

Terrorism Monitor

In-depth analysis of the War on Terror

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AL-QAEDA LIKELY TO EXPLOIT BAGHDADI'S DEATH

Brian M. Perkins

The death of Islamic State (IS) leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi is being hailed as a victory by al-Qaeda, which stands to benefit significantly from his death. While Baghdadi's death is unlikely to see the collapse of IS—the group has already appointed Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi as its new leader—it could see some IS fighters defect or IS affiliates reconcile with their al-Qaeda counterparts ([Aljazeera](#), November 1).

The coming months will likely see some notable changes within the IS organization as its new leader works to take the reins and assert himself as the rightful heir. At a base level, IS' rank and file is not too dissimilar from that of al-Qaeda and its affiliates. One of the chief reasons for the fierce rivalry between al-Qaeda and IS was the public disdain between Baghdadi and al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, as well as the former's claim to be a direct descendant of the Prophet Mohamed. However, this rivalry could cool as a new crop of IS leaders steps up.

Little is known about Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi but it is clear there will be a decision to be made on whether to hold tight to Baghdadi's strategies or to pivot in a new direction. Al-Qaeda has already been working behind the scenes to draw the remnants of IS in northern Syria into its fold. Numerous al-Qaeda-linked ideologues have released statements regarding Baghdadi's death and calling for his followers to return to the "righteous" path ([Alaraby](#), October 29). Although core al-Qaeda has yet to release a statement on Baghdadi's death, it is likely only a matter of time before Zawahiri remarks on the occasion and attempts to seize the opportunity it presents.

There are few locations that IS operates in without overlapping with an al-Qaeda affiliate, and the dynamic between them is not universally characterized by incessant fighting. Even in locations such as Somalia and Yemen where the landscape has been marked by violent battles and rhetorical sparring between the countries' respective al-Qaeda and IS branches, reconciliation is not out of the question. At the least, the two sides could see a return to non-aggression pacts following Baghdadi's death. The implications of a development such as this could be disastrous for the host countries as the groups refocus their efforts against the state. This is particularly

the case in Yemen, where the majority of al-Qaeda and IS operations have overwhelmingly focused on one another (See [TM](#), April 5). Al-Qaeda's ability to draw away or reconcile IS fighters will likely come down to al-Qurayshi's moves in the first several months of his tenure. Any perception that the group has become rudderless under his guidance could prove to be a major boon for al-Qaeda.

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TUNISIA'S NEW PRESIDENT PRESENTS OPPORTUNITY TO UNDO SOURCES OF RADICALIZATION

Brian M. Perkins

Tunisia's presidential and parliamentary elections marked a noticeable political shift for the fledgling democracy as voters rejected the ruling class by electing Kais Saied, a conservative law professor and independent political newcomer. Despite being considered the only successful democratic transition to come out of the Arab Spring, Tunisia's government has been plagued by corruption, social unrest, continued radicalization, and a declining economy. Islamic State (IS) and the local al-Qaeda branch, Katibat 'Uqbah Bin Nafi (KUBN), have faced an uphill battle in establishing strong interconnected networks across the country, but the poor socioeconomic conditions, unequal regional development, and returning foreign fighters, particularly from Libya, continue to help produce small terrorist cells and lone-wolf attackers.

KUBN and IS do not maintain large cohesive operational networks across the country due to a lack of stable local leadership and Tunisia's improved counterterrorism capabilities, though pockets of the country's western and southern regions still host larger cells. KUBN faced another setback on October 20, when security forces killed the group's leader, Murad al-Shayeb, while it was attempting to reorganize and expand its operations. Shayeb's death will undoubtedly be another significant setback for the al-Qaeda affiliate, which was already struggling to establish a significant foothold. IS has similarly struggled to build a core cadre in Tunisia in recent years, unlike in other North African countries where the group commands a larger force.

The terrorism threat in recent years, however, has stemmed less from well-established networks receiving direction and training from local leaders and more from individual returnees or disenfranchised, self-radicalized, and self-organized Tunisians. This trend became most apparent in October 2018, when an unemployed Tunisian woman detonated a suicide bomb outside of the Municipal Theater on Habib Bourguiba Avenue in the capital city of Tunis ([MosaiqueFm](#), October 30). The threat was also apparent in a series of stabbings in Bizerte in late September and twin suicide bombings in Tunis in June ([Asharq al-Awsat](#), October 16; [Aljazeera](#), June 27). IS claimed responsibility for the bombings and

at least one of the stabbings, but authorities have not conclusively tied all of the assailants to a specific terrorist organization and those responsible appear to be locally or self-radicalized.

Saied's biggest challenge will not be to dismantle large-scale terror networks but instead to attempt to undo the ill effects from years of economic stagnation and poor governance. Tunisia's western and southern regions, in particular, have long been marginalized by the central government and suffer from significant underdevelopment and the country's highest unemployment rates. These regions have also historically been the bases for local and regional militant groups, with many of the social structures that support radicalization still intact. These regions are also major transit points for arms smuggling from Libya. Kasserine in the west and Tataouine in the south, in particular, have seen high levels of radicalization, civil strife, and anti-government action due to their marginalization. These problems, however, not only exist in the peripheral regions but also in the impoverished suburbs of Tunis, where economic opportunities have dwindled and the ideology espoused by the now defunct Ansar al-Sharia Tunisia is still pervasive. Economic development will not come quickly but signs of goodwill and a public commitment to developing these regions can likely go a long way in starting to overturn the perception that the west and south have been forgotten by the government.

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The Ongoing Fight to Contain Terrorism in Morocco

Ben Abboudi

The latent threat Islamic State (IS) poses to Morocco was again highlighted by recent large-scale counter-terror operations in Morocco. The country's internal security forces, the Central Bureau of Judicial Investigation (Bureau Central d'Investigations Judiciaires—BCIJ), dismantled suspected IS cells on October 25 in Casablanca, Ouezzane, and Chefchaouen. In the raids, seven people were arrested and chemical agents, two rifles, and three automatic pistols were seized across the sites ([Middle East Online](#), October 25). Reports indicate that the disrupted IS cells were at an advanced stage in planning attacks that would have targeted unspecified sensitive economic infrastructure and strategic sites, with the support of foreign IS operatives. These attacks would have been unprecedented in scale in Morocco. Local reports suggest the group received weaponry from the Sahel, which was sourced through a Syrian IS member who transited to Morocco following the caliphate's destruction.

While counter-terrorism raids are common in Morocco, the scale of this operation is indicative of the persistent and underlying risk of terrorism in the country. Morocco has been spared many of the high profile IS attacks inflicted upon neighboring countries when the group was at its most powerful. The last major mass-casualty attack was in 2011, when militants belonging to al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) attacked a cafe in Jemaa el-Fnaa square in Marrakech, killing 17.

Strength of the BCIJ

AQIM, and subsequently IS, have struggled to gain a foothold in Morocco, largely due to the creation of the BCIJ in 2015; the organization has been instrumental in breaking up dozens of militant cells. The BCIJ has also helped prevent numerous attacks in Europe through intelligence sharing; one notable example of this success was on December 22, when the BCIJ reportedly disclosed the location of a lead 2015 Paris attacker, Abdelhamid Abaaoud, to French authorities who was then identified at Stuttgart airport in Germany. The organization has received widespread international support, typified by the announcement on October 22 that the United States and Morocco were increasing counter-terror

cooperation ([Yabiladi](#), October 23). However, the BCIJ's mammoth task in preventing such high profile attacks was highlighted in January when two Scandinavian tourists were murdered in Imlil, in the Atlas Mountains, by jihadist operatives. The BCIJ has recorded countless successes and conducts almost monthly counter-terror operations and arrests. However, there are certain trends within Morocco that makes the anti-terrorism mission harder. For example, the increasing prevalence of radicalized youths and concerns regarding a chemical weapons attack.

Issue of Radicalized Youths

A key issue faced by the BCIJ is a problem faced by many other security forces globally; there is a growing population of impoverished and politically excluded youths, who are more susceptible to radicalization. Reports indicate that those involved in the Casablanca, Ouezzane, and Chefchaouen cells were overwhelmingly young men between the ages of 19 to 27, with little formal education and who were working low-paid jobs ([Telquel](#), 28 October). These are long-standing issues in Morocco; a bomb attack in Marrakech in 2003 was conducted by young men recruited from economically deprived areas of Sidi Moumin.

Higher poverty rates and lower life expectancy levels in the mountainous Rif region in the north provide an environment favorable for those seeking to radicalize local populations. This is in line with global trends—domestically radicalized jihadists are most commonly profiled to be disaffected young men. Morocco's internal security forces have taken steps to address the radicalization of its population, especially identifying those returning from Syria and Iraq, by introducing numerous counter-radicalization measures. Implemented measures include the introduction of 'aljamia attarbawiya' (the educational university), which critiques radical interpretations of Islam, and training centers for imams to encourage a moderate interpretation of Islam and to discourage young people away from the potential lure of jihadism. These measures have helped the country deal with the large amounts of returning jihadists from Syria.

The Threat of Chemical Weapons

While it is more likely that the chemical agents that were seized in the October raid were intended to be used to create explosives, its discovery has caused concern among the internal security forces. While the details have not yet been made public, the authorities have

stated that terrorists in-country have increasingly trended toward the use of chemical weapons, as opposed to commonly used tactics of car and suicide bombings. The seriousness of this threat was underscored by the inclusion of chemical weapons as a priority threat in a new anti-terror plan implemented at the beginning of the year ([Africa News](#), October 28). However, there is little precedent for the usage of chemical weaponry by terrorist actors, particularly in Morocco. Unsophisticated attacks such as that in Imlil are likely to be the continued modus operandi of terrorist actors in Morocco, who have little operational maneuverability within the country.

Looking Forward

Going forward, the security forces in Morocco will likely continue to dismantle terrorist cells, securing a continuation of financial and logistical support from U.S. and European allies, thus enabling the BCIJ to prevent both lone-actor and cell-based attacks from becoming a regular occurrence. However, criticisms leveled at the BCIJ, such as intrusive surveillance, torture of detainees, and detainment and prosecution on politically motivated charges will likely continue to ensure a low-lying jihadist presence.

Community-led resistance continues to hinder the growth of sympathy for jihadist views. There were numerous well-attended vigils throughout Morocco to commemorate the Imlil attack and it has been condemned across the political spectrum. Despite being a majority-Sunni country, there has been little evidence of radical interpretations of Islam triggering widespread jihadist thought.

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Islamic State Central Africa Province: Rebranding or Coopting of ADF Faction

Nicholas Lazarides

Islamic State (IS), somewhat shockingly, announced the formation of Islamic State Central Africa Province (IS-CAP) nearly seven months ago on April 18, expanding the group's presence into the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) ([The East African](#), April 19). Details regarding the size or demographics of its forces are murky, but evidence indicates ties to the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), one of the country's most bellicose militant groups. Many analysts believed the announcement portended a drastic shift in the security environment, but the operations claimed by IS-CAP seemingly indicate that it has only coopted a small faction within the ADF, or that there are only a handful of ADF fighters aligned, or in communication, with IS.

In terms of IS-CAP's claimed attacks, there has been very little divergence between the scale, targets, and tactics used by the new group and the ADF, with attacks remaining unsophisticated and no obvious signs of increased capabilities. There is also an obvious overlap between the group's area of operations and the ADF's historical strongholds in DRC's North Kivu province. These facts should not be interpreted as the whole of ADF aligning with IS. IS-CAP's diminutive propaganda output is similar to that of other nascent IS branches and affiliates where the group has seemingly only attached its banner to a local group instead of successfully rebranding or recruiting and building a significant network of loyal IS combatants.

In many cases, new IS provinces have grown out of dissident or alienated factions of well-established militant groups, which is likely the case with IS-CAP. Where there is a difference, however, is that there was not a public pledge of allegiance to the now deceased IS leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, prior to the group being formally recognized as an official IS province. This has typically been the case for many new IS provinces, including in Sinai and Afghanistan/Pakistan. The lack of a public pledge and limited release of propaganda and claims of responsibility make it exceptionally difficult to discern IS-CAP's strength or leadership structure, as well as how it

fits in with the amorphous ADF and the plethora of other militant groups operating in the region.

IS-CAP has only claimed a small fraction of the attacks compared to the number of attacks attributed to ADF. The disparity could have several explanations, including challenges local fighters might face with communicating operations back to central IS for inclusion in formal IS propaganda channels. Several noteworthy attacks, however, have been attributed to ADF fighters that IS would surely be inclined to claim—even if the claim was significantly delayed—if their fighters had in fact been involved.

The security landscape has notably declined in North Kivu over the past year, with hundreds killed and the violence threatening to worsen the ongoing Ebola outbreak in the region. The decline, however, can hardly be attributed to the emergence of a new IS branch alone as other militias, known locally as *mai mai*, have also been responsible for violence against civilians, health workers, and security forces ([Al Jazeera](#), May 9). On October 31, the government launched a large-scale operation against the ADF while also citing the presence of countless other militia groups operating in North Kivu. The operation comes after the military has strengthened its troop presence in the area and sought external military help from neighboring countries such as Uganda and Tanzania ([The East African](#), October 24). The operation is unlikely to be of a scale needed to do more than marginally disrupt the militants present in the region, but it will likely help reveal further information regarding IS-CAP, whether through evidence uncovered by the military or through any claims IS-CAP makes regarding counter-attacks on DRC forces.

At present, there is no indication that the ADF, as a whole, is rebranding as IS-CAP or that it is entirely aligned with IS. Some segments of ADF have historically held more jihadist inclinations than the group, as a whole, projects. One of these groups likely became IS-CAP and is serving dual purposes, with operations still aligned with the overarching strategies of the ADF but with an eye toward an IS-inspired end state. It is apparent, at this stage, that IS-CAP has established some sort of foothold. A resounding difference exists, however, between IS having coopted a faction and it successfully rebranding an entire militant organization. IS-CAP could recruit from a myriad of militias and armed groups in the region, but ADF remains the most plausible as many of the armed groups are not motivated by jihadist ideolo-

gies. For now, the strategic calculus remains much the same as there has yet to be a seismic shift in how the insurgency is proceeding. However, the military must remain assertive because the simple fact that an IS branch—regardless of size—does exist in DRC can help draw outside financing and recruits in a way that the ADF brand could not.

Protests in Iraq Represent a Significant Challenge to Shia Militias

Rafid Jaboori

Dozens have been killed and hundreds injured in the ongoing wave of street protests in Baghdad and the predominantly Shia provinces of southern Iraq. Protesters are demanding jobs, reform, and a real shake-up of the political system. The political ruling class is undoubtedly unsettled by the nature and identity of the leaderless—yet energetic—protest movement ([Al-jazeera](#), October 24).

At the center of the predominantly Shia protesters' anger is the Iran-backed Shia militias. Several bloody clashes have occurred as protesters attacked local branches of the militias and other Shia parties in predominantly Shia cities in southern Iraq. Militiamen were accused of being heavily involved in the shooting of protesters in Baghdad. This wave of protests represents the most daring and serious challenge to not only the powerful Iranian-backed Shia militias in Iraq, but to the whole Iranian domination of Iraqi politics since 2003. In post-Saddam Hussein Iraq, the political system has centered on the sharing of senior positions and resources among the three main sectarian factions—Shias, Sunnis, and Kurds. Shia parties allied with Iran, however, received the lion's share. Iran also has historic influence over the Kurdish parties, and more recently some Sunni groups. The protests demand an overhaul to the whole political system, which would likely destabilize the power sharing arrangements that benefit Iran's interests.

Against Iran

Although the protests did not begin as an anti-Iran movement, Iran and its allies in Iraq have been the most anxious about the protests and their likely implications. Shia militia leaders have vehemently opposed the protests, which they labeled a U.S.-backed conspiracy. Reports even suggested that General Qassim Soleimani, commander of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps - Quds Force (IRGC-QF), visited Baghdad in early October to lead the crackdown on the demonstrations ([Arab News](#), October 23).

On October 30, Iran's supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, called on authorities in Iraq and Lebanon to deal with what he described as riots driven by the United States and Israel. Khamenei also claimed the protests were funded by some "regressive nations"—referring to Arab Gulf states, especially Saudi Arabia ([al-Ansaar](#), October 30).

A Broken System

Since the formation of the new Iraqi political system after the U.S.-led invasion in 2003, Iraqi parties have been running a patronage system on multiple levels. Senior members of these parties dominated public administration on every level, and jobs were given to followers and loyalists. Corruption is also endemic in Iraq, which has long been one of the most corrupt countries in the world. It was inevitable that fundamental problems with the system, which have existed since its formation, would lead it to a crisis point.

The Iraqi Shia-led government allowed Shia militias to operate and access the political system more visibly after the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq in 2011. After the Islamic State's (IS) advances in 2014, the Shia militias gained more prominence under the Popular Mobilization Units (Hashd al-Shabi—PMU), which were endorsed by the government and blessed by a Fatwa from the most senior Shia cleric, Ali al-Sistani. Although most of the leaders and members of the Iranian-backed militias religiously follow Khamenei rather than Sistani, they have emphasized Sistani's Fatwa and promoted it as a mandate.

Figures such as the deputy leader of the PMU—a historic ally of Iran's IRGC—Jamal Jafar al-Ibrahim (better known as Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis), operated freely and effectively on both battlefields and in Baghdad. He previously had to operate covertly, as he has been on the U.S. list of designated terrorists since the 1980s. In the June 2018 elections, the PMU's political arm, al-Fatah, came in second after the Sairoon party led by anti-U.S. Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr. Al-Sadr's militia, Saraya al-Salam (Peace Brigades), also belongs to the PMU, but operates with a high degree of independence.

The protesters have been peaceful and unarmed in most cases. When the first wave of protests began on October 1, they suffered casualties as security forces and militias opened fire in multiple locations in Baghdad, Nasiriya, and other cities. At least 150 people were believed to have been killed, with thousands more in-

jured and hundreds arrested in the first week of October ([Al Arabiya](#), October 23).

Despite the violent response, protesters heeded calls on social media to resume demonstrations on October 25 and returned energized and in higher numbers. This time the protesters managed to occupy Tahrir Square in central Baghdad. Clashes between protesters and the militias in southern Iraq have since grown even more violent ([Asharq al-Awsat](#), October 26).

Sadr's Position

The anti-U.S. cleric Moqtada al-Sadr faces a particularly challenging position in this crisis. He is more independent of Iran in comparison to other militia leaders. Yet, when the protests first broke out, al-Sadr was visiting Iran. He attended the ceremony celebrating Ashura—the most important day in the Shia calendar—in Tehran as a special guest of Khamenei. A picture of al-Sadr sitting on the floor with Khamenei's aids, including General Soleimani, while Khamenei sat on a chair did al-Sadr a further disservice. That occasion was weeks before the protests, and al-Sadr was in fact looking for greater Iranian recognition of him as a senior leader and powerbroker in Iraq ([al-Arab](#), September 12).

Despite his rhetoric on Iraqi independence and Iraqi nationalism—some of which is likely genuine—al-Sadr would not join any effort that might destabilize Iran or threaten its own national security. The recent protests are perceived as a threat. Ahead of the second wave of the protests, which was going to start on October 25, al-Sadr told the protesters to focus their condemnation on the United States and Israel ([MC Doualiya](#), October 15).

Al-Sadr does not want to appear out of touch with Iraqis. He played a major role in the previous wave of mass protests in 2015-2016, when he personally led his followers in the movements' call for reform. In last year's elections, his party, Sairoon, won the most seats in parliament. His agreement with the leader of al-Fatah, Hadi Al-Amiri, and Badr led to the appointment of Abdul-Mahdi's government. Part of the public resentment is now directed toward him for failing to deliver on his promises of reform.

However, al-Sadr's suggestions seem to be one of the few that could lead to defusing the tension. He called for the resignation of Abdul-Mahdi and early elections under international supervision. Other militias have very little chance to survive as political parties if they are dis-

solved or defeated. Al-Sadr, however, will always have his mass movement, which is significantly larger than his militia.

Sistani's Speech

The leaders of the Iranian-backed militias were about to start their own rallies, but they were seemingly aborted by Sistani. During the weekly Friday prayer, a representative for Sistani said that no party should use his pictures or claim to represent him. More importantly, he called for the security forces and any other part of the Iraqi armed forces, including the PMU, not to use violence against the protesters. The speech also called for foreign countries to not attempt to impose their will on Iraqis. The reference was interpreted by protesters as directed against Iran. Yet, beyond general principles, Sistani has not yet supported immediate change of the government and constitution. The most important point was his opposition to the deployment of security forces to repress the protesters ([Azzaman](#), November 1).

The situation is still evolving and the end result is unclear, but the Shia militias are under immense pressure on how to deal with the protests and how to avoid emerging as losers at the end of the crisis. Iranian domination of the Middle East at large is being challenged too, as the protests in Iraq coincided with protests in Lebanon. Unlike in Iraq, there have been no casualties and almost no violence in Lebanon, but the power of the Iranian-backed Hezbollah is being challenged in an unprecedented manner.

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