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The Atlantic

ISIS in the Caribbean

Trinidad has the highest rate of Islamic State recruitment in the Western hemisphere. How did this happen?



Joe Raedle / Getty

SIMON COTTEE

DEC 8, 2016

GLOBAL

This summer, the so-called Islamic State published [issue 15](#) of its online magazine *Dabiq*. In what has become a standard feature, it ran an interview with an ISIS foreign fighter. “When I was around twenty years old I would come to accept the religion of truth, Islam,” said Abu Sa’d at-Trinidad, recalling how he had turned away from the Christian faith he was born into.

At-Trinidad, as his *nom de guerre* suggests, is from the Caribbean island of Trinidad and Tobago (T&T), a country more readily associated with calypso and carnival than the “caliphate.” Asked if he had a message for “the Muslims of Trinidad,” he condemned his co-religionists at home for remaining in “a place where you have no honor and are forced to live in humiliation, subjugated by the

disbelievers.” More chillingly, he urged Muslims in T&T to wage jihad against their fellow citizens: “Terrify the disbelievers in their own homes and make their streets run with their blood.”

For well over a year and a half now, Raqqa, the so-called stronghold of the Islamic State in Syria, has been subjected to [sustained aerial bombardment](#) by [U.S.](#), [French](#), and [Russian](#) war planes. In recent months, the U.S.-led anti-ISIS coalition has reportedly killed more than [10,000 ISIS fighters](#), including key figures among ISIS’s leadership, most notably its senior strategist and spokesman [Abu Muhammad al-Adnani](#). It has also launched an offensive, now in its second month, on the group’s Iraqi capital of Mosul. According to [estimates](#) by American officials, ISIS has lost about 45 percent of its territory in Syria and 20 percent in Iraq since it rose to prominence in the summer of 2014. At the same time, the flow of foreign fighters to the caliphate has [plummeted](#), from a peak of 2,000 crossing the Turkey-Syria border each month in late 2014 to as few as 50 today. Yet still there are people making the long and precarious [6,000-mile](#) journey from Trinidad to Syria in an effort to live there. Just three days before the release of [Dabiq](#) 15, [eight](#) were [detained](#) in southern Turkey, attempting to cross into ISIS-controlled territory in Syria. All were [female](#), and they included children.

In a recent [paper](#) in the journal *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, John McCoy and W. Andy Knight posit that between 89-125 Trinidadians—or Trinis, to use the standard T&T idiom—have joined ISIS. Roodal Moonilal, an opposition Member of Parliament in T&T, insists that the total number is considerably higher, [claiming](#) that, according to a leaked security document passed on to him, over 400 have left since 2013. Even the figure of 125 would easily place Trinidad, with a population of [1.3 million](#), including [104,000 Muslims](#), top of the list of Western countries with the highest rates of foreign-fighter radicalization; it’s by far the largest recruitment hub in the Western Hemisphere, about a four and a half hour flight from the U.S. capital.

How did this happen?

* * *

In a 1986 travelogue essay about Saint Lucia, a Caribbean island north of Trinidad, the British novelist Martin Amis [described](#) the place, condescendingly, as “both beautiful and innocuous, like its people.” “Even at its most rank and jungly,” he continued, “St Lucia has a kiddybook harmlessness.” This is all very far from Trinidad, where away from the tourist spots at Maracas beach and the Queen’s Park Oval Cricket ground, you can feel an edge and menace on the streets, especially after dark.

On the night I arrived in St. Augustine, a town in the northwest, there was a [double murder](#). The number of murders for the year was already [77](#), and it was still only February. This was unprecedented, even for [Trinidad](#), where the “overall crime and safety situation” is currently [rated](#) by the U.S. State Department as “critical,” with 420 murders in 2015. By late June, when I made a second trip to the island, the number of murders for 2016 had soared to [227](#), a 15 percent increase on the 196 murders over the same period in 2015. Last month, on November 11, it [reached 400](#).

In 2011, the government [declared a state of emergency](#), in response to a wave of violent crime linked to drug trafficking and intelligence reports warning of an assassination plot against the then-Prime Minister [Kamla Persad-Bissessar](#) and senior members of her cabinet. At-Trinidad, along with several others, [was detained](#) on suspicion of colluding in the alleged plot. In *Dabiq*, at-Trinidad, alludes to this, but denies any involvement. “That would have been an honor for us to attempt,” he [acknowledged](#), “but the reality of our operations was much smaller.” He also credited a Muslim scholar named Ashmead Choate as a formative spiritual influence. [Choate](#), a fellow Trini and former principal of the [Darul Quran Wal Hadith Islamic School](#) in Freeport, central Trinidad, reportedly left for Syria between [2012 and 2013](#), taking his family with him. According to at-Trinidad’s [testimony](#) in *Dabiq*, Choate, who was [detained](#) alongside him during the state of emergency, was killed fighting in Ramadi, Iraq.

Trinidad is “the only country in the Western Hemisphere that has had an actual Islamic insurrection.”

The last state of emergency in T & T was [declared](#) in 1990, when, on July 27, a group of black Muslims, the [Jamaat al Muslimeen](#), stormed into the nation's Parliament in the capital city of Port of Spain and tried to overthrow the government, shooting then-Prime Minister Arthur Robinson and taking members of his cabinet hostage. Around the same time, another group of Muslimeen gunmen forced their way into the studio of the nation's only TV station. At 6:30 p.m. the Muslimeen's leader [Yasin Abu Bakr](#) came on television and [announced](#) that the government was overthrown. This was premature: Six days later, the Muslimeen surrendered, and the government regained control. But history was made. As Harold Trinkunas of the Brookings Institution remarked to *The Miami Herald*, Trinidad is "the only country in the Western Hemisphere that has had an actual Islamic insurrection."

In a telling [comment](#) his *Dabiq* interview, at-Trinidad references this cataclysm in T&T's recent history, alluding to "a faction of Muslims in Trinidad," who "attempted to overthrow the disbelieving government but quickly surrendered, apostatized, and participated in the religion of democracy, demonstrating that they weren't upon the correct methodology of jihad." In Trinidad, the Muslimeen is widely excoriated as a "militant" group, yet it is instructive that at-Trinidad condemns it for not being militant enough, and for not practicing the right kind of Islam.

* * *

The Islamic scene on the island is divided: There is the Indo Islam of the [East Indians](#), who first came to Trinidad in the mid-19th century as indentured slaves, and there is the Islam of the Jamaat al Muslimeen, whose members, many of whom were formerly Christians, are almost exclusively black. These two groups do not tend to mix, still less intermarry. But both, in their different ways, are far from the Salafi Islam that the Trinidadian criminologist Daurius Figueira believes has infiltrated T&T. Figueira, who is Muslim, has written widely on drug trafficking in the Caribbean and, more [recently](#), on the jihadist ideologues [Abu Muhammad Al-Maqdisi](#) and [Anwar al-Awlaki](#).

He attributes the growth of Salafism on the island to Saudi proselytizing. “They’ve spent money and brought in all these Wahhabi scholars from Mecca,” he told me when I visited him. “They’ve passed on the doctrine, then they’ve started to take the young males and send them to Mecca, and then they come back to Mecca and they continue, so now you don’t even need to send missionaries again.” The most visible sign of this infiltration, he said, is the full hijab: Before the Saudis’ missionaries came, Muslim women in Trinidad didn’t wear it, but now he said it’s relatively commonplace. Figueira was keen to dissociate the Jamaat al Muslimeen from the militant Salafis whom he believes are sympathetic to ISIS. “If you have any understanding of the Jamaat al Muslimeen,” Figueira said, “you’ll understand that Islamic State will have nothing to do with them because the Muslimeen does not pass the test by Islamic State to be a Salafi jihadi organization.”

In a research [paper](#) on the Jamaat al Muslimeen, published in the *British Journal of Criminology*, the sociologist Cynthia Mahabir describes how the Muslimeen, after 1990, transformed itself from an idealistic social movement—“a fraternity of ‘revolutionary men of Allah’”—into a criminal enterprise, or “Allah’s outlaws,” to use the title of Mahabir’s paper. Figueira puts it like this: “Yasin [Abu Bakr] would never get involved with Islamic State and recruit [people] and send them to Syria, because it’s bad for business! They [are] on a hustle, they’re hustlers, they looking for a living.” According to the analyst Chris Zambelis, this hustle has allegedly [involved](#) “gangland-style slayings, narcotics and arms trafficking, money laundering, extortion, kidnapping, and political corruption.”

On the two occasions when I was in Trinidad earlier this year I tried to meet Yasin Abu Bakr, but he was unable to see me. However, I did meet his urbane and charming son, Fuad, who leads a political party called [New National Vision](#). Fuad, who has inherited his father’s height and striking looks, showed me around the Muslimeen compound on the outskirts of Port of Spain. He spoke of his father with great warmth and affection, describing him as “a genuinely good person” who has spent his life defending the underdog and fighting injustice.

From what I’d [read](#) about the compound, I had expected to see Abu Bakr’s scowling security detail policing the joint, but they were nowhere to be seen. Instead, while I was waiting outside in the carpark with my noticeably nervous

East Indian cab-driver, who remained inside his locked and glacially air-conditioned car, I was surveilled by a group of giggling girls, no more than 7 or 8 years old, from an Islamic school on the site. The compound was quiet, and has clearly seen better days. “This place was full, it was a community, people lived here, people were coming in droves,” Fuad said, referring to the period just before the attempted coup in 1990. (Afterward, the group declined due to internal feuds and law enforcement’s massive curtailing of their activities.) He also spoke wistfully of a period of “communal living, even community justice.” “If you had an issue, you came to the imam, and he would send his guys and they would sort it out.”

Tentatively, I asked Fuad about ISIS and whether there were recruiters in T&T working for the group. According to local news [reports](#), the recruitment hubs are located in Rio Claro in the southeast and Chaguanas in central Trinidad. “Listen,” he said, “there are facilitators, people who are there [in Syria], they communicate to friends. Trinidad is small and the Muslim community is even smaller, so it’s basically friends, people you know, who are saying to you, ‘you know, do you want to come?’ No big, bad recruiter.” Yet this not quite the picture I received from one source within the Ministry of National Security, who said there was one particular imam playing the role of “big, bad recruiter.”

How were so many able to leave Trinidad to join ISIS? Nobody was stopping them.

The source, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said the Trinis who had gone to Syria since the outbreak of the civil war included an entire community of Muslims from Diego Martin, a small town north of Port of Spain. “An *entire* community,” he repeated. He also claimed that some leavers had received military training in Trinidad before they left. “There is mujahideen training, or there has been mujahideen training going on in T&T, since about 2007. I was made aware of that in 2009.” He received this information, he said, from a trusted confidant from within the Muslim community, and added that it wasn’t the Muslimeen, but a more radical faction of Salafis that had splintered from them. I had heard this rumor many times when I was in Trinidad, but this was

the first time I'd heard it from a source within the security services. Mark Bassant, an investigative TV journalist in Trinidad, also suspects that some of those who have gone to Syria have undergone [weapons training in Trinidad](#).

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When, in the [summer of 1498](#), Christopher Columbus approached the shores of Trinidad, he would have been struck by the richness of the island, with its tropical climate, flowering vegetation, flashing birds, rivers and waterfalls. For more recent visitors, who reach the island by air, it is the richness of Trini culture, vividly exemplified in its annual carnival in February. To outsiders, Trinidad can look like a paradise. But for those many Trinis who are blighted by its high crime rate, rising unemployment, pockets of abject poverty and endemic corruption this proposition is routinely put to the test. This may explain why Islam, with its call to end corruption and oppression and to return to a simpler, more just society, appeals to so many of those from whom Trinidad's myriad blessings are withheld. But this doesn't get us any closer to understanding why so many Trinis have been captivated by the brutal and hallucinatory Islam of ISIS.

A more immediate question, and one that's easier to answer, is how so many were able to leave Trinidad to join ISIS. The answer to this is that they were allowed to. Nobody was stopping them. In fact, this was state policy. It was state policy when the [conflict](#) first started in Syria, in 2011, and it is [still](#) state policy in late 2016. As Roodal Moonilal flatly explained to me, over a drink in the Hyatt in downtown Port of Spain, "ISIS is not proscribed in T&T, meaning that you can go and train with ISIS for 2-3 years and come back here with all the rights and privileges of a citizen of T&T."

Gary Griffith, who served as Minister of National Security between September 2013 and February 2015, told me, when we met earlier this year, that his "concern as Minister of National Security was not them [fighters from T&T] going across—they were free to go across, if they wanted—my concern was to ensure that they do not come back." Griffith is particularly critical of his successor and political opponent Edmund Dillon, for what he sees as Dillon's evasiveness in dealing with the issue of returnees from Syria. Griffith, by

contrast, is emphatic: “They should not be allowed re-entry. ... If they know that it’s a one-way ticket to hell, that is the ultimate deterrent.” He also expressed indignation that his own proposal to create “a counter-terrorism intelligence unit” for monitoring terrorist threats, launched when he was minister, was blocked by the current government. Dillon, he said, has “a good heart and means well.” But “he’s burying his head in the sand. He thinks God is a Trini.” Dillon did not respond to my numerous requests for comment.

In addition to turning a blind eye to ISIS recruitment, the current government has done little to challenge the spread of Salafi Islam in in the country. Moonilal believes that this, more than derailing ISIS recruitment networks, is the greatest security challenge facing T&T. Yet there are few signs that it will be taken up any time soon.

“We have beautiful sunshine, we have oil and other natural resources, arable land, we have a blessed country,” Fuad Abu Bakr told me. But it evidently wasn’t enough for at-Trinidad. A woman identifying herself as his mother [told](#) the *Trinidad Express* that, since he left, “His life is better. He has purpose.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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