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The Ties that Bind: How Terrorists Exploit Family Bonds

by Mohammed M. Hafez

Tightening security environments are encouraging jihadis to turn increasingly to the family unit for recruits. This phenomenon complicates efforts to detect, monitor, and prevent violent radicalization. Kinship recruitment, which is difficult for security agencies to observe, is facilitated by several psychological mechanisms that bind individuals together on the path to extremism. Importantly, it deters ambivalent recruits from defecting to the authorities for fear of damaging their own valued relationships. The reliance on kinship recruitment is supplemented by greater use of social media and an emphasis on recruiting Islamic converts and women, which suggests that jihadis are adjusting their mobilization patterns to avoid detection based on previous, well-known strategies for radicalization.

The Paris and San Bernardino terrorist attacks at the end of 2015 have brought into focus the threat of homegrown extremism and its linkage to transnational actors, principally the Islamic State. Each episode of mass carnage invariably raises the question of how citizens of Western countries could undertake attacks on their host societies. What explains their radicalization and leap toward violent extremism? Why do individuals residing in relatively peaceful and affluent Western societies come to embrace extremist ideologies that emanate from distant places? This bewilderment is compounded by the fact that several of the recent episodes of mass casualty terrorism involved family members participating in the attack teams. In the Boston bombings, we had the Tsarnaev brothers; in the Charlie Hebdo massacre, we had the Kouachi brothers; in the Paris attacks, we had the Abdeslam brothers; and in the San Bernardino mass shooting, we had a husband-and-wife team of Syed Rizwan Farook and Tashfeen Malik. In three of these cases, the brotherhood of arms is literal, not just figurative.

Indeed, a New America study of 474 foreign fighters from 25 Western countries found that one-third “have a familial connection to jihad, whether through relatives currently fighting in Syria or Iraq, marriage or some other link to jihadis from prior conflicts or

attacks.”¹ A German internal intelligence service report shows that 69 out of 378 German foreign fighters traveled with family members, which is a little over 18 percent.² These percentages are higher than the one reported by the American scholar Marc Sageman more than a decade ago, when his sample of 172 jihadis yielded 14 percent with kinship ties.³

Kinship Radicalization in Historical Perspective

Media analysts and the public often express shock when terrorists undertake violent attacks alongside their family members. It does seem puzzling that terrorists would entangle family members in their clandestine world. Given the hardships and risks associated with radical activism, one would suspect that jihadis would seek to shield their beloved family members from harm’s way. Yet, this is not always the case as jihadis are turning to their spouses and extended families for recruits, either as homegrown terrorists or as foreign fighters.

History, however, suggests that it is not at all surprising for terrorist recruiters to mobilize their own siblings and spouses for violent extremist causes. Donatella della Porta’s 1995 study of the Italian Red Brigades during the 1970s and 1980s found that 298 out of 1,214 militants “had at least one relative, usually husband or wife, brother or sister” in the movement, which is a little less than 25 percent.⁴ Two of the founders of the Red Brigades, Renato Curcio and Margherita Cagol, were husband and wife.⁵ Six of the 19 hijackers on September 11, 2001, were brothers.⁶ Abu Musab al-Zarqawi dispatched his father-in-law Yassin Jarrad to carry out a major bombing that killed the Shiite cleric Ayatollah Muhammad Bakr al-Hakim in 2003.⁷ The 2005 Amman, Jordan, hotel bombings involved an Iraqi husband-and-wife team of Ali-Hussein al-Shamari and Sajidah al-Rishawi. In that same year, Muriel Degauque traveled to Iraq with her husband, Issam Goris, both with the intent to carry out suicide attacks. She succeeded; he was foiled and killed in the process.⁸

Cementing ties between jihadis and local communities through marriages is an old strategy rooted in tribal traditions. Some Arab Afghans married off their daughters or sisters to fellow jihadis. The Algerian Abdullah Anas married the daughter of his Palestinian mentor Abdullah Azzam. These marriages were not always calculated to produce enduring political relationships among radicals, but their effect was the same. Abu Musab al-Zarqawi married his sister off to Khaled Mustafa al-Aruri (Abu Qassam or Abu Ashraf), who was one of Zarqawi’s closest associates from 1989 to 2001. Usama bin Ladin is believed to have arranged his own marriage to Amal al-Sada, a Yemeni from a powerful tribe in the mountain town of Ibb south of Sana`a, to bolster al-Qa`ida’s recruitment in Yemen.⁹

Tight-knit kinship and friendship ties offer opportunities for radical socialization that simultaneously satisfy psychological needs such as avoidance of cognitive dissonance, the need for maintaining meaningful relationships, and validation from valued peers. The

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close associations may also entrap individuals through dynamics of peer pressure, groupthink, and what terrorism expert della Porta calls affective focusing and cognitive closure. That is, kinship and friendship ties can transpose radical political commitments, and these commitments, in turn, intensify bonds of loyalty among kith and kin.¹⁰ Radical Islamists facing vigilant security services are turning to these psychological dynamics to unleash homegrown terrorism and recruit foreign fighters.

Mechanisms of Kinship Radicalization

Radicalization involves adopting an extremist worldview, one that is rejected by mainstream society and one that legitimizes the use of violence as a method to effect societal or political change. Radicalization usually involves grievances, ideological socialization, social networking, and enabling support structures.¹¹

Counterterrorism specialists generally presume that it is rare for individuals to migrate from a state of normalcy to violent extremism without some ideological mediation accompanied by a series of commitments to a radical cause.¹² However, some recent cases of radicalization cast doubt on this assumption. We have seen several instances where individuals with little prior history of radicalism suddenly surface as terrorists. These include Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, one of the two brothers responsible for the Boston bombing in 2013; Mohammad Abdulazeez, the 2015 Chattanooga shooter; and Mohammad Oda Dakhllalla and Jaelyn Delshaun, the newlywed couple from Mississippi who were arrested for seeking to join the Islamic State in 2015.¹³

Those who do make such a leap without prior activism often do so at the hand of radicalized family members or friends who transfer their radicalism onto others by virtue of having preexisting bonds of trust and personal interdependence. This peer-to-peer radicalization suggests that the search for individual motivations may not always be helpful in explaining why persons get involved with terrorism because the motivation may not reside with the individual actors themselves, but in the small extremist milieu from which they hail. One of the most robust findings in the study of political participation, social activism, gang and cult membership, right-wing and left-wing terrorism, and religious extremism is that preexisting friendship and kinship ties facilitate recruitment into these milieus.¹⁴



Police photo of Paris attacker Salah Abdeslam (left) and Islamic State photo of his brother Brahim Abdeslam

Radicalization and recruitment are localized and highly personal tasks involving interpersonal ties, bonds of solidarity, and trust. This is especially the case in Western societies (and strong states in general) where vigilant security services are on the lookout for overt political and religious networks seeking to radicalize and recruit others for violent ends. In a highly constricted security environment, radicals must look for recruits within preexisting networks such as educational and faith-based institutions, community centers, bookstores, religious study groups, sports teams, workplaces, professional associations, social movement organizations, local charities, and prisons. As these spaces come under the watchful eyes of the authorities, radicalizers turn to an even more secure source of recruits—the family.

Preexisting networks, including the extended family, can facilitate recruitment into radical groups in several ways. First, they often link individuals who share similar beliefs or a social category, creating an immediate collective identity. It is much easier to recruit people with a shared sense of unity or identity than to struggle to forge a new one. Regular meetings between familiar faces in non-threatening settings facilitate the exchange of ideas between the radicalizer and the recruit. Political ideas are infused with emotional commitments and high degrees of deference.

Second, a group that engages in high-risk activism, including participation in violence, depends on interpersonal ties because trust and commitment are prerequisites for inviting people into the group. The adage “don’t talk to strangers” also applies in radicalization. A recent study of 119 “lone wolf” attacks in the West revealed an astonishing statistic: 64 percent of the terrorists discussed with family and friends their intention to undertake an attack.¹⁵ This suggests that they had high enough levels of trust to share such damaging secrets. Recruiters first dip into the pool of family, friends, and likeminded activists because trust is already established and the risk of talking to the “wrong people” is minimized. Moreover, potential recruits are more willing to entertain radical ideas when they have shared experiences and bonds of kinship and friendship with their interlocutors. Narrative fidelity is enhanced by actual brotherly fidelity.

Third, tight-knit groups, of which families are one, present radicalizing agents with the possibility of “bloc recruitment.” The latter involves group commitments that are self-reinforcing. Once a few individuals make a commitment to a cause, it is difficult for those around them to stay behind. Bloc recruitment may be facilitated by a number of psychological mechanisms, including peer pressure, concern for reputation, groupthink, a desire to maintain extant friendships or spousal relations, or guilt feelings for staying behind.

Lastly, radicalization involves a continuous effort by recruiters to deepen the commitment of their acolytes, discourage them from heeding countervailing influences, and incentivize them to engage in acts of bridge burning (for example, leaving for training camps abroad, or declaring in front of a camera one’s intention to engage in a suicide attack). Extreme interdependency of family members minimizes resistance to these processes while it maximizes cohesion with limited transaction costs. Under such circumstances, the unit of the group becomes bound to shared ideals and heightened emotional camaraderie. Defection from the group entails a double betrayal—betraying the cause and betraying one’s family.

Implications for Counter-Radicalization

It is notable that the mastermind of the Paris attacks, Abdelhamid Abaaoud, recruited his younger brother Younes to join him in Syria when he was just 13 years old.¹⁶ Abdelhamid apparently also used his female cousin, Hasna Aitboulahcen, to help him secure the Saint-Denis apartment in which they both died during a police raid following the Paris attacks.¹⁷

These concerning developments suggest that the fight against homegrown radicalization will become even more complicated as the ties that bind family members under normal circumstances are exploited for nefarious ends by violent extremists. Kinship radicalization seems to be part of a mix of other recruitment strategies, including expanding the proportion of converts to Islam and women in the ranks of radicals as well as increasing reliance on social media. In other words, extremists are going beyond the traditional profile of Muslim males from diaspora communities recruited through the known vectors of radicalization: mosques, prisons, and established militant milieus. The home and extended family is not entirely a new vector of radicalization, but it is becoming more prominent as security agencies are constricting the recruitment en-

vironment around radical Islamists.

Another important implication of kinship radicalization is conceptual. As noted earlier, the search for individual motivations for joining the jihad may be missing the point. Kinship recruitment suggests that radicalization is a small-group phenomenon whereby valued peers with extremist ideas transpose their extremism onto apolitical individuals within their orbit through social and psychological mechanisms that are devoid of grievances, ideology, or politics, but instead associated with love, trust, and life-long bonding.

Lastly, it is not entirely clear how counter-radicalization specialists can combat kinship recruitment given its near invisibility to outsiders prior to major acts of terrorism. Therefore, short of specific intelligence on individuals actively engaging in peer-to-peer radicalization, governments may need to design a number of incentives to encourage families to report troubling signs of in-home radicalization and recruitment without fear of prosecution or stigmatization. Such incentives may include the possibility of extending social support to help family members before they have voyaged too far on the arc of radicalization. **CTC**

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The Military Doctrine of the Islamic State and the Limits of Ba'athist Influence

By Barak Barfi

The Islamic State has seized large swaths of territory in Iraq and Syria, handily defeating state armies and rebel groups. The conventional wisdom is that its large contingent of former Ba'athist army officers is the key to its military success. Although overlap exists between the Islamic State's techniques and Ba'athist military doctrine and tactical methods, there are also many differences. A hybrid of experiences including lessons learned from the Iraqi insurgency and tactics imported by Chechen jihadis has influenced the Islamic State's military posture and tactics. Three case studies comparing the Islamic State's battles to Ba'athist campaigns sheds light on the organization's military doctrine.

Some attribute the martial success of the Islamic State to the high salaries and perks it provides to its fighters, which dwarf those of other rebel outfits. Others emphasize the Islamic State's unit cohesion and motivation, arguing that while its opponents are motivated by money, the organization fights for Allah's supremacy. The commander of Ajnad al-Sham, a small Salafi brigade fighting in Hama, Syria, told the author, "ISIS [Islamic State] fighters fear nothing. They are completely focused on fighting and nothing else."¹ Indeed, one Islamic State sniper strapped himself to a telephone pole for two days and was fed intravenously before being fatally hit by shrapnel.² Still others posit that the Syrian regime colludes with the Islamic State in order to reinforce Damascus' narrative that it is fighting "terrorist gangs."³ On the domestic front, the Islamic State has made civic inroads by maintaining the Arab social contract whereby the state provides security, subsidized basic staples, and social services in exchange for political quiescence.⁴

The Islamic State's success has certainly benefited from these factors. But beyond coercing hearts and minds and marshalling a large, highly motivated, and well-paid army, the Islamic State must win on the battlefield to hold and extend its caliphate. Military strategy and tactics have rendered it the most skilled fighting force in Iraq and Syria, significantly more effective in most military exchanges than regime and rebel forces there.

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Discussions about the Islamic State's leadership often note that many of its commanders served in the Ba'athist army of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein.⁵ Mingling in prisons such as Camp Bucca and fighting alongside each other against U.S. troops created bonds between these strange bedfellows.⁶ The Ba'athists' absorption into the Islamic State has facilitated a narrative that Hussein loyalists are the driving force behind the organization's military strategy and battlefield triumphs.⁶ This article provides a corrective by mapping out the limits of Ba'athist influence on the military doctrine of the Islamic State.

The Ba'athists certainly brought vital experience to their jihadist partners. Their ability to think in military terms and lead large numbers of fighters has facilitated battlefield success. And their understanding of clandestine tradecraft, such as organizational compartmentalization, operational secrecy, and counterintelligence, has also been useful. Indeed, the Islamic State's military campaigns illustrate that in some cases it improved Ba'athist methods while in others the organization adapted these teachings directly to the current conflict. However, sometimes the group abandoned cumbersome and ineffective Ba'athist techniques.⁷ One reason why the Islamic State differs from the Ba'athist military is that the organization has benefited from lessons learned during the Iraqi insurgency. In addition, Islamic State members who fought in other conflicts, such as Chechnya, imported their battle knowledge. The Islamic State is thus a hybrid organization. Its members' disparate experiences combined to transform an insurgent force into a formidable army that can shift from acting like a guerilla militia to a conventional army, all while fighting on multiple fronts hundreds of miles away from its logistical bases.

Examining three specific battles, based on eyewitness accounts, sheds light on the military doctrines of the Islamic State. An analysis of these military exchanges, based on interviews with commanders from Free Syrian Army (FSA) units and the Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), as well as sources in the Islamic State, highlights its use of light, decentralized detachments to fashion a creative, bold, and mobile force whose approach is different in key respects from Hussein's army.

This does not mean, however, that analysts should reduce the Ba'athists to prisoners of pre-2003 Iraqi military doctrines. Freed from the strictures imposed by Hussein, it is likely that many learned new battle techniques and improvised existing ones. Rather, what should be stressed is that there is no linear connection between Ba'athist doctrines and Islamic State battle methods. Instead, the Islamic State's battle techniques fall into three categories—employing Ba'athist tactics, adapting Ba'athist methods, and

a Hussein's faith campaign facilitated the demise of Ba'athist secularism. See Amatzia Baram, *Saddam Husayn and Islam, 1968-2003* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014).

inventing its own new techniques. Though this article compares Ba'athist and jihadist military tactics, a detailed evaluation of how they fused together as an increasing number of Hussein's military officials joined the Islamic State is beyond the scope of this article.^b

The July 2014 Milibiyya Offensive

At the end of July 2014, the Islamic State attacked the village of Milibiyya, located approximately 10 kilometers southeast of Hassaka, Syria. According to a senior Islamic State source, 400-500 regime soldiers from the 17th Division and the paramilitary National Defense Forces (NDF) were garrisoning Milibiyya.⁸ The Islamic State deployed 123 men—121 fighters, a suicide bomber, and a cameraman to film the operation—and targeted Milibiyya for its heavy weapons arsenal, including GRAD rockets and about 60 artillery pieces. The attack lasted from approximately 3 AM to 11 AM.

The Islamic State surrounded the village from the south, west, and north, leaving the main entrance in the east unguarded. Emir from the Caucasus, headed by the Georgian Abu Umar al-Shishani, led the operation. The other commanders were Abu Hala al-Russi and Abu Mujahid al-Russi. Al-Shishani led light infantry forces from the south, while Abu Hala commanded heavier artillery from the west, including DShK and PK heavy machine guns and 121mm cannons. Abu Mujahid directed a sniper brigade in the north, positioned in what locals call the cotton factory. The three Islamic State units attacked simultaneously. Surrounded on three sides, regime forces fled to Milibiyya's unguarded main entrance. There, a suicide vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (SVBIED) was detonated, leading to the eventual collapse of regime forces.

The Milibiyya operation highlights the Islamic State's deviation from traditional Ba'athist military tactics. Under Hussein, force ratios varied from 2:1 for attack to 6:1 at the point of penetration.⁹ At the outset of the Iran-Iraq war, Baghdad had a 6:1 overall force advantage.¹⁰ But in Milibiyya, the Islamic State was at a quantitative disadvantage of 1:4, illustrating that it often conceives of battles in guerilla rather than conventional military terms. The Islamic State's quantitative disadvantages are offset by its qualitatively superior troops and motivation, a characteristic lacking in the Ba'athist army where many frontline soldiers quickly surrendered in 1991.

But Milibiyya also illustrated how some Ba'athist military doctrines have continued to shape the Islamic State's practices. Although in this case the SVBIED was employed at the end of the attack, the Islamic State often uses SVBIEDs at the outset to break

b Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the creator of the Islamic State's forerunner, was distrustful of Ba'athists. His successor, Abu Umar al-Baghdadi, proved more accepting. When current Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi took control in 2010, the numbers of Ba'athists then increased. Already by 2007, analysts were highlighting the links between al-Qa'ida in Iraq and the Ba'athists. See Andrew Tilghman, "The Myth of AQI," *Washington Monthly*, October 2007. For the later expansion of ties, see Martin Chulov, "Isis: The Inside Story," *Guardian*, December 14, 2014; Shiv Malik et al., "How Isis Crippled al-Qaida," *Guardian*, June 11, 2015; Liz Sly, "The Hidden Hand Behind the Islamic State Militants? Saddam Hussein's," *Washington Post*, April 5, 2015; and Hamza Hendawi and Qassim Abdul-Zahra, "There's One Major Reason Why ISIS Has Been So Successful," Associated Press, August 8, 2015.

c As the war progressed, Iraq's quantitative advantage fell to 2:1, although in some battles, such as al-Faw, it was as high as 13.33:1. Stephen Pelletiere and Douglas Johnson, *Lessons Learned: The Iran-Iraq War*, U.S. Marine Corps, v. 1, pp. 10 and 39.

"The Islamic State is a hybrid organization. Its members' disparate experiences combined to transform an insurgent force into a formidable army that can shift from a guerilla militia to a conventional army."

through lines and feign assaults. The use of SVBIEDs has often been highlighted,¹¹ but its place in the Islamic State's military doctrine is not well understood. Some analysts have emphasized their shock value in disorienting enemy forces and causing chaos.¹² Others have focused on the extensive damage they cause.¹³ But, arguably, the key to understanding the Islamic State's use of SVBIEDs is Ba'athist military doctrine. Following Baghdad's dismal showing against the Israelis in 1973 and its failed campaigns against Kurdish rebellions, the army moved away from frontal assaults to focus on overwhelming firepower.¹⁴ Central Intelligence Agency reports on Iraqi tactics noted that assaults were "preceded by artillery barrages" and that "the Iraqis learned to rely heavily upon armored units for offensive operations. By 1984, tank formations were almost always used for the primary assault."¹⁵

In its early days, the Islamic State changed strategy by favoring infantry over armor. Unlike the Iraqi army, the Islamic State did not have sufficient caches of artillery and armor to sustain long assaults until it captured Mosul in June 2014. Instead, it had abundant and superior infantry. But Islamic State commanders clung to Ba'athist doctrines. They merely substituted SVBIEDs for artillery and armor, employing suicide bombers in the same fashion. For this reason SVBIEDs are used heavily at the outset of Islamic State offensives. They can be seen as a continuation of traditional Ba'ath techniques albeit adapted to the current situation.

Another indication that some Ba'athist military doctrines have become ingrained is that the Islamic State almost always deploys SVBIEDs against targets in fixed areas selected before the battle and only rarely changes these targets.¹⁶ The Iraqi army favored frontal assaults over maneuvering and flanking operations.¹⁷ Its heavy artillery—even mobile mechanisms such as surface to air missile launchers—was static.¹⁸ Artillery was deployed according to predetermined firing plans and was rarely repositioned.¹⁹ During the Gulf War, prepositioned oil drums on roads were used to guide salvos against coalition forces, but when they maneuvered away, the Iraqis still aimed at the drums.²⁰ The Islamic State does the same.

The August 2015 Umm-al-Shuk Offensive

On August 29, 2015, Islamic State forces amassed in Umm al-Shuk, about 10 kilometers southwest of Hassaka. Moving north, Islamic State fighters opened fire against heavily fortified defensive positions of the YPG about 2.9 kilometers away. Approximately 50-60 fighters used heavy weapons such as DshKs and mortars in a battle that lasted from 9 PM until the morning. This was a tactical diversion from the real objective, the Martyr Aras post several hundred meters to the east. In a cluster of houses in Rajim al-Tufayhi, they amassed a platoon of fewer than 10 men. These camouflaged forc-

“The use of IEDs demonstrates the Islamic State’s smooth transition from an insurgent force to a traditional military, tailoring its advantages to specific situations.”

es tried to crawl the 915 meters to the Kurdish post, but suffered losses and retreated.⁴ Though a failure, the Umm al-Shuk attack reveals that the Islamic State is willing to take risks, aiming to be a much more flexible and nimble fighting force than its Ba’athist predecessor.

The highly creative operation was likely decided at the tactical level without input from the strategic command. This indicates that the Islamic State has overcome the greatest obstacle to Arab military effectiveness—tactical deficiency.²¹ Historically, Iraqi forces from platoon to brigade have “repeatedly showed little aggressive initiative, little willingness to innovate or improvise, little ability to adapt to unforeseen circumstances, and little ability to act independently.”^{22 e}

The Islamic State, however, is not saddled with this patrimony. King’s College Professor Andreas Krieg, who embedded with Iraqi Kurdish forces, concluded that Islamic State tactical commanders are given significant latitude to improvise.²³ The organization’s decentralized structure affords them “significant autonomy to initiate operations without strategic-level authorization.”²⁴ Some analysts see junior units’ lack of “strategic coherence” and “tactical restlessness” as a weakness.²⁵ In truth, it is vital to the Islamic State’s success. Tactical leeway nourishes a mobile force that innovatively strikes against larger and better-equipped forces.

Moreover, the Islamic State exhibits a learning curve by improving its effectiveness over time. In contrast, the Ba’athists “simply did not learn from one battle to the next,”²⁶ largely due to the Iraqi army’s overcentralized military hierarchy. It had “a rigid top-down C2 (command and control) system” where senior commanders made all the decisions.²⁷ In the 2003 war, Hussein did not permit division and corps commanders authority over units.²⁸ Commanders up to the corps level refused to initiate activity, fearing execution if they failed.²⁹ Junior officers could not plan offensives, and even if they were permitted, they could never draw them up. Tactical forces were only successful in heavily scripted operations and static positions. For these reasons, Ba’athist forces were not only trained but indoctrinated to conduct purely static defensive operations. The Islamic State’s tactical creativity is likely due to the jihadist experience, where small cells operate outside the purview of the leadership’s command, rather than an epiphany by its Ba’athist members.

d The author visited the site the following day, viewed Islamic State fighters through binoculars, and was briefed by YPG field commanders.

e In contrast, McLaurin argues that tactical commanders and conscripts are “reasonably competent fighters” and blames the senior echelons for poor military performance. R.D. McLaurin, “Military Operations in the Gulf War: The Battle of Khorramshahr,” *U.S. Army Human Engineering Laboratory* (Aberdeen Proving Ground, 1982), p. 25.

The June 2015 Hassaka Offensive

On May 31, 2015, the Islamic State attacked Hassaka from the south, quickly capturing the southern regime-held neighborhoods as the NDF units there collapsed. The YPG, which controlled the northern part of the city, did not intervene until June 27 when the Islamic State moved north, brushing up against the Kurdish quarters. From Jabal Aziz, west of the city, the YPG moved troops southeast to Hassaka’s southern entrance where Islamic State forces were concentrated. From the village of Fallahi, east of Hassaka, the YPG marched southwest. These deployments were designed to encircle the Islamic State and cut off its supply routes from the cities of al-Arish and al-Hawl. After several weeks of fighting, the YPG cornered the Islamic State in the southeastern neighborhood of al-Zuhur.

Among the Islamic State’s heavy weapons employed were SVBE-IDs, mortars, and tanks. The Islamic State used high ground, placing snipers and DShKs on tall buildings. As fighters retreated, they mined buildings and planted remote controlled improvised explosive devices (IEDs). They burned tires as smokescreens, impeding the coalition’s airstrikes.³⁰

The al-Zuhur siege best illustrates the hybrid organization that the Islamic State has become, using insurgent tactics in defensive positions. The weapon of choice for the Islamic State’s predecessors during the U.S. occupation in Iraq was the IED, which was an effective tool that protected its own troops. But in al-Zuhur, it was used to screen the withdrawal of a conventional fighting force. The use of IEDs demonstrates the Islamic State’s smooth transition from an insurgent force to a traditional military, tailoring its advantages to specific situations. The tactics used during the withdrawal reflect the employment of methods the Ba’athists never utilized.

The Hassaka offensive further demonstrates how the Islamic State now approaches battles. The insurgent’s objective is to win the population’s support.³¹ Receptive Arabs in the southern parts of Hassaka facilitated the Islamic State’s lightning-speed occupation, but the northern areas are populated with hostile Kurdish civilians who actively aided the YPG. Such demographics would normally dissuade insurgents from futile operations like the Hassaka offensive. But the Islamic State is no longer an insurgent organization that can only hold remote territory or engage in hit-and-run ambushes. Its desire to become a continuously conquering state to which Muslims can emigrate has led it to modify and even abandon various guerilla tactics.

The Hassaka offensive also illustrates the Islamic State’s use of intelligence. The Ba’athist military consistently failed at collecting, assessing, and sharing intelligence,³² which was sometimes politicized with battlefield and casualty losses underreported.³³ At other times it was not analyzed. Rarely was it dispatched to field units. During the Gulf War, Iraqi prisoners of war revealed that intelligence was “almost zero.”³⁴ Intelligence officers and their commanders gleaned information about coalition troops through Western radio and television broadcasts.³⁵ During the invasion of Kuwait, field commanders relied on tourist maps.³⁶

Intelligence and reconnaissance, however, are a key factor in the Islamic State’s success. According to Ciwan Ibrahim, head of Syrian Kurdish internal security, the Islamic State initially sends small groups into enemy territory to ascertain its power holders.³⁷ Next comes close-target reconnaissance of checkpoints, defensive positions, enemy routines, force size, and weaponry. An advance guard is then dispatched to provide early warning and security to

ensure unhindered movements. Finally, the main force moves in. Sleeper cells are a part of this strategy, and infiltrating enemy ranks reflects the apex of counterintelligence. Their use in Hassaka expedited the NDF's quick collapse there while facilitating the seizure of other towns.³⁸

Islamic State agents captured by the YPG revealed to the author how the organization surveils enemy territory. One adolescent claimed that he was dispatched to the village of Ayn Isa to identify military targets for SVBIEDs.³⁹ He then reported to his handlers, who sent an SVBEID to the point he identified. The Islamic State has also created sleeper cells in YPG-controlled areas to assemble and detonate car bombs.⁴⁰

Use of Special Forces

The Islamic State's use of frontline special forces represents a sharp deviation from traditional Ba'ath techniques. FSA commanders such as Captain Hassan Hajari of the Suqur al-Jabal Brigade⁴¹ note that SVBIEDs are often followed by small commando units working in groups of 20 or fewer, known as the *Inghimasiyyin*,⁴² largely foreign contingents according to Islamic State commanders.⁴³ Prized for their speed and ability,⁴⁴ they are specially trained for fighting in close quarters.⁴⁵ Their mission is to break enemy defensive lines and take difficult targets such as fortified positions.⁴⁶

In contrast, forward Ba'athist units were poorly staffed by conscripts⁴⁷ but backed up by more proficient armor and artillery units.⁴⁸ In the rear were Hussein's elite Republican Guard units, who "served as the theater reserve and counterattack force."⁴⁹ The difference between frontline Ba'athist and Islamic State fighters also extends to ideology. The *Inghimasiyyin* are highly motivated and fearless, donning explosive belts that they do not hesitate to use.^h Dr. Nasser Hajj Mansour, a senior official in the Syrian Kurds' Defense Ministry, emphasized that initial Islamic State infantry forces are composed of highly ideological foreign fighters and that subsequent assault units contain less ideological troops.⁵⁰ In contrast, frontline Ba'athist infantry had no ideological connection to the regime and was often no more than cannon fodder. Thus, while Ba'athist forces were progressively more effective as one moved away from the front lines, Islamic State troops are qualitatively more superior as one moves toward them.

The Caucasus Factor

Although the Islamic State blends Ba'athist and insurgent tactics, it also draws on other groups' techniques. The organization has a large contingent of fighters from the Caucasus. Many of them fought against the Russians in Chechnya. There, rebels defended their capital of Grozny against the Russians and later employed guerilla tactics after losing it. Highly ideological and motivated,⁵¹



In this Islamic State image, one of its fighters is pictured in Fallujah, Iraq, in July 2015.

they relied on mobile, light infantry units. Platoons of 10-15 men swarmed armored columns,⁵² rarely ambushing with more than 75 men.⁵³ They hugged the Russians from 50-250 meters away, rendering heavy artillery unusable.⁵⁴ They were nimble,⁵⁵ with mortar crews firing several rounds before relocating to avoid Russian detection.⁵⁶ These agile troops outflanked the Russians from the rear, a tactic the Ba'athists could not perform.⁵⁷

Like the Islamic State, the Chechens encountered unfavorable force ratios. In 1994-95, the Chechens had about 10,000 fighters against approximately 24,000 Russians.⁵⁸ During the second Battle for Grozny in 1996, they attacked with about 1,500 troops against 12,000 Russians.⁵⁹ During the third Battle for Grozny four years later, they were 2,000-3,000 against 95,000.⁶⁰ When Russian forces invaded Grozny in January 1995, rebels created a concentric three-ring defense with strongpoints for firing positions.⁶¹ To defend it in 2000, they dug trenches and used an elaborate underground tunnel system.⁶² The Islamic State has created similar defenses in its cities of Mosul and Raqqa, building walls and digging trenches in concentric circles.^k Like the Islamic State during the al-Zuhur siege, the Chechens mined everything from doorways to Russian soldiers' corpses when retreating from Grozny.⁶³ They set charges at oil installations and chemical plants.⁶⁴ And like the Islamic State, the Chechens possessed a vast array of heavy weaponry.⁶⁵ In fact, the Islamic State's adaptation to the coalition air campaign may draw on the Chechens' own experiences.⁶⁶

But just as there are discrepancies between Ba'athist and Islamic State tactics, they exist between the organization and the Chechens. Against the Russians, the least skilled fighters were placed at the front.⁶⁷ And unlike the Islamic State's ample manpower and

f An Islamic State commander of an *Inghimasi* brigade in the Salah al-Din province in Iraq claimed he had 300 men with an additional 600 in similar brigades in the governates of Mosul and al-Anbar. For the criterion used to select them, see Absi Sumaysam, "Al-Inghimasiyyun: Al-Quwwah Al-Dharibah li-al-Tanzimat Al-Jihadiyyah." [Inghimasis: The Striking Force of Jihadi Organizations], *al-Arabi al-Jadid*, December 22, 2014.

g The Islamic State commander also noted they are the best troops.

h The *Inghimasiyyin* should not be confused with suicide bombers whose sole mission is to blow themselves up. The *Inghimasiyyin* only detonate their charges after fighting and only if death is imminent. For the differences between them, see Absi Sumaysam.

i Other analysis claims the range was 25-100 meters. Arthur Speyer, "The Two Sides of Grozny," in Russell Glenn ed., *Capital Preservation: Preparing for Urban Operations in the Twenty-First Century* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation), p. 88.

j Other analysis notes that Russia had 45,000 troops against 15,000 Chechen guerrillas. Speyer, p. 68.

k The Islamic State began building these trenches in Mosul in 2014, long before the Western press began reporting on it. See "Da'ish Tahfur Khanadiq Hawl Madinat Al-Mosul." [Da'ish Digs Trenches Around Mosul City], *Karbala News*, December 18, 2014. For Raqqa, see Bawla Astih, "ISIS is Digging," *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, June 25, 2015.

weaponry, the Chechens had limited resources, which prevented conducting extensive engagements.⁶⁸

Conclusion

The Islamic State has evolved as a fighting force throughout its various iterations and expansion. The conscription of Ba'athists brought the organization valuable military experience, but instead of a wholesale embrace of these teachings, a continually developing Islamic State has selected, adapted, and at times even rejected these techniques. Ba'athist influence can be seen clearly—for example, in its use of SVBIEDs as early overwhelming firepower. But from morale to tactical command, the organization is not saddled with the Ba'athists' liabilities. The Islamic State's expert use of forward agents and sleeper cells to gather intelligence is in direct contrast to the Ba'athists' utter lack of pre-battle reconnaissance. Moreover, the group continues to adapt and innovate, sinuously moving between

guerilla tactics, conventional military techniques, and hybrid methods. A clear demonstration of this creativity is the use of tactical battle diversions devised without the input of senior leaders. And the Islamic State adapts to specific contexts rather than applying rigid doctrines. For example, lacking the Ba'athists' superior force ratios, the group instead often deploys special forces at the outset of battles. For this reason, the Islamic State is a formidable military force that cannot be easily categorized.

Understanding the Islamic State's various components, its military evolution, and its battlefield strengths is vital if it is to be defeated. Dismissing it as an insurgent organization or the offspring of a conventional army blinds military strategists to its hybrid realities. Its multifaceted nature affords it a panoply of strategy and tactics that it tailors to its current foes. This flexibility and unpredictability is a key to its success that cannot be overlooked. **CTC**

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