



# Terrorism Monitor

In-Depth Analysis of the War on Terror

VOLUME XIII, ISSUE 20 ♦ OCTOBER 2, 2015

IN THIS ISSUE:

BRIEFS ..... 1

TEHRIK-E-TALIBAN PAKISTAN EVOLVES UNDER PRESSURE  
By Farhan Zahid ..... 3

THE ISLAMIC STATE’S BALKAN ‘STRONGHOLDS’  
By Ebi Spahiu ..... 5

SAUDI ARABIA’S YEMEN INTERVENTION: A HIGH RISK GAMBLE?  
By James Brandon and Nicholas A. Heras ..... 8



**A Bosnian house flying the flag of the Islamic State. The jihadist group has focused significantly on the Balkans recently.**

## BERLIN KNIFE ATTACK, WAVE OF ARRESTS UNDERLINES GERMAN RADICALIZATION THREAT

*James Brandon*

A known radical Islamist stabbed and wounded a policewoman in Berlin on September 17, and was subsequently shot dead (DW, September 17). The attacker, a 41-year-old ethnic Kurdish Iraqi man called Rafik Mohamad Yousef, had previously been convicted by a German court in 2008 of being a member of Ansar al-Islam, a jihadist group comprised mainly of Iraqi Kurds, and for plotting to kill the Iraqi prime minister on a visit to Berlin; he was released in 2011 (*Berlin Morgenpost*, September 17; Rudaw, September 18). The precise motives for the attack, and Yousef’s most recent affiliations, are not yet known.

A few days after the stabbing attack, on September 22, police carried out eight counter-terrorism raids, focusing mainly on suspects in the Berlin area (DW, September 22). Among those arrested was a 51-year-old Moroccan man suspected of inciting others to join the Islamic State. Although the police said that the raids were not related to the earlier knife attack, the developments indicate the increasing threat to Germany from jihadists and the authorities’ increasing efforts to monitor radical Islamist circles and to disrupt groups actively involved in supporting jihadist groups abroad or plotting attacks at home.

Underlining this trend, also on September 22, the Office for the Protection of the Constitution (Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz—BfV), Germany’s internal security organization, said that the number of radical Salafists had increased to 7,900, up from an estimated 7,500 in June. In addition, BfV President Hans-Georg Maassen stated:

We are very concerned that Islamists in Germany are trying, under the cover of humanitarian assistance, to exploit the situation of the refugees for their own ends

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and to proselytize and recruit among asylum-seekers (The Local, September 22).

In addition, Maassen provided updated figures on the number of German foreign fighters abroad, saying that an estimated 740 people had left Germany to join jihadists in Syria and Iraq; around one-third of these individuals have returned to Germany, and about 120 have been killed. The government has also begun prosecuting those who have returned from Syria, particularly those involved with the Islamic State. For instance, also in September, the authorities charged a 25-year-old German individual, known legally as “Nils D,” for traveling to Syria to join the Islamic State in October 2013, and subsequently receiving firearms and explosives training (*Berlin Kurier*, September 9). He returned to Germany in November 2014, and was arrested two months later (DW, January 10).

Meanwhile, in the Middle East itself, Germany has continued to provide some of the most significant European support for forces fighting against the Islamic State (particularly the Kurds), most recently training Iraqi peshmerga forces on mitigating chemical weapon attacks (Rudaw, September 18). This came after the government confirmed instances of the Islamic State using mustard gas against Kurdish fighters. Adding urgency to both the German government’s efforts in Iraq and its actions against the growing number of Islamist radicals at home is the flow of migrants and refugees expected into Germany in the coming months and years from mainly Muslim parts of the Middle East; an estimated 800,000 people will arrive this year (*Der Spiegel*, August 31). To date, Germany has generally been more successful in integrating Muslim immigrants than other European countries. However, this is partly because up until now the vast majority of German Muslims have generally originated in relatively more developed countries with a long history of secularism, such as Turkey, Iraqi Kurdistan and a range of Balkan states; the flow of new migrants from Iraq, Syria and elsewhere, including states without a similarly strong secular tradition, will undoubtedly pose new challenges to the German government, including in the sphere of political radicalization.

## VICTORY OVER BOKO HARAM CONTINUES TO ELUDE NIGERIA

*James Brandon*

Nigeria’s conflict with the Boko Haram Islamist militant group continues to be marked by a mix of successes and setbacks, with the group continuing to prove itself an adaptable and wily adversary. For instance, in the last few weeks, the government has scored a number of considerable localized victories against the group. On September 23, the government announced that its troops had continued to advance against Boko Haram in parts of Borno State, the longstanding heartland of the group’s Islamist insurgency. The government claimed to have captured the group’s “kingpin” in the area, Bulama Modu, arrested 43 suspected militants, freed 241 women and children being held prisoner by the militants and seized arms and ammunition (*Premium Times* [Abuja], September 23). Separately, across the border in northern Cameroon on the same day, Cameroonian forces said they had killed 17 suspected militants in a series of operations (*Punch* [Lagos], September 23).

Simultaneously, the Nigerian government has continued to give the impression that the defeat of the group is imminent. A senior presidential advisor, on September 23, tweeted a message ascribed to the country’s president, Muhammadu Buhari, that: “Boko Haram’s reign of terror in parts of the country will be finally over very soon as the ongoing military onslaught against the terrorist sect will continue relentlessly until total victory is achieved” (Twitter, September 23; *Punch* [Lagos], September 23). Similar rhetoric has come from the ministry of defence. Colonel Rabe Abubakar, the ministry spokesperson, in response to an apparent audio message released by Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau, said that: “Our candid advice to Shekau or his ghost, cohorts or impersonators is to toe the line of their fellow comrades and surrender now as there is no more hiding place for him or his criminal gang to operate freely,” adding that the “era of cheap propaganda is over and in no distance time Nigerians and the whole world will know who is saying the truth” (*Premium Times* [Abuja], September 22).

On the ground, however, evidence of solid Nigerian gains against Boko Haram are harder to find. On September 20, the group carried out one of its most significant attacks in months, killing around 85 people in the northeast city of Maiduguri, in Borno State (*Vanguard* [Lagos], September 21). The attacks mainly targeted a mosque and people watching a football game on television. In further evidence that the group remains strong in Borno State, the government banned the use of cars, public transportation, donkeys and

camels in the state over the Eid al-Adha Islamic holiday in order to reduce the potential for militant attacks (BBC, September 24). Moreover, in addition, between July and August, the Nigerian authorities arrested 20 suspected Boko Haram leaders in southern parts of the country, suggesting that the group may be planning to extend its operations to these regions, including the economically critical city of Lagos, which have largely been unaffected by the conflict so far. A Department of State Service (DSS) spokesman said that “the sudden influx of Boko Haram members into Lagos State points to the determination of the sect to extend its nefarious terrorist activities to the state and in fact, other parts of the country” (*This Day Live* [Lagos], August 31). In a further indication that the government’s offensive is not going entirely as well as advertised, the government has also floated the idea of negotiating with the group, or potentially releasing some prisoners, in return for the release of the schoolgirls who were kidnapped from Chibok in May 2014 (*Punch* [Lagos], September 16; *The Nation* [Lagos], September 22).

## Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan Evolves Under Pressure

*Farhan Zahid*

The recent attack by Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) on a Pakistan Air Force (PAF) camp at Badaber, located 10 miles from Peshawar, fully displayed the jihadist group’s professional, yet highly violent, nature. Dressed in uniforms of the Frontier Constabulary (a paramilitary force), 14 militants breached the security parameter of the PAF camp and then entered from two different points in the early hours of September 18. The resulting battle went on for two hours and left at least 28 military personnel and all 14 attackers dead (*News International*, September 18). Later, five of the dead militants were identified; two of whom were from the Swat district of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province while three came from the tribal areas where the camp was located (*Dawn*, September 19).

The attack is the first time an air force camp (as opposed to an airbase) has been targeted by militants. However, PAF airbases have long been repeatedly targeted by TTP and associated groups, and long before the government launched its Operation Zarb-e-Azb anti-militant campaign in June 2014. For instance, PAF Base Kamra, in Punjab province, was targeted by Islamist militants in 2007 (*Dawn*, December 11, 2007). A likely reason for the TTP’s attacks on PAF facilities is the air force’s role in military campaigns against the TTP in the country’s tribal areas. The rugged terrain of the tribal areas, the epicenter of the Islamist insurgency, provides formidable cover for TTP militants, and as a result, PAF bombardments are often the only way for the military to progress in its operations, often causing considerable collateral damage in the process. Of the 11 active flying bases of Pakistan Air Force, five have been attacked in last ten years, whereas another three airports (Karachi, Peshawar and Quetta) have also been targeted.

Militant attacks on the air force, although not seriously disrupting government operations, have nonetheless imposed a considerable toll on air force personnel and finances. For instance, an attack on PAF Base Mushaf in Sarghoda district killed 11 officers in 2007 (*Dawn*, November 2, 2007). A Pakistan Navy airbase (PNS Mehran) in Karachi was also targeted by TTP in 2011, resulting in the destruction of three PC-3 Orion maritime reconnaissance aircraft and the killing of 18 Pakistan Navy personnel (*Express Tribune*, May 23, 2011). In another spectacular attack by TTP militants, at PAF Base Kamra in 2012, the attackers destroyed one Saab 2000 Erieye aircraft fitted with an Airborne Early Warning &

Control System (AEW&C) and severely damaged the other one (*News International*, February 9, 2013). In addition, the TTP launched its most well-coordinated attack to date in 2014, simultaneously attacking two PAF bases (PAF Base Khalid and PAF Base Samungli), killing 12 people (*Dawn*, August 15, 2014).

### TTP Bounces Back

Due to the government's on-going Operation Zarb-e-Azb military operation in North Waziristan, the TTP recently appeared to have lost its momentum due to scores of Islamist militants being killed or arrested by the government. [1] The spectacular nature of the attack on Badaber PAF Camp, however, showed that the TTP remains capable and has caused the public to question the success of the ongoing military operation. Indeed, it can be argued that, in some senses, the government's military operations have strengthened the region's fractious jihadist organizations by forcing them to put aside their differences and work together.

The TTP has never been monolithic. It comprises more than 42 Islamist-tribal groups and some groups from mainland Pakistan, such as the Punjabi Taliban. [2] The broadness of the TTP's coalition also presents challenges, however, and has threatened the group's cohesion. For instance, after the death of its former amir Hakimullah Mehsud in a U.S. drone strike in November 2013, the jihadist leaders of several key TTP factions failed to reach a consensus over who should head the group. The resulting decision to eventually select Fazlullah (a.k.a. Fazal Hayat) as the new amir of TTP annoyed many as he was not from the tribal areas, hailing instead from the Buner district of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province. Despite having led an Islamist insurgency in Swat and adjoining districts in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province in 2008-2009, he was not unanimously accepted as new amir, leading to further fragmentation of the TTP. However, ironically, the government's commencement of the Zarb-e-Azb operation in North Waziristan district, and supplementary operations in other districts of tribal areas, served to soften the TTP's differences over the leadership and to bind these groups together against a common enemy.

In addition, Fazlullah carrying out the December 16, 2014 attack on the Army Public School in Peshawar, in which 141 people (a large number of them children) were killed, outclassed all other competing jihadist groups, and Fazlullah thereby proved his mettle to rule TTP. Other groups, most importantly the Jamaat ul-Ahrar group, led by Omar Khalid Khorasani, led then sued for reconciliation, leading to Khorasani pledging allegiance to Fazlullah. As a result, in March 2015, Ehsanullah Ehsan, the spokesperson of Jamaat

ul-Ahrar, issued a statement confirming the merging of TTP factions:

We congratulate the *Ummat-e-Muslima* [the Muslim community] in common and especially the mujahideen of Pakistan for the coalition of strong jihadist groups, Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan Jamaat ul-Ahrar, Tehrik-e-Lashkar-e-Islam and Tehrik-e-Taliban on one name Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan against the *taghooti* [satanic], infidel, democratic, unIslamic system and the Na-Pak *Murtad* [a Muslim who rejects Islam] Army. [3]

In addition, Lashkar-e-Islam's amir, Mangal Bagh Afridi, merged his organization with the TTP in March, and pledged allegiance to Fazlullah. This was partly in the response to the government's Operation Khyber I, which was directed against his strongholds of Tirah Valley and Bara in Khyber District. The TTP's spokesperson, Ehsanullah Ehsan, endorsed the alliance as creating what he termed the "mujahideen of Pakistan" (*Dawn*, March 13).

### Conclusion

While the military operations Khyber I (concluded) and Zarb-e-Azb (on-going) have achieved many successes, such as killing a large number of militants and putting such groups on the back foot, there have also been unexpected disadvantages of the operations. For instance, in response to the government's military pressure, Islamist militants are now resolving their differences and forming alliances, and are also committing attacks on high-profile targets, such as the school in Peshawar and on Badaber PAF camp, in an effort to prove their continued abilities. In particular, the merger of Lashkar-e-Islam into the TTP and the reconciliation between two major factions of TTP are two major recent developments that threaten to empower the group further. In addition, the government's various operations have only been able to restrict the space for Islamist militants to operation in rather than deny it complete; there is also the fact that no senior militant leaders have yet been killed or arrested, making it is easier for these groups to bounce back once government pressure is removed. The latest attack on a highly secured PAF camp displays the militants' reinvigorated abilities and their continuing resolve to target the state, sending a clear message that the TTP is a still a force to be reckoned with.

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## Notes

1. According to official figures released by the Pakistani military's press and media department, Inter-Services Public Relations, between June 2014 and June 2015, 2,763 terrorists have been killed, 837 hideouts of terrorists destroyed, 253 tons of explosives captured and 18,087 weapons recovered. 347 officers and soldiers of Pakistan Army were also killed during the operation. For details please see, "2,763 terrorists killed in Operation Zarb-e-Azb", *The Express Tribune*, June 14, 2015, <http://tribune.com.pk/story/903282/2763-terrorists-killed-in-operation-zarb-e-azb/>.
2. Other notable groups in the TTP include Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), Harkat-ul Mujahideen (HuM), Harkat ul Jihad ul Islami (HuJI) and Jaysh-e-Mohammad (JeM).
3. "A Profile of Omar Khalid Khurasani: Emir of Jamaatal Ahrar," FATA Research Centre, July 2015, <http://frc.com.pk/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Omar-Khalid1-2.pdf>.

## The Islamic State's Balkan 'Strongholds'

*Ebi Spahiu*

To the Islamic State militant group, foreign fighters from the Balkans have particular importance due to their historical ties to Islam, their homelands' proximity to other Western Europe and because ethnic disputes in the region remain close to the surface. A video released in June 2015 by the organization's al-Hayat media center, for instance, emphasizes the strategic importance of the Balkan Peninsula to the Islamic State by lengthily analyzing the historical significance Balkan Muslims purportedly had in defying "European crusaders" during the Ottoman Empire, as well as enduring hardships during Enver Hoxha's and Josip Broz Tito's Communist regimes in Albania and Yugoslavia respectively. [1] In the last issue of *Dabiq*, the Islamic State's English language magazine, the jihadist organization again continued to refer to the importance of the Balkans and also calls for its followers in the region to conduct lone wolf attacks. [2]

The region's Muslim communities in Albania, Kosovo and Bosnia still largely practice a moderate vision of Islam, based on Hanafi jurisprudence and Sufi traditions inherited from decades of Ottoman rule. However, Saudi-led efforts following the fall of the region's communist regimes have attempted to make the Balkans a bastion of Salafist and Wahhabist doctrines and practice. One outcome of this process is that in the last two years, over 1,000 foreign fighters from the Western Balkans have joined the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq (*Illyria Press*, August 7). These recruits come from Muslim communities throughout the region, including Albania, Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Montenegro.

During the past year, the authorities in the region have conducted a series of arrests of groups and individual imams purportedly involved in inspiring and facilitating the flow of foreign fighters to the Islamic State. In Albania, for instance, the authorities undertook a series of security operations in March 2014 against an alleged network of recruiters based in two mosques on the outskirts of the capital Tirana, and arrested nine individuals on grounds of facilitating recruitment for terrorism, financing of terrorist activities. These included two imams allegedly instrumental in radicalizing the group's followers. In addition, since August 2014, the security authorities in Kosovo have arrested and questioned over 100 individuals during investigations into the recruitment of young Albanian men and women from

Kosovo to the Islamic State (*Gazeta Express* [Prishtina], January 17). Similar operations have been conducted in Macedonia, Bosnia and Serbia against individuals accused of involvement in militant recruitment on behalf of the Islamic State. Although most of these policing operations have proved successful in identifying and isolating the main lines of militant recruitment, questions remain over the continuity of hardline religious doctrine in these areas and ways it is being utilized to establish strongholds of support among smaller communities in the countries most affected. Even though most countries in the region remain keen to join the European Union (EU), high levels of corruption, organized crime and a weaker and less appealing EU have created an environment where hardline ideologies can spread, especially in countries with predominantly Muslim populations, such as Kosovo or Bosnia. The lack of preventative measures against this radical upswing may potentially make religious radicalism one of the region's greatest security threats, alongside organized crime.

### Islamic State 'Strongholds'

Weak governance and poor rule of law, and a corresponding limited government presence in remote areas, is a problem common to many Balkan countries. Communal anger over high levels of unemployment and extensive government corruption has been further stoked by a widespread dissatisfaction with a prolonged EU integration process. These elements have accordingly become the centerpiece of the grievance narrative that many Islamist leaders have promoted in order to gain local support and fuel anti-Western and anti-government sentiments among their followers. In addition, this dissatisfaction with the status quo also explains the gradual increase in people from Kosovo and Albania migrating to Western Europe in hopes of finding employment. For instance, Albanian migrants rank third after Syrians and Afghans seeking asylum in Germany (*Panorama* [Tirana], September 19).

As state institutions lack credibility, radical imams and similar groups are filling the vacuum, while additionally replacing moderate religious leaders and other societal actors in these communities. Several testimonies from local civil society groups based in northeastern Albania, for instance, describe the rapid transformation of local religious life and an increased commitment towards following imams among youths, whose lives are increasingly shaped by religious doctrine in the absence of a strong school system and meaningful employment opportunities. [3] Similarly, a recent report found that youth in Kosovo are also becoming increasingly conservative, while their main reference points for spiritual and intellectual guidance are also imams [*Tema*

[Tirana], August 10). While religiosity was already an integral component of a society that has historically promoted peaceful co-existence between religions, many in Kosovo have gradually embraced Salafist and Wahhabist ideologies, leading to a shift in their views and attitudes, while hundreds of religious hardliners from Kosovo have also joined the Islamic State in recent years. Kacanik, a small town in Kosovo near the border with Macedonia, is a particular example of where radical religious rhetoric has flourished and despite recent efforts to curb its influence, many radical imams in the area are still able to carry on giving sermons to radical youth despite being in hiding from the authorities (*Telegrafi* [Prishtina], September 1, *Telegraph*, August 23).

In addition to Balkan youths' changing approach to religion, hardliners sympathetic to the Islamic State have apparently also established a physical presence in the region by purchasing vacant real estate along the former lines of contact between the local warring factions in the 1990s conflicts. This has been particularly visible in Bosnia, where these types of properties are often in badly damaged remote areas that have been abandoned by state authorities (*Avaz* [Sarajevo], May 28). According to another report, this one on Bosnian fighters in Syria, these types of purchases are common among local Salafists, and many known Islamic State foreign fighters from Bosnia have visited these villages in the past. [4] Current communities inhabiting these villages do not shy from advertising their support for the Islamic State, either via flying the group's flags or through displaying other symbols of the group (Localno [Skopje], May 28).

### Organized Crime and Religious Radicalism

Although most regional security officials and security experts treat the threats posed by religious extremism and organized crime as separate concerns—growing out of separate networks—there are strong possibilities that these two elements may combine in future, as Islamist groups, such as the Islamic State, attempt to establish their presence in other parts of Europe. Throughout the past year, for instance, there have been several media reports and events that reflect that such combination is possible in a region marked by trafficking, prostitution and political links to organized crime.

This emerging nexus between criminals and religious radicals is particularly visible in Lazarat, a village in southern Albania infamous for its production and export of cannabis. There have been several instances of unrest in the area, with authorities issuing arrest warrants for five young men allegedly responsible for a series of explosions near Lazarat in March, which resulted in no reports of death or injuries

(BalkanWeb, May 23). Facebook profiles in the name of the five men showed that they were vocal supporters of the Islamic State, but also led glamorous lives, involving expensive cars and Mediterranean trips, despite outstanding domestic and international arrest warrants. Arbion Aliko, one of the main individuals involved, was apprehended in June, following a shootout between the young men and police, on charges of carrying out acts for terrorist purposes and over the killing of Ibrahim Basha, a special forces officer on duty in Lazarat. According to a Facebook profile in Aliko's name, which was later taken down, he expressed his admiration for Lavdrim Muhaxheri (an infamous Albanian-Kosovar jihadist with the Islamic State), and other known Albanian jihadists reportedly fighting for the jihadist organization. Aliko had also repeatedly called for action to take back Lazarat from state control. [5]

Although direct links between organized criminal groups and IS supporters in Albania were denied by the authorities, these events exposed the potential for organized crime to converge with religious radicalism and violent extremism in Albania (BalkanWeb, June 29). The events in Lazarat shocked public opinion in Albania, but they also suggest the possible emergence of other nexuses between radicals and active criminal groups elsewhere in the country. Albania has a long history of being a transit and destination country for cannabis, heroin and cocaine, and also has long been considered a source country for cannabis going to EU countries. The Albanian government has sought to tackle this problem; for instance, in 2014, Albanian police undertook a massive raid on Lazarat that was intended to end the village's production and export of cannabis to Western Europe. However, although Albania's interior minister, Saimir Tahiri, has recently claimed that almost all marijuana plants in northern and southern parts of the country, which are particularly known for their high production of cannabis, were destroyed as a result of police operations, questions remain over who managed these areas and profited from their lucrative revenues (Fax [Tirana], August 16). On the other hand, for hundreds of local residents, drug production is a valuable source of income in the absence of other employment opportunities, and the destruction of these plantations poses an economic threat to them due to the lack of alternatives. These areas are particularly vulnerable to the influence of radical religious leaders, as well as criminal groups that still maintain their own influence, in absence of police control and weak institutions. This situation illustrates that efforts to tackle the drugs trade also risk boosting radicalization.

## Conclusion

Convergences between organized crime groups and traditional terrorist organizations are nothing new. Frequent evidence of direct linkages is seen between terrorist organizations and criminal networks who seek to capitalize upon each others' skills and assets, despite divergences in ideologies and objectives. For instance, the U.S. National Security Council has said that "today's criminal networks are fluid, striking new allegiances with other networks around the world and engaging in a wide range of illicit activities, including cybercrime and providing support for terrorism." [6] Although details of direct links between the Islamic State and organized groups in Albania, especially since the recent events in Lazarat, are not confirmed, the rampant corruption in all sectors of society, including the judiciary, and allegations of prostitution and drug links to the political establishment mean that Albania and the rest of the Balkan region are particularly vulnerable to extremist groups looking to establish their presence in Europe. In addition, according to several unofficial sources, in Albania in particular, political polarization and electoral fraud have led religious leaders to support particular political agendas in exchange for delivering votes, thus leading to the willingness of authorities and politicians to overlook illicit activities that these individuals may be involved in. This underlines that high levels of corruption at administrative and political levels in affected Balkan countries can create additional vacuums in which religious radicalism can take hold, potentially increasing threats not only in the region itself but also further afield.

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## Notes

1. See: <http://jihadology.net/2015/06/04/al-%E1%B8%A5ayat-media-center-presents-a-new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-honor-is-in-jihad-a-message-to-the-people-of-the-balkans/>.
2. "An Opportunity for Noble Deeds," Dabiq (August), pg. 54.
3. Author's own discussions with civil society representatives based in different regions in Albania, September 2015.
4. "The Lure of the Syrian War," The Atlantic Initiative [http://atlanticinitiative.org/images/THE\\_LURE\\_OF\\_THE\\_SYRIAN\\_WAR\\_THE\\_FOREIGN\\_FIGHTERS\\_BOSNIAN\\_CONTINGENT/The\\_Lure\\_of\\_the\\_Syrian\\_War\\_-\\_The\\_Foreign\\_Fighters\\_Bosnian\\_Contingent.pdf](http://atlanticinitiative.org/images/THE_LURE_OF_THE_SYRIAN_WAR_THE_FOREIGN_FIGHTERS_BOSNIAN_CONTINGENT/The_Lure_of_the_Syrian_War_-_The_Foreign_Fighters_Bosnian_Contingent.pdf).
5. Arbion Aliko Lazarat, Facebook profile <https://www>.

facebook.com/ar.al.18?fref=ts.

6. “Strategy to Combat Transnational Organized Crime,” U.S. National Security Council, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/administration/eop/nsc/transnational-crime/strategy>.

## Saudi Arabia’s Yemen Intervention: A High Risk Gamble?

*James Brandon and Nicholas A. Heras*

Saudi Arabia’s ongoing armed intervention in Yemen, which began overtly in March with airstrikes in support of Yemen’s internationally-recognized president Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi, has since become a coalition effort, although the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has emerged as Saudi Arabia’s major military partner in the intervention. On balance, the coalition campaign to oust the predominately Zaydi Shi’a Ansar Allah (Partisans of God—a.k.a. the Houthis) movement and their allies, which include forces loyal to Yemen’s former president Ali Abdullah Saleh, has made strong progress. Saudi Arabia’s daily air strikes on the Houthis and their allies in the country’s capital of Sana’a and in other Houthi-dominated areas in Yemen’s western highland region are degrading the Houthi alliance’s conventional military forces (al-Arabiya, September 28; al-Arabiya, September 5).

Concurrently, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar and Kuwait have landed troops in the southern city of Aden, the former capital of South Yemen, and are using the city to assist local, southern tribal militias organized under the broad network of al-Muqawama al-Sha’biya (Popular Resistance Committees). This has succeeded first in pushing the Houthis and their allies back from the city and pressuring Houthi-held areas around the city of Taiz in the country’s southwest and in the mainly desert region of Mareb, to the west of Sana’a (*The National*, September 7; YouTube, July 3; YouTube, June 17; YouTube, June 8; YouTube, June 5; YouTube, May 31; Khabar News Agency [Taiz], April 21; YouTube, April 21; al-Arabiya, March 26).

### Border Troubles

In spite of these successes, Houthi and allied forces continue to maintain strong control over northern Yemen, including Sana’a, and Houthi forces have launched consistent attacks on several areas of southwestern Saudi Arabia that border Yemen, particularly in Najran and Jizan Provinces (YouTube, June 9; YouTube, May 29; YouTube, May 5). For instance, on September 18, two Bangladeshis were killed when mortars fired from Yemen struck a hospital in Samtah, a town in the Saudi Red Sea coastal province of Jizan that is only a few miles from the Yemen border (*Daily Star* [Dhaka], September 19). Earlier, on September 14, Saudi Arabia announced that one soldier had been killed in an attack on a border post in Jizan, (SPA, September 14). A day earlier, four soldiers had been killed in another cross-border attack in Najran (SPA,



September 13). This stream of attacks, while not seriously jeopardizing Saudi control of the area, is nonetheless almost constant, placing considerable pressure on civilian populations in the region, particularly through the Houthis' use of indiscriminate rocket attacks.

A further challenge to Saudi Arabia is the latest risk of the conflict with the Houthis igniting long-dormant tensions in Najran and Jizan. Local politics in these provinces is significantly driven by sectarian and tribal loyalties that uneasily coexist with the Saudi state. Najran and Jizan, which have only been formally governed by the al-Saud dynasty since 1934, retain a strong territorial identity of their own, often in conscious opposition to the forcibly-imposed sterner al-Saud/Wahhabist traditions of central Arabia. In addition, there are strong cross-border ties between tribes in Najran and Jizan, and with the core areas of Houthi support in northern Yemen (YouTube, March 29; *al-Akhbar* [Beirut], November 12, 2014). [1]

Suggestive of Saudi awareness of these potential tensions, early in the coalition's campaign in Yemen, the Saudi government deployed a strong, and highly symbolic, Saudi Arabian National Guard (SANG) force to its southwestern provinces that border Yemen (YouTube, April 27). Najran, which historically had a majority Ismaili Shi'a Muslim population and also a significant Zaydi Shi'a population with historic socio-cultural ties to areas of northern Yemen presently controlled by the Houthis, has previously been the site of significant protests against the Saudi regime, as well as inter-sectarian violence between Sunnis and the Shi'a sects (YouTube, April 27; YouTube, April 27; Okaz [Riyadh], April 1; al-Riyadh, April 1; AP, May 12; Okaz [Riyadh], April 1; *al-Akhbar* [Beirut], November 12, 2014; BBC, April 25, 2000). [2] Apparently concerned with demonstrating the loyalty of the local Najrani population, Saudi media showed footage of elaborate local, tribal welcoming ceremonies for SANG forces, especially from the Bani Yam, the most important Ismaili tribal confederation in the governorate (YouTube, April 27; YouTube, April 26; YouTube, March 28). Saudi Arabia's Minister of the National Guard, Prince Mu'atib bin Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz al-Saud, the son of the recently deceased King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz al-Saud and a powerful player within the Saudi royal family, also personally travelled to Najran to participate in festivities marking the SANG's deployment with the region's powerful local tribes (YouTube, June 14). These efforts can be understood as an attempt to bolster local loyalties to the Saudi state, to spread a wider message that the area is calm and also to show SANG forces protecting the local population against the Houthi threat.

In addition, there have previously been unverified reports—mainly from Iranian state media sources—of local opposition forces emerging from Najrani tribes who were deeply dissatisfied with Saudi Arabia's air campaign in Yemen. Most strikingly, in mid-June, reports by Iranian media, and media produced by Iran's allies in Syria, claimed that an armed opposition organization called Ahrar al-Najran (Free Ones of Najran) had been formed in the region by these local, anti-Saudi tribal forces (Shaam Times [Damascus], June 18; Fars News [Tehran], June 15; YouTube, June 15). Pro-Iran media also claimed that the movement had captured a military base, shot down a Saudi helicopter, engaged in numerous clashes with government forces and also set up an organization called "The Youth of Najran" (Fars News, July 2; Fars News, July 1). In addition, these media sources claimed that the Saudi Air Force was conducting air strikes against Najrani armed opposition groups belonging to the Ahrar al-Najran movement (Fars News, July 22; Tasnim News Agency [Tehran], July 2). There has been no independent corroboration of any of these events, however. Moreover, since summer, Iranian claims of domestic Saudi opposition forces in Najran have tailed off. This suggests either that such forces, if they existed, have become less active, or that Iran's government decided that promoting such propaganda were no longer in its interests.

### South Yemeni Secession Threat

Further complicating the Saudi-led coalition's efforts in Yemen is the re-emergence of an emboldened Southern Yemeni secessionist movement. This is primarily being driven by local anti-Houthi Popular Resistance Forces, stylizing themselves as the Southern Resistance; these forces are more loudly seeking support for the independence of South Yemen, which was forcibly reunified with North Yemen after the country's 1994 civil war, through the assistance of Saudi Arabia and the UAE, even if this move runs contrary to the Saudi-led coalition's aim to restore a strong, pro-Saudi national government in Sana'a (al-Jazeera, November 29, 2014; YouTube, December 23, 2013; YouTube, March 19, 2013).

As the Saudi and UAE-led coalition seeks to build a Houthi-resistant, quasi-national government structure in southern Yemen, these local calls from prominent southern Yemeni actors for secession (and a growing rejection of President Hadi, a unitary Yemeni state or even a devolved federalism structure), present a growing policy dilemma for Saudi Arabia (*Aden al-Ghad*, September 16; *Aden al-Ghad*, September 8; *al-Akhbar* [Beirut], January 30; YouTube, March 25, 2013). As the necessary local partners for the Saudi and UAE-led coalition against the Houthis and allies forces, the Southern

Resistance militias and the overall southern secessionist movement, which is generally strongly anti-Houthi, and anti-Saleh, cannot easily be dismissed, and are reportedly being engaged actively at least by pragmatic policymakers in the UAE, who understand the need to address southern pro-separatist sensibilities and related grievances (*al-Youm al-Saba* [Aden], September 15; *Yemen Akhbar* [Aden], September 14; *Ababiil* [Aden], September 3; YouTube, September 23, 2014). Saudi Arabia, therefore, finds itself in a quandary in southern Yemen too: it needs to build up southern forces to counter the Houthis; however, by doing this, the strength of southern separatists, whose long-term goals run counter to its own, is increased.

### Outlook

The new Saudi monarch, King Salman, has embarked on a high-risk gamble in launching a military intervention to defeat what Saudi Arabia perceives as Iranian expansionism in Saudi Arabia's traditional client state, and to reinstall Hadi as president. Thus far, the Saudi-led coalition has succeeded in driving the Houthis out of Aden and many areas of southern Yemen. It has faltered, however, in its broader aims of removing the Houthis from the capital, while also being hampered by the continued Houthi pressure on Saudi Arabia's southwestern border regions and by the South Yemen separatist movement's renewed activism as a result of the Saudi-led intervention.

Saudi policymakers therefore find themselves at a crossroads. On one hand, they are clearly tempted to continue to press boldly, and potentially dangerously, towards Sana'a in hope of restoring Yemen as a unitary, centrally-ruled Saudi client state, with President Hadi at its helm. However, the potential unwillingness of the Southern Resistance militias to advance into northern Yemen to displace the Houthis, seems likely to severely limit these ambitions. Adding to the pressure are the Houthi cross-border attacks and the potential for a prolonged conflict to reignite long dormant tribal, regional and sectarian irredentist feeling in southwestern Saudi Arabia.

As a result, if Saudi Arabia wants to end the conflict quickly, unless the government is willing to commit large numbers of their own forces in north Yemen, or to find some other way to mobilize significant Yemeni forces against the Houthis, the Saudis may have to recognize some form of Houthi self-rule in the north, and a significantly devolved form of government in southern Yemen. Alternatively, and even more radically, they may have to acquiesce to an independent South Yemen that may be favored by some pragmatists in the UAE government, and which would at least secure them a

strong pro-Saudi bastion in southern Yemen.

None of these options are particularly palatable to Saudi Arabia, which is loath to see a de facto Houthi state on its southern border, or to set a precedent of partitioning a fellow Arab state along quasi-sectarian lines, with all the implications this holds for Iraq, Syria and elsewhere. The most obvious alternative, however, is for the Saudi military to plunge deeper into the Yemeni morass, and to take on the battle-hardened and highly capable Houthi guerrillas on their own turf, with all the risks this entails to Saudi Arabia's finances, to its military and to its regional and international prestige.

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### Notes

1. Madawi al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pgs. 266-267.
2. For more information on Ismaili Shi'a protests in Najran, and the Saudi state security forces' harsh reaction, see: "The Ismailis of Najran: Second-Class Saudi Citizens," Human Rights Watch, September 3, 2008, <http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/saudiArabia0908web.pdf>.