Milestones to Militancy

What the lives of 100 jihadis tell us about a global movement

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Executive Summary

This report explores how prominent militants, from senior commanders to thought-leaders, made the journey to jihad.

Tomorrow's jihadi leaders are being shaped on the Syrian battlefield today. They are forging the friendships and absorbing the ideology that will secure them prominent positions in this global, violent movement.

In January 2016, over 50 countries were compelled to respond to the jihadi threat.[1]

Too often, the international community has focused on the groups that make up this violent network. But it is individual journeys that have shaped this phenomenon. Relationships formed as far back as Afghanistan in 1979 directly influence the brutality we see in Syria, Libya,

1 'Global Extremism Monitor', Centre on Religion and Geopolitics, January 2016. Accessed at: http://bit.ly/23wX8un

and Somalia.

Understanding the connections between the jihadi past and present is vital. The leaders of Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS today can be linked through personal contacts over generations to the forefathers of global jihad.

The jihadi movement has grown exponentially over the decades. It has attracted more recruits and seized more territory, while evolving its ideology and vision. ISIS has an estimated 25,000 members in Iraq and Syria alone. Its members are active as far afield as Nigeria, Indonesia, and Libya.

AIM OF THE REPORT

We set out to explore how prominent militants – from senior commanders to thought-leaders – made the journey to jihad. We analysed the biographies of 100 jihadis from across the Middle East and Africa. We selected these jihadis based on their eminence within the movement, the quality of data regarding their life, and their geographical spread. Our sample crossed generations, from the early Mujahidin fighters in Afghanistan in the 1980s to those who rose up the ranks during the Syrian civil war.

Allegiances and splits in jihadi ranks, and the groups that form as a result, give us insight into this global network. Understanding individual motivations and journeys is key. While such insights tell us about the dynamics at play in the movement today, they also help us see where it may be headed in the future.

This global problem will not be solved by military might alone. The ideology that draws each individual along the path to violence is the enemy that must be faced. Jihadi ideology exploits non-violent Islamism, and half of the jihadis from our sample were drawn from such movements.

Our selection included only the global jihadi elite, but these 100 jihadis alone operated in 41 countries and 49 different groups.

Our analysis has shown that there is no 'typical' jihadi. Prominent figures have diverse socio-economic backgrounds, religious upbringings, and a range of educational levels. But the research has yielded striking trends across the sample:

KEY FINDINGS

The jihadi elite is globalised. Forty-nine per cent of our sample had most recently been active in a foreign country. Meanwhile, 27 per cent of those operating in their home countries had returned from conflicts abroad, while 24 per cent of the total stayed in their home countries.

For global jihadis, it's who you know. Personal networks are key to the development of the jihadi movement. Our data links the leaders of Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS today to the forefathers of the movement through people they met in prison, at university, and on the battlefield.

Conflict hubs draw jihadis. Seventy-six per cent of prominent jihadis have fought in at least one of four major regional conflict zones. These are the Levant (Iraq/Syria), Sahel (Algeria/Mali/Mauritania/Niger), Khorasan (Afghanistan/Pakistan), and East Africa (Somalia/Kenya). Though the movement is global, these hubs serve as gathering points.

Middle Eastern and sub-Saharan jihadis have broadly separate networks. There is little cross-fertilisation between Middle Eastern and sub-Saharan African jihadi networks, despite groups like ISIS and al-Qaeda claiming to be global. However, a number of prominent militants from both continents spent time training and fighting in Afghanistan.

The majority of jihadis move from group to group. Fifty-one per cent of our cross-section joined multiple militant groups over the course of their jihadi career. In fact, 49 different groups were represented in our sample of 100 jihadis.

Prominent jihadis are often well educated. Forty-six per cent of our sample went to university. Of these, 57 per cent graduated with STEMM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics and medicine) degrees.[2] This was double the number of jihadis taking Islamic studies.

Half of jihadis came from non-violent Islamist

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2 See World Bank 'Fact Sheet: Middle East and North Africa' at: http://go.worldbank.org/IYX7EIPHS1. Compared to an average of 30 per cent university enrolment across the MENA region, according to 2008 World Bank figures.

movements. Fifty-one per cent of the jihadis profiled had non-violent Islamist links before joining violent movements. One in four had links to the Muslim Brotherhood or affiliated organisations.

Most jihadi careers include time in prison. Sixty-five per cent of our sample of jihadis spent time in prison during their careers, yet only 25 per cent of those are known to have committed crimes or served sentences before becoming jihadis. In prison cells across the globe, future recruits were exposed to the ideology that later drew them to jihad.

Twenty-five per cent of jihadis have links to government. A quarter of our sample had previously worked for the state or security services, or had immediate family members in government service. This demonstrates that it is not just peripheral figures or those ostracised by the state who are vulnerable to extremism.

By looking closely at 100 jihadi personalities, CRG was able to map out each path to extremism. Our research revealed the strong interpersonal networks that have driven global jihad's growth and ideological development. These personal journeys tell a significant part of the story that takes us to the birth of ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra, al-Shabaab, and others.

Just as jihadis have embraced mobility, their ideology has also remained dynamic. The ideology of Salafi-jihadism has become increasingly offensive rather than defensive, and more violent and sectarian.

This study reveals the figures at the centre of the global jihadi movement, rather than providing an exhaustive study of its membership. Consequently, our sample is exclusively male: despite the growing trend of women travelling to join such groups, few have broken into the upper echelons. Our sample is also constrained to prominent figures from across the Middle East and Africa. However, further research is underway into how much of these findings can be applied to the European context.

We produced comprehensive biographies of jihadis using a wide range of open-source material. We analysed and coded these for recurring themes across the sample, and displayed them using qualitative data software to generate quantitative findings. This enabled us to draw trends, while being sensitive to the nuances of each biography.

Exploring group membership, notable contacts, and theatres of operation, alongside background information including education, criminality, and family background, we have considered a range of possible factors that might have influenced an individual's journey to violence.

Our findings paint a picture of a global network formed by individuals who are linked across generations. In campuses and prison cells, in training camps and battlefields, future jihadis have formed friendships – and adopted an ideology – that would one day draw them into the leading ranks of one of the most influential and violent movements of our times.

FIG. 1.1 Of 100 Prominent Jihadis...
By percentage

Have been foreign fighters
76

Are still alive*
57

Had non-violent Islamists links
51

Were members of multiple jihadi groups
51

Attended university
46

From capital cities or provincial capitals
41

Fought in Afghanistan
33

Had close links to the government or military
25

Were in prison before joining jihad
16

Are currently in prison*
11

0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100

* As of 1 April 2016

Policy Recommendations

On the basis of the findings of our research, we make the following recommendations to policymakers.

1 HARNESS THE OPPORTUNITIES OFFERED BY EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS TO PROVIDE RESILIENCE AGAINST EXTREMISM

STEMM[3] disciplines dominate the educational history of jihadi leaders. Conversely, Islamic studies and humanities degrees are underrepresented, especially among ideologues and self-appointed sharia judges. Universities are uniquely positioned to provide students of all disciplines the skills to resist and counter extremist narratives. Universities must be proactive in tackling this ideology rather than leaving it to the security services or religious groups.

Counter-narratives should recognise and exploit the weakness of the claim to Islamic scholarship of many leading jihadi ideologues. For example, neither Aymen al-Zawahiri nor Osama Bin Laden were trained

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3 Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics, and Medicine.

in Islamic jurisprudence.[4] Despite this, Salafi-jihadi groups regularly claim to be true enforcers of Sharia.

Universities should:

Incentivise students from all disciplines to attend modules that build skills to critically analyse texts on social and political issues. Many students already audit modules outside of their subject but this existing policy can be applied to widen access to structured environments in which sensitive topics, including extremist ideologies, can be safely explored.

Place a responsibility on managerial and student bodies to ensure that extremist viewpoints face intellectual challenge, especially during events and debates hosting controversial speakers. Many serving faculty members are more qualified than external speakers to address such topics.

Avoid censoring non-violent extremist content, but rather foster a critical culture towards such texts.5 Thoughtlessly censoring content can play into the narrative of victimisation and persecution fostered by extremists, that 'falsehood' is intent on extinguishing 'truth'.[6]

The British government should:

② EQUIP PRISONS TO OBSTRUCT THE BUILDING OF JIHADI NETWORKS

Prisons are a crucial part of the development of jihadi networks. While in prison, jihadi leaders interact with one another, develop their ideology, and build a following. These experiences are instrumental in an individual's growth within jihadi circles. Prisons must be able to disrupt these conditions and instead provide the means for deradicalisation. In several Arab countries,

many Islamists and jihadis have abandoned their ideology while exposed to deradicalisation programmes in prison. Hardened jihadis are not likely to renounce their Islamist objectives easily, but a systematic approach that deals with the violence in their ideology is a necessary initial step.

Governments should:

Place senior jihadis into separate units in prisons, isolating the current leaders and ideologues of the jihadi movement from more junior figures. This will help to prevent the establishment of 'mentorship' structures towards radicalisation.

Provide compulsory religious education programmes for inmates convicted of jihadi-related offences. This should include a critical study of the core texts of the Salafi-jihadi ideology, the revisionist literature produced by leading figures and groups that have renounced violence, and a study of the works of major Islamic scholars through history in order to develop a more sophisticated understanding of the role of Islam in modern society.

Create a mentoring programme between those convicted of jihadi offences and Islamic scholars from respected international institutions to encourage a more nuanced understanding of their faith. Existing schemes of 'pen-pals' for prisoners, to support them in their rehabilitation, are a model for how this could be achieved.

Ensure that all religious teaching in prisons occurs under the auspices of a trained and regulated Muslim chaplaincy programme in order to prevent jihadi prisoners from radicalising fellow inmates.

③ BUILD REGIONAL COOPERATION TO DISRUPT THE SPREAD OF CONFLICTS

Regional conflict hubs act both as gathering points for jihadi networks, and as launching pads for operations elsewhere. Conflicts are rarely contained, and jihadis exploit unstable conditions in neighbouring countries in order to spread their influence across borders. The majority of jihadis in this sample have been active in at least one of the four conflict hubs that we identified. At least two more are currently developing around Libya and the Lake Chad Basin.

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4 Even Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's claim to Islamic authority is based on his education in *tajweed* (Quranic recitation) rather than in *tafsir* (exegesis or Quranic analysis) or jurisprudence.

5 Western academic study of history will often expose students to extremist texts such as Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, just as Western approaches to Middle Eastern and Islamic studies introduce students to the writings of Sayyid Qutb and Aymen al-Zawahiri. But in these contexts, exposure occurs in a constructive and critical manner.

6 For more on this ideological dynamic see Emman El-Badawy, Milo Comerford and Peter Welby, 'Inside the Jihadi Mind: Understanding Ideology and Propaganda', *Centre on Religion and Geopolitics*, October 2015. p.23. Accessed at: http://bit.ly/1SkNLYO

Failure to obstruct this development now will cause grave, long-term damage to counter-extremism efforts worldwide. In many cases, military force will be required to prevent emerging areas of jihadi territorial control from incubating new hubs of international conflict.

In order to prevent cross-border spillover, governments should:

Increase their security, intelligence, and economic cooperation at a regional level to strengthen good governance and resilience across borders against jihadi security threats. The Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF),[7] tackling Boko Haram in the Lake Chad Basin, has demonstrated how a regional approach to tackling a group that operates across borders is more effective than a national one. Meanwhile, the operations of the International Security and Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan were hampered by the ability of militants to regroup in Pakistan's tribal areas.

4 | CHALLENGE THE GLOBAL ISLAMIST IDEOLOGICAL NARRATIVE THAT FEEDS JIHADISM

While some jihadis enter the movement in the midst of a war, others have a longer journey towards violent extremism, often starting in non-violent Islamist groups.

Governments must:

Focus on organisations that seek to undermine the state and its values by any means, including subversion and disregard for the rule of law, not only those that advocate violence. This can only be done by understanding extremist ideology, and how it differs from traditional Islamic practice.

Better understand the conditions that breed vulnerability to extremist voices, through increased engagement with civil society actors. Simplistic theories that poverty, foreign policy, or lack of education alone are the root causes of radicalisation are not conducive to effective counter-extremism policy-making.

Challenge extremist ideology, not just terrorism, its violent manifestation. During the Cold War, as well as building military readiness, Western countries tackled the foundations of Communist ideology, including through news outlets such as Radio Free Europe. The lessons of previous ideological conflicts should not be lost.

The UK Government's Prevent Strategy specifically rules out working with extremist groups in tackling violent extremism.[8]

Learning from this approach, civil society in countries experiencing rising extremism should:

Apply organisational social pressure by refusing to work with groups that oppose fundamental values of openness and pluralism. This includes support for the implementation of literalist sharia as state law, the destruction of Israel, and the subjugation of women and minorities.

5 | IDENTIFY AND TARGET THE NEXT GENERATION OF JIHADI LEADERS TO UNDERMINE THE MOVEMENT'S DEVELOPMENT

Seasoned jihadis who are not in the upper echelons of the movement often slip under the radar, but among them will be an Osama Bin Laden or Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi of the future. Too much focus is paid to the current leadership of the jihadi movement, while the networks that perpetuate it are being built at the next level down.

Governments should:

Examine the development of the current networks of leading jihadis to generate analytical models by which they can target the nucleus of tomorrow's jihadi network. Our findings show that peripheral members of networks often provided crucial links between major players and continuity to the next generation, while themselves remaining in the shadows.

Apply a network-driven approach to weakening jihadi groups, targeting the network-builders as well as

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7 Comprising security forces from Benin, Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Nigeria.

8 UK Government, Prevent Strategy Review, 2011. https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/97976/prevent-strategy-review.pdf

the leaders of the movement. The leadership of al-
Qaeda in Iraq was ravaged by coalition operations
after the Anbar Awakening in 2007, yet now
forms the basis of ISIS, in part due to the strengths
of its networks.

Introduction

This research focuses on the backstories of prominent jihadis, exploring the trends in their routes to violence, and how these have shaped the movement.

Until 2010 no one had heard of Ibrahim Awad Ibrahim al-Badri, an obscure Iraqi militant from Samarra, east of the Tigris. An unassuming figure who preferred to spend his youth in religious studies, he threw himself into the writings of the world-renowned Muslim Brotherhood and developed a particular liking of people he met who put words into action. He became a firm believer in using violence to accomplish Islamist aims, and soon entered a tight network of fellow Iraqi jihadis that included veterans of the famed Arab-Afghan Mujahidin. The personal interactions and relationships he formed guided his journey into al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), which would become ISIS. After its leader Abu Ayyub al-Masri died in 2010, this 'quiet' but vengeful figure was propelled to global prominence as leader of one of the world's most brutal jihadi groups. Today we know him as Abu Bakr

al-Baghdadi, the self-proclaimed caliph of the global Muslim ummah.

Baghdadi did not embark on this journey by himself; he joined a much larger network with a long history. His progression through the ranks of that movement shaped his ideology and vision, just as much as he, and others like him, now carve out its future. This research focuses on the backstories of Baghdadi and 99 other prominent jihadis like him. We explore the common trends in their routes to violence, and how these have shaped the movement.

Syria today serves as a networking event of seismic proportions for the global jihadi movement. The internationalisation of the Syrian civil war has resulted in a mass movement of foreign fighters to the country from all corners of the world. On the battlefield, jihadi novices are being introduced to seasoned veterans, just as jihadis from different cities, countries, and regions are establishing new connections. These networks pose a critical threat should these foreign fighters return home, or move elsewhere.

> On the battlefield, jihadi novices are being introduced to seasoned veterans, just as jihadis from different cities, countries, and regions are establishing new connections.

The Afghanistan conflict of the 1980s, in which an international band of Mujahidin fought against the Soviets, is without doubt the single most important development in Salafi-jihadism. The conflict provided a networking opportunity for an entire generation of jihadis, leading directly to the creation of al-Qaeda and its successors, and to a wave of Islamist violence across the world. All the Salafi-jihadi groups in the Middle East and Africa today that have created and exploited new hubs of conflict can be traced to this Afghan network.

For a generation of emerging jihadis, the Syrian battleground has the potential to take on a similar role in spawning new groups and theatres of conflict, just as the war in Afghanistan did 30 years ago. The travels and activities of the 100 jihadis we sampled demonstrate how an ideology has been exported across borders through the individuals and networks that have come to represent it.

The findings of this research have significant implications for security policy today. Despite the focus on Syria, the situation in Libya is rapidly worsening as ISIS' affiliate in the country continues to gain territory and builds its efforts against targets of domestic and international importance. With longstanding chaos and no unifying state body to adequately address the growing threat of the group in Libya, ISIS threatens to strengthen its grip on its closest territory to Western Europe.

ISIS has already called for aspiring jihadis to make their way to Libya, with reports emerging that the group's leadership has dispatched hardened commanders to oversee its activities in the country. Other reports have cited Libya as ISIS' fallback option should it be defeated in Iraq and Syria. Tunisia to the west and Egypt to the east have both seen scores of citizens travel to ISIS-held territory in Syria. A continued advance by ISIS or a rival jihadi group in Libya could witness the birth of a new hub that will attract jihadis from both the Middle East and Africa.

WHY DID WE CARRY OUT THIS RESEARCH?

Looking at how today's jihadi leaders reached positions of prominence reveals crucial information about the jihadis currently making their way through the ranks. Pursuing a 'decapitation' strategy against Salafi-jihadi groups alone will be insufficient to counter the threat. We must build a firebreak: ways to prevent the development of a new generation of battle-hardened leaders following a violent and expansionist ideology. Our aim throughout this research is to see how its findings can inform the building of this firebreak.

While the majority of the jihadis in our sample were members of Salafi-jihadi groups, we did not limit our search to Salafi-jihadis alone. The distinction between Salafi-jihadis and nationally focused jihadis is important, but it was not essential to the analysis for this report. Both pose a threat to global security and both should be the targets of international action.

Our analysis was divided into two areas: an examination of the networks that drove the formation of groups and the ways in which individuals came into their positions; and the shared characteristics of individuals that might have informed their journey to jihad.

Our examination of networks showed the importance of personal contacts in the advance of jihadis through the movement. These contacts were made in prison, on the battlefield, and at university. Our findings showed that, with few exceptions, the current crop of leaders in the global jihadi movement either met in the Afghan conflict, or were later brought in by members of that network. A similar process is happening in the current regional hubs of jihadi conflict. Identifying these networks will build our capacity to counter them.

Our analysis also showed the prominence of non-violent Islamist organisations in the biographies of the jihadis we studied. This demonstrates the importance of ideology in the development of the movement. The Islamist groups we recorded in our sample are not violent, and in some cases they explicitly oppose violence. However, many jihadis in our sample developed an Islamist ideology in these groups before going on to advance that ideology through violence. Countering that ideology is an essential part of countering that violence.

A lack of education is frequently cited as a driver of extremism. However, our research shows that, at least among prominent jihadis, a significant proportion are university graduates. We found that science degrees appeared more frequently in our sample than Islamic studies degrees – including among the ideological leaders of the movement. This is in line with other recent research into the educational backgrounds of jihadis.[9] It suggests that jihadi ideology is vulnerable to good Islamic scholarship focusing on counter-narratives – though, as previous research has shown, it must be presented in a way that rivals Salafi-jihadi propaganda in its simplicity and applicability.[10]

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[9] Diego Gambetta and Steffen Hertog, *Engineers of Jihad* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).

[10] 'Inside the Jihadi Mind', Centre on Religion and Geopolitics, October 2015.

Global Networks

Looking at how prominent individuals' outlooks shift from a local context to global aims, our data gives insight into how jihadis have internationalised militancy.

The jihadi movement is largely considered global in nature. In January 2001, at least 11 religious extremist groups carried out violent attacks in seven countries. In January 2011, at least 13 such groups were behind attacks and kidnappings in 13 countries. In January this year, the data showed 16 groups active in 21 countries. Their violence caused at least 1,673 deaths.[11]

Back in 1990, most jihadi activity was restricted to the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia. Only two of nine notable jihadi-inspired attacks in the 1980s

11 'Global Extremism Monitor', Centre on Religion and Geopolitics, January 2016. Accessed at: http://bit.ly/23wX8un

Definitions

Theatre of Operation / Classified as a country or territory in which an individual has taken part in armed struggle or been involved with a jihadi group.

Returnee / A fighter or ideologue whose jihad, or support for jihad, has taken them abroad, but who is now active in their own country.

Remainee / A fighter or ideologue whose jihad, or support for jihad, has only occurred in their home country.

Hubs / Regional clusters of conflict.

Khorasan / Historic term used predominantly by jihadi groups (and in our classification) to refer to Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Levant / Historic term used to describe large areas of Syria and Iraq (and in the rhetoric of some jihadi groups, parts of Lebanon).

East Africa / Used in this study to refer to the Horn of Africa, primarily Somalia, as well as areas of Kenya affected by jihadism.

Sahel / Area of northwest Africa, used in this case to refer to the main strongholds of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and its affiliates, i.e. areas of Algeria, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger.

and 90s were in Europe.[12] By 2000, however, at least 26 countries, including Argentina, India, Chechnya, Kenya, Tanzania, Spain, France, the Netherlands and the United States, had been directly affected by jihadi networks.

The global expansionist agenda in Salafi-jihadism is driven by the prominent jihadis that make up the movement, rather than the foot soldiers.[13]

As such, by looking at how prominent individuals' outlooks shift from a local context to global aims, our data gives insight into how jihadis have internationalised militancy. There are two aspects of this: regionalisation of conflicts, and the foreign fighter dynamics of jihadi insurgencies.

FIG. 4.1 Number of Theatres of Operation
By percentage of total sample

At least 1 — 100
More than 1 — 76
More than 2 — 45
More than 3 — 30
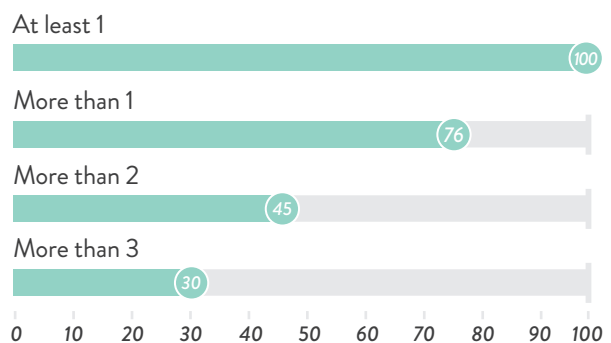
REMAINING OR RETURNING?

The issue of foreign fighters travelling to Iraq and Syria dominates the headlines. Our sample contains varied accounts of jihadis travelling to international theatres of operation, moving between conflicts, or coming home from such conflicts to continue their armed struggle.

Seventy-six per cent of our sample is known to have been operationally active in multiple

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12 These incidents were the 1985 El Descanso bombing in Spain relating to the Lebanese civil war and claimed by Islamic Jihad Organisation, and the 1985 hijacking in Athens of the Trans World Airlines flight 847 from Cairo to San Diego, also claimed by Islamic Jihad as well as Hizbullah.

13 'Exploiting Disorder: al-Qaeda and the Islamic State', International Crisis Group, Special Report, 14th March 2016. p.iii. Accessed at: http://bit.ly/1U-w4Rpb

FIG. 4.2 Jihadis Who Have Been Abroad
By percentage of total sample

Latest theatre of operation a foreign country
49

Returnees from foreign conflicts
27

'Remainees' (exclusively local struggle)
24

0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100
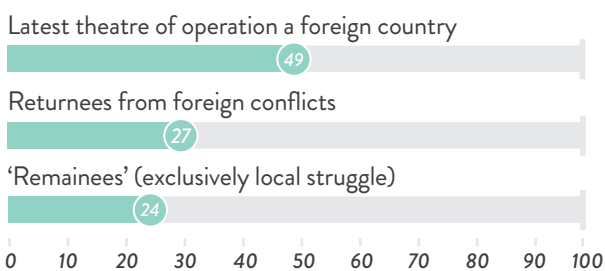
FIG. 4.3 Hub Conflicts
By percentage of total sample

Khorasan
37

Levant
24

Sahel
17

East Africa
15

Combined
76

0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100

their entire jihadi career in their home country.

There are important insights to be gleaned from the theatres that have retained, or regained, fighters. Syria, Yemen, and Palestine all have a large proportion of prominent jihadis who remained or returned to conduct operations. The ongoing conflicts in these areas (in the latter case, predominantly the Gaza Strip) have attracted many militants with overseas experience who come to fight the 'near enemy.'

PROFILE
Hassan Hattab

Born in Algeria in 1967, Hattab first became involved in jihadi activity following the Algerian army's annulment of the 1991-92 election. He joined Said Makhloufi's Movement for the Islamic State (which later became part of the Armed Islamic Group, or GIA) in which he served as a commander. Disillusioned by the GIA's massacre of civilians, Hattab fell out with the group's leader Djamel Zitouni, before leaving the group to found and lead the Salafi Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC). He left the GSPC in 2003 and in 2007 handed himself in to Algerian authorities during a national amnesty, as a result of which he now remains under house arrest. Despite his jihadi activity, Hattab is believed to have amassed a sizable fortune during the Algerian civil war.

countries,14 while 45 per cent took part in conflicts or acts of terrorism in three or more countries. This internationalism may contain an element of selection bias given our focus on 'prominent' jihadis. It is likely that 'prominence' within the global jihadi movement stems, at least in part, from an extensive and international CV. The 'previous experience' column seen in recently leaked admissions forms of ISIS' foreign recruits supports this hypothesis.[15]

A significant proportion of jihadis stay abroad. Forty-nine per cent of our sample's most recent theatre of operation was a foreign country, including those who died overseas. However, more than half of the 51 per cent whose latest theatre of operation was their home country were returnees who had fought – or proselytised for jihad – away from home. Only 24 per cent of the total sample were remainees who spent

Meanwhile, according to our data Iraq, Egypt, Algeria, Saudi Arabia, and Libya were the main exporters of ideologues and militants. Fighters from those countries predominantly left their birth country to engage in violence elsewhere.

Our analysis found that both internal and geopolitical events affect this 'import and export' of jihadis. The Syria conflict has drawn militants from across the world under the ISIS and al-Qaeda banners. But a quarter of prominent jihadis currently in Syria travelled from Iraq, after being deprived of power bases there by popular uprisings against insurgents in 2007. Syria was then used by ISIS as a platform to relaunch

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14 Defined as engaging in armed struggle or involvement with a jihadi group.

15 See Stuart Ramsay, 'IS Documents Identify Thousands of Jihadis', *Sky News*, Thursday 10th March, 2016. http://bit.ly/1SSz7ss

its campaign within Iraq in 2014.

Other local factors explain outflows of foreign fighters. The end of the Algerian civil war in 2002 saw many fighters dispersed across the Maghreb. Meanwhile, Egypt, Saudi Arabia,[16] and Libya[17] have undergone internal struggles between non-violent Islamist, militant, and state interests, resulting in many jihadis leaving for foreign conflicts, either willingly or by force. In Libya, this dynamic is being reversed. The growing jihadi presence in the country since the 2014 civil war has drawn Libyan foreign fighters back from elsewhere.

These dynamics show the major challenge African, Middle Eastern – and increasingly, European – countries face in integrating, monitoring, or detaining citizens returning from conflicts, particularly currently in Iraq and Syria, in order to avoid dangerous ideologies and networks spreading at home.

THE FOUR CONFLICT HUBS

Many in our sample come from countries that border major conflict zones: Mali, which borders Algeria; Kenya, which borders Somalia; and Syria, which borders Iraq. Porous borders have facilitated the spillover of conflicts, as they enable individuals to travel back and forth to neighbouring countries with ease. Our research into 100 jihadis has shown the nature of the overlap between countries that share borders with a major conflict zone.

Extremist movements have taken leading roles in today's deadliest crises with increasing success. They exploit weak governance, instability, and geopolitical vacuums, hindering a coherent, regional response to the threat they pose.

This developing trend is reflected in our sample. Seventy-six per cent have been active in four hubs of regionalised conflict – the Levant (Iraq and Syria), Khorasan (Afghanistan and Pakistan), the Sahel (Algeria, Mali, Mauritania and Niger), and East Africa (Somalia and Kenya). This is partly due to the majority

of our prominent jihadi sample having been members of four key groups in those regions: al-Qaeda Central, ISIS, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), and al-Shabaab respectively.

FIG. 4.4 Countries Where Jihadis Have Been Active
By percentage of total sample

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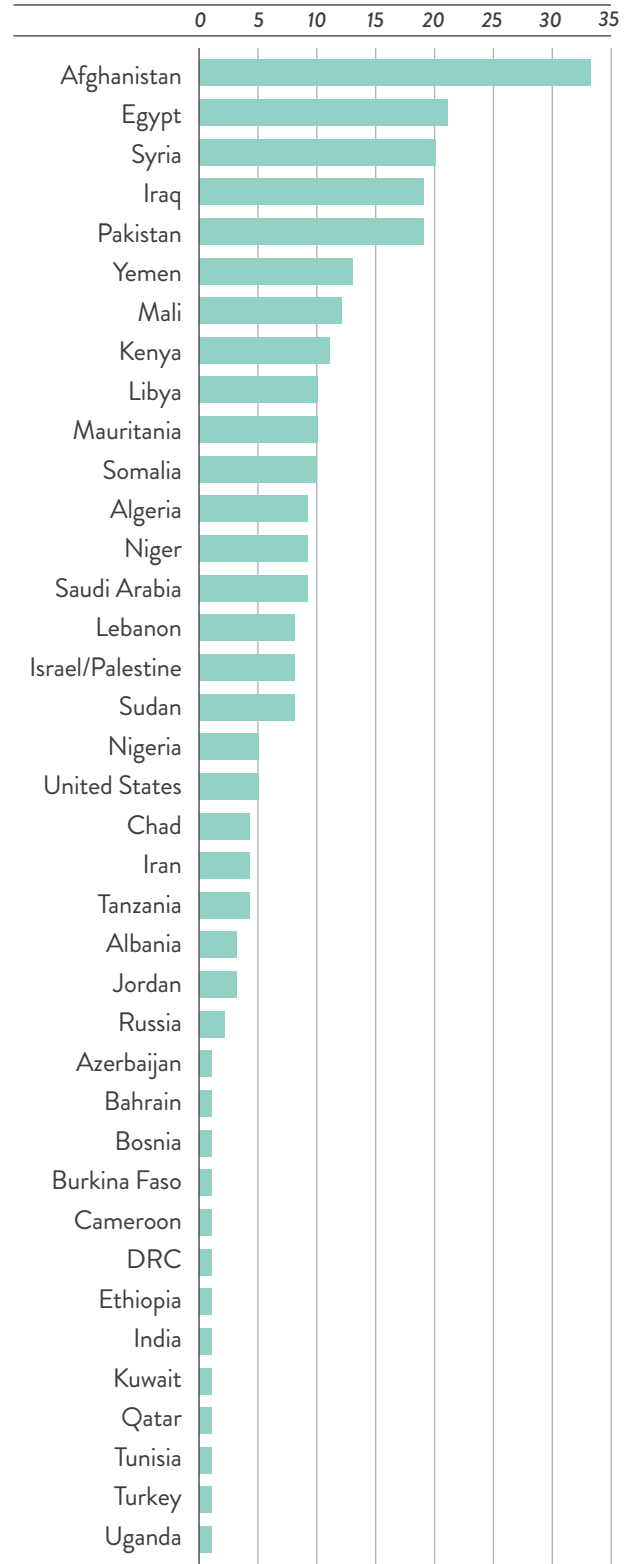
16 For more, see Thomas Hegghammer, *Jihad in Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

17 Muammar Gaddafi's Islamic Legion was an internationalist paramilitary force founded in the 1970s to support the creation of a unified Islamic state across North Africa. Martin Vogl, 'Tuaregs 'join Gaddafi's mercenaries'', *BBC News*, 4 March, 2011. http://bbc.in/1MV6Uly

FIG. 4.5 The Four Conflict Hubs

Seventy-six per cent of prominent jihadis have fought in one of the four theatres below

● *Sahel*   ● *East Africa*   ● *Levant*   ● *Khorasan*

As our sample of jihadis contains both contemporary and historical figures, it does not necessarily provide a snapshot of the current state of play in the movement. Rather, it provides insight into how groups have appropriated and regionalised conflicts in Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia across generations. It also provides an insight into the broader story of Salafi-jihadism beyond Iraq and Syria.

Although these regional conflicts differ enormously, they share a few notable features. Relatively unpoliced, decentralised – and, in some areas, partly tribal – borderlands provide ideal environments for militant groups to flourish. This dynamic has in some cases been made worse by short-sighted policies designed to remove an imminent national security threat by allowing jihadis to move freely to neighbouring countries. Russia's alleged turning of a blind eye towards North Caucasian militants travelling to Syria is an often-cited example of this.

These conflicts have also seen some form of international intervention in response to growing insurgencies. Recent American counter-extremism strategies have singled out three of these four areas (the Sahel, the Levant, and Khorasan) as major focuses for both 'hard' and 'soft' operations.[18]

Other insurgencies in Africa have also demonstrated these cross-border characteristics, most notably Boko Haram's regionalisation in the Lake Chad Basin. The Centre on Religion & Geopolitics' February 2016 Global Extremism Monitor[19] recorded as many civilian casualties from Boko Haram violence in Cameroon as in Nigeria. Furthermore, in North Africa the internal disintegration of Libya is having major repercussions for security in Egypt, Chad, and Tunisia in particular, while neighbouring Sudan has

18 John Hudson, 'Growth of Islamic State Forces State Department Overhaul', *Foreign Policy*, 1 February 2016. http://atfp.co/23FmhE8

19 'Global Extremism Monitor', Centre on Religion and Geopolitics, February 2016. http://bit.ly/23eRekT

PROFILE
Sayyid Imam al-Sharif

Born in northern Egypt in 1950, Sharif studied at Cairo University's medical college where he met Aymen al-Zawahiri. Sharif founded Egyptian Islamic Jihad along with Zawahiri, before traveling with him to Peshawar, Pakistan to work as doctors for the Red Crescent, and eventually moving on to Afghanistan to join the Mujahidin fighting against the Soviets. Sharif wrote two of the most important books in modern Islamist discourse, used by al-Qaeda to indoctrinate recruits and justify killings. He was among the founding members of the group and was part of al-Qaeda's top council.

PROFILE
Saif al-Adel

Born in Egypt in 1960, Adel served as a special forces officer in the Egyptian army before joining Egyptian Islamic Jihad. Adel was part of the Arab-Afghan Mujahidin that fought against the Soviets in Afghanistan in the 1980s. He went on to become a senior figure within al-Qaeda, serving as the group's head of strategic planning and providing explosives and intelligence training to new al-Qaeda recruits. Adel travelled widely, including to Afghanistan, Pakistan, Sudan, and Somalia, where he trained Somali fighters who killed 18 US servicemen in an attack in Mogadishu. Among his notable contacts are Osama Bin Laden, Aymen al-Zawahiri, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, and Abu Khalid al-Suri.

also expressed concern about the danger posed by ISIS in Libya. Libya is attracting a growing number of veterans of the conflict in Iraq and Syria, as well as fresh-faced foreign fighters from Europe and the rest of the Middle East. Add to these concerns the reports of jihadis from Kenya and other African countries travelling to Libya to join the group, and the scale of the problem becomes evident.20

Continued advancement of ISIS in Libya could witness the birth of a new hub, one that is territorially only miles from the shores of Europe, but also one that can serve to attract jihadis from both the Middle East and Africa. The symbiotic relationship between networks and conflicts tells us that Libya's unique position could place it as an ideal platform for Middle Eastern and sub-Saharan African jihadis to come together and harness the jihadi efforts across the two regions. The Libyan conflict is one of the only battlefields that could present such an opportunity due to its cross-cultural significance. Yet if it does not generate such potential, then this raises an important question: does the global jihadi movement suffer from

an inherent ethnic sectarianism that, contrary to its global branding, is deeply divided along racial fault-lines?

Further study is needed to establish whether jihadi groups serve as cause, catalyst, or consequence of growing regional instability. However, our data indicates it is essential to build more resilient communities, particularly in neglected border areas, and to strengthen governance around borders, in order to ensure conflict prevention is our primary means of denying jihadis the existing divisions on which they thrive.

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CASE STUDY: THE AFGHAN HUB

A good example of how contacts and partnerships contributed to the establishment of a jihadi group is in the formation of al-Qaeda in the 1980s. The relationship between Abdullah Azzam and Osama Bin Laden was first formed away from the battlefield in King Abdulaziz University in Jeddah. Azzam was one of a number of exiled Muslim Brotherhood members

20 Conor Gaffey, 'Kenya arrests four men suspected of trying to join ISIS in Libya', *Newsweek*, 8 March 2016. http://bit.ly/1NaOs3b

teaching in Saudi institutions, while Bin Laden was a civil engineering student. Bin Laden become attracted to ideas put forward by prominent Muslim Brotherhood members like Azzam.[21]

Both would go on to represent the Arab contingent of the Arab-Afghan Mujahidin, a loosely organised body of foreign fighters from across the Arab world. A large proportion of the Arab militants were Egyptian; many already engaged in jihadi activities back home. Among such Egyptians were Aymen al-Zawahiri and Sayyid Imam al-Sharif, who joined after volunteering as physicians for the Red Crescent in Peshawar, Pakistan. The meeting of these four individuals was central to the formation of al-Qaeda.

Afghanistan serves as an anchoring point within our research, with a third of the jihadis in our sample having travelled to the country. But it also serves as a point of departure. Fifty-eight per cent of the jihadis who travelled to the region had links to the theatres of operation of Pakistan, Egypt, and Algeria alone. Our findings showed that the internationalisation of Afghanistan's conflict in the 1980s was the single most important event in shaping global jihadism up until the rise of ISIS.

Afghanistan was the turning point in the careers of many prominent jihadi ideologues and leaders from around the world, including Azzam, Bin Laden, Zawahiri, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, and Abu Qatada al-Filastini. Those who would go on to lead jihadi movements in Africa such as Mokhtar Belmokhtar, Aden Hashi Farah Ayro, and Ahmed Godane, were also among them.

This is reflected in the state of the global jihadi movement today, and in jihadi propaganda, in which those who fought against the Soviets are lauded for taking part in glorified battles against an outside 'aggressor.'

A COHESIVE MOVEMENT?

Many jihadi groups claim to be part of a common global struggle. Despite this, and despite the shared

experiences of senior militants in conflicts such as Afghanistan, there is relatively little overlap between prominent jihadis in the Middle East and (particularly sub-Saharan) Africa in the sample.

ISIS serves as a useful case study for this dynamic. In 2015, the group accepted a pledge of allegiance to 'caliph' Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi from Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau, resulting in the group adopting the name 'West Africa Province.' Yet our militant profiles indicate there is little concrete evidence of these two factions working together, beyond the Nigerian group embracing 'brand ISIS.' US intelligence officials have even suggested that this lack of overlap might be due to racist Arab supremacism on the part of ISIS. The group works hard to rebut this narrative in its propaganda by emphasising the internationalism of its 'caliphate.'[22]

There are exceptions to this separation. The confluence of sub-Saharan and Arab militants in the Sahel, and in particular the jihadi base of operations in areas neighbouring post-conflict southern Algeria, is one example. In fact, attacks in 2016 on tourist infrastructure in Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire[23] suggest jihadi expansion into relatively virgin territory. Niger and Mali have faced the double challenge of being home to operations from both al-Qaeda affiliates and Boko Haram, despite the groups' largely distinct spheres of influence.

Meanwhile, in Somalia the majority of al-Qaeda affiliate al-Shabaab's members are native fighters who have never travelled abroad. However, up to a quarter are believed to be foreign fighters, largely Kenyan, as well as other members of the Somali diaspora abroad.[24] Although four of the five Somali-born jihadis in our sample had Somalia as their latest theatre of operation, three had previously trained and conducted operations with groups abroad, mostly in Afghanistan and Kenya. Al-Shabaab recruitment in Kenya is especially significant given the relative strength of the Kenyan

21 Another ideologue he was drawn to was the brother of the executed jihadi ideologue Sayyid Qutb, who also gave lectures at the university.

22 Milo Comerford, 'How Jihadis Exploit Racism for Recruitment', *Centre on Religion & Geopolitics*, 11 January 2016 http://bit.ly/23eQwUI

23 'Malian Spillover in Burkina Faso', *Centre on Religion & Geopolitics*, 19 January, 2016, http://bit.ly/1q98XIl; 'Côte d'Ivoire Attack Was A Matter of Time', Centre on Religion & Geopolitics, 14 March 2016. http://bit.ly/25NcexI

24 Tom Burridge, 'Funding jihad: Al-Shabab cash lures in young Kenyans', *BBC News*, 12 December 2014. http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-30419987

Mokhtar Belmokhtar

Born in Algeria in 1972, Belmokhtar's first jihadi activity came when he travelled to Afghanistan to join the Arab Mujahidin in 1991 after the Soviet withdrawal, where he met Osama Bin Laden, Abu Mohammad al-Maqdisi, and Abu Qatada al-Filastini. Belmokhtar returned to Algeria to fight in the civil war with the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) and later the breakaway faction of the group, Salafi Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) in 1998, before eventually becoming a member of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Belmokhtar has travelled and operated extensively throughout the Sahel region, covering Algeria, Mali, Niger, Mauritania, and Libya. He became known for his long-term strategies to win support from local tribes by offering loans and vehicles, as well as cigarette smuggling, which earned him the epithet 'Mr Marlboro,' and marrying into four prominent northern Malian Arab and Tuareg families.

state. In Kenya, al-Shabaab has also been successful in attracting recruits beyond the ethnic Somali community.

The only prominent Somali jihadi in our sample who is not believed to have travelled abroad is Ahmad Umar, who was appointed Emir of al-Shabaab in 2014. Umar was a product of the militant group al-Ittihad al-Islamiyya (AIAI)[25] and then the Islamic Courts Union, which aimed to restore 'Islamic' order to war-torn Mogadishu in 2006, and would eventually spawn al-Shabaab. However, Umar was also influenced by his predecessors Ahmed Godane and Aden Hashi

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25 Al-Ittihad al-Islamiyya (AIAI) was established in Somalia between 1982 and 1984. It sought to overthrow the Somali government and, from 1993, was allied with al-Qaeda and received funding from Osama Bin Laden. After achieving its stated objective of ousting Somali President Siad Barre in the early 1990s, the group moved its attention to Ethiopia in support of the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF). After being largely crushed by Ethiopian forces, many former AIAI members helped form the Islamic Courts Union (ICU). Some sources speculate that AIAI lost control and increasing numbers of courts were established. The ICU absorbed a sizeable number of former AIAI members, such as Sheikh Dahir Aweys, who also became a prominent leader of the ICU.

Farah Ayro who had strong links to al-Qaeda and the international Mujahidin in Afghanistan.

This internationalism can be seen in links across the continent and to the Middle East. In February 2016, Somalia's president Hassan Sheikh Mohamud told the Munich Security Conference that there was "proof and evidence" that Boko Haram fighters from Nigeria have been trained in Somalia.26 This international trade in jihadi 'best practice' is seen across our sample, whether this cross-pollination is communicated through propaganda videos or through shared experiences.

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CASE STUDY: MOKHTAR BELMOKHTAR'S INTERNATIONAL OUTLOOK

Notorious Algerian jihadi Mokhtar Belmokhtar had weak operational links to the upper ranks of al-Qaeda, according to our data. However, he encapsulated the group's transnational focus, exporting this approach to the Sahel.

His main associates during his time in Afghanistan were Palestinian ideologues such as Abu Qatada al-Filastini and Abu Mohammad al-Maqdisi, the mentor to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who founded al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). He did not spend much time with al-Qaeda leaders such as Aymen al-Zawahiri and Osama Bin Laden. In fact, Belmokhtar was allegedly inspired to join the jihad in Afghanistan because of the death of Abdullah Azzam, the founding member of al-Qaeda and 'Father of Modern Jihad,' whom he greatly admired. He was not drawn there by a specific group or network.

The story of Belmokhtar's return to North Africa from Afghanistan also shows how Azzam's transnational aims influenced him. Although his most renowned operation was at the In Amenas gas facility in Algeria in 2003, his operations would span five countries in the Sahel under the banner of four separate jihadi groups.

In Niger, Belmokhtar was involved in the 2008 kidnapping of Canadian diplomat Robert Fowler, while during the 2012 jihadi takeover of northern Mali, he

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26 Conor Gaffey, 'Is al-Shabab training Boko Haram fighters?', *Newsweek*, February 15 2016. http://bit.ly/22fd0PB

was based in the then-militant stronghold of Gao. There are also reports of an attack by Belmokhtar on barracks in Mauritania in 2005 and incursions into chaotic Libya to avoid French forces after 2012. Reports of his demise in a US airstrike in Libya have been called into question, given his likely coordination of the November 2015 attack on the Radisson Blu hotel in Bamako.[27]

GENERATIONAL JIHAD

Our data included the personal relationships that exist among prominent jihadis. We found that many of our sample shared contacts, demonstrating the links between groups operating today and the first generation of foreign jihadis in Afghanistan.

We have been able to trace prominent jihadis from the battlefields in Iraq and Syria today to the forefathers of modern jihadism. For instance, Abdullah Azzam, the hardened Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood member who helped to form Hamas and was a chief ideologue in the earliest incarnations of al-Qaeda, can be linked through personal contacts to the leaders of Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS today.

By mapping out notable contacts for each of our prominent jihadis, we can see that Azzam came into contact with the following:

- Saif al-Adel (prominent member of Egyptian Islamic Jihad and al-Qaeda)
- Sayyid Imam al-Sharif, a.k.a 'Dr Fadl' (prominent member of Egyptian Islamic Jihad and al-Qaeda)
- Aymen al-Zawahiri (leader of Egyptian Islamic Jihad, successor to Osama Bin Laden in al-Qaeda leadership)
- Abu Khalid al-Suri (member of al-Qaeda and later Ahrar al-Sham in Syria)
- Osama Bin Laden (leader of al-Qaeda)

All of these individuals fought in the Arab-Afghan Mujahidin during the 1980s Afghan-Soviet War. All of them came into contact with Azzam during this time; some also came into contact with each other.

27 Matthew Mpoke Bigg, 'Mali hotel attack puts veteran militant back in spotlight', *Reuters*, November 10 2015. http://reut.rs/1Ojmjcz

PROFILE

Abu Khalid al-Suri

Born in Syria in 1963, Suri is believed to have been among the large contingent of Arab Mujahidin who fought against the Soviets in Afghanistan in the 1980s as well as operating in Afghanistan in the late 1990s. Prior to Afghanistan, he was involved with the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria throughout the 1970s. Suri provides a physical link from the Afghan-Soviet jihad to the present-day conflict in Syria, where he helped form the jihadi group Ahrar al-Sham along with others with whom he was incarcerated in Sednaya prison in the late 2000s. He was appointed as an 'independent' arbitrator by al-Qaeda chief Aymen al-Zawahiri to help resolve the dispute between ISIS' chief Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and Abu Mohammad al-Jolani, the leader of the al-Qaeda affiliated group Jabhat al-Nusra, which broke away from ISIS. Despite Suri's denial of ever having been a member of al-Qaeda, he is reported to have been served as Osama Bin Laden's courier between Europe and the Middle East as well as attending the al-Qaeda run al-Farouq training camp in Afghanistan. Suri was killed in an ISIS-claimed suicide attack in Aleppo in February 2014.

For example, Bin Laden, who was particularly close to Azzam and regarded him as a spiritual mentor, also met Zawahiri there. Zawahiri in turn knew Sharif, from their time volunteering in Peshawar for the Red Crescent.

Looking at four people from our sample – Bin Laden, Zawahiri, Suri, and al-Qaeda in Iraq leader Abu Ayyub al-Masri – illustrates the links between Azzam and prominent jihadis involved in the Syrian conflict today.

SALAFI-JIHADISM FROM BIN LADEN TO BAGHDADI

Osama Bin Laden and Aymen al-Zawahiri both knew Abu Ayyub al-Masri. Zawahiri and Masri had both been members of Egyptian Islamic Jihad and all three fought in Afghanistan. Masri was among the

early adherents of the global jihadi aims that led to the eventual creation of al-Qaeda. He became a close aide of Zawahiri.

The personal links and interactions across our sample become extremely complex in the 1990s when the al-Farouq training camp near Kandahar, Afghanistan was established by al-Qaeda. This camp led to significant movement in and out of Afghanistan, creating a hub for jihadis to train and network. From there, they either returned home or moved elsewhere. Today, camps in Libya, Syria, and Iraq, where swathes of territory are controlled by jihadi elements, will no doubt serve as the incubators of future networks.[28]

It was in al-Farouq training camp that Masri came into contact with Jordanian jihadi Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who would go on to lead al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). Both men would work hand in hand in entrenching al-Qaeda's insurgency in that country. After Zarqawi's death in 2006, Masri assumed the leadership of AQI, establishing a new generation of aspiring jihadis in the group, including Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of ISIS today, who became Masri's personal protégé. With his support, Baghdadi continued to rise up the ranks of the group.

In addition to Baghdadi, our analysis shows that two other leading jihadi figures from the Syrian conflict, Abu Khalid al-Suri, one of the founding members of Ahrar al-Sham, and Abu Mohammad al-Jolani, the leader of al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra, can also be traced back to Abdullah Azzam.

Like Masri, Suri came into contact with Azzam, Bin Laden and Zawahiri during his time in the Arab-Afghan Mujahidin. Suri developed a relationship with Zawahiri, who later asked him to resolve the dispute between Baghdadi and Jolani. The unresolved rift between Baghdadi and Jolani led to ISIS' eventual split from al-Qaeda. Unlike Baghdadi, Jolani maintained his allegiance to Zawahiri and al-Qaeda Central. Suri and Jolani retained their relations with each other through the close cooperation between Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra on the Syrian battlefield until Suri's death at the hands of ISIS in 2013.

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28 The Long War Journal estimate the presence of some 63 camps in Iraq and Syria alone. See map by Caleb Weiss and Bill Roggio, 'Jihad-ist training camps in Iraq and Syria', *The Long War Journal*. http://bit.ly/1UZatdl
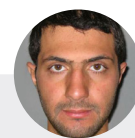
PROFILE
Abu Mohammad al-Jolani

Born in Deir ez-Zor Governorate in 1981, Jolani is the leader of the powerful Syria-based al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra. Jolani, whose father worked for the military, did well at school and went on to study medicine at the University of Damascus. It was around this time that he was influenced by the radical Syrian preacher Mahmud al-Aghasi, whose group Ghuraba al-Sham coordinated the smuggling of Syrian jihadis into Iraq. Jolani was active in Iraq from 2003 until 2011, when the current ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi entrusted him with setting up a Syrian cell amid the civil war. The pair would later fall out after Jolani refused to integrate his group into ISIS when it expanded into Syria in 2013, opting instead to maintain loyalty to al-Qaeda chief Aymen al-Zawahiri.
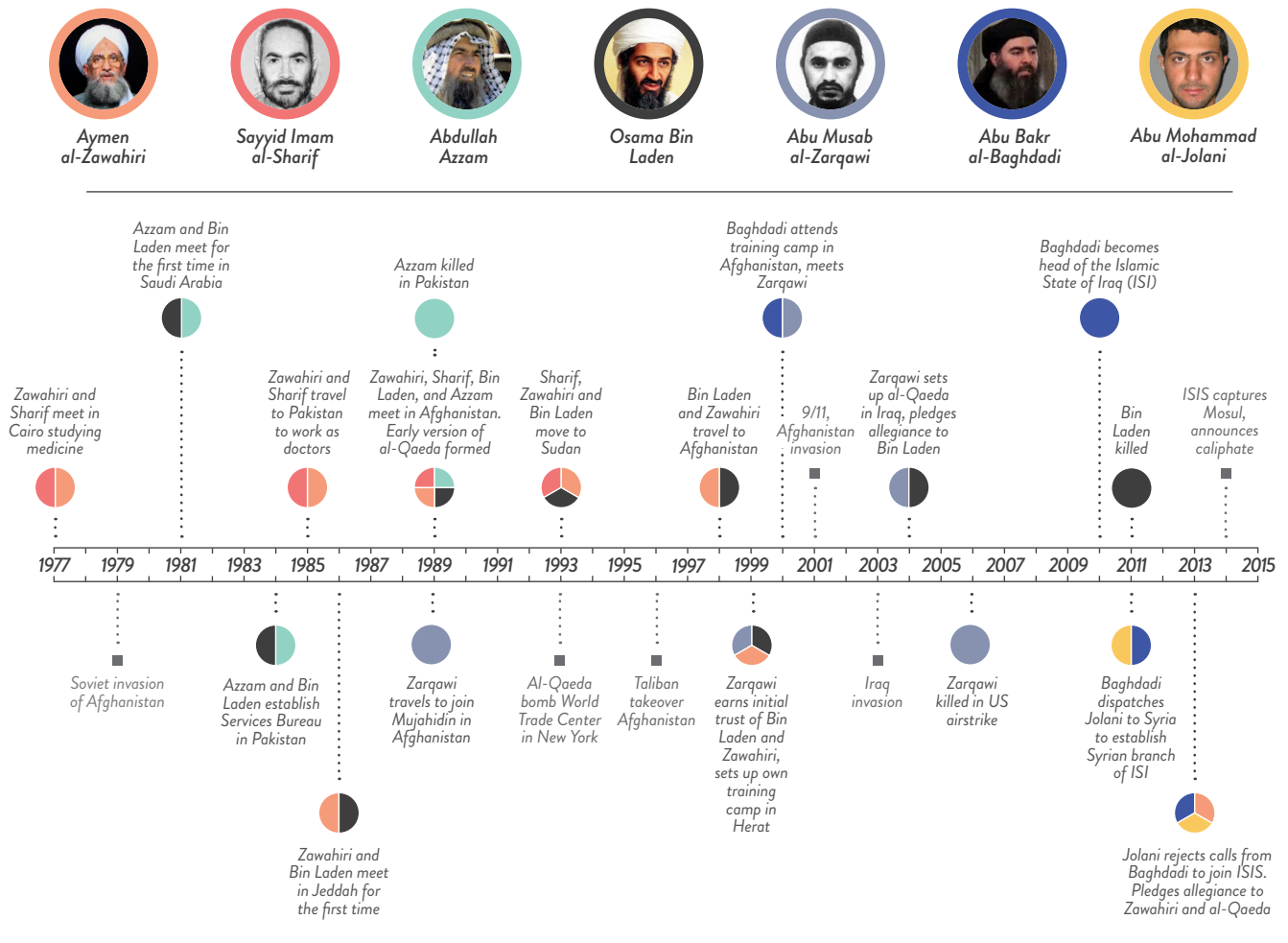
Both Masri and Suri played a role in the development of prominent jihadis currently operating in Syria and Iraq. However, the significance of their influence remains eclipsed by figures such as Bin Laden and Zawahiri. As such we know relatively little about the networks of high-level, but less prominent jihadis, their expanse and the individuals' role within such networks. The top ranks of jihadi groups in the coming years are likely to feature individuals who have come into contact with operatives like Masri and Suri, rather than those at the top leadership level like Bin Laden and Zawahiri. More attention should in future be paid to mid-level jihadis who are freer to move undetected, and to build prolific networks, than those at the top. Those operatives who earned their stripes in ongoing conflicts are likely to be in the best position to keep the global jihadi flame alight for future generations.

RIFTS AND ALLEGIANCES

Analysing contacts and shared networks reveals that rifts and allegiances between prominent

FIG. 4.6 The Building of a Global Network

Timeline of interactions from the Afghan-Soviet conflict to the present

Aymen al-Zawahiri · Sayyid Imam al-Sharif · Abdullah Azzam · Osama Bin Laden · Abu Musab al-Zarqawi · Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi · Abu Mohammad al-Jolani

Above the timeline:

- Zawahiri and Sharif meet in Cairo studying medicine
- Azzam and Bin Laden meet for the first time in Saudi Arabia
- Zawahiri and Sharif travel to Pakistan to work as doctors
- Azzam killed in Pakistan
- Zawahiri, Sharif, Bin Laden, and Azzam meet in Afghanistan. Early version of al-Qaeda formed
- Sharif, Zawahiri and Bin Laden move to Sudan
- Bin Laden and Zawahiri travel to Afghanistan
- Baghdadi attends training camp in Afghanistan, meets Zarqawi
- 9/11, Afghanistan invasion
- Zarqawi sets up al-Qaeda in Iraq, pledges allegiance to Bin Laden
- Baghdadi becomes head of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI)
- Bin Laden killed
- ISIS captures Mosul, announces caliphate

Timeline years: 1977 · 1979 · 1981 · 1983 · 1985 · 1987 · 1989 · 1991 · 1993 · 1995 · 1997 · 1999 · 2001 · 2003 · 2005 · 2007 · 2009 · 2011 · 2013 · 2015

Below the timeline:

- Soviet invasion of Afghanistan
- Azzam and Bin Laden establish Services Bureau in Pakistan
- Zarqawi travels to join Mujahidin in Afghanistan
- Al-Qaeda bomb World Trade Center in New York
- Taliban takeover Afghanistan
- Zarqawi earns initial trust of Bin Laden and Zawahiri, sets up own training camp in Herat
- Iraq invasion
- Zarqawi killed in US airstrike
- Baghdadi dispatches Jolani to Syria to establish Syrian branch of ISI
- Zawahiri and Bin Laden meet in Jeddah for the first time
- Jolani rejects calls from Baghdadi to join ISIS. Pledges allegiance to Zawahiri and al-Qaeda

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jihadis since the 1980s have contributed to the 'mushrooming' of the global movement. Exploring the nature of these relationships further, it becomes clear that disputes and partnerships have been motivated by ideology and strategy, but they have always been personal.

Disputes can arise out of personal interactions, causing shifts in group direction and leading to new groups forming. Those who established a degree of loyalty fighting besides Aymen al-Zawahiri and Osama Bin Laden have generally remained loyal to the al-Qaeda identity despite taking their jihad to different parts of the world. The fallouts between Abdullah Azzam and Zawahiri, between Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and Abu Mohammad al-Jolani, and even splits in groups like al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), have more often than not resulted from personal disagreements, yet have had geopolitical implications.

Azzam and Zawahiri disagreed on what the next objective for the Arab-Afghan Mujahidin should be following the Soviet withdrawal in 1989. Zawahiri insisted on targeting Muslim leaders he considered un-Islamic, while Azzam wanted to direct the global jihadi movement towards attacking non-Muslim enemies, beginning with Israel.

Baghdadi initially dispatched Jolani to Syria in 2011 to set up Jabhat al-Nusra as the Syrian branch of the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI), but the two fell out after Baghdadi announced the merger of Jabhat al-Nusra and ISI to form the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), to which Jolani objected. Instead, Jolani chose to pledge allegiance to al-Qaeda chief Zawahiri.

In 2012, AQIM commander Mokhtar Belmokhtar fell out with the group's leadership and formed his own group, al-Mulathamun. Despite this split, he remained loyal to the al-Qaeda cause and continues to be

involved with AQIM today.

The deepest rifts and the firmest allegiances in the jihadi movement were formed on deeply personal levels, which created coteries of like-minded militants. These informal groupings would in time become formalised networks that, if traced back, can tell much about the many jihadi factions that appeared around the world in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

Today's young jihadi fighters romanticise the days of the Arab-Afghan Mujahidin, but the movement was far from monolithic. Its approach to Arab-Afghan resistance to the Soviets and the influx of foreign fighters soon created deep social, ideological and ethnic rifts. This intensified when the Soviets left Afghanistan in 1989, with the Mujahidin splintering without the glue of a common enemy. Gilles Kepel recounts an incident in March 1989, during the siege of Jalalabad, when Arab-Afghan relations among the Mujahidin became especially strained. An Arab contingent reportedly declared a group of Afghan prisoners apostates and proceeded to 'chop' them into 'small pieces...packing them in boxes.'[29]

This account echoes reports of infighting among Syria's jihadi factions, and the imagery is chillingly familiar. Indeed, many of these rifts, entrenched during the Afghan jihad, went on to create deep divisions within today's movement. With it, they created opposing versions of jihadi history that translate into alternative visions for today's jihad.

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CASE STUDY: ZAWAHIRI VS. ZARQAWI: IDEOLOGICAL DISPUTES

Aymen al-Zawahiri's and Osama Bin Laden's assessments of Jordanian jihadi Abu Musab al-Zarqawi revealed their mistrust of him. Even before he took up the mantle of leading al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), al-Qaeda's hierarchy saw him as something of a loose cannon who would harm the jihadi cause. Zarqawi's brutal and ruthless approach is clear from his own words:

"The killing of infidels by any method including martyrdom [suicide] operations has been sanctified by many scholars

even if it means killing innocent Muslims...The shedding of Muslim blood...is allowed in order to avoid the greater evil of disrupting jihad."[30]

Zawahiri, however, insisted on winning the hearts and minds battle, a mantra that continues to echo in his messages today, and remains a key distinction between it and its rival ISIS. In correspondence with Zarqawi, Zawahiri wrote, "We are in a media battle in a race for the hearts and minds of our Umma."[31] Zawahiri also extended this quest of winning hearts and minds to address the sectarian element that Zarqawi had championed, having announced that his "al-Qaeda organisation in Iraq...has declared war against Shias in all of Iraq."[32]

While both Zarqawi and Zawahiri viewed the Shia as agents working for the US-led coalition in Iraq, Zawahiri insisted that al-Qaeda's focus should remain foreign targets, not the Shia, whom he viewed as of secondary importance. The al-Qaeda chief warned that attacks on Shia would raise questions about the nature of the jihad and would do little to garner popular support:

"The sharpness of this questioning increases when the attacks are on one of their mosques, and it increases more when the attacks are on the mausoleum of Imam Ali Bin Abi Talib, may God honour him. My opinion is that this matter won't be acceptable to the Muslim populace however much you have tried to explain it, and aversion to this will continue."[33]

Tactics employed by ISIS today, such as the attacks on Shia mosques and shrines, reflect the inclinations of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, current ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's predecessor. In comparison, the Syrian al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra, which maintains loyalty to Zawahiri, adopts his 'hearts and minds' approach in the face of ISIS' widespread brutality and ruthlessness.

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29 Gilles Kepel, *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., 2006), p. 148.

30 David Aaron, *In Their Own Words: Voices of Jihadi-Compilation and Commentary* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2008)

31 See GlobalSecurity.org: "Letter from al-Zawahiri to al-Zarqawi." Accessed at: http://bit.ly/23eQxl7.

32 "Al-Zarqawi declares war on Iraqi Shia" *Al Jazeera*, 14 September, 2005. Accessed at: http://bit.ly/1TDWQ23.

33 See GlobalSecurity.org: "Letter from al-Zawahiri to al-Zarqawi." Accessed at: http://bit.ly/23eQxl7.

Trends Among Prominent Jihadis

While there is no single pathway to jihad, our sample sheds light on common factors in jihadis' educational, criminal, and ideological backgrounds.

The networks that developed in Afghanistan in the 1980s drove the growth of a movement that has spread across the world. These findings can help identify similar networks in the four current major conflict hubs, obstruct the development of new ones, and hinder the further growth of the global jihadi movement, which is driven by today's civil wars.

Biographies can also test assumptions about what, if any, social factors create a jihadi. Social or economic deprivation and poor education are often cited as drivers, but our research shows that, for the prominent jihadis in our sample, this is not necessarily true. Prison is acknowledged as a recruiting ground, which leads to the assumption that many jihadis are common

Definitions

Ideologue / Jihadis whose primary function entails leading and steering the groups ideological and strategic activities.

Operational / Jihadis primarily charged with frontline operations, carrying out attacks, and providing logistical assistance.

Administrative / Jihadis whose main function involved working on internal legislative and procedural tasks.

STEMM / Acronym for Science, Technology, Engineering, Maths, and Medicine.

Islamism / A modern religious-political ideology requiring a dominant role for an interpretation of Islam as state law.

Islamist Group / Modern religious-political groups that seek to establish an interpretation of Islam as state law.

criminals, but our research shows that such figures rarely make it to the top of the movement. A link is often anecdotally drawn between non-violent Islamist movements and violent jihadism; our research found over half of the prominent jihadis in our sample had previously been connected with an Islamist group.

FIG. 5.1 Jihadis Attending University

By percentage

Attended University

46

Studied STEMM

57

Studied Islamic studies

28

Studied humanities

11

0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100
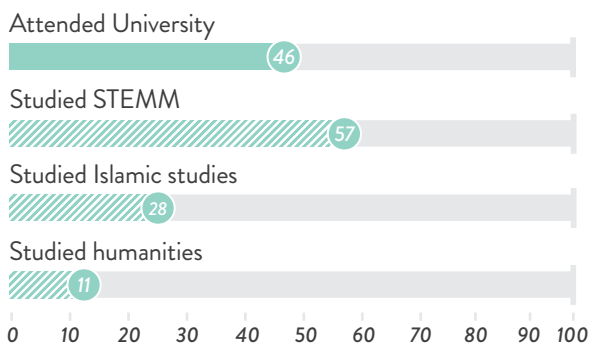
FIG. 5.2 Islamist Links Prior to Jihad

By percentage of sample

51

0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100
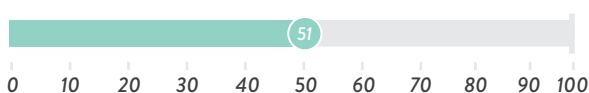
By examining the trends in the personal histories of the 100 jihadis in our sample, we were able to build a picture of the common factors in what makes a jihadi leader.

FIG. 5.3 Jihadis with Criminal Backgrounds

By percentage

Spent Time in Prison

65

Imprisoned Before Engaging in Jihad

25

Imprisoned After Engaging in Jihad

75

0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100
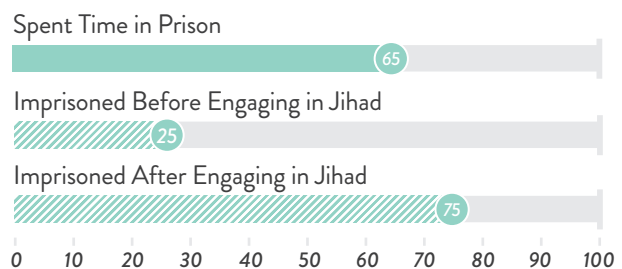
FIG. 5.4 Family Background

By percentage of total sample

Military Background

18

Links to Local, Regional or National Government

13

Refugee Background

7

0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100
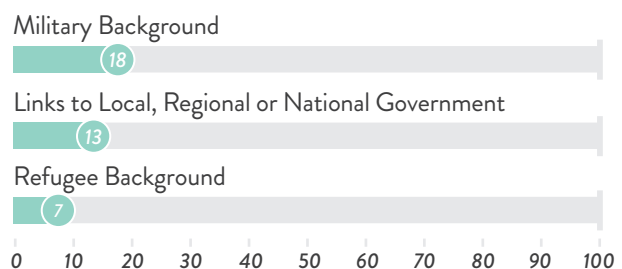
THE ISLAMIST LINK

At least 51 per cent of our sample had a connection to Islamist groups prior to jihad, whether directly as members of Islamist organisations or through auxiliaries affiliated to them. These included bodies that are not necessarily political activist organisations but form a functioning arm of existing Islamist groups, such as youth wings, student associations, and other societies.

FIG. 5.5 Islamist Links by Group

By percentage of jihadis with Islamist links

Muslim Brotherhood
50

Other
30

Hamas
12

Islamic Courts Union
8

Muslim Youth Council
7

Islamic Salvation Front
5

0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100
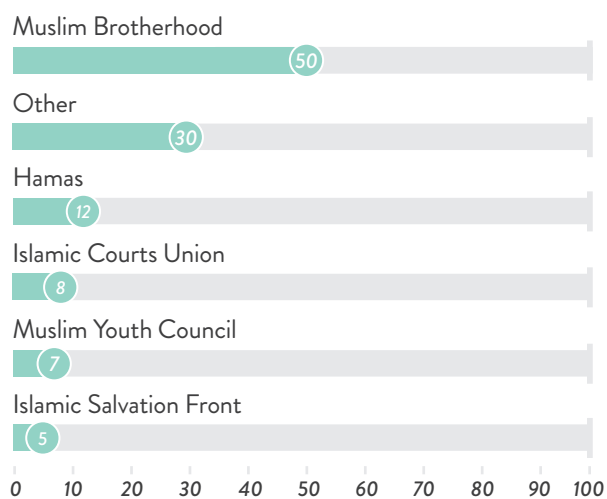
All the prominent jihadis in our sample from Jordan (2) and Somalia (5) were involved with Islamist groups before joining jihad. Meanwhile, the proportion of jihadis from Egypt (13), Algeria (4), and Palestine (7) with prior Islamist links was consistent. All three countries have been home to a considerable Islamist presence. The Muslim Brotherhood began in Egypt in 1928, developing a strong position in the Palestinian territories before its offshoot Hamas was formed in 1987. The majority of the jihadis in our sample from Algeria had affiliations with the country's Salafi-oriented Islamic Salvation Front (FIS).

Libya (2), Saudi Arabia (1), and Iraq (1) had the lowest proportion of jihadis with known Islamist links prior to jihad, while none of the jihadis in our sample from Yemen were documented as having had any Islamist past. These results may be due to the fact that there is very little information on Islamist links in these countries, as well as political conditions having been disruptive to Islamist activity.

In Libya, it was not until the fall of the Gaddafi regime in 2011 that Islamists affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood were able to operate openly. Before then, the group operated in secret, having been outlawed in the 1980s. The Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated Iraqi Islamic Party was also banned under the rule of Abd al-Karim Qasim (1958-1963), while the Baathist regimes that followed continued to repress Islamist groups. They were only able to operate openly after the fall of Saddam Hussain.

In Saudi Arabia, there are no official Islamist groups due to the authority of state-sanctioned Wahhabism. As such, those who identified with Islamist groups did so unofficially. Crackdowns on the Muslim Brotherhood in a number of Middle Eastern countries also led to many of its members seeking sanctuary in the Kingdom. In light of this, our finding that 51 per cent of jihadis had Islamist links is likely a low estimate.

FIG. 5.6 Islamist Links by Country of Origin

Number of sample

0 5 10 15 20

Egypt
Palestine
Libya
Iraq
Algeria
Syria
Saudi Arabia
Somalia
Nigeria
Kenya
Mali
Jordan
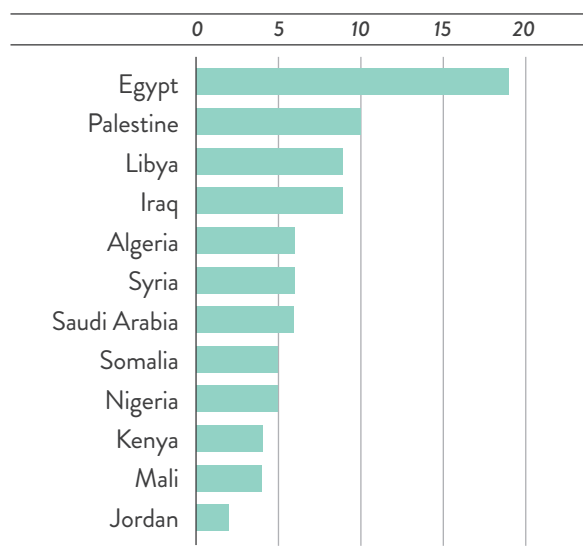
Some of the jihadi groups that appeared in our sample started out as non-violent Islamist movements. These included groups in Somalia, Nigeria, Egypt, and Algeria.

The Islamic Courts Union in Somalia first emerged in Mogadishu in 1994. As a response to the crumbling state apparatus in the country, the Islamic Courts sought to apply an interpretation of Islamic law in Somalia, although it did not strictly adhere to any particular school of jurisprudence. Hardline elements of the Islamic Courts, calling for a stricter application

Djamel Zitouni

Born in the Birkhadem suburb of Algiers in 1964, Zitouni was the leader of the Armed Islamic Group (GIA). Prior to his engagement in jihadi activity, Zitouni was part of the non-violent Islamist group the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS). He is believed to have travelled to Afghanistan to participate in the Arab Mujahidin's efforts against the Soviets, after which he returned to his native Algeria in 1992 to take up jihad with the GIA. He was a commander of the 'Algerian Afghans' within the GIA before eventually becoming the group's leader in 1994. Zitouni is reported to have been interested in Salafi thought prior to his engagement in jihadi activity, and was known to be among the leading Salafi hardliners within the GIA. It was under the leadership of Zitouni that the GIA carried out the 1994 hijacking of Air France flight 8969 as well as its bombing of multiple targets in Paris between July and October 1995.

Abdullah Azzam

Born in the West Bank in 1941, Azzam has often been described as the 'Father of Global Jihad' for his prominent role in the formation of the global jihadi ideology and the early incarnation of al-Qaeda. Following study at the agricultural college in Jenin, Azzam was a distance-learning student at the University of Damascus, graduating from the Faculty of Sharia. It was also around this time that he became involved with the Muslim Brotherhood. In the 1970s Azzam moved to Egypt where he pursued doctoral studies at al-Azhar University in Cairo, earning a Ph.D in Islamic jurisprudence. It is believed that around this time Azzam became close to the family members and ideas of Sayyid Qutb. Azzam would go on to teach Islamic studies at the University of Jordan between 1973-1980 and King Abdulaziz University between 1980-1981, where he would come into contact with Osama Bin Laden for the first time. Azzam travelled to Peshawar in 1981, before joining the Arab Mujahidin in Afghanistan. He played a key role both as an ideologue and a recruiter.

of Islamic law, went on to form the al-Qaeda affiliate al-Shabaab in 2006. Previously, this was a youth wing of the Islamic Courts Union.

The Nigerian-based jihadi group Boko Haram, which pledged allegiance to ISIS in March 2015, started out as a non-violent movement to establish an Islamic state in northern Nigeria. Founded by Mohammad Yusuf, the group set up schools and religious activities for poor Muslim families. At the same time, it tapped into the existing networks of the Izala Society, a Wahhabi-inspired group. Rising tensions with the government led to clashes that killed hundreds of members of the group in 2009, and the start of its ongoing violent insurgency in Nigeria and the Lake Chad Basin.

Extreme elements in the Muslim Brotherhood movement were opposed to the organisation's renunciation of the legitimacy of violence during the

Sadat era. This led to splinter groups with jihadi aims forming. The ranks of Egyptian Islamic Jihad and al-Gamaa al-Islamiyya were filled with many Brotherhood members who were in favour of using violence to establish an Islamic state.

The Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) was a Salafi Islamist political party in Algeria. Its strong showing in the 1992 elections led to a military coup, and the group was banned. The Armed Islamic Group (GIA), a jihadi faction that launched an insurgency against the government and the army, emerged as one of a number of FIS splinter groups. It went on to dominate Algeria's jihadi scene. The group included members of the Mujahidin who had fought in the Afghan-Soviet conflict and had returned home, as well as members of the FIS political party.

CASE STUDY: 'ZERO TO JIHADI'

None of the Yemeni jihadis in our sample were noted as having had any involvement with Islamist groups prior to joining the jihadi movement. This includes the former chief of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) Nasir al-Wuhayshi. Wuhayshi's first taste of jihad was when he went to join Osama Bin Laden in Afghanistan in the late 1990s. Two of the other Yemenis in our sample, current AQAP chief Qasim al-Raymi and Jamal Mohammad al-Badawi, who was convicted of being involved in the bombing of the USS Cole in 2000, followed a similar path.

Other prominent jihadis who did not have any documented involvement with Islamist organisations include ISIS spokesman Abu Mohammad al-Adnani, Jabhat al-Nusra leader Abu Mohammad al-Jolani, and former al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) commander Mokhtar Belmokhtar.

The existence of major conflicts that attract jihadis from around the world such as Afghanistan in the 1980s or Syria today, creates conditions that can accelerate the radicalisation of individuals to violence. Meanwhile, localised conflicts can draw individuals caught up in the hostilities to violent extremism even if they have never been involved with Islamism or jihadism. This could go some way to explain why there was little evidence of Islamist engagement prior to jihad for individuals in our sample from Nigeria, Libya, and Iraq.

This demonstrates that the decision to join a jihadi group is not always the result of a deep-rooted identification with Islamist ideas, but can also be driven by pragmatism, or some other motivation. Our sample suggests that while for some, engagement with jihad started as a steady process, for others it was initiated by a major conflict, either in their country of origin or in one that attracted global attention.

EDUCATED EXTREMISTS

Our sample reinforces research that suggests that prominent figures within jihadi circles are often

PROFILE
Abu Ayyub al-Masri

Born in Egypt in 1968, Masri became one of al-Qaeda's most senior operatives and the rise of ISIS today may be attributed to his legacy. Masri pursued pharmacy at university before switching his attention to economics, but then left for Saudi Arabia before the academic year was over. In Saudi Arabia he studied forensic science and went on to obtain a BA degree in Islamic studies from the Islamic University of Medina in 1985. Masri was a known member of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood before becoming involved with Egyptian Islamic Jihad and al-Qaeda, where he became a key aide to Aymen al-Zawahiri. He taught the Salafi-jihadi ideology of al-Qaeda to new recruits at the al-Farouq training camp in Afghanistan, where Masri also first met Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Masri went on to help Zarqawi set up the first al-Qaeda cell in Iraq and eventually took on leadership when Zarqawi was killed in 2006 during the US-led counter-insurgency operations. Masri was described as being even more violent than his predecessor and built on the sectarian rhetoric first employed by Zarqawi. In 2006, Masri announced the formation of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), the precursor to the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (ISIS).

well-educated. At least 46 per cent of the jihadis in our sample attended university. Fifty-seven per cent of the university graduates in our sample undertook STEMM degrees.

FIG. 5.7 Jihadis' Areas of Study
Number of sample
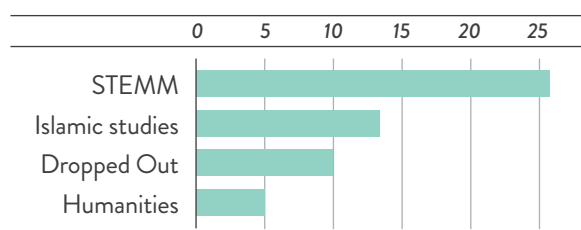
In total, 29 per cent of those we classified as ideologues – those providing intellectual direction, justification, and organisation to a group's activities – studied STEMM degrees, while only 18 per cent of the ideologues completed Islamic studies degrees. The same trend is true of operational figures – those primarily active in the areas of combat, logistics, and weapons. In fact, among these, the number of STEMM graduates was more than double that of Islamic studies graduates.

While the proportion of those who undertook Islamic studies degrees was higher among those jihadis classified as ideologues – 18 per cent compared to eight per cent of those classified as operational – it still highlights a void of Islamic scholarship among the jihadis in our sample. In fact, only two of the jihadis in our sample classified as holding administrative functions (including legislative positions involving the application of sharia) had degrees, and neither of them were in Islamic studies.

This finding reflects recent research alluding to the idea that there is a specific educational mindset associated with extremism. According to this theory, extremism draws people who like simple solutions and wish to avoid nuance, ambiguity, or dialogue.[34] Research from Diego Gambetta and Steffen Hertog has looked at whether people with a pre-disposition to such a mindset might be more likely to adopt certain subjects, and whether these attitudes might be reinforced by the way STEMM subjects are taught.[35]

However, the individual biographies in our sample offer further clues as to why STEMM graduates seem to dominate militant circles. For example, there is reason to believe that the acquisition of STEMM degrees, particularly in developing countries, is associated with greater social mobility. People enroll in specific disciplines for a variety of reasons, ranging from commitment and interest in the subject to a pragmatic calculation of the advantages that the subject will bring to the individual. Furthermore, in many Middle Eastern and North African countries, the choice of discipline is dependent on the grades

a student receives at the end of secondary school. Engineering and medicine became the most prestigious subjects of study across the Middle East, as they were exclusively reserved for high-achievers. Therefore, the high level of STEMM graduates among our sample should be seen in this context.

Although 46 per cent of our sample attended university, 22 per cent of these are known to have dropped out, while many others moved between numerous courses and disciplines. This suggests an ongoing search for fulfillment and purpose, which may have left some of our sample vulnerable to jihadi groups offering opportunities for positions of influence.

FIG. 5.8 Education by Primary Jihadi Role
By percentage
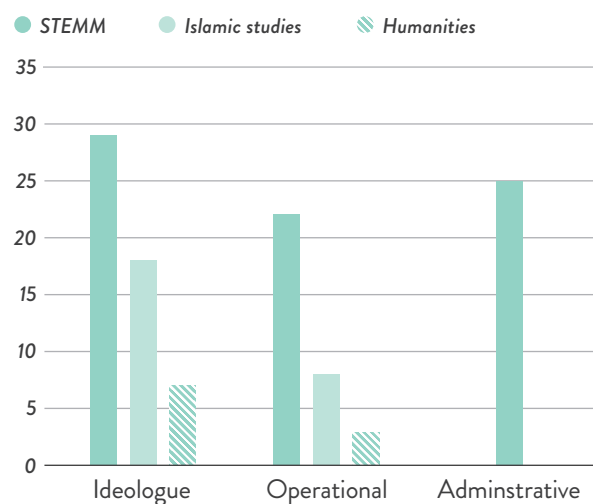
CASE STUDY: OSAMA BIN LADEN, FROM ENGINEER TO IDEOLOGUE

The study of STEMM subjects at university is a key trend among the jihadis in our sample. One of the most notable individuals with this academic background is one of the main protagonists in the global jihad, Osama Bin Laden. Bin Laden studied for a degree in civil engineering at the King Abdulaziz University in Jeddah during the late 1970s, a choice that may have been influenced by his father, who led a multi-billion dollar construction empire. His time at university coincided with the influx of Muslim Brotherhood members from Egypt, Syria, and Jordan, who sought sanctuary in Saudi Arabia following heavy clampdowns on the movement. Many of these took up posts in Saudi universities. One such member was Abdullah Azzam,

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34 Martin Rose, *Immunising the Mind*, British Council, November 2015. https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/immunising_the_mind_working_paper.pdf

35 Diego Gambetta and Steffen Hertog, *Engineers of Jihad: The Curious Connection Between Extremism and Education* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).

the man renowned for turning Bin Laden towards jihad.

The combination of an engineering background, an Islamist outlook, and access to vast resources proved to be integral to the success of the Mujahidin in Afghanistan. It also laid the foundations for the formation of al-Qaeda.

THE URBAN CONNECTION

For 86 jihadis in our sample, we coded the specific town or village where they were born or raised. Our findings showed no striking trend: there were 45 recruits from the peripheries, compared to 41 from major cities. Of those from the periphery, there was a broadly equal division between those from provincial towns and cities and those from rural villages.

FIG. 5.9 Jihadis According to Places of Birth
By percentage of total sample

Periphery
45

Centre
41

Unknown
14

0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100
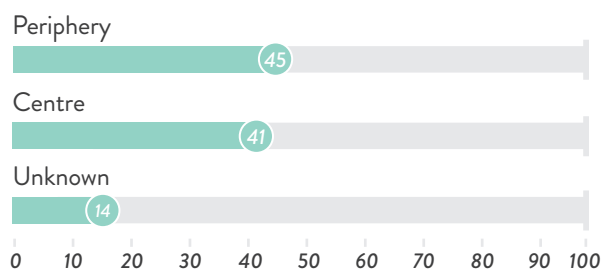
Across the Middle East and Africa, peripheral locations are typically more neglected and isolated from central government. However, the broadly similar number from our sample being urban born and bred means that this does not in itself explain why those from the periphery are drawn towards extremism. Some of the most prominent jihadis came from urban, middle-class neighbourhoods in capitals or major cities. Aymen al-Zawahiri was brought up in an affluent part of Cairo, and the Nigerian 'underwear bomber,' Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, was from Lagos. Similarly, all the Iraqi jihadis in the sample came from the urban centres of Mosul, Ramadi or Samarra.

Yet others in the Middle East sample, such as Sayyid Imam al-Sharif (leader of Egyptian Islamic Jihad and a prominent figure within al-Qaeda), Nasir al-Wuhayshi (head of AQAP from 2009 to 2015), and Najih Ibrahim (founding member of al-Gamaa al-Islamiyya), were raised in provincial towns and later moved to major cities for school or university.

FIG. 5.10 Jihadis According to Places of Birth
By percentage of total sample
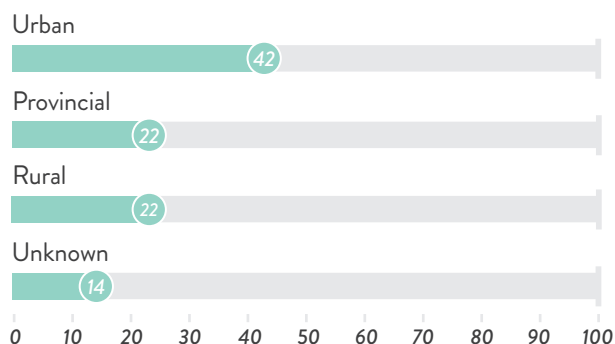
Urban
42

Provincial
22

Rural
22

Unknown
14

0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100

Yet others in the Middle East sample, such as Sayyid Imam al-Sharif (leader of Egyptian Islamic Jihad and a prominent figure within al-Qaeda), Nasir al-Wuhayshi (head of AQAP from 2009 to 2015), and Najih Ibrahim (founding member of al-Gamaa al-Islamiyya), were raised in provincial towns and later moved to major cities for school or university.

Nevertheless, a trend across the sample was that jihadis experience an urban lifestyle at some stage. It is often in major cities where they interacted with other prominent jihadis in our sample. For instance, after moving from his provincial hometown in northern Egypt to study medicine in Cairo, Sayyid Imam al-Sharif met Zawahiri, who would go on to be his colleague in the global jihadi movement.

The same can be seen in al-Shabaab. Prominent members of al-Shabaab came from both Somalia and Kenya, but while three of the four Kenyans came from Mombasa, all four of the prominent Somalis came from different provinces: Kismayo, Hudur, Hargeisa, and Mogadishu. All four – Aden Hashi Farah Ayro (Mogadishu), Ahmad Umar (Kismayo), Ahmed Godane (Hargeisa), and Mukhtar Robow (Hudur) – joined the Islamic Courts Union, primarily based in Mogadishu. While they came from disparate regions of Somalia, the capital Mogadishu likely served as a magnet for attracting like-minded individuals.

Boko Haram is an exception to this trend. Data on places of origin of jihadis in our sample showed how contained its leadership network is. Prominent Nigerians in the cross-section came from the states of Yobe, Borno, and Sokoto. However, this is consistent with the understanding of the demographic makeup of Boko Haram. The group is unusual in the current

Ahmed Godane

Born in Somalia in 1977, Godane served as al-Qaeda affiliated al-Shabaab's leader from 2008 to 2014 when he was killed by a US drone strike. Godane was involved with the Islamic Courts Union and was appointed secretary general of the Courts' executive council in 2006. In 2009, after becoming the leader of al-Shabaab following the death of Aden Hashi Farah Ayro, Godane pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda. A bright student, Godane was awarded scholarships from Saudi Arabia to study in Sudan and Pakistan, from where he would then travel on to Afghanistan. Godane is believed to have masterminded the attack on the Westgate mall in Nairobi in 2013.

Aden Hashi Farah Ayro

Born in Somalia in 1973, Ayro played a key role in developing al-Shabaab from the youth wing of the Islamic Courts Union into a fully formed jihadi group. Ayro dropped out of school to wash cars and became involved with street gangs fighting for control of Somalia following the central government collapse in the early 1990s. He is reported as having travelled to Afghanistan in 2001, where he fought alongside the Taliban and al-Qaeda against US forces, remaining there until 2003 when he returned to Somalia. Ayro was widely reported to have aided plotters and participants involved in the 1998 bombings of the US Embassies in Kenya and Tanzania.

ISIS network; its membership is driven through ethnic affiliation as well as ideological. This would help explain why most of the Nigerian jihadis in our sample are from ethnic Kanuri strongholds.

A PREDISPOSITION TO LAWLESSNESS?

Sixty-five per cent of our sample spent time in jail at some point in their lives, with 75 per cent of those being jailed after engaging in jihadi activity. Only 25 per cent of the jihadis who spent time in prison were in jail before they embarked on jihad. The vast majority of prominent jihadis are not petty criminals turning to jihadi activities, nor does jihadism follow as a 'natural conclusion' of any previous criminality. Indeed, our findings establish that the convictions of most prominent jihadis are related to their jihadi activity.

As we only gathered data on prominent jihadis, our findings on criminal background may not be representative of global jihad's foot soldiers, the majority of the movement's membership. It does, however, give insight into the most influential figures in the network. Our data cannot illustrate any causal relationship between crime and extremism, but it does suggest that prisons create an echo chamber for jihadi

ideas to spread and networks to develop.

The difficulty in dealing with jihadi prisoners is an important aspect of our findings. In prison, jihadis have ample opportunity to recruit others to their cause. For a great many of our sample, time in prison facilitated interaction with other jihadis.

The interaction between future al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI)leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and al-Qaeda-associated ideologue Abu Mohammad al-Maqdisi in a Jordanian prison is a well-known example of this. Between 1995 and 1999, the two men were incarcerated together, sparking an ongoing relationship of mentorship and dialogue. Maqdisi exerted significant influence over Zarqawi's ideological outlook. Both would go on to use prison networks to recruit.

The role of prison in the global jihadi movement was illustrated more recently in connections between factions of the Syrian jihadi network. The founding leaders of Jaish al-Islam and Ahrar al-Sham both spent time in Sednaya Prison in Damascus before being released in 2011 amid protests and instability in Syria. The shared prison experience of those fighting in opposition to Assad's regime likely facilitated

links between factions on the front lines. Jabhat al-Islamiyya (Islamic Front), for instance, effectively merged seven groups under one united banner when it formed in November 2013. While only Hassan Abboud, the founder of Ahrar al-Sham, and Zahran Alloush, the founding leader of Jaish al-Islam, featured in our sample of prominent jihadis, at least two of the six others behind the coalition's formation, Ahmed Abu Essa and Abu Rateb al-Homsi, were also imprisoned in Sednaya.

Incarceration of those with strong and emergent links to jihadi networks, without a system through which their extremist ideas can be challenged and disengaged, can lead to such individuals leaving prison with their worldview unchanged or even reinforced. Within our sample, one might point to the effect time in prison had on Aymen al-Zawahiri in reinforcing the conviction of his beliefs.

CASE STUDY: AYMEN AL-ZAWAHIRI'S TIME IN PRISON

In 1981, Aymen al-Zawahiri was arrested along with hundreds of other Egyptian Islamist and jihadi activists in the aftermath of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat's assassination. Already a member of Egyptian Islamic Jihad, Zawahiri was arrested as a possible accomplice to the President's assassination. By the time the mass trial was underway, Zawahiri emerged as a leader of the defendants and was filmed telling the court: "We are Muslims who believe in our religion. We are trying to establish an Islamic state and Islamic society." This was the first sign of his emerging leadership position. He used his time in prison to gain notoriety among his fellow prisoners.

Although Zawahiri was cleared of involvement in Sadat's assassination, he was convicted of the unlawful possession of arms and served a three-year sentence. During this time, as with many political prisoners, authorities regularly tortured Zawahiri. This likely hardened his views against the authorities and his commitment to overthrowing what he saw as a corrupt and apostate regime. Throughout the 1990s, as the leader of Egyptian Islamic Jihad after its re-emergence in 1993, Zawahiri spearheaded a series of attacks on Egyptian government ministers.

Following his release from prison in 1984, Zawahiri left for Saudi Arabia, and later Pakistan, where he

PROFILE
Zahran Alloush

Born in Douma, Syria, in 1970, Alloush was the leader of Syrian jihadi group Jaish al-Islam until he was killed in an airstrike in December 2015. Following in the footsteps of his father (who was a prominent Salafi preacher) Alloush pursued Islamic studies at both Damascus University in Syria and Saudi Arabia's Islamic University of Medina. From 1987, Alloush became known for his missionary activities in Syria, which prompted the Syrian regime's interest in him. He was imprisoned on charges of weapons possession in Sednaya prison in 2009 with a host of other prominent Syrian jihadis, and was released in the general amnesty in 2011 following the start of the civil conflict in the country. Alloush described ISIS as the "dogs of hell," but said that the differences between his group and al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra were merely superficial ideological disputes.

would foster strong ties with fellow jihadis and embark on an unwavering path into violent extremism.

REFUGEES

Only seven per cent of our sample were documented as having been refugees before becoming involved in jihadi activity. This suggests that the correlation between refugee background and jihadism, or at least prominence in the movement, is weak.

Furthermore, almost all the jihadis we recorded as having refugee backgrounds were from the Palestinian territories or refugee camps for displaced Palestinians. This is reflected in their jihadi activity; all of them joining Hamas or Fatah al-Islam, groups that consider the destruction of Israel as a central objective.

ISIS and al-Qaeda use rhetoric about the plight of the Palestinians and evocative imagery of reclaiming Jerusalem to rally support, but of the jihadis in our sample, those from the Palestinian territories tended

to be more committed to their local cause than global jihad.

FAMILY BACKGROUND

Military

Eighteen of the jihadis in our sample had military links before engaging in jihad; thirteen had served in the armed forces, while five had close family members in the military.

Individuals with a military background are invaluable to jihadi groups. Not only does it inculcate a degree of military precision in their activities, but it also provides them with insights into the very state actors trying to defeat them.

Our sample included 10 members of ISIS' core group in Iraq and Syria, of whom six had previous military experience, with five having served in the Iraqi army under Saddam Hussein. This data reinforces the notion that former Iraqi military officers form a significant part of ISIS' leadership. However, as our sample included only prominent jihadis, it is perhaps no coincidence that a proportion would have military experience.

Two notable jihadis with these skills are Saif al-Adel and Abu Omar al-Shishani, who have played leading operational roles in al-Qaeda and ISIS respectively.

A former Egyptian army colonel, Adel was a trained explosives expert and is believed to have played a key role in the 1998 US Embassy bombing in Nairobi. He also gave operational instructions to the hijackers in the 9/11 attacks. Having first pursued jihadi activities in Egypt, al-Adel joined the Mujahidin in Afghanistan.

Shishani, often described as ISIS' 'minister of war,' was recruited to a special reconnaissance group of the Georgian army, served in a newly established intelligence unit, and was on the front lines of the 2008 conflict with Russia shortly before he was dismissed from the army. His military experience helped him rise rapidly through the ranks of ISIS, which he joined in May 2013. Reports in March 2016 suggested he was killed or incapacitated in an airstrike.

Interestingly, of the five jihadis that had strong familial links to the military, three have been major contributors to the conflicts in Iraq and Syria. Abu

Musab al-Zarqawi, the former leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of ISIS, and Abu Mohammad al-Jolani, the leader of al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra, all had family members in the army.

Government Links

Twelve of the jihadis in our sample were identified as having links to government and state institutions via family members. Notable cases included members of Baghdadi's family joining the Baath Party in Iraq and Osama Bin Laden's family having strong ties to members of the Saudi royal family. Those hailing from well-connected families are more likely to be from middle to upper class backgrounds.

Structure, discipline, and hierarchy can be seen as integral components for all types of jihadi groups, given that they tend to be close-knit and under-equipped. The way these groups are organised mirrors similar structures seen in government, the military, and Islamist groups.

Appendices

*6.0* / Appendix

Methodology

OVERVIEW

This research is based on the biographies of 100 prominent jihadis from across the Middle East and Africa. Information on each jihadi was gathered using open-source data. The Centre on Religion & Geopolitics (CRG) used a wide-range of online and offline sources in English, Arabic, and French, to collect a comprehensive account of each individual's journey to violent extremism. We examined socio-economic indicators, educational background, and international travel, among other factors, in order to build a picture of an individual's life before and after engaging in jihad. The biographies were later coded according to recurring themes or traits across the sample. This allowed researchers to quantify the data and conduct more detailed analysis.

SELECTING OUR SAMPLE

Our selection of jihadis was limited to individuals from the Middle East and Africa, with three exceptions – Anwar al-Awlaki, Abu Omar al-Shishani, and Abdul Rahman Yasin. We included them because they went on to carve prominent jihadi careers within groups operating exclusively in, or from, the Middle East. In addition to these three, we sought roughly equal representation for African and Middle Eastern jihadis in our sample. The 100 jihadis included 54 Africans and 46 Middle Easterners, with Awlaki, Shishani, and Yasin included in the Middle East sample (our 'African' designation includes all of North Africa).

FIG. 6.1 Distribution of Sample

By percentage

Africa

54

Middle East

46

0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100
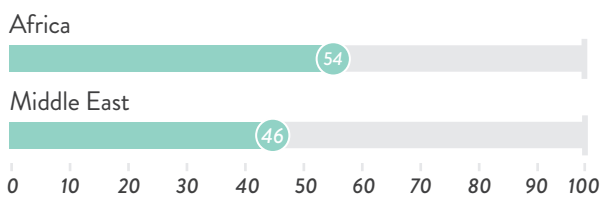
Individuals were selected only if they had engaged in jihad at some stage. The majority of our sample belong to the broader Salafi-jihadi movement. Where jihadis did not belong to a group whose global jihadi aims were explicit, we did not seek to verify their position on global jihad as this did not impact our analysis. Regardless of their long-term ambitions, every individual in the sample had a prominent position within a jihadi group operating in the Middle East or Africa, either as an ideologue or a top-level operative. This could include those providing logistical support in a group as well as those operating on the battlefield in a commanding or front-line role.

Our selection ranged across generations, from veterans of the Arab-Afghan jihad in Afghanistan in the 1980s, to those active in ongoing conflicts in Syria, Mali, or Nigeria.

Our sampling was not random; prominent individuals and those in the limelight were more likely to make our list. As such, our findings are only representative of the prominent members – on the whole, the leadership structure – of groups in the global Salafi-jihadi movement. The 100 jihadis in our sample were chosen on the basis of their prominence in the movement, and how much information was available on individuals, whilst ensuring that we had a strong geographical spread across the Middle East and Africa.

WHY ONLY PROMINENT JIHADIS?

Conducting research on only prominent jihadis could yield very different results to studying the rank and file of the movement. This is because it should be assumed that they share qualities and characteristics that set them apart from the grass roots. This may be that they are veterans in battle, or that they are particularly well travelled, or prolific networkers. It may be that they are better educated, either in technical

subjects or religious studies. Perhaps they present themselves as being more pious, or have skills that make them a valuable asset in strategising for a group. All of these considerations are important when we try to understand what makes someone vulnerable to recruitment and how to disrupt the movement's development.

What makes a study of the jihadi elite essential, however, is the influence it has on the development of the movement. The Salafi-jihadi ideology is not static: it develops over time, in response to its conditions and in response to its leaders.

COLLECTION OF DATA

CRG used open-source material in English, Arabic, and French. This ranged from eulogies produced by groups, published biographies, academic research, grey literature,[36] and journalistic material. From these sources, our researchers looked for relevant information according to set categories. The following is a comprehensive list of the categories included:

- Name, legal and nom de guerre;
- Life dates;
- Place of birth, including town, city, or village;
- Islamist groups or networks joined;
- Jihadi groups or networks joined;
- Positions held within all networks or groups;
- Last group or position held;
- Family background, including any information on parents, socio-economic status etc.;
- Education;
- Religious upbringing, including any relevant information on level of religious literacy;
- Notable influences on childhood or adolescence. This could include significant events in a person's life, influential people in their lives, or influential literature;
- International travel and influences. Alongside the data on specific travel destinations, any information of people the individual might have met during his travels was noted;

- Notable contacts or known allies;
- Criminal record, before and after engaging in jihad.
- Theatres of operation (i.e. what conflicts was the individual directly involved in?);
- Notable life events, such as the death of a family member, or the outbreak of civil war in the individual's home country;
- Notable statements, including relevant fatwas;
- Other notable facts

All efforts were made to find information on each of these categories for each of the individuals in our sample. However, due to the nature of open-source material, gaps in the available data was a limiting factor. Choosing prominent jihadis helped to minimise this obstacle, with more data on prominent figures in the public domain. We took into consideration that subjectivity was a factor in collecting data, particularly in some categories. For example, it became apparent during the data gathering that the 'religious upbringing' category relied too heavily on subjective accounts. As a result, we did not include the data collected in this category in our final analysis. Problems also arose when gathering information on Islamist links. When drawing from secondary sources, absence of data can not be regarded as confirmation of a particular trend. It is possible, for instance, that many more of our sample had Islamist links but because of a dearth of information on Islamist groups, our results likely showed a low estimate. However, unless researchers found a reference to a direct connection to an Islamist group or individual in a source, then Islamist links were not recorded in an individual's biography.

On occasion, the research revealed conflicting accounts on details of individuals. In each case where there were contradictions between sources of information, these were flagged and the validity of the various sources was assessed. We accounted for potential biases, and favoured formally published and academic material over grey literature or eulogies.

CODING OF DATA

In order to quantify the findings, the 100 biographies were coded manually using qualitative data analysis software, Nvivo. Recurring trends and themes were flagged for potential significance. We followed this first layer of analysis with a more

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36 Grey literature is a term used to refer to materials and research produced by organisations that are outside the traditional academic publishing distribution channels. This includes work published by think tanks, non-governmental organisations, civil society, government departments, private companies, and consultants. The types of sources in this category include archives, privately run public databases, and non-academic publications. All grey literature used in this research is available to the public.

targeted, qualitative analysis, taking into account the most recurring trends across the sample. Then, our researchers assessed the significance of the results and contextualised findings according to country and region.

7.0 / Appendix

Prominent Jihadis in our Sample

Abd al-Aziz Awda
Abd al-Muhsin al-Libi
Abdel-Hakim Belhaj
Abdelhamid Abou Zeid
Abdelmalek Droukdel
Abdul Rahman Yasin
Abdullah al-Janabi
Abdullah Azzam
Aboud al-Zumar
Aboud Rogo
Abu Abdullah al-Libi
Abu Ahmad al-Alwani
Abu Arkan al-Amiri
Abu Aymen al-Iraqi
Abu Ayyub al-Masri
Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi
Abu Hafs al-Mauritani
Abu Hajer al-Iraqi
Abu Humam al-Shami
Abu Khalid al-Suri
Abu Laith al-Libi
Abu Mohammad al-Adnani
Abu Mohammad al-Jolani
Abu Mohammad al-Maqdisi
Abu Musab al-Zarqawi
Abu Muslim al-Turkmani
Abu Nabil al-Anbari
Abu Omar al-Shishani
Abu Qatada al-Filastini
Abu Yahya al-Libi
Abubakar 'Makaburi' Sharif Ahmed
Abubakar Shekau
Aden Hashi Farah Ayro
Adnan Abu al-Walid al-Sahrawi
Ahmad Ashush
Ahmad Iman Ali
Ahmad Jabari
Ahmad Umar
Ahmed al-Tilemsi

Ahmed Godane
Ahmed Ibrahim al-Naggar
Ahmed Ismail Osman
Ahmed Salam Mabruk
Amadou Kouffa
Amari Saifi
Anwar al-Awlaki
Atiyah Abd al-Rahman
Aymen al-Zawahiri
Djamel Zitouni
Fathi Shaqaqi
Fazul Abdullah Mohammad
Haji Bakr
Hamadou Ould Mohammad Kheirou
Hasan al-Karami
Hassan Aboud
Hassan Hattab
Ibrahim al-Asiri
Ibrahim al-Banna
Ibrahim al-Rubaish
Ibrahim Mohammad Farag Abu Eita
Ibrahim Omar
Imad Akal
Iyad Ag Ghali
Jalal Balaidi
Jamal Mohammad al-Badawi
Jamil Mukulu
Kabiru Sokoto
Kamal Habib
Khaled Mahmoud al-Dandashi
Khalid Batarfi
Khalid Islambouli
Marwan Issa
Maysar Ali al-Jubari
Mohammad Salem Ould Mohamed Lemine
Mohammad Deif
Mohammad 'Mamman' Nur
Mohammad Abd al-Salam Faraj
Mohammad Rabee al-Zawahiri

Mohammad Yusuf
Mokhtar Belmokhtar
Muhsin al-Fadhli
Mukhtar Robow
Najih Ibrahim
Nasir al-Wuhayshi
Omar Abdel Rahman
Osama bin Laden
Othman al-Ghamdi
Oumar Ould Hamaha
Qasim al-Raymi
Saif al-Adel
Salah Shahade
Saleh Ali Saleh Nabhan
Sami al-Oreidi
Sanda Ould Bouamama
Sayyid Imam al-Sharif
Shaker al-Absi
Shukri Mustapha
Turki al-Binali
Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab
Zahran Alloush

Until 2010 no one had heard of Ibrahim Awad Ibrahim al-Badri, an Iraqi militant from Samarra, east of the Tigris. An unassuming figure who spent his youth in religious studies, he became a firm believer in using violence to accomplish Islamist aims. He soon entered a tight network of fellow Iraqi jihadis that included veterans of the famed Arab-Afghan Mujahidin. The relationships he formed guided his journey into al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), which would become ISIS. After its leader Abu Ayyub al-Masri died in 2010, this 'quiet' but vengeful figure was propelled to global prominence as leader of one of the world's most brutal jihadi groups.

Today we know him as Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the self-proclaimed caliph of the global Muslim ummah. Baghdadi did not embark on this journey alone; he joined a much larger network with a long history.

In this research we set out to explore how prominent militants made their journey to jihad. We analysed the biographies of 100 jihadis from 41 countries, and 49 groups, across the Middle East and Africa. Tomorrow's jihadi leaders are being shaped today as far afield as Somalia and Syria. They are forging the friendships and absorbing the ideology that will secure them prominent positions in this global, violent movement.