



The Jihadist Maritime Strategy: Waging a Guerrilla War at Sea

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In the eighth issue of the MES Monograph Series, Dr. Norman Cigar reviews the often neglected maritime component of jihadist military strategy. Dr. Cigar's work deepens our understanding of the evolution and application of jihadist military strategy at sea. He argues that, while these organizations have not developed a maritime doctrine comparable to their land strategy, they are gradually forming a framework of conceptual thinking for the maritime domain that should not be ignored. To deal effectively with this challenge, it is necessary to understand how the jihadists have gradually integrated operations at sea into a broader strategy to support their strategic and theater goals. This monograph is intended to stimulate the thinking of counterterrorism planners and operators in the United States and other states with maritime interests to help them counter the challenge of this threat. I thank Dr. Cigar for his continued cooperation with and support of MES.

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by Norman Cigar

INTRODUCTION AND TERMS OF REFERENCE

Jihadists have long presented a threat at sea as well as on land but although jihadist military strategy has been the object of considerable analysis and writing over the years, it has been the land-based aspect that has drawn the most attention, while the jihadists' maritime strategy has been relatively neglected. The present study seeks to focus attention on and to better understand the maritime component of jihadist military strategy in order to stimulate thinking and discussion that will help formulate more effective responses to this threat.

While there are many militant jihadist groups, the emphasis in this study is on al-Qaeda and on the Islamic State (or the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria—ISIS) since the latter's appearance in 2014. Themselves in a sense coalitions of component organizations, these two groups have been the largest and most prominent actors, including in the maritime arena, in what has been a global insurgency, while other significant jihadist groups such as the Taliban or the ones in the Caucasus or Turkestan—not least because of their land-locked geography—have been land-centric and not globally-oriented. To be sure, the focus of effort even of al-Qaeda has been primarily land-based (and even more so for ISIS), with the maritime component only a supporting effort in their overall strategy. Nevertheless, jihadists regard the maritime effort as important in terms of its potential to harm its adversaries, as well as of its benefit to the overall jihad. And, conversely, the West and, in particular, the United States should also view this facet of the jihadist threat as significant, given the importance of the maritime factor for international security and economic well-being.

The use of the designation “jihadist” here does not mean that there is a specifically “Islamic” or “jihadist” operational art in present-day maritime warfighting. Rather, what is meant is that the actors who have developed and implemented the strategy under study here are “jihadists,” that is that they have been fighting a global conflict (jihad as they see it) whose ultimate political objectives and reading of the law of war are informed and legitimated by their extremist interpretation of Islam. While al-Qaeda and ISIS may differ in detail—and, significantly, in their projected time horizons and strategies—one would be hard-pressed to find substantive differences in their belief systems or fundamental goals.

The thesis of the study is that over the years, rather than maritime attacks being random (apart from some spontaneous lone-wolf attacks), discernible patterns have emerged and that jihadists—and al-Qaeda, in particular—have developed an increasingly coherent maritime strategy. The intent here is to provide an analytical reference source for professional military education, as well as to stimulate thinking and discussion there and in the policy and academic sectors and, at the same time, to develop ideas on how best to deal with this threat.

Understanding the challenge at all levels is key to crafting effective policies to deal with the threat. Specifically, such an understanding entails an analysis of how the jihadist maritime strategy has evolved both in terms of theory and practice. A useful means to appreciate this process is by means of an “inside-out” approach, that is by understanding from the jihadists’ own viewpoint what they believe a war at sea is meant to achieve. Of course, the maritime component of strategy must be seen within a broader framework of jihadist political goals and of military strategy and policy designed to achieve those goals, and this study will evaluate the implementation of the maritime aspect relying on an analysis of past successful and failed events using such matrices as those of geography, terrain features (natural and artificial), and target sets (military and economic ones) in order to determine patterns and future vulnerabilities. To be sure, reliable detailed information in the public domain about past jihadist operations is not always readily available, especially as both jihadists and the local governments have not always been forthcoming with details or seek to present versions that are favorable to them or that avoid embarrassment. However, a synthesis of the jihadists’ conceptual writings, along with reporting by the international and regional media, can provide sufficient data and perspective to understand the key issues related to the maritime component of the jihadist war.

The jihadists’ stated intent related to threatened or executed attacks is in itself a valuable indicator and, while intent has to be combined with capability in order for intent to come to fruition and constitute a realistic threat, the two factors are interrelated. That is, a recognized general or specific intent can indicate a strategy to work toward building the capability required to implement that intent, although of course it often may not be possible to do so because the adversary—whether the United States or a local player—has been able to prevent that. In that light, even aspirational, at present unrealistic, jihadist objectives should not be ignored, such as the call by a former spokesman for al-Qaeda, the American-born convert Adam Yahiyeh Gadahn (d. 2015), to continue spectacular maritime attacks. As he put it after the 2014 attack on a Pakistani warship, “it’s just a matter of time before the lions of Allah make good on their threats and carry out a new Pearl Harbor, with all that entails in terms of devastating consequences for what is euphemistically called ‘international stability’ (read Crusader hegemony).”¹ Specifically, this study will provide an analysis of interrelated overlays representing the jihadists’ objectives, their analysis of the adversary, operational art, target sets, and techniques, as well as the geographic setting, as a framework to appreciate how the sea fits into their plans. The study will highlight specific past attacks that illustrate patterns of action within this analytical context, and even foiled plots contribute to our understanding of a fuller picture of models of thinking and planning for maritime operations.

THE CONTEXT OF JIHADIST STRATEGY: ENDS, WAYS, AND MEANS

Translating strategic political objectives into actionable military strategies, of course, involves making decisions and choices based not only on ideology but also on Realpolitik and operational art. When it works as intended, al-Qaeda’s and ISIS’ operational decisionmaking relies on analysis that is often as hard-headed and unsentimental as any done anywhere else. Although their ultimate objectives are shaped by ideology, al-Qaeda and ISIS do think in geostrategic terms and the strategies they have developed to achieve those objectives have been based to a significant degree on Realpolitik considerations. Ultimately, as al-Qaeda’s present-day leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, saw it, victory would consist of a “political victory,” tantamount to the attainment of al-Qaeda’s political objectives.² Al-Qaeda’s grandiose and unrealistic early objectives were to convince the United States to leave the Middle East by raising the cost of its presence and by destabilizing the US economy, intending to thereby pave the way for the downfall of local regimes and their replacement by an Islamic state.

A Supporting Military Strategy

Al-Qaeda and ISIS have recognized the need to set intermediate political objectives to help achieve their goals and to neutralize the obstacles that hinder the achievement of their objectives. In turn, intermediate military operational objectives have had to be developed to support that effort. Unavoidably, of course, al-Qaeda and, later, ISIS have clashed not only with the United States (their principal obstacle) but also with local governments they have faced in various operational theaters—some of whom have been friendly to the United States, while others may have been neutral or hostile—but which have stood in the way of the jihadists' achieving their objectives.

In general, jihadists have hoped to contribute to a weakening of US national will as part of an indirect strategic approach. In effect, for al-Qaeda, the objective of the military strategy needed in order to overcome such adversaries has been focused beyond that of causing just material damage. Instead, as a Saudi al-Qaeda theorist stressed, victory would not be measured by the number of enemy killed or by the quantity of weapons deployed but by “achieving the big strategic objectives.”³ In fact, for one of al-Qaeda's most prominent early military thinkers and until his death head of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), Yusuf al-Ayyiri (d. 2003), “victory over the enemy does not consist in destroying his personnel or his equipment... the definition of the adversary's defeat is that you destroy his will to fight... One finds that he who lost a million and half is the winner while the one who lost fewer than that is the one who was defeated because you destroyed the enemy's will and resolve to fight.”⁴ For al-Zawahiri, too, “breaking the will” (*tahtim al-manawiyat*) is a key requirement for defeating an adversary.⁵

In particular, al-Qaeda early on recognized the importance of the US economy as a critical requirement—a factor that the United States needs in order to be able to wage war—and that by targeting it that the latter could become a critical vulnerability, given the perceived weakness of the US economy, and that this could contribute to undermining America's will.⁶ At first, projecting their interpretation of the US experience in Vietnam, Beirut, and Somalia, al-Qaeda political figures often assumed that defeating the United States could be quick and easy. A key assumption for al-Qaeda's leadership, at least initially, was that targeting such critical vulnerabilities would lead quickly to the United States' defeat, believing the US economy to be fragile and dismissing US military personnel as inept cowards.⁷

In addition, the factor of casualties had been seen initially as key. However, a misplaced optimism eventually receded, largely as a result of a realization that it was not possible to inflict the number of casualties needed to have an impact. As Osama Bin Ladin noted in a letter to a senior al-Qaeda figure in 2010, it had been simply beyond al-Qaeda's capability to inflict decisive losses, which, according to his calculations, would have had to be about 100 times greater to reach the proportion of casualties in Vietnam:

By perusing aspects of America's history, we would find that despite the fact that it had become involved in about sixty wars since its creation, the common trait between some of these wars is that the military actions of its adversaries overseas were not the decisive factor in determining the outcome of the wars... About 1,000 soldiers have been killed in Afghanistan during eight years, and in Iraq about 4,000 soldiers. This means that the harm has hit only a small portion of them, not enough to provoke them and make them pressure the politicians to stop the war.⁸

Likewise, al-Qaeda had been over-optimistic in the wake of 9/11 that the US economy might be brought down quickly by such attacks. Indeed, with respect to the 9/11 attacks, the prominent al-Qaeda strategist al-Ayyiri was to claim in 2003 that “that strike was genuinely successful, as

America's economy was smashed to a great extent. The economy had [already] been languishing in a recession and was trying to revive the market when, suddenly, it collapsed with the collapse of the two towers."⁹ Typically, Osama Bin Ladin, al-Qaeda's initial leader, would often come back to the point that he believed that direct and indirect economic losses to the United States from the aftermath of 9/11 had totaled \$1 trillion and that the 9/11 attacks were responsible for America's budget deficits in subsequent years.¹⁰ And, he was confident that "we can target that fragile base [of US power] and concentrate on the critical vulnerabilities (*abraz nuqat al-daf*)," so that the United States could be made to "reel, to shrink back, and abandon its leadership and oppression of the world."¹¹ However, such calculations clearly proved to be grossly exaggerated, as the US economy proved resilient, although al-Qaeda was able to exact a cost, even if indirectly.

As a greater degree of reality set in over time, al-Qaeda policymakers settled for a protracted war of attrition, as many of al-Qaeda's military theorists had advocated from the beginning. Recognizing the vast mismatch in power with its adversaries, al-Qaeda, in particular, has long emphasized guerrilla warfare in theory and practice as a way to implement this strategy, with al-Qaeda planners identifying such critical vulnerabilities as casualties, economic cost, and time to undermine the will of the United States and lead to its defeat. Typically, one writer from Yemen saw as a given that states with "great military power cannot bear the psychological and economic strain that results from guerrilla war."¹²

In the maritime arena, a similar, more realistic, view also emerged in the work of an al-Qaeda military thinker, Abd al-Rahman al-Faqir, who noted in 2009 that since it is impossible to destroy all American warships—or to kill 1 million American troops—al-Qaeda's objective, rather than material damage, should be to target the United States' will by means of such attacks.¹³

Developing a Maritime Component of Strategy

Not surprisingly, al-Qaeda from an early date looked to the sea as an important operational zone, stressing, in particular, the defensive and offensive value of operating along the Middle East's maritime periphery. If nothing else, the need to counter or neutralize the threat that America's naval capability posed forced the jihadists to pay attention to this aspect of war. In particular, in terms of the importance of seeking sea denial, one apparently senior al-Qaeda strategist had concluded early that historically the West had ultimately been successful against the Muslim heartland by adopting an indirect approach on the region's weak maritime flanks. As he stressed in 1994, "most, if not all, of the battles are won or lost because of operations on the adversary's flanks," noting that the early Crusaders had failed because they had adopted a direct approach against the heartland of the Muslim world, whereas with the Age of Discovery "the encirclement of the Islamic world with military positions on its periphery and seizure of control of the international sea lanes and then lopping off the more distant parts one after the other [the Crusaders] were successful in finally reaching the heartland and dominating it completely."¹⁴ As the head of AQAP, Nasir al-Wuhayshi, also saw it, modern-day Western "Crusaders"—whom he called "pirates from the sea"—had managed to surround the Arabian Peninsula by controlling the sea.¹⁵ At the same time, according to Abu al-Walid, the sea also presented an opportunity to strike at the West's own interests: "I believe that the most appropriate strategy and the one that should drive the joint effort [for Africa and Asia]... is activity on the enemy's flanks with the intent of enabling an advance into the latter's own vulnerable areas."¹⁶

Al-Qaeda grudgingly developed a healthy respect over the years for the maritime capabilities that the United States could deploy against jihadist interests and the impossibility of matching that

power symmetrically. As Isa al-Awshan, a prominent Saudi figure in al-Qaeda (d. 2004), noted in 1996, it was the United States' warships, and especially its aircraft carriers, that enabled "the Crusaders to establish their strategic and sensitive positions in the Arabian Peninsula" and, not surprisingly, another al-Qaeda strategist also singled out aircraft carriers as a necessary target.¹⁷ Indeed, according to al-Qaeda's most prolific military thinker al-Ayyiri, it was the Navy that had enabled the United States to "conquer the world."¹⁸ Moreover, al-Qaeda early on identified the joint capabilities contained in the United States' regional facilities, and the ability to mass forward-deployed forces quickly that that forward presence provided, as key to America's position in the Middle East.¹⁹ Indeed, a maritime capability was said to make it possible for the United States to use naval bases to launch aircraft and to provide logistics support to its ground forces.²⁰ Bin Ladin, in particular, saw US naval power as a significant obstacle to al-Qaeda's objectives, noting that "Rational people know that if the Mujahidin in Egypt were to become stronger than the present regime and wanted to topple it and truly institute God's laws, America would come to [the regime's] aid, beginning with the forces positioned in the Mediterranean: the American Sixth Fleet."²¹ Al-Qaeda has continued to identify control of the sea as a vital US national interest.²²

The Gap in Doctrinal Literature and a Focus on Practice

A maritime strategy seems to have developed only gradually for al-Qaeda. To be sure, the maritime jihad holds a distinguished place in the traditional hierarchy of jihad and, as one al-Qaeda legal authority pointed out, is considered even more laudable than the jihad on land, as operations at sea are more dangerous, for in addition to the enemy there is also the danger of drowning and one cannot run away except with one's comrades. In fact, according to that legist, while a martyr who dies on the jihad on land has his sins forgiven, one who dies at sea has his debts forgiven as well as his sins.²³ In practical terms, however, initially the focus on the sea seems to have been as a source of income, as when al-Qaeda acquired tramp steamers and other sea-going craft in East Africa for trade.²⁴

To this day there has been no jihadist naval theorist in al-Qaeda (members of ISIS have not really written about military theory). Typically, in his 1600-page work on strategy, even the prolific independent jihadist writer Abu Musab al-Suri mentioned the maritime aspect only in passing, with a nod to the importance of the major chokepoints abutting Muslim countries and recognizing the importance of closing them in order to pressure the West into leaving the Islamic world, but did not propose a strategy to do so.²⁵ In his work devoted specifically to guerrilla war, he ignored the sea completely.²⁶

Perhaps one should not necessarily expect to find a comprehensive jihadist doctrinal manual dedicated to naval operation. Bin Ladin, like his successor al-Zawahiri, and as was true of all of al-Qaeda's military theorists, had been formed by a largely land-centered early personal experience, whether in Afghanistan, Bosnia, Algeria, the Caucasus, or Central Asia, and they do not seem to have focused on maritime operations initially. This gap in doctrine is in stark contrast with the situation for general military theory and, specifically, for ground operations, for which there have been numerous studies—some of them quite good—by al-Qaeda thinkers. Their land-centered doctrine had developed as a synthesis between practical experience and the study of foreign strategists such as Karl von Clausewitz, Mao Tse Tung, Sun Tzu, B. H. Liddell Hart, or Vo Nguyen Giap, and Western and ex-Soviet doctrinal manuals, whose influence is often made explicitly evident in the voluminous jihadist military literature, whereas al-Qaeda thinkers do not indicate that they have even read standard foreign naval writers such as Alfred T. Mahan or Julian Corbett, proponents of the coastal-focused French "nouvelle école" approach, or even contemporary

accounts of the exploits of Aruj and Khayr El-Din, the famous 16th century Ottoman naval commanders operating in the Mediterranean. Only more recently has there been a somewhat more systematic exposition of jihadist thinking on maritime affairs against both military and civilian targets, such as was published by al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS—a branch established in 2014) in the inaugural issue of its English-language *Resurgence* magazine in the Fall of 2014.

Although some early al-Qaeda military thinkers had begun to urge that operations be conducted at sea and in the air as well as on land, this was largely pro-forma, with granularity devoted only to ground operations. Even the attack on the USS *Cole* in 2000 appears to have been intended at the time as a strike against a visible high-value target as such, a follow-on to the US embassies struck earlier in East Africa, rather than representing an initial element in a maritime strategy or an integral element of a wider military campaign.²⁷ As Bin Ladin’s bodyguard at the time, the Yemeni Nasir al-Bahri (Abu Jandal, d. 2015) pointed out, the attack on the USS *Cole* was principally meant to have a psychological effect or, as he put it, “to raise the Muslims’ morale and to confirm to the Islamic Umma that its sons can strike the Umma’s enemies wherever the latter are, whether on land, sea, or in the air.”²⁸ According to Syrian-born *Al-Jazeera* TV journalist Ahmad Zaydan, who visited Afghanistan and met with Bin Ladin and other al-Qaeda leaders in October 2000, shortly after the attack on the USS *Cole*, al-Qaeda viewed that attack and the earlier ones as “notices to the Americans that they must leave the Arab region and, in particular, the Arabian Peninsula.”²⁹

Of course, even though there was no comprehensive written doctrinal document and even though maritime doctrine long remained implicit did not mean that al-Qaeda had not been thinking about, planning for, and executing sea-related operations even in its early years. Indeed, the successful attack against the USS *Cole* in October 2000 was conducted without the existence of any doctrinal writings or conception of a maritime strategy. In the absence of maritime doctrinal publications, a study of policy directives by al-Qaeda and an analysis of the latter’s past operations and the strategy that has evolved is the best way to approach conceptual jihadist thinking about the sea.

Translating Policy into Operational Plans

How al-Qaeda’s strategic objectives have been translated into operational plans for the maritime arena has varied over time and space. Jihadist activity at sea eventually de facto jelled into a campaign, with a view to connecting separate attacks (which one could view as engagements) and their tangible and intangible effects into a pattern in support of a broader strategy with common objectives. It was the success of the attack on the USS *Cole* in both material and political terms that seems to have encouraged al-Qaeda to focus more systematically on the sea. Significantly, in retrospect, al-Qaeda considered the attack on the USS *Cole* to have been “a qualitative leap” and as marking the beginning of its maritime jihad.³⁰ The fact that the attack had had a high perceived pay-off for a nominal financial investment made similar attacks all the more attractive and more likely in the future.³¹ Al-Qaeda figures and discussion fora gradually began to reflect an increasing interest in sustained maritime operations as part of a wider campaign, even if sometimes only in succinct terms or after the fact.

It was a prominent al-Qaeda military writer, Abu Ubayd al-Qurayshi, who first sought to integrate the maritime aspect into broader strategy conceptually, even if he did not do so in detail. In 2002, stressing the importance of freedom of the seas for the US economy and encouraged by the success of the strike against the USS *Cole* (noting that that operation had been very cost-effective), al-Qurayshi called for a revival of the historic “maritime jihad.”³² A later “think piece” by an al-Qaeda-related outlet, Jihad Press, published in 2008 assessed that the “Crusaders and Zionists” now only had the sea where they could be dominant and which they could use freely. Therefore, if

the mujahidin wanted the battle to be global, “the next step must be to control the sea and the maritime outlets.”³³ As that analysis argued, “It is vital to expand the war to the sea. Just as the mujahidin have succeeded in developing martyr units on land the sea represents the next strategic step toward dominating the world and reviving the Islamic Caliphate.”³⁴ Much later, in 2014, AQIS, following its aborted attack on the Pakistan Navy, again highlighted the continuing importance of the sea, noting that that operation had been “a reminder for mujahideen all over the world to make jihad on the seas one of their priorities. They should strive to raise the flag of Islam on the seas and take a decisive step towards the liberation of this Ummah [i.e. Islamic community] by breaking the Crusader forces’ naval stranglehold on our region.”³⁵ Despite the threat that the West’s naval power represented for the jihad, Adam Yahye Gadhafi also identified this factor as a critical vulnerability, characterizing the West’s “navies and international shipping” as its “Achilles heel.”³⁶

For its part, ISIS, once it emerged, was quick to address the maritime theater, even striving for an overly-ambitious blue-water capability of its own. In an analysis from March 2015, an ISIS figure highlighted the naval threat to the jihad, maintaining that “today, Worshippers of the Cross and the infidels pollute our seas with their warships, boats, and aircraft carriers and gobble up our wealth and kill us from the sea.”³⁷ However, the audience was urged not to despair, as “thank God, the descendants of our lions who fought at sea are alive and have established for us an Islamic state, restoring our pride and glory ... and, after seizing control of the land, God willing, it will also take to the sea in what is only a matter of a short time.”³⁸ As the Islamic State would expand toward the sea, “We will hear of the creation of an Islamic fleet by the Islamic State.”³⁹ The objective was to then to sink the enemy’s “warships and [commercial] ships... and to threaten their shores and lines of communication... yes, an entire fleet, God willing, not just a single ship.”⁴⁰ Ultimately, the intent was to “take the battle to the enemy,” since “any nation which was attacked in its home will be defeated.”⁴¹ Indeed, taking to the sea “will bring us closer to conquering Rome sooner rather than later.”⁴² To be sure, ISIS remained largely a land-centric phenomenon, with its center of mass in Iraq and Syria, and such grandiose thinking has been largely aspirational, if not delusional. Nevertheless, with affiliates in Libya, Somalia, and Yemen with access to the littorals, such ISIS threats cannot be discounted altogether and the development of even far lesser capabilities than those desired could cause considerable problems.

WAGING A MARITIME GUERRILLA WAR

The jihadi movements, of course, have not developed a blue-water naval force. More sober jihadist analysts understood that they could not really compete with the United States on the high seas and as one analyst acknowledged, the latter “controls the oceans.”⁴³ Recognizing that al-Qaeda did not have a blue-water navy or the ability to seek command of the sea, jihadi strategists therefore concluded that it was necessary to counter the United States asymmetrically by engaging in the equivalent of a guerrilla war at sea.

The Operational Art of Guerrilla War at Sea

Given the existing balance of forces, the jihadists’ focus has been on operations launched directly from shore similar to the concept used on land. That is, although such operations have at times been marked by sophisticated planning and execution, operations have taken the form of hit-and-run, small-unit actions against vulnerable targets, not large-scale efforts, as is characteristic of Mao’s first phase in his insurgency strategy, a strategy which al-Qaeda and ISIS adopted, as evident in the writings of all al-Qaeda military thinkers, including in those by two prominent Saudi-

born authors, Abd al-Aziz al-Muqrin and Yusuf al-Ayyiri.⁴⁴ Unlike their operations on land, where at times (as in Iraq/Syria or Yemen) jihadists have gone beyond guerrilla operations, with more conventional, permanent, mobile maneuver units, operations at sea have never gone beyond the initial guerrilla phase. Even at that lower end of the spectrum of violence, of course, such operations have the potential for causing substantial cumulative physical and political damage disproportionate to the assets expended by the jihadists.

In particular, jihadist thinkers advised enticing the US Navy into areas where narrow seas and unfriendly land environments would place the latter at a disadvantage. One al-Qaeda analyst, probably a Yemeni, argued that by “luring” US fleets into such waters it would then be possible to “settle scores with America and its allies by striking and sinking their ships.”⁴⁵ In particular, from that standpoint, Yemen and Somalia suggested themselves as suitable venues, preferably in a pincer movement.⁴⁶ To create the necessary bait for the maritime trap, proponents recommended that it was necessary to hijack ships and to encourage pirates.⁴⁷ That is, even if pirates are motivated largely by economic, rather than political, purposes, objectively they can contribute to jihadist interests. More broadly, as was the case with one prominent jihadist writer, some hoped that such maritime attacks would lure the United States onto the land, specifically into Yemen and the Arabian Peninsula, where he hoped it would pay a high cost and suffer a defeat.⁴⁸

Operational Command & Control

One of the reasons that it may not always be easy to prevent or disrupt jihadist attacks is the flexible command philosophy that jihadists have developed which favors initiative, surprise, and adaptation. In many ways, the attack on the USS *Cole* illustrates the philosophy that al-Qaeda had developed by which it sought to conduct what it saw as a global war. This approach, necessitated by the distances and difficulty in communications that al-Qaeda faced in fighting a global insurgency, was a synthesis of traditional patrimonial/personal loyalties and networks combined with delegated authority, whereby commanders on the ground would be trusted and expected to use their own initiative to help achieve strategic objectives as defined by general guidance communicated from the center. As “Uncle”—a term perhaps referring to Bin Ladin—reiterated in a letter to Sayf al-Adl, a senior al-Qaeda strategist, in 1993, “The leaders in the field are the best ones to determine the best methods for operating” and again also to fighters in Africa in 1994, while a senior advisor, Abu al-Walid al-Masri, in 1994 advised commanders operating in Africa that “the [African and Asian theaters] must enjoy a significant degree of independent action within the framework of flexible decentralization in pursuing shared strategic objectives... [such recommendations] achieve for us jihadist activity having a unified strategic vision.”⁴⁹

Although, as noted, not yet part of a maritime campaign, the attack on the USS *Cole* in 2000 illustrated al-Qaeda’s overall command philosophy. The operation—a raid in which greater central control was possible than in more dynamic extended operations—was carefully planned, as suggested in the charge sheet by the Office of Military Commissions against Abd al-Rahim al-Nashiri, the alleged mastermind of the attack, involving detailed analysis, reconnaissance, coordination, and preparation, including the testing of explosives at al-Qaeda’s headquarters camp.⁵⁰ The process was an interactive one between the center and the field commander, with operational planning and execution in local hands. As Nasir al-Bahri noted specifically in terms of the USS *Cole* operation,

Al-Qaeda has a guiding principle that says: centralized decisionmaking and decentralized execution. The decision is taken centrally but the manner of the strike and of the execution are tasks for the commanders in the field like those who were

in Yemen, such as Abd al-Rahim al-Nashiri and others who took part in the operation... In the case of the Cole operation, the planning for the concept and objective were developed and forwarded to al-Qaeda's higher supervising military committee which is called the Military Affairs Committee. The latter does not do planning but only gives the green light [to proceed] and provides support and financing for operations. The actual planning for the execution and for how the attack is to be carried out, however, all that is in the hands of the field commanders in the operational theater.⁵¹

This command philosophy focusing on “mission-type orders” extends to all subordinates. For example, the veteran jihadist Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani, who was to become leader of al-Qaeda's Jabhat al-Nusra branch in Syria, urged fighters to “cooperate with the [other] combat groups in the field” and underlined that that “is an order from the general leadership of Jabhat al-Nusra” but, he added, that they were to apply his guidance “as you see best.”⁵² Typically, the Moroccan operatives arrested in 2011 for planning a maritime strike had sought guidance from a senior figure in the al-Qaeda in the Maghrib branch organization, who had suggested in generic terms targets such as foreign ships operating in Moroccan waters, but apparently left operational details up to the local cell.⁵³

Al-Qaeda has operated with this flexible command and control philosophy by relying as much as possible on a careful selection and appointment of personnel, and on control of the electronic media to provide guidance, analysis, and a common ideology, reinforced by religious cohesion and personal loyalty enshrined in the religiously-based *baya* or oath of allegiance. Typically, when the Arab Spring erupted, Bin Ladin, in a letter to a senior al-Qaeda figure, spoke of the importance of putting “some qualified brothers on the ground in their own countries where there is a revolution in order to seek to direct events in a legal and wise manner in coordination with the [existing] Islamic forces there.”⁵⁴ Such a command and control philosophy works best when leaders and subordinates share a common educational and operational experience, but may not be effective when local leaders—as had been the case with Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in Iraq—have neither gone through al-Qaeda's educational system nor have been tested or appointed by the organization's personnel system. In fact, this command and control relationship is a fragile structure and is most vulnerable from the inside, as was to occur with the ISIS schism in 2013 in the Syrian theater that was to split al-Qaeda from top to bottom.

Local branches, whether of al-Qaeda or ISIS, normally have had a great deal of autonomy from the central decisionmakers and may vary widely in their operational conduct depending on the degree of subordination to and distance from the center. In the early days, when al-Qaeda policymakers were concentrated in Afghanistan, decisions typically were made by Bin Ladin, but with analysis and input from the equivalent of a staff.⁵⁵ Greater direct control (and more deliberate planning by the center) would have been possible for an operation such as the attack on the USS *Cole*. However, after 9/11, with the forceful US response and the resulting dislocation of al-Qaeda's leadership and force structure—perhaps 80 per cent of whom were neutralized at least temporarily—more decisions by default had to be delegated to the regional branches and field commanders, albeit with continuing attempts at central guidance and efforts at personnel appointments.⁵⁶ The degree of autonomy of the local branches, in fact, increased significantly under al-Zawahiri, who has lacked Bin Ladin's combat credibility, charisma, and authority, and who has had limited scope for activity.

Very often, maritime operations may be in support of the immediate objectives of local branches but, in the aggregate, even if indirectly, also support the broader intent and objectives of the

parent organizations, whether al-Qaeda or ISIS. Subordinate local affiliates often have taken the initiative even in significant operations. According to Nasir al-Bahri, the 2002 attack on the French supertanker *Limbourg*, unlike the earlier one on the USS *Cole*, had not been initiated by al-Qaeda's central authorities. Instead, it was a locally-generated reaction to the killing of an al-Qaeda supporter in Sanaa, and al-Nasiri later characterized the attack as "a mistake," as he viewed that the consequences for the Yemeni population were largely negative, although at the time Bin Ladin welcomed the attack enthusiastically, probably not least because of al-Qaeda's bleak situation at the time, after its ouster from Afghanistan.⁵⁷

ISIS, with its senior leadership collocated near the battlefield may have a greater capability of direct command and control, but the fluid nature of operations on two fronts suggests that ISIS also has had to rely on flexible delegated authority. Autonomous command relationships may be most evident, in fact, in areas where there is a potential for maritime operations by ISIS in the form of its far-flung branches, as in Sinai, Libya, Somalia, and Yemen, given the distances involved from the central leadership. Significantly, as a way to ensure functioning command and control relationships in such areas as Libya or Yemen, ISIS could rely on its veterans who had gone through its system in Syria and Iraq, returning home, combined with the personal *baya* to ISIS's leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, and general guidance from the center.⁵⁸ This exercise of command has not always gone smoothly for ISIS, as when the latter's appointment of a new leader for the West Africa-based Boko Haram in August 2016 was resisted by the existing leader.⁵⁹

In addition to directed and organized attacks, al-Qaeda and, later, ISIS, have also encouraged spontaneous lone-wolf operations by cells and individuals—including, specifically, in the maritime arena—especially once al-Qaeda's central decisionmakers were constrained in their activity after 9/11, functionally not unlike Winston Churchill's call during World War II for independent resistance activists on the continent to "set Europe ablaze." There is no real control over such operations, but anything accomplished that can add to the enemy's discomfort would contribute to the greater overall military effort and would be welcomed by al-Qaeda or ISIS leaders. Even here, there is an attempt to exert some influence through general guidance and online distance education. While the material impact of such lone-wolf operations mounted by individuals or small cells may be limited, they can present a special challenge. Those undertaking such operations, because of their clandestine nature, small footprint, or spontaneity, may be particularly hard to detect and there may be only limited warning, with few if any telltale signs of preparation or even of the attackers' existence.

THE GEOGRAPHIC DIMENSION OF STRATEGY

It is perhaps not surprising that the majority of maritime operations initiated by jihadist groups have been concentrated in certain areas or theaters. The focus of operations in a specific geographic area may result from a combination of factors: an area's conducive geographic features such as a suitable coastline or proximity to a chokepoint, whether the environment is benign in terms of the degree—or lack—of control by the local government, the presence of operatives and the support of at least part of the population, and the nature of suitable targets (that is whether warships, commercial traffic, or other maritime targets are present and accessible). Significantly, the Arabian Gulf has been largely immune up to now to jihadist maritime attacks despite the lucrative commercial and military maritime targets to be found there, thanks to the hostile environment for the jihadists on the Iranian shore, and the heavy security on the Arab side, reducing the degree of access and, proportionately, the level of vulnerability. Success for the jihadists, ultimately, depends on accessibility, with the need to be able to achieve at least local and temporary sea control even

if general sea control, given the mismatch of capabilities with their adversaries, is not realistic.⁶⁰ That is, jihadists must either control a territory to have a secure land base from which to launch or they must be able to breach the adversary's sea control at least temporarily by taking advantage of a security lapse. A number of theaters offer such advantages and, conversely, represent areas of greatest likely activity.

Geographic Areas of Interest and Zones of Vulnerability

Although a threat can materialize wherever jihadist cells or even “lone wolves” have access to coastlines, several regions offer jihadists the greatest actual or potential advantages and, conversely, represent areas of greatest threat for US and international maritime interests. To be sure, the jihadist presence in general and along the coast in particular even in territories where they have been most successful has been subject to an ebb and flow depending on the effectiveness of the response by the international community and by local forces but, in general, in certain areas the jihadists have remained a persistent factor.

Yemen

Yemen, with a coastline of almost 1400 miles and over 100 islands, has perennially been marked by weak central control and for the last half century has been beset by often violent confrontations involving tribes, ideological movements, political and personal factions, and foreign interference, resulting in weak or absent government control in certain areas and fertile ground for al-Qaeda activity. In particular, while al-Qaeda has viewed Yemen as a pivot for its maritime strategy over the years, maritime issues have never been a priority for successive Yemeni governments. Plagued by few ships, a lack of training, and the phenomenon of “ghost” personnel, the Yemeni Navy and Coast Guard have never really had adequate assets to control the long seacoast at the best of times.⁶¹ The 2015-17 civil war and ensuing security disarray—exacerbated by the intervention of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE)—contributed to the growth of al-Qaeda (and by now also ISIS) and to the threat to maritime interests, further compromising coastal security despite the increased presence of US and other Western naval and air assets in a blockade of the country. The blockade led to an increase in smuggling by small craft, further complicating maritime enforcement and no doubt facilitating al-Qaeda's participation in that traffic to move personnel and arms.⁶² Although in May 2016 al-Qaeda withdrew inland from key port towns and the coast that it had seized, this occurred largely as a result of negotiated agreements by the UAE through local intermediaries, allowing the jihadists to preserve much of their force structure and to continue to represent a long-term threat, especially if stability, as is likely, remains elusive.⁶³ As a case in point, in August 2016 al-Qaeda mounted an unsuccessful operation using for the first time two bomb-laden traditional fishing boats to try to penetrate and blow up the port of al-Mukalla, while in November 2016 it set off an explosion at the naval base in that city.⁶⁴ Saudi Arabia has also been planning to build a new canal across its own territory that would terminate on the Arabian Sea in Hadramawt, Yemen. While this waterway would bypass the risk of potential Iranian hostility in the Strait of Hormuz, it would provide a potent new magnet for jihadist attacks, with its oil facilities on the Yemeni sea coast and the expected concentration of tanker and cargo ships it would attract.⁶⁵

Somalia

Somalia remains unsettled and insecure despite the internal splits within al-Shabab, the main jihadist group, and years of security operations by some 20,000 African Union troops and US interventions. In fact, by 2016, there appeared to be a resurgence of al-Shabab power under new leadership, including in the heretofore relatively stable semi-independent northeast part of the country,

Puntland.⁶⁶ In October 2016, al-Shabab forces—by then pro-ISIS—seized the port city of Qandala in Puntland and were only expelled in December, although remaining nearby.⁶⁷ With its long coastline on the busy artery of the Indian Ocean and Arabian Sea, Somalia remains a potential maritime, as well as continental, threat theater.

Libya

The upheaval and ensuing instability resulting from the Arab Spring opened up new possibilities for jihadist maritime activity in a number of countries as local surviving or successor governments often saw their control weakened, and as local jihadist organizations—both al-Qaeda and ISIS—were now able to operate with greater freedom. This was certainly the case with Libya where, after the overthrow of the Qadhafi regime in 2011, a civil war and the subsequent emergence of two rival governments left sizeable areas of the coast ungoverned. At one point in early 2016, Russian military intelligence estimated that ISIS controlled some 150 miles of the Libyan coast radiating from the port of Sirte.⁶⁸ Later in 2016, a counteroffensive by forces supporting the UN-brokered government in Libya seemed on its way to wresting the coastal area from ISIS control, but progress has been slow and the situation remains tenuous, and it was unclear how permanent such gains would be.⁶⁹

Egypt

The general political turmoil connected to the Arab Spring that led to the fall of the Hosni Mubarak regime, followed by the July 2013 military coup under General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi that overthrew the successor Muslim Brotherhood government (led by Muhammad Mursi) that had been elected in June 2012, have led to a deterioration of the security situation in the country overall, which has facilitated the rise of jihadist elements. The Sinai Peninsula, in particular, with its long-standing grievances towards the Cairo government and its traditional tribal society has become the focus of much of the instability and jihadist activity. With a coastline at the crossroads of the Mediterranean and Red Sea, and in proximity of the Suez Canal, as well as of Israel and Saudi Arabia, Sinai has represented a security concern for the international community as well as for Egypt.

The Straits of Malacca/South China Sea Region

The expansive maritime area bordered by Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines includes the Strait of Malacca, one of the world's most widely-used waterways. The Filipino Islamist Abu Sayyaf Group and the Jemaah Islamiyah, a transnational jihadist group, which were both originally aligned with al-Qaeda but subsequently shifted to ISIS, have operated in the area.⁷⁰ Local governments and analysts take the threat seriously and devote significant assets to countermeasures.⁷¹ Although the countries affected are stable and secure overall, there are pockets of undergoverned territory in some of the constitutive archipelagos in the Philippines and Indonesia, and the jihadist groups have been able to mount attacks over the years.⁷²

Syria/Lebanon

While Syria's Mediterranean coast has enjoyed relative security despite the on-going civil war, in May 2016, for the first time there was a series of explosions in the area, which killed over 140 people, including in the port city of Tartus where Russian Navy units are berthed. This development created concern for the Assad regime of the possibility of a deteriorating maritime situation in that country's coast too.⁷³ And, in mid-summer 2016, there was intense fighting in the country's Latakia Governorate, which is on the coast.⁷⁴ However, that area is a stronghold of the dominant Alawite

community and consists of rough terrain, limiting ISIS prospects for seizing it. ISIS and al-Qaeda's Syrian branch Jabhat al-Nusra (which declared its separation from the latter in July 2016) have both sought, also without success, to establish an outlet to the Mediterranean on the Lebanese coast, at times fighting each other for control of territory.⁷⁵ Although the level of that threat will recede after ISIS's recent setbacks in the theater, isolated attacks will continue to be possible.

Focusing on Terrain Vulnerabilities

An additional geographical dimension of the jihadists' focus has been key terrain where maritime traffic is most vulnerable, whether due to natural features or to artificial ones. Specifically, from the perspective of geography, Abu Ubayd al-Qurayshi had urged already in 2002 that chokepoints such as the Bosphorus, Gibraltar, the Suez Canal, the Strait of Malacca, the Strait of Hormuz, and the Bab al-Mandab be made priority target areas.⁷⁶ (See Figure 1)



Figure 1. The Strait of Hormuz (renamed in jihadist sources after the Caliph Umar bin Khattab) as an enduring focal point for al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, al-Luyuth forum, 2011.

In 2014, AQIS reiterated the enduring importance of the mujahidin's fortunate proximity to such key chokepoints for maritime operations.⁷⁷ Ports, of course, may also be considered a specific chokepoint and be a location where ships could be especially vulnerable, as they are stationary or have limited maneuver space.

Not surprisingly, one chokepoint that has drawn considerable jihadist attention is the Suez Canal. Although before the Arab Spring the Egyptian authorities were very confident about that waterway's security, with the upheaval in government and ensuing growth of jihadist strength following the overthrow of the Mubarak regime in 2011, the situation changed considerably and, by 2012, Ayman al-Zawahiri felt emboldened enough to call for a stoppage of the flow through the Canal of US military assets to be used in the Middle East.⁷⁸ Despite the heavy security in the Canal Zone, the waterway is flanked by Sinai, where a jihadist insurgency continues to fester. At least two small-scale attacks occurred in 2013 involving machine-gun fire and rocket-propelled grenades (RPG).⁷⁹ According to regional sources, several other planned attacks have been thwarted. For example, a cell in Saudi Arabia with suspected links to al-Qaeda was alleged to have been planning to blow up a ship transiting the Canal before being arrested in 2012.⁸⁰ In 2014, Egyptian security

seized an RPG just east of the tunnel that runs under the Canal.⁸¹ Again, in 2015, security forces stopped the driver of an explosive-laden vehicle trying to force his way through a control point on a road to the Canal.⁸² One cell arrested in Egypt belonging to the Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis (Supporters of Jerusalem) organization (then still loyal to al-Qaeda before switching to ISIS) allegedly even wanted to use a mini-submarine to target ships transiting the Canal.⁸³ While such attacks would be unlikely to sink a ship even if successful, they could disrupt traffic, add to insurance costs, motivate shippers to consider alternate albeit longer routes, and provide jihadists with a propaganda boost.

As could be expected, given its location, al-Qaeda has long viewed Yemen as a particularly significant theater of operations. As the 2008 *Jihad Press* analysis cited earlier underlined, Yemen is “at the crossroads of the Arabian Sea and the Gulf of Aden, and overlooks the Bab al-Mandab to the Red Sea, as well as facing on the Indian Ocean.”⁸⁴ Not surprisingly, according to the same source, the “Zio-Crusader enemy” had therefore established bases and other forms of a naval presence in the area.⁸⁵ Al-Qaeda studies often reiterated the importance of Yemen, stressing that at the Bab al-Mandab it could control what it called “the vital highway” through which al-Qaeda claimed that 30% of the world’s oil transited.⁸⁶ Another senior AQAP leader, in a message addressed to al-Qaeda’s central leadership, stressed that controlling the Bab al-Mandab would be “a great victory with global impact” and that closing that waterway would “strangle the Jews.”⁸⁷ Still another writer termed Yemen “a strategic point” necessary in order to pursue a successful maritime strategy to thereby undercut “the Zio-Crusader enemy’s” land strategy, which relies on naval bases and mobility at sea.⁸⁸

Yemeni authorities, at least before the 2015-17 civil war, were confident that al-Qaeda would not be able to establish control over the Bab al-Mandab, but nevertheless acknowledged that that group could still threaten shipping.⁸⁹ Significantly, if reports from May 2016 are accurate, al-Qaeda was said to have shifted forces toward the Bab al-Mandab area after having negotiated with the Saudi-led coalition for a withdrawal from the port of al-Mukalla.⁹⁰ For a time, al-Qaeda’s Yemeni leadership hoped that a combined front could be formed with al-Shabab in Somalia “for the purpose of controlling the sea and the maritime chokepoints,” noting that “al-Qaeda is committed to controlling the strategic Bab al-Mandab in cooperation with the mujahidin in Somalia.”⁹¹ However, working with al-Shabab has always been a challenge for al-Qaeda, which over the years has accused the latter of providing falsified reports and poor information, and of mistreating foreign al-Qaeda personnel.

As part of a wider programmatic strategy, ISIS’s maritime component has adopted al-Qaeda’s thinking on chokepoints, focusing on the Suez Canal with the intent of reducing the Egyptian government’s badly-needed revenues from ship tolls, as well as for now the largely aspirational objectives of also carrying out attacks in the Bab al-Mandab and the Strait of Gibraltar from Morocco.⁹² And, as has been true of al-Qaeda thinking, ISIS too has highlighted the importance of seizing territory in order to affect the situation at sea, with one strategist calling for a parallel effort by jihadists in Yemen, Somalia, and Djibouti to take control of the land areas on both sides of the Bab al-Mandab in order to then specifically enable the mujahidin to close the Red Sea.⁹³

DEVELOPING A TARGET MATRIX

This section will categorize maritime operations within a target matrix as an overlay superimposed on geographic considerations. Essentially, one can identify two general categories of operations: against a military presence (US, other foreign, and local) including warships, bases, and personnel;

and against commercial traffic, with the oil sector as a key subsystem (tankers, coastal oil refineries, oil rigs, export facilities), but also against the general maritime economy (ships, ports, other littoral assets and activities).

An overview of the operations that jihadists have conducted in the past can help determine likely objectives and methods for future attacks. Even those operations that have not been successful provide valuable insights into the conceptualization, intent, and capabilities of jihadist planners and operators, as well as lessons learned for both the latter and for the intended targets. What to target has been a factor not only of desirability but also of accessibility and of opportunity when preferred targets may not have been vulnerable to available jihadist capabilities.

The United States cannot remain indifferent even to attacks against foreign assets, as they also affect US interests. Not only might such attacks abroad have a global impact, as with the oil and shipping industries, but there are shared interests in freedom of the seas, and security is mutually interconnected, and any jihadist success at sea would also represent a victory and boost in prestige for the jihadist movements overall. The assets of any country that the jihadists deem hostile are at risk. The jihadists have not targeted Iranian interests at sea up to now, whereas over the years the Iranian Navy has had numerous encounters with pirates in the course of protecting either Iranian or foreign vessels. One might attribute this relative immunity to al-Qaeda attacks due to the fact that many prominent figures in al-Qaeda's leadership (including Bin Ladin's family) had crossed into Iran from Afghanistan while fleeing from the US pursuit after 9/11. Imprisoned in Iran for many years, they served the function of de facto hostages. Moreover, at least central al-Qaeda (though not necessarily its Iraqi branch which, however, was land-bound) also sought to prioritize targeting US/Western and local regimes instead. While ISIS would have no such qualms about Iran, in the areas where its affiliates have a maritime capability, such as in Libya or Sinai, there is no Iranian naval presence to target.

Targeting the Military Presence

Military targets had the advantage of not involving civilian collateral damage, which could be used as an accusation against the jihadists. Al-Qaeda's leadership, in particular, became sensitive to the image of civilian casualties in the media, and often cautioned planners and commanders to limit collateral damage among Muslim populations. From that perspective, al-Qaeda saw targeting a warship as particularly desirable and, as an al-Qaeda figure, Rifai Ahmad Taha (Abu Yasir, d. 2016), noted, in the case of the attack on the USS *Cole* "no one can condemn it using the excuse that civilians were attacked."⁹⁴

Warships

US, as well as other warships, in particular, are a desirable target for a number of reasons but, despite their high value, they present a difficult target set, as al-Qaeda recognizes. As one al-Qaeda analyst noted, while attacks on the US Navy and bases in the region were "not impossible," he acknowledged that that might require "a more complex effort."⁹⁵ However, the potential pay-off of such attacks is high, especially because of the political symbolism and the considerable media coverage that can accompany such attacks, encouraging al-Qaeda to make repeated efforts in that domain. In addition, such attacks can also contribute to degrading an adversary's military capability and threat, at least temporarily. Thus, Sayf al-Adl, a long-time prominent al-Qaeda figure with a military background, urged the targeting of US aircraft carriers—however unrealistic that might be—which he considered veritable "floating bases."⁹⁶

United States Warships

The deadliest jihadist attack on a US warship occurred against the USS *Cole* on 12 October 2000 in Yemen. During a brief routine fuel stop in the port of Aden, a small boat carrying more than 500 pounds of explosives enhanced by a shaped charge detonated alongside the Aegis-class destroyer. The blast ripped a large hole through the port side of the ship, killing 17 US sailors and injuring 39 more. Strategic surprise contributed to the success of the attack in that, as a Congressional investigation concluded, there was a “general mindset that tended to discount the likelihood of a terrorist attack against a US warship.”⁹⁷ Only considerably later did it become clear that al-Qaeda was responsible for the attack and that it had previously attempted a similar but less publicized attack on the US Navy destroyer USS *The Sullivans* while at anchor in Aden on 3 January 2000. However, unknown to US authorities at the time, that earlier attack had failed, as the boat was so overladen that it sank, forcing the operation to be abandoned.⁹⁸

After the success of the attack on the USS *Cole*, al-Qaeda developed high hopes for a vast expansion of maritime operations against warships. Bin Ladin sought to also put into motion an attack in the Strait of Hormuz to be carried out by a boat launched from Pakistan, as well as other attacks, including one by an aircraft against a US warship in Dubai, but, in the post-9/11 atmosphere of heightened security, as well as logistic obstacles, none of those attacks were to mature.⁹⁹ That more attacks on US warships have not materialized can be attributed to a great extent to the enhanced security measures introduced, based on lessons learned from the USS *Cole* incident, although other near-misses have been reported, as was the case of a rocket attack directed at US warships in Jordan’s port of Aqaba in 2005.¹⁰⁰

Foreign Warships

Pakistani Warships

On 6 September 2014, elements of AQIS for the first time targeted a warship of the Pakistani Navy. The precise details of the incident remain murky, as the local media and official sources provided incomplete and often contradictory accounts. Apparently, a number of jihadist militants were able to board a frigate, the *Zulfiqar*, at its Karachi naval base. That ship was scheduled to sail that day for maneuvers with the US Navy and the attackers were said to have planned to meet additional reinforcing personnel at sea with the intent of then using the ship’s armaments to fire on US vessels.¹⁰¹ However, naval commandos from a nearby base succeeded in subduing the attackers before the latter’s plan could be carried out.¹⁰² While the Pakistani authorities, for political reasons, claimed that the ultimate target had been the Pakistani Navy, the communique that AQIS issued stated that “the real target... was the American Naval fleet in the Indian Ocean, which was to be targeted using Pakistani warships.”¹⁰³ In fact, according to an al-Qaeda analysis, the plan had been to seize control of two Pakistani warships, both the aforementioned *Zulfiqar* and another frigate, the *Aslat*.¹⁰⁴ Al-Qaeda claimed to actually have taken control of both Pakistani frigates and that the ensuing firefight on board the *Zulfiqar* took place at sea, not in port.¹⁰⁵ The intent was to then target a US Navy oiler as well as Indian Navy warships. Al-Qaeda, in fact, has identified oilers not only as more vulnerable than fighting ships but also as a crucial capability needed to support the US Navy’s extended operations and power projection.¹⁰⁶

Significantly, al-Qaeda’s communique identified the US Navy as a key capability—if not an operational center of gravity—for the United States’ global reach, claiming that it was the Navy that enabled the United States to control commerce and carry out military operations in the Muslim world. At the same time, the communique identified those maritime geographic points that

al-Qaeda considers important in relation to US maritime strategy:

It is because of their naval strength that America and its allies have been able to impose a military and economic stranglehold on the Muslim world, especially the land of Makkah and Medina. America's naval-military capability represents the backbone of its global empire of oppression. Using its seven naval commands, America rules the seas and oceans of the world; and in this way, America is able to control vital maritime trade routes and straits in the Muslim world and pillage the resources of the Ummah. These same resources are then employed by America to perpetuate its aggression against the Muslim world.¹⁰⁷

Such attacks could also inspire lone wolves among military personnel. In fact, according to the spokesman of AQIS, when the latter launched its 2014 attack, one of the benefits was said to be that, "This mutiny should also inspire those officers and soldiers who have for years suppressed their bitter disagreement with the pro-American policies of the [Pakistani] armed forces to stand up in defiance against this deliberate subservience to America and offer their blood for the defense of Islam."¹⁰⁸ What must have been of even more concern was that this attack, as earlier ones in Pakistan, was against a secure naval base and could not have been implemented without inside assistance. Even if not all the attackers were commissioned officers as al-Qaeda claimed, apparently at least one or more current or former members of the Pakistani Navy were implicated.¹⁰⁹

Egyptian Warships

In Egypt, in November 2014, a patrol boat was also the target of an attack by jihadist elements. The group held responsible was one operating mostly in Sinai, originally known as Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis, most of which by then had sworn allegiance to ISIS and had renamed itself the Sinai Province of the Islamic State. Official and media details of the attack remain vague, with two versions of the event, and, as is typical, despite promises of additional information once an official investigation was completed, the Egyptian authorities did not release any other details apart from the statements at the time of the incident. According to one version, during a patrol in the Mediterranean some 40 miles north of Damietta, three (other reports said four) fishing boats sent out a distress signal, subsequently ambushing the responding patrol craft as it approached and, in the ensuing firefight which included RPGs and Anti-tank Guided Missiles (ATGM), the latter was set on fire and sank.¹¹⁰ The local media reported that the attackers had engaged the patrol craft from multiple directions, and were described as having been "very professional" and of having shown "a high level of training," having apparently engaged in long-term observation of naval movements and conducted effective planning.¹¹¹ The attackers were said to have come from within Egypt itself rather than from a foreign country.¹¹² However, the local media was anxious to suggest that the attackers must have received help in the form of training, weapons, money, and planning from some unnamed foreign country.¹¹³

In another version—the one that the attacking organization itself claimed—members of the jihadist group had hijacked the patrol boat—whose name the group provided as the *6 October*—while it was still in port before it set out to sea.¹¹⁴ That group's official account claimed that the hijacked craft succeeded in attacking with its guns an Egyptian troop transport in Rafah, the Egyptian town on the eastern border with the Gaza Strip, and intended as its next objective an Israeli naval craft in order to seize its crew to use as a bargaining chip for the release of Palestinian prisoners.¹¹⁵ Israeli sources also reported sea-based energy facilities as the attackers' possible intended targets.¹¹⁶

In the first scenario—the fishing boat attack version—loyal Egyptian forces, including aircraft,

ships, and special forces, were dispatched from Damietta and subdued the attackers, sinking all the attacking boats. As a result of the incident, 8 of the crew of 13 in the targeted patrol boat were listed as missing in action, while of the reported original 65 attackers, about 30 were said to have been captured and the rest killed.¹¹⁷ In the second scenario, media reports from elsewhere in the region suggested that two Egyptian F-16s were dispatched and succeeded in sinking the commandeered boat after the latter had not responded to communications from the home base.¹¹⁸ The follow-on Egyptian response was to mount raids ashore, as support for whichever scenario was the actual one had clearly originated in Egypt itself, leading to the arrest of at least 18 suspects.¹¹⁹

In a subsequent incident, Egyptian forces foiled another potential attack when they arrested a cell in Sinai in December 2014, when they found scuba diving gear and suggested that another attack on a warship was being planned.¹²⁰ Another attack, in July 2015, was somewhat better documented, not least thanks to photographic evidence provided by the attackers, the same group that had been involved in the previous strike. (See Figure 2)



Figure 2. Projectile fired from the Sinai shore at the Egyptian ship, Islamic State online, 16 July 2015.

This case involved the hitting of an Egyptian patrol vessel operating off the Sinai coast near Rafah and setting it ablaze by what may have been an ATGM fired from the shore. Egyptian forces have often used such ships to ferry personnel and equipment to Sinai to avoid the hazardous land route, although it is not clear what the stricken ship's mission was that day.¹²¹ The Egyptian response was to raise the security level in the area and to seek the attackers on land, using helicopters and ground forces, apparently unsuccessfully.¹²²

Other Warship Attacks

Elsewhere, in the Libyan port of Benghazi, in November 2014, during the fighting between al-Qaeda and a Libyan warlord, General Khalifa Haftar, a naval vessel was sunk in port by artillery fire from al-Qaeda.¹²³ There have also been other, unsuccessful, attempts to target warships. In Morocco, three Saudi members of an al-Qaeda sleeper cell were arrested in 2002 before they could put their plan into action of enlisting suicide bombers willing to run explosives-laden Zodiac rubber boats into US warships transiting the Strait of Gibraltar.¹²⁴ Again, in 2012, the Algerian

authorities likewise arrested an al-Qaeda cell planning a suicide attack against a US warship.¹²⁵ In 2011, al-Qaeda again tried to ram a warship, this time a Yemeni one, with an explosives-laden boat, although unsuccessfully, off the Abyan coast in Yemen, and although the boat approached the warship, it was driven off by gunfire from the latter.¹²⁶ In Somalia, in 2012, land-based al-Shabab fighters and a Kenyan warship offshore the port of Kismayo traded machine gun and missile fire, apparently forcing the ship to leave its station.¹²⁷ According to Singaporean authorities, the Jemaah Islamiyah jihadist group, which has links to al-Qaeda, in the past also explored attacks against warships in Singapore.¹²⁸

Attacks on Military Maritime Facilities

Another target set, that of maritime military facilities, is also attractive, as it has the potential of if not crippling at least obstructing the adversary's military capability, not to speak of the potential political and propaganda impact. Pakistani naval facilities had first been the target of jihadist attacks in 2009, apparently by al-Qaeda, and again in 2011 at the hands of the Pakistani Taliban and al-Qaeda, but those attacks appear to have targeted Pakistani and US military personnel and equipment rather than having a specific maritime objective, although in the latter attack a naval patrol aircraft was also destroyed.¹²⁹ Likewise, in the port city of Derna, Libya, a satchel bomb was set off in a Libyan naval facility in 2014.¹³⁰ In Yemen, al-Qaeda in 2013 claimed to have destroyed a government facility which also housed a monitoring post for shipping that the United States also used.¹³¹ Also in Yemen, more recently, ISIS launched a deadly attack involving three car bombs against the Yemeni Coast Guard base at al-Mukalla.¹³² Other attacks have been thwarted before their intent was made clear, as when the Kenyan Navy in 2011 intercepted al-Shabab boats seeking to infiltrate into Kenyan waters with unknown objectives.¹³³

Naval personnel have also been targets. While only key personnel might have a major impact on maritime operations, the propaganda value of any such strikes could still be considerable. To be sure, at times the fact that such personnel belong to a naval service may not be the motivating factor but merely a coincidence, as the intent is simply to target any military personnel at hand. Thus, in Yemen, al-Qaeda claimed in 2012 to have ambushed a vehicle in the port town of al-Hodeida carrying US trainers for the Yemeni Coast Guard. In France, at least two plans by small cells to attack the naval base at Toulon and take hostages were foiled in their early stages by the authorities in 2015.¹³⁴ And, again in Yemen, al-Qaeda attackers were more successful in gunning down the head of Yemen's Navy and Coast Guard intelligence in August 2015.¹³⁵

The Economic War at Sea

As part of its strategy, al-Qaeda has often suggested an indirect approach against the United States by targeting the global economy, which al-Qaeda has long identified as a critical requirement for Western and US power, including for its military power. Not surprisingly, al-Qaeda has viewed the sea as a key component within that strategy and, as an al-Qaeda analyst addressing economic warfare against the United States stressed, al-Qaeda should "seek to establish itself in the world's maritime passageways and threaten to strike only those commercial ships flying the American flag," which he believed would raise insurance rates and transportation costs, with oil tankers being an especially desirable target, given their visibility and value.¹³⁶ Al-Qaeda strategists, of course, were especially encouraged to target commercial shipping after the successful USS *Cole* attack, with calls to expand such operations to the trade routes not only in the Middle East but also in East Asia in order to strike at global trade.¹³⁷

In particular, as one would expect, given the world economy's dependence (though reduced in

recent years) on energy imports from the Middle East and from other Muslim countries, al-Qaeda came to place a high value on targeting the world's oil supply. At first, whether to strike at the oil sector in Muslim countries apparently gave rise to some qualms within al-Qaeda, as the negative economic and environmental consequences also could affect ordinary Muslims. Bin Ladin himself, in declaring the jihad against the United States in 1996 had urged the mujahidin to avoid attacking the oil sector, arguing that it was the Muslims' asset and part of their power.¹³⁸ Ultimately, an al-Qaeda legal expert drafted a long legal opinion on striking such targets as oil tankers, offshore drilling platforms, and land-based oil facilities, concluding that such attacks were permissible, but only if the damage caused to the infidel exceeded the damage caused to the Muslims.¹³⁹ In fact, he noted that "oil is the basis of modern industry, a pillar of the economy of the industrial infidel countries; thanks to oil, America was able to impose its control over the world once it had occupied the oil sources in Eastern Arabia, in Iraq, and elsewhere."¹⁴⁰ In that vein, military expert Sayf al-Adl suggested targeting oil tankers and other sea-borne traffic, hoping—however unrealistically—that this would help bring US industry to a standstill.¹⁴¹

In October 2002, a small explosive-laden boat rammed the French oil supertanker *Limbou* in Yemeni territorial waters, causing significant damage and some casualties.¹⁴² Bin Ladin described the attack as a major success, striking "the line of supply and nourishment to the artery of the Crusader bloc and reminding the enemy of the heavy cost in blood and losses that it would incur for its continued aggression against our Umma."¹⁴³ Again, in August 2010, a suicide boat-bomb rammed the Japanese super tanker *M. Star* as it passed through the Strait of Hormuz, but only caused limited damage.¹⁴⁴ Shore-based oil-related facilities have also been targeted, as was the case in 2004 when members of al-Qaeda in Iraq, then led by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, staged an attack by several speedboats against oil facilities in Basra harbor, although the group claimed that the real targets had been the oil tankers in port.¹⁴⁵ Jihadists have also suggested striking Western workers in the oil industry in the Muslim world, as well as oil terminals and pipelines.¹⁴⁶

While targeting the oil industry infrastructure had long since become a standard practice, it was a short document in the inaugural issue of *Resurgence* magazine in the Fall of 2014 by AQIS that presented the most extensive assessment and rationale for such attacks and synthesized past experience.¹⁴⁷ That study analyzed the global energy system and emphasized the desirability of striking at the maritime transportation network as part of the economic campaign, "targeting the super-extended energy supply line that fuels their [i.e. the Western countries'] economies and helps to sustain their military strength," and characterized the maritime transportation network as "the Achilles heel of the oil industry."¹⁴⁸ The study expected that by striking at what it termed "the energy umbilical cord" the resulting "sustained disruption in this supply system would not only increase insurance costs for international shipping, but also affect the price of oil globally, making the theft of our petroleum resources an expensive venture for the West."¹⁴⁹ ISIS, too, has seen the oil industry as a lucrative target and, as a case in point, in January 2016, ISIS operatives mounted an attack from the sea against oil export terminals on Libya's western coast.¹⁵⁰

In addition, jihadists have also set their sights on various other aspects of maritime-dependent industries, whether non-oil seaborne commerce, tourism, or port earnings. While warships, at least at sea, have felt fairly secure, and larger ships now often carry their own security details, smaller vessels are at greater risk, with Italy, for example, especially concerned about its unarmed fishing boats and ferries as potential targets of jihadist attacks, as others also are about luxury yachts plying the Mediterranean.¹⁵¹ More concretely, in 2011, Moroccan authorities detained an al-Qaeda cell planning attacks on foreign ships in that country's territorial waters and ports using unspecified methods.¹⁵² Algerian commercial ship traffic, in fact, had to modify its routes in the Eastern Mediterranean in late 2015 due to threats of ISIS attacks from Libya.¹⁵³ Ships in difficulty

near coasts where there is a jihadist presence can also present targets of opportunity, as was the case with a Kenyan cargo ship that ran aground in Somalia in 2014, although in that case al-Shabab soon released the crew as they were East African Muslims.¹⁵⁴

Simply disrupting the support infrastructure for maritime traffic at sea or in port, as in Yemen, where local security sources reported that al-Qaeda had plans to target foreign experts working in the country's ports, could also cause significant economic damage.¹⁵⁵ Again in Yemen, members of ISIS gunned down the supervisor of the dock workers for the port of al-Mukalla in May 2016.¹⁵⁶ Even more worrisome is the possibility of cooperation by sympathizers inside the shipping industry, who could leak information or introduce cyber viruses into operating systems, a concern that is not far-fetched and that is taken seriously by the security services in some countries.¹⁵⁷ Particularly disturbing would be the recruitment by a jihadist organization of personnel with expertise in the maritime field with the professional skills and knowledge to provide advice in planning and executing attacks at sea or in port. As a case in point, in 2016, a recent graduate of a course for deck officers in the United Kingdom joined ISIS.¹⁵⁸

The possibility of attacks by jihadist scuba divers has also been a concern and, in 2003, French security arrested an individual trained in scuba diving, who had links to al-Qaeda and who had been recruiting other divers originally from the Middle East.¹⁵⁹ Such concerns continued, and the US Department of Homeland Security in May 2004 issued an alert for potential attacks by al-Qaeda scuba divers, although at the time there was no specific information to that effect. The charge sheet of a prominent Saudi al-Qaeda figure arrested in 2005, likewise, included an allegation that he had sought to recruit divers for attacks on unspecified foreign ships in the Red Sea.¹⁶⁰ On another economic aspect, in March 2013, Egyptian naval forces detained a fishing boat off the coast of Alexandria carrying three divers who were said to be planning to cut the internet sea cable which, if it had succeeded, could have caused significant disruptions to communications.¹⁶¹ The Philippines-based Abu Sayyaf Islamist group has had a long and continuing history of seaborne attacks intended to kidnap local personnel and foreign tourists and, more recently, also crews of small commercial ships, holding them for ransom.¹⁶² It was also held responsible for the 2004 bombing of a ferry boat in the Philippines that left over 100 people dead.¹⁶³

Attacks, or even the potential of attacks, can have a tangible impact on the most fragile aspects of the maritime economy, such as the tourist trade on which the economies of many regional countries depend. Seen as a luxury by its patrons, the tourist industry is particularly vulnerable to threats of attack. For example, in 2015, at least some of those who attacked two tourist hotels on the Tunisian coast arrived to the site by a rubber Zodiac.¹⁶⁴ Likewise, in January 2016, the terrorist attack on a hotel in the Egyptian Red Sea resort town of Hurghada, which left a number of foreign tourists wounded, was mounted from the sea.¹⁶⁵ Al-Qaeda in the Maghrib operatives who in 2016 attacked a beach resort in the Cote d'Ivoire frequented by the country's elites and by expatriates also arrived by boat, bypassing security forces on land.¹⁶⁶ In such cases, an approach from the sea can contribute to surprise, as was clearly the case in the Tunisian attack.¹⁶⁷

In some cases, cities have lost their international status as tourist ports of call due to inadequate security against maritime terrorism, with a loss of income for the countries involved, as was the case in 2016 for Trogir, on Croatia's Dalmatian coast, which relies heavily on the summer maritimetraffic.¹⁶⁸ As a policy, cruise ships at times have been reluctant to face the higher risk of terrorism, as when the Norwegian Cruise Lines cancelled its port calls in Turkey for 2016 due to security concerns.¹⁶⁹ In the case of Algeria, the latter declined a Tunisian offer to open a cruise line between the two countries, citing security concerns.¹⁷⁰ In fact, principally as a result of terrorism, Egypt's tourism industry—much of it based on its coasts—which is a major pillar of the national

economy, has collapsed.¹⁷¹ Likewise, in Algeria, there has been an opportunity cost for tourism, as the maritime terrorist threat has prevented the development of some coastal tourist sites.¹⁷² Of course, other economic facilities on the coast can also become targets, as was the case when Mogadishu airport was attacked by a gun-boat in 2015.¹⁷³

The jihadist threat could also undercut the economies of local states if their port or waterway security is shown to be deficient. Some ports around the world are known to lack adequate but expensive security capabilities, which may lead to the avoidance of such facilities by commercial firms, resulting in losses of badly-needed revenue for struggling countries.¹⁷⁴ Indicative of the overall insecurity of the port of Aden, for example, in 2016 there was an attempt to hijack the national refinery company's only sea-going tug in order to sabotage planned fuel deliveries from the UAE. The attempt was foiled only with the help of unspecified—very likely Western—air observation after the tug was well out to sea on its way to Somalia.¹⁷⁵ Just a potential threat can have a tangible cost, causing countries to divert significant assets as a precaution to deal with the situation. In financially-strapped Egypt, security concerns along the Suez Canal resulted in the Army's having to build an expensive wall along part of the waterway in 2014.¹⁷⁶

Maritime states could also be forced to devote additional military assets to counter the threat, as occurred when fear of explosive-laden boats against oil tankers spread to Mediterranean ports, such as Trieste, leading to increased air and naval patrols.¹⁷⁷ Often, such military deployments could be for the long term in the form of forces on station, committed and in support, entailing significant costs in time, money, and increased operational tempo.¹⁷⁸ This has been the case, for example, with a significant French air and naval task force deployed to the Mediterranean in late 2015 that was intended to protect against ISIS (including with strikes against land-based targets), or the longer-term increased forward-deployed presence in the Middle East as a key part of the US Navy's current maritime strategy.¹⁷⁹

Observers often conflate piracy and jihadist warfare but, while there is some overlap, they are distinct phenomena insofar as both objectives and techniques. However, although pirates are essentially motivated by financial gain rather than politics or ideology, governments have long worried that jihadists and pirates might cooperate for mutual benefit and there have been indications that that may have happened on a local basis, such as in Somalia, even if not extensively.¹⁸⁰ Al-Qaeda itself, nevertheless, has been skeptical of cooperation with Somali pirates, noting that the latter have their own tribal protection networks and worried that, rather, the international community might see the pirates as a tool not unlike the Sahwa tribal militias in Iraq to be used against the mujahidin.¹⁸¹ At times, in fact, as was reported to have occurred in 2008, there has been noticeable tension between the pirates in Somalia and the jihadists.¹⁸²

The Intangible Effects of Maritime Attacks

Beyond the strictly material impact of maritime strikes, less tangible but no less important factors also come into play. Significantly, jihadists have viewed the political impact and the related symbolic and media value as equally, if not more, important than the concrete damage caused. Specifically, the high visibility and value of maritime targets and the ensuing media coverage (and even more so nowadays with instantaneous social media) can have a political and psychological benefit in terms of publicity and recruitment efforts and, conversely, damaging an adversary's image as being weak and ineffective. That is, maritime attacks can be seen as achieving a cumulative political impact and psychological sense of insecurity even if they cannot deliver a decisive blow against the enemy's economy or to the latter's military potential.

Typically, in the attack on the *M. Star* oil super tanker in 2010, in addition to the intended economic objective (“to weaken the infidel global system, which plunders the Muslims’ riches”), the al-Qaeda-affiliated attackers also claimed to be retaliating for the incarceration of Shaykh Omar Abd al-Rahman in the United States on terrorist charges.¹⁸³ (See Figure 3)



Figure 3. Al-Qaeda boasted widely in its media of the attack on the Japanese oil tanker *M. Star*, Kata'ib Abd Allah Azzam website, 2010.

Characteristically, with respect to the attack on the *USS Cole*, the prominent Saudi al-Qaeda thinker Luways Atiyat Allah highlighted psychological shock as perhaps the key benefit of this type of attack.¹⁸⁴ Al-Qaeda, as one could expect, was anxious to publicize this attack and, although because of a timing error, the al-Qaeda operatives were unable to shoot a video of the actual attack, the organization subsequently produced a video with a reenactment in order to gain maximum publicity.¹⁸⁵ Drawing media attention may have been the intent when a senior al-Qaeda leader in 2004 suggested to operatives in Turkey that they target an Israeli ship visiting that country, although an operation never materialized.¹⁸⁶ Likewise, the November 2008 attack in Mumbai, India, reportedly by Lashkar-e-Taiba (a Pakistani group loosely associated with al-Qaeda), that targeted several hotels was apparently intended to take hostages and to garner media attention. The latter attack involved an approach from the sea as, according to media reports, the attackers departing from an undetermined location commandeered an Indian trawler at sea, and had then deployed to the shore in rubber dinghies.¹⁸⁷

Publicity stemming from maritime operations can also enhance a jihadist organization’s image among sympathetic or neutral regional publics, which is especially important now in the context of the al-Qaeda-ISIS war. Just reports of threats or rumors can enhance al-Qaeda’s and ISIS’s prestige and have a psychological impact which can be amplified by media coverage even if no attacks materialize, as when precautionary alarms were sounded in Aden in 2012 due to fears of attacks from the sea.¹⁸⁸ Simply establishing a jihadist “presence” and the panic and the visible defensive precautions that governments and the private sector have to devote to guard against the threat can equate to a political success, magnifying a jihadist group’s image, boosting recruitment efforts, and entailing economic costs to affected governments, companies, and individuals. As a

case in point, an apparently false alarm of a bomb on a ferry boat traveling from Genoa to Tunis in 2015 caused considerable public consternation, while in the case of another ferry traveling to Algeria a false bomb alert at the very least caused additional cost and public concern when the ship was obliged to turn back to its point of departure in France.¹⁸⁹

THE SEA AS A JIHADIST ASSET

In addition, for jihadists, the sea is not only a theater for attacks against high-value maritime targets, but also represents a positive asset in terms of supporting their own conventional operations and serving as a source of income.

The Sea As an Avenue of Approach

The sea can serve as an avenue of approach for attacks against the land as well as a line of communication for the combat service support element integrated at the operational level, being used to transport personnel and equipment for current or future land operations. To actualize this asset requires a degree of at least temporary local sea control and, from a military perspective, local control of the sea is an interactive process for the jihadists, with the sea being used to support various land theaters to then, in turn, use the latter as additional secure bases for further maritime operations.

An al-Qaeda strategist, having concluded that “defended positions on the coast are relatively neglected from the direction of the sea,” was an early proponent of ship-to-shore attacks.¹⁹⁰ In fact, jihadists have often mounted attacks from the sea and have used the sea as a route for maneuver and withdrawal for tactical combat operations. Most jihadist attacks conducted from the sea have been small raids typical of guerrilla operations, many of which may often be unreported in the media. For example, in Yemen, in 2012, al-Qaeda mounted at least two amphibious operations, successfully outflanking Yemeni Army positions and seizing the latter’s artillery and in both cases causing casualties.¹⁹¹ Likewise, a raiding party in a boat attacked a manned observation tower on the Algerian coast, wounding some of the personnel before eluding a government reaction force despite exchanging fire with the latter.¹⁹² In March 2016, Somalia’s al-Shabab were able to shift 700 fighters by sea to the heretofore relatively secure Puntland region who, although checked, could not be eliminated completely.¹⁹³

At a higher level, for propaganda purposes, jihadists have at times portrayed the sea as only a weak defensive barrier for Europe, as was the case with a Tunisian ISIS figure, who threatened France that “Between us and you is [only] the sea. By Allah’s permission, the march is advancing towards you. And insha’allah, your women and children will be sold by us in the markets of the Islamic State,” while the Islamists’ flag would fly over that country’s presidential palace.¹⁹⁴

As part of the mass migration phenomenon that has developed in recent years, European Union authorities have well-founded fears that ISIS and al-Qaeda will also use the flow of migrants by sea to infiltrate their own personnel—whether for immediate attacks or as sleeper cells—into Europe, a concern validated by anecdotal reporting.¹⁹⁵ An ISIS figure in Libya, in fact, envisioned using such migrations to create “hell” in southern Europe, citing the ease of reaching Europe by sea from Libya under this cover, and suggested tasks such as targeting ships once jihadist personnel arrived at their destination.¹⁹⁶ What is more, in his posting, he provided a graphic suggestion as to where the best preliminary landing sites would be (See Figure 4)



Figure 4. Abu Irhim al-Libi, Suggested landing sites from Libya, 26 January 2015.

Such fears of jihadist fighters aboard the migrant-carrying boats, especially prevalent in southern Europe, have been voiced both by government officials and by the media.¹⁹⁷ Not surprisingly, Italy, with its long coastline and moderate distances from poorly-controlled areas across the Mediterranean, has felt particularly vulnerable to such maritime threats, not only as the point of entry of choice for the maritime infiltration of potential jihadists but also for sea-based attacks.¹⁹⁸ Italian intelligence, in fact, is convinced that ISIS, has controlled much of the migrant flow from Libya.¹⁹⁹ With the intensification of the campaign to retake the Libyan port city of Sirte from ISIS in August 2016, the Head of Italy's Parliamentary Intelligence Oversight Committee voiced increased alarm that fleeing ISIS elements would seek to blend in with migrants coming to Italy by sea.²⁰⁰ Or, ISIS might encourage mass migrations to Europe simply to create economic and social difficulties in the latter, as its Libyan branch has threatened to do to Italy if it is subjected to military strikes.²⁰¹

The Sea as a Line of Communication

More practically, jihadists have used the sea as a line of communication to move equipment and personnel routinely, often viewing it as a more reliable and faster route than ones on land. Al-Qaeda has relied on this mode of transportation from the beginning, as one can see from the narrative of one al-Qaeda operative, originally from the Comoros Islands, as he and his companions were able to travel easily around East Africa and the Arabian Peninsula by boat during the less-well monitored early years.²⁰² Al-Qaeda in Yemen has long used the sea to receive men and equipment by way of East Africa, including arms originating from Syria and Iraq.²⁰³ In 2016, a French frigate intercepted a fishing boat carrying small arms reportedly destined for al-Shabab in Somalia.²⁰⁴ In 2014, Egyptian authorities foiled an attempt by ISIS operatives to infiltrate the Port Said area by sea.²⁰⁵ Again in Egypt, explosives used in a major attack by ISIS in Sinai in 2015 were reportedly shipped there from the mainland using a fishing boat.²⁰⁶

In Libya, too, the sea has played an operational role for jihadists' logistics, as air strikes and naval patrols by government forces have had to deal numerous times with boats seeking to bring arms and munitions to the jihadists either from abroad or from one part of the country to another.²⁰⁷ And, in July 2015, Libyan aircraft sank one vessel and damaged another near Benghazi as they were reportedly carrying personnel, arms, and munitions for the jihadists.²⁰⁸ Libyan press accounts

suggested that it was foreign frogmen who in March 2016 blew up two fishing boats in Misrata harbor being used to smuggle arms.²⁰⁹ This means appears to have been used again in October 2016 when another two supply vessels belonging to an ISIS affiliate were sunk quay-side in Misrata harbor.²¹⁰ Also in 2016, the Libyan Air Force attacked off Benghazi a barge carrying heavy arms (including armored vehicles) allegedly bound for ISIS forces.²¹¹ ISIS apparently has also relied on foreign-flagged ships to smuggle arms to Libya, a number of which were being tracked during the summer of 2016 after leaving ports in Turkey.²¹²

At the same time, the sea can serve as line of communication for jihadist personnel mobility. When Fahd al-Qus al-Awlaqi, a Yemeni al-Qaeda leader, was asked whether it was possible that Yemeni mujahidin would be sent to Somalia, he replied: “The sea is wide open to American and Crusader warships, and it will not be off limits [either] for the Muslims to sail on it to all locations, thanks be to God.”²¹³ In Algeria, al-Qaeda has used fishing boats to transport fighters to various places along the coast.²¹⁴ Not surprisingly, one of the tasks of Egyptian Navy patrols is to prevent jihadist fighters from transiting by sea between Gaza and Sinai.²¹⁵ In Yemen in 2015, during fighting against military units loyal to the country’s former President Ali Abdullah Saleh, al-Qaeda used the sea to bring reinforcements from the coastal town of al-Mukalla to Aden.²¹⁶ Significantly, in Yemen, large numbers of jihadist fighters returning from Syria to Yemen in 2014 reportedly took an indirect route, reaching Africa by air to then infiltrate home by boat.²¹⁷ Elsewhere, ISIS fighters returning from Syria to Libya have also relied on cargo ships as transportation home.²¹⁸ Tunisian recruits are said to embark in the country’s Kerkennah Islands for Libya, while Tunisian fighters returning from Syria and Iraq are said to first travel to Libya, from where they take boats for the last leg to Tunisia, passing through the same islands.²¹⁹ In one case, would-be recruits for ISIS even planned to set off from Australia in a boat to Indonesia on the first leg of their trip but were intercepted before they could depart.²²⁰

At other times, jihadists have used the sea as an escape route. For example, in 2012, fleeing al-Shabab fighters reached safety in Yemen by boat and, conversely, Somali fighters returned home when military pressure increased in Yemen.²²¹ This has also been the case frequently for jihadist fighters in Yemen over the years, who have withdrawn tactically by sea from unfavorable combat situations.²²² Similarly, in 2014 the Libyan Coast Guard seized a boat carrying escaping al-Qaeda fighters.²²³ During combat operations in Libya in 2016, ISIS used the sea not only as a route to bring arms and reinforcements to Benghazi during the fighting, but also as an escape route when the tide of battle became unfavorable.²²⁴

The Sea as an Economic Asset

In addition, the sea can be used to generate income for jihadist organizations. In Libya, for example, in 2014 the local Ansar al-Sharia, at the time still allied to al-Qaeda, was reported to be earning money—as well as receiving arms—through a sea-based smuggling operation.²²⁵ Also in Libya, ISIS and al-Qaeda, in league with local tribes and coastal towns, were said to be earning money by smuggling people to Europe across the Mediterranean.²²⁶ The central ISIS has also relied on sea shipments, even if through intermediate parties, to sell its oil abroad, as was the case with sales to Bulgaria and Italy.²²⁷ In Yemen, when it controlled part of the coast during 2015-16, al-Qaeda profited from fees it levied on ships using the ports of al-Mukalla and al-Shihr.²²⁸ In fact, Yemeni authorities estimated that at its height al-Qaeda was also earning \$150m a month from the oil trade, which depended on its access to the sea.²²⁹

LOOKING AHEAD: AN ADAPTIVE ADVERSARY

War, of course, is an interactive process, with an adversary's skill likely to affect and limit the effectiveness of the other(s). From this perspective, jihadists have been adaptive in their planning and operational art, displaying a willingness to experiment with and use a variety of tactics, techniques, and procedures, depending on their availability and the likelihood of success. There are additional techniques that jihadists have not yet used but that could prove challenging to the international community's maritime security. One can expect future options and operations at sea, as on land, to be governed by the law of war as it has been developed by al-Qaeda and other jihadists rather than by conventional international law of war practice, governed by traditional legal considerations. This means a very flexible, permissive, framework, where mission success is the priority, with minimal constraints on the jihadists in such matters as neutrality, national borders, the distinction between combatants and non-combatants, the treatment of prisoners, the types of weapons used, or proportionality.

Since jihadists have been skillful at integrating lessons learned and new technology, the international community therefore must wargame and prepare for new potential threats. While some ideas, such as the use of a mini-submarine against ships using the Suez Canal thought up by a cell arrested in Egypt, as noted earlier, may seem far-fetched, such "out-of-the-box" thinking is nevertheless worrisome, as it indicates a willingness to innovate and experiment. Other potential options and innovations, moreover, may be more realistic.

The first potential future option is simply one of horizontal escalation, that is extending current operations to new areas wherever possible. As noted above, that had been an objective in Syria and Lebanon, but other areas, such as West or East Africa, could become involved depending on the local political situation.

The second potential option is that of expanding the target matrix to include new target sets. For example, causing an explosion on a liquid natural gas transporter, either by having hijacked it or by ramming it with another vessel, could be disastrous to a port or a waterway such as the Suez Canal. There have already been at least two attempts to cause explosions in the port of Balhaf in Shabwa Province, home to Yemen's major liquid natural gas liquefaction facility and export terminal. In 2013, the Yemeni Coast Guard managed to blow up and sink a bomb-laden boat heading for the port, but in December 2016 al-Qaeda did set off an explosion there in a gas pipeline.²³⁰ And, in October 2016, there was an attempt against the Spanish *Galicia Spirit* liquid natural gas carrier near Bab al-Mandab, but the explosives aboard the attacking skiff apparently detonated before the skiff could reach the ship.²³¹ Of particular concern, the numerous nuclear reactors that Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states plan to build over the coming years—many of them on the sea coast—will present new potential doomsday targets at least theoretically vulnerable from the sea.

A third potential option is the extension and adaptation of tried techniques. For example, explosive-laden remote-controlled maritime or airborne drones could be used in strikes. ISIS and al-Qaeda have already used drones for battlefield reconnaissance and their reconfiguration for maritime use could be fairly simple. Even if airborne drones might carry only an explosive package of limited weight, the political impact of a successful attack might matter more than the material damage caused. Although not part of the groups dealt with in this study, but underlining the feasibility of such an approach, an engineer with links to the Gaza-based Hamas organization who was developing a drone submarine was assassinated in Tunisia in December 2016, probably by Israeli agents.²³²

A fourth potential option consists of the use of sea mines, in essence transferring the capability already widely displayed by jihadist operatives in the use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) as a land weapon. While they can be viewed as a defensive weapon in tactical terms, in operational and strategic terms one can also view them as an offensive weapon due to their potential effect at higher levels, achieving not only sea denial but having political impact. The adaptation of such IEDs for maritime use could be relatively simple and their use could cause disruption of navigation, especially in narrow sea approaches and ports. In fact, a prominent al-Qaeda figure, Yunis al-Mawritani, detained in Pakistan in 2011, reported that the organization's "technical workshop" within the Military Committee of which he had been head was interested in developing remote-controlled devices in preparation for strikes against large US cargo ships.²³³ Significantly, in 2015, Egyptian security reportedly foiled a plan in the Sinai for divers to lay sea mines, although it was not clear from the local media whether the case involved ISIS, Hamas, or the Muslim Brotherhood.²³⁴ And, in October 2016, the authorities in Yemen's port city of al-Mukalla defused in time remote-controlled mines consisting of explosive-laden canisters powerful enough to destroy the harbor infrastructure and halt navigation.²³⁵ Moreover, such weapons could become increasingly lethal, as we know that jihadists have been interested in developing new more potent explosives to use against ships.²³⁶

A fifth potential technique that apparently has never been attempted is that of a booby-trapped shipping container, of which millions enter not only the United States but virtually every other maritime country.²³⁷ So far, as seen, jihadist attacks have been ones of "direct fire" from a coast, and there has been no evidence of a real power-projection capability. However, the use of containers as a ship-borne vehicle for an explosive device would represent a form of power-projection, with a strike potentially occurring against out-of-area targets, whether port facilities or ships, at a distance from the original launch site. Jihadist thinkers have discussed such a possibility, at times with fanciful twists. One writer even suggested modifying a container to carry a rocket launcher that would apparently be set off remotely.²³⁸ Of even greater concern would be a vertical escalation in force with the use of WMD in such containers, not least for the political and psychological impact of such weapons. Al-Qaeda strategists have long considered such options, with one prominent writer suggesting in 2003 that the United States, for example, viewed nuclear devices as "a nightmare," although the method he considered for introducing such a device into the country was on trucks entering the United States from Mexico.²³⁹ To shift the delivery vehicle to a ship-borne container would be a natural conceptual adaptation. To be sure, as the same writer observed, obtaining and handling nuclear material is no easy matter.²⁴⁰

A sixth potential option is that of the use of cyber technology, which one expert has identified as "a key concern" for the shipping industry, although the target could also be military.²⁴¹ Cyber attacks could cause business disruptions to shipping and accidents, raising costs. Jihadists have long thought about the utility of cyber attacks, with one prominent al-Qaeda writer in 2003 arguing that such attacks are cheap, require few people, and could be executed secretly, with considerable effect.²⁴²

A final potential option to consider here is a functional expansion. For example, jihadists could expand their economic sea-borne activity by increasing their cooperation with organized crime and moving into more commodities. In fact, in 2014, UAE Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed al-Nahyan expressed his apprehension that ISIS might develop such ties to criminal networks and, "therefore, we must stop them before their activities reach the sea."²⁴³ In particular, drug trafficking could become a lucrative option that should be of considerable concern for the international community. Of course, drug trafficking also involves land routes, but this activity has often been combined with maritime routes as well, including by jihadists—whether as an

organization or as individuals—lured by high profits and indifference to harm caused to their enemies. In terms of sea traffic, the areas that are especially vulnerable to being used for such a purpose include Yemen and the Horn of Africa (primarily to the Gulf countries and beyond), Libya, and the Southeast Asian basin. In West Africa, where jihadists have already established connections with organized crime, jihadists benefit at least indirectly from the sea route from Latin America and, more directly, on to Europe.²⁴⁴ There are indications that such links with networks in Europe may be expanding, which could then be used to further any form of seaborne traffic, be it involving migrants, arms, or drugs.²⁴⁵ Potentially, Lebanon could also become involved if the jihadists should ever establish an outlet to the sea there, although the likelihood of that has decreased significantly over the past year. In such cases, law enforcement agencies in European countries must play a key role in disrupting any links with local crime networks.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Dealing with a Complex Threat

Although many, and perhaps most, jihadist maritime attacks so far have been thwarted, this should not be a cause for complacency. There is an understandable temptation to focus on the failure of such operations to draw satisfaction. Typically, a retired senior Egyptian intelligence officer categorized the attack against the patrol boat off the coast of Damietta noted above as “a great success” for the armed forces, as it highlighted the latter’s preparedness to deal with emergencies.²⁴⁶ Likewise, Pakistani officials (and the Western media) dismissed cavalierly the 2014 Karachi attack against the Pakistani Navy as a “dismal failure.”²⁴⁷ However, not only have such attacks revealed gaps in some countries’ defenses, including disturbing instances of potential sympathizers inside their armed forces, but a bit of additional luck here or there for the attackers could have made the difference between an operation’s failure and significant material, human, and political damage for the targeted country. Based on the preceding study, one can draw several conclusions and related implications that may suggest what may contribute to dealing with the challenge that the jihadist threat at sea presents.

As General Alfred Gray, the distinguished former Commandant of the US Marine Corps, assessed, maritime security is “a vital interest” but acknowledged that there is “no easy solution, no textbook solution” to this threat.²⁴⁸ Dealing with a complex threat characterized by a wide range of potential targets, methods, and areas as in the case here suggests that there is no one template as a solution. Instead, the alternative may be for individual governments, alliances, and private companies to develop and maintain multiple capabilities to wage a complex political-military “maritime counterinsurgency” within an overarching flexible strategy. For the United States, specifically, addressing the jihadist challenge at sea could be structured as a three-tier strategy designed to deter and prevent, respond, and defeat, elements that are not necessarily sequential or exclusive, but that may co-exist in time and be mutually reinforcing.

Fostering the Necessary Political and Military Counterfunctions

Certain political and military activities (some may call them “lines of operation,” in the functional rather than geographic sense) will be key to a successful strategy in countering the jihadist maritime threat at any level and must remain, or become, a focus of effort. This common set of capabilities will be useful at whatever level of war the United States is operating in addressing the jihadist maritime threat, as well as in the effort against the overall jihadist threat, since the maritime aspect is nested within the overarching general jihadist strategy.²⁴⁹

Actionable Intelligence

Actionable intelligence is essential in narrowing the window of vulnerability to prevent (and respond to) the maritime threat. As is most often the case and given the wide range of the threat, all-source intelligence is required, whether visual data provided by UAVs, communications traffic monitoring, or human intelligence (HUMINT). Admittedly, providing adequate warning against jihadist maritime attacks will continue to be a challenge, with physical evidence often able to provide indicators for only tactical warning of impending attacks and hostile actors often having only a small footprint. That is, many of the components in the jihadists' arsenals—such as trawlers, dinghies, scuba gear at a resort, or GPS systems—reveal no visible difference between military and civilian equipment and use. While other components to be used in maritime attacks, such as explosives, anti-tank missiles, or small arms are more transparent indicators of intent, they may be present in such limited quantities that they, too, may not be readily detectable. In particular, it may be very difficult to identify and interdict small-scale jihadist maritime operations, which perhaps represent a quite literal version of Mao's dictum that guerrillas must be able to swim among the people as a fish swims in the sea. That is, jihadist assets and activities at sea can blend in easily with legitimate (or at least non-jihadist) maritime activities, such as trade, fishing, transportation of goods and passengers, or commercial smuggling. For example, a group of sailors in Algeria who supported al-Qaeda by delivering dynamite to them by boat also used that item routinely in fishing.²⁵⁰ Likewise, also in Algeria, locals routinely used their fishing activities as a cover to transport personnel and supplies for al-Qaeda.²⁵¹ Economic need, rather than ideology, may drive cooperation between arms smugglers and jihadists, as with the fishermen in Egypt—who have over 4000 sea-going trawlers—bringing in weapons from international suppliers.²⁵² In fact, auxiliaries, as in the preceding cases, may only be involved part-time with the jihadists, as during the lull in fishing in the winter in Egypt. In such an environment, HUMINT becomes all the more important in order to track jihadist networks.

Multilateral Cooperation

Bilateral and multinational cooperation is a key element in dealing with any aspect of the jihadist maritime threat, as the challenge extends across national borders and requires more resources than any one country can devote. Although most maritime attacks have been generated by local al-Qaeda or ISIS branch organizations, the planning and preparation for some, such as the USS *Cole* operation, with its planning and training in Afghanistan and additional training and execution in Yemen, illustrates also a potential international dimension. Moreover, even operations planned in-theater can extend across national borders, as with the plans to involve Israeli ships as part of the naval attack on the Egyptian Navy, or Indian and US ships in the case of the attack on the Pakistani Navy, or potential cross-Mediterranean operations launched from Libya. Or, more routinely, as seen earlier, jihadist maritime operations can also involve multiple countries, as in the case of the transport by jihadists of arms and personnel between Libya and Tunisia or into Libya from the Eastern Mediterranean, or the intercepted arms shipments to Somalia's al-Shabab from unknown destinations, not to mention ISIS-managed sea travel of migrants to Europe. Incidents at sea involving jihadists can easily take on a multinational aspect with attendant jurisdictional and security complications and the need for coordination and deconfliction. That is, a ship's origin of departure and destination, route, identity of employer, its registry and ownership, crew nationality, and insurance coverage, may consist of a conglomerate of nationalities, while operations on the high seas, including interdiction or hot pursuit, can complicate the situation still further in terms of legal jurisdiction and responsibility.²⁵³

The United States, of course, must continue to play a major role in this counterinsurgency, given its unique capabilities and its global presence. International cooperation, whether in the form of exercises with the participation of the United States (as was the case with the ASEAN Maritime Security and Counter-Terrorism Exercise in May 2016) or the multinational sea patrols by local forces in the Strait of Malacca region that were spurred by a kidnapping carried out by Abu Sayyaf in 2016, can be a deterrent, as well as create a more effective response capability.²⁵⁴ Elsewhere, Combined Maritime Force 150, a multi-national naval partnership whose command is rotated, has a counterterrorist mission in an area of operation which covers the Red Sea, Gulf of Aden, Indian Ocean and Gulf of Oman. Not only is multilateral cooperation in such matters as combined sea and air patrols, exercises, and intelligence sharing a force multiplier, but it can also alleviate the burden on US forces and resources, permitting broader security coverage.

In addition, the United States should continue its activity in helping at-risk nations build their security capacity by providing equipment, advice, and training. This approach can be cost-effective and has the additional advantage that local actors have a permanent presence and may know the local environment best. This, of course, is already being done, and should be continued or even increased. For example, the US Navy has restored cooperation in terms of exercises and equipment transfers with the Egyptian Navy following a hiatus caused by the military coup that brought that country's current regime to power.²⁵⁵ Likewise, US Special Forces can also play a significant role building up other countries' littoral capabilities as, for example, has been the case with US Special Operations Command Africa in Kenya, which has provided the latter such aid as patrol boats and training, enabling Kenya to set up a Special Boat Unit, and there are similar plans by the European Union to also train Libya's Coast Guard.²⁵⁶

In the international sphere, given the significance of the jihadist challenge, more nuanced political approaches by the international community might also have positive results. For example, even Iran, despite significant policy differences with the United States and other countries, shares a similar interest in maritime security, and could be viewed in certain situations as a co-belligerent against the jihadist threat. De facto, this has been the case with the Iranian Navy's participation in the fight against piracy, which has included coming to the aid of other countries' commercial ships on more than one occasion. A policy reconsideration might also mean accepting a degree of out-of-area presence by the Iranian Navy if the latter's objective is clearly that of countering the jihadist threat, as in responding to any attack at sea by al-Shabab.

Forward Presence

A forward presence can be a significant factor in the ability to provide a deterrent and a timely and effective response, and the United States has already done much in recent years to develop access overseas, including in areas that are relevant for addressing the maritime threat, such as in East Africa. These facilities can range from a significant base such as at Camp Lemonnier in Djibouti, with over 4000 personnel, to bare-bones positions (the numerous so-called "lily-pads"), strategically-located skeleton facilities with infrastructure that can provide the nucleus for a rapid expansion as needed, most often in conjunction with existing host-country bases.²⁵⁷

In addition to the deterrent factor, naval basing and task forces in theater can provide a potent combat capability against not only direct maritime threats but also against the jihadists' strategic depth on land in a timely manner. Intelligence collection from land sites or ships (whether by drones, manned flights, HUMINT, or electronic methods), personnel familiarization with the area of responsibility, more frequent and intense sea and air patrols, or strikes (whether the platforms are manned aircraft, ships, or drones or as launch sites for strikes by Special Forces or US Marine

Corps forces afloat) can all be better supported by the timeliness that is most easily generated by being in-theater.²⁵⁸ In this respect, a further development of sea basing, the capability to perform at sea combat support functions that would otherwise have to be performed on land, can also make a valuable contribution in this type of war, complementing land-based facilities for naval, amphibious, and other joint operations.²⁵⁹ In circumstances where, for political or security reasons, there is no access to adequate land-based facilities, sea basing can enable a timely response and an extended presence that would not otherwise be possible, whether for deterrence, response, or large follow-on operations. Not to be neglected, at the same time, is also the opportunity to support training for host-country forces from these forward positions, as at Camp Simba, a Kenyan naval base, and elsewhere.²⁶⁰

Soft Power

It is important to also integrate “soft power,” the term coined by Professor Joseph Nye to describe “the ability to attract and co-opt” rather than using coercion, in the effort against the maritime threat. Of course, as the maritime aspect of the threat is part of a single battle against the greater jihadist challenge and, while some soft power initiatives may be tailored to maritime issues, many others will also overlap with measures intended to address the more general threat. In particular, the systematic development and application of state-to-state diplomacy, the provision of economic aid to affected countries, the activation of legal mechanisms (whether the conclusion of treaties, the harmonization of legislation, or the codification of regulatory practices), and coordination with the maritime industry can all play a role. Such initiatives can contribute to degrading the viability of the operational environment in which maritime jihadists operate by preventing territorial sanctuary, reducing popular support, and enabling quicker and more effective US and multinational responses. In this arena, civilian US government agencies may have the lead, in coordination with the military, as well as with other countries and the private sector, the media, NGOs, or, in particular, the commercial shipping industry.

An information (psychological operations) effort can also play a supporting role in the campaign against al-Qaeda and ISIS, including in the maritime sphere. Even though this may ultimately be a war of ideas, one should not exaggerate what psychological operations can do and, ultimately, it is necessary to defeat the jihadists themselves. While the nucleus of a movement may be relatively impervious, requiring its physical defeat, a more positive effect may be possible with the periphery, although even here the impact is most likely a dependent variable of the situation. That is, it is difficult to argue with success, and unless they are coupled with the infliction of tangible failure for jihadists on the ground, psychological campaigns may not be effective. Nevertheless, such campaigns to delegitimize the jihadists could help complicate the latter’s operational environment by degrading support among active and potential sympathizers locally and worldwide on whom jihadists rely for support functions—such as logistics, intelligence, or force protection. Not surprisingly, such campaigns would be most effective using trusted key communicators and, specifically, local religious ones. A number of Middle East countries are already engaged in such information efforts, both in broader terms and, as the occasion may warrant, with a particular maritime focus, as was the case when al-Azhar, Egypt’s traditional Islamic religious and educational center, condemned the attack on Egypt’s Navy in 2015, and international coordination efforts could prove synergistic in this sphere.²⁶¹

Implementing a Complex Approach

These and other capabilities can be leveraged asymmetrically, applying the advantages—both kinetic and non-kinetic—that the United States and the international community have over the

jihadists in dealing with the latter's sea-base guerrilla war.²⁶²

Deter

Forecasting, deterring, and otherwise preventing jihadist maritime attacks from occurring can require many mutually-reinforcing methods, especially given the wide range of environments, potential targets, and of the adversaries' techniques that are involved.

Many measures, of course, are obvious and have been implemented, although not uniformly, not completely, or not effectively around the world. In this respect, ships, ports, and other maritime infrastructure in the United States are safer than those in most countries, thanks not only to technology and security measures and the assets to respond to disasters allocated, but also thanks to the buffer provided by the distance from where there is a significant al-Qaeda or ISIS presence, either in the same country or nearby. In addition, the nature of the domestic "human terrain" would not provide the advantages of mobility, force protection, or logistics that might be available to jihadists in some Middle East countries. Nevertheless, US and foreign targets and interests overseas remain vulnerable.

Preventive measures should focus on "hardening" of potential targets to make them less vulnerable by preventive measures that can include changing navigation routes, bolstering inspection regimes, adding security procedures for equipment or personnel, securing information flows, or increasing security forces. Naval and air patrols in areas of greatest vulnerability can play a major role in reducing the likelihood of surprise. Controlling the internet is a significant defensive measure, since al-Qaeda, in particular, as part of its effort at distance learning, has long distributed on the internet the military literature it has produced. Even if such steps cannot always prevent an attack from occurring, they may be able to reduce the damage an attack may cause.

Of course, the allocation of what are always limited assets entails risk management, as no nation has the military resources to defend everywhere at all times. Key potential targets should be defended insofar as possible but, since the threat can take different forms and occur in different places, realistically, one cannot defend everything everywhere without overextending one's finite resources and weakening one's posture overall. Significantly, for example, the US Navy's 6th Fleet headquartered at Naples must increasingly worry about multiple security concerns and, in particular, that from Russia, thereby diluting its ability to focus on ISIS.²⁶³ In fact, al-Qaeda has seen inducing the United States to generate multiple maritime operations in various theaters as a means to "stretch their [i.e. the US Navy's] resources further in this global war."²⁶⁴ To an extent, the international community must accept a degree of risk management, weighing the likelihood of an attack in a particular area or by a particular method against the importance of the potential target.

Respond

The ability to respond rapidly is necessary in order, if possible, to prevent an attack or to react quickly and effectively if deterrence fails. This approach could include pre-emptive measures such as the arrest of leaders or cells or strikes against jihadist physical assets and personnel, the rescue of hostages, intervention in an on-going attack, or hot pursuit of the attackers.

While all maritime operations are ultimately dependent on land, this is especially so for jihadist maritime forces, given the short range of their power projection capability, so that control of territory to deny safe-haven and a gateway to maritime targets becomes key for defeating jihadist maritime attacks. Al-Qaeda is clearly aware of this relationship between control of the land and

control of the sea. As one al-Qaeda analyst observed realistically with respect to the Bab al-Mandab waterway, even “a rapid comparison of the naval force that America has in the waters of the Mediterranean, the Red Sea, and the Arab Gulf, and especially in the Gulf of Aden, and that which the Organization [i.e. al-Qaeda] has reveals the almost total impossibility of controlling that chokepoint [by al-Qaeda].”²⁶⁵ Instead, he suggested that it would make more sense to seize the land area that controls the Bab al-Mandab, including in Somalia, from which it would then be possible to dominate traffic through that chokepoint.²⁶⁶

In effect, all jihadist operations so far have been almost “direct fire” ones from land in what, as seen earlier, one can categorize as a maritime variant of guerrilla warfare. As in traditional guerrilla war, success for such operations requires a benign operational environment on land, whether thanks to permanent control of a territory by the jihadists or the ability to exercise temporary control, something that is only possible on territory where control by an adversary is weak or incomplete. Key to ensuring control of the sea is the ability to also control the land. Control does not require a permanent presence on the ground, which may be impossible for political or logistical reasons. Rather, what may be sufficient in countering the jihadist maritime threat is functional control, that is the ability to intervene at least temporarily in a potentially hostile environment (such as Libya, Somalia, Yemen) as needed to prevent attacks from materializing.

Instability or a lack of effective governance is a major contributor to the ability of jihadists to operate, whether on land or at sea, and the likelihood of an area being the source of sustained and organized attacks is inversely proportional to the degree of security and government control of its own territory. This means control not just of the immediate coastal area, but also of territory further inland or even countrywide. Symptomatically, the increased instability in some countries affected by the Arab Spring, such as Libya and Egypt, or by civil war such as Yemen, also led to increased jihadist activity, including at sea.

To be sure, as history has shown, maritime threats can also develop in friendly states—even those with relatively good security—as well as where direct foreign intervention may not be welcome. Although a multinational effort is optimal for dealing with this persistent and potentially significant threat, the United States will remain the central player thanks to its unique command and control, logistics, and intelligence capabilities, and there is no other friendly country that is able to mount sustained out-of-area operations. The US military effort will most likely be a joint one, although that, of course, does not mean that all services need participate in every situation. Given the wide range of the threat and the different theaters involved, one service or other may have the lead or be the supporting one. While deployment from bases abroad can provide an important advantage, the availability of such bases may not always be possible due to political or security reasons. The US Special Operations Command (USSOCOM), with its ability to provide small, agile, and stealthy expeditionary forces in the form of flexible force packages with multiple capabilities that can act quickly, can make an especially substantial contribution in such situations.²⁶⁷

However, follow-on operations on land may well be necessary. In situations where greater force is required on the ground in an expeditionary mode, the US Navy-Marine Corps team, with its unique capabilities to respond quickly and in force not only after an attack but also to prevent one, will be especially relevant to countering the jihadist maritime threat. The US Marine Corps, in effect, is the only US service that currently has the capability to mount an amphibious operation against a defended shore in a hostile environment and then carry out sustained follow-on operations inland as an organically “joint” Marine Air-Ground Task Force. At the same time, given the extent of the jihadists’ capabilities at sea, naval warfare will be in the littorals and narrow seas, presenting the

US Navy specific challenges that require different organization, command and control, training, platforms and equipment, and doctrine than in open ocean warfare.²⁶⁸

In addition, there is also a significant role for the civilian sector's capability to provide the assets and training to implement an effective maritime disaster response and recovery effort if the need arises in the aftermath of an attack, whether it be dealing with a stricken ship, oil spills, or the effects of WMD.

Defeat

As important as it assuredly is to be able to deter and react to attacks if they occur in order to frustrate the jihadists' maritime strategy, policy cannot only be defensive. What is also needed is an emphasis on the initiative, with a pro-active policy aimed at neutralizing potential threats by defeating the jihadists and by dealing at the source of such threats as well as at the end-point.

The ultimate objective should be to defeat the jihadist maritime strategy and to achieve victory. One, of course, has to ask what "to defeat" and "victory" mean in such a situation and what measures of success to use. The maritime threat, as noted in this study, is only an aspect of a greater jihadist challenge and cannot be seen in isolation. That is, it may not be possible reach the ideal objective, that of eliminating the maritime threat completely without also eliminating completely the overall jihadist threat, something that itself may be difficult to achieve quickly, and is unlikely barring systemic political and social changes, especially in the Middle East. A more realistic goal for the near-term horizon may be to manage the maritime threat, preventing most attacks—especially large ones—while seeking to bring security levels in the Middle East and Africa closer to those in Europe or the United States.

Ideally, one would want to use a direct method against the jihadist maritime threat by neutralizing the leadership (the strategic center of gravity of the jihadist movement), but that may be difficult and, instead, it may be necessary to opt for an indirect longer-term approach to defeating the jihadists' military (the jihadists' operational center of gravity) by degrading its capabilities, thereby neutralizing the jihadist leadership's power and ability to carry out threats and implement its strategy. The indirect approach does not mean targeting only those aspects of the jihadist movements connected specifically with maritime issues. Rather, as it is a single battle, eliminating or degrading a jihadist movement's leadership, logistics, or safe areas in general will also have an impact on its ability to present a threat at sea. At a preliminary level, it is necessary to take away even temporary sea control from the jihadists to prevent or weaken potential attacks. In addition, as seen, jihadists also use the sea as an asset for their own ground operations and as a source of income. Even though this aspect may not pose an immediate threat to US assets, it does represent a longer-term threat by supporting the broader jihadist war effort and therefore requires attention to interdict or at least disrupt such jihadist maritime traffic.

Over the long run, the objective should be to help stabilize states in the affected land area, if possible while avoiding a large-scale US commitment if that adds to long-term instability. Specific strategies, of course, will vary by theater. In Yemen, for example, rather than a direct major ground combat presence, US diplomacy to end the civil war, including by pressuring regional US allies who are involved to seek a political solution instead of seeking an elusive military victory, can have a positive impact on security by reducing the security vacuum in which jihadist elements thrive. Dealing with the instability or defective governance that can enable jihadist activity in a country can be a long and complex process requiring the application of multiple national and international elements of power. To be sure, in such a situation, the military can serve as the "shield" to provide

the necessary security and time for the real “sword”—political, economic, and social measures—which alone can ensure the long-term and enduring success of a counterinsurgency to be implemented. Without such basic changes, best brought about by a joint and multinational effort of government and non-governmental agencies, military success may be temporary, with insurgent movements likely to endure and regenerate in some form, including in the maritime arena.

Notes:

- ¹ “An Exclusive Interview with Adam Yahye Gadahn,” *Resurgence*, Summer 2015, 81. (hereafter Gadahn, *Resurgence*)
- ² Ayman al-Zawahiri, *Fursan taht rayat al-nabi [Knights under the Prophet's Banner]*, 2nd. edition, part 1, (Al-Sahab, 2010), 138.
- ³ Luways Atiyat Allah, “Al-Nizam al-duwali al-jadid bi-qalam Usama Bin Ladin” [The New World Order As Osama Bin Ladin Sees It], 15 April 2007, www.alsaha.com/users/415647119/entries/35460.
- ⁴ Yusuf al-Ayyiri, *Harb al-isabat [Guerrilla War]*, (Al-Tahaddi, 1435/2014), 10.
- ⁵ Ayman al-Zawahiri, *Fursan taht rayat al-nabi [Knights under the Prophet's Banner]*, 1st. edition, 2001, 111.
- ⁶ As one al-Qaeda analysis noted of the US economy, “It is the main pillar of overwhelming American military power ... as well as an important element which America uses to implement its foreign policy.” And, this analysis concluded that “the collapse of the economy means the collapse of the state ... it is very possible that the [U. S.] economy will collapse.” *Nazif al-khasair al-amrikiya [The Attrition from American Losses]* (Markaz al-dirasat wa-l-buhuth al-islamiya, October 2003), <http://taw7ed.110mb.com/Nazeef.htm>. The publishing entity was an al-Qaeda think tank.
- ⁷ Norman Cigar, “Al-Qaida’s Theater Strategy,” in Norman Cigar and Stephanie E. Kramer, eds., *Al-Qaida after Ten Years of War*, (Quantico, VA: Marine Corps University Press, 2012), 40-41 and, more generally, 35-53.
- ⁸ Letter from “Zamray,” that is Bin Ladin, to Shaykh Yunis al-Mawritani, probably 2010, US Department of Justice, United States Attorney, Eastern District of New York, United States v. Abid Naseer, Criminal Docket No. 10-19 (S-4) (RJD), filed 15 February 2015, http://kronosadvisory.com/Abid.Naseer.Trial_Abbottabad.Documents_Exhibits.403.404.405.420thru433.pdf.
- ⁹ Yusuf al-Ayyiri, *Amrika wa'l-suud ila al-hawiya [America Moving Toward the Precipice]*, [2003], www.tawhed.ws/pr?i=zxq0rb5q.
- ¹⁰ For example, interview from 21 October 2001 with Osama Bin Ladin by Taysir Alluni, “Al-Nass al-kamil li'l-liqa' al-suhufi” [The Complete Text of the Interview], *Al-Arab Niuz* (Egypt), 29 March 2002, www.alarabnews.com/alshaab/GIF/29-03-2002/Usama.htm, and Osama Bin Ladin, “Risala bad thalathat ashhur ala al-darabat al-mubarakata” [Letter Three Months after the Blessed Strikes], 11 December 2001, Jihad Archive, www.jarchiv.net/b/details.php?item_id=4706, and Osama Bin Ladin, “Al-Risala al-thaniya ila ahl Al-Iraq khassatan wa'l-muslimin ammatan” [The Second Letter to the People of Iraq Specifically and to the Muslims in General, 1 October 2003, *Al-Arshif al-jami li-kalimat wa-khitabat imam al-mujahidin al-shaykh Usama bin Muhammad Bin Ladin ka-ma nushirat wa-bi'l-tartib al-zamani [The Complete Archive of the Interviews and Speeches of the Imam of the Mujahidin Shaykh Osama bin Muhammad Bin Ladin as They Were Released and in Chronological Order]* (7 Jumada II 1427/3 July 2006), 154.
- ¹¹ Osama Bin Ladin, *Tawjihāt manhajiya (2) [Programmatic Guidance (2)]*, 1423/2002-03, www.tawhed.ws/r?i=yiqgogik.
- ¹² Hamil al-Misk, “Fi Al-Aqsa naltaqi: sinariyu inhiyar al-nizham al-hakim” [We Will Meet in Jerusalem: A Scenario for the Collapse of the Dominant System], *Sada al-Malahim*, number 9, Jumada I 1430/April-May 2009, 31.
- ¹³ Abd al-Rahman al-Faqir, *Al-Taqqim wa'l-taqqim fi al-amaliya al-jihadiya [Assessments and Estimates in Jihadist Activity]*, (Al-Sumud, Dhu al-qada 1430/December 2009), 150-51.
- ¹⁴ Abu al-Walid [al-Masri ?], Five Letters to the Africa Corps, AGFP-2002-600053, Letter 3, [1994], Arabic text, , in Combating Terrorism Center, *Harmony and Disharmony; Exploiting al-Qa'ida's Organizational Vulnerabilities*, (West Point: United States Military Academy, 2006), 13-14. (hereafter Abu al-Walid, Five Letters)
- ¹⁵ Nasir al-Wuhayshi, “Yamkuruna wa-yamkuru Allah’ [And God Is the Best Deceiver], *Al-Malahim*, n. 8, Rabi I 1430/February-March 2009, 5.
- ¹⁶ Abu al-Walid, Five Letters, 13-14.
- ¹⁷ Isa Al Awshan, *Risala qabl fawat al-awan [A Message before It Is Too Late]*, 1996, 3-4, and Hazim al-Madani (Hani al-Awfi al-Harbi), *Hakadha nara al-jihad wa-nuriduhu, [This Is How We See and Want the Jihad]*, 2002, 26. (hereafter Al-Madani, Hakadha nara)
- ¹⁸ Yusuf al-Ayyiri, *Haqiqat al-harb al-salibiya al-jadida [The Truth about the New Crusade]*, 2nd edition, Rajab 1422/September-October 2001, 135.
- ¹⁹ “Al-Wujud al-amriki fi al-Khalij... tarkikh wa-dalalat” [The American Presence in the Gulf: History and Indications], *Sawt al-Jihad*, number 2, Shaban 1424/September-October 2003, 6-7.

- ²⁰ Osama Mahmood, al-Qaeda in the Subcontinent spokesman, Press Release, “Operation against the American Navy by the Mujahideen; Reasons and Objectives,” 16 September 2014, in *Resurgence*, number 1, Fall 2014, 9.
- ²¹ Letter from Osama Bin Ladin to Yunis al-Mawritani, ca. May 2010, 10-CR-019 (S-4) (RJD), www.jihadica.com/new-abbottabad-documents.
- ²² Fadil al-Tamimi, “Suriya masrahan alamiyan fi munatafat al-al-suqut wa’l-suud” [Syria As a World Theater in Twists of Fall and Rise], *Majallat al-Balagh*, number 2 [March 2013], 19. (hereafter Al-Tamimi, “Suriya”)
- ²³ Yusri bin Atiya Al Salih (Abu Hajir al-Filastini), *Qaidat al-jihad ila rabb al-ibad* [The Rules of the Jihad for the Lord of the Believers], (Mu’assasat al-Jihad li’l-Intaj al-Ilami, 2009), 53. Other legal writers also were intent on showing how strongly Islamic tradition and legal arguments support a maritime jihad, Muhajir100, “Fadl ghazw al-bahr” [The Merit of Maritime Campaigning], Shabakat al-Luyuth al-Islamiya forum, 13 April 2011, <http://66.225.155.72/leyothin/vb>.
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- ²⁸ Interview with Nasir al-Bahri (Abu Jandal), “Al-Murafiq al-sabiq li-zaim al-Qaida Abu Jandal: Zawwajt Bin Ladin min fatat yamaniya” [Al-Qaeda Leader’s Former Bodyguard Abu Jandal: I Arranged Bin Ladin’s Marriage to a Yemeni Girl], originally in *Al-Quds al-Arabi* (London), reprinted in *Dunya al-Watan* (Gaza), 3 August 2004, www.alwatanvoice.com/arabic/news/2004/08/03/7956.html. (hereafter Nasir al-Bahri, “Al-Murafiq al-sabiq”)
- ²⁹ Ahmad Zaydan, *Bin Ladin bila qina; Liqa’at hazhzarat nashraha Taliban* [Bin Ladin Unmasked; Meetings Whose Publication the Taliban Banned], (Beirut: Al-Shirka al-Alamiya li’l-Kitab, 2003), 51.
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About the Author

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Dedication

This study is dedicated to the late CDR Bruce Watson, USN, PhD, mariner, consummate expert on the Soviet Navy, mentor, and friend.

The Jihadist Maritime Strategy

Waging a Guerrilla War at Sea

Norman Cigar

Although jihadist military strategy has been the subject of considerable analysis and writing over the years, it has been the land-based aspect that has drawn the most attention while the jihadists' maritime strategy has been relatively neglected. This monograph begins to address that gap. Maritime operations constitute a significant element of the threat that jihadist movements pose—principally from al-Qaeda and, since 2014, from the self-identified Islamic State (also referred to as ISIS or ISIL). To deal effectively with this challenge, it is necessary to understand how the jihadists have gradually integrated operations at sea into a broader strategy to accomplish their strategic and theater goals. The intent of this study is to deepen understanding of the evolution and application of this strategy and to provide the basis of an approach for US planners and operators to counter this challenge.



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