

## Violent Extremism

# Jihadist Networks After the Collapse of Daesh's Pseudo-Caliphate

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The 'Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant,' also known by its Arabic acronym Daesh, was proclaimed in April 2013 in the Syrian city of Raqqa, under the leadership of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.<sup>1</sup> In June 2014, over the course of a few days, Daesh captured Mosul, the second largest city in Iraq. Shortly thereafter, Baghdadi dramatically assumed the title of 'caliph.' Daesh organizes its territorial base in 'provinces.'<sup>2</sup> The same term is used to designate its growing number of affiliates. Daesh lost Mosul in June 2017, after nine months of some of the fiercest urban combat since World War II. The fall of Mosul was followed by the retaking of Raqqa, 80% of which was destroyed by the fighting.

Daesh no longer controls the territory between Syria and Iraq, where its pseudo-caliphate thrived for three years. Nevertheless, the jihadist threat remains, due to the networks that Daesh continues to encourage and inspire. To facilitate a better understanding of this constantly evolving reality, the remainder of this article will take a three-part approach. First, it will offer a status update on the 'French veterans of globalized jihad,'<sup>3</sup> discussed in an article in a previous edition of the IEMed Yearbook. Next, it will present a case study of Daesh's 'Sinai Province,' which has continued to develop since the collapse of the pseudo-caliphate. Finally,

it will report on the situation in Libya, where networks have been organized and deployed not only to neighbouring Tunisia, but also Europe.

## The End of the French 'Veterans'

In 2003, Boubaker al-Hakim founded the 'Buttes-Chaumont network,' active in France, Syria, and Iraq. He was the mentor of the brothers Cherif and Said Kouachi, who carried out the *Charlie Hebdo* massacre (12 dead) in January 2015 in Paris. By then, he was also part of Daesh's operational hierarchy, under the nom de guerre<sup>4</sup> Abu Muqatil. In November 2016, he was killed in an American strike on Raqqa. He thus joined the growing list of French 'veterans' eliminated, one after another, in strikes by the US-led anti-Daesh coalition, including: Salah Gourmat, a key propagandist in the jihadi world who went by the pseudonym 'Ichigo Turn'; Rachid Marghich, Wissem al-Mokhtari, and Walid Hamam, all three from Trappes and close to the Bataclan suicide bombers; Charaffe al-Mouadan, also linked to the Bataclan terrorists; and Macreme Abrougui, the inspiration for a fortunately foiled plot to attack a church in Villejuif, in April 2015.

In contrast, Salim Benghalem, who welcomed Daesh's French 'volunteers' under the name Abu Mohammed, seems to have survived several liquidation attempts. In January 2016, he was sentenced in absentia in France to 15 years of prison for his role in sending jihadists from Val-de-Marne to Syria in

<sup>1</sup> Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi is the pseudonym of Ibrahim al-Badri al-Samarrai, born in 1971, not far from the Iraqi city of Samarra.

<sup>2</sup> The Arabic word for 'province' is *wilaya*.

<sup>3</sup> FILIU, Jean-Pierre. "The French Veterans of Globalized Jihad" in *IEMed Mediterranean Yearbook 2016*. Barcelona: IEMed 2016, pp. 42-45. [www.iemed.org/observatori/arees-danalisi/arxiu-adjunts/anuari/med.2016/IEMed\\_MedYearBook2016\\_French%20Veterans%20Jihad\\_Jean%20Pierre\\_Filiu.pdf](http://www.iemed.org/observatori/arees-danalisi/arxiu-adjunts/anuari/med.2016/IEMed_MedYearBook2016_French%20Veterans%20Jihad_Jean%20Pierre_Filiu.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> The Daesh branch responsible for attacks abroad is referred to with the generic term *Emni*, or 'Security.'

2012-13. He was also identified as one of the jailers of the French hostages held by Daesh in 2013-14. The investigation into the attacks of 13 November 2015 in Paris and Saint-Denis (130 dead, in addition to seven terrorists) revealed his role as a sponsor. Similarly, Fabien Clain, who claimed responsibility for those attacks on behalf of Daesh, released an audio message in January 2018 and would thus still seem to be at large.

Meanwhile, Thomas Barnouin, sentenced in absentia to 15 years in prison for his participation in a jihadist network, was captured in December 2017 by the Kurdish militias<sup>5</sup> that control north-eastern Syria. His fate, like that of his two compatriots also held by the YPG, Romain Garnier and Thomas Collange, poses a legal quandary. France cannot recognize the authority, let alone the judgement, of a militia, as opposed to that of the Iraqi State, whose judicial decisions it does accept. (As Iraq has the death penalty, the French Justice Minister has considered intervening were it to be given to a French national.)

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France has generally made every possible effort to prevent the return to its territory of jihadists who participated in attacks or perpetrated blood crimes. However, the cases of Benghalem and Clain, amongst others, show that confirmed terrorists have been able to escape the strikes of both the coalition and its allied militias. Of course, France has not suffered an attack since the murder of a police officer on the Champs-Élysées on 20 April 2017. Although

Daesh claimed responsibility for that attack, it released a false terrorist identity, suggesting less an operational responsibility than an opportunistic recovery. The terrible blows inflicted on Daesh by the Western coalition, and especially the liberation of Mosul and Raqqa, have undeniably weakened the jihadist networks and their capacity to strike France and its European neighbours. However, this considerable weakening should not be mistaken for the elimination of this terrorist threat.

It is worth recalling that 'victory' against what was then known as 'Islamic State in Iraq' had already been proclaimed in 2011. However, as a result of the sectarian policies pursued by the regimes in Baghdad and Damascus against the Sunni population, 'Islamic State' was able to reconstitute itself first in Syria, then in Iraq, until achieving its culmination in the pseudo-caliphate. These same Sunni populations are still excluded and marginalized, even repressed, wherever the Western coalition has chosen to rely on mainly Shiite partners in Iraq or Kurds in Syria. As there is no reason to expect the same causes to have different outcomes, a revival of Daesh in the coming years, fuelled by Sunni resentment and the lack of real reconstruction in Mosul and Raqqa, is entirely conceivable. This is all the more so given that 'Islamic State' had only 700 fighters in 2011 versus ten times that number between Syria and Iraq today. Furthermore, Daesh's affiliates have never been so active, beginning with its 'Sinai Province.'

### **Jihadists Rooted in Sinai**

The Sinai Peninsula, comprised largely of desert, is home to only 600,000 inhabitants, two thirds of whom are Bedouins belonging to some fifteen tribes (the remaining third consist of 'Nile Valley Egyptians' and Palestinians). This population's resentment of an Egyptian army that it perceives as an occupying force led to the development, in 2011, of the Supporters of Jerusalem (Ansar Beit al-Maqdis or ABM). This jihadist group, with ties to the smuggling of weapons to Gaza, was consolidated in the town of Sheikh Zuweid, situated between the cities of Ar-

<sup>5</sup> The People's Protection Units (YPG), the Syrian branch of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), itself a part of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), supported by the Western coalition.

ish and Rafah. The extremely brutal Egyptian repression, and, in particular, the collective punishments that accompanied it, simply broadened the base of this mainly Bedouin and local guerrilla.

In July 2013, General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi overthrew the only democratically elected President in the history of Egypt, the Muslim Brother Mohammed Morsi, whose disastrous mismanagement had caused millions of Egyptians to take to the streets. Sisi, who was promoted to field marshal before renouncing his military titles upon being sworn in as President, in May 2014, accuses all his opponents of 'terrorism,' whether they are Islamists, secular or nationalists. As in other Arab countries where similar processes are underway, the escalation of the repression has led to an embrace of jihadist extremes. However, unlike the Assad regime, whose sick games **directly** fuelled the rise of Daesh, in Egypt, it is the army's patent inefficiency that has **indirectly** allowed the jihadists to take root in Sinai.

On 24 October 2014, ABM carried out one of its bloodiest operations, killing 30 members of the security forces and destroying at least one M60 tank. Sinai was declared a military zone and closed to journalists, who are sanctioned if they contradict the army's official accounts. Two weeks later, the Egyptian jihadists pledged allegiance to Daesh, officially becoming its 'Sinai Province.' The Sisi regime, engaged in an all-out campaign against 'terrorism,' proved unable to regain the support of at least some of the Sinai Bedouins to turn them against Daesh. On the contrary, the systematic destruction of entire towns has uprooted thousands of people, rendering them even more vulnerable to jihadist recruitment. This is particularly true in the Egyptian part of Rafah, a city split in two, with a Palestinian side across the border in the Gaza Strip.

On 1 July 2015, the 'Sinai Province' led some 20 coordinated attacks against the security forces. The official death toll of 21 was certainly understated, with sources on the ground speaking of 70 dead in the government ranks. Two weeks later, an Egyptian naval ship was sunk in the Mediterranean by a jihadist missile. On 31 October, 224 people perished in the destruction over Sinai of a Russian aircraft belonging to the company Metrojet. Although the 'Sinai Province' claimed responsibility for the attack, it took Moscow several days, and Cairo several months, to accept the reality of a terrorist attack. In

fact, Daesh had seized control of the aircraft before it took off from Sharm el-Sheikh Airport, one of the few remaining popular tourism destinations in Egypt. The impact of the attack on the already devastated sector was terrible.

Daesh then turned against the Coptic minority in Sinai, forced by a streak of killings to flee their homes and seek refuge elsewhere in Egypt. That, however, was only the start of a wave of anti-Coptic terrorism carried out by Daesh, reaching Cairo (25 dead on 15 December 2016), Alexandria and the Nile Delta (44 dead on Palm Sunday 2017). In each case, the suicide attackers sought to strike churches, although the Coptic patriarch targeted in the Alexandria explosion came out unscathed. The ravings of Sisi and his generals thus led not to Daesh's decline in Sinai, but rather to the spread of the jihadist violence to the rest of Egypt.

### The Egyptian armed forces have not been able to retake control in Sinai, which has become the most dangerous abscess of jihadist obsession in the southern Mediterranean

The worst massacre in contemporary Egyptian history was perpetrated by Daesh on 24 November 2017, in a North Sinai mosque in Bir al-Abed. At least 311 people were killed by jihadist commandos who surrounded the building during Friday prayers. The killers' freedom of movement was so appalling that Sisi ordered security to be restored in Sinai in three months, an ultimatum he obviously could not enforce. The bloodbath targeted a Sufi community, whose mysticism Daesh regards as 'heretical.' However, it was also aimed at Bedouins who might be tempted to cooperate with the army. Daesh used the carnage to recall that the security forces, which were hard-pressed to protect themselves in Sinai, could not safeguard the lives of potential local partners.

The seemingly inexorable progress of jihadist terror in Sinai has enabled Daesh to take root in a strategic region, at the crossroads of Africa and Asia,

even as its pseudo-caliphate was collapsing in Syria and Iraq. Any new conflict over the Gaza Strip, such as those of November 2012 or the summer of 2014, would now risk spreading to Sinai in case of a jihadist provocation. Israel takes this disastrous scenario seriously enough to have offered discreet support to the Sisi regime. According to the *New York Times*, in 2016-17 Israel ordered a hundred strikes, usually carried out by drones, against jihadist targets in Sinai, at an average rate of once a week.<sup>6</sup> Despite this unofficial yet substantial assistance, the Egyptian armed forces have not been able to retake control in Sinai, which has become the most dangerous abscess of jihadist obsession in the southern Mediterranean.

### The Libyan Knot

Paradoxically, the situation is less worrying in war-torn Libya than in Egypt under Sisi's boot. Nevertheless, it is particularly disturbing that Daesh has three 'provinces' in Libya, corresponding to the historical divisions between Tripolitania, Cyrenaica and Fezzan. Baghdadi's supporters first gained a foothold in 2014, in Derna, Cyrenaica, taking advantage of active local networks to send 'volunteers' to Syria and Iraq. With their usual sadism, they subsequently beheaded 21 Egyptian Copts, in February 2015, on a beach in Tripolitania. They then set up a training camp in Sabratha, not far from the Tunisian border, which produced the Tunisian terrorists who attacked the Bardo National Museum in Tunis (22 dead, 18 March 2015) and a beach in Sousse (39 dead, including 30 British nationals, on 26 June 2015). Hakim, who, as noted, played a role in Daesh's attacks in France, also bore some responsibility for these deaths: between 2011 and 2013, the Franco-Tunisian had organized a jihadist group in Tunisia, which was targeted by Daesh from Libya as France had been from Syria.

The confrontation between the rival governments in Tripoli and Tobruk was conducive to the establishment of Daesh. The warlord Khalifa Haftar, who controls Tobruk, models himself so closely after Egypt's Sisi that he borrowed the title of 'Field Marshal.' As in Egypt, the branding of all opposition as

'terrorists' has played into the hands of the actual terrorists. Daesh managed to take Sirte, halfway between Tripoli and Tobruk, and to seize control of a stretch of coast in the centre of the country. This territorial conquest largely offset the destruction of the Sabratha camp in an American airstrike in February 2016. Haftar preferred to extend his influence to the 'Oil Crescent' of the Gulf of Sirte, through which most of the country's oil exports pass, rather than take on Daesh directly. Thus, it was the Misrata-based militias, loyal to the UN-backed 'national unity government,' who went to battle in Sirte, liberating the city from Daesh in December 2016 at the cost of very heavy losses.

### An analysis of profoundly changing jihadist networks must not neglect one sad fact: long-established dormant cells are just as capable of spreading terror as jihadists infiltrated or sponsored from the Middle East

Baghdadi's supporters had lost their territorial base in Libya even before they lost it in Syria and Iraq. However, in the interim they had managed to establish a new dynamic in networks designed to strike Europe. Daesh documents seized in Sirte revealed the existence of a jihadist cell in Milan, the city where the Tunisian Anis Amri was shot dead by the police, on 23 December 2016, four days after ploughing a lorry into a Christmas market in Berlin and killing 12 people. Amri's incredible flight following the attack, through Amsterdam, Brussels and Lyon, did not reveal all of his secrets. On the other hand, he was certainly in contact with Tunisian jihadists in Libya. The Libyan connection is even stronger in the case of Salman Abedi, the terrorist behind the Manchester Arena suicide attack (22 dead, 22 May 2017). A British citizen of Libyan origin, he had forged relationships with Daesh in Tripoli and Sabratha during trips to his parents' country of origin.

<sup>6</sup> David KIRKPATRICK. "Secret alliance: Israel carries out strikes in Egypt, with Cairo's OK." *New York Times*, 3 February 2018.

Unlike the ‘Sinai Province,’ which has always been led by local Bedouins, in Libya Daesh has been taken over by political operatives sent by Baghdadi. The internationalization of this Libyan branch, as well as the multiple transit facilities along the coast or through Tunisia, thus explain the importance of the networks directed from Libya in Europe. However, the loss of Sabratha and, especially, Sirte has forced the jihadists to retreat to the desert in southern Libya, eroding its capacity to operate in Europe. One can only hope this weakening will last, although any definitive victory against Daesh in Libya will ultimately depend on the establishment of legitimate authorities throughout the country.

Today, European opinion remains highly polarized on the issue of the return of the jihadists fighting in the Middle East, totalling some 5,000 in Western Europe, of whom 1,500 have already come back.<sup>7</sup> However, none of Daesh’s attacks in Europe in 2017 was carried out by a ‘veteran’ of Syria or Iraq. An analysis of these profoundly changing jihadist networks must not neglect one sad fact: long-established dormant cells are just as capable of spreading terror as jihadists infiltrated or sponsored from the Middle East. That was the tragic lesson of the

Barcelona and Cambrils attacks (15 dead on 17 and 18 August 2017), which mobilized a strong cell of 12 terrorists. Furthermore, Spain’s lack of participation in the anti-Daesh coalition did not spare its people, which once again gives the lie to the notion that Daesh’s attacks are a ‘retaliation’ for Western strikes. Daesh’s ‘European campaign,’ launched in May 2014 with the attack on the Jewish Museum in Brussels (four dead), is most likely not over, even if Baghdadi’s ‘caliphate of terror’ no longer exists as an established entity. The imperative of a genuine European anti-terrorism policy remains all the more urgent.

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<sup>7</sup> Eric SCHMITT. “Thousands of ISIS fighters flee to Syria, many to fight another day.” *New York Times*, 4 February 2018.