

Report

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# The Nature of Affiliation: Daesh in Africa and the Middle East



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## Contents

Introduction .....	4
Daesh - Organisational Structure.....	4
Daesh Affiliate Groups Selected for Comparison .....	6
The Nature of Affiliation of the Various Daesh Affiliates.....	9
Conclusion.....	10
Bibliography .....	12

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## Introduction

Daesh, also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), gained prominence in early 2014, when it drove Iraqi forces out of key cities in Western Iraq taking control of Fallujah and Mosul. The group became notorious for the strict enforcement of its austere interpretation of sharia law, videos of beheadings, and the destruction of cultural heritage sites it deems idolatrous. As a caliphate, Daesh claims religious and political authority over all Muslims worldwide. The group is committed to spreading its own extreme interpretation of Islam and has expanded its presence on social media to reach out to a global audience and recruit fighters from abroad. Outside Iraq and Syria, Daesh controls territory in Sinai, Afghanistan and Libya, (Reuters, 2015) and over forty jihadi groups around the world have pledged allegiance or support to Daesh (IntelCenter, 2015).

Previous examination of these groups has largely focused on their individual motivations and ideologies. It is the objective of this report to develop an analytical framework with which to compare Daesh affiliated groups. For reasons of brevity, this report will offer a comparative analysis of four groups. Further research projects can employ the framework presented here to make sense of Daesh affiliate groups across the wider Middle East and Africa.

Due to the contemporary nature of the topic and the speed of change in the wider region, there are few reliable, peer-reviewed sources available. Therefore, our research is largely based on secondary sources, media reports, and articles from NGOs. The availability of dependable information was the deciding factor in selecting Daesh affiliate groups to be examined. This report is divided into three sections: in the first part, we analyse the organisational structure of Daesh; the second section give a detailed account of affiliated groups in Africa and the Middle East; finally, we compare the selected Daesh affiliate groups and comment upon their similarities and differences.

## Methodology

The project, in regards to its methodology, was separated into two phases. The first phases constituted an extensive literature review in order to identify key themes and patters which were to aid us in our comparative analysis. In order to obtain a comprehensive account of existing alliance patterns, this research employed a qualitative analysis based on secondary sources including official documents, governmental websites, newspaper articles and interviews. Given the nature of the topic in question, we had to be mindful of the material we were using and remain wary of the ethical and legal considerations regarding researching Daesh and its affiliated groups. The groups investigated below were based due to the availability of credible sources and to demonstrate the comparative nature of the groups and to trace distinctive alliance patterns between them. The groups were selected also has they demonstrated the diversity of the Daesh's network. The reports methodology split the groups geographically to show how the network not only possesses broad territorial reach, but how the network is also responsible for fermenting a range of regional problems in the Middle East and North Africa. Essentially, the methodology enables the report to present how these various groups align around Daesh, their significance, their similarities and their differences.

## Daesh - Organisational Structure

### Leadership structure:

Daesh has a hierarchical structure that includes many functions and jurisdictions including specific operations such as finance, prisoners and detainees, coordination of the martyrs and women . A large number of Daesh's leaders are former officers of Saddam Hussein's long-disbanded army who supplemented their military training with asymmetrical strategies during the American occupation of Iraq. The organisation effectively works as a state with a cabinet, councils, and a military, who respond directly to Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi. The leader relies on a number of advisers with direct access to him. Members of this council help handle religious differences, order executions, and ensure that policies conform to Daesh's doctrine. The Caliph is the sole decision-maker in the self-proclaimed state and his decisions are implemented with no avenue for recourse (Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, 2014). As the Prophet's representative, he wields absolute power and does not share authority with any of his lieutenants. Abu Muslim Al-Turkemani (also known as Fadl Ahmad Abdullah al Hiyali) is reported to serve as his deputy (Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, 2014) and charged with overseeing the Iraqi provinces. There are ministries of finance, transport, security; another ministry is dedicated to the care of foreign fighters (The Clarion Project, 2015). The group claims to administer healthcare and education and to maintain public order throughout its territory. Courts' rulings are based on an extreme interpretation of sharia law and gender segregation is strictly enforced.

### Methods of propaganda and communication:

Daesh uses social media to disseminate propaganda and incite fear, and to recruit members from abroad by presenting the 'Islamic State' as a Muslim utopia. The group's messaging is effective due to strategic emphasis on hybridized digital warfare, where it coordinates its military and messaging campaigns with the support of a robust media bureaucracy (Ghambir, 2016). Daesh has a central media foundation that sets messaging priorities and media campaigns in consultation with Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and his council. These messages are further spread through multiple outlets, including Daesh's official media foundations, provincial reporting offices, unofficial media collectives and online supporters. Daesh's online presence has already inspired other terrorist groups to pledge their support and it is probable that its operations will continue to do so. The group's initiative to release an English language magazine, *Dabiq* was copied by other groups, such as Jabhat al Nusra (Ghambir, 2016). In terms of communication, Daesh members seem to be very familiar with techniques of encrypting messages or making them anonymous. One of Daesh's most well known apps is an Arabic-language model of Twitter, called 'The Dawn of Glad Tidings', or 'Dawn' (Berger, 2016). The app can be downloaded from the Google Play store and automatically posts tweets to the user's personal account. The content that appears later on the newsfeed is decided by a specific person in Daesh's social-media operation (Berger, 2016). The group also uses couriers to convey some messages in order to keep away from digital communications or other encrypted applications, such as Alrawi or Threema (Harris, Snachtman, 2014).

Over the past years, Daesh has managed to gather sympathisers from more than 40 organisations in dozens of countries (IntelCenter, 2015), and by early 2016 it had formally embraced groups in 8 countries. These groups add over 15,000 fighters to Daesh's force outside Syria and Iraq (Rahmani and Tanco, 2016). Daesh refers to its affiliates as semi-independent wilayats, or 'provinces'. These wilayats are represent pockets of territory, varying in size, that expand the group's geographic reach

and strategic depth (Rahmani and Tanco, 2016). Most of the terrorist groups that have pledged allegiance to Daesh have done so online by posting audio or video messages online. However, despite drawing inspiration from material released by Daesh, there is no evidence of a direct command-and-control structure between Daesh and its associated organisations. The terrorist group continues its propaganda to increase its followership in the near-abroad.

## Daesh Affiliate Groups Selected for Comparison

### Boko Haram

Boko Haram must be understood with regard to Nigeria's current conditions. Nigeria is Africa's most populous country containing around 177 million people. It is Africa's largest economy and its biggest oil producer. However astonishing levels of corruption have left it without basic infrastructure, particularly in the North (Smith, 2014). Inequality between Nigeria's predominantly Muslim North and the Christian South is rife. The North face increasingly poor socio-economic infrastructures and inadequate governance relative to the South. These conditions have paved the way for Boko Haram to attract members. Boko Haram's membership currently stands at around 15,000 (Amnesty, 2015).

Boko Haram emerged in 2002 in Maiduguri, capital of the north-eastern state Borno, in opposition to the Nigerian government, opposing secular authority. However, the group has only been actively fighting the Nigerian government and its military forces since 2009, with the insurgency extending to Cameroon, Chad and Niger. The premise behind Boko Haram's insurgency rests on the creation of an Islamic state, in order to defeat Western influence. as directly translated in their name Boko Haram, claiming 'western education is forbidden' (BBC News, 2015b) . Boko Haram advocates a strict fundamentalist interpretation of the Qur'an, expressing that they are 'People Committed to the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad' (BBC News, 2015b) which has taken form in the action of widespread violence to enforce extreme Islamic ideals and to replace Western influence and ideology. Boko Haram is considered the largest and most brutal group affiliated with Daesh in Africa. In 2015 Boko Haram reached out to Daesh, pledging their allegiance which Daesh accepted. The reasons as to why Boko Haram became an effective vassal of Daesh cannot be confirmed definitively, although it would be an oversight to not take note of both ideological considerations and the threats which Boko Haram face within their regional context. Sources highlight that the nature of Boko Haram's affiliation with Daesh at that point in time was crucial for Boko Haram considering the opposition faced from multi-national organisations and government forces of Cameroon, Chad and Niger, territories occupied by Boko Haram (The Guardian, 2015; The Independent, 2015).

Analysts agree that Boko Haram's allegiance to Daesh has materialised in their actions showing similarities between both Daesh and Boko Haram since they have both declared a caliphate in their respective regions; both armed groups have mimicked each other's tactics and strategies such as mass kidnappings of women along with widespread atrocities terrorising and threatening communities in their controlled regions (Aljazeera, 2015). The violent acts instigated by Boko Haram have killed around 13,000 civilians within Northern Nigeria and across the border (Ogunlesi, 2014). Amongst the most notorious of Boko Haram's acts are the Chibok kidnappings of 276 school girls, gaining international media attention (Smith, 2014). Reports recently show that Boko Haram has followed a similar style to Daesh in terms of imagery and propaganda videos. Critics agree that this

alliance, unsure of its association to Daesh, could be more operational in terms of consolidating Boko Haram's image and boosting morale since, recently losing territory (The Guardian, 2015).

### **Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis (ABM)**

Egypt has been divided politically since the 2011 revolution, "it is polarised between the interim government, the military and the Muslim Brotherhood" (BBC News, 2015). This political instability has contributed to high levels of mass unemployment, giving rise to extremism, allowing groups such as Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis (ABM) to thrive. The Sinai Province has been particularly chaotic, allowing the group to emerge due to a lack of central authority. It is here that the group is most dominant. ABM, also known as the Sinai Province group emerged in the aftermath of the uprising that removed Hosni Mubarak from government and have become more prevalent after Mohamed Morsi. Many of its members can be linked to Al Qaeda and other Jihadist groups. They have since become Egypt's most dangerous Islamic Terrorist group.

As a group who has affiliated themselves to the Daesh caliphate their main motivation is 'to join the war against the international coalition led by the United States' (ict.org, 2015) and fight against western oppression, on behalf of Muslims oppressed under the Morsi regime. However, prior to their affiliation other more localised aims existed, primarily to 'drive the Israeli government from Jerusalem' (Stanford University, 2016) and combat the government in Cairo. The geography of the Sinai region is particularly important in terms of regional stability owing to its access to the Gaza Strip.

ABM swore allegiance to Daesh on November 3rd 2014 via social media which read; "After entrusting God we decided to swear allegiance to the emir of the faithful Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, caliph of the Muslims in Syria and Iraq and in other countries." (ICT, 2015). Daesh are also known to be funding militant operations in the region, supplying them with weapons and resources. Their unique nature of affiliation suggests they have attached themselves to Daesh in an attempt to branch out and expand. Funding is crucial to the affiliation as it came at a time of turmoil for the group. The pledge offers a new insurgency at a critical turning point, explaining why in spite of some ulterior motives ABM joined the caliphate.

Significant attacks include interference with gas pipelines between Jordan, Egypt and Israel with the most prolific attacks in terms casualties being on armed convoys and at borders of the Sinai region. AMB have also been linked with "an attack with a Russian Charter Jets, killing over 224 people" (Stanford University, 2016). The Russian Government claim AMB was responsible, although this is not confirmed.

### **Mujahedeen Shura Council in the Environs of Jerusalem (MSC)**

The group was established in 2012 as an umbrella group composed of jihadist terrorist sub-groups as a consolidation of Salafi-jihadist organisations operating in the Gaza Strip and previously in neighbouring Sinai. The MSC existed before the Egyptian Revolution of 2011 however it shifted focus from Egypt to Gaza to target the State of Israel (ICT, 2012). The group is motivated by a strong anti-Semitic sentiment supported by jihadi ideology which identifies it as a religious obligation to use violence against the Jewish people (ICT, 2012). In keeping with Islamism, the group, in their online videos claims that there is no place in the Arab or Muslim world for liberal, secular or democratic values. Such values are associated with the State of Israel, compounding the group's animosity towards it,

In relation to their affiliation to Daesh, the group in question, like many other jihadi organisations in Gaza, did not respond to Ayman al-Zawahri's statement rebuffing al-Baghdadi and Daesh. On 2 February 2014, the MSC issued a video, declaring their commitment to Daesh in the hope of bolstering its ranks and denounced the jihadi infighting taking place in the wake of the formation of the caliphate in Syria and Iraq. Their video asserted the significance of Islamist solidarity and declared that the armies of Daesh, in Syria and Iraq, are joined by the environs of Jerusalem, "which shall champion you undeterred by its fight against the Jews" (Al-Monitor, 2014).

Despite these bold assertions by the MSC, Mohammed Hijazi, an expert on Islamist groups, believes that Daesh still lacks an organisation presence in the Gaza Strip. There are scores of Salafists in Gaza, some of whom fight alongside Baghdadi's caliphate, but this does not equate to a branch of Daesh in Gaza. There are many young people in Gaza that are receptive to Daesh's ideology however no structures have been created to leverage this sentiment. The relationship between Daesh and the MSC is not one which is easily unpicked, and whilst there is an affinity, it is not clear how far such an affinity extends or what it entails (Al-Monitor, 2014).

On numerous occasions (18 June 2012, 16 August 2012 and 21 March 2013) the MSC have engaged in violence against Israel through cross border attacks on the Israeli-Sinai border, the launching of rockets into the city of Sderot and within the Gaza Strip (Long War Journal, 2012).. Whilst these attacks were not particularly damaging to the city of Sderot or the State of Israel itself, since these acts have been committed, the ability of the Palestinian Authority and Hamas to control violence in Gaza has been called into question ultimately leading to Hamas arresting members of the group in July 2013 (Long War Journal, 2013). Despite the fact that the group is not an existential threat to Israel, its existence does demonstrate that the tendrils of Daesh extend substantially into the Gaza Strip, an area of pre-existing social discord as well as political and religious strife; issues which groups such as the MSC only serve to aggravate.

### **Yarmouk Martyrs Brigade**

Yarmouk Martyrs Brigade was formed in August 2012 in the context of the unfolding civil war in Syria (The Carter Centre, 2015: 3). The group derives its name from the Yarmouk Valley in Syria's southwestern Deraa province, in which the group controls a contiguous area of towns and villages encompassing a population of approximately 40,000 Syrian civilians (Gross, 2015). According to the Israeli Defence Forces, Yarmouk Martyrs Brigade consists of approximately 600 fighters with access to large stores of weapons (Gross, 2015). Initially founded as an opposition group to the Syrian regime, Yarmouk Martyrs Brigade's organisation is based on local and familial ties rather than an Islamic ideology (The Carter Center, 2015: 3). Previous to allegations of Daesh affinity, it was a declared component of the Western-backed 'Southern Front' initiative in 2014 (Al-Tamimi, 2015a). From mid-2014 onwards, signs of tensions emerged between Yarmouk Martyrs Brigade and other Syrian opposition groups, allegedly due to the group's echoing of Daesh discourse in pronouncing takfir on rival groups (Al-Tamimi, 2015a).

Yarmouk Martyrs Brigade was first accused of alignment with Daesh in December 2014 by the Western-backed opposition group Jabhat al-Nusra which cited extremist views and statements, symbolism, and financial support (Al-Tamimi, 2015b). Although Yarmouk Martyrs Brigade has not openly acknowledged any form of association to Daesh, it has, at the same time, refused to denounce the organisation (The Carter Centre, 2015: 2). While academic Al-Tamini has suggested

that this allegation was circulated by Jabhat al-Nusra to justify military engagement, various factors have pointed to an existing affiliation (Al-Tamimi, 2015c). Shortly after emerging accusations, a video was released which displayed the brigade's commander, Abu Ali al-Baridi Aka al-Kha, singing an ode to Daesh's leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdad, during a Yarmouk Martyrs Brigade gathering (The Carter Centre, 2015). Furthermore, official photos released by the group appeared to imitate Daesh propaganda such as depicting the distributions of da'wa pamphlets and portraying scenes of normality in captured territory (Al-Tamimi, 2015a). In addition, it appears that Yarmouk Martyrs Brigade has increasingly adopted the administration model employed by Daesh in the Yarmouk basin. Over the course of 2015, it reportedly established its own da'wa office, an Islamic court, and an Islamic police force (Al-Tamimi, 2015a). In August 2015, the group founded a 'Diwan al-Hisbd', adopting the name Daesh has given its department of governance responsible for the enforcement of Islamic morality (Al-Tamimi, 2015b). Strikingly, the group has also chosen to feature Daesh's flag in its emblem (Al-Tamimi, 2015a).

Ascertaining motivations remains difficult as Yarmouk Martyrs Brigade is not officially aligned with Daesh. This lack of official information and statements obstructs an empirical analysis. One explanation that has been put forward relates to the religious values in attained territory. According to that explanation, Yarmouk Martyrs Brigade chose to gradually become more 'Islamic' in governance and deepen its affinity to Daesh in order to improve its reputation among the local population (Al-Tamimi, 2015b). Comparable cases have been found elsewhere in the region (Al-Tamimi, 2015b). Throughout 2015, Yarmouk Martyrs Brigade has taken territory approximately 15 kilometers away from the Israeli border. According to the Times of Israel, a high-ranking army officer has stated that the group poses a legitimate threat to Israel. (Gross, 2015). Furthermore, Al-Tamimi has pointed out that opposition forces in the Syria might be trapped between Daesh from the north and Yarmouk Martyrs Brigade from behind (Al-Tamimi, 2015b).

## **The Nature of Affiliation of the Various Daesh Affiliates**

As a result of the research outlined above and a lower resolution analysis of other Daesh affiliate groups it is clear that these groups fall into two broad categories: partners and bandwagoners.

Partners are groups that have openly affiliated with Daesh and share ideological, tactics or financing. Two of the groups examined in this report fall into the Partner category. Boko Haram declared allegiance to the Daesh caliphate and mimicked the tactics employed by Daesh in Syria and Iraq within their sphere of influence. These tactics included acts of violence and social media campaigning for which Daesh has become infamous. As a Partner Boko Haram enjoys the prestige that comes from Daesh victories but is left unaffected by their defeats due to their location. Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis also fall within the Partner category through financial and ideological connections. ABM have declared allegiance to Daesh and enjoy the spoils of their victories through financial contributions.

Bandwagoners are groups that have a more tenuous relationship with Daesh. Yarmouk Martyrs Brigade have adopted a Daesh-like governing systems within their sphere of influence but they have failed to declare their allegiance to the Daesh project openly. YMB clearly gain from Daesh's success and are inspired by them but it is evident that they do not share ideological, tactic or financial connections. Likewise the Mujahideen Shura Council of Jerusalem showing aspects of

devotion and distance in equal measure. The MSC clerally adhere to Daesh's ideology however jihadi rhetoric does not reflect realities in Gaza. Analyst Mohammed Hijazi refuse to acknowledge that there is a sufficient organisational framework in place within Gaza for MSC to be much more than a loose affiliate in voice.

What is clear is that the groups examined here highlight the diversity within the transnational network of which Daesh is the leader. The nature of the relationship between Daesh and their affiliate groups is contingent upon the geopolitical, ideological and financial context in which they find themselves. Partner groups are those which contribute to the Daesh project more directly and are therefore shown more support by the heirarchical head. Bandwagoners are given less support due to their pragmatic or idealised motivations to affiliation but still fostered by Daesh.

## Conclusion

Essentially, the appearances that the various groups take up are, indeed, indicative of the diverse nature of a global jihadi project. The sheer multiplicity of aims, the distinctions between the various affinities, and the differing of the socio-economic surroundings of each group confirms the fears held by policymakers and analysts who study the topic. Daesh is an entity which can no longer be confined to the borders of Syria and Iraq as it is establishing, often robust ties with other organisations who perceive it to be an effective hegemon of Islamist extremism. Whilst aforementioned, these four examples do exist independently, in their own context, this does not negate from the fact that Daesh is resonating deeply within the hearts and minds of the politically, religiously or socially disenfranchised on a global scale. It could soon be the case that the already highly volatile region will be confronted with the reality that Daesh is interwoven throughout the fabric of the Middle East and North Africa and that the fight against Islamist extremism is not one only existing within Syria and Iraq but is unfolding at this very moment within various nation-states within the region, and beyond. Whilst it is undoubtedly the case that the various groups differ in the both the nature and degree of their affiliation to Daesh, the fact that we can establish some traceable link between these groups and Daesh itself is a concept which endangers the future of the Middle East and Africa.

All groups evaluated in this report show similar traits in regards to their social and political context. In each case, they are operating in a region beset by social conflict and in which the internationally recognised government appears to be unable to maintain the social contract and provide their population with a minimum of social security. This lack of critical infrastructure and provision of basic needs creates incentives for the highly vulnerable populations groups to seek protection with so-called terrorist networks. Four hypotheses can be derived from these

- 1) A lack of social security increases incentives for vulnerable groups to join terrorist organisations which provide the social security desired
- 2) The success of Daesh in terms of territorial gains increases the ideological appeal to other groups  
Following recommendation are derived from this
- 3) Increased resources and humanitarian aid is needed in order to support governments in providing the basic functions required by the social contract

- 4) The model of success portrayed by Daesh needs to be discredited and legitimisation

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