



COMBATING TERRORISM CENTER AT WEST POINT

# CTC SENTINEL

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## About the CTC Sentinel

The Combating Terrorism Center is an independent educational and research institution based in the Department of Social Sciences at the United States Military Academy, West Point. The CTC Sentinel harnesses the Center's global network of scholars and practitioners to understand and confront contemporary threats posed by terrorism and other forms of political violence.

The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and not of the U.S. Military Academy, the Department of the Army, or any other agency of the U.S. Government.

# The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant: More than Just a June Surprise

By Daniel Milton, Bryan Price and Muhammad al-` Ubaydi



A spokesman for Baghdad Operations Command discusses the state of Iraqi security forces on June 22, 2014. - Washington Post/Getty

ON JUNE 29, 2014, the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) declared a caliphate in territories it holds in Iraq and Syria.<sup>1</sup> In the past few weeks, the world has watched as the rapid advance of the ISIL has offered a serious and significant challenge to the stability of Iraq. Combined with the announcement from President Barack Obama about the deployment of 300 U.S. military advisers to help combat the threat posed by the ISIL, the quickly evolving nature of the crisis has focused public attention more on recent developments.

While the importance of understanding the ISIL's current actions is clear, it is also critical to understand the group's past actions. Indeed, the ISIL has deep

roots in Iraq, going back as early as 2002, when the leader of the ISIL's predecessor group, Abu Mus`ab al-Zarqawi, set up operations in Baghdad.<sup>2</sup> In 2004, al-Zarqawi pledged *bay`a* to Usama bin Ladin and his group became known as al-Qa`ida in Iraq (AQI).<sup>3</sup> During its existence, AQI conducted numerous attacks against coalition forces, but it was Iraqis who bore the brunt of the campaign.<sup>4</sup>

2 U.S. Intelligence Community's Prewar Intelligence Assessments on Iraq S 108-301, U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, 2004, pp. 337-338.

3 "Al-Qaeda in Iraq," U.S. National Counterterrorism Center, available at [www.nctc.gov/site/groups/aqi.html](http://www.nctc.gov/site/groups/aqi.html).

4 Scott Helfstein, Nassir Abdullah, and Muhammad al-Obaidi, *Deadly Vanguard: A Study of al-Qa`ida's Violence Against Muslims* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2009). Separately, while AQI is the commonly-used name for al-Zarqawi's organization after it joined al-Qa`ida, the group refers to itself as al-Qa`ida in Meso-

1 Together with the declaration of a caliphate, the ISIL also shortened its name to the "Islamic State."

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Since al-Zarqawi's death from a U.S. airstrike in Iraq on June 7, 2006, AQI has undergone several changes. In late 2006, al-Zarqawi's successor declared the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) and AQI came to be known by that name from that time forward. Finally, in April 2013, the leader of the ISI, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, announced in an audio message that his group was merging with Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) in Syria to form the "Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham."<sup>5</sup> This merger triggered a public rift between JN and Ayman al-Zawahiri on one side and the ISIL on the other.<sup>6</sup> In the end, al-Qa`ida and JN broke from the ISIL, leaving the ISIL to operate on its own.

This article offers a recent operational history of the ISIL. It relies on a new source of data: the words of the ISIL itself. The ISIL has published an extensive listing of its operations from November 2012-November 2013, including where and how each of its operations were carried out.<sup>7</sup> Reviewing this record, particularly given the ISIL's recent actions in Iraq, allows the examination of the ISIL from a different perspective. Indeed, this brief exploration of the ISIL's actions demonstrates that the events of the past few weeks are not surprising, but consistent with the ISIL's activities during the past year. The sheer number of successful ISIL operations between November 2012-November 2013 suggests that a limited military solution that rolls the ISIL back to its pre-May 2014 state will not eliminate the threat posed by the group in the future.

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<sup>5</sup> This is the name used by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in this statement. This article uses ISIL to refer to the same group. See "Iraqi al-Qaeda and Syrian Group 'Merge,'" al-Jazira, April 9, 2013.

<sup>6</sup> Nelly Lahoud and Muhammad al-`Ubaydi, "The War of Jihadists Against Jihadists in Syria," *CTC Sentinel* 7:3 (2014); "Al-Qaeda's Zawahiri Disbands Main Faction Operating in Syria," al-Arabiya, November 9, 2013.

<sup>7</sup> This is not the first article to make use of the ISIL's "annual report." See Alex Bilger, "Backgrounder: ISIL Annual Reports Reveal a Metrics-Driven Military Command," Institute for the Study of War, May 22, 2014. This article builds on Bilger's work with the insight of recent events, as well as with a dedicated effort to corroborate what the ISIL puts in its annual report using local media sources.

**The ISIL in its Own Words**

One interesting characteristic of the ISIL is that it has placed a large amount of information in the public sphere to further its goals. This section presents some of that information in an effort to contextualize the ISIL's success and illustrate its actions in the year leading up to June 2014.

In early April 2014, the ISIL posted a 410-page document through the Twitter account of its media arm—al-I`tisam Establishment for Media Production—that listed each of its operations in detail from November 2012-November 2013.<sup>8</sup> It is worth noting that, in addition to publishing their attack data on an annual basis, the ISIL also posts attack information in the hours and days after an attack to their Twitter feed. Such a public and real-time accounting by a terrorist organization is rare and highlights the ISIL's savvy propaganda campaign as it seeks to spread fear, attract recruits, and raise money.

Before presenting some of the descriptive statistics from the ISIL's annual report, it is important to recognize that the report is ISIL propaganda. Terrorist organizations like the ISIL often publicize their attacks for their own self-interested reasons.<sup>9</sup> Whether to gain a competitive advantage over other organizations or simply to spread more fear, terrorist groups have powerful incentives to exaggerate their activities and their capabilities. For example, the Afghan Taliban claimed to have killed more than 5,000 foreign troops during 2008, a number 20 times higher than the actual figure.<sup>10</sup>

Because of this dynamic, the authors were understandably skeptical about the validity of the casualty and attack numbers in the ISIL report. To offer some assessment of the veracity of the report, the authors took a small sample

<sup>8</sup> This time period corresponds with one year in the Hijri calendar (1434), which started in the middle of November 2012.

<sup>9</sup> For an excellent discussion and analysis on why groups claim credit for attacks, see Aaron M. Hoffman, "Voice and Silence: Why Groups Take Credit for Acts of Terror," *Journal of Peace Research* 47:5 (2010): pp. 615-626.

<sup>10</sup> Jason Straziuso and Rahim Faiez, "Taliban Whopper: 5,220 Foreign Troops Killed," *Army Times*, January 5, 2009.

of the ISIL's attacks (those which occurred in Baghdad) and attempted to find corroborating evidence in various media reports. One of the challenges highlighted in the previous section is that international media attention on this group and its activities in Iraq was at a low-point during this period of time. This forced a reliance on local Iraqi media sources, where questions of accuracy and the government's own incentives come into play.

Of the 345 attacks that the ISIL says took place in Baghdad during the November 2012-November 2013 timeframe, the authors found a media match in 198 cases (57.39%). Before it can be determined whether the ISIL overstated its operations, the possibility that the media systematically overlooked incidents and failed to report on many operations must be considered. If underreporting was a factor, then the media would have likely underreported minor attacks that produced small numbers of casualties. Indeed, of the ISIL operations for which no media match could be found, 85% produced fewer than three casualties. Therefore, even though the possibility exists that the ISIL exaggerated the number of operations it conducted, the media has also likely underreported the number of their attacks.

Province	Number of Operations (%)
Baghdad	346 (4.5%)
Ninawa	2765 (36%)
The South*	716 (9.3%)
Diyala	896 (11.7%)
al-Anbar	1067 (13.9%)
Salah al-Din & N. Baghdad	1509 (19.6%)
Kirkuk	382 (5%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>7681</b>

Table 1. Purported ISIL Attacks by Province.

\* This does not refer to the entire southern half of Iraq (Basra, Najaf, etc.). Rather, when the ISIL refers to "The South," they are referring to an area that includes the very southern neighborhoods of Baghdad, to include the portions of Babil, Karbala, and Wasit provinces that border Baghdad.

By examining the 198 instances in which corroborating media stories about the ISIL's purported attacks were found, it is possible to address the question of whether the ISIL

	Baghdad	Ninawa	The South	Diyala	al-Anbar	Salah al-Din	Kirkuk	Total
Martyrdom Operations (VBIEDs)	1	23	2	6	18	11	17	78
Martyrdom Operations (Explosive Belts)	81	11	7	11	21	24	5	160
Parked VBIED	251	27	125	38	23	47	26	537
Parked VBIED (Motorcycles)	1	0	1	2	4	4	2	14
Other IEDs	78	1672	370	555	617	931	242	4465
Breaking in	73	69	53	19	48	50	24	336
Assassinations and Eliminations	95	438	130	78	108	202	32	1083
Shelling	8	132	59	96	146	158	12	611
<b>Total</b>	<b>588</b>	<b>2372</b>	<b>747</b>	<b>805</b>	<b>985</b>	<b>1427</b>	<b>360</b>	

Table 2. ISIL's Self-Reported Operations By Province, November 2012-November 2013.<sup>11</sup>

exaggerated its casualty count. Within these 198 operations, the average number of casualties as reported by the ISIL is 25.95, while the media reported an average of 21.47. Of course, it is not clear if this is a result of the ISIL exaggerating figures, media under-counting, or a combination of the two.<sup>12</sup> What is relatively surprising, however, is the fact that the numbers are as close as they are. If the ISIL were padding its numbers, one would expect to see a larger discrepancy.

Up until this point, the descriptive statistics presented have focused only on the figures that could be extracted from the ISIL's report of its Baghdad operations. As one might imagine, the numbers tell a far more sobering tale when considered in the aggregate across the entire country. Table 1 shows

<sup>11</sup> A number of categories were dropped to streamline the presentation. For example, in Ninawa there were four reports of "sniping," as well as "dozens" of reports of "the removal of cameras spying on Muslims." Neither of these categories appeared in all of the other provinces. For the "Other IED" category, the ISIL does not just employ large-scale IEDs. It also, particularly when targeting individuals, uses smaller IEDs that can be attached to the undercarriage of a car or thrown at a particular target. In the document summarizing their operations, the ISIL refers to these IEDs as "explosive, sticky, flying, etc." For the "Assassinations and Eliminations" category, the ISIL notes that these were operations conducted "using silenced weapons, normal weapons or cold weapons."

<sup>12</sup> It should be noted that this second possibility cannot be discounted. A number of media stories relied on casualty figures from local police, the Interior Ministry, or other government sources. Each of these actors has an incentive to downplay the magnitude of violence.

the aggregate numbers of operations that the ISIL claims to have carried out across several Iraqi provinces in a one-year span from November 2012-November 2013.

At the aggregate level, the ISIL purportedly conducted the fewest attacks in Baghdad and the most in Ninawa Province, the latter of which includes Mosul where the events of this month captured the world's attention. In this context, the ISIL's recent success in June 2014 was not an anomaly, but a continuation of the group's proven organizational capability over several years.

In light of the group's rapid advance through northern and western Iraq in June, one interpretation of the data in Table 1 suggests that the ISIL purposefully focused the majority of its operations in Ninawa and Salah al-Din in 2013 (~57% of their attacks) to prep the battlefield for its June 2014 assault. The purpose of these attacks may have been to soften the government's defenses and lay a psychological foundation of fear and intimidation in these specific provinces prior to the campaign. Another theory suggests that the ISIL chose to advance on Baghdad from north to south via Mosul, Tikrit, and Samarra rather than from west to east through Anbar Province because it enjoyed more operational success in Ninawa and Salah al-Din provinces in 2012-2013. Like any good business wanting to reinforce success and exploit operational gains earned in the past, the ISIL may have chosen the north to south axis simply because

it enjoyed the most success in that area during the past year.

The ISIL also broke down its purported operations by attack type. This data is presented in Table 2. The group accounted for every time it used a different weapon during an operation. For example, if the ISIL detonated a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED) and simultaneously launched a mortar attack, it then accounted for both the VBIED and the mortar attack as separate operations. The ISIL also recorded the types of attack by province. This breakdown of operations provides additional insight into the ISIL's operational capability and organizational priorities.

The data also offers insight into the ISIL's strategy in the year leading up to its 2014 advance. For example, "parked VBIEDs" were a key component of the ISIL's strategy in Baghdad. Assuming this count to be comprehensive, about 47% of all parked VBIEDs it used during this period of time were in Baghdad. This stands in stark contrast to Ninawa, where other types of IEDs were primarily used. It is also worth noting that, particularly in Ninawa, the ISIL employed a strategy of intimidation and coercion through more personal assassinations using small arms. This strategy appears to have paid off, as month after month of these types of tactics against security forces and civilians may have contributed to the military's willingness to drop their arms, shed their uniforms, and flee.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Bryan Price, Dan Milton and Muhammad al-'Ubaydi, "Al-Baghdadi's Blitzkrieg, ISIL's Psychological Warfare,

The data presented in Table 2 also reveals the extent of the logistical network that the ISIL has built to support these operations. For example, the use of a VBIED involves the purchase of a vehicle and explosives. Often, the actual execution of an operation may include a team that

**“Given the preceding analysis of the ISIL’s record of its own actions from November 2012-November 2013, it is clear that returning to the status quo ante bellum will not eliminate the threat posed by the ISIL in the future.”**

positions the VBIED, another one that films the operation, and follow-up reconnaissance to assess the success or failure of the operation. Each of these individuals likely receives some financial incentive from the ISIL, if not a salary.<sup>14</sup> Given that the ISIL claims to have conducted an average of more than one VBIED attack per day during the course of a year, this is an astonishing feat from an organizational perspective.

The cost of such operations is not inexpensive. The total cost of a VBIED ranges from several thousand at the lowest end to over \$15,000.<sup>15</sup> Focusing

and What It Means for Syria and Iraq,” *Combating Terrorism Center*, June 12, 2014; Liz Sly and Ahmed Ramadan, “Insurgents Seize Iraqi City of Mosul as Security Forces Flee,” *Washington Post*, June 10, 2014.

<sup>14</sup> Salary numbers of ISIL fighters/personnel are hard to assess in the current environment. Based on captured documents, however, salaries were paid in the past. For details, see “ISI Fighter Registry March-April 2007 (English Translation),” *Combating Terrorism Center*, Harmony Program, undated. In addition, current reporting suggests that the ISIL continues to pay competitive salaries and death benefits to its members in a more reliable fashion than the Iraqi Army. See Mitchell Hartman, “ISIL Gets Rich in Attack on Iraq’s Cities,” *Marketplace*, June 13, 2014.

<sup>15</sup> Spencer Ackerman, “\$265 Bomb, \$300 Billion War: The Economics of the 9/11 Era’s Signature Weapon,”

on the cost of the vehicles alone, several thousand dollars for 537 parked VBIEDs means that the ISIL spent millions of dollars on these operations from November 2012-November 2013.<sup>16</sup> Add to that the salaries of those involved in planning, preparing, and executing the operation, and it is apparent that this organization has been well-funded for years. After raiding Mosul’s central bank and stealing an estimated \$429 million in June 2014, one report speculated that the ISIL may now be sitting on nearly \$1.5 billion in assets.<sup>17</sup>

**Avoiding Going Back to the Future**

Sun Tzu stated that “he who lacks foresight and underestimates his enemy will surely be captured by him.”<sup>18</sup> The ISIL, as an organization, has existed in some form or another for a number of years. It has undergone many changes since its inception, however, which have allowed it to become a very active and capable terrorist organization. In attempts to understand the ISIL and to avoid the shortcomings identified by Sun Tzu, it is critical not just to focus on recent actions, but also on what the group has done in the past.

The sharp and sudden focus on the ISIL’s recent advances alone may lead some policymakers to seek an attractive but unwise solution to the problem at hand: simply roll the ISIL back to where it was on May 31, 2014.

*Wired*, September 8, 2011; Tom Vanden Brook, “Afghan Bomb Makers Shifting to New Explosives for IEDs,” *USA Today*, June 25, 2013; “Car Bombs: History and Facts,” *Sky News*, February 24, 2014.

<sup>16</sup> Of course, one may argue that the group need not spend money on the vehicles and instead just steal them. The authors do not have evidence to determine the primary mode of acquisition of vehicles for VBIEDS. Theft of a vehicle that will later be used in an operation, however, carries risks for a terrorist group of having the plot discovered beforehand and/or unnecessarily raising the awareness of security forces. For a group with no shortage of money available, this seems an unwise course of action. Even if they were to steal them, there would be some cost associated to carry out the theft. The purpose is not to state the primary mode of acquisition, but to offer a crude minimum estimate of the ISIL’s financial capabilities.

<sup>17</sup> Martin Chulov, “How an Arrest in Iraq Revealed Isis’s \$2bn Jihadist Network,” *Guardian*, June 15, 2014.

<sup>18</sup> Sun Tzu, *The Art of War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 122, translated by Samuel G. Griffith.

Given the preceding analysis of the ISIL’s record of its own actions from November 2012-November 2013, it is clear that returning to the *status quo ante bellum* will not eliminate the threat posed by the ISIL in the future. The insights gleaned from the ISIL’s accounting of its operations, even allowing for some exaggeration in their own reporting, indicate the group is more capable, dangerous, and organized than most mainstream media outlets gave it credit for prior to this month’s alarming activity, and it will likely remain so regardless of how the short-term military campaign ends.

*Daniel Milton, Ph.D., is a Research Associate at the Combating Terrorism Center and Assistant Professor in the Department of Social Sciences at the U.S. Military Academy in West Point, NY.*

*Major Bryan Price, Ph.D., is the Director of the Combating Terrorism Center.*

*Muhammad al-`Ubaydi is a research assistant at the Combating Terrorism Center and monitors Arabic jihadist websites.*

*The views presented are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the Department of Defense, the U.S. Army, or any of its subordinate commands.*

## A Glimpse into the Minds of Four Foreign Fighters in Syria

By Vera Mironova and Sam Whitt

SINCE THE SYRIAN conflict began three years ago, thousands of foreigners have entered the country to fight either alongside rebels with the Free Syrian Army (FSA), various Islamist groups including those with links to al-Qa`ida, and pro-government forces loyal to Bashar al-Assad. Although many foreign fighters hail from locations in the Middle East and North Africa, they are also arriving in Syria from the United States, Western Europe, Russia, and Central Asia.

In May 2014, the authors interviewed foreign fighters from Saudi Arabia, France, Algeria, and Russia. This article profiles those four fighters, identifying their goals and motivations, what inspired them to leave their homes and fight in Syria, and what they hoped to achieve by joining radical Islamist groups.<sup>1</sup> Although this article primarily quotes from the French and Saudi fighters, the others expressed similar views. It finds that in contrast to other Syrian-born rebel fighters, civilians, and refugees interviewed as part of a special project<sup>2</sup> during the past year, the foreign fighters are not driven ultimately by a desire for victory against the al-Assad regime. For these four foreign fighters, vengeance against the al-Assad regime is a peripheral concern at best. Rather, disillusioned by life in their home countries, they came to Syria on a mission for spiritual fulfillment. They sought out like-minded idealists to

take part in a violent jihad, which they intend to wage well beyond Syria's borders.

### The Fighters

The foreign fighters interviewed for this article were concerned about revealing personal information that authorities in their home countries could use to identify them. They all refused to reveal their true names or even a *nom de guerre*. The data presented in this article is the most that could be gathered from anecdotal comments pieced together in the course of the interview. In some instances, the authors have incomplete information because the fighter refused to answer the question or did not reveal an answer during the interview.<sup>3</sup>

The Saudi Arabian fighter was born in 1986, is 28-years-old, and unmarried. He once worked in the field of higher education. He is from a wealthy family and even in a combat zone appeared clean and well-dressed, wearing expensive clothing brands.<sup>4</sup> He claims that he lost nearly \$150,000 from investments in the U.S. stock market as a result of the 2008 economic recession. He is a big fan of the soccer teams Real Madrid in Spain and the Al Nasr Team in Saudi Arabia. He is currently fighting with the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). The interview was conducted in Qasab.

The French fighter was born in Toulouse in 1990, is 24-years-old, and has a degree in construction engineering. He says he was born a Christian, but his father is an atheist. As a teenager, he acknowledges that he drank alcohol, was around drugs, and was sexually active at an early age. He converted to Islam at the age of 19, in part as a means of escape from his drug, alcohol, and relationship problems. The following year, he moved to Morocco to marry his first wife, learn Arabic and study the Qur'an. He married his second wife in Syria. He came to Syria through Turkey. He is also currently fighting

with the ISIL. The interview was conducted in Qasab.

The Russian fighter is 29-years-old. He converted to Islam at the age of 21. He says his conversion was influenced by a close Muslim friend, but did not specify the nature of the friendship. He has two Russian wives and two daughters who live in Turkey. He studied at al-Azhar University in Egypt. His family does not know that he is a mujahid; they think that he works for a charity organization. He is a commander in his own "all Russian" brigade. The interview was conducted in the rural area near Idlib.

The Algerian Fighter did not reveal his age. He indicated that he is in his late 30s. He was traveling only with a laptop and a change of clothes. He is currently fighting with Jabhat al-Nusra. The interview was conducted in Turkey.

### "Why Did You Come to Syria?"

Following brief introductions, the foreign fighters explained what compelled them to come to Syria. Their motivations appeared largely divorced from political grievances against the al-Assad regime. Instead, these four fighters are driven primarily by religious motives. Most see the Syrian conflict as a test of their faith and devotion to Islam. They often reference jihad, but it is unclear exactly what jihad means to them in the context of the ongoing violence in Syria and the struggle against al-Assad.

### *Fighter from France*

"In the beginning of 2013 [sic] the Syrian crisis started, and I had already heard that the Levant is a Holy Place, recommended for protection by The Prophet (may prayer and peace be upon Him). It was then that I flew to Turkey and then on into Syria...The easiest thing now is entering Syria. We do not actually say that we are going for jihad [in Syria]. We said that we were going for commercial business or for philanthropic work [in Syria]. No one ever doubted us. Now I am leading the best life, and I am so satisfied with it. Life is all about dignity and pride, which is something I am doing now. I do not live at my own pace in the Western countries because they are racist and they do not believe in the religious freedom. They intervene in my affairs and even prevent me from exercising my religious rites.

1 Interviews were conducted in Idlib and Qasab regions of Syria and in Turkey in May 2014. The authors chose these four fighters because they agreed to be interviewed and to reflect the heterogeneity of people coming to Syria from different parts of the world. All interviews were conducted in Arabic by a local journalist. Because of the dangers involved, the authors were not able to ask all the questions in which they were interested, but only questions that were not considered controversial and would not anger the participant (and as a consequence endanger the interviewer).

2 This article is based on the authors' larger project called Voices of Syria. For more details of the project, see [www.vmironova.net/voices-of-aleppo/](http://www.vmironova.net/voices-of-aleppo/).

3 The foreign fighters often shifted focus from one topic to another in stream of conscious fashion, offering tangential anecdotes along the way, ignoring some questions entirely, and refusing to answer others.

4 As identified by the journalist who was interviewing him.

They sin for 24 hours and seven days a week but they deprive me of a five minute prayer...For example, in France, women are not allowed to wear *niqab* [a cloth that covers the face] which is one of the Islamic dictations. Every single woman caught wearing it is charged 150 euros, whereas if you decide to go out naked, nobody will utter a word about this, claiming it to be 'freedom.' It has turned into a war with Islam, they have a problem with it. It even became a war between Muslims and non-Muslims. All we want is the religious freedom..."

When asked why he joined the ISIL instead of the FSA, he said, "I actually refuse the label 'free army.' This label is invalid because we are not 'free'; we are Muslims, and we are a 'Muslim army.' They [the FSA] are fighting under the banner of democracy and having political purposes. It is undeniable that many of them are good people. All of us are fighting for the same cause, but as 'fighters for the cause of Allah' we are fighting under the banner of Islam [with the ISIL], having nothing to do with politics."

#### *Fighter from Saudi Arabia*

"We cannot talk of an 'army' in my home country [Saudi Arabia]. They are dictators, not Muslims! They are only fighting to preserve thrones [government], not for the cause of Allah...When I told my family that I decided to go to Syria, it depressed them a lot. They were somehow religiously distant...but they could not refuse me, nonetheless! This is what Allah called for. He prescribed fighting for His cause in At-Tawbah and Al-Anfal [chapters of the Qur'an]. My family was mis-conceptualizing Islam; if they take a closer look at Qur'an, in At-Tawbah, they would understand everything. They would be aware that those who do not listen to the call of Allah for jihad would be penalized severely; Allah warned against not responding to the call for jihad, this warning was directed to Muslims, not to disbelievers! Even in the history of Islam, those who did not join with the Messenger in jihad is not forgiven...Also, I was engaged, but I broke off my marriage for the sake of jihad. She [his fiancé] refused to go to Syria so I gave her the freedom to choose. Here, I miss being surrounded by my family, relatives and friends; I miss the places I used to visit. I led a luxurious

life there, but I am more comfortable here. I mean, psychologically speaking, life is better because I am abiding by our Messenger's recommendations (may prayer and peace be upon Him) and fighting for the cause of Allah."

#### *Fighter from Russia*

"I had a Muslim friend, and he told me about Islam and I converted. I was always questioning myself. Why we are here? Why we are alive? But when I converted to Islam I found all the missing answers. I have read the history and nothing convinced me, but just one phrase in Qur'an was enough...The main reason why I came here was that my government [Russia] is fighting against Islam, but in subtle ways. I faced a lot of pressure from my government because I am a converted Muslim. They came to my house several times searching for anything that will harm me but they found nothing. The Russian intelligence always puts pressure on Muslims. Also I have two little girls so I felt terrible when I saw what's going on in Syria, especially with raping women and killing children."

#### **"What Does Jihad Mean to You?"**

Because several of the foreign fighters reference Islam and jihad as a motivation for coming to Syria, they were asked to explain more clearly what they mean by "jihad." The fighters were very animated and emotional when answering this question. Jihad, for them, is an ultimate, purifying expression of faith, culminating in martyrdom and heavenly rewards. Fighting in Syria is a means to a spiritual rather than political end. It fills an existential void.

#### *Fighter from France*

"I am but a contribution to the conquest of Islam, and I also look forward to reach paradise via Al Jihad for the cause of Allah. We are all promised paradise because we listened to the words of Allah. Islam is a really great religion, it includes all aspects of life... it gives meaning to the human life. I have devoted my entire life for jihad. All my bodily parts are wounded. I am only looking up to paradise, is there anything better than this? As for us, we believe in the afterlife, a blissful life in the vicinity of Allah. Martyrdom is probably the shortest way to paradise, which is not something I was told. I did

witness my martyred friends, noticing contentment on their faces and the smell of musk coming out of their corpses, unlike those of the dead disbelievers, the enemies of Allah, whose faces only exhibit ugliness, and corpses smell worse than pigs."

The fighter continued, saying, "I'll give you the example of my friend Abu Ahmed al-Maghrabi, who was martyred by my side. From night till morning, his face still wore a bright smile and his corpse smelled pleasantly. How can we ever cast doubt? The only thing left for us to go through in order to reach paradise is death. We are praying Allah for victory and then martyrdom. We

**"If the Syrian conflict is resolved, the fighters intend to continue their struggle elsewhere, if they are still alive. They see the Syrian war as part of a broader regional struggle."**

will conquer them, God willing, and we will liberate Syria from oppression. God willing, one day, Muslims will gain possession of this land. I am not at all sad, I am rather extremely happy, a happiness that will double up once I get martyred and meet my friends. Thirty-seven of my friends have been martyred in 10 days, and I swear that I did not see any one of them dying without a smile on his face!"

#### *Fighter from Saudi Arabia*

"Usama bin Ladin is the one who revived the notion of jihad. Jihad returned thanks to Allah and thanks to Bin Ladin. He used to be one of the wealthiest people in the world, but he abandoned all that wealth for the sake of the religion of Allah. Everyone disagreeing with Usama bin Ladin definitely does not comprehend religion. Jihad is all about *aqidah* [faith], it's not simply choosing to go for jihad. It's about firmness. Martyrs do not feel the hurt of death, that's firmness given by Allah. There are fighters whose faith is eminent, but they do not execute martyrdom actions but you find others that have just converted to Islam that do! For example

myself, if I am put in a situation where I should slaughter a chicken, it's likely that I will not be able to. But if it were in a case where I should kill a disbeliever, I would bravely do it."

*Fighter from Russia*

"If there is a call for jihad, we need to support our brothers. Muslims are weak; they need our support. The war in Syria is between the Alawite and Shi'a people and Sunni. We have to follow the orders of God and help them [the Sunni]."

**"Do You Have Any Plans for the Future?"**

The foreign fighters have no plans to return home once the Syrian conflict concludes. They have come to Syria expecting to die as martyrs for Islam. Since they have families, the only question that concerns them is what is going to happen to their families should they die? In contrast to other Syrian rebel fighters interviewed by the authors, these foreign fighters are generally unconcerned with ultimate political outcomes from the Syrian civil war or their own long-term prospects and well-being. They are all living in the moment.

*Fighter from France*

"Going back. That's impossible! How could I leave such a glorious life and return to the animalistic one? Never! Besides, if I go back to Morocco, I will be put in jail for 30 and 15 years. Also, in France they now associate my name with weapons and bombing, so what would motivate me to return? Nothing... My family and my wives are able to afford life after I am dead. Allah will never give up on us because He answers our needs, not me. I do not want my wife to work; I don't want her to experience any exhaustion. She is a queen; every Muslim wife is a queen! And my wives will get married after my death, God willing. They have the right to, if they ever consider doing it. It is something that Islam grants them. The wife is a human being, not an angel, and she needs a man to protect her and love her for the rest of her life. You never know, Allah may grant me the chance to return to them and die in my house."

*Fighter from Saudi Arabia*

"I really wish I could get a chance to marry, but for the time being, jihad is my priority. All I'm asking from Allah is giving me the chance to die

as a martyr...If granted the chance of martyrdom, I can intercede for the sake of other people I will not have come across in heaven. I mean, anybody I used to know in this current life and I don't see in heaven, I can intercede for them. Even if you were not a martyr and you ask the Lord for intercession of those persons, He will tell you 'they are in Hell, go bring them over here' [to heaven]. That's how merciful Allah is..."

**"Does Your Jihad Extend Beyond Syria?"**

If the Syrian conflict is resolved, the fighters intend to continue their struggle elsewhere, if they are still alive. They see the Syrian war as part of a broader regional struggle, frequently referencing Jerusalem and the Palestinians.<sup>5</sup>

*Fighter from France*

"The Levant does not only include Syria, it also includes Lebanon, Jordan and Palestine...and we are always keeping an eye on Jerusalem. The war in Syria is only three-years-old, whereas the war of Palestine has lasted for over 60 years. We are asking Allah, Almighty, to attain conquest of Jerusalem, which is a certainty, God willing. We must point out that the Levant is not a regular land; it is a land of the prophets, whereby many prophets were sent."

*Fighter from Saudi Arabia*

"Jihad is all the way. It's not limited to Syria. As our Prophet says (may prayer and peace be upon Him), the Levant, the Arabian Peninsula, and then the Islamic caliphate, God willing. And I have made an oath that, if I will still not be martyred yet, I will go back, as a fighter to free the Arabian Peninsula."

*Fighter from Algeria*

"After Syria, in case we will still be alive, we will head to Golan and then straight to Jerusalem. Jerusalem has been disconnected from the Islamic attention for over 60 years. It is downright shameful to leave it occupied...And Palestine would be a place of the government. And in terms of law we will have a referendum, asking people

if they want to apply the laws of Allah in ruling."

**Conclusion**

The goals and motivations of these foreign fighters are a stark contrast to Syrian-born civilians and rebel fighters interviewed by the authors during the past year. Unlike Syrian-born civilians and rebel fighters, these foreign fighters are not driven by specific political grievances against Bashar al-Assad's regime and his supporters; they are guided instead by religious ideations concerning jihad.<sup>6</sup> War is instrumental to their understanding of jihad, which necessitates purification through martyrdom.

Their presence in Syria severely complicates the ability to resolve the civil war, since many appear to be seeking conflict for conflict's sake. They have little incentive to negotiate for peace. Finally, in contrast to Syrian-born rebel fighters and civilians, these four foreign fighters claim that they will never disarm, demobilize, and reintegrate into society should the Syrian conflict be resolved. They are deeply committed and will continue to pursue other avenues for jihad if they cannot realize their goals in Syria. For now, the Syrian conflict provides a venue for motivated foreign fighters to obtain spiritual fulfillment and practical training for combat that might extend beyond Syrian borders.

*Vera Mironova is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Maryland.*

*Sam Whitt is assistant professor of political science at High Point University.*

<sup>5</sup> The interviewer was reluctant to ask the foreign fighters whether they were interested in conducting attacks against the West for fear of provoking them or raising suspicions about intelligence gathering. None of the fighters specifically mentioned attacks against the West in the course of the interviews.

<sup>6</sup> The authors acknowledge that the interviews of four fighters cannot be generalized to speak for the goals and motivations of all foreign fighters, but it does provide a window into cognition and decision-making processes of members of a difficult to reach population.



## Foreign Fighters from the Western Balkans in Syria

By Timothy Holman

ON MARCH 20, 2014, three foreign fighters from the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) killed three people and wounded five others, including law enforcement officials, in Nigde, Turkey.<sup>1</sup> Although the three were variously reported as Albanian, German, or Swiss, later reports indicated that two were citizens of Macedonia, one of whom had previously resided in Germany. The third was a Kosovar, who had lived in Switzerland.<sup>2</sup> Three weeks later, on April 10, two female teenagers of Bosnian origin traveled from Vienna, Austria, to Syria.<sup>3</sup> These incidents pointed to the presence of foreign fighters from the Western Balkans in Syria as well as ties between the Western Balkans and Western Europe.<sup>4</sup>

Although attention has been given to foreign fighters originating in Western Europe who have traveled to Syria in the past two and a half years, less notice has been paid to foreign fighters originating from other parts of Europe. To date, no consolidated estimates of numbers fighting, returned or killed have been made available for the Western Balkans region.<sup>5</sup> This article provides a brief

background on prior foreign fighting activity by militants from the Western Balkans. It gives overall estimates for involvement in the Syria conflict, and provides analysis of the Western Balkans foreign fighter groups in Syria and comparisons with other foreign fighter contingents. It concludes with an examination of efforts by states in the region to counter foreign fighter activity. Research for this article found that between 218-654 foreign fighters have traveled from the Western Balkans to fight in Syria since 2012. Initially the vast majority of fighters (83%) joined Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) with 10% joining the ISIL. Reports from late 2013 and early 2014, however, suggest that foreign fighters from the region are increasingly joining and fighting with the ISIL over other groups.

### Foreign Fighters from the Western Balkans: Then and Now

Prior to the war in Syria, a small number of foreign fighters from the former Yugoslav Republics (Bosnia-Herzegovina, Macedonia, Kosovo, Serbia, and Montenegro) and Albania reportedly traveled or attempted to travel to fight or train in various jihadist conflicts between 2003 and 2011.<sup>6</sup>

A Bosnian with connections to Germany trained in Afghanistan in 2005.<sup>7</sup> In October 2005, a national of Macedonia was listed in a Multinational Force in Iraq (MNF-I) briefing containing captured foreign fighter nationalities.<sup>8</sup> In the same month, an Australian national was alleged to have been introduced to the Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi network via a Bosnian based in Lebanon.<sup>9</sup> In November 2005, Syrian authorities arrested an Albanian national in Damascus on suspicion of being involved with foreign fighter activities.<sup>10</sup> In September 2007, the

identification details of a resident of Bosnia-Herzegovina were listed in documents recovered by U.S. military forces at Sinjar in Iraq.<sup>11</sup> An associate of the Rustempašić group<sup>12</sup> is believed to have fought in Chechnya.<sup>13</sup> An undetermined number of Bosnians traveled to Yemen.<sup>14</sup>

In sum, perhaps fewer than a dozen known individuals from the Western Balkans had engaged in foreign fighter activity prior to the conflict in Syria.

Based on a review of press reporting between January 2013 and June 2014, it is estimated that since mid-2012 between 218-654 foreign fighters from Albania (50-90 fighters), Bosnia (50-330 fighters), Kosovo (80-150 fighters), Macedonia (6-12 fighters), Montenegro (two fighters) and Serbia (30-70 fighters) have traveled to Syria.<sup>15</sup> The number killed in Syria is 38-51 individuals (Albania: 6-8; Bosnia: 10-15; Kosovo: 12; Macedonia: 4-10; Montenegro: 1; Serbia: 5). The returnee total varies from 69-93 (Albania: 22-28; Kosovo: 15; Bosnia: 32-50).

11 Brian Fishman, *Al-Qa'ida's Foreign Fighters in Iraq: a First Look at the Sinjar Records* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2007).

12 Rijad Rustempašić, Abdulah Handžić and Edis Velic were accused of being part of a "...group [that] was formed and acted with the intention of carrying out a terrorist attack on the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina..." Rustempašić and his brother were also charged with weapons trafficking offenses. On November 10, 2011, Rijad Rustempašić, Abdulah Handžić and Edis Velic were found guilty and sentenced to prison terms ranging from three to four years. Rustempašić and his brother were acquitted of weapons trafficking charges. In a decision on September 6, 2012, the Court upheld the sentences. See "The Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina: First Instance Verdict in Rijad Rustempašić et. al.," Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina, November 10, 2011; "The Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina: Written Copy of the Second Instance Verdict Sent in the Case of Rijad Rustempašić et al.," Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina, September 10, 2012.

13 Anes Alic, "Bosnia: Catching Up with 'Terrorists,'" ISN Security Watch, October 1, 2009.

14 Alic, "Re-Arrests Hope to Prove Bosnia Terror Plots"; Mijatovic, "Gornja Maoca Is Transit Point for Wahhabis Who Go to Jihad."

15 These estimates are based on 36 articles from regional press between January 2013 and April 2014. The lowest and highest estimates are cited. In one case, a report suggested that there were 1,500 persons from Bosnia. This figure is not used, as it is unlikely to be accurate based on what is known about the broader European foreign fighter mobilization in Syria. See Zelin.

1 Semih Idiz, "ISIS Emerges as Threat to Turkey," *al-Monitor*, March 25, 2014.

2 Branko Gjorgjevski and Biljana Arsovska, "Ohrid-Born Jihadist Aged 18 Has Fought in Syria for Three Years," *Dnevnik*, March 26, 2014; Branko Gjorgjevski, "Chinese From Greece Village Also Among Jihadists Who Attacked Turkish Police," *Dnevnik*, March 27, 2014.

3 S. Degirmendzic, "Police 'Tighten Noose' Around Wahhabis in Vienna," *Dnevni Avaz*, April 24, 2014; Suzana Mijatovic, "Have You Seen the Girls?" *Slobodna Bosna*, April 24, 2014.

4 An individual from Sweden with family connections to Albania is mentioned in Per Gudmundson, "The Swedish Foreign Fighter Contingent in Syria," *CTC Sentinel* 6:9 (2013): pp. 5-9.

5 An exception was an article in *Jane's Islamic Affairs Analyst* that noted the presence of militants from the Balkans in Syria in September 2013. See "Balkan Salafists Join 'Jihad' in Syria," *Jane's Islamic Affairs Analyst*, September 1, 2013. In December 2013, Aaron Zelin provided initial estimates for Albania, Bosnia, Kosovo, Macedonia and Serbia, but not Montenegro. See Aaron Y. Zelin, "ICSR Insight: Up to 11,000 Foreign Fighters in Syria; Steep Rise Among Western Europeans," International Centre

for the Study of Radicalization, December 17, 2013.

6 Suzana Mijatovic, "Gornja Maoca Is Transit Point for Wahhabis Who Go to Jihad," *Slobodna Bosna*, March 29, 2012.

7 Ibid.; Anes Alic, "Re-Arrests Hope to Prove Bosnia Terror Plots," ISN Security Watch, December 11, 2009.

8 Dexter Filkins, "Foreign Fighters Captured in Iraq Come From 27, Mostly Arab, Lands," *New York Times*, October 21, 2005.

9 Martin Chulov, "Sydney Fugitive Linked to Zarqawi," *Australian*, October 30, 2005.

10 "Syrian Police Reportedly Arrested Albanian Terror Suspect on 17 November 2005," B92, January 4, 2006.

### What is Known about Foreign Fighters in Syria?

To date, details of 159 individuals associated with foreign fighter activity in the Western Balkans have been made available in press reports.<sup>16</sup> The analysis that follows draws from this smaller but more detailed dataset of foreign fighters from the Western Balkans compiled by the author. Based on the roles attributed to these individuals, 125 are foreign fighters, 18 are facilitators, 10 are identified as the wives of foreign fighters, and the role of six people could not be clearly identified. The majority of the persons listed are male (94%) with a small number of females (6%).

In terms of nationality, the dataset contains 70 individuals from Bosnia-Herzegovina, 42 from Kosovo, 25 from Albania, nine from Serbia, five from Macedonia, and two from Montenegro. There are also a number of dual nationals, including one from Algeria/Bosnia, two from Egypt/Bosnia, one from Lebanon/Bosnia, one from Syria/Bosnia, and one from Switzerland/Bosnia. The dual nationals, with the exception of the Swiss/Bosnian, are all ex-members of the disbanded el-Mujahid unit that was active during the conflict in the former-Yugoslavia in the 1990s.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> The author compiled a datasheet of 159 individuals. The datasheet contains among other items biographic details, information related to network or group affiliation and dates associated with travel or death of foreign fighters. The information comes from press reports. Searches were run in BBC Monitoring from 2012 to June 2014 to identify press articles mentioning foreign fighters from the Balkans. Regional press and magazine sources were also monitored using keyword searches. Facebook and other webpages were searched using names from press reporting or links from Twitter. Additional searches were run on names of individuals in BBC Monitoring and additional reports dating back to 2010 were located about the activities of individuals prior to their engagement in foreign fighting. Online records from the Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina were checked and information about current foreign fighters and their prior activities was found. The data sample does not include all foreign fighters from the Balkans but it likely contains the majority of persons publicly identified in press, media and social media sources since 2012. This dataset represents 24.3% to 72.9% of the reported estimates for foreign fighters from the Balkans.

<sup>17</sup> The el-Mujahid, el-Muzahid or el-Mujahedin detachment was formed in August 1993 and was comprised primarily of foreign fighters already fighting in Bosnia but

Based on the dataset, foreign fighters from the Western Balkans range in age from 16-74, and on average they are 32.6-years-old. Given that the majority of ages are not known, it is possible that the average is not representative. In comparison, French foreign fighters are reported by government sources to be an average of 27-years-old, and the Belgians 23.5-years-old based on estimates compiled by Pieter Van Ostaeyen, a Belgian researcher.<sup>18</sup> There are very few minors in the Western Balkans sample in contrast to France (3.5-4.6%) and Belgium (4.7%).<sup>19</sup> The minors from Belgium and France are reported to be engaged in fighting, whereas those who are mentioned in the Western Balkans dataset appear to be the children of the foreign fighters.<sup>20</sup>

The data provides some insight into the arrival of foreign fighters to Syria, although the sample is limited to 40 out of the 159 cases. Based on the author's dataset, the earliest recorded mention of foreign fighters from the Western Balkans arriving in Syria is August 2012, when a group of seven reportedly arrived. The next group—comprised of four individuals—allegedly arrived in January 2013, while small numbers continued to arrive throughout 2013: seven in February, five in March, three in May, three in June, five in July, two in August, three in October, and finally one in December 2013—with no reports yet of travelers in 2014. There were 23 cases of foreign fighters traveling with their families to Syria.<sup>21</sup> In some cases, press reports

also Bosnians. The detachment was part of the Bosnian Third Army Corps. For a detailed account of the formation of the unit, see pp. 39-75 in "The Prosecution Final Public Redacted Trial Brief in The Prosecutor versus Enver Hadzihanovic and Amir Kabura," The International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY), August 10, 2005. A copy is available with the author.

<sup>18</sup> "L'inquietant Retour Des Jihadistes en France," *Le Parisien*, April 3, 2014; Pieter Vanostaeyen, "Belgium's Syria Fighters - A Statistic Analysis," Pietervanostaeyen blog, March 21, 2014.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.; "24 candidats au jihad en Syrie signalés en dix jours, dont cinq ont quitté la France," Agence France-Presse, May 8, 2014; Patricia Tourancheau, "French Counter Terrorism: A Matter of Proper Sorting," *Liberation*, June 16, 2014.

<sup>20</sup> Suzana Mijatovic, "Trip to Promised Land," *Slobodna Bosna*, December 26, 2013.

<sup>21</sup> A. Corbo-Zeco, "BH Women Also Go to Syria," *Dnevni Avaz*, November 28, 2013.

suggested that some of the children in their late teens were being trained for military operations.<sup>22</sup> In eight cases, the date of arrival and the date of death are known. Based on this figure, time spent in Syria ranges from one to eleven months, with an average of five months between entry and eventual death.

In 65 cases, there is information about whether the foreign fighters are dead, have returned, or have been arrested. There are 35 persons who have died fighting in Syria, 19 who have been arrested in their country of origin, eight returnees who have not been arrested, and three returnees who were arrested in Turkey.<sup>23</sup> Unlike the European or Australian foreign fighter contingents where the number of known former military personnel is low—one Australian, one Dutch, and one French national—there are almost a dozen foreign fighters from the Western Balkans with prior military service.<sup>24</sup> These include the seven Bosnians, who are former el-Mujahid unit members, as well as four former members from the Albanian Army's Commando Brigade based in Zall-Herr.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Mijatovic, "Trip to Promised Land."

<sup>23</sup> The number of dead foreign fighters in this dataset, 22%, is higher than the estimates for France (26 to 31 persons or 3.6% to 4% of the contingent of 650 to 850) and Belgium (27 persons or 7.6% of the contingent of 357 persons). The number of returnees in the dataset for the Western Balkans (6.9%) is lower than France (105 to 160 persons or 16.2% to 18.8% of the contingent) and Belgium (29 persons or 8.1% of the contingent). See "L'inquietant Retour Des Jihadistes en France"; Stephane Mantoux, "GUEST POST: 'Hide These Jihadists That I Can't See: The French Volunteers In Syria,'" *Jihadology.net*, February 25, 2014; Tourancheau, "French Counter Terrorism: A Matter of Proper Sorting"; Vanostaeyen, "Belgium's Syria Fighters - a Statistic Analysis."

<sup>24</sup> "Former Dutch Soldier Trains Jihad Fighters in Syria," *DutchNews.nl*, January 27, 2014; Dan Oakes, "Former Australian Soldier Caner Temel Killed Fighting Alongside Syrian Rebels," Australian Broadcasting Corporation, March 19, 2014; Klodiana Lala, "Four Zall-Herr Commandos in Syria," *Gazeta Shqiptare*, March 21, 2014; Georges Malbrunot, "Un militaire français passé au djihad en Syrie," *Le Figaro*, April 22, 2014.

<sup>25</sup> The Albanian Commando Regiment and the Special Operations Battalion are based at Zall Herr, a few miles from Tirana. Units are trained by the U.S. military and have served in Iraq and Afghanistan. See Lala, "Four Zall-Herr Commandos in Syria"; Blerina Toslluku, "12th Contingent Leaves for Iraq," *Rilindja Demokratike*, September 5, 2008.

The number of dead foreign fighters in this dataset (22%) is much higher than the estimates for France (4%) and Belgium (8%), but if the higher estimates—218 or 654—are used, then the figure falls to between 5% and 16% of the Western Balkans contingent.<sup>26</sup>

In 71 cases, the group that the foreign fighters joined is known: 83% joined JN, 10% joined the ISIL, 3% joined Kataib al-Muhajirin in Latakia, 3% joined the Free Syrian Army, and 1% joined JN and then switched to the ISIL. The connection to Kataib al-Muhajirin is based on that group's provision of training to incoming foreign fighters from the Western Balkans in Azaz.<sup>27</sup> At one period, approximately 40 foreign fighters from the Western Balkans were staying in the same villa near Azaz managed by Bajro Ikanovic.<sup>28</sup>

The division between the groups is likely to have altered, as the ISIL continues to attract more foreign fighters. The three individuals involved in the firefight in Turkey were reported to have initially joined JN and then switched allegiances to the ISIL.<sup>29</sup> A Kosovar who died recently in a suicide attack in Iraq was also fighting with the ISIL.<sup>30</sup> Bosnian press reported on the Bosnian government debriefing of a returnee who stated that foreign fighters from Bosnia now found themselves caught up in the inter-group rivalry, with sets of brothers fighting on different sides—

26 "L'inquiétant Retour Des Jihadistes en France"; Vanostaeyen, "Belgium's Syria Fighters - a Statistic Analysis"; Tourancheau.

27 Suzana Mijatovic, "Bosniak Fratricidal War," *Slobodna Bosna*, March 20, 2014.

28 Ibid. Ikanovic had previously been sentenced to eight years for terrorism offenses linked to the Bektaševic case on January 10, 2007, which was reduced to four years on appeal on May 21, 2007. He was released from prison in 2011. According to the prosecution, "Mirsad Bektaševic and Abdulkadir Cesur [had] the intention of committing a terrorist act on the territory of BiH or some other European country...the aim of this attach [sic] was to force the Bosnian government or government of another state to withdraw their forces from Iraq and Afghanistan." For more information on the Bektaševic case, see "Mirsad Bektaševic, Abdulkadir Cesur, Bajro Ikanovic and Senad Hasanovic Found Guilty," Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina, January 10, 2007.

29 Gjorgjevski and Arsovska.

30 "Kosovar Albanian Blerim Heta Announced 'Meeting with Allah,'" Independent.mk, April 3, 2014.

one for JN and the other for the ISIL.<sup>31</sup> Facebook pages of foreign fighters from the Western Balkans now tend to display ISIL material, images of ISIL operations, pictures of foreign fighters from the region who have died in Iraq, and comments that are hostile to JN.<sup>32</sup>

#### Foreign Fighter Clusters

The data suggests that there are a number of clusters or small groupings within the foreign fighter community from the Western Balkans. The smallest identified cluster consists of 11 individuals who were members of the now disbanded el-Mujahid unit. This cluster is comprised both of Bosnians (seven individuals) and dual-nationals (four individuals from Egypt, Algeria and Syria). Some of these individuals appear to have traveled relatively early to Syria in August 2012.

A second cluster is comprised of at least 18 individuals associated with the community based in Gornja Maoca, which was established by Nusret Imamovic.<sup>33</sup> In June 2014, Bosnian press

31 Mijatovic, "Bosniak Fratricidal War."

32 For example, the Facebook page of Lavdrim Muhaxheri, an Albanian foreign fighter, carries comments about fighting for ISIL against JN. A second Facebook page has references to an ISIL produced video, *Saleel al Sawarim 4* (Clanging of the Swords 4). A YouTube channel for Albanian foreign fighters carries a five minute video titled, *ISIS Albanian Mujahideen Celebrating the Liberation of Mosul in Irak*.

33 Nusret Imamovic is a 42-year-old Bosnian citizen. According to press reports, he studied at an Islamic school in Sarajevo prior to the conflict in the former Yugoslavia. During the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, he fought in the Bosnian army. He served at some point during the war as a religious instructor and came into contact with foreign fighters. It is alleged that he became more radical in his religious views at this time. After the war, Imamovic went to Vienna, Austria, from where he traveled and studied in Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. He returned to Vienna, and in mid-2005 was sent to establish and lead a community in Gornja Maoca near Brcko. At this time, Imamovic fell out with one of his contacts in Vienna. Imamovic has been arrested twice, once in 2010 when Gornja Maoca was raided by the Bosnian authorities and in 2012 in connection with the October 2011 attack on the U.S. Embassy in Sarajevo by Jašarevic. He was released without charge on both occasions. See "Gornja Maoca - Biggest Joint Police Operation After Dayton: Six Hundred Police Officers, Long Barrel Guns, and Personnel Carriers Against Wahhabis," *Dnevni List*, March 3, 2010; Zdenko Jurilj, "Wahhabis in Favour of War Against US, Oppose B-H's NATO Accession," *Vecernji List*, April 24, 2012.

reported that Imamovic himself had traveled to Syria, possibly in December 2013.<sup>34</sup> This radical community in Gornja Maoca, which was at one point 300-strong, has been the subject of a number of security investigations and was raided by Bosnian security forces in 2010 and 2012.<sup>35</sup> The community is based in an isolated rural area and its members had over time purchased all of the houses in the village.<sup>36</sup> The community lived according to their interpretation of Shari`a and "functioned as an extraterritorial zone."<sup>37</sup> It was connected to individuals in Austria, Croatia, Germany, Montenegro, Serbia and Switzerland, who traveled to live or stay in the community or contributed money for others to purchase homes.<sup>38</sup> Mevludin Jašarevic, a Serb from Novi-Pasar, convicted for his attack on the U.S. Embassy in Sarajevo in October 2011, was a former resident of the community.<sup>39</sup> Gornja Maoca is not the only such community; others have been set up along similar lines in 10 villages across Bosnia.<sup>40</sup> The International Crisis Group refers to these communities as "unincorporated Islamists" as they do not accept the supremacy of the official or recognized Islamic community or the state.<sup>41</sup>

A third grouping is the "Albanian" cluster comprised of fighters from Kosovo, Albania and Macedonia. This cluster appears to have developed when fighters from Albanian-speaking areas arrived in Syria and organized themselves into a semi-structured

34 Amarildo Gutic, "Bosnian Salafi Leader Reportedly Joins Jabhat Al-Nusra in Syria," Bosnia-Herzegovina Federation TV, June 3, 2014; S. Degirmendzic, "Financiers Cut Off Supply," *Dnevni Avaz*, June 5, 2014.

35 Ibid.

36 Majda Tatarevic, "Our Numbers Are Growing Daily," *Dani*, April 5, 2013.

37 Mijatovic, "Gornja Maoca Is Transit Point for Wahhabis Who Go to Jihad"; "Bosnia's Dangerous Tango: Islam and Nationalism," International Crisis Group, February 26, 2013.

38 "Gornja Maoca - Biggest Joint Police Operation After Dayton: Six Hundred Police Officers, Long Barrel Guns, and Personnel Carriers Against Wahhabis"; Tatarevic.

39 Mijatovic, "Gornja Maoca Is Transit Point for Wahhabis Who Go to Jihad."

40 Dragan Sladojevic, "Wahhabis Creating Community Near Maglaj," *Nezavisne Novine*, April 9, 2012; Tatarevic.

41 "Bosnia's Dangerous Tango: Islam and Nationalism."

unit.<sup>42</sup> Benjamin Hu and Muhamed Zekiri, two of the individuals arrested in Turkey in March 2014, met in this unit commanded by Hu's father, Nimetula Imeri.<sup>43</sup> A video entitled *Albanian Mujahideen Joins Islamic State of Iraq and Sham* and subtitled in English was released in early June 2014, via the Dawla Islamiya YouTube channel.<sup>44</sup> The video featured a speaker outlining the unit's support for the head of the ISIL, surrounded by approximately 16 individuals, supposedly Albanian foreign fighters. Zekiri was also reported to have attended a mosque in Tirana, although it is unclear if his voyage to Syria was organized during his time in Albania.<sup>45</sup> Press reports have suggested that radical imams operating between Kosovo and Macedonia may have played a role in radicalizing potential foreign fighters, although the details remain vague.<sup>46</sup>

A final grouping consists of individuals connected to past terrorist activity in Bosnia-Herzegovina through direct involvement, friendship or kinship ties. Emrah Fojnica, a foreign fighter, was previously acquitted of the charge of helping Mevlid Jašarevic, who was sentenced to 15 years in prison in December 2012 for attacking the U.S. Embassy in Sarajevo.<sup>47</sup> Elmedin Velic, another foreign fighter, is the brother of Edis Velic, who was convicted of terrorist offenses as a member of Rijad Rustempašić's group.<sup>48</sup> Edis Velic was alleged to have fought in Chechnya.<sup>49</sup> Bajro Ikanovic, the reported head of the Western Balkans guesthouse in Azaz, has connections to Mirsad Bektašević as well as

Rijad Rustempašić.<sup>50</sup> In June 2014, a Swedish journalist reported on his blog that Bektašević had posted pictures on a Facebook page that seemed to indicate that he was in Syria fighting.<sup>51</sup> There are also connections between the clusters; Rustempašić is a former member of the el-Mujahid unit and Jašarevic has connections to the Imamovic cluster.<sup>52</sup>

#### Similarities and Connections with Western Europe

The data for the region suggests that patterns observed elsewhere in Europe are present in the Western Balkans: there are larger numbers of fighters than for previous conflicts, and there are a small number of females traveling with their husbands to Syria, in some cases with their children. Similar to Belgium, where a large number of foreign fighters were associated with radical groups like Sharia4Belgium, a number of the foreign fighters from the Western Balkans have connections to radical communities in Bosnia and the Sandzak region of Serbia.<sup>53</sup> These communities have tended to be isolationist and based in remote villages.<sup>54</sup> Physical networks as well as kinship and friendship connections appear to play a role in facilitating foreign fighter activity. In the case of Albania, it is possible that one network, led by Genci Balla and Bujar Hysa, was responsible for the quasi-totality of known foreign fighters.<sup>55</sup> This network operated around two informal mosques and radical communities associated with Balla and Hysa.<sup>56</sup>

As with the Belgian and French foreign fighters, the Albanian, Bosnian, and Serbian foreign fighter clusters have

a social media presence. Mevludin Cicvara and Mirza Ganic ran a series of Facebook pages, including their personal pages as well as group pages for the Balkan foreign fighters in Syria.<sup>57</sup> These Facebook pages show multiple connections within the region, to Europe as well as further afield to Saudi Arabia. Since the death of Ganic, some of the Western Balkans

### **“Foreign fighters from the Western Balkans are reported to have traveled a number of routes to Syria. One report indicates that fighters from Bosnia flew from Slovenia to Austria and then to Turkey.”**

foreign fighter pages have ceased activity, although other sites remain active.<sup>58</sup> The Albanian group led by Balla and Hysa ran three websites, but the facilitation of foreign fighting activity appears to have been based more around the radical community developed through the two mosques and a religious school attached to one of the mosques.<sup>59</sup>

Foreign fighters from the Western Balkans are reported to have traveled a number of routes to Syria. One report indicates that fighters from Bosnia flew from Slovenia to Austria and then

42 Gjorgjevski, “Chinese From Greece Village Also Among Jihadists Who Attacked Turkish Police.”

43 Ibid.; Gjorgjevski and Arsovska.

44 The video is available at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=2rdIptNnaCU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2rdIptNnaCU).

45 Gjorgjevski, “Chinese From Greece Village Also Among Jihadists Who Attacked Turkish Police”; Gjorgjevski and Arsovska.

46 Vehbi Kajtazi, “Kosovars’ Jihad in Syria,” *Koha Ditore*, published in three parts on November 6, 7, and 8, 2013.

47 “First-Instance Verdict Revoked in Relation to Mevlid Jašarevic,” Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina, July 12, 2013; “Mevlid Jašarevic Sentenced to 15-Year Imprisonment,” Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina, November 20, 2013.

48 Alic, “Bosnia: Catching Up with ‘Terrorists.’”

49 Ibid.

50 “Mirsad Bektašević, Abdulkadir Cesur, Bajro Ikanovic and Senad Hasanovic Found Guilty.”

51 Per Gudmundson, “Mirsad Bektašević Poser at Med Vapen I Syrien,” Gudmundson Blog, June 5, 2014, available at <http://gudmundson.blogspot.sg>.

52 Alic, “Bosnia: Catching Up with ‘Terrorists’”; Mijatovic, “Gornja Maoča Is Transit Point for Wahhabis Who Go to Jihad.”

53 Vanostaeyen, “Belgium’s Syria Fighters – a Statistic Analysis.”

54 Dejan Sajinovic, “SIPA Keeping an Eye on Wahhabis,” *Nezavisne Novine*, April 7, 2012; Sladojevic.

55 Klodiana Lala, “Interceptions of ‘Imams’: They Sent 50 Albanians to Syria’s War,” *Gazeta Shqiptare*, March 12, 2014.

56 Ibid.

57 Aleksandar Apostolovski, “Road to Hell of Syria,” *Politika*, September 9, 2013; A. Corbo-Zeco, “Mevludin Cicvara Killed in Combat,” *Dnevni Avaz*, January 6, 2014; Boris Vukovic, “Serbie: des bancs du lycée au djihad en Syrie,” *Le Courrier Des Balkans*, December 17, 2013.

58 Foreign fighter specific pages included the Balkans Emirat page which has not been updated since November 2013. The page is available at [www.facebook.com/pages/Emirat-Balkan/150042905201595](http://www.facebook.com/pages/Emirat-Balkan/150042905201595). Or see Mirza Ganic’s Facebook page, which has not been updated since his death in early January 2014. Prior to his death, Ganic had more than 1,800 followers. The page is available at [www.facebook.com/mirza.ganic.ebu.sheheed.1994](http://www.facebook.com/mirza.ganic.ebu.sheheed.1994). More general pages that are still active include [www.putvjernika.com](http://www.putvjernika.com) or the Salafi Media Balkans YouTube channel, available at [www.youtube.com/user/SalafiMediaBalkans](http://www.youtube.com/user/SalafiMediaBalkans).

59 Lala, “Interceptions of ‘Imams’: They Sent 50 Albanians to Syria’s War”; Klodiana Lala, “Videos Calling for Jihad Blocked,” *Gazeta Shqiptare*, March 14, 2014.

to Turkey.<sup>60</sup> Another report suggests some drove by car from Bosnia to Turkey via Serbia and Bulgaria.<sup>61</sup> Fighters from Albania have either flown by plane from Albania to Turkey or traveled overland via Macedonia and Bulgaria to Turkey. It has been suggested that some of the travelers may have used false identities.<sup>62</sup>

Once in Turkey, the foreign fighters have used at least two points of entry into Syria. One report indicates that they gathered in Reyhanli and crossed over through Bab al-Hawa into Syria.<sup>63</sup> A returned foreign fighter told Bosnian investigators that this route was used, as well as an entry point near Kilis where guides helped them cross illegally.<sup>64</sup> He also stated that the majority of fighters from the region gathered in Azaz, Syria, where they underwent initial training.<sup>65</sup>

Fighters appear to use a mix of travel facilitators and cover stories. Nusret Imamovic is alleged to have used the services of a former human smuggler to organize his trip to Syria.<sup>66</sup> The same individual was said to have organized the travel of many foreign fighters from Bosnia.<sup>67</sup> Mirza Ganic, the now deceased Serb foreign fighter from Novi-Pasar, used a cover story to explain his departure for Syria to his parents. He told them he was going to Cairo, Egypt, to study Arabic. He phoned his parents from the Turkish border to tell them that he was in fact entering Syria to fight.<sup>68</sup> Another fighter told his employer he was going to Germany for medical treatment for a month; he then spent eight months fighting in Syria.<sup>69</sup>

Following the April 2014 departure of two teenage females of Bosnian origin from Vienna, reports emerged that individuals based in Vienna, but born in Serbia, were allegedly involved in organizing and facilitating the travel

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of children of former Bosnian refugees residing in Western Europe to Syria.<sup>70</sup> The two are connected to the community in Gornja Macoa and were reportedly Imamovic’s “key people” in Vienna.<sup>71</sup> One of the girls was supposedly met by her future husband, a Chechen foreign fighter, and another report suggested that the cellular phone signal from one of the girls had been tracked to northern Syria.<sup>72</sup> This again points to links not just within the Western Balkans, but also to the wider diaspora in Western Europe.<sup>73</sup> There is also some anecdotal evidence that foreign fighters from the Western Balkans in Syria are mixing with other contingents from Europe, such as the Belgians.<sup>74</sup>

### Responding to the Foreign Fighter Mobilization

There have been attempts to counter foreign fighter activity in Kosovo (November 2013 and June 2014), Albania (March 2014), and Serbia (March 2014) where individuals involved in foreign fighter facilitation or travel to Syria have been arrested.<sup>75</sup> In the case of Kosovo, the arrests were connected to terrorist attack planning and preparation. While investigators recovered weapons and “explosive devices connected to cellphones,” no target was mentioned in press reports about the arrests.<sup>76</sup> One of those arrested had returned from Syria, where it is alleged he took part in combat operations.<sup>77</sup> Two other people arrested were alleged to have been involved in a physical assault on two U.S. citizens in Pristina three days before the counterterrorism operation.<sup>78</sup> To date, no further details have emerged about the arrests.<sup>79</sup> In June 2014, Kosovo authorities arrested three people and were looking for a fourth suspect in relation to forming a terrorist group and recruiting foreign fighters.<sup>80</sup> The individuals arrested are alleged to have fought for both the ISIL and JN. One of the individuals arrested has a social media presence with photographs of trips into Syria showing the individual dressed in military garb and handling weapons.

Bosnia, with the largest number of foreign fighters, has yet to launch operations similar to that of Kosovo or Albania against identified networks and facilitators. There have been media reports that Bosnia’s State Investigation and Protection Agency (SIPA) had interviewed individuals in relation to facilitation activities, but no arrests have been reported.<sup>81</sup> The

60 Corbo-Zeco, “BH Women Also Go to Syria.”

61 Mijatovic, “Trip to Promised Land.”

62 Aurora Koromani, “Builder Who Funded Terrorist Cell Revealed,” *Gazeta Shqiptare*, March 25, 2014; Vesna Peric Zimonjic, “Religion: Balkans Feed the Syria Battle,” Inter Press Service, August 2, 2013.

63 Zimonjic, “Religion: Balkans Feed the Syria Battle.”

64 Mijatovic, “Bosniak Fratricidal War.”

65 Ibid.

66 Gutic, “Bosnian Salafi Leader Reportedly Joins Jabhat Al-Nusra in Syria.”

67 Ibid.

68 Vukovic.

69 Suzana Mijatovic, “Diplomatic Offensive Against Mujahedin,” *Slobodna Bosna*, June 13, 2013.

70 Mijatovic, “Have You Seen the Girls?”

71 Mijatovic, “Gornja Macoa Is Transit Point for Wahhabis Who Go to Jihad.”

72 Mijatovic, “Have You Seen the Girls?”; Degirmendzic, “Police ‘Tighten Noose’ Around Wahhabis in Vienna.”

73 Ibid.; Dan Oakes, “Muslim ‘Cult Leader’ Revealed,” *The Age*, September 24, 2012; Tatarevic, “Ils ont grandi en Suisse et combattent en Syrie,” *Le Matin*, May 4, 2014.

74 Belgians were also involved with the Chechen group Kataib al-Muhajirin. See Pieter Vanostaeyen, “GUEST POST: Belgian Jihadis in Syria,” *Jihadology.net*, September 5, 2013.

75 Lala, “Interceptions of ‘Imams’: They Sent 50 Albanians to Syria’s War”; Vehbi Kajtazi, “Police Looking for Intimidator’s Address,” *Koha Ditore*, November 15, 2013; M. Niciforovic, “Instead of Syria, Wahhabis Land in Jail,” *Vecernje Novosti*, March 8, 2014; “Kosovo Terror Suspects in 30-day Detention,” Associated Press, June 27, 2014.

76 Vehbi Kajtazi, “Fighters Who Returned From Syria Arrested as Terror Suspects,” *Koha Ditore*, November 12, 2013.

77 Ibid.

78 Ibid.

79 Ibid.

80 “Kosovo Terror Suspects in 30-day Detention.”

81 Goran Maunaga, “Ex-Mujahedin - Connection to Holy War,” *Glas Srpske*, May 25, 2013.

absence of arrests has been explained by loopholes in Bosnian law, which did not criminalize facilitating or participating in foreign fighting.<sup>82</sup> In June 2014, media reports suggested that Bosnian authorities could soon start investigations into approximately 20 returnees once a new law passes targeting foreign fighters.<sup>83</sup> The new law provides for sentences of up to 10 years for recruitment and participation in foreign fighting and four years for inciting via media channels participation in foreign conflicts.<sup>84</sup>

In Bosnia, the head of the Bosnian Islamic community and other figures have made statements against foreign fighters traveling to Syria and in support of changes to the criminal code.<sup>85</sup> Some of these statements have caused a virulent online reaction from within the pro-foreign fighter community in the region but also among the diaspora in Western Europe.<sup>86</sup> Others have taken a more ambiguous line, refusing to condemn outright involvement in foreign fighting.<sup>87</sup>

Albania has also introduced changes to the criminal code to allow for the prosecution of individuals traveling abroad to participate in conflicts, and in Macedonia there have been calls for changes to the law to criminalize travel for the purposes of fighting as well as facilitation activities.<sup>88</sup> Similar to France and the United Kingdom, however, the announcement of these measures and their eventual implementation come more than two years into the conflict, and after the departure of large numbers of foreign fighters. Whether these measures will prove dissuasive is unclear.

82 S. Degirmendzic, "Investigation Against Syria Returnees," *Dnevni Avaz*, June 18, 2014.

83 Ibid.

84 Ibid.

85 A. Nuhanovic, "Sarajevo Could Be Leader in Interpretation of Islam," *Dnevni Avaz*, June 15, 2014.

86 "Disgraceful: After Invitation to Salafis Not to Send Children to Other Peoples' Wars, Grahovic Attacking Imam Beganovic," *Dnevni Avaz*, November 27, 2013.

87 Kajtazi, "Kosovars' Jihad in Syria."

88 "Punishment Against 'Jihad' in Albania," *ATA*, April 7, 2014; Branko Gjorgjevski, "There Is Nobody to Stop the Jihadists," *Dnevnik*, March 27, 2014; Daria Sito-Sucic, "Bosnia Introduces Jail Terms to Curb Recruitment for Syria," *Reuters*, April 29, 2014.

Furthermore, the measures come without apparent coordination between the countries in the region despite the intra-Western Balkans connections. They also seem to have been slow to take the initiative to engage with international partners; countries from the region were not among those who participated in an INTERPOL foreign fighter meeting in July 2013.<sup>89</sup> Officials from the U.S. and some EU countries traveled to Sarajevo to discuss the issue with Bosnian authorities in June 2013.<sup>90</sup> In May 2014, the counterterrorism coordinator of the European Union outlined measures that the EU was in the process of taking in relation to foreign fighters. The countries in the Western Balkans are mentioned as an area where increased cooperation is required and a number of proposed initiatives are outlined.<sup>91</sup>

It remains to be seen whether these responses to the foreign fighter challenge at the national level or wider coordination efforts to mitigate against the risk of terrorist activity by returning foreign fighters will prove enough to avoid terrorist attacks in the region or in the European Union. The May 2014 attack in Belgium by a returning French foreign fighter is an indicator that greater coordination between foreign fighter source countries is necessary. The threat posed by foreign fighters is no longer limited to the fighter's country, but also to neighboring states.

*Timothy Holman is a first year Ph.D. candidate at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Singapore. He holds a BA (Hons) in Persian and Development Studies from the School of Oriental and African Studies in London and an MLitt in Terrorism Studies from the University of St. Andrews in Scotland. He is a former criminal intelligence analyst with INTERPOL, The Swiss Federal Police and The International Criminal Court.*

89 "Foreign Fighters' Threat Focus of INTERPOL Counterterrorism Meeting," *Interpol*, July 12, 2013.

90 Mijatovic, "Diplomatic Offensive Against Mujahedin."

91 EU Counterterrorism Coordinator, "Foreign Fighters and Returnees From a Counter-Terrorism Perspective, in Particular with Regard to Syria: State of Play and Proposals for Future Work," Council of the European Union, Brussels, May 5, 2014, available at <http://www.statewatch.org/news/2014/may/eu-council-coter-syria-fighters-9280-14.pdf>.

## Three Hurdles to Peace: Negotiations with the FARC in Colombia

By Abigail Jeffers and Daniel Milton

COLOMBIA HAS BEEN engaged in internal armed conflict since the early 1960s, with the impact of the fighting taking a tremendous toll on the country politically, economically, and socially. The decades-long armed struggle between left wing terrorist groups, right wing paramilitaries, and the government has left more than 215,000 Colombians dead and five million displaced, the most of any other active conflict in the world.<sup>1</sup> A strong military offensive from 2000 to 2012 against all of the violent non-state actors, with significant support from the United States, has diminished the opposition groups' capabilities.<sup>2</sup>

In October 2012, the Colombian government began peace negotiations with the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, FARC), the country's largest and historically most powerful armed group.<sup>3</sup> Since the start of these negotiations, the FARC, the Colombian government, and the international community have expressed optimism about the talks and the outlook for Colombia's future.

Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos noted that the most recent negotiations between the government and the left-leaning insurgent organization are the "furthest we have ever come in trying to end the war."<sup>4</sup> Negotiators have agreed on three of the five issues that divide the two groups, with agreements on reparations and transitional justice outstanding. Many see Santos' recent victory in Colombia's presidential election as a positive sign for the prospects for peace.<sup>5</sup> While his

1 "Estadísticas del conflicto armado en Colombia," Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2012; "Colombia Displacement," *Reuters*, August 29, 2013.

2 Dana Priest, "Covert Action in Colombia," *Washington Post*, December 21, 2013.

3 "FARC," *Insight Crime*, undated.

4 "The Politics of Peace," *Economist*, May 17, 2014.

5 Katalina Vásquez Guzmán, "Este es el momento de la paz," *dijo Santos*, *Página 12*, June 2014.

victory helped the peace talks remain afloat, a number of difficult hurdles remain to any implementation of a peace agreement between the government and the FARC.

This article highlights the three most difficult hurdles that remain in an effort to assess the longevity of any agreement reached in Havana: overcoming the history of mistrust between the government and the FARC, convincing the Colombian public to back the final agreement, and implementing an agreement within the FARC's organizational structure. Given these hurdles and despite the recent electoral success of President Santos, the Colombian government will have a difficult time eliminating the FARC and the long term threat posed by the group.

#### A History of Mistrust

In past negotiations, the government has been able to find common ground with the FARC. In 1984, during the negotiations that occurred under President Belisario Betancur, both sides maintained a cease-fire throughout the negotiations and the government reached an agreement with the FARC that promised agrarian reform and allowed the group to form a political party, the Patriotic Union.<sup>6</sup> When the next president was elected in 1986, however, the agreements generated through the negotiations process were all but ignored and as many as 3,000 members of the FARC's political party were killed following the political transition.<sup>7</sup> The government, which had promised to protect the new political party, did little to stop the violence as members were killed, often by right wing paramilitary groups that had been known to work with the military.<sup>8</sup> In 2011, the Colombian government even admitted to ordering the assassination of Patriotic Union senator Manuel Cepeda, who was killed in 1994.<sup>9</sup>

6 Camilo González Posso, "Negotiations with the FARC: 1982-2002," Conciliation Resources, 2004.

7 Ibid.

8 "Colombia's FARC Rebels Face History in Considering Return to Politics," Public Radio International, September 3, 2013.

9 Constanza Vieira, "RIGHTS-COLOMBIA: Government Apologises for Senator's Murder," Inter Press Service, August 10, 2013.

Given this history of broken promises following a change in political leadership and retaliation against the FARC's attempt at political legitimacy, the strong showing of Oscar Ivan Zuluaga (a critic of the peace process) in the May 25, 2014, presidential elections and in the subsequent runoff has significant implications for the peace process.<sup>10</sup>

After narrowly beating Santos in the first round of the 2014 Colombian presidential election, polls indicated a narrow victory was possible for Zuluaga in the runoff.<sup>11</sup> These results reflected the fact that support for President Santos had been declining recently as he has faced increasing criticism since his term began in 2010, particularly on the issue of peace talks with the FARC. Former President Álvaro Uribe, who oversaw the military offensive against the FARC under Plan Colombia,<sup>12</sup> has been one of the strongest voices against President Santos. He has criticized the president for easing off militarily and granting the FARC, whom he had worked so hard to defeat militarily, political power through the peace talks.<sup>13</sup>

While Santos has not gone so far as to accept the FARC's multiple calls for a cease-fire, he has stated that given the opportunity, he would think twice about killing the FARC's commander, Rodrigo Londoño, viewing it as a move that could intensify the violence and draw the FARC away from the negotiating table.<sup>14</sup> Although such a move could derail the peace talks, Santos' public proclamation of such intentions has been unpopular, and similar comments have sparked doubt both in Santos' leadership and the likelihood that successful negotiations

10 William Neuman, "Peace-Talk Critic Takes Lead in Colombia Presidential Vote," *New York Times*, May 25, 2014.

11 "The Prospects for Peace," *Economist*, May 26, 2014.

12 Plan Colombia was the U.S. aid package that provided military support for counternarcotics and counterterrorism in Colombia.

13 Juan Forero and Marina Villeneuve, "Colombian Ex-President Sounds Off on his Successor's Peace Talks with FARC Rebels," *Washington Post*, October 5, 2013.

14 "Santos lo pensaría dos veces antes de atacar a 'Timochenko,'" *Vanguardia.com*, April 11, 2014. For an example of the FARC's call for a cease-fire, see "Electoral Ceasefire," FARC-EPEACE.ORG, May 18, 2014.

could bring an end to the conflict with the FARC.

These are doubts upon which Zuluaga capitalized during the campaign, making a tough line on potential peace talks a key part of the runoff campaign.<sup>15</sup> Such criticism forced Santos to explicitly state that he would not allow war crimes committed by FARC members to go unpunished.<sup>16</sup> Santos finds himself in a difficult position politically, as any attempt to ward off the criticisms from the right may be met by criticisms from the left that he is unable to be fully trusted, as was shown in a recent article written by Ivan Marquez, a member of the FARC's Secretariat.<sup>17</sup>

In the end, even though Santos was able to secure the presidency, overcoming the historical mistrust between the government and the FARC will be difficult. Zuluaga's surprisingly strong campaign and narrow defeat is a reflection of a fair amount of angst over the peace talks, which may not fade over time.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, Santos' opponents are painting his victory as the product of his corruption and voter intimidation by the FARC.<sup>19</sup> While many have seen

15 Adriaan Alsema, "Zuluaga Makes Suspending FARC Peace Talks Central Point in Race to 2nd Round," *Colombia Reports*, May 26, 2014. Despite the initial tough line, there have been some signs of Zuluaga's willingness to continue talks. See Julia Symmes Cobb and Peter Murphy, "Colombia's Zuluaga Softens on FARC Peace Talks Ahead of Run-off Vote," Reuters, May 29, 2014.

16 In one recent interview, Santos said quite bluntly: "I would never accept general impunity for the guerrillas!" See Juliane von Mittelstaedt and Helene Zuber, "Colombian President Santos: 'Waging War Is More Popular than Negotiating,'" *Spiegel Online*, May 21, 2014; Adriaan Alsema, "Santos Assures Colombian Military That FARC Will Not be Granted Impunity," *Colombia Reports*, November 27, 2013.

17 In this article, Marquez claims that President Santos told military leaders and fellow politicians over a phone conference that they could not let up the offensive against the FARC until the peace agreements were signed. See Ivan Marquez, "Juan Manuel Santos habla de paz vomitando fuego," FARC-EP.co, May 26, 2014.

18 Indeed, some analysts have called for caution in interpreting these election results as a resounding mandate. There are still elements of the Colombian Congress, including former President Uribe, who are completely opposed to the talks. See Jim Wyss, "Santos Predicts 'Beginning of a New Colombia' After Victory," *Miami Herald*, June 15, 2014.

19 Frank Bajak and Libardo Cardona, "Pressure on Santos to Reach Peace for Colombia," *News and Observer*,

the victory of Santos as the Colombian public's endorsement of the peace process, the narrow victory sends a message of caution regarding the future of any peace agreement.

### Convincing the Colombian Public

Even if the talks reach conclusion, the Colombian people will play a critical role in the fate of the FARC as well as the future stability of the country. In October 2013, Colombia's Congress passed a bill requiring that any peace deal between the government and the FARC be put to a referendum and voted on by the public.<sup>20</sup> This means that even if the FARC and the government are able to agree upon terms acceptable to both parties, the agreement may ultimately fail if the public opposes them.

Unfortunately, the Colombian people have plenty of reason to disapprove. The conflict, which has involved other left wing terrorist groups such as the National Liberation Army (ELN), right wing paramilitaries such as the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC), and drug cartels, has claimed more than 215,000 lives, the vast majority of which are thought to have been civilians.<sup>21</sup> It has resulted in one of the world's largest internal displacements, with nearly five million Colombians having fled their homes only to face challenges ranging from future employment to threats of violence.<sup>22</sup>

Although the FARC started as a group committed to peasant rights, over time it moved away from a strong initial focus on ideology and began to exploit the very people it set out to protect.<sup>23</sup> The group turned to narcotics trafficking for income,

committed hundreds of massacres, and drove people from their lands. The half-century conflict between the FARC, other left wing terrorist organizations, paramilitaries, and the government has affected the lives of all Colombians and there are few who would like to see the perpetrators of violence obtaining even more political influence than the talks have already given them.

Polling data from March 2014 collected in Colombia reflects the uncertainty that the Colombian people have towards the FARC and the peace process. Although the Colombian people want peace, they are skeptical about the negotiations. This poll showed that 34% of Colombians believe that the best way to solve the conflict with the FARC is through a military defeat, with only 30% believing in the negotiations and 29% behind promoting the demobilization of members (the other 6% were unsure).<sup>24</sup> A total of 58% of Colombians believe that the government's current approach will not bring the conflict to an end.<sup>25</sup> Another sticking point is how the FARC fighters will be treated once an agreement is reached, with 78% of Colombians disagreeing with the idea that former FARC terrorists be allowed to serve in political roles without first serving time in jail.<sup>26</sup>

For their part, the FARC has come out in strong opposition to the national referendum on the results of the negotiations, even halting the talks when the bill was proposed.<sup>27</sup> The FARC has instead proposed that the agreements made through the peace process be ratified by a constituent assembly, which would consist of representatives of different groups such as the guerrillas, peasants, retired soldiers, indigenous Colombians, and victims of the conflict.<sup>28</sup> Perhaps the group feels that the public will not pass the referendum given the toll that the FARC's actions have taken on the

country in the last 50 years, which is why it would prefer an assembly. An assembly might be under more pressure to ratify the results of the negotiations.

That said, even though Colombians in general do not support the FARC, the farmers who traditionally have made up the core of the FARC's support are upset with the government as well. Given that they are living in poverty, they will support the group that enables them to live peacefully and to make a living off

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the land. In their view, the FARC has protected them from government forces that have worked to eradicate the coca crops upon which both the FARC's and the farmers' livelihoods depend.<sup>29</sup>

Simply eradicating the coca crops will not be enough to stop the cocaine trade, and taking away farmers' ability to earn a living in this way serves only to increase support for armed groups that protect the coca farmers.<sup>30</sup> When the FARC became violent against the coca farmers that it had once protected, the government was able to offer a better alternative: protection against the FARC and agrarian reform that allowed the farmers to earn a legal living.<sup>31</sup> These policies spurred a shift in the farmers' support away from the FARC and in favor of the government.

June 16, 2014.

20 Daniel Freeman, "Colombia's Congress Approves Referendum to Seal Eventual Peace Deal with FARC," *Colombia News*, October 24, 2013.

21 "Colombian Conflict has Killed 220,000 in 55 years, Commission Finds," Associated Press, *Guardian*, July 26, 2013.

22 "Safe Haven: Sheltering Displaced Persons from Sexual and Gender-Based Violence. Case Study: Colombia," Human Rights Center & UNHCR, May 2013; Diana Diaz Rodriguez and Liva Mota, "Colombia's Indigenous Pushed to Find Safety in Cities," UNHCR, October 18, 2012; Obinna Anyadike, "Colombia's Internally Displaced People Caught in Corridor of Instability," *Guardian*, August 12, 2013.

23 "World Report 2013," Human Rights Watch, 2013.

24 "Polimétrica: La Encuesta Elecciones 2014," Cifras & Conceptos, March 2014.

25 Ibid.

26 "Uribe's New Platform," *Economist*, March 11, 2014.

27 Helen Murphy and Peter Murphy, "Colombia Peace Talks Suspended After FARC Call for Pause," Reuters, August 23, 2013.

28 "Press Conference End of 18<sup>th</sup> Round," Peace Delegation of the FARC-EP, December 20, 2013.

29 Ricardo Vargas, "The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the Illicit Drug Trade," Transnational Institute, June 7, 1999.

30 Vanda Brown, *Shooting up Counterinsurgency and the War on Drugs* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2010).

31 Lyda Fernanda Forero, "Colombia and Free Trade Agreements: Between Mobilisation and Conflict," Transnational Institute, June 3, 2014.



Colombia may see another shift away from governmental support as thousands of farmers across Colombia recently protested the government's lack of progress on agricultural policies introduced last August.<sup>32</sup> Should the peace talks fail, the FARC might be able to regain the confidence of the rural farmers who are losing their faith in the government. Knowing that the farmers are upset with the government and that the referendum that comes out of the peace talks may not pass a popular vote gives the FARC reason to back out of the peace talks altogether. In other words, the Colombian public plays a key role in any eventual peace deal and it is uncertain how they will vote.

#### Implementing the Agreement within the FARC

Even assuming that the first two hurdles can be overcome, the question then becomes what the impact of a peace agreement would have on overall FARC operations. On this front, there are two issues that call into question the efficacy of any agreement between the FARC and the Colombian government. First, while the FARC's ideological commitment to the drug trade is uncertain, what is clear is that the group's involvement in the drug trade has increased over time.<sup>33</sup> Although the group originally opposed the drug trade on ideological terms, initially only imposing their own taxes on large growers of illicit crops, by the mid-1980s they had begun growing, processing, and trafficking cocaine because of the financial opportunities it afforded.<sup>34</sup> Because of the profitability of the drug trade and the FARC's deep involvement, there are vested organizational interests in the drug trade that may be difficult to end through negotiations. Second, it is

unclear whether the central command of the FARC can implement an agreement within its constituent parts.

The FARC has sat down with the government on official terms in three separate sets of negotiations during the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s, with the last round of talks resulting in the concession of a large area of land to the FARC, which the group used to consolidate its cocaine production operations.<sup>35</sup> In addition, various fronts have been known to partner with drug cartels in their areas of operation to be able to sustain operations.<sup>36</sup> The FARC's reach into the drug trade extends outside Colombia's borders in Mexico and beyond.<sup>37</sup>

As recently as April 2013, after the peace talks began, an alleged member of the FARC was arrested in Algeria for trying to trade cocaine for weapons with members of a group linked to al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb.<sup>38</sup> There also have been allegations that the terrorist group Lebanese Hizb Allah is a beneficiary and participant in the FARC's drug activities.<sup>39</sup> This expansion of relationships makes the cessation of the drug trade (and the associated conflict over the trade), whether under the FARC name or a different banner, difficult to envisage.

Even setting aside FARC's involvement in the lucrative drug market, an agreement within the organization may be hard to implement because of the differing levels of buy-in by various FARC commanders. Because the group is decentralized and divided into fronts of around 200 fighters each, it is difficult to relay information throughout the network.<sup>40</sup> In

September 2013, a senior Colombian official reported that the FARC only had real control of 15 out of 67 fronts.<sup>41</sup>

Given this potential lack of organizational control, it is possible that any agreement may result in a fracturing of the organization and a continuation of violence. An example of this is what happened in Northern Ireland following the progress of the peace talks between the Provisional Irish Republican Army (among others) and the British and Irish governments. The Real Irish Republican Army formed in response to the peace talks and began planning and executing acts of violence and remains in existence today.

In addition to the potential for the FARC to produce splinter groups in the result of top-down demobilization, there are other armed groups still active in Colombia that must be addressed by the government as well. Regardless of the

**“Should the peace talks fail, the FARC might be able to regain the confidence of the rural farmers who are losing their faith in the government.”**

results of the government's negotiations with the FARC, the Colombian government must also consider the other armed groups acting in Colombia, to include the left wing terrorist group the ELN, the various cocaine trafficking cartels, and the former paramilitary members who have joined new armed groups such as the Aguilas Negras (Black Eagles).<sup>42</sup> The government took a step in this direction, announcing a few days before the runoff election that

Groups: A Comparative Study of FARC and Paramilitary Groups in Colombia,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 32:6 (2009): p. 460.

41 Ibid.

42 “Colombia Ready to Negotiation with the ELN,” al-Jazeera, August 29, 2013; Olle Ohlson Pettersson, “Neoparamilitaries Declare War against FARC, ELN in Northeastern Colombia,” *Colombia Reports*, August 6, 2012; “Aguilas Negras’ amenazan a poblacion en zona de influencia de FARC,” *Colombia.com*, January 23, 2014.

32 “Colombian Farmers Protest Against Government's ‘Broken Promises,’” BBC, August 28, 2014.

33 Helen Murphy and Luis Jaime Acosta, “FARC Controls 60 Percent of Drug Trade - Colombia's Police Chief,” Reuters, April 22, 2013. See the “FARCLANDIA” section in Frank Cilluffo, “The Threat Posed from the Convergence of Organized Crime, Drug Trafficking, and Terrorism,” statement given to the U.S. House Committee on the Judiciary Subcommittee on Crime, December 13, 2000.

34 “Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia - People's Army,” Mapping Militant Organizations, Stanford University, August 13, 2012.

35 Juan Carlos Hidalgo, “Peace Talks with the FARC: A Good Idea?” Cato Institute, August 28, 2012.

36 “The FARC at their Worst Moment in History,” Ministry of National Defense - Republic of Colombia, undated.

37 “Colombia Rebels Linked to Mexico Drug Cartels,” *New York Times*, October 7, 2008.

38 James Barget, “Arrests Point to FARC Ties to Al Qaeda in North Africa,” *Insight Crime*, April 8, 2013.

39 Jo Becker, “Beirut Bank Seen as a Hub of Hezbollah's Financing,” *New York Times*, December 13, 2011.

40 Douglas Farah, “Terrorist Groups in Latin America: The Changing Landscape,” testimony to the Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade in the U.S. House of Representatives, February 4, 2014; Bilal Y. Saab and Alexandra W. Taylor, “Criminality and Armed

it had started preliminary discussions with the ELN.<sup>43</sup>

### Looking Past the Hurdles

Given the political climate and the high social disapproval of the FARC, there is a chance that the peace talks may fail to reach a conclusion that is acceptable to both groups, or that any agreement between the government and the FARC may not be passed in the public referendum. Unfortunately, a failure of the peace talks will result in the continuation of one of the world's longest running civil conflicts.

If the conflict does continue, the FARC is a shadow of its former self and the military has already pushed it to the point of peace talks; a breakdown in the negotiations would allow the government to resume a persistent military campaign against the FARC. While such a campaign would continue to reduce the FARC's operational force, unless the Colombian government provides relief to the underlying grievances fueling the FARC's base, they may find it difficult to fully eliminate the threat posed by the FARC in the future.

*Abigail Jeffers is a cadet at the U.S. Military Academy in West Point.*

*Daniel Milton, Ph.D., is a Research Associate at the Combating Terrorism Center and Assistant Professor in the Department of Social Sciences at the U.S. Military Academy in West Point.*

*The views presented are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the Department of Defense, the U.S. Army, or any of its subordinate commands.*

## The Radicalization of Tunisia's Mosques

By Anne Wolf

IN AUGUST 2013, the Tunisian government declared Ansar al-Shari'a Tunisia (AST) an illegal terrorist organization following its alleged involvement in two political assassinations.<sup>1</sup> Recently, the interim government of Mehdi Jomaa has intensified efforts to crack down on violence by dismantling radical sleeper cells and preventing unauthorized imams from preaching. Despite these efforts, religiously-motivated violence remains a challenge to Tunisia's democratic transition, as underground jihadist networks continue to operate, often with close ties to neighboring countries. Tunisia's vast southern border, shared with Libya, is especially difficult to control. In March 2014, a new Salafist media outlet known as Shabab al-Tawhid (Youth of Pure Monotheism) was established, which some analysts suspect is a front or rebranding for AST.<sup>2</sup> While AST has kept a low-profile following the Tunisian government's decision to label it a terrorist organization, many of its members are still active in Tunisia and look for different channels to continue their activities, which include *da'wa* (proselytizing), the facilitation of foreign fighters to Libya and Syria, and in some cases religiously-motivated violence.

Within this increasingly clandestine network, mosques remain key locations for AST members and other radical Islamists to operate and spread their views, especially as imams. To understand the root causes of this problem, this article provides a brief background on religious scholarship in Tunisia and then evaluates how certain imams use mosques to spread a radical interpretation of Islam. It concludes that some preachers will continue to incite violence or politicize their sermons if the state fails to pursue significant reform within the religious sector.

1 "Tunisia Declares Ansar al-Sharia a Terrorist Group," BBC, August 27, 2013.

2 Aaron Y Zelin, "Shabab al-Tawhid: The Rebranding of Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia?" The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, May 9, 2014.

### Instrumentalizing Religion

Tunisia's tradition of Islamic scholarship and preaching was long centered around its important Zitouna mosque-university, created around 703 CE. Zitouna scholars have been divided between a conservative majority, who were reluctant to the processes of modernization, and a more liberal minority who supported modernization trends and called for the reopening of *ijtihad* (interpretation of religious texts).<sup>3</sup>

Following independence in 1956, Tunisia's first president, Habib Bourguiba, dismantled Zitouna University, replacing it with a simple faculty of Shari'a and Theology. Since Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's regime, imams are officially appointed by the Ministry of Religious Affairs, which also used to control the content of prayer services, mainly in an effort to eradicate any political dissent, which they believed could easily gain momentum in mosques.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, many imams were actually members of Ben Ali's Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD) party, an upfront instrumentalization of religion for political ends. Moreover, a law in 1988 prohibited all activities and meetings in mosques by people other than those appointed by the state.<sup>5</sup>

### Losing Control of the Mosques

In the months that followed the 2010-2011 revolution, several hundred imams were replaced, often by violent Islamists who accused the imams of having collaborated with the former Ben Ali regime. By October 2011, the Ministry of Religious Affairs announced that it had lost control of about 400 mosques.<sup>6</sup> The "uncontrolled" classification means that a mosque's imams are operating

3 *Ijtihad* is commonly understood as "independent reasoning" or "interpretation" of religious texts. For more information, see Arnold H. Green, *The Tunisian Ulama 1873-1915: Social Structure and Response to Ideological Currents* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1978).

4 Anne Wolf, "An Islamist 'Renaissance'? Religion and Politics in Post-Revolutionary Tunisia," *The Journal of North African Studies* 18:4 (2013): pp. 560-573.

5 "La Tunisie veut récupérer les mosquées contrôlées par des radicaux," *Jeune Afrique*, March 12, 2014.

6 For more information, see "Election de la Constituante: Ennahdha concurrencé par Attahir et les Salafistes," *La Tunisie Vote*, October 17, 2011.

43 Helen Murphy and Peter Murphy, "Colombia Government in Preliminary Peace Talks with ELN Rebels," Reuters, June 10, 2014.

without the official authorization of the Ministry of Religious Affairs. To become an “authorized” preacher, one needs to either have a relevant education at the Zitouna institution or take a special exam. Since October 2011, the state tried to reestablish control over these 400 mosques. On March 13, 2014, the Ministry of Religious Affairs estimated that 149 mosques remained out of government control; yet earlier the same month, the Ministry of Interior put the number of uncontrolled mosques at 380, in what illustrates the unreliability of publicly available figures.<sup>7</sup> The latest official figure from May 2014 estimates that around 90 mosques remain out of government control.<sup>8</sup> Most of the uncontrolled mosques are located in the densely populated Sahel region, a key destination for tourists.

It is unclear how many of the uncontrolled mosques are actually run by Salafists or jihadists, but the fact that their leaders and followers reject government authority over their activities—and that they have often taken over mosques by means of force—indicates that radical elements may be present. Additionally, a number of unofficial places of worship, generally estimated at less than 100, were also created after the revolution; the government’s efforts to replace unauthorized preachers might increase such parallel structures.<sup>9</sup>

Besides two imams, at least two other people work at Tunisia’s approximately 5,050 controlled and uncontrolled mosques, and there is no transparent procedure for selecting these 20,200 people.<sup>10</sup> It is also difficult to find such a high number of qualified people given that the level of religious scholarship during the Ben Ali regime was low.<sup>11</sup>

7 Ben Abda Sana, “Tunisia: 149 Mosques Under the Control of Radical Salafists,” *Tunis Times*, March 14, 2014.

8 “Tunisie – Encore 90 mosquées non contrôlées par l’État,” *Tunisie Numérique*, May 3, 2014.

9 Personal interviews, officials at the Ministry of Religious Affairs, Tunis, Tunisia, May and June 2014.

10 For example, many Tunisians do not understand why certain imams end up preaching at their local mosque; the government occasionally places imams in villages to which they have no ties. The appointment process is not transparent.

11 Personal interviews, officials at the Ministry of Religious Affairs and imams, Tunis, Tunisia, May and June

In Tunisia’s new political landscape, the content of prayer services is also no longer controlled by government authorities, a step many Tunisians approve of and view as part of the new liberties acquired through the revolution. Some imams, however, have taken advantage of this by inciting violence, preaching jihad and politicizing their sermons.

#### Controversial Preachers

Many of Tunisia’s controversial prayer services take place in mosques that are uncontrolled, but even official, state-approved imams have incited violence, which indicates that Tunisia’s challenges within the religious sector are deeper than just a matter of replacing unauthorized preachers with approved ones. In March 2013, for example, then-minister of religious affairs, Nourredine Khademi, called upon Tunisians to join jihad in Syria, a position that is officially rejected by the government.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, Tunisia’s current mufti is from Zitouna’s conservative camp and has supported polygamy; the previous mufti was forced to leave in 2013 as he was known to have political ties to the Ben Ali regime.<sup>13</sup>

Nasreddine Aloui, the preacher of the Ennour mosque in the banlieu of Manouba in Tunis, called upon the youth in November 2012 to die as martyrs in the fight against the then-Islamist-led government. “Ennahda and other political parties want elections on the ruins and cadavers of the Salafist movement,” he claimed.<sup>14</sup> Shortly before these statements, his predecessor, Khaled Karaou, and two other Salafists died after attacking two National Guard posts in Manouba.<sup>15</sup>

Khamis Mejri, a self-proclaimed preacher of the El-Wardia mosque south of Tunis, has publicly called Usama bin Ladin a “hero” and Kamel Gadhgadh, the alleged murderer of

2014.

12 “Nourredine Khademi appelait les Tunisiens au jihad en Syrie,” *Business News*, March 19, 2013.

13 Personal interviews, Tunisian imams, June 2014. For more information, see Asma Smadhi, “Controversial Figure Hamda Saïd Appointed as Tunisia’s New Mufti,” *Tunisia Live*, July 8, 2013.

14 “Tunisie: un imam salafiste appelle au jihad contre le gouvernement,” *Jeune Afrique*, November 2, 2012.

15 Ibid.

politician Chokri Belaid, a “martyr.”<sup>16</sup> In December 2012, he stated on Hannibal TV that “people [who] say there is no such thing as a time for prayer” and “renounce prayer...should be killed as infidels.”<sup>17</sup> In March 2014, he was sentenced to three months in prison for giving unauthorized

### “Many of Tunisia’s controversial prayer services take place in mosques that are ‘uncontrolled,’ but even official, state-approved imams have incited violence.”

prayers, but was conditionally released shortly afterwards.<sup>18</sup> Authorities claim that Mejri is no longer preaching,<sup>19</sup> but he still enjoys significant media attention.

In January 2014, the imam of the Sidi Ali Ben Salah mosque in Kef Province in northwest Tunisia was condemned for encouraging followers to kill police officers.<sup>20</sup> In addition, the official preacher Ahmad al-Suhayli in Rades called for the destruction of the Jews in one of his prayer services that was aired on Hannibal TV.<sup>21</sup> He also declared that “the al-Nusra Front, Ansar al-Shari`a, al-Qa`ida, the Islamic State of Iraq and the mujahidin in Somalia, in Mali and in Algeria – we all stand united against the enemies.”<sup>22</sup> Suhayli claims that the

16 “Tunisie-Religion: L’imam Khamis Mejri de nouveau interpellé,” *Kapitalis*, March 19, 2014; “Tunisian Salafi Cleric Khamis Mejri Rejects Democracy and Praises Bin Laden,” *Middle East Media Research Institute*, June 7, 2013.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.

19 Personal interviews, officials at the Ministry of Religious Affairs, Tunis, Tunisia, June 2014.

20 “Tunisie-Société: 6 mois de prison ferme pour un imam appelant au meurtre des policiers,” *Kapitalis*, January 29, 2014.

21 “Tunisian Salafist Kamel Zarouq Talks about Future Conquest of Andalusia, Rome, and Jerusalem,” *Middle East Media Research Institute*, December 24, 2012.

22 “Uproar In Tunisia Over Antisemitic Friday Sermon Exposed,” *Middle East Media Research Institute*, De-

media has exaggerated his statements, and the Ministry of Religious Affairs insists that he has the necessary credentials to continue preaching.<sup>23</sup>

Moreover, Adel Almi, a self-proclaimed preacher who heads the “Moderate Association for Awareness and Reform,”<sup>24</sup> has called for the death of Tunisian Femen activist Amina.<sup>25</sup> In December 2013, he also founded a party called “Tunisia – Zaytouna,” in what is a claim to represent Tunisia’s centuries-old tradition of Islamic scholarship. Indeed, following the revolution, Zitouna University declared itself an organization independent of the government, and now various ideologues claim to represent its legacy; the actual status of the institution remains uncertain.

For his part, the imam of the Zitouna mosque, Shaykh Houcine Laabidi, has called in the past for the death of the artists of an exhibition he judged as blasphemous.<sup>26</sup> Laabidi’s declarations have led authorities in several instances to prevent him from preaching—measures that were, however, only effective in the short term. Laabidi continues to lead prayers and insists that given Zitouna’s self-declared independence, authorities have no right to decide over its imam.<sup>27</sup>

A legal framework has also been adopted to respond to the challenges within the religious sector, but the current stipulations are likely to be insufficient to guarantee a moderate preaching of Islam.

### A New Legal Framework

Article Six of the Tunisian Constitution, which was adopted in January 2014, defines the state’s role as “the guardian of religion” which “guarantees liberty of conscience and of belief, the free exercise of religious worship and the neutrality of the mosques and of the places of worship from all partisan instrumentalization.” It also enshrines that the state is committed to “the dissemination of the values of moderation and tolerance and to the protection of the sacred and the prohibition of any offense thereto,” as well as “the prohibition of, and the fight against, appeals to *takfir* [excommunication] and incitement to violence and hatred.”<sup>28</sup>

Human Rights Watch Tunisia has warned that Article Six could allow repressive interpretations of the definition of “sacred.”<sup>29</sup> Most preachers, for their part, have fiercely criticized the article as it does not include a reference to Shari`a. They have also maintained that “the criminalization of apostasy is contrary Shari`a” and that such an important issue “should have been dealt with by a committee of ulama.”<sup>30</sup>

Besides the new constitutional framework, the Ministry of Religious Affairs announced in March 2014 the establishment of fixed opening hours for mosques—half an hour before and after services—to undermine “negligence” of certain mosques.<sup>31</sup> Earlier that month, security forces seized molotov cocktails and cutting weapons in the al-Hidaya Mosque in Menzel Abderrahmen in northern Tunisia.<sup>32</sup> It is unlikely, however, that this law is properly applied to mosques that are not controlled by the Ministry of Religious Affairs. In many other

mosques, however, the new legislation is observed.<sup>33</sup>

### Popular Resistance

Besides such legal measures to curb the spread of radical Islamist ideologies through mosques, there have been popular attempts to regain control of mosques. Among others, the inhabitants of Gammarth, a northern suburb of Tunis, chased away their imam, saying that he accused people of apostasy.<sup>34</sup> Also, the inhabitants of the Jendouba Province town of Ghardimaou threw out their imam for being an extremist.<sup>35</sup> Even a famous imam, Fadhel Achour, threatened to lead an imam strike in 2013 to protest security concerns within mosques, as well as to protest the lack of accountability within the ministry over the appointment of clergies.<sup>36</sup> When Adel Almi threatened to publicly shame anyone who eats during Ramadan in 2013, a website countering his efforts was launched on Facebook with many people posting pictures of themselves consuming food during the holy month.<sup>37</sup>

### Conclusion

Moderate imams observe that younger Tunisians in particular are influenced by violent discourse within mosques, while older generations seem to be more resilient.<sup>38</sup> This is consistent with previous observations that Salafijihadi ideology is more common among Tunisians under the age of 35.<sup>39</sup>

In security terms, the state has increased efforts to control unauthorized activities within mosques and ensure that unlicensed

23 Personal interviews, officials at the Ministry of Religious Affairs, Tunis, Tunisia, June 2014.

24 The civil society association was previously known as “The Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice.” It wants to implement Shari`a in Tunisian society. For more information, see Asma Ghribi, “Tunisia Recognizes Controversial Islamist Organization,” Tunisia Live, February 21, 2012.

25 “Tunisie: Amina doit être lapidée jusqu’à la mort, estime un prédicateur islamiste,” Kapitalis, March 19, 2013.

26 “Tunisia: Artists Under Attack,” Artsfreedom.org, June 22, 2012.

27 “Tunisie: Appel au meurtre d’artistes - Houcine Laabidi interdit de prêcher,” Tunis Afrique Presse, June 16, 2012.

28 Anna Guellali, “The Problem with Tunisia’s New Constitution,” Human Rights Watch, February 3, 2014.

29 Ibid.

30 “Tunisie/ Constitution: Des Imams appellent à se référer à la Charia,” Gnet.tn, January 21, 2014.

31 Sarah Ben Hamadi and Adjil Kribi, “Tunisie: Le ministère des Affaires religieuses fixe des horaires d’ouverture et de fermeture des mosquées,” *AlHuffington Post Maghreb*, March 11, 2014.

32 “Tunisie: Des armes blanches et des cocktails Molotov dans une mosquée à Menzel Abderrahmen,” *Tunisie Numérique*, March 4, 2014.

33 Personal interviews, Tunisian imams, Tunis, Tunisia, June 2014.

34 “Tunisie – Gammarth: Un imam chassé de la mosquée,” Webmanager Centre, August 31, 2012.

35 “Ghardimaou: l’imam de la mosquée Errahma évincé pour son discours jugé extrémiste,” IMosaique FM, October 2013.

36 Zied Mhirsi, “Imams Contest Government’s Role in Religious Affairs,” Tunisia Live, October 2, 2013.

37 This page is available at [www.facebook.com/pages/Photos-prises-durant-Ramadan-chmeta-fi-Adel-Almi/295136230632655?ref=nf](http://www.facebook.com/pages/Photos-prises-durant-Ramadan-chmeta-fi-Adel-Almi/295136230632655?ref=nf).

38 Personal interviews, Tunisian imams, Tunis, Tunisia, June 2014.

39 Anne Wolf, “The Salafist Temptation: The Radicalization of Tunisia’s Post-Revolution Youth,” *CTC Sentinel* 6:4 (2013).

preachers do not hold prayer services, but the challenges go much further than simple enforcement, as they touch upon the very substance of Islamic education in Tunisia. Moderate preachers insist that as long as the state does not pursue reform within Islamic institutions and properly train imams, some preachers will continue to incite violence or politicize their sermons regardless of government interventions, as a sufficient number of well-trained imams simply do not exist.

Many Zitouna scholars and imams constantly debate government policies, so it is unlikely that the institution provides the necessary neutral ground needed to properly train imams. In February 2014, Tunisian and Moroccan authorities agreed to train some Tunisian imams and preachers in Morocco in an attempt to elevate educational standards.<sup>40</sup> A plan also exists to create a center to train imams in the province of Kairouan, but concrete steps to that end have yet to materialize. Until such long-term reforms are implemented, any attempts to regain control over preachers and their activities within mosques are likely to remain limited.

*Anne Wolf is a graduate of Cambridge University specializing in North African affairs. She works in Tunisia as a journalist, researcher and political risk analyst.*

## A Profile of Syria's Strategic Dar`a Province

By Nicholas A. Heras

DAR`A PROVINCE IS one of the most important battle spaces in the Syrian civil war. It is where the Syrian uprising began as popular demonstrations in response to the imprisonment of 15 children for writing anti-regime graffiti in March 2011. Predominately populated by Sunni Arab tribes, the province is approximately 60 miles from the capital and is located in southern Syria. It borders the country of Jordan, Syria's Golan Heights-bordering region of al-Quneitra, and is the major land route from points south to Damascus.<sup>1</sup> Dar`a is widely believed to be one of the most successful areas of operation for the armed opposition, particularly the Free Syrian Army (FSA), and an important conduit of foreign military support for the rebel fighters via Jordan.<sup>2</sup> According to the Syrian military, 95 (70%) of Dar`a Province's cities, towns, and villages are directly under the control of the armed opposition, although Dar`a city is predominately under the control of the Syrian military.<sup>3</sup> Further underscoring the importance of Dar`a to the FSA on the strategic level, one of the organization's leaders, Brigadier General Abdullah al-Qarazi, stated in February 2014 that "Dar`a Province is the gateway to Damascus. The battle for Damascus starts from here."<sup>4</sup>

The strategic importance of Dar`a in the greater battle for control of the country is not lost on the Bashar al-Assad government and its allies. In what was purported to be a Syrian military briefing that the al-Assad

government allowed the pan-Arab news channel al-Mayadeen to film in June 2013, Syrian army planners preparing a major military campaign on the town of Khirbet Ghazalah, approximately 10 miles north of Dar`a city, outlined how the major, inter-provincial highways running through Dar`a Province that form a junction at Khirbet Ghazalah could be utilized by the armed opposition to reinforce rebels in the Damascus suburbs that could then threaten regime control over the capital.<sup>5</sup> As a result of the strategic location of Dar`a, purported foreign assistance to Dar`a rebels has become the subject of conspiracy theories from the al-Assad government and its allies.<sup>6</sup> Both Fars News and Lebanese Hizb Allah's al-Ahed media agencies have consistently asserted that Dar`a is the prime location for what it views as a Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)-led proxy war aiming to occupy Dar`a city and to eventually impose a no-fly zone in southern Syria to topple the al-Assad government.<sup>7</sup>

This article examines the human geography, particularly Sunni Arab tribes, in Dar`a Province. It finds that the potential for tribal conflict within the armed opposition in Dar`a weakens the rebels' ability to resist the Syrian military's attempts to reinstate al-Assad's rule. Dar`a Province is an essential region for the FSA's *al-jabhat al-janoobiya* (Southern Front). The FSA's ability to make gains in the Southern Front, which its leadership hopes will result in the capture of Damascus from the south, is dependent on the FSA's capacity to maintain its social harmony and cohesion in the province, to secure lines of communication, supplies, and potentially advanced weaponry, such as anti-aircraft missiles, from Jordan into Dar`a.

### Dar`a Province: Tribes and Conflict

Part of the larger geographical feature of the Hawran plain that extends from the southern suburbs of Damascus to northern Jordan, Dar`a has traditionally been a rich agricultural region of settled

1 These details are based on the author's trips from Damascus to southern Syria, including in Dar`a, in July 2009 and March 2010.

2 Matthew Lee and Lolita C. Baldor, "US Eyes Training Moderate Syrian Rebels," Associated Press, May 27, 2014; Zvi Bar'el, "Military Option Against Syria is Alive," *Haaretz*, February 24, 2014; Thom Shanker, "With Eyes on Syria, U.S. Turns Warehouses Into Support Hub for Jordan," *New York Times*, August 15, 2013; Michael Weiss, "The Southern Front, Part 1," NOW Lebanon, August 15, 2013.

3 Firas Choufi, "A Journey Through Syria's Daraa," *al-Akbar*, April 3, 2014.

4 "Syrian Rebels Say Planning Damascus Spring Offensive," *Naharnet*, February 18, 2014.

5 "Dar`a: Ma`rakat Hawran," al-Mayadeen News, June 13, 2013.

6 "Syrian Army Foils Rebels' Infiltration Attempts in Daraa's Countryside," Fars News, June 6, 2014.

7 "CIA Prepares for Invasion of Daraa via Jordan," al-Ahed News, August 5, 2013.

40 "Morocco to Train Tunisian Imams," *Yes Morocco*, February 14, 2014.

Arab tribes that stood on the edge of the Syrian Desert. Dar`a, under the Ottomans, was incorporated into Hawran district that also included areas of modern-day northern Jordan, and was attached to the Damascus *velayet* (province).<sup>8</sup> It was considered to be one of the “breadbaskets” that fed Damascus.<sup>9</sup> Modern-day Dar`a Province retained its agricultural importance and Dar`a city was also a major transit point for southbound commercial traffic and also the smuggling of goods between Turkey, Syria, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia.<sup>10</sup>

Demographically, Dar`a Province is predominately Sunni Arab with smaller populations of sectarian minorities including Christians, Druze, and Shi`a. There are four major tribes in Dar`a Province—al-Zou`bi, al-Hariri, al-Na`ime, and al-Rifa`i—which are, with some controversy among them, believed to have originated as part of the larger al-Na`ime tribal confederation.<sup>11</sup> The major tribal groups in Dar`a have experienced significant rivalries in their modern history, including between al-Hariri and al-Zou`bi, which inhabit generally the same area of Dar`a Province and were rivals on opposing sides of the Syrian national question during the French Mandate era,<sup>12</sup> and between the al-Hariri and al-Rifa`i, which are reported to be closely related to each other, with the al-Rifa`i splitting from the al-Zou`bi.<sup>13</sup> In spite of the

existence of these traditional rivalries, the major tribes of Dar`a are reported to share common grievances, described accurately as a “tribal revolt” or a “blood feud,” against the al-Assad government in Dar`a, and to have established armed groups in the province that are generally tribally integrated.<sup>14</sup>

Geographically, al-Zou`bi are believed to be the most numerous tribal group in Dar`a, with extensive cross-border relations with al-Zou`bi living in northern Jordan’s Irbid Province, particularly in and around the Jordanian border town of al-Ramtha and in the city of Irbid, where the tribe has a large presence in the local population.<sup>15</sup> An estimate of the tribe’s population, spread between southern Syria and northern Jordan, is over 160,000, not all of whom in Syria have actively joined the armed opposition.<sup>16</sup> Al-Zou`bi are predominate in and around Dar`a city, with populations of al-Zou`bi living in towns and villages including al-Na`ima, Saïda, al-Ta`iba, Nassib, al-Museefra and al-Jeeza that are east of the city; Da`il and Khirbet Ghazalah northeast of the city; and `Uthman, al-Yaduda, Muzayrib, and Tafas that are north and west of the city.<sup>17</sup> Members of the al-Hariri tribe co-habit with the al-Zou`bi in generally the same geographic location, with the tribe’s major concentrations in the towns of Da`il, Bitā’, and al-Sheikh Maskin north

of Dar`a city.<sup>18</sup> Al-Rifa`i, the smallest of the major tribes in Dar`a, are located in several of the same towns as al-Zou`bi, with their greatest concentration in the villages of Nassib and `Uthman near Dar`a city.<sup>19</sup>

Al-Na`ime tribesmen are reported to be located in the greatest number in the northwestern region of Dar`a from the city of al-Sheikh Maskin to Nawa and Jasim in Izra` district, and the north-central region of al-Sanamayn district, and in neighboring al-Quneitra Province.<sup>20</sup> Several of the most prominent leaders within the FSA’s Southern Front are members of the al-Na`ime tribe, including the FSA Supreme Military Council’s (FSA-SMC) commanding officer Brigadier General Abdel-Illah al-Bashir, and Colonel Abdo Na`ime, who was captured by Jabhat al-Nusra’s Dar`a branch in May 2014.<sup>21</sup>

Other tribal groups also exist in the province. Southwest of the city of Dar`a, the most prominent tribal group is the al-Miqdad, which is predominate in the towns of Ghasam and Ma`raba, and the city of Busra, near the Jabal al-`Arab mountain range on the Syrian-Jordanian border.<sup>22</sup> In the city of Dar`a, which is the economic hub of southern Syria, tribes such as the Maslma, Mahameed, and Abizaid, and clans of the `Anaza tribal confederation, co-habited with the province’s larger tribal groups and economic migrants from the Shammar tribal confederation of al-Hasakah Province.<sup>23</sup>

8 Hanna Batatu, *Syria’s Peasantry, the Descendants of Its Lesser Rural Notables, and Their Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 10.

9 Dick Douwes, *The Ottomans in Syria: A History of Justice and Oppression* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2000), pp. 17, 19, 20, 24.

10 Stephen Starr, *Revolt in Syria: Eye-Witness to the Uprising* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), p. 3. These details are also based on the author’s trips from Damascus to southern Syria, including in Dar`a, in July 2009 and March 2010.

11 Hassan Hassan, “Tribal Bonds Strengthen the Gulf’s Hand in a New Syria,” *The National*, February 16, 2012; personal interviews, Jordanian tribesmen and Syrian tribesmen from Dar`a living in al-Ramtha, Jordan, November 2013, January 2014, April 2014. The controversy exists because al-Zoubi and al-Hariri tribesmen, generally more powerful than al-Na`ime in Dar`a Province, question the designation of themselves as belonging to the al-Na`ime.

12 Batatu, p. 26.

13 Personal interviews, Jordanian tribesmen and Syrian tribesmen from Dar`a living in al-Ramtha, Jordan, No-

vember 2013, January 2014, April 2014. Al-Zou`bi assert that al-Rifa`i started as a family known for being Islamic clerics which subsequently split from al-Zou`bi and established their own tribe in the Ottoman era.

14 “The Destruction of Daraa,” *Vice*, June 2, 2014; Tareq al-Abd, “Tribalism and the Syrian Crisis,” *al-Monitor*, January 18, 2013; Rania Abouzeid, “Syria’s Revolt: How Graffiti Started an Uprising,” *Time*, March 22, 2011; personal interviews, Jordanian tribesmen and Syrian tribesmen from Dar`a living in al-Ramtha, Jordan, November 2013, January 2014, April 2014.

15 Muhammad al-Da`ma, “Al-Ramtha al-Urduniyya Tata`ataf ma` Dar`a al-Sooria Bisabab Tadakhul Al-`Ailat wa al-Tijara,” *Asharq al-Awsat*, March 26, 2011; personal interviews, Jordanian tribesmen and Syrian tribesmen from Dar`a living in al-Ramtha, Jordan, November 2013, January 2014, April 2014.

16 Michael Weiss, “The Southern Front, Part 1,” NOW Lebanon, August 15, 2013.

17 Batatu, pp. 25-26; personal interviews, Jordanian tribesmen and Syrian tribesmen from Dar`a living in al-Ramtha, Jordan, November 2013, January 2014, April 2014.

18 Batatu, pp. 25-26; personal interviews, Jordanian tribesmen and Syrian tribesmen from Dar`a living in al-Ramtha, Jordan, November 2013, January 2014, April 2014.

19 Personal interviews, Jordanian tribesmen and Syrian tribesmen from Dar`a living in al-Ramtha, Jordan, November 2013, January 2014, April 2014.

20 Ibid. The controversy exists because al-Zou`bi and al-Hariri tribesmen, generally more powerful than al-Na`ime in Dar`a Province, question the designation of themselves as belonging to al-Na`ime.

21 Phil Sands and Suha Maayeh, “Al-Qaeda Kidnapping of Syrian Commander Could Open New Front,” *The National*, May 6, 2014.

22 Tareq al-Abd, “Tribalism and the Syrian Crisis,” *al-Monitor*, January 18, 2013; Batatu, pp. 24-25.

23 Carole A. O’Leary and Nicholas A. Heras, “Syrian Tribal Networks and Their Implications for the Syrian Crisis,” *Terrorism Monitor* 10:11 (2012).

Although there is a smaller population of sectarian minorities in Dar`a Province than in other regions of Syria, these communal groups still play an important role in ongoing events in the province. Dar`a city has traditionally had a small population of Christians, and the villages of al-Bashir and Naamer, which are suburbs of Dar`a city, and the village of Izra` are considered to be the major population centers of Christians in the province.<sup>24</sup> Christians from the city of Naamer are reported to have joined Popular Committees organized under the National Defense Force (NDF) as auxiliaries to the 2013 Syrian military campaign that seized Khirbet Ghazalah.<sup>25</sup> Busra, a small city 24 miles southwest of Dar`a city, is the major population center for Shi`a in the province. The city's Shi`a population is believed to have migrated from the area of Nabatiyya in southern Lebanon during the Ottoman period.<sup>26</sup> Currently, an estimated 15,000 people, or 40% of the city's population, are Shi`a, and are concentrated in the eastern section of the city.<sup>27</sup> Busra has a notorious reputation among the Syrian armed opposition due to repeated assertions that Hizb Allah operatives are present in the Shi`a section of the city, and that the local Shi`a population has organized NDF militias to confront rebel groups.<sup>28</sup>

#### The FSA in Dar`a

The major armed opposition groups in Dar`a are considered to be part of the FSA's Southern Front, which claims to have the allegiance of more than 50 militias with a combined 30,000 fighters concentrated in Dar`a Province, and represented in Dar`a's neighboring provinces of al-Quneitra, al-Suweida, and Reef

Damascus.<sup>29</sup> Although the constituent armed opposition factions of the Southern Front do not all share areas of operation or control territory that are territorially contiguous with each other, they have sought to coordinate, where able, to relieve pressure on other battle fronts in northern, central, and eastern Syria. Their goal is to cut the Syrian military off from

**“The Southern Front, in theory, represents the FSA’s intended strategy to apply strong pressure on the al-Assad government in Damascus to reduce the regime’s ability to respond to other important battle spaces.”**

southern Syria by gaining control over the inter-provincial Damascus-Dar`a highway, and to open strategic lines of supply into Damascus and opposition-controlled areas in the Damascus suburbs that are under siege by the Syrian military, including in the town of Mleha. The Southern Front, in theory, represents the FSA's intended strategy to apply strong pressure on the al-Assad government in Damascus to reduce the regime's ability to respond to other important battle spaces, such as north of Homs and in and around Aleppo.<sup>30</sup>

Several of the largest constituent armed groups within the Southern Front are composed of tribal fighters that are based in Dar`a. These armed groups, especially in the southern regions of Dar`a, integrate fighters from multiple tribes and include: Farqa al-Yarmouk (Yarmouk Division), led by a prominent al-Zou`bi tribesman named Bashar al-Zoubi and composed of al-Zou`bi, al-Rifa`i, al-Miqdad, and al-Hariri

tribesmen, active in several front-lines in and around Dar`a city; Liwa' Falluja Hawran (Falluja Hawran Brigade), which is composed of al-Zou`bi, al-Rifa`i, Maslama, and Mahameed tribesmen and is active in and around Dar`a city, especially in the villages of Na`ima, Tafas, and Saida; Liwa' Fajar al-Islam (Dawn of Islam Brigade), which is composed of al-Zou`bi, al-Rifai`i, and al-Hariri tribesmen, and is active in Tafas and `Uthman and inside Dar`a city, and in Busra al-Harir in northeastern Dar`a Province; and Liwa' Moataz Bi-Allah, which includes al-Zou`bi, al-Rifa`i, Mahameed, and al-Rifa`i tribesmen and is active in Dar`a city, Muzayrib, Tafas, and `Uthman.

#### Militant Islamist Factions in Dar`a

In addition to FSA-affiliated armed groups, both of the major militant Salafist organizations are active in Dar`a: Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya (Islamic Movement of the Free Ones of the Levant) and the al-Qa`ida affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra (Victory Front).<sup>31</sup> The largest concentration of militant Salafist groups in Dar`a is occurring in and around the cities of Nawa and Jasim. Nawa, in particular, with a pre-war population estimated to be at 50,000, is strategic because it is built near the inter-provincial Highway 5 that extends from Idlib to Dar`a, and which routes through Damascus. The city also lies near the border between Dar`a and al-Quneitra provinces, and is considered by the armed opposition as a staging point to launch operations into al-Quneitra Province and to relieve pressure applied by the Syrian military on opposition fighters in southern Dar`a Province.<sup>32</sup>

From the al-Assad government's perspective, the siege of Nawa is one of its most important campaigns in southern Syria, which is echoed by media sympathetic to the Syrian regime.<sup>33</sup> The importance of Nawa

24 "Dar`a: Ma`rakat Hawran," al-Mayadeen News, June 13, 2013; Brooke Anderson, "Syria's Daraa: Writing History on the Wall," *Daily Star*, March 14, 2012; Starr, p. 9; Batatu.

25 "Dar`a: Ma`rakat Hawran."

26 Batatu, p. 24.

27 Muhammad Abo Abdo and Ahmed Kwider, "Hezbollah Fighters Seen in Daraa Province," Syria Direct, June 14, 2013; personal interviews, Jordanian tribesmen and Syrian tribesmen from Dar`a living in al-Ramtha, Jordan, November 2013, January 2014 and April 2014.

28 "Syrian Army Prepares for an Attack from its Southern Border," *al-Akbar*, February 19, 2014; "Hezbollah Flags and Sectarian Logos Flying From the Skies of Busra al-Sham, Dara'a," August 8, 2013, available at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=DcO5Wg808tw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DcO5Wg808tw).

29 "49 Factions Declare the 'Southern Front' in 5 Governorates," *Zaman al-Wasl*, February 13, 2014.

30 "Reef Damascus: Clashes Between the Free Army and Regime Forces on the Southern Front in the Town of Mleha," *Mojez*, May 24, 2014; "Conflict in the Southern Front in Syria to Open the Damascus Road," NOW Lebanon, March 4, 2014.

31 Nicholas A. Heras, "The Battle for al-Quneitra, the 'Gateway to Damascus,'" *Terrorism Monitor* 12:5 (2014).

In spite of the active presence of these militant Salafist groups in the Nawa area, the Syrian military continues to maintain an active siege of the city.

32 Ibid.

33 "Syria: Army Continues Advancing, Cuts Militants' Supply Route in Daraa," *Fars News*, May 19, 2014; "Syrian Army Repels Militants' Attack on Strategic Daraa Region," February 1, 2014, available at [www.liveleak.com](http://www.liveleak.com).

to the Syrian military's efforts in southern Syria has led to allegations that it has sought the active involvement of seasoned Hizb Allah operatives to coordinate its campaign. Fawzi Muhammad Ayoub, a veteran Hizb Allah commander, was reportedly killed in Nawa in late May 2014.<sup>34</sup>

Ahrar al-Sham has made the battle to control Nawa and its surrounding areas a priority for it in southern Syria, naming its current campaign *Ma`rakat Fajr al-Rabi`* (Dawn of Spring Battle).<sup>35</sup> Militant Islamist groups close to Ahrar al-Sham and the powerful, multi-provincial armed opposition coalition that it belongs to, al-Jabhat al-Islamiyya (Islamic Front), have also cooperated with Ahrar al-Sham in Dar`a. Most prominent among these armed factions is Alwiya al-Furqan (The Criterion Brigades), which is based in the southern Damascus exurbs centered on the town of Kanakir. Alwiya al-Furqan, which has reportedly close links to the Islamic Front in Damascus' suburbs, Dar`a, and al-Quneitra, is the primary faction behind the armed opposition campaign *Ma`rakat Fajr al-Taw`hid 2* (Dawn of Holy Unity Battle 2) that operates in the same battle space as Ahrar al-Sham's *Ma`rakat Fajr al-Rabi`*.<sup>36</sup>

Jabhat al-Nusra is the most active militant Salafist armed opposition organization in Dar`a. Jabhat al-Nusra fighters are reportedly engaged in combat throughout the province, in battle spaces ranging from Nawa in the northwest, to Busra al-Harir in the northeast, and in and around the city of Dar`a.<sup>37</sup> They have generally

cooperated as an auxiliary force to the FSA-affiliated armed groups in the province.<sup>38</sup> The leadership of Jabhat al-Nusra in Dar`a Province is reportedly composed of a core of foreign fighters from Jordan and other areas of the Middle East, most of whom have fought in northern Syria, and some of whom have recent experience fighting U.S.-led forces in Iraq, who command rank-and-file militants composed of local tribesmen from Dar`a.<sup>39</sup> The threat of violence, and protracted tribal vendettas, directed against Jabhat al-Nusra by tribesmen in FSA-affiliated groups is a developing factor in the conflict in Dar`a Province. A threat from the al-Rifa`i and Maslama tribes against Jabhat al-Nusra for the capture of two FSA-affiliated officers from these tribes, who were captured with Colonel Abdo Na`ime, is reported to have led to the release of the officers and an apology from Jabhat al-Nusra to their tribes.<sup>40</sup>

#### Conclusion

Dar`a Province is the strongest area of operations for the FSA in Syria, a position which has been challenged by ongoing Syrian military operations and the increase in the operational presence of Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham in the province. FSA-affiliated armed groups with a predominately tribal, local composition have, however, successfully resisted the Syrian military and either co-opted or diffused the strength of the militant Salafist opposition organizations for more than three years. Jabhat al-Nusra has begun to challenge the leadership role in the Dar`a armed opposition that has been held by the FSA. Jabhat al-Nusra's expanded and increasingly independent operations in and around the city of Dar`a—the "prize" of the fighting in the province—threatens FSA control over the conflict in Dar`a. The potential appeal of a reinvigorated Jabhat al-Nusra organization in Dar`a—as the militant Salafist group

is widely credited within the armed opposition for being notably fierce in its commitment to combating the al-Assad government—could be a draw that brings young tribal fighters away from the FSA-affiliated militias.

The FSA's apparent position of strength in Dar`a Province can also be further weakened by the rising social tensions between tribesmen belonging to the armed opposition organizations and the militant Salafist groups. This growing tension between tribally-organized revolutionaries—primarily between FSA-affiliated militias and the al-Qa`ida affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra—threaten to overcome rebel cohesion in Dar`a. FSA-affiliated armed groups and Jabhat al-Nusra will seek to maintain the ideological *asabiyya* (social cohesion) of their fighters, while simultaneously preventing serious *fitna* (social discord and conflict) between local tribesmen that could force them to withdraw from Dar`a in the face of the ongoing Syrian military campaign in the province. Conflict between the FSA-affiliated tribes and Jabhat al-Nusra in Dar`a would assist the Syrian military and weaken one of the FSA's few viable battle spaces where it could appeal to direct foreign assistance for its war effort and to possibly help it establish a "free Syrian" civil and military administration on the actual territory of Syria.

*Nicholas A. Heras is an analyst at the Jamestown Foundation, a senior analyst with Michael Moran & Associates, LLP, and an associate editor at the international affairs journal Fair Observer. A former David L. Boren Fellow and Sorel Fellow, he has significant field experience throughout Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan researching the politics of identity, cultural conflict, and socio-economic tension.*

com/view?i=c93\_1391269563.

34 "Canadian Hezbollah Commander Killed Fighting Rebels in Syria," *al-Arabiya*, May 27, 2014.

35 "Harakat Ahrar al-Sham-Issuing the Dawn of Spring Battle-Liberate al-Quneitra Countryside," Islam Sham YouTube page, February 19, 2014. The "Dawn of Spring Battle" is the successor to Harakat Ahrar al-Sham's earlier campaign, which was launched in November 2013, called *Ma`rakat Fajr al-Tawhid* (Dawn of Holy Unity Battle).

36 Nicholas A. Heras, "Muhammad Majid al-Khatib: A Rising Leader in the Free Syrian Army," *Militant Leadership Monitor* 5:2 (2014).

37 See the YouTube page of "Kaesar Zezoon" for an updated list of videos of purported Jabhat al-Nusra operations in the area of Nawa: [www.youtube.com/channel/UCdoamYmugmat5GyAOqbQAVQ/videos](http://www.youtube.com/channel/UCdoamYmugmat5GyAOqbQAVQ/videos). Also see Tareq Al-Abed, "Jabhat al-Nusra Losing Support

Among Rebels, Tribes in South Syria," *al-Monitor*, May 8, 2014; Sands and Maayah, "Syrian Army Prepares for an Attack from its Southern Border," *al-Akbbar*, February 19, 2014.

38 Ibid.

39 Carole A. O'Leary and Nicholas A. Heras, "Those 'Son of a Bitch Bonds' That Can Never Be Broken," *Counter Violent Extremism (CVE) Journal* 4 (2014).

40 Sands and Maayah.



## Recent Highlights in Political Violence

May 1, 2014 (AFGHANISTAN): A suicide bomber detonated an explosives-laden vehicle in Panjshir Province, killing six policemen and six road construction workers. Panjshir Province, which is usually peaceful, is fiercely anti-Taliban. – *Reuters, May 1*

May 1, 2014 (YEMEN): Yemeni security forces killed seven fighters from al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in Abyan Province. One of those killed was an Uzbek AQAP commander known as Abu Muslim al-Uzbeki. – *Voice of America, May 1*

May 1, 2014 (NIGERIA): A car bomb exploded on a busy street in the Nigerian capital of Abuja, killing approximately 19 people. – *AP, May 1*

May 2, 2014 (SYRIA): Al-Qa`ida chief Ayman al-Zawahiri released a new video message, in which he said that Iraqi al-Qa`ida's entry into Syria's civil war has caused "a political disaster." Al-Zawahiri said in the video message that if the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) had accepted his decision to stay out of Syria and had instead worked to "busy itself with Iraq, which needs double its efforts," then it could have avoided the "waterfall of blood" caused by militant infighting. As explained by Reuters, Iraqi al-Qa`ida "militants joined the conflict in Syria last year and unilaterally declared they were taking over the Nusra Front, which had won the admiration of many rebels fighting Syria's President Bashar al-Assad for its battlefield prowess...Al-Zawahiri, who has run al-Qa`ida since Usama bin Ladin was killed in May 2011, accused ISIL's leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, of 'sedition' and said rebel disunity had been handed 'on a plate of gold' to Assad, the ultimate target of all Sunni Islamist groups in Syria." – *Reuters, May 3*

May 2, 2014 (SYRIA): Two car bombs exploded in two villages in Hama Province, killing 18 people. – *Voice of America, May 2*

May 2, 2014 (EGYPT): A suicide bomber in the South Sinai killed an Egyptian soldier. – *Reuters, May 2*

May 2, 2014 (EGYPT): A car bomb killed a policeman at a traffic security post in Cairo. – *Reuters, May 2*

May 2, 2014 (YEMEN): Al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) threatened to attack any party involved in U.S. drone operations in Yemen. "For us, all such establishments are legitimate targets," warned AQAP's Qasim al-Raymi. "We won't wait for them to come to us—we will go to them." Al-Raymi accused Yemeni security forces of helping the United States track AQAP's vehicles. – *AFP, May 3*

May 2, 2014 (YEMEN): Yemeni forces killed five al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) militants in Shabwa Province. The attack came on the fourth day of a Yemeni military offensive against the group and its allies. – *Reuters, May 2*

May 3, 2014 (IRAQ): Gunmen killed four Sunni anti-al-Qa`ida militiamen in Tarmiyya, 30 miles north of Baghdad. – *AP, May 3*

May 3, 2014 (YEMEN): Al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula announced that Ali bin Likra al-Kazimy died after succumbing to injuries days after an attack by the Yemeni military and U.S. drone aircraft in the town of Mahfad. – *Guardian, May 3*

May 3, 2014 (SYRIA): Jabhat al-Nusra, al-Qa`ida's affiliate in Syria, kidnapped Ahmed Nehmeh, a Western-backed military leader in the Dar`a Military Council, after he criticized extremist groups. According to the *National*, "his abduction is a setback for the rebels' efforts to unify their ranks and push a new offensive against the forces of President Bashar al-Assad on the southern front. It also shows that although the south is widely considered the most coherent opposition bloc in the country, it is also affected by lingering rebel schisms." – *The National, May 6*

May 3, 2014 (JORDAN): The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) released a video calling on residents of the southern Jordanian city of

Maan to begin jihad against the Jordanian government. In the video, an ISIL fighter said that the Jordanian government is a "regime that has ruled over the Muslims for dozens of years according to [laws] differing from those of the Qur'an and the Sunna of the Prophet. It rules them instead according to infidel man-made laws. It is a regime that kills Muslims and aggresses their sacred places...it is a regime that battles jihad and the mujahidin in all the jihad arenas..." The speaker also called on Jordanian tribes in Maan to turn against the Jordanian government. – *Jerusalem Post, May 6*

May 4, 2014 (SYRIA): Jabhat al-Nusra, al-Qa`ida's affiliate in Syria, set its conditions for a cessation of fighting with its rival group, the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). The ISIL, which was formerly al-Qa`ida's affiliate in Iraq until Ayman al-Zawahiri disowned the group, has engaged in bloody infighting with Jabhat al-Nusra. According to Jabhat al-Nusra, "as soon as the ISIL announces an end to its attacks on Muslims, we will spontaneously stop firing." – *AFP, May 4*

May 5, 2014 (IRAQ): A car bomb exploded outside a restaurant in Kirkuk, killing three people. – *Boston.com, May 5*

May 5, 2014 (UNITED ARAB EMIRATES): A court hearing began for nine suspected al-Qa`ida members accused of plotting attacks in the United Arab Emirates. The nine suspects are charged with "planning attacks damaging to the country's security and (foreign) residents." The nine are Arab nationals, mostly from North Africa. One is being tried in absentia. – *AFP, May 6*

May 5, 2014 (YEMEN): Gunmen killed a Frenchman who was working as a security agent for the European Union's mission in Sana`a. On May 7, Yemeni security forces said that they killed the man responsible for the attack, who was identified as Wael Abdallah Masoud al-Waeli, along with one of his accomplices. Authorities captured a third member of the group alive. According to Yemen's supreme security committee,

al-Waeli had organized other attacks on Westerners. – *Reuters, May 7*

May 5, 2014 (NIGERIA): Suspected Boko Haram gunmen kidnapped eight girls from the village of Warabe in northeastern Nigeria. The girls were between the ages of 12 and 15. According to local residents, the gunmen arrived in two vehicles and took the girls away on trucks, along with food and livestock that they stole from the village. – *Chicago Tribune, May 6*

May 5, 2014 (NIGERIA): Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau released a new video message, in which he threatened to sell the more than 200 teenage schoolgirls the group abducted in April. “By Allah, I will sell them in the marketplace,” he threatened in the hour-long video. – *USA Today, May 5*

May 6, 2014 (SAUDI ARABIA): Saudi authorities announced that they broke up a “major terrorist network” linked to al-Qa`ida groups in Iraq, Yemen and Syria that was plotting attacks against foreign interests and government installations in Saudi Arabia. The Saudi Interior Ministry said that they had arrested 62 suspected members of the group, including 35 Saudi nationals and three foreigners. An additional 44 suspects remain on the loose. Saudi authorities said that the network had made direct contact with the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), and that the network was plotting “large-scale assassinations” in addition to other attacks on Saudi government installations and foreign interests. As stated by the *Guardian*, “The announcement comes against a background of growing anxiety in the conservative kingdom about the risk of ‘blowback’ from jihadi groups fighting in Syria, despite enthusiastic Saudi government and private financial and logistical support for the overthrow of President Bashar al-Assad.” – *Guardian, May 6*

May 6, 2014 (YEMEN): Gunmen bombed Yemen’s main oil export pipeline, halting the flow of crude. According to Reuters, “The pipeline was bombed twice in less than 12 hours late on Tuesday [May 6] in an area between the central Marib Province and the capital, Sana`a...” It was not immediately clear who was

responsible for the attack, as both Yemeni tribesmen and al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula have targeted pipelines and other infrastructure in the past. – *Reuters, May 7*

May 6, 2014 (YEMEN): Yemeni troops secured control of the al-Mahfad area of Abyan Province, which has served as a stronghold for al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula. – *Reuters, May 7*

May 7, 2014 (SYRIA): Hundreds of Syrian rebels left their last stronghold in Homs as part of a deal brokered by Iran and facilitated by the United Nations. As explained by the BBC, “Much of Homs fell to the opposition in 2011, but over the past two years [Syrian] government forces have gradually regained control by subjecting areas once home to tens of thousands to continuous siege and bombardment...It marks the end of three years of resistance in the central city [of Homs], once dubbed the ‘capital of the revolution’ against President Bashar al-Assad.” – *BBC, May 7*

May 8, 2014 (AFGHANISTAN): The Afghan Taliban announced the start of its annual spring offensive. In its statement, the group warned that it would target “military gatherings of foreign invading forces, their diplomatic centers and convoys as well as the military bases of their internal mercenary stooges, their convoys and the facilities of foreign, interior, intelligence and Arbaki militia [government-supported local armed groups].” According to the Afghan government, more than 13,000 Afghan soldiers and police officers have been killed in the country since 2001, while, according to an Associated Press count, at least 2,179 U.S. military members have died in that same time period. – *NBC News, May 8*

May 8, 2014 (PAKISTAN): A bomb targeted a Pakistani military vehicle in the tribal areas near the border with Afghanistan, killing nine Pakistani soldiers. – *RFE/RL, May 8*

May 8, 2014 (IRAQ): A bomb exploded inside a small café in a Baghdad suburb, killing four people. – *AP, May 8*

May 8, 2014 (IRAQ): A bomb exploded on a commercial street in Baghdad’s Dora district, killing two people. – *AP, May 8*

May 9, 2014 (IRAQ): Iraqi security forces launched an operation to retake areas of Falluja, which has been held by the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). The purpose of the operation was to lay the groundwork for a future military assault on the city. – *Dawn, May 10*

May 9, 2014 (YEMEN): Suspected al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula militants attempted to assassinate Yemeni Defense Minister Muhammad Nasr Ahmad in Shabwa Province. – *Voice of America, May 9*

May 9, 2014 (YEMEN): Militants from al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula killed three Yemeni soldiers at a checkpoint near the presidential palace in Sana`a. – *Voice of America, May 9*

May 10, 2014 (IRAQ): The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant attacked a small Iraqi military base in Ninawa Province, capturing 20 soldiers who were subsequently executed. – *AFP, May 10*

May 10, 2014 (EGYPT): Egyptian authorities charged 200 suspected militants with carrying out more than 50 terrorist attacks, killing 40 policemen and 15 civilians, and collaborating with the Palestinian militant group Hamas. All of the defendants allegedly belong to Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis. Ninety-eight of the defendants were tried in absentia. – *AP, May 10*

May 11, 2014 (GLOBAL): A spokesman for the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) sharply criticized Ayman al-Zawahiri, rejecting the al-Qa`ida chief’s call to leave Syria. “Shaykh Usama [bin Ladin] gathered all the mujahidin with one word, but you [al-Zawahiri] divided them and tore them apart,” said the spokesman. “We call on you to undo your fatal mistake...because you are the one who kindled sedition, you are the one who will extinguish it.” He also accused Ayman al-Zawahiri and al-Qa`ida of protecting Iran from militant attacks during the past several years. The

ISIL's spokesman said that al-Qa`ida had issued orders to Islamist militants not to attack Iran or its interests. - *AFP, May 12; AP, May 12; al-Arabiya, May 12*

May 11, 2014 (SYRIA): The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant reportedly took control of key parts of Dayr al-Zur Province from other rebel groups. - *Reuters, May 11*

May 11, 2014 (YEMEN): A suicide bomber in a vehicle killed 10 Yemeni soldiers and one civilian in an attack on a military police building in the southern coastal city of Mukalla. - *Reuters, May 11*

May 11, 2014 (AFGHANISTAN): A suicide bomber in a vehicle killed at least five people in Kandahar Province. - *RFE/RL, May 11*

May 11, 2014 (PAKISTAN): A suicide bomber killed at least four people at a soccer stadium in northwest Pakistan. The bomber apparently targeted refugees from Khyber Agency as they registered with the government in the stadium. - *Voice of America, May 11*

May 12, 2014 (AFGHANISTAN): To mark the start of its spring offensive, Taliban fighters killed two police guards and then stormed a government building in Jalalabad. Separately, Taliban fighters launched rockets at Kabul International Airport, but caused no damage. They also launched rockets at Bagram airbase, although that attack did not cause any casualties. - *CBS News, May 12*

May 12, 2014 (YEMEN): A suspected U.S. drone strike killed six al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula militants in Marib Province. - *AP, May 12*

May 12, 2014 (SOMALIA): A suicide bomber in a vehicle apparently tried to assassinate Abdi Fatah Gesey, a former governor, but instead killed at least 12 people, including Somali government soldiers and civilians, in Baidoa. Gesey was unharmed. - *al-Jazeera, May 12*

May 13, 2014 (IRAQ): A series of car bombs struck Shi`a districts in Baghdad, killing at least 25 people. - *BBC, May 13*

May 13, 2014 (NIGERIA): According to Reuters, "Nigeria's government signaled willingness on Tuesday [May 13] to negotiate with Islamist militants holding more than 200 schoolgirls, a month after the kidnap that has provoked global outrage." Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau recently said that the group would release the girls in exchange for a number of Boko Haram militants currently imprisoned by the Nigerian government. - *Reuters, May 13*

May 13, 2014 (NIGERIA): Boko Haram militants ambushed and killed four Nigerian soldiers outside Maiduguri in northeastern Nigeria. - *Reuters, May 14*

May 15, 2014 (SYRIA): A car bomb killed at least 29 people near the Bab al-Salama border crossing with Turkey. - *CNN, May 15*

May 16, 2014 (IRAQ): Gunmen opened fire from a speeding vehicle on a security checkpoint manned by anti-al-Qa`ida Sunni fighters near Balad, killing three of them. - *AP, May 16*

May 16, 2014 (CAMEROON): Suspected Boko Haram militants attacked a Chinese plant near Waza in northern Cameroon. Waza lies just 12 miles from the Nigerian border close to the Sambisa Forest, an area known for being a Boko Haram hideout. According to Reuters, "Chinese state news agency Xinhua quoted Chinese officials as saying unidentified assailants had attacked the camp of a Chinese enterprise operating in Cameroon on Friday night, injuring one person and leaving 10 unaccounted for." - *Reuters, May 17*

May 16, 2014 (KENYA): Two bombs ripped through a market near central Nairobi, killing 10 people. - *Guardian, May 16*

May 17, 2014 (KENYA): The United States said that it was preparing to reduce staff levels at its embassy in Nairobi due to the growing threat of attacks in Kenya by Islamist militants. As stated by Agence France-Presse, "The move comes after a wave of shootings, bombings and grenade attacks in Kenya's capital, Nairobi, and the port city of Mombasa. Authorities

have blamed the attacks on militants connected to Somalia's al-Qa`ida-linked al-Shabab rebels." - *AFP, May 17*

May 18, 2014 (SOMALIA): Kenyan fighter jets attacked al-Shabab facilities in Somalia. - *Bloomberg, May 18*

May 18, 2014 (NIGERIA): A suicide bomber in a vehicle killed five people on a street known for popular bars and restaurants in Kano. - *Reuters, May 18*

May 19, 2014 (UNITED STATES): A U.S. court found radical Islamic preacher Abu Hamza guilty of terrorism charges. As stated by the *Telegraph*, "Hamza was accused of providing material support to terrorist organizations by enabling hostage-takers in the Yemen kidnapping to speak on a satellite phone, by sending men to establish an al-Qa`ida training camp in the U.S. state of Oregon, and by sending at least one man to training camps in Afghanistan." Hamza was extradited from the United Kingdom to the United States in 2012. - *Telegraph, May 19*

May 19, 2014 (UNITED ARAB EMIRATES): The United Arab Emirates referred nine expatriate Arabs to a state security court, accusing them of joining al-Qa`ida, collecting donations and recruiting fighters for Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria. - *Reuters, May 19*

May 19, 2014 (PAKISTAN): Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan kidnapped a Chinese tourist who was on a cycling tour of the country. The cyclist was kidnapped near Dera Ismail Khan in western Pakistan. - *Reuters, May 20*

May 20, 2014 (AFGHANISTAN): Taliban fighters killed eight Afghan policemen and kidnapped 27 other policemen in Badakhshan Province. In a rare move, the Taliban freed 23 of the police officers as a gesture of "mercy" one week later. - *Washington Post, May 23; Washington Post, May 27*

May 20, 2014 (NIGERIA): Two car bombs exploded at a busy bus terminal and market in Jos, killing at least 118 people. According to the Associated Press, "the second blast came half an hour after the first, killing some of the rescue workers who had rushed

to the scene, which was obscured by billows of black smoke.” There was no immediate claim of responsibility, although authorities suspect that the Boko Haram group is to blame. – *AP, May 20*

May 22, 2014 (UNITED STATES): The U.S. Justice Department has assigned a veteran prosecutor to monitor the flow of foreign fighters, including Americans, to Syria. The FBI has also created a special team to identify U.S. citizens traveling to Syria to fight. – *Reuters, May 22*

May 22, 2014 (SYRIA): The United Kingdom said that Syria has made no progress in giving up its last batch of chemical weapons, with the Bashar al-Assad regime claiming that the weapons are inaccessible due to fighting. – *Reuters, May 22*

May 22, 2014 (IRAQ): A suicide bomber detonated explosives among Shi`a pilgrims in Baghdad’s Mansur district, killing 11 people. – *CNN, May 22*

May 22, 2014 (IRAQ): A suicide bomber in a vehicle killed eight people in a commercial district in Baghdad. – *CNN, May 22*

May 22, 2014 (CHINA): Two vehicles ploughed into a market in Urumqi, the capital of China’s restive Xinjiang Province. One of the vehicles exploded, killing more than 30 people. According to Australian media, “It was not immediately clear who was responsible for the attack, but recent violence in the region has been blamed on extremists from Xinjiang’s native Turkic Uighur Muslim ethnic group seeking to overthrow Chinese rule in the region.” – *news.com.au, May 22*

May 23, 2014 (YEMEN): A suicide bomber in an explosives-laden vehicle targeted a checkpoint manned by Shi`a Muslim Huthi fighters in al-Jawf Province in northern Yemen, killing at least three people. – *Reuters, May 23*

May 24, 2014 (BELGIUM): A gunman shot and killed four people in an attack on the Jewish Museum in Brussels. French authorities later arrested Mehdi Nemmouche at a bus station

in Marseille after he arrived on a coach from Amsterdam via Brussels. Nemmouche allegedly spent more than a year training in Syria with the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant. Nemmouche reportedly admitted to the museum attack in a video. – *France 24, June 1; BBC, June 1*

May 24, 2014 (DJIBOUTI): A suicide bombing at a restaurant filled with Western military personnel killed three people. Al-Shabab claimed responsibility. – *al-Jazeera, May 25; AFP, May 27*

May 24, 2014 (IRAQ): A car bomb exploded outside a liquor store in Kirkuk, killing at least seven people. – *Sky News, May 25*

May 24, 2014 (NIGERIA): The United Nations added Boko Haram to its list of al-Qa`ida associates subject to financial sanctions and an arms embargo. – *AFP, May 24*

May 24, 2014 (PAKISTAN): Two small bombs exploded in the heart of Islamabad, killing a security guard. – *Reuters, May 24*

May 24, 2014 (YEMEN): Heavily-armed al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) militants attacked the southern city of Seyoun in Hadramawt Province. The militants targeted an army base, the Central Bank building, the city’s central security headquarters, the traffic police department, the post office and the agricultural bank. At least 10 Yemeni soldiers and 15 AQAP militants were killed. – *al-Jazeera, May 24*

May 24, 2014 (SOMALIA): Al-Shabab militants undertook a complex attack on Somalia’s parliament building, killing at least one soldier. The attack involved a car bomb, a suicide bomber and gunmen on foot. – *Times, May 24*

May 25, 2014 (UNITED STATES/SYRIA): Moner Mohammad Abu-Salha, a U.S. citizen from Florida, blew himself up in an attack on Syrian government troops in Syria. According to the *New York Times*, “The [U.S.] officials said they believed that Mr. Abusalha, who adopted the nom de guerre Abu Huraira al-Amriki, used a large truck in helping to carry out

the bombing in the northern province of Idlib, where he had traveled after spending two months in a training camp of the militant group the Nusra Front in Aleppo. The officials said they thought it was the first time an American had been involved in a suicide attack in Syria.” – *New York Times, May 30*

May 25, 2014 (AFGHANISTAN): A suicide bomber wearing a *burqa* killed Abdul Wadood Sarhadi Jajo, a prominent police commander, in Kandahar. – *Wall Street Journal, May 25*

May 25, 2014 (LEBANON): Lebanese security forces arrested Omar Bakri Muhammad, a radical Islamic cleric who spent years in the United Kingdom. He had been on the run in Lebanon since April, when Lebanese security forces raided his home in Tripoli. According to the *New York Times*, “Lebanese authorities viewed him with increasing concern after he expressed support for an extremist group that has taken over parts of northern Syria, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, and called for it to activate cells in Lebanon. He has denied links to al-Qa`ida, but has called for the group’s flag to be flown over Lebanon’s presidential palace.” – *New York Times, May 25*

May 25, 2014 (YEMEN): Yemeni security forces killed a senior leader from al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula during a raid near Sana`a. The leader was identified as Salih al-Tais. – *Reuters, May 25*

May 26, 2014 (AFGHANISTAN): A suicide bomber on a motorcycle rammed into a bus carrying soldiers and civilian employees in Kabul, killing two Afghan Defense Ministry staffers. – *AP, May 26*

May 27, 2014 (NORWAY): Norwegian police announced that they arrested three people suspected of aiding the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). At least two of the three suspects are accused of having joined the ISIL as foreign fighters. Two of the men were born in the former Yugoslavia, while the third is from Somalia. – *Reuters, May 27*

## CTC Sentinel Staff

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### Editorial Board

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Department Head  
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Department of Social Sciences (West Point)

MAJ Bryan Price, Ph.D.  
Director, CTC

### CONTACT

Combating Terrorism Center  
U.S. Military Academy  
607 Cullum Road, Lincoln Hall  
West Point, NY 10996  
Phone: (845) 667-6383  
Email: [sentinel@usma.edu](mailto:sentinel@usma.edu)  
Web: [www.ctc.usma.edu/sentinel/](http://www.ctc.usma.edu/sentinel/)

\* For Press Inquiries: (845) 667-6383

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The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and not of the U.S. Military Academy, the Department of the Army, or any other agency of the U.S. Government.

May 27, 2014 (IRAQ): A suicide bomber attacked a Shi'a mosque in Baghdad, killing at least 19 people.  
- *AFP, May 27*

May 28, 2014 (PAKISTAN): Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) announced a separation between the Mehsud faction, which is led by Khan Said (also known as Sajna), and another faction led by TTP chief Maulana Fazlullah. The Mehsud faction said that they were cutting ties with Fazlullah since his faction is too violent and unpredictable. - *UPI, May 29*

May 29, 2014 (YEMEN): A gunman riding on the back of a motorcycle assassinated a Yemeni intelligence officer and his son in broad daylight in Mukalla, Hadramawt Province.  
- *AFP, May 30*

May 30, 2014 (SPAIN): Spanish police broke up a jihadist cell operating in the country, arresting six individuals in Spain's North African territory of Melilla. According to Spain's Interior Ministry, the cell was recruiting and sending jihadists to "terrorist organizations" based in Mali and Libya. - *AFP, May 30*

May 30, 2014 (NIGERIA): Suspected Boko Haram gunmen killed a traditional Muslim *amir* in Borno State.  
- *Reuters, May 30*

May 31, 2014 (UNITED STATES/ AFGHANISTAN): Sgt. Bowe Bergdahl, the only American prisoner of war held by the Taliban, was released to U.S. forces in exchange for five Taliban prisoners held at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. Bergdahl was captured by the Taliban nearly five years ago. - *New York Times, May 31*