



# Terrorism Monitor

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**Members of the Islamic State's branch in Yemen (Wilayat al-Yemen) who blew up Shi'a mosques in Sana'a in March.**

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## BOKO HARAM SURVIVES REGIONAL OFFENSIVES AND STRIKES BACK

*James Brandon*

Rumors of the demise of the Nigerian militant group Boko Haram appear to have been greatly exaggerated, as indicated by a series of fresh attacks by the organization in Nigeria and surrounding countries in recent weeks. On August 4, Boko Haram militants killed nine Nigerian fisherman on the shores of Lake Chad (*Vanguard* [Lagos], August 5). The Nigerian Army later claimed to have found and killed 13 of the attackers, as they sought to escape the area, and also captured an all-terrain vehicle used by the gunmen. On the same day, Boko Haram kidnapped an estimated 135 people around the village of Chakamari, in neighboring Cameroon (*Vanguard* [Lagos], August 5). In addition, earlier in July, a series of suicide attacks took place in Cameroon's Far North Region, close to the Nigerian border, killing around 50 people in total (*Cameroon Tribune*, July 15). These and other attacks in the region are believed to have killed around 800 people in the last two months (*Vanguard* [Lagos], August 5).

In response, the Nigerian authorities have continue to seek regional and international support against Boko Haram, while also continuing to pursue a military solution in northeast Nigeria, where Boko Haram activity is concentrated. In particular, Nigeria is pushing ahead with Chad, Cameroon and Niger with plans to create a 8,700-strong combined force to operate across the region's borders (The News Nigeria, July 30; BBC, July 29). Nigeria has also lobbied for the United States to lift its restrictions on military aid to Nigeria, imposed under the Leahy Law over concerns of human rights abuses, and has also sought foreign economic assistance to address chronic underinvestment in the country's northeast (News Agency of Nigeria, August 4; *Daily Post* [Lagos] August 5).

Accompanying this has been forceful public messaging by the Nigerian authorities, and particularly by the military, that the government has successfully put Boko Haram on the back foot. For instance, the authorities have recently claimed that a group within Boko Haram has reached out to the government's Centre for Crisis Communication (CCC), requesting to open dialogue with a view to laying down their arms (*Daily Post* [Lagos], August 4). Claims of victory—or near victory—have also been widely touted by the military. “They [Boko Haram] are no longer looking for land to occupy. They are looking for soft targets,” said the outgoing commander of the army's 2nd Division in one such recent statement (*Vanguard* [Lagos], August 4). This message was echoed by the army's retiring Chief of Staff, Lieutenant-General Kenneth Minimah, who said in a recent valedictory speech that he believed that the army's performance against Boko Haram had been previously been hampered by political infighting, but that the army's increased emphasis on enforcing discipline and cracking down on lax behavior, including through the use of courts martial, would bolster its fight against militants (This Day Live [Lagos], August 5).

In Cameroon, meanwhile, official responses have included increased security throughout the country, including in the south, at public gatherings and bars, and checks on the curriculum in religious schools have also been instituted (*Cameroon Tribune*, August 5). Security has also been increased in the eastern region, which has been less affected by Boko Haram so far, while a citizen-led sticker and poster campaign in the north has also taken place, to “sensitize public opinion that the danger is within us,” in the words of one of its organizers (*Cameroon Tribune*, August 5; *Cameroon Tribune*, August 6). Chadian forces have also clashed with Boko Haram militants in recent weeks in the Lake Chad area, although without notably decisive results (Reuters, August 5).

Despite the above range of initiatives, however, Boko Haram attacks still continue to cause significant civilian casualties, and the group remains both stubbornly resilient and active in northeast Nigeria and the broader Lake Chad region. Nigeria's president, Muhammadu Buhari, perhaps buoyed by the recent optimistic statements by his army and government, has himself recently repeated earlier promises to eradicate the Boko Haram threat, even saying at one event in early August that “I assure you that we will defeat Boko Haram by the end of this year” (*Vanguard* [Lagos], August 2). Given Boko Haram's continued survival against the regional forces massing against it, however, such confidence appears sadly misplaced for now.

## DEATH OF MULLAH OMAR LEAVES TALIBAN AT CROSSROADS

*James Brandon*

The Taliban, the most powerful Afghan insurgent faction, on July 30, announced the death of their long-time leader, Mullah Muhammad Omar, from an unspecified illness in a press statement released via their website (Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, July 30). The statement provided few concrete details on the date or location of Mullah Omar's death, prompting a variety of largely unfounded speculation, although it also claimed that “in the previous fourteen years never for a single day did he leave Afghanistan to visit Pakistan or another country.” It also paid tribute to his memory, saying his Taliban government (in power from 1996-2001) had “portrayed to the world the true meaning of Islamic sovereignty,” and said that “our duty to steer this Islamic Emirate, left behind to us as a trust, in the same direction as he had done.”

Such platitudes aside, the Taliban's leadership have since moved to avoid any impression that Mullah Omar's death has led to any splits within the movement as well as any suggestions that their complex alliance with a wide range of other insurgent factions has been weakened, or that their military campaign is in anyway tailing off. The following day, the Taliban announced a new leader, Mullah Akhtar Muhammad Mansour, a founding member and long-standing senior member of the group; a statement said that he was a “reliable and suitable person for shouldering huge tasks,” and that he had been “the intimate and trusted associate of late Mullah Muhammad Omar” (Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, July 31). The theme of continuation was further communicated by another press release quoting Jalaluddin Haqqani, the veteran militant leader of one of Afghanistan's most potent jihadist factions, as saying that “my particular recommendation to all members of the Islamic Emirate is to maintain their internal unity and discipline” (Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, August 2). Underlying the Taliban's carefully choreographed press releases and heavy emphasis on unity and continuity is likely to be the group's fear that Mullah Omar's death may accentuate centrifugal trends within the movement, which is already internally divided over whether and how to engage in negotiations with the Afghan government and also on relations with Pakistan. Indeed, only a few days after the Taliban publicized news of Omar's death, Tayyab Agha, the head of the Taliban's Qatar-based political office, claimed that Omar had died two years previously; he also said that the Taliban had been mistaken to cover this up and also to appoint Mansour as successor (*Daily Times* [Lahore], August 4). Tayyab Agha's very

public departure may partly reflect personal rivalries with Mansour, or else indicate more ideological divisions over the movement's future strategy; either way, it suggests that Mansour is unlikely to enjoy the same levels of deference and respect that Taliban members previously accorded Mullah Omar.

At the same time, however, attacks by the Taliban have continued, notably with the group carrying out a large truck-bomb attack on a government special forces base in Pol-e-Alam, the capital of Logar Province, on August 6, killing at least three soldiers (RFE/RL, August 6). In another notable development, supporters of Mullah Omar, including a range of high-level former militants and Taliban officials and also Soviet-era mujahideen fighters, held a public meeting to pray for him in Kabul (Afghan Zaria, August 2). The event is a reminder that, on one hand, the Taliban threat to the Afghan government is not only military in nature but also a political one, and also that, even to his detractors and opponents, Mullah Omar was an iconic figure in modern Afghan history whose successors may struggle to control the fractious, politically divided and geographically fragmented movement that he bequeathed them.

## Nuclear Agreement Overshadows Arab Unrest in Iranian Khuzestan

*Chris Zambelis*

The accord recently struck between Iran and the five permanent UN Security Council members plus Germany (P5+1) represents a watershed in Middle East diplomacy. The culmination of almost two years of negotiations, the deal outlines a plan to lift most international economic sanctions on Iran in exchange for its agreement to forego any pursuit of nuclear weapons and to accept other limits on its nuclear program. The implications of Iran's return to the international fold for geopolitics, Iran's overall strategic posture and domestic political situation and global energy markets have been extensively analyzed and debated. Also important, however, is the agreement's potential impact on Iran's precarious ethnic and sectarian minority dynamics.

Given the opposition to the nuclear agreement from many Arab Persian Gulf states, the current position of Iran's ethnic Arab minority population in the country's southwestern province of Khuzestan merits consideration. This was underlined by a series of attacks in recent months against Iranian security forces and other targets in Khuzestan claimed by ethnic Arab militants affiliated with the Harakat al-Nazal al-Arabi li-Tahrir al-Ahwaz (Arab Struggle Movement for the Liberation of Ahwaz—ASMLA) (YouTube, May 17; al-Arabiya, April 2; Press TV, April 2; Ahwazna.net, April 1). The Arabs of Khuzestan are known as the Ahvazi (Ahwazi in Arabic) and have endured various forms of abuse and repression by the state on account of their ethnic and cultural identity. Significantly, the vast majority of Iran's proven oil reserves—between 80 and 90 percent—are located in Khuzestan. Consequently, any volatility in Khuzestan will become increasingly relevant as foreign oil firms contemplate their much-anticipated return to Iran's energy sector (*Financial Times*, July 16).

In April, the ASMLA announced what it called an “unprecedented escalation” in its armed campaign against Iranian security forces, including the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Basij paramilitary units and other targets that represent the state, on its network of official websites and social media platforms (Ahwazna.net, April 1; Twitter, April 1). On April 2, the ASMLA's armed wing, the Mohieddin al-Nasser Martyr Brigades, attacked a police checkpoint in Hamidiyeh, approximately 16 miles west of the provincial capital Ahwaz, killing three police officers and wounding two others (al-Arabiya, April 2; Press TV, April 2). Iranian authorities later announced that they had detained

the perpetrators of the April attack (Press TV, April 22). The ASMLA also claimed responsibility for a May 16 attack against the governor's office in Susangerd, located about 40 miles northwest of Ahvaz. The attackers used homemade explosives and small-arms fire. Video footage of the operation was shared by the ASMLA online (YouTube, May 17; al-Arabiya, May 17). The number of casualties resulting from the May attack is uncertain. These attacks fit the pattern of previous operations executed by the ASMLA and other Ahwaz militant currents in Khuzestan (See: Terrorism Monitor, January 23, 2014).

The attacks occurred amid a backdrop of heightened tensions in Khuzestan in recent months. The March 14 self-immolation of an Ahwazi street vendor, Younes al-Asakirah, in Khorramshahr to protest against what he saw as the unlawful confiscation of his wares by the authorities sparked a wave of protests across Khuzestan. Ahwazis who attended al-Asakirah's funeral used the occasion to direct their ire against the government. The ensuing crackdown by the security forces resulted in scores of arrests and the imposition of other repressive measures (Middle East Eye, March 26). In another incident, at a May 17 soccer match between the local Foolad Khuzestan team and the visiting al-Hilal team from Saudi Arabia, some Ahwazi fans reportedly chanted anti-government slogans couched in Arab nationalist rhetoric, while other fans showed their support for the visiting al-Hilal squad on account of its Arab origin (al-Arabiya, May 18).

Between two and four million Ahwazis reside in Khuzestan; estimates of the Ahwazi population can be smaller or larger depending on the political persuasion of the source. Despite residing amid tremendous oil wealth, Ahwazis suffer from severe poverty, underdevelopment and environmental degradation, as well as social, political and cultural subjugation due to their Arab identity (Human Rights Watch, April 29). Many Ahwazis believe that their predicament is the product of a calculated effort to emphasize the Islamic Republic's Persian character at their expense, even though the majority of Ahwazis are Shi'a Muslims. These circumstances have provided a fertile ground for the spread of secessionist and nationalist impulses among many Ahwazis over the years.

Central to the Ahwazi national cause is a discourse of historical grievance and sacrifice, and the ASMLA draws from a long tradition of Ahwazi separatist activism. For example, its armed wing, the Mohieddin al-Nasser Martyr Brigades, draws its namesake from Mohieddin Shaykh Nasser al-Kaabi Humaidan, one of the founding leaders of the Arabistan Liberation Front (ALF). Founded in 1958, the ALF sought the establishment of an independent

"Arabistan"—Ahwazis and pan-Arab nationalists often refer to Khuzestan as Arabistan, the largely Arab territory that enjoyed a period of limited self-rule during different eras of history—and hoped for its eventual unification with other Arab lands. The ALF was steeped in the pan-Arab nationalist ideology advocated by Egyptian President Gamal Abd al-Nasser. However, Mohieddin al-Nasser was arrested in 1963 for his involvement in irredentist and separatist politics, and was executed in 1964 along with other leading ALF figures (National Liberation Movement of Ahwaz, August 3, 2001). The Ahwaz nationalist movement also leverages a sophisticated political activist network, and the Ahwazi diaspora and sympathetic activist organizations in Europe and beyond regularly advocate on behalf of the Ahwazi cause. In July, for example, protesters gathered at the London headquarters of Iran's National Oil Company to draw attention to the plight of the Ahwazis (YouTube, July 3).

Iran has accused the ASMLA and other ethnic Ahwazi activist and militant organizations as serving as proxies for enemies of the Islamic Republic. In particular, the historical links between Ahwazi militants and Saddam Hussein's Iraq continues to shape Iranian perceptions of its Arab population. The rhetoric and actions of Ahwazi militants are likely to feed Iran's suspicions. The ASMLA has embraced similarly motivated activist movements that purport to act on behalf of Iran's ethnic Kurdish, ethnic Baloch and other minority communities, including violent insurgent groups. For instance, a statement issued by the ASMLA in May threatened that its future military operations will be coordinated with ethnic Baloch and ethnic Kurdish insurgents (*al-Sharq* [Dammam], May 15). The claimed establishment of a virtual "joint media center" between Ahwazi and Baloch national causes in Iran also raises another set of questions about the level of coordination—real or otherwise—between violent opposition movements operating in Iran (Twitter, July 5).

The ASMLA has also praised Saudi Arabia and other Arab nations for devoting more attention to the Ahwazi cause. The ASMLA has also declared solidarity on behalf of Ahwazis with Saudi Arabia and other countries involved in Operation Decisive Storm to repel the advances of Zaydi Shi'a Ansar Allah (Supporters of God, a.k.a. the Houthis) in Yemen and what it describes as Iran's "destructive interference" in Arab affairs (Ahwazna.net, April 1). For Iran, an opinion column penned in March by prominent Emirati businessman Khalaf Ahmed al-Habtoor vindicates its worries about the intentions of its Arab rivals regarding Khuzestan. Titled "Arab Ahwaz Must be Liberated from Iran," al-Habtoor echoes the claims of injustice made by Ahwazis and calls on Arab countries—and especially the Gulf Cooperation Council—to support the Ahwazis' demands for independence by, among other

things, providing billions of dollars of direct aid. He also suggests that the return of an independent “Arabistan” would sever Iran’s access to oil revenue (al-Arabiya, March 29). A series of meetings between Ahwazi activists and U.S. officials, disclosed by Wikileaks, is also likely to have raised alarm bells in Tehran over the extent of foreign influence in Khuzestan (Wikileaks, January 14, 2007; Wikileaks, December 6, 2006; Wikileaks, June 13, 2006; Wikileaks, May 8, 2006; Wikileaks, April 4, 2006).

The strategic repercussions of any further rebellion and upheaval in Khuzestan carry far-reaching implications for Iran, regional stability and global energy markets. The ASMLA has previously targeted energy infrastructure, and any future foreign investment in Khuzestan’s energy sector would likely represent a high-value target for Ahwazi militants. Meanwhile, Iran’s traditional rivals in the Middle East are also likely to continue to view the Ahwazi cause as a lever in which to check or otherwise threaten Iran, even as the shifting global diplomatic climate becomes more favorable to the Islamic Republic.

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## A Profile of Bangladesh’s Ansarullah Bangla Team

*Sudha Ramachandran*

On May 25, the Bangladesh government banned the Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT) organization under the country’s 2013 anti-terrorism laws. The ABT was behind the recent killing of three secular/atheist bloggers—Avijit Roy, Washiqur Rahman and Anant Bijoy Das—whose writings criticized organized religion and the intolerance of the country’s Islamist radicals. However, while the immediate trigger for the ban on the ABT was the killing of these three bloggers—their hacking to death evoked immense outrage in Bangladesh and abroad—the outfit had been on the radar of security agencies since at least 2013. Notably, in February of that year, ABT activists hacked to death Ahmed Rajib Haider, another secular blogger whose writings galvanized the so-called “Shahbag protests,” which were held against Islamist groups involved in the country’s 1971 war of independence.

In August 2013, the ABT’s leader, Mufti Jashimuddin Rahmani, was arrested along with 30 of his followers for making incendiary speeches in mosques and madrassas. Police later recovered from Rahmani a “hit list” that identified 12 secular liberals, including Haider, for elimination (Bdnews24.com, August 8, 2014). The ABT has potential links with al-Qaeda, and five ABT activists, who were arrested for Haider’s murder, were hailed as “Five Lions of the Ummah” on the al-Qaeda-affiliated Ansar al-Mujahideen website (*Daily Observer* [Dhaka], November 7, 2014).

### Waves of Religious Radicalism

The context behind the ABT’s rise is the decades-long clash between secular liberals and religious fundamentalists in Bangladesh. Although the 1971 Liberation War marked the triumph of linguistic nationalism in Bangladesh, the Islamists were not fully defeated. Within a few years, Jamaat-e-Islami (JI), the country’s leading Islamist group that was banned for its role in the 1971 war, was resurrected and has benefitted from patronage received from successive regimes, whether military or democratic. Its madrassas also provided young recruits for militant Islamist outfits that proliferated from the mid-1980s.

Bangladesh has witnessed two waves of religious radicalism in recent decades (RSIS, October 8, 2013). The first (1999-2005) was led by Bangladeshis who fought alongside the Afghan mujahideen in the 1980s and was dominated by groups like Harakat ul-Jihad al-Islami-Bangladesh (HUJI-B)

and Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB); this wave included hundreds of Bangladeshi youth waging jihad in countries like Afghanistan and Iraq. Upon returning home, they radicalized others and joined local extremist outfits. At the domestic level, a fundamentalist-friendly coalition led by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), which included the JI and the Islamic Oikya Jote came to power in 2001 (*Asia Times*, December 9, 2004). It was only in 2005 that the Bangladesh government, acting under international pressure, began banning various extremist and jihadist outfits. The crackdown caused a lull in extremist activity, although various banned outfits continued to function quietly under new names or front organizations.

A second wave in religious radicalism was sparked by the secular Awami League-led government's setting up of a domestic tribunal in 2010 to try JI leaders and other Islamists accused of war crimes during the 1971 war. Islamist mobilization gathered further momentum in early 2013 in response to the Shahbag protests when secular liberals took to the streets and cyberspace to demand the death penalty for war crimes convicts. In their blogs, these individuals were sharply critical of Islam and the intolerance of Islamists (Dikgaj.wordpress.com, February 16, 2013). Islamists in return denounced secular liberals as "apostates" and openly called for their elimination. For instance, the Chittagong-based Hefajat-e-Islam issued a 13-point demand for Shahbag protestors and "atheist[s]... bloggers and anti-Islamists" to be hanged to death (YouTube, April 6, 2013). Of the 84 "enemies of Islam" on its "hit list," nine people, including Roy, Rahman and Das have been killed so far, and several others have been attacked (Risingbd.com, March 30).

### Similar yet Different

Although terrorism and religious extremism were linked in both waves of radicalism in Bangladesh, there are significant differences between new radical outfits like ABT and the older ones. The goal of the major radical outfits of the 1999-2005 period was to impose a rigid, narrow interpretation of Islamic law on Bangladesh. They sought to achieve this through undermining the authority of the state by carrying out spectacular terrorist attacks that made the state appear weak and helpless. In 2005, for instance, the JMB carried out over 500 well-synchronized bomb attacks in over 300 locations across Bangladesh over a span of an hour. By contrast, the second wave appears to have less sweeping goals; at least for now, it seems aimed at silencing the articulation of secular and/or atheist views. Bomb attacks are rare, with outfits like the ABT preferring to eliminate specifically identified individuals by hacking them to death in crowded places. Machetes and meat cleavers have been the weapons

of choice. The simplicity of such attacks has made it difficult for Bangladesh's police to prevent them (Huffington Post, March 4).

Although their methods of killing opponents are rudimentary, the new outfits are technologically-savvy. They have a significant presence in cyberspace and counter criticism of secular-atheist writers on social media. They also use the internet not only to keep abreast with what their "enemies" are writing but also to identify their targets (*Dhaka Tribune*, November 3, 2014). These groups also use the internet for propaganda; the ABT is said to be translating al-Qaeda's online material into Bengali and disseminating it, thus acting as an important link between the global jihadist movement and the local population (RSIS, October 8, 2013). Despite this, many of the movement's foot soldiers are not familiar with the internet. For instance, Washiqur Rahman's two killers had neither read his blogs nor knew how to operate a Facebook account, while being nonetheless willing to kill him for his online writings (Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, May 21).

### Ban and Beyond

The ABT's immediate response to the ban has been defiance. Weeks after the ban was imposed, it issued death threats to ten people, including the junior minister for home affairs, Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal (Bdnews24.com, June 2). This bravado was probably aimed at boosting the morale of its rank and file. In the longer-term, the ban is likely to strengthen the hands of the law enforcement agencies to arrest activists. However, it is also likely to push the outfit deeper underground, which makes it harder for police to trace its leaders and their hideouts, and the ban is also likely to shift ABT's activities increasingly into cyberspace. Recruitment and fundraising will be affected adversely.

The ban, however, is not likely to mean the end of ABT. Banned outfits like HUJI-B are active ten years after they were outlawed. There is also the potential for ABT to shift from carrying out targeted knife attacks on individuals to using bomb attacks, as during the country's first wave of radicalism. Over the past year, police have found large amounts of weapons, explosives, detonators and bomb making manuals in the possession of arrested extremists. In addition, several banned outfits have come together on a common platform, the Bangladeshi Jihadi Group, which should provide a boost to their operations (*Daily Star* [Dhaka], October 26, 2014).

Adding to the complexity of the present wave of religious radicalism in Bangladesh is the growing influence of the Islamic State group on young Islamists (Terrorism Monitor,

February 6). Reports in the Bangladeshi media have notably drawn attention to the arrest of Bangladeshis recruiting locals on behalf of the Islamic State (*Dhaka Tribune*, September 30, 2014). If these are true, then Bangladesh's second wave of radicalism is likely to be not only prolonged but also, more intense and violent.

Much will, of course, depend on how scrupulous the Awami League government is in tackling religious extremism. Its performance on this score has been mixed so far. While it has confronted the Islamists head on, some of its steps may have provided a shot in the arm to radicals, allowing them to portray themselves as being unjustly persecuted; the ban on JI, for instance, has had this effect (*Bdnews24.com*, March 6, 2013). In addition, the government has also sometimes sought to appease the radicals, with some atheist bloggers being arrested for their writings (*Daily Star* [Dhaka], April 2, 2013). Meanwhile, the government has made little effort to foster a culture of tolerance, to reinvigorate democratic institutions or to restore public confidence in the judiciary, all of which will be needed to dissuade the country's youth from heeding the call of religious radicals.

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## Wilayat al-Yemen: The Islamic State's New Front

*Brian M. Perkins*

The protracted and ongoing civil conflict in Yemen has brought to the fore a range of regional threats, both old and new. Most prominently, Yemen's multisided battle space has already allowed al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and its locally branded affiliate Ansar al-Shari'a to regain ground across the country. However, in a less noticed development, militants aligned with the Iraq and Syria-based Islamic State group officially entered Yemen's crowded jihadi scene in November as Wilayat al-Yemen, or "Province of Yemen." The group's existence was made public on November 13, when the Islamic State's Syria-based leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announced via an audio message titled "Despite the Disbelievers' Hate" that he had accepted coordinated oaths of allegiance from fighters based in Yemen, as well as in Libya, Egypt and Saudi Arabia (*Al-Monitor*, November 14). Although much remains unclear about the Islamic State's nascent presence in Yemen, the group is clearly gaining strength there, increasing in size and audacity, and beginning to pose a significant threat to the country and even to other jihadist factions.

### The Islamic State's Expansion Into Yemen

Aside from statements of support from low- to mid-level AQAP members, the Islamic State had no significant operational footprint in Yemen until the Houthis, Zaydi Shi'a rebels from the country's north, began wresting control of the capital Sana'a from the government in late 2014. During this period, the Islamic State apparently made a calculated decision to move into Yemen to exploit the deepening security void and the favourable sectarian dynamics. Prior to the Houthi takeover of the capital, and subsequently much of the country, conflicts in Yemen, even areas with a long-standing AQAP presence, largely lacked the sectarian connotations the Islamic State typically requires to thrive. However, the fact that an Iranian-backed Shi'a minority group had seized control of a majority Sunni country has now allowed the Islamic State to frame the conflict as part of the broader Sunni-Shi'a conflict and to build its support base accordingly, as it has done successfully in Iraq and Syria.

In terms of the group's structure, al-Baghdadi often publicly appoints a *wali*, or governor, after accepting oaths of allegiance from pro-Islamic State groups (known as *wilayat-s* or "provinces") throughout the region. However, unusually, there has been no public appointment of an overall *wali*

for Wilayat al-Yemen. Well-informed commentators, most notably Yemen expert Gregory Johnsen, have identified the *wali* as Abu Bilal al-Harbi, a Saudi national reportedly known for being an adept recruiter and scholar of Islamic law (BuzzFeed, July 6). However, these claims could not be independently verified. One reason for the lack of a publicly-identified *wali* could be because the group's leader is non-Yemeni, for instance, a Saudi Arabian, or that he lacks the necessary military, tribal, personal or religious credentials.

Although the group's leadership is unclear, Wilayat al-Yemen's organizational structure is further divided into several other sub-*wilayat*-s. At least seven separate sub-*wilayat*-s, falling under Wilayat al-Yemen, have claimed responsibility for attacks in Yemen since the beginning of the year—Sana'a, Ibb and Taiz (the "Green Brigade"), Lahij, Aden, Shabwa, Hadramawt and al-Bayda. The internal structure of these sub-*wilayat*-s is unclear, but each presumably has their own leadership structure capable of operating autonomously, as is the case in Syria and Iraq. [1] If the group continues to expand its geographical footprint in Yemen, more *wilayat*-s (and sub-*wilayat*-s) may yet be announced.

The exact composition of the Islamic State's ranks in Yemen is also a grey area at this stage, but it likely consists of some of the same disaffected Yemeni AQAP members who had previously signaled their support to the organization when it was still known as the "Islamic State in Iraq and Syria" (*Yemen Times*, August 19). For instance, in a video titled "Messages from Lions of the Peninsula," which the Islamic State's Wilayat Shabwa sub-group distributed via Twitter on May 29, Saudi fighters from the group threatened to return to Saudi Arabia and conduct attacks against the state. [2] The video suggests that the Yemeni branch of the Islamic State also has several Saudis among its ranks or that members of the Wilayat Najd, named after a region in Saudi Arabia, are training together in Yemen. There is also evidence to suggest some level of coordination between the group and Islamic State branches both in Yemen and further afield. For instance, Wilayat al-Yemen released an audio message to al-Baghdadi and was accepted into the group's global ranks at the same time as the pledge of a Saudi branch, Wilayat Najd. This indicates some level of coordination, either between the core Islamic State and each group that pledged allegiance to it, or between the various groups that released the coordinated audio messages (even allowing for Najd and Yemen *wilayat*-s being co-located). Furthermore, on May 22, sub-group Wilayat Sana'a and Wilayat Najd conducted seemingly coordinated attacks at Shi'a mosques in Sana'a and Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province respectively (Middle East Eye, May 22). However, despite an outpouring of online and verbal support for the Wilayat al-Yemen branch from

global Islamic State affiliates such as those in Raqqa, Syria and Ninewah, Iraq; it is unlikely Wilayat al-Yemen has so far drawn a significant number of foreign fighters other than those from neighboring Saudi Arabia, although this could clearly change.

### Targets, Propaganda and Strategy

Although the extent to which the war in Yemen is driven by sectarian issues is contested, the Islamic State's Wilayat al-Yemen is clearly seeking to drive the conflict in that direction. The targets, tactics and propaganda of each Yemeni sub-*wilayat* reflect the Islamic State's global strategy and its overarching narrative of Sunni-Shi'a conflict. The Yemeni branch's propaganda has so far focused on recruiting followers in Yemen and abroad, on denouncing the Zaydi Houthis and on claiming to be the protector of the country's Sunnis.

Wilayat Sana'a claimed the first attacks by the Islamic State's Yemeni branch on March 20, after twin suicide bombings targeted pro-Houthi mosques in Sana'a (al-Bawaba, March 20). In south Sana'a, one suicide bomber detonated an explosive vest inside the Badr mosque and a second bomber detonated his device as worshippers fled towards the facility's main gate. Meanwhile, in the northern part of the city, two suicide bombers used the same tactics to target the al-Hashoosh mosque. The two attacks killed at least 137 people and wounded more than 300 others, making it the deadliest terrorist attack in Yemen's history. The overtly sectarian nature of the attacks shocked the nation and both the Houthis and former President Abdu Rabbu Mansur Hadi, whose forces are battling the Houthis, issued statements condemning the violence (*The Guardian*, March 21).

Just three days after the attack, Wilayat Sana'a published photos of the militants responsible for the bombings. All four militants were Yemeni, and at least three hailed from Ibb Governorate, suggesting coordination between Wilayat al-Yemen's sub-groups. The photo series and accompanying message was part one of a new series titled "Convoy of the Martyrs." [3] The attached message said that the operation was just the "tip of the iceberg," and the Islamic State would "cut off the arm of the Safavid [Iranian] project in Yemen."

Almost a month later, on April 23, Wilayat Sana'a released the first video produced by the Yemeni branch of the Islamic State (al-Arabiya, April 26). The video depicted more than a dozen fighters conducting training exercises in an unidentified desert setting while their apparent leader issued statements threatening further attacks against the "tyrannical Houthis." The nine-minute video, titled "Soldiers



of the Caliphate in the Land of Yemen,” depicted the group as a well-equipped and organized fighting force. The fighters were dressed in matching camouflage uniforms, firing brand new weapons with what appeared to be two recent model Toyota Hiluxes—a vehicle favored by Islamist militants across the world. The Islamic State’s *wilayat*-s in Yemen and elsewhere have since produced at least half a dozen more such videos with varied themes to promote the new Yemeni front. Although the messages vary, all of the videos share the stylish production quality that has become indicative of Islamic State propaganda.

As the above indicates, Wilayat Sana’a was the first announced Islamic State sub-group in Yemen and is by far the most potent and also seemingly most inclined to attack mosques associated with the Houthis. By contrast, the Green Brigade, which operates in Ibb and Taiz, has claimed several attacks on Houthi military positions, including a bombing in Yarim on April 23 that killed five Houthis traveling in a military vehicle. [4] Meanwhile, Wilayat Shabwa has claimed several more attacks, some of which have been deliberately gruesome, such as the beheading of 15 Yemeni soldiers in Azzan (a town with a long history of Islamist militancy) on April 14, which was depicted in a video later disseminated via Twitter (Ababil Net, May 1). While media attention has largely focused on Islamic State operations in Sana’a, each *wilayat* has carried out several successful attacks against targets ranging from Shi’a mosques and Houthi positions to pro-Hadi elements of the Yemeni military. The brutality of the attacks has varied by *wilayat*, but the overall narrative and their primary targeting of the Houthis has not.

### Competition With AQAP

Although AQAP undeniably remains Yemen’s largest and most potent Sunni Islamist militant group, the Islamic State’s *wilayat*-s in Yemen are beginning to pose a direct threat to AQAP’s predominance. For instance, AQAP and the Islamic State are both now vying for influence over anti-Houthi Sunni tribes and militias, in many of the same regions. There has yet to be any large-scale open conflicts between the two organizations, but as both expand their areas of influence, their operations will increasingly overlap. Competition for vital resources such as financing, weapons and recruits has already fueled conflict between al-Qaeda and Islamic State affiliates elsewhere in the world, most notably in Syria, and this pattern is liable to now recur in Yemen. If the Islamic State’s highly sectarian message begins to gain traction in Yemen, AQAP may also attempt to compete by framing their operations in a more sectarian light. In addition, AQAP could also become increasingly willing to attack religious targets and employ gruesome Islamic State-like tactics that

the group has previously denounced (even while carrying out its own attacks and killings of suspected spies, for instance, in al-Mukulla earlier this year).

### Outlook

As the war continues and the Houthis’ progressively more indiscriminate attacks affect more and more Sunni civilians, there is a risk that the Islamic State’s sectarian arguments will appear increasingly valid to local people, particularly in the absence of more legitimate protectors, such as the divided and effectively defunct Yemeni military and police force (El-Balad, July 2). The Islamic State’s Yemeni branch has yet to reach critical mass, although its operational tempo has increased significantly in the past several months, and its attacks and propaganda output are likely to continue to multiply. The organization’s rate of expansion is, however, largely contingent on its ability to play the sectarian card and on the group being left un-molested; for instance, the Saudis, despite expending a huge amount of resources and munitions against the Houthis, have not yet successfully targeted the Yemeni branch of the Islamic State. If such trends continue, the Islamic State’s front in Yemen could continue to expand exponentially until the group faces or provokes significant resistance, either from rival jihadist or Sunni groups, from local tribes, from the regional powers or the international community.

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### Notes

1. Based on a combination of press releases and claims made by pro-Islamic State Twitter accounts. For example, see <https://twitter.com/btaralhrme/media>.
2. The twitter account that first disseminated the video has since been suspended, as Twitter has purged some 20,000 pro-ISIS accounts this year. The video can be seen here: [https://archive.org/details/ansar004\\_yandex\\_1](https://archive.org/details/ansar004_yandex_1).
3. Original Twitter account @aljanoub\_95 has since been suspended. Photograph series can be found here: <http://yemennow.net/news537724.html>.
4. The Islamic State’s al-Bayan News Bulletin for April 23, 2015.