

# Terrorism Monitor

In-depth analysis of the War on Terror

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## LIBYA: ISLAMIC STATE STILL HOLDING OUT

*Alexander Sehmer*

Fighters with Islamic State (IS) are clinging on in Libya despite the loss of their stronghold in Sirte last year. The country's continuing political crisis has given the extremists time and space to regroup.

In the last few months, IS fighters were spotted manning checkpoints on the coastal road from Sirte, where they have carried out kidnappings ([Libya Observer](#), September 3; [Middle East Eye](#), September 7). IS' own publication, *al-Naba*, claimed its fighters had seized parts of the road between Sirte and Nufaliya around the same time.

On October 4, IS claimed responsibility for a coordinated attack on a court building in Misrata — at least four people were killed and several others were injured. The attack may have targeted the head of the court, Assadik Badi. One report quoting a defense ministry spokesman indicated that the attack was in response to comments Badi had made about IS ([Libya Herald](#), October 4).

Meanwhile, Hashem Abedi, the younger brother of the Libyan-British national who carried out an attack in May on concertgoers in Manchester in the United Kingdom, remains under arrest in Tripoli. The authorities accuse him of having planned to carry out attacks in the capital. He is reportedly linked to the arrest last month of a Tripoli-based imam, who was detained over allegations that he used his mosque in the capital to seek out IS recruits ([Libya Herald](#), September 11).

IS built up its operations in Sirte between 2015 and 2016, with analysts warning that the city could become the next base for the group after Mosul and Raqqa. The group was eventually forced out in December, defeated by Libyan forces loyal to Prime Minister Fayez al-Serraj, led by a militia from Misrata and backed by U.S. air power ([Africa News](#), December 5, 2016; [al-Jazeera](#), August 11, 2016).

U.S. Africa Command estimates that there are now only 500 IS fighters active in Libya. However, while the collapse of their stronghold was a setback, IS is yet to be fully defeated in Libya. The jihadists' numbers have been reduced, but many of those who escaped Sirte have started to regroup near Bani Walid in the desert areas southeast of Tripoli.

IS fighters are also reportedly sharing resources with al-Qaeda, in contrast to other parts of the world where the two organizations are at loggerheads, and Libya's neighbors are weary — including Chad, which temporarily closed its border in January, concerned that migrating jihadists might flee into its territory ([Africa News](#), January 6).

Nearly a year after it was defeated in Sirte, IS is reappearing in Libya. Without a resolution to the country's political stalemate, too little attention may be being focused on them.

## SAUDI ARABIA: CRITICS AND CLERICS JAILED

*Alexander Sehmer*

Saudi Arabia has rounded up and jailed a number of Islamist clerics in recent weeks, many with alleged links to the Muslim Brotherhood ([al-Jazeera](#), September 13). However, the clampdown betrays an element of state paranoia, and appears to be more of an effort to prepare for the eventual handover of power from King Salman bin Abdulaziz to his son, Crown Prince Mohammed, than an attempt to tackle radicalism.

The arrests — they have included arrests of those with ties to the Islamic Awakening, an antigovernment movement that emerged in the Kingdom in 1990s — are part of a wider crackdown that has included businessmen, artists and academics ([al-Bawaba](#), September 13).

The authorities have attempted to portray some of those detained as part of a foreign-directed spy ring, but those held have all in some way been critical of the authorities over the years. Among them are clerics with wide popular appeal — two of the most prominent, Salman al-Ouda and Awad al-Qarni, are effectively religious celebrities and have millions of social media followers. The Saudi authorities want to silence their critics, and they have rounded up some of the loudest among them. Although, as the journalist Hassan Hassan points out, the fault of some of them lies partly in not being vocal enough when it comes to their country's dispute with Qatar ([The National](#), September 13).

The International Union of Muslim Scholars (IUMS) condemned the clerics' arrests and called for their release, a call Riyadh ignored, not least as the IUMS is headquartered in Doha and headed by the Qatar-based Egyptian Islamist cleric Yusuf al-Qaradawi ([al-Jazeera](#), September 13).

Saudi Arabia views Islamists within its borders as the country's main domestic threat, but while al-Ouda and al-Qarni, who were both influential in the Awakening movement back in the 1990s, have fallen foul of the law in the past over their political activities, they are probably best characterized today as former radicals.

Extremist Islamist threats do exist in Saudi Arabia, and these require the government's attention. Ahead of the crackdown, the authorities reportedly arrested Islamic

State sympathizers preparing to carry out a suicide bombing in Riyadh ([Khaleej Times](#), September 12; [The National](#), September 12). The recent clampdown on the government's Islamist antagonists, however, is more likely about gaining greater domestic political flexibility. It may also have made it easier for Saudi Arabia to finally reverse its ban on women drivers, a much-needed social reform — albeit one that only takes affect from June next year — which came hard on its heels ([al-Jazeera](#), September 27).

Meanwhile, al-Qaeda made reference to the crackdown in the 16th issue of its *al-Nafeer* publication, posted in Arabic and English on Telegram, urging its supporters in Saudi Arabia to rise up against the authorities. Islamic State (IS) appears to have suffered a setback in Libya after they were pushed out from the city of Derna this month ([al-Arabiya](#), April 21). The victory was claimed by both the Libyan military under General Khalifa Haftar and the local “Shura Council of the Mujahideen of Derna and its Outskirts,” or SCMD, which released a two and a half minute-long video entitled “The joy of the people after liberation” via its al-Sabeel Media Foundation ([North Africa Post](#), April 22). The film consists of aerial footage of the city, apparently filmed using a drone and overlaid with the sounds of congested traffic.

IS found a foothold in Derna in May 2014 with the return of members to the city of the Syria-based but Libyan-led al-Battar Brigade ([Terrorism Monitor](#), April 1). These militants formed the Islamic Youth Shura Council, which mounted highly visible street patrols but never quite managed to take control of the city from their Islamist rivals. In fact, the groups behind the SCMD had already pushed IS forces out of central Derna into the city's eastern outskirts of Al Fatayih as early as last year.

Meanwhile, there is no love lost between the SCMD and Haftar, whose Operation Dignity fought Libya's Islamists for more than a year until a ceasefire in 2015 and his official appointment as head of the military. The SCMD, for its part, is an umbrella group of local Islamist militias that includes the Abu Slim Martyrs Brigade and was formed in opposition to Haftar in 2014 ([Al Jazeera](#), December 13, 2014).

In the days following the IS retreat from Derna, the SCMD accused Haftar of ordering airstrikes on the town that killed at least three people ([Libya Observer](#), April 23). Mohamed al-Mansuri, the SCMD's media

spokesman, also accused Haftar and the military of cooperating with IS, calling the parties “two faces of the same coin” ([Libya Herald](#), April 24).

IS fighters appear to have retreated towards Sirte about 370 miles away following their defeat in Derna. The military can be expected to pursue them, but clashes in Derna are likely to continue. Additionally, with IS gone, the remaining al-Qaeda-linked groups will be dominant but General Haftar will be unwilling to let them regain free reign of the city.

# Pakistan's Jamaat-ud-Dawa Positions Itself for Politics

*Animesh Roul*

On August 7, 2017, Hafiz Muhammad Saeed, the chief of Pakistan's banned Jamaat-ud-Dawa (JuD) and Lashkar-e-Taiba terrorist groups, launched a political party. The Milli Muslim League (MML) has yet to be recognized as a legitimate political party by Pakistan's election commission, but it already has its eye on the 2018 general elections. Its leaders have been vocal, heavily criticizing the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and the former prime minister, Nawaz Sharif, who was ousted from office in July by a supreme court ruling.

The MML has been scathing in its criticism of Sharif and the PML-N, accusing them of misrule, corruption and of attempting to appease India. The party's own objectives are the establishment of an Islamic welfare state in Pakistan and the liberation of Kashmir from India. It claims that its intentions are to protect the constitution and the ideology of the Pakistani state. In many ways, this is a reaction to the growing influence of liberalism and secularism in the country.

## House Arrest

Heading the MML is Saifullah Khalid, a senior JuD operative and religious cleric. He was appointed as the party's president by Saeed, who has been under house arrest since late January 2017.

Along with its political objectives, the MML is calling for Saeed's speedy release from so-called preventive detention, a demand it has made repeatedly via numerous press releases.

Saeed remains at the forefront of several Islamist formations, campaigning against the United States and Indian interests in Pakistan and Kashmir. The JuD leader, who is blamed for fomenting a decade long militancy in the Indian State of Jammu and Kashmir, is the prime suspect in a series of terror strikes against mainland India, including the November 2008 Mumbai attacks. Since late January, his JuD and the Falah-i-Insaaniat Foundation (FIF), a charity front for the organization, have been on a government watch list.

The provincial government of Punjab in Pakistan placed Saeed under house arrest initially for three months, but with the possibility of periodic extensions. He has remained in protective custody at his Johar Town residence ever since. Several other JuD operatives are also under house arrest, including Abdullah Ubaid (in Faisalabad), Qazi Kashif Niazi (in Multan), Zafar Iqbal and Abdul Rehman Abid (both in Muridke) ([Dawn](#), August 1). Pakistan's interior ministry has also placed the names of several JuD leaders, including Saeed, on the Exit Control List (ECL), restricting their ability to leave the country ([Geo TV News](#), February 1).

The creation of the MML is the latest move in long-standing attempt to legitimize Saeed and his group's nefarious activities.

## Political Ambitions

Saeed and JuD are broadly engaged in social charity works, as well as violent political and religious activism. The JuD has a checkered past and is banned by several countries — including the United States and the European Union — for its role in militant violence in India. JuD and all of its formations and associated entities have been listed under the UN Security Council (Resolution 1267) with many of its top commanders, including Saeed and Zaki-ur-Rehman Lakhvi, designated as terrorists.

The timing of JuD's forays into Pakistani politics is significant, especially following the supreme court order that disqualified former Prime Minister Sharif and barred the PML-N leader from holding public office over corruption allegations ([Express Tribune](#), July 28).

Both PML-N and JuD have a strong presence in Punjab, Pakistan's most populous and second largest province, a region that has remained at the epicenter of power politics in Pakistan since the country's establishment in 1947. Similar to many political parties, including the PML-N, the JuD has garnered massive grassroots support as a result of its religious charities, educational works and health services. These have been deployed effectively during times of disaster in the province and beyond ([Indian Express](#), October 14, 2013).

Hoping to field more of its leaders in the 2018 general elections, the MML tried to have Qari Muhammad Yaqub Sheikh, a member of LeT's central advisory com-

mittee, elected to the National Assembly by having him campaign in Lahore (constituency NA-120) after the seat fell vacant when Sharif was deposed. Sheikh was listed as Specially Designated National by the U.S. Treasury in August 2012 and has been actively involved with JuD and the Difa-e-Pakistan Council (DPC), an Islamist umbrella platform that aims to defend Pakistan against U.S. and Indian interests ([The News](#), December 5, 2011).

Although the party put Sheikh forward as a candidate, his election campaign was stymied by the election commission, which warned him against using MML's symbols or insignia as the party was still without ECP recognition. Sharif's wife, Kulsoom Nawaz, won the by-election.

The ECP's ruling notwithstanding, the MML is planning to back another JuD operative, Haji Liaqat Ali, as an independent candidate in an October by-election in Peshawar ([The News](#), September 22).

### **'Patriotic Islamists'**

The JuD's recent political overtures can be viewed as a retrenchment from its long held "apolitical" character. However, some early signs of JuD's political ambitions surfaced as far back as 2009, when the Pakistani military (and later civilian) government started an initiative to rehabilitate several pro-Pakistan militant ideologues into mainstream political life. The plan stalled but was revived in 2016, backed almost exclusively by the military. Indeed, several militant personalities and entities are undergoing an image makeover, rebranded as pro-Pakistan Islamists or "patriotic Islamists," under a military-proposed plan to mainstream militant groups.

Islamists such as Fazlur Rehman Khalil of Harakat-ul-Mujahideen, who runs the Ansar-ul-Umma group as a religious front, are attempting to join mainstream politics and legitimize their activities with the help of the military.

Like MML, Khalil's group is said to be preparing to launch a political party. Named Islah-e-Watan, it will have the reported aim of "promoting peace and tranquility" ([Pakistan Today](#), August 25). Like Saeed, Khalil is also designated as a terrorist by the United States.

Supporters argue that the army is carrying out a much needed reintegration process by bringing erstwhile mili-

tant groups into the mainstream. For its part, the military denies it is in any way encouraging the political ambitions of banned Islamist groups. Those claims are somewhat undermined, however, by the increasingly common chants praising the Pakistani army made during Islamist political rallies.

### **Populist Sentiment**

With Pakistan's mainstream political parties struggling to cope amid internal squabbling and allegations of corruption and nepotism, Saeed hopes he and the MML will be able to enter politics, despite the \$10 million bounty on his head.

A grand coalition of the so-called patriotic Islamist entities in the coming elections could conceivably offer a populist political alternative, one that exploits anti-West and anti-India sentiment to harness nationalistic fervor.

MML's Kashmir posturing is arguably aimed at gathering broad national support that could unite fringe political and religious groups alongside a section of civil society. Despite concerted international efforts over the years to stifle the JuD and its leader, the social and charity fronts that form such an integral part of Saeed's operation have remained resilient. Formal entry into electoral politics via the MML, whether ultimately successful or not, is a natural progression and one that could ensure that JuD thrives despite the changing security dynamics of the region.

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# The Favored Conflicts of Foreign Fighters from Central Europe

*Ryszard Machnikowski and Arkadiusz Legieć*

Relatively few jihadist fighters have originated from Central and Eastern European Countries (CEEC) by comparison to the number of fighters seen from Western Europe. The networks in Western Europe are far larger, and CEEC jihadists have frequently only embarked on their path to violence after migrating to Western European nations.

However, while the number of CEEC-origin jihadists responding to the global call to fight in the name of the so-called caliphate is limited to the tens rather than the hundreds — and is likely to remain relatively small in the foreseeable future — there is another conflict that has proved to be attractive to fighters from Central Europe.

## Radicalized in Germany

Christian (Krystian) Ganczarski, probably the best known of CEEC jihadists, was a convert to Islam who took up jihad in Germany. He had migrated there with his family as a young boy in 1970. Born in 1966 in a small town of Gliwice, Polish Silesia, Ganczarski belonged to an older generation of jihadist fighters, those who started their careers in terrorism within the ranks of al-Qaeda in the 1990s. In February 2009, a French court found Ganczarski guilty of masterminding the 2002 suicide bombing of a Tunisian synagogue on the island of Jerba that left 21 people dead. For this, he was sentenced to 18 years in prison.

In a more recent case, Karolina R, a convicted jihadist, was born in a small town in Pomerania and migrated with her Catholic parents to Bonn, Germany, later converting to Islam. The 28-year-old was arrested in March 2014 in an apartment belonging to her parents in Bonn's Bad Godesberg district, where she lived with her 18-month-old son Luqman. In June 2015, Karolina R was sentenced to three years and nine months in prison in Düsseldorf for supporting jihadist fighters. She had provided financial assistance equivalent to EUR 11,000 (about \$13,000) and three camcorders to her husband Farid S, an Algerian-born German Salafist who fought in

Syria ([DW](#), January 1, 2015). Karolina R had travelled with her husband to Syria in May 2013, but returned to Germany with their child that year and started fundraising for Islamic State (IS). Her husband used the camcorders she provided to produce propaganda films. One such film released in July 2014 showed him kicking the corpses of men killed in the Syrian city of Homs. Karolina R, who has German citizenship, did not contact Polish authorities during her trial in Germany.

Karolina R's 20-year-old brother Maksymilian also went to Syria in May 2013 and stayed with her husband. He was also a convert and died fighting for IS near Kirkuk in Iraq in February 2015 ([Fakt](#), February 5, 2015). Maksymilian was a fan of *parkour* and allegedly achieved a high level of proficiency in this activity while in Germany. He is probably the first Polish citizen known to have died fighting for IS. Although, he was soon followed by another Polish immigrant to Germany, 28-year-old Jacek S. His social background is very similar to that of Karolina R and her brother. Jacek S was born in Miastko, a small town in Polish Pomerania, but lived in nearby Kamnica. In 2005, he immigrated with his parents to Germany, where he lived in *Göttingen* and was granted German citizenship. In April 2016, he went to Iraq. Just over a month later, Jacek S drove a car packed with explosives into a security compound at an oil refinery near Baiji, north of Baghdad, killing 11 people and wounding 27 more ([Wyborcza](#), August 12, 2015).

Another Polish jihadist, Adam al-N, has been serving a four-year sentence in Jordan since September 2015 ([RMF24](#), March 24). His mother was Polish and his father Palestinian. He has both Polish and Jordanian citizenship, but was born in Wolfhagen Germany. In October 2012, he went to Syria, joined Ahrar al-Sham and later al-Nusra, though he ended up within the ranks of IS. He was detained several times in Germany during his trips back and was later deported to Poland. In summer 2015, he gave an interview — the first by a Polish jihadist fighter — to journalist Witold Gadowski, trying to explain the motives standing behind his joining IS. He was subsequently arrested in Jordan a couple months later. [1]

## Domestic Troubles

In each of these cases, Polish citizens converted to Islam and became radicalized only after their migration from Central and Eastern Europe. However, the most recent

cases of Polish and CEEC jihadist fighters suggest that both the process of conversion and radicalization may have happened in Poland. Such are the cases of 25-year-old Dawid Ł. (a.k.a. Abu Hanifa), and his peer, Jakub Jakus.

Dawid Ł. is still awaiting trial in a Polish jail, while the fate of Jakub is unknown—he allegedly died fighting for IS in Syria ([INTERIA](#), July 20,). Both were born in small towns—Dawid Ł in central Poland and Jakus in the eastern Poland. They both converted to Islam while in Poland. Dawid Ł probably completed the process of radicalization in Norway, where he emigrated with his parents.

According to the prosecution at their trial, Dawid Ł and his wife Małgorzata both went to Syria in winter 2014 and spent a year there. He joined a local Syrian militia allied to Jabhat al-Nusra near Aleppo, although he also allegedly attempted to join IS. When Dawid Ł visited Norway in April 2015, he was detained by the PST, the Norwegian security services, at the airport and finally deported to Poland in September 2015. There he was arrested.

Jakus joined IS and was wounded while fighting in Syria. There he married a local woman and was allegedly killed in action ([TVN24](#), September 8, 2016). His conversion is believed to have taken place while he was attending a Catholic high school in the city of Lublin. He then moved to the Polish city of Łódź, where he entered his studies at the university there. While in Poland, he was a well-known Islamic activist within the ranks of the Muslim League. He paid a visit to Mecca in summer 2012. Upon returning from Saudi Arabia, he quit university and emigrated to Norway. There he was likely recruited with David Ł through members of the local organization Profetens Ummah.

From Norway, Jakus travelled to Syria in June 2013, with three other members of Profetens Ummah, one of whom later died there. On March 1, the SITE Intelligence group reported that a jihadist fighter known as Abu Khattab al-Polandi had been killed in Syria. A photograph of the dead fighter showed a young, bearded male with long blonde hair ([Wiadomosci](#), March 2). He was not identified, though it is thought to have been Jakus.

Both Jakus and Dawid Ł were connected to a larger group of Salafists who travelled from Poland to Syria—some of them were born in Polish families, others were born abroad but with Polish citizenship ([TVN24](#), August 27, 2016). Dawid Ł's upcoming trial will likely provide the public with more information on this "network" connected to one of Warsaw's mosques. The separate trial of a group of Chechens who were involved in fundraising and buying equipment for their "brothers" fighting in Syria is another example of Poland's jihadist networks ([Onet](#), October, 27, 2016). Estimates of the number of Polish jihadist fighters varies between 20 and 40. However, this number could certainly be larger, as not all will be known to the security services. Nevertheless, the Polish authorities do not yet consider Polish jihadist fighters as posing a severe threat to the country's security.

The small number of cases means that overall the CEECs do not perceive returning jihadist fighters as a serious threat. Jan Silovski, a 22-year-old Czech from the small town of Třebíč, was recently sentenced to six years in prison for attempting to travel to Syria to join IS ([Novinky](#), July 13). He converted to Islam four years earlier, and he appears to have been radicalized through contact with jihadist propaganda online. According to Miroslav Mares, a Czech expert on terrorism: "What's interesting here is that, apparently, the man had no ties with the Muslim community and is an ethnic Czech. (...) In the 1990s, people like Silovsky might have become neo-Nazis. But today, it's groups like IS that seem to attract them." [2]

In February, Silovski flew from Prague to Gaziantep in Turkey. He wanted to reach Jarabulus, Syria, which was then under IS control. During a stopover in Istanbul, Turkish police officers detained him, and ultimately the Turkish authorities returned Silovski to the Czech Republic. There he was investigated, charged and sentenced.

Information is not yet available in open sources on Slovakian and Hungarian jihadist fighters, though Salah Abdeslam, one the Paris attackers, is known to have spent three weeks in the Slovakian city of Nitra in the summer of 2015. He reportedly was connected to Slovakia via one of his relatives, who had married a Slovak woman ([Spectator](#), April 6, 2016). Also, a number of would-be fighters travelling to Syria via Hungary have been arrested there by counterterrorism authorities ([France 24](#), January 14).

## A Battleground Closer to Home

Global jihad is not the only option available to aspiring CEEC fighters. Their immediate neighborhood has a violent conflict that attracts hundreds of volunteers from across Europe — Ukraine. The Ukraine conflict has yet to draw the same number of foreign fighters that IS has managed to attract. Even so, approximately 17,000 fighters from 56 countries have already taken part in the conflict, more than 2,000 of them non-Russians.

Following Russia's annexation of Crimea in March 2014, the first recorded instance of foreign fighters in Ukraine were the Serbian Chetnik Brigades, which were comprised of Bulgarians and fighting in support of the Russian forces.

The factors that affect the influx of foreign fighters and their radicalization — whether fighting alongside Russian forces or against them — include the existence of extremist ideologies, the activity of paramilitary groups, the weakness of state structures and the geographic position of Ukraine. [3]

Central European countries are directly adjacent and well connected to Ukraine. As a result, they have become transit countries for fighters who visit them for either recreational purposes or to promote their activities. Militants from Finland, Norway, France and Austria have traveled to Ukraine via Central Europe by air and land. A group of Chechens from Denmark crossed the Polish-Ukrainian border illegally in 2015, and in 2017 the Polish border police stopped Austrian Benjamin Fisher, who was wanted for war crimes in Ukraine. Fisher had previously fought in Syria and Iraq among the ranks of the Kurdish Peshmerga, and he had served in the Austrian military. [4]

Moreover, some groups of foreign fighters in Ukraine, such as so-called Tactical Group Belarus, are organizing open meetings, crowdfunding campaigns and paramilitary training in Central European countries.

Citizens of Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia — and indeed of Hungary, albeit on a smaller scale — form a distinctive group of foreign fighters in Ukraine. They are attracted by the geographical proximity of Ukraine, and benefit from having good knowledge of the internal situation in the country, as well as a relatively good knowledge of the Russian and Ukrainian languages.

The main reason given by Polish fighters for taking part in the Ukrainian conflict is their personal feelings toward Russia or Ukraine. On the side of the separatists are those with pro-Russian views, who perceive Ukraine as being run by a neo-fascist regime. They emphasize the historical misdeeds of Ukrainians toward the Poles, chief among them the ethnic massacres of the 1940s. On the other hand, those who fight on the Ukrainian side perceive Russia as an existential threat to Poland and treat Ukraine as the frontline of a struggle against a common enemy. Ukraine is a popular destination among radical Polish right-wing organizations, such as the National-Radical Organization (ONR) and Great Poland Organization (OWP), as well as neo-fascist organizations such as *Falanga*, which underlines their desire to take up historically Polish territories from Ukraine such as Lviv.

Czech and Slovak fighters who often form common paramilitary task forces in Ukraine share many common characteristics: a negative attitude toward the EU, NATO and liberal democracy; subscription to a pan-Slavic ideology; and military experience (many are veterans with experience from Kosovo and Afghanistan). Many Czechs are familiar with military service, having worked in their country's professional armed forces. Some are experts in martial arts — Paweł Botka, a mixed martial arts (MMA) professional, fought in a unit of foreign fighters on the side of pro-Russian separatists. [5]

Many Slovaks fighting in Ukraine have military experience they acquired in the ranks of the Slovak armed forces. Additionally, some fighters have been convicted of criminal activity or of involvement in the activities of extremist political groups, such as Mario Reitjman, who has been frequently written about in the Slovak press. [6]

In another instance, a Slovak fighter who wanted to take part in the conflict on the side of the separatists found that he required a Russian visa. Since he failed to qualify, he instead travelled to Ukraine and became a volunteer with the Azov Regiment, a group fighting *against* the separatists. While amusing, the story also serves to show how the conflict in eastern Ukraine attracts people whose primary interest is militancy, regardless of politics. [7]

## A Combination of Factors

Participation of the CEECs' fighters in the Ukraine conflict is a culmination of many political, ideological, religious, ethnic and historical factors. Their presence in the conflict provokes a dangerous transnational social radicalization. It has the effect of strengthening transnational contacts between radicals and leads to the infiltration of foreign security services. It also results in negative social consequences such as increased instances of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), or as those coming out of the Ukraine conflict term it "Donbass syndrome."

Moreover, many of the foreign fighters in Ukraine are already experienced, having fought in other conflicts around the world. Many of them go on to join other battlegrounds — some have travelled on from Ukraine directly to Syria and Iraq.

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## NOTES

[1] Witold Gadowski, "Polak w szeregach ISIS – wywiad": [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QF9qrp\\_TYM&t=358s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QF9qrp_TYM&t=358s)

[2] Miroslav Mares quote from "Czech Is Sentenced to Prison for Trying to Join ISIS", by Jan Richter, (New York Times, February 24)

[3] For more information about foreign fighters and the phenomenon of the "ideological traverse" in Ukraine, where Communists and Nazis fight "arm in arm" see: Arkadiusz Legieć, "Profiling Foreign Fighters in Ukraine – Theoretical Introduction", in: Kacper Rękawek, [ed.] *Not only Syria? The Phenomenon of Foreign Fighters in Comparative Perspective*. NATO Science for Peace and Security Series – E: Human and societal Dynamics, IOS

Press, Amsterdam, 2017, <http://www.iospress.nl/book/44928/>.

[4] Holmsted Larsen Chris, *Danish Foreign Fighters: Past and Present Patterns. W: Not Only Syria? The Phenomenon of Foreign Fighters in Comparative Perspective*. IOS Press, Amsterdam, 2017, <http://ebooks.iospress.nl/volume/not-only-syria-the-phenomenon-of-foreign-fighters-in-a-comparative-perspective>

[5] Prague Monitor, Aktualne.cz: Czech man fighting among separatists in Ukraine. Prague Monitor (July 28, 2015) <http://praguemonitor.com/2015/07/28/aktu%C3%A1ln%C4%9Bcz-czech-man-fighting-among-separatists-ukraine>

[6] Dennik, Slovenski zoldnieri na Ukrajinie, ich usilovni pomocnici a nase slovenske Kocurkovo. Dennik, (January 23) <https://dennikn.sk/blog/slovenski-zoldnieri-na-ukrajine-ich-usilovni-pomocnici-a-nase-slovenske-kocurkovo/>

[7] Rękawek Kacper, *Człowiek z małą bombą*. Wydawnictwo Czarne, Warszawa, 2017

# The Fall of a Jihadist Bastion: A History of the Battle of Mosul (October 2016 – July 2017)

*Brian Glyn Williams and Robert Troy Souza*

Islamic State's (IS) greatest conquest was its bold June 2014 seizure of Mosul, Iraq's second largest city and home to approximately two million predominately Sunni inhabitants. For almost three years, IS dug in to defend this strategic stronghold and the site of the declaration of the IS *khilafah* (caliphate) by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the self-styled "Caliph Ibrahim" ([al-Jazeera](#), July 6, 2014). When a U.S.-backed coalition of jostling Kurdish Peshmerga, Iranian-backed Shia militias and Iraqi Security Forces made up of 114,000 troops launched "Operation We are Coming Nineveh" on October 16, 2016, they knew they were in for a bloody slog to dislodge IS fighters who had "worm-holed" the city, creating tunnels through buildings and building extensive defensive barricades. [1] They were not mistaken in this assumption, and for nine months the allies battled their way first through modern east Mosul, then through the warrens of older west Mosul on the opposite side of the Tigris.

The fighting cost thousands of lives on both sides and saw IS deploy suicide bombers, off-the-shelf drones armed with IEDs, snipers and human shields. However, with the tactical use of U.S. artillery in the form of HIMAR (satellite-guided rockets with small warheads) and "air artillery" guided to their targets by local and American Joint Terminal Attack Controllers (JTACs), the allies fought their way to the historic al-Nuri Mosque, where al-Baghdadi had declared his caliphate three years earlier. On July 10, Haider al-Abadi, the Iraqi prime minister, declared victory over the "false Caliphate," and the Iraqi half of al-Baghdadi's theocracy all but collapsed, even as the terrorist group mutated back to its original insurgent roots to continue its reign of terror.

## The Prelude to Mosul

On June 6 2014, IS launched a raid that was initially intended to be a jihadist version of the 2003 American "thunder run" into Baghdad. Their goal was to strike numerous targets with massive suicide bombings as a

bold statement against the Shia government of then Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki ([al-Arabiya](#), June 12, 2014). But when the much larger Shia-dominated government force defending this Sunni town collapsed and fled with very little resistance, the surprised IS fighters seized control of the city, their greatest conquest thus far.

It was obvious that the United States and its allies would not allow IS to retain control of such a strategic and symbolic prize, but Mosul would be the largest city yet that the U.S.-led coalition attempted to wrest from the so-called caliph's grasp, and it took nearly three years to prepare. As the Iraqi army approached from the south and Kurdish militias advanced from the north and east, satellites, drones and spies made it apparent that IS had not been idle. Following a holy template set by the Prophet Mohammed's successful defense of Medina in the Battle of the Trench in 627 AD [2], the outnumbered jihadists dug trenches and underground tunnels, blasted holes through the walls of buildings, established sniper posts on rooftops, piled cars in streets as barricades and turned Mosul into a massive defensive bastion

The fanatical defenders realized that the Americans would play a key role in the impending attack to overcome such obstacles. The United States had been shocked by IS's bold 2014 conquest of Mosul, and President Barack Obama (who had been elected, to a considerable extent, off the back of his promise to end the blood drip of American lives in what he called the "war of choice" in Iraq) decided to officially intervene later that summer. Thus, the proxy campaign to "degrade and destroy" IS, ultimately dubbed Operation Inherent Resolve, was born.

Obama ordered Green Berets, who served as spotters on the ground, to embed with the Kurdish, PKK-linked Peoples Protection Units (YPG) in Kobane and Hasakah in northern Syria. They were also stationed with Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) and Kurdish Peshmerga fighters in Iraq to act in a "training and assisting role" as "force multipliers." The president's surrogate approach to war aimed to destroy the IS caliphate without costing American soldiers' lives. Obama was well aware of the widespread unpopularity of President George Bush's Operation Iraqi Freedom, which had cost America approximately 4,500 lives and over a trillion dollars, and he intended to use local forces to do the fighting in the back

alleys of jihadist-occupied cities like Fallujah, Ramadi and ultimately Mosul.

Events would show that Obama's "stand off" approach to waging war in the Middle East was effective. Ultimately, IS would be pushed back from controlling an area larger than Britain, with eight million inhabitants under its control, all the way to Raqqa, an inconsequential backwater town in the middle of the Syrian desert where the terrorist group is currently making its fiery last stand. Once Obama ordered supplies to be dropped to outgunned Kurds in the northern Syrian town of Kobane in the fall of 2014, the "ever-expanding caliphate" that IS proclaimed after its inexorable conquest of one third of Iraq and Syria began to recede ([Rudaw](#), October 20, 2014). Obama also supported the Kurdish defenders with precision-guided bombings and put considerable pressure on a reluctant Turkish government to allow reinforcements in the form of heavily armed Kurdish Peshmerga forces from northern Iraq to cross to Kobane through Turkey ([Sabah](#), October 21, 2014).

The defense of Kobane — the Kurds described it as their "Stalingrad" — was the first test of Obama's "stand off" strategy, which relied on surrogate forces in the region to fight IS, instead of directly putting Americans in harm's way ([Rudaw](#), January 19, 2015). History would show it was an astounding success. By the time IS was repulsed from Kobane at the end of January 2015, after taking unsustainable losses, the jihadists officially acknowledged for the first time, via their Amaq news agency, that their fighters had been defeated.

The defeat of IS in Kobane proved to be a decisive turning point and, with the U.S. air force supporting their movements, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a Kurdish and Arab fighting unit dominated by the YPG, pushed IS out of an area in northeastern Syria about the size of Massachusetts. By mid-2016, the Kurds had created a proto-state known as "Rojava" that consisted of three separate cantons: Jazira, Kobane and Afrin ([al-Monitor](#), March 1, 2016). American-backed SDF forces have, as of the time of writing, moved further south and conquered 90 percent of the IS capital of Raqqa and are poised to defeat the remaining 2,000 IS militants holed up there ([SOHR](#), September 20; [ARA](#), August 6).

Meanwhile in Iraq, Iraqi Security Forces, once again backed by the might of U.S. Central Command's air armada, fought to the west of Baghdad and retook the

heart of Sunni Iraq, namely Fallujah and Ramadi, the original base for IS. Iraqi forces loosely aligned to the Iranian-backed Popular Mobilization Unit (PMU) militias also moved northward and conquered another Sunni bastion, former Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein's hometown of Tikrit, on April 1, 2015. Having deprived IS of its strongholds in the Sunni Triangle, it was time to focus on Mosul.

### **Breaching the Jihadists' Lair**

By October 2016, the pieces were in place for a coalition of Iraqi government forces, supported by U.S. special forces (primarily the Green Berets Fifth Group, as well as artillerymen and trainers), Shia militias from the PMU and Kurdish Peshmerga fighters coming from the east to move on Mosul.

The Tigris River bisects Mosul, and the Coalition forces began their assault on the city's more modern eastern side. The ISF advanced from the south while the Kurdish forces moved in from the east in the rural villages and northern plains of Nineveh, where the jihadist defenders burnt tires to create clouds of drifting smoke that would conceal their positions from the ever-present Predator and Reaper drones and U.S. bombers. It was here that Coalition forces had their first encounter with one of the IS fighters' greatest psychological and tactical weapons — suicide vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (SVBIEDs).

Despite the losses they suffered in the outskirts of eastern Mosul from SVBIEDs and snipers, the Coalition forces moved forward inexorably and reached the city's eastern gates in the Gogjali district by November 1, 2016. There they began their first probes into the city. Now the real battle would commence between a force of outgunned and encircled by IS militants numbering somewhere between 3,000 and 12,000, and an uneasy alliance of Arabs and Kurds bent on eradicating all traces of IS in Iraq. [3]

In November 2016, Coalition forces on the ground supported by U.S. B-1 Lancer, F-16 Fighting Eagle, F-18 Hornets and B-52 Stratofortress bombers began to tentatively probe IS positions. Here they encountered a complex set of defenses. IS defenders used everything from forcefully recruited child soldiers, known as the "Cubs of the Caliphate," to booby-trapped houses with explosives capable of blowing up a whole platoon to

halt the advance. In addition to these tactics, IS deployed off-the-shelf drones, which could spy on enemy movements and even drop improvised explosive devices. The jihadists also corralled thousands of terrified civilians to be used as human shields and deployed a vast array of seemingly endless suicide bombers, including those in cars that hurtled into enemy troops at an estimated rate of 14 per day ([CTC Sentinel](#), April 14).

### Support From Above

Although U.S. attention switched to Donald Trump's presidential victory and his inauguration on January 20, 2017, the proxy war started by his predecessor three and half years earlier continued building momentum. The culminating battle of Mosul would be either a vindication of Obama's strategy, or its greatest setback.

By this time, the troops on the ground were making significant progress, including the American "ghost soldiers" moving furtively through the lines of Coalition forces and calling in airstrikes. Despite official statements that U.S. ground troops were not on the frontlines, according to the Kurds, Green Berets were in the thick of things calling in close airstrikes that acted essentially as "airborne artillery." [4] Time and again hard-pressed Kurdish Peshmerga, Iranian-backed PMU Shia militias and the ISF — including the elite Golden Division fighters, who wore skull masks, some inspired by the Marvel comic book character "The Punisher" — were able to rely on this air support in the form of JDAMs (satellite-guided munitions) dropped by fighter-bombers or, GPS-guided artillery strikes from High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARs).

The U.S.-backed Coalition of jostling and often hostile allies also made use of American-supplied M1-Abrams tanks, Humvees and TOW wire-guided anti-tank missiles — used against SVBIEDs — and light infantry weapons to punch through street after street to reach Mosul University on January 14, 2017. With the five bridges that link the two sides of Mosul destroyed by the Coalition, the IS fighters, made up mainly of foreign die-hards, could expect no reinforcements.

Although eastern Mosul was not officially declared liberated until January 24, 2017, four days after Obama's departure from office, the victory was a parting gift to the Obama administration, which had loosened the rules of engagement for JTACs in its final months ([Mili-](#)

[tary](#), February 24). However, the victory was darkened by the fact that advancing troops often found civilian corpses hanging from lamp posts, burnt and beheaded bodies left by fleeing IS troops in mass graves and a landscape of homes that had been reduced to rubble, forcing approximately one million civilians to flee for their lives.

Despite the atrocities and the damage to the city, eastern Mosul was liberated from terrorist rule and IS was clearly in retreat by late January 2016. Compounding its defeat in Iraq, by the fall of 2016, the group had also lost its fallback *wilayat* (province) in Libya, based in the city of Sirte — its "Raqqqa on the Sea" — to a coalition of anti-IS Libyan militias backed by U.S. special forces and air support.

While the battle for western Mosul would continue for six more months under the Trump administration, by the time President Obama handed over the three-and-a-half-year war, the departing president could take credit for the fact that 180 top IS leaders had been killed in 17,000 airstrikes. IS had lost 30 percent of its territory in Syria and 62 percent in Iraq, and had seen its oil production and export destroyed in a bombing campaign known as Operation Tidal Wave II. [5] The number of fighters in IS' ranks had also been reduced from 31,000 to approximately 12,000.

Continuing with the battle plan that had already been carefully put in place by U.S. Central Command, the Coalition forces prepared for the final battle for Mosul across the Tigris River. Western Mosul was made up of a labyrinth of medieval-era infrastructure, narrow streets and densely packed neighborhoods. With the black flag of IS, the *Rayat al Sawda* (Banner of the Eagle), still defiantly flying over the famed al-Nuri Mosque, the Coalition made its way across the Tigris River on pontoon bridges and began to drive into the west.

### The Conquest of West Mosul

Since October 2016, the Kurds had been advancing from Kurdistan into the Makhmur region northeast of Mosul. By February 14, 2017, when the move into western Mosul began, the Peshmerga offensive had already been brought to an end — they never actually entered Mosul city itself. The Kurds established defensive berms to protect their troops from SVBIEDs and effectively annexed the areas to the north and east. For all their ha-

ted of IS, the Peshmerga had no desire to fight an urban battle for an Arab city that would ultimately lie outside what they considered to be their own state of Kurdistan. [6]

Meanwhile, in Mosul, IS reacted to the ever-present “air artillery” that supported Iraqi troops by increasing the use of thousands of human shields. That technique was in evidence in the Jidideh section of west Mosul on March 17, 2017. As Iraqi forces were advancing, two IS snipers began firing at them from atop a nearby building. Spotters on the ground contacted the Erbil-based command center and requested immediate air assistance. But when an American aircraft targeted the snipers with satellite-guided munitions, the entire building collapsed because IS had been using the building as an ammunition storage facility. More than 100 Iraqi civilians were killed in the attack on the booby-trapped building, and news of the incident provoked international outrage.

Despite this public relations setback, the Coalition forces continued the advance and, by June 2017, had encircled the famous al-Nuri Mosque. By this time, al-Baghdadi had gone into hiding somewhere between Syria and Mosul. Even so, it was clear by June 2017 that his claim to have established an “ever-expanding, ever-victorious” transnational theocracy was hollow. As his “state” on the Tigris collapsed, Iraqi troops took to bulldozing buildings with IS fighters holed up in them in order to avoid further casualties.

In a final act of spite and defiance, the surrounded jihadists trapped in one square mile of Old Mosul, stunned the world by blowing up the al-Nuri Mosque. The building had stood as a symbol of the 12th Century Seljuk atabeg (governor) Nur ad-Din Zengi’s success in repulsing Western crusaders. Ironically, Zengi had had the al-Nuri mosque built to celebrate his triumph over Western foes.

As the smoke cleared, on July 9, 2017, Prime Minister al-Abadi arrived in Mosul to proclaim the liberation of Mosul to his people ([Twitter](#), July 9). The battle for IS’ greatest prize was officially over, but in Mosul, the victorious (largely Shia) Iraqi troops sought to avenge the deaths of the approximately 1,500 Shia Iraqi army troops gunned down during the IS jihadists’ massacre at Camp Speicher in Tikrit on June 12, 2014. They threw captured IS fighters off buildings or shot them in extra-

judicial executions. Many of those summarily executed were Sunni insurgents who had been previously captured by the Iraqi authorities, but had subsequently been liberated by IS assaults on Iraqi prisons in the summer 2013 — this was part of a campaign that Baghdadi had dubbed “Breaking the Walls.”

While IS still controls al-Qaim on the Syrian border, with the conquest of the Turkmen-dominated city of Tal Afar in the northwest and the liberation of Hawija in Kirkuk, the jihadist movement that began among disgruntled Sunnis after the 2003 invasion of Iraq has for the most part been suppressed.

The final battle to obliterate the Syrian half of the so-called IS caliphate now lies in the hands of advancing Kurdish and Arab forces of the SDF, who have been heavily backed by 500 U.S. special forces and an artillery unit from the 11th Marine Expeditionary Force.

## Conclusion

According to the Pentagon, as of August 7, 2017, about 70 percent of IS’ territory in Iraq and 50 percent of its territory in Syria has been lost since August 2014, and the group’s dream of a jihadist empire in the Middle East has been all but crushed in the process. [7]

IS will doubtless continue to wage hit-and-run guerilla campaigns in Iraq and Syria of the sort that have already occurred in Mosul and most recently in the Shia south, where suicide bombers and gunmen killed 74 people near the town of Nasiriya at a checkpoint restaurant on September 14 ([al-Arabiya](#), September 14). With Shias in control of Baghdad, home of the Abbasid caliphs that al-Baghdadi sought to emulate, and the Alawites in control of Damascus, the first Sunni caliphate of the medieval Umayyads, two of the Sunnis’ most important historical centers are in the hands of what the extremists call *munafiqs* (hypocrites) or apostates. These festering issues remain, as does the sense of Sunni disenfranchisement in post-U.S. invasion Iraq following the empowering of the Iranian-linked Shia “Safavids” (a term used by Sunni extremists that refers to a fanatical Turkmen Shia dynasty in Iran). The pressure cooker has been capped for now with the suppression of the Sunni jihadist state-building project in Iraq, as it was under General Petraeus with the 2007 troop surge. However, just as the IS rise out of the ashes of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi’s suppressed al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) shows, the vir-

ulent form of Sunni jihadism he created has remarkable resilience and regenerative capabilities. The pot could once again boil over in the form of a new *shamal* (sandstorm) of violence like the one that emerged from the desert south of Mosul in June 2014.

Al-Baghdadi, after months of hiding, issued a “proof of life” recording on September 25, in which he bemoaned the loss of Mosul to the “crusader air force,” but stated: “The leaders of the Islamic State and its soldiers have realized that the path to ... victory is to be patient and resist the infidels” ([al-Jazeera](#), September 28).

IS is clearly mutating back to its original insurgency mode, and its resilient historical “re-enactors” take inspiration from the Quran and hadiths ([Niqash](#), July 27). Its followers seek the fulfillment of prophecy and even accept that their “holy” movement will come close to extinction, before once again returning to power as predicted in the Quran. Most notably, they take heart in the words of the Prophet: “A victorious band of warriors from my followers shall continue to fight for the truth — despite being deserted and abandoned — they will be at the gates of Jerusalem and its surroundings, and they will be at the gates of Damascus and its surroundings.”

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## NOTES

[1] It is worth noting that only Iraqi security forces would enter the city of Mosul. Peshmerga fighters were limited

to seizing and securing areas on the outskirts, which they planned to garrison over the long term. Iranian-backed PMU militias focused more on isolating Mosul from the west to fill out the desert on the Syrian border, whereas non Iranian-backed PMU forces initially involved in breaching eastern Mosul were those raised from local micro-minorities such as Christians, Shabaks and Yazidis.

[2] Based on the authors’ monitoring of IS-related channels on the encrypted messaging app Telegram, the jihadists spoke frequently of reenacting this famous battle in Mosul.

[3] Estimates vary depending on the source. At a US Defense Department briefing on October 17, 2016, Peter Cook told reporters there were an estimated 3,000 IS fighters in Mosul, while outlets such as ARA News placed the estimate much higher at 12,000. <https://www.c-span.org/video/?417070-1/peter-cook-briefs-reporters-military-operations-mosul>; <http://aranews.net/2016/06/12000-isis-militants-fighting-mosul/>

[4] Author interview with Masrour Barzani, Kurdish intelligence minister (January 12, 2016)

[5] The numbers of airstrikes be found on the official Operation Inherent Resolve website, available [here](#). Maps with the percentage of territory IS controls can be found on the Global Coalition Against Daesh website, available [here](#).

[6] Author interview with Falah Mustafa Bakir, Kurdish foreign minister (January 15, 2016).

[7] See Pentagon statement (August 7, 2017). Available [here](#).