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Mansour al-Turki, Ministry of Interior spokesman, recently announced the arrest of 88 individuals for establishing terrorist cells in Saudi Arabia.

The JAMESTOWN
F O U N D A T I O N

HOUTHI REBELS SEIZE YEMENI PORT

Kathryn Basinsky

On October 14, Houthi rebels captured the Yemeni city of Hodeidah on the Red Sea coast. Hodeidah is the second largest port in Yemen as well as the country's fourth largest city. According to one account, the rebels "took control of the checkpoints without fighting any soldiers," and control the airport as well, although it continues to operate (Yemen Times, October 15). The group had previously captured the national capital of Sana'a in September and many members still control a number of government buildings. [1]

The Houthis are a political-religious movement made up of Zaydi Shi'ites based in the northern highlands of Yemen who have fought against the central Yemeni government for many years. Among other complaints, Houthis disagree with the current structure of the Yemeni government, desiring that that the north of the country be one region instead of the current three (al-Jazeera, October 16). While the Houthis controlled Sana'a, Yemeni President Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi appointed Khaled Bahah as prime minister as part of the Houthis' demands. Rebels also signed the Peace and National Partnership Agreement, a guideline for a federal state. As a part of this agreement, the Houthis agreed to leave Sana'a, but this has yet to happen (*al-Ahram Weekly*, October 16).

In addition to their fight against the Yemeni state, the Houthis are also enemies of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) because the Salafist AQAP views the Shi'a Houthis as heretics. According to one account, the Houthis seized an arsenal in Hodeidah that belonged to Ali Mohsen, a fugitive general who the rebels accuse of funding and supplying al-Qaeda (*al-Ahram Weekly*, October 16). Shortly after Houthis seized Hodeidah, other Houthi fighters clashed with militants from Ansar al-Shari'a, a close affiliate of AQAP, and ultimately seized control of Ibb, a city 150 kilometers south of Sana'a and close to an AQAP stronghold (al-Jazeera, October 16). Skirmishes have

continued between the two groups since Ibb fell.

Hodeidah is Yemen's primary oil export hub. Control of the port gives the Houthi rebels further leverage over Sana'a as the rebel group has asked all foreign oil companies to stop exports immediately (*Daily Sabah* [Istanbul], October 16). Port access also provides an easier means of obtaining weapons for the interior Houthi strongholds, potentially from Iran, which already provides financial support as well as small arms and ammunition for the rebel group (Al-Monitor, October 19). In early 2013, an Iranian ship was intercepted by Yemeni authorities carrying explosives and surface-to-air missiles (Reuters, February 2, 2013). This support goes all the way to the top of Iran's leadership; a high-level advisor to Grand Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said that "Iran supports the rightful struggle of [the Houthis] in Yemen" (Arab News, October 22). Iran supports the movement as a way of disrupting Saudi Arabia's involvement in Yemen and because of the shared Shi'a denomination. The additional funding of the Houthis through port activities and access will be enough to provide for the materials needed to continue their assault on both the government and al-Qaeda. With the capital and a significant port under the control of Houthi rebels and al-Qaeda strongholds in other parts of the country, the Yemeni government is clearly too weak to intervene between the two groups, promising more violence and destabilization in the country.

Kathryn Basinsky is a program associate for The Jamestown Foundation in the Global Terrorism Analysis program. You can follow her on Twitter @kbasinsky.

Note

1. For more on the Houthi expansion, please see Terrorism Monitor, May 2, 2014, http://www.jamestown.org/regions/middleeast/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=42302&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=677&cHash=fe7c90cfc01735fb85cfb70485b1eb22#.VEfeN_nF_To.

DESPERATE FOR RECRUITS, TEHRIK-E-TALIBAN PAKISTAN DECLARES THEN RETRACTS SUPPORT FOR ISLAMIC STATE

Abubakar Siddique

The Islamic State organization is proving to be a magnet for desperate Pakistani Taliban figures and factions after their umbrella organization, the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP),

has been rapidly fragmented by rivalries, assassinations and doctrinal divisions. The once powerful organization that controlled large swathes of territory in northwestern Pakistan is rapidly losing leaders and fighters.

In the latest sign of its rapid disintegration, the TTP condemned its former spokesman Shahidullah Shahid, whose real name, it claimed, is Shaykh Maqbool (RFE/RL Gandhara, October 21). A TTP statement on October 20 said that the sacked spokesman used the position "for personal gains." The statement reiterated that the current TTP leader Mullah Fazlullah has pledged an oath of allegiance to the Afghan Taliban leader Mullah Muhammad Omar, which apparently repudiated the Islamic State organization's claim over the Islamic caliphate (*The News* [Islamabad], October 21).

The statement followed an October 14 announcement in which by Shahid announced his allegiance to the Islamic State. He also claimed that five little-known TTP commanders from the northwestern tribal areas and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province have also joined the extreme jihadist faction now controlling large parts of Iraq and Syria. "From today, I accept Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as my caliph and I will accept every directive of his and will fight for him whatsoever the situation," Shahid said in a video statement (*The News* [Islamabad], October 21).

The most important TTP defection to the Islamic State happened in September when a powerful faction led by Omar Khalid Khorasani declared its support for the Islamic State organization. The faction renamed itself Jamat-ul Ahrar. Its spokesman Ehsanullah Ehsan declared that "the Islamic State is an Islamic Jihadi organization working for the implementation of the Islamic system and creation of the Caliphate. We respect them. If they ask us for help, we will look into it and decide" (Reuters, September 7).

With Fazlullah seen as hiding in the high mountains of eastern Afghanistan and his organization in disarray, the possibility of more TTP leaders and cadres joining the Islamic State organization cannot be ruled out. The TTP has seen a sharp decline after a U.S. drone strike killed its leader Hakimullah Mahsud in November 2013. Together with his erstwhile rival Waliur Rehman Mahsud, Hakimullah was largely successful in keeping the TTP united even after it lost key leaders and most of the territory it once controlled to Pakistani military operations and U.S. drone strikes since 2009.

The factions, whose alliance created the TTP in 2007, failed to agree on choosing a successor to Hakimullah Mehsud.

Their differences boiled to the surface after Waliur Rehman Mehsud's successor Khan Said Sajna, also known as Khalid Mahsud, split from the TTP and said that the group's leaders were involved "in extortion, kidnapping for ransom and other such crimes" (RFE/RL Gandhara, May 28). The faction also stopped fighting the Pakistani forces and instead took on its erstwhile allies. Scores of militants later died in clashes between the two factions in their erstwhile stronghold in South and North Waziristan tribal districts along Afghanistan's borders.

An ongoing Pakistani military offensive that began in June, with the declared aim of clearing North Waziristan from militants, further dispersed the TTP cadres and pushed some of its members to embrace the Islamic State organization. Among those that have already joined the Islamic State organization, Khorasani was closely allied to the Arab extremists who sheltered in the tribal areas after fleeing the U.S.-led military offensive against the Taliban and al-Qaeda in neighboring Afghanistan. In fact, most Pakistani Taliban factions were created to protect al-Qaeda's sanctuary in the tribal areas. But some of them later coalesced into the TTP to fight Pakistani forces and to establish control over the Pashtun populated regions of northwestern Pakistan.

It is worth noting that the Pakistani Taliban defections have largely spared the Afghan Taliban, but this might pose a threat to the movement's political and military clout if dissatisfied field commanders rebel against their fugitive leaders believed to be hiding in Pakistan.

Although the Islamic State organization currently lacks the administrative structure to outmaneuver the Afghan Taliban and al-Qaeda from the Afghanistan-Pakistan theater, it certainly has the ideological appeal and funds to attempt at building a base in the two countries. For now the Pakistani Taliban defections to the Islamic State organization are a result of desperation caused by infighting and realignment among Pakistani jihadists in response to Pakistani military operations and the planned end to the NATO combat mission in Afghanistan by the end of this year.

Abubakar Siddique is a journalist with RFE/RL and the author of The Pashtun Question: The Unresolved Key to the Future of Pakistan and Afghanistan (London: Hurst and Company, 2014).

Saudi Security Forces Crack Down on al-Qaeda and Islamic State

Zaina Konbaz

A U.S. citizen working for Vinnel Arabia, an American defense contractor, was shot dead and another wounded at a gasoline station in eastern Riyadh, Saudi Arabia on October 14 (*Bloomberg Businessweek*, October 14). The Saudi Arabian Embassy in Washington, D.C. issued a statement identifying the assailant as 25-year-old Abdul Aziz Fahad Abdul Aziz al-Rashid, who has dual Saudi-American citizenship. Initial investigative reports suggest that al-Rashid was dismissed from his job at Vinnel Arabia "due to drug related issues," and has no links to extremism. [1] Yet, the attack raised fears reminiscent of al-Qaeda's terrorist attacks inside the Saudi Kingdom from 2003 to 2005.

The threat of terrorist attacks may again be likely as Saudi Arabia – along with three Gulf state allies and Jordan – has joined the U.S.-led coalition against the Islamic State organization, previously the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). In order to crack down on possible terrorist activity inside the Kingdom, the Saudi government has taken several drastic, domestic anti-terrorism measures in the past several months by galvanizing and coordinating legal, security and religious institutions in the country against any form of political and religious dissent.

The efforts made by the Saudi government against terrorism during this year alone demonstrate that the regime is alert to the threat of religious dissent. On February 1, a new and controversial "anti-terror" law came into effect in response to a decree by King Abdullah al-Saud. The law includes 41 articles that authorize the Interior Minister to prosecute anyone who "undermines" the state or society as an act of terrorism (*Independent*, February 3). It is worth mentioning that the law also punishes any Saudi national proven to have fought in a jihadist group outside the Kingdom with three to 20 years of jail time. Working under this legal framework, the Ministry of Interior is now authorized to monitor social network websites as well as arrest and detain suspects linked to terrorist activity, expressions of sympathy with any terrorist organization or encouragement of youths to fight abroad.

Shortly after this law came into effect – on March 7 to be exact – the Saudi government followed Egypt in labeling the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization (al-Arabiya, March 7). The list of "terror" groups published by the Saudi Ministry of Interior also includes "al-Nusra Front, which is

al-Qaeda's official Syrian affiliate, and ISIS," as well as Shi'ite militant groups, the Saudi Hezbollah and Houthi rebels in Yemen (al-Arabiya, August 26).

While the Interior Ministry indicated the list will be periodically updated, no terrorist groups have been added in seven months. Nevertheless, a series of arrests show that the groups linked to the Islamic State and al-Qaeda have revived their activities inside the Kingdom and the Interior Ministry is working to eliminate this threat from within.

On September 2, Interior Ministry spokesman Major General Mansour al-Turki announced that the security forces have arrested 88 suspects; of those, 83 are Saudi nationals, three are Yemenis and one has yet to be identified (BBC, September 2). These individuals had established ten terrorist cells throughout the Kingdom and were plotting a series of attacks and assassinations inside and outside the country (al-Arabiya, September 2). This announcement came two weeks after an Interior Ministry statement indicated that eight citizens were arrested due to their involvement in recruiting youths to "extremist groups abroad" (al-Arabiya, August 26). Media reports confirmed that the recruitment group was indeed for the Islamic State organization.

These two nearly simultaneous arrests were not the first to reveal connections to the Islamic State organization. Earlier in May, Major General al-Turki confirmed the apprehension and dismantlement of the first ISIS cell inside the Kingdom, which peculiarly maintained communications and coordination with al-Qaeda in Yemen and "other deviant groups in Syria and other misguided elements in a number of regions of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia" (*al-Sharq al-Awsat*, May 7). This Islamic State-affiliated group consisted of 62 suspects, including 35 Saudi nationals who had been previously imprisoned on similar terrorism charges before they were released by a court order. The amir of this terrorist cell was among those apprehended, according to al-Turki.

The significant security measures and the legal framework the Interior Ministry uses are not the only steps the Saudi regime has taken. A few weeks after Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi proclaimed himself as the caliph of the self-declared Islamic State on June 29, King Abdullah publicly scolded Saudi religious scholars for their silence on the Islamic State organization's abuse of Islam (al-Arabiya, August 10). A few days later, Grand *Mufti* (chief Islamist jurist and, in this case, the head of the Saudi religious establishment) Shaykh Abdel Aziz al-Shaykh said that the Islamic State organization is "Islam's number one enemy" (al-Arabiya, August 19). He later added a fierce but implicit condemnation of the militant

group during the main sermon of the annual hajj pilgrimage on October 3. The *mufti* called on Islamic leaders to "hit with an iron hand the enemies of Islam." In his address to more than two million pilgrims, he referred to those affiliated with "deviated groups" as criminals, tyrants, rapists and murderers and said that these individuals threaten religion itself and the security of Muslims as a whole (al-Arabiya, October 4).

The Saudi Arabian government is not taking the rise of the Islamic State organization lightly. While geographical space may separate the physical Islamic State from Saudi Arabia, internal religious dissidents show some connections to the Islamic State organization and possibly some coordination with al-Qaeda's affiliate in Yemen. Therefore, from the Saudi regime's perspective, it is crucial to allocate all available resources to counter internal terrorism as strongly as those devoted to its war against external violent extremism.

Zaina Konbaz is currently a research assistant at the Middle East Institute (MEI).

Note

1. "Shooter Arrested in Riyadh for Death of American Citizen," Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia, October 14, 2014, http://saudiembassy.net/latest_news/news10141401.aspx.

Al-Qaeda's Future in Pakistan Amid the Rise of Islamic State

Farhan Zahid

Al-Qaeda appears to be on the back foot globally. The Islamic State organization, previously the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and years before that al-Qaeda in Iraq, is dominating the global jihad scene. More than 19 Islamist militant groups worldwide have pledged allegiance to Islamic State amir Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, some of whom used to be affiliated with al-Qaeda (Intel Center, October 9). It is unclear how al-Qaeda will compete with this new jihadist group, which threatens al-Qaeda's leadership. However, in Pakistan, where al-Qaeda Central is based, it seems that al-Qaeda does have a future. The establishment of al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) in September is one major step by Ayman al-Zawahiri to reaffirm al-Qaeda's standpoint concerning Pakistan (*The Express Tribune* [Karachi], September 3).

Pakistan remains pivotal for al-Qaeda as it is home to Al-Qaeda Core or Central. Veteran al-Qaeda leaders still maintain residences in tribal areas of Pakistan. Al-Qaeda maintains close relations with principal Pakistani Islamist militant groups such as: Harkat-ul Jihad-e-Islami (HuJI), Harkat-ul Mujahideen (HuM), Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), Jaysh-e-Muhammad (JeM), Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and, to some extent, Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT). [1] The perception that most Pakistani Islamist terrorist groups would sooner or later bandwagon with the Islamic State has not come to fruition. Apart from some members of the TTP, specifically from the Fazlullah group, and a less-known Tehrik-e-Khilafat Pakistan, no major Pakistani Islamist group has pledged allegiance to Islamic State (*The News* [Islamabad], October 15).

Al-Qaeda in Pakistan

There are many reasons why these Pakistani militant organizations would not be interested in leaving al-Qaeda for the Islamic State organization.

- **Personal Contacts**

As stated earlier, al-Qaeda maintains a strong presence in settled areas of Pakistan and in the tribal areas between Pakistan and Afghanistan and it has long-standing ties with Pakistani Islamist terrorist groups. These contacts predate al-Qaeda's establishment in Pakistan in 1988 by Osama bin Laden. The leadership, over a period of time, has cultivated

contacts based upon personal interactions, sometimes intermarrying with tribal women, establishing strong tribal ties. Al-Zawahiri himself is believed to be married to a woman from the tribal areas after settling there following the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan (*The Nation* [Islamabad], June 18, 2011).

- **Financial Support Networks**

Al-Qaeda has been providing financial support to Pakistani Taliban and Punjab-based Islamist networks since its arrival in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan. This support is pivotal to Islamist violent non-state actors operating in Pakistan. Al-Qaeda's financial network has always been crucial for jihadi groups in the country for continuing their activities and, above all, this support base strengthens the Islamist network in Pakistan by funding religious seminaries, Islamist charity organizations, proselytizing groups and, to some extent, even Islamist political parties.

- **Taliban and Afghanistan**

Osama bin Laden pledged allegiance to Mullah Omar, the supreme leader of the Afghan Taliban. This act technically made al-Qaeda subservient to the Taliban and, in fact, part of the Afghan Taliban network. Al-Qaeda has high hopes for a Taliban regime returning to Kabul after the withdrawal of most U.S. forces from Afghanistan in 2014. Al-Qaeda's current amir, Ayman al-Zawahiri, renewed the oath of allegiance to Mullah Omar after the rise of the Islamic State organization (al-Nafir, July 20).

- **Training and Indoctrination**

The Taliban regime in Afghanistan had neither had the expertise nor the interest in training Islamist jihadists. They outsourced the training part to al-Qaeda during their rule, giving al-Qaeda a monopoly over training of jihadists from all over the world. During the five years of Taliban rule, al-Qaeda trained thousands of local and foreign jihadists. Al-Qaeda-trained and indoctrinated jihadists are part of many Islamist groups currently operating in Pakistan.

- **Proximity**

Proximity to Pakistan and Afghanistan is pivotal in the case of al-Qaeda. The core of al-Qaeda is in Pakistan and continues to guide jihadist organizations, both foreign and local, operating in Pakistan. The Islamic State organization, formed out of territories carved out of Iraq and Syria, is perhaps more interesting for Middle Eastern, North African and European jihadists, but it is far away from Pakistan. From

the local jihadist perspective, the Pakistani regime operated hand-in-glove with the United States, therefore the jihadists consider the Pakistani government as "apostate." Joining the Islamic State organization and establishing a new jihadist base in Pakistan would, therefore, be considered a futile effort, as many fronts are already available in the homeland.

- **Pakistan**

For al-Qaeda, Pakistan is crucial. It is a country with a plethora of Islamist groups (violent, political, puritanical and proselytizing with assorted charity wings and non-violent supporters), nuclear weapons, a huge landmass, tribal areas where the organization can operate freely, dense cities in which to find safe havens and a segment of the population sympathetic to Islamist ideals. This is more than the Islamic State organization could acquire in Iraq and Syria. Al-Qaeda can also capitalize on Pakistan-India animosities and it maintains ties with Islamist organizations with an anti-India demeanor.

Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent

On the other hand, al-Qaeda is reinvigorating itself with the creation of al-Qaeda in the Indian subcontinent (AQIS) in early September. Ayman al-Zawahiri announced the establishment of AQIS in a 55-minute video message:

> This entity was not established today, but it is the fruit of a blessed effort for more than two years to gather the mujahideen in the Indian subcontinent into a single entity to be with the main group, Qaedat al-Jihad, from the soldiers of the Islamic Emirate and its triumphant amir, Allah permitting, amir of the Believers Mullah Muhammad Omar Mujahid. [2]

Al-Zawahiri named Asim Umar, a known jihadist ideologue in Pakistani, as the amir of AQIS.

Brigadier General Zahoor Fazal Qadri, an army officer of Pakistan's powerful Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), became the first target of AQIS on September 6 in the Punjab province. The assailants targeted Qadri while he was off duty and offering prayers at a shrine belonging to his family. In a brazen attack on the shrine, the armed assailants killed Qadri and two others while wounding seven more. AQIS spokesperson Usama Mahmood claimed responsibility: "The Sargodha attack should be taken as a warning by the slaves of [the United States of] America in the Pakistani Armed Forces to leave the U.S.-backed 'war on terror' or get ready to face the consequences" (*The News* [Islamabad], September 20).

Just a week after its establishment, AQIS's newly appointed amir Asim Umar claimed responsibility for a terrorist attack on *Pakistan Naval Ship (PNS) Zulfiqar*, a Chinese-made F22P-type frigate docked at the navy's Karachi dockyard. The attackers unsuccessfully attempted to hijack the frigate and use it to target Indian or U.S. Navy ships in international waters. Interestingly, the perpetrators were all members of the Pakistani Navy. Two were killed during the attempted hijacking while four were arrested after a shootout with security forces. Another four were arrested near Quetta on their way to Afghanistan (*The Express Tribune* [Karachi], September 8).

Conclusion

Apart from all these favorable environs, al-Qaeda is perturbed. Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent represents the latest step in trying to reinvigorate al-Qaeda, launch high-profile terrorist attacks in India and Pakistan and flex al-Qaeda's muscles to reassure the masses sympathetic to the group. The worst case scenario would be jihadist competition between al-Qaeda and its affiliates and the Islamic State organization's affiliates in Pakistan. There is evidence that suicide terrorism is the result of competition among groups with overlapping goals and similar causes. Group competition, in the case of terrorism, yields greater ferocity in terrorist attacks as rival organizations try to influence their audience by seeking to outdo other groups as far as performance is concerned. [3] Consequently, more high-profile attacks or attempts in the near future by al-Qaeda may occur in order to stay the primary jihadist organization in Pakistan.

In order to stay in operation, al-Qaeda has to capitalize on its available resources. Apart from its current weaknesses (no territorial control, depleted leadership, living in the shadows and a detached network), al-Qaeda still possesses some arrows in its quiver: al-Zawahiri is a seasoned strategist; al-Qaeda still has clear doctrinal beliefs with no counter-narrative; their network is present in over 60 countries; there is a thriving culture of conspiracy theories in Pakistan and elsewhere; and they continue to receive financial support from the global Salafist community.

In the case of Pakistan, the situation still favors al-Qaeda's operations. Exceptions exist, but because of their longstanding ties with al-Qaeda, most Pakistani jihadist groups would not support the Islamic State organization over al-Qaeda. With the formation of AQIS, al-Qaeda will probably attempt to reincorporate the Islamist, violent non-state actors operating in Pakistan into its fold. The only scenario in which the Islamic State organization could penetrate the Pakistani jihadist scene would be due to sheer inaction from al-Qaeda.

Otherwise, given the more than 25 years of relations with Pakistani Islamist violent non-state actors, it would be rather difficult for al-Qaeda to lose ground in Pakistan.

Farhan Zahid writes on counter-terrorism, al-Qaeda, Pakistani al-Qaeda-linked groups, Islamist violent non-state actors in Pakistan, militant landscapes in Pakistan and the Afghan Taliban.

Notes

1. All have worked with Al-Qaeda. HuJI's leader Qari Saifullah Akhter was close to the al-Qaeda leadership in Afghanistan during the Taliban era (1996-2001) and HuJI's offshoot, Brigade 313, led by Ilyas Kashmiri, later became part of al-Qaeda Central in the tribal areas of Pakistan. HuM amir Fazal ur Rehman Khalil was a co-signer of Osama bin Laden's *fatwa* against the United States in 1998 and was also part of the Bin Laden-led Islamic Front against Jews and Crusaders. Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, a sectarian jihadist group of Pakistan trained its rank and file at al-Qaeda-run training camps in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan. Jaysh-e-Muhammad and Lashkar-e-Taiba joined hands to perpetrate the Indian Parliament attack in December 2001 to create a military standoff between Pakistan and India in order to provide breathing space to the besieged al-Qaeda leadership along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. HuM and JeM, along with Khalid Shaykh Muhammad, kidnapped and assassinated *Wall Street Journal* correspondent Daniel Pearl in Karachi in March 2002. Apart from these activities, scores of terrorist incidents against U.S. and Western interests and against Pakistani security forces were conducted by these organizations in collusion with al-Qaeda. Most importantly, the TTP provides sanctuaries and safe havens to al-Qaeda leaders in tribal areas where TTP operates as an umbrella organization of more than 27 factions. Al-Qaeda planned and executed many of the high-profile terrorist attacks while comfortably staying in TTP-controlled areas.
2. The message can be heard here http://www.theguardian.com/world/video/2014/sep/04/al-qaida-leader-ayman-al-zawahiri-islamist-india-video.
3. Please see, Mia Bloom, *Dying to Kill: The Allure of Suicide Terrorism*, Columbia University Press, June 2007.

The Geography of Discontent: Tunisia's Syrian Fighter Dilemma

Dario Cristiani

In June, Tunisia's interior minister said that at least 2,400 Tunisian jihadists are fighting in Syria. The majority of them, about 80 percent, are allegedly fighting within the ranks of the Islamic State organization, previously the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), although some of them have joined Jabhat al-Nusra, the other major jihadist actor in Syria. Earlier in February, the minister said Tunisian authorities had prevented a further 8,000 people from traveling to Syria, while some 400 Tunisians had already returned from fighting there (AFP, June 23). However, this is still only a partial picture: in October 2014, the number of Tunisian jihadists rose to 3,000, making them, by far, the largest contingent of foreign fighters who have joined jihad in Syria (DirectInfo, September 2). Tunisian authorities are now increasingly involved in prevention activities. In early October, security forces dismantled a recruitment network in Bizerte made up of six people operating in the areas between d'El Alia and Ras Jbel (Africa Manager, October 2). This is only the last operation carried out by the authorities. The prime minister of the Tunisian caretaker government, Mehdi Jomaa, has revealed that Tunisia has arrested about 1,500 alleged terrorists in 2014 (Reuters, October 10).

Tunisia has a history of jihadists active abroad. Tunisians were the two militants who killed Ahmad Shah Massoud, the famous anti-Taliban leader in Afghanistan, just two days before 9/11. They were linked to the Tunisian Combatant Group, a group established in 2000 by Abu Yahd (a.k.a. Seifallah Ben Omar Ben Hassine, the future leader of Ansar al-Shari'a, who was arrested in Libya in very unclear circumstances in December 2013) and Tarek Maaroufi in Afghanistan. [1] Tunisians were fighting in a number of other jihadist theaters such as Iraq, Somalia and Mali. As such, the presence of Tunisian jihadists in the ranks of global jihad is nothing new. What has changed now is the scale of this phenomenon, since Tunisians represent the largest national group within the ranks of jihadist organizations fighting in Syria.

The Path to Radicalization

The profiles of most of these jihadists are similar: young adults aged 17 to 27. Many of them are university or high school students, but some are civil servants (Middle East Online, October 10). Although it is possible to profile the average Tunisian jihadist in Syria, there are also a number of

examples of jihadists who did not fit these categories. Tunisian fighters in Syria come from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds, For instance, Nidhal Selmi, a former footballer who played for the Etoile sportive du Sahel and the national team, was killed in Syria in October 2014 (BusinessNews. com.tn, October 16).

Tunisians have often blamed the process of radicalization on the revolution as many mosques have fallen into the hands of radical *imams*. Shortly after it took office, the new caretaker Tunisian government stated that up to 1,100 mosques, out of the 5,100 in Tunisia, were in the hands of radical *imams*. In June, the caretaker government announced a plan to regain control over these rebel mosques. A commission created under the control of the Ministers of Religious Affairs, Interior and Justice will examine all mosques already under observation and will appoint new *imams*, who would need to receive accreditation from the Minister of Religious Affairs in order to preach (*La Croix* [Paris], June 23). These extremist *imams* became radicalized in the jails under Ben Ali and during their periods abroad, especially in Afghanistan and Iraq. In many cases, these two processes converged, as many Tunisians fighting abroad were jailed once they returned home (as was the case for Abu Yahd, who was arrested in Turkey in 2003 and extradited to Tunisia). [2] Once the revolution erupted, many of these radical militants were released from prison during the March 2011 amnesty and were able to deepen their presence in the society. This led to a marginalization of the local versions of Islam, which were much more syncretic, tolerant and less radical than the Salafi purism and jihadist maximalism that had developed in the Islamic world over the past two centuries.

Jihadist Recruitment as a Response to Marginalization

In the specific case of Tunisia, wider regional and global dynamics interact with a number of local elements that are fundamental to understanding the rising radicalization of significant groups of Tunisians. The 2011 revolution that led to the overthrow of Ben Ali was prompted by the suicide of a street vendor in Sidi Bouzid, an extreme protest triggered by the dissatisfaction with the government and humiliation that the average Tunisian suffered under the pervasive control of the security forces at that time. Sidi Bouzid is one of the areas in Tunisia with a stronger radical Islamist presence and is emblematic of the kind of marginalization and alienation that some interior parts of the country suffer. The socio-economic polarization between the north (a network of major urban coastal centers) and the south (a loosely connected network of rural centers and small villages) is a well-known reality in Tunisia and one of the structural causes underlying the 2011 revolution.

This socio-economic cleavage also had a number of political consequences: the ruling elites were very much linked, economically and politically, to the interests of these coastal areas. As such, the interior has suffered for years of serious neglect that has widened this gap. A visible paradigm of this cleavage is the declining state of infrastructure as one moves from the northern coast of Tunisia to the interior of the country. The success of the revolution triggered high expectations from the disposed peoples of these regions, but they were soon disappointed. This further disillusionment has created the cultural and social conditions for the radical message of new *imams* and groups to spread. Ben Gardane, geographically the farthest Tunisian city from Tunis, is considered the core of the jihadist recruitment network. It is a coastal town in southeastern Tunisia, based in the Medenine Governorate, and is close to the border with Libya. This border has increasingly become a major problem for Tunisia, as weapons, fighters and illegal goods have inundated Tunisia from Libya. Interestingly, Ben Gardane's extreme distance from the capital (559 kilometers by road) has become a symbol of the distance between the center and the Tunisia periphery. It shows that – in the marginalized and peripheral areas of the country far from the relative stability of the center – there is a latent social crisis and jihadist recruitment and journeys to Syria are a major flashpoint.

The Speculations on Ennahda

According to media investigations, the significant outflow of Tunisian jihadists toward Syria can be explained as the result of a pact between Ennahda, the major Islamist political party, and Salafi organizations, whose broker was Said Ferjani, a notable Ennahda politician. The rationale, according to the *Tunis Tribune*, was a sort of political exchange following the troubles created in Tunisia by the attack against the U.S. Embassy in 2012: go to Syria to fight Bashar al-Assad if you do not want to spend the rest of your life in prison. This plan has been carried out with Qatari and Libyan support, with a number of Islamist Libyan groups providing training for those Tunisians willing to join the ranks of jihad in Syria (Tunis Tribune, May 26, 2013). The existence of a sort of "tacit agreement" between Ennahda and radical Tunisian Salafist groups has always been discussed in Tunisia, but in this specific case, journalistic speculations aside, elements that would visibly support the idea that Ennahda had a role in this process are still missing. Yet, this strategy appears to be politically feasible; a policy of turning a blind eye could explain why such a tiny country as Tunisia has provided the largest group of jihadists fighting in Syria. Indeed, one of the most striking differences between the new caretaker government and the previous one led by Ali Larayedh – one of the key figures of Ennahda – has been their diverse

approaches toward the issue of Tunisians flying to Syria. While the new government has made preventing Tunisians fighting abroad a significant priority, Larayedh was instead criticized for the laxity of his government toward this significantly growing phenomenon. Larayedh responded, "there are Tunisians who travel to another country, such as Libya or Turkey, officially for work or tourism, and then move to Syria. We do not have the right to impede this" (Kapitalis, March 25, 2013).

Conclusions

Tunisia, similar to other countries who experienced violent turmoil and regime change during the Arab Spring, has struggled to get back on track. For now, the polarization and fragmentation of the political environment remain significant; the economy struggles to stay afloat and local crime is on the rise in Tunis and other urban centers. Nevertheless, Tunisia is in a much better situation than regional fellow countries as its political transition has been fairly successful. Yet, the increasing presence of radical militants, and their narratives, and the peaks in political violence the country has experienced raise concerns within the wider political spectrum.

The strong presence of Tunisians in the jihadist ranks in Syria does not have a single explanation. It can be rather understood through a number of concurrent explanations. On the one hand, Tunisia has experienced what many other countries have experienced: some of its citizens, like many Europeans and Asians fighting in Syria, has found in the fight against Bashar al-Assad, depicted as an enemy of Islam, a way to make sense of their lives. Economic problems alone are not enough to explain why these people have joined the war in Syria although there a number of other factors to take into consideration on a social and psychological level. This frustration is exploited by radical preachers, whose cross-cutting, simple and direct messages provide these people with relief for their insecurities and existential problems.

This radical rhetoric, as well as the rising tension between Ennahda and the groups to the right of it politically, brought the government headed by Ennahda to list Ansar al-Shari'a as a terrorist organization in 2013 and to adopt a more resolute stance against it (BBC, August 27, 2013). This evolution in Ennahda's approach showed the recognition of a problem. Despite all the shortcomings, Ennahda remains a rather pragmatic actor, whose primary aim is to avoid the marginalization it has suffered under the Ben Ali regime. As such, in order to reduce the threats to its renewed post-revolutionary political centrality, it had to curtail some of its links with Salafi groups, as their radical stances were detrimental to the interests of the party. In this sense, turning a blind eye to the moves of Tunisian jihadists fleeing the country to go to Syria could be consistent with the need to reduce domestic troubles and the pressure that Ennahda may face from its right side. However, while the causes for this strong Tunisian presence in Syria may be several, in the long-term the return of further radicalized, and trained jihadists, will pose a strong security threat.

Dario Cristiani is a PhD Candidate in Middle East and Mediterranean Studies at King's College London.

Notes

1. Please see http://www.un.org/french/sc/committees/1267/NSQET9002F.shtml.
2. *Ibid.*