



# Terrorism Monitor

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**Anjem Choudary was recently arrested in the UK for his pro-Islamic State comments and history of militant Salafism.**

## LIBYA FACES DEEPENING CHAOS

*James Brandon*

Overshadowed by events in Syria, Yemen and elsewhere in the Middle East, Libya has slipped deeper into chaos in recent weeks. This trend was accentuated in mid-August when the Islamic State in Libya, a group that has pledged allegiance to the Syria and Iraq-based Islamic State organization, made fresh territorial gains in and around the central coastal city of Sirte, having previously taken control of much of the city in June. The fighting in Sirte reportedly began after the Islamic State branch assassinated a prominent imam, Khalid bin Rajab Ferjani, who was from the local al-Farjan tribe, a substantial force in many of Libya's central coastal cities. Although the al-Farjan tribe has traditionally been strongly represented in the region's Sufi orders, the assassination came after local Salafists and al-Farjan tribesmen had refused to pledge allegiance to the Islamic State (Libya Herald, August 16).

Significantly, one of the Islamic State foreign fighters killed in the fighting in Sirte is reported to have been Abdullah Abu Zaid Mohamed Hamza, whose father, Abu Zaid Mohamed Hamza, and other relatives, were prominent Sudanese militant Salafists (Libya Herald, August 17). Abdullah's involvement in the Sirte fighting shows both that Libya continues to attract foreign fighters, particularly from elsewhere in Africa, and that some fighters have decades-old family linkages to radicalism. Medical sources in the town were separately reported as saying that Islamic State fighters only allowed doctors to treat their own injured (ANSA, August 17). The bodies of 12 tribal fighters were later put on public display in the city by the group, which then prohibited their relatives from giving them Muslim burials, on the grounds that by resisting the Islamic State, they had become infidels (Libya Herald, August 16). The group was also reported to have executed a suspected "spy" in the eastern city of Derna (Libya Herald, August 17). Although the Islamic State in Libya may only be linked tenuously to the Iraq and Syria-based Islamic State group, its tactics—which include the targeting of rival and more moderate religious leaders, their treatment of their enemies as non-Muslims and their

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calculated use of atrocities to instill fear in their enemies—nonetheless indicate the close ideological links between the two organizations.

In response to the Islamic State in Libya's latest gains in Sirte, the country's internationally-recognized government, which is based in the eastern city of Tobruk, called for Arab countries to carry out airstrikes against the group, saying that it was itself "unable to ward off these terrorist groups because of the arms embargo" (France24, August 17). The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, the main pan-Islamic global body, however, merely issued a statement expressing "strong condemnation" of the Islamic State attacks, underlining that many Arab countries remain too overstretched by their own internal problems, or with other situations such as Syria, to offer much effective action on Libya (KUNA, August 17). Egypt, meanwhile, reported the disappearance of an unspecified number of Egyptian soldiers in the vicinity of the Libyan border, raising the possibility that extremists in Libya may be testing Egyptian defenses in the area, perhaps with a view to carrying out raids deeper into Egypt (*al-Ahram*, August 17).

Meanwhile, Libya's various governments—seemingly unaware that the country has collapsed around them—have continued to pump out bizarre and out-of-touch announcements. The Tripoli-based government, despite being desperately short of money, declared on August 16, that the city's destroyed airport would be rebuilt, a project which would cost many millions of dollars; just the previous week, the Tobruk-based government had unilaterally announced that the airport would be renamed after the country's former monarch, King Idris (Tripoli, August 16). The internationally-recognized government in Tobruk also announced the appointment of the head of the state oil firm, ignoring the fact that the oil ministry and associated bureaucracy remain based in Tripoli and firmly under the control of its rivals (Reuters, August 15). The continuing divisions between these governments are both a cause and a consequence of the rise of the Islamic State's local variant, reflecting that the Libya has effectively ceased to exist as a functional state and also underlining the difficulties involved in tackling extremist groups in the country.

## AUSTRALIAN ARRESTS UNDERLINE CONTINUING BATTLE AGAINST ISLAMIC STATE

*James Brandon*

Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott, on August 20, confirmed that seven suspected Australian would-be jihadists had been arrested earlier in the month at Sydney airport while trying to travel to the Middle East (*The Australian*, August 20). Abbott, not known for mincing his words on Islamist radical groups, said the arrests showed "the continuing allure of this death cult," a reference to the Iraq- and Syria-based Islamic State organization. While indeed underlining the continuing appeal of the organization to a minority of Australian Muslims, the arrests also underline that the Australian authorities appear highly vigilant to the threat posed by the Islamic State and are quick to take a range of actions, both conventional and unconventional, against suspected fighters or supporters of the group.

Particularly noteworthy are the Australian authorities' effort to encourage individuals known to have been involved with jihadist groups in Syria and Iraq to willingly return to Australia in order to face trial. For instance, in July, the Australian Federal Police negotiated the voluntary return of Adam Brookman, a 39-year-old nurse and convert to Islam from Melbourne, to Australia from Turkey (AAP, July 26). Brookman has claimed that he was forced to work as a nurse for the Islamic State in their capital Raqqa after initially entering Syria to perform humanitarian work. He was arrested upon his arrival in Australia and is currently awaiting trial. Another Australian convert, 18-year-old Oliver Bridgeman, is also reported to be trying to negotiate his return to Australia, having apparently joined Jabhat al-Nusra, al-Qaeda's official affiliate in Syria (*Courier Mail*, May 21; ABC, May 16). In response to Brookman's return, the Australian Federal Police's manager of counter-terrorism operations, Commander Peter Crozier, told the media that he was "hopeful" that other Australian jihadists would also return home, although he said that they would nonetheless face penalties: "If people think they are just going to walk through the front door and nothing is going to happen, then that is unfair and it is being naive" (*Courier Mail*, May 21). Australia's approach in this regard is almost unprecedented among Western countries and will be being watched closely by other governments, which are also struggling to find a way to balance the need to punish appropriately jihadists while also recognizing the need to help individuals seeking to exit jihadist groups, as they could pose a greater threat if they remain with these organizations.

At the same time, however, the Australian government is also pursuing a range of more conventional measures against known jihadist supporters. For instance, in August, the government imposed financial sanctions against Mostafa Farag (a.k.a. Abu Sulayman al-Muhajir), a former Sydney cleric who is one of the country's most prominent jihadists presently active in Syria (*The Australian*, August 20). Farag, who travelled to Syria in 2011 is now in the *shura* (leadership committee) of Jabhat al-Nusra. Focusing Australian governmental attention is the risk of returning radicals, or individuals inspired by the group, carrying out attacks domestically. Underlining this potential threat, a recent Islamic State "hit list" circulated online by a number of radicals, including prominent Australian Islamic State member Neil Prakash, formerly of Melbourne, that featured at least 11 Australians, including politicians and government employees (ABC, August 13; *Herald Sun*, August 13). Although this particular threat does not appear to be backed by any concrete plans to conduct attacks in Australia, Prakash is one of the Islamic State's most successful Australian online influencers, with a track record of attracting would-be recruits initially through public social media outlets and then radicalizing them further in private forums (*Herald Sun*, August 19). In December 2014, a lone Muslim radical, who was apparently partly-inspired by the Islamic State, took 18 hostages in a cafe in downtown Sydney; two of the hostages—and the perpetrator—were killed when police stormed the store, and the potential for such attacks clearly remains (*The Australian*, December 30, 2014).

## Jaysh al-Islam and the Battle for Damascus

Nicholas A. Heras

On August 16, a Syrian Air Force raid struck a crowded market place in the capital Damascus' northeastern suburbs of Douma and Harasta; these suburbs are located in the Ghouta region east of the city, a major center of armed opposition activity. The attack killed over 100 people and drew intense international condemnation (*al-Quds al-Arabi*, August 17; August 15; L'Orient Le Jour [Beirut], August 13). Also reportedly targeted in the attack was the Douma headquarters of the Damascus area's most powerful rebel organization, Jaysh al-Islam (JAI—Army of Islam), and its leader Shaykh Zahran Alloush (al-Ayam [Damascus], August 19; Sky News Arabia [Dubai], August 17; for more on Zahran Alloush and Jaysh al-Islam, see *Militant Leadership Monitor*, October 2013). The attack on JAI underlines that the government's ongoing confrontation with the group, one of Syria's most powerful rebel militias, and its allies in the Damascus area is critical for the future of the capital and of Syria itself.

JAI leader Zahran Alloush is one of the most important Syrian armed opposition commanders in the entire civil war, largely due to the size and cohesion of the organization and its strategic location close to the country's capital, which could have significant implications on the politics of a potential post-Assad Syria. Alloush is a long-time member of Islamist opposition movements in Syria and has expressed a desire to participate in the political order of a potential post-Assad Syria, although in recent public sermons, he has rejected democracy (YouTube, December 21, 2014; *Militant Leadership Monitor*, October 2013). Alloush has also aired contradictory views on the role of Shari'a in a potential post-Assad state. Additionally, he has made inflammatory comments against Shi'a Muslims, although he has also said that he supports the protection of sectarian minorities, within the context of Shari'a (YouTube, May 23; YouTube, May 21; YouTube, January 6, 2014; YouTube, June 19, 2013).

JAI should be generally regarded as a militant Islamist organization. It and its local allies are believed to have the ability to mobilize 30,000-50,000 fighters and have seized significant numbers of military vehicles, including tanks, from the government's security forces (*al-Jazeera*, August 15; *Al-Monitor*, May 28; YouTube, April 30). [1] JAI and its allies have also demonstrated the continued capability to resist repeated attempts by the security forces, including the elite Republican Guard, to seize opposition-controlled areas

in eastern Ghouta (al-Arabi al-Jadeed, May 5; Orient News [Dubai], February 16). [2] JAI has also a significant stockpile of rockets and artillery that it has deployed, and threatens to continue deploying, against loyalist areas in Damascus, Lattakia and Aleppo Governorates (*al-Safir* [Beirut], August 17; YouTube, August 9; YouTube, July 13; al-Souria [Damascus], January 24).

Alloush is also the commanding officer of the Ghouta Unified Military Command, a coalition of important eastern Ghouta armed opposition groups in which JAI is the most prominent faction; it also includes the groups al-Itihad al-Islami al-Ajnad al-Sham (Islamic Union of the Soldiers of the Levant), Faylaq al-Rahman (Legion of the Most Merciful One), Alwiya al-Habib al-Mustafa (Brigades of the Chosen One) and Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiya (YouTube, August 29, 2014; YouTube, August 27, 2014; al-Arabi al-Jadeed, August 23, 2014; Militant Leadership Monitor, June 2015). The Ghouta Unified Military Command, and Jaysh al-Islam in particular, are arguably the most important factor restricting the growth of the Islamic State and al-Qaeda's Syria front, Jabhat al-Nusra (JAN) within the Damascus area. [3] Under Alloush's command, JAI has been a particularly implacable opponent of the Islamic State, and it generally directs the Ghouta area's armed opposition groups to block the Islamic State's expansion (Arabi 21 [Damascus], July 9; al-Arabiya, July 1; El-Dorar al-Shamiya [Beirut], July 1; YouTube, July 3, 2014; Militant Leadership Monitor, July 2014). Alloush's role as the Damascus area's most powerful rebel commander and an opponent of the Islamic State and JAN is believed to have helped attract the attention and diplomatic outreach to him by powerful regional anti-Assad states, including Saudi Arabia and Turkey, and other actors such as Jordan (El-Dorar al-Shamiya [Beirut], July 20; al-Arabi al-Jadeed, April 21; *al-Safir* [Beirut], April 20; Rai al-Youm [Amman], December 10, 2014).

However, in spite of the challenge to the Syrian government presented by the Ghouta Unified Military Command under Alloush's leadership, the Syrian Army is nonetheless conducting a slow, but increasingly successful, war of siege and attrition against JAI and other armed groups in the Damascus area; the same thing is happening in the city of Zabadani, located 50 kilometers northwest of the capital on the strategic Damascus-Beirut highway (*al-Safir* [Beirut], August 18; al-Arabiya, August 18; *al-Nahar* [Beirut], August 18; al-Arabi al-Jadeed, August 18; al-Jazeera, August 16). In addition, the supply lines of JAI and its allies, which run from Ghouta north to Turkey and west to Lebanon, are severely strained by Islamic State operations in the eastern Qalamoun region northeast of Damascus, particularly in the town of al-Qaryatayn. [4] In response, JAI is attacking the Islamic State

in the eastern Qalamoun, with the assistance of a coalition of local rebel factions that it is coordinating (Arabi 21, August 12; al-Arabi al-Jadeed, July 2). [5]

The Assad government's strategy in Damascus is to create incredible pressure on rebel areas through siege warfare, including highly destructive artillery bombardments and air raids, followed by the offer of release from suffering through the cessation of hostilities and the potential incorporation of surrendering rebel fighters into loyalist security forces and militias. [6] An example of this type of rebel-turned-loyalist militia is Jaysh al-Wafa (Loyalist Army), created via the government's "Reconciliation Committees" (al-Masdar [Damascus], March 13; *al-Akhbar* [Beirut], February 9; *al-Safir* [Beirut], January 29; *al-Safir* [Beirut], May 15, 2014; *al-Akhbar* [Beirut], February 21, 2014). [6] Jaysh al-Wafa, in particular, poses a significant challenge to JAI and its allies, due to its direct attacks against them and the potential model it could present for the suffering population of the eastern Ghouta, prompting JAI to recently capture and later execute the leader of Jaysh al-Wafa (al-Masdar [Damascus], June 16; al-Jazeera, May 25; *al-Akhbar* [Beirut], February 9). [8]

An additional challenge for JAI and its allies is that government forces are present in great numbers in Damascus, enjoy heavier weaponry, including an air force, and have thus far had more secure lines of supply and reinforcement. These government forces include regular and elite Syrian Army units, neighborhood-level paramilitary militias under the Quwat al-Difa al-Watani (National Defense Force—NDF), Hezbollah and predominately Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)-mobilized Shi'a groups (AFP, July 25; al-Souria Net [Damascus], July 12; al-Arabiya, March 31; al-Jazeera, January 14; *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, April 8, 2014; Reuters, February 21, 2014; Militant Leadership Monitor, June 2013; Terrorism Monitor, May 2, 2013). The government's advantage in being able to put heavy pressure on the armed opposition in this manner has direct impact on the state of civil society and internal security in opposition-controlled areas around Damascus, which threatens the position of JAI and its allies as the leading civil-military force in the area. Protests against Alloush and other rebel groups are frequent in eastern Ghouta, mainly focusing on alleged corruption, mismanagement or hoarding of essential goods intended for the area's civilians, a repressive rebel security apparatus that includes imprisonment without charges, sporadic factional rebel infighting and the inability of the Ghouta Unified Military Command to break al-Assad military sieges (All4Syria [Damascus], August 16; Arabi 21, August 10; All4Syria [Damascus], August 8; YouTube, July 27; *al-Quds al-Arabi*, July 1; YouTube, June 19; Arabi 21, May 30; Orient News [Dubai], May 30; YouTube, January 25; YouTube,

November 17, 2014).

Thus, JAI faces an ongoing threat to its position as the leading civil-military force in the largest Damascene rebel-controlled area, due to the government's siege warfare strategy and growing discontent of the population that JAI and its allies claim authority over. The Islamic State is a looming threat, actively challenging JAI and its allies' supply lines and presenting a potentially appealing ideological alternative as civilian discontent over JAI and its allies' rule grows. Managing these challenges will continue to test the leadership abilities of Alloush, who is already operating under considerable pressure.

The struggle for the Damascus region between the government and opposition forces, such as JAI, is important as its outcome will help establish the parameters of any potential future negotiation for a post-conflict Syria. Accordingly, the Syrian government is focusing heavily on attacking rebel forces in the region as well as undertaking other measures, such as population transfers, as recently demonstrated by reported Zabadani, Fuaa and al-Kefraya population exchanges, which are apparently aimed at securing the demographic future of an Assad-led statelet in western Syria; such a statelet would continue to function as a strategic ally of the IRGC. The Assad government and its allies currently remain sufficiently well entrenched in the capital and its environs to set the terms of any future negotiations over the region. However, Zahran Alloush, assuming he survives and that JAI and its allies can maintain their territories in the eastern Ghouta, is also well positioned to be the most significant rebel leader in any such negotiations or a post-war scenario.

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#### Notes

1. Author's personal interviews with Syrian activists from the Damascus area in Washington, DC, on December 9, 2014, June 8, 2015, August 11, and August 18, 2015.
2. Many of these are documented on the group's Twitter account <https://twitter.com/islamarmy01>.
3. *Op cit.*, personal interviews.
4. *Ibid*; author's Skype conversation with a leader in Jaysh Asuud al-Sharqiya, who is based in Gaziantep, Turkey, August 11, 2015.
5. Among the rebel groups that are participating in the coalition coordinated by JAI in the eastern Qalamoun area is Jaysh Asuud al-Sharqiya (Army of the Lions of the East). Jaysh Asuud al-Sharqiya is a constituent faction within

the Syrian Islamist national umbrella organization Jabhat Asala wal-Tanmiya (Authenticity and Development Front), which was originally mobilized in Deir al-Zor Governorate in eastern Syria near the Syrian-Iraqi border. The majority of its fighters were displaced from Deir al-Zor over the last year as the Islamic State consolidated its rule over that governorate. Jaysh Asuud al-Sharqiya has reportedly begun to receive some military support, weapons and ammunition from JAI, although it seeks to remain distinct from Alloush's organization. This assistance, although limited, is reportedly being provided in order to provide a line of supply from the eastern Qalamoun into Deir al-Zor Governorate, where approximately 1,000 fighters from different militias affiliated with Jabhat Asala wal-Tanmiya continue to provide resistance against the Islamic State. However, Jaysh Asuud al-Sharqiya is not a significant rebel actor in the battle for control over the Damascus area; Author's Skype conversation with a leader in Jaysh Asuud al-Sharqiya who is based in Gaziantep, Turkey, August 11, 2015.

6. Amnesty International accuses armed opposition groups, especially JAI, as well as the government, of committing war crimes against the civilian population, estimated to be more than 163,000 people, of the eastern Ghouta. JAI and its allies in the Ghouta Unified Military Command are particularly accused of manipulating the price of necessary existential goods, hoarding these goods, running a repressive security and detention system and directly targeting civilian, loyalist communities with artillery and rocket barrages. See: Amnesty International, "Left to Die Under Siege": War Crimes and Human Rights Abuses in Eastern Ghouta, Syria," August 2015, <http://www.amnestyusa.org/sites/default/files/mde2420792015english.pdf>.

7. Author's interviews with Syrian activists from Damascus area in Washington, DC, on December 9, 2014, June 8, 2015, August 11, and August 18, 2015.

8. *Ibid*.

## India Faces Up to Growing Islamic State Threat

Animesh Roul

One of the first indications of the Islamic State's potential appeal in India occurred in late 2014, when Aarif Majeed, a youth from the state of Maharashtra, returned to the country from Iraq, where he had reportedly received training from the Islamic State (*Times of India*, November 28, 2014). He and three other youths from the State had reportedly travelled to Iraq and Syria in May last year specifically to the join the organization. Following this incident, in December 2014, a Bengaluru-based engineer, Mehdi Masroor Biswas, was arrested for allegedly managing and running the influential pro-Islamic State Twitter account "ShamiWitness," an event which seems to have served as a wake-up call for the Indian security establishment (*Indian Express*, December 14, 2014).

Since then, authorities have said that it estimated that a total of 13 Indian nationals have joined the Islamic State so far, of whom six have already died during the fighting in Iraq and Syria (*Indian Express*, August 4). Another 17 men have been arrested or detained while attempting to leave India to join the organization. These youths are from several different states, but most are from Telangana, Maharashtra and Karnataka.

Further evidence of Indian nationals in the Islamic State has come through social media outlets like Twitter and Facebook, either run by jihadist sympathizers or the group's own media units. For instance, on July 21, images of a boatful of purported Indians were released by al-Hayat Media, the Islamic State's media wing. Jihadist pseudonyms of alleged Indian fighters were also released. These include the slain "Abu Turab al-Hindi," who was in fact Muhammad Sajid, a prominent member of the Indian Mujahideen militant group accused of involvement in several bombings in India in 2008, and "Abu Qaqa al-Hindi," another Indian Mujahideen fugitive who is presently with the Islamic State (*Indian Express*, July 21). Another Indian Mujahideen fugitive, Abdul Khadir Sultan Armar, was killed in March 2014, in heavy fighting in the Kurdish town of Kobane in Syria (*One India*, December 8, 2014). Sultan Armar is believed by the Indian authorities to have previously been involved in recruiting for the Islamic State, mostly from Madhya Pradesh and Karnataka. Following his death, the Islamic State has reportedly installed his brother and fellow jihadist, Shafi Armar (a.k.a. Yusuf al-Hindi) at the leadership position of Ansar-ut Tawhid (AuT), an India-centric militant

splinter group, and as head of its recruitment in India. Both Armar brothers were reported to have previously undergone militant training in North Waziristan, Pakistan (*One India*, May 6).

Evidence is also growing that AuT has turning itself into a full-fledged Islamic State unit, and that it has been active in the Pakistan-Afghanistan border areas. This process was illustrated when one of its members, "Abu Abdullah al-Hindi," in November 2014, released an English-language audio recording of him making an oath of allegiance to the Islamic State and urging Indian Muslims to join and support the group (YouTube, November 14, 2014). The evolution of the Islamic State/AuT's military units meanwhile came to light in April 2015, when Muhammad Sharif and five other youths affiliated with AuT were arrested in Madhya Pradesh for conspiring to carry out attacks inside India. Shafi Armar was reportedly instrumental in talent-spotting of all these men for the Islamic State, and the Indian intelligence agencies reportedly believe that such recruitment and radicalization efforts are further underway in India (*New India Express*, May 8; *Indian Express*, May 6).

In addition, there is evidence of broader Islamic State influence among some Indian Muslims, as evidenced by the waving of Islamic State flags, the display of the group's banner or pictures of youths wearing fatigues with the Islamic State logo or insignia, as well as instances of pro-Islamic State graffiti on walls, for example, in Jammu and Kashmir, Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra. One of the most recent such instances of Islamic State flag-waving occurred in June in Srinagar, the summer capital of Jammu and Kashmir (*Times of India*, June 19). Similar flag waving took place in the state in July and October last year, prompting the security agencies to investigate the possible Islamic State influence in Kashmir and beyond. These events indicate the potency of the Islamic State brand on at least some of the country's more impressionable Muslim youths, even if this trend is not widespread.

Not long ago, in December 2014, India's Minister of Home Affairs dismissed the potential Islamic State threat to India as "negligible" and showered credit on the country's Muslim community for discouraging their children from being influenced by the organization (*The Hindu*, December 16, 2014). Since then, the government has taken some major steps, notably imposing proscriptions on the Islamic State terror group, all its manifestations and affiliate organizations under Section 35 Of Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967 in late February this year (*The Hindu*, February 26). The increasing evidence of recruitment and much talked about threat from "returnees" from the fighting in Iraq and Syria

clearly prompted the government to take this strong measure. In addition, in June 2015, India banned all trade with the Islamic State and related terrorist organizations active in Middle East, specifically in oil, oil products and items of cultural, scientific and religious importance (Reuters, June 30). The Indian government has also sought to intercept young men suspected of leaving the country to join the Islamic State and to conduct follow-up counsel with them on the values of Islam and other religions. For instance, one such group consisting of at least 14 individuals from Andhra Pradesh, who were suspected of seeking to travel to Syria and Iraq, were detained on May 6 at Hyderabad Airport and subsequently counselled by authorities before their release (Daily News and Analysis, May 6). Such attempts, while common in some Muslim-majority countries, are novel in India, which has traditionally used more hard-edged methods to control radicalization and militancy.

Despite the Islamic State's sporadic successes in recruiting some Indian Muslims, much remains unclear about the group's activities in the country, particularly in comparison to other neighboring countries like Pakistan, the Maldives or even Bangladesh. However, India is very much within the operational ambition of the Islamic State for at least three reasons: the relative proximity of the Islamic State's most active South Asia branch (Wilayat Khurasan), which is centered around Afghanistan and Pakistan and gaining strength day by day; its links with home-grown/indigenous Indian Mujahideen members; and, last but not least, the Islamic State's powerful social media channels that proved to be the most enticing medium for aspiring jihadi volunteers. Irrespective of the government's recent endeavors, including its novel effort to build a counter-narrative against the jihadist ideologies, and, most importantly, in contrast to the popular belief about India's composite culture and liberal minority Muslim populations, India clearly remains vulnerable towards the Islamic State brand of transnational jihadism.

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## Rise of Islamic State Reignites British Radicalization Threat

*James Brandon*

During much of the 1990s and 2000s, the United Kingdom was the undisputed hub of much of the jihadist radicalization and activism in Western Europe. This was caused by a confluence of factors, including active and entrenched Islamist and Salafist networks that provided a seedbed for the spread of jihadist ideology, the government's tolerance of various ostensibly foreign-focused jihadists and the strong familial links between many British Muslim communities and Pakistan, a primary center of jihadist activity during this period. The net result was that British Muslims became involved in a wide range of attacks, including hostage-taking and suicide-bomb attacks in locations as diverse as Pakistan, Iraq, Yemen, Sweden and the UK itself. Today, up to a thousand British Muslims are believed to have joined jihadist groups fighting in Syria (BBC, May 14). Although much has changed since earlier waves of radicalization in the 1990s and 2000s, the latest wave nevertheless points to important continuing trends.

### Islamic State Impact

Although the Arab Spring uprisings initially had a limited impact on the UK's Islamist radicals, the subsequent rise of jihadist groups in Syria has massively galvanized domestic extremists, with the UK police estimating in May that over 700 British Muslims had travelled to Syria to join jihadist groups there (BBC, May 14). Such recruits are highly diverse, including unattached young men, university-educated women and converts. Among them are a family of 12, including three children and a 75-year-old man, who relocated together to the Islamic State in June from the town of Luton, a hub of both Islamist and far-right radicalization north of London (BBC, July 4). During the early stages of the Syrian civil war, British recruits joined various groups, including al-Qaeda's official Syrian affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra, in order to fight the Shi'a-led regime of President Bashar al-Assad. However, since the rise to prominence of the Islamic State organization from mid-2014, most British would-be jihadists have gravitated toward that group. Since then, British Muslims have been prominently involved in many of the group's most high profile atrocities. For example, Mohammed Emwazi, a former University of Westminster student of Kuwaiti origin, played a starring role in the filmed beheading in 2014 and early 2015 of various western hostages, including U.S. journalists James Foley and Steven Sotloff (BBC, February 26). Meanwhile, various British Muslim

women, including Aqsa Mahmood, a 20-year-old student from Glasgow, reportedly joined the al-Khanssa Brigade, an Islamic State unit involved in slavery, rape and other war crimes (al-Arabiya, September 12, 2014). Another British woman, “Mujahidah Bint Usama,” apparently a doctor with the Islamic State, has meanwhile posted pictures online of herself posing with severed heads, with the message: “Dream job, a terrorist doc” (*Daily Mail*, September 14, 2014). British volunteers’ deliberate publicization of such atrocities, and the continuing flow of recruits from the UK to the Islamic State even *after* its violent modus operandi became clear, strongly suggest that for many recruits, the Islamic State’s brutality is an important motivation for the joining the group.

### Al-Muhajiroun Links

As in the 1990s and 2000s, many British jihadists in Syria have previous involvement with al-Muhajiroun (later known as Islam4UK), a pro-jihadist organization established under the Lebanese-Syrian immigrant Omar Bakri in the 1990s and then led by British-born Anjem Choudary following Bakri’s return to Lebanon in 2005. Since its inception, the group has advocated the need for Muslims to strive to apply Shari’a law, including *hudud* (punishments), such as stoning, within an Islamic state, with Choudary repeatedly urging Muslims to reject the West and its “oppressive man-made law” (Twitter, May 5). Not surprisingly, this ideology, which previously helped inspire attacks within the UK, now leads its followers to travel to Syria and Iraq to fight to create and defend the self-declared Islamic State there. For instance, in mid-2014 Abu Rahin Aziz (a.k.a. Abu Abdullah al-Britani, a former member of al-Muhajiroun front-group ‘Muslims Against Crusades’) from Luton travelled to Syria to join the Islamic State (BBC, June 18, 2014). Once in Syria, he regularly taunted the British government on Twitter, including saying that the British home secretary should be “should be hunted down and run over with a car” (*Luton on Sunday*, March 24). In July, he was reportedly killed in the vicinity of Raqqa by a U.S. drone strike (*Luton Today*, July 16). Another al-Muhajiroun veteran, Abdul Waheed Majid, a 41-year-old of Pakistan origin from south London, who was active with the group in south London in the late 1990s and early 2000s, carried out a suicide bombing on behalf of Jabhat al-Nusra against Aleppo prison in February 2014 (*Guardian*, July 26, 2014). In addition, al-Muhajiroun’s European offshoots, most notably via its Sharia4Belgium group, have had a significant role in radicalizing future Islamic State members in these countries, too (See *Terrorism Monitor*, May 29).

### Travel Plans

Once British radicals have decided to join jihadist groups in the battlefields of Syria and Iraq, many travel to the region in small groups, typically through Turkey, or else one individual often leads the way and is then followed by various acquaintances, although many such journeys have depended heavily on chance. A good example of this is the so-called “Portsmouth Cluster” of five young men of British-Bangladeshi origin who travelled to Syria in October 2013. The first to leave was Ifthekar Jaman, who had been privately educated and had a job in customer service. Travelling to Turkey without contacts, he fortuitously met a Syrian Arab on a bus, who then helped him across the border to Aleppo, where he took Jaman to Jabhat al-Nusra’s offices (*New Statesman*, November 6, 2014). As Jaman had arrived without being vouched for, the group rejected him; however, another chance encounter with an Algerian jihadist then led to him joining the Islamic State. Jaman subsequently became active on social media, inspiring four friends from Portsmouth to join him. The oldest, Mashudur Choudhury, returned swiftly to the UK and was convicted of seeking to join the Islamic State in May 2014 (BBC, May 20, 2014). However, the remainder, calling themselves the “Britani Brigade Bangladeshi Bad Boys,” subsequently fought in various locations, including in Kobane in late 2014 against pro-Kurdish British volunteers, while sharing their activities widely on Facebook, Instagram, twitter and other social media platforms. Jaman was killed in December 2013, and three others in subsequent months (BBC, December 17, 2013). The last of the group, Assad Uzzaman, was killed in July (*Guardian*, July 26).

### Mobilizing Ideology

While there is no clear profile, in terms of age, socio-economic status or ethnicity, for British jihadists, volunteers are nonetheless united by their ideological adherence to the tenets of Salafist-jihadist ideology, principally the idea of creating an Islamic State, living under Sharia law, and fighting the “*kuffar*” (nonbeliever, whether Shi’a Muslims, rival jihadist groups, the Syrian Army or local religious minorities) in order to expand their territory. Statements by recruits underscore their belief that the Islamic State represents the true form of Islam, and that its self-appointed caliph, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, is the true leader of the world’s Muslims. For instance, the Mannan family of Luton, on their arrival in Islamic State territory, issued a statement that they were “willingly leaving the so called freedom and democracy” in order to “make *hijrah* [to migrate] to the state of Islam” and to “a land that has established the [Shari’a]” (*Daily Mail*, July 4). Such statements, which are made

frequently by British jihadists, underline that prominent British non-jihadist Islamist groups, such Hizb ut-Tahrir and various Muslim Brotherhood and Jamaat-e-Islami derived groups, have successfully convinced many British Muslims that, for a true Muslim, religious, personal and political fulfilment can only come through living in an “Islamic state,” where one particular interpretation of Islam is imposed on society under the guise of this being normative “Shari’a law.” Although some of these group have rejected the Islamic State on the grounds that, in the words of Hizb ut-Tahrir, it does not follow “the methodology of the Messenger of Allah” (i.e. the specific methodology approved by Hizb ut-Tahrir), the ideology popularized by these groups has nonetheless created an ideational conveyor belt that leads some British Muslims to see the Islamic State as the earthly incarnation of God’s designs for mankind (Hizb ut-Tahrir, July 1, 2014).

### Domestic Threat

The Islamic State has so far helped to inspire attacks in France, Belgium and the United States. However, the extent of the current domestic threat in the UK is difficult to assess. A large proportion of British fighters are either still in Iraq and Syria, dead or in prison. Moreover, jihadist groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State are currently more focused on fighting their “near enemy” (i.e. the Shi’a-dominated governments of Iraq and Syria, secular Kurds and local religious minorities) than the “far enemy” in the West. That said, there is clear potential for radical groups in Syria to inspire domestic attackers, and British Islamic State members have made various sporadic efforts to encourage such attacks. For example, in one recent online conversation on the Ask.fm chat website, Ismail Jabbar, a 22-year-old West Londoner who is in Syria with the Islamic State, urged readers in the UK to “go stab a soldier [it is] so much easy to kill an enemy of Allah there than here coz they fore [fought] back” (Daily Mail, May 31, 2014). Such messages, however, do not necessarily amount to a sustained or systematic campaign by the Islamic State to organize or inspire attack abroad.

In addition, however, there is the risk that frustrated jihadists unable to reach Syria will chose to fight unbelievers at home instead. This threat is not purely theoretically. In August 2014, Brusthom Ziamani, a 19-year-old recent convert to Islam, was arrested in the street in East London while armed with a knife en route to a nearby army barracks, where he allegedly intended to kill a soldier. He had previously written that “Because I have no means [of getting] there I will wage war against the British government on this soil” (BBC, March 20).

However, while the present threat remains ill-defined, the challenge posed by returnees is likely to grow over time, as fighters return to the UK, whether freely or via prison. In some instances, fighters themselves have remarked on their potential to carry out attacks once back in the UK. For instance, one of the now-deceased Portsmouth jihadists bragged on Twitter: “Yeah mate, go back to Britain. You got to be joking. I’ll probably end up going on a killing spree with all the *kuffar* around me” (Portsmouth City Council, June 17). Such casual references to killing underline that any efforts to rehabilitate former fighters are not only legal or ideological; they are also psychological. In addition, there is the danger that returning jihadists will radicalize others, whether in wider society or in prison. Arguably the primary impact in the UK of previous waves of jihadists returning, notably from Afghanistan and Bosnia in the 1990s, was not that they themselves carried out attacks themselves, but that their rose-tinted and seemingly glamorous tales of fighting “enemies of Islam” inspired others to carry out attacks domestically, at least partly in lieu for being able to partake in conflicts abroad. Moreover, the mass incarceration of returning fighters also threatens to increase the risks of radicalization in British prisons; according to official 2014 estimates, 14 percent of British prisoners are Muslim, a ripe audience for imprisoned ex-jihadists seeking fresh recruits (BBC, March 11).

### Government Response

Since the election of a Conservative Party government in May, British counter-terrorism policy has significantly tightened, with a fresh emphasis on combating extremist ideology. On July 20, Prime Minister David Cameron, in a keynote speech on the subject, said that “the root cause of the threat we face is the extremist ideology itself,” and described the need to “take its component parts to pieces—the cultish worldview, the conspiracy theories and yes, the so-called glamorous parts of it as well” (Prime Minister’s Office, July 20). Related initiatives include plans to introduce an “Extremism Bill” to tackle non-jihadist Islamism and to improve the UK’s troubled “Prevent” counter-radicalization strategy. Such talk has been backed by the hefty prison sentences for returning fighters. For instance, in February, Imran Khawaja, a 27-year-old from West London who had posed for photos with severed heads in Syria, was sentenced to 12 years in prison for joining Rayat al-Tawheed, an Islamic State subgroup, and for taking part in films encouraging others to join the group (BBC, February 6). Others, such as Mohammed Saboor of High Wycombe, a notable center of radical recruitment, have been convicted for seeking to purchase items, such as ballistic goggles, intended for jihadists already in Syria (Bucks Free Press, May 21). In May, the UK police said that

during the previous financial year they had arrested 157 people on terrorism charges relating to Syria, and that 114 people were awaiting trial for terrorism offences (Met Police, May 14). Such figures suggest the security services and police have a strong understanding of those fighting abroad, as well as an understanding of their UK-based support network.

One of the most significant government blows against extremist networks, however, occurred on August 5, when the Crown Prosecution Service charged Anjem Choudary, the leader of al-Muhajiroun/Islam4UK with “inviting support for ISIL [the Islamic State], a proscribed terrorist organisation,” specifically, “in individual lectures which were subsequently published online” (CPS, August 5). Given MI5 and the police’s long-standing policy of meeting with and talking to radicals, previously including Abu Hamza and Abu Qatada, it is plausible that Choudary’s arrest results from a breakdown in the security services’ relationship with him (BBC, May 10, 2014; BBC, June 26, 2014). An alternative interpretation relates to the idea, put forward by various leading British analysts of the Islamic State, such as the former Hizb ut-Tahrir member and leading British Islamic State analyst Shiraz Maher, that the security services may have until recently deliberately allowed Choudary and others to operate in the belief that their activities will act as “honeypots,” attracting other radicals whom the security service can then identify and monitor (*The Spectator*, May 30, 2013). If this second theory is correct, Choudary’s arrest may reflect that the security services now assess that the damage Choudary was doing by radicalizing large numbers of British Muslims had started to outweigh the benefits of them being able to identify and monitor the people he was radicalizing.

## Conclusion

It is presently too early to tell what long-term impact the conflict in Syria and the rise of the Islamic State will have on UK security and on British Muslim communities. Many British fighters with the Islamic State are still in Syria and Iraq, where they are likely far more concerned with fighting their various enemies, avoiding airstrikes, navigating intra-jihadist plots and in a strikingly modern touch—nurturing their social media profiles—than planning attacks on a country whose citizenship they have often openly renounced. Moreover, many of those who have returned are in prison, awaiting trial or keeping an understandably low profile.

In addition, much will depend on how the conflict in Syria and Iraq evolves; for instance, the rejection and expulsion of the Islamic State from the region by local Muslims would be a grave setback to jihadist ideology and credibility. However,

conversely, if the Islamic State is able to entrench itself in the region and to bring a modicum of order to areas under its control, this would potentially permit jihadists to claim that Shari’a-based despotism is a viable form of government for Sunni Muslims. Such a state would also doubtless serve as a magnet and radicalizing force for aspiring jihadists and as a platform for spreading hardline Islamist ideology further afield. This ideological threat would become a more acute security challenge if the Islamic State decided to actively encourage or organize attacks against the West. Regardless of how events in the Middle East play out, however, precedents from Bosnia and Kashmir in the 1990s and from other conflicts strongly suggest at least some of those British Muslims now involved with the Islamic State will either seek to carry out attacks in the UK, or will inspire others to do so in the future.

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