

Terrorism Monitor

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IRAQ: WHAT TO EXPECT FROM MUQTADA AL-SADR

Alexander Sehmer

Iraq's parliamentary elections have left Muqtada al-Sadr politically ascendant, a development that will sit uneasily with both the United States and Iran and marks something of a transformation for the populist Shia cleric.

As the dust settled after the vote on May 12, it became clear that Sadr's bloc had come out ahead of the predicted favorite, the Nasr coalition of incumbent Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, which only managed third place ([al-Jazeera](#), May 20; [Rudaw](#), May 14). It was, for most, a shocking result that has turned a populist firebrand, known during the U.S. occupation of Iraq for his leadership of the murderous Mahdi Army, into a potential kingmaker. Sadr will not become prime minister—he was not an election candidate himself—but he will influence what happens next.

Since there is little love between Sadr and Hadi al-Amiri, the head of the Iranian-backed Fateh Alliance, which came second, or Nour al-Maliki, the divisive former prime minister, who came fourth, an alliance with Abadi seems increasingly likely ([Iraqi News](#), May 22). The real

question will be what concessions he wants and how his populist rhetoric translates into policy.

Sadr, who disbanded his Mahdi Army when he temporarily withdrew from politics in 2013, is a nationalist. He appears to want an inclusive, technocratic government free from external interference, and having campaigned strongly on social issues will presumably want to be seen taking action on corruption ([Rudaw](#), 28 May; [Iraqi News](#), May 29).

He also appears intent on seeing Iraq re-established as a regional power, rather than allowing itself to fall further into the Iranian orbit. The Shia leader has sent a strong message to the Gulf States in that regard, making an unannounced visit to Kuwait in recent days ([Gulf News](#), May 30; [Asharq al-Awsat](#), May 30). He has engaged the Gulf States before—in July last year, he made an unusual visit to Saudi Arabia, where he met Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and later met Abu Dhabi's Crown Prince Mohammad bin Zayed al-Nahyan ([al-Jazeera](#), July 31, 2017; [The National](#), August 13, 2017).

Iran will be following developments closely. Qassem Soleimani, the head of Iran's Revolutionary Guards' Quds Force, was in Baghdad soon after the elections—

just as Sadr was emerging as the potential frontrunner—to discuss the establishment of a “friendly” government ([New Arab](#), May 15).

While Sadr is critical of Iran, he has also show himself to be adaptable. It may be premature to imagine that pro-Iran elements will now be excluded, nor is that necessarily desirable given the divisions among Iraq’s Popular Mobilization Units, now legitimized as part of the security forces, many of which are backed by Iran. The elections have cast Sadr as a skillful political operator, it remains to be seen how he will handle Iran, and how Tehran will handle him.

QATAR: GULF RIFT SHOWS LITTLE SIGN OF HEALING

Alexander Sehmer

A year on since the Gulf States began their boycott of Qatar, the situation appears no closer to being resolved. Allowing the spat to drag on, however, risks entrenching divisions in the region.

The long-simmering disagreement between Qatar and its neighbors erupted on June 5 last year, with Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain and Egypt severing diplomatic ties with Doha over allegations it was supporting terrorist groups. Qatar ignored a list of 13 demands—including that it sever ties with the Muslim Brotherhood and close down its influential al-Jazeera television channel—and has endured a political blockade imposed by the four countries ([Gulf News](#), June 23, 2017; [MEE](#), January 23).

Little progress has been made since the dispute began. Instead, things have turned petulant, with Saudi Arabia floating the idea of digging a channel to separate itself from Qatar and dumping nuclear waste close to the border ([Daily Sabah](#), April 9). Qatar has meanwhile ordered domestic retailers to remove from their shelves goods from Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the UAE and Egypt, and appears to have banned further imports ([The Peninsula](#), May 26). It has also become involved in tit-for-tat email leaks with the UEA, with the two sides feeding damaging material to the media in an attempt to score diplomatic points.

Despite initial sympathy for the Saudi position shown by the U.S. administration, things have since gone relatively quiet on Qatar, a tacit recognition that Qatar is actually a useful ally in the realm of counter-terrorism. Indeed, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has made clear that the United States would like to see the situation be resolved, but neither side seems willing to give ground ([Qatar Tribune](#), April 30).

In the early days of the boycott, Qatar made some initial moves to tighten anti-terrorism legislation, but was never realistically going to acquiesce to the list of 13 demands, a number of which seemed downright unfair—such as severing ties with Iran, even though the UAE maintains them. In fact, Qatar had broken its ties with Iran in solidarity with other members of the Gulf Coop-

eration Council (GCC) in 2016, after protesters attacked two Saudi diplomatic posts in Iran, but it re-established them after the Gulf boycott began ([The National](#), August 24, 2017).

The boycott also accelerated an improvement in relations between Qatar and Turkey. Ankara, now firmly behind Doha, had previously pressed the GCC states to work together in the global fight against terrorism ([Asharq al-Awsat](#), June 6, 2017).

The continuing disagreement with Qatar is at best a distraction from events in an increasingly polarized Middle East, but at worst it is extending dangerous fault lines in the region that have pit Iran, its proxies and supporters against Saudi Arabia, Israel and other traditional Western allies. This division has become a feature of the various conflicts across the region, and leaving the situation unresolved only makes further escalation more likely.

Taliban Demonstrates Resilience With Afghan Spring Offensive

Animesh Roul

The Taliban's notorious spring offensive, an annual war ritual launched this year on April 25, has resulted in a series of violent strikes across Afghanistan, demonstrating once again the resilience of the group. The Taliban claims to have carried out as many as 300 attacks on various targets in the first three days of its offensive alone ([Voice of Jihad/Alemarah](#), April 29). Government sources meanwhile say the group had, by May 7, carried out more than 2,600 operations across the country, of which the Afghan armed forces foiled as many as 1,700 ([Tolo News](#), May 7).

The deadly violence, unleashed at a time when the Afghan government has made a considerable effort to bring the Taliban to the negotiating table, is taking place against the backdrop of a major voter registration process with parliamentary and district council elections scheduled for October.

'The Battle of the Trench'

The Taliban has named its spring offensive *al-Khandaq*, a reference to a seventh century battle—the month-long siege of Medina by Arab and Jewish tribes known as *Gazhwat-al-Khandaq*, in which the Prophet Muhammad's forces resisted and eventually prevailed.

The Taliban maintains that it is fighting an ongoing "jihad against the Afghan and its allied forces is a holy obligation [...] and only recourse for re-establishing an Islamic system and independence" ([Ariana News](#), April 12, 2016). However, the use of such a significant historical reference to legitimize violence and bloodshed in the name of Islam has been heavily criticized by Afghanistan's Ulema Council, which said the Taliban's war was against innocent Afghan people and Muslims in general, in contrast to the Prophet Muhammad who fought against infidels or non-believers ([Bakhtar News](#) [Kabul], May 9).

The Taliban's spring offensives have been going effectively since 2006, using different historical Islamic battles

and the names of renowned jihadist commanders, including Operation Khalid bin Waleed (in April 2013), Operation Khaibar (May 2014), Operation Omari (April 2016) and Operation Mansouri (April 2017). They are primarily targeted at the U.S. and foreign troops, defense contractors and their existing support systems and infrastructure, such as military airbases, police outposts and foreign embassies.

Prior to the start of Operation al-Khandaq, on March 21, the Afghan military launched a pre-emptive strike, named *Nasrat* (meaning "victory" in Arabic), battling the Taliban and militants from Islamic State-Khorsan (IS-K), as well as a host of other violent groups, across the country and in the regions bordering Pakistan. Nonetheless, the wave of violence over the last few weeks has caught the government security apparatus off guard.

The first fortnight of the Taliban's offensive has already resulted in hundreds of fatalities on both sides. Despite the deaths, the Taliban remains boastful of its achievements on the ground. It claims complete success in Kunduz, Badakhshan, Zabul, Ghazni and Paktika provinces, while in other provinces such as in Helmand, Farah, Faryab, Kandahar, Badghis and Logar the clashes continue to favor the Taliban militants ([Alemarah](#), May 8). Indeed, the Taliban's braggadocio has some substance, given the acknowledgement by Tariq Shah Bahrami, the Afghan defense minister, of the high number of losses inflicted on the Afghan security forces (Pajhwok, May 7).

As per the data shared by the minister on May 7, at the Wolesi Jirga, the lower house of the Afghan National Assembly, a total 252 security personnel, including army and police, and 63 civilians have been killed, with violence continuing in several districts. Bahrami also informed the house that at least 799 Taliban militants were killed and about 500 injured during the battles that raged across the country. On May 14, Afghan defense ministry sources updated the death toll of troops to 300, but vehemently denied the larger fatality figures claimed by the media ([Afghanistan Times](#), May 14).

While heavy fighting is continuing in at least in 12 provinces across Afghanistan, it is mostly concentrated in Zabul province (southern Afghanistan), in Farah province (western Afghanistan), Baghlan and Faryab province (both in northern Afghanistan). On May 8, Taliban militants claimed victory in Tala Wa Bafarak district in Bagh-

lan, after government forces retreated after days of fighting. The Taliban also claimed to have captured the city of Farah, capital of the western province of Farah, and two districts of central Ghazni province in mid-May 2018 ([Tolo News](#), May 16).

At the time of writing, Zabihullah Mujahid, the Taliban spokesman, has claimed via Twitter that Taliban militants had withdrawn from the besieged provincial headquarters in Farah after killing 63 security force personnel and stealing military equipment. [1] The claim is unverified, but earlier reports suggest that fighting in Farah had been fierce and that Taliban forces had managed to destroy parts of the headquarters of the National Directorate of Security, as well as the customs office, and had reached the central provincial prison ([Khaama Press](#), May 17; [Reuters](#), May 16).

Besides unleashing a robust military campaign elsewhere, Taliban forces have also struck the capital Kabul with a number of suicide attacks and shootings over the last few weeks. Many have targeted police stations, including one on May 9, when five Taliban members attacked a police station in the Shar-e Naw business district ([Salam Times](#), May 9). Similarly suspected Taliban forces targeted Kandahar city with a vehicle borne bomb attack on May 22, and around 21 people were killed and more than 40 people injured in a bomb attack in the city's Hazrat Ji Baba neighborhood ([Afghan Voice Agency](#), May 23).

The National Directorate of Security suspects the spate of attacks in Kabul is the handiwork of the Taliban-affiliated Haqqani Network and Lashkar-e-Taiba ([Gandhara](#), May 10). Earlier, suspicions circulated within Afghan intelligence circles that the Taliban's second in command, Sirajuddin Haqqani, was planning to carry out massive attacks in key cities of Afghanistan, including Kabul, Kandahar and Herat ([Khaama Press](#), April 30). Haqqani, a member of the notorious Haqqani Network, is leading the military commission of the Taliban group and is chief strategist behind the spring offensives.

The Heat of Battle

With the spring offensive under way, the situation in Afghanistan remains fluid. Reports indicate that people have been abandoning their homes in cities and towns after facing massive destruction of infrastructures and

looting, and there are competing claims of military successes from both sides.

According to an assessment by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), the Afghan government has control of more than 229 of Afghanistan's 407 districts, while the resurgent Taliban either control or have influence over 59 districts ([Tolo News](#), May 2). The remaining 119 districts continue to be contested.

Nevertheless, some hope remains for Afghan forces in the form of NATO's Resolute Support mission and U.S. military backing—in particular through air support (including unmanned aerial vehicles), which could swing things in their favor.

Since the post-2014 U.S. military withdrawal from [Afghanistan](#), there is little sign that the Taliban's firepower has waned, or that the group is suffering from battle fatigue. Through persistent violence, the Taliban formations have proven they are still a major force in Afghanistan. It is likely the support structures the group has established over the last two decades remain intact. Since the fall of its so-called Islamic Emirate in 2001, the militant group has restricted the governments that followed from fully governing the country.

While he has denounced the ongoing violence, Afghanistan's President Ashraf Ghani has urged the Taliban to "turn bullets and bombs into ballots"—to take part in upcoming elections and run for political office. This effective olive branch appears to come without any preconditions, but Ghani's gesture underlines the weakness of the incumbent administration in the face of a raging Taliban force.

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NOTES

[1] Zabihullah Mujahid, Official Twitter Account of the Spokesman of Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, May 16, 2018, <https://twitter.com/ZabihullaM4/status/996689150689542146>

India's Ceasefire in Kashmir Raises Prospect of Talks

Sudha Ramachandran

On May 16, the Indian government announced a unilateral ceasefire in the restive northern state of Jammu and Kashmir. According to a statement issued by the Ministry of Home Affairs, the security forces will not launch operations in Kashmir during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan, although they reserve "the right to retaliate if attacked or if essential to protect the lives of innocent people" ([Indian Express](#), May 16).

Kashmir's political mainstream parties welcomed the ceasefire ([Times of India](#), May 16). Moderate separatists, however, dismissed it as merely a "cosmetic measure," and predictably none of the militant groups operating in Kashmir have come on board ([Greater Kashmir](#), May 17). Syed Salahuddin, who heads the United Jihad Council (MJC) as well as its main constituent the Hizbul Mujahideen, described the ceasefire as a "half-hearted measure" and warned that the Indian security forces would "unleash terror" as soon as the month of Ramadan is over ([Greater Kashmir](#), May 18). The Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Taiba likewise dismissed the ceasefire as "nothing but drama" ([Kashmir Observer](#), May 17).

The ceasefire comes amidst a sharp deterioration in the situation in Kashmir, but with moderate and militant separatists alike rejecting the move, it is unclear what India hopes to gain from such a one-sided offer.

Goodwill Gesture

Anti-India militancy has surged in the Kashmir Valley since July 2016 when Burhan Wani, a popular Hizbul Mujahideen commander in south Kashmir, was killed by security forces. Kashmiri youth have joined the militancy in growing numbers ([The Wire](#), April 7). The number of young people who took up arms has risen markedly, according to Kashmir government figures, from 66 in 2015 to 88 in 2016, and 126 in 2017 ([Greater Kashmir](#), February 6). A further 45 young people joined the militant ranks between January and mid-April this year ([Rising Kashmir](#), May 4).

More worrying than the rise in militant numbers is growing public support for the militants. Armed encounters

between militants and the security forces routinely draw scores of angry Kashmiri civilians to the sites of the violence, enabling militants to escape police cordons, while funerals of militants have attracted large numbers of slogan-shouting civilians and stone-throwing protestors frequently clash with police.

The ceasefire comes after four years of force in Kashmir. Since 2014 when the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came to power, New Delhi has adopted a muscular approach to Kashmir. It has relied on hard power to deal with Kashmiri protests, using “unbridled force,” including tear gas and rubber bullets to disperse crowds ([Greater Kashmir](#), June 1, 2017). Indeed, BJP lawmakers have favored the use of terrorism charges against protestors, further fueling public anger ([Zee News](#), March 30).

Possibly the ceasefire marks a shift in government policy, an acknowledgment that excessive reliance on hard power has failed to yield positive results in Kashmir ([The Quint](#), May 21). However, both the Indian army and the intelligence services were opposed to the government decision, according to media reports ([The Quint](#), May 21). Officials who spoke to Jamestown also disagreed with the move. An interior ministry official described the ceasefire as simply “a goodwill gesture” that “bridges the gap” between civilians and the government. He refused to rule out the use of force in the future, saying the elimination of militants had made the groups more amenable to talks. “It has opened up space for the next phase, the initiation of dialogue,” he said. [1]

An Indian army officer involved in counter-insurgency operations in Shopian agreed the past use of force had served to weaken the militancy and that “robust counter-insurgency operations” over the past four years had enabled the “security forces to gain the upper hand.” Indeed, several Hizbul Mujahideen commanders have been eliminated and the group has been weakened. By announcing a ceasefire, the government has “blundered,” he said, as the lull will provide the militants with “breathing time to recover lost ground.” [2]

Pessimistic Mood

Similar lulls in operations in Kashmir have occurred in the past. In 2000, New Delhi announced a similar ceasefire in Kashmir during the Ramadan period. It was extended three times and spanned a period of five months from December 2000 to April 2001. Ahead of the truce,

New Delhi had done considerable preparatory work, with backchannel negotiations taking place between India and Pakistan, the Hizbul Mujahideen and India’s intelligence agencies, and sections of civil society in Delhi and Srinagar ([The Hindu](#), May 15). India even managed to get the Hizbul Mujahideen to join the ceasefire and convinced Abdul Majeed Dar, the Hizbul Mujahideen’s commander in the Valley, to return from Pakistan-occupied Kashmir to explore further dialogue. Even Salahuddin appeared keen to return home ([DailyO](#), May 10). The conflict-weary Kashmiri people were desperate for normalcy, having borne the brunt of violence through the 1990s.

This time, however, things are different. The Kashmiris are angry, and New Delhi’s olive branch appears unlikely to win them over. Kashmiri alienation from India is as high as it was in the early 1990s at the height of the anti-India militancy. There is little public pressure on the militants to give up arms, and New Delhi did little preparatory work this time before announcing the truce. Instead, the offer seemed impulsive.

Without the participation of the armed groups, the ceasefire is largely meaningless, and militant groups have given few signs that they will join it in the coming weeks. The militants active in Kashmir today appear more radicalized than the ones operating in the 1990s. According to the security forces, in instances when they have appealed to trapped militants to surrender, they have refused to do so ([Indian Express](#), May 28, 2016).

Importantly, Pakistan continues to call the shots in the militant groups. The Hizbul Mujahideen leadership “remains captive in Muzaffarabad,” the capital of Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, and has “no capacity to define its own agenda,” Ajai Sahni, executive director of the New Delhi-based Institute for Conflict Management said. He noted that although Hizbul Mujahideen has not joined the ceasefire, the group is likely to avoid “openly challenging” it. Having suffered “major losses” in recent years, it would use the “month of relative peace” to consolidate itself. Sahni believes that if the ceasefire is successful, it could be extended beyond Ramadan and that the government might “intensify efforts for talks.” [3]

Long-Term Prospects

Nonetheless, violence can be expected to continue in the coming months. [4] The 2000 ceasefire saw a great deal of fighting—during the five-month period, 158 members of the security forces were killed, along with 278 civilians and 183 militants ([The Quint](#), May 21).

According to official data, the first week of the ceasefire was bloodier than the week before it. There were four incidents of militant violence in the run-up to the ceasefire, and a civilian was injured. The number of militant attacks rose to 13 in the May 16-23 period, with one civilian killed and 13 others injured ([NDTV](#), May 24). However, incidents of stone throwing dipped from 38 in the week preceding the announcement, to just 16 in the first week of the ceasefire ([Rising Kashmir](#), May 25).

A meaningful ceasefire would bring a measure of normalcy to the lives of Kashmiri civilians, but, it could also pave the way for a sustained peace process. This would require action on two fronts. New Delhi would need to reach out to all sections of Kashmiri society, including the separatists, and engage in unconditional talks. Simultaneously, it must use the space provided by the ceasefire to train its police in the use of non-lethal methods of riot control.

On the external front, New Delhi must revive the suspended talks with Pakistan. Militancy in Kashmir cannot be controlled without Pakistan's help, and engaging Pakistan rather than isolating it should be the government's focus. Importantly, the India-Pakistan ceasefire, currently in tatters with the two sides engaging in daily shelling, needs to be restored. It is well-known that it is under the cover of shelling that Pakistan infiltrates militants into Kashmir. It is in India's interests to get the bilateral ceasefire along the Line of Control back on track.

With all its flaws, the ceasefire in Kashmir should be seen as an opportunity for New Delhi to rebuild trust with the Kashmiri people. The ceasefire by itself will not bring peace, however. New Delhi must bring the political and militant separatists on board. Engaging in talks with Pakistan is the only way India can take things forward.

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and security issues for The Diplomat, Asia Times and Jamestown's China Brief.

NOTES

[1] Author interview with an official from the Ministry of Home Affairs, New Delhi, May 23.

[2] Author interview with an Indian Army officer serving in Shopian in Jammu and Kashmir, May 25.

[3] Author Interview with Ajai Sahni, Executive Director of Institute for Conflict Management, New Delhi, May 25.

Dangerous Amateurs: Indonesia's New Generation of Jihadists

James Brandon

Shortly after 7 AM, on Sunday May 13, a woman on a motorcycle, Puji Kuswait, with two young girls also riding on the vehicle, approached Santa Maria Catholic Church, a prominent building in Surabaya, in eastern Java. A church volunteer tried to prevent the trio from entering the church compound, at which point Kuswait detonated a suicide bomb belt. The explosion killed her, the church volunteer and her two daughters, aged 9 and 12. The latter were also reportedly wearing bomb belts ([Jakarta Post](#), May 15).

Shortly afterwards, the woman's husband, Dita Oepriyanto, drove a car filled with explosives into the city's Surabaya Center Pentecostal Church. Almost simultaneously, the family's two teenage sons conducted a third attempt against another church in the city. Later that day, three others from a separate family—a husband, his wife and their teenage son—who were preparing a follow-up bombing, were killed when their homemade bombs exploded prematurely in an apartment in a low-income area on the city's outskirts ([Tempo](#), May 14). The combined attacks, which actively involved (excluding young children) seven adults and teenagers, killed 13 people in total.

The following day, shortly before 9 AM, five members of another family riding two motorbikes approached the police headquarters in Surabaya. When they were stopped at the gate, they detonated their explosives. Four of the attackers were killed, but one of their daughters survived. No-one else was killed, although several police officers were injured ([Tempo](#), May 14). A day later, on May 16, five jihadists in an SUV vehicle attempted to drive into a police station in Pekanbaru, in Riau province in Sumatra, effectively on the opposite side of the country. When police blocked them from entering the facility, they exited the vehicle and attacked the officers with swords ([Jakarta Post](#), May 16). One police officer was killed before four of the attackers were shot dead—the fifth attacker fled, but was later arrested, along with a co-conspirator.

The wave of attacks, which killed a total of 14 people (excluding the attackers), are the most fatal jihadist incidents in the country since 20 people were killed in an attack in Bali in 2005—a follow-on attack on the larger and better known 2002 Bali bombings, which killed more than 200. The operations, which as discussed below, were almost certainly inspired by Islamic State (IS) and are significantly larger in scale and fatalities than the previous largest IS attack in the country. This was the January 2016 attack in Jakarta, in which four attackers killed three Indonesians and one Algerian-Canadian in the center of the capital.

The latest events also directly follow a brief uprising by around 150 jihadist prisoners, all largely pro-IS, who were being held in a police compound in Depok, outside Jakarta, between May 8-9. The inmates killed five guards before specialist counter-terrorism forces restored order a day later ([Tempo](#), May 10). The police meanwhile shot dead two suspected jihadists on 10 May in Western Java who were reportedly traveling to the scene of the prison rising to “help” the rioters.

In the days after the Surabaya and Pekanbaru attacks, the security forces launched widespread raids against suspected militants, including shooting dead a suspected Jamaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD) fundraiser near Surabaya on May 15, and killing a further suspect in Tanjung Balai in North Sumatra the following day ([Tempo](#), May 15, [Jakarta Post](#), May 17). The head of the National Police, Tito Karnavian, later said that 74 suspected terrorists had been arrested in days following the Surabaya suicide attacks ([Kompas](#), May 22).

The government has also sought to accelerate its attempts to toughen the country's comparatively weak counter-terrorism laws, which make it difficult to prosecute returning fighters for abuses committed abroad. In particular, President Jokowi after the initial attack issued an ultimatum to the House of Representatives to complete their debates on proposed revisions to anti-terrorism laws by June, or else he would pass the law using his executive powers ([Tempo](#), May 22). Parliament subsequently passed the law on May 25 ([Jakarta Post](#), May 25). He also said that the country needs to use more “soft power” to fight terrorism, including through challenging radical ideologies spread through schools, colleges and universities ([Tempo](#), May 22).

Domestic and International Links

The initial church attacks were quickly claimed online by IS, via its Amaq news agency. However, the group provided no evidence of its involvement in the attack, and such claims over the past year have become increasingly unreliable, as indicated by the group's false claims for an attack on a Manila casino by an gambling addict in June 2017, and for the 2017 Las Vegas shooting, whose perpetrator appears to have had no links to jihadism.

However, although IS' claim has little value, the police have credibly said that Dita Oepriyanto, the father who led the initial church attacks, was a JAD member ([Surya](#), May 20). The group, a loose network of IS supporters in Indonesia, were responsible for the 2016 Jakarta attack, and some of its members have had direct links to IS leaders in Iraq and Syria.

Oepriyanto is reported to have been a friend of the individual whose bombs detonated prematurely on the evening of the attacks. Unusually, however, given that the attacks involved significant preparation and the involvement of more than a dozen conspirators, they do not appear to have produced a statement or video that could be circulated after their deaths. By contrast, there were clearer links between the 2016 Jakarta attack and IS leaders, with Bahrum Naum—the most senior Indonesian in IS in Syria—using WhatsApp to communicate with the plotters, as well as PayPal to make payments to enable the operation ([Straits Times](#), January 17, 2017).

It therefore seems highly likely that the Surabaya attackers were to some extent inspired by IS. However, there is at present nothing to suggest a closer link between the Surabaya plotters and IS' leadership, or indeed to directly connect them with Aman Abdurrahman, JAD's imprisoned founder and leader. For instance, the Surabaya attackers' explosives all used TATP (acetone peroxide), which is widely favored by jihadist groups as it can be created with easily available ingredients and equipment ([Jakarta Post](#), May 14). Instructions for creating TATP are also widely available online, including on pro-jihadist websites, and therefore the attackers' use of it does not necessarily indicate a direct link to more experienced militants or to IS leaders abroad.

Indeed, the fact the second family's bombs exploded at home while being prepared arguably suggests they did not benefit from any specialist assistance. That said, it

seems highly likely that the two Surabaya family groups coordinated their attacks jointly, with one intentionally planned for the day following the first wave of attacks, with the presumed intention of causing a greater psychological shock through conducting attacks on consecutive days. This level of planning and sophistication arguably shows some engagement with jihadist thinking, even if direct communication cannot be proven.

Similarly, the attackers' decision to target Christians and the security forces is comparable to similar targeting choices by more structured and centralized IS branches, for instance in Egypt's Sinai. However, again, this is less indicative of a solid link between the Surabaya attackers and IS central leadership. More likely, it merely reflects that the attackers were familiar with IS attacks in other parts of the world. They may also have thought that such attacks would appeal to Islamist hardliners in Indonesia, who periodically indulge in strong anti-Christian rhetoric and see the security forces as suppressing Islamists in order to uphold Indonesia's non-sectarian founding state ideology of Pancasila (which they typically regard as un-Islamic).

Although the attackers' direct links to senior IS members is unclear, there is increasing evidence that the families were part of radical networks that had deliberately isolated themselves from society. For instance, the families were reported to have withdrawn their children from mainstream schools and to have indoctrinated them with online radical material ([Jakarta Post](#), May 15). This further suggests that the group had largely self-radicalized, albeit within broader radical circles, and had planned and conducted their own attacks with likely only minimal assistance from IS leaders elsewhere.

Meanwhile, there is no evidence that the Pekanbaru attackers, who launched a sword attack on a police station in Sumatra, were directly linked to those in Surabaya. Indeed, a week earlier, this group had launched their seemingly independent own journey toward jihad, travelling from Sumatra to the police compound in Depok, scene of the brief jihadist prison uprising ([Tribun Pekanbaru](#), May 16). Their trip reflects that the incident had gained considerable publicity for IS as jihadists inside the prison sent exclusive footage to IS followers outside. IS' central media team then released this footage via its media channels, claiming the incident for the "East Asia Division" of IS.

However, by the time the Pekanbaru attackers arrived at Depok, the security forces had restored order at the prison. Consequently, the thwarted militants returned to Pekanbaru, where they attacked the police station. It therefore seems likely that this operation was intended partly as an act of sympathy with the imprisoned jihadists and partly to take revenge on the security services for putting down the riot. The attack also likely aimed to contribute to the IS cause, both in Indonesia and globally, while the perpetrators also undoubtedly hoped to gain spiritual benefits from their attack.

Limited Returns Over Time

One repeated and striking aspect of jihadist attacks in Indonesia during the last two years is the sheer inefficiency of the attackers, on both a tactical and strategic level. The first significant IS attack in Jakarta, involved one suicide bomber and three others armed with explosives and guns. Assaulting a busy central shopping area during a weekday daytime, the suicide bomber detonated himself in a café and the other attackers then fired on those fleeing the premises, as well as throwing explosives ([Jakarta Post](#), January 14, 2016). The surviving militant then attacked a police post, killing one Indonesian on duty. This assault killed only four people; a grisly but unimpressive 1:1 ratio of attackers to victims.

Further poorly-executed attacks followed in the coming months. In August 2016, a man inspired by IS attempted to set off a bomb during a mass in a church in the city of Medan. The explosives failed to detonate and the attacker instead unsuccessfully assaulted the priest with an axe ([Jakarta Post](#), August 28, 2016). The assailant and four accomplices were later given long prison sentences. In November 2016, a militant threw a Molotov cocktail into a church, killing a toddler—he attempted to flee the scene but was detained by local residents ([Jakarta Post](#), November 17, 2016). He was later identified as having been previously convicted of a 2011 plot to attack police, a science and technology center and churches ([Media Indonesia](#), November 14, 2016).

Further attacks in 2017 have shown minimal technological advances. One of the most notable attempted strikes was a double-suicide bombing near a Jakarta bus terminal in May 2017 that targeted police and a Sufi procession marking the start of Ramadan. Despite taking place in a crowded and largely unsecured area, the two attackers succeeded only in killing three police officers,

and wounding several civilians. In another attack, in June 2017, two jihadists attacked a police post in North Sumatra, killing a policeman before both being shot dead ([Tempo](#), June 25, 2017).

Outlook

The latest attacks therefore do not suggest a growing direct link between IS' Middle East-based leadership and jihadists in Indonesia. However, they do likely affirm that the developments relating to IS continue to galvanize local jihadists. This includes IS' targeting of Christians and the security forces in Iraq, Egypt, Libya and elsewhere inspiring radicals elsewhere to conduct similar attacks—just as IS had hoped would take place.

In addition, however, whereas IS' physical control of territory in the Middle East had inspired jihadists in Indonesia, this self-proclaimed caliphate also acted as magnet for Indonesian jihadists in 2015-6, drawing them away from Indonesia and toward Iraq and Syria. With the IS caliphate now collapsed, these individuals are no longer drawn to the Middle East and may therefore be more likely to act locally. This could also explain the involvement of entire families in the recent attacks. A previous trend had been for Indonesian families—often tied together not only by kinship, but by a shared hardline ideology—to relocate together to the IS caliphate. With the physical caliphate no longer available, such families may now be re-directing their energies against local targets.

That said, another result of the dislocation of IS' central leadership in Iraq and Syria is that local jihadists may be even less able to contact experienced militants prior to attacks. This could explain the largely ineffective nature of many recent jihadist operations in Indonesia, where the attackers have often suffered almost as many fatalities as their targets. Although there remains the potential for more experienced militants—returning for instance from the Middle East or from jihadist conflicts in the Philippines—to boost local jihadists' capabilities, this amateurishness may yet remain a persistent feature of Indonesian attacks.

Meanwhile, however, another aspect of these attacks is the severe government crackdown that they trigger, including detentions and the extra-judicial killings of suspected militants. While this may inflame jihadist and radical feeling, and swell the population of radicals in prison, it will also have the effect of disrupting many

networks and plots. On balance, while the recent surge in attacks in Indonesia is significant and illustrates how jihadist groups in the country are evolving, it does not necessarily indicate that a substantially larger or bloodier jihadist campaign in the country is imminent.

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