

p.1

BRIEFS

Alex Sehmer

p.3

WILAYAT KHORASAN STUMBLES IN AFGHANISTAN

Nathaniel Barr

p.5

AQIM'S RESURGENCE: RESPONDING TO ISLAMIC STATE

*Jacob Zenn and Dario
Cristiani*

PAKISTAN: MILITANT SYMPATHIES AMONG THE MIDDLE CLASS

Alexander Sehmer

Pakistani police arrested a Karachi-based dentist named Usman Khan on February 14 in connection with last year's Safoora bus attack, which killed 45 and wounded 13 more. Under interrogation, Khan reportedly told the authorities that he had links to al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), and has been working for them since 2008 ([Dunya News](#), February 15, 2016).

He was arrested following a clash with police – who later said they recovered a Kalashnikov rifle from the scene ([The News](#), February 14, 2016). Khan's alleged role, however, appears to have been in fundraising. According to the police, he collected in the region of \$2,000-3,000 a month for the group ([Geo](#), February 14, 2016).

Khan ran a private dental clinic in in the Ayesha Manzil neighborhood after graduating from the Fatima Jinnah Dental College, which is connected to the University of Karachi ([Dental News](#), February 15, 2016). There is no suggestion that Khan is a “big name” in the Pakistani militant scene or that authorities have sufficient evidence backing their accusations against him (beyond his alleged confession). Reports of his arrest have stressed

Khan's status as “another highly educated professional” ([Daily Capital](#), February 15, 2016), following the trend of those accused of involvement in the Safoora attack, many of whom have turned out to be well-educated.

The attack, which occurred on May 13, 2015, saw six gunmen riding motorcycles stop a bus carrying members of the Shia Ismaili community at Safoora Goth in Karachi; they then opened fire on the passengers ([Dawn](#), May 14, 2015). Those alleged to have been behind the attack include Saad Aziz, a young graduate from the Institute of Business Administration in Karachi, who authorities accuse of involvement in up to 20 incidents of terrorism, including the attack on United States national Debra Lobo ([Dawn](#), July 10, 2015), as well as Khalid Yusuf Bari, a former engineer with Pakistan's national airline ([Dawn](#), October 31, 2015). Adil Masood Butt, described as a business associate of Aziz that studied in the U.S. and had set up his own educational institution in Karachi, was arrested in December, accused of financing the attack ([Dawn](#), December 19, 2015).

It should no longer be surprising that those attracted to militant causes may be drawn from among the ranks of well-educated, financially secure individuals. It has become increasingly well established that there is a far weaker correlation between poverty and support for mil-

itant politics in Pakistan than Western policymakers initially believed. [1]

Notes:

[1] The Safoora Goth incident was also explored in the February 4, 2016, issue of *Terrorism Monitor* in an article by Faran Zahid, entitled, "Growing Evidence of Islamic State in Pakistan," http://www.jamestown.org/programs/tm/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=45065&cHash=547a6e0e90327659248b7108b3925ab0#.VtckTDaMDq0.

PHILIPPINES: MILF STAYS CLEAR OF SECURITY FORCES DURING MINDANAO RAID

Alexander Sehmer

Philippines security forces announced they had killed 42 fighters with links to Islamic State on February 26. This declaration followed a major five-day operation in southern Mindanao, which included shelling and aerial bombardment of areas near Butig, a base of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) ([Philippine Star](#), February 26, 2016). Three soldiers were killed and 11 were wounded in the operation.

The authorities say the group they targeted is an affiliate of Jemaah Islamiah (JI), the group behind the 2002 Bali bombings; their leader, Abu Bakar Bashir, pledged allegiance to Islamic State in July 2014 ([Jakarta Post](#), July 14, 2014). The affiliate group is estimated to have about 80 to 100 members and is led by brothers Omar and Abdullah Maute. Omar Maute was reportedly killed by security forces in the first days of the operation ([Manila Bulletin](#), February 24, 2016).

The brothers are said to have been associated with the Indonesian militant Ustadz Sanusi, who was killed by security forces in November 2012 ([Philippine Daily Inquirer](#), February 26, 2016). That the pair has been operating freely in territory controlled by MILF is a reminder of the separatist group's connections to JI, links that date back at least as far as the Mujahideen training camps of 1980s Afghanistan.

However, it is significant there was no involvement from MILF fighters during the clash. Instead, according to the Philippines military, MILF fighters helped thousands of locals flee the violence ([Reuters](#), February 26, 2016).

MILF signed a peace deal with the Philippines government in 2014, but the group is still waiting for legislators to pass the Bangsamoro Basic Law (BBL) that would establish an autonomous region - one of its key demands. The passage of the law has suffered repeated delays, with a number of legislators withdrawing their support, raising tensions on both sides ([MindNews](#), January 29, 2016). There have still been clashes, notably the government's disastrous raid on the village of Tukanalipao in Mamasapano, to capture Jemaah Islamiah leader Zulkifli bin Hir in January 2015. The clash between MILF fighters and the Philippines Special Action Force (SAF) sparked by the raid left 18 MILF fighters and 44 SAF members dead ([Philippine Star](#), January 26, 2015).

While these incidents risk reversing the gains made so far, February's apparently successful raid on the Maute group offers some comfort – both that MILF fighters are distancing themselves from the Maute's brand of Islamic State-inspired militancy, and that they continue to see the peace process as legitimate and beneficial.

Wilayat Khorasan Stumbles in Afghanistan

Nathaniel Barr

January marks a year since Islamic State announced its official expansion into Afghanistan. On January 26, 2015, Abu Muhammed al-Adnani, Islamic State's chief spokesperson, released an audio statement in which he declared the establishment of Wilayat Khorasan, a branch of the group "encompassing Afghanistan, Pakistan and other nearby lands" ([Jihadology](#), January 26, 2015). Since then, Wilayat Khorasan has pursued a campaign of expansion and consolidation in the region, with most of its activity centering in eastern and south-eastern Afghanistan. The group, however, has experienced several setbacks on the battlefield that have raising questions about the group's staying power and future prospects in Afghanistan.

Collapse of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan

The most crushing defeat that Wilayat Khorasan suffered in recent months was the annihilation of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), which had pledged allegiance to Islamic State in August 2015. The IMU's decision to join Islamic State marked a break from the group's historic relationship with the Afghan Taliban.

In the 1990s, the Taliban provided the IMU with access to training camps in Afghanistan in exchange for a pledge of allegiance to Mullah Muhammed Omar. The IMU also contributed several hundred fighters to the Taliban's ongoing conflict with the Northern Alliance ([Carnegie](#), August 12, 2014). The relationship between the Taliban and the IMU continued beyond 9/11. Starting around 2010, the IMU collaborated closely with the Taliban in northern Afghanistan, facilitating the Taliban's expansion into ethnic Uzbek areas ([Eurasia Daily Monitor](#), April 26, 2013).

However, declaration of the Caliphate by Islamic State was a game-changer for the IMU. The group began to express support for the Islamic State in September 2014. Then, in August 2015 following a period of flirtation, the IMU released a video in which its emir, Uthman Ghazi, pledged allegiance to Islamic State and announced that the IMU would serve under the command of Wilayat Khorasan.

The IMU's pledge of allegiance was received with great enthusiasm. In late August, the media wing of Wilayat al-Furat, also known as Wilayat Euphrates, produced an Uzbek-language video praising the IMU and calling upon Central Asian Muslims to join the Islamic State ([Jihadology](#), August 21, 2015).

The excitement was short-lived. In August 2015, small skirmishes erupted between the IMU and the Taliban in Zabul province, where Ghazi and his supporters had settled. The Taliban then issued an ultimatum to the IMU: renounce the pledge of allegiance to Islamic State or leave Afghanistan (*Afghan Islamic Press*, September 2, 2015). Several IMU fighters realigned with the Taliban following this ultimatum, according to one press report, but a core group of IMU members, led by Ghazi, defied the Taliban and remained in Zabul (*Afghan Islamic Press*, November 28, 2015).

The conflict between the two groups escalated quickly. The Taliban launched an offensive in Zabul, attacking the IMU as well as Mansoor Dadullah, a Taliban splinter group commander who opposed the appointment of Mullah Akhtar Mansour as Mullah Omar's successor. Contrary to several news reports, Dadullah never joined Islamic State and remained loyal to the Taliban worldview. However, he maintained an alliance with the IMU in Zabul that pre-dated the latter group's pledge of allegiance to the Islamic State.

The IMU stood no chance against the Taliban onslaught. In mid-November 2015, an IMU member posted a desperate audio message on Facebook in which he explained that the Taliban had killed hundreds of IMU fighters in Zabul and had laid siege to remaining IMU militants. The fighter concluded his message: "This might be our last appearance on the Internet." [1]

That prediction proved prophetic. On December 9, an Islamic State supporter posted an Arabic-language statement on his Twitter account detailing the IMU's demise at the hands of the Taliban. According to this statement, the Taliban killed the remaining IMU fighters in Zabul, as well as Dadullah and 45 of his relatives. The statement also reported that the Taliban had captured Ghazi, though other reports claimed that Ghazi was killed ([SITE Intelligence](#), December 11, 2015).

Regardless of Ghazi's fate, it was clear the Taliban had brought a decisive end to the IMU. As the Islamic State supporter noted in his statement: "The Taliban achieved in 24 hours what the Americans were unable to do in 14 years."

Troubles in Nangarhar

The IMU's collapse in Zabul is not the only battlefield setback Wilayat Khorasan has experienced in Afghanistan. In recent months, Taliban militants, Afghan security forces, and local militias have chipped away at Wilayat Khorasan-held territory in Nangarhar province along the Pakistani border in eastern Afghanistan, where the group had hoped to establish a base of operations.

Wilayat Khorasan initially appeared to be on a steady upward trajectory in Nangarhar, with Islamic State reportedly killing Taliban shadow governors from three districts in Nangarhar in May 2015, facilitating the group's growth in the province ([Pajhwok](#), May 17, 2015). By the following month, Wilayat Khorasan held territory in at least six districts in Nangarhar and began disseminating Islamic State propaganda to local populations and destroying poppy fields – signs that the group was looking to consolidate its control in the province ([Reuters](#), June 29, 2015).

In July 2015, however, U.S. drone strikes killed several Wilayat Khorasan leaders in Nangarhar, including former Pakistani Taliban spokesman Shahidullah Shahid ([Dawn](#), July 9, 2015). Several months later, a provincial parliament member from established a local militia intended to combat Wilayat Khorasan, although the militia itself has been mired in controversy because of its involvement in extra-judicial killings ([AFP](#), December 27, 2015).

The biggest threat to Wilayat Khorasan, however, has come from the Taliban. In October 2015, the Taliban established a special forces unit, comprised of highly skilled and experienced militants, to combat the Islamic State ([BBC](#), December 18, 2015). After taking on the IMU in Zabul, the unit went on the offensive in Nangarhar, reversing many of the gains Islamic State had made earlier in the year.

Wilayat Khorasan's biggest defeat came in early January 2016, when Taliban forces drove Islamic State out of two districts in Nangarhar ([Voice of America](#), January 5, 2016). According to U.S. military officials, by late January, the group had been "pushed back to the southern parts of Nangarhar province." [2] In mid-February, Wilayat Khorasan suffered another major loss in Nangarhar, as Afghan army and police units backed by U.S. airstrikes drove the group out of its stronghold in Achin district ([Wall Street Journal](#), February 21, 2016).

Conclusion

Despite its recent losses in Zabul and Nangarhar, Wilayat Khorasan remains active in Afghanistan. Recent estimates indicate that there are approximately 7,000-8,500 Islamic State members in Afghanistan ([RUSI](#), February 5, 2016), including about 1,000 fighters still in Nangarhar ([New York Times](#), January 31, 2016); the group has demonstrated an ability to carry out terrorist attacks in urban areas, including Nangarhar's capital of Jalalabad.

However, Wilayat Khorasan's recent defeats make it clear that the Taliban poses a serious obstacle to the Islamic State's expansion in Afghanistan. Unless Wilayat Khorasan can either co-opt or overpower Taliban forces in Nangarhar and other provinces, the group risks becoming strategically irrelevant.

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Notes:

[1] Message posted on the 'Afghan Shine' Facebook page, November 14, 2015.

[2] See Department of Defense [Press Briefing](#) by Gen. Shoffner via Teleconference from Afghanistan, January 19, 2016.

AQIM's Resurgence: Responding to Islamic State

Jacob Zenn and Dario Cristiani

Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and its allied militant groups have undergone something of an operational revival since late 2015, expanding their area of operations and mounting high-profile attacks in Burkina Faso and Mali. Local and regional concerns play a role in these, but a more significant factor is the growing rivalry with Islamic State in northwest Africa and further afield.

Ouagadougou and Bamako Hotel Attacks

Recent high-profile attacks by AQIM and their affiliates in Burkina Faso and have shifted the threat level in the Sahel region to bear more similarities with the security situation in littoral West Africa. On January 15, 2016, at least three heavily armed gunmen stormed the Cappuccino Cafe and Splendid Hotel in the heart of Burkina Faso's capital, Ouagadougou, killing around 30 people, most of whom were foreigners. Burkinabe and international security forces finally intervened to end the siege, freeing about 176 hostages. Just two days later, on January 17, AQIM claimed responsibility for the attack and released a list of those involved, one of whom was named Ahmed al-Fulani. The fighter's name suggests he comes from West Africa's most transnational ethnic group, the Fulani, a group AQIM has been courting in order to expand its influence across the region. ([Sidwaya](#) [Ouagadougou], January 16, 2016, [Jeune Afrique](#), January 19). A few weeks later, AQIM also claimed responsibility for an attack against the UN MISMUNA forces in Timbuktu. On February 5, militants launched an attack against the old La Palmeraie Hotel, located between the airport and the administrative area of the city in the south, which is home to Nigerian policemen working with MINUSMA ([Studio Tamani](#), February 7).

Two months prior to these attacks, on November 20, 2015, gunmen stormed the Radisson Blu Hotel in the Malian capital, Bamako. As with the Ouagadougou attack, the operation was carried out by a relatively small group – just three gunmen armed with assault rifles and grenades. The attackers broke through a security barrier at dawn and opened fire, shouting *Allahu Akbar* ([Jeune Afrique](#), November 20, 2015; [Reuters](#), November 20, 2015). The attack reportedly killed 27 people. The target, the Radisson Blu Hotel, was considered one of the safest places in Bamako. Indeed, the Malian capital as a whole had been considered safe from the types of at-

tacks that have struck the country's north (Timbuktu and Kidal), and other West African cities in Niger (Arlit and Agadez), Nigeria (Kano and Abuja), and Chad (N'djamena).

Bolstering Local Alliances

Malian authorities have highlighted the role played in the Bamako attack by local accomplices ([Journal Du Mali](#), November 24, 2015), raising fears that sleeper cells remain present in the Malian capital ([Jeune Afrique](#), November 20, 2015). Al-Mourabitun – the group supposedly led by Mokhtar Belmokhtar, though his status following an air strike last year remains unclear (see *Militant Leadership Monitor's* August 2015 issue) – claimed responsibility for the Bamako attack on November 22. It also condemned France for its role in the region.

Two weeks later on December 4, AQIM leader Abdel Malek Droukdel also claimed the Bamako attack, calling it the first “joint act” between al-Mourabitun and AQIM. A second statement from al-Mourabitun later that day confirmed the group was “united” with AQIM, an unexpected claim as Belmokhtar had previously feuded with Droukdel ([Al-Akhbar](#), [Nouakchott], [November 20](#)); however, possible evidence that the al-Mourabitun leader was indeed killed in an airstrike in Libya.

The AQIM-Sahara Branch, the Fulani-led Macina Liberation Front (FLM), and Ansar Dine also all claimed the Bamako attack, suggesting multiple allied local groups are integrated within AQIM. Further, when AQIM named the three militants “martyred” in the attack, the list included two brothers with the name “al-Fulani,” just like the Ouagadougou attacker.

In August 2015, a smaller-scale hotel attack in Mali, saw militants target the Byblos hotel in Sévaré, central Mali. Twelve people (five soldiers, five militants, and two foreigners) were killed after Malian troops intervened ([AFP](#), [August 11, 2015](#)). Although the targets, which were UN personnel staying at the hotel, are more consistent with AQIM-Sahara Branch and Ansar Dine operations, al-Mourabitun claimed responsibility, saying the attack's “executor” was from the Songhai tribe of southern Mali. The Malian government, however, believed the FLM was behind the attack (*L'Indicateur du Renouveau* [Bamako], August 13, 2015).

Earlier still, in March 2015 in the first major terrorist attack in Bamako, militants killed five people at a nightclub, including two foreigners. Nine other people were wounded in the attack, which was claimed by al-Moura-

bitun. Again, the network behind the operation appears to have been made up of AQIM and AQIM-Sahara Branch, al-Mourabitun, and more local elements, such as Ansar Dine and FLM.

Wider Strategic Imperatives

The AQIM affiliates behind the recent wave of attacks in West Africa likely have multiple motivations ranging from the local to the global, but the incidents come at a time of high-profile Islamic State attacks on several cities around the world, both of sophisticated (Paris in November 2015) and unsophisticated (Jakarta and Istanbul in January 2016) nature.

The Radisson Blu attack in Bamako, for example, came just 10 days after the Islamic State attack in Paris and, whether intended or not, shifted the focus from Paris back to the threat of AQIM in northwest Africa and the Francophone space; Air France staff at the Radisson Blu were reportedly among the attackers' primary targets ([ICG](#), [November 20](#)). In addition, the attack on the Radisson Blu coincided with an ongoing and regionally supported peace process between the Malian government and the secular Tuareg National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), which Ansar Dine leader Ag Ghaly labeled a “platter of shame” in a October 29, 2015, video. Other local-level operations carried out by AQIM include the killing of tribal leaders labeled “traitors” by the group for cooperating with Malian security forces. AQIM has also released videos of its militants intervening in tribal meetings near Timbuktu to encourage opposition to France.

Similarly, the attack at the Cappuccino Café and Splendid Hotel in Ouagadougou on January 15, 2016, coincided with the end of a “tacit peace” that the regime of Burkina Faso's deposed president Blaise Compaoré had achieved with AQIM ([Limes](#) [Rome] January 20). It also occurred two days after the Islamic State attack in Jakarta and thereby stole the media limelight away from the group's first ever attack in southeast Asia.

It is unlikely that AQIM's attacks in Bamako and Ouagadougou are timed to respond directly to the Islamic State's attacks in Paris and Jakarta, especially considering the amount of preparation AQIM would have needed to execute the operations. However, AQIM and other al-Qaeda affiliates are conscious that Islamic State intentionally carries out attention-grabbing attacks in multiple regions of the world. This prompts al-Qaeda affiliates to match Islamic State with high-profile attacks of their own, as seen in Bamako and Ougadougou.

This ideological and political rivalry with Islamic State is an important influence on the recent AQIM attacks in northwest Africa, a region characterized by weak states incapable of adequately tackling the security challenges they face. The targeting of luxury hotels and restaurants frequented by foreigners – as well as the targeting of the foreigners – damages the economies of the countries in the region, reducing tourism and spooking potential investors.

Rivalry with Islamic State

In recent months AQIM-Sahara Branch released videos of two hostages, a South African and a Swedish citizen kidnapped in 2012, while AQIM and al-Mourabitun announced the kidnappings in Timbuktu of a Swiss citizen and an Australian couple (both in January 2016), as well as a Romanian laborer (kidnapped in April 2015) in northern Burkina Faso ([20min.ch](#) [Zurich], January 10, [ABC](#), January 17, [Jurnalul](#) [Bucharest], August 30, 2015). These kidnappings are unlike AQIM's past abductions, however. The group is moving southwards in search of operations that score propaganda victories. The value of such kidnappings is in the additional international attention they provide to AQIM in its rivalry with Islamic State, as opposed to the millions of dollars earned through earlier operations.

The shift comes as a result of AQIM's relatively new-found competition against a powerful brand. An affiliation with Islamic State can benefit local, smaller groups such as the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), in search of jihadist legitimacy. MUJAO's leaders, Walid Abou Adnan Sahraoui and Hamadou Kehiry, pledged allegiance to Islamic State leader Abubakr al-Baghdadi last year ([Al-Akhbar \[Nouakchott\], May 13](#); [Jeune Afrique, May 14](#)). Similarly, Abubakr Shekau, the leader of Boko Haram (now Islamic State in West Africa Province), pledged his allegiance to al-Baghdadi in March 2015 to much fanfare from Islamic State supporters in Africa and the Middle East. This move by militant groups towards Islamic State loyalty has impacted regional recruitment dynamics. AQIM and allied militants fear a rising and unfettered Islamic State can attract more young militants via the ideological pull of al-Baghdadi's announcement of the Caliphate and the Islamic State social media recruitment campaign that comes with it.

Another development worth noting is AQIM's adoption of themes and stylistic features popular in Islamic State videos that had been previously absent from AQIM's past propaganda material. This includes AQIM-Sahara Branch's newfound focus on conquering Rome, the cast-

ing of a British-accented "Jihadi John"-style militant in videos, and the use of distinctive Islamic State production techniques, such as the *nasheed* (Islamic chants) overlaying its films ([Le Monde](#) [Paris], January 18). However, Islamic State also follows AQIM's operations and propaganda in Northwest Africa. Following the attacks in Bamako and Ougadougou, Islamic State heavily promoted its own video series focusing on the Maghreb region and calling on Muslims in the area to join the organization's ranks.

Organizational differences remain between the two groups. Consistent with its vertical organizational structure, key decisions by Islamic State affiliates are directed from Raqqa by Islamic State's "core" that dictates strategic priorities. In contrast, al-Qaeda is organized more horizontally, allowing its affiliates like AQIM and AQIM-Sahara Branch, allies such as al-Mourabitun, and local franchises such as Ansar Dine and FLM considerable freedom to set their own agendas. Islamic State meanwhile avoids relying on local fighters to guide its operations, but encourages militants to migrate to Syria and Iraq; Libya and, to a lesser extent, Nigeria, now also feature as "migration" destinations in Islamic State propaganda. Islamic State also appoints emirs from the Middle East to oversee local operations in West Africa – among them, the unnamed Libyan emir for Boko Haram who Abdulkakar Shekau, the local Boko Haram leader, refers to only as the *wali*, or governor. (See *Militant Leadership Monitor's* December 2015 issue). All things considered, the two strains of militancy maintain significant cultural and ideological influences and similar long-term strategic aims.

Conclusion

AQIM's process of adapting and responding to Islamic State should be seen as a "normalization" of AQIM of sorts. Since the rise of Islamic State, AQIM has become more sensitive to what happens on the global stage. This indicates a significant change, as AQIM had been peculiarly localized in its priorities, even after its 2007 rebranding as a part of al-Qaeda.

AQIM's recent operational revival comes in response to a number of factors. While local priorities play a role, increasing competition with Islamic State is the key driver behind AQIM's adapted rhetoric and operations and the group has consequently translated its strategic communications and resources into high-profile attacks on international targets in cities where it had previously lain dormant.

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