



# Terrorism Monitor

In-Depth Analysis of the War on Terror

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**Central Asia militia  
Katibat Tahwid wal Jihad  
raised their flag over a  
church in Jish al-Shughur,  
Syria, after a battle for  
control of the town.**

## FRESH UK TERRORISM CONVICTIONS AND ARRESTS UNDERLINE GROWING THREAT

*James Brandon*

A spate of fresh incidents involving UK-based jihadists underlines the significant threat that the UK continues to face from homegrown extremists, as well as illustrating the UK government’s enhanced efforts to confront this increasing security challenge. On May 15, for example, the Islamic State announced that a British suicide bomber, “Abu Musa al-Britani,” had blown himself up as part of coordinated assault by at least three suicide bombers on Iraqi government forces in Ramadi (*Independent*, May 15). The bomber was later identified as Fatlum Shakalu, a 20-year-old London student from a non-observant family of Kosovar immigrants (*ITV*, May 25). Remarkably, he is one of five pupils at a single London government-run secondary school, Holland Park School, who have died fighting for the Islamic State in the last two years (*Sunday Times*, May 24). Separately, another British individual, known as Abu Antaar al-Britani, was apparently killed in a coalition airstrike, presumably in Syria, according to his wife (a Tunisian calling herself “Grenade al-Britani”). Abu Antaar had been a leading English-language online recruiter for the group (*SITE*, May 26). On May 27, a separate Islamic State communiqué said that “Abu Ameen al-Britani”, another UK jihadist, had died in a suicide attack north of Baghdad (*SITE*, May 27). Another prominent British jihadist with the Islamic State, Abu Rumaysah al-Britani, meanwhile published online a 48-page guide, which eulogized the organization (*Daily Telegraph*, May 19). These developments underline how British fighters play an important role within the Islamic State, notably through providing suicide bombers in key attacks and in English-language online recruitment and radicalization.

Underlining the scale of Islamic State recruitment of UK citizens, Mark Rowley, the UK police’s leading counter-terrorism officer, said in mid-May that the police estimated that 700 British nationals and residents had travelled to Iraq and Syria to join jihadist

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1111 16th St. NW, Suite #320  
Washington, DC • 20036  
Tel: (202) 483-8888  
Fax: (202) 483-8337

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groups, and that around a third of these had already returned (*Daily Telegraph*, May 14). Recent arrests and convictions in the UK demonstrate the steps that the authorities are taking to combat both aspiring fighters and their supporters. For example, on May 26, Zakariya Ashiq, a 20-year-old from Coventry, was found guilty of attempting to join the Islamic State. After leaving the UK by bus, he had taken a complex route, travelling via Amsterdam, Frankfurt and Bulgaria to Jordan, before failing to cross from there into Syria. After his failed attempt, he returned to the UK. His elaborate route to the Syrian border illustrates the ongoing game of cat and mouse between the British authorities and jihadists, who are increasingly aware of the former's attempts to apprehend them, particularly when travelling through Turkey (*Evening Standard*, May 26). In addition, also in mid-May, Mohammed Abdal Miah was charged with disseminating terrorist publications in Newcastle, a northeastern city with a relatively small Muslim population and little Islamist activity, highlighting the authorities' attempts to target not only active jihadists but also their ideological facilitators, including in areas not traditionally linked with radicalization (*The Chronicle*, May 20).

Other recent terrorism trials further suggest the seriousness with which the UK police and judiciary are now pursuing jihadist activity and the government's increased cooperation with other nations. An example of this is the conviction, also in May, of Anis Sardar, from Wembley in northwest London, for killing a U.S. soldier in Iraq in 2007. Sardar was found guilty of helping a Sunni militia near Abu Ghraib in Baghdad construct roadside bombs, one of which killed Sergeant First Class Randy Johnson in September 2007 (*BBC*, May 22). Sardar was arrested after the FBI found his fingerprints on a part of the bomb (*Daily Telegraph*, April 21). This is believed to have been the first time in UK legal history that a person has been convicted of carrying out what the courts defined as an act of terrorism in a warzone overseas.

In another instance of the UK government's increasingly innovative legal approach to jihadists, details were released in May of how courts and a local town council had used child protection laws to take four British children into custody after they and their parents were detained by police in Turkey. The children's parents—Asif Malik and Sara Kiran, from the London commuter town of Slough—were believed to be planning to cross into Syria to join the Islamic State. However, as there was not enough evidence for them to be arrested and tried under UK laws, the authorities instead used child protection orders, which have a lower threshold for evidence, in order to take the children into custody to safeguard “the children's future welfare;” the parents consequently agreed to return to the UK (*BBC*, May 20). [1]

The UK government is likely to become even more active in combating jihadism in the coming months following the country's May general election, which led to an outright Conservative government taking power from a Conservative-Liberal Democrat governing coalition. This could likely lead to tougher counter-terrorism policies, including new laws to allow police to disrupt the “harmful activities” of non-violent Islamists, potentially limiting their access to the internet and ability to hold public events (*Guardian*, May 13). Other plans include granting the security services increased surveillance powers, which had previously been blocked by the Conservative's Liberal coalition partners (*BBC*, May 27). Although such steps may alleviate the jihadist threat, the large numbers of UK Muslims active with the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria will continue to pose a substantial security and ideological challenge to the UK for many years to come.

#### Note

1. See also, the High Court's judgement on the case (No. EWHC 1433, May 20) [https://www.judiciary.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/re\\_m\\_20\\_5\\_152.pdf](https://www.judiciary.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/re_m_20_5_152.pdf).

## ATTACK ON SHI'A MOSQUE HIGHLIGHTS ISLAMIC STATE CHALLENGE TO SAUDI ARABIA

*James Brandon*

An Islamic State-linked militant killed at least 21 Shi'a worshippers and injured another 81 in a suicide bomb attack on a Shi'a mosque in al-Qadeeh village in the Kingdom's eastern Qatif province on May 22 (*al-Arabiya*, May 22). The bomber detonated his explosives amid worshippers performing their Friday prayers, having first locked the door of the mosque behind him (*al-Sharq al-Awsat*, May 22). The Islamic State soon afterwards claimed responsibility for the attack, and named a Saudi citizen known as “Abu Amer al-Najdi,” as the bomber (*al-Sharq al-Awsat*, May 23). The attack is one of the bloodiest jihadist attacks in Saudi Arabia in recent years, as well as one of the most significant assaults on the country's Shi'a minority for at least a decade. It also highlights the increasing struggle that the country's monarchy faces in preventing anti-Shi'a sectarianism, which Saudi Arabia has long stoked up at home and abroad, from manifesting into potentially destabilizing attacks against Shi'as within the country itself.

In response to the bombing, Saudi Arabia's official religious figures swiftly condemned the attack in religious terms, with the country's grand mufti, Shaykh Abd al-Aziz al-Shaykh,

saying that the attackers “are working to divide the *ummah* [Muslim community] and incite and spread *fitna* [strife]” (*al-Sharq al-Awsat*, May 23). The government also said that it was investigating the incident and that the bomber’s father had been arrested (*al-Arabiya*, May 23). In addition, a spokesman from the country’s Ministry of Islamic Affairs reiterated that the government would take action against any state preachers who were openly sympathizing with extremists, including on social media, and the country’s state-funded preachers should continue to spread what he called a “moderate and centrist message” (*al-Arabiya*, May 25). The nature of the May 22 attack, involving a suicide bomber targeting Shi’as at prayer in a mosque, is a significant escalation in the Islamic State’s targeting of Shi’as in Saudi Arabia. In the previous most significant such incident, in November 2014, five Shi’as celebrating the Shi’a festival of Ashura were killed in the country’s al-Ahsa district in a gun and grenade attack by three Islamic State supporters, veterans of the fighting in Iraq and Syria (*al-Jazeera*, November 4, 2014).

The government’s latest promises to crack down on extremist preachers and online expressions of support for jihadists may help to restrain some of the country’s many official and unofficial preachers, and they show that the government now at least recognizes that extremist sectarian sentiments play a role in inspiring jihadist attacks. However, in coming years, the country will nevertheless continue to face considerable challenges from the Islamic State, whose very name and its open aspirations to lead the world’s Muslims through a nominally meritocratic and pan-national caliphate system is a fundamental political and ideological challenge to Saudi Arabia’s claims that the country’s monarchy is the defender and apotheosis of true Islam. Ironically, however, the Islamic State and Saudi Arabia also share much in common, in particular, their present fixation on the alleged threat that Shi’as pose both to Sunni regional political predominance and, at a theological level, to Islam itself. Moreover, while the Islamic State is engaged in terrorist attacks on Shi’as in Iraq, Syria and Saudi Arabia, the latter is itself engaged in a massive political and military effort to contain what it sees as Shi’a expansionism, conducting military interventions directly in Yemen, backing sectarian Sunni forces in Syria and working closely with Gulf countries like Bahrain, where a Sunni monarchy rules over an often restive Shi’a majority population. As a result, just as in the 1990s, when the Saudi religious establishment’s anti-Western rhetoric helped to prepare the ground for destabilizing jihadist attacks against Western targets in the country, so Saudi Arabia now finds its domestic stability threatened by the same sectarian sentiments that it has helped to stir up across the region.

## How Belgium Became a Top Exporter of Jihad

*Guy Van Vlierden*

Belgium has in recent years produced some of the largest numbers of foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq, both in absolute and relative terms of any European country. This article aims to take a critical look at the numbers of Belgian fighters active with the Islamic State and other militant groups in Iraq and Syria, and explain why and how Belgium has become a leading exporter of jihadist fighters.

### Number of Fighters

The Belgian government’s latest estimate of the number of Belgian fighters in the Syrian-Iraqi conflict is about 380 (*HLN*, April 7). However, independent research by the Belgian historian and Arabist Pieter Van Ostaeyen and this author found that 482 people are known to have at least departed to the conflict, including those who were stopped before they reached their goal, were killed or who have since returned. This includes some people within the ranks of moderate rebel and even pro-regime groups—both in Syria and Iraq—but most of these fighters can nonetheless be considered as jihadists who sought to join Sunni Islamist militant groups. Most of the Belgians, perhaps 70 percent by mid-2014, appear to have joined the Islamic State, the most prominent extremist force in Iraq and Syria. [1] However, affiliations have often changed with time. For instance, many Belgian fighters in Syria, before summer 2013, initially joined the then independent militia *Majlis Shura al-Mujahideen*. When this became part of the Islamic State, many switched to *Jabhat al-Nusra*, the Syrian branch of *al-Qaeda*, before gradually switching back to the Islamic State.

The difference between the official count and independent estimates—which is not unique to the Belgian figures—is probably because governments tend to limit their data to juridically sound cases, while independent research relies more heavily on social media. On the one hand, using social media can lead to overestimating numbers. For instance, in the first months of the Syrian civil war, many people put Syrian cities as their place of residence on their Facebook accounts, but these later turned out to be mere rhetorical expression of support. On the other hand, some Belgian foreign fighters were only known once their deaths were announced. For example, when two Belgians recently died in suicide attacks—“*Abu Abdallah al-Belgiki*,” who died on April 24 near the Iraqi-Jordanian border, and “*Abu Bakr al-Belgiki*,” on March 11 near Ramadi in Iraq—they had

no prior publicly available social media footprint ([Twitter](#), March 11).

However, even allowing for such discrepancies, a total number of nearly 500 Belgians who have joined—or tried to join—the Syrian jihad seems plausible. Even the Belgian government's lower estimate of 380 would give Belgium the largest number of jihadists per capita, with 33.9 fighters per one million inhabitants. In Western Europe, only Sweden (30.6) and Denmark (26.3) come close to that, and only when calculated at their highest estimates. High end estimates for Germany (22.3) and France (18.1) show far fewer relative numbers of jihadists, and only high end estimates of 2,000 fighters for the UK (31.0) result in a comparable rate ([Daily Telegraph](#), November 24, 2014). [2] Strikingly, on the entire European continent, Belgium's number of foreign fighters per capita is only surpassed by two Muslim-majority Balkan states, both of which have a recent history of war and related jihadist activity: Bosnia and Herzegovina with 87.2 fighters per million inhabitants, and Kosovo with a stunning 157.9.

Underlining the high levels of sympathy for jihadist groups, in an Italian study of two million posts on Twitter and Facebook, the only countries showing a higher proportional level of popular online support for the Islamic State than Belgium were Qatar and Pakistan ([Guardian](#), November 28, 2014).

### History of Extremism

Although it has not so far suffered any major attacks, Belgian Islamist radicals have long played a significant role in such events elsewhere. For instance, the murderers of the Afghan anti-Taliban fighter Ahmad Shah Massoud, who was deliberately killed just days before the September 11, 2001 attacks, started their deadly mission in Brussels ([Le Monde](#), April 19, 2004). Similarly, a cell of the Groupe Islamique Marocain Combattant (GICM) operating from the small Belgian border town of Maaseik was later implicated in the terrorist attack on March 11, 2004 in Madrid ([El Mundo](#), July 11, 2006). In addition, the Belgian-born Muslim convert Muriel Degauque became the first known female Western Islamist suicide bomber in Iraq on November 9, 2005 ([New York Times](#), December 6, 2005).

The prominent role of Belgium in such plots is probably due to its status as an ideal logistical hub, due to its geography, and the fact that it has a substantial and rather diverse Muslim population in which planners and executors of attacks could easily hide and recruit. Indeed, there is often speculation that Islamists avoided committing large scale attacks on Belgian soil because they needed the country as an organizational

base. During the 1990s and 2000s, Islamist extremism in Belgium involved many different groups, currents and orientations, in which no one organization or individual dominated. In addition, most such activities happened underground, without a significant base of support in the mainstream Muslim community. Despite this, however, the current generation of jihadist fighters have different roots.

### Radical Networks

The most significant cause of Belgium's current jihadist problem—and the large number of Belgian fighters with the Islamic State—was the establishment of the radical group Shariah4Belgium in 2010. This was founded as an offshoot of the radical al-Muhajiroun and Islam4UK movements in Britain, which are led by Omar Bakri and Anjem Choudary, but was completely separate from other radical networks in Belgium. In the first years of its existence, Shariah4Belgium was not considered a dangerous group. Its core activities were “dawa” sessions in Belgian cities—mainly trying to convert non-Muslims by preaching in public places—and protests against what the group considered as violations of Muslims' rights. As these activities were so overt and outspoken, it was widely assumed that Shariah4Belgium was only a nuisance and would never commit violent acts. [3]

Because Shariah4Belgium was not taken seriously by the authorities, the group found it easy to recruit. Many young people were attracted by its message of resistance, and its appeal was increased further by some unfortunate policy measures—such as a ban on wearing headscarves in public schools in the city of Antwerp—which made the group's message seem more relevant and credible. As a result, with its rather simple discourse, which also covered the need for Muslims to implement Shari'a and to live under an Islamic state, Shariah4Belgium radicalized a large number of followers in very short time. And when authorities finally started to act against it at the end of 2012, most of these people had already been radicalized to the point of no return. However, at this exact time, when the group's leaders such as its Belgian founder Fouad Belkacem were imprisoned and its overt activities became impossible, the Syrian war presented itself as an alternative outlet for radicals; young people who had absorbed the group's message that Belgian society did not want them and that it offered no space for Islam, saw the Syrian jihad as a worthy way out.

### Radicalization

Little is known about the foreign connections that led the first members Shariah4Belgium to Syria, but probably the Syrian-born Omar Bakri—with whom Shariah4Belgium

member Said M’Nari had very close contacts from the group’s early days—facilitated such linkages. These first recruits immediately formed a separate Belgian faction within the existing Majlis Shura Al-Mujahideen. That militia was led by Amr al-Absi, a Syrian extremist who is now considered one of the key people in the establishment of the Islamic State (*al-Akhbar*, January 14, 2014). The group’s Belgian faction was headed by a very young amir from the town of Vilvoorde, Houssien Elouassaki, and it was later also joined by people from the Netherlands and France (*De Morgen*, June 8, 2013).

Networks linked to earlier generations of jihadists—for instance, related to conflicts in North Africa—seem to hardly play a role in connecting young Belgians with radical Syrian groups. However, there are examples of people from old networks infiltrating the new ones. One example is the convicted GICM terrorist Abdelkader Hakimi, who tried to get in touch with the new generation, and whose associate Rachid Iba has been fighting in Syria with the newer generation of radicals and has links to Shariah4Belgium. [4] But up to now, there are no indications that figures like them have risen again to important positions, and links between the first generation of Belgian jihadists and the current fighters with the Islamic State seem thin or non-existent.

This disconnect between the earlier generation of mostly foreign born fighters and the youngsters drawn to the Syrian jihad via Shariah4Belgium is underlined by a recent survey of 50 Belgian fighters by the author, which found that unlike first-generation jihadists, only 18 percent of these fighters was born abroad (*Het Laatste Nieuws*, November 27, 2014). The study also found that almost 80 percent of them have roots within the Moroccan community, the largest group of Muslims in Belgium. Overall, their socio-economic backgrounds are quite diverse, underlining that their radicalization was not primarily a result of deprivation or due to having a problematic or criminal past. For instance, the Elouassaki brothers from Vilvoorde, of whom three have left for Syria, had a history of problems with the law; Hakim Elouassaki, for instance, during a routine identity check when he was 16 years old, wounded three policeman so badly that they had to be hospitalized. [5] By contrast, the three brothers of the Mezroui family, also of Moroccan descent, who also left for Syria, had previously lived with their parents in a luxurious villa in the upscale Antwerp suburb of Kapellen (*Het Laatste Nieuws*, April 18, 2013). And similarly, in the eulogy that jihadist comrades published after the death of Said El Morabit, it was claimed that he had quit a leading job in an important insurance company to go to the Syrian jihad (*Het Laatste Nieuws*, April 3, 2014). Of the eight percent of this sample who were Muslim converts, most were adopted or raised in ethnically mixed families,

underlining the role that identity issues can play in causing radicalization.

## Conclusion

One consequence of the fact that the Shariah4Belgium-linked jihadists had previously typically operated openly in Belgium, is that they still were surrounded by a wide range of friends when they left for jihad (in contrast to the previous generation’s underground networks, which operated only within already radicalized circles). This has enabled them to keep in touch with less radicalized people at home, while the ease of internet communication has made it possible to provide those back home with a mix of adventurous stories and religious indoctrination. One result of this is that a considerable number of young Muslims in Belgium are both exposed to such messages and consider the jihadists’ acts—or at least their motivations—to be acceptable, even when atrocities have come to light. This development is probably the biggest danger that current foreign fighters pose for the future; that their activities in Syria and Iraq are creating a broad base of jihadist supporters at home whose own actions may unleash a true “clash of civilizations” within Western societies themselves.

*Guy Van Vlieden is a journalist for the Belgian newspaper Het Laatste Nieuws, specializing in issues relating to terrorist and extremism.*

## Notes

1. For more details, see: <https://emmejihad.wordpress.com/2014/08/23/270-belgians-in-the-ranks-of-the-islamic-state/>.
2. Full sources for the international numbers of foreign fighters can be found at <http://thecountofemmejihad.wordpress.com>.
3. “Sharia4Belgium”: An Atypical but Extremist Salafist Organization Steps on the Belgian Stage,” ESIS, May 21, 2010, <http://www.esisc.org/publications/analyses/sharia-4belgium-an-atypical-but-extremist-salafist-organisation-steps-on-the-belgian-stage>.
4. For further details, see: <https://emmejihad.wordpress.com/2014/06/07/convicted-european-top-terrorist-abdelkader-hakimi-has-traveled-to-syria/>.
5. For further details, see: <https://emmejihad.wordpress.com/2013/05/24/phone-tap-of-belgian-syria-fighter-revealing-brussels-terrorist-plot/>.

## The Jihadist Threat in Italy

Stefano M. Torelli

In recent months, a number of incidents have brought attention to the possible threat to Italy from cells or individuals linked to the Islamic State. For instance, since mid-April, some pictures of self-proclaimed Islamic State supporters have been circulating on the web, in which Italy was threatened in written messages held in front of symbolic places such as the Colosseum in Rome and the Duomo in Milan. Also in recent months, a Moroccan citizen was arrested near Milan over his involvement in the attack against the Bardo Museum in Tunis last March. This article seeks to assess to what extent these events constitute a serious security threat against Italy.

### Between ‘Old’ and ‘New’ Jihadism

Since the 1990s, Italy has been at the center of Islamic terrorist networks, although it was not a direct target of jihadism. The main cause was its geographical proximity to North Africa to the south and the Balkans to the east, at a time when this area was affected by the most serious European conflict since the Second World War. In those years, Bosnia witnessed the rise of jihadist groups, and since then, there has been evidence that some individuals from the western Balkans have formed networks in Italy. On the other hand, in 2002, the Egyptian militant Abu al-Sirri (a.k.a. Abu Ammar) declared that Italy was a privileged transit point for jihadists going to Bosnia, and that it represented for Islamists what Pakistan represented for Afghanistan (*La Repubblica*, July 13, 2002). In this sense, the jihadist networks in Italy seemed averse to causing instability, which would have resulted in repressive measures against them by the government. This attitude changed in the wake of the 9/11 attacks and Italian participation in the international interventions in Afghanistan in 2001 and in Iraq in 2003. Since then, Rome has also been a potential target of Islamist terrorism. Nevertheless, there have been no attacks to date like those that took place in London and Madrid in 2005 and 2004, respectively.

However, this situation changed again after the so-called “Arab Spring” and the rise of the Islamic State in the Middle East, particularly after the establishment of the self-declared caliphate in 2014. At first, the focus was on the so-called foreign fighters who have gone to fight in Syria and Iraq, although this phenomenon is much less widespread in Italy than in other European countries. [1] Later, especially after the *Charlie Hebdo* attack in Paris in early 2015, Italian authorities have focused on the possibility that Italy could become a direct target. In January 2015, Italian Interior

Minister Angelino Alfano announced that nine suspected militants had been expelled (*Corriere della Sera*, January 18). At the same time, however, Italian authorities have more than once declared that there is no evidence of an imminent attack in Italy (*La Repubblica*, January 9). Since April, a series of pictures have been circulating on the web, in which a self-proclaimed jihadist called Omar Moktar, was threatening Italy in front of some symbolic places (*La Stampa*, April 28; *Terrorism Monitor*, May 1). According to investigators and many analysts, it would not constitute a credible, or at least significant, new threat. Furthermore, it also appeared contradictory and amateur, with the picture of the Colosseum having been widely circulated since last June, with a picture of someone claiming to be the Italian self-styled jihadist actually depicting a Belgian jihadist who had died in Syria, and there are also Arabic grammatical mistakes. [2] More concretely, on May 20, the Italian authorities arrested Abelmajid Touil, a Moroccan citizen, for his alleged role in the March Bardo Museum attack in Tunis. The role that Touil actually played is unclear, and while Tunisian authorities initially said Touil was in Tunis the day of the attack, the Italian judiciary reportedly found evidences that he was in Italy (*Tunisie Numerique*, May 20; *La Stampa*, May 20). In light of such developments, Italian Undersecretary for Security Marco Minniti wrote in a recent report that the risk of attacks in Italy, although not concrete nor likely, remains “possible.” [3]

### Italy as a Possible Target

Several sources of possible threats to Italy exist, due to political, cultural and geographical elements. Some risk factors are temporary, while others involve some longer-term structural aspects. These include:

- The generic identification of Italy with the West, which is considered by the new generation of jihadists as a land of infidels and, therefore, a legitimate target.
- Italy’s participation in the anti-Islamic State coalition.
- The presence on Italian territory of the Vatican, the global symbol of Christianity.
- The Pope’s recent announcement that a special Jubilee Year will start in December in Rome.
- The hosting of the Universal Exposition (Expo) in Milan for the next six months. The event will see the participation of the most important heads of state in the world and will certainly renew attention on Italy.

From the geographical point of view, Italy borders directly with some of the major theaters of instability where jihadism is being incubated:

- **Libya:** Currently Libya is the biggest concern for the Italian foreign and defense ministries due to the country's ongoing civil war, which has made Libya a regional hub for North African jihadist groups. On several occasions, Libyan Islamic State-affiliated groups have explicitly threatened Italy (*Il Sole 24 Ore*, February 15). [4]
- **Tunisia:** Despite being the only country still going through a process of democratization after the so-called "Arab Spring," Tunisia provides more foreign fighters than any other country in the world, and there is an on-going widespread radicalization among the younger generations. In addition, Tunisia is the closest North African country to Italy, and Italy, after France, is the country with the largest Tunisian migrant community. About a third of the 32 suspects expelled by Italy for security reasons linked to jihadism are Tunisians. On April 11, two Tunisian brothers living in Verona in northern Italy were expelled (*La Repubblica*, April 11).
- **Egypt:** Egypt provides generally fewer foreign fighters than countries like Tunisia. This is primarily because Egyptian jihadists are engaged directly on their territory, especially in Sinai. However, Egypt is part of the southern Mediterranean, and there is a regular flow of people from Egypt to Italy.
- **Balkans:** In past years, strong networks have developed between radical groups in Balkan countries, such as Bosnia, Kosovo, Albania and Macedonia, and Italy. In September 2014, Bosnian authorities arrested the Salafist preacher Bilal Bosnic, who, in summer 2014, recruited jihadists in northern Italy to fight in Syria and Iraq in the ranks of the Islamic State (*Panorama*, September 3, 2014; *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, September 4, 2014). Some of the foreign fighters that left Italy also originated in the Balkans, and the frequent contacts between Balkan communities and Italy accordingly attract high levels of attention from the Italian authorities.

Another source of Italian governmental concern is linked to illegal immigration. On May 12, the Minister of Information of Libya's internationally-recognized government in Tobruk said that Islamic State fighters would infiltrate Italy in the next waves of migrants from western Libya (which is under the control of the rival Libyan government of Tripoli) (*Corriere della Sera*, May 12). To date, however, the Italian authorities have found no evidence of jihadists attempting to hide in refugees boats. In addition, the Tobruk government claims could hide a political purpose, namely to discredit the self-proclaimed Tripoli government in the eyes of Italy. It is worth noting that debate over this threat began in Italy after the arrest of Abelmajid Touil. The first reports said that Touil had arrived in Italy by boat together with other migrants last February (*Corriere della Sera*, May 20). However, Italian

intelligence has underlined that there is not a single case of suspected extremists arriving by boat, out of almost 1,000 people investigated for suspected links with religious extremism (*La Repubblica*, May 20).

### Conclusion

On April 15, the Italian government finally approved the anti-terrorism decree discussed on February 10 by the Council of Ministers (ANSA, April 15). Among the measures are new penalties for those who organize travel to fight in jihad abroad and for those who make jihadist propaganda, and there are also new crimes relating to self-radicalization and self-training. Moreover, the decree proposes the establishment of a black list of websites linked to jihadism. These measures are clearly aimed at tackling the phenomenon of so-called lone wolf attackers or individual jihadists. Currently, the main threat to Italy seems to come precisely from such quarters, with the secondary threat likely coming from the links between cells in Italy (especially in the north of the country) and jihadist groups abroad.

*Stefano Maria Torelli, Ph.D., is a Research Fellow at the Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI).*

### Notes

1. Out of the 5,000 foreign fighters that are supposed to have left Europe to fight in Syria and Iraq, only 57 have come from Italy. Only five of these hold an Italian passport. See also Lorenzo Vidino (ed.), *L'Italia e il terrorismo in casa. Che fare?*, ISPI, Milano, 2015. France would provide around 500 foreign fighters, United Kingdom and Belgium 400, Germany 240, Netherlands 140 and Denmark 100.
2. Here is the picture that was posted last April by the Italian Newspaper *La Stampa*: <http://www.lastampa.it/2015/04/27/italia/cronache/isis-foto-con-messaggi-allitalia-siamo-tra-voi-ENmYjViv0ifM7oqJzoCwln/pagina.html>. Here is the same picture published by the *Daily Mail* on June 2014: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2663447/AllEyesOnIsis-Savvy-Jihadis-set-storm-Twitter-ISIS-propaganda-Q-A-10-30am-morning-Obama-prepares-air-strike-Iraq.html>.
3. Stefano M. Torelli, Arturo Varvelli, *L'Italia e la minaccia jihadista. Quale politica estera?*, ISPI, Milano, 2015.
4. In February, Italy was forced to evacuate its diplomatic mission from Libya, the last among the major Western countries to be still operating, due to the continuous threats. In the February video, in which Islamic State-affiliated militants showed the beheading of 21 Egyptian Coptic Christians on a Libyan beach, they said "We were in Syria. Now we are south of Rome."

## Al-Qaeda-Aligned Central Asian Militants in Syria Separate from Islamic State-Aligned IMU in Afghanistan

Jacob Zenn

On April 25, 2015, a coalition of rebel forces led by al-Qaeda affiliate, Jabhat al-Nusra (JN), and including the Uyghur-led Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) and Uzbek-led Imam Bukhari Jamaat (IBJ) and Katibat Tawhid wal Jihad, defeated the Syrian army in a battle at the strategic town of Jisr al-Shughur in northwestern Syria's Idlib governorate ([YouTube](#), April 25; [Twitter](#), April 16). Idlib governorate's capital city, also called Idlib, Jisr al-Shughur and other towns in northwestern Syria fell under rebel control. With Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia supporting this rebel coalition and with a direct supply line open from Turkey's Hatay Province to Idlib, the rebels may have enough resources to establish a de-facto state in northwestern Syria led by JN and supported by several Central Asian militias ([Doha News](#), April 13).

This de-facto state, which Islamic State condemns for allowing what it describes as *jahliyya* (pre-Islamic) symbols alongside Islamic ones—such as the blue nationalist flag of “East Turkistan” and the flag of the Free Syrian Army (FSA)—would rival both the Syrian government and the Islamic State, whose territories now encompass most of eastern Syria and western Iraq. For Central Asian countries and China, the emergence of such a de-facto state in northwestern Syria poses a security threat to their countries. Central Asian militant groups in Idlib can potentially take advantage of this safe haven in northwestern Syria to recruit and train fighters and collect funding to support their ultimate goal of creating an Islamic caliphate in Central Asia—a goal not all that different from the Islamic State's.

Meanwhile, Central Asian militants in the Islamic State-aligned Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) are currently shifting from Pakistan into Afghanistan, adopting the Islamic State's propaganda strategies and working with factions of the Taliban. These Taliban factions, like the IMU, are no longer loyal to Mullah Omar or “constrained” by his demand for fighters to stay within the borders of the Taliban's Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan ([Express Tribune](#) [Karachi], May 8).

Moreover, the emergence of two theaters of war for Central Asian militants in Syria-Iraq and Afghanistan-Pakistan and the relative ease of transit between these two theatres via

Turkey heightens the possibility that foreign fighters can return to Central Asia at an opportune moment, such as at a time of political, social or economic unrest.

Thus far, the most significant outcome of the war in Syria and, in particular, the battle at Jisr al-Shughur, for Central Asian militants is their increasing visibility, operational experience and international networks. A safe haven in Idlib would accelerate all three of these trends. This article focuses, in particular, on the TIP and the Uzbek rebel groups, IBJ and Katibat Tawhid wal Jihad, in northwestern Syria and their former ally, the IMU, in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

### The Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) in Jisr al-Shughur

Before the war in Syria commenced, the TIP was mostly based in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region, where in 2006, it formed its own “brand” among other militant groups, after operating for years under the IMU with sanction from Mullah Umar and al-Qaeda ([Kavkaz Center](#), November 12, 2006; [Archive.org](#), 1999). When the TIP openly announced its support for the rebels in Syria in 2013, in its quarterly Arabic-language online magazine *Islamic Turkistan*, the TIP became less active in Afghanistan and Pakistan and began to show in its propaganda dozens of fighters in Syria, including their children and wives ([Islamic Turkistan](#), March 2013). While the TIP had up to 300 fighters in Afghanistan and Pakistan, of whom most were Uyghurs and to a lesser extent Turks, Chinese Kazakhs and other Russian-speakers, the TIP's total numbers in Syria may now reach 1,000 militants, including male fighters and their families ([The Friday Times](#) [Lahore], June 8, 2012). [1]

Until the battle at Jisr al-Shughur, the extent of the TIP influence on the battlefield in Syria was difficult to ascertain because most evidence of TIP militancy in Syria came from the TIP's own propaganda, which could be exaggerated. However, during the battle, several rebel groups filmed TIP fighters combating Syrian government forces, including in candid “homemade-style” videos released on YouTube ([YouTube](#), April 22). The most notable TIP fighter to emerge from the videos in Jisr al-Shughur was the Arabic-speaking Abu Ridha al-Turkistani, who has been the spokesman for the TIP's “Syria branch” since 2014, but also has claimed TIP attacks in China, including a suitcase bombing at Urumqi train station in 2014 and a suicide car bombing at Tiananmen Square in Beijing in 2013 ([South China Morning Post](#), May 14, 2014). In the videos of Abu Ridha al-Turkistani in Jisr al-Shughur, he led fighters to take over a building and climbed a clock tower in the center of the city and placed a black-and-white JN-style flag with “Turkistan Islamic Party” written in Arabic on it ([Islam](#)



Awazi, May 1).

According to a TIP audio report released after the Jisr al-Shughur battle, which included Uyghur, Hui Chinese, Kazakh and Arabic speakers, the TIP artillery group consisted of “74 mujahideen from Turkistan [likely referring to Uyghurs] and 60 Uzbek, Turk and Arab mujahideen,” while a heavy machine gun group consisted of “seven Turkistan [Uyghur] mujahideen and one Uzbek” (*Islom Awazi*, May 3). This audio and visual reporting from Jisr al-Shughur taken together therefore suggests a prominent role for the TIP in northwest Syria.

### Uzbek Groups in Jisr al-Shughur

Another rebel group to gain prominence in the battle at Jisr al-Shughur is the Uzbek-led Imam Bukhari Jamaat (IBJ). The IBJ and TIP have similar origins under the IMU in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and their respective Uzbek and Uyghur fighters are often shown together in Syria coordinating attacks and speaking in their mutually intelligible Uyghur and Uzbek languages (*Sadilarbiz.Blogspot.com*, January 16).

The Uzbeks first gained visibility in Syria when they organized under JN in Aleppo in a group then called Seyfuddin Uzbek Jamaat, which was led by a former IMU militant, an Uzbek named Abu Hussein (*ChechensinSyria.com*, April 14). This *jamaat* (religious fighting unit) began to receive new Uzbek fighters and evolved into what is now called the IBJ (“Imam Bukhari” was a ninth century Islamic scholar from Bukhara, present-day Uzbekistan). Unlike the TIP, whose “Syria branch” remains united with the TIP leadership in Afghanistan and Pakistan (and intermediaries in Turkey), the IBJ likely broke from the IMU when the IBJ began receiving new recruits independent of the IMU. These recruits were attracted to Syria because of the ease of travel there via Turkey and the theological significance of Syria (or “al-Sham” as it is known in classical Arabic) compared to Afghanistan or Pakistan.

A faction of the IBJ, *Katibat Tahwid wal Jihad*, is likely comprised almost exclusively of Uzbeks who fight in Syria now, but, unlike IBJ fighters, never fought with the IMU and has no connection to the Afghanistan-Pakistan theater. This *katibat* (battalion) filmed one of its battles in Jisr al-Shughur. At the end of the battle, the film showed a TIP flag being hoisted on top of a cross of a church (*YouTube*, May 9). This suggests that *Katibat Tahwid wal Jihad* and the TIP also operate together.

### Growing Alliance Between IMU and Islamic State

The IMU is currently in a state of flux. The IMU has complained about Central Asians “abandoning” Central Asia and Afghanistan in its official statements. IMU fighters have also been forced to leave their long-standing bases in northwest Pakistan and return to northern Afghanistan after successive Pakistani army offensives in late 2014 (*Jamia Hafsa Urdu Forum*, July 11, 2014; *The Nation* [Lahore], May 16). As a result of losing Central Asian fighters to al-Qaeda affiliated JN and fleeing from zones where al-Qaeda was active in Pakistan, the IMU’s relationship with al-Qaeda Central has suffered.

In addition, Osama bin Laden’s death in 2011 and the deaths in drone strikes of al-Qaeda and Pakistan Taliban leaders who supported the IMU has weakened IMU relations with al-Qaeda. Moreover, the Taliban under Mullah Omar may also have sidelined the IMU as part of its efforts to gain some level of international and diplomatic legitimacy with a view to reclaiming its place as the government in Afghanistan (*Express Tribune* [Lahore], December 1, 2014).

Due its alienation from al-Qaeda and the Taliban, the IMU has likely found new synergies with Islamic State, which is seeking to expand its influence in Central Asia, or “Khorasan,” and can provide funding and legitimacy to the struggling IMU. In September 2014, IMU leader Usman Ghazi pledged support to Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and criticized the “missing” Mullah Omar, who has not been seen in public since 2001. At roughly the same time as Ghazi’s pledge, several former Taliban factions also pledged loyalty al-Baghdadi (*al-Akhbar* [Beirut], October 6, 2014). A subsequent IMU statement in April 2015 from Uzbek commander Sadullah Urgenci in Faryab, Afghanistan, and another IMU statement in Dari in May 2015, reaffirmed the IMU’s pledges to al-Baghdadi (*Express Tribune* [Lahore], April 2). Soon after these pledges, the IMU adopted the Islamic State’s tactics, notably with the IMU undertaking its first propagandized beheadings of Afghan soldiers and kidnappings and beheadings of Shi’a Hazaras in Afghanistan (*Tolo News*, April 1).

Similarly, the Islamic State’s “Khorasan Province” group claimed its first major attack in Pakistan in Karachi in a bus of Shi’as who were visiting a shrine in April 2015 (*Hindustan Times*, May 13). The attack was carried out in coordination with Jundallah, the name of the IMU’s media wing and which was an IMU faction created by IMU founder Tahir Yuldashev together with late Pakistan Taliban leader Baitullah Mahsud in South Waziristan in 2008 (*AFP*, May 13; *Asia Times*, January 31, 2008). This suggests that the

IMU, which has launched several major attacks in Pakistan, including breaking into Bannu prison in 2012, kidnapping and selling U.S. aid worker Warren Weinstein to al-Qaeda in 2013 and raiding Karachi airport in 2014, is playing a key role in spreading the Islamic State's influence in Afghanistan and Pakistan (*Express Tribune* [Lahore], June 11, 2014; *The News International* [Karachi], April 27).

### Impact of Islamic State-IMU Relationship

Even though al-Baghdadi has not explicitly recognized Ghazi's pledge to him, al-Baghdadi has recognized "Islamic State in Khorasan," which appears to be comprised of several IMU brigades. The IMU's growing operational and ideological synchrony with the Islamic State will likely widen its rift with the TIP and IBJ in northwestern Syria. The TIP and IBJ are both under the umbrella of JN, and therefore also al-Qaeda, and also maintain their allegiance to Mullah Omar. The TIP in April 2015, for example, expressed "gratitude" to Mullah Omar for respecting what it called the Islamic principle of "friends and foes" and not handing former leader of Uyghur militants in Afghanistan, the late Hassan Mahsum, over to China or the United States after the latter's invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 ([Sadiqlarbiz.Blogspot.com](http://Sadiqlarbiz.blogspot.com), April 10). The IBJ also released a video of its fighters taking an oath of loyalty to Mullah Omar in November 2014 ([RFL/RL](http://RFL/RL), November 12, 2014).

Although most Central Asians in Syria appear to be aligned with JN, the Islamic State has featured several Uzbek, Kyrgyz and Uyghur suicide bombers in Iraq and several dozen Kazakh families in propaganda videos in areas under its control in Iraq (*Daily Star* [Beirut], March 12). In addition, four Uyghurs were arrested for allegedly trying to meet Islamic State's affiliate in Sulawesi, Indonesia (*Jakarta Globe*, March 18). However, overall, the Islamic State appears to be less successful in recruiting Central Asians in Syria and Iraq than it is in expanding its influence into Central Asia, Afghanistan and Pakistan with the IMU and Jundallah.

### Conclusion

The rise of Central Asian groups like the TIP and IBJ in northwestern Syria is the most significant development in Central Asian militancy since the rise of the IMU in the Fergana Valley in the mid-1990s and its shift to northern Afghanistan in the late 1990s. Central Asian governments must now deal both with the threat of the "old" IMU in Afghanistan and its "new" derivatives—namely, groups like the TIP and IBJ in Syria. At the same time, because of the prolific activities of the TIP, IBJ and the IMU on the internet, even if governments can succeed in preventing the return

of Central Asian fighters to their homelands, these militant groups can still inspire or train fighters there without actually being on-the-ground or face-to-face. The increasing frequency of suicide bombings in Xinjiang, which are not necessarily carried out by the TIP but may be facilitated by its propaganda and online training materials, are an example of what the future may hold for the Central Asian states (*South China Morning Post*, May 24, 2014).

The Central Asian states are also in a bind insofar as there is little they can do to stymie the growth of the TIP and IBJ in Syria given their lack of influence—and likely also intelligence—there. It is because of this that Kazakhstan's President Nursultan Nazarbayev, in late 2014, warned of a "worsening geopolitical context" in Eurasia (*Eurasia Daily Monitor*, November 21, 2014). As such, Central Asian governments will likely need to develop comprehensive national security strategies with allies both within the region and abroad to manage the complexities of emerging threats.

*Jacob Zenn is an Analyst of African and Eurasian Affairs for The Jamestown Foundation.*

### Note

1. Author's Interviews in Turkey, April 2015.