

Terrorism Monitor

In-depth analysis of the War on Terror

VOLUME XVIII, ISSUE 2

p.1

Brian Perkins

BRIEFS

p.4

Jacob Zenn

Is the 'Bakura Faction' Boko Haram's New Force Enhancer Around Lake Chad?

p.6

Brian M. Perkins

Magufuli's Reign and Tanzania's Creeping Radicalization Issue

p.8

Animesh Roul

Al-Qaeda in Indian Subcontinent's Propaganda Campaign Continues Despite Digital Disruptions and Stifled Operational Capability

OMAN'S ABILITY TO BALANCE COMPETING PRIORITIES WILL HELP SHAPE THE GULF IN COMING YEARS

Brian M. Perkins

During the fraught aftermath of the airstrike that killed Major General Qasem Soleimani, another key development with broad implications for the Middle East was unfolding. The death of Oman's Sultan Qaboos bin Said on January 10 comes at a pivotal moment for both Oman and the region. The longstanding question of succession was answered quickly and smoothly when the late ruler's cousin, Haitham bin Tariq al-Said, was confirmed as the sultanate's new leader. While the ruling family announced his appointment with little debate or turmoil, tensions in the region coupled with the country's declining economy will undoubtedly test the new sultan and his ability to fulfill his predecessor's legacy of peaceful neutrality.

Oman has long positioned itself as "friend to all, enemy to none," deftly managing to maintain close and largely cordial ties to Iran, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and the United States. Haitham has vowed to continue along this path, but with Iran-US tensions at an all-time high, the

continuing Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) blockade against Qatar, and Saudi Arabia and the UAE's designs in the region, external actors are likely to view the timing as an opportunity to overtly and covertly sway the country's political stances.

The UAE, in particular, has long been involved in attempts to exert influence over Oman and was caught operating spy rings in 2010 and 2019. The most recent incident resulted in five Emiratis and one Omani citizen in the strategic Musandam governorate being arrested and imprisoned ([Middle East Monitor](#), April 10, 2019). The UAE has increasingly pursued controversial and aggressive policies in Oman's strategic border areas, most notably in Musandam, which is Oman's peninsular province that lies on the strategic Strait of Hormuz and is cut off from the rest of Omani territory by the UAE. Emirati land purchases in Musandam and other strategic locations were a major factor in the decision to issue a 2019 Royal Decree banning "ownership of real estate and land for non-Omanis in Musandam, Buraimi, Dhahirah, Al Wusta, Dhofar (except Salalah), Liwa, Shinas, Masirah, Jebel Akhdar and Jebel Shams" ([Oman Observer](#), November 28, 2018).

Outside of Musandam, the UAE and Saudi Arabia have engaged in highly controversial activities in Yemen's al-Mahra governorate, which shares a border as well as deep tribal and cultural ties with Oman's Dhofar governorate. Al-Mahra has been insulated from the war in Yemen and the Saudi and Emirati presence in the region is largely seen as an attempt to develop a pipeline through al-Mahra to the Indian Ocean. Their presence undermines Oman's security along its border ([Terrorism Monitor](#), March 21, 2019).

For Iran, Oman is a longstanding and essential partner as the country shares control over the Strait of Hormuz, counterbalances Saudi and Emirati power, and is a growing economic partner. Thus far, Oman and Iran have demonstrated an interest in maintaining this relationship as Omani and Iranian diplomats have traveled to Muscat and Tehran, respectively, for multiple meetings since the start of the year. Iran will likely attempt to pull Oman closer while seeking to prevent deepening ties with Saudi Arabia or the UAE.

The United States cannot afford for either Iran or Saudi Arabia and the UAE to find a way to gain undue influence over the sultanate as it could mark the unraveling of a key counterbalance in the region. In 2019, the United States won an important strategic port deal with Oman that will allow the U.S. Navy increased access to its ports, most notably the large Duqm port, several hundred miles south of Muscat ([Middle East Eye](#), March 24, 2019). While this deal is essential to the United States' ability to project strength and respond to hostilities in the region, the Trump administration has seemingly slighted Oman on several occasions in the past few years and could increasingly attempt to push Oman to choose a side, which could alter the country's diplomatic approach.

Haitham will have to balance the competing priorities of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Iran, and the United States, all of which hold some form of political or economic leverage over the sultanate. For instance, in an extreme case, Oman has been forced into a bind over the GCC blockade of Qatar and could be similarly punished, but with even more devastating effects. Meanwhile, the country's budget deficit continues to grow each year, and with little prospect for drastic improvement, the population will continue to grow increasingly unsettled as they look to the new sultan for answers. Oman has not experienced prolonged or substantial unrest recently, but protests in 2015 demonstrated rising discontent over

the economy and failure to reform government policies. The stability and balance of power in the Gulf will undoubtedly have much to do with how well Oman is able to persist in the diplomatic role it has held for decades while staving off any domestic unrest due to its poor economic performance and rising youth unemployment.

Brian M. Perkins is the Editor of Terrorism Monitor.

WHAT THE DEATH OF THE IRANIAN COMMANDER IN YEMEN WOULD HAVE MEANT

Brian M. Perkins

The United States' bold airstrike on Iranian Quds Force Commander, Major General Qasem Soleimani, was portrayed as a response to an imminent threat in Iraq. The attack, however, came on the same day that the United States attempted to kill Abdul Reza Shahlai, the Quds Force commander responsible for Iranian involvement in the war in Yemen. The unsuccessful strike is likely to be viewed as a significant missed opportunity, but even if it had been successful, it would likely have had little effect on the situation on the ground.

The attempted strike in Sanaa could prove to be the United States' last, best chance to remove Shahlai from the equation for two primary reasons. First, the attempt on his life will likely result in a tightening of his operational security. Second, the United States has played a diminishing role in the war in Yemen and does not have forces in Houthi controlled territory. The likely calculus was that the attack on Soleimani would overshadow the death of Shahlai, who the United States has been tracking for years, and would elicit a different response as a coordinated effort than a more prolonged series of targeted attacks on Iranian figures. The aftermath of Soleimani's death has prompted both sides to err toward de-escalation, and another attempt on Shahlai any time soon would certainly cause another flare up.

Shahlai remains alive, and for the time being, will continue to manage Iran's complex relationship with the Houthis while interfacing with other allied Iranian proxies elsewhere, namely Hezbollah in Lebanon, where the Houthi media outlet al-Masirah is based. If the strike had been successful, it would not have been a decidedly devastating blow to the Houthis' capabilities as the networks he helped build are already firmly established. Further, few believe Shahlai, or Tehran for that matter, is entirely directing Houthi operations. The Houthis, while closer to Iran than ever, have never shown a proclivity for taking actions that do not primarily serve their own unique agenda. Unlike Iranian proxies in Iraq, the Houthis have less of an appetite, and would have had fewer avenues, to retaliate against the United States aside from punishing Saudi Arabia if Shahlai had been killed.

Shahlai is far from the only Iranian training and advising the Houthis in Yemen, and conflicting reports suggest another Quds Force operative, Mohammad-Mirza'i, was killed in the attempted strike on Shahlai ([Middle East Monitor](#), January 13; [FARS](#), January 5). It is unclear exactly how many Iranian operatives are currently in Yemen, but some estimates suggest upwards of a hundred Iranian and Hezbollah personnel have been deployed to the country. [1] Iran and Hezbollah have established firm communications, training, and smuggling networks that would not be undone by the death of a single commander. In fact, the Houthis seemingly have a direct line to Hezbollah, which has clearly advised the group on its media-related affairs and has even benefited from Houthi-led fundraisers ([Al Arabiya](#), July 7, 2019).

The benefits already derived from Shahlai and the rest of the Iranian/Hezbollah personnel would persist even if the Quds Force commander were to be killed, and the Houthis who have been trained have already gone on to train their own cadres. The technological and strategic capabilities will likewise continue unless there is a concerted effort to drive a wedge between the Houthis from Iran or push tenuous ceasefire talks forward. A future, successful strike against Shahlai, however, would result in another flare up that would likely have more significant ramifications outside of Yemen, such as retaliatory incidents against U.S. interests in Iraq.

Brian M. Perkins is the Editor of Terrorism Monitor.

Is the 'Bakura Faction' Boko Haram's New Force Enhancer Around Lake Chad?

Jacob Zenn

On January 19, a female suicide bomber detonated explosives at Kaiga Kindjiria village near Lake Chad in Chad, killing nine civilians ([Actucameroun](#), January 20). The attack occurred at a time of heightened sensitivity in the Lake Chad subregion, as only two weeks earlier Chad had announced the withdrawal of 1,200 troops stationed in the epicenter of the Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria—Borno State—since early 2019 ([Daily Trust](#), January 5). The attack also coincided with Borno Governor Babagana Zulum's January 19 visit to the Chadian capital N'Djamena to meet military commanders from Chad, Cameroon, and Nigeria who were coordinating the fight against Boko Haram as part of a multinational force ([Facebook.com](#), January 19).

The broader context of these events was the G-5 meeting in Pau, France on January 13, which includes Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger ([Lepoint.fr](#), January 14). One of the outcomes of that meeting was a decision to designate the terror group Islamic State in Greater Sahara (ISGS) - as the greatest security threat in the Sahel ([Dakaractu](#), January 15). Shortly after the female suicide bombing occurred, Chad announced its intention to deploy troops to ISGS' main operational strongholds along the Niger-Burkina Faso-Mali tri-border region ([Alwihda](#), January 20). One might presume Chad's withdrawal from Borno was done with some foresight of the country's impending deployment of troops to the Sahel.

Who Deployed the Female Suicide Bomber?

Female suicide bombings have been a key tactical characteristic of the Boko Haram insurgency since 2014, but in recent years, particularly since 2016, the number of women involved in suicide attacks has declined at a rapid rate. In what appears to be a new upswing, however, another female suicide bombing recently occurred in Kaiga Kindjira, Chad in August 2019, killing six people, including one soldier ([Al-Jazeera](#), August 14, 2019). What is unusual about these two recent female suicide bombings is that since the split within Boko Haram in August 2016 created the faction of Is-

lamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP), ISWAP has been the most active group operating around Lake Chad. ISWAP incorporated ISGS in March 2019. The other, weaker faction created in 2016 is led by Abubakar Shekau, and is based relatively far from Lake Chad in southern Borno. Because ISWAP does not conduct female suicide bombings, and the Shekau-led faction of Boko Haram operates in an area far from the site of the attack, neither groups seem likely to have conducted these attacks.

Ironically, ISWAP surprisingly has not claimed responsibility for several major barracks raids around Lake Chad since June 2019, nor has it claimed a series of abductions of Muslim civilian women in primarily southeastern Niger, where ISWAP is also strong ([Terrorism Monitor](#), June 14, 2019). Shekau has publicly acknowledged using female suicide bombings and enslaving Muslim women who are, in his view, apostates for living outside his territories. It would seem that his southern Borno-based faction would condone these attacks even if Shekau's fighters are geographically incapable of carrying them out. This then raises the question about who might actually be conducting these attacks on Shekau's behalf?

The Bakura Faction: Reconciling the Paradox

Reports from local journalists and Nigerian security officials indicate the emergence of a new faction of Boko Haram led by 'Bakura.' Bakura has reportedly pledged loyalty to Shekau within the past year, which would make it all the more likely that Bakura's fighters are conducting attacks in Niger, Chad, and around Lake Chad, which ISWAP would deem impermissible ([Twitter.com/sembetv](#), December 23, 2019). Shekau, for his part, also sent "glad tidings" to fighters near Lake Chad in a September 2019 video, just after fighters there had declared their loyalty to Shekau in a video that also claimed attacks on Lake Chad. [1] While those fighters near Lake Chad did not explicitly identify themselves as Bakura's fighters, they may well have been under Bakura's command.

Bakura is believed to be from the area north of Lake Chad in Niger and leads primarily ethnic Buduma militants, although Bakura is Kanuri, like most ISWAP members and especially most Shekau faction members ([Twitter.com/vincentfoucher](#), February 4, 2019). The Buduma people on Lake Chad are known for fishing and livestock herding. Buduma militants were featured in a 2014 Boko Haram video in which Buduma fighters beheaded three

Kanuri vigilantes for crossing into their territory and stealing their cattle. [2] An audio message in 2014 featured Chadian fighters speaking in the Buduma language threatening Chad with attacks. These attacks occurred at an increasing pace in 2015 ([Alwihda](#), June 5, 2014). It would not be inconsistent if Buduma fighters fought with Shekau from 2014 onward and then more recently realigned under Bakura's command to act as Shekau's force amplifiers around Lake Chad. This would be despite the fact that the area has been mostly under ISWAP's influence since August 2016. Shekau had led ISWAP from March 2015 until IS announced a new leader, Abu Musab al-Barnawi, in August 2016, at which point he left ISWAP to lead his own faction.

Other attacks on Lake Chad that can be attributed to Bakura's faction have been reports of various massacres of civilians, including one in December 2019 where dozens of fisherman were killed on Darak island, Cameroon, in Lake Chad ([PM News](#), January 4). A major barracks raid also occurred on this island in 2019 that was claimed by the fighters near Lake Chad who had declared loyalty to Shekau in the September 2019 video. The attack on Darak's fishermen would have been sanctioned by Shekau, but not ISWAP. The massacre seemed to be related to Bakura's fighters' desire to control the fishing trade on Lake Chad. This would boost Shekau's coffers if Bakura has aligned with him. Seeing anyone living outside his territories as an infidel—whether or not they are Muslim—Shekau would have few ideological problems with the Bakura faction enslaving Muslim women, conducting female suicide bombings, raiding barracks, or killing innocent fishermen, even if Bakura's fighters' motives relate to both ideology and economics.

The Shekau Faction Prospectus

While Shekau's faction is nowhere near as strong as ISWAP, it is seeing a resurgence in not only its Lake Chad presence, but also in central Borno. This was demonstrated by the Shekau faction's January 20 attack that reportedly killed 17 Nigerian soldiers on the Bama-Gwoza highway ([Vanguard](#), January 20). Reports have emerged of battles taking place between ISWAP and the Shekau faction along the Nigeria-Niger border, where ISWAP has been trying to rescue Muslim civilian women captured by the Shekau faction (or possibly its allied Bakura faction). These reports come amid jihadist infighting that is also gripping the wider Lake Chad sub-region ([Vanguard](#), January 20).

The jihadist map in West Africa continues to evolve: with a strengthened Shekau faction around Lake Chad and in central Borno, a resurgent ISWAP (including ISGS, which is now officially a part of ISWAP) in Borno and the Sahel, and a revived Ansaru in northwestern Nigeria—which in January claimed an ambush on the convoy of the emir of Potiskum, a city in northwest Nigeria ([TheCable](#), January 20). These developments cannot be decontextualized from the expanding French and Chadian presence in the Sahel and reduced Chadian presence in Borno. Shekau's faction is the potential winner of these developments, as his group is seen as less of a military priority by the regional governments than ISWAP. This is perhaps because Shekau's faction is not a formal Islamic State province, despite Shekau's faction potentially posing a greater danger to civilians. Nevertheless, Shekau's faction is hardly a peripheral jihadist actor, especially if Bakura's fighters are now loyal to and becoming force enhancers for Shekau.

Jacob Zenn is an adjunct professor on Violent Non-State Actors in World Politics at the Georgetown University Security Studies Program (SSP) and fellow on African and Eurasian Affairs for The Jamestown Foundation in Washington DC.

Notes

[1] The video is available via the SITE website: <https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/Statements/boko-haram-leader-shekau-addresses-video-speech-to-nigerian-muslims-in-lake-chad-region.html>

[2] The graphic video is available at: <https://unmasking-bokoharam.com/2019/03/30/boko-haram-chadian-buduma-faction-execution-video-november-2014/>.

Magufuli's Reign and Tanzania's Creeping Radicalization Issue

Brian M. Perkins

Over the past several years, Tanzania has served as an origin and transit point for radicalized individuals fighting alongside terrorist groups operating in nearby countries, particularly al-Shabaab in Somalia and Ansar al-Sunna in Mozambique. Tanzania has not been as internally affected by jihadist groups as nearby Mozambique, Kenya, and Somalia, but it is likely only a matter of time before the threat increasingly turns inward. Following contentious local elections in late 2019 that saw the ruling party run mostly unopposed and with the 2020 presidential elections likely to continue the status quo, Islamist groups in the country are likely to become more active.

A sizeable number of radicalized Tanzanians have historically left the country to join terrorist groups elsewhere, rather than turning their violence toward the state. Similarly, networks of radicalized groups in Tanzania have also facilitated the training and transfer of non-Tanzanians through the country to fight alongside terrorist groups outside of Tanzania. Most recently, Kenyan police confirmed in December that Kenyans radicalized by an al-Shabaab recruitment cell in western Kenya's Siaya county were using Tanzania as a gateway to Somalia, likely using well-established networks in Tanzania to circumvent Kenya's more stringent security controls by traveling from Tanzania's coast. Tanzanian security forces confirmed they had captured and returned several individuals but others remained on the loose ([Garowe](#), December 11, 2019). The structures that facilitate radicalization and recruitment are clearly present and resentment toward the government's progressively authoritarian rule is growing. As such, it is easy to conceive that the country could see a rise in violent extremism if the ruling Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM) party and President John Magufuli continue their reign, hardening the narrative of *mfumo Kristo* (Christian dominance).

The threat of radicalization on Tanzania's predominantly Muslim Zanzibar archipelago has been well-documented, but the rising threat on the country's more homogeneous mainland has flown more under the radar. Understanding the nature of violent extremism in Tanzania's

mainland is challenging as Tanzanian police have chronically downplayed the threat and characterized numerous attacks over the past several years as being linked to criminal groups rather than radicalized armed groups, much like the Mozambican government did during the early days of the conflict in Cabo Delgado. Also similar to Mozambique, reporting in many areas is scant due to media restrictions and reporters' own self-censorship, particularly following the disappearance of multiple journalists ([East African](#), January 18).

Thus far, the government's increasingly authoritarian tendencies have not explicitly targeted or galvanized Muslim communities, but they have riled other groups. However, restrictions on political and religious organizations, alleged extrajudicial killings and detentions, and unequal economic policies, particularly relating to land management, have only contributed to a further loss of legitimacy for the state's National Muslim Council of Tanzania (*Baraza Kuu la Waislamu Tanzania*—BAKWATA). These factors have helped facilitate the advent of fundamentalist challengers who are particularly adept at recruiting vulnerable Muslim youth by playing into the generational conflict between the younger generation of Wahhabi-leaning Muslims and their Sufi-oriented elders, whom they view as complicit in the government, and by association, BAKWATA's marginalization of certain Muslim communities. [1] The perception of Sufi elders' pro-government stance is compounded by young fundamental Islamists' rejection of Sufi practices, particularly relating to burial rituals.

The threat of violent extremism is most prevalent in the coastal regions of Tanga, Pwani, and Mtwara, all of which have seen a rise in militant attacks and activity over the past five years and are uniquely vulnerable to such activity due to a variety of political, economic, and geographic factors. The current political climate and the likelihood of President Magufuli winning the presidential election will exacerbate the factors that contribute to radicalization as he continues to clamp down on alleged Islamists and closes political space for any meaningful opposition or dissent through actions such as banning political rallies, which will increasingly force individuals toward actions outside of the political system.

Tanga, which shares a border with Kenya and has a large coastline, has served as an epicenter of more radical interpretations of Islam since the 1970s with networks of mosques linked to Ansar Youth Centre cropping up across the region. Tanga has also been a hub for radical-

ized individuals fleeing crackdowns in Kenya as well as militants seeking to join al-Shabaab in Somalia ([East African](#), January 19, 2019). Between 2015 and 2017, a series of violent incidents linked to a well-armed organization police tracked to the Amboni Caves renewed concerns of radicalized youths from nearby mosques joining shadowy armed groups in the area ([The Citizen](#), May 31, 2016). It is also worth noting the prominence of political opposition in Tanga, which was one of three regions that did not hold polling in the 2019 local elections due to the opposition boycott.

In Pwani Region, the district of Kibiti has particularly experienced a similar rise in radicalization as well as targeted attacks against ruling CCM party members and police officials reportedly connected to youths from mosques erected after Islamists clashed with worshippers at preexisting mosques, with dozens being killed since 2017. Kibiti has also historically exported a significant number of fighters to al-Shabaab and Ansar al-Sunna. Security forces responded to the spate of violence in Kibiti by launching a significant crackdown on alleged Islamists in the broader Pwani region, with locals and members of parliament accusing the government of being responsible for the disappearance of 380 people, among other alleged abuses ([East African](#), May 5, 2018).

Mtwara is particularly vulnerable given the escalation of the conflict in nearby Cabo Delgado, Mozambique and those militants' connections to Tanzanians. Multiple cross border attacks have already taken place and Tanzanian authorities have arrested upwards of a hundred Tanzanians for attempting to cross the border to fight in Mozambique or for attempting to establish training camps ([The Citizen](#), November 13, 2019; [East African](#), August 11, 2019). Tanzanian authorities have also stated that they believe individuals who fled security operations in Kibiti had relocated to Mtwara and fear that fighters will return from Mozambique. Mtwara has long been a peripheral region far removed from the government and has suffered significantly due to fluctuations in cashew yields. The region has increasingly become an opposition stronghold, particularly following harsh crackdowns in response to protests against a planned oil pipeline ([Quartz](#), May 31, 2018). The neglected region of Mtwara, aside from sharing many linguistic and ethnic features with Cabo Delgado, is also facing a similar issue in that the discovery of natural gas reserves threatens to further the economic disparity between residents and those who will benefit from the boom.

The prevalence of radicalized networks in Tanzania and the connections to other militant groups in the region has created an outlet through which marginalized Muslim youth are likely to channel their resentment toward the government and *mfumo Kristo*, should Magufuli win. The generational religious conflict between younger Islamists and the Sufi community will continue to be amplified by the government's restrictions on religious and political groups, police crackdowns, matters of land management, and the coming oil boom. Tanzania could be primed to experience an increase in violence directed inward as opposed to exporting its radicalized individuals elsewhere in the region. Meanwhile, the conflict in Mozambique continues to worsen and there is a likelihood that the violence will increasingly spill into Mtwara.

Notes

[1] Author's interview with Dar es Salaam-based scholar on November 15, 2019.

Al-Qaeda in Indian Subcontinent's Propaganda Campaign Continues Despite Digital Disruptions and Stifled Operational Capability

Animesh Roul

In late November 2019, al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) issued a message on its digital platforms, both through Telegram messaging channel and through al-Qaeda's official al-Sahab web portal, urging members to ensure unity among the ranks and learn lessons from the death of Islamic State (IS) leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. AQIS criticized the rival IS group and its slain leader, underscoring how the group divided the global jihad movement and almost destroyed it through sowing discord within. This message was among a series of publications released late last year by the AQIS spokesman and present leader Osama Mahmoud, who succeeded slain leader Asim Umar in September last year, with blessings from al-Qaeda central leader Ayman al-Zawahiri.

Despite a series of setbacks with leadership decapitations in Afghanistan and Pakistan in the last few months, AQIS, the fifth and youngest affiliate of the transnational terrorist group, maintains its propaganda campaign to mobilize a broad support base in its areas of operation—Pakistan, India and Bangladesh.

Broadly, two principals are a constant focus of AQIS' media campaign—far enemies (anti-Western propaganda, US, Israel, Christian and Jews) and the near enemy (Anti-Pakistan campaign/Pakistan military). The category of near enemy also includes the Saffron terrorist campaign (the Hindu right-wing in India) and war against secular and anti-Islam (Taghut) governments (Bangladesh and Myanmar). Like AQAP's *Inspire* magazine series, AQIS published at least two issues of *Resurgence* magazine. The first issue released under the editorship of Hassaan Yusuf in October 2014 covered most of the countries of South Asia and also delved into Myanmar and East Turkestan. [1]

Besides *Resurgence*, which has described various future targets and strategies to achieve jihadist goals, AQIS came out with more robust and specific guidelines for violent jihad after almost three years of its formation. It released its "Code of Conduct" (CoC) document in June 2017, emphasizing its allegiance to Zawahiri and the emir of the Taliban. This document remains a core propaganda literature of AQIS, reiterating its geographical focus and objectives. The document is also vital for several reasons as it provides details about AQIS' bureaucratic structure, operations, and, more importantly, the future targets of AQIS. Though two years have passed since its release, AQIS has largely failed to act upon the document, which specified its targets in different countries in South Asia. These targets included Western assets in Afghanistan—in order to defend the so-called Islamic Emirate—and military targets in Pakistan, Bangladesh, Myanmar and India.

The strategy behind AQIS' consistent information campaign is to continue the so-called 'long war' and to win the hearts and minds of the Muslim populace in South Asia, particularly in Pakistan, India and Bangladesh. Often criticized for not using vernacular local languages as its rival IS used in southern parts of India, AQIS' media wing has begun strategically using languages other than Arabic and Urdu, such as Bengali and Tamil, to incite Muslims in the subcontinent to take up arms to defend Islam. Its various media units focus on the narrative of Ghazwat al-Hind (Islamic Battle against India). AQIS highlighted jihadist mythology of decisive Islamic war against India for the re-establishment of the Islamic caliphate in accordance with Sharia law. Also, the statements from Zawahiri, Asim Umar and Hassan Yusuf often cite a hadith (a report of the deeds and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad) stating, "Allah has saved two groups of the Ummah from hellfire; the group that will invade al-Hind [India] and the group that will be with Isa Ibn-e-Maryam [Jesus] in Damascus." [2] This seems to be one of the key doctrinal factors behind the renewed jihadist surge in the Indian subcontinent and birth of AQIS.

Return of AQIS' Mouthpiece

In August 2019, AQIS resumed publication of the long-standing jihadist magazine, *Nawa-i-Afghan Jihad* (Voice of Afghan Jihad), under a new editorial team, following the Pakistani crackdown on the previous publishing unit of AQIS. Muthanna Hassan was identified as the present

chief of AQIS' newly formed media commission and perhaps succeeded Usama Ibrahim, who was killed in a U.S. drone strike in 2016. In a series of audiovisual messages, titled *Paigham e Islam* (Message of Islam), AQIS linked clerics, Usama Mahmood, Maulana Muthanna Hassan and Hafiz Sohiab Ghauri, criticized Pakistan by saying that the Pakistani Constitution was not adhering to Islamic Sharia laws and was contradicting every aspect of Sharia. The messages also urged Islamic scholars and clerics to clarify the truth to the Pakistani people and expose the so-called democratic regime. In one of these messages Muthana Hasan criticized the Pakistani Army and reiterated that it is an individual obligation of the people of Afghanistan and those in neighboring regions to support the Afghan Taliban to fight and ultimately defeat America, its allies and its agents." [3]

Since 2008, al-Qaeda has been publishing the Urdu monthly *Nawa-i-Afghan Jihad* and it has an active web portal, nawaiafghan.com, showcasing past issues of the magazine.

Nawa-i-Afghan Jihad magazines' focus on India is an indicator of AQIS's desire to incite, influence, and induct Indian Muslims into its fold. One of the recent issues criticized the Indian Supreme Court ruling that allowed Hindus to build a temple at the site of demolished Babri mosque in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh. This ruling prompted AQIS to urge for "jihad to end alleged injustice against Muslims in India." To note, al-Qaeda and other India-centric militant groups in Pakistan have often used the Babri mosque demolition of 1992 as a starting point for the Muslim oppression argument to incite jihad in and against India. Similarly, AQIS' saffron terror audiovisual series in late 2017 targeted India's right-wing political groups and purported vigilante violence against minority Muslims. The AQIS video messages were ostensibly aimed at vitiating the communal atmosphere in India ([Terrorism Monitor](#), March 23, 2018). Similarly, the editorial section of the magazine's September 2019 issue focused on Kashmir, indicating al-Qaeda's larger ambition to take advantage of the deteriorating situation in the Indian-administered state. The editorial also criticized both India and Pakistan for their anti-Islamic activities and announced that Islamist fighters "were ready to free Kashmir" from the control of both countries ([Nawa-i-Afghan Jihad](#), September 2019).

Global Ambition?

Even if AQIS struggles to impact jihadist movements in the South Asian region after five years operating, it continues to show ambition to influence global jihadist discourse. A cursory look at AQIS' five-year media campaign suggests it is mostly focused on local concerns including the plight of Kashmiris or Rohingyas in Pakistan and Myanmar, and the Bangladeshi army's atrocities against Muslims. Occasionally, however, it delves into global concerns in tandem with its parent group. For instance, the December 2019 issue of AQIS' *Nawa-i-Afghan Jihad* magazine eulogized Muhammad al-Shamrani, the Saudi Royal Air Force officer who mounted a deadly attack in Pensacola, Florida as a jihadist hero and called for similar attacks against U.S. soldiers. The Urdu language magazine also paid rich tribute to Omar Dabaa Ilyas, a resident of Kristiansand, Norway who saved a copy of the Koran from being burned during a protest in November 2019. The magazine said Omar Ilyas had made Muslims proud by attacking an "infidel" who was burning a copy of the Koran. [4]

AQIS' recent comments on its global agenda were not new. In November 2014, two months after AQIS was formalized as a group under al-Qaeda's banner in South Asia, it released a statement urging jihadist groups in the Middle East to unite in order to fight the U.S.-led coalition's war against jihadists in Syria and Iraq. The statement was issued by spokesman Osama Mahmoud stating that "the latest American aggression on Iraq and Syria has once again proved that America is the head of kufr (infidels) and a leader of tyrannical system." [5] In a video message in June 2015, titled "From France to Bangladesh: the Dust Will Never Settle Down," AQIS covered issues ranging from Charlie Hebdo's cartoons to India's right-wing government and the speeches of its leader, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's speeches ([First-post](#), May 21, 2015).

Surviving Digital Disruption

AQIS and its parent group al-Qaeda have shown remarkable resilience in keeping the propaganda campaign afloat, especially the virtual presence and information dissemination through social media platforms. The group's official website, al-Sahab, has remained active since 2018, despite concerted international efforts to block the website. It survives without much interruption by frequently changing its domain services. It smoothly

shifted to different domain names when faced with outages, for example, from 'alsahabmedia.com' and 'alsahabmedia.info' to the latest 'alsahabmedia.co' with all its content remaining intact and accessible. Both groups share the same platform to showcase respective press releases, audio-visual statements, and publications by providing free access.

AQIS continues to exploit the messaging app Telegram, despite recent crackdowns on extremist content. Most recently, AQIS has also used Rocket Chat, another messaging app, among other social media messaging applications for its propaganda along with 'Al-Sahab' or 'Matboaatejihad' web portals.

Conclusion

AQIS, the youngest subsidiary of al-Qaeda, emerged and remained powerful as a conglomeration of existing militant groups within the Indian subcontinent. After a brief lull in 2018, AQIS renewed its propaganda campaigns by constantly focusing on targets and possible attacks in South Asia in 2019, thereby suggesting that al-Qaeda's South Asian affiliate is resilient in the region despite several major setbacks that include the death of its founding leader Asim Umar in Musa Qala, Afghanistan in September 2019.

Even though it failed to carry out any large strikes in the countries the group focuses on—despite its organizational strength, strong ties with local militant groups, and terror infrastructures at its disposal—its unhindered media campaigns over the years is suggestive of al-Qaeda's long-term jihad in South Asia. At the time of its formation, it was endorsed as "vanguard of Muslims in the east" by al-Qaeda's powerful branch, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). Like AQAP, which played a pivotal role in al-Qaeda's global jihadist propaganda campaign, AQIS seemingly plays a similar role in the Indian subcontinent.

Animesh Roul is the executive director of the New Delhi-based policy research group Society for the Study of Peace and Conflict. He specializes in counterterrorism, radical Islam, terror financing, and armed conflict and violence in South Asia.

Notes

[1] Hassan Yusuf, "A step Towards Unity of Ranks", Resurgence, October 2014, pp.19-20.

[2] For example, Cited in Asim Umar's message for the Muslims of India, "Why is There No Storm in Your Ocean?", July 2013, accessible at <https://archive.org/details/As-saxaab/page/n3/mode/2up>.

[3] Featured in "The Message of Islam (Episode 3 and 4) – "Is Pakistan an Islamic State?" and, "Is Peaceful Struggle (Nonviolence) the Path to the Establishment of the Shariah" with English subtitles), September - October 2019, available at <https://matboaatejihad.net/?cat=3>

[4] The New dedicated website of AQIS "matboaatejihad.net" (Publications of Jihad and Dawaa)" exclusively publishing jihadist material in Urdu language including Nawa-i-Afghan Jihad magazines. See, the <https://matboaatejihad.net/?p=1668>

[5] 'Targeting The Interests Of The Enemy [America] Worldwide Through The Global Movement Of Jihad Is The Way', MEMRI, November 04, 2014

<https://www.memri.org/reports/jihad-and-terrorism-threat-monitor-jttm-weekend-summary-115>