



# Terrorism Monitor

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Abdirahim Mohammad Abdullani, one of the Garissa University College attackers, was one of al-Shabaab’s Kenyan college-educated recruits.

## FRESH MILITANT VIOLENCE IN PHILIPPINES ILLUSTRATES CONTINUING JIHADIST PRESENCE

James Brandon

Armed members of Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) kidnapped and killed nine Christian farmers in the southern Philippines island of Mindanao on December 24 (*Manila Bulletin*, December 27, 2015). On the same day, also in Mindanao, BIFF militants attacked Pigcawayan town using a range of weapons including 40mm mortars (*The Standard* [Philippines], January 2). The military was able to repulse the attack, leaving six militants and one official dead. The militants simultaneously launched at least two other largely unsuccessful attacks in the villages of Shariff Aguak and Linantangan; the latter attack reportedly involved up to 50 militants (*Ibid*). The attacks underline Mindanao’s status as a center of Islamist militant activity, despite many years of counter-insurgency work by the Philippines government in conjunction with the U.S.

The BIFF, which conducted the latest attacks, is a hardline splinter group of the Mindanao Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), a more secular Muslim militant group. BIFF separated from MILF in 2008 after the latter reached an agreement with the government. The MILF and BIFF sporadically cooperate, however, as shown in the ‘Mamasapano incident’ in January 2015; the incident occurred in the form of a clash between members of these militant groups and the military, killing leading militant Zulkifli bin Hir as well as 44 members of the Philippines special forces (*Rappler*, February 3, 2015). Although the early 2015 Mamasapano clash disrupted government attempts to reach a political agreement with MILF in the hopes of ending longstanding separatist violence, the group has carried out few significant attacks in recent months (*Inquirer*, January 3). MILF has continued, however, to publicly push for the government to grant greater autonomy to the predominantly Muslim Bangsamoro region of western Mindanao, arguing that this is necessary to undercut popular support for more hardline separatist and Islamist

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groups (*Philippines Star*, December 24, 2015). The latest BIFF attacks show that the Islamist groups remains active and willing to target both civilians and troops in Mindanao province.

Unrelated violence in the Philippines involving al-Qaeda-affiliated Abu Sayyaf, which follows a global jihadist agenda unlike the relatively parochial BIFF and MILF, has also occurred during the last month. In particular, government troops launched raids against Abu Sayyaf in the isolated Sulu region, the group's main stronghold, located to the south of Mindanao. Following five days of fighting, the government said that it had killed 26 Abu Sayyaf militants, mainly in and around Al Barka town, with three soldiers also reported to have been killed (*Inquirer*, December 20, 2015). If true, these losses are a significant setback for the group, which is believed to have only several hundred active fighters. Among those reportedly killed was a Malaysian bomb-maker by the name of Mohammed Najib, also known as Abu Anas, alleged to be one of the group's key technical experts (*The Star* [Malaysia], December 17, 2015). According to Malaysian security sources cited by local media, 37-year-old Najib had a degree in electrical engineering from University of Malaya (UM) and was believed to have joined Abu Sayyaf in 2014. Najib has, however, more recently sworn his allegiance to the Islamic State, and reportedly has helped Malaysians travel to the Middle East to join the group (Ibid).

On January 4, soldiers disrupted what was potentially an Abu Sayyaf attempt to kidnap 26 locals in Ungkaya Baku, Basilan, where the organization has a known presence. The soldiers intercepted a bus full of passengers that gunmen had earlier commandeered at gunpoint (*Philippines Star*, January 4). Later that day, government forces claimed to have arrested a wanted militant known as Junni Jamala in Patikul town, Sulu (*Philippines Star*, January 4). The authorities said that the individual was believed to have been involved in an Abu Sayyaf unit specializing in assassinations. The government's decision to take the fight to Abu Sayyaf on their "home turf" may indicate an increased tempo of counter-insurgency operations in the coming year.

## PAKISTAN-BASED MILITANTS LAUNCH UNUSUAL ATTACK ON INDIAN AIRBASE

*James Brandon*

On January 2, Pakistan-based militants launched one of their most high-profile and significant attacks on India in recent years. Militants attacked Pathankot Air Force Station, located in northeast India, 20 miles from the border with Pakistan (*New India Express*, January 6). The attack involved six heavily armed gunmen who successfully infiltrated the highly-defended base in the early hours of the morning, disguised in Indian military uniforms. Patrolling guards intercepted them in a forested area within the base, sparking a shootout that killed four militants. The two remaining militants were unaccounted for within the base for almost 50 hours before being killed as a result of an intensive military operation involving attack helicopters. In total, seven members of the security forces were killed. Although the attackers apparently attempted to target Indian military helicopters and jets at the base, none were successfully attacked or damaged (*India Today*, January 4). However, Indian media has been critical of the time needed by the military to neutralize attackers in a relatively confined area of an airbase (*The Hindu*, January 4).

The United Jihad Council (UJC), a Kashmir-focused umbrella organization for a number of militant groups claimed credit for the attack, which it attributed to its so-called 'Highway Squad' (*The Hindu*, January 4). The UJC includes organizations such as the hardline Islamist Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed. Local Indian media quoted security sources as saying that the UJC claim may have been intended to 'indigenise' the attack in the hopes of distancing attackers from Pakistan and diverting attention from any Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed involvement (NDTV, January 4). The ultimate directors and planners of the attack remain unknown. The UJC and many of its consistent member groups are known to have close links to the Pakistan security services, particularly its Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency. It is therefore plausible that planning for the attack involved members of the Pakistan security establishment opposed to the recent rapprochement between Pakistan's civilian government and India.

The Indian response to the incident was characterized by a series of missteps. In the first instance, a day before the attack, the gunmen hijacked a car driven by a plainclothes police superintendent. The police viewed the incident as criminally motivated, despite the police superintendent alleging that the attackers had been heavily armed and had made calls to Pakistan in Urdu (*Zee News*, January 5). Then, the policeman's cook - who was also abducted in the incident

- was reportedly beaten by policemen who refused to believe his story (*The Hindu*, January 4).

The attack on Pathankot airbase shows that Pakistan-based jihadists remain capable of carrying out plots in India. The attack also raises questions over the ability of the Indian military to protect even high profile military targets, both preventing such attacks from being successfully executed and acting decisively once such attacks are underway.

## **Unrest in Northern Afghanistan Heralds Regional Threats**

*Abubakar Siddique*

By carrying out the biggest offensive in 14 years in previously peaceful northern Afghanistan, the Taliban is once again threatening Afghan stability and the survival of the country's current political system. This offensive heralds the return of fugitive Central Asian and Russian jihadists to their homelands. This poses an expanding threat to Russia and its Central Asian allies, particularly as Moscow deepens its involvement in the Syrian war with the stated goal of crippling the jihadists' abilities to threaten Russia and its interests.

### **What Went Wrong**

While the brief capture of Kunduz by the Taliban in late September made headlines and put Afghanistan back on the Western radar, the Afghan insurgents and their Central Asian militant allies have been building up their presence in the region since 2009. The Taliban began plotting to return to northern Afghanistan soon after President Barack Obama announced that year a surge of US troops to "disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan." Faced with military pressure in their strongholds in southern and eastern Afghanistan near the Pakistani border, the Taliban decided to open new fronts in the north. This effort was aided by militants affiliated with the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). As early as October 2010, senior Afghan officials were raising concerns that these fighters were seeking to establish bases in the region. "The problem of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan truly exists," said Shaida Mohammad Abdali, deputy national security adviser under Afghan President Hamid Karzai. "They are instrumental in bringing insecurity to the north" (RFE/RL, December 8, 2010).

The IMU's return to Afghanistan's northern provinces, which border Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, was the result of a symbiotic relationship between the IMU and the Taliban. The Sunni Muslim militants of the IMU had assisted a Taliban campaign to win broader influence among the Uzbek, Turkmen and Tajik communities in Afghanistan's north. These communities had largely shunned joining the predominantly Pashtun Taliban during the 1990s, when the hardline movement gained control of most of northern Afghanistan in a series of long and brutal battles. In turn, the Taliban helped the IMU set up sanctuaries in the remote northern regions, providing the IMU with a platform to

recruit militants and launch attacks in the five predominantly Muslim former Soviet republics of Central Asia. (RFE/RL, December 8, 2010). In recent months, however, the Taliban has turned against the IMU, as part of its broader effort to distance itself from more global jihadist groups. In particular, in an unusual step, it published a report outlining its efforts against the group, and there are even unconfirmed reports that IMU leader, Usmon Ghazi, was killed by the Afghan Taliban in November (RFE/RL, November 30, 2015).

Central Asian militants were familiar with northern Afghanistan, as many of them found shelter in the region as a result of being driven out of their home countries in the late 1990s. As the Taliban regime crumbled under US bombing in late 2001, these militants fled to Pakistan along with their Taliban allies. For the next 13 years, thousands of Central Asian militants sheltered in and operated out of Pakistan's northwestern Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). After years of taking part in fighting and launching attacks in conjunction with the Pakistani Taliban and al-Qaeda, the Central Asian militants were finally pushed out of FATA and into Afghanistan by a large-scale Pakistani military operation launched in June 2014. The Pakistani offensive forced the Central Asian militants to abandon their last FATA sanctuary in the region's North Waziristan district.

However, these events coincided with a major political and military transition that was underway in Afghanistan. For most of 2014, Afghan elites bickered over power-sharing following a disputed presidential election. Afghan forces, meanwhile, were struggling to fill security gaps left by NATO troops, who had announced they were ending all combat operations in Afghanistan by the end of 2014.

### Expanding Insurgency

Afghanistan's mountainous northeastern province of Badakhshan, which borders Tajikistan, Pakistan and China, was particularly vulnerable to assault by the Taliban, the IMU and Central Asian militants; these groups rapidly seized territory there and even set up training camps. In October 2014, Noor Aqa Naderi, the district governor of Badakhshan's remote Jurm district, said that only 25,000 of the region's 100,000 residents lived in government-controlled areas, with the rest living in militant-controlled zones. "If this lasts until spring, when the snow melts and movement between mountain communities becomes easier, some other Badakhshan districts might fall into insurgent hands," he warned (RFE/RL, October 3, 2014).

Indeed, the spring of 2015 saw unprecedented violence across northeastern Afghanistan. The insurgents overran

Jurm in early April, and Badakhshan's Yumgan district was seized in May (RFE/RL, May 21, 2015). The heaviest fighting, however, took place in the province of Kunduz. By the end of April, a multi-pronged Taliban offensive saw rapid insurgent gains around the provincial capital city, Kunduz (Radio Free Afghanistan, April 28, 2015). In subsequent months, the Taliban and its Central Asian militant allies would go on to seize the Chardara and Dasht-e Archi districts surrounding Kunduz, practically putting the city of 300,000 residents under siege. In August, lawmaker Ghulam Rabbani predicted the Taliban would capture the provincial capital after the summer harvest (RFE/RL, August 11, 2015). In a major embarrassment to the government, the city temporarily fell to the Taliban on September 28. The government re-established its control over the city in a matter of weeks, but its hold remains tenuous as insurgents continue to sit on key territory around the province.

During the summer months, the Taliban offensive expanded to provinces along Afghanistan's largely unprotected northwestern border with Turkmenistan. The Taliban and its Central Asian militant allies carried out a series of attacks and captured large chunks of territory in Jowzjan, Faryab, and Badghis provinces. By August, an estimated 3,000 insurgent fighters had captured hundreds of villages in four Faryab districts: Almar, Qaisar, Ghormach, and Pashtun Kot. The losses prompted Afghanistan's First Vice President, Abdul Rashid Dostum, to rush to the region in July to personally supervise a counter-offensive. Dostum, a former warlord, was worried he was losing his power base in the Uzbek-majority provinces of Faryab and Jowzjan. The violence displaced more than 30,000 civilians in Faryab alone, while hundreds of thousands of residents were displaced elsewhere across northern Afghanistan (RFE/RL, August 20, 2015). By the fall of 2015, the Taliban had succeeded in launching attacks in all eight northern and western Afghan provinces bordering Central Asian states.

Thousands of battle-hardened Central Asian fighters have been a major factor in the northern Afghanistan insurgency. As these militants fled Afghanistan in late 2001, they were organized in a single organization, the IMU. Today, the IMU has suffered severe setbacks. However, Afghan officials estimate that the number of Central Asian fighters ranges between 5,000 and 7,000, with their loyalties split among the IMU, the Islamic Jihad Union and Jammāt Ansarullah (RFE/RL, May 12, 2015). In a video released in August, IMU leader Usmon Ghazi pledged allegiance to the Islamic State (RFE/RL, August 6, 2015). Earlier, the IMU had criticized the Taliban and questioned the prolonged disappearance of its founding leader, Mullah Mohammad Omar. At least one Uzbek commander has joined a Taliban splinter group

in the southern Afghan province of Zabul. The Taliban has been pushing back against emerging Islamic State-aligned groups in Afghanistan, including against Central Asian militants who have pledged their loyalty to it. That said, such disagreements have not affected the overall cooperative relationship between the Taliban and Central Asian fighters.

### Afghan Worries and Weaknesses

Afghan officials are deeply worried about the invasion of foreign militants in northern Afghanistan. In a late October interview, President Ashraf Ghani's national security advisor, Hanif Atmar, called the influx "unprecedented" and said the Central Asian fighters had changed the battlefield dynamic. "A majority of these foreign terrorists that were chased out of Waziristan arrived in northern and northeastern province of our country this year," he said. "Most of them are from Central Asia, Russia and China and they are trying to get close to the borders of those countries. Their aim is to carve sanctuaries close to those countries. This is why it is important for them to be in the provinces of Kunduz, Badakhshan and Faryab in the first place. This is why we faced unprecedented pressure from the enemy in these three provinces" (1TV Kabul, October 28, 2015). Afghanistan's Deputy Foreign Minister Hekmat Khalil Karzai said some 1,300 foreign militants had participated in the temporary capture of Kunduz in September. "These foreign fighters came from Pakistan, Tajikistan, China and various other [Central Asia] countries," he said on November 15. He added that the end objective for these groups is not to control Afghanistan, but to use the country as a base to extend their regional and global influence (VOA, November 15, 2015).

Due to a variety of systemic factors, the Afghan government has been too weak to organize an effective military response to the insurgent threat in the north. The absence of a comprehensive NATO air cover has also allowed the militants to maneuver virtually at will, conquering villages and holding territory. "The foreign forces had an advanced air force that reacted immediately [to insurgent attacks]. [But] we don't even have an organized air force," noted Atmar, the Afghan national security advisor (1TV Kabul, October 28, 2015). He added that more than 352,000 Army and police forces and 30,000 local police are spread across 365 districts in 34 provinces, and these forces must also guard thousands of kilometers of border. "During the past year we have attempted to extract most of our best police and military units from a defensive position and are organizing them to go on the offensive," he said in October.

Long-running disputes among Afghan factions, particularly in northern provinces, over land, water and control of roads

have been exacerbated by disputes over appointments to government and security leadership positions. Indeed, many senior leaders in the Afghan national unity government have a decades-long history of leading factional fighting in northern Afghanistan. Their patronage of hastily created pro-government militias has led to accusations of abuse, with many of these militias regarded by local populations as marauding predators, as opposed to forces committed to fighting insurgents and protecting civilians (RFE/RL, September 29, 2015).

### Lukewarm Cooperation

The increasing insecurity in northern Afghanistan, and the roles played there by fighters from Central Asian states, has major implications for Kabul's relations with Afghanistan's northern neighbors. The situation has particularly alarmed Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, which share more than 2,000 kilometers of border with provinces in northern and western Afghanistan. While Tajikistan and Uzbekistan have tried to strengthen their defenses and border controls, Turkmenistan's response has seemed somewhat ambivalent.

Russia, meanwhile, appears to consider Central Asian countries to be part of its backyard a quarter century after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Soon after launching Moscow's new intervention in the Syrian war, ostensibly aimed at preventing militants fighting in Syria from turning their guns on Russia, President Vladimir Putin cited what he called the "deteriorating" security situation in Afghanistan. "There is an increase in the real danger of terrorist and extremist groups entering nations that neighbor Afghanistan, and the threat is made worse by the fact that in addition to the well-known organizations, the influence of the so-called Islamic State has also spread to Afghanistan," Putin said in September. He was speaking to a meeting of the Moscow-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), which also includes Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan (Kremlin, September 15, 2015).

After the fall of Kunduz, Moscow announced plans to send more troops to its base in Tajikistan. The plan calls for the number of soldiers to be increased from 5,900 to 9,000 by 2020. Moscow also says it will dispatch a helicopter unit to its Ayni airbase in Tajikistan, near the Afghan border (Afghanistan Today, October 30, 2015). CSTO head Nikolai Bordyuzha said the close proximity of Kunduz to CSTO borders has alarmed the alliance. "We see these events as a real threat to stability and security in the region," he said. The CSTO has pledged to create a rapid reaction force of up to 70,000 troops, capable of deploying to flash points within 72 hours. In 2015, Moscow conducted military drills that aimed

at “containing” a conflict in Central Asia (RFE/RL, October 5, 2015). Complicating the picture, however, are contradictory and unconfirmed reports of some form of Russian contact with the Taliban to forge a covert alliance against the Islamic State. The Taliban have denied this, but Russian officials are adamant that they are actively in contract with the Taliban (RFE/RL, December 27, 2015).

Meanwhile, Russia and Central Asian nations have offered little direct support to Kabul. Moscow has hosted Abdul Rashid Dostum, the Soviet-trained warlord who became Afghan first vice president, but it is not clear whether Moscow is ready to deliver the Mi-35 attack helicopters that Kabul seeks to bolster its counterinsurgency operations. Atmar, the Afghan national security advisor, has suggested that the Afghan administration has received only a lukewarm response from Russia to Kabul’s proposals to create a regional alliance to combat terrorism and drug-trafficking, which the two sides regard as common threats. “[Russia] always [says] that they will cooperate,” Atmar said. “We are thankful for their good intentions, but we are concerned about the speed with which they are moving” (1TV Kabul, October 28, 2015).

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## Al-Shabaab Recruitment from Kenyan Universities Alarms Officials

*Sunguta West*

Al-Shabaab, the Somalia-based Islamist militant organization, is still actively recruiting from neighboring Kenya even as the group suffers major setbacks in southern Somalia. Underpinning the group’s notable success in recruitment is the radicalization and indoctrination of young men in order to prepare them for the battle in Somalia and beyond (*The Standard*, November 5, 2015). This trend has clear implications for efforts to tackle al-Shabaab in Somalia, as well as for Kenya’s own internal security.

The methods and aims driving al-Shabaab recruitment have changed in response to the combat theater in which the actors operate (*The Star*, November 2, 2015). Initially, recruitment targeted desperate slum youths in the Kenyan capital of Nairobi and the port city of Mombasa, but the tactics and the individuals they prey on has since changed. According to officials in Kenya’s National Security Intelligence Service (NSIS), the militants are increasingly luring well-educated university students to the group, thereby penetrating institutions of higher learning with recruitment, training and indoctrination efforts (*Daily Nation*, June 29, 2015). Like the slum youths al-Shabaab previously targeted, students and recent graduates are been offered money, jobs and opportunity. Typically, such opportunities include a \$700 per month salary, upkeep for their families, and a list of economic and spiritual benefits, which have led many educated individuals to accept al-Shabaab’s offer. Reports indicate that al-Shabaab may be seeking the development of chemical weapons to employ in East Africa. Perhaps for this reason, recruits with science background – such as chemical, electrical, and mechanical engineering – have reportedly been a priority (Intelligence Brief, May 24, 2015; *The Star*, November 2, 2015).

Although the recruitment process has netted young people from all parts of Kenya, the majority are from Muslim-dominant regions in the country’s northeastern territory (Intelligence Briefs, May 25, 2015). The recruits’ presence in the militant group has been put on display by its propaganda videos, which feature fighters speaking a Kenyan Kiswahili dialect (*Daily Nation*, November 1, 2015). In April, Kenyan security agencies learned firsthand the impact of educated Kenyan recruits after it was revealed that one of the Garissa University College attackers was a prior University of Nairobi

(UON) law student. The attack killed 148 people, primarily university students in Garissa, a town often cited as the gateway to Kenya's northern districts.

Abdirahim Mohammad Abdullahi, the former student behind the attack – killed by Special Forces during an operation to retake the university – was a privileged son of a chief in Mandera (*Kenya Today*, April 25, 2015). Abdullahi had graduated in 2013 and worked for a local bank as an advisor before joining the ranks of al-Shabaab. He became the second university student to die while carrying out an attack on behalf of al-Shabaab. Another university graduate died by suicide bomb in 2014 in an al-Shabaab raid on a police station in Nairobi. That attacker, Abdul Hajira, had disappeared for a year before reappearing to complete his studies in a Bachelors of Commerce degree (Citizen TV, August 2, 2015).

Student recruits like Abdullahi are believed to be under the wing of Sheikh Ahmad Iman Ali, an engineer recently declared the supreme leader of al-Shabaab's Kenyan branch. Ali, a former student of the Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology (JKUAT), additionally heads video production within al-Shabaab (Wardheernews, December 14, 2015). Based in Somalia since 2009, Ali's recruitment efforts are believed to target not only students, but also deprived individuals in the Majengo slums in Nairobi where he grew up. Shabaab recruiters like Ali are recruiting street children between ages 12 and 16 residing in the coastal region. The children tend to be "easy targets," as they often lack fundamental human needs, such as housing, clothing and food, which the group promises to provide in return for membership. Al-Shabaab also offers them a sense of family, purpose and belonging (*Daily Nation*, November 1, 2015). In August, security agencies named the top al-Shabaab members responsible for recruiting Kenyans; they included the aforementioned Ali, as well as Abdifatah Abubakar Ahmad and Ramadan Hamisi Kufungwa. The latter two are leaders of the Jeshi la Ayman ('Army of Ayman'), a group formed by the militants to increase the number of attacks in Kenya. They have also participated in some large attacks in Kenya's coastal region, where they reportedly focus many of their recruiting efforts (*Tuko*, August 17, 2015).

Recently, however, divisions between foreign fighters and ethnic Somalis have escalated, threatening to tear apart the militant force. This infighting is exacerbating the pressure on the group coming from increasingly effective operations in Somalia by the African Union's African Mission in Somalia (AMISOM). In particular, the loss of strategic towns and key revenue sources in Somalia due to AMISON actions have left the group looking weak and disjointed. An additional

cause of the divisions within the group has been whether the organization and its various, diverse sub-factions should pledge allegiance to the Islamic State or remain loyal to al-Qaeda (*Intelligence Brief*, April 27, 2015).

Since the emergence of the Islamic State, foreign fighters in al-Shabaab have pushed to strengthen links with the group. These fighters are convinced that linking themselves with Islamic State would raise al-Shabaab's status to that of a global jihadist group, as opposed to its current profile as a regional heavyweight. The rift between foreign recruits and the more locally-focused ethnic Somalis that comprise al-Shabaab appeared to widen in October with international media reporting that a faction led by the formerly UK-based Abdul Qadir Mumin had pledged its loyalty to the Islamic State (*Tuko*, October 23, 2015).

These developments have put foreign al-Shabaab fighters on a collision course with native Somali fighters who, though loyal to al-Qaeda, see the current battle partially in nationalistic terms; it is away to liberate the country from foreign influence. Indeed, al-Shabaab has constantly emphasized its allegiance to al-Qaeda in spite of personnel changes in both groups. Al-Shabaab's previous leader, Mukhtar Abu Zubair, pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri after the death of Osama bin Laden in 2012. Abu Ubaidah made a point of renewing al-Shabaab's allegiance to al-Qaeda under his leadership 2014 after his promotion (*Daily Nation*, September 17, 2014).

Even with tumultuous internal politics, recruitment by al-Shabaab's leaders have continued to be successful. In particular, the presence of Kenyan foreign fighters has accelerated the recruitment of new individuals from Kenya, bringing on board both Somali and non-Somali speakers and expanding the organization's reach. So far, the group has been keen to use Kenyans to attack their country. Al-Shabaab has sought to target since the 2011 invasion of Southern Somalia by the Kenya Defense Forces (KDF), which dealt a heavy blow to the group's previously strong presence in that region.

In spite of the apparent influx of Kenyan fighters into al-Shabaab, there is a notable flow of individuals departing the group, as well. In the last few months, 700 al-Shabaab members are believed to have left the group and returned to Kenya (*The Star*, November 4, 2015). Many have sought to take advantage of a government amnesty program announced in April after the Garissa University college attack, while others have returned on their own accord after promises made by al-Shabaab recruiters were not kept. Many foreign fighters returned with amputated limbs, head injuries

and other significant bodily harm.

Al-Shabaab has unquestionably penetrated Kenya's institutions of higher learning, radicalizing and recruiting students. The government's poor monitoring of these institutions has directly impacted the success of such efforts, and Kenya should prioritize the issue. Until the country takes a proactive stance on the outflow of foreign fighters from its country and into the ranks of al-Shabaab, Kenya risks losing highly trained, educated students to the appeal of a terrorist organization and, as seen in the Garissa University College attack, knowledgeable students may be able to carry out more complex, effective attacks.

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## Ireland's Foreign Fighters

*James Brandon*

Since the start of the Syrian uprising in 2012, around 30 to 50 Irish citizens are believed to have traveled to the country to join various Sunni rebel groups. At least three of them are known to have been killed. Although these numbers are small compared to other large European countries such as France or Germany, they are high when taking into consideration Ireland's total Muslim population of around 50,000. Indeed, according to one study, Ireland has the highest rate of Muslim participation in the Syrian conflict of any country besides Finland (*The Journal* [Ireland], September 5, 2014; CNN, September 1, 2014). The proportion of Irish recruits active with the Islamic State (IS) group is also believed to be high. For instance, in November, the country's former justice minister said that the government was aware that approximately "30-40 people from this country [...] had gone to fight with Islamic State in Syria," including both citizens and residents of Ireland (*Independent* [Ireland], November 21, 2015).

As in many cases, the initial wave of Irish volunteers to fight in Syria in early 2012 and 2013 were motivated more by anger at the Syrian government's brutal crackdown on protesters than by clear aspirations to set up an Islamic State. Many of these fighters also operated relatively openly. Mahdi al-Harati for example, a Irish-Libyan, became a leading figure in the Libyan uprising against Colonel Muammar Gaddafi in 2011 and a minor Irish celebrity in the process, openly traveling to Syria to assist rebels there in 2012 (*Irish Times*, August 13, 2011). Drawing on his Libyan experience, al-Harati helped found Liwaa al-Umma, a relatively moderate Islamist-leaning militia, before returning to Ireland. Liwaa al-Umma later merged with the Free Syrian Army, the main western-backed rebel group. Al-Harati's presence attracted at least two other Irish nationals to join Liwaa al-Umma. One was al-Harati's brother-in-law, Housam Nadjair, a 33-year old builder who was also a veteran of the Libyan uprising, and who later described his motivations: "It wasn't a religious war of any sorts... the mission in general was to topple the dictatorship. And our mission in particular was to help the Syrians themselves: train them how to protect themselves, how to maintain their weapons to topple the regime. After we passed on what knowledge we had, I returned" (*Irish Times*, August 1, 2012; *Independent* [Ireland], February 7, 2012).

Another Irish citizen who travelled to Syria during this early phase to join Liwaa al-Umma was a Jordanian-born

Palestinian, 22-year old Alaa Ciymeh, who had been brought up in Ireland before returning to Jordan in 2008. He was killed while fighting for the group in April 2013 (*Irish Times*, May 3, 2013; *Herald* [Ireland], June 27, 2014). Another Irish citizen, 22-year old Hudhaifa ElSayed, who was of Egyptian origin but raised in Ireland's County Lough, was killed with Liwa al-Umma during a clash with Syrian government forces in Idlib province in northern Syria in December 2012 (*The Journal*, December 20, 2012). Another individual, 16-year old Shamseddin Gaidan, a Dublin resident of Libyan origin, was killed in Syria in February 2013 fighting with an unknown rebel group, having crossed into the country from Turkey the previous year (*Independent* [Ireland], February 23, 2013).

Although details of Irish involvement in more hardline groups such as the Islamic State or al-Qaeda's official Syrian affiliate, Jahbat al-Nusra, are scarce, there is evidence that Irish citizens are active with these groups. In August 2014, Irish media reported that a self-described "Irish-Nigerian" convert to Islam had been trying to recruit individuals to come to Syria via the ask.fm internet forum, an approach used by other Islamic State recruiters (*Independent*, August 21, 2014). In one exchange, the individual - whose online name was "Muthenna ibn Abu" - defended IS's beheading of British aid worker, David Haines (*Independent*, September 14, 2014). His identity and current whereabouts are unknown.

There is evidence that Ireland, as well as a key exporter of jihadists, is home to a number of Islamic State supporters who are actively providing financial and other forms of support, using the country not only as a recruiting center, but as a logistical hub. At present, the Irish government is seeking to deport a 52-year old individual (who cannot be named for legal reasons) to a Middle Eastern country (*The Journal*, December 29). The government has described him as "the foremost organizer and facilitator of travel by extremists prepared to undertake violent action" on behalf of Islamic State in Ireland, and of having also recruited for jihadist groups in Afghanistan (Ibid). In a potentially related development, in November 2015, citing a security service source, Irish media reported that "a small number of Irish-based Muslim extremists" with a "central group consisting of around 12 radicals" had been sheltering British and European jihadists, including supplying them with fake passports for travel (*Irish Independent*, November 1, 2015). The source additionally said that Ireland was being used as a stop-off point for jihadists en route to Turkey, in order to confuse security services watching for jihadists travelling to Turkey directly (Ibid).

There is also evidence that some of the Islamic State's

online supporters are based in Ireland. In November 2015, independent cyber security analysts used leaked details of Islamic State-supporting Twitter accounts to establish that between 20 and 50, active Islamic State online-based supporters were residing in Ireland (*The Journal*, November 23). In another indicator of latent support for the Islamic State domestically, Irish Muslims responsible for organizing a 'Not in Our Name' protest against the terrorist group in July 2015 have said they were assaulted by two self-identified Islamic State supporters in an unnamed mosque in Dublin (*Irish Times*, July 27).

One potential cause of Irish radicalization, aside from the typically effective propaganda, is the range of Islamist groups from the Arab world with strong ideological commitments to "sharia law" and to creating an "Islamic state" are strongly entrenched in Irish Muslim communities. These have prepared the ground for recruitment and hampered attempts to combat it. Most notably, the Muslim Brotherhood-linked Islamic Cultural Centre of Ireland (ICCI), based in a mosque in Clonskeagh on Dublin's outskirts, has positioned itself as a representative of all Muslims in Ireland and consequently enjoys privileged access to the government. This group is closely tied to the hardline European Council for Fatwa and Research, run by Muslim Brotherhood figurehead Yusuf al-Qaradawi, which has sought to promote highly conservative interpretations of Islam to European Muslims. Even today, ICCI's website openly offers PDFs of books calling for adulterers to be flogged or stoned to death, thereby directly promoting the same core Islamist ideologies as the Islamic State itself, even while remaining a key partner of the Irish government [1].

As with other Islamist-influenced organisations in the West, the ICCI has also consistently denied that any radicalization is taking place in Ireland, greatly hampering the authorities' attempts to understand domestic radicalization or gain the support of Muslim communities. For instance, following the November 2015 Paris attacks, the ICCI's spokesman, Ali Selim, told Irish media that while he condemned the attacks, Irish Muslims "have not been entertaining the ideas [the Islamic State] has been trying to sell them" (RTE, November 14, 2015). The ICCI has also sought to publicly undermine other Muslim group's anti-Islamic State protests, for instance, refusing to join an anti-Islamic State march organized by a non-Islamist Sufi Muslim group, further undermining Irish efforts to combat Islamist radicalization (*Irish Independent*, July 5, 2015).

To date, the Irish government, which has traditionally maintained a neutral foreign policy, has said relatively little publicly about the potential Islamist terrorist threat. For

instance, after the Paris attacks, the defense minister said that “the latest threat assessment to Ireland does not increase... it is low,” and rejected claims that the country’s 9,500 strong Defence Force was inadequately equipped to deal with the terrorist threat (RTE, November 18, 2015). His remarks underscore the government’s assessment that the Irish security services, despite their small size, have an extremely competent counter-terrorism wing, honed over decades of tackling Irish republican militancy. The question, however, is to what extent this expertise can now be repurposed towards dealing with militant Islamism, especially given that the threat is rapidly growing and evolving. The Irish police (*Garda*), however, took one important initial step in 2014 when it established a ‘Counter Terrorism International’ unit to specifically target Islamist extremists and militants linked to Ireland (*Independent*, January 18, 2015). The Irish security services also already enjoy close links with various international partners, particularly the UK and the U.S. as well as the European Union, and are therefore positioned to leverage these relations to monitor and counter Islamist militant threats linked to the Middle East, the UK or Europe.

Despite this progress, the Irish security services - even its specialized Islamist-focused unit - face significant resourcing and expertise shortfalls. Irish media recently reported the police lack key counterterrorism tactics such as knowledge of the Arabic-language skills, a dedicated unit tracking jihadist social media and a de-radicalization strategy to rehabilitate returning foreign fighters (*Irish Examiner*, November 21, 2015). As the above instances demonstrate, Irish jihadists’ alleged use of the country as a logistical and transport hub where false passports can be procured poses potential risks not only to Ireland but also to its allies. Uniquely, Irish citizens do not need passports to travel to the UK, and the country is part of the EU and enjoys easy travel to the US under the latter’s visa waiver system. As a result, Islamist radicalization in Ireland may not just pose a threat within Ireland’s borders, but also to countries further afield.

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#### Notes

1. ‘Adultery and Fornication in Islam’, PDF document, Islamic Cultural Centre of Ireland [Last accessed: December 29, 2015] [http://www.islamireland.ie/site/assets/files/1181/adultery\\_and\\_fornication\\_in\\_islam.pdf](http://www.islamireland.ie/site/assets/files/1181/adultery_and_fornication_in_islam.pdf)