

Combating Terrorism Center at West Point



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FEATURE ARTICLE

## Kidnappings in Nigeria

The terrorist strategy behind the Chibok and Dapchi kidnappings

JACOB ZENN

A VIEW FROM THE CT FOXHOLE

## LTC Kent Solheim

COMMANDER, 3RD BATTALION,  
3RD SPECIAL FORCES GROUP

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## FROM THE EDITOR

This issue focuses on counterterrorism challenges in Africa. Next month marks the four-year anniversary of Boko Haram's kidnapping of as many as 276 schoolgirls in Chibok, Nigeria. The hostage attack created global outrage and sparked the social media campaign #BringBackOurGirls. In our cover article, Jacob Zenn outlines the internal dynamics within Boko Haram that led the group to eventually enter into negotiations and release many of the girls. Zenn compares and contrasts the terrorist calculus in this earlier hostage crisis with the kidnapping of 111 schoolgirls in Dapchi, Nigeria, last month, which also resulted in many of the girls being released.

Our interview is with Lieutenant Colonel Kent Solheim, commander of 3rd Battalion, 3rd Special Forces Group, which is currently focused on security challenges in Africa. Christopher Anzalone documents how al-Shabaab has continued to take advantage of turmoil in Somalia to sustain its operations and maintain itself as the dominant jihadi group in the country. In the wake of rising jihadi violence in Burkina Faso, including an attack on the French embassy and the Burkinabe army headquarters earlier this month, Héni Nsaibia and Caleb Weiss profile the recently established al-Qa`i`i-aligned Burkinabe terrorist group Ansaroul Islam and the threat it poses to the country.

Markus Binder, Jillian Quigley, and Herbert Tinsley examine the Islamic State's development and deployment of chemical weapons. They note that while the group has used such weapons on the battlefield in Syria and Iraq, it has featured little in its propaganda, calling into question how useful the group sees these weapons in advancing its strategic goals. While there has been much alarm about the threat of chemical terror attacks in the West, the authors note the only evidence so far that the Islamic State has transferred its chemical warfare expertise from the battlefield to its foreign terrorism activities is the summer 2017 Sydney hydrogen sulfide plot.

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*Cover: Released Nigerian school girls who were kidnapped from their school in Dapchi, in the northeastern state of Yobe, Nigeria, wait to meet the Nigerian president at the Presidential Villa in Abuja on March 23, 2018. (Philip Ojisua/AFP/Getty Images)*

# The Terrorist Calculus in Kidnapping Girls in Nigeria: Cases from Chibok and Dapchi

By Jacob Zenn

Nearly four years since Boko Haram's kidnapping of 276 schoolgirls in Chibok, Nigeria, Nigerian jihadis again carried out a mass kidnapping—this time of more than 100 schoolgirls in Dapchi in February 2018. The behind-the-scenes maneuvering of the Abubakr Shekau-led group in the aftermath of the Chibok kidnapping showed even the most hardline jihadis were prepared to negotiate. The group behind the new kidnapping—reportedly the Islamic State's Wilayat West Africa led by Abu Musab al-Barnawi—took a different approach than the mercurial and publicity-hungry Shekau. Among other reasons, the Dapchi girls, unlike most of the Chibok girls, were Muslim who from the group's point of view needed to be 'rescued' from and warned about their 'Western' education. With Wilayat West Africa's release of almost all of the girls taken from Dapchi one month after the kidnapping, it has carried out one of the most effective—and most surprising—propaganda coups in the history of the jihadi insurgency in Nigeria while also solidifying its position as the preeminent jihadi force in Nigeria.

More than 15 years ago, in 2002, Abubakr Shekau was among the first members of Boko Haram<sup>a</sup> to retreat from urban society to the rural village of Dapchi, Yobe State, Nigeria, after his co-religionists declared *takfir* (infidelity) on the entire Nigerian population.<sup>1</sup> After clashing with villagers there over fishing rights, Shekau's group retreated to another village called Kanama in Yobe State. In late 2003, however, Nigerian security forces in consultation with Nigerian salafis who originally supported Boko Haram destroyed the group's encampment in Kanama after they realized the group was in contact with al-Qa`ida and the Algerian GSPC<sup>b</sup> and was training for jihad in Nigeria.<sup>2</sup> The village of Dapchi, which had faded into anonymity since 2002, made international

a The group was then commonly called the "Yobe Taliban."

b The GSPC is an acronym for Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat, which was the predecessor to al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and was active from 1998 to 2007.

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headlines after it was confirmed that 111 girls were kidnapped from a school there in February 2018.<sup>3</sup> Four years since Boko Haram's kidnapping of 276 girls in Chibok in April 2014, another hostage crisis played out in Nigeria.

This article provides a chronology of the Chibok kidnapping from the day it occurred through the release of more than 100 girls in October 2016 and May 2017 and explains Boko Haram's internal motivations for negotiating their release. It then makes a number of observations about the more recent Dapchi case. The Dapchi girls were reportedly held by the Islamic State's Wilayat West Africa<sup>c</sup>—and not 'Boko Haram' fighters<sup>d</sup> under the leadership of Abubakr Shekau, who held the Chibok girls—and this resulted in a very different approach than Boko Haram's in the Chibok kidnapping.

## Chronology of the Chibok Kidnapping

This section provides a chronology of five phases of the Chibok kidnapping.

### Phase 1: Kidnapping

On April 14, 2014, Boko Haram kidnapped 276 schoolgirls from their school dormitory in Chibok, Borno State, Nigeria. The jihadis presented themselves as Nigerian soldiers seeking to protect the girls from a Boko Haram attack in order to convince them to leave the school. In the ensuing hours, Boko Haram took the girls in a convoy toward the group's base in Sambisa Forest, Borno State. Fifty-seven of them immediately escaped from the group's convoy when they suspected the "soldiers" were really Boko Haram, but the other 219 schoolgirls were taken to a Boko Haram camp in Sambisa Forest.<sup>4</sup>

### Phase 2: Publicity

On May 5, 2014, while international media was focused on a missing Malaysia Airlines flight from Kuala Lumpur to Beijing, Shekau issued an hour-long video in which he said he would "sell" the girls as "slaves in the market."<sup>5</sup> He also justified slavery in Islam and his

c Islamic State's Wilayat West Africa is also referred to as Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP) or Wilayat Gharb Ifriqiya in Arabic.

d Shekau's fighters operated under the name Jama`at Ahl al-Sunna li-Da`wa wa-l-Jihad from 2009 until Shekau's pledge to the Islamic State in March 2015 when Jama`at Ahl al-Sunna li-Da`wa wa-l-Jihad ceased to exist and became Wilayat West Africa. After the Islamic State promoted Abu Musab al-Barnawi to be the new "governor" of Wilayat West Africa and Shekau was demoted in August 2016, Shekau revived Jama`at Ahl al-Sunna li-Da`wa wa-l-Jihad, which was not part of the Islamic State but has still expressed loyalty to the Islamic State. However, since 2009 Jama`at Ahl al-Sunna li-Da`wa wa-l-Jihad has almost universally been known in the popular press and government circles as "Boko Haram" (which means "Western education is sinful" in the Hausa language). Prior to 2009, the group did not have a consistent name, but was often referred to as the "Yobe Taliban" or "Nigerian Taliban."



*A soldier from the 7th Division of the Nigerian Army stands amidst the ruin of the Government Girls Secondary School Chibok in Borno State in northeastern Nigeria on March 25, 2016. (Stefan Heunis/AFP/Getty Images)*

opposition to “the religion of nationalism, democracy, the constitution, Western education, and all other acts of polytheism.”<sup>6</sup> The international media soon took notice of his claims about the girls as “slaves” and shifted its attention to Boko Haram; three weeks after the actual kidnapping, it became the world’s top news story.<sup>7</sup> Various world leaders and celebrities, among others, promoted a campaign calling for the girls’ freedom, #bringbackourgirls, including most prominently U.S. First Lady Michelle Obama on May 10, 2014.<sup>8</sup>

On May 12, 2014, Boko Haram released a second split-screen video showing Shekau and about 50 of the girls for the first time since the kidnapping.<sup>9</sup> In it, Shekau said, “You [the international community] make noise about Chibok, Chibok” and added that “Allah said we should enslave them.”<sup>10</sup> He also repeated calls that he had made since 2013 for the Nigerian government to release imprisoned Boko Haram members.<sup>11</sup> In the portion of the video showing the girls, they were wearing niqabs, reciting Islamic prayers, and holding the rayat al-uqab flag while a uniformed Boko Haram member asked them their names and hometowns and why they had converted to Islam.

Shekau next spoke about the schoolgirls in a July 2014 video mocking the #bringbackourgirls campaign and the Nigerian army by chanting “bring back our [Nigeria’s] army!”<sup>12</sup> In another video in November 2014, Shekau told the parents of the schoolgirls “not to worry” and said in third-person that, “those girls who Shekau abducted and took to his place six months ago” converted to Islam and “memorized several sections of the Qur’an.”<sup>13</sup> Shekau added

that “we have married them off, and they are in the houses of their husbands.”<sup>14</sup>

#### *Phase 3: Proof-of-Life*

The first time the Chibok girls were seen or heard from publicly after May 12, 2014, was on the two-year anniversary of the Chibok kidnapping on April 14, 2016, when CNN showed an unbranded video of 12 girls wearing black niqabs in front of a wall of a mud-brick house.<sup>15</sup> In this video, like the one on May 12, 2014, the girls stated their names to a uniformed Boko Haram member. They also said that the date was Christmas Day, December 25, 2015.

The next ‘sighting’ of the girls after April 14, 2016, was four months later in a Boko Haram-branded video on August 14, 2016. In that video, a uniformed Boko Haram member spoke in front of about 40 of the girls, one of whom had a baby, and asked some of them to state their names.<sup>16</sup> The Boko Haram member also said some of the girls were killed in Nigerian airstrikes. The video then showed footage of a Nigerian air force plane in the sky and blurred images of dead bodies of girls’ corpses on the ground. It could not be confirmed, however, that the corpses were the Chibok girls, despite the claims of the Boko Haram member.

#### *Phase 4: Deal-Making*

Negotiation breakthroughs occurred on October 13, 2016, when Boko Haram exchanged 21 of the Chibok girls, and on May 7, 2017, when Boko Haram again exchanged 82 of the girls.<sup>17</sup> The 57 girls who escaped in the days immediately after the kidnapping, the 103

girls released in these two exchanges, and three other girls who were found separately with infants outside of Sambisa Forest are the only Chibok girls to have gained their freedom since the kidnapping on April 14, 2014.<sup>18</sup> Because around 10 girls are believed to have died in airstrikes, from disease, or during childbirth, there are about 100 remaining girls in Boko Haram captivity.

#### *Phase 5: Psychological Operations (Psyops)*

Five days after the second exchange for the girls, on May 12, 2017, Boko Haram released a new Boko Haram-branded video of four of the girls wearing black niqabs and face coverings.<sup>19</sup> One of the girls, Maida Yakubu—who in the August 14, 2016, video asked the girls' parents to “beg” the Nigerian government to release Boko Haram members from prison and spare the girls more pain, suffering, and bombardments—held a gun in this new video and said they did not want to return to their families.<sup>20</sup> She also called on her parents to convert to Islam.

The May 12, 2017, video was released alongside another Boko Haram-branded video of five militants training in uniform who said the Chibok girls were exchanged for them along with money provided to Boko Haram, which the Nigerian government had initially denied.<sup>21</sup> One of those five militants, Shuaibu Moni, who called the Nigerian government “liars” and promised “no dialogue (sulh)” in the May 12, 2017, video, released another video on March 7, 2018.<sup>22</sup> In that video, he stood in front of several dozen fighters, called the government “liars” again, and said that Boko Haram was still “fully in control of Sambisa Forest.”<sup>23</sup>

The most recent ‘sighting’ of some of the remaining 100 girls in captivity was in a Boko Haram-branded video on January 15, 2018, showing about 20 of the girls and some of them wearing blue and black niqabs.<sup>24</sup> As in the May 12, 2017, video, one of the girls said she did not want to return home and that “we thank our father, Abubakr Shekau, he is the one who married us to our husbands. We are all living here with dignity. We lack nothing because he gives us everything we want. May Allah accept his devotion; may he die as a faithful Muslim.”<sup>25</sup>

## **Boko Haram Behind-the-Scenes**

This section discusses Boko Haram's strategic calculus in the five phases discussed in the previous section.

#### *Phase 1: Kidnapping*

The current evidence about the Chibok kidnapping suggests that the Boko Haram militants deliberately targeted the dormitory where the girls were sleeping overnight in order to steal appliances, such as a generator, but they made the decision to kidnap the girls on the spot. Nevertheless, since Boko Haram's convoy was large enough to take away 276 girls, presumably the militants anticipated they would also have an opportunity to kidnap a large number of girls.

While at the school, the militants discussed amongst themselves that they would take the girls to Shekau in Sambisa Forest and that Shekau would know what to do with them.<sup>26</sup> In contrast, in prior attacks at boys' schools, Boko Haram had killed all the boys.<sup>27</sup> The Boko Haram commanders may have considered that kidnapping the girls would be acceptable to Shekau because in the months prior to the Chibok kidnapping, he had threatened to target women and had claimed kidnappings of wives of government officials in purported retaliation for the military imprisoning wives of Boko

Haram members.<sup>28</sup>

#### *Phase 2: Publicity*

After Boko Haram kidnapped the Chibok girls, there is little indication that the group intended to use them for propaganda; they were to spend their next few years quietly in custody as Boko Haram used them as wives or “slaves.” Shekau's video on May 5, 2014, for example, mentioned “enslaving” them in passing, and his justification of slavery in that video was only one of several themes along with condemning homosexuality and democracy. This suggests he knew about the kidnapping after they were taken to the Boko Haram camp in Sambisa Forest but did not initially intend to feature them prominently in propaganda.

The timing of Shekau's second video on May 12, 2014, only two days after the international uproar about the Chibok kidnapping reached its peak, suggests that the split-screen video with 50 of the girls was a response to international condemnation of the kidnapping.<sup>e</sup> This type of response was not uncharacteristic for Shekau. He also, for example, declared in a video that President Obama was a “terrorist in the next world” weeks after the United States designated Shekau a terrorist on June 21, 2012.<sup>29</sup> Since there is little evidence that Boko Haram was actively negotiating terms for the girls' release by May 12, 2014, it is likely that the split-screen video with Shekau and the Chibok girls was related more to Shekau's megalomania and desire for publicity than as a tactic to pressure the government to negotiate for the girls.<sup>30</sup>

#### *Phase 3: Proof-of-Life*

CNN's obtaining of the video clips of the 12 girls, which it showed on the two-year anniversary of the kidnapping on April 14, 2016, followed the Nigerian government reaching out to one of the few Nigerians who had Boko Haram's trust, Ahmed Salkida.<sup>f</sup> Salkida is a convert to Islam and a journalist who reported on Boko Haram from before the start of the insurgency in 2009. He returned from exile in the United Arab Emirates to Nigeria and became the first non-Boko Haram member to arrange a face-to-face meeting with Shekau at the Boko Haram camp in Sambisa Forest and to see the Chibok girls.<sup>31</sup> It is unclear whether the April 14, 2016, video released by CNN was taken during Salkida's visit, but he did bring back to the Nigerian government several videos of the girls, including some Boko Haram-branded videos of them that the group has not publicly released.<sup>32</sup>

One of Salkida's main points of contact in Boko Haram had been a militant called Abu Zinnira. Salkida established contact with Abu Zinnira from before the start of the insurgency in 2009. At that time, Abu Zinnira was a follower of Shekau's predecessor and the Boko Haram leader from 2004 until 2009, Muhammed Yusuf, and

e Google trends, for instance, show that searches for “Chibok” only began rising on April 28, 2014, and reached a peak on May 10, 2014, when U.S. First Lady Michelle Obama showed support for the “#bringbackourgirls” campaign. “Michelle Obama raises pressure over kidnapped schoolgirls,” *Guardian*, May 11, 2014.

f The author has viewed the original full versions of two videos of the Chibok girls, which were condensed into one shorter clip that CNN showed on April 14, 2016. Joe Parkinson and Drew Hinshaw, “Nigeria Brought Back Its Girls—Now Comes the Hard Part,” *Wall Street Journal*, February 2, 2018; Joe Parkinson and Drew Hinshaw, “Freedom for the World's Most Famous Hostages Came at a Heavy Price,” *Wall Street Journal*, December 22, 2017.

Yusuf was so fond of Salkida that he wanted Salkida to not just cover Boko Haram as a journalist but to also be the group's media head.<sup>33</sup> Abu Zinnira was the Boko Haram member who likely also interviewed the girls in the May 12, 2014, Boko Haram-branded video and the April 14, 2016, CNN-released video, especially considering the voice, tone, and style of the interviewer were similar in both videos, and Abu Zinnira was the only spokesperson who Shekau explicitly designated for that position after 2013.<sup>35</sup>

The April 14, 2016, proof-of-life video ended up making it into the hands of a select group of organizations involved in the negotiations or efforts to treat the Chibok girls before being released by CNN, including the Embassy of Switzerland and Médecins Sans Frontières.<sup>34</sup> The proof-of-life video confirmed to Nigerian president Muhammadu Buhari that the Chibok girls were alive. Buhari then authorized a ransom payment for the Chibok girls under the condition it would lead to a comprehensive peace agreement.<sup>35</sup>

#### *Phase 4: Deal-Making*

At the time that CNN made public the two-year anniversary proof-of-life videos of the Chibok girls on April 14, 2016, the Swiss government had started a track of negotiation in coordination with Nigerian barrister Zanna Mustapha, who had been introduced to the Swiss.<sup>36</sup> Mustapha was the former lawyer of Muhammed Yusuf and ran an orphanage and school that even aided children of Boko Haram members. Therefore, like Salkida, he had the contacts and trust of Boko Haram members.<sup>37</sup>

By 2016, key changes in group dynamics were unfolding that had a significant impact on the negotiations. The origins of these changes dated to as early as February 2015 when former al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)-aligned Boko Haram members, such as Mamman Nur, threatened to split from Boko Haram if Shekau did not pledge loyalty to the Islamic State.<sup>38</sup> After receiving this threat, Shekau made the pledge to the Islamic State in March 2015, which led to the group's rebranding as Wilayat West Africa.

In August 2016, however, Wilayat West Africa itself split, and Shekau was demoted from the leadership of Wilayat West Africa by the Islamic State.<sup>39</sup> One reason for the demotion was that Shekau engaged in the kidnapping of Muslims, which Mamman Nur told Shekau was unacceptable according to the guidance from the Islamic State.<sup>40</sup> According to Nur, the Islamic State ordered Wilayat West Africa to only kidnap "unbelievers," such as the Christian Chibok girls, but that Muslim men or women who committed apostasy, such as voting in democratic elections, could only be killed if they did not repent.<sup>41</sup>

g The author learned from his involvement in an organizational mapping project about Boko Haram that Salkida's main point of contact was Abu Zinnira and that Abu Zinnira had been a member of the group since before Muhammed Yusuf's death in July 2009. Shekau had announced Abu Zinnira as the new Boko Haram spokesperson in March 2013 in a split-screen video that Boko Haram released showing Shekau and a French family of seven who were kidnapped in Cameroon and subsequently exchanged for \$3 million to Boko Haram. Abu Zinnira subsequently released Boko Haram videos on YouTube in his name, including one in February 2015 just before Shekau's pledge to the Islamic State and another as late as September 2016. Presumably, the relationship between Abu Zinnira and Ahmed Salkida developed as a result of their mutual media acumen. "New Boko Haram video released of kidnapped French family emerges," YouTube, March 21, 2013; Tim Cocks, "Nigerian Islamists got \$3.15 million to free French hostages: document," Reuters, April 26, 2013.

Nur and Shekau both submitted their theological arguments on "slavery" and other issues to the Islamic State. The Islamic State agreed with Nur's interpretations, which is one reason why the Islamic State named Nur-allied Abu Musab al-Barnawi, who is Muhammed Yusuf's son, as the Wilayat West Africa "governor" on August 3, 2016.<sup>42</sup> Notwithstanding Shekau's complaints that Abu Musab al-Barnawi—who controlled the communication line to the Islamic State—had blocked Shekau's messages to the Islamic State, which meant the Islamic State could not hear his side of the story, Shekau accepted the demotion while still professing loyalty to Abu-bakr al-Baghdadi. Shekau then immediately revived Boko Haram on August 3, 2016, after it had ceased to exist since March 2015. He thus became the Boko Haram leader again.<sup>43</sup>

It was less than two weeks after Shekau's demotion that the August 14, 2016, video of the girls was released. It was the first time the girls had appeared publicly in a Boko Haram-branded video since May 12, 2014. The close timing of Shekau's demotion from Wilayat West Africa and the release of this video suggests that the two incidents were related. Moreover, because the voice, tone, and style of the militant who interviewed the girls in the video on August 14, 2016, resembled that of the May 12, 2014, Boko Haram video and April 14, 2016, unbranded CNN-released video, it possible that Abu Zinnira produced all three videos.

One possibility is that after Shekau's demotion from Wilayat West Africa, he needed money and ordered Abu Zinnira to issue the video of the girls on August 14, 2016, in order to pressure the Nigerian government to make a financial exchange for them. Another possibility is that Abu Zinnira was among the Boko Haram fighters who were leaning toward defecting to Wilayat West Africa under the leadership of Abu Musab al-Barnawi after Shekau's demotion on August 3, 2016, and that he was holding some of the girls independent of Shekau's authority. He may have then issued the video without Shekau's approval to either receive money for himself or for Wilayat West Africa to which he intended to defect and because, like Wilayat West Africa, he found it unacceptable to keep Muslim girls as "slaves." Consistent with this latter possibility is the fact that by December 2016, Shekau told his commanders in an audio that has since been leaked that he killed Abu Zinnira for "conspiring" with Mamman Nur.<sup>44</sup>

While there is no direct evidence Abu Zinnira unilaterally released the footage on August 14, 2016, in the period prior to the video's release Shekau was struggling to maintain full control of even his loyalists. The barrister Zanna Mustapha, for example, had learned that Shekau was fearing being assassinated by his commanders.<sup>45</sup> In the December 2016 audio from Shekau to his commanders, Shekau seemed paranoid and even said that he believed Mamman Nur implanted a tracking device on him to assassinate him and Shekau admitted he was having problems with his deputy, Man Chari.<sup>46</sup> Shekau's demotion from Wilayat West Africa leadership on August 3, 2016, was also preceded by Abu Musab al-Barnawi- and Mamman Nur-loyal fighters clashing with Shekau loyalists with a reported 400 militants killed.<sup>47</sup>

Further circumstantial evidence pointing to the possibility that it was militants other than Shekau who released the video on August 14, 2016, was the fact that Shekau loyalists who remained in Boko Haram, such as Abu Zinnira, were considering a mutiny over Shekau's refusal to exchange the girls.<sup>48</sup> They were increasingly concerned that the girls (and their infants) were a drain on the group because they required food, lodging, medical treatment, and trans-

port during periods of military pressure, especially those who did not convert to Islam and take husbands.<sup>49</sup> In sum, although Shekau has always dominated Boko Haram media and appeared in virtually all of the group's videos, the August 14, 2016, video may be one of the few that did not receive Shekau's approval. Rather, Abu Zinnira may have released the video because he wanted to renew attention on the girls and prove they were alive so a deal could be made.

The actual deal to release the first 21 girls in October 2016 was approved by Shekau in an exchange to Boko Haram for one million euro.<sup>50</sup> (Boko Haram added one extra girl from the original 20 as a goodwill gesture for barrister Zanna Mustapha's caring for children of Boko Haram members.) That the negotiations continued despite Shekau's killing of Abu Zinnira indicates there were others in contact with negotiators beyond Abu Zinnira. Since Abu Zinnira was one of Salkida's main points of contact, it may therefore have been Zanna Mustapha's contact who liaised with Shekau on the final terms of negotiation.

The second group of 82 girls released in May 2017 reportedly included all of the remaining girls who 'wanted' to leave Boko Haram and was a follow-up to the 'trust-building' of the first exchange in October 2016. In this exchange, Zanna Mustapha collected the girls from a group of uniformed Boko Haram fighters in the bush near a Boko Haram camp, and the group received two million euro and five Boko Haram imprisoned commanders, including Shuaibu Moni. Ahmed Salkida selected Moni and the four other commanders for their low enough standing in Boko Haram so as to not threaten Shekau's leadership but not so low that Shekau would lose face for receiving "nobodies" in exchange for the Chibok girls.<sup>51</sup> It seems likely given the delicate dance required to win the release of the girls that Zanna Mustapha and Salkida were coordinating together throughout the negotiation process, although likely indirectly at most times, as well as with the Embassy of Switzerland and International Committee of the Red Cross, which accompanied Zanna Mustapha to the bush to retrieve the girls.<sup>52</sup> After the exchanges, Zanna Mustapha said in an interview that Salkida was like his "younger brother."<sup>53</sup>

#### *Phase 5: Psychological Operations (Psyops)*

If there was any element of truth in Boko Haram's claim that all the Chibok girls who wanted to leave the group did so in the second exchange (the second deal was intended to achieve the release of all girls who wanted to leave), then the Boko Haram-branded videos on May 12, 2017, and on January 15, 2018, featuring girls who said they did not want to return home could reflect at least some of the girls' genuine feelings, even if they have Stockholm Syndrome.<sup>i</sup> The latter occurred with some girls kidnapped by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in Uganda and was experienced by some freed Chibok girls, according to psychologists who work with them.<sup>54</sup> Some

of the girls who did leave have said that the girls became divided in the Boko Haram camp, with some girls marrying Boko Haram members to get better treatment and giving birth to children, for example, and then reporting on violations committed by the "unmarried" and still Christian girls, such as their writing in diaries.<sup>55</sup> Nevertheless, the May 12, 2017, and January 15, 2018, videos could also signal to potential negotiators that the negotiations are now closed because Boko Haram is unwilling to even consider exchanges of "wives" of Boko Haram members who now also have children.

#### **The Dapchi Girls**

In light of the above review of the Chibok kidnapping, it is worth examining how the Dapchi case played out, including the operation, the perpetrators, the benefits accrued to Wilayat West Africa, and the long-term implications of how it came to an end. First, the operation to kidnap the Dapchi girls on February 18, 2018, was eerily similar to the Chibok kidnapping and may possess some 'institutional memory' of that operation. As in Chibok, the Dapchi kidnapping occurred when a convoy of trucks rolled into the school and militants in army fatigues tricked the girls by saying, "Stop, stop! We are not Boko Haram! We are soldiers, get into our vehicles. We will save you" from an alleged imminent Boko Haram attack.<sup>56</sup> While some girls suspected a ruse when they saw "Allah Akhbar" written on one of the vehicles in the convoy and escaped over the school's walls, over 100 other girls were not so fortunate.<sup>57</sup>

The Nigerian government's response in Dapchi was also similar to the Chibok kidnapping. Officials initially claimed that all girls in the school escaped or were rescued, but they later admitted to the media and the girls' parents that 111 girls were kidnapped from the school.<sup>58</sup> This also suggests crisis communications, let alone the defense of schools, has not improved much, if at all, since the Chibok kidnapping.

Second, although the perpetrators in Dapchi may have duplicated some aspects of the Chibok kidnapping by Boko Haram, the location of Dapchi in Yobe State is relatively far from Chibok and suggests this kidnapping was more likely Wilayat West Africa than Boko Haram.<sup>j</sup> In addition, although Shekau in previous years claimed direct command over attacks in Yobe State, since the Wilayat West Africa split and Shekau's revival of Boko Haram on August 3, 2016, Wilayat West Africa has been the primary jihadi actor in Yobe State and the Dapchi environs. On January 5, 2018, for example, Wilayat West Africa released photos of a raid on a barracks in Kanama—the village near Dapchi where the Nigerian security forces destroyed Boko Haram's encampment in late 2003—after the Islamic State's Amaq News Agency claimed the raid on January 1, 2018.<sup>59</sup> Wilayat West Africa also claimed killing 12 soldiers in another attack in Kanama on October 26, 2017.<sup>60</sup> Wilayat West Africa has also claimed a number of raids in Niger, including killing 25 and 15 Nigerian soldiers in Toumour and Chetimari, Diffa Region, in January 2018, which are not far from the Nigerian border and towns such as Kanama and Dapchi.<sup>61</sup> In contrast, Boko Haram militants in videos since August 3, 2016, such as with Shuaibu Moni, have purported to be in Sambisa Forest, and their recent attacks

h Shuaibu Moni said in the May 12, 2017, Boko Haram video that "I was captured by you infidels in Gombe because I detonated bombs in your infidel lands," but there are no other details on when he was arrested or what his specific role was in Boko Haram.

i Stockholm Syndrome is a condition experienced by people who are held hostage for a long period of time, during which they become attached to their captors as a survival mechanism. This attachment is based on the often unconscious idea that the captor will not hurt them if they are cooperative and even supportive. Els de Temmerman, "When captives get attached to captors," *New Vision*, May 20, 2006.

j This would also be consistent with the fact that some individuals close to Boko Haram reported that Wilayat West Africa carried out the kidnapping in Dapchi. "Mama Boko Haram begs Abu Musab Al-Barnawi to release Dapchi Girls," *Vanguard*, February 27, 2018.

outside of Sambisa—often suicide bombings— have extended only as far as Maiduguri in Borno State.

If Wilayat West Africa indeed carried out the Dapchi operation, it could suggest that the kidnappers who have ‘institutional memory’ of the Chibok kidnapping are former Boko Haram members who chose to join Wilayat West Africa after the split on August 3, 2016. This could also explain why Shekau appears to no longer have fighters in Yobe State.

Third, the timing of the Dapchi kidnapping less than one year after the second Chibok girls’ exchange and amid growing media reports of the three million euro ransom to Boko Haram could suggest that the perpetrators recognized the financial benefit they could receive for ransoming the schoolgirls.<sup>62</sup> While Wilayat West Africa receives income from taxing fisheries along Lake Chad, the group does not appear—at least from the existing evidence, including some of its now public internal communications with the Islamic State—to be receiving any substantial or consistent funding from the Islamic State.<sup>63</sup> If Wilayat West Africa is short on funds, then one of the purposes of the Dapchi kidnapping may have been to provide a financial boost for the group. The government’s history of retracted denials on numerous issues during the Chibok kidnapping and the first days of the Dapchi kidnapping creates questions about its current denials of unconfirmed reports that it paid five million euro and released Wilayat West Africa prisoners in exchange for Wilayat West Africa releasing the Dapchi girls.<sup>k</sup>

Moreover, even before the Dapchi kidnapping there was precedent for Wilayat West Africa kidnapping-for-ransom operations. The group kidnapped professors from University of Maiduguri in 2016 who were on an oil exploration mission north of Maiduguri and exchanged them for an undisclosed sum of money only one week before the Dapchi kidnapping.<sup>64</sup> This could have inspired the group to continue kidnappings, albeit with a more ‘lucrative’ target in Dapchi—the schoolgirls.

Despite the obvious financial incentives, arguably Wilayat West Africa’s main benefits from the Dapchi kidnapping came from a weeklong ceasefire with the Nigerian government, holding out the possibility for a longer-term arrangement that would take the pressure off the group and allow it to consolidate its position in its strongholds in northeastern Nigeria. Another benefit was the positive publicity the group received after freeing the girls, which differed from the way that Boko Haram freed the girls in the Chibok kidnapping. If Wilayat West Africa held hostage the Dapchi girls indefinitely, it would have faced an ideological conundrum because all but one of the girls in Dapchi were Muslim, unlike the Chibok girls who were primarily Christian. Mamman Nur, the formerly AQIM-aligned and now Wilayat West Africa mentor of Abu Musab al-Barnawi, for example, told Shekau before the August 3, 2016, split that the Islamic State disapproved of Boko Haram “enslaving” Muslim women (only Christians could be “enslaved”), which means that Wilayat West Africa could only justify the Dapchi kidnapping on the grounds that the group “rescued” the Muslim Dapchi girls from Western education.

To live up to its purported ideology, Wilayat West Africa, therefore, released all of the surviving girls (five girls reportedly suffo-

cated in a vehicle immediately after the kidnapping), except the one Christian girl, back to their families in Dapchi and warned the villagers to “not ever put their daughters in school again.”<sup>65</sup> Wilayat West Africa kept the Christian girl hostage because in their view it is permissible to “enslave” her until she converts to Islam which, according to reports of the freed Dapchi girls, she has refused.<sup>66</sup> It is also possible that Wilayat West Africa leaders, such as Mamman Nur and Abu Musab al-Barnawi, are based in the group’s strongholds in Borno and a faction of the group (perhaps the formerly Shekau-loyal fighters in Yobe) conducted the kidnapping just as Boko Haram had in Chibok. The leadership of Nur and Abu Musab al-Barnawi may have then demanded that the faction release the girls, while also seeking some compensation in return. In addition to reported ransom money and released prisoners, this included the weeklong ceasefire.<sup>67</sup>

The camera-shy Abu Musab al-Barnawi, who unlike Shekau has never revealed his face (Nur has also not revealed his face since 2009), did not need to boisterously claim the Dapchi kidnapping like Shekau did in the Chibok kidnapping to also score a major propaganda victory. Instead when his fighters returned to Dapchi to free the girls they received “praise” and a “rousing reception,” according to headlines in Nigerian publications that linked to a video clip and photograph of villagers racing toward the convoy of uniformed Wilayat West Africa soldiers dropping off the girls.<sup>68</sup> This is the first time since the start of the insurgency in 2009 that the jihadis have mingled so publicly and so ‘positively’ with villagers in Nigeria, especially in areas that are clearly held by the government. In a November 22, 2014, message, members of Abu Musab al-Barnawi’s media team in Boko Haram had written to Islamic State intermediaries to convey they took a “hearts and mind” approach to the civilian population and distanced themselves from some Shekau-claimed attacks.<sup>l</sup> This appears to have been borne out in Abu Musab al-Barnawi’s ‘softer’ handling of the Dapchi kidnapping compared to the way Shekau approached the Chibok kidnapping.<sup>69</sup>

That Wilayat West Africa held the Dapchi girls for one month and moved them around without detection, reportedly even up to or across the border with Niger, also suggests that the jihadis have high maneuverability and are far from being on their “last legs,” as President Buhari claimed in December 2017.<sup>70</sup> A government ceasefire with Wilayat West Africa could also serve to further allow the group to consolidate its presence in territories in Yobe and Borno. Paradoxically, if as a result of a longer term ceasefire with Wilayat West Africa, the Nigerian army focuses on Shekau, it could even lead fighters who are frustrated with Shekau to defect to Wilayat West Africa, thus strengthening Abu Musab al-Barnawi’s hand.

Despite their rivalry and mutual rejection of the name “Boko Haram” that is ascribed to them, Wilayat West Africa and Boko Haram (whose real name is Jama`at Ahl al-Sunna li-Da`wa wa-l-Jihad) agree on certain fundamentals, including the impermissibility of Western-style education and what they perceive as Christian proselytizing through international humanitarian organizations.<sup>71</sup> The attacks of both groups are having a significant impact on both of these institutions in northeastern Nigeria. Recently, for example, an

k As of March 22, 2018, one Christian girl was still in custody. “Nigerian Govt Lied, 5 Million Euros, Boko Haram Fighters, Swapped for Dapchi Girls,” Sahara Reporters, March 21, 2018; “Dapchi girls: 5 of our students died on day of attack – Fasima, released girl,” *Vanguard*, March 22, 2018.

l Abu Musab al-Barnawi was the self-declared Boko Haram “spokesperson” by November 22, 2014, although Abu Zinnira was still Shekau’s personal ‘spokesperson’ at the time. Though Abu Musab al-Barnawi and Shekau were both in Boko Haram and Shekau was the recognized group leader, they were in different factions of Boko Haram even then.



attack in Rann, Borno State on March 2, 2018, killed three International Organization for Migration (IOM) employees and forced the IOM to halt operations there.<sup>72</sup> And after the Dapchi kidnapping, boarding schools in 25 of 27 local government areas in Borno (all except for Maiduguri and Biu) were reportedly shut down for fear of another “Chibok” or “Dapchi.”<sup>73</sup>

This means both groups are shaping the environment in north-eastern Nigeria through a mix of violence and threats while Wilayat West Africa introduces people in its territories to the theology of Abu Musab al-Barnawi (and therefore also the Islamic State) and exposes ‘students’ to jihadi military education from a young age.<sup>m</sup>

m Wilayat West Africa’s Telegram account has released audio sermons by Abu Musab al-Barnawi in which he interprets sermons from the Islamic State in Hausa language to local audiences in Borno. Abu Musab al-Barnawi’s media team also released photos of children training in shooting guns in the run-up to Shekau’s pledge to the Islamic State.

These are among the reasons why Wilayat West Africa poses the main long-term threat in Nigeria compared to Boko Haram. Nigerian scholar Moses Ochonu articulated most precisely the threat of Wilayat West Africa on the day of the release of the Dapchi girls when he wrote:

“Abu Musab al-Barnawi is infinitely more dangerous and more threatening to Nigeria’s sovereignty than Shekau, who is his own enemy and is wont to self-destruct. With today’s release, similar acts of pretend goodwill in the past, and by refraining from wanton killings and embarking on community reassurance gestures, al-Barnawi is quietly normalizing ... Boko Haram, or at least his faction of it [Wilayat West Africa]. His jihad has the potential to become mainstreamed, rehabilitated, accepted at the Muslim grassroots, and eventually naturalized. That would be a nightmare scenario for Nigeria.”<sup>74</sup> **CTC**

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# A View from the CT Foxhole: Lieutenant Colonel Kent Solheim, Commander, 3rd Battalion, 3rd Special Forces Group

By Bryan Price

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*Lieutenant Colonel Kent G. Solheim has been the Commander of 3rd Battalion, 3rd Special Forces Group (Airborne) since June 2016. He has served in a variety of roles within the Special Forces community, deploying numerous times to Iraq and Afghanistan. Most recently, Lieutenant Colonel Solheim served as the Special Operations Command Forward North and West Africa Deputy Commanding Officer, and the Commander of the Special Operations Command and Control Element for SOF units in North and West Africa. From 2014 to 2016, he was assigned to the Combating Terrorism Center at the United States Military Academy.*

*The views expressed in this article do not necessarily reflect those of the Combating Terrorism Center, United States Military Academy, Department of Defense, or U.S. Government.*

**CTC: You have now fought in three very distinct conflict zones: Africa, Iraq, and Afghanistan. What are some of the common challenges that you have encountered in each of these areas? What have been some of the biggest differences?**

**Solheim:** There are certainly commonalities in the challenges that are woven in each of these conflict zones. First, each of these zones are faced with an asymmetric and adapting threat that loosely share ideological banners. Second, the internal conditions in these places help to empower sub-state actors. Governments generally lack the ability to care for the basic needs of the populations they are governing, and governments do not control portions of their territories.

I believe the biggest differences between Iraq, Afghanistan, and Africa exist in the strategies sub-state groups must use in response to conditions, and the level of support that sub-state actors in North and West Africa receive as compared to conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Unlike Iraq, many of the countries in Africa, although still extremely diverse in ethnic, religious, linguistic, and intercommunal tensions, maintain some degree of nationalism and are generally unified in a collective disdain for insurgency and terrorism. Fissures like the Sunni and Shi`a rift that al-Qa`ida and later ISIS exploited in Iraq are not as prevalent, and this plays in the favor of the state. ISIS was unable to recycle this tactic in Libya and lost their hold in Sirte.

Additionally, the insurgent groups in North and West Africa lack the level of external support that groups like the Taliban benefit from. This includes moral, political, and material support, as well as sanctuary. Without these types of support, insurgent groups face much greater challenges in achieving their goals. Boko Haram and ISIS-West Africa are largely contained to the northeast of Nigeria. They will remain a threat and a drain on the region, but their containment is attributable to both the pressures of security forces of the Lake Chad Basin countries, and the VEOs' [violent extremist groups'] lack of external support.

**CTC: When you took command of your battalion, they had recently been reassigned from Afghanistan to Africa. How were you able to help prepare your soldiers to this new mission set?**

**Solheim:** The battalion and 3rd Special Forces Group as a whole assessed the mission and challenges of Africa, and training was tailored for these distinctive conditions. In this new area of operations, Special Operations Forces are often operating in very austere conditions and in extremely remote locations that present challenges for resupply, medical evacuation, and the distribution of limited resources. Teams must be capable of self-sustaining, prolonged medical field care, mobility in challenging and harsh conditions, and have a grasp of the language and culture specific to the assigned operational area.

Our soldiers also needed to prepare themselves to operate in the Joint, Interagency, Intergovernmental, and Multinational environment. Our successes in Africa are not only tied to what we accomplish advising and assisting security forces, but also our ability to work closely and effectively with the U.S. Department of State, European partners, other U.S. government agencies, African systems of government, etc. These transactions occur daily and share primacy in mission success. We needed to prepare ourselves to effectively manage these relationships, and this required dedicated training and investment.

**CTC: One of the missions we are undertaking in Africa is the development of local security forces' capability to fight against terrorist organizations. What are the biggest challenges in executing this mission? What opportunities do forming and developing these new partnerships present for the United States?**

**Solheim:** This mission is very challenging. Our African partners are at war, but we are not. We execute a wide range of roles to include training, equipping, advising, assisting, and at times accompanying our partner force, but our success is measured through what our partner forces are able to accomplish. There are many competing interests in the Joint, Interagency, Intergovernmental, and Multinational environment that are characteristic in this mission. Understanding these interests and navigating them are critically important, but at times the challenges this poses can be debilitating. We must also understand that the drivers of instability are often going unchecked, and legitimate security, effective governance, and improving development are essential to countering the VEO narrative and threat in the region. Unfortunately, these challenges will likely remain for the foreseeable future. Finally, Africa is an economy of force mission, where resources are understandably subject to competing requirements across the globe. Our forces do more with less, and constrained resources becomes a limiting factor on impending results.

Even within the confines of these challenges, persistent engage-

ments applied in the right places with the right security forces have and will continue to produce tactical victories that have strategic implications. Our support and training enable more effective and sustained counterinsurgency/counter-VEO operations. We are building trust and relationships with foreign security force partners and governments that are critical, and are best built long before an in-extremis event. We are influencing our partners' actions. The more we prepare and influence how the government and security forces respond to the threats they face, the greater the burden will be on the VEO. Finally, SOF elements in Africa are directly contributing to the continuous pressure that we and our allies are putting on VEOs. We have learned that we can degrade the capabilities of VEOs when we apply pressure through our training and partnership. Conversely, when VEOs have freedom of maneuver, their capabilities grow.

**CTC:** As the commander of soldiers getting ready to undertake difficult mission sets in Africa, an area that is not usually on the front page of the newspaper unless something goes wrong, how do you help your soldiers maintain a high level of motivation about the importance of the mission to develop the capacity of local forces?

**Solheim:** The mission in Africa is not unique in that Special Operations Forces are conducting similar missions of advising and assisting foreign militaries globally every day, which—more often than not—are absent from the headlines. Our forces are uniquely designed to operate in small teams for extended periods of time in the most challenging of environments, and Africa exercises all of these capabilities. The battalion has embraced the mission. We have had time to usher in the culture shift from conducting the combat roles that the unit had conducted in the previous 13+ years, to the much different role we have assumed in Africa, and we understand the importance of what we are doing. 3rd Special Forces Group has also now established tenure on the continent, and the battalion will soon be departing for their third rotation in Africa. The soldiers have been able to see the benefits of persistent and focused efforts that have created positive effects throughout the region.

**CTC:** Special Operations Forces have been placed at the center of today's fight against violent extremist organizations and are being relied on more than ever. What impact has this reliance had on the SOF community? Is there a risk of over-reliance, or is the current balance manageable?

**Solheim:** Special Operations Forces have and will continue to feel the strain of a high operational tempo inherent with the current reliance on USSOCOM units, having seen continuous combat operations and high operational tempo for the last 16 years. Although the pace varies between the different entities within Special Operations Forces as well as assigned areas of operations, the overall tradeoffs presented by this high OPTEMPO<sup>a</sup> can't be ignored.

**CTC:** In January, Secretary Mattis stated he is seeking ways to leverage “common capabilities” that conventional forces have developed in an effort to use “more general purpose forces for



*Lieutenant Colonel Kent Solheim*

some of the missions” that have traditionally been the purview of SOF soldiers. How can (or should) conventional forces be leveraged in this type of campaign?

**Solheim:** Special Operations Forces operators are highly trained and capable, with skills that are applicable to certain mission sets more than others. Since the demand signal for SOF forces has increased, so too has the range of missions that they have been asked to accomplish to the degree that not all of our current missions require a SOF solution. If conventional forces were able to assume some of these roles that are compatible to their strengths and capabilities, this would help reduce some of the operational strain that SOF are experiencing. Although Foreign Internal Defense is a core task of SOF, conventional forces also possess capabilities to conduct this mission, and they should be applied where suitable. The Security Force Assistance Brigades are also templated to assume roles of advise and assist missions that will likely allow SOF to better focus on missions more specifically tailored to their advanced and specific capabilities.

**CTC:** Based on your recent time focused on threats in Africa, where would you place the threat that jihadi groups pose in general in the Sahara and Sahel? To what degree do they pose a threat to U.S. interests?

**Solheim:** Recent history has taught us that VEOs will continue to try and control territory as AQAP did in Yemen in 2012, as AQIM did in Mali in 2012, and more recently as ISIS did in Syria, Libya, and Iraq. The jihadi groups in the Sahara and the Sahel pose this type of threat. Continuous pressure on them is critical.

The greatest threat that I see in Africa is this threat of increased instability that would push already weak and failing states into a general collapse. North and West Africa is ripe with deep-rooted governmental, societal, and climate issues—cataclysmic climatic change—that make this area of the continent susceptible to the

a Operational tempo

VEO narrative and the consequences associated with their proliferation. To state it another way, the VEOs are only one of many problems that these countries face, but the VEO actions in countries like Niger, Nigeria, and Mali are causing varying levels of internal state disruption that if left unchecked, could become the downward tipping point. The loss of this fragile balance and the subsequent security vacuum would pose a threat to U.S. interests, particularly in countries as regionally powerful as Nigeria.

**CTC: What should the public understand about what Special Operations Forces are doing in the region?**

**Solheim:** The public should understand that the environment in which SOF is operating in Africa is volatile, complex, and very ambiguous. The security threats there exist because of, among other things, the lack of foreign governmental reach both in terms of security and a lack of governance. SOF efforts are only one piece of addressing the problem, and our efforts must be nested within the much larger comprehensive approach to create stability.

It is also important to understand that the problems in Africa will not be resolved quickly, and given the depths and complexities of the problems, may never see resolution in absolute. Instead, SOF will likely continue to be the force of choice, and persistent and enduring engagement by SOF will likely be required.

**CTC: The CTC has been fortunate to have an affiliation with you for a number of years now. Can you speak a little to the importance and challenge of bridging the “academic,” often strategic-level approach of the CTC with the needs of the warfighter?**

**Solheim:** Throughout this interview, questions and answers have often focused on the complexities of the problems that SOF faces.

This issue of complex problems is not just a phenomenon for SOF in Africa, but in most of the places SOF are operating. Our forces are working in the most complex environments. In these environments, the threats are transnational, mobile, adaptive, and illusive, and devising approaches and plans to solve them require a holistic look that tries to determine possible actions to minimize uncertain consequences and conditions that are dynamic and independent of another. Framing and understanding of these types of problems and developing approaches and solutions require the type of research and theoretical rigor that the CTC has the time, space, resources, and expertise to analyze. The CTC has access to a multitude of perspectives through policymakers, executive-level leadership, academia, and others. The value of the relationship between academia and the strategic-level approach of the CTC [to] the needs of the warfighter is best characterized by the critical information that the CTC provides this warfighter that may otherwise not be considered.

**CTC: You are the founder of Gold Star Teen Adventures, an organization dedicated to providing healing, mentorship, development, and opportunity to the children of Special Operations service members who lost their lives in the line of duty. As the war against terrorists continues and in some cases expands into new theaters, can you speak to why you see serving the needs of families as a critical part of our nation’s effort?**

**Solheim:** Having been in the military for 23 years and also having worked with Gold Star children since 2011, I have become intimately aware of the enormous sacrifices that these families have made and the challenges they endure after the death of a parent. I have also seen that making a positive difference in their lives is possible. I believe that we have a responsibility to take care of these families, and to do so as long as the need exists. **CTC**

# Black Banners in Somalia: The State of al-Shabaab's Territorial Insurgency and the Specter of the Islamic State

By Christopher Anzalone

For the past year and a half, al-Shabaab has continued to take advantage of the ongoing political and security turmoil between Somalia's federal government, regional state administrations, and other powerful social groups, including the country's clans and sub-clans and minority groups. Militarily, the jihadi-insurgent group retains significant capabilities to launch a range of attacks targeting both military and "soft" targets, including major suicide-vehicle bombings inside the most secure areas of the country such as central Mogadishu. In 2017, the group also overran a number of African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) and Somali government military bases and forcefully reasserted itself in the northern Puntland region. Meanwhile, the Islamic State in Somalia, al-Shabaab's main jihadi competitor, continues to lag behind it in terms of numbers, military capabilities, and media reach, though there are recent signs that the Islamic State-Somalia has been able to penetrate more deeply into the Afgooye area to the west of the capital and outside of its Puntland base.

The election of Somali President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed "Farmajo" in February 2017 was greeted with hopes that he would be able to bring about real political change and improvements in national security. He vowed to defeat the al-Shabaab insurgency and secure the country in two years and called on the insurgents to surrender, offering them amnesty.<sup>1a</sup> Despite his promise and signs of some political headway between the Somali federal and Somali regional state governments, together with a notable increase in di-

a President Farmajo promised that those insurgents who surrendered would be rehabilitated and trained to both rejoin mainstream Somali society and be ready for regular employment.

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rect U.S. military involvement on the ground since the start of the Trump administration, the situation in Somalia remains unsettled and al-Shabaab today is arguably in the strongest and most stable organizational and territorial state that it has been in since the group's "golden age" between 2009 and early 2011.<sup>b</sup> In 2017, the militant group continued to carry out deadly attacks throughout the country including in its most secure area, central Mogadishu. It also dramatically reasserted its territorial reach by moving back into spaces abandoned by AMISOM and Somali government forces and continuing to launch coordinated, mass attacks on enemy military bases throughout 2017.

In addition to maintaining relatively strong organizational and operational stability and reach—complete with the capable Amniyat internal security apparatus, the frontline Jaysh al-Uusra, and the domestic Jaysh al-Hisba security forces—al-Shabaab in 2018 also continues to take advantage of ongoing political infighting and the often competing interests of the country's different political and social actors including clan/sub-clan leaders, politicians, and businesspeople. Al-Shabaab's emir, Ahmed "Abu Ubayda" Umar, succeeded the late Ahmed Godane upon the latter's death in a U.S. airstrike on September 1, 2014. The group's senior leadership and civil regional administrators and military commanders have remained largely loyal despite a period of severe internal dissension between 2012 and 2014 and the rise of the Islamic State and its attempts, which began in earnest in 2015, to set up its own foothold in Somalia.

This article examines al-Shabaab's organizational state, including its strengths and potential weaknesses, through an analysis of

b Since the start of the Trump administration, the United States has carried out over 40 airstrikes against al-Shabaab and Islamic State-Somalia. In early 2018, there have also been signs of some political progress between the Somali federal and regional state governments on a number of issues, including security cooperation, resource sharing, and preparations for national elections scheduled for 2020. If this early progress is successfully sustained and expanded, it may lead to an improvement in the overall security situation by increasing stability and luring away the support or continued acquiescence by local leaders and communities to al-Shabaab's presence and operation as an insurgent organization and proto-state. There have also been positive signs in Kenya, chiefly the recent reconciliation meeting between bitter rivals for the presidency, President Uhuru Kenyatta and opposition leader Raila Odinga. See Eric Schmitt, "Under Trump, U.S. Launched 8 Airstrikes Against ISIS in Libya. It Disclosed 4," *New York Times*, March 8, 2018; Jason Burke, "Somali citizens count cost of surge in US airstrikes under Trump," *Guardian*, January 23, 2018; "Somalia chides its regions for cutting ties with Qatar," Al Jazeera, September 22, 2017; Stig Jarle Hansen and Christopher Anzalone, "After the Mogadishu Attacks: Will the Weakened Al Shabaab Rise Again?" *Foreign Affairs*, November 3, 2017; "Jawari challenges opposition MPs to oust him through the ballot," Garowe Online, March 18, 2018; George Obulutsa, "Kenya's president and opposition leader pledge to heal divisions," Reuters, March 9, 2018; and Kate Hairsine, "Political confusion reigns in Kenya after Odinga, Kenyatta deal," *Deutsche Welle*, March 13, 2018.

its administrative, military, and media activities in 2017 and into the first quarter of 2018. Primary sources produced by al-Shabaab and core Islamic State and Islamic State-Somalia have been used in tandem with relevant secondary sources, including local and international news reporting and NGO, United Nations, African Union, and U.S. government publications, and in consultation with sources on the ground when possible so that the militant groups' claims are not simply taken at face value. Al-Shabaab's continued governing administration over large amounts of territory, which is in its 10th year, lethality as both an insurgent and terrorist force, and the full rejuvenation of its robust media campaign receive particular attention in an attempt to sketch out possible future trajectories for the militant group, which continues to wage one of the modern world's most successful and longest-running jihadi insurgencies.

### Asymmetric Warfare and Strategic Suicide

On January 27, 2017, al-Shabaab launched a major attack on the Kenyan Defence Forces (KDF) base at Kulbiyow in Lower Juba.<sup>2</sup> Using strategically deployed suicide vehicle-borne explosive devices (SVBIEDs) followed by a massed infantry assault by 150 to a few hundred fighters and mobile artillery, the insurgents successfully used the same plan of attack that had proved so successful one year before in their January 2016 attack on the KDF's El-Adde base in Gedo.<sup>c</sup>

In September 2017, the insurgents used the same tactics again to overrun four Somali government military bases, demonstrating that they remain a potent security threat. In addition to base attacks and strategic suicide attacks targeting government buildings and busy urban areas in places like Mogadishu, al-Shabaab's military strategy continues to include a wide variety of different tactics, including grenade and mortar shelling, ambushes, targeted assassinations using both firearms and explosive devices, hit-and-run attacks, and the use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs), and non-suicide vehicle bombs. In 2017 and the beginning of 2018, al-Shabaab has also proven that it remains capable of planning and executing major attacks, including coordinated assaults utilizing both SVBIEDs and teams of *inghimasi* ("storming") gunmen, in the most secure zones in the country such as central Mogadishu.<sup>d</sup>

In the aftermath of the Kulbiyow attack, al-Shabaab secured a propaganda victory when the Kenyan government's claim that its forces had not lost control of the base or suffered significant casualties and had instead repelled the insurgents was shown to be untrue

by journalists who interviewed local eyewitnesses.<sup>e</sup> High-resolution photographs released by al-Shabaab's Al-Kataib Media Foundation on January 31 and its lengthy propaganda film on the attack released in May 2017 also pointed to higher casualties.<sup>3f</sup>

In the northern semi-autonomous Puntland region where it had laid low for two years, al-Shabaab dramatically reasserted itself on June 8, 2017, when 150-200 insurgents overran the Af-Urur military base in the Galgala Hills, killing at least 48 Puntland forces and wounding 20.<sup>g</sup> Al-Shabaab, through its military affairs spokesman Abdi Aziz Abu Musab, claimed to have inflicted higher casualties—60-61 dead.<sup>4</sup>

Al-Shabaab's reemergence in Puntland, where it is estimated to have between 450-500 fighters, comes after the rise of a 200- to 300-man strong Islamic State-aligned faction led by former al-Shabaab official, Sheikh Abdi Qadir Mu'min, who defected and pledged allegiance (*bay`a*) to Islamic State emir Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in October 2015.<sup>5</sup>

Al-Shabaab closed 2017 by overrunning four Somali government bases in September. In each attack—at Bula-Gaduud, Beled Hawo, El-Wak, and Bariire—insurgent forces used SVBIEDs followed by massed infantry supported by mobile artillery. After capturing the bases and other government buildings in the nearby towns, al-Shabaab forces freed prisoners and looted government buildings and NGO warehouses, capturing vehicles and military equipment, and then withdrew before AMISOM or Somali government forces could organize a counterattack. The insurgents also scored propaganda victories by, for example, recording footage of al-Shabaab fighters raising the black-and-white flags the group uses after tearing down Somali national and regional state flags.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to attacks on Somali government and AMISOM military bases, al-Shabaab since mid-2016 has possessed the operational capability to carry out successful major attacks using suicide bombers and *inghimasi* gunmen, often in coordinated attacks together on "soft targets" including hotels, restaurants, and near government buildings in central Mogadishu, the most secure part of the country. Al-Shabaab, unlike some other jihadi-insur-

c Following the El-Adde base attack, al-Shabaab warned it would try to carry out similar attacks in the future. These comments were made in al-Shabaab radio broadcasts as well as in the group's propaganda film about the attack. See "The Sheikh Abu Yahya al-Libi Raid: Storming the Crusader Kenyan Army Base, El-Adde, Islamic Province of Gedo," Al-Kataib Media Foundation, April 9, 2016.

d The term *inghimasi* refers to fighters who literally charge into and penetrate the enemy's lines. It is used by al-Shabaab and other Sunni jihadi groups to refer to teams of fighters who participate in seeming or actual suicide attacks in which they will almost certainly be killed or captured. The term is sometimes used alongside terms for "martyr" (*shahid*) and "martyrdom-seeker" (*istishhadi*).

e The Kenyan Ministry of Defence claimed that its forces had only suffered nine dead—seven soldiers and two officers—in the attack, with 15 more wounded. The Kenyan government also initially denied having lost control of the base and instead claimed that the garrison had repelled al-Shabaab, killing 70 insurgents, and was in active pursuit of the surviving attackers. Local eyewitnesses, however, reported seeing the surviving KDF garrison flee the base as well as a large but unclear number of casualties, higher than the KDF's official number. See "Follow Up Operational Update-Kolbiyow," Kenyan Defence Forces press release, January 27, 2017; Jason Burke, "Witnesses say dozens killed in al-Shabaab attack on Kenyan troops," *Guardian*, January 27, 2017; Harun Maruf, "Al-Shabab Captures Military Base in Somalia Before Withdrawing," *Voice of America*, January 27, 2017; Nancy Agutu, "Kulbiyow deaths surpass KDF number, al Shabaab releases photos," *Star* (Kenya), February 1, 2017.

f The attack was named by al-Shabaab after one of its slain senior commanders, the Kenyan-Somali Mohamed Mohamud Ali (also known as "Dulyadayn") who was killed in a joint operation by U.S. Special Forces and Somali government commandos on June 1, 2016. Before his death, Dulyadayn had been a senior al-Shabaab commander and official in the Lower and Middle Juba regions and was also suspected of masterminding attacks inside Kenya.

g An undetermined number of survivors also defected to al-Shabaab after the battle. Harun Maruf, "Somali Officials Condemn Attacks, Vow Revenge," *Voice of America*, June 9, 2017; "Al-Shabab attack Puntland army base leaves scores dead," *Al Jazeera*, June 8, 2017.

gent organizations such as Boko Haram, primarily deploys suicide bombers against Somali government and AMISOM targets as well as their international allies.<sup>7</sup> Places attacked in 2016 by trained suicide bombers and inghimasi gunmen, who know they will likely die in the attacks, included the Ambassador Hotel on June 1<sup>8</sup> and the Nasa-Hablod Hotel on June 25,<sup>9</sup> two suicide bombings targeting AMISOM forces near the airport,<sup>10</sup> the Somali government's Criminal Investigative Police Division on July 31,<sup>11</sup> the Bakaara Market on November 26, and the seaport on December 11,<sup>12</sup> all in Mogadishu, as well as twin suicide bombings in the city of Galkayo on August 21.<sup>13</sup>

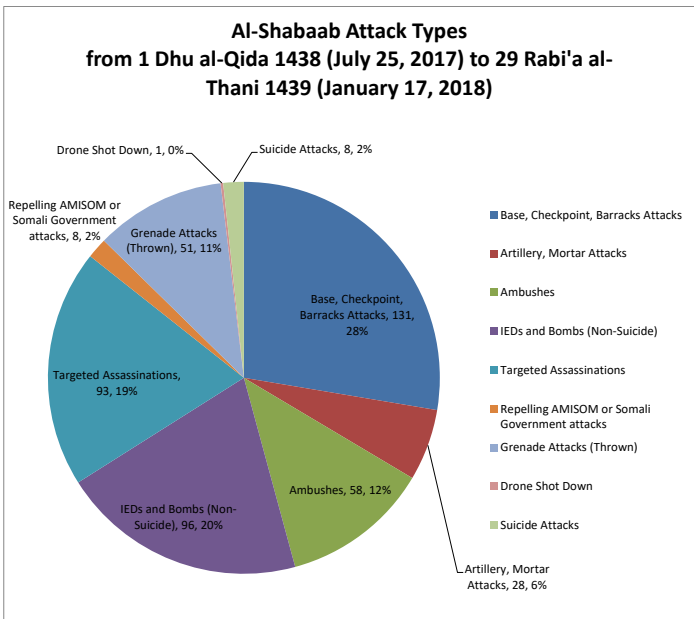
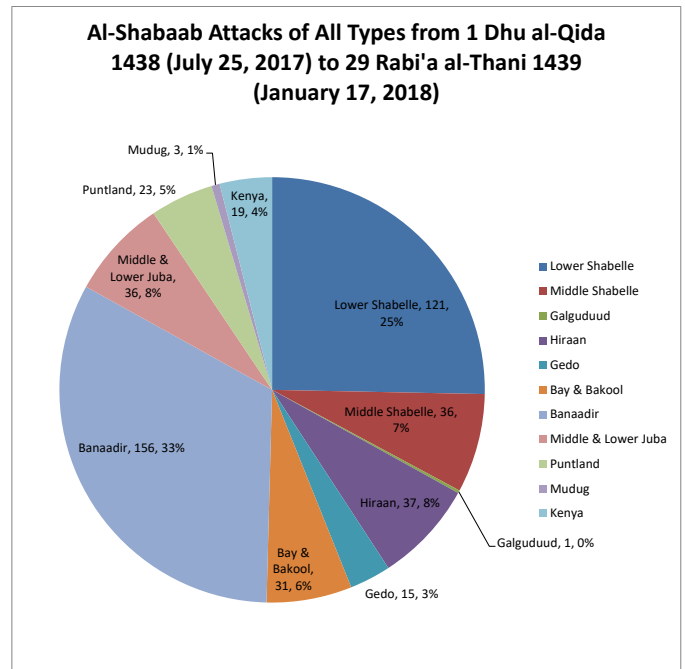
Throughout 2017, al-Shabaab also continued to carry out deadly bombings and other types of attacks across the country. These included attacks in central Mogadishu—a February 19 attack in the Kawo Godey Markey in the Wadajir district;<sup>14</sup> a suicide attack targeting the new head of the Somali army, General Ahmed Mohamed Jimale, near the Ministry of Defense on April 9;<sup>15</sup> an attack on the Pizza House restaurant and the Posh Hotel on June 14;<sup>16</sup> and suicide bombings outside the gates of Mogadishu's main AMISOM base on July 26.<sup>17</sup> The insurgent group also assassinated the Galguduud regional governor in August and a senior Somali army general in September, both in Mogadishu.<sup>18</sup>

On October 14, 2017, in one of the deadliest terrorist attacks in Africa in recent decades, a massive suicide truck bomb set off a nearby fuel truck on a busy street in the Hodan district of central Mogadishu. The attack, which no one has claimed but is suspected to have been carried out by al-Shabaab because no other militant group in the country has routinely demonstrated the operational or military engineering capability of carrying out such an attack,<sup>h</sup> killed at least 512 people and wounded 295 others.<sup>19</sup> Somali government officials have suggested that a new Turkish military training base near the place of the bombing may have been the intended target.

Two weeks after the Hodan SVBIED attack, on October 28, 2017, al-Shabaab launched a multi-pronged suicide attack on the Nasa-Hablod Hotel in central Mogadishu, the same hotel it struck in June 2016, using an SVBIED and inghimasi gunmen who stormed the hotel. The gunmen were reportedly wearing either Somali military or National Intelligence and Security Agency (NISA) uniforms and reportedly carrying forged ID cards.<sup>20</sup> This attack was followed by a December 14 suicide bombing at the police training academy in Mogadishu that killed 18 police officers.<sup>21</sup>

In the first two months of 2018, al-Shabaab continued to carry out major attacks in Mogadishu and other parts of the country. These included two SVBIED and gunmen attacks on February 23 near the Villa Somalia presidential residence and NISA headquarters that killed at least 45 people;<sup>22</sup> an SVBIED attack on a Somali military base in the major town of Afgooye located about 20 miles from Mogadishu and the temporary capture of the town of Balad

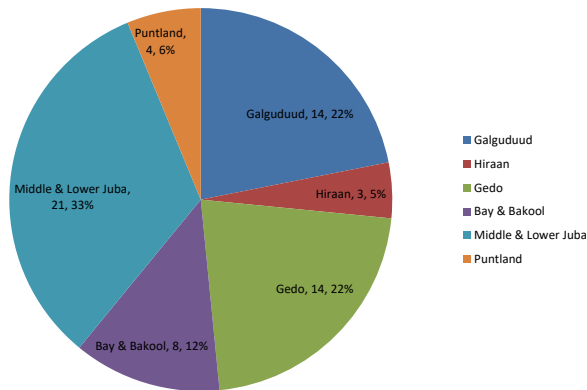
after a deadly ambush on an AMISOM convoy on March 2;<sup>23</sup> and the IED killing near Wanlaweyn, Lower Shabelle of two officials from the Hirshabelle and Southwest regional states.<sup>24</sup> In early March, AMISOM and Somali government officials acknowledged that al-Shabaab has successfully cut off large swaths of the highways linking major cities and towns including Baidoa, Kismaayo, and Jowhar, setting up checkpoints to tax humanitarian aid and other shipments and launching ambushes on AMISOM and Somali government convoys.<sup>25</sup>



<sup>h</sup> There is some precedent for al-Shabaab denying responsibility or remaining silent about an attack, particularly when the domestic Somali reaction was as overwhelmingly critical as it was following the October 14, 2017, attack. In December 2009, a suicide bomber struck a graduation ceremony for medical students at the Hotel Shamo in Mogadishu, killing 22 people. See "Somalia ministers killed by hotel suicide bomb," BBC, December 3, 2009; "Blast kills 19 at graduation ceremony in Somalia," CNN, December 4, 2009; and Ibrahim Mohamed, "Somali rebels deny they carried out suicide bombing," Reuters, December 4, 2009.



**Defections from Federal Government & Regional State Militias Claimed by al-Shabaab from 1 Dhu al-Qida 1438 (July 25, 2017) to 29 Rabi'a al-Thani 1439 (January 17, 2018)**



The numbers in these three graphs are based on analysis of six al-Shabaab official monthly operations reports organized according to the Islamic lunar calendar from the month of Dhu al-Qida 1438 (which began on July 25, 2017) to the month of Rabi'a al-Thani 1439 (which ended on January 17, 2018), the latter of which was the most recent report available at the time this article was written. A significant number, though not all, of these attacks can be verified through secondary sources including news reporting and local sources. But it is also important to issue a note about their origin in al-Shabaab's own official operations reports, which serve in part as propaganda. With this caveat in mind, the figures are still instructive with regard to pinpointing, alongside secondary and other sources, the insurgent group's current geographical spread of operations and the most frequent types of attacks it employs against Somali federal and regional government, AMISOM, and other international forces.

### Robust Insurgent Media Capabilities

Al-Shabaab's media operations production and dissemination capabilities remained robust in 2017 and into early 2018 with the group's official and affiliated media outlets continuing to produce propaganda videos, news reports, radio broadcasts, photography, and artwork aimed at domestic, regional East African, and international audiences. The insurgent group has also maintained an active presence online through social media platforms, such as Telegram and Twitter.<sup>26</sup>

Al-Shabaab launched a coordinated, multi-part influence campaign that sought to impact the Kenyan national general elections that were held in August 2017. Beginning in the fall of 2016 and continuing through the summer of 2017, the group released a series of audiovisual and print messages from insurgent officials and East African, particularly Kenyan, foreign fighters. Ali Rage, al-Shabaab's spokesman, told Kenyans that their country's military intervention in Somalia, Operation Linda Nchi (Protect the Country), had led to more, not less, insecurity in Kenya and was also negatively impacting the national economy by hitting the tourism sector hard.<sup>27</sup>

In July 2017, Al-Kataib released a documentary-style film in

English targeted at the Kenyan electorate. Narrated by the same U.K.-native foreign fighter and narrator who has appeared in all of al-Shabaab's English-language videos and audio releases since June 2010, the film painted a stark economic, political, and security picture of Kenya's "adventure" into Somalia.<sup>28</sup> In between graphic footage and images from al-Shabaab attacks inside Kenya and on KDF bases in Somalia, the narrator warned Kenyan voters, "[This is] a stark reminder of the ramifications of the ill-advised, ill-conceived, opportunistic war your government wants you to pay for. The images of blood-spattered shopping malls, blazing houses, and ordinary Kenyans being butchered by the mujahideen will continue to haunt you for the rest of your lives. And we are still in the initial stages of the war."<sup>29</sup>

The film—together with a series of hostage videos of Kenyan and Ugandan soldiers captured during insurgent attacks on AMISOM bases, including a final message execution film of one captive Ugandan soldier—also directed specific messaging to rank-and-file AMISOM soldiers and their families.<sup>30</sup> "We know exactly how many of your soldiers died in Somalia; we killed them with our own hands," the narrator said. "The KDF knows exactly how many of its soldiers died in Somalia; they buried them with their own hands. We know exactly how many of your soldiers are now in captivity; we captured them in their bases. The KDF knows exactly how many of its soldiers are now in captivity; they abandoned them in their bases."<sup>31</sup> Repeating a message first used in al-Shabaab's media operations campaign in the summer of 2010, he warned rank-and-file soldiers that their political and military leaders did not care about their safety and instead viewed them as expendable and "simply ... another statistic."<sup>32</sup>

In a lengthy interview with Ahmad Iman Ali, the commander of its Kenyan foreign fighters and a key ideologue, insurgent media warned Kenyan Muslims not to participate in the elections because democracy was a form of unbelief (kufr) as it allows for human beings to reject God's law and the Prophet Muhammad's teachings if popular will supports it.<sup>33</sup> Ali, who resurfaced in a March 2017 al-Shabaab video after a lengthy period of silence and quashed rumors that he had defected to the Islamic State,<sup>34</sup> rejected the notion that the Islamic concept of shura, or "consultation," permitted participation in democratic elections and government.<sup>35</sup> He also asserted that any Muslim who works for "Crusaders" or an apostate (murtadd) government abandons Islam and becomes an apostate himself, a capital offense.<sup>36</sup> Al-Shabaab's ability to coordinate and produce a targeted messaging campaign while also continuing to produce a number of other print, audio, audiovisual, and visual propaganda products in multiple languages for multiple audiences has demonstrated that the group remains not only a formidable on-the-ground insurgency but also prolific in terms of its media capabilities.

i In the final days before the August 2017 elections, al-Shabaab also released propaganda videos featuring messages from a diverse array of East African fighters in its ranks who addressed the Kenyan electorate in a number of languages, including Swahili, Bajuni, Digo, Luo, Kikuyu, Luhya, Oromo, and Sheng, a Nairobi working class dialect of Swahili. It was an apparent attempt to project both an image of diversity among its ranks as well as an effort to reach the widest possible audience in East Africa. See "Are You Content With ... ? Questions to the Muslims in Kenya," Al-Kataib Media Foundation, July 27, 2017; "A Message to the Muslims in Kenya a Few Days before the Country's General Elections," Al-Kataib Media Foundation, August 4, 2017.

## How Strong is the Islamic State in Somalia?

The main Islamic State-aligned faction in Somalia led by Mu'min remains primarily based and most active in Puntland, though small pro-Islamic State groups have also emerged in parts of western and southern Somalia, though whether these other groups are directly controlled by Mu'min is unclear.<sup>37</sup> In comparison to al-Shabaab, which organizationally possesses a far greater number of fighters, a more capable and deeply rooted governing administration, and a more sophisticated media operations capability, the Islamic State-Somalia continues to play second fiddle in the insurgency field. The ties between core Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, which itself continues to suffer major losses, and Islamic State-Somalia remain unclear, but there is little evidence that the latter has enjoyed any significant funding from the former.<sup>38</sup>

Propaganda output from Somalia officially branded by official Islamic State and semi-official or affiliated media organs such as Al-Furat and the Al-Amaq News Agency have also remained limited in terms of frequency and number.<sup>j</sup> The majority of videos and photography sets originate in Puntland, presumably from the group directly led by Mu'min.

Beginning in November 2017, Islamic State-Somalia began to take credit for an increasing number of attacks in Afgooye, located about 20 miles west of Mogadishu. Between November 2017 and early March 2018, the Islamic State's official media network and the affiliated Al-Amaq News Agency claimed at least nine separate attacks there, all assassinations using firearms targeting individuals accused of working for the Somali government, including several alleged intelligence agents, two soldiers, and an employee of the Ministry of Finance. All victims in the attacks, where photographs or short video recordings were released by official or semi-official Islamic State media outlets, were dressed in civilian clothing and not government uniforms.<sup>39</sup> The attacks also overlapped with regular attacks carried out by al-Shabaab in and around Afgooye. In early February 2018, a Somali police commander in Afgooye denied an Islamic State-Somalia presence in Afgooye and near Mogadishu but was inconsistent in doing so, telling Voice of America that the police were also "on alert and investigating the claims [of Islamic State-Somalia attacks in Afgooye]."<sup>40</sup> Most of the attacks claimed by Islamic State-Somalia have not been claimed by al-Shabaab.<sup>k</sup>

On Christmas Day 2017, official Islamic State's media released a video from the "province" (wilayat) of Somalia (Wilayat Sumal), marking the first time that the core organization has referred to Islamic State-aligned militants in Somalia officially as a "province."<sup>41</sup> The use of the new name, however, was inconsistent with a later official infographic on attacks in Somalia published in the 118th issue of the Islamic State's Al-Naba news bulletin, released on February 8, 2018. Unlike other recent infographics for other official "provinces"

such as Khorasan and West Africa, the February 8 infographic for Somalia did not list it as a "wilayat" but merely as "Somalia."<sup>42</sup> In the February 8 infographic on Somalia, the Islamic State claimed to have carried out a total of 14 attacks between September 21, 2017, (Muharram 1, 1439 Hijri) and February 1, 2018, (Jumada al-Awwal 15, 1429 Hijri)—three in Bosaso, Puntland, and 11 in Afgooye, Lower Shabelle—killing a total of 30 alleged Somali government police, soldiers, or intelligence agents.

## Al-Shabaab and Territorial Governance

Al-Shabaab, unlike its Islamic State rival, continues to govern large swaths of territory, including in the regions of Gedo, Bay and Bakool, Lower and Middle Shabelle, Lower and Middle Juba, Hiraaan, Puntland, Galguduud, and Mudug.<sup>43</sup> The group's civil administration continues in 2018 to carry out a variety of governance activities, including the running of sharia courts, holding meeting with clan leaders, and providing aid collected as religiously mandated charity (zakat).<sup>44</sup> Al-Shabaab administrators also ran sharia institutes, schools, and courses for clan youth, merchants, and craftspeople and organized traveling health and vaccination clinics for people and livestock.<sup>45</sup> During Ramadan and for the Islamic holidays of Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha, insurgent officials also organized special religious courses and competitions for local clans/sub-clans and minority Bantu (Jareer) communities, particularly around the group's de facto administrative center, the large town of Jilib in Middle Juba.<sup>46</sup> Al-Shabaab also continued to tax humanitarian aid organizations as part of its revenue extraction, which in turn funds its military operations and governing administrations.<sup>47</sup>

Despite their stated rejection of nationalism and "destructive clannism," al-Shabaab leaders and administrators remain keenly aware of the need to maintain ties with local clans/sub-clans. Al-Shabaab's administrators and courts continue to mediate inter-clan disputes and hold meetings with local clan/sub-clan elders and leaders of Bantu communities.<sup>48</sup> The insurgent group also opened up religious institutes and schools for the young and the elderly from particular clans/sub-clans, including the all of the major clan families and a diverse array of their sub-clans.<sup>49</sup> Sharia, medical education, and other courses were also organized by al-Shabaab for women, craftspeople, merchants, pharmacists, teachers, members of specific clans/sub-clans and Bantu communities, and al-Shabaab's own members and mosque preachers.<sup>50</sup>

Al-Shabaab's courts mediated inter-clan disputes, tried criminal cases, and passed sentences of flogging, amputations, financial penalties, and execution for violations, including different types of fornication, homosexuality, apostasy for spying or practicing magic, theft, and unlawful killing.<sup>51</sup> Insurgent leaders remained particularly concerned about the danger posed by locally recruited spies following the targeted killings of a number of the group's senior leaders and officials—including Ahmed Godane in September 2014, Mohamed Mohamud Ali "Dulyadeyn" in June 2016, and the shadow governor of the Banaadir region, Ali Jabal in July 2017.<sup>52</sup> The group announced the trial and execution of at least 16 accused spies for Kenya, Ethiopia, Djibouti, the United States, the United Kingdom, the Somali government, or other AMISOM forces between late July 2016 and mid-January 2018.<sup>53</sup>

## Conclusion

The withdrawal of AMISOM and Somali government forces from the countryside has forced local civilians to recognize that al-

j To date, the Islamic State's central media department has released only one film branded as being from Somalia and two photography sets from outside of Puntland totaling only three photographs. The Islamic State-affiliated Al-Furat Media has released two films, and the affiliated Al-Amaq News Agency has recently released five short video recordings of assassinations in Afgooye.

k An exception was the killing of a man accused by Islamic State-Somalia in January 2018 of being a government intelligence agent, which was captured in very brief video footage released by Al-Amaq. On the same day, al-Shabaab also claimed to have assassinated a government intelligence agent but released no media proof in the form of photographs or video.

Shabaab remains a strong territorial force over large parts of the country. It overtly governs some areas, maintains an open and regular presence in others, and runs clandestine cells to carry out military and terrorist attacks in even the most secure areas of the country such as major cities like Mogadishu, Baidoa, Bosaso, and Kismaayo.<sup>54</sup>

Continued corruption and the poor overall capabilities of the Somali military and security forces—many of which remain inadequately trained and led, go regularly unpaid, and even unarmed—has led to the suspension of most U.S. military aid following the Somali military's repeated failure to account for food and fuel and Germany's decision to withdraw from the European Union's training mission by the end of March, citing frustration with the continued slow progress of developing a viable Somali national army and "deficits in political and institutional structures."<sup>55</sup> Regularly unpaid, different parts of the government's security forces instead rely on the control of lucrative checkpoints and the fees and bribes they can charge civilians, and they have engaged in gun battles over these checkpoints and regular protests decrying the government's failure to pay them.<sup>56</sup> Large parts of the security forces also remain largely clan-based and cannot be reliably deployed outside of their home areas.<sup>57</sup> These serious deficits in the Somali government's political and security capabilities and the continuing lack of significant improvements and reforms enables al-Shabaab to take advantage of mistakes made by the Somali federal and regional governments, AMISOM forces, the United States, and other countries, such as the accidental killing of Somali civilians in restive regions that inflame local public opinion and clan dynamics.<sup>58</sup>

The Somali government, with the support of U.S. military officials, is attempting to lure defectors away from al-Shabaab in an attempt to both weaken the group and, they hope, force its leadership to accept a politically negotiated settlement.<sup>59</sup> Somali government officials have claimed that recent defections have set "record numbers," but the reliability of these claims and the number of actual number of defectors are difficult to independently verify. It is possible that the government is purposefully exaggerating the numbers in a bid to try and create internal divisions within the group.<sup>60</sup>

Increased U.S. military involvement in Somalia, which has included a significant jump in the number of airstrikes on al-Shabaab and Islamic State-Somalia targets, has reportedly forced al-Shabaab to change tactics in order to better protect its forces, particularly after U.S. African Command (AFRICOM) claimed to have killed over 150 al-Shabaab insurgents in strikes on a training camp north of Mogadishu in March 2016 and another 100 militants in a November 2017 strike on another training camp northwest of the cap-

ital.<sup>61m</sup> While airstrikes have taken a significant toll on al-Shabaab, including the targeted killings of senior leaders and administrators and despite claims made in late January by a senior African Union official that drone attacks were "wiping out al-Shabaab in good numbers" the insurgents continued throughout 2017 to be able to assemble large forces of fighters and launch major attacks on AMISOM and Somali government bases.<sup>62</sup> Increased U.S. military strikes in the country also run the risk of inflaming local tensions and have increased the chances that Somali civilians will be negatively impacted and even killed, as happened in a joint Somali government and U.S. raid in Bariire in August 2017 that killed 10 civilians including children and inflamed tensions between the Somali government and the large and influential Habar Gidir/Hawiye clan.<sup>63</sup> The incident also underlined the delicate political balance that needs to be maintained between the Somali government and its international partners and the country's multiple constituencies including its influential clans/sub-clans and civil society.<sup>64</sup>

The August 2017 defection of Mukhtar Robow, a founding al-Shabaab member and senior commander, and the defection of other insurgents have been heralded by the Somali government.<sup>65</sup> Al-Shabaab, after remaining largely silent about Robow's defection and subsequent public criticisms of the group, finally denounced him through its spokesman, Ali Rage, who called Robow an "apostate" who should be killed for allying with the "enemies of Islam and the Muslims."<sup>66</sup> Robow, since his defection, has met with Ethiopian and Somali federal and regional state officials to discuss ways to combat al-Shabaab, including another former insurgent, Ahmed Mohamed Islam "Madobe," the president of the Jubaland regional state.<sup>67</sup> They hope that Robow may be able to serve as a symbolic as well as political and paramilitary weapon against al-Shabaab, though this prospect remains untested.<sup>n</sup>

When interviewed about why they continue to seek adjudication from al-Shabaab's sharia courts, local residents said that it was because they, unlike government courts, were not marked by rampant corruption and nepotism. Locals also said that while many government forces continued to loot and extort money at will, al-Shabaab, at least, more strictly regulates its own forces and punishes mem-

m In the March 2016 strikes, Somali intelligence sources claimed two senior al-Shabaab administrative officials were among those killed—regional commander Yusuf Ali Ugaas and Mohamed Mire, the shadow governor of the Hiraa region. Al-Shabaab, through its military affairs spokesman Abdi Aziz Abu Musab, denied AFRICOM's casualty figures, and a week after the strikes, Mohamed Mire appeared at the public execution of a man accused of being a government soldier, giving an interview to al-Shabaab's Al-Andalus and Al-Furqan radio stations. See Robyn Kriel, Barbara Starr, and Greg Botelho, "Somali source: U.S. attack killed 2 high-level Al-Shabaab figures," CNN, March 10, 2016; Hamza Mohamed, "Al-Shabab denies top leaders killed in US air strikes," Al Jazeera English, March 10, 2016; "Alshabaab Commander Denies He was Killed in US Airstrike," Radio Dalsan, March 11, 2016; and "Somalia's Al-Shabab: Toll of US Air Strikes Exaggerated," Al Jazeera, March 8, 2016.

n The extent of Robow's ability to mobilize capable forces to fight for the government against al-Shabaab remains untested, and his clan militia performed with mixed results against sustained insurgent attacks against him in July and August 2017, forcing him to defect in order to protect his life. However, his ability to recruit clansmen loyal to him has alarmed al-Shabaab and its supporters who have routinely accused him in their media, since his defection, of "collaborating" with "apostates" and "Crusaders" to form a new "Awakening" (*Sahwa*) militia. This is a reference to the Iraqi Sunni Arab tribal militias recruited and financed by the U.S. military to fight the Islamic State of Iraq beginning in 2006 and 2007.

l The United States said that it would continue to provide aid to Somali military units that are directly overseen by U.S. military advisers or are actively in combat. See Ryan Browne, "US is cutting some military aid to Somalia amid allegations of misuse," CNN, December 14, 2017.

bers for infractions against its edicts including against the local population.<sup>68</sup> This is not to say that al-Shabaab does not also perpetrate numerous abuses against local civilians; it has and continues to do so. But it does underline the importance of perception in the campaign to roll back the group. Only sustained political progress between the Somali federal and regional state governments will ultimately be able to eliminate the threat to Somalia's national security posed by al-Shabaab and, to a much lesser extent, Islamic State-Somalia. Forging political, economic, and security cooperation, reducing rampant levels of corruption and nepotism, and improving the training and maintenance of its soldiers, police, and other security forces, including regular pay, will significantly aid the Somali government's ability to convince local communities and leaders that they do not have to continue to recognize al-Shabaab's de facto role as a territorial governing power and should instead invest solely in supporting the government.

The United States, AMISOM, United Nations, and European Union Training Mission Somalia (EUTM-S) can play an important political and security role in preparing Somali government forces

to eventually function on their own by supporting Somali efforts to combat al-Shabaab and Islamic State-Somalia. Improvements in security will also help to improve the government's reach into rural areas in which al-Shabaab is currently able to operate with impunity. But aid should be tied to tangible, regularly reviewed progress on the ground by the Somali government, military, and security and intelligence forces to combat corruption, improve organization and performance, and crack down on human rights and other legal abuses.<sup>69</sup>

Although the international community can and should continue to support the Somali government and Somali civil society actors in building up their country's capacity and institutions, it will ultimately be the Somalis who close the doors to al-Shabaab and other militant groups and prevent them from being able to play the role of spoilers and de facto proto-state authorities. This will only happen when local leaders and communities feel that it is no longer in their interest to continue interacting with al-Shabaab as an alternative government.<sup>70</sup> **CTC**

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# Ansaroul Islam and the Growing Terrorist Insurgency in Burkina Faso

By Héni Nsaibia and Caleb Weiss

Since last year, jihadi attacks in northern Burkina Faso have been steadily on the rise. These have largely been attributable to a newly established but understudied jihadi group, Ansaroul Islam, which has its roots in the ongoing insurgency in Mali and is linked to al-Qa`ida's network in the Sahel. Its budding insurgency greatly threatens the security of Burkina Faso and neighboring countries. State responses to the violence have been heavy-handed, which only furthers the cause of Ansaroul Islam.

**O**n the evening of December 15, 2016, a group of around 30 heavily armed gunmen came from the area of Mondoro in Mali and arrived in the village of Bouroubouta, just across the border in neighboring Burkina Faso.<sup>1</sup> Early the following morning, the group set out, steering across the hinterland in the direction of Nasoumbou, a locality harboring a camp of the combined Burkinabe army and gendarmerie counterterrorism task force GFAT (Groupe des Forces Anti-Terroristes).<sup>2 a</sup>

Before the first morning prayer, the militants launched an assault on the camp. Although the defending forces attempted to hit back, the jihadis overpowered the government forces, killing 12 soldiers. Several military vehicles, including a French-produced ACMAT Bastion armored vehicle, were destroyed. The militants pillaged the camp, seizing two vehicles, several arms, ammunition, uniforms, and other military materiel, before withdrawing toward the Mali border.

The jihadis returned to their base in the Fousaré forest before announcing themselves to the world as Ansaroul Islam.<sup>3 b</sup> It was the first native jihadi group founded in Burkina Faso.<sup>4</sup> The group, which the authors will argue is aligned with al-Qa`ida, was designated a terrorist organization by the U.S. State Department in

a GFAT was created in 2012 to counter the militant threat along Burkina Faso's northern border with Mali.

b Ansaroul Islam is the Francophone transcription of Ansar al-Islam.

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February 2017.<sup>5</sup>

Ansaroul Islam's first attack in Burkina Faso—so far, the largest by the nascent insurgency in the northern regions near the border with Mali—was a turning point in jihadi operations in the country. Although jihadis, especially those linked to al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), have long operated in Burkina Faso and have recruited among various communities there as well as carrying out sporadic kidnapping operations near the Malian border in the north, jihadi attacks against civilians and Burkinabe security forces only began in earnest in 2017.

These attacks have largely been linked by local residents and officials to Ansaroul Islam,<sup>6</sup> which has been able to exploit weak security near the Mali border to build up its operations. This article first outlines the jihadi currents in Burkina Faso and the wider region, which led to the group's founding. It then examines the tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) used by the group, before assessing the regional security implications of rising jihadi violence in Burkina Faso.

## Destabilization of Burkina Faso

In the fall of 2014, a series of events shook Burkina Faso that paved the way for the jihadi insurgency in the north of the country. The then president, Blaise Compaoré, attempted to amend the constitution ahead of the 2015 presidential elections in order to extend his 27-year rule<sup>7</sup>—sparking a popular uprising that forced Compaoré to resign and flee to neighboring Ivory Coast. The events that followed included a further destabilizing power struggle,<sup>8</sup> which led to the disbandment of the autonomous Regiment of Presidential Security (RSP), the secret service of the Compaoré regime.

The Compaoré regime was an important regional ally and military partner of France, which since 2010 has had special forces stationed in the capital, Ouagadougou.<sup>9</sup> Burkina Faso was also one of the first countries to support the French intervention in Mali in 2013, contributing troops to the African-led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA).<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, the regime maintained what appeared to be strong lines of communication with jihadis in the region and played a significant role in several hostage releases.<sup>c</sup>

Burkina Faso did not experience any attacks attributed to jihadi groups until after the fall of the Compaoré regime. In April 2015, six months after the downfall of the Compaoré regime, jihadis abducted a Romanian security guard, Iulian Ghergut, at the manganese

c Moreover, in 2012 French intelligence services indicated that weapons were transported by trucks to the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) via Burkina Faso. At the time, MUJAO controlled the northern Malian town of Gao, and northern Mali was under jihadi rule. With Diendéré as the Burkinabe intelligence chief, he undoubtedly knew that jihadi groups used Burkina Faso as a rear base and logistics hub. Rémi Carayol, "Amée burkinabè: Gilbert Diendéré, la discrétion assurée," *Jeune Afrique*, November 5, 2014.

mining site in Tambao.<sup>11</sup> Several months later, jihadis carried out an armed assault in Samoroguan in October 2015.<sup>12</sup> It was the first attack of its kind in the country and notably took place just two weeks after the disbandment of the RSP.

While Burkina Faso did not endure attacks during Compaoré's regime, parts of its territory served as a recruitment ground and logistics hub for jihadis in the Sahel region. In the early 2010s, AQIM and its allies made several attempts to establish a more permanent presence in Burkina Faso and on its borders.<sup>d</sup>

In the wake of the France-led military intervention in Mali in 2013, the jihadis were ousted from major towns in the north previously under their control. As the French intervention changed to a counterterrorism mission (Operation Barkhane), the commanders of the al-Qa`ida groups gravitated to areas in central and southern Mali and near the borders with Burkina Faso. Most of these commanders were members of AQIM and its front group Ansar Dine.<sup>13</sup>

Two senior leaders—Souleymane Keita and Yacouba Touré—created the Ansar Dine *katiba* (brigade) Khalid Ibn al-Walid, which was also known as Ansar Dine Sud.<sup>14</sup> The *katiba* established a base in the Sama Forest in the Sikasso Region, close to the borders with Ivory Coast and Burkina Faso. However, the group was short lived and only managed to conduct two attacks against Malian gendarmerie positions in the villages of Misseni<sup>15</sup> and Fakola<sup>16</sup> in mid-2015. The Khalid Ibn al-Walid brigade was quickly dismantled by the Malian army,<sup>17</sup> and both Keita<sup>18</sup> and Touré<sup>19</sup> were arrested.

Ansar Dine also created a branch to operate in Burkina Faso. Boubacar Sawadogo,<sup>e</sup> a Burkinabe and associate of Keita and Touré, was responsible for the creation of this wing, which can be seen as a predecessor of Ansaroul Islam. It was Sawadogo's group who carried out the October 2015 attack against the gendarmerie in Samoroguan.<sup>20</sup> Sawadogo, like his associates Keita and Touré, was eventually arrested.<sup>21</sup>

In addition to its recruitment efforts, al-Qa`ida has been able to conduct several attacks inside Burkina Faso since 2015. This includes the aforementioned kidnapping of a Romanian security guard, as well as the kidnapping of an Australian couple in January 2016.<sup>22</sup> The same day of the couple's kidnapping, gunmen belonging to AQIM<sup>f</sup> carried out a large-scale terrorist attack in Ouagadougou, killing at least 30 people at the Splendid Hotel and a café popular with foreigners.<sup>23</sup> In August 2017, at least 18 were killed at a Turkish restaurant in Ouagadougou popular with expats in another terrorist attack.<sup>24</sup> While no group has claimed the assault yet, it is widely suspected to have been carried out by al-Qa`ida-aligned jihadis.

Earlier this month, The Group for Support of Islam and Muslims (JNIM)<sup>g</sup> claimed another major terrorist attack in Ouagadougou. On March 2, jihadis simultaneously targeted the French ambas-



*Image captured from Ansaroul Islam video showing Ansaroul Islam militants in northern Burkina Faso, date unknown. (Video obtained by Héni Nsaibia from source in Mali.)*

sy and the Burkinabe army headquarters. The assault utilized a suicide car bomb and seven gunmen, which initially left at least eight people dead and more than 80 others wounded.<sup>25</sup> It is, so far, JNIM's most brazen terrorist attack.

A notable difference between the March 2 attacks and previous ones in Ouagadougou is that the choice in targets were 'hard targets' (high-profile locations with large security details) rather than 'soft targets.' Additionally, one striking coincidence is that the latest attacks came on the first anniversary of the announcement of JNIM, which may have also factored into the group's rationale for launching the attack.

The investigation into the attack is still in its early stages. However, this is the first high-profile attack in Burkina Faso that points to a significant involvement of Burkinabes. At least eight local individuals have been arrested, including two active soldiers and one former soldier.<sup>26</sup> Although the results of the investigation have yet to be seen, they appear to point to JNIM having established a local support network that possibly includes members of Burkina's armed forces. This adds additional implications for future terrorist attacks inside the Burkinabe capital.

## Jihad in Mali

After the French military intervention in Mali and the deployment of a United Nations peacekeeping mission, the jihadi insurgency in Mali was largely confined to its northern regions. AQIM, its local front group Ansar Dine,<sup>27</sup> and MUJAO<sup>h</sup> routinely mounted assaults on French and U.N. peacekeepers. From 2015, the violence spread southward. According to data compiled for the Long War Journal, there were at least 30 notable attacks in central and southern Mali in 2015. The following year, there were 51.<sup>28</sup> And in 2017, there were at least 90 attacks in central and southern Mali.<sup>29 i</sup>

Several *katibas* of Ansar Dine are largely responsible for the rising number of attacks in central and southern Mali. This includes the aforementioned Khalid Ibn al-Walid brigade, the Sèrma bri-

d This was confirmed by Abu Talha al Libi, a Mauritanian leader within al-Qa`ida's network in the Sahel who is also known as al-Mauritani and al-Azawadi, in a 2012 Al Jazeera documentary from jihadi-occupied northern Mali. "Orphans of the Sahara: Rebellion," Al Jazeera, January 9, 2014.

e Boubacar Sawadogo is also known as Boubacar Mossi, a reference to the majority ethnic group in Burkina Faso to which he belongs.

f The attack was conducted by Al Murabitoon, which had merged into AQIM the previous month.

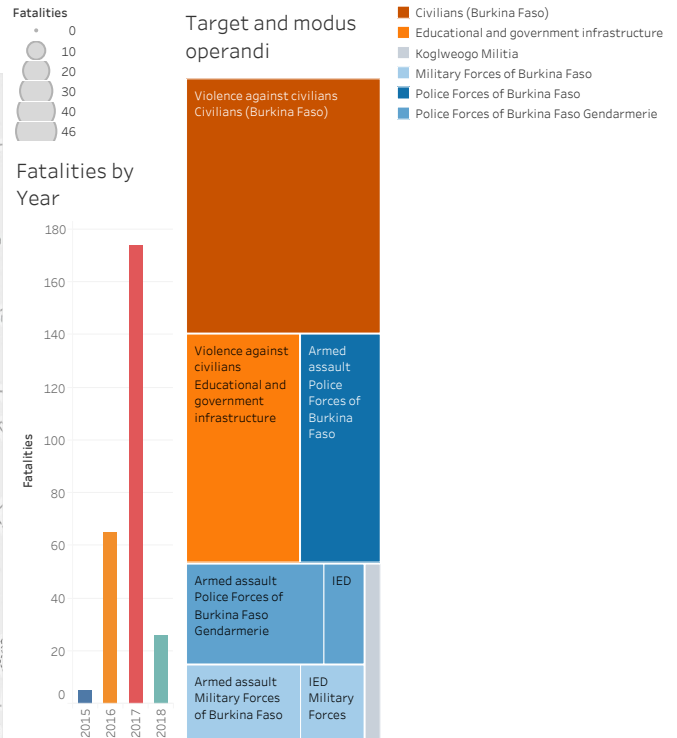
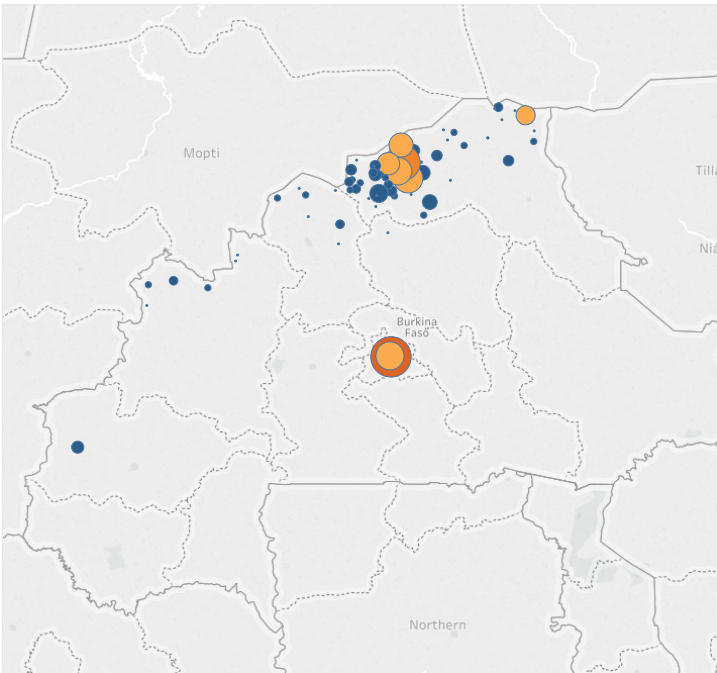
g JNIM was formed in March 2017 as a merger between AQIM's Sahara branch, Ansar Dine, Al Murabitoon, and Katibat Macina. The group is led by Iyad Ag Ghaly and swears allegiance to al-Qa`ida leader Ayman al Zawahiri and AQIM leader Abdelmalek Droukdel.

h MUJAO is the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa.

i There were at least 117 attacks suspected to be carried out by jihadis in the three northern regions combined in 2017. Caleb Weiss, "Al Qaeda maintains operational tempo in West Africa in 2017," FDD's Long War Journal, January 5, 2018.



Burkina Faso: Fatalities linked to militancy and counter-militancy operations 2015-2018 (as of March 2, 2018)



This map shows fatalities as the result of militancy and counter-militancy operations in Burkina Faso between 2015-2018 (as of March 2, 2018) as per the dataset compiled by the authors. Separately, the graph shows fatalities by year due to militancy and counter-militancy operations for the same period, while the box graph shows the distribution of Ansaroul Islam attacks between targets. (See TTPs of Ansaroul Islam.) Note: The key applies only to the box graph.

gade, and perhaps most notably, the Macina battalion. The latter, which is also known as the Macina Liberation Front, has been the most operationally active southern branch of Ansar Dine. It has conducted the majority of attacks in central and southern Mali and has been linked to abuses and other crimes against the civilian populations.<sup>30</sup>

Concurrently, the rise in violence in northern Burkina Faso has been directly correlated to the growing violence in central and southern Mali. As the jihadis began to move southward into the regions closer to the Burkina Faso border,<sup>j</sup> more operating space was made for cross-border raids into neighboring Burkina. The jihadis made use of several forested areas and the largely unprotected borders to their advantage. And they had new opportunities to train and facilitate the growth of a local Burkinabe jihadi faction.

### The Birth of Ansaroul Islam

Although Ansaroul Islam is largely focused in Burkina Faso, its roots are deeply embedded in the conflict in Mali. The group was founded by Boureima Dicko (a deceased Burkinabe jihadi who was also known as Malam Ibrahim Dicko)<sup>k</sup> who was a close ally of Amadou Kouffa, the leader of the aforementioned Macina battalion of Ansar Dine (which is now within the Mali-based al-Qa`ida umbrella group JNIM<sup>31</sup>). In posts made on its former Facebook page, Ansaroul Islam confirmed that Dicko had met with Kouffa in the

past.<sup>32</sup> One post also mentioned that Dicko and Kouffa were together in central Mali, further showing the links between the two.<sup>33</sup> According to a defector from Ansaroul Islam, Kouffa played a large role in the creation of Ansaroul Islam.<sup>34</sup>

According to a report in *Jeune Afrique*, Dicko tried to join jihadi groups in northern Mali in 2013, but was arrested by French forces in Tessalit and subsequently released in 2015.<sup>35</sup> In mid-2017, Dicko died of reported natural causes and was replaced by his brother Jafar, according to *Le Monde*.<sup>36</sup> Citing the aforementioned defector, the French newspaper reported that Ansaroul Islam contains around 200 members and is largely based in the surroundings of the villages Boulkessi and N'Daki, Mali. This base has allowed Ansaroul Islam to take part in operations in both Burkina Faso and in Mali.<sup>37</sup> The fact that Ansaroul Islam has carried out attacks on the Mali side of the border is further evidence the group has very close ties with JNIM.

In March 2017, JNIM claimed credit for an assault on Malian troops near the town of Boulkessi. According to many reports, Ansaroul Islam also took part in the assault. Over the course of 2017, JNIM claimed credit for six attacks in Burkina Faso.<sup>38</sup> In many of

j This includes the central Mopti region, as well as part of the southern Sikasso region.  
 k Malam Ibrahim Dicko's full name is Boureima Amadou Oumarou Issa Dicko.

l This was an unverified Facebook account presumably linked to Ansaroul Islam. According to Dicko's former Qu'ranic school teacher, Dicko had indeed met with Kouffa in central Mali in what Dicko described as an effort to "finish his Qu'ranic studies" before returning to Burkina Faso. See "Sur les traces de Malam Ibrahim Dicko..." YouTube, June 13, 2017.  
 m JNIM media operative "Al-Andalusi" indicated on Telegram, with reference to Ansaroul Islam leader Ibrahim Dicko, that Ansaroul Islam carried out the attacks against French forces near Douna on April 5, 2017.

these, local reporting indicated that Ansaroul Islam was either responsible for or had taken part in the operation.<sup>39</sup>

Further illustrating the close relationship between Ansaroul Islam and JNIM, there have been documented cases of JNIM sending operatives to train Ansaroul Islam in various tactics. One such operative was a Mauritanian named Abu Bakr al-Shinquti, a senior AQIM commander who sat on the Sahara Emirate's<sup>n</sup> Shura Council.<sup>40</sup> In early 2015, al-Shinquti was dispatched by senior AQIM leaders to the Gondo plain in Douentza, Mali, where he reportedly trained members of what would become Ansar Dine's Sèrma Brigade,<sup>41 o</sup> as well as future members of Ansaroul Islam. While al-Shinquti died around a year later,<sup>42</sup> he was instrumental in recruiting, training, equipping, and transferring militant tradecraft to and for the group that would announce itself as Ansaroul Islam. Not long after al-Shinquti's death, Ansaroul Islam and the Sèrma brigade jointly conducted the aforementioned attack in Nassoumbou and thus began the jihadi insurgency in northern Burkina Faso.<sup>43</sup>

Ansaroul Islam is primarily made up of recruits from the Fulani and Rimaibé ethnic groupings, with Rimaibé in the majority. However, Ansaroul Islam is not an ethnic-based group and also includes members from the Mossi, Bellah (Black Tamasheq), Dogons, and Songhai communities.<sup>44</sup> Ansaroul Islam founder Dicko was able to challenge long-established and prevailing hegemony of the traditional aristocracy represented by customary chiefs and marabout families<sup>p</sup> through sermons focused on equality and brotherhood and questioning the stratification of nobles, clerics, and serfs—in particular the subdivisions within Soum's majority ethnic group, the Fulani.<sup>q</sup> This discourse and rhetoric allowed Dicko to gain popularity and followers, especially among the Rimaibé.<sup>45</sup>

### TTPs of Ansaroul Islam

Ansaroul Islam has carried out at least 78 attacks in northern Burkina Faso since December 2016, according to a dataset compiled from open-sources by the authors, which provides a picture of the group's TTPs. The group's primary targets are civilians and civilian infrastructure. This includes kidnappings, assaults, and assassinations of local elders, mayors, or other prominent civilians across the Sahel region. Administrative buildings, houses, and schools have also been burned down by Ansaroul Islam militants.

At least 30 attacks targeted defense and security forces and members of self-defense groups,<sup>r</sup> which resulted in at least 40 fatalities. IEDs were used in five of these attacks. Ansaroul Islam members also carried out 35 targeted killings, assassination at-

n AQIM's Sahara Emirate was AQIM's branch in the Sahel and specifically northern Mali.

o The group is referred to as the Sèrma Brigade because it uses the Sèrma forest, south of Boni, as a base and staging area. It is also known as Ansar Dine fil-Janub (Ansar Dine in the South), or Ansar Dine Janub al-Nahr (Ansar Dine South of the River), pointing to the areas where it operates south of the Niger River, specifically in the administrative subdivisions of Gourma-Rharous and Douentza. This group is not to be confused with the aforementioned Katiba Khalid Ibn al-Walid/Ansar Dine Sud.

p Marabout refers to Islamic scholars or leaders in North Africa and the Sahel.

q The Rimaibé are descendants of slaves, originally groups of the indigenous population subjugated and absorbed by the Fulani.

r These groups are known as Kogllewo, which refers to a structure of vigilante militias enjoying intermittent government support.

tempts, and abductions that resulted in 45 fatalities. At least 11 of the individuals killed were notables, including village chiefs, local councilmen, imams, and marabouts. Education and government infrastructure was targeted on at least 13 occasions, 12 of these attacks targeted schools. However, the group has threatened civil servants, including teachers, mayors, judges and court officers, on a much larger scale, but were not added to the overall count as these were only threats of violence.

Ansaroul Islam has also routinely targeted Burkinabe security forces, including the regular military, police officers, and gendarmerie personnel. A large portion of these assaults have been against fixed positions such as checkpoints and buildings. However, Burkinabe patrols have also been the focus of its attacks.

Ansaroul Islam is more than just a terrorist group. It has acted as a self-defense group, protecting communities from whom it enjoys support,<sup>46</sup> as well as herders and livestock in a region where banditry, cattle rustling, and intercommunal violence is rife. At the same time, the group itself engages in activities such as localized robberies and cattle rustling.<sup>47</sup> The group's involvement in both terrorist activity and banditry means that it is best described as a hybrid terrorist-criminal group. The group's second in command and military commander, Oumarou Boly, was himself a highwayman. That said, the group's terror agendas have so far outweighed its criminal agendas.

Ansaroul Islam's strategy, much like its allies in Mali, is not apparently focused on holding territory currently. After its attacks or assaults, it quickly disperses from the scene. In some instances, it has looted or taken war spoils from its targets before withdrawing.

In addition, the group has mostly used small arms in its attacks, according to local media reporting, although last year it began using improvised explosive devices (IEDs) against Burkinabe security forces.<sup>48</sup> The first IED attack ever recorded in Burkina Faso occurred on August 17, 2017, killing three Burkinabe counterterrorism soldiers.<sup>49</sup> Over the course of the rest of the year, the group carried out four more IED attacks. The group's increasing use of IEDs is likely a product of JNIM's provision of assistance and training.<sup>8</sup> The IED tradecraft obtained by Ansaroul Islam was most likely transferred by the Sèrma Brigade, with which Ansaroul Islam shares operational linkages and closeness in terms of areas of operations, but also due to the Sèrma Brigade's prolific deployment of IEDs in central Mali.<sup>50</sup>

Ansaroul Islam also appears to have carried out its first IED attack in Mali. On April 3, 2017, two young shepherds were killed by the explosion of an IED while herding their animals in the forest near the village of Moungnoukana.<sup>51</sup> Two days later, French forces operating near the borders with Burkina Faso were subjected to a two-pronged attack by Ansaroul Islam militants.<sup>1</sup> First, the

s In particular, the Sèrma Brigade with whom it has cooperated closely, therefore a distinctly possible source from where Ansaroul Islam obtained the tradecraft in the use of explosives.

t Despite JNIM claiming responsibility for the attack, a JNIM media operative later attributed it to Ansaroul Islam in a Telegram post about a month later with the following statement: "God preserve you in his keeping our honorable Sheikh Malam Ibrahim Dicko ... and he/[God] made of you a fork in the throats of the French and their agents." Menastream, "#BurkinaFaso: #AQIM/#JNIM-affiliated telegram channel honors #AnsaroullIslam leader Malam Ibrahim Dicko "God preserve you in his keeping..." Twitter, May 13, 2017.

militants detonated an IED against a light armored vehicle, which wounded two soldiers, and then carried out an ambush that killed a soldier who was part of a unit that arrived to secure the perimeter of the first attack.<sup>52</sup>

### Implications for Regional Security

Given that the group appears to be growing in capability, there is concern Ansaroul Islam's campaign of violence will spread from the northernmost province of Soum to the provinces of Yatenga, Lorum, Kossi, Oudalan, and Bam. Sporadic attacks have already taken place within all these provinces. There is also concern that jihadis on both sides of the Mali-Burkina Faso border will also be able to utilize northern Burkina Faso as a rear base for attacks inside Mali.

Ansaroul Islam's violence will also likely impact France's Operation Barkhane, requiring French Special Forces to further expand their joint and unilateral operations, including possibly inside Burkina Faso's borders. French Special Forces have been operating near the border with Burkina Faso since early 2017.<sup>53</sup> In April and May 2017, these French forces conducted "Panga" and "Bayard," respectively. The former was a joint operation carried out in conjunction with Malian and Burkinabe forces and was limited in its success.<sup>54</sup> The intelligence gathered paved way for the unilateral multi-pronged operation Bayard a month later,<sup>55</sup> which had long-lasting effects on Ansaroul Islam's tactical calculus.<sup>u</sup>

The emergence of an Ansaroul Islam network inside Burkina Faso also permits al-Qa`ida's regional networks more operating space inside the country, allowing for greater recruitment as well as possibly more opportunities to conduct additional large-scale terrorist attacks. There is also the potential the Burkina Faso's government response to the nascent insurgency, which some have accused of being heavy-handed,<sup>56</sup> may also drive people to join the jihadi cause.

### State Responses and Their Implications

Burkina Faso is currently the largest contributor of troops to the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). With 1,886 personnel deployed, this accounts for roughly one-fourth of the country's defense forces.<sup>57</sup> But it is questionable how sustainable this overseas deployment will be given the increasingly pressing security needs in northern Burkina Faso. As late as on February 11, 2018, the local police closed down and evacuated the police station in Déou, Oudalan Province, fearing retaliation for the killing of an assailant while repelling an attack a week earlier.<sup>58</sup> The recently appointed Minister of Security Clément Sawadogo referred to the events in Déou as a "tactical

<sup>u</sup> After France's Operation Bayard, Ansaroul Islam started to avoid larger gatherings in the Foularé forest and started to split into smaller cells and disperse along the borders.

withdrawal."<sup>59 v</sup>

The response by security forces have caused a local crisis in Burkina's Sahel region. Internally displaced persons (IDPs) have steadily risen as the security forces have cracked down on jihadis. As of February 2018, over 23,000 people have been displaced,<sup>60</sup> some forced out of their homes by security forces in the name of fighting back against Ansaroul Islam.<sup>61</sup> There are allegations that in the months since late 2017, Burkinabe security forces have carried out extrajudicial killings of civilians as part of their efforts to root out militants. The past two years, an estimated 2,000 Burkinabes have been scattered around Gossi, in the Tombouctou Region of Mali.<sup>62 w</sup>

The local Fulani population, much like across the Sahel, appears to have borne the brunt of this state-sanctioned violence. Violence or crimes committed against the Fulani people are not just limited to Burkina Faso; this trend can be seen across the Sahel.<sup>63</sup> The humanitarian situation in northern Burkina Faso is also alarming, as the conflict has created a sharp reduction in economic activity at the local markets. Access to the health and education system have also become extremely limited. As of February 2018, more than 10,000 students have been deprived from their education, and there are serious food shortages.<sup>64</sup> Long a destination for refugees fleeing the conflict in Mali, the flow is now reversing out of Burkina Faso.<sup>65</sup>

The March 2 terrorist attacks in Ouagadougou was JNIM's most brazen attack in the Sahel to date. The jihadi group justified its murderous actions by saying it was in response to French raids on its leadership, as well as joint French and Burkinabe military operations near the borders between Mali and Burkina Faso.<sup>66</sup> The use of a suicide car bomb within the capital suggests JNIM maintains an effective support network in Ouagadougou. As Burkina Faso attempts to crackdown on jihadi activity within its borders and the situation deteriorates in the north, more terrorist attacks in the country, and especially in Ouagadougou, are likely to occur. **CTC**

<sup>v</sup> In November 2016, Burkina's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Alpha Barry, sounded the alarm by stating that the continued overseas deployment effort was not sustainable. The country had been subjected to around 20 attacks between April 2015 and October 2016, while being engaged in external operations. This came amidst talks between President Roch Kaboré, MINUSMA's chief Mahamat Saleh Annadif, and the European Union's Special Representative for the Sahel on a redeployment of Burkinabe peacekeepers stationed in Diabaly closer to Burkina's borders. In July 2017, Burkina withdrew its peacekeepers from Darfur in order to strengthen its military presence in the Sahel Region. "Burkina withdraws peacekeepers from Darfur," VOA Afrique, July 19, 2017.

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# Islamic State Chemical Weapons: A Case Contained by its Context?

By Markus K. Binder, Jillian M. Quigley, and Herbert F. Tinsley

**With the July 2017 Sydney hydrogen sulfide plot, there is some evidence that the Islamic State has transferred its chemical warfare (CW) expertise from the battlefield to its foreign terrorism activities. Despite this development, Islamic State appears to put scant organizational stock into the use of CW to advance its strategic goals. Though this lack of enthusiasm cannot be confirmed without secret intelligence or broad primary source data, the Islamic State's most obvious means of threatening CW attacks—its affiliated propaganda organs—appear to lack any mention of CW events, prowess, or alleged planning. Ultimately, the Islamic State CW experiment seems to predict little about the future of the group's chemical terrorism.**

**D**uring the Islamic State's brief control of territory in Iraq and Syria, its forces repeatedly employed chemicals in both offensive and defensive operations.<sup>a</sup> In the absence of access to appropriate sources, whether human or documents, it is difficult to draw firm conclusions about the Islamic State's desire to acquire and use chemical weapons. Furthermore, the question remains as to why the Islamic State did not extend this capability into its far-reaching foreign terrorism campaign. Indeed, there is open source evidence of only one instance in which the Islamic State directed the transfer of chemical warfare (CW) related skills to its *al-Amn al-Khariji* (Ex-

a This article's findings are based on research conducted by the authors as part of a predictive analysis of potential Islamic State chemical terrorism pathways against the United States and its allies and interests. The work was funded by the Department of Homeland Security and the report furnished to the funding office. The views and conclusions contained in this document are those of the authors and should not be interpreted as necessarily representing the official policies, either expressed or implied, of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security or START. All information contained in this article is solely derived from open sources and represents the authors' integrative opinions on what the research offered which is of pertinence to the broader question here posed.

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ternal Operations) operatives or their remote associates.<sup>b</sup> Moreover, Islamic State CW activities in theater were possibly relegated to a "special operations" unit—known as "*Jaysh al-Khalifa*" or "*Jaysh Dabiq*"—which may have been responsible for all CW deployments in Syria and Iraq.<sup>c</sup> Considering these notions, available evidence reveals no trends concerning the Islamic State's present and future chemical terrorism ambitions. The more critical question becomes: can the Islamic State's CW experimentation reveal anything about future chemical terrorism threats? This article will argue it cannot.

## The Islamic State's Use of Chemical Weapons

The Islamic State has demonstrated a willingness to use any means to maximize the harm and disruption it inflicts upon its enemies. Starting in 2014, these means came to include chemical weapons, which were utilized in possibly 37 discrete attacks in Syria and Iraq,<sup>d</sup> causing a handful of confirmed deaths and a limited number

b That exception is the July 2017 plot allegedly involving Australian brothers Khaled and Mahmoud Khayat. An individual identified by the Australian Federal Police as a senior Islamic State figure in Syria instructed the Khayats in constructing a device that could disperse hydrogen sulfide, a toxic industrial chemical. See "AFP (Australian Federal Police) and NSW (New South Wales Police) discuss the two Sydney men charged over terrorist acts," AFP on *Periscope*, August 3, 2017. *The Sydney Morning Herald* alleges a public transit target for the chemical device. See Rachel Olding, "Khaled Merhi pleads not guilty to weapons charge after Sydney 'bomb plot' raid," *Sydney Morning Herald*, August 24, 2017. This development followed a failed attempt to down an Emirati airliner using an improvised explosive device. While some aspects of this plot are still unclear, the authors discuss the pertinent implications toward the end of this article.

c This certainly does not rule out other Islamic State assets with chemical weapons expertise or experience. Most importantly, there does appear to have been a group responsible for CW testing and development, which U.S. military efforts seem to have degraded by the summer of 2016.

d This figure, and all other data unless otherwise cited, is from the authors' open source research and is included in the report referenced in footnote a. The exact number of attacks is difficult to pin down. Many have likely gone unreported, whether in local news reports or in the international media. The authors compiled incident data from three different sources in order to focus their research efforts. However, of those that were indicated, some have been disproven, some reports retracted, and still others were documented on the basis of dubious open source evidence. The authors have come to the conclusion that the majority of available data on Islamic State chemical weapons incidents is non-authoritative, particularly in the cases of chlorine and other weaponized industrial chemicals. Generally speaking, reports on mustard agent attacks are better supported due to the potential to test for specific breakdown products in biological or soil samples. The authors chose to focus on sulfur mustard-related attacks in their report to the Department of Homeland Security partly because of the technical prowess its production suggests.

of injuries.<sup>e</sup>

In the course of its operations, the Islamic State has utilized two basic classes of agents: weaponized toxic industrial chemicals (TICs) and warfare agents. The use of weaponized TICs, dominated by the use of chlorine, illustrated the Islamic State's willingness, and capacity, to effectively adapt resources that came into its hands. It also clearly demonstrated that the group had no compunctions about adopting CW. Chlorine was deployed frequently between August 2014 and June 2015 but slowed to a trickle thereafter. In total, there were at least 20 strongly supported instances of the use of chlorine by the Islamic State.<sup>f</sup> In addition, there are indications that Islamic State forces may have used chlorine grenades and other small-scale delivery methods extensively in the course of their defense of Mosul and other sites in north-central Iraq, although these attacks have not been recorded in detail.<sup>g</sup> A noteworthy feature of these deployments is that they all occurred in Iraq.

In addition to chlorine, the Islamic State appears to have employed other TICs on an experimental or opportunistic basis. Phosphine, an organophosphorus compound commonly used as an agricultural fumigant, was allegedly used in a series of attacks in the vicinity of Hasakah, Syria, on June 28, 2015.<sup>h</sup> Islamic State forces reportedly used vinyltrichlorosilane, a compound used in the production of plastic and rubber products,<sup>g</sup> in at least one attack,<sup>h</sup> although this agent's use is not strongly supported, with only two sources of doubtful reliability mentioning it.<sup>g</sup>

In a grave development, the Islamic State also made use of the CW agent sulphur mustard. The initial deployments of mustard agent occurred in August and September 2015. A second set of attacks took place in February and March 2016.<sup>h</sup> Significantly, it appears that this agent was actually produced by the group, which would make it only the second violent non-state actor (VNSA) to

have produced warfare agents in any useful quantity.<sup>i</sup> Although there was a suspicion that the Islamic State had simply deployed agent taken from Saddam-era stockpiles, analysis of samples gathered at the site of the August 21, 2015, attack in Marea, Syria, clearly refuted this. The analysis revealed that the agent employed had been produced using the Levinstein method<sup>6</sup> rather than the Meyer-Clarke method used in the Saddam-era program,<sup>7</sup> strongly supporting the contention that the agent was self-produced.

The Islamic State's CW activities have been almost entirely confined to battlefields and their immediate environs, using a variety of artillery and mortar systems for agent delivery. Otherwise, the Islamic State's CW use seemed designed to slow enemy advances through the extensive use of roadside bombs. The Islamic State's CW approach is markedly different to that adopted by its precursor organization, al-Qa'ida in Iraq (AQI). AQI carried out an explicit chemical terrorism campaign between October 2006 and June 2007.<sup>8</sup> All told, AQI conducted approximately 20 attacks using vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIEDs) charged with varying quantities of chlorine gas.<sup>9</sup> These attacks struck residences, marketplaces, and other public gathering areas, and in one attack, U.S. military personnel, northeast of Baghdad.<sup>10</sup> AQI demonstrated a capacity to refine its methods with early attacks "poorly executed, burning the [chlorine] rather than dispersing it"<sup>11</sup> whereas in March 2007, AQI coordinated two to three massive chemical attacks in Fallujah and Ramadi, exposing as many as 300 civilians in a single incident.<sup>12</sup> Not long after this successful operation, the campaign ceased.<sup>j</sup> In contrast to AQI's progression, there was no apparent evolution in the generally unsophisticated delivery systems employed by the Islamic State.

As for the broader reaches of the putative caliphate, there are apparently no open source reports of a single chemical IED among the scores of devices the Islamic State has used in other theaters or terrorist operations.<sup>k</sup> It is true that jihadis do not differentiate between "terrorist" and "tactical" applications, preferring to see all such operations as "military" in nature. This all-inclusive approach

e Figures on deaths and casualties are incomplete and often inconsistent, particularly where chlorine or commercial toxic chemicals were employed. The following casualty figures for mustard agent are, however, reasonably well supported: one minor was killed following mustard agent exposure at Marea, Syria, in August 2015. See "S/2016/738: Third report of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons-United Nations Joint Investigative Mechanism," United Nations Security Council, August 24, 2016. Thirty-five injuries were reported after a mustard attack on a Kurdish Peshmerga position near Makhmour, Iraq, in August 2015. See "Blood tests reveal traces of mustard gas used by IS in attacks on Peshmerga forces," ARA News, October 9, 2015, and Barbara Starr, Jim Sciutto, and Elise Labott, "U.S. investigating 'credible' reports that IS used chemical weapons," CNN, August 14, 2015. At least three Peshmerga soldiers were injured in a second Makhmour attack in February 2016. See "Peshmerga endure fresh ISIS chemical attack," Rudaw, February 17, 2016, and Matthew Vickery, "Eyewitness account: ISIL steps up chemical weapons attacks on Kurds in Iraq," *USA Today*, March 10, 2016. A Peshmerga officer was seriously wounded in early March 2016. See Peshmerga News, "Major Jamal, brave #Peshmerga who defused many ISIS IEDs, is hospitalized after ISIS used Mustard agent near Zummar," Twitter, March 4, 2016. This comprises a total of one confirmed death and 39 probable injuries. Other reports were not evaluated for their credibility due to imprecise or inconsistent numbers.

f This figure is based on open source research by the authors and is included in the report referred in footnote a.

g Also identified as trichlorovinylsilane. See "Trichlorovinylsilane," National Center for Biotechnology Information, PubChem Compound Database.

h Testing of samples from a suspected mustard attack against U.S. forces in September 2016 initially suggested mustard agent was used, but subsequent testing produced inconclusive results. Ryan Browne, "US: ISIS did not use mustard agent in base attack," CNN, September 27, 2016.

i The other example is Aum Shinrikyo, which mastered the production of sarin and VX nerve agents.

j As to why this campaign ended, plausible explanations include the possibility that AQI had been starved of chlorine supplies. The Iraqi government appears to have suspended chlorine shipments, which may partly be substantiated by high incidences of cholera due to a lack of chlorine for civilian water treatment. See James Glanz and Denise Grady, "Cholera Epidemic Infects 7,000 People in Iraq," *New York Times*, September 12, 2007. Otherwise, AQI's operational latitude may have changed considerably due to the Anbar "Awakening" and the U.S. troop surge.

k This is to exclude the plans for a chemical dispersal device as developed by the Sydney plotters and their handler. Otherwise, UWT researchers surveyed 77 international terrorism incidents associated with the Islamic State, all of which occurred between May 2014 and January 2017. The primary purpose of the survey was to derive Islamic State TTPs in sophisticated, high-casualty, and other types of attacks. Another incident that could turn out to have links to Islamic State CW is a chlorine charged IED discovered by Indonesia authorities in a Jakarta mall in February 2015. While the chlorine itself did not disperse and was "crafted inside a cardboard box," Indonesian police claimed that the culprits were Islamic State foreign fighter returnees. No additional information was supplied by which to analyze this claim. As compared to the Sydney case, as described below, this incident is far more difficult to square as an organizationally driven plot. Kate Lamb, "Indonesian police blame jihadist returning from Syria for chlorine bomb," *Guardian*, March 25, 2015.

raises questions about why the Islamic State has largely refrained from employing CW abroad in pursuit of the strategic goals it associates with terrorism.

### Propagandizing or Not

One rich vein of data on Islamic State activities comes from its own propaganda—less so the famously slick *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah*, more so the battlefield chronicler, *al-Naba*.<sup>13</sup> The toll of the Islamic State's far-flung operations, as well as its Syria and Iraq actions, can be read in the weekly's pages. As part of an effort to assess potential chemical terrorism pathways last year, the authors surveyed over 80 issues of the above titles.<sup>1</sup> The absence of any mention of chemical agents or allusions to chemical capabilities in any of the issues published within a week or less of some 16 chemical incidents is quite surprising.<sup>m</sup>

The Islamic State's use of chemical weapons on the battlefield overlapped mere tactical objectives. For example, at Taza Khurmatu, Iraq, in March 2016, chlorine and mustard agent were mixed in with artillery barrages targeting areas just beyond the battlefield proper, exposing civilians and combatants in rear areas and along likely supply routes.<sup>n</sup> The Islamic State's understanding of CW's potential use to generate panic amongst local enemies connects to the fact that the organization considers psychological warfare, terrorism, and tactical combat as part and parcel of the same operational doctrines. The Islamic State's choice to employ CW agents, as it did, suggests that a link between the group's operational calculus and its strategic objectives may have had some initial traction in its leaders' minds.

It is difficult to perfectly substantiate the Islamic State's knowledge of Iraqis' fear of chemical weapons, but circumstantial evidence is abundant. A British CW expert who has had extensive

1 Researchers reviewed issues #5 through #77 of *al-Naba*, corresponding to the time period November 15, 2015, through April 20, 2017. This time period covers 14 of the 37 Islamic State-related chemical weapons events considered for the UWT report (eight sulfur mustard related events and six events related to other weaponized chemicals.) Researchers also reviewed all available time-period relevant English issues of *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah*, especially in order to account for CW incidents occurring prior to November 2015. Though *al-Naba* is more exhaustive in its coverage than *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah*, it is, in fact, more interesting, in the context of this argument, that these magazines do not mention chemical weapons or chemical releases. After all, the latter two titles were Islamic State's flagship efforts for Western audiences.

m Certainly a more exhaustive search could yield different results. However, in order to keep within the time allotted for the research mentioned, the authors had to restrain their search.

n In this case, the target was a Shi'a Turkmen-majority town significantly to the east and south of what was then considered the Makhmour front, approximately 150 kilometers southeast of Mosul. This area was plausibly within the AOR of the Iraqi Army's Nineveh Operations command, if not along that command's supply corridor. (There was no evidence, however, that the units under this command had stationed any of their elements in or near the town of Taza Khurmatu.) BBC News reported that 24 "shells and rockets" fell on Taza Khurmatu on March 8. VICE News claimed "more than 40 rockets," alleging that all of these carried chemical warheads. A Shi'a Popular Mobilization spokesman told Al-Sumaria news that two more "Katyusha" rockets had struck on the evening of March 11. See Nafiseh Kohnavard, "Iraqi town Taza 'hit in IS chemical attack' appeals for help," BBC News, March 25, 2016, Campbell MacDiarmid, "Inside Taza, the Iraqi Town Gassed by the Islamic State," VICE News, March 9, 2016, and "Taza Subjected to New Attack by Ordnance Carrying Toxic Gas," Al-Sumaria, March 11, 2016.

contact with Iraqi, Syrian, and Turkish medical and military professionals reports that many of these individuals profess to a dread of "gas" and basic misunderstandings of the nature of various CW agents for preparedness and defense purposes.<sup>14</sup> In Iraq, this dread is predicated on the Saddam-era use of chemical weapons for internal suppression. On a number of occasions, Iraqi political figures have dismissed or denied the very existence of Islamic State CW capabilities, likely in the hope of allaying civilian fears.<sup>15</sup> For example, Hakim al-Zamili, chairman of the Iraqi parliament's security and defense committee, alleged in 2016 that the notion was an American fiction and that claims that the Islamic State's CW specialist, Suleiman Dawoud al-Afari, had been captured were baseless.<sup>16</sup> Islamic State propagandists are likely to have been aware of these official statements and their motivation.

Since Aum Shinrikyo's spectacular mid-1990s attacks, the West has manifested a growing and somewhat sensational fear of chemical terrorism—as potentially threatened by the Islamic State itself against Europe, if not the United States—reflected in both official analyses and news reports.<sup>17</sup> Whether one believes that the media drives public perceptions or that media aligns to the public's thought life, Islamic State propagandists may have easily read this trend themselves. John Cantlie, a British journalist forced into Islamic State propaganda services after late 2012, either chose to exploit or was ordered to stoke Western fears of nuclear terrorism in *Dabiq* #9.<sup>18</sup> In that issue, the feature article implies that the Islamic State was well aware of European and American psychological vulnerabilities related to CBRN.<sup>19</sup>

Certainly the linkages between Islamic State propagandists and the organization's leadership are imperfectly understood. But considering that the group's propaganda was most likely intended to hype "statehood" through the boasting of state-level technical prowess, and, more critically, to draw followers into its fold or convoke them to homespun violence, Islamic State propagandists saw fit to talk up even the most ambiguously successful operations. Why then omit such an obvious accomplishment as the CW program? Could the effort have been too important or too unsatisfying to propagandize? Did Islamic State insiders quickly begin to consider the program ineffective or non-strategic by nature? Might they have feared moral outrage from their supporters or cadres? Again, the exact answers are unclear but to believe that the Islamic State neglected this opportunity without good motive is very difficult.

### Implications

The clarion contrast between the Islamic State's lack of propaganda output on CW and its regular media celebration of even the smallest tactical activities, and the determination to demonstrate technological achievements as seen with the adoption and publication of advances in the employment of drones as weapons, suggests Islamic State leadership did not unambiguously support the CW effort. There are several reasons why this might be the case, including the possibility that the effort was a low priority, pet project of a limited number of actors within the organization.

The Islamic State's leadership, and the organization more generally, is likely to have learned a number of lessons from the CW effort. First, the organization (and at least some of its members) is likely to have an enhanced understanding of the difficulties of producing, weaponizing, handling, and effectively deploying CW agents. Secondly, the organization may, based on results from field deployments, have concluded that CW agents are ineffective tools

for generating significant numbers of casualties, which may affect any consideration of future use of these agents in terrorist operations.<sup>o</sup> To date, there is only one indication that the skills and training required to weaponize chemicals (or produce CW agents) have been transferred out of the Syria-Iraq theater.<sup>p</sup> While it is possible that some survivors of the units involved with the production and use of chemical agents have escaped from the territory of the former caliphate, only the Sydney hydrogen sulfide plot offers any suggestions about what Islamic State chemical terrorism may actually entail.

Certainly, the New South Wales Police discovery of hydrogen sulfide precursors in the possession of aspiring Islamic State allies could seem to indicate a strategic evolution toward chemical attacks. But this single data point may speak more to the tactical improvisation of the Islamic State handler who directed the plot from afar.<sup>q</sup> When the Khayat brothers failed to get an IED onboard a passenger flight in July 2017, the handler probably instructed them to quickly set up a fake powder coating company and begin experiments in TIC weaponization and dispersal.<sup>r</sup> Hydrogen sulfide is among the less difficult substances to produce outside of an industrial setting, but poses impressive risks to the layman and furthermore to successful lethal deployments.<sup>20</sup> Switching from an IED to this particular chemical may have been driven more by a newly chosen target or by the prerogative of the handler.<sup>s</sup> More confounding to a connection between Islamic State strategy and the Sydney plot is the status of the remote controller. If an *al-Amn al-Khariji* coordinator, as is plausible, then his personal initiative to option a TIC would not necessarily have needed a superior's review or

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- o This observation is not intended as an explanation for the 2017 cessation of Islamic State CW use in theater, which was likely driven by other factors, including loss of personnel, infrastructure, and territory.
  - p The exception may be the Sydney hydrogen sulfide plot. Nevertheless, the Sydney suspects did not attempt to produce chemical warfare agents, but to weaponize commercially available toxic chemicals. The distinction is very important in terms of the threat posed and the technical sophistication involved.
  - q Australian Federal Police Deputy Commissioner Michael Phelan announced that the suspects were in conversation with a senior Islamic State figure from April 2017. See "AFP and NSW discuss the two Sydney men charged over terrorist acts." The conversations were allegedly facilitated by the suspects' brother, who had traveled to Syria as a foreign fighter more than a year before. Phelan characterized these interactions as the provision of inspiration and instruction on how to plan, resource, and then execute a civilian aviation plot. The Islamic State figure was not identified, but this plot is similar to the "virtual planner" model described by Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and others, possibly suggesting an *al-Amn al-Khariji* operative like Rashid Qassim or Abdselam Abbaoud. See Rachel Olding, "Lebanese authorities monitored Australian bomb plot suspects: minister," *Sydney Morning Herald*, August 22, 2017, and Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Madeleine Blackman, "ISIL's Virtual Planners: A Critical Terrorist Innovation," *War on the Rocks*, January 4, 2017.
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  - s Both of these points are arguable. *The Sydney Morning Herald* alleges that the chemical device target would have been "crowded spaces or public transport." Olding and Benny-Morrison. As to the handler's prerogative, see the following footnote.

approval, though this does not eliminate leadership involvement.<sup>t</sup> New details may change this assessment, but the Sydney chemical plot seems best understood as a context-specific innovation instead of an organizational trend.<sup>u</sup>

Be that as it may, the Islamic State's use of CW is primarily of interest for its illustration of the potential for quasi-state organizations with territorial control to employ military capabilities typically associated with state military forces. In the case of the Islamic State, the adoption of chemical weapons is clearly unusual when compared to other insurgencies with territorial pretensions or active control throughout the MENA region and throughout history more generally. It is likely, though difficult to prove, that the Islamic State's employment of chemical weapons was very much a product of the circumstances of the group's rise. This surely helps to explain both the Islamic State's interest in developing CW capabilities as well as perhaps why those capabilities have not been applied outside Iraq and Syria. Iraq, after all, has a long history of production and use of chemical weapons, which is likely to have ensured the availability of the necessary technical personnel, awareness of the associated technologies, and its probable utility in theater. In addition, the extensive use of chemical weapons by the Syrian government since late 2012 is likely to have been a further factor in attracting attention to chemical weapons and commercially available TICs.<sup>v</sup>

While the Islamic State has demonstrated on multiple occasions an essentially unrestrained willingness to engage in attacks on civilian populations, its CW activities show a tight association with battlefield tactics. As such, although the Islamic State's CW activities undoubtedly represent an interesting data point, not least in terms of the scientific and engineering capacity of insurgencies, and its ability to address the challenges of production and weaponization of CW agents, that data point does not tell us much of anything useful about how the Islamic State or a successor organization might seek to employ chemical weapons against remote Western targets. It may, however, be relevant for those planning future operations against insurgencies with territorial control in so far as it suggests the need to consider that insurgents may employ chemical weapons against Western forces or their local proxies.

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- t According to one understanding of Islamic State foreign terrorism operations planning, *al-Amn al-Khariji* operatives conduct attack creation and logistics largely according to their own cognizance, provided that they respect Islamic State leaders' strategic vision and mandates. Like the somewhat similar *auftragstaktik*, or "mission-based tactics," model used by the Imperial German Army in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, this operational doctrine emphasizes the innovation and initiative of Islamic State controllers.
  - u Whether the "mission-based tactics" model was or continues to be accurate can be disputed for at least two reasons. First, *al-Amn al-Khariji* operations may have changed after the group lost its primary coordination and training center in late 2016 (months before the Sydney plot). Second, former *al-Amn al-Khariji* leader Abu Mohammed al-Adnani is said to have involved himself with most of the group's ongoing operations and was undoubtedly part of the Islamic State's highest echelon. His successor may have also been routinely involved in decision making, to include the hydrogen sulfide choice. If so, chemical terrorism may feature in an as yet unclear way in Islamic State strategizing. Future evidence surrounding the Sydney incident may be key to understanding its wider associations.
  - v The first widely documented use of CW agents or weaponized industrial chemicals by the Islamic State dates to July 12, 2014. See Jonathan Spyer, "Did ISIS Use Chemical Weapons Against the Kurds in Kobani?" *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 18:3 (2014): pp. 90-94.



This does not diminish the fact that terrorist organizations or their operatives may come to fetishize chemical and other warfare agents because of the fear they can induce, much as Aum Shinrikyo did. However, given the Islamic State's limited chemical warfare activities, the concern generated by these deeds does not yet justify

seeing the Islamic State as an inevitable chemical terrorism danger. And though Western security agencies are correct to monitor this threat vector, publicized warnings remain alarmist for the time being. **CTC**

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