

Combating Terrorism Center at West Point



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FEATURE ARTICLE

## Terror in Catalonia

The inside story of the attacks in Barcelona and Cambrils  
FERNANDO REINARES AND CAROLA GARCÍA-CALVO

A VIEW FROM THE CT FOXHOLE

## Nicholas Rasmussen

FORMER DIRECTOR, NATIONAL  
COUNTERTERRORISM CENTER

# Contents

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## FEATURE ARTICLE

### 1 "Spaniards, You Are Going to Suffer:" The Inside Story of the August 2017 Attacks in Barcelona and Cambrils

FERNANDO REINARES AND CAROLA GARCÍA-CALVO

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## INTERVIEW

### 12 A View from the CT Foxhole: Nicholas Rasmussen, Former Director, National Counterterrorism Center

PAUL CRUICKSHANK

---

## ANALYSIS

### 18 The Evolution of Shi`a Insurgency in Bahrain

MICHAEL KNIGHTS AND MATTHEW LEVITT

### 26 Red on Red: Analyzing Afghanistan's Intra-Insurgency Violence

MATTHEW DUPÉE

### 32 The Potential Jihadi Windfall from the Militarization of Tunisia's Border Region with Libya

ANOUAR BOUKHARS

## FROM THE EDITOR

During the course of nine hours in August 2017, a terrorist cell carried out two vehicle-ramming attacks in Catalonia, with the first striking pedestrians on the famous Las Ramblas promenade in the heart of Barcelona. In our cover article, Fernando Reinares and Carola García-Calvo draw on judicial documents and interviews with investigators to provide the inside story of the worst terrorist attack in Spain since the 2004 Madrid bombings. Their account reveals the 10-man cell of 'homegrown' radicals, led by an extremist Moroccan cleric in the town of Ripoll, had initially planned to carry out vehicle bomb attacks in Barcelona and possibly Paris, but changed and accelerated their plans after they accidentally blew up their bomb factory where they were manufacturing TATP. While it is still not clear whether the cell had any contact with the Islamic State, the authors reveal that the network behind the November 2015 Paris attacks was also plotting to launch a similar attack in Barcelona that year.

This month's interview feature is with Nicholas Rasmussen, who retired as the head of the U.S. National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) at the end of 2017. Michael Knights and Matthew Levitt draw on interviews with Bahraini security officials to outline how Shi`a militant cells in the country have evolved from easily detectible groups of amateurs to small cells of attackers with overseas training and combat experience and the ability to mount effective IED attacks. Matthew DuPée looks at the threat to the Taliban from other insurgent groups. Anouar Boukhars examines the potential jihadi windfall from the militarization of Tunisia's border region with Libya.

This issue is the first to be launched on the Combating Terrorism Center's redesigned website, which is also being unveiled. The new, easy-to-search, interactive interface showcases the important scholarship contained in *CTC Sentinel* over the past decade, as well as all the research published by the Combating Terrorism Center since its founding almost 15 years ago.

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Cover: *The Las Ramblas promenade in Barcelona, Spain, on August 19, 2017, two days after a terrorist vehicle attack there.*  
(Carl Court/Getty Images)



# “Spaniards, You Are Going to Suffer:” The Inside Story of the August 2017 Attacks in Barcelona and Cambrils

By Fernando Reinares and Carola García-Calvo

**In the space of nine hours in August 2017, a terrorist cell armed with vehicles and knives launched two attacks on the city of Barcelona and the town of Cambrils, in Catalonia, Spain, killing 16 in the worst terrorist atrocity in Spain since the 2004 Madrid train bombings. New information obtained by the authors from judicial documents and interviews with investigators make clear the attacks could have been much worse. The 10-man cell, which included four sets of brothers all indoctrinated by an Islamic State-supporting cleric in the Catalan town of Ripoll, initially planned to carry out ambitious vehicle bomb attacks in Barcelona and possibly Paris using TATP, but changed and accelerated their plans after they accidentally blew up their bomb factory. The Islamic State claimed the attackers were “soldiers of the caliphate,” but while newly disclosed information shows the network behind the Paris attacks targeted Barcelona for an attack in 2015, it is still unclear whether the group had any direct role in the August 2017 attacks.**

**O**n August 16, 2017, shortly before midnight, a massive explosion destroyed a house in Alcanar, a coastal town in the province of Tarragona, one of the four provinces that make up Spain’s northeastern region of Catalonia. As a result of the blast, two men inside the property died and a seriously injured man was brought to a hospital in nearby Tortosa.

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Although authorities did not suspect any link to terrorism at the time, all three men were pro-Islamic State jihadis and part of a larger cell whose members were preparing to strike in Barcelona—and perhaps beyond.<sup>1a</sup> The Alcanar house was the cell’s base of operations and its bomb factory, where members were making triacetone triperoxide (TATP). But it exploded accidentally when two of the jihadis were drying and moving part of the extremely sensitive white crystalline powder known as “Mother of Satan.”<sup>2</sup>

With the loss of their bomb factory, other cell members changed their attack plans and improvised vehicle-ramming attacks in Barcelona and Cambrils the following day. After outlining how the group changed their plans to launch the most devastating attack on Spain in more than a decade, this article examines the evolution of the threat to Barcelona and the Catalan region. It then outlines what investigators and the authors themselves have uncovered about the Ripoll-based cell behind the attacks and the nature of its links to the Islamic State. Finally, the article looks at lessons that can be learned from the failure to thwart the attacks.

This article draws on nine sessions of interviews with police, intelligence, and judicial officials knowledgeable about the case, which were conducted by the authors between September and December 2017 in Barcelona and Madrid. Among the interviewees were officials from Catalonia’s autonomous police, or Mossos d’Esquadra (hereafter Mossos), Cuerpo Nacional de Policía (CNP, National Police), Guardia Civil (GC, Civil Guard), Centro de Inteligencia contra el Terrorismo y el Crimen Organizado (CITCO, Center for Intelligence on Terrorism and Organized Crime), Centro Nacional de Inteligencia (CNI, National Intelligence Center), and the Prosecutor’s Office of Audiencia Nacional (National Court).<sup>b</sup> This account also draws on legally available judicial and law enforcement documents—that is, criminal proceedings that are not subject to a gag order—as well as reliable open sources.

a During an initial site inspection, officers of the Catalan autonomous police, known in the vernacular as Mossos d’Esquadra, dismissed the explosion as related either to the unauthorized refill of butane canisters for nearby campers or to an illegal drugs laboratory.

b The authors wish to express their gratitude for the time and attention of all of their interviewees. Information derived from the meetings the authors had with these individuals is presented as coming from them jointly and in an undifferentiated fashion. As agreed with the interviewees, concrete information will not be attributed to any of them in particular. Unless otherwise indicated, the substantive information contained in this article emanates from these individual and group interviews. Because of the gag order on the criminal proceedings opened after the Barcelona and Cambrils attacks, it is important to state that explicit references to these court proceedings are not related to contact with any member of the police and intelligence services. Also, the authors wish to thank Álvaro Vicente, research assistant at the Program on Global Terrorism at Elcano Royal Institute, for his outstanding help in collecting and contrasting open sources.



Northeast Spain (Rowan Technology)

### From Vans with Bombs to Vehicles without Bombs

According to Spanish investigators, the aim of the terrorists who were making TATP was to carry out a terrorist action of a “big magnitude.”<sup>33</sup> When their bomb-making preparations in Alcanar went wrong, far from paralyzing other cell members or prompting them to surrender to the authorities, the destruction of the bomb

factory galvanized them into alternative, improvised action. It is possible this happened because they anticipated it was only a matter of time before the police would identify them after grilling their hospitalized co-conspirator or after checking information on the car and motorbike parked directly in front of the collapsed Alcanar property. It is also highly likely that at least one of the cell members became aware of the Alcanar blast and its consequences when, over the morning and afternoon of August 17, Mossos, having unproductively questioned the injured man, also attempted via phone calls to find out about the users of the two vehicles. At least one phone call, made on or very shortly before 3:00 PM on August 17, reached cell member Younes Abouyaaqoub<sup>d</sup> while he was driving a rented van on a beltway road about one hour away from Barcelona’s city

c TATP was used by Islamic State militants in the attacks in November 2015 in Paris and March 2016 in Brussels, as well as in the May 2017 Manchester bombing. It was also used in al-Qa’ida plots against London on July 21, 2005, and New York in September 2009. Inside Spain, the 2004 Madrid attack conspirators considered using the substance before opting for another form of explosives. See Fernando Reinares, *Al Qaeda’s Revenge: The 2004 Madrid Train Bombings* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), p. 146; Neville Dean, Caroline Gammell, and John Bingham, “21 July bombers planned London carnage,” Press Association, January 15, 2007; and “Najibullah Zazi Pleads Guilty,” U.S. Department of Justice, February 22, 2010.

d The registered owner of the car parked in front of the Alcanar house was Younes Abouyaaqoub’s younger brother, Houssaine.

center.<sup>4e</sup>

Investigators believe that Younes Abouyaaqoub, as a result of this call, then decided to head toward downtown Barcelona. From that moment on, he and the remaining cell members redirected their attack efforts in a hurried, uncoordinated fashion. At about 4:30 PM, Younes Abouyaaqoub drove the van off Plaça de Catalunya into the popular Las Ramblas boulevard, which was packed with tourists and locals.<sup>f</sup> He plowed into pedestrians, zig-zagging for several hundred meters as he tried to hit as many people as possible. Thirteen people were killed immediately and over 100 injured.<sup>g</sup> Younes Abouyaaqoub then fled the scene on foot, walking through an adjacent market. Shortly afterward, he hijacked a car at knifepoint, stabbing the driver to death. Subsequently, he was able to break through a police checkpoint inside Barcelona, physically driving through a barrier that had been set up by Mossos after the attack, and drive away.

The car used by Younes Abouyaaqoub to escape was subsequently found abandoned south of Barcelona, in the Sant Just Desvern municipality. Four days later, on August 21, Mossos were tipped off by people who had spotted Younes Abouyaaqoub in a rural Subirats zone, some 40 kilometers away. He was then located in the countryside and shot dead. He was wearing a fake explosive belt, in what seems to have been a ploy to intimidate any person who might catch sight of the vest and to force police to shoot him dead so that he could attain martyrdom and what he hoped would be paradise.<sup>5h</sup>

Almost nine hours after the Las Ramblas vehicle-ramming attack, at around 1:15 AM on August 18, a new car, with five additional cell members inside wearing fake suicide belts, plowed into another pedestrian promenade in the seaside resort town of Cambrils in the province of Tarragona, 120 kilometers from Barcelona.<sup>i</sup> The car, owned by a brother of one of these terrorists, then crashed into a Mossos vehicle. The occupants jumped out and went on a stabbing spree using large knives and an axe acquired four hours earlier.<sup>6j</sup> A woman was killed and several other people injured before the terrorists were shot dead by a policeman.<sup>7</sup> The group had rented a second van, but a traffic collision the previous afternoon prevented them from using it in an attack, in addition to or instead of the car

e It is known that Mossos also contacted an older brother of Younes Abouyaaqoub. See Patricia Ortega-Dolz, "Los Mossos buscaban a Younes, el autor de la matanza de Las Ramblas, horas antes de que la llevara a cabo," *País*, November 20, 2017.

f At about the same time, a second explosion further shook the remains of the Alcanar house. Police and fire services were on the site at the time.

g One of those seriously injured during the Las Ramblas attack died 10 days later (August 27) after being hospitalized. Among the 14 killed and over 100 injured, there were individuals from at least 35 countries. See "Muere una mujer alemana de 51 años herida en el atentado de La Rambla y se elevan a 16 las víctimas," *Mundo*, August 27, 2017, and "Las víctimas del atentado en Barcelona," *País*, August 21, 2017.

h There has been a public debate in Spain as to whether or not the killing of Younes Abouyaaqoub, in the circumstances the two Mossos agents found him, was proportionate.

i Before they reached the site, they had been looking for a site in the vicinity with more crowds but were unable to locate or access such an area.

j The attack in Cambrils resembles the one in London Bridge and Borough Market area, also in London, on the night of June 3, 2017, where the terrorists were wearing what looked like explosive vests, but these were later established to be fake. See "London terror attack: Terrorists wore fake suicide vests, police say," *Independent*, June 4, 2017.

they finally used in Cambrils.<sup>8k</sup>

Altogether, the two terrorist attacks in Barcelona and Cambrils left 16 dead—the eight dead jihadis not included in this total—and about 140 people wounded.<sup>1</sup> The existing evidence indicates the terrorist cell had planned a far more ambitious and potentially more deadly operation. Their original intent included turning the two vans they had rented into vehicle-born improvised explosive devices (VBIEDs). Their plan had been to load the vans with large quantities of TATP together with flammable gas canisters to perpetrate a major attack or series of attacks, most likely in Barcelona but maybe elsewhere in Spain, too, or even France. It seems the terrorist cell intended for the gas canisters to amplify the explosion. But technically, this would unlikely have been the case. The canisters would nevertheless have become shrapnel during the explosion.

It is known that three cell members had visited a car rental company in the city of Sabadell in the province of Barcelona on August 16—the day before the accidental Alcanar explosion—where they rented two vans. One of these two vehicles was used in the Las Ramblas attack.<sup>9</sup> Around 120 canisters of butane and propane were stored in the Alcanar house. Other material found in its wreckage included some 500 liters of acetone, a significant quantity—340 liters<sup>10</sup>—of hydrogen peroxide, as well as bicarbonate. Nails to create shrapnel were also retrieved, as were push-buttons to initiate the devices. At least one viable (because of its configuration) explosive suicide vest was retrieved as well as fake ones.<sup>11</sup> Traces of TATP were also found. The terrorists had begun filling metal cylinders with shrapnel and the TATP they had made thus far.<sup>11</sup> Investigators told the authors that the terror cell had enough precursor chemicals to make more than 200 kilograms of TATP, perhaps up to 250 kilograms.

Most of these materials and substances were purchased on August 1, 2, and 16.<sup>12</sup> On the evening of August 16, just hours before the Alcanar bomb factory exploded, white pillowcases and cable ties were acquired by cell members in Sant Carles de la Ràpita in the province of Tarragona to store the TATP.<sup>13</sup> It was confirmed to the authors that a depiction of the Islamic State flag was marked with a pen on at least one of these pillowcases. These acquisitions and the rental of two vans the same day suggest that the terrorists initially planned a large-magnitude attack or attacks to take place within one week or so of August 17. The terrorists were waiting on all 200 to 250 kilograms of TATP to be prepared. The two vans were rented for seven days, starting August 16.

Investigators believe the cell's original targets were in Barcelona but possibly elsewhere, too. Considering the lethal resources assembled by the terrorists and their lethal intent, the death toll could have reached hundreds had they not accidentally blow up their bomb factory in Alcanar. There were media reports that a suspect had revealed in court that the Sagrada Família church in Barcelona

k The one among these five terrorists who had rented this second van on August 17 from a rental company in Parets del Vallès, province of Barcelona, was involved in a traffic collision on highway AP-7, very near Cambrils, at 3:25 PM that day. He hurried to leave the site on foot and was later picked up in a nearby location by other cell members.

l Fatalities included persons of nine different nationalities: six Spaniards, three Italians, two Portuguese, one Belgian, one dual Australian and British, one German, one American, and one Canadian.

m It was not clarified to the authors whether TATP was found inside the viable suicide vest.



was among the targets.<sup>14</sup> In reality, the judicial declaration in question from the cell member surviving the Alcanar blast was vague on this point, referring to “monuments and churches, such as the Sagrada Familia” as targets.<sup>15</sup> The individual in question was not suspected to be a senior member of the cell and did not apparently have knowledge of specific targets. Nevertheless, the Sagrada Familia was one of the locations—marked by means of Google maps searches—that was found in a cellular phone used by members of the cell, in addition to the Nou Camp, the soccer stadium of Barcelona Football Club.<sup>n</sup>

To get a sense of the potential devastation such a large amount of high explosives could have caused, it is worth noting that the two TATP suitcase bombs that were detonated by Islamic State suicide bombers at Brussels airport likely weighed under 20 kilograms each.<sup>o</sup> Two vans each loaded with over 100 kilograms of high explosives had the potential to inflict significant structural damage in buildings and/or cause very high casualties in crowded outdoor urban areas.

### Preceding Plans to Strike in Barcelona

Between January 2013 and September 2017, the four Catalan provinces accounted for 33 percent—that is, 76—of all suspected jihadi terrorists arrested (222) or deceased (eight) in Spain.<sup>p</sup> Only 27 percent of Spain’s Muslims live in Catalonia,<sup>16</sup> indicating a higher rate of violent extremism among Muslims in Catalonia than in Spain as a whole. This seems to correlate with a much higher salafi presence in the region as compared to the rest of Spain. In 2016, one-third of all 256 Islamic worship places and centers in Catalonia were controlled by salafis, more than double the number in 2006.<sup>17q</sup>

The radicalization rate runs particularly high in Barcelona. The province accounted for over one-fifth—22 percent, or 53—of all jihadis arrested or deceased in Spain as a result of terror-related activity during this 2013–2017 period, though just 17 percent of Spain’s Muslims live in that province.<sup>18</sup> Between January 2013 and September 2017, Barcelona’s province had 1.6 jihadis per every 10,000 Muslims. Inside Catalonia, only the province of Girona has a higher rate of radicalization, with 1.8 jihadis per every 10,000 Muslims.<sup>r</sup>

Catalonia has been a center of jihadi activity since the 1990s. It was in Barcelona, in 1995, that a jihadi was arrested for the first

time in Spain.<sup>s</sup> Cambrils—and nearby Salou—is where Mohammed Atta, assisted by a jihadi resident in the area, met Ramzi Binalbish two months ahead of 9/11.<sup>19</sup> In January 2003, an al-Qa`ida-linked cell was broken up in the provinces of Barcelona and Girona; it was preparing chemical attacks by means of a product referred to as “homemade napalm” and found to be in possession of mobile phones identical to those used to trigger the 2004 Madrid bombs and modified in the same way.<sup>20</sup> Some members of the Madrid bombing network escaped to Iraq through Santa Coloma de Gramanet town in Barcelona province, where facilitators linked to the Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group (GICM) had a safe house.<sup>21</sup>

Barcelona itself was the target of a terrorist plot when a planned attack on its metro was thwarted in January 2008.<sup>22</sup> The detained suspects had links to al-Qa`ida-aligned Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), whose spokesman acknowledged responsibility for the plot.<sup>23</sup> Eleven cell members, including longtime residents of the city and more recent arrivals from Pakistan, were found guilty of the plot.<sup>24</sup> During this period, Barcelona also produced a high proportion of Spain’s jihadis. Between 2004 and 2012, four out of every 10 jihadis convicted in Spain resided in and were arrested in the province of Barcelona.<sup>25</sup>

There has been a string of thwarted plots in Barcelona in the past three years. On April 2015, Mossos agents arrested, in three locations in the province of Barcelona and a fourth one in the province of Tarragona, eight members of an Islamic State-inspired cell composed of Moroccan nationals and converted Spaniards.<sup>26</sup> They were preparing attacks in Barcelona. In spite of the somewhat amateurish character of these preparations, they had amassed significant amounts of precursor chemicals needed to make explosives and had obtained weapons.<sup>27</sup> Their choice of targets were the Plaça d’Espanya, the autonomous Parliament of Catalonia, and Montjuïc Olympic Stadium.<sup>28</sup>

But Catalonia’s capital was not solely in the crosshairs of Islamic State-inspired cells. Not only was Barcelona a main target of Islamic State external operations command, when still directed from Raqqa, but it was the first Western European city designated by the organization as a target for a major, large-scale attack. The Islamic State operative at the center of the plot was Moroccan national Abdeljalil Ait el-Kaid, who resided in the town of Torreveija in the province of Alicante within the Valencian Community region, south of Catalonia before joining the Islamic State in Syria in September 2014.<sup>29</sup> Guardia Civil officers had detected el-Kaid’s radicalization and alerted Spanish security authorities about his disappearance.<sup>30</sup> El-Kaid also attracted the attention of Mossos when trying, from Raqqa, to seduce and recruit a young Muslim woman living in Barcelona, through social media and instant messaging applications.<sup>31</sup> This and additional information shared by foreign intelligence services led Spain to issue an international arrest warrant for el-Kaid.

In mid-2015, el-Kaid departed from Syria for Europe with fellow French Islamic State recruit Reda Hame. Hame had traveled to Syria early the same month but was almost immediately recruited to return to France to launch an attack by the Belgian Islamic State operative Abdelhamid Abaaoud, who two months later<sup>32</sup> would himself return to Europe to lead the attack team that carried out the November 2015 attacks in Paris. Before Hame left for Europe,

n A soccer match between FC Barcelona and Seville’s Real Betis was scheduled (and took place as planned) in Barcelona’s Nou Camp stadium on Sunday, August 20. See Manuel Cerdán, “La policía descubrió en un móvil que los yihadistas del 17-A querían poner una furgoneta bomba en el Camp Nou,” *Okdiario*, January 19, 2018.

o The suitcase bomb that failed to explode at Brussels airport on March 22, 2016, reportedly weighed 35 pounds (16 kilograms). Doug Stanglin and Jane Onyanga-Omara, “One 35-pound bomb in Brussels attack failed to go off; suicide note found,” *USA Today*, March 23, 2016.

p Calculations are made on the basis of the Elcano Data Base on Jihadis in Spain (EDBJS).

q French authorities are very concerned about the very significant salafi presence in Catalonia, which is a frontier region between Spain and France, as revealed by former French Prime Minister Manuel Valls during an interview published by *El Mundo* in mid-December 2017. Carlos Segovia, “Manuel Valls: ‘Los salafistas han apostado por Cataluña y no se habla de ello ahora,’” *Mundo*, December 13, 2017.

r The same rate for the whole of Spain is of 1.0 per 10,000 Muslims who reside in the country—North African enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla included.

s He was convicted the year following his detention. See Audiencia Nacional, Sala de lo Penal, Sección Segunda, *Sentencia 7/1996*.



*The viable suicide vest found in the rubble at the cell's Alcanar bomb factory. Photographs from different angles obtained by the authors from investigators.*

Abaaoud had promised him he would receive the rewards in paradise of two martyrs for carrying out a separate attack.<sup>33</sup> El-Kaid used exactly the same argument when attempting, from Syria, to persuade the previously mentioned young Muslim woman living in Barcelona to kill “infidels” there.<sup>t</sup>

El-Kaid was arrested in June 2015 in Warsaw, Poland, in transit from Istanbul.<sup>u</sup> Handed over to Spain in July 2015, el-Kaid was imprisoned and charged with terrorism offenses.<sup>34</sup> Trained in arms and explosives while in Syria, he was among the Islamic State recruits in Abaaoud’s circle there and was sent back by Abaaoud to operate in Western Europe.<sup>35</sup>

At the time of his arrest, el-Kaid had been on his way to Spain on a funded mission to prepare attacks in Barcelona and, according to investigators, had envisioned carrying them out in September 2015. These plans were disrupted as a result of his detention. But another group within the same Islamic State attack network succeeded in perpetrating, two months later, the November 2015 attacks in Paris.<sup>36</sup> Investigators have learned the disrupted plot to strike Barcelona was meant to be similar to the one later executed in Paris and was meant to also involve operatives from France and Belgium with whom el-Kaid was meant to link up. As with the Paris attacks, the Barcelona plan was to involve the use of Kalashnikov rifles and bombs in multiple crowded spaces such as concert halls, dining areas, and sports events. The two plots were meant to be part of the same Islamic State-directed terror campaign in Western Europe, which illustrates the fact that the francophone cadre of the Islamic State’s foreign fighters were the most actively involved in external operations.<sup>37</sup>

t “Infidels must be killed. And you stay with the rewards of two martyrs,” El Kaid insisted to her. See Antonio Baquero, “El Estado Islámico a una joven en Catalunya: ‘Vas a una reunión y empiezas a matar a saco,’” *Periódico*, March 5, 2017.

u Reda Hame was arrested in the Paris area in August 2015. Rukmini Callimachi, “How ISIS Built the Machinery of Terror Under Europe’s Gaze,” *New York Times*, March 29, 2016.

### Imam Es Satty and the Ripoll Cell

The terrorist cell behind the August 2017 attacks was composed of at least 10 men.<sup>v</sup> Two of them—cell leader Abdelbaki Es Satty and Youssef Aalla—died in the Alcanar explosion on August 16; six others—Mohamed Hichamy, Houssaine Abouyaaqoub, Said Aalla (younger brother of Youssef), Moussa Oukabir, Omar Hichamy (younger brother of Mohamed), and Las Ramblas attacker Younes Abouyaaqoub (elder brother of Houssaine)—were shot dead by the police, the former five on August 18 in Cambrils and Younes Abouyaaqoub on August 21 near Subirats. Two alleged cell members were arrested. Mohamed Houli Chemlal, who was injured in the Alcanar blast, was arrested on August 18 in Tortosa, and Driss Oukabir (elder brother of Moussa) was arrested the same day in Ripoll.<sup>w</sup>

Ripoll, a small town of around 11,000 people in the foothills of the Pyrenees near the French border, is where nine of the 10-man cell resided. The tenth was domiciled in Ribes de Freser, a village 14 kilometers from Ripoll. Their average age at the time of the August attacks was 23. All were in their 20s or younger,<sup>x</sup> apart from the cell’s 45-year-old ringleader Es Satty, who was born in Madchar, Morocco, in 1973, some 100 kilometers south of Tangier. In the years leading up to the attack, Es Satty preached as an imam in

v Investigators believe the 10-man cell likely benefited from the collaboration of at least two others. One of them, a Moroccan, was arrested on September 22 in Vinaroz, a town in the province of Castellón just eight kilometers south of Alcanar. The second individual remains on conditional bail, as evidence of offenses were not considered solid enough at the time of his arrest on August 17, 2017, in Ripoll. Ministerio del Interior, Oficina de Comunicación y Relaciones Institucionales, *Nota de Prensa*, September 22, 2017. See *Diligencias Previas 60/2017, Auto* of August 22, 2017, pp. 13-14.

w On August 22, the judge in Spain’s National Court leading the investigations on the case ordered the two surviving alleged co-conspirators to be remanded in custody. They were charged with murder, possession of explosives, and belonging to a terrorist organization, among other crimes. See Audiencia Nacional, Juzgado Central de Instrucción núm. 4, *Diligencias Previas 60/2017, Auto* of August 22, 2017, p. 13.

x His nine followers were aged between 17 and 28, with a total of four still teenagers at the time of the attacks.





*A policeman walks past gas bottles in Alcanar, Spain, on August 18, 2017, during a search linked to the Barcelona and Cambrils attacks. (Jose Jordan/AFP/Getty Images)*

#### Ripoll.

Eight of the nine Es Satty acolytes were Moroccan nationals, and only one of them was a Spaniard. Yet all nine were second-generation descendants of Moroccan immigrants, and all nine were born or raised in Spain. Two were born in Spain—in Ripoll and in Melilla—and seven were born in Morocco and then brought to Spain as children.<sup>y</sup> As legal residents of Spain, they were all entitled to the same public health and education services as any other citizen. Additionally, all nine benefited from a program to prevent social exclusion among people with migrant backgrounds.<sup>z</sup> Seven out of the nine had completed secondary education, and of those, six attended or were attending a professional training program. On or before August 2017, Las Ramblas attacker Younes Abouyaaqoub and Mohamed Hichamy (one of the Cambrils attackers) were employed as skilled metallurgical workers.<sup>38</sup> Hichamy received a monthly salary of €2,000, and he was benefiting from public housing, as were most other cell members and their families.<sup>39</sup> Another of the Cambrils attackers, Omar Hichamy, had a similar kind of job.<sup>40</sup> The Alcanar blast survivor Mohamed Houli Chemlal repeatedly refused employment at the same firm where Younes Abouyaaqoub and Mohamed Hichamy worked.<sup>41</sup> Cambrils attackers Moussa Oukabir and Said Aalla were still enrolled in professional training programs at the time of the attack.<sup>42</sup> Three members of the cell had previous criminal records for petty crime: Youseff Aalla (who died in the Alcanar explosion), Houssain Abouyaaqoub, and Driss Oukabir (the man

arrested in Ripoll).<sup>43</sup>

Yet, teachers, social workers, school friends, and others in Ripoll who knew these young men tended to have the perception that they were ‘good boys’ and expressed shock that they had become terrorists. Their circle of friends was not limited to Moroccans, and they were widely seen in Ripoll as being well or completely integrated into the local community.<sup>aa</sup> This strongly suggests these young men became socially disenfranchised not as a result of exclusion, segregation, or deprivation, but because of the influence of their local imam Es Satty, who acted as an in-person radicalizing agent. Es Satty first worked as an imam in Ripoll for a short time in 2015 in what was then the only Islamic place of worship there and then, from June 2016 on, in a new prayer center.<sup>44</sup> Between January and March of the same year, he had traveled to Belgium, reportedly looking for a job as an imam in the Brussels municipality of Vilvoorde,<sup>45</sup> an area in which one of the most significant clusters of Belgian Islamist extremists reside.<sup>46</sup>

By the time Es Satty arrived in Ripoll in 2015, he had already been immersed in jihadi circles in Spain for a decade. After he migrated from Morocco to Spain in 2002 at the age of 30, he settled for a while in the Andalusian province of Jaén where he shared a residence with an Algerian man who would die in 2003 as a suicide

y Of those born in Morocco, four were born in Mrirt, two in Aghbala, and one in Naour.

z The program of the Catalanian autonomous administration intended to facilitate the acquisition of linguistic and digital skills as well as, in the case of children and teenagers, assisting in tasks related to school performance and professional training, among other initiatives. See Generalitat de Catalunya, Departament de Treball, Afers Socials i Famílies, *Programa Òmnia*, and Sílvia Oller, “Casi todos en Ripoll hemos compartido espacio con Moussa,” *Vanguardia*, August 19, 2017.

aa An acquaintance of Younes Abouyaaqoub said he was “unable to lead anything,” and a local social educator remarked how “responsible” he was. See Jordi Pérez Colomé, Marta Rodríguez, and Patricia Ortega-Dolz, “Cómo el imán de Ripoll creó una célula yihadista,” *País*, August 21, 2017; “¿Cómo puede ser, Younes? No he visto a nadie tan responsable como tú...,” *Vanguardia*, August 22, 2017. On the Oukabir brothers, a social worker pointed out that they belonged to “a large family which was integrated in our town.” See David López Frías, “En el nido de víboras de Ripoll: en esta casa planearon la masacre los hermanos Oukabir,” *Español*, August 19, 2017.



bomber in Iraq.<sup>ab</sup> Es Satty next moved to Vilanova i la Geltrú town, in the province of Barcelona, sharing lodgings with the then head of a cell linked to the now-extinct GICM.<sup>ac</sup> Es Satty was the focus of counterterrorism investigations but, unlike others he was associated with, never arrested. He served a prison sentence in Castellón between 2010 and 2014 after being convicted of drug smuggling.<sup>ad</sup> Before Es Satty took over the position of imam in Ripoll, it is known that he attended salafi meetings held in Catalonia.<sup>ae</sup>

When radicalizing and recruiting the young Muslims of Ripoll, Es Satty benefited from preexisting family and social ties among those who joined his cell.<sup>ae</sup> Out of the nine he recruited for the attack, there were four pairs of brothers, with one set of brothers cousins with another set of brothers.<sup>af</sup> The nine were all neighbors, attended the same educational institutions, and participated in the same recreational activities.<sup>ag</sup> At first, investigators believed that cell members had undergone very rapid radicalization processes. But a cousin of two of the terrorists reported that Es Satty had been meeting with some of them discreetly, outside his worship place,

for no less than a year before the attacks.<sup>ag</sup> Members of the future attack cell were also indoctrinated by Es Satty during meetings at a rural compound in Riudecanyes in the province of Tarragona. In the years before they started to become radicalized, these nine young men were not known for their religiosity,<sup>50</sup> with the exception of Cambrils attacker Mohamed Hichamy.<sup>ah</sup> Subsequently, they all embraced a fundamentalist interpretation of Islam.<sup>51</sup> The pattern was the elder brothers became radicalized first, then the younger siblings.

Age and kinship appear to have been the determinant factors in how the cell was structured. Under Es Satty's charismatic authority, elder brothers such as Las Ramblas attacker Younes Abouyaaqoub, Cambrils attacker Mohamed Hichamy, the alleged surviving cell member Driss Oukabir, and most probably Youssef Aalla played central operational roles or were positioned in the intermediate tier of the group, along with Alcanar blast survivor Mohamed Houli Chemlal (who was the only one of Es Satty's recruits not to have a sibling in the cell). The evidence so far uncovered by investigators suggests the younger brothers, including Houssaine Abouyaaqoub, Omar Hichamy, Moussa Oukabir, and Said Aalla, had more peripheral roles in the cell and were controlled and pressured into full compliance by their older siblings.

### Contact with the Islamic State?

Amidst the debris of the Alcanar property, a green-colored notebook was found with the name of Abdelbaki Es Satty on the first page, suggesting it belonged to the cell leader. In a sheet inside the notebook, handwritten in Arabic, cell members are portrayed as "soldiers of Islamic State in the land of al-Andalus."<sup>52</sup> On August 17, 2017, before the attack in Cambrils, the Islamic State-affiliated Amaq News Agency issued a short statement on the Telegram messaging app claiming that "perpetrators of the attack in Barcelona were Islamic State soldiers and the operation was carried out in response to calls for targeting coalition countries."<sup>53</sup> Responsibility for the attack in Cambrils was subsequently claimed by the same outlet.<sup>54</sup>

On August 23, 2017, the Islamic State's Wilayat al-Khayr disseminated a video celebrating "The Raid of Barcelona," featuring two Spanish-speaking militants based in Syria.<sup>55</sup> One of the young Islamic State fighters featured was the Córdoba-born eldest child of

ab The Algerian man, Bellil Belgacem, traveled from Spain to Iraq and blew himself up on November 12, 2003, in an attack against a base of Italian Carabinieri in the city of Nasiriyya, which was claimed by the group that later became al-Qa`ida in Iraq. See Mohammed M. Hafez, *Suicide Bombers in Iraq: The Strategy and Ideology of Martyrdom* (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, 2007), p. 155.

ac This cell operated out of a place of worship. It was connected to Ansar al Islam, a then al-Qa`ida-aligned jihadi group in Kurdistan and from late 2004, al-Qa`ida's branch in Iraq. See Dirección General de la Policía, Comisaría General de Información, Unidad Central de Información Exterior, *Diligencia 466*, January 9, 2006, pp. 52-53 and 86. Personal ID documents belonging to Abdelkabi Es Satty, next to those belonging to other people including Bellil Belgacem, were found at the beginning of 2006 in the residence of a jihadi ringleader in Santa Coloma de Gramanet. See Audiencia Nacional, Sala de lo Penal, Sección Primera, *Sentencia 3/2010*, p. 70.

ad While in prison in Castellón, he became close to a convicted member of the 2004 Madrid bombing network, namely Rachid Aglif. See "El imán de Ripoll trabó amistad en prisión con un terrorista del 11-M," *País*, August 20, 2017.

ae The drivers of radicalization seen with the Cambrils cell fit the dominant pattern seen in Spain. As the authors pointed out in a 2017 article for this publication, "violent radicalization [in Spain] leading to involvement in jihadi terrorism appears to be highly contingent upon two key factors of what has been termed 'differential association,' namely contact with radicalizing agents and pre-existing social ties with other radicalized individuals." The study found that "the importance of contact with a radicalizing agent points toward the relevance of ideology in the development of jihadi terrorists, while the significance of pre-existing social ties indicates the relevance of communitarian bonds with local networks, which facilitate terrorist radicalization and recruitment." Fernando Reinares, Carola García-Calvo, and Álvaro Vicente, "Differential Association Explaining Jihadi Radicalization in Spain: A Quantitative Study," *CTC Sentinel* 10:6 (2017).

af In recent years, many terrorist cells in the West have involved siblings, including in the 2013 Boston bombings, the January 2015 Charlie Hebdo attacks, and the November 2015 Paris attacks. Mohammed Hafez noted in this publication that "tightening security environments are encouraging jihadis to turn increasingly to the family unit for recruits. This phenomenon complicates efforts to detect, monitor, and prevent violent radicalization. Kinship recruitment, which is difficult for security agencies to observe, is facilitated by several psychological mechanisms that bind individuals together on the path to extremism. Importantly, it deters ambivalent recruits from defecting to the authorities for fear of damaging their own valued relationships." Mohammed Hafez, "The Ties that Bind: How Terrorists Exploit Family Bonds," *CTC Sentinel* 9:9 (2016).

ag His testimony reads as follows: "They used to meet in the van, parked in an out-of-the-way street and they stayed there for two hours or more. If someone walked by close to them, they stopped talking and started looking at their mobile phones". See Nacho Carretero, "La radicalización no fue rápida," *País*, August 21, 2017, and Audiencia Nacional, Juzgado Central de Instrucción núm. 4, *Diligencias Previas 60/2017, Auto* of August 22, 2017, p. 6.

ah A female relative described Mohamed Hichamy as becoming "the most conservative" of them all, after his behavior changed some three years before the attacks. She said he refused to shake hands with women, even from his own family. A colleague at work said he "prayed a lot" but disliked to talk about his creed. In the year before the attacks, Las Ramblas attacker Younes Abouyaaqoub started to follow the example of his older cousin, Mohamed Hichamy. In the same period, Mohamed Aalla and Moussa Oukabir also embraced Islamist fundamentalism. See Samia Herraizouki, "El sospechoso del ataque de Barcelona se volvió más conservador el año pasado, según su familia," Reuters, August 21, 2017; Colomé, Rodríguez, and Ortega-Dolz; Víctor Vargas, "Younes, el joven que cambió el fútbol por el terrorismo," *Periódico*, August 21, 2017; Manuel Marraco, "Los terroristas de Cataluña sospechaban que la mezquita de Ripoll estaba vigilada," *Mundo*, September 2, 2017.

Tomas Pérez, a Spanish woman who converted to Islam and married to a Moroccan jihadi currently imprisoned in Morocco. Pérez relocated to Syria in 2014 alongside her five sons and a daughter.<sup>56</sup> In the video, Pérez's son, 22-year-old Muhammad Yasin Ahram Pérez, boasts, in rather rudimentary Spanish, "Allah willing, al-Andalus will be back on track as land of the caliphate."<sup>57</sup> The following day, a new release by the Islamic State's al-Naba news bulletin included infographics of the attacks in Catalonia next to a bloodied image of Barcelona's famous Sagrada Familia church.<sup>58</sup>

Three weeks after the attacks, the Islamic State featured another picture of the Sagrada Familia in issue 13 of its propaganda online magazine Rumiya. The article again described the perpetrators as "a group of Islamic State soldiers" and the attacks as "a blow to the tourism sector" in Spain. It claimed the country was targeted because it had taken part in "the war against the Islamic State" by providing training to the Iraqi Army and participating in the international coalition to fight the Islamic State.<sup>59</sup>

Thus far, no evidence has yet come to light that the Barcelona cell was in touch with an Islamic State cybercoach in Syria, Iraq, or somewhere overseas. Perhaps tellingly, unlike after the November 2015 Paris attacks, the Islamic State has provided no additional particulars about the attackers beyond calling them their soldiers, nor has it aired any video recorded by the attackers as it did after the December 2016 Berlin attack. The exact nature of the relationship between the Ripoll cell and the Islamic State organization remains unclear. On the one hand, Islamic State communiqués disseminated in the aftermath of the Barcelona and Cambrils attacks, including the article in Rumiya, contained a number of inaccuracies,<sup>ai</sup> suggesting lack of direct contact between the cell and the Islamic State propaganda apparatus in Syria.

On the other hand, international trips made by some Ripoll cell members in the years and months before the attack open up the possibility that the group developed some links to European networks connected to the Islamic State. Las Ramblas attacker Younes Abouyaaqoub, who was one of the senior figures in the cell, visited France at least three times between July and December 2016. He last traveled by car to Paris—accompanied by one to perhaps three other unidentified individuals—on August 11 and 12, 2017, less than one week before the attacks.<sup>60 aj</sup> Mohamed Hichamy and Yousef Aalla, also senior members of the cell, traveled to Zurich in December 2016.<sup>61</sup> In addition, Driss Oukabir, one of the four elder brothers inside the cell, flew to Tangier in northern Morocco from Barcelona and back, between August 5 and August 13, 2017.<sup>62</sup>

Except for some aspects of Driss Oukabir's trip to Morocco (he

visited an uncle in Fnideq, but his relatives noted he strangely did not visit his father who lives in his native village), the exact purposes of all of these travels remain unclear.<sup>63</sup> What investigators have established, however, is that at a certain point a member or members of the Ripoll cell, while in Paris, purchased a video camera and taped the Eiffel Tower.<sup>64</sup> In September 2017, Spanish authorities communicated this finding to their French counterparts.<sup>65</sup> The French government assessed that Paris could have also been a target of the Ripoll cell, and this prompted the decision to install a glass fence around the Eiffel Tower to protect the area from terrorist attacks utilizing firearms and vehicles.<sup>66</sup> The footage of the Eiffel Tower was included in a video recording—found among the debris in Alcanar—in which Mohamed Hichamy appears inside the safe house, holding TATP in his hands and saying, in Arabic, "Spaniards, you are going to suffer."<sup>67</sup>

Aside from that, U.S. intelligence—and more precisely, the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC)—shared directly with Mossos and statewide police agencies in Spain a threat bulletin on May 25, 2017, less than three months before the attacks in Barcelona and Cambrils. It contained the following note: "Unsubstantiated information of unknown veracity from late May 2017 indicated that the Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham (ISIS) was planning to conduct unspecified terrorist attacks during the summer against crowded tourist sites in Barcelona, Spain specifically, La Rambla Street."<sup>68</sup> The head of Mossos and, before him, both the president of the Catalanian autonomous government and the regional minister of interior initially denied receiving this information. Mossos subsequently conceded to having received the brief note, stating it was of "low credibility," and public security arrangements in the center of Barcelona, a sole responsibility of Mossos and local police (Guàrdia Urbana), were not, therefore, modified.<sup>ak</sup>

The Ripoll cell members financed the above-mentioned trips and other activities not only with their own income but also with money obtained with the sale of gold. Mossos discovered that they obtained around €1,200 from the sale of stolen gold jewelry.<sup>69</sup> The money was used to purchase butane gas canisters stored in the safe house of Alcanar. Investigators have also established that they bought part of the cylinders in a staggered way and made some orders online so as not to raise suspicions.<sup>70</sup> This was part of the elaborate measures the cell took to prevent their plot from being detected. The residence in Alcanar that the cell used as a bomb factory was an abandoned property where they were squatting. The electricity they used was illegally taken from the main supply.<sup>71</sup>

## Lessons Learned

The members of the Ripoll cell showed remarkable skills in forming the group and planning the attack without arousing suspicions from security services or the local community. Es Satty's leadership, given his longstanding experience in jihadi milieus, may explain the careful, even meticulous conduct of his followers, assisted by elder brothers in imposing rules of conduct onto the younger members.

ai A second written message that claimed the attacks in Catalonia one day after they were carried out referred, for instance, to a non-existent assault on a bar and a hostage situation that never occurred. See, in this respect, Manuel Torres, "Jihadism in the Spanish Language After the Barcelona Attacks," George Washington University, Program on Extremism, August 2017. The same mistake regarding a stormed bar was found on pages 39 and 41 of Rumiya's issue 13, where the car used in the Cambrils attack is referred to, incorrectly, as a truck.

aj In the last trip to Paris, the members of the Ripoll cell stayed at B&B Hotel Paris Malakoff, not far from Villejuif where a TATP lab was discovered on September 6, 2017. See "De l'explosif TATP découvert lors d'une opération antiterroriste à Villejuif, deux hommes interpellés," *Monde*, September 6, 2017; Jean Chichizola and Christophe Cornevin, "L'officine de Villejuif aurait pu produire des kilos de TATP," *Figaro*, September 7, 2017; and "Villejuif: les deux suspects voulaient confectionner une bombe en vue d'un attentat," *Parisien*, September 10, 2017.

ak Protective bollards at the intersection where Younes Abouyaaqoub stormed into the Las Ramblas pedestrian promenade were not introduced by Barcelona's city hall until December 11, 2017—that is, nearly four months after the van attack—following a resolution adopted by the Local Security Board (Junta Local de Seguridad). Similar protection was installed, over the prior weeks, in other popular and emblematic points of the city, such as the surroundings of the Sagrada Familia. See Alfonso L. Congostrina, "Bollardos en la Rambla cuatro meses después del atentado," *País*, December 12, 2017.



The changes of the mood and habits of the young men, far from raising alarm within the Muslim community or inside their own families, were seen as either irrelevant or positive.<sup>72</sup> This may have been a product of a lack of awareness inside the Muslim community and wider society about pointers toward radicalization.

But failure to detect the Ripoll cell and thwart the Barcelona and Cambrils attacks has raised many questions about counterterrorism capacity inside Catalonia. No fewer than three law enforcement agencies have full counterterrorism competences in the region: on the one side, the autonomous police, Mossos; on the other side, two statewide police forces, the Cuerpo Nacional de Policía (CNP, National Police) and the Guardia Civil (GC, Civil Guard).<sup>al</sup> Between January 2013 and July 2017—the month before the Barcelona and Cambrils attacks—33 police operations against jihadi terrorism were conducted in Catalonia. The CNP conducted 15 of these operations and arrested 29 suspects (45 percent of the total), the GC conducted 11 and arrested 19 (29 percent), and Mossos conducted seven and arrested 17 (26 percent).<sup>73</sup>

Despite these results, the work of these security services in preventing terrorism was hindered both by insufficient implementation of existing legislation on the control of explosive precursors in the whole of Spain and by deficiencies in coordination among security agencies. The Ripoll cell found no obstacles in purchasing some 500 liters of acetone—to make TATP—in different locations of Catalonia and the town of Vinaroz, 20 kilometers south of Alcanar, in the Valencian Community region.<sup>am</sup> Despite a 2013 European Union regulation on the sale of potential explosive precursors, which is directly applicable to member states, its actual implementation in Spain proved inadequate when members of the Ripoll cell purchased the substances they needed to make TATP.<sup>an</sup>

Coordination and exchange of information between the above-mentioned counterterrorism services is widely acknowledged among practitioners themselves as being limited, if not poor. This is despite the existence of the Centro de Inteligencia contra Terrorismo y Crimen Organizado (CITCO, Center for Intelligence against Terrorism and Organized Crime), which is officially charged

with counterterrorism coordination across the whole of Spain. Indeed, following the Barcelona and Cambrils attacks, the judge at the National Court in charge of the criminal proceedings instructed CITCO to coordinate all police investigations on the case, to which all security services with counterterrorism competences in the Catalan provinces must have access.<sup>74</sup>

Traditional rivalries and inter-organizational competition explain part of the problem. But it is the authors' belief, shared by most but not all of the officials interviewed for this article, that secessionist tensions in a highly divided and polarized Catalonia—where pro-independence parties in control of the autonomous executive have taken defiant stances toward the central government of Spain—have complicated counterterrorism cooperation between Mossos and statewide police agencies. These shortcomings are particularly concerning because ever since June 2015, the terror alert level in Spain has been at four out of five, meaning a “high risk” of terrorist attacks.<sup>75</sup> Furthermore, Catalonia and Barcelona have been the most salient regional and provincial centers of jihadi activity, respectively, in Spain since 2013.<sup>76</sup>

One example of how well-intentioned but flawed police exchanges, domestically and internationally, precluded Mossos and state security services from introducing a timely scrutiny of Es Satty, which might have prevented the Ripoll cell from forming, came on March 8, 2016. On that day, a Mossos officer responded by email to a question he had received from a Belgian local police officer in Vilvoorde about a radicalized individual named Es Satty who had come from Catalonia and was looking for a position as an imam in the city. The two policemen knew each other from a professional seminar they had both attended previously, and their contact did not follow official channels. The Mossos officer replied that there was no information to tie Es Satty to Islamist militancy, but he did so without consultations with other services.<sup>77</sup> In fact, CNP and GC had investigated Es Satty a decade earlier. The Belgian local police officer likewise neglected to communicate about the case with the Belgian Federal Police, which would have allowed for the formal procedure between Belgian and Spanish authorities for counterterrorism information exchange.

This is not to say it would have been easy to detect the cell's plotting. Es Satty was skilled at concealing the full extent of his violent extremism from authorities. This was evidenced when CNI agents approached him while he was serving a sentence in a Castellón penitentiary a few years before the attacks but found no cause for alarm, despite following usual protocols with individuals in prison who had jihadi contact in the past.<sup>78</sup> Furthermore, Es Satty avoided administrative expulsion from Spain upon his release from the penitentiary because a local judge, never briefed on the subject by any of the state security agencies, annulled the expulsion order citing Es Satty's efforts to integrate into Spanish society and the judge's own concerns about human rights protection.<sup>79</sup>

Due to the unprecedented levels of jihadi mobilization experienced over the past six years in Spain and Western Europe as a

al Mossos d'Esquadra (currently 17,000 officers) is deployed as a police force over the whole of Catalonia. CNP (with some 2,900 permanent officers in the autonomous territory) and GC (having approximately 1,900 officers in the region) are more limited in functions. See Generalitat de Catalunya, Institut d'Estadística de Catalunya, *Anuario estadístico de Catalunya 2016*; Javier Oms, “Interior eleva el número de policías y guardias civiles en Cataluña,” *Mundo*, September 9, 2017; and Luis B. García, “El contingente policial desplazado a Catalunya supera los 10.000 agentes,” *Vanguardia*, September 28, 2017.

am Mohamed Hichamy, a key cell member, personally bought 100 liters of acetone in a paint shop of Vinaroz. See Braulio García, “Cómo pudieron los terroristas de Ripoll acumular cien kilos de explosivo?” *Vanity Fair* (Spanish edition), September 17, 2017.

an According to regulation (EU) No 98/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 15 January 2013 on the marketing and use of explosive precursor, vendors in Spain are required to flag suspicious sales of potential drug and explosive precursors to authorities with the client's identity. A national law (Ley 8/2017) on the control of explosive precursors was adopted in Spain in November 2017. Further improvements concerning the practical application of such normative as well measures to control the hiring of imams, both of which are matters deriving from lessons extracted from the attacks in Barcelona and Cambrils, were announced by Spain's minister of interior on December 27, 2017. “Zoido anuncia un paquete de iniciativas para la mejora de la seguridad y el fortalecimiento de la lucha contra el terrorismo yihadista,” Ministerio del Interior, December 27, 2017.

whole,<sup>40</sup> more terrorist incidents including of the kind both initially envisioned and carried out by the Ripoll cell are likely to be repeated in the country and across the European Union. What stood

ao It should be noted that jihadi mobilization levels are proportionally lower (as compared to total Muslim population) in Spain than in some other Western European nations where Muslim populations are predominantly made up of second and further generations, such as Belgium, France, the United Kingdom, Germany, the Netherlands, Austria, Denmark, and Sweden. See Fernando Reinares, "Jihadist Mobilization, Undemocratic Salafism and Terrorist Threat in the EU," *Georgetown Security Studies Review* (Special Issue, February 2017), pp. 70-76.

out about the Ripoll cell, however—in addition to being formed by apparently well-integrated, second-generation young Muslims and being led by an imam who had been part of the jihadi scene for more than a decade—was its size. It shows that even in the wake of the Paris and Brussels attacks, which were carried out by attack groups of comparable size, a large terrorist cell can still plan ambitious attacks without being detected. It also illustrates that jihadis in Europe continue to want to plot bomb attacks, including with difficult-to-make TATP, but have a range of lower-tech ways to otherwise create carnage. A terrorist cell of 10 can, after all, carry out 10 vehicle-ramming attacks. **CTC**

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# A View from the CT Foxhole: Nicholas Rasmussen, Former Director, National Counterterrorism Center

By Paul Cruickshank

*Nicholas Rasmussen was Director of the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) between December 2014 and his retirement from U.S. federal government service in December 2017. He had previously served as deputy director since June 2012, after returning from the National Security Council (NSC) where he served as Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for Counterterrorism from October 2007. Mr. Rasmussen previously served at NCTC from 2004-2007 in senior policy and planning positions. From 2001 to 2004, he served on the NSC as the director for regional affairs in the Office of Combating Terrorism.*

*Editor's Note: On December 13, 2017, outgoing NCTC Director Nick Rasmussen answered questions from five national security reporters, including CTC Sentinel Editor-in-Chief Paul Cruickshank, in an on-the-record interview at NCTC headquarters. Rasmussen replied to additional questions from CTC Sentinel before he left government service at the end of the year, which appear at the end of this interview. These highlights from the Q&A have been lightly edited by CTC Sentinel.*

**Director Rasmussen noted in brief introductory remarks that it was “safe to say that we are at far less risk today of a large-scale, mass-casualty, catastrophic attack here in the homeland than certainly we were at the time of 9/11 and the aftermath of 9/11.”**

**Greg Miller (Washington Post): As you depart here [after] many years focused on this [terrorism] threat, I think it's clear to a lot of us that that threat has changed and diminished significantly, aside from the lone wolf or one-off attacks that we see in greater frequency. But this other sort of danger seems to have grown, the mass-shooting danger in the United States. I'm just curious if you could offer any insights into the evaluation of these sorts of threats and the government's ability to rationalize its response.**

**Rasmussen:** I can't help but still answer the question or describe my thinking through the lens of terrorism because that's where my set of responsibilities lies. But I had a conversation not that long ago with an intelligence officer from a partner country who talked about, “Wow, if we faced our level of terrorism threat” meaning in his country “with your level of weapons available to the public [...] we'd be in real, real trouble.” Because in his country, they have a large extremist population, a large terrorism problem, but a relatively contained access to firearms. So they find themselves dealing with other forms of terrorist attacks. So while I'm not involved in the domestic debate about gun control, I can't help but observe when I'm thinking about the terrorism problem that we find ourselves in a more dangerous situation because our own population of home-grown violent extremists, though relatively small, has no

difficulty at all gaining access to weapons that allow them to be quite lethal. And I wish that weren't so. That doesn't mean I have a policy prescription, or this kind of gun control measure versus that kind of gun control measure would be effective in dealing with that. It's just a simple observation. More weapons more readily available increases the potential lethality of actors who would pick those weapons up and use them regardless of their purpose. So it doesn't leave me with a policy prescription other than that I wish it wasn't so and that we could find a way to control at least the most lethal end of the spectrum with respect to firearms.

**Jeff Pegues (CBS News): So are you saying that the only way to get or one of the only ways of getting lone-wolf type attacks under control is by limiting access to lethal weapons?**

**Rasmussen:** No, absolutely not. First of all, you'll almost never hear me use words like “only” or “exclusive” because I'm very rarely categorical. [...] I've talked a lot about the prevention side of the spectrum. Some of the work we're doing and need to do more of here in the United States I would say [is] akin to soft power that we use overseas, sometimes bundled under the heading of CVE, countering violent extremism. And so, no, I do not think that limiting access to either weapons or explosives is the only way to increase our level of safety from homegrown violent extremists. Another far more effective way, I would argue, is trying to shrink the population of those extremists. The way to do that, in my view, is not only through effective law enforcement investigations of the sort that FBI carries out but also through more community-based efforts fed by the federal government's information that allow communities to recognize what is going on around them before an individual rises to the level of being a subject of an FBI investigation.

As I look back at the last couple of years, I wish we had done more to increase the amount of engagement we, the federal government, do with state, local, municipal governments, all of whom are likely to encounter these potential extremists, these potential homegrown terrorists long before they show up on an FBI investigation. That's soft power in a sense. It's information sharing. It's being able to brief and share information with communities that says “this is how ISIS' message is landing on young people in your environment, and this is what you ought to be looking for, the indicators and signs that you ought to be looking for, and these are the potential pathways you can use to try to divert somebody once you've identified somebody who's at risk.” [...]

**Courtney Kube (NBC News): What do you need to do that? What is it that you don't have?**

**Rasmussen:** I don't have a ready-made policy prescription, other than that we ought to scale up what we are doing. In the last administration, we reached, by the end of the administration, an



organizational construct centered on the Department of Homeland Security, where an interagency task force was responsible for guiding the development of programs among a number of agencies, ours among them, to deliver this kind of service to communities around the country. That was a good step. It was a modest step, one that I was hoping we could continue to build on. The problem is there's no federal program that could be tailor-made so that it delivered the right thing in the right place to every community that needs it. [...] I just think we have to find a way to bring our expertise from the federal government into the rest of the country to help them tailor their own solutions to what is, in a sense, a pretty local problem at times.

**Jim Sciutto (CNN):** Has the political rhetoric, anti-Muslim rhetoric, which is common as can be right now, hindered community-based efforts in terms of liaising with communities, asking for their help, identifying suspects, etc.?

**Rasmussen:** I don't know that there's any one statement or any one event that you can point to that you could say, "Aha, all of sudden, now things are worse." I tend to look at these things as being more environmental. Anything that kind of contributes over time to a sense that the authorities are inexorably set in conflict with particular communities makes our work more difficult. And again, I'm not coming up with some blinding flash of insight there. I just think even in the best of circumstances, those conversations with communities can often be fraught with mutual suspicion and questioning of motives. "Wait a minute, why is NCTC and DOJ and DHS and FBI in my community, coming to talk to us about this? It's because they want to target our kids. They want to find young people to arrest." That can be a community's perception of this, and so anything that is done environmentally, to answer your question, Jim, that would kind of feed that narrative, to me, doesn't help the cause. But does that mean any one day, any one statement creates a tipping point? I wouldn't go that far either.

The last thing I would say on this set of issues is the lesson learned over the past five or six years working on this particular set of issues is that the conversation actually looks different and plays out differently in almost every community around the country, which is why it's hard to come up with one federal program, replicate it, and say, "what works in Dallas/Fort Worth will work in San Francisco, will work in Chicago, which will work in New York." Because it really doesn't. [...] That's our lesson learned is that there isn't a single community that we're talking about, so there isn't a single-community solution that we're talking about either.

**Sciutto:** Let me ask you, just to be clear here, because I'm not talking about one statement or one tweet, I'm speaking about a collection of statements and frankly policies over time, including a travel ban targeting Muslim-majority countries but also other statements. I know it's an uncomfortable question, and I know you're not a politician. But you are someone whose job it is to protect the country and has to liaise with these communities. But just so I understand correctly, are you saying that the environment today is one that makes your job more difficult?

**Rasmussen:** Yes. In one respect, yes. I'm often asked the question "does this make it harder to gain [the] kind of, international cooperation of the sort we need to carry out our counterterrorism activities?" And there, I'm much more confident the work we are doing



*Then Director of the National Counterterrorism Center Nicholas Rasmussen speaks at the White House Summit to Counter Violent Extremism at the State Department on February 19, 2015, in Washington, D.C. (Mandel Ngan/AFP/Getty Images)*

proceeds pretty much undisturbed. Because I think one of the good things about intelligence professionals—and I don't really consider myself an intelligence professional; I came to the intelligence business fairly late after being more of a policy person for most of my career—but the intelligence professionals that I deal with and other partner countries are very, very good at tuning out politics—whether it's their politics, whether it's our politics, or whether it's anybody's politics.

And so even if there are things floating around in the political atmosphere that would suggest conflict between the United States and some other partner country, I can assure you, working with their security services, that work continues on unabated, unaffected. What I'm talking about is a little harder to put a metric to because I don't know how you put a metric around community cooperation. But if environmentally, you are increasing the level of suspicion and distress between one community and the federal government, then I don't think it's controversial or arguable to suggest that that places challenges in our way.

**Miller:** You're talking about community relations with the community partnership aspect of it, but it might also feed the motivations of actors.

**Rasmussen:** It can certainly be construed as validating the narrative that ISIS and other terrorist organizations props its recruitment efforts upon. So, yes, it can create problems in that regard as well. [FBI] Director [Christopher] Wray often talks about—and I've been in testimony with him—about how much we need community help, how much the FBI relies on communities to come forward [...] to engage with law enforcement and the federal government,

not just on transactional matters like “who is this bad guy?” or “what is this bad guy doing?” but also a broader conversation about how do we [engage] in some preventive work. So again, I don’t think it’s arguable that those conversations are harder when the environment is contaminated by mutual suspicion and questioning of motives. And anything that makes that work harder I think is something that I prefer we not have to deal with. [...]

**Paul Cruickshank (CTC Sentinel):** When it comes to the ISIS threat, there was this major plot thwarted in Sydney in the summer of 2017 involving a number of Lebanese brothers [in which the Islamic State allegedly] managed to send PETN explosive from Syria to Turkey all the way by air mail to Australia in a partially assembled device, and then also managed to communicate with them to help them build a poison gas dispersal device.<sup>a</sup> Given the fact that for a lot of Western jihadi extremists, it’s been quite tricky to build high-end, high-grade explosives, is the idea that they’ve succeeded in air mailing explosives to operatives in the West a game changer when it comes to the threat against the United States?

**Rasmussen:** We were certainly quite struck by what our Australian colleagues uncovered in the course of that investigation. It revealed to us a broader vulnerability than we perhaps had earlier appreciated. If you think back to the springtime [of 2017], you remember measures taken to try to manage the bringing of laptops onto airplanes flying to the United States from a certain discrete number of Middle Eastern airports—what the aviation industry calls the last points of departure. There, we had specific intelligence that gave us concern about a potential effort to get an explosive device aboard an airplane and without having exactly precise intelligence, we still could draw enough from what we knew to say we were more at risk in these places because these places were close to the areas controlled by ISIS and therefore most likely to present a threat.

So you could tailor your security measures around the idea that if we up the game in security at these places, we have moderated or limited our risk and our exposure, to be sensible about it without going to some global ban [...]. What is challenging about the Sydney experience is that if it does prove possible to ship components that way, in ways that evade our scrutiny, then you can’t simply develop analytics that tell you, “Ah, it’s more likely to happen, emanating from country X as opposed to country Y.” You could face just as much a risk potentially from Lima, Peru, as you do from Beirut in terms of an explosive aboard an airplane.

So I think this just confirms for us what we already know, and that is that the only solution to the aviation threats that we face is to, across the board, globally find ways to introduce more technology into the screening capabilities of countries around the world and to

do it on a global basis—rich countries, poor countries. Because we’re only as secure as our most vulnerable partner in this area.

[...] Now we have to proceed from the assumption that this is a threat that could manifest itself literally anywhere in the world. And so that puts much more pressure on the global aviation community and the technological solutions rather than intelligence disruption solutions: go find the cell, go find the bad guy.

**Cruickshank:** On the al-Qa`ida side of the ledger, there’s been this back and forth between al-Qa`ida leader Ayman al-Zawahiri and the leaders of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham [HTS], the [Jabhat] al-Nusra successor group. There seems, on the surface, to have been a genuine falling-out between al-Qa`ida senior leadership and Nusra essentially. Do you now still see HTS as an al-Qa`ida affiliate or more like an al-Qa`ida-aligned [group]? Or is there a sort of deeper rift that is going on between these two organizations? And what are the implications? [Secondly, when it comes to the] al-Qa`ida threat, there seems to have been a moratorium on international plotting by the group and its affiliates in the last few years. Are you seeing any signs that they’re pivoting back into international terrorism?

**Rasmussen:** Yes, to answer the second part first. One, I think we always focus both on capability and intent, and so even during periods when you may see certain things, either in public statements or even in intelligence, that suggest that there is a stepping-back or a “let’s not do that right now” approach from a terrorist group, including al-Qa`ida and some of the affiliates, that never creates any sense of comfort among terrorism analysts because there is not perfect command-and-control of these organizations. Even if there is an organizational decision not to focus on the West for a period of time, we still see during that period of time plenty of indications that there are elements of those organizations that continue to look to carry out plotting in the United States or the West. So there’s never any sense of comfort that we are, in a sense, in a hiatus phase with al-Qa`ida-related plotting.

With respect to HTS and core al-Qa`ida, we’ve also watched with great interest the kind of ongoing debate about the alignment of HTS with al-Qa`ida. I’ve literally had half a dozen conversations with our analysts in recent months about this, and the best way I can think to describe the picture is messy and muddled because we get sometimes contradictory pieces of information. We know in some cases there’s an active effort to deceive, [an effort] to try to disassociate some elements from al-Qa`ida so as to insulate [the] group from counterterrorism pressure that we would apply or that others would apply. So what I would fall back on is that I think there is still fundamental, ideological alignment between HTS and al-Qa`ida, HTS being kind of an umbrella organization as it is.

There may be differences that emerge in terms of phasing or tactics or what prioritization scheme should be followed—“Should we be focused in the first instance on the conflict inside Syria? Or should we be also, at the same time, looking to carry out or to advance an agenda in attacking the West?” But those are relatively minor gradations in differences of organizational philosophy, not massive ideological cleavages, in my view. From a threat perspective, we don’t have the ability to turn on and turn off our intelligence collection apparatus to say, “Oh, we’ll wait to they get interested in external operations again before we jack up our effort to collect intelligence on them.” We have to operate on the presumption that

a Editor’s note: According to Australian officials, the Sydney plotters initially planned to smuggle an explosive device onto an airliner at Sydney international airport but aborted the plan after bringing the bomb to the airport in a suitcase on July 15, 2017. Australian authorities were unaware of the plot at that point. The Sydney terrorist cell subsequently started plotting to attack crowded areas in Australia with poison gas, but its members were arrested on July 29, 2017. Andrew Zammit, “New Developments in the Islamic State’s External Operations: The 2017 Sydney Plane Plot,” *CTC Sentinel* 10:9 (2017); Paul Maley, “From Syria to Sydney: how the airport terror plot unfolded,” *Australian*, August 5, 2017.



they are engaged in that activity, so long as they are an al-Qa`ida-aligned or an al-Qa`ida-supported movement. So from a “what do you do about it?” perspective, it doesn’t matter sometimes a little bit of the churn about “are they or aren’t they? Will they or won’t they?” We have to act and be prepared as if they are.

It does, however, make complicated some of the prioritization decisions that we face, in terms of who we devote our resources to because we do not have infinite resources and the operating environment in Syria is quite challenging. So bottom line: messy and muddled, and we spend a lot of time trying to peel apart who represented the most proximate threat to U.S. interests, but it is a constantly shifting calculation.

**Pegues: A year and a half or so ago, the warnings about fighters from Syria returning to Europe were pretty dire. But I think last month, your European counterparts said they weren’t seeing what they expected.<sup>b</sup> Do you agree with that?**

**Rasmussen:** I do. And in some of my testimony in recent months, I’ve kind of shifted our analytical line in terms of how we talk about the foreign fighter problem. 2014 to 2016, we spent a lot of time as an intelligence community fathering as much information as we could about these foreign fighters in whatever way that we could. The point was to develop as much identity information of people going in so that when those persons came out, we would stand a chance of being able to disrupt their travel.

That was done on the presumption that a flow-in would lead to a flow-out when the conflict subsided. Well, the conflict has not really subsided, but it’s certainly a different conflict now with the upper-hand having been gained against ISIS. [...] So the conflict is not over in Syria by any means, but what we have not seen is what we expected a couple of years ago, which was a pretty significant, maybe even large-scale or massive out-flow of foreign fighters back to either their places of origin or other Western countries.

That’s not happened for a couple of reasons. One, we think ISIS has made aggressive efforts to prevent it—confiscating passports of individuals who go to fight, actually physically preventing individuals from leaving the conflict zone. Then there’s also I think the ideological pull for many of these individuals [that] has led them to a place where they’re willing to fight and die on behalf of the caliphate, even if the caliphate is not succeeding the way it was succeeding a few years ago. So I’m not saying we were wrong. It’s just we’ve now adjusted our view on the volume issue, how much of this we were going to face. That’s not to suggest, though, that this isn’t a problem because a relatively modest number of these individuals who get out of the conflict zone and line up in a European capital or a Western capital or any capital could still pose quite a significant threat.

Our focus more recently has been on quality rather than quantity. If the individual we get information on is an individual who has special skills—some facility with weapons of mass destruction or some experience with explosives or has ties back into a network in Western Europe, be [it] in Belgium or France or the U.K. or some partner country, then so what if that one person isn’t one among 500 foreign fighters? If he’s the wrong guy and he has a high degree

of capability, then that is every bit as much a concern to us as if it were a volume problem.

I think one of the reasons why we’re in a better place on this than we were a few years ago is that these foreign fighters also know that they have a tougher time going home. They, in many cases now, face a criminal prosecution regime in their home country that they didn’t face at the time they departed to go to Iraq or Syria. One of the things I think we’ve done successfully, in partnership with other countries, is increase the awareness of countries that they need to update their legal frameworks to criminalize activities like traveling to Iraq and Syria for purposes of jihad. The kinds of things that we would capture in the United States under a material support charge, in many countries are not criminal activities. I think a lot of our European partners have realized that that was an important gap in their legal regime, and so, [if you’re an] individual [who has waged jihad in Syria], if you’re going back to your point of origin, you know that [if] you get back there, you’re not going to be just welcomed back and rehabilitated. You may go to jail for 20 years or face some pretty significant legal penalties. So that has made the foreign fighter flow more of a one-way flow than we first anticipated.

**Miller: Can you give us any sense of the magnitude of the out-flow?**

**Rasmussen:** It’s hard to come up with anything by way of real numbers, but I would say it’s probably in the hundreds, not the thousands.

**Sciutto: That’s returning foreign fighters? In the hundreds?**

**Rasmussen:** Exiting. I would say exiting because it doesn’t necessarily mean returning solely to the place of origin. They could be trying to find some alternate playground on which to carry out their extremist activities. We’ve thought about whether there would be other conflict zones that individuals or small groups would try to make their way to in order to kind of carry the fight forward to another location. I think we worried about Libya in that regard at various times. We’ve worried about Egypt in that regard at various times. Other places where ISIS has had a pretty significant presence, we have tried to turn our intelligence resources on those places to make sure that if there were, in fact, a trend line of fighters moving to that location as an alternate safe haven, we would pick that up before it became a fait accompli. Now, I don’t think we’ve seen it in volume at this point.

**Cruikshank: There seems to be in some recent plots—[the attacks in] Manchester, Berlin being the cases in point—a link back to some kind of external operations effort inside Libya when it comes to ISIS.<sup>c</sup> ISIS is somewhat on the run in the northern part of Libya, but what concern [do] you have that there may be elements for external operations plotting from there directed at Europe, perhaps even the United States?**

<sup>b</sup> Editor’s note: For more on this, see Eric Schmitt, “ISIS fighters Are Not Flooding Back Home to Wreak Havoc as Feared,” *New York Times*, October 22, 2017.

<sup>c</sup> Editor’s note: For more on this angle, see Johannes Saal, “The Islamic State’s Libyan External Operations Hub: The Picture So Far,” *CTC Sentinel* 10:11 (2017).

**Rasmussen:** That's a very tough question, Paul, because I think we're operating on less of an intelligence base than we would like when we make those judgments now about what's going on in Libya and certainly less of an intelligence basis than we have in places like Iraq and Syria, where our intense involvement on the ground gives us many more resources—human intelligence, technical intelligence. We simply don't know as much about what ISIS is doing in Libya as we would like, and so you have to, in some cases, go to the far end of the spectrum in terms of anticipating or fearing the worst even though you don't necessarily have a lot to back that up.

There's no doubt that in the course of the early part of this year, ISIS was ejected from Sirte and, in a sense, sent on the run into more rural parts of central Libya. That was undoubtedly a success. But it also made them a harder target from an intelligence-collection point of view. [...] They are, in a sense, operating more outside our view today than they were when they were holed up in urban locations in Sirte and we had a kind of unblinking eye, as it were, watching them. That does not mean I would have altered our strategy and left them alone in Sirte to have a safe haven and maintain territorial control over a large Libyan city. That's not what I'm saying. I'm just saying it requires us now to have a strategy that will give us more access than we currently have. I think this administration has approached this in the same way that the last administration was approaching it at the end, which was "we need to develop some Libyan partners." We're not going to go into Libya with large numbers of American troops, with large contributions of assets from the American intelligence community, but we are willing to provide tailored support to key partners who we think can do the job on the ground. Now, that's the challenge: identifying who those capable partners are on the ground inside Libya given all the political turmoil that is going on there. And so, like many places, our terrorism work would be advanced if we could find a durable political solution in a place like Libya, much the same way our CT agenda would be advanced if we had a durable political solution in Yemen or Somalia or any of those other conflict zones. So Libya is just kind of, I would say, an archetypal example of that but made worst by the fact that we are doing it, in a sense, with that relatively modest levels of investment. [...]

**Cruickshank:** February marks the 25th anniversary of the first World Trade Center terrorist attack. The United States has been confronting jihadi terrorism in various manifestations, including al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State, since then—a period spanning almost your entire service in government. How do you see things 25 years from now? Is the best case scenario containing and defending against a persistent and enduring threat? Or can the United States, international partners, and communities isolate and decisively weaken the extremists? In other words, how does this story end?

**Rasmussen:** If there is one thing that I've taken away from my 16-plus years working on the terrorism problem, it's a healthy dose of humility about our ability to project past the two-to-three year mark and make useful predictions about the future evolution of terrorism. I tossed out a question to NCTC's analysts this fall—which is one of the great privileges of being director; I can ask smart folks to answer my questions—and I put the question in front of them, "How does it all end?" Meaning, in essence, when does the salafi jihadist movement stop inspiring violence against the West?

The analysts pulled together a conference with this title, and

they came back with two scenarios, which are not mutually exclusive: one scenario in which the movement collapsed because of repeated failure to demonstrate value in resolving the grievances of its followers, and another scenario in which the movement reoriented away from attacks on the West because the local environment provided more opportunities to achieve its aims. In effect, the movement stopped being global in favor of being local. And they told me this was the best we could hope for. None of this provides any near-term relief to the threat we face, and I'm convinced that my successor—and probably my successor's successor—will be dealing with many of the same problems we're dealing with at NCTC today. But it does tell us one thing, and that's the persistence of this evolving threat.

**Cruickshank:** With the Islamic State losing its territorial caliphate, how do you see competition playing out between al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State in the decade to come? Given the relationship between their leaderships is toxic—and each has accused the other of theological illegitimacy—do you see any prospect for them mending their differences and combining forces? Could al-Qa`ida reassert itself as the standard bearer of global jihad? Could some newly formed organization upstage both? Or do you see a more crowded and fragmented jihadi landscape emerging with no dominant group, and if so, what would be the good news and bad news about such a messy new reality?

**Rasmussen:** We continue to see al-Qa`ida and ISIS operating on essentially different playing fields. They have different timelines for reestablishing an Islamic caliphate, and that results in competing operational priorities for the groups. We do see them cooperate in a limited tactical way on certain battlefields—for instance, in Syria and Yemen—when they need resources and are facing a common enemy. But at this point, we don't anticipate they will expand beyond this transactional cooperation to some grand reunification because there is no real basis for the groups to engage on that strategic level. The simple fact of ISIS emir Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi laying claim to the title of caliph creates an ideological barrier that makes it tough for the groups to reconcile their opposing visions for the caliphate.

To answer the second part of your question, we see ISIS as pretty anchored in its claim over other jihadist groups, even with the territory ISIS has lost in Iraq and Syria. No branch or network has defected from the group despite its losses, and they continue to inspire violence worldwide. Al-Qa`ida has been holding steady during this period of ISIS loses, and we expect al-Qa`ida may see an opportunity to exert even more influence in leading the global movement as ISIS continues to lose territory. But we don't expect that level of influence to eclipse ISIS.

**Cruickshank:** Are there any additional lessons you've learned that you'd like to get across?

**Rasmussen:** As I look back on my efforts to help develop CT strategies—from my time in the Bush White House, Obama White House, and today with President Trump's administration—the lesson learned that I take away from my involvement is simply this: We should all bring a good amount of humility to the project of developing CT strategies touching on conflict zones like Iraq and Syria, Afghanistan, Yemen, Somalia, and the Sahel. I say that because as powerful and capable as the United States is—and we have

military, law enforcement, and intelligence capabilities that surpass those of any other country on earth—it's still quite difficult to deliver outcomes in these conflict zones such that the terrorism threat will be eliminated.

We have it within our power to play very effective offense and very effective defense. We can do great work in building partner capacity, and we are sharing intel more rapidly and more effectively than ever to enable partner action. But truly altering the environment that gives rise to the terrorist threat we face, that's a much

more formidable task. More resources are required, more time is required, and much more patience is required.

All one need do is look at the persistence of conflict in South Asia, the Levant, East Africa, and North Africa to understand the point I am making. And so, the unsolicited advice I would offer to anybody engaged in CT strategy development is this: Keep these underlying fundamentals in mind as you set forth to articulate new and bold strategic objectives, or to set timelines for achieving those objectives. **CTC**



# The Evolution of Shi`a Insurgency in Bahrain

By Michael Knights and Matthew Levitt

**Since 2011, Iran and its proxy militias in Lebanon and Iraq have undertaken an unprecedented effort to develop militant cells in Bahrain. These cells have evolved from easily detectible groups of amateurs to small cells of attackers with overseas training and combat experience and the ability to mount effective IED attacks. The threat of Iranian-backed Shi`a cells in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia is likely to expand with their use of unmanned air and sea vehicles, anti-armor weapons, and assassination tactics.**

In Bahrain, where a Sunni monarchy rules over a predominantly Shi`a population, the government has faced numerous waves of militant opposition to the government since the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979. In the early 1980s, the Iranian government supported a coup attempt by the Tehran-based Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain (IFLB), which planned to assassinate Bahraini royals and seize television and radio stations to foment a Shiite uprising on December 16, 1981.<sup>1</sup> Later in the 1990s, another coup effort was planned for June 3, 1996, by a Tehran-backed offshoot of the IFLB called Bahraini Hezbollah, led by Muhammed Taqi Mudarassi.<sup>2</sup> During and since the Shiite “intifada” in the 1990s, the Bahraini intelligence services maintained extensive documentation on Iranian recruitment of Bahraini Shi`a, including their selection for religious courses in Qom and for further intelligence and paramilitary training at the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps’ Bahnar Camp, near Iran’s Karaj Dam.<sup>3</sup> Carefully sealed arms caches buried during the 1980s and 1990s were periodically discovered during building work in Manama as late as the mid-2000s.<sup>4</sup>

## Post-2011 Militarization of Resistance in Bahrain

Despite these episodes of Iranian support, Shi`a militancy in Bahrain was a largely indigenous phenomenon until 2011. Before then,

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young Shi`a men from slums such as Sanabis, Daih, and Bani Jamma regularly mounted riots against the security forces, barricading off their streets, burning tires, and throwing Molotov cocktails at security force vehicles and riot police on foot. When bombs were detonated, they were invariably “sound bombs,” small pipe bombs that were used at night away from passers-by and rarely caused injury.<sup>5</sup> The Shi`a rioters did not own guns. Indeed, the loss of even a single police weapon—such as the loss of a police MP-5 sub-machine gun in Sanabis in December 2007—sparked a months-long effort to recover the weapon.<sup>6</sup> Where Iranian support for the rioters was cited by the Bahraini government, it related to the spinning-off of militant cells such as al-Haq, a group that Bahrain accused of receiving Iranian training in the use of social media and SMS text messages to orchestrate the rapid mobilization and deployment of rioters.<sup>7</sup>

The crackdown on the 2011 “Arab Spring” protests in Manama seems to have pushed some Bahraini Shi`a oppositionists and the Iranian intelligence services toward a new level of militancy. The deployment of Bahraini Defense Force tanks, backed by Saudi Arabian and UAE forces,<sup>8</sup> caused shock and anger among Bahraini Shi`a and among the Shi`a leadership and people of Iran and of Iraq.<sup>9</sup> There is some indication that the Iranian leadership—from Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei down—regretted not being in a position to support the Bahraini Shi`a in what might have been a decisive political action against the Sunni monarchy.<sup>10</sup> It was immediately after the 2011 protests that Iran’s IRGC Quds Force began planning the assassination of the Saudi ambassador to the United States, Adel al-Jubeir. Gholam Shakuri, the IRGC Quds Force officer identified by one of the plotters as being in charge of the operation, is believed by Saudi Arabian intelligence to have met Bahraini protest leaders in early 2011 before the operation began.<sup>11</sup> In addition to trying to strike a painful blow against Saudi Arabia, Iran’s main reaction to the Arab Spring crackdown in Bahrain appears to have been to strive to better prepare the Shi`a resistance for the next uprising in Bahrain, should it come.

The post-2011 evolution of armed resistance in Bahrain began with increased use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs). Some of these attacks conformed to the historic pattern of attention-grabbing, non-lethal attacks, mostly undertaken at night or following a warning. Targets included shopping malls, ATM machines, car dealerships, and unsecured outer perimeters of prominent sites such as a power station, the national airport, the Bahrain Financial Harbour, and the U.S. naval base in Manama.<sup>12</sup> In parallel, lethal attacks were also increasing. In 2011, there were no IED attacks on the security forces; this rose to four in 2012 and 10 in 2013. Initially, the devices were crude. In April 2012, a victim-operated IED was placed in a pile of tires in Hamad Town to target a security force member, but it ultimately ended up killing a civilian who tried to move the obstacle.<sup>13</sup> In October 2012, a homemade grenade was used to kill a police officer in Al-Eker.<sup>14</sup> At this early stage, there

were numerous incidents of fratricide as devices exploded prematurely, killing bomb makers and those transporting the devices.<sup>15</sup> Bahraini militants were already getting weapons training abroad, and electronic surveillance caught some of the militants, including Abdul Raouf Alshayeb,<sup>a</sup> maintaining contact with the IRGC, according to Bahraini authorities.<sup>16</sup>

By 2014, the picture had changed. On March 3, 2014, the Bahraini police suffered its worst terrorist incident when a sophisticated IED was used to kill three policemen (including one UAE advisor) and injure seven others. Under the cover of darkness, a “daisy-chain” of three anti-personnel “Claymore”-type IEDs (loaded with ball bearings) was positioned to create a kill-zone in the Daih area.<sup>17</sup> Police were lured to the site by the staging of a local protest.<sup>18</sup> The explosions were initiated by a rooftop spotter who armed the devices using a cellphone-controlled arming switch.<sup>19</sup> A passive infrared firing switch detonated the device as the unarmored police bus passed. Single “Claymore”-type devices were used on two other occasions in the month afterward, killing another policeman in one incident. The attack was claimed by a new Bahraini militant group called Saraya al-Ashtar. The Bahraini government accused Saraya al-Ashtar’s Iran-based leadership of facilitating travel for members of the group to Iraq for training by “Shi’ite Hezbollah Brigades” (a reference to the Iraqi group Kata’ib Hezbollah) in bomb-making and IED use.<sup>20</sup>

### Evolution Toward Externally Backed Resistance

The Bahraini government has often sought to undermine the domestic Shi’a political opposition by painting it as an Iranian project. Even if this is almost certainly an exaggeration, there is mounting evidence of external support to Bahrain’s militant opposition since 2011. The story is familiar to the one that played out previously in Lebanon and Iraq. This article will show, in a step-by-step manner, that the IRGC has latched onto more hardline elements of the Shi’a opposition, brought some of them to training bases outside Bahrain, and then reinserted them into Bahrain as cell leaders. A network of safe houses was developed to receive and store arms shipments and to train individuals with the set-up of bomb-making workshops to integrate locally sourced and imported bomb components.

The first stage in this process appears to have been the grooming and training of leadership figures in 2011-2013. According to both the U.S. and Bahraini governments, the leaders of Saraya al-Ashtar (Al-Ashtar Brigades, or AAB in U.S. terminology) are Ahmad Hasan Yusuf and Alsayed Murtadha Majeed Ramadhan Alawi, both of whom were named as Specially Designated Global Terrorists by the United States on March 17, 2017.<sup>21</sup> The 31-year-old Yusuf is described by the U.S. State Department as “an Iran-based AAB senior member,” and the designation notes that “AAB receives funding and support from the Government of Iran.”<sup>22</sup> The 33-year-old Alawi (usually known by the name Mortada Majid al-Sanadi) is a junior cleric with a long record of being detained by the Bahraini security services. Since 2011, he has been based in Qom, Iran. Since relocating to Iran, he has been a vocal supporter of armed resistance

against the Bahraini royal family.<sup>23</sup> His Bahraini citizenship was revoked in January 2015 when he received a life sentence in absentia from a Bahraini court.<sup>24</sup>

Since 2012, a number of Bahraini resistance groups have emerged—Saraya Mukhtar, Saraya al-Kasar, Saraya Waad Allah, Saraya al-Muqawama al-Shabiya, and the aforementioned Saraya al-Ashtar.<sup>25</sup> While it is questionable whether they are truly separate organizations or simply different “brands” within the same broad network, there are strong indications that all are IRGC-backed groups that share a similar outlook and methods. When cells are discovered by the security forces, they tend to have been working under an Iran-based coordinator who is a Bahraini militant who left the country since 2011. In December 2013, Bahrain linked some 2013 bomb-plotting activity to Iran-based Bahraini national Ali Ahmed Mafoudh al-Musawi.<sup>26</sup> In March 2017, Bahrain described one such Iran-based individual—prison escapee Qassim Abdullah Ali—as the offshore coordinator for a 14-man cell.<sup>27</sup> Bahrain recently identified a 31-year-old Iran-based coordinator, Hussein Ali Dawood, as the offshore director of two cells (one 10-man Saraya al-Ashtar<sup>28</sup> cell arrested in August 2017 with a large amount of explosives and another cell that killed a policeman in a bombing in Diraz on June 18, 2017).<sup>29</sup>

In-country teams are supported by offshore threat finance. In 2015, Bahrain assumed control of the Iran Insurance Company, as well as Future Banks, which comprised two major Iranian banks.<sup>30</sup> While it initially refrained from closing Future Bank, Bahrain opted to close the bank shortly before its March 2016 designation of Hezbollah as a terrorist organization, suggesting Bahrain was concerned that the bank might be used as a means to finance Shi’a extremism in Bahrain.<sup>31</sup>

### Training in Iran and Iraq

The training<sup>32</sup> of the new generation of Bahraini militants has been carried out in Iran, Lebanon, and increasingly Iraq. On February 20, 2013, the head of Bahrain’s Public Security Forces announced that a militant cell had been disrupted, which included members who had received training in Iran and by Lebanese Hezbollah in the use of weapons, explosives, and surveillance. Following a series of arrests in December 2013, Bahraini prosecutors claimed that those detained “confessed that they had travelled to Iran and received training by Iranian personnel at Iranian Revolutionary Guard camps.”<sup>33</sup> An arms smuggler detained by the Bahraini security forces in July 2015 testified to having received weapons and explosives training at an IRGC camp in Iran two years prior.<sup>34</sup>

On March 4, 2017, the Bahraini government issued its most explicit descriptions of the foreign training of Bahraini terrorists. Bahrain’s chief prosecutor, Ahmed al-Hammadi, stated that a Germany-based leader of the Saraya al-Ashtar group had helped organize trips for members from Bahrain to Iran and Iraq for training. Hammadi added that “several members [were sent] to Iran and Iraq to train on the use of explosives and automatic weapons in Revolutionary Guards camps to prepare them to carry out terrorist acts inside the country.”<sup>35</sup>

On March 26, 2017, Bahraini authorities further detailed that six arrestees had received military training in IRGC camps in Iran, five had been trained by the Iraqi Kata’ib Hizballah group, and three received training in Bahrain itself.<sup>36</sup> The connection between Bahraini militants and Iranian-backed Iraqi militias has been growing in significance since at least 2015. In June 2015, Bahraini police

a Alshayeb was sentenced in the United Kingdom to five years for terrorism offenses after being detained in possession of bomb-making manuals when arriving in the United Kingdom from Baghdad in 2015. See Rori Donaghy, “Bahrain warns of fake activists after UK convicts Bahraini dissident of terrorism,” Middle East Eye, December 19, 2015.



*Manama, Bahrain, in 2016 (Mohammed Al-Shaikh/AFP/Getty Images)*

chief Major General Tariq al-Hassan stated that Kata'ib Hizballah (led by U.S.-designated terrorist Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis) provided training on explosively formed penetrator (EFP) armor-piercing bombs at a camp in Iraq and “offered logistical and financial support” to Saraya al-Ashtar.<sup>37</sup> On August 13, 2015, the Bahraini Ministry of Interior arrested Qasim Abdullah Ali, who they claimed trained in Iraq with Kata'ib Hizballah before attempting to smuggle explosives back to Bahrain.<sup>38</sup> (Qasim Abdullah Ali later escaped and reemerged as an Iran-based network runner.<sup>39</sup>)

The allegation of a Kata'ib Hizballah connection is credible on a number of counts. First, Kata'ib Hizballah is directly controlled by the IRGC Quds Force, and it was the premier user of EFP munitions in the anti-coalition resistance operations in Iraq prior to 2011.<sup>40</sup> Second, Iranian-backed militias such as Kata'ib Hizballah are collectively committed to supporting other Shiite communities in a so-called “axis of resistance,” which regularly professes strong support for the Bahraini Shi'a and levels military threats against the Bahraini monarchy.<sup>41</sup> Third, there is a strong emotional connection between Iraqi and Bahraini Shi'a, with the latter looking to Iraq's shrine cities of Najaf and Karbala—not Qom, Iran—for religious guidance.<sup>42</sup> One particularly significant Karbala-based preacher was Mohammad al-Husayni al-Shirazi, whose nephew Muhammad Taqi Mudarassi established the aforementioned Bahraini Hizballah and whose other cousin Hadi Mudarassi headed the 1981 coup attempt by the Iranian-sponsored IFLB.<sup>43</sup> According to Bahraini authorities, Hadi Mudarassi met in 2016 with Iraqi Shiite militias “to talk about escalating militancy in Bahrain in 2017.”<sup>44</sup>

### Dependency on Maritime Routes

The sea spaces surrounding the Bahraini archipelago connect Bahraini-based cells with Iran-based leadership and Iran/Iraq-based training and equipping bases. If Bahraini militants have not yet been identified by the authorities, they can leave Bahrain using

conventional transportation options, including Shi'a pilgrim flows headed to Iraq and Iran. Militants can also return to Bahrain in this manner until they have been identified as suspects. Covert egress and insertion is required for three types of transit. The first and rarest is inbound insertion of fighters. In December 2016, a group of men armed with AK-47s fled security forces after being dropped off by boat in Bahrain. Two individuals were traced from the drop-off and were found to have just traveled to Iran for a 10-day visit the previous month.<sup>45</sup> The boat carried a GPS device that showed numerous trips into Iranian waters stretching back to February 2015.<sup>46</sup> Thus, at least one boat was able to operate for almost two years without being intercepted.

Outbound exfiltration of wanted men (usually prison escapees) is more frequent. In December 2013, the Bahraini Coast Guard impounded a boat containing 13 wanted individuals trying to flee to Iran.<sup>47</sup> On June 5, 2016, the Bahraini Coast Guard recaptured eight escapees (out of 17 convicted terrorists) from a mass escape from the Dry Dock Detention Center the day before. The boat's GPS indicated they were headed toward a pick-up point with a ship in Iranian waters.<sup>48</sup> On February 9, 2017, Bahraini Special Forces intercepted a boat carrying escapees from a December 31, 2016, prison break at the Jau Reformation and Rehabilitation Center. Seven of the 10 escapees were rearrested and three killed in the operation.<sup>49</sup>

The most regular known use of militant boat sorties is the inbound smuggling of explosives, weapons components, or whole weapons systems.<sup>50</sup> The first major shipment to be intercepted came on December 28, 2013, when a speedboat was tracked by coastal radar and intercepted carrying large quantities of advanced bomb components, including 31 Claymore-type antipersonnel fragmentation mines and 12 EFP warheads, plus the electronics to arm and fire the devices.<sup>51</sup> On July 25, 2015, another inbound speedboat was intercepted carrying 43 kilograms of C4 explosives and eight AK-type assault rifles with 32 magazines and ammunition.



The speedboat had received weapons from a ship just outside the island's territorial waters, and one crew member testified to having been trained by the IRGC in Iran in 2013.<sup>52</sup>

No inbound weapons shipments were intercepted in 2016 or 2017. One reason for this may be that the logistical suppliers of Bahraini militants are adapting to the government's more effective maritime policing. In 2017, Bahrain began intercepting bags containing small arms and explosives that had been professionally water-proofed. Other bags were found offshore, sunken in shallow water and attached to floating buoys. Weapons smugglers appear to have shifted from direct delivery of weapons to the Bahraini mainland to an indirect system of dropping water-proofed weapons in Bahraini waters, with militants undertaking pick-up themselves, to lessen the risk to smugglers.<sup>53</sup> The next stage of this process is expected to be delivery by unmanned vessels, with Bahraini security officials stating that they anticipate the use of programmable drone boats to bring materials into Bahrain in the future in order to make it completely unnecessary for smugglers to risk penetrating Bahraini waters with manned craft.<sup>54</sup>

### Foundations of Insurgency, 2013-2016

Bahrain has, by now, arguably seen the cycling of three generations of post-2011 militants. The first were the unsophisticated small bombing cells that activated in 2012-2013, who did not show signs of having received significant training or equipment from abroad. A second wave comprised the named groups emerging since 2013, which showed more sophistication and debuted new capabilities such as advanced remote-control IEDs. As Phillip Smyth suggested in the earliest analysis of the pantheon of post-2013 Bahraini groups, some of the newer and more ephemeral brands, such as Saraya al-Kasar and Asa'ib al-Muqawama al-Bahrainia, might have been "fronts" for more enduring entities, such as Saraya al-Ashtar, Saraya al-Mukhtar, and Saraya al-Muqawama al-Shabiya.<sup>55</sup> The Bahraini government has claimed that new brands emerging in 2017, such as Saraya Waad Allah, are fronts for Saraya al-Ashtar.<sup>56</sup>

What can be said with more certainty is that these organizations appear to have maintained quite small active-service memberships, with even the largest—Saraya al-Ashtar—limited to operating two or three attack cells and a similar number of bomb-making workshops at any given time.<sup>b</sup> The narrowing down of active-service units may have been deliberate, replacing the insecure networks of amateur bomb-throwers with small cells of externally trained terrorist operators. Arrest announcements suggest members tended to range in age from 22 to 29 years of age during their active service, with the odd older recruit in his late 30s and some younger members involved in moving and hiding weapons and explosives.<sup>c</sup> Women played only a supporting role, typically coordinating male relatives to back their militant husbands with passive and active support.<sup>57</sup> In 2013-2015, these networks launched 23 bombing attacks that killed 14 security force members and wounded 25.<sup>58</sup> In contrast to earlier years, there were far fewer reports of fratricide by bomb makers, emplacements (one who installs device at detonation

point), or transporters, indicating more skilled operators and better-constructed devices.

This second generation of militants was mostly arrested in 2014-2015, seemingly in large part because of the intelligence materials gained during the interdiction of boat movements, which in turn led the authorities to bomb-making workshops and broader networks. In September 2015, Bahraini authorities raided a home in Nuwaidrat where they found "a secret hide-out underground used for storing and manufacturing explosive devices." Among the weapons found were 20 military-grade hand grenades manufactured in Iran (and embossed with the logo of the Defense Industries Organization of the Islamic Republic of Iran).<sup>59</sup>

The Bahraini 'resistance' fell into a lull in 2016. The loss of trained manpower may have triggered the two prison breakouts and related exfiltration efforts to Iran that were undertaken in 2016-2017 to free key unit members such as Muhammed Ibrahim Mulla Redhi al-Tooq, described by the Bahraini government as the triggerman<sup>60</sup> for a July 28, 2015, remote-control IED attack that killed two policemen outside a girls' school in Sitra.<sup>61</sup>

### Third-Generation Cells Active in 2017

A third generation of militants is now arguably active, and the insurgency picked up again in 2017. Though fewer explosive devices were detonated in 2017 (nine bombings) than in 2013 (10), the attacks caused seven security force deaths and 24 injuries in 2017 versus six security force deaths and seven injuries in 2013.<sup>62</sup> The networks active in the summer of 2017 had access to multiple bomb-making workshops and cache sites.<sup>63</sup> Bahrain's Ministry of Interior listed the assembled contents as including unspecified numbers of usable Claymore-type devices and EFPs, plus "127kg of high-grade explosives and bomb-making material including more than 24kg of C4, TATP and nitro cellulose, chemicals ... [and] automatic and other homemade weapons, electric detonators, grenades and ammunition."<sup>64</sup> Seven MAGICAR automobile security systems were seized in Sadad and al-Dair in mid-2017 where they were being prepared for use in remote-control IEDs.<sup>65</sup>

No instances of self-inflicted accidental deaths have been reported, and there is evidence that Bahrain-based cells are using externally provided prototype IEDs as training aids and models for domestic production of IEDs, including making digital videos of step-by-step actions in order to gain input from bomb-making instructors based outside Bahrain.<sup>66</sup> Causing more security force deaths in 2017 than 2013, attacks are increasingly set to occur when and where the fewest civilians are present, in part due to growing public disquiet over the collateral damage caused by bombings.<sup>67</sup>

The cells are not only undertaking remote-control IED attacks on police buses but also new categories of targeted attack. Under-vehicle IEDs (so-called "sticky bombs") are emerging in the militants' arsenal. From January to October 2017, Bahraini authorities report seizing four sticky bombs in Daih and Karzakan. Militants are also becoming more skilled at small unit tactics and shootings, resulting in attacks such as close-quarter assassinations of off-duty police officers<sup>d</sup> and a successful December 31, 2016, assault on a maximum security prison that involved drone surveillance, exploitation of

b The authors' time-lining of security events in Bahrain since 2013 suggests that Saraya al-Ashtar does not appear to have had more than three bombing cells active at the same time at any point.

c The authors created a spread of ages of arrested suspects from open source announcements.

d A police lieutenant was shot dead in Bani Jamra on January 14, 2017, and another in Bilad al-Qadeem on January 29, 2017. Authors' dataset of attacks on Bahrain security forces.

a shift change by guards, and use of an IED to delay police reinforcements.<sup>68</sup> In one arms cache, Bahraini investigators found five Makarov pistols and five AK-pattern rifles with specialized barrel modifications to accept custom suppressors, all with internal and external serial numbers professionally removed.<sup>69</sup> Bahraini authorities are increasingly concerned that militant cells seem to be arming and training to attack protected facilities or armored convoys, possibly to strike government leadership figures.<sup>70</sup>

### Militant Cell Case Studies

Arrest data from 2017 paints an interesting picture of contemporary Bahraini militant networks. On August 24, 2017, the Bahraini government arrested the members of one Saraya al-Ashtar cell linked to a workshop containing 52 kilograms of high-grade TNT explosives, including C4, urea nitrate, and ammonium nitrate.<sup>71</sup> The network's offshore coordinator was claimed to be the aforementioned Iran-based Hussein Ali Dawood, and its Bahraini cell leader was identified as 27-year-old Hassan Maki Abas Hassan, who Bahraini authorities arrested when he returned to Bahrain from a trip to Lebanon. Hassan Maki Abas Hassan's sister is accused of storing explosives for him.<sup>72</sup> Hassan Maki Abas Hassan is characterized by Bahraini authorities as a bomb maker, trained in Syria and possibly Iraq in 2013 and instructed by Dawood to construct IEDs and handle the warehousing of weaponry and explosives sent into Bahrain.<sup>73</sup> Hassan Maki Abas Hassan returned from Lebanon in the company of Mahmood Mohammed Ali Mulla Salem al Bahrani, an older (33-year-old) Bahraini man who authorities say helped train Hassan Maki Abas Hassan as a bomb maker.<sup>74</sup> All the other individuals arrested or sought in relation to the cell were characterized as involved in moving and hiding devices and buying components (ball bearings and gas cylinders).<sup>75</sup> Bomb makers seem to be operating as bomb emplacers in some cases, suggesting cells lack the manpower to spare skilled bomb makers from such dangerous work.<sup>76</sup>

In another case, another Saraya al-Ashtar cell linked to Hussein Ali Dawood was arrested on June 29, 2017. The local cell leader was named as Sayed Mohammed Qassim Mohammed Hassan Fadhel, a 25-year-old man who the government claims led one previous bombing attack in February 2016 (for which he was sentenced in absentia to life imprisonment).<sup>77</sup> Evading capture as a wanted man for over 12 months, Fadhel allegedly orchestrated two IED attacks and one grenade attack on a checkpoint, none of which caused security force casualties. His five-man team all ranged between 19 and 21 years of age, and it allegedly included one individual who had visited Iran multiple times, one who traveled to Syria to fight as a Shi'a volunteer, and two accused of training in Iraq, one with Kata'ib Hizballah.<sup>78</sup>

### The EFP Conundrum

One of the most alarming aspects of the post-2011 evolution of Bahraini militancy has been the introduction of EFPs into the arsenal of the resistance. As readers of this publication will well appreciate,

the EFP<sup>f</sup> is a potentially game-changing weapon for Iran and its proxies to deploy in Bahrain and elsewhere in the Gulf. The size of a paint can, an EFP munition can cut through any vehicle armor deployed by the Bahraini and Gulf militaries, potentially giving militants the ability to prevent a Saudi-backed state crackdown such as occurred in 2011 and to create urban "no-go zones" for security forces. An uprising by Shi'a youth might stand a far better chance of succeeding if such weapons can be employed, even in small numbers. As already mentioned, alongside 31 Claymore-type antipersonnel fragmentation mines intercepted on the speedboat heading for Bahrain on December 28, 2013, were 12 EFP warheads, plus the electronics to arm and fire the devices. The EFPs had eight-inch copper focusing "liners" (which create the armor-piercing effect).

Though these devices were the first EFPs to be intercepted, they were probably not the first to be imported. EFPs were also found in two bomb-making workshops in Bahrain: in Dar Kulaib (on June 6, 2015) and in Nuwaidrat (on September 27, 2015). In the first workshop, Bahraini forces uncovered a number of EFPs. The devices were collocated with passive infrared sensors (used to initiate a device as vehicles pass) and numerous radio-controlled arming switches (to turn on the sensors), indicating that the devices were using the exact same configuration as Lebanese Hizballah and Iraqi EFPs.<sup>79</sup>

On September 27, 2015, security forces discovered another bomb-making facility in Nuwaidrat that contained an EFP-making industrial press and EFP components.<sup>80</sup> The workshop had been built around an industrial press used to make the armor-piercing liners. A variety of specialized dies were found, allowing the site to manufacture EFPs of different diameters. At the workshop were twelve disassembled EFPs with 4-inch and 10-inch copper focusing "liners" (which create the armor-piercing effect).<sup>81</sup>

Most recently, on June 29, 2017, the Bahraini Ministry of Interior announced that an unspecified number of EFPs were found in safe houses in Daih.<sup>82</sup> Bomb makers active at the site seem to have been using imported 12-inch EFPs as prototypes, with locally made versions showing an iterative improvement in technique over time.<sup>83</sup> Four-inch EFPs, unusually small for such a weapon, were also discovered at the site.<sup>84</sup>

The obvious question to pose is if EFPs have been present, why have they seemingly not been used. One answer is that EFPs may be overkill at this stage, with the main target—Bahraini police—moving entirely in unarmored vehicles that are more susceptible to high-explosive blasts than the fist-sized molten slugs produced by EFP munitions. Furthermore, EFPs are not simple weapons to employ correctly; their precise effect means it is very possible to miss a moving vehicle completely. This means that significant training may be required, especially when there are no "on-the-job" training

f One of the authors has written: "The EFP is a form of roadside charge that has exceptional armor-piercing capabilities and is easily concealed and detonated. High explosives are packed into a cylinder akin to a paint can with the lid removed. A concave liner of professionally milled copper or steel is then clamped over the cylinder's open end. When the explosive is detonated, it creates a focused jet of hypervelocity molten metal that can cut through even the heaviest main battle tank armor at close range. In Iraq, 1,526 EFPs killed a total of 196 U.S. troops and injured 861 others between November 2005 and December 2011; British troops were intensively targeted as well and suffered many casualties." Michael Knights, "Iranian EFPs in the Gulf: An Emerging Strategic Risk," *PolicyWatch* 2568, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, February 23, 2016.

e The individuals had an average age of 33.

opportunities in active theaters where EFPs are being used in combat. Another option is that EFPs are being deliberately withheld for some reason—perhaps to react to a Saudi-Bahraini escalation, to send a signal regarding Iranian “red lines,” to avoid harsh retaliation against the population, or to complement some form of future uprising. All that is clear is that Bahraini networks were given small numbers of imported EFPs and were told to experiment with replicating them and to build up stocks of them.<sup>85</sup>

### Expansion to Saudi Arabia?

Located across a 25-kilometer causeway from Bahrain, the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia is a predominately Shi`a area that holds more than 20 percent of the world's total proven oil reserves and serves as the center of the kingdom's oil and petrochemicals industries.<sup>86</sup> The Shi`a population has become more restive in recent years,<sup>87</sup> in part reacting to a tough crackdown that saw Saudi Arabia execute Nimr al-Nimr, the most senior Shi`a cleric in the Eastern Province, on January 2, 2016. Facing unrest, Saudi Arabia also began to demolish parts of Nimr al-Nimr's hometown of Awamiyah in the summer of 2016,<sup>88</sup> sparking intense skirmishes between the Saudi armed forces and unnamed groups of armed Shi`a militants.<sup>89</sup>

In terms of attack metrics, the increase in violence in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province is even more notable than in Bahrain. In 2014-2015, there were just four attacks on security forces, all shooting incidents that left a total of five officers dead and three wounded.<sup>90</sup> In 2016-2017, the number of attacks jumped to 24, with 18 killed and 39 wounded, with an even balance of shootings and bomb attacks.<sup>91</sup> The importation of IEDs from Bahrain may be one factor in this change. On May 8, 2015, an unspecified number of remote-controlled Claymore-type IEDs were intercepted as they were being smuggled into Saudi Arabia over the causeway. These devices were eventually matched to IEDs found on June 6, 2015, in a bomb maker's workshop in Dar Kulaib, Bahrain.<sup>92</sup> One notable trend in 2017 has been the use of rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs) by militants on six occasions,<sup>93</sup> though it is unclear if these were imported or captured from security forces.<sup>94</sup> EFPs would have been an ideal weapon for militants to deploy in the fighting in Awamiyah, but there is no evidence that they have been used and no evidence of vehicle losses of any kind for the security forces.

As Phillip Smyth has noted, Bahraini Shi`a militias such as Saraya al-Mukhtar are clear in their communiqués that they are joined with Saudi Arabian ‘resisters,’ noting as far back as February 20, 2014, that “the cause of the people in the Eastern Region [of Saudi Arabia] and our defense is one ... Resistance against Saudi occupation, our taklif, and our fate are united.”<sup>94</sup> (Taklif is an order from God that must be followed.<sup>95</sup>) On November 10, 2017, Bahraini militants may have acted on this intent by bombing a key pipeline, the AB3 pipeline supplying Saudi Arabian crude to the Bahrain Petroleum Company refinery at Sitra and a major source

of Saudi Arabian economic support to Bahrain.<sup>96</sup> The incident also looks like a warning sign from Tehran, recalling Saudi Arabian rhetoric about the November 4, 2017, missile strike on Riyadh by Yemen's Houthis, which Saudi Arabia characterized as “an act of war” by Iran. According to Saudi investigative files provided to Saudi media in August 2017, Saudi authorities had at some point before then uncovered a five-man cell of Saudi Arabian Shi`a who were trained inside Revolutionary Guard camps in Iran on the use of RPGs and explosives, including TNT, RDX, and C4. Riyadh claimed this was the leading edge of an Iranian effort to revive “Hizballah al-Hejaz,” an Iran-affiliated Saudi group that has been inactive since it carried out the 1996 Khobar Towers bombing, which killed 19 U.S. servicemen.<sup>97</sup>

### Outlook for Resistance in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia

Since 2011, Iran and its proxy militias in Lebanon and Iraq have mounted an unprecedented effort to train, activate, and resupply IED cells inside Bahrain. Following the military suppression of Arab Spring protests in Bahrain, a fragment of the Shi`a youth traveled abroad to receive Iranian training in camps and battlefronts in Iran, Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria. Iran's effort brought significant quantities of military high explosives into Bahrain and assisted Bahraini cells in developing IED workshops capable of churning out reliable, remote-controlled IEDs. Bahraini militants have witnessed the attrition of two generations of fighters since 2011 and have emerged as a smaller, tempered movement with better operational security. Iran is adapting its resupply methods to cope with tighter maritime policing, using at-sea caching of weapons and perhaps drone boats.

The next steps for the insurgency are less clear. On June 19, 2016, Major General Qassem Soleimani, head of the IRGC's Quds Force, made the most explicit Iranian threats against the Bahraini royal family since the 1980s, warning that Manama's actions would lead to a “bloody uprising” that would “leave people with no other option but the toppling of the regime in armed resistance.”<sup>98</sup> To be sure, the months that followed saw several terrorist plots and expanded recruitment efforts as well. This month, Bahraini Minister of Interior Shk Rashid bin Abdullah al Khalifa highlighted a series of Shi`a militant operations carried out in 2017. He pointed to seized envelopes containing BD50 (Bahraini dinar), which he said were handed out as cash rewards for terrorist operations and acts of vandalism and tied these to cells “run by individuals in Iran who coordinate with the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, the Popular Crowd Forces in Iraq (Al-Hashd al-Shaabi) and the Hezbollah in Lebanon to train terrorists.”<sup>99</sup>

For now, this threat looks unrealistic due to the energetic efforts of the country's security forces. This may change in the future, however. Iran might be trying to deter Bahraini crackdowns or develop leverage over the Gulf States more generally. Or Soleimani's words might reflect the longstanding Iranian determination to overthrow the monarchy if another 2011-type opportunity emerges. Indicators of a more ambitious Iranian strategy in Bahrain might include assassinations of Bahraini security leaders, stockpiling of larger stores of small arms and ammunition, further prison breaks or weapons thefts, and an expansion in the manpower pool of trained Bahraini militants available for use in a future uprising. **CTC**

g Saudi Arabian security force members have taken video of their colleagues shooting RPGs in Awamiyah. See “Secret Saudi War In Al-Awamiyah,” South Front, August 6, 2016.



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# Red on Red: Analyzing Afghanistan's Intra-Insurgent Violence

By Matthew DuPée

**Once renowned for its political cohesion, the Afghan Taliban movement now finds itself enduring sustained internal divisions and threats from rival factions. The revelation in July 2015 that the leader of the Taliban, Mullah Omar, had, in fact, been dead for nearly two years led to an internal power struggle that further fractured the Taliban movement. Ever since, various factions of Taliban fighters opposed to the current Taliban leadership council have engaged in open combat with their former group. The emergence of the Islamic State in Khorasan Province, a group that includes some disaffected Afghan Taliban commanders, has resulted in conflict between the two groups. The Afghan Taliban remains the most organized and lethal insurgent group operating in Afghanistan, and it controls significant swaths of the country. But its fracturing is weakening its ability to sustain its current position.**

**T**he Afghan Taliban remain the most organized and lethal insurgent group operating in Afghanistan, despite competition from the other 20 terrorist organizations and three violent extremist organizations present in the region.<sup>1</sup> However, once renowned for its political cohesion, the Afghan Taliban movement now finds itself distracted by sustained internal divisions and threats from rival factions. The revelation in July 2015 that supreme leader of the Taliban, Mullah Muhammad Omar, had been dead for nearly two years and that certain senior Taliban leaders had closely guarded this secret, further fractured the Taliban movement's senior leadership, known as the *Rahbari Shura* (Leadership Council). Ever since, rival Taliban factions have engaged in open combat, resulting in at least 60 clashes between the summer of 2015 and December 2017, according to a review of local media reports and Taliban press statements. Hundreds of insurgents belonging to the Taliban and rival Taliban splinter factions have been killed in those clashes. Similarly, the

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emergence of the Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP), an Afghanistan-based offshoot of the deadly terrorist organization in Syria and Iraq, in January 2015 has created violent competition between the Taliban and ISKP cadres in as many as 10 Afghan provinces,<sup>4</sup> leaving scores dead on both sides since late 2014.

This article describes these developments and identifies the catalysts and factors involved in each of the main warring factions within the Taliban as well as between the ISKP and Taliban. The article also attempts to assess what impact sustained internal divisions have had on the Taliban movement and its cohesion, and whether these divisions could erode the Taliban's momentum on the battlefield.

## Fractures

During its formation in the early 1990s, the Taliban successfully transcended tribal and cultural norms, representing a strict form of Sunni Islam based on Deobandi doctrine, a dogmatic form of Islam originating in northern India that reinforces a conservative Islamic ethical code. Although the Taliban were mostly drawn from Afghanistan's largest ethnic group, the Pashtun, tribal lineage overall had very little to do with its formation but did assist in the movement's continuity. Core Taliban leaders hailed from both the Durrani and Ghilzai tribal confederations, which have historically competed for and clashed over political dominance. The Taliban movement, from a political standpoint, aimed to transcend tribal affinity.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, the movement initially tried to appeal to all of Afghanistan's ethnicities, including Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazaras.<sup>3</sup>

One of the most notable and enduring attributes of the Taliban movement is its perceived level of cohesiveness and its senior leadership's ability to remain largely unified despite internal pressures and external threats. However, in 2012, analysts observed serious political rifts emerging among the Taliban's senior leadership, which included dismissal of insubordinate or disagreeable commanders and disregard for orders from superiors by some field commanders. These developments, in part, were born from an internal political debate between those Taliban blocs that supported engaging in a peace dialogue with the United States and those that opposed a negotiated peace process.<sup>4</sup>

Additionally, in late 2014, the Islamic State first emerged in Afghanistan, although it only formally announced its creation and named its leadership in January 2015.<sup>5</sup> The ISKP mostly consisted of disaffected and marginalized former Afghan and Pakistani Taliban leaders and their loyalists. It did not take long before elements of the Afghan Taliban and rival ISKP factions were battling over territory, especially the fertile farming valleys in Helmand and Nan-

a The ISKP, since its inception, has had a presence in Farah, Helmand, Ghor, Jowzjan, Sar-e Pul, Faryab, Kunduz, Ghazni, Nangarhar, and Kunar provinces.





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garhar provinces where the Taliban reap windfall profits from the area's poppy cultivation.<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps the strongest disruption for the Taliban occurred in July 2015, however, when senior Taliban leaders could no longer conceal the fate of its Amir al-Mu'minin ("Commander of the Faithful") Mullah Muhammad Omar, whose death sometime in 2013 had been kept secret.<sup>7</sup> The Taliban broke into two segments almost immediately after his death became public as competition over the selection of the Mullah Omar's successor intensified. Mullah Omar's close adviser Mullah Akhtar Muhammad Mansoor was chosen to lead the Taliban movement in late July 2015 in a process kept behind closed doors, once again raising the ire of Mansoor's detractors and prompting some Taliban leaders, such as Political Commission Chairman Tayyeb Agha, to resign in protest.<sup>8</sup> Despite Mansoor's call for unity in his Eid al-Ahda message on September 22, 2015,<sup>9</sup> the Taliban effectively split into two blocs, which remain in place today.<sup>10</sup> Mansoor was later killed in a U.S. drone strike as he traveled through a remote area in Pakistan's Baluchistan Province in May 2016, which created a short-lived leadership vacuum. Sheikh

Haibatullah Akhundzada, a Noorzai Pashtun<sup>b</sup> from Kandahar, became the new leader of the Taliban, although he is widely considered to be more of an Islamic scholar than a military tactician. Sirajuddin Haqqani, a Pashtun from the Zadran tribe in the east of Afghanistan<sup>c</sup> and leader of the Haqqani Network, maintained his position as deputy leader of the Taliban, a position he had ascended to under Mansoor's tenure in 2015.<sup>11</sup> Mullah Yaquub, the

b The Noorzai tribe belongs to the Panjpai tribal component of the Durrani Pashtun Confederation, the largest Pashtun confederation found in southern Afghanistan. Prominent Noorzai Pashtuns are split between supporting the current Afghan government and the Afghan Taliban, though some Noorzai Taliban commanders have allegedly been underrepresented within the ranks of the Taliban leadership. Although Haibatullah is a Noorzai, he is viewed as 'tribe-neutral' and has not leveraged his tribal heritage with respect to his new position. Borhan Osman, "Taleban in Transition: How Mansur's death and Haibatullah's Ascension May Affect the War (and Peace)," *Afghan Analysts Network*, May 27, 2016.

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eldest son of deceased Taliban leader Mullah Omar, also became a deputy leader of the Taliban.<sup>12</sup> The Taliban senior leadership, in this context, has tenuously overcome its most acute internal political divisions, though claims persist of friction between Mansoor's favored Ishaqzai Pashtun<sup>d</sup> Taliban commanders and Haibatullah as well as rivalries between the Taliban's Peshawar Shura and the Quetta Shura.<sup>13</sup>

Several anti-Taliban entities, mostly a coterie of disgruntled former Afghan and Pakistani Taliban commanders, including the ISKP, the Islamic Emirate High Council of Afghanistan (IEHCA), and local paramilitary groups comprised of disaffected former Taliban fighters supported by the Afghan government, currently conduct operations against Taliban field commanders and fighting elements.<sup>14</sup>

### Emergence of Islamic State in Khorasan Province

The phenomenon known as the Islamic State announced its expansion into "Khorasan Province"—modern-day Afghanistan, Pakistan, parts of eastern Iran, and Central Asia—in late January 2015.<sup>15</sup> However, this was much more of a branding exercise than a true expansion effort by the Islamic State. In March 2014, a small group of al-Qa`ida members who were active in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region defected to the Islamic State, setting the stage for rogue elements of the fractured Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and disgruntled, disenfranchised Afghan Taliban commanders to coalesce around the black flag of the Islamic State during the summer of 2014.<sup>16</sup>

The emerging ISKP factions in Afghanistan's eastern Nangarhar Province consisted of militants from Lashkar-e-Islam, an anti-Pakistan organization, as well as radical salafis<sup>17</sup> and TTP leaders from Pakistan's Orakzai and Mohmand Agencies. One such former TTP leader, Hafez Sayed Khan, a trained salafi from Orakzai, would serve as the first *wali* (governor) of Khorasan Province. Sayed Khan often criticized the Afghan Taliban for accepting support from the Pakistan government and for being too lenient on the Afghan government. Many of Sayed Khan's fighters and loyalists had relocated to Nangarhar following a series of Pakistani military operations in Khyber Agency and North Waziristan beginning in 2010.<sup>18</sup>

Tension between the Afghan Taliban and ISKP was apparent from the onset, and violent clashes between the rivals exploded in December 2014 in Nangarhar's Naziyan and Kot districts, which lasted through the spring of 2015. The Taliban lost several district shadow chiefs in costly attacks conducted by the ISKP, which ultimately forced the Taliban to withdraw from three districts in Nangarhar by May 2015. By late June 2015, the ISKP had consolidated its position in eight of Nangarhar's districts and likely comprised a fighting force of 3,750 to 4,000 fighters.<sup>19</sup>

Meanwhile, the ISKP factions in Afghanistan's Helmand and Farah provinces—led by local, disgruntled Afghan Taliban leaders—

failed to recruit, expand, and hold their small pockets of territory. Deputy *wali* of Khorasan Abdul Rauf Khadem, a hardline salafi and Taliban commander who had spent several years in detention at Guantanamo Bay, was killed in a coalition airstrike in February 2015, less than two months after his emergence as a senior ISKP leader.<sup>20</sup> His ISKP faction quickly dissipated following additional attacks against it by loyalist Afghan Taliban fighters in Helmand's Kajaki District. The ISKP faction in Farah Province was virtually wiped out by rival Taliban factions around the same time, with its leader, Abdul Razeq Mehdi, fleeing Farah for Nangarhar Province.<sup>21</sup>

Although the ISKP failed in its initial effort to expand throughout Afghanistan, the group reconstituted itself in Nangarhar Province throughout 2015 and 2016,<sup>22</sup> distracting the Taliban from otherwise attacking Afghan government interests or coalition forces in many parts of Nangarhar. Despite attempts by the Afghan Taliban to mediate the situation and deescalate the level of violence, the ISKP most likely was responsible for killing an influential Taliban shadow governor for Nangarhar in June 2015 while he visited Peshawar, Pakistan.<sup>23</sup>

By then, the specter of the Islamic State expansion became a top order concern for the Afghan government and coalition forces, and since mid-2015, tremendous resources have been expended trying to eliminate the ISKP from every corner in Afghanistan. But their efforts to weaken the group have produced uneven results.<sup>e</sup> This leveraging of resources may have unintentionally strengthened Afghan Taliban factions who were otherwise bogged down fighting against the ISKP, however. The Taliban appeared to maximize the notoriety of the ISKP brand, and thus the Afghan government's zeal in countering the group, by labeling rivals as belonging to the group. General John Nicholson, the top U.S. commander in Afghanistan, estimated in September 2016 that the ISKP could field a fighting force of 1,200 to 1,300, most of whom were former Pakistani militants affiliated with the TTP and remnants of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU).<sup>24</sup>

Ongoing fighting between the ISKP and Taliban continued throughout 2016 and 2017, with the former nearly overrunning the notorious Tora Bora cave complex in June 2017, an area where al-Qa`ida leader Usama bin Ladin escaped from after 9/11.<sup>25</sup>

The ISKP suffered numerous blows to its leadership after its inception, however, including the loss of three of its *walis*.<sup>f</sup> In February 2017, General Nicholson reported that Afghan and coalition forces had succeeded in reducing the ISKP's number of fighters by almost half and its territory by two-thirds, and had eliminated the ISKP's top 14 leaders.<sup>26</sup> Though the ISKP has borne the brunt of numerous Afghan and coalition offensives since 2016, including an

d The Ishaqzai tribe belongs to the Panjpai tribal component of the Durrani Pashtun Confederation, and its members are predominantly found living in Farah, Kandahar, and Helmand provinces. The Taliban has had several influential Ishaqzai leaders among its upper echelon, including deceased Taliban Amir Akhtar Mansur, Taliban Financial Commission Chairman Gul Agha, and the powerful Taliban shadow governor for Helmand Province Mullah Abdul Manan. "Ishaqzai Tribe," Tribal Analysis Center, November 2009; Matthew C. DuPée, "The Taliban Stones Commission and the Insurgent Windfall from Illegal Mining," *CTC Sentinel* 10:3 (2017).

e For instance, while initial successful operations against ISKP in 2015 forced ISKP leadership to consolidate its forces and move them from Farah, Helmand, and other areas to Nangarhar Province, ISKP has since weathered leadership decapitation strikes and several offensives launched against it. As of January 2018, ISKP still remains very active in the eastern provinces of Nangarhar and Kunar, has succeeded in establishing a second front in the northwestern Jowzjan province, and still orchestrates and carries out suicide attacks in Kabul City. Dan Lamothe, "U.S. Service Member Killed, 4 Wounded in Afghanistan Combat," *Washington Post*, January 2, 2018; "Deadly Suicide Blast Hits Afghan Capital," Al Jazeera, January 5, 2018.

f Hafiz Sayed Khan was killed in July 2016, Abdul Hasib in April 2017, and Abu Sayed in July 2017. "ISIS-K Leader Killed in Afghanistan," DoD News, Defense Media Activity, July 14, 2017.



operation in which the U.S. military detonated a Massive Ordnance Air Blast (MOAB) munition against an ISKP tunnel complex in Nangarhar,<sup>27</sup> it continues to maintain a fighting presence of approximately 2,000 fighters, according to the Afghan Chief of Army Staff in December 2017.<sup>28</sup> Approximating the actual troop strength of ISKP is a rather difficult task, though the group's fighting force in early 2018 probably numbers at least 1,000 to 1,200 fighters, a figure much smaller than the 20,000 fighter's ISKP claimed it had in October 2017.<sup>29</sup> The ISKP continues its urban terror campaign in Kabul, including 10 complex attacks in 2017 mostly targeting Shi'a mosques and cultural centers in an attempt at fomenting sectarian conflict.<sup>30</sup> Presently, the ISKP also remains capable of battling the Afghan Taliban and Afghan security forces in Kunar, Nangarhar, Ghor, Faryab, and Jowzjan provinces despite pressures against it from the Afghan government, coalition forces, and the Taliban.<sup>31</sup>

Of the various internal divisions and fractures the Taliban faces, the ISKP remains the biggest military and ideological threats to the organization and its dominance over rural Afghanistan, so much so that the Taliban has often exaggerated claims and spread rumors that rival commanders have defected to the ISKP in hopes that Afghan and coalition forces will respond by targeting and eliminating such commanders. For instance, after the Taliban failed to reconcile with former Afghan Taliban commander Mullah Mansour Dadullah in the summer of 2015, the Taliban publicly accused Dadullah of defecting to the Islamic State<sup>g</sup> in an attempt to erode Dadullah's local support and to entice the Afghan government and coalition forces into targeting Dadullah and his followers. Dadullah released a statement in September 2017 denying he had pledged fealty to the Islamic State, calling such claims "propaganda."<sup>32</sup>

### The Islamic Emirate High Council of Afghanistan

After the Afghan Taliban split in July 2015, Mullah Mohammad Rasoul, a Noorzai who had long served as the Taliban shadow governor of Nimroz Province and who had a long history of working closely with Mullah Omar, led a cabal of disaffected and disenfranchised Taliban officials and commanders in opposition to Mansoor's Taliban.<sup>33</sup>

Rasoul announced the formation of his Taliban faction, known as the Islamic Emirate High Council of Afghanistan (IEHCA), and appointed the IEHCA's leadership council in early November 2015.<sup>34</sup> Reportedly 6,000 fighters gathered to listen to Rasoul's call to arms in Farah Province, in which Rasoul denounced Mansoor for "hijacking" the Taliban movement.<sup>35</sup> The IEHCA comprised mostly of Noorzai Pashtun Taliban commanders loyal to Rasoul and was active in Herat, Nimroz, and Farah provinces and in parts of Badghis, Ghor, Helmand, and Kandahar provinces. Rasoul appointed former Taliban-era Governor of Herat Province Mullah Abdul Manan Niazi as the IEHCA's chief spokesman and political deputy, and the aforementioned Mullah Mansour Dadullah

became the IEHCA's deputy leader.<sup>36</sup> Dadullah, a Kakar Pashtun<sup>h</sup> and former senior Afghan Taliban leader, had long opposed Mansoor and had opened his own military front against the Taliban in southeastern Zabul Province in August 2015, prior to being named IEHCA's deputy leader. Between August 2015 and May 2016, the Taliban found themselves at war with the IEHCA in multiple provinces, including Herat, Farah, Helmand, Badghis, Ghor, and Zabul. Although the Taliban killed Dadullah and several of his top commanders in mid-November 2015, subsequent battles between the IEHCA and the Taliban between November 2015 and May 2016 killed approximately 166 Taliban and 67 IEHCA fighters, with hundreds more wounded on both sides.<sup>37</sup>

In February 2016, Obaidullah Hunar, a Kakar Pashtun affiliated with the Haqqani Network and an associate of Dadullah who had defected from the Taliban following their killing of Dadullah, issued a statement refusing to acknowledge Mansoor as the legitimate leader of the Taliban and initiated clashes with the Haqqani Network, killing as many as 18 Haqqani fighters, including the Taliban shadow chief for Urgan District named Hizbullah.<sup>38</sup> Hunar most likely defected shortly after the Taliban siege against Mansour Dadullah and his Kakar associates in Zabul, though Hunar announced the formation of the Islamic Movement of Afghanistan in February 2016, a Taliban splinter faction comprised of many Kakar Pashtuns loyal to Dadullah and the IEHCA. The Taliban responded swiftly by killing Hunar in a suicide bombing within a week of the Islamic Movement of Afghanistan's creation, though some 70 fighters on both sides had been killed before the clashes subsided.<sup>39</sup>



*Obaidullah Hunar (right) appeared in a propaganda video announcing the formation of the Islamic Movement of Afghanistan in early February 2016 shortly before he was killed in a suicide attack. (Image source: "New Taliban Faction Emerges In Paktika," Tolo News, February 15, 2016.)*

The IEHCA continued to pressure the Taliban in southwestern Afghanistan throughout 2016. However, the loss of Mansour Dadullah, Obaidullah Hunar, and the defection of Maulavi Baz Mohammad Noorzai back to the Taliban imperiled the IEHCA.<sup>i</sup> In

g The Taliban released a statement in Pashto on the Al Emara website on February 12, 2015, that described how Dadullah had pledged allegiance to the Islamic State. Despite the Taliban's attempt at negotiating with Dadullah to surrender, Dadullah chose to fight, resulting in his death in November 2015. The statement was titled "Second Detailed Statement Released by Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan About Da'esh (IMU) & Mansur Daadullah."

h The Kakar Pashtun tribe belongs to the Ghurghusht Tribal Confederation. The Kakar tribe is dispersed among rural areas of Helmand, Uruzgan, Kandahar, and Zabul provinces, and a much larger population of Kakar is located in the Zhob District of Baluchistan Province, Pakistan. "Kandahar City, Kandahar Province: A TLO District Study," Tribal Liaison Office, April 2011.

i Baz Mohammad defected back to the Taliban in August 2016 and was reportedly appointed as the Taliban shadow governor for Wardak Province as of January 2017. Sami Yusufzai and Jibrán Ahmad, "Afghan Taliban's New Chief Replaces 24 'Shadow' Officials," Reuters, January 27, 2017; Bill Roggio, "Former Senior Taliban Leader Reconciles with Jihadist Group," FDD's Long War Journal, August 10, 2016.



March 2016, Pakistani authorities confirmed its arrest of the IEHCA's overall leader, Mohammad Rasoul.<sup>40</sup> Although it has never disclosed its troop strength, it is unlikely that the IEHCA could mobilize more than 3,000-3,500 fighters across the seven to 10 provinces where it maintains a presence.<sup>j</sup> Despite crushing blows to its leadership structure, the IEHCA has managed to survive, albeit with alleged tacit Afghan government support, and continues to clash frequently with rival Afghan Taliban fighters in southwestern, western, and northwestern Afghanistan.<sup>41</sup>

To date, the most active IEHCA-Taliban battlefield remains the Zer Koh Valley, in Shindand District, Herat Province, where hundreds of IEHCA and Taliban fighters have been killed and wounded since the summer of 2015. The IEHCA in Herat Province is led by a former Taliban commander named Mullah Nangyalai Khan, a Noorzai Pashtun from the Zer Koh Valley.<sup>42</sup> Nangyalai commands several hundred fighters in Herat and frequently clashes with Afghan Taliban fighters led by Mullah Abdul Samad, a senior Taliban commander for Herat Province.<sup>43</sup> The fighting between both sides has intensified recently, and the situation remains tense as of January 2018 after Mullah Samad and several of his key commanders were reportedly injured and/or killed during clashes with Nangyalai's forces in late December 2017.<sup>44</sup>



*Nangyalai Khan (center) appeared in an undated IEHCA propaganda video in November 2016. The video was provided to the author in August 2017 by a source from Herat Province.*

### The Taliban's Three-Front Campaign

The Afghan Taliban remains a potent, lethal threat to the Afghan government, coalition forces, and local insurgent rivals. The Taliban

j Estimating the IEHCA's troop strength is difficult given the rate of defections, attrition, and deaths among its members. One analyst estimated that the IEHCA consisted of a fighting force of as many as 15,000 personnel. Khaja Baser Ahmad, "Rebel Groups in Afghanistan: A Run-Through," Pajhwok Afghan News, October 25, 2017.

have maintained significant momentum on the battlefield since the deaths of Mullah Omar and his successor, Akhtar Mansoor. The Taliban reportedly control or contest an estimated 13.3 percent of Afghanistan's districts as of August 2017, a five-point increase from the same period in 2016, according to U.S. military data.<sup>45</sup> However, the Taliban now face fighting a three-front campaign: the Afghan government and coalition forces; the ISKP; and a coterie of splinter factions, such as the IEHCA. The Taliban are now led by the cleric, Sheikh Haibatullah, who, though held in high esteem, lacks any noteworthy battlefield management experience. By contrast, Mullah Omar had leveraged his role as a symbolic figurehead during his tenure as leader of the Taliban and delegated critical responsibilities to highly trusted and competent deputies, and Mansoor's financial prowess and hands-on style led to more victories on the battlefield during his period of leading the Taliban. So far, Haibatullah's low-key approach and disconnect from influential field commanders has led to ongoing internal discord, especially in key battlefield areas such as Helmand Province where both the Taliban shadow governor and the Taliban military council leader have disobeyed Haibatullah's orders, reportedly even refusing to send locally acquired revenue streams back to Haibatullah in Quetta, Pakistan.<sup>46</sup> Haibatullah eventually had to purge and replace 24 Taliban shadow officials in early 2017 in an attempt to consolidate his chain of command.<sup>47</sup>

"Haibatullah is a simple, village-type mullah, very conservative and hardline, but he has no capability to manage the strong personalities of the Taliban Military Commission. His selection can be considered mostly symbolic, although it is important to note that his strongest lobbyists were Taliban commanders from Kandahar," an observer in close contact with the Taliban told the author.<sup>48</sup> By contrast to its ISKP and IEHCA rivals, who collectively could field a fighting force not exceeding a few thousand fighters, the Afghan Taliban most likely comprises of 35,000 to 50,000 active combatants nationwide at any given time.<sup>49</sup> Despite an exceptional numerical advantage, the Taliban have failed to eradicate ISKP from Nangarhar and other areas like Jowzjan, nor have the Taliban defeated the IEHCA in Herat, even though the Taliban have launched numerous offensives against both rivals. The Taliban have also adapted and innovated over time and now implement tactics and techniques seen from other battlefields, such as replicating the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria's usage of plundered government Humvees as vehicle-borne-IEDs (VBIEDs); highly destructive "tunnel bombs;" coordinated suicide attacks against hard and soft targets; high-profile assassinations; and magnetic IEDs.<sup>50</sup>

It should be expected that the Taliban's campaign of terror will persist in the near and medium term, and its campaign against local rivals shows no signs of relenting. However, given the continued infighting and fracturing within its ranks, it is yet to be determined how long the Taliban can endure waging a three-front campaign across Afghanistan. **CTC**

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# The Potential Jihadi Windfall from the Militarization of Tunisia's Border Region with Libya

By Anouar Boukhars

**Tunisia has increasingly relied on the military to bring security to its border region with Libya in response to a growth of jihadism in the region and the rise of new forms of trafficking in the aftermath of the 2011 revolution. But the current approach risks worsening the security situation and playing into the hands of jihadis. In the absence of a concerted program to lift Tunisia's southeast out of poverty, crackdowns on small-time, cross-border traffickers have hurt the traditional economy, creating an even deeper sense of marginalization at a time when a significant number of Tunisian foreign fighters who fought in Iraq, Syria, and Libya are returning to the country.**

Tunisia has made laudable democratic progress since the popular uprising that toppled longtime strongman Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali in January 2011. But economic instability and persistent social tensions, particularly along the country's fragile borders where smuggling and contraband with Algeria in the west and Libya in the east is often the only means of employment, pose significant challenges to the country's nascent democracy. With the decline of the Islamic State in several theaters of conflict, Tunisia faces the additional complex challenge of dealing with the return of hundreds of foreign fighters who traveled to join jihadi groups in Iraq, Syria, and Libya.<sup>a</sup> The fear is that these returnees will destabilize the country by bolstering domestic extremist networks. Such a prospect conjures up the specter of the decade-long armed insurgency against the Algerian government in the 1990s, when the return of Algerian veterans

a According to official figures, around 3,000 Tunisian foreign fighters traveled to Syria, Iraq, and Libya, but according to a report by the Soufan Group, the actual number may be more than double that figure. By late 2016, Tunisian officials believed that at least 800 Tunisian foreign fighters who had departed in the previous decade had returned from the frontlines. Richard Barrett, "Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees," Soufan Group, October 2017; "Tunisia says 800 returning jihadists jailed or tracked," Agence France-Presse, December 31, 2016.

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from the Afghan jihad contributed to the violence.

The response from the Tunisian government has so far relied to a significant degree on a mixture of heavy-handed security approaches and nothing more than palliative economic measures, which has further polarized communities and worsened growing youth disillusionment. The recurrent protests in Tunisia's southern regions highlight the deep discontent that residents in these areas have with the ruling elite. At a time when the government is playing catch-up against a continually shifting terror threat and with the menace of returning Tunisian foreign fighters looming, the prolonged disconnection between the state and its marginalized regions is dangerous, threatening to plunge Tunisia into a vicious cycle of violence. Such deterioration creates an environment that is conducive to extremist recruitment, organized criminality, and other illicit activities. Breaking this cycle requires the government to rethink its approach to its peripheral regions.

## Destabilization of the Border Economy

The fall of Ben Ali created a security vacuum in Tunisia's southeast border and disrupted cross-border markets and trade networks. Taking advantage of the disorientation of the security services and disorganization of the border economy, new actors expanded trading to prohibited goods such as alcohol and drugs. The Ben Ali regime had tolerated the growth of contraband as long as the traders did not engage in alcohol, drug, and arms trafficking and committed to helping the government protect the border from infiltration by arms and drug dealers.<sup>1</sup> The intelligence services also monitored the contraband and smuggling trade through placement of informants within these networks.<sup>2</sup> This was seen as a win-win approach to managing Tunisia's impoverished and historically rebellious periphery without assuming the financial costs and security risks of interdictions. In the absence of other options, the informal economy that developed provided people who had historically relied on smuggling and contraband a source of daily subsistence.<sup>3</sup> It also allowed the border police and customs service agents to supplement their low salaries by taking bribes in exchange for lax border oversight.

The 2011 revolution's destabilization of the contraband market, however, allowed for the creation of new opportunistic groups unknown to security officials and more willing to trade in drugs and firearms. The entry of new products and traffickers created a competitive underground labor market that made winners and losers. For example, the transformation of Tunisia into a transit point for the traffic of cannabis, stimulant drugs, and alcohol between Algeria and Libya affected the old contrabandists of legal commodities who saw a significant decrease in profits. The squeeze pushed some into the criminal marketplace to avoid financial insolvency.<sup>4</sup>

The proliferation of armed groups on the Libyan side of the Tunisia-Libya border has further exacerbated competition between rival traffickers (both tribal and militia-based) over access to border



resources. The Tunisian government estimates the number of Libyan armed groups operating on its border at 15.<sup>5</sup> Their competing economic agendas and political loyalties contribute to increased tensions and at times violent clashes over the cross-border economy. For example, in the Dehiba–Wazin border crossing situated near Nalut in the Nafusa Mountains, groups from the western town of Zintan have been trying to contest the dominance of armed Berber militias from the Nalut area.<sup>6</sup> Fearing the domination of Berbers over all major border crossings between Libya and Tunisia, Zintan militias have been supporting groups like the Si'an, which collaborated with the Qaddafi regime to monitor the border, before being displaced by the Nalut military council after the 2011 revolution.<sup>7</sup>

This kind of tribal and ethnic competition over border resources has affected the livelihood of Tunisians across the border. In Dehiba, a small town located less than two miles from the Libyan border in the governorate of Tataouine, Tunisians have had to adapt to the reconfiguration of cross-border markets and changing power structures across the border. In the past, locals could rely on trans-border tribal relations and social solidarity to smooth the passage of people and goods through the border. The unstable political and security situation in Libya has created economic disruption and security concerns for traders who fear being kidnapped or arrested by armed groups.<sup>8</sup>

The same dynamic can be seen in the protracted dispute over the control of the strategic border crossing of Ras Jedir, a coastal town that leads to Ben Gardane. After the violent overthrow of Qaddafi, Ras Jedir came under the control of armed militias from the nearby Berber-majority town Zuwara, which has seen control of the border crossing as vital to secure Zuwara's position as an important economic and military hub. Zuwara's control of Ras Jedir is contested by the brigade Tarek al-Ghayeb from the town of Zawiya 40 miles east of Zuwara along the coast.<sup>9</sup> This brigade is affiliated with the Madkhali movement, which is named after the Saudi Sheikh Rabi al-Madkhali and follows a strain of salafism characterized by doctrinal rigidity, hostility to political Islam and jihadism, and unquestioned obedience to those in power.<sup>b</sup> The movement has had a significant impact in Libya ever since the mid-2000s when Qaddafi invited Saudi salafi Madkhali clerics to help rehabilitate jihadis from the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG), founded in the early 1990s by Libyans who had fought against the Soviets. Qaddafi did this in order to brandish his religious credentials and counter rival groups attempting to derive legitimacy from religion.<sup>10</sup> Since his death, Madkhali groups have become critical actors in the

political and military conflicts that still engulf Libya.<sup>c</sup>

Madkhaliists have formed their own separate militias and fought alongside different groups. The ties of the various strands of the Madkhali movement to the different major players in Libya are reflective of a complex set of loyalties, including their primary tribal allegiances and religious loyalty to their sheikhs, particularly the fatwas that Sheikh Rabi al-Madkhali issues regarding the conflict in Libya.

Authorities in Tunis are worried about the strengthening of Madkhali forces on Tunisia's borders and the significant potential for Madkhaliists to feed on a deep well of anger in the border region at the persistence of social exclusion and regional disparities.<sup>11</sup> With the exception of the island of Djerba, a tourist haven located at the southern end of the Gulf of Gabès, much of Tunisia's border region with Libya is beleaguered by low levels of development and a woeful lack of basic infrastructure services. For example, the governorate of Tataouine, which has become a flashpoint for demonstrations against marginalization, has one of the highest numbers of unemployed university graduates in the country (58 percent).<sup>12</sup> Despite the large size of the governorate (25 percent of Tunisia) and its oil fields, which account for 40 percent of Tunisian production,<sup>13</sup> the region is held back by a lack of development on roads, hospitals, and schools.<sup>14</sup>

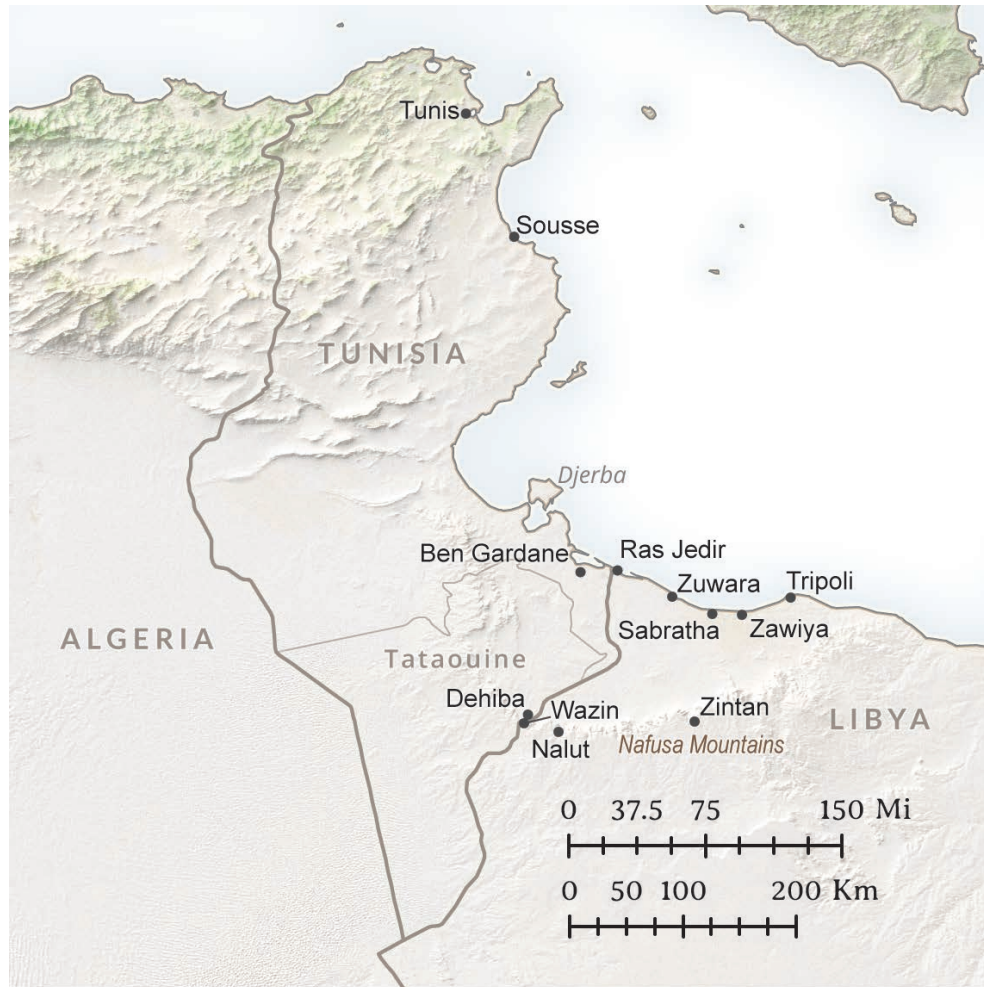
Similar problems afflict the governorate of Gabès, a coastal region bordering Libya that boasts one of the largest industrial zones in Tunisia. The region is choked by industrial pollution and plagued by unsafe working conditions, and the lack of access to hospitals and healthcare speaks volumes about the degree of marginalization experienced by local communities.<sup>15</sup> "Al-sha'b yureed al-bii'a-esseli-ma" ("the people want a clean environment") has become a common refrain during protests over pollution by the phosphate industry.<sup>16</sup>

With poor infrastructure and less-qualified workers than the regions along Tunisia's eastern Mediterranean coast, Tunisia's south-east has attracted less investment.<sup>17</sup> Bureaucratic hurdles and poor government transparency also hurt business development.<sup>d</sup> Per-

b The Madkhali movement emerged in the 1990s in Saudi Arabia as a reaction to the Awakening Movement, a Muslim Brotherhood-cum-salafi grouping of clerics, professors, and Islamic students who denounced the stagnancy and corruption of Saudi Arabia. Shaykh Rabi al-Madkhali mobilized his disciples to vilify the Sahwa clerics as heretical. Today, Madkhali and his followers remain staunch opponents of political Islamists and jihadi groups. See Frederic Wehrey, "Quiet No More?" Diwan (blog), Carnegie Middle East Center, October 13, 2016.

c There are a number of militia groups in Libya that are part of the Madkhali movement. In Benghazi, Madkhaliists have created their own militia—the al-Tawhid Brigades—which is allied with Field Marshal Haftar, a fierce ideological foe of Islamists and jihadis. In Tripoli, Abdelraouf Kara leads the Rada Special Deterrence Force that backs Libyan Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj. A third Madkhali militia is the 604<sup>th</sup> Infantry Battalion of Misrata. Ahmed Salah Ali, "Libya's Warring Parties Play a Dangerous Game Working with Madkhali Salafists," Atlantic Council blog, November 3, 2017.

d For example, in its two-year stint in power, Ennahda increased the public funds destined for the poorest regions by 30 percent. But extensive delays with infrastructure projects—due to both structural and political causes—derailed the government's plans. The result is that the amounts spent were less than pre-revolutionary levels. Conflicts between the central government, local representatives, and governorate authorities slowed the pace of investments and capital expenditures. The lack of coordination between the Ministry of Regional Development and the Ministries of Industry, Finance, Economy, Employment, Agriculture and Environment, and Equipment fragmented economic policies and led to each ministry pursuing its own interests and protecting its turf. In an unstable political environment, the governors appointed by the Islamist-led government faced dogged resistance from the local elite, unions, and regional administrations. Anouar Boukhars, "The Geographic Trajectory of Conflict and Militancy in Tunisia," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, July 20, 2017. See also Irene Bono, Béatrice Hibou, Hamza Meddeb, and Mohamed Tozy, *L'État d'injustice au Maghreb: Maroc et Tunisie* (Paris: Karthala, 2015).



Tunisia (Rowan Technology)

sistent rumors of hidden oil reserves and government collusion on corrupt deals with foreign multinational corporations led to weeks of protests in 2017 in Tataouine province that disrupted production and forced some foreign companies to close oil and gas fields and remove their “staff as a precaution.”<sup>18</sup> The demonstrators demanded a more equitable redistribution of state resources as well as a transparent and inclusive process to manage Tunisia’s natural resources. Tunisia produces only 55,000 barrels of oil per day, but a history of mismanagement and secrecy has given fodder to serious suspicions that the hegemonic elite and powerful lobbies of the coastal Sahel region are hiding the country’s natural wealth and funneling oil revenue to their allies through the patronage system.<sup>19</sup> The pro-transparency movement called “Winou el Petrole?” (Arabic for “Where is the Oil?”) that first emerged in 2015 quickly gained popularity with the youth,<sup>20</sup> thanks to its use of social media, highlighting the deep distrust and sense of abandonment that the southern and interior regions have toward the ruling elite and its heartland, the coastal Sahel region.<sup>21</sup>

Rising security threats have compounded these difficulties by exacerbating underdevelopment. The March 2016 attack by Islamic State militants in Ben Gardane resulted in an increase in border militarization to deter terrorism and stem the mushrooming smuggling trade. The government accelerated the construction of a 125-mile anti-terror barrier along its border with Libya. The barrier, which Tunisia calls a “system of obstacles,” is made of sand

banks and water-filled trenches to prevent vehicles and people carrying contraband from crossing the border.<sup>22</sup> While the Tunisian authorities’ focus on border reinforcement was understandable, it has deflected attention away from the socioeconomic problems in the region that fuel political discontent and social unrest. The result, so far, is that border residents whose livelihoods depend on informal cross-border trade and the free movement of people and goods tend to see the government as impeding the main source of revenue available to them.

Many of those living in the southeast are convinced that the political system, which is controlled by the northeastern elite, is designed to perpetuate their structural marginalization and exclusion.<sup>e</sup> This has especially been the case since the ascent of President

e The south of Tunisia has always been hounded by political exclusion and economic deprivation. From French colonial rule to that of deposed Tunisian president Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali, the southern periphery was marginalized and stigmatized as a zone of tribalism and unruliness. The French imposition of arbitrary borders and the confiscation of land and forced sedentarization of nomads in a region with weak agricultural potential disrupted the pastoral livelihood of the region’s population. The reaffirmation of this asymmetrical squeeze by Tunisia’s post-independence presidents generated an enduring sense of injustice. From President Habib Ben Ali Bourguiba’s authoritarian statism to President Ben Ali’s crony economic liberalism, the southern regions found themselves at the losing end of an extremely lopsided economy. Boukhars.

Mohamed Beji Caid Essebsi, whom the impoverished south voted massively against in the 2014 presidential election.<sup>23</sup>

### Counterterrorism Pitfalls

It is common for political elites in Tunisia to blame Libya for the country's security woes. After all, the perpetrators of the major attacks that hit Tunisia in 2015—the Bardo National Museum in Tunis in March (22 deaths) and a beach resort in Sousse in June (38 deaths)—were Tunisians who received training in Islamic State camps in the vicinity of Sabratha, a Libya town near the Tunisian border.<sup>24f</sup> There was also a Sabratha connection to the March 2016 attack in which dozens of Islamic State-trained Tunisians staged a dramatic assault on Tunisian security forces in Ben Gardane.<sup>25</sup> The deep connections between Libyan and Tunisian militants are further illustrated by the involvement of Tunisians in several attacks in Libya, including against the diplomatic facilities of both Tunisia and the United States.<sup>g</sup> In January 2015, Tunisian fighters participated in the attack against the Corinthia Hotel in Tripoli.<sup>h</sup>

The recent dislodging of the Islamic State from coastal areas in Libya has, in the short term, increased the risk that Tunisians who joined the group there will return home. One concern is they will seek to tap into the anger of communities in Tunisia's southeast for recruitment purposes. One study of the dozens of Islamic State-trained insurgents who staged the assault in Ben Gardane found that a number of the assailants were from the R'baya' tribe, whose interests in the border economy and land claims have historically been marginalized by the Twazine tribe, which dominated the local economy and cross-border contraband networks.<sup>26</sup>

Negatively affected by the turmoil in Libya and Tunisia's limita-

tions on the cross-border trade around Ben Gardane,<sup>i</sup> R'baya' contrabandists and traffickers found in the lure of violent extremism the opportunity to chip away at both the authority of the government and the town's established tribe of Twazine.<sup>27</sup> As the rivalries between tribes and smuggling networks expand, there is a risk that loose alliances among jihadis, traffickers, and opportunistic tribal youths are becoming a reality. Tunisian security forces successfully repelled the attempt by Islamic State militants to seize Ben Gardane and inflame a disgruntled populace<sup>j</sup> into open revolt.<sup>28</sup> However, the scale of the attempt and the collusion of some Ben Gardane residents who did not belong to the Twazine tribe illustrate that militant groups have the potential to exploit localized tensions, economic hardship, and locals' estrangement from the political system.

The government's current prioritization of building walls, reinforcing border surveillance, and developing the capacities of the intelligence agencies and security services is not likely to be very effective if it is not accompanied by a genuine regional development program and reform of the internal security apparatus and criminal justice sector. Border militarization has disproportionately affected the most vulnerable people who are dependent on trade in contraband and who lack the means and networks to circumvent border checks.<sup>29</sup> The most powerful and well-resourced smuggling rings now use the main roads, having secured the connivance of Tunisian border patrol agents and other security officials.

The rising militarization of the border has had the opposite of the intended effect. Instead of curbing criminal activity and the trafficking of harmful substances, it has created more openings for corruption. For example, the expansion of the role of the Tunisian army in securing the frontier regions has resulted in the armed forces not only shouldering the responsibility for fighting organized crime and stemming the arms and drugs trade along Tunisia's porous borders with Libya and Algeria, but also becoming responsible for the regulation of the cross-border illicit economy. The resulting increase in corruption in the armed forces risks tainting the image of one of

f A study by the Tunisian Center for Research and Studies on Terrorism (CTRET) concluded "that 69% of Tunisian jihadis received military training in Libya, and 21% in Syria" and a significant number of those who traveled to Syria first underwent training in Libya. Ahmed Nadhif, "New Study Explores Tunisia's Jihadi Movement in Numbers," *Al Monitor*, November 8, 2016.

g Tunisians were involved in the attack against their country's embassy and consulate in Libya in 2012. A Tunisian, Ali Ani al-Harzi, was "one of the ringleaders of the infamous Benghazi US Consulate attack in September 2012." Aaron Zelin, "The Tunisian-Libyan Jihadi Connection," *ICSR Insight*, July 6, 2015.

h The individual and organizational ties between Libyans and Tunisian jihadis go back to the 1980s' Afghan jihad when "Libyans alongside Abdul Rasul Sayyaf, the Afghan leader of Ittihad-e-Islami, attempted to help the Tunisians create their own military camp and organization." In the 2000s, jihadi groups from both countries collaborated to plan attacks and provide logistics to fighters willing to execute attacks in the Sahel, Iraq, and Europe. Zelin.

i After the 2015 terrorist attacks in Tunis and Sousse, Tunisia tightened its border security, making smuggling more challenging and riskier. In May 2017, Prime Minister Youssef Chahed launched his "war on corruption," which targeted the informal financial sector in the southeast, especially Ben Gardane, which serves as a major marketplace for currency exchange and supply of funds for informal trade. As noted by Matt Herbert and Max Gallien, the result is that this "security response to a complex economic issue, has not been tied to the formalization of the informal monetary system, but to the contraction of its capital base, further depressing the region's economy." The summer of 2017 also saw cross-border gasoline trade come to a halt, driving smugglers out of work as well as tripling the price of gasoline. Matt Herbert and Max Gallien, "Out of the Streets and Into the Boats: Tunisia's Irregular Migration Surge," *Atlantic Council*, November 27, 2017.

j Ben Gardane, writes Olfa Lamloum "is part of those spaces which are at the bottom of the hierarchy of places, to the point of being called on to prove their national allegiance." In a survey of 700 hundred people from Ben Gardane and Dhehiba, Lamloum found "that feelings of marginalisation (*tahmich*) now shape the self-image of people in Ben Guerdane and Dhehiba, with almost 90% and 98% of inhabitants, respectively, reporting a strong sense of exclusion." This, she adds, "echoes a history of marginalisation of Tunisia's southern regions and from the colonial period to the present day, resulting in a bitter sense of injustice, voiced by many of the inhabitants." Olfa Lamloum, "Marginalisation, Insecurity and Uncertainty on the Tunisian-Libyan Border: Ben Guerdane and Dhehiba From the Perspective of Their Inhabitants," *International Alert*, December 2016.



the few state institutions that still enjoys credibility and popular acceptance. It has also increased competition and distrust between the different services in charge of monitoring the borders.<sup>30</sup>

## Conclusion

The collapse of order in Libya has complicated the security and social situation in Tunisia's southeastern border region. The successive changes in the balance of power among Libyan tribal militias have upset the established order of the traditional cartels that controlled trafficking routes and border posts on the Libyan side. This has subsequently disrupted cross-border markets and trade networks. It also upset the traditional internal and external hierarchies of tribal power. Some of the dominant tribal elites and smuggling cartels have lost out to once-peripheral tribes and young adventurous actors who expanded trading to include previously prohibited goods such as alcohol and drugs.

The emergence of terrorism as a top national security concern has further muddled the black-market landscape, making it ever more crucial to distinguish between innocuous informal networks of cross-border traders and entrepreneurs of organized crime and violence. Tunisian authorities and the media, however, increasingly tend to lump all kinds of illicit trafficking together as endangering state security. In the absence of a concerted effort in Tunis to address the political and economic marginalization of the southeast, this tendency to criminalize the shadow economy is alienating the local populations and economic actors that the government needs in order to help manage the border. It is also aggravating the social crisis brewing in the south.<sup>31</sup> The turmoil, in turn, is hampering desperately needed economic growth as well as the consolidation of democratic reforms. At a time when Tunisian foreign fighters are returning home, these realities are also playing into the hands of the jihadis. **CTC**

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