

Current Trends IN ISLAMIST IDEOLOGY

VOLUME 28

May, 2021

■ AL-QAEDA AFTER THE ARAB SPRING:
A DECADE OF EXPANSION, LOSSES, AND EVOLUTION

Katherine Zimmerman

■ THE ROUTINIZATION OF THE
ISLAMIC STATE'S GLOBAL ENTERPRISE

Haroro J. Ingram, Craig Whiteside, and Charlie Winter

■ YEMEN'S CLASH OF TWO REVOLUTIONS

Baraa Shaiban

■ ISLAM WITHOUT SUPREMACISM:
A CONVERSATION WITH MARIA KHAN

Aparna Pande

■ THE POPULAR FRONT OF INDIA:
LOOKING BEYOND THE SENSATIONALISM

Mohammed Sinan Siyech

■ STILL NO STORM IN THE OCEAN:
NEW JIHADIST NARRATIVES ON INDIAN ISLAM

Hari Prasad

Hudson Institute

Center on Islam, Democracy, and the Future of the Muslim World



HI

Current Trends IN ISLAMIST IDEOLOGY

VOLUME 28

Edited by
Hillel Fradkin,
Husain Haqqani,
Eric Brown,
and James Barnett

Hudson Institute

Center on Islam, Democracy, and the Future of the Muslim World

© 2021 Hudson Institute, Inc. All rights reserved.
ISSN: 1940-834X

For more information about obtaining additional copies of this or other Hudson Institute publications, please visit Hudson's website at www.hudson.org/bookstore or call toll free: 1-888-554-1325.

ABOUT HUDSON INSTITUTE

Hudson Institute is a nonpartisan, independent policy research organization dedicated to innovative research and analysis that promotes global security, prosperity, and freedom. Founded in 1961 by strategist Herman Kahn, Hudson Institute challenges conventional thinking and helps manage strategic transitions to the future through interdisciplinary studies in defense, international relations, economics, health care, technology, culture, and law. With offices in Washington and New York, Hudson seeks to guide public policymakers and global leaders in government and business through a vigorous program of publications, conferences, policy briefings, and recommendations. Hudson Institute is a 501(c)(3) organization financed by tax-deductible contributions from private individuals, corporations, foundations, and by government grants.

Visit www.hudson.org for more information.

ABOUT THE CENTER ON ISLAM, DEMOCRACY, AND THE FUTURE OF THE MUSLIM WORLD

Hudson Institute's Center on Islam conducts a wide-ranging program of research and analysis addressed to the political, religious, social, and other dynamics within majority Muslim countries and Muslim populations around the world. A principal focus of the Center's work is the ideological dynamic within Islam and the connected issue of how this political and religious debate impacts both Islamic radicalism and the Muslim search for moderate and democratic alternatives. Through its research, which includes collaboration with partners throughout the Muslim world and elsewhere, the Center aims to contribute to the development of effective policy options and strategies to win the worldwide struggle against radical Islam.

For more information, visit www.CurrentTrends.org

Contents

- Al-Qaeda After the Arab Spring: / 5
A Decade of Expansion, Losses, and Evolution
Katherine Zimmerman
- The Routinization of the / 32
Islamic State's Global Enterprise
*Haroro J. Ingram, Craig Whiteside,
and Charlie Winter*
- Yemen's Clash of Two Revolutions / 51
Baraa Shaiban
- Islam Without Supremacism: / 66
A Conversation with Maria Khan
Aparna Pande
- The Popular Front of India: / 82
Looking Beyond the Sensationalism
Mohammed Sinan Siyech
- Still No Storm in the Ocean: / 97
New Jihadist Narratives on Indian Islam
Hari Prasad

Al-Qaeda After the Arab Spring: A Decade of Expansion, Losses, and Evolution

By Katherine Zimmerman

TEN YEARS AGO, WHEN POPULAR UPRISINGS AND REGIME CHANGE ricocheted through the Arab world, many in the West wrote off al-Qaeda as irrelevant. What the Arab Spring protests stood for—democracy and better governance, not Islam and different governments—were inimical to al-Qaeda’s aims. U.S. counterterrorism pressure had already diminished the threat from al-Qaeda.¹ The killing of Osama bin Laden in May 2011 was trumpeted as the nail in al-Qaeda’s coffin. U.S. government officials soon thereafter described al-Qaeda as “on the ropes,” a shadow of its former self, and a movement on the verge of collapse.² Yet al-Qaeda’s leaders saw opportunities in the uprisings as Sunni populations mobilized against their governments. These jihadists sought to redirect the revolutions toward al-Qaeda’s purposes. Al-Qaeda prioritized building and expanding its popular base in the conflicts that followed the Arab Spring, focusing locally without losing sight of its global jihad.

Al-Qaeda sees itself as the vanguard for Islam and the Salafi-jihadi movement.³ It seeks to reform Muslim societies under its narrow interpretation of *shari'a* (Islamic law)-based governance and frames its fight as defensive jihad, arguing that armed force is obligatory because Islam is under attack. The group seeks to unify the *umma*, the global Muslim community, in a struggle to lead revolutions across the Muslim world, replacing so-called tyrannical and infidel regimes and imposing governance following a Salafi interpretation of Islam. Ultimately, it seeks the reestablishment of the Caliphate in Muslim lands. Terrorism is only one of its means toward this end.

The Arab Spring revolutions served to re-initiate al-Qaeda's efforts to overthrow the governments of Muslim-majority states. Breakdowns in governance and security created inroads for al-Qaeda to gain influence within vulnerable communities as counterterrorism pressure lifted. Paradoxically, al-Qaeda benefited further from the rise of the Islamic State, which, though it contested al-Qaeda's status as the vanguard, galvanized the global Salafi-jihadi movement and drew the focus of U.S.-led counterterrorism operations. Al-Qaeda strengthened in the Islamic State's shadow, eschewing transnational terror attacks that would shine a spotlight on it again, and pursued its larger strategic aim of transforming Muslim society.⁴ U.S. officials once again characterize al-Qaeda as on the verge of collapse, with the "contours of how the war against al-Qaeda ends" visible.⁵ Yet misconstruing the absence of terror attacks for weakness misunderstands al-Qaeda's ultimate aims.

Al-Qaeda on the Eve of the Arab Spring

AFTER NEARLY A DECADE OF SUSTAINED COUNTERTERRORISM PRESSURE IN Afghanistan and elsewhere, al-Qaeda was stronger at the start of 2011 than it was when it conducted the September 11 attacks. The "core" al-Qaeda group, which the U.S. government defined as the Pakistan-based senior leaders and a surrounding cadre of operatives, had been degraded.⁶ But al-Qaeda had established an operational presence in other theaters—Iraq, the Maghreb, and the Arabian Peninsula—through directly affiliated groups while also associating itself with groups in Somalia, Pakistan, and elsewhere. Its senior leaders and veteran operatives had

dispersed with clusters in places like Iran and Yemen. Al-Qaeda's founder and leader, Osama bin Laden, provided strategic direction to al-Qaeda's network and ensured that al-Qaeda, wherever it was, continued the jihad, including through transnational terror attacks.⁷

Al-Qaeda functioned as a global organization with a decentralized and networked hierarchy.⁸ A formal bureaucratic hierarchy sat at the helm of this organization, headed by Osama bin Laden, with Ayman al-Zawahiri as his deputy. Al-Qaeda's senior leaders, who constitute its global leadership, oversaw the operations of al-Qaeda in Afghanistan-Pakistan as well as the three publicly recognized affiliates. Many contemporary assessments in 2010 and 2011 wrongly distinguished the so-called core group from the affiliates, dismissing al-Qaeda as weakened while citing concerns about rising threats from its peripheries. Some argued that al-Qaeda, referencing the core, was almost irrelevant; bin Laden's vision still inspired followers, but the al-Qaeda brand was just a label for attacks targeting the West.⁹ They cited al-Qaeda's diminished capacity and argued that the need to survive under U.S. counterterrorism pressure "consumed" the group's attention.¹⁰

Yet the affiliates were no less "al-Qaeda" than the al-Qaeda forces in Afghanistan-Pakistan. The leaders of Yemen-based al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) were previously members of the U.S.-government-defined "core" group before 2001.¹¹ Osama bin Laden accepted pledges of loyalty, *bay'a*, from the leaders of what al-Qaeda recognized as al-Qaeda in the Land of the Two Rivers (more commonly, al-Qaeda in Iraq) and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), in effect establishing those affiliate leaders as equals to other members of al-Qaeda's organization. These affiliate leaders followed directives from al-Qaeda's senior leaders.

The global network's operational focus was outward against the West, its "far" enemy. Osama bin Laden framed the West and particularly the United States as the enemy that propped up corrupted regimes in Muslim lands and prevented Muslims from determining their own governments. Cutting these regimes' lifeline by weakening the West and compelling it to withdraw from the Muslim world, bin Laden argued, would precipitate the eventual overthrow of these regimes. Al-Qaeda senior leaders directed their followers to undermine American influence through direct attacks on Americans and American interests, attacks on American "agents" such as U.S.-aligned governments, and by subverting the U.S. economy.¹²

Al-Qaeda thus targeted American and other Western interests in Muslim lands as well as in the United States and Europe. After 9/11, al-Qaeda struck trains in Madrid in 2004, killing 191 people, and then the Underground and a double-decker bus in London in 2005, killing 52 people.¹³ The shoe-bomber Richard

Reid and underwear-bomber Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab each smuggled explosives past airport security, seeking to bring down commercial airliners in December 2001 and 2009, respectively.¹⁴ Al-Qaeda bombed American hotels in Amman, Jordan, in 2005, killing 57 people.¹⁵ Less spectacular attacks and failed attempts are scattered throughout the decade.¹⁶

Yet al-Qaeda also continued to fight locally against its “near” enemies: the regimes that governed Muslim-majority states. By the end of 2010, al-Qaeda’s most dangerous and successful affiliate was AQAP. AQAP, whose size the U.S. government estimated at the time as several hundred fighters, had been behind two attacks on the U.S. homeland and multiple attacks on U.S., British, Saudi, and Yemeni targets in the region.¹⁷ AQIM was conducting small-scale attacks under significant pressure in Algeria but had just attempted its first vehicle-borne suicide attack in Niger followed by one in Mauritania. Its most visible activities were kidnappings-for-ransom targeting Europeans in the Sahel. Al-Qaeda in Iraq was a shell of what it had been but conducted regular attacks against Iraqi security forces.

In Afghanistan and Pakistan, al-Qaeda faced increasing pressure from a U.S. drone campaign but received support from the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban. Al-Shabaab in Somalia, which had declared its allegiance to bin Laden but was not yet recognized as al-Qaeda, controlled most of south-central Somalia and contested the Somali government’s few blocks of control in the capital.¹⁸

Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda senior leaders were concerned with how the prosecution of their near war affected the local populations’ sympathies. An undated letter to senior leader Atiyah Abdul Rahman called on him to tell AQIM’s leaders that their “job is to uproot the obnoxious tree by concentrating on its American trunk” rather than being “occupied with local security forces” and to warn AQAP against targeting Yemeni security forces.¹⁹ In a May 2010 letter, bin Laden expressed concerns over the “miscalculations” of local groups in killing Muslim bystanders in their attacks.²⁰ He advised prioritizing attacks inside the United States, as well as active theaters like Afghanistan, and then attacks targeting American interests in non-Muslim countries with the origins masked.

Al-Qaeda’s narrative began to shift fundamentally by the start of 2010 as “individual jihad” became a central theme.²¹ In 2004, an al-Qaeda strategist, Abu Musab al-Suri, had published a lengthy treatise calling for a global wave of jihad initiated independently by individual or small-group cells of Muslims under al-Qaeda’s strategic guidance.²² Anwar al-Awlaki, a charismatic Yemeni-American cleric, accelerated al-Qaeda’s evolution toward this approach.²³ Awlaki’s lectures on jihad were readily accessible online in colloquial English. He spearheaded

al-Qaeda's first English-language magazine, *Inspire*, which placed the ideological justifications next to jihadi how-to manuals for individual attackers.²⁴ However, the absence of any real support for al-Qaeda (and Salafi-jihadism more broadly) among Muslims at the time limited the impact of this message to a limited pool of radicalized individuals.²⁵

The Arab Spring Accelerates al-Qaeda's Localization

THE ERUPTION OF ANTI-GOVERNMENT PROTESTS THAT SPREAD ACROSS THE ARAB world in early 2011 caught al-Qaeda senior leaders off-guard and unprepared to respond to the rapidly unfolding collapse of regimes. Al-Qaeda had no role in these popular uprisings nor in shaping the people's demands for what came next. Senior leaders scrambled to react and remain relevant, especially after losing the group's charismatic founder, Osama bin Laden, in May 2011. The Arab Spring accomplished what al-Qaeda had never been able to do itself: mobilize the Sunni masses against the Arab regimes. Yet the instability that followed the uprisings presented opportunities for al-Qaeda, which shifted its narrative and prioritized building local relationships to advance its operational objectives within the Muslim world.

The peaceful revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt undercut al-Qaeda's central premise that these regimes could be overthrown only after weakening the United States—and then only through violent means.²⁶ In 2007, then-deputy leader Ayman al-Zawahiri said, "Whatever its form, method, and means, force remains a necessary element for bringing about change."²⁷ As Anwar al-Awlaki later wrote on the Arab Spring, "when it came from Tunisia, no one saw it happening in Egypt."²⁸ The late Senator John McCain remarked after Hosni Mubarak's resignation that Egypt's "revolution is a direct repudiation of al-Qaeda, who believe that the only way you bring about change is through violence."²⁹ To add insult to injury, nationalist and democratic values drove the popular uprisings.³⁰ Moreover, other Salafis who had been potential allies for al-Qaeda before the uprisings opted to participate in the successor governments, pushing al-Qaeda further to the fringes of society.³¹ Al-Qaeda neither wrote the script nor directed how the events played out in the early days of the revolutions.

Osama bin Laden's death and the resulting spike in successful targeting of senior leaders compounded al-Qaeda's problems. With bin Laden's death, al-Qaeda lost its key visionary figure on the global stage. What his successor Ayman al-Zawahiri lacks in charisma, he makes up for in dour and long-winded diatribes. Zawahiri's authority stems from his experience as a long-time credentialed *mujahid* and decades'-worth of crucial relationships rather than any ability to lead or inspire. Adding to al-Qaeda's woes, the intelligence recovered during the raid that killed bin Laden informed additional counterterrorism targeting: The United States and its partners removed at least five of al-Qaeda's top figures in the months that followed. In Pakistan, U.S. drone strikes killed a member of al-Qaeda's military committee, Ilyas Kashmiri, in June; al-Qaeda's "number two," Atiyah Abdul Rahman, in August; and al-Qaeda's leader in Pakistan, Abu Hafs al-Shahri, in September.³² A joint U.S.-Pakistani operation also detained senior leader Younis al-Mauritani in September.³³ In Yemen, a U.S. drone strike killed Anwar al-Awlaki in September.³⁴ Additionally, al-Qaeda in East Africa leader Fazul Abdullah Mohamed was shot dead at a checkpoint in Somalia in June, apparently by happenstance.³⁵ Yet, as the June 2011 U.S. *National Strategy for Counterterrorism* noted: "It is unlikely that any single event—even the death of Osama bin Laden, the only leader al-Qaeda has ever known—will bring about its operational dismantlement."³⁶

By mid-2011, al-Qaeda was already taking steps to engage proactively with the Arab Spring developments, as revealed by correspondence recovered during the bin Laden raid. Multiple letters welcomed what these al-Qaeda senior leaders characterized as the end of U.S. dominance in the Middle East and evidence of the West's weakness.³⁷ A key thread woven through the letters is al-Qaeda's intent to ensure the revolutions unfold in a way that favors al-Qaeda's objectives. Bin Laden provided internal guidance for his followers that "their main duty now is to support the revolutions taking place."³⁸ He continued that al-Qaeda must prevent half-solutions to the revolutions, and separately framed what was happening as a "transitional phase" to the next one, which would then advance Islam.³⁹ Bin Laden ordered a pause in al-Qaeda attacks against local security forces to keep the revolutions unaffiliated with al-Qaeda.⁴⁰

Operational guidance to AQAP revealed how al-Qaeda had already shifted its strategic approach and sought to manipulate the unrest to its advantage, which AQAP did to great effect.⁴¹ An undated letter called for patience from AQAP and noted the benefit of preserving Yemen's current regime, led by Ali Abdullah Saleh, over heralding in one that would oppress all Islamists.⁴² Saleh prioritized Yemen's few security resources against more imminent threats to his regime, creating a semi-permissive environment for AQAP. Minimizing AQAP's threat to the Yemeni

regime optimized AQAP's ability to use its Yemeni sanctuary for external operations against the West. AQAP was to focus on attacking American targets while working with local powerbrokers to stabilize the country as it collapsed.⁴³ Senior al-Qaeda leader Atiyah Abdul Rahman ordered AQAP to conduct a covert assassination campaign in Yemen, avoid actions that might provoke a response, and support local tribes' authorities.⁴⁴ In sum, the plan remained simple: exhaust the United States, then the local regimes, and finally establish an Islamic state.⁴⁵

Publicly, al-Qaeda sought to craft a narrative of the Arab Spring as the start, not end, of the umma's revolution. Senior leaders, particularly Ayman al-Zawahiri, discussed the revolutions as the first phase in a greater struggle for justice that would eventually return Islam to its proper place in society.⁴⁶ Al-Qaeda dismissed the compromise that other Islamists like the Muslim Brotherhood offered to the masses. Bin Laden's sole public statement before his death warned revolutionaries to "beware" of negotiations.⁴⁷ Senior leaders also sought to empathize with the masses, purporting to understand their aspirations but also warning against straying from al-Qaeda's prescribed way forward.⁴⁸ Zawahiri later contested the prevailing narrative that al-Qaeda had lost influence during the Arab Spring, claiming that the group's work over the previous two decades had set the conditions for the revolutions' successes.⁴⁹ For its audience outside of the Arab world, al-Qaeda still called for "lone jihad."⁵⁰

Conditions grew increasingly favorable for al-Qaeda as 2011 progressed, catalyzing its growth across the Middle East and North Africa. Many prisoners, including veteran Salafi-jihadis, were released under amnesty programs or escaped amid unrest across the region.⁵¹ Former prisoners led new groups in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, and eventually Syria that received support from the al-Qaeda network.⁵² The uprisings disrupted counterterrorism operations and cooperation across the region, giving al-Qaeda some much-needed breathing space in places like Yemen. Significantly, the overthrow of secular regimes and outbreak of civil wars in Libya and Syria created an unprecedented chance for al-Qaeda to try to realize its vision of governance. Al-Qaeda's devolution of authority to the local level, a trend that predated the Arab Spring, positioned its local leaders well to make the most of their newfound situations. These affiliate leaders would advance al-Qaeda's aims on the local front in their respective theaters while also supporting the global jihad, whether directly or by buttressing al-Qaeda's global network.

Al-Qaeda operated in each of the conflicts that emerged in the wake of the Arab Spring. It supported the establishment of multiple groups under the name, "Ansar al-Sharia," in Yemen, Tunisia, Libya, and elsewhere, perhaps reflecting its own awareness that the "al-Qaeda" brand had tarnished.⁵³ In Yemen, Ansar al-Sharia

brought tribal forces under its command, multiplying AQAP's size without requiring members to swear allegiance to al-Qaeda itself. AQAP, through Ansar al-Sharia, briefly controlled what it declared to be the "Emirate of Waqar" until Yemeni counterterrorism operations resumed in 2012. In Libya, Ansar al-Sharia, which had fought against Muammar Qaddafi, controlled Benghazi and its environs. In Tunisia, Ansar al-Sharia, which focused on service delivery and proselytization, pushed for the Islamization of society and developed a militant wing.⁵⁴ In Syria, Jabhat al-Nusra formed with support from al-Qaeda in Iraq and quickly became the most successful faction of the armed opposition.

Within a year of the Arab Spring, al-Qaeda's network was rapidly expanding. Ayman al-Zawahiri formally recognized al-Shabaab in Somalia as an al-Qaeda affiliate in February 2012.⁵⁵ The decision countermanded Osama bin Laden's position, which had been to keep the relationship secret to prevent further mobilization against al-Shabaab and to facilitate donations and support to the group.⁵⁶ Al-Qaeda also saw opportunities in Libya, having called for fighters from neighboring countries to support the revolution there.⁵⁷ "Libya is now ready for the jihad," claimed senior official Atiyah Abdul Rahman. "Because of its important location, it will be a jihadist battlefield opening on Algeria and the Sahara, Sudan, Darfur, Chad, and the depth of Africa."⁵⁸ By March 2012, al-Qaeda was well positioned to expand in North Africa as well as into the Sahel through a new group affiliated with ethnic Tuareg rebels, Ansar al-Din, that sought to take advantage of Mali's collapse.⁵⁹ Its Iraqi group was also gaining strength, benefiting from the withdrawal of U.S. forces. The so-called core in Afghanistan-Pakistan remained under pressure even as al-Qaeda strengthened across all other fronts.

Overall, al-Qaeda had softened its call for global jihad, favoring instead the local fight. This adaptation better enabled al-Qaeda to extend its relationships into various communities, preying on their vulnerabilities, and broaden its reach into the Muslim world. However, localization presented al-Qaeda with other challenges, including a new requirement to ensure that local compromises did not undercut its global efforts or change its fundamental nature. For many foot soldiers, including some field commanders, local political dynamics played a greater role in drawing them to al-Qaeda's ranks than any desire to destroy the West. Al-Qaeda's ideology and methodology emphasizes an interplay between local and global jihad, however, such that success on the local front advances its objectives globally.⁶⁰ Al-Qaeda's focus on its "near" enemies and entrenchment in Muslim communities did not mean that it had abandoned its "far" enemies either: Even as it engaged in the local fight, AQAP attempted to bring down an airliner again in May 2012.⁶¹ Al-Qaeda simply chose not to pursue external attack capabilities in

every battlefield. Despite a common assessment among analysts to the contrary, al-Qaeda was very much not “in decline.”⁶²

Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State: Contest for Vanguard Status

THE ISLAMIC STATE’S 2013 TRANSFORMATION FROM THE DOWN-AND-OUT GROUP in Iraq to challenger of al-Qaeda’s primacy within the Salafi-jihadi movement produced greater cohesion within the al-Qaeda network. The late leader of the Islamic State, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, broke away from al-Qaeda in April 2013 and then declared the Caliphate’s return in June 2014. The public falling out surfaced a major schism within the Salafi-jihadi vanguard that had existed since at least the mid-2000s when Abu Musab al-Zarqawi had led al-Qaeda in Iraq. Islamic State leaders openly denigrated al-Qaeda’s strategy and its claim to be the vanguard. The key ideological disagreements—over *takfir*, the practice of declaring other Muslims to be apostate; the role of *da’wa*, i.e. proselytization; and application of shari’a—led to radically different strategic approaches to reestablishing the Caliphate.⁶³

Al-Qaeda’s dominance over other Salafi-jihadi groups had traditionally derived from its founders’ jihadi credentials, its access to the wealth of Osama bin Laden and his fundraising network, and its influence among the Afghan Arabs—the Arab *mujahideen* who had gone to Afghanistan to fight the Soviets. The group outlasted more locally focused Salafi-jihadi competitors that collapsed during authoritarian crackdowns in the 1990s. By 2001, few other groups had global brand recognition, and al-Qaeda’s spread to Iraq catapulted it to the forefront in 2003. Salafi-jihadi groups sought to associate themselves with al-Qaeda to reap perceived benefits, though al-Qaeda withheld recognition from those who did not adhere fully to its ideology, such as Nigeria’s Boko Haram.⁶⁴

The Islamic State’s emergence created a second powerful force within the Salafi-jihadi movement, causing those groups and individuals that did not fully adhere to al-Qaeda’s approach to realign themselves.⁶⁵ After declaring its Caliphate, the Islamic State expanded as groups on the fringes of al-Qaeda’s network and small al-Qaeda splinters shifted allegiance and foreign fighters flocked to respond to the Islamic State’s slickly broadcast call. These new Islamic State branches

formed from a preexisting Salafi-jihadi base and benefited from their new affiliation by gaining access to Islamic State resources, global media attention, or, for splinters, newfound autonomy. Al-Qaeda leaders called for an end to the perceived *fitna* (sedition) and pressed for *tawhid* (unity) under al-Qaeda. Both sides accused the other of heretical beliefs, an accusation that also justified killing the other, but neither prioritized such actions. Outright battles between the two have occurred in Syria, primarily in the immediate aftermath of the schism; in Yemen, where local disputes erupted starting in mid-2018; and in the Sahel, where the Islamic State and al-Qaeda coordinated and even cooperated before fighting broke out in spring 2020.⁶⁶

As the rift deepened, the Islamic State's open questioning of al-Qaeda's authority generated a series of al-Qaeda leadership statements defining its methodology and basing in Islam. Ayman al-Zawahiri published guidance clarifying al-Qaeda's strategic approach in September 2013.⁶⁷ The guidance explains al-Qaeda's stance on jihad and takfirism—only fighting those Muslim groups who initiate fights against the Sunni community and then only targeting combatants—and calls for cooperation with other Islamist groups as part of *tawhid*.⁶⁸ This document reflects a consensus among al-Qaeda leaders, as it was reportedly provided to them for comment prior to release.⁶⁹ In a similar vein, AQAP issued guidelines for suicide attacks in December 2015, outlining six recommendations to inform whether an attack is permissible. Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) also released a lengthy code of conduct for its followers in June 2017.⁷⁰ Al-Qaeda's actions have not always observed these guidelines, but they nonetheless inform how al-Qaeda operates globally.⁷¹

Al-Qaeda's methodology is visible across its network. It has embedded into the local contexts where it operates, forming pragmatic alliances with indigenous actors and building non-ideological ties to communities.⁷² The distinctly local flavor of al-Qaeda's affiliates masks their advancement of al-Qaeda's global aims, which ultimately lie in the Muslim world, not the West. Al-Qaeda's intermingling with local insurgencies, insinuation into local institutions, and focus on local issues are key adaptations that have better enabled it to gain acceptance and support.⁷³ It has learned from experience—especially that of al-Qaeda in Iraq during the 2006 “Anbar Awakening”—that developing and maintaining relationships with local communities is critical: being isolated from Sunni communities increases al-Qaeda's exposure to counterterrorism actions and inhibits progress toward its aim of transforming these communities into ideal Islamic societies.⁷⁴ Demonstrating strategic patience, al-Qaeda has opted for retreat or concessions in lieu of provoking outright rejection.⁷⁵ It has moderated its activities and rhetoric

to avoid alienating local populations, distilling its ideology to be more palatable and slowly infusing its extremist views rather than engaging in a state-building project. Al-Qaeda has better defined itself and its methodology in contrast to the brutal and exclusivist nature of the Islamic State, building more coherence across its network.

Understanding the al-Qaeda Network Today

TODAY AL-QAEDA HAS MORE FIGHTERS ACTIVE IN MORE COUNTRIES THAN EVER before. It has strengthened without raising alarms in Western capitals, building a popular base through its “localization” effort while still pursuing capabilities to conduct transnational terror attacks. The globally networked organization remains united under the leadership of Ayman al-Zawahiri, who provides strategic guidance and direction to followers across the Muslim-majority world.⁷⁶ Al-Qaeda’s senior leaders are dispersed more intentionally across theaters to defend against decapitation efforts, though Western counterterrorism operations eliminated over a dozen top figures in 2020.⁷⁷ Few of al-Qaeda’s early members survive, though a new generation of leaders is rising to carry al-Qaeda’s mission forward.⁷⁸ These leaders have tasted success, governing in some fashion in Mali, Somalia, Syria, and Yemen, and have cut their teeth in conflicts in their own homeland rather than far afield in Afghanistan. They will lead an organization that is ethnically diverse and geographically disparate, stretching into the far corners of the Muslim-majority world and engaged on multiple battlefields.⁷⁹

Al-Qaeda is the global network of individuals who have sworn allegiance to Ayman al-Zawahiri and are united by their purpose to conduct global jihad. Its leadership hierarchy remains significant in charting the strategic course for the organization: its *shura* council and other senior leaders help advise Zawahiri and provide guidance to the general members. The framework that constructs a “core” al-Qaeda group in Afghanistan-Pakistan as the central node and affiliated groups as subordinates wrongly infers hierarchical structure from geographic location. Al-Qaeda has organized itself across defined theaters based on territorial regions: Afghanistan-Pakistan, the Indian Subcontinent, Syria, Yemen, East Africa, the Maghreb, and the Sahel.⁸⁰ Each of these regional groups constitute the al-Qaeda

affiliates—including the local al-Qaeda forces fighting in Afghanistan. Previously, senior leaders had been concentrated in Afghanistan and Pakistan, which increased their direct influence over local forces there. Today senior leaders are dispersed throughout the affiliates as well as in Iran and continue to provide strategic direction to the affiliate leaders.⁸¹ The affiliate leaders are almost certainly card-carrying al-Qaeda members, even those who have come up behind the original leaders.

The affiliates themselves remain strong—in many cases stronger than their Islamic State counterparts.⁸² In Afghanistan, al-Qaeda has expanded beyond its historical strongholds and is now active in at least 11 provinces, having exploited the weakening of the Islamic State's Khorasan province and the easing of Western counterterrorism pressure.⁸³ The Afghan and Pakistani Taliban both work closely with al-Qaeda in the region.⁸⁴ Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent complements the Pashtun recruitment into Afghanistan by targeting Punjabi populations.⁸⁵ In Syria, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, the successor to al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra, dominates Idlib province and controls significant territory and local commerce.⁸⁶ Another Syrian group, Hurras al-Din, has been weakened but remains more closely aligned with al-Qaeda's global objectives and coordinates activities with foreign-fighter-dominant Salafi-jihadi groups.⁸⁷ In Yemen, AQAP is far weaker than it was a decade ago but has begun recovering from significant setbacks due to Emirati-U.S. counterterrorism operations that severely attrited its leadership.⁸⁸ In Somalia, al-Shabaab's influence remains strong, administering territory in parts of south-central Somalia, and the group regularly conducts attacks in the capital, Mogadishu, and northern Kenya. In the Maghreb, French and Algerian decapitation efforts have disrupted AQIM operations, killing senior al-Qaeda leader and AQIM emir Abdelmalek Droukdel in June 2020.⁸⁹ The AQIM-affiliated group Jama'a Nusrat al-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM) has sanctuary in north-central Mali and is expanding down into the littoral states around the Gulf of Guinea.⁹⁰

Identifying al-Qaeda members outside of the senior and affiliate leadership becomes more challenging. Whether all members of the affiliates are themselves full-blown members of al-Qaeda is less clear. Adherence to al-Qaeda's mission and strategic aims, namely the eventual restoration of the Caliphate through violent jihad, is a requirement for al-Qaeda membership; the intent to pursue this through global rather than local jihad not necessarily so. Multiple al-Qaeda-associated groups operate—some with relations directly to al-Qaeda senior leadership, such as Hurras al-Din—without the public imprimatur of al-Qaeda. Veteran al-Qaeda operatives are among Hurras al-Din's leaders, and the group has attracted fighters from the Syrian front that identify with al-Qaeda. Zawahiri has not yet recognized it as al-Qaeda's affiliate in Syria, however. Changes in self-identification probably

indicate a group's closer alignment with al-Qaeda: Militants who had previously identified as members of JNIM in the Sahel, for example, now increasingly identify themselves as being al-Qaeda members.⁹¹

The al-Qaeda network has deliberately woven itself into the fabrics of local Sunni communities to capture them for its own purposes. It has embedded itself deeply into local political dynamics, choosing sides of a conflict or becoming a go-to mediator or security guarantor. Yet al-Qaeda's seemingly parochial engagements and activities aspire to achieve much more strategic effects: through its alliances and partnerships, often non-ideological in scope, al-Qaeda increases influence over local governance and the practice of Islam. Though many communities reject al-Qaeda and what it promotes, they are too often without a viable alternative or too weak to expel the group. While such localization bears management costs—and certainly risks of miscalculations—it also yields promising rewards. Al-Qaeda benefits from access to terrain, resources, and potential recruits. Separating al-Qaeda from a community in which it has entrenched itself is no easy task. As Americans have learned at various times in Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, and Yemen, and the French have learned in the Sahel, al-Qaeda can make common cause with local communities to generate popular resistance to counterterrorism operations. Disentangling al-Qaeda from penetrated communities is a much more complex effort than mere terrorist targeting.

Al-Qaeda faces a global narrative problem, despite its successful expansion. The terrorism threat it poses to the United States and others has not grown relative to its size. Yet interpreting the absence of a major al-Qaeda attack as weakness judges al-Qaeda's strength by the wrong metric.⁹² Al-Qaeda measures success by the number of Sunni Muslims living under its governance. Al-Qaeda's decisions whether or not to strike the West have been calculated, sometimes wrongly. In 2015, al-Qaeda's leader in Syria revealed he had orders "not to use Syria as a launching pad to attack the U.S. or Europe," a shift from 2014, when al-Qaeda veterans were actively planning external attacks from Syria.⁹³ Presenting a diminished threat to the West, which had launched military operations against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, while prioritizing the anti-Assad fight probably drove this decision. But even though al-Qaeda has decided to focus on its "near" war, it still must respond to criticism that it has abandoned the global fight. Last September, Ayman al-Zawahiri dedicated his annual 9/11-anniversary remarks to defending al-Qaeda's jihadist credentials rather than offering the usual diatribes against the West.⁹⁴

Al-Qaeda's threat to the West is not gone, however. In Syria, al-Qaeda again poses an external attack threat, perhaps usurping the position AQAP had held since

2009.⁹⁵ AQAP, under counterterrorism strain, most recently claimed responsibility for the December 2019 shooting of U.S. Navy personnel on an air-base in Pensacola, Florida.⁹⁶ Concerningly, al-Shabaab has sought to develop 9/11-style attack capabilities, which nearly slipped under America's radar.⁹⁷ Whether al-Qaeda's senior leadership sanctioned al-Shabaab's pursuit of these capabilities or al-Shabaab has done so of its own initiative is unclear. What is clear is that components of al-Qaeda's network, embedded in local contexts, have chosen to also launch attacks against the "far enemy."

Conclusion: Al-Qaeda's Prospects

THE FUTURE SEEMS TO FAVOR AL-QAEDA. THE GROUP HAS LAID A STRONG FOUNDATION in key regions and has proven that its strategy of building non-ideological relationships with local populations effectively increases its influence. The local conflicts where it has strengthened remain unresolved and many are expanding. The coronavirus pandemic challenges the ability of governments to respond to multiple, simultaneous crises and has exacerbated already poor conditions in many of the areas where al-Qaeda operates.⁹⁸ Moreover, the misreading of al-Qaeda's strength based on an absence of major terror attacks has led Western countries to begin to draw down resources committed to counterterrorism.

Western fatigue with the so-called "forever war" and the requirement to shift resources from counterterrorism toward other national security priorities will lift pressure from al-Qaeda. The group is waiting patiently to reclaim victory in the wake of the U.S. drawdown in Afghanistan. It has capitalized on its relationship with the Afghan Taliban to rebuild in Afghanistan and to advise on the negotiated terms for the peace deal with the United States.⁹⁹ The U.S. military's re-posturing in the Horn of Africa will also likely afford al-Shabaab space to recapture territory in Somalia.¹⁰⁰ In Yemen, counterterrorism progress has already backslid after the United Arab Emirates drew down its presence in 2019, though AQAP will likely remain weak for the immediate future.¹⁰¹ France, which has led the counterterrorism efforts against al-Qaeda in the Sahel, has also signaled recently that it may draw down its commitments.¹⁰² On nearly all fronts, al-Qaeda's prospects are rising.

Al-Qaeda has positioned itself well to reassume its place at the helm of the

Salafi-jihadi vanguard in the years to come. Its entrenchment in the local contexts in Africa, the Middle East, and parts of Asia as well as the recent decapitation of much of al-Qaeda's leadership may make the threat appear more "manageable," but al-Qaeda has proven its resilience.¹⁰³ Nothing indicates that al-Qaeda has altered its aims in any way or changed how it seeks to achieve them. The growth of its popular support base through its local efforts increases its access to resources, sanctuaries, and networks—both licit and illicit—through which to connect its disparate branches. Enhanced local influence through cooperation rather than coercion also reduces its vulnerability to another "Awakening."¹⁰⁴

Al-Qaeda may be focused on the local contexts today, but it still understands its work as part of the global jihad. When the mirage of weakness fades, al-Qaeda's long-term threat will be evident.

NOTES

1. Obama White House, "Overview of the Afghanistan and Pakistan Review," press release, December 16, 2010, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2010/12/16/overview-afghanistan-and-pakistan-annual-review>.
2. John O. Brennan, "Strengthening our Security by Adhering to our Values and Laws," speech, Harvard Law School, Cambridge Massachusetts, September 16, 2011, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/09/16/remarks-john-o-brennan-strengthening-our-security-adhering-our-values-an>.
3. For more on the Salafi-jihadi movement, see Katherine Zimmerman, *America's Real Enemy: The Salafi-Jihadi Movement*, Critical Threats Project at the American Enterprise Institute, July 18, 2017, <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/americas-real-enemy-the-salafi-jihadi-movement>.
4. Katherine Zimmerman, "Al-Qaeda's Strengthening in the Shadows," testimony before the Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence, Committee on Homeland Security, U.S. House of Representatives, July 13, 2017, <https://www.aei.org/research-products/speech/testimony-al-qaedas-strengthening-in-the-shadows/>.
5. Chris Miller, "This 9/11 Anniversary Arrives with the End of the War on al-Qaeda Well in Sight," *Washington Post*, September 10, 2020.
6. James R. Clapper, *Statement for the Record on the Worldwide Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community for the Senate Committee on Armed Services*, Office of the Director

- of National Intelligence, March 10, 2011, https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/Newsroom/Testimonies/20110310_testimony_clapper.pdf.
7. Leah Farrell, "How al-Qaeda Works: What the Organization's Subsidiaries Say About Its Strength," *Foreign Affairs* 90, no. 2 (March/April 2011): 128-138, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/south-asia/2011-02-20/how-al-qaeda-works>.
 8. Katherine Zimmerman, *The al Qaeda Network: A New Framework for Defining the Enemy*, Critical Threats Project at the American Enterprise Institute, September 10, 2013, <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/the-al-qaeda-network-a-new-framework-for-defining-the-enemy>.
 9. Marc Sageman, for example, described al-Qaeda as "just a loose label for a movement that seems to target the west," in a 2010 interview with the *Financial Times*. James Blitz, "Al-Qaeda: A Threat Transformed," *Financial Times*, January 18, 2010, <https://www.ft.com/content/173635a6-046f-11df-8603-00144feabd0>.
 10. Dennis C. Blair, *Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community for the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence*, Office of the Director of National Intelligence, February 2, 2010, https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/Newsroom/Testimonies/20100202_testimony.pdf. See also Deputy National Security Advisor for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism John Brennan's characterization of al-Qaeda in Blitz, "Al-Qaeda: A Threat Transformed."
 11. Farrell, "How al Qaeda Works."
 12. For example, Osama bin Laden threatened continued attacks until Muslim lands were free from Western influence, and al-Qaeda deputy leader Ayman al-Zawahiri called on Muslims to support the mujahideen and fight those who aid America. Osama bin Laden, speech excerpt, al Jazeera, June 3, 2009, captured by SITE Intelligence Group; and Ayman al-Zawahiri, "From Kabul to Mogadishu," speech, al-Sahab Media Foundation, February 22, 2009. Translated by SITE Intelligence Group.
 13. Both the Madrid and the London attacks were dismissed early on as "homegrown" plots, but later evidence indicated al-Qaeda senior leadership played a central role in both attacks. See Bruce Hoffman, "Radicalization and Subversion: al Qaeda and the 7 July 2005 Bombings and the 2006 Airline Bombing Plot," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 32, no. 12 (2009): 1100-1116, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10576100903319896>; and Fernando Reinares, "The Madrid Bombings and Global Jihadism," *Survival* 52, no. 2 (2010): 91-95, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396331003764629>.
 14. Michael Elliott, "The Shoe Bomber's World," *Time*, February 16, 2002; and Scott Shane, "Inside al Qaeda's Plot to Blow Up an American Airliner," *New York Times*, February 22, 2017.
 15. "Al-Qaeda in Iraq Takes Credit for the Amman Bombings," *Terrorism Focus* 2, no. 21

- (November 2005), <https://jamestown.org/program/al-qaeda-in-iraq-takes-credit-for-the-amman-bombings/>.
16. Souad Mekhennet and Alan Cowell, "Qaeda Group Says it Bombed Embassy," *New York Times*, June 6, 2008; Robert F. Worth, "10 are Killed in Bombings at Embassy in Yemen," *New York Times*, September 17, 2008; Mark Mazzetti and Robert F. Worth, "U.S. Sees Complexity of Bombs as Link to al Qaeda," *New York Times*, October 30, 2010; Bob Orr, "Inside the '09 Plot to Bomb NYC Subways," *CBS News*, April 19, 2012; and Richard Esposito, "Exclusive: NY Rail Plot Details Based on 'Reliable' FBI Source," *ABC News*, November 26, 2008.
 17. Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism, "Chapter 6. Foreign Terrorist Organizations," in *Country Reports on Terrorism 2010*, U.S. State Department, August 18, 2011, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2010/170264.htm>.
 18. Katherine Zimmerman, *The al Qaeda Network*, 15.
 19. Osama bin Laden specifically advised against escalating the conflict in Yemen to preserve the theater as a support zone for the global al-Qaeda network. For a good overview of the approach as revealed in the few bin Laden letters declassified by May 2012, see Gabriel Koehler-Derrick, "The Abbottabad Documents: Bin Ladin's Cautious Strategy in Yemen," *CTC Sentinel* 5, no. 5 (May 2012): 15-19, <https://ctc.usma.edu/the-abbottabad-documents-bin-ladins-cautious-strategy-in-yemen/>; and "Letter Addressed to Atiyah." Declassified document available through the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl/english/Letter%20Addressed%20to%20Atiyah.pdf>.
 20. Osama bin Laden, "Letter from UBL to 'Atiyatullah al-Libi 4," Letter, May 2010. Declassified document available through the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, <https://ctc.usma.edu/harmony-program/letter-from-ubl-to-atiyatullah-al-libi-4-original-language-2/>.
 21. Discussion on jihadi online forums about individual jihad had begun in the late 2000s. The concept is emphasized in formal al-Qaeda media by Anwar al-Awlaki following the 2009 Fort Hood shooting. Notably, Adam Gadahn issued a statement in October 2010 urging Muslims to take initiative to conduct individual jihad. Adam Gadahn, "Zio-Crusader Coalition," al-Sahab Media Foundation, October 23, 2010. Translated by SITE Intelligence Group.
 22. Paul Cruickshank and Mohannad Hage Ali, "Abu Musab al Suri: Architect of the New al Qaeda," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 30, no. 1 (2007): 1-14, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10576100601049928>.
 23. Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, "Voice of Terror," *Foreign Policy*, January 18, 2011, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/01/18/voice-of-terror-2/>.
 24. Katherine Zimmerman, "Expanding the Campaign of Violence: Al-Qaeda in the Arabian

- Peninsula's English-Language Magazine," Critical Threats Project at the American Enterprise Institute, July 13, 2010, <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/expanding-the-campaign-of-violence-al-qaeda-in-the-arabian-peninsulas-english-language-magazine>.
25. Blair, *Annual Threat Assessment*.
26. See Daniel Byman, "Terrorism after the Revolutions: How Secular Uprisings Could Help (or Hurt) Jihadists," *Foreign Affairs* 90, no. 3 (May/June 2011): 49, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2011-04-03/terrorism-after-revolutions>.
27. Ayman al-Zawahiri, "The Advice of One Concerned," al-Sahab Media Foundation, July 4, 2007, translated by SITE Intelligence Group, <https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/Jihadist-News/site-intel-group-7-4-07-zawahiri-advice-concerned-sahab-video-72007-p.html>.
28. Anwar al-Awlaki, "Tsunami of Change," *Inspire* 5 (Spring 2011), 50.
29. Lucy Madison, "John McCain: Putin and Hu Should Watch Out," CBS News, February 13, 2011.
30. Donald Holbrook, "Al-Qaeda's Response to the Arab Spring," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 6, no. 6 (December 2012), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26296891>.
31. For an excellent assessment of the Islamist challenge to al-Qaeda, see William McCants, "Al Qaeda's Challenge: The Jihadists' War with Islamist Democrats," *Foreign Affairs* 90, no. 5 (September/October 2011): 20-32, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/south-asia/2011-09-01/al-qaedas-challenge>.
32. Michael Georgy and Augustine Anthony, "Al Qaeda's Ilyas Kashmiri Killed in Pakistan by U.S. Drone," *Reuters*, June 5, 2011; Greg Miller and Julie Tate, "Al-Qaeda's No. 2 Leader Is Killed in Pakistan, U.S. Officials Say," *Washington Post*, August 27, 2011; and Jason Ukman and Peter Finn, "Al-Qaeda Operations Chief in Pakistan Killed," *Washington Post*, September 15, 2011.
33. Bill Roggio, "Pakistani Forces Capture Senior Al Qaeda Leader Younis Al Mauritani in Quetta," *Long War Journal*, September 5, 2011, https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2011/09/pakistani_forces_cap.php.
34. Katherine Zimmerman, "Killing Anwar al Awlaki," Critical Threats Project at the American Enterprise Institute, September 30, 2011, <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/killing-anwar-al-awlaki>.
35. Hillary Rodham Clinton, "Death of Harun Fazul," statement, Washington, DC, June 11, 2011, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2011/06/165942.htm>; and Jeffrey Gettleman, "Somalis Kill Mastermind of 2 U.S. Embassy Bombings," *New York Times*, June 11, 2011.
36. Obama White House, *National Strategy for Counterterrorism*, June 28, 2011, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/counterterrorism_strategy.pdf.

37. "Letter to Shaykh Mahmud." Declassified document available through the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl/english/Letter%20to%20Shaykh%20Mahmud.pdf>.
38. Multiple drafts of similar writings from bin Laden include this sentiment. The quoted text is in a draft letter from Osama bin Laden to Atiyah Abdul Rahman and echoed in a letter addressed to Atiyah Abdul Rahman (Shaykh Mahmud). Osama bin Laden, "UBL to Atiyah identified in a folder titled 'to send.'" Declassified document available through the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl/english/Letter%20from%20UBL%20to%20Atiyah.pdf>; and "Letter to Shaykh Mahmud."
39. In one reference, bin Laden criticized the solution that the Muslim Brotherhood might offer and instead expressed hope the next stage will reinstate the Caliphate. In another, the author said the next phase will be for Islam without reference yet to the Caliphate. Osama bin Laden, "Letter from UBL to Atiyah." Declassified document available through the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl/english/Letter%20from%20UBL%20to%20Atiyah.pdf>; and "Letter to Shaykh Mahmud."
40. "Letter to Shaykh Mahmud."
41. For contemporary assessments of AQAP, see Katherine Zimmerman, "Ten Years after 9/11: al Qaeda's Reemergence in Yemen," Critical Threats Project at the American Enterprise Institute, September 20, 2011, <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/ten-years-after-911-al-qaedas-reemergence-in-yemen>; and Katherine Zimmerman, *Recipe for Failure: American Strategy toward Yemen and al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula*, Critical Threats Project at the American Enterprise Institute, February 17, 2012, <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/recipe-for-failure-american-strategy-toward-yemen-and-al-qaeda-in-the-arabian-peninsula>.
42. "Give the Tribes More Than They Can Handle." Declassified document available through the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl2016/english/Give%20the%20tribes%20more%20than%20they%20can%20handle.pdf>.
43. "Letter to Abu Basir." Declassified document available through the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, <https://www.odni.gov/files/documents/ubl2016/english/Letter%20to%20Abu%20Basir.pdf>.
44. Atiyah Abdul Rahman, "Letter from Atiyah to Abu Basir," March 27, 2011. Declassified document available through the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl2017/english/Letter%20from%20Atiyah%20to%20Abu%20Basir.pdf>.
45. "Give the Tribes More Than They Can Handle."

46. Donald Holbrook, "Al-Qaeda's Response to the Arab Spring," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 6, no. 6 (December 2012): 1-21, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26296891>.
47. Osama bin Laden, "Speech from the Martyr of Islam—As We Think of Him—To the Islamic Ummah," al-Sahab Media Foundation, May 18, 2011. Translated by SITE Intelligence Group.
48. For example, Zawahiri said the Egyptian people's demand to rule with shari'a remains the demand of the vast majority in a March 3, 2011, speech. Ayman al-Zawahiri, "A Message of Hope and Glad Tidings to our People of Egypt," al-Sahab Media Foundation, March 3, 2011. Translated by SITE Intelligence Group.
49. "The Dawn of Imminent Victory," al-Sahab Media Foundation, September 12, 2011. Translated by SITE Intelligence Group. See also Shiraz Maher and Peter R. Neumann, "Al-Qaeda at the Crossroads: How the Terror Group is Responding to the Loss of its Leaders and the Arab Spring," International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, August 2012, <https://icsr.info/2012/10/30/al-qaeda-at-the-crossroads-how-the-terror-group-is-responding-to-the-loss-of-its-leaders-the-arab-spring/>.
50. See "You are Only Responsible for Yourself," al-Sahab Media Foundation, June 2, 2011. Translated by SITE Intelligence Group.
51. The Assad regime granted amnesty to Islamists to radicalize the armed opposition that was forming against it, for example. Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Aaron Zelin, "How the Arab Spring's Prisoner Releases Have Helped the Jihadi Cause," *The Atlantic*, October 11, 2012, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/10/how-the-arab-springs-prisoner-releases-have-helped-the-jihadi-cause/263469/>; and Rania Abouzeid, "The Jihad Next Door: The Syrian Roots of Iraq's Newest Civil War," *Politico*, June 23, 2014, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/06/al-qaeda-iraq-syria-108214>.
52. The Egypt-based Jamal network, for example. See Zimmerman, *The al Qaeda Network*, 21-22.
53. Al-Qaeda identifies its fighters as "Ansar" (locals) or "Muhajirun" (foreign fighters), a differentiation that persists and also recalls the Ansar, locals in Medina who converted to Islam, from the time of the Prophet Mohammed. Notably, Ansar al-Sharia was not listed as a potential alternative to al-Qaeda in recovered correspondence. See "A Suggestion to Change the Name of al-Qa'ida," SOCOM-2012-0000009, in declassified letters available through the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/harmony-program/a-suggestion-to-change-the-name-of-al-qaida-original-language-2/>. For an overview of Ansar al-Sharia, see Aaron Zelin, "Know Your Ansar al Sharia," *Foreign Policy*, September 21, 2012, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2012/09/21/know-your-ansar-al-sharia/>.
54. Aaron Y. Zelin, "Not Gonna Be Able To Do It: al-Qaeda in Tunisia's Inability to Take

- Advantage of the Islamic State's Setbacks," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 13, no. 1 (February 2019), 64, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26590509>.
55. "A Glad Tiding from Sheikhs Abu al Zubayr and Ayman al Zawahiri," al-Sahab Media Foundation, February 9, 2012. Translated by SITE Intelligence Group.
56. Osama bin Laden wrote to al-Shabaab's emir on August 7, 2010, declining a request for formal unity. See "Letter from Usama bin Laden to Mukhtar Abu al-Zubayr," SOCOM-2012-0000005, in declassified letters available through the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, <https://ctc.usma.edu/harmony-program/letter-from-usama-bin-laden-to-mukhtar-abu-al-zubayr-original-language-2/>.
57. Ayman al-Zawahiri, "A Message of Hope and Glad Tidings to Our People in Egypt: The Battle of the Quran," al-Sahab Media Foundation, May 21, 2011. Translated by SITE Intelligence Group.
58. Atiyah Abdul Rahman, "Letter from Atiyah to Abu Basir." March 27, 2011. Declassified document available through the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl2017/english/Letter%20from%20Atiyah%20to%20Abu%20Basir.pdf>.
59. For more on al-Qaeda's expansion into the Sahel, see Katherine Zimmerman, "Salafi-jihadi Ecosystem in the Sahel," American Enterprise Institute, April 22, 2020, <https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/salafi-jihadi-ecosystem-in-the-sahel/>.
60. Katherine Zimmerman, *Beyond Counterterrorism: Defeating the Salafi-Jihadi Movement*, American Enterprise Institute, October 8, 2019, <https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/beyond-counterterrorism-defeating-the-salafi-jihadi-movement/>.
61. Additionally, detailed plans for attacks in the U.K. were found in Harun Fazul's possession when he was killed in June 2011. For more on how AQAP, an affiliate, related to the global network, see Katherine Zimmerman, "AQAP's Role in the al Qaeda Network," testimony before the U.S. House Committee on Homeland Security Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence, September 18, 2013, <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/testimony-aqaps-role-in-the-al-qaeda-network>; Adam Goldman and Matt Apuzzo, "CIA Thwarts 'Undetectable' al Qaeda Bomb Plot," Associated Press, May 7, 2012; and Michelle Shephard, "Star Exclusive: Documents Found on body of al Qaeda's African Leader Detail Chilling Plans for Kidnapping, Attacks," *Toronto Star*, July 11, 2012, https://www.thestar.com/news/world/2012/07/11/star_exclusive_documents_found_on_body_of_al_qedas_african_leader_detail_chilling_plans_for_kidnapping_attacks.html.
62. For example, Brian Fishman and Phil Mudd, "Al Qaeda on the Ropes," *Foreign Policy*, February 24, 2012, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2012/02/24/al-qaeda-on-the-ropes/>.
63. Mary Habeck, "Assessing the ISIS-al-Qaeda Split: Introduction," INSITE Blog, June

- 18, 2014, <http://news.siteintelgroup.com/blog/index.php/about-us/21-jihad/4388-assessing-the-isis-al-qaeda-split-introduction>; and Cole Bunzel, *From Paper State to Caliphate: The Ideology of the Islamic State*, Brookings Institution, March 2015, <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/the-ideology-of-the-islamic-state.pdf>.
64. Boko Haram, for example, sought to affiliate with al-Qaeda and received support from AQIM. The relations soured as Boko Haram's leader repeatedly ignored AQIM's strategic guidance and tolerated attacks that killed numerous Muslim civilians. See Jacob Zenn, *Unmasking Boko Haram: Exploring Global Jihad in Nigeria*, Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2020, chapters 7 and 8.
65. Katherine Zimmerman, "Competing Jihad: The Islamic State and al Qaeda," Critical Threats Project at the American Enterprise Institute, September 1, 2014, <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/competing-jihad-the-islamic-state-and-al-qaeda>; and Zimmerman, *America's Real Enemy*.
66. The Afghan Taliban has fought aggressively against the Islamic State in Afghanistan, though it is not clear whether al-Qaeda is participating in this directly. Al-Shabaab has also targeted Islamic State members for assassination in Somalia, but the groups have not engaged in sustained fighting. Elisabeth Kendall, "The Failing Islamic State within the Failed State of Yemen," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 13, no 1 (February 2019): 77–86, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26590510>; Jessica Kocan, "Yemen File: COVID-19 Strain Expedites Saudi Arabia's Exit From Yemen War," Critical Threats Project at the American Enterprise Institute, April 29, 2020, <https://www.criticalthreats.org/briefs/yemen-file/yemen-file-covid-19-strain-expedites-saudi-arabias-exit-from-yemen-war>; Héni Nsaibia and Caleb Weiss, "The End of the Sahelian Anomaly: How the Global Conflict Between the Islamic State and al-Qa'ida Finally Came to West Africa," *CTC Sentinel* 13, no. 7 (July 2020): 1–14, <https://ctc.usma.edu/the-end-of-the-sahelian-anomaly-how-the-global-conflict-between-the-islamic-state-and-al-qaida-finally-came-to-west-africa/>; Jacob Zenn and Colin P. Clarke, "Al Qaeda and ISIS had a Truces in Africa—Until They Didn't," *Foreign Policy*, May 26, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/05/26/al-qaeda-isis-west-africa-sahel-stability-jihadi-groups/>; and Hassan Hassan, "Two Houses Divided: How Conflict Shaped the Future of Jihadism," *CTC Sentinel* 11, no. 9 (October 2018): 1–8, <https://ctc.usma.edu/two-houses-divided-conflict-syria-shaped-future-jihadism/>.
67. Ayman al-Zawahiri, "General Guidelines for Jihad," al-Sahab Media Foundation, September 13, 2013, <https://jihadology.net/2013/09/14/as-sa%e1%b8%a5ab-media-presents-a-new-release-from-al-qaidahs-dr-ayman-al-%e1%ba%93awahiri-general-guidelines-for-the-work-of-a-jihadi/>.
68. Ayman al-Zawahiri also advised against "meddling" with Christian, Sikh, and Hindu communities in Muslim territory but to respond to their aggression proportionately.

69. Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Nathaniel Barr, "Extreme Makeover, Jihadist Edition: al-Qaeda's Rebranding Campaign," *War on the Rocks*, September 3, 2015, <https://warontherocks.com/2015/09/extreme-makeover-jihadist-edition-al-qaedas-rebranding-campaign/>.
70. Harith bin Ghazi al-Nadhari, "Sanctity of Inviolable Blood," al-Malaham Media Foundation, January 23, 2015. Translated by SITE Intelligence Group; and al-Sahab Media Subcontinent, "Code of Conduct: al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent," June 23, 2017. Accessed through SITE Intelligence Group.
71. For example, AQAP's December 2013 attack on a military hospital in Sana'a, Yemen, resulted in significant local backlash. Yet after a simultaneous bombing of two mosque in Sana'a in March 2015, AQAP reiterated its adherence to Zawahiri's guidelines when it denied responsibility. Zimmerman, *America's Real Enemy*; Katherine Zimmerman, *Yemen's Pivotal Moment*, Critical Threats Project at the American Enterprise Institute, February 12, 2014, <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/yemens-pivotal-moment>; and al-Malaham Media Foundation, "Statement no. 91," March 20, 2015. Translated by SITE Intelligence Group.
72. Mohammed M. Hafez, "The Crisis within Jihadism: The Islamic State's Puritanism vs. al-Qa'ida's Populism," *CTC Sentinel* 13, no. 9 (September 2020): 44, <https://ctc.usma.edu/the-crisis-within-jihadism-the-islamic-states-puritanism-vs-al-qaidas-populism/>.
73. Katherine Zimmerman, *Terrorism, Tactics, and Transformation: The West vs. the Salafi-Jihadi Movement*, Critical Threats Project at the American Enterprise Institute, November 5, 2018, <https://www.criticalthreats.org/reports/terrorism-tactics-and-transformation-the-west-vs-the-salafi-jihadi-movement>.
74. Katherine Zimmerman, *Road to the Caliphate: the Salafi-Jihadi Movement's Strengths*, Critical Threats Project at the American Enterprise Institute, June 6, 2019, <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/road-to-the-caliphate-the-salafi-jihadi-movements-strengths>.
75. Ali Soufan, "The Resurgent Threat of al Qaeda," *Wall Street Journal*, April 21, 2017.
76. Reports broke in November 2020 that Ayman al-Zawahiri had died of natural causes. However, Zawahiri's death has not been confirmed by al-Qaeda or Western intelligence officials. His presumed successor is senior leader Saif al-Adel. Hassan Hassan, tweet, November 13, 2020, <https://twitter.com/hxhassan/status/1327310792383983616>; and Ali Soufan, "Al-Qa'ida's Soon-To-Be Third Emir? A Profile of Saif al-'Adl," *CTC Sentinel* 14, no. 2 (February 2021): 1-21, <https://ctc.usma.edu/al-qaidas-soon-to-be-third-emir-a-profile-of-saif-al-adl/>.
77. Among the senior leaders killed in 2020 are Abu Muhammad al-Masri (d. August 7, 2020;

- Tehran, Iran); Abdelmalek Droukdel (d. June 3, 2020; Talahandak, Mali); Abu Yahya al-Jazairi (d. April 6, 2020; Bamba, Mali); Qassem al-Raymi (d. January 2020; Ma'rib, Yemen); Bashir Mohamed Mahamud (d. February 22, 2020; Saakow, Somalia); Hossam Abdul Raouf (d. October 18, 2020; Ghazni, Afghanistan); and Khaled al-Aruri (d. June 14, 2020; Idlib, Syria). Bruce Hoffman and Jacob Ware "Terrorism and Counterterrorism Challenges for the Biden Administration," *CTC Sentinel* 14, no. 1 (January 2021): 4, <https://ctc.usma.edu/terrorism-and-counterterrorism-challenges-for-the-biden-administration/>.
78. Katherine Zimmerman, "Al Qaeda's Generational Change," *Newsweek*, September 8, 2020, <https://www.newsweek.com/al-qaedas-generational-change-opinion-1529823>.
 79. Arabs still dominate the group's leadership ranks despite a more diverse pool of members.
 80. See Mary Habeck's work on al-Qaeda's self-defined regions, or *aqalim*. Al-Qaeda-affiliated groups are active in Khorasan (al-Qaeda in Afghanistan-Pakistan, or what the U.S. government has defined as the "core"); Hindustan (al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent); Sham (Hurras al-Din); Haramayn (al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula); Huratayn (al-Shabaab); Islamic Maghreb (al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb); and Sudan (Jama'a Nusrat al-Islam wa al-Muslimin). Mary Habeck, "Al Qaeda and ISIS Geographical Organization," in "Understanding ISIS and al Qaeda," Critical Threats Project at the American Enterprise Institute, June 15, 2019, <http://longform.aei.org/understanding-isis-and-al-qaeda/post/28/al-qaeda-and-isis-geographical-organization>.
 81. As of February 2021, al-Qaeda senior leaders operate from Afghanistan, Iran, Syria, and Yemen. Abdelmalek Droukdel, AQIM's late leader, had been a senior leader presence in the Maghreb.
 82. United Nations Security Council, "Twenty-Fifth Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team Submitted Pursuant to Resolution 2368 (2017) Concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and Associated Individuals and Entities," January 20, 2020, 6, <https://undocs.org/S/2020/53>.
 83. The Islamic State's Khorasan province may have recovered from a series of setbacks, according to recent statements by U.S. military and intelligence officials. Jeff Seldin, "Islamic State Poised for Possible Resurgence in Afghanistan, US Officials Warn," *Voice of America*, February 9, 2021; United Nations Security Council, "Twenty-Sixth Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team Submitted Pursuant to Resolution 2368 (2017) Concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and Associated Individuals and Entities," July 23, 2020, <https://undocs.org/S/2020/717>; and United Nations Security Council, "Twenty-Seventh Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team Submitted Pursuant to Resolution 2368 (2017) Concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and Associated Individuals and Entities," February 2, 2021, <https://undocs.org/S/2021/68>.
 84. Office of the Inspector General, "Operation Inherent Resolve - Summary of Work Per-

- formed by the Department of the Treasury Related to Terrorist Financing, ISIS, and Anti-Money Laundering for First Quarter Fiscal Year 2021,” Department of the Treasury, January 4, 2021, <https://www.oversight.gov/sites/default/files/oig-reports/OIG-CA-21-012.pdf>.
85. Katherine Zimmerman, “Al Qaeda’s Strengthening in the Shadows”; and United Nations Security Council, “Twenty-Sixth Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team,” 15.
 86. United Nations Security Council, “Twenty-Seventh Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team,” 7.
 87. Hurras al-Din and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham clashed in summer 2020, weakening Hurras al-Din. United Nations Security Council, “Twenty-Sixth Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team,” 8; United Nations Security Council, “Twenty-Seventh Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team,” 7.
 88. United Nations Security Council, “Twenty-Seventh Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team,” 8; Isabel Ivanescu and Will Christou, “Syria Situation Report: June 24–July 6, 2020,” Institute for Study of War and Syria Direct, July 9, 2020, <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/syria-situation-report-june-24-july-6-2020>; and Isabel Ivanescu, “Syria Situation Report: January 30–February 18, 2021,” Institute for the Study of War, February 19, 2021, <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/syria-situation-report-january-30-february-18-2021>.
 89. Droukdel had risen to be among the top five leaders in al-Qaeda by the time of his death. Caleb Weiss, “AQIM Confirms Leader’s Death,” Long War Journal, June 18, 2020, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2020/06/aqim-confirms-leaders-death.php>; and United Nations Security Council, “Twenty-Sixth Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team,” 10.
 90. Evidence indicates the ability to operate in northern Benin as well as JNIM cells in Senegal. Anderson, remarks at the American Enterprise Institute; Zimmerman, “Salafi-jihadi Ecosystem in the Sahel”; and Rahma Bayrakdar, “Al Qaeda’s Growing Threat to Senegal,” Critical Threats Project at the American Enterprise Institute, February 18, 2021, <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/al-qaedas-growing-threat-to-senegal>.
 91. Roundtable on strategic challenges facing the U.S. military in Africa, American Enterprise Institute, September 9, 2020..
 92. Katherine Zimmerman, “The Salafi-Jihadist Movement is Winning,” Real Clear World, February 12, 2019, https://www.realclearworld.com/articles/2019/02/12/the_salafi-jihadist_movement_is_winning_112964.html.
 93. U.S. Director of National Intelligence James R. Clapper testified in early 2014 that Jabhat al-Nusra aspired to attack the U.S. homeland. The United States conducted airstrikes targeting what officials called the “Khorasan Group” in Syria in September 2014 to disrupt

an active threat. For more on the Khorasan Group, see Katherine Zimmerman, “The Khorasan Group: Syria’s al Qaeda Threat,” Critical Threats Project at the American Enterprise Institute, September 23, 2014,

<https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/the-khorasan-group-syrias-al-qaeda-threat>.

Barack H. Obama, “Statement by the President on Airstrikes in Syria,” White House Office of the Press Secretary, September 23, 2014; Josh Earnest and Ben Rhodes, “Press Gaggle by Press Secretary Josh Earnest and Deputy National Security Advisor Ben Rhodes en route New York, NY, 9/23/2014,” White House Office of the Press Secretary, September 23, 2014,

<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/23/press-gaggle-press-secretary-josh-earnest-and-deputy-national-security-a>; James R. Clapper, statement before the Senate Select Intelligence Committee, January 29, 2014,

<https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/hearings/open-hearing-current-and-projected-national-security-threats-against-united-states>; and “Nusra Leader: Our Mission is to Defeat Syrian Regime,” al Jazeera, May 28, 2015,

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/5/28/nusra-leader-our-mission-is-to-defeat-syrian-regime>.

94. Ayman al-Zawahiri’s statement seems offered in defense of al-Qaeda and explaining what al-Qaeda is. He couches his statement with reminders of “historical facts” of the struggle between Muslims and “Crusaders,” and then devotes significant energy to discounting a 2019 *al Jazeera* documentary. Ayman al-Zawahiri, “Deal of the Century or the Crusade of the Century,” al-Sahab Media Foundation, September 11, 2020, <https://jihadology.net/2020/09/11/new-video-message-from-al-qaidahs-dr-ayman-al-%E1%BA%93awahiri-deal-of-the-century-or-the-crusade-of-the-century-episode-1/>.
95. A July 2020 UN report noted that Hurras al-Din “remain committed to preparing for external attacks.” U.S. counterterrorism operations have repeatedly targeted al-Qaeda individuals affiliated with Hurras al-Din. United Nations Security Council, “Twenty-Sixth Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team”; Eric Schmitt, “U.S. Sees Rising Threat in the West from Qaeda Branch in Syria,” *New York Times*, September 29, 2019; and Eric Schmitt, “U.S. Commandos Use Secretive Missiles to Kill Qaeda Leaders in Syria,” *New York Times*, September 24, 2020.
96. Katherine Zimmerman, “Al Qaeda’s Role in the Pensacola Shooting and What It Means,” AEIdeas, May 18, 2020, <https://www.aei.org/foreign-and-defense-policy/al-qaedas-role-in-the-pensacola-shooting-and-what-it-means/>; and Colin Clarke, “The Pensacola Terrorist Attack: The Enduring Influence of al-Qa’ida and its Affiliates,” *CTC Sentinel* 13, no. 3 (March 2020): 16-23, <https://ctc.usma.edu/pensacola-terrorist-attack-enduring-influence-al-qaida-affiliates/>.
97. Commander of U.S. Special Operations Command Africa Maj. Gen. Dagvin Anderson

- stated that the United States only “stumbled upon some information” that uncovered these plans. Maj. Gen. Dagvin Anderson, remarks at the American Enterprise Institute, September 9, 2020, <https://www.aei.org/events/the-crossroad-of-competition-counter-ing-the-rise-of-violent-extremists-and-revisionist-powers-in-africa/>; and Southern District of New York U.S. Attorney’s Office, “Kenyan National Indicted for Conspiring to Hijack Aircraft on Behalf of the al Qaeda-Affiliated Terrorist Organization al Shabaab,” press release, December 16, 2020, <https://www.justice.gov/usao-sdny/pr/kenyan-national-indicted-conspiring-hijack-aircraft-behalf-al-qaeda-affiliated>.
98. Emily Estelle, “Vicious Cycles: How Disruptive States and Extremist Movements Fill Power Vacuums and Fuel Each Other,” American Enterprise Institute, August 17, 2020, <https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/vicious-cycles-how-disruptive-states-and-extremist-movements-fill-power-vacuums-and-fuel-each-other/>.
99. Office of the Inspector General, “Operation Inherent Resolve - Summary of Work”; United Nations Security Council, “Eleventh Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team Submitted Pursuant to Resolution 2501 (2019) Concerning the Taliban and Other Associated Individuals and Entities Constituting a Threat to the Peace, Stability and Security of Afghanistan,” May 27, 2020, <https://www.undocs.org/S/2020/415>; and Thomas Joscelyn, “U.N.: Taliban ‘Regularly Consulted’ with al Qaeda throughout Negotiations with U.S.,” Long War Journal, June 1, 2020, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2020/06/u-n-taliban-regularly-consulted-with-al-qaeda-throughout-negotiations-with-u.s.php>.
100. Katherine Zimmerman, “Biden Should Reverse Trump’s Decision on Somalia,” Critical Threats Project at the American Enterprise Institute, January 28, 2021, <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/biden-should-reverse-trumps-decision-on-somalia>.
101. Bureau of Counterterrorism, “Yemen,” in *Country Reports on Terrorism 2019*, State Department, June 24, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2019/yemen/>.
102. Victor Mallet and Neil Munshi, “Macron Signals Military Pullback from Sahel Terrorist Fight,” *Financial Times*, February 1, 2021, <https://www.ft.com/content/d5e7c04a-1f10-4fcd-a7f1-9af7faedb8a6>.
103. Matthew Levitt and Aaron Zelin, “Al-Qaeda’s External Operations One Year after the Pensacola Attack,” Washington Institute, December 11, 2020, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/al-qaedas-external-operations-one-year-after-pensacola-attack>.
104. Jami T. Forbes, “The Revival of al Qaeda,” *Joint Force Quarterly* 96 (January 2020), https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/jfq/jfq-96/JFQ-96_84-89_Forbes.pdf.

The Routinization of the Islamic State's Global Enterprise

*By Haroro J. Ingram,
Craig Whiteside, and
Charlie Winter*

IN 2020, THE ISLAMIC STATE CHANGED TACK ON ITS BRANDING EFFORTS. After years of focusing its global media efforts on the activities of its enterprise in Syria and Iraq,¹ last year saw the group shift focus onto its pursuits in Sub-Saharan Africa more than anywhere else.² To be sure, it published more attack reports about the activities of its core in the Middle East (581 in Syria and 981 in Iraq, to be precise), but the lion's share of its photo and video propaganda was devoted to the exploits of provincial franchises in the Lake Chad Basin and the Greater Sahara and, to a slightly lesser extent, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Mozambique.³ Given that it also claimed on average five times as many confirmed kills and casualties per attack in West and Central Africa as were reported from either Syria or Iraq, it would appear that the caliphate's expanded presence in Africa is not just window dressing.⁴

The role of the Islamic State's central leadership in shaping activities in pre-existing insurgencies from West Africa to East Asia is a subject of a healthy and worthwhile debate. Too often, the Islamic State's claims to have established a

global network of *wilayat* (literally, provinces) are taken uncritically. When the group says it has inaugurated a new province in a given country, the *wilayah* designation often ends up distorting said affiliate's actual strategic trajectory and capabilities. For example, while its foothold in Nigeria is a well-established reality now, the situation is markedly less clear when it comes to its alleged activities in the DRC and Mozambique.⁵ Indeed, while some level of linkage between militants in these states and the central bureaucratic authority of the Islamic State is undeniable—consider for one the steady stream of imagery and reporting emerging from the DRC via its closed communications network⁶—many observers have called into question the extent to which it should actually be considered a part of the Islamic State.⁷

It is increasingly clear that the lack of a coherent and consistent lens through which to understand the Islamic State's transnational enterprise is undermining how scholars and practitioners alike are interpreting the significance of the group's global agenda. Our purpose in this present study attempts to bring some nuance to the table, aiding our understanding of how the Islamic State conceptualizes—and then operationalizes—its international endeavors. We argue that the caliphate today is best understood as an *adhocratic global insurgency*—an irregularly managed collection of diverse, geographically dispersed militant groups competing to govern in suitable areas—the character of which is reflective of the ideological compulsion, strategic principles, and organizational traits that underpin the ambitions of its larger political project. In doing so, we demonstrate that its forays abroad are impacted by both top-down and bottom-up forces that can lead to synchronicities and tensions—both globally and at an affiliate level. Drawing on a spectrum of case studies, we address below what these mean for both the Islamic State's core and its global *wilayat*.

A Globalized Insurgency

WHILE THE ISLAMIC STATE MOVEMENT'S PENCHANT FOR GLOBAL EXPANSIONISM is a relatively new development in its decades-long history, it has always demonstrated a willingness to leverage transnational opportunities and networks.⁸ For example, in its nascency under the leadership of founder Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, the group shifted its base from Afghanistan to Iraq, where it immediately attracted foreign fighters into its ranks and directed terror attacks in Jordan, Israel, and Turkey even before the 2006 establishment of its first "state," the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI).⁹

That being said, it was only when it was into its second decade under the leadership of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi that it extended its insurgency from Iraq into neighboring Syria, a move formalized in 2013 with the announcement that it was henceforth to be known as the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS).¹⁰ Nearly eight years on, its appetite for globalism has shown few signs of waning. Despite losing its first caliph and all territorial control in the intervening years, the Islamic State currently has an operational presence in at least twenty countries.¹¹

At the heart of this quite extraordinary expansion have been both top-down and bottom-up forces—top-down as the Islamic State seeks to diffuse itself globally, and bottom-up as local groups pursue its backing and affiliation. The “jurisprudential” enabler for these forces was set out in 2014 with the declaration of its caliphate, which meant that Sunni Muslims the world over were “obliged” to join it. As then spokesman Abu Muhammad al-‘Adnani stated:

“We clarify to the Muslims that with this declaration of *khilafah*, it is incumbent upon all Muslims to pledge allegiance to the *khilafah* Ibrahim and support him. The legality of all emirates, groups, states, and organizations, becomes null by the expansion of the *khilafah*’s authority and arrival of its troops to their areas.”¹²

While this declaration was designed to—and, indeed, did—intensify those bottom-up dynamics, resulting in groups across the Middle East, Asia, and Africa seeking affiliation, it was as much as anything else a reflection of a belief *within* the Islamic State that expansionism was both ideologically obligatory, strategically necessary, and symbolically powerful.

As was articulated in a contemporaneous Islamic State document entitled, *Principles in the Administration of the Islamic State*:

“External relations are the first foundation for building every nascent state, and they are among the foundations that show the strength and might of the state, and they should constitute for it, a general stance in everything that happens in the world with the people of Islam and be for it an external hand protecting its dealings.”¹³

A “first foundation” for the state they may be, but the Islamic State faced a challenge in all this: to manage its expansion while ensuring that all prospective affiliates were ideologically aligned and strategically beneficial to its cause—something about which there has been a large amount of disagreement within

the group's own ranks in recent years.¹⁴ To this end, it established a suite of criteria that local groups needed to satisfy in order to be accepted as formal wilayat. These criteria at least nominally included public pledges of loyalty to the caliph (known as *bay'at*), approval of the group's leadership by the Islamic State, consolidation of local factions under a single banner, healthy communications between the local leadership and the Islamic State core, and application of the Islamic State's *'aqidah* (creed) and *manhaj* (methodology).¹⁵

Its absolutist rhetoric notwithstanding, the Islamic State has inconsistently applied these criteria, a fact which it publicly acknowledged in 2014.¹⁶ This has fueled internal tensions as certain provinces (like, for example, the now-defunct Wilayat al-Bahrayn) were accepted as affiliates.¹⁷ Dissent spread at both a core and affiliate level. In Yemen, for example, local members of the Islamic State branch resisted what they saw as managerial overreach on the part of the core.¹⁸

Clearly, balancing the ideological compulsion to expand with the need to ensure that local affiliates actually enhance capabilities rather than detract from them has been a challenge for the movement. In view of this, and regardless of the actual extent to which a given affiliate is living up to the Islamic State's declared ambitions, there is at present only one standard for whether or not a group is deemed a provincial affiliate, and that is whether it has been officially declared one. As historical and strategic ebbs and flows in the Islamic State's transnational activities attest, explicit designation generally indicates that some or all of the above-described criteria have been satisfied.

However, it remains the case that there is a great deal of flexibility as to what actually constitutes a wilayah. At one end of the spectrum, there are the mainly symbolic, largely inactive provinces like those in Algeria and Saudi Arabia. At the other end are provinces like those in Syria, Iraq, and West Africa that have achieved a state of territorial consolidation. In the middle are those that emerged as beneficiaries of a global restructuring effort implemented in 2018 (see below): the likes of Wilayat Sharq Asiyya (East Asia) and Wilayat al-Sumal (Somalia), both of which exhibit minimal evidence of direct intervention from the Islamic State's core, though they remain operationally active and are regularly featured in official media output.

The Islamic State Adhocracy

TO UNDERSTAND HOW THIS GLOBAL DIFFUSION AND VARIANCE HAS COME TO BE, IT serves to assess the Islamic State's affiliates on a case-by-case basis with consideration being given to: (i) the extent of centralized control and influence being exerted by the Islamic State's core leadership over said affiliate, (ii) the specific types of activities being conducted by said affiliate in the name of the core and, (iii) the frequency with which said affiliate and its activities are being leveraged by the core for strategic and propaganda purposes.

Variation and/or blatant inconsistency across these three planes—things that would in any other context cause potentially existential challenges to a revolutionary political movement—are enabled by the adhocratic nature of the Islamic State. It is this same nature that has enabled it to transition from clandestine insurgency to bureaucratic proto-statehood and back to insurgency so seamlessly in recent years.

Adhocracies are structurally fluid organizations in which “interacting project teams” work towards a shared purpose and/or identity.¹⁹ The fluidity that characterizes an adhocracy results in it being adaptive to strategic conditions—at times being more hierarchical and bureaucratic while at others more informal and network-like—with a core team of specialists driving its overall direction and collaboration through a series of decentralized decision-making mechanisms.²⁰

It is a version of these essential adhocratic traits that have held the key to the survival of the Islamic State in recent years. These traits have allowed it to project an image of a movement far more coherent and monolithic than it is in reality. ‘Abdulnadir Qardash, a senior Islamic State leader detained in 2019, indicated as much in a 2020 interview in which he stated that the Islamic State's relationship with most of its branches beyond Iraq and Syria is largely based on nothing more than the oath of allegiance, propaganda, and finances.²¹ In other words, while it projects an image of a unified and monolithic caliphate spreading globally, all that coheres most of its composite parts is a pledge to its caliph and a stated commitment to applying its ‘aqidah and manhaj.²² This loose adhocratic character has meant that the Islamic State has been able to be both highly adaptable and innovative in how it has responded to constantly changing (and usually souring) strategic conditions in recent years.

Importantly, while resilient, adhocratic organizations are also prone to weaknesses. Generally, they rely on communication technologies and the deployment

of specialist personnel to synchronize efforts and agendas. For that reason, breakdowns in communication can have serious repercussions for strategic and operational coherence as well as group coherence. Such issues have surfaced time and again in the history of the Islamic State, including during its early years as ISI.²³

Moreover, adhocracies are at heightened risk of mistiming organizational transition towards more formal or informal structures, and this too can act as a catalyst for network fraying. This dynamic is arguably evidenced in the Islamic State's rush to declare a caliphate and establish a full-spectrum bureaucratic "system of control" across Syria and Iraq in 2014, only to see it decimated, materially speaking, in a few short years. However they have manifested in practice, these adhococratic forces have contributed to growing dissent and extremism within the ranks of the Islamic State in recent years.²⁴

How Globalism Benefits the Core

HAVING SET OUT THE IDEOLOGICAL PREMISES BEHIND ITS EXPANSIONISM AS WELL as the adhococratic character that enables it, it is now time to turn to what, practically speaking, 'affiliation' means for both the Islamic State as a centralized organization and the various franchises that are in its orbit.

For a group like the Islamic State, the benefits of declaring the establishment of a new wilayah are in many ways self-evident. Being perceived to have a robust and continually expanding global network, especially in this post-territorial phase vis-a-vis the "caliphate," is existentially important. When, in 2017, its territories in Iraq and Syria were well on their way to being liberated, it had to double down on reimagining and rebranding itself as an archipelagic insurgency rather than one that was reliant on success in the Middle East, as had hitherto been the case.²⁵ The first major sign of this new reality came in July 2018, when the group altered the terms of reference for its network of global affiliates. Iraq and Syria, which had previously consisted of 22 individual wilayat, were reframed as just two individual provinces—Wilayat al-'Iraq and Wilayat al-Sham, or Iraq Province and Levant Province—with 22 active *minatiq* ("areas").²⁶ Moreover, its supporters in Southeast Asia were referred to for the first time as Wilayat Sharq Asiyya, or East Asia Province, with Somalia soon following suit.²⁷

This shift was not just a rhetorical turn. Rather, it was the point at which the Islamic State backed away from the idea of having a contiguous proto-state spanning

the borders of Iraq and Syria, at least for the time being. This is not to say that it was entering a “post-caliphate” world—contrary to some claims, the Islamic State cannot and will never undeclare its caliphate. Rather, it is merely to suggest that it had internally conceded that it had neither the capacity nor the need to pin its brand to the Middle East in the same way that it had in the fifteen years up to 2018. It was a change which had the effect of framing the Islamic State’s Iraqi and Syrian branches as just that—branches. Essentially, they were demoted; their overall status in the global caliphate project altered in such a way that they were now “just” part of its global network.

This move tied the Islamic State—both operationally and in terms of its overall branding—more to the global adhocatic aspects of its insurgency than to its “conventional” core in Syria and Iraq. Indeed, it marked the internationalization proper of the movement, a concerted effort to dislodge the idea that it was a Syrian-Iraqi insurgency first and a global network second. To be sure, this did not mean that Syria and Iraq were no longer critically important territories to it. However, its symbolic reliance on them as foundational components of its strategic vision was radically altered.

Considered through this lens, on the “Islamic State core” side of the equation, expansionism should always be understood, at least in part, as an experiment in narrative-led warfare. By declaring wilayat the world over, it has been staking a claim to new territories, showing itself not just to be remaining in the wake of its setbacks in Syria and Iraq, but to be continually expanding as well. Of course, the strategic dividends to international expansion are not only symbolic. The core’s tremendous investment in outlying provinces has brought numerous other benefits that extend well beyond its global competition with Islamist rivals. As was described in detail in the group’s weekly *al-Naba’* newsletter in 2019, by promoting its refined techniques of guerrilla warfare—i.e., subversion, assassination, and terrorism—across several continents simultaneously, it has been able to apply its insurgent creed, methodology, and doctrine at a global level.²⁸ This means that it has been able to work to degrade its adversaries in a range of places all at once.

The globalization of the Islamic State helps the group build strategic depth and manage risk through its affiliates. By pushing simultaneously on multiple fronts with asymmetric *nikayah* (irritation) and more conventional *sawlat* (complex assaults), it has tested the capabilities of the Global Coalition and its local allies from West Africa to East Asia. At the same time that the Islamic State core is poised to capitalize on the drawdown of military pressure in Iraq and Syria, the ongoing and synchronous activities of the affiliates increase the likelihood that at any given point, some affiliate somewhere is enjoying operational success, possibly

tying down Western counterterrorism resources in the process. Affiliate operations and the attendant communications from the core around such operational successes are thus a force-multiplier for the Islamic State.²⁹ The ability to carve out areas of influence in various parts of the globe also becomes an important source of revenue generation for each local branch, with the goal of becoming self-sustaining or better yet, generating revenue for the core entity.³⁰

How the Core Supports the Wilayat

INSURGENCIES ARE OFTEN SUPPORTED BY FOREIGN PROXIES, EVEN IDEOLOGICALLY dissimilar ones. Sometimes, this relationship benefits the insurgency as a whole; in other instances, it hinders it. In the present context, it is clear that the Islamic State's prospects have benefited from its adoption of a hands-on approach to globalism, something that stands somewhat in contrast to the experience of its rival al-Qaeda, which is known for its light-touch guidance of affiliates.³¹ This management is executed by its "offshore operations management network" and its office of Remote Province Administration and is supervised directly by the Delegated Commission of the Islamic State, which runs all day-to-day activities of the organization.³²

Principal-agent difficulties—essentially conflicts in priorities between leader and led—are common in all affiliate relationships, particularly when political objectives are not strictly aligned between sponsor and client.³³ This is an area in which the Islamic State has excelled in its franchise model, because it treats each new geographic context as a unique strategic environment, one into which it can transmit, but not transplant, valuable experience from past or contemporaneous campaigns elsewhere. Some of this pragmatism has backfired in spectacular fashion, as discussed in the following section. Nonetheless, the group has been aware of its own past failures and the limits of remote management in a business (terrorism and insurgency) that requires exquisite amounts of local political and cultural acumen.³⁴

At the heart of its expeditionary approach has been the transmission of a well-traveled and ever-evolving insurgency doctrine (i.e., a set of commonly held military practices). This is exemplified in politico-military documents like the Fallujah Memorandum of 2009, which was an attempt by Islamic State officials to identify their failure to co-exist with Iraq's Sunni tribes and fellow Islamist rebels

in Iraq in 2006–07, as well as in lessons learned from the early mismanagement of the first franchising effort in Syria in 2011–13.³⁵ Receiving access to this now-mature doctrine is one of the primary benefits that prospective franchises receive in return for their association with the Islamic State. The early Islamic State movement’s near defeat of the U.S. military in Anbar province in 2006 and its later military conquests in Iraq and Syria in 2013–14 give it plenty of credibility when preaching its doctrine—and affiliates without such a track record are listening.³⁶

Responding to these affiliates’ demands (albeit to varying degrees), the Islamic State’s military and political leaders offer training and technical advice to diffuse components of the archipelagic caliphate and invest resources in their peripheries, combining a coherent, centralized playbook with the flexibility they enjoy as ad hoc bureaucratic bureaucrats. This model is similar to the advisory activities of Iran’s Revolutionary Guards, not to mention the U.S. military’s concept of unconventional warfare, both of which involve the deployment of trained advisor teams to improve local partner performance in both peacetime and combat conditions.³⁷

Based on the available evidence—which, it should be noted, is fairly scant—these expeditionary activities manifest in three main ways: (i) remote support for the furthest-flung *wilayat*, (ii) in-theater advice in conflict zones, and (iii) direct integration of veteran foreign jihadists into local ranks.³⁸

An example of the first type of expansionist activity can be seen in the Philippines. The Maute-Hapilon group—a sub-faction of the Abu Sayyaf group, which pledged allegiance to the Islamic State in 2014—received remote strategic and tactical directives both before and during the siege of Marawi in Mindanao in 2017, including best practices for urban defense as well as extensive remote support for media production and editing.³⁹ However, although jihadists from neighboring Asian states were counted among the Maute-Hapilon ranks, no one from Iraq or Syria actually travelled to assist the group directly.⁴⁰

By contrast, in Nigeria, the Islamic State’s interventions were initially very limited but were destined to become more sophisticated beginning in 2015. Islamic State cadres began by providing the group externally known as “Boko Haram” (*Jamaat Ahlussunnah lid-Dawa wal Jihad*), which pledged allegiance to Baghdadi and became Wilayat Gharb Ifriqiyya in the spring of that year, with remote advice using encrypted internet communication technologies. This advice largely related to religious jurisprudence issues, which Boko Haram officials eagerly sought due to a dearth of trained imams in the affiliate. The Islamic State then progressed by dispatching, per Vincent Foucher of the International Crisis Group, a small team of advisors to enhance their new supporters’ martial skills. This training was centralized in a secure location in the Sambisa Forest in Nigeria’s Borno state, although

defectors noted that the advisors also accompanied them into combat to assess their tactics, which were described as so counterproductive as to be “like suicide.” These same defectors said that they were then retrained in small unit maneuvers (vice frontal assaults), anti-aircraft skills, and maneuvering with armored vehicles. Advisors helped improve local media operator skills and the operational security practices of key leaders while also facilitating bi-monthly financial transfers by courier and other means.⁴¹

The third mechanism of expansion—the integration of experienced jihadists into local ranks—is rarer than the other two. Some scholars, such as Antonio Giustozzi, report that the Islamic State core in Syria and Iraq sent hundreds of advisors, including some top-level officials, into Afghanistan in 2015-16 to support Wilayat Khurasan. However, the absence of Syrians or Iraqis killed or captured in the fight against the Islamic State in Afghanistan to date makes this claim unsupported at present. There is considerably more evidence that between 2012 and 2014 the Islamic State proactively dispatched foreign fighters from Central and South Asia that it had trained and indoctrinated in Iraq and Syria back to their home countries to merge with fragments of local jihadi groups, forming the nucleus of Wilayat Khurasan’s initial cadre.⁴²

Perhaps the clearest instance of the Islamic State plugging experienced cadres into a local insurgency to improve performance was the appointment of Abu Nabil al-Anbari as “delegated leader” of the Libyan provinces in 2014. Prior to his appointment, Anbari was a military commander in Iraq and *wali* of a province there, Wilayat Salah al-Din. His eulogy, published in 2016, reads:

Then, after the [Islamic State] considered expanding to Libya, it dispatched its knight and shining sword Abul-Mughirah [a.k.a Abu Nabil al-Anbari and other *kunyas*], in order to establish the edifice of the Caliphate there, and the nucleus of the army of those to conquer Rome and Europe. He went there and placed the corners and foundations. Then he marched with his soldiers with all firmness and constancy to expand left and right, that the religion should be wholly of God.⁴³

Short of evidence emerging of this happening elsewhere, the imposition of an experienced commander on a developing wilayah might be the exception to the rule rather than evidence of the rule itself. The Libya episode nevertheless speaks to the Islamic State’s flexible and innovative experimentation with global expansionism.

The Islamic State provides diverse training to its wilayat. Experience on the lethal and conventional battlefields of Iraq and Syria have earned its trainers experience handling highly sophisticated equipment that most affiliates can only dream of. Beyond imparting knowledge on how to use, maintain, and employ such weaponry, Islamic State advisors work to adapt affiliates to the group's highly developed structure and administrative practices.⁴⁴ The Islamic State's integration of jurisprudence and creed down to platoon-level units not only increases the ideological indoctrination of foot soldiers but also assists in the management of *ghanimah* and *fay* (war spoils and confiscations), important revenue streams that are carefully managed to avoid corruption and abuse.⁴⁵ The Islamic State ran its own leadership academy for small unit leaders in Mosul in 2015-16, and it likely pushes this type of instruction to the wilayat.⁴⁶ Finally, Islamic State experimentation with special operations—namely the raid in Haditha, Iraq in 2012 and the Abu Ghraib prison break in 2013—has undoubtedly filtered down to the external provinces, as demonstrated in the Khurasan province.⁴⁷ While the impact of former Ba'athists within the core group has often been exaggerated, the disciplined influence of deliberate planning and execution demonstrated in these special operations can likely be attributed to former Ba'athist military officers in the now-defunct *Diwan al-Jund* (Department of Soldiers).⁴⁸

In many ways, it is unsurprising that the Islamic State has adopted this framework of unconventional, adhoc expansionism. After all, many Islamic State leaders have their roots in a vanguard of trained militants that gained combat experience in other parts of the world before eventually ending up in Iraq and integrating with its local Salafi underground.⁴⁹

Core-Wilayat Tension

THE PUSH-PULL DYNAMICS BETWEEN THE CENTRAL ORGANIZATION AND ITS affiliates produce frictions, some of which can prove fatal for the relationship. The Islamic State lost a franchise due to strategic and methodological differences and historically had a contentious relationship with its own parent organization, al-Qaeda. During its first franchising attempt in 2012, then-Islamic State *emir* (leader) Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi sent his deputy Abu Ali al-Anbari into Syria to monitor its Syrian startup, Jabhat al-Nusra. Anbari's scathing review to his boss set into motion the split between the Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra—and the

more consequential schism between Islamic State and al-Qaeda. From these experiences, the Islamic State's leadership identified the need for a more directive relationship between the hub and the periphery of its organization.⁵⁰ Yet this has not prevented commonplace friction between the core and the affiliates. We see friction develop in three sensitive areas: the selection and mentorship of leaders, the correction of methodological errors, and strategic direction.

Leadership management is important for any organization, and the Islamic State's own history of managing and transitioning leaders at all levels has been a general strength for the group. There are notable exceptions, however. Jabhat al-Nusra's charismatic leader Mohammad al-Jolani represents an interesting paradox. He is an example of the talented leaders which the Islamic State seems to produce, yet his rupture with the group represents an early error in which a leader was appointed who did not share the central leadership's vision. The Islamic State's recruitment of Boko Haram to become the West Africa province and the subsequent demotion of its charismatic leader, Abubakar Shekau, lies at the root of a splintering of the West African group into two distinct factions that both still pledge allegiance to Islamic State.⁵¹ In Yemen, Afghanistan, and Mindanao, the Islamic State has failed to impart its successful leadership management doctrine. This has had the effect of undermining the legitimacy and stability of those franchises struggling from a rapid turnover of leaders due to poor selection and security practices.⁵²

Second only to leadership considerations, imparting the Islamic State's *manhaj* is key to eliminating the "say-do" gap between its ideology and global practice, a key tenet of the group's propaganda philosophy.⁵³ While the Khurasan province broadly appears to imitate the central hub in its attacks on the Shi'a Hazara minority and urban assassination campaigns—most recently targeting female media workers—others have been reluctant to adopt Islamic State norms.⁵⁴ Foucher's recent report on the West Africa province indicates that in addition to rejecting leadership management from afar, Boko Haram commanders ignored religious edicts on eliminating child soldiers and female suicide bombers as regular combatants. The group also failed to establish a standing army (as opposed to using haphazard militias), contra the advice of Islamic State trainers.⁵⁵

There is inevitably a mix of synchronicities and tensions at play in core-wilayat dynamics, making it difficult at times to gauge the relative importance of top-down directives as opposed to bottom-up decisions by the local franchise. The 2017 Marawi Siege in the southern Philippines is a pertinent example. Reports allege that the Islamic State directed its affiliate to capture Marawi as the caliphate was collapsing in Iraq and Syria. This would seem, through a transnational lens,

as beneficial to the Islamic State but potentially devastating to a newly cohered Filipino affiliate whose plan to seize and hold a major city in the face of well-trained state security forces seemed foolhardy.⁵⁶ Yet, from a local perspective, the view is very different. The Marawi siege is often seen by locals as an attempt by a new rebel group that was *exploiting* the Islamic State's brand to derail a national peace process that was, at the time, hanging in the balance. The siege also offered a way for this new group to demonstrate that it could overcome traditional ethnic, factional, and rural-urban divides to devastating effect.⁵⁷ The Marawi siege ultimately had the opposite effect in that it strengthened the resolve of the Philippines government and its historical adversary, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, to ensure the peace agreement succeeded. The ultimate failure of the siege notwithstanding, the Marawi incident should remind us to consider potential local explanations for affiliate behavior even when such behavior appears at first glance to simply advance broader Islamic State objectives at the expense of local affiliates.

Conclusion

IN 2001, IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE U.S. ONSLAUGHT ON AFGHANISTAN AND THE immense material losses faced by both the Taliban and al-Qaeda, jihadist military trainer and theorist Abu Musab al-Suri wrote a manifesto, "Call to Global Islamic Resistance," as a sober reflection that attacking the United States as Bin Laden had was "strategic stupidity."⁵⁸ Suri advocated instead for a decentralized dispersion of networks in the face of overwhelming U.S. military power.⁵⁹ The Islamic State, which openly criticized al-Suri's tome in its *Dabiq* magazine, believes that by attacking everywhere, it is assured of success somewhere.⁶⁰

At the heart of the Islamic State's transnational enterprise are three key exports: its brand, its ideology, and its methodology. Local affiliates, in theory, need to demonstrate their willingness to champion all three in order to be formally accepted. In return, the Islamic State offers varying degrees of support—anything from amplifying the activities of the local group to global audiences via its much-vaunted propaganda units to providing material and operational assistance. As this study has highlighted, the Islamic State's execution of this assistance varies widely across its transnational affiliates. In reality, being one of its wilayah can mean lots of things. Consider that, years ago, it declared a wilayah in Kuwait (Wilayah al-Bahrayn) that has been entirely inactive aside from one suicide attack committed the day it was

declared.⁶¹ Contrast that with the labyrinthine civil-military administrative network that spanned much of Libya's coastline (Wilayat Tarabulus and Barqah) for much of 2014 to 2016, and which at one point was tipped to rival the caliphal heartlands in Iraq and Syria.⁶²

For its part, the Islamic State seeks two principal benefits from expansion: one is operational, and one is propagandistic. On the operational side of things, establishing new outposts around the world has made the group more resilient and thus better able to weather the storm of territorial collapse in Iraq and Syria. Through its global networks, especially those based in Africa, it has been able to remain active in pursuing its caliphate agenda and capable of inflicting pain on its adversaries. To be sure, its jihad in Syria and Iraq is far from over, but it is able to sustain itself at a lower intensity than would otherwise be required on account of the rest of its international roster.

Connectedly, on the propagandistic side of things, through global expansionism, the movement writ large is able to show itself to be continually on the offensive, a perception that is critical if it is to keep up the centrifugal force of its brand and maintain organizational cohesion. It is for this reason in particular—the fact that the Islamic State reaps enormous symbolic dividends by boasting of its *wilayat*—that we must understand its globalism with a critical eye.

NOTES

1. See, for example: Aaron Zelin, "Picture or it didn't happen: A snapshot of the Islamic State's media output," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9, no. 4 (2015): 85–97; Daniel Milton, *Communication breakdown: Unraveling the Islamic State's media efforts* (West Point: Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, October 2018); Daniel Milton, "Down, but not out: An updated assessment of the Islamic State's visual propaganda," Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, July 2018; Charlie Winter, "Apocalypse, later: A longitudinal study of the Islamic State brand," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 35, no. 1 (2018): 103–121.
2. Frank Gardner, "Is Africa overtaking the Middle East as the new jihadist battleground," BBC, December 3, 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-55147863>; Jacob Zenn, "ISIS in Africa: The caliphate's next frontier," Center for Global Policy, May 2020; Tomasz Rolbiecki, Pieter van Ostaeyen, and Charlie Winter, "The Islamic State's strategic trajectory in Africa: Key takeaways from its attack claims," *CTC Sentinel* 13, no. 8 (August 2020): 31–40.

3. Author archive compiled from Daesh distribution network on Telegram.
4. “Infographic: Attacks of the Islamic State in Nigeria in 2020,” A’maq News Agency, January 2020.
5. Work on the Islamic State connection in Mozambique in particular is variable. See Barnett’s nuanced account: James Barnett, “The “Central African” Jihad: Islamism and Nation-Building in Mozambique and Uganda,” *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology* 27 (October 2020): 29–49.
6. Djamel Belayachi, “What do we know about Islamic State group in the DR Congo,” *France 24*, January 1, 2021, <https://observers.france24.com/en/africa/20210111-video-adf-beni-dr-congo-islamic-state>; Andrew Harding, “Mozambique: Is Cabo Delgado the latest Islamic State outpost,” BBC News, May 4, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-52532741>.
7. See, for example: Daniel Fahey and Judith Verweijen, “A closer look at Congo’s Islamist rebels,” *Washington Post*, September 30, 2020. For a detailed analysis of the relationship between the Islamic State and its affiliate in Congo see Tara Candland et al., *The Islamic State in Congo* (Washington: George Washington University Program on Extremism, March 2021).
8. *The ISIS Reader* analyses the Islamic State’s history from its founding in the 1990s to al-Baghdadi’s death in 2019 through four historical periods. For more see: Haroro J. Ingram, Craig Whiteside, and Charlie Winter, *The ISIS Reader: Milestone Texts of the Islamic State Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).
9. Brian Fishman, *The master plan: ISIS, Al Qaeda, and the Jihadi strategy for final victory* (Yale University Press, 2016), 27, 75–78.
10. Ingram, Whiteside, and Winter, “Chapter 6: The declaration of the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham,” in *The ISIS Reader*, 149–160. Aaron Zelin argued that there are earlier signs, including liaisons with Tunisian veterans of the Iraq jihad during the Arab Spring, including members of Ansar al-Sharia Tunisia. See *Your Sons are at Your Service: Tunisia’s Missionaries of Jihad* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), 174–175.
11. Haroro J. Ingram, Craig Whiteside, and Charlie Winter, *The Islamic State’s Global Insurgency and Its Counterstrategy Implications* (The Hague: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), November 2020).
12. Abu Muhammad al-‘Adnani, *This is the Promise of Allah*, Al-Hayat Media Center, 2014.
13. Abu Abdullah al-Masri, “Chapter Nine: Administration of Relations,” *Principles in the Administration of the Islamic State*, translated by Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, 2014.
14. Abu al-Faruq al-Masri, *Message on the Manhaj*, translated by Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, 2015.
15. Abu Muhammad al-‘Adnani, *This is the Promise of Allah*, Al-Hayat Media Center, 2014; Unknown author, “Remaining & Expanding,” *Dabiq* no. 5 (2014): 22–33; Unknown author, “Wilayat Khurasan and the bay’at from Qawqaz,” *Dabiq* no. 7 (2015): 33–37;

- Unknown author, "A fatwa for Khurasan," *Dabiq* no. 10 (2015):18-24; Abu Muhammad al-'Adnani, "O Our People Respond to the Caller of Allah," 2015; Abu Muhammad al-'Adnani, "So they kill and are killed," Furqan Foundation, March 2015; Abu Muhammad al-'Adnani, "Say, 'Die in your Rage,'" Al-Hayat Media Center, January 2015; "The structure of the caliphate," Furqan Foundation, 2016.
16. Unknown author, "Remaining & Expanding," *Dabiq* no. 5 (2014): 24.
 17. Abu al-Faruq al-Masri, *Message on the Manhaj*, translated by Aymenn Jawal al-Tamimi, 2015.
 18. "Dissent in the Islamic State's Yemen Affiliates: Documents, Translation & Analysis," translated by Aymenn Jawad Tamimi, 2016.
 19. Henry Mintzberg, "Organization Design: Fashion or Fit?" *Harvard Business Review*, January 1981.
 20. Henry Mintzberg, *Mintzberg on Management: Inside Our Strange World of Organizations* (New York: The Free Press, 1989): 207.
 21. Husham Al-Hashimi, "Interview: ISIS's Abdul Nasser Qardash," Center for Global Policy, June 4, 2020.
 22. Aaron Zelin, "The Islamic State's Bayat Campaign," *Jihadology*, November 3, 2019.
 23. Brian Fishman, *Dysfunction & Decline: Lessons learned from inside al-Qa'ida in Iraq* (West Point: Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, 2009).
 24. Cole Bunzel, *The Islamic State's Ideology: History of a Rift* (Washington: George Washington University Program on Extremism, June 2020).
 25. Haroro Ingram, Craig Whiteside, and Charlie Winter, "Lessons from the Islamic State's 'milestone' texts and speeches," *CTC Sentinel* 13, no. 1 (January 2020): 11-21.
 26. "Harvest of the soldiers infographic," *Al-Naba'* no. 158, July 20, 2018.
 27. "Analysis: Islamic State restructures its 'provinces' a year on from 2017 defeats," BBC Monitoring, October 17, 2018, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c200bdcn>.
 28. Unknown author, "Bringing Down the Towns Temporarily as a Method of Operation for the Mujahidin," *Al-Naba'*, No. 179-181, April 25, May 2, and May 9, 2019, translated by Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi. A follow up article one year later is also helpful. See, "Except for one manoeuvring for battle, or retreating to [another fighting] company," *Al-Naba'*, No. 236, May 28, 2020, translated by Sam Heller ("Abu Jamajem"), 2020.
 29. The Islamic State frequently describes their strategy as attrition (*istanzaf*) but its rhythm is more of an exhaustion strategy; for more see Ingram, Whiteside, and Winter, "The Islamic State's Global Insurgency and Its Counterstrategy Implications," 32-34.
 30. For example, al-Qaeda central was asking Zarqawi's al-Qaeda in Iraq for funds as early as 2006 due to the group's domination of Sunni Iraq's lucrative extortion rackets related to smuggling and oil distribution. Benjamin Bahney, et al., *An economic analysis of the financial records of al-Qa'ida in Iraq* (Santa Monica: Rand Corporation, 2010), 14.

31. Tore Refslund Hamming, "The Al Qaeda-Islamic State Rivalry: Competition Yes, but No Competitive Escalation," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 32, no. 1 (2020): 23-24; Haroro J. Ingram and Craig Whiteside, "Don't Kill the Caliph: The Islamic State and the Pitfalls of Leadership Decapitation," *War on the Rocks*, June 2, 2016.
32. Hisham al-Hashimi, *ISIS in 2018: Iraq as a Model* (Istanbul: The Center of Making Policy for International and Strategic Studies, 2018), 9.
33. Mara E Karlin, *Building militaries in fragile states: Challenges for the United States* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018).
34. Craig Whiteside and Anas Elallame. "Accidental ethnographers: the Islamic State's tribal engagement experiment," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 31, no. 2 (2020): 219-240.
35. Ingram, Whiteside, and Winter, "Chapter 5: Fallujah Memorandum," in *The ISIS Reader*, 107-145.
36. Unknown author, "State of the Insurgency in al Anbar," USMC 1MEF, 2006.
37. Afshon Ostovar, "The grand strategy of militant clients: Iran's way of war," *Security Studies* 28, no. 1 (2019): 159-188; Stephen Tankel, *With us and against us: How America's partners help and hinder the war on terror* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018); U.S. Army Special Operations Forces, "FM 3-05.130: Unconventional Warfare" (Washington DC: HQDA, September 30, 2008).
38. Michael DiPietro, "Unconventional Warfare: An Islamic State Way of War," (Monterey, CA: Naval Postgraduate School Master's Thesis, 2019). In comparison, U.S. SOF developed the Remote Advise Assist (RAA) concept during the fight with ISIS in 2015 when no one was allowed past the forward line of troops with Iraqi Counterterrorism forces; the next level is advise, assist, and enable (A2E); if accompanying into combat it is (A3E); thanks to FPRI Fellow Tim Ball for this information.
39. Charles Knight and Katja Theodorakis, *The Marawi Crisis—Urban Conflict & Information Operations* (Canberra, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, August 8, 2019).
40. Patricia Blocksome and Craig Whiteside, "Rebel Waterways: Modern Militant Use of the Maritime Domain," in *Maritime Security: Counter-Terrorism Lessons from Maritime Piracy and Narcotics Interdiction* vol. 150, ed. Edward R. Lucas, Samuel Rivera-Paez, Thomas Crosbie, and Felix Falck Jensen (Amsterdam: IOS Press, 2020): 207-221.
41. Vincent Foucher, *The Islamic State Franchises in Africa: Lessons from Lake Chad* (Brussels: International Crisis Group, October 29, 2020).
42. Antonio Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan: Afghanistan, Pakistan and the New Central Asian Jihad* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Craig Whiteside, "A Rare Inside Look Into ISIL's Franchise Business," in "Book Review Roundtable: A Look Into the Islamic State-Khorasan," ed. Theo Farrell, *Texas National Security Review*, August 13, 2019.
43. Ibn al-Sadiqa, "Eulogy to Abu Nabil al-Anbari: Islamic State leader in Libya," translated by Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi.

44. Craig Whiteside, "A Pedigree of Terror: The Myth of the Ba'athist Influence in the Islamic State Movement," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 11, no. 3 (2017): 2-18; Aymenn Al-Tamimi, "The evolution in Islamic State Administration: The Documentary Evidence," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9, no. 4 (2015): 117-129.
45. Craig Whiteside, et al., *The ISIS Files: The Islamic State's Department of Soldiers* (Washington DC: George Washington University Program on Extremism, 2021).
46. Foucher, *The Islamic State Franchises in Africa*; Whiteside, et al., *The Islamic State's Department of Soldiers*; War Minister Abu Hamza al-Muhajir wrote leadership advice in 2007 that the group still teaches in its leadership academies. See Ingram, Whiteside, and Winter, "Chapter 4: Advice to the Leaders of the Islamic State," in *The ISIS Reader*, 93-106.
47. Zabihullah Ghazi and Mujib Mashal, "29 Dead After ISIS Attack on Afghan Prison," *The New York Times*, August 3, 2020; Craig Whiteside, Ian Rice, and Daniele Raineri, "Black Ops: Islamic State and Innovation in Irregular Warfare," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, (2019).
48. Whiteside, "Pedigree of Terror;" Whiteside, et al. *Islamic State Department of Soldiers*; Barak Barfi, "The Military Doctrine of the Islamic State and the Limits of Ba'athist Influence," *CTC Sentinel* 9, no. 2 (2016): 18-23.
49. Daniel Milton, "The al-Mawla TIRs: An Analytical Discussion with Cole Bunzel, Haroro Ingram, Gina Ligon, and Craig Whiteside," *CTC Sentinel*, 13, no. 9 (September 2020): 14-23.
50. Abu Abdullah al-Anbari, "Knowledgeable study on the biography of Sheikh al-Anbari," Mu'assasat al-Turath al-'Ilmi (Islamic State), 2018, trans. Aymenn al-Tamimi, <http://www.aymennjawad.org/21877/the-biography-of-abu-ali-al-anbari-full>.
51. Jacob Zenn, *Unmasking Boko Haram: Exploring Global Jihad in Nigeria* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2020), 255-318.
52. Elisabeth Kendall, "The Failing Islamic State Within The Failed State of Yemen." *Perspectives on Terrorism* 13, no. 1 (2019): 77-86; Amira Jadoon and Andrew Mines, *Broken, But Not Defeated: An Examination of State-Led Operations Against Islamic State Khorasan in Afghanistan and Pakistan (2015-2018)* (West Point: Combating Terrorism Center, 2020), 8, 24-28; "Philippines hopes Islamist group 'neutralized' after de facto leader killed," *Reuters*, March 15, 2019.
53. Haroro J Ingram, "The Strategic Logic of State and Non-State Malign 'Influence Activities'," *The RUSI Journal* 165, no. 1 (2020): 12-24.
54. Abdul Sayed, "Who is the New Leader of Islamic State-Khorasan Province?" *Lawfare*, September 2, 2020; "Islamic State says it killed female media workers in east Afghanistan," *Reuters*, March 2, 2021.
55. Foucher, *The Islamic State Franchises in Africa*.
56. Jacob Zenn, "The Islamic State's Provinces on the Peripheries: Juxtaposing the Pledges

- from Boko Haram in Nigeria and Abu Sayyaf and Maute Group in the Philippines” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 13, no. 1 (2019): 87-104.
57. Haroro J. Ingram, “Stigma, Shame, and Fear: Navigating obstacles to peace in Mindanao,” *RESOLVE Network*, March 2021.
58. Glenn E. Robinson, *Global Jihad: A Brief History* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2020), 126.
59. Paul Cruickshank & Mohannad Hage Ali, “Abu Musab Al Suri: Architect of the New Al Qaeda,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 30, no. 1 (2007): 1-14.
60. Quote from *Dabiq*: “It is important to note that contrary to Western media claims, this book never defined the methodology of the mujahidin. The top Islamic State leadership—including Shaykh Abu Mus’ab al Zarqawi—did not recommend al Suri’s book,” in Islamic State, “The revival of Jihad in Bengal, *Dabiq* no. 12 (2015): 39.
61. For more on this, see: Charlie Winter, “Has the Islamic State abandoned its provincial model in the Philippines?” *War on the Rocks*, July 22, 2016.
62. See: Aaron Zelin, *The Islamic State’s Territorial Methodology* (Washington: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, January 2016).

Yemen's Clash of Two Revolutions

By Baraa Shaiban

THE ARAB SPRING WAS A TURNING POINT IN THE HISTORY OF YEMEN. It is a story that is still unfolding, and the final chapter is yet to come. The protests that erupted across Yemen in 2011 were an accumulation of years of frustration, local grievances, and the corruption and authoritarianism of Ali Abdullah Saleh—the former president for over 33 years—and his regime. None of the pro-democracy youth who took to the streets imagined that only four years later, the country would be plunged into a civil war and one of the world's worst humanitarian catastrophes. This failure of imagination owes to the fact that, in the early days of the Arab Spring, Yemeni youth activists and civil society leaders—just like many western policymakers and researchers to this day—were unable to see the Houthis for what they are: an armed theocratic movement with a transnational ideological agenda.

In the beginning of February 2011, it became evident that Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak was about to be ousted from power. The developments in Cairo boosted the morale of Yemen's civil society and youth activists, who launched a year of protests in a bid to replace the longstanding military dictatorship with a civil democracy. In the weeks prior to the protests, civil society leaders and left-wing activists held a meeting in Sanaa with representatives of the Houthi movement to invite the Houthis to join the protests. Yemen's pro-democracy movement—

including students' unions, human rights and advocacy groups, and even political parties—generally saw the Houthis as a provincial insurgency from the northern province of Saadah.¹ The Houthis had been fighting the military regime in Sanaa from 2004–2010, and they repeatedly claimed that the regime forced war on them and that they had no other option but to defend themselves. Although the Houthis were clearly a traditionalist religious group, they appealed as a revolutionary, anti-establishment group that shared the same political grievances with Yemen's pro-democracy movement. Civil society activists saw no reason to be wary of the Houthis if they joined the anti-government protests peacefully and endorsed the same pluralist democratic platform. Little did the pro-democracy activists know that, only a few years later, they would be terrorized by a Houthi cartel and held in Houthi prisons and subjected to all kinds of torture and abuse.

Soon after the 2011 meeting with youth activists, the leader of the Houthis, Abdulmalik Al-Houthi, announced his movement endorsed the demands of the Yemeni youth and that the Houthis would be joining the pro-democracy uprising. The young and enthusiastic protesters celebrated the announcement and welcomed the Houthis with open arms. This decision would prove to be catastrophic.

In March 2011, the Houthis struck a deal with tribal leader and notorious arms trafficker Fares Manaa to attack the main city of Saadah in North Yemen. Fares Manaa is sanctioned by the UN Security Council for supplying weapons to Al-Shabab in Somalia in violation of the UN arms embargo.² The Houthis appointed Manaa as the new governor of Saadah and, while they took advantage of Manaa's tribal connections, the Houthis also took control of the military and security structures in the North of the country. Saadah was thus the first province to fall to Houthi hands, and the group imposed a reign of terror while also taxing and extorting the public. Despite these developments in the North, Yemeni as well as international attention was largely fixed on the pro-democracy protests in Sanaa. From their stronghold in Saadah, the Houthis started advancing militarily, trying to push their presence into new territories.

Meanwhile, the civil protests in Sanaa continued for the remainder of 2011 and, due to growing international pressure, President Saleh signed a deal that would grant him and his family immunity for his crimes in exchange for him stepping down from power. The deal, known as the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Initiative, called for forming a coalition government, organizing a national dialogue to draft a new constitution, and electing Saleh's deputy Abdurabuh Mansoor Hadi as the new president of Yemen.

The Houthis opposed this and rapidly positioned themselves as the main opposition force to the GCC Initiative and the newly formed government. Their stated

justification for rejecting the deal was that Saudi Arabia, the U.S., and other Western powers had conspired against the Yemen's democratic revolution. The Houthis also said they would not hand over their weapons or territory to a "western-stooge" government. Saleh, for his part, was not satisfied with the outcome of the initiative. Although the election gave him a face-saving exit, he was humiliated. Subsequently, signs of a new alliance between the Houthi movement and Saleh and his supporters began to surface, as the two parties agreed to temporarily set aside their history of conflict to unify against the fledgling government. This plunged Yemen into war and shattered hopes of a transition to a constitutional democracy. This turn of events would not have come as much of a surprise to Yemen's democracy movement or to the world at-large had greater attention been paid to the ideological underpinnings of the Houthi movement.

The Houthi Ideology

THE ZAYDI SCHOOL OF THOUGHT EMERGED IN NORTH YEMEN IN 893 CE AND established a ruling dynasty which lasted until September 26, 1962, when the Zaydi imamate was replaced with a new republic.³ Zaydism, of all the Shia schools, is the closest to Sunni Islam. Zaydis are distinct from the Twelver Shia which predominate in Iran in that they do not believe in the Twelve imams and do not view those imams as individuals with supernatural powers or as the representatives of God on earth. Zaydis do, however, believe that imams should meet specific requirements to rule, including being a descendant of the Prophet Mohammed, having personal piety, being qualified as a religious scholar, and not having any physical imperfections. In Zaydi theology, the imam is not accountable to the public, only to similarly qualified scholars who are also the descendants of the prophet.⁴ On the basis of these religious ideas, Zaydi society was historically rooted in a strong caste structure and the different imams that ruled their community derived their power in large part from the traditional Zaydi scholars.

The Republic of Yemen that was created after the toppling of the old monarchy in 1962 strove to establish itself as a modern republic based on popular sovereignty and equality of citizenship. Further, the Yemeni legislative branch was empowered to regulate Islamic jurisprudence within the framework of the constitution, in order to make the Sharia conform with modern laws and convention.⁵ Through this, the new state worked to eliminate discriminatory measures and

eradicate the social caste system rooted in Zaydism. Not only was the political system modernizing, but the educational system went through a total transformation. The state created schools that taught modern natural and social sciences in addition to teaching the ideals of the republic. Meanwhile, the Zaydi religious schools were no longer permitted to provide general education. The traditional Zaydi leadership and community resisted and struggled to cope with this new situation, and the dynamics of this struggle between the Zaydi leaders and the state took a further turn in 1990.

In that year, following the unification of North and South Yemen, the central government in Sanaa declared a new constitution based on civil democracy and political pluralism. Eventually, many Zaydi scholars announced they would recognize democracy and the right of the people to choose their rulers. Other Zaydi leaders, however, rejected the scholars' announcement, fearing the new republic would lead Zaydism to extinction. This faction included Badr Al-Deen Al-Houthi—a prominent Zaydi scholar and the father of Abdulmalik Al-Houthi. Although not a scholar, Hussein Al-Houthi—Abdulmalik Al-Houthi's elder brother and founder of the Houthi movement—also rejected the scholars' announcement to recognize democracy.⁶

In the early 1990s, a new Zaydi revivalist movement known as “The Believing Youth” began to emerge. At the time, a number of traditionalist Zaydi scholars who enjoyed considerable status in the province of Saadah began running private courses to promote the Believing Youth in an attempt to keep Zaydism alive. Many secular critics warned the Zaydi courses were a quiet attempt to restore the Zaydi theocracy under the camouflage of the republic. The Zaydi scholars, however, were determined to oppose calls to reform, and they argued that the secular intellectuals of the republic were leading a “cancel culture” instead of accepting different opinions and ideologies.⁷

Hussein Al-Houthi participated in the parliamentary elections in 1993 and served as a parliament member until 1997. But he also began preaching against the republic, and this intensified after he visited Iran along with his father in 1995. Hussein Al-Houthi was inspired by the idea of merging the Zaydi school of thought with the Khomeinist revolutionary ideology of Iran. Subsequently, the Believing Youth started shifting towards his teachings. Then, Al-Houthi managed to take control of the movement and push out its founders. After 2000, the movement started to become militant, mirroring Hezbollah in Lebanon.⁸

When the first war erupted between the new Houthi movement and the state in 2004, the traditional Zaydi scholars denounced Hussein Al-Houthi and assured President Ali Abdullah Saleh and the Yemeni public of their commitment

to the republic.⁹ Abdulmalik Al-Houthi came to lead the Houthi movement after the death of his brother and father in the first and second (2005) wars. The traditional Zaydi scholars, however, did not see Hussein or Abdulmalik Al-Houthi as sufficiently qualified religiously to lead and to revive Zaydism in Yemen. In addition, the heavy hand of the Sanaa government during the six wars from 2004 until 2010 made the traditional scholars reluctant to get too close to the Houthis, or to show signs of sympathy and support.

This changed in February 2012, when traditional Zaydi scholars joined with the Houthis faction to sign the “intellectual and cultural manifesto.” The manifesto is a summary of the Houthi interpretation of Islamic jurisprudence, and of their vision for internal and foreign policy. The significance of this document is the emphasis it puts on the divine right of rulers as exclusive to the descendants of Prophet Mohammed. It states clearly that knowledge of Islamic jurisprudence is passed through lineage and that the “guidance to truth” is through the descendants of the prophet, known as Ahl Al-Bayt or the “People of the House.”¹⁰

Describing him as a “beacon for people,” the manifesto also endorsed the political and religious leadership of Abdulmalik Al-Houthi, who can lead the nation in all aspects of life:

We believe that Allah has favoured Ahl al-Bayt and made them guides to the nation and inheritors of the Book (Holy Quran) until life ends on earth as He makes a specific person at a particular time be a beacon for people and capable of taking care of the Ummah (Muslim Nation) and promoting it in all its fields.

One clear feature of the manifesto is that it is deeply influenced by Khomeinism. The document states that it is Houthi followers’ duty to promote virtue and prevention of vice. It is also their religious duty to call for jihad against the wrongdoers and to stand against the arrogant and the enemies of God. In our time, the main enemies of God are “Israel and America and their supporters, allies and whoever stands on their side in their hostility against Islam and Muslims”:

We believe that inviting all to do good, promotion of virtue and prevention of vice as well as standing up to those who are arrogant are of the most crucial religious duties that people have to do. It is also a religious duty commanded by Allah to be loyal to worshippers of Allah and to be foes of the enemies of Allah—according to Sharia—especially the heads of infidelity in our time, foremost among which

are America, Israel and whoever help, befriend and/or stand with them in their hostility against Islam and Muslims; “Thou wilt not find any people who believe in Allah and the Last Day, loving those who resist Allah and His Messenger.”

The publication of the manifesto in 2012 raised alarm bells among many Yemeni intellectuals as the Houthi program and ideology represented a clear threat to the ideals and principles of a civil republic. The manifesto says that power is in the hands of God, not the people, and that God entrusts this power to a selected individual and social caste, i.e., the descendants of the prophet. The manifesto, as such, rejects the Yemeni constitution and it calls for the promotion of virtue and prevention of vice based on the interpretation of Abdulmalik Al-Houthi, as a selected leader.

In effect, the manifesto was also a declaration that the Zaydi leadership was now united under the Houthis. Moreover, following the endorsement of the traditional Zaydi scholars, Abdulmalik Al-Houthi came to be seen as the selected leader that “God chose to be a beacon for people.” The followers of the Houthis see Hussein and Abdulmalik Al-Houthi as leaders and revivers of Zaydism who remained true to their teachings and beliefs, and their message must now spread across the country. The killing of Hussein Al-Houthi made him a martyr in their eyes and the resilience of Abdulmalik Al-Houthi during the Houthis’ six wars with the state made him look defiant. Meantime, the traditional Zaydi scholars opened their private schools and camps for the Houthis to recruit and spread their ideology and agenda. The Houthis, from their stronghold in Saadah, subsequently began recruiting large numbers and extending their influence into other provinces reaching all the way to Sanaa.¹¹

The Iranian Connection

THE HOUTHİ POLITICAL IDEOLOGY IS BASED ON THE TEACHINGS OF HUSSEIN Al-Houthi and deeply influenced by Khomeinism. The familiar Houthi chant “Death to America, Death to Israel, Curse on the Jews and Victory to Islam” came as a direct result of Hussein Al-Houthi’s visit to Iran and is a clear sign of Tehran’s continuing influence. The Houthis believe that they are fighting U.S. imperialism and a world order that is run by Zionists. They have nothing but enmity toward

the Jews, who are perceived as the source of all evil. They further believe that the Yemeni government, political parties and civil society are subservient to U.S. interests in Yemen. Likewise, the Houthis see Saudi Arabia as subservient to the U.S., and they do not believe the kingdom's current rulers are worthy of being the custodians of the holy mosques and the holiest land for Muslims.¹²

In its bid to end the U.S.-led regional order, revolutionary Iran has sought to empower militias and insurgents to weaken central governments across the Arab world. This has proven effective in countries like Iraq, Lebanon and Palestine. When the Zaydi leadership and the Houthi movement were united under Abdulmalik Al-Houthi in 2012, they began to prove to Iranian regime that they are an insurgency worth investing in.

In late 2011 and early 2012, Iran initially handed the "Yemeni file" over to Lebanon's Hizbollah to manage it, as Hizbollah is more familiar with the Arab world. Hizbollah then started organizing seminars and conferences for Yemeni youth activists. The Houthis were the main point of contact on the ground for Hizbollah's recruiting efforts of Yemenis from all backgrounds. In Lebanon, the handler of the Yemeni delegations is a man called "Abu Mustafa." His real name is Khalil Yusif Harb.¹³ Harb is known as a senior Hizbollah commander and was designated as a global wanted terrorist by the U.S. in August 2013 with a reward of five million dollars.¹⁴

Initially, the conferences that Hizbollah organized in Yemen discussed the popular demands of the Arab Spring (or the "Islamic Awakening" as Hizbollah and the Iranian government have called it) and prospects for change in the region. The real aim of the conferences, however, was to begin a thorough vetting process to determine who from the various Yemeni groups would be receptive to Hizbollah's and Iran's messages and also cooperative. When individuals showed an interest in further cooperation, they would be sent to meet an Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) representative in Lebanon known as "Abu Hadi." Abu Hadi is an Iranian IRGC commander who had fought in the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s. He is fluent in Arabic and has been living in Lebanon for many years. Meeting with him was an initial step for many Yemenis before traveling onward to Iran for further conferences and events.

Between 2012 and 2014, Houthi delegations began regularly travelling to Lebanon and Iran. Some of these delegations included militant commanders. They were received by IRGC officers who provided training in military telecommunications, missile attacks and drone attacks. According to two former Houthi members who travelled frequently to Iran and Lebanon, different Iranian regime units received the various Houthi and other Yemeni delegations. The units were

from the IRGC, the Foreign Ministry, the intelligence services, and the Supreme Leader's office. Significantly, these units did not communicate or exchange information with one another. Instead, all communication went vertically, that is, directly to the Supreme Leader's office and his closest trustees. According to a Yemeni politician interviewed for this research, while visiting Iran in 2012, he ran into a tribal delegation headed by Saleh Al-Samad; neither one of the Yemeni groups knew of the other's presence in Iran. Al-Samad was a senior Houthi figure who led the Houthi Supreme Political Council in August 2016 until his assassination in April 2018.¹⁵ The Iranians, moreover, instruct the Houthis to only communicate up the chain and they do not share information between the different Houthi groups. This tight control of communication and information by both the Iranian and Houthi leaderships helps them to maintain a high level of operational secrecy and security. It is also critical to maintaining the top-down control over both the Houthi movement and the Iranian regime, not to mention the Iranian regime's control and influence over various Yemeni factions.

As time passed, IRGC operatives became more comfortable engaging with Yemeni delegations coming to Iran and started to communicate directly with the Houthis. Despite Tehran's growing engagements with the Houthis, Lebanon remained an important hub for the Houthis and Hezbollah also remained actively engaged with the Houthis.

The Yemeni government has accused Iran of aiding and abetting the Houthis for many years. The Iranians have repeatedly denied this despite the growing evidence of Iranian support for the Houthis. In 2012, United States officials publicly acknowledged for the first time Iran's support for the Houthis. An American official told *The New York Times* that the U.S. helped the Yemeni coastal authorities seize weapons shipments after they intercepted Iranian smugglers backed by Iran's Quds Force.¹⁶ The shipment was an attempt to replace old weapons used by the Houthis.

In January 2013, Yemeni authorities with U.S. assistance seized a boat carrying Iranian weapons meant for the Houthis.¹⁷ According to a Yemeni security official, it was the biggest shipment seized by the Yemeni coastal guards to date. The shipment carried surface-to-air missiles, C4 military-grade explosives, and rocket-propelled grenades, in addition to other types of weapons. This increase in material and arms support showed that the IRGC was becoming ever more involved in the Yemeni conflict. Tehran, however, kept denying that it was sending arms to the Houthis despite mounting evidence and growing accusations by the international community. In the many meetings and events that brought Yemenis to Lebanon and Iran, Hezbollah handlers carefully selected a few Yemenis to meet "Abu Hasan."

Abu Hasan was appointed directly by Iran's Supreme Leader Khamanei to oversee the whole Yemen operation. Abu Hasan worked on the Yemeni file for many years without appearing in public until October 2020, when he was revealed as Hasan Irlu, Iran's *de facto* ambassador to the Houthis.¹⁸ In December 2020, Hasan Irlu was sanctioned by the U.S. administration for being an associate of the former IRGC commander Qassim Soleimani.¹⁹

The Houthi Cartel

WHEN THE HOUTHIS ESTABLISHED THEIR SO-CALLED “POLITICAL COUNCIL” IN Sanaa in 2012, they immediately appointed sympathetic political and tribal figures to assume roles in the council. Appointees also included activists that Iran had recruited in the trips it organized for Yemenis. The political council represented the Houthis during various political dialogues and UN-led negotiations, including the National Dialogue Conference—the 10-month convention between 2013 and 2014 that negotiated the framework of the new constitution. Despite the talks they attended, political council members have no real influence on the Houthi movement, and they are not part of the decision-making process. The council, instead, is more of a public relations arm that attempts to provide political cover for the militant movement.

The Houthis have acquired power and they maintain it through terror. Like many Islamist extremist groups, the movement began by targeting vulnerable minorities. In 2007 in Saadah province, the Houthis launched a campaign of persecution against Jews and, as a result, many Jewish families were expelled from their villages and sought refuge in the capital Sanaa. When the Houthis took over Sanaa in September 2014, Jewish families were singled out for harassment and intimidation. In 2015, the rabbi of the Jewish community was imprisoned and, in a very humiliating incident, his family was made to publicly chant the Houthi slogan including the phrase “curse on the Jews.” Since then, Jewish families have continued to flee the country and, in March 2021, the Houthis finally forced the last remaining three Jewish families out, thus ending the presence of the Jewish community in Yemen after more than thirty-five hundred years. The Bahai minority has also been subject to imprisonment, harassment and intimidation. In February 2018, the Houthis sentenced the head of the Bahai community Hamid Haidrah to death. In August 2020, the Bahai leader was released, but he and his

entire family were then expelled from Yemen, and the Houthis confiscated their properties in Sanaa.

As its power has grown, the Houthi movement began terrorizing the rest of society, too. When the Houthis took over Sanaa in 2014, more than 120 Sunni imams were removed from mosques and prevented from delivering Friday sermons at gunpoint. In the provinces they took over, more than twenty Sunni mosques and school were bombed and flattened. In April 2014, in the village of Hamdan near Sanaa, teachers at a public school refused a letter sent by the Houthis instructing them to teach the words of Abdulmalik Al-Houthi. Houthi armed men showed up the next day and bombed the school in front of the teachers. Mohammed Al-Yamani was one of the few journalists who documented the incident, but he was later killed by the Houthis in March 2016. Parliament members and tribal leaders who criticized the Houthis have also had their homes destroyed. The Houthis routinely film their demolition of houses, schools and Sunni mosques for use in their propaganda and recruitment efforts.

Soon after reaching Sanaa in 2014, the Houthis turned on Yemen's civil society, including many of the same pro-democracy activists who once welcomed Houthi participation in the 2011 Arab Spring revolution. At the time, Yemeni civil society was growing increasingly critical of the Houthis, and they started organizing protests demanding the Houthis end their armed presence of Sanaa. In response, in February 2015, the Houthis abducted several civil activists in the midst of a public protest and then tortured them late into the night. One activist was killed, and his body was dropped off at one of the main hospitals in Sanaa. Pro-democracy figures have since had to flee the capital and find refuge elsewhere.

Like a cartel, the Houthis use excessive violence to intimidate the public and spread fear. In a televised speech in September 2015, Abdulmalik Al-Houthi specifically directed his followers to target journalists and writers because he considers them more dangerous than enemy combatants. More than 83 media outlets have since been shut down and journalists have been subjected to harassment, threats, and arbitrary detention; some have even been killed. Houthis have deployed a huge number of informants who watch and monitor neighbourhoods. They also track activists writing on social media and have forcefully disappeared critics on Facebook and Twitter.

Abdulmalik Al-Houthi does not only obsess about crushing political dissent. He is, like Hasan Nasrallah, the leader of Hizbollah in Lebanon, also a religious fanatic who constantly directs his followers to monitor women's clothing, shut down cafes which do not enforce segregation and, most recently, to ban women from working in restaurants. In March 2020, his followers abducted three young

Instagram fashion models for “damaging public piety.” Abdulmalik Al-Houthi directs his followers to be vigilant and monitor the society very carefully, to enforce his moral code and also to strike against any possible resistance against him and his movement.

Abdulmalik Al-Houthi also regularly preaches on “anti-imperialism” and the necessity of waging jihad against the disbelievers and the enemies of the “Muslim Nation.” His followers say they adhere to all of his directions and that he will lead them toward victory against the enemies of Islam. Abdulmalik Al-Houthi is the ultimate authority and almost never appears in public. Only the chosen few can meet him personally and, when tribal delegations are taken to Saadah to speak with him, they usually do so through a screen. This is carefully designed to create a holy aura around him. Although a significant number of Houthis are religious fanatics like their leader, the movement has also attracted criminals and convicts. The head of their criminal investigation department in Sanaa was sanctioned by the UN Security Council for running a network of secret prisons allocated for women activists. These women have been systematically tortured, raped, and abused. The families of those women have been blackmailed to pay huge sums of money to release their daughters.

In many ways, the Houthi movement is structured like a criminal syndicate. The movement’s cartel-like structure is formed of “supervisors,” “general supervisors,” and Abdulmalik Al-Houthi’s “trustees.” The general supervisors use aliases and rarely appear in public.²⁰ The structure is most apparent in neighborhoods, districts and in state institutions. In the latter, the Houthis have kept the facade of government, but introduced “the supervisors’ network”—a complex of small militias run by Houthi commanders in all state offices and ministries. In each ministry, the supervisor, accompanied by his armed men, oversees the work of the minister and other officials. Supervisors are given unlimited authority; they storm government offices, block ministers’ decisions, and assault or arrest officials if they wish. The supervisors are poorly qualified to govern; instead, they are appointed because of their loyalty to the movement. As an example, in the Ministry of Electricity, the appointed supervisor, a man named “Zabarah,” is a technician who has two qualifications: First, like Abdulmalik Al-Houthi, he claims to be a descendant of the Prophet (from Ahl Al-Bayt). Second, he is very loyal to the Houthi leader. Every week, Zabarah gathers all ministry employees to listen to sermons of Abdulmalik Al-Houthi. In the Ministry of Oil, they appointed Mohammed Al-Emad, a former cameraman and owner of a pro-Houthi tabloid. In the Ministry of Health, they appointed Taha Al-Mutwakil, a Houthi imam who during the Covid-19 pandemic was preaching conspiracy theories about how the U.S.

created the virus to occupy Muslim lands in his Friday sermons. With supervisors like this in charge, the government has been paralyzed and services have deteriorated, including basic services like hygiene and sanitation. This has resulted in the spread of diseases like cholera and diphtheria.

In various neighborhoods and districts, the Houthi supervisors interact with the public and each one runs an armed group. Further, each supervisor has his own turf that he protects from rivals and also exploits to generate income. The most common practice is extorting money out of private businesses, including shops and groceries. In other instances, supervisors exploit fuel shortages and run their own oil black market. An owner of a successful private company interviewed for this research said that days after the Houthis took over Sanaa, a supervisor and his armed men stormed his company and looted everything inside including the cash they had in the safe and his own vehicle. When the businessman tried to complain, he was informed of rumours and accusations that he was an American spy, and that it is best for his safety to stop harassing the supervisor. In January 2020, Adel Al-Mutawakil, a Houthi supervisor, took over the University of Science and Technology—the biggest private university in Yemen—after abducting the university’s president.

This cartel structure has made some supervisors extensively rich within a short period of time. In November 2015, one former tabloid owner turned supervisor who had previously struggled to cover the costs for his paper, began building an eight-story building and roaming the streets of Sanaa with armored vehicles. The wealth generated by a supervisor depends on what he controls, and supervisors regularly clash with each other for control of key turf and institutions.

Despite the fighting between different supervisors on the ground, the hierarchy is very strict. These supervisors must show total loyalty to the movement and its kingpin Abdulmalik Al-Houthi and they have three main tasks. First, they share a percentage of their revenue up the chain, and this is important to keeping the movement alive. Second, supervisors all run an active indoctrination campaign, organizing courses and sermons to teach the public the words of Abdulmalik Al-Houthi and his brother Hussein. The third task is constant recruitment; supervisors regularly visit schools, universities and mosques to recruit youth and children to join the movement and to fight on various battlefronts. Those supervisors exploit people’s poverty and the dire humanitarian situation in Yemen. In interviews for this paper, two families said the local Houthi supervisor forced them to send their children to the battlefields in exchange for humanitarian aid and a small salary. The salaries their children receive and the humanitarian aid they get, although very limited, is the main source of income they have.

Conclusion

SINCE THE END OF THE IMAMATE ERA IN 1962, THE YEMENI STATE HAS STRUGGLED to form itself as a modern republic. The 2011 Arab Spring protests began as an attempt to revive the spirit of the 1962 revolution and to establish a civil democracy based on equal citizenship. But these Yemeni aspirations have always faced a powerful theocratic backlash. The 1979 “Islamic Revolution” in Iran, and the Tehran regime’s bid to export its revolution, helped to resurrect the traditionalist Zaydi political class which believes in the divine right of rulers who are the descendants of Prophet Mohammed (known as Ahl Al-Bayt). The rise of the Houthi movement was the result of the merging of revolutionary Khomeinism and traditional Zaydism political theology. In the upheaval of 2011, the two revolutions—the “Islamic Revolution” and the Yemeni republican one—were bound to clash.

Since taking over in Sanaa in September 2014, the Houthi movement has continued to undermine the central state and establish an alternative, cartel-like power structure. The Houthis have succeeded in shutting down all political parties, civil society organizations and any free press. Houthi power depends on religious loyalty to the movement and its kingpin, and therefore they will never give the public the power to choose their government. The Houthis do not intend to change their behaviour. Instead, their reign of terror and the chaos in Yemen directly benefits Houthi war lords, and it allows the Houthi movement to extract greater resources from the people and to recruit and grow in large numbers. There is no incentive for the movement to push for a political settlement to the current conflict.

Some Western policymakers and researchers today, like many in the Yemeni pro-democracy movement during the early days of the Arab Spring, mistakenly see the Houthis as a traditionalist rebel group that is only responding to a conflict waged against it first by the Sanaa government and now by foreign powers (mainly Saudi Arabia and the U.S.). A further assumption is that less military pressure on the Houthis will bring them to negotiate. This simplistic view disregards the fact that the Houthi bid to establish a theocracy pre-dates the current conflict and that the movement also receives enormous operational and political support from Iran’s revolutionary regime.

Since 2015, the Houthis have lost some territory due to military operations conducted by the Saudi-led coalition against it and not because of the political talks led by the UN envoy. Therefore, the calls by some Western policymakers to reduce military pressure against the Houthis are counterproductive to achieving

peace and stability in Yemen. The world needs to understand the Houthis for what they are: a theocratic, armed movement with a transnational agenda. Like many extremist groups, the conflict and humanitarian catastrophe that the Houthis have caused in Yemen is the result of their extremist ideology and ambitions. Yemen's core struggle today is to defeat the Houthi movement by rebuilding a state that enjoys a monopoly of power and establishing a republic that is rooted in the principles that many Yemenis have held since 1962, including the belief that all people are created equal and with inalienable rights, including the right to vote on their government.

NOTES

1. Al-Eshtraky Net, "The Join Meeting Parties issue a statement regarding the war in Saadah," February 27, 2007, http://aleshteraky.com/archive/news_details.php?lng=arabic&sid=1848.
2. UN Security Council sanctions "Fares Mana'a sanctioned for illegal arms smuggling," April 2010, <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/sanctions/751/materials/summaries/individual/fares-mohammed-mana%27a>.
3. The Zaydi state did not rule the whole North of Yemen continuously from 893 to 1962. The monarchy had rose and fell many times during this period until it was toppled in 1962.
4. Abdulhameed Hamoud, "Al-Imam Al-Hadi," September, 2010, <https://karmanysa.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/>.
5. Constitutional Lawyer, "Interview by Author," May, 2013.
6. Zayed Jaber, "Analysis: reading into the intellectual manifesto," August, 2020, <https://karmanysa.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/>.
7. Historian Abdullah Al-Shamahi, "Interview by the Author," February 14, 2021.
8. Sheikh Othman Mujali, senior tribal leader from Saadah, "Meeting with the Author," May 2016.
9. Al-Hamdi News, "The Zaydi scholars statement on the Houthi movement signed in 2004," March 2013, <http://alhamdinews.blogspot.com/2013/03/blog-post.html>.
10. Al-Ahmadi Riyadh, "The Intellectual and cultural manifesto," March 24, 2012, <https://nashwannews.com/newsold/138874/>.
11. Author's observation in Sanaa 2012.
12. Ali Al-Bukhaiti, former Houthi spokesperson, "Interview by the Author," February 20, 2021.

13. Reward for Justice “Khalil Yusif Harb,”
https://rewardsforjustice.net/english/khalil_harb.html.
14. Ali Al-Bukhaiti former Houthi spokesperson, “Interview by the Author,” February 20, 2021.
15. BBC News, “Assassination of Saleh Al-Sammad,” April 23, 2018,
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-43872482>.
16. *New York Times*, “Iran weapon’s shipment to Yemen,” March 15, 2012,
<https://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/15/world/middleeast/aiding-yemen-rebels-iran-seeks-wider-mideast-role.html>.
17. *New York Times*, “Yemen Seizes Sailboat Filled With Weapons, and US Points to Iran,” January 28, 2013,
<https://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/29/world/middleeast/29military.html>.
18. Counter Extremism Project, “Hasan Irlu Designation,” December, 2020,
<https://www.counterextremism.com/extremists/hasan-irlu>.
19. Anonymous, “Interview by the Author,” March 1, 2021.
20. The supervisors report to the General Supervisors. These General Supervisors are usually formed of commanders who have served the movement loyally during the six wars of Saadah. Examples of those General Supervisors: Abu Haidar (Al-Jawf Province), Abu Murtadha (Tihama province), Abu Harb (Baqim district), Abu Nasr (Taiz province), Abu Adel (Dhamar province), Abu Malik (Hajjah province), and others. These General Supervisors report directly to Abdulmalik Al-Houthi and his trustees.

Islam Without Supremacism: A Conversation with Maria Khan

MARIA KHAN IS AFFILIATED WITH THE CENTER FOR PEACE AND Spirituality (CPS) International, which was founded by her grandfather and well-known Muslim scholar and activist, Maulana Wahiduddin Khan. Maria Khan received her doctorate degree from the Department of Islamic Studies, Jamia Hamdard, New Delhi. The topic of her PhD was *The Quranic Concept of Dawah: Contemporary Relevance*. She has edited translations of some of Maulana's books and is sub-editor of the monthly periodical *Spirit of Islam*. She is also the author of *Ali ibn Abi Talib*, and a regular contributor to the print and television media. Dr. Khan sat down with Hudson Institute's Dr. Aparna Pande, director of the Initiative on Future of India and South Asia.

DR. PANDE: *Thank you for being with us today, Dr. Khan. I was hoping we could start by asking you to enlighten our readers about the great scholar and reformer, Maulana Wahiduddin Khan, who is also your grandfather, about the Maulana's background, and his views and thoughts.*

DR. KHAN: Yes. Thank you so much for letting me be here and sharing my thoughts. Maulana's forefathers are from Afghanistan and part of his family

migrated to India and they finally settled in the city of Azamgarh, which is today in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. Maulana was educated in an Islamic seminary in Azamgarh, and that seminary is called Madrasatul Islah. After receiving his initial traditional education in Islam, Maulana began interacting with his relatives and extended family members. And he found a communication gap between him and them because he had graduated as a *maulvi* [an Islamic doctor of law] and learned Arabic.

But his family members had received Western-style education and they were very well conversant in English as well, and they would give references to modern thought in their conversations and discussions. This was the first kind of intellectual challenge Maulana faced, and it motivated him to study the English language. He realized that a paramount requirement of the modern age is to present Islam in the contemporary idiom. So, an aspect of Maulana is that he introduced a certain scientific temper in explaining Islamic concepts and ideas. I will give an example of one of the themes which is present in his writings concerning religious belief. That is, religion is a matter of self-discovery.

The Quran urges the reader to reflect, ponder and contemplate. Maulana interprets this to mean that every believer or every individual must discover God at the intellectual level and not simply have blind faith in God. Faith is neither something that is imposed upon you nor is it something which you inherit from someone. Faith requires the involvement of your spiritual pursuit. Connected to this is the idea that simply being born into a Muslim family will not guarantee you salvation and there is no group salvation in Islam. This notion described by Maulana negates the basis of Muslim supremacism: Muslims are no special group who will get salvation just because they are Muslims. Every individual Muslim has to discover his faith on his own. Muslims have to make intellectual effort to understand and follow their faith.

In Islamic jurisprudence, there is a principle called *ijtihad* (re-interpretation or re-application of Islamic teachings to changing times). Maulana has applied *ijtihad* concerning changes we see in the present age. For example, he has written that Muslims established a political empire in the past and were rulers of vast areas of the world. Some believe that gaining political authority is part of a Muslim's religious duty and that it is enjoined upon Muslims by Islam. An important intellectual contribution Maulana has made is that he has discussed the evolution of the nature of political power through history.

Maulana has shown how political power monopolized everything from the economy to agriculture and even religion. But today we see that there is de-monopolization and decentralization, meaning that political power is now restricted to

the spheres of governance and administration, while every other nonpolitical field outside of administration is now opened up to people to pursue freely.

So, for example, when the Prophet Muhammad in the seventh century introduced his faith to a tribe called the Banu Shayban on the borders of the Persian empire, they refused to accept his message. They said that we have a pact with the [Persian] emperor, and one of the stipulations is that we should not entertain any novel idea or doctrine.

Today I do not need the sanction of an emperor to follow my faith. And most importantly, I do not need a Muslim empire to practice my faith. This led the Maulana to conclude that the struggle for political power is an anachronism and that today political dominance is not necessary for Islam. This is a fundamental change in the narrative on Islamic thought. I relate this to what Thomas Kuhn discussed in his book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. He says that in the scientific world, when a particular paradigm collapses under the weight of new observations and new problems, then that opens up the possibility for the development of new paradigms. I would say that Maulana provided this new paradigm and new mindset to Muslims. He sees modern changes as pro-Islam, not anti-Islam, and believes that they are desirable and propitious for Islam.

DR. PANDE: I have quite a few questions on the broader issue you mentioned, but before I go into that, what I want to ask you was what led the Maulana to set up the Center for Peace and Spirituality and what led you to follow in your grandfather's spot?

DR. KHAN: As I was growing up, I increasingly found religion irrelevant to my life because the society we live in tends to present religion to us simply as a list of dos and don'ts.

So, there was this disenchantment that I increasingly developed with religion and felt that it was outdated and could have been applicable in the seventh century but is certainly not applicable in the 21st century. And since I also was studying physics at college, I developed an inquisitive mind, a characteristic not encouraged in traditional religious circles. At the same time, I started interacting with Maulana, realizing that he appreciated critical thinking. In our discussions, the first statement that he would ask is: do you have any troubling questions. He would also provide a scriptural reference in favor of expressing dissent. [Quran 2:30] The Quran says that when God created Adam, at that time the Angels disagreed with God and said, why was there any need to create a creature like

Adam when we were already there to glorify you? The Quran says that God did not chastise the angels. Rather, he clarified their apprehension by providing them a reason. [Quran 2:31] And therefore, God himself established that we have to engage with critical ideas, we do not have to suppress or censor them. Interacting with Maulana allowed me to explore Islam freely. And I would also say one of the reasons why I was attracted to Islam after my discussions with and reading of Maulana is that he focuses a lot on the wisdom that is contained in Islam.

So, he would not present the Prophet as a person who had miraculous abilities as a result of which he was able to resolve all the problems that he faced. Rather, he presents the Prophet in his writings as a person who used wisdom to manage the affairs of his life. For example, there was a very tense situation at the time when the Prophet was at Hudaibiyah, where he had to enter into a treaty in 628 AD. In the agreement on paper, the other side refused to write down the prefix “messenger of God” before the Prophet’s name. That was a humiliating moment, but the Prophet did not convert that moment or that issue into one of community prestige. He left behind the reactive psychology and tried to enter into a peace treaty, irrespective of all the conditions that were laid down before him, only to create a peaceful atmosphere for his work, which proved beneficial for him later on. These eternal pieces of wisdom from the Prophet appealed to me.

Another reason why I chose to study Islam is also based on my experience as an Indian Muslim. In this pluralistic age, the sociologist Peter Berger has said that your belief system is not self-evidently true. In a Muslim majority setting, you live within your worldview and simply absorb whatever is told to you about your faith. But in a pluralistic environment such as India, you have a more dynamic relationship with your faith. For example, some Muslims refer to non-Muslims as *kuffar* or nonbelievers, and this term is used in a derogatory way, giving the impression that non-Muslims are impure and should not be intermingled with. Now, I have been educated in a Christian school and then I went to study at Delhi University. I have friends from the Hindu, Christian, Sikh, and Jain communities. And I realized through my interactions with them that they are as much human as I am. This made me rethink aspects of the prevalent traditional narrative. I would go back to scripture and discuss with Maulana. I realized that *kuffar* was a temporary, non-derogative term used only for some contemporaries of the Prophet, and not a permanent label to be attached to a group or a community.

This is also one reason why I decided to work with CPS and let people know about the kind of rediscoveries I’m making about my faith. CPS, which stands for Center for Peace and Spirituality, was established in the year 2001. Now, before that, Maulana had been working individually. He had been writing numerous

articles and books. Particularly his magazines, *Al-Risala*, which is published in Urdu, is very famous in the Indian subcontinent, and it is also available now in English as Spirit of Islam. These writings impacted several people who decided to come together to form an organization, which is now CPS. To explain the work CPS does, I will give two examples. We know that when the cartoon controversy emerged there were calls across the Muslim world that the magazine should be banned or that bilateral relations with France should be suspended. Some said we should file defamation suits against those who defame the Prophet. CPS members, however, believe in responding to such issues by introducing to people the Prophet *they* have discovered from scripture.

We take it as a matter of intellectual discussion. One of the very important projects that CPS has undertaken is to translate the Quran into various national and international languages so that people can know for themselves what the text contains. Part of our task is also to highlight the spiritual aspect of the Prophet's teachings and values, which were the most prominent part of his mission or his prophetic career. Once a group of Germans came to our Center. One among them said that it seemed that the Prophet Muhammad was a person who commanded armies and indulged in military warfare throughout his lifetime. This is a popular impression of the Prophet. Our purpose is to share with people the fact that the Prophet was a seeker of truth. He adopted divine ethics, imparted spiritual lessons and wisdom to his companions, and enlightened people about the meaning and purpose of life.

The Maulana is a regular contributor to the Speaking Tree column, which is the spiritual column of *The Times of India*, and it is read by both Muslims and people of other faiths. Spirituality is increasingly becoming a common ground for discussion across communities here in India. So, there is a growing interfaith space and CPS tries to utilize this space by participating in various kinds of interfaith or interreligious dialogues. There is an increasing trend among youngsters to learn more about spirituality found in religion. A group of youngsters from the Hindu community came to me and said that we want to know more about your faith and the spiritual teachings of your faith, but don't give us abstract theoretical principles. They said, tell us how you as a person have been transformed by your spirituality, how have you adopted spirituality, and received solace and peace in your life. Sharing spiritual experiences is a very important means of bringing people closer. We are also translating our literature into Hindi. Besides that, CPS also engages in practically applying the peaceful ideas of Islam. For example, Tipu Sultan [1750-1799] is a very famous Muslim soldier and military commander. His great-grandson, Dr. Ahmed Sultan, is a reader of Maulana's literature and

writings. One time he went to Maharashtra and there was a town where a Ganapati procession was about to go on the streets. There was fear among Muslims that the procession would culminate into a riot. Dr. Sultan said to the Muslims that we cannot stop the procession, but we can stop the riot from happening. He advised the Imam of the mosque: When the procession goes past your mosque, you should come forward with *Phool malas* (garlands of flowers) and receive the processionists with these garlands. When the Imam did this, it completely changed the atmosphere. Such processions generally involve provocative slogans from both sides, escalating into a riot. But something which could have become a symbol of communal clash became a symbol of communal harmony. People started embracing each other, exchanging sweets and shaking hands. This is one of the ways in which we are trying to apply these peaceful teachings of Islam in India.

DR. PANDE: *I have been an avid reader of Maulana's columns and books. I will now quote a sentence from a book by the Maulana titled Indian Muslims: Need for a Positive Outlook. "Both Hindus and Muslims have fallen into negative thinking because of one fear or another. If there's a Hindu-Muslim problem in the country [India], it is because neither community has been able to play a truly constructive role in the shaping of the nation's destiny." You gave the example right now of Tipu Sultan's great-grandson, but could you offer examples of how the Maulana and CPS have tried to implement this in action?*

DR. KHAN: As far as the statement that you read out from his book, I would say that Maulana has studied Hindu-Muslim relations in the country extensively. When he made this statement, he meant that Partition left a legacy of Hindu-Muslim rivalry which was at its peak before Independence. This old antagonism continued to simmer. It did not die down, and we both know that any trivial matter between two individuals would assume the proportions of a full-scale riot between two communities. This is the negative thinking of the past, which Maulana advised both Hindus and Muslims to come out of and advised both communities to work together and collaborate for the development of the nation. This was also the constructive role that he was talking about, which was often hampered because of the general tendency of becoming a victim of communal psychology, which would lead to a lot of destructive episodes and loss of life and property. His advice has always been to take into consideration the larger interests of the nation. If there has been anything unpleasant from the Hindu side, or the Muslims think that something wrong has happened with them, then they should take the initiative to

forgive. Maulana cites a particular verse of the Quran that says good deeds are to be done in return for bad deeds. (41:34) This is not only a matter of moral teaching, rather it is something that takes into account human psychology. If there is some kind of tension between me and somebody who belongs to another faith, and if I try to be more compassionate in listening to that person, if I am not reactive and defensive about myself or if I don't hurl accusations at them or their community, and if instead I speak about the commonalities and the fact that we should try to maintain peace for our common betterment, then it helps in subduing the other person's antagonism. It helps in creating a peaceful environment for dialogue and conducive atmosphere for community relations.

DR. PANDE: India has the second-largest Muslim population in the world, after Indonesia, and yet India is a non-Muslim majority country. How do you, both as a scholar and a person, view the spread of Islam in India over the decades and where would you say we stand today?

DR. KHAN: There were two points of entry of Islam into India. The first was from the South. That is where Islam initially entered India. We know that Arab merchants were transporting goods from the Mediterranean into the southern coast of India. These merchants started to flourish on the southern Indian coast after they gradually started intermarrying with the local community and preaching their religion. India has always offered a very conducive atmosphere to Muslims. There has been no report of widespread persecution or the dwindling of Muslim populations. The Muslim population has only increased over the years. One of the very important aspects of Islam in India is that when Islam entered India from the north, the conquerors were not responsible for the spreading of the religion. Along with the conquerors came several teachers, Sufis, mystics, scholars, and they were the ones who were responsible for preaching the religion of love. Sufism has had a very important history in India. Even the colony in which I live, Nizamuddin West, is named after the famous Sufi saint, Nizamuddin Auliya [1238-1325]. We have the shrine of Nizamuddin Auliya nearby and people from different faiths and even westerners come to the shrine to offer their respects.

One reason why Islam did not become the majority religion here in India, is that Indian Islam has been largely Sufi Islam or mystical Islam, a peaceful and compassionate Islam. There have been no forceful conversions to Islam. It attracted people as and when it filled their spiritual void. Therefore, we see that the extent of the spread of Islam was natural.

DR. PANDE: *Women have played a central role in the Indian subcontinent right from the days of the Indus Valley civilization and India has had women scholars, freedom fighters, and political leaders. Yet, I am sure you will agree with me, women face tremendous challenges even today and many of those challenges are rooted in religion, society, and culture. The Maulana has written on several issues including the role of women in Islam and India. Three women play a central role at CPS: Dr. Farida Khanam, Dr. Naghma Siddiqi, and yourself. Could you offer some thoughts on how you view these challenges and what is the way forward?*

DR. KHAN: I would like to begin with my own experience. When I started speaking about Islam on social media platforms, there was encouragement from people, but there was also a strand in the Muslim community who had a very different view. Some said that you should cover your entire face when you come out into public. Some said that you shouldn't speak at all since a woman's voice is *awrah*. *Awrah* is an Arabic word which means something to be concealed, so a woman's voice is to be concealed from men unrelated to her. Others said that religion is the domain of men, not the domain of women, therefore we as women shouldn't be coming forward to do this task.

But this was the moment when I went to Maulana and he said to me unequivocally, that my last advice to you is that you should try to find out your role in life which you want to perform, by studying scripture, by discussing with people and looking into other relevant resources. Once you have discovered your role, then let those who are issuing fatwas against you keep issuing fatwas. But you should remain firm on what you have decided. I think this advice was very empowering. It gave me the understanding that I am the one responsible for my future. Once I discover what I want to do, I should be steadfast and courageous enough to face detractors. This is how I was able to overcome the initial discouragement that I faced. I also find immense encouragement in the example of Aisha, the wife of the Prophet. A very interesting aspect of their relationship is that often there was discussion and dialogue between the Prophet and Aisha. She would often question the Prophet about something, which was followed by an intellectual exchange between the two. This is extremely important because you see Aisha as a woman interacting or exchanging with the Prophet as an intellectual partner or an intellectual companion, and not as an intellectual inferior.

After the Prophet died, Bibi Aisha continued to guide the community for another 50 years. She was the person to whom senior companions of the Prophet would come to discuss faith-related matters. They would come to her for her advice and counsel, and she would fearlessly speak about what she had understood

about religion. This is extremely important for me since I am also studying Islam, and I have a model from early Islamic history of a woman who was at the helm of intellectual contributions.

I would like to also speak about some cultural challenges, which I feel are not religious, but common to all societies.

The first is the attitudinal challenge that we must face in society. So, for example, I was reading about the Indian particle physicist Rohini Godbole. She is a professor at the Indian Institute of Science in Bangalore, a very prestigious institution. She has been recently awarded the French Order of Merit for collaboration between France and India on science. She went to the U.S. to do her Ph.D. and returned after the completion of her degree. While speaking with a colleague, when he came to know that she had gone all the way to the U.S. and completed her Ph.D. after a ten-year-long period, he casually remarked, "I didn't realize that you were so serious about this." This example explains the kind of challenge we women face because, in Indian society, it is often said that a woman should take up a career that does not adversely impact her family life. They often say that you should go into teaching because you will have time for your career, and you will also have time to devote to your family. Research, academics and sciences are considered as fields women cannot handle. I think women should be welcome in whichever field they want to enter, and wherever they seek to best invest their talent.

And another important aspect concerning women that I want to speak about and something that I feel personally is that often the challenge is not as much external, as it is internal. I was reading about the American biochemist, Jennifer Doudna, who has been awarded the 2020 Nobel Prize in Chemistry. She went to Harvard for her graduate studies. During her initial days at Harvard, she said "I started doubting myself because there were so many smart people around me. I thought that I might not be able to stick around doing research." Women tend to doubt their abilities more than men. This is something which we have to overcome ourselves. If we women decide to do something, then we should be confident enough to follow through on it.

DR. PANDE: Indians of all faiths played a role during India's national freedom struggle. Indian Muslims are present in every arena of Indian society, politics, culture, and economy. Yet, there has been a rise in Hindu majoritarianism in India and a concomitant growth in attacks on Indian Muslims. Majoritarianism is not a phenomenon unique to India but how do you view this issue in the Indian context and what do you see as the way forward?

DR. KHAN: One of the most important points I would like to mention is that it is generally portrayed that these attacks on Muslims, which you have mentioned, especially in Muslim literature, Muslim journals, and newspapers, represent the only situation that Muslims are confronting in India.

I do not agree with this notion. Although there is a lot of discussion around such occurrences, I think there is hardly any discussion on the achievements that Muslims are making. Only recently I was reading about the topper of the prestigious All India Pre Medical Examination. He is a Muslim called Shoyeb Aftab. And, interestingly, we had a top scorer from Kashmir's Pulwama district. His name is Basit Bilal Khan. Basit Bilal Khan said something very wise. He said that if your goal is important to you, find ways rather than excuses. And, Shoyeb said, never take your eyes off your objective despite the difficulties. It is interesting to note that Shoyeb said that after completing my medical school, I would like to go into research in the cardiovascular field. He did not say that the reason is that I would like to serve the Muslim community after research. Rather, he said that in our country cardiovascular problems are increasingly becoming an epidemic. I want to address this problem in the country.

Why I am mentioning this is that today the greatest concern of the young Muslim in India is education. I will give the example of my locality or the area that I live in. I live in Nizamuddin West and there is a quarter attached to our colony called Hazrat Nizamuddin Basti. Now earlier, girls from this Muslim quarter used to come to work as domestic helps in the homes in our colony. But now, increasingly, it is becoming very difficult to find such girls because their families are now sending them off to school. The condition of Muslims has become far better than what it was before Independence. But we do not generally talk about this even though this is something that Maulana has emphasized extensively.

I would say that young Muslims have realized that they have remained backward in India due to the lack of culture of education in their community in the past. Madrassas dot the entire Indian landscape. But these are traditional Islamic seminaries. There are not many high-quality, modern secular institutions run by Muslims. This has been the cause of Muslims' socio-economic decline compared to other communities. But now you see that young Muslims are seeing opportunities everywhere and they want to utilize these opportunities to have a better share in the economic prosperity in this country.

What is important to note here is that there is a desire to rise above the narrative of discrimination, inequity, and injustice.

It seems that young Muslims are now increasingly wanting to take their future into their own hands. I was speaking to a young girl who is pursuing her master's

in applied psychology from a university in Delhi. She said that our leaders and speakers seem to give us the impression that India is a country that has only problems to offer to us. But she said I am seeing that there is an increasingly visible alternative reality of Muslims in India, and I want to be part of that alternative reality, and I want my leaders to tell me what I can do or what I should do to become part of that alternative reality. So, I think these young Muslims will change the image of Muslims being a persecuted minority in India to being a creative minority in India, one that is helping in the development of the nation. What is also important is that to me, as a young Muslim in India, when I am exposed to discussions and conversations in Muslim circles, when I read Muslim newspapers, people giving speeches and sermons on the Muslim condition and constantly claiming that we have a bleak future in this country—this is something that makes you feel very depressed. It's something that causes you to feel insecure, alienated, and marginalized, and I think this rhetoric has done the greatest disservice to the Indian Muslim community.

As far as this discussion on majoritarianism is concerned, I was recently having an online discussion with a few Muslims. A young Muslim called Jamal said that if the condition has become such that there are tendencies of majoritarianism in our society, then we Muslims should question how our society, or our country has reached this point. If there are aspects of polarization and distrust between communities, what can we as youngsters do to counter this tendency and bring back the old days?

I would say that we should initiate bridge-building activities. We should improve relations across communities and try to compassionately reach out to people. I want to share how young Muslims are already doing this.

In the lockdown period, I participated in a webinar. I learnt of a Calcutta-based group of young Muslims who wanted to help a poor Hindu locality. When this group of Muslim boys approached the Hindu locality, they were met with suspicion. They were not allowed to enter the locality and could not do their work. They came up with a very innovative and creative idea. They took some of their Hindu friends along with them to the locality, and that was a welcome step. They got a chance to do aid work, as this gesture helped in removal of the earlier atmosphere of suspicion.

I would say that it is important for us to understand why we have reached this point, instead of simply complaining about the present condition, railing against others and speaking about why things are becoming so hopeless, we at the individual level at least should begin to do something. We should act. In our small ways, in these little ways, hopefully, the condition will change and hopefully, things will come back to normal.

DR. PANDE: *India is unique in that, unlike many other countries with large Muslim populations, there are still not that many Indian Muslims who have joined global jihadi organizations, from Al Qaeda to ISIS. I believe CPS has over the years taken part in helping de-radicalize youths. What would you say you have seen as the reason why some young people join these organizations?*

DR. KHAN: So, yes, I would say that there are two broad reasons. First is the theological narrative, a certain theological narrative, which causes young people to become radicalized. We can term this theological narrative as the political interpretation of Islam, which was developed in the 19th and 20th centuries. These political ideologues of Islam have misinterpreted certain verses from the Quran and given them a political interpretation.

I will give an example. There is a verse in the Quran which says: “All power belongs to God alone,” or, *ini l-hukmu ila lillah*. (12:40) Now, the literal meaning of the Arabic word *hukm*, which appears in this verse, is power or authority. In this verse, *hukm* is meant in the sense of God exercising control and authority over the entire universe. He is the being or entity who has created the universe or the cosmos. And it is he who is sustaining and regulating it. This verse speaks of a reality which is already manifest and does not need to be brought into effect. But the political ideologues of Islam, have taken the word *hukm* in this verse to mean worldly political power or political authority. According to them, it is the responsibility of Muslims to impose God’s political rule all over the world.

Since there are so many countries where Muslim political rule does not exist, they desire to take political power into their hands, even if it involves violence. Many even indulge in violent activities aimed at destabilizing those countries or those political rules which they feel are irreligious. This political interpretation of the text of Islam, has to be addressed and Maulana has tried to do that. He has deconstructed the political interpretation and shown theologically how it is not drawn from the text’s real meaning. It is an erroneous interpretation of Islam.

Another reason why I feel that there is an initial inclination towards radicalization or radical groups is that if you see the workings of these radical groups, they try to focus a lot on doing negative propaganda about the countries in which Muslims reside. For example, to attract the youth they focus on certain experiences that Muslims have in these countries. One of the experiences that Muslims increasingly are having, especially in liberal, pluralistic, and even western societies, is an identity crisis. They feel that they are no more supreme, they are powerless. They feel that they have been defeated. Also, in Muslim literature, you see a lot of discussion about the moral depravities, materialism, and moral degeneracy of the

West, and that there are elements in their culture that separate “us” from “them.” This brings in a feeling of alienation in these Muslim youth, and they develop a desire to associate with a cause that will bring back the imagined, pure world of the past.

DR. PANDE: So, when you interact with these young people, what is it that you tell them to counter questions or concerns they have and disincentivize them from joining these groups?

DR. KHAN: It is important for us to counter this narrative, to provide an alternative to this picture which is presented to Muslims. First of all, we have to address the identity crisis that Muslims face in the modern world. If you read the history of civilizations, every civilization is succeeded by another civilization after some time. Each civilization gets its role to play. The Muslims got the chance to lead humanity in a certain direction. And now it is the chance of the modern civilization spearheaded by the West. The Quran also affirms this when it says: “We bring these days to people by turns.” (3:140) Muslims must realize that earlier it was their turn to lead humanity or to lead civilization. Now it is the turn of the modern civilization which is headed by western countries. Instead of focusing a lot on the moral depravity of the West, it is important for Muslims to also focus on the enormous intellectual contributions that the West has made in the modern world, particularly in the fields of science. There is a massive intellectual output that helps in understanding the workings of the cosmos, the laws of the universe, and in providing profound insights into the nature of reality. This is extremely important for us. We should learn from all these discoveries, findings, and research. Even the Quran says to the reader to reflect over nature and to contemplate over the universe. Modern-day discoveries and findings of science provide us a deeper understanding of these verses of the Quran. Earlier I could not understand verses of the Quran that said that there are signs of God in the creation of the cosmos, for people of understanding. But I can understand these verses in a far better way after I refer to modern scientific discoveries and insights which western scientists have offered. They are helping me to understand my religion, and that is a great contribution that they have made.

In the Middle Ages, Muslims made contributions to civilization in terms of adding to human knowledge. Philip Hitti says that this very stream of knowledge travelled from Muslim Spain to Western Europe, where it helped in bringing about the Renaissance. Present Muslims should understand that we are part of the same

civilizational journey which was earlier headed by Muslims and is now being headed by the West. It will give you a feeling of belonging to the same world and you would not want to have an alternative world created for you.

And most importantly, you see, there are so many amenities brought about by modern means of communication. Life has become so easy. The kind of freedom of conscience and freedom of religion we enjoy today were not even available to the prophets in the past. Why would I want the world of the past to come back when I have so much more to look forward to in the present? This aspect may help Muslims understand that they need not have an identity crisis.

I was reading Jocelyne Cesari, who has written a book on Muslims in the West. She says that increasingly people in the West are looking to Islamic spirituality because they want to know how spirituality can help them find meaning in life. If some Muslims think that the materialism or moral degeneracy, they see in the West is unpleasant, then that is also an opportunity for Muslims, as Larry Poston and David Kerr have pointed out. Because they can now share their spiritual message or spiritual learnings from Islam and help people find meaning in life they so long for.

DR. PANDE: *There are those who argue that Islam and Democracy are antithetical. Yet, millions of Indian Muslims have participated in the democratic process for decades. What would you say when someone asked for your views on Islam and democracy?*

DR. KHAN: Democracy is a form of government in which people's representatives manage the socio-political affairs of the society. Islam distinguishes between two aspects of life. One is the individual sphere and the other is the collective sphere. As far as individual persons are concerned, Islam says that an individual is free to believe and can do whatever he wants in whichever way he wants. But as far as society is concerned, as far as a collectivity is concerned, then there are many people involved in there. This is why, when it comes to deciding matters for society, there should be consultation with others. The Quran also says that believers are those who conduct their affairs by mutual consultation. (42:38) We can interpret this as the formula of democracy according to Islam. Another very important point is that the Quran does not provide details of socio-political philosophy. One of the reasons for this is that according to Islam, the socio-political structure or the socio-political system depends upon the circumstances of society and the will of the people. Even the Prophet has said, "As you are, so shall be your rulers." (Mishkat al-Masabih 3717)

This means that government or the form of government emerges from within the society. There is no pre-designed, pre-determined political system to be imposed on people, irrespective of their situation. Also, a fundamental aspect of Islamic theology is that God Almighty has given freedom to every individual so that he or she may develop his or her potential in whichever way he or she wants.

That is a fundamental aspect of Islamic theology. The Quran also says: “We created death and life to test which of you is best in conduct.” (67:2) Unless a person does not have freedom, he cannot be tested. This test can happen only in an environment where there is no coercion. This implies that nobody has the right to curtail people’s freedom by imposing against their will a system that forces them to abide by certain rules and curbs their free expression.

I was reading Mustafa Akyol recently and he said that in certain Muslim countries, although the structure is outwardly Islamic, on the inside you see that there are many young Muslims who are rebelling against Islam or fleeing from Islam. This is an experience we learn from modern-day society: if you impose your ideas undemocratically on people and if you do not allow them the freedom to choose, then you cause them to flee from those very ideas. This is why, freedom is central to Islam.

DR. PANDE: *Dr. Khan, before we stop is there anything you would like to tell our readers?*

DR. KHAN: I would like to make two points. An aspect about radicalization is that often there are certain concepts and terminologies that are used to radicalize minds. For example, Dar al-Islam and Dar al-Harb, which respectively mean that Muslims reside in the Abode of Islam, while non-Muslims reside in the Abode of War. These are certain concepts that were developed by Muslim jurists in the Abbasid period when Muslims were politically dominant. It is important to note that this terminology is not found in the Quran. These terminologies are used to radicalize people, to create divisions between Muslims and people of other communities. If you see the Quran, you will realize that every prophet addressed his contemporaries as “O my people” or *ya qawmi*. The Quran too uses words like *insan* (human being), *al-nas* (people), *Bani Adam* (Children of Adam). The whole humankind, according to the Quranic scheme of things, is Dar al-Insan, or the abode of all human beings.

Another point which I would like to make in the end is about misinformation and negativity, which is spread on social media.

What we need to do is we have to counter this negative current with a positive stream of information. We cannot censor misinformation, but we have the full freedom to articulate our perspective forcefully. Negative news has a sensational aspect to it. It goes viral.

What CPS is trying to do is that we are trying to make positivity go viral. We are trying to highlight positive stories, positive developments, and positive experiences. For example, when in 2018 France won the FIFA World Cup, we took it as an opportunity to make a video on Islamophobia. We asked the question: Does Islamophobia exist in the absolute sense as is sometimes portrayed? We showed that the French football team had many Muslim players. They were shown praying for their team's success in the video. Also, the French President was seen embracing all the French players after they had won the World Cup. These are incidents around which there is no discussion. Nobody would make a video on such incidents. Nobody would deliver a speech on this. Nobody would write an opinion piece on this. But this is what CPS is essentially trying to do. We have to bring good happenings and positive developments into conversation. This is also what the Prophet had counselled. We have to wipe out hatred with love. We cannot wipe out hatred by generating further hatred.

The Popular Front of India: Looking Beyond the Sensationalism

By Mohammed Sinan Siyech

AMID THE EMERGENCE OF NEW-AGE POLITICAL AND ACTIVIST GROUPS across India over the last two decades, the Popular Front of India (PFI) and its political wing, the Social Democratic Party of India (SDPI), have come under increasing scrutiny. Formed in the mid-2000s, the PFI has been in the news for all the wrong reasons in recent years, particularly due to violent incidents in the southwestern state of Kerala. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-run national government, for its part, has continuously attempted to ban the group.

This essay looks to understand the PFI and its role in Muslim politics across India while also interrogating the allegations of jihadist activities that are frequently levelled against it. In doing so, this essay seeks to chart the origins, expansion, ideology, and political affiliations of the group as well as the ways in which the organization operates and recruits today. By relying on both the group's public messaging as well as author interviews conducted in India, this essay will shed light on this frequently misunderstood organization.

History of the PFI

THE ROOTS OF THE PFI CAN BE TRACED TO A STATE ORGANIZATION THAT EXISTED in Kerala in the 1990s, the National Development Front (NDF). The NDF was formed in 1997, in the wake of a reactionary Islamist wave that emerged in response to the 1992 demolition of the Babri Masjid by a Hindu mob.¹ The original NDF leadership comprised nineteen so-called Supreme Members of which one, P. Koya, had previously founded a now-disbanded terrorist group, the Students Islamic Movement of India (SIMI). SIMI had been responsible for a wave of terrorist attacks between 1992 and 2002 and former members of the group have been involved in other illegal terrorist organizations like the Indian Mujahideen and the Islamic State.²

The stated objective of the NDF was to work for the socio-economic advancement of minorities, with a particular focus on the Muslims of Kerala.³ In line with this objective, the group began to agitate for the implementation of quotas for Muslims in the civil service while also protesting police brutality against Muslims and other forms anti-Muslim discrimination. The organization also advocated aggressive preaching of Islam (known as *daw'a* in Arabic) across Kerala in a bid to win converts.⁴

The NDF was soon implicated in several incidents of intercommunal violence, including the Marad massacres of 2002-03 that saw both Hindus and Muslims killed in a series of brawls and planned attacks (only two NDF members were arrested in relation to the Marad violence, however; most of those arrested were members of the Hindu nationalist Rashtriya Swayam Sevak or the Indian Union Muslim League).⁵ The then-State Secretary of the Communist Party of India, Pinarayi Vijayan, accused the NDF of being a terrorist organization.⁶ The BJP even accused the party of being funded by the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency, an accusation later echoed by two police officials in 2005.⁷ However, the enquiring commission that prepared a 490-page document on the Marad massacres claimed that there was no evidence to support this claim.⁸ The damage had already been done to the NDF's reputation, however. The group therefore merged with several other organizations from neighboring states and changed its name to the Popular Front of India in 2006.

The involvement of certain ex-SIMI members in the PFI, namely P. Koya, perhaps explains why some government authorities considered the PFI to have merely been a rebranded SIMI.⁹ There is reason to doubt such claims, however.

Over the years, the PFI expanded into many other states by merging with organizations that count non-Muslims among their ranks. As of 2017, the PFI claimed to be present in 22 states and a few union territories such as Puducherry while boasting a nationwide membership of over 500,000.¹⁰

PFI Objectives, Structure, and Funding

THE PFI'S CONSTITUTION WAS DRAFTED IN 2010 AND LAST UPDATED IN 2014.¹¹ According to this 24-page document, the PFI has an 18-point agenda which includes issues such as promoting national integration and social harmony, upholding the country's democratic and secular order, working for peace, advancing the cause of minorities, protecting civil and political rights, and speaking out against human rights violations.¹²

While some observers label the PFI a Salafist organization, this is not correct. According to interviews with some of their members and press releases by group representatives, the group purports to follow Islam and does not specify which tradition or sect it adheres to. Moreover, according to one interviewee, the PFI makes no distinction between any Muslim who shows interest in becoming a member, so long as they pray regularly and observe what they consider basic Islamic rituals.¹³ The group membership includes Sufis, Tablighis, and even Shias (although not Ahmadis). The political arm of the PFI, the SDPI, is even more open and allows non-Muslims to join, including Christians and Dalits (the "untouchable" cast).¹⁴ This diversity indicates that the group is interested in unity among Muslims as well as among traditionally marginalized communities in India. Thus, at least on the surface, the PFI's appeal is not limited to any single religious community, which likely helps the organization garner a broad base of support.

The PFI has a hierarchical organization with both state- and national-level offices. The most basic functional body is the local *Unit*, which has 20 members. The body above it is called an *Area* comprised of anywhere between 3-10 *Units*, followed by a *Division* (3-10 *Areas*), a *District* (3-10 *Divisions*), then *Zones* (2+ *Districts*). The PFI maintains a State General Assembly in each state where it operates, the purpose of which is to elect members for a State Executive Council which makes state-level decisions for the party.¹⁵ The National General Assembly

(NGA) is the national body comprised of representatives from each state. Each NGA member represents some 300 party members. The NGA elects fifteen members to the National Executive Council (NEC), from which the Central Secretariat, the chief executive body of the party, is selected. The current party Chairman is O. M. A. Saleem while the current General Secretary is Anis Ahmed.¹⁶ The party structure allows the different state branches to keep afloat during times when the national party leaders may be incapacitated due to arrest.

The PFI appears to primarily fundraise through its membership. According to an interview with one party member, all members of the group are expected to contribute at least one percent of their monthly salary to the organization. The author was not able to verify this with other sources, though the party constitution states that every member should contribute at least Rs.10 (14 cents in U.S. dollars) per month to the party.¹⁷ Assuming this is adhered to by all 500,000 members reported to be in the organization, that would mean that the party collects at minimum Rs. 5,000,000 (\$68,000) each month. However, this should be treated as a rough and speculative estimate. All of the organization's finances are subject to periodic audit by the National Executive Council.¹⁸

The PFI also uses its networks and social activities to fundraise. According to one interviewee, a real estate salesman, many businessmen who are sympathetic to the PFI contribute large sums when asked.¹⁹ This author also witnessed many instances of PFI members collecting donations at mosques at various spots in the country. News reports additionally claim that the PFI raises funds from the Middle East,²⁰ an unverified but plausible claim given how much money flows between the Arab states and India. For example, many people from Kerala, where the PFI has its strongest base, have immigrated to the Gulf states and send remittances from there.

While we do not know the full extent of the PFI's fundraising, we can glean some understanding from various news reports. For example, when the PFI was fighting a legal case in 2019, it employed the services of Indian National Congress official and lawyer Kapil Sibal for 77 lakh rupees (\$105,000), an extraordinary sum in India.²¹ The PFI's detractors have also alleged that the group receives hundreds of thousands of dollars from abroad to foment unrest in India. Although the government is currently investigating these allegations,²² the government's Enforcement Directorate stated as recently as October 2020 that such claims are untrue.²³

Unpacking PFI Expansion

MULTIPLE FACTORS HAVE AIDED THE PFI'S NOTABLE GROWTH OVER THE PAST THREE decades. For starters, no organization with any sort of social activist outlook is likely to sustain itself without the support of local politicians and businessmen. In the case of the PFI and its NDF predecessor, expansion was intertwined with political dynamics within Kerala. The Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M), which is currently in power in Kerala, had an intense rivalry with the National Congress and its regional ally, the Indian Union Muslim League (IUML), throughout the 2000s.²⁴ Both the IUML and Congress recruited heavily within Kerala's Sunni Madrasas, including Salafist ones. The CPI-M allegedly cast a blind eye to the NDF's activities and growth in the hopes that the upstart Islamic party would cut into the Congress and IUML bases.²⁵

Another reason that the NDF grew, especially in places where it did not initially have networks, was its relentless social programming and related programs. For instance, in Bangalore, interviewees noted that the NDF was quite effective in alleviating the problems of slum communities and other economically marginalized segments of society. The group did so by providing loans to various small businessmen, clearing the debts of those who were unable to pay, and helping students apply for government scholarships. Several interviewees in Bangalore claimed that the organization had helped local families advance up the socioeconomic ladder, although official data to verify these claims is lacking. The PFI has also recently engaged in relief activities, including most recently during flooding in Tamil Nadu and Puducherry in 2020 and following rioting in Delhi that same year. The group has also provided economic relief for families impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, social work that the group has highlighted in its press releases and media.²⁶

More interestingly, the PFI has been keen to provide legal assistance across India. This has proven an effective tool in building popular support since the Indian police system has a reputation of bias against minorities. Muslims in particular are overrepresented in prison systems across India and are often subject to arbitrary detention and, in some cases, torture.²⁷ The PFI has therefore made an effort to provide legal aid in many cases of wrongful arrest. According to one PFI activist, legal aid is such an important element of the group's strategy that the group specifically helps prospective law students get international scholarships on the condition that they join the PFI upon returning to India.²⁸ According to

the PFI's own website, scholarships are prioritized for those studying law, journalism, and social work-related Master's programs.²⁹

The PFI's strong legal network has also likely helped the group challenge and evade the many legal hurdles that authorities have attempted to place in its way.³⁰ For example, when authorities investigated the PFI for allegedly forcing a girl from Kerala to convert to Islam and marry a Muslim, the PFI's extensive legal network ensured that the group would not be subject to any unfair proceedings during the course of the investigation (the National Investigation Agency eventually declared that there had been no foul play).³¹ In another instance, the group initiated a campaign, "Jail Bharo" ("fill the jail"), in which it asked supporters to voluntarily get arrested in order to protest law enforcement bias against Muslims. In 2013, up to 20,000 members were arrested and released shortly thereafter in the southern state of Tamil Nadu alone.³² Additionally, the PFI has filed multiple complaints against media organizations that have vilified the group, thereby reducing some of the baseless accusations it is subjected to.

In its messaging, the PFI seeks to appeal to various marginalized communities in India. The group's message seems to resonate most strongly, however, among Muslims. The group deftly plays on existing grievances within India's Muslim communities, grievances that stem from significant socioeconomic and political marginalization. Decades of discrimination and rising intercommunal tensions have eroded Muslims' confidence in the Indian political system (other minorities feel similarly).

Against this backdrop, the PFI presents itself as a protector of marginalized groups.³³ One interviewee in the southern state of Karnataka claimed, for example, that PFI presence helps Muslims stay safe in what is an increasingly hostile environment.³⁴ The government's campaign of rhetorical and legal attacks often plays to the PFI's advantage: The group is able to accuse the government of conducting a witch hunt against Muslim communities that are unfairly maligned as terrorists. By pointing to how the government considers the PFI to be threatening, and thus implicitly strong, the PFI further burnishes its credentials. As one PFI member claimed, the government goes after the group because they know that it is the only one that is strong enough to go head-to-head with the BJP-aligned Rashtriya Swayam Sevak (RSS), a Hindu nationalist organization.³⁵ General Secretary Anis Ahmed made a similar claim in one of his speeches.³⁶

The PFI has also expanded through successful mergers with other like-minded organizations across India. Indeed, the group's initial formation was the result of a merger between individuals affiliated with other Islamic groups, as noted earlier. Since then, the PFI has reportedly merged with or absorbed various organizations,

some of which count non-Muslims among their ranks, in Andhra Pradesh, Goa, Rajasthan, West Bengal, and Manipur.

Finally, the PFI appears to have expanded its membership through increased online engagement. The group's YouTube channel has approximately 320 different videos, one of which has more than 100,000 views. Similarly, the group has a strong presence on Twitter. A brief search of PFI on the social media platform reveals more than 20 different handles for the national organs of the PFI, many of which command more than 20,000 followers, while the handles of state-level branches generally have between 1,000 and 7,000 followers each.

New Models of Muslim Politics in India

IN THE ABSENCE OF A COHESIVE POLITICAL PARTY OF THEIR OWN, INDIAN MUSLIMS have historically been courted by various parties. In return for their votes, they have traditionally been rewarded with limited patronage, little more than political scraps. After a Hindu mob demolished the Babri Masjid in 1992, however, Muslim communities across India were forced to dispel any notion that the government could be guaranteed to protect and provide for them. These concerns have been exacerbated in recent years by the increasing arrests of Muslims, shrinking political space for Muslim activists, and pervasive poverty and economic marginalization.³⁷ Many Muslims have begun to feel that their community representatives spend too much time fighting over symbolic issues while ignoring the worsening socio-economic conditions of their communities.³⁸ Some Muslims have accused the *'ulama* (clerical establishment) of being elitist, upper-class organizations that only seek to benefit themselves.³⁹

Such grievances and fears gave rise to a new brand of Muslim politics in the 2000s, a politics that is based more on grievance, and is in some ways more inclusive than the inward-looking, symbolic politics of the 20th century. Lower caste groups have organized similar political movements across the country in recent years. According to Arndt-Walter Emmerich, the PFI embodies such a movement, crafting a genuine grievance-based politics that is inclusive of non-Muslims and seeks to use legal means to advance its cause.⁴⁰ The leadership of the PFI comprises a mix of both traditionally trained clerics as well as university-educated professionals, underscoring the group's diverse and grassroots nature.

The PFI gains support by framing Muslims as victims and by capitalizing on the moral injuries sustained by the community, including the persistent violence that India's Muslims have endured since the destruction of Babri Masjid. Such violence includes the Gujarat riots and pogrom of 2002, the Uttar Pradesh riots of 2012, and many other incidents.⁴¹ The PFI's primary opponent is the Hindu right, as various speeches by key members of the PFI make clear. For instance, in 2015 then-Vice Chairman E.M. Abdur Rahman declared that "Hindutva fascism" was the biggest challenge facing India.⁴² General Secretary Anis Ahmed similarly noted in early 2021 that India was under the dictatorship of "Hindutva and fascism."⁴³ At the same time, the group presents itself as patriotic, often asserting its allegiance to the Indian constitution. Moreover, the group has released statements condemning foreign attacks on Indian soil, such as during the India-China skirmishes in Ladakh in 2020.⁴⁴

Allegations of Violence and Extremism

WHILE THE PFI HAS WORKED TIRELESSLY ACROSS INDIA TO EXPAND ITS BASE, IT has come to prominence in a less-than-flattering light as a result of several violent incidents. In 2010, PFI activists chopped off the hand of a professor in Kerala for drafting an exam question that disrespected the Prophet Mohammed.⁴⁵ Several years later, the group was implicated in a string of revenge killings of approximately 30 people, including RSS and Congress members, in Kerala and parts of coastal Karnataka state.⁴⁶ While the PFI officially denied involvement in these incidents, this author's interviews suggest that low-level party activists were most likely involved in some violent incidents over the years. However, it is not clear to what extent this violence was sanctioned by senior party officials.⁴⁷ A 2017 report by the newspaper *Scroll* noted that in 14 out of 24 cases in which the PFI was held responsible for the murder of Hindu activists, the violence was not connected to the PFI and was rooted in personal issues rather than communal or political issues.⁴⁸

The PFI's national prominence increased throughout 2019 and 2020. At the peak of protests that began in December 2019 against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (which excludes Muslim immigrants from an eased pathway to citizenship), various media outlets reported, without providing evidence, that most of the protests were coordinated by the PFI with the support of foreign benefactors

(specifically the Gulf states). Additionally, there have been allegations that PFI activists have been involved in riots across Mangalore and parts of Uttar Pradesh.⁴⁹ Most recently, in August 2020, several key PFI figures were arrested in Bangalore for allegedly instigating riots that had left four dead earlier that year.⁵⁰

At this point, many Indian media outlets are quick to allege a connection between the PFI and virtually any anti-government protest that occurs.⁵¹ Such allegations are routinely refuted by the PFI and even government agencies, often after a degree of investigation.⁵² Indeed, these allegations have become so commonplace that PFI General Secretary Anis Ahmed often pre-empts them. For instance, one of his recent tweets questioned, perhaps sarcastically, when the media would begin to blame the PFI for protests conducted by farmers in New Delhi.⁵³

The branding of the PFI as an extremist group reflects a securitized view of Islam that has increasingly taken hold in India, one that construes Muslim organizations as inherently threatening regardless of their actual proclivity for violence.⁵⁴ An ex-police official based in Bangalore noted to the author, for example, that the state government benefits from the PFI presence since the group provides an easy scapegoat during any social unrest.⁵⁵ As a result, the group faces frequent threats of proscription from the government. Indeed, the group was banned twice (in 2018 and 2019, respectively) in the state of Jharkhand.⁵⁶

The PFI has no professed international ambitions, the sensationalist allegations of the Indian media notwithstanding. The group does not officially sanction violence, although it may turn a blind eye when its members engage in violence over personal or local disputes (which are not uncommon in India), and particularly when the violence is defensive or retributory in nature.⁵⁷ It therefore seems unlikely that the group would have any interest in engaging in any sort of international terrorist plots or in allowing its members to fight in conflicts abroad.

However, it is also possible that some PFI members may leave the group out of frustration with its non-violent stance, choosing instead to pick up arms. This has happened on several occasions, although the PFI has been quick to distance itself from such individuals. For instance, the PFI categorically denied its involvement in the aforementioned attack on the professor in Kerala in 2010.⁵⁸ Similarly, the PFI has condemned the killing of innocent people by jihadist groups such as the Islamic State and Boko Haram.⁵⁹ Such disavowals were also communicated to the author by the group's press secretary in 2019. As such, while security agencies might do well to maintain awareness of the group's membership and activities, it is highly unlikely that the group as a whole will pose a direct threat to India or any other nation.

While much of the criticism of the PFI comes from government quarters, the

group does not enjoy unquestioning or universal support from Muslim communities. Muslims may oppose the group for a variety of ideological or practical reasons. Some individuals have expressed consternation that the PFI and allied groups have encouraged gangster-like behavior among their members. For instance, this author has heard complaints that PFI members have often been overly aggressive in their opposition to pre-marital relationships, resulting in a great deal of “moral policing.” Similarly, some Muslims have criticized the PFI for being too extremist. For instance, the Salafist Jamaat in Kerala accused the PFI (and another group, Jamaat e-Islami) of radicalizing Muslims in the state.⁶⁰ Alternatively, some Muslims have criticized the PFI on practical grounds, arguing that many of the group’s policies are short-sighted or brash and will thus prove counterproductive in the long run.⁶¹

Observers should understand the context in which some of these criticisms arise: Muslim organizations in India often try to fit themselves within boundaries set by the government for what constitutes a mainstream or “acceptable” Islamic organization so as to avoid vilification. One way of doing so is to point fingers at other organizations in order to deflect charges of extremism. Thus, it is common for the Barelvis to single out Deobandis and accuse them of radical tendencies, for the Deobandis to, in turn, single out Ahle Hadeeth and other Salafist organizations, and for the Salafists to then point fingers at the PFI.⁶² Muslim politics, in short, are far from homogenous.

Conclusion

THE POPULAR FRONT OF INDIA AND ITS PREDECESSORS WERE FORMED AS A REACTION to right-wing Hindu activism and violence. Yet the group has long tried to present itself as more than a mirror image of Hindu extremism, as seen in the group’s political alliances with diverse local and state-level parties across India.⁶³ Moreover, it has worked hard to project itself as a responsible and charitable organization committed to upholding the Indian constitutional system. In doing so, it has reaped dividends in the form of page significant grassroots support and has even managed to field candidates for office in some places.

However, the group has had many run-ins with the authorities, which have not always helped its reputation, especially given the ubiquitous misperceptions about Muslim politics in India and the ease with which the tag of extremist or terrorist

is thrown around. The participation of the PFI in different anti-government protests since 2019 has further sharpened the government's crosshairs on the group.

There is a need for the Indian government, its international partners, and commentators and analysts (both Indian and foreign) to understand the nuances of Muslim politics across India and refrain from branding any political engagement on the part of Muslim groups as a form of extremism. This does not mean that concerns about extremism are never warranted. Splinter groups or local elements within the PFI or similar organizations may indeed engage in violence, as noted throughout this piece. But merely monitoring the group's activities for signs of extremism would be a shortsighted approach. There is a greater need for stakeholders to engage with the group's leadership, which has repeatedly expressed its willingness to participate in the legal and democratic process. A failure to do so could lead to further unrest and evermore poor intercommunal relations at a time when India can ill afford such troubles.

NOTES

1. Ramesh Babu, "The story of Popular Front of India and reason behind its growth," *Hindustan Times*, January 29, 2020, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/the-story-of-popular-front-of-india-and-reason-behind-its-growth/story-kOYX8k91LjsaY8EC9sbZDO.html>.
2. C. Christine Fair, "Students Islamic Movement of India and the Indian Mujahideen," *Asia Policy*, No. 9 (2010): 101-120; see also Shishir Gupta, *The Indian Mujahideen: Tracking The Enemy Within*, (Hatchette: New Delhi, 2011).
3. M G Radhakrishnan, "The Muslim Rightwing in Kerala," *India Today*, February 15, 1999.
4. Radhashekar S., "The Dark Night: The what, why, where, when & how about SDPI," *Bangalore Mirror*, August 16, 2020, https://bangaloremirror.indiatimes.com/bangalore/others/the-dark-night-the-what-why-where-when-how-about-sdpi/articleshow/77568103.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst.
5. R. Krishnakumar, "Marad shocks," *Frontline* 23, no. 20 (October 2006). <https://web.archive.org/web/20090112093108/http://www.hinduonnet.com/fline/fl2320/stories/20061020003810600.htm>.
6. "Marad massacre was NDF-sponsored: Vijayan," *Times of India*, May 04, 2003, http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/45388365.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst.

7. George Iype, "Kerala is a soft target for the ISI," *Rediff*, July 28, 2000, <https://www.rediff.com/news/2000/jul/28isi.htm>.
8. Rajveepi, "Marad report slams Muslim League," *Indian Express*, September 27, 2006, <https://indianexpress.com/article/news-archive/marad-report-slams-muslim-league/>.
9. "Is PFI the new SIMI? ED raids offices, netas across 9 states," *Times of India*, December 04, 2020, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/is-pfi-the-new-simi-ed-raids-offices-netas-across-9-states/articleshow/79556959.cms>.
10. TA Ameerudheen, "Popular Front of India: A peek into the Kerala Muslim organisation the government threatens to ban," *Scroll*, November 03, 2017, <https://scroll.in/article/856458/popular-front-of-india-a-peek-into-the-kerala-muslim-organisation-the-government-threatens-to-ban>.
11. Full agenda is available in the constitution of PFI which can be found at its website: <https://www.popularfrontindia.org/sites/default/files/PDFDocuments/Constitution.pdf>.
12. *Ibid.*
13. Interviews conducted with PFI member in Bangalore in February 2020.
14. *Ibid.*
15. *Ibid.*
16. "Will fight against the fascist forces until our last drop of blood: Anis Ahmed," PFI, October 13, 2017, <https://popularfrontindia.org/?q=mon-10232017-1404>.
17. *Ibid.*
18. All details taken from the constitution of PFI.
19. Interview conducted with a real estate agent based in Bangalore in February 2020.
20. Babu "The story of Popular Front of India."
21. "Kapil Sibal defends Rs 77 lakh payment from PFI, says it had nothing to do with anti-CAA protests," *Financial Express*, January 28, 2020, <https://www.financialexpress.com/india-news/kapil-sibal-defends-rs-77-lakh-payment-from-pfi-says-it-had-nothing-to-do-with-anti-caa-protests/1836927/>.
22. "PFI raised substantial funds to organise terror camps in Kerala," *Times of India*, January 05, 2021, http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/80119725.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst.
23. "ED clarifies Bhim Army has no links with PFI, claims of Rs 100 crore pumped for Hathras protest false," *India Today*, October 10, 2020, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/hathras-ed-clarifies-bhim-army-no-links-with-pfi-1729910-2020-10-09>.
24. Saritha S. Balan, "The politics of opportunity: CPI(M)'s long history with PFI," *News Minute*, July 20, 2020, <https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/politics-opportunity-cpim-s-long-history-pfi-85098>.

25. For more see Arndt-Walter Emmerich, *Islamic Movements in India: Moderation and Its Discontents* (Routledge: New York, 2020).
26. See, for example, Popular Front of India, "Covid-19," YouTube video playlist, last updated July 29, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLdFdtpm_d0P2exoBBP6YpPg62dgVpW85V.
27. Hannah Ellis Petersen, "'We are not safe': India's Muslims tell of wave of police brutality," *The Guardian*, January 03, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jan/03/we-are-not-safe-indias-muslims-tell-of-wave-of-police-brutality>.
28. Interviews conducted with PFI Member in Bangalore in February 2020.
29. For more on the PFI's scholarships, see their webpage: <https://schp.popularfrontindia.org/scholarship/guest/index.html#:~:text=Criteria,%2C%20Law%2C%20Social%20Work%20etc>.
30. Interviews conducted with observer of PFI activities in Bangalore, February 2020.
31. "Sibal defends Rs 77 lakh payment from PFI"; "NIA Finds No Evidence of 'Love Jihad' After Kerala Probe," *The Wire*, October 18, 2020, <https://thewire.in/politics/nia-love-jihad-kerala-hadiya>.
32. N.A. Ansari, "More than 20000 arrested in Chennai and Madurai under PFI's jail bharo movement against human rights violations," *The Milli Gazette*, November 12, 2013, <https://www.milligazette.com/news/1-community-news/9500-more-than-20000-arrested-in-chennai-and-madurai-under-pfis-jail-bharo-movement-against-human-rights-violations/>.
33. For more, see Emmerich, *Islamic Movements in India*.
34. Discussion with Muslim social worker based in Mangalore, India in 2018.
35. Interviews conducted with PFI member in Bangalore in February 2020.
36. Popular Front of India, "Why does ED / NIA targets Popular Front of India?" YouTube video, 5:29, December 12, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mKnLqa90eMk>.
37. Lindsay Maizland, "India's Muslims: An Increasingly Marginalized Population," Council on Foreign Relations, August 20, 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/background/india-muslims-marginalized-population-bjp-modi>.
38. Emmerich, *Islamic Movements in India*, 3-4.
39. *Ibid.*, 3-4.
40. *Ibid.*, 86-107.
41. *Ibid.*, 86-107.
42. "Hindutva fascism biggest challenge before country: PFI," *The Hindu*, February 18, 2020, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/kerala/hindutva-fascism-biggest-challenge-before-country-pfi/article6907572.ece>.
43. "PFI Day, Unity March held at Ullal," *VarthaBharathi*, February 17, 2021,

- <https://english.varthabharati.in/karavali/pfi-day-unity-march-held-at-ullal>;
see also, Anis Ahmed, "Rise of Hindutva Fascism—Part 1." *Facebook*. May 3, 2020,
<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=274818123686651>.
44. "Popular Front condemns Chinese aggression against India," Popular Front of India, June 17, 2020, <https://popularfrontindia.org/?q=june-17-2020-1612>.
45. "2010 Kerala professor hand chopping case: NIA finally arrests accused PFI member," *The News Minute*, August 05, 2017, <https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/2010-kerala-professor-hand-chopping-case-nia-finally-arrests-accused-pfi-member-66322>.
46. Babu, "The story of Popular Front of India."
47. Interviews conducted with PFI member in Bangalore, February 2020.
48. Sruthisagar Yamunan, "Ground report: Behind Karnataka BJP's 'jihadi' murder list, more than Hindutva and Islamist clashes," *Scroll*, May 21, 2018, <https://scroll.in/article/872528/ground-report-behind-karnatakas-trail-of-murders-a-deepening-communal-divide-and-rising-greed>.
49. Sandeep Rai, "PFI west UP coordinator arrested for role in December 20 violence," *Times of India*, January 14, 2020, http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/73234326.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst.
50. "NIA arrests 17 SDPI members for conspiracy in Bengaluru riots case," *New Indian Express*, December 22, 2020, <https://www.newindianexpress.com/cities/bengaluru/2020/dec/22/nia-arrests-17-sdpi-members-for-conspiracy-in-bengaluru-riots-case-2239496.html>.
51. See for example, Shaswati Das, "Delhi police arrests PFI leaders over anti-CAA protests," *Live mint*, March 12, 2020, <https://www.livemint.com/news/india/delhi-police-arrests-pfi-leaders-over-anti-caa-protests-11583988119606.html>; "Leader of PFI's student wing held in Kerala, Hathras funding link under scanner," *Hindustan Times*, December 13, 2020, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/leader-of-pfi-s-student-wing-held-in-kerala-hathras-funding-link-under-scanner/story-aKSaBQ04hlxBVdOqHY1wsL.html>; Bhumika Arora, "After pro-Khalistani elements, now PFI supports farmers' stir against Modi," *Newsbred*, November 28, 2020, <https://www.newsbred.com/article/after-pro-khalistani-elements-now-pfi-supports-farmers-stir-against-modi>.
52. Anand Mohan, "Delhi riots: Bail to school owner, court says no evidence of PFI link," *Indian Express*, July 22, 2020, <https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/delhi/delhi-riots-bail-school-owner-pfi-link-6470209/>.
- 53 Anis Ahmed (@AnisPFI). "It's been 2 days and no media has linked PFI to the #FarmersProtest ? So strange? May be because there are no upcoming elections?" Twitter, November 27, 2020, 10:30 a.m., <https://twitter.com/AnisPFI/status/1332255378004877313>.

54. Emmerich, *Islamic Movements in India*, 2-5.
55. Interview held in Bangalore in February 2020.
56. Mukesh Ranjan, "Jharkhand reinstates ban on Popular Front of India for anti-national activities," *New Indian Express*, February 12, 2020, <https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2019/feb/12/jharkhand-reinstates-ban-on-popular-front-of-india-for-anti-national-activities-1937998.html>.
57. Babu, "The story of Popular Front of India."
58. Popular Front of India, "Case of Attack on TJ Joseph - Popular Front response to NIA's Misleading Dossier—LIES EXPOSED!", YouTube video, 3:21, October 5, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T6GKLQ9n9HY>.
59. Posters provided to the author by the press secretary of PFI via email in 2019.
60. Prashant MP, "Salafi group blames Jamaat, PFI for growth of extremism," *Times of India*, January 16, 2019, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kozhikode/salafi-group-blames-jamaat-pfi-for-growth-of-extremism/articleshow/67547958.cms>.
61. Interview with Muslim activist based in Mangalore in February 2020.
62. "Truth vs Hype: The Shadow of Salafism," *NDTV*, September 24, 2016, <https://www.ndtv.com/video/news/truth-vs-hype/truth-vs-hype-the-shadow-of-salafism-432536>.
63. "Congress has formed 'radical syndicate' with Jamaat-e-Islami, PFI; RJD also its part: BJP," *Times of India*, October 25, 2020, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/congress-has-formed-radical-syndicate-with-jamaat-e-islami-pfi-rjd-also-its-part-bjp/articleshow/78858972.cms>.

Still No Storm in the Ocean: New Jihadist Narratives on Indian Islam

By Hari Prasad

ON APRIL 23, 2006, AL-JAZEERA AIRED AN AUDIO RECORDING attributed to Al-Qaeda's (AQ) then-leader Osama Bin Laden.¹ In it, bin Laden refers to a "Crusader-Zionist-Hindu" war against Muslims.² The message referenced the Government of India's policies in the Muslim-majority state of Jammu and Kashmir, and this was clearly aimed at stoking greater anti-India sentiment among Islamist extremists in Pakistan. At the time, al-Qaeda wanted to foment a larger war between Pakistan and India, and some analysts believed it was actively allied with Lashkar-e-Taiba, the Pakistani state-sponsored terrorist group that committed the 2008 Mumbai attacks.³ At the same time, when bin Laden's recording was released, India, a Hindu-majority democracy that is also home to over two hundred million Muslims,

actually figured very little in the salafi-jihadist movement's propaganda. Bin Laden's message on the Hindu "war" against Islam made only a passing mention of New Delhi's policies; his main complaint was about how then-Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf had acquiesced to U.S. President George W. Bush's demand to shut down Kashmiri terrorist camps. In fact, throughout the 2000s, transnational jihadist ideologists said very little about India and, when they did, they primarily focused on the anti-India struggle in Kashmir.

By the mid-2010s, transnational salafi-jihadist propaganda about India had changed dramatically. In September 2014, AQ established Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), led by an Indian-born Muslim from the state of Uttar Pradesh named Asim Umar.⁴ The Islamic State (ISIS) followed suit, establishing a *wilayah*, or "province," for India in May 2019. It was further reported that small cells of ISIS supporters wanted to build a province in the jungles of southern India.⁵ As these salafi-jihadist groups have tried to expand into India, they have attempted to shatter the country's traditions of Hindu-Muslim comity and toleration and to radicalize individuals both to recruit Indian support and fighters for foreign theaters and, increasingly, to wage war in India itself.⁶

To date, however, only a small number of Indian nationals have actually joined transnational salafi-jihadi organizations. An estimated 100 Indians have left the country to join the Islamic State movement in the Middle East,⁷ and by 2019, 155 were arrested inside India for allegedly belonging to ISIS.⁸ This is not insignificant, yet these numbers are miniscule compared to salafi-jihadist recruitment in other South Asian countries—and in Western ones. For instance, more nationals of the Maldives, a country with a population of only 400,000, have traveled to join ISIS than Indians have.⁹ Meanwhile, roughly 300 Americans have joined or attempted to join ISIS.¹⁰ Yet, America's Muslim population is estimated to be around 3.45 million—a fraction of India's.¹¹ Meanwhile, as many as 1,700 citizens of France (whose Muslim population is about the same size as the U.S.'s) have traveled to the Middle East to join ISIS.¹²

This general failure of the transnational jihadist movement to radicalize and recruit Indian Muslims in large numbers has clearly become an issue for today's salafi-jihadist ideologists. Indeed, in his 2013 call for action entitled "Why Is There No Storm In Your Ocean?: A Message for the Muslims of India," the former head of AQIS, Maulana Asim Umar, asked, "Why is it that the Muslims of India are totally absent from the fields of Jihad?"¹³ In the years since, both ISIS and AQ have launched new ideological campaigns online and in various publications targeting India's Muslims. In all this, Kashmir is still a central issue, but salafi-jihadist propaganda has also increasingly focused on the "failures" of Indian democracy

and on the socio-political situation that Indian Muslims face under India's Hindu nationalist-led government.

Absence of Indian Muslims from Global Jihad

AS MOHAMMAD SINAN SIYECH HAS ARGUED, MULTIPLE FACTORS HELP TO EXPLAIN why so few Indian nationals have, to date, been recruited by transnational jihadist groups.¹⁴ These include India's non-participation in the Afghan Jihad against the Soviet Union, India's Muslim leadership and a strong sense of Indian national identity, effective government actions, various practical barriers that have hindered radicalized individuals from actually joining jihadist groups, and (perhaps most important) the influence of strong Indian Muslim families. Moreover, unlike Pakistan-based groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba or India-based terrorist groups like the Indian Mujahideen,¹⁵ transnational movements like AQ and ISIS have historically focused their operations and radicalization efforts on other regions and countries, not on India. Indeed, a frequent complaint of the small number of Indian nationals who do sympathize with AQ and ISIS is that the "Islamic struggle" in "Hindu India" has been ignored by the global jihadist movement.

One example of the conspicuous neglect of Indian Muslims in global jihadist propaganda is the November 2017 Al-Qaeda document from Al-Nasr Media, *Don't Get Stung Out of the Same Hole Repeatedly! A Call to the Muslims of the Subcontinent*. Written by Muhammad Miqdaad, an AQIS "mujahid," the document is primarily addressed to Muslims in Pakistan, not to Indians. It describes India as a bigoted state which wants to enslave the Asian subcontinent's Muslims. Yet, while the document criticizes the Pakistani state, Islamist parties in Pakistan and Bangladesh, and the atrocities of the Pakistani military against Pakistanis, it very rarely addresses itself to Indian Muslims. The anti-India struggle in Kashmir is noted in passing, but this is to criticize the Pakistani state's own self-interested and capricious policy of support for Kashmiri separatism.¹⁶

A blog post by a self-described ISIS supporter in the Indian state of Kerala mentions the global jihad movement's limited focus on India. "All *jihadi shaikhs* outside India are of the view that India is Darul Harb and *jihad* is compulsory in India. But they have formed their views based on what is happening in Kashmir."¹⁷

The author blames salafi-jihadism's neglect of India on the failure of Indian Islamists themselves to inform the larger world about their struggles in India. Similar frustrations can be seen in a comment on a pro-AQ Telegram messaging channel:

...i would like to say that, Media branch of Al Qaida Indian Sub Continent 24/7 busy with khorashan, shaam, somalia etc, but they r not worried about Indian sub continent! there is no news about the Muslims of assam, monipur, (sic) nagaland etc but full news about khorashan or shaam! is this the responsibility? wht r u doing actually? have u not any common sence (sic)??? if u r going like this, may b, someday u will be vanish from this area.”¹⁸

In the past few years, AQIS and ISIS have increasingly responded to the complaints of their India-based sympathizers via social media. The two movements have competed with one another and tried to displace regional and local terrorist groups by attempting to convince Indian Muslims that they are aware of the struggles that Muslims face and supportive of the “Indian Islamic cause.”¹⁹ A pro-AQ Telegram account, for example, acknowledges the complaints of Indian jihadist sympathizers, and promises that Prime Minister Modi will be unable to stop the rise of the mujahideen. The message ends with a direct appeal to India's Muslims: “Mujahideen are aware of the trails (sic) that the muslims (sic) in India are facing and we promise them that we the Mujahideen will protect them like a wall and we are preparing for it.”²⁰

Transnational jihadist movements have also featured more coverage of Indian Muslims in their official publications. ISIS, for instance, published a 22-minute video in May 2016 that showcased its Indian members and denounced India while encouraging others to make *hijrah* to the Islamic State.²¹ In February 2020, ISIS released the first issue of its English language magazine for South Asia, *Sawt Al-Hind (Voice of India)*. It featured an article addressed to Indian Muslims titled “So Where are You Going? A Call to Muslims of India.”²² The article promotes an “us versus them” mentality and portrays relations between Islam and Hinduism as unbridgeable.²³ The May 2020 issue of the magazine also featured an in-depth article titled “Rise Up O Ahl-u-Sunnah of Hind.”²⁴ The August 2020 issue has a cover story titled “From Babri to Aqsa,” which seeks to entwine, in the salafi-jihadist imagination, the 1992 destruction of the Babri Masjid by Hindutva extremists and Israel's control of Palestine and Jerusalem.²⁵

AQIS has also expanded its propaganda outreach to Indian Muslims. Its main

Urdu publication, *Nawai Afghan Jihad*, was renamed as *Nawai Ghazwat Ul Hind* (*Voice of the Conquest of India*) in April 2020. In January 2020, Asim Umar's *de-facto* successor, Usama Mahmood, published a 27-minute audio track addressed to Indian Muslims titled "If Islam is Your Home, Then it is Your Nation: Message of Love and Brotherhood in the Service of Muslims in India."²⁶

One main focus of salafi-jihadist propaganda (and of ISIS in particular) has been to showcase and lionize the Indian nationals who have left their home to join the global jihad. An article in the March 2021 issue of *Sawt Al-Hind*, "The Irhabis Who Infuriated the Pagans," celebrated the Indian Mujahideen terrorist group while highlighting how many Indian Mujahideen members joined the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq.²⁷ Likewise, a pro-ISIS Telegram message celebrated the martyrdom of Dr. Shahnawaz Alam, known by his *nom-de-guerre* Abu Muhammad Al-Hindi, who pledged allegiance to ISIS and participated in the 2017 battle of Mosul where he was later killed.²⁸ Allegedly, Dr. Alam said in his last will that he wanted to take "revenge and kill Americans for they were the ones who destroyed Mosul and hacked civilians to death. In his will He [Alam] also said, Their women, children, old people kill them destroy them, burn down their houses. The maximum loss to the *'deen* (religion) of Islam is caused by America. Enter their place and kill them. Kill them wherever you can."²⁹

Yet another pro-ISIS Telegram message celebrated another former Indian militant, Mohammad Shafi Armar, aka Yosuf Al-Hindi, who had travelled to Syria and reportedly died in the battle of Baghouz in March 2019.³⁰ The message concluded by asserting "These are the *Abtaal* (deeds) who should be taken as an inspiration by the Muslims of Indian Subcontinent. What better example of steadfastness than the example of these mujahideen who were besieged in Al-Baghouz. May Allah open the hearts of Indian Muslims for Jihad."³¹

ISIS's *Sawt Al-Hind* also profiled multiple Indians who had joined Islamic State to fight in Afghanistan. The September 2020 issue looks at Abu Khalid Al-Hindi, a Kerala-born Indian who massacred Afghan Sikhs in Kabul. Little is mentioned about his life in India, except that he had "seen the brutalities of infidel hindus (*sic*) and Sikhs from his own eyes in Kashmir and India, but had no way to take revenge or support his Muslim brothers then."³² The article justifies Al-Hindi's atrocities as a way to "avenge the heinous crimes that kuffar committed in Kashmir and Hindustan upon Muslims" and celebrates the fact that Al-Hindi killed many "hindus and sikhs in their togetherness" and multiple Afghan Muslim soldiers.³³ The October 2020 issue celebrated the life of one Abu Rawahah Al-Hindi, an Indian who conducted a suicide bombing against U.S. forces in Afghanistan. Unlike Abu Khalid's story which had minimal background on life in India, details

on Abu Rawahah's life in India are practically non-existent. Both profiles, however, valorized each man's life with the Islamic State and their battles and attacks against enemy forces.

Clearly, ISIS's showcasing of Indian fighters is aimed at drawing more young Indians to fight and die on foreign battlefields. It is significant, however, that of the fifteen available issues of *Sawt Al-Hind*, only five articles are directly addressed to Indian Muslims and the situation they face at home. In fact, most of *Sawt Al-Hind*'s content tends to address a general jihadist audience, rather than focusing on South Asian issues. Moreover, despite ISIS's aim to recruit Indian Muslims, India is not a main focus. The cover story for the April 2020 issue of *Sawt Al-Hind* discussed the hadith *Ghazwa-e-Hind*, i.e., the traditional Muslim saying on the Islamic conquest of India. The story featured a map of South Asia with ISIS flags planted on the locations of Khorasan, Pakistan, Kashmir, Sri Lanka, Maldives, and Bangladesh. Curiously, India is conspicuously absent in ISIS's imagining of its "caliphate."³⁴ This may be a reflection of the small number of Indian nationals that have actually joined the group. Despite this, transnational jihadist groups are intent on expanding in India, and they have increasingly looked to exploit the country's religious and political tensions for their own gain.

Under the Shadow of Hindutva

SIGNIFICANTLY, TRANSNATIONAL JIHADISM'S BID TO EXPAND INTO INDIA HAS coincided with the rise to power of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Since the BJP's 2014 election victory, Hindu nationalism or Hindutva has become the dominant political force in India. Hindu nationalism is, in fact, a broad-based phenomenon, although its Indian opponents and many of its supporters alike say the movement's ultimate goal is to establish India as a majoritarian Hindu state. Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, major aspects of the Hindutva program have been implemented, and this has generated considerable upheaval, debate, and worry over Indian democracy's future.

The rise of Hindu nationalism has met with a wide variety of responses from India's civil society, including from Indian Muslims. India is perceived by many to be on an illiberal path and, for many Muslims, the youth especially, the traditional Islamic leadership is seen as out of touch or too slow to respond to the dramatic changes in the country. This has led many Indian Muslims to seek out

new leadership, just as it has driven new forms of religious and political activism. At the same time, Indian Islam is as ethnically, theologically, linguistically and sociologically diverse as the rest of India is. Because of this, as the scholar Hilal Ahmed has poignantly argued, there is not one “political Islam” in India, nor is there only one “Muslim response” to the rise of Hindutva.³⁵

Significantly, many of India’s premier Islamic institutions, such as Darul Uloom Deoband,³⁶ the All India Muslim Personal Law Board, the Jamiat Ulema-e-Hind,³⁷ etc., have said very little about the rise of Hindutva.³⁸ In contrast, activism has generally increased among younger Indian Muslims, particularly among students who not only assert their Indian Islamic identity, but also argue that India must never become a Hindu state and that Muslims form an important part of India’s history and its future. One prime example of this trend can be seen in the rise of Muslim political leaders like Asadudin Owaisi, a member of parliament from Hyderabad. Although Owaisi is seen as a controversial firebrand for his provocative statements and accusations that his party, the All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen, engages in communalism,³⁹ he also clearly advocates for Muslim rights within the framework of the Indian constitution and argues that a religious Muslim identity and Indian nationalism are not incompatible.

In 2019, a major controversy erupted over the Government of India’s passage of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), which offered expedited Indian citizenship to non-Muslims fleeing religious persecution in nearby Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Bangladesh.⁴⁰ BJP officials argue the law and related measures are meant to make India a safe haven for religious minorities who are fleeing persecution in neighboring Muslim-majority states. The CAA, however, effectively bars persecuted Muslim minorities such as Shia and Ahmadi Muslims from pursuing expedited citizenship in India.

The CAA and subsequent developments triggered widespread protests in December 2019 in Delhi and several other major cities. The protests were led by Muslim women from the neighborhood of Shaheen Bagh, and many of the protestors were Muslims.⁴¹ Although many Muslim protestors did shout religious slogans, they also held high many pictures of B.R. Ambedkar, the famous Dalit leader and the man most responsible for India’s 1950 secular and liberal constitution.⁴² Meantime, pro-Hindutva media channels labeled the protesters as anti-India radicals or extremists,⁴³ and some protesters were met with violence from the police as well as from Hindutva gangs. This culminated in what some Indian media termed the “Delhi pogroms,”⁴⁴ in which a BJP minister, Kapil Mishra, was accused of inciting violence against Muslim citizens.⁴⁵ Fifty people were killed in the ensuing violence, and thousands were displaced. With little to

no evidence, far-right news sites claimed that jihadists had infiltrated the protests and were responsible for the violence. The protests ended as the COVID-19 pandemic started to affect India, although this led to a new bout of accusations and violence targeting Muslims.⁴⁶

ISIS and AQIS have both seized on these developments, arguing the anti-Muslim violence is proof of the threat posed by Hindu nationalism and of how Indian democracy is a tool for the oppression of Muslims.⁴⁷ ISIS and AQ sympathizers both ridiculed the majority of Indian Muslims who protested peacefully. In the December 2020 issue of *Sawt Al-Hind*, ISIS criticized the anti-CAA protestors as participating in an un-Islamic system, i.e. democracy. The many Muslims who marched alongside Hindus were further said to be begging the “Kaffir” (infidels) for concessions.⁴⁸ If Indian Muslims refused to respond with violence, this made the protests unacceptable.

AQIS’s approach to the anti-CAA protests was different from ISIS’s. An article in the February 2020 issue of *Nawai Afghan Jihad* argued the political protests were a “temporary necessity.” In this, the article seemed to offer a qualified endorsement of the anti-CAA protests—if, that is, the protestors continued to use Islamic slogans and worked to impose Sharia.⁴⁹ Subsequently, an Indian AQ supporter sent a “letter to the editors” criticizing the February 2020 article. The protests, AQ sympathizer argued, were not legitimate because Muslim protestors mixed with women and with non-Muslims, and also because the protests were in support of a kufr and secular system. The author insisted that protests to “save democracy” could never be condoned by Sharia.⁵⁰

AQIS responded to this critique by arguing that the protests were not in favor of democracy but against anti-Muslim atrocities. In this view, protests are acceptable as a tactical expedient and step toward establishing Sharia. AQIS explicitly compared this argument to AQ’s support of the 2011 Arab Spring protests. Although many of those protesters were, like the ones in India, pro-democracy, AQ sought (and partially succeeded) to take advantage of the political upheaval. Further, for AQIS, the presence of women at the protests mean that it was up to jihadists to “inform” their co-religionists on proper Sharia.⁵¹ Despite all this, there is little evidence that AQ or its members were, in fact, involved with the anti-CAA protests.

In May 2020, AQ in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) released a statement affirming its “solidarity” with the Muslims of India.⁵² The short declaration began by recounting the events of the anti-CAA protests and the violence against Delhi’s Muslims. At the time, former U.S. President Donald Trump was on a state visit in India. AQAP argued Trump had actually given a “green light” for the Delhi violence to take place, and AQAP’s message about an “international war waged

against Islam” harked back to bin Laden’s 2006 message. AQAP also called on India’s Muslims to join their fellow Mujahideen in India and to exhort the India’s Muslim religious leaders to take a committed stance against the injustice.

On January 2020, AQIS’s Usama Mahmoud released a long audio message arguing it was necessary for India’s Muslims to raise their voice in protest against anti-Muslim oppression, but that this was not enough. “Just by crying softly, one cannot protect their lives.” Instead, Mahmoud directed Indian Muslims to start preparing for battle. A large segment of the audio message discusses inter-religious relations in India. For Mahmoud, a religious war between Muslims and Hindus is inevitable, as the Hindus, in his mind, are “unbelievers” who will only double cross Muslims. Although many Hindus supported the anti-CAA protests, Mahmoud further stated that “it will be murderous self-deception if we [Muslims] trust the white lies of Hindu-Muslim brotherhood and religious tolerance ... Ram Ram (God God) on their mouth and a knife behind the back is their modus operandi.”⁵³

While ISIS and AQ continue to debate tactics, ideologists from both movements see Hindu-Muslim toleration and brotherhood as “delusional,” and they see political strife in India as an opportunity to foment violence. Unlike ISIS, some parts of AQIS appear to support protests as a tactical expedient, although they insist this is a prelude to the use of violence, which they view as inevitable. Given this, ideologists from both movements continue to ask why large numbers of Indian Muslims have not taken up violence. The answer, jihadists argue, is that the fault lies with Indian Muslims and their leadership.

The Leadership

INDIA’S MUSLIM LEADERS HAVE WIDELY AND FORCEFULLY CONDEMNED ISIS AND al-Qaeda. In 2015, 70,000 clerics associated with the Barelvi school of Islam issued a fatwa saying ISIS and AQ were not “real Islamic” organizations.⁵⁴ The same year, 1,000 Deobandi scholars issued a fatwa condemning ISIS and its activities.⁵⁵ Not surprisingly, the Indian Muslim leadership, including prominent politicians, intellectuals, and institutions, are all targets of harsh criticism by ISIS and AQIS. Jihadist propagandists argue that, at best, the Muslim leadership is ineffective, and at worst, they are complicit in the oppression of Muslims.

Jihadist groups have likewise sought to undermine the Muslim leadership in other countries. However, to India’s advantage, the country possesses a wide variety

of Muslim intellectuals, theologians, and political figures, all of which can hinder the appeal of these extremist groups. More ISIS fighters from the state of Kerala have traveled overseas than from any other Indian state. Kerala's Islamic religious and political scene is considerably diverse, although it has a particularly strong Salafist movement, which is frequently described in the Indian media as a driver of radicalization in Kerala.⁵⁶ However, Salafism has been a part of the state's politics since before independence,⁵⁷ and scholars argue there is little evidence that Kerala Salafism by itself has led to extremism.⁵⁸ There is, however, evidence of a dispute between jihadist ideologists and the leaders of the Kerala Salafi community. Abdul Rasheed, an ISIS fighter from Kerala, sent multiple voice messages sometime in 2017 over WhatsApp and Telegram to radicalize his friends and colleagues.⁵⁹ In a 10-minute-long WhatsApp recording, Abdul Rasheed calls on Indian Muslims to either make *hijrah* to the Islamic State or, at minimum, to commit violence against their Hindu neighbors. He ends the recording by slamming several leading Islamic organizations in Kerala, most notably the Kerala Nadathul Mujahideen (KNM) and Wisdom Global Islamic Mission, both prominent Salafist religious organizations. Referring to these organizations as *Munafiqun* (false Muslims), Abdul Rasheed goes on to assert, "They do not say anything, [but] fight amongst themselves on everything including Jinn [genies]. In between, just to make the muslims (*sic*) happy, once in a while they host talk shows for other religions, all unnecessary.... Even if you do this for a 1000 years, what change can you bring in to the situation? Nothing."⁶⁰

The 2019 Babri Masjid Supreme Court judgement, which gave the land to a Hindu group, has also been used as a pretext by jihadists to attack India's Muslim leadership. The AQ-aligned Ansar Ghazwatul Hind group based in Kashmir issued a statement in November 2019 calling the Court's judgment a vindication of their own view of the "Hindu" Indian government and the Muslim leaders that support it:

Nothing else could be expected from this unjust Hindu government and its unjust courts regarding the verdict on Babri Masjid. But on this occasion, the gullible Muslim leaders who have laid their hopes on the oppressive polytheist government and on its subservient departments, and who teach the Muslim community to do likewise, must necessarily review their stance.⁶¹

An ISIS article in *Sawt al-Hind* took the attack on Muslim leaders still further. In the article “Rise Up Ahl-u-Sunnah of Hind,” India’s established Muslim scholars are broadly referred to as “mouthpieces of evil.” “Beware the Ulama as-Su’ who use the pulpits of the Masajid to spread misguidance, these mouthpieces of evil and lead them astray.”⁶² Indeed, the very first issue of *Sawt al-Hind* refers to the prominent religious scholars Mahmoud Madani and Arshad Madani of Jamiat Ulema-e-Hind as “wicked.” It also described Asaduddin Owaisi and the student activist Kanhaiya Kumar “at the forefront of misguiding Muslim youth.”⁶³

Asaduddin Owaisi, who is probably one of the most visible Muslim politicians in India today, has since been heavily vilified. In 2016, Owaisi condemned ISIS, calling the group “bloody murderers and rapists.”⁶⁴ Following this, an ISIS supporter tweeted at Owaisi that he was a “Disgrace for Muslims of India. Opposing islamicstate (sic) will lead you to hell only repent before end.”⁶⁵ ISIS supporters continue to regularly attack Owaisi, with one ISIS Telegram channel posting: “O Muslims of Wilayah Hind, Democracy (Kuffur) is not going to save you? Murtaad (apostate) Asaduddin Owaisi #Wilayah_Hind #Islamic_state #The_truth_Media.”⁶⁶

India’s Muslim leadership is also blamed for weakening the Muslim community. As an ISIS supporter put it in one chat message:

The problem with most Indian Muslims is that they are taught by murjiah (those who postpone) imams who make them sheep instead of lions? They tell them to follow the law of the land. Even when there are riots they point out that there (sic) own “akhlaq” wasn’t good otherwise whole world would have loved us.⁶⁷

Muslim religious figures—including even ones like Zakir Naik, a controversial Salafi televangelist who has lived in exile outside of India since 2017—were further criticized for their support of the Indian State:

So called ulema in India can’t call for hijrah or jihad. They sold their Imaan. Zakir Naik used to say he was proud Indian and that he had faith in Indian judiciary system. He went on to call IS (Islamic State) as un-IS. Yet kuffar were not pleased with him. Now he is hiding in Saudi. Indian Muslims have become used to humiliation. Their evil ulema kept them saying, jihad is not allowed today. Now they are so afraid of fighting back that they let mobs beat them till they die, offering no bit of resistance.⁶⁸

AQIS's former emir, Asim Umar, also issued a number of scathing attacks on the Muslim leadership. In a 2014 article, Umar dismissed Muslim leaders as instruments of state power with nothing to offer Muslims but empty slogans about freedom, democracy, and human rights.⁶⁹ According to Umar, Muslim leaders, political parties, the Supreme Court, and Bollywood all exist to keep the illusion that India is a genuine democracy. Furthermore, Umar argued that all power in India is controlled by the Brahmin upper caste, and he asked his Islamist followers whether Muslims are actually better off than Dalits. Here, he treats Muslims as simply one people, despite the fact that India's Muslims are themselves divided by caste. And, rather than condemning the caste system outright, as Indian democrats do, Umar makes clear that he views it as insufferable that Muslims are just as bad if not worse off than Dalits.

When prominent Muslim leaders speak out against anti-Muslim violence in India, jihadists argue this is insufficient. They insist democracy and its associated values are not only un-Islamic, but a threat to Islam itself. Advocacy on behalf of the Muslim community is normally framed as a human and minority rights issue, but an ISIS supporter took issue with that conceptualization:

...the situation is changing and some of them [the Muslim leadership] are outspoken for the rights of muslims and about killing of muslims. They are portraying this as human rights or political issue. Some of them in Kashmir also do the same thing but recently their support by masses has dwindled and masses support Mujahideen of Kashmir and want to be part of it but weapons are in low supply and thus costly. May Allah subhanhuwatala give all of us hidayah.⁷⁰

In jihadist propaganda, one of the most damning failures of the Indian Muslim leadership is their embrace of Hindu-Muslim comity and brotherhood. Ever since the arrival of Islam in India in the 7th century, Muslim scholars have generally regarded Hindus as *Ahl-ul-Kitaab*, or "People of the Book." Initially, the decision to declare Hindus as People of the Book was based on political calculation, as the Muslim Mughal minority sought to enable their rule in India, but this soon had religious justification.⁷¹ The ideals of Hindu-Muslim comity have been crucial to the emergence of modern India, and they have been championed by many Muslim scholars. The famous modern pan-Islamic revivalist Jamal al-Din Afghani [1839-1897] called for Hindu-Muslim unity as an anti-imperialist strategy and as a basis of Indian nationalism.⁷² Maulana Hussain Ahmad Madani [1879-1957]

of the conservative Deobandi school similarly advocated against Partition and for “composite nationalism” in which Hindus and Muslims live side by side.⁷³ To be sure, some Indian Muslim scholars and revivalists have argued for Islamic supremacy over Hindus, but one can just as easily find many more arguing for unity and co-existence.

ISIS and AQIS are both trying to destroy this tradition. AQIS released a video in 2018 titled “A History of Islamic India.” The video portrays Islam’s arrival as bringing a new age of enlightenment to India, where “people were so shackled by slavery and cruel laws that their lives were no different from that of animals and other four-legged creatures.”⁷⁴

The video is simplistic, and it only presents a timeline from the arrival of Islam to 1857, the year of the Sepoy Mutiny, the famous rebellion against British colonizers. But the video’s main message was that Islam is the gift for what was a backwards subcontinent that believed in slavery, unlike pre-Islamic India. Importantly, there is an implication that there is no distinction between today’s Hindutva street mobs and Hinduism itself. Instead, the actions of Hindutva mobs against ordinary Muslims are simply carried out by Hindus, hence justifying the idea that Hindus and Hinduism as a whole represent a threat to all Muslims. But this anger also is reserved for Indian Muslims, who are often attacked by global jihadists for failing to use violence.

“Why Is There No Storm In Your Ocean?”

JIHADIST IDEOLOGISTS RESERVE MUCH OF THEIR HARSHTEST CRITICISMS FOR Indian Muslims themselves. For ISIS and AQIS members and sympathizers, Indian Muslims have done little to take action against “their oppressors” nor have they truly “embraced” Islam (as defined by ISIS and AQIS.) Indian Muslims, jihadists lament, are too dedicated to secularism, democracy, and nationalism.

As mentioned earlier, the AQIS leader Asim Umar released a video in 2013 titled “Why Is there No Storm in Your Ocean?” The video calls on Indian Muslims to put aside their “weakness” and to reclaim their lost “honor” through violent struggle:

Today when the call of Jihad is being raised all over the world and Muslims of every region have started Jihad in their lands to eradicate the system based on disbelief, the leaders of global jihad have the right to ask not just the scholars but also the ordinary Muslims of India: Where are the Muslims of India whose history is witness to the fact that they have in every age raised the banner of truth against the enemies of Islam?⁷⁵

Zakir Musa, a Kashmiri fighter that led the AQ-aligned Ansar Ghazwat ul-Hind, described Indian Muslims as the “most shameless Muslims in the world. They should be ashamed of calling themselves Muslims. Our sisters getting abused and dishonoured and Indian Muslims keep screaming that ‘Islam is peace.’”⁷⁶ Musa’s statement specifically referenced the perceived silence of Indian Muslims about the Kashmiri cause, but his criticism of Indian Muslims is hardly unique.

The ISIS fighter Abu Muhammad Al-Hindi (aka Shahnawaz Alam) likewise criticized the lack of action by Indian Muslims. In what is alleged to be his final recording, Al-Hindi said Muslims are “happily living a dishonored life among the lowliest unbelievers. Walk on the path of Allah, recognize your religion and your abilities, pick up weapons, if not then immigrate to the nearest frontiers of Caliphate, follow jihad and hijrah, it’s a life of respect there.”⁷⁷

Indian Muslims are further attacked for their refusal to fight or kill Indian Hindus; a topic frequently brought up on Telegram. “Indian Muslims being treated like animals by Indian Hindus. When will India Muslims wake up?”⁷⁸ Another pro-ISIS message goes further, saying Indian Muslims willingly dishonor themselves to win the favor of Hindus, but this does not “saved” the Muslims from “massacres.”⁷⁹ None of this should be dismissed as simple talk by rabble rousers on social media. The first *Sawt Al-Hind* issue includes a statement saying,

O Muslims of India! Will you not pay heed at this glorious from al-Qur’an?....Haven’t the filthy Hindu polytheists become dominant over you already? Your situation is living proof that indeed Allah has forsaken the Muslims of India. Allah almighty has forsaken you, for you chose for yourselves the deen of secularism over Islam.⁸⁰

Indeed, this theme of Indian Muslims trading in Islam for the “religion” of the Indian constitution and nationalism is a frequent topic. A long pro-ISIS Telegram message declares Indian Muslims “were more nationalists than Hindus to please

kuffar. How many of them bowed down to Hindu idols along with Hindus to show brotherhood. How many of them sang national anthem while they knew it had words of kufr. They still could not please kuffar.”⁸¹ Meantime, an AQIS Telegram channel, Ghazwathul Hind, commented on India’s 70th Independence Day and the fact that Muslims took part in the celebration:

To the Muslims in India! How long are you going to sleep and dream about the peace and harmony by which Hindus are trying to enslave your mind? How long are you going to obey the so called holy book? The Constitution of India? which contradict the Holy Quran of Allah (swt)? Why do you want to be the slave of this constitution, while Allah has ordered us to reject these man-made laws? Allah (swt) says in the Quran?⁸²

Despite salafi-jihadist efforts to proselytize and spread their war into India, the March 2021 issue of *Sawt al-Hind* once again lamented the lack of Indian participation in the global jihad. One article hailed the political and economic turmoil caused by the COVID-19 pandemic as a “blessing in disguise” for ISIS’s efforts to spread mayhem in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Even so, the article said ISIS remains “disappointed over the situation of Muslims in the mainland India which has become barren and devoid of Jihad even as the ‘Ansar al Khilafah’ (supporters of the caliphate) have largely restricted their efforts merely to the social media platforms.”⁸³

Conclusion

THE PROFOUND SOCIO-ECONOMIC CHANGES UNDERWAY IN INDIA TODAY AFFECT all of its citizens, and this expresses itself in many ways, including in the country’s religious politics. To many Indian Muslims, the traditional Islamic leaders are out of touch. This disconnect between Muslim citizens and established Islamic leaders and institutions provides some opportunity for the delegitimization of the latter, particularly among those who are seeking leadership and protection against the ascendant politics of Hindutva.

Salafi-jihadist movements are trying to take advantage of this, and India is a prime area of competition between AQ and ISIS, both of which are trying to radicalize and recruit Indian Muslims. Yet, their narratives about Indian Muslims and efforts to

undermine Indian democracy and nationalism remain relatively understudied. This needs to change. ISIS and AQIS view any pact with a democratic or Hindutva government as religiously invalid. As such, their propaganda has targeted established Islamic institutions, Muslim leaders, and the Hindu nationalist-led government. To many younger Indian Muslims, the traditional Islamic leadership is out of touch. This disconnect between Muslim citizens and established leaders and institutions provides some opportunity for the delegitimization of the latter, particularly among those who are seeking leadership and protection against the ascendant politics of Hindutva.

The salafi-jihadist threat to India is real, but, even so, ISIS and AQ propaganda is not driving Muslim politics in India. Indian Muslims, for the most part, are forging their own religious and political paths, within the framework of the Indian constitution and the country's democracy. It is imperative for the Indian government and foreign observers to recognize this. Indeed, the discussion should not be about Indian Muslims as a potential security problem, but about Indian Muslims as citizens. Despite the turmoil in India, few Muslims in India have actually joined extremist groups. They have instead doubled down on India's constitutional tenets, viewing the rise of majoritarian politics as a threat to the Indian constitution, to its democracy, and to its existence as a nation. Perhaps nothing else puts this clearer than an anti-CAA Malayalam rap song performed by Haris Saleem, "We are Indians beyond languages, attires and bloodlines, we will roar together, together again."⁸⁴

NOTES

1. The author would like to acknowledge the help provided by Amarnath Amarsingam, Meili Criezis, Munira Mustafa, and Mohammad Sinan Siyech for their feedback on this article; Aaron Zelin and *Jihadology* for access to their materials, and Daneesh Majid, Aparna Menon, and Faysal Abbas Mohamad for providing translations.
2. "A Crusader-Zionist-Hindu War Against Muslims," *Outlook India*, April 24, 2006, <https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/a-crusader-zionist-hindu-war-against-muslims/231048>.
3. Bruce Riedel, "Mumbai Attacks: Four Years Later," *Brookings Institution*, November 26, 2012, accessed April 1, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/mumbai-attacks-four-years-later/>. However, other analysts have argued that the linkages were historical only, see *Lashkar-e-Taiba Beyond*

- Bin Laden: Enduring Challenges for the Region and International Community, Before the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee*, 112th Congress (2011) (testimony by C. Christine Fair, Assistant Professor at Georgetown University), <https://www.foreign.senate.gov/publications/download/c-christine-fair-testimony-5-24-2011>.
4. Dipanjan Roy, Roy Chaudhury, and Rahul Tripathi, "Al-Qaeda in Indian Subcontinent Releases Audio Speech Warning Fighters Against Harming Innocent Muslims," *Economic Times*, July 18, 2018, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/al-qaeda-in-indian-subcontinent-releases-audio-speech-warning-fighters-against-harming-innocent-muslims/articleshow/52544561.cms?from=mdr>.
 5. Neeraj Chauhan, "Islamic State Group Al-Hind Plotted to Build Province in Jungles of South India: NIA Charge Sheet," *Hindustan Times*, October 3, 2020, accessed March 21, 2021, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/is-group-planned-province-in-south-india-nia-charge-sheet/story-PqPdkxdOdt7ormlxfD95hO.html>.
 6. Hari Prasad, "The Salafi Jihadist Reaction to Hindu Nationalism" *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology* (2019), <https://www.hudson.org/research/15137-the-salafi-jihadist-reaction-to-hindu-nationalism>.
 7. Mohammed Sinan Siyech, "Understanding the Indian Foreign Fighter Lacuna," *ORF Online*, January 31, 2020, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/understanding-the-indian-foreign-fighter-lacuna-60921/>.
 8. Press Trust of India, "155 ISIS Operatives, Sympathisers Arrested So Far in India: Home Ministry," *NDTV*, June 25, 2019, <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/155-isis-operatives-sympathisers-arrested-so-far-in-india-home-ministry-2059073>.
 9. Azim Zahir, "Islamic State Terror in the Maldives as COVID-19 Arrives," *The Diplomat*, April 18, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/04/islamic-state-terror-in-the-maldives-as-covid-19-arrives/>.
 10. Greg Myre, "Americans in ISIS: Some 300 Tried to Join, 12 Have Returned to U.S.," February 5, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2018/02/05/583407221/americans-in-isis-some-300-tried-to-join-12-have-returned-to-u-s>.
 11. "U.S. Muslims Concerned About Their Place in Society, but Continue to Believe in the American Dream," *Pew Research*, July 26, 2017, <https://www.pewforum.org/2017/07/26/findings-from-pew-research-centers-2017-survey-of-us-muslims/>.
 12. Adam Nossiter, "How ISIS Changed France," *New York Times*, October 31, 2019, accessed April 3, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/31/world/europe/al-baghdadi-isis-france.html>.

13. Asim Umar, "Why is There No Storm In Your Ocean? A Message for Muslims of India," *As-Sahab Media*, June 8, 2013.
14. Mohammed Sinan Siyech, "India's Foreign Fighter Puzzle," *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, February 5, 2021, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00856401.2021.1864706>.
15. For example, see Praveen Swami, "India's Invisible Jihad," *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology* (2017), <https://www.hudson.org/research/13974-india-s-invisible-jihad>. Shishir Gupta, *Indian Mujahideen: The Enemy Within* (Hachette India: Gurgaon, 2011). Samina Yasmeen, *Jihad and Dawah: Evolving Narratives of Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jamat Ud Dawah* (Hurst & Company: London, 2017). C. Christine Fair, *In Their Own Words: Understanding Lashkar-e-Tayyaba* (Hurst & Company: London, 2018).
16. Muhammad Miqdad, "Don't Get Stung Out Of The Same Hole Repeatedly! A Call to Muslims of the Subcontinent," *An-Nasr Media*, November 2017.
17. Stanly Johny, *The ISIS Caliphate: From Syria to the Doorsteps of India*, (New Delhi: Bloomsbury, 2018), 120.
18. Telegram message, بتایلمع مساق نبا.
19. This analysis was informed by English Telegram messages collected between September 2015 to February 2021, three Urdu videos obtained through the website *Jihadology*, 14 issues of ISIS's English *Sawt Al-Hind* publication, 2 issues of AQIS's *Nawai Afghan Jihad/Nawai Ghazwat al-Hind* magazine, a Malayalam Whatsapp Chat, an Arabic publication, and translated Malayalam pro-ISIS posts available in the appendix of Stanly Johny's book: *The ISIS Caliphate*. This paper will primarily focus on English language sources, which represent a small fraction of both organization's propaganda.
20. Telegram message, Ghazwathul Hind.
21. The Land of India: Between Pain and Hope—Wilayat Hims," *Jihadology*, May 19, 2016. <https://jihadology.net/2016/05/19/new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-the-land-of-india-between-pain-and-hope-wilayat-%e1%b8%a5im%e1%b9%a3/>.
22. Abu Zakariya Al-Hindi, "So Where Are You Going? A Call To Muslims of Hind," *Sawt Al-Hind* issue 1, 5-7, <https://jihadology.net/2020/02/24/new-issue-of-the-magazine-%e1%b9%a3awt-al-al-hind-1/>.
23. Prithvi Iyer and Maya Mirchandani, "Can Communal Violence Fuel an ISIS Threat in India? An Analysis of 'Voice of Hind'," *ORF Online*, September 4, 2020, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/can-communal-violence-fuel-an-isis-threat-in-india/>.
24. "Rise Up O Ahl-u-Sunnah of Hind..." *Sawt Al-Hind* issue 4, 4-6, <https://jihadology.net/2020/05/23/new-issue-of-the-magazine-%e1%b9%a3awt-al-hind-4/>.
25. "From Babri to Aqsa," *Sawt Al-Hind* issue 7, 9-12,

- <https://jihadology.net/2020/08/23/new-issue-of-the-magazine-%e1%b9%a3awt-al-hind-7/>.
26. Ustad Usamah Mahmud, "If Islam Is Your Home Then It Is Your Nation! Message of Love and Brotherhood in the Service of Muslims in India," *As-Sahab Media (Subcontinent)*, <https://jihadology.net/2020/01/23/new-release-from-al-qaidah-in-the-indian-subcontinents-ustad-usamah-ma%e1%b8%a5mud-if-islam-is-your-home-then-it-is-your-nation-message-of-love-and-brotherhood-in-the-service-of/>.
 27. "The Irhabis Who Infuriated the Pagans," *Sawt Al-Hind* issue 14, 6-9, <https://jihadology.net/2021/03/17/new-issue-of-the-magazine-%e1%b9%a3awt-al-hind-14/>.
 28. Telegram message, India/Kashmir/Pakistan/Bangladesh.
 29. Telegram message, India/Kashmir/Pakistan/Bangladesh.
 30. Telegram message, *wilāyat al-shām*
 31. Telegram message, *wilāyat al-shām*.
 32. "Abu Khalid Al Hindi," *Sawt Al-Hindi* issue 8, 12-14, <https://jihadology.net/2020/09/22/new-issue-of-the-magazine-%e1%b9%a3awt-al-hind-8/>. "Abu Rawahah Al-Hindi," *Sawt Al-Hindi* issue 9, 13-14, <https://jihadology.net/2020/10/20/new-issue-of-the-magazine-%e1%b9%a3awt-al-hind-9/>.
 - 33 "Abu Khalid Al Hindi," *Sawt Al-Hindi* issue 8, 12-14, <https://jihadology.net/2020/09/22/new-issue-of-the-magazine-%e1%b9%a3awt-al-hind-8/>. "Abu Rawahah Al-Hindi," *Sawt Al-Hindi* issue 9, 13-14, <https://jihadology.net/2020/10/20/new-issue-of-the-magazine-%e1%b9%a3awt-al-hind-9/>.
 34. "Preparation of Ghazwa-e-Hind," *Sawt Al-Hind* issue 3, 6-8, <https://jihadology.net/2020/04/22/new-issue-of-the-magazine-%e1%b9%a3awt-al-hind-3/>.
 35. Hilal Ahmed, *Siyasi Muslims: A Story of Political Islams in India* (New Delhi: Viking India, 2019).
 36. Safoora, "Deoband asks Shaheen Bagh to End Dharna, Unleashes Controversy," *The Siasat Daily*, February 8, 2020, accessed February 10, 2021, <https://www.siasat.com/deoband-asks-shaheen-bagh-end-dharna-unleashes-controversy-1819835/>.
 37. Aditya Menon, "Betrayal or Pragmatism? Why Madanis of Deoband Praised RSS & Modi," *The Quint*, September 18, 2019, accessed March 15, 2021, <https://www.thequint.com/news/politics/arshad-mahmood-madani-jamiat-mohan-bhagwat-narendra-modi-article-370-muslims#read-more>.
 38. Asim Ali, "Not Just Hindutva, India's Useless Ulema Leadership Has Silenced Muslims Today," *The Print*, November 18, 2019, accessed March 15, 2021,

- <https://theprint.in/opinion/not-just-hindutva-indias-useless-ulema-leadership-has-silenced-muslims/321974/>.
39. Neyaz Farooquee, "The Seeker," *The Caravan*, August 31, 2016, accessed February 10, 2021, <https://caravanmagazine.in/reportage/the-seeker-asaduddin-owaisi-india-muslim-electorate>. Rama Lakshmi, "Why A Rising Star of Muslim Politics in India Stirs Hope and Fear," *Washington Post*, August 17, 2015, accessed February 10, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/why-a-rising-star-of-muslim-politics-in-india-stirs-hope-and-fear/2015/08/16/1a81275c-3d21-11e5-a312-1a6452ac77d2_story.html.
 40. Specifically, if they arrived in India prior to December 31, 2014, full text of the amendment here, "The Citizenship (Amendment) Bill, 2019," PRS Legislative Research, accessed February 20, 2021, <https://prsindia.org/billtrack/the-citizenship-amendment-bill-2019>.
 41. "Shaheen Bagh: The Women Occupying Delhi Street Against Citizenship Law," *BBC News*, January 4, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-5090290>, Farah Farooqi, "To Better Understand the Shaheen Bagh Protest, We Must Understand the Locality Itself," *The Caravan*, January 20, 2020, accessed February 18, 2021, <https://caravanmagazine.in/politics/shaheen-bagh-locality-caa-protest>.
 42. Rehnamol PR, "Why Ambedkar Has Replaced Gandhi as the New Icon of Resistance and Social Awakening," *News18*, December 27, 2019, <https://www.news18.com/news/opinion/why-ambedkar-has-replaced-gandhi-as-the-new-icon-of-resistance-and-social-awakening-2437333.html>.
 43. Md Tarique Alam and Arpita Jaya, "A Year On, Looking Back at Student Protests Against the Citizenship Law," *NewsLaundry*, December 29, 2020, <https://www.newslaundry.com/2020/12/29/a-year-on-looking-back-at-student-protests-against-the-citizenship-law>.
 44. See Shivam Vij, "The Delhi Pogrom 2020 is Amit Shah's Answer to an Election Defeat," *The Print*, February 26, 2020, accessed March 15, 2021, <https://theprint.in/opinion/delhi-pogrom-2020-is-amit-shah-answer-to-an-election-defeat/371558/>. Javed M. Ansari, "Why This Report Says the Delhi Riots Were A Pogrom," *Article 14*, July 18, 2020, accessed March 20, 2021.
 45. Jeffrey Gettleman, Suhasini Raj, Sameer Yasir, "The Roots of the Delhi Riots: A Fiery Speech and an Ultimatum," *New York Times*, February 26, 2020, accessed March 20, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/26/world/asia/delhi-riots-kapil-mishra.html>. M.R. Shamshad, "Report of the DMC Fact-Finding Committee on North-East Delhi Riots of February 2020," *Delhi Minorities Commission*, July 2020, accessed March 20, 2021, <https://ia801501.us.archive.org/28/items/dmc-delhi-riot-fact-report-2020/-Delhi-riots-Fact-Finding-2020.pdf>.

46. Shweta Desai and Amarnath Amarasingam, “#CoronaJihad: COVID-19, Misinformation, and Anti-Muslim Violence in India,” *Strong Cities Network*, May 26, 2020, <https://strongcitiesnetwork.org/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2020/06/CoronaJihad.pdf>.
47. Prasad, “The Salafi Jihadist Reaction to Hindu Nationalism.”
48. “There Is No Islam With Democracy,” *Sawt Al-Hind* issue 11, 6–8, <https://jihadology.net/2020/12/19/new-issue-of-the-magazine-%e1%b9%a3awt-al-hind-10%e2%80%b3/>.
49. Khairuddin Bhatkal, “Kufr Loses to the Coward,” *Nawai Afghan Jihad*, February 2020, 100–103, <https://jihadology.net/2020/02/13/new-issue-of-al-qaidah-in-the-indian-subcontinents-magazine-nawai-afghan-jihad-magazine-february-2020/>.
50. “Are Demonstrations Against Sharia And Does Taking Part of in a Democracy Amount to Kufr,” *Nawai Ghazwat al-Hind*, April 2020, 119, <https://jihadology.net/2020/04/22/new-issue-of-al-qaidah-in-the-indian-subcontinents-magazine-nawai-ghazwat-al-hind-april-2020/>.
51. “Response,” *Nawai Ghazwat al-Hind*, April 2020, 120, <https://jihadology.net/2020/04/22/new-issue-of-al-qaidah-in-the-indian-subcontinents-magazine-nawai-ghazwat-al-hind-april-2020/>.
52. “A Declaration on the Plight,” Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, accessed December 10, 2020, <https://jihadology.net/2020/05/02/new-statement-from-al-qaidah-in-the-arabian-peninsula-about-what-muslims-are-exposed-to-in-india/>.
53. Mahmud, “If Islam Is Your Home Then It Is Your Nation!”
54. Priyangi Agarwal, “70,000 Clerics Issue Fatwa Against Terrorism, 15 Lakh Muslims Support It,” *Times of India*, December 9, 2015, accessed February 10, 2021, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/70000-clerics-issue-fatwa-against-terrorism-15-lakh-muslims-support-it/articleshow/50100656.cms>.
55. Mohammad Ali, “Madrasas on anti-IS drive,” *The Hindu*, March 25, 2016, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/madrasas-on-antiis-drive/article7897119.ece>.
56. Kabir Taneja, Mohammed Sinan Siyech, “The Islamic State in India’s Kerala: A Primer,” *ORF Online*, October 15, 2019, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/the-islamic-state-in-indias-kerala-a-primer-56634/>.
57. For more on this, see Filippo Osella and Caroline Osella, “Islamism and Social Reform in Kerala, South India,” *Modern Asian Studies* 42, no. 2–3, 317–346, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/modern-asian-studies/article/abs/islamism-and-social-reform-in-kerala-south-india/18943FB16EB7554D4159A00C1D0267E5>.
58. Kabir Taneja, Mohammed Sinan Siyech, “The Islamic State in India’s Kerala: A Primer,” *ORF Online*, October 15, 2019, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/the-islamic-state-in-indias-kerala-a-primer-56634/>.

59. Sneha Mary Koshy and Tanimia Biswas, “‘Need Jihad, Not Prayer’: ISIS Recruiter’s WhatsApp Message in Malayalam,” *NDTV*, May 31, 2017, <https://www.ndtv.com/kerala-news/take-up-sword-kerala-engineer-turned-isis-man-abdul-rasheeds-chilling-voice-message-1705871>. Gopika Ajayan, “Horrorifying Audio Clip Surfaces of Kerala ISIS recruiter urging war on Hindus, democracy,” *The News Minute*, November 15, 2017, <https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/horrifying-audio-clip-kerala-isis-recruiter-urging-war-hindus-democracy-surfaces-71651>.
60. Abdul Rasheed WhatsApp message.
61. “Statement Regarding the Indian Court’s Verdict of the Babri Masjid,” *Ansar Ghazwat al-Hind*, accessed November 5, 2020, <https://jihadology.net/2019/11/16/new-statement-from-an%e1%b9%a3ar-ghazwat-al-hind-regarding-the-indian-courts-verdict-on-the-babri-mosque/>.
62. “Rise Up O Ahl-u-Sunnah of Hind...”
63. Abu Zakariya Al-Hindi, “So Where Are You Going? A Call To Muslims of Hind,”
64. Press Trust of India, “ISIS are Murderers and Rapists, Have to be Condemned: Asaduddin Owaisi,” *Economic Times*, February 5, 2015, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/isis-are-murderers-and-rapists-have-to-be-condemned-asaduddin-owaisi/articleshow/46133879.cms?from=mdr>.
65. Tweet from alleged ISIS supporter on January 6, 2016, “‘Shut Your Mouth’: Islamic State Tells Owaisi After he Slams Terror Group Supporters on Twitter,” *Firstpost*, January 7, 2016, <https://www.firstpost.com/india/shut-your-mouth-islamic-state-tells-asaduddin-owaisi-after-he-slams-terror-group-supporters-on-twitter-2574218.html>.
66. Telegram Message, Discussion 3.
67. Telegram message, Chat Caliphate legacy.
68. Telegram message, @theanf1.
69. Asim Umar, “The Future of Muslims in India,” *Resurgence* issue 1, February 2014, 72-78, <https://jihadology.net/2014/10/19/as-sa%e1%b8%a5ab-media-presents-a-new-magazine-from-al-qaidah-resurgence-1/>.
70. Telegram message, Chat Caliphate legacy.
71. Irfan Omar, “Delhi’s Debates on Ahl-i-Kitab: Dara Shikuh’s Islamization of the Upanishads” in *The Judeo-Christian-Islamic Heritage: Philosophical and Theological Perspectives*, edited by Richard C. Taylor and Irfan A. Omar (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2012), 89-109.
72. N.R. Keddie, “Afgani, Jamal-Al-Din,” *Encyclopedia Iranica*, accessed March 15, 2021, <https://iranicaonline.org/articles/afgani-jamal-al-din>.

73. Maulana Hussain Ahmad Madani, *Composite Nationalism and Islam* (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 2005).
74. <https://jihadology.net/2018/01/07/new-video-message-from-al-qaidah-in-the-indian-subcontinent-history-of-islamic-india/>.
75. Asim Umar, "Message to the Muslims of India: Why Is There Not a Storm In Your Ocean," *As-Sahab Media*,
<https://jihadology.net/2013/06/08/as-sa%e1%b8%a5ab-media-presents-a-new-video-message-from-al-qaidahs-mawlana-a%e1%b9%a3im-umar-message-to-the-muslims-of-india-why-is-there-not-a-storm-in-your-river/>.
76. Ashiq Hussain, "Zakir Musa, Who Quit Hizbul, Asks Muslims to Launch Jihad Against Cow Protectors'," *Hindustan Times*, June 5, 2017,
<https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/hizbul-leader-zakir-musa-tells-muslims-to-launch-jihad-against-cow-protectors/story-06uTzDJqAE7s9oTC3hAnUL.html>.
77. Telegram message, India/Kashmir/Pakistan/Bangladesh.
78. Telegram message, Wilayat Philippines Update.
79. Telegram Message, Grup Pembela Tauhid **بَلَدَا اَلْاَل**.
80. "Rise Up O Ahl-u-Sunnah of Hind..."
81. Telegram message, Akjk private.
82. Telegram message, Ghazwathul Hind.
83. "The Irhabis Who Infuriated the Pagans," *Sawt Al-Hind* issue 14, March 2021, 6-9.
<https://jihadology.net/2021/03/17/new-issue-of-the-magazine-%e1%b9%a3awt-al-hind-14/>.
84. Street Academics, "Hara Hara," *Youtube*, December 23, 2019, accessed March 1, 2021,
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LIS-sJlQoyY>.

Contributors

HARORO J. INGRAM

is a Senior Research Fellow at the Program on Extremism at George Washington University and a co-author of *The ISIS Reader*.

MARIA KHAN

is affiliated with the Center for Peace and Spirituality International.

APARNA PANDE

is Director, Initiative on the Future of India and South Asia, Hudson Institute.

HARI PRASAD

is a research associate at Critica Research and Analysis.

BARAA SHAIBAN

is a Yemeni analyst, Reprieve MENA caseworker, and Member of the Yemeni National Dialogue Convention.

MOHAMMED SINAN SIYECH

is a doctoral candidate in Middle East Studies at the University of Edinburgh.

CRAIG WHITESIDE

is an associate professor of national security affairs at the U.S. Naval War College and a co-author of *The ISIS Reader*.

CHARLIE WINTER

is a Senior Research Fellow at the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation at King's College London and a co-author of *The ISIS Reader*.

KATHERINE ZIMMERMAN

is a Resident Fellow at the American Enterprise Institute.

\$12.95



CENTER ON ISLAM, DEMOCRACY, AND
THE FUTURE OF THE MUSLIM WORLD
www.CurrentTrends.org



HUDSON INSTITUTE
1201 Pennsylvania Ave NW
Suite 400, Washington, DC 20004
Telephone 202-974-2400
www.hudson.org