# Contents

**FROM THE EDITOR**

The Combating Terrorism Center at West Point is proud to mark its 15th year anniversary this month. In this issue's feature article, Charles Lister tells the inside story of how al-Qa`ida lost control of its Syrian affiliate, drawing on the public statements of several key protagonists as well as interviews with Islamist sources in Syria. In the summer of 2016, al-Qa`ida's Syrian affiliate, Jabhat al-Nusra, announced it was uncoupling from al-Qa`ida and rebranding itself. Al-Qa`ida's deputy leader at the time, Abu al-Khayr al-Masri, released a message endorsing the move, which even included a previously unheard audio clip of Ayman al-Zawahiri stressing that organizational links should be sacrificed if necessary for unity, creating the impression that al-Qa`ida's paramount leader had also sanctioned the decision. What appeared to be a carefully choreographed set of announcements made many analysts conclude the split was nothing more than a PR exercise, designed to advance the local aims of al-Qa`ida in Syria by improving al-Nusra's standing among Syrian rebel groups and insulating it from international pressure. But this interpretation was challenged by a bombshell message released by al-Zawahiri on November 28, 2017. Al-Qa`ida's leader publicly revealed that not only had he not endorsed the split, but he regarded it as a "a violation of the covenant."

"Al-Zawahiri's interjection was a watershed moment," Lister writes, "making clear to the wider global jihadi movement that a real split had taken place between al-Qa`ida and its Syrian affiliate." One function of the split has been the beginnings of a tense modus vivendi between hardcore al-Qa`ida loyalists in Syria and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (the latest rebrand of al-Nusra). The result, Lister argues, is "a complex counterterrorism threat, in which a locally focused jihadi outfit with a sizable 12,000 fighters continues to control territory, govern people, and maintain sources of local finance, while accepting—even grudgingly—a deeply dangerous, small, tight-knit clique of al-Qa`ida terrorists committed to attacking the West. That image looks eerily similar to the Taliban-al-Qa`ida relationship in Afghanistan in 2000-2001, the consequences of which are well known to all."

Our interview this month is with Deputy Assistant Commissioner Neil Basu, the Senior National Coordinator for Counterterrorism Policing in the United Kingdom. Michael Horton examines the challenges faced by the UAE in its counterinsurgency campaign against al-Qa`ida in Yemen. Kendall Bianchi looks at how Hezbollah has used the mothers of fighters killed in Syria to promote martyrdom. Miles Hidalgo, one of the CTC's Downing Scholars, provides a first-hand account of the cooperation between Europol and U.S. Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) at Europol's headquarters in The Hague.

**Paul Cruickshank,** *Editor in Chief*

# How al-Qa`ida Lost Control of its Syrian Affiliate: The Inside Story

## By Charles Lister

**The Syrian jihad presented invaluable opportunities for al-Qa`ida to establish what it had always sought: a popular, broadly representative jihadi resistance movement that could support the creation of an Islamic government presiding over an expanse of important territory. Jabhat al-Nusra assumed the mantle of responsibility in seeking to achieve this grand goal. And it did remarkably well, up to a point. As conflict dynamics evolved, however, the goal of transforming into a mass movement with social and political popularity became an increasingly distant objective. In its determination to aggressively achieve its grand goals, Jabhat al-Nusra prioritized localism over globalism, which as time passed, pushed its relationship with al-Qa`ida to the breaking point.**

**T**o confront ... blatant aggression and brutal occupation, it is absolutely vital to unite on the basis of Tawhid, [to] organize our ranks to fight in the way of Allah, and [to] transcend our disagreements and disputes ... We must understand that we are in for a long war, a battle of creed and awareness before weapons and combat; a battle for the sake of upright conduct, inculcating ethics and abstinence from this world ... So let us cooperate, come closer, join ranks, correct mistakes and fill the gaps.

*This is a clear-cut order from me to our brotherly soldiers of Al-Qaeda in the Levant, to cooperate with your sincere Mujahid brothers—those who agree with you as well as those who disagree with you—for the sake of Jihad and fighting the Baathists, Safavid Rawafidh, Crusaders and the Khawarij.*[1]

Those were the words of al-Qa`ida's General Leadership, issued within a stern directive on January 7, 2018, and intended for a jihadi audience in Syria. There, al-Qa`ida's prospects for success have faced existential challenges in recent years. Now, al-Qa`ida's claim to command any Syrian affiliate stands on the thinnest of foundations, if any at all. Instead, the once-dominant al-Qa`ida affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra embarked on a series of rebrands through 2016-2017 that although intended to further its long-term objectives, served only to engender crippling internal divisions and a de facto break from al-Qa`ida. After a months-long public feud pitting

*Charles Lister is a senior fellow and Director of Extremism & Counter-Terrorism at the Middle East Institute. His book,* The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency*, was published in February 2016, and his 50-page Brookings Institute report, "Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra," was published in July 2016. Follow @Charles_Lister*

Jabhat al-Nusra's successor, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), on the one side against al-Qa`ida and its loyalists in Syria on the other, mediation efforts energized by prominent al-Qa`ida ideologues and Shura Council members managed to secure three days of détente in January 2018—though that soon crumbled.

In fact, the al-Qa`ida statement's clear acknowledgement of two distinct factions of fighters—the soldiers of al-Qa`ida in the Levant (*junud qa'edat al-jihad fi'l Sham*) and the sincere mujahid brothers (*al-mujahideen al-sadiqin*)—was the group's first public admission that al-Qa`ida and HTS had become two separate entities.[a] That admission underlined how divisive Jabhat al-Nusra's recent evolution had been, significant enough to catalyze the formation of an entirely separate al-Qa`ida loyalist entity.

It is undoubtedly true that al-Qa`ida's reversal of fortunes in Syria was, in part, a consequence of shifting conflict dynamics, as Russia's September 2015 intervention turned the tide of regime losses and secured a series of consequential military victories, including in Aleppo. That reality, coupled with the West's tunnel-like fixation on combating the Islamic State and increasing political fatigue with backing the anti-Assad effort, had combined through 2016-2017 to create conditions in which al-Qa`ida could no longer benefit from intense levels of conflict (which had given it its best chance to acquire credibility) and a viable, potent revolutionary opposition (which it had embedded into and partnered with to consolidate its credibility).

It was facing these far less favorable conditions that had prompted an internal discussion around a need to use additional methods to secure popular acceptance and support. After all, as Jabhat al-Nusra had repeatedly explained,[2] achieving its ultimate objective of establishing an Islamic state in Syria would only ever be feasible if it could acquire a sufficiently large and broad spread of support from those living in its midst. The primacy of military conflict through 2012-2015 may have allowed for Jabhat al-Nusra's rise to prominence and acquisition of some popularity, but shifting dynamics in 2016 meant additional methods were needed to sustain and grow existing support.

Central within this challenge was one issue: could a self-identified al-Qa`ida affiliate broaden its support base to the extent necessary not only to negotiate a broad-spectrum merger (not alliance) with Syria's armed opposition but to secure widespread support for a jihadi government? Making use of information released publicly by involved jihadis as well as deeper insight provided to this author by individuals directly and indirectly involved in Jabhat al-Nusra's

---

a    Intriguingly, the specific acknowledgement of *junud qa'edat al-jihad fi'l Sham* was excluded from the English version of al-Qa`ida's statement, which merely referenced brotherly cooperation in the Levant.

evolution since 2016,[b] this article seeks to tell the story of how and why al-Qa`ida has seen its Syrian affiliate slowly drift out of its control and what that means for its project in Syria.

## From Jabhat al-Nusra to JFS

As international diplomacy intensified in early 2016 toward the first of several nationwide 'cessations of hostility,' Jabhat al-Nusra convened unity talks with opposition factions based in northern Syria.[3] Pressure was rising inside Syria's revolution to adapt to changing circumstances. Politics were beginning to trump military affairs, and the Syrian opposition's external backers were coercing their proxies to play along. For Jabhat al-Nusra, an avowed al-Qa`ida affiliate opposed to any foreign manipulation of events inside Syria, this state of affairs represented a potentially existential threat. The unity negotiations that began in January 2016 were Jabhat al-Nusra's way of preempting *any* foreign attempt to co-opt its military partners into acting against its interests. After all, the United States and Russia were also intensively negotiating to establish a joint intelligence cell in Jordan to deal specifically with Jabhat al-Nusra's 'marbled' presence within opposition areas.[4]

As it happened, Jabhat al-Nusra's best attempts to convince opposition groups that a full organizational merger was in their best interests resolutely failed. One reason for rejection hovered above others: Jabhat al-Nusra's affiliation and loyalty to al-Qa`ida. As far as Syria's mainstream opposition was concerned, their revolution was under increasing pressure both from within and outside Syria; now was not the time to risk further alienating the cause by uniting with a terrorist group, no matter how valuable a military partner it might be.

This was not the first time that Jabhat al-Nusra's attempt to encourage a broad inter-factional merger had failed, but the circumstances surrounding the collapse of this round catalyzed something new. Concerned about recent developments, a number of senior Jabhat al-Nusra commanders coalesced in secret in June 2016 in a series of meetings organized in part by former senior member Saleh al-Hamawi. Originally one of Jabhat al-Nusra's seven founding members, al-Hamawi had been expelled from the group in July 2015 for his overly 'progressive' views.[5] Al-Hamawi and his secret cohort, which included Jabhat al-Nusra's military chief in Aleppo, Abdullah al-Sanadi, believed the time had come to sever ties with al-Qa`ida in order to broaden the appeal of Jabhat al-Nusra's jihadi project so as to better secure the kind of unity that might save their armed struggle from being slowly strangled from the outside. Al-Hamawi confirmed his role in the process to this author in July 2016, explaining that it would amount to an ultimatum to Jabhat al-Nusra leader Abu Mohammed al-Julani:

*Soon, there will be an ultimatum made to al-Nusra: either disengage [from al-Qa`ida] and merge with major Islamic factions, or face isolation socially, politically and militarily.*[6]

Were al-Julani to refuse to consider breaking ties, up to a third of Jabhat al-Nusra's fighting force were loyal to the reformist wing, one informed source also told the author at the time. A name had even been selected for the potential defecting faction: the Syrian

Islamic Movement (*al-harakat al-souriya al-islamiyya*).[7]

The interlinked issues of al-Qa`ida affiliation, inter-factional unity in Syria, and Jabhat al-Nusra's goal of establishing an Islamic state had been discussed within jihadi circles in Syria since at least 2014. Despite their geographic and communications distance, al-Qa`ida's central leadership had also begun to weigh in. In a speech released in May 2016 but likely recorded early that year, Ayman al-Zawahiri had urged jihadis in Syria to unite, stressing the objective of establishing a "Muslim government" and indicating that formal affiliations (to al-Qa`ida) would no longer apply only if and when such a goal could be achieved.[8] Preemptively breaking ties, however, would not protect jihadis from international counterterrorism scrutiny, and if they were to break ties early, further attacks would be inevitable. Though some of the wording may have appeared ambiguous to some, the logic was clear: do not break your *bay`a* (oath of allegiance); your goals have not been met.

Events in Syria were moving rapidly, and al-Zawahiri was too far away to influence directly what was, for Jabhat al-Nusra and its leadership, an issue needing urgent attention. According to multiple senior Jabhat al-Nusra and Islamist sources inside Syria who spoke to this author both at the time and since, al-Julani convened an initial, urgent meeting of his Shura Council in mid-July 2016 to discuss the issue of al-Qa`ida ties and how best to continue to pursue Jabhat al-Nusra's objectives in Syria. That meeting ended in discord when it became clear that the Shura Council was divided on the issue.

As the Shura members dispersed and retreated to their respective hideouts, the debate continued behind multiple closed doors and attracted a broader circle of people, these sources told the author. A number of different camps emerged. Some determined that protecting Jabhat al-Nusra's achievements in Syria and proceeding further toward a united Islamic government made a major break and rebrand from al-Qa`ida necessary. Some insisted that any breaking of ties would be wholly illegitimate without the permission of al-Qa`ida leader al-Zawahiri, his deputies, and the broader Shura Council. And others proposed a middle-way, in which Jabhat al-Nusra would sever its ties of allegiance to al-Qa`ida *outside* Syria, while retaining close, consultative contact with al-Qa`ida leadership figures *inside* Syria. The latter option, its proponents insisted, would be presented to the world as a full breaking of ties in the hopes of justifying or legitimizing whatever united body might then result.

As pressure mounted and details of the controversy were leaked (including to this author), al-Julani reconvened a significantly expanded Shura Council, which now included two further levels of the group's religious and military commands. According to the author's Islamist and al-Nusra sources in Syria, as that larger Shura met several times through mid- and into late July 2016, al-Julani's hyper-loyal deputy, Abdulrahim Atoun (aka Abu Abdullah al-Shami), began consulting with prominent al-Qa`ida ideologues outside Syria (including Issam Mohammed Tahir al-Barqawi, aka Abu Mohammed al-Maqdisi, in Jordan) and with senior al-Qa`ida figures in Syria. The latter included global deputy leader, Abdullah Mohammed Rajab Abdulrahman, aka Abu al-Khayr al-Masri (a veteran Egyptian jihadi with longstanding close ties to al-Zawahiri);[9] Khaled Mustafa Khalifa al-Aruri, aka Abu al-Qassam al-Urduni (a former deputy to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi),[10] and Ahmed Salameh Mabruk, aka Abu al-Faraj al-Masri (a veteran Egyptian jihadi also previously close to al-Zawahiri)[11] on the feasibility of pursuing the

---

middle-way option.

What appears to have resulted from these consultations was a general permission for Jabhat al-Nusra to pursue the middle-way—that is, breaking external ties—to protect its project in Syria and to improve the chances of achieving the Islamic government that al-Qa`ida had so long sought. Abu al-Khayr, Abu al-Qassam, and Abu al-Faraj all qualified their permission by insisting that if al-Zawahiri—who was out of contact—later rejected the move, they too would retrospectively oppose it, and Jabhat al-Nusra would have to reverse its decision. Al-Julani, Atoun, and others reportedly agreed to these terms, and the proposal was made to a final meeting of the expanded Shura on July 23, 2016. The debate that followed was tense, and a number of Jabhat al-Nusra's most senior leaders balked at the proposal. At least one, Iyad al-Tubasi (aka Abu Julaybib), stormed out of the meeting. Nevertheless, a slim majority ultimately voted in agreement.[12] Jabhat al-Nusra began preparing a major announcement.

Five days later, on July 28, 2016, in a brief audio statement, Abu al-Khayr al-Masri gave al-Qa`ida's blessing for Jabhat al-Nusra's breaking of ties. At the end of his message, he included a previously unreleased audio clip from al-Zawahiri stressing that organizational links should be sacrificed if necessary for unity, creating the impression that al-Qa`ida's leader had also sanctioned the move himself.[c]

Shortly thereafter, al-Julani, Atoun, and Abu al-Faraj appeared on video—al-Julani revealing his face for the first time—and announced the dissolution of Jabhat al-Nusra and the establishment of Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (JFS), a jihadi movement devoid of "external ties" and dedicated to forming "a unified body" in Syria to "protect" and "serve" its people.[13] In the days that followed, JFS' eloquent, English-speaking spokesman Mostafa Mahamed (Abu Sulayman al-Muhajir) sold the move to the Western media as a complete break from al-Qa`ida driven by a determination to focus solely on Syrian issues and to secure broader unity with opposition factions:

*[Before this change, Jabhat al-Nusra] was an official branch of al-Qaeda. We reported to their central command and we worked within their framework; we adhered to their policies. With the formation of JFS, we are completely independent. That means we don't report to anyone, we don't receive directives from any external entity. If dissolving external organizational affiliations or ties will remove the obstacles in the way of unity, then this must be done. When we were part of al-Qaeda ... our core policy was to focus all of our efforts on the Syrian issue. That was our policy before and it will be our policy today and tomorrow.[14]*

This was al-Julani's gamble.[15] Faced with severe internal pressure to consider a move that he personally had repeatedly refused,

al-Julani had now decided to take a leap into the unknown in hopes that doing so would be enough to overcome the trust gap with Syria's opposition and secure its willingness to merge and then its backing to establish a unified Islamic political project.

## JFS: Rising Tensions

Despite the grand nature of JFS' emergence, the movement's birth was not altogether smooth. In fact, several of Jabhat al-Nusra's most senior figures were furious. Abu Julaybib—a former close aide to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi[16]—publicly quit JFS in August 2016 in protest at the "disengagement" from al-Qa`ida.[17] He was later followed by two other senior leaders, Abu Khadija al-Urduni and Abu Hammam al-Shami, who opposed what they saw as the 'dilution' of jihadi purity.[18] Jabhat al-Nusra's former deputy leader Sami al-Oraydi chose not to quit JFS altogether, but he refused to take any position of responsibility. At least 11 other senior Jabhat al-Nusra figures adopted similar positions.[19]

Almost as soon as JFS came into existence, this band of detractors emerged as a thorn in al-Julani's side. Their mere existence was compounded by a private letter that arrived in late September 2016 from al-Zawahiri in which he angrily chastised al-Julani and called the rebrand to JFS an "act of disobedience."[20] Al-Zawahiri explained that such a move could only occur after an Islamic state was established, and even then, it would need the approval of al-Qa`ida's entire Shura Council.[21] In a separate message that came with the secret letter, al-Zawahiri also admonished his global deputy Abu al-Khayr for giving his permission to al-Julani.[22] Shortly thereafter, as he had warned he might, Abu al-Khayr reversed his support for JFS' creation, leaving the ball in al-Julani's court. Al-Julani was now expected to dissolve JFS, reassert his allegiance to al-Qa`ida, and reestablish Jabhat al-Nusra.[23]

Notwithstanding the Syrian opposition's continued skepticism that JFS was anything different to Jabhat al-Nusra, the arrival of al-Zawahiri's letter caused shockwaves. Al-Julani's gamble was already facing serious challenges, and its internal detractors now had the greatest piece of ammunition possible. By this time, it had also become clear, after communications had been established to Iran, that two other veteran al-Qa`ida senior leaders living there—Mohammed Salah al-Din Zaidan (Saif al-`Adl) and Abdullah Ahmed Abdullah (Abu Mohammed al-Masri)—had also rejected the rebrand.[d]

Rather than abiding by his initial assurances to al-Qa`ida's senior representatives, however, al-Julani refused to reverse JFS' formation and external break from al-Qa`ida. Instead, he hurriedly convened a meeting of JFS and al-Qa`ida leaders in the Idlib town of Jisr al-Shughour on October 3, 2016, in which he and his loyal comrade Atoun sought to convince those in attendance of the importance of standing firm and correcting al-Zawahiri's 'misun-

---

c    Abu Khayr states, "These are the words of our Emir and Sheikh Dr. Ayman, may Allah preserve him." Al-Zawahiri is then heard saying, "The brotherhood of Islam that is between us is stronger than all the finite, ever-changing organizational links. Your unity and familiarity is more important, dear, and precious to us than any organizational link ... Indeed, without hesitation those factional organizational links are sacrificed if they go against your unity and familiarity and your standing in one rank." "Zawahiri's Deputy Tells Nusra Front to Do What is Necessary to Preserve Syrian Jihad," SITE Intelligence Group, July 28, 2016.

d    According to an essay posted online in October 2017 by Abu al-Qassam al-Urduni, al-`Adl and Abu Mohammed al-Masri remained based in Iran after being freed from detention but were not allowed to travel. There had been much speculation about their whereabouts since they were reportedly released in a prisoner deal between Iran and al-Qa`ida. Al-Qassam described them as the second and third of al-Zawahiri's deputies, after the first, Abu Al-Khayr. Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, "The Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham-al-Qaeda Dispute: Primary Texts (III)," aymennjawad.org, December 10, 2017; Rukmini Callimachi and Eric Schmitt, "Iran Released Top Members of Al Qaeda in a Trade," *New York Times*, September 17, 2015.

derstanding.'[24] According to Atoun, the al-Qa`ida figures jumped to al-Julani's defense, claiming that al-Zawahiri must have misunderstood JFS' nature and the circumstances surrounding its creation.[25] Other than Atoun's biased claims, though, no other evidence has emerged proving that al-Julani was so strongly defended. Abu al-Faraj's death in a drone strike an hour after the meeting further added to tensions, according to one HTS-linked source who met some of the attendees afterward.[26]

Throughout the remainder of 2016, pressure continued to mount on JFS and al-Julani. The first attempt to negotiate a merger with opposition factions since JFS' formation precipitously broke down in mid-August, due to continued concerns about the group's al-Qa`ida connections and objectives. After only six weeks, the rebrand was not going to plan. Moreover, by late September 2016, JFS had grudgingly evacuated all its positions in northern Aleppo in protest to Turkey's "Euphrates Shield" intervention against the Islamic State and the Kurdish YPG. Al-Julani was then forced to watch almost all Syrian opposition groups sign on to a major ceasefire on September 13 enforced by the international community that provided for possible U.S. or Russian strikes on JFS.

In a series of undisclosed meetings in September 2016 with Turkish security officials in Ankara, an armed opposition delegation then considered lending intelligence support to U.S. drone strikes on al-Qa`ida figures in exchange for Turkish oversight on the targeting process, two attendees told the author.[27] Though the outcome of those meetings was left ambiguous, U.S. strikes against veteran al-Qa`ida members as well as leading JFS figures steadily increased in northwestern Syria from September into the winter of 2016-2017.[e]

Having embraced the role as JFS' public defender-in-chief, Mostafa Mahamed's October 17, 2016, 'resignation' from JFS[f] was the first sign of discontent within the group's 'dovish' wing. Protest was now coming from both ends of the spectrum. To make matters worse, al-Julani was then forced in October 2016 to come to the defense of a particularly troublesome front group, Jund al-Aqsa,[28] which a recent opposition investigation had accused of working for the Islamic State.[g] That opened up an uncontrollable can of worms in which Ahrar al-Sham, which had repeatedly dissolved recent merger talks with Jabhat al-Nusra *and* JFS, and others led a military campaign to eradicate Jund al-Aqsa. Having secretly established Jund al-Aqsa in early 2013 as a front to take in Jabhat al-Nusra's foreign fighters and shield them from recruitment attempts by the emerging Islamic State group, al-Julani's sense of

loyalty saw him subsume and protect a force otherwise viewed almost universally with hostility. Even when Jund al-Aqsa suicide car bombs targeted Ahrar al-Sham bases, as in Saraqeb on October 10, 2016, JFS took to misinformation, claiming instead that airstrikes were the culprit.[29]

## From JFS to HTS: Aggressive Expansion

As 2016 drew to a close, rumors abounded that al-Qa`ida had lost patience with al-Julani and that Abu Julaybib was laying the groundwork for a new loyalist al-Qa`ida faction known as "Taliban al-Sham."[30] Leading jihadi ideologue Abu Mohammed al-Maqdisi also launched a public critique of JFS, questioning the "diluters'" (*al-mumayi'a*) motives in degrading the purity of Jabhat al-Nusra's methodology (*manhaj*).[31]

Having pushed through the rebrand based on the gamble that it would secure a mass merger in Syria, al-Julani began preparing for a final try in November 2016. According to three members of Ahrar al-Sham and an Islamic cleric close to HTS, those preparations included a lobbying effort within Ahrar al-Sham to undermine the group's most nationalistic wing, which had consistently vetoed a merger.[32] Eventually, Ahrar al-Sham's internal divisions on the issue erupted when an extremist wing favoring closer ties with JFS and calling itself Jaish al-Ahrar announced itself as a "sub-faction."[33] In effect, Jaish al-Ahrar and its leadership—including Ahrar's former leader Abu Jaber al-Sheikh, military leader Abu Saleh Tahhan, and Kurdish Islamic advisor Abu Mohammed al-Sadeq—were positioning themselves as an 'almost-splinter group,' in case unity talks with JFS again failed.

The merger talks began in December 2016, and although an initial agreement was signed by Ahrar al-Sham's then-leader Ali al-Omar,[34] it later fell apart when a majority of Ahrar's leadership again refused.[35] They were especially concerned about JFS' lack of ideological change; recent death threats made in the event of 'no' votes; and a fear of losing external support, particularly from Turkey.[36] The failure of the talks was the straw that broke the camel's back. By January 2017, JFS and Ahrar al-Sham were engaged in violent conflict in northwestern Syria.[37] Although Ahrar refused to attend the first round of the controversial Astana talks co-hosted by Russia, Iran, and Turkey, it expressed support for those who did.[38]

The January 2017 JFS-Ahrar conflict had been preceded by coordinated JFS attacks on several Free Syrian Army (FSA)-branded groups in Idlib and western Aleppo,[39] which severely damaged its reputation within the broader opposition. The Turkey-based, mainstream Syrian Islamic Council (SIC), which retains close relations with almost all northern Syria's opposition, even called for full-scale mobilization against JFS, labeling al-Julani's group "*khawarij*"[40]—the same term commonly used to refer to the Islamic State's ultra-extremist breakaway tendencies. Throughout the fighting, which was clearly designed to undercut allies and neutralize future threats, JFS sought to defeat some of the most popular FSA factions

---

e    Drone strikes targeted and killed JFS military leader Abu Omar Saraqeb (September 2016); al-Qa`ida veteran and close aide to Ayman al-Zawahiri Abu al-Faraj al-Masri (October 2016); Khorasan Group external relations coordinator Haydar Kirkan (November 2016); al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) veteran Abu Khattab al-Qahtani (January 2017); and JFS Shura Council member Younes Shoeyb (January 2017).

f    Mahamed announced his resignation in a public, written statement released on October 17, 2016, in which he explained that he intended to "pursue a number of projects independently," presumably a reference to his earlier stated focus on issues relating to "education and Islamic sciences." He gave no reason for his departure, but in a final paragraph, he stated that "I would like to make absolutely clear that my resignation was not a result of the disassociation of JFS from Al-Qaeda, which I believe was not only in the best interests of JFS, but also in the nest interest of the Syrian people."

g    The investigation was undertaken internally within Ahrar al-Sham, and its results are available at https://justpaste.it/y23n.

*Image captured from an HTS video entitled "The Battle to Liberate al-Mushirfa and Abu Dali Villages," which was produced by "Amjad Foundation for Video Production" and released in December 2017*

within the CIA-led assistance program,[h] claiming it was preempting a foreign "conspiracy" against its forces.[41] JFS also aggressively sought control of important areas along the Turkish border, including the Bab al-Hawa crossing—an invaluable source of income and a potent source of control over the fate of rivals in Syria's northwest.[i]

The key consequence of this unprecedented spate of inter-factional fighting was a clarification of the line distinguishing Ahrar al-Sham and JFS, with a series of substantive defections and mergers taking place between sub-factions of the two groups. On the one hand, Ahrar al-Sham lost approximately 800-1,000 defectors to JFS, but gained at least 6,000-8,000 more[42] from the integration into its ranks of Suqor al-Sham, Jaish al-Mujahideen, Tajamu Fastaqim Kama Umrit and the western Aleppo units of Al-Jabhat al-Shamiya, and the Idlib-based units of Jaish al-Islam. On the other hand, JFS lost at least several hundred fighters to Ahrar al-Sham, while securing 3,000-5,000 additional fighters[43] from a merger with Harakat Nour al-Din al-Zinki, Liwa al-Haq, Jaish al-Sunna, and Jabhat Ansar al-Din. With this expansion, JFS announced a second rebrand on January 28, 2017, to Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS).[44]

## HTS Comes Under Fire

This 'great sorting out' was the consequence of al-Julani's aggressive determination to neutralize potential threats within northern Syria's opposition; to deter or preempt externally driven 'conspiracies'

against his forces; and to catalyze the necessary conditions for an absorbing of other groups. Although al-Julani arguably succeeded in achieving all three objectives, the methods used irreversibly damaged his movement's standing in the broader rebel movement and the feasibility of ever transitioning into a truly representative, mass movement. Consequently, Syria's opposition communities began referring to the group as "Hitish"—a use of the "HTS" acronym in Arabic and purposefully denigratory given its audible similarity to the Islamic State's pejorative acronym-based nickname, Daesh. Sizable protests against the jihadi group also became the norm.

This second rebrand in six months also proved to be the final nail in the coffin in al-Julani's relationship with al-Qa`ida. Whether al-Julani had intended for JFS' creation to represent a total break from al-Qa`ida or not had now become a largely academic debate, as al-Qa`ida and its loyalists began to view HTS as an independent jihadi outfit—and one that had become so by illegitimately breaking its strict oath of *bay`a*.

Al-Maqdisi was again the first to weigh in following HTS' creation, warning on January 30, 2017, that "the influence of the diluters … is now growing greater!"[45] Three days later, al-Maqdisi called on HTS' leadership to clarify its *manhaj*, and two days after that, he called on HTS to urgently clarify "your disavowal of wicked coalitions such as Euphrates Shield … your disavowal of conferences and conspiracies like Astana … your views on … secular regimes [and] foreign backing."[46] Amidst this intensifying public controversy, Sami al-Oraydi and a close aide, Abu Hajar al-Shami, both quit HTS on February 8, 2017, citing the second rebrand as the final straw. Hours later, al-Oraydi proclaimed that "among the greatest forms of disobedience is disobedience to the mother organization." As Cole Bunzel has pointed out, al-Oraydi had used that line before, in September 2015 in reference to the Islamic State's criminal behavior and break from al-Qa`ida.[47] Al-Julani and HTS were now being openly compared to the Islamic State by al-Qa`ida loyalists.

Al-Oraydi's public exit from HTS and al-Maqdisi's escalating criticism sparked a defensive retort by al-Julani's loyal defender Atoun on February 10, 2017. In a 20-page screed posted on Telegram, Atoun accused al-Maqdisi of spouting inaccuracies based on a lack of information and of failing to make use of JFS' attempts to

---

h    The CIA-led, covert assistance effort began in late 2012 and was coordinated through operations rooms in Turkey and Jordan, known as the MOM and MOC, respectively. The program was a multilateral effort, with the CIA being responsible for vetting groups prior to their inclusion in the MOC or MOM. CIA-led assistance was briefly frozen after JFS's attacks in January 2017. Tom Perry, Suleiman al-Khalidi, and John Walcott, "Exclusive: CIA-backed aid for Syrian rebels frozen after Islamist attack: sources," Reuters, February 21, 2017.

i    According to local sources (on social media) located in the area, JFS began amassing forces on the main road to Bab al-Hawa on January 24, 2017, and launched an attack on the border village of Babsiqa on January 27 in an attempt to seal effective control of access to the border.

consult him on issues related to rebranding. Atoun also explained that some of the strategic issues internally considered by JFS and HTS necessitated nuance, rather than a black-and-white lens. For example, Atoun implied that different opinions existed on issues like the legitimacy of Turkey's President Erdogan and relationships with foreign governments. Atoun strongly rejected al-Maqdisi's claim that "diluters" had weakened HTS' *manhaj*. HTS was loyal to "the same principles as before," Atoun insisted.[48]

Having been publicly critiqued by his junior, al-Maqdisi responded boldly on February 14, 2017, charging Atoun with skirting around important issues and, more seriously, having deceived him and others about the nature of Jabhat al-Nusra's rebrand to JFS. According to al-Maqdisi and despite claims otherwise, Jabhat al-Nusra had failed to secure permission for JFS' creation from al-Qa`ida's leadership, and in initial consultations he had with Atoun in July 2016, the latter had personally described the potential rebrand as "superficial" and something that would be reversed should al-Zawahiri turn out to oppose it. Al-Maqdisi was now implying that the rebrand to JFS had been conducted with a genuine intention to break ties, especially given the nature of the second transition to HTS—a group he claimed *had* eroded its *manhaj*, given its emphasis on "liberation" (*tahrir*), instead of the more religious "conquest" (*fath*).[49]

Although Jordanian jihadi ideologue Abu Qatada al-Filistini hurriedly stepped in and mediated a détente between al-Maqdisi and Atoun, the issue had now become very public. Moreover, despite remaining loyal to al-Qa`ida's side of the debate, Abu Qatada grudgingly admitted several weeks later that one needed to celebrate the fact that a new "jihadi current" was emerging that prioritized "a project of the Islamic community" over and above a more exclusivist "ideological group" project. This was a clear reference to efforts by groups like HTS to broaden their appeal by focusing on the local and thus, being more willing to make ideological concessions for the sake of securing mass appeal.[50]

In mid-February 2017, amidst the al-Maqdisi-Atoun spat, a meeting of senior al-Qa`ida figures was convened in Idlib to discuss HTS' formation and how to deal with the fallout. Al-Qa`ida deputy leader Abu al-Khayr attended, as did al-Oraydi, Abu Julaybib, Abu al-Qassam, and Abu Hammam. According to two individuals attuned to the meeting's attendees and its outcome,[51] those in the room unanimously opposed HTS' creation but disagreed on the path forward. Alarmingly for many in attendance, Abu al-Khayr admitted that he was never consulted about JFS' evolution into HTS, and in fact, he had not met with any JFS or HTS leader for six weeks.[52] That revelation strongly suggested that JFS no longer considered itself bound by al-Qa`ida's constraints—again, whether the Jabhat al-Nusra-to-JFS rebrand was intended to fully break ties or not.

Abu al-Khayr's death in a drone strike on February 26, 2017, served to remove another possible obstacle from under HTS' feet, but also emboldened al-Qa`ida's loyalists further. Al-Oraydi, the onetime deputy leader of Jabhat al-Nusra, led the charge this time with a series of public postings through March and April accusing HTS of sowing division (*fitna*) within the Syrian jihad by embracing nationalism over Islam, breaking its *bay`a* to al-Qa`ida through the use of "legal trickery," and insisting that al-Julani's behavior was no different to the Islamic State's betrayal. In what was then unlikely to be coincidental timing, al-Zawahiri released a statement on April 23, 2017, (three days after al-Oraydi's final message) in which he warned his followers to remain loyal to the global jihad, to resist attempts to prioritize "nationalist" war, and to engage in guerilla

warfare rather than territorial control. Though he made no direct reference to HTS, al-Zawahiri's intention was clear. After all, everything he warned against defined HTS' strategy. Unsurprisingly, al-Oraydi responded to al-Zawahiri by describing his message as being "as clear as the sun."[53]

## The Great Syrian Jihadi Breakup

Al-Zawahiri's April 23, 2017, statement appeared to temper tensions, or at least stop disagreements from being aired publicly. Al-Oraydi and fellow al-Qa`ida loyalist Abu al-Qassam both pivoted toward offering constructive advice for Syria's 'mujahideen,' including how to face the challenges posed by the emerging triumvirate of Turkey, Iran, and Russia, as well as by emphasizing the strategic importance of fighting an underground guerrilla war as the next stage in Syrian jihad.[54] As al-Qassam wrote in June 2017, external pressure on the Syrian jihad was so significant that the ongoing *fitna* between HTS and al-Qa`ida needed to end. Notwithstanding various accusations made, most al-Qa`ida figures who had spoken on the subject—including al-Zawahiri—had focused and continued to focus on prioritizing "unity" and "cooperation."[55]

The one key and consistent exception to that rule was the diehard al-Qa`ida loyalist Abu Julaybib who, since his resignation from HTS in August 2016, had been driving tensions on the ground by undermining al-Julani's authority and repeatedly pitching the formation of a new, al-Qa`ida loyalist faction to rival HTS.[56] According to three well-connected sources, Abu Julaybib had also repeatedly tried to move back to southern Syria to pursue this separate goal with the aim of coordinating the transfer of al-Qa`ida loyalists from the south to Idlib to stand in opposition to HTS and al-Julani.[57] Abu Julaybib was a serious thorn in al-Julani's side.

By the summer of 2017, another increasingly difficult issue was HTS' relationship with Ahrar al-Sham, once Jabhat al-Nusra's closest military ally but now increasingly distant from HTS. Though Ahrar had always held politically and ideologically different positions to Jabhat al-Nusra, evolving geopolitical dynamics, the increasingly assertive role of Turkey, and Jabhat al-Nusra's own evolution all had a part to play in encouraging Ahrar's own identity rebrand, which eventually included an embrace of the green FSA revolutionary flag and increasingly nationalist-focused rhetoric.[58]

The repeated breakdown of merger talks; Ahrar al-Sham's role in Euphrates Shield, close relations to Turkey, and support for Astana; and the actual intra-rebel hostilities that preceded HTS' formation all prepared the ground for the most significant battle to take place between the two groups. Between July 18 and July 24, 2017, HTS launched a series of coordinated assaults on Ahrar's network of headquarters across Idlib, western Aleppo, and northern Hama. What followed was a limp response by Ahrar's fighters, who suffered catastrophic defeat in a week.[59]

The fighting's death toll, though, was very low—two or three dozen from both groups combined, according to commanders from both groups speaking to this author.[60] Rather than fight back in force, Ahrar personnel largely retreated, withdrew, or surrendered, in part due to their long history of cooperation with Jabhat al-Nusra; the localism that defined much of the two group's micro-level relations; and the shock and awe nature of HTS' campaign. There was also a question of poor resolve within Ahrar's ranks. The group's especially broad spectrum of political and religious/ideological thought had gradually eroded a shared sense of internal identity, putting it at a significant disadvantage when faced with a more ideologically unified adversary.

Aware that some fighters within its own ranks might balk at fighting against fellow Islamist rebels, HTS had prepared its fighters to turn on their long-time partners. For weeks beforehand, "Julani dispatched his most important [Sharia figures] to talk to the fighters," one Islamist figure close to HTS' Shura Council claimed, "first to question the purity of Ahrar al-Sham's political positions and to suggest it had become a foreign puppet that would be used to attack the *mujahideen*, and then to explain why it had become a legitimate target."[61]

By late July 2017, HTS had cemented itself as *the* dominant armed actor in opposition-held areas of northwestern Syria. Its main rival, Ahrar al-Sham, retreated back to its bases, hoping to fight another day. Three months later, Ahrar elected an entirely new leadership headed up by Hassan Soufan, a long-time former regime prisoner who, as he told this author in person in October 2017, came into the job determined to distinguish his movement from "criminal" and "corrupt" projects, such as "Hitish and Daesh."[62]

## The Break Becomes Official

In a speech released on October 4, 2017, al-Zawahiri publicly admonished HTS—again, without referencing the group by name—by chastising those who try to "escape from facing reality and seek to repeat the same failed experiment … [of trying to] deceive America," a reference to the argument that by breaking ties to al-Qa`ida, jihadis could protect themselves from counterterrorism scrutiny. Al-Zawahiri then went on to censure those who find false, legalistic excuses to avoid or to dissolve one's *bay`a*—an oath which he describes as "binding," any "violation" of which is strictly "forbidden."[63] Five days later, a new jihadi group called Ansar al-Furqan announced itself in Idlib as a movement that would remain loyal to Islam where others were becoming "distant."

*[Ansar al-Furqan] are Sunni jihadist Muslims, consisting of [foreign fighters] and [local fighters] who have attended most of the Syrian events since their beginning and witnessed most of what has become of the groups. Thus, they have discovered that the secret of the issue and the reason behind deficiencies was the [new distance] from the evident verses [of the Qur'an] and not adhering to them or abiding by them and using the brain superficially and not giving in to following the [Qur'an] in many issues.*[64]

Multiple informed sources[65] assured this author at the time that Ansar al-Furqan was Abu Julaybib's initiative and had gathered no more than 300 al-Qa`ida loyalists in northwestern Syria. Several days after Ansar al-Furqan's emergence, HTS launched a low-level security campaign across Idlib in which suspected al-Qa`ida loyalists with positions critical of HTS were questioned by the group's internal security service. In a few cases, questioning led to detention, but most were released.[66]

This attempt to reassert HTS authority and to intimidate potential competition, paired with leaked comments by Atoun criticizing al-Zawahiri's October 4 speech, sparked fury within al-Qa`ida circles.[j] Beginning on October 15, 2017, and ending six days later, al-Oraydi published five "testimonies" in which he laid out al-Qa`ida's various protests against the Jabhat al-Nusra-JFS rebrand

and then HTS' formation, which he explained had resulted in a full break from al-Qa`ida. Al-Oraydi repeatedly labeled al-Julani's actions as acts of "rebellion"—similar to those of the Islamic State, while explaining that al-Julani and Atoun had sold the JFS rebrand to its early opponents as a move that would have had more of an effect in the media than in reality. In other words, it had been suggested that JFS would quietly retain its al-Qa`ida ties, presumably given the presence inside Syria of senior al-Qa`ida figures like Abu al-Khayr. Even this, al-Oraydi insisted, had proven to be deception, as had al-Julani and Atoun's repeated promise to abide by any future decision by al-Zawahiri to reject the rebrand.

Predictably, al-Oraydi's powerful critiques drew a strong response from Atoun, who defended the methods and logic behind the rebrand to JFS, while stretching the truth by describing the move as something overwhelmingly supported within Jabhat al-Nusra's Shura Council and al-Qa`ida's central circles. Atoun's excuse for refusing to reverse the JFS rebrand was to claim that al-Zawahiri had been misinformed about its nature and that senior al-Qa`ida figures like Abu al-Khayr and Abuj al-Faraj had consistently been on al-Julani's side. Conveniently, both were now dead and unable to confirm Atoun's claim, which has not been supported by any other source before or since. Atoun also claimed that communications with al-Zawahiri had been nonexistent for security reasons for nearly three years (from November 2013 to September 2016)[67]—something rejected by a senior al-Qa`ida "external communications" official known as Abu Abdullah, who claimed in response that it had long been possible to send messages to al-Zawahiri through one of his colleagues, "almost on a daily basis."[68] In an apparent recognition of al-Oraydi's declaration that HTS' creation represented a full break from al-Qa`ida, Atoun suggested that although this had not been the intention, JFS' achievement of a broad merger (i.e., HTS) had met the necessary conditions to separate from external ties of allegiance.

This tit-for-tat series of testimonies continued through late October and into November 2017. Al-Qassam jumped to al-Oraydi's defense, and senior HTS figure Abu al-Harith al-Masri publicly criticized al-Zawahiri, saying he was so distant from Syria's realities he had ceded his position of authority. Later in November, HTS fighters arrested Abu Julaybib and his family at a checkpoint in western Aleppo as they reportedly sought to escape Idlib toward southern Syria. Hours later, al-Julani dispatched security units to arrest al-Oraydi and several other al-Qa`ida loyalists—including a member of al-Qa`ida's central Shura Council, Abu Abdul Karim al-Khorasani, and a close aide to al-Qassam known as Abu Khallad—in a move later justified as preventing further "harm and evil" espoused by those who advocated *takfir* (excommunication) upon HTS and its leaders.[69]

HTS' arrest of prominent al-Qa`ida figures drew ire both amongst its own members and the al-Qa`ida loyalist community inside and outside of Syria. Demands flooded in for the prisoners to be released. Within that tense environment, al-Qa`ida-linked calls for a loyalist mobilization in northwestern Syria also became public. In his condemnation of the arrests, for example, Abu Hammam al-Shami explained how an effort was underway to collect and organize personnel.[70] Upon his release from HTS detention, Abu Julaybib immediately re-pledged his *bay`a* to al-Qa`ida and defiantly asserted that "if you think by jailing us the idea of Al-Qaeda is over, then you are delusional."[71]

Clearly, neither side planned to back down, and whatever account of events held more truth, the consequence was clear: HTS

---

j    Atoun's leaked comments appear to have found their way to jihadi circles in Syria, but not to the public. They were referenced repeatedly within al-Oraydi's five testimonies.

had severed itself and/or been severed from al-Qa`ida. With his loyalists in HTS prisons, al-Zawahiri released another message on November 28, 2017, in which he directly denounced HTS' "violation of the covenant," accusing al-Julani of creating more unnecessary complexity as well as "killing, fighting, accusations, fatwas and counter-fatwas."

*We gave opportunity after opportunity and deadline after deadline for more than a year, but all we saw was increasing aggravation, inflammation and disputes ... Verily, the jihad in al-Sham is a jihad of the entire Ummah; it is not a jihad of the people of Syria; and it is not a jihad of the people of Idlib, or Deraa or Damascus ... The bay'at between us ... is a binding contract which prohibits [you] from being able to breach it ... I remind my brothers in al-Sham, that the al-Qaeda organization repeated many times that it is willing to give up its organizational ties with Jabhat al-Nusra if two matters were achieved: the first is a union of the mujahideen in al-Sham; and the second matter is an Islamic government is established in al-Sham, and the people of al-Sham choose an Imam, and then at that time and that time only – and not before then – we give up our organizational ties and we would congratulate our people in al-Sham for what they achieved ... As for the creation of new entities without unity, in which absurd schisms are repeated ... this is what we refused.*[72]

Al-Zawahiri's interjection was a watershed moment, making clear to the wider global jihadi movement that a real split had taken place between al-Qa`ida and its Syrian affiliate. That clarified break has not appeared to benefit al-Julani, however, as his broader position in northwestern Syria looks to have become more precarious. Having sought out negotiations with Ankara in October 2017 to ensure a Turkish incursion into Idlib was done without the threat of violence by Turkish forces against his group (and the resulting threat of a broader anti-HTS front emerging), al-Julani has since invited FSA groups in Idlib to consider a merger "for the sake of defending Syria's revolution."[73] Sending such an "invitation" to groups that did not share his hardline Islamist ideology would have been considered outrageous by al-Julani a year prior, but its use in early 2018 spoke volumes about his sense of being surrounded by hostile actors. That would also explain HTS' repeated military withdrawals along the periphery of Idlib's core central, more defensible areas, and online discussion of strategically shifting to guerrilla tactics.[74]

Notwithstanding a determined mediation effort that lasted through December 2017 into early January 2018, which resulted in a short-lived agreement to coexist in peace, the relationship between HTS and al-Qa`ida loyalists in northwestern Syria remains tense. The two remain decidedly separate, as officially established by al-Qa`ida's January 7, 2018, statement quoted at the beginning of this article. For reasons of Islamist brotherhood and the prohibition of shedding blood, as well as continued, shared, long-term objectives, it is very unlikely both sides will fall into a state of all-out conflict. However, were HTS to successfully position itself as an actor tolerated by some regional and international players in at least part of Idlib, al-Julani's willingness to allow a faction of committed global jihadis with overt allegiance to al-Qa`ida may become an overly inconvenient fact needing to be dealt with. Unless that happens, however, the two movements are likely to continue existing uncomfortably together in Idlib.

That produces a complex counterterrorism threat, in which a locally focused jihadi outfit with a sizable 12,000 fighters continues to control territory, govern people, and maintain sources of local finance, while accepting—even grudgingly—a deeply dangerous, small, tight-knit clique of al-Qa`ida terrorists committed to attacking the West. That image looks eerily similar to the Taliban-al-Qa`ida relationship in Afghanistan in 2000-2001, the consequences of which are well known to all. HTS may not be al-Qa`ida anymore, but that does not make its existence any less dangerous.    CTC

## Citations

1    "And it is due from Us to aid those who believe ...," General Leadership of al-Qa`ida, January 7, 2018.

2    Thomas Joscelyn, "Al Nusrah Front spokesman explains differences with Islamic State in video appearance," FDD's Long War Journal, August 13, 2014.

3    Mariam Karouny, "Syrian rebel splits deepen after failed 'merger' with al Qaeda arm," Reuters, January 29, 2016.

4    Patricia Zengerle and John Davison, "Violence rages in Syria as Kerry and Lavrov reach provisional deal on ceasefire," Reuters, February 21, 2016; Karen DeYoung, "U.S. offers to share Syria intelligence on terrorists with Russia," *Washington Post*, June 30, 2016.

5    Jabhat al-Nusra written statement, issued July 15, 2015.

6    Charles Lister, "Under Pressure, Syria's Rebels Face al-Nusra Quandary," Huffington Post, July 18, 2016.

7    Ibid.

8    Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, "Success for al-Qaida in Syria?" *Perspectives on Terrorism* 11:6 (2017).

9    Ray Sanchez and Paul Cruickshank, "Syria's al-Nusra rebrands and cuts ties with al Qaeda," CNN, August 1, 2016.

10    Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, "The Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham-al-Qaeda Dispute: Primary Texts (III)," aymennjawad.org, December 10, 2017.

11    Charles Lister, "The Dawn of Mass Jihad: Success in Syria Fuels al-Qa`ida's Evolution," *CTC Sentinel* 9:9 (2016).

12    Author interview, two Islamist clerics (one, a former Jabhat al-Nusra official) involved in the effort to encourage Jabhat al-Nusra's rebrand to JFS, July-August 2016.

13    Charles Lister, "The Nusra Front Is Dead and Stronger Than Ever Before," *Foreign Policy*, July 28, 2016.

14    Bryony Jones, Clarissa Ward, and Salma Abdelaziz, "Al-Nusra rebranding: New name, same aim? What you need to know," CNN, August 2, 2016.

15    Charles Lister, "Al-Qaida's Complex Balancing Act in Syria," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 11:6 (2017).

16    Tore Hamming, "Abu al-Qassam: Zarqawi's right-hand man who stayed loyal to al-Qaida," Jihadica, November 20, 2017.

17    Abu Julaybib statement, issued August 23, 2016.

18    "Jabhat Fateh al-Sham: Untroubling defections," Al-Modon, August 26, 2016.

19    Mona Alami, "Al-Sha'ar: I wish that Fatah al-Sham's behavior confirms the complete disengagement from Al-Qaeda," *Asharq al-Awsat*, September 12, 2016.

20    Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, "The Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham-al-Qaeda Dispute: Primary Texts (I)," aymennjawad.org, December 6, 2017; Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, "The Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham-al-Qaeda Dispute: Primary Texts (II)," aymennjawad.org, December 10, 2017.

21    Al-Tamimi, "The Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham-al-Qaeda Dispute: Primary Texts (I);" Tore Hamming, "What we learned from Sami al-Uraydi's testimony concerning Abu Abdullah al-Shami," Jihadica, October 24, 2017.

22    Al-Tamimi, "The Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham-al-Qaeda Dispute: Primary Texts (III)."

23    Ibid.

24    Hamming, "What we learned from Sami al-Uraydi's testimony concerning Abu Abdullah al-Shami."

25    Al-Tamimi, "The Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham-al-Qaeda Dispute: Primary Texts (II)."

26    Author interview, a prominent Islamist in northern Syria, March 2017.

27    Author interviews, September 2016.

28    "Syria rebels outraged as Fateh al-Sham sides with 'IS front group,'" Middle East Eye, October 10, 2016.

29    Charles Lister, "A suspected Jund al-Aqsa suicide car bomb targeted an Ahrar al-Sham HQ this AM, killing several. JFS has blamed it on an airstrike. #Idlib," Twitter, October 9, 2016. (Original sources now deleted.)

30    "Taliban al-Sham: A New Branch of Al-Qaeda in Syria," *Ain al-Medina*, December 9, 2016.

31    Cole Bunzel, "Diluting Jihad: Tahrir al-Sham and the Concerns of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi," Jihadica, March 29, 2017.

32    Author interviews, November 2016-January 2017.

33    "Sixteen formations of Ahrar al-Sham united under Jaish al-Ahrar," Orient News, December 11, 2016.

34    See Ali al-Omar's account, for example: "The First Media Meeting of the Commander in Chief of the Ahrar al-Sham Movement, Ali al-Omar Abu Ammar," interview with Hadi al-Abdullah, January 12, 2017.

35    Author interview, three Ahrar al-Sham Shura council members, January-February 2017.

36    Ibid.

37    Alex MacDonald, "Syrian rebels threaten to 'annihilate' rivals as Idlib infighting rages," Middle East Eye, January 23, 2017.

38    "A Statement of the Shura Council to the Sons of Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiya on Going to the Astana Conference," Ahrar al-Sham Shura Council, January 18, 2017.

39    "Syrian rebel alliances shatter as former al Qaeda group attacks FSA," Middle East Eye, January 24, 2017.

40    "A Statement on Jabhat al-Nusra (Fateh al-Sham)," Syrian Islamic Council, January 24, 2017.

41    "A Statement of Jabhat Fateh al-Sham on Recent Events," Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, January 23, 2017.

42    Author estimations based on a compilation of dozens of small-scale defections and intra-faction transfers reported through January 2017.

43    Author estimations; Ibid.

44    "Tahrir al-Sham: Al-Qaeda's latest incarnation in Syria," BBC Monitoring, February 28, 2017.

45    Abu Mohammed al-Maqdisi, "Many people commented on the statement that Hayat Tahrir al-Sham was a national project, and therefore, we asked our loved ones about it!" Telegram, January 30, 2017.

46    Bunzel, "Diluting Jihad."

47    Cole Bunzel, "Abandoning al-Qaida: Tahrir al-Sham and the concerns of Sami al-Uraydi," Jihadica, May 12, 2017.

48    Abu Abdullah al-Shami, "Comments sincerely advising Abu Mohammed al-Maqdisi," February 10, 2017.

49    Abu Mohammed al-Maqdisi, "Comments on the comments of Sheikh Abu Abdullah al-Shami," February 14, 2017.

50    Bunzel, "Diluting Jihad."

51    Author interviews, December 2017.

52    Hamming, "What we learned from Sami al-Uraydi's testimony concerning Abu Abdullah al-Shami."

53    Bunzel, "Abandoning al-Qaida."

54    Hamming, "Abu al-Qassam."

55    For example, al-Zawahiri's statements entitled "Sham Will Not Submit to Anyone Except Allah," April 2017; "Hasten to al-Sham: Go Forth to al-Sham," May 2016; "Syria is Entrusted Upon Your Necks," January 2016.

56    Author interview, senior HTS figure, January 2018; author interviews, two prominent Islamist clerics in Idlib, late 2017.

57    Ibid.

58    Ahmed Abizeid, "How did the Ahrar al-Sham Movement Collapse?" Toran Center, September 2017; "Syrian revolutionary flag flying over Ahrar al-Sham-controlled border crossing for the first time in years," Al-Arabi al-Jadeed, July 9, 2017.

59    Abizeid; Fehim Tastekin, "Turkey might have to do its own dirty work in Idlib," Al-Monitor, July 30, 2017; "Hay'et Tahrir al-Sham take control of Syria's Idlib," Al Jazeera, July 23, 2017.

60    Author interviews, HTS and Ahrar al-Sham officials, August-September 2017.

61    Author interview, prominent Islamist cleric in northern Syria, January 2018.

62    Author interview, Ahrar al-Sham leader Hassan Soufan, October 2017.

63    Thomas Joscelyn, "Analysis: Ayman al Zawahiri argues jihadists can't deceive America," FDD's Long War Journal, October 5, 2017.

64    Rita Katz, "Disarray in the Syrian Jihad is Making Perfect Conditions for an AQ Revival," SITE Intel Group, October 16, 2017.

65    This included two prominent Islamic clerics with close involvement in mediation initiatives between HTS and al-Qa`ida loyalists; two HTS commanders; a former senior Ahrar al-Sham leader; and three Ahrar al-Sham leadership figures.

66    Ibid.

67    Al-Tamimi, "The Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham-al-Qaeda Dispute: Primary Texts (II)."

68    Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, "The Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham-al-Qaeda Dispute: Primary Texts (V)," aymennjawad.org, December 14, 2017.

69    Hayat Tahrir al-Sham statement, issued November 27, 2017.

70    "A Statement From the Poor Servant, Abu Hammam al-Shami," released on social media on December 2, 2017.

71    Abu Julaybib Telegram account, December 6, 2017.

72    Ayman al-Zawahiri, "Let Us fight Them As a Solid Structure," November 28, 2017.

73    Author interviews, three FSA commanders in Idlib and southwestern Aleppo, January 2018.

74    Sam Heller, "Sina'at al-Fikr: 'The mujahideen at this stage shouldn't defend according to the principle, 'Until the last man and the last bullet,'" Abu Jamajem blog, February 3, 2018.

# A View from the CT Foxhole: Neil Basu, Senior National Coordinator for Counter-terrorism Policing in the United Kingdom

## By Raffaello Pantucci

*Deputy Assistant Commissioner Neil Basu is Senior National Co-ordinator for Counterterrorism Policing in the United Kingdom, a role he was appointed to in October 2016. He is responsible for delivering the police response to the Pursue and Prevent elements of the Government's CONTEST strategy. In this role, he coordinates the policing response to threats arising from terrorism and domestic extremism nationally and also manages the Metropolitan Police Service's Counter Terrorism Command (SO15). In his career, Basu has worked as a detective in all ranks to Detective Superintendent, served as the Area commander for South East London, and headed London's Armed Policing within Specialist Crime & Operation.*

**CTC: How has U.K. counterterrorism policing evolved to confront the changing threat?**

**Basu:** 9/11 was the contemporary game changer. In the U.K., it started off with some plotting between 2002 and 2004, which wasn't just concentrated in London. It was also regional. Then you get to 2005, and in the worst way possible, we were taught that this was actually embedded in local communities: domestic home-grown terrorism with some direction from abroad. So there was a need to build regional capability, and that was the start of the network that we have today. Now we have nine counterterrorism units—embedded regionally, collocated with MI5, building intelligence in local communities, [and] connected into local community policing.

Given the nature of the threat we now face, we need to be even more focused on communities and more focused on getting local information. While the ambition is still there for the mass spectacular—and the July 2017 airline plot in Sydney, Australia, was a recent example of that—IS [the Islamic State] has been encouraging supporters living in the West to carry out high-impact/low-complexity attacks. Because of the military push on the ground in Syria and Iraq and the effective eradication of IS' geographical territory and their ability to project that abroad, it is much harder for them to send trained people back. Borders have closed. Turkey has done well with their border.

The big threat for us now is the ideology that's been diffused onto the internet and the calls for attacks by its followers in the West by IS online. The caliphate may have been defeated militarily, but it has now become a virtual network. What we're not seeing is a reduction in people's willingness to align themselves with this ideology. So even though there is no caliphate to go and fight for, in the minds of some British extremists, the fight carries on because they can aspire to go to Libya or another 'province.'

In confronting this evolving threat, we have to be more 'fleet of foot' at a time when 'going dark,' due to the widespread availability of encrypted apps, has become the new norm. We can no longer depend upon all the usual intelligence-gathering apparatus.

**CTC: Has the locus of the threat abroad shifted? Syria and Iraq was where the threat was, but would you now look to Libya as a place where you could see the same sort of a threat emanating from?**

**Basu:** You would be completely foolish not to worry about Libya. All of the coalition thinks that that is going to be a tremendous problem in years to come. Anywhere there is ungoverned space, anywhere there is fragile political governance is a potential source of threat. But it is not clear that it is going to be easy for terrorists to move from location to location. We already know of eight or nine IS affiliates around the world that have claimed allegiance, with [fighters in] Libya being one example. Libya is very close to home for Europe and our allies, but for a long time, it was not the focus for our attention. For us in the U.K., what happened in Manchester was a big wake-up call to the fact that there were people who had traveled back and forth to Libya doing much the same thing we were preventing people from doing in Iraq and Syria and who had a similar hatred for this country. And oddly enough, these travelers were second or third generation [immigrants], not necessarily the generation you would assume.

**CTC: The Manchester attack and its links to Libya were particularly striking given the similarities with other networks and plots seen previously in the U.K., in particular historical networks linked back to terrorist groups in Pakistan.**

**Basu:** You would have to take a huge leap of faith to say Salman Abedi [the Manchester suicide bomber] was not traveling to and from Libya with some malicious intent and that it was all just about family and socializing and not about training. We've long known that training overseas can battle-harden people. It's not just being able to fire a gun; it's the psychological bar that you overcome by being brutalized in theater. Once you get a taste for violence, the second time is much easier. And cops know that from dealing with violent criminals.

**CTC: A year after the cluster of plots in the first half of 2017, do we have any more clarity on what precipitated all of that terrorist activity in the U.K.?**

**Basu:** JTAC [Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre] was very good at saying something is coming. Security analysts understood that once there was a military push on the ground against them [Islamic State fighters] in Syria and Iraq, they were going to start lashing out. Leaders like [Abu Bakr] al-Baghdadi and [Abu Muhammad] al-Adnani, before he was killed, were telling followers in the West they didn't need to ask permission from an emir; they could just go

ahead and launch attacks.

This was the backdrop that was making security forces nervous. Then, and this is a personal view, Khalid Masood [the March 2017 Westminster bridge attacker] launched his attack. He had no clear and obvious connection to either IS or al-Qa`ida. He was clearly someone who cherry-picked the bits of Islam that he believed justified what he did. Whether his particular religious interpretations was the actual driver for what he did, I am of two minds, but his motivation died with him. There is no concrete information that it was for the glory of the caliphate or for the glory of IS or for the glory of AQ. But what he did achieve was that he gave fellow violent extremists the understanding that the U.K. was not such a hostile place to launch attacks and that by using this simple methodology you could succeed. Some violent extremists admired him for actually going ahead and doing it. Some criticized him for not doing a very 'good job.' But at the end of the day, what it did say to them was that 'my plot could work. What I have been thinking of doing, I could actually do.'

**CTC: Have you seen much of a change in the threat picture since Raqqa has fallen? Or has it had no effect?**

**Basu:** What we've seen is a lot more chatter, a lot more people thinking that they have a chance of successfully carrying out attacks. So the pace and tempo, the number of leads that we think are concerning, the pace has gone up. Whether or not this is linked to the push in Raqqa is hard to tell.

In terms of plots, the trend is towards less sophistication, more amateurism. We've not seen a growth of extremists. We've seen more conversations among extremists expressing the belief they can launch successful attacks here. So definitely the pace of plotting activity we're looking at has gone up. But then that was predictable as well. I don't think anyone thought the military defeat of the group in Syria and Iraq was going to be the end of this. We are dealing with an ideology, which is being spread online and has global reach, and we to need to confront this by clamping down on what's being spread through the internet and better engaging with people who are vulnerable to the extremist message.

**CTC: Earlier this year, Minister of State for Security Ben Wallace stated a significant number of British nationals who signed up to fight with extremist groups in Syria and Iraq had gone missing somewhere in the region.[1] What do we think has happened to those who are unaccounted for? Where have they ended up?**

**Basu:** I think there's probably more in detention overseas, including in YPG or Kurdish or SDF detention, than we currently know. We obviously won't know everyone who's died. It's a warzone and difficult to be definitively accurate. We estimate that 15 percent of the 850 foreign fighters that have traveled from the U.K. to Syria and Iraq have died. There are some we absolutely know died, and there are ones we guess are deceased because, for example, they are no longer communicating. Establishing the fate of the others is going to be very difficult.

I think we have made it very clear how hostile it would be for foreign fighters if they return here. The policy is very clear. You do not get to come back here if you did manage to get over there and you are a fighter.



*Deputy Assistant Commissioner Neil Basu (Metropolitan Police)*

About half of the 850 who traveled to Syria and Iraq since the onset of the Syrian civil war have returned to the UK. The large majority of these came back very quickly and early on. Some of those were genuine aid workers. Some were people who thought they were going to build a caliphate, not necessarily be immersed in a war. Generally speaking, the people who came back quickly are not where the bigger threat lies.

The larger threat is posed by the return of committed recruits who went there to be trained. When it comes to people who we know are back in the U.K. that we suspect fall into this category, we have either tried to build a case or we've monitored them or we have talked to people who know them. As far as those who are still overseas are concerned, we have been making it very clear that this will be a very hostile place to come back to, and I do not think most of these foreign fighters will want to come back. They will want to fight on, and that's why they have been so committed to being in theater for this length of time.

We are still not seeing what many predicted was going to be a large reverse flow as the so-called 'caliphate' disintegrated. Instead, we are seeing just the odd person come back.

When it comes to those still unaccounted for—and who are not being held in detention in the region—I have no doubt a number might be trying to reach other IS strongholds. It is almost impossible to say what has happened to these people. I think we overestimated the stand-and-fight-until-you-die attitude. Some of these foreign fighters will want to fight another day. It is also too early to say where they will coalesce. Could it be the Philippines? Could it be Libya? But it is worth thinking about how practically easy it would be for somebody who is not Arab-speaking, doesn't necessarily 'look the part,' to meld into society in a place like Libya. Very difficult, I would think.

If you crunch the figures: about 850 foreign fighters who went, about half who came back, 15 percent who died, you're probably looking at a cohort of about 300 that we know traveled who are still out there. Not all of those are mono-Brits; a lot of those are

dual nationals. Like other countries, we operate on the principle that we don't want you back, and therefore we will deprive you of your British passport. And the government has done that. Because of this, the ones who could come back are about a third of this 300 number. And for those among these who end up coming back, we are absolutely waiting for them. That's the bottom line.

**CTC: British officials have said a residual risk is posed by about 20,000 individuals who were previously the subject of counter-terrorism investigations. This is a very large number. How is it possible to manage the risk from such a large community of people? Who is going be responsible for managing this? Is this a job for the security services?**

**Basu:** It's impossible for any country to allocate resources for that kind of number. And every country will have a similar issue. That number will always grow. Because there will always be people who *have been* considered a national security threat but are no longer considered a national security threat. There is no way the security services or policing can manage all of those on their own. What we have to make sure is that there are ways of assessing whether the risks still exist or not in specific cases, and that's going to involve something that the security agencies have never done before, which is sharing information from the secret space into multi-agency part-ners who may be able to help assess that risk. This is not a new concept. Multi-agency public protection arrangements for serious and violent offenders already exist. These individuals live in com-munities, and there are all kinds of measures in place to manage them. Local authorities need to be informed in a similar way as when people convicted of TACT [terrorism legislation] offenses return to their communities.

People get hung up on the full 20,000 number that is circulated, but what we need to be focused on is what the actual risk in that group is. The bigger risk to us are the additional 3,000 open cases that U.K. security minister Ben Wallace has talked about. That's where the larger risk lies. A lot of the nervousness has come from the fact that we had two people come out of the 20,000 pot and attack us last year—Khalid Masood and Salman Abedi—while London Bridge attacker Khurram Butt was in the 3,000 who were being looked at. But we would be making a terrible mathematical mistake if we said that we need to swivel all of our guns onto the 20,000, when the 3,000 is where the big risk is.

What exists in that 20,000 is the possibility of people reengag-ing, like Abedi and Masood. How do you spot that reengagement? Do we have the right triggers in place so that when somebody who has previously shown signs of violent extremism reengages or does something or contacts someone of concern, it comes onto our radar screen?

The only way we are ever going to significantly improve coverage of this is by alerting a broader number of U.K. agencies about who is in the 20,000 pot. David Anderson [former Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation in the United Kingdom] has stated this is something we are going to have to get much better at. We have already learned a great deal from the Operational Improvement Re-view in the wake of the attacks, and Mr. Anderson praised the work that had been done. But clearly more needs to be undertaken to tighten up our processes to prevent such attacks from taking place.

We are going to run pilot programs and see where we get to on this larger group, to see whether there are issues around reengage-ment. As a result in some of those cases, we will end up moving them deeper into the safeguarding space: they don't want to be en-gaged in extremist activity, they might choose to volunteer, and they might want assistance in all kinds of ways, whether that's mental health, education, or intervention providers providing religious in-struction. There might be people who genuinely want to get off this extremism carousel. And there might be others who are reengaging who become a risk again, and we need to look at them from a law enforcement and security perspective. We are only going to be able to know this is the case if more people are helping us, and that includes my core policing colleagues outside of the specialism of counterterrorism policing. They will be used to the principles; they just need to learn to apply them to terrorism offenders. The key is information sharing and spreading the risk, but because we work in a top-secret world, that's a cultural change, which is easy to call for out loud like this but really difficult to achieve.

**CTC: We keep seeing TATP showing up in terrorist plotting. Is there more that could be done to stop that?**

**Basu:** A few very obvious things need to be done. We need much more help from the private sector. Anyone who sells materials that could be used in this process needs to be engaged with, and we need to be much quicker at spotting suspicious purchasing activity. Same with the banking sector and suspicious transactions—all of which has been in place for some time, but we need to be much better at it. And we need to make sure that we remove anything that looks like bomb-making instruction from anywhere on the internet. The difficulty is that some of this stuff is O-level [type] chemistry exper-imentation[a] that is available online and aimed at children and stu-dents. So some of it is not IS appearing online saying 'this is how to blow people up.' And so there is a danger is being disproportionate in what we take down and what we don't. TATP is still dangerous, volatile, and difficult to make, but it is probably not as difficult as we thought it was. So you don't need to be a chemical engineer to be able to do this kind of stuff.

**CTC: When it comes to social media and its role in encourag-ing or directing terrorism, is there more, from the policing per-spective, that you can do?**

**Basu:** This is principally a role for intelligence agencies rather than police. What it does require, however, is close cooperation from so-cial media companies. And where there isn't cooperation, we need to consider coercive measures. Governments need to consider leg-islation. In reality, 2017 was a wake-up for the U.K. and for a lot of companies, not just in the CSP [communication service provider] space. It is about corporate social responsibility [for] how they pro-tect their clients. I do not think it is acceptable anymore to say, "I'm defending free speech" if free speech involves blowing people up. The companies need to be in that space. There are positive signs that they are in that space. They've been in front of various hearings and political leaders. I've no doubt that they are listening, but they need to make sure their business models are effective in dealing with this now. They've got the brainpower, and they've got the re-sources, and they need to help.

---

a    O-levels are exams students in the United Kingdom used to take at age 16.

**CTC: Turning to the threat posed by the Extreme Right Wing (XRW) in the U.K. It has been discussed as an escalating problem for some time. Has it now crossed the threshold of being a national security threat?**

**Basu:** It is too early to see how much it should be escalated. The threat assessment should be looked at by JTAC, and where we think there is a national security threat, then the security services should be involved. The far-right group National Action was the first time we saw anybody who was organized in the XRW space in a way that would represent a national security threat. Thankfully, it is nowhere near the same scale or problem as we've had from the IS-inspired or -directed [threat] or the AQ [threat] prior to that or the IRA threat prior to that. That is really something to be proud of in the U.K. culture and tradition that we don't have this mass wave of extreme right wing. So far, we have seen people try to get on the back of that and not be incredibly successful. They are still relatively small, relatively disconnected, relatively disorganized groups.

My biggest concern about the extreme right wing, which is not a national security threat, is the Darren Osbornes[b] of the world, the Thomas Mairs of the world [the murderer of Member of Parliament Jo Cox], and the lone actor with the mental health problems, depression, drugs, and the personal grievance who is acting alone. It is spotting people doing something like that which is very difficult.

The biggest concern for the country should [be] that violent Islamist extremism and violent right wing extremism will feed off each other. Islamophobia is something we have to be really clear about in policing: hate is hate. And we should be very, very robust and have a zero tolerance towards hate crime. And if we don't do that, and Muslim communities are being stigmatized and attacked because of things a tiny minority of people are doing, I think we will create problems for ourselves. The Muslim community is going to be thinking that it is unfair and unjust. I think we don't have parity at the moment in the way that we look at things. But we don't have parity because at the moment, the scale of the threat is not the same. I do not want to wait for the scale of the threat to get to a point that something has to be done about it. You have seen a lot of the robust action we've taken against National Action, and that was because we were determined to stop this [from] becoming the next problem.

**CTC: What about the policy side? The latest iteration of CONTEST [the U.K. counterterrorism strategy] is due out in a few months. What is your particular view on the "Prevent"[c] pillar of the strategy?**

**Basu:** Prevent is the hugely controversial part of the strategy. Government will not thank me for saying this, but an independent reviewer of Prevent, as suggested by David Anderson, would be a healthy thing. In fact, he would be excellent in the role. Prevent is, as a Prevent officer who used to work for me said, five percent of the budget but 85 percent of the conversation. Prevent is the most

important pillar of the four pillar strategy.[d] There is no doubt in my mind about it. We're pretty good at Pursue; we're pretty good at Prepare, as people have seen in our response. What needs to be better in Protect is the private sector, and I think there's a big willingness, like there is with CSPs, to understand that they need to protect their customer base better. And whether that's insider threats, cyber threats, or security guards [in] crowded places, there is an understanding that they need to invest more in that. But Prevent is the key.

There is still this hangover of toxicity around the Prevent campaign that we need to stop, because people need to understand that this about stopping people in the pre-criminal space ever getting anywhere near criminality. And Prevent needs to concentrate on how it does that. That cannot be a job for the police and security services. That has got to be a wider societal pillar. The more that policing and security service could withdraw from Prevent in order to focus Prevent work on problem solving within communities and getting communities to deal with it, the better in the long-term. There will always be a role for policing because we are a frontline. And here I don't mean counterterrorism policing but the other 115,000 or so police officers who are in the frontline working together with communities. But actually the big responsibility is how do we get everyone else interested and involved and talking positively about some of the brilliant work that is going on.

Prevent, at the moment, is owned by the government, but I think it should be outside central government altogether. I think people who are running their local communities should be taking the lead. Local leaders around the country should be standing up and talking about this, not central government, security services, and counterterrorism police. Communities should be talking about protecting themselves from the grassroots up. When you see Prevent working on the ground brilliantly, that's where it's working, and largely unsung and un-talked about. Substantial community resilience is produced by that sort of work, and giving people that resilience is important and communities have to help each other do that. I would love to see a professional communications company say, as part of their social responsibility programming, "I'll give free training to anybody from youth or whoever who wants to start a conversation around this." That would be great. Rather than the government handing over a sum of money and then it becoming state sponsored with accusations of demonizing communities, it should be locally generated. We have gotten all of that messaging the wrong way around, it should be grassroots up.

Previously, this was not being done. But there are increasingly some phenomenal voices who've got real gravitas in their communities who are beginning to talk about the issues. The mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, is a really good example of that. He is not central government, he runs a city, and the protection of the city is his concern, he should be doing that, not MI5. Not the Cabinet, and the National Security Council and New Scotland Yard.

**CTC: The threat picture we talked about is about a scattering of diffuse, random, isolated loners who latch onto ideologies, launching lone actor-style attacks. Have you seen any evidence in the attack planning of anything more substantial than that? Or is that really where the heart of the threat now sits? And is**

---

b    Darren Osborne is the recently convicted extreme right-wing terrorist who drove into a crowd outside the Finsbury Park mosque in June 2017.

c    "Prevent" is the forward-looking aspect of the strategy that focuses on preventing individuals from being drawn to extremist ideas.

d    The other three pillars are "Pursue," "Prepare," and "Protect."

**that where the threat picture going forward is going to be?**

**Basu:** We will never eradicate the ambition [of extremists] to put a complicated network together to do a big, spectacular attack. The difficulty with that for a terrorist is that all that planning and all that preparation makes you very vulnerable. Where people aren't vulnerable is when they are sitting in their bedrooms, using encrypted apps or not using any technology at all, and not having any contact with the outside world. Thomas Mair was a good example of that: no one spotted that happening because he was just a bit of an odd, loner, social misfit. No one saw any triggers that would be interpreted as leading him to that extreme level of violence. That is the bit that concerns me. We are seeing people who are vulnerable to suggestion, who have low-level mental health challenges, which probably don't hit any clinical threshold. So even if they presented to the National Health Service, they would not look like they were someone of concern. It might be a low-level mental illness, but it's a low-level mental illness with a lot of other red flag markers around it—for example a propensity towards violence. You can be seriously mentally ill and not violent. Nobody should ever stigmatize people with mental health, or put the two things together. But it is that kind of thing that concerns me most, and we are seeing more of that. And most disturbingly, very young and more female interest in violence.

That disturbs me and has got to have come from social media, if you think where kids get all of their information and how fast that they get it ... and then how easy it is to go from—it's a horrible expression—'flash-to-bang,' from having no understanding [of] what they are dealing with to a tiny, partial, ridiculous kind of notion of what religion or what violence, or what freedom of expression, or what these things mean because they picked it up in six-second soundbites on their phone. That malleability worries me a lot, and that concern seems to be being replayed around the world in my conversations with partner agencies across the European continent. So how we influence that younger, very vulnerable generation is going to be a key question. A revamped Prevent strategy is going to be a large part of the answer.    CTC

## Citations

1    Roger Baird, "Government has lost track of hundreds of British jihadi fighters," International Business Times, January 5, 2018.

# Can the UAE and its Security Forces Avoid a Wrong Turn in Yemen?

By Michael Horton

**The complex war in Yemen and the ensuing collapse of a unified Yemeni government has provided al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) with opportunities to develop and test new strategies and tactics. While AQAP has been weakened by Emirati-led efforts in southern Yemen and recent U.S. strikes, it remains a formidable foe whose more subtle approach to insurgent warfare will pay dividends if there is a failure to restore predictable levels of security, sound governance, and lawful policing in the country.**

Three years of war in Yemen have laid waste to the country's infrastructure, killed at least 10,000 people, impoverished millions, and empowered insurgent groups like al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).[1] The war, or more accurately wars, in Yemen are layered and complex with a growing number of factions, all with their attendant militias. Before the launch of "Operation Decisive Storm" by Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and their allies in March 2015, Yemen was already a country riven with divisions.[2] The internationally recognized government—in exile in Saudi Arabia since March 2015—of President Abdu Rabbu Mansour Hadi exercised little control over Yemen. This was made clear when Yemen's Zaidi Shi`a Houthi rebels seized the capital of Sana'a in September 2014 with the acquiescence of parts of the Yemeni Army.[3] In the south, separatist movements calling for the recreation of an independent south Yemen have gained influence and power.[4] The increase in factionalism and the hollowing out of an already weak national government has provided AQAP with an abundance of new opportunities to grow its organization and its influence. Opportunities that it has, over the last three years, exploited with notable success.

In April 2016, Yemeni troops—nominally allied with the Hadi government—backed by Emirati units retook the port city of Mukalla, which AQAP had held and governed for the previous year. Despite initial claims by the Saudi and Emirati coalition, the retaking of Mukalla was largely bloodless.[5] AQAP chose a strategic retreat rather than to fight a superior force. As it has done in the past, AQAP sought and found shelter in Yemen's vast hinterlands.[6]

*Michael Horton is a senior analyst for Arabian affairs at The Jamestown Foundation where he specializes in Middle Eastern affairs with a particular focus on Yemen. He is a frequent contributor to* Jane's Intelligence Review *and has written for numerous publications including* Islamic Affairs Analyst, The Economist, The National Interest, *and* The Christian Science Monitor. *He has completed numerous in-depth, field-based studies in Yemen and Somalia on topics ranging from prison radicalization to insurgent tactics, techniques, and procedures.*

Since retaking Mukalla, Emirati-backed forces such as the Hadrami Elite Force and its Security Belt Forces have used Mukalla as a central base for operations aimed at degrading AQAP.[7] This ground war is being aided by the United States, namely through the use of UAVs that have successfully targeted a number of AQAP's leaders.[8] While there is some evidence that AQAP has been weakened by the ground campaign and the targeting of its operatives by UAVs, as it has demonstrated in the past, it is resilient, adaptive, and—most critically—expert at exploiting local and even national grievances.
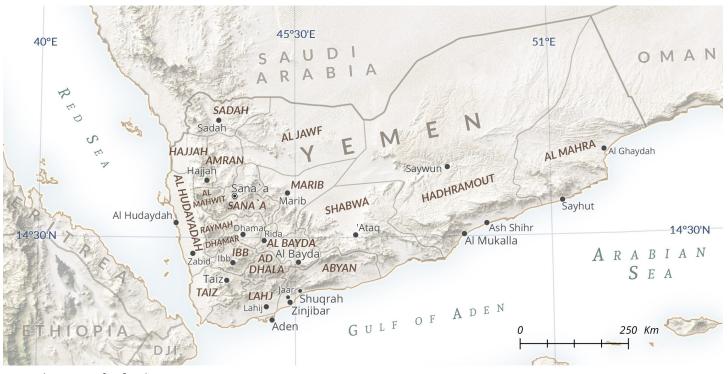
AQAP is not the organization it was three or even two years ago. Just like most of Yemen's political, social, and insurgent groups, it has been changed by the country's multifaceted conflict. AQAP's focus has shifted from the "far enemy"—though, this is not to say it does not continue to pose a threat to the West—to an array of "near enemies."[9] Its concerns, both political and martial, are local and national rather than international. Its de-prioritization of ideology reflects this shift. In many respects, AQAP has adopted and is guided by a more subtle and indigenized strategy with two primary aims: organizational survival and long-term growth. To achieve these aims, it remains intent on building alliances where it can by leveraging its fighting capabilities and by exploiting local and national grievances.[10]

Emirati-led efforts to combat AQAP in southern Yemen—largely limited to the governorates of the Hadramawt and Shabwa—could succeed where others have failed, or they could result in an abundance of new opportunities for AQAP to exploit. The Emirati-led effort to combat AQAP is another test for counterinsurgency warfare. While the Emiratis and the security forces that they are backing are making gains against AQAP in some parts of southern Yemen, these could be compromised by missteps that allow AQAP to apply the lessons that it has learned over the last three years.

## Overcoming the Friction of Factions

The idea of friction in war was first introduced by Carl von Clausewitz in his book, *On War*. Clausewitz describes friction as a force that arises from the many unpredictable variables that materialize during war that can lay waste to the best-planned campaigns and the most efficient military forces.[11] It is friction that distinguishes real war from war on paper.[12] There are few theaters of war that are as capable of generating as much friction as a war in Yemen. As is evidenced by Yemen's history, the country, its people, and its terrain are not kind to outside powers.

In 25 BC, a Roman expeditionary force led by Aelius Gallus was forced to retreat from what is now the governorate of Marib. The Ottoman Turks tried to subdue Yemen twice and failed both times despite expending vast sums of blood and treasure on the effort. Most recently, from 1962 to 1967, Egypt, under President Nasser, intervened in what was then north Yemen on the side of Republican forces who were fighting the Royalist supporters of Imam Muhammad al-Badr. Despite deploying more than 70,000 sol-

*Yemen (Rowan Technology)*

diers who enjoyed extensive air support, the Egyptian campaign in north Yemen failed.[13] The Egyptians lost at least 10,000 soldiers.[14] Their rivals, the Royalists, were armed with light weapons and had no air support. However, they leveraged Yemen's rugged terrain, superior human intelligence, and, most critically, the factionalism that predominated in much of Yemen. Egyptian officers often complained about their "allies" who fought with them during the day and against them at night. These shifting alliances were reflective of the pragmatic and often quite democratic nature of the plurality of tribal relationships, structures, and allegiances that predominate in much of Yemen.

A counterinsurgent war in Yemen—which is what the Egyptians were fighting from 1962 to 1967—is replete with challenges for counterinsurgent forces and abounds with opportunities for the insurgent. This was the case before the collapse of the central Yemeni state and fragmentation of the Yemeni Army in 2014. Now that the country has largely been divided into a multiplicity of fiefdoms governed to varying degrees by numerous factions and militias, the challenges for conducting counterinsurgent warfare are even more pronounced.

Chief among these challenges is the factionalism that predominates across almost all of Yemen. In the south, where Emirati-backed forces are primarily conducting their campaign, there are multiple insurgencies underway. Various southern separatist groups are fighting to recreate an independent south Yemen, salafi militias are fighting to advance their own conservative religious agendas, displaced elites are fighting to retain and/or recover their power and influence, and both AQAP and, to a far lesser degree, the Islamic State are active across southern Yemen.[15] These factions and their competing agendas produce high levels of Clausewitzian friction for the Emiratis and the security forces that they are supporting.

To combat factionalism, the Emiratis have tried to forge three

security forces: the Security Belt Forces (also referred to as al-Hizam Brigades) largely deployed in southwest Yemen; the Hadrami Elite Forces deployed in the governorate of the Hadramawt; and the Shabwani Elite Forces deployed to southern Shabwa.[16 a] The three forces are primarily composed of Yemeni soldiers drawn from the southern governorates. These soldiers often have Emirati and foreign advisors. In the case of the Hadrami Elite Forces, the men are almost all from the Hadramawt, the rationale being that this incorporation of men drawn from the areas they will be deployed to will enhance the forces' HUMINT capability while at the same time ensure some local support.[17] The leadership of the three forces is largely drawn from tribal elites, some of whom formerly served as officers in the Yemeni Army, and ranking members of al-Hirak (the Southern Movement).[18]

The mission of the Emirati-backed forces—at least in theory—is twofold: first, restore a measure of security in those cities under their control, namely Aden and Mukalla, and the areas around them. Second, plan and launch security sweeps and clearing operations aimed at combating AQAP and what is left of the Islamic State. By using Mukalla in particular as a key staging point, the sweeps and clearing operations are designed to gradually widen the area controlled by the Emirati-backed forces.[19] Following the ink spot theory, Mukalla and Aden will be held and secured as the security forces move into and clear the surrounding areas—many of which have been dominated by AQAP for the last three years.[20] Due to the topography north of Mukalla—which is riven with deep

---

a    The UAE is also in the early stages of training and arming a separate force, Mahri Elite Forces, in Yemen's easternmost governorate, al-Mahrah. Eleonara Ardemagni, "Emiratis, Omanis, Saudis: the rising competition for Yemen's al-Mahra," London School of Economic and Political Science, Middle East Centre Blog, December 28, 2017.

*wadis*, box canyons, caves, and mountains—the ink spot looks more like an ink blot as security forces struggle to clear and hold broken terrain that is ideal for ambushes and raids. Hadrami Elite Forces have repeatedly been targeted in the southern reaches of the Hadramawt.[21] There, the roads are few and almost always overlooked by high ground. AQAP has engaged in numerous hit-and-run attacks on the elite forces.[22]

Despite the treacherous terrain, the Hadrami Elite Forces have made some progress in clearing AQAP from the southern half of Wadi Huwayrah, Wadi Hajr, and the areas surrounding Ash Shihr.[23] However, these gains are frequently reversed due to poor coordination between individual units within the security forces, which—as has often been the case with the Yemeni Army—do not adhere to chains of command. This lack of coordination is especially pronounced between the largely independent Security Belt Forces, Shabwani Elite Forces, and the Hadrami Elite Forces. The three forces do not have a unified chain of command and their commanders are often at cross-purposes.[24]

While the Emirati effort in southern Yemen is currently benefiting from the surge in southern nationalism, this nationalism is itself factional and subject to intense internal fighting. In the Hadramawt, groups calling for the independence of the governorate—which has a history of self-governance—have been active for years.[25] Many who serve within the Hadrami Elite Forces are more dedicated to an independent Hadramawt than to other iterations of an independent south Yemen. Those who serve in the Security Belt Forces differ from those serving—especially at the command level—in the Hadrami Elite Forces in that most either support or are fighting for a wholly independent and unified south Yemen along the lines of the former People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY). In addition to groups that are either advocating or fighting for different visions of an independent south Yemen, there are elites who have been displaced by those who have been more successful at cultivating their relationship with the United Arab Emirates. They, too, will fight to recover what they feel they have lost in terms of influence, wealth, and power.[26]

There is a lot at stake in south Yemen. It is home to most of the country's natural resources, and its most important oil handling facilities are located there. The creation of a new country or, at a minimum, new autonomous regions such as the Hadramawt is possible. Such high stakes all militate against the formation of cohesive security forces capable of engaging in the kind of sustained operations that counterinsurgency warfare demands. Adding to what is a long list of circumstances that will produce high-levels of friction is AQAP's subtle approach to achieving its aims.

## A More Subtle Foe

AQAP is intently focused on fighting what it views as a long war for the hearts and minds of the people it seeks to govern. As with any organization, there are those who believe the rhetoric produced by the leadership and those who—usually the leadership itself—recognize the rhetoric as an expedient reference point—possibly another political tool—rather than as a binding ideology. While AQAP's leadership and media wing continue to produce (though media releases have decreased) the kind of extremist religious propaganda that jihadi groups have become known for, this is not necessarily reflective of the strategy and tactics employed by AQAP on the ground. This has been the case for much of the last three years.

AQAP's April 2015 takeover of Mukalla was a watershed mo-

ment for the group. The takeover, which was largely bloodless, allowed them to seize large amounts of cash, weapons, and materiel, but most importantly, it provided the leadership with an opportunity to try out new strategies and tactics.[27] The last time AQAP held and attempted to govern a significant swath of territory was in 2011-2012 when it took over a large part of the governorate of Abyan in the wake of the uprising against Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Saleh.[28] AQAP learned a great deal from its failures in 2011-2012. Namely, it learned that its radical interpretation of sharia is not acceptable to a majority of Yemenis. It also learned that the utilization of a punishment strategy is not suitable for a country where many people identify with various tribes that are often well-armed. In 2011-2012, AQAP attempted and failed to impose its will on those it wanted to govern by force.[29] It did not make this mistake in Mukalla in 2015.

Rather than relying on a punishment strategy when it took over Mukalla in April 2015, AQAP adopted a far more subtle and pragmatic strategy that combined ruling covertly through proxies with a continued focus on guerrilla and hybrid operations against its rivals outside the city. During its yearlong occupation of Mukalla, AQAP largely refrained from imposing its interpretation of sharia. Instead, it allied itself with select local elites and focused much of its effort, with some success, on improving living conditions in the city and providing predictable levels of security.[30] AQAP's efforts to improve living conditions, operate charities, and provide security during its occupation of Mukalla are now being contrasted with current Emirati-led efforts to govern the city. The result, according to some, is that AQAP did a better job.[31] While this is to a large degree subjective, it is reflective of a widespread sentiment.[32] And it is a view that will be used by AQAP's leadership to critique the new government in Mukalla.

AQAP's strategic retreat from Mukalla in April 2016 also reflects the fact that the leadership learned many lessons in 2011-2012. The leadership had clearly planned and prepared for the retreat. They had no intention of taking on a superior force aided by air support.[33] This was a mistake they made in trying to defend and hold parts of Abyan in 2012. AQAP's leadership recognized that preserving what they viewed as good relations with the people of Mukalla and the alliances they made with some members of the Hadrami elite was critical to their ability to continue fighting.

Since its strategic retreat from Mukalla, AQAP has continued to pursue its more subtle strategy and has successfully enmeshed its operatives—both covertly and overtly—within many of the militias, both salafi and tribal, that are fighting the Houthis, their allies, and in some cases Emirati-backed forces.[34] AQAP remains one of the best organized and motivated insurgent forces in Yemen, and this has allowed it to build relationships with numerous militias.[35] Most of these relationships will not abide and are merely based on the fact that AQAP and the militias share a common enemy, whether that be the Houthis or the Emirati-backed forces.[36] For AQAP, the fact that the relationships and alliances are only nominal is of little consequence. What is important is that enmeshment within anti-Houthi forces allows for concealment, a chance to demonstrate their superior fighting abilities, and, in some cases, income for AQAP. In some areas, just as it has in the past, AQAP acts as a mercenary force for elites whose interests happen to align with its own, even if this alignment is only temporary.[37]

AQAP's focus on enmeshment, covert governance where possible, and jettisoning of a punishment strategy will make it more dif-

ficult to combat. This, combined with the fact that Yemen is mired in multiple wars being fought by multiple insurgent groups, means that discerning who is and who is not a member or ally of AQAP will be all the more difficult. Yet, AQAP's adoption of a more subtle strategy makes discernment, security, and good governance all the more important.

## Challenges and Opportunities

While the Emirati-led effort to combat AQAP is heavily reliant on indigenous fighters, the country's efforts have led to the perception that the UAE is a colonizing force. The growing influence of the UAE and those elites that it has either chosen to empower or that have sided with it are already fueling debate and rhetoric on all sides of the conflict. While the UAE has been careful to minimize the outward signs of the presence of its forces and advisors in southern Yemen, there is the growing sense among many Yemenis that the Emiratis are in southern Yemen to stay.[38] Stories about the UAE's occupation of the Yemeni island of Socotra and its plans to build a military base there have provoked angry responses from many sectors of Yemeni society.[39] AQAP will be quick to take advantage of and foster the perception that the UAE is intent on occupying Yemen for its own purposes. The veracity of the claim matters little. While Muslim and Arab, the Emiratis, which also employ many foreigners as advisers and mercenaries, are foreigners, and few actions empower an insurgency like foreign occupation—perceived or otherwise.[40]

Concurrent with what could be a growing perception by many of the UAE as an occupying force in Yemen is the problematic tactics used by some of the UAE-backed security forces. These security forces are conducting sweeps that often result in the detention of large numbers of men with no or only a minimal relationship with AQAP.[41] AQAP controlled Mukalla and many of the surrounding areas for more than a year. Many residents in these areas were forced to interact with AQAP on some level. At the same time, AQAP recruited many men as foot soldiers. For the most part, these recruits did not share the group's ideology or aims. Most joined to collect salaries, receive food aid, and, in some cases, protect their families from retribution by AQAP. Still others—a minority—joined to help AQAP fight the Islamic State whose ideology and tactics are viewed by most as far more virulent and alien to Yemen.[42] There is also the very real danger that, as happened in Afghanistan in the early years of the U.S. war there, informants label rivals as AQAP for security forces as a way of settling scores, making money, removing rivals, and enhancing their own power.[43] Given the prevalence of factions and competing agendas in Yemen as well the informal nature of many of the security units, the danger of this is especially high.

In addition to the possibility that many of those rounded up in the sweeps are not members of AQAP, there are credible allegations of security forces abusing detainees. In June 2017, Human Rights Watch released a report that cited numerous cases of torture, abuse, unlawful detention, and disappearances purportedly carried out by Security Belt and Hadrami Elite forces.[44] Additional reports have appeared in the international media about Emirati-run detention centers where Yemenis held for alleged ties to AQAP have been tortured, including reports that some detainees were roasted on a spit.[45] Reports of these kinds of actions—regardless of whether or not they are true—will be seized upon by AQAP. It is worth remembering that the first issue of AQAP's English language publication, Inspire, featured an article written by Usama bin Ladin in which he referenced the abuses committed at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq as evidence of the United States' malicious intent.[46] Similarly, the alleged abuses committed at Emirati-run detention facilities will fuel resentment that AQAP will exploit.

AQAP and other insurgent groups operating in Yemen will seize on any and all missteps by the Emirati-backed forces and the Emiratis themselves. Having largely abandoned the punishment strategy in favor of one that is better adapted to the socio-cultural terrain it operates in, AQAP's leadership likely understands the benefit of drawing the UAE and its forces into a war where they employ a punishment strategy of their own. Such a strategy, especially when employed by a foreign power, will alienate the populace and in turn drive recruitment for AQAP and other groups.

## Conclusion

In his article, "Evolution of a Revolt," T.E. Lawrence, speaking about the Arab revolt against the Ottoman Empire in 1916-1918, argued that insurgents would be victorious if they understood and applied certain "algebraical factors." These factors included mobility, force security, time, and respect for the populace.[47] AQAP has adopted and is, to varying degrees, employing Lawrence's algebra for a successful insurgency. It has retained its mobility. Its enmeshment within anti-Houthi forces is—to some extent—contributing to force security and drawing its enemies into a punishment strategy. AQAP is also patient and committed to the long war and is intent on working within the Yemeni socio-cultural context in a way that allows subjects to remain, at a minimum, neutral. This is not to say that AQAP will be victorious. However, its ability to adapt, learn, and employ strategies that are increasingly well adapted to the areas in which it operates, does mean that it will survive and will, given the opportunity, go on the offensive yet again.

As Colonel Gian Gentile argues in his book *Wrong Turn: America's Deadly Embrace of Counterinsurgency*, "hearts-and-minds counterinsurgency carried out by an occupying power in a foreign land doesn't work, unless it is a multigenerational effort."[48] While the Emiratis do not seem intent on occupation and its counterinsurgency efforts are heavily reliant on Yemenis, it is a foreign-led effort in a country that has, throughout its history, violently and successfully resisted incursions by outside powers. While it is extremely unlikely that AQAP could ever take over southern Yemen, short of the kind of highly problematic, multigenerational effort described by Gentile, it will remain a persistent and potent threat over the long term.

The short-term success of Emirati-led efforts in Yemen are predicated on their ability to compete with AQAP in regard to the levels of security and efficacy of governance that they can provide. This success is also predicated on the Emiratis' ability to avoid being seen as occupiers acting through militias motivated by their own factional interests. A failure to restore governance, predictable levels of security, and "clean" policing will be exploited by an enemy that—while weakened—remains capable, resilient, and perhaps most importantly, patient.    CTC

## Citations

1    "ECHO Factsheet Yemen," European Commission's Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations, January 2018; Noah Browning, "Deep in Yemen war, Saudi fight against Iran falters," Reuters, November 9, 2017.

2    Ben Watson, "The War in Yemen and the Making of a Chaos State," *Atlantic*, February 3, 2018.

3    "How Yemen's capital Sanaa was seized by Houthi Rebels," BBC, September 27, 2014.

4    "UAE-backed separatists launch 'coup' in southern Yemen," Al Jazeera, January 28, 2018.

5    "Yemen conflict: Troops retake Mukalla from al-Qaeda," BBC, April 25, 2016.

6    "Al Qaeda in Yemen confirms retreat from port city of Mukalla," Reuters, April 30, 2016.

7    Zine El Abidine Osman, "South Yemen, Engulfed by UAE; Dimensions and Consequences," Yemen Press, September 9, 2017.

8    Phil Stewart, "Small U.S. military team in Yemen to aid UAE push on al Qaeda," Reuters, May 6, 2016; "US drone kills five al-Qaeda suspects in war-torn Yemen," New Arab, October 8, 2017.

9    Michael Horton, "Fighting the Long War: The Evolution of al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula," *CTC Sentinel* 10:1 (2017).

10   Nadwa Al-Dawsari, "Foe Not Friend: Yemeni Tribes and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula," Project on Middle East Democracy, February 2018; "Yemen's al-Qaeda: Expanding the Base," International Crisis Group, February 2, 2017.

11   Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, Indexed Edition, Michael Eliot Howard, Peter Paret eds. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989).

12   Ibid., p. 119.

13   Jesse Ferris, *Nasser's Gamble: How Intervention in Yemen Caused the Six-Day War and the Decline of Egyptian Power* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012).

14   Ibid.

15   "Yemen's Salafi warlord-armed by Riyadh branded a terrorist by Riyada," Middle East Eye, October 27, 2017; Bruce Riedel, "Advancing separatists could restore South Yemen," Al-Monitor, February 1, 2018.

16   Eleonara Ardemagni, "UAE-Backed Militias Maximize Yemen's Fragmentation," Istituto Affari Internazionali, August 29, 2017; Aziz El Yaakoubi, "UAE builds up Yemen regional army but country fragments," Reuters, May 3, 2017.

17   Author interview, Yemen-based analyst, January 2018.

18   Demolinari, "Commander Brig Gen Munir Abu Al-Yamamah raising the #SouthYemen flag during the military parade at Martyr Iyad bin Suhail camp in Bureiqa #Aden. #Yemen," Twitter, January 20, 2018; Demolinari, "Brig Gen Munir Abu Al-Yamamah Al-Yafei of Security Belt 1st Support Brigade left #Aden for a visit to Abu Dhabi #UAE. #SouthYemen #Yemen," Twitter, November 24, 2017.

19   Author interview, Yemen-based analyst, January 2018.

20   Andrew F. Krepinevich Jr., "How to Win in Iraq," *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2005.

21   "AQAP Photographs Rocket Strike on Hadrami Elite Forces' Camp in Hadramawt," SITE Intelligence Group, December 2, 2017. See Demolinari, "#AQAP claims attack on Hadrami Elite forces camp at Budha in Doan #Hadramout at 5:45am this morning. Six photos published of the attack. #Yemen," Twitter, January 10, 2018.

22   "AQAP Claims Ambushing Hajr District Security Director's Vehicle in Hadramawt, Attacks on SBF, Shabwani Tribes, and Houthis," SITE Intelligence Group, January 18, 2018.

23   Author interview, Yemen-based journalist, January 2018.

24   Author interview, Yemen-based analyst, January 2018.

25   Michael Horton, "Yemen's Hadramawt: A Divided Future?" Jamestown Foundation, May 20, 2011; Michael Horton, "The Growing Separatist Threat in Yemen's Hadramawt Governorate," *Terrorism Monitor* 8:40 (2010).

26   Michael Horton, "Guns for Hire: How al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula is Securing its Future in Yemen," *Terrorism Monitor* 16:2 (2018).

27   Saeed Al Batati, "Yemen: The truth behind al-Qaeda's takeover of Mukalla," Al Jazeera, September 16, 2016.

28   "Al-Qaeda fighters seize Yemeni City," Al Jazeera, May 29, 2011.

29   Horton, "Fighting the Long War."

30   Ayisha Amr, "How al-Qaeda Rules in Yemen," *Foreign Affairs*, October 28, 2015.

31   Faisal Edroos and Saleh Al Batati, "After al-Qaeda: No signs of recovery in Yemen's Mukalla," Al Jazeera, January 11, 2018.

32   Author interview, Yemen-based journalist/ analyst, January 2018.

33   "Al Qaeda in Yemen confirms retreat from port city of Mukalla."

34   "My enemy's enemy is my ally: How al-Qaeda fighters are backed by Yemen's government," Middle East Eye, November 9, 2017.

35   "'We have to obey them,' Al-Qaeda increases its power in Yemen's Taiz," Middle East Eye, March 29, 2017.

36   Al-Dawsari.

37   Horton, "Guns for Hire;" Martin Jerrett and Mohammed al-Haddar, "Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula: From Global Insurgent to State Enforcer," Hate Speech International Investigating Extremism, March 2017.

38   Author interviews, Yemen-based journalists, January-February 2018.

39   Paola Tamma, "Has the USE colonised Yemen's Socotra island paradise?" New Arab, May 17, 2017.

40   "The UAE is 'employing' Blackwater to run its army," New Arab, July 8, 2017; Emily B. Hager and Mark Mazzetti, "Emirates Secretly Sends Colombian Mercenaries to Yemen Fight," *New York Times*, November 25, 2015; "UAE Deploys Mercenaries in Yemen," Economist Intelligence Unit, November 30, 2015; Elliott Balch, "Myth Busting: Robert Pape on ISIS, Suicide Terrorism, and US Foreign Policy," *Chicago Policy Review*, May 5, 2015.

41   Author interview, Yemen-based analyst, January 2018; author interview, Yemen-based journalist, December 2017.

42   Author interview, Yemen-based analyst, December 2017.

43   David Leigh and James Ball, "Guantánamo Bay files: Caught in the wrong place at the wrong time," *Guardian*, April 24, 2011; Heidi Blake, Tim Ross, and Conrad Quilty Harper, "WikiLeaks: children among the innocent captured and sent to Guantanamo," *Telegraph*, April 26, 2011; Anand Gopal, *No Good Men Among the Living: America, the Taliban, and the War through Afghan Eyes* (London: Picador, 2015).

44   "Yemen: UAE Backs Abusive Local Forces," Human Rights Watch, June 22, 2017.

45   "Yemen: Urgent investigation needed into UAE torture network and possible US role," Amnesty International, June 22, 2017; "Amnesty urges probe into report of UAE torture in Yemen," Al Jazeera, June 22, 2017.

46   Inspire, Al-Malahem Media, 2010.

47   Thomas Edward Lawrence, "Evolution of a Revolt," *Army Quarterly* 1:1 (1920).

48   Colonel Gian Gentile, *Wrong Turn: America's Deadly Embrace of Counterinsurgency* (New York: The New Press, 2013).

# Letters from Home: Hezbollah Mothers and the Culture of Martyrdom

## By Kendall Bianchi

**Hezbollah's culture of martyrdom has helped sustain the organization's manpower needs since the organization's founding. A critical question, however, is how the group communicates this narrative to its base, especially given recent challenges to the group's legitimacy as a result of its intervention in Syria. The 'Party of God's' online content reveals that it does so in part by using the mothers of martyred fighters to promote the culture of martyrdom. Mothers possess unique access in society due to their ability to shape the minds of the next generation. As a result, Hezbollah uses their voices to amplify its propaganda in a way that resonates with the group's following. Signs of tension between the party and these women, however, could pose challenges to this strategy in the future.**

I n March 2017, an article on Hezbollah's online media outlet Arabipress featured a poem by the Egyptian poet Hafez Ibrahim (b. 1872) that opens with the line, "Our mothers are like our schools; pampering them means securing our future."[1] Seven months earlier, the same website posted a music video in which a young man crooned, "For you, my mother," sentimentally dramatizing their close relationship and her reaction to his eventual martyrdom.[2] Frequently, Hezbollah's media also quotes a song by the renowned Lebanese musician Marcel Khalife to honor the mothers of its martyrs: "*ajmal al omahat*" (the most beautiful mother).[3] These items are not simply rhetorical devices; they also serve a strategic purpose. Hezbollah uses the mothers of its fallen fighters to sustain a culture of martyrdom that provides it with a self-replenishing pool of fighters, a critical function throughout the group's history but especially today.

Since late 2012, Hezbollah's founding principle of resistance to Israel has been eclipsed by its intervention in Syria on behalf of the regime of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad. Mounting casualties and increasing resentment[4] among the group's base in Lebanon have, to some extent, challenged the pervasive culture of martyrdom that sustains its manpower. This is where the mothers of martyrs come in. In order to retain control over the martyrdom

*Kendall Bianchi's research focuses on security issues in the Middle East. She was previously a research assistant in the Military and Security Studies Program at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. Before this, she studied Arabic in Jordan on a NSEP Boren Scholarship and in Morocco on a U.S. Department of State Critical Language Scholarship. Her work has also appeared in* Foreign Affairs *and on the Washington Institute's Fikra Forum.*

narrative, Hezbollah uses these mothers to relay stories that promote both self-sacrifice and the sacrificing of one's children to the resistance. As the opening examples illustrate, the cooptation of popular refrains are meant to capitalize on a deeply held local value: the importance of mothers in building a society. Mothers, therefore, represent a crucial demographic for Hezbollah, serving as a bridge between the party leadership and the community from which it draws its fighters. In order to convince these women to sacrifice their sons, the party shrewdly uses the voices of those who have already done so. Signs of tension between the group and the mothers of its martyrs, however, could call into question the viability of this strategy in the long term.

### The Culture of Martyrdom

Throughout the first three decades of Hezbollah's existence, its role in the "axis of resistance" against Israel imbued it with legitimacy, attracting ideologically motivated fighters to its cause. Equally important in this respect, however, was the group's culture of self-sacrifice that regarded martyrdom as a blessing. Whereas the resistance and self-sacrifice narratives no doubt became intertwined and fed off of each other, Hezbollah's concept of martyrdom also took on a life of its own, independent of political slogans against Israel. Martyrdom has always occupied a sacred space in the Shi`a religious tradition, dating back to the martyrdom of the Prophet's grandson Husayn in the seventh-century Battle of Karbala. But the Shi`a cleric Imam Musa al-Sadr, the founder of Lebanon's Amal movement, helped transform it into a tool of recruitment. Throughout the 1970s, al-Sadr encouraged his followers to draw inspiration from martyrdom, in the hope that each instance would unleash a flood of revolutionary zeal and thereby strengthen his forces.[5] Hezbollah, founded by a stream of Amal defectors with Iranian assistance in the early 1980s, capitalized upon this culture—holding public funerals and plastering images of its martyrs across towns to reap the highest possible reward from each casualty incurred in its resistance to Israel. The strategy resonated among the group's base. "Nobody here wants war," said one Lebanese man at a Hezbollah funeral in the town of Barachit in 2006. "[But] for each martyr that [has died], there will be a thousand more like them."[6]

The culture of martyrdom persists, but contemporary developments threaten its potency. First, despite Hezbollah's public branding as the defender of Lebanon's Shi`a community, the group's de facto prioritization of the Syria fight over that against Israel has evidently cheapened the cause for which martyrs are dying.[7] Second, payments to martyrs' families have reportedly been cut due to rising war budgets, a step that threatens to provoke discontent.[8] Third, Hezbollah's combat fatalities over almost five years in Syria exceed those sustained over the 18 years from its founding in 1982 until Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000.[9] The group is suffering significant casualties, and for a cause that many are questioning. Indeed, the party seems to be concerned that as martyrs accumulate,

they may begin to alienate more followers than they galvanize. Public funerals have become less frequent in the present day, for example, suggesting that party leadership no longer views celebrations of martyrdom to be as useful as they once were. Experts also estimate that the group has only acknowledged about half of its actual combat deaths in Syria—even actively covering up the causes of death in some cases, according to some reports.[10] Against this backdrop, Hezbollah's ability to control the narrative surrounding martyrdom is more critical—and maybe more vulnerable—than ever.

## The Martyr's Mother as Spokeswoman

Perhaps the most compelling way to promote the culture of martyrdom is through an endorsement by the martyr himself. Indeed, this happens to an extent in 'last will' videos recorded by fighters and released after their death in battle. But the martyr, of course, can no longer speak, so his family—and his mother in particular—represents his next-best spokesperson.

The benefit of using mothers as a mouthpiece is both spiritual and practical. On a spiritual level, a mother thanking God for her son's martyrdom constitutes a powerful image, given the universal nature of maternal love and the instinct to protect one's children from danger. Accordingly, Hezbollah uses mothers to propagate the martyrdom narrative in an emotionally resonant fashion. On a practical level, the martyr's mother serves as a crucial intermediary between party officials and other women who might be willing to sacrifice sons to the cause. Hezbollah's ability to reach out to these other women is critical because they will educate the next generation of fighters, hopefully (from Hezbollah's point of view) instilling within them the values of self-sacrifice and martyrdom.

Mothers are also important players when their sons reach military age. Some stories[11] on Hezbollah websites have made mention of young men requesting their mother's written permission before leaving to wage jihad in Syria—suggesting that the mother often has at least some say in the matter, even if in practice the party may not require parental consent (or heed parental objections) before sending fighters to Syria. A mother's blessing may also help relieve a son's guilt at leaving his family, a critical element of strategic messaging given that many of these young men repeatedly ask their families to forgive them in 'last will' videos.[12] Moreover, given the new trend of recruiting young and unmarried fighters, the mother's opinion likely weighs particularly heavily in the minds of these younger recruits.[13]

Endorsement in written form is useful to Hezbollah not only to persuade potential fighters, but also as an insurance policy in case of martyrdom. A mother who has willingly surrendered her child is less likely to publicly blame the party for his death, as has happened in cases in which permission was allegedly not granted.[14] It is for these reasons that Hezbollah's propaganda has in recent years targeted women as much as the fighters themselves, if not more.

Hezbollah circulates a variety of materials, including purported letters from mothers to their martyred sons, personal narratives, voice recordings, and even documentaries featuring interviews with martyr families with a special focus on the mother. Virtually all of these mothers relay similar narratives. For them, the martyrdom of a son is a blessing that brings the entire family closer to God and Ahl al-Bayt (the Prophet Muhammad's family), strengthening their resolve to sacrifice more to the resistance.[a]

## Crafting the Martyrdom Narrative

The process of celebrating martyrdom begins before death, with Hezbollah online content depicting women encouraging their sons to sacrifice themselves in battle. Arabipress, for example, published a news item in 2014 under the title "Mother of a Hezbollah Fighter in Syria: 'God, Please Grant My Son Martyrdom, Please God!'"[15] Another article, written in Hezbollah's Arabipress in 2015, contains screenshots (see photos) of a conversation between a woman and her son who was at the time deployed to Syria by Hezbollah, in shock that he remains alive while his comrade has just been killed next to him in Syria. "Maybe Mahdi was ready for martyrdom before you ... my dear, remain on your path, and stay strong like I taught you ... May God not deny you martyrdom," she wrote.[16]

After death, the mothers of dead fighters may express grief but ultimately treat martyrdom as a happy occasion, according to the script set by Hezbollah. Pro-Hezbollah press frequently publishes articles and videos that portray women thanking God for their son's martyrdom—including one in October 2017 in which the mother of the martyr Ali Zaitar appears to kneel over her son's burial site: "God has given me more than I deserve," she repeats.[17]

Another important element of the mother's narrative is the idea that sacrificing children brings one closer to God and Ahl al-Bayt. One mother in 2014 described feeling as though she had finally answered Imam Husayn's call when she sent her son to Syria.[b] After his martyrdom, she went even further, announcing, "I feel as though I have passed God's test."[18] Here, the historical Shi`a narrative is also key. The mothers frequently conflate current wars with early Islamic history, particularly the seventh-century Battle of Karbala. "Listen to me: you are in Karbala, with the Imam Husayn," said one mother to her jihadi son in a voice recording published in April 2016. "Forget this world; everything will be gone one day. Just focus on Husayn, Karbala, and what happened there!"[19] For these mothers, their sons who wage jihad very literally walk in the footsteps of the men killed in Karbala—and they themselves in the paths of Husayn's mother, Fatima, and his sister Zainab (often referred to as Sayyida Zainab), women of Ahl al-Bayt who both sacrificed sons in the battle.

After a fighter's martyrdom, the Hezbollah narrative emphasizes his enduring presence in his family's life and beyond. In one interview, a woman claims of her martyred son, "He didn't leave me ... He is still among us. I smell his scent, I feel his presence, and he talks to me and makes me laugh."[20] Another example is found in a letter written in 1995 from the mother of a Bosnian 'martyr' to the mother of a Lebanese Hezbollah 'martyr' killed in Bosnia. Hezbollah's Arabipress published an Arabic translation of the letter in March 2016: "These martyrs are the candles of our youth, the price of our freedom and resolve as Muslims ... We all remember [your son] with great joy, and we can never forget him."[21] Given mounting Hezbollah casualties in Syria, the letter's implication seemed timely and deliberate—that even those martyrs who die far from their

---

a    These observations are based on the author's review of Hezbollah propaganda materials posted online by the group.

b    The martyrdom of Husayn ibn Ali, a grandson of the Prophet Mohammed, at the Battle of Karbala in 680 A.D. is central to Shi`a identity. Husayn is revered by Shi`a Muslims.

كرار سوريا
last seen today at 8:17pm    **4**

كون قوي وبطل    8:16PM

وتذكر اهل البيت ع    8:16PM

انا مش خيفان بس نحن متفقين    8:16PM
ما نستشهد

الا مع بعض    8:16PM

وانا قلت هيك    8:16PM

بو صيتي    8:16PM

هوي قال نفس الشي    8:16PM

يمكن هوي صار جاهز للشهادة قبلك
الايمام بعت وراه يلاه شد حالك وكون مع
الله بنية صافية اكتر كي تلحق به
وتجتمعوا سوا بالجنة

كرار سوريا
last seen today at 8:17pm    **5**

علوش حبيبي يا عمري خليك على
خطك وضل قوي متل ما علمتك وهلا لزم
تكون اقوى من قبل قوم صليبا عمري
وادعي من كل قلبك الله ما يحرمك
الشهادة شو بس ام رفيقتك بدا تشوف
حالها عند الزهراء ع وانا كمان

😉 😉 😉 😉
www.southlebanon.org    8:24PM
8:18PM

*An article, written in Hezbollah's Arabipress in 2015, contains screenshots of a conversation between a woman and her son fighting with Hezbollah in Syria, in shock that he remains alive while his comrade has just been killed next to him in Syria. "Maybe Mahdi was ready for martyrdom before you … my dear, remain on your path, and stay strong like I taught you … May God not deny you martyrdom," she wrote.*

homeland live on for years after their death.

Perhaps the most critical part of the narrative involves the notion that martyrdom should strengthen the resolve of others to sacrifice even more to the cause. After all, Hezbollah's ability to replenish its ranks depends largely upon the degree to which one man's sacrifice inspires others to follow in his path. Pledges to do so are common in the mothers' narratives. One woman, in a short documentary film, claimed that after the martyrdom of her first son, Mahdi Yaghi, she hoped her other son, Ali, would also die a martyr's death.[22] Her wish was granted when Ali was killed in Syria in June 2017.[23] In another conversation around the same time with the mother of Mustafa Badreddine, a senior Hezbollah official killed in 2016, the interviewer asks what she would tell her son a year after his martyrdom. "Your siblings, your grandchildren … all of us remain steadfast on

your path," she responds, "and we will not leave it until every last one of us is martyred, with God's permission."[24]

In these ways, the mother's words are used to motivate young men and other mothers to make sacrifices for Hezbollah's cause. The message resonates. In one particularly powerful and inflammatory video posted in August 2017, the mother of Hezbollah 'martyr' Mahdi Khadr bellows into a megaphone before a large crowd of men: "Raise your heads!" she orders, a phrase often invoked by Arab leaders to garner support and boost morale among the marginalized. She then directs them to repeat after her, with pride and honor: "At your service, Zainab!" The crowd obeys her command, erupting with boisterous chants in response.[25]

### Promoting the Narrative: Carrots and Sticks

While these narratives are likely authentic to a decent extent, Hezbollah appears to stage-manage them to ensure both uniformity and conformity. The group seems to rely upon an inner circle of families it trusts to toe the party line. In many cases, the same families appear repeatedly in Hezbollah's media—in letters, interviews, and documentaries—whereas other families are not even granted the "privilege" of a published martyrdom announcement. The group also regularly features the families of its most prominent martyrs—including Badreddine and Imad Mughniyeh, the Hezbollah commander assassinated in 2008. The latter serves the extra purpose of demonstrating that if families of such stature have sacrificed their sons, anyone should be willing to do so.[c] The 'martyrdom' of Hassan Nasrallah's son Hadi in 1997 has, in itself, become a talking point. "O, Sayyid [Hassan], you sacrificed a martyr as well, my brother," wailed one mother as she addressed Nasrallah from beside her son's coffin in early 2017.[26] Another, in September 2016, proclaimed in an article, "I am the mother of a martyr … our sacrifices pale in comparison to [Hassan's]!"[27]

This is not the only method Hezbollah employs to ensure adherence to the party line. Reports[28] have emerged of party officials planted at public funerals to ensure proper comportment and to boost morale, as well as repeated visits by party members to the families of its martyrs.[29] Hezbollah's web content, moreover, shames those who react with excessive grief to a loved one's martyrdom—as always, using the mother as an example. "Mohammad shouldn't be cried over … no, no, no … Mohammad deserves for people to be happy for him because he reached heaven!" yells one woman in response to mourners weeping over her son's coffin.[30] Another mother, shown hugging her son's corpse, holds back tears while repeating to herself that she won't cry to avoid him seeing her upset.[31] An additional way Hezbollah pressures mothers is by using the voices of their martyred sons. In a 'last will' video, the martyr Mahdi Yaghi tells his mother—in an obviously scripted segment—not to be sad when he is martyred and to try to behave in the way Fatima and Zainab once did.[32] The speech is likely canned, as martyrs reading from scripts in other videos express the same sentiments toward their own mothers—including the martyr Hassan Ahmad Kanaan in a video published in 2014. "Do not be sad when you hear the news of my martyrdom, but rather hold on to the patience of Sayyida Zainab, peace be upon her."[33] These videos are also used to court mothers emotionally through what appear to be sponta-

---

c    These observations are based on the author's review of Hezbollah propaganda materials posted online by the group.

neous words, such as a segment of Yaghi's video when he is quietly prompted twice by the cameraman to speak to his mother.

In addition to emotional pressure and financial inducements, Hezbollah encourages sacrifice by granting the mothers of martyrs a unique symbolic status within the party. As mentioned previously, Hezbollah's media draws frequent parallels between the mothers of martyrs and Sayyida Zainab, the sister of Imam Husayn revered by Shi`a Muslims for her bravery and sacrifices in the Battle of Karbala. Zainab's rising status in Hezbollah doctrine—protecting her shrine in Damascus has served as a central justification for involvement in Syria[34]—has only rendered these comparisons more poignant and effective. Such parallels therefore lionize the sacrifices of Hezbollah women, signaling that a son's martyrdom will earn them eternal glory in the eyes of God. Hierarchies of sacrifice are also present within the party's propaganda, with the mothers of martyrs at the top. A Mother's Day[d] special from Hezbollah's media outlet al-Manar, for example, featured the mother of a wounded fighter who offered her own disclaimer at the end, arguing that Mother's Day should be dedicated fully to the mothers of martyrs for they are the ones who have sacrificed the most.[35]

## Signs of Trouble

Outside Hezbollah's own carefully curated media, some mothers have begun to question the group's justification for the Syria intervention and its narrative of martyrdom. These accounts have appeared in both traditional and social media. In May 2015, a Twitter user under the handle "Um al Hasan" (mother of Hasan) tweeted, "Sayyid Hassan Nasrallah, I want my son back from Qalamoun. It is enough that one already died."[36] Fourteen minutes later, the same user tweeted again under the Arabic hashtag "we want our sons."[37] Although the hashtag has also been used frequently as a rallying cry for Palestinian martyr families against Israel, a number of other users followed Um al Hasan's example, tweeting the hashtag to protest Hezbollah's involvement in Syria.[e]

Rumors of discontentment among mothers have also appeared in Lebanese traditional media, despite Hezbollah's known efforts to intimidate reporters. For instance, the news outlet Al Mustaqbal reported in the spring of 2016 that a number of mothers of Hezbollah fighters killed in Syria had refused to welcome delegations of party members on Mother's Day.[38] In June 2016, the website quoted the mother of a martyred fighter addressing Hassan Nasrallah: "Why, Sayyid [Hassan]? This was not what we agreed to. We agreed that my son would learn religion and fight Israel ... What is there for us in Syria? My son's blood is on your hands."[39] In another article published by *Al Joumhouria*, the mother of a Syria casualty dared to ask the ultimate question more explicitly: "Did my son truly die a martyr's death?"[40]

Admittedly, these reports appear largely in anti-Hezbollah Lebanese media, but even if they are not reliable across the board, their very existence may threaten the party's legitimacy by raising doubts in its followers' minds. Hezbollah's culture of martyrdom relies on the mothers of martyrs to promote martyrdom wholeheartedly as the ultimate form of religious devotion; it does not allow for debate over what constitutes a martyr's death. The breaking of taboos on these questions therefore elevates concern among party leaders about growing disillusionment among its rank and file. If this discontentment further takes hold and affects actual decision-making, it would not be the first time a group of mothers in the region had influenced military decisions through grassroots activity. Perhaps ironically, Israel's "Four Mothers" movement, which decried what many Israeli soldiers' mothers saw as the squandering of young lives in an unnecessary war in Lebanon, helped prompt the IDF's withdrawal from the country in 2000.[41]

## Conclusion

While signs of tension between Hezbollah and its community of mothers is undoubtedly a source of anxiety among its leadership, the severity of these concerns will depend largely upon the trajectory of the Syrian war and the party's role in it. If combat fatalities continue unabated, the internal challenges described here could grow in importance and eventually overshadow the additional problem of Hezbollah's loss of legitimacy in the eyes of many Arabs across the region. However, reports of discontent have been appearing on an occasional basis for several years and without much apparent change to Hezbollah's ability to carry on the fight in Syria.

For now, the party seems to be managing this trend. Hezbollah also holds a subtler psychological advantage. For many of these families, blindly accepting the narrative of martyrdom may be less emotionally wrenching than questioning whether a child's death was worth the pain. Until more families are ready to face such difficult questions, Hezbollah may continue to capitalize on the cult of martyrdom to the detriment of Lebanon's Shi`a community.    CTC

---

d    Most Arab countries celebrate Mother's Day in March.

e    These tweets were observed by the author.

---

## Citations

1    Qasem Istanbuli, "Our mothers are like schools," Arabipress, March 8, 2017.

2    Mahmoud Shahin, "For you, my mother – a message from a member of the resistance to his mother," music video posted to Arabipress, August 29, 2016.

3    See, for example, "The most beautiful mother: Listen to what the mother of the martyr Ali Hassan Ibrahim said," Arabipress, October 10, 2016. See also "The most beautiful mother ... The mother of the martyr Mohammad Jaafar Dagher talks about her son," Arabipress, May 21, 2014.

4    Jesse Rosenfeld, "Hezbollah Fighters Are Fed Up With Fighting Syria's War," Daily Beast, December 30, 2015.

5    Fouad Ibrahim, "Al-Shahada: a Centre of the Shiite System of Belief," in Madawi al-Rasheed and Marat Shterin eds., *Dying for Faith: Religiously Motivated Violence in the Contemporary World* (London: I.B. Taurus & Co Ltd, 2009), p. 118.

6    Scott Peterson, "Funerals in Lebanon's south foster culture of martyrdom," *Christian Science Monitor*, August 21, 2006.

7    Bassem Mroue and Zeina Karam, "Hezbollah finds fighting in Syria less popular than battling Israel," Times of Israel, July 12, 2016.

8    Hanin Ghaddar, "Hezbollah's Women Aren't Happy," *Tablet Magazine,* October 12, 2016.

9    "Hizbollah's Syria Conundrum," *Report No. 175*, International Crisis Group, March 14, 2017.

10    Rabia Haddad, "Top Secret Casualties of Hezbollah," Al Modon, April 20, 2015. See also Leila Fadel, "Cemetery for Hezbollah Martyrs Continues to Grow," NPR, October 12, 2012.

11    "The story of the martyr Abbas Alama between him and his mother," Arabipress, June 6, 2017.

12    For example, see "Last will of the martyr Mahdi Mohammad Yaghi – full (serious and unprompted)," YouTube, September 20, 2013. See also "In video: the martyr Qasem Shamkha through his will: forgive me," Arabipress, November 7, 2016.

13    Ghaddar.

14    Suha Jafal, "About the mother of the victim Yaser Ali Shahla, who rebelled against Hezbollah officials," Al Janoubia, July 31, 2015.

15    "Mother of a Hezbollah fighter in Syria: 'O God, please grant my son martyrdom, O God'," Arabipress, April 10, 2014.

16    "In pictures: conversation between the martyr Ali Abbas Ismael and his mother after the martyrdom of his friend, the martyr Mahdi Fakhreddine," Arabipress, June 13, 2015.

17    "This is what the mother of martyr Ali Zaitar said," Arabipress, October 3, 2017.

18    "The story of the martyr Zulfiqar Azzadin, in the words of his mother," Arabipress, August 7, 2014.

19    "In sound: Mother of a fighter in Aleppo sends him a voice recording … urging him toward Jihad and patience," Arabipress, April 16, 2016.

20    "Mother of the martyr Mohammad Ali Asad Bakri: My son before his martyrdom visited the Zainab shrine and told me he had asked her to have patience with me," Arabipress, May 19, 2016.

21    "Special: letter from the mother of a Bosnian martyr to the mother of the martyr Ramzi Mahdi in Lebanon, 1995," Arabipress, March 7, 2016.

22    "New, unique documentary about the Prince of Martyrs, the martyr Mahdi Yaghi," Arabipress, July 9, 2017 (filmed at an earlier date). See 21:40.

23    "Town of Asira/Baalbak presents the Zainabi martyr Ali Mohammad Hussein Yaghi," Arabipress, June 3, 2017.

24    "Mother of Jihadi Commander in her first recollection: rest easy, my dear, my son," Al Manar, May 10, 2017.

25    "Watch what the mother of martyr Mahdi Khadr said," Arabipress, August 6, 2017.

26    "In video: this is what the mother of the martyr Mohammad Basam Murad said to Sayyid Nasrallah," Arabipress, January 31, 2017.

27    "Letter from mother of the martyr Alaa Mustafa Aladdin 'Jawad' to Sayyid Hassan Nasrallah," Arabipress, September 12, 2016.

28    Fatima Hawhaw, "Shia oppositionists topple barrier of fear on Facebook," Al Mustaqbal, June 5, 2013.

29    Ghaddar.

30    "This is what the mother of the martyr Mohammad Jouni said," Arabipress, June 13, 2015.

31    "The most beautiful mother: Listen to what the mother of the martyr Ali Hassan Ibrahim said."

32    See "Last will of the martyr Mahdi Mohammad Yaghi – full (serious and unprompted)," YouTube, September 20, 2013.

33    "Will of the martyr Hassan Ahmad Kanaan (Malaak) – full version," YouTube, March 24, 2014.

34    Jean Aziz, "Hezbollah Leader Defends His Party's Involvement in Syria," Al-Monitor, May 2, 2013.

35    "Mothers of the injured and the gift that keeps on giving," Al Manar, March 21, 2017.

36    @Umalhasan70, "#Hezbollah O Sayyid #Hasan_Nasrullah, for your sake, I want my son. Bring him back to me from Qalamoun. One was killed, and that's enough. Have mercy on our kids, some of them are very sick. I ask you by the soul of your martyred son," Twitter, May 9, 2015.

37    @Umalhasan70, "#Dahieh  We beg you, bring back our kids from #Qalamoun. One martyr is enough. #Hezbollah #Mustaqbal #we_want_our_kids," Twitter, May 9, 2015.

38    "It is said that …," Al Mustaqbal Issue 5676, March 23, 2016, p. 2.

39    "33 Hezbollah fighters killed in Damascus suburbs; Their mothers say to Nasrallah, 'this is not what we agreed upon,'" Al Mustaqbal Issue 5759, June 20, 2016, p. 3.

40    Ali Husseini, "Mother of a fighter in Hezbollah: Is my son a martyr?" Al Mustaqbal, October 10, 2012.

41    Deborah Sontag, "Israel Honors Mothers of Lebanon Withdrawal," *New York Times,* June 3, 2000.

# Beyond the Conflict Zone: U.S. HSI Cooperation with Europol

By Miles Hidalgo

**With the fall of Raqqa, many foreign fighters from the Islamic State have since fled territory previously controlled by the group—some returning to their countries of origin within Europe. United States law enforcement entities, with assistance from the U.S. Department of Defense, are leveraging partnerships within Europol to identify returning foreign terrorist fighters and prevent attacks on both U.S. and European soil. This article focuses specifically on Homeland Security Investigations' (HSI) role in this effort. International and interagency counterterrorism cooperation benefits from Europol's unique multilateral coordination tools to deter and defeat both terrorist and criminal threats.**

**A**s Islamic State fighters flee Iraq and Syria for their countries of origin,[1] law enforcement, not the military, is the entity best positioned to curtail the terrorist threats they pose.[a] For the United States, much of the international counterterrorism fight carried out within conflict zones, such as Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Libya, is primarily military in nature. External to these areas, the U.S. military, whose authorities are especially limited in Europe, has sought to enable law enforcement to provide the "finish" option: arrests and prosecutions. This mission, Operation Gallant Phoenix (OGP), was originally focused on tracking foreign fighter flows into Syria and Iraq, but its charter has been expanded to address these individuals returning to areas throughout Europe. The United States' European Command (EUCOM), seeking to leverage its partnerships with law enforcement, funds several U.S. Homeland Security Investigations

(HSI)[b] special agents who work at Europol but also assist EUCOM in identifying transnational European-based criminal and terror threats. This effort supplements an already large U.S. interagency presence at Europol, which provides both opportunities and challenges as a medium for coordination. Despite the growing pains associated with the recent expansion, law enforcement enablement against foreign terrorist fighters is resulting in increasing numbers of investigations and arrests throughout Europe due to the rapid flow of information and tremendous resources available within Europol, the newest member of OGP.[2]

This article draws on insights the author gained during the approximately three months he spent as an HSI embed at Europol headquarters during the summer of 2017. This article focuses on the contributions of HSI to Europol's work. It is not intended to capture the totality of partnership activity between U.S. law enforcement agencies and Europol and should not be read as a comprehensive assessment of all cooperation between these entities. Unless otherwise specified, the information contained in this article is based on interactions with U.S. and European officials working there during this period.

## European CT Cooperation Mechanisms

Located in The Hague, Europol maintains a staff consisting of over 1,000 people representing all 28 E.U. member nations and an assortment of 33 operational and strategic partners.[3] The United States is an operational partner, enabling cooperation similar to a member nation but without direct access to the Europol criminal database. The database, called the Europol Information System (EIS), is one of the most unique capabilities of Europol, hosting records from almost 300,000 cases across member nations and operational partners. The EIS enables cross matching and multilateral cooperation across the millions of investigatory subjects entered in the database, which represents a multinational capability not found elsewhere in the law enforcement realm.[c] Europol also utilizes a secure messaging system that enables rapid multilateral information sharing across all of its partners. As the Deputy Director of Europol Wil van Gemert previously told this publication, Europol "moved from not only collecting information but to connecting information."[4] Using assets like EIS and experienced counterterrorism professionals from multiple countries, the new European Counter

---

a    Nick Rasmussen, former NCTC Director, qualified this concern in a recent interview in this publication. Rasmussen stated that the outflow of foreign fighters from the former Islamic State-controlled territories was not reaching the volume that intelligence agencies anticipated two years previously. He stressed the focus was now on the "quality rather than quantity" of returning foreign fighters. See Paul Cruickshank, "A View from the CT Foxhole: Nicholas Rasmussen, Former Director, National Counterterrorism Center," *CTC Sentinel* 11:1 (2018).

*Miles Hidalgo is an MPhil candidate in International Relations at Oxford University as a Downing Scholar. He is an active duty U.S. Army officer with experience in special operations.*

*The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any agency of the U.S. government.*

---

b    HSI is the investigative arm of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). The organization's stated mission is to protect the United States and uphold public safety, which it fulfills by identifying criminal activities and eliminating vulnerabilities that pose a threat to the nation's borders.

c    The INTERPOL database is rarely used by E.U. and U.S. law enforcement due to its unrestricted access by states that may sponsor and benefit from illicit activity, such as Russia. Both Europol and U.S. officials highlighted this advantage in interviews with the author in the summer of 2017.

Terrorism Centre (ECTC) contains a growing U.S. presence that helps combat the foreign terrorist fighter threat.

The ECTC, established in 2016, has only recently featured a semi-permanent U.S. presence. In the aftermath of the Paris terror attacks in November 2015, subsequent U.S.-enabled investigations illuminated an Islamic State-affiliated network that funded the perpetrators' travel and daily expenses.[5] This support network utilized a system of Money Service Businesses (MSBs) and criminal networks to fund illicit activity, allegedly to include the purchase of false official documents and weapons once the Paris attack perpetrators reached continental Europe from Syria.[6] Europol and U.S. officials have pointed out that the increased interweaving of criminal and terrorist networks can provide an advantage for investigators.[7]

Much of the specifics of the Paris investigation remain publicly unavailable as there are still ongoing trials for the support network in Belgium, France, and other countries. However, HSI and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) were integral members of the ECTC that helped identify these financial links.[d] Though not well known among the general public, HSI—as the investigative arm of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE)—has broad statutory and legal authority to investigate illicit trade, travel, and financial activities as well as a number of other threats. Due to its unique border authorities, HSI is positioned to acquire, analyze, and share U.S.-based MSB data.[e] HSI agents provided a quick turnaround on the Paris attack investigations, resulting in an increased demand from Europol member nations for investigative assistance.

HSI is the largest investigative body within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), with over 6,700 special agents. Currently, HSI agents and analysts are working alongside Europol partners in the ECTC, with additional HSI agents working in the European Migrant Smuggling Centre (EMSC). The HSI agents within the EMSC fulfill a critical function as they collect information and provide analysis on criminal smuggling and Special Interest Alien[f] illicit travel, which helps further protect U.S. borders. The nature of unclassified financial information provides HSI a distinct advantage: they can openly share financial information with European partners, which expands a quid pro quo relationship with Europol members.

HSI and the U.S. government in general benefit from increased awareness regarding terrorists and illicit travel facilitators operating in Europe that could also threaten U.S. national security, public safety, and border security. From January 2016 through July 2017, HSI agents identified 1,843 known or suspected terrorists and 9,774 illicit Special Interest Alien travel facilitators by answering 984 requests for information from European partners.[8] With HSI's coop-



*Europol headquarters*

eration with Customs and Border Protection (CBP) and other law enforcement partners, these investigatory subjects can be added to watchlists and prevented from entering the United States, further protecting the homeland. The role of law enforcement agents at Europol is not without challenges, however.

## The Challenges of Cooperation

An exponential growth in both Europol's role and the number of requests for assistance from European partners constantly strain the capacity of the HSI agents at Europol. Although HSI shares information acquired from U.S.-based MSBs with European partners, the financial transaction data requires additional analysis by all-source intelligence analysts to identify potential links to any U.S.-based entities. The rapid growth of requests from European partners for this financial information has also caused procedural challenges, resulting in a duplication of analysis effort as both CBP and the FBI, along with seven other U.S. agencies, receive the same requests within the counterterrorism space. Recent changes have streamlined the process, with OGP requests being handled specifically through the FBI. The addition of a Europol representative at OGP in August of 2017 is also a new factor in communication, and could potentially streamline the process for sharing information originating from the small amount of contested space still controlled or influenced by the Islamic State.

HSI, FBI, and CBP assign the ECTC and EMSC portfolio to their permanent agents as an additional duty, but it might not replicate the benefits of an agent working full-time inside the ECTC or EMSC. Although EUCOM guaranteed funding through FY18 for additional HSI agents, there are inherent challenges with the current 90-day rotations such as case continuity, rapport with partners, and domain knowledge.

Another undermentioned aspect of potential conflict for Europol and interagency cooperation rests in a differing view of the role bilateral cooperation plays in defeating terrorist threats. Certain U.S. agencies have a propensity for protecting what they consider proprietary information. At times, information may be over-classified. Agencies are then constricted to a formal sharing process based on classification, but some also prefer to share information bilaterally due to historic relationships.[9] Some E.U. member states also prefer to work counterterrorism investigations bilaterally with U.S. law

---

d    U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) and Diplomatic Security Services (DSS) are also members of ECTC that assist in ongoing investigations.

e    HSI is authorized under Title 19, section 1401 of the U.S. Code to cross-designate other federal, state, and local law enforcement officers to investigate and enforce customs laws. Due to the broad reach of customs laws, Title 19 authorities enable HSI to investigate any lead that may be relevant to the illegal movement of people or goods across the border.

f    As defined by DHS, a Special Interest Alien is a person seeking entry into the United States who originates from "specially designated countries that have shown a tendency to promote, produce, or protect terrorist organizations or their members." "Supervision of Aliens Commensurate With Risk," Department of Homeland Security, Office of Inspector General, December 23, 2011, p. 8.

enforcement, potentially degrading opportunities to share information more broadly through Europol. This latter process is cumbersome, and with the geographic proximity of so many countries on the European continent, bilateral sharing alone could prevent a member state from quickly receiving pertinent information about credible threats. Europol as an entity has become more operational in the aftermath of the migrant crisis and the renewed terrorist threat of the last few years. Europol's secure messaging system, SIENA, combined with the robustness of its criminal database, EIS, provides an invaluable resource in both rapid information sharing and cross matching, as highlighted through the effective cooperation that led to rapid arrests in three countries in the aftermath of the Paris attacks.[10] This burgeoning capacity is a source of disquiet for those who believe that the best way to share information still rests more in traditional bilateral exchanges.

Despite those challenges, the HSI attachments to Europol have been successful in a variety of ways. Although details on most of the ongoing investigations remain limited due to ongoing legal proceedings, a recent prominent case provides a positive example of the burgeoning cooperation between elements of the U.S. government and Europol. This named operation started after an eminent Islamic State financier was detained by the U.S. military within a conflict zone. Based on evidence recovered from sensitive site exploitation, HSI began analysis of his financial links and conveyed a number of critical leads to European nations through the use of both SIENA and Europol relationships. Cooperation between HSI, the U.S. Department of Defense, and Europol on this specific case thus far has contributed to over 130 open investigations and 15 arrests in France, Belgium, Germany, and other European countries.[11] Another significant operation includes Operation ERMIS, where HSI in The Hague provided over 2,000 financial leads on document forgers, which led to 19 separate arrests in Greece and the Czech Republic in 2016.[12] Further investigation into these illicit travel rings indicated ties to both transnational criminal organizations and possible foreign terrorist fighter movements. This type of coordination benefits from the unique authorities HSI agents possess, their relationship with European and U.S. partners, and their understanding of transnational threat networks.

## Improving the Process
A few critical changes could streamline the processes at Europol. There is an intrinsic benefit in the current configuration with agents collocated inside the EMSC and ECTC: they develop relationships, share information, and engage in the daily operations that improve any multilateral collaborative effort. However, with FBI, CBP, HSI, and seven other U.S. agencies working within the same Europol organization, the U.S. agencies lack a cohesive leadership structure, which creates some confusion among European partners. The disparate U.S. elements inside the ECTC all work under different legal authorities as well. For example, the FBI has statutory lead for U.S. counterterrorism investigations. However, there is only a known or suspected U.S. nexus or involvement in approximately five percent of counterterrorism labeled requests to U.S. agencies for information by European partners via their secure messaging system, SIENA.[g] The other 95 percent of requests by European partners may not meet the threshold for FBI involvement, which is why HSI has an advantageous role in providing financial information and in turn receiving information that identifies these subjects of investigations and potentially prevents them from entering the United States.

The growing capability of Europol might justify the addition of more permanent U.S. law enforcement liaison positions within Europol. Additional analytical support could also help with faster processing of requests, enabling agents to be more proactive as with the case of the aforementioned Islamic State financier. That analytical support could be collocated at Europol or staged within the U.S. National Targeting Center or another D.C.-based center with a focus on allowing reach-back analysis for the forward-deployed agents. U.S. agents assigned to Europol across all law enforcement agencies would benefit from more continuity and a better system of internal information sharing that fully captures the intricacies of the work being done at Europol.

Despite the potential challenges that exist at Europol and with the various agencies assigned, the overall benefit of the program is significant. Through collaborative efforts with European partners, U.S. law enforcement is addressing the challenges of combating terrorism in an area where their legal authorities are limited. As foreign terrorist fighters return to their countries of origin or travel through the porous borders of Europe, the increased efforts of the law enforcement entities throughout Europol will help to pursue and hopefully defeat the terrorist threat outside of the conflict zones.    **CTC**

---

g    This estimate is based on the author's interview with senior ICE officials and analysis of SIENA statistics from FY 2016 and 2017. SIENA has the option to "bin" or "tag" the requests for information in order to direct it toward a specific U.S. agency. In this case, the percentages refer to the number of requests for information, sent through SIENA, that arrived in the counterterrorism inbox for U.S. agencies at Europol.

## Citations

1    Paul McLeary, "SitRep: ISIS 2.0 On the Way," *Foreign Policy: The Cable*, October 18, 2017.
2    Matthias Monroy, "Biometric data exchange with the US military: Europol seconds liaison officer for Operation Gallant Phoenix," Security Architecture and Police Collaboration in the EU, April 21, 2017.
3    "Staff Statistics," Europol.
4    Paul Cruickshank, "A View from the CT Foxhole: Peter Edge, ICE Acting Deputy Director, and Wil van Gemert, Europol Deputy Director," *CTC Sentinel* 10:1 (2017).
5    Author interview, HSI supervisory special agent, June 2017.

6    Ibid.
7    Cruickshank.
8    SIENA statistics from FY16 and FY17 were obtained by the author.
9    Author interview, senior FBI special agent, June 2017.
10    Author interview, ICE supervisory special agent, June 2017; Cruickshank.
11    Numbers are based on SIENA statistics from E.U. member nation reports.
12    "ICE partners with Europol to combat document forgery and migrant smuggling." U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement news release, June 3, 2016.