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Contents

FEATURE ARTICLE

1 **The Cult of the Offensive: The Islamic State on Defense**

By Michael Knights and Alexandre Mello

REPORTS

7 **Chad: A Precarious Counterterrorism Partner**

By Margot Shorey and Benjamin P. Nickels

11 **Ethnic Albanian Foreign Fighters in Iraq and Syria**

By Adrian Shtuni

14 **Canadian Foreign Fighters in Iraq and Syria**

By Christopher Anzalone

20 **A View From the CT Foxhole: An Interview with Tom Wheelock**

By LTC Bryan Price

23 **Jamaat-ud Daawa: Into the Mainstream**

By Animesh Roul

26 **CTC Sentinel Staff & Contacts**

About the CTC Sentinel

The Combating Terrorism Center is an independent educational and research institution based in the Department of Social Sciences at the United States Military Academy, West Point. The *CTC Sentinel* harnesses the Center's global network of scholars and practitioners to understand and confront contemporary threats posed by terrorism and other forms of political violence.

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The Cult of the Offensive: The Islamic State on Defense

By Michael Knights and Alexandre Mello



An image from an Islamic State video, showing improvised rockets during an attack in April at Al-bu-Ayyuda in Anbar Province, Iraq

THE ISLAMIC STATE has been on the defensive in Iraq for more than eight months and it has lost practically every battle it has fought. After peaking in August 2014, its area of control has shrunk, slowly but steadily. The group's ability to control terrain has been dictated largely by the weakness of its opponents. When the Iraqi security forces (ISF) and the Kurdish Peshmerga have committed resources to an attack they have dislodged the Islamic State's defenses, particularly when Western airpower, intelligence, and planning have been a large part of the mix.

This paper will use case studies from recent battles in north-central Iraq¹

¹ This research draws on case studies from Iraq's northern provinces for a number of reasons. The authors have focused their six-month research program in this area

to argue that the Islamic State has a distinctive defensive operational style and that this style has many exploitable weaknesses as the coalition considers new offensives in Anbar province and Mosul. In many ways, the Islamic State's defensive style is reminiscent of the German military between 1944 and 1945:² At the tactical level they

due to the availability of good quality imagery and news reporting, particularly from behind Kurdish lines. This part of Iraq has witnessed the bulk of offensive actions against IS, both launched by the Kurds and by federal ISF and Hashd forces. Northern battles have also been well-supported by Western airpower and intelligence support, a factor that is increasingly relevant to the next stages of the conflict in Iraq and perhaps in Syria also. Detailed focus on southern battles like Jurf as-Sakr, Samarra and Dhuliyah might provide subtly different lessons.

² One tactical treatise notes of the German army in the

are highly dangerous and can still win engagements, but at the operational level they lack strategic coherence and they display a chronic inability to defend terrain.

The Islamic State's Operational Style

Like all organizations the operational behavior of the Islamic State in Iraq is driven by its composition, structure, ideology, and leadership. As a number of studies argue,³ the Islamic State seems to have been effectively led at the strategic level by some genuinely capable planners, but at the operational level there is seemingly much less opportunity for centralized control. Instead, the Islamic State group's military operations have become gradually more disjointed and localized in their scope and scale since the fall of Mosul.

A number of dissimilar ideologies and objectives seem to be pulling the Islamic State military operations in different directions. Within the leadership there are Salafi ideologues, former Baathist military officers of considerable skill, and hybrids of the two.⁴ Front

line soldiers are a mix of location-specific part-time fighters and Iraqi auxiliaries who have signed on with the Islamic State for an unknown period, uprooted Iraqis who may be willing to fight anywhere that the Islamic State raises its flag, and fully nomadic foreign fighters with varying levels of commitment to the Iraqi theater and specific Iraqi locations.⁵ Well over half of the Islamic State's fighters appear under 30 years of age, though some are clearly considerably older.⁶

The different sources of fighters have created disparate outlooks for each operational Islamic State unit active in the Iraqi theater. Some may be highly committed to fighting in just one location, particularly when their involvement with the Islamic State is tied to local tribal and sectarian conflicts. For some locally focused affiliates, if the fight is lost in that specific area, the war is over. Many fighters will be fixated on their own experience of the jihad, their personal odyssey, and exploits in search of a reputation and military glory. Others will be much more seriously committed to the goals of the Islamic State's leadership: the defense of Caliphate territories and the imposition of religious structure in those territories for as long as is possible. In many cases there will be differences between the needs of the group and the preferences of individuals.

Then there are the practical issues that underlay military strength: experience, numbers, and equipment. The core Islamic State is still a very small military movement in Iraq. It is far too small to perpetually defend the territories

it currently dominates.⁷ They boast many skilled and charismatic small unit leaders,⁸ but they are not a professional military institution by any measure. Their base of experienced fighters may be weakened by attrition rates even if foot soldiers may still be flooding to the jihad because leaders and specialists take time to develop and the war in Iraq is both intensifying and accelerating.⁹

Armaments are a problem too. The Islamic State has access to many different types of captured weapons,¹⁰ but their arsenal is slowly degrading too thanks to ongoing airstrikes and other engagements.¹¹ They are ultimately

Second World War: "Defensive operations were originally envisaged as holding situations pending resumption of the offensive and laying great stress on immediate and violent counter-attacks." W.J.K Davies, *German Army Handbook 1939-1945* (London: Purnell, 1973). p. 57. This method achieved many tactical successes but was also costly, especially when enemy troops became used to predictable counter-attacks and prepared for them. German tactics in the First World War also showed this, with Paddy Griffith describing them as "an over-rigid and excessively expensive system." Commonwealth forces learned the "bite and hold" tactic—to seize ground cheaply in surprise attacks and then inflict heavy casualties on the German counter-attackers, a situation not unlike today's Kurdish/Western tactics on their frontlines in northern Iraq. Paddy Griffith, *Battle Tactics of the Western Front: The British Army's Art of the Attack 1916-1918* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), pp. 32, 194.

3 See Richard Barret "The Islamic State," *The Soufan Group*, October 28, 2014; Hisham al-Hashimi and the Telegraph interactive team, "Revealed: the Islamic State 'cabinet'," *The Telegraph*, July 9, 2014; Hisham al-Hashimi "Inside the leadership of Islamic State: how the new 'caliphate' is run," *The Telegraph*, July 9 2014.

4 See Richard Barret "The Islamic State," *The Soufan Group*, pp. 18-21, 24-34, "The hidden hand behind the Islamic State militants? Saddam Hussein's." Liz Sly, *Washington Post*, April 4, 2015; "Iraqi Officer Takes Dark Turn to al Qaeda," Matt Bradley and Ali A. Nabhan, March 17, 2014. At least six of the Islamic State's

upper-tier leadership cadres in early 2014 are known to have been high-ranking officers in the Saddam-era Iraqi Army, the Republican Guard, Directorate General of Military Intelligence, and air force intelligence.

5 The Islamic State draws from a range of sources for its manpower: foreign fighters, released prisoners who may it have resettled in their home areas, and existing insurgent group members who merged with Islamic State, some of whom have a very localized outlook and joined purely to gain advantages over local rivals. Michael Knights, personal interview, Islamic State expert Aymenn Al-Tamimi, November 19, 2014.

6 The authors' assessment of the age distribution among Islamic State fighters is based off a year-long survey of imagery and video footage derived from Islamic State's social media output.

7 See "CIA says IS numbers underestimated," *Al-Jazeera English*, September 12, 2014, and "How Many Fighters Does the Islamic State Really Have," Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, *War on the Rocks*, February 9 2015. The Islamic State has attempted to fast-forward its expansion from its insurgent core into a hybrid army by boosting recruitment and imposing conscription measures in areas like its stronghold of Hawijah district in Kirkuk province.

8 For example one of the Islamic State's most high-profile mid-tier commanders, Abu Umar ash-Shishani (Tarkhan Tayumurazovich Batirashvili), a 29-year old former Georgian Army sergeant from the Georgia's Pankisi Gorge, who initially fought in Syria as leader of Jaysh al-Mujahirin wal-Ansar, a group of hardened foreign fighters from Chechnya and the Caucasus region before pledging allegiance to the Islamic State in May 2013 and went on to command the 'northern sector' in Syria, the provinces of Aleppo, Idlib, and Latakia. See "Treasury Designates Twelve Foreign Terrorist Fighter Facilitators," U.S. Department of the Treasury, September 24, 2014.

9 The Islamic State forces in Iraq initially drew on leaders whose military experience went back thirty years or more (in terms of Baathist officers and some jihadists with Afghan experience), whilst even some younger commanders have extensive experience in combat within Iraq or Syria over the last half decade. At the time of writing it has only been ten months since the fall of Mosul but casualties have been steady. It is uncertain that combat skills can be learned fast enough to make up for operational attrition in leaders and specialists.

10 These include over a hundred T-55, T-69 and T-72 main battle tanks, dozens of M113 APCs, M117 armored security vehicles, hundreds of Humvees, trucks, 4WD pickup trucks, and several towed artillery pieces. For a comprehensive list see "Vehicles and equipment captured and operated by the Islamic State inside Syria," *Oryx Blog*, November 10, 2014, and "Vehicles and equipment captured, operated and destroyed by the Islamic State inside Iraq," *Oryx Blog*, November 22, 2014.

11 For an comprehensive, regularly updated list see "Operation Inherent Resolve: Targets Damaged/Destroyed," CENTCOM, April 8, 2015.

capped at being a confederation of fierce motorized war bands, most often undertaking tactical engagements at reinforced platoon strength.¹² The above factors—organizational, ideological, and logistical—have a strong influence on the Islamic State's defensive style of war.

Can the Islamic State Defend Terrain?

Since June 2014, the Islamic State has fought major defensive actions in at least 14 Iraqi locations: Ramadi, Mosul Dam, the Amerli district, Jalula-Saadiyah, Muqdadiyah, Rabiya, Jurf as-Sakr and northern Babil, the Samarra-Jallam-Udaim desert, Sinjar, Beyji, Makhmour, Aski Mosul, Kirkuk, and Tikrit.¹³ The Islamic State has lost every time they faced a determined and well-resourced ISF or Peshmerga attack. In fact, when outnumbered the Islamic State frequently relinquishes terrain to suit its own operational needs and often signals an awareness that they will be forced from attacked areas in short order. Though the Islamic State frequently holds out until the last possible moment before withdrawing, they have a track record of draining their main forces from areas that are about to be attacked—for instance in Jalula and Jurf as-Sakr.¹⁴ Due to a basic

lack of military strength the Islamic State cannot mount an exclusionary perimeter defense if sufficient attackers come forward. The limiting factor on the speed of advance against the Islamic State in Iraq is gathering sufficient quantities of capable Iraqi forces to fill up the spaces.

An early example of preemptive withdrawal behind a screen of IEDs, booby-trapped buildings, and snipers was Jurf as-Sakr, the Sunni town overlooking the pilgrim route between Baghdad and Karbala, which was decisively cleared and occupied by Popular Mobilization Units (PMUs) in late October 2014.¹⁵ The Islamic State's main forces likewise melted away when long-awaited Peshmerga and ISF offensives began in mid-November 2015 to liberate Jalula-Saadiyah,¹⁶ the Islamic State-occupied twin towns by the Hamrin Dam. In a wide range of areas—from small towns like Suleiman Beg to Mosul city—the Islamic State seems to accelerate its destruction of religious, cultural, and administrative sites (and its withdrawal of the Islamic State families and economic equipment) when it feels that an attack is imminent.¹⁷ In essence, the Islamic State seems to have a clear-headed assessment of its own limited defensive capabilities.

The Islamic State's Defensive Playbook

Though towns and cities are of both

symbolic and strategic value, the Islamic State seems more focused on actively defending the rural zones in which urban areas are located. In many cases, the urban center may be the part of the defended zone allocated the smallest proportion of available Islamic State forces. The Islamic State has not shown a tendency to fight “last stand” defensive actions. Snipers, mobile shooter teams, and thick improvised minefields made of crude canister IEDs and explosive-filled houses are more than sufficient to slow, but not stop, an advancing force: populated areas are denied rather than actually defended.¹⁸

The rural belts surrounding the city are often more actively contested by the Islamic State and for longer. This strategy first appeared in the battle for Baghdad in 2006 and 2007, when the phrases “Baghdad belts”¹⁹ and “commuter insurgency” summed up the pivotal role of the rural periphery to the urban battle. This strategy is still in play. In Ramadi, the Islamic State has been pursuing a commuter insurgency strategy²⁰ for more than a year, because the difficult task of securing the city's rural belts has not been adequately resourced.²¹

The same problem of nearby ungoverned sanctuaries afflicts all the areas the Islamic State group is still

¹² The authors' review of Islamic State attacks since June 2014 suggest that a typical attack force comprises around 20–40 foot soldiers—historically the size of the average insurgent cell, including indirect-fire, IED-laying/triggering teams, RPG/ambush teams, etc.—plus three to five armored cars and unarmored utility vehicles, with a couple of heavy support weapons. When larger attacks are undertaken, it is usually coordinated, simultaneous but only loosely connected activity by these small war bands, not a larger unit action per se.

¹³ See the Institute for the Study of War (ISW)'s daily updated Iraq Situation Report blog for a daily coverage of events in Iraq since summer 2014.

¹⁴ The ISF carried out 13 clearing sweeps of Jurf as-Sakhr between January 2014 and a final conclusive operation in October 2014. The Islamic State consistently chose to withdraw and re-infiltrate, with the area permanently cleared only when it was entirely depopulated and turned into a closed military zone. See “The Clearing Of Iraq's Jurf Al-Sakhr, Babil And Its Impact,” Joel Wing, *Musings on Iraq*, January 15, 2015; and “Iraqi security forces and Kurds gain ground against Islamic State,” Ahmed Rasheed and Isabel Coles, Reuters, October 25, 2014. The Islamic State held Jalula and Saadiyah for months, but then collapsed its defense in a few days during November 2014 with under a hundred casualties by most estimates. See ISW Iraq Situation Reports for November 22-23 and November 24, “Jalawla heavily

mined, most homes booby trapped,” *Rudaw*, November 25, 2014.

¹⁵ “Iraqi security forces and Kurds gain ground against Islamic State,” Ahmed Rasheed and Isabel Coles, Reuters, October 25, 2014.

¹⁶ See ISW Iraq Situation Reports for November 22-23 and November 24, “Jalawla heavily mined, most homes booby trapped,” *Rudaw*, November 25, 2014.

¹⁷ In only one week period at the end of March Islamic State demolished the 2nd Iraqi Army division headquarters at Camp Kindi, the Mosul Police Academy, Mosul Traffic Directorate, police stations, plus dozens of houses of ISF and Peshmerga members. See “The terrorist organization blew up the Traffic of Nineveh Directorate building in northern Mosul,” *NINA*, March 30, 2015; “ISIL terrorists steal contents of Police Academy, detonate it in Mosul” *All Iraq News*, March 24, 2015; “Daash blow up the headquarters of army Second north of Mosul” *NINA*, March 21, 2015; “IS blew up three police stations north of Mosul” *NINA*, March 28, 2015. Islamic State demolitions are remarkably widespread and must consume a significant proportion of the time of members who might otherwise be undertaking military operations.

¹⁸ See “Operation to retake Tikrit from Islamic State stalled by heavy casualties, discord,” Mitchell Prothero, *McClatchy*, March 20, 2015, for an example of Islamic State' defensive preparations encountered by the ISF during the operation to clear Tikrit. IS made use of huge numbers of IEDs, booby-trapped buildings and small sniper and suicide attacker cells to slow the ISF advance and cause maximum casualties, but its stay-behind presence in the city (likely well under 750 fighters by the authors' calculations of simultaneous daily engagements) was not intended to fight a prolonged, intensive urban battle.

¹⁹ For a great account of the battle of the Baghdad belts see Michael R. Gordon and Bernard E. Trainor, *The Endgame* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2012), pp. 336-401.

²⁰ The “commuter insurgency” refers to an urban fight in which insurgents travel in each day, like suburban commuters, from support zones in the outskirts. Coined by U.S. forces in Iraq, the concept is explained further in David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 142.

²¹ For an account of the Ramadi battle's first three months see Michael Knights, “The ISIL's Stand in the Ramadi-Falluja Corridor,” *CTC Sentinel* 7:5 (2014).

effectively defending. In some Anbar battlefields, uncontrolled deserts and riverside groves leave the Islamic State with clear reinforcement routes and fallback options.²² In Sinjar, the Syrian border offers the Islamic State a degree of sanctuary. The Islamic State remains able to defend in areas where the Kurds are disunited and do not provide sufficient resources.²³ And in areas such as Bayji,²⁴ which backs onto the remote Jallam Desert and Hamrin Mountains, the Islamic State is also able to confound attempts to dislodge it. The Islamic State exacerbates the challenge by extensively shaping terrain. It often impedes force movement by clogging mobility corridors with improvised minefields and destroying key bridges.²⁵

One unknown in the Islamic State defensive playbook is their true attitude toward civilians. They were unable to prevent the outflow of civilians from Tikrit, Jurf as-Sakr, and many other areas, but they have actively prevented the inhabitants of Mosul from leaving thanks to a variety of security measures.²⁶ It is unclear whether this is because they want to prevent the depopulation of the Caliphate's biggest city or whether they are planning to use Mosul's residents as human shields or as a way to blunt airstrikes.²⁷ The Islamic

State has never defended a populated city before. Will they drive out the population or let them leave when the military operation begins? Will they adopt the same approach in other places or will that decision be locally controlled? The ISIL view regarding the presence of civilians in the defended zone should be a priority area of near-term research.

Active Defense

When the Islamic State does commit to the defense of a zone it often chooses the most aggressive offensive approach to the mission. This probably reflects the mindset of many junior Islamic State commanders, who appear to have very considerable latitude in the planning and execution of operations.²⁸ Many Islamic State units appear to be afflicted with chronic "tactical restlessness,"²⁹ an almost pathological need to take the initiative and attack the enemy. This approach can and does help sustain morale and extend the operational experience of surviving troops, but it also tires troops and continually erodes overall force strength.³⁰

A prime example of this restlessness is the tendency to mount tactical counter attacks soon after suffering a setback. This trend almost approaches doctrinal instinct and is one of the ways in which the Islamic State units resemble German forces during the final phase of the Second World War.³¹ The Wehrmacht's experience also shows how predictable counter-attacks can prove very costly in the face of growing enemy power and air superiority.³²

Such immediate counter-attacks are also achieving fewer and fewer successes. After Mosul fell the battlefields in Iraq

were rather empty, with porous gaps between forces, and the Islamic State had great mobility. ISF and Peshmerga forces had not yet learned to consolidate their hold on newly-won positions and they lacked anti-armored weapons and air support.³³

The optimal conditions for counter-attacking warfare do not currently exist yet the Islamic State keeps trying. Both the ISF and the Peshmerga are now undertaking more methodical clearing operations with large numbers of units operating in close proximity and often with Western or Iraqi air support.³⁴ The Kurdish frontline between Mosul and Makhmour offers a good case study. In one week-long period (February 17–23, 2015) the Islamic State attempted to launch ten major raids along the 170-mile front: eight were repelled with the aid of Western airpower, and the remaining two were disrupted before they had even commenced when aircraft destroyed the attack forces in their assembly areas.³⁵ Though body counts should always be treated with caution, the Coalition's claims to have inflicted over 150 casualties are probably not too wide of the mark.³⁶

For many months the Islamic State's leaders appear to have been stubbornly

22 See "ISIS Offensives in Ramadi City and Al-Asad Airbase in Al-Anbar, Iraq," Jessica Lewis, Ahmed Ali, and Sinan Adnan, December 24 2014.

23 See "Kurdish Forces Show The Strain Of The ISIS Fight," Mike Giglio, February 19 2015.

24 "Islamic State recapture parts of northern refinery city Baiji," Reuters, December 17 2015. An ISF column punched through Baiji in November 2014 to relieve the besieged Baiji refinery clearing the neighborhoods along the main urban area. The Islamic State withdrew to the peripheries and in December reinfiltated the city, over-running several isolated ISF positions. At the time of writing IS in control of some 80% of Baiji, with ISF confined to holding a corridor along the central road axis.

25 For a detailed overview of ISIL's extensive use of IED minefields see "The Hidden Enemy In Iraq," Mike Giglio, March 19, 2015.

26 In Mosul residents are kept in by a security trench that channels movement to vehicle check points, where persons leaving are forced to give the names of friends or relatives as hostages who may be harmed if they do not return. Residents also fear that they may permanently lose their property if they leave the city. See "How to Retake Mosul From the Islamic State," Michael Knights and Michael Pregent, February 27 2015.

27 See "Mosul residents prepare for battle," Saleh Elias, March 13, 2015.

28 For an excellent overview of ISIL's operational art, command and control and mission-type tactics see "How to defeat Islamic State's war machine," Metin Gurcan, *al-Monitor*, October 14, 2014.

29 The authors' phrase to sum-up the Islamic State's restless patrolling and attacking actions along the frontline.

30 "U.S. officials say 6,000 ISIS fighters killed in battles," Barbara Starr, CNN, January 22, 2015. We discuss this casualty metric later in this piece.

31 See W.J.K Davies, *German Army Handbook 1939-1945* (London: Purnell, 1973).

32 See Paddy Griffith, *Battle Tactics of the Western Front: The British Army's Art of the Attack 1916-1918* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), pp. 32, 194

33 This impression was gained during months of open-source reporting and imagery analysis plus interviews. Michael Knights, multiple personal interviews, Iraqi and Peshmerga leadership, June to March 2015.

34 Examples include the recent Kurdish offensives at Aski Mosul (January 21, 2015) and Kirkuk (March 9, 2015) which both involved Kurdish brigades fighting in line abreast, with no unguarded flanks or gaps between units.

35 The ISIL attacks struck at Sinjar, Aski Mosul, Baqufa/Tall Asqof, Fasiliyah/Mt Bashiqa, Quban/Mt Bashiqa, Hassan Shami, Makhmour peninsula (Tall Shair, Sultan Abdullah, Jarallah, Tall al-Reem). Attacks in the Badush area and Mt. Zartak east of Mosul were disrupted by airstrikes before they commenced. See Horizon Client Access, Northern KRG Security Threat Triggers, November 17-23, 2014 (subscriber service available via www.hcaccess.com).

36 *Ibid.* See "(22) Elements of the IS killed by Coalition planes bombing to the outskirts of Sinjar," *NINA*, February 16, 2015; "Coalition shells ISIS-held bridge on eastern Tigris River" *Rudaw* February 21, 2015; "Peshmerga forces repulse the IS attacks north of Mosul" *NINA* February 21, 2015; "Warplanes pound ISIS group near Mount Zartak" *Rudaw* February 20, 2015; "Warplanes blast ISIS positions in Kirkuk, Makhmour" *Rudaw* February 17, 2015.

unwilling to accept that the military tide has turned against it in Iraq. Their commitment to a version of the “cult of the offensive”³⁷ led them to experiment with two even more costly versions of counter-attacking warfare. The first was the creation of tactical reserves made up of Suicide Vehicle-Borne Improvised Explosive Devices (SVBIEDs), often a quick reaction force made up of armored suicide truck bombs. This kind of shock force has been used on a range of battlefields—Udaim Dam, Hamrin oilfield, Tikrit³⁸—but the largest such counter-attack came at Askri Mosul, south of Mosul Dam. On January 21, 2015, Peshmerga forces achieved a breakthrough across a 30-mile front that seemed to threaten the city of Mosul. In response, the Islamic State committed its operational reserve. In a scene that could have been lifted straight from the dystopian vision of the *Mad Max* movies, 14 armored fuel tanker SVBIEDs were directed against the Peshmerga breakthrough, all of which were destroyed by Western airpower and guided anti-tank missiles before they reached their targets.³⁹

Another costly experiment was a theater-wide counter-offensive from the Islamic State on January 9-11, 2015. This was the largest of the Islamic State group’s coordinated operations, drawing together more than a dozen platoon-sized attacks cells to mount assaults on the area held by Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) forces between the Syrian border and

37 This concept, adapted slightly here, describes the belief that the power of offensive action is so decisive that static defence is almost never adopted, regardless of local circumstances. For a good review of the issue see Jack. L Snyder, *The Ideology of the Offensive: Military Decision Making and the Disasters of 1914* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984).

38 Between March 29 and April 6, 2015, the Islamic State launched at least six SVBIEDs at ISF positions in the Hamrin oil field (footage of Hamrin SVBIED utilizing a captured ISF M113 APC). IS threw numerous SVBIEDs at the ISF in Tikrit and the surrounding areas during recent operations to clear the city, see “Casualties Increase In Iraq Due To Tikrit Operation,” Joel Wing, *Musings on Iraq*, April 2, 2015.

39 See Isabel Coles, “Kurdish forces squeeze Islamic State supply line in northern Iraq,” Reuters, January 21, 2015, “Peshmerga Kills Over 200 IS Militants in East Mosul Operation,” *BasNews*, January 21, 2015. Video footage of the destruction of several SVBIEDs by Peshmerga anti-tank guided missiles.

Makhmour.⁴⁰ The centerpiece of the operation was a double envelopment of Kurdish forces that had pressed southwest of Erbil to the Tigris River, deep in territory held by the Islamic State since June 2014. The northern flank of the Kurdish salient suffered a series of platoon-sized river assaults across the Tigris and Zab rivers,⁴¹ while the southern flank buckled under the weight of motorized blitzes up the Tigris, which overran Kurdish advance guard outposts that had reached the river.⁴² The operation was impressive, achieving tactical surprise with dawn attacks under cover of river mist, and Kurdish forces remain stalled in the area at the time of writing. But the front opened up by the counter-offensive has sucked the Islamic State forces into a grueling battle in open areas where Kurdish forces and Western airpower continue to inflict heavy casualties.⁴³ This operational-level counter-offensive by the Islamic State in Iraq could well be their “Battle of the Bulge,” the doomed and costly German effort in late 1944 to regain the initiative in Western Europe.⁴⁴

Operational Impact of Tactical Restlessness

The “cult of the offensive,” manifested in tactical restlessness, is probably driven by the fusion of individual and group

40 “Peshmerga Respond to Islamic State Attacks in Zumar” *BasNews* January 11, 2015; “ISIS launches fierce attacks across Iraq” *al-Jazeera* January 15, 2015; “Kurdish official: Daash suffered 125 killed in Qwayer battles,” *NINA* January 11, 2015, “Kidnapped Civilians Freed by Peshmerga in Gwer,” *BasNews*, January 12, 2015; “ISIS Assault on ‘Gwer: Shaikh Serwan Barzani and His Team Ran a Way, 70 Reported Killed or Missing,” *Millet* January 10, 2015. IS video footage of the Gwer attacks

41 “In heaviest fighting since August, Kurds turn back Islamic State assault near Irbil,” Mitchell Prother, *McClatchy*, January 11, 2015; IS footage of the Gwer attacks

42 Ibid.

43 Since January 2015 Coalition airstrikes have pounded exposed Islamic State forces holding the Makhmour front including pinpoint close air support on frontline Islamic State vehicles and positions, Islamic State concentrations massing for attacks, and rear-area support infrastructure sustaining the front. See “The International Coalition bombed a gathering to the IS ‘in Tal al-Sha’ir village in al-Qayyarah district in Nineveh” *NINA* March 11, 2015; and “Coalition aircraft bomb ISIL hideouts in Gwer sun-district” *PUK Media* February 20, 2015.

44 For a thorough account of this operation see Charles B. MacDonald, *The Battle of the Bulge* (London: George Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1984).

motivations that make up the Islamic State in Iraq. Decentralized operational control gives significant leeway to local commanders, often at platoon level, to plan and undertake operations. Individual volunteers are clearly driven by their personal commitment to the armed jihad, by their desire to fight, and by a personal and small-unit quest for glory.⁴⁵ The defense of specific terrain, or even of Mosul itself, may not be important to the significant elements of the Islamic State who are not tied to particular Iraqi locales.

The willingness of Islamic State fighters to undertake offensive action can be an asset. The group creates a constant flow of well-publicized actions that bolster its propaganda efforts.⁴⁶ These images create the sense among sympathizers that the Islamic State is still on the offensive, whereas the reverse is true. Images of offensive warfare and particularly of suicide operations may be powerful recruitment tools, aiding the “refresh rate,” the rate at which it is able to bring in fresh troops.

At the tactical level, the active patrolling undertaken by Islamic State units has often slowed down their opponents. Like other proficient infantry forces, the Islamic State uses fighting patrols to dominate no man’s land, fix the enemy and prevent enemy intelligence-gathering, and reconnoiter attack routes. The Islamic State desensitized units with constant patrolling, with a sub-set of attacks being well-planned

45 IS video releases show motivated, predominately young, 20–40 man groups—the size of an old Iraqi army platoon—making their military reputations with daring attacks. Foreign fighters and suicide and SVBIED operatives are also prominently featured. For two recent examples see footage of the complex assault on Peshmerga positions near Kirkuk in “Raiding the Barracks of the Peshmerga #2 – Wilayat Kirkuk,” *Jihadology*, April 11, 2015, and the raid on a Zerevani outpost in Kisik area, “Storming the Barracks of the Peshmerga in the Area of Shandukhah – Wilayat al-Jazirah,” *Jihadology*, April 5, 2015.

46 The Gwer raid video footage makes good propaganda use of captured ISF Humvees and advanced weapons systems, such as a captured 155mm M198 howitzer, to create the image of formidable, well-armed military force. IS deliberately emphasizes operations with high propaganda value versus statistically far more numerous, run-of-the-mill IED attacks, indirect-fire harassment and small-unit ambushes, which in fact inflict the majority of ISF and Peshmerga casualties.

trench raids intended to overrun and massacre or capture small garrisons.⁴⁷ The Islamic State got particularly effective at dominating the night and attacking under cover of morning mist or fog, greatly undermining the confidence of ISF and Peshmerga units.⁴⁸ This enabled the Islamic State to move through encirclements as if they did not exist, allowing surrounded groups to be reinforced or to slip away, and letting the Islamic State reposition forces with great freedom.⁴⁹ This night advantage has increasingly ebbed away on more static battlefields where Western airpower and intelligence assets have been provided to support the Kurds or, less frequently, the ISF. On a visit to the frontlines at Kirkuk in March 2015 one of the authors was told by Peshmerga infantrymen that the Islamic State's technicals could only break cover for a few moments to undertake heavy machine-gun attacks on Peshmerga fighters before they would be inevitably destroyed by airpower in over-watch mode.⁵⁰

In general, however, the costs of offensive actions are rising steeply for the Islamic State while the benefits are declining. The Peshmerga and ISF are planning and conducting offensive operations with little apparent disruption from the Islamic State active patrolling.⁵¹ Such raids

and other fruitless probing actions are wearing down the Islamic State at the battlefield, a factor that may contribute to a less effective defense of key ISF objectives like Mosul, Fallujah, and Tall Afar.

Attrition to Islamic State forces is undoubtedly mounting. On January 22, 2015, U.S. ambassador to Iraq Stuart Jones told Al Arabiya television that an estimated 6,000 fighters had been killed at that point in the campaign. Breakdowns of the target types in the air campaign to that date⁵² suggest that the figure may be quite likely.⁵³ Counting in the Islamic State losses to Kurdish forces, ISF and other causes, the Islamic State might have credibly lost many more than the U.S. estimate of six thousand in the first 24 weeks since Mosul fell, and at the time of writing there has been another 12 weeks of increasingly effective strikes and battles against the Islamic State in Iraq. Though the Islamic State refresh rate is unknown, the Islamic State group may struggle to replace weekly losses of more than 250 fatalities⁵⁴ (plus commensurate numbers of other casualties and desertions), particularly leaders and skilled specialist manpower.

The Islamic State after Mosul

The battle of Tikrit shows that the coming battles of Mosul and Fallujah will be tough but winnable, if the right formula of planning, adequate resources, Western airpower, and intelligence support is employed.⁵⁵

Mosul, and Kirkuk have taken place despite frequent ISIL raids on the frontline. Where the Kurds are not attacking—Makhmour, Sinjar, Bashiqa—it is because they have chosen not to attack further.

52 See Chris Woods, US & allied airstrikes Iraq 2014-15: Dataset maintained by freelance reporter Chris Woods

53 Targeting data showed that of the strikes, around a quarter were programmed strikes aimed at low-lethality fixed targets (buildings, often empty). The remainder (1,300–1,500 strikes by late January 2015) were dynamic targets where very careful real-time positive identification was possible because enemy units were undertaking military activity, creating high potential for multiple enemy casualties. An average of around four fatalities per strike (1,500 times four) would give 6,000 fatalities from airstrikes alone, hardly unimaginable considering the fact that Western controllers had eyes-on most IS targets until the moment of weapon impact.

54 Six thousand divided by 24 weeks, as of January 22, 2015, gives an average of 250 fatalities a week.

55 ISIL's defensive system of IEDs, snipers, and exten-

Mosul is far bigger than Tikrit—around 144 square miles versus eight square miles respectively⁵⁶—but as Tikrit showed, ISF forces do not need to attack the whole city at once. Additionally, Tikrit is probably too big for the Islamic State to mount an exclusionary defense with their relatively small numbers. Coalition forces will be able to penetrate the city. Getting into the Islamic State-dominated areas is rarely the problem.

An under-acknowledged aspect of the Islamic State's military campaign in Iraq is that it has been a theater-wide "economy of force" effort. The Islamic State forces have engaged in a blur of active defense to conceal the basic thinness of their troops on the ground. If sufficient forces are available to take over and consolidate recaptured areas, then a step-by-step approach can be used to reduce the lethality and effectiveness of the Islamic State delaying tactics.⁵⁷ The key limiting factor on the speed of advance against the Islamic State is the mustering of sufficient clearing forces, the development of effective plans to clear areas, and the use of sufficient numbers of effective units to fill up contested spaces and consolidate ownership.⁵⁸

This finding suggests that the Islamic State might also be defeated in other Iraqi cities and even in Raqqa, Syria, which is not a great distance from potential military jump-off points in Turkey, if motivated, well-supported forces can be developed to liberate and consolidate those areas. There is nothing mystical about the Islamic State as a defensive force: it has succeeded almost entirely due to the absence of

sively booby-trapped buildings successfully absorbed and repulsed an assault on Tikrit in mid-March by Popular Mobilization Units (PMUs), but rapidly collapsed in early April under a multi-pronged push into the city by Iraqi Special Forces (ISOF) and battle-hardened federal police backed by Coalition air support. See "Divisions Over Iraq War Exposed In Victory In Tikrit," Joel Wing, *Musings on Iraq*, April 6, 2015.

56 See "How to Retake Mosul From the Islamic State," *Foreign Policy*. Michael Knights and Michael Pregent, February 27, 2015.

57 "Iraqi prime minister claims victory against Islamic State in Tikrit," Loveday Morris, *Washington Post*, March 31, 2015.

58 "CENTCOM Outlines Battle for Mosul, Doubles Estimate for IS Dead," Paul McLeary, *Defense News*, February 19, 2015.

47 See the same video footage cited above, for an excellent example of this: footage of the complex assault on Pesh positions near Kirkuk "Raiding the Barracks of the Peshmerga #2 - Wilayat Kirkuk," *Jihadology*, April 11, 2015, and video of the raid on a Zerevani outpost in Kisik area, "Storming the Barracks of the Peshmerga in the Area of Shandukhah - Wilayat al-Jazirah," *Jihadology*, April 5, 2015.

48 On January 11, 2015 Islamic State took advantage of poor weather conditions to stage a boat-borne infiltration attack across the Zab river at Gwer southeast of Mosul. They were able to control the town and its vital Mosul-Erbil highway bridge for several hours, killing 25 rear-area Asayesh security force personnel in one of the deadliest single attacks on Peshmerga forces since the fall of Mosul.

49 Ibid. The January 11 boat-borne raid on Gwer is a prime example. Islamic State undertook a night attack, also taking advantage of fog and bad weather to infiltrate across the river and achieve complete tactical surprise.

50 Michael Knights, personal group interview, Peshmerga lieutenant and Peshmerga private soldiers, Maktab Khalid, Kirkuk, March 8, 2015.

51 For instance Peshmerga advances at Khazr, Askri

effective opposition, not because of its inherent strength.

What will follow the liberation of cities such as Mosul, Fallujah, and Tall Afar? One option is the Ramadi model—that Islamic State elements will remain in place to mount commuter insurgencies in areas where population centers and economic hubs can be attacked from rural redoubts. This kind of operational model could work along some stretches of the Syrian border, in parts of the Western Desert and Jazira, in Beyji, in the areas between Ramadi and Fallujah, and in areas adjacent to the Hamrin Mountains. It could even work in Mosul if the ISF and Kurds repeat the error of failing to adequately garrison the city and its desert belts and satellite towns (most significantly Tall Afar).⁵⁹ A key lesson of the last six months is that retaking town centers is not a real measure of success: stabilizing the whole defensive zone, including the rural belts, is the real victory.

Rebuilding large reliable locally accepted occupation forces will not be easy given today's sectarian and economic climate in Iraq. Counter-insurgency efforts will benefit from the resettlement of displaced persons but restoring governance and services for returnees will also be very difficult. The formula of leaving Sunni areas as depopulated garrisoned zones has been used in some places—Amerli, Jurf as-Sakr, and Jalula-Saadiyah⁶⁰—but it is not a mid-term solution and will only create ghost towns that are favorable haunts for the Islamic State. Resettling populations will be a major challenge because the Islamic State has destroyed hundreds of police stations, administrative offices, bridges, and official dwellings⁶¹ in a deliberate counter-stabilization effort that may hint at a slow-burn strategy to wear down the Iraqi nation with repeated sorties from insurgent-controlled

redoubts in Iraq and Syria. The Islamic State has failed to hold terrain, but they may prove adept at preventing post-conflict resettlement and stabilization of affected areas.⁶² This is where the Islamic State's real paramilitary strength lies and this is the real military challenge faced by Iraqis and their coalition partners.

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Chad: A Precarious Counterterrorism Partner

By Margot Shorey and Benjamin P. Nickels

THE REPUBLIC OF Chad is building a reputation as a leading African state in the fight against terrorism. Chad will provide more than a third of the 8,700 soldiers—3,000 men, nearly as many as Nigeria's 3,250—currently assigned to the African Union (AU) approved Multi-National Joint Task Force (MNJTF),¹ and Chadian forces have already claimed successes against Boko Haram in its strongholds along Nigeria's borders. From the capital N'Djamena, President Idriss Déby Itno is busy working to project an image of his country as a regional powerbroker and valuable counterterrorism player. A closer look, however, reveals worrying vulnerabilities and triggers of instability that raise concerns about the risks of overreliance on this precarious partner to contain and counter terrorist threats in Central and West Africa.

This article provides an analysis of Chad's role in regional counterterrorism efforts, examining its track record in such efforts and a number of its political, economic, and structural vulnerabilities. The article concludes by examining the implications of these concerns through some possible scenarios for instability in Chad, with serious consequences if Western partners were to rely too heavily on Chad's help in regional counterterrorism ventures.

A New Prominence

In the past few years, Chad has earned international recognition as a regional security leader, thanks to its provision of a tough peacekeeping force and its successes as a strong counterterrorism partner in a troubled part of Africa. A large country located in the heart of Africa, Chad is strategically well placed to partner with regional and international actors seeking to counter various insurgent and extremist threats throughout West and Central Africa. In President Déby, Chad has a ruler who has demonstrated the political will to lead in security cooperation and a willingness to enforce collective decisions.

⁵⁹ For a great account of the neglect of Mosul see Joel Rayburn, *Iraq after America: Strongmen, Sectarians, Resistance The Great Unraveling: the Remaking of the Middle East*, Hoover Institution Press Publication; No. 643, August 1, 2014, pp. 137-162.

⁶⁰ Human Rights Watch, "After Liberation Came Destruction: Iraqi Militias and the Aftermath of Amerli," March 18, 2015.

⁶¹ See footnote 17 for examples of the Mosul demolitions.

⁶² The current situation in Diyala province, which the Iraqi government declared cleared in January 2015, is a cautionary example. ISF cleared IS from its urban stronghold in Jalula/Saadiyah in November 2014, but the insurgents merely dispersed and regrouped in rural sanctuaries along the middle Diyala river valley and their historic support zones south of Balad Ruz, with the result that overall insurgent activity in Diyala has not measurably declined since November 2014.

¹ Thomas Fessy, "Boko Haram: Can regional force beat Nigeria's militant Islamists?" BBC News, March 3, 2015.

Chad has raised its regional security profile since 2013 through leadership in several multilateral bodies. Chad currently represents Central Africa in the AU Peace and Security Council, and it recently successfully campaigned for a seat as a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council with its two-year term concluding at the end of 2015. A founding member of the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), Chad provided the organization's current and previous secretaries-general.² Chad's government has also made new connections to the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) through on-the-ground operations, displaying its military prowess in responding to terrorism and instability in the neighboring sub-region.

With its strong experience fighting in the Saharan terrain, Chad's military has been very active in countering al-Qa'ida-linked Islamist extremists in northern Mali. Chadians fought alongside the French to halt the extremists' southern offensive towards Bamako in early 2013, and the Chadian government contributed approximately 2,000 troops to the African-led International Support Mission in Mali (AFISMA).³ When AFISMA was replaced by the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) in July 2013, Chad again contributed to the mission, sending approximately 1,100 troops.⁴ Although described in peacekeeping terms, these missions saw soldiers in direct combat with extremists, and Chad's contingent has suffered the most casualties in MINUSMA.⁵ Chad is again taking casualties in the regional counterterrorism fight against Boko Haram, with 71 dead and 416 wounded in less than three months of fighting in the Lake Chad Basin.⁶

2 "UNOCA présent à la cérémonie d'installation du nouveau SG," UNOCA, Bureau régional des Nations Unies pour l'Afrique centrale,

3 African Union Peace and Security Council, 358th Meeting, *Progress Report of the Chairperson of the Commission on the African-Led International Support Mission in Mali*, March 7, 2013.

4 United Nations, Troop and Police Contributors, August 31, 2014.

5 United Nations, "United Nations Peacekeeping," *Fatalities by Nationality and Mission*, (As of March 31, 2015)

6 Agence France-Presse, "Chad army says 71 soldiers

Chad's ability to act in Mali is in part thanks to long-term counterterrorism investments by international partners, such as France and the United States. France has provided financial and military support to President Déby for decades, and it has maintained a military base in N'Djamena since 1986.⁷ In August 2014, when the French government restructured its Sahel strategy following its intervention in Mali, it showed its ongoing commitment to and reliance on Chad by basing troops for Opération Barkhane in N'Djamena, even though actual operations will likely have a West African focus.⁸

For Washington, Chad is a successful example of the light-footprint approach to security in Africa. Chad served as a base for recent U.S. support to Nigeria in combating Boko Haram and the search for the approximately 230 young women kidnapped from Chibok in mid-April 2014.⁹ Chad also has been a core partner for over a decade in initiatives such as the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP), through which the United States seeks to build African capability and capacity to combat terrorism in the region. Between 2009 and 2013, the United States obligated approximately \$13 million in TSCTP funds to Chad.¹⁰ Through the Partnership, the United States trained the Chadian Army's elite Special Anti-Terrorism Group, the only African force to participate in the French-led offensive in Mali in early 2013.¹¹ In February and March 2015, Chad hosted the annual U.S.-sponsored Exercise Flintlock, a regional counterterrorism exercise for countries in the Sahel.

killed fighting Boko Haram", April 10, 2015.

7 French Defense Ministry, "Les éléments français au Tchad (EFT)," February 24, 2014.

8 French Defense Ministry, "Opération Barkhane," August 11, 2014.

9 Ernesto Londoño, "U.S. deploys 80 troops to Chad to help find kidnapped Nigerian schoolgirls," *The Washington Post*, May 21, 2014.

10 United States Government Accountability Office, *Combating Terrorism: U.S. Efforts in Northwest Africa Would Be Strengthened by Enhanced Program Management*, June 2014.

11 Lesley Anne Warner, "The Trans Sahara Counter Terrorism Partnership Building Partner Capacity to Counter Terrorism and Violent Extremism," *Center for Naval Analyses*, March 2014.

Enduring Vulnerabilities

Yet on closer inspection, Chad's counterterrorism successes obscure some troubling traits in its politics, military, economy, and diplomatic relations that, if considered pragmatically, cast doubt on its leadership and hint at the possibility of future crisis.

The most salient political reality is that President Déby heads an authoritarian regime that relies on patronage and repression for its longevity. Like other African strongmen, his tenure as president has long outlasted the typical span of democratic rule. President Déby took power in 1990 by overthrowing the country's previous ruler, Hissène Habré, whose harsh eight-year term seems brief compared to President Déby's current quarter-century tenure.¹² President Déby claimed victory in elections in 1996 and 2001, before rewriting the constitution to do away with term limits to run and win again in 2006 and 2011. On each occasion ballots were cast, but massive restrictions, intimidation of opponents, and widespread fraud meant President Déby's electoral successes were far from democratic.¹³ Chad's politics have prompted concerns from many quarters, including, for example, Freedom House, which has categorized Chad as "Not Free" in its Freedom in the World report for more than a decade.¹⁴

Politicization and patronage in the Chadian Armed Forces also creates points of concern. President Déby has cultivated a military elite that is drawn predominantly from his own ethnic group, the Zaghawa,¹⁵ and Chad's senior officers are loyal to the president rather than the republic. President Déby has deployed his armed forces against Chadian rebel groups. Chad's military has been lauded for its efficiency in

12 Celeste Hicks, "Clay Feet: Chad's Surprising Rise and Enduring Weaknesses," *World Politics Review*, November 13, 2014.

13 Freedom House, "Chad: Freedom in the World 2014"; Freedom House "Freedom in the World: Chad 2013"; Amy McKenna, "Idriss Déby, President of Chad," *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

14 See the annual reports available at Freedom House "Chad: Freedom in the World 2014."

15 Gaël Grilhot, "Les forces tchadiennes au Mali : mythe et réalités," RFI, January 21, 2013, and "L'armée tchadienne aux avant-postes de la guerre au Mali," *Le Monde*, March 4, 2013.

Mali, but the hallmark of its success, its expertise in desert warfare, stems from campaigns against insurgents in the country's desert north and east.¹⁶

There are also socio-economic concerns driven by Chad's failure to meet its potential. Despite the discovery of oil, which Chad began exporting in 2003, the inequitable distribution of Chad's new wealth means that life for most Chadians remains extremely difficult.¹⁷ Poor governance and corruption—Chad sits at 154 out of 174 on Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index¹⁸—have ensured that unemployment remains very high and development remains limited. Chad, for example, ranks 184 out of 187 countries on the 2014 UN Human Development Index.¹⁹ President Déby has used Chad's oil wealth to fund national security at the expense of other development projects, breaking a deal with the World Bank in 2006 to do so.²⁰ To this day, despite its military partnerships, Chad receives less international non-humanitarian development aid than its neighbors in the Sahel, such as Niger and Mali.²¹

Diplomatically, Chad's international relations are potentially volatile because they rely on President Déby's tenuous personal dealings with neighboring autocrats, a risky approach with great potential for sudden and complete reversals. Chad, for example, has a working relationship with Sudan at the moment, but President Déby had hostile relations with President Omar al-Bashir in the early 2000s, when both men supported rebel groups operating in each other's country.²² Chad still houses

some 350,000 Sudanese refugees, largely from Darfur,²³ who could become a greater humanitarian or security risk if conflict between Chad and Sudan were to reignite. In addition, President Déby's long-time links with Libya's former leader Mu'ammar Qadhafi has complicated Chad's relations with its northern neighbor.²⁴

These long-term drivers of instability make Chad fragile, and any number of near-term triggers might tip the country into crisis. Protests, especially by young people, have become an increasingly common disturbance in N'Djamena and smaller cities across the country. In March 2015, enforcement of a new law requiring motorcyclists to wear helmets, like the one that sparked Boko Haram violence in Nigeria in July 2009,²⁵ spurred an intense round of demonstrations that led to three deaths and closed high schools and universities.²⁶ Meanwhile, new technologies are empowering and accelerating unrest. A recent video of Chadian police violently beating unarmed students went viral, causing outrage among civil society and invigorating the opposition.²⁷ These incidents could be just a taste of future events. For example, following the popularity of the *#twili* hashtag in Burkina Faso's rallies that eventually helped push the former president Blaise Compaoré from power, Chadians adopted the hashtag *#Goum Mou* during November 2014 protests, demanding a leadership transition in Chad's upcoming 2016 elections.

If a crisis in Chad were to develop, multiple vectors and sustainers of instability could easily aggravate and prolong instability across the country. Once in the grip of a major crisis, Chad

could become a danger in and of itself, rather than the source of stability in the Sahel it is currently perceived to be.

Implications and Scenarios

Chad's combination of under-appreciated vulnerabilities and importance to regional counterterrorism efforts could lead to unwelcome developments.

President Déby's personalized diplomacy and penchant for interfering in neighbors' affairs raises concerns, given N'Djamena's central role in the MNJTF and Chad's enthusiastic cross-border operations against Boko Haram in Cameroon and Nigeria. Such entanglements have limited Chad's effectiveness in other regional forces over the years. Once peace support operations began in the Central African Republic (CAR) in 2013, for example, Chad's long history of interference in the CAR's internal affairs,²⁸ coupled with reports of financial and military support to the Seleka rebels, undermined N'Djamena's role in the International Support Mission to the Central African Republic. Subsequent accusations that Chadian forces conducted politically motivated killings of unarmed civilians in March 2014 eventually forced President Déby to withdraw from the mission altogether.²⁹

External reliance on Chad as a force for regional security might also exacerbate internal drivers of instability. The perception among Western partners that N'Djamena's support is needed for success in regional counterterrorism efforts may encourage them to compromise on their values in order to protect their interests, just as it lets President Déby trade on his government's perceived international utility as a way to compensate for a lack of domestic legitimacy. The more the international community depends on Chad as a security partner, the more important its stability becomes, even if it comes at the expense of democracy, respect for human rights, and economic development. Of course this dynamic is not unique to Chad: the tradeoff is

16 Peter Tinti, "In Mali fight, Chad proves a powerful partner for France," *Christian Science Monitor*, March 7, 2013.

17 Celeste Hicks, "Chad's oil project 10 years on: has anything changed?" *African Arguments*, July 31, 2013

18 "Corruption Perceptions Index 2014," *Transparency International*.

19 "Human Development Index and its components," 2014 Human Development Report, *United Nations Development Programme*.

20 Celeste Hicks, "Is Chad managing to beat the 'oil curse'?" *The Guardian*, April 14, 2014

21 See and compare Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development data from Chad and its neighbors.

22 Celeste Hicks, "Clay Feet: Chad's Surprising Rise and Enduring Weaknesses," *World Politics Review*,

November 13, 2014.

23 "2014 UNHCR country operations profile – Chad," United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

24 International Crisis Group, "Africa without Qaddafi: The Case of Chad," *Africa Report* No. 180, October 21, 2011.

25 "Boko Haram Recent Attacks," *National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism*, May 2014.

26 Siobhán O'Grady, "Why Are Chadian Youth Rioting Over a Motorcycle Helmet Law?" *Foreign Policy*, March 11, 2015.

27 "Violences policières: l'opposition tchadienne appelle à des sanctions," *RFI*, March 15, 2015.

28 Celeste Hicks, "Clay Feet: Chad's Surprising Rise and Enduring Weaknesses," *World Politics Review*, November 13, 2014.

29 "UN Investigators: Chadian Soldiers Fired on Civilians in CAR," *Voice of America*, April 4, 2014.

apparent in several countries in Africa and beyond.

Yet that focus may be short-sighted even in relation to counterterrorism issues. There are no guarantees that Chad will remain stable long enough to mitigate or overcome terror threats in West and Central Africa. Chad's many vulnerabilities mean that scenarios in which the country becomes more unstable are easy to envisage. Elite infighting, along with possible military discontent from repeated deployment, significant casualties, or unfair distribution of pay from regional missions against terrorists could precipitate a coup d'état. Factionalism could also increase tensions if rivalries based on religious, ethnic, or regional divisions harden and turn violent, something that could emerge in the event of disputes over the country's oil revenues, for example.

Any of these developments could be the spark for significant destabilization given the underlying reality of Chadian life. There is little economic opportunity, few ways to express political dissent, and no near-term end in sight to the regime led by the 62-year-old president who has already ruled for nearly 25 years. In this context, the citizens of Chad—especially residents of the capital city, where a tenth of the population lives—could take inspiration from recent revolutions on the continent and foment a broader popular uprising.

Alternatively, these factors might provide fertile ground for the attempted radicalization of disaffected young Chadians by terror groups. Boko Haram could conceivably target Chadians for recruitment or expand operations in Chad, as it has in northern Cameroon. According to news reports, Boko Haram is already operating in Chad and has already moved some of the girls kidnapped in Chibok, Nigeria, across the border into Chad.³⁰ Boko Haram's first attack on Chadian soil occurred shortly after Chadian troops joined the MNJTF.³¹ Also, Boko Haram's activities are close to the border with Chad. Maiduguri, a hotbed of Boko Haram

activity, is only some 250 kilometers from N'Djamena, compared to the more than 800 kilometers separating this remote town in northeastern Nigeria from the Nigerian capital Abuja.

The threat of further retaliatory attacks is real and concerning for the citizens of N'Djamena, as are the economic implications of the loss of important trade routes through northeastern Nigeria. Finally, Chad's stability could suffer not only from this type of terrorist spillover, but also from a sub-regional conflagration, with a combination of refugees, proxy forces, and state aggression coming from bordering nations, if the country's delicate personalized relations with neighboring heads of state were to sour.

These scenarios are not farfetched. The recent fall of Burkina Faso's president Blaise Compaoré, one of the Sahel's other enduring strongmen, is a vivid example of an authoritarian ruler toppled by a mobilized population. President Déby has also come close to losing power. In 2008, rebel forces reached the capital city and nearly overthrew the regime, but retreated from the capital after a three-day battle. Ultimately, France continued its role as President Déby's protector, helping thwart the rebels in N'Djamena before they could oust the president.³² President Déby survived the attack and made some reforms, but they did not go far enough to avoid another such crisis.

Chad may seem to be a strong counterterrorism partner with a capable military in a troubled region, but the country's internal vulnerabilities warrant more attention from a wide variety of stakeholders. Regional states and international partners who invest in and depend heavily on Chad's security and counterterrorism capabilities should remain alert. Another crisis might yet push this regional powerbroker into turmoil, with grave consequences for regional counterterrorism strategies

and operations across both Central and West Africa.

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³² See "Chadian Army, Rebels Battle in Capital; Hundreds Killed; Civilians Flee; France, U.N. Back Government," *Facts on File World News Digest*, February 7, 2008; Ketil Fred Hansen, "Chad's Relations with Libya, Sudan, France and the US," Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre, April 15, 2011.

³⁰ "Chibok abductions: Nigeria girls 'taken abroad'," BBC News, April 29, 2014.

³¹ "Nigeria's Boko Haram militants attack Chad for first time," BBC News, February 13, 2015.

The views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the Department of Defense, USMA, or the ACSS.

Ethnic Albanian Foreign Fighters in Iraq and Syria

By Adrian Shtuni

EXTENSIVE RESEARCH SUGGESTS that about 500 ethnic Albanians from the Western Balkans have traveled to Syria and Iraq since 2012, predominantly joining the Islamic State and Jabhat-al-Nusrah (JN).¹ For the most part these fighters are the product of a well-integrated regional network of extremist entities painstakingly expanded across the region over the past two decades. Recent counterterrorism operations in Albania and Kosovo have shed some light on the structure and inner workings of this network. These efforts by local law enforcement agencies have revealed that the web of extremist actors primarily comprises a new generation of local fundamentalist clerics trained in the Middle East and closely affiliated with a number of foreign-funded Islamic charities and cultural associations.

This article examines the involvement of ethnic Albanian foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq and provides an analysis of their backgrounds, affiliations, and activities. The data reveal that the age groups most vulnerable to recruitment are different among the countries examined—Albania, Kosovo, and Macedonia—despite broad ethno-linguistic and cultural similarities. The study concludes that if they are to be effective, counter-narrative campaigns and government responses must take into account evolving trends of radicalization, and that they should be fine-tuned to target the age groups most vulnerable to being swept up into violent extremism.

Historical Conditions

The Western Balkans are home to the largest indigenous Muslim population in Europe and a long standing tradition of moderate Islam that dates back to the Ottoman conquest of the peninsula in the 15th century. There are important distinctions, however, among the different countries of the region. Islam lost significant ground in Albania

during the communist era. Albania's long-time dictator Enver Hoxha went so far as to declare his country to be the first atheist state in the world, and all religion was banned between 1967 and 1990.² The fall of communism in the early 1990s, however, created significant volatility, both political and ideological.

The vacuum attracted pan-nationalist movements and Islamist revivalists across the Balkans, including some 20 Arab Islamic foundations, which established a strong presence in Albania.³ These foundations financed the building of hundreds of mosques and awarded educational scholarships to thousands of malleable young Muslim Albanians. Many of these young men who took up these opportunities returned home from their studies in Arab and Asian religious institutions with a strong sense of spiritual identity and an eagerness to promote a puritanical form of Islam.⁴ The impoverished Albanian government, due to its law enforcement agencies' lack of experience in dealing with extremist groups and the country's critical need for foreign aid and investment, paid inadequate attention to the dubious dealings of some of these charities for many years, until in June 1998 law enforcement agencies raided the offices of the Revival of Islamic Heritage Society and four sites linked to other charities, arresting four foreign terrorist operatives in their employ.⁵ The raids broke up a cell of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad⁶ terrorist organization and reportedly foiled a bomb attack on the U.S. Embassy in Tirana.⁷ Nevertheless, almost a quarter century of forced atheism had made Albanian society comparatively less susceptible to radical Islam.

2 Finngeir Hiorth, "Albania: An Atheistic State?," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* 10:5, Article 3, 1990.

3 Miranda Vickers, "Islam in Albania," *Defense Academy of the United Kingdom*, March 1, 2008.

4 Ibid.

5 Jeffrey Smith, "U.S. Probes Blasts' Possible Mideast Ties." *The Washington Post*, August 12, 1998.

6 The Egyptian Islamic Jihad is an al-Qa'ida affiliate established in the 1970s responsible for the assassination of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat in 1981 and for targeting U.S. and Israeli facilities in a number of countries.

7 John Kifner, "Police Seek Suspects Tied To Terrorism In Albania." *The New York Times*. August 21, 1998.

In contrast, ethnic Albanians who lived in the territories of the former Yugoslavia as an ethnic and religious minority struggling for civil rights embraced Islam. It was not simply a dogma for them, but it was also part of a pragmatic strategy intended to secure ethnic and territorial preservation. Yugoslavia's decade-long violent dissolution intensified ethno-religious cleavages, creating a more welcoming environment for a militant strain of Islam. As the 1998–1999 Kosovo war came to an end, and almost a decade after infiltrating Albania, dozens of foreign faith-based charities—particularly Saudi-funded groups—set up shop in Kosovo. Besides providing humanitarian aid and building schools and community centers, they also erected significant numbers of Wahhabi mosques and madrassas,⁸ the financing of which was opaque.

The Saudi Joint Relief Committee for Kosovo and Chechnya (SJRC), whose activities have been linked to al-Qa'ida operatives,⁹ reportedly built 98 primary and secondary schools in rural Kosovo after the war. The most promising students were enrolled in 30 Koranic schools sponsored by the Islamic Endowment Foundation, an SJRC entity.¹⁰ In a massive construction boom, more than 100 unlicensed mosques sprouted across Europe's poorest country within ten years.¹¹ Kosovo covers just 4,212 square miles.

The development of an extensive religious infrastructure required a significant increase in the number of qualified clerics. Agencies and groups such as The World Assembly of Muslim Youth made available hundreds of scholarships to Middle Eastern Islamic education institutions.¹² The returning graduates, often sporting

8 David Gardner, "Saudis Have Lost the Right to Take Sunni Leadership," *Financial Times*, January 1, 2014.

9 "Written Testimony Of Jean-Charles Brisard, International Expert On Terrorism Financing Lead Investigator 911 Lawsuit, CEO JCB Consulting International—Before The Committee On Banking, Housing And Urban Affairs United States Senate." October 22, 2003.

10 "Political Islam Among the Albanians: Are the Taliban Coming to the Balkans?" KIPRED, June 1, 2005.

11 "Kosova Mbyll Sytë Para Xhamive Ilegalë," (Kosovo turns a blind eye towards illegal mosques), *Balkan Insight*, January 12, 2012.

12 William Finnegan, "The Countdown," *The New Yorker*, October 15, 2007.

1 This estimate is based on data provided by multiple specialized reports tracking the flow of foreign fighters to Syria, hundreds of articles from regional media outlets reporting on this issue, and social media inquiries between November 2012 and early March 2015.

the Salafis' trademark long beard with the clean-shaven upper lip, created a steady supply of hard-line clerics for the growing network of mosques and madrassas across Kosovo. Tellingly, eight of the 11 Kosovo imams arrested between August and September 2014 on charges of preaching extremism and helping to recruit jihadists were relatively young and educated in the Middle East.¹³

Genci (Abdurrahim) Balla, a 35-year-old imam educated in Saudi Arabia, is typical of those caught up in the operation. He was arrested in April 2014 in Albania on suspicion of leading a recruitment ring authorities believe to have sent dozens of fighters to Syria.¹⁴ These imams were closely affiliated with a chain of 14 Islamic charities and cultural associations whose leaders were also educated in the Middle East and which the authorities in Kosovo shut down recently because of their alleged ties to Islamist organizations such as the Muslim Brotherhood.¹⁵

The Scale of the Problem

There were only a small number of ethnic Albanian individuals involved in jihadist activity prior to the Syrian conflict.¹⁶ The evidence now suggest that the number of ethnic Albanians who have gone to fight in Syria and Iraq as of early March 2015 is about 500. Among the data points that are publicly available, Kosovo's Minister of Internal Affairs in a late February 2015 interview stated that the number of foreign fighters from Kosovo stands at "about 300."¹⁷ The latest available estimates

for Albanian citizens range from 90 to 148.¹⁸ By comparison, published estimates of Macedonian fighters—just 12—are very low, and other evidence seems to suggest a higher number may be more accurate. The similar number of reported casualties among jihadists from Albania (12) and ethnic Albanian jihadists from Macedonia (14) would indicate that the total number of ethnic Albanian fighters from Macedonia is about 100. This estimate is further supported by the reported death rate of around 10 percent among German,¹⁹ Belgian,²⁰ Dutch,²¹ and Bosnian²² jihadists. Only one ethnic Albanian jihadist from Serbia has been reported dead so far.

The data also reveals that relative to its population of 1.8 million, Kosovo is arguably the largest source of European jihadists in Syria and Iraq. With a rate of over 16 fighters per 100,000 nationals, Kosovo's recruitment rate is more than eight times that of France, Europe's largest overall source of jihadists in Syria and Iraq.²³ Kosovo's per capita rate of recruitment exceeds by about 60 percent even that of a failed state like Libya.²⁴

There are several likely factors for this development. Geographic proximity, lack of visa restrictions, and low transportation costs make the trip to Syria logistically easy. Yet the

confluence of particular sociopolitical, economic, and demographic factors may help explain Kosovo Albanians' disproportionate rate of radicalization. With 44 percent of the population aged below 25, Kosovo has the youngest population in Europe.²⁵ There is also a surplus of young men, with a ratio of 1.1 male(s) per female. This youth bulge makes the country more susceptible to radicalization and social unrest, especially as it is combined with rapid urbanization and poor economic conditions.²⁶ In fact Kosovo has the lowest Human Development Index in Europe and the lowest per capita income in the Balkans.²⁷ Also, as of 2013, Kosovo's unemployment rate for the 15–24 age group was 56 percent.²⁸ A number of studies demonstrate a significant association between an excessive rate of youth unemployment and incidence of terrorism in Europe.²⁹ Furthermore, according to United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) 62 percent of Kosovo's adult population has low levels of education.³⁰ Ignorance and lack of proper educational opportunities often make people more vulnerable to ideological indoctrination and radicalization.³¹ This vulnerability is compounded by Kosovo's significant ethnic polarization and exacerbated by a recent traumatic ethno-sectarian conflict that had sharp religious undertones.

Who are the Ethnic Albanian Foreign Fighters?

The author researched, examined, and categorized publicly available data related to ethnic Albanian foreign fighters and their known associates published between November 2012 and

13 Fatos Bytyci, "Imam Arrested in Kosovo on Suspicion of Recruiting Islamist Fighters," Reuters, August, 2014 14, and Fatos Bytyci, "Kosovo Imams Arrested in Push to Stop Fighters Going to Syria, Iraq," Reuters, September 17, 2014. 2015.

14 Nikoleta Kovaci, "Lufta Në Siri, Zbulohet Celula Terroriste Në Tiranë" (War in Syria: Terrorist Cell Identified in Tirana, *Shekulli Mobile*, February 1, 2014.

15 Fatos Bytyci, "Indebted to America, Kosovo Struggles to Curb Islamist Recruits," Reuters, October 14, 2014 and "Mbyllet OJQ-ja e imamit qe eshte e lidhur me 'Vellazerine Myslimane'" (Shut down the imam's NGO with links to 'Muslim Brotherhood'), *Portali Telegraf*, September 22, 2014.

16 Timothy Holman, "Foreign Fighters from the Western Balkans in Syria," Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, NY, June 30, 2014.

17 "Intervistë me Skender Hysenin, Ministrëri i Brendshëm i Kosovës" (Interview with Skender Hyseni,

Kosovo's Minister of Internal Affairs). VOA. February 20, 2015.

18 Peter R Neumann, "Foreign Fighter Total in Syria/Iraq Now Exceeds 20,000; Surpasses Afghanistan Conflict in the 1980s," ICSR, 26 January, 2015 and "Foreign Fighters Flow to Syria," *The Washington Post*, January 27, 2015.

19 Daniel H. Heinke, and Jan Raudszus, "German Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq | Combating Terrorism Center at West Point." Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, NY. January 20, 2015.

20 Christian Levaux, "Belgian Police Kill Two in Raid on Suspected Islamists," Reuters. January 15, 2015.

21 Samar Batrawi and Ilona Chmoun, "Dutch Foreign Fighters Continue to Travel to Syria | Combating Terrorism Center at West Point." Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, NY, July, 20 2014.

22 Rusmir Smajilhodzic, "Bosnia Arrests 16 Would-be Fighters, Balkans Move Against Jihadists," *Agence France Presse*, September 3, 2014.

23 "France to Get Better Weapons, Hire More Intelligence Agents to Fight Homegrown Terror," CBS News, January 21, 2015.

24 Ibid., Neumann.

25 "The World Factbook: Kosovo," Central Intelligence Agency and "Kosovo Population and Housing Census 2011," UNSTATS. November 1, 2012.

26 Henrik Urdal, "A Clash of Generations? Youth Bulges and Political Violence," UN Department of Economics and Social Affairs. January 1, 2012.

27 "Kosovo Human Development Report 2012: Private Sector and Employment," UNDP November 2012.

28 "Workforce Survey Results," Kosovo Statistics Agency 2014.

29 "Global Terrorism Index 2012: Capturing the Impact of Terrorism for the Last Decade" Institute for Economics and Peace, 2012.

30 "Kosovo Human Development Report 2012: Private Sector and Employment," UNDP. 2012.

31 Omer Taspmar, "Fighting Radicalism, Not 'Terrorism': Root Causes Of An International Actor Redefined," *SAIS Review* XXIX, no. 2 (2009), pp. 75–86.

early March 2015 by media outlets, released by regional governments, or posted on social media. The resulting dataset compiled for the purposes of this study contains information on 211 ethnic Albanian men who have either fought in Syria and/or Iraq at some point between 2012 and 2015 or have been arrested and are being investigated for recruiting fighters or attempting to join terrorist groups. This number does not include the dozens of women, children, and other family members who have accompanied them.

According to official sources at least 13 Albanian nationals have traveled to Syria with their wives and 31 children.³² Another report claims that about 20 Kosovo Albanian families have “made hijrah”³³ to live and fight in the region and that one of these families—composed of three brothers, two wives, and five children—traveled to Syria as late as September 2014.³⁴ Bearing in mind the patriarchal family structure common among ethnic Albanians, particularly in Kosovo, it would be reasonable to assume that more than 100 ethnic Albanian relatives of jihadists have made the trip, some of whom may have received military training and eventually participated in armed operations.

Of the 211 men in the data set, at least 152 of these men from Albania (70), Kosovo (64), Macedonia (17), and Serbia (1) have fought in Syria and/or Iraq in the past three to four years. Of those 152 men, 49 were reportedly killed in action: 12 from Albania, 22 from Kosovo, 14 from Macedonia, and one from Serbia. The first local media report of an ethnic Albanian casualty came in early November 2012 regarding Naman Demolli, a 35-year-old Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) veteran and a staunch activist for a radical Islamic movement turned political party in

Kosovo.³⁵ The presence of at least two groups of ethnic Albanians fighting in Syria was also recorded in November 2012.³⁶

The deadliest year was 2014 with at least 29 reported deaths. The deadliest month was September 2014 with ten reported deaths mostly the result of U.S.-led airstrikes targeting Islamic State strongholds. January 2014 was the second deadliest with five reported deaths, mainly linked to intensified clashes between the Islamic State and JN. Media reports on at least three, and possibly as many as six, Kosovo Albanian youths traveling to Syria in early January 2015 attest to the continued flow of fighters despite the punitive measures taken by local governments to curb the phenomenon.³⁷

At least ten of the fighters identified in the dataset belong to the ethnic Albanian diaspora in Western Europe and possibly had dual nationality, specifically five from the ethnic Albanian diaspora originating from Macedonia, and five from the ethnic Albanian diaspora originating from Kosovo. Their last reported residences were in Germany, Sweden, Norway, Austria, and Switzerland. Other fighters or would-be fighters arrested before they could travel to Syria or Iraq are known to have resided at some point in the United Kingdom, Belgium, Spain, Greece, Italy, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Egypt, and Syria.

Two main clusters of fighters that stand out are those with previous military experience (14) and those with previous formal religious training (ten). At least 14 of the fighters from the dataset have previous guerilla warfare experience or formal military training. There were ten KLA and/or National Liberation Army veterans from the armed conflicts in

Kosovo and Macedonia in late 1990s and the beginning of 2000s and four former Albanian Army Commandos in the data set.³⁸ Media reports suggest they traveled to the conflict zone in groups and that the number of KLA veterans who have already fought in Syria may be even higher. One press article from mid-2013 quotes a KLA veteran as stating that he was planning to join the war in Syria “with about a dozen war comrades, experts in different weaponry.”³⁹

Meanwhile, the pool of imams and madrassa students involved either directly or indirectly in this armed conflict increases from ten to 23 when adding the 13 imams arrested in Kosovo and Albania for inspiring or recruiting jihadists.⁴⁰ Albanian authorities reportedly possess strong evidence that a ring operated by two imams in the suburbs of Tirana is responsible for recruiting 70 fighters.⁴¹

Not surprisingly, due to a tradition of close-knit families among ethnic Albanians, a third cluster of fighters is connected to each other mainly through kinship ties. There are at least eight cases in which a small group of fighters related to each other (e.g., brother or cousins) traveled to the Middle East, for a total of 20 known fighters. In five of these cases, the fighters originate from Kosovo. This is in line with a similar trend observed among fighters from other countries such as France and Britain.⁴²

38 “Katër Komando Të Zall Herrit Shkuan Për Të Luftuar Në Siri. Dy U Vranë” (Four Commandos from Zall Herr Went to Fight in Syria: Two Now Dead), *Gazeta Tema*, March 21, 2014.

39 Ismet Hajdari, “Unknown to Their Families, Balkan Former Guerrillas Join Rebels,” *The Daily Star Newspaper*, August 8, 2013.

40 Fatos Bytyci, “Kosovo Imams Arrested in Push to Stop Fighters Going to Syria, Iraq,” Reuters, September 17, 2014.

41 “Tetë Në Pranga, Rekrutoni Luftëtarë Besimtarë Shqiptarë Për Të Luftuar Në Siri” (Eight Arrested for Recruiting Albanians to Fight in Syria), *Gazeta SHQIP*, March 12, 2014.

42 “French Brothers Seek Jihad in Syria,” BBC News, August 20, 2013, and Chris Pleasance, “Last Surviving Brother of Trio of British Extremists Who Left Britain to Fight in Syria Says He Will Not Return to UK until All Muslim Lands Are ‘liberated,’” Mail Online, November 15, 2014.

32 Aleksandra Bogdani, and Flamur Bezaj, “Dhjetra Fëmijë Shqiptarë, “pengje” Te Xhihadisteve Ne Siri (Tens of Albanian kids, “hostages” of Jihadis in Syria),” Reporter.al, December 16, 2014.

33 Hijrah refers to Muhammad’s journey from Mecca to Medina to escape persecution, but in this context is used simply as migrate.

34 Besiana Xharra and Anita Kadriu, “Familja Dhjetarë njetarëshe Në ISIS. (Ten-member (Albanian) Family with ISIS).” *Zeri*, January 25, 2015.

35 “Vritet Ish-ushtari I UCK-se Ne Siri Gjate Sulmeve Kunder Asadit (Former KLA Soldier Killed in Syria during Raids against Assad).” *Shqiptarja.com*, November 14, 2012.

36 “Grupe Shqiptarësh Në Luftë Kundër Assadit (Albanian Groups in War against Assad),” *Portali Telegraf*, November 14, 2012.

37 “Dy Nga Tre Gjilanasit Qe Shkuan Ne Siri Nuk Kishin Pasaporta; E Paraqarte Si Dolen” (Two of the Three People from Gjilan That Travelled to Syria Did Not Have Passports; Unclear How They Managed to Travel), KOHA, January 20, 2015.

What Age Groups are Most Susceptible to Recruitment for Violent Jihad?

Of the 152 ethnic Albanian foreign fighters identified by name or by pseudonym in the media, the data set contains demographic data for 88 fighters. Based on this information the ethnic Albanian fighters range in age from 17–70 and they are on average 30 years old. The data suggests that the age group most susceptible to recruitment for violent jihad among ethnic Albanians is 21–25 years old.

While the individuals in this data set share similar ethnic and linguistic backgrounds and are clustered together on the battlefields of Syria and Iraq, they originate from three different socio-economic and political environments. Ethnic Albanians from Kosovo and Macedonia have more points of commonality due to their common Yugoslav past than they share with Albanian nationals. In order to detect potential variances between fighters, the data was segmented by country of origin: Albania (23), Kosovo (49), Macedonia (15), and Serbia (1). Though the sample sizes of fighters originating from each country are not equal, they represent comparable ratios relative to the number of estimated fighters per country, 16, 16, and 15 percent respectively.

The data segmentation reveals distinctly different patterns of recruitment among this pool of foreign fighters. While the age group most susceptible to recruitment is the same among ethnic Albanians from Kosovo and Macedonia (21–25) that changes by a decade in the case of Albania (31–35). This variance is largely reflected in the fighters' average age by country of origin as follows: Albania 35.6, Kosovo 28, and Macedonia 25.8. These differences, which are somewhat explained by Kosovo's younger median population age and other drivers of radicalization listed above, could also be influenced by the demographics of the most radical, charismatic, and successful recruiters in each country. In Kosovo this includes a 25-year-old Islamic State commander named Lavdrim Muhaxheri, who until recently ran an Islamic cultural association. His counterpart in Albania was, until his arrest, the 35-year-old Imam Genci Balla. Another potential

causal factor worth exploring may be the fact that Kosovo society experienced the growth of Middle Eastern charities with extremist links well after Albania did—post-1999 in Kosovo compared to post-1990 in Albania.

Conclusion

The unprecedented proportion of ethnic Albanians being drawn to violent extremist organizations testifies that militant Islamist narratives have struck a chord. This preliminary study based on a detailed, yet partial footprint of the ethnic Albanian foreign fighters, identified two distinct age groups particularly susceptible to recruitment into violent extremism. While the typical foreign fighter from Albania is a male between 31 and 35 years old, the typical ethnic Albanian foreign fighter from Kosovo and Macedonia is a male between 21 and 25 years old. The data indicate that country-specific dynamics, despite all the many ethno-linguistic and cultural similarities among ethnic Albanians in the Balkans, may have had a more determining role in their path to radicalization.

A more granular understanding of the complex radicalization environment and recruitment patterns identified in this study would allow for a more informed counter-radicalization strategy and effective counter-narrative campaigns targeting the most susceptible age groups. Moreover, these counter-radicalization efforts would benefit from frequent monitoring and assessment of evolving radicalization patterns in the region. Ultimately, the long-term success of these efforts will be determined by the ability to adjust to and anticipate the radicalization trends.

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Canadian Foreign Fighters in Iraq and Syria

By Christopher Anzalone

The outbreak of mass popular protests against the Syrian government of President Bashar al-Assad in the spring of 2011 and the country's rapid descent into an increasingly brutal civil war following violent repression by state security forces and militias have produced a chaotic environment in which armed groups such as the Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra have flourished.

The Syrian government's brutality and use of mass violence, including the bombing of civilians, the widespread use of torture and rape, and campaigns of starvation, has been well documented. The emotive images, coupled with ease of travel and a host of highly personalized factors ranging from a search for a greater purpose and identity to troubled backgrounds involving crime and mental illness, have helped fuel the mobilizations of foreign fighters, first to Syria and later to Iraq.¹

This article examines the flow of Canadian foreign fighters to the Syrian and Iraqi theaters, placing it in context of earlier Canadian involvement in jihadi groups, and in particular other recent cases, such as Somalia. Canadian foreign fighters, like those from other countries, are a diverse set of individuals with different backgrounds who have traveled to the battlefield at different times.² This article describes

1 On the ease of access to the battlefield in Syria, and by extension Iraq, as a possible factor for high mobilization numbers of Europeans, see the Project on Middle East Political Science interview with Thomas Hegghammer, "POMEPS Conversations 32," 20 January, 2014.

2 The timing of travel is often significant. In previous cases, such as Somalia, individuals who traveled earlier were seemingly driven by different factors than those individuals who went later, particularly in regard to their ideological affinity with al-Shabab. From 2007 to January 2009, when the Ethiopian military still occupied parts of Somalia, nationalism seems to have played an important role in the decisions of foreign fighters. Later foreign fighters appear to have had more specifically ideological motives, rather than wanting to simply join an effective organization.

the different types of individuals who have joined jihadi groups in Syria and Iraq and examines Canada's mentions in the Islamic State's official media discourse, particularly related to claims that it inspired recent lone wolf attacks in Ottawa and Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu, near Montreal.

The Canadian Contingent

Despite some uncertainty around the margins, it is clear that the number of foreign fighters traveling to the ongoing conflicts in Syria and Iraq far outstrips earlier episodes of jihadi mobilization. The national, ethnic, and linguistic diversity of the foreign fighters is also much broader. A record number of Canadians or those with Canadian connections, around 30 according to the federal department, Public Safety Canada, have joined jihadi groups active in Syria and Iraq, primarily Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State. This is somewhat more than the estimated 20 to 25 Canadians who joined al-Shabab in Somalia between 2007 and 2013.³ Other high-end estimates put the possible number between 35-100 individuals.⁴ There are a total estimated 130 Canadians who are believed to have joined militant groups overseas, with Syria and Iraq being the most popular theater of choice for Canadian foreign fighters.⁵ Most of the Canadians

who joined al-Shabab were of Somali descent, but those joining the Islamic State, Jabhat-al-Nusra, or other Syria- and Iraq-based militant groups are more diverse in terms of their ethnic, religious, and family backgrounds.⁶ Canadian recruits are also featured prominently in the Islamic State's media operations, more so than in the media operations of other jihadi groups.

Like the foreign fighters from other countries, many of the Canadians who left in 2011 and 2012 were motivated in part by a desire to engage in what they see as a kind of "armed humanitarianism"⁷ on behalf of Syrian civilians who are being violently suppressed by the al-Assad government. Others were motivated by the search for identity and purpose, which, for them, was fulfilled by the fight against the Syrian government and the idealized rhetoric of groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra and, to an even greater degree, the Islamic State and its claim to have reformulated a caliphate.

As with other foreign fighters, there are multiple factors influencing the decision to join armed groups abroad. It is often difficult to construct a full picture about the underlying

motivations because of the limits of the information. There is often a dearth of open source information, which is limited to jihadi primary sources and whatever insights are available from the friends and family of fighters. It is difficult to interview most of these individuals once they leave Canada. Some fighters have produced material once on the ground in Syria or Iraq, but their motivations generally have evolved by that point, limiting analysis.

Personal reasons are also factors, though they are often overlooked in much of the analysis of Muslim foreign fighters. These motivations include the desire to atone for self-perceived sins (such as previously living in an un-Islamic way), feelings of disillusionment, and a desire to belong to a group and participate in a "noble" cause.⁸ Such motivations are difficult to classify concretely for analytical purposes because they often vary significantly among individuals. As a result, it is difficult, if not impossible, to develop a fully applicable and explanatory typology.

The decision to travel to Syria and Iraq rather than other battlefields is also likely influenced by logistical factors. Travel to Syria is easier than traveling to jihadi battlefronts in Afghanistan, Pakistan, or Somalia, for example. The international news media and the images of suffering civilians also put the spotlight on the Syrian conflict, likely influencing the decision-making of prospective foreign fighters. Finally, there is also the powerful allure of the media narratives put forward by jihadi groups, especially for those fighters who are not well educated in the nuance of Islamic theology, history, or jurisprudence. This is particularly true of certain concepts such as that of the *ghuraba*, the strangers who will once again emerge as the "true Muslims" and the important placement of Syria in eschatological narratives and certain *hadith*.⁹ These are concepts that jihadi

3 Colin Freeze and Joe Friesen, "Why the Canadian Pipeline to al-Shabab has Dried Up," *The Globe and Mail*, September 30, 2013.

4 Public Safety Canada, "2014 Public Report on the Terrorist Threat to Canada," p. 30, Aaron Zelin, "ICSR Insight: Up to 11,000 Foreign Fighters in Syria; Steep Rise among Western Europeans," International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation, December 17, 2013; Michelle Shephard, "Canadians Hurrying to Syria in Record Numbers to Join Rebels," *Toronto Star*, August 23, 2013; Amarnath Amarasingam, "Canadian Foreign Fighters in Syria: An Overview," *Jihadology*, March 4, 2015.

The high-end estimate of up to 100 Canadian foreign fighters was repeated on January 15, 2014 by Abu Turab al-Muhajir (the Emigrant), a Twitter user claiming to be one of them. See "Canadian 'Martyred' while Fighting in Syria, Jihadist Says," QMI Agency, January 17, 2014.

5 Public Safety Canada, "2014 Public Report," p. 11, p. 17. Estimates of the number of Canadians fighting in Syria and, later, Iraq, also come from non-governmental sources, such as documentary filmmaker Bilal Abdul Kareem, who interviewed fighters from various Islamist rebel groups in Syria in 2013. He noted in a September 2013 interview with the Canadian Broadcasting Company (CBC) that he met 20-30 Canadian fighters during his time in Syria. See CBC News, "Syria Conflict

Attracts Canadians to Fight on Front Line," September 4, 2013. See also the article's accompanying video report, "Canadians Fighting in Syria." American photographer Matthew Schrier, who was imprisoned for seven months in 2013 by Jabhat al-Nusra in Aleppo, also reported being interrogated in fluent English by three masked individuals whom he believed to be Canadians. See "US Photojournalist Recounts Horror of Captivity after Escaping al-Qaeda in Syria," *Agence France-Presse*, August 23, 2013; "American Photographer Escapes Syrian Islamist Torturers: Paper," *Reuters*, August 23, 2013; C.J. Chivers, "American Tells Odyssey as Prisoner of Syrian Rebels," *The New York Times*, August 22, 2013, and Michelle Shephard, "Canadians Hurrying in Record Numbers to Join Rebels," *The Toronto Star*, August 23, 2013.

6 Canadian Security Intelligence Service, "Somalia and Al Shabaab."

7 This description was coined by Thomas Hegghammer. See: Stefan Binder, "Interview: Syrien: Humanitäre Helfer mit Kalaschnikow," *Der Standard*, February 13, 2014. Jihadi rebel groups operating in northern Syria have set up, according to British government officials, fronts whose members pose as aid workers in order to facilitate the travel of foreign fighters into Syria, see Anthony Lloyd, Alex Christie-Miller, and Michael Evans, "Jihadists Using Aid Agencies as Cover to Join Syria Fight," *The Times*, February 10, 2014.

8 Libération, "Je suis allé en Syrie pour racheter mes péchés," February 12, 2014, and Charlotte Boitiaux, "Confessions of a French Jihadist in Syria," *France24*, February 13, 2014.

9 The framing of the current conflicts in Syria and Iraq in eschatological/apocalyptic terms can be seen most clearly in the naming of the Islamic State's English language e-magazine, *Dabiq*, and the name of an affiliated media organization, the Al-Amaq News Agency. Both

media operatives and ideologues derive from selective readings of historical treatises, the *hadiths*, the Qur'an, and exegetical works.

Individual Case Studies

Although open-source data on the Canadian foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq are limited, there are significant data on some individuals that provide useful, if tentative, comparisons with other groups of Canadian foreign fighters.

André Poulin

Poulin, a 24-year-old from Timmins, Ontario, who left for Syria in late 2012 from Calgary, was killed in August 2013 during an assault on the Syrian government-held military airbase of Menagh in the governorate of Aleppo.¹⁰ Reports of his death emerged in January 2014.¹¹ Poulin was featured in a June 2013 report about Western foreign fighters in Syria broadcast by Channel 4 in the United Kingdom, in which he noted that he was “helping people” in Syria, something that he said his parents supported but did not fully understand.¹² In the Channel 4 report, Poulin was shown fighting alongside a number of Europeans in *Katibat al-Muhajirin* (Brigade of the Emigrants), a rebel group founded and commanded by Russians and foreign fighters from the Caucasus.

names are those of places mentioned in Sunni hadith about locations of a final great battle with “Rome,” which is today often interpreted by jihadis as referring to “Christendom” generally.

10 CBC News, “Syria Conflict Attracts Canadians to Fight on Front Line,” September 4, 2013, CBC News, “André Poulin, Jihadi from Timmins, Ont., Confirmed Dead in Syria,” January 16, 2014; ICI Radio-Canada, “André Poulin, un autre Canadien djihadiste tué en Syrie selon CBC,” January 16, 2014; The Canadian Press, “Canadian Man Killed Last August in Syrian Conflict: Report,” January 17, 2014; and The Canadian Press, “Another Canadian Reported to Have Been Killed while Fighting in Syria,” January 17, 2014.

11 CBC News, “André Poulin, Jihadi from Timmins, Ont., Confirmed Dead in Syria,” January 16, 2014, and ICI Radio-Canada, “André Poulin, un autre Canadien djihadiste tué en Syrie selon CBC,” January 16, 2014. Photographs of Poulin’s body following the battle were tweeted on March 20 and March 21, 2014 by Twitter user “Abu Bakr al-Muhajir,” who claimed to be a Canadian foreign fighter in Syria. Al-Muhajir confirmed that Poulin had died during the battle for the airbase.

12 Channel 4, “Britons Fighting with Syria’s Jihadi ‘Band of Brothers,’” June 14, 2013.

Poulin, who had married in Syria, was expecting a child at the time of his death.¹³ A convert of only six years, Poulin had a troubled youth, including some criminal activity, before he left for Syria.¹⁴ Early on, he reportedly adhered to a particularly rigid, black-and-white interpretation of Islam.¹⁵ In a series of Internet postings, he claimed that he had been accused of terrorism, had been imprisoned, and was feared by people in his hometown of Timmins. He also claimed that his activities were being monitored constantly by the police.¹⁶ Poulin posted about his legal troubles online, describing some of the acts he was accused of, including threatening to blow up a Timmins gas station. He also described arrest for making death threats after he was caught having an affair with the common-law wife of a man whose house he was then living in as well as arrests for harassment, theft, and carrying a weapon illegally.¹⁷

The Islamic State has posthumously featured Poulin in two major films, *Al-Ghuraba: The Chosen Few from Different Lands*, released in July 2014, and *Flames of War*, released in September 2014. In the first, Poulin speaks candidly about his previous life as a “normal Canadian” before urging Muslim viewers to fulfill what he says is their religious obligation

13 CBC News, “André Poulin, Jihadi from Timmins, Ont., Confirmed Dead in Syria,” January 16, 2014, and ICI Radio-Canada, “André Poulin, un autre Canadien djihadiste tué en Syrie selon CBC,” January 16, 2014.

These rumors were confirmed in a film released by the Islamic State in July 2014, *Al-Ghuraba: The Chosen Few from Different Lands*.

14 He converted sometime between late 2008 and early 2009, just after turning 20. See CTV News, “Another Canadian Man Dies Fighting in Syria,” January 17, 2014. Poulin confirmed that he had converted six years before in the Islamic State film *Al-Ghuraba: The Chosen Few from Different Lands*.

15 *Ibid.*, “André Poulin, Jihadi from Timmins, Ont., Confirmed Dead in Syria.”

16 *Ibid.* Poulin posted about his legal troubles online, describing some of the things he was accused of. These included threatening to blow up a Timmins gas station. He also had been arrested for making death threats after he was caught having an affair with the common-law wife of a man in whose house he was then living in, harassment, theft, and carrying a weapon illegally.

17 *Ibid.*, “Canadian ‘Martyred’ while Fighting in Syria, Jihadist Says”, QMI Agency, and Michael S. Schmidt, “Canadian Killed in Syria Lives On as Pitchman for Jihadis: ISIS Uses André Poulin, a Convert to Islam, in Recruitment Video,” *The New York Times* July 15, 2014

of emigrating from non-Muslim countries and coming to the blessed land of Syria to live a life of purity.¹⁸ In his recruitment pitch, he emphasizes his identity as an “average” Canadian who “loved” hockey and other sports as well as summers in the countryside, and who was employed in a well-paying job as a street cleaner, saying, “You know, mujahidin are regular people too.”¹⁹

He is at pains, though, to also note the support network that he says is in place for foreign fighters.²⁰ Ultimately, though, the reward for those who emigrate, he says, will be the recompense (*ajr*) from God.²¹ He calls for those with any skill, from road construction to technology, to come rebuild Syria. In *Flames of War*, Poulin’s frontline participation in the battle for Menagh is prominently featured in the film’s narrative, though he is not identified by name.

The Calgary Group: Damian Clairmont, Salman Ashrafi, and the Gordon Brothers

Clairmont, 22, a resident of Calgary from an Acadian family, was killed in Syria in January 2014 during fighting between Jabhat al-Nusra and Free Syrian Army (FSA) militias.²² He had left Canada in November 2012 after telling his mother that he was going to study Islam and Arabic in Egypt. He instead traveled to Turkey before crossing the border into Syria and joining Jabhat-al-Nusra.²³

18 Islamic State film, *Al-Ghuraba: The Chosen Few from Different Lands*, July 2014. Poulin, when speaking about the rewards from God that await emigrants, notes that it is Ramadan at the time of recording, suggesting that it was recorded during Ramadan in 2013, which fell in July and early August.

19 *Ibid.*

20 *Ibid.*

21 *Ibid.*

22 Jean-Marie Yambayamba, “Un jeune Calgarien tué en Syrie après s’être rallié à un groupe djihadiste,” ICI Radio-Canada, 15 January, 2014, and Fadi al-Haruni, “Death of a Canadian Jihadi in Syria,” Radio Canada International, January 15, 2014.

23 The Huffington Post Alberta, “Damian Clairmont Dead: Calgary Islam Convert Killed Fighting in Syria,” 15 January, 2014 and CBC News, “Damian Clairmont Killed Fighting with al-Qaeda-linked Rebels in Syria,” and *Postmedia News*, “Canadian Man Fighting against Regime ‘Executed’ by Other Rebels: Report,” January 16, 2014; Nick Logan, “Calgary Man Damian Clairmont Reportedly Killed Fighting in Syria,” *Global News*, January 15, 2014; Stewart Bell, “It’s between Me and God’: How a Calgary High School Dropout Joined Syria’s Civil

Once in Syria, he was attracted to the “al-Qa’ida types,” such as those in Jabhat al-Nusra, because they “do not steal, rape, or sell drugs or murder or kidnap for ransom.”²⁴

Clairmont, who suffered from bipolar disorder and, between 15 and 17, agoraphobia, had a troubled childhood. His family moved to Calgary in October 1997 when he was seven.²⁵ At 17, he attempted suicide.²⁶ After turning 20, he became “very angry, very political,” according to his mother, and began to speak forcefully about the worldwide suffering of Muslims.²⁷ Despite holding some basic jobs for short periods, he lived largely off a disability pension that his psychiatrist had recommended he apply for after he was released from the hospital following his suicide attempt.²⁸

Though he initially lied about his destination, Clairmont later admitted to his mother and in correspondence with a Canadian newspaper that he wanted to fight in Syria because women and children were being tortured and killed there by the al-Assad government and he believed that, by fighting, he was doing something productive by contributing to a cause greater than himself.²⁹ He also stated that the afterlife was a better place than this world, hinting at his desire for martyrdom.³⁰ Although he initially kept in contact with his mother, it tapered off.³¹

War,” *National Post*, July 12, 2014.

24 Stewart Bell, “Canadian Killed in Syria: Calgary Man, 22, Joined Fight after Converting to Islam,” *National Post*, January 15, 2014.

25 Stewart Bell, “It’s between Me and God’: How a Calgary High School Dropout Joined Syria’s Civil War,” *National Post*, July 12, 2014; Stewart Bell, “‘He was a sitting target’: Mother of Canadian Muslim Convert says Sons Recruited into Syrian Conflict from Calgary Mosque,” *National Post*, June 20, 2013.

26 *Ibid.*

27 Stewart Bell, “It’s between Me and God’: How a Calgary High School Dropout Joined Syria’s Civil War.”

28 *Ibid.*

29 Postmedia News, “Canadian Man Fighting against Regime ‘Executed’ by Other Rebels: Report,” January 16, 2014, and Stewart Bell, “Alberta High School Dropout Explains Why He, and Many Others, Have Gone to Fight in Syria,” *National Post*, September 26, 2013.

30 Bell, “It’s between Me and God’: How a Calgary High School Dropout Joined Syria’s Civil War.”

31 He last called her on June 22, 2013 and had become, according to his mother, even angrier. He also, she said, “became increasingly angry about Canada, increasingly

The news of Clairmont’s killing was first reported on Twitter through user Abu Turab al-Muhajir, who claimed to be a foreign fighter in Syria.³² On January 14, he tweeted a photograph of Clairmont, whom he called Abu Talha al-Canadi (the Canadian), and, in subsequent conversations with other Twitter users, reporting that his “bro” had been killed fighting FSA militias in Aleppo.³³

His execution was confirmed by FSA-affiliated sources.³⁴ Like many foreign fighters in Syria and elsewhere, Clairmont reasons for engaging in militant activism were guided not only by a personalized and peculiar interpretation of Islam, but also by graphic scenes of conflict and the suffering of civilians as well as highly individualized characteristics, life experiences, and personal motivations.

Group dynamics and interpersonal relations, however, are also important aspects of the recruitment process for militant groups and, more broadly, social movements in general.³⁵ While living in Calgary, Clairmont was part of a study group that also included fellow converts and brothers Gregory and Collin Gordon and Salman Ashrafi. The four men also shared an apartment together in downtown Calgary during 2011 and 2012. Ashrafi left Canada in October 2012 and in November 2013 carried out a suicide bombing against

determined to be in Syria fighting.” CBC News, “Damian Clairmont Killed Fighting with al-Qaeda-linked Rebels in Syria” and Bell, “It’s between Me and God’: How a Calgary High School Dropout Joined Syria’s Civil War.”

32 His Twitter account, which has since been suspended, was: https://twitter.com/abu_muhajir1.

33 http://twitter.com/abu_muhajir1/status/423121184180281344/photo/1 and https://twitter.com/abu_muhajir1/status/423127061188706305

34 Murray Brewster and Ben Makuch, “Calgary Man Killed in Syria Prompts Warning on Homegrown Radicals,” *The Canadian Press*, January 15, 2014.

35 For example: Carrie Rosefsky Wickham, “Interests, Ideas, and Islamist Outreach in Egypt,” *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach*, (ed) Quintan Wiktorowicz, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2004, pp. 231–249 and Donatella della Porta, “Recruitment Processes in Clandestine Political Organizations: Italian Left-Wing Terrorism,” *International Social Movement Research, Vol. 1: From Structure to Action: Comparing Social Movement Research Across Cultures*, (ed) Bert Klendermans, Hanspeter Kriesi, and Sidney Tarrow, London, JAI Press, 1988.

Iraqi forces for the Islamic State.³⁶ The Gordon brothers left for Syria sometime in late 2012, around the same time as Clairmont and Ashrafi.³⁷

Farah Mohamed Shirdon

Shirdon, another former Calgary resident, first emerged publicly as an Islamic State foreign fighter in a film released by the group in mid-April 2014 in which he is shown tearing up and burning his Canadian passport and threatening both Canada and U.S. President Barack Obama.³⁸ From a prominent Canadian-Somali family, he had previously studied at the Southern Alberta Institute of Technology before leaving for Syria after stating that he no longer felt comfortable living in Canada.³⁹ He was active on Twitter, urging readers to join the Islamic State and posting ideological messages about martyrdom and the religious duty of becoming mujahidin.⁴⁰ Shirdon was reported to have been killed fighting in Iraq in August 2014, but subsequent reports suggested that he was still alive.⁴¹

John Maguire

Maguire, 24, left for Syria sometime in 2013 after expressing views that Islamic law should be enforced through violence and criticizing a local Calgary-based imam for condemning the Islamic State.⁴² According to the Royal Canadian

36 Stewart Bell, “Canadian ISIS Member’s Online ‘Wake Up Call’ Urges Muslims to Follow Example of Calgary Suicide Bomber,” *National Post*, June 16, 2014.

37 CBC News, “Gregory and Collin Gordon, Calgary Brothers, Join Ranks of Canadians Fighting for ISIS,” August 29, 2014.

38 Islamic State film, *They Hear You, O’ Muslims*, April 2014. He was not identified by name or nationality, though he spoke in English.

39 CBC News, “Farah Mohamed Shirdon of Calgary Fighting for Islamic State of Iraq and Syria,” June 18, 2014.

40 Shirdon tweeted on everything from his desire for martyrdom and the inability of his parents to prevent him from engaging in military action to calls for other Canadians to join the Islamic State. His account has since been suspended, but the author has recorded and saved many of his tweets. His former account was: <http://www.twitter.com/MuhajirSumalee>.

41 CBC News, “Farah Mohamed Shirdon of Calgary, Fighting for ISIS, Dead in Iraq, Reports Say,” August 15, 2014. and Bryan Passifume, “Calgary Jihadi May Not Have Been Killed in Iraq,” QMI Agency, 12 September, 2014.

42 Jessica Hume, “Canadian ISIS Fighter: Headed

Mounted Police (RCMP), Maguire was part of a group of six young men in Ottawa sympathetic to jihadi activity. One other member, Khadar Khalid, 23, is also believed to have traveled to Syria and Iraq. Suliman Mohamed, 21, twin brothers and recent converts, Ashton and Carlos Larmond, 24, and Awso Peshdary, 25, were later arrested by the RCMP and charged with terrorism-related offenses, including funding Maguire's travel.⁴³

In early December 2014, Maguire was featured in a video series produced by the Islamic State, titled *Message of a Mujahid*.⁴⁴ Standing amid rubble and presenting himself as a "typical Canadian," educated and with no criminal history, he calls for Muslim viewers, particularly those in Canada, to join the Islamic State. He also links the two lone wolf attacks in Canada to that government's participation in attacks on the militant group. Maguire clearly displayed his heavy ideological debt to the late al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) preacher Anwar al-Awlaki, closely paraphrasing him and even basing his own *nom de guerre*, "Abu Anwar al-Kanadi," on al-Awlaki's name.⁴⁵ Maguire and another Canadian, Mohamud Mohamed Mohamud, 20, formerly a student at York University, were reportedly killed during the months-long battle for Kobane in northern Syria along the Turkish border.⁴⁶

Down Dark Path," QMI Agency, August 26, 2014.

43 Andrew Duffy and Meghan Hurley, "From JMag to Jihad John: The Radicalization of John Maguire," *Ottawa Citizen*, February 7, 2015.

44 Islamic State film, *Message of a Mujahid 5: Abu Anwar al-Kanadi*, December, 2014.

45 Maguire specifically mimicked or copied a message from al-Awlaki featured in AQAP's eulogy video for the preacher, *The Martyr of Da'wa*, December 2011. Similarities or outright paraphrasing or citation includes Maguire's urging of non-Muslim viewers to read the Qur'an themselves in order to determine its validity, warning Muslims against trusting promises of Western governments that the war is not one against Muslims, and even his closing, "peace be upon those who follow the guidance."

46 Stewart Bell and Meghan Hurley, "Mother Mourns Ottawa Jihadi Maguire, Believed Killed in Syria," *Ottawa Citizen*, January 14, 2015; Bill Dunphy and Nicole O'Reilly, "Hamilton Family Fears Son Killed Fighting for Islamic State in Syria," *The Hamilton Spectator*, September 25, 2014.

Ali Mohamed Dirie

Dirie, a member of the "Toronto 18" group who had been previously imprisoned for his role in a domestic terrorism plot to attack the Toronto Stock Exchange, the Canadian Security Intelligence Service, and a military base, left Canada in 2012 using someone else's passport since he was forbidden to have one of his own as part of his parole.⁴⁷ He traveled to Syria via Dubai and is believed to have joined Jabhat al-Nusra.⁴⁸ Reports of his death surfaced in late September 2013 from sources close to his family and friends.⁴⁹ Born in Somalia, he had come to Canada as a refugee when he was seven.

Quebec Foreign Fighters

Montreal residents Jamal Mohamed Abd al-Qadir, 24, Bilel Zouaidia, 18, Shayma Senouci, 18, Mohamed Rifaat, 18 or 19, Imad Eddine Rafai, 18 or 19, Ouardia Kadem, 18 or 19, and Yahia Alaoui Ismaili, 29, are suspected of having left to fight in Syria. Abd al-Qadir was from a Kurdish Syrian-Canadian family and is believed to have left Canada in the summer of 2012. He grew up in Montreal and was a college student at the time of his departure.⁵⁰ He said that he was driven to become a foreign fighter because of the suffering of his fellow Syrians and the inaction of the world powers in stopping the Syrian government's atrocities.⁵¹ Abd al-Qadir first joined the Free Syrian Army but later transferred his allegiance first

47 CBC News, "'Toronto 18' Member Ali Mohamed Dirie was under Strict Court Order," September 26, 2013.

48 Ibid., CTV News, "Toronto 18 Member Killed Fighting in Syria," September 25, 2013; CBC News, "'Toronto 18' Member Ali Mohamed Dirie Reportedly Died in Syria," September 25, 2013; and *The Canadian Press*, "Toronto 18 Plotter says He's Changed," September 13, 2010. For his role in procuring and smuggling weapons for the plotters, Dirie received a seven-year prison sentence in 2009, but was given credit for five years of pre-trial custody and paroled in October 2011. He served his two years imprisonment in Canada's highest maximum security prison, the Special Handling Unit, in the province of Quebec. At a parole hearing in 2010, Dirie claimed that while he still opposed Canada's then-involvement in Afghanistan, he no longer subscribed to violence and wanted to find peaceful and political ways to express his opposition.

49 CBC News, "'Toronto 18' Member Ali Mohamed Dirie Reportedly Died in Syria."

50 Kurt Pelda, "Fodder for the Front: German Jihadists on Syria's Battlefields," *Der Spiegel*, April 30, 2013.

51 Ibid.

to Harakat Ahrar al-Sham and then to Jabhat al-Nusra before he was killed fighting in Azaz in February 2013.⁵²

Zouaidia, Senouci, Rifaat, Rafai, Kadem, and Ismaili, who were all students at the College de Maisonneuve, a public pre-university college in Montreal, reportedly left for Syria and Iraq in mid-January 2015 to join the Islamic State.⁵³ Rafai, Kadem, and Zouaidia come from Algerian-Canadian families and Ismaili is originally from Morocco.⁵⁴ At least one of the six is believed to have briefly attended classes run by Quebec-based teacher Adil Charkaoui, though he denies that there is any connection to his classes and the choice to travel to Syria and Iraq.⁵⁵

The Islamic State and Lone Wolf Attacks

In addition to seeking recruits for the Syria and Iraq battlefields, the Islamic State is also seeking to project its power and influence abroad by claiming to have influenced the decision-making of a number of lone wolf militants in Western countries, including Canada, the United States, Australia, and France.⁵⁶ The Islamic State claims the two lone wolf attacks in Canada during October 2014 were inspired by calls from its official spokesman and a prolific ideologue Abu Muhammad al-Adnani al-Shami. The assertion came in a story in *Dabiq*, the Islamic State's e-magazine in an article attributed to John Cantlie, a captive British journalist. The Islamic State, however, does not state that either the shooting attack in Ottawa by Michael Zehaf-Bibeau or the vehicle attack in St. Jean-sur-Richelieu on two Canadian soldiers by Martin "Ahmad" Couture-Rouleau received any operational support.⁵⁷

52 Ibid.

53 CTV News, "Six Young Montrealers Believed to Be Fighting for ISIS in Syria," 27 February, 2015, and Hugo Joncas, "Deux derniers djihadistes allégués identifiés," March 1, 2015.

54 Joncas, "Deux derniers djihadistes allégués identifiés."

55 Alan Woods, "Tough Terror Laws Won't Stop Canadians from Fleeing to Islamic State, says Adil Charkaoui," *The Toronto Star*, February 27, 2015, and Steve Rukavina, "Collège de Rosemont severs ties with Adil Charkaoui group," CBC News, April 16, 2015.

56 Islamic State e-magazine, *Dabiq*, issue 5, November 2014, p. 37, and issue December 6, 2014, pp. 3-5.

57 Islamic State, *Dabiq*, issue 5, pp. 36-37. The Islamic State issued even stronger claims on having influenced

By claiming responsibility, even if only “spiritual” and not operational, for lone wolf attacks in the West, the Islamic State is trying to further inflate its image of power and influence has already benefited from non-stop coverage by the international news media and attention from world leaders. This, in turn, allows it to nudge the news narrative away from the increasing on-the-ground pressures it faces, particularly in Iraq, toward an image of the group as an inexorable regional and global force. A similar media strategy was quite successful for al-Shabab, which has called for lone wolf attacks in Europe and North America as well, garnering significant amounts of news media coverage and masking its battlefield setbacks inside Somalia.⁵⁸

Conclusion

The current group of Canadian foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq has evolved in comparison with previous Canadian jihadists, particularly those who joined al-Shabab. The fighters who have traveled to Syria and Iraq have no familial, ethnic, or national ties to either Syria or Iraq. This stands in stark contrast to those who joined al-Shabab, the second largest grouping of foreign fighters. The majority of those jihadists had Somali roots, which was a significant factor for many in their decision to travel to Somalia.

There are also some significant commonalities between the grouping in Syria and Iraq and previous Canadian foreign fighters, however. These include similar demographic characteristics among most individuals, present or past, including age. The fighters are usually

in their late teens to mid-twenties, with the average age decreasing over time.⁵⁹ This average age range is similar to the ranges (twenties to early thirties) seen in other samples of Islamist militants from the United Kingdom, continental Europe, the United States, and elsewhere.⁶⁰ The sample sizes are small, making it difficult to identify a firm trend, but there also appears to be an increasing number of Canadian converts who participate in jihadi militancy—from just one before the September 11, 2001 attacks to four after that date.⁶¹

Assessing the religiosity of these individuals is difficult due to lack of information, but some tentative conclusions are possible.⁶² Poulin, Clairmont, and the Gordon brothers were all converts, while others, including Shirdon and possibly Abd al-Qadir, were newly religious. The available information indicates that Poulin, Clairmont, the Gordon brothers, and many other Canadian foreign fighters had limited knowledge about Islam, particularly its diverse historical, literary, theological, and legal heritages. This evidence suggests further avenues for research, perhaps on the commonality of such patterns among other groups of foreign fighters or the impact of educational campaigns on the flow of foreign fighters.

In the meantime, it is possible that the number of Canadians attempting to join the Islamic State or other jihadi groups in Iraq or Syria may decline. These Canadians face tighter surveillance by the authorities and the confiscation of their passports, making it difficult to travel. The Islamic State also continues to lose territory in Iraq, which will likely further impede it from living up to the grandiose claims of its media

campaign and make it a less attractive group for prospective foreign fighters.

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Man Haron Monis' hostage-taking in a Sydney café, connecting him to the militant group due to his bay'a to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and describing him as a mujahid engaged in jihad in the path of God. *Islamic State, Dabiq*, issue 6, p. 4.

⁵⁸ Al-Shabab films, *Woolwich: It's an Eye for an Eye*, October 2013 and *The Westgate Siege: Retributive Justice*, February 2015, and Christopher Anzalone, “The Rapid Evolution of Al-Shabab's Media and Insurgent Journalism”, *OpenDemocracy*, 16 November, 2011. Al-Shabab is keenly aware of the power of the news media and the 24-hour news cycle and has frequently designed its media operations to take advantage of the need for sources by journalists, such as during the Westgate Mall attack in Nairobi in September 2013. See Christopher Anzalone, “The Nairobi Attack and Al-Shabab's Media Strategy,” *CTC Sentinel* 6, no. 10 (October, 2013), pp. 1-6.

⁵⁹ Sam Mullins, ““Global Jihad”: The Canadian Experience,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 25, no. 5 (2013): pp. 734-776, p. 744.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ Mullins, “Global Jihad: The Canadian Experience,” p. 746. This was out of a sample of 35 cases in the pre-September 11 period and 29 cases in the post-September 11 period.

⁶² It is also difficult to define religiosity or piety, though both are often presented in accounts of Muslim foreign fighters, particularly in the news media, as being sufficient explanations of individuals' decisions to engage in militant activism.

A View From the CT Foxhole: An Interview with Tom Wheelock

By LTC Bryan C. Price

Tom Wheelock is a Senior Vice President of Creative Associates International and the Director of its Communities in Transition Division. He oversees implementation of a wide range of development, stabilization, and political transitions programs funded by the State Department and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). Over the past few years, these programs have increasingly focused on countering violent extremism (CVE). His portfolio of countries includes Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Nigeria, Colombia, and numerous other at-risk countries. He is a 1969 graduate of the U.S. Military Academy, and was awarded the Bronze Star Medal for Valor and a Purple Heart for action during combat operations in Vietnam. He later received an M.P.A. from the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard.

CTC: Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) programs have received a lot of attention since the White House hosted an international summit on the topic in late February. The concept is not new, but it has gained momentum with the rising numbers of foreign fighters flocking to Iraq and Syria, many of whom are from the West. How would you best articulate the concept of CVE to our readers?

Wheelock: CVE is the use of non-coercive means to dissuade individuals or groups from mobilizing towards violence and to mitigate recruitment, support, facilitation, and engagement in ideologically motivated terrorism by non-state actors in furtherance of political objectives. It complements but should not be confused with counterterrorism operations. It recognizes a wide range of motives—such as political or economic grievances, feelings of marginalization, money, kinship, coercion, and radicalization.

CTC: This is such a broad and all-encompassing topic. What is the best way to frame CVE? How do we go about conducting CVE practically?

Wheelock: The best framework I have for thinking about CVE has two parts: CVE-relevant and CVE-specific programming.¹

CVE-relevant programming tries to favorably shape the environment for a particular community in terms of political, social, and economic issues. Basically, what you're trying to do is to ameliorate the grievances that people have and make them less vulnerable to extremist recruiters. You're making communities more resilient to the lure of violent extremism.

There is also more targeted CVE-specific programming. It consists of four stages: prevention, intervention, interdiction, and rehabilitation. These match closely with the stages of crime and violence prevention (CVP) programming, so there may be a lot of crossover in best practices that we can apply in a CVE context. Here you get down to the nuts and bolts inside a specific community, trying to identify youth at risk by analyzing a range of appropriate risk factors. Then, having identified those youth at risk, it is about intervention: working with families, local leaders, and institutions to guide those individuals away from these negative activities and toward more positives ones. The United Kingdom and some U.S. cities such as Los Angeles and Boston have community-level programs focused on prevention and intervention.

Next is the interdiction phase, where law enforcement and the military respond to those that have already radicalized.

The final phase is the reintegration phase. This entails de-programming those who have radicalized and bringing them back into mainstream society. Saudi Arabia CVE programming is an example of this. The U.S. government does not engage in reintegration.

A strategic communications campaign should be overlaid on all of these phases. Broadcast and print media can emphasize the broader values of peace, unity, resilience, and tolerance of other views. It can also highlight instances where acts of violent extremism go against established religious or cultural norms. A more focused communications campaign would concentrate on social media and interact with specific

individuals under the influence of radical ideologies. The question becomes: How can we reach them and convey a message that they will respond to in a positive manner?

CTC: What role can the U.S. government play in regards to conducting CVE activities in other countries?

Wheelock: Many of our foreign assistance programs are CVE-relevant programs. These include improving educational systems, fostering economic growth, and facilitating good governance. These programs attempt to reduce the window of opportunity for extremists to take advantage of political, economic, and social grievances.

In terms of U.S. CVE-specific programming overseas, there isn't that much right now. There are U.S.-sponsored CVE communication campaigns in various countries and pilot programs—some of which we at Creative implement—to test how a program can gain entry into communities, create the space needed to operate, and build the confidence of local partners, communities, and local governments to emphasize messages of peace and tolerance and introduce CVE-specific type of programming. A U.S. implementing partner such as Creative would not directly conduct prevention or intervention activities. That is best done by local organizations. Our role would be to train local organizations in best practices for conducting prevention and intervention activities, making technical assistance available, and providing funding to support the CVE programs of our local partners and broadcast media.

Having said that, we don't call it CVE—that kind of language is offensive to a foreign government and local communities. So it might be called a "peace and unity campaign," or a "resilience campaign." This sets it into a positive light and mitigates the political difficulties that these types of activities may cause a partner government. There is a USG program designed to interact with potential extremists through social media, but it does not have sufficient capacity to counter the overwhelming number of social messages generated by extremist groups.

¹Humera Khan, "Why Countering Extremism Fails: Washington's Top-Down Approach to Prevention Is Flawed." *Foreign Affairs*, February 18, 2015.

¹ Editor's note: For a more in-depth discussion see

CTC: Is it best to conduct CVE at the grassroots level or is it better coordinated by the host country government?

Wheelock: My view is the more local the better. Community leaders, civil society organizations, and parents know their communities, the context, and relevant grievances. They are best placed to identify and work with youth at risk. The central government should provide grants to fund these programs and then determine and disseminate best practices. When it comes to the law enforcement aspect of it, of course you need the capabilities of the central government, but on the prevention and intervention side, those activities should be very much locally driven.

CTC: When you talk about gaining entry into these kinds of communities, is it through the central government or going directly into these communities yourself?

Wheelock: All U.S. development assistance programs are implemented with concurrence from the host country government, which may ask us to work in certain communities. We deliberately seek to work with relevant government ministries (education, sports, and youth) to gain their buy-in and support. Partner civil society organizations, local government officials, or other trusted interlocutors generally facilitate entry into communities. In order for a program to be sustainable over a long period of time, the government must buy-in to the program with its approval and, we hope, financial support.

CTC: What about CVE in failed states such as Somalia or Yemen, where the government is non-existent, unable or unwilling?

Wheelock: You're not going to be able to do much, if any, CVE-specific prevention and intervention programs in those kinds of places. Those types of situations can only be dealt with through a counterterrorism type of approach.

CTC: That seems like a major problem that does not bode well for our long-term prospects in minimizing radicalization in these countries. In the countries where we are

conducting CVE, is there support at the community level?

Wheelock: There is support for the most part—especially when we are implementing in communities where we're already working with a trusted and respected interlocutor or partner organization. The level of community support is generally high once someone has made the introduction and we're allowed to execute one or two activities, which may not be directly relevant to CVE but which gain trust and allow a partnership to develop. You're not going to get anywhere without community support.

CTC: How do we measure the effectiveness of CVE programs? How do we know which ones work and which ones do not?

Wheelock: It is a difficult issue because it is hard to empirically prove a negative. If recruitment of youth to extremist organizations declines in a community, what caused the drop? CVE-specific programming, strong police action or changes in public policy that remove grievances? Anecdotally, you can cite examples of success, but how do you quantify and ascribe causation for that success? Right now I don't have the answer for it, and I don't think the CVE community yet has an answer either.

It is somewhat easier to evaluate metrics when you look at crime and violence prevention (CVP) programs. You can see if the number of crimes has gone down and if the number of murders has gone down, even if it takes a long time to gather the data. There was a recent Vanderbilt University study on our primary crime and prevention programs in Central America, and there was a strong correlation between these kinds of programs and the drop in homicide rates.

CTC: So would you recommend that U.S.-sponsored CVE programs borrow somewhat liberally from the crime and violence prevention programs?

Wheelock: Certainly there are techniques and best practices of CVP that are applicable and can be adapted to CVE programming. We can learn from successful CV programs that have an integrated, place-based strategy,

including programs in Los Angeles and Central America. When an area is identified as a hotbed of extremism, a best practice that can be adapted to CVE is to implement an integrated program of prevention, intervention, policing, and rehabilitation—along with an overlay of strategic communications. This has been successful in Los Angeles. The U.S. State Department and USAID are starting an integrated CVP strategy in Honduras and El Salvador. [Editor's note: These two countries have among the highest murder rates in the world due to gang and drug-trafficking activities.]

CTC: You've had experience with CVE programs in some of the planet's most conflict-ridden countries. What country or countries do you feel are leading the pack in implementing CVE strategies?

Wheelock: The emphasis changes in different countries. For example, in Saudi Arabia the focus is on rehabilitation and less on prevention. The British are focused more on prevention and intervention.

CTC: What about the differences between crime and violence prevention programs in Latin America where religion is not a motivating factor in the violence like it is in countries such as Nigeria and Pakistan?

Wheelock: The religious component is a major distinction between CVP and CVE programs. To be clear, gangs do have an ideological component, but I would argue it is not as enduring, nor as strong as it is in the case of Islamic extremism.

CTC: Can you provide examples of some successful counter-narratives? Specifically, what counter-narrative can we provide to discourage disenfranchised Sunnis from radicalizing? What could dissuade those who are considering joining jihadist groups such as Islamic State in situations where the predominant grievances can be legitimately focused on the corrupt central government?

Wheelock: Counter-narratives ultimately have to be locally driven. They have to come from the people who know the context and what is going to

appeal to the populace. For the Middle East, the people you have to convince are the senior sheiks and tribal leaders as well as the religious authorities.

It is vital for religious authorities to articulate messages of peace and tolerance and to provide convincing arguments bolstered with religious underpinnings explaining why nonviolent methods are better able to accomplish change in political and economic systems. Beyond the contributions from trusted interlocutors, there are several instances of locally produced television and radio programming and print media that promote values of peace and tolerance.

CTC: What are some things that decision-makers should know about CVE? What are some of the misconceptions?

Wheelock: A lot of U.S. foreign assistance can be viewed as being relevant to CVE in building resilient communities, removing economic grievances, and reducing political grievances. The increasing emphasis on CVE, I think, will result in more of the typical foreign assistance programs being couched in these kinds of terms.

But that just sets the context. I think that much debate will center on how the United States can contribute to CVE-specific types of programming—prevention, intervention, interdiction, and reintegration. Where in the spectrum will the U.S. focus? Maybe the U.S. role is only supporting prevention or intervention programs or assisting police work on the interdiction side. It will be different in each country, but at least there is a framework for how to think about and discuss CVE programs.

The second point I'd like to make is about the prevention/intervention side. I think you can take a good hard look at the lessons from crime and violence prevention programs in Los Angeles and in Central America. These programs excel at identifying youth at risk and working with them to bring them back from the brink. If we can apply that framework and appropriate lessons to the countries where want to do CVE, I think that's a great place to start.

CTC: How would you invest the lion's share of resources among the four buckets in your CVE-specific framework (prevention, intervention, interdiction, and rehabilitation)?

Wheelock: The key word there is resources. Policymakers are more likely to invest resources into the interdiction part because these activities go after individuals who have already been radicalized and are easier to identify. You get short-term results.

The prevention/intervention part is going to be much more difficult to do. You have to mobilize a lot of community groups, get them on board, train them, and it may be more costly—especially when you are attempting to identify youth at risk and work with them. It is very manpower intensive. In the long-run, however, investing resources in this area is probably more effective than interdiction. How we strike that balance between the policing effort and the prevention/intervention effort is going to be the essential issue.

CTC: I imagine that some practitioners would recommend concentrating resources into interdiction because evaluating its effectiveness is relatively easy. In comparison, it will be difficult to gather metrics on prevention/intervention, even though it may be the most effective over the long-run.

Wheelock: Exactly. It is tough to prove a negative.

CTC: Given your knowledge of violent extremism around the globe, which region or group do you think poses the greatest risk to the security of the United States?

Wheelock: Syria and the Islamic State along with Yemen and AQAP have to be high up on the list of threats, but CVE programs need to focus on countries such as Tunisia and Jordan that are major sources of jihadi foreign fighters.

CTC: Final question. What question or issue do you think is important for our readers to know about?

Wheelock: I think communications campaigns are an area that needs improvement and should be a priority.

This is not just in the broad sense—the broadcast media where we can overlay messages of peace, resilience, unity, tolerance—but also in regard to how we can shape some of the more individualized communications on social media and work with companies like Twitter that are involved at that level.

The question we need to answer is how can we get locally driven messaging to the forefront. The U.S. government can provide funding in the background for the technology and provide funding for the programming element as well. But local leaders and institutions have to frame and articulate the message. The U.S. government cannot and should not do it all. You don't want to "hug your partners" too hard because that will expose them to criticism and undercut any media campaign's effectiveness.

Jamaat-ud Daawa: Into the Mainstream

By Animesh Roul

Pakistan's Jamaat-ud Dawa (JuD) is often compared with Lebanon's Hezbollah thanks to its efforts at blending charitable works and Islamic proselytization with overt political activism. The JuD is consciously attempting to improve its image, taking advantage of Pakistan's religiously charged socio-political environment. It appears that it is being aided by government policy, notwithstanding international sanctions imposed on the group. The JuD's influence has now extended to even the most remote corner of the country through its exploitation of the media, the expansion of its social services that range from health care to education, and its ability to assist affected populations during natural calamities outside its epicenter of power in the province of Punjab.

The JuD has been banned by many countries and international groupings, including the United States, India, and the European Union, for its association with terrorist violence. As a sister organization to Lashkar-i-Tayyiba (LeT), JuD, along with all its associated entities, has been designated as a terror organization under UN Security Council Resolution 1267. Many of its top commanders have been designated as terrorists, including Hafiz Muhammed Saeed and Zaki-ur-Rehman Lakhvi, the two founding fathers of JuD and LeT, who were listed in December 2008.¹

More recently, in June 2014 the U.S. Department of the Treasury named Nazir Ahmad Chaudhry and Muhammad Hussein Gill of LeT as Specially Designated Global Terrorists (SDGTs), taking the number of designated terrorists associated with LeT and JuD to more than 20. Treasury also listed six entities associated with LeT, including Jamaat-ud-Daawa, Al-Anfal Trust, Tehrik-e-Hurmat-e-Rasool, Tehrik-e-Tahafuz Qibla Awwal, Falah-i-Insaniat Foundation (FIF), and Idara Khidmat-e

Khalaq (IKK).^{2,3} Despite these efforts, JuD has flourished.

This article explores JuD's shifting narrative and its efforts to secure socio-political legitimacy both by supporting the government and the military and by conducting humanitarian works intended to improve its reputation in civil society. The article also examines JuD's efforts to strike a balance between its roles as a jihadi proxy for Pakistan, a political pressure group, a social welfare group, and its efforts to remain domestically relevant under direct state patronage.

The Historical Context

Pakistan arguably provides a unique environment for terror groups. Internationally designated terrorist leaders and operatives, sometimes claiming a cover as religious scholars or social workers, appear to travel and work with little legal restraint. This situation has its roots dating back more than 20 years to the early days of the mujahidin revival in the 1980s. Pakistan's then-government served as a willing partner in efforts to fund and supply Afghan rebels in their fight against Soviet troops. As part of that process, it allowed the creation and operation of many activist groups. After the USSR withdrew from Afghanistan, elements within Pakistan's government moved to use the mujahidin groups in their efforts to secure gains against long-time rival India. Some of the individuals and organizations that flourished, or their descendants, continue to operate today.

JuD, its sister group LeT, and Hafiz Muhammed Saeed are examples of this dynamic. JuD was originally created in 1985 in Muridke, Lahore, as a small preaching group. A year later it merged with Lakhvi's group of anti-Soviet

jihadists to form the Markaz Ad-Da'awa Wal Irshad (MDI) or the Center for Proselytization and Preaching. One of MDI's early online releases clearly mentions Saeed's original role and how the organization raised funds for jihad in the name of Mujahidin-e-Lashkar-i-Tayyiba.⁴ The group's ostensible role was to implement humanitarian missions and preaching according to the Islamic tenets. Below the surface though, the group's links to jihadi philosophies and aims were readily apparent. One MDI document details how "the brothers [Lakhvi, Saeed, and others] gathered and in 1989, Markaz Ad-Da'awa Wal Irshad was established. This caravan of Da'wah and Jihad, started its journey towards its destination under the guidance of Professor Mohammad Saeed."⁵ Another document states: "We declare that Lashkar-e-Taiba is not a terrorist organization [...] but is fighting for freedom and liberty of Kashmiris."⁶

After the Soviets left Afghanistan, the MDI and LeT shifted their attention to Kashmir as part of Pakistan's Operation Tupac. The LeT established a number of training camps in Pakistan's Kashmir and engaged in terror attacks across the border in India's Jammu and Kashmir, along with other Islamist terror groups nurtured by Pakistani agencies.⁷ There is evidence suggesting that MDI and LeT were jointly operated by the same group of leaders, even after the Pakistani government banned MDI's operations in 2002 and despite some frictions between the two groups in 2004, which

4 "Introduction: Da'awah and Jihad Movement," <https://web.archive.org/web/20020109200440/http://www.markazdawa.org/english/organization/introduction.htm>, October 30, 2001. For the fund raising activities in the name of LeT, See, <https://web.archive.org/web/20010128024900/http://markazdawa.org/English/organization/contribution.htm>.

5 "Introduction: Da'awah and Jihad Movement," <https://web.archive.org/web/20011217234502/http://www.markazdawa.org/English/organization/introduction.htm>.

6 Official Site for Markaz Ad-Da'awa Wal Irshad and Mujahidin-e-Lashkar-e-Taiba, URL, <https://web.archive.org/web/20001017212716/http://www.markazdawa.org/English/radio/news>.

7 Zahid Hussain, *Frontline Pakistan: The Struggle with Militant Islam*, Columbia University Press, 2008, pp. 55-59. Also See, K Santhanam (ed.) *Jihadis in Jammu and Kashmir: A Portrait Gallery*, Sage (New Delhi), 2003, pp. 22-24.

1 For UN listing of JuD, See, <http://www.un.org/sc/committees/1267/pdf/AQList.pdf>.

2 United States Treasury, "Treasury Sanctions Two Senior Lashkar-E-Taiba Network Leaders," June 25, 2014

3 United States Department of State added Jamaat-Ud-Dawa and Idara Khidmat-E-Khalq to the Specially Designated Global Terrorist Designation of LeT on April 27, 2006 and added Falah-i-Insaniat Foundation (FIF) as an alias of LeT on November 24, 2010, along with FIF chief Hafiz Abdur Rauf as Specially Designated Global Terrorist. See, United States Department of State, "Addition of Aliases Jamaat-Ud-Dawa and Idara Khidmat-E-Khalq to the Specially Designated Global Terrorist Designation of Lashkar-E-Taiba," April 28, 2006.

was reportedly resolved with help from Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI).⁸

There is significant evidence linking LeT to attacks on Indian targets and installations throughout the 1990s and beyond as the tensions in Jammu and Kashmir escalated. LeT was involved in skirmishes during 1999, fighting alongside Pakistan army regulars.⁹ LeT organized numerous terrorist attacks in India, including the December 2000 Red Fort (Delhi) attack, the May 2002 Kaluchak (J&K) massacre, and the November 2008 Mumbai attacks, among other deadly strikes. Even Pakistan's government has admitted LeT's role in the late November 2008 Mumbai attacks in its July 2009 report, and underscored the roles of Zakiur-Rehman Lakhvi and Zarar Shah, another LeT operative, in the tragic event.¹⁰

Charity Camouflage

The September 11, 2001, terror attacks in the United States and the December 13 attack on the Indian Parliament in the same year changed the security dynamics in the region and forced a response from Pakistan. Under significant U.S. and Indian pressure, the Pakistani government, led at the time by President Pervez Musharraf, on January 12, 2002, ordered a crackdown on militant groups active in the Kashmir region and in Pakistan, including LeT and Jaish-e Muhammad, another terror group active in Jammu and Kashmir.¹¹ The order, however, did not affect Pakistan-Administered

Kashmir (PAK), the Northern Areas (Gilgit and Baltistan), or the Federally-Administered Tribal Areas (FATA).

In an attempt to ensure continuity, the MDI's senior leaders decided to split the organization into two distinct units as laid out in an internal MDI document from October 2002. The document describes the planned division in light of the fast-changing security scenario in the region and how JuD was reconstituted. "A general council of Lashkar-i-Tayyiba has been established which will work under the chairmanship of Maulana Abdul Wahid Kashmiri who belongs to Poonch [Jammu and Kashmir]. The Lashkar-i-Tayyiba will continue its jihadi activities in occupied Kashmir...rather it will further intensify them. On the other hand, to continue the mission of Markaz al-Dawa Wal Irshad in the country [Pakistan], JuD has been established. All the organizational, political, and reformatory work will be accomplished under the Jamaat."¹² This shift also marked the beginning of JuD's move to the mainstream.

As part of the reorganization, Hafiz Saeed took control of JuD while Lakhvi became the supreme commander of LeT. Notwithstanding the internal arrangements, JuD maintained its financial and logistic support, especially for LeT operations in Jammu and Kashmir, via various existing charity fronts and other channels such as Idara Khidmat-e Khalaq (IKK) and Falah-i-Insaniyat Foundation (FiF).¹³

There is, however, much evidence to indicate that Saeed's aggressive language directed at India going back nearly 20 years more accurately describes his ideological leanings and intent. On February 18, 1996, while addressing the Lahore Press Club, he stated that "jihad in Kashmir would soon spread to all of India and the

mujahidin would create three Pakistans in India."¹⁴ More recently in mid-April 2015, he stated in an interview with Channel-4 Pakistan that JuD would support action by the Pakistani army in Jammu and Kashmir. "We support the Pakistani government and Pakistan army in their efforts to help the people of Kashmir...we call it jihad."¹⁵ He also admitted that Lakhvi has been a senior member of JuD, negating earlier claims by the JuD's leadership, who in the months after the 2008 Mumbai attack had denied Lakhvi and Zarar Shah's role within the organization.¹⁶ Six months earlier, the newspaper *Dawn* quoted Saeed saying that "if India can send its troops to Afghanistan, it can't stop mujahidin from entering Kashmir to win freedom for the oppressed Muslim brothers."¹⁷

Hafiz Saeed and other senior JuD leaders have pursued several strategies to maintain JuD's continued relevance in the face of growing international scrutiny and sanctions. JuD carried out humanitarian relief activities in the aftermath of the 2005 Kashmir earthquake and the 2010 floods in Pakistan via the IKK and FiF respectively. JuD had several motives. Not only was it able to heighten its public support, but by assisting in this way it was also able to gain favor with senior government officials. The JuD was careful to work in tandem with the Pakistani Army and other agencies during rescue and relief operations and use these opportunities to win the hearts and minds of the refugees.¹⁸ The JuD's ability to reach inhospitable regions such as North Waziristan or Balochistan before government help arrives during natural calamities and other humanitarian relief operations has not surprisingly made the JuD quite popular.

8 Evidently, in 2004 Saeed and Lakhvi increasingly disagreed over financial irregularities and nepotism, which eventually led to the creation of a breakaway faction of JuD/LeT, Khair-un Naas (KuN or People's Welfare). It was able to forcibly control JuD's headquarters in Muridke and other assets before ISI intervened to find a truce between two factions. See, for example, Amir Mir, *The True Face of Jihadis*, Mashaal books, 2004, pp. 95-113.

9 In June 1999, Hafiz Saeed reportedly claimed that his organization led the war against Indian troops in Kargil. See, Praveen Swami, "The Other Wars," *Frontline*, June 19-2 July 2, 1999.

10 "After admission, Pak files 26/11 charge sheet", Times Now TV, 18 July, 2009; Also See, "Part of 26/11 plot hatched on our soil, admits Pak," *Mid Day*, February 13, 2009.

11 "Musharraf bans Lashkar, Jaish; says no terrorism on name of Kashmir," *Daily Excelsior*, 12 January, 2002.

12 "Strategy to Foil Nefarious Designs of India", Voice of Islam, January 2002.

13 For instance, See, "Extremists given 'free hand' to collect funds for flood victims", *Daily Times*, August 27, 2010; Also, "Secretary of State's Terrorist Designation of Falah-i-Insaniyat Foundation."

U.S. Department of State Press Release, November 24, 2010, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2010/11/151931.htm>; Khalid Khattak,

"Government takes over 10 JD schools", 27 December, 2008.

14 For example Navnita Chadha Behera, "Demystifying Kashmir," Brookings Institution Press, 2007, p. 162.

15 See, Hafiz Saeed's Interview with Mujahid Bareilvi on Channel 24, April 16, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H_Hyl4_cFCE.

"JuD supports Pak Army's jihad in Kashmir," *Kashmir Monitor*, April 19, 2015,

16 Amir Mir, "LeT commander furious at JuD chief," *The News*, January 15, 2009.

17 "JuD call to arms to help Kashmiris," *Dawn*, December 6, 2014,

18 "Footprints: Extremist bodies run IDP relief efforts", *Dawn*, July 4, 2014,

Such activities also helps generate further charitable contributions, some of which it can funnel to LeT, and also refreshes the flow of recruits to the cause of Kashmiri reunification. JuD also used its humanitarian efforts, such as during relief operations, to spread Islamic teachings, along with a dose of Kashmiri or Afghan jihad.¹⁹

The central government has been hesitant to take action against the JuD. On at least three occasions the government has cracked down on the JuD, and all three occasions were the result of India raising its concerns with Pakistan about the involvement of Lashkar-i-Tayyiba militants in attacks against India.

In January 2002, as a result of the September 11 terror events in the United States and the December 2001 Indian Parliament attacks, the Pakistan government did take action against militant groups including LeT. In 2006, the government intervened in JuD facilities and placed its top leaders under house arrest following the July 2006 Mumbai commuter train bombings. Saeed was detained until mid-October that year and subsequently released by the Lahore High Court for lack of concrete evidence against the JuD leader.²⁰

Then, in early December 2008, in the wake of the LeT's Mumbai attacks and under pressure from the United States and India, Pakistan launched a brief police operation against LeT hideouts and training camps. Top leaders including Hafiz Saeed, Lakhvi, and Zarar Shah were arrested and security forces again took control of JuD establishments across the country.²¹

Despite these actions, there are many signals that the JuD enjoys a privileged status with various levels of government. This kind of protected status has helped the group fuel its move into the mainstream of Pakistani society and politics. Despite the UN ban, the central government has not shut down JuD's or FIF's establishments completely,

claiming that the groups were primarily charities. Following the June 2009 verdict from the Lahore High Court that quashed all terrorism charges against Hafiz Saeed, JuD was able to continue its move into the mainstream.

In many regards, the government intervention in the wake of Mumbai attacks can be best seen as an effort to avoid international criticism.²² Additionally, it is no secret that the provincial government of Punjab has provided and continues to provide significant financial and physical security for JuD's properties and establishments.²³ In fact, the government approach could be interpreted as protecting the JuD in an effort to use it to further policy goals with an apparent degree of deniability. On January 24, 2015, for example, Pakistan's High Commissioner to India, Abdul Basit, clarified that there is no ban on JuD's activities, only that its accounts have been frozen and a travel ban has been implemented restricting foreign travel by its leaders, in accordance with the UN Security Council resolution.²⁴

Pakistani agencies, such as the ISI, have systematically used Islamist ideologues like Saeed to raise issues like Jammu and Kashmir, but at a distance.²⁵ This analysis is supported

22 Khalid Khattak, "Government takes over 10 JD schools", *The News*, December 27, 2008.

23 For example, in the fiscal 2009-2010 the Punjab government allocated Pakistan Rupees 79.7 million (US\$936,240) to JuD's Al-Dawa School System, a mosque, hospital, and other health facilities built on the JuD Markaz-e-Taiba campus at Muridke. An additional Rs. 3 million (US\$35,207) was given to schools run by Jamaat-ud-Dawa. Again in the budget for fiscal 2013-14 the Punjab provincial government allocated more than Rs. 6.1 crore for Markaz-e-Taiba and allocated a further Rs. 35 crore for setting up a Knowledge Park at the centre along with other developmental activities. See, "Punjab Govt. funded outfits on UN terror blacklist: report, *Express Tribune*/ AFP, June 17, 2010; Also, "Pakistan's Punjab Government allocates funds for JuD centre," *Hindu/Press Trust of India*, June 18, 2013.

24 "JuD not banned, only accounts frozen: envoy", *Daily Times*, January 24, 2015.

25 Pakistan's ISI has nurtured LeT and other Kashmir centric Islamic extremist groups (e.g. Jaish-e-Mohammed) financially and with other logistics since their inception. The latest piece of evidence comes from 26/11 accused David Coleman Headley during interrogation by India's National Investigation Agency (NIA). According to Headley, every important member of LeT

by the fact that most of the Kashmir-focused terror groups, including LeT, Jaish-e-Mohammed, and Hizbul Mujahidin have never targeted Pakistan or its interests abroad. In contrast, the government has occasionally used these groups to counter other anti-Pakistan militant extremist groups such as the Pakistani Taliban. The government has even deployed ideologues such as Saeed in the government's militant rehabilitation or reform program.²⁶

Most recently, JuD has heightened its profile by supporting Saudi Arabia. It spearheaded a campaign along with other religious groupings such as Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat (ASWJ), pressing the government to send troops to Saudi Arabia to protect Muslim holy sites against possible aggression by the rebels in Yemen.²⁷ Issues like these are another way that JuD can garner public and government support while pleasing multiple stakeholders, including the people.

The Mainstreaming of JuD

Over the years, JuD has grown into a socio-religious behemoth with its Islamic education and health service units spread across Punjab and other parts of Pakistan. Free education and free medical treatments comprising five hospitals, 200 dispensaries, ambulance services, and 250 schools fuels growing support for JuD's presence and facilitate its legitimacy substantially within the Pakistan.²⁸

Despite international pressure, it appears that at least some elements

is handled by one of more ISI officials. For example he named Maj. Sameer Ali and Maj. Iqbal who took care of him, Brig. Riaz handled Zaki ur Rahman Lakhvi (Chief military commander of LeT). Headley also revealed how Maj. Iqbal gave him US\$25,000 in cash for his India trip prior to Mumbai attacks. See, "Interrogation Report of David Coleman Headley," National Investigation Agency, India.

26 "Hafiz Saeed helping de-radicalize militants, says official", *Dawn/Reuters*, April 6 2012.

27 "JuD, ASWJ activists ask govt. to send troops to Saudi Arabia", *The News*, April 4, 2015.

28 According to JuD's own website, there are 146 Ad Dawa model schools with an estimated 2,050 teachers and nearly 35,000 students enrolled throughout the country. See, <http://jamatdawa.org/en/education/>. Also for a rough estimation of overall strength, See, "Banned' Jamaat-ud-Dawa group thrives in Pakistan," *Dawn*/ AFP, February 10 2015

19 JuD includes religious lessons with flood relief," *Express Tribune*, October 26, 2011.

20 "Hafiz Saeed set free", *Dawn*, August 29, 2006

21 "Pakistan cracks down on Lashkar, JuD", *Reuters*, 13 December, 2008.

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of the Pakistani government consider actors such as Saeed to be assets. There are clear signals that this is so, to include, for example, his participation in the de-radicalization and rehabilitation of former militants, as mentioned above.²⁹ Other evidence is seen in the group's own conclaves and rallies, such as "Revival of Pakistan Ideology" and the Takbeer Conventions that focus attention on its pro-Pakistan agenda.³⁰ These conventions are usually well attended by political and religious leaders and the general populace.

JuD is also engaged in transforming its self-image. It aggressively uses social media outlets such as Twitter and Facebook, as well as the Internet, and a variety of Urdu- and English-language publications to showcase its socio-religious works, including health and education programs. There are also reports about JuD's political ambitions and possible participation in Assembly elections in Punjab province, its traditional stronghold.³¹ The JuD itself, however, claimed that the group or leadership do not believe in power politics, but are engaged in educating people on various political and security issues and in constructive criticism of political actions. This could be loosely termed as political activism, and may be prelude to large-scale political action in the future, something that would complete the JuD's move from the shadows into the light and cement its legitimacy.

Conclusions

The shift from an entity that supported violence in Kashmir and India in general into a ubiquitous pro-State entity hints at JuD's likely new trajectory of Islamic nationalism, fueled by the legitimacy of

its jihadi roots. With highly motivated, trained, and fanatically committed cadres, JuD could find success in national politics or as a significant lobby. These many developments underscore JuD's apparent move into the mainstream, but also raise concerns about the direction of politics in Pakistan.

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²⁹ 'Hafiz Saeed helping de-radicalise militants', *The Nation*, 7 April, 2012.

³⁰ "JuD calls for reviving Pakistan ideology," The News, March 24, 2014. For Takbeer Convention, See for example, "Takbeer Convention" held in solidarity with Pak Army attracts Karachi public," June 18, 2014.

³¹ Hafiz Saeed once reiterated that it was a misconception to consider JuD as apolitical. As a political platform, JuD brings together different religious and political entities and raising awareness on issues, like the Difa-e-Pakistan Council. For details on this, See, "Difa-e-Pakistan Council: Ahead of 40-party rally, JuD chief parries questions on electoral ambitions", *Express Tribune*, 1 February, 2012.