

Combating Terrorism Center at West Point



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FEATURE ARTICLE

## The Battle for Raqqa

Liberating and securing the Islamic State's Syrian capital  
HASSAN HASSAN

A VIEW FROM THE CT FOXHOLE

## LTG Michael K. Nagata

DIRECTOR, DIRECTORATE OF STRATEGIC  
OPERATIONAL PLANNING, NATIONAL  
COUNTERTERRORISM CENTER

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### FROM THE EDITOR

Two recent developments suggest the Islamic State's caliphate pretensions are being consigned to history. The first is the group's destruction of the Great Mosque of al-Nuri in Mosul, where three years ago Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared his caliphate to the world. The second is the fact that the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a U.S.-backed Kurdish and Arab militia, has now entered the city limits of Raqqa, the group's de facto capital in Syria. In our cover article, Hassan Hassan outlines the challenges ahead in liberating and holding Raqqa. While removing the Islamic State from the city could take anywhere from weeks to months, he argues the harder task will be for the force, whose backbone is made up of Kurdish fighters, to prevent the Islamic State from exploiting ethnic tensions to destabilize the city after it is liberated. But he argues there is a window of opportunity for the SDF to bring sustainable security to Raqqa and surrounding areas because of the willingness of local tribes to work with liberating forces and warming relations between the SDF and Syrian Sunni rebel groups, who increasingly view the U.S.-backed force as a check on the Assad regime's ability to regain control of northeastern Syria.

While the Islamic State is shrinking, Lieutenant General Michael K. Nagata, director of the Directorate of Strategic Operational Planning at the U.S. National Counterterrorism Center, in a wide-ranging interview on evolving terror threats, draws attention to the group's organizational resilience in the face of withering pressure from the coalition fighting it.

The Islamic State's attack on Tehran on June 7 was a case in point. At a time of rising sectarian tension across the Middle East, Chris Zambelis argues the Islamic State carried out the attack in part to bolster its recruitment and fundraising efforts—and one-up al Qaeda—as it pivots from territory control to global terrorism. Michael Horton examines the enduring threat posed by the Islamic State's local affiliate in the Sinai, arguing counterproductive tactics by the Egyptian government risk provoking a broader insurgency. In a study based on comprehensive data on those arrested in Spain for terrorism crimes maintained by the Elcano Royal Institute in Madrid that has wide implications for the understanding of radicalization processes across Western countries, Fernando Reinares, Carola García-Calvo, and Álvaro Vicente find that jihadi radicalization in Spain has been driven by two key factors of “differential association,” namely contact with radicalizing agents and pre-existing social ties with other radicalized individuals.

**Paul Cruickshank, Editor in Chief**

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*Cover: A member of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), made up of an alliance of Kurdish and Arab fighters, observes smoke rising in the al-Meshleb neighborhood of Raqqa, Syria, on June 7, 2017, as the SDF attempt to advance further into the Islamic State bastion. (Delil Souleiman/AFP/Getty Images)*

# The Battle for Raqqa and the Challenges after Liberation

By Hassan Hassan

**The operation to dislodge the Islamic State from the northern Syrian city of Raqqa comes at a time of considerable change in the country's conflict. As the Syrian government and allied forces make steady gains throughout the country, regional and international backers of the opposition have shifted focus away from the original goals of removing Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and toward dealing with the dangers emanating from militias, which they perceive as a greater threat to their national security. The Syrian rebels are locked in northwestern and southwestern Syria, while al-Qa`ida's offshoot is increasingly tightening its grip on Idlib, the main rebel stronghold. In this context, the areas that once constituted the caliphate of the Islamic State are emerging as a critical battlefield for various forces vying for expanded influence. Raqqa and the Kurdish-dominated forces fighting in the city are now the epicenter of a new chapter for the Syrian conflict.**

In November 2011, Bashar al-Assad made a rare visit to Raqqa, the first for a Syrian president since 1947 when Shukri al-Quwatli visited it as part of a country tour. Before he became president in 1953, Adib al-Shishakli had traveled to Raqqa in 1945 to visit the Afadlah clan, whose current members are known to have joined the Islamic State in large numbers, in recognition of the tribe's role in defying the French occupation of Syria. However, since the advent of the Assad government in 1971, Raqqa—much like the two other provinces that make up the eastern region, namely Hasakah and Deir ez-Zor—has been marginalized, despite its rich history.<sup>a</sup>

The choice of Assad's visit presumably reflected the govern-

a Raqqa was once home to the 9<sup>th</sup> century Abbasid rulers Haroun al-Rashid and his two sons, who mostly ruled from Baghdad. It was also home to 12<sup>th</sup> century Muslim rulers Imad Ad Din Zangi and his son Nour who marched from Raqqa to conquer Aleppo and later establish a dynasty rule linking Aleppo to Mosul.

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ment's belief that Raqqa,<sup>b</sup> despite its marginalization, was a city that was to a significant degree loyal to the regime. Even though protests took place in the city in 2011 and 2012, opposition activists attributed the quiet in Raqqa to three reasons at the time: the city had a large number of intelligence informants; tribal leaders were too invested in the regime to allow a rebellion against it; and the protest movement there was relatively weak. At the end of December 2012, local tribes also organized a major tribal conference in support of the regime under the slogan, "We will continue to confront the conspiracy against Syria, condemn terrorist acts that target innocent Syrian lives, and reject economic sanctions."<sup>1</sup> Three months after what some regarded as a mass oath of allegiance to Assad, Raqqa fell to a consortium of rebel groups led by Ahrar al-Sham and then al-Qa`ida-affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra at dawn on March 4, 2013.<sup>2</sup>

The fall was abrupt, with government defenses collapsing within three days.<sup>3</sup> The fighters who took over Raqqa were primarily outsiders,<sup>4</sup> hailing mostly from the eastern countryside of Aleppo. Although civil society flourished for a few months after the "liberation" of Raqqa—the first provincial capital to be controlled by the anti-government forces—jihadis then began to dominate the scene inside the city and throughout its countryside. As with Aleppo, Raqqa was the unusual case of a population center captured from the outside, rather than an organic anti-regime pushback by the town's residents. This created a degree of distance between the armed groups and the population, which kept the new rulers' hold on the city relatively weak.

When it came to developing ties to the local population, Jabhat al-Nusra was an exception to the weak social links. The group had recruited dozens of hardliners from Raqqa and its countryside, utilizing tribal and Islamist networks to co-opt individuals and their relatives.<sup>5</sup> One example was the Iraqi-born Toubad al-Berayj, a member of the prominent al-Berayj clan, which is part of the Afadlah tribe.<sup>6</sup> Toubad's father lived in exile in Iraq<sup>7</sup> during the 1980s because of alleged links to the Iraqi branch of the Ba'ath Party. Jabhat al-Nusra exploited its contacts in Iraq to connect with Toubad and recruit him.<sup>8 c</sup>

The exploitation of links to Iraqi families was a familiar re-

b Raqqa and its countryside are situated along the two banks of the Euphrates River, locally known as Jazira (part of historical Mesopotamia, east of the river) and Shamiyah (part of historical Levant, west of the river).

c Another high-profile recruit is Abu Ali al-Sharii, a relative of Toubad and a former prisoner of the notorious Syrian Sednaya prison whose *nom de guerre* is Fawaz al-Kurdi. Toubad had a major role in recruiting individuals from his own tribe and other tribes by virtue of his role within the Islamic State as an official in charge of tribal affairs. Author interview, Abdullatif al-Jasim, a spokesman of the Raqqa Revolutionary Front and a tribal figure, May 2017; Ahmed Ibrahim, "Tribes: caught up between the Assad regime and the Islamic State," Aljamhuriya, May 26, 2015, <http://aljumhuriya.net/33481>.

recruitment tactic by Jabhat al-Nusra. Its founders were members of the Islamic State of Iraq before they were dispatched to Syria to establish a Syrian branch by reaching out to local tribes after the armed insurrection began there. Around 35 of the most notable early members of Jabhat al-Nusra came from rural Raqqa,<sup>9</sup> and they recruited dozens of their relatives into the organization. After hostilities erupted between Jabhat al-Nusra and its former patron, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi—who in April 2013 unilaterally announced a merger between the Iraqi and Syrian groups—most of these members joined the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. In November 2013, exactly two years after Assad's historic visit, representatives of 14 Raqqa tribes appeared in a video pledging allegiance to al-Baghdadi—including the same tribes that made the same oath to Assad a year earlier. And in January 2014, Raqqa became the first city in either Syria or Iraq under the sole control of the Islamic State. The city had again fallen abruptly, after a brief period of fighting between the Islamic State on the one side and Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra on the other.

The story of Raqqa has thus been one of unpredictable developments. The calm in the city throughout 2011 and 2012, in contrast to the other provinces of eastern Syria, hid the Raqqa'is' profound sense of social, political, economic, and educational marginalization. The fall of Raqqa in March 2013 was also unexpected and revealed the regime's frail grip on a city perceived by both sides of the conflict to be loyalist. Raqqa was known at the time for its social conservatism but not its religiosity. That the city would become the nominal capital of the Islamic State's caliphate in 2014 was almost inconceivable for those in Syria familiar with society in the city and its countryside.

Raqqa was also where some of the faultlines of the Syrian conflict created deep reverberations, more so than they did in places like Aleppo. Preparations for the battle to expel the Islamic State, for example, brought the United States and Turkey—the latter being NATO's second-largest army—on a collision course over the Kurdish YPG's lead role in the U.S.-led coalition efforts. The Kurdish YPG, the People's Protection Units, is a group that Ankara considers a branch of the PKK, the Kurdistan Workers' Party. Whereas Damascus and its allies in Tehran and Moscow had kept their distance from the U.S.-led coalition previously, they jostled for a role in the Raqqa operation. Jordan had also grown concerned that the defeat of the Islamic State in eastern Syria and Anbar would see the militants try to regroup in the Syrian Desert and the Qalamoun region in southern Syria, adjacent to the Jordanian border.<sup>10</sup>

This article explores the political, social, and military circumstances surrounding Operation Euphrates Wrath—the battle to dislodge the Islamic State from its most significant stronghold in Syria. Based on extensive conversations with individuals from Raqqa and with figures representing the various parties of the conflict in Syria, there seems to be a consensus that while liberating Raqqa will be hard, the harder challenge still will be providing security and stability after the expulsion of the Islamic State. Sustainable success will also be contingent on whether social and political tensions are adequately addressed. The article first examines the composition of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and its evolving relations with Sunni Arab rebel groups in Syria, before assessing the challenges it will face in retaking and securing the city.

## SDF Composition

Until recently, the U.S.-led coalition has pursued an Iraq-first strat-

egy to defeat the Islamic State.<sup>11</sup> Tribal, Kurdish, and professional forces in Iraq were trained and equipped to expel the group from the third of Iraq it captured in the summer of 2014. In Syria, an expensive effort to train a contingent from within the opposition factions to oppose the Islamic State failed.<sup>12</sup> The United States came to rely heavily on an effective but inadequate Kurdish militia, the YPG, until October 2015 when the Kurds announced the establishment of the SDF,<sup>13</sup> partly to satisfy a U.S. desire not to alienate Turkey, which views the YPG as a terrorist group.

A multi-ethnic 50,000-strong coalition,<sup>14</sup> the SDF includes around 30,000 Arab fighters organized under the Syrian Arab Coalition, forming around 60 percent of the SDF.<sup>15</sup> Besides organized factions and individuals, the SDF recruits military-age people from the region. While Arab recruits constitute a large percentage of the force, the YPG remains the backbone of the SDF. The alliance relies on the leadership and fighting capabilities of the YPG fighters, especially battle-hardened PKK veterans who were based in the Qandil Mountains in Iraq before the Syrian uprising.<sup>16</sup> The SDF has been seen by some as a vehicle for the YPG, and the PKK, to expand its influence in predominantly Arab areas.<sup>17</sup> The Syrian opposition have also accused the YPG, and by extension the SDF, of collaborating with the regime and serving as a fifth column, facilitating the return of the regime to areas liberated from the Islamic State.<sup>18</sup>

Although the Syrian rebels assert that American reliance on the YPG since 2014 was a deliberate choice, the arrangement was arrived at in an ad hoc way. The battle in Kobani triggered a tactical alliance that later expanded into a strategic one in the fight against the Islamic State. John Allen, who served as the special presidential envoy for the U.S.-led coalition until October 2015, said the alliance was accidental.<sup>19</sup> During the battle of Kobani, the persistence of Kurdish volunteers fighting with some Arab rebel factions against the Islamic State, which was then at its peak, impressed U.S. policymakers and led the United States to establish a working relationship with the YPG. The Kurdish force helped liberate all of Hasakah in the spring of 2016,<sup>20</sup> making it the first Syrian province to have been almost fully controlled by the YPG-aligned forces, apart from a small regime presence.

The failure of the U.S. program to train and equip the Syrian rebels to fight the Islamic State coincided with the growing influence of the YPG beyond Kurdish areas. This put the United States in a difficult position as Turkey began to see the expansion of the Kurdish militia as a threat to its national security. Turkey also feared that weapons given to the YPG could be used against it by the PKK.<sup>21</sup> The reluctance of the Obama administration to ally itself with the Syrian Sunni Arab rebels, combined with the skills the YPG developed in combating the Islamic State, enabled the YPG and allied forces to become an indispensable force in the fight, even beyond Kurdish areas.

By the spring of 2015, the United States seemingly gave up on its effort to persuade moderate rebel groups to focus exclusively on the Islamic State instead of fighting the Assad regime and the extremist group at the same time.<sup>22</sup> After the disbanding of two of the most capable moderate forces in northern Syria, namely the Syrian Revolutionary Front and the Hazm Movement,<sup>23</sup> after the groups endured deadly clashes with Jabhat al-Nusra, the YPG emerged as the only viable force that the Obama administration was willing to support in the effort to end the caliphate in Syria. The problem was the U.S. reliance on the YPG, and later the broader SDF coalition, became more divisive, especially as the Kurdish-dominated



*Syria (Rowan Technology)*

force began to operate in Arab or Arab-majority areas in Raqqah and Aleppo.

The core of the Syrian Arab Coalition within the SDF includes two main local militias. The first one is the Sanadid Forces, which joined the SDF in October 2015. The group, previously known as the Army of Dignity, is led by Hemaïdi Deham al-Jarba, the tribal sheikh of the Shammar tribal confederation, one of the largest tribes in Syria. The group had forged an alliance with the YPG in 2013<sup>24</sup> when the two controlled areas along the Syria-Iraq border before they were expelled by the Islamic State a year later. Al-Jarba has emphasized that his group was not party to the original Syrian conflict and instead acts as a local self-defense force. He famously said “whoever rules Damascus rules Syria.”<sup>25</sup>

Al-Jarba’s tribe historically struck alliances with the Kurds in feuds involving rival tribes or powers in the region.<sup>26</sup> Along with kinship, such ancient alliances are often effective tools in tribal areas to open communication channels among different groups or settle disputes. In 2003, al-Jarba left Syria for Iraq, where he stayed in Erbil. In an interview with BBC Arabic, he said he then spent two years mediating between Kurds and Arab tribes in Iraq before he relocated to Doha and then back to Syria in 2009.<sup>27</sup> The Sanadid Forces is a small group in the SDF, which has, by its own likely inflated account, 4,500 fighters,<sup>28</sup> and therefore al-Jarba’s role is more relevant as a mediator between Arabs and Kurds. However, the size of the broader Shammar tribe could also bolster post-Islamic State stabilization efforts, if it is mobilized to do so.

The other main group in the Arab Coalition within the SDF is Jabhat Thuwwar al-Raqqah (Raqqah Revolutionary Front), a rebel faction whose force dwindled over the years from around 4,500 fighters in 2013–2014 to around 1,250<sup>29</sup> presently due to depletion and the lack of strong foreign support. Jabhat Thuwwar al-Raqqah, led by Abu Issa from Raqqah, emerged out of the mainstream anti-Assad rebellion, unlike the Sanadid, which did not participate in the initial uprising and remained largely a local armed group. In 2014, Jabhat Thuwwar al-Raqqah participated in the battle of Kobani against the Islamic State alongside the YPG and Kurdish volunteers from Iran, Iraq, and Turkey, even though the group had previously clashed with the YPG in Ras al-Ain.

In addition to these two main constituent groups, another group that operates under the Syrian Arab Coalition is the Elite Forces, a small group led by Ahmed al-Jarba, who is of the same Shammar tribe as Hemaïdi al-Jarba but not a close relative. Ahmed al-Jarba is the former chief of the opposition’s Syrian National Coalition, which helped cut the last supply route into Raqqah from Deir ez-Zor on March 6.<sup>30</sup> Additionally, the SDF also includes remnants of disbanded groups such as the Syrian Revolutionary Front and the Deir ez-Zor Military Council, a former rebel faction that was expelled by the Islamic State in 2014. The former joined the SDF by late 2015 and the latter in November 2016.<sup>31</sup>

### **The Growing Legitimacy of the SDF**

On top of the lack of a reliable local force to fight the Islamic State,

differences between Turkey and the United States slowed down the Raqqa operation.<sup>32</sup> The territorial expansion of the YPG after 2014 increased tension between the United States and Turkey. In August 2016, as the YPG liberated much of northern Syria and edged closer to Raqqa and eastern Aleppo, Ankara intervened in Syria in a bid to prevent the Kurds from linking Kurdish cantons in northeastern and northwestern Syria. Turkey also pushed for an alternative force to the YPG to dislodge the Islamic State from Raqqa. An initial plan Turkey proposed in October 2016 envisaged the deployment of a total of 12,000 troops, including 4,000-5,000 Turkish Special Forces and at least 8,000 Arab fighters,<sup>33</sup> approaching Raqqa either from Manbij or Tal Abyad,<sup>34</sup> towns that had been liberated by the YPG and allied forces.<sup>35</sup> The American assessment for the number of troops needed for the battle of Raqqa changed earlier this year, to a total of 22,000 troops.<sup>36</sup> Turkey claimed it could organize a Syrian fighting force of this size, but the United States was not convinced Ankara could deliver.<sup>37</sup>

Turkey increasingly found its attempts to curtail the Kurdish expansion into Raqqa<sup>38</sup> challenged by multiple sides. Turkey's plan for rebel groups friendly to Ankara to march from the Islamic State-'free zone' they created was undercut by regime advances in northeastern Aleppo<sup>39</sup> and coincided with an agreement between the SDF and Damascus to create a buffer<sup>40</sup> between the Kurdish-aligned forces and the Turkish-backed rebels. Furthermore, after an initial effort to find common ground with Turkey, the Trump administration began to put pressure on Ankara to support the SDF. But these efforts were to no avail.<sup>41</sup> On April 25, 2017, Turkish strikes targeted the YPG inside Syria.<sup>42</sup> News then emerged that the United States had deployed American troops accompanied by Kurdish forces to patrol the Syria-Turkey border<sup>43</sup> in a show of support for its Kurdish allies.<sup>44</sup>

The YPG has also faced resistance for its actions in Syria. The expansion of the YPG, including its announcement of a "federal system"<sup>45</sup> in northern Syria in December 2016, has been perceived with varying degrees of suspicion by the Syrian opposition and local communities. Syrian armed rebel groups have been particularly outspoken against the YPG, largely due to the perception that the Kurdish militia was in cahoots with the Syrian regime and Russia. Tensions had previously spiked in early 2016, when rebels in Aleppo were concurrently under attack from government and Kurdish forces.<sup>46</sup>

Hostilities between the rebels and the YPG translated into widespread suspicion toward the YPG. These tensions increased after Turkey-backed rebels in August 2016 launched a campaign to expel the Islamic State from Aleppo's eastern countryside, which it successfully did in approximately 5,000 square kilometers.

Many in the Syrian opposition perceived the SDF as a vehicle for the YPG and the regime. But attitudes appeared to shift just before the Raqqa operation began on June 6, 2017, for a number of reasons. One reason was the frustration felt toward Turkey, especially after the expulsion of the rebels from Aleppo in December 2016, which many saw as a result of Turkey's "abandonment" of the rebels there, and its shift to fighting the Islamic State and the Kurdish groups in Aleppo's eastern countryside. Such disappointment was reflected in the refusal of prominent rebel leaders to participate in the Turkish Operation Euphrates Shield west of the Euphrates River when approached by authorities in Turkey.<sup>47</sup>

Additionally, with the increased U.S. military footprint in northern and southern Syria, those within Syrian rebel groups previously

opposed to joining the SDF started to see the SDF as "an American project"<sup>48</sup> rather than a PKK project. This made rebel groups more agreeable to reaching understandings with the SDF, especially after the Turkish role in northern Syria seemed to have reached a dead end.<sup>49</sup> For example, the SDF has negotiated with moderate rebel groups to relocate some rebel forces to eastern Syria to join the fight there as part of the SDF in the coming months, according to individuals involved in the ongoing talks.<sup>50</sup> Some of these groups, which the SDF envisage deploying in eastern Syria if the talks succeed, during or after the Raqqa operation, include fighters previously vetted by the United States who were driven out of their areas by al-Qa`ida-aligned jihadis and the Islamic State. Former fighters of the Syrian Revolutionary Front, which disbanded<sup>51</sup> in northwestern Syria in 2014, had already joined the SDF by late 2015.

The additional entry of rebel groups might boost the popular legitimacy of the Kurdish-led SDF coalition. The negotiations come amid a nascent trend in which rebel forces, including Ankara-aligned Ahrar al-Sham but excluding al-Qa`ida-aligned Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, are increasingly willing to turn their attention against extremist forces rather than strictly engaging in the anti-regime fight. The rebels' discomfort with the focus on extremists rather than the Syrian regime had been a major factor for the collapse of the American train-and-equip program, but attitudes are changing.<sup>4</sup> One benefit the rebel groups see in taking the fight to the Islamic State is that areas liberated from the group by U.S.-aligned forces become difficult for the Syrian government to bomb because of U.S. involvement.<sup>52</sup>

The cautious but growing acceptance of the SDF by Sunni Arab rebel groups reflects a subtle change in how it is perceived. And as outlined, the warming toward the SDF goes beyond its central areas of operation in Hasakah and Raqqa.<sup>53</sup> Cooperation between the SDF and rebel groups could bolster the security of Raqqa after it is eventually liberated from the Islamic State by denying the terrorist group safe havens in adjacent areas. In Deir ez-Zor, for example, the leaders of the two most powerful rebel groups expressed no reservation in operating alongside the Kurds as long as it was under sustained American leadership.<sup>54</sup> The two groups, namely Maghawir al-Thawra and Usud al-Sharqiyyah, have been fighting the Islamic State in al-Tanf and the Qalamoun region near Jordan, respectively. In June, an official at the Combined Joint Task Force – Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR) echoed the Syrian opposition's changing sentiments toward the SDF, by suggesting that the SDF is "less Kurdish than before."<sup>55</sup>

d An audio message that circulated on social media in June 2017—which featured a rebel aligned with Maghawir al-Thawrah, a Pentagon-backed rebel group from Deir ez-Zor—offers insight into changing attitudes toward the U.S. policy in Syria. The rebel urged people from eastern Syria to join the U.S.-sponsored groups in the fight against the Islamic State. In the message, he spoke of previous widespread criticism of a rebel commander for joining forces with the YPG to dislodge the Islamic State from Kobani in 2014. He said the criticism was short-sighted and that the YPG managed to liberate much of Syria with the help of the United States. He said that failure to join the U.S.-backed effort may mean that pro-regime militias, including from Iraq, will liberate Deir ez-Zor instead of the rebels with the help of the United States. "America has become the mother of the revolution," he said, suggesting that the liberation of their areas and the prevention of a regime expansion could only be achieved by working with the United States. See <https://www.facebook.com/Albukamalnews/videos/1132609863550314/?pnref=story>.

## The Race to Raqqa

The fight against the Islamic State in Manbij in the spring and summer of 2016 was the second-deadliest battle for the YPG after Kobani, and Raqqa is set to be even deadlier. A common question about the Kurdish involvement in predominantly Arab Raqqa is what the Kurdish group might gain from the battle.<sup>56</sup>

Three main motivations can be identified. The first is a kind of race-to-Berlin dynamic. For the Kurds, involvement in liberating Raqqa forestalls the possibility Turkey might liberate the city and implant hostile forces in a strategic area for the YPG. Such a situation, from the point of view of the YPG, would create a nightmare scenario of encirclement by Turkey in the north and the Islamic State in the south.<sup>57</sup> Participation in a successful liberation of Raqqa, on the other hand, would constrain Turkish influence to eastern Aleppo.

The second Kurdish motivation in participating in the battle of Raqqa is that securing the city would pre-empt any move by the regime to recapture Raqqa. Even though the regime has struck deals with the YPG and tolerated Kurdish self-administration, the return of regime control in northeastern Syria is seen by the YPG as a threat. Here, their current perception of American intentions in Syria is important. The relatively assertive current U.S. policy provides the Kurds with the incentive to expand their influence in eastern Syria, while they see the return of the regime as both threatening and limiting to their ambitions.<sup>58</sup> In May 2017, leaks from Kurdish leaders in Hasakah indicated that the YPG anticipates a confrontation with elements loyal to the regime and Iran in northern Syria.<sup>59</sup> The Kurds are determined to maintain control of the three dams on the Euphrates River<sup>60</sup> near Raqqa and Manbij,<sup>e</sup> in addition to a fourth dam on the April 17 Lake,<sup>f</sup> and thus control vital sectors such as electricity, constraining the influence of the regime in the region.

Finally, senior Kurdish leaders know the liberation of Raqqa will be the most notable achievement in the fight against the Islamic State in Syria and will serve as a hammer blow to its caliphate pretensions, thereby strengthening the YPG's relationship with the United States. The Syrian Kurds see the United States as not only key to constraining maneuvers by the Turkish and Syrian governments, but to gaining local and international legitimacy for their ambition to control what they see as Kurdish 'historical lands' in eastern and northern Syria and asserting their ethnic, cultural, and political identity.<sup>61</sup>

## Raqqa vs. Mosul

Operation Euphrates Wrath, spearheaded by the YPG-dominated SDF, has been conducted in five operational phases, the first of which was announced on November 5, 2016, three weeks after the offensive on the city itself of Mosul. The initial phases involved 'shaping operations,' which took seven months, and focused on isolating the city of Raqqa and clearing rural areas to the north, east, and west of the city. The fifth and final phase—to storm the city—began on June 6, 2017.<sup>62</sup> SDF forces have since entered the city and expelled the Islamic State from several neighborhoods in the northern, eastern, and western sides of the city.

e The three dams are Tishrin Dam, near Manbij; Tabqa Dam; and Baath Dam, near Raqqa.

f The lake, in the Kurdish-dominated Afrin, is known locally as Midanki Lake.

Before the SDF entered the outskirts of Raqqa city on June 7, the Islamic State seemingly pursued a slightly different strategy to the one in Mosul. When the Iraqi forces mobilized in Nineveh, the group's tactics had focused on deploying a barrage of suicide bombers to delay the advancing forces.<sup>63</sup> In Raqqa, the group deployed far fewer suicide bombers as the SDF advanced on the city.<sup>64</sup> A rebel commander, speaking from within a mile from the city of Raqqa, said the group showed no resistance in those areas.<sup>64</sup> As SDF forces advanced on Raqqa, the Islamic State also withdrew abruptly from Tabqa, west of Raqqa, after it agreed to terms of surrender to the SDF.<sup>65 h</sup>

These moves by the Islamic State were in stark contrast to the way it fought in Mosul and can be attributed to several factors.<sup>1</sup> Unlike in Mosul, where most Islamic State fighters were local Iraqis, many of whom were die-hard and longstanding members of the group, the Islamic State had fewer local fighters with deep-rooted loyalty in Raqqa. Tribal figures from Raqqa say<sup>66</sup> that the majority of those who pledged allegiance to the Islamic State in its de facto Syrian capital did so out of fear and opportunism, rather than ideological commitment. As evidence for this, Abdullatif al-Jasim,<sup>67</sup> a tribal figure and a rebel spokesman who currently lives in Urfa, Turkey, pointed out the little resistance to SDF advances in former strongholds of the Islamic State, such as al-Karama,<sup>68</sup> a town east of Raqqa where dozens of individuals from certain clans, like the aforementioned Berayj tribe, had joined the group.<sup>3</sup>

Given the fact that local fighters are proving less than committed to the caliphate, the Islamic State will likely have to rely on the city's still likely large population of foreign fighters as well as a new generation of young fighters brainwashed by the group's ideology who typically fight viciously to the end. Officials and activists stated that senior leaders and administrative staff of the Islamic State evacuated<sup>69</sup> the city several months before the battle began, eastward along the Euphrates in the areas in and around Mayedin.<sup>70</sup> (See map). However, other reports<sup>71</sup> indicate that the Islamic State dispatched fighters from Homs, Deir ez-Zor, and Iraq before the three-pronged encirclement of Raqqa in April. The group is thought to have about 4,000 fighters currently present in the city of Raqqa, though the real figure judging by their defensive efforts so far is likely lower.<sup>72</sup>

g Another likely reason the Islamic State has not done more to block the SDF's march on Raqqa is that in Mosul the group faced a relatively professional Iraqi counterterrorism force in addition to tens of thousands of army, federal police, and militia forces participating in the battle. In Syria, although YPG fighters are battle-hardened, no such force exists, making it less imperative from the Islamic State's point of view to block the SDF's approach.

h A senior U.S. Department of State official involved in the campaign against the Islamic State confirmed to the author in May 2017 that the group surrendered after a deal with the SDF, and the terms of surrender were favorable to the SDF.

i After an initial focus on suicide attacks outside Mosul, the Islamic State reduced its reliance on the tactic, presumably because the Iraqi army and the international coalition learned how to reduce their effect. This could have factored into the Islamic State's decision not to rely on suicide bombers outside Raqqa, especially given that Raqqa and the surrounding areas are more exposed and sparsely populated. "Iraqi forces see reduction in suicide attacks after adapting tactics in Mosul," Rudaw, December 1, 2016.

j Another town that saw the same collapse in tribal support for the Islamic State was Suluk, a former Islamic State stronghold north of Raqqa that prior to its recapture saw a sizeable tribal support for the group.

It is unclear how long it will take to liberate Raqqa, a city around one-tenth the size of Mosul, both in terms of population and geographic size. These factors may make the Raqqa operation faster than the nearly nine-month offensive on Mosul. Nevertheless, American officials expect the battle in Raqqa to be long and deadly. The Islamic State is poised to fight until the end and could pivot to a campaign of guerrilla warfare and terrorism after it is expelled. In an editorial<sup>73</sup> published in its al-Naba newsletter two days after the launch of the Raqqa operation, the Islamic State vowed to turn Raqqa into a long “battle of eradication” against the SDF. The editorial summed up the group’s assessment of the Raqqa battle, claiming that the SDF was not ready to fight a Mosul-like operation inside the city, that the SDF fighters are “poorly trained,” and that it would be hard to replenish its force if the battle dragged on as happened in Mosul. The authors compared Raqqa with Manbij, a smaller town with fewer Islamic State fighters, where fighting continued for around two months. A speech by the Islamic State’s official spokesman, Abu al-Hassan al-Muhajir, in June 2017<sup>74</sup> also suggested the group would stand and fight in Raqqa.

Senior U.S. officials involved in the Raqqa battle say<sup>75</sup> that the group might rely on tunnel systems dug below houses to prolong the fight to a greater extent than it did in Mosul, especially because Raqqa generally has low-rise buildings. High-rise buildings and densely populated areas make it easier for snipers, on whom the Islamic State relies heavily during its urban battles, to slow down advancing forces.<sup>76</sup> Raqqa, much like Fallujah, is more exposed than cities like Mosul, hence the need for tunnels.

As elsewhere, the Islamic State is set to utilize tunnels in Raqqa to ambush ground forces, resupply, and hide. In Mosul, dozens of Iraqi soldiers were killed after they were ambushed in this manner in the al-Salam hospital as the army advanced deep in the city.<sup>77</sup>

Such attacks, if they happen, will likely have greater effect on the militia groups fighting to liberate Raqqa, unlike in Mosul where forces are better trained and more professional. In previous engagements, the SDF has had a tendency to be stretched thin<sup>78</sup> and will likely face fierce resistance as they edge closer to the city center.

The pace of the campaign in Raqqa might also be affected by streamlined decisionmaking processes<sup>k</sup> for U.S.-led coalition airstrikes in crowded areas where there is a risk of civilian casualties.<sup>79</sup> A week into the offensive to take back the city, U.N. war crimes investigators reported “staggering” civilian toll caused by airstrikes.<sup>80</sup> More than 600 civilians were killed in coalition attacks between March and May 2017 in Raqqa, according to estimates by the United Kingdom-based Airwars, while the U.N. documented at least 300 civilian deaths in the city.<sup>81</sup>

As has been well documented, the Islamic State used human shields to slow down Iraqi advances in Mosul. It will also likely do the same to slow down the SDF in Raqqa,<sup>82</sup> which is home to an estimated 300,000 civilians.<sup>83</sup>

An uprising from within did not materialize to any significant degree in Mosul, and it is extremely unlikely to occur in Raqqa, partly because the population did not have an organized resistance before the Islamic State took over. Since 2013, the city changed hands with little fighting and with no popular involvement. Additionally, there has been no precedent of a popular uprising from

k While acknowledging a mounting toll of civilian deaths, the United States military says there has not been a relaxation in the rules of engagement for such strikes. “Coalition and Iraqi forces not adequately protecting Mosul civilians, says Amnesty,” Airwars, March 28, 2017; Ben Hubbard and Michael R. Gordon, “U.S. War Footprint Grows in Middle East, With No Endgame in Sight,” *New York Times*, March 29, 2017.



This image, captured from a video entitled “Purifying the Souls” released by the Islamic State’s Wilayat Raqqah Media office on June 19, 2017, allegedly shows an Islamic State fighter during a battle in Raqqah province, Syria.



within the Islamic State areas in Iraq or Syria. One explanation why has been the group's extreme brutality in reaction to any dissension.

The Islamic State in Raqqa is set to rely on small combat units for mobility and to minimize damage on its remaining forces. As the SDF moves into Raqqa, past defensive campaigns by the Islamic State suggest it is also set to rely heavily on snipers and suicide bombers to inflict damage on and slow down advancing forces. Its tactics in urban areas have also included counter-attacks and night ambushes. The group has also utilized weaponized drones to monitor and attack enemy troops, for example in Mosul.<sup>84</sup> Locally manufactured weapons have also enabled the group to sustain itself inside besieged strongholds.<sup>85</sup>

Overall, however, most of these tactics might be undermined by the small size and sparse layout of Raqqa, compared to the larger and more densely inhabited Mosul. Conversely, the lack of professional counterterrorism forces like the Iraqi counterterrorism service deployed in the battle might enable the group to prolong the fighting in Raqqa for several weeks or even months.

There is a consensus view in interviews the author has conducted with individuals in or from the Raqqa area that while liberating Raqqa will be hard, the harder challenge still will be providing security and stability after the expulsion of the Islamic State. Sustainable success will be contingent on whether social and political tensions are adequately addressed. An understanding of tribal dynamics and the urban-rural divide will be key to preventing a jihadi comeback in the region.

### The Tribal Factor and the Urban-Rural Divide

Syrian tribes have their highest concentrations in four provinces—Deraa, Deir ez-Zor, Hasaka, and Raqqa—where they constitute around 90 percent of the population in each.<sup>86</sup> Overall, tribes account for 30 percent of the country's population but inhabit more than 60 percent of its territory.<sup>87</sup> Rural areas in Hama, Aleppo, Idlib, and Damascus also have a heavy tribal presence.

The Islamic State sought to entrench itself in all of these tribal areas with some success. Raqqa, and the eastern countryside of Aleppo province to a lesser degree, was its clearest success. After its takeover of territory in these two areas in 2014, the Islamic State was able to control the population with little to no resistance. In the case of Raqqa, one key reason was arguably the fact that mainstream rebels had not entrenched themselves in the city by the time the Islamic State overran them there, so a local resistance was not yet fully formed, unlike in areas such as Idlib, Aleppo city, and Deir ez-Zor where a full-fledged resistance had formed.

Given the lack of a solid support base for its rivals, the Islamic State was able to dedicate more time to building alliances with the local communities in Raqqa rather than having to pacify a rebellious population, as happened in Deir ez-Zor.<sup>88</sup> As will be outlined below, the Islamic State's focus on tribal outreach in the city and rural areas should be understood in context to avoid myths about how tribes work and how jihadis operate in tribal areas.

Unlike other state and non-state actors in Iraq or Syria, the Islamic State has an organizational branch dedicated to tribal outreach, underscoring the importance the group attaches to the task. According to accounts by locals who met him, the Islamic State "minister" in charge of these efforts is a Saudi national identified as Dhaigham Abu Abdullah.<sup>89</sup> He has overseen the group's "Public Re-

lations bureau"<sup>90</sup> and has received tribal delegates to address grievances. The bureau purportedly has dispatched delegates to various tribes and has often handled old disputes among tribes that remain unresolved or were resolved according to tribal codes the group views as un-Islamic. Some of these disputes were several decades old and often involved the deportation of entire families because a relative killed a member of another tribe or committed adultery.<sup>90 m</sup>

In the early phases of its expansion, the Islamic State followed a divide-and-rule approach to control tribal areas and subjugate them to their laws by aligning itself with and cultivating particular members from each tribe, typically young leaders. In an era of increased restiveness, young tribal figures tended to have more credibility and initiative than tribal elders who once worked with the regime. The Islamic State cultivated such members from various tribes.<sup>91</sup>

As Raqqa and other Islamic State strongholds come under attack by militias from outside areas, it is important to point out a common misconception in commentary about tribes, which is to suggest that entire tribes join jihadi groups or that a tribal leader who joins such groups commands the loyalty of his entire tribe. This is seldom the case, and one would be hard-pressed to find a single example of an entire tribe with loyalty to a jihadi organization. The distinction is important to grasp in order to understand the local dynamics as strongholds of the Islamic State, like Raqqa, come under attack by militias from outside areas. Tribes are essentially pragmatic institutions and tend to seek to protect their tribal members from bad outcomes.<sup>n</sup>

In Raqqa, the Islamic State recruited members from various tribes. Where the group had a large number of a certain tribe, it was often because a member of the tribe was more effective in recruiting more of his relatives than others. As such, no one tribe could be regarded as entirely, or even largely, loyal to the Islamic State.

The Islamic State has often expressed how it hopes to win tribal loyalists. One notable example is its discussion of how useful tribes are in a defining document written by the Islamic State's predecessor group, the Islamic State in Iraq, in 2010, just as the previous incarnation sought to reconstruct itself after its defeat at the hands of American troops and tribal fighters. The document, titled the "Strategic Plan for the Consolidation of the Political Standing of the Islamic State of Iraq,"<sup>92</sup> assessed that most of those who joined the Awakening Councils did so out of solidarity—to stand with their

l Several residents from Deir ez-Zor confirmed to the author the identity of Abu Abdullah in 2014 as tribal delegates from the area visited him in Qai'm, Iraq, to resolve disputes with the Islamic State. Steve Negus, "'ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror,' and More," *New York Times*, April 1, 2015.

m The Islamic State has also regularly produced propaganda videos showing it negotiating settlement of old tribal disputes. Residents living under the Islamic State also confirm that the group warns against resolving disputes according to tribal codes rather than Islamic sharia, including enforcing inheritance laws. Steve Negus, "'ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror,' and More," *New York Times*, April 1, 2015.

n Even in Iraq, where tribes are more organized and coherent than in Syria, it was armed members of the tribes who had already been involved in the insurgency that turned against al-Qa'ida-affiliated jihadis amid the U.S. troop surge in 2007, rather than a collective tribal effort. In other words, local insurgents rather than the tribes as a whole took action. These "sons" of tribes turned from anti-American insurgents into American allies, and their credibility among their tribes helped deepen the social reach of U.S. forces undertaking a new strategy to gather intelligence and resolve disputes.

relatives rather than any personal convictions to fight the jihadis. “Tribal solidarity is well known, and does not necessarily indicate a flaw in the policy of the Islamic State,” the document reads. The authors then explained that jihadis should exploit the same virtue, “the tribal principles that regard collaboration with foreign occupiers against their countrymen as criminal and treason.”

Understanding the jihadi-tribal relationship is crucial to building local rapport, establishing credibility for the liberating forces, and avoiding continued jihadi infiltration of these communities. Some locals, for example, fear that a Kurdish expansion into their areas would change the demographics of the population and would see the Kurds even scores for the Syrian Ba’athist regime’s settlement of Arab families in Kurdish areas near the Turkish border after the creation of Lake Assad and the Euphrates dam in the 1970s. Kurds claim that tens of thousands of Kurds were displaced from their home areas by the regime for the resettlement of Arab families, known as the Arab *al-Ghamr* (the Arabs affected by flooding).

Another source of tension in the liberation of Islamic State-controlled areas in both Iraq and Syria has been how the liberating force determines which residents were members of the Islamic State.<sup>9</sup> This becomes even more complicated in tribal areas where informing on relatives or neighbors to “out-of-towners” is frowned upon. Many government employees continued to work, either because the Islamic State pressured them or because they saw their work as service to their town. If such people in Raqqa are ill-treated or killed by militias operating under the YPG’s command, it risks inflaming ethnic tensions. The tendency of anti-Islamic State forces on the ground in Syria and Iraq to view residents who continued to live under the Islamic State as fellow travelers or family members of jihadis as complicit could complicate efforts to prevent the Islamic State or other jihadi groups from winning back influence in Raqqa. Tribal pragmatism, embodied in the popular tribal proverb “the wolf shall not die, nor shall the sheep perish,”<sup>93</sup> keeps the door open for a working relationship with any force in control of the city, regardless of its ethnic or political orientation. It is not impossible that a Kurdish-dominated force could be accepted if it successfully reassured the population about its long-term intentions.

Tribal alliances are not static, as demonstrated by the swift shift of Raqqa tribes from ostensible allegiance to Assad in 2011 to Jabhat al-Nusra in 2013 to the Islamic State in 2014. “We tribes do not go after anyone who does not go after us,” Abu Nasser, an elder of the Abu Shaaban tribe in Raqqa told the author last month, “If the devil itself liberates our areas from the Islamic State, we do not have a problem. Just give us our rights. Even if the Syrian army

comes, we will provide it with logistics. We do the same with the [SDF].”<sup>94</sup>

Besides its experience dealing with tribes, the Islamic State has also exploited rural-urban divisions to gain a foothold in certain areas. Focus on rural areas has been a hallmark of the Islamic State’s work. In Mosul, for example, residents reported a heavy presence of Islamic State recruits from Tal Afar, a town north of Mosul and a long-time stronghold of the group and its previous incarnations. Moslawis tend to look down on people from Tal Afar as coarse and less educated, and locals of Tal Afar in turn exhibit rancor toward those from Mosul,<sup>95</sup> even if other factors such as sectarian and ethnic tensions are more decisive in creating tensions between them.

A similar dynamic has played out in rural Syria in the countryside around Deir ez-Zor and Raqqa, where at least two members of the Islamic State cited<sup>96</sup> a desire to “keep urban dwellers subservient” in justifying their membership in the group. Such explanations are unlikely to be a deciding factor for their membership, but the Islamic State uses such sentiments to strengthen what a 14<sup>th</sup> century Arab historian called *asabiyyah*, or social solidarity that ensures loyalty to a ruler. Additionally, rural areas are typically more impoverished and rural people are less educated than city dwellers, providing the Islamic State with opportunities to win their loyalty by promising social and economic advancement. The presence of such rural recruits in the city of Raqqa may stiffen opposition to the SDF advance because some may feel they have everything to lose.

## Future Outlook

The dynamism of tribal alliances is an opportunity and, at the same time, a problem for the forces advancing on Raqqa. While former strongholds of the Islamic State like Fallujah, Ramadi, Tikrit, and Hasakah have since shown few signs of resistance to the liberating forces, the lessons from Iraq after the 2007 troops surge suggest that post-conflict calm and population fatigue could be temporary. Judging the success of a campaign based on the lack of an immediate rebellion,<sup>97</sup> especially in tribal areas, is short-sighted. The Islamic State is already regenerating<sup>98</sup> in places like Diyala.<sup>99</sup> Tribal structures have also fragmented under the Islamic State with traditional leadership either sidelined or discredited, which could complicate efforts to hold and secure Raqqa.

The Islamic State could make something of a comeback after the liberation of Raqqa if the regime returns to areas the rebels liberated before 2014. The return of a distrusted regime, and likely its repressive tools, will make it easier for jihadis, whether the Islamic State or al-Qa`ida, to build new influence in those areas.

Despite the likelihood that Raqqa tribes will seek a *modus vivendi* with the SDF, some, like a member of the activist group Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently interviewed by the author,<sup>100</sup> believe that the Islamic State’s monopoly over propaganda in its areas might have also altered people’s attitudes towards the Kurds. This could increase the possibilities of conflicts if the liberating forces commit future abuses or fail to govern effectively. Others counter that Raqqawis have continued to flee Islamic State areas into Kurdish areas and that locals, because of these travel flows and continued communication with those who have fled, tend to be aware of the reality around them (contrary to the Islamic State’s propaganda claims). Moreover, townspeople who fled to these areas are likely to return after Raqqa is liberated.<sup>101</sup> On balance, the Islamic State propaganda, political or religious, will likely have a lasting effect on some in communities it controlled. The resulting deficit of trust

o This could be a bigger problem in Raqqa and Syria than in Iraq, where there is a relatively functioning state system to handle the interrogation process. In Mosul, whole families were reportedly rounded up by formal army officers for interrogation for days because a relative was accused of being a terrorist. Mohamed Mostafa, “Mosul council deports IS fighters families, cites need for rehabilitation,” Iraqi News, June 20, 2017. In an interview with Al Sharqiya TV, Mashaan al-Juburi warned against violations against the families of individuals who joined the Islamic State. Specifically, he accused the head of Salaheddin operations, Major General Inad al-Juburi, of rounding up the families of Islamic State members in a detention facility, which he said was violation of human rights. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vlcj8E4UZWs>. In an interview with Alsumaria TV, Shaalan Al-Karim, a member of parliament from Salah Ad Din, described the families of Islamic State members as “malignant disease.” See <http://www.alsumaria.tv/news/201980/alsumaria-news/ar>.

between the Kurds and Arabs in some areas could be a faultline that jihadis exploit to try to return to liberated areas.

However, interviews with residents of the Raqqa area<sup>102</sup> leads the author to conclude that Kurdish-Arabic conflict is not inevitable. In areas newly liberated from the Islamic State, there seems to be an opportunity to win over the local communities that feel relieved to be freed from the group. And although the Islamic State could launch a campaign of guerrilla warfare and terrorism after being ousted from Raqqa, it may face less fertile territory for doing so than in some parts of Iraq. In areas of mixed Sunni Shi'a population in Iraq, the Islamic State has exploited sectarian faultlines to launch terror attacks on Shi'a as part of a strategy of inflaming sectarian tensions so that it can cast itself in the role of the defender of Sunnis. But the area around Raqqa is overwhelmingly Sunni, making such a strategy difficult. Set against this, it should be noted that with the continuation of the Syrian conflict, and any emerging ethnic or political tensions between Arab tribes and Kurds in the process, tensions could rise over time.

The Raqqa battle is likely to take at least several weeks, which is around the same time it took to expel the Islamic State from Manbij

and Fallujah. But the battle will likely be bloodier, considering the symbolism of Raqqa to the Islamic State, the commitment of the group to fight until the end, and the dearth of professional forces like the U.S.-trained counterterrorism service in Iraq.

The lack of a clear-cut plan for the future of Raqqa, including which forces will administer the city, and the uncertainty over future relations to the Syrian regime and rebel forces is damaging to the overall fight against extremism in eastern Syria. However, for now, the priority for individuals living under the Islamic State is liberation. A word frequently used by Raqqawis to describe the general mood in the city and its countryside is *taraqquq*, or eager anticipation. Raqqawis are generally encouraged by the lack of regime bombing in areas liberated by the U.S.-backed groups, after earlier doubt. As the Islamic State's self-styled caliphate collapses in much of northeastern Syria, the emergence of an alternative to the group could bring peace to communities that have greatly suffered from bombardment by the Syrian regime and the savagery of the Islamic State. In this sense, Raqqa, once a neglected province in Syria's hinterlands, now stands at a crossroads not only for the overall fight against the Islamic State but for the future of the country. **CTC**

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# A View from the CT Foxhole: LTG Michael K. Nagata, Director, Directorate of Strategic Operational Planning, NCTC

By Brian Dodwell and Don Rassler

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*Lieutenant General Michael K. Nagata assumed the position of Director, Directorate of Strategic Operational Planning at the National Counterterrorism Center on May 13, 2016. Previously, LTG Nagata served as the Commander, Special Operations Command Central (SOCCENT), a sub-unified command of CENTCOM, from June 2013 to October 2015. A native of Virginia, Lieutenant General Nagata graduated from Georgia State University and commissioned as an Infantry Officer in 1982. He initially served as a Platoon Leader in the 2d Infantry Division before volunteering for Army Special Forces in 1984.*

*Throughout his career he served in various positions within Army Special Forces to include: Detachment Commander, Executive Officer, Battalion S-3, Operations Center Director, BN Executive Officer, and Group Operations Officer. Later, he served as the Commander of 1st BN, 1st Special Warfare Training Group, responsible for the Special Forces Qualification Course. In 1990, he volunteered and assessed for a Special Missions Unit (SMU), in which he served at various times throughout his career as a Troop Commander, Operations Officer, Squadron Commander, and SMU Commander. After graduating from the National War College, Lieutenant General Nagata served in the Office of the Undersecretary of Defense for Intelligence. He then served within the Intelligence Community as a Deputy Director for Counter Terrorism. As a general officer, he has served as the Deputy Chief, Office of the Defense Representative to Pakistan (ODRP), the Deputy Director for Special Operations and Counter Terrorism (J-37) of the Joint Staff, and Commander, SOCCENT.*

**CTC: In your view, what is the scale and scope of the terrorism threat that we face? And which organizations, movements, or issues are you the most concerned about? How long do you think the current challenges the United States faces on the terrorism front will last? Do you think this is the new normal?**

**LTG Nagata:** I'll take that last part first. The phrase "new normal" is not a bad description of this, but in my judgment, it's an imperfect phrase because it appears to allude to the notion that whatever the "new" is, that's the way it's going to stay. And I would argue that what we're seeing, not just on the terrorism landscape but frankly across the global stage in all of its dimensions, is unrelenting change. I can't actually think of anything except maybe human biology that is remaining static. And that's true not just in the security sphere of which terrorism is a subset, but I would argue that's happening politically, it's happening economically, it's happening demographically, it's happening societally, it's happening culturally. Very few things remain static; that includes the phenomenon of terrorism. So I do believe that rising and rapidly adapting international terrorism is what we are going to see for the rest of our lives. So "new normal,"

it's not a horrible description, [but] I think it more important to recognize that terrorism in its various forms is not just "here to stay" but is going to continually adapt and seek growth in ways that we probably cannot completely anticipate or predict.

In terms of scope and scale, I don't want to be guilty of hyperbole here. Terrorism is not the worst problem the world faces. But it is certainly a much larger problem today than it was 10 years ago. Unfortunately, its opportunities for growth are significant, and it is imperative that both the United States and the international community find more effective ways to both arrest its expansion, and ultimately to eliminate the drivers and root causes of this phenomenon. We have made some obviously significant strides against terrorism, but today I would argue the biggest deficit we have is on the prevention side, not the countering side.

I think a fair indicator of what its scope is and what it will someday be is simply to reflect on the journey we have taken with Sunni violent extremism, which of course is only one form of terrorism. On 9/11, the dominant Sunni extremist actor, which was al-Qa`ida, existed in essentially four places: Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, and the Sudan. Where is it today? The answer is not reassuring. That is probably an instructive trajectory to consider when one asks the question, "Where will it be in the next 10 years?" It will probably be more expansive than it is today. And when you have this very unusual phenomenon of the Islamic State, I actually don't think it's a linear slope, and we must ensure it does not become exponential in nature.

Let me talk about scale because I think ISIS is the best example of the kind of scale we're going to see. We don't know how many people have joined the Islamic State since its inception. One could make the argument that it [the Islamic State] began with the fall of Mosul, but obviously, ISIS had to exist before the fall of Mosul. Our knowledge of how it was germinated and how it grew and how it expanded so rapidly is imperfect. We do know many of the survivors of the AQI experience, some former Ba'athists, some people who reverted over from al-Qa`ida, a number of other people formed a nucleus of what became ISIS. Today, about four years after it arose in Syria and Iraq, and we should consider how resilient this adversary has proven to be. For example, we now know that U.S. and Coalition military operations have killed tens of thousands<sup>a</sup> of ISIS combatants in one of the most impressive military campaigns against terrorism we've ever seen. The fact that we've inflicted so much harm on ISIS is inarguably a good thing. However, we should reflect a little on what would be the state of any nation-state's armed forces,

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a Editor's note: In February 2017, a senior U.S. military official stated more than 60,000 Islamic State fighters had been eliminated by the anti-Islamic State coalition. Ryan Browne, "US Special Ops chief: More than 60,000 ISIS fighters killed," CNN, February 15, 2017. The figure is likely to have risen significantly since then.

including our own, if they had to absorb this much damage in such a compressed period of time? The fact that ISIS has been able to absorb this much damage and yet still somehow continue to resist the Coalition, albeit in weaker form, to this day, and even more impressively continue to direct, enable, or inspire terrorist attacks around the world should be a sobering and instructive demonstration of organizational resilience. That doesn't directly answer the question of "how big is this problem?" but when I consider how much damage we've inflicted, and they're still operational, they're still capable of pulling off things like some of these recent terrorist attacks we've seen internationally, I think we have to conclude that we do not yet fully appreciate the scale or strength of this phenomenon.

**CTC:** To follow up on that a little bit, you talked about the exponential growth of al-Qa`ida. You talked about the organizational resilience of the Islamic State. What do you attribute that to, especially given all of our counterterrorism efforts over the last 15-plus years?

**LTG Nagata:** Good question. Well, first of all, I want to stipulate something. When I made these assertions in other forums, occasionally I get asked if I am arguing that the efforts by the international community and/or the United States have actually accelerated this problem. That is not what I'm trying to suggest. I would actually argue that had the world not exerted itself, were the world not exerting itself today, it would be much worse. I would argue that, obviously, the world's efforts against this kind of terrorism have been imperfect, but it's had a significant retarding effect on the growth trend in international terrorism. That said, as your question suggests, we've not collectively been able to stop the expansion of al-Qaida or other groups such as ISIS. The best we seem to have been able to do is slow down its growth, which is a good step. It's a necessary first step. But it begs the question, though, "Are both the United States and our international partners able to take the next step, which is to stop its growth and then eventually begin rolling back its growth?" Arguably, we're still in the trying-to-slow-it-down phase.

To more directly answer your question, my own view of what we have learned to do effectively against terrorism has been impressive, but it's suffered from an imbalance. Obviously, given my Special Operations background, what I'm most conversant in and what I have the most practical experience in has been this rather extraordinary journey that military and intelligence organizations have taken—not just in the United States but around the world—in rapidly improving our ability to identify, to track, to pursue, and to precisely target. It's become almost doctrine in the U.S. counterterrorism community—something that General Stanley McChrystal is often cited as the pioneer for, the "find, fix, finish, exploit, analyze, disseminate" (F3EAD) philosophy, which I personally believe has been incredibly effective, and remains so today. And there are other things as well. That's not the only impressive progress achieved by what I will imperfectly call the kinetic side of counterterrorism. Both Special Operations and General Purpose Forces across many countries have made great strides in making military operations against terrorists much more effective.

However, here's where the imbalance becomes more visible. We know from our experience over the last 16 years that these kinetic activities to capture/kill individuals, to disrupt plots, to interdict finances, to interrupt propaganda and media activities, to hinder

**“The fact that ISIS has been able to absorb this much damage and yet still somehow continue to resist the Coalition, albeit in a weaker form, to this day, and even more impressively continue to direct, enable, or inspire terrorist attacks around the world should be a sobering and instructive demonstration of organizational resilience.”**

recruitment prospects—as important as they are—we've learned that none of these things are decisive. Or said more simply, none of these things deliver permanent results. Because inevitably the financier is replaced, the propagandist recovers his media or builds more media, the enemy finds and promotes replacement leader, they find a new courier, etc. I subscribe to the school of thought—this is certainly not original thought by me; I think I actually began hearing this more than 10 years ago—that these kinetic activities primarily buy time and space, for mostly non-military, non-kinetic activity that have a fairer prospect of creating durable results. They are things such as countering effective propaganda, counter-messaging if you will, stopping illicit financing that flows into the coffers of terrorist organizations, and impeding or ending the international travel of either terrorists or people who aspire to be terrorists. We've made clear progress in all these arenas, but I think if you stack up the progress we have made on the kinetic side, with all these other primarily non-kinetic things, it's a lopsided picture.

So in other words, where we're really strong as a global community is in achieving military/kinetic effects that will probably not create permanent results, and where we're comparatively weak is delivering durable results that predominantly flow from non-military/non-kinetic means. And in my own view, so long as that imbalance remains the way it is, we're likely to be limited to hindering the growth of extremism, but we're not likely to bring an end to it.

**CTC:** Do you think part of that is potentially a metric issue? If you look at al-Qa`ida's ability to plan external plots and attacks, we have significantly degraded their capability in that area. However, if you look at their manpower and the territory where they have some level of influence, it appears as though that has grown over the last decade. Do you think part of our issue or challenge with respect to this broad phenomenon, how we're managing the problem, is that the metrics we have primarily been using to evaluate the problem have mostly been focused around issues like external plots and less on the sustainment mechanisms you mentioned?

**LTG Nagata:** That's a great question. You made me think of discussions we're having in my office with a number of people across the United States government. In my view, we've not settled yet on a consistent approach to evaluating our own progress. Some people focus very heavily on the kinetic effects, which actually are fairly

easy to measure, such as counting enemy casualties. The problem is that this is an incomplete measure of progress, and we have to have a more sophisticated approach that encompasses how effectively we are eliminating the drivers that propel individuals and groups from peaceful co-existence, to radicalization, and ultimately to terrorist violence.

There are many people, including my own office since we have a specific mission to conduct counterterrorism assessments, who are striving for ways to effectively measure our effectiveness in both arenas, but it's an incredibly complex endeavor because both the adversary, and the world's response to the adversary, are an incredibly complex situation.

My own view is that we have try a number of pathways both countering and preventing terrorism, and each one will probably require a somewhat different approach toward measuring progress. We can't rely on just one approach. One example is that we cannot solely rely on how many terrorists have been killed, captured, or arrested. Another example is that we cannot solely rely on quantitatively measuring the volume of terrorist activity on the Internet as the sole indicator of whether or not the world is successfully preventing online radicalization. Perhaps even more fundamentally, we must be willing to continually experiment with different approaches to both; I don't think anyone can plausibly argue that either the

U.S. or the international community is as effective as we need to be today. There are going to be some instruments that we attempt that will not work, but the only way we will know they don't work is if we attempt them, and once we realize they do not work, we persevere and try the next idea.

**CTC:** As part of that, how would you assess how we've done in identifying our own strategic objectives in this campaign that you've just mentioned? To be able to assess against something, you have to identify what you're trying to achieve. From a strategic perspective, do you think we have identified the right objectives in the counterterrorism campaign we're engaged in?

**LTG Nagata:** That's a very good question. I'll start with what's happening now. The new U.S. Government is currently developing a new ISIS strategy. Because ISIS is a global phenomenon, it is intended to be a global strategy. As you might expect, this will require the strongest possible collaboration between the United States and the international community. Identifying our strategic objectives, therefore, cannot be done in a vacuum; it will require a conversation with all of our allies and partners around the world to ensure that we have sufficient agreement on those objectives. Otherwise we risk inadvertently working at cross-purposes. It will take some



*LTG Michael K. Nagata addresses West Point cadets in the field during his visit to the United States Military Academy in June 2017.*

time before the work to create this new strategy will be complete, though we obviously enjoy the advantage that we can build on some very good work that had already been done since the rise of ISIS in 2014. Specifically regarding objectives, though it doesn't completely answer your question, I think we will find broadest agreement across all stakeholders that we will never completely eliminate all terrorism everywhere; to assume we could is probably as unwise as assuming we can someday completely eliminate crime everywhere.

Instead, my presumption is that we'll likely renew our belief that reducing terrorism down to the level that local actors, local law enforcement, local communities can effectively handle cases of radicalization-to-violence effectively is both the desirable and achievable goal across all stakeholders. Beyond that, I'd be speculating too much about what the contents of our new strategy will be, so I can only tell that there is "more to follow."

Also, at the risk of repeating one of my earlier answers, I think we're starting to see the limits of how far down we can take this problem with just pursuing kinetic objectives. It begs the question about our ability—the world's ability, not just the United States' ability—to more effectively articulate and pursue non-kinetic, mostly non-military objectives.

**CTC: You had a ground floor view and were a key contributor to a number of important organizational change initiatives related to counterterrorism. These changes, as typified by the institutionalization of operational, inter-agency task forces and enhancements made to the targeting methodology used by the United States, greatly enhanced U.S. counterterrorism effectiveness. When you look back on that time what are the key lessons that you take away that you think might be important for the future challenges that lie ahead?**

**LTG Nagata:** Thank you, that's one of my favorite topics. I'm going to start with an analogy that you might find a little odd, but personally I find it very instructive. It's a sports analogy. I don't care what professional sport we're talking about—basketball, baseball, football—it really doesn't matter. I doubt there's any sports fan around the world that has not seen what I'm about to describe. Team A is owned by some incredibly wealthy person who buys nothing but superstars. But they never truly coalesce as a team because they don't like each other, are rivals with each other, won't cooperate with each other, etc. Then, they get beaten by a less capable team that, player for player, is nowhere near as capable as the superstar team. But they get beaten by this arguably weaker team because the supposedly "weaker" team actually plays like a team. They know each other, they like each other. Because they like each other, they're willing to trust each other. They're willing to make sacrifices for each other. That's real teamwork, and I would argue that's where the USG has made the greatest progress in counterterrorism is wherever we've been willing and able to make this kind of journey—where actors from different agencies and professions are willing to set aside their differences, build strong personal relationships with each other, come to trust each other, and start delivering the kinds of strength and effective performance that comes from true "teamwork."

One of the things I look for in the counterterrorism world, both in the U.S. Government and in the international community, is "integration." Integration is more than coordination; it is more than collaboration. Both of those words are important, but I've come to believe that "integration" is where the CT community must go

**“One of the things I look for in the counterterrorism world, both in the U.S. Government and in the international community, is ‘integration.’ Integration is more than coordination; it is more than collaboration ... I’ve come to believe that ‘integration’ is where the CT community must go because it promises the greatest degree of effectiveness.”**

because it promises the greatest degree of effectiveness that we can achieve. Of course, coordination remains important, but I think we've squeezed all the profit we can get out of better interagency or international coordination. Collaboration is important as well, but like coordination, there's limited room for growth there as well. The next step is creating—again I'm going to use government speak here but I would argue it applies to more than just governments—integrated environments where countries or agencies are willing to put their people and capabilities together into the same missions and into the same organizations so they get to know each other, so that they get to like each other, so that they get to trust each other. And then they eventually start doing, referring back to my sports example, things that were previously impossible for each country or agency on their own. Integration creates opportunities for activities and operations that would otherwise be impossible to pull off effectively.

So there are many obstacles to what I'm suggesting, to include cultural obstacles. This makes people very uncomfortable. But if you can pull it off, I've seen [the benefits] first-hand. I saw General McChrystal do it. I've seen other people do it. I like to think I've done it in my own small way. I've seen a degree of effectiveness emerge from integration that I've been unable to find anywhere else. It's also one of the hardest things one can try to do because there are so many obstacles, even antibodies against what I'm suggesting. Because it's a challenge to the normal. It's a challenge to the expected. It's a challenge to the "way we've always done things." It can make senior leaders, it can make entire organizations, it can make outside observers very uncomfortable. But, I do believe it is the path to far greater effectiveness.

**CTC: What issues keep you up at night?**

**LTG Nagata:** I do have an answer for your question. It's related to terrorism, but it's actually something that terrorism is only a subset of. A lot of this is not original thought, but here goes. Terrorism is often perpetrated by non-state actors, unless those entities happen to be state-sponsored. Said differently, there are "malign" non-state actors, while there are many other non-state actors (e.g. non-governmental organizations) that are wholly benevolent and beneficial to mankind.



Regardless, all non-state actors, whether malign or benevolent, are both finding enormous profit in two related phenomena. The first has been the amazing global growth of the free flow of information, goods, services, and people. The fact that you can be anywhere in the world, buy something, and have it delivered to you within three days is simply amazing, but increasingly commonplace. The second has been the arrival of the so-called “Digital Age,” where it is now possible to have a supercomputer and high-speed access to information about virtually anything wherever one happens to be around the world at one’s fingertips. The power and advantage this is generating has been enormously beneficial for most of mankind, but malign actors can profit just as much.

One of the results we’re now seeing unfold before us is that non-state actors, whether malign or benevolent, can accrue power, influence, capability, and reach that were once exclusively available only to nation-states.

A positive outcome of this is how extraordinarily effective non-governmental organizations and commercial ventures and actors have become in delivering positive outcomes, goods, services, information, and advantages for people all over the world. Unsurprisingly, this does not keep me up at night, and in fact my own family profits from all of this, as does my community and my country.

A darker outcome has been how much advantage any malign non-state actor can find for the very same reasons. A particularly vivid example today is how much military and terrorist capability ISIS is finding in the widespread availability of cheap-but-powerful technology that they can freely purchase on the open market any-

where in the world and online places like Amazon. One example of this is the rather nefarious usages that ISIS is finding in the employment of cheap, affordable commercial drone technology—you can see from media reporting alone that they’ve successfully weaponized such things.

**CTC: And you can buy them on Amazon.**

**LTG Nagata:** That’s right. What I mean by this is I think we need to do more to appreciate the phenomenon of the rapidly rising power of the non-state actor, and I don’t think I see commensurate awareness or adaptation in the nation-state community. Not necessarily to contest it. Not all non-state actors are bad, as I’ve previously described. But I think that we in the nation-state community sometimes have difficulty even seeing this trajectory. It’s a little reminiscent—this is going to sound like an odd analogy, but every time I consider this, I think of that moment more than a century ago when Admiral [Matthew C.] Perry sailed his black fleet into Japan to signal the United States’ desire that Japan end its isolationist period, under the Tokugawa government, and there are accounts of some of the Japanese who were at the harbor who reported being unable to see the ships. They reported that because they were so strange, so unusual, they reported not being able to see them. I sometimes think that’s what I’m observing when I watch nation-states struggle to recognize what is happening on the non-state actor side of the equation. **CTC**

# Terror in Tehran: The Islamic State Goes to War with the Islamic Republic

By Chris Zambelis

**The Islamic State's coordinated assault on Iran's Parliament and the mausoleum of the late Ayatollah Khomeini on June 7 was its first-ever attack in Iran. At a time of deep anger against Iran in the Sunni Arab world because of its intervention in Syria, the Islamic State likely saw the attack as a way to help its fundraising and recruitment efforts, as well as one-upping al-Qa`ida, as it transitions to trying to survive and regenerate through a campaign of local and international terrorism. The use of Iranian recruits in the attack demonstrated the resilient external operations capability of the group, and was likely designed to sow sectarian discord in Iran and win the backing of Sunni jihadi groups present on Iranian soil.**

The Islamic State's June 7 coordinated assault on Iran's Majles-e Shoraye Eslami (Islamic Consultative Assembly), also referred to as Iran's Parliament, and the mausoleum of the Ayatollah Rohollah Khomeini, the Islamic Republic's founder, in Tehran, which left at least 17 dead and over 50 others injured, was the Islamic State's first-ever attack on Iranian soil.<sup>1</sup> It came on the heels of its widely touted video release, "Persia, Between Yesterday and Today," which was published in March by the media wing of its Iraq-based Wilayat Diyala (Diyala Province) faction. The 36-minute-long production was the Islamic State's first-ever Persian-language feature.<sup>2</sup> The video, which is subtitled in Arabic, featured the testimonies of alleged Iranian members of the Islamic State and appealed to Iran's Sunni religious minority to rise up and topple the Islamic Republic.

The attacks seem to have signaled a natural outgrowth of the Islamic State's increasingly threatening rhetoric toward Iran. They also appear to be a culmination of determined efforts by the Islamic State to attack Iran on its soil. Iran has claimed to have detected plots hatched by the Islamic State in Syria and thwarted plots by groups sympathetic to it within its borders in recent years.<sup>3</sup> For example, Iran's Intelligence Minister Mahmoud Alavi claimed in May 2015 that Iranian intelligence had foiled separate plots involving potential bombings in the northeastern city of Mashhad, the central city of Qom, and another plot involving a possible use of an undisclosed poison in Tehran.<sup>4</sup> Iranian authorities claimed in June 2016 to have disrupted what they called one of the "biggest" terrorist plots

ever planned to target Tehran.<sup>5</sup>

The attacks occurred amid Iran's increasingly expansive role in Syria in support of the Assad regime, which has enflamed regional tensions, particularly between the Sunni Arab monarchies led by Saudi Arabia on the one side and Iran on the other. Iran's entry into the Syrian conflict has also enflamed hardline salafi and other strains of Sunni Islamist opinion toward Iran. Amid this backdrop, and at a time when its control of territory in Syria and Iraq has diminished considerably, the Islamic State leadership will see its successful strike against Iran as a propaganda coup. It may prove useful in its fundraising and recruitment efforts as the group transitions toward a strategy of survival and regeneration and intensifies its campaign of local and international terrorism.

The Islamic State's loathing of Iran and the community of Shi'a believers worldwide is a central tenet of its extremist worldview and a frequent theme of its sectarian-tinged discourse. Its brazen targeting of the Iranian capital signaled a notable escalation in its campaign of global terrorism, even as it continues to endure battlefield setbacks in Syria and Iraq as a result of the efforts of competing enemy forces that include Iran, Iranian allies such as Syria and Iraq, and Iranian-backed Shi'a militias. The Islamic State's recruitment of Iranians—the purported assailants are reported to have been native Iranian Sunnis of Kurdish extraction who are said to have fought with the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq—and its ability to evade Iran's pervasive domestic security apparatus is likewise reflective of its operational resilience.<sup>6</sup>

This article looks at the impetus behind the Islamic State's targeting of Iranian territory. It outlines what is known about the June 7, 2017, attacks and considers the ideological, operational, and geopolitical factors underlying the Islamic State's strategy. It also examines the timing of its decision to direct its sights and attention toward Iran as well as the social, political, and cultural disposition of Iran's Sunni minority community and the extent of its receptiveness to the Islamic State's narrative.

## Targeting Tehran

On June 7, five militants launched a coordinated assault against Iran's Parliament and the tomb of the Ayatollah Rohollah Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Republic. Armed with AK-47s, grenades, and suicide vests, three of the assailants stormed the Iranian Parliament and opened fire indiscriminately at staff and security forces as they made their way through the building. The assailants managed to reach the fourth floor where they proceeded to shoot at fleeing staff on the street before eventually being shot and killed by Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) forces.<sup>7</sup> The assailants involved in the attack against the Parliament were dressed in women's clothing in an apparent attempt to increase their chances of infiltrating the facility. Two militants targeted Khomeini's mausoleum, which is located approximately 10 miles south of the Parliament. One of them is reported to have successfully detonated a

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*Police take security measures after gunmen open fire at Iran's Parliament on June 7, 2017, in Tehran. (Fatemeh Bahrami/Anadolu Agency/Getty Images)*

suicide vest while the other was shot and killed by security forces.<sup>8</sup>

Multiple contradictory accounts claimed that up to seven assailants may have been involved in the attack, including at least one woman, although video footage captured at the respective scenes of the incidents show a total of five militants.<sup>a</sup> According to other accounts, an alleged female cell member was captured alive while some reports suggested that a female cell member had ingested a cyanide pill prior to being apprehended by Iranian security forces.<sup>9</sup> Most accounts also emphasize that the attackers were Iranian Kurds, although some reports claim that some of the assailants were heard speaking in Iranian-accented Arabic, a likely reference to Iran's minority ethnic Arab community.<sup>10</sup> No further details have surfaced from Iranian authorities or the Islamic State subsequent to the events to corroborate these claims. A number of announcements issued by both the Islamic State and Iranian authorities following the attacks seem to suggest that a total of five militants were responsible for the operation.<sup>11</sup> Iranian authorities released graphic photographs of the deceased corpses of four of the alleged perpetrators who were killed during the attacks along with only their first names.<sup>12</sup> Iranian officials reported that a third Islamic State cell's plans to launch a separate attack to coincide with the operations executed against the Parliament and Khomeini's tomb were thwarted by security forces, although no additional information regarding their identities or their targets has been released.<sup>13</sup>

a Iranian authorities announced that they had detained at least one female suspect along with a host of others on the grounds of Khomeini's tomb, although no further details have since been released regarding her alleged connection to the attacks. See "Five Suspects Detained Over Tehran Attacks," Radio Farda, June 8, 2017.

The symbolism of the two locations targeted by the assailants is worthy of note. According to the Islamic State's worldview, Iran's Parliament represents a symbol of political and religious depravity. The late Islamic Republic's revolutionary founder is a despised figure among hardline salafis.<sup>b</sup>

The Islamic State's multiple propaganda arms moved quickly to exploit the attack for maximum effect. The Islamic State-affiliated Amaq News Agency released a 24-second video clip on its official Telegram channel and other platforms on June 7 shortly after the attack, which showed graphic scenes of the carnage captured by one of the militants with his smartphone from inside the parliament building.<sup>14</sup> A subsequent video was released by Amaq News Agency on June 8 containing footage of five of the purported attackers involved in the June 7 attacks. The footage, which is subtitled in Arabic, features a statement by a Kurdish-speaking militant who is joined by four other militants. The speaker reiterated the Islamic State's calls for Sunnis in Iran to take up arms and suggested the attacks were the first salvo in a sustained campaign: "This is a message from the soldiers of Islamic State in Iran, soldiers of the first brigade of Islamic State in Iran which, God willing, won't be the last. This brigade will mark the start of jihad in Iran ... and we call on our Muslim brothers to join us." The speaker concluded by threatening future attacks against Saudi Arabia.<sup>15</sup> The June 8

b For ultraconservative salafis, participatory and democratic systems of governance of even the Iranian variety elevate mankind to a position where it can challenge or otherwise usurp what is, in essence, God's sovereign domain. In this context, salafis tend to view man-made institutions, including political parties, elections, constitutions, and legislation, as anathema because they supersede the brand of sharia (Islamic law) they promulgate and their concept of monotheism or *tawhid* (oneness [of God]).

release of the Islamic State's weekly al-Naba newspaper included multiple features about the Tehran attacks, including a one-page infographic summarizing the events. It also identified five of the alleged assailants by their *kunyas*: Abdelrahman al-Irani, Abu Jihad al-Irani, and Abu Warda al-Irani were, it was claimed, the gunmen behind the assault against the Iranian Parliament while Abu Abdullah al-Irani and Abu Muhammed al-Irani were involved in the suicide bombings at the Khomeini shrine.<sup>16</sup>

The assailants reportedly traveled to Iraq and Syria and fought on behalf of the Islamic State in Mosul and Raqqa, respectively, before eventually returning to Iran during the summer of 2016 to lay the groundwork for their plot.<sup>17</sup> Four of the assailants allegedly hailed from the same village in Iran's northwestern Kermanshah Province.<sup>18</sup> Home to a significant ethnic Kurdish population, Kermanshah Province is part of a wider region often referred to as Iranian Kurdistan. One of the alleged attackers has been identified as Serias Sadeghi, a resident of Paveh. Sadeghi was named along with others in a 2014 report by the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (KDPI)—a longtime opposition and insurgent movement that announced in 2016 that it would resume its campaign of armed resistance against Iran—as a recruiter for the Islamic State.<sup>19</sup> Iranian authorities have linked the attackers to the late Abu Aisha al-Kurdi, an Islamic State commander centered in Mosul.<sup>20</sup> Al-Kurdi is reported to have directed efforts to expand the Islamic State's influence in Iran. Iranian authorities have linked al-Kurdi, who was reportedly about to be announced as the Islamic State's emir (commander) for Iran prior to his death, to multiple foiled terrorist plots targeting Iran. Al-Kurdi was killed along with at least nine other militants by IRGC forces in September 2016 in Kermanshah Province.<sup>21</sup>

Iranian authorities reacted to the June 7 attack by announcing a large number of counterterrorism operations and arrests. The lack of detail provided makes it difficult to independently verify all the claims, including how many of the arrests were truly directly linked to the June 7 conspiracy, but it is likely the country's security services significantly intensified their efforts given the widespread shock and anger among Iranians that an attack had been executed in Tehran. They announced a number of arrests of suspected militants linked to the Islamic State cells implicated in the June 7 attacks and additional counterterrorist operations targeting active extremist cells. Iran's Intelligence Ministry announced on June 9 that the alleged plot ringleader responsible for the attacks in Tehran had been located and killed by Iranian security forces working in cooperation with the intelligence services of a friendly nation after he had fled the country. To date, no further details regarding his identity or the location where he was killed have been publicized.<sup>22</sup> An operation led by the IRGC and Iranian police is reported to have resulted in the arrests of multiple individuals linked directly to the attacks in Tehran.<sup>23</sup>

The ministry also announced a series of counterterrorism operations that resulted in the arrest of dozens of individuals it claims are connected to the Islamic State, including some allegedly linked to the June 7 attacks, in the northwestern provinces of Kermanshah, Kurdistan, West Azerbaijan, and Tehran. Iranian authorities claimed the arrests also yielded the location of militant safehouses, as well as an assortment of weapons, explosives components, communications equipment, and forged documents. One operation executed in Iran's southern Fars province allegedly led to the arrests of another group of Islamist militants purportedly linked to the Islam-

ic State.<sup>24</sup> Iranian authorities announced the arrest of an additional eight militants in Iran's northwestern Albroz Province who they alleged had provided undisclosed assistance to the cell that perpetrated the June 7 attacks.<sup>25</sup> Iranian security forces also announced that they had dismantled a terrorist cell in Sistan-Balochistan Province associated with the Baluchi Sunni jihadi group Ansar al-Furqan (Partisans of the Criterion).<sup>26</sup> The IRGC later announced that it had killed Ansar al-Furqan's leader Jalil Qanbar-Zahi and four other members of the organization during ensuing operations.<sup>27</sup>

## Declaration of War

The Islamic State's much-touted release of its first Persian-language video production in March helps to shed light on its motivations and objectives in relation to Iran.<sup>28</sup> It should be noted the Islamic State has devoted ample attention toward broadcasting its hatred of Iran in particular and Shi'a believers in general throughout its panoply of official publications and other messaging platforms, including Dabiq and Rumiya magazines, in multiple languages. For example, since the release of its inaugural Persian-language video release, the Islamic State has issued Persian-language translations of Rumiya magazine.

The discourse and symbology featured in the video is replete with historical narratives shaped by anti-Shi'a and anti-Iranian invective that has become synonymous with extreme-salafi polemics. The video's emphasis on Iran's Zoroastrian heritage and references to the legacy of the Safavid Dynasty—Iran's adoption of Shi'a Islam occurred under Safavid rule—are also recognizable themes. The labeling of Iran as a *rafidi* (rejectionist) society, a pejorative used to chastise Shi'a believers, along with its portrayals of Shi'a Muslims as heretics and apostates are similarly familiar descriptors used by extreme salafis. The portrayal of Iran as a covert ally of Israel and the United States and its criticism of the tolerance Iran affords to its Jewish minority are other accusations that have been repeatedly directed toward the Islamic Republic.

At the same time, the video's direct appeal to Iran's minority Sunni community and its presentation of three alleged Iranian members of the Islamic State identified by their *kunyas* as Abu Mujahid al-Balochi, Abu Saad al-Ahwazi, and Abul Farouq al-Farsi represents a notable shift in the Islamic State's approach toward Iran. The aforementioned militants represent Iran's ethnic Baloch, ethnic Arab (Ahwazi), and ethnic Persian Sunni minority, respectively. The video also introduced the previously unknown Salman-e-Farsi (Salman the Persian) Battalion, the Islamic State's apparent cadre of Iranian militants.<sup>c</sup> The video features footage of its alleged members engaging in target practice and other forms of military training in Iraq's Diyala Province located along the Iraq-Iran border. The symbolism behind the group's namesake is noteworthy; Salman the Persian was a companion of the Prophet Muhammed and the first Persian to convert to Islam.

The timing of the Islamic State's focus on Iran raises a number of questions. Given its deteriorating prospects in Iraq and Syria, its decision to divert precious resources toward opening another front meant the group saw the attack as highly important. The Islamic State's ambitious foray into Iran appears to be part of its existing

c Some sources have implicated the Salman-e-Farsi Battalion in the Tehran attacks. For example, see "We Reveal the Truth: The Salman al-Farsi Brigades are Responsible for Targeting Iran," Al-Bawaba News, June 8, 2017.

strategy to incubate and develop an organic militant infrastructure among Iranian Sunnis, many of who feel disenfranchised or harbor other forms of grievances toward the Islamic Republic. It may also reflect an attempt to co-opt the existing terrorist and insurgent movements led by Iranian Sunnis. Furthermore, the group's blatant targeting of the symbols of Iran's political legitimacy and religious identity may also have been an attempt to provoke Iran to crackdown harshly on its Sunni population, exacerbating sectarian tensions between Shi'a and Sunni inside Iran and the wider Islamic world in the process. A heavy-handed response by Iranian security forces against its Sunni population may serve to swell the Islamic State's ranks with additional Iranian recruits. Incidentally, this is the strategy employed by the late Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, leader of the Islamic State's predecessor al-Qa`ida in Iraq.<sup>29</sup>

The attack may also have been calculated to draw Iran even further into Syria, Iraq, and potentially other combat zones influenced by sectarianism, worsening tensions. Iran's targeting of Islamic State forces in Syria's Deir ez-Zor Province, where the Islamic State maintains its self-declared capital Raqqa, with a barrage of medium-range missiles in retaliation for the Tehran attacks is a case in point.<sup>30</sup> The audaciousness of the attacks may also help to divert attention from the Islamic State's losses in Iraq and Syria and demonstrate that it remains a relevant and viable force. This may serve to raise the spirits of its support base in Syria and Iraq and enlarge its pool of recruits and sympathizers worldwide. Given the state of geopolitical tensions involving Iran and the Gulf states, the Islamic State's targeting of Iran may help to increase its coffers through private donations provided by contributors in the Gulf motivated by anti-Shi'a sentiments.

The attacks may also have been designed to bolster the Islamic State's position in relation to its rival al-Qa`ida. The Islamic State's approach toward Iran differs strikingly from the one applied by its parent organization. Despite their ideological differences, al-Qa`ida has not targeted Iran because it has seen the utility of occasional cooperation in some contexts with the Islamic Republic.<sup>31</sup> Al-Qa`ida also tended to downplay or disregard outright sectarian divisions between Sunni and Shi'a. The group applied a pragmatic strategy toward the Islamic Republic that was at least partially influenced by its goal of avoiding a direct and potentially destructive confrontation with Iran. In contrast, goading Iran into a broader regional struggle and provoking further sectarian enmity between Sunni and Shi'a in the Middle East serves to advance the Islamic State's declared objectives. It also helps to further distinguish it from al-Qa`ida, as the two organizations compete for recruits in the post-caliphate era.

### Fortress Iran

The threat to Iran from the Islamic State needs to be put in perspective. Notwithstanding its contentious international predicament, Iran is one of the most stable and secure countries in the Middle East. This is in part a consequence of its robust security and intelligence apparatus. It also stems from the nature of its political landscape, where a synergy between Islamist clerical rule and a dynamic participatory form of democratic politics has evolved alongside an embedded authoritarianism. Ethno-nationalist resistance and violent uprisings driven by social, cultural, political, and economic grievances toward the established ruling order present Iran with more pressing threats than Islamist terrorist groups.

Iranian leaders swiftly downplayed the significance of the at-

tacks. Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei referred to the attacks as "firecrackers" and a sign that Iran's regional strategy in Syria and Iraq was valid and justified.<sup>32</sup> In an attempt to make the attacks fit the narrative of regime propaganda, the IRGC implicated its archrivals Saudi Arabia and the United States in the attacks. Some Iranian officials went as far as to blame the Mujahideen-e-Khalq (MEK, Peoples Mujahideen of Iran), an exiled, cult-like opposition movement with a history of violence and terrorism in Iran.<sup>33</sup> Given the security protocols in place at the targeted locations, a report issued by a Saudi-based think-tank suggested the possibility that Iran had manufactured the attacks as a false flag operation to rationalize a harsher, more comprehensive crackdown against ethnic and religious minority-led opposition movements agitating in Iran's peripheral border regions.<sup>34</sup>

However, the tactical, operational, and logistical elements associated with the attacks are suggestive of the presence of a relatively sophisticated militant network in Iran. Much has been said of the symbolism behind the targeted locations. The fact that both locations constituted hardened targets in the capital are further evidence that the threat of Islamic State-style militancy in Iran may exceed previous earlier assessments. In light of the spread of Islamic State-style Sunni militancy within Iran's neighbors, there are indications that Iranian authorities have grown increasingly wary of that threat metastasizing to include elements of its own Sunni minority. Iran has aired its anxieties about the apparent spread of extreme versions of salafism and affinities for the Islamic State among its ethnic Kurdish Sunni minority.<sup>35</sup> Here it should be noted that Iran's apprehension toward its ethnic Kurdish minority has usually stemmed from its experience with a number of largely secular-minded political activists and insurgent campaigns that have agitated on behalf of ethnic Kurdish political and cultural rights and other Kurdish-centric causes analogous to the struggles waged by their kin in Turkey and Syria.<sup>36</sup> But there is strong evidence to suggest that the Islamic State has enjoyed great success luring ethnic Kurds from Turkey and Iraq into its fold, and this is likely to have given it openings with Iranian Kurds.<sup>37</sup> The northern Iraq-based Ansar al-Islam (Partisans of Islam), which was previously affiliated with al-Qa`ida in Iraq, boasts a sizeable contingent of Iraqi Kurds. Some of its members have been known to seek sanctuary on the Iranian side of the Iraq-Iran frontier. A series of organizational splits have prompted much of its rank-and-file to align themselves with the Islamic State.<sup>38</sup> The significant presence of ethnic Kurds of various national origins in Islamic State ranks is likely to have facilitated contacts with Iranian Kurds and acted as a recruiting tool.

Much attention has been paid to the fact that the June 7 attacks marked the Islamic State's first successful operation inside Iran. Yet Iran is no stranger to domestic-borne radical salafi-inspired militancy. A simmering insurgency in Iran's southeastern Sistan-Balochistan Province that originated as an ethno-nationalist struggle on behalf of the ethnic Baloch Sunni community has since evolved into salafi- and sectarian-inspired campaigns.

### Co-opting Resistance

The Islamic State's professed objectives of toppling Iran's Shi'a leadership and compelling Iran's majority population of Shi'a believers to adopt its interpretation of the Sunni faith is an exercise in futility. At the same time, Iran is not immune to domestic insurrection and unrest stemming from disaffected religious and ethnic minority populations, including among its small yet diverse Sunni

religious minority. Approximately 10 percent of Iran's population is Sunni, with sizeable concentrations among its ethnic Baloch and ethnic Kurdish populations. Smaller communities of Sunnis are counted among Iran's ethnic Arab, ethnic Persian, and other populations. Many Iranian Sunnis complain of discrimination and harbor grievances toward Iran. This includes displays of radical salafi-inspired Sunni militancy. The Islamic State's reliance on native Iranian militants in the June 7 attack may help it incite other extremist-leaning Sunni Iranians to adopt its violent program.

While the attacks in Tehran appeared to have been executed by Iranian Kurds associated with the Islamic State, the most organized and sustained display of violent salafi militancy reminiscent of the Islamic State and its al-Qa`ida progenitor in Iran to date has been borne out of Iran's southeastern Sistan-Balochistan Province and a collection of ethnic Baloch-led insurgent organizations. An insurgency in Iran's southeastern Sistan-Balochistan Province led by myriad of ethnic Baloch militant factions has increasingly come to reflect the salafi jihadi dogma typical of al-Qa`ida and its ideological progeny the Islamic State. The since-defunct Jundallah (Soldiers of God), an ethnic Baloch-led militant organization implicated in an array of attacks targeting Iranian security forces and other symbols of state authority in Sistan-Balochistan, eventually adopted an ideology and discourse that reflected the anti-Shi`a sectarianism embodied by salafi extremists. Formed to defend Iran's disaffected ethnic Baloch minority on issues of human rights, religious freedom, and social and economic justice from what was widely portrayed as a hostile campaign by Iran to suppress Baloch culture and religious identity, Jundallah abandoned its emphasis on targeting military and security targets to include attacking civilian locations such as Shi`a mosques with suicide bombings.<sup>39</sup>

Jundallah's destruction following the capture and execution of its founder and leader Abdolmalek Rigi in 2010 spawned an assortment of other militant organizations led by ethnic Baloch, including factions that likely count surviving members of Jundallah within their ranks. Unlike Jundallah during its initial phase when it endeavored to downplay allegations that it was driven by radical Islamist and sectarian impulses,<sup>40</sup> the array of factions that emerged in Jundallah's wake, including Ansar al-Furqan, Jaish al-Adl (Army of Justice), and Harakat Ansar Iran (Movement of the Partisans of Iran), along with other splinter factions, are explicitly sectarian in their orientation and broadcast their affinity for hardline salafi ideology.<sup>41</sup> Despite sharing much in common in terms of ideology, the nature of the Islamic State's relationship with these organizations at this time is uncertain. Nevertheless, their shared ideological affinities may help pave the way for future cooperation.

The Islamic State's inclusion of the testimony of a member of

Iran's ethnic Arab minority (known as Ahwazis) in its inaugural Persian-language video is likely a sign that it considers the Iranian Arab minority as another potential opportunity to spread its influence in Iran. Khuzestan Province remains a hotbed of popular unrest and insurgency driven by cultural, ethnic, political, economic, and environmental grievances.<sup>42</sup> It must be noted the majority of Iranian Arabs are Shi`a, although a sizeable Sunni community does exist. The state of animosity toward Iran is reported to have inspired a movement toward Shi`a Ahwazis converting to Sunnism.<sup>43</sup>

There are indications that the Islamic State has made inroads into the Iranian Sunni community that extend beyond the circumstances involving the June attacks. While there is more clarity regarding the diverse ethnic and national origins of the foreign fighters that comprise the Islamic State and other Sunni jihadi organizations in Iraq and Syria, there has been scant attention paid to the modest Iranian Sunni cadres that have departed Iran to join their ranks. The death of an ethnic Arab Iranian Sunni from Khuzestan Province known as Abu Obadah al-Ahwazi in June 2016 has been recognized as the first publicized death of an Iranian Sunni extremist in Syria. Al-Ahwazi is reported to have perished while fighting with the since rebranded Jabhat al-Nusra (Support Front), al-Qa`ida's former Syria-based affiliate, in Aleppo.<sup>44</sup> Ethnic Arab Iranian members of the Syria-based Ajnad al-Sham (Soldiers of the Levant) have issued public video statements.<sup>45</sup> An obscure detachment of purported Iranian Sunnis that includes ethnic Baloch, Persians, and others known as the Defenders of the Nation has also reported to be fighting in Aleppo.<sup>46</sup>

### The Bigger Picture

An assessment of the implications of the Tehran attacks is not complete without a consideration of their broader geopolitical implications, especially as they relate to the state of heightened tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia and its regional allies. Iran has accused Saudi Arabia of both encouraging and actively facilitating salafi extremist currents across the Middle East. It is no surprise that Iranian authorities implicated Saudi Arabia in the latest attacks.<sup>47</sup>

The Islamic State is likely keen to seek to aggravate and exploit these geopolitical faultlines to advance its aims. Even as it continues to endure heavy losses, the Islamic State likely considers the climate of sectarian tensions as an opportunity to reinvigorate its standing and bolster its narrative. While the extent of the Islamic State's reach in Iran is difficult to pinpoint, the persistence of multiple, hardline salafi-inspired insurgencies may provide it with additional opportunities to establish a lasting presence within Iran's borders. **CTC**

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# Crossing the Canal: Why Egypt Faces a Creeping Insurgency

By Michael Horton

**The Islamic State affiliate Wilayat Sinai has proved to be a determined enemy that is increasingly capable of attacking targets within mainland Egypt. This is despite the fact that in 2013 the Egyptian government launched its largest ongoing military operation in the Sinai since the 1973 war with Israel, against the group. Rather than defeating or even weakening Wilayat Sinai, however, many of the tactics being employed by the Egyptian government risks ensuring that organizations like Wilayat Sinai and more moderate militant groups are able to continue to expand their operations within Egypt.**

**E**gypt-based Islamic State affiliate Wilayat Sinai is one of the most formidable of the Islamic State franchises. Despite the organization's relatively small size—it is estimated to have fewer than 1,000 operatives—Wilayat Sinai has fought the Egyptian army, one of the region's more capable armies, to a standstill.<sup>1</sup> Egypt has deployed in excess of 20,000 mainline troops to the northern half of the Sinai Peninsula in addition to an equal or larger number of police and paramilitary forces.<sup>2</sup> These forces, especially troops from the relatively well-trained Second and Third Field Armies, benefit from dedicated air support and access to a range of sophisticated weapons systems. Yet despite Egypt having launched what is its largest military operation in the Sinai since the 1973 war with Israel, Wilayat Sinai is, as yet, undefeated. In fact, both the tempo and sophistication of its attacks have increased. It launches attacks on soft and hard targets across northern Sinai almost daily.<sup>3</sup> Wilayat Sinai has also carried out an attack in southern Sinai, and most significantly, it is increasingly able to operate in mainland Egypt.

On April 9, Wilayat Sinai carried out improvised explosive device (IED) attacks on Coptic churches in Tanta and Alexandria. The attacks killed 45 people.<sup>4</sup> On April 18, the group attacked a guard post near St. Catherine's Monastery,<sup>5</sup> which is visited by thousands of tourists and pilgrims annually, in southern Sinai where Wilayat

Sinai had previously struggled to expand its reach.<sup>6</sup> Most recently, Wilayat Sinai attacked Coptic Christians who were on their way to visit a monastery located in Minya, 150 miles south of Cairo, killing 28.<sup>6</sup> These three attacks demonstrate the Islamic State's two-pronged strategy in Egypt: inflame Muslim-Christian tensions and damage the country's fragile economy by targeting its already beleaguered tourist industry. In response to the attacks, the Egyptian government, led by President Abdul Fattah el-Sisi, declared a new and more sweeping state of emergency that further increases the scope of police detentions, suspends many constitutional rights, and further limits the right to assembly.<sup>7</sup><sup>b</sup> However, the state of emergency will do little, if anything, to hamper Wilayat Sinai's growth in Egypt. In fact, the government's heavy-handed and often punitive tactics in the Sinai particularly are partly responsible for creating an ideal operational environment for groups like Wilayat Sinai.

Instead of reassessing its policies and tactics, the Egyptian government now appears to be doubling-down on what were arguably already dubious approaches to combating insurgents in the Sinai. In April, videos surfaced of what appear to be Egyptian troops summarily executing detainees in the Sinai.<sup>8</sup> The release of the videos follows reports by organizations like Human Rights Watch that claim the Egyptian government has detained thousands and "disappeared hundreds."<sup>9</sup> Those detained span the political spectrum and include moderate and radical Islamists, members of labor unions and professional syndicates, and many liberals who supported the 2013 ouster of former president Mohamed Morsi.<sup>10</sup>

Just as Wilayat Sinai is taking its fight across the canal to the mainland, the Egyptian government is increasingly utilizing the counterinsurgent tactics that were once reserved for the Sinai in mainland Egypt.<sup>11</sup> Far from effectively combating insurgent groups like Wilayat Sinai, the sort of scorched earth tactics used in the Sinai risks not only aiding Wilayat Sinai, but more worryingly for the security of Egypt, these tactics are creating new operational spaces for a range of emergent insurgent organizations. Some of

a Wilayat Sinai has found operating in southern Sinai more difficult due to several factors. Two of the primary restraining factors are one, the Bedouin who inhabit southern Sinai have not been exposed to the same level of salafi proselytization as their brethren in the north and two, the dark networks that abound in the north are not as dense and active in the south.

b Egypt has a long and complex history of declaring "states of emergency." In 1958, the martial law that had been upheld during the 1952 revolution was changed to a "state of emergency." This state of emergency was finally allowed to lapse in 2012. After the 2013 coup against Morsi, another state of emergency was declared, but this was limited in its scope and bound by time and geography. Northern Sinai was already under a state of emergency. See Nathan Brown, "Egypt is in a state of emergency. Here's what that means for its government," *Washington Post*, April 13, 2017.

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these emergent groups, like the Hasm Movement,<sup>c</sup> are far more moderate than the Islamic State and more capable of tapping into growing discontent among the Egyptian population. While formidable, Wilayat Sinai's extreme views will limit its appeal and ability to put down deep roots in mainland Egypt. This may not be the case for emergent groups who have moderate views and a more discriminate approach to the use of violence. However, these groups will be able to learn from Wilayat Sinai's experience with fighting the Egyptian army and police forces in the Sinai. The war in the Sinai has clearly demonstrated the very real limitations and vulnerabilities of the Egyptian army and police forces.

### Fertile Ground: Insurgency in the Sinai

The Sinai Peninsula has proved to be an ideal operational environment for a determined insurgent group like Wilayat Sinai. There are three primary reasons for this. First, the peninsula is home to a relatively large population, the Bedouin, which has been marginalized and disenfranchised for decades.<sup>12</sup> Second, the Sinai's rugged terrain offers ample cover for hit-and-run attacks and insurgent training, while the lack of roads makes it hard to patrol. Third, dark networks that traffic in everything from arms and drugs to people proliferate in the Sinai.<sup>13</sup> Since antiquity, the Sinai has acted as a gateway from Africa to the Levant. While licit overland trade has declined, illicit trade through the Sinai is flourishing.

Wilayat Sinai, known as Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis (ABM) before its leadership pledged *bay`a* to Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in November 2014, has effectively exploited all of the factors that make the Sinai such a desirable insurgent territory. ABM itself grew out of groups of aggrieved Bedouin and salafi-oriented outsiders who had fled to the Sinai from mainland Egypt. During the revolt that overthrew Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak, the government lost control of northern Sinai. The area's police stations and army installations were besieged by angry Bedouin who, in many cases, had been the victims of years of discrimination, arbitrary arrest, and disenfranchisement. The Bedouin are routinely denied Egyptian citizenship, generally prohibited from serving in the military or police forces, and frequently denied claims to ancestral land by the government. During the 2011 revolt, numerous police stations were burned down, their weapons looted, and several hundred—if not several thousand—detainees and prisoners were freed.<sup>14</sup> The government slowly reasserted control over northern Sinai and promised residents increased development and attention to local grievances. For the most part, the government has failed to deliver on these promises.

While the coastal regions of southern Sinai have been developed to cater to tourists, the majority of the Sinai remains poor, even by Egyptian standards.<sup>15</sup> For decades, the government has failed to develop the area's infrastructure. Many communities remain without adequate water supplies, medical facilities, or educational access. The reasons for this lack of development stem from an institutional belief on the part of the Egyptian military that the Sinai is a buffer zone between Egypt and Israel, and as such, development is not a

sound investment given even the high possibility of renewed war. In addition, the Bedouin are regarded by many in the military as a kind of fifth column.<sup>16</sup> While many Bedouin acted as the eyes and ears of Egyptian military intelligence during the Israeli occupation of the Sinai, some Bedouin did cooperate with the Israelis.<sup>17</sup>

The suspicion with which the Egyptian government regards the Bedouin has contributed to decades of discrimination and disenfranchisement. While only a very small percentage of Bedouin support radical groups like ABM—now Wilayat Sinai—these groups have been able to draw on a large pool of recruits. Most critically, such groups and Wilayat Sinai in particular can depend on the apathy of many of these communities. The Bedouins' relations with the security services and military are such that most want no involvement with them and are willing to turn a blind eye to insurgent activities in their communities.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, Wilayat Sinai has set up an intelligence arm that monitors communities and punishes those it considers to be informants.

### Wilayat Sinai Evolves

The Sinai has acted as a kind of laboratory in which Wilayat Sinai has had the operational freedom to practice and perfect its tactics. This includes learning how best to exploit the vulnerabilities of the Egyptian military and security services as well as, and most importantly, how to best navigate the Sinai's tribal politics.

Navigating the Sinai's tribal politics was critical to the evolution of ABM and now Wilayat Sinai. Without the support—or at least the acquiescence—of local communities, Wilayat Sinai could not operate as effectively as it does. Most critically, it would find it very difficult to access and benefit from the dark networks (i.e. illegal and covert networks) that proliferate in the Sinai.<sup>19</sup> Without access to these networks, it is unlikely that Wilayat Sinai would be able to fund its operations. Nor would it be able to, especially in its early years, acquire needed weapons and materiel.<sup>20</sup>

The Sinai's dark networks and tribal politics, particularly in the north, are interwoven and complex. Many of the Bedouin, especially parts of the Sawarka and Tarabin tribes whose traditional territories extend into Gaza and the Negev Desert, have long benefited from the smuggling routes that extend from the Egyptian mainland across the Sinai and into Gaza.<sup>21</sup> The Egyptian government's crackdown on the tunnels that run under the Egyptian border and into Gaza began in earnest in 2013. This was a serious blow to the economy of northern Sinai.<sup>22</sup> The amount of goods that were moved via the tunnels into Gaza was estimated to be worth \$700 million a year at the peak of the trade.<sup>23</sup> In addition to destroying many of the tunnels, the Egyptian government also created a *cordon sanitaire* along its border with Gaza. The creation of the cordon necessitated the destruction of over 2,000 homes and displaced hundreds of families.<sup>24</sup> Most received no compensation for their losses.

The government's heavy-handed approach along the border further alienated much of a population that already regarded the government with suspicion. ABM capitalized on these feelings of alienation and vulnerability. Much of the leadership and first-generation membership of what came to be ABM and then Wilayat Sinai has been intimately involved with these communities—both Bedouin and non-Bedouin—for years. The Sinai has long acted as a kind of safe haven for moderate and radical Islamists who have run afoul of the Egyptian government. Going back to at least the 1990s, moderate and radical Islamists began moving into northern Sinai's urban areas following the Egyptian government's crackdown on

c The Hasm Movement declared its existence in July 2016 when it claimed credit for an attack on a police officer in Fayoum. It has gone on to carry out attacks on a range of targets, from police officers to high-level government officials. Thus far, the organization has limited its attacks to targets that are representative of the Egyptian state. "Non-commissioned police officer dies after sustaining injuries," *Daily News Egypt*, July 18, 2016.



*Gunmen opened fire on a guard post near St. Catherine's Monastery in Egypt's south Sinai (pictured) on April 18, 2017, in an attack claimed by the Islamic State. (Pedro Costa Gomes/AFP/Getty Images)*

radical groups in Upper Egypt. Here, many self-styled clerics, mostly those who adhere to salafism, set themselves up as community leaders. Many of these men acted as judges and ran informal courts where they helped settle civil and tribal disputes.<sup>25</sup> Many residents prefer the informal courts to the state courts, which are regarded as corrupt and where it may take years for a judge to rule on a case.

While most of these clerics have nothing to do with Wilayat Sinai or the radical groups that preceded it, some did become members and leaders of armed groups, including Wilayat Sinai. The experience of adjudicating and settling tribal disputes was invaluable for understanding tribal and inter-tribal politics as well as for building trust and abiding relationships with some members of these communities.<sup>26</sup>

Wilayat Sinai has also built its capacity to plan and carry out ever more complex attacks on both hard and soft targets. This capacity to attack even the most heavily fortified targets was evidenced when on January 29, 2015, when Wilayat Sinai staged a multi-pronged attack on the headquarters of the Army Battalion 101 Headquarters in al-Arish.<sup>27</sup> This attack was ABM's first major attack after its leadership had pledged *bay`a* to al-Baghdadi. It subsequently began referring to itself as Wilayat Sinai. The attackers used multiple suicide vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (SVBIED) to penetrate what was one of the peninsula's most secure facilities. At the same time, Wilayat Sinai operatives also launched secondary and diversionary attacks that utilized GRAD rockets, mortars, and RPGs.<sup>28</sup> In the same year, Wilayat Sinai also downed an Egyptian Apache helicopter and claimed credit for the October 2015 bombing of the Russian Metrojet airliner that killed all 224 passengers and crew.<sup>29</sup> The attack on the airliner has proved to be devastating to Egypt's already troubled tourism sector. Russia subsequently banned all civilian flights to Egypt.

Wilayat Sinai has also proved adept at maintaining an oper-

ational tempo that is marked given the organization's small size. Since January 2017, Wilayat Sinai has carried out almost daily attacks on military checkpoints, convoys, police stations, and lightly defended military outposts. These attacks generally involve hit-and-run operations carried out by small contingents of fighters armed with small and medium arms such as mortars and RPGs. Wilayat Sinai has also consistently shown that it is able to innovate and circumvent Egyptian countermeasures, especially when it comes to IEDs.<sup>30</sup>

Egyptian security forces, in particular the Central Security Force (CSF), have been slow to adapt to the threats that Wilayat Sinai poses. Until recently, CSF and police units relied on unarmored light trucks and Jeeps for much of their transportation, even in areas where there are persistent attacks. Wilayat Sinai operatives have made short work of these lightly defended convoys and the equally lightly defended checkpoints that the convoys routinely service. In addition to using unarmored or lightly armored vehicles, the CSF in particular relies heavily on conscripts to fill its ranks. Conscripts are generally poorly treated, trained, and equipped.<sup>31</sup> Wilayat Sinai rightly regards them as the "soft underbelly" of the Egyptian forces deployed to the Sinai. The situation has become dire enough for CSF forces to periodically go on strike to protest their treatment.<sup>32</sup>

In response, the government has tried to make some improvements to its force protection measures. Many of the light trucks and Jeeps have been replaced with lightly armored transport like the UAE-manufactured Panthera armored personnel carrier.<sup>33</sup> Some of the armored personnel carriers have been equipped with electronic countermeasures to defeat IEDs. In response to the upgrades, Wilayat Sinai is using shaped charges that are often hard-wired and thus immune to electronic countermeasures. The shaped charges make short work of thin-skinned armored personnel carriers like the Panthera.<sup>34</sup> In addition to finding ways to defeat Egyptian

countermeasures, Wilayat Sinai, just like the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, is honing its ability to use off-the-shelf drone technology for surveillance of troop movements, targets, and potential threats. While it has not yet used armed drones like the Islamic State has in Iraq, Wilayat Sinai is aware of both how to arm drones and adapt them for use in various tactical environments. This is due to frequent exchanges of information about tactics and technology within and across the broader Islamic State organization.<sup>35</sup>

Ideal conditions in the Sinai combined with the flawed tactics employed by the Egyptian government have allowed Wilayat Sinai to become self-healing and highly resilient. Rather than fundamentally reevaluating its approach to counterinsurgency in the Sinai, the Egyptian military in particular seems intent on escalating what can be described as a “scorched earth” policy in northern Sinai.

### Scorched Earth

While bringing in additional troops and upgrading military hardware, the Egyptian military and security services have also intensified their use of dubious tactics. These tactics include collective punishment,<sup>36</sup> arbitrary and mass arrests of villagers,<sup>37</sup> indefinite detention,<sup>38</sup> and as recent video footage may demonstrate, extrajudicial execution of detainees.<sup>39</sup>

These tactics, which have been in use to varying degrees since el-Sisi took power in 2013, have further alienated large numbers of Bedouin who make up the majority of the population of Sinai.<sup>4</sup> The support of the Bedouin should be fundamental to any counterinsurgency plan in the Sinai. The Bedouin, more than any other group, possess an intimate and detailed knowledge of the Sinai’s complex physical and cultural geography.

While the vast majority of the residents of Sinai do not support

d Egypt’s Western Desert encompasses an area roughly equal in size to the U.S. state of Texas. The vast and largely barren landscape is sparsely populated with the majority of its inhabitants living around five major oases. Like the Sinai, the Western Desert is the traditional home of Bedouin tribes but are generally better integrated into local economies. While many still face similar issues with gaining title to lands and with being denied citizenship status as those in the Sinai, antipathy toward the government is far less pronounced among the Bedouin of the Western Desert. Despite this, the Western Desert remains fertile ground for Islamic State expansion. Egypt’s 1,100-kilometer border with Libya is largely unguarded. The collapse of the state in Libya and the subsequent outflow of arms and jihadis has had a profound effect on communities in the Western Desert. Like the Sinai, many of those living in the Western Desert have long made a living off of smuggling everything from weapons to people. In the five years since the fall of the Qaddafi regime, the Western Desert has become a critical corridor for the smuggling of weapons and operatives on their way to the Sinai and further afield.

The Islamic State has launched a number of attacks in the Western Desert, the most recent being a January 16, 2017, attack on a checkpoint near Kharga Oasis that killed 10 police officers. “Police officers die in attack in Egypt’s Western Desert,” Al Jazeera, January 16, 2017. There are indications that the Islamic State is attempting to use the same strategy that it has used in the Sinai—an initial focus on soft targets in order to build support and confidence among its operatives. Author interview, Egypt-based analyst and former government official, April-May 2017. In response, the government has increased the number of security forces but has so far taken a softer approach to the desert’s Bedouin tribes. There appears to be an effort to bring more of the Bedouin community onside. The military and security services in the Western Desert have long been dependent on Bedouin guides and trackers, and this long-standing relationship may be having some effect on how those same organizations interact with the tribes.

Wilayat Sinai, the government’s frequently punitive tactics and failure to effectively engage with the very population that could most effectively fight Wilayat Sinai mean that the government is regarded with suspicion and anger by many locals. Rather than tapping into the human networks that could curtail Wilayat Sinai’s operational freedom, the Egyptian military and security services treat many Bedouin as collaborators. Examples of this suspicion and the resulting tactical responses abound. For example, when a convoy is struck by an IED or ambushed, the Egyptian military often destroys nearby homes, livestock, and even water wells as a way of punishing residents for not warning the military or security services about the IED or attack. At the same time, when a resident does come forward with information, the resident—and in some cases all the male members of his family under the age of 50—is detained for “security screenings.”<sup>40</sup>

The mountains, deep canyons, and deserts of the Sinai are sparsely populated, and most of the Sinai is still without roads, making the terrain ideal for a group like Wilayat Sinai. When under pressure, its operatives simply disappear into the vastness of the peninsula’s mountains, canyons, caves, and deserts. In northern Sinai where it is most active, Wilayat Sinai operatives routinely launch hit-and-run attacks on targets in the urban areas of al-Arish, Sheikh Zuweid, and Hasna. The fighters then retreat into the mountains of Jabal Halal, located south of al-Arish and east of Hasna.<sup>41</sup> These mountains are riddled with caves and are home to nomadic herders from the Sawarka and Tarabin tribes. In remote areas like Jabal Halal, the cooperation of locals is critical to combating insurgents. The Bedouin are aware what is going on in their territories and are famous for their ability to relay information quickly, something early travelers to the Sinai dubbed the Bedouin telegraph.

Wilayat Sinai’s ability to appear, attack, and then, seemingly at will, disappear has induced a kind of paranoia among the rank and file of Egypt’s army and particularly among CSF forces and police units. When out on patrol or when manning checkpoints, the default assumption of many officers and non-commissioned officers is that everyone in rural areas and increasingly in urban areas of the Sinai sympathizes with the Islamic State until proven otherwise. The paranoia and the reactive tactics it induces has set in motion a self-fulfilling cycle: the more individuals the military and police detain—or in some cases kill—the easier it is for the Islamic State to recruit and to maintain its operational security.<sup>42</sup>

According to recent reports in the Egyptian media,<sup>e</sup> parts of the Tarabin and Sawarka tribes have aligned themselves with the Egyptian government in its fight against Wilayat Sinai. Reports have gone so far as to suggest that tribal leaders have “declared war on IS [the Islamic State].” These reports should be treated with caution.<sup>43</sup> Wilayat Sinai is keenly aware of the fact that without at least limited local support, its ability to operate as an effective insurgent organization would be greatly limited. Wilayat Sinai, much like al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in Yemen, has gone to some lengths to cultivate relationships with north Sinai’s tribes.<sup>44</sup> These relationships lack breadth, but they do run deep with certain tribal elements. Wilayat Sinai’s leadership is aware of the need to remain above and outside of tribal disputes, which in the case of the Tarabin

e It should be noted that reporters, Egyptian or otherwise, are not allowed in northern Sinai.

and Sawarka often involve clashes over smuggling routes.<sup>f</sup> While only a minority of the members of these two tribes are involved in smuggling, this minority is of particular interest to Wilayat Sinai because of its involvement in dark networks, which are supremely useful to the organization.

Egyptian media reports about tribesmen wanting to fight alongside Egyptian forces against the Islamic State likely indicate the Egyptian government's frustration with its war in the Sinai. The creation and arming of tribal militias in the Sinai would be something of a last ditch effort to try to roll back Wilayat Sinai's influence. The policy, if it is indeed being implemented, is fraught with risks. Wilayat Sinai has developed an impressive human intelligence capability that will allow it to penetrate the militias and quite possibly co-opt some of what is likely to be a fluid membership.<sup>45</sup> There is also the real risk that many of the armaments provided to the militias will be sold on to the black market and that the militias will be more interested in settling old feuds than fighting Wilayat Sinai. For its part, Wilayat Sinai has released a statement, which is as yet unverified, declaring that it has no interest in fighting with the Tarabin and is only interested in targeting the Egyptian government and those who collaborate with it.<sup>46</sup>

Given the widespread suspicion and, in some cases, intense dislike of the Egyptian government by a significant percentage of the population of northern Sinai, the creation and arming of militias is a high-risk strategy especially when combined with punitive tactics. Rather than evaluating its policies in the Sinai in light of Wilayat Sinai's unabated growth, the government of el-Sisi seems intent on intensifying its punitive approach to counterinsurgency in the Sinai and, of most concern, is increasingly employing these tactics in mainland Egypt.

### Crossing the Canal and Threat Proliferation

There are indications that the tactics employed by the government in Sinai are being used by the security services in mainland Egypt. Following the 2013 ouster of Egypt's first democratically elected president, Mohamed Morsi, Egyptian authorities began a wide-ranging crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood. While initial efforts were focused on the Brotherhood, in the months and years

f In late April, members of the Tarabin, one of Sinai's largest Bedouin tribes, engaged in a pitched battle with Islamic State operatives just south of the Egyptian town of Rafah. Members of the Tarabin tribe attacked an Islamic State outpost after the Islamic State kidnapped a member of their tribe. This dispute between the Islamic State and the Tarabin is indicative of how careful the Islamic State has to be if it is to continue to successfully navigate tribal relations in the Sinai. Many members of the Tarabin tribe, whose territory includes part of Egypt's border with Gaza as well as the Negev Desert in Israel, are deeply involved in the lucrative smuggling routes that cross into Gaza. These same routes are often contested by the Sawarka tribe whose territory abuts that of the Tarabin. It is notable that the Islamic State has managed to benefit from the smuggling routes while not inserting itself into the perennial feuds between the Tarabin and Sawarka. To this end, the Islamic State has attempted with some success to rise above tribal feuds and act as a neutral party that has been called upon in the past to mediate disputes between members of tribes. In the April fight between the Tarabin and the Islamic State, however, a new jihadi group calling itself Rabitah Ahl al-Sunnah wal Jama'a released a statement calling on both parties to cease fighting. See "Sinai-Based Group Seeks to End Dispute Between IS' Sinai Province and Bedouin Tribe," SITE Intelligence Group, April 24, 2017. The statement by this al-Qa'ida-linked entity highlights the fact that these insurgent groups recognize the importance of remaining above tribal disputes.

after el-Sisi's rise to power, Egyptian security services have detained and arrested members of numerous groups deemed to be a threat to or even just critical of the Egyptian government.<sup>47</sup>

In a policy that mirrors that used in the Sinai, Egyptian authorities frequently arrest the male members of the families of those that they detain. The government refers to these arrests as "security screenings." Yet, many of those arrested disappear for months or even years.<sup>48</sup> Police stations are commonly referred to as "homes for the living dead" because many of those who are taken there are never seen again.<sup>49</sup> These kinds of tactics are becoming more common.

Using such tactics in the Sinai is problematic enough, but employing them in Egypt's densely populated Nile Valley is far more dangerous for the government. The government's approach to terrorism—which it defines broadly—is creating an abundance of new opportunities for a range of insurgent and terrorist organizations.<sup>50</sup> Egypt's 2015 counterterrorism law, referred to as Law No. 8, includes sweeping definitions of terrorism and terrorists.<sup>51</sup> The new opportunities being created by the government's hard-line approach to combating terrorism and opposition groups are being seized upon not only by Wilayat Sinai but also by what can be called nationalist insurgents. These new groups have relatively moderate religious views and a national focus. As such, they may be able to build a broad base of support in Egypt's densely populated Nile Valley.

Egypt's various insurgent and terrorist organizations are learning from the military's and security services' failures in the Sinai. They are closely examining the tactics that have allowed Wilayat Sinai to expand and remain on the offensive. Additionally, just as Wilayat Sinai has tapped into widespread discontent and anger in the Sinai, a new breed of insurgent organization is hoping to do the same in mainland Egypt. One of these newly formed nationalist insurgent groups, the Hasm Movement, declared itself in July 2016 after an attack on a police officer in Fayoum.<sup>52</sup> The Hasm Movement (Hasm can be translated as 'settling an argument') has gone on to launch numerous attacks on high-profile state figures, including former Grand Mufti Ali Gomaa, Assistant Attorney General Zakaria Abdul Aziz, and one of the three judges who tried former President Morsi.<sup>53</sup> In addition to these attacks, which failed, the Hasm Movement has assassinated numerous mid- and low-ranking police officers.<sup>54</sup>

The Hasm Movement's attacks demonstrate a relatively high degree of competency and a disciplined use of violence. The group has released "military communiqués" and a well-produced video that show how it is able to track officials and then target them. It has been able to evade Egypt's formidable layered human intelligence network as shown by the fact that their operatives were able to get as close as they did to high-profile targets like Assistant Attorney General Aziz.<sup>55</sup> Figures of importance like Aziz have dedicated security details and are subject to secondary and even tertiary surveillance by other security services.

While the Hasm Movement is a small organization that has neither the size nor the funds to be self-healing in the way that Wilayat Sinai is, it may be the leading edge of a new kind of insurgent group. The group's military communiqués have emphasized its determination to "defend the defenseless" and bring an end to what its communiqués describe as a "military dictatorship."<sup>56</sup> The group's religious views are relatively moderate and do not feature prominently in its communiqués or videos. The Hasm Movement has condemned Wilayat Sinai's attacks on Coptic churches.<sup>57</sup> Most

interestingly, the Hasm Movement is decidedly nationalist in its focus. The group seems to have no ambitions beyond Egypt.

The Egyptian government has linked the Hasm Movement to the now illegal Muslim Brotherhood. However, it should be noted that the government has also linked the Muslim Brotherhood with the Islamic State and many other insurgent and terrorist organizations active in Egypt. As of yet, none of these groups have openly declared an affiliation with the Muslim Brotherhood, and the Brotherhood's older generation of leaders—those in prison and in exile—have largely eschewed calls for violence.<sup>58</sup> The government has presented no proof of the Hasm Movement's ties to the Muslim Brotherhood. However, it is likely that it and other groups, like the degraded but still active Lewaa Thaura,<sup>g</sup> do include former members of the organization.

While the Egyptian security services will likely disrupt and destroy the Hasm Movement before it has a chance to expand, the group and those like it are worthy of particular attention. The el-Sisi government's tactics in the Sinai and particularly in mainland Egypt have created new spaces in which relatively moderate groups, like the Hasm Movement, with a national focus can thrive. Wilayat Sinai's extreme views and its indiscriminate use of violence will limit its ability to build the kind of support that it requires to expand in mainland Egypt. This may not be the case with more moderate groups that can tap into growing discontent with a government that is increasingly reliant on violence to assert its authority.

## Conclusion

The insurgency in the Sinai began as a localized conflict with very

<sup>g</sup> Lewaa Thaura is a small insurgent organization that is notably similar to the Hasm Movement. Its leadership does not subscribe to salafi ideology and has gone to some lengths in its statements to emphasize that it does not and will not target civilians.

particular grievances. However, the insurgency has become a brutal war that threatens to spread well beyond the Sinai. When he was Morsi's defense minister, el-Sisi warned the Egyptian army that it must tread carefully in the Sinai.<sup>59</sup> If it did not, it risked creating more enemies of the civilians it was supposed to protect. Unfortunately, as president, el-Sisi has not followed his own advice. If such a thing as a successful counterinsurgency strategy exists, engagement with the indigenous population must be at its very core.<sup>60</sup> In his timeless book on guerrilla warfare, *War of the Flea*, author Robert Taber argues that the guerrilla's—or the insurgent's—chief weapon is his relationship with the community.<sup>61</sup> Likewise, the same principle applies to the relationship between the government and its citizens. This is particularly the case among those communities that are most vulnerable to being co-opted by insurgent organizations. Even superior armies will find it difficult or impossible to prevail over irregular forces if they do not have at least the tacit support of local communities. However, rather than stepping back and reevaluating its approach to the war in the Sinai, the Egyptian government looks set to intensify the punitive tactics that have cost it the critical support of local communities.

Such an approach will do little to ensure stability in Egypt. In fact, tactics such as collective punishment and extrajudicial detention will likely provide groups like Wilayat Sinai and the Hasm Movement with more recruits and more opportunities to expand across Egypt. These tactics, combined with a moribund economy and startlingly high youth unemployment, risk setting in motion a cycle whereby Egypt's creeping insurgency provokes ever-more punitive responses by the government that insurgent groups will in turn feed on. At the same time, an ever-more complex insurgent landscape will further imperil Egypt's fragile economy and curtail the government's ability to tackle the long-term structural issues that must be addressed if Egypt is to prosper. **CTC**

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# Differential Association Explaining Jihadi Radicalization in Spain: A Quantitative Study

By Fernando Reinares, Carola García-Calvo, and Álvaro Vicente

**Violent radicalization leading to involvement in jihadi terrorism appears to be highly contingent upon two key factors of what has been termed “differential association,” namely contact with radicalizing agents and pre-existing social ties with other radicalized individuals. This empirical study, which examines all those arrested in Spain for jihadi terrorism activities over the four-year period between 2013 and 2016, quantitatively assesses the importance of these two factors and sheds light on why some individuals radicalize while many more with similar demographic and social characteristics, in the same country, do not. The importance of contact with a radicalizing agent points toward the relevance of ideology in the development of jihadi terrorists, while the significance of pre-existing social ties indicates the relevance of communitarian bonds with local networks, which facilitate terrorist radicalization and recruitment.**

**B**etween 2013 and 2016, a total of 178 individuals who adhered to salafi-jihadi attitudes and beliefs were arrested in Spain for terrorism-related activities. The authors gathered information on all of them and built a database—the Elcano Database on Jihadists

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in Spain (EDBJS)<sup>a</sup>—so as to study empirically, among other topics, their socio-demographic characterization, patterns of terrorist involvement, and radicalization processes before their detention.<sup>b</sup> The sources were criminal proceedings and related court documents as well as public hearings at the Audiencia Nacional (National Court) in Madrid, the only jurisdiction in Spain dealing with terrorism offenses, in addition to police reports and press releases from the Ministerio del Interior (Ministry of Interior). Interviews with law enforcement experts, as well as to a lesser degree a search of media reporting, contributed to the resulting database. It should be noted that for certain variables, there is much more comprehensive information about some cases than others.

Most detainees are men (87.1%), three-quarters of them were between 18 and 38 years old at the time of detention, and more often married (54.8%) than not. Moroccans (42.7%) and Spaniards (41.5%) are the main nationalities. Around half are second-generation descendants of Muslim immigrants and 40% are first-generation immigrants. Around 10% are converts. Some 70% attended secondary education, over three times the number of those who only attended primary school. At the time of detention, nearly half the detainees were unemployed (25.2%) or had no known occupation (19.7%). A further 25.2% had some degree of employment in the services sector. No less than one-fourth of all them had a previous criminal record as petty criminals.

In the vast majority of known cases, their radicalization started in either 2011 or 2012 as the civil war in Syria unfolded and jihadis made advances in Mali. The average age at the onset of the process was 20.7 for women and 25.9 for men. Nine out of every 10 detainees radicalized partly or fully while inside Spain. However, far from this phenomenon happening uniformly with respect to the size and distribution of the Muslim population across the country, it

a The EDBJS schema is designed to store information, at an individual level of analysis, for about 136 variables (50 variables on socio-demographical traits, 40 variables on radicalization processes, and 46 variables on terrorist involvement).

b According to Spain's Ministry of Interior, 265 individuals were arrested in the country as a result of police operations against jihadi terrorism in the period between 2013 and 2016. However, it is important to note that this study's EDBJS excludes detainees who were not finally brought before antiterrorist courts as well as those who, even if arrested in the course of law enforcement operations against jihadi terrorism and brought before a judge, had no proven jihadi ideas. This accounts for the apparent discrepancy in the number of cases.

occurred in clusters.<sup>c</sup> The four administrative demarcations where detainees radicalized coincide with their residence: the Catalanian province of Barcelona (23.2%), the North African city of Ceuta (22.2%), Madrid and its metropolitan area (19.2%), and Melilla, the other Spanish enclave surrounded by Moroccan territory (12.1%).

Based on the data from the EDBJS database, this article explores the environments and modalities of radicalization for the detainees. Then, informed by differential association theory, the authors assess the social influences relevant to the detainees' radicalization. Differential association theory is a longstanding criminological framework for understanding deviant behavior. It posits that individuals become criminals because they belong to social circles in which "definitions" favorable to deviant behavior outweigh alternative ideas and in which deviant conducts, unimpeded by counteracting forces, are learned through interaction with other people, primarily communication in small intimate gatherings.<sup>d</sup>

Adapting differential association theory to jihadi radicalization, this article assesses thereafter, with respect to the detainees, one of the key differential association factors, namely their previous exposure to salafi-jihadi attitudes and beliefs through contact with radicalizing agents. Finally, the authors look at pre-existing social bonds between detainees and other individuals who similarly became involved in jihadi terrorism activities, including as foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs), in order to gain a better understanding of how their violent radicalization processes took place and tended to cluster in the case of Spain.<sup>e</sup>

### Environment and Modalities of Radicalization

An estimated 40.3% of individuals arrested in Spain between 2013 and 2016 for activities related to jihadi terrorism, in which information on their environment of radicalization was available, were

radicalized in the context of a mixed, simultaneously online and offline environment (Table 1).

While an online environment of jihadi radicalization was observed in three-quarters of all these cases, 35.3% of detainees radicalized exclusively online.<sup>f</sup>

Exclusively online radicalization is typically found among individuals who radicalized solitarily as well as among those who radicalized as part of small clutches of people geographically dispersed across the national territory and who never met in person, at least before actual involvement in terrorism-related activities. A further 24.4% detainees appear to have radicalized only offline, a percentage significantly lower than the one corresponding to those who radicalized exclusively online. The examples of offline-only radicalization in the dataset are found among individuals who adhered to salafi-jihadi ideas while in prison, but also among individuals who radicalized within dense local networks of intimate interpersonal relations and where there was no evidence their use of online communication technologies was directly related to their process of radicalization.

**TABLE 1: Individuals arrested in Spain between 2013 and 2016 for activities related to jihadi terrorism, by their environment of radicalization (in %)**

Environment of radicalization	Total
Offline and online	40.3
Only online	35.3
Only offline	24.4
Total	(119)
Missing Data: 59	

Source: EDBJS

Independent of whether their radicalization took place online, offline, or through a combination of both in a mixed environment, the fact is that an overwhelming majority of the individuals arrested in Spain between 2013 and 2016 for activities related to jihadi terrorism embarked on this journey in the company of other people. That was indeed the case for almost nine out of every 10 of them, an estimated 86.9% (Table 2). Conversely, no more than 13.1% of all the detainees—about one out of every 10 of them—radicalized on their own without interacting with others aside from their exposure to jihadi propaganda, making them genuine cases of self-radicalization.

c This finding for Spain has also been observed with regard to other Western European countries in the context of the same wave of jihadi mobilization. See, for example, Georg Heil, "The Berlin Attack and the 'Abu Walaa' Islamic State Recruitment Network" *CTC Sentinel* 10:2 (2016): pp. 1-11; Michele Gropi, "The Terror Threat to Italy: How Italian Exceptionalism is Rapidly Diminishing," *CTC Sentinel* 10:5 (2016): pp. 20-28; and Pieter Van Oystaeyen, "Belgian Radical Networks and the Road to the Brussels Attacks," *CTC Sentinel* 9:6 (2016): pp. 7-12.

d On the original formulation of the differential association theory, see Edwin Sutherland, *Principles of Criminology* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1947, fourth edition). Also Edwin Sutherland and Donald R. Cressey, *Criminology* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1978, 10th edition) and Edwin H. Sutherland, "A Sociological Theory of Criminal Behavior," chapter 12 in Suzette Cote ed., *Criminological Theories: Bridging the Past to the Future* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2002). A recent application of the theory to radicalization and recruitment for armed organizations relying on terrorism tactics can be found in Taylor Armstrong and Jonathan Matusitz, "Hezbollah as a Group Phenomenon: Differential Association Theory," *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment* 23:4 (2013): pp. 475-484. The authors are particularly grateful to professor Emilio Lamo de Espinosa, chairman of Elcano Royal Institute, for his insightful advice on differential association theory.

e Quantitative findings are offered, throughout the article, in the form of tables. All 10 tables include a distribution of percentages calculated on the basis of the total number of cases on which data is available for single variables (tables 1, 2, and 7) under consideration or statistics derived from the crossing of variables (tables 3 and 8). When disaggregating variables, data similarly refers to the total number of detainees on which information was found for each of the categories or subcategories being measured (tables 4, 5, 6, 9, and 10). Figures for cases on which there was no relevant information are always indicated as missing data.

f Entries in EDBJS are coded as pertaining to radicalization "exclusively online" only where there was absence of evidence of any physical contact with a radicalizing agent, with other individuals undergoing the same process or related face-to-face interaction concerning exposure and adoption of salafi-jihadi ideas before a particular individual became involved in terrorism. Entries are coded as "exclusively offline" where there was an absence of evidence of any other environment of radicalization and where there was no evidence that the use of communication technologies directly contributed to radicalization before a particular individual became involved in terrorism. It was sometimes difficult coding entries in the various categories. However, the authors' rigorously examined each of the cases and substantiated enough information to code categories about the environment of radicalization for as many as two-thirds (119) of the total number of detainees in Spain between 2013 and 2016 for activities related to jihadi terrorism. Data was missing for this variable in the remaining one-third of the cases (59).



**TABLE 2: Individuals arrested in Spain between 2013 and 2016 for activities related to jihadi terrorism, by their modality of radicalization (in %)**

Modality of radicalization	Total
In company of others	86.9
In solitary	13.1
Total	(107)
Missing data: 71	

Source: EDBJS

Most of the detainees who radicalized alongside others did so mainly in mixed environments of radicalization—both online as well as offline—and to a lesser extent, exclusively offline (Table 3). Nonetheless, a small but still significant proportion of them radicalized into salafi-jihadism only online. This latter subset of individuals typically established online contact with one or more individuals, at or near the start of the radicalization process, but never got to know each other in-person. This was observed among detainees who communicated intensely via websites or social media and occasionally by phone, but never in person.<sup>1</sup>

Data confirms that online jihadi radicalization is not limited to individuals who radicalize alone. In fact, only four out of 10 detainees who radicalized solely online involved purely self-radicalization. It should also be noted that among the small set of 14 self-radicalized individuals in the overall database, 13 ended up adhering to salafi-jihadism solely in the context of online exposure to these ideas. The remaining case corresponds to a converted man, 45 years old at the time of his arrest in 2014, whose radicalization derived from meticulously reading many books and other printed materials on Islam in general and particularly on salafi-jihadi doctrine.<sup>2</sup>

**TABLE 3: Individuals arrested in Spain between 2013 and 2016 for activities related to jihadi terrorism, by their modality of radicalization and environment of radicalization (in %)**

Environment of radicalization	Modality of radicalization	
	In company	In solitary
Only online	19.5	92.9
Online and offline	52.9	--
Only offline	27.6	7.1
Total	(87)	(14)
Missing Data		
	6	0

Source: EDBJS

Online radicalization may therefore take place either in the company of others or in solitary, with the data on individuals arrested in Spain between 2013 and 2016 for jihadi activities showing many more were radicalized by communicating with others online than those surfing the internet without those personal communications. Radicalization in the company of others is also by far the most common modality of jihadi radicalization for those detainees whose process took place to some degree offline, either in an offline-only environment or in a mixed, simultaneous online and offline environment.

**Critical Contact with Radicalizing Agents**

Among detainees who radicalized in the company of others, irrespective of their radicalization environment, the influence of a radicalizing agent was critical. In all cases of radicalization in company—86.9% of all cases in which relevant data is available as indicated above—individuals experienced the influence of at least one radicalizing agent. However, the type of contact they maintained with a radicalizing agent varied. In 73% of the cases in which relevant data was available, this contact involved only in-person, face-to-face interaction (Table 4), while only 17.6% of these cases involved online contact. Finally, 9.4% maintained contact with their radicalizing agent both in person and online.

**TABLE 4: Individuals arrested in Spain between 2013 and 2016 for activities related to jihadi terrorism, who radicalized in the company of others, by type of contact with agent of radicalization (in %)**

Type of contact with agent of radicalization	Radicalization in company of others
Only in person	73.0
Only online	17.6
Online and in person	9.4
Total	(85)
Missing data: 8	

Source: EDBJS

In well over half of the cases in which in-person contact with agents of radicalization was observed, at least one or more individuals who can be characterized as activists in part or in whole played this role (Table 5). Activists in this context are defined as individuals previously involved in jihadi activities, often as FTFs in a conflict zone but also as former militants who had been imprisoned in Spain or confined elsewhere. Their experiences furnish them a degree of distinction, even of a charismatic kind, among those they indoctrinate, who come to accept them as ideological guides.

One example of detainees in Spain between 2013 and 2016 who acted as in-person radicalizers and who can be described as activists were two individuals trained by al-Qa`ida or the Taliban in Afghanistan prior to 9/11, captured shortly thereafter, and subsequently confined at the U.S. military base in Guantánamo. They were handed over some years later to Spanish authorities and finally acquitted—by the Audiencia Nacional in one case and by the Tribunal Supremo (Supreme Court) in the other. In the latter case, the acquittal occurred despite a previous condemnatory sentence handed down by the Audiencia Nacional.<sup>3</sup>

**TABLE 5: Individuals arrested in Spain between 2013 and 2016 for activities related to jihadi terrorism, who radicalized in face-to-face contact with an agent of radicalization, by type of in-person radicalizing agent (in %)**

Type of in-person radicalizing agent	Detainees radicalized by in-person radicalizing agents
Activist	58.0
Friend	20.3
Religious figure	20.3
Relative	18.8
Other	8.7
Total	(69)
Missing cases: 1	

Source: EDBJS

Note: Sum of percentages is not 100 because individuals can be radicalized by two or more radicalizing agents of different types.

Additionally, the individuals who radicalized through contact with others in-person were also in about 20% of cases radicalized in part or in whole by friends, in 20% of cases in part or whole by religious figures, and in about 19% of cases in part or in whole by relatives. (See Table 5). An example of a religious figure who acted as a radicalizing agent in Spain for arrested individuals or those who became foreign fighters in Syria between 2013 and 2016 is Ibrahim Mohammed Hijjo. A man of Palestinian origin, Hijjo was since 2013 a prominent preacher at an Islamic place of worship in the Basque province of Vizcaya.<sup>4</sup>

In some of the cases, the individual characterized as activist who acted as the radicalizing agent was also a relative of the person he or she radicalized and who became subsequently detained on terrorism grounds. This was the case of detainee Karim Abdesalam Mohamed, also known as “Marquitos,” who was convicted in 2015 after becoming one of the leading figures in the jihadi circles of Ceuta’s Barriada del Príncipe.<sup>5</sup> This man was well-known in the area because of his 2006 arrest and prosecution for terrorism crimes and had also radicalized his own nieces and nephews.<sup>6</sup>

Notably, religious figures were seldom radicalizing agents for detainees who radicalized online without the help of an in-person radicalizing agent. Activists, either FTF or not, were online radicalizing agents in six out of every 10 of cases in which relevant data was available (Table 6). In over half of the cases involving detainees who radicalized in online contact with an agent of radicalization, the radicalizing agents were peers.

**TABLE 6: Individuals arrested in Spain between 2013 and 2016 for activities related to jihadi terrorism, who radicalized in online contact with a radicalizing agent, by type of online radicalizing agent (in %)**

Type of online radicalizing agent	Detainees radicalized in online contact with agent of radicalization
Peer	56.5
Foreign terrorist fighter	34.8
Activist (other than FTF)	26.1
Religious figure	8.7
Total	(23)
Missing cases: 0	

Source: EDBJS

Note: As in Table 5, sum of percentages is not 100 because individuals can be radicalized by two or more radicalizing agents of different types.

One example of a person who radicalized online with the help of FTFs or activists is Samira Yerou, a Moroccan woman residing in the Barcelona area, who was 32 at the time of her arrest on March 2015. Throughout her radicalization process, she maintained contact via the internet, social media, and instant messaging applications with al-Qa`ida and Islamic State militants in Syria and also with salafi clerics based in countries of the Arabian Peninsula as well as Syria and Morocco, including Omar el-Hadouchi in the latter country, as well as jihadi activists based in Austria.<sup>7</sup>

**The Strength of Pre-Existing Social Bonds**

In addition to underscoring the significant role played by radicalizing agents for individuals beginning and continuing the radicalization process, data on detainees in Spain from 2013 until 2016 also clearly shows how the process leading to the adoption of salafi-jihadi ideas and subsequent terrorist engagement is associated with pre-existing social ties to others involved in jihadi terrorist activity. Indeed, pre-existing social ties between detainees and other individuals arrested in Spain for terrorist-related activity or who became an FTF during the four-year period under study were found in nearly seven out of every 10 cases (Table 7).

**TABLE 7: Individuals arrested in Spain between 2013 and 2016 for activities related to jihadi terrorism, by their pre-existing social bond with another detainee or FTF (in %)**

Pre-existing social bond	Total
Yes	68.7
No	31.3
Total	(160)
Missing data: 18	

Source: EDBJS

Most of the detainees in the study had long established social ties

with at least one other detainee in Spain or with an FTF<sup>g</sup> prior to beginning their radicalization process. In turn, over eight out of every 10 of these individuals with pre-existing social ties radicalized in either a mixed online/offline environment or in an exclusively offline context (Table 8). Conversely, almost eight of every 10 detainees lacking these social ties experienced their radicalization processes exclusively through the internet.

**TABLE 8: Individuals arrested in Spain between 2013 and 2016 for activities related to jihadi terrorism, by pre-existing social bond with other detainee or FTF, and environment of radicalization (in %)**

Environment of radicalization	Pre-existing social bond	
	Yes	No
Only online	17.1	76.7
Mixed	52.4	10.0
Only offline	30.5	13.3
Total	(82)	(30)
Missing data: 0		

Source: EDBJS

These social ties, which are common among the detainees in this study, are based on links formed through neighborhood of origin, friendship, and kinship. These three different kinds of interpersonal bonds are not mutually exclusive and may converge. According to the data, in 80% of the cases where these social ties among detainees or between detainees and FTFs are known to have existed, they originated in neighborhood relationships in the individual’s town/area of residence, and in half of these cases the neighborhood relationships formed within a specific district in the town of residence. (Table 9).

For 50% of the detainees who had previous social ties with at least one other detainee in Spain or an FTF, these interpersonal bonds were based in part on friendship. Likewise, those exhibiting social links to other detainees based in part on kinship made up 42.7% of the cases. Such percentages clearly indicate that different types of previously established social bonds intermingle for many individuals, including intimate ties founded on both friendship and kinship. As has been noted, these relationships are not mutually exclusive.

g All the foreign terrorist fighters in question had either Spanish or Moroccan nationality, and were residents either in Spain or in Morocco.

**TABLE 9: Individuals arrested in Spain between 2013 and 2016 for activities related to jihadi terrorism, with pre-existing social bond with another detainee or FTF, by type of pre-existing social bond (in %)**

Type of pre-existing social bond	Detainees with pre-existing social bond with other detainees or FTF
Neighborhood (town)	80.0
Neighborhood (district)	50.0
Friendship	50.0
Kinship	42.7
Total	(110)
Missing data: 0	

Source: EDBJS

Note: As above, sum of percentages is not 100 because individuals can have two or more types of pre-existing social bonds.

It is worth underscoring the fact that among the subset of detainees having known kinship ties with at least one other detainee in Spain or with a FTF from Spain or Morocco before beginning their radicalization process, these ties most often refer to bonds between siblings (Table 10). The siblings of detainees or FTFs have indeed been identified in 10 of the police operations carried out in Spain between 2013 and 2016 against the threat posed by jihadi terrorism.<sup>h</sup>

Also notable among those cases with known kinship ties were bonds with in-laws, couples or partners, and even between uncles or aunts and nephews or nieces. Prior kinship ties between detainees or detainees and FTFs based on relationships between fathers or mothers and sons or daughters, and also between cousins, were also present, but were less frequent than the others already mentioned.

h Second phase of Operation Kibera in December 2014; first and second phase of Operation Chacal in January and March 2015; Operation Jardín Beni in February 2015; Operation against two teenagers in February 2015; Operation Tebas in March 2015; fifth phase of Operation Kibera in July 2015; arrests carried out in Ceuta in February 2016; Operation Sable in April 2016 as well as the detentions carried out in July 2016 in two different operations in Lleida and Girona.

**TABLE 10: Individuals arrested in Spain between 2013 and 2016 for activities related to jihadi terrorism, with pre-existing kinship bond with another detainee or FTF, by their type of kinship bond (in %)**

Type of kinship	Detainees with kinship bonds
Between siblings	47.7
With in-law family	27.3
Between couples	25.0
Between uncle or aunt and nephew or niece	18.2
Between father or mother and son or daughter	9.1
Between cousins	9.1
Total	(44)
Missing data: 3	

Source: EDBJS

Note: As above, sum of percentages is not 100 because individuals can be two or more types of kinship.

## Conclusion

A number of key observations can be made about jihadi radicalization in Spain based on this quantitative study of the individuals arrested in the country between 2013 and 2016 for activities related to jihadi terrorism. Contact with a jihadi radicalizing agent such as an activist, a religious authority, or a relative was observed in 86.9% of cases on which information was available. Social bonds, formed long before the initiation of radicalization and typically from within a neighborhood or via more intimate friendship and kinship relations, were detected in 68.7% of the detainees for whom relevant information exists. The authors' empirical assessment on those individuals over a period of four years, amid an unprecedented wave of jihadi mobilization in Western Europe, indicates that violent radicalization leading to jihadi terrorism involvement is highly contingent upon these two factors of differential association.

Further research on these two differential association factors—contact with a radicalizing agent on the one hand and pre-existing social bonds on the other—can advance understanding of the jihadi radicalization process in general and help explain why some individuals become radicalized while others with similar demographical and social characteristics in similar countries or within the same country do not. The answer in many cases is they just do not happen to be exposed to the influence of radicalizing agents or have previous close ties with other individuals already radicalized or undergoing the process of radicalization. Conversely, the two factors of differential association help explain the existence of uneven pockets of jihadi radicalization across Spain and other Western European countries.

Furthermore, the importance of contact with a radicalizing agent points to the relevance of ideology in the production of violent Islamist extremists and jihadi terrorists.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, the importance of pre-existing social bonds emphasizes the relevance of local networks, made out of interpersonal ties and communitarian bonds, which facilitate jihadi radicalization and recruitment.<sup>9</sup> Taken together, these two factors indicate that jihadi radicalization leading to terrorism involvement to a large extent is associated with social interactions through which individuals learn about ideas justifying terrorism. This framework of understanding sheds light on how attitudes and beliefs condoning jihadi terrorism are channeled as well as clustered in Spain, other Western European countries, and perhaps further afield.

From a policy perspective, the implications of the empirical findings on these two major interrelated factors of differential association and recent jihadi radicalization in Spain seem straightforward and twofold, at least considering a range of analogous countries in the immediate Western European scenario. Key in preventing the seeding and spread of jihadi radicalization processes is, first of all, to detect radicalizing agents and neutralize their actions by means of law enforcement. Secondly, national programs aimed at preventing these processes should avoid dispersion of institutional efforts and should focus on localized demarcations where jihadi radicalization is known to concentrate. **CTC**

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