

Combating Terrorism Center at West Point



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FEATURE ARTICLE

## Defeat by Annihilation

The Islamic State's all-out defense of Mosul  
MICHAEL KNIGHTS AND ALEXANDER MELLO

A VIEW FROM THE CT FOXHOLE

## Bernard Kleinman

DEFENSE ATTORNEY

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## FROM THE EDITOR

In our April cover article, Michael Knights and Alexander Mello examine the Islamic State's ongoing defense of Mosul. Despite the group's use of innovative and lethal tactics such as pairing car bombs and drones, it has been outfought by coalition-backed Iraqi forces, which liberated eastern Mosul in January. With Islamic State fighters now engaged in a final fight on the western side of the Tigris, the authors describe how the group continues to prioritize mobile defensive tactics to seize the initiative and mount counterattacks.

Our interview is with Bernard Kleinman, an American defense attorney who has been on the defense teams of several high-profile individuals in terrorism cases, including Ramzi Yousef, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, Abu Anas al-Libi, and alleged USS Cole mastermind Abd al-Rahim al-Nashiri. Mirroring the global rift between al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State, Kleinman reveals that almost all the prominent alleged al-Qa`ida figures in U.S. custody he has had conversations with since 2014 are disturbed by the actions of the Islamic State, which they view as corrupting Islam and illegitimately targeting Shi`a for death. Kleinman reveals his client Ramzi Yousef, who is being held in the "Supermax" facility in Florence, Colorado, recently finished writing a 250-page treatise theologically repudiating the Islamic State. Kleinman also weighs in on the Guantanamo Bay military tribunal process and the relationship between Iran and al-Qa`ida, which his clients have described as being driven by a "my enemy's enemy is my ally" logic.

That is also the conclusion of Assaf Moghadam who draws on recently declassified Abbottabad letters and court documents to argue the relationship between Iran and al-Qa`ida, while historically not without tensions, is best understood as a tactical cooperation that is based on cost-benefit calculations. He argues that despite the intervention of Iran and its proxies in the Syrian civil war, these calculations are unlikely to change anytime soon. Fifteen years ago this month, al-Qa`ida detonated a truck bomb outside the el-Ghriba synagogue in Djerba, Tunisia, killing 19, including 16 German and French tourists. Aaron Zelin sheds new light on al-Qa`ida's first successful international attack after 9/11, drawing on court documents and detention files. Finally, with concern growing over the Islamic State threat to Jordan, Sean Yom and Katrina Sammour assess the social and political dimensions behind youth radicalization in the kingdom.

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*Cover: A man walks along a damaged street in west Mosul on March 14, 2017, as Iraqi forces advanced in the embattled city and fought Islamic State fighters. (Aris Messinis/AFP/Getty Images)*

# Defeat by Annihilation: Mobility and Attrition in the Islamic State's Defense of Mosul

By Michael Knights and Alexander Mello

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**The Islamic State's defense of Mosul has provided unique insights into how the group has adapted its style of fighting to dense urban terrain. While the Islamic State failed to mount an effective defense in the rural outskirts and outer edges of Mosul, it did mount a confident defense of the denser inner-city terrain, including innovative pairing of car bombs and drones. The Islamic State continues to demonstrate a strong preference for mobile defensive tactics that allow the movement to seize the tactical initiative, mount counterattacks, and infiltrate the adversary's rear areas. Yet, while the Islamic State has fought well in Mosul, it has also been out-fought. Islamic State tactics in the final uncleared northwestern quarter of Mosul are becoming more brutal, including far greater use of civilians as human shields.**

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**T**he battle of Mosul is an unparalleled event in the history of the current war against the Islamic State, not only because Mosul is the largest city to be liberated from the group or because of the unprecedented size of the security forces concentrated against the Islamic State. It also unprecedented because, for the first time, the Islamic State has no nearby sanctuary to which it can retreat. Mosul is the capital of the Islamic State in Iraq, and the group draws significant prestige from occupying Iraq's second largest city. Unlike in Tikrit, Ramadi, or Fallujah, the Islamic State defenders of Mosul are genuinely cut off from escape; they cannot simply mount a temporary resistance and then slip away to nearby Islamic State refuges to fight another day. Mosul is instead a *Kesselschlacht* (cauldron battle)<sup>1</sup> in which the group is encircled and cannot hope to achieve a cohesive breakout at the end of the battle, as was attempted at Fallujah.<sup>2</sup> The end of the Islamic State's occupation of Mosul is drawing near, and it could end with the group mounting a ferocious (and atypical) last stand

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in northwestern Mosul.<sup>3</sup>

With at least one quarter of Mosul still under Islamic State control, it is too soon to uncover the full story of the liberation of western Mosul. Therefore, this article will largely focus on the completed battle for east Mosul that raged between October 20, 2016, and January 24, 2017. During that 97-day fight, the Islamic State defended an area of 500 square miles, including 47 east Mosul neighborhoods with an urban area of just under 50 square miles. In a previous study of the defensive style of the Islamic State, the authors observed that Mosul is probably too big for the Islamic State to mount a perimeter defense capable of excluding a large attacking force due to the group's relatively small numbers.<sup>4</sup> The authors also stressed the "tactical restlessness" of Islamic State units—the compulsion of local Islamic State leaders to mount active, mobile defenses that were disruptive to attackers but which also led to high levels of attrition within the group's ranks.<sup>5</sup> This update will look at what aspects of the Islamic State's "defensive playbook" remain the same and what aspects have changed to meet the conditions and challenges of defending Mosul.

## East Mosul's Rural "Security Zone"

Operational factors and the geography of Mosul shaped the design of the Islamic State's defense of the city. The bisection of Mosul by the Tigris River (and the likelihood that all five bridges might be denied to the Islamic State) meant that the group needed to build stockpiles of munitions, plus IED and car bomb assembly workshops, on both sides of the river. Mosul was always likely to be fully encircled during the course of the battle, and in any case, the rural outskirts are lightly populated with open terrain, making them of limited use as long-term defensive bastions (in contrast to the dense palm groves outside Ramadi).<sup>a</sup> These factors meant that the Islamic State could not hope to mount a long-lasting defense in the east Mosul outskirts. Instead, it employed an economy of force effort that bolstered small numbers of infantry with extensive defensive IED emplacements and prepared fighting positions, tunnel complexes, and mortars with pre-surveyed defensive targets.<sup>6</sup>

Some towns were "strong-pointed" to act as breakwaters against the advancing security forces. One example was Tishkarab, a small village nine miles east of Mosul, which held out for several days in mid-October against strong Kurdish forces directly supported by coalition special forces and on-call Apache gunships and fixed-wing

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a The terrain in the Fallujah-Ramadi corridor is characterized by dense groves and a sprawl of medium-density villages and rural areas. In contrast, the area in the Nineveh plains surrounding Mosul is characterized by relatively open terrain with small, scattered villages. The Mosul-Erbil highway corridor gradually coalesces into a continuous, built-up area of mechanic garages, scrap yards, and shops as it nears the eastern edges of Mosul.

airpower.<sup>b</sup> At Abbasi, 15 miles southeast of Mosul, Iraqi Army forces pushing up the Mosul-Kirkuk highway ran up against a dense cluster of bunkers, tunnels, IED-rigged obstacles, and an anti-tank guided missile (ATGM) ambush zone. The result was that insurgents dug in at Abbasi held up the Iraqi security forces (ISF) advance for several weeks.<sup>7</sup>

A final component of the Islamic State security zone outside Mosul was its intense drip-feed of suicide vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (SVBIEDs) into the strongpoint battles. In a single day in the third week of October 2016, the Islamic State reportedly deployed 15 up-armored truck bombs against an Iraqi Special Operations Forces (ISOF) column advancing toward Bartella, most of which were destroyed by main-gun rounds from the M1 Abrams tanks spearheading the column.<sup>c</sup> On the same date, Kurdish Zerevani forces pushing into Tishkarab ran into a stream of up-armored SVBIEDs racing toward their positions, including some large five-ton truck bombs.<sup>8</sup> Despite last-minute airstrikes called in by Coalition JTACs that intercepted most of the Tishkarab SVBIEDs, the tremendous shock effect of these high-yield devices degraded Kurdish morale and inflicted substantial casualties.<sup>d</sup>

The actions in Mosul's outer security zone were supported by the extensive use of operational and tactical smokescreens. Strongpoints like Tishkarab, Bartella, and Bashiqa were covered by a thick haze caused by scores of piles of burning tires. This obscuration was surprisingly effective because it made positive target identification more difficult and created additional hurdles for aerial weapons release under the rules of engagement prevailing at the time.<sup>e</sup> A broader pall of toxic smoke from the sabotaged Qayyarah oil wells and Islamic State-ignited sulphur piles at Mishraq covered the southern approaches to Mosul.<sup>9</sup>

### Outer Crust Urban Defenses

As in previous urban battles in Ramadi and Fallujah in 2015-2016, the Islamic State's defense of Mosul was concentrated along a defensive "crust" roughly two to three kilometers (one to two miles) in depth running along the outer neighborhoods of city. In east Mosul, the Islamic State defensive belt ran from the al-Sukar and al-Hadba residential districts in the north through al-Tahrir, Zahra'a (just northeast of al-Bakir on the map), Samah, and the densely built up al-Karama district, where the Erbil highway enters Mosul, then

flowing down to al-Intisar and Sumer in the south.<sup>10</sup> In west Mosul, this defensive belt ran from the Tanak (area just west of al-Yarmuk on the map) and Tal al-Ruman districts, where the highway from the Islamic State stronghold at Muhallabiyah enters the city, down to the Wadi Hajar and Jawsaq neighborhoods north of Mosul airport and the Camp Ghizlani military complex.<sup>11</sup> The Islamic State clearly had an accurate appreciation of the vectors from which the assault on Mosul were most likely to come (and subsequently did).

In these districts, the Islamic State used the months preceding the ISF assault to build up defensive zones covering several contiguous urban blocks. Local residents were ejected,<sup>f</sup> and the outer neighborhoods were honeycombed with prepared fighting positions and caches of explosives and ammunition. Insurgents "mouse-holed" rows of houses to allow them to move rapidly between buildings while evading airstrikes.<sup>12</sup> The urban equivalent of tunnels, this mouse-holing signaled the Islamic State's intent to fight a battle of movement within neighborhoods, including the re-infiltration of areas cleared by the security forces. Small four- to five-man squads, usually with one heavy machine-gun and one RPG gunner, were distributed every few hundred meters of frontline, grouped into platoon-sized 20- to 30-man neighborhood fighting cells. These cells drew on the extensive network of pre-positioned ammunition caches to sustain their local fights.<sup>13</sup>

Unlike in Ramadi, which was marked by high-density improvised minefields made of IEDs, insurgents do not appear to have made extensive use of static IEDs in urban Mosul. As in Fallujah, the lack of dense IED minefields in Mosul city was probably due to the civilian population still in place and the high volume of civilian traffic until the very start of the battle.<sup>g</sup> The lack of improvised minefields could have also been a reflection of changing ISF tactics in the battles before Mosul, where motorized infantry units bypassed IED minefields and moved on to their objectives, leaving such devices to be cleared by follow-on forces. Other static defense features used by the Islamic State also did not greatly impact the Mosul battle. In east Mosul, the group constructed a new earthen berm that ran along the edge of the urban area, while in southwest Mosul the group built a more substantial berm line that traced the path of the old Saddam-era anti-tank trench, which had been improved by the coalition in 2008. Roads were obstructed by roadblocks, including T-wall barriers, parked cars, and rubble berms. These obstacles did not greatly aid the defense and were only effective when they were covered by fire, typically snipers, mortars, or anti-tank weapons.

Islamic State anti-tank defenses were particularly effective in

b Author Michael Knights observed the Tishkarab battle from Peshmerga and U.S. positions, including discussions between U.S. Joint Terminal Attack Controllers.

c The authors' synthesis of open source reporting, with duplicates removed, resulted in 15 separate credible claims of car bombs detonating on the eastern axis. (Indeed, one author heard multiple car bombs detonating per hour over a four-hour period on that axis in late October). Also see Bryan Denton, "ISIS Sent Four Car Bombs. The Last One Hit Me," *New York Times*, October 26, 2016.

d Most VBIEDs deployed in the east Mosul fight were SUVs or pickup trucks, capable of carrying around 500-750 kg of explosives. The charges are mostly built from large barrels or jugs filled with ammonium-based homemade explosives, sometimes boosted with military high explosives, anti-tank mines, and propane tanks. See Conflict Armament Research, "Tracing the supply of components used in Islamic State IEDs: Evidence from a 20-month investigation in Iraq and Syria," February 2016.

e Author Michael Knights observed the thickness of the smokescreen over the eastern axis and spoke to coalition and Kurdish officers about the difficulties the smokescreen caused.

f In an earlier *CTC Sentinel* article, "The Cult of the Offensive," the authors explained that the Islamic State's approach to Mosul's civilian population was hard to predict and should be intensively studied. For most of the battle, the Islamic State has made surprisingly little use of civilians as "human shields" in the urban battle, though as its defensive pocket shrinks in northwest Mosul, there are signs of explicit gathering of civilians at strong-pointed buildings and VBIED storage sites. See "Press Release on civilian casualties in west Mosul," Joint Operations Command – War Media Cell, Republic of Iraq, March 27, 2017.

g In the defensive layout seen in Fallujah, Iraqi forces found IEDs were rare in the interior of the city after breaking through the outer belt of IED minefields and defensive fighting positions. Joel Wing, "Iraq Gains Big Victory Over Islamic State In Fallujah In Record Time," *Musings on Iraq*, June 20, 2016.

the rural belts and at the outer edge of Mosul city.<sup>h</sup> Humvee columns spearheaded by M1 Abrams tanks ran into a dug-in, firmly anchored Islamic State defense supported by urban anti-tank guided missile (ATGM) positions. The Islamic State seems to have saved up a large stock of ATGM ammunition and distributed it throughout concealed positions in the outlying villages and outer edges of the city neighborhoods, turning the peripheries of Mosul city into ATGM ambush zones.<sup>i</sup> The flurry of ATGM strikes against buttoned-down tanks during the initial probes into east Mosul made the Iraqi Army reluctant to push its armor further into the urban area, leaving columns of soft-skinned Humvees to advance without armor support.<sup>14</sup> The Islamic State achieved an important goal for much of the east Mosul battle: to separate enemy tanks and infantry from cooperating in the street-to-street fighting.

### Defending the Mid-Density Inner City

The Islamic State could not prevent the security forces from penetrating into the city, whereupon the nature of the defense changed again. The Islamic State adopted a mobile defense after being evicted from the fortified outer crust of east Mosul. This mobile defense consisted of aggressive and well-supported counterattacks against exposed ISF penetrations—a continuation of the “tactical restlessness” observed by the authors in their earlier piece on the group’s “defensive playbook.”<sup>15</sup> Small squad and platoon-sized teams of insurgent fighters repeatedly infiltrated cleared areas and launched night counterattacks and ambushes, frequently exploiting low-visibility weather conditions, including heavy rain and dust storms.<sup>j</sup>

In some cases, ISF columns penetrated into the urban area but were then broken up and isolated in a series of large ambushes in the urban interior. In late October 2016, a column of the Iraqi Special Operations Forces (ISOF) Salahuddin Regional Commando Battalion ran into a large ambush in the Karkukli neighborhood after penetrating about two miles into east Mosul. As documented by a CNN film crew, the unit was ambushed, isolated, and under sustained attack for over 24 hours, suffering heavy personnel and vehicle losses.<sup>16</sup>

In early December 2016, an armored ISF strike force launched a “thunder run” from outer Intisar district toward the Salam Hospital near the Tigris. The column broke through to the hospital complex but was then hit by multiple suicide car bombs and intense rocket-propelled grenade and small-arms fire. The company-sized unit was cut off for over 24 hours, suffering heavy casualties.<sup>17</sup>

h The Islamic State had previously used ATGM “snipers” to pick off significant numbers of Iraqi armored vehicles south of Baiji in April and May 2015. The area is near Hajjaj, where the ISF main supply route passed close to uncleared Islamic State-held villages.

i ISF pushing up the Mosul-Kirkuk highway from Kuwayr reported taking daily effective ATGM hits fired from positions inside insurgent-held villages. At least one IA M1 Abrams was disabled by an ATGM during the initial push into east Mosul. The tempo of ATGM strikes tapered off after the first few weeks of the assault as insurgent ATGM stocks were depleted. For an example of ATGM strikes on Iraqi armored vehicles near Mosul, see Thomas Gibbons-Neff, “This video shows ISIS destroying an advanced U.S.-built tank outside Mosul,” *Washington Post*, November 3, 2016.

j In the first phase of the Mosul battle, 14 Iraqi special operations forces personnel were killed in a night counterattack by insurgents after clearing Bazwaya, a hamlet on the eastern axis. Nick Payton Walsh, Ghazi Balkiz, and Scott McWhinnie, “Battle for Mosul: The Iraqi Fighters Closing in on ISIS,” CNN, October 31, 2016.

Most recently, in March 2017, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Emergency Response Brigade of the Ministry of Interior launched a “thunder run” through Islamic State-held streets of west Mosul to reach the Nineveh Provincial Council compound. The Islamic State counterattack on the compound involved the use of Islamic State bulldozers (covered by sniper and RPG fire) to breach perimeter T-walls, allowing insurgent fighters to assault the compound. The retreating Federal Police convoy was struck with several suicide car bombs released from nearby hide sites.<sup>18</sup>

### The VBIED/Drone Nexus in Urban Fighting

The SVBIED was the “momentum breaker” most frequently used by the Islamic State to blunt ISF penetrations into the inner city. The Islamic State quickly learned that this tactic was much more effective in the dense urban terrain than it had been in the open areas outside Mosul. In the initial phase of the urban battle, the Islamic State was able to generate up to 14 SVBIED attacks per day, drawing on an essentially limitless supply of civilian vehicles looted from car dealerships or the local population, some even donated by residents.<sup>19</sup> Vehicles were converted to car bombs at industrial-scale manufacturing workshops dispersed around the Mosul urban area.<sup>k</sup> The devices were then moved to forward hide sites in residential areas, such as houses with garages or covered driveways, where they were concealed from coalition sensors.<sup>l</sup>

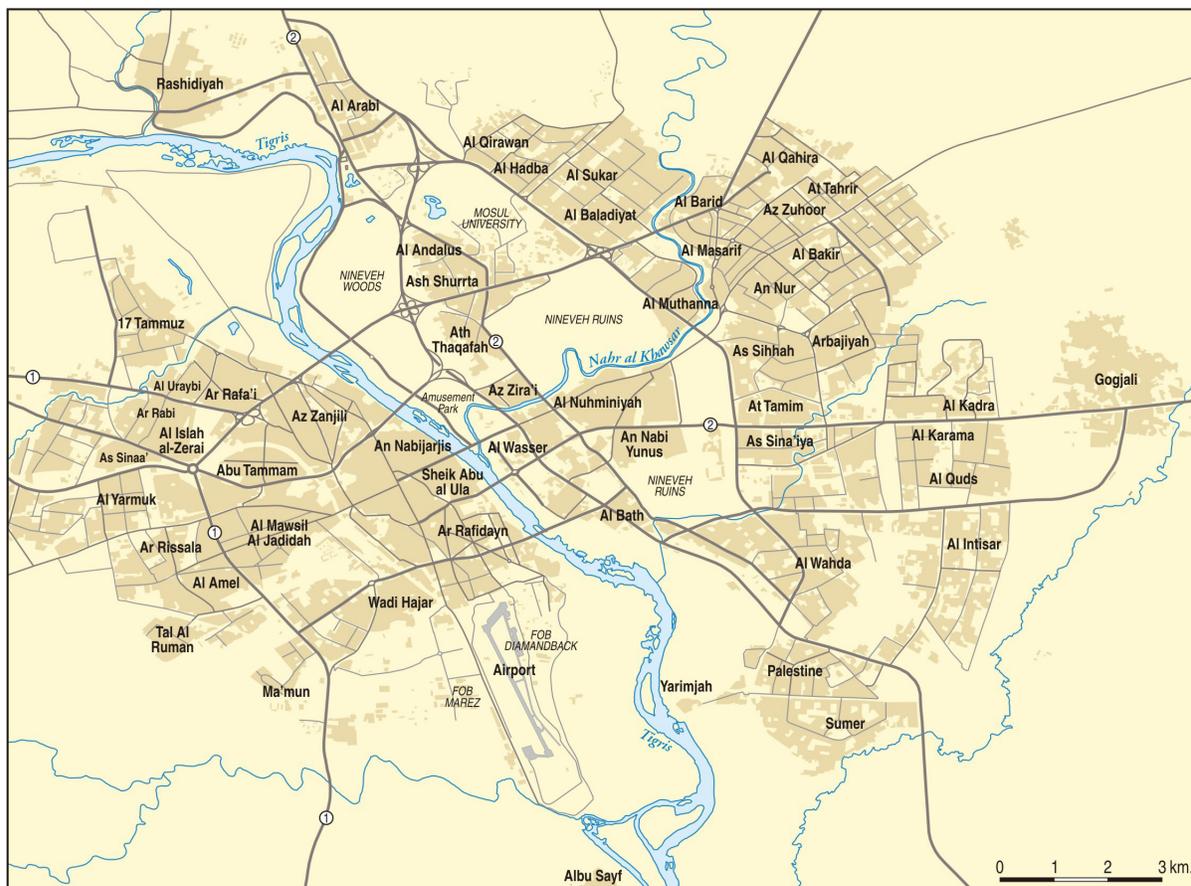
ISF columns moving slowly through the dense urban terrain faced SVBIEDs released from hide sites at high speed through narrow side streets to detonate against their flanks. The tight urban spaces dramatically reduced the ISF’s reaction times and ability to engage SVBIEDs with tank main gun rounds or anti-tank guided missiles, forcing security forces to rely on less effective close-range AT-4 rockets and RPGs.<sup>20</sup> In some cases, parked SVBIEDs were driven directly out of garage hides into passing ISF columns.<sup>21</sup>

The SVBIED cat-and-mouse game in Mosul evolved rapidly. The ISF blockaded streets with wrecked cars and T-walls, but the Islamic State stayed one step ahead by using camera-equipped hobby drones to bypass roadblocks and guide suicide car bombs onto targets using live video feed and radio.<sup>22</sup> SVBIEDs were also regularly sent out in pairs, with the first car bomb breaching any defensive berm or barrier, allowing the second to access the target.<sup>m</sup> Local Iraqi Islamic State fighters familiar with the neighborhoods were also sent out on motorcycles to accompany and guide in car bombs.<sup>23</sup> The Islamic State adapted to coalition strikes on UAV launch sites and control stations by switching to mobile UAV con-

k The main clusters of VBIED manufacturing workshops were located in the Gogjali industrial area on the eastern outskirts, the east Mosul industrial area (As Sina`iya) on the Mosul-Erbil highway, and the Wadi Iqab industrial area in northwest Mosul, marked as As Sinaa' on the map in this article, north of al-Yarmuk.

l Potential VBIED hide sites in residential neighborhoods were marked at the ground level with a spray-painted red circle to guide in drivers ferrying car bombs forward. See Chad Garland, “Stealth is Islamic State’s weapon against coalition’s sophisticated tactics,” *Stars and Stripes*, March 10, 2017. Some Islamic State tunnel complexes were reported to be wide enough for vehicles to access, suggesting car bombs may be also have been pre-positioned in underground hide sites.

m The Islamic State also used armored SVBIED bulldozers that were capable of clearing obstacles. For an excellent, in-depth look at the Islamic State’s urban VBIED tactics, see “The History and Adaptability of the Islamic State car bomb,” zaytunarjuwani.wordpress.com, April 26, 2016.



Mosul, Iraq (Institute for the Study of War)

troller teams moving around the city on motorcycles.<sup>24</sup>

The Islamic State also changed the visual signature of its car bombs. SVBIEDs were painted with dun-colored camouflage to blend in with Mosul's urban terrain and were fitted with improvised armor plating, allowing them to shrug off small-arms fire. By February 2017, insurgents had further adapted by "camouflaging" up-armored SUV or pickup SVBIEDs, painting fake windows and tires and bright colors to resemble conventional civilian vehicles in an effort to confuse ISF and overhead coalition intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR).<sup>25</sup> One armored SVBIED was even mocked up as a taxi, replete with an accurate paint job and exterior features.<sup>11</sup>

### Infiltration Attacks into Cleared Areas

A feature of the Islamic State defense of Mosul has been its investment of effort into the destabilization of liberated parts of the city. One method has been the use of SVBIED "deep strikes" into seemingly secure areas of Mosul. In late December, three up-armored SUV suicide car bombs passed through several cleared neighborhoods and hit a market and police checkpoint in the Gogjali district, a six-mile drive into the eastern outskirts of Mosul.<sup>26</sup> UAV route reconnaissance likely aids these types of missions by diverting car bombs around ISF checkpoints.

Even after the Islamic State lost all of its neighborhoods in east Mosul, the group continued to send night raids across the Tigris, linking up with Islamic State fighters still present in the east bank in an effort to disrupt the ISF occupation of east Mosul. In one case, Islamic State infantry crossed the Tigris and made a five-mile penetration around Mosul's outer southeastern edge to attack ISF rear areas. The Islamic State's remarkable tactical energy at the small-unit level has been sustained even through the ongoing fighting in west Mosul, where insurgent fighting cells have continued to undertake night raids and sniper attacks behind the ISF front lines.<sup>9</sup>

The Islamic State has also made extensive use of rocket and mortar fires against liberated neighborhoods to create mass civilian casualties and disrupt the return to normal civilian patterns of life.<sup>27</sup> Armed drones have now been added to this effort, dropping grenade-sized munitions on schools and humanitarian aid distribution centers to maximize civilian casualties and disrupt ISF stabilization efforts.<sup>28</sup>

Camera-equipped quadcopter hobby UAVs have also proven effective at attacking the ISF and have been used since at least the first week of November 2016.<sup>29</sup> The volume of UAV-dropped munition attacks grew from pinpricks to persistent harassment over the course of the east Mosul battle. Having access to real-time tar-

n There were also some reports of suicide car bombs disguised as civilian vehicles flying white flags. For the fake taxi, see the image at <https://twitter.com/AbraxasSpa/status/843490681331113985>

o One such night raid involving an Islamic State sniper equipped with a night-vision scope is described by an Iraqi officer in Susannah George, "In Mosul, a heavy but not crushing blow to IS group," Associated Press, March 14, 2017.

getting data, the Islamic State effectively targeted small clusters of ISF personnel, Humvees, and tanks during both the daytime and at night.<sup>30</sup> By February 2017, ISF were reportedly sustaining up to 70 UAV attacks per day,<sup>31</sup> and while these attacks caused few casualties, they were a sap on morale.<sup>32</sup>

### Assessing the Islamic State Defense of East Mosul

On one level, it is difficult not to be impressed by the confident defense that the Islamic State has mounted in Mosul. The city is large, with a 32-mile perimeter and over 70 neighborhoods. Well over 50,000 security forces took part in the offensive to clear Mosul, with two-thirds of these forces deployed to eastern Mosul. Persistent coalition surveillance and airstrikes supported the Iraqi forces, day and night.

Yet, the Islamic State never faced the full weight of the Iraqi security forces. The Kurdish Peshmerga were only asked to participate in shallow breaching of the security zone to a depth of two to three miles. In the view of the authors, based on synthesis of hundreds of pieces of individual battle reporting and imagery, the Iraqi Counter-Terrorism Service forces proved to be the only reliable and resilient attacking force. The various axes of advance were poorly coordinated. As a result, for most of the battle, the Islamic State could largely focus its efforts on just one out of the five main axes of attack—that of the Counter-Terrorism Service forces on the eastern axis. The authors calculate that between 450 and 850 Islamic State fighters were engaged at any one time in fighting in east Mosul.<sup>p</sup> Iraqi combat forces actively engaged in eastern Mosul city probably never exceeded 6,000 during the first 12 weeks of the battle, and they numbered considerably less during the first phase in November 2016.<sup>q</sup> Thus, the Islamic State defenders were never overwhelmingly outnumbered at the point of contact.

Viewed with clear eyes, the battle for east Mosul provides many lessons about the Islamic State's evolving defensive playbook and its strengths and weaknesses. The Islamic State has historically projected and sustained defensive power from the rural zones around contested cities, leaving the inner cities as an "economy of force" effort that relied on improvised minefields covered by very small numbers of defenders.<sup>33</sup> In Mosul, the formula was turned on its head: the rural operations were short-lived and not very successful. The inner-city fighting was the key, and thus Mosul may be the Islamic State's first true defense of a city.

The Islamic State rural security zone proved valuable to the defense in areas where the attacking forces were hesitant and easily deterred, notably against the Iraqi Army forces on the northeastern and southeastern axes. The incorporation of anti-tank guided missiles into rural strongpoints, covered obstacles, and outer crust

## "The Islamic State has fought well at Mosul, but it has also been out-fought in the battle and is on the verge of defeat."

defenses was genuinely effective in separating Iraqi motorized infantry from its supporting armor. But the security zone proved ineffective at delaying high-quality attacking troops such as the Counter-Terrorism Service, the most effective units of the Peshmerga, and their attached coalition special forces. Within just 11 days, the ISF had a secure beachhead on the eastern edge of Mosul city. SVBIED counterattacks, while fierce, were largely defeated by airpower in the open suburbs. Even the well-prepared defensive belt along the eastern edge of Mosul city did not blunt the ISF attack, which employed new tactics to bypass strongpoints.

As the battle spread into the interior of east Mosul city, the size of the battlespace increased, including both high-density urban neighborhoods and large tracts of open land set aside for archaeological sites and parks. In this environment—where Islamic State and Iraqi forces both employed a low forces-to-space ratio—the battle was mobile and fluid. This allowed the Islamic State to take back the tactical initiative periodically and to exercise the aggressive counterattacking instincts of its local commanders. The SVBIED-led counterattack regained its potency as a tactic in this environment, and the Islamic State innovated with its use of camouflaged car bombs, "deep strike" SVBIEDs sent into the stabilized areas, and the use of UAVs for real-time target and route reconnaissance. The Islamic State stepped up its long-range raids and armed UAV attacks, further indications that the group is never comfortable unless it is tactically on the offensive. All of the Islamic State's concealment activities—night-fighting, use of bad weather, smokescreens, tunnels, mouse-holing, and camouflage—are aimed at restoring tactical mobility to the battlefield under conditions of enemy air supremacy.

### Adaptation to Islamic State Tactics

The Islamic State has fought well at Mosul, but it has also been out-fought in the battle and is on the verge of defeat. A gradual opening of multiple fronts against the Islamic State is certainly one reason, drawing more Iraqi forces into the fight, but a more important factor is that the ISF-coalition partnership has adapted and partially neutralized all of the Islamic State's tactics.

After a series of devastating SVBIED strikes on ISF columns and clusters of parked vehicles in the initial phase of the urban fight, the security forces rapidly learned to fortify-in-place by using bulldozers to throw up earth berms, putting up roadblocks made up of abandoned civilian vehicles, and positioning Abrams tanks at intersections.<sup>r</sup> The ISF also increasingly began calling in "terrain denial" airstrikes to crater roads to prevent SVBIEDs that were stalking

p This estimate is derived from the authors' calculations of the size of the urban combat area, the number of simultaneous contact zones, and the density of the Islamic State presence at the tactical, neighborhood-level—as reported by ISF personnel and as seen in video footage released by the Islamic State. These frontline fighters were likely supported by an additional several hundred insurgents distributed among dedicated indirect-fire, VBIED, and logistics support cells, as well some rear-area security personnel in neighborhoods behind the frontline.

q The main forces employed in east Mosul on the eastern axis were the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and 3<sup>rd</sup> Iraqi Special Operations Forces brigades, plus some supporting Iraqi Army forces from the 1<sup>st</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> divisions. All Iraqi units are chronically undermanned, and an estimate of 6,000 combat troops present on the ground would be generous.

r At least one M1 Abrams tank was rendered inoperative in east Mosul when a car bomb drove directly into the tank. "ISIS suicide bomber takes out Iraqi tank in battle for control of Mosul," Associated Press, November 17, 2016.

their columns along parallel streets from ramming their vehicles.<sup>34</sup>

In December 2016, a series of coalition airstrikes selectively destroyed replaceable bridge sections and cratered access ramps on all five of the Tigris bridges, interdicting the flow of car bombs from car bomb factories in the west to attack zones in east Mosul and forcing the Islamic State to use up its remaining VBIED reserve in the east half of the city.<sup>35</sup> Airstrikes destroyed car bomb workshops and hide sites inside Mosul city.<sup>36</sup> By the first week of January 2017, commanders had begun to note a decline in the Islamic State's ability to generate SVBIED attacks,<sup>37</sup> which dropped from an average of 10 per day (with half striking home) to one to two per day (with roughly less than one in six penetrating to their target). Soft-skinned civilian vehicles with lower explosive yields were also increasingly common instead of up-armored trucks or SUVs.<sup>38</sup>

Attrition and more coordinated ISF-coalition operations broke the resistance of the Islamic State in eastern Mosul in the second week of January 2017. Coordination between Islamic State neighborhood fighting cells began breaking down under the pressure from the multiple ISF lines of advance, coalition airborne jamming platforms, and intensified precision airstrikes.<sup>39</sup> The shrinking Islamic State defensive pocket in east Mosul could not maneuver, lacked fortified positions, and ran out of car bombs.<sup>40</sup>

The volume of armed UAV attacks was also reduced when the United States deployed counter-drone jamming systems up to the frontline.<sup>41</sup> ISF and embedded coalition special operators also adapted to Islamic State route reconnaissance drones by monitoring insurgent two-way radio traffic and using Iraqi and coalition hand-launched UAVs to track moving car bombs and call in airstrikes.<sup>42</sup>

## The Battle Ahead

On January 24, 2017, Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi declared the complete liberation of eastern Mosul, 97 days after the operation had begun. The west Mosul clearance operation is ongoing at the time of writing and has seen fairly rapid ISF advances into a nearly half of western neighborhoods in its first 50 days, albeit

bypassing some of the denser old city areas whose narrow streets preclude the use of armored vehicles and fire support.<sup>43</sup> The advance has slowed as Islamic State fighters are compressed into the densely populated northwest of the city, an area two miles by three miles, where Islamic State tactics have become more desperate.<sup>44</sup> Iraqi and coalition tactics have also become more costly in civilian lives,<sup>45</sup> in part due to the Islamic State's increasing collocation of civilians with Islamic State car bomb hide sites, fighting positions, and rocket launch sites.<sup>46</sup> The Islamic State's first real defeat by annihilation, its first true "last stand" battle, appears to be now unfolding in northwest Mosul. If the other Islamic State capital, the Syrian city of Raqqa, were to be encircled, a similar last-stand battle might also ensue, possibly catching more Islamic State fighters in its net but guaranteeing a tougher, more brutal battle first to secure the city.

Liberation does not, of course, necessarily equate to security, and there have been ongoing Islamic State attacks inside eastern Mosul since January. Some of these are from bypassed Islamic State fighters; others are deliberate infiltrations across the river from Islamic State-held areas.<sup>47</sup> Drone-delivered bombings and indirect fire are also used to harass the eastern half of the city.<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, resentment is growing among civilians over the arrest of eastern Mosul military-age males in the search for those complicit in Islamic State crimes.<sup>49</sup> In both the eastern and (eventually) the western halves of Mosul, there is a need to develop and use a consensus-based security decision-making body that represents all the city's factions.<sup>50</sup> Residual Islamic State elements need to be combed out with surgical counterterrorism and counter-organized crime operations (as mafia-type activity is typically how the Islamic State and its forebears have rejuvenated after setbacks in Mosul).<sup>51</sup> The key risk is that Mosul's distance—physical and political—from Baghdad will result in the same neglect of local security dynamics that opened the door for the Islamic State in 2014.<sup>52</sup> Salafi terrorists have been defeated in Mosul before, only to mount strong comebacks in 2005, 2007, and 2014. The story of the Islamic State in Mosul is far from over. **CTC**

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# A View from the CT Foxhole: An Interview with Bernard Kleinman, Defense Attorney

By Paul Cruickshank

*Bernard V. Kleinman is an attorney-at-law in White Plains, New York, who has been on the defense teams of several high-profile clients charged with terrorist crimes, including Ramzi Yousef and Khalid Sheikh Mohammed. He was part of Yousef's defense team during the federal prosecution held in the Southern District of New York (SDNY) from 1996 to 2001 for the Bojinka plot and the 1993 World Trade Center bombing. Kleinman continues to represent him as his attorney of record both in New York and Colorado. Other clients include Wadiah el-Hage, who was convicted in the SDNY for the 1998 East Africa embassy bombings, and Mamdouh Salim, who was charged in connection with the attack but convicted in the SDNY of other crimes, including the attempted murder of a prison guard. Both Salim and el-Hage, like Yousef, are being held at the Bureau of Prisons so-called "Supermax" Facility, ADX, located in Florence, Colorado. Kleinman also represented Nazih al-Ruqa (Abu Anas al-Libi) between his capture and transfer from Libya to the United States in 2013 until his death from liver cancer in 2015. As part of the Guantanamo military commission tribunal process, Kleinman has traveled to the detention facility in Cuba. He is currently one of the civilian counsel to the alleged al-Qa`ida operative Ammar al-Baluchi (who is Ramzi Yousef's cousin), and provides assistance to the legal teams of alleged 9/11 mastermind Khalid Sheikh Mohammed (Yousef's uncle) and alleged USS Cole mastermind Abd al-Rahim al-Nashiri.*

**CTC:** For justice to be done, whether it's in civilian or military courts, it is a bedrock principle of the U.S. judicial system that those charged with crimes are able to mount a proper defense. How have you sought to gain the trust of your clients?

**Kleinman:** It's not always been easy. It is a matter of public record that some of those whom I have worked to defend include individuals with very hostile views against the United States and individuals who have suffered waterboarding, and other forms of alleged torture, while in U.S. detention. To establish a rapport and build trust, I find asking about their family and talking about my family helps. It creates a human connection. Only then do I start discussing the details of the case with them. I was downtown on the morning of 9/11 and saw what happened, and I was horrified and deeply traumatized like everybody else. But I never question my clients about whether they did what they are accused of doing because my role is contesting the government's case. And I don't discuss politics or religion unless they bring it up.

One client I have built a particularly strong connection of trust with is Ramzi Yousef, whose English is flawless. When we first met in person, at the Supermax facility in Colorado (ADX) after his convictions, he was extremely suspicious of lawyers because he was disappointed by the outcome of the trials. He asked me about my background and then asked me if I was Jewish. I replied that I was.

He then asked me, "How do you feel about the Palestinian issue?" I replied, "You know, how I feel about the Palestinian issue is completely irrelevant, OK? Because I'm your lawyer, and I've been hired to represent you. And my politics and my religion have nothing to do with the representation you get." He complained afterwards to the court saying he did not want a Jewish lawyer, but the court turned him down, ruling that under the 6<sup>th</sup> Amendment he was entitled to counsel but not counsel of his choice. Since then, over the last 19-plus years, we have developed a very close relationship—in person, on the telephone, and through correspondence. He's a prolific writer and must have sent me over 2,000 pages of letters over the years. Trust with clients is important because without it you risk getting blindsided when the government introduces witnesses and evidence. By building this kind of relationship, I can ask my clients specifics such as "were you in this and this place?" and "did you meet this and this person?"

**CTC:** Over the many years you have represented alleged terrorist operatives, including al-Qa`ida figures, what have you learned about what motivated them and made them tick?

**Kleinman:** Grievances over American foreign policy are a very strong feature. From conversations with Ramzi, and his family members and others, it has been explained to me that the root of a lot of this is the Israeli-Palestinian issue and the United States' support for Israel. Another key factor is anger over U.S. support for the House of Saud and presence, in past years, of the U.S. military in Saudi Arabia.

The religious dimension cannot be overlooked. They all have deeply held religious views and see themselves as defenders of their religion. This includes Ramzi Yousef. There were reports in the media that he had converted to Christianity while in Supermax, but he has made it clear to me he has never had any interest in doing that. Knowing him, it would be the kind of charade he would put on just to fool everybody because he has that kind of wry sense of humor.

In my personal interactions, I have not got the sense any of my clients are out-and-out religious fanatics. After all, they have accepted being represented by a Jewish attorney, as have any number of other accused terrorists. Another thing that needs to be stressed is these individuals are not 10 feet tall. Ramzi Yousef has, on more than one occasion, been ascribed MacGyver-type qualities, which is ridiculous. While they stand accused of terrible crimes, they are complex human beings with frailties and worries about their families' future. The clients I have dealt with are accused of horrendous crimes, but they are not psychopaths.

**CTC:** How have the alleged al-Qa`ida operatives you have represented viewed the emergence of the Islamic State?

**Kleinman:** They are almost all disturbed by the emergence of ISIS,

which they view as a corruption of Islam and greatly destructive to their religion. The alleged al-Qa`ida inmates I've spoken to do not see ISIS as representing the Way of the Prophet. That includes both convicted al-Qa`ida members and alleged members of al-Qa`ida, both in the U.S. and at Guantanamo, who have spoken to me about this since the rise of ISIS in 2014. You have to understand that whether at the Supermax facility or down in Guantanamo, they have access to news and watch channels such as CNN, so they know what's going on.

They have a problem with several facets of ISIS violence, including its sectarian attacks on Shi`a. The standpoint of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi is starkly different to Usama bin Ladin, who wanted the age-old schism between Sunni Islam and Shi`a Islam to be resolved. As it's been explained to me, bin Ladin did not automatically condemn individuals because they were Shi`a. It was more a matter of converting them to Sunni beliefs. In contrast, ISIS views the Shi`a as apostates who need to be killed, and that is something that has been impossible for people like my clients and other accused terrorists I have discussed this with to accept. Nor do they see the caliphate ISIS has declared as legitimate. And they don't believe that al-Baghdadi is really a Qureshi, part of the tribe of descent of the Prophet Mohammed, which he has claimed to legitimize his leadership.

Ramzi Yousef feels so strongly that ISIS is corrupting Islam that he has written a 250-page essay in Arabic with theological arguments repudiating the group, which he completed this year. His treatise is based on the Qur'an, the hadith, and religious commentaries. He utilized a lot of religious books to help him in his research, and he spent a lot of time on this. His hope is that this treatise can somehow be used to stop youngsters from joining ISIS. He has provided the document to me, and I have informed the U.S. Attorney's Office, who so far has not shown an interest in publishing or otherwise using the text. But Yousef has made clear he does not expect any quid pro quo. He knows he is going to die in federal prison, although of course he would prefer not to be subject to the Special Administrative Measures [SAMs] he is currently under in Colorado. But he has made clear to me that he has devoted his efforts to this project solely, and I believe him, on the basis that he believes that ISIS does great harm to Islam throughout the world. I think it would be a waste for the United States, or the West, not to somehow try to make use of this treatise. Of course, ISIS will make the argument he has been pressured or coerced to write this because he is in U.S. custody, but this is a theological argument being made by Yousef which, to some degree, has to be taken on its own merits in terms of the religious argument and the citations of the Qur'an and the hadith.

And if you can create doubt in just one wannabe ISIS recruit about the religious legitimacy of ISIS's actions, and by doing that save lives, then I think it would be worth it. ISIS, after all, has been lionizing figures such as Ramzi Yousef for years and other al-Qa`ida parties in custody, notwithstanding these individuals' inability to control what is written about them in their propaganda—for example, using Ramzi's detention as a recruiting tool in ISIS's English language online magazine, Dabiq. And that's even been used to justify the continuation of SAMs against Yousef. If the world knows the full scale of their distaste for ISIS, that might have some impact, especially because in the case of Yousef, this is his own writing, while whoever has been putting together Dabiq magazine has never met him.



*Bernard Kleinman*

**CTC: Is it only the Islamic State that they're worried about? Or is there any criticism of the modern-day al-Qa`ida?**

**Kleinman:** There's really no discussion of that. Their focus is on the threat ISIS poses to what they see as the true faith.

**CTC: You have defended clients in terrorism trials in Article III courts in the United States and as part of the military commission process at Guantanamo. How would you compare the two approaches?**

**Kleinman:** The first thing I'd like to say is for all the concerns about the military commissions, one thing that is not in doubt is the professionalism and dedication of the defense teams, including U.S. military personnel assigned to the cases, and here I'm talking about the JAGs (Judge Advocate General's Corps).

But there has been a through-the-looking-glass aspect of the military commissions, where you never know what the rules are. It's very difficult because there's still a huge amount of classified material that's not been turned over to defense counsel yet. And there are all sorts of issues that are classified that relate to alleged torture sites, for example, and what information related to such sites can be used.

There has been longstanding concern over the question of discovery. Even though I received a security clearance during a 10-month vetting process to be able to work on the cases at Guantanamo, a lot of sections in the materials we receive are redacted. And to compound the issue, the reasons for why particular sections are redacted are often classified above our clearance level.

Bigger picture, I can tell you, as inefficient as the Article III

courts may be at times, they're clearly exponentially more efficient than the military commissions. If the 9/11 defendants and the other defendants who are down there in death cases had been tried in Article III courts, the trials would be over and done with, and in all likelihood, either Khalid Sheikh Mohammed would have been executed or would have been serving a life term in Florence, Colorado. The cases in Guantanamo Bay have dragged on much, much longer than they should have. Some people there have been in custody for 15, 16 years, and there's no trial date really in sight. Although the Presiding Authority has talked about some type of trials in 2018, nobody really anticipates that will happen. I personally would be surprised if any of the current proceedings are completed before the 2020s.

After they caught Khalid Sheikh Mohammed and the others way back in the first decade of this century, I thought they would be tried in New York. That was a logical place, and I don't buy the argument about security concerns because there have been plenty of high-profile terrorism cases tried in New York. In New York, you have huge experience with this when it comes to prosecutors, with investigators at the FBI, with defense counsel who have tried these cases and understand the issues, and judges who have tried these cases and understand the problems that arise in them. One problem with New York might have been finding a jury without a personal connection to the 9/11 attacks, but you could have tried the cases elsewhere in the United States.

Instead, they transferred the defendants to Guantanamo and kept them there. And that, in a lot of ways, has benefited the defendants. As I said, I think it's fairly well-recognized that if they had been tried in Article III courts, the cases would be over by now. Somebody like the Boson Marathon bomber Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, for example, is much closer to being executed. But things just drag on and on down there, and as bad or as not bad as it is down there, it's certainly better than being dead—at least the way I see it—and it's certainly better than being in ADX—as they see it. Conditions down there are better there than at ADX, that's for sure. For example, Ahmed Ghailani, who was down in Guantanamo Bay before being transferred to the United States for trial in federal court,<sup>a</sup> has made it clear that he'd much rather still be at Guantanamo Bay than in Florence, Colorado where he is now, from the point of view of conditions of confinement.

I do not believe that any of the accused that I know who are being held at Guantanamo have any interest in being transferred to Article III courts. At the same time, they've had these legal teams and are familiar with their lawyers and their investigators, and they've gotten a really close relationship with them and they trust them. But at the end of the day, the Office of Military Commissions is the system that has been created by Congress, and that's the system that has to be worked out. I don't think the military commissions will be shut down.

**CTC: None of the alleged principal organizers of 9/11 have been convicted.**

a Editor's note: Ghailani was convicted in federal district court in Manhattan in 2010 on one count of playing a role in the East Africa embassy bombings and acquitted of all other charges. Benjamin Weiser, "Detainee Acquitted on Most Counts in '98 Bombings," *New York Times*, November 17, 2010.

**Kleinman:** Correct.

**CTC: What other challenges have you faced defending individuals in terrorism cases?**

**Kleinman:** One big challenge is traveling overseas to interview witnesses in parts of the world where there is suspicion against Americans or fear of speaking to one. At first, many assume I work for the intelligence services. One of the things that's helpful before going to meet some of these individuals is to Skype with them. That way, they know the person that shows up to discuss [the case] with them is the same person they've already seen.

**CTC: Based on your time with your clients, is there anything about the conventional wisdom regarding terrorist plots and attacks that you believe is wrong?**

**Kleinman:** One thing that is not sufficiently understood is that for something like the Bojinka plot for the people who were involved in it, they were propelled as much by the engineering and physics challenge as by the notion of religious duty or their political beliefs. I always felt that whether it was Ramzi or some of the other individuals I dealt with, that if they'd been recruited by the CIA, they would have relished the challenge.

If you think about the Bojinka plot,<sup>b</sup> this idea of bringing down 12 U.S. flag carriers over the Pacific simultaneously is an incredible engineering feat. You have Ramzi's perfection of the use of digital watches, timing devices, which was almost brand new in this area. Ramzi was extremely bright and inventive. You know, not just anyone can figure out how to make a bomb that's not detectable by metal detectors and goes off three days later at a particular time at a particular altitude, 12 times. That's pretty impressive.

That said, a number of the members of the first World Trade Center crew were really stupid people. I think the perfect evidence is that after the bombing, they go back to get their deposit back. This was almost like the gang that couldn't shoot straight. The only smart one in the group was Ramzi.

**CTC: Abu Anas al-Libi spent around a decade in Iran after 9/11. Based on your conversations with him and other clients, what is your understanding of the relationship between Sunni jihadis and Iran broadly?**

**Kleinman:** Abu Anas al-Libi left al-Qa`ida to join the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) in the early 1990s.<sup>c</sup> Nazih [aka

b Editor's note: According to the 9/11 Commission report, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed and Ramzi Yousef, while in the Philippines in 1994, began planning the so-called "Bojinka plot," the "intended bombing of 12 U.S. commercial jumbo jets over the Pacific during a two-day span." The 9/11 Commission stated the two men "acquired chemicals and other materials necessary to construct bombs and timers" and "cased flights to Hong Kong and Seoul that would have onward legs to the United States." Yousef was convicted in connection with the plot in a trial in the Southern District of New York. National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report*, 2004, p. 147.

c Editor's note: Anas al-Libi left al-Qa`ida after Qaddafi put pressure on the government of Sudan, where al-Qa`ida was then based, to expel Libyans. Tim Lister and Paul Cruickshank, "Exclusive: Senior Al-Qa`ida Figure 'living in Libyan capital,'" CNN, September 27, 2012.

al-Libi] was a member of the LIFG going back to its origins, which predate al-Qa`ida. He “joined” al-Qa`ida in the Afghan war to fight Charlie Wilson’s War,<sup>d</sup> as it were. He, along with most of the other Libyans, was much, much more committed to ridding Libya of Qaddafi than in the political/religious goals of bin Ladin. When al-Libi came to Iran, he was questioned but was then relatively free to move around. He and other Libyans lived in Tehran. They could go out shopping and take their kids to school. They had to live in a certain area, but there were not as many restrictions, at least on the Libyans, as some have reported. They were pretty much left to themselves as long as they didn’t engage in any political activity or any religious proselytizing. They were allowed to pray as they wanted and have their own imams.<sup>e</sup>

One might think it’s odd that many Sunni al-Qa`ida members chose to flee to Shi`a Iran after the fall of the Taliban. But dealing with the al-Qa`ida clients that I’ve had and having discussed the role of Iran with them, I think there is an understanding of a common ground and that is that both are the enemies of Israel and the United States. Al-Qa`ida members have found that both they and the Iranians can agree that “my enemy’s enemy is my ally.” This is different from the way ISIS views the world and the role of Islam. From the al-Qa`ida point of view, there’s a certain pragmatism. The Iranians, from what I’ve understood from my clients, have also seen the benefit. From the Iranians’ point of view, it has been better to have members of al-Qa`ida in their country not shooting at them than on the other side of the fence shooting at them.

Even today, despite the Iranian intervention in Syria, some of my clients are more hostile to Assad, who they see as a greater threat to stability and peace in the Middle East actually than the Iranians or some of their surrogates.

**CTC:** As recounted in one of the articles in this issue of *CTC Sentinel*, al-Libi wrote privately to bin Ladin under the pseudonym al-Subayi,<sup>f</sup> describing conditions while in Iran.

**Kleinman:** Yes, that’s correct. That was his pen name. But the description in that letter of his treatment in Iran depicted significantly harsher conditions than he described to me in private conversations. He had been really close to bin Ladin and knew him in the Sudan, and they remained very close on a friendship level. But notwithstanding the unproven allegations of the U.S. government, al-Libi was not a member of al-Qa`ida after the early 1990s and never swore *bay`a* to bin Ladin.

**CTC:** From your understanding, when did al-Libi leave Iran?

**Kleinman:** Around 2010. It was at the beginning of the Libyan

d This is a reference to George Crile III’s 2003 book by the same name, which details U.S. Congressman Charlie Wilson’s efforts to support the Afghan mujahideen during the Soviet-Afghan War in the 1980s.

e Editor’s note: Al-Qa`ida operatives like Sulayman abu Ghayth have said they and their families were confined to residential quarters in Iranian military facilities. See Assaf Moghadam, “Marriage of Convenience: The Evolution of Iran and al-Qa`ida’s Tactical Cooperation,” *CTC Sentinel* 10:4 (2017).

f Abu Abd al-Rahman Anas al-Subayi. See Moghadam.

revolution. There was no love lost between the Iranians and Qaddafi, and he believed the Iranians let him and other LIFG members travel back to Libya because they viewed the LIFG as useful in overthrowing Qaddafi. They understood that the jihadis who had fought with bin Ladin against the Soviets in Afghanistan knew how to fight a war. From Abu Anas’ point of view, getting rid of Qaddafi was always the most important thing. When he left Iran, he was thrilled to go back and fight in the revolution, and he viewed the West as allies of the LIFG because nothing was worse than Qaddafi. They had seen friends tortured and killed by this mad man. Back in Tripoli, Abu Anas wasn’t an active fighter, but he was very well-respected among Libyan Islamist rebels because he had a long and dedicated history in the LIFG. And he knew Abdul Hakim [Bel-Hage and other LIFG leaders].

**CTC:** Within Tripoli, was al-Libi someone who had the credibility to motivate people to fight?

**Kleinman:** Yes, which turned out to be the pro-Western fight.

**CTC:** His presence in Libya appears to have been well known. The United Nations was provided a street address for al-Libi in Tripoli by Libyan authorities in late 2010.<sup>g</sup> What do you understand about the circumstances of his capture?

**Kleinman:** When U.S. Special Forces captured him in Tripoli in September 2013, he was really low-hanging fruit. He had a routine. He went out to pray before sunrise. About six months before he was seized, he had actually gone to the Libyan Ministry of Justice to find out whether the United States still wanted him, because he knew he was under indictment. On whether he was going to be arrested, he was told no. He was convinced that he was yesterday’s news. Though he was under indictment for the East Africa embassy bombings, even in the indictment his last alleged role in that plot [editor’s note: surveillance of alleged targets in Nairobi] was four years before the August 1998 Nairobi and Dar es Salaam bombings (i.e. in 1994).

**CTC:** How do you see the threat of global terrorism evolving?

**Kleinman:** I think it’s important for the decision-makers, whether it’s here in the U.S. or Western Europe or Australia or wherever they may be, to really understand that terrorism goes through an evolutionary process, and how terrorists express their actions is going to change over time. There was a time when al-Qa`ida was more focused on clearly definable targets. That made a difference, whether it was the World Trade Center, which for them was the symbol of American economic power, or the Pentagon, obviously, or the bombing of the USS Cole, which was a military target. With ISIS, what this has evolved into is the completely arbitrary killing of individuals in both the West and Arab and Muslim world. That has made no one feel safe anywhere. **CTC**

g Tim Lister and Paul Cruickshank, “Exclusive: Senior Al-Qa`ida Figure ‘living in Libyan capital,’” CNN, September 27, 2012.

# Marriage of Convenience: The Evolution of Iran and al-Qa`ida's Tactical Cooperation

By Assaf Moghadam

**The relationship between Iran and al-Qa`ida goes back at least a quarter of a century, but it remains one of the most understudied and poorly understood chapters in the history and evolution of the jihadi organization founded by Usama bin Ladin. Recently declassified letters seized in 2011 from bin Ladin's Abbottabad hideout and U.S. government and court documents, however, have shed some additional light on their partnership. The existing information suggests that the relationship is best understood as a "tactical cooperation"—one that, despite the intervention of Iran and its proxies in opposition to al-Qa`ida in the Syrian civil war, is likely to continue for as long as the parties perceive the benefits of cooperation to exceed the costs.**

**O**n February 26, 2017, a U.S. drone strike in Syria killed al-Qa`ida deputy leader Abu al-Khayr al-Masri (Abdullah Muhammad Rajab Abd al-Rahman).<sup>a</sup> A 59-year-old Egyptian with longstanding membership in al-Qa`ida's shura council, al-Masri was targeted in Syria's northwestern Idlib province, where he managed al-Qa`ida's relations with its Syrian affiliate Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (JFS). Before moving to Syria, al-Masri, who was a close associate of al-Qa`ida leaders Usama bin Ladin and Ayman al-Zawahiri, spent most of the years following the attacks of September 11, 2001, in Iran. Iranian authorities released al-Masri in mid-2015 as part of a prisoner swap. Four other al-Qa`ida members were released along with him, including Saif al-`Adl and Abu Muhammad al-Masri, two senior al-Qa`ida operatives who are believed to have traveled to Syria as well, raising concerns among U.S. counterterrorism officials of a reinigorated al-Qa`ida in close proximity to

a This article draws from a chapter examining the al-Qa`ida-Iran-Hezbollah connection in the author's forthcoming book on terrorist cooperation. See Assaf Moghadam, *Nexus of Global Jihad: Understanding Cooperation Among Terrorist Actors* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), chapter 8.

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Western nations.<sup>b</sup>

The killing of al-Masri and the movement of senior al-Qa`ida members from Iran to Syria is the latest episode in one of the least examined and most poorly understood chapters of al-Qa`ida's history, namely its relationship with Iran. Recently declassified documents seized in 2011 from bin Ladin's hideout in Abbottabad, Pakistan, along with a review of additional material—much of it released by the U.S. Department of the Treasury—offer an opportunity to revisit an elusive partnership that links one of the most consequential Sunni terrorist organizations of the modern era with the Shi`a majority state described by the U.S. State Department as the "foremost state sponsor of terrorism."<sup>c</sup> This relationship, the author argues, is best understood as a tactical cooperation—one that goes back a quarter of a century and continues into the present.<sup>c</sup> The article examines the nature of tactical cooperative relationships by contrasting this type of collaboration from other partnerships between militant actors. It then examines the al-Qa`ida-Iran relationship based on this framework.

## Tactical Cooperation

Cooperative relationships between militant actors that adopt terrorist tactics—be they states, formal organizations, informal networks, or individuals—can vary significantly in terms of their quality. A review of the empirical and theoretical literature of terrorist cooperation suggests four general types of cooperation.<sup>2</sup> In descending order of strengths, these are mergers, strategic alliances, tactical cooperation, and transactional collaborations.<sup>3</sup> These four types of cooperation differ in terms of five main factors central to cooperative relationships: the expected duration of cooperation; the degree of interdependence between the two entities; the variety of cooperative activities that groups engage in; their ideological affinity; and the level of mutual trust.<sup>4</sup>

Mergers, for example, will score highly on all five factors. Two merging terrorist groups—take, for example, the Egyptian Islamic Jihad and al-Qa`ida, which merged in June 2001—will expect an indefinite duration of cooperation; full interdependence; coopera-

b To date, al-Qa`ida has not officially confirmed the presence of Saif al-`Adl and Abu Muhammad al-Masri in Syria. The release of the four al-Qa`ida operatives was first reported by Sky News and later confirmed by U.S. officials and online activists close to al-Qa`ida. "Terror Fears as Iran Frees Al Qaeda Members," Sky News, September 14, 2015; Rukmini Callimachi and Eric Schmitt, "Iran Released Top Members of Al Qaeda in a Trade," *New York Times*, September 17, 2015; Thomas Joscelyn, "Senior al Qaeda Leaders Reportedly Released from Custody in Iran," *Long War Journal*, September 18, 2015.

c Most recently, on July 20, 2016, the U.S. Department of the Treasury designated three Iran-based al-Qa`ida operatives who were considered part of al-Qa`ida's support network in the country. U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Designates Three Senior Al-Qaida Members," July 20, 2016.

tion on the entire spectrum of activities (operational, logistical, and ideological); full ideological affinity; and complete levels of trust. Transactional relationships are situated on the opposite end of the spectrum. They can include isolated transactions, such as barter exchanges, between two groups that do not intend to establish a longer-term relationship, that retain their full autonomy, and that may have divergent ideological orientations.

In between these two poles are strategic alliances and tactical relationships. Strategic alliances, like mergers, are “high-end” relationships that score relatively high on the five factors, but the partners maintain a degree of their autonomy.<sup>5</sup> Strategic allies expect their partnership to last for an extended period of time and, like mergers, expect to cooperate on multiple activities (spanning ideological and logistical) and frequently on operations.<sup>6</sup> These partnerships are dependent on a high degree of ideological affinity, although groups may retain differences of emphasis and interpretation in terms of their ideological or strategic agendas. They are also marked by a relatively high degree of trust between the partners. The relationships between al-Qa`ida and most of its formal affiliates, such as al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula or Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, exemplifies a strategic alliance. Breakups of strategic partnerships—such as the split between al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)—are oftentimes the outcome of a gradual erosion of trust.

Tactical cooperative relationships are “low-end relationships” that fall short of strategic alliances, but are also more intensive than transactional collaborations. Whereas strategic alliances (and mergers) are built to last, no such expectation is inherent in a tactical cooperation. Neither is a tactical cooperation necessarily based on ideological affinity. Actors engaged in a tactical alliance do not necessarily pursue the same strategic objectives, and they tend to maintain their organizational independence. Tactical alliances are not conditional upon mutual trust; on the contrary, these partnerships can bring together uneasy, even distrustful partners. A necessary condition for a tactical cooperation, however, is the perception of common interests—oftentimes the identification of a common enemy. Since such interests are subject to change based on shifting circumstances, tactical alliances can be uneven, even unpredictable. Because partners in a tactical cooperation entertain a variety of interests—some of which converge, while others may diverge—such relationships frequently manifest not only signs of cooperation, but also signs of conflict.

While there are significant informational gaps on the puzzling relationship between al-Qa`ida and Iran, the available evidence on the ties between these actors supports the conclusion that they should be viewed as an example of tactical cooperation.

### Pre-9/11 Cooperation

Ties between al-Qa`ida and Iran predate the 9/11 attacks by roughly a decade. Several accounts date initial relevant contacts to April 1991, when al-Zawahiri, then the emir of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ), secretly visited Iran. Al-Zawahiri had been a supporter of the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran and had hoped that Egyptians would follow the Iranian example and set up a theocratic regime of their own.<sup>7</sup> The Iranians, for their part, had celebrated the 1981 assassination of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat by an EIJ operative, Khalid Islambouli, and even named a street in Tehran in the assassin’s honor.<sup>8</sup>

On his secret trip to Iran, al-Zawahiri asked his Iranian inter-

locutors to support his group’s attempted overthrow of the Egyptian regime. According to former al-Qa`ida trainer Ali Mohamed, the Iranians granted al-Zawahiri’s request and began training EIJ members in both Iran and Sudan, while also providing \$2 million in financial support.<sup>9</sup> Al-Zawahiri also reportedly met Hezbollah commander Imad Mughniyeh during that visit and later sent EIJ members for training with Hezbollah in Lebanon.<sup>10</sup>

In late 1991 or 1992, the talks between the EIJ and Iran began to include al-Qa`ida. The discussions were the fruits of a growing friendship between al-Zawahiri and bin Ladin and were held in Sudan, which harbored members of the EIJ, al-Qa`ida, Hezbollah, and hundreds of Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps operatives during the 1990s.<sup>11</sup> According to the 9/11 Commission Report, these meetings resulted in an informal agreement between al-Qa`ida and Iran—and, by extension, the EIJ and Hezbollah—to cooperate “in providing support—even if only training—for actions carried out primarily against Israel and the United States.”<sup>11</sup> It included training in explosives and suicide operations that would later enable al-Qa`ida to carry out the 1998 U.S. Embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania.<sup>12</sup>

After al-Qa`ida’s return from Sudan to Afghanistan in 1996, Iran helped facilitate al-Qa`ida training and logistics in the Gulf region and helped the group set up its network in Yemen, thereby facilitating the bombing of the USS Cole in October 2000.<sup>13</sup> Iranian officials also frequently granted transit through Iran to al-Qa`ida members seeking to travel into or out of Afghanistan. Saif al-`Adl, a senior Egyptian al-Qa`ida operative, wrote in his biography of al-Zarqawi that al-Qa`ida suggested setting up guest houses in Tehran and Mashhad to facilitate the movement of fighters to al-Zarqawi’s training camp in Herat, Afghanistan.<sup>14</sup> Iranian border inspectors were instructed not to stamp the passports of the jihadis in transit.<sup>15</sup>

Among the al-Qa`ida members transiting through Iran were also no less than eight of the 9/11 muscle hijackers. While the 9/11 Commission found “no evidence that Iran or Hezbollah was aware of the planning for what later became the 9/11 attacks,” the persistence of contacts between Iranian security officials and senior al-Qa`ida figures in the decade from 1991 to 2001 raised important questions that the commission believed warranted further investigation by the U.S. government.<sup>16</sup>

### Post-9/11 Cooperation

Following the attacks of September 11, 2001, members of al-Qa`ida fled Afghanistan. While most of the senior leadership moved to Pakistan, Iran provided “safe passage” to many jihadis, as al-`Adl acknowledged.<sup>17</sup> These jihadis were part of a first wave of “Afghan Arab” fighters who, along with their families, entered Iran shortly after the 9/11 attacks. According to a statement provided by former al-Qa`ida spokesman Sulayman abu Ghayth to the FBI, they included hundreds of people, consisting of both formal al-Qa`ida members and other jihadis not formally associated with the group such as Abu Musab al-Suri and al-Zarqawi, as well as their fami-

d Former al-Qa`ida trainer Ali Mohamed, for example, testified that he provided security for a meeting between bin Ladin and Mughniyeh in Sudan; that Hezbollah provided explosives training for al-Qa`ida; that Iran provided weapons to EIJ; and that Iran used Hezbollah to transfer weapons. Peter L. Bergen, *The Osama bin Laden I Know: An Oral History of al Qaeda’s Leader* (New York: Free Press, 2006), p. 143.



A screen capture of Sulayman Abu Ghayth, al-Qaeda spokesman, and Osama bin Ladin released by Al-Jazeera in 2001. (0851/GAMMA/Gamma-Rapho via Getty Images)

lies.<sup>18</sup> A few months later, Iranian officials indicated their willingness to provide “shelter” to some two dozen al-Qaeda members, while expelling the other jihadis. According to Abu Ghayth, the reason for the expulsion was a growing resentment on the part of the Iranian population who were “not happy” with the growing number of Arab families “spread[ing] among the Iranian population.”<sup>19</sup> Whatever the reason, al-Qaeda members in Iran saw the expulsion as a betrayal.<sup>20</sup> This was relayed in a comprehensive report provided to bin Ladin in an October 2010 letter by a onetime al-Qaeda member who had been detained in Iran and was allowed to leave the country around 2010. The letter was authored by Abu Abd al-Rahman Anas al-Subay’i, most likely an alias for famed operative Abu Anas al-Libi (Nazih Abdul-Hamed Nabih al-Ruqaii)—a onetime Libyan member of al-Qaeda and a longtime member of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG). Al-Libi was indicted for the 1998 U.S. Embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania and died in a New York hospital in January 2015.<sup>e</sup>

In January 2002, one month after U.S. President George W. Bush’s State of the Union Address in which he referred to Iran as part of an “axis of evil,” Iran provided access to a “second wave” of al-Qaeda-linked jihadis and their families. Abu Ghayth, who entered Iran as part of the second wave, and al-Subay’i/al-Libi both confirmed that members of the second group were initially allowed to roam relatively freely. According to al-Libi, al-Qaeda members and associated jihadis found shelter in Zahedan, Shiraz, Mashhad, Tehran, Karaj, and other cities.<sup>21</sup> This relative freedom of movement allowed the group to establish a “management council” in 2002 that was charged with providing strategic support to the main leadership in Pakistan. The council would eventually include Saif al-Adl, Abu Ghayth, Abu al-Khayr al-Masri, Abu Muhammad al-Masri, Abu Hafs al-Mauritani, bin Ladin’s son Saad, and longtime al-Qaeda-

e According to the U.S. State Department’s Rewards for Justice Program, “Anas al-Sabai” was a known alias of Abu Anas al-Libi. It is also widely believed that following the 9/11 attacks, al-Libi indeed spent about a decade in Iran. Tim Lister and Paul Cruickshank, “Senior Al Qaeda Figure Living in Libyan Capital,” CNN Security Clearance, September 27, 2012. Editor’s note: For more on Abu Anas al-Libi, see Paul Cruickshank, “A View from the CT Foxhole: Bernard Kleinman, Defense Attorney,” *CTC Sentinel* 10:4 (2017).

ida-Iran middleman Abu al-Walid al-Masri (Mustafa Hamid), among others.<sup>22</sup>

Their relative freedom during 2002 and early 2003 allowed the Iran-based operatives to plan and direct acts of terrorism. In May 2003, for example, *The New York Times* reported that U.S. intelligence officials intercepted communications strongly suggesting that Saif al-Adl and Saad bin Ladin, among others, communicated with the cell that planned and executed the May 2003 attacks on a Western housing complex in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, using three truck bombs.<sup>23</sup> In October 2003, *The Washington Post* reported that many experts believed that Saad bin Ladin coordinated the May 16, 2003, suicide attacks against multiple targets in Casablanca.<sup>24</sup>

Starting in early 2003, the lax treatment of the al-Qaeda contingent in Iran began to change. Iranian authorities, according to al-Libi, started monitoring the al-Qaeda members closely, eventually detaining them over the course of 2003 under conditions that were initially harsh, but improved over time.<sup>25 f</sup>

In his letter to bin Ladin, al-Libi provided a broad report about the conditions of the “brothers” in Iran. He reported to bin Ladin that the Arab “brothers”—by which he means both formal members of al-Qaeda as well as affiliated jihadis such as members of the LIFG—were divided into four groups. The first group included mostly senior al-Qaeda members who had been detained in Shiraz, including Abu Ghayth, al-Adl, Abu Muhammad al-Masri, and Muhammad Islambouli, the brother of the assassin of Anwar Sadat.<sup>8</sup> The second group included members of the LIFG who appear to have been detained in Tehran. The third group included Abu Hafs al-Mauritani and others who were living in the Karaj area. The fourth group was apparently composed of those jihadis who were detained in Mashhad. Apart from these four groups, there were also “single men” as well as jihadis who were married (some with families) who were not detained along with one of the four groups. Of these, Abu al-Walid al-Masri is probably the most prominent person.<sup>26</sup>

Abu Ghayth told the FBI that he was arrested in Shiraz on April 23, 2003, together with al-Adl, Abu Muhammad al-Masri, and Abu Khayr al-Masri, and placed under “forced incarceration” in an “Iranian intelligence building in Tehran” for about 20 months. The detainees were then moved to a second location in or near Tehran, described as a 100-square-meter “military camp” that was “akin to a rest area for soldiers.”<sup>27</sup> Al-Libi, in his report to bin Ladin, referred

f The statements by both Abu Ghayth and al-Subay’i/al-Libi are the most important primary sources on al-Qaeda members in Iran released thus far. While both sources describe relatively similar conditions and suggest that conditions varied for individual members of al-Qaeda, the two sources do not always correspond in their description of dates and location of the detention of al-Qaeda and affiliated jihadi operatives. Given that the length of their detention and lack of information flow, it is not surprising that the dates provided by these two sources do not always match up.

g According to the comprehensive report of al-Libi, there were at least four groups of jihadi detainees in Iran. A cross-check between al-Libi’s letter and the statement provided by Ghayth to the FBI suggests that Ghayth was a member of the first of the four groups mentioned by al-Libi. Indeed, in recounting his experience in Iran, Ghayth seems to refer exclusively to the experience of this first group. Al-Libi’s letter is therefore more comprehensive in recounting the experience of al-Qaeda operatives in Iran than the statement by Ghayth. Ghayth’s statement, however, provides a large amount of detail on his specific group.

to this location as Sisast (Farsi for “300”) and suggests that it was a training ground for militant groups associated with the Iranian regime.<sup>28</sup> At that location, the Iranians allowed the wives al-`Adl, Abu Muhammad, and Abu Khayr to join their husbands. After six months at the second location, the detainees were moved to a third location that Abu Ghayth described as an “apartment-like housing without any windows in which they stayed for approximately four years.”<sup>29</sup> The third location was, according to Abu Ghayth, in a different section of the same military compound. During that period, they were joined by bin Ladin’s family, including his sons Saad, Hamed, Uthman, and Hamza, as well as the al-Qa`ida emir’s daughter Fatima, whom Abu Ghayth married in 2008.<sup>30</sup> Conditions at the third location were unsanitary. Abu Ghayth reports that some of the women developed “mental conditions” as a result and staged a protest. In response to the protest, the detainees were “beaten and tortured.”<sup>31</sup>

Despite the difficult conditions, some aspects of their detention apparently improved in location number three. The detainees were now allowed to have a satellite television, having previously been allowed only to read books. Nevertheless, Abu Ghayth reports that they were only rarely allowed communication with the outside world.<sup>32</sup>

After roughly four years at the third location, Abu Ghayth and the other al-Qa`ida members, along with their families, were moved to a fourth location within the same military compound—a “walled off area” in which each family had their own house with a yard, and all houses “surrounding a central court-yard/playground.”<sup>33</sup> Overall, conditions at the fourth location improved, but the detainees demanded internet access as well as better educational facilities for their children.<sup>34</sup>

The detention of al-Qa`ida members and associates notwithstanding, Iranian officials continued to allow al-Qa`ida to use Iran as a facilitation hub. Testifying before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on March 16, 2010, then commander of U.S. Central Command David Petraeus stated that al-Qa`ida “continues to use Iran as a key facilitation hub, where facilitators connect al-Qa`ida’s senior leadership to regional affiliates ... and although Iranian authorities do periodically disrupt this network by detaining select al-Qa`ida facilitators and operational planners, Tehran’s policy in this regard is often unpredictable.”<sup>35</sup>

In July 2011, the U.S. Treasury Department stated that the Iranian government had entered into an agreement with al-Qa`ida operatives to use Iran as a transit point for funneling money and people from the Gulf to Pakistan and Afghanistan. Outlining extensive fundraising operations involving Iran-based operatives who drew from donors in oil-rich Gulf countries such as Kuwait and Qatar, Treasury highlighted the role of Ezedin Abdel Aziz Khalil, aka Yasin al-Suri.<sup>h</sup> A Syrian-born senior al-Qa`ida member who had operated in Iran since 2005, al-Suri was arrested by Iranian authorities in December 2011, at which time he was al-Qa`ida’s key facilitator in Iran.

Al-Suri was temporarily replaced in this position by Muhsin

al-Fadhli, a close confidant of bin Ladin. Under Fadhli, al-Qa`ida elements in Iran began supporting the movement of fighters and money through Turkey to “support al-Qa`ida-affiliated elements in Syria.”<sup>36</sup> Fadhli would later leave Iran to become a leader of al-Qa`ida’s so-called “Khorasan Group” in Syria, where he was killed in a U.S. airstrike in Syria in July 2015.<sup>37</sup>

According to the Rewards for Justice Program, al-Suri resumed his role as al-Qa`ida’s lead facilitator in Iran at some point. The role involved overseeing the transfer of jihadis to Afghanistan, Pakistan, Syria, and the West; fundraising and facilitation of fund transfers; and working directly with the Iranian government to facilitate and manage the release of al-Qa`ida operatives from Iranian detention.<sup>38</sup>

Al-Suri’s facilitation role also involved the use of Iran as a staging ground for attacks against the West. One such plan was the so-called “Europlot,” which was overseen by bin Ladin and envisioned commando-style attacks in Germany, France, and the United Kingdom and which led to a U.S. security advisory being issued for Europe in October 2010.<sup>39</sup> The Europlot conspirators included German and British jihadis who traveled to the Waziristan region of Pakistan to receive training. The plotters traveled through Iran and relied on al-Suri and his network for transit support. After the foiled attacks, some of the network’s members found refuge in Iran for a limited time.<sup>40</sup>

In another example, Canadian authorities disrupted a plot in April 2013 to derail a passenger train heading from New York to Toronto. According to the assistant commissioner of the Canadian Royal Mounted Police, the two suspects had received “direction and guidance” from “Al Qaeda elements living in Iran,” although there was no evidence that Iran had sponsored the plot.<sup>41</sup>

While al-Qa`ida could use Iran to plot attacks abroad, striking Iran was—and remains—strictly taboo. Before his detention in December 2011, al-Suri had brokered a deal with Iran on behalf of al-Qa`ida according to which the latter “must refrain from conducting any operations within Iranian territory and recruiting operatives inside Iran while keeping Iranian authorities informed of their activities. In return, the Government of Iran gave the Iran-based al-Qa`ida network freedom of operation and uninhibited ability to travel for extremists and their families.”<sup>42</sup> The benefits of the deal for al-Qa`ida were substantial. In a letter from October 2007 to an unknown jihadi called “Karim” penned most likely by bin Ladin, the al-Qa`ida founder described Iran as “our main artery for funds, personnel, and communication.”<sup>43</sup>

Bin Ladin’s acknowledgement of the benefits of al-Qa`ida-Iran cooperation is all the more interesting when contrasted with the group’s on-the-record, deep mistrust of the Shi`a Iranians. In an August 2009 As-Sahab interview, for example, then deputy al-Qa`ida leader al-Zawahiri accused Iran of being “willing to sell Muslims in any place to the invading Crusaders and support them against Muslims, if it believes that its imminent interests will be achieved through this collusion.”<sup>44</sup> He went on to present the following view of what drives Iranian behavior: “[T]he key to explain Tehran and its followers is that they are looking for a political influence by all means ... If the political influence will be reached by them by assisting the Crusader invaders against Muslims, then they will assist the Crusaders against the Muslims without hesitation.”<sup>45</sup>

Despite the deep and open mistrust between Iran and al-Qa`ida, they continue to collaborate into the present. As recently as July 20, 2016, the U.S. Treasury Department imposed sanctions on three se-

<sup>h</sup> The Treasury report also named five other operatives who contributed to al-Qa`ida’s activity in Iran, including the prominent bin Ladin emissary Atiyah Abd al-Rahman. Bin Ladin appointed al-Rahman al-Qa`ida’s envoy in Iran before tasking him with commanding al-Qa`ida in Pakistan’s tribal areas. Helene Cooper, “Treasury Accuses Iran of Aiding Al Qaeda,” *New York Times*, July 28, 2011; Solomon, “U.S. Sees Iranian, al Qaeda Alliance.”

nior al-Qa`ida members located in Iran: Faisal Jassim Mohammed al-Amri al-Khalidi, Yisra Muhammad Ibrahim Bayumi, and Abu Bakr Muhammad Muhammad Ghumayn. The three carried out a range of activities for or on behalf of al-Qa`ida, including weapons acquisition, liaising with other militant groups, assisting al-Qa`ida members in Iran, fundraising, and facilitating funds transfers.<sup>46</sup>

## Analysis

A look at the available evidence strongly suggests that the relationship between these two strange bedfellows most closely resembles a tactical cooperation. First, Iran and al-Qa`ida's relationship, rather than consistently strong, was marked by ebbs and flows. This is typical of such "low-end" relationships because they are based not on common strategic objectives, but upon identifying common tactical and operational goals that are subject to change. Such shifts naturally cause friction among the partners. The changes in Iran's policy appeared so erratic that even al-Qa`ida members failed to understand its rationale. Iran's detention of al-Qa`ida members, Saif al-`Adl once admitted, "confused us and foiled 75 percent of our plan."<sup>47</sup>

Second, the two parties retained their full autonomy throughout their periods of cooperation. Even though al-Qa`ida members in Iran were detained, and hence not strictly independent, there is no evidence to suggest that either party transferred resources to the other or shared command and control functions with the other. On the contrary, their deep mutual distrust consistently thwarted any such strategic-level cooperation.

Third, the cooperative activities between Iran and al-Qa`ida have been limited mainly to the logistical domain and have possibly extended to the operational domain, but they have not included ideological collaboration. Fourth, Iran and al-Qa`ida maintained separate and incompatible ideologies in the process—Shiism and Sunni jihadism, respectively.

Finally, their relationship was marked by deep mutual distrust, as the above referenced interview with al-Zawahiri as well as declassified letters seized from bin Ladin's compound in Abbottabad indicate. In one letter to his confidant, the al-Qa`ida leader suggests that returning detainees from Iran "should be warned on the importance of getting rid of everything they received from Iran ... since the Iranians are not to be trusted then it is possible to plant chips in some of the coming people's belongings."<sup>48</sup> In a later letter to two of his sons, bin Ladin similarly cautions about injections by Iranian doctors that may contain "a tiny chip ... as long as a seed of grain but very thin and smooth."<sup>49</sup>

Despite their enmity, al-Qa`ida and Iran's mutual ideological antagonism has been trumped by pragmatism and the belief that limited cooperation is more beneficial in the long run than conflict. Iran likely calculates that cooperation affords the Shi`a state with "options for possible or even unforeseen contingencies,"<sup>50</sup> as Georgetown University professor Daniel Byman put it. It provides Iran with a credible way to deter or retaliate against unwanted actions from the United States.

Detaining al-Qa`ida members also provides Iran with an insurance policy against al-Qa`ida attacks directed at it. Evidence to support this claim is contained in the letter to al-Zarqawi intercepted by the United States and published in 2005. In it, al-Zawahiri chastises the emir of al-Qa`ida in Iraq: "Why kill ordinary Shia considering that they are forgiven because of their ignorance? And what loss will befall us if we did not attack the Shia? ... And even

if we attack the Shia out of necessity, then why do you announce this matter and make it public, which compels the Iranians to take counter measures? And do the brothers forget that both we and the Iranians need to refrain from harming each other at this time in which the Americans are targeting us?"<sup>51</sup>

Though they continued to target Shi`a in Iraq, AQI and its successor organizations clearly heeded al-Zawahiri's injunction when it came to Shi`a in Iran. In May 2014, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, then the chief spokesman for AQI's successor organization the Islamic State, admitted that his group "has kept abiding by the advices and directives of the sheikhs and figures of jihad. This is why [the Islamic State] has not attacked the Rawafid [a derogatory term for Shiites] in Iran since its establishment. It has left the Rawafid safe in Iran ... Let history record that Iran owes al Qaeda invaluable."<sup>52</sup>

Letters found in bin Ladin's compound and statements by al-Qa`ida members who defected to the Islamic State similarly indicate that al-Qa`ida is adamant about honoring its commitment to refrain from attacking Iran directly. In the letter "to Karim" declassified by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, for example, bin Ladin told the recipient that "there is no need to fight with Iran, unless you are forced to," and if forced to fight, bin Ladin continues, Karim should "not announce [his] intentions and threats" but instead "deliver [the] strikes in silence."<sup>53</sup>

Another confirmation that al-Qa`ida has honored its pledge not to attack Iran was alleged more recently by a former al-Qa`ida member, Abu Ubaydah al-Lubnani, who defected to the Islamic State, according to the latter group. Speaking to the Islamic State's Al Naba magazine, al-Lubnani stated that "Iran's biggest concern is that no operations happen on its soil." Hence, it hosts the "majority of al-Qa`ida's leaders," thereby "secur[ing] the loyalty of al Qaeda."<sup>54</sup>

Al-Qa`ida's calculations in cooperating with Iran are no less pragmatic than those of its counterpart. Iran was a convenient safe haven when it opened its doors to jihadis in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, and it also served as a shield against aggressive U.S. counterterrorism efforts in subsequent years.<sup>i</sup> As a declared enemy of the United States, Iran was unlikely to meet any U.S. requests to arrest or extradite suspected al-Qa`ida members. Al-Qa`ida members expected to also enjoy protection from drone strikes, as the United States would clearly refrain from acts of targeted killings on the soil of a country that would view such strikes as an act of war. Finally, Iran's geographic location between Iraq and Afghanistan and next to the Gulf, Pakistan, Turkey, and other countries coupled with an important jihadi presence offers al-Qa`ida additional strategic advantages.

The Abbottabad documents contain several letters indicating bin Ladin's concern for his family members in Iran, raising the question over the extent to which these concerns were driving al-Qa`ida's policy to refrain from attacking Iran. In one letter, for example, bin Ladin complained that the Iranians refused to release his daughter Fatima.<sup>55</sup> In more recently declassified letters to his sons Uthman and Muhammad, bin Ladin expresses concern about the "personal conditions and circumstances" of his sons, adding that "we are longing to see you."<sup>56</sup> In yet another letter written by bin Ladin's son Khalid to Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, Khalid called for the release of the remaining members of his family

<sup>i</sup> The author is grateful to Dan Byman for this point. Author correspondence, Daniel Byman, October 12, 2015.

and plainly expressed his frustration that numerous earlier requests had been ignored by the Iranian government.<sup>57</sup>

Though bin Ladin obsessed about the safety of his family members, the detention of parts of his family in Iran is neither a necessary nor sufficient explanation of the partnership between al-Qa`ida and Iran, which predated the detention of al-Qa`ida operatives in Iran by many years. Similarly, the non-aggression pact between Iran and al-Qa`ida survived following the death of bin Ladin, so it could have hardly been the reason that the agreement continues to this day. That said, the detention of members of the bin Ladin family likely served as an additional incentive to ensure 'good behavior' on the part of al-Qa`ida.

In sum, the Iran-al-Qa`ida connection has alternated between periods of more or less intensive cooperation interrupted by periods of tension, reminiscent of a "longstanding ... shotgun marriage or marriage of convenience," as memorably described by former DNI James Clapper.<sup>58</sup> Despite their divergent ideological and strategic objectives, both al-Qa`ida and Iran identified, at various moments in their shared history, tactical or operational interests that could be advanced by mutual cooperation and whose importance overrode any doctrinal reservations to such collaboration.

The implications for policy that follow from this discussion are that al-Qa`ida and Iran are tied in a pragmatic relationship that is unlikely to change unless the partners fundamentally reevaluate the costs and benefits of their partnership. Fundamental ideological divisions that exist between the parties have not led to a reassessment of these costs and benefits, and there is no reason to believe that they will in the future. Iran may change its assessment if it perceives al-Qa`ida as too weak to significantly strike Iran or to be used as a stick against the United States. But with the decline of the Islamic State and al-Qa`ida's "long-game strategy," this eventuality seems remote. For al-Qa`ida, on the other hand, a fundamental reassessment of its relationship is likely only if another country will substitute for Iran as al-Qa`ida's "main artery for funds, personnel, and communication."<sup>59</sup> Here, too, no contender is currently in sight that can replace the value that Iran provides to the group. Another condition under which the existing rules of the game could change is a fundamental reassessment on the part of Iran and/or al-Qa`ida about its respective role in the world. Such a reassessment appears unlikely, however, short of a regime change in Iran or a fundamental change in al-Qa`ida's leadership. Until then, cooperation is simply too valuable for these partners to be abandoned. **CTC**

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# Fifteen Years After the Djerba Synagogue Bombing

By Aaron Y. Zelin

**Fifteen years ago this month, a Tunisian operative named Nizar Nawar detonated a truck bomb outside the el-Ghriba synagogue in Djerba, Tunisia, killing 19, including 16 German and French tourists. Orchestrated by Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, it was al-Qa`ida's first successful international attack after 9/11, but it has received far less attention than other attacks launched by the group. Court documents, case files, and primary sources shed significant new light on the attack and al-Qa`ida's then modus operandi for international attack planning, which has both similarities and differences with recent international terrorist plots carried out by the Islamic State. In retrospect, the Djerba attack should have been a warning sign of the international threat posed by Tunisian foreign fighters, who are now one of the most dangerous cohorts within the Islamic State.**

**O**n April 11, 2002, a Tunisian al-Qa`ida operative named Nizar Bin Muhammad Nasar Nawar (Sayf al-Din al-Tunisi) ignored security officers' orders to stop and drove a truck filled with liquid propane into the wall of el-Ghriba Synagogue, one of Africa's oldest Jewish synagogues, in Djerba, Tunisia.<sup>1</sup> Masterminded by Khalid Sheikh Mohammed (KSM),<sup>a</sup> the attack killed 14 Germans, three Tunisians, and two Frenchmen and left 30 others injured. Although it was al-Qa`ida's first successful external operation following the 9/11 attacks, little has been written about how the attack materialized. It is one of the only large-scale, post-9/11 attacks or plots that has not been given a full retrospective treatment based on information that has been gleaned since its execution.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, in light of the current Islamic State external operation campaign, it is worth examining how the Djerba bombing compares to more recent terrorist attacks in order to shed light on the evolution of terrorist attack planning.

This article draws on court documents, media reports, Guanta-

a French and Spanish court documents on the Djerba attack obtained by the author show that Khalid Sheikh Mohammed was the mastermind behind the attack.

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namo Bay prisoner review files, and Arabic primary sources from the jihadi movement to tell the story of the attack. While there is much contradictory information, the author has attempted to piece together what really happened by cross-referencing sources and weighing their credibility. While many scholars and general observers were surprised at the number of Tunisians who became involved with jihadism following the country's revolution, this study of the network behind the Djerba attack makes clear that Tunisians have, in fact, played a significant role in the global jihadi movement for decades. Equally relevant to understanding the contemporary threat picture, this article sheds light on the longstanding importance of entrepreneurial individuals who link different nodes of networks together.<sup>3</sup>

## The Planning of the Attack

The central figure in the Djerba attack was Nizar Nawar, who was born in 1978.<sup>4</sup> His family was originally from Ben Gardane, a town west of Tunisia's border with Libya that has since become infamous as a recruitment hub for sending foreign fighters to Iraq, Syria, and Libya. Little is known about Nawar prior to his involvement within al-Qa`ida, beyond the fact that he was a poor student, which led him to drop out at the age of 16 and become a small-time salesman. Nawar is known to have traveled to Libya to buy cheap goods and sell them back in the local markets in Ben Gardane.<sup>5</sup> When interviewed about Nawar following the attack, family members and friends, did not seem to know fully about his activities after he dropped out of school. Many stated they had not observed any outward signs of militancy.<sup>6</sup>

According to the autobiography of Fadl 'Abd Allah Muhammad (better known as Fadl Harun), then head of al-Qa`ida in East Africa who spent time in Afghanistan with Usama bin Ladin in the late 1990s, Nawar had been planning the attack since he first returned to Tunisia from Afghanistan in late 1999.<sup>7</sup> Between his original return home in late 1999 and the attack in April 2002, Nawar would travel back and forth between Tunisia and Afghanistan for additional guidance. The Saudi al-Qa`ida member Hasan Muhammad 'Ali Bin Atash, for example, noted that he saw Nawar at the al-Matar Airport Complex in Kandahar in October 2000.<sup>8</sup>

Fadl Harun's autobiography also commends Nawar for his training capabilities and independence. Nawar had trained in explosives at the al-Qa`ida-affiliated Khalden camp in Paktia province while in Afghanistan.<sup>9</sup> According to French court documents on the Djerba attack, this is where Nawar met the Polish-German convert Christian Ganczarski (Abu Muhammad al-Almani).<sup>10</sup> Ganczarski befriended Nawar at Khalden and provided support and guidance to him for the synagogue bombing. In 2009, Ganczarski was convicted in a French court for his role in the Djerba attack.<sup>11</sup>

Further evidence from the trial uncovered that Ganczarski and Nawar had many simultaneous travel patterns in the year or two prior to the Djerba attack, suggesting they worked in tandem.<sup>12</sup>

Ganczarski allegedly became a mentor to Nawar, possibly due to Ganczarski's high stature and position within al-Qa`ida.<sup>13</sup> According to testimony by Shadi `Abd Allah, the leader of a German Jama`at Tawhid wa-l-Jihad cell, who was arrested in April 2002 in connection with Abu Mus`ab al-Zarqawi's Turkish network, Ganczarski was very close to top al-Qa`ida leaders Saif al-`Adl, Abu Hafis al-Masri, and bin Ladin.<sup>14 b</sup> According to evidence from the French prosecution, Ganczarski was often seen at al-`Adl's logistics base in Afghanistan and was one of the individuals in charge of al-Qa`ida's information technology, including radio links and al-Qa`ida's internet activities and passing messages between bin Ladin and KSM.<sup>15</sup> Ganczarski can also be seen in a January 2000 video sitting near Muhammad Atta, Ramzi Bin al-Shibah, and `Abd al-Ra'uf Jiday (Faruq al-Tunisi) as bin Ladin gives a sermon at Tarnak Farms.<sup>16 c</sup>

It is certainly possible that Ganczarski was Nawar's handler for the plot. In fact, the French prosecution noted that just prior to the suicide attack in Djerba, Nawar phoned two individuals: Ganczarski and KSM (twice). According to Germany's domestic intelligence agency, the Office for the Protection of the Constitution, which was wiretapping Ganczarski's phone, Nawar asked Ganczarski for his *du'at* (blessings) ahead of the operation, to which Ganczarski replied, "go in peace, God's mercy and blessing be with you."<sup>17</sup> The French were able to determine from wiretapping that Nawar was in constant contact with KSM in the two months leading up to the attack, likely receiving instructions and advice on final plans.<sup>18</sup> For these conversations to take place, Nawar relied on a supportive logistical network in Spain and France; KSM had a direct hand in the former, specifically connecting individuals from different parts of the broader Djerba attack network.<sup>19</sup> These networks also helped provide the necessary financial resources, which were funneled through Spain, for the planning and execution of the attack, which ended up costing €19,326 (about \$17,000) at the time.<sup>20</sup>

Nawar last left Afghanistan on September 4, 2001, and returned to Tunisia via Switzerland on September 5. He may have had a meeting during his layover with one of KSM and Ganczarski's European associates, a Swiss-German named Daniel `Yusuf Morgeneegg, who had originally met Ganczarski in Germany in late 1992.<sup>21</sup> Morgeneegg was likely overseeing the logistics of KSM's Djerba attack network in Europe, which besides himself, included operatives in France and Spain.<sup>22</sup> Once back in Tunisia, Nawar created a front

import-export business in Djerba. Final preparations for the attack began in January 2002 when Nawar purchased a used truck and his uncle Biljakim Nawar, a sheet metalworker,<sup>23</sup> welded a large steel tank inside it, which Nawar said he planned to use to transport olive oil. In reality, Nawar filled it with liquid propane for his attack.<sup>24</sup> Also in January, Nawar dispatched Tariq Hidiyya (Tahar), one of his associates in his hometown of Ben Gardane, to France, with money to purchase a satellite phone through his brother Walid Nawar.<sup>25</sup> Hidiyya and Walid met in Saint-Priest near Lyon where Hidiyya presented Walid with an envelope containing €1,800. The money was used by Walid to buy a phone (as well as a modem) in Paris for his brother Nizar, the Djerba attacker.<sup>26</sup> This allowed Nizar to speak with KSM and others more conveniently since Nizar had previously been using pay phones to remain in contact with the network.<sup>27</sup>

According to Spanish court documents, in early March 2002, in order to arrange additional funds for Nawar's activities, KSM associate Isa Isma'il Muhammad, a Canadian-Pakistani based in Karachi, faxed a message to Enrique Cerda Ibanez (Kiké), CEO of the Valencia-based business Hispania de Calcomanias. In the fax, he stated that a man named `Abd Allah Jafir would be calling Ibanez and that "Isa Karachi has a gift of €5,720."<sup>28</sup> The Spanish investigation found that `Abd Allah Jafir was a pseudonym that KSM gave Nawar to use when contacting Ibanez.<sup>29</sup> Isa Isma'il Muhammad and Ibanez had business dealings for years, suggesting that transfers between the two men were one way that money was being sent from the Afghanistan/Pakistan region to operatives and cells in Europe.<sup>30</sup>

KSM also gave Nawar the business phone number of Ibanez, which Nawar used to contact Ibanez via his new satellite phone. Apparently, there were issues with Ibanez, however. Morgeneegg, the network's Swiss-German logistical coordinator, called KSM saying that the "wedding" (a code-term used by al-Qa`ida for an attack) would happen soon, but that those based in Europe and Tunisia were waiting for Ibanez to "arrive" (i.e. provide the money).<sup>31</sup> Morgeneegg then ordered Walid Nawar to follow through on KSM's orders to contact Ibanez. Walid called Ibanez on March 16, and Morgeneegg then followed up with KSM, Nizar, and Nizar's uncle Biljakim about the status of the payment. On the same day, the Pakistan-based Isa Isma'il Muhammad sent another fax to Ibanez, reprimanding him for not yet transferring the funds.<sup>32</sup>

The reprimand appears to have worked because Ibanez finally made the transfers two days later. He deposited €9,500 into a shared Bancaja bank account with Ahmad Rukhsar, a Logrono-based owner of New Lagpal, a business in Spain that was used for *hawala* transfers, among other things.<sup>33</sup> There was also another deposit of €6,000 on April 10, the day before the attack.<sup>34</sup> Given at least one phone call took place between Nawar and Rukhsar, it is likely that Nawar was the final recipient of these funds.<sup>35</sup> With the money and equipment in place, the attack was imminent. As with other deceptions, on the day of the attack, Nawar told his family he was traveling to Libya.<sup>36</sup> According to French court documents, he also had a specific message for his uncle Biljakim, telling him that after he conducted the attack, Biljakim should contact KSM.<sup>37</sup>

The bomb Nawar prepared for the attack was a smaller version of the one used in the 1998 U.S. Embassy bombing in Tanzania,<sup>38</sup> illustrating how tradecraft was replicated over time. Additionally, similar to the 1998 embassy attacks in Kenya and Tanzania, a statement of responsibility was released by Jaysh al-Islami Li-Tahrir al-Muqadisat (JITM, or the Islamic Army for the Liberation of the Holy Sites, a front name for al-Qa`ida) via fax to the Arabic news-

b Shadi `Abd Allah himself met Ganczarski in Afghanistan in early 2000. Jama`at Tawhid wa-l-Jihad was the name of the group that Abu Mus`ab al-Zarqawi led before it became a part of al-Qa`ida in October 2004 (and subsequently the Islamic State). Guido W. Steinberg, *German Jihad: On the Internationalization of Islamist Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), pp. 44-48; French prosecution charging/indictment document on the Djerba bombings, November 8, 2006, pp. 81-83.

c Jiday was a Tunisian-Canadian among the 29 candidates for the 9/11 attacks and later assigned to what KSM dubbed the "second wave" of 9/11-style attacks. He even prepared a martyrdom video tape for the operation. According to Nasir al-Bahri, bin Ladin's bodyguard at the time, in the summer of 2001 in Karachi, he (al-Bahri) stayed at the house where KSM, Muhammad Atta, Ramzi bin al-Shibah, and Jiday were also staying and remembers the latter three individuals playing a flight simulator game on a PlayStation in preparation. Sometime between the summer of 2001 and the 9/11 attack, it is believed that Jiday dropped out and returned to Canada. Jiday remains on the FBI's Most Wanted List for further questioning. Nasser al-Bahri, *Guarding Bin Laden: My Life in al-Qaeda* (London: Thin Man Press, 2013), pp. 88-89.



*El-Ghriba synagogue in Djerba, Tunisia, in May 2016 (Yassine Gaidi/Anadolu Agency/Getty Images)*

papers *Al-Hayat* and *Al-Quds al-Arabi* on April 16, 2002.<sup>39</sup> It stated that “Nizar Bin Muhammad Nawar Sayf al-Din al-Tunisi carried out the attack, which was commissioned by JITM,” that the “martyr” Nawar was a model for the *ummah*, and that Nawar carried the attack out in the name of Palestine against the Jews. Attached to the statement was a martyrdom will from Nawar dated July 5, 2000, which highlighted the plot’s long gestation period. In the will, Nawar reminds the reader to “not be fooled ... I’m a martyr in the cause of God.”<sup>40</sup> Months later, in late June 2002, al-Qa`ida’s spokesperson at the time, Sulayman Abu Ghayth, officially claimed responsibility, stating that the attack was carried out by a “man of the al-Qa`ida organization.”<sup>41</sup>

### **A Canadian Interlude?**

Questions remain about whether Nawar traveled to Canada as part of the planning for the attack. The details that came forth in jihadi primary sources and the court cases in France and Spain would suggest otherwise, but following the Djerba bombing, his family made a number of claims about Nawar’s whereabouts between 1999 and 2002. It should be remembered that Nawar’s brother and uncle took part in the attack planning and would eventually be arrested for providing material support for the attack. Therefore, it is plausible that some family members were attempting to cover up what they knew by spinning an alternative history or only repeating what Nawar told them.

The first claim was that Nawar traveled to South Korea in early 1999 to work at a restaurant and returned nine months later after

not making any money.<sup>42</sup> This time frame tracks with Nawar’s first trip to Afghanistan, suggesting talk of work in South Korea was a deception Nawar concocted to conceal his ulterior motives. The second claim by family members was that Nawar traveled to Montreal shortly after his late 1999 return to Tunisia in order to study at a travel agency.<sup>43</sup> While the alleged study trip seems far-fetched, it is possible that Nawar traveled to Montreal for other reasons—specifically, guidance or support in preparation for the attack. Yet, according to Canadian travel records, there is no evidence that Nawar traveled to the country.<sup>44</sup> That said, Canadian officials believe that many of the Tunisians who entered the country in 1999 and 2000 used fraudulent student visas, which they were unable to monitor.<sup>45</sup>

It is possible Nawar traveled to Montreal by exploiting connections in his network, though definitive proof remains elusive. One person he may have come into contact with was Ra’uf Hanashi, a Tunisian who acquired Canadian citizenship in 1986. Hanashi first became involved in the jihadi milieu during the Bosnian war when he fought for Katibat al-Mujahidin.<sup>46</sup> After that, he was a key part of the jihadi recruitment network in Montreal in the mid-to late 1990s that connected recruits to the Khalden safe houses in Pakistan and Afghanistan run by Zayn al-‘Abidin Muhammad Husayn, better known as Abu Zubaydah. (The Khalden safe house network should not be confused with the Khalden camp in Afghanistan’s Paktia province.) After Hanashi returned from training at Khalden in Paktia in the summer of 1997, he became the *mu`azin* (the one who leads the call to prayer) and later imam at al-Sunnah al-Nabawiyyah Mosque in Montreal.<sup>47</sup> The mosque was established

in 1993 and was frequented by many Afghan and Bosnian jihad returnees.<sup>48</sup> There is even evidence to suggest that videos promoting jihad and committing martyrdom were distributed at the mosque at that time.<sup>49</sup>

It was through Hanashi's stories of jihad that the Algerian Ahmad Ressay, who illegally immigrated to Montreal in 1994, was first inspired to go to Afghanistan to train.<sup>50</sup> Hanashi facilitated Ressay's contact with Abu Zubaydah and the Khalden network in Afghanistan, where he (Ressay) allegedly joined a 60-man group made up of mostly Tunisian veterans of the Bosnian jihad.<sup>51</sup> One of the earlier (and largest) plots that the Khalden network's Abu Zubaydah planned was the thwarted 2000 millennium plot that sought to bomb four tourist sites in Jordan, Los Angeles International Airport (LAX), the USS The Sullivans, and the hijack of Indian Airlines Flight 814.<sup>52</sup> Ressay played a role in planning the LAX component of the plot.<sup>53</sup> After training at the Khalden camp in Paktia from March 1998 through February 1999, Ressay traveled back to Canada and was arrested on December 14, 1999, while attempting to cross the U.S.-Canadian border in Vancouver en route to Los Angeles to conduct the attack.<sup>54</sup> Nawar's training at Khalden and the Tunisian connection with Abu Zubaydah is a plausible way Hanashi and Nawar could have come into contact.

Another possible contact Nawar might have exploited to reach Montreal was a Mauritanian jihadi well known to Nawar's mentor Ganczarski,<sup>55</sup> Muhammadu 'Uld Slahi (Muhammad al-Muritani). Slahi trained at al-Faruq in Afghanistan in the early 1990s, fought in Bosnia, and then helped recruit al-Qa`ida operatives in Europe, including three of the 9/11 hijackers (Muhammad Atta, Marwan al-Shihi, and Ziyad Jarrah).<sup>56</sup> He then based himself in Duisburg, Germany, where he ran an alleged import-export business. It was in Duisburg that Slahi met Ganczarski in the mid-1990s.<sup>57</sup> In 1995, the two founded al-Taqwa Mosque.<sup>58</sup>

The reason Slahi may have played a role in helping Nawar get to Canada is around the same time that Nawar's family claims that Nawar went to Montreal, Slahi himself moved to Montreal.<sup>59</sup> Further, Karim Mihdi, one of the individuals Slahi recruited and who attended his mosque in Duisburg, moved to Montreal with Slahi, illustrating further the interconnectedness of these various networks.<sup>60</sup> Relatedly, according to Tunisian Combatant Group member 'Abd al-Bin Muhammad Bin Abis Awrji, Slahi was also a close associate of the Tunisian-Canadian cleric Hanashi and took over the pulpit of Hanashi's mosque starting in November 26, 1999, during Ramadan while Hanashi was in Saudi Arabia.<sup>61</sup> Awrji also claimed that Slahi helped Hanashi with Ressay's LAX plot.<sup>62</sup> Although the Canadian government never charged Slahi with involvement in the plot,<sup>63</sup> it is possible that Slahi provided spiritual guidance to Ressay ahead of his arrest. Slahi left Canada on January 21, 2000, after being interrogated by Canadian authorities.<sup>64</sup> Therefore, if Nawar did, in fact, travel to Montreal in late 1999 as his family alleged, it is possible that Slahi and Nawar met through Ganczarski.

It is clear from the above information that there is only circumstantial evidence that Nawar traveled to Montreal. But based on what is known about the case and Nawar's prior lie about traveling to South Korea, it is most likely that instead of going to Montreal, Nawar simply traveled to Afghanistan and fabricated another aspect of his travel plans to deceive members of his family.

## Evolution of International Terrorism Since Djerba

Much has changed since the Djerba attack—in particular, the cre-

ation of a global, cooperative counterterrorism architecture and advancements in communications technologies. The former has benefited the nations fighting al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State, while the latter has benefited jihadi groups. One consistent factor, however, has been that terrorism training matters. As Thomas Hegghammer has noted, those who have been involved in foreign fighting and training have been far more effective and lethal in perpetrating attacks than those who have not.<sup>65</sup> For example, the 2015 mass casualty attacks at the Bardo Museum and Sousse beach in Tunisia were carried out by individuals who had previously trained with the Islamic State in Sabratha, Libya.<sup>66</sup> Similarly, when comparing the multi-pronged Islamic State attacks in Paris in November 2015, which killed 130 and injured another 368,<sup>67</sup> and the Islamic State-inspired, multi-pronged attack in San Bernardino in early December 2015 that killed 14 and injured 22, one can see the difference that foreign fighting, training, and guidance have in conducting attacks.

Another consistent factor in major international plots has been the role of a coordinator. Coordination was evident in the Djerba synagogue attack and a series of plots in 2015-2016 by the Paris-Brussels attack network. Nawar traveled back and forth between Tunisia and Afghanistan, but he also remained in close contact via satellite phone with KSM and Ganczarski until right before the attack. Similarly, Abdelhamid Abaaoud coordinated a plot by a group of operatives hiding in a safe house in Verviers, eastern Belgium. And in the Paris attacks, Abaaoud was so involved, he was even in the vicinity of the Bataclan attack and likely giving direct orders in real-time.<sup>68</sup> Likewise, Boubaker al-Hakim, a French-Tunisian Islamic State external operations leader based in al-Raqqah who was killed in a drone strike in November 2016, helped enable the Bardo and Sousse attacks through an intermediary in Libya.<sup>69 d</sup>

There has also been consistency in target selection. Global jihadis have retained a focus on Jewish-related entities. Nawar chose to attack a Jewish synagogue in Tunisia, while more recently, Mehdi Nemmouche attacked the Jewish Museum of Belgium in Brussels.<sup>70</sup> Part of this trend is due to the continuing resonance of the Palestinian plight within the broader Muslim world, which jihadi groups co-opt to gain legitimacy, support, and new recruits.

Another constant is the reliance on support networks in various locations to facilitate attacks. There were a number of support nodes that helped the Djerba attack materialize, spanning Afghanistan, France, Germany, Spain, Switzerland, Tunisia, and possibly Canada. Similarly, the Tunisian Islamic State supporter and Berlin attacker Anis Amri had an attack and support network that spanned France, Germany, Italy, Libya, and the Netherlands.<sup>71</sup> Such support systems underscore the fact that gaps in information sharing and cooperation between nations still exist.

On the other hand, due to the larger tracking architecture and sharing system for worldwide counterterrorism operations, decep-

d Prior to joining up with the Islamic State in Syria, al-Hakim had spent time in mid- to late 2013 (and possibly early 2014) in Libya, helping traffic weapons and train individuals for attacks in Tunisia, which were set into motion in Sousse and Monastir but ultimately failed due to the attacker's bomb malfunctioning in Monastir and the attacker's inability to kill anyone else in Sousse. Maria Abi-Habib, "Young Tunisians Embrace Jihad, Raise Tension at Home," *Wall Street Journal*, December 17, 2013; Carlotta Gall, "Worry in Tunisia Over Youths Who Turn to Jihad," *New York Times*, December 18, 2013.

tion is more necessary than ever for the new generation of international attack plotters. Unlike Nawar, who was able to travel back and forth between Afghanistan and Tunisia, the Paris attackers used the refugee flows to return to Europe from Syria, which shielded those who were already on watch lists.<sup>72</sup> Furthermore, plots in the Islamic State era generally entail a shorter time period between inception and execution. Recent Islamic State plots, including the Paris attacks, have seen a quicker “flash to bang” than some of al-Qa`ida’s conspiracies a generation ago. As outlined above, Nawar had begun planning the April 2002 Djerba attack after he first returned to Tunisia from Afghanistan in late 1999, a time span of almost two and a half years.

One advantage contemporary international plotters have is access to encryption technology, which has been used in many recent cases, including the attacks in Paris, Brussels, Berlin, Istanbul, and the United States.<sup>73</sup> And yet, while the methods of communication may differ, then—as now—there has consistently been an ability for the leader of the plot to communicate whenever necessary with the individual executing the attack.

Finally, there are major differences in methodology for claiming attacks. In the case of al-Qa`ida and the Djerba attack, Nawar sent a written will and statement of responsibility to major Arabic newspapers, and Sulayman Abu Ghayth’s video claiming responsibility was played on Al-Jazeera. This is in contrast to the Islamic State, which has adherents that will pledge *bay`a* to the group’s leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, either through a video message, which the Islamic State then releases through its own news agency, Amaq, or through a private message, which the Islamic State then uses to claim responsibility via an Amaq graphic. In many ways, these differences reflect changes in jihadi media capabilities over the past 15 years. Previously, al-Qa`ida was reliant on the mainstream media to push out its message, whereas today, individual jihadis and jihadi groups, whether the Islamic State or al-Qa`ida, have the ca-

pability to bypass the gatekeepers, disseminate information directly through their own media systems, and therefore, exert greater control over their narrative.<sup>74</sup>

In the aftermath of the Djerba synagogue bombing, the Tunisian government was initially dismissive of any ties to terrorism, suggesting the attack was only an accident.<sup>75</sup> A sense of denial about the threat contributed to a fundamental lack of understanding within Tunisia’s political establishment of jihadism, of how many people were involved in Tunisia, and of the plotters themselves. Part of this misunderstanding stemmed from many in the government viewing the threat as a homegrown issue rather than one with regional or even international components.<sup>76 e</sup>

Thus, Tunisia’s political leadership was surprised when in December 2006/January 2007, a Tunisian al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb front group called Jund Asad Bin al-Furat (JABF) carried out a series of attacks in the country.<sup>77</sup> There were no other large-scale incidents until after the Tunisian uprising four years later.

As the Djerba attack illustrated, Tunisians have long been involved in international terrorism plots, attacks, and foreign fighting. This trend is likely to continue, especially as so many Tunisians have gone to train in Libya, Iraq, and Syria over the past six years. The Nizar Nawars of today are finding a melting pot of contacts and networks they can tap into, just as Nawar himself did more than 15 years ago. Given the fact that Tunisia has had one of the largest foreign fighter mobilization to Libya, Iraq, and Syria and that hundreds of Tunisian foreign fighters have returned home or to Europe,<sup>78</sup> the world is likely to continue to see Tunisians play a significant role within the jihadi movement in the years to come. **CTC**

e This was even though Tunisians had been foreign fighters since the 1980s and were, at the time of the JABF attacks, one of the highest per capita groups of foreign nationals that had become foreign fighters in Iraq between 2003-2009.

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# Counterterrorism and Youth Radicalization in Jordan: Social and Political Dimensions

By Sean Yom and Katrina Sammour

**Youth radicalization by Islamist extremists poses a domestic security challenge for Jordan, a key U.S. ally and crucial link in the campaign against the Islamic State. Jordanian policies aimed at neutralizing this jihadi threat have long emphasized bolstering the government's policing capabilities and control over society. Yet ongoing terrorist attacks carried out by Jordanian youths suggest this conventional approach is not working. Economic deprivation, substandard education, and the presence of radical Islamist discourse are part of the problem, but the fundamental concern is that Jordan's booming youth population has no emotive attachment to Jordanian identity and thus little stake in political order. Recent research by the authors in Jordan makes clear that young Jordanians are susceptible to radicalization not just because Islamist radicalism seems so strong, but because the political alternative—everyday life as a Jordanian citizen—is so weak. This creates a compelling argument for more political engagement with youngsters as part of a comprehensive counterterrorism strategy.**

**S**hortly after the founding of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant in 2013, the first Jordanian youth<sup>a</sup> left the kingdom to join the jihadi organization. Since then, between 2,000 and 4,000 Jordanians have fought with the Islamic State, which makes Jordan one of the world's highest per capita contributors of foreign fighters.<sup>b</sup> As extremist overflow from the Syrian and Iraqi civil wars loomed, the govern-

a The authors define youth as ages 14 to 29, a demographic category also used by the World Bank.

b Most Western estimates suggest upwards of 2,500 Jordanians have joined jihadi groups in Syria and Iraq, including the Islamic State. See "Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq," Soufan Group, December 2015. Independent Jordanian reports, however, suggest the number of Jordanians who have traveled to join the Islamic State is closer to 4,000. "4000 urduni bi-sufuf al-tanzhimat, I-irhabiyyah fi-surriyyah," *Al-Ghad*, August 7, 2016.

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ment responded with the traditional counterterrorism strategy of strengthening its physical and legal security infrastructure. The General Intelligence Directorate (GID), gendarmerie, and Special Forces ramped up their operations, with an eye toward Syrian refugee camps and urban areas. The U.S.-funded and Raytheon-contracted Border Security Program began protecting the northern border with Syria.<sup>1</sup> The legal system, too, expanded its purview. In 2014, the government vastly expanded its existing anti-terror law, allowing police to arrest anyone whose spoken or published views were deemed threatening to stability.<sup>2</sup> This past March, the judiciary executed 15 prisoners in a single day, most of whom were convicted of Islamic State-related terrorism.<sup>3</sup> Finally, the government strengthened its influence over religious discourse as well, setting guidelines for mosque sermons and utilizing official Islamic institutions to counter extremist teachings with moderate Islam.<sup>4</sup>

These conventional counterterrorism strategies target what scholars have called "pull" factors, or the ideological and material benefits that draw recruits into terrorist group membership.<sup>5</sup> From the perspective of the Jordanian government, the centerpiece of this approach is unapologetically militaristic—to relentlessly strike at the organizational infrastructure of terrorism through the early detection of militant activities, swift dismantling of discovered cells, and prevention of border penetration by Islamic State operatives from Syria.<sup>6</sup> The imposition of steep punishments for those linked even tangentially to extremist violence is another pillar of this policy. The logic is austere: impose a harsh disincentive for even dabbling in radicalism that would theoretically outweigh the financial rewards or religious affirmations of joining the Islamic State—and for those that slip through, hope to catch them before any terrorist act.

Despite these efforts, Jordan still suffered an unprecedented surge of homegrown terrorism starting in late 2015, instilling new fears of instability in a country still grappling with nearly one million Syrian refugees. In November 2015, a Jordanian police officer killed five, including two Americans, at a security training facility outside of Amman, with reports indicating the 28-year-old had become influenced by radical Islamism.<sup>7</sup> Months later, in March 2016, security forces were locked in a major shootout with an Islamic State cell in Irbid, close to the northern Syrian border.<sup>8</sup> In June, a local shooter inspired by the Islamic State rampaged through a GID office near the largest Palestinian refugee camp.<sup>9</sup> Weeks later, an Islamic State suicide bombing struck an army outpost on the eastern Syrian border, an area that has since witnessed several more bombing attempts.<sup>10</sup> In September, Christian journalist Nahed Hattar was assassinated in Amman outside the national courthouse by a local imam known for his extremist views.<sup>11</sup> In December, several Islamic State jihadis went on a shooting spree against the police in the southern town of Karak, resulting in more than a dozen deaths (including a Canadian tourist) and only ending after a dramatic siege at the historic Crusader castle there.<sup>12</sup>



*A Jordanian Islamic State fighter holds up his passport in an April 2014 Islamic State video in which fighters burned their passports.*

Beyond these attacks lurk several deeper security threats. First, the discovery of an enormous arms and explosives cache maintained by the Karak terrorist cell revealed the ease with which militants can obtain weaponry today.<sup>13</sup> Jordan has been saturated with arms since it began supporting Western-backed Syrian rebels by serving as a key training and supply route. While weapons smuggling has surged, so too have thefts of combat supplies. In the largest known case to date, huge CIA shipments of U.S.- and Saudi-supplied arms were reportedly stolen and resold on the black market, including some that investigators believe were used in the November 2015 attack that killed Americans.<sup>14</sup> Second, while recent terrorism involved just a few dozen attackers, there is a far larger pool of extremists and thus potential terrorists. Each successive attack suffered over the past year was followed by security crackdowns rounding up hundreds more suspected militants. By one estimate, for example, the police and GID arrested 700 suspected jihadis in the two months following the December 2016 Karak siege.<sup>15</sup>

Finally, Jordan remains squarely within the sights of the Islamic State, with recruiters and ideologues actively encouraging and pursuing new Jordanian membership. For years, Islamic State announcements have openly called for violence against and within the Hashemite Kingdom. An Islamic State video released earlier this month glorified the Karak attack and promised to further destabilize Jordan. The group made clear its vow to destroy the monarchy, especially due to its role in training anti-Islamic State groups in Syria and imprisoning young Jordanians who joined the Islamic State.<sup>16</sup>

### Diagnosing the Problem

These attacks highlight the need for Jordan to address not just pull factors but also “push” factors—that is, the negative circumstances that compel young Jordanians to consider membership in extremist groups like the Islamic State in the first place. Jordan is fortunate

to have no sectarian faultlines or any recurrent conflict between its large Sunni Muslim majority and small minorities of Christians and other faiths. Nor has the influx of displaced Syrians destabilized the country; security forces control all major refugee centers, which have not become hotbeds of radicalization as some initially feared. Rather, most terrorists in Jordan hail from Jordanian homes, which suggests research should focus on the material and political conditions within society pushing these youths into extremism. In assessing such factors, this article draws upon observations by the authors in Jordan, including field-based interviews with youths and activists conducted during the summer and fall of 2016.

Well prior to the Islamic State’s rise, terrorism researchers understood that in many societies, the impetus for radicalization was linked to concrete problems felt by youths, including economic deprivation, social disenchantment, and most of all, lack of political voice and identity.<sup>17</sup> Terrorist organizations “exploit a basic human need—the need for meaning, achievement, or esteem,” and often that need runs deeper than material desires for financial gain or physical protection.<sup>18</sup> Scholars like Scott Atran have reinforced these insights with new interviews with jailed Islamic State terrorists, which reveal a near-universal justification for joining. Becoming part of a fervently committed organization provided a powerful galvanizing identity missing in their lives.<sup>19</sup>

In Jordan, counterterrorism policies have not kept up with these theoretical lessons, instead retaining the traditional emphasis on hardening homeland security through greater monitoring and intelligence. Countering and preventing radicalization, however, must also entail complementary engagement with the underlying social and political pressures that push individuals toward the visceral realization that carrying out extremist violence is worth dying for. This requires understanding why Jordanian youths feel so alienated from their political system and so disenchanting by their social and economic prospects that embracing the extremist violence of the

Islamic State appears as the most attractive path.

### Youth Bulge: Economics, Education, and Religion

Jordan's youth population is bulging. Two-thirds of the national population of nearly seven million is under the age of 30, and the national median age is 22.<sup>20</sup> Even before considering the deficit of political identity, it is important to note the economic and educational challenges for this vast youth demographic.

Jordan's youth unemployment rate is over 36 percent, more than double the overall rate of 16 percent.<sup>21</sup> However, these figures underestimate the true figure because they do not count those who stop looking for work after fruitless years. The public sector, including the bloated civil service, has long ceased serving as an absorber for the educated, while the private sector still struggles to grow amidst excessive regulations and inadequate investment.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, university graduates have such few prospects that their unemployment rate is nearly double that of Jordanians with only a high school diploma.<sup>23</sup> In effect, going to college penalizes young Jordanians because it reduces their likelihood of finding work commensurate with their skill level. In this context, it is easy to grasp the deprivation felt by many youngsters, particularly those from middle-income families hit hard by rising prices and creeping poverty. Indeed, youth protests regularly occur over this massive unemployment problem.<sup>24</sup>

The poor quality of education constitutes another factor. It is well-documented that public schools in Jordan do not stress teaching critical thinking and that prevailing pedagogies emphasize the attainment of degrees as a credential over intellectual growth and creative learning.<sup>25</sup> Less understood to the outside world, though, is how the antiquated curricula is saturated with Islamic symbolism rather than Jordanian nationhood and civic identity.<sup>26</sup> Yet these curricula are so deeply entrenched among teachers and parents that reform has become nearly impossible. This issue is essential given that most Jordanian recruits to the Islamic State are products of Jordanian schooling. The generation of Jordanians that has become sympathetic to the group are not drop-outs; they are the country's inadvertent educational outcomes.

These economic and educational problems contribute to youth radicalization, but focusing on them alone is problematic. For one, they will require many years to overcome. Staunching the unemployment rate requires long-term private sector growth, including reshaping the "culture of shame" that discourages vocational work, such as manufacturing jobs, as well as encouraging more entrepreneurship. Likewise, the battle over updating the educational curricula is ongoing and will likely require years of negotiation between officials, teachers, and religious critics.

The salafi community, which is far more conservative than mainstream Islamists like the Muslim Brotherhood, is facilitating the youth radicalization. First, there are several tens of thousands of salafis in Jordan, but most adherents and imams are "quietist" insofar as they are disseminating their ideas through education and preaching rather than political involvement, much less violent activities.<sup>27</sup> The jihadi variant of salafism emitted by the Islamic State resonates with about 7,000 hardline Jordanian salafis, of which around 2,000 are known Islamic State sympathizers.<sup>28</sup> Traditionally, hardline salafis mobilized in poor rural areas like Ma'an, Karak, and Zarqa, flourishing given the government's inability to monopolize Islamic discourse. For example, the Ministry of Awqaf (Religious Endowments) regulates mosque sermons by certifying

all imams and punishing those who do not preach official guidelines of moderation. However, of Jordan's 6,000 mosques, 700 have no government-assigned imams; most of these are in poor areas and are largely unmonitored.<sup>29</sup> Some served as informal pulpits for uncertified salafi preachers, while an unknown number of underground mosques also exist.

Over the past several years, however, new developments have complicated past assumptions that this singular variable—the salafi-jihadi community—was the vector to spreading extremism. For one, the salafi-jihadi community itself quickly fragmented along the same generational divide afflicting broader society. Prominent salafi-jihadi clerics in Jordan like Abu Qatada, Abu Sayaf, and Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi have spoken out against the Islamic State. They and some other traditional salafi advocates continue to back competing groups like Jabhat Fateh al-Sham and other past or present al-Qa`ida-aligned groups. To be sure, not all salafi-jihadi theologians agree with this stance. Some, like Abu Muhammad al-Tahhawi and Saad al-Hunayti, have supported the Islamic State instead, but they also have less public visibility due to sustained government harassment designed to quiet them.<sup>30</sup> By contrast, Jordanian experts have found that youths joining the salafi-jihadi trend overwhelmingly favor the Islamic State's vision despite admonitions and warnings of punishment from religious elders<sup>31</sup> and the fact that the most prominent salafi-jihadi voices against this vision, like al-Maqdisi, are allowed the loudest media pulpit by the government. In other words, the generational disconnect from traditional authorities seen in Jordanian society is being replicated within even the salafi-jihadi community.

Second, Islamic State sympathizers responsible for recruiting new members have found the most success outside traditional heartlands of salafi-jihadi ideology in Jordan. It became apparent early on that youth adherents were hailing not just from impoverished cities like Ma'an and Zarqa, but more middle-class cities like Salt and Irbid, as well as Palestinian refugee camps abutting urban areas like Amman.<sup>32</sup> In addition, many eschew mosques favored by older salafi authorities, recruiting instead online or at recreational venues like soccer games and university clubs.<sup>33</sup> Whereas salafi-jihadism previously flourished on the periphery of Jordan's geography and society, it now has spread into its center.

### Political Disconnect

Economics, education, and religion are important push factors when assessing youth radicalization in Jordan. However, focusing on these alone leaves an important stone unturned. That even educated middle-class Jordanian youths are gravitating toward the Islamic State indicates not just the strength of extremist Islamist ideology they adopt, but also the weakness of the life and identity they leave behind. Put another way, the salafi-jihadi narrative appears far more appealing and alluring when the counternarrative—the status quo position of being a young citizen supporting the Jordanian government—becomes meaningless or even repugnant. Here, it is vital to turn toward the political context, which reveals the underlying crisis. Many young Jordanians simply do not see themselves as stakeholders in their state or society. Surveys have long shown that Jordanians resemble other Arab youth cohorts in wanting less corrupt and more democratic governments.<sup>34</sup> The prevailing assumption within Jordan has been that frustration about not obtaining this goal would manifest in apathy rather than action among youths. For instance, most Jordanians under the age of 30

do not vote in parliamentary elections because they see the legislature as symbolizing the government's incompetence and futility.<sup>35</sup>

However, the authors' research points to another direction. Jordanian youths evince not just apathy, which would suggest inaction, but also powerful feelings of political marginalization that make them susceptible to Islamist radicalization and its promise of creating a new political and social order. In particular, young Jordanians frequently invoke concepts of injustice and helplessness, which embody deep political disconnect. The injustice embodies fury at the widespread corruption and meddling that troubles national political institutions, from business moguls purchasing parliamentary seats to frequent interventions by the security services. As one youth blogger relayed, "You can't feel pride in your country like the government says to when they are the ones who bribed their way to the top: it is insulting to our dignity."<sup>36</sup>

As recent focus group findings corroborate, young Jordanians also feel helplessness.<sup>37</sup> That helplessness stems from the belief that mobility is fundamentally determined by forces beyond their merit or control like tribal connections, royal favor, inherited wealth, and other ascriptive factors. Amplifying this strain of disempowerment is the increasingly restrictive environment for self-expression since the 2014 expansion of the anti-terror law. Few feel safe enough to speak honestly about these issues in public, given that security forces have ensnared hundreds of journalists, bloggers, and students with no connection to religious extremism for the simple reason that their criticisms and ideas "disturbed public order."<sup>38</sup>

Linking these feelings of injustice and helplessness is also the belief that the young have no political voice in the national decision-making process, which is dominated by the monarchy, its appointed government, and the intelligence apparatus. Interviews with seasoned activists divulge examples of demands consistently ignored by officials.<sup>39</sup> One is integrating the youth demographic into the political structure. The existing Ministry of Youth is an afterthought in terms of both budget and priority, and apart from occasional royal retreats or civil society meetings, youth groups have little access to government ministers and the royal court. Activists also call for the government to launch a comprehensive anti-corruption campaign aimed not just at catching prominent scapegoats, such as high-ranking officials charged with embezzling millions, but also eliminating the everyday acts of corruption that mar public life. The latter include such activities as small-scale bribery and the use of *wasta* (connections) to enjoy favorable treatment, as with the securing of a civil service position or wiping clean a criminal record. For many, this untreated issue means that criminality lurks deep within the Jordanian state, but political leaders are unwilling to uproot it.<sup>40</sup> Equally frustrating is the fact that these simmering anti-corruption demands helped instigate the youth movements that protested throughout Jordan during the 2011-12 Arab Spring, but even that tumultuous period did not result in promised reforms becoming reality.

The authors' discussions with youth-driven activist movements divulge these and other political grievances that signify a collective perception of exclusion and humiliation. This is precisely the environment identified by terrorism researchers that makes individuals susceptible to the siren song of extremist ideology. Jordanians who join the Islamic State or even feel inspired by it were not born as terrorists; they were made by a political ecology that has long ignored their generation's craving for dignity and purpose. Only recently have policymakers accepted this reality, but today the only notable

anti-extremism program aimed at youths is a small-scale United Nations Development Programme initiative funded by Japanese foreign aid.<sup>41</sup> Countering and preventing extremism through political engagement with disenchanting young citizens has not yet become a policy priority for the Jordanian government.

### Weakness of Jordanian Identity

These expressions of injustice, helplessness, and powerlessness are symptomatic of the weak attachment Jordanian youths have with their state and society. At the heart of this problem lies the absence of any robust sense of Jordanian nationalism or national identity. Historians frequently attribute this to Jordan's young age. The kingdom's founding in 1921 as a byproduct of British imperialism means that much of what passes as Jordanian culture today was explicitly invented during the colonial decades.<sup>42</sup> However, the most important reason is the multiplicity of competing subnational identities that more often exclude than include. The primary cleavage that still shapes public life today is the divide between the Palestinian majority and the non-Palestinian or "Transjordanian" minority.<sup>43</sup> Though virtually all are Muslim, most Transjordanians trace their heritage from tribal confederations that resided in the area before the arrival of Palestinian refugees-cum-citizens starting with the 1948 Arab-Israeli War.

Political tensions between these communities were magnified by the 1970 Black September civil conflict and, to this day, continue to manifest in discrimination and mistrust. For example, Transjordanians monopolize the state apparatus; they staff the civil service, armed forces, and security organs, and they are considered the core constituency for the ruling Hashemite monarchy.<sup>44</sup> Even among Transjordanians, however, lurk sharp divisions: central and northern tribes, like the Bani Sakhr and Sirhan, enjoy far more preferential access to public employment and resources than poorer southern tribes like the Bani Hamida and Huwaytat.<sup>45</sup> Inversely, Jordanian-Palestinians retain a prominent role in the private-sector economy but have little access to political power. The electoral process for parliament exemplifies this, as voting districts are highly gerrymandered to favor rural tribal areas at the expense of more densely populated urban areas where Jordanian-Palestinians predominate. They are also frequently targeted by Transjordanian reactionaries who still see them as glorified guests rather than Jordanian citizens.

There are nuances that fuzzy this simplifying optic, such as increasingly frequent Transjordanian-Palestinian intermarriage since the 1980s.<sup>46</sup> Yet the broader point is that Jordan has always lacked an indigenous identity at the national level that could cut across communal boundaries and enshrine an equal sense of political voice. Identity instead is an exclusionary act, a reminder of inequality that tells Jordanians what they are not, rather than what they are. The result is a hollow framework of citizenship incapable of mobilizing the populace behind unifying symbols, save for rare outpourings of grief—for instance, the death of King Hussein in 1999 or more recently, the Islamic State's grisly murder of captured Jordanian pilot Muath Kasasbeh in 2015. While that latter event instigated collective anger by the Jordanian public, it clearly did not stop the flow of disaffected youths to the Islamic State, as evidenced by recent terror attacks.

For its part, the ruling monarchy does recognize this problem but has never fully addressed it because doing so would endanger its self-cultivated image as impartial arbiter of politics, one above

the fray of communal rivalries and internecine conflict. King Abdullah's initial decade of rule after ascending to the throne in 1999 was marked by several royal initiatives designed to stoke national pride and which were accompanied by glitzy marketing, such as "al-Urdun Awalan" (Jordan First) in 2002 and "Kulna al-Urdun" (We Are All Jordan) in 2006.<sup>47</sup> However, these ended almost as quickly as they began because they lacked buy-in from youths. Young Jordanians never marched in support of these ideals of unity, seldom attended the government-sponsored forums designed to inculcate them, and blogged about them only to ridicule their hollow nature. As one youth organizer remarked, "There is no solidarity in society because there is no single Jordanian society—there are competing ones ... until [the government] admits this, we won't pretend that all Jordanians are the same."<sup>48</sup>

## Conclusion

Security-oriented counterterrorism strategies in Jordan have impeded but not fully staunch youth radicalization. Economics, education, and religious ideology have all played roles in pushing young Jordanians toward the Islamic State. However, as insights from terrorism studies and the authors' own research suggest, more direct political engagement with the large youth population is also important. The susceptibility of young Jordanians to extremist ideologies reflects pervasive feelings of injustice and helplessness, resulting in political disconnect amplified by the absence of any inclusive national identity. Terrorism has political outcomes, but in Jordan it also has political origins. **CTC**

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