

# Congressional Testimony

## **Salafi Jihadism in the North African Regional Context**

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Chairmen Poe and Ros-Lehtinen, Ranking Members Sherman and Deutch, distinguished members of the subcommittees, it is an honor to appear before you today to discuss the threat of jihadist terrorism in North Africa.<sup>1</sup> The Arab Uprisings have significantly altered the shape of jihadism in the region. This is not just a country-to-country phenomenon: rather, al-Qaeda and other salafi jihadist groups possess a defined regional strategy. Indeed, leading salafi jihadist strategists have been intensely debating the implications of the changes gripping the region, and how the movement should respond, essentially from the very outset.

The U.S. has been at a disadvantage when it has failed to understand the enemy's perceptions of the world and the strategies that arise from them. This was true in our general inability to understand the economic dimensions of al-Qaeda's strategy for fighting the United States.<sup>2</sup> It was also true for the Arab Uprisings specifically, when many analysts let their optimism drive their analysis, and concluded that the Uprisings were the death knell for salafi jihadism.<sup>3</sup> Though the argument that al-Qaeda and aligned groups have been rendered largely impotent has not completely faded from the scene, the position is increasingly untenable—and it seems we have made some strategic errors in the interim due to overreliance on that analytic line.

I will begin this testimony by examining salafi jihadist perspectives of what the Arab Uprisings mean for the region and will then turn to how Libya fits into that picture specifically. I will conclude with some thoughts on the region beyond Libya and how the U.S. can best shape its policies to address this changed environment.

### **The Arab Uprisings and Salafi Jihadist Strategy**

As the Arab Uprisings intensified, major salafi jihadist strategists quickly reached a rough consensus about what the developments meant. They agreed that the political upheavals gripping the region were good for the movement for a variety of reasons. With respect to the impact on the movement, these strategists thought they would enjoy three primary advantages in the post-Uprisings world, two of which are operational and one of which will help them to propagate their understanding of Islam.

The two major operational advantages are the amount of jihadists who have escaped or been released from prison and the ability of jihadist groups to control territory. As to the former,

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<sup>1</sup> This testimony employs the terms *jihadism* and *jihadist* to describe the militant movement with global ambitions that claims its inspiration from salafi Islam. This terminology is controversial amongst terrorism researchers, and also within government, in large part because it is derived from the religious term *jihad*. I choose to employ this language in large part because it has the benefit of being organic, the way that those within the movement refer to themselves. That makes it superior to alternatives that also have their own limitations. Moreover, as Jarret Brachman notes, the labels *jihadism* and *jihadist* have “been validated as the least worst option across the Arabic-speaking world,” including being employed in Arabic-language print and broadcast media. Jarret M. Brachman, *Global Jihadism: Theory and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> This point is discussed at length in my most recent mass-market book, Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, *Bin Laden's Legacy: Why We're Still Losing the War on Terror* (New York: Wiley, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> For such conclusions, see Fawaz Gerges, “The Rise and Fall of al Qaeda: Debunking the Terrorism Narrative,” *Huffington Post*, Jan. 3 2012; Neal Conan, “Bergen Correctly Predicted bin Laden's Location,” interview with Peter Bergen, *National Public Radio*, May 3, 2011; Dan Murphy, “Bin Laden's Death Puts Exclamation Mark on al-Qaeda's Demise,” *Christian Science Monitor*, May 3, 2011.

the jihadist thinker Hani al-Siba'i has released multiple lists of violent Islamists who have been released from Egyptian prisons.<sup>4</sup> The same phenomenon also occurred in Libya, where Muammar Qaddafi's government actually used prisoner releases as an offensive tactic against the rebellion it faced, believing that freeing prisoners would create strife in rebellious areas. But as the anti-regime uprising escalated, Qaddafi was no longer able to control these prisoner releases. Some prison governors decided for their own reasons (perhaps as a way of defecting) to empty prisons they were charged with guarding. Chaos allowed some escapes, as guards afraid of reprisals fled their posts; and in other cases gunmen attacked prisons in order to release the inmates. While those released ranged from political prisoners to violent criminals and were not exclusively jihadists, the resulting increase in liberated jihadist manpower has profoundly altered the dynamics of the movement in the region.

The second operational advantage, control of territories, was attainable before the Uprisings, but the rebellions presented the movement with some new opportunities that did not previously exist. Instability gripped Libya, a country whose harsh crackdowns had previously made it nearly impervious to a jihadist foothold. Jihadist groups also made significant gains in Mali (recently reversed by the French intervention) and also in Yemen (where Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) has also seen its advances reversed). In an interview with the London-based *Al-Quds Al-Arabi*, AQAP's Fahd al-Qasa portrayed these gains as naturally stemming from the Arab Uprisings. "We are an integral part of the people's project toward dignity and freedom under the banner of Islam," he said.<sup>5</sup> There are a few important points to draw from this perception. Salafi jihadists view territory where they can train and plan operations as an important part of their regional strategy. Mali served that role until the French intervention changed dynamics on the ground; and today Libya is at the forefront in serving these needs of the movement. But conversely, al-Qaeda and aligned groups have had great difficulty in maintaining control over the territory they capture. This inability to maintain control is a structural problem with the movement that should factor into the U.S.'s strategy.

A third advantage jihadists have identified is that the fall of established regimes would lead to an era of greater openness that would create unprecedented opportunities to undertake *dawa* (missionary work).<sup>6</sup> In addition to this freedom, jihadist strategists thought the movement would be well positioned to gain new adherents after the regimes' falls. For one thing, they

<sup>4</sup> See the following Open Source Center translations: Hani al-Siba'i, "The Release of Prisoners After Nearly Twenty Years of Injustice," *Ansar Dawlat al-Iraq al-Islamiyah*, Feb. 23, 2011; Hani al-Siba'i, "The Release of a New Batch after Long Years Behind Bars," *Al Jahafal*, Feb. 27, 2011; Hani al-Siba'i, "Urgent: The Release of a New Batch of Those Charged with Military Verdicts," *Ansar Dawlat al Iraq al Islamiyah*, Mar. 4, 2011; Al Maqrizi Center for Historical Studies, "Names of the Released Detainees from the al Aqrab, al Istiqbal, al Wadi, and Burj al Arab Prisons," *Shumukh al Islam Network*, Mar. 18, 2011. For an in-depth discussion of early salafi jihadist perceptions of the Arab Uprisings, see Daveed Gartenstein-Ross & Tara Vassefi, "Perceptions of the 'Arab Spring' Within the Salafi-Jihadi Movement," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 35 (2012), pp. 831-48.

<sup>5</sup> "Third on U.S. Wanted List Interviewed on al-Qaeda Operations in Yemen, U.S. Stand," *Al Quds Al Arabi* (London), Sept. 20, 2011, trans. Open Source Center.

<sup>6</sup> See Ayman al-Zawahiri, "And be Neither Weakened nor Saddened," *Al-Sahab Media*, Aug. 15, 2011, trans. Open Source Center; Hamzah bin Muhammad al-Bassam, "Heeding the Advantages and Lessons of the Two Uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia," *Ansar Dawlat al-Iraq al-Islamiyah*, Feb. 25, 2011, trans. Open Source Center; Hamid bin Abdallah al-Ali, "The Joy Lies in the Harvest of the Two Revolutions," posted on al Ali's official website, Feb. 15, 2011, trans. Open Source Center; Atiyatallah Abd al-Rahman, "The People's Revolt... The Fall of Corrupt Arab Regimes... The Demolition of the Idol of Stability... and the New Beginning," distributed by the Global Islamic Media Front, Feb. 16, 2011.

thought they would gain from the revolutions because they were a part of the revolutions. Looking at the situation in Libya, for example, Abu Sa'ad al-Amili opined that Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) was well positioned to gain after Qaddafi's fall because the "mujahedin" included Libyans, and they fought beside other rebels.<sup>7</sup>

Of course, the salafi jihadist movement has never been satisfied in constraining itself to nonviolent *dawa*. It thus has a staged plan which one can discern from the early theoretical work. Even while undertaking *dawa* peacefully, in ways it could not under the old regimes, the movement has been preparing to later engage in large-scale violence.<sup>8</sup> There is also a median step, which can be seen clearly in Tunisia, of *hisba* violence—a concept denoting “forbidding wrong,” which is not warfare directed at enemies of the faith, but rather is designed to internally cleanse the Muslim community.<sup>9</sup> In Tunisia, this *hisba* violence carried out by hardline salafists has been aimed at such adversaries of the movement as artists, civil society activists, and educators.<sup>10</sup>

Countries like Tunisia and Egypt saw relatively smooth successions because their dictators either fled (Ben Ali) or were forced from power (Mubarak) early in the process rather than following a protracted military confrontation, as in Libya or Syria. These countries can be largely characterized by continuity in terms of the institutions of the old regimes: since the state was not destroyed in the process of regime change, neither Tunisia nor Egypt had to re-establish a central government or, for the most part, rebuild their security services. Thus, these relatively stable countries have been lands of *dawa* for salafi jihadist groups. On the other hand, unstable countries like Libya or Syria have been lands of jihad—but it is important to note the synthesis between these lands of *dawa* and lands of jihad. The lands of jihad have been used to train and arm jihadists living in the lands of *dawa*, and thus to prepare them for what the movement sees as an impending military confrontation. They have also been used as a launching pad for attacks—something that can be seen in how Libya was a staging ground for the In Amenas attack in Algeria that occurred in January 2013.

### **Libya: A Land of Jihad**

For these movements, Libya is clearly a land of jihad. The revolution has left Libya's central government weak and unable to extend its writ throughout the country. Armed militias have been able to fill this power vacuum. In some cases, these militias have been able to keep the areas under their control stable, but they have also left a situation where the Libyan government has been unable to effectively address threats to its own stability, threats to its neighbors, or threats to such allies as the United States.

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<sup>7</sup> Abu Sa'ad al-Amili, “Sharia Clarifications and Highlights on the Two Revolutions in Libya and Syria: Episode One (the Libyan Revolution),” posted on *Ansar al Mujahedin Network*, Aug. 26, 2011, trans. Open Source Center.

<sup>8</sup> Al-Bassam, “Heeding the Advantages and Lessons of the Two Uprisings.”

<sup>9</sup> For a good discussion of *hisba*, see Michael Cook, *Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong in Islamic Thought* (Cambridge University Press, 2010).

<sup>10</sup> See “Tunisie: Lycée de Menzel Bouzelfa—Un directeur agressé par des salafistes,” *All Africa*, Apr. 11, 2013; Alexander Smoltczyk, “Islamist Intimidation: The Battle for the Future of Tunisia,” *Der Spiegel*, Dec. 5, 2012; Sarah Leah Whitson, Human Rights Watch, “Letter to Tunisian Minister of Interior and Minister of Justice,” posted online Oct. 14, 2012.

*The weakness of Libya's central government.* There are numerous glaring examples of the general weakness of Libya's government. A preeminent recent example occurred in April to May of this year, when armed militias undertook a two-week siege of the foreign and justice ministries in Tripoli as a means of pressuring the parliament to pass a "political isolation" law that would place restrictions on what positions within government Qaddafi-era officials could hold.<sup>11</sup> Regardless of the merits of this law, the fact that a siege could occur for such an extended period within the country's capital is powerful evidence of a struggling central government.

Several recent terrorist attacks have further illustrated this point. The most recent of these incidents was a car bomb attack intended for two Italian diplomats that fortunately claimed no lives.<sup>12</sup> Even though the bomb attempt failed, it illustrated the limitations of the Libyan security services: they could claim no credit in foiling the attack, as the diplomats were warned by alert citizens. Before that, the French embassy was struck by a car bomb at the end of April, in "the most significant attack against a Western interest in the country" since U.S. ambassador J. Christopher Stevens and two other Americans were killed on September 11, 2012.<sup>13</sup> Though that attack occurred before most embassy employees had arrived that morning, it injured two guards, one of them critically. In March, five British humanitarian activists were kidnapped in eastern Libya, at least two of whom were "women who had been sexually assaulted."<sup>14</sup>

These are just a few indications of the weakness of Libya's central government. The weakness is systemic in nature. Unlike Tunisia and Egypt, the prolonged civil war in Libya destroyed the old structures of Qaddafi's centralized government and made an orderly transition impossible. The central government is limited to Tripoli while the country's means of oil production are in the east. This means that Tripoli does not profit from all of the oil revenues that could otherwise be used to grow the central government and gradually stabilize the country. Further, Libya's borders are porous and difficult to secure, which allows foreign nationals to enter and leave basically at will.

The porousness of Libya's borders has helped the salafi jihadist movement take full advantage of the chaos in Libya, but the problems related to this are far broader than that singular problem. Libya's porous borders have also been used for arms smuggling, human trafficking, and the movement of illegal goods throughout the region. This has contributed to instability in the region of Africa known as the Sahel,<sup>15</sup> including Mali. I will speak further about the flow of arms to jihadist factions shortly.

*Al-Qaeda's presence in Libya.* Before examining how al-Qaeda and salafi jihadists may take advantage of the chaotic situation in Libya, it is worth examining the extent of al-Qaeda's presence within the country. The most comprehensive report in this regard, entitled *Al-Qaeda in*

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<sup>11</sup> "Deal with Former Rebels Ends Libya Siege," *Al Jazeera*, May 12, 2013.

<sup>12</sup> Essam Mohammad, "Libya: Tripoli Car Bomb Targets Italian Diplomats," *All Africa*, June 12, 2013.

<sup>13</sup> David D. Kirkpatrick, "Car Explodes Outside French Embassy in Libya," *New York Times*, Apr. 23, 2013.

<sup>14</sup> Kareem Fahim, "Libya arrests Two Men in Attack on Five British Aid Activists," *New York Times*, Mar. 29, 2013.

<sup>15</sup> The Sahel is the geographic region bordered by the Sahara desert in the north, the Sudanian Savannas in the south, the Atlantic Ocean in the west, and the Red Sea in the east.

*Libya: A Profile*, was published in August 2012 by the Library of Congress's Federal Research division.<sup>16</sup>

The report notes that in Libya, al-Qaeda's senior leadership is attempting to create a clandestine network. The clandestine nature of its efforts in Libya is consistent with the salafi jihadist regional strategy: there is complementarity between *dawa* and jihad, but too overt an al-Qaeda presence could prompt foreign intervention, and thus erase whatever advantages the network was enjoying. This fear is illustrated by the French-led intervention in Mali to clear out a jihadist stronghold in the north, as well as the intervention in Somalia that was undertaken by several countries (including Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, and Burundi, with the U.S. playing more of a supporting role).

There are several organizations within Libya through which al-Qaeda may enjoy influence, or which could perhaps even be regarded as new faces of al-Qaeda. One of these is the Ansar al-Sharia group in Libya. Like Ansar al-Sharia Tunisia (AST), the Libyan Ansar al-Sharia has a prominent social media presence that highlights its "goodwill and civic activities" to further its *dawa* efforts.<sup>17</sup> A second possibility is some remnants of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG). Though some former LIFG members now align themselves with the government, the report notes that "some former members of LIFG may be among those helping to create the al-Qaeda network."<sup>18</sup> There are further *katibas* (battalions or militia groups) that are aligned with Ansar al-Sharia and may assist in strengthening a network for al-Qaeda.

Other emissaries have been dispatched directly by al-Qaeda's senior leadership. The report mentions an operative known as "AA," whom Ayman al-Zawahiri sent to Libya in the middle of 2011. This is almost certainly a reference to Abdul Baset Azzouz, who had managed to mobilize more than 200 fighters by the end of 2012.

Overall, while it is not clear how many al-Qaeda aligned groups and individuals are present in Libya, the Library of Congress report concludes that "a few hundred al-Qaeda members" are operating there and that salafi jihadists aligned with al-Qaeda ideologically have also come to control "dozens of mosques and prayer halls in the country."<sup>19</sup> This core presence is in addition to militias who are aligned with al-Qaeda but apparently not part of its command structure. That provides enough presence to attempt to capitalize on Libya's chaos.

Even as of August 2012, the Library of Congress report concluded that "al-Qaeda appears to constitute a significant threat to the state-building process in Libya."<sup>20</sup> This is one reason that I don't think the terrorist threat has changed significantly since the Benghazi attack: rather, a pre-existing trajectory continued. Salafi jihadism was a problem in Libya prior to September 11, 2012. Unlike Tunisia, where the September 14, 2012 attack on the U.S. embassy in Tunis was followed by the state's crackdown on the country's largest jihadist group, no such reprisals occurred after the Benghazi attack. Thus, the Libyan state missed an opportunity to counter this

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<sup>16</sup> Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, *Al-Qaeda in Libya: a Profile*, (Aug. 2012).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 18, 25.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

violent presence that could impede Libya's rebuilding efforts (although whether it had the capacity to counter the salafi jihadist threat at the time can certainly be debated).

*Jihadist efforts.* Salafi jihadist groups have taken advantage of the new Libya in several ways. One is training for militant activities. The Library of Congress report notes that al-Qaeda has operated training camps in Libya,<sup>21</sup> which exist in large part because the central government has been unable to control southern Libya. In fact, some of the impact of the southern Libya camps may be seen in the January attack on the In Amenas gas complex attack in Algeria, for which some of the attackers reportedly trained in camps in southern Libya.<sup>22</sup> More than 800 people were taken hostage in that attack, in which at least thirty-nine foreign hostages were killed.

Muhammad al-Zawahiri has connected his brother, al-Qaeda emir Ayman al-Zawahiri, with Egyptian militant Muhammad Jamal Abu Ahmad, who has used this safe haven in Libya to establish his own enclave there. As the *Wall Street Journal* has reported, the Jamal network operates camps in Libya that include training for suicide missions, has demonstrated proficiency in smuggling fighters, and also has connections to European jihadists.<sup>23</sup> In addition to Muhammad al-Zawahiri, another connection the Jamal network has to militancy in Egypt is Marjan Salim, a militant who was released from prison following Mubarak's fall, and who served as the head of Egyptian Islamic Jihad's *sharia* committee when Ayman al-Zawahiri led the group in the late 1990s.<sup>24</sup> This network demonstrates the manner in which a country in which jihad is the predominant mode for militant groups can strengthen networks where *dawa* is predominant: unsurprisingly, given Jamal's connections to Egypt, Egyptian recruits have been training there. This arrangement thus helps to bolster the military capabilities of the Egyptian networks even at a time that they are not engaged in combat against the state.

A second distinct issue is the flow of arms from Libya into neighboring countries. As previously mentioned, the flow of Libyan arms had a role in the Malian conflict, although the extent of their role is a matter of debate amongst regional scholars. In addition to making use of training camps in Libya, the In Amenas attackers also made use of Libyan arms when attacking that facility.<sup>25</sup> There has also been a flow of arms from Libya across Algeria and into Tunisia.<sup>26</sup> There, these weapons have helped to strengthen AST's military capabilities. The weapons smuggling into Tunisia was also at the center of recent clashes (beginning in late April) between Tunisian security forces and an AQIM-linked group called Katibat Uqbah Ibn Nafi on the Tunisia-Algeria border. In these incidents, two Tunisian soldiers were killed and at least twenty wounded by improvised explosive devices. Libyan arms have also poured into Egypt's northern Sinai.<sup>27</sup> Thus, the flow of arms out of Libya also has been strengthening jihadist movements' long-term military capabilities in countries where the movement is currently focused on *dawa*.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>22</sup> Paul Cruickshank & Tim Lister, "Algeria Attack May Have Link to Libya Camps," *CNN*, Jan. 23, 2013.

<sup>23</sup> Siobhan Gorman & Matt Bradley, "Militant Link to Libya Attack," *Wall Street Journal*, Oct. 1, 2012.

<sup>24</sup> Muhammad Salah, "Jihad's Organizational Structure," *Al-Hayah*, Feb. 12, 1999, p. 6, Open Source Center trans.

<sup>25</sup> Richard Spencer, "Libyan Arms That Went Missing Under Aaddafi 'Fueling Multiple Conflicts,'" *Telegraph* (London), Apr. 10, 2013.

<sup>26</sup> Andrew Lebovich, "Confronting Tunisia's Jihadists," *Foreign Policy*, May 16, 2013.

<sup>27</sup> Soraya Sarhaddi Nelson, "Libyan Arms Flow into Egypt Across Northern Sinai," *NPR*, Oct. 13, 2011.

A third distinct issue is how Libya can serve as a safe haven for jihadists. I have mentioned the French intervention into Mali: following that military operation, Islamic fighters from both Ansar al Dine and AQIM made their way into southwest Libya, where they “are blending with local militant groups.”<sup>28</sup> This is also an important part of the salafi jihadist regional strategy: rather than standing and fighting in Mali (where they would lose badly in a conventional fight), jihadists who were occupying the north melted away. Being able to move to across porous borders and into areas where they can find safe haven is an important part of keeping the movement’s militant capabilities alive and preventing significant attrition within the ranks.

A fourth and final issue is that the safe haven within Libya, coupled with the country’s porous borders, means that it can be used as a staging ground for future attacks. This was certainly the case for the In Amenas attack in Algeria. Other neighboring countries will continue to be concerned about Libyan soil being used as a staging ground for attacks in their borders, and Europe will similarly have concerns in this regard, especially given the links between Libyan militant groups and those in Europe.

*Lack of state reprisals.* The advantages that jihadist groups currently enjoy from the situation in Libya should be understood in the context of a government that is either unable or unwilling to respond to provocations from jihadist groups within its soil. The September 11 attack in Benghazi that killed Ambassador Stevens was an enormous embarrassment for Libya, yet it did not mount a crackdown against militant groups. Salafi attacks have targeted Sufis, a sect particularly disfavored by hardline salafists, with dozens of attacks on sufi shrines. For example, in March a bomb blew up the Sidi Al-Andalusi mausoleum in Tripoli, which is a shrine to a fifteenth century theologian and is regarded as a national monument.<sup>29</sup>

Christians have also been targeted by salafists. In March, the Coptic church in Benghazi was ransacked and set on fire. Christian graves have also been attacked and defaced.<sup>30</sup> These attacks on minority groups—whether minority Islamic sects or Christians—are not representative of Libyan society as a whole, but rather are the work of a distinct group of hardline salafists. And yet after all of these incidents we have not seen a vigorous state response. The net result is the perception that salafi militants have free reign within Libya.

## Conclusion

This testimony has outlined salafi jihadist regional strategy in North Africa, and has shown the relationship between countries where *dawa* is the dominant jihadist strategy and countries where jihad is the dominant strategy. The latter countries can thus make the former more dangerous, and help to usher jihadist groups located there from the stage of *dawa* to the stage of jihad. Libya provides several examples of this symbiotic relationship. This relationship between lands of *dawa* and jihad is further illustrated by the symbiotic relationship between

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<sup>28</sup> Adam Entous, Drew Hinshaw, & David Gauthier-Villars, “Militants, Chased From Mali, Pose New Threats,” *Wall Street Journal*, May 24, 2013.

<sup>29</sup> “Sufi Shrine Blown Up in Latest Religious Attack in Libya,” *Reuters*, Mar. 29, 2013.

<sup>30</sup> Mohamed Eljarh, “Libya’s Copts Under Attack?,” *Foreign Policy*, Mar. 19, 2013.



AQIM (which benefits from its presence in Libya and from Libyan arms) and AST. AQIM has publicly urged AST to de-escalate its confrontations with the Tunisian state, so as to preserve the ability to undertake *dawa* in Tunisia. But at the same time AQIM has been bolstering AST militarily and also threatening the Tunisian state—maintaining the threat of violence so that AST has less of a need to do so.

The salafi jihadist regional strategy is coherent, and working well. The U.S. does not have to be at the forefront of a response—indeed, one of the trends of the past few years has been local actors or partner nations taking the lead against jihadist groups where possible, and it is sensible for the U.S. to minimize its expenditure of resources when feasible and wise. However, the U.S. should understand that the jihadist strategy is designed for the longer term. Rather than tricking ourselves into thinking that groups like AST will naturally become part of the political system and moderate, we should listen to what these groups are saying, and understand what their plan is.