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Cars continue to burn after a suicide attack by the Islamic State in Beirut.

BANGLADESH ATTACKS SHOW INCREASING ISLAMIC STATE INFLUENCE

James Brandon

In the last six weeks, Bangladesh has been hit by a near-unprecedented series of Islamist militant attacks targeting foreigners and local Shi'a Muslims. On September 28, an Italian NGO worker, who was residing in the country, was shot and killed by attackers on a moped as he was jogging near the diplomatic area of capital city Dhaka (*Daily Star* [Dhaka], September 29). A few days later, on October 3, a Japanese aid worker was killed by gunmen in Rangpur, following which the Islamic State group reportedly claimed responsibility for the attack online (BDNews24, October 4). Soon afterwards, on October 5, a Christian Baptist priest was badly injured after being slashed by men in the town of Iswardi; five members of the Jama'at ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) militant group were subsequently arrested for their suspected involvement (BanglaNews24, October 13). The attacks follow a string of mostly fatal knife and machete attacks on secular and atheist Bangladeshi bloggers earlier in the year, and underline how militant attacks in the country have recently trended towards being extremely low-tech. Attacks have also targeted specific individuals variously accused of insulting or challenging Islam, the country's dominant religion.

In a departure from this trend, however, on October 24, bomb attacks targeted the Hossaini Dalan Imambara, the most significant Shi'a shrine in Dhaka. One 14-year-old boy was killed, and others were injured. The attack occurred shortly before a pilgrimage to mark the Ashura festival, the most important in the Shi'a calendar, was due to take place. According to local investigators, the attacks involved three homemade bombs being detonated in one section of the facility, following which two more bombs were thrown into the crowd as people sought to flee the first explosions (*Dhaka Tribune*, October 27). The attack is reported to be the first such sectarian attack on the Shi'a shrine since its construction in the 17th century, underlining the impact of the influx

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of Wahhabi-derived ideologies on the country's complex religious make-up.

The Islamic State group, whose Wahhabi-influenced ideology is heavily focused around denouncing Shi'as as non-Muslims, subsequently claimed credit for the attack on the shrine via some of their commonly used Twitter profiles (*Daily Star* [Dhaka], October 24). Bangladesh's Home Minister, however, cast doubt on the group's claims of involvement, both in the shrine attack and in the prior assassinations: "Those who claim to be Islamic State here are offshoots of militant outfits Huji, al-Qaeda and JMB [Jama'at ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh]. They all have their roots within Jamaat-Shibir" (*Daily Star* [Dhaka], October 25). Still, while it may be true that these attackers often derive from existing domestic Bangladeshi militant groups, this does not mean that these individuals are not now affiliated with the Islamic State's global movement. Indeed, the fact that the attackers may have had such links to extant local militant groups strengthens recent observations that the Islamic State is succeeding in becoming an effective umbrella group for many smaller jihadist groups worldwide, including in South Asia, as well as a significant ideological lodestar for jihadists globally.

Confusing the issue further, the Bangladeshi government has also sought to use the recent series of attacks to score points against their political rivals, most notably in a series of bizarre statements about the fatal attack on the Italian NGO worker in Dhaka and the Japanese aid worker in Rangpur. For instance, on October 28, the Joint General Secretary of the country's ruling Awami League Party said that the orders for the targeted killing of the two foreigners "came from London," an apparent reference to leadership of the its archrival, opposition Bangladesh National Party, some of whom are based in London (*Daily Star* [Dhaka], October 28). More troubling, this highly unlikely accusation was also repeated by the investigating police authorities, who said that the "big brother" said to have funded that attacks had wanted "to take advantage by creating unrest in the country" (*Dhaka Tribune*, October 27). The statements underline the challenges that Bangladesh faces, firstly in correctly identifying the recent attacks as being rooted in an emerging link-up between local jihadist groups and the Islamic State, and secondly in tacking effective action against this emerging—and clearly potent—nexus.

RECENT GAINS AGAINST THE ISLAMIC STATE IN IRAQ POINT TO GROWING COALITION CAPABILITY

James Brandon

Iraqi government forces, and their Iran-backed Shi'a allies, scored a significant victory in mid-October when, after a seven-month battle, they succeeded in recapturing Baiji, a strategic town and oil refinery on the main highway connecting the capital Baghdad with Islamic State-held Mosul, the country's third-largest city. The recapture of Baiji is a small but significant development in the Iraqi government's struggle against the jihadist organization, and is further evidence of government forces' slow progress north, through mainly Sunni areas, toward Mosul as well as of the Iraqi military's slowly increasing competence and abilities. Following its capture, Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi visited the town and lauded the its recapture from the Islamic State, which he said "brought out the capacity of Iraqis and their persistence until they liberated their city," while he also praised the "martyrs" who had fallen in the fight (Rudaw, October 24; Prime Ministers' Office, October 23).

Striking a different note, however, Iranian media linked to that country's government and religious establishment, drew particular attention to the role of Iran-backed Shi'a militias in the battle, singling out for particular praise the Imam Ali Battalion, effectively the armed wing of Harakat al-Iraq al-Islamiyah (Movement of the Islamic Iraq), many of whose leaders are linked to the strongly anti-U.S. Sadr movement (Tasnim News, October 20). By contrast, various Sunni Islamist groups, both inside Iraq and globally, responded to the recapture of Baiji by launching their own counter-propaganda aimed at the Iraqi government and their Shi'a allies. For instance, the influential UK-based British Muslim Brotherhood-linked website *Middle East Monitor*, ran an alarmist article quoting Shaykh Abdul Razzaq al-Shammari, an Iraqi Sunni tribal Islamist leader, as accusing Shi'a-backed militias in Baiji of burning eight—presumably Sunni—mosques in the area and of committing a "genocide" (*Middle East Monitor*, October 26). These divided and starkly polarized responses to the Iraqi government's advances against the Islamic State highlight the risk that the ongoing conflict in Iraq, and particularly the upcoming battle for Mosul, will be used by hardliners on both sides to further stir up sectarian tensions across the region.

Meanwhile, the news of a joint U.S.-Kurdish raid on an Islamic State prison in Hawija, also in Islamic State-held Sunni areas of northern Iraq, drew attention to the ongoing role of special

forces units in the conflict. The nighttime attack, launched by helicopter on the night of October 22, freed 70 prisoners, killed at least 15 Islamic State members and captured others; however, one experienced U.S. special forces soldier also died in the attack (Rudaw, October 22). Although the raid was unusually large in scale—and its publicization, including the release of helmet-camera footage of the raid, was also relatively novel—the action nonetheless drew attention to both the Kurds’ increasingly effective special forces, and also the close relationship between them and their U.S. mentors. Such units can be expected to play an increasing role against the Islamic State in coming months, both in supporting ground offensives and in conducting further behind-the-lines operations, which may well begin to directly target the jihadist leadership with the aim of seriously damaging the group’s military capacity and credibility.

Meanwhile, more conventionally, the U.S. military continues to conduct almost daily airstrikes against Islamic State forces in Iraq, providing both strategic and tactical-level support to Iraq forces on the ground. For instance, on October 27, Combined Joint Task Force–Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR) said that its “bomber, fighter and attack aircraft” had conducted a total of 14 strikes on the day against Islamic State targets. Some of these near Mosul, likely in close support of Kurdish forces, “struck two separate tactical units and destroyed two fighting positions and an heavy machine gun” (CENTCOM, October 28). Similar attacks in Sinjar, where Kurdish forces are preparing an offensive against the militant organization, struck Islamic State “tactical units,” “fighting positions” and a “mortar position.” By contrast, other strikes on the day away from the front-lines targeted Islamic State rear-area facilities. For instance in Tal Afar, these hit a “weapons storage area, an [Islamic State] logistical facility, and an staging area.” The day’s activities give a reasonable representation of the U.S. military’s daily aerial operations, which for now at least are focused on gradually degrading the organization’s capabilities and morale, while also supporting localized engagements against the Islamic State by friendly forces, and particularly the Kurds. Taken together, these developments—the Iraqi military and Shi’a militias’ growing ability to dislodge strongly held Islamic State positions in Sunni areas, the Kurds’ growing special forces capability and the U.S. military’s pin-point intelligence-driven airstrikes—point to the likely modus operandi to be followed by the coalition forces in the coming months as the critical battle for Mosul draws inexorably near.

The Swarm: Terrorist Incidents in France

Timothy Holman

The terrorist threat from Sunni jihadists connected to France presents multiple challenges to the French authorities due to the number of distinct entities involved and the volume of events generated by their activities. The threat comes from returning foreign fighters, supporters of the Islamic State, individuals loosely connected to the group and persons with an on-going engagement in jihadist activity pre-dating the Syria conflict and the rise of the Islamic State.

If the January 2015 Paris attacks are treated as separate incidents—given the attackers claimed their attacks for different terrorist entities—since September 2012, there have been public reports of 17 plots and attacks in France:

1. In September 2012, French authorities investigated the Cannes-Torcy group over members’ involvement in a grenade attack on a Jewish grocery. The investigation led to the discovery of explosives and the killing of one of the members in Strasbourg (*Le Figaro*, July 5, 2013; *Le Figaro*, March 26, 2014).
2. In March 2013, French authorities arrested three males in the Marignane area in possession of 50 grams of the explosive acetone peroxide, precursor chemicals for another 600 grams and firearms (*Le Monde*, March 11, 2013). The three were active on social media and had sent a threatening letter to the White House (*Le Parisien*, March 11, 2013).
3. In October 2013, Lyes Darani, a returnee from Syria, was arrested in Lille on suspicion of preparing a possible suicide attack (*La Voix du Nord*, November 3, 2014).
4. In February 2014, Ibrahim Boudina, linked to the Cannes-Torcy group, was arrested in Nice, and was allegedly planning an attack using explosives against the city’s carnival. He had spent 15 months in Syria, first with Jabhat al-Nusra and then with the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS—the previous name of the Islamic State) (*Le Figaro*, March 26, 2014; *L’Express*, June 26, 2014).
5. In May 2014, Mehdi Nemmouche, an ISIS-affiliated returnee, was arrested in Marseilles following his attack in Brussels. He reportedly told his hostages that he wanted to carry out an attack in Paris (*Libération*, September 28, 2014).

6. In July 2014, the French arrested another Islamic State-linked returnee, Mohamed Ouharani. It is believed that he was initially tasked with carrying out an attack in Lebanon; however, he desisted and instead returned to France, where he began to try and identify Shi'a-related targets (TF1, April 23).
 7. In August 2014, two adolescent females allegedly intending to join the Islamic State were arrested in Lyon; press reports said they expressed interest in attacking a synagogue with firearms. One was reported to have had access to weapons (TF1, April 23; *Le Télégramme*, May 3).
 8. In September 2014, a group was disrupted in Lyon. Numerous firearms were recovered, and the authorities were concerned they were on the point of carrying out an attack (AFP, September 19, 2014).
 9. In December 2014, Bertrand Nzohabonayo, attacked and wounded police officers in Joué-lès-Tours with a knife. He is reported to have cried "Allah Akbar," although some witnesses dispute this account (AFP, December 20, 2014). The prosecutor chose to investigate it as a terrorist incident, and Dabiq, the Islamic State's propaganda magazine, cited Nzohabonayo as an example to follow. [1]
 10. In January 2015, Cherif and Said Kouachi carried out an attack against the *Charlie Hebdo* magazine, claiming their act for al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) (*Le Monde*, February 17). The brothers were linked with an Iraq war-era network, as well as a group involved in planning a prison break in 2010 that included Amedy Coulibaly (*Le Figaro*, March 1).
 11. Shortly after the Kouachis initiated their attack, Amedy Coulibaly carried out a series of attacks and stated that he was acting for the Islamic State (*Le Monde*, February 17). The attack was executed using firearms. Coulibaly's wife and a number of individuals associated with his wider network left France prior to the attacks; some were arrested en route, while others successfully joined the Islamic State (*Le Parisien-Aujourd'hui en France*, May 16).
 12. In February 2015, Moussa Coulibaly (no relation to Amedy), who had tried to travel to Turkey and is suspected of wanting to enter Syria or Iraq, attacked three soldiers near a Jewish community center in Nice (*Le Monde*, February 5, *Le Monde*, February 9).
 13. In April 2015, Sid Ahmed Ghlam was arrested after having contacted the police because of a gunshot wound. He was covered in blood and is a suspect in the murder of a female, although the motive for the killing remains unclear. He is suspected of being in the process of planning an attack against a church in the Paris region. He appears to have been in contact with Islamic State-affiliated entities. He had travelled to Turkey for a week in February 2015, but the purpose of this visit remains unclear (*Le Figaro*, June 25; *Le Monde*, August 3).
 14. In June 2015, Yassine Salhi beheaded his employer and then attempted to ram the main gate of a gas storage facility south of Lyon with his car. He sent pictures via Whatsapp to Syria. The Islamic State mentioned the attack in Dabiq's tenth issue. [2] Salhi is alleged to have told the police that he tried to cover the murder of his employer as a terrorist incident (AFP, June 29).
 15. In July 2015, French authorities arrested four persons, charging three for their involvement in planning to carry out an attack against a military target in the south of France. At least one of the individuals had intended to travel to Syria, but had been unable to do so. The authorities said he had been encouraged by a member of the Islamic State in Syria to conduct an attack in France (Parquet du Tribunal de Grande Instance de Paris, July 17).
 16. In August 2015, passengers on a train between Amsterdam and Paris neutralized a Moroccan national, Ayoub al-Khazzani, as he attempted to use an AK-47. The individual denies attempting to carry out a terrorist attack and says he was trying to commit a robbery. He was previously the subject of exchanges of information between Spain, France and Belgium and had been entered into information systems as a suspect (EuroNews, August 25).
 17. In September 2015, the French press reported that an individual had been arrested by the authorities on August 11, and that he had spent one week in Raqqa, Syria, where he had been instructed to carry out an attack to kill as many persons as possible. The reports suggested that a possible target was a concert venue (*Le Monde*, September 18).
- Of the 17 above events, three were successful: the two January 2015 Paris attacks and the June 2015 beheading in Lyon. Another five attacks were partially successful as the perpetrators carried out an attack and either wounded or killed persons, but they did not attack their primary target.

Of the above, the French authorities disrupted 52.9 percent (9) of the plots prior to any kind of execution, while 29.4 percent (5) of the plots were partially completed, and a further 17.6 percent (3) have been successful.

To date six returnees have been involved in plots, an approximate ratio of 1 to 40 returning fighters engaging in attacks for a returnee population of 250 in France or a 1 in 86 ratio for the current in-country contingent. [3] Based on the number of French fighters currently in Syria and Iraq (about 520), this suggests the possibility of another six plots emerging from the present foreign fighter contingent. [4]

The proportion of returnee involved in attacks in this dataset suggests a peak in 2013-2014, and then an absence of their involvement until late summer 2015. The drivers of the attack tempo are not entirely clear, but there has been an acceleration following Islamic State spokesperson Abu Muhammad al-Adnani's call for attacks, with ten of the 17 events occurring post September 2014. [5] The most recent events—conducted by Ghلام, al-Khazzani and Reda—appear to have indications of direction from the Islamic State. For instance, Ghلام is reported to have links to an Islamic State-affiliated cluster of French foreign fighters with connections to the Artigat group. This suggests the presence of a nascent external operations capacity among the French Islamic State adherents in Iraq. A French returnee has also reportedly told the authorities that Syria was a “terrorist factory” where individuals were being trained to attack Europe in the near future, and it has also been reported that returnees would attack not in their countries of origin, but elsewhere to lessen the risk of detection upon return (*Le Monde*, October 20).

Given that there is approximately a 3 to 1 ratio of sympathizer events versus returnee attacks, there could also potentially be at least another 18 events generated by the non-traveling population given the current plot and attack tempo. Based on the past two years, French authorities could be expected to disrupt ten of these plots; however, precedents suggest that three could be successful and a further five partially executed. Obviously, terrorist attack cycles are not linear, but the current surge in events suggests that more incidents are likely; most could emerge from the non-traveling population, and the authorities will not successfully disrupt all of the eventual plots. The threat is also durable in terms of the length of time it is likely to take for the threat to fully manifest and then exhaust itself. For example, by comparison, individuals involved in foreign fighter networks linked to the first Iraq conflict remained engaged for nearly a decade before executing their attacks (Caderol, May 16). The same may be true for the current Syrian conflict.

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Notes

1. See page 4, <https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2015/02/the-islamic-state-e2809cdc481biq-magazine-622.pdf>.
2. See <https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2015/07/the-islamic-state-e2809cdc481biq-magazine-1022.pdf>.
3. The returnee figure has been used to calculate the ratio as opposed to the sum of fighters present, deceased or returned, as the fighters currently in place may not all return and the deceased fighters will obviously not return. For the returnee figure, see: *Le Monde*, “Pas de risque zéro pour l'antiterrorisme,” August 3, <http://www.sen360.com/sport/en-france-pas-de-risque-zero-pour-l-antiterrorisme-320211.html>.
4. Figures from French Ministry of the Interior via Jean Charles-Brisard, October 14, <https://twitter.com/JcBrisard/status/654194866705068032>.
5. Silber, Mitchell D. 2015, “Crowdsourced Jihad: a New Framework for Understanding ISIS Plots Against the West,” *The Cipher Brief*, July 9, 2015, <http://thecipherbrief.com/articles/crowdsourced-jihad-new-framework-understanding-isis-plots-against-west>. The article has subsequently been taken down.

Caught Between Russia, the United States and Turkey, Syrian Kurds Face Dilemma

Wladimir van Wilgenburg

Russia, on September 30, launched airstrikes in support of the Syrian government in order to stop the advance of the Turkish and Saudi-backed Islamist Sunni rebel group Jaysh al-Fatah (“Army of Conquest”) into the country’s coastal Alawite Shi’a heartlands (NowLebanon, August 27). Meanwhile, the United States provided 50 tons of ammunition and weapons to the Syrian Kurds and its Arab allies to launch an operation to attack Raqqa, the Islamic State’s self-declared capital in eastern Syria (ANF, October 14). Turkey is also reportedly concerned that, in addition to the United States, Russia will also soon provide weapons to the Kurds (Daily Sabah, October 14). The aim of this article is to outline these key developments, to illuminate the serious challenges facing Syria’s Kurds and to suggest their most likely course of action.

Russia vs the United States

The launch of the Russian operations and statements from Kurdish officials about potential Russian support have raised questions over whether the Syrian Kurds are considering asking for Russian support in order to expand their territory in Aleppo or else maintain their alliance with the United States to destroy the Islamic State in northern Syria. There were already unconfirmed rumors that Kurdish security officials have been meeting with the Russians in Latakia, a Syrian government-held coastal city, in order to coordinate around the Kurdish-held town Hasakah to control the Syrian-Iraqi border, which an official from the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat—PYD) rejected as propaganda (Welati, October 8; Kurdwatch, October 13). Last week, the PYD announced that the PYD-led administration would open an office in Moscow in the future (ANHA, October 24).

The PYD has held several meetings with Russian officials—like Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov—since 2012, and enjoys good diplomatic relations with Russia (Terrorism Monitor, May 18, 2012). The PYD supported the Russian-backed Geneva talks between the Syrian government and the opposition to find a political solution to the conflict, although the peace talks failed in February 2014, and the war continued.

However, since the Islamic State attacked the mainly Kurdish Syrian border town of Kobane in September 2014, the Syrian Kurds have become the main ally for the U.S.-led coalition against that jihadist organization. This is despite the fact that the United States knows there are close relations between the PYD and the Kurdistan Workers Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê—PKK), which the United States and the EU consider a terrorist organization. Nevertheless, on October 10, the PYD co-chairman, Salih Muslim, met with Russian Deputy PM Bogdanov again in Paris to discuss the fight against the Islamic State (Welati, October 10).

Despite the good Russian-Kurdish diplomatic contacts, it is more likely that the PYD will strengthen their relations with the United States in the future, since they can only advance against the Islamic State with that country’s support. Without U.S. airstrikes since September 27, 2014, the PYD’s armed militia, the People’s Protection Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel—YPG), would have never been able to connect PYD-controlled administrations of Kobane and the Hasakah area by capturing Tal Abyad in June 2015. Likewise without U.S. support, Syrian Kurdish territories would be very vulnerable to Islamic State attacks. If the YPG or PYD decided to work openly with Russia, this could end U.S. air support. So while Salih Muslim met Bogdanov in October, Ilham Ahmed was in the United States seeking more support (Al-Monitor, October 8).

Conflicting Policies

The Kurds could try to benefit from the conflicting policies of the United States, Russia and Turkey. While the United States wants to defeat the Islamic State, Russia principally wants to defend Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and Turkey only wants to prevent Kurdish expansion and support its favored Islamist-leaning rebel groups against al-Assad. Meanwhile, the main goal for the YPG is to create a contiguous Kurdish controlled region from Derik to Efrin, alongside the Syrian Turkish border, and unite their three administrations in Kobane, Efrin and Hasakah provinces.

Turkey’s Syria policy since the Kurds took Tal Abyad in June, is to prevent Kurdish expansion westwards from Kobane toward Efrin. Turkey, therefore, does not want Jarabulus to fall into YPG hands, even if that means the city stays under the control of the Islamic State, as at present. “It is in Turkey’s interest to keep Jarabulus under [Islamic State] control,” a YPG fighter told this author. [1] However, the jihadist organization’s presence gives the YPG an excuse to try to take it. As a result, Turkey wants to create a safe zone to protect non-Islamic State rebels in the area and thereby prevent the YPG from connecting the Kurdish-controlled

areas of Kobane and Efrin without necessarily being seen to support the Islamic State.

However, this safe zone plan so far has failed, and the Islamic State has increased their advances in Aleppo's countryside, pushing back Turkish-supported rebels even more. Given the failure of the Turkish strategy to block further Kurdish advances in this area, the Kurds now hope Russian jets will protect them from the potential threat from Turkish jets carrying out airstrikes against YPG advances in the northern Aleppo countryside (Al-Monitor, October 1).

The United States, on one hand, is not worried about Kurdish expansion. The main goal of this country is to destroy the Islamic State in Syria and in Iraq, in cooperation with local Kurdish and Arab forces. Furthermore, Washington does not appear to be interested in regime-change in Syria, and prefers to fight only the jihadist organization. As a result, there are several disputes between the United States and Turkey over the former's support for YPG rebels. Turkey might not oppose the YPG and allied Arab groups taking Raqqa, but Jarabulus for Turkey is a red line, given its strategic importance. Although the United States says that they will arm rebels for them to take on Raqqa, the priority for the YPG, however, is Jarabulus.

On the other hand, the goal of Russia is to protect Syria's Alawite heartland and to keep al-Assad in power. Therefore, it might be interested in working with the Syrian Kurds in order to cut off the rebel lifeline in Azaz and the Syrian Bab al-Salameh border gate in the Aleppo governorate, a key channel for Turkish aid to rebels. Thus, if the Kurds in Syria manage to advance from Kobane all the way to Efrin, they could cut off the strategic border gate from Turkish-supported rebel groups.

"If Russia fights [the Islamic State], this is good step, too. The coalition helped us to liberate Giri Spi [Tal Abyad], Kobane and Hasakah... The coalition will continue to support YPG: they have to liberate Raqqa, and will help us in Jarabulus," senior Kurdish official Idris Nassan explained. [2]

However, the Kurds also recognize that Russia is not interested in fighting the Islamic State: "Their aim is not to fight [the Islamic State], but to steal the role [in fighting the group], and this is what Russia does. It tries to re-establish Assad's dominance. For example, they do not have an aim to recognize Rojava's canton [local PYD-led administrations]," according to senior PKK commander Duran Kalkan (*Milliyet*, October 6).

Moreover, PYD Co-Chair Salih Muslim has said al-Assad cannot stay in power, another significant difference between the group and Russia: "But as far as al-Assad remaining in power, we think differently. Al-Assad cannot remain in power as before... in the long term, it seems inconceivable that the majority of the Syrian people would accept his leadership anymore" (Al-Monitor, October 1).

Therefore, in reality, Russia cannot offer the Syrian Kurds much apart from protection against al-Qaeda's Jabhat al-Nusra and the rebel's Military Operation Room in Aleppo, or to supply the YPG with limited weapon supplies. Since last summer, there have been several clashes between the YPG and Nusra-allied rebel groups around Efrin and the Kurdish neighborhood of Shaykh Maqsoud (Aranews, July 31).

But, these rebel groups are growing weaker and weaker due to Russian airstrikes targeting them and Islamic State advances in Aleppo and towards Azaz. That jihadist organization is now already seven kilometers from Efrin and could capture Azaz (Welati, October 14). This will make it even more difficult for the Turks to protect its favored Syrian rebels or to create a safe zone alongside its border. Therefore, this arguably reduces the Kurds' need for direct Russian support.

As a result, the YPG said in a statement that their relations with the U.S.-led anti-Islamic State coalition would continue. They are afraid this would prevent the United States from arming them in the future, or provide them with ongoing airstrikes: "[This relation] will not simply continue but emerge stronger against committed enemy, the Daesh [Islamic State] terrorists... Yet, some sides are trying to distort the collaboration between the YPG and the coalition," the YPG said (YPG Rojava, October 2).

Moreover some Kurdish officials say cooperation with Russia is impossible, or could hurt their cooperation with local Sunni Arabs. "We are working with the Free Syrian Army," local Syrian defense minister in Kobane, Ismet Sheikh Hassan, said, adding "They are against al-Assad, so cooperation [with the Russians] is impossible... It would be contradictory because they back the regime clearly." [3]

Conclusion

At this point, it is unlikely the Kurds to support the Russians in their fight for the al-Assad government. Kurdish support for Russian-efforts to keep al-Assad in power could damage their relations with the FSA rebels they need for the Raqqa offensive, and also risk losing U.S. air support. The U.S. airstrikes were one of the main reasons the Kurds were able to defeat the Islamic State in Kobane. Without them, it

would be difficult for the Kurds to hold their lines or to make further progress, particularly in the key area between Efrin and Kobane, since they already lack the manpower required to take the towns. Therefore, it is unlikely that the Kurds will risk Western support for Russia, even though the United States itself will need the Kurds and allied rebels to defeat the Islamic State.

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Notes

1. Author's interview with YPG fighter Heval Serfiraz in the YPG headquarters, close to Ayn al-Issa, October 13, 2015.
2. Author's interview with Idris Nassan, deputy foreign minister in Kobane, October 11, 2015.
3. Author's interview with Ismet Sheikh Hassan, the local defense minister in Kobane, October 15, 2015.

The Evolution of Sunni Jihadism in Lebanon since 2011

Patrick Hoover

Since the Syrian civil war began in early 2011, the conflict has reignited sectarian tensions in neighboring Lebanon, transforming parts of the country into flashpoints of violence and operational spaces for militant groups. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Sunni jihadists, as well as a variety of secular militants, recruited, trained and plotted in Lebanon's Palestinian refugee camps, using them as a springboard for attacks elsewhere in the region. However, this changed when Sunni jihadist group Fatah al-Islam (FI) attempted to turn north Lebanon—which includes various impoverished, Salafist-influenced Sunni-majority areas where hatred of the Syrian regime has been brewing for decades—into a so-called Islamic emirate in 2007. Despite its defeat at the hands of the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) in a 111-day battle at the Nahr al-Bared Palestinian camp near Tripoli that summer, FI's actions marked the point when Lebanon became a battleground for jihadists, rather than simply a launching pad for attacks elsewhere. This set a precedent for subsequent Sunni jihadist groups, such as Jabhat al-Nusra (JN), the Islamic State, and Abdullah Azzam Brigades (AAB), to threaten Lebanon's territorial integrity and delicate sectarian balance.

According to the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation, an estimated 900 Lebanese citizens have fought or are currently fighting for Sunni militant groups in Syria and Iraq. [1] This reflects that since the summer of 2011, north Lebanon emerged not only as a vast recruiting pool, but also as an effective staging area for Lebanese jihadists crossing into Syria. Supported financially by local Salafist leaders, these jihadists fought for either FI, Jemaat Jund al-Sham (JJS) or smaller groups. FI, in particular, fought battles against the Syrian government in Aleppo, Rif Dimashq, al-Qusair and Homs. [2] However, with most of its leadership decimated by September 2012, FI's rank-and-file subsequently merged with other groups, including JJS.

Historically a Palestinian extremist group based in Ain al-Helwah, JJS reemerged in late 2012, as a major recruiter of Lebanese Sunni militants. A key step in this process occurred on December 23, 2012, when former FI fighter Khaled Mahmoud al-Dandashi (a.k.a. Abu Sulayman al-Muhajir) declared himself the "amir" of the newly-formed JJS at the medieval fortress Krak des Chevaliers that overlooks Qalaat al-Hosn, a village near Homs. [3] Al-Dandashi thereafter leveraged familial and personal connections in both Lebanon

and Syria to recruit hundreds of followers (*al-Hayat*, August 21, 2013). He also had agents who had served with him in FI embedded in the Salafist recruiting networks of the Sunni-majority Bab al-Tabbaneh district in Tripoli, which is the scene of frequent clashes against local Alawite Shi'a Muslims. Al-Dandashi remained at Krak des Chevaliers until his death in March 2014, prompting the return of 300 JJS fighters and their families back to north Lebanon (*Daily Star* [Beirut], March 22, 2014).

Throughout the first two years of the conflict, jihadists such as al-Dandashi focused primarily on using Lebanon as a transit point for recruits, cash and weapons. However, in 2013, the strategic direction of the Salafist-Jihadist community shifted away from fighting the forces of President Bashar al-Assad in Syria toward fighting Hezbollah and the Lebanese government, which they regarded as Hezbollah's "proxy," in Lebanon. With clearer objectives, Salafist-Jihadists began to behave more in unison, coalescing around the perception that destabilizing Lebanon directly contributes to the weakening of Hezbollah, and thus, al-Assad. Sunni jihadists sought to do this by tainting Hezbollah's legitimacy and labeling the group as an Iranian tool.

Around this time, in 2012, Sunni firebrand Shaykh Ahmad al-Assir emerged as a popular voice for these grievances. Al-Assir first came to widespread attention in 2012 when he demanded an expansion of the state's writ to curb Hezbollah's authority (*al-Akhbar* [Beirut], March 2, 2012). His rhetoric at this time was conciliatory, rational and supportive of greater political rights for Sunnis, many of whom felt themselves economically and politically marginalized. His views grew more radical, however, when the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) grew increasingly hesitant to disarm Hezbollah, especially in Sidon—the site of continuous clashes between pro-Hezbollah and pro-Assir groups. The tension reached a climax in June 2013, when several al-Assir loyalists opened fire on a LAF checkpoint in Sidon, sparking an intense, two-day firefight (*Daily Star* [Beirut], June 24, 2013). Al-Assir fled into hiding, but was arrested by Lebanese authorities in August 2015 (*Daily Star* [Beirut], August 15). Even though al-Assir is a fringe character, he came to epitomize the extent to which Sunni grievances can be transformed into armed mobilization in an "open front" and semi-conventional context against the LAF and Hezbollah.

Throughout the spring of 2014, Syrian opposition groups suffered defeats in western Syria, particularly in and around al-Qusayr, Qalamoun Nabak and Yabroud. This forced the retreat of hundreds of JN and Islamic State fighters into Lebanon, and particularly into Bekaa's Baalbek district. Prior to the rebel influx, the Sunni and Syrian-majority

camp of Arsal in the Bekaa Valley had served as a gateway for the covert transport and provision of resources and reinforcements for rebels in western Syria. However, after the influx, the camp became a safe haven for militants, allowing them to recruit Syrian refugees and launch attacks on Hezbollah and LAF positions across the northern Bekaa Valley. From December 2013 to March 2014, JN conducted 11 attacks, targeting Hezbollah positions in Hermel, Brital, Nabi Shayth and Nabi Uthman with at least 27 Grad rockets and four martyrdom operations. [4] JN cooperated with the Marwan Hadid Brigades, the Gaza Strip-based wing of the Abdullah Azzam Brigades (AAB), in two of these operations. Established in 2009 as an official al-Qaeda affiliate, AAB is a decentralized network of local militant groupings active in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon and Palestine, all of which are responsible for a number of attacks against Israeli and Western targets.

The increasing isolation of Arsal due to military pressure from Hezbollah and the LAF encouraged greater cooperation between jihadist groups. This dynamic came into full force in August when JN and AAB came to the Islamic State's aid in fighting the LAF in response to the arrest of Ahmad Jomaa (al-Jazeera, August 8, 2014). Jomaa was the amir of Fajr al-Islam—a detachment of the Islamic Front-allied Suqor al-Sham Brigade that cooperated closely with JN in al-Qusayr—before pledging allegiance to the Islamic State (Naharnet, August 2, 2014). [5] The five-day battle resulted in nearly 60 militants and 19 Lebanese troops killed, and dozens of security personnel being captured (*Daily Star* [Beirut], August 12, 2014). Even though the LAF managed to enter Arsal, the camp continues to be a source for Sunni extremism.

This inter-jihadist collaboration continued and increased in late October 2014, when the LAF busted an Islamic State-affiliated cell in Asoun and arrested its leader Ahmad Mikati, sparking a series of retaliatory attacks from Islamic State and JN militants. Mikati admitted that he sought to occupy the northern villages of Bakhoun, Asoun, Sir al-Dinnieh and Bekaa Sefrin and turn them into a safe haven for jihadist militants (*al-Nahar*, October 27, 2014). Mikati planned to coordinate this operation with JN-affiliated militants Khaled Hoblos in Zahrieh, a neighborhood in Tripoli, and Shadi al-Mawlawi, Ousamma Mansour, Ahmad Kasha and Abu Hureira in Bab al-Tabbaneh. Mawlawi and Mansour were the alleged recruiters of suicide bombers who had attacked the mainly Shi'a Jabal Mohsen district in Tripoli (Naharnet, January 20). Over 160 militants were arrested, dozens of weapons caches discovered and several explosives-rigged vehicles dismantled. Had this plan succeeded, the regime-held Homs corridor in Syria would have been sandwiched

between two Sunni jihadist-held territories.

Meanwhile, in Lebanon, from July 2013 to February 2014, with assistance from JN elements, AAB and Islamic State operatives claimed a total of six attacks in south Beirut. In one of the most significant of these, in November 2013, AAB conducted a double suicide bombing of the Iranian Embassy, killing 23 and injuring at least 160. [6] About three months later, AAB launched another double suicide bombing on the Iranian cultural center, killing at least five and wounding more than 100. [7] The Islamic State claimed responsibility for the bomb attacks on January 4, 2014, in the capital's Haret Hreik suburb and on June 15 at the Duroy Hotel (*Daily Star* [Beirut], January 2, 2014). [8]

These operations represent another example of tangible teamwork between the Islamic State, AAB, JN, JJS and FI. Illustrative of the personal connections linking various jihadist group, Naim Abbas—one of the masterminds behind the Beirut attacks—befriended Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's bodyguard in AQI, joined forces with AAB former amir Majid al-Majid in Ain al-Helwa, received training on rocket warfare from AAB's Sirajuddin Zurayqat and spent the majority of 2013 plotting and conducting attacks at the behest of JN and the Islamic State (*al-Akhbar*, February 26, 2014). His two main contacts were JN's Yabroud amir Abu Malek al-Talli and the Islamic State's Abu Abdullah al-Iraqi. Abbas also helped an individual named Mohamad Monther al-Hassan provide explosive material to the Duroy bombers (*Daily Star* [Beirut], July 3, 2014). Al-Hassan's uncle was former JJS amir al-Dandashi, who fought with FI alongside two other of al-Hassan's uncles (NOW Lebanon, July 16, 2014). Well after most of FI's corps integrated into JJS, on July 7, 2014, JJS pledged allegiance to the Islamic State (YouTube, July 7, 2014). On January 25, 2014, Abu Sayyaf al-Anbari, a former FI commander, released a video announcing the establishment of an Islamic State franchise in Lebanon (al-Arabiya, January 25, 2014).

After the clashes in north Lebanon in October 2014, Salafist-Jihadists suffered a number of setbacks in 2015, including the assassination of JN leader Usama Mansur Abu Umar in April, and the arrests of al-Assir in August, Islamic State recruiter Omar Ghannoum on August 25, and Ibrahim al-Atrash in September. Al-Atrash, along with JN's Qalamoun amir Malek Abu al-Talleh, formed and armed JN units in Aarsal, and also participated in the kidnapping of LAF and policemen during the August battle (Naharnet, September 16).

Conclusion

The future of Salafist-Jihadist movements in Lebanon will largely be determined by the ongoing conflict in Syria and Lebanese domestic politics. The recent Russian military intervention in Syria may diminish the burden on Hezbollah and instead allow it to consolidate and extend its defensive ring from the northeastern Lebanese border to the Homs-Damascus corridor. This prospect could spell trouble for the thousands of Sunni fighters entrenched in Lebanon's al-Nabek and al-Zabadani districts—key staging zones for operations in eastern Lebanon. Another overlooked but key factor is Lebanon's domestic political situation. The Lebanese government lacks a president and remains highly-fragmented, dysfunctional and incapable of building fully-functioning, impartial non-sectarian institutions. The lack of credible, moderate Sunni leadership means that some Sunnis will continue to perceive jihadist groups as the most effective defenders of the community.

While an increase in Hezbollah's capabilities and a refocusing of the group on Lebanon may prove disastrous for jihadist groups, it may also harden Sunni militants' resolve to adapt and survive. Secondly, the Lebanese government shows no signs of becoming significantly more capable to govern, which means that the current conditions in the country, which have allowed jihadists to gain strength and influence, will continue. Despite the government's recent operational success against jihadist plots, the pattern of fighters coalescing into new, emerging groups continues to underline the influential role of personal connections—most of which have roots in al-Qaeda (including the former al-Qaeda in Iraq group)—in fostering inter-jihadist collaboration and resiliency, which is correspondingly difficult to disrupt. If these groups continue to centralize under fewer banners, as seems the current trend, Lebanon's Salafist-Jihadist movements will potentially come to pose a greater threat to the country's fragile political state and delicate sectarian balance in the coming months and years.

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Notes

1. See <http://icsr.info/2015/01/foreign-fighter-total-syriairaq-now-exceeds-20000-surpasses-afghanistan-conflict-1980s/>.
2. Please see <http://jihadology.net/2012/07/18/new-statement-from-fata%E1%B8%A5-al-islam-killed-thirty-of-the-soldiers-of-the-rawafi%E1%B8%8D-kufr-in-fondness->

in-rural-aleppo/; <http://jihadology.net/2012/07/23/new-statement-from-fata%e1%b8%a5-al-islam-about-the-ambush-of-the-army-of-the-alawi-nu%e1%b9%a3ayris-in-the-village-of-al-qas%e1%b9%adal/>; <http://jihadology.net/2012/07/29/new-statement-from-fata%e1%b8%a5-al-islam-pride-of-the-mujahidin-and-the-dead-of-the-martyrs/>.

3. Please see <http://jihadology.net/2012/12/23/%E1%B9%A3ada-ash-sham-foundation-for-media-production-presents-a-new-video-message-and-statement-from-jund-ash-sham-announcement-on-the-founding-of-jamaat-jund-ash-sham-fi-rif-%E1%B8%A5om/>.

4. Please see <http://jihadology.net/2013/12/19/new-statement-from-jabhat-al-nu%E1%B9%A3rah-in-lebanon-targeting-the-strongholds-of-%E1%B8%A5izb-irani-with-ten-grad-rockets-in-the-hermel-region-of-lebanon/>; <http://jihadology.net/2014/01/16/new-statement-from-jabhat-al-nu%E1%B9%A3rah-in-lebanon-martyrdom-operation-upon-the-stronghold-of-%E1%B8%A5izb-irani-in-the-hermel/>; <http://jihadology.net/2014/02/02/new-statement-from-the-abd-allah-azzam-brigades-raid-of-bombing-the-stronghold-of-%e1%b8%a5izb-iran-in-the-hermel/>; <http://jihadology.net/2014/02/01/new-statement-from-jabhat-al-nu%E1%B9%A3rah-in-lebanon-a-second-martyrdom-operation-upon-the-stronghold-of-%E1%B8%A5izb-iran-in-the-hermel/>; <http://jihadology.net/2014/02/19/new-statement-from-jabhat-al-nu%E1%B9%A3rah-in-lebanon-launching-five-grad-rockets-on-the-regions-of-brital-and-al-nabi-shayth/>; <http://jihadology.net/2014/02/22/new-statement-from-jabhat-al-nu%E1%B9%A3rah-in-lebanon-blessed-martyrdom-operation-in-the-hermel-region/>; <http://jihadology.net/2014/03/03/new-statement-from-jabhat-al-nu%E1%B9%A3rah-in-lebanon-launching-a-number-of-grad-rockets-upon-the-brital-region/>; <http://jihadology.net/2014/03/05/new-statement-from-jabhat-al-nu%E1%B9%A3rah-in-lebanon-launching-three-grad-rockets-upon-the-region-of-al-nabi-shayth/>; <http://jihadology.net/2014/03/08/al-awzai-foundation-for-media-production-presents-a-new-statement-from-the-abd-allah-azzam-brigades-targeting-the-hermel-region-with-six-grad-rockets-in-conjunction-with/>; <http://jihadology.net/2014/03/13/new-statement-from-jabhat-al-nu%E1%B9%A3rah-in-lebanon-launching-three-grad-rockets-upon-the-region-of-al-nabi-shayth-2/>; <http://jihadology.net/2014/03/16/new-statement-from-jabhat-al-nu%E1%B9%A3rah-in-lebanon-blessed-martyrdom-operation-on-the-stronghold-of-the-dreaded-%E1%B8%A5izb-iran-in-the-region-of-al-nabi-uthman/>.

5. The video, which has since been taken down, was available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tQB-pJEBOOg>.

6. Please see <http://jihadology.net/2013/12/26/new-video-message-from-abd-allah-azzam-brigades-siraj-al-din-zurayqat-about-the-raid-of-the-iranian-embassy-in-beirut/>.

7. Please see <http://jihadology.net/2014/03/07/al-awzai-foundation-for-media-production-presents-a-new-statement-from-the-abd-allah-azzam-brigades-on-the-raid-of-the-iranian-cultural-center-in-beirut/>.

8. Please see <http://jihadology.net/2014/06/26/new-statement-from-the-islamic-state-of-iraq-and-al-sham-the-first-raid-in-lebanon/>.