

Terrorism Monitor

In-depth analysis of the War on Terror

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ISLAMIC STATE FIGHTERS REGROUP IN IRAQ, REBUILD SUPPORT AND SMUGGLING NETWORKS

Brian M. Perkins

The past several weeks has seen a surge in Islamic State (IS) attacks in Iraq as the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) attempt to make a final push to eradicate IS from its last enclave in Baghouz, Syria. Despite the Iraqi government declaring victory over IS in December 2017, the group has still managed to conduct attacks across the country and estimates of how many IS fighters have crossed into Iraq in the past six months range to upwards of 1,000 ([al-Hurra](#), February 22). In addition to the inflow of returning fighters, IS has also firmly entered a new structural and tactical phase akin to how it first managed to take root in Iraq—small self-contained cells operating relatively independently of one another.

These cells have focused on rebuilding support and smuggling networks while launching sporadic attacks on Iraqi security forces. While the group still operates in several provinces, Anbar and Nineveh are, unsurprisingly, the provinces that have witnessed the most notable IS activity in recent weeks.

In Nineveh, a series of bombings in Hadhra and Mosul killed two individuals and injured at least 28 others and an ambush on a convoy of Popular Mobilization Forces on Makhmour-Mosul road left six dead and more than 30 others wounded ([Asharq Al-Awsat](#), March 10). In Anbar, IS fighters have been behind several kidnappings and bombings, including the February 9 bombing that targeted Iraqi forces in Kabisa, killing four soldiers and wounding several others ([Iraqi News](#), February 9).

Iraqi forces responded to the surge of violence by launching a series of ground operations and airstrikes in Nineveh and Anbar. According to security officials, the operations have led to the capture and death of dozens of IS fighters ([Kurdistan 24](#), February 21). A series of tunnels that IS has reportedly used as a hideout were also discovered and destroyed in Anbar's Maheya Valley ([Iraqi News](#), March 3). Further operations are likely to continue in the coming weeks, focusing primarily on rural hideouts in both provinces.

Despite the recent military operations to disrupt IS' regrouping, Iraqi forces are facing a serious challenge in managing the flow of returnees evacuating from Syria. Efforts to prevent an IS resurgence there are likely to be hampered not only by the group's strategic shift to small

cells, but also by a lack of intelligence capabilities outside of urban areas and the lack of coordination between the disjointed Iraqi military and Popular Mobilization Forces. IS cells have already reestablished supply and smuggling routes in Anbar and Nineveh and into Erbil, and the lack of coordination across the organizations responsible for security in their respective provinces will make it difficult to prevent further infiltration and the group's ability to regenerate itself.

CHAD: REBEL ACTIVITY ALONG LIBYA-CHAD BORDER INCREASING AS LNA PUSHES SOUTH

Brian M. Perkins

The Chadian government has increasingly spoken out on jihadists and terrorists threatening its border with Libya. While jihadist groups do operate in southern Libya, the government has used the term "terrorists" in broad terms recently to describe a rising anti-government rebellion that is increasingly threatening the stability of the Chadian regime.

Chadian rebels have long operated in Libya, and the chaos throughout the country over the past several years has granted them significant freedom of movement, allowing them to engage in trafficking and act as mercenaries for Libyan militias. As the situation in Libya has improved, even if only slightly, and Khalifa Haftar, head of the Libyan National Army (LNA), continues to conduct military operations in southern Libya that began in mid-January, rebel groups will be pushed closer to the border and into Chad's northern regions.

On February 3, French Mirage-2000s based near N'Djamena as part of France's counter-terrorism Operation Barkhane conducted airstrikes against a Union des Forces de la Résistance (Union of Resistance Force—UFR) convoy of around 50 vehicles that reportedly intended to overthrow President Idriss Deby. French officials announced that the strike came in response to a formal request from President Deby (RFI, February 8). The airstrikes reportedly destroyed upward of 20 vehicles and Chadian authorities reported that they captured 250 "terrorists." Despite the setback, the UFR's spokesperson stated "We will continue to progress to N'Djamena" and that the group's goal was to create "a transitional government bringing together all the forces of the country and to hold elections" ([Bamada](#), February 11).

On March 5, Chad announced the closure of its border with Libya near the town of Kouri Bougoudi in response to the heightened violence along its borders, with the Chadian Minister of Security stating that the closure was intended to prevent terrorists from infiltrating the country ([Libya Herald](#), March 5).). The closing also comes amid recent clashes between Sudanese and Chadian rebel groups near contested gold mines as well as the

increasing threat posed against the government, most notably by UFR.

Tensions along the Libya-Chad border are likely to intensify in the coming months with Chadian rebels being pushed back into Chad as the LNA operations in southern Libya continue. While the French airstrikes were the first in Chad since 2008, given the current context and rising tensions along the border, it is likely that they set a precedent for further French support to President Deby in the coming year. The request for French support underscores the weaknesses of the Chadian military, which has been spread increasingly thin due to operating in numerous other theaters. France's involvement in the Sahel is intended to strictly be for counterterrorism, but it is unlikely that it will deny future requests for support given its broad investment in the security of the region, and the destabilizing effect the overthrow of the Chadian government would have, regardless of his autocratic tendencies.

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Prison Radicalization and Recidivism Threaten Moroccan and European Security

Brian M. Perkins

Three months after an Islamic State-inspired cell slayed two Scandinavian hikers in Imlil, authorities continue to uncover more and more small terrorist cells. Many of these groups are comprised of similar individuals—disenfranchised or previously imprisoned Moroccans with financiers and planners currently in Europe or those of European nationality residing in Morocco. In the case of the Imlil murders, it was the latter. The attackers were, allegedly, quickly organized, in contact with, and provided basic training by Kevin Zoller, a Swiss-Spanish national arrested in Marrakesh. Moroccan authorities have also accused Zoller of recruiting and financing other locals as well as individuals transiting through Morocco to Europe.

Despite the successful attack in Imlil, Morocco remains effective at identifying and arresting individuals involved in terrorism-related crimes—ranging from plotting attacks and financing terrorist groups to possession of propaganda. One of the most significant challenges Morocco faces, however, is within its prisons. This challenge presents itself not only in Morocco's penal system, but in numerous countries across Europe.

Morocco has one of the most well-defined counterterrorism strategies in Africa and maintains security partnerships with countless countries, including the United States, France, and Spain. Despite Morocco's close counterterrorism partnerships with European countries, a significant number of attacks in Europe have been committed by individuals of Moroccan origin and there has been a notable number of Europeans of various origins seeking haven in, or returning to, Morocco. Most notably, almost all of the individuals responsible for the attacks in Barcelona and Cambrils in 2017 were of Moroccan origin and some were apparently radicalized while in prison.

Morocco has been lauded for its countering violent extremism efforts and plans to reintegrate offenders into society. Morocco created the Mohammed VI Institute for the Training of Imams, Morchidines, and Morchidates in

2015 to help spread a moderate interpretation of Islam, and the country keeps a close track of activity within the country's mosques and religious institutions.

In 2018, the General Delegation for Prison Administration and Reintegration (DGAPR) started a reintegration program for released prisoners. However, evidence still indicates that Morocco has a high rate of recidivism for terrorist offenders—several of the Imlil cell were formerly imprisoned—and there is an increasing nexus between terrorism and organized crime involving Moroccan prisoners ([Le360](#), March 24, 2015; [Morocco World News](#), February 15). Given the number of individuals arrested on terrorism charges (918 since December 2018), the country faces an extremely daunting challenge in not only attempting to reintegrate those released after being charged with terrorism offenses but also preventing further radicalization while in prison ([Morocco World News](#), February 15).

The new Moussalaha deradicalization program launched in 2018 seeks to address this issue by working directly within the prisons, but hundreds of prisoners are competing for the attention of only a couple dozen spots, and the program does not account for those detained abroad that are actively working to strike Morocco. In August 2018, King Mohammed VI granted a royal pardon to 22 people convicted for charges of extremism and terrorism that had completed the Moussalaha program, including individuals convicted for the 2003 attacks in Casablanca. The pardons created concern in Spain as authorities noted the released individuals posed a potential threat if they illegally migrated to the country, where they could easily connect with already well-established networks within the Moroccan diaspora.

There have also been countless incidents suggesting recruitment and financing efforts to commit terrorism in Morocco are organized from numerous European prisons. Most recently, on February 4, Spanish authorities dismantled a terror cell within the Valdemoro prison in Madrid. The cell was led by a Moroccan man, with many activities facilitated by a prison guard. According to authorities, the cell was well-organized and had established a drug distribution network to finance their operations and had begun efforts to recruit people outside of the prison ([Yabiladi](#), February 26). While Moroccan authorities would likely be tracking these individuals upon their release, it is unclear how the country handles rein-

tegration for those imprisoned abroad. Opportunities for deradicalization in European prisons are negligible.

Morocco, meanwhile, has become a destination for radicalized European nationals of various origins, with numerous such people being arrested on terrorism charges in the past year, including three French nationals on February 12 ([Telquel](#), February 12). The dismantling of several terror cells throughout last year has often revealed former prisoners or European nationals, as could be seen with the Imlil attackers. In the past year, Morocco's Financial Intelligence Processing Unit has reported a rise in crimes related to money laundering and terrorism. Moroccan security forces have concurrently noted an uptick in the discovery of terrorist cells operating in the country.

With already established networks between Morocco and Europe as well as an apparent increase in the number of terrorist cells identified, the pardoning and reintegration of individuals convicted of terrorism presents a threat both in Morocco and Europe. As has already been seen, radicalized Europeans have sought safe haven in Morocco and connected with locals, while released Moroccan prisoners have similarly made their way to Europe where they have connected with criminal and terrorist networks.

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Indian Airstrikes: Weakening Terrorists or Winning Votes?

Sudha Ramachandran

On February 26, Indian Air Force (IAF) jets struck a Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) training camp at Balakot in Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. Less than two weeks earlier, a JeM suicide bomber targeted an Indian paramilitary convoy in the Pulwama district of the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), killing over 40 personnel. The Indian government described the Balakot operation as "a pre-emptive strike" aimed at preventing JeM from carrying out a major attack it was planning in India ([Hindustan Times](#), February 27).

The Balakot operation was significant for several reasons. It is the first time since the 1971 India-Pakistan war that IAF aircraft entered Pakistani airspace. India had targeted terrorist camps in the past as well, but with ground operations. In September 2016, for instance, Indian ground forces crossed the Line of Control (LoC) to carry out surgical strikes on terrorist "launch-pads" in Pakistan-administered Kashmir. The recent assault not only involved airstrikes, but the IAF's Mirage-2000s crossed the international border to target a JeM camp deep inside Pakistan. The Balakot strikes were, therefore, a significant scaling up of India's counter-terrorism operations directed at Pakistan ([Indian Express](#), March 3). How successful will this be in fighting Pakistan-based anti-India terrorism? India's past experience suggests that the airstrikes will neither weaken JeM nor force Pakistan to address anti-India terrorist groups.

Strong Messages

The airstrikes on Balakot sent a message to Islamabad that India would retaliate strongly, even militarily, in Pakistan, if terrorist groups based there attacked India ([Times of India](#), February 26). In addition to this display of power vis-à-vis Pakistan, the airstrikes carried a message for the Indian public—it is the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which acts most robustly in dealing with India's enemies.

The nationalist BJP has always been a strong advocate of a muscular approach towards Pakistan. This approach strikes a chord with its hawkish supporters and the BJP-led government publicly announced that it carried out

strikes on the JeM camp at Balakot to consolidate this support base. With India due to vote in general elections in a few months, nationalist mobilization and patriotic drum-beating has been useful for the BJP to deflect public attention away from voter woes with unemployment and other economic issues ([Scroll](#), March 6). It has served to focus attention instead on the external enemy and on the BJP government's tough handling of that enemy.

Pakistan used India's airstrikes to send out its own messages. A day after the IAF assault on the Balakot camp, Pakistan's F-16s entered Indian airspace and in the ensuing air skirmish, an Indian MiG-21 jet was shot down and its pilot taken captive, before eventually being released. With its military response, the Pakistan government signaled to India and its domestic audience that it would not remain passive in the event of India violating its airspace and that such Indian action in the future would not go unchallenged ([The Wire](#), March 5).

The recent cycle of events underscores that a future terror attack in India could very quickly escalate into another India-Pakistan military confrontation. The question is whether this possibility will prompt Pakistan to address anti-India terror groups.

Setback to JeM?

According to the Indian government, "a very large number of terrorists, trainers and senior commanders were eliminated in the strike." Among those reportedly killed was Yousuf Azhar, mastermind of the 1999 hijack of an Indian Airlines passenger plane and brother-in-law of JeM's founder-chief, Maulana Masood Azhar ([Times of India](#), February 26). According to Maulana Ammar, Azhar's younger brother, IAF jets bombed JeM "schools where students were being trained" in waging jihad ([Hindustan Times](#), March 3).

The Pakistan military has ruled out damage to infrastructure or even loss of lives. Indeed, it dismissed India's claims of having hit the JeM training camp at Balakot, saying that IAF jets "released payload...in open area" ([Express Tribune](#), February 26). Even if JeM did lose several hundred fighters, this is not a major setback to the terrorist group. It can be expected to recover quickly as the Indian strikes on its camp will likely help mobilize support and recruit fighters. JeM leaders have already started rallying their supporters. "By entering

our territories and attacking our schools, India has ensured the beginning of jihad against them,” Maulana Ammar warned soon after the Indian airstrikes ([Hindustan Times](#), March 3). JeM can be expected to step up attacks in India to raise the morale of its fighters and to signal its continuing capacity to strike India.

Boost to Terror

India can expect more terror attacks in the coming months. This was its experience in 2016 when, within weeks of its surgical strikes on terrorist staging-posts, Pakistan-based terrorists carried out a string of attacks targeting Indian Army camps in Baramullah and Kupwara, a police post in Shopian, and a government building in Pampore, all in J&K. There was an immediate surge in cross-LoC shelling after the surgical strikes as well ([Indian Express](#), November 7, 2016).

Since 2016, the militancy in Kashmir has surged. Around an estimated 406 terrorists entered J&K from Pakistan in 2017, up from 371 in 2016. Terror attacks and terror-related fatalities too surged and India-Pakistan ceasefire violations more than doubled in 2017. Pakistan also allegedly “ramped up” its “covert support for the insurgency” ([Mint](#), September 27, 2018).

India’s recent airstrikes on Pakistan-based terror groups are unlikely to prompt the Pakistan government to halt support to them. Even the United States’ innumerable airstrikes on Taliban and Haqqani Network training camps in Pakistan failed to get the country to shut them down or deny them sanctuary ([South Asia Terrorism Portal](#), February 8). There is little reason to believe that India’s airstrikes on JeM’s Balakot camp will be more successful in getting Pakistan to address anti-India terrorist groups.

The suicide attack at Pulwama as well as the India-Pakistan military face-off in the skies has resulted in the international community pressing Pakistan to act against JeM and its leaders. Under pressure, Pakistan has detained around 44 members of banned terror groups, including Azhar’s close relatives ([Dawn](#), March 6). Such action occurred before, only to be reversed in a matter of months ([Daily O](#), January 31, 2017). Skepticism over the latest Pakistani crackdown is therefore widespread in India.

Conclusion

Pakistan’s current crackdown on terror groups should not be read as a sign that it is rethinking its use of terrorism as a weapon in its conduct of foreign policy. Its actions over the last couple of decades suggest that the crackdown will be short-lived, aimed at getting the international community off its back.

India’s targeting of the JeM training camp at Balakot will not weaken the terrorist group. Rather, this will likely increase its capacity for targeting India. Indeed, with India-Pakistan relations worsening, Pakistan’s support to anti-India terrorist groups could increase after a temporary lull. The airstrikes are expected to boost the BJP’s electoral chances. Thus, it is the BJP and JeM that are the main beneficiaries of the Indian airstrikes.

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Alleged Coup Attempt Exposes Hazimite Faction Within Islamic State Divisions

Rafid Jaboori

As Islamic State (IS) was losing its last strongholds in Syria to the advancing, U.S.-backed, Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), there were reports of a coup attempt against its leader Abu Baker al-Baghdadi. The attempted ouster of the IS leader started with reports about fighting near the town of Hajin in Eastern Syria near the border with Iraq, which is one of the last IS-controlled areas to fall to the hands of the U.S.-backed forces. The plan included an attack on his convoy with an improvised explosive device (IED)—a direct attempt on the life of al-Baghdadi ([Asharq al-Awsat](#), February 8).

The attempt had apparently failed, but it revealed the scale of the internal division between IS and a more radical group within it known as the Hazimite, named after the radical Saudi jihadist cleric Sheikh Ahmed Bin Omar al-Hazimi. Al-Hazimi was arrested in his home country and has been in prison since 2015. Media reports indicated that IS issued a warrant and put a bounty on an individual named Abu Muath al-Jazairi, who was accused of leading the ultra-radical Hazimite faction ([Al-Sumaria](#), October 7, 2016). [1]

The recent events also indicate a possible new path for the group after losing all the territory it controlled in Iraq and Syria. One of the features of this next period could be shaped by the rivalry between two or more IS factions over who is more genuine in its extremist ideology and practices.

Roots of Division

Abu Muath al-Jazairi is believed to be a prominent leader of the Hazimite faction. He is from Algeria and is better known as Abu Muath al-Asimi. [2] Hazimites and their supporters appear to hold high respect of al-Asimi and his writings. Since the arrest of al-Hazimi and the killing of other Hazimites, al-Asimi emerged as a Hazimite ideologue. [3] A considerable number of IS members from North African countries are believed to have become Hazimites. That could be tracked to the years al-Hazimi himself had spent in Tunisia after the

Arab Spring upheaval that struck the region in 2011 and after ([Noon Post](#), July 31, 2017).

The central point of the disagreement between Hazimites and the rest of IS concerns the notion of *takfeer* (excommunication). IS is well-known for its broad, extremist definition of who should be declared apostate or non-Muslim and consequently excommunicated, but Hazimites believe IS has not gone far enough. According to the doctrine introduced by al-Hazimi and promoted by those influenced by him, anyone who does not embrace a radical Salafist interpretation of Islam is not a Muslim. In their world, ignorance of their ideology or having no access to it is not an excuse for an individual or a group not to embrace *al-Tawheed* (literal meaning is monotheism, but for them, it is specifically Salafism and more specifically their interpretation of it). Accordingly, those who do not believe in *al-Tawheed* should be considered *kafir* (non-believers) and anyone who does not consider them *kafir* should be excommunicated as he is equally a nonbeliever ([Almarjie-Paris](#), May 9, 2018).

This last notion has been alarming for many IS members and its leadership because it could lead to what is called “chain takfeer,” an endless chain of denunciation for the group’s members and even leaders who showed the slightest degree of tolerance. Before his killing in a coalition airstrike in 2015, Bahraini IS ideologue Turki al-Bin Ali wrote arguments against the Hazimites condemning their hard lines ([Al-Quds](#), July 26, 2017).

In 2016, IS launched a purge against the Hazimites. Prominent Hazimite figures were executed but al-Asimi survived and is believed to be living in Turkey now. He has written a number of essays against IS leadership. As the military campaigns against IS intensified and reached the largest two cities it controlled—Mosul in Iraq and its self-declared capital Raqqa in Syria—IS communication lines became difficult to maintain. In an attempt to tackle that challenge, al-Baghdadi delegated some of his power to a body called the Delegated Committee and decreased his visibility significantly in order to avoid being detected. The Delegated Committee, which was created to go around logistical and field challenges, found itself in the middle of the theological debate of who should be *kafir* and what were the limits, if any. In May 2017, the Delegated Committee issued a statement that was perceived to be an acknowledgment of the Hazimi doctrine. At one point, even an article in

the IS weekly publication al-Naba attacked and condemned prominent jihadists like al-Qaeda's Attiyah al-Libi as *kafir* ([Jihadology](#), June 15, 2017). That implied that al-Baghdadi himself might be considered *kafir* as he previously praised al-Libi. That led al-Baghdadi to appear again to take back control of his group which was seemingly about to disintegrate. He reshuffled the Delegated Committee, removing members and putting more trusted men in charge ([Al-Quds](#), October 21, 2017). However, by the time al-Baghdadi introduced his new measures the Hazimites seemed to have morphed into a distinct, new entity that is not part of IS. That led to a significant question—will the Hazimites split completely from IS or try to take it over?

Conclusion

Since the inception of the Hazimite group, the question was if it was part of IS or a new group. The writings of al-Asimi indicate the latter, but the recent attempt on al-Baghdadi's life suggest otherwise. The appeal of the Caliphate figure has been quite attractive to jihadists around the world, and convinced many to declare allegiance to IS and consider themselves parts of the movement. IS might be very weak and lost in Iraq and Syria, but there are other regions that could be well suited to become its new headquarters, helping maintain the claim it persists and holds territory, or according to its infamous slogan, is "remaining and expanding."

The Hazimites have already gained a base of support in West Africa. The leader of the Nigerian radical group Boko Haram Abubakar Shekau is already leading a faction that was condemned by IS as too extremist ([Mauri News](#), November 21, 2017; [See Militant Leadership Monitor](#), January 4).

The Hazimite ideology is more suitable for an age of total violence without any consideration of governing a territory. Yet the symbolism of the Caliphate has been central in the IS' appeal to jihadists. By eliminating al-Baghdadi, Hazimites could well be poised to take over leadership of the IS heartland in Iraq and Syria in order to subsequently inherent influence over its franchises in North and West Africa.

Unlike in 2016-2017, IS and its leadership obviously do not have the capacity to quell a better-prepared coup attempt. One of the main reasons behind IS' domination in Syria was that it was less prone to splits compared to

other militant groups. By moving to areas controlled by the Syrian government, IS will need to face new challenges that are not similar to the environment of 2011-2014. Groups of IS fighters have reportedly already moved to the areas controlled by the Syrian regime, fleeing the SDF's final campaigns against their last remaining pockets. The IS element in the Syrian civil war was vital to the survival of the Syrian regime which always wanted the war to be portrayed as a confrontation between a secular government and savage jihadists who threaten not only the regime, but the world. Therefore, the regime would not accept being excluded from the U.S. and SDF endgame. Both IS and the Hazimites will likely try to initiate new bases or revive old ones in Syria.

Iraq, however, remains IS and its leaders' favorite retreat. More than a year and a half since the Iraqi government declared victory against IS, the group is not completely defeated. It lost all the territory it held in Iraq, but a new phase of IS insurgency has emerged. Despite deployments of thousands of Iraqi armed forces and Shia militias in the areas IS controlled, the group is still able to launch attacks and destabilize the area. The Iraqization of the IS leadership, which was introduced by al-Baghdadi, was vital to the group's ascendancy. It will likely be key to any strategy of survival and revival. But that will always require keeping the position of the Caliphate intact and occupied by al-Baghdadi or one of his inner circle when he dies. The Hazimites have proven to represent an imminent threat to that.

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Notes

[1] The bounty is new but the warrant was issued in 2016. See November 7, 2016 <https://www.alsumaria.tv/news/181897/بالوثيقة-داعش-يصدر-مذكرات-قبض-واعدام-بال>

[2] Al-Jazairi means the Algerian in Arabic. Al-Asimi means the one who comes from al-Asima which means the capital in Arabic and that is a common word Algerians use to refer to their capital.

[3] See writings about al-Asimi July 7, 2016 <https://just-paste.it/vy9e>