

Jaysh Rijal al-Tariq al-Naqshabandia

AT A GLANCE

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HOW TO CITE

Mapping Militants Project (MMP). “Jaysh Rijal al-Tariq al-Naqshabandia.” Last modified April 2019. <https://mappingmilitants.org/node/418>

SUMMARY

Formed: 2006

Disbanded: Active

First Attack: February 2009: Hamas Iraq troops used Rocket Propelled Grenades to attack US forces in Baqouba, the provincial capital of Diyala. It was not until the Hamas Iraq cell was apprehended that the U.S. discovered that the cell had been subcontracted by the JRTN, which was responsible for planning, financing, and facilitating the attack. (Casualties unknown)¹

Last Attack: January 3, 2015: The JRTN used an RKG-3 to target an Iraqi Army convoy west of Mosul (0 killed, 3 wounded).²

OVERVIEW

The Jaysh al-Tariq al-Naqshabandia (JRTN) is a Sufi insurgent group largely comprised of ex-Ba’ath Party members. It was formed by Izzat Ibrihim al-Douri in 2006 in response to the execution of Saddam Hussein. After Hussein’s death, many of Iraq’s remaining Ba’athists coalesced around Douri, the most senior remaining Ba’athist leader in the country, forming the basis of the JRTN. During its prime years of activity from 2013-2016 the group expanded to become one of the most powerful insurgent organizations in Iraq, second only to the Islamic State (IS). Despite the two groups’ almost diametrically opposed ideologies, the JRTN and IS have worked closely with one another on multiple occasions, most notably in the capture of Mosul in June of 2014. As of April 2019, there has been no recent activity from the JRTN, however the group is still listed as a current Foreign Terrorist Organization by the U.S. Department of State.³

NARRATIVE SUMMARY

The Jaysh Rijal al-Tariq al-Naqshabandia (JRTN), also known as the Naqshabandi Order or Naqshabandi Army, derives its name from the Naqshabandi Sufi movement, a mystical branch of Sunna Islam that emphasizes spiritual connection with God and the renunciation of worldly desires.⁴ The Naqshabandi Order in Iraq was built around these religious beliefs; however, by the mid-twentieth century, it had become more of a political and business patronage network than a religious association.⁵ In the late 1970s, Naqshabandi Order members recruited Izzat Ibrahim al-Douri, Saddam Hussein's second in command, to be their leader. Douri was ordained as a Naqshabandi Sheik and used his influence in the Hussein regime to create an alliance between the Ba'ath party and the Naqshabandi Order.⁶

After the execution of Saddam Hussein in December of 2006, many of the remaining Ba'athists and Naqshabandi Order members in Iraq looked to Douri for leadership as the most senior remaining Ba'athist in the country. They coalesced around him in January 2006 to form the JRTN.⁷ Although the group chose a name that emphasized its Sufi roots, the group itself has always been vehemently secular in its ideology.⁸ Douri established the group with the explicit aim of expelling the U.S.-led coalition partners in Iraq and replacing the government formed under Coalition guidance with a Ba'athist state. To this end, the JRTN repeatedly attacked coalition forces, utilizing a network of high-quality fighters and an arsenal that included mortars, Rocket Propelled Grenades (RPGs), road bombs, and rockets.⁹ In response, U.S. coalition forces targeted the JRTN; the most notable instance of which was when the U.S. captured several minor JRTN leaders in a raid on December 12, 2009.¹⁰

While the JRTN carried out its own attacks, it more commonly coordinated other militant organizations' attacks on coalition forces. In particular, the JRTN helped finance, organize, and provide intelligence for attacks carried out by the 1920s Revolutionary Brigades, Ansar al-Islam, and Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), among other groups.¹¹ Although it occasionally worked with AQI, the predecessor organization to the Islamic State (IS), the JRTN often condemned AQI for using tactics that resulted in the deaths of Iraqi civilians. In stark contrast, the JRTN chose to limit its own attacks to "the unbeliever-occupier" and denounced any groups that targeted civilians based on their ethnic or sectarian association.¹²

After the U.S. Coalition's withdrawal in 2011, the JRTN shifted its efforts to focus on the overthrow of the Maliki government.¹³ Reports also suggest that the organization funneled resources towards quelling the Kurdish independence movement that it deemed incompatible with its Arab Nationalist agenda.¹⁴ Around this time, the JRTN also established an activist branch known as the Intifada Ahrar al-Iraq (IAAI). The IAAI was responsible for managing the public image of the group and often released statements and videos of JRTN attacks.¹⁵

In 2013, the JRTN played an active role in organizing the General Military Council for Iraq's Revolutionaries (GMCIR).¹⁶ The GMCIR's leadership is predominantly composed

of former Ba'athist army officers of Arab tribal descent and its fighters are largely Arab Sunni tribesmen, many of whom fought in the 2007 Anbar Awakening. The group, whose most prominent member is the 1920's Revolutionary Brigades, coordinates the actions, attacks, and distribution of resources among its component groups, which are often local tribal militias.¹⁷ Although the JRTN is not technically a member group, it continues to help advise and direct the GMCIR. Like the JRTN, the GMCIR is vehemently anti-Iranian and anti-Maliki, and it seeks to overthrow the government in Baghdad.¹⁸

There have been several instances of cooperation between the Islamic State and the JRTN. In terms of ideology, IS and the JRTN appear to be rivals; the JRTN has sought to form a secular Ba'athist state within the internationally recognized borders of Iraq, while IS aims to establish a Salafist caliphate stretching across the Middle East, North Africa, and parts of Europe.¹⁹ However, both groups' hatred of the United States and Iraqi governments drove them to cooperate.²⁰ Initial cooperation between IS and the JRTN likely began through the JRTN's role in the founding of the GMCIR, which started working with IS in 2013 to fight the Iraqi Security Forces for control of parts of Iraq.²¹ The JRTN was instrumental in IS's conquest of Fallujah in January 2014 and was responsible for the seizure of five vital bridges in Mosul when IS captured the city on June 10, 2014.²² Yet within days of the capture of Mosul, the two groups began to clash. A firefight between JRTN and IS militants in Hawija left 17 fighters dead. There are conflicting reports as to the cause of the skirmish; some sources attribute the fighting to a dispute over two oil tankers, while others allege that it began after JRTN fighters refused to acknowledge al-Baghdadi as their caliph.²³ After additional skirmishes between the JRTN and IS forces in May 2015, Douri released a statement making clear that no alliance could ever or would ever exist between the two groups.²⁴ Douri also condemned IS's tactics, namely its expulsion of Christians from Mosul and massacre of the Yazidis, actions which were in stark contrast to the JRTN's policy of not targeting civilians.²⁵

From 2013-2016, the JRTN was widely considered the second most powerful Sunni insurgent group operating in Iraq after the Islamic State (IS).²⁶ As the years went on, however, it is increasingly difficult to find evidence of JRTN activity. It appears as if though the Iraqi government's attempts at reconciliation have disbanded many former cells and that IS subsumed many others.²⁷ In 2018, several think tank analysts stated that the JRTN could make a resurgence, but it is still unclear whether or not the JRTN has any presence on the ground.²⁸ Despite this lack of physical activity, the JRTN appears to have continued to maintain an online presence. As recently as March 2018, the JRTN put out a statement, and, in April 2018, Izzat al-Douri resurfaced on a video posted online.²⁹ As of April 2019, there has been no recent activity from the JRTN; however, the group is still listed as a current Foreign Terrorist Organization by the U.S. Department of State.³⁰

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

A. LEADERSHIP

Izzat Ibrahim al-Douri (December 30, 2006-Present): Following Saddam Hussein's execution in December of 2006, Douri became the de facto leader of the remaining Ba'athists in Iraq and founded the JRTN.³¹ On April 17, 2015, Iraqi state-run television reported that Douri had been killed by Iraqi security forces and Shiite militia fighters in the mountains between Kirkuk and Tikrit. The report was corroborated by the Governor of the Salah al-Din province, where the alleged assassination took place. Photos were released of what appeared to be Douri's corpse.³² However, the JRTN repudiated these claims and in May 2015 released an audio clip of Douri in which he addressed events that occurred after his purported death.³³ Douri again resurfaced in April 2018.³⁴

Wathiq Alwan al-Amiri (Unknown to December 12, 2009): Amiri was the JRTN's media coordinator before his arrest by Iraqi and U.S. forces in Tikrit Iraq in December 12, 2009.³⁵

Abd al-Majid Hadithi (Unknown to December 12, 2009): Hadithi was the JRTN's media manager and propaganda distributor before being arrested by Iraqi and U.S. forces in Tikrit Iraq in December 12, 2009.³⁶

Azhar al-Obeidi (Unknown to Unknown): Obeidi is a former Ba'athist army general who holds a leadership position in the JRTN.³⁷ After the fall of Mosul on June 10, 2014, IS named Obeidi as the governor of Mosul in a show of friendship to their JRTN allies.³⁸ Obeidi is no longer the governor of Mosul, and his current whereabouts and status are unknown.

B. NAME CHANGES

The Jaysh Rijal al-Tariq al-Naqshabandia (JRTN) is also known as the Naqshabandi Order or Naqshabandi Army.

C. SIZE ESTIMATES

- 2009: 1,500-2000 (The Combating Terrorism Center at West Point)³⁹
- June 2014: 1,500-2000 (The New York Times)⁴⁰

D. RESOURCES

The JRTN relies heavily on large-scale contract and small business extortion as well as donations from tribal leaders for revenue.⁴¹ Ba'ath Party diasporas in Jordan, Yemen, and Syria, particularly those composed of former Republican Guard officers, appear to be another key source of funding for the JRTN.⁴²

E. GEOGRAPHIC LOCATIONS

Disclaimer: This is a partial list of where the militant organization has bases and where it operates. This does not include information on where the group conducts major attacks or has external influences.

Although there are scattered cells of JRTN fighters across Iraq, the JRTN is concentrated in Salah al-Din, Ninawa, Tikrit and Kirkuk.⁴³ It has been particularly active in and around

Mosul, Hawija, and the “occupied territories” in the north of the country where Kurdish forces have seized control and asserted their autonomy.⁴⁴

STRATEGY

A. IDEAOLGY AND GOALS

The JRTN is a Sufi organization that derives its name from the Naqshabandi Order of Sufism, which was founded in the fourteenth century and known for its peaceful, apolitical ideology.⁴⁵ However, under the regime of Saddam Hussein, the Order began functioning as more of a political and business network than a religious organization.⁴⁶ It was during this period that the Order began recruiting top Ba’athist officials, most notably Izzat Ibrahim al-Douri.⁴⁷ Thus, when al-Douri founded the JRTN in 2006, he chose to emphasize the group’s Ba’athist rather than Sufi ideology.⁴⁸

The group is known for being tolerant of all the major religious groups in the region—Shiites, Sunnis, Sufis, Jews, and Christians—and has condemned IS’s targeted killings of civilians based on their religious affiliation.⁴⁹ The group seeks the re-unification of Iraq, including all its religious and ethnic groups, under a secular Ba’athist government similar to that of Saddam Hussein.⁵⁰ In this vein, the JRTN employs vehemently nationalistic rhetoric, which echoes the Arab Nationalist sentiments popularized by Egypt’s Gamal Abdel Nasser in the 1950s and 1960s.⁵¹ In order to achieve its goal of a reunified Iraq, the JRTN has directed the majority of its attacks against coalition forces (prior to their withdrawal in 2011), the Maliki government, Iran, and Iraq’s Kurdish separatist groups.⁵²

B. POLITICAL ACTIVITIES

There are no recorded political activities for this group.

C. TARGETS AND TACTICS

The JRTN often hires other groups to carry out attacks on the targets it chooses and helps coordinate the finances, logistics, and collection of intelligence for these groups in return.⁵³ It is unclear exactly why the JRTN utilizes this strategy. One possibility is that the group does not want to risk being associated with attacks in which citizens are accidentally harmed. The group has made clear its policy of only targeting government and coalition fighters and protecting Iraqi citizens regardless of their religion or ethnicity. To be seen as going back on this policy would harm to the group’s relationships with the communities in which it operates.⁵⁴

Although the JRTN often hires other groups to carry out its attacks, it also has its own well trained and organized, if small, military branch. Immediately after the JRTN’s formation in 2006, local cells consisting of around 7-10 JRTN fighters, each lead by an Emir, were established in almost every Iraqi province.⁵⁵ The JRTN quickly became known for its military-like structure and precision in its attacks; forward deployed cells were organized into brigades, platoons, battalions, and companies.⁵⁶ However, despite the video propaganda released extolling this professional organization, the actual structure of JRTN’s army is likely more ad hoc than this nomenclature may suggest.⁵⁷

Regardless, there is evidence that the JRTN utilizes an intricate and sophisticated system for planning and executing attacks. This system at least partially explains the noticeably high quality of JRTN fighters and the precision of the group's attacks.⁵⁸ When an attack is first conceived, the JRTN leaders begin their planning by soliciting personal recommendations about each cell's reliability.⁵⁹ After a particular cell is chosen to carry out an attack, JRTN leaders personally visit and evaluate the fighters in this cell. Trainers, who are usually former Revolutionary Guard elites, are then sent in to prepare the cell tactically.⁶⁰ This training usually includes an extended 90-day course during which fighters are physically and mentally pushed to their limits.⁶¹ Reports suggest that the JRTN uses this process for both its own cells and cells from other insurgent groups that it subcontracts for individual attacks.⁶²

The JRTN chooses its targets very carefully. It only targets fighters who operate in the name of the Maliki government, Iran, coalition forces, or insurgent groups that oppose the creation of a Ba'athist state in Iraq. The JRTN has explicitly forbidden its fighters from killing Iraqi citizens, regardless of their sectarian or ethnic affiliation.⁶³

In carrying out its attacks, the JRTN has used light and medium rifles, IEDs, anti-tank RPG-7s, RKG-3 grenades, and various unspecified missiles.⁶⁴ According to some analysts, the JRTN's 'signature attack' is a drive-by assassination.⁶⁵

MAJOR ATTACKS

Disclaimer: These are some selected major attacks in the militant organization's history. It is not a comprehensive listing but captures some of the most famous attacks or turning points during the campaign.

Although the JRTN was known to be carrying out attacks prior to 2009, none were verifiably documented. This may be in part due to the JRTN's strategy of subcontracting other militant organizations to carry out the attacks that it organizes and finances.⁶⁶

February 2009: Hamas Iraq troops used Rocket Propelled Grenades to attack US forces in Baqouba, the provincial capital of Diyala. It was not until the Hamas Iraq cell was apprehended that the U.S. discovered that the cell had been subcontracted by the JRTN, which was responsible for planning, financing, and facilitating the attack (casualties unknown).⁶⁷

February 18, 2011: A senior commander of the JRTN detonated an IED in a car showroom in the town of Muqdadiyah (7 killed, unknown wounded).⁶⁸

June 10, 2014: The JRTN played a critical role in IS's capture of Mosul and was responsible for seizing control of the five bridges that connected the western and eastern sections of the city (unknown casualties).⁶⁹

June 21, 2014: JRTN soldiers clashed with IS fighters in the city of Hawija near Kirkuk. Reports differ as to whether the skirmish occurred because there was disagreement over which group would assume control of several captured oil tankers

or because the JRTN fighters refused to lay down their weapons and swear fealty to IS leader Baghdadi (17 killed, unknown wounded).⁷⁰

January 3, 2015: The JRTN used an RKG-3 to target an Iraqi Army convey west of Mosul (0 killed, 3 wounded).⁷¹

INTERACTIONS

A. DESIGNATED/LISTED

The U.S. Department of State labeled the JRTN as Specially Designated Global Terrorists and as a Foreign Terrorist Organization in September 2015.⁷²

B. COMMUNITY RELATIONS

The JRTN works hard to foster positive relations with the communities in which it operates. By virtue of its Ba'athist roots, the organization has strong relations with many tribes across Kirkuk, Rashad, northern Diyala, Salah al-Din and Hawija.⁷³ Mimicking an old Hussein regime strategy, the JRTN typically cultivates alliances with a wide range of sub-tribes rather than attempting to negotiate with the most preeminent tribes, which are more prone to ideological interagency that could destabilize a larger alliance network.⁷⁴ From 2007-2011, JRTN tailored its rhetoric to match the specific dispositions of local populations, particularly playing on Sunni fears of an Iranian sponsored Shiite rebellion and framing the Coalition as the "unbeliever-occupier."⁷⁵ After the Coalition's withdrawal in 2011, the JRTN turned its focus to the growing anti-Maliki sentiments among Iraq's Sunni population. The group capitalized on such events as Maliki's arrest of Sunni MP Ahmed al-Awani and the Iraqi Security Force's (ISF) brutal crackdown on a protest in Hawija in April 2013 to bolster recruitment.⁷⁶

Additionally, the JRTN has a history of publishing a local monthly magazine that promotes group ideology, reports recent military accomplishments, requests donations, and even has a question and answer section where readers can write in to ask theological questions that are then answered in the next addition by prominent Naqshabandi sheiks.⁷⁷ The group has also posted videos detailing its military endeavors, as well as speeches by prominent Ba'athist and Sufi leaders on its official website and YouTube channel. The JRTN has used all of these platforms—its magazine, website, and YouTube channel—to put out propaganda and recruit new members.⁷⁸

Another important aspect of the JRTN's public relations campaign has been its repeated promises not to kill Iraqi citizens, regardless of their religious affiliation or ethnicity, as long as they are not cooperating with the al-Maliki government.⁷⁹ The group had made a point to target the "occupiers" and "oppressors," and it has strived to build a reputation as an "Iraqi first" group.⁸⁰ Where many other militant organizations in Iraq have large foreign components, the JRTN is almost entirely comprised of Iraqis—a fact that lends it credibility in the public's eyes.⁸¹

C. RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER GROUPS

One of the central messages promulgated by the JRTN has been the need for cooperation and unity among Iraq's Sunni insurgent organizations.⁸² The JRTN cooperated with

Hamas Iraq, the 1920s Revolution Brigades, Ansar al-Sunna, the Islamic Army, and Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), often hiring them to carry out attacks on its chosen targets.⁸³ There is also evidence that the JRTN assisted in managing the finances, intelligence collection, and other logistics of these groups in exchange for video recordings of their attacks, which the JRTN then posted on its own online media outlets.⁸⁴ In 2013, the JRTN formalized several of these cooperative relationships when it helped to create the General Military Council for Iraq's Revolutionaries (GMCIR), an umbrella organization comprised of several moderate Sunni militant groups, including the 1920s Revolution Brigades.⁸⁵ The JRTN also belongs to the Supreme Command for Jihad and Liberation (SCJL), another umbrella organization in which the JRTN is the largest militant group.⁸⁶

The alliance of convenience between the JRTN and IS, which began in late 2013, became increasingly strained throughout 2014 as cooperation born out of common interest gave way to ideological rivalry.⁸⁷ Whereas IS sought to establish a global caliphate, the JRTN sought the resurrection of a secular Ba'athist state within the internationally recognized borders of Iraq.⁸⁸ Despite these differences, however, the two groups initially cooperated in an effort to overthrow their mutual enemy, the Maliki government.⁸⁹ However, as early as June 16, 2014, reports surfaced of skirmishes between IS and JRTN fighters over the proliferation of Saddam Hussein banners in Mosul.⁹⁰ Then on June 21, 17 JRTN and IS fighters were killed when the two groups clashed in Hawija.⁹¹ Reports vary on whether this clash was the result of the JRTN fighters' refusal to swear allegiance to IS leader Baghdadi or if it was a tussle over control of two oil tankers.⁹² Yet despite these clashes, on July 13, Douri publicly praised IS for its leadership in taking Mosul and expressed "the love and pride" he felt for the group.⁹³ It was not until April 2015 that the JRTN directly denounced IS. In a public statement, Douri claimed that "the bitterest enemies" of the Arab nation are those that subscribe to "Takfiri ideas." Takfiri ideas are those that brand Muslims of different sects as infidels and call for their deaths—an ideology that IS subscribes to. As an Arab Nationalist group that claims to represent the Arab Nation, the JRTN was making clear its opposition to IS's ideology. This tension between the JRTN's secular, Arab Nationalist goals and IS's vision of a Salafist caliphate heightened, and the groups' alliance of convenience dissolved. After additional clashes between JRTN and IS forces in May 2015, Douri released another statement stating definitively that no alliance existed between the two groups.⁹⁴ However, neither group has openly declared war on the other.

D. STATE SPONSORS AND EXTERNAL INFLUENCES

Beginning in early 2015, the JRTN began cultivating a relationship with Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and other Arab states. The group made public statements praising the late Saudi king, eulogizing the Jordanian pilot burned alive by IS, congratulating Saudi Arabia's new King Salman, and extolling the Saudi air campaign in Yemen.⁹⁵ These states have provided safe havens for the group's leaders. This includes Douri, who purportedly ran JRTN operations from Qatar for a period of time after being taken there for emergency medical treatment.⁹⁶

MAPS

- Iraq

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