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CHANGE

Milestones to Militancy: What the Lives of 100 Jihadis Tell Us About a Global Movement

MUBARAZ AHMED
MILO COMERFORD
EMMAN EL-BADAWY

CO-EXISTENCE

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SUMMARY

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.

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

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

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, 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.

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. This was double the number of jihadis taking Islamic studies.
- **Half of jihadis came from non-violent Islamist 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.

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. 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.

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

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