

# Terrorism Monitor

In-depth analysis of the War on Terror

## VOLUME XV, ISSUE 6

p.1

*Alexander Sehmer*

BRIEFS

p.3

*Farhan Zahid*

PAKISTAN BATTLES A  
RESURGENT HIZB UT  
TAHRIR

p.5

*Stefano M. Torelli*

THE BEN GUERDANE  
ATTACK AND  
TUNISIA'S TACKLING  
OF TERRORISM

p.7

*Nicholas Heras*

RETAKE PALMYRA:  
THE SLOW CAMPAIGN  
AGAINST ISLAMIC  
STATE IN SYRIA

## COTE D'IVOIRE: AQIM EXPANDS ITS REACH IN WEST AFRICA

*Alexander Sehmer*

Heavily armed gunmen opened fire on residents and visitors at the luxury L'Etoile du Sud Hotel in Grand Bassam, a coastal resort town in Côte d'Ivoire, on March 13. The gunmen killed at least 16 people – 14 civilians and two members of the security forces – according to officials, although at the time of writing the exact toll appears to remain disputed, with some putting the number at 18 ([Jeune Afrique](#), March 13). Three attackers were also killed, though initial reports had said six. Early reports from AFP also said one attacker had been overheard shouting "Allahu Akbar" ([AFP](#), March 13), while Reuters later reported the men had all consumed beer at a beachside bar before mounting their assault ([Reuters](#), March 15). Amid this confused picture, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) claimed credit for the attack, saying that three "heroes" had stormed the hotel. Efforts are now under way by the Ivorian authorities to identify the attackers ([La Dépêche d'Abijan](#), March 15).

Grand Bassam, a UNESCO World Heritage Site and the one-time colonial capital of Cote d'Ivoire, is the location for several hotels popular with wealthy Ivorians and expatriates. The attack is reminiscent of those on the Radisson Blu in the Malian capital of Bamako in November last year, and in Burkina Faso in January. Both of those attacks were claimed by AQIM. Since the Bamako attack, security in cities across West Africa has been heightened. French intelligence agencies had reportedly warned that both Cote d'Ivoire and Senegal were possible targets ([Bloomberg](#), January 19), though neither country has a history of Islamic extremism.

In fact, the Grand Bassam attack is the first of its kind in Cote d'Ivoire, a worrying development as AQIM seeks to expand both the geographic reach and the profile of its operations in the region (See [Terrorism Monitor](#) for more discussion on this point).

Senegal, which quickly condemned the Cote d'Ivoire attack ([Dakar Matin](#), March 13), will now be closely examining its own domestic security setup. Like Cote d'Ivoire, it maintains strong links to France and contributes troops to the UN peacekeeping mission in Mali (MINUSMA), making it a potential target for an ambitious and resurgent AQIM.

## TANZANIA: SUSPECTED AL-SHABAAB MILITANTS KILLED IN ARUSHA

*Alexander Sehmer*

Tanzanian police killed three suspected militants on February 28 in a shootout in the northern town of Arusha. Police in the Engosheraton area of Sinoni Ward appear to have been alerted to “suspicious persons” in the area by local residents, and a firefright broke out when they visited the house where the three were meeting ([Tanzania Daily News](#), March 1). A woman, thought to be the wife of one of those killed, was arrested following the raid.

Initial reports described the men only as criminals, but latter the authorities announced they had found flags emblazoned with Arabic inscriptions – possibly those of Somali group al-Shabaab – at the scene ([Arusha Times](#), Issue 0896). Police also reportedly recovered an AK-47 rifle with 18 rounds of ammunition, a motorcycle, five army uniforms, face masks, a selection of mobile phones, and a karate outfit ([Daily Nation](#), March 2).

Compared to its East African neighbors, Tanzania has seen relatively little militant activity over the years. In April of 2015, police arrested 10 people in a raid on a mosque in Kilombelo District in Morogoro Region in the southwest, recovering explosives and an al-Shabaab flag ([The Citizen](#), April 16, 2015). A spate of grenade attacks in 2014 that struck bars and restaurants in Arusha supposedly ended with an October 2014 police shooting dead the alleged “mastermind,” Yahya Hassan Omari Hela (who was, incidentally, alleged to be a karate trainer) ([The Citizen](#), October 21, 2014). Meanwhile the UN’s Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea has linked Tanzania’s Ansar Muslim Youth Centre with al-Qaeda’s East African affiliates ([UN](#), S/2013/413) and suggested similar ties for the Boko Haram-linked Association for Islamic Mobilization and Propagation (Uamsho), led by Farid Hadi Ahmed, on the island of Zanzibar.

There is discontent among the Muslim-majority island, but the current simmering unrest is largely connected to last October’s annulled elections. The elections have been rescheduled for later this month despite the demands of the opposition Civic United Front (CUF), which claimed it was on the path to victory. Zanzibar has seen

several attacks, notably small grenade attacks on the island of Unguja ([ETN](#), February 26, 2014) and an acid attack in 2013 on two British teenagers working as volunteer teachers ([BBC](#), August 8, 2013), for which Uamsho members were later arrested.

These incidents indicate the potential for extremist activity, but the Tanzanian authorities maintain a relatively effective street-level intelligence network. The fact Tanzania has refrained from contributing troops to the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) has likely served to insulate it somewhat from al-Shabaab, although Kenyan authorities recently arrested two Tanzanian militants during an operation against the group in the Boni forest ([Daily Nation](#), October 23).

# Pakistan Battles a Resurgent Hizb ut Tahrir

Farhan Zahid

A series of raids by Pakistani counterterrorism forces in recent months has resulted in the arrest of several members of Hizb ut Tahrir (HuT). The group remains an insidious threat to the country and one that should not be overlooked. While it has not yet perpetrated the systemic violence that Islamic State (IS) has become known for – despite its Central Asian chapter's bloody involvement in the Tajik Civil War between 1992 and 1997 – the organization in Pakistan continues to quietly recruit influential members to its cause.

## Recruiting to the Cause

Unlike its allies in the West, Pakistan has always viewed HuT as a significant threat. The Pakistan chapter of the group has made clear that its ultimate aim is an Islamist coup that would make way for its establishment of an Islamic Caliphate, which would be hastened through control of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal. While it holds to a similar Salafist ideology as other radical groups (including Islamic State's), HuT's operational methodology is distinctive.

The group focuses its energies on recruiting highly qualified, successful, and often influential Pakistanis. The preferred targets are often bureaucrats, doctors, or military officers. It favors the use of *dars*, or closed-door gatherings and study sessions, to win over prospective members, after first reaching out to them at their local mosques. HuT recruiters are typically highly educated, eloquent and articulate, and often fluent in English. The potential recruits are invited – and often pressured – into attending the *dars*, which ultimately results in their joining the organization. [1]

HuT was founded in Jerusalem in 1953 by Taqiuddin Nabhani, a former jurist, cleric, and member of the Muslim Brotherhood. During the 1990s, the group, which is Salafist in outlook, gained a foothold in Central Asia, the Middle East, and Western Europe. The UK also became a notable hub of activity, and the organization there has successfully recruited a large number of young British nationals of Pakistani and Bangladeshi descent.

HuT's Pakistan chapter was established in 1999 by British-born Pakistanis Imtiaz Malik and Maajid Nawaz alongside U.S.-educated Naveed Butt. The authorities outlawed the group in 2003 in the wake of its recruitment of military officers and use of anti-government propaganda campaigns. Military officers have frequently been the targets of HuT recruiters, with Butt, the HuT spokesperson for Pakistan, calling on military officers to “move now to uproot Pakistan's traitor rulers.” [2]

The organization successfully recruited 13 Pakistani Army commandos in 2003, all of whom were later arrested and court marshalled ([Dawn](#), October 12, 2012). In 2009, a military officer, Colonel Shahid Bashir, was arrested on the same charges ([Dawn](#), May 14, 2009) and in 2012, Brigadier Ali Khan and four army majors were similarly charged ([Dawn](#), August 3, 2012). According to an investigation by the military police's Special Investigation Branch (SIB), Khan and the others were planning an aerial attack “to clear the way for establishing the Caliphate governance system in Pakistan” ([Dawn](#), October, 12, 2012).

## Recent Developments

Over the last six months, a series of raids by the Counter Terrorism Department (CTD) of the Sindh and Punjab police saw the arrest of HuT activists who held key positions at Pakistani universities, as well as in the private and public sectors. The raids were arguably triggered by the August 2015 appearance of posters and pamphlets in Islamabad Capital Territory. The pamphlets called on Pakistanis to join HuT and condemned military and government officials for allying with the US and arresting clerics who called for the establishment of an Islamic Caliphate in Pakistan. They complained about networks of “American spies” in the country, called for the overthrow of the democratic system, and criticized government policies supportive of the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The pamphlets avoided naming the Afghan Taliban, but praised those calling for jihad in Afghanistan and against U.S. forces.

Among those arrested by the CTD for distributing HuT propaganda was Owais Raheel, a lecturer of statistics at Szabist Institute from Karachi's affluent locality Clifton neighborhood. Raheel had been tasked by HuT's high command with recruiting young people from among the educated, upper classes of Pakistani society ([Express Tribune](#), October 8, 2015). Raheel was an engineer who

had graduated from the country's elite NED University of Engineering and Technology, according to CTD sources. He later studied business administration at the prestigious Institute of Business Administration (IBA), before joining HuT in 2007. He had been influenced by the speeches and sermons of Dr. Israr Ahmad, a former member of Jamaat-e-Islami and the founder of Tanzeem-e-Islami, which advocates the establishment of an Islamic Caliphate in Pakistan and the implementation of sharia law ([Dawn](#), October 7, 2015).

In November 2015, CDT forces in Sindh arrested Hisam Qamar, the emir of HuT's Karachi chapter. Qamar, who worked as the deputy general manager of the local power generation company called K-Electric, was found in possession of large amounts of HuT literature and was charged with recruiting for an outlawed organization, propagating anti-state material, and conspiring against the state ([Dawn](#), November 28, 2015). Less than a month later, in two consecutive raids, CTD forces arrested three faculty members of the University of Punjab, including Ghalib Ata and Amir Saeed – both assistant professors – and lecturer Omer Nawab ([Dawn](#), December 14, 2015).

## **Conclusion**

The recent arrests indicate the creeping influence of HuT in Pakistan, with the group apparently drawing its most recent recruits from reputed educational institutions rather than from among the military officer class. The recent emergence of IS actors in Pakistan risks overshadowing the threat posed by HuT, which has long advocated the overthrow of the Pakistani government and the establishment of an Islamic Caliphate.

No links between the two have yet been established, but the resurgence of the HuT threat alongside the growing presence of IS is a serious concern for the security services. Despite HuT's distinct operational methodology, both groups share the same ultimate goal.

## **Notes:**

[1] Author's discussions with a former member of HuT in Islamabad.

[2] See 'No Exit from Pakistan: America's Tortured Relationship with Islamabad' by Daniel S Markey, Cambridge University Press (2013), p.57.

# The Ben Guerdane Attack and Tunisia's Tackling of Terrorism

Stefano M. Torelli

As Tunisian jihadists with Islamic State (IS) in Libya come under increasing military pressure from local and international forces, they appear to be returning home with the intention of capturing territory. That manifested itself this month in the attack on the border town of Ben Guerdane, the first IS insurgency-style attack to hit Tunisia.

The Ben Guerdane attack is a worrying development for the Tunisian authorities who, while experiencing some success utilizing the security forces against domestic terrorists, still lack a comprehensive strategy to tackle radicalization.

## Evolution of the Threat

Until 2014, the major external threat to Tunisia came from Algeria through the infiltration of fighters linked to al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). These formed the core of the "Uqba ibn Nafi" brigade, which is the largest jihadist group operating in Tunisia. The crisis in Libya, however, has had a significant impact on the evolution of the jihadist threat, with dozens of Tunisian fighters with IS-linked groups returning home, in part as a result of targeted operations on their strongholds in Tripolitania.

As a result, the real threat to Tunisia now comes from Libya. Those behind last year's attacks on the Bardo Museum and the beach resort in Sousse had received training in Libya. Many returning jihadists are former members of Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia (AST) who, after the group was outlawed in Tunisia in 2013, have found refuge in Libya and established new networks with jihadists operating there.

On February 19, a drone attack conducted by U.S. forces in the Libyan city of Sabratha targeted an IS-linked group's training camp. At least 40 militants were killed, most of whom were Tunisian ([Webdo.tn](#), February 20). Among them was Nouredine Chouchane, who allegedly masterminded the Sousse attack. A week later,

the authorities announced they had killed 33 jihadists in a clash on February 25; 13 of the jihadists were revealed to be Tunisian ([Réalités](#), February 25). There have also been reports that Abu lyadh, the AST leader, was killed in an airstrike in Libya, although his death has not been confirmed [1].

The partial dismantling of Tunisian cells linked to IS in Sabratha, 100 kilometers from the border with Tunisia, has raised concerns that IS-linked Tunisian fighters could soon return to Tunisia. On February 20, border authorities arrested five suspected militants entering Ben Guerdane from Sabratha ([Tunisie Numerique](#), February 20). In the same area, between February 27 and 29, an additional 10 people were arrested, including three women from Gafsa who were attempting to travel to Libya ([Nessma Tv](#), February 29). Then, on March 2, five militants were killed in a clash on the Libyan border ([Jeune Afrique](#), March 3).

The Tunisian town of Ben Guerdane, close to the border with Libya, has become the focus of several recent attacks by Libyan-trained Tunisian militants. On March 7, a group of at least 50 jihadists attacked the town, targeting an army barracks and the homes of military officers. Thirty-six militants were killed in the battle that followed, along with seven civilians and 12 members of the security forces.

Just days before the attack a captured militant, Mohamed Ben Mohsen Ben Mohamed al-Gharbi, revealed Tunisian jihadists were developing a plan to use about 200 fighters in conjunction with car bombs to capture Ben Guerdane and proclaim a new province of the Islamic State in Tunisia ([Webdo.tn](#), March 3). This is an important change in jihadist strategy in Libya and shows the direct involvement of IS-linked cells in Tunisia, which had until now only seen infiltration from al-Qaeda-linked groups.

Following the attack the government sent reinforcements to the city, imposing a curfew and closed the border with Libya.

## Government Response

The Tunisian authorities had stepped up counterterrorism operations ahead of the Ben Guerdane attack. On January 3, security forces killed a suspected jihadist in the area between Mount Serj and Mount Ballouta, in the



governorate of Siliana ([Tunisie Numerique](#), January 3). In the first few days of February, three militants were killed in a gun battle with security forces in the mountainous area of Tounine, in the Gabes region, and on February 14, security forces arrested 12 suspected militants in Menzel Bourguiba ([Kapitalis](#), February 15). Security forces subsequently recovered weapons and ammunition in the wake of the various ambushes ([Le Figaro](#), February 2). On February 22, another suspected jihadist was shot and killed near Mghila ([Mosaïque FM](#), February 22), after which security services were able to yet again recover weapons and ammunition, as well as arrest an additional 16 suspects ([Global Post](#), February 22). On March 1 in Ain Jaffe, which lies between Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine, security forces killed four jihadists. Among them was Mohamed Basdouri, a militant wanted in connection with the Bardo and Sousse attacks, as well as for the killing of six members of the National Guard in Sidi Ali Ben Aoun in October 2013 ([Tunisia Live](#), March 1).

Tunisia is also in the process of bolstering its border defenses. On February 6, construction was completed of a 200 km fence along the border with Libya, covering an area from the crossing point of Ras Jedir to Dhiba. Tunisia is also stepping up strategic cooperation with its Western partners. Germany and the U.S. will assist Tunisia in installing electronic equipment on the border ([Al-Jazeera](#), February 7). The UK has similarly sent 20 soldiers to train the local border forces ([The Telegraph](#), March 7).

### **Challenge of Radicalization**

Successful operations by the security forces, however, are not in themselves enough to counter the small but growing number of homegrown militants who travel to Libya and nearby nations for training. Since 2012, between 6,000 and 7,000 Tunisians traveled to Syria, Iraq or Libya to train and fight, according to data provided by the Rescue Association of Tunisians Trapped Abroad (RATTA). The authorities have arrested at least another 12,000 in the same period who were supposedly planning to make the journey.

Since the 2013 banning of the AST, an indiscriminate crackdown on Salafists – including non-violent groups – has helped to bolster this number. In the more remote parts of the country, economic marginalization also contributes to radicalization, with young people aware that their hometowns are experiencing a level of economic

development much lower than that experienced in coastal areas in the east. They are similarly aware that Tunisia's political elite continues to be drawn from among the ranks of the former regime, albeit under a new guise.

The authorities' neglect of young people is fomenting the seeds for a potential new crop of jihadists. A network of contacts between IS-related jihadist cells in Libya and the local population in Tunisia would allow IS to further exploit local grievances against the central government. It is worth noting that during the Ben Guerdane attack, officers' private residences were targeted, which suggests local operatives are already in place.

### **Conclusion**

Tunisia has yet to fully develop a multi-faceted counterterrorism strategy. It currently remains too singularly focused on security with little attention paid to de-radicalization or efforts to tackle the socioeconomic root causes of young Tunisians turning to radical Islam.

The Ben Guerdane attack has highlighted Tunisia's vulnerability. If the situation in Libya continues to deteriorate, Tunisia will be the country most affected by spillover and thereby risks becoming a new outpost for IS-inspired jihadists. While the military has led the fight against terrorism with some success thus far, it requires greater support from international actors, especially the European Union and the U.S.

### **Notes:**

[1] On July 2, 2015, several sources reported that Abu lyadj had been killed in a US airstrike conducted on June 13 targeting former AQIM commander Mokhtar Belmokhtar in Ajdabiya, Western Libya, however, his death has never been officially confirmed. Other sources list Abu lyadh as one of the victims of the drone attack conducted by US against a jihadist training camp in Sabratha, Eastern Libya, on February 19 ([Mosaïque FM](#), 20 February).

# Retaking Palmyra: The Slow Campaign Against Islamic State in Syria

Nicholas A. Heras

Backed by Russian airstrikes, the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) has in recent months renewed a military campaign to recapture the strategic city of Palmyra from the Islamic State (IS) ([Al-Bawaba](#) [Palmyra], March 15; [Al-Alam](#) [Tehran], March 15), one that will continue in spite of Russia's announcement this month that it is pulling back the "main part" of its military forces in Syria.

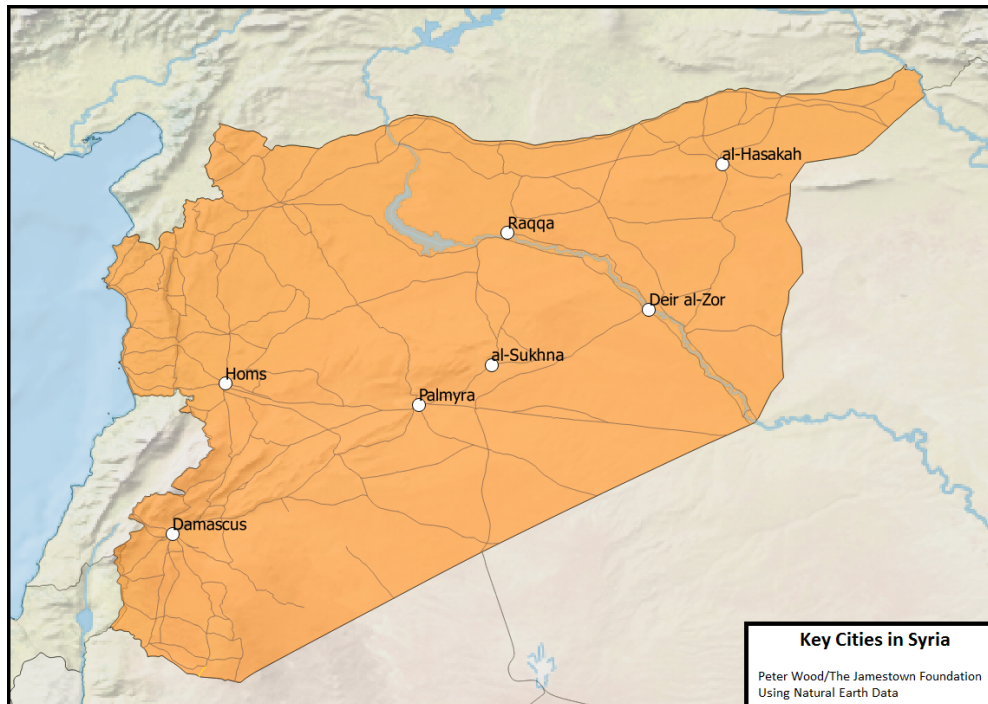
While IS has maintained territorial control throughout most of eastern Syria, it is losing territory on the borders of its declared Caliphate in Raqqqa, al-Hasakah, and Homs governorates. Successfully re-capturing Palmyra and the areas around it – which are rich in natural gas – would be a powerful symbol of the resurgence of the SAA and its auxiliary forces. Although control over the natural gas resources is important for the Assad government – especially in order to provide fuel for the over-worked, regime-controlled electricity grid in western Syria – victory there would deny IS what was arguably the Salafist militants' most high-profile victory last year, and land a significant blow against the group.

## Competing Interests

IS captured Palmyra in May 2015. Since then the SAA has mounted a slow and steady campaign to retake the city and its surrounding area, including the key town of

al-Sukhna, which lies approximately 70km northeast of the city ([All4Syria](#) [Palmyra], March 11; [Sputnik News](#) [Palmyra], March 7). Palmyra is the largest and most important city in the al-Hamad region of Syria's *badia*, the arid, semi-desert area that stretches from Syria's south-eastern borders with Iraq and Jordan to the Euphrates River and on to the eastern areas of several of the country's western governorates. It also sits on the important east-west M20 highway that provides vital supply lines for SAA forces in southeastern Syria's Deir al-Zor governorate ([Shaam Times](#) [Damascus], July 4, 2015; [Shaam Times](#) [Damascus], October 31, 2014; [Al-Safir](#) [Beirut], July 23, 2014). [1]

The al-Hamad region is an important staging point for a military campaign against IS in Deir al-Zor, although its remote and relatively desolate terrain makes its most highly populated areas in and around Palmyra and al-



Sukhna particularly difficult to control. [2] Currently, IS, the Assad government, and the U.S.-led coalition are competing in the region for the loyalty of the local population. That region includes al-Hamad, and the

more fertile Euphrates River valley region that runs from the northeastern areas of Aleppo governorate down through the IS 'capital' of Raqqqa, and into the Syrian-Iraqi border region near the city of Deir al-Zor. The population in these areas is composed mostly of Sunni Arab tribes ([Terrorism Monitor](#), December 19, 2014).

The tribes are pragmatic, shifting their loyalties over the course of the civil war depending on the state of the conflict. Until it is displaced, IS remains the most power-

ful actor in this region of Syria and, as a consequence, the level of the local tribes' opposition to it is reduced ([Terrorism Monitor](#), December 19, 2014).

A fundamental component of the IS strategy throughout Syria is to crush internal armed opposition, including suspected Assad government sympathizers, and to promote and secure the peaceful allegiance of Sunni Arab tribes in each locality it seizes ([Enab Baladi](#) [Deir al-Zor], October 18, 2015; [Terrorism Monitor](#), December 19, 2014). IS has ensured aggressive media coverage of the tribes that pledge allegiance to it, including the local, tribal population of al-Sukhna, which was subsequently renamed Um al-Qura by IS in July 2015 ([Syrian Observatory for Human Rights](#) [Deir al-Zor], January 21; [Enab Baladi](#) [Al-Sukhna], July 23, 2015).

While IS currently holds sway over the local Sunni Arab population of the al-Hamad region and the Syrian-Iraqi border area around Deir al-Zor, the SAA is in a comparatively better position than the U.S.-led coalition to tackle the challenge; this is due largely in part to the SAA's developing campaign in the western suburbs of Palmyra and its military airbase in the city of Deir al-Zor ([MLM Briefs](#), November 30, 2015; [Terrorism Monitor](#), December 19, 2014). The SAA's forward operating base in Deir al-Zor is the center of gravity for the Assad government's efforts to establish a resistance force – a kind of Syrian *sahwa* movement – against IS ([Baladi News](#) [Deir al-Zor], March 10; [MLM Briefs](#), November 30, 2015; [Arabi 21](#) [Deir al-Zor], November 5, 2015). Those efforts are constrained, however, by the local population's resistance to the continued rule of the Assad government, and the SAA continues to struggle with reserve manpower, limiting its ability to project power in Deir al-Zor governorate ([MLM Briefs](#), November 30, 2015; [ARA News](#) [Deir al-Zor], August 13, 2015; [Enab Baladi](#) [Deir al-Zor], August 6, 2015).

### Coalition Efforts

The U.S.-led coalition has also been attempting to build an armed tribal resistance movement in the area over the past year, aided in particular by Jordan ([MLM Briefs](#), December 31, 2015; [Al-Arabi Al-Jadid](#), July 5, 2015; [Al-Arab](#) [Amman], June 15, 2015). The Hashemite kingdom is primarily concerned with Syria's *badia* in the context of stabilizing its northern border with Syria and preventing IS from staging attacks inside Jordan from this sparsely populated, desert region. [3] It is believed that

the Jordanians are engaged in two distinct efforts to accomplish this counter-terrorism objective.

The first is to organize an alternative counter-terrorism force within the structure of al-Jabhat al-Janoobiyya (SF-Southern Front), which is a U.S.- and Jordanian-backed moderate Syrian armed opposition coalition active in southwestern Syria since February 2014 ([Militant Leadership Monitor](#), February 28, 2015; [Terrorism Monitor](#), March 6, 2014 ). This force, called Jaysh Ahrar al-Asha'yer (Army of the Free Tribes), though affiliated with the SF, is believed to be a direct proxy of Jordanian intelligence established to prevent the expansion of IS into the Lajat area in northern Dara'a governorate, a front-line against the expansion of IS in southwestern Syria. It was formed in December 2015 from local, moderate armed opposition militias mobilized from among the Sunni Arab tribes, and could have as many as 3,000 fighters ([Jordan Zad](#) [Amman], December 3, 2015; [YouTube](#), December 2, 2015). [4]

Since its formation in December 2015, the Army of the Free Tribes has battled IS in Lajat. It has also fought the Salafist organization Harakat al-Muthanna al-Islamiyya (Islamic Movement of Muthanna), a rising armed social movement in Dara'a governorate and a long-term security concern of the Jordanians ([El-Dorar Al-Shamiyya](#) [Dara'a], March 11; [Al-Khal](#) [Dara'a], January 17). [5]

However, at present, there is no indication that the Army of the Free Tribes is expected to be a compelling force against IS. That role is reserved for another, coalition-supported force, al-Jaysh Sooria al-Jadeed (New Syrian Army).

The New Syrian Army was formed in November 2015 with support from the U.S. and Jordan. It was mobilized from the remnants of Free Syrian Army (FSA) affiliated groups from the Syrian-Iraqi border region of Deir al-Zor governorate ([MLM Briefs](#), December 31, 2015). The number of New Syrian Army fighters is highly disputed, estimates range from 36 to 1,000 ([The National](#) [Abu Dhabi], March 13; [Al-Arabiyya](#) [Dubai], March 7; [MLM Briefs](#), December 31, 2015). Most were affiliated with the Saudi-backed Jabhat Asala wal-Tanmiya (Authenticity and Development Front) umbrella organization, and share the experience of defeat at the hands of IS when the group established its rule in Deir al-Zor ([MLM Briefs](#), December 31, 2015).



At that time, many sought refuge in the eastern Qalamoun mountain range on the border of Rif Damascus and Homs governorates ([MLM Briefs](#), December 31, 2015; [Terrorism Monitor](#), August 21, 2015; [Al-Akhbar](#) [Beirut], October 16, 2014). It is from this group that the U.S.-led coalition is seeking to build the New Syrian Army into an ethnic Arab, tribally-networked vanguard force. They hope to exploit the group's preexisting lines of influence among the local tribes in the al-Hamad area, and the more heavily populated areas along the Euphrates River valley. The so-called provinces, newly formed by IS, of al-Khayr (Deir al-Zor and its suburbs) and al-Furat (Albu Kamal in Syria and Qa'im and its suburbs in Iraq) are particular targets for the New Syrian Army. It is hoped they will pressure the remaining IS supply lines from Iraq into Syria. [6] The staging point for this campaign is the al-Hamad area. A series of raids by the New Syrian Army and affiliated militias – including the former Authenticity and Development Front affiliate Jaysh Usuud al-Sharqiyya (Army of the Lions of the East) and the SF-affiliated Quwat al-Shahid Ahmad al-Abdo (The Martyr Ahmad al-Abdo Force) – saw raids on the important al-Tanaf border post on the Syrian side of the Syrian-Jordanian border in early March ([Orient News](#) [Deir al-Zor], March 9; [All4Syria](#) [Deir al-Zor], March 5).

Although the New Syrian Army has the military support of the U.S.-led coalition, and has a secure base in Jordan for staging operations into al-Hamad, it faces significant recruiting challenges, preventing it from effectively targeting IS and the SAA's forward operating bases. A stark example of this is the group's apparent inability to join with the Army of the Lions of the East, a union that would provide 1,000-2,000 additional fighters from displaced members of the FSA and Asala wal-Tanmiya. [7] Until it can recruit additional manpower, the New Syrian Army is likely to continue to operate as a special operations force, conducting raids against fixed IS positions. [8]

Coalition efforts are further constrained by the reality that, in southeastern Syria, the SAA's campaign to displace IS has potentially important geopolitical outcomes. If the slow moving, SAA offensive is successful against IS, the Assad government could force the coalition and other opposition supporters to acquiesce to its authority over eastern Syria.

## Conclusion

Efforts to retake Palmyra are not necessarily a race between Syrian government forces and the U.S.-led coalition. There are reports that the U.S. and Russia could coordinate efforts against IS. That could see the U.S.-led coalition focusing on Raqqa and IS-held areas north of the Euphrates, while the Assad regime and its allies target the Palmyra-Deir al-Zor axis to the south and along the Euphrates to the Syrian-Iraqi border ([Al-Arabiyya](#) [Dubai], March 14).

The challenge for the Assad government in the aftermath of displacing IS, however, would be how to hold the newly-seized areas. It is unclear whether enough of the local Sunni Arab tribal population would concede to a return of the regime's authority. Constrained by manpower shortages, the Assad government would likely be forced to allow the local population significant autonomy in exchange for their loyalty, and still have to devote precious military resources to combatting the return of groups such as the al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra and its ally, Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya, in the area.

## Notes:

[1] Author's interviews with Syrian activists from the cities of Deir al-Zor and Albu Kamal, interviews (December 7 and December 15, 2015). Author's interview with a leader in Jaysh Asuud al-Sharqiya, who is based in Turkey, (August 11, 2015).

[2] Author interviews with retired Jordanian security officials (January 13, 2016).

[3] Author's interviews with a Southern Front political official; Jordan-based, Syrian-run NGOs that operate in Dara'a and al-Quneitra governorates with close ties to the Southern Front; and a Jordanian journalist with close ties to field commanders in the Southern Front (January 9-14, 2016). Author's interview with a Jordanian journalist with close ties to field commanders in the Southern Front (February 13, 2016). Author's interview in Washington, DC with a defected high-level Syrian diplomat who is a senior adviser to the Syrian National Coalition's Higher Negotiations Committee and who maintains close ties to the political leadership of the Southern Front (March 9, 2016).

[4] Author's interviews with a Southern Front political official, Jordan-based, Syrian-run NGOs that operate in Dara'a and al-Quneitra governorates with close ties to the Southern Front, and a Jordanian journalist with close ties to field commanders in the Southern Front (January 9-14, 2016). Author's interview with a Jordanian journalist with close ties to field commanders in the Southern Front (February 13, 2016).

[5] Author's interview with coalition official (March 4, 2016); Syrian activists from the cities of Deir al-Zor and Albu Kamal, (December 7 and December 15, 2015). Author interview with a leader in Jaysh Asuud al-Sharqiya based in Turkey (August 11, 2015).

[6] Ibid.

[7] Author's interview with coalition official (March 4, 2016)