



Edited by Andrea Plebani

**New (and old) patterns of jihadism:  
al-Qa'ida, the Islamic State and beyond**

*Foreword by Paolo Magri*

**ISPI**



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ISTITUTO PER GLI STUDI DI POLITICA INTERNAZIONALE

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**NEW (AND OLD) PATTERNS OF JIHADISM:  
AL-QA'IDA, THE ISLAMIC STATE  
AND BEYOND**

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PAOLO MAGRI

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## FOREWORD

*by Paolo Magri*

Thirteen years after the tragic events of 9/11, al-Qa'ida can count on more regional nodes than ever before, as well as on a still significant influence over the most extreme parts of the wider radical Islamist galaxy. The movement survived the loss of its sanctuaries in Afghanistan, the elimination of its founder and several of its top leaders, as well as the ephemeral victories obtained by the Muslim Brotherhood and its sister organizations, after the Arab Spring toppled several of the regimes it vowed to destroy. Victories that, until a couple of years ago, were described as the final nails in the coffin of al-Qa'ida's armed struggle: a global jihad considering the ballot boxes as no more than a tool in the hands of the enemies of Islam and tasked with the restoration of its Golden Age.

Despite all the requiems sung in the past decade by experts and officials alike, then, al-Qa'ida is alive, albeit not as dangerous as in 2001. But, differently from the past, the group seems not to be alone. The last few years witnessed the emergence of a series of actors that, while sharing several features with al-Qa'ida, developed new and often competing interpretations able to threaten its supremacy over the whole jihadi community. The swift ascendance of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, its creation of an emirate ruled by extremely rigid shariah norms, and the dispute soaring between its leader, the 'Caliph' Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, and the amir of al-Qa'ida, Ayman al-Zawahiri, are the most tangible evidences of this process. But they are just a part of a wider picture. In Tunisia and Libya the local branches of Ansar al-Sharia gave birth to a hybrid stream of jihadism, mixing appeals to social justice with

## Foreword

calls to renew the armed struggle in defense of the Islamic community. In 'post-Morsi Egypt' the restive Sinai Peninsula appears to have become the seat of a new 'jihadist international', able to gather a composite array of violent groups extolling objectives and modus operandi close to the ones expressed by al-Qa'ida but not officially under its wing. At the same time, growing numbers of foreign volunteers responded to the appeal launched by jihadist organizations fighting in Syria and Iraq - their ranks replenished by would-be jihadists (often in their twenties or even younger) coming from all over the world, Europe included. A phenomenon that has been described by the main intelligence agencies as the most serious threat the West will have to face in the mid- to long term.

How did the Islamic State emerge in Iraq and Syria and how serious is its challenge for the international community and for al-Qa'ida? What could be the impact of the different Tunisian and Libyan Ansar al-Sharia branches operating in North Africa and beyond? Can Sinai become the next frontier of jihadism and how is it affected by the instability pervading Libya and Palestine? Who are the European jihadists fighting in Syria and Iraq and what could their impact be once they decide to return to their homes? How do security agencies perceive the threat of transnational extremist networks and what are the strategies they implement to counter them?

These are some of the questions this volume aims to address, taking into account the heterogeneity of a phenomenon that has been aptly described as a hydra, capable of regenerating from every single blow and – above all – of spawning new heads once one is cut off. Questions that the Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI) examines in the framework of multi-year research rooted in a long-term vision aimed at deepening the understanding of a reality in constant evolution and able to have a deep impact on the wider Middle East that – with its Mediterranean leg – is far closer than usually described.

**Paolo Magri**

*Executive Vice-President and Director, ISPI*



# 1. THE UNFOLDING LEGACY OF AL-QA'IDA IN IRAQ: FROM AL-ZARQAWI TO THE NEW ISLAMIC CALIPHATE

*Andrea Plebani*

Whether Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi will succeed or not in creating a Caliphate able to extend its hold over the whole Islamic community and beyond, 2014 will be remembered as a defining moment for the broader radical Islamist galaxy. Only three years ago, officials and analysts alike scrambled to celebrate the requiem of al-Qa'ida and of the brand of global jihad it embodied. The flames of its struggle had apparently been exhausted by US-led counterterrorism efforts as well as by the successes the movements of "Political Islam" were obtaining at the ballot boxes after the Arab Spring, ousting the same apostate regimes al-Qa'ida (AQ) had tried in vain to topple in decades of 'honoured career'. And yet, all of a sudden, the world was awakened last June by the news that the insurgents fighting under the black flag of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) had conquered Mosul, the second biggest city in Iraq. In the midst of the indifference that had shrouded Iraq since the withdrawal of US troops in 2011 and of the convolutions of the Syrian war, the forces commanded by al-Baghdadi succeeded in recovering and in infiltrating an area stretching from north-western Syria to eastern Iraq and – even more important – in laying the foundations of a state located in the very heart of the Arab and the Islamic world. An objective that not even Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, al-Baghdadi's mentor and founder of al-Qa'ida in Iraq (AQI), could have dreamt of and that until a couple of years ago would have appeared impossible even to his staunchest supporter. A state

that these black warriors seek to transform into a model for the whole *ummah* and into a launching pad for a global struggle aimed at reuniting the Islamic community and at restoring the golden age of Islam. No matter how much suffering they will inflict and how many innocent victims they will slaughter, nor if the overwhelming majority of the Islamic community rejects their battle, is horrified by their methods and accuses them of having followed in kharijites's footsteps.<sup>1</sup> Whether we like it or not, Daesh<sup>2</sup> forces have deeply altered the frail equilibriums of the Middle Eastern region, challenging the very existence of the nation states that emerged from the ashes of the Ottoman Empire at the end of the First World War and spreading a legacy of hatred and instability destined to affect the whole area for years, if not for decades to come. They also have the potential to extend their threat to the West as well, Europe *in primis*, thanks in part to the significant number of foreign fighters who have left our continent to join their ranks.

But how is possible that a movement that in 2010 was considered in its death throes succeeded a few years later to emerge as a key player in Syria and Iraq and to openly challenge the predominance of al-Qa'ida over the radical Islamic galaxy? Who are these extremists who terrorize entire provinces and what are their ideological bases? And – even more important – is their hold so entrenched on the territories they control that we will have to become accustomed to the existence of the 'Islamic State' (IS) and its reshaping of the modern Middle East?

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1. The term indicates a group of Muslims who after the 656 killing of the third Caliph, 'Uthman, and the ensuing struggle between 'Ali and Mu'awiyah invoked the need to adopt an extremely harsh stance towards Muslims committing grave sins. According to their interpretation, these people should be considered apostates and therefore deserve capital punishment. See E. Van Donzel, B. Lewis, Ch. Pellat, *The Encyclopaedia of Islam. New Edition*, Vol. IV, Brill, 1997, p. 1074-1077.

2. The term is widely used to indicate the militants fighting under the banner of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, whose acronym in Arabic reads as daesh or da'ish.

### 1.1 *The origins: the armed jihad in Iraq*

The origins of the Islamic State can be traced back to Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and to the radical Islamist movement Jamat al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad (Twj). The group – which operated mainly in north-western Iraq – was little known to Western security agencies and radical circles alike and was mainly composed of a few non-Iraqi operatives led by Jordanian-born Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Taking an extremely aggressive stance as well as utilizing a media-savvy campaign, the movement soon became one of the symbols of the anti-US insurgency. It was not the bare number of attacks, but its high-level capabilities (demonstrated in dozens of terrorist operations conducted against Coalition forces and international personnel and objectives) as well as its ruthless tactics that allowed Twj to emerge among the hundreds of groups comprising the Iraqi insurgency. In this context, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's name quickly became associated with some of the cruellest images of the Iraqi war, such as the beheading of Western prisoners, the indiscriminate killing of civilians and soldiers, as well as the attacks against the symbols of the 'new Iraq'. These acts were presented by the Jordanian terrorist as mere responses to the subjugation and humiliation of the Islamic community, and conveyed by new and old media through extremely powerful images, like the beheading of Western hostages attired in the same orange clothes worn by Guantanamo prisoners.

Al-Zarqawi succeeded in becoming one of the most important players of the Iraq war, but he had to face the restrictions stemming from the limited resources and fighters at his disposal, as well as the mainly foreign nature of his group. This *gharib* paradox, as Brian Fishman<sup>3</sup> called it, while preserving the cohesion of the movement and its loyalty to the leadership of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, prevented the Jordanian terrorist from accessing the wide pool of Iraqi militants operating in the country against Coalition forces, as well as the vast numbers of foreign fighters active on the ground but not aligned with his group. It is in

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3. B. Fishman, "After Zarqawi: The Dilemmas and Future of Al Qaeda in Iraq", *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 29, No. 4, Autumn 2006.

this context that the formation of al-Qa'ida in the Land of the Two Rivers (better known as al-Qa'ida in Iraq - AQI) took place in 2004. The classic marriage of convenience: al-Qa'ida needed a charismatic leader on the ground to carry the flag of the group against US forces after the setbacks suffered in Afghanistan. Al-Zarqawi needed Osama bin Laden's blessing to enhance his stature inside the insurgency and obtain more visibility, but – above all – to gain sufficient legitimacy among the cadres of foreign fighters who entered Iraq to respond al-Qa'ida's call.

AQI soon emerged as one of the most powerful groups of the insurgency but, despite the spectacularity of its attacks, it never succeeded in dominating the other groups fighting the Coalition and the nascent Iraqi security forces nor in extending its grip over significant swaths of Iraqi territory. The situation was further worsened by the three rounds of elections which took place in 2005. While Arab Sunnis *de facto* boycotted the January 2005 voting, the community turned out *en masse* for both the referendum on the constitution (October) and the December elections, even if it failed to sink the constitutional process and to obtain enough seats to exert significant influence over the new Iraqi institutions.<sup>4</sup> Despite these results, the community's participation in the electoral process was considered an existential threat by al-Zarqawi, who knew very well that his success depended heavily on the instability of the Iraqi system and on the support (or at least the connivance) of the Arab Sunni community. He decided then to shift the group's agenda, ceasing to limit its attacks to Coalition troops, Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) and international personnel and waging an all-out war against the Iraqi Shia community to foster inter-community hatred and competition. The hundreds of attacks against Shia civilian, religious and political targets culminated in the June 2006 Samarra bombing – generally considered the event that marked the beginning of Iraq's civil war.<sup>5</sup> The destruction of the 'Askariyya shrine, one of the most revered Shia holy sites, unleashed a wave of anger that not even Grand Ayatollah

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4. See P. Marr, *The modern history of Iraq*, Boulder, Colorado, 2011.

5. See M. Hafez, *Suicide bombers in Iraq*, United States Institute of Peace, Washington DC, 2007.

'Ali al-Sistani could stop. Shia militias spearheaded by the Mahdi Army (and supported by important segments of the Iraqi institutions) faced Sunni insurgents led by al-Qa'ida in Iraq, with Baghdad becoming the epicentre of a spiral of terror that spread through most of the country.

While AQI forces succeeded in inflicting tremendous blows to the Shia militias and their constituencies, their opponents ultimately got the upper hand, extending their control over most of the capital and completing a sectarian cleansing which dramatically altered the demographic equilibriums of a city which has always been deeply marked by its 'mixed' heritage<sup>6</sup>.

The defeat at the battle of Baghdad represented a huge blow for AQI, which came under growing criticism. At the international level, fellow jihadists stepped up their condemnation of the ruthless tactics adopted by the movement as well as of the decision to focus its attacks against Shia forces and not against Coalition troops and the Iraqi government. Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, widely considered to be al-Zarqawi's mentor, openly attacked the *modus operandi* of the organization and even Ayman al-Zawahiri – at the time Osama bin Laden's deputy – invited the Jordanian leader to modify his tactics, especially concerning attacks against the Shia population. "People of discernment and knowledge among Muslims know the extent of danger to Islam of the [...] Shiism [...]. [But] the majority of Muslims don't comprehend this [and] this matter won't be acceptable to the Muslim populace however much you have tried to explain it, and aversion to this will continue"<sup>7</sup>.

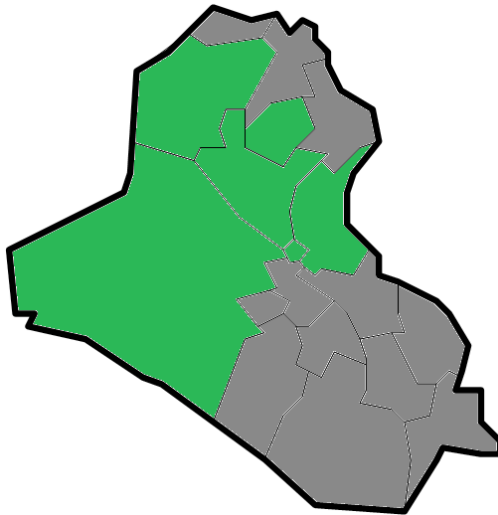
AQI had to face serious challenges at the Iraqi level too, with several insurgent groups blaming the movement for the fall of Baghdad and opposition emerging even inside its ranks. This last element proved to be particularly significant, as it exposed a series of internal fractures that – while rooted in the foundation of AQI – emerged in all their depth in 2006. While the affiliation with al-Qa'ida provided al-Zarqawi

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6. See A. Plebani, "Baghdad: città immaginata tra memoria e speranza di rinascita", *Storia Urbana*, No. 139, April-June 2013.

7. A. Moghadam and B. Fishman, *Fault lines in global jihad: organizational, strategic, and ideological fissures*, Routledge, 2011.

with increased manpower and capabilities, it also weakened the bonds linking AQI cadres to its leadership, sowing the seeds of discontent and sedition. These rifts were exploited by AQI enemies who succeeded in infiltrating the group and in killing its leader in June 2006. The death of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi represented a terrible blow for the movement, which underwent significant re-organization under the dual leadership of Abu Ayyub al-Masri and Abu Omar al-Baghdadi based on a twofold strategy: on the one hand, it launched an operation aimed at ‘Iraqifying’ its cadres in order to dilute the side effects of the ‘gharib paradox’;<sup>8</sup> on the other, it decided to enlarge its areas of action, integrating its military operations with management of the territory under its direct control. This led the organization to lay the foundations of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), an Islamic emirate which should have extended its reach over most of central-northern Iraq.



AREAS CLAIMED BY THE ISLAMIC STATE OF IRAQ IN 2006

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8. A measure already begun during the last months of al-Zarqawi's tenure, when AQI merged with other insurgent groups under the umbrella of the *Majlis Shura al-Mujahedin*.

Despite these efforts, the heyday of the group founded by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in Iraq seemed to be over: ISI's attempt to extend its control over Arab Sunni majority governorates was met by stiff local resistance, pitting ISI forces directly against other insurgent groups and local tribal *shaykhs* for the control of strongholds, resources and illicit trafficking.<sup>9</sup> The disputes between these former allies were not limited to material issues but also to different interpretations of Islamic precepts as well as to ISI's violation of traditional laws and values deeply rooted in Iraq's Arab Sunni society.<sup>10</sup> This situation led several tribal *shaykhs* and insurgent groups to begin considering ISI a bigger threat than the new government of Baghdad and its international allies. Coalition forces exploited these rifts, supporting the formation of military councils known as *sabwa* (awakening): in exchange for their support against ISI forces, these groups obtained non-persecution for their previous activities as well as money and weapons.<sup>11</sup> The program – backed by a shift of US tactics and a surge of its troops on the ground – was decisive in rooting the forces of the Islamic Emirate out of most of its strongholds in central-western Iraq.<sup>12</sup> ISI forces had no other option than to relocate to north-western Iraq, in an area stretching around Mosul and the Niniveh plain, where it could count on a deep historical presence and good relations with local insurgent groups as well as on the benefits stemming from proximity to the Syrian border.<sup>13</sup> Despite these efforts the group was on its knees with its militants hunted all over the country, its operations limited to

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9. D. Kilcullen, "Field Notes on Iraq's Tribal Revolt Against Al-Qa'ida", *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 1, No. 11, 15 October 2008, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/field-notes-on-iraq%E2%80%99s-tribal-revolt-against-al-qaida>.

10. B. Fishman, *Dysfunction and Decline: Lesson Learned From Inside al-Qa'ida in Iraq*, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, March 2009, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/v2/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/Dysfunction-and-Division.pdf>.

11. M. Eisenstadt, "Tribal Engagement: Lessons Learned", *Military Review*, September-October 2007.

12. J. McCary, "The Anbar Awakening: an Alliance of incentives", *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 31, No. 1, 2009

13. See A. Plebani, "Ninawa Province: Al-Qa'ida's Remaining Stronghold", *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 13 January 2010, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/ninawa-province-al-qaida%E2%80%99s-remaining-stronghold>.

racket, illicit trafficking and attacks against local minorities, and the flow of volunteers from all over the world drained. In this context the killing of Abu Ayyub al-Masri and Abu Omar al-Baghdadi in 2010 was hailed by US and Iraqi authorities alike as a death blow inflicted on the group.

### *1.2 ISI's return and its ascendance in the Levant*

Amid the havoc unleashed over ISI's ranks, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (*nom de guerre* of the Iraqi Ibrahim Awwad Ibrahim 'Ali al-Badri al-Samarrai) emerged as the new leader of an organization considered to be in its death throes. The new *amir* vowed to reverse the fate of the movement, reorganizing its ranks, stepping up its activities in its north-western strongholds and returning to organizing high-level attacks all over Iraq. He purged the group of the elements whose loyalty could not be trusted and strengthened its internal bonds in order to create a brotherhood of foreign and Iraqi operatives united by a common aim and ready to fight against anyone not sharing the same objective. Thanks to this internal re-organization as well as to the heightening polarization of Iraq's socio-political system and to the withdrawal of US forces from the country, ISI made a slow but steady return on the Iraqi scene.<sup>14</sup>

But al-Baghdadi did not limit his reach to the "land of the two rivers" only: understanding the importance of the Syrian revolution (and the opportunities it could bring the movement) and thanks to its proximity to remaining ISI strongholds in Iraq, he decided to dispatch a contingent of hardened fighters to face pro-Assad forces. Despite their limited numbers, al-Baghdadi's militants – who fought under the banner of a new group named Jabhat al-Nusra (JAN) led by Abu Muhammad al-Julani – proved their valour and capabilities on multiple occasions, becoming in a few months one of the most feared and admired groups of the anti-Assad insurgency. And not only for its prowess on the battlefield: in stark contrast to other groups, JAN succeeded in building

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14. See M. Knights, *Back with a vengeance: al-Qaeda in Iraq rebounds*, HIS Defense, Security & Risk Consulting, February 24, 2012.



a good reputation among the local population. The organization invested significant resources on alleviating the widespread scarcity of food and on imposing rule of law in the areas under its control through the formation of *sharia* courts which proved their inflexibility with criminals and – at least in the beginning – avoided imposing extremely strict Islamic rules on society. The group also made clear from the beginning its intention to collaborate with the other movements of the insurgency and with society (tribes *in primis*) and did not refrain from accepting Syrian volunteers in its ranks – even if only after a harsh selection aimed at co-opting the most capable and dedicated. Such a *modus operandi* seemed to confirm that al-Baghdadi did not want to risk repeating his predecessors' mistakes in Iraq.

The successes on the battlefields and the good feedback from the Syrian population helped JAN to increase its local and international stature, attracting thousands of volunteers from Syria and all over the world,<sup>15</sup> as well as funding from international donors which – coupled with the network of illicit activities managed by the group<sup>16</sup> – replenished the movement's coffers, allowing it to obtain advanced weapons that not only fellow insurgents but even the Assad regime could not match.

These resources allowed al-Baghdadi to step-up his activities in Iraq, too: the movement launched an anti-government campaign based on its old panoply of tactics (improvised explosive devices, multiple bombings, suicide bombings...) as well as on new means. The group claimed responsibility for a long list of assassinations of politicians, security officials and members of the *sahwa* forces (whose deaths were presented as retribution for their treason in 2006-2008, filmed and shown on the web as a message for its old and future opponents).<sup>17</sup> It also succeeded

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15. R. Barret, *Foreign fighters in Syria*, The Soufang Group, June 2014, <http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/TSG-Foreign-Fighters-in-Syria.pdf>, accessed on 20 July 2014.

16. See T. Keatinge, "The importance of financing in enabling and sustaining the conflict in Syria (and beyond)", *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 8, No. 4, 2014, <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/360/html>.

17. M. Knights, "ISIL's Political-Military Power in Iraq", *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 7, No. 9, 27 August 2014, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/isils-political-military-power-in-iraq>.

in conducting high-level attacks on hard targets in the proximity of the Green Zone, the most fortified area of the capital,<sup>18</sup> as well as on some of Iraq's most important prisons – a tactic that, aside from demonstrating the Iraqi government's inability to control the country, allowed the movement to free several of its members as well as to co-opt hundreds of prisoners with significant military skills.<sup>19</sup> For several of them it was more a matter of survival than a choice stemming from the full acceptance of the group's agenda and objectives: marginalized and persecuted by the new Iraqi government, publicly ostracized due to their (real or assumed) relations with Saddam Hussein's regime and with no option whatsoever of returning to a normal life, they joined the ranks of ISI considering it the only opportunity to regain their honour and to fight against the Iraqi and international actors responsible for their desperate situation. Their military and strategic prowess, together with their deep knowledge of Iraq's territories and dynamics, proved of extreme value for the future successes of the organization.

The growing strength acquired by ISI forces on both sides of the Syrian-Iraqi border pushed al-Baghdadi to devise a deep strategic shift. On April 9, 2013 the Iraqi leader officially declared JAN's subservience to ISI and the merging of the two groups into the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). While ISI-JAN relations were widely known to security and academic circles, the merger of the two groups was quite unexpected, due both to JAN's self-proclaimed "Syrian-first" policy and to the great autonomy its leader, Abu Muhammad al-Julani, seemed to enjoy *vis-à-vis* his Iraqi patrons. Despite al-Baghdadi's declaration, several JAN leaders and affiliates (especially of Syrian nationality) refused to

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iraq.

18. Such as the March 2013 attacks against the Iraqi Ministry of Justice, located a few hundreds metres from the Iraqi Government headquarters and the US Embassy. See M. Abbas, "Al-Qaeda in Iraq Targets Baghdad's Green Zone", *Al Monitor*, 20 March 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/03/iraq-bloodletting-al-qaeda.html>.

19. See J. Lewis, *Al-Qaeda in Iraq's "breaking the walls" campaign achieves its objectives at Abu Ghraib*, Institute for the Study of War, update No. 30/2013, 28 July 2013, <http://iswiraq.blogspot.it/2013/07/al-qaeda-in-iraqs-breaking-walls.html>.

pledge allegiance to the new group. In a public statement issued in response to the April 9 declaration, Al-Julani praised al-Baghdadi's support for JAN, but reaffirmed his loyalty to Ayman al-Zawahiri, *de facto* opposing the merger and involving al-Qa'ida's leadership in the dispute. Al-Zawahiri tried to quell the escalation of the crisis, condemning intra-jihadi division and asking the two organizations to respect their respective areas of actions: ISI in Iraq and JAN in Syria. Despite its formal and conciliating tones, the message of the Egyptian leader was a clear rebuke to al-Baghdadi's ambitions. The move did not pay off and the dispute evolved into an open struggle, leading to a schism of the intra-jihadi forces affiliated with the al-Qa'ida network both in Syria and beyond the borders of Mesopotamia and the Levant. Al-Baghdadi seemed to get the upper hand: he obtained the support of most of JAN forces (especially among its foreign cadres), occupied several of its most important strongholds (especially in and around Raqqa) and openly criticized the stance taken by Osama bin Laden's heir.

After several failed mediations and hundreds of victims, the feud ended last February with al-Qa'ida's formal disavowal of ISIS.<sup>20</sup>

Al-Baghdadi's April 2013 declaration had far-reaching effects not only on the broader radical Islamist galaxy but also on local Syrian and Iraqi dynamics. From that moment on, the group adopted a much more aggressive stance (both towards the population and towards the other groups of the Syrian insurgency) aimed at laying the foundations of a truly Islamic State under the direct authority of the Iraqi leader. The control exerted over civilians in Raqqa and in the other main ISIS strongholds became more intrusive and oppressive, with cruel and public punishments taking place on a daily basis – a means used to instil fear among supporters and foes alike. At the same time, al-Baghdadi completely changed his attitude towards the other groups of the insurgency, adopting an extremely polarizing *modus operandi* based on

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20. See A. Zelin, *The war between ISIS and al-Qaeda*, in *Research Notes*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Analysis, n. 20, June 2014, [http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/ResearchNote\\_20\\_Zelin.pdf](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/ResearchNote_20_Zelin.pdf).

an “either with us or against us” approach and on a vision of the Islamic message deeply hostile to any other interpretation. A new stance which considered the ‘other’ (i.e. everyone not recognizing ISIS’ dominance) an enemy to be crushed using every means, no matter whether he belongs to regime or insurgent forces or whether the fight provokes humanitarian tragedies and widespread violations of human rights. Such a strategic shift allowed Daesh forces to strengthen their hold over growing swaths of territories, but exacerbated its relations with the other Syrian insurgents. Day by day ISIS forces shifted their attention from the regime’s strongholds towards fellow insurgents in the area of Raqqa as well as to northern and eastern Syrian territories, beginning an all-out war that caused thousands of victims and severely weakened the anti-Assad insurgency.<sup>21</sup> While in most cases the Syrian insurgents proved no match for ISIS forces, the jihadi group had to face a significant setback at the beginning of 2014, when a joint operation led by some of the most important groups of the insurgency obliged Daesh forces to abandon several important bases in the north, and especially in the areas of Idlib and Aleppo.<sup>22</sup> But it was an ephemeral victory: ISIS was already involved in a series of major operations in Iraq which would have soon transformed the movement into the most important insurgent group on both sides of the Syrian-Iraqi border.

### *1.3 From insurgents to state-makers: the fall of Mosul and the creation of the new Caliphate*

2014 marked the beginning of ISIS’ all-out offensive against the Iraqi state. The invasion culminating in the fall of Mosul was preceded by months of heightening violence which allowed al-Baghdadi to

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21. N. Lahoud and M. al-‘Ubaydi, “The war of jihadists against jihadists in Syria”, *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 7, No. 3, 26 March 2014, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-war-of-jihadists-against-jihadists-in-syria>.

22. See R. Abouzeid, *Syria’s uprising within an uprising*, European Council on Foreign Relations, 16 January 2014, [http://www.ecfr.eu/content/entry/commentary\\_syrias\\_uprising\\_within\\_an\\_uprising238](http://www.ecfr.eu/content/entry/commentary_syrias_uprising_within_an_uprising238).

destabilize most of Iraq's Arab-Sunni heartland as well as to weaken the cohesion and morale of the Shia-majority federal troops stationed in north-western Iraq. But these results could have never been achieved without the gradual but steady deterioration of the Iraqi social pact especially along the Shia-Sunni axis. Fuelled by discrimination, neglect and non-respect of the agreements made with key political and tribal actors,<sup>23</sup> growing segments of the Arab Sunni community stepped up their opposition towards the government of the Shiite Prime Minister, Nuri al-Maliki, considered biased and inherently hostile.<sup>24</sup> As a result, huge protests enflamed central-western Iraq in 2013, with whole provinces completely paralyzed and connections with Syria and Jordan halted. Al-Maliki refused to renege on his uncompromising stance and tried to quell the manifestations by using heavy-handed tactics. His decision didn't pay off and the crisis reached its peak with the Hawija massacre (April 2013), when clashes between protestors and security forces resulted in hundreds of deaths and in the explosion of a new wave of ethno-sectarian violence.<sup>25</sup>

Once again whole parts of Iraqi territory spun completely out of control, providing ISIS with ideal conditions for a full-scale return. Building on the deepening gulf separating Baghdad and the Arab Sunni community, as well as on the important resources the group acquired, ISIS succeeded in re-establishing significant in-roads in the same Arab Sunni domains which only a few years before had been the seats of bloody feuds that pitted the movement against its former tribal and insurgent allies. Despite this legacy of hatred, the common opposition to

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23. A. Plebani, *Iraq Towards 2014 Elections: a Social Political Perspective*, ISPI Analysis, No. 196, September 2013, [file:///C:/Users/Andrea/Desktop/analysis\\_196\\_2013\\_0.pdf](file:///C:/Users/Andrea/Desktop/analysis_196_2013_0.pdf)

24. M. Sullivan, "Maliki's authoritarian regime", *Middle East Security Report*, no. 10, Institute for the Study of War, 2013, <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Malikis-Authoritarian-Regime-Web.pdf>.

25. International Crisis Group, "Make or Break: Iraq's Sunnis and the State", *Middle East Report*, no. 144, August 2013, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Iraq/144-make-or-break-iraq-s-sunnis-and-the-state.pdf>.

Baghdad prevailed, thanks also to the traditional flexibility of local tribal dynamics, rather aptly described by the old adage “me against my brother, my brother and I against my cousin, and all of us against the stranger”. The stranger being in this case the al-Maliki-led administration.

This marriage of convenience did not take long to show its fruits: the upsurge of violence registered in 2013 (with levels similar to those recorded in the final stages of the civil war<sup>26</sup>) obliged al-Maliki to postpone provincial elections in al-Anbar and Niniveh, whose population dwindled significantly due to the exodus of thousands of families escaping the areas hit by the ISIS-insurgents attacks. This trend worsened at the beginning of 2014 when Daesh-backed insurgents succeeded in expelling Iraqi security forces from growing swaths of the al-Anbar governorate – Ramadi and Fallujah included.<sup>27</sup> The move allowed ISIS to weaken Baghdad’s hold over its western territories, to co-opt new volunteers, to strengthen its partnership with local Arab Sunni partners, and to infiltrate the administrations they established – a passage of critical importance in preparation for the battle that would bring all Arab-Sunni territories under ISIS direct control.

From that moment on, al-Baghdadi’s forces launched an all-out armed campaign over an arc of crisis stretching from al-Anbar and Niniveh in the west to Diyala in the east. Critical for Daesh success was its military prowess that allowed it to defeat forces often superior numerically and in weaponry terms. Far from being a band of irregulars with scarce military notions, the group could count on the expertise of a bunch of selected fighters coming from the ranks of Saddam’s former army as well as from cadres of hardened jihadists who fought all over the world. Aside from its military capabilities, ISIS showed also significant diplomatic and tactical skills, often achieving its objectives without shooting a single bullet.

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26. P. Hakala, *Iraq’s deadly spiral toward a civil war*, European Parliament, Directorate General for External Policies -Policy Department, Policy Briefing, October 2013, [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2009\\_2014/documents/d-iq/dv/05iraq-spiral-civil-war\\_pb\\_2013\\_/05iraq-spiral-civil-war\\_pb\\_2013\\_en.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2009_2014/documents/d-iq/dv/05iraq-spiral-civil-war_pb_2013_/05iraq-spiral-civil-war_pb_2013_en.pdf).

27. See International Crisis Group, “Falluja’s Faustian Bargain”, *Middle East Report*, no. 150, 28 April 2014, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/iraq-iran-gulf/iraq/150-iraq-falluja-s-faustian-bargain.aspx>.

Critical for this outcome has been the presence of Iraqi militants amid its ranks, who – relying on their deep knowledge of local equilibriums and dynamics (as well as on their tribal affiliations) – proved fundamental to brokering *ad hoc* agreements and alliances.<sup>28</sup> Equally important has been ISIS' ability to exploit the aura of ferocity imbuing Daesh fighters, instilling horror in the hearts of its enemies through the adoption of cruel methods shown to the wider public through an effectively media-savvy strategy. These measures proved decisive to weakening the morale and the discipline of its enemies, both among its local opponents and its ISF counterparts.

The 2014 ISIS offensive differed from the group's previous attempts not only for the important military and diplomatic capabilities it demonstrated, but also for its multi-pronged strategy that, together with aiming at encircling Baghdad, focused on strengthening Daesh hold especially over Mosul and the Niniveh plains.<sup>29</sup> The reasons for this stance were multiple: while the ISF could count on the presence of over 60.000 units on the ground, they had to face stiff local opposition and its presence was spread thin over the territory – a situation that was frequently exploited by Daesh forces to break ISF lines of communications and to eliminate their isolated units.<sup>30</sup> Critical in this context was also the geopolitical location of the area which allowed al-Baghdadi to exploit the strategic depth offered by the Syrian battleground and the restive al-Anbar province. Equally important was also the deep historical presence ISIS established in and around Mosul<sup>31</sup> as well as the backing offered

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28. Author's interview with Munqith Dagher, Ceo, Independent Institute for Administration and Civil Society Studies, Amman, August 2014.

29. J. Lewis, *AQI's 'Soldier's Harvest' Campaign*, Backgrounder, Institute for the Study of War, 9 October 2013, pp. 2-4, [https://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Backgrounder\\_SoldiersHarvest.pdf](https://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Backgrounder_SoldiersHarvest.pdf).

30. J. Wing, "How Northern Iraq Fell To The Insurgency", *Musings on Iraq*, 26 August 2014, <http://musingsoniraq.blogspot.it/2014/08/how-northern-iraq-fell-to-insurgency.html>.

31. A. Plebani, (2010).

the movement by other important insurgent groups.<sup>32</sup> These favourable conditions proved fundamental for ISIS' most successful offensive: the battle of Mosul. On June 10, 2014, after less than 3 days of battle, the second Iraqi city – home to an estimated population of over one million and a half – fell into the hands of a coalition spearheaded by Daesh units but supported by important insurgent groups. The Iraqi army retreated ignominiously, with officers fleeing the city a few hours before and thousands of soldiers leaving weapons and uniforms behind to save their lives. It was the brightest military success obtained by jihadi forces since the beginning of the new century – a result that allowed ISIS to access the huge military deposits of the north, to acquire over 450 million dollars stored in Mosul banks, to control a series of oil-rich areas close to the ones it already administered in Syria and to kidnap the Turkish consul and several members of his staff. Above all, it allowed al-Baghdadi to extend his hold over a string of territories stretching from north-eastern Syria to the very heart of Iraq's Arab Sunni domains, laying the foundations of an 'Islamic State' – a result that has been the group's main goal since at least 2006. A goal difficult to achieve but tangible and concrete, in the midst of a regional scenario that saw the failure of old ideologies (i.e. Arab Socialism, Ba'thism...), different Islamist streams (Political Islam versions included) and of imported foreign-state models. The establishment of an Islamic emirate in Raqqa and later in Mosul and the ability to hold and manage them (even if recurring to an extremely authoritarian and ruthless *modus operandi*) were other proofs of ISIS sophistication.<sup>33</sup> More than 18 years after the Taliban conquered Kabul, another Islamic emirate was created and, this time, not at the periphery but at the core of Islamic civilization: a step that even Ayman al-Zawahiri indicated in his 2001 book *Knights under the Prophet's banner* as fundamental to aspiring to final victory. The importance of this

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32. A.J. al-Tamimi, *Iraq crisis: Key Players in Iraq's Sunni Rebellion*, BBC, 1 July 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-28053496>.

33. C. Caris and S. Reynolds, "ISIS governance in Syria", *Middle East Security Report*, no. 22, Institute for the Study of War, 1 August 2014, [http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/ISIS\\_Governance.pdf](http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/ISIS_Governance.pdf).



result, especially after the movement wrested control over Mosul, was not lost either at the local or at the international level, strengthening ISIS' credentials inside the broader radical Islamist galaxy and obliging several local and international actors to come to terms with an advance that no one believed could have taken place.

But al-Baghdadi did not limit himself to consolidating his hold over the new territories or to continuing the offensive in Iraq and Syria. He stepped up the level of confrontation and on June 29 – the first day of Ramadan – he proclaimed the creation of a new Caliphate under his rule as *Amir al-Mu'minin* (Commander of the Believers), asking all the believers to join him in his fight against the oppressors of Islam.

“O *ummah* of Islam, indeed the world today has been divided into two camps and two trenches, with no third camp present: the camp of Islam and faith, and the camp of *kufr* (disbelief) and hypocrisy [...]. Indeed the Muslims were defeated after the fall of their *khilafah* (caliphate). Then their state ceased to exist, so the disbelievers were able to weaken and humiliate the Muslims, dominate them in every region, plunder their wealth and resources, and rob them of their rights.[...] O Muslims everywhere, [...] raise your head high, for today – by Allah's grace – you have a state and *khilafah*, which will return your dignity, might, rights, and leadership”.<sup>34</sup>

In doing so, he tried to present himself as the legitimate successor of the Prophet, adopting a name (Abu Omar al-Husseini al-Hashimi al-Qurashi al-Baghdadi) reflecting his purported descent from Prophet Muhammad's family and donning the black turban of the *sayyid*. These moves were part of a scheme aimed at consolidating his legitimacy and asserting his authority over the territories under his control as well as over the other jihadi groups based in different parts of the globe, as clearly expressed by IS spokesman Abu Muhammad al-'Adnani: “We clarify to the Muslims that with this declaration of *khilafah*, it is incumbent upon

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34. Al-Hayat Media Center, *A message to the mujabidin and the Muslim ummah in the month of Ramadan*, 1 July, 2014, <https://news.siteintelgroup.com/Jihadist-News/islamic-state-leader-abu-bakr-al-baghdadi-encourages-emigration-worldwide-action.html>

all Muslims to pledge allegiance to the *khalifah* Ibrahim<sup>35</sup> and support him (may Allah preserve him). The legality of all emirates, groups, states, and organizations, becomes null by the expansion of the *khalifah's* authority and arrival of its troops to their areas<sup>36</sup>.

Al-Baghdadi's declaration was not directed toward local actors and jihadi groups only, but also towards the thousands of foreign volunteers willing to join the Syrian and Iraqi armed jihad. It is in this context that the new Caliph's appeal to migrate to the lands of the Islamic State<sup>37</sup> needs to be read: in this way he attempted to monopolize the stream of international volunteers while at the same time subtracting potential would-be fighters from other jihadi groups, al-Qa'ida *in primis*. A battle for foreign fighters' 'hearts and minds' that IS seems currently to be winning, as aptly described by Aaron Zelin: "ISIS is not only talking the talk about establishing an Islamic state, it is walking the walk. This has attracted many foreign fighters to its side. [...] Additionally, individuals like winners and, unlike al-Qaeda, which has not had a clear victory in a decade, ISIS continues to build its prestige and legitimacy within the overall movement"<sup>38</sup>.

#### 1.4 What future for the Islamic State?

Despite all the territorial gains made and the successes obtained against regular and irregular troops alike, the Islamic State is far from being invincible. Even if there are no reliable estimates of the numerical strength of the group, it seems IS can count on only a few thousand

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35. Another name with which is indicated al-Baghdadi

36. *ISIS Spokesman declares Caliphate, rebrands group as 'Islamic State'*, SITE, 29 June 2014, <https://news.siteintelgroup.com/Jihadist-News/isis-spokesman-declares-caliphate-rebrands-group-as-islamic-state.html>

37. "Rush O Muslims to your state. [...]. Rush, because Syria is not for the Syrians, and Iraq is not for the Iraqis. [...] O Muslims everywhere, whoever is capable of performing *hijrah* (emigration) to the Islamic State, then let him do so, because *hijrah* to the land of Islam is obligatory". Al-Hayat Media Center, 2014.

38. A. Zelin (2014), p. 7.

fighters organized along what appears to be a complex multi-layered structure.<sup>39</sup> At the core there would be a series of elite units composed of the most capable and dedicated Daesh fighters, some of whom joined the group's ranks during Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's tenure. This bunch of hardened fighters is said to comprise a significant number of foreign fighters with high-level combat skills acquired all over the world. These elite units appear to be supported by thousands of members of more recent affiliation: particularly significant among their ranks seems to be the percentage of militants of local (Syrian and especially Iraqi) descent who provided the group with important military and tactical skills as well as with their deep knowledge of the territory and of its equilibriums. Their contribution has been particularly important to re-establishing direct relations with important local tribes, to moulding tactical alliances with other insurgent groups as well as to benefitting from the support, or at least the connivance, of the Arab Sunni communities inhabiting the areas occupied by the movement as well as from their in-group solidarity. Despite their relatively recent affiliation they should be considered an integral part of the organization, having joined it out of full identification with its message and goal or due to a lack of possible alternatives. To the outer ring belong cadres of new affiliates and external groups (of tribal or insurgent nature) who pledged their support to IS only in the past few months to benefit from its success or out of fear of being harmed for their opposition. This multifarious structure can represent a significant weakness that could be exploited by al-Baghdadi's enemies: while IS first and second tiers will have to be defeated through a massive military offensive, the elements on the outer level could be persuaded to renege their actual collaboration by adopting a "carrot and stick approach" similar to the one that led to the formation of the *sahwa* groups. Al-Baghdadi's hold over the territory under his authority is far from being absolute and is dependent on the

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39. The description of the inner structure of the Islamic State here presented is the result of several interviews conducted by the author since 2009. Among the experts interviewed there are: Ibrahim al-Marashi, Kamal Field al-Basri, Munqith Dagher, Bakhtiar Amin and Safa al-Sheikh Hussein.

tactical support of a wide array of tribal and insurgent actors, whose long-term agendas are significantly different from IS'. In this context, the formation of a new government in Iraq under the leadership of Haider al-Abadi can represent a potential turning point, able to distance local Arab Sunni actors from IS' uncomfortable embrace, but only if adequate local, regional and international support is provided.

In any case this will not be an easy task. On the one hand IS is much stronger than AQI/ISI was at the height of the civil war; on the other, local insurgents and Arab Sunni tribes appear much more fragmented and weaker than at the time of the US surge. Furthermore, Iraqi forces are still recovering from the tremendous setback suffered in the north and continue to be widely perceived as Shia-dominated, while Kurdish *peshmergas* cannot defeat Daesh forces by themselves. Despite US aerial support, the lack of US troops on the ground represents another significant limit, since their contribution proved to be critical in the past both to inflict decisive blows to the enemy and to reach an agreement with the different actors of the insurgency.<sup>40</sup> Similar considerations can be made for the Syrian side of the equation, albeit the manifest superiority of al-Baghdadi forces to the other groups of the insurgency, the controversial stance taken by the Bashar al-Assad regime towards the Islamic State and the reluctance of the international community to intervene risk making a Daesh defeat even more complicated than in Iraq.

Apart from internal Syrian and Iraqi dynamics, al-Baghdadi is facing far stiffer opposition from key regional and extra-regional actors than a few months ago, as demonstrated by the recent American raids as well as by the critical support provided by Europe to civilians and anti-IS forces. The regional situation, too, is far more negative for IS than before: Teheran stepped up its efforts to protect its key Iraqi ally through direct assistance to the Iraqi government and the main Shia paramilitary units, while Ankara seems to have abandoned its previous controversial stance towards the movement, especially after the kidnapping of its consul in

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40. Interview of the author with Dr. Ibrahim al-Marashi, California State University San Marcos, August 2014.

Mosul and the defeats Daesh forces inflicted on its allies in southern Kurdistan. Persian Gulf countries have also adopted a harsher stance towards the group, even if several reports indicated private donations from *Khaleji* states as one of the main sources of income for the Islamic State.<sup>41</sup>

IS will have to face significant challenges also at the military and administrative levels: while its forces proved to be formidable foes during their offensive, it would be far more difficult for them to hold the ground conquered, especially in case Baghdad and Erbil – with adequate regional and international support – succeed in launching a major joint counteroffensive.<sup>42</sup> Neither will it be easy for the group to replicate its success in north-eastern *peshmerga* strongholds or in the Baghdad area, where it will find a far less conducive environment, due to strong opposition from inhabitants and to the fact that the anti-ISIS front will fight to the death to defend territories that are home to their own families and not areas widely perceived as strongholds of hostile populations.<sup>43</sup> Difficulties could also stem from the day-to-day management of the areas under al-Baghdadi's control: while the movement succeeded in providing basic services to the population, these efforts required the allocation of significant human and financial resources that the group had to subtract from other activities and which could exact, especially in the long term, a significant toll.

Adding to this picture is also the widening IS-al-Qa'ida fissure. The proclamation of the Caliphate represented the umpteenth challenge launched by al-Baghdadi to Ayman al-Zawahiri's leadership over al-Qa'ida and the broader radical Islamist galaxy. The rift has significantly weakened the current AQ leader but he still retains the support of the

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41. See T. Keatinge, (2014).

42. M. Knights, (2014).

43. M. Eisenstadt, *The rise of ISIL: Iraq and beyond*, Testimony submitted to the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Policy Analysis, 15 July 2014, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-rise-of-isil-iraq-and-beyond-part-ii>.

vast majority of AQ regional nodes.<sup>44</sup> While an all-out confrontation between AQ and IS seems quite unlikely, at least for the time being, al-Baghdadi's ambitions (and the significant appeal the latter has acquired especially among the youngest cadres of foreign fighters) could push al-Zawahiri to adopt a much harsher stance, damaging IS agendas not only in Iraq and Syria but also on a much wider scale, since both movements are competing for the support of would-be jihadists coming from all over the world.

IS' agenda and *modus operandi* have also been harshly contested by several top Sunni scholars belonging to different schools of thought like Yusuf al-Qaradawi, and al-Azhar scholars. Severe criticism has also been levelled against the group by religious experts known for their extreme and radical views, like Abu Qatada al-Filistini, Abu Basir al-Tartusi and Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi.<sup>45</sup> While this stance has not yet significantly diminished the appeal the group enjoys, it could limit its backing in the medium-long term, especially if IS will keep resorting to its extreme tactics. While fear is a powerful tool, it is also a double-edged sword that might contribute to foster anti-IS sentiments and to accelerate the group's demise. The stance adopted by these religious experts appears also to be shared by a growing number of Gulf dignitaries who in the past did not refrain from publicly sustaining extremist forces operating in Syria and Iraq. Far from being limited to Iraq and Syria only, the global appeal of the Caliphate led by al-Baghdadi risks becoming a serious menace also for those regimes which – directly or indirectly – contributed to its ascendance and whose legitimacy could be contested by the same warriors they sustained.

While Daesh forces have proven to be an extremely able foe, they are far from being invincible and their ambitions are hindered by several

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44. See A. Zelin, (2014), pp. 6-7.

45. See A. Zelin, (2014); H. Jemmo, "Al-Qaeda's Internal Divide Grows in Syria", *Al-Monitor*, 19 August 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/security/2013/08/al-qaeda-internal-divide-syria-islamic-state-jabhat-nusra.html#>; E. Oddone, "Jordanian jihadist leader condemns ISIS caliphate", *Al-Monitor*, 7 July 2014, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/07/jordan-maqdisi-jihad-iraq-isis-caliphate-qaeda.html#>.

limits. Defeating IS is therefore far from impossible but it will require a multi-pronged strategy supported by as many actors as possible, both at the regional and at the international levels. Particularly critical will be the role regional actors will play: Iran, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey *in primis*. Without their backing IS will continue to threaten the region and the international system, no matter the amount of raids the US and its allies will be able to conduct against its positions.<sup>46</sup> It will not be an easy or fast struggle but is a battle that deserves to be fought. For the sake of the population living under Daesh grip or threatened by its forces, as well as for our own future, since never as in this moment has the enemy we can fight today in Syria and in Iraq been the one we risk facing tomorrow in our own countries.

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46. B. Fishman, *The Islamic State: A Persistent Threat*, Prepared Testimony to the House Armed Services, 29 July 2014, <http://docs.house.gov/meetings/AS/AS00/20140729/102590/HHRG-113-AS00-Wstate-FishmanB-20140729.pdf>.





## 2. EUROPEAN JIHADISTS IN SYRIA: PROFILES, TRAVEL PATTERNS AND GOVERNMENTAL RESPONSES

*Lorenzo Vidino*

Over the last year authorities in several European countries have expressed strong concerns about the hundreds of their citizens fighting alongside various armed groups in the Syrian civil war. The phenomenon of so-called ‘foreign fighters’ is hardly limited to Syria or new. From the Afghan-Soviet war of the 1980s to various conflicts in the 1990s (Bosnia, Chechnya) and 2000s (Iraq, Somalia), the number of individuals who identified with various forms of militant Islamist ideology who have been involved as volunteers in various conflicts is estimated between 10,000 and 30,000.<sup>1</sup> Today in Syria, as in the past in other conflicts, a small yet significant percentage of these foreign fighters come from Western countries.

This paper seeks to analyze the dynamics of Sunni foreign fighters from Europe in Syria.<sup>2</sup> It first seeks to gauge the size of the phenomenon in various countries, highlighting the fears that such an unprecedented mobilization has triggered throughout the Continent. It then analyzes

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1. T. Hegghammer, “The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters: Islam and the Globalization of Jihad,” *International Security*, Vol. 35, No. 3, Winter 2010/11, p. 53.

2. While this article analyzes only the phenomenon of foreign fighters embracing Sunni militant ideology, the author is well aware that the phenomenon of European foreign fighters in Syria is not limited to militant Sunni Islamism. There are in fact indications that European residents and citizens have also joined secular, Kurdish, Shiite and Christian militias.

the diversity of profiles of the individuals who leave Europe for Syria and the logistical dynamics that lead them to the war-torn country. Finally, it provides an overview of how European governments have sought to challenge the phenomenon.

### *2.1 Unprecedented numbers and fears*

While exact numbers are obviously impossible to provide, various studies indicate that, by the fall of 2014 up to 20,000 foreign fighters were estimated to be in the war-torn Arab countries and that up to 3,000 of them come from Western Europe alone – unprecedentedly large numbers that have triggered the current alarm. Large European countries have been touched by the phenomenon more than others. In September 2014, for example, President Francois Hollande stated that some 1,000 individuals coming from France moved to Syria.<sup>3</sup> British authorities estimated the number of individuals who have left Britain to fight in the Syrian conflict at 700.<sup>4</sup> German authorities estimated the number of German militants in Syria at 400.<sup>5</sup>

While per se lower, the numbers in some smaller European countries are even more troubling if considered in relation to their small population. Dutch and Austrian authorities estimated that more than 100 individuals have left their countries to join various

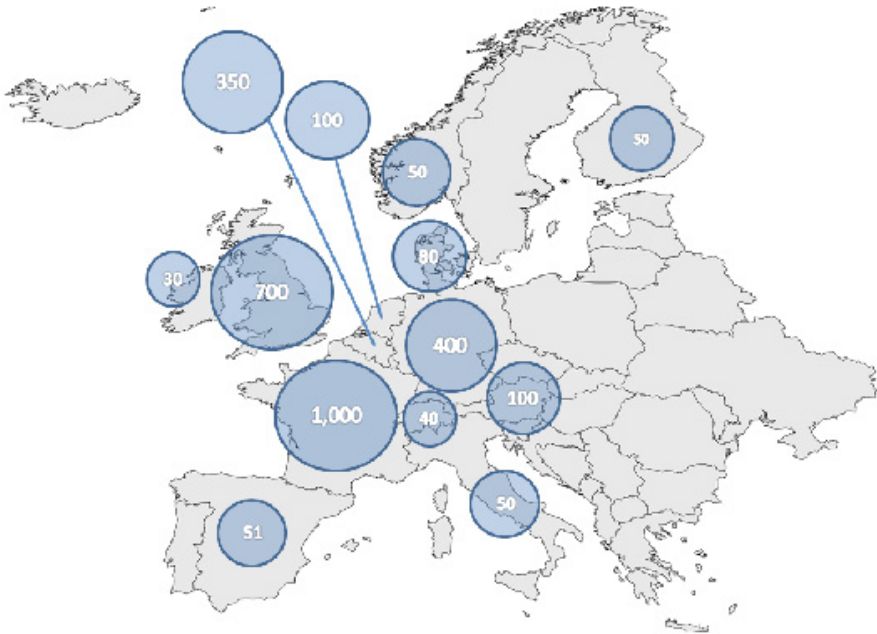
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3. A. Geneste, “L’ONU adopte à l’unanimité une résolution contre l’Etat islamique”, *Le Monde*, 25 September 2014, [http://www.lemonde.fr/ameriques/article/2014/09/25/l-onu-adopte-a-l-unanimite-une-resolution-contre-l-etat-islamique\\_4494139\\_3222.html?xtmc=holland\\_onu&xtcr=2](http://www.lemonde.fr/ameriques/article/2014/09/25/l-onu-adopte-a-l-unanimite-une-resolution-contre-l-etat-islamique_4494139_3222.html?xtmc=holland_onu&xtcr=2).

4. T. Whitehead, “Up to 700 Britons feared to be in Syria”, *Telegraph*, 24 April 2014

5. Jane’s, “German security service warns that militants returning from Syria and Iraq pose a security risk”, *HIS Jane’s Intelligence Review*, 7 August 2014. Telephone interview with German Ministry of Interior official, January 2014.

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militant groups.<sup>6</sup> As of September 2014, Belgian authorities were aware of 350 individuals who traveled to Syria to fight.<sup>7</sup>

In December 2013 Danish intelligence agency PET's Centre for Terror Analysis (CTA) estimated that at least 80 individuals had departed Denmark since the summer of 2012 to participate in the Syrian conflict.<sup>8</sup> In February 2014 Irish authorities estimated that around 30 volunteers

6. 25 February Interview with Austrian officials, Vienna, September 2014.

7. Interviews with Belgian officials, Brussels, February September 2014.

8. *The Threat to Denmark from Foreign Fighters in Syria*, report by PET's Center for Terroranalyse, 4 December 4, 2013.

left the country for Syria<sup>9</sup>. Even Norway and Finland, two countries that traditionally have seen only limited jihadist activities, have been touched by the phenomenon with unprecedented intensity (the estimated numbers are around 50 militants per country).<sup>10</sup> The numbers appear to be smaller in some southern European countries. As of April 2014 Spanish authorities estimated that 51 individuals had traveled to Syria to join various jihadist groups.<sup>11</sup> In Italy the number is commonly assessed at around fifty.<sup>12</sup> Swiss authorities estimate 40 people moved to Syria.<sup>13</sup>

In most European countries this mobilization, which is happening on a larger scale than any comparable phenomenon in the recent past (Bosnia, Iraq, Somalia), has been perceived as the main security threat for the continent in the near future. British authorities have described this phenomenon as “a game-changer” and “the most profound shift in the threat we have seen since 2003”.<sup>14</sup> In January 2014 then French Minister of Interior Manuel Valls called the possibility of these individuals returning to France as hardened jihadists as “the biggest threat that the country faces in the coming years”.<sup>15</sup> Hans-Peter Friedrich, the country’s

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9. R. Barret, *Foreign Fighters in Syria, The Soufan Group*, <http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/TSG-Foreign-Fighters-in-Syria.pdf>

10. *Norway working to foil unspecified Islamist terror attack expected 'within days'*, Fox news, 24 July 2014, <http://www.foxnews.com/world/2014/07/24/norway-has-information-about-terror-threat-from-people-with-ties-with-syria/>; “Norway terror threat to rise in 2014,” *The Local*, February 24, 2014; Juha Saarinen, “The Finnish Foreign Fighter Contingent in Syria,” *CTC Sentinel*, March 26, 2014; J. Huhtanen and A. Teivainen, “One-tenth of Finnish fighters in Syria have died”, *Helsinki Times*, 21 September 2014, <http://www.helsinkitimes.fi/finland/finland-news/domestic/12091-one-tenth-of-finnish-fighters-in-syria-have-died.html?ref=nl-hs-aamu>.

11. R. Barret, (2014).

12. V. Piccolillo, *50 Italians Fighting with ISIS*, *Corriere della Sera*, 25 September 2014, [http://www.corriere.it/english/14\\_agosto\\_25/50-italians-fighting-with-isis-07d44d1e-2c74-11e4-9952-cb46fab97a50.shtml](http://www.corriere.it/english/14_agosto_25/50-italians-fighting-with-isis-07d44d1e-2c74-11e4-9952-cb46fab97a50.shtml). Lorenzo Vidino, *Il jihadismo autoctono in Italia: nascita, sviluppo e dinamiche di radicalizzazione*, ISPI, Aprile 2014.

13. *Sicherheit Schweiz: Lagebericht 2014 des Nachrichtendienstes des Bundes*, May 2014, [http://www.vbs.admin.ch/internet/vbs/de/home/documentation/publication/snd\\_publ\\_parsys.75921.downloadList.64771.DownloadFile.tmp/ndbsicherheitschweiz2014webd.pdf](http://www.vbs.admin.ch/internet/vbs/de/home/documentation/publication/snd_publ_parsys.75921.downloadList.64771.DownloadFile.tmp/ndbsicherheitschweiz2014webd.pdf).

14. R. Sherlock and T. Whitehead, (2014).

15. *Ibid.*

former Minister of Interior, has stated that returnees from Syria trained in “deadly handwork” will be “ticking time bombs”.<sup>16</sup>

The concerns are twofold. First, it is feared that, upon joining the conflict, foreign fighters will commit acts that will accentuate its duration, sectarian nature and barbarity. But the biggest fear is related to the so-called ‘blowback effect’ that could take place upon their return to their home countries or to a third country they reach after concluding their experience as foreign fighters. These fears have been expressed by policymakers throughout Europe and North America. In January 2014, EU Home Affairs Commissioner Cecilia Malmström warned about “Europeans [who] travel abroad to train and to fight in combat zones, becoming more radicalized in the process”. “Some of these young men”, she added, “have joined groups with terrorist agendas, they have been trained and hardened in war, and could pose a threat to our security upon their return from a conflict zone. In the longer term they could act as catalysts for terrorism”.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, Matthew G. Olsen, the director of the US National Counterterrorism Center, has stated: “The concern going forward from a threat perspective is there are individuals traveling to Syria, becoming further radicalized, becoming trained and then returning as part of really a global jihadist movement to Western Europe and, potentially, to the United States”.<sup>18</sup>

The fear that their newly acquired combat experience, network of contacts and ideological outlook might drive some foreign fighters to carry out attacks after their combat experience is not universally shared. Despite common assumptions, the empirical evidence from previous conflicts has shown that only a small minority of foreign fighters

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16. N. Busse, “Diese Leute sind tickende Zeitbomben in Europa”, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 7 June 2013.

17. C. McDonald-Gibson, “EU citizens fighting in Syria pose threat of terror attacks when they return home, says domestic affairs chief”, *The Independent*, 15 January 2014, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/eu-citizens-fighting-in-syria-pose-threat-of-terror-attacks-when-they-return-home-says-domestic-affairs-chief-9062518.html>.

18. E. Schmitt, “Worries Mount as Syria Lures West’s Muslims”, *New York Times*, 27 July 2014, [http://mobile.nytimes.com/2013/07/28/world/middleeast/worries-mount-as-syria-lures-west-s-muslims.html?\\_r=0](http://mobile.nytimes.com/2013/07/28/world/middleeast/worries-mount-as-syria-lures-west-s-muslims.html?_r=0).

became involved in terrorist activities upon returning home. The fear of a blowback from foreign fighters, for example, did not materialize after the Iraq war, as only a few returnees from it engaged in acts of terrorism in the West. Similarly, many argue, most individuals currently involved in Syria either harbor no ill intentions against their home countries or, for a variety of other reasons, will never act against them.

At the same time, there are indications that at least some foreign fighters will indeed be engaged in terrorist activities upon returning home. The groundbreaking studies conducted by Norwegian academic Thomas Hegghammer have shown that only one in nine foreign fighters engages in terrorist activities after the conflict but that those who do are involved in plots that are twice as likely to kill.<sup>19</sup> It is clear that each foreign fighter's dangerousness should be assessed individually (something obviously very difficult to do) but that some do pose a threat.

With specific regard to the current conflict in Syria, there are already preliminary indications of a possible blowback effect. In Egypt, for example, individuals directly involved in various attacks carried out over the last few months by the group Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis were Syria returnees.<sup>20</sup> As for the West, in January 2014 *The New York Times* reported that American authorities believed that "Islamic extremist groups in Syria with ties to al-Qa'ida are trying to identify, recruit and train Americans and other Westerners who have traveled there to get them to carry out attacks when they return home".<sup>21</sup> Similar reports citing Western intelligence sources have since followed.<sup>22</sup> Various European militants in Syria have already publicly issued videos threatening their

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19. T. Hegghammer, "Should I Stay or Should I Go? Explaining Variation in Western Jihadists' Choice between Domestic and Foreign Fighting", *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 107, Issue 1, February 2013, pp. 1-15.

20. D. Barnett, "Blowback in Cairo", *Foreign Policy*, 9 January 2014.

21. M.S. Schmidt and E. Schmitt, "Syria Militants Said to Recruit Visiting Americans to Attack U.S.", *New York Times*, 9 January 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/10/world/middleeast/syrian-groups-try-to-recruit-us-travelers.html>.

22. See, for example, B. Starr, "Officials: Al Qaeda Tries to Recruit Americans in Syria", CNN, 21 February 2014, <http://security.blogs.cnn.com/2014/02/21/officials-al-qaeda-tries-to-recruit-americans-in-syria/>.

home countries.<sup>23</sup> And in the fall of 2013 British authorities reportedly thwarted a plot conceived by Syrian returnees to conduct Mumbai-style attacks in London.<sup>24</sup>

Even though its dynamics still need to be investigated, it appears that the first act of violence on European soil with strong connections to the Syrian conflict took place on May 24, 2014 in Brussels. The gunman that killed four people inside the city's Jewish museum, in fact, is known to be a member of France's jihadist underworld and had reportedly just returned to Europe after spending over a year in Syria fighting with the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL or ISIS).<sup>25</sup>

### *2.1.1 Who are the European foreign fighters?*

Mirroring dynamics seen in European jihadist networks over the last decade, the European 'contingent' in Syria is characterized by extreme diversity in the origin, age, background, and socio-economic conditions of the individuals fighting there. Some of them are seasoned jihadists, individuals with a long track record of militancy and fighting experience. That is the case, for example, of Raphaël Gendron, a French native who for years was one of the key players in the jihadist/Salafist scene in Belgium, who died in Syria while fighting alongside Ahrar al Sham in April 2013.<sup>26</sup> Or of Slimane Abderrahmane, the son of a Danish mother and an Algerian father who was detained at Guantanamo Bay

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23. For British militants, see S. Wright, "Fanatics in Syria vow to bring terror home to UK: Terrorists say they will attack public transport and financial centres", *Daily Mail*, 5 February 2014, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2552626/Fanatics-Syria-vow-bring-terror-UK-Terrorists-vow-attack-public-transport-financial-centres.html>. For Belgians, see "Brian, un Anversois parti se battre en Syrie, menace la Belgique d'attentats", *La Libre*, 10 December 2013.

24. A. Williams, "Hundreds of British jihadis returning from fight in Syria spark terror alert after police and MI5 thwart Mumbai-style attack on London", *Daily Mail*, 16 February 2014.

25. "Brussels Jewish Museum killings: Suspect 'admitted attack'", BBC, 1 June 2014.

26. "Le Franco-algérien Raphaël Gendron, proche des milieux islamistes belges, décède en Syrie", *Le Soir*, 15 April 2013.

after fighting in Afghanistan. After being released from US custody Abderrahmane worked as a postman in the Copenhagen area but, once the conflict in Syria broke out, he left to join a militia fighting al Assad's regime. He was reportedly killed in February 2013.<sup>27</sup>

Yet, despite the presence of some of these veterans of the first generations of European jihadists, many of the individuals fighting in Syria seem to be young aspiring jihadists with no previous battlefield experience. Many of them were known to belong to militant networks or be active in the Salafist scene in their countries of origin but had not been previously involved in any direct violent action, whether domestically or abroad. Others were individuals who had previously not shown any signs of sympathy with jihadist ideology or even of any interest in politics or religion. Cases of individuals that in the span of a few weeks go from no interest in jihadism to fighting in Syria are frequently reported throughout the continent.

One characteristic that has been noticed in most European countries is that many of the foreign fighters are extremely young, in some cases as young as 13. And another development that has been witnessed Europe-wide is the growing number of females who decide to travel to Syria with their husbands or to get married to mujaheddin they met online. There are indications that some of these women are also involved in actual fighting, a relatively new development in the world of jihadism. Emblematic of these developments is the case of Sabina Selimovic and Samra Kesinovic, two Viennese girls of Bosnian descent aged 15 and 16 who have reportedly left their parents' home and reached Syria, where they post on Facebook pictures of themselves wearing a *niqab* and handling weapons.<sup>28</sup>

The reasons that attract European foreign fighters to Syria are as diverse as their backgrounds and vary from case to case. It is arguable that, in most cases, various factors are concurrently at play. In interviews and

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27. L. Prasz, M. Skjoldager and C. Blok Thomsen, "Kontroversiel dansker kan være dræbt i Syrien", *Politiken*, 18 February 2013.

28. J. Diehl and B. Hengst, "Verschwundene Österreicherinnen: Als Teenager in den Dschihad", *Der Spiegel*, 23 April 2014.



on their social media profiles many of them talk about their frustration at the apathy of other Muslims and the international community at the plight of Syrians and their desire to defend fellow Muslims from an unjust fate. Indeed many of them unquestionably perceive their participation in the conflict as a noble and altruistic gesture aimed at saving innocent women and children.

At the same time religious motivations play a crucial role. Most foreign fighters who join jihadist groups are driven by a deep hatred for Alawites and Shias in general and see fighting what they consider deviant Islamic sects a religious duty. Similarly, many of them are enthusiastic about the idea of establishing an Islamic state governed by a strict interpretation of the sharia in Syria, a country in the heart of the Arab world. This prospect arouses particular emotions among those espousing jihadist ideology, also due to Syria's particular importance in Islamic history and eschatology.

Finally, personal issues and circumstances cannot be ignored as important drivers behind the radicalization process of the many European foreign fighters and their decision to travel to Syria. These intertwined factors are visible in the personal recollections of some of the first European jihadists who have publicly spoken about their experiences in Syria. One of them is a slightly atypical militant, 38-year-old Abderrozak Benarabe. Benarabe is widely known in Denmark as Store A (Big A) and is the former leader of one of the country's most notorious criminal gangs, the Blågårds Plads Gruppe. Benarabe was profiled in a 2013 documentary broadcasted by Danish public television that followed the gangster's journey from Copenhagen to Syria, where he spent time with the Sunni militant group Ahrar al Sham.<sup>29</sup>

In the documentary Benarabe explained that he had spent most of his life engaging in criminal activities and without being religious. But when his younger brother, who was also a gang member, found two nodes in his neck Benarabe reconsidered his approach to life. "I made a covenant with God that if he let my little brother survive", he

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29. The documentary can be seen at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7wKG82b9lrw>.

recounted “I would pull myself together and stay away from crime”.<sup>30</sup> Big A interpreted the fact that the nodes were found to be harmless as a sign: “I began to relate to Islam, stopped smoking marijuana, tried to stay away from crime and had started frequenting the local mosque”. After a few months he decided to travel to Syria. “With all the crap I’ve done in my life, I want to make something good again, and if it costs me my life, it happens at least in a good cause”, he explained. “I will fight against the injustice that is happening down there, while the whole world is looking at”.

A similar story of religiously inspired personal redemption was recounted by a Paris-born militant who gave an extensive interview to a reporter with the French TV station France 24 whom he had known for years.<sup>31</sup> The 27-year-old, who took the fictitious name of Salahudine, had reportedly left France in June 2013 to join a jihadist group in Syria and had taken his wife and his two daughters along. He described the process that led to his decision with these words:

I gave up everything to come here. I had good professional prospects. I earned about 3,000 euros per month. I had to let go of everything. This is how Allah judges our sincerity. I’m not sure what was the trigger. Everything happened gradually. Early in the Syrian conflict, in 2011, I resented the world’s indifference toward my Muslim brothers. At first I did not know what to think. In French mosques, you cannot talk about it. They just teach you to perform your ablutions. They ask you to be respectful. They never talk about the context of confrontation. Islam calls for an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. I only learned that on the Internet, when I started watching videos and listening to bin Laden’s sermons. You can call it “religious radicalization” – I call it “awareness”. I did not join any network

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30. F. Hvilsom, “Bandleder fra Nørrebro i krig i Syrien”, *Politiken*, 7 September 2013.

31. C. Boitiaux, “France24 Exclusive: Confessions of a French jihadist in Syria”, *France24*, 13 February 2014, <http://www.france24.com/en/20140212-france-24-exclusive-syria-french-jihadist-foreign-fighter-confessions/>.

or group, believe me. I did not know anyone. I prepared for my journey alone.

A month before my departure, I could not sleep anymore. Allah made me realize that my land was no longer here in France. I had to go to Syria to atone for my sins. Before that, I used to go to nightclubs, I drank alcohol, I was a man of this world – only interested in possessions. Now, jihad has become an obligation.

These factors are unquestionably crucial for some of the Europeans who travel to Syria. But, at the same time, it can be argued that for many European foreign fighters the conflict in the Middle Eastern country is just one of the many “jihad” they seek to join and are particularly drawn to it because of the relative logistical ease with which they can reach it. It is not uncommon to find cases of individuals who have managed to reach Syria that had previously attempted or at least researched the possibility of traveling to other regions where conflicts they interpret as legitimate jihads are taking place.<sup>32</sup> But unlike Mali, Somalia or Pakistan, reaching Syria is easy, fast and cheap. It is therefore unsurprising that it is not uncommon for European jihadists to frequently travel back and forth between their countries of origin and Syria, where they spend only a few weeks at time. There are reports, for example, of small spikes of travel during summer or Christmas holidays, when European jihadists can travel to Syria without missing work or school.

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32. See, for example, the case of a mini-cell of three militants dismantled by French authorities in 2013 which, until days before it was scheduled to leave for Syria, was still debating whether to travel instead to Mali, Libya or Yemen. See A. Makhoul-Yatim, “Les tribulations de trois apprentis djihadistes qui voulaient aller en Syrie”, *France24*, 30 January 2014, <http://www.france24.com/fr/20140130-tribulations-terrorisme-islam-fondamentalisme-djihadistes-voulaient-aller-syrie/>.

## *2.2 Mobilization dynamics*

The patterns through which aspiring jihadists leave Europe and make their way to the Syrian battlefield are difficult to establish, as these dynamics tend to be shrouded in secrecy. Traditionally, European jihadists reached countries in which they could fight in armed conflicts or joined jihadist groups either on their own or through facilitators.

The first form of travel takes place when an individual, irrespective of how he became radicalized, does not benefit from anybody's help to contact al-Qa'ida and affiliated groups outside of Europe. The aspiring jihadist would leave his country without receiving any kind of support from any accomplice and, most important, would make contact with the jihadist organization he seeks to join without having anybody facilitate the process.

Cases witnessed throughout Europe have shown that, apparently, some individuals or small groups of aspiring jihadists have successfully managed to link up with established jihadist groups without any previous connection just by showing up. At the height of the war in Iraq, for example, it was not uncommon for unaffiliated jihadist wannabes to simply travel to Syria and there start asking around for a way into Iraq, hoping to make the right connection. While some did not succeed, many did and joined Iraqi-based jihadist groups that way.

Recently, there are indications that the current conflict in Syria has offered opportunities for individuals without connections. Their large numbers and the nature of their activities put foreign fighters in Syria in a situation more like that of those fighting the Soviet Union in Afghanistan in the 1980s than like those who have joined various al-Qa'ida-affiliated outfits in Pakistan, Somalia or Yemen over the past 10 years. Militant groups do have security procedures set up to prevent infiltration, but it appears that it is relatively easy even for individuals without prior connections to enlist in some of them.

Most counterterrorism experts nonetheless consider solo travelling an exception. In most cases, individuals manage to link up with established jihadist groups outside of Europe because somebody facilitates the

process. Basing their acceptance policy on selection rather than outreach and recruitment, jihadist groups tend to open themselves to individuals whose background, commitment and usefulness to the cause can somehow be verified. Exceptions are always possible and, in recent months, there have been indications that some volunteers reaching Syria without facilitation have been accepted. But most experts argue that it is unlikely that such security-conscious and infiltration-wary groups would accept individuals who just show up. A facilitator, a gatekeeper, somebody who can somehow vouch for the aspiring jihadist is, in most cases, necessary.

Facilitators are individuals who possess the right connections with one or more jihadist groups and can therefore vouch for the aspiring European jihadist. Often facilitators are committed militants who have fought in various conflicts and established solid links to various al-Qa'ida-affiliated networks outside of Europe. Charismatic and generally older, they do not recruit in the traditional sense of the word; rather, they make things happen, connecting various European individuals and clusters with those abroad. The ways in which facilitators come to meet these individuals and clusters are varied, and can happen in places ranging from a mosque to a gym, from an Internet cafe to a kebab store. Pre-existing social and family networks play a crucial role, as they reinforce trust among militants.

A phrase that most accurately describes this process is 'scenarios of opportunity'. Unless they opt to travel solo, European-based jihadist wannabes looking for ways to train or participate in conflicts abroad generally seek people who might help them. In some cases, they might do this online, asking chat room interlocutors for travelling tips. But, in many cases, this sort of search is done in person, as the wannabe jihadist looks for individuals who can help him join jihadist groups abroad. They might look for facilitators who are known to have a radical presence at the margins of certain mosques. They may activate social networks, asking around within trusted circles and looking for the friend of a friend, the

one-time acquaintance, the individual rumored in the community to have had a militant past.

The degree of the facilitator's involvement can vary. Some can simply provide advice, indicating to the aspiring jihadist how to best enter the country he seeks to reach or, once there, in what places he is most likely to find people with connections to jihadist groups. But facilitators can take more active roles, particularly after they have come to trust the aspiring jihadist. In that case, they might provide him with the phone number of the right contact in the destination country, provide him with a letter of recommendation or directly set up a meeting with a jihadist group's member. They may even provide the aspiring jihadist with visas, documents, air tickets and money, making their efforts similar to those that could properly be defined as recruitment.

These different patterns are somewhat visible, for what at this stage can be determined, in the case of the only two Italians who are publicly known to have joined jihadist groups in Syria: Ibrahim Giuliano Delnevo and Anas el Abboubi. The former is a convert from Genoa who was reportedly killed in Syria in June 2013 while fighting alongside a jihadist militia. El Abboubi is a young man of Moroccan descent from the Brescia area who, in September of 2013, travelled to Syria, where he reportedly joined an al-Qa'ida-linked formation.<sup>33</sup>

At the time of writing there is limited publicly available information as to how el Abboubi and Delnevo managed to reach Syria. As for Delnevo, his two trips seem to confirm the general view that a facilitator is necessary. When he first travelled to Turkey in the summer of 2012, the Genovese convert apparently did not have any connection that could facilitate his passage into Syria and his adventure ended ingloriously on a flight back to Italy. But over the following few months, Delnevo apparently managed to find the right connection and his next trip, in December, was successful. Not only did he manage to cross the border into Syria, but he also joined a prominent jihadist militia. While authorities are still working on establishing the details of how Delnevo

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33. L. Vidino, (2014).

managed that, there is a consensus that he could achieve such results only through pre-existing connections.

Preliminary and previously undisclosed evidence seems to indicate that el Abboubi's journey to Syria was also facilitated by 'gatekeepers'. It appears that, shortly after having been released by the Brescia court, el Abboubi entered into contact with an Albanian jihadist network with a strong presence in Italy. Despite an unsuccessful trip to Albania to meet its leaders, el Abboubi managed to gain the network's trust. Within a few weeks the Albanian network reportedly paid for his trip to Syria (via Turkey) and, most importantly, vouched for his credentials with the al-Qa'ida-linked Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant.<sup>34</sup>

In many European countries this role of facilitators has been played by Salafist organizations that for years had operated without being directly involved in any militant activity but that, once the conflict in Syria began, changed their approach. Arguably the most remarkable example of this dynamic is that of Sharia4Belgium. For years the group engaged in very controversial and deliberately provocative actions that attracted the attention of the media and Belgian authorities. But the general consensus, including within the Belgian counter-terrorism community, was that Sharia4Belgium did not pose a security threat.

This assessment changed dramatically by the fall of 2012, when dozens of Sharia4Belgium activists left the country and joined jihadist groups in Syria. The Sharia4Belgium core was soon joined by dozens of individuals who were either at the periphery of the group or had previously had no connection whatsoever with it. More than half of the 226 Belgians estimated to have fought in Syria as of February 2014 were linked to Sharia4Belgium.<sup>35</sup> Some of them have been killed, some have posted videos threatening attacks against Belgium, and others are known to have committed particularly heinous acts against enemies and civilians during the conflict.

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34. Interviews with Italian government officials, January 2014.

35. Interviews with Belgian officials, Brussels, February 2014.

### *2.3 European governments' approaches*

European authorities have reacted to what most of them perceive as a significant security challenge with a variety of measures aimed at mitigating the threat. Many initiatives aim at preventing European Muslims from travelling to Syria in the first place. While approaches vary from country to country, most employ a mix of hard and soft measures to do so.

When possible, authorities seek to arrest and criminally prosecute individuals seeking to leave for Syria. While no country criminalizes traveling to Syria or any other conflict area per se, many have statutes under which individuals seeking to do so can be charged with training for terrorist purposes, providing support to a terrorist organization or similar claims. Obviously, in order to do so, authorities need to be in possession of solid evidence that can be produced in court, something not easy to obtain when seeking to prosecute individuals who are simply planning terrorism-related activities. Many European countries consider prosecutions simply one of the various tools in their “travel disruption strategies”. Other measures include, when possible, the confiscation of travel documents or, in the case of minors, judicial custody.

Authorities face similarly significant challenges when dealing with individuals who have returned from Syria. Authorities seeking to prosecute returnees are faced with the challenge of proving through evidence admissible in court that a given individual committed specific crimes – a daunting task given the difficulty in obtaining reliable, if any, evidence from the Syrian battlefield. Many European countries have also been employing various measures to reintegrate returnees. Countries such as Denmark or the Netherlands, in fact, have had a counter-radicalization structure in place for almost ten years and are using many of their resources to diffuse the potential threat posed by returnees. In many countries such efforts take the form of psychological counseling



and coaching from trusted mentors.<sup>36</sup> At the same time authorities seek to monitor the returnees' activities and assess the dangerousness of each.

### *Conclusion*

It is difficult to assess what exactly the blowback of the presence of European fighters in Syria will be. It has been argued by some that the current infighting among various jihadist groups will make the Arab country less attractive to aspiring jihadists. Others believe that, with no end in sight for the Syrian conflict, it is premature to believe that the trajectory of European jihadists' presence is on the decline. Either way, the massive presence of European jihadists in the Syrian conflict has triggered some ominous questions throughout Europe. The first – whether it will have direct security repercussions for Europe – will eventually find answers. But the second and, arguably deeper, question is why (for the time being) some two thousand European youths have decided to travel to a foreign land and potentially die while fighting alongside jihadist groups. Answering or at least attempting to answer this extremely difficult question is crucially important to understanding not just security but also social dynamics with important implications for Europe and likely to be present well beyond the Syrian conflict.

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36. For an overview, see the conference paper *RAN Cities Conference on Foreign Fighters*, Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN), Den Haag, 30 January 2014, [http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation\\_awareness\\_network/cities-conference/docs/conference\\_paper\\_cities\\_conference\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/cities-conference/docs/conference_paper_cities_conference_en.pdf).



### 3. NEW TRENDS IN NORTH AFRICAN JIHADISM: ANSAR AL-SHARIA IN TUNISIA AND LIBYA

*Stefano M. Torelli and Arturo Varvelli<sup>1</sup>*

Since the so-called Arab Spring erupted, the Middle East has undergone structural changes that have marked the beginning of a new phase in the region's political landscape. Paradoxically, a trend that has clearly manifested itself – in addition to the attempts at political transitions – is the emergence of new jihadist movements challenging the 'traditional' al-Qa'ida-dominated narrative. Probably one of the reasons explaining this phenomenon is the creation of new room for manoeuvre after the collapse of former regimes and the consequent change in the balance of political and social forces in the field. At the same time, however, the tactics and characteristics of the new jihadist movements seem to have deeply changed, as well as their theatres of operation. Therefore, this article addresses the issue of jihadism in North Africa, highlighting its new features. In fact, if on the one hand 'traditional' movements like al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) continue to operate, and countries such as Algeria continue to be the main target for the local jihadi, on the other hand Islamic radicalism has begun to manifest itself even in contexts that in past decades were considered immune to local jihadism. In particular, Tunisia and Libya –

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1. Stefano M. Torelli wrote the first paragraph and the part relating to Tunisia; Arturo Varvelli wrote the paragraphs on the Libya case study. The authors have written the introduction and the Conclusion together.

albeit with varying intensity – have become two new centres of regional jihad activism in the Maghreb. The study of this phenomenon is even more interesting in the light of the fact that these are the two North African countries that had been most able to defeat radical Islam, or in which radicalism has not had a grip similar to that manifested in Algeria or in Egypt. As will be analysed, the Salafi jihadist groups now operating in Libya and Tunisia are heterogeneous, both in their nature and in their origin. Along with manifestations of home-grown religious extremism – as a consequence of individual contexts' factors – there are also new networks that are being built in North Africa. AQIM has expanded its activities beyond the Sahel, especially in Tunisia, while Libya has become the new regional hub of jihadism, where groups from Tunisia itself and from Egypt operate alongside the Libyan and can find refuge and new ways of organizing.<sup>2</sup>

### *3.1 Framing AST and ASL within Salafism*

The Arab-Islamic world, especially after the so-called 'Arab Spring' that has reshaped its borders and balances, is in a process of change which affects all spheres of public life: politics, society and the economy. Inevitably, with the changing of individual institutional contexts in the Near East and in North Africa, the actors involved in defining the socio-political dynamics have undergone changes too. In some cases, there have been new non-state actors able to catalyse such influence as to acquire a weight that would hardly have been imaginable just three years ago. Among them, an important place is occupied by the movements

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2. As mentioned by a recent RAND report, in addition to Ansar al-Sharia Libya, several other Salafi-jihadist groups enjoy sanctuary in Libya: the Muhammad Jamal Network (from Egypt), which established a presence in such northern areas as Benghazi and Darnah; Mokhtar Belmokhtar's al-Murabitun in the southwest around Ghat, Awbari, and Tasawah; al-Qai'da in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in parts of southwestern and northeastern Libya; and, the previously cited Ansar al-Sharia Tunisia (AST) in such areas as Zuwarah, Darnah and Ajdabiya. Elsewhere in North Africa, Mokhtar Belmokhtar's al-Murabitun established a presence in an arc of territory that includes Algeria, Libya, Mali, Niger, and Mauritania.

related to political Islam and to its more radical forms, those of Salafism and, in particular, jihadi Salafism. The two actors on which this essay focuses most – Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia (AST) and Ansar al-Sharia in Libya (ASL) – represent better than others the new Islamist movements that emerged after the fall of the regimes of Ben ‘Ali and Gaddafi. Therefore, the regime changes and the political shifts that ensued are the first factors explaining the emergence of the phenomenon of Salafism in Tunisia and Libya. The fall of the previous authoritarian and repressive regimes led to the ‘liberalization policy’ of their respective contexts. In this way political Islam, in all its forms, has been able to re-integrate into the public life of these countries and – at least in a first step – to operate without incurring repression. It is in this context that the phenomenon of Salafism in Tunisia and Libya should be read, in addition to an apparent desire to integrate more closely with local communities in order to avoid being rejected, as happened in part with armed jihadism in other contexts, as was the case with al-Qa‘ida in Iraq (AQI) or Al-Qa‘ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Alongside these political-institutional factors, also to be considered is socio-economic development, so the difficulties the new transitional governments – albeit with different characteristics in Tunisia and Libya – encountered in resolving the economic basis of the 2011 riots, progressively led many young people to embrace radical ideologies and groups as an alternative to socio-economic change, leading to the radicalization of hundreds of individuals.

The definition of Salafism is not univocal and is still a subject of debate among scholars. If we follow the classical interpretation of Salafism in the modern era it dates from the late nineteenth century, with the emergence within the Islamic world of that movement that would be known as Islamic Reformism (*islah*). The term Salafism derives from Arabic *Salafyyun*, literally “the ancestors”, which designates the first three generations of Muslims, deemed by this current of thought to be the most pious believers. *Salafyya* theorized a return to original Islam by eliminating all those elements that, throughout history, have been introduced from the outside and had inevitably changed the essence of

its origins. In order to return to a more correct and pure Islam, the main instrument was represented by *ijtihad* (literally “interpretation”), namely the effort to interpret the basic texts of Islam, the Qur‘an and the Sunna, with the aim of giving them their original meaning, stripped of any external interference. The use of the term Salafism in reference to current Islamic radical movements is – especially by the media<sup>3</sup> – relatively new and, meant in this sense, has partially lost the meaning it had initially assumed during the era of Islamic reformism. Referring to organizations and groups characterized by a purist interpretation of Islam – and, ultimately, by the use of violence as a strategy of action to conduct its political struggle – as Salafist, from the end of the 1990s there has been a kind of *a posteriori* transposition of a term that originally had a specific meaning into a phenomenon that was not initially associated with that term. Such a theoretical premise is fundamental to any disquisition on Salafism today, regardless of the context or the case study that is taken into consideration. Making it easier to understand the difficulty we have in categorizing the radical political organizations related to Islam in the current political landscape. As highlighted by the American scholar Quintan Wiktorowicz,<sup>4</sup> in spite of the fact that within the contemporary Islamic world different categories of Salafi movements can be identified, there is an element that they all have in common: religious creed (in Arabic ‘*aqida*),<sup>5</sup> that concerns the basic principles of Islam, from which no believer can deviate. Specifically, current Salafi groups profess God’s unity (*tawhid*), the need to strictly follow the Qur‘an and the Sunna as a source of inspiration and the need to prevent forms of innovation (*bid‘a*) that could modify the original message of the prophet Muhammad and

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3. For example see T. Hegghammer, “Jihadi-Salafis or Revolutionaries? On Religion and Politics in the Study of Militant Islamism”, in R. Meijer (ed.), *Global Salafism: Islam’s New Religious Movement*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2009, p. 248.

4. Q. Wiktorowicz, “Anatomy of the Salafi Movement”, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol. 29, No. 3, 2006, pp. 207-239, [http://www.cerium.ca/IMG/pdf/WIKTOROWICZ\\_2006\\_Anatomy\\_of\\_the\\_Salafi\\_Movement.pdf](http://www.cerium.ca/IMG/pdf/WIKTOROWICZ_2006_Anatomy_of_the_Salafi_Movement.pdf).

5. See also J.M. Brachman, *Global Jihadism. Theory and Practice*, Routledge, New York, 2009, pp. 41-51.

of his immediate successors in the leadership of the Muslim community. Starting from these assumptions – which form the shared theoretical basis of the Salafi current and involve a project aimed at returning to a primordial form of Islam – it will be possible for us to provide a categorization of the Salafi movements, based on their strategy of action (the method) and the context to which their message is addressed to (the spatial dimension).

Wiktorowicz identifies three forms of Salafism: purist; political; jihadist. According to this classification, the purist Salafis are those that are primarily focused on maintaining the purity of Islam, in compliance with the requirements of the Qur'an and the Sunna and with what was predetermined by the consensus (*ijma'*) of Companions (*Ansar*) of Muhammad. The strategy of action favoured by the purist Salafism is based on two main pillars: propaganda (*da'wa*) and education (*tarbiyya*). These tools are preferred to political activism, since purists theorize Islamization from below and don't interfere with the legal and institutional framework in which government acts. This is justified by pragmatic reasons of opportunism: they fear that if any political action – even violent – comes to threaten the very existence of the state, the latter would react with repression. In this perspective, political movements and jihadists are criticized because their action would be counterproductive and actually lead to the disappearance of Islam.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, the methodological choice based on political activism is the one adopted by political Salafism, who feel a sort of frustration against the purists' persistence in remaining outside the political arena. Therefore, political Salafism decides to act directly within the political system, in order to influence its choices. Finally, in this categorization jihadism is also included in the group of Salafi movements, as a form of violent opposition aimed at establishment of the Islamic State. The basic creed is, in fact, shared with the other Salafi groups, but unlike the political

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6. The strategy followed by purist Salafism results in a kind of isolationism, which finds its source of legitimacy in the first period of Muhammad's preaching (the so-called Meccan period) when the hostile environment urged the Prophet to prefer forms of 'horizontal' propaganda, rather than political action.

one, whose formation took place in the Islamic universities based on the classic texts of Salafism, “[...] jihadists have received their political training on the battlefields”;<sup>7</sup> jihadi Salafism agrees with the political critique of purists, even accused of being accomplices of some Muslim countries’ governments, considered wicked. In addition, the example of the armed struggle against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in the eighties, represents the model to follow in order to pursue their goals. Therefore, jihadism goes a step further than political Salafism.

Given this context, to frame AST and ASL in one of the existing categories of Salafism is very difficult, because they seem to possess the characteristics of both quietist Salafism and the jihadist. It is at the edge of jihadist Salafism that the two groups would be positioned, although both seem to have the typical characteristics of purist Salafism. Both, in fact, were born as movements devoted mainly to *da’wa* and *tarbiyya* activities and both have developed a network of Islamic welfare typical of other Islamist movements such as Hamas in the Palestinian territories, or Hezbollah in South Lebanon. At the same time, both the Tunisian and Libyan groups are openly opposed to a democratic system of government and explicitly reject the possibility of forming a political party or becoming part of the institutional world through participation in the electoral process. If these features make the two groups essentially quietist movements, on the other hand both of them make calls for jihad, although in different forms. This characteristic is partly intrinsic to the Salafi groups themselves, while partly it is a reaction to the attitude of the Tunisian government and the secular Libyan armed groups, who in the last year have implemented a campaign of repression against AST and ASL, provoking a more open confrontation. In the next paragraphs the authors will analyse the peculiarities of the two groups.

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7. Q. Wiktorowicz, (2006), p. 225.



### 3.2 *Jihadism in Tunisia: repression, radicalization and external influences*

#### 3.2.1 *Tunisia: how jihad violates the cradle of Arab secularism*

The trajectories undertaken by international jihadism, with the formation of new groups directly affiliated with al-Qa'ida; the al-Qa'ida-inspired movements with local focus; and the presence of single cells or individuals referring to the global jihadist message in order to put in place isolated actions,<sup>8</sup> seem to have converged in Tunisia. What we refer to as the “third wave of jihadism” in the Near East – with two main epicentres, in Syria (Mashreq) and Libya (Maghreb) – has not spared the country that, at least until 2011, had been universally considered the most immune to radical Islam's threat.<sup>9</sup> The Salafi jihadist groups currently operating in Tunisia are various and different from each other and it is difficult to provide a classification of their activities. The main group, Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia (AST), has been outlawed and is operating in hiding, while we still have just little and fragmented news about the others.<sup>10</sup> AST is at the boundary between the so-called quietists and

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8. For a classification of contemporary jihadism, see S.G. Jones, *A Persistent Threat. The Evolution of al Qa'ida and Other Salafi Jihadists*, RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, CA, 2014.

9. Since its independence from France in 1956, Tunisia has developed a secular country model that has no equal in the Arab world. Tunisia's institutional structure, as well as its social context, has been based on a strict division between religion and politics and all Islamic features have been relegated to the individual and private sphere.

10. Few comprehensive studies have been conducted on Tunisian Salafism since the fall of Ben 'Ali. However, the issue is becoming more and more analysed. Among the most important studies so far are: F. Merone and F. Cavatorta, “Salafist mouvance and sheikh-ism in the Tunisian democratic transition”, *Working Papers in International Studies*, Centre for International Studies, Dublin City University, No. 7, 2012, <http://doras.dcu.ie/17570/1/1207.pdf>; S.M. Torelli, F. Merone and F. Cavatorta, “Salafism in Tunisia: Challenges and Opportunities for Democratization”, *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 19, Issue 4, 2012, pp. 140-154.; International Crisis Group, “Tunisia: Violence and the Salafi Challenge”, *Middle East/North Africa Report*, No. 137, 13 February 2013 <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/North%20Africa/Tunisia/137->

political Salafis on the one hand and, on the other, the jihadist<sup>11</sup>. In addition to AST, there are isolated jihadist cells currently operating in Tunisia whose origins are in many cases to be traced to the Algerian jihadist circle. To make the context still more complicated, there is the presence of a new regional jihadi safe haven in Libya, which could result in new threats to the process of political transition and to security in Tunisia.

Certainly, as a first determining factor in analysing the emergence of Salafism – even in its most radical forms – in Tunisia, the new situation created by the fall of the Ben ‘Ali regime in January 2011 has to be taken into account. In fact, on the one hand progressive political liberalization has permitted the creation of a space within which all social and political expressions could take part in the process of institutional transition (even the Islamist movements, not only the Ennahda party, before then systematically repressed by the state); on the other hand it has contributed to the formation of a new climate of national reconciliation, which led to the amnesty granted to many political prisoners by the first transitional government, including Islamist militants arrested in previous years<sup>12</sup>. To these preconditions are added all the factors that, during the last three years, have contributed to the formation – and, in later stages, the radicalization – of jihadist movements and cells that, for the first time in the history of Tunisia, constantly threaten its security. From the internal point of view, the political polarization between secular and Islamist groups around which the most evident social cleavage is occurring in Tunisia today, has created a general climate of tension, reaching levels

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[tunisia-violence-and-the-salafi-challenge.pdf](#); D. Gartenstein-Ross, B. Moreng and K. Soucy, “Raising the Stakes: Ansar al’Sharia in Tunisia’s Shift to Jihad”, ICCR Research Paper, February 2014, <http://www.icct.nl/download/file/ICCT-Gartenstein-Ross-Moreng-Soucy-Raising-the-Stakes-ASTs-Shift-to-Jihad-Feb-2014.pdf>. See also A. Wolf, “Tunisia: Signs of Domestic Radicalization Post-Revolution”, *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 6, Issue 1, February 2013, pp. 1-4, <file:///C:/Documenti/Downloads/305-2068-1-PBFull.pdf>.

11. For a classification of Salafi movements, which differ from each other in their strategies while having the same ultimate goal, namely the creation of an Islamic State based on the *sharia*, see Q. Wiktorowicz, (2006).

12. “Tunisia signs amnesty for political prisoners”, Reuters, 20 February 2011.

never achieved during the previous decades. However, if we consider the external factors influencing the events in Tunisia: the war in Libya in 2011 and its long-term effects on the entire region; the deteriorating security situation in Mali; the resumption of al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) activities and its infiltration attempts from Algeria, are all factors that have influenced the emergence of new Salafi jihadist groups in Tunisia.

### 3.2.2 *New Salafis, all jihadists?*

Aside from AST, the best known and – at least before its ban – better organized Tunisian Salafi movement, it is difficult to map jihadism in Tunisia, as it is composed mainly of small cells, probably in contact with each other but acting independently. First of all, even in this case, a distinction between non-jihadist and jihadist Salafi movements has to be made. AST, which was classified as a terrorist organization by both the Tunisian government (August 2013), and the U.S. Department of State (January 2014), was initially a Salafi movement devoted mainly to activities of *da'wa* and social interest. In this context, its main activities in Tunisia focused especially on two directions: preaching and proselytising (activities related to *tarbiyya*, or 'education') and all the activities that can be traced to what has been called "Islamic welfare",<sup>13</sup> such as aid to needy families, the organization of convoys carrying food and medicines and relief for people affected by natural disasters.<sup>14</sup> However, to make it a movement *sui generis* if compared to traditional Salafi group

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13. The so-called 'Islamic welfare' activities have already been experienced by other movements in other contexts, as is the case of Hamas in Palestine and Hezbollah in Lebanon. See M. Levitt, *Hamas. Politics, charity, and terrorism in the service of jihad*, Yale University Press, New Haven-London, 2006.

14. The AST activities at the social level were rather similar to those of charitable organizations and include the distribution of basic goods and food in the poorest areas of the country, the raising of funds for those in need and the provision of aid and assistance to populations affected by natural disasters, as happened in early 2012 in the regions of Janduba and Kasserine.

classifications, there were at least two factors. On the one hand, the nature of its leadership: in fact, the founder, Abu ‘Ayyadh (whose real name is Sayf Allah Ben Hassine), is a former jihadist who fought in Afghanistan after the U.S. intervention in 2001, afterwards founded the al-Qa‘ida-inspired movement Tunisian Combatant Group (TCG) and was finally arrested in Turkey and deported to Tunisia on charges of terrorism.<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, as a consequence of its leader’s origins, AST has always maintained a double strategy: while in Tunisia it dedicated itself to social activities and *da‘wa*, at the same time it endorsed the global jihad. This feature is evident from AST’s symbolism and ideology of reference, as well as from its frequent references to jihad in Iraq, Syria and even Myanmar.<sup>16</sup> AST’s positions *vis-à-vis* the Tunisian government have gradually radicalized in part as a consequence of Ennahda’s democratic stance within the framework of the Tunisian political transition, and in part as a direct result of the government’s attitude against it. AST was the protagonist of the incidents occurring in September 2012, when a group of Salafists attacked the U.S. Embassy in Tunis and four militants were killed in the subsequent clashes. The event marked a change in tactics for the movement, because for the first time AST had targeted a Western symbol and clashed directly with Tunisian security forces. Thus, is it possible to say that, from that moment on, AST became a jihadist movement?

Indeed, whether or not AST is gradually becoming a jihadist movement at home is still a controversial issue. Since the spring of 2013, Tunisia has been affected by a series of attacks against security forces and the National Guard, especially in the area of Jebel Chaambi, on the border with Algeria.<sup>17</sup> Although the Tunisian government has singled out AST as

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15. See S.M. Torelli, “A Portrait of Tunisia’s Ansar al-Sharia Leader Abu Iyad al-Tunisi: His Strategy on Jihad”, *Militant Leadership Monitor*, The Jamestown Foundation, Washington DC, Vol. 6, Issue 8, 2013, pp. 9-11.

16. On the Ansar al-Sharia facebook page, its most important propaganda channel, could be found several photographs and press releases highlighting this kind of commitment to global jihad.

17. Since the beginning of the attacks, the jihadists have killed at least 30 Tunisian security forces members. The most ferocious attacks were the one on July 29, 2013,

responsible for the repeated attacks, it has not provided clear evidence of the direct involvement of the Salafi movement in the terrorist activities. In addition, some attacks' features give the impression that other jihadist groups are operating in the country. What is the origin of these groups? The assumptions, in this case, appear to be substantially two. On the one hand, there is evidence of infiltration by Algerian jihadist elements: this would be confirmed by the arrest of some Algerian nationals at the border with Tunisia,<sup>18</sup> but also by the kind of operation conducted, which resembled those of the Algerian jihadists during the nineties' civil war. It is worth noting, in this regard, that in June 2014, for the first time AQIM claimed responsibility for an attack on the home of the Interior Minister Lotfi ben Jeddou in the city of Kasserine<sup>19</sup>. The Tunisian government has deployed an increasing number of forces in order to fight jihadism, but attacks continue, reflecting these groups' elusiveness. Between 2012 and 2013, the authorities declared they had identified a new jihadist cell called Uqba ibn Nafa'a, but in the following months the group was no longer mentioned, nor has any attack been ever claimed by this alleged Tunisian jihadist movement, although some sources have accused this elusive group of being responsible for the July 17 terrorist attack on the Jebel Chaambi in which 15 Tunisian soldiers were killed. The second hypothesis – which does not exclude the first one – is that there are individual Tunisians who have gradually radicalized, becoming part of

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when a jihadist commando attacked a military patrol on the mountains of Jebel Chaambi, killing eight soldiers, and the one occurring on July 17, 2014 in which 15 soldiers were killed on the Jebel Chaambi. This was the worst terrorist attack in Tunisian Republican history, after the suicide attack in 2002 in Jerba.

18. For example, on February 16, 2014, a jihadist commando with a fake uniform simulated a checkpoint and killed four members of the National Guard in the village of Ouled Manaa, near Jendouba. Two of the terrorists were Algerian. During the last months, Algerian intelligence has repeatedly warned the Tunisian authorities about the impressive number of jihadists trying to infiltrate into Tunisia. See also S.M. Torelli, "Meeting the Jihad Challenge in Tunisia: The Military and Political Response", *Terrorism Monitor*, The Jamestown Foundation, Washington DC, Vol. 11, Issue 17, 2013, pp. 5-7.

19. "AQIM claims Tunisia attack", *Magharebia*, 16 June 2014, [http://magharebia.com/en\\_GB/articles/awi/features/2014/06/16/feature-01](http://magharebia.com/en_GB/articles/awi/features/2014/06/16/feature-01).

the local jihadist networks. In this case, it is possible that we are facing forms of so-called personal jihad.

### *3.2.3 Socio-economic crisis and repression: the ways for new forms of personal jihad?*

Alongside the Algerian jihadist infiltrations, a phenomenon that is becoming increasingly widespread seems to resemble the so-called individual (or personal) jihad. The radicalization of individuals – whether coming from AST itself or not – is mainly due to two reasons: on the one hand it is a result of the repression inflicted by the government;<sup>20</sup> on the other hand there is the frustration caused by a socio-economic situation whose difficulties have not been overcome since Ben ‘Ali’s fall. Even if it cannot be excluded that individual jihadists contribute to strengthening the ranks of the Algerian-linked jihadist groups operating in the area of Jebel Chaambi, manifestations of this kind of radicalism have even occurred in urban centres. This trend represents one of the most dangerous developments for the stability of the country and one of the most worrying evolutions of Tunisian jihadism: on October 30, 2013, two attacks occurred, one in the coastal city of Sousse against a tourist resort and the other one in Monastir, targeting Bourguiba’s mausoleum. Besides the novelty of the choice of targets – Sousse represents the economic sector on which Tunisian economy should revive more than any other, namely tourism;<sup>21</sup> Bourguiba’s mausoleum represents Tunisia’s

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20. Since AST has been labelled a terrorist organization its activities have been banned and the Tunisian government has launched a campaign of mass arrests and repression. Between 2013 and 2014 over 1,300 persons have been arrested under the controversial anti-terrorism law enacted under Ben ‘Ali in 2003. Summary and arbitrary arrests were reported, along with cases of torture and civil rights violations against members of the Salafi movement. See J. Schneider, “Le dilemme tunisien face au terrorisme”, *OrientXXI*, 6 March 2014, <http://orientxxi.info/magazine/le-dilemme-tunisien-face-au-0533>. See also A. Ghribi, “In Tunisia, It’s Shoot First, Ask Questions Later”, *Foreign Policy*, 17 February 2014.

21. Tourism represents 5% of total Tunisian GDP and in 2013 assured the government a 2.3 million \$ income. Source: *World Tourism Organization*.

secularist tradition – even the modes itself were unusual since, for the first time, they were suicide bombings (although Monastir’s was foiled, while in Sousse only the perpetrator died).

The emergence of this kind of jihadism creates weighty safety issues for the Tunisian authorities, since it is more difficult to face and prevent terrorist actions organized by individuals or small isolated cells. An interesting dynamic to be studied in order to understand the phenomenon of the radicalization of individuals who turn into Salafi jihadists, concerns the simultaneous dismantling of the AST’s structure in Tunisia. In fact, both the attacks in Sousse and Monastir (apparently carried out by individual jihadists), as well as the ongoing attacks against security forces on the border with Algeria, have been occurring even after AST’s designation as a terrorist organization and the campaign of repression against Salafism by the government. On the one hand, what is taking place is the process of individuals’ radicalization through exclusion.<sup>22</sup> On the other, AST’s lack of legitimacy and its subsequent disappearance from the public space led its leadership to have less control over members, some of whom have gradually turned into jihadists. In this case, the actual element of novelty and transformation if compared to the first months of AST’s activity, is the fact that some Salafists have gone through jihadi training (while AST was jihadist in its background ideology and symbolism, but not in concrete actions). Moreover, they shifted from supporting jihad just outside Tunisia, to take it within Tunisian territory, even if this process cannot be attributed to AST as a movement, but rather to out-of-control individuals. This sort of ‘individual radicalization’<sup>23</sup> is often the result of the disillusionment

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22. This process is opposite to the theory of moderation through inclusion, which has been repeatedly invoked in the debate about Islamist movements. See J. Schwedler, “Can Islamists Become Moderates? Rethinking the Inclusion-Moderation Hypothesis”, *World Politics*, Vol. 63, Issue 2, 2011, pp. 347-376.

23. In fact, according to the radicalization theory literature, the radicalization arising from socio-economic factors, differently from the type caused by political (as repression) factors, represents a dynamic that is individual, not collective. This kind of radicalization seems to involve mainly the younger population and is caused by social and economic factors such as urbanization, unemployment, population growth, poverty and social exclusion. See in particular O. Ashour, *The De-radicalization*

created among certain sections of the younger population, who feel alienated from the transition, despite having contributed to the previous regime's fall.

Finally, it is worth mentioning the existing connections – this trend has already been observed in the Sahel region with AQIM and other Islamist groups present in Mali such as MUJAO (Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa) Ansar al-Din – between local criminality devoted to illegal drugs, weapons and goods trafficking, and jihadist cells.<sup>24</sup> This occurs both at the border with Algeria and with Libya. The networks built around the relationship between smuggling and guerrilla jihadi provide a means to obtain financing and, at the same time, strive to exercise a form of control over a given territory. This aspect seems to be correlated to two factors: the ongoing economic crisis – as new illegal businesses are gaining ground – and the regional security crisis. Therefore, Libya is becoming a new safe haven for regional jihadi groups, even from Tunisia itself. In March 2014, a new channel for the dissemination of the Tunisian jihadist message appeared: Shabab al-Tawhid Media (STM). This is a Libyan-based network, even if its contents are mainly referred to Tunisia, so that it can be assumed that this is a re-branding of AST that is occurring in Libya<sup>25</sup>. Abu 'Ayyadh himself has reportedly gone into hiding in Libya.

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*of Jihadists. Transforming Armed Islamist movements*, Routledge, London-New York, 2009. In general, for the discussion about the radicalization and moderation of Islamist political movements, see also J. Schwedler, *Faith in Moderation: Islamist Parties in Jordan and Yemen*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2007

24. See also International Crisis Group, "Tunisia's Borders: Jihadism and Contraband", *Middle East and North Africa Report*, No. 148, 28 November 2013, [http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/North%20Africa/Tunisia/148-tunisi-as-borders-jihadism-and-contraband-english.pdf](http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/North%20Africa/Tunisia/148-tunisi-as-borders-jihadism-and-contraband-english.pdf).

25. See S.M. Torelli, "Tunisian Jihadists Establishing New Networks with Libyan Islamists", *Terrorism Monitor*, The Jamestown Foundation, Washington DC, Vol. 12, Issue 11, 2014, pp. 5-6.



### 3.3 *Ansar al-Sharia Libya: local or global focus?*

#### 3.3.1 *Islamists and anti-Islamists: the polarization of political and security landscapes*

On September 11<sup>th</sup> 2012, Islamist militants stormed the American mission in Benghazi, killing the United States ambassador to Libya, J. Christopher Stevens, and three officials. The attack has been attributed to Salafi extremists and Ansar al-Sharia. The attack is extremely symptomatic of the deterioration of the security situation in the country. In the last few months, Libya has been sinking into a spiral of ever-worsening violence: the poor control of its porous borders, illicit trafficking, the relocation of jihadists and armed militants from the Sub-Saharan region and across the Middle East have raised the country's instability to an alarming degree. Fragmented and fragile Libyan authorities haven't demonstrated a strong commitment to identifying the suspected, protecting foreigners and restoring security. In June 2014 Ahmed Abu Khattala, indicted by Washington as a prime suspect in the murder of the U.S. ambassador, was seized in Benghazi by U.S. special forces.<sup>26</sup>

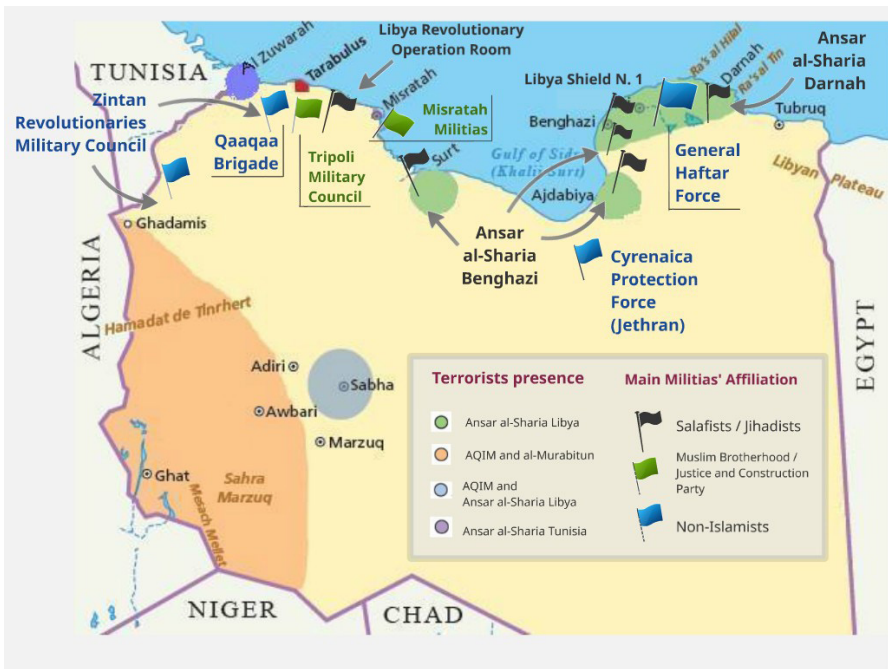
In addition, Libya is going through a power struggle between two increasingly polarized groups, which is progressively shifting from the political to the military sphere. On the one side – the 'Islamist' one – are the militias from Misrata, parts of Tripoli, and other smaller towns that have coalesced and acquired the political cover of the two strongest blocs in the General Nation Congress (GNC): the Muslim Brotherhood and the so-called "Loyalty to Martyrs", a label associated with various Islamist movements. On the other side – the 'pro-secularist' or 'anti-Islamist' – are the militia from Zintan, the powerful militia of Qaqa,

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26. "American special forces capture top Islamist leader, Ahmed Bukhatallah, in Benghazi operation", *Libya Herald*, 17 June 2014, <http://www.libyaherald.com/2014/06/17/american-special-forces-capture-top-ansar-leader-ahmed-bukhatallah-in-benghazi-operation/#ixzz3503IiiQd>.

which also comprises Zintani citizens officially aligned with the more secular coalition known as the National Forces Alliances (NFA), the more secularist party, led by Mahmoud Jibril, and the forces in Cyrenaica under the control of General Khalifa Haftar.

Since July, the Zintan and Misrata militias have been locked in battle at Libya's main airport in the south of Tripoli, disrupting air transport. Members of the Islamist Libya Revolutionaries Operations Room (LROR) – part of the Misrata militias – were trying to seize control of the airport, which has been in the hands of the Zintan group since the toppling of Col. Muammar Gaddafi in 2011.



In May, retired Libyan general Khalifa Haftar launched a military campaign (Operation Dignity) to purge Cyrenaica of 'Islamist militants', politically supported by NFA. Haftar, a controversial figure coming

from Gaddafi's regime<sup>27</sup>, rapidly gained support among the population, especially in Benghazi and Derna, where people were eager to find a way out of two years of daily assassinations and a series of politically motivated terrorist bombings. At the same time, though, the military confrontation in Cyrenaica is increasing political tension in Libya, as became even more apparent during the elections of the House of Representatives held last June.

The major cause for the country's security predicament are the Islamist groups' activities and pro-violence declarations, with the members of Salafi and Islamist movements (even from within the General National Council) sponsoring violence against intellectuals, journalists, judges, and thus contributing to the deterioration of the country's security and the rise of perceptions of threat among the population.

Nevertheless, secular and anti-Islamist forces are also powerful factors in the political polarization in Libya – also influenced by the evolution of the regional context, in particular the military takeover in Egypt and the rise of General 'Abdel Fatah Al-Sisi. In 2013-14 the NFA has been delegitimizing the GNC and the institutions, considered to be too prone to the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) and Salafi influence. The NFA and GCA have tried to provide the international community (the U.S. and EU in particular) with a narrative that can put all the blame on the Islamists, denying them any institutional role since they would be 'unfit' to govern in a democratic regime. In alliance with NFA, Haftar not only moved against the jihadist group Ansar al-Sharia, but also affirmed he would "cleanse Libya of the Muslim Brotherhood", deliberately blurring the lines between terrorist and Islamist groups.<sup>28</sup>

In the summer of 2013, the MB and some Salafi movements overthrew the GNC's majority, gaining the support of a number of independent congressmen. As a result, the parliament's activities and role have seemingly been 'defended' by MB, but were boycotted by the secularists,

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27. For a profile of Gen. Haftar see C. Tawil, "Operation Dignity: General Haftar's latest battle may decide Libya's future", *Terrorism Monitor*, Jamestown Foundation, Vol. XII, Issue 11, 31 May 2014.

28. A. Al Gomaty, *Khalifa Haftar: Fighting terrorism or pursuing political power?*, Al Jazeera, 10 June 2014 <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2014/06/khalifa-hifter-operation-dignity-20146108259233889.html>.

who consider the GNC to be under the Islamist spell. This resulted in the paralysis of parliament, with negative consequences on the institution-building process; it also offered room for ignoring and not implementing laws and decrees. Moreover, this political polarization tends to be self-reinforcing, especially in connection with the debate over the drafting of the new Constitution – a typical polarizing process in fragmented and post-conflict societies.

The elections in June 2014 seemed to overthrow the Muslim Brotherhood's stance toward parliamentary representation as such. Fewer than 25 of the 200 MPs are Muslim Brotherhood members or their allies. According to Sasha Toperich, for the Muslim Brotherhood, their presence in the House of Representatives "is a matter of survival".<sup>29</sup> The new parliament will be out of their control, and may quickly begin to reverse legislation and cut the revenue stream that so far has been subsidizing their militias. In this context, according to some observers,<sup>30</sup> the struggle between pro-Islamist and pro-secularist forces combines with – and at the same time 'hides' – the struggle for political supremacy in the country, with a strong involvement of both regional and international powers. It is possible that Haftar may get help from Egypt and probably the U.S.; the MB was certainly supported by Qatar, while international jihadist networks have close relationships with Ansar al-Sharia.<sup>31</sup>

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29. S. Toperich, "Libya: The Muslim Brotherhood's Last Stand?", *Huffington Post*, 24 July 2014. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/sasha-toperich/libya-the-muslim-brotherhoods-last-stand\\_b\\_5618001.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/sasha-toperich/libya-the-muslim-brotherhoods-last-stand_b_5618001.html).

30. J.A. Khaled, "Libya's struggle: weapons, military factions and generals", *Aspenia online*, 4 June 2014.

31. For example it is reported that the UAE offered Haftar backing with 800 million dollars, which includes paying money to armed groups willing to join Operation Dignity. This aid is also alleged to include Egyptian backing. C. Tawil (2014).

### 3.3.2 What is Ansar al-Sharia in Libya?

Various Salafi-jihadist groups have plotted attacks against U.S. and Western interests overseas, while others are focused on local enemies. Despite the fact that the radical militias called “Ansar al-Sharia Libya (ASL)” appear to have primarily a parochial goal – taking over power in Libya and establishing an emirate<sup>32</sup> – the group seems also to respond to al-Qa’ida’s call for violent and global jihad, orchestrating attacks against international offices (U.S. and European legations, Red Cross headquarters, etc.), killing and kidnapping Western citizens or Libyan officials. Although ASL has probably at least 10,000 members at its core there are less than 1,000 fighters.<sup>33</sup> Some of them are well trained and experienced, from Iraq and Afghanistan.<sup>34</sup>

Similar to other of the Arab world’s Ansar al-Sharia movements, ASL has devoted much of its effort to *da’wa* (missionary activities) and trying to gain local support through the provision of social services, ranging from security patrols to garbage collection. ASL has also sought to insert itself into the local social fabric by establishing, amongst other things, a cultural center for women, a medical clinic and religious schools. ASL’s real agenda remains somewhat vague (besides the call for the application of *Sharia*). Several indications suggest that alongside its charitable efforts – Hamas or Hezbollah style – ASL is also involved in shadowy activities aimed at assisting regional jihadists in using Libyan territory as a safe

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32. S.G. Jones, *The Evolution of al Qaida and Other Salafi Jihadists*, Rand Corporations, June 2014.

33. Author’s interview with Colonel Wolfgang Pusztai (Policy and Security analyst and former Austrian Defense Attaché to Libya from 2008 to 2012). See also J. Pack, K. Mezran and M. Eljarh, “Libya’s Faustian Bargains: Braking the Appeasement Cycle”, *Atlantic Council*, Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East, May 2014, [http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/images/publications/Libyas\\_Faustian\\_Bargains.pdf](http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/images/publications/Libyas_Faustian_Bargains.pdf).

34. Two of the most important leaders of the Benghazi branch are Mohammed Ali Al Zahawi and Ahmed Abu Khattala. The leader of the Derna branch is Sufian Bin Qumu, who had spent six years in Guantanamo for having worked with Osama bin Laden.

haven for militant training and the smuggling of weapons and fighters.<sup>35</sup> In this sense Ansar al-Sharia appears the product of the general criticism of some violent jihadist strategy (for example al-Zarqawi in Iraq), alienating the local communities. A group of scholars led by Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, one of the most prominent Salafist figures in the world, has produced a number of significant changes, trying to strengthen the focus on social activities and *da'wa*,<sup>36</sup> but nonetheless ASL remains prominently a military group.

Mohammed Ali Al Zahawi, one of the leaders of Ansar al-Sharia, has always denied direct involvement with al-Qa'ida and other jihadist regional organizations, focusing on the role the organization plays in Libya. Ansar al-Sharia headquarters are in a building in the Quwarshah area of Benghazi. According to many reports, ASL is spreading itself in Tripoli, Sabratha, Ajdabiya and Sirte. ASL is trying to expand its activities outside Cyrenaica, also establishing friendships and alliances with other radical militias in Libya, such as "Libya Shield" or "February 17 Martyrs Brigade". This success was also a result of its *da'wa* efforts, permitting ASL to gain consensus or tolerance from the population and part of Libyan institutions. Libya Revolutionaries Operations Room (LRO), for example, is one of the most powerful militias in Tripoli. This militia, led by the popular militant Salafist preacher Shayk Hadia, considers itself to be a legitimate component of the Libyan state security forces, because GNC President Abu Sahmein created it. LRO maintains a strong relationship with ASL, including fighting alongside the militia

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35. F. Wehrey, *The Struggle for Security in Eastern Libya*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 2012, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2012/09/19/struggle-for-security-in-eastern-libya/dvct>; and F. Wehrey, C. Peter, *Building Libya's Security Sector*, CEIP Outlook, August 2013 <http://carnegieendowment.org/2013/08/06/building-libya-s-security-sector/ghle>.

36. D. Cristiani, *Ansar al-Sharia in Libia: jihadisti a geometria variabile*, ISPI Commentary, June 2014. <http://www.ispionline.it/it/publicazione/ansar-al-sharia-libia-jihadisti-geometria-variabile-10721>.

during a November 2013 Libyan Army operation in Benghazi ordered by former Prime Minister Ali Zeidan.<sup>37</sup>

The case of Abu Khattala is emblematic of the ambiguous goals of ASL. The U.S. State Department designated him a terrorist in January 2014, calling him a 'senior leader' of the Benghazi branch of the militant organization. At the same time Ansar al-Sharia was designated a terrorist organization. The U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence released its review of the intelligence concerning the terrorist attack in Benghazi. The report confirms that multiple parts of the network have been linked to the attack. According to the report "individuals affiliated with terrorist groups, including AQIM, Ansar al Sharia, AQAP (al-Qai'da in the Arabian Peninsula), and the Mohammad Jamal Network, participated in the September 11, 2012, attacks". The committee noted that there is insufficient intelligence to conclude whether or not the leaders of any of these groups ordered their fighters to take part in the attack.<sup>38</sup>

Despite speculation about the possible role of al-Qa'ida in leading the attack, Abu Khattala is "a local, small-time Islamist militant".<sup>39</sup> He has no known connections to international terrorist groups, according to American officials briefed on the criminal investigation and intelligence reporting, and by other Benghazi Islamists and militia leaders who have known him for many years. In several hours of interviews since the attack, Abu Khattala was glad to profess his admiration for Osama bin Laden and other leaders of al-Qa'ida, nevertheless he remained a distant

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37. N.A. Heras, "Sketches of Shaikh Saha'ban Madoud Khalifa Hadia and Uthman Mliqta rival Libyan militia commanders", *Militant Leadership Monitor*, Vol. 5, Issue 5, 3 June 2014.

38. B Joscelyn, "Senate report: Terrorists 'affiliated' with multiple al-Qa'ida groups involved in Benghazi attack", *The long war journal*, 15 January 2014 and "Review of the Terrorist Attack on the U.S. Facilities in Benghazi, Libya, September 11-12, 2012 together with additional view", 15 January 2014, Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, United States Senate. <http://www.intelligence.senate.gov/benghazi2014/benghazi.pdf>.

39. D.D. Kirckpartick, "Brazen Figure May Hold Key to Mysteries. Ahmed Abu Khattala Capture May Shed Light on Benghazi Attack", *New York Times*, 17 June 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/18/world/middleeast/apprehension-of-ahmed-abu-khattala-may-begin-to-answer-questions-on-assault.html?hpw&rrref=world>.

admirer of the organization, having spent most of his life in jail for his extremism under Col. Muammar Gaddafi.<sup>40</sup> In a letter to the UN Security Council, Ambassador Samantha Power said an investigation determined that Khattala “continued to plan further armed attacks against Americans”.<sup>41</sup>

### 3.3.3 Radical Islamists in Libya: doctrine and tactical alliance

Many Libyans welcomed the news that a violent criminal like Abu Khattala was in detention.<sup>42</sup> Thanks to the religious moderation of most Libyans, up to now the Islamic mainstream has been relatively ‘temperate’ from a doctrinal point of view, as demonstrated by the positions of most of the Muslim Brotherhood. The definition of Libyans as religiously moderate may appear debatable, considering the high numbers of Libyan jihadists that fought in Afghanistan and Iraq, and who are currently fighting in Syria.<sup>43</sup> What should be pointed out in this regard is that under the previous regime global jihad *outside* Libya became a sort of substitute for Islamist activities *within* the country. The high number of Libyans (especially from Darnah and Cyrenaica) amongst mujaheddins fighting for the global jihad did not stem from a strong theological and doctrinal dogmatism; on the contrary, this ‘jihadist attitude’ is better understood as a traditional expression of discontent and dissatisfaction with the domestic situation (rooted in the Gaddafi period) rather than

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40. M. Fitzgerald, “A Conversation with Abu Khattala”, *The New Yorker*, 18 June 2014, <http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/newsdesk/2014/06/abu-khattala-before-his-capture.html>.

41. M. Nichols, *US to UN: Benghazi suspect was planning more attacks on Americans*, Reuters, 18 June 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/06/18/us-usa-politics-benghazi-un-idUSKBN0ET0CU20140618>.

42. A. Elbrqawi, M. al-Traboulssi and J. Arfaoui, “Libyans welcome Boukhtala arrest”, *Magharabeia*, 18 June 2014, [http://magharebia.com/en\\_GB/articles/awi/features/2014/06/18/feature-01](http://magharebia.com/en_GB/articles/awi/features/2014/06/18/feature-01)

43. A.Y. Zelin, E.F. Kohlmann and L. al-Khouri, *Convoy of Martyrs in the Levant*, The Washington Institute, June 2013, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/convoy-of-martyrs-in-the-levant>.



genuine theological extremism. The outcome may be considered a sort of ‘functional jihadism’, rather than a doctrinal one.

A range of Islamist groups are currently operating in Libya. It is interesting to note that Libyans themselves tend to differentiate between two main strains of Islamism: the first is more quietist and tends to uphold the belief that individuals do not have the right to rebel against the unjust ruler. The second kind is the jihadi version of Salafism, which allows the use of force against an unjust ruler. Ansar al-Sharia and other radical militias belong to the latter current.

Despite this widely acknowledged distinction, though, the two strains seem to converge into a sort of tactical alliance within the highly polarized political scenarios of today’s Libya. According to Alison Pargeter,<sup>44</sup> in the GNC there are many congressmen openly close to radical militias. For example, ultraconservative member of the General National Congress, Shaikh Mohamed Bu Sidra, who is from Benghazi, is allegedly close to hard line Islamist groups in the east. More generally speaking, some Islamist political and religious figures are not extremist tout-court, but they sometimes favor an extremist view of Islam. This is the case with Shaikh Sadiq Al Gharyani, mufti of Libya and head of the *Dar al-Ifta’* (House of Fatwas). The content of his speeches and fatwas is frequently used by many imams of mosques in coastal Tripolitania. He demanded a council in order to oversee implementation of sharia. Recent messages from Gharyani appear very conservative and can be explained by the pressure he receives from more radical Islamists. It seems that he wants to keep his influence by moving a little bit closer to the extremists and had called on the government to accommodate their demands rather than antagonize them, even if recently Gharyani has called for Ansar al Sharia to take part into elections.<sup>45</sup>

Moreover, the attitude of Libya’s religious establishment to the matter of extremist groups is ambiguous. Islamists also maintain an

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44. A. Pargeter, “Islamist Militant Groups in Post-Qadhafi Libya”, *CTC Sentinel*, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, Vol. 6, No. 2, February 2013.

45. “Gran Mufty calls on Ansar al-Sharia to set the record straight and to participate in upcoming elections”, *Libya Herald*, 9 June 2014.

equivocal approach towards the new institutional frame, weakening the reconstruction process. Regional events, with the deepening of the sectarian polarization in Syria and Iraq, the radicalization of Islamist groups in Egypt after the military's repression and the tension in Tunisia negatively influence the attitudes and political postures of the Libyan Muslim Brotherhood and Salafi groups<sup>46</sup>.

Ansar al-Sharia and other radical Islamists in Libya are thought not only to have led terrorist attacks against Westerners, but also to be threatening the use of force to pressure government decision-making in the religious sphere, to implement a radical vision of Islam, including the substitution of moderate imams in the mosques. Until June 2014, they refrained from carrying out massive armed jihad in Libya because they supposed that for the time being they had greater chances of creating an Islamic state by gradually gaining control of state institutions and by engaging in social work,<sup>47</sup> but after the military campaign against them and the Islamist fiasco in the elections, the strategy is rapidly changing.

According to Aaron Zelin, ASL has already internationalized its *da'wa* campaign to areas that are not part of its traditional Libyan constituency. For example, it has conducted a number of campaigns "to help the people" of Gaza and Sudan or demonstrated its ability to have connections on the ground in Syria, training and sending a large number of jihadists<sup>48</sup>. By reaction to military confrontation with anti-Islamists, the ASL's 'international orientation' could grow. The significant presence

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46. Some former jihadists and a variety of Islamists shared experiences in the prison of Abu Salim, during Gaddafi's regime, where Salafis and MBs were jailed, have forged lasting relationships between the various individuals. For example, former Abu Salim inmates Busidra (tablighi), al-Saadi (a former jihadi that led the re-radicalization program), Belhaj (former jihadi, who led revolutionaries during the 2011 war), Fawzi Bu Katef (of the Muslim Brotherhood), and Majdi al-Hawat (sharia counselor of the katiba shuhada' bu slim of Darnah) maintain regular contacts and are in clear conversation with one another.

47. According to analysts, among the most important ideologues of this current are Shaikh Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi and Shaikh Abu Mundher al-Shanqiti.

48. For a complete report of international ASL's aids and interconnections see A.Y. Zelin, "When jihadist learn how to help", *Washington Post*, 7 May 2014, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2014/05/07/when-jihadists-learn-how-to-help/>.

of Libyan fighters in Syria (which are estimated at 5,000 personnel, according to diplomatic sources<sup>49</sup>) is expected to reinforce radical elements even within Libya since they are mainly fighting alongside jihadist organizations. In July, ASL captured the headquarters of special forces allied to Haftar. Buoyed by its success, the militia announced the creation of an “Islamic emirate” in Benghazi on 30 July.

However, it is more likely to remain confined to the regional level due to the group’s limited ability to move outside Cyrenaica. ASL remains the major player in Libyan radical Islam but it is not the only one. It has demonstrated that it has a special ‘variable geometry’<sup>50</sup> and has shown flexibility to adjust and change its strategy.

### *Conclusion*

Beyond the name, Ansar al-Sharia Tunisia and Ansar al-Sharia Libya have a common background. Both have some leaders with jihadist pasts in Afghanistan or Iraq and strong personal links with jihadist networks. Both groups have adopted a sort of double strategy: while they dedicate themselves to social activities and *da’wa*, while at the same time they endorse the global jihad. AST was jihadist in its background ideology and symbolism, ASL with more concrete actions. Both groups seem to take the advantage of semi-anarchic Libya, which has rather quickly become a safe-haven for national, foreign and international jihadist groups. The two groups appear to be interlinked with each other and with various other militias, groups and networks in Libya and in the region. Both groups are also involved in actively recruiting jihadi fighters to send abroad. Liberals, intellectuals and journalists have become with

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49. Author’s personal conversation with anonymous diplomatic personnel in Libya, March 2013.

50. D. Cristiani (2014).

increasing frequency the targets of these groups, protected directly or indirectly, especially in Libya, by elements of the state institutions.

Relations between Ansar al-Sharia groups and international terrorist organizations remain nebulous, but the same groups identify themselves as something other than al-Qa'ida, even though they substantially share the same values and goals. International jihadist networks in Libya seem to have different aims and there is also growing competition in their power to attract, yet at the same time tactical convergence on specific targets and purposes between them is increasingly likely. During the past few months, al-Qa'ida seemed to be in a visibility competition with the rising Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). AQIM and other jihadist groups in Tunisia and Libya did not merely express support for the "Caliphate State", but have also joined al-Baghdadi's ISIS in the holy fight. This raises serious questions about their devotion to al-Zawahiri. As noted by such reports, some Western security alerts have explicitly referred to the fact that the spread of the ISIS in North Africa is only a question of time.

As for the Tunisian landscape, the emergence of new jihadist groups and the increase in the number of attacks against its security forces represent a worrying development for Tunisia's political transition. The causes of jihadism's spread in traditional secular countries like Tunisia are two: while we have infiltration attempts by groups already active in North Africa who are now looking towards further expansion, on the other hand we are witnessing new radicalization trends, affecting individuals disenchanted by a still awful socio-economic condition, despite the promises fostered by regime change.

In Libya, the polarization process does not seem to be likely to stop or even decrease in the foreseeable future. Despite a quite moderate interpretation of religion, Libyan Islamist movements challenge ever more forcefully the legitimacy of the government and radically oppose secular/liberal agendas. Also here, their positions are further radicalized by the spread of an exogenous radical vision of Islam, supported by external jihadist movements that also exploit the return of Libyan jihadists who left the country to fight armed jihads abroad. Gen. Haftar's military

actions are offering a good chance to strike at the Islamists' safe haven in Libya. At the same time, though, its presence offers a potential new target that might lead the radical Islamic forces to close their ranks again and open a new jihadist war – also triggering a radicalization process of the Libyan Muslim Brotherhood. ASL seems to be the catalyst of this process.

Currently, ASL appears to have entered more prominently on the path of local jihad (with international connections) and armed struggle for the conquest and control of the territory, while AST acts in secrecy, in particular trying to rebuild a network of contacts after being banished from Tunisia. In the latter case, it is not yet clear whether or not AST is involved in episodes of jihadism against the Tunisian security forces that have been occurring with greater intensity since the summer of 2013, especially on the border with Algeria. In conclusion, despite these differences, Ansar al-Sharia groups' increasing influence in the political sphere in Tunisia and Libya in the last three years has come as a surprise to many, especially to those who believed that the roadmap of North Africa transition ('Arab Spring') would ensure the success of the more liberal, Western-friendly forces. Even if ASL and AST remain small minority groups refusing the political process, due to Libyan instability they are able to threaten the stability of both countries and the entire Mediterranean region.



#### 4. SINAI: NEXT FRONTIER OF JIHADISM?

*Giuseppe Dentice*

Sinai is a strategically and geopolitically significant zone for Egypt, being a land bridge situated between Africa and Asia. For many years, the Peninsula has represented a buffer zone helping to build trust and ensure peace between Egypt and Israel. However, during the last decade, this land has become a lawless territory, while poverty and political marginalization among local Bedouins have favoured the proliferation of transnational crime and jihadist militancy. After Mubarak was ousted in 2011, violence increased significantly in Sinai and public authorities lost their control over the area. Since the ousting of Morsi in July 2013, the instability of the Peninsula has been growing, especially in the northern area, in the triangle of Rafah, al-Arish and Sheikh Zuweid, near the Israeli border, where there is the highest concentration of multiple terrorist groups. Although the Egyptian government launched three counterterrorism campaigns between 2011 and 2013, the results have not been satisfactory. The growing instability of the Sinai is thus posing a serious threat to the security of North Africa and the Middle East.

This paper tries to explain the complex dynamics ongoing in the Sinai. In the first part, it will take into account the role of terrorism in the Peninsula and the new wave of jihadist organizations based there. The analysis will also focus on the most significant actors in the area and especially on Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis and its terror operations against the Egyptian state and its security forces. The final part will explain the risks for Egypt's mainland and immediate neighbours. In particular,

focusing attention on the growing transnational links between Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis, other Sinai-based organizations and foreign jihadist groups operating in Libya.

#### 4.1 *Terrorism in Sinai*

The growing instability in the Sinai Peninsula represents one of the most dangerous threats for Egypt's national security. The weakness that characterizes this area has its roots in issues created over time well before the overthrow of former president Hosni Mubarak in February 2011. A security vacuum caused by the complex relations between the Bedouin populations and the central state, accused of promoting discriminatory policies, economic marginalization and repressive measures towards local residents.<sup>1</sup> All of these factors have favoured a growing radicalization of the Sinai Bedouins, exacerbated further by the big economic gap between the south of the Peninsula – rich thanks to tourism revenues – and the north of Sinai, poor and undeveloped despite the presence of the Arab Gas Pipeline (AGP), the infrastructure that exports natural gas to Israel and Jordan.<sup>2</sup>

At the same time, Sinai experienced a deep proliferation of other forms of illicit economy (human trafficking, arms and drugs smuggling) and an increasing inflow of Salafi-jihadist terrorist groups, many of them linked to or inspired by al-Qa'ida's ideology. The presence of these groups in the Peninsula has favoured a radicalization of the local Bedouins and, at the same time, promoted an upsurge of violence against Cairo authorities.<sup>3</sup> Between 2004 and 2006, the Peninsula was involved

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1. N. Pelham, "Sinai: The Buffer Erodes", Chatham House, September 2012, <http://www.geema.org/documentos/1349783511Z7cGE9ij2Tv36HN4.pdf>.

2. G. Siboni and R. Ben Barak, *The Sinai Peninsula Threat Development and Response Concept*, Saban Center at Brookings and the Military and Strategic Affairs Program at INSS, Analyses Paper No. 31, 28 January 2014, pp. 3-5, <http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2014/01/28%20israel%20sinai%20siboni/web%20%20analysis%2031%20edited.pdf>.

3. *Ibid*, p. 4.



in a large wave of attacks. South Sinai's Red Sea resort towns of Taba, Ras al-Shaitan and Nuweiba (October 2004),<sup>4</sup> Sharm al-Shaykh (July 2005)<sup>5</sup> and Dahab (April 2006)<sup>6</sup> were involved in several bombings. The attacks killed 130 people (11 of them Israelis). These were the worst terror attacks on foreign tourists since the 1997 Luxor massacre<sup>7</sup>. After investigation, the perpetrators of these attacks were identified as members of Tawhid wa al-Jihad, an Egyptian Islamist group supported by several Sinai Bedouins and heavily influenced by the *modus operandi* of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (the late founder of al-Qa'ida in Iraq). At the time, the group co-opted local Bedouins, Palestinian jihadists and other Egyptian Salafists operating in northern Sinai<sup>8</sup>.

The Mubarak regime's response to terrorism in Sinai was a very hard-line military crackdown. Security forces used the same form of repression towards both jihadis and Bedouins, promoting a simplification of the problem. Many Egyptian Islamist and jihadist members were imprisoned. Moreover, state security forces arrested 3000 terror suspects, especially among the Sinai Bedouins<sup>9</sup>. Until 2011, the Peninsula did not experience other episodes of violence but these groups prepared the ground for an increase in Islamist attacks (favoured also by Hamas' seizure of power

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4. See P. Spiller, *Taba attacks shatter Sinai tourism*, BBC, 11 October 2004, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/3732098.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/3732098.stm);

5. BBC News, 25 April 2006, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/4940506.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4940506.stm).

6. M. Slackman, "30 Are Killed in Sinai as Bombs Rock Egyptian Resort City", in *The New York Times*, 25 April 2006.

7. In the November 1997, some gunmen of the *al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya* opened fire against 58 foreign tourists in the archaeological site of Deir al-Baharit, near Luxor. See A. Cowell and D. Jehl, "Luxor Survivors Say Killers Fired Methodically", *The New York Times*, 24 November 1997, <http://www.nytimes.com/1997/11/24/world/luxor-survivors-say-killers-fired-methodically.html>.

8. See O. Ashour, *Jihadists and Post-Jihadists in the Sinai*, Brookings, 5 September 2012, <http://www.brookings.edu/research/opinions/2012/09/05-jihadism-sinai-ashour>.

9. N. Pelham (2012), p. 4. See also G. Siboni and R. Ben Barak (2014), pp. 4-5.

in Gaza in 2007) and for deep cooperation between local Bedouins and Islamist organizations on both sides of the shared border.<sup>10</sup>

#### 4.2 *The armed groups in the Sinai Peninsula*

After Mubarak's fall in 2011, "the Sinai Peninsula became a lawless region, creating a security vacuum in the area".<sup>11</sup> Police stations were abandoned or attacked by militants, prisoners were freed and, in general, Cairo authorities gradually slackened their control on the ground. At the same time, Sinai became a land of opportunities for proselytization, for the recruitment of jihadists and for widely spreading al-Qa'ida's ideology and the global jihad.<sup>12</sup> Since 2011, Egyptian, Israeli and Western intelligence services have registered an increasing presence of foreign fighters operating in Sinai, many of whom are al-Qa'ida affiliates arriving from the main crisis area of the Middle East and North African region.<sup>13</sup>

In a few years, many al-Qa'ida-inspired groups and other Salafi-jihadist organizations proliferated in the Peninsula. These new transnational actors used Sinai as strongholds, headquarters and operational bases for confronting Israel and Egypt. Although the number of armed groups operating in the Peninsula and their real capabilities are uncertain, Western intelligence and Egyptian security forces recognized 24 terrorist

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10. H. Breen, *Violent Islamism in Egypt from 1997 to 2012*, Norwegian Defence Research Establishment, 3 June 2013, <http://www.ffi.no/no/publikasjoner/documents/01703.pdf>.

11. R. Tuitel, "The Future of the Sinai Peninsula", *The Quarterly Journal*, Vol. 13, No. 2, 2014, p. 85, [http://connections-qj.org/system/files/13.2.05\\_tuitel.pdf](http://connections-qj.org/system/files/13.2.05_tuitel.pdf).

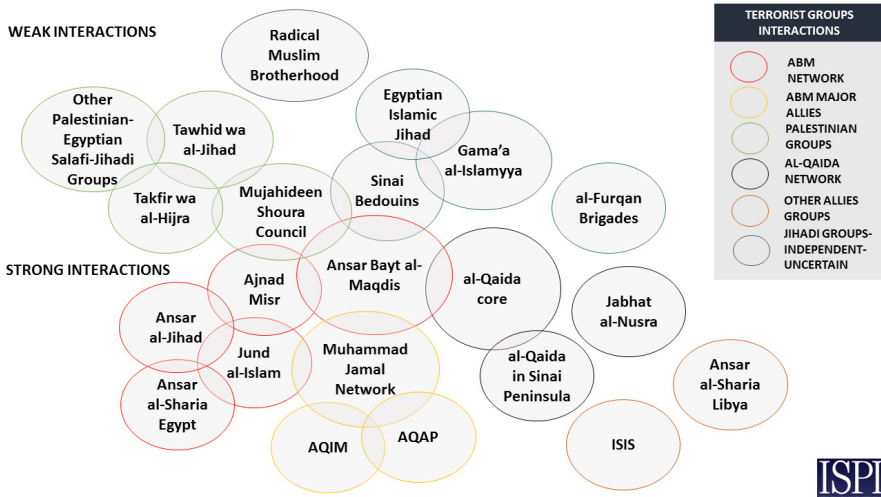
12. B. Riedel, "Al-Qaeda Grows in Sinai", in *The National Interest*, 10 February 2012, <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/al-qaeda-grows-sinai-6486>.

13. See also D. Barnett, "Rising Concerns over Foreign Militants in the Sinai as More Explosives Seized", *The Long War Journal*, 19 January 2013, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/threat-matrix/archives/2013/01/concern-that-militants-from-al.php>.

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organizations currently operating in Sinai, eight of which allegedly affiliated with Hamas or connected to Gaza-based jihadist groups.<sup>14</sup>

Among these groups, the most prominent is Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis (ABM). Other movements operating in the area are: Mohammad Jamal Network (MJN), al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), al-Qa'ida in the Sinai Peninsula (AQSP), Ansar al-Jihad, Mujahideen Shoura Council in the Environs of Jerusalem (MSC), al-Salafiya al-Jihadiya, Ajnad Misr, Jund al-Islam, Jaish al-Islam, al-Furqan Brigades, Tawhid wa al-Jihad, and Ansar al-Sharia Egypt.



14. See S. K. Isaac, "The Egyptian Transition, 2011-13: How Strategic to Europe?", *Middle East Policy*, Vol. XXI, No. 1, Spring 2014, p. 161. See also G. Siboni and R. Ben Barak (2014), p. 2.

### 4.3 The emerging role of Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis

Jamaat Ansar al-Dawla al-Islamiyya fi Bayt al-Maqdis, also known as Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis (ABM), “Supporters of Jerusalem” or “Ansar Jerusalem” is a Salafi jihadist organization and an al-Qa’ida - inspired group based in northern Sinai and responsible for several attacks against Israel and Egypt. The final goal of the group is the promotion of jihadism and the implementation of *sharia* law in the Levant.<sup>15</sup> ABM emerged in 2011 but it officially announced its formation on June 25, 2012 in a video<sup>16</sup> in which its members claimed responsibility for an attack against a gas pipeline in al-Arish. The jihadist group is responsible for the majority of the most complex attacks against military and security installations in the Peninsula. For these reasons, on April 14, 2014, the Cairo Court for Urgent Matters officially designated ABM a terrorist organization.<sup>17</sup>

Despite the discussions over the origin of the group,<sup>18</sup> ABM is an organization with roots in the territory. The group recruits its

15. See T. Joscelyn, “Al Qaeda’s Expansion in Egypt: Implications for US Homeland Security”, *Foundation for Defense Democracy*, 11 February 2014, p. 1, <http://docs.house.gov/meetings/HM/HM05/20140211/101734/HHRG-113-HM05-Wstate-JoscelynT-20140211.pdf>.

16. *Ansar Jerusalem Releases Video of Bombing Arish-Ashkelon Pipeline*, SITE Intelligence Group, 24 July 2012, [http://ent.siteintelgroup.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=10421](http://ent.siteintelgroup.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=10421).

17. “Ansar Beit Al-Maqdis placed on Egypt terrorist list”, *Abramonline*, 14 April 2014, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/98999/Egypt/Politics-/Ansar-Beit-AlMaqdis-placed-on-Egypt-terrorist-list.aspx>. Both United States and United Kingdom had declared Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis as a terrorist organisation. See UK House of Commons, *Explanatory Memorandum to the Terrorism Act 2000*, 2 April 2014, [http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukdsi/2014/978011112960/pdfs/ukdsiem\\_978011112960\\_en.pdf](http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukdsi/2014/978011112960/pdfs/ukdsiem_978011112960_en.pdf); US Department of State, *Terrorist Designation of Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis*, 9 April 2014, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2014/04/224566.htm>.

18. Some analysts discuss over the ABM’s origin. According to Andrew McGregor, Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis is an Egyptian branch of a Gazan Islamist organization, while Joshua Goodman considers ABM all an Egyptian group. A relative confirm to McGregor’s thesis came out from Hamas spokesman Sami Abu Zuhri that in a press statement has declared that «Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis is not Palestinian at all». See A. McGregor, “Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis Intensifies Assassination Campaign in the Sinai”, *Terrorism Monitor*, Vol. XI, Issue 22, The Jamestown Foundation, 3 December 2013, [http://www.jamestown.org/uploads/media/TM\\_011\\_Issue22.pdf](http://www.jamestown.org/uploads/media/TM_011_Issue22.pdf). J. Goodman,

members in Egypt – many of them are former Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ) and al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya (IG), radical Bedouin members (in particular from the Sawarka, Masaid and Tarabeen tribes) and other Salafist groups operating in the Sinai (such as Tawhid wa al-Jihad) – and abroad.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, ABM includes some foreign fighters (largely from the Gaza Strip, Afghanistan, Libya, Algeria, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Yemen, Sudan and Somalia<sup>20</sup>) and veteran jihadists with combat experience in Afghanistan, Bosnia Herzegovina, Iraq and Syria.<sup>21</sup> For some security analysts, ABM consists of 1000-2000 fighters, many of them foreigners.<sup>22</sup> However, while there is little information about its power structure and source of funding it is reasonable to believe that ABM financed its operations with the weapons smuggling and human trafficking activities that have flourished in Sinai in the last five years.<sup>23</sup> As for its power structure, ABM is led by local militants, many of whom escaped from prison in 2011 during the anti-Mubarak revolt. Amongst them were Ibrahim Mohammed Freg (*aka* Abu Suhaib) – killed in an

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“Egypt’s Assault on Sinai”, in *Sada Journal*, 5 June 2014, <http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/2014/06/05/egypt-s-assault-on-sinai/hcu2>; S. Farid, “Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis: Egypt’s own al-Qaeda?”, *al-Arabiya English*, 1 February 2014, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/perspective/features/2014/02/01/Ansar-Bayt-al-Maqdis-Egypt-s-own-al-Qaeda-.html>.

19. T. Joscelyn (2014); See also M. Sabry, “Al-Qaeda emerges amid Egypt’s turmoil”, *Al Monitor*, 4 December 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/12/al-qaeda-egypt-sinai-insurgency-growing-influence.html>.

20. D.D. Kirkpatrick and E. Schmitt, “Jihadist Return Is Said to Drive Attacks in Egypt”, *International New York Times*, 5 February 2014, [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/06/world/middleeast/jihadist-return-is-said-to-drive-attacks-in-egypt.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/06/world/middleeast/jihadist-return-is-said-to-drive-attacks-in-egypt.html?_r=0). See also “Local, foreign Islamic militants turn Egypt’s Sinai a new front for jihad”, *Associated Press*, 3 September 2013, <http://www.foxnews.com/world/2013/09/03/local-foreign-islamic-militants-turn-egypt-sinai-new-front-for-jihad/>.

21. S. Stewart, “Ansar Beit al-Maqdis: A New al Qaeda Franchise in Egypt?”, *Stratfor*, 11 February 2014, <http://www.stratfor.com/sample/weekly/ansar-beit-al-maqdis-new-al-qaeda-franchise-egypt>.

22. T. Joscelyn (2014), p. 11; R. Tuitel (2014), p. 86.

23. L. Attalah, “The Sinai Connection”, *Cairo Review*, Vol. 9/2013, pp. 71-75, <http://www.aucegypt.edu/gapp/cairoreview/pages/articleDetails.aspx?aid=334>.

ambush in Sheikh Zuweid<sup>24</sup> – and Shadi al-Menei, the purported head of ABM probably killed by Egyptian security forces during a counter-terrorism operation in central Sinai.<sup>25</sup> Abu Osama al-Masry is believed to be another important leader. Despite the meagre information at our disposal, the role of al-Masry clearly emerged in January 2014 after a series of car-bomb attacks in Cairo, when he appeared for the first time in an ABM video message released a few hours later.<sup>26</sup> In the video, al-Masry threatened the Egyptian government and its security forces and he expressed his support for “our brothers fighters in Syria, especially those of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant”.<sup>27</sup>

Since 2011, ABM has maintained its stronghold in al-Mahdiyya, a village in south Rafah<sup>28</sup> and focused its operations on northern Sinai, particularly in the areas of Rafah, Sheikh Zuweid and al-Arish, next to the Israeli border. After Morsi’s fall in July 2013, the jihadist group expanded its actions from Sinai to the Egyptian mainland, especially in the densely populated areas of the Nile Delta and the Cairo district. In most of them, ABM proposed combined attacks with MJN, Ajnad Misr<sup>29</sup> and Ansar al-Sharia Egypt.

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24. “Egypt kills senior leader of Ansar Beit al-Maqdis”, *World Bulletin*, 10 December 2013, <http://www.worldbulletin.net/?aType=haber&ArticleID=124650>.

25. An Egyptian army spokesperson confirmed the death of al-Menei but an official statement of the Islamist group denies the leader’s assassination. “Egyptian jihadi group denies leader’s killing”, *al-Akhbar English*, 25 May 2014, <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/19910>.

26. D. Barnett, “Can Egypt Handle Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis?”, *The National Interest*, 26 January 2014, <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/can-egypt-handle-ansar-bayt-al-maqdis-9765>.

27. B. Daragahi, “Sinai jihadi group emerges at forefront of Egypt violence”, *Financial Times*, 31 January 2014, <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/b5ad40d0-8a7b-11e3-9c29-00144feab7de.html#axzz3Bc4Dz0hq>.

28. D. Barnett, “Egyptian army claims successes as jihadists allege ‘massacre’”, *The Long War Journal*, 16 September 2013, [http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/09/egyptian\\_army\\_claims.php](http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/09/egyptian_army_claims.php).

29. For some analysts Ajnad Misr, Ansar al-Sharia Egypt and Jund al-Islam are part of the same jihadist umbrella Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis. Particularly Ajnad Misr, thanks to the strength of cooperation with ABM, has improved its potential for deadly attacks. See T. Joscelyn (2014), p. 11. See also A. Lindsey and S. Stewart, “A New Egyptian Jihadist Group Makes Its Presence Felt”, *Stratfor*, 1 May 2014, <http://>



not mean that such ties do not exist”.<sup>31</sup> Still, Joscelyn explained that ABM is “at a minimum, pursuing al-Qaeda’s agenda and al-Qaeda’s senior leadership approves of the organization”.<sup>32</sup> Joscelyn’s statement on increasing al-Qaeda’s presence in the Sinai is also shared by Steven Cook, senior analyst of the Council on Foreign Relations. Since the *coup d’etat* of July 2013, Cook noted a growing ideological entrenchment of Qa’idism in parallel with a penetration of armed groups and foreign fighters in the Peninsula.<sup>33</sup>

Nevertheless, the Egyptian security apparatus considers the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) to be solely responsible for the growing instability in the Sinai.<sup>34</sup> Despite the speculation promoted in Egyptian media about ABM linkages with the MB<sup>35</sup>, these alleged connections have never been completely proven. To date there is no evidence of the jihadist group being an offshoot of MB. It is more probable, as David Barnett surmised in his article in *The National Interest*, that the group attracted some disillusioned MB members: “ABM certainly has former members

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31. T. Joscelyn (2014), p. 12.

32. *Ibid.*

33. S. Cook, *Al Qaeda’s Expansion in Egypt: Implications for US Homeland Security*, Council on Foreign Relations, 14 February 2014, <http://docs.house.gov/meetings/HM/HM05/20140211/101734/HHRG-113-HM05-Wstate-CookS-20140211.pdf>.

34. Although Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis claimed responsibility for the attacks on the police station in Mansoura and Beni Suef in 24 December 2013, the Egyptian government considered the Muslim Brotherhood to be responsible for the operations. Afterwards, the state authorities declared MB a terrorist organisation. In August 2014, the Supreme Administrative Court in Cairo ordered the dissolution of the Freedom and Justice Party, the political wing of the MB, because “it broke the law regarding political parties. [...] The party and the Muslim Brotherhood are the same thing”. See K. Fahim, “Egypt, Dealing a Blow to the Muslim Brotherhood, Deems It a Terrorist Group”, *The New York Times*, 26 December 2013, p. 4. See also L. Noueihed, *Egypt Dissolves Muslim Brotherhood Political Wing*, Reuters, 9 August 2014, available <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2014/08/09/uk-egypt-brotherhood-idUKKBN0G90AK20140809>.

35. According to former militant and founder of the Islamic Jihad in Egypt, Nabil Naeem, Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis is funded by the Muslim Brotherhood’s Deputy Supreme Guide Khayrat al-Shater. See “Islamic Jihad Founder: Brotherhood has been funding Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis”, *Egypt Independent*, 9 September 2013, <http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/islamic-jihad-founder-brotherhood-has-been-funding-ansar-bayt-al-maqdis>.



of the Muslim Brotherhood within its ranks, these are former members who specifically left because the Brotherhood was not, in their view, fully committed to offensive jihad”.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, according to Scott Stewart “It’s possible that some Egyptians have left the Brotherhood for Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis. Some Brotherhood members have become radicalized since their party was ousted from power. Others have grown disillusioned and frustrated with the Muslim Brotherhood’s policy of nonviolence. Thinking that violence is the only viable solution, they have turned to Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis”.<sup>37</sup>

After the ousting of Morsi, the situation in the Peninsula deteriorated and ABM began to expand its targets, striking locations on Egypt’s mainland.<sup>38</sup> At the same time, the group also changed the quality of its attacks. Indeed, during the SCAF’s transition<sup>39</sup> ABM’s activities were focused on kidnapping Egyptian army officers and bombing AGP pipelines (15 attacks in 2011-2012).<sup>40</sup>

After July 2013 and the ongoing crackdown on MB and other

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36. See D. Barnett, “Can Egypt Handle Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis?”..., cit.

37. S. Stewart, (2014).

38. A.Y. Zelin, *Jihadists on the Nile: the Return of Old Players*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Analysis, Policywatch 2016, 17 January 2013, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/jihadists-on-the-nile-the-return-of-old-players>. S. Saleh, “Terrorism expands from Sinai to Cairo”, *Al Monitor*, 16 April 2014, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/04/egypt-terrorism-shift-sinai-cairo.html>.

39. After the Mubarak ousting in February 2011, Field Marshal Mohammed Hussein Tantawi was the Chairman of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), the military junta charged with guiding the country until the presidential election in June 2012, won by Mohammed Morsi.

40. Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis’ attacks on economic infrastructures pursued the same strategy also conducted by AQAP in Yemen. Both armed groups target economic interests in order to paralyze state activities. See J. P. Rantac, “Egypt: danger in the Sinai”, *The National Interest*, 30 April 2014, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/egypt-danger-the-sinai-10323?page=show>. See also “Jihadist group claims Taba bombing as part of ‘economic war’”, *Times of Israel*, 18 February 2014, <http://www.timesofisrael.com/jihadist-group-claims-taba-bombing-as-part-of-economic-war/>; O. Adaki, “Yemen begins southern offensive against AQAP”, *The Long War Journal*, 28 April 2014, [http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/04/yemen\\_begins\\_souther.php?utm\\_source=rss&utm\\_medium=rss&utm\\_campaign=yemen-begins-southern-offensive-against-aqap](http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/04/yemen_begins_souther.php?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=yemen-begins-southern-offensive-against-aqap).

Islamist forces, ABM radicalized its terror activities, targeting military checkpoints and local governorates in al-Arish.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, the group has pledged new strategic alliances with other transnational jihadist groups as well as ISIS,<sup>42</sup> MJN and AQAP.

This change of strategy<sup>43</sup> also led to an escalation in the attacks and the group's increasing sophistication and capabilities.<sup>44</sup> The most significant attacks were the militants' assault on the Kerem Abu Salem checkpoint, near Rafah, on August 5, 2012<sup>45</sup> (in which 16 soldiers were killed); the bombing of the South Sinai Security Directorate headquarters in at-Tur on October 7, 2013<sup>46</sup> (3 soldiers dead and 62 injured); the shooting down of an Egyptian army helicopter with MANPADS (man portable air defense systems) in al-Shollaqa, a small town just south of Sheikh Zuweid, on January 25, 2014;<sup>47</sup> the ABM's attack in Taba on an Egyptian bus in which four South Korean tourists

41. See D. Barnett, "The Strategy of Egypt's Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis", *The Atlantic Council*, 10 February 2014, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/egyptsource/the-strategy-of-egypt-s-ansar-bayt-al-maqdis>.

42. After the recent victories in Iraq and Syria, ISIS seems to be planning to expand its armed jihad throughout the Middle East, in particular towards Jordan, the Gaza Strip, Sinai, Kuwait and Lebanon. See "Will ISIS find fertile ground in Egypt's Sinai?", *Al Monitor*, 23 June 2014, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/06/egypt-sinai-isis-connection-ansar-bayt-al-maqdis.html>.

43. Al-Lafitaat, *Special Report: Egyptian militants outwit army in Sinai battlefield*, Reuters, 16 March 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/03/16/us-egypt-sinai-specialreport-idUSBREA2F05020140316>.

44. M. Elmenshawy, *Al Qaeda's Expansion in Egypt: Implications for US Homeland Security*, The Middle East Institute, 11 February 2014, p. 3, <http://docs.house.gov/meetings/HM/HM05/20140211/101734/HHRG-113-HM05-Wstate-ElmenshawryM-20140211.pdf>.

45. B. Berti and Z. Gold, "Security Vacuum in the Sinai", *The National Interest*, 10 August 2012, <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/the-security-vacuum-the-sinai-7317>.

46. "Militants involved in South Sinai attack arrested: Third Field Army", *Abramonline*, 10 October 2013, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/83702/Egypt/Politics-/Militants-involved-in-South-Sinai-attack-arrested.aspx>.

47. Already between 2011 and 2012 there had been other failed attempts. See D. D. Kirkpatrick, "Militants Down Egyptian Helicopter, Killing 5 Soldiers",

were killed on February 16, 2014.<sup>48</sup> Following that deadly attack, ABM warned all visitors and tourists to leave the country by February 20, threatening more violence.<sup>49</sup> Finally, on August 28, 2014, near Sheikh Zuweid, ABM militants released a video showing the beheading of four Egyptians accused of being Mossad spies who had allegedly provided Israel with intelligence for an airstrike in northern Sinai that killed three of its fighters on July 23, 2014.<sup>50</sup> Three days later, the group claimed responsibility for beheading another two Egyptian men in al-Mahdiyya, a village south of Rafah.<sup>51</sup> Again near Sheikh Zuweid, an Islamist attack killed 11 Egyptian army soldiers on September 2, 2014.<sup>52</sup>

Recent Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis operations have concerned the Suez Canal, the Nile Delta region, the Cairo district and the Libyan cross-border. The group claimed responsibility for several high-profile attacks in Cairo such as the failed assassination attempt on Interior Minister Mohammed Ibrahim, on September 5, 2013;<sup>53</sup> the murder of Lt. Col. Mohammed Mabrouk, a senior counterterrorism official, on November

*International New York Times*, 26 January 2014, [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/27/world/middleeast/militants-down-egyptian-helicopter-killing-5-soldiers.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/27/world/middleeast/militants-down-egyptian-helicopter-killing-5-soldiers.html?_r=0).

48. "Egyptian bus bombing kills Korean tourists and driver", *The Guardian*, 17 February 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/feb/16/egypt-bus-bombing-koreans-sinai>. See the original statement, Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis, "Declaration of responsibility for targeting the tourist bus in the port of Taba", 17 February 2014, <http://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2014/02/jamc481at-ane1b9a3c481r-bayt-al-maqdis-22declaration-of-the-responsibility-for-the-targeting-the-tourist-bus-in-the-port-of-e1b9adc481bc48122.pdf>.

49. "Egyptian militants warn tourists to leave or face attack", *Ynetnews*, 10 February 2014, <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4489851,00.html>.

50. P. Kingsley, "Sinai jihadist group says it has beheaded four men", *The Guardian*, 28 August 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/aug/28/sinai-jihadist-beheads-ansar-beit-al-maqdis>.

51. Y. Yaakov and A. Sterman, "Two decapitated bodies found in northern Sinai", *The Times of Israel*, 31 August 2014, <http://www.timesofisrael.com/two-decapitated-bodies-found-in-northern-sinai/>.

52. *Egypt security forces killed in Sinai attacks*, Al Jazeera, 2 September 2014, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/09/egypt-security-forces-killed-sinai-attacks-20149210354214745.html>.

53. *Egypt's Minister Mohammed Ibrahim survives bomb attack*, BBC News, 5 September 2013, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-23971239>.

17, 2013;<sup>54</sup> the assassination of Gen. Mohammed Said, an aide to the Interior Minister, on January 28, 2014.<sup>55</sup> Other significant attacks have been the Islamist assault on Ismailia on October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2013;<sup>56</sup> the bombing of the Daqahlia Security Directorate in Mansoura on December 24, 2013<sup>57</sup> (16 dead); several bombs against police infrastructures – including the car bombing outside the Cairo Security Directorate and a police station in Beni Suef – on January 23-24, 2014<sup>58</sup> (13 killed and some 80 wounded). In recent months, ABM also intensified its attacks along the Libyan border.

Significant examples of these are the assault in the western desert area of al-Wahat, in June 2014<sup>59</sup> (6 soldiers were killed); the murder of 22 border guards at the al-Farafra checkpoint in the New Valley in July 2014;<sup>60</sup> the militants' attack on the police checkpoint in the Dhabaa area, in the province of Marsa Matrouh (5 killed).<sup>61</sup>

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54. K. Fahim, "Egypt: Security Official Assassinated", *The New York Times*, 18 November 2013, p. 9.

55. "Egypt's Minister of Interior aide shot dead in Giza", *Ahramonline*, 28 January 2014, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/92812/Egypt/Politics-/Egypst-Minister-of-Interior-aide-shot-dead-in-Giza.aspx>.

56. "Violence targets Egyptian security near the Suez Canal and the Sinai Peninsula", *Deutsche Welle*, 7 October 2013, <http://www.dw.de/violence-targets-egyptian-security-near-the-suez-canal-and-the-sinai-peninsula/a-17139198>

57. "15 dead, 134 injured in Egypt's Mansoura explosion", *Ahramonline*, 24 December 2013, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/News/89902.aspx>. See also, "Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis claims responsibility for Beni Suef attack", *Egypt Independent*, 23 January 2014, <http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/ansar-bayt-al-maqdis-claims-responsibility-beni-suef-attack>.

58. D.D. Kirkpatrick, "Prolonged Fight feared in Egypt After Bombings", *International New York Times*, 24 January 2014, [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/25/world/middleeast/fatal-bomb-attacks-in-egypt.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/25/world/middleeast/fatal-bomb-attacks-in-egypt.html?_r=0).

59. *Six Egyptian border guards killed: army spokesman*, Reuters, 1 June 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/06/01/us-egypt-soldiers-idUSKBN0EC12A20140601>.

60. A. Nader, "Egypt mourns death of 22 soldiers following militant attack", *The Daily News Egypt*, 20 July 2014, <http://www.dailynewsegypt.com/2014/07/20/egypt-mourns-death-22-soldiers-following-militant-attack/>.

61. *At least nine killed in shootout in Egyptian coastal town*, Reuters Africa, 5 August 2014, <http://af.reuters.com/article/idAFL6N0QB61020140805>.

## Sinai: next frontier of jihadism?



## ANSAR BAYT AL-MAQDIS ATTACKS IN EGYPT SINCE JULY 2013

#### 4.4 The Gaza Strip Connection

After Mubarak's fall, the violence in Sinai increased drastically and Israel has continuously warned Egypt about the dangers of the situation. During Morsi's tenure, Sinai became a safe haven for a broad array of jihadist groups, which could count on significant support from local Bedouin tribes and Gaza-based movements. Over the last years, the Israeli government has repeatedly warned Cairo about a constant flow of foreign fighters who have contact with terrorist cells in Sinai.<sup>62</sup> The largest group – with historical and cultural ties – is composed of Palestinians (about 13,000 men). Although Egyptian security forces have destroyed about 80% of the 1500 tunnels – also used for weapon and contraband smuggling – and keep closing the Rafah checkpoint (the main crossing between Egypt and the Gaza Strip), Cairo has not been able to halt illicit traffic to and from Gaza. In order to stop the proliferation of foreign/

62. G. Siboni and R. Ben Barak (2014), pp. 6-8.

Palestinian fighters in both directions and to securitize the stability of the Peninsula, in July 2013 the military regime started to act against Hamas.<sup>63</sup>

The main threat is that Sinai-based organizations use the Peninsula as an operational area to direct attacks against the Jewish state and the North African country.<sup>64</sup> As noted by Yoram Schweitzer, currently there are dozens of Palestinian jihadist groups in the Gaza Strip «which presents a challenge to Hamas hegemony in Gaza».<sup>65</sup> Among these groups the most active and dangerous Gaza organizations operating also in Sinai are Mujahideen Shura Council (MSC), Jaish al-Islam and Tawid wa al-Jihad. The main peculiarity is that individuals who left Hamas founded these organizations.

Headed by Hisham al-Saidini, MSC is currently the most prominent among the Palestinian jihadist groups. The group claimed responsibility for several attacks on the Gaza Strip and in Sinai and expressed its support for al-Qa'ida.<sup>66</sup> MSC did not refrain from establishing solid operative linkages with other groups: the movement was involved in the “Nasr City Cell” affair<sup>67</sup> and it has collaborated with other Salafist organizations such as Tawhid wa al-Jihad and Jaish al-Islam.<sup>68</sup>

In order to contain Sinai-based armed groups, Egyptian and Israeli authorities include in terrorism lists Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis and its allied groups as terrorist entities able to destabilize regional equilibriums

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63. S. Shay, *Egypt and the Threat of Islamic Terror*, Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, Perspective Papers No. 230, 1 January 2014, <http://besacenter.org/perspectives-papers/egypt-threat-islamic-terror/>.

64. Y. Schweitzer *Al-Qaeda and Global Jihad in Search of Direction*, Institute for National Security Studies, Strategic Survey for Israel 2012-2013, 2013, p. 220, [http://d26e8pvoto2x3r.cloudfront.net/uploadImages/systemFiles/INSS2012Balance\\_ENG\\_Schweitzer.pdf](http://d26e8pvoto2x3r.cloudfront.net/uploadImages/systemFiles/INSS2012Balance_ENG_Schweitzer.pdf).

65. *Ibid*, p. 221.

66. M.B. al-Shishani, “Gazan Jihadists Unite to Create New Operational Base in Sinai”, *Terrorism Monitor*, The Jamestown Foundation, Vol. 11, Issue 4, 22 February 2013, [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/gta/single/?tx\\_ttnews%5Bttnews%5D=40492&cHash=4f5c6c93c06d310d5a56b2325f11bd80](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/gta/single/?tx_ttnews%5Bttnews%5D=40492&cHash=4f5c6c93c06d310d5a56b2325f11bd80).

67. Over the “Nasr City Cell” case, see the next chapter.

68. T. Joscelyn (2014), pp. 9-10.

and even their own interests in the area. At the same time, Cairo has increased its pressure on Hamas and other Islamist forces in Gaza and expressed its will to consider any danger in the Peninsula as a national security threat, or in the worst case, as a terror threat.<sup>69</sup> Following Morsi's fall, the *interim* government pushed the Egyptian media to launch a widespread anti-Hamas campaign and, at the same time, polarized political confrontation within Egyptian Islamist groups.<sup>70</sup> In addition, Egypt reinforced its security cooperation with Israel in order to secure the Peninsula.<sup>71</sup> In the same way, the Egyptian army began to consider *Hamas* an enemy directly affiliated with MB and in charge of terrorism in the Sinai.<sup>72</sup>

These factors explain the decision of an Egyptian Court in March 4<sup>th</sup> 2014 to ban all Hamas activities in Egypt. The charges against the Palestinian movement were that of posing a national security threat and giving financial, logistical and military support to the terrorist groups affiliated with al-Qa'ida in the Sinai Peninsula.<sup>73</sup>

#### 4.5 From Sinai to Egypt's mainland: the Libyan Threat

Egyptian security is threatened not only by the heightening instability affecting its eastern borders but also by the crisis in Libya after 2011. The situation in lawless Cyrenaica, the attacks by jihadists and their continuous flow across the eastern border could open a new front of

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69. E. Yaari, *The New Triangle of Egypt, Israel and Hamas*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policywatch 2193, 17 January 2014, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-new-triangle-of-egypt-israel-and-hamas>.

70. *Ibid.*

71. According to E. Yaari (2014).

72. Z. Gold, "The Sinai War Escalates", *Foreign Policy*, 19 February 2014, [http://mideastafrica.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2014/02/19/the\\_sinai\\_war\\_escalates](http://mideastafrica.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2014/02/19/the_sinai_war_escalates).

73. Y. Saleh, *Court bans activities of Islamist Hamas in Egypt*, Reuters, 4 March 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/03/04/us-egypt-hamas-idUSBREA230F520140304>.

instability for Egyptian security. The risk is that Libya's eastern border could become an important logistics hub for the flow of militants and weapons from Libya to the Sinai Peninsula. Moreover, the presence of many jihadist groups in both countries forces Egyptian authorities to use all necessary measures to secure its long, shared border.<sup>74</sup> Egyptian security forces identified the Muhammad Jamal Network (MJN) and Free Egyptian Army (FEA) as the main threats to national security.

Muhammad Jamal al-Kashef (*aka* Abu Ahmed) is an Egyptian jihadist with considerable experience in Afghanistan and in Egypt. During the 1990s, Jamal joined EIJ where he met Ayman al-Zawahiri. In those years, Jamal became a commander of the group and one of the most important subordinates of the current al-Qa'ida leader.<sup>75</sup> Released in 2011 from an Egyptian prison, Jamal set up a militant group and established several training camps in Egypt, Libya and Mali, allegedly with funding from AQAP.<sup>76</sup> According to a US official cited by *The Wall Street Journal*, the MJN group was involved in the Benghazi attack<sup>77</sup> on the US consulate in September 2012 during which Ambassador Christopher Stevens and

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74. G. Aronson, "Egypt threatened by 'ungoverned space' on Libyan border", *Al Monitor*, 22 May 2014, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/05/egypt-sinai-ungoverned-space-lawless-libya-security-military.html>.

75. See Z. Gold (2014a), p. 9; S.G. Jones, *A Persistent Threat. The Evolution of al Qa'ida and Other Salafi Jihadists*, Rand Corporation, 4 June 2014, p. 28, [http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research\\_reports/RR600/RR637/RAND\\_RR637.pdf](http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR600/RR637/RAND_RR637.pdf).

76. According to US State Department statement, MJN has provided funding from AQAP. See US Department of State, *Terrorist Designations of the Muhammad Jamal Network and Muhammad Jamal*, 7 October 2013, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2013/10/215171.htm>;

77. In 2014, the US Senate Select Committee on Intelligence published a bipartisan report on the Benghazi assaults that concluded: "Individuals affiliated with terrorist groups, including AQIM, Ansar al-Sharia Libya, AQAP, and the Mohammad Jamal Network, participated in the September 11, 2012 attacks". Terrorist Attacks on US facilities in Benghazi, Libya, 11-12 September 2012, in "Senate Select Committee on Intelligence", United States, 113<sup>th</sup> Congress, 15 January 2014, p. 40, <http://www.intelligence.senate.gov/benghazi2014/benghazi.pdf>. S. Gorman and M. Bradley, "Militant Link to Libya Attack", *The Wall Street Journal*, 1 October 2012, <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10000872396390444549204578020373444418316>.



three other Americans were killed.<sup>78</sup> According to David Kirkpatrick in *The New York Times*, the US consulate attack involved militants from multiple parts of al-Qa'ida's international network, including a jihadist group from Egypt.<sup>79</sup> After the terrorist attack the UN Security Council's anti-terrorism committee levied sanctions against MJN and a year later the US State Department designated MJN "as Specially Designated Global Terrorists under Executive Order (E.O.) 13224, which targets terrorists and those providing support to terrorists or acts of terrorism".<sup>80</sup> Before his arrest in November 2012 by Egyptian security forces, Mohammed Jamal was involved in the "Nasr City Cell" case.<sup>81</sup>

Nasr City is an eastern district of Cairo where in October 2012 a terrorist cell, named for the district planned some jihadist attacks inside Egypt. This jihadist organization has connections to EIJ, the al-Qa'ida core, Ansar al-Sharia Egypt and the Muhammad Jamal Network. The leaders and founders of this cell are the same Muhammad Jamal, Sheikh Adel Shehato (a senior EIJ official and a cellmate of Jamal during his long imprisonment in Egypt), and Tariq Abu-al-Azm, a former major in the Egyptian air force and previously arrested in 2002 under the Mubarak regime with the charge of terrorism.<sup>82</sup> Egyptian Interior Minister Ibrahim confirmed that 21 suspected cell members were arrested immediately, while others members, including the three leaders, were jailed a few weeks later, in November 2012. During the investigations, the National Security Agency arrested 26 men of the "Nasr City Cell".<sup>83</sup> According to Ibrahim, some militants of the cell have ties to al-Qa'ida and were

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78. D.D. Kirkpatrick, "A Deadly mix in Benghazi", *The New York Times*, 28 December 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/projects/2013/benghazi/#/?chapt=0>.

79. *Ibid.*

80. US Department of State (2013).

81. T. Joscelyn, "More al Qaeda links to Cairo terror cell reportedly found", *The Long War Journal*, 9 November 2012, [http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2012/11/more\\_al\\_qaeda\\_links.php](http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2012/11/more_al_qaeda_links.php).

82. *Ibid.*

83. "Egyptian Authorities Question 17 in Terror Cell Probe", *Al Monitor*, 29 October 2012, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/tr/security/01/10/17-arrested-egypt-nasr-city.html>.

involved in the Benghazi assault in September 2012 and in the failed assault on Western embassies in Cairo on May 2013.<sup>84</sup> The “Nasr City Cell” experience is a very important one because it represents the link between the Jamal group, the Egyptian jihadists and al-Qa’ida’s multiple parts. According to Dyer and Keller, the Jamal Network has developed direct connections with al-Qa’ida’s core and its leaders, including al-Zawahiri, and maintained good relations with AQAP (in particular with its leaders, Nasir al-Wahishi and Qasim al-Raymi) and AQIM.<sup>85</sup> Despite Jamal’s re-arrest in November 2012, his network continued to support jihadist organizations along the Libyan border, on the Egyptian mainland and in the Sinai.<sup>86</sup> In most of those attacks, MJN proposed combined attacks with other Sinai-based groups as well as ABM but to this day it is not clear whether ABM had a role in the assault on the US consulate in Benghazi.

If MJN represents a real problem for Egyptian security forces, much more uncertainty surrounds the jihadist group known as the FEA. The organization emerged for the first time in April 2014 when former Egyptian Foreign Minister, Nabil Fahmy, admitted during a US-Egypt summit in Washington “that one of Egypt’s security concerns about Libya was the recent formation of a new Islamist movement, known as the Free Egyptian Army, the goal of which is the destabilization of Egypt”.<sup>87</sup> Libyan officials deny the existence of this jihadist brigade while Egyptian security forces confirmed its foundation. Nevertheless, speculation about the so-called “Free Egyptian Army” continues to be

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84. T. Joscelyn, “Egyptian interior minister: Al Qaeda cell plotted suicide attack against Western embassy”, *The Long War Journal*, 11 May 2013, [http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/05/egyptian\\_interior\\_mi.php###ixzz32oX1Q5MX](http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/05/egyptian_interior_mi.php###ixzz32oX1Q5MX).

85. E. Dyer and O. Kessler, *Terror in the Sinai*, The Henry Jackson Society, 7 May 2014, <http://henryjacksonsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/HJS-Terror-in-the-Sinai-Report-Colour-Web.pdf>.

86. S. Gorman and M. Bradley (2012).

87. A. Mahjar-Barducci, *Libya: Islamist Group Forms to Destabilize Egypt*, Gatestone Institute, 6 May 2014, <http://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/4303/libya-freeegyptian-army>.

promoted only in Egyptian and Saudi media.<sup>88</sup> An anonymous state security source cited by the newspaper *al-Akhbar*, explained that FEA is an anti-government Islamist movement based in Libya, in the Jebel al-Akhdar region, with growing links to Ansar al-Sharia Libya. According to the cited source, FEA was formed by “[Egyptian]MB and al-Qaeda, under Qatari-Turkish-Iranian patronage”<sup>89</sup> to “target vital installations, including Cairo International Airport, storm prisons to free MB detainees, and spread chaos”<sup>90</sup> Some FEA members have had previous jihadist experiences in Syria and in Libya. According to Nabil Naem, former leader of the EIJ, total FEA membership consists of 3000 fighters, based in three Libyan training camps in Zintan, Abu Salim and Derna<sup>91</sup>. Although FEA’s existence has not been proven, Anna Mahjar-Barducci considers the group “not yet organized as an army in the real sense but a movement that can create security problems for Egypt”.<sup>92</sup>

Beyond the Egyptian security forces’ paranoia about the veracity of the Islamist group, it could be a growing threat to Egypt’s national security because of the increasing number of people disillusioned or frustrated by MB’s policy that have decided to join in jihad against the governments in Libya and Egypt.

#### 4.6 Sinai: from a buffer zone to a lawless land?

Securing the Sinai should be a priority for the Egyptian government and the international community. The new regime has understood the need for a shift in its policies in the Sinai Peninsula. A heavy responsibility that Cairo authorities can deal with by implementing clear and immediate

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88. “No such thing as the Free Egyptian Army”, *Al-Ahram Weekly*, April 23, 2014, <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/News/6016/17/%E2%80%98No-such-thing-as-the-Free-Egyptian-Army%E2%80%99.aspx>.

89. I. Ibrahim, “Egypt: Free Egyptian Army being formed in Libya”, *al-Akhbar*, 10 April 2014, <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/19368>.

90. *Ibid.*

91. A. Mahjar-Barducci (2014).

92. *Ibid.*

policies: counter-radicalization of jihadists, intelligence sharing, security cooperation and economic development measures. Development and equality policies can favour a *détente* but a political approach can stabilize the area, as can the inclusion of Bedouin tribes in Egyptian economic, political and military organs. At the same time, reduced militarization could be the best way for the Egyptian government to maintain control over the territory. Moreover, better coordination in information sharing between intelligence and other national security agencies could stop the development of extremism and violence in the region; simultaneously, major security cooperation and coordination with Israel could help Egyptian authorities identify and monitor jihadist phenomena, cracking down on illicit activities. Without any progress in these guidelines, the Egyptian government could also face further economic losses (mainly in Suez Canal and tourism revenues). The situation in the Sinai Peninsula represents the main challenge for the stability and legitimacy of the Egyptian state but is also an important testing-ground for the regional balance of power.

5. AN ALTERNATIVE TO ‘GOING BALLISTIC’.  
COUNTERING TRANSNATIONAL VIOLENT EXTREMIST NETWORKS THROUGH  
A LAW ENFORCEMENT OPERATIONAL APPROACH<sup>1</sup>

*Emilio Palmieri*

Recent counterinsurgency (COIN) military experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan, where NATO and Coalition Forces<sup>2</sup> in general have been involved or recently disengaged, has produced a remarkable operational shift regarding how to wage war in an irregular warfare environment. From a military confrontation between foes – however asymmetric in nature – we have seen a move towards an indirect approach through training, partnering, assisting and advising local security forces of the Host Nation (HN).<sup>3</sup>

Within the strategic phase of enforcing the Rule of Law (RoL)<sup>4</sup> as a pillar of the legitimization process, Coalition Forces work to empower their local counterparts. An enabling task is currently being executed

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1. The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not represent the views of, and should not be attributed to, the official Italian military policy doctrine and procedures.

2. In the study, we refer to Coalition Forces as the combined effort of nations with common strategic interests to coordinate their war-fighting capability for defense of those interests against the irregular adversary.

3. Host Nation is a nation that receives the forces and/or supplies of allied nations, coalition partners, and/or NATO organizations to be located on, to operate in, or to transit through its territory.

4. RoL can be viewed as the shield through which fundamental political, social, and economic rights are protected and enforced. The concept assumes the existence of effective and legitimate institutions, primarily a country’s national government, to administer the law and to guarantee personal security and public order.

in order to enhance law enforcement-related capabilities in favor and support of HN security forces<sup>5</sup> against insurgencies, guerrillas, terrorists and other opposing entities.

In this regard, the study tries to highlight the role of the law enforcement approach that is increasingly being adopted by Coalition Forces within the operational environment related to stability operations. The contemporary Global Struggle Against Violent Extremists – formally known as the Global War On Terror (GWOT) – is forcing combat soldiers to collect evidence and preserve combat objectives as *crime scenes* in order to prevent captured opposing forces from returning to the field of battle. As a consequence, if we look at COIN operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, there has been a move from intelligence-driven, effect-based operations<sup>6</sup> (EBO) towards warrant-authorized, evidence-based operations<sup>7</sup> (EvBO). Behind the change lies the need to support and sustain the enforcement of institutions, moving from unilateral military operations towards enabling HN security forces to achieve the legal prosecution of criminals in judicial courts.

The shift has essentially been about changing from being able to build an *intelligence picture* intended to enable forces to directly and unilaterally engage the enemy, to assisting local security forces in devising an *investigative picture* with the goal of supporting the enforcement of the RoL within the HN.

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5. The US military doctrine defines the aforementioned activity as Security Force Assistance (SFA): they are essentially joint military operations carried out through the progressive application of military power (from intense to light-footprint) with the aim of increasing the capacity and/or capability of foreign security forces and/or their supporting institutions in countering irregular threats.

6. Military doctrines define EBO as operations that are planned, executed, assessed, and adapted to influence or change systems or capabilities in order to achieve desired outcomes. Effects can be intended or unintended, direct or indirect, lethal or nonlethal.

7. EvBOs are operations carried out primarily by HN security forces, but supported, enabled and assisted by Coalition Forces, and are aimed at gathering, processing and producing, in a timely and legitimate manner, information/leads/evidence/proof against criminals that have to be presented in a HN court of law.

### 5.1 *Multi-Disciplined Counter-Threat approach*

The effective and exhaustive evaluation of opposing forces requires a methodological approach, labeled the Multi-Disciplined Counter-Threat (MDTC) analysis process and based on three main pillars:

- threat analysis: the definition and assessment of the threat, its intentions and capabilities (the external factor);
- vulnerability assessment: the evaluation of vulnerabilities and risks emanating from aggressions carried out by the threat (the internal factor);
- active measures implementation: the identification, evaluation and implementation of measures to detect, disrupt and defeat the threat.

#### 5.1.1 *Threat Analysis*

##### *The Current threat environment*

The operational environment where MDTC is adopted has been described as irregular warfare, low intensity conflict and fourth generation warfare (4GW). A US Government directive<sup>8</sup> defines irregular warfare as a “violent struggle among state and non-state actors for legitimacy and influence over the relevant population(s) ... [that] favors indirect and asymmetric approaches, though it may employ the full range of military and other capacities, in order to erode an adversary’s power, influence, and will”. Low Intensity Conflict (LIC) has instead been described as<sup>9</sup> a “political-military confrontation between contending states or groups below conventional war and above the routine, peaceful competition among states. [...] LIC ranges from subversion to the use of armed force. It is waged by a combination of means, employing political, economic, informational and military instruments. LIC are often localized, generally

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8. Department of Defense Directive 3000.07.

9. CLIC Papers, *Low Intensity. Overview, definitions, policy concerns*, Army - Air Force Center for Low Intensity Conflict, 1989, p. 23.

in the Third World, but contain regional and global security implications”. At the end of the 1980s, Fourth Generation Warfare<sup>10</sup> was described as a phenomenon “widely dispersed and largely undefined [...]. It will be nonlinear, possibly to the point of having no definable battlefields or fronts. The distinction between ‘civilian’ and ‘military’ may disappear. Actions will occur concurrently throughout all participants’ depth, including their society as a cultural, not just a physical, entity. Major military facilities, such as airfields, fixed communications sites, and large headquarters will become rarities because of their vulnerability; the same may be true of civilian equivalents, such as seats of government, power plants, and industrial sites (including knowledge as well as manufacturing industries). Success will depend heavily on effectiveness in joint operations as lines between responsibility and mission become very blurred”.

All the above definitions refer essentially to what can be described as irregular threats: they are basically violent entities seeking to erode state power through protracted struggle and usually resorting to asymmetric methods, tactics and means. This kind of irregular warfare includes terrorism, insurgency, and guerilla warfare and is a violent struggle among state and non-state actors for legitimacy and influence over a population. It substantially differs from conventional operations because, first, it is warfare among and within the people; and second, it emphasizes an indirect approach. In fact, irregular warfare avoids direct military confrontation while combining irregular forces and unconventional indirect methods to exhaust the opponent.

### *Threat network assessment*

The goal of threat network assessment (TNA) is typically twofold: on the one hand, the evaluation aims at gathering and analyzing significant

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10. William S. Lind, Colonel Keith Nightingale (USA), Captain John F. Schmitt (USMC), Colonel Joseph W. Sutton (USA), and Lieutenant Colonel Gary I. Wilson (USMCR), *The Changing Face of War: Into the Fourth Generation*, Marines Corps Gazette, 1989.



indicators<sup>11</sup> related to relevant events, as well as collecting and processing data and information, with the aim of achieving a 'picture' related to the efficacy and effectiveness of the threat. On the other, the process tries to foresee and develop certain, likely or possible courses of action planned by Persons and Networks of Interest, and to establish ensuing operational trends.

The following step, once individuals and networks are isolated and positively identified, is represented by the suitable *targeting*<sup>12</sup> phase in order to execute arrest warrants and other disrupting measures. Basically, the final goal of TNA is to provide a methodology that allows operators to identify enemy *intentions*<sup>13</sup> and *capabilities*.<sup>14</sup>

But what is the nature of irregular forces within the contemporary military environment? What are the main characteristics and attributes portraying the threat?

There are several actors who have played a major role in confronting Coalition and assisted local security forces.<sup>15</sup> Among them, the threat

11. Indicators are clues or leads that point toward opponent activities, capabilities, vulnerabilities or intentions. The integration of multiple indicators and other factors is essential to identifying and assessing adversary profiles.

12. Military doctrine defines targeting as "the process of selecting and prioritizing targets and matching the appropriate response to them, considering operational requirements and capabilities"; with regards to the goals of the present study, the targeting process applies with respect to actions carried out by HN security forces – assisted by Coalition Forces – aimed at disrupting (through non-lethal engagements like detention measures) persons and networks of interest.

13. *Intentions* imply the existence of two factors that are *desire* – which can be viewed as the attacker's aspiration to cause harm in pursuing his goals –, and *expectation* – which is the level of confidence of the attacker in achieving his goals as planned.

14. *Capabilities* are composed of *knowledge* – which means having information that will allow the attacker to use means or carry out processes that are necessary for accomplishing the mission –, and *resources* – which include the skills, experience, materials and funds needed to execute plans.

15. Violent networks – other than global Salafi-jihadis – possess alarming features: criminal patronage, guerrillas, insurgency, illegal traffickers, and kidnappers. Illegal activities carried out in irregular environments have shown the importance of and the danger posed by the so called *nexus* which is the operational relationship established between the aforementioned irregular actors in opportunistically contrasting Coalition efforts.

posed by Transnational Violent Extremist Networks (TVEN) of global Salafi-jihadi nature is of paramount importance: we will be referring to TVEN as violent extremist individuals and/or organizations who share and act upon the ideological and strategic lines of the so-called *qa'idism*.<sup>16</sup>

These individuals and networks aspire to instill fear into societies and governments through acts of unlawful violence, primarily attacking civilian targets and employing terrorist tactics. Unlike insurgent or guerrilla groups, whose actions may include attacks on civilian targets to create instability that undermines government's legitimacy, TVEN rely on such attacks as their principal means of action. They are motivated by an ultra-conservative interpretation of Islam, which constitutes the justification of violent acts of mass murder.<sup>17</sup>

On the organizational level, TVEN structures are more networked than the hierarchical structures common to insurgencies and guerrillas. Nowadays adversaries are low-contrast foes easily camouflaged among civilians in complex terrain such as mountainous or urban environments. While drawing support from their networks, they keep a low profile until they strike and then quickly blend back into the population. Moreover, the global communications revolution has provided the opposing forces with an *electronic safe haven* where they can conceal their illicit activities within the digital environment that is constituted by daily cell phone and Internet traffic. It is from this new sanctuary of impunity that TVEN coordinate activities from dispersed networks in order to plan, self-synchronize, pass orders and information, and transfer funds.

In this regard, and expanding the attributes of an effective violent extremist and militant network, it is commonly understood that critical

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16. Essentially, the term *qa'idism* refers to the political, ideological and operational vision provided by global Salafi-jihadi leaders with regard to the violent engagement against the *near enemy* – symbolized by local Arab regimes deemed apostate – and the *far enemy* – embodied by the US, Israel and in general those Western countries that follow them -, in order to remove the obstacles that hamper the restoration of the pan-Islamic Caliphate.

17. Joint Irregular Warfare Center, *Irregular Adversaries and Hybrid Threats - An Assessment*, 2011, pp. 3-5, <https://info.publicintelligence.net/USJFCOM-IrregularThreats.pdf>.

capabilities and requirements are leaders and planners, ideology, training, safe havens, freedom of movement, logistics, communications, finance, intelligence and fighters.

Nowadays, TVEN have become more dispersed, decentralized, and hidden within the society in which they operate. TVEN have evolved and have focused on their international dimension, being able to overcome national efforts and go beyond national borders. Although a central hard core component of the former al-Qa'ida structure is still present (at least in an inspirational and representative function, mainly for propaganda and narrative purposes), a wide, structured, global-reaching and operational network run directly by the base and capable of executing 9/11-type of attacks is likely no longer to be expected.

Given the successes in disrupting leadership and network, al-Qa'ida-style operations are increasingly being carried out by loosely affiliated local *franchises*. This phenomenon is particularly important in ungoverned or under-governed places (like Yemen, Somalia, and significant parts of the Middle East and North Africa), and is being used by non-state, transnational actors to establish training camps to pursue indoctrination and develop operational capacity. Hollowed-out, weak or failed governments are either unwilling or unable to counter, on their own, operational activities executed by violent outfits. TVEN have been able to achieve a strategic victory: they have asymmetrically taken advantage of the losses inflicted by the reactions of their targets (mainly Western powers and their local allies) and have been able to morph into a more dispersed and flexible 'hydra'. This evolution has led to the emergence of more limited attacks (act locally) and in so doing diminished the scope and reach of al-Qa'ida's activity, while in the meantime being able to impact strategically (think globally) by hitting selected soft targets: it has been the application of the lessons assembled and disseminated by the

Syrian militant strategist Abu Musaab al-Suri's<sup>18</sup> about how to wage a modern jihadi warfare<sup>19</sup>.

### 5.1.2 Vulnerability Assessment

The main task of Vulnerability Assessment (VA) is finding the way to reduce the chances for a target to get attacked. VA is a process intrinsically defensive in nature, and it is deemed significant when referred to soft targets and usually characterized by the following steps:

- assessing the attractiveness of potential targets and applying the appropriate preventive techniques;
- evaluating the ease of accessibility of a target by the violent irregular opponent;
- reducing the opportunities for them to obtain weapons and tools that make it easier to take advantage of the inherent vulnerabilities of targets and to organize/implement the attacks.

Contemporary criminological studies<sup>20</sup> have contributed to developing a process aimed at identifying elements to define the vulnerability of

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18. *Nome-de-guerre* of Mustafa Setmariam Naser, born in 1958 in Syria and involved in proselytising work carried out by the local Muslim Brotherhood; he came to light, drawing the attention of Western security agencies, because of his close relations with the Taliban and al-Qa'ida (despite some different strategic visions) and for his alleged involvement in the Madrid 2004 and London 2005 terrorist attacks. After several years spent in Europe (Spain, France, Great Britain), northern Africa (Algeria), and Asia (Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia) he was captured in Quetta in November 2005 during a combined Pakistan-American operation.

19. S. Santamato and M.T. Beumler, *The New NATO Policy Guidelines on Counterterrorism: Analysis, Assessment, and Actions*, INSS, Strategic Perspectives no. 13, 2013, pp. 4-7, <file:///C:/Documenti/Downloads/ADA585205.pdf>.

20. An authoritative literature about the topic can be found in G.R. Newman and R.V. Clarke, *Policing Terrorism: An Executive's Guide*, Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, U.S. Department of Justice, 2008, pp. 86-87.

targets named EVIL DONE. These features can be summarized as follows:

- Exposed: the target carries distinctive features (like federal government buildings, large shopping complexes or nuclear power plants), which makes it attractive for terrorists;
- Vital: the target plays a critical role because of its daily function (water supply, electricity grid, food chain, and transportation system);
- Iconic: the target possesses a high symbolic value (both for the victim and for the attacker);
- Legitimate: the attack against the target is viewed as a legitimate action in the framework of the global armed *jihad*;
- Destructible: the consequence of the attack is to cause the physical and functional destruction of the target or the death of the targeted individuals in order for the terrorist act to be regarded as successful;
- Occupied: TVEN seek to kill as many people as possible, because it is what most frightens their enemies (the psychological effect). The target selection process will be oriented towards targets that, being crowded by potential victims, when attacked will produce mass casualties;
- Near and Easy: the closeness of the target to attack and ease of accessibility play a critical role in selecting the objective because the variable critically affects the planning phase, the logistic support, the chances of escape and the outcome of the attack.

### 5.1.3 Active Measures Implementation

Having in mind the achievement of Rule of Law goals by Coalition Forces, the paradigm shift from intelligence-led to evidence-based operations implies the need to consolidate the *investigative picture*: the goal is to legally find, capture, prosecute, sentence and convict individuals

proved to be guilty of violent and serious offences related to terrorism against the populations, the governments and institutions of HNs. Within the contemporary military environment, a new operational approach – inspired by the one utilized by law enforcement agencies – is progressively being adopted: the fundamental requirement deemed useful to counter the irregular threat is the enhancement of situational awareness, the expansion of understanding and the development of knowledge, which are achieved through the employment of procedures, systems, platforms and sensors aimed at identifying and locating the adversary network.

TVEN live, operate, thrive, get support from and hide in complex societies: the most difficult task within the realm of low intensity warfare is finding the adversary in order to properly target and defeat the violent network he belongs to.

One analytical method that is incrementally being adopted is Link Analysis (LA): it is the process of identifying and analyzing relationships between persons, contacts, events, activities, organizations, and networks to determine key or significant links, with the aim of determining and developing operational patterns, associations and trends. The system relies on Social Network Analysis theories and its aim is to identify critical hubs within a network so that a selected targeting process can be properly set up with the ultimate goal of disrupting the adversary's organizational structure. Commercial and off-the-shelf automated analysis applications are being used to store, process and disseminate data and information. A subset of LA is Nodal Analysis (NA): it connects relationships between places and people by tracking their daily behaviors of interest, also known as *life patterns*. While a suspect moves from point to point, sensors track and fix every location (named hot-spots) and individual visited. Connections between those sites and individuals to the suspect are built, and nodes in the adversary's low-contrast network surface. NA can be utilized to unveil the cover that the adversary has used by revealing detectable and *traceable* factors such as associates, events of interest, funding channels, meetings, mobile phones, headquarters, and weapons supply points. As a consequence, the network becomes

more visible, vulnerabilities emerge, patterns are observed, and the adversary's advantage of hiding himself by exploiting the cover provided by the environment disappears. NA is a time-consuming activity and requires dedicated analysts and *assets*:<sup>21</sup> the process, however, allows the network's picture to develop over a long term.

Surveillance assets are increasingly being utilized in the contemporary irregular domain.

Essentially, there are two kinds of resources that are of interest with regard to the goals of the present study: Communications Eavesdropping and Geospatial Surveillance and Reconnaissance (S&R).<sup>22</sup>

With regard to phone intercepts, there are two major factors: the capture of communications between individuals and the so-called *metadata*. Communications control is one of the most powerful tools at the disposal of the intelligence community. Unfortunately, despite its efficacy, the source suffers from the following blowbacks: the first concerns the need to rely on vetted and trusted translators, given that conversations are being held in a foreign language; the second concerns the adversary's use of *tradedcraft* to avoid being positively identified and thereby putting at risk the network he belongs to. *Metadata* are data concerning a captured phone call other than the conversation itself. These kinds of information make it possible to get a clearer picture about whom a militant is in contact with, the phone numbers in contact with the targeted selector, the duration of the call, the location of the person called: using metadata, analysts are able to expand their understanding<sup>23</sup> and then develop knowledge about the violent network under investigation.

In addition to phone-related monitoring measures, Geospatial S&R is of particular importance. The resource is a valuable instrument in

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21. Asset can be defined as any resource, group relationship, instrument, installation, or supply at the disposition of an intelligence/law enforcement organization for use in an operational or support role.

22. In the military intelligence jargon the two capabilities are commonly referred to as Signal Intelligence (SIGINT) and Imagery Intelligence (IMINT).

23. Understanding the network or local cells means having an appreciation for the nature of adaptive networked threats, their structure, characteristics, dynamics,

pinpointing a militant who needs to be located (and then tracked) in space and time. The term *geo-location* indicates that the goal of the measure is to detect and share the precise geographic coordinates of the individual's location in a given timeframe: it is essentially *dotting-on-a-map*.

Geo-location is an operational source that pertains to both ground and airborne S&R platforms, sensors and systems. However, in order to be effective in terms of exploiting the ability to detect, identify, and track a suspect in low-contrast irregular environments, the following are essential features of the monitoring measure under scrutiny:

- persistence: sensors have to be employed in prolonged monitoring *dwell times*<sup>24</sup> in order to achieve information confidence and fidelity that are critical for follow-on actions;
- mass employment: geo-location sensors must be massed and oriented towards hot-spots to be effective. Redundancy and saturation are helpful approaches in order to overcome shortfalls in finding and locating the adversary;<sup>25</sup>
- outwardly driven: in order to be effective, these sensors must have a limited space of detection;

they cannot cover and monitor wide portions of territory. As a consequence, and especially for airborne assets, other sources and methods are useful in providing a starting point.

Due to the fact that, as stated earlier, countering TVENs is essentially looking for *bad guys*, another crucial resource is Site Exploitation (SE).<sup>26</sup>

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and purposes.

24. In military terminology, *dwell time* is the length of time the objective intended to be monitored is expected to remain in one location.

25. US military literature has been using the metaphor *The Unblinking Eye* to describe the feature of massing S&R assets: dispatching different *eyes-on-target* (mass employment) for a prolonged time-period (persistence) seems to be producing unprecedented results in the geo-location discipline.

26. Center for Army Lessons Learned (CALL), *Tactical Site Exploitation Handbook. Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures*, No. 7-26, May 2007, <http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB410/docs/Tactical%20Site%20Exploitation.pdf>.



The process can be defined as actions taken to ensure that documents, material, electronic data and personnel are identified, collected, protected, and evaluated in order to facilitate follow-on activities. SE is basically the systematic process of collecting materiel from a site for immediate and future exploitation, in so doing feeding and updating the *Common Investigative Picture*.<sup>27</sup> When conducted correctly, SE can provide further information for future operations, fulfill information requirements, and most importantly provide evidence to support the detention of individuals belonging to TVEN: this is the reason why operators on the ground must understand the value of preserving evidence and moving it from the field to the laboratory for additional evaluations.

The bottom line of exploitation is taking full advantage of any information that has come to hand, on-the-spot and rapidly turning it into operational action aimed at defeating the opponent's network.

Interviews and Questionings (I&Q), Biometric identifiers, Documents and Media Exploitation (DOMEX), Cell phone Exploitation (CELLEX) and forensics are all part of a set of investigative-related resources that help Coalition Forces and HN personnel glean on-the-scene sources of evidence useful to evaluating the adversary's structure, organization, capabilities, and intentions, and that have the final aim of supporting the conviction of individuals deemed responsible for violent actions.

The first element is based on the observation that simply killing enemies will not lead (at least in a medium to long term) to greater effectiveness against them; what is essential is to gather information and leads against the enemy network. In fact, capturing the foe for purposes of interrogating him is normally the preferred option. I&Q are law enforcement functions crucial to revealing information about the adversary's network. The ability to talk to arrested or detained leaders, facilitators, and financiers about how the organization functions offers

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27. CAPT Frederick Gaghan, USN, "Attacking the IED Network", NDIA Global EOD Conference, 5 May 2011, p. 12.

significant insight into how to find the network's vulnerabilities and as a consequence the effective way to disrupt that organization.

*Biometric identifiers* consist of fingerprints, iris scans, facial photographs or other biological characteristics that can be used to identify a person through DNA samples, palm prints, voice patterns; in addition to the proper biological source of person recognition, behavioral characteristics – such as gait and even keystroke patterns on a keyboard – can also be employed in order to support the positive identification of suspects and militants of interest.<sup>28</sup>

DOMEX is the processing, translation, analysis, and dissemination of collected hard-copy documents and electronic media. DOMEX includes two sources of information: content of the material and (for digital media) the technical setting of the data. Current technologies permit the collection of materials whose content is gathered in one of the 8,000 languages spoken around the world; it can also include a rich supply of biometric information. The content, through letters and photos, can provide significant biographical information about individuals, their interrelationships with other members of the network under investigation, and potentially provide clues about a group's intentions and capabilities.

CELLEX is the process of scanning the device and taking advantage of mobile phone files such as subscriber identity module (SIM) card models, device numbers (IMEI), phone records, short message service (SMS) messages, service providers, calendar events, pictures and other media content. CELLEX is a very sensitive activity able to provide relevant data/information that can be processed within the analysis cycle. The result can have a twofold outcome: conversion into evidence useful in judging significant past events or employment as actionable information elements for future operations.

Finally, forensics, which is the application of multidisciplinary scientific processes to establish facts that can be used to support operations by adding depth and scope to the comprehensive picture.

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28. *Identity Dominance: The U.S. Military's Biometric War in Afghanistan*, 21 April 2014, [www.publicintelligence.org](http://www.publicintelligence.org) (last retrieved on 02 May 2014).

Exploited materials make it possible to link specific persons to places, materials, or events. The resulting information can be utilized to target, apprehend and detain, or prosecute violent militant extremists operating in the HN.

All the aforementioned measures cannot be taken singularly: in order to be effective and decisive in terms of acquiring the investigative picture that can be actionable by HN security forces assisted by Coalition Forces against irregular violent networks, a multi-source process needs to be built. As already said, the irregular adversary benefits from the environment in which he hides: finding him is a challenging endeavor and it requires a combination of sources and methods to accomplish the mission.

### 5.2 The F3EA targeting methodology

Within the aforementioned MDCT three-step analytical cycle, a targeting methodology can be overlapped in order to *operationalize* the theoretical decision-making model. The process – which is deemed useful in rationally allocating and honing forces, resources, assets and time – has been labeled Find, Fix, Finish, Exploit and Analyze (F3EA).<sup>29</sup> F3EA is a system that makes it possible on the one hand to identify, track, locate, and target opposing forces, and on the other to exploit and analyze captured personnel and materiel. Pivotal to the F3EA process is the functional fusion of operation and knowledge development functions: operations drive the collection, processing and dissemination effort, and the product of this effort (the investigative picture) in turn feeds operations with the information necessary to the successful accomplishment of the mission. It is essentially an operational cycle. The goal of the operations/knowledge fusion and the rapid pace of the

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29. Unclassified studies on the F3EA topic are very limited. See: C. Faint and M. Harris, "F3EA: Ops/Intel Fusion? Feeds? The SOF Targeting Process", *Small War Journal*, 31 January 2012, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/f3ead-opsintel-fusion-%E2%80%9Cfeeds%E2%80%9D-the-sof-targeting-process>.

F3EA process is to enable Coalition Forces and HN security forces leaders at all levels to plan and execute operations against the irregular foe faster than the foe can react. When utilized successfully, the process permits the identification and ensuing focused action against critical and vulnerable parts of the opposing network: as a consequence, friendly forces are able to dictate the *operational tempo* (OPTEMPO), and set the conditions for disrupting the adversary's efforts.

Current combat experience has demonstrated that the F3EA process is particularly tailored to counter-network operations: the increasingly incremental inclusion of law enforcement culture and the investigative, forensic, and information-sharing capabilities within the contemporary military environment in the irregular warfare domain are critical in the process of turning data/information into leads/evidence. In this regard, the main effort of F3EA methodology is being directed at the 'exploit-analyze' portion: it is really within this segment that the data and informative elements are being turned into evidence that is crucial to developing a coherent investigative picture, instrumental to triggering the issue of warrants by the HN judicial authority and then enabling the successful legal prosecution of the irregular adversary.

Digging into the singular components of the methodology, the following are the elements of the F3EA operational method.

### *Find*

It describes the process through which militants and violent networks are observed, detected, modeled, and prepared. Within this phase several actions are taken in order to provide assessment of the threat under investigation, identify detectable and targetable elements of the network of interest, develop militants' life patterns, produce detailed requests to send to HN authorities based on investigative reports showing evidence of guilt for individuals deemed responsible for religiously motivated violent activities, and start preliminary location which is useful to triggering collection resources to isolate and identify persons of interest. As already stressed, within the contemporary irregular environment, the ability to accurately identify TVEN militants is a critical component

in COIN operations. In traditional conflicts the identity of individual combatants did not matter, as their uniforms easily identified them as the enemy. However, in COIN conflicts where combatants, noncombatants, insurgents, and civilians may dress the same way and live and work together, the positive identification of individual irregular opponents has progressively assumed much greater importance. In this regard, Identity Analysis (IA) is extremely appreciated by practitioners: the method is the result of the fusion of specific identifying attributes (biological, biographical, behavioral, and reputational information related to an individual) and other data, information and leads associated with those attributes collected across all collection disciplines. IA utilizes enabling activities like biometrics, forensics, and DOMEX, to discover the existence of unknown potential threat actors by connecting individuals to other persons, places, events, or materials, analyzing life patterns, and characterizing their level of potential threats.

#### *Fix*

This phase makes it possible to identify, locate, and monitor individuals belonging to TVEN in preparation for following work. The fix portion includes the generation of a precise location of the adversary in the irregular environment, the positive identification of the suspect, and the maintenance of a track on him (*eyes-on-target*). This phase also includes the constant updating of situational awareness of the local area and detection of indicators and warnings of changes (be they communication patterns, behavioral patterns, relationship patterns). Once a person of interest is positively identified, collection resources and processing methods are implemented in order to develop operational triggers to 'fix' him in space and time.

#### *Finish*

The term describes the operation executed in order to implement detention measures (arrest warrants) or other non-lethal actions, issued by HN judicial authorities and based on evidence collected during the 'find' phase against the identified radical as a consequence of a legal

prosecution (EvBO). During this phase an S&R track is maintained on the area of operation while execution assets are maneuvered to implement the measures. In F3EA, the ‘finish’ portion refers more to finishing a particular mission than to finishing off enemy forces. Within traditional targeting methodologies, the finish phase was considered the main effort. This made sense in prior symmetric wars where the engagement focus was on the physical destruction of enemy forces and infrastructure as a means to end a foe’s will to resist. However, in the current irregular, networked, prolonged warfare era, the main effort cannot be on ‘finishing’ opposing forces in the traditional sense: therefore, the segment creates the conditions for having the process start again, in that way renewing the interlock between operations and knowledge development.

### *Exploit*

The overall aim of the exploitation effort is to collect, analyze, interrogate, and process captured adversary individuals, equipment, and materiel for investigative purposes in order to produce enough actionable prosecutorial evidence to keep pushing the F3EA process as rapidly as possible. As previously highlighted, this phase includes a set of investigative sources executed on-the-scene as a consequence of the implementation of warrants: samples, biometric collection of biological evidence from the site, gathering of documents and media present on the site, interrogation of detainees’ or other individuals in or around the target area, collection of data from computers or mobile phones recovered on the site of warrant execution. The ‘exploit’ phase, as the main effort of the F3EA cycle, is the most critical single step as it leads to the finding, fixing, and finishing of tracking related persons and networks of interest, thereby perpetuating the sequence.

### *Analyze*

The ‘analyze’ phase is where data and information gained in the find, fix, finish, and exploit stages turns into evidence which can be used both to sentence captured personnel in judicial courts and to proactively

drive future engagements against other militants of the network under investigation. 'Analysis' is a more in-depth investigation than 'exploitation' of the outcome of the 'fix' phase: it can require the involvement of HN's and Coalition Forces' higher authorities or echelons.

Taken as a whole, the F3EA approach provides an operational method for dealing with engagements featuring a high OPTEMPO against irregular, low-signature violent individuals and networks (and their proxies) while focusing not only on the execution of legal detention warrant-based measures against current foes but also on the generation of follow-on actions rooted in outcomes of previous activities.

### *Conclusion*

The requirements of the current irregular warfare environment set the Rule of Law as the overarching strategic goal: access to effective mechanisms to resolve disputes without resorting to violence and in accordance with a consistent set of rules is fundamental to ensuring that the local population feels secure. The concrete result will be the demonstration of the political credibility of the HN government in the eyes of its own population.

As a consequence, within the counter-TVEN operational domain, the paradigm shift from unilateral intelligence-driven effective-based operations towards multilateral warrant-authorized evidence-based investigations is increasingly being appreciated as the effective approach by the political, strategic and military leadership. Warrant-based, prosecution-oriented targeting is a form of non-lethal law enforcement-like measure subsidiary carried out by Coalition Forces and one which employs the "operations execution-knowledge development cycle" pattern in concert with and in support of the HN's security forces and judicial authorities: the final aim is the generation of lawful warrants in order to counter irregular opponents by removing them from the operational environment. The investigative picture, as the result of the investigative targeting process, creates the conditions to legally prosecute

militants belonging to TVEN, thus enforcing the HN's criminal justice system.

From the Coalition Forces' prospective, the strategic line of operation has been labeled an 'indirect approach': it is about enabling HN security forces and judicial authorities to progressively enhance their own capacities and capabilities in order to achieve an operational level so that they are able to act unilaterally and, subsequently, to allow the progressive disengagement of Coalitions assets.

Processes (F3EA targeting within the 'investigation-trial-conviction' cycle), methods (data-mining, link analysis) and sources (technical surveillance, site exploitation) are all tools aimed at obtaining lawful warrants and sentences from the HN judicial system based on and compliant with local legislation.

Within the targeting realm of non-lethal measures that we have been dealing with as the main topic of the present report, the business is essentially about countering identified critical hubs and nodes of violent extremist networks<sup>30</sup> (with their proxies) and denying them safe locations, both physical and virtual, where they can thrive, organize and hide.

Given the currently evolving posture of the threat posed by TVENs, which is and will be characterized by adaptability and looseness, and taking into account the decrease of the scale and threshold of attacks – especially against soft targets with a high degree of impact – it is crucial that the defense organization in general be able to implement the role of the so called *red cells*. These are elements of friendly forces (both of the Coalition and of the HN) that are tasked with thinking imaginatively and trying to figure out and then anticipate likely enemy courses of action in terms of plans, intentions and capabilities.

Within the modern, complex operational environment, and as recent military engagements have consistently shown, one of the key approaches

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30. The process requires that a target prioritization be built in order to hone forces, resources, assets and time: as a result, with regard to violent militants the prioritization matrix refers to the disruption of the leadership (known as High Value Targets - HVTs), then of enablers (operatives, logisticians, financiers) and in the end supporters.



to countering irregular threats is networked organizational architecture.<sup>31</sup> As the former ISAF Commander General Stanley McChrystal put it “*it takes networks to defeat networks*”: resulting from the approach is the accent placed on the importance of a collaborative, inter-multiagency effort, less hierarchical and stove-piped, and more horizontal and flat. In this regard and in order to counter this kind of structured violent irregular opponent, a more effective approach is being required: it has been called “collaborative warfare”: network-referenced organizations, the fusion of intelligence and operations and law enforcement-like activities all require unprecedented collaboration and integration between different departments and agencies, civilian and military: interdepartmental and multi-agency staffs are required to synchronize their efforts and develop lines of operations in order to support counter-network strategies.

Finally, because Coalition Forces and HN security forces share and work in the same operational space, another currently alarming and deceptive threat calls for a specific implementation: the so-called *green-on-blue* attacks.<sup>32</sup> These are essentially acts of violence surreptitiously performed by elements of the HN security forces (green force) against Coalition Forces personnel (blue force), taking advantage of the environmental proximity that the Security Assistance Force mission requires. Several of these *green-on-blue* attacks are identified as motivational triggers: *infiltration* by TVEN within the HN security forces; *co-option* of HN security force employees by means of ideological pressures, financial incentives, intimidation, or familial and tribal ties; *mimicking* (or impersonation) by violent militants posing as HN security force members in order to facilitate the conduct of attacks. The issue also significantly affects achievement of the strategic goal of fostering the Rule of Law, in terms of the detrimental influence it has over trust

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31. One of the most important resources on networked warfare is J. Arquilla and D. Ronfeldt (eds.) *Networks and Netwars: The Future of Terror, Crime, and Militancy*, RAND Corporation, 2001.

32. Center for Army Lessons Learned (CALL), *Inside the Wire Threats - Afghanistan Green on Blue*, February 2012, pp. 3-5.

and confidence in what is commonly recognized as the spear-head of a state's legitimacy, i.e. its security apparatus.

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