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Research Note

The Abdullah Azzam Brigades

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This article looks at the growth and evolution of the The Abdullah Azzam Brigades, from the group's Egyptian origins through its most recent attack on a Japanese tanker in the Hormuz Straits. In addition to an overview of the group's main personalities and claims of responsibility, the article aims to explain the group by placing it in the context of recent jihadi theory.

On 19 November 2010, the U.S. Department of Transportation Maritime Administration (MARAD) released a statement about an attack on a Japanese oil tanker in the Straits of Hormuz the previous summer. "Government and industry sources can confirm that the claim by the Abdullah Azzam Brigades (AAB) that the group had attacked the tanker *M Star* is valid," the statement read, adding that the group "remains active and can conduct further attacks on vessels in areas in the Strait of Hormuz, southern Arabian Gulf, and western Gulf of Oman."¹

The attack had occurred about 12 miles off the Iranian coast on 28 July 2010 at 00:30 local time. That same day, the Japanese company Mitsui O.S.K. Lines Ltd. issued a statement saying that one of its oil tankers (the *M Star*) had suffered hull damage from what appeared to be an external explosion.² The damage was limited, no oil had leaked, and only one of the crew was slightly injured. Officials from the International Maritime Bureau (IMB) and the general manager of Fujairah port (the United Arab Emirate where the ship was taken for repairs) initially ruled out an attack and said the ship may have been hit by a "high wave" caused by a tremor. This and subsequent theories, including collision with a submarine or an unexploded mine from the Iraq–Iran War, were soon replaced by a consensus that the *M Star* was attacked by a smaller ship.

On 4 August a group calling itself the "Abdullah Azzam Brigades—Yusuf al-Uyayri Detachment"³ claimed responsibility on a *jihadi* website, stating that a suicide bomber on board had carried out the attack; the delay in issuing a statement was explained by the need to ensure that all operatives had "safely returned to base."⁴ The statement was

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accompanied by a still photograph of the alleged bomber pointing to an image of a tanker on a computer screen. The group claimed to carry out the attack in the name of Omar Abdul Rahman, the blind Egyptian sheikh and spiritual leader of Egypt's Gama'a al-Islamiyya, who is imprisoned in the United States for his involvement in the 1993 World Trade Center bombing.

There were various reasons for doubting the group's claim, including their previous history of dubious claims, their lack of a known presence in this area, and the absence of conclusive proof in their statement. Indeed, the picture accompanying the statement appears to show a Saudi-owned tanker rather than the *M Star*.⁵ If a *jihadi* group had been behind the attack, it seemed more likely that the increasingly active Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) would be it.⁶ Despite the MARAD statement and the absence of a counterclaim, some remain doubtful. Speaking of the incident in December 2010, the commander of the French forces in the Indian Ocean said: "In my opinion, the fundamental fact is that we don't know exactly what happened."⁷

It was also unclear whether this group was related to the "Abdullah Azzam Brigades—Al Qaeda in Egypt and the Levant" that had claimed a series of attacks in Egypt between 2004 and 2006. There was, however, consensus that a group using the same name had taken responsibility for launching a rocket attack on U.S. warships off the Jordanian Red Sea coast in 2005. In 2009, another group calling itself the "Abdullah Azzam Brigades—Ziad al-Jarrah Detachment" claimed two separate rocket attacks on Israel from Lebanon.

The name Abdullah Azzam Brigades (AAB) was first used in a claim in 2004 (see Table 1 for a full list of attacks). On the night of 7 October (the day after the Egyptian holiday commemorating the 1973 War with Israel), a truck bomb detonated next to the Hilton Hotel in Taba, a resort on the Gulf of Aqaba near the Israeli border. The attack killed over 30 people, wounded over 100, and destroyed part of the luxury hotel. Smaller bombs also went off in two small campsite resorts south of Taba, which were frequented by young Israelis. The claim of responsibility came two days after the attack and was followed by similar claims from other unknown local groups.⁸ After a major crackdown, the Egyptian government detained or killed several members of a local Bedouin tribe whom it alleged were behind the attacks.

Six months later, the Brigades took credit for an attack in Cairo. On 7 April 2005, a suicide bomber blew himself up in Khan al-Khalili, Cairo's main bazaar and a common tourist destination. The blast killed two foreigners and wounded over a dozen. In the ensuing crackdown, police were able to identify various accomplices; as they moved in to detain one of them he fled by jumping off a bridge near the Egyptian Museum and detonated a suicide vest as he plunged to the ground. A handful of tourists were injured. Some hours later, two veiled women—the bomber's wife and sister—opened fire on a tourist bus (no casualties) and then killed themselves. These attacks were claimed by the AAB, as well as by a group calling itself "Egypt Mujahideen."⁹

A few months later, on 23 July 2005, (Egypt's "Revolution Day" commemorating Nasser's coup), three coordinated explosions shook various parts of the resort of Sharm El Sheikh, at the southern tip of the Sinai Peninsula. The bombs shattered a shopping market and two hotels, killing over 60 people and wounding over 200. Once again, the AAB and other unknown groups claimed responsibility for the attack. The government moved against the suspected perpetrators, killing and detaining many of them a few days later in the city of El Arish in the northern Sinai.¹⁰

Dahab, a small resort popular with young foreigners and located about one hour by car north of Sharm El Sheikh, was the third tourist destination attacked on Egypt's Gulf

Table 1
Attacks claimed by the Abdullah Azzam Brigades

Date	Target	Group/Leader	Casualties*	Type
10/07/04	Taba/Ras Shaitan, Egypt	AAB–AQ in Egypt and Levant/Mohammed al-Hukaymah	34 killed, 160+ injured	Truck bombs, car bombs
04/07/05	Cairo, Khan El Khalili, Egypt	AAB–AQ in Egypt and Levant/Mohammed al-Hukaymah	3 killed, 20+ injured	Suicide attacks
07/23/05	Sharm El Sheikh, Egypt	AAB–AQ in Egypt and Levant/Mohammed al-Hukaymah	90+ killed, 150+ injured	Truck bombs, suicide bombs
08/19/05	Aqaba, Jordan	AAB–AQ in Iraq/ Abu Musab al-Zarqawi	1 killed	107-mm Katyusha rockets (3)
09/11/09	Nahariya, Israel	AAB–Ziad al-Jarrah Detachment/Salih al-Qar’awi	N/A	122-mm Katyusha rockets (2)
10/27/09	Kiryat Shmona, Israel	AAB–Ziad al-Jarrah Detachment/Salih al-Qar’awi	N/A	107-mm Katyusha rocket
07/28/10	Straits of Hormuz	AAB–Yusuf al-Uyayri Detachment/Salih al-Qar’awi	N/A	Unclear

of Aqaba in less than three years. On 24 April 2006, three nail bombs with timers went off during the Egyptian spring holidays of “Sham al Nessim,” killing over 20 people and wounding around 80. Egyptian authorities blamed an unknown group calling itself “al-Tawhid wal Jihad,” which they also held responsible for the other two Sinai bombings. Two days later, the government killed or detained the remaining members of the network in northern Sinai, effectively ending the wave of violence that targeted Egyptian tourism from 2004–2006.

The Dahab attacks were less sophisticated than those of Taba or Sharm El Sheikh and were not claimed by the AAB. The Egyptian government, though, held the same group responsible for all three Sinai attacks. After the clashes in northern Sinai following the Dahab bombings, the Egyptian government claimed to have fully dismantled the cells behind the attacks. The government described the suspects as local Bedouin groups inspired by global *jihadi* rhetoric but with more parochial grievances and no links to global *ihadism*. It is natural that the Egyptian government’s narrative would downplay the foreign dimension if one did exist, due to the detrimental effects that the perceived existence of a global and continuous terror threat could have on the country’s vital tourism industry. The sophistication and deadliness of the Sharm and Taba bombings, though, at least hint at some degree of foreign assistance. In this case one may interpret the Dahab attacks—the final and weakest of the three that targeted Sinai tourism—as the final act of a weakened network whose foreign links had been severed.

On 19 August 2005, one month after the Sharm el Sheikh bombings, a group calling itself the Abdullah Azzam Brigades claimed an unrelated attack. Three 107-mm Katyusha rockets were fired at two U.S. warships in the port of Aqaba, Jordan, not far from Taba.¹¹ Although the AAB claimed responsibility for the attacks, Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) also did so a few days later. One of the perpetrators was captured while attempting to flee and his testimony, along with physical evidence, traced the rockets and the coordination of the attack back to Iraq, where the remaining team members had returned to safety.¹²

The presumptive founder and mastermind of the group that claimed the Egypt attacks was Muhammad Khalil al-Hukaymah. He was described in early 2007 as a “rising star” in the jihadi movement and considered Al Qaeda’s chief propagandist from 2006 to 2008.¹³ Al-Hukaymah, who was killed by a drone attack in North Waziristan in late 2008, was a prolific author whose works include an assessment of the U.S. intelligence community titled *Myth of Delusion*, an instruction manual for the lone *jihadi* called *How to Fight Alone* and an influential publication called *Toward a New Strategy in Resisting the Occupier*.¹⁴ He had been a mid-level activist in the Gama’a al-Islamiyya (GI) in his home town of Aswan, Egypt, but fled the country after the crackdown in the 1980s and eventually linked up with Al Qaeda members in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Al-Hukaymah traveled extensively in subsequent years, finally returning to Afghanistan in the late 1990s.¹⁵ Following the fall of the Taliban in 2002, al-Hukaymah reportedly fled to Iran along with various other members of Al Qaeda (many of them former GI militants who allegedly opposed the 9/11 attacks) and entered Pakistan’s tribal areas in 2005 or 2006.¹⁶ While in Pakistan, al-Hukaymah appears to have begun playing a more prominent role in Al Qaeda. In addition to his various writings on *jihadi* theory, he entered into a polemical discussion with members of the GI in Egypt (the “historical leaders”) who had followed up on a nonviolence initiative and, in 2002, officially renounced violence and denounced Al Qaeda’s tactics. Al-Hukaymah created his own branch of the GI, to which he appended the name al-Thabitun ‘ala al-’ahd, and founded a website with the same name that he used as a platform to attack the GI in Egypt and to post his writings and statements in support of various *jihadi* endeavors. In August 2006, he appeared in a video alongside

Ayman al-Zawahiri where his group (the GI offshoot) was officially welcomed as an Al Qaeda regional branch.

Al-Hukaymah had used the term “Abdullah Azzam Brigades—Al Qaeda in the Land of Kinana [Egypt] and the Levant” when claiming the Egypt attacks. Once his group was officially sanctioned as an Al Qaeda “franchise,” he stopped using the name of “Abdullah Azzam Brigades.”¹⁷ His group took credit for no attacks after this period. Instead, al-Hukaymah turned his attention to publishing, recruitment, incitement, and *jihadi* proselytism via the Internet. From his website, he released a statement calling for attacks against Israeli and Western targets in Egypt in the summer of 2007. The fact that his Al Qaeda “affiliate” claimed no further attacks may be indicative of a shift in focus, although some attributed it to inability rather than lack of desire. According to former Gama’a al-Islamiyya leader Kamal Habib, “I don’t believe that al Qaeda has a presence in Egypt. I don’t think that Hakaima [sic] has any supporters in Egypt.”¹⁸ In addition to encouraging attacks in Egypt, al-Hukaymah published a number of statements in support of Fatah al-Islam, a Salafi-inspired group that fought the Lebanese security services in the Palestinian refugee camp of Nahr al-Barid during the summer of 2007.¹⁹

Al-Hukaymah’s exact links to the 2004–2006 attacks in Egypt remain unclear. The multiple claims of responsibility and the Egyptian government’s denial of outside involvement do not alone warrant discrediting his group’s claim. The Egypt attacks were likely carried out by a network of cells working together, at least one of which had some link to al-Hukaymah and consequently to the AAB.

Two other events should be mentioned in order to avoid confusion. First is an attack that took place on 11 June 2009, when the “Martyr [Shaheed] Abdullah Azzam Brigades” attacked the Pearl Continental Hotel in Peshawar, Pakistan. A suicide team shot its way into the hotel and detonated a car bomb that destroyed part of the building and killed over 15 people.²⁰ The group behind this attack appears to be under Pashtu leadership and should be considered separate from the one under discussion, which has Arab membership and operates in Arab countries.

Second are a series of attacks, between 2009 and 2010, which resemble those of 2004–2006 but are unrelated. These include another bombing in Cairo’s Khan al-Khalili (February 2009) and rocket attacks into the neighboring cities of Aqaba in Jordan and Eilat in Israel (in April and August 2010). These attacks have been interpreted as responses to the Israeli offensive in Gaza in late 2008 and early 2009. The AAB was involved in none of these attacks.

In the summer of 2007, a reputable *jihadi* commentator named Asad al-Jihad2 answered a query on the existence of “Al Qaeda in the Levant” by saying it was “a deeply rooted formation that was sponsored and nurtured by the late Abu Musab al Zarqawi . . . with a meticulous long-term plan that has purposely remained underground until now, but whose existence and impending revelation have been alluded to by the leadership of international jihad . . .”²¹ There is doubtless some hyperbole in this answer, particular given the diffuse nature of *Salafi-jihadi* movements in Lebanon. Although various groups in Lebanon may sympathize with Al Qaeda, as some have noted they are “not united under a single umbrella or organization” and have “dissimilar agendas and are relatively small and clandestine semi-autonomous entities with informal organization structures.”²² One of these small groups would surface in 2009, operating under the name of the AAB.

On 11 September 2009, the Brigades claimed their first attack in over four years. This time, the group’s previously unknown “Ziad al-Jarrah Detachment” claimed responsibility for firing two 122-mm Katyusha rockets from southern Lebanon (the village of Qleilah in the west) into the Israeli town of Nahariya.²³ The rockets caused no injuries or damage. The

following month, on 27 October, the same group fired a smaller, 107-mm rocket into Israel from the Lebanese village of Houla. There were again no casualties and the next morning authorities found four more rockets on launchers.²⁴ The “Abdullah Azzam Brigades—Ziad al-Jarrah Detachment” claimed both of these attacks, stating that the second of them was in response to earlier Israeli raids on the al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem.²⁵

Some months before the attacks, the “Abdullah Azzam Brigades Media Office” had released its first video. In July 2009, the group posted links to the video—titled *Kharq al-Hasun (Breach of Forts)*—on various *jihadi* forums via the semi-official Al Qaeda outfit “al-Fajr Media Center.” The links were preceded by a short text, in which the group pledged its allegiance to Osama bin Laden. The video includes various clips of speeches by important *jihadi* leaders, including al-Zarqawi, bin Laden, and al-Zawahiri, as well as leaders of AQAP, speaking out against Hassan Nasrallah and Hizbullah. The video is meant to demonstrate that Hizbullah is complicit with Israel in maintaining the northern border of the Jewish state safe. The video also shows images of three men assembling and preparing to launch rockets toward Israel, along with crude graphics illustrating how the attack would take place.

In February 2009, the Saudi Arabian government released a list of its “85 Most Wanted.” On it was the name of Salih bin Abdullah al-Qar’awi, who would later identify himself as the Brigades’ field commander. The Saudi government accused al-Qar’awi of supporting Al Qaeda by recruiting and smuggling fighters abroad (particularly into Iraq and Lebanon), providing financing for the organization, carrying out attacks, setting up new cells, and helping various Saudis on the most wanted list escape from al-Malaz prison.²⁶ In September 2009, a few days after the rocket attacks, the Saudi Arabian newspaper *Okaz* reported that al-Qar’awi had called his parents after two years without communication. He said he was calling from Afghanistan, although the number from which he called did not appear to originate there.²⁷

Salih al-Qar’awi was born in 1982 in the conservative town of Buraydah in Saudi Arabia. He went to fight in Iraq in 2005, likely recruited through AQAP. Upon attempting to return to the Kingdom he was detained in Syria and deported. After spending various months in a Saudi Arabian jail, he was released and moved in with his family. He left for the UAE in September 2006 and from there to Iran, where he reportedly received advanced training in explosives and electronics and served as the assistant for AQ’s presumptive chief Iranian facilitator.²⁸ Al-Qar’awi, who also goes by the alias “Najm al-Khir,” is married to one of Muhammad Khalil al-Hukaymah’s daughters. Although there are scant details on the relationship between the two men, they are likely to have come into contact in Iran, where al-Qar’awi was reportedly married.²⁹

In April 2010 the semi-official Al Qaeda media center al-Fajr published an interview with al-Qar’awi, where he identified himself as the leader of the AAB.³⁰ The interview was covered in various Arab media outlets and brought notoriety to the previously obscure group. The first part of the interview mostly consists of general questions on al-Qar’awi’s background and ideas. He explains that he fought in Fallujah alongside Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, after which he was tasked with following up on various cells that had been created outside Iraq. The second and longer part focuses largely on Lebanese politics; repeating some of the themes touched on in the *Kharq al-Hasun* video, al-Qar’awi is highly critical of Hizbullah and its role in domestic and regional politics. Some found his choice of words perplexing.

The well-known Salafist Omar Bakri, discussing al-Qar’awi’s interview, noted a number of differences between his discourse and that of Al Qaeda, including his referring to Rafiq al-Hariri as former Lebanese prime minister (since AQ does not use these titles as it does not recognize such governments as legitimate).³¹ Bakri even wonders whether the

interviewee was truly al-Qar'awi, saying "the wording used in this message was not the work of a Salafist jihadi but of someone who is familiar with the intelligence world and has a vested interest in Lebanese politics."³²

Subsequent releases by the Brigades' Media Center have emphasized similar themes. On 11 October 2010, shortly before Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad made a highly publicized visit to Lebanon, the AAB put out a statement on this visit, entitled *Identifying the Way of the Offenders—Part 1*.³³ The statement alluded to an alliance between Iran and the United States against Islam, a familiar theme in certain Sunni circles. It speaks of a "Safavid Project" in which America withdraws from Muslim countries and hands control of them to Iran; this is seen as having happened in Iraq, occurring in the Levant, and to take place in the Gulf States and Saudi Arabia. The statement attempts to show that Syria and its Alawi rulers, along with Lebanon's Hizbullah and Iran, together form a tripartite alliance against Sunni Islam. It adds that despite their rhetoric, these Shi'a groups have not threatened American or Israeli interests.

On 24 November, the group issued its second statement in the "Way of the Offenders" series.³⁴ The statement consists of a letter written to the Sunnis of the Levant, whom al-Qar'awi portrays as suffering from oppression at the hands of the Shi'a powers of Hizbullah and the Syrian Alawi government. It lists a series of incidents of repression carried out by the Syrian government against its people, and then moves on to the familiar themes of Lebanon, Iran, the conspiracy against Sunni Muslims, and the need for them to stand up. It also calls for the oppressed Lebanese Sunnis to set up *Sharia* courts and to refuse cooperating with the Lebanese military and security services.

The group released its second video, called *Al-Ta'ifa al-Madh'luma (The Oppressed Sect)* in September 2010. While the pre-release publicity on *jihadi* forums spoke of an "outstanding video release" of "unique quality," the video is the expected propaganda documenting what it sees as Shi'i complicity with Israel and the West in Lebanon to oppress the Sunni community. Although of better quality than the group's previous effort, the video is a mix of stock images from the Lebanese Civil War and interviews from various media outlets with an amateur voiceover.

The group has put out various other statements online, including a September 2010 one on the celebration of Eid al-Fitr.³⁵ On 27 April, nearly two weeks after the death of Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, head of the "Islamic State of Iraq," the group put out a statement to honor him and Abu Hamza al-Muhajir (Abu Ayyub al-Masri), the successor to Zarqawi in AQI, who was also killed. The group put out a similar statement after the death of Mustafa Abu al-Yazid (Saeed al-Masri), who was killed by an airstrike in Pakistan in May 2010. Abu al-Yazid was among the early Al Qaeda members opposed to the 11 September attacks who allegedly fled to Iran in 2002.

The *M Star* attack was certainly an important achievement for the group, bringing it notoriety that it would not have otherwise received and which in turn has allowed it to release statements that are followed more closely than before. The *M Star* attack also shows that the Brigades have at least two separate operational units, the "Ziad al-Jarrah Detachment" operating out of Lebanon and the "Yusuf al-Uyayri Detachment," which claimed credit for the Straits of Hormuz attack. Some say the group in the past also had an "Abdul Aziz al-Muqrin Detachment," named after an early leader of AQAP, although it is unclear when this was.³⁶

Many commentators have noted that one should distinguish between the AAB under al-Hukaymah and the group as it exists today.³⁷ The group's currently active cells were probably created in Iraq, and the group is led by al-Qar'awi and other young Saudis of the post-"Afghan-Arab" generation of *jihadism*. Al-Hukaymah's group only claimed responsibility for the Egypt attacks and also called itself "Al Qaeda in Egypt and the

Levant,” while the current group does not attach Al Qaeda’s name to its claims. Despite the clear differences, links between al-Hukaymah and al-Qar’awi may indicate some degree of continuity in the group.

The Saudi Arabian government claims that Salih al-Qar’awi is currently in Iran, and is alleged to head Al Qaeda’s operations there.³⁸ Many prominent Egyptian *jihadists* who were said to oppose the 9/11 attacks went to Iran after the fall of the Taliban government in 2002, including al-Hukaymah, Saeed al-Masri, Saif al-Adel, and Muhammad al-Islambouli, brother of Anwar Sadat’s assassin. Some are said to remain there, under house arrest, while others have reportedly been released and are once again operating out of Pakistan’s tribal areas.³⁹ Al-Zarqawi, of course, was also based in Iran before the Iraq War.

The AAB seems a good example of the post-9/11 decentralized model of *jihad* best articulated by Abu Musab al-Suri (Mustafa Setmariam Nasr) in his monumental *The Call to Islamic Global Jihad*. Under al-Suri’s model, the new generation of *jihad* is thought to best operate under a paradigm of *Nizam la Tanzim*.⁴⁰ Muhammad al-Hukaymah, himself a prolific author, borrowed heavily from al-Suri’s ideas, particularly in his main theoretical work, *Toward a New Strategy in Resisting the Occupier: Targets and Methods*.⁴¹ Al-Hukaymah’s work was released in September 2006, after the Egypt attacks had ceased, and may be seen as a framework for his newly minted regional Al Qaeda affiliate.

Abu Musab al-Suri is known for advocating *jihad* via small independent groups rather than a central organization. Al-Suri divides the *jihad* into two general forms: open front *jihad* and individual (including small-scale) *jihad*. The former is to take place only under certain political and geographic conditions, while the latter is to take place at all times, via small and independent “Global Islamic Resistance Units.” It is these units that work under a paradigm that is “a system of action, not a centralized, secret organization for action.”⁴²

For al-Suri, the various individual units are to have no organizational bonds except a “program of beliefs, a system of action, a common name, and a common goal.”⁴³ Each individual unit, however, is to additionally pick its own specific name, “regardless of whether the unit consists of one, two, five or more Mujahidun . . .”⁴⁴ While the Sinai attacks do not fit this model particularly well, given that in the end a large network was behind the attacks and was effectively dismantled, the Aqaba, Southern Lebanon, and Hormuz attacks all seem to generally fit this pattern: small cells operating independently but under a common banner. Indeed, it is striking that both the Aqaba and Lebanon attacks may have been carried out by a cell of no more than four people. Although it is as of yet unclear, one could presume that the *M Star* attack could have been carried out by a cell of no more than ten people.⁴⁵

Al-Suri conceives of three main circles under which the Islamic resistance will operate: the first circle or “guidance center,” which operates clandestinely and issues communiqués, guidance, and counseling; the second circle or “circle of coordination/decentralized units,” which links the first circle to the third one, which itself consists of “resistance call units,” that is, individual cells established spontaneously. For al-Suri, the post-9/11 conditions make it too difficult for this second circle to be active, thus leading to activities in which the links between the central circle and the individual units are loosely, if at all, coordinated.⁴⁶ The AAB, characterized by geographical disparity, small operational units, and an active propaganda branch, seems a close approximation to this. Although al-Qar’awi’s status as field commander may imply some degree of centralization, it is significant that claims of responsibility have come from the individual detachments, with no mention of him as their leader or commander.

Has this model been successful for the Abdullah Azzam Brigades? In terms of individual impact, the answer is no. The *M Star* attack was praised by the perpetrators as

having “caused severe damage” and had a “great impact . . . on the global economy and the price of oil.” None of this was true; however, the fact that a small, unknown group was able to execute this attack without leaving a trace is remarkable. Indeed, al-Suri focused less on the impact of each individual attack and more on their frequency: “If twelve Units are formed throughout the Islamic world, and each unit carries out one operation a year, we will have one operation each month. If they carry out two operations annually, there will be one operation every fifteen days. This is something which not even the strongest secret organization is capable of doing.”⁴⁷ Even under this standard, the AAB has been unsuccessful, with only three attacks to its credit in over a year (since September 2009).

An additional factor that clarifies—or perhaps further clouds—the group’s significance is the way they are embroiled in developing tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The *M Star* attack, some allege, would not have been possible without Iranian assistance.⁴⁸ The *jihadists* could simply be an Iranian cover for its westward expansion. The *M Star* attack did, after all, take place at a time of heightened tensions regarding Iran sanctions and the perceived threat it represents to governments in the Gulf. Indeed, the Saudi government alleges that not only is al-Qar’awi in Iran, but so are nearly half (35 of 85) of those on its most wanted list.⁴⁹

It would be clever for the Iranian government to nurture an *agent provocateur* that releases anti-Iranian diatribes if it were also true that the Iranian government could effectively neutralize the group or use it to its advantage at a moment’s notice. A less complex although equally conspiratorial view is that al-Qar’awi is in fact a Saudi agent. This is in part bolstered by claims that Saudi intelligence has infiltrated some of Al Qaeda’s cells. The fact that al-Qar’awi was so quickly released from Saudi Arabian custody, his training in explosives and forgery at a young age, and the way he discusses Lebanese and Iranian politics during these times of increased tensions among the two major powers in the Gulf are also cited as evidence for his links to official Saudi circles.⁵⁰

Whether or not under the tutelage of a sovereign government, the AAB appears to be a real organization with a sophisticated *jihadi* lineage. Created by Muhammad Khalil al-Hukaymah, the group was then transformed, nurtured, and developed by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. The group is now led by Salih al-Qar’awi, who has an Iraqi connection to al-Zarqawi and an Iranian one to al-Hukaymah and other Egyptian *jihadists*. The group is focused on Lebanon and appears to have significant Iran-based Saudi membership.

The group does not appear to be after the type of high-casualty high-impact attacks that became Al Qaeda’s trademark. At the same time, it is unable to galvanize a sizeable number of “resistance call units” in the way envisaged by al-Suri. Neither of these is necessary, though, for a self-proclaimed global *jihadi* group to have a significant impact. With the Middle East in an era of transition, inflaming sectarian tensions and promoting insecurity would require only a small number of saboteurs. Judging from its crude anti-Shi’a statements, the AAB has shown it is not averse to inciting *fitna*. With the Levant under increasing popular pressure for political reform, its claim to have a strong presence in Lebanon’s Palestinian refugee camps is troubling.⁵¹

Postscript: Sinai Attacks Revisited

In the first week of March 2011, Egyptian protesters overran the offices of the recently deposed regime’s state security services, first in Alexandria, and then in Cairo and other parts of the country. Although many sensitive documents were destroyed or removed before

the offices were stormed, others remained behind and soon made their way into the public arena. It was and will remain difficult to know which among them are genuine.⁵²

Among the most spectacular claims to surface in the aftermath of this event were those printed by Kuwaiti newspaper *al-Jarida* on 6 and 7 March 2011. In a two-part series, the newspaper details the contents of secret interior ministry reports that imply that Habib al-Adly and Gamal Mubarak planned the 2005 Sharm al-Sheikh attacks as revenge against businessman Hussein Salem.⁵³ Gamal Mubarak, according to one report, became angry with Salem in January 2005 after his personal cut from the contract to export gas to Israel was set at 5 percent rather than the 10 percent Mubarak wanted.⁵⁴

Another report says that a secret organization was formed in 2000, led by Habib al-Adly, which was tasked with protecting the Mubarak family's economic and political interests. On 7 June 2005, members of this organization enlisted an Islamic group to attack Hussein Salem's properties in Sharm El Sheikh with three car bombs. Although three explosions did indeed strike Sharm on the predetermined date (23 July), another report explains the fact that none of Salem's properties were targeted as a betrayal by the Islamic group, which went after targets of its own choosing.

Efforts to determine the veracity and significance of these and other allegations will take time and may never prove conclusive. Regardless, claims that elements from the Mubarak government were involved in terrorist attacks should not be taken lightly. Part of the difficulty in untangling the Sinai bombings is that they appear to be the result of combined efforts by various and at times unwitting collaborators, driven by overlapping interests rather than shared ideology. And although the foot soldiers may see themselves as furthering a far-fetched global *jihadi* revolution, the interests they most serve are likely more modest in scope, grounded in competition over resources and political influence rather than rigid ideological goals.

Notes

1. Maritime Administration, U.S. Department of Transportation. *Advisory# 2010-10*. Available at http://www.marad.dot.gov/news_room_landing_page/maritime_advisories/advisory/advisory_2010-10.htm (accessed 10 May 2011).

2. "Incident involving the VLCC *M. STAR*, west of the Strait of Hormuz," Mitsui O.S.K. Lines Press Release, 28 July 2010, on Mitsui O.S.K. website. Available at <http://www.mol.co.jp/pr-e/2010/e-pr-1037.html> (accessed 10 May 2011).

3. The group is also referred to as the Martyr Abdullah Azzam Brigades (Abdullah Azzam Shaheed Brigades). Abdullah Azzam was a Palestinian religious scholar considered one of the most eloquent and admired proponents of *jihad* against Soviet troops in Afghanistan in the 1980s. He is viewed by many as Osama bin Laden's early mentor. Azzam is also considered one of the founders of Hamas, and one of the group's early armed wings carried his name. Yusuf al-Uyayri was an early leader of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) who was killed by Saudi Arabian security in 2003. He was born in the same conservative Saudi Arabian town as the Brigades' purported current leader Salih al-Qar'awi.

4. A translation into English of the claim can be found on the Jihadology website. Available at <http://jihadology.net/2010/08/04/new-statement-from-abdullah-azzam-brigades-martyrdom-attack-on-the-japanese-m-star-oil-tanker/> (accessed 10 May 2011).

5. The ship in the photo may be the Saudi-owned *Sirius Star* rather than the *M Star*, according to terrorism analyst Evan Kohlmann, who tweeted "The vessel shown in the 'Azzam Brigades' communique claiming a bomb attack on a Japanese oil tanker is actually the Saudi-owned *Sirius Star*." Available at <http://twitter.com/IntelTweet/statuses/20395431333> (accessed 10 May 2011).

6. For an argument of why AQAP would be responsible see for instance, Malcom Nance, "The Strait of Hormuz: al-Qaeda's Newest Jihad Zone?" *Small Wars Journal*. Available at <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/journal/docs-temp/493-nance.pdf> (accessed 10 May 2011).

7. Frederik Richter, "Experts Question U.S. Finding on Gulf Tanker Incident," *Reuters*. Available at 5 December 2010. Available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE6B41D920101205> (accessed 10 May 2011).

8. Also taking responsibility were groups calling themselves "Army of Mohammed," "Tawhid Brigades," and the "Global Jamaa al-Islamiya al-Alamiya." See "Hilton Taba Attack," Global Jihad website. Available at http://www.globaljihad.net/view_page.asp?id=655 (accessed 10 May 2011).

9. For a detailed chronology of the Cairo attacks, see Jailan Halawi, "Desperate Measures," *Al-Ahram Weekly Online*, 5–11 May 2005. Available at <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2005/741/eg5.htm> (accessed 10 May 2011).

10. Less than a month later, suspects attacked the base of the Multinational Force and Observers (MFO) in El Gora, near El Arish. Major clashes the following spring were effectively neutralized. See "Al-Jora Bombing," Global Jihad website. Available at http://www.globaljihad.net/view_page.asp?id=1254 (accessed 10 May 2011). Also see "Al-Jora Clashes," Global Jihad website. Available at http://www.globaljihad.net/view_page.asp?id=1262 (accessed 10 May 2011).

11. Of the three rockets, one landed in a warehouse on a dock owned by the Jordanian army, killing a soldier, a second near a military hospital, and the third in Eilat, Israel.

12. "Zarqawi's Group Claims Jordan Attack," *The New York Times*, 24 August 2005. Available at <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9C0CE7DF1E3EF937A1575BC0A9639C8B63&sec=&spon=> (accessed 10 May 2011).

13. Jarret Brachman, "Statement of Jarret Brachman before the House Armed Services Committee Subcommittee on Terrorism, Unconventional Threats and Capabilities on the Topic of Challenges Posed to the Special Operations Command by the Global Terrorist Threat," 14 February 2007. Available at <http://www.investigativeproject.org/documents/testimony/266.pdf> (accessed 10 May 2011).

14. For an overview of al-Hukaymah see Chris Zambelis, "Al-Hakaima Positions Himself for Key Role in the Global Salafi-Jihad," *Terrorism Focus* 3, 41 (October 2006). Available at [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=943](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews[tt_news]=943) (accessed 10 May 2011).

15. See Al-Hukaymah's memoir (in Arabic), "The Mujahid's Memoir." Available at <http://www.muslm.net/vb/showthread.php?t=193059> (accessed 10 May 2011).

16. Bill Roggio, "Senior al Qaeda leader thought killed in North Waziristan strike," *The Long War Journal*, 1 November 2008. Available at http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2008/11/senior_al_qaeda_lead_2.php#ixzz12SMxZrB1 (accessed 10 May 2011).

17. That is, in the same way that Al Qaeda in Iraq and Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula are considered "regional franchises." For background on this (in Arabic) see Camille Tawill, "The Other Face of Al Qaeda" *al-Hayat*, 30 September 2010. Available at <http://www.daralhayat.com/portalariclenid/186187> (accessed 10 May 2011).

18. "Militant calls for attacks on Targets in Egypt," *Reuters*, 24 June 2007. Available at <http://in.reuters.com/article/idINIndia-28150420070624> (accessed 10 May 2011).

19. "Many dead in Lebanon camp battle," *Al Jazeera English*, 6 February 2007. Available at <http://english.aljazeera.net/news/middleeast/2007/06/2008525132746895269.html> (accessed 10 May 2011).

20. "New group takes credit for Pakistan blast," *UPI*, 11 June 2009. Available at http://www.upi.com/Top_News/Special/2009/06/11/New-groups-takes-credit-for-Pakistan-blast/UPI-35741244744635/ (accessed 10 May 2011).

21. Hassan Mneimneh, "The Jihadist International: Al Qaeda's Advance in the Levant," *AEI: A Report of the American Enterprise Institute (AEI)*, 1 June 2009. Available at <http://www.aei.org/docLib/Jihadist%20International.pdf> (accessed 10 May 2011). Some speculated that Asad al-Jihad2 is al-Hukaymah himself, although this exchange and others took place after his death.

22. Magnus Ranstorp and Bilal Y. Saab, "Securing Lebanon from the Threat of Salafist Jihadism," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 30 (2007), p. 826.

23. A translation of the claim is available at the NEFA Foundation website. Available at http://www.nefafoundation.org/miscellaneous/nefa_abdullahazzam0909.pdf (accessed 10 May 2011).

24. Meris Lutz, "Lebanon: Militant Group's Attack on Israel Complicates the Situation Along Tense Border," *Los Angeles Times*, 30 October 2009. Available at <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/babylonbeyond/2009/10/lebanon-militant-groups-attack-on-israel-muddies-waters-along-tense-border.html> (accessed 10 May 2011). The statement of responsibility (in Arabic) can be downloaded here <http://www.aljazeeraatalk.net/forum/showthread.php?t=212885> (accessed 10 May 2011). Although not specifically claimed by the Abdullah Azzam Brigades, a prior attack in December 2005 also saw many Grad rockets launched toward Kiryat Shemona, this time claimed by Al Qaeda in Iraq. The attempt may have been to implicate Hizbullah, and shortly after the attack the Israeli Air Force dropped missiles on a PFLP camp near Beirut.

25. Lutz, "Militant Group's Attack Complicates the Situation." The detachment is named after one of the 9/11 hijackers, Ziad al-Jarrah, who was from Lebanon.

26. Turki al-Saheil, "List of 85 Reveals that al-Qaeda is Using Iran as a Base to Plan Attacks against Saudi Arabia and Jordan," *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 5 February 2009. Available at <http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&issueno=11027&article=505834&search=%D5%C7%E1%C D%20%C7%E1%DE%D1%DA%C7%E6%ED&state=true> (accessed 10 May 2011). In Arabic.

27. "Al-Qar'awi, the Most Dangerous on the 85 Most Wanted List Calls His Family after an Absence of Two Years: 'I am in Afghanistan,'" *Okaz*, 15 September 2009. Available at <http://www.okaz.com.sa/new/issues/20090915/Con20090915304652.htm> (accessed 10 May 2011). In Arabic.

28. Al-Qar'awi's entry from the Most Wanted List is available on the Okaz newspaper website. Available at <http://www.okaz.com.sa/okaz/myfiles/15.pdf> (accessed 10 May 2011). In Arabic.

29. "Al-Qaeda Leader Attacks Hizbullah . . . and Promises Attacks against Israel," *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 5 April 2010. Available at <http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&article=563849&issueno=11451> (accessed 10 May 2011). In Arabic.

30. The interview is available at the aljond website. Available at <http://www.aljond.com/vb/showthread.php?t=24740> (accessed 10 May 2011). In Arabic.

31. Bakri, nicknamed the "Tottenham Ayatollah," lived in London for some time but left for Lebanon in 2005 and was not allowed re-entry in Britain following the 7/7 attacks. In November 2010 he was convicted in absentia to life in prison for various acts of subversion and membership in banned Islamist groups. He was subsequently detained and will be tried in person. He was released on bail in mid-November.

32. Mona Alami, "Decoding al-Qaeda's Message: Talking to Omar al-Bakri," Nowlebanon website, 9 April 2010. Available at <http://www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArchiveDetails.aspx?ID=159433#ixzz12jS2kPrZ> (accessed 10 May 2011).

33. The statement is available at the al-jahafal website. Available at <http://al-jahafal.com/vb/showthread.php?t=14139> (accessed 10 May 2011). In Arabic.

34. The statement is available from the Jihadology website. Available at <http://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2010/11/abdullah-azzam-brigades-statement-number-2-within-the-series-identifying-the-way-of-the-offenders-letter-from-salih-bin-abdullah-al-qurawi-to-the-people-of-sunnah-in-greater-syr.pdf> (accessed 10 May 2011). In Arabic.

35. Various statements from the group are available on the Jihadology website. Available at <http://jihadology.net/maktabah-al-jihadiyyah-%D9%85%D9%83%D8%AA%D8%A8%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D9%87%D8%A7%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%A9/other-groups/> (accessed 10 May 2011).

36. The Abdul Aziz al-Muqrin Detachments is mentioned in Hani Nasira, "Meaning of the *M Star* Attack in the Straits of Hormuz: Targeting the Media and Soft Targets," *Al-Hayat*, 10 August 2010. Available at <http://international.daralhayat.com/internationalarticle/170601> (accessed 10 May 2011). In Arabic. The reference is likely to the claim from the 2005 Aqaba attacks, although this is not specified in the article.

37. For instance commentators on shows aired on the two principal pan-Arab TV news networks (al-Jazeera and al-Arabiya). See “Ma Wara’ al-Khabar,” *Al-Jazeera*, 8 April 2010. Available at http://www.aljazeera.net/Channel/KServices/SupportPages/ShowMedia/showMedia.aspx?fileURL=/mritems/streams/2010/8/4/1_1007082_1_13.mp3&ImgURL=/mritems/images/2010/8/4/1_1007079_1_34.jpg (accessed 10 May 2011) and transcript: <http://www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/D6B8121A-0335-4CC8-98C3-36081E23E641.htm> (accessed 10 May 2011) (in Arabic). Also see “Sina’at al-Maut,” *Al-Arabiya*, 19 November 2010. Available at <http://www.alarabiya.net/programs/2010/11/19/126658.html> (accessed 10 May 2011). In Arabic.

38. Turki al-Saheil, “Saudi Arabia: Al-Qaeda Using Iran as Base of Operations,” *Al-Sharq al-Awsat English Edition*, May 2, 2009. Available at <http://www.asharq-e.com/news.asp?section=1&id=15626> (accessed 10 May 2011)

39. “A Top Terrorist Returns to Al-Qaida Fold,” *Spiegel Online International*, 25 October 2010. Available at <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/0,1518,725181,00.html> (accessed 10 May 2011). In Arabic.

40. A concept that translates as “System not Organization.”

41. Bynjar Lia, *Architect of Global Jihad: The Life of Al-Qaida Strategist Abu Mus’ab al-Suri* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), p. 25. Lia notes that “the degree of plagiarism of al-Suri’s work by al-Hukaymah is remarkable, although such unattributed borrowing is far from uncommon and is not frowned upon in the jihadi community to the same degree as it is in academia.”

42. Lia, *Architect of Global Jihad*, p. 421.

43. Ibid., p. 422.

44. Ibid., p. 426.

45. See interview with Jonathan Alterman from “Ma Wara’ al-Khabar,” *Al-Jazeera*. In Arabic.

46. Lia, *Architect of Global Jihad*, p. 446.

47. Ibid., p. 456.

48. “Did Iran Attack Japanese Oil Tanker in Strait of Hormuz,” *Christian Science Monitor*, 30 July 2010. Available at <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/terrorism-security/2010/0730/Did-Iran-attack-Japanese-oil-tanker-in-Strait-of-Hormuz> (accessed 10 May 2011).

49. Turki al-Saheil, “List of 85 Reveals that al-Qaeda Using Iran as a Base,” *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*.

50. “Al-Qar’awi: Al-Qaeda Leader or ...?” *Khabaronline*, 7 April 2010. Available at <http://www.khabaronline.com/item.php?Item=4079&sec=0> (accessed 10 May 2011), In Arabic.

51. Patrick Galey, “Al-Qaeda-Linked Militant Group Urges Lebanon’s Sunnis to Rise up against Government, Hizbullah,” *The Daily Star Lebanon*, 2 December 2010. Available at http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition_id=1&categ_id=2&article_id=122098#axzz187nIuc6P (accessed 10 May 2011).

52. See for instance Heba Afify, “State Security Leaks: Victory or Hoax?” *Al-Masry al-Youm*, 7 March 2011. Available at <http://www.almasryalyoum.com/en/node/343186> (accessed 12 June 2011).

53. Habib al-Adly is Egypt’s former interior minister and Gamal Mubarak is former president Hosni Mubarak’s son and one-time likely successor. Both are currently in jail.

54. Rami Ibrahim, “Al-Jarida Documents Major Scandal: Hosni Mubarak’s Son Received Commission from Israel in Exchange for Gas Contract,” *Al-Jarida*, 6 March 2011. Available at <http://www.aljarida.com/aljarida/Article.aspx?id=198570&searchText=%D4%D1%E3> (accessed 12 June 2011). In Arabic. Emad Fawaz, “Al-Jarida Obtains Documents on Secret Organization within Egyptian Interior Ministry. Gamal Mubarak and al-Adly Ordered Sharm El Sheikh Bombings in July 2005 as Revenge on Hussein Salem,” *Al-Jarida*, 7 March 2011. Available at <http://www.aljarida.com/aljarida/Article.aspx?id=198718> (accessed 12 June 2011). In Arabic. *Der Spiegel* picked up the story a few days later: Yassin Musharbash and Volkhard Windfuhr, “Did Mubarak’s Secret Service Order Terror Attacks?” *Der Spiegel*, 9 March 2011. Available at <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/0,1518,749989,00.html> (accessed 12 June 2011).