

A Strategic Analysis of Violent Extremist Organizations in the United States Central Command Area of Responsibility

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Executive Summary

In this study, our research team examines the organizational sophistication, leadership, and tactical patterns of five high-priority Violent Extremist Organizations (VEOs) operating in the United States Central Command Area of Responsibility (USCENTCOM). The five VEOs include Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL), the Islamic State – Sinai Province (IS-SP), Jaish al-Adl, and Lebanese Hezbollah. We draw from both the leadership for the Extreme and Dangerous for Innovative Results project and the Global Terrorism Database to examine the organizational sophistication, leadership, and tactical patterns of each of the five VEOs. Our findings indicate that ISIL continues to pose the greatest threat to US interests in the CENTCOM AOR. In the near future, however, HTS and Lebanese Hezbollah may pose greater threats depending on dynamic actions.

VEO Selection Process and Data Sources

The VEOs examined in this effort were selected using a two-stage process. In the first stage, our research team pulled a list of all VEOs with at least one terrorist attack during 2018 in the CENTCOM AOR per the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) *and* had organizational and leadership information in the leadership for the Extreme and Dangerous for Innovative Results (LEADIR) dataset. During this stage, we removed VEOs who fit these criteria but were not relevant to this project. For instance, we removed several reactionary groups only formed to oppose the Syrian Regime, Kurdish separatist groups, and political parties. In total, eight VEOs who were: (1) active, (2) had organizational and leadership information housed in LEADIR, and (3) were strategically relevant to this project's goals remained.

In the second stage, we sent our list of eight VEOs to CENTCOM subject matter experts (SMEs) and asked for their feedback on which VEOs to prioritize. Of those eight VEOs, the SMEs asked our research team to focus on the following five VEOs for this effort: HTS, ISIL, IS-SP, Jaish al-Adl, and Lebanese Hezbollah. These five VEOs are the focus of the remainder of this effort.

VEO Backgrounds

Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham. HTS was formed in 2017 after several Syrian rebel groups [Harakat Nour al-Din al-Zinki, Liwa al-Haq, Jaysh al-Sunna, and Jabhat Ansar al-Din] merged. However, HTS's

“organizational lineage” can be traced back to 2011, and the establishment of the al-Nusra Front in Syria (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2018). Ideologically, HTS is a Salafi-Jihadist organization whose primary goals are two-fold: (1) overthrow the al-Assad government in Syria and (2) establish an Islamic state. At present, the organization is unusually large, with an estimated membership of 20,000 (Mapping Militants, 2017; BBC, 2019).

Islamic State of Iraq and Levant. ISIL evolved from Jama'at al-Tawhid wa-al Jihad and became al-Qaeda in Iraq from 2004 until 2014 (Sporer, Logan, Ligon, & Derrick, 2019). The group follows a Salafi-Jihadist ideology, interested in establishing a new Islamic caliphate and growing it across the Levant. During their height of power (2014-2016), ISIL controlled large portions of territory in Iraq and Syria. Today, however, ISIL has lost much of its territory and controls some rural areas on the Iraq/Syria border. Despite their losses, ISIL is still rather large in terms of membership relative to other VEOs. ISIL is reported to have an estimated 18,000+ members, an allied fighters held in Kurdish jails and supporters in internally displaced person camps (Dunford & Wallace, 2019).

Islamic State - Sinai Province. IS-SP is a Salafi-Jihadist group located in Egypt with the goal of the re-establishment of an Islamic caliphate. IS-SP was founded in 2014 when members of Ansar Beit al-Maqdis but pledged allegiance to ISIL. At present, the group is moderately sized with an estimated 1,100 members. The Sinai Province has been the most vocally supportive branch of ISIL, being the first of the branches to pledge allegiance to the new leader of ISIL, al-Qurashi, following the death of al-Baghdadi (Johnson, 2019).

Jaish al-Adl. Jaish al-Adl is an anti-Iranian Salafi-Jihadist group founded in 2012. The group operates in southern Iran and parts of Pakistan. The group is interested in the independence of the Iranian province of Sistan and Baluchestan (Zahid, 2017). They have actively attacked Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps soldiers and utilized a porous border between Iran and Pakistan to evade retaliation (Joscelyn, 2019). There are few reports about the group and its leader in open-source media, but membership is estimated around 200 members, led by Salahuddin Farooqui, who established the current form of the organization in 2012.

Lebanese Hezbollah. Lebanese Hezbollah is by far one of the oldest Islamist groups, founded in 1983. The group's primary goals are to support Shi'ites in Lebanon and combat the state of Israel (Alami, 2018; Robinson, 2020). Lebanese Hezbollah is particularly large with 20,000+ members and even more supporters due to the social services they provide in Lebanon. In recent years, the group's popular support has allowed them to gain political power within the Lebanese government. Iran is a direct state sponsor of Lebanese Hezbollah, providing them an upwards of \$700 million a year (U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2018). These funds provide Lebanese Hezbollah with sophisticated weapon systems, including an estimated include 130,000 rockets and missiles, including anti-ship and anti-air rockets (Shaikh, 2018). In recent years, this group has primarily engaged in violence under the banner of the Shia Liberation Army (Levitt, 2015) rather than taking direct claim for attacks.

Organizational Sophistication

One way to differentiate VEOs and their capacity for violence is based on their organizational sophistication, or the degree to which an organization is centralized, formalized, and specialized (Logan & Ligon, 2019). First, *Centralization* refers to the degree to which decision-making is concentrated. For instance, VEOs with a single leader or ruling council are more centralized and better equipped to acquire and distribute resources among the organization compared to those with fragmented or decentralized leadership. Next, *Formalization* refers to the extent to which rules and procedures are used to govern the behaviors of members of the organization. Indicators of formalization include the use of uniforms and titles to denote status or tenure within the organization as well as to mark in-group versus out-group membership. Organizational, ideological, and combat training is also a marker of formalization in VEOs as these activities socialized members to the rules and codes of the organization. At the tactical-level, formalization enhances organizational decision-making – especially in times of crisis. It also increases organizational commitment, as the practice of rituals and group behavior can distinguish in-group from out-group members. Finally, *Specialization* refers to the degree to which the organization is composed of many interrelated parts. Indicators of specialization in VEOs are high levels of expertise among rank-and-file members and having units/cells in the organization dedicated to specific non-violent roles (e.g., media, medical services). Specialization increases VEOs’ ability to engage in complex tactics and operations.

Table 1. Classification on the Dimensions of Organizational Sophistication

VEO	Centralization	Formalization	Specialization
HTS	High	Moderate	High
ISIL	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate
IS-SP	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate
Jaish al-Adl	Low	Low	Low
Lebanese Hezbollah	High	High	High

Table 1 shows each VEO’s rating on the dimensions of organizational sophistication relative to the other VEOs in the LEADIR dataset. Beginning with centralization, HTS and Lebanese Hezbollah rated the highest on this dimension. As illustrated in more detail in the leadership section, both VEOs have longstanding leaders invested in the strategic success of the organization and top-down command-and-control mechanisms in place. ISIL and IS-SP rated moderate on the centralization dimensions. For ISIL, this is primarily due to the recent death of their previous leaders, Abū Bakr al-Baghdadi, coupled with their recent territorial losses. Although there is evidence that ISIL’s leader, Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi, has a strategic influence over the organization (Johnson, 2019), it is difficult to maintain a centralized, coordinated organizational structure without some degree of territorial control. IS-SP was also rated moderately centralized. IS-SP has lost several of its leaders since they aligned with ISIL. Their current leader, Abu Hajar al-Hashemi, remains a shadowy figure despite his rise to prominence in 2016. Given IS-SP’s experience with leadership decapitation events, it is likely that its leaders prefer a relatively decentralized structure to ensure operational secrecy. Last, Jaish al-Adl is rated low on centralization. Little is known about their current leadership (see below); however, we suspect Jaish al-Adl followed the footsteps of their predecessor organization, Jundullah, allowed operational autonomy to sub-units despite the presence of a central figurehead.

In terms of formalization, only Lebanese Hezbollah rated highly. Fighters for Lebanese Hezbollah undergo intensive training at the organizational, ideological, and tactical levels (Blanford, 2011). For instance, fighters in Lebanese Hezbollah must undergo a phase of *tahdirat* where they learn cultural history and ideological underpinnings of the organization as well as a period of *intizam* where fighters undergo basic military training (Blanford, 2011). Lebanese Hezbollah fighters also utilize military-style uniforms to denote their tenure and affiliation to the organization. Next, HTS, ISIL, and IS-SP rated moderately on formalization. For example, in 2018, an announcement was posted on the pro-HTS Telegram channel Aafaq News Agency looking for applicants interested in joining the Osama bin Zaid Brigade (HTS's elite fighting force), construction equipment operators, and surveillance drone operators (Middle East Media Research Institute, 2018). The telegram post suggests that HTS fighters must undergo basic religious and military training to join and advance in the organization suggestive of formalization of roles and procedures. During their peak, ISIL was highly formalized with training camps for recruits scattered across Syria and Iraq. Today, ISIL has lost much of this territory and the majority of its training camps. IS-SP also showed evidence of tactical training indicative of organizational formalization. Confessions from IS-SP fighters illustrate how the organization provided physical and combat training focused on ways to attack military and police forces (Sakr, 2018). Finally, Jaish al-Adl rated low on the formalization dimension. There is little evidence of organizational or rigorous combat training within the organization. Most available images of Jaish al-Adl members do not show the consistent use of uniforms or other insignia typically of formalized VEOs.¹

Finally, concerning specialization, HTS and Lebanese Hezbollah rated highly on this dimension. HTS has a highly complex organizational structure with many diverse functions. HTS provides social services, administrative functions, and food in the areas under its control (Mapping Militant Organizations, 2019). Before the formation of HTS, al-Nusra was only second to ISIL in recruiting foreign fighters. It is likely that some of these foreign fighters, and their unique expertise, are still embedded in HTS. Likewise, Lebanese Hezbollah provides social support and community services across Lebanon. Next, ISIL and IS-SP scored moderately on the specialization dimension of organization sophistication. During their height of power, ISIL was highly specialized at both the organizational-and individual-level. With their loss of territory and the population within it, many of these specialized roles are no longer necessary (e.g., medical services, court system). As such, while some members still have specialized skill sets, ISIL's current recruitment strategy focuses on casting a wide net as opposed to "headhunting" for expertise (Windisch, Logan, & Ligon, 2018). IS-SP also scored moderately on specialization. At present, IS-SP has an active media wing as well as organizational units that handle security and military affairs (Sakr, 2018). Finally, Jaish al-Adl rated low on the specialization dimension. Sources from the Middle East Center for Reporting and Analysis (2019) suggest that Jaish al-Adl is organized into three military branches across southeastern Iran. Jaish al-Adl also includes an "intelligence branch" whose mission is to identify individuals working with the Iranian Regime. There is little information on any other organizational functions in Jaish al-Adl nor evidence that the group uses any recruitment strategies to foster expertise.

Leadership

¹ There are some reports that Jaish al-Adl receives weapons and combat training from the Pakistan government, but these reports are largely unverified.

The current leader of HTS, **Abu Mohammad al-Julani**, has been tied to al-Qaeda since at least 2003 when he joined them as a fighter during the Iraq War. During that time, he was captured and detained in Camp Bucca with Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. After their release, al-Julani was committed to al-Baghdadi and to AQI, leading AQI operations in the Mosul province, before al-Julani was sent to establish an al-Qaeda presence in Syria in 2011 (Joscelyn, 2013). Since his time as leader of HTS, al-Julani has worked to move the group away from being labeled an extremist organization and into a moderate Islamist group focused on local, pragmatic issues (Enab Baladi, 2019). More recently, al-Julani has faced criticism from the former HTS leader Hashim al-Sheikh, who has maintained a vocal presence even after leaving the group. As al-Julani works to expand HTS’s reach, he has spoken about the group’s local support of Sunnis and works to ensure they do not become a religious minority in Syria and the greater Middle East even if this means crossing “religious aisles” to do so (al-Tamimi, 2020). This exemplifies al-Julani’s interest in winning popular support over ideological purity.

Before his appointment, little was known about ISIL’s current leader, **Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi** (also known as al-Mawli al-Sabli). It has been suggested that the last name, “al-Hashimi al-Qurashi,” was adopted to create the appearance of a lineage to the Prophet Mohammad. Regardless, reports from Chulov and Rasool (2020) suggest that al-Hashimi al-Qurashi has been involved with al-Qaeda since the early 2000s before leaving the position to become an officer in Saddam Hussein’s Iraqi army. In 2004, he was captured and sent to Camp Bucca, where he met with al-Baghdadi. Later, al-Hashimi al-Qurashi joined ISIL, where he rose through the ranks due to his religious education (he reportedly holds a degree in sharia law from Mosul University) and became an ideological leader within the group. There is evidence that al-Hashimi al-Qurashi played a key role in decreeing the massacre of Yazidis in Iraq and was later given the nickname “The Destroyer” for his harsh policies (Chulov & Rasool, 2020). Based on his ideological background, al-Hashimi al-Qurashi will likely continue many of the precedents set by al-Baghdadi of meriting the actions of ISIL on religious terms. Furthermore, his track record with issuing the decree to validate the massacre of the Yazidis points to his upholding, if not furthering, ISIL’s policy of ethnic cleansing and strict adherence to Islamic fundamentalism.

Table 2. VEO Leaders and Background (Present)

VEO Name	Current Leader
HTS	Abu Mohammad al-Julani
ISIL	Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi
IS-SP	Abu Hajar al-Hashemi
Jaish al-Adl	Salahuddin Farooqui
Lebanese Hezbollah	Hassan Nasrallah

Little is known about the current IS-SP leader, **Abu Hajar al-Hashemi**. Reports have indicated that he may have previously served as an officer within the Iraq army before joining ISIL’s predecessor Tawheed and Jihad (Egypt Today, 2017). Despite this military background, al-Hashemi has displayed a “positive and welcoming attitude towards Sinai residents,” highlighting their strength and honor. He also mentions in an interview with ISIL’s *Al-Naba* news bulletin how IS-SP was the “protective shield” for the Sinai province and that his men would give their life for the people of Sinai (Green, 2017).

This suggests that al-Hashemi is attempting to win over the local populous by appealing to the people within Sinai as opposed to a more global approach.

Salahuddin Farooqui is the shadowy leader of the Jaish al-Adl group. Little is known about the leader beside his vocal opposition to Iranian involvement in Syria and the backing of al-Assad's regime (France24, 2019). Farooqui has been consistent that the organization only is fighting for the support of Sunnis and ethnic Balochs in the region. In an interview with Al Arabiya, he actively denied any links to ISIL or al-Qaeda (Hameed, 2014)

The leadership of Lebanese Hezbollah is highly religious. Lebanese Hezbollah has always stated its *raison d'être* as the protection and face of Shi'ites in Lebanon. By maintaining their religious leadership, Lebanese Hezbollah holds onto their political leadership within the Lebanese government and continues to pursue policies that further the support of Shi'ites within the country (Alami, 2018).

Hassan Nasrallah has been the leader of Lebanese Hezbollah for almost 30 years. More recently, he has stepped back his public appearances and allowed his deputy, **Naim Qassem**, to take on a more public role. Qassem directs the political wing within Lebanon Hezbollah, meaning he had led the recent push for increasing involvement in Lebanese politics. **Hashem Safieddine** is also an important figure in Lebanese Hezbollah. As the head of the Executive Assembly, Safieddine leads the domestic affairs of Lebanese Hezbollah, directing both Lebanese Hezbollah's political affairs and social and economic programs. Safieddine, a first cousin of Nasrallah, attended seminary in Iraq and Iran, later returning to Iran for leadership training. His father is currently in Iran, acting as Lebanese Hezbollah's liaison for Iranian relations. The close relationship that Safieddine has with Iran, with both a passive and active influence, means that even with Iran decreasing funding for Hezbollah, Iranian interests will continue to shape the group (Sly & Haidamous, 2019).

Tactical Pattern

Tables 3-9 highlight different tactical patterns for each of the five VEOs from 2013 through 2018.² The data were supplied by the GTD.³ For both HTS and IS-SP, we included attacks associated with their previous organizational names, Al Nusra Front and Ansar Beit al-Maqdis, respectfully. Beginning with Table 3, there are four important findings to point out. First, ISIL was by far the most violent and accounted for 88% of all attacks across the five VEOs from 2013 through 2018. While this should come as no surprise, it is important to put the sheer volume of ISIL's violence in perspective. Second, HTS and IS-SP are in the middle-tier in terms of the number of attacks across the five VEOs. More

² We selected 2013 as the starting point since this was the year the ISIL officially broke off from Al-Qaeda and operated as a standalone group. In addition, 2018 was the end since this was the last year collected by the GTD at the time of this study.

³ We excluded attacks that were defined as other crime types (e.g., guerrilla warfare) as well as attacks in which there was doubt regarding who perpetrated the attack.

specifically, HTS and their predecessor groups accounted for roughly 4% of all attacks, while IS-SP and their predecessor groups accounted for about 7% of all attacks.

Table 3. Number of Total Attacks (2013-2018)

Year	HTS	ISIL	IS-SP	Jaish al-Adl	Lebanese Hezbollah
2013	25	196	12	4	1
2014	55	1000	56	3	3
2015	64	951	109	2	2
2016	60	1148	95	0	0
2017	30	995	86	1	2
2018	7	534	24	1	1

The third finding to glean from Table 3 is that Hezbollah and Jaish al-Adl were by far the least violent in terms of the number of attacks attributed directly to them. Both organizations accounted for less than 1% of attacks of the VEOs examined. However, it should be noted that Lebanese Hezbollah accounts for 8,000 fighters in the Shia Liberation Army (SLA)⁴. Finally, Table 3 illustrates that violence, as a whole, began increasing in 2014 and 2015, peaked in 2016, and started decreasing in 2017 and 2018. This trend is consistent with overall terrorist attack trends worldwide (Miller, 2019) and is mostly driven by the rise and decline of ISIL. The total number of attacks per VEOs shown on Table 3 are important to remember as we proceed and discuss other violence-related outcomes.

Next, Table 4 illustrates the total number of victim-only fatalities and the average number of fatalities per attack from 2013 through 2018. Unsurprisingly, ISIL was the most lethal of the five VEOs,

Table 4. Number of Victim-Only Fatalities (2013-2018)

Year	HTS	ISIL	IS-SP	Jaish al-Adl	Lebanese Hezbollah
2013	354 (14.2)	635 (3.2)	37 (3.1)	31 (7.8)	0
2014	445 (8.1)	5753 (5.8)	61 (1.1)	5 (1.7)	1 (.33)
2015	646 (10.1)	4502 (4.7)	377 (3.5)	8 (4.0)	6 (3)
2016	141 (2.4)	6307 (5.5)	117 (1.2)	0	0
2017	297 (9.9)	3341 (3.4)	442 (5.1)	10 (10.0)	3 (1.5)
2018	15 (2.1)	1051 (2.0)	35 (1.5)	0	0

The values in parentheses reflect the average number of victims killed per attack.

followed by HTS and IS-SP. Hezbollah and Jaish al-Adl accounted for very few fatalities between 2013 and 2018. Perhaps the most interesting finding on Table 4 is not the total number of fatalities but the average number of fatalities per attack, which is an indicator of tactical efficiency. Excluding Hezbollah and Jaish al-Adl due to their low number of attacks, Table 4 suggests that HTS is the most tactically efficient VEOs. For example, Al Nusra Front (HTS's predecessor) averaged more than ten victim fatalities per attack in 2013 and 2015. In 2017, after the formation of HTS, the organization

⁴ Matthew Levitt writes extensively about the nature of Lebanese Hezbollah as a highly trained fighting contingent of the Shia Liberation Army, functioning as a recruiter and trainer of forces in Arab-speaking countries. For the purposes of this analysis, we only included attacks directly attributed to each group.

averaged just under ten victim fatalities per attack. In contrast, ISIL and IS-SP were not nearly as tactically efficient as HTS despite the sheer number of fatalities attributed to both VEOs. Based on the degree to tactically efficiency illustrated by HTS, the organization likely engages in high levels of planning and coordination when committing an attack.

Next, Tables 5-9 focuses on indicators of expertise and tactical complexity among the five VEOs. These indicators of tactical expertise and complexity include attacks on hard targets, tactical, targets, and geographic diversity, and sequentially linked attacks. For example, Table 5 shows the number and proportion of attacks on hard targets for each VEO over time. Hard targets consist of military, police, and government targets. Unlike soft targets, these target types are often well guarded and have the capacity to fight back against a terrorist attack. As such, attacks on hard targets require a high degree of planning, creativity, coordination, and expertise (Logan, Ligon, and Derrick, 2019).

There are three interesting findings from Table 5 to discuss — first, Jaish al-Adl and IS-SP attack hard targets at a relatively high rate. Jaish al-Adl only targets hard targets. These attacks were primarily focused on Iranian targets such as the Iranian National Police Force, the Iran Border Guard Police, and the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps. IS-SP has also shown a propensity to strike hard targets. For example, IS-SP attacked hard targets in over 60% of their total attacks in three of the six-years between 2013 and 2018. This suggests that these VEOs have an organizational commitment to attacking hard targets and require expertise in their ranks.

Table 5. Number of Attacks on Hard Targets (2013-2018)

Year	HTS	ISIL	IS-SP	Jaish al-Adl	Lebanese Hezbollah
2013	14 (56%)	39 (20%)	8 (67%)	4 (100%)	0
2014	14 (25%)	321 (32%)	23 (41%)	3 (100%)	1 (33%)
2015	33 (52%)	288 (30%)	75 (69%)	2 (100%)	0
2016	5 (8%)	213 (19%)	63 (66%)	0	0
2017	6 (20%)	193 (19%)	40 (47%)	1 (100%)	0
2018	0	167 (31%)	11 (46%)	1 (100%)	0

The values in parentheses reflect the average number of victim fatalities per attack.

The second important finding to discuss is the relationships between the proportion of attacks on hard targets and overall lethality for ISIL and HTS. More specifically, in 2015, HTS attacked hard targets in 52% of their attacks. That year, 2015, was also HTS’s most lethal year (see Table 4). In contrast, ISIL’s most lethal year was 2016. During that time, ISIL attacked hard targets in 19% of their total attacks. Together, this suggests that HTS is tactically effective despite a large proportion of their violence being on hard targets. In contrast, ISIL attacked hard targets at a very low rate in their most violent year, suggesting they focused on easier, more opportunistic targets. The third and final finding from Table 5 is that Hezbollah rarely struck hard targets. This is likely a function of their violence being constrained due to their partnership with Iran.

Table 6 shows the number of tactics used by each VEOs from 2013 through 2018. Excluding attacks coded as unknown, there are eight different attack type categories coded in the GTD, including, but not limited to, assassination, armed assault, bombing/explosion, and kidnapping. Each VEO’s score on Table 6 represents the number of different tactics used by that organization for that particular year.

There are two important findings to discuss from Table 6. First, ISIL and IS-SP are the most tactically diverse, while Jaish al-Adl and Hezbollah are the least diverse. According to Horowitz and colleagues (2018), “diversification [of tactics] increases flexibility, unpredictability, and complicates adversary calculations, but embracing diversification is risky because it requires resources that can tax an organization while distracting from developed capabilities” (pg. 143). The tactical diversity illustrated by ISIL and IS-SP suggests that both VEOs operated in an environment that valued experimentation of tactics and, more importantly, both VEOs had the resources to invest in tactical diversification. For Lebanese Hezbollah, we suspect their lack of diversification was a function of their goals as opposed to their resources. However, we also suspect that Jaish al-Adl lacked tactical diversity due to a lack of resources in combination with their singular focused goals. The second finding from Table 6 is that HTS showed relatively high degrees of tactical diversity until 2018. We suspect this shift is a function of HTS’s change in strategy, causing an overall decrease in violence and tactics.

Table 6. Tactical Diversity (2013-2018)

Year	HTS	ISIL	IS-SP	Jaish al-Adl	Lebanese Hezbollah
2013	5	5	3	1	1
2014	5	7	4	3	1
2015	5	6	6	2	1
2016	4	6	6	0	0
2017	5	6	5	1	2
2018	2	6	5	1	1

The values reflect the number of different tactics used by each VEO over time.

Table 7 shows the number of targets attacked by each VEOs from 2013 through 2018. Excluding targets coded as unknown, there are twenty-one different target types coded in the GTD, including,

Table 7. Target Diversity (2013-2018)

Year	HTS	ISIL	IS-SP	Jaish al-Adl	Lebanese Hezbollah
2013	8	12	5	2	1
2014	11	16	11	1	1
2015	9	16	11	1	1
2016	6	16	10	0	0
2017	7	15	11	1	1
2018	3	13	7	1	1

The values reflect the number of different targets attacked by each VEO over time.

but not limited to, military, educational institutions, tourists, utilities, transportation, and private civilians. Each VEO’s score on Table 7 represents the number of different target types attacked by for that particular year. Like tactical diversity, the findings suggest that ISIL and IS-SP attack the broadest range of target types, while Jaish al-Adl and Lebanese Hezbollah lack target diversity. Furthermore, HTS saw a significant drop-off in target diversity in 2018 compared to previous years. Since target selection is mostly driven by an organization’s ideology and goals (Drake, 1998), ISIL and IS-SP’s target diversification is likely a function of their expansive-global ideology, while Jaish al-Adl and Lebanese Hezbollah lack of diversity are due to their proximal goals. HTS’s decline in target diversity is likely due to their shift away from Al Qaeda and towards a more pragmatic ideological narrative.

Table 8 shows the number of countries each VEO committed an attack from 2013 through 2018. The findings from Table 8 are straightforward: ISIL has the broadest geographical influence while the remaining VEO's influence is much more concentrated. This is consistent with ISIL goal of becoming a prominent "brand" in the Global Jihadi Industry and the ability to instruct and inspire violence globally (Logan, Ligon, and Derrick, 2016). Violence from each of the other VEOs was concentrated in and around their primary country of operation. For instance, violence perpetrated by IS-SP was limited to Egypt, Israel, and the West Bank/Gaza Strip.

Table 8. Geographical Diversity (2013-2018)

Year	HTS	ISIL	IS-SP	Jaish al-Adl	Lebanese Hezbollah
2013	3	3	2	1	1
2014	2	8	2	1	2
2015	1	9	2	1	1
2016	1	15	1	0	0
2017	2	10	3	1	1
2018	1	6	1	1	1

The values reflect the number of different countries each VEO perpetrated an attack in from 2013 through 2018.

Lastly, Table 9 illustrates the number and proportion of attacks that are part of a larger set of sequentially linked attacks for each VEO overtime. Sequential attacks are suggestive of a high degree of planning and intra-organizational collaboration in order to execute successfully. Findings from

Table 9. Number of Sequential Attacks (2013-2018)

Year	HTS	ISIL	IS-SP	Jaish al-Adl	Lebanese Hezbollah
2013	4 (16%)	140 (71%)	3 (25%)	0	0
2014	21 (38%)	434 (43%)	12 (21%)	0	0
2015	36 (56%)	277 (29%)	28 (26%)	0	0
2016	32 (53%)	312 (27%)	9 (9%)	0	0
2017	10 (33%)	271 (27%)	17 (20%)	0	0
2018	2 (29%)	85 (16%)	2 (8%)	0	0

The values reflect the number and proportion of sequential attacks (attacks connected over time or space) per VEO overtime.

Table 9 indicate the HTS (and their predecessor group) consistently engaged in the highest rate of sequentially linked attacks of the five VEOs. Consistent with previous trends, HTS did experience a decline in sequential attacks in 2018 relative to previous years. ISIL had the highest raw number of sequential attacks over time; however, coordinated attacks did not make-up a large percentage of their tactical profile in any given year (with the exception of 2013). The proportion of sequential attacks for IS-SP was also relatively low (< 25%), and Jaish al-Adl and Lebanese Hezbollah had no sequential attacks from 2013. 2018. In conclusion, sequential coordinated attacks are a consistent part of HTS's tactical repertoire despite their general decrease in violence. This provides further evidence of HTS's tactical expertise and complexity.

Conclusions

The goal of this effort was to examine the organizational sophistication, leadership, and attack patterns of five high-priority VEOs operating in the CENTCOM AOR. In doing so, we hope to provide counter-terrorism planners with insights into the strategic and tactical capabilities of these VEOs. Table 10 illustrates our research team’s summary of each of the five VEOs’ level of threat to US interests, existing barriers or constraints to violence against US interests, and potential triggers or exacerbators to violence against US interests.

First, based on our analysis, ISIL has the highest threat level at present of the five VEOs. Despite their organizational restructuring and change in leadership, ISIL maintains an active military presence in al-Anbar desert and rural areas in central Syria. Unlike the complex military operations during their height of power, much of ISIL's present capabilities focus on hit-and-run tactics perpetrated by covert cells due to their resource shortages (Hassan, 2020). While less sophisticated, the remaining ISIL fighters are an active threat to US and Coalition forces operating in the region. Perhaps the most significant threat related to ISIL is not in the CENTCOM AOR but West Africa and South East Asia. Recent reports suggest that ISIL has increased its presence in countries such as Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso in West Africa (Paquette & Warrick, 2020). Furthermore, there is a potential for ISIL to grow its insurgency in the Philippines, given the recent withdrawal of the Philippines from its Security Pact with the United States (Strand, 2020).

Table 10. Strategic Analysis of VEOs Relative to US Interests

VEO	Current Threat Level	Constraints and/or Barriers	Potential Triggers
HTS	Moderate	Strategic focus on the Syrian Regime and their allies; Ideological shift away from Al Qaeda	Gaining a more significant territorial foothold in Syria allowing for more planning and complex operations
ISIL	High	Loss of territorial control and resources across Syria and Iraq; Death of al-Baghdadi	Globalization of ideology; Inspired violence in the Homeland or on US target abroad; Relocation to Africa or Southeast Asia
IS-SP	Moderate	Strategic focus on the Egyptian Regime; Resource constraints due to Isolation of Sinai Peninsula	Continued punitive strategies employed by Egyptian Security Services fueling local grievances and recruitment
Jaish al-Adl	Low	Strategic focus on Iran; No identifiable grievance with the United States	None
Lebanese Hezbollah	Moderate	Relationship with the Iranian Regime; goals of SLA	Direct conflict between Iran and the United States

Next, HTS, IS-SP, and Lebanese Hezbollah were rated as a moderate threat level to US interests. HTS is currently trying to “Syrianize,” protect their territory in the Idlib Province of Syria and shed their Al Qaeda identity (Al Kanj, 2019). Currently, much of HTS’ violence focuses on protecting their territorial interests against the Syrian Regime. What is unknown, however, is whether HTS will keep their distance from Al Qaeda in the future. However, there is some evidence that HTS will struggle to survive as an organization without future sponsorship from a state or non-state actor. In a recent interview, HTS leader al-Julani stated that Syrian rebel factions, including HTS, lack organization concerning coordinating soldiers and equipment (MEMRI JTTM, 2020).

Next, concerning IS-SP, the Egyptian government has been cracking down on the Sinai Peninsula in recent months in response to IS-SP violence. Despite this, IS-SP has had continued success against Egyptian Security Services. As discontent grows among the local population – primarily due to the tactics of Egyptian Security Services – IS-SP is likely to continue to expand their operations (Horton, 2017). However, at present, IS-SP is only a moderate threat to US interests as they focus on violence against the Egyptian Regime.

Next, Lebanese Hezbollah was rated as having a moderate threat level. Of the five VEOs, there is no doubt that Hezbollah is the most operationally capable and greatest direct threat to US interests. However, Hezbollah is also the most constrained VEO, given its linkage to the Iranian Regime and the Lebanese government. Outside of direct warfare, direct violence against US interests is too risky for Hezbollah or the Iranian Regime, and the role of the Hezbollah in the Lebanese government is too integral to the mission of expanding Iran's influence. If recent protests are any indication, Hezbollah is more concerned with their influence and appearance in Lebanese politics than regional combat (Vohra, 2020). However, there is still evidence that they continue to support instability via recruiting, training, and equipping missions with other members of the SLA⁵. Finally, Jaish al-Adl was rated as a low threat to US interests. No reports suggest that the group has any outstanding grievances against the US. Instead, Jaish al-Adl is likely to continue covert operations on Iranian forces.

⁵ Uskowi (2018) describes the Iranian terror network as one that allows Lebanese Hezbollah to maintain its political position while still supporting destabilization of Coalition Forces in the USCENTCOM AOR.

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