

Terrorism Monitor

In-depth analysis of the War on Terror

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MOROCCO: ISLAMIC STATE SYMPATHIZERS IN MOROCCO

Brian M. Perkins

The North African country and popular tourist destination, Morocco, has mostly been spared from the terrorism and jihadist violence that has plagued many other North African states. The country has faced threats from regional al-Qaeda affiliates and, more recently, Islamic State (IS) and its sympathizers. Moroccan security forces have historically managed to identify and disrupt terror cells before they could execute attacks, aside from the 2011 bombing in Marrakesh that left 17 dead and several more injured. Their success ran out on December 17, when French hikers discovered the decapitated bodies of Louisa Jesperon of Denmark and Maren Ueland of Norway two Scandinavian at their campsite between Imlil and Mount Toubkal.

Days after the victims were found a video surfaced of Jesperon's gruesome execution and another of four men, one brandishing a large knife, in front of an IS flag pledging allegiance to the group's leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi ([Jihadology](#), December 20, 2018). Authorities have stated that the execution video is authentic, and

the men can be heard shouting "this is for our brothers in Haijin", referring to military operations against IS in one of its few remaining holdouts ([Telquel](#), December 20, 2018). The four men also referenced Haijin, in Syria, while pledging allegiance to IS.

Moroccan authorities quickly labeled the murder an act of terrorism and managed to identify and arrest one suspect in Marrakesh on December 18 and three others on December 20 ([Telquel](#), December 20, 2018). Among the items seized during the arrests were several large knives, likely the same knives featured in the videos, though authorities have not officially confirmed if this is the case. An additional 18 individuals have been arrested in connection with the attack, and 15 are currently facing charges.

Among those arrested was Kevin Zoller, a Swiss-Spanish dual national suspected of providing training and instruction to the perpetrators, though he did not necessarily instruct them to commit the murders. Morocco's Central Bureau of Judicial Investigation (BCIJ) and police have indicated that Zoller was responsible for providing instructions to Moroccans and other immigrants on passing through the country to Europe, as well as recruiting potential terrorists via social media ([El Mundo](#),

January 8). Zoller reportedly even provided arms training, and was allegedly in contact with IS members in Syria through the messaging app Telegram ([Yabiladi](#), January 9).

It is unclear how extensive Zoller's network of contacts is and if he was communicating back to locals, Moroccan immigrants in Spain, or others living elsewhere in Europe. Additionally, it is unclear how Zoller first came into contact with the attackers. Further revelations about Zoller and the perpetrators' activities are likely to come to light throughout the investigation and trial. What is evident to authorities, however, is that the perpetrators were reportedly radicalized and in communication with Zoller over a very short period of time. As such, the perpetrators were not on the radar of counter-terrorism authorities. While the incident does not necessarily indicate a sudden shift in the security environment in Morocco, it does shed light on the persistent threat posed by IS sympathizers and how quickly some beleaguered Moroccans can be radicalized.

Brian Perkins is the Editor of Terrorism Monitor

AUSTRALIA—BOURKE STREET ATTACK AND ANTI-TERRORISM LEGISLATION

Brian Perkins

On November 9, Hassan Khalif Shire Ali, set his truck full of gas tanks on fire on Bourke Street in central Melbourne before stabbing a man to death and injuring two other people. Police officers arrived on the scene to Shire Ali still brandishing the knife—the incident ended after police officers shot him. He succumbed to his wounds at Royal Melbourne Hospital ([ABC](#), November 10, 2018). The attack was quickly labeled an act of terrorism and bore a striking resemblance to numerous other attacks in Australia that have occurred in the past several years.

Shire Ali, who was born in Somalia and had lived legally in Australia since the 1990s, had been on the Australian police and intelligence agencies' radar. Authorities revoked his passport for allegedly wanting to fight alongside the Islamic State (IS) in Syria and his brother is currently facing trial for terrorism-related charges. IS' Amaq media agency quickly claimed responsibility for the attack, though Shire Ali had no confirmed contact with notable members of the group, a fact that was later noted in an article featured in the 156th issue of Islamic State's newsletter, al-Naba, which was published on November 15, 2018 ([Jihadology](#), November 15, 2018). The article applauded the attack in Melbourne and alluded to the fact that Shire Ali did not have contact with members of the Islamic State. The article goes on to explain that the fact the attacker—as is the case in similar incidents around the world—did not have contact or train with IS is proof that motivation to join and support the group is alive and well.

Australia's counterterrorism legislation is among the toughest in the world, and legislation passed in late November and December, 2018 only provides authorities more power, including granting authorities access to encrypted messages on platforms such as Telegram and WhatsApp. Prime Minister Scott Morrison and Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton also introduced legislation to lower the requirements for the government to strip any dual nationals convicted of terrorism charges of their Australian citizenship ([Guardian](#), November 21, 2018). This legislation, however, is unlikely to have prevented Shire Ali's attacks or the lone-wolf style incidents that have taken place in Australia in recent years. Of the

dozens of individuals arrested and found guilty of terrorism-related charges in Australia—most of which have been associated in one way or another to IS—around 55 percent were locally born, and a significant percentage of the rest did not hold dual citizenship ([News.com.au](#), November 23, 2018). Few individuals had fought or trained with IS. Shire Ali was not convicted of terrorism charges and was known to authorities, but like many others, was not a high enough priority to be continuously monitored.

Stripping dual nationals has already proven more difficult and controversial than the government has expected. In late December, 2018, the government revoked the citizenship of Australia's most infamous jihadist and IS member, Neil Prakash, who is currently in prison in Turkey facing terrorism charges ([ABC](#), December 28, 2018). The government stripped his citizenship based on "clear advice" that he was entitled to citizenship in Fiji through his father. Fiji's Immigration Director, however, indicated that the Australian government did not communicate with Fiji and that there is no record that Prakash has a right to Fijian citizenship ([New.com.au](#), January 8).

The seemingly outsized legislative response to the Bourke Street attack is unlikely to stop attacks such as the ones perpetrated by Shire Ali or other homegrown radicals, which has proven to be the most notable threat and occurs at a higher frequency in Australia than most Western countries. The move to lower the bar for offenses that could result in the stripping of Australian citizenship could easily lead to passing the threat off to countries less equipped to monitor the individual and prevent them from returning to the battlefield or committing new acts of terrorism.

Brian Perkins is the Editor of Terrorism Monitor

Looking Up: The Security Implications of UAV Proliferation

James Pothecary

Introduction

In the ebb and flow of the Afghanistan war, international coalition forces have historically had sole access to unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs). The U.S. Air Force (USAF) has regularly used UAVs to monitor and neutralize Taliban forces ([Khaama Press](#), May 16, 2018). Although insufficient to turn the tide of conflict by themselves, UAVs have given coalition forces a distinct tactical advantage.

Recent indications, however, suggest that Taliban forces are making their first forays into this space. In October 2018, during a demonstration of counter-UAV (CUAV) technologies, a USAF official revealed that Taliban fighters have been using drones to conduct reconnaissance on coalition bases. [1] This fits with current assessments of Taliban UAV capability; sufficient to monitor and surveil—as demonstrated by a 2016 propaganda video of a Taliban attack recorded by drone—but not enough, yet, to pose a kinetic threat to international or Afghan forces.

As evidenced with Islamic State (IS) actions in Iraq and Syria, this status quo could rapidly change. IS militants defending Mosul repeatedly used modified drones to drop small explosives on advancing forces ([Iraqi News](#), February 21, 2017). It takes minimal engineering skills to augment easily accessible, commercially available drones with low-grade armaments, and militants with more sophisticated technical abilities could seek to upgrade them with more advanced weapons or even build weaponized models from scratch. Meanwhile, lone operators can also wreak havoc with off-the-shelf UAVs.

From Afghanistan to London: The 'Lone Operator' Threat

The acquisition of "terrorist drone fleets" by non-state armed groups is a phenomenon that has been well-documented ([Terrorism Monitor](#), September 11, 2017). The proliferation of UAVs, however, has security implications far beyond the world's conflict zones. In December 2018, the United Kingdom's Gatwick Airport—the coun-

try's second busiest air transport hub—was forced to suspend operations for an unprecedented several days after a UAV was sighted within the airport perimeter. Over 1,000 flights were delayed and around 140,000 passengers impacted, with costs running into the tens of millions of pounds ([Evening Standard](#), January 7). The chaotic state response shows how even first-world countries with advanced, robust security apparatuses are woefully unprepared to detect and neutralize a basic UAV flown with malicious intent.

This breach should be seen as particularly serious as there is no indication that the UAV was deployed by a non-state armed group or any trained militant ([Brighton and Hove Independent](#), December 20, 2018). The ability of lone operators to cause widespread chaos with commercially available drones will only escalate in the future, as drones become cheaper, more advanced and more operable. The role of autonomous operating modes was neglected in reporting on the recent incident. It is a simple matter to program one or more UAVs to operate remotely, making it potentially very difficult to track down a determined operator.

How a lone operator—either deliberately or by accident—has not caused a disaster with major loss of life already is purely a question of luck. Over the past twelve months, there have been repeated near miss incidents between commercial aircraft and UAVs. For example, in October 2018, a Virgin Atlantic jet on final approach to Heathrow narrowly missed a drone by a matter of meters ([Sky](#), October 23, 2018).

This risk is also not restricted to aircraft close to the ground. In December 2018, a drone operator flying a UAV at a distance of 10,000 feet—violating UK law—almost collided with Boeing 737 approaching Stansted Airport, Essex ([BBC](#), December 15, 2018). Amateur hobbyists have even managed to fly homemade UAVs at 33,000 feet—the same altitude as a cruising civilian airliner ([Gizmodo](#), March 29, 2018). The ease with which operators could bring down an airliner is a serious gap in aircraft security, one that is impossible to easily or quickly rectify and could easily be exploited by both non-state groups or radicalized lone operators.

Neither is it solely airports or aircraft at risk. Any critical infrastructure—power plants, transport hubs, ports to name a few—could find themselves impacted by hostile UAVs, as could soft targets, such as shopping centers.

Furthermore, militants could utilize a small handful of UAVs to completely overwhelm host-nation security forces by simply flying them within the restricted areas of airports. This would divert law enforcement and military resources away from normal duties, potentially leaving other, more vulnerable targets open for attack. Similar tactics have been employed by IS in Iraq. IS operated drones distracted Iraqi soldiers from an inbound suicide vehicle-borne explosive device ([The New Arab](#), February 23, 2018). While this is an extreme case, it is likely only a matter of time before tactics used in the battlefield make their way to civilian spaces, and a distraction of half the magnitude of the Gatwick incident could still prevent security forces from quickly responding to a less sophisticated attack on a soft target.

Mitigation

Governments have a role to play in protecting their countries from UAVs. Law enforcement and military forces must be prepared and equipped with the necessary training and technology to bring down UAVs quickly and safely. On a political level, nations must take steps to regulate the use of drones—in many countries a legal grey area—and ensure that their own security forces are sufficiently empowered to take action to protect life and property.

Site managers also have a key role to play. CUAV, whether in the Afghan mountains or suburban London, must adhere to some key principles. No single bit of equipment, no matter how cutting-edge, will be sufficient to mitigate UAV risk. Systems should be well-thought out and multi-layered, with radar systems supported by active tracking technology where feasible, passive tracking where not, and a variety of neutralization responses. These systems must also be supported by appropriately trained personnel; the most advanced CUAV kit is next-to-useless without the human infrastructure to maintain, monitor and operate it. Furthermore, given the limited time-frames inherent in a UAV attack, operators must be pre-authorized by the competent decision maker to escalate and deploy active countermeasures as soon as the threat necessitates action.

Moreover, stakeholders in the civilian and military communities are behind the curve with respect to developing a sense of urgency about this problem. The threat posed by UAVs to all facilities, regardless of the local

security environment, is here now. Practitioners must respond immediately by factoring the aerial dimension into their security plans and investing in the technologies and personnel needed to mitigate this risk. As drones proliferate, local security managers in the UK will be united with base commanders of Iraq and Afghanistan in one key aspect—they will be failing to manage one of the key security risks of the 21st century.

Written with input from ISS Aerospace.

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Notes

[1] USAF video of experiments with directed energy to take down UAVs. <https://youtu.be/6y5Kh47nq2Q>

The Sangorian: Weakening the Taliban from Within

Sudha Ramachandran

On October 17, Abdul Jabar Qahraman, a former member of the Afghan parliament, was killed when a bomb placed in his office at Lashkar Gah in Helmand went off. Qahraman was among ten candidates who were killed in the run-up to the October 21 parliamentary elections ([Tolo News](#), October 17, 2018). The Taliban and Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K) had called for a boycott of the election and threatened to “disrupt” it ([Salaam Times](#), September 28, 2018). So, was Qahraman killed for defying their diktats and contesting the election?

More factors than his contesting of the election were at play. An “honest politician” who was vocally anti-Pakistan and staunchly anti-Taliban, Qahraman had many enemies, several of whom wanted him dead. In January 2016, he set up an anti-Taliban militia called Sangorian to infiltrate and weaken the Taliban from within. The Sangorian has been “a great threat to the Taliban.” [1] This would have put him in the Taliban’s crosshairs, culminating in his death.

Situation in Helmand

Qahraman set up Sangorian when Afghan President Ashraf Ghani appointed him in January 2016 as operational commander of all Afghan forces in Helmand. He remained at this post until 2017. Located in southwest Afghanistan, Helmand is Afghanistan’s most fertile province. It is near Iran and shares a border with Pakistan’s Baluchistan province, where several of the Taliban’s top leaders are based. The province is also the center of poppy cultivation and opium production that finances the Taliban’s insurgency. Understandably, the government is keen to control Helmand to deny the Taliban these advantages.

The situation in Helmand in early 2016 was precarious. Following the withdrawal of most foreign troops from Afghanistan in late 2014, the Taliban focused attention on wresting back control over Helmand; in 2015, it carried out more attacks in Helmand than any other province in Afghanistan ([Afghanistan Analysts Network](#), December 28, 2015). During this period, it adopted the *quet’a* strategy, which involves the deployment of small

and mobile commando forces. This strategy was successful and the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), Afghan National Police (ANP), Afghan Local Police (ALP), and militia commanders—who managed to consolidate control over large parts of Helmand following the 2010 surge—crumbled in the face of the Taliban advance in 2015. By the end of that year, the Taliban was in control of ten of Helmand’s 14 districts while the government was in control of only three districts, including the provincial capital, Lashkar Gah. Control over Nad Ali district was split between the government and the Taliban ([Afghan Analysts Network](#), March 11, 2016).

With the Taliban advancing towards Lashkar Gah, the possibility of it overrunning the entire province loomed. It was in the context of this grave situation in Helmand that Ghani dispatched Qahraman to oversee security in Helmand.

Kabul’s plan was to counter the Taliban’s advance by arming local communities to defend themselves. This has been tried before. In 2010, for instance, the Afghan government armed local groups called ALPs to defend their communities. Only now these were called ‘*patsun-ian*’ (uprising forces) ([Afghan Analysts Network](#), March 11, 2016). Locals were recruited to these groups to hold areas recaptured from the Taliban, freeing the army for offensive operations. Simultaneously, the government set up Sangorian.

Enter Sangorian

Sangorian, a pro-government militia, draws its name from a Turkish television soap opera about covert operatives. It comprises local residents, Taliban dissidents, and those who were previously part of the Taliban regime. Its activities are rarely reported in the Afghan or foreign media. [2] Afghan government officials deny its existence and claim that it is a creation of Pakistani propaganda. [3]

Most government-affiliated militias like the ALP, for instance, are defensive formations that come under the Afghan Ministry of Interior. Sangorian, however, is deployed in offensive operations and its fighters are recruited and trained by the National Directorate of Security (NDS), Afghanistan’s intelligence agency and falls under the ambit of the Ministry of Defense. Sangorian fighters are in touch with their handlers in the NDS during operations. [4] Since they are sent on offensive op-

erations, they need intelligence, transportation, and directives, which the NDS likely provides. [5] Sangorian fighters also live in NDS facilities—a suicide attack on an NDS facility in July 2017 resulted in the death of fighters identified as being Sangorian.

Sangorian reportedly has 500-1,000 fighters. Fighters sport flowing beards, dress like the Taliban and are equipped with weapons similar to the ones used by the Taliban ([Gandhara](#), February 15, 2018). This enables Sangorian fighters to blend in easily with the Taliban and fight it from within by triggering divisions within the insurgent group.

Unlike ANSF personnel who suffer from low motivation and morale, Sangorian “have an incentive to fight.” They are convinced that they are doing the right thing in fighting the Taliban. They have local sympathy and support. [6] However, there is concern among Helmand’s residents that, like other government-affiliated covert militias, they will engage in future widespread abuse of civilians ([Gandhara](#), February 15, 2018).

Rattling the Taliban

Listing Sangorian’s achievements in terms of attacks “is hard as its operations are quiet and rarely reported in the media.” [7] However, it is credited with having played “a major role” in preventing the fall of Helmand to the Taliban in 2016 and, more recently, helping recapture the Babaji area of Lashkar Gah and portions of Nad Ali ([Pajhwok](#), December 11, 2018; [Salaam Times](#), June 6, 2018). In mid-2016, Lashkar Gah was under a virtual siege by the Taliban for over four months. According to Qahraman, it was Sangorian’s operations behind Taliban lines in their strongholds of Sangin and Musa Qala districts that prevented the insurgent group from capturing Lashkar Gah ([Gandhara](#), February 15, 2018). The Sangorian has also been more successful than the ALP in taking on the Taliban. [8] Sangorian’s infiltration of the Taliban is said to have triggered suspicions and mistrust among its members, prompting Taliban commanders to surround themselves with bodyguards ([Gandhara](#), February 15, 2018).

The Taliban has never mentioned the Sangorian by name or issued statements on its attacks on the insurgent group. Soon after the killing of Qahraman, for instance, the Taliban claimed responsibility for killing him ([Khaama Press](#), October 17, 2018). It was silent on the

reason for doing so, only describing him as “a prominent communist commander” ([Voice of Jihad](#), October 17, 2018). [9] There was no mention of his founding of the Sangorian. It is possible that the Taliban was reluctant to link its killing of Qahraman to his founding of Sangorian, as that would be perceived as an admission of its concerns over the group.

That the Taliban takes the threat posed by the Sangorian seriously is evident from the fact that the son of Taliban chief Haibatullah Akhundzada was sent to carry out a suicide attack on the NDS headquarters at Gerishk district in Helmand in July 2017. [10] The target of that attack was the Sangorian fighters being housed in the NDS facility.

Fights between the Taliban and defectors are known to be, “vicious with no quarter given.” [11] Consequently, the Taliban uses extreme violence to deal with Sangorian members. Captured Sangorian fighters are tortured brutally and killed by the Taliban. [12] The Taliban also uses heavy weapons in its attacks on Sangorian units ([Gandhara](#), February 15, 2018). Since many Sangorian fighters are former Taliban members and working within the Taliban to weaken it, they are an intimate enemy and thus not only seen to be more dangerous but also, in the perception of the Taliban, deserving the worst punishment.

Conclusion

Sangorian’s success will depend on how focused it remains in its activities. It was set up to undermine the Taliban from within. Should it become yet another militia that unleashes violence on civilians or acts as a private army for NDS officials, it will lose public support, which the Taliban will be quick to exploit.

Although the government has poured in resources and set up a variety of militias, including the Sangorian, to weaken the Taliban in Helmand, it has achieved only limited success. The Sangorian have inflicted losses on the Taliban and kept it at bay, but three years after it came into being, the Taliban continues to control a large portion of Helmand. In early 2018, the Taliban was said to be in control of seven of Helmand's 14 districts and contesting government control in the rest.

Militias like the Sangorian have a small and specific role in fighting an insurgent group like the Taliban. They can,

at best, be useful in deepening divisions and perhaps eliminating some fighters. Qahraman himself came to believe that military operations alone could not defeat the Taliban. Indeed, it was this conviction that prompted him to step aside as overall security chief of Helmand in 2017.

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Notes

[1] Author Interview with *Hekmatullah Azamy*, Acting Head of the Kabul-based Centre for Conflict and Peace Studies, December 5, 2018.

[2] Azamy, n.1.

[3] Author Interview with an Afghan government official, November 29.

[4] Azamy, n.1.

[5] Former Indian intelligence official, November 26.

[6] Azamy, n.1.

[7] Azamy, n.1.

[8] Azamy, n.1.

[9] A former general in the Afghan National Army, Qahraman was known for his counterinsurgency operations against the mujahideen in the 1982-92 period.

[10] Azamy, n.1.

[11] Former Indian intelligence official, n. 5.

[12] Azamy, n.1.

Conditions in Mosul Ripen for Return of Islamic State

Rafid Jaboori

Several warning calls by prominent Iraqi political parties regarding the precarious situation in Mosul have emerged. More than a year has passed since Iraq's second largest city was cleared of Islamic State (IS), but the area seemingly remains vulnerable ([Al Arabiya](#), November 21, 2018).

Although there have been no major military operations since the city was retaken, circumstances similar to those that preceded the fall of Mosul in 2014 are widely reported. Corruption and the lack of effective reconstruction efforts have stalled normalization. Different Iraqi government forces and militias control the city of Mosul and the wider Ninawa province and are accused of using their power to generate revenue through controversial or illegal means. There has been no real work to address the root causes that led to IS' rise, and Iraq's Shia-led federal government has not prioritized Mosul. The U.S. administration's recent decision to withdraw from Syria makes the situation in Mosul and Ninawa even more relevant for the efforts to defeat IS completely ([Al-Ithihaq](#), November 9, 2018).

Corruption, Sectarianism and Stalled Reconstruction

Corruption and sectarianism were among the major factors that led to the sudden fall of Mosul in June 2014. Soldiers were too corrupt to fight and retain the population's support, and many locals saw IS as the lesser of two evils. In the years preceding IS' occupation of Mosul, Shia-led security forces pursued sectarian policies against the Sunni majority local population. Suffering humiliation and insults at security checkpoints was commonplace. Meanwhile, the government of the former hardline Shia Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and many in Iraq's Shia community accused local Sunni leaders of inciting hatred against the security forces.

The security forces were riddled with corruption before the fall of Mosul. Many soldiers paid part of their salaries and allowances to their commanding officers and stayed at home in remote provinces. IS, under its previous name the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI), imposed illegal taxes on local businesses in Mosul for years before it took

over the city. Meanwhile, the security forces did nothing to prevent this as they were engaging in similar practices. Today, security forces and powerful Shia militias are also involved in profiteering of various means, from seizing ownership of abandoned real estate to coercing local businesses to pay protection money.

Iraqi security forces and Shia militias jointly control the city and the Ninawa province. Corruption within their ranks stands as one of the main challenges in the region. It makes the lives of the locals more difficult and weakens the combat capabilities of the Iraqi security forces. After the liberation of the city, many IS members were captured and released after paying bribes to the security forces, while other suspects who are likely innocent stayed in jail because they could not buy their freedom. This situation has caused confusion and uncertainty in the local community ([Al-Khaleej Online](#), January 11).

There is currently less sectarianism in the behaviors of the security forces, but the Shia dominance is still very clear. The U.S.-backed elite Counter Terrorism Service (CTS) played a major role in the liberation of Mosul. Most of the CTS commanders were Shia but were career officers who served in the old Iraqi army and were even members of former president Saddam Hussein's now-banned Ba'ath party of Iraq. They managed to win the hearts and minds of local Sunnis in Mosul. Their role ended after the liberation of Mosul, but they created and left a better atmosphere between the locals and the security forces. Also, the public appeal of the Sunni opposition movement's struggle against Shia dominance in Iraqi politics has disappeared. The Sunni community, however, is still very weary after the whole saga of IS occupation.

The U.S.-backed Major General Najim al-Juburi—a Sunni who comes from Mosul—was appointed the head military commander of Mosul but his real power is limited. Considering the balance of power and the chain of command of the most dominant units, he is not in a particularly prominent position. His role is closer to that of a local sheriff than a military ruler. The better equipped and trained units receive their orders from central command in Baghdad. More critically, the Iran-backed Shia militias which operate under the umbrella of the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) have significant presence and power in Ninawa province and beyond. Despite earlier claims that they would pull out of major cities, especially

Mosul, they are still there ([Alghad Press](#), August 12, 2018).

The process of reconstruction has also been stalled by the central government's apparent lack of interest. The Shia-led government did not prioritize Sunni-majority Mosul in its budget plan and very little money was allocated for reconstruction. Meanwhile, the local government is led by a governor, Nawfal Humadi al-Sultan al-Agoob, who is known for his unannounced visits to government services where he has had heated debates with junior officials regarding basic services, but apart from those showings, there has been no delivery ([Erem News](#), February 28, 2018).

The old city and other parts of the west bank of the Tigris River, which divides the city, look as devastated as they were a year ago. The governor is accused of facilitating illegal lucrative activities for influential parties. He is a Sunni but owes his appointment and survival to the support of the Iran-backed Shia militias who have a solid presence in Mosul. He is also on good terms with the Kurds who have a certain influence in the area ([Mawazin](#), November 27, 2018). [1]

IS is still too weak to run the same parallel system of control, but the group is likely watching and making plans. Sunni locals still consider the current situation to be better than IS rule, but continuing corruption, perceived sectarianism, and stalled reconstruction could create doubt and make many have second thoughts ([Al Arabiya](#), December 10, 2018).

IS' Ambitions and Sleeper Cells

Losing Mosul and other Sunni majority cities in Iraq was a major blow for IS. Recent statements and the group's literature, in general, do not make IS look desperate but rather determined to make a comeback. Much of this is morale-boosting rhetoric, but volatility in post-2003 Iraq suggests that any bad scenario is possible.

The editorial of IS' weekly newspaper al-Naba makes the case for a comeback. Under the title "Wait and I will be waiting with you," the article explains how jihadists had come under immense pressure from local Iraqi partners backed by the United States before 2014 and how that changed after the U.S. withdrawal, for which IS claims credit.

"The Sahwat (Sunni, U.S.-backed, anti-IS militias) and Rafidha (the Shias) were encouraged by the power of the U.S. home they served and committed atrocities against Muslims (Jihadists and their supporters). They thought that America would protect them from Allah's will until Allah made his slaves (IS) in the charging position and they shattered the Sahwat and massacre the Rafidha." [2]

A large part of the editorial is dedicated to the story of the Yezidi community, especially in the city of Sinjar. Sinjar, being located between Mosul and the border with Syria, was the scene of some of IS' most atrocious acts. The group attacked the Yezidi community there and killed most of the adult men and captured and enslaved the minors and women. The recent rift between Kurds, Yezidis, Sunni, and Shia forces which control Sinjar now proves how fragile the situation could become. IS' exploitation of the conflicts between rival Iraqi groups was a major element of the group's strategy to make gains.

When IS captured Mosul in 2014, almost half of the population fled the city and the whole province to safer areas, especially in the neighboring semi-autonomous region of Kurdistan. Many could afford to rent houses, but thousands ended up living in poor conditions in internally displaced people's camps. Those who stayed under IS rule quickly discovered how difficult their situation had become. They suffered IS' heavy-handed security policies, increased isolation from the outside world and eventually major military operations that resulted in IS' defeat but left civilian casualties and devastation along the way.

Since the liberation, many returned home but others remain in the camps. Wives and minor children of IS members are also living in camps now. Abuses of camp residents, including sexual abuse and exploitation, are frequently reported. So far, the camps are under control but have the potential to become jihadist hotbeds. Indications also exist of IS having more fighters than suggested by the sparse activities the group has conducted since it lost the battle of Mosul. Iraqi sources estimated that, in Mosul alone, there are at least 300 IS fighters in sleeper cells, some likely within IDP camps, who are ready to move when the opportunity arises ([Vice](#), December 20, 2018).

Conclusion

The threat of IS and the jihadist ideology will never disappear with the presence of corruption and a lack of meaningful reconciliation, accountability, and transitional justice. Meanwhile, IS is intent on making a comeback. One silver lining is the joint Iraqi-U.S. efforts to target active IS elements in the area. Those efforts, however, do not include any attempts to reform the system. When Mosul fell four and a half years ago, there was an Iraqi CTS unit located in the city, which had better discipline and a more trustworthy reputation. Yet the only difference in their response to IS' attack was that they managed to withdraw properly without disintegrating like other larger units of the Iraqi military.

From the outside, there is no immediate threat from IS and the jihadists. The main IS force that overran Mosul in the summer of 2014 came from Syria where they had controlled territory and established a solid base. IS no longer has that in Syria, but the U.S. administration's decision to withdraw from Syria has raised alarms in Mosul. With no intention of leaving Iraq, the U.S. forces will continue to support Iraqi security forces. The latter has yet to win major combat operations without U.S. support. Any military efforts, however, would still need to be matched by addressing the root causes that led to the rise of IS by introducing and implementing plans for reconstruction and reform. Having several parties, including different units of security forces, on the ground who share control makes the situation complicated and unpredictable. Those groups might coexist well at times, especially when they enjoy the financial rewards of power. However, without a powerful government that imposes the rule of law and fights corruption, the situation will remain fragile and vulnerable to a possible resurgence of IS, or its successor.

Rafid Jaboori is a journalist, writer and researcher. He is a former BBC World Service Reporter. He covered The Iraq War and its aftermath, the conflict in Syria, and several other events. He is an expert in militant groups in the Middle East.

Notes

[1] Author's phone interview with an academic who lives in Mosul on December 27, 2018.