were both used extensively to recruit Pakistani Shi`a fighters. See Phillip Smyth, "The Shiite Jihad In Syria and Its Regional Effects," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, *Policy Focus* 138 (2015), particularly Appendix 8.

sored by Tehran were placed by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and allied clerics under the umbrella of the Badr Corps.^b Like Hezbollah in Lebanon, the group established developed significant capabilities and experience in asymmetric warfare as it carried out attacks against the forces of Saddam Hussein's security forces.²⁸

During the 2006 Hezbollah-Israel War and the U.S. and coalition occupation of Iraq (2003-2011), it became clear that Iranian-controlled Shi'a militia groups had reached a new level of capability in asymmetric conflict. Lebanese Hezbollah used such tactics to initiate the conflict with Israel and defend against the Israeli counterattack. The group also gained access to more advanced weapons. On July 14, 2006, Hezbollah militants launched an advanced surface-to-surface missile (SSM) at the INS Hanit, an Israeli naval vessel, heavily damaging it and causing four deaths.²⁹ This know-how, along with Iranian-supplied ballistic missiles, anti-ship missiles, and sea mines, was reportedly transferred to Yemen's Houthis (Ansar Allah), which launched anti-ship missiles at U.S. and Saudi-led coalition vessels in October 2016.³⁰

Iran's Iraqi proxies conducted a number of attacks against U.S. troops during the U.S. occupation of Iraq, with organizations like Kata'ib Hezbollah (KH) using advanced weapons.³¹ Explosively formed penetrator (EFP) forms of improvised explosive devices (IEDs), first employed by Hezbollah against the Israel Defense Forces, were modified and heavily employed against U.S. and coalition forces by the group.³² Kata'ib Hezbollah also used numerous types of short-range rocket munitions. In 2008, for example, a rocket attack launched by the group killed two United Nations workers.³³ The group's so-called "Ashtar" improvised rocket-assisted munition (IRAM) was also used against U.S. and coalition forces.³⁴ Newer variants developed by the group have increased range and have been used against Sunni rebel groups in Syria and the Islamic State in Iraq.³⁵ In combating the Islamic State, KH Shi'a militias operating in Iraq will presumably have developed capabilities in discovering and dismantling IEDs targeting their forces.

While groups like Lebanese Hezbollah learned how to fight a modern, well-equipped army and retained asymmetric tactics, the war in Syria and other regional sectarian conflicts provided a learning curve toward enhancing conventional capabilities. Unlike earlier experiences in Lebanon and Iraq, the Syrian conflict has provided these groups with experience in combined arms warfare and a large battle space to integrate its multi-national units. Hezbollah and its other Iranian-backed Iraqi Shi'a militia allies have also relied on the deployment of larger-sized units and have improved the ability of these units to effectively utilize air and mechanized support.^c

Iran's Shi'a proxies growth in conventional capability and expertise is reflected in its propaganda. In numerous propaganda

posts, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq's (AAH) Syrian expeditionary unit and front, Liwa Kafil Zaynab (the Brigade of the Custodians of Zaynab), deployed its fighters alongside armored vehicles, including tanks. Since the first announcement of AAH under this moniker, AAH propaganda has shown its fighters working in concert with Assad's forces.^{36 d}

The introduction of advanced UAV (unmanned aerial vehicle) technology has been another facet of expanding Hezbollah's capabilities, although the group has primarily used drones for surveillance and reconnaissance. In 2012, Hezbollah launched an advanced drone into Israel and has already demonstrated an ability to hack Israeli drones.³⁷ The expertise, reportedly developed with the direct assistance of the IRGC-QF, was expanded and used by Iraqi clones of Hezbollah, such as KH.³⁸ In 2009, Kataib Hezbollah hacked U.S. drones by exploiting an unprotected communications link in some of the UAV systems to intercept the feed and download data in near real-time. KH was able to do this by utilizing SkyGrabber, a Russian software system originally designed to pirate satellite television.³⁹

As these multinational groups continue to fight side by side, gain knowledge and experience in asymmetric and conventional tactics, and receive training on increasingly sophisticated equipment, the potency of Iran's Shi'a militia proxies will only increase and further serve as an extension of Iranian foreign and security policy.⁴⁰

Iran Ascendant

The formalization and expansion of the Shi'a foreign fighter units is just one piece of Iran's multi-pronged strategy for regional hegemony in the Middle East. To achieve this, Iran apparently seeks to prevail against Saudi Arabia, consolidate its status as vanguard of the Shi'a, and perhaps most importantly, successfully force the retreat of U.S. forces from the region. This is especially true of Iran's neighbors Iraq and Afghanistan, where the Iranians have worked for years to undermine U.S. policy and expand their own interests.⁴¹

The Iranian threat network is global and includes not only its nuclear weapons potential, but also cyber and maritime capabilities and its use of the IRGC-QF to spread its influence in Syria, Yemen, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, and elsewhere.⁴² Since the beginning of the civil war in Syria, Iran has grown closer to Russia, while also seeking rapprochement with groups it once clashed with, including the Afghan Taliban and Hamas, highly capable non-state actors locked in conflict with the United States and Israel, respectively.⁴³

Iran has successfully used its intensifying rivalry with Saudi Arabia and the threat of the Islamic State to strengthen its position and cement sectarian support. Following the Islamic State attack on the tomb of the Ayatollah Khomeini and its parliament in early June 2017, some IRGC officials predictably blamed Saudi Arabia and the United States for somehow being involved.⁴⁴ That those claims are preposterous is irrelevant. The message plays well with the scores of young Shi'a men looking to join Iran's ever-growing cadre of foreign fighters enlisted to defend their faith.

Shi'a foreign fighters are already deployed in Syria, Iraq, and

b The Badr Corps was initially part of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI). In 2011, when SCIRI became the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, the Badr Corps split from the party and established itself as the Badr Organization. See also "The 35th Anniversary of the Establishment of the Victorious Badr Organization. Badr: 35 Years of Giving and Jihad," Al-Ghadeer TV; Afshon Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam: Religion, Politics, and Iran's Revolutionary Guards*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 111.

c Semi-official Iranian media has promoted these new abilities by showcasing Russian air support offered to some of these groups. See "Russian Air Force Supporting Syrian, Hezbollah Forces in Anti-ISIL Operation toward Deir Ezzur," Fars News Agency, June 14, 2017.

d It is important to note that Hezbollah's Ali Musa Daqduq was sent to Iraq to aid in the creation and development of Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq. See Liz Sly and Peter Finn, "U.S. hands over Hezbollah prisoner to Iraq," *Washington Post*, December 16, 2011.

Yemen and could be used elsewhere to defend Iranian interests under the auspices of protecting Shi`a from Sunni repression. This includes in countries where the United States retains vested interests, such as Bahrain and Saudi Arabia.⁴⁵ This network could also help Iran establish a greater presence in Afghanistan and Pakistan.⁴⁶ As Ari Heistein and James West argued in *The National Interest*, “When these battle-hardened foreign fighters return home after being trained and indoctrinated by Iran and having built a network of likeminded people, it is no stretch to believe that they could serve as transnational networks to advance longstanding Iranian ambitions in South Asia.”⁴⁷

Well-trained and resourced, Iranian-directed Shi`a foreign fighters pose a significant potential threat to U.S. interests. Both Lebanese Hezbollah and Kata`ib Hezbollah are designated terrorist groups that have historically targeted Americans and American interests, to great effect, as evidenced by the high numbers of American soldiers killed by each of these groups and continued anti-American propaganda efforts.⁴⁸ The more robust this network grows, the more opportunities it will have to expand abroad, as it appeared to have done most recently by gaining a toehold in Nigeria.⁴⁹ Again, the model is Lebanese Hezbollah. After three decades, it now boasts a truly global presence with strong nodes in places like

Latin America, West Africa, and even parts of Europe and North America.⁵⁰

In 2004, Jordan’s King Abdullah II spoke of a growing expansion of Shi`a influence stretching from the Gulf of Aden to the Mediterranean becoming more of a reality with each passing year.⁵¹ The Iranians have gone “all in” on Syria, expending vast amounts of blood and treasure, not to mention domestic political capital, in propping up Assad’s regime, one of its few remaining allies in the region.⁵²

Because Tehran’s influence is so ingrained in certain parts of the Middle East, completely usurping Iranian power is unrealistic. As the Islamic State is further weakened in Syria, the United States is rightly concerned that IRGC forces and their affiliates may very well fill the power vacuum left behind. These fears are palpable in Kirkuk, following clashes between Iraqi government forces and Kurdish fighters in that city in mid-October.⁵³ Shi`a militias also went into Kirkuk during this time period.⁵⁴ In areas of Syria where the Islamic State has withdrawn, the United States and its allies have been competing with Assad regime and its allies, namely Iran and Russia, to secure these newly liberate territories. The United States is worried that Iran is attempting to establish a land bridge from Tehran to Damascus, through Iraq.⁵⁵

There are strong grounds to push back, with force if necessary, against encroachment by Shi`a foreign fighters, as the United States did in southeast Syria in early June, when U.S. forces struck Iranian-backed militias on multiple occasions near al-Tanf.⁵⁶ But kinetic force can only be one piece of a more comprehensive U.S. strategy, which includes aggressive efforts at diplomacy. The Syrian civil war is, in many ways, the impetus behind the growth of Iran’s transnational Shi`a foreign fighter network. If the United States and the international community can help foster a negotiated political settlement in Syria, this will attenuate Iran’s ability to act with impunity and curtail its efforts to project power within the region through its use of proxy forces and foreign fighters. **CTC**

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Europe's True Southern Frontier: The General, the Jihadis, and the High-Stakes Contest for Libya's Fezzan Region

By Andrew McGregor

Libya's relentless post-revolution conflict appears to be heading for a military rather than a civil conclusion. The finale to this struggle may come with an offensive against the United Nations-recognized government in Tripoli by forces led by Libya's ambitious strongman, Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar. However, the conflict will continue if Haftar is unable to consolidate control of the southern Fezzan region, the source of much of the oil and water Libya's coastal majority needs to survive. Contesting control of this vital region is an aggressive assortment of well-armed jihadis, tribal militias, African mercenaries, and neo-Qaddafiists. Most importantly, controlling Fezzan means securing 2,500 miles of Libya's porous southern desert borders, a haven for militants, smugglers, and traffickers. The outcome of this struggle is of enormous importance to the nations of the European Union, who have come to realize Europe's southern borders lie not at the Mediterranean coast, but in Libya's southern frontier.

As the territory controlled by Libya's internationally recognized government in Tripoli and its backers shrinks into a coastal enclave, the struggle for Libya appears to be entering into a decisive phase. Libyan strongman Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar claims his forces are now in control of 1,730,000 square kilometers out of Libya's total of 1,760,000 square kilometers.¹ However, to control Tripoli and achieve legitimacy, Haftar must first control its southern approaches through the Fezzan region. Europe and the United Nations recognize the Tripoli-based Presidential Council/Government of National Accord (PC/GNA) as the official government of Libya, but recognition has done nothing to limit migrant flows to Europe. Whoever can control these flows will be the beneficiary of European gratitude and diplomatic approval.

Securing Tripoli means preventing armed elements supporting the PC/GNA from fleeing into the southern desert. Haftar must control water pipelines (the "Man-Made River Project") and oil pipelines from the south, secure the borders, and prevent Islamic State fighters, pro-Qaddafiists, Islamist militias, and foreign mercenaries from turning Fezzan into a generator for continued instability in Libya.

Fezzan is a massive area of over 212,000 square miles with a

mostly tribal population of less than 500,000 living in isolated oases or *wadis* (dry riverbeds, often with subsurface water). Hidden by sand seas and rocky desert are the assets that make Fezzan so strategically desirable: vital oil fields, access to massive subterranean freshwater aquifers, and a number of important Qaddafi-era military airbases. A principal concern is the ability of radical Islamists to exploit Fezzan's lack of security to further aims such as territorial control of areas of the Sahara/Sahel region or the facilitation of potential terrorist strikes on continental Europe. Many European states are closely watching the outcome of this competition due to the political impact of the large number of sub-Saharan African migrants passing through Fezzan's unsecured borders on their way to eventual refugee claims in Europe.

Competing Governments, Competing Armies

The security situation in Fezzan and most other parts of Libya became impossibly complicated by the absence of any unifying ideology other than anti-Qaddafiism during the 2011 Libyan revolution. Every attempt to create a government of national unity since has been an abject failure.

At the core of this political chaos is the United Nations-brokered Libyan Political Agreement (LPA) of December 17, 2015, which called for a tripartite government consisting of a nine-member Presidency Council (PC) to oversee the functions of head-of-state, a Government of National Accord (GNA) as the executive authority, and a House of Representatives (HoR) as the legislative authority with a High Council of State as a consultative body. In practice, most of these bodies are in conflict with each other or enduring high levels of internal dissension, leaving the nation haphazardly governed by scores of well-armed ethnic, tribal, and religious militias, often grouped into unstable coalitions. Contributing to the disorder is Khalifa Ghwell's Government of National Salvation (GNS), which claims to be the legitimate successor of Libya's General National Congress government (2014-2016) and makes periodic attempts to seize power in Tripoli, most recently in July 2017.²

The most powerful of the military coalitions is the ambitiously named Libyan National Army (LNA), a coalition of militias nominally under the Tobruk-based HoR and commanded by Khalifa Haftar, a Cyrenaican strongman who lived in Virginia after turning against Qaddafi but is now supported largely by Russia, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). It is this author's observation that Haftar has a habit of speaking for the HoR rather than taking direction from it.

The Tripoli-based PC, which has military authority under the LPA, is still trying to organize a national army. In the meantime, it is backed by various militias based in Misrata and Tripoli. Together with the GNA, it forms the internationally recognized government of Libya but still requires a majority vote from the Tobruk-based HoR to be fully legitimate under the terms of the LPA. There are even divisions within the seven-member PC, with three members

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Libya (Rowan Technology)

now opposing PC chairman Fayez Serraj and supporting the HoR and Haftar.³

Fezzan's Tribal Context

Fezzan's human dimension consists of a patchwork of often-overlapping tribal and ethnic entities prone to feuds and shifting alliances. These might broadly be said to belong to one of four groups:

- Arab and Arab-Berber, consisting of the Awlad Buseif, Hasawna, Magarha, Mahamid, Awlad Sulayman, Qaddadfa, and Warfalla groups. The last three include migrants from the Sahel, descendants of tribal members who fled Ottoman or Italian rule and returned after independence. These are known collectively as Aïdoun ("returnees");⁴
- Berber Tuareg, being the Ajjar Tuareg (a Libyan-Algerian cross-border confederation) and Sahelian Tuareg (typically migrants from Mali and Niger who arrived in the Qaddafi era);
- Nilo-Saharan Tubu, formed by the indigenous Teda Tubu, with smaller numbers of migrant Teda and Daza Tubu from Chad and Niger. These two main Tubu groups are distinguished by dialect;

- Arabized sub-Saharan known as Ahali, descendants of slaves brought to Libya with little political influence.

The LNA's Campaign in Jufra District

The turning point of Haftar's attempt to bring Libya under his control came with his takeover of the Jufra district of northern Fezzan, a region approximately 300 miles south of Tripoli with three important towns in its northern sector (Hun, Sokna, and Waddan), as well as the Jufra Airbase, possession of which brings Tripoli within easy range of LNA warplanes.

The campaign began with a series of airstrikes by LNA and Egyptian aircraft in May 2017 on targets in Hun and Waddan belonging to Abd al-Rahman Bashir's 613th Tagreft Brigade (composed of Misratans who had fought the Islamic State in Sirte as part of the Bunyan al-Marsous ["Solid Structure"] coalition)⁵ and the

Benghazi Defense Brigades (BDB)^a, the latter allegedly supported by a group of Chadian mercenaries. In early June 2017, the LNA's 12th Brigade swept into the Jufra airbase with the help of local tribal leaders.⁶ Opposition was slight after the Misratan 13th Brigade and the BDB pulled out toward Misrata.

This allowed the LNA to take the town of Bani Walid, an important center in Libya's human trafficking network strategically located 100 kilometers southwest of Misrata and 120 kilometers southeast of Tripoli. The site offers access by road to both cities and will be home to the new 27th Light Infantry Brigade commanded by Abdullah al-Warfali (a member of the Warfala tribe) as part of the LNA's Gulf of Sidra military zone under General Muhammad Bin Nayel.⁷ Possession of Bani Walid could allow the LNA to separate the GNA government in Tripoli from its strongest military supporters in Misrata.

An Opening for Islamist Extremists

North African jihadis are likely to use the political chaos in Fezzan to establish strategic depth for operations in Algeria, Niger, and Mali. Those militants loyal to al-Qa`ida united in the Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wa'l-Muslimin (JNIM) on March 2, 2017, as a merger of Ansar al-Din, al-Mourabitoun, the Macina Liberation Front, and the Saharan branch of al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). The group's Tuareg leader, Iyad ag Ghali, will look to exploit Libyan connections in Fezzan already established by al-Mourabitoun chief Mokhtar Belmokhtar, who mounted his attack on Algeria's In Amenas gas plant in 2013 from a base near al-'Uwaynat in Fezzan.^b For now, it appears Ag Ghali can count on only minimal support from the Sahelian Tuareg community in Fezzan, which largely favors Qaddafiism over jihadism.^c

The rival Islamic State announced the establishment of the *wilaya* (province) of Fezzan as part of its "caliphate" in November

2014.^d Since their expulsion from Sirte last December by al-Bunyan al-Marsous and intensive U.S. airstrikes, Islamic State fighters now range the rough terrain south of the coast, presenting an elusive menace.⁸ Following the interrogation of a large number of Islamic State detainees, the Attorney General's office in Tripoli announced that Libyans were a minority in the group, with the largest number having come from Sudan, while others came from Egypt, Tunisia, Mali, Chad, and Algeria.⁹

Some Sudanese Islamic State fighters are disciples of Sudanese preacher Masa'ad al-Sidairah, whose Jama'at al-I'tisam bil-Quran wa'l-Sunna (Group of Devotion to the Quran and Sunna) publicly supported the Islamic State and its leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi until a wave of arrests forced it to pledge to abandon Islamic State recruitment in Sudan for the Libyan and Syrian battlefields.¹⁰ Sudanese authorities state that at least 20 Sudanese Islamic State recruits have been killed in Libya.¹¹ Many of these entered Libya via the smugglers' route passing Jabal 'Uwaynat at the meeting point of Egypt, Sudan, and Libya.¹²

Other Islamic State fighters fleeing Sirte headed into Fezzan, where they were reported to have concentrated at the town of al-'Uwaynat, just north of Ghat and close to the Algerian border. This group was believed responsible for the February 2017 attacks on Great Man-Made River facilities and electricity infrastructure, including the destruction of almost 100 miles of electricity pylons between Jufra and Sabha.¹³ On May 6, 2017, Islamic State militants mounted an ambush on a Misratan Third Force convoy on the road between Jufra and Sirte, killing two and wounding three.¹⁴ Libyan investigators claim the Islamic State has rebuilt a "desert army" of three brigades under the command of Libyan Islamist al-Mahdi Salem Dangou (aka Abu Barakat).¹⁵

Islamic State fighters shattered any thought their Sirte defeat left the group in Libya incapable of mounting operations on August 23, 2017 with an attack on the LNA's 121st Infantry Battalion at the Fugha oasis (Jufra District). Nine soldiers and two civilians were apparently killed after capture by close range shots to the head or by having their throats slit. Most of the soldiers were former members of Qaddafi's elite 32nd Mechanized Brigade from Surman and may have been targeted due to the role of Surmani troops in wiping out Islamic State terrorists who had briefly occupied the town of Sabratha, in between Tripoli and the border with Tunisia, in February 2016.¹⁶

Securing the Southern Borders

Control of the trade routes entering Fezzan was based on the *mi-di-midi* (friend-friend) truce of 1893, which gave the Tuareg exclusive control of all routes entering Fezzan west of the Salvador Pass (on the western side of Niger's Mangueni plateau), while the Tubu controlled all routes from Niger and Chad east of the Toumou Pass on the eastern side of the plateau.¹⁷ The long-standing agree-

a The BDB is a coalition of Islamists and former Qaddafi-era army officers, which includes some fighters who were in the now largely defunct Ansar al-Sharia group. See Andrew McGregor, "Libya's Military Wild Card: The Benghazi Defense Brigades and the Massacre at Brak al-Shatti," *Jamestown Foundation Terrorism Monitor* 15:11 (2017).

b The town of al-'Uwaynat in southwest Fezzan is not to be confused with Jabal 'Uwaynat, a mountain in southeast Cyrenaica. According to Malian and Mauritanian security sources, Belmokhtar was replaced in early May 2017 by his Algerian deputy, Abd al-Rahman al-Sanhaji, whose name suggests he is a Berber. Belmokhtar's presence in southern Libya, far away from operations in Mali, was cited as a major reason for the change. Malek Bachir, "Exclusive: Notorious leader of Saharan al-Qaeda group loses power," *Middle East Eye*, May 9, 2017.

c The 'Ubari-based Maghawir Brigade, created from Sahelian Tuareg as a Libyan Army unit in 2004, split during the revolution with those favoring the revolution forming the new Ténééré (Tamashaq – "desert") Brigade, while the Qaddafi loyalists were forced to flee to Mali and Niger. Many of the latter returned after the collapse of the Azawad rebellion in northern Mali (2012-2103) and regrouped around Tuareg General Ali Kanna Sulayman as the Tendé Brigade, though others rallied around Ag Ghali's cousin, Ahmad Omar al-Ansari, in the Border Guards 315 Brigade. Mathieu Galtier, "Southern borders wide open," *Libya Herald*, September 20, 2013; Rebecca Murray, "In a Southern Libya Oasis, a Proxy War Engulfs Two Tribes," *Vice News*, June 7, 2015; Nicholas A. Heras, "New Salafist Commander Omar al-Ansari Emerges in Southwest Libya," *Jamestown Foundation Militant Leadership Monitor* 5:12 (2014); Rebecca Murray "Southern Libya Destabilized: The Case of Ubari," *Small Arms Survey Briefing Paper*, April 2017, fn. 23.

d The Islamic State declared the division of Libya into three provinces of its self-proclaimed caliphate on November 10, 2014, based on the pre-2007 administrative divisions of Libya: Wilayah Barqa (Cyrenaica), Wilayah Tarabulus (Tripolitania), and Wilayah Fezzan. See Geoff D. Porter, "How Realistic Is Libya as an Islamic State 'Fallback'?" *CTC Sentinel* 9:3 (2016).

e The Great Man-Made River is a Qaddafi-era water project that taps enormous aquifers under the Sahara to supply fresh-water to the cities of the Libyan coast. Cutting the pipelines is a relatively cheap and efficient way of applying pressure to the urban areas on the coast where most of the Libyan population lives.

ment collapsed during the Tubu-Tuareg struggles of 2014, fueled by clashes over control of smuggling operations and the popular perception of the Tuareg as opponents of the Libyan revolution.

Today, both passes are monitored by American drones operating out of a base north of Niamey and by French Foreign Legion patrols operating from a revived colonial-era fort at Madama, 60 miles south of Toummo.¹⁸ Chad closed its portion of the border with Libya in early January 2017 to prevent Islamic State militants fleeing Sirte from infiltrating into north Chad, but has since opened a single crossing.¹⁹

On a September 2017 visit to Rome, Haftar insisted the international arms embargo on Libya must be lifted for the LNA, adding that he could provide the manpower to secure Libya's southern border, but needed to be supplied with "drones, helicopters, night vision goggles, [and] vehicles."²⁰ Haftar said earlier that preventing illegal migrants from crossing the 2,500-mile southern border would cost \$20 billion.²¹

Some southern militias have proven effective at 'policing' the border when it is in their own interest; a recent fuel shortage in southern Fezzan was remedied when the Tubu Sukour al-Shara ("Desert Eagles") militia, which is based in Qatrun some 200 kilometers south of Sabha, closed the borders with Chad and Niger on September 7, 2017, and began intercepting scores of tanker trucks smuggling fuel and other goods across the border into Niger, where they had been fetching greater prices, but leaving Fezzan with shortages and soaring prices.²²

Sukour al-Sahra is led by a veteran Tubu warrior from Niger, Barka Shedemi, and has support from the HoR.²³ Equipped with some 200 vehicles ranging over 400 miles of the southern borders, Shedemi is said to have strong animosity toward the Qaddadfa tribe after he was captured by them in the 1980s and turned over to the Qaddafi regime, which punished him as a common brigand by cutting off a hand and a leg.²⁴ Shedemi has reportedly asked for a meeting with Frederica Mogherini, the European Union's top diplomat, to discuss compensation for his brigade in exchange for halting migrant flows across Libya's southern border.²⁵

Foreign Fighters in Fezzan

Since the revolution, there has been a steady stream of reports concerning the presence of Chadian and Darfuri fighters in Libya, especially those belonging to Darfur's Justice and Equality Movement (JEM). JEM leaders were once harbored by Qaddafi in their struggle against Khartoum, and took refuge in Libya after the revolution as pressure from the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) forced the rebels across the border. Khartoum backs the PC/GNA and has complained of JEM's presence in Libya to the United Nations' Libyan envoy.²⁶

Haftar sees the hand of Qatar behind the influx of foreign fighters: "The Libyan army has recorded the arrival in Libya of citizens from Chad, Sudan, and other African and Arab states. They got into Libya because of the lack of border controls. They received money from Qatar, as well as other countries and terrorist groups."²⁷ Haftar's statement reflects the deteriorating relations between Qatar and much of the rest of the Arab world as well as Haftar's own indebtedness to his anti-Qatar sponsors in Egypt and the UAE. Haftar and HoR spokesmen have also claimed Qatar was supporting what it called terrorist groups (including the Muslim Brotherhood, Ansar al-Sharia, and the defunct Libyan Islamic Fighting Group) and carrying out a campaign of assassinations that included

an unsuccessful attempt on Haftar's life.^{28 f}

Notwithstanding his complaints about JEM and other foreign fighters, Haftar is accused of employing JEM and Darfuri rebels of the Zaghawa-led Sudan Liberation Army-Minni Minnawi (SLA-MM), which arrived in Fezzan in 2015. Acting as mercenaries, these fighters participated in LNA campaigns in Benghazi and the oil crescent alongside members of SLA-Unity and the SLA-Abd al-Wahid, largely composed of members of the Fur ethnic group for which Darfur is named.²⁹ When the SLA-MM returned to Darfur in May 2017, they were badly defeated by the RSF.³⁰

Foreign fighters are alleged to have played a part in the June 2017 Brak al-Shatti airbase massacre of 140 LNA soldiers and civilians by the BDB and their Hasawna tribal allies, with a spokesman for the LNA's 166th Brigade asserting the presence of "al-Qa`ida associated" Chadian and Sudanese rebels with the BDB.³¹ In the days after the Brak al-Shatti combat, the LNA's 12th Brigade spokesman claimed that his unit had captured Palestinian, Chadian, and Malian al-Qa`ida members, adding that 70 percent of the fighters they had killed or taken prisoner were foreign.³² The claims cannot be verified, but many BDB commanders have ties to factions of al-Qa`ida and/or the Islamic State.

While Arab rivals of the Tubu in southern Libya often delegitimize local Tubu fighters by referring to them as "Chadian mercenaries," there are actual Tubu fighters from Chad and Niger operating in various parts of Libya. Fezzan's Tubu and Tuareg ethnic groups often take advantage of their ability to call upon their cross-border kinsmen when needed.³³ Tubu leaders in Niger's Kawar region complain that most of their young men have moved to Libya since 2011.³⁴

Chadian rebels opposing the regime of President Idriss Déby Itno have established themselves near the Fezzan capital of Sabha as they build sufficient strength to operate within Chad.³⁵ In mid-June 2017, artillery of the LNA's 116th Infantry Battalion shelled Chadian camps outside Sabha (including those belonging to Mahamat Mahdi Ali's Front pour l'alternance et la concorde au Tchad [FACT]) after accusing them of fighting on behalf of the PC/GNA. A U.N. report suggests that FACT fought alongside the BDB during the latter's operations in the Libyan oil crescent in March 2017, losing a prominent commander in the process.³⁶ A FACT splinter group, the Conseil de Commandement Militaire Pour le Salut de la République (CCMSR), also has a base near Sabha, which was attacked by LNA aircraft in April 2016.³⁷

Efforts to Restore Border Security in Fezzan

Alarmed by the rising numbers of migrants trying to reach Europe from Libya and Libya's inability to police its own borders, Italy and Germany called in May for the establishment of an E.U. mission to patrol the Libya-Niger border "as quickly as possible."³⁸ Ignoring its colonial reputation in Libya, Rome suggested deploying the Italian Carabinieri (a national police force under Italy's Defense Ministry)

f Military sources in the UAE claimed on October 23, 2017, that Qatar was assisting hundreds of defeated Islamic State fighters to leave Iraq and Syria for Fezzan, where they would create a new base to threaten the security of Europe, North Africa, and sub-Saharan Africa. However, this alarming news must be tempered by recognition of the ongoing propaganda war being waged on Qatar by the UAE and Saudi Arabia. Amal Abdullah, "Hamdeen Organization moves hundreds of armed 'Daesh' to Libyan territory," *Al-Ithad*, October 22, 2017.

to train southern security forces and help secure the region from Islamic State terrorists fleeing to Libya from northern Iraq.³⁹

European intervention of this type is a non-starter for the PC/GNA government, which has made it plain it also does not see Libya as a potential holding tank for illegal migrants or have interest in any plan involving their settlement in Libya.⁴⁰

In Fezzan, migrants are smuggled by traffickers across the southern border and on to towns such as Sabha and to its south Murzuq, 'Ubari, and Qatrun in return for cash payments to the Tubu and Tuareg armed groups who control these passages. In 2017, the largest groups of migrants were from Nigeria, Bangladesh, Guinea, and Côte d'Ivoire.⁴¹ The main center of the trade is Sabha, where members of the Awlad Sulayman are heavily involved in human smuggling.⁴² The Tubu and Tuareg also run profitable but dangerous operations smuggling narcotics, tobacco, alcohol, stolen vehicles, state-subsidized products, and other materials across Libya's borders. Street battles in Sabha are common between competing factions of traffickers.⁴³

Italy has signed a military cooperation agreement with Niger that will allow it to deploy alongside Sahel Group of Five (SG5) forces (an anti-terrorist and economic development coalition of five Sahel nations with support from France and other nations) and French and German contingents with the objective of establishing control over the border with Libya.⁴⁴ On the Fezzan side of the border, Italy will support a border guard composed of Tubu, Tuareg, and Awlad Sulayman tribesmen as called for in a deal negotiated in Rome last April.⁴⁴ Rome will, in turn, fund development projects in the region. Local leaders in Fezzan complain national leaders have been more interested in border security than the lack of development that fuels border insecurity, not realizing the two go hand-in-hand.⁴⁵ Italian Interior Minister Marco Minniti noted his conviction that "the southern border of Libya is crucial for the southern border of Europe as a whole. So we have built a relationship with the tribes of southern Sahara. They are fundamental to the south, the guardians of the southern border."⁴⁶

A Failed Experiment

Proof that the migrant crisis cannot be solved on Libya's coast came in September/October 2017 in the form of a 15-day battle in the port city of Sabratha (78 kilometers west of Tripoli) that killed 39 and wounded 300. The battle marked the collapse of an Italian experiment in paying militias to prevent migrants from boarding boats for Italy.⁴⁷

The Italian decision to select the GNA-aligned Martyr Anas Dabbashi Brigade (aka 48th Infantry Brigade) to cut off migrant flows from Sabratha (which it did with some success) angered the Wadi Brigade (salafist followers of Saudi *shaykh* Rabi' bin Hadi al-Madkhali who are aligned with the LNA)⁴⁸ and the (anti) Islamic State-Fighting Operations Room (IFOR, consisting of pro-GNA former army officers, though some have ties to the Wadi Brigade). Like the Anas Dabbashi Brigade, both groups had made great sums of cash from human trafficking. With the southern border still un-

secured, migrants continued to pour into Sabratha but could not be sent on to Europe, creating a trafficking bottleneck.⁴⁹ Suddenly, only Anas Dabbashi was making money (in the form of millions of Euro from Italy),⁵⁰ leading to a fratricidal struggle to restore the old order as members of Sabratha's extensive Dabbashi clan fought on both sides of the conflict.^h Both LNA and GNA forces claimed victory over the Anas Dabbashi Brigade, with Haftar claiming IFOR was aligned with his LNA.⁵¹ Following the battle, migrant flows resumed while Haftar warned his forces in Sabratha to be ready for an advance on Tripoli.⁵²

The Fezzan Qaddafists

A challenge to Haftar's efforts (and one he has tried to co-opt) is the strong current of Qaddafism (i.e., support of the Jamahiriya political philosophy conceived by Muammar Qaddafi) in Fezzan, the last loyalist area to be overrun in the 2011 revolution. Support for Qaddafi was especially strong in the Sahelian Tuareg, Qaddadfa, and parts of the Awlad Sulayman communities.

Fezzan's Qaddafists were no doubt inspired by the release of Saif al-Islam al-Qaddafi in early June 2017 after six years of detention.⁵³ Saif, however, is far from being in the clear; he remains subject to a 2015 death sentence issued in absentia in Tripoli and is still wanted by the International Criminal Court (ICC) for alleged war crimes committed in 2011.⁵⁴ On October 17, 2017, the Qaddafi family lawyer announced Saif was already visiting tribal elders as he began his return to politics.⁵⁵ The announcement followed a statement from the United Nations Special Envoy to Libya, Ghassan Salamé, that Libyan elections must be open to all, including Saif and other unreformed Qaddafists.⁵⁶

General Ali Kanna Sulayman, a Tuareg Qaddafi loyalist, fled to Niger after the fall of Tripoli in 2011, but was reported to have returned to Fezzan in 2013.⁵⁷ His former comrade, Qaddafi-era Air Force commander Ali Sharif al-Rifi, also returned from Niger to his Fezzan home of Waddan in June 2017.⁵⁸ Thirty Qaddafi-era prisoners, mostly military officers, were released in early June 2017 by the Tripoli Revolutionaries' Brigade (TRG) under orders from the HoR.⁵⁹

General Ali Kanna took control of the massive Sharara oil field in Fezzan after the Misratan 13th Brigade pulled out in the last week of May 2017. As leader of a neo-Qaddafist militia, Ali Kanna has spent his time trying to unite local forces in a "Fezzan Army" that would acknowledge the legitimacy of the Qaddafist Jamahiriya.⁶⁰ In October 2016, there were reports that former Qaddafist officers had appointed Ali Kanna as the leader of the "Libyan Armed Forces in Southern Libya," a structure apparently independent of both the GNA and Haftar's LNA.⁶¹

The effort to promote armed Qaddafism in Fezzan has faltered under pressure from the LNA's General Muhammad Bin Nayel.⁶² LNA spokesman Colonel Ahmad al-Mismari downplayed the threat posed by Ali Kanna, claiming his "pro-Qaddafi" southern army is composed mostly of foreign mercenaries with few professional military officers.⁶³

g The SG5 is a multilateral response to terrorism and other security issues in the Sahel region. Created in 2014 but only activated in February 2017, the SG5 consists of military and civil forces from Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Chad, and Burkina Faso, with logistical and financial assistance from France and other Western partners.

h The Italian government maintains that the estimated €5 million payment was issued only to the GNA government or Sabratha's local council and not directly to a militia. However, the route payments took is largely irrelevant to the outcome. Patrick Wintour, "Italy's Deal to Stem Flow of People from Libya in Danger of Collapse," *Guardian*, October 3, 2017.

In mid-October, an armed group of Qaddafiists (allegedly including 120 members of the Darfuri JEM) attempted to take control of the major routes in and out of Tripoli before clashing with Islamist Abd al-Rauf's Rada (Deterrence) force, a semi-autonomous police force operating nominally under the GNA's Ministry of the Interior.⁶⁴

Two alleged leaders of the Qaddafiist group, Libyan Mabruk Juma Sultan Ahnish (aka Alwadi) and Sudanese Rifqa al-Sudani, were captured and detained by Rada forces.⁶⁵ Ahnish is a member of the Magraha tribe from Brak al-Shatti, while Rifqa (aka Imam Daoud Muhammad al-Faki) is supposedly a Sudanese member of JEM, though other accounts claim he may be Libyan.⁶⁶ According to Rada, the rest of the JEM group refused to surrender and presumably remains at large. It was claimed the Darfuri mercenaries were working on behalf of exiled Qaddafiists belonging to the Popular Front for the Liberation of Libya (PFLL).⁶⁷ ⁱ

The fragility of Tripoli's water supply became apparent on October 19, 2017, when Mabruk Ahnish's brother, Khalifa Ahnish, made good on his threat to turn off the Great Man-Made River if Mabruk was not released within 72 hours. Khalifa also threatened "kidnapping and murder," cutting the Sabha-Tripoli road, and blowing up the southern gas pipeline leading to Italy via the Greenstream pipeline.⁶⁸ Khalifa claimed to be working under the command of General Ali Kanna, though the general denied having anything to do with Khalifa or his brother.⁶⁹

Conclusion

Haftar's apparent military strategy is to secure the desert airbases south of Tripoli and insert LNA forces on the coast west of Tripoli, cornering his opponents in the capital and Misrata before mounting an air-supported offensive, similar to the tactics that enabled the capture of Jufra.^j Haftar is trying to sell the conquest of Tripoli as

ⁱ The founding declaration of the PFLL declares its intent is to build a sovereign state and "liberate the country from the control of terrorist organizations that use religion as a cover and are funded by foreign agencies." "Founding Declaration of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Libya," Jamahiriya News Agency, December 25, 2016.

^j Of concern to Tripoli are reports that Haftar forces have repeatedly struck civilian targets (especially in Hun) as displayed in the LNA's Jufra air offensive. Abdullah Ben Ibrahim, "A night of airstrikes in Hun town," Libya Observer, May 24, 2017.

a necessary (and desirable) step in ending illegal migration from Libyan ports to Europe.⁷⁰ The strategy has political support; HoR Prime Minister Abdullah al-Thinni has consistently rejected international proposals for a mediated settlement to the Libyan crisis, insisting, as a former professional soldier, that only a military effort can unite the country.⁷¹

The LNA's prolonged effort to take and secure Benghazi points to both the difficulty of urban warfare and the weakness of the LNA relative to its ambition to bring Libya's largest cities under its control. The pullback of the PC/GNA-allied Misratan militias from Jufra may be preparation for a consolidated stand against Haftar, but it also weakens security in the south, offering room for new actors. Fezzan remains an attractive and long-term target for regional jihadis who may find opportunities to exploit or even hijack the direction of a protracted resistance in Fezzan to the imposition of rule by a new Libyan strongman. With no single group strong enough to resist Haftar's LNA (whose ultimate victory is by no means certain), all kinds of anti-Haftar alliances are possible between Qaddafiists, Islamists, Misratans, and even jihadis, with the added possibility of eventual foreign intervention by the West or Haftar's assertive Middle Eastern or Russian partners.

In a study of the 2014-2016 fighting in 'Ubari (a town in between Sabha and al-Uwaynat) released earlier this year, Rebecca Murray noted her Tuareg and Tubu sources "overwhelmingly dismissed the possibility that radical IS [Islamic State] ideology could take root in their communities, which they described as traditional, less religiously conservative, rooted in local culture, and loyal to strong tribal leaders."⁷²

The perspective of her sources might be optimistic. Unfortunately, the situation strongly resembles that which existed in northern Mali before well-armed Islamist extremists began moving in on existing smuggling networks, using the existence of "militarized, unemployed and marginalized youths" (as Murray describes their Libyan counterparts) to create new networks under their control while simultaneously undermining traditional community and religious leadership. While tribal leaders may still command a certain degree of loyalty, they are nonetheless unable to provide social services, employment, reliable security, or economic infrastructure to their communities, leaving them susceptible to those who claim they can, whether religious radicals or would-be strongmen. **CTC**

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A Legitimate Challenger? Assessing the Rivalry between al-Shabaab and the Islamic State in Somalia

By Jason Warner and Caleb Weiss

The October 2015 emergence of the Islamic State in Somalia has led some observers to wonder if its presence poses a legitimate challenge to the jihadi hegemony exerted by al-Shabaab. However, al-Shabaab far outstrips it in three domains: capacity for violence, ability to govern, and media and propaganda efforts. Though the Islamic State in Somalia remains unlikely to threaten al-Shabaab's hegemony, scenarios that could at least lead to a greater parity between the groups include greater coordination between ISS and Islamic State central, and the degradation of al-Shabaab by the multinational AMISOM force.

Since 2007, al-Shabaab has ruled the roost as the most powerful jihadi group in Somalia, and indeed, the Horn of Africa. Yet, the longevity of this supremacy came into question in October 2015 when Abdulqadir Mumin,^a a former al-Shabaab ideologue who was part of a Puntland-based faction of the group, defected from the avowed al-Qa`ida branch and pledged allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and the Islamic State. Over time, an intra-jihadi battle of sorts has arisen. The Islamic State has begun courting and converting al-Shabaab members, and in response, al-Shabaab has been waging an internal counter-messaging campaign, in addition to employing violence against members of the Islamic State as well as its own members sympathetic to the Islamic State cause inside Somalia.

With the presence of both al-Shabaab and the Islamic State in Somalia (ISS) in the country, sundry observers have wondered aloud: could the Islamic State in Somalia challenge al-Shabaab for land, legitimacy, or influence?¹ Or has al-Shabaab sufficiently ce-

a Mumin was a well-known ideologue who was featured in several al-Shabaab videos, when he was still part of that group. This includes an April 2015 video in which he tried to rally fighters to the Golis Mountains in Somalia's northern Sanaag Region. Prior to that, he was featured in a video series for Ramadan, one in which he gave a speech. He would appear in at least two more videos documenting al-Shabaab battles in the Lower Shabelle and Bay regions before his defection.

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mented itself in Somalia so as not to seriously face a threat from the relatively new Islamic State-aligned Somalia group? More broadly, what impact might the presence of two groups—one an al-Qa`ida branch and the other an Islamic State affiliate—mean for peace and security in Somalia? This piece traces the four periods in the ISS and al-Shabaab rivalry—starting with the emergence of ISS; the Islamic courting of al-Shabaab members; al-Shabaab's attacks on its own pro-Islamic State members; and al-Shabaab attacks on Islamic State cells in Somalia.

Chronology of the Dispute

Phase 1: The Emergence of the Islamic State in Somalia

While much has been written on the emergence of al-Shabaab, which formed as a violent arm of the Islamic Courts Union in Somalia in 2006 when Ethiopia invaded the country,² far less is generally known about the Islamic State in Somalia. The Islamic State in Somalia emerged in mid-2015, with two factions arising in two different parts of the country. The first and most well-known of these is what most commentators today refer to as the Islamic State in Somalia. ISS was founded in October 2015 when Mumin, at one time an al-Shabaab ideologue stationed in Puntland defected from al-Shabaab and pledged allegiance to al-Baghdadi and the Islamic State in that same month.^b Although the ISS remained generally inactive for the first year or so, its emergence as a real threat came in October 2016 when it briefly invaded and held the Somali port city of Qandala. Since then, it has been increasingly active.

While Mumin's Puntland-based ISS has been the most visible Islamic State cell in Somalia, in fact, other pro-Islamic State cells in Somalia, based in the southern parts of the country—and without formalized names, to our knowledge—have emerged even before his outfit, pledging their loyalty to al-Baghdadi and the Islamic State prior to October 2015. However, these did not gain any traction until more well-known al-Shabaab commanders, such as Bashir Abu Numan—a former al-Shabaab commander and veteran of the jihad in Somalia who had fought for one of al-Shabaab's predecessor groups, al-Ittihad al-Islami—left al-Shabaab in late 2015 and pledged allegiance to the Islamic State. Nevertheless, these southern Islamic State cells remain less well-known, and pose less of a threat, than Mumin's ISS. And while it appears likely that Mumin

b Mumin, Somali by birth, spent time in Sweden and the United Kingdom, where he became known as a radical cleric, before returning to Somalia to fight within al-Shabaab in 2010. While he was originally sent to the Puntland region to attract recruits in 2012, when his commander in the region, Mohamed Said Atom, was given asylum in Qatar, Mumin played an increasingly larger role in the group. For more see, Jason Warner, "Sub-Saharan Africa's Three 'New' Islamic State Affiliates," *CTC Sentinel* 10:1 (2017); Christopher Anzalone, "The Resilience of al-Shabaab," *CTC Sentinel* 9:4 (2016); Christopher Anzalone, "From al-Shabab to the Islamic State: The Bay'a of 'Abd al-Qadir Mu'min and Its Implications," *jihadology.net*, October 25, 2015.

acts as the overall leader of Islamic State-loyal forces in Somalia, the connections between his group in Puntland and those in the south are fuzzy.^c

Phase 2: The Islamic State's Overtures to al-Shabaab

The genesis of the conflict between al-Shabaab and ISS began not on the battlefield, but online, as the Islamic State began to court al-Shabaab away from al-Qa`ida to join the caliphate. The first instances of the Islamic State's calls to al-Shabaab were done through informal channels, followed eventually by formal pleas. The first instance identified by the authors came in February 2015 through the Global Front to Support the Islamic State media. An article authored by Hamil al-Bushra implores al-Shabaab to join the caliphate, asking in its conclusion, "when will we hear, oh dear brothers, of Wilayat al-Somal?"³ A resumption in overtures occurred in September 2015 when two more products were released. After a shorter article was released in al-Battar on September 23, 2015,⁴ the main informal pleas came from three articles in the Islamic State's unofficial al-Wa'fa Foundation media outlet, released on September 27, 29, and 29, 2015, respectively.⁵ The first, targeting al-Shabaab, lays out the principles for legitimacy of the Islamic State and the obligations for pledging allegiance to it. The second article argues that after the establishment of the caliphate, all other groups are null, specifically underlining the illegitimacy of al-Qa`ida, al-Shabaab's adopted parent organization. The third article focuses on the apostasy of al-Qa`ida and puts forward evidence of its purportedly shifting creed. In each of these early cases, the Islamic State's calls to al-Shabaab were generally respectful and laudatory, referring to al-Shabaab members as "steadfast mountains" and "roaring lions" and the "new generation of the caliphate."⁶ Moreover, in early calls, the Islamic State assiduously avoided critiquing al-Shabaab's leadership, leveling attacks instead at al-Qa`ida.

The Islamic State's first official outreach to al-Shabaab occurred in a series of five videos released by various wilayat, or provinces, of the Islamic State, through each of their official media wings. On October 1, 2015, three wilayat—Ninawa,⁷ Homs,⁸ and Sinai⁹—released such videos, while Raqqa¹⁰ released one on October 2 and Baraka¹¹ on October 4. Each of these videos broadly made the case that al-Shabaab should join the caliphate, simultaneously underlining the illegitimacy of al-Qa`ida.

Al-Shabaab did not take kindly to such overtures. However, the group has still never publicly released an official statement about the situation, mimicking the general approach taken by other al-Qa`ida affiliates courted by the Islamic State at the time. Instead, pushback against the Islamic State came only occasionally from individual al-Shabaab supporters online.¹² That said, while al-Shabaab was officially silent on the Islamic State's invitation to abandon an al-Qa`ida allegiance in the open, a different story was playing out internally.

c The exact nature of connections between Mumin and ISS groups in southern Somalia remain unclear. At their deepest, connections could be such that Mumin controls south Islamic State groups, which nevertheless maintain significant autonomy from him. At their most shallow, there might well be only nominal connections between Mumin and southern ISS groups. Another possibility is that, in fact, there are no significant remaining Islamic State elements in southern Somalia at all. Indeed, although there have been recent claims of attacks, it is unclear if these are legitimate, or simply fabrications.

Phase 3: Al-Shabaab Attacks on its Pro-Islamic State Members

Rather than lash out directly against the Islamic State, al-Shabaab's ire at the suggestion that it abandon its links with al-Qa`ida was mostly directed toward its own members who showed sympathy to the Islamic State. Indeed, since at least 2012, when members began to publicly criticize the leadership of Ahmed Godane,¹³ the group has endured internal ideological fissures that have threatened to destabilize it,¹⁴ and the question of how to respond to the Islamic State served as another flashpoint capable of dividing the group. As researcher Christopher Anzalone neatly articulates: "Though the Islamic State's ideology, or aspects of it, are attractive to some members of al-Shabaab, the emergence of such a competitor [in the Islamic State]...provides those disgruntled members [of al-Shabaab] a way to challenge the status quo" of al-Shabaab's operational culture.¹⁵

Thus, as early as September 2015, reports suggest that al-Shabaab was beginning to detect and silence pro-Islamic State sentiments within its ranks. According to one report, in that month, the group issued an internal memo that "stated the group's policy is to continue allegiance with al-Qaeda and that any attempt to create discord over this position [by suggesting an alliance with the Islamic State] will be dealt with according to Islamic law."¹⁶ A second report in November 2015 noted that al-Shabaab radio stations issued a threat to members who were thinking about joining the Islamic State.¹⁷ "If anyone says he belongs to another Islamic movement [other than that of al-Qa`ida], kill him on the spot ... we will cut the throat of anyone ... if they undermine unity." These releases coincided with others by al-Shabaab's spokesman Ali Mahmud Rage, which warned al-Shabaab members about advocating an alliance with the Islamic State, suggesting that those who sought to promote division within al-Shabaab are "infidels" and will be "burnt in hell."¹⁸

Beyond issuing statements prohibiting pro-Islamic State sentiments, al-Shabaab—led by its notorious internal security service, the Amniyat—moved against its own members who sympathized with the group. Soon after the overtures from the Islamic State began, in September 2015, al-Shabaab arrested five of its own pro-Islamic State members in Jamame, a town in the Lower Jubba Region.¹⁹ In October 2015, the Amniyat arrested at least 30 more pro-Islamic State al-Shabaab fighters.²⁰ A month later in November 2015, al-Shabaab executed five former leaders of the group, including Hussein Abdi Gedi, who was formerly al-Shabaab's deputy emir for the Middle Jubba Region but who had recently become the leader of a small pro-Islamic State faction based there.²¹ Later in November 2015, the Amniyat initiated large-scale arrests of al-Shabaab members with Islamic State sympathies across southern Somalia in the towns of Jilib, Saakow, Jamame, Hagar, and Qunyo Barrow,²² including some foreign fighters from Egypt and Morocco. Fast forward to late March 2017, and al-Shabaab reportedly executed at least five Kenyan members of the group for pledging allegiance to the Islamic State in the Hiraan region, and a month later, two prominent al-Shabaab commanders, Said Bubul and Abdul Karim, were also executed for switching their allegiances.²³

Phase 4: Al-Shabaab Attacks Somali-Based Islamic State Cells

The fourth phase of the clash between al-Shabaab and the Islamic State in Somalia began in November 2015, when the discord between the groups went from the online sphere to physical attacks. There are at least four instances in which al-Shabaab has attacked avowed Islamic State personnel. The first occurred in November



Abdulqadir Mumin is pictured at an ISS training camp named after Bashir Abu Numan somewhere in Puntland, Somalia, in 2016. (Furat)

2015, when al-Shabaab's Amniyat clashed with an Islamic State cell in southern Somalia led by Bashir Abu Numan.^d The skirmish near the town of Saakow in the Middle Jubba region left eight militants dead, including Numan.²⁴ The second al-Shabaab attack on Islamic State members occurred in December 2015, when the Amniyat killed several members of another ISS faction in southern Somalia, including Mohammad Makkawi Ibrahim, a former member of al-Qa`ida in Sudan linked to a 2008 assassination of a USAID employee in Khartoum.²⁵ The third instance was a skirmish between al-Shabaab fighters and Mumin's faction in Puntland, though the number of casualties remains unclear. The fourth instance of an al-Shabaab attack on an Islamic State faction occurred a few weeks later in late December 2015 when the Amniyat battled an Islamic State faction in Qunyo Barrow, in the Lower Shabelle region.²⁶

A few points bear stating before moving forward. First, it is important to note that the violence between al-Shabaab and Islamic State cells has been unidirectional: al-Shabaab has only attacked Islamic State cells. To date, the authors have not found evidence of either northern or southern Islamic State cells in Somalia attempting to attack al-Shabaab. Second, the majority of the battles between al-Shabaab and the Islamic State have been between al-Shabaab and non-Mumin ISS cells in southern Somalia. Again, although Mumin's ISS is the stronger of the two Islamic State affiliate groups in Somalia, its relative distance from al-Shabaab's areas of operation means that the two clash less frequently than the southern Islamic State factions. As per the above, the authors have found evidence of only one clash so far between al-Shabaab and Mumin's faction in northern Somalia.²⁷ Third, it is worth noting that other actors in Somalia, especially the Ahlu Sunnah wal Jamaa (ASWJ) coalition of anti-al-Shabaab clans have also claimed to have arrested and even physically fought against pro-Islamic State fighters in central Somalia last year, while Somali officials have also claimed

that fighting occurred last year in the Bay and Lower Shabelle regions between Somali and pro-Islamic State forces.²⁸

The Islamic State Challenge to al-Shabaab

Having described the conflict between the various Islamic State cells in Somalia, this article now looks at the extent these upstart Islamic State cells challenge al-Shabaab's prolonged hegemony as Somalia's preeminent jihadi group. It is useful to examine this from three dimensions: capacity for violence, capability for governance, and propaganda efforts.

Assessing ISS vs. al-Shabaab on Violence

In considering capacity for violence, a key determinant is how many fighters each group has. When Mumin first defected from al-Shabaab to form the Islamic State in Somalia, initial reports suggested that only 20 of the 300 al-Shabaab fighters from his al-Shabaab cell in Somalia's northern autonomous Puntland region decided to leave with him.^e Despite this inauspicious beginning, upper estimates suggested that at its peak, the group had at least 200 people.²⁹ However, due to a combination of losses in military operations^f or defections, ISS has remained relatively small. In June 2017, a defector from Mumin's ISS group reportedly told Puntland authorities that the faction contained only 70 members, almost entirely based in the eastern Bari region of the country.³⁰ The defector also claimed that the group was so low on funds and supplies that it often resorts to stealing livestock and food and to extorting locals.³¹ It is likely that this June 2017 number has risen following increased recruitment efforts in Puntland, the main source of ISS recruit-

e However, as these numbers are mutable, it could well be the case that more than 20 left with him. For more, see Bill Roggio, "US adds Islamic State commander in Somalia to list of global terrorists," FDD's Long War Journal, August 31, 2016.

f For instance, Mumin's faction reportedly lost 30 fighters in the battles at Qandala, according to Harun Maruf. Harun Maruf, "Forces Retake Somali Town Held by Pro-Islamic State Fighters," VOA News, December 7, 2016.

d So important was he to the group that Mumin's ISS faction is known to have operated a training camp named after Numan.

ing, given that Puntland is Mumin's ancestral homeland. Beyond traditional means of recruitment, in the U.S. State Department's designation of Mumin as a global terrorist, it noted that he had "expanded his cell of Islamic State supporters by kidnapping young boys aged 10 to 15, indoctrinating them, and forcing them to take up militant activity."³² Beyond soldiers, a former Somali intelligence official also reported last year that Mumin's faction has received assistance from Islamic State-loyal militants in Yemen. According to this account, in addition to money, weapons, and uniforms, Islamic State militants in Yemen also sent trainers to inspect ISS bases.³³ And, a U.N. report released as this piece was going to print, in November 2017, has claimed that Mumin's faction receives money and guidance from Islamic State officials in Syria and Iraq. However, the authors cannot verify this report.³⁴

The Islamic State-loyal force officially claimed its first attack^g inside Somalia on April 25, 2016, when the Islamic State-affiliated news outlet Amaq released a statement^h claiming that "fighters of the Islamic State" had detonated an IED against an African Union convoy in Mogadishu.³⁵ Unquestionably, however, ISS' most important attacks occurred on October 26, 2016—nearly a year after its emergence—when Mumin's forces captured the port town of Qandala after Puntland security forces retreated.³⁶ A video released by Amaq showed a handful of Islamic State fighters parading through the streets and hoisting the Islamic State's black flag on several rooftops of the town.³⁷ And, while Puntland authorities said a day later that Islamic State forces had left the town, Somali journalists refuted this claim.³⁸ Nevertheless, by December 7, 2016, Puntland forces again reported that its forces had regained control of the town, offering photo evidence and ending ISS' siege.³⁹ Apart from the Qandala occupation, recent attacks claimed by the Islamic State in Somalia include its first claimed suicide bombing in Bosaso on May 25, 2017,⁴⁰ and an assault on a hotel in Bosaso on February 8, 2017.⁴¹

As an older and more established group, al-Shabaab's capacity for violence is far more proven than that of ISS. While the exact number of fighters in the ranks of al-Shabaab is very difficult to ascertain, current estimates suggest that al-Shabaab has between 5,000 to 9,000 within its ranks.⁴² Most of these fighters are native Somalis. Al-Shabaab also contains sizeable portions of fighters from other East African states, such as Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania. Arabs and Western fighters have also been documented within al-Shabaab's ranks, including senior figures.⁴³ Conversely, while ISS does not seem to have a significant number of non-Somalis, the aforementioned U.N. report did note the presence of a senior Sudanese member, as well as some members from Yemen.⁴⁴

Operationally, al-Shabaab routinely mounts large-scale assaults

on Somali government officials and troops, in addition to attacking personnel associated with the African Union Mission to Somalia (AMISOM). Although it has lost considerable territory since the apogee of its operations in 2011, it continues to penetrate more heavily fortified areas of Mogadishu and has also mounted both assaults and suicide bombings outside of Somalia, including in Kenya, Uganda, and Djibouti. In particular, in a forthcoming report, the authors have given acute focus to al-Shabaab's proclivity for suicide bombings⁴⁵—documenting at least 214 al-Shabaab suicide bombers since 2006, including the massive October 2017 attack that left an estimated 358 dead and another 400 wounded.⁴⁶ Indeed, as of late 2017, al-Shabaab was noted for being the deadliest terror group in all of Africa in the new millennium,⁴⁷ a distinction that the Islamic State in Somalia is far from challenging.

Assessing ISS vs. al-Shabaab on Governance

When it comes to governance, ISS appears to have relatively little capability. Reports of ISS governance are virtually nonexistent. Even when ISS held the town of Qandala in October 2016, there was no evidence ISS made a real attempt at governing.ⁱ Especially given that civilians of Qandala fled during the fighting, this removed the chance of ISS engaging in any form of governance. Its current territorial holdings, thought to be small swaths in the mountainous areas of the Bari region,^j contain few to no civilians, and the land that the group is assumed to hold is not believed to be very expansive. The nearest suggestion of possible ISS governance comes from an ISS defector, Abdulahi Mohamed Saed, who told Puntland authorities of ISS members engaging in extortion.⁴⁸ However, this is likely in reference to extortion of civilian populations in ISS' area of operations *generally* and not in any direct way in reference to those that it "governs" *per se*.

For its part, al-Shabaab acts, in many parts of the country, as a full-on stand-in for the state. Among other governance capabilities, in varying locales it provides food, water, and education; runs an effective judiciary; provides security; has an effective tax system; and maintains roads.⁴⁹ To that end, as of mid-2017, the researcher Tricia Bacon found that "al-Shabab is thriving because it's still offering a comparatively attractive alternative to the Somali government. It capitalizes on grievances, keeps areas secure and settles disputes, with relatively little corruption."⁵⁰

Indeed, whereas ISS' potential for governance is inherently stunted because of its limited territorial claims, in the case of al-Shabaab, it is precisely because of the wide-ranging territorial presence of the group that capacity for governance is imperative. Primarily situated in the Hiran, Middle Shebelle, Lower Shebelle, Bay, Bakool, Gedo, Lower Juba, and Middle Juba regions in southern Somalia, al-Shabaab maintains a significant presence in central and northern Somalia as well.⁵¹ While the group has been forced out of many of its urban strongholds by African Union and Somali

g However, there is some debate as to whether the April 25, 2016, attack was the first conducted by the Islamic State in Somalia or if one preceded it. On December 11, 2015, Somali media reported that pro-Islamic State militants in southern Somalia captured a small town near the border with Kenya. Not long after, Somali officials then claimed that the town was back under government control. However, the official statement did not explicitly mention a pro-Islamic State militant faction, thus raising questions about whether the group was ISS, or perhaps instead al-Shabaab. For more, see Abdirizak Shiino, "Kismaayo: Al-Shabaabka Daacish la midoobey oo qabsadey Tuulo Barwaaqo," Horseed Media, December 9, 2015, and "Jubba: Tuulo-Barwaaqo Dib Ayaan U Qabsanay," VOA Somali, December 11, 2015.

h This statement was released on the same day a video was disseminated showing a training camp run by Mumin's forces in Puntland.

i The authors have not been able to find any evidence of this taking place.

j To date, ISS appears to be almost exclusively centered in the mountainous Bari region of northern Somalia. This concentration in Puntland has been confirmed by the aforementioned June 2017 ISS defector, as well as by release of photos from the Islamic State's central media office on October 11, 2017, showing Mumin's ISS troops in terrain that appeared to be the Bari mountains. Giving further credence to the fact that the group is primarily based in Bari, many of the operations of the group take place in Bosaso, the capital of the Bari region.

forces over the years, it continues to control significant swaths of rural territory in southern and central Somalia.⁵² In short, whereas there is virtually no evidence that the Islamic State in Somalia engages in any real sort of governance—both out of lack of territorial holding and its small size—for al-Shabaab, one of its primary interpretations of its role in the county is as a stand-in for an impotent state, to include the provision of a wide-range of governmental and social services.

Assessing ISS vs. al-Shabaab on Propaganda

Of all three categories investigated, the Islamic State's propaganda efforts are the domain in which it is most demonstrably inferior to al-Shabaab. To date, there is no official media wing of the Islamic State in Somalia nor is there a robust informal media presence run by its members or sympathizers. Despite the lack of ISS' own media capabilities, Islamic State central's media apparatus—including Amaq—has released photos and videos from Somalia, while other official Islamic State wilayat, as discussed previously, have released videos about or featuring ethnic Somali fighters.^k

Conversely, al-Shabaab's propaganda machine is generally well-run and prolific. Al-Shabaab operates several radio stations in southern Somalia, including Radio Al Furqan and Radio Al Andalus. It frequently produces videos through its Al Kata'ib media wing, and disseminates photo reports on various aspects of its operations published by the websites of its radio stations, Al Furqan and Al Andalus. Since at least 2015, it has also run the Shahada News Agency, which reports on its daily activities and also produces photo reports in a more "traditional" news setting. Al-Shabaab and its supporters also run several Telegram channels, spreading new and archived propaganda in English, Arabic, Somali, and Swahili, and most recently, Oromo.^l Every month, al-Shabaab also releases a monthly report of its daily operations around the country. Thus, in the main, al-Shabaab's myriad media outlets—ranging from radio stations to internet releases propagated both by al-Shabaab members and its adopted parent group, al-Qa`ida—leaves al-Shabaab significantly ahead of the propaganda efforts of its would-be rival, ISS, which has no real parallel capacity of which to speak.

Assessing Future Scenarios

It remains unlikely that the Islamic State in Somalia will imminently challenge al-Shabaab for hegemony, due to a combination of its inferior capabilities in the areas of capacity for violence, ability for governance, and quantity and quality of propaganda. However, under what hypothetical conditions might it be able to do so?

^k The Islamic State's wilayat Furat, Sayna, Homs, Ninewa, Hadramawt, Khayr, West Africa, and Tripoli all released videos from May 2015 to January 2016.

^l On September 24, 2017, al-Shabaab's Al Kata'ib Media released an Oromo translation of its video "They Are Not Welcome, They Shall Burn in the Fire," which was distributed by al-Qa`ida's Global Islamic Media Front.

On one hand, there are changes that ISS *itself* could undertake to make it more competitive. First, at present, the authors see little tangible evidence of real funding of ISS from the Islamic State, apart from some affiliates in Yemen. If for some reason the Islamic State decided to increase funding, ISS could improve its standing vis-à-vis al-Shabaab. Second, at present, foreign fighters seem to be rare in the ranks of ISS: most of its members, as previously stated, are defectors from al-Shabaab, or new recruits from the Puntland region of Somalia. If ISS begins to attract foreign fighters *regionally*—especially from Kenya, Ethiopia, Uganda, or Yemen—or *globally*—especially foreign fighters leaving the crumbling caliphate in the Levant—its growing numbers could allow it to challenge al-Shabaab. Third, another factor that would help ISS to gain prominence would be if it could actually hold territory in a sustained way.

On the other hand, there are missteps that al-Shabaab itself might make that could give ISS an upper hand in the battle for jihadi supremacy. For one, a surge by AMISOM—potentially buoyed by the entrance of more Ethiopian troops in November 2017⁵³—and a poor response by al-Shabaab could work to degrade the group, while the weaker and more benign-seeming ISS could theoretically strengthen itself in the relative shadows. Second, it could be the case that the internecine battles within al-Shabaab could lead it to splinter. For instance, commentators have recently noted that there are a range of competing factions *within* the group—those loyal to al-Qa`ida versus those (quietly) sympathetic to the Islamic State and those who accept foreign fighters into the group's ranks versus those that do not; and those who believe that the group should 'liberalize' versus those who do not.⁵⁴ However, it remains to be seen how widespread these reported divisions are. Third, for whatever reason, al-Shabaab could begin to fail on the battlefield, losing its leaders (thanks to new broader U.S. mandates for drone targeting),⁵⁵ failing at governance (with citizens losing patience for overly harsh rule), and losing access to financing (via new embargos on the charcoal trade),⁵⁶ all of which could exacerbate tensions within the group and lead to fighters' switching allegiances to ISS.

Finally, there are also scenarios in which al-Shabaab gains even greater power vis-à-vis the upstart Islamic State factions in Somalia. For one, if Mumin or other Islamic State leaders in Somalia are killed, it is a strong possibility that given the small size of the cells and waning fortunes of Islamic State globally, the cells might collapse entirely. With the news that the United States began conducting airstrikes against the Islamic State in Somalia in November 2017, this scenario is not wholly unlikely. If ISS collapsed, fighters from Mumin's faction could attempt to return to the al-Shabaab fold. How al-Shabaab would react to the repentant soldiers is unclear.

While these possibilities may exist, many of these scenarios are relatively unlikely. Indeed, barring any significant changes, al-Shabaab will face few serious challenges from the Islamic State in Somalia for the foreseeable future. **CTC**

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Foreign Technology or Local Expertise? Al-Shabaab's IED Capability

By Daisy Muibu and Benjamin Nickels

Al-Shabaab has become one of Africa's deadliest terrorist groups in recent years through its use of improvised explosive devices, or IEDs. Technological sophistication from abroad, especially from al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in Yemen, may explain some exceptional recent attacks. However, al-Shabaab's purge of external influences, reliance on local materials, and refinement of bomb deployment all indicate the importance of local expertise in its current IED campaign. Responses focused primarily on breaking international ties or taking out tech-savvy foreign-born or foreign-trained bomb makers are therefore unlikely to be sufficient or to succeed.

On October 14, 2017, Somalia suffered its largest terrorist attack in decades when two truck bombs exploded in the capital city,¹ killing at least 350 people and wounding hundreds more.² While unclaimed, it is likely the work of al-Shabaab, and the attack—the 33rd car bombing in Mogadishu in 2017³—highlights the terrorist group's increasing explosives capabilities. Al-Shabaab has become one of Africa's deadliest terrorist groups primarily through a precipitous increase in the use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs). Al-Shabaab's record 395 IED attacks in Somalia in 2016—almost 11 times the number in 2010 and nearly a 50-percent increase over 2015—more than doubled IED-related injuries and more than tripled IED-related deaths over the previous year, according to a recent study by Sahan Research.⁴ Al-Shabaab also managed to carry out only the third recorded suicide terrorist attack on a commercial passenger flight, bombing a Daallo Airlines flight in February 2016

a Sahan research materials were provided to the authors in fall 2017. Sahan is a think-tank with offices in Somalia, Kenya, and the United Kingdom focused on security and development in the Horn of Africa, East Africa, and the Middle East.

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with an IED sophisticatedly disguised as a laptop.

The rise of al-Shabaab's IED attacks is often seen as the result of a technology upgrade going hand-in-hand with the organization's growing international connections. Emerging from the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) around 2006, al-Shabaab progressively affiliated with al-Qa`ida and conducted attacks abroad against targets in Kenya, Djibouti, and Uganda. Today, al-Shabaab's ties to al-Qa`ida's affiliate in Yemen remain the most consequential of its international links. Yemen, long a source of fighters for al-Shabaab,⁴ has become a source for IED detonators and detonating cords.⁵ Moreover, the analyst Katherine Zimmerman stated in U.S. congressional testimony that al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) "almost certainly provided the equipment or the expertise for al-Shabaab's 2016 laptop bomb" on the Daallo flight.⁶ The same year, Somali Foreign Minister Abdisalem Omer "cited the use of laptop explosives as well as the 'sophisticated engineering' of truck bombs that are now leveling buildings 'four or five blocks' from the site of the blast as evidence of heightened collaboration between al-Shabab and AQAP."⁷ Furthermore, the U.N. Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea reported in October 2016 that al-Shabaab has "used increasingly sophisticated improvised explosive device technology in its operations, facilitated by the continued arrival of foreign trainers, and involving the transfer of knowledge from other conflict areas."⁸

But the tendency to understand the growth in al-Shabaab's lethal IED power primarily or exclusively through new technologies imported through intensifying international contacts is incomplete. This interpretation overlooks important actions taken to limit and reduce foreign influence in recent years. The situation today is unlike a decade ago when foreign influence within al-Shabaab was quite significant. Even before the group emerged, there were reports of the presence of foreign fighters in training camps run by al-Shabaab's precursor militia in the ICU.⁹ Early on, veteran al-Qa`ida foreign fighters with experience in Afghanistan occupied key positions within al-Shabaab's leadership. They were instrumental to the introduction of guerrilla tactics, such as suicide attacks, and they played a major role in training al-Shabaab members in bomb-making and other IED explosives skills.¹⁰ Saleh Ali Saleh Nabhan, an al-Qa`ida East Africa member, trained al-Shabaab fighters in asymmetric tactics, including suicide bombings and advanced explosives.¹¹ Conflict in Somalia drew foreign fighters of diverse backgrounds, skills, and experiences. Al-Shabaab embraced and encouraged their arrival,¹² and a sharp increase in IED attacks followed in 2007 and 2008, likely a result of mounting foreign fighter influence.¹³

However, the foreign influence reached something of an apex around 2010. Counterterrorism pressure intensified, stoking concerns among terrorist operatives about outsiders and spies, and broader disputes within al-Shabaab over strategy, ideology, and leadership came to the fore. Emir Ahmed Abdi Godane eventu-



A Somali man reacts at the site of a double-truck bombing at the center of Mogadishu, Somalia, on October 14, 2017, which killed at least 350 people. (Mohamed Abdiwahab/AFP/Getty Images)

ally moved against challengers and eliminated critics,¹⁴ including high-profile foreign fighters. By the end of 2013, through a combination of military action and internal housecleaning, key al-Qa`ida-linked international figures in al-Shabaab—Fazul Abdullah Mohammed, Bilal al-Berjawi, Omar Hammami—were dead, leaving the remaining foreign fighters cowed.¹⁵ In subsequent years, more attractive theaters for foreign fighters (like Syria) arose, al-Qa`ida may have adopted a less-centralized organizational model,¹⁶ and Somalia's conflict entered a phase of increasingly internal and clan-based dynamics.¹⁷ While it continued to integrate foreign fighters, none from the sizeable Kenyan contingent, for example, achieved a top leadership role.¹⁸ Today, al-Shabaab occasionally directs some recruits from Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda to return to their homes to fight,¹⁹ and the group continues to execute foreign fighters on accusations of spying.²⁰ The destructive capacity of al-Shabaab's IED attacks significantly increased in the same period that there was a purge of foreign fighter influences in the group, suggesting there is more behind this trend than the "continued arrival of foreign trainers" and "transfer of knowledge from other conflict areas."

Moreover, al-Shabaab operatives do not need to go abroad for basic IED materials, most of which are sourced locally. In addition to unexploded ordnances that litter the country after a quarter century of conflict,²¹ al-Shabaab gets IED main charges from its enemies in Somalia. According to a recent IED assessment, about 60 percent of the explosives contained in al-Shabaab attacks along the Kenyan border come from counterterrorism forces, obtained either from sub-munitions dropped by Kenyan war planes or through plunder of the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM).²² Al-Shabaab has successfully overrun several AMISOM forward operating bases (FOBs). At one point, the group attacked three

AMISOM FOBs in seven months—Leego in June 2015, Janaale in September 2015, and El-Adde in January 2016—and made off with large quantities of military equipment, weapons, and explosives.²³ In January 2017, al-Shabaab once again overran a Kenya Defence Forces FOB at Kolbiyow and claimed to have captured military vehicles and weapons.²⁴

Access to military materials has meant that al-Shabaab most commonly uses military explosives as its IED payload, notably cyclotrimethylene variants such as military-grade RDX.²⁵ When military sources for main charges are unavailable, al-Shabaab substitutes them with TNT harvested from highly explosive artillery shells or anti-tank mines²⁶ or with fertilizer (seized from farmers or purchased at local markets), which is legally imported and widely available in Somalia through aid organizations promoting agriculture.²⁷ Al-Shabaab gets many other IED components locally as well. Motorcycle alarms and mobile phones, commonly used as triggers, are inexpensive and readily available at Mogadishu markets, as are pressure plates mounted on top of a spring—typical triggers for IED landmines.²⁸ None of these components are beyond al-Shabaab's budget. If early on al-Shabaab relied on financial support from external charities, the diaspora, and Eritrea's sponsorship,²⁹ the group today is far more self-sufficient, overseeing a remarkably effective 'taxation'/protection system across south-central Somalia³⁰ and making money off illicit trade in sugar and charcoal,³¹ as well perhaps as kidnapping for ransom³² and piracy.³³ Through seizure and purchase of materiel available in Somalia, al-Shabaab has all the pieces it needs for IEDs.

Finally, al-Shabaab's IEDs are becoming more deadly and complex, but the growing impact of attacks comes not just from imported technology, but also from innovative deployment. Notwithstanding the U.N. Monitoring Group's finding that al-Shabaab

is using “increasingly sophisticated improvised explosive device technology,” most of the group’s IEDs are not particularly technologically advanced. Setting aside outliers like the Daallo laptop and the recent Mogadishu truck bombings, news reports suggest that when “compared with IEDs found in other parts of the world, the al-Shabaab IEDs are of relatively poor quality and construction.”³⁴ IEDs recovered from Somalia feature crude triggers, such as “pressure plates rigged with metal sheets separated by pieces of paper, pressure plates using saw blades, and bombs rigged with salvaged rocker switches like those found in a house to turn the lights on and off.”³⁵ In fact, the quintessential signature design feature of an al-Shabaab suicide vest includes simple “male-female quick-connect devices such as those used in car stereos, or white plastic rocker switches.”³⁶

The key evolution is that al-Shabaab has become more adept in its deployment of bombs, tailoring its IED attacks through refined tactics, techniques, and procedures. In ambushes of security convoys and patrols along main supply routes, al-Shabaab strategically positions the IED to stop vehicles in a pre-determined ‘kill zone’ exposed to small-arms fire and rocket-propelled grenades. To defend its own camps, al-Shabaab sets out systems of multiple IEDs, either linked together in a daisy chain or detonated separately and arranged for area saturation. Yet another technique involves sending vehicle-borne IEDs (VBIEDs) or suicide vehicle-borne IEDs (SVBIEDs) to break through a security perimeter, followed by fighters with small arms and light weapons, sometimes wearing IED suicide vests, to enter the breach and kill large numbers before dying themselves. This IED tactic has been used against FOBs, official buildings and compounds, and hotels and restaurants in Mogadishu and other parts of southern and central Somalia.³⁷

To punish first responders and to inflict maximum damage at soft targets, al-Shabaab has developed still other approaches of de-

ploying secondary IEDs in complex secondary attacks, like those conducted against the Ambassador Hotel and Naaso-Hablood Hotel in Mogadishu in June 2016, where delayed VBIEDs hit first responders as they arrived at the scene after the initial explosion.³⁸ Al-Shabaab has even refined IED tactics to overcome specific AMISOM and Somali National Army (SNA) countermeasures. In Merca, for example, al-Shabaab set up a double IED trap: a small motorcycle alarm IED served as bait to lure in a bomb unit, while a second, much larger IED lay buried deeper than usual (in order to prevent detection by bomb sniffing dogs) exactly under the spot where the bomb-recovery vehicle would park while disarming the first IED.³⁹

Conclusion

The purge of foreign influence, reliance on local materiel, and sophistication in bomb deployment all point to al-Shabaab’s local IED skills—warranting concern on their own merits. Al-Shabaab’s most sophisticated attacks may indeed rely on new technologies imported from abroad, but it is nonetheless the group’s Somali operatives who establish the makeshift IED factories in abandoned industrial facilities, storage sites, and garages; conceal the bombs in false floors or as cargo in trucks and minivans; distribute IEDs without detection throughout the capital and south-central Somalia; and implement them to deadly effect.⁴⁰ Responses such as isolating al-Shabaab from AQAP and other external actors and/or applying a ‘find, fix, and finish’ logic to a handful of tech-savvy bomb makers are therefore unlikely to fully resolve Somalia’s new challenge. To the extent that recent IED attacks indicate advancing internal abilities to make, move, and deploy cheap and crude but effective bombs, al-Shabaab will continue to propel Somalia’s conflict forward through its devastating IED campaign. **CTC**

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