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**A Parisian police officer waits in position during the November 13, 2015 Paris Attacks.**

**SOMALI ISLAMIC STATE SUPPORTERS LAUNCH REPORTED ATTACK IN PUNTLAND**

*James Brandon*

Supporters of the Islamic State group reportedly carried out one of their first attacks in Somalia this month, in a potentially significant development that may presage the group spreading into other parts of East Africa. The incident occurred in Puntland, an autonomous self-governing region in the northeast of Somalia, where government sources were reported by local media as saying that at least seven people were killed in a clash between government troops and an pro-Islamic State militia (Horseed Media, November 27). Although details were sparse, local reports said that the attack occurred near the village of Galgala, and began when the Islamist fighters shelled a military encampment. The rebels are believed to be former members of al-Shabaab who retreated to the mountainous region when the movement was driven out of central Somalia. These subsequently evolved into two separate groups, one loyal to the al-Qaeda-aligned al-Shabaab and one which pledged allegiance to the Islamic State and is led by Shaykh Abdul Qadir Mumi, a former al-Shabaab spiritual leader (VOA, November 25). Mumi had earlier pledged allegiance to Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in an audio recording released online and Mumi's active followers are believed to number around 20 (Reuters, October 23).

The violence occurred against the backdrop of fighting in Galkayo City between the Puntland government and rival clans from Galmudug, which the Puntland authorities have claimed are backed by the country's federal government (Horseed Media, November 19). This development underscores that Islamist militant groups are continuing to evolve, and in some cases become even more extreme, despite the group being driven out of both Mogadishu and central parts of Somalia. The fresh violence also shows that Puntland, whose self-declared autonomous government is weak in part because it is not

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

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internationally recognized, remains potentially vulnerable to extremist movements. The Islamic State had previously in October released a video, “From the Land of al-Sham [Syria] to the Mujahideen in Somalia–Wilayat al-Khayr,” aimed at encouraging Somalis, both in Somalia and in the Somali diaspora, to support the group (Jihadology, October 3). The video featured Somali Islamic State members, apparently in Iraq or Syria, and included one British-Somali man telling viewers in English that “establishing *Khilafah* [caliphate] in Somalia will not only benefit you, but will benefit the Muslims in Somalia and East Africa.” Tellingly, however, most of the video was delivered in either English or Arabic, suggesting that the Islamic State has limited Somalis willing and able to star in its media productions. This factor seems likely to limit the group’s ability to wean fighters away from al-Shabaab, a group which is not only long established in Somalia, but which is also extensively embedded in Somalia’s tribal landscape.

Nonetheless, the emergence of the Islamic State in Somalia has the potential to pose a substantial distraction to al-Shabaab, which is already beleaguered by increasing military pressure from African Union (AU) troops and from increasingly numerous and effective Somali government forces. Indicative of this is that al-Shabaab has threatened to “cut the throat” of any of its members who join the Islamic State (Capital FM [Nairobi], November 24). Al-Shabaab’s senior spiritual guide, Shaykh Abdalla, also reportedly warned in a broadcast on the group’s “Radio Andulus,” that suspected Islamic State supporters would be “immediately beheaded” (*The Star* [Nairobi], November 25). Backing up its threats with actions, al-Shabaab has reportedly killed a number of former members who have defected to the Islamic State, notably killing Shaykh Hussein Abdi Gedi and four others near Gududley village in Middle Jubba region (VOA, November 22). Gedi was formerly al-Shabaab’s deputy governor of the Juba region and was a significant figure within the movement, indicating how seriously al-Shabaab is taking the emerging Islamic State threat to its position as Somalia’s premier jihadist group.

## TURKEY-PKK VIOLENCE CONTINUES TO COMPLICATE ISLAMIC STATE FIGHT

*James Brandon*

Violence between Turkey and the militant Kurdistan Workers Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê—PKK) during recent weeks has continued to complicate regional and international efforts to tackle the Islamic State militant group and the spread of other hardline Islamist groups in Syria. During recent weeks, fatal violence between the PKK and the Turkish military has continued on an almost daily basis in Turkey’s Kurdish-minority southeastern provinces. This violence has had important broader consequence for Turkey and region. One outcome is a hardening of Turkish popular feeling against Kurdish nationalist groups, including those PKK-linked groups such as the People’s Protection Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel—YPG) fighting against the Islamic State in Syria. Another result is to prompt the Turkish military to adopt ever more drastic measures in pursuit of security and perceived national interests, which, as demonstrated by the Turkish military’s downing of a Russian military aircraft along the Turkey-Syria border, has the potential to lead to significant regional destabilization.

Much of the ongoing violence between the government and the PKK occurs in relatively remote areas in southeastern Turkey. In one typical incident, for instance, on November 30, the Turkish government reported that three PKK members and one government soldier were killed in clashes in Derik district in Mardin Province, while three more PKK fighters were killed in Sirnak Province, reportedly after a police patrol discovered a PKK unit that was preparing to launch an attack (Anadolu Agency, November 30). While such incidents rarely cause civilian casualties, another significant trend is for PKK fighters to attack the construction of Turkish checkpoints and observation points, particularly in border regions, which are intended to control and limit PKK activity in the region. For instance, on November 24, PKK fighters attacked a construction team working on one Turkish military facility near Cizre, a town known for its strong PKK presence, killing one civilian worker (Anadolu Agency, November 24). In a bid to stop such violence and to disrupt PKK attacks, Turkey also launched airstrikes within Turkish territory, for instance, bombing what the military described as PKK shelters and supply points in Şemdinli district of Hakkari Province on November 23 (*Hurriyet Daily News*, November 23). As a result of this violence, officials have said that 180 members of the security forces have been killed in fighting with the PKK since July, while more than 1,700 PKK fighters are believed to have been killed in the same period, both in Turkey and as a result of Turkish airstrikes in Iraq

(Anadolu Agency, November 30).

The increasingly bitter mood that this fighting is causing in Turkey, both among Kurds and ethnic Turks, is evidenced by the growing brutality and randomness of much of the violence. In the latest example, a prominent Kurdish human rights lawyer, Tahir Elci, was killed on November 28 in Cizre apparently by local police who opened fire on individuals who had attacked them with guns, prompting them to open fire on a nearby crowd (*Today's Zaman*, November 28). His death prompted large Kurdish demonstrations. Moreover, there have been reports of a pro-Turkish Islamist group, known as Esedullah ("Allah's Lions"), apparently supporting the police and intimidating and carrying out violence against Kurdish activists, prompting questions in parliament by Kurdish MPs and members of the secularist CHP party (*Al-Monitor*, November 12). Meanwhile, in another unusual but noteworthy development, videos purportedly taken recently of Turkish paramilitary forces in the region show masked police units firing into the air and chanting "Allah Akbar," in a manner that some commentators argue is reminiscent of the Islamic State itself, a marked departure from the traditional rigid secularism of the Turkish security forces (YouTube, November 17). These and other such incidents underline that the ongoing fusing of Islamist and Turkish nationalist ideologies under the country's ruling Islamist-leaning AKP party has the potential not only to complicate and deepen the conflict between the government and Kurdish separatists, but also to hamper international efforts to combat the Islamic State, a struggle which remains heavily dependent on armed Kurdish separatist groups in Iraq and Syria, many of which have close links with the PKK.

## **Militant Islamists, Organized Crime and the Balkan Diaspora in Europe**

*Ebi Spahiu*

In light of terrorist attacks in Paris on November 13, countries across Europe have visibly increased security measures and are on the alert for more attacks. Countries in the Western Balkans have similarly boosted security after state agencies received alerts from international partners and from their own intelligence organizations on potential Paris-style attacks in cities of the region (*Ora News*, November 18). Since the emergence of the Islamic State and continuous reports of Balkan foreign fighters who have joined the organization in Syria and Iraq in recent years, local security analysts and think tanks have attempted to provide profile local fighters who have joined this jihadist organization. They have largely concluded that a majority have criminal backgrounds and come from impoverished areas, but were then mobilized and inspired by individual radical imams, who serve as key links between volunteers and jihadist groups abroad. [1] So far, however, there has been relatively little focus on the alleged role that organized crime groups from the region have played in aiding militant cells in Western Europe, or the involvement of the Balkan diaspora in providing an arms for terrorist groups in the West.

A recent study released by the Flemish Peace Institute, based in Brussels, concluded that the majority of firearms used for violent attacks, including the Paris shootings, make their way to Europe via the Western Balkans from groups that capitalize on existing routes originating in or transiting the region utilized for drug trafficking and other illegal activities. "Police have noticed an increase of Kalashnikov-type of assault weapons in recent years and official records show that the majority of these weapons come from the Balkans," said Nils Duquet, co-author of the study, in an interview with Top Channel News in Tirana (*Top Channel*, November 21).

### **Organized Criminal groups, Terrorism and the Balkan Diaspora**

Since the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia and the collapse of the Communist regime in Albania in the 1990s, weak rule of law and corruption have strengthened smuggling networks in the region, many of which are often closely linked to public officials. Such weak state structures to combat organized crime and high levels of corruption have enabled several nexus groups to emerge and dominate drug trafficking and

arms trade in European markets, but also establish significant relationships with terrorist organizations, as they have done in the past with the Kurdish PKK or al-Qaeda. [2] The most notable case is the rise of the Albanian mafia and the nexus with the Kosovo Liberation Army in the late 1990s, which expanded out of Albania's economic downfall following the collapse of "pyramid" investment schemes in 1997. Violent rebellions led to the ransacking of hundreds of military and police storage facilities across the country (Bota Sot, October 25). Over 100,000 weapons are believed to have been stolen over the course of a few months during this period—the majority of which are still used in conflicts or recycled in European markets. Some are also now believed to end up on the hands of terrorist organizations, including sleeper cells based in Western countries, with Belgium providing the largest black market (*Financial Times*, November 19). Furthermore, regional networks created over the years out of these criminal and political nexuses, including those tri-border areas between Albania, Kosovo and Macedonia, are also believed to be "directly tied to operational developments of militant Islamist cells in the UK," often due to their dominance of smuggling heroin and other types of drug and human trafficking. [3] According to several accounts, heroin from the Balkans accounts for over \$20 billion annually, which also largely finances groups like Hezbollah and al-Qaeda (*The New York Times*, April 28, 2014).

In this context, it is no surprise that militant Islamist groups, including the Islamic State, seek to exploit homegrown cells established in the Western Balkans, but also diaspora-based communities and the trafficking networks elsewhere in Europe. According to an EU-led study, looking at the ties between organized criminal groups and terrorism in Western Europe, in addition to geographical components that link terrorism to Balkan organized crime, there is also a notable increase of Balkan second and third generation diaspora becoming more involved with radical Islamist communities based in the West. This has been particularly concerning for the Balkan diaspora in Austria, Switzerland, Italy and the UK, which have seen a number of youth, mainly nationals of Albania, Kosovo and Montenegro, among others in the Balkan, join the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. In Switzerland, for instance, a sizable percentage of foreign fighters are of Balkan origin, particularly from Kosovo, whose migrant population makes up a large portion of Muslims in the country (CTC Sentinel, July 30, 2014). Although, according to experts, many of the ethnic Albanian Muslim communities in Europe, including those in Switzerland, have access to independent funding for their religious needs, they are not immune to the influence of well-funded Wahhabist and Salafist foundations and mosques representing more radical religious views. "Many religious communities fight

over the leadership that is going to represent Muslims, making Albanians practitioners susceptible to be usurped by suspicious finances and attracted to radical ideologies," claims a Tirana-based security official interviewed by this author who wishes to remain anonymous. [4]

### The Balkans as a Transit Route for Terrorists

A number of police counter-terrorism operations have exposed these connections, which are now becoming increasingly visible to security agencies across Europe. In July 2014, Italian police, in collaboration with the Albanian authorities, carried a large operation against a group of Islamic State supporters who had recruited and aided several foreign fighters to cross over to Turkey, to join the Islamic State in Syria (Shqiptarja [Tirana], July 1). Among those arrested, the majority were Albanian and Italian nationals who had allegedly assisted the travels of foreign fighters, including that of Maria Gulia Sergio, an Italian convert, and her Albanian husband, Aldo Kobuzi. Investigations have since revealed that these individuals traveled to Syria on September 2014, by seeking help from Kobuzi's remaining relatives in Albania, who were also followers of Salafist ideologies (Balkan Insight, March 2015). Similar stories are becoming noticeable as local and international media discover transit routes of foreign fighters linked to the Islamic State. This is particularly underlined in light of the flow of refugees crossing the region on their journey to Western Europe and the potential for individuals linked to extremist organizations to enter Europe through this route. Such fears have been heightened by allegations of some of the Paris attackers entered Europe through the Balkans, posing as a Syrian refugee (RT, November 15).

### Conclusion

Since the Paris attacks, regional security services have stepped up security to prevent any possible attacks by local Islamic State supporters. For instance, Albania, a NATO member, has deployed over 1,500 armed security forces to ensure safety in public spaces and adopted a new national strategy against terrorism (Ora News, November 18). [5] In the wake of the Paris events, Albania's security level has also been increased to "red," following several alerts from state agencies and a note from the U.S. Embassy in Tirana that credible intelligence suggested that the capital city is among the Islamic State's targets (Lapsi, November 20). Serbia's security forces are similarly "showing off" their regional military might in the face of potential terrorist threats and deadly attacks (Balkan Insight, November 20). These examples show how regional governments are demonstrating their commitment to prevent attacks and building further

cooperation between agencies.

However, arrests and increased military capacity do not address the real concerns that have enabled violent extremism and religious radicalism to develop in the Balkans in the first place. These problems include corrupt officials who are involved in organized crime and the drugs trade (Exit, November 13; Balkan Insight, November 10). An additional problem is that moderate Islamic religious authorities that have been ousted by more radical preachers in recent years, leaving Islamic State supporters in the Balkan region, particularly those in Albania and Kosovo, with an open field (Balkan Insight, November 14). There are already indications that this toxic environment is starting to produce attackers; Bosnia-Herzegovina experienced its first violent assault by an alleged Islamist lone wolf, who killed two soldiers and wounded several others in a shooting in the suburbs of Sarajevo on November 18 (Balkan Insight, November 18). Despite the region's governments' efforts, however, it is becoming more clear that authorities are also aware of their own relatively limited capacities to carry investigations that involve acts of terrorism, and that the region's security continues to rely heavily on international intelligence. As threats levels remain high in the midst of the Islamic State's strong support-base in the Balkans, very few believe that the region's political elite has the will to confront violent extremism and organized crime. [6]

*Ebi Spahiu is a researcher on Central Asian and Western Balkan Affairs, focusing on gender and religious extremism.*

#### Notes

1. "Report inquiring into the causes and consequences of Kosovo citizens' involvement as foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq, Kosovo Center for Security Studies," April 2015, [http://www.qkss.org/repository/docs/Report\\_inquiring\\_into\\_the\\_causes\\_and\\_consequences\\_of\\_Kosovo\\_citizens'\\_involvement\\_as\\_foreign\\_fighters\\_in\\_Syria\\_and\\_Iraq\\_307708.pdf](http://www.qkss.org/repository/docs/Report_inquiring_into_the_causes_and_consequences_of_Kosovo_citizens'_involvement_as_foreign_fighters_in_Syria_and_Iraq_307708.pdf).
2. "Europe's Crime-Terror Nexus: Links Between Terrorist and Organized Crimes Groups in the European Union," <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/document/activities/cont/201211/20121127ATT56707/20121127ATT56707EN.pdf>.
3. *Ibid*, pg. 19.
4. Interview with Tirana-based security official who wishes to remain anonymous due to security concerns, November 19, 2015.
5. National strategy in combating violent extremism, [http://www.qbz.gov.al/botime/fletore\\_zyrtare/2015/PDF-2015/203-2015.pdf](http://www.qbz.gov.al/botime/fletore_zyrtare/2015/PDF-2015/203-2015.pdf).
6. Adriatic Institute, February 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QV4zZ2MAv9Q>.

## Islamic State's Sri Lankan Outreach

*Animesh Roul*

In recent months, there has been growing evidence of actual and attempted outreach by the Islamic State into Sri Lanka, presently struggling to recover from a three-decade long conflict between its Sinhalese and Tamil ethnic groups. One of the most significant developments was the news of two Sri Lankan nationals fighting with the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. One such report, in July 2015, indicated that a Sri Lankan national in his mid-30s, identified as Mohamed Muhsin Sharfz Nilam (a.k.a. "Abu Shurayh al-Silani"), was killed while fighting in Raqqa, Syria, during a U.S.-led coalition airstrike. Sri Lanka's prime minister subsequently ordered investigations into possible Islamic State influence in the country to fathom the levels of radicalization among its minority Muslim populace.

The news of Nilam's death was released by another Sri Lankan, Thauqeer Ahmed Thajudeen (a.k.a. "Abu Dhujaana Silani"), who is believed to be still fighting with the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (LankaNewsPaper.com, July 26). Six months after Nilam's death, the November 2015 issue of the Islamic State's online magazine *Dabiq* paid tribute to its slain Sri Lankan fighter:

May Allah accept Abu Shurayh and have mercy on him and all those who gave their life, wealth and time for the cause of Allah... whose actions continue to inspire and awaken this Ummah. [1]

A cursory look at Nilam's life gives us some clues on his Islamic education background and possible radical orientations. A resident of Warallagama of Kandy district, Mohamed Muhsin Nilam received an education in Shari'a law at Pakistan's International Islamic University before returning to Sri Lanka. He afterwards became a visiting Urdu teacher in the capital's Colombo University before 2012, and later became principal of a school in Galewala, Kandy (*Sunday Times* [Colombo], July 26).

Besides Urdu and Islamic law, Nilam was known locally as a martial arts trainer as he gave karate lessons at various schools as an instructor in Maharagama, Kotahena and Kandy. However, he left the Galewala school in 2014, reportedly informing the school administration that he would travel to Mecca with his family for pilgrimage in January 2015 (*Sunday Times* [Colombo], July 26). Per available reports, Nilam and his entire family of six children, then pregnant wife and his parents obtained tourist visas in December 2014

to visit Turkey. Information given in *Dabiq* about Nilam claimed that he was in fact leading a party of 16 Sri Lankan nationals, including his family members, to perform *hijrah* (migration) not to Mecca but to the Islamic State's so-called caliphate in Iraq and Syria. [2]

Insights into some of Nilam's motivations are given by his posts on Facebook. For instance, in one post, dated July 3, 2015, he wrote: "America, Iran, Bashar [al-Assad, president of Syria], Arab Countries, 70 other countries are fighting [the Islamic State]. The only country who doesn't fight is Sri Lanka. So logically [the Islamic State] is a product of Sri Lanka" (Facebook, July 3). On the same day he posted an image of the Islamic State's leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, with text that said "We will kill every man, woman, child, Shi'a, Sunni, Zoroastrians, Kurds, Christians" (Facebook, July 3).

In another of his many Facebook postings, Nilam went on to justify al-Baghdadi's position as the caliph and attempted to validate the legitimacy of the Islamic State's caliphate. He seemed to be prepared for any eventuality in his life with the jihadist organization. For instance, he wrote a prayer that: "May Allah guide us all, make us steadfast in the truth until death, make our life and death pleased to Him, and grant us death of a *Shahid* [martyr]" (Facebook, June 28). His more recent Facebook posts prior to his death dealt with discussions of the caliphate, Shari'a and eulogizing the Islamic State's martyrs. According to *Dabiq*, Nilam was engaged in "*dawah*" (recruitment) activities, as well as taking part in battles for the T3 gas fields and Jazal, located in "Wilayat Homs" in Syria. [3]

Nilam and Thajudeen's cases have spurred debate in Sri Lanka about the possible inroads of the Islamic State into the country and whether its local supporters are now actively scouting potential foot soldiers. The security establishment is at present apprehensive about two things: the existence of Islamic State-linked jihadist networks in the country and that several other Sri Lankan nationals may also be fighting for the jihadist group in Iraq and Syria. For instance, like Nilam and Thajudeen, another Lankan national from Colombo who has pledged allegiance to the Islamic State and is very active on Facebook is Abu Abdulla Silani, who has mentioned in his online profile that he, too, is a soldier of the Islamic State and lives in the group's self-declared capital, Raqqa, in Syria, according to his now-deleted Facebook page.

Moreover social networking sites have many Sri Lankan nationals and groups who claim to be affiliated with jihadist groups in Syria and Iraq, and are mostly linked with the Islamic State. For instance, a Facebook group named "Seylan

Muslims in Shaam" (Sri Lankan Muslims in the Levant) urged Sri Lankan people, irrespective of Tamils or native Sinhalese, to join the Jihad bandwagon. For instance, in a message posted on August 16, the group said:

O people of Sri Lanka, we the Muslims of Shaam with origins from Sailaan (Sri Lanka) send you this message as a wakeup call with sincere intentions, keeping Allah (SWT) as our witness. We invite you to leave all corrupt systems, which subjugate mankind to seek the freedom and justice of Islam. So that you will be successful in this world and hereafter. Remember that we will reach you even if it takes another generation and we will fight the corrupt leadership that prevents you from seeking the truth and establish Islam in Sailaan. [4]

The message even urged the Muslims of Sri Lanka:

[W]ake up from your slumber and see how humiliated you have become, not a single leader to lift a finger, when your mosques are destroyed or being bullied by extremists. You are being fooled by sellouts of our community, who work for American, Israeli, Iranian and Indian intelligence, who only care about themselves and their families. Soon you will see their real faces by the will of Allah. [5]

It exhorted further: "O Muslims of Sailaan, after 90 years your Khilafah (caliphate) is back, and despite 70 nations pouncing on it, the Khilafah is remaining and expanding." [6]

While the government of Sri Lanka investigates the growing stature of the Islamic State, several Muslim clerics' organizations, like All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama (ACJU), have issued a joint statement denouncing the jihadists' violent agenda and naming it as a deviant organization. The statement also condemned all or any Lankan individuals associated with the the Islamic State. The ACJU also urged the Colombo administration to take action against any individual involved in any form of extremism (Colombo Telegraph, July 25).

The government's and ACJU's stands against the Islamic State's outreach activities notwithstanding, grassroots radicalization of some Muslim youths in Sri Lanka is potentially directly connected with many violent skirmishes between Sri Lankan Muslims and vigilante groups associated with the majority Buddhist population in recent years.

Not only are anti-Buddhist sentiments high among a section of Muslim populations in Sri Lanka, but alarmingly, the minority population is more vulnerable to increasing

attempts by Salafist sectarian groups, such as Sri Lanka Thawheed Jamaat (SLTJ), which not only promotes sectarian discord within Islam, but also attempts to preach a rabid strain of Islam that largely despises the practices and existence of other Islamic sects like Shi'as and Ahmadiyahs (*New Indian Express*, November 8). [7]

These many fast shifting situations in Sri Lanka would possibly provide an opportunity for transnational jihadist groups like the Islamic State, which has been attempting to spread its influence beyond its base in Iraq and Syria. And most certainly, the group's propaganda machinery would attempt now to portray native fighters like Nilam in an Islamic and heroic light to create an atmosphere of sympathy and support for the caliphate within the Sri Lanka's Muslim minority population.

*Animesh Roul is the Executive Director of Research at the New Delhi-based Society for the Study of Peace and Conflict (SSPC).*

#### Notes

1. The November 2015 issue of Dabiq can be found at <https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2015/11/the-islamic-state-e2809cdc481biq-magazine-12e280b3.pdf>.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*
4. The group's protected Facebook page can be found at <https://www.facebook.com/seylanmuslimsinshaam/posts/1663851737179801:0>.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*
7. For instance, Thawheed Jamaath's attempt to get Saudi and foreign funding to protect Sri Lankan Muslims and views against Lankan Buddhists and government, See, "Thawheed Jamaat's Call To Protect SL Muslims Irks Security Establishment" Colombo Telegraph, July 23, 2014, <https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/thawheed-jamaats-call-to-protect-sl-muslims-irks-security-establishment/>.

## The Islamic State Strikes Again in France: A Tale of Two Omars

*Timothy Holman*

The November 13, 2015 attacks in France were the deadliest in Europe committed by the jihadist movement since the Madrid attacks in March 2004. The attacks, claimed by the Islamic State in a statement and a video, are still in the very early stages of investigation by the French authorities. The full details will take months to determine, including: the exact details of the perpetrators, the role of external entities and why the attackers were not disrupted prior to executing the attacks. However, some facts are already clear: The attacks come in a year where, prior to the latest incidents, the French authorities have dealt with nine other publicly known plots or attacks, double that of previous years (two in 2012, four in 2013, six in 2014 and nine in 2015). [1] Initial indications are also that an Islamic State-linked group of Belgian and French foreign fighters are behind at least half of the plots and attacks in 2015. The plot and attack tempo will have engaged significant levels of counter-terrorism resources, which were simultaneously dealing with travelers to and returnees from Syria and Iraq—approximately 2,000 people—with about half that number having been in the Syria and Iraq conflict zones at some point since 2013. [2]

#### Returnee Involvement in Plots

Initially plots and attacks in France from September 2012 onwards suggested some returnee involvement, albeit as single attackers, with a number of individual acts inspired by the Islamic State. The January 2015 attacks by associates of the Buttes-Chaumont network—claimed by both the Islamic State (Amedy Coulibaly) and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) (the Kouachi brothers)—pointed towards multiple threat vectors—the Islamic State, AQAP as well as an earlier generation of jihadists. [3] If the Islamic State appeared willing to allow returnees to attack at home as well as endorsing more the personal initiatives of sympathizers—for example, the list of attacks mentioned in the sixth and tenth issues of the Islamic State's online magazine Dabiq—without providing direct support, an acceleration in the tempo of plots and attacks following the January events suggested a change in the threat environment. [4]

Evidence also emerged over the course of the summer of 2015 that French and Belgian nationals with the Islamic State in Syria were involved with tasking and equipping plotters arrested in France. This group of French and Belgian nationals are alleged to have been involved in five plots or

attacks; one in Verviers, Belgium in January 2005, one in Paris in April 2015, two in August 2015 (a concert hall in Paris and the Paris-bound Thalys train) and the November 13, 2015 attacks, again in Paris. [5] The French authorities have also announced a second wave of attacks planned for either the 18th or 19th of November in the La Defense area of Paris when they raided a safe house in Seine-Saint-Denis. [6] The raid in January 2015, in Verviers, is assessed to have potentially disrupted a series of attacks. If this was the case, the attack network was delayed by four months before they restarted their targeting efforts. [7] There is also a suggestion that Mehdi Nemmouche (a French national who carried out the May 2014 Brussels attack) knows one of the individuals believed to have played a key role in November attacks, Abdelhamid Abaaoud (“Abu Omar al-Soussi” or “Abu Omar al-Baljiki”), a Belgian national. It is unclear if Abaaoud was in anyway involved in Nemmouche’s May attack.

A second individual, Fabien Clain (a.k.a. “Omar”), a French convert from Toulouse, has been mentioned in connection with this series of plots and attacks. He arrived in Syria in early 2014 along with his brother. [8] Fabien Clain has long-standing ties to the Artigat cluster of foreign travelers, which emerged in the early 2000s and included, among others, Sabri Essid (who is in Syria with the Islamic State and has appeared in a beheading video) and Mohamed Merah (who was behind the March 2012 Toulouse attacks). Press have reported that Clain had connections to individuals interested in attacking the Bataclan in 2009. [9] In the mid-2000s, Clain lived or visited Belgium and knew persons connected to the Iraq War-era “Kari” network, responsible for facilitating the first female European convert’s involvement in an attempted suicide attack against U.S. forces in Iraq in November 2005. [10] Clain’s name recently surfaced in another Belgian foreign fighter trial in September 2015; some of the accused had traveled to France to meet him on two occasions, including when Clain left prison. [11]

Reports following the arrest of Sidi Ahmed Ghلام in April of this year in Paris suggested that he had been tasked by French speaking Islamic State fighters, including Fabien Clain. [12] Later indications of the involvement of the other “Omar”—Abdelhamid Abaaoud—emerged with the arrest of Reda Hame, tasked with the possibility of attacking a concert hall, and also Ayoub el-Khazzani. Abaaoud, had been earlier linked to the police raids in Verviers, Belgium, which stopped an attack. [13] Calls by Abaaoud from Greece to the men in the house in Verviers were intercepted. [14] Abaaoud was notorious for having taken his 13-year-old brother to Syria and was active on social media and gave an interview to the Islamic State’s seventh issue of Dabiq. [15] Abaaoud appears to have leveraged both his prior social

network—friends and family—as well as a more recent one formed within the French-speaking Islamic State community in Syria to organize and carry out the attacks.

Abaaoud’s involvement in the November 13 attacks was made public prior to the French police raiding a house on the outskirts of Paris seeking to arrest him and where he was killed. Clain’s connection to the November 13 attacks was confirmed in a video statement, where he acknowledged them. [16] It is unknown to what extent this attack activity involving Clain and Abaaoud is supported directly by the Islamic State, or whether other French nationals like Salim Benghaldem or Boubakeur el-Hakim play roles. The death of Abaaoud will have disrupted the immediate menace from this attack network and exposed wider support networks, but the numbers of French and Belgian fighters and the mixing of three “generations of jihad” in the Islamic State means that this is likely only a temporary setback.

This Syria-based Francophone attack network has some similarities to the pre-9/11, Rachid Boukhalfa (Abu Doha) network that provided facilitation support for entry to the camps in Afghanistan for training or for those wanting to travel to Chechnya. [17] This predominantly Algerian grouping also attempted a number of attacks, most notorious being the 2000 Strasbourg market plot. Similar to the Paris attacks, the logistics and planning for this projected attack were conducted from a neighboring state, in this case Germany, in the hope that the German authorities were less vigilant or that cross-border intelligence cooperation was not functioning.

### The Threat to France

The French counter-terrorism services are now faced with a threat that is more complex than in previous years, with multiple actors engaged in plotting attacks, inside and outside the country. While targeting is concentrated against Paris, it also involves other urban centers in France. The geographic origins too are more dispersed, lying not only in Iraq or Syria, but also Yemen and Turkey. [18] And the activity is highly disruptive because of the tempo of operations involving numerous actors, a variety of targets (civilian and military) and different modi operandi (firearms, knives or explosives). The distribution of the targeting is also scattered. While Paris remains a primary focus of attack activity, plots in other urban centers, such as Lille, Lyon and Nice among others, have been foiled.

The threat is also durable; some individuals, like Clain, have remained engaged over long periods of time. Persons involved in foreign fighter networks connected to the first Iraq



conflict (such as the Buttes-Chaumont and Artigat clusters) took nearly a decade to become involved in attacks inside France. [18] The same may be true for the Syrian conflict, and given the volume of persons involved, attempted attacks are likely to continue for a number of years. The presence of different “generations of jihad” in the threat matrix along with the wider social networks of the foreign fighters adds to the complexity of the assessment process for the French security services.

The current threat is also highly disruptive due to the tempo of plots, acts and operations—approximately one every ten weeks since September 2012—emerging from Syria and Iraq or from individuals sympathetic to the groups operating in that theater. The investigation of these incidents requires resources, and the number of events will have stretched the French counter-terrorism entities, particularly over the past year. The reasons for this tempo are not entirely clear, but there has been an acceleration since Islamic State spokesperson, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, called for attacks in September 2014; twelve of 22 events have occurred since this. The engagement of French military assets against the Islamic State might be another reason. The cadence of future events will depend to a certain extent on the evolution of the conflict in Syria and Iraq, and the ability of the groups to continue to influence French nationals and residents both at home and in the conflict zone to act. There will be no end to the current Islamic State-generated attacks until political settlements end the conflicts in Syria and Iraq. This is highly unlikely in the short term.

The immediate challenge, therefore, is for the French security services to manage the investigation of the November 13 attacks, which will require significant resources, and at the same time prevent further incidents that seem probable given the current plot rhythm. This will be difficult as the personnel in the various services are nearing the limits of what is physically possible, and new staff promised following the January attacks will take time to become trained and operational. More resources will not of themselves solve the current challenge. As a result of this, and the continuing volume of attempted attacks, there will be further successful attacks and also partially successful ones, both in France and involving French nationals in the coming years.

*Timothy Holman is a Ph.D. candidate at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Singapore.*

#### Notes

1. Details of the plots and attacks are available in an Excel spreadsheet at this link [https://acrossthegreen-](https://acrossthegreen-mountain.files.wordpress.com/2015/11/plots-attacks-france-24112015.xlsx)

[mountain.files.wordpress.com/2015/11/plots-attacks-france-24112015.xlsx](https://acrossthegreen-mountain.files.wordpress.com/2015/11/plots-attacks-france-24112015.xlsx).

2. See here for numbers <http://mobile.interieur.gouv.fr/Actualites/L-actu-du-Ministere/Ouverture-de-la-journee-de-reflexion-sur-la-prevention-de-la-radicalisation>.
3. On contact with Coulibaly, see Vincent, Elise, “Attentats De Paris : La Justice Sur Les Traces Des Commanditaires,” *Lemonde*, November 7, 2015, [http://abonnes.lemonde.fr/police-justice/article/2015/11/07/attentats-de-paris-la-justice-sur-les-traces-du-donneur-d-ordres\\_4805115\\_1653578.html](http://abonnes.lemonde.fr/police-justice/article/2015/11/07/attentats-de-paris-la-justice-sur-les-traces-du-donneur-d-ordres_4805115_1653578.html).
4. Dabiq, Issue 6, <https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2015/02/the-islamic-state-e2809cdc481biq-magazine-622.pdf>.
5. Soren Seelow, “Abdelhamid Abaaoud, Le Commerçant Belge Soupçonné D’avoir Commandité Les Attentats,” *Abonnes.Lemonde.Fr*, November 17, 2015, [http://abonnes.lemonde.fr/attaques-a-paris/article/2015/11/17/abdelhamid-abaaoud-le-petit-commercant-belge-soupconne-d-avoir-commandite-les-attaques-de-paris\\_4811395\\_4809495.html](http://abonnes.lemonde.fr/attaques-a-paris/article/2015/11/17/abdelhamid-abaaoud-le-petit-commercant-belge-soupconne-d-avoir-commandite-les-attaques-de-paris_4811395_4809495.html).
6. “Attentat Déjoué À La Défense, Nouveau Mandat D’arrêt International Émis : Le Point Sur L’enquête,” *Lemonde*, November 25, 2015, [http://www.lemonde.fr/attaques-a-paris/article/2015/11/24/le-point-sur-l-enquete-attentat-dejoue-a-la-defense-un-complice-sous-mandat-d-arret-international\\_4816740\\_4809495.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/attaques-a-paris/article/2015/11/24/le-point-sur-l-enquete-attentat-dejoue-a-la-defense-un-complice-sous-mandat-d-arret-international_4816740_4809495.html).
7. Paul Cruickshank, “A View From the CT Foxhole: An Interview with Alain Grignard, Brussels Federal Police,” *CTC Sentinel* 8, no. 8 (August 2015): 7–10.
8. Jean-Manuel Escarnot, “Fabien Clain, De La PME Islamiste Au Jihad Syrien,” *Liberation.Fr*, August 4, 2015, [http://www.liberation.fr/societe/2015/08/04/fabien-clain-de-la-pme-islamiste-au-jihad-syrien\\_1358714](http://www.liberation.fr/societe/2015/08/04/fabien-clain-de-la-pme-islamiste-au-jihad-syrien_1358714).
9. Soren Seelow, “Fabien Clain, La « Voix » Du Massacre De Paris, Avait Déjà Menacé Le Bataclan en 2009,” *Lemonde.Fr*, November 18, 2015, [http://www.lemonde.fr/attaques-a-paris/article/2015/11/18/fabien-clain-la-voix-du-massacre-de-paris-avait-deja-menace-le-bataclan-en-2009\\_4812298\\_4809495.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/attaques-a-paris/article/2015/11/18/fabien-clain-la-voix-du-massacre-de-paris-avait-deja-menace-le-bataclan-en-2009_4812298_4809495.html).
10. *Ibid.*
11. Julien Balboni, “Terrorisme: Les Liens Troubles Entre Radicaux Belges Et Français,” *Dhnet.Be*, September 16, 2015, <http://www.dhnet.be/actu/faits/terrorisme-les-liens-troubles-entre-radicaux-belges-et-francais-55f872943570b0f19ea70a19>.
12. Soren Seelow, “Attentat Manqué De Villejuif : Sur La Piste Des Commanditaires,” *Le Monde*, August 3, 2015; Timothée Boutry and Adrien Cadorel, “La Nébuleuse De Sid Ahmed Ghlam,” *Le Parisien-Aujourd’hui en France*, August 10, 2015.

13. Seelow, “Abdelhamid Abaaoud, Le Commerçant Belge Soupçonné D’avoir Commandité Les Attentats;” Soren Seelow, “Qui Est Abdelhamid Abaaoud, Le Commanditaire Présumé Des Attaques De Paris ?,” *Le Monde.Fr*, November 16, 2015, [http://www.lemonde.fr/attaques-a-paris/article/2015/11/16/qui-est-abdelhamid-abaaoud-le-commanditaire-presume-des-attaques-de-paris\\_4811009\\_4809495.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/attaques-a-paris/article/2015/11/16/qui-est-abdelhamid-abaaoud-le-commanditaire-presume-des-attaques-de-paris_4811009_4809495.html); “Arrestation D’un Homme Revenu De Syrie Qui Aurait Projeté Des Attentats Contre Une Salle De Concert,” *Lemonde.Fr*, September 18, 2015, [http://www.lemonde.fr/police-justice/article/2015/09/18/arrestation-d-un-ex-djihadiste-qui-aurait-projete-des-attentats-contre-une-salle-de-concert\\_4762141\\_1653578.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/police-justice/article/2015/09/18/arrestation-d-un-ex-djihadiste-qui-aurait-projete-des-attentats-contre-une-salle-de-concert_4762141_1653578.html).
14. Department of Homeland Security, “Future IS Operations in the West Could Resemble Disrupted Belgian Plot,” May 13, 2015, p.2.
15. The interview is on pages 72 to 75 in Dabiq 7. Emmanuel Fansten, Sylvain Mouillard, and Willy Le Devin, “Qui Sont Les Auteurs Et Le Commanditaire Présumé Des Attentats ?,” *Liberation.Fr*, November 16, 2015, [http://www.liberation.fr/france/2015/11/16/qui-sont-les-auteurs-et-commanditaires-des-attentats\\_1413775](http://www.liberation.fr/france/2015/11/16/qui-sont-les-auteurs-et-commanditaires-des-attentats_1413775).
16. Seelow, “Fabien Clain, La « Voix » Du Massacre De Paris, Avait Déjà Menacé Le Bataclan en 2009.”
17. Thomas Hegghammer first made this comparison on Twitter, see <https://twitter.com/Hegghammer/status/666784823466442753> and Thomas Hegghammer and Petter Nesser, “Assessing the Islamic State’s Commitment to Attacking the West,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9, no. 4 (2015). See also Millot, Lorraine, “Premier Procès Al-Qaeda en Allemagne,” *Liberation.Fr*, April 17, 2002, [http://www.liberation.fr/planete/2002/04/17/premier-proces-al-qaeda-en-allemande\\_400544](http://www.liberation.fr/planete/2002/04/17/premier-proces-al-qaeda-en-allemande_400544).
18. Ghلام is alleged to have met an individual in Turkey who began to task him to commit an attack in France. Seelow, Soren, “Sid Ahmed Ghلام, entre les mailles du filet,” *Le Monde*, August 3, 2015; Boutry, Timothée, and Adrien Cadorel, “La nébuleuse de Sid Ahmed Ghلام,” *Le Parisien-Aujourd’hui en France*, August 10, 2015.
19. Cadorel, Adrien, “Attentats : l’ombre des vétérans français du jihad,” *Le Parisien-Aujourd’hui en France*, May 16, 2015.