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FEATURE ARTICLE

The Islamic State and al-Qa`ida Go to War in West Africa

HÉNI NSAIBIA AND CALEB WEISS

A VIEW FROM THE CT FOXHOLE

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PRESIDENT AND SENIOR DIRECTOR
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FROM THE EDITOR

Earlier this month, the United Nations monitoring team that tracks the global jihadi threat warned the Security Council that “ISIL franchises in West Africa and the Sahel continued to enjoy operational success in early 2020, as have those of Al-Qaida, heightening international concern about stability in the region.” Concern over the threat has grown despite the fact that a year ago clashes erupted between the Islamic State and al-Qa`ida franchises in the region, turning what had been an often amicable and sometimes cooperative relationship into fighting between them in Mali and Burkina Faso.

In our feature article, Héni Nsaibia and Caleb Weiss assess that a number of factors ended the “Sahelian anomaly” of amicable relations between the regional Islamic State and al-Qa`ida groupings, “including the hardening of ideological divisions, pressure from Islamic State Central for its regional satellite to take on a more confrontational approach toward its rival, and tensions created by the growing ambition of the Islamic State affiliate in the Sahel.” They note that “while some argue that fighting between jihadi groups is positive for the counterterrorism landscape, it is also possible that the two groups are in effect engaging in a process called ‘outbidding,’ wherein a group aims to show ‘greater resolve to fight the enemy than rival groups.’”

Our interview is with Chris Costa, who during the first year of the Trump administration served as the Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for Counterterrorism.

Building on a study of terrorist recidivism in Belgium by Thomas Renard published in the April issue of *CTC Sentinel*, Robin Simcox and Hannah Stuart examine the problem set created by jihadi prisoners in Europe from two different angles. Firstly, they examine the nature of the threat by analyzing a dozen alleged jihadi terror plots and attacks that occurred inside and outside prisons in Western Europe since 2014 in which at least one of the attackers/plotters had been convicted in Europe of a previous terrorism offense. Secondly, they look at the scale of the threat by calculating the rates of various forms of recidivism from a comprehensive database relating to U.K. jihadi terror activity.

Amarnath Amarasingam and Marc-André Argentino assess the emerging security threat posed by the QAnon conspiracy. They write: “A survey of cases of individuals who have allegedly or apparently been radicalized to criminal acts with a nexus to violence by QAnon, including one case that saw a guilty plea on a terrorism charge, makes clear that QAnon represents a public security threat with the potential in the future to become a more impactful domestic terror threat. This is true especially given that conspiracy theories have a track record of propelling terrorist violence elsewhere in the West as well as QAnon’s more recent influence on mainstream political discourse.”

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Cover: An unofficial photo obtained by the authors from ISGS's pledge ceremony to the Islamic State, apparently taken during the same event as published in a video by Amaq in October 2016.

The End of the Sahelian Anomaly: How the Global Conflict between the Islamic State and al-Qa`ida Finally Came to West Africa

By Héni Nsaibia and Caleb Weiss

After the emergence of the Islamic State in the Sahel (or the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara) in 2015, the group existed in an uneasy alliance with al-Qa`ida's various franchises in the region. Proving to be an exception to the rule that al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State fight each other in whichever territory they co-inhabit, the Sahel was for several years spared from such jihadi-on-jihadi fighting, in part because of personal relationships between jihadis in the rival groups. However, in recent months, this trend has been bucked by fighting between the two jihadi forces in Mali and Burkina Faso. As the two forces expand in the Sahel, a number of factors explain the growing tensions between the two sides, including the hardening of ideological divisions, pressure from Islamic State Central for its regional satellite to take on a more confrontational approach toward its rival, and tensions created by the growing ambition of the Islamic State affiliate in the Sahel.

Persistent violence has raged on for more than eight years in the Sahel, where al-Qa`ida's Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) are driving sub-regional insurgencies in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. After the emergence of ISGS in 2015, the two rival jihadi franchises for several years existed within an uneasy alliance in the region. This relationship was often described as the "Sahelian exception,"¹ drawing attention to the lack of conflict between the two amid intra-jihadi fighting between al-Qa`ida and Islamic State affiliates in other conflict theaters around the world.

For instance, internecine battles between the Taliban and the Islamic State Khorasan Province in Afghanistan,² al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula and the Islamic State in Yemen,³ al-Shabaab

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The authors thank Jules Duhamel, who created the map featured in this article. Follow @julesdhl

and the Islamic State in Somalia,⁴ and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and the Islamic State in Syria⁵ have all transpired since the inception of the Islamic State. Despite this precedent, JNIM and ISGS were reported as still cooperating in the region by the United Nations as recently as February 2020.⁶

While it is true that ISGS had intermittent issues with the various al-Qa`ida franchises in the Sahel in the years after its emergence, these issues had historically always stopped short of outright violence, with the sides able to deconflict before disagreements came to blows. This so-called 'exceptionalism,' however, appears to have recently run its course. Beginning last year, tensions and violent clashes between the two sides have been reported in several areas of northern and central Mali, and northern and eastern Burkina Faso.⁷

The recent fighting between JNIM and ISGS, which since March 2019 has formally operated as a subgroup with the Islamic State's West Africa Province,^a has sparked debate among observers and analysts about the nature of the relationship between the two. Some argue that these groups have historically been two clearly distinct entities with no cooperation between them,⁸ or at best opportunistic or circumstantial cooperation, while others state that they regularly coordinate and conduct operations to jointly control territory.⁹ Proponents of the former argument tend to contend that the historical lack of violence is explained by indifference and that clashes were inevitable,¹⁰ while proponents of the latter argument tend to find that the lack of perceived violence is indicative of outright amity and cooperation.¹¹

This article seeks to offer a nuanced perspective of the JNIM and ISGS relationship. The authors find that while there was never a "grand alliance" between JNIM and ISGS, the two groups benefited from cooperation on the ground owing to their shared histories and the personal relationships that transcended the global jihadi rivalry. Over time, however, significant local tension between the jihadi franchises developed, which undercut the previously built-up goodwill and led to violent clashes between them across the Sahel.

The first part of the article examines the special relationship that was forged between ISGS and JNIM. In looking at the "Sahelian" anomaly, it examines the common origins of both ISGS and JNIM, before assessing what the authors identify as the two key *drivers*

a It is important to note that the name ISGS is unofficial. Since March 2019, the group has operated under the Islamic State's West Africa Province (ISWAP) moniker, formally operating as a subgroup within that entity. However, the leadership hierarchy between Islamic State commanders in Nigeria, where ISWAP is headquartered, and ISGS commanders in the Sahel is currently unknown. The United Nations has found that although ISGS and ISWAP "have joint facilitators," ISGS is currently "operationally independent" from ISWAP. The usage of "ISGS" in this article is based on familiarity and for easier understanding. See "Twenty-fifth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities," United Nations, December 27, 2019, p. 11.

and manifestations of the previous special relationship between the groups in the Sahel: amicable personal relationships and coordinated actions in the Sahel. The second part of the article looks at how the groups have descended into open warfare since the summer of 2019. It provides a timeline of clashes between the entities and then identifies and examines a number of drivers of tension and conflict between the groups, which help to explain why the special relationship collapsed. The article concludes by discussing the future outlook for the conflict and the implications of the intra-jihadi clashes for the Sahel writ large.

Part One: The Forging of a Special Relationship

The Common Origins of ISGS and JNIM

In discussing the relationship between JNIM and ISGS, it is important to briefly describe the common origins of both entities. This history provides important context that helps explain why the two organizations continued to cooperate, even after one set of jihadists left al-Qa`ida's fold.^b In this respect, ISGS can be traced back to the former Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), a splinter group that left al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in 2011.¹²

Originally founded by Sultan Ould Bady, Ahmed al Tilemsi, Hamada Ould al-Kheiry (or Kheirou), and Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahraoui,¹³ MUJAO continued to work with AQIM and other al-Qa`ida franchises in the region, especially during the 2012 takeover of northern Mali.¹⁴ During al-Qa`ida's control of northern Mali, many of MUJAO's leaders became influential in Gao, including al-Sahraoui, who subsequently became the leader of the proclaimed 'Mujahideen Shura Council of the Islamic Emirate of Gao.'¹⁵ Following the French-led intervention that removed al-Qa`ida from its northern Mali territory in January 2013, much of MUJAO merged with another al-Qa`ida group in the region, Al-Mulathimin (or the Al-Muwaqqioon Bid-Dima Brigade) led by Mokhtar Belmokhtar, to form Al-Mourabitoun and pledged allegiance directly to al-Qa`ida's overall leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri.¹⁶

Both Tilemsi and Belmokhtar, however, would step aside to allow Egyptian fighter Abu Bakr al-Masri to command Al-Mourabitoun.^c Following al-Masri's death in April 2014, Tilemsi, a Malian Arab, would then take over until his death in December 2014.¹⁷ It was after Tilemsi's death and the emergence of the Islamic State that Al-Mourabitoun would start to split. In May 2015, the aforementioned al-Sahraoui released an audio message in which he pledged allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and the Islamic State on behalf of Al-Mourabitoun, declaring the formation of a new group called the Islamic State in Greater Sahara (ISGS).¹⁸ This was

quickly rebuffed by the group and Belmokhtar himself, but confirmed a splinter had taken place because it showed that only part of the group had defected to the Islamic State.¹⁹ Regardless of the confusion, it was clear that the Islamic State now had its first loyal band of fighters in the Sahel.^d

In late 2015, Al-Mourabitoun minus the defectors, renewed its loyalty to al-Qa`ida by joining AQIM's Saharan branch,²⁰ heralded by a series of successive terrorist attacks in Mali,²¹ Burkina Faso,²² and Ivory Coast.²³ In March 2017, AQIM's Sahara wing, along with Al-Mourabitoun and two other franchises, the AQIM front group Ansar Dine and its southern Malian contingent Katiba Macina, merged to form the Group for Support of Islam and Muslims (JNIM).²⁴ Iyad Ag Ghaly, the Tuareg leader of Ansar Dine, was given the reins over the conglomerate and pledged his allegiance to Abdelmalek Droukdel of AQIM, al-Qa`ida's Ayman al-Zawahiri, and Hibatullah Akhundzada of the Afghan Taliban.²⁵

To make the groups, leaders, and affiliations discussed in this article clearer, the authors have delineated these relationships in Table 1.

Table 1: Overview of the Sahelian jihadi constellation since 2012, including top leaders, dates of existence, and relationships with other groups.

Group	Leader(s)	Dates Active	Affiliation
Al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)	Abdelmalek Droukdel (deceased) ^e	2007-present	AQIM's Saharan branch is a constituent group of JNIM.
Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO)	Ahmed al-Tilemsi (deceased), Sultan Ould Bady, Hamada Ould al-Kheiry (or Kheirou), and Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahraoui	2011-2013	Splintered from AQIM's Saharan branch in 2011, before merging with Al-Mulathimin to form Al-Mourabitoun in 2013
Al-Mulathimin	Mokhtar Belmokhtar (fate not clear)	2012-2013	Splintered from AQIM's Saharan branch in 2012, before merging with MUJAO to form Al-Mourabitoun in 2013

b There have also been substantial tribal and familial ties between the groups, as well as overarching business interests that transcend the movements. These relationships undoubtedly contributed to why this exceptionalism occurred. See, for example, Dalia Ghanem, "Jihadism In The Sahel: Aqim's Strategic Maneuvers for Long-Term Regional Dominance," Carnegie Middle East Center, June 23, 2017, and Katherine Zimmerman, "Salafi-jihadi ecosystem in the Sahel," American Enterprise Institute, April 22, 2020.

c Internal jihadi documents found in Mali described al-Masri as having been sent by al-Qa`ida's senior leadership to the region. See Thomas Joscelyn, "Confusion surrounds West African jihadists' loyalty to Islamic State," FDD's Long War Journal, May 14, 2015.

d While this was the first official Islamic State group in the region, Hamada Ould al-Kheiry, who would later join the Islamic State, penned a letter in support of the group and its proclaimed caliphate almost a year prior to the formation of ISGS. Additionally, while ISGS first emerged in May 2015, it would not be officially recognized by the Islamic State until over a year later. See Hamada Ould al-Kheiry, "Azawadi Support for the Islamic State," July 10, 2014.

e Following his death in northern Mali in early June 2020, a successor has yet to be publicly named by AQIM.

Al-Mourabitoun	Abu Bakr al-Masri (deceased), Ahmed al-Tilemsi (deceased), Mokhtar Belmokhtar (fate not clear), Mohamed Ould Nouini (deceased), Himama Ould Lekhweir	2013-2015	Formed as a merger between MUJAO and Al-Mulathimin before the group, minus a pro-Islamic State faction, joined AQIM's Saharan branch in 2015. It is a constituent group of JNIM.
Ansar Dine	Iyad Ag Ghaly	2011-2017	Formed as a Tuareg jihadi group in northern Mali in late 2011 and was subsequently utilized as a front group for AQIM. It is a constituent group of JNIM.
Katiba Salaheddine	Sultan Ould Bady	2013-2017	Formed as a splinter from MUJAO and briefly joined Ansar Dine before becoming an independent unit. Loosely tied to JNIM before it joined ISGS in 2017.
Katiba Macina	Amadou Kouffa	2015-2017	Formed in 2015, it acts as Ansar Dine's branch in central Mali. It is a constituent group of JNIM.
Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS)	Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahraoui; Abdelhakim al-Sahraoui	2015-present	Islamic State's Sahelian affiliate that emerged as a splinter from Al-Mourabitoun in 2015
Ansaroul Islam	Ibrahim Dicko (deceased); Jafar Dicko	2016-present	Burkinabe jihadi group formed in 2016 that acts as a de facto constituent group of JNIM, although it is officially an independent group
Group for Support of Islam and Muslims (JNIM)	Iyad Ag Ghaly	2017-present	Formed as a merger between Ansar Dine and its Katiba Macina, AQIM's Saharan Branch, and Al-Mourabitoun in 2017

What Drove and Embodied the Special Relationship

Despite the early defection of a wing of Al-Mourabitoun and public disagreements over who actually joined the Islamic State, this did not stop the local wings of two global jihadi franchises from communicating or even cooperating on the ground in the Sahel. In this respect, the authors assess there were two main sources of cooperation between JNIM and ISGS: amicable personal relationships along with crossovers of personnel and coordinated actions.

Personal Relationships and Crossovers of Personnel

The first and perhaps most important driver of cooperation between JNIM and ISGS was that senior members of both organizations maintained interpersonal ties with each other despite belonging to rival groups. The web of relationships was to a significant degree a function of the just discussed common origin story of both entities. The amicability this produced was a key manifestation of the special relationship. This is perhaps unsurprising as the deep historical ties between local clans and tribes have transcended the group labels, allowing for a greater ease in cooperation.^f As such, these close relationships formed by the shared roots in the AQIM network and years of fighting together in the Sahel contributed to the so-called “Sahelian exception.”

This can be seen when, almost a year after the creation of the so-called ‘Islamic State in the Greater Sahara,’ Saharan al-Qa`ida commander Yahya Abu al-Hammam was quite open about AQIM’s ongoing relationship with al-Sahraoui and the would-be Islamic State group.^g In a January 2016 interview with Al-Akhbar, a Mauritanian news outlet, al-Hammam was even asked about his relationship with al-Sahraoui and his group, stating that “it is still a normal relationship and we have a connection with them.”^h

In addition to relationships between leaders of groups, evidence has also emerged about the presence of lower-level liaisons that have worked to maintain relations between the two groups, who likely benefited from the common origins of both organizations. For instance, local media has reported that Amadou Kouffa, the emir of JNIM’s Katiba Macina, personally met with Illiassou Djibo (or Petit Chafori), a Fulani emir within ISGS with a long history of previously being within the al-Qa`ida milieu in the Sahel, in early 2017 to discuss cooperation.ⁱ Perhaps most notably, however, at

f The commander of U.S. Special Operations Command Africa stated in an interview published in the February 2020 edition of this publication: “There are obviously historical ties between these groups [JNIM and ISIS-GS] that span clans, span tribes, and go from the leadership all the way down to the local fighters. This allows the ISIS and al-Qa`ida affiliates here [to] cooperate in [a] way we don’t see anywhere else.” Jason Warner, “A View from the CT Foxhole: Brigadier General Dagvin R.M. Anderson, Commander, U.S. Special Operations Command Africa,” *CTC Sentinel* 13:2 (2020).

g While ISGS first emerged in May 2015, it would not be officially recognized by the Islamic State until over a year later. See Thomas Joscelyn and Caleb Weiss, “Islamic State recognizes oath of allegiance from jihadists in Mali,” *FDD’s Long War Journal*, October 31, 2016.

h Al-Akhbar and other Mauritanian news outlets have a history of relaying information and statements from al-Qa`ida and other related groups.

i Chafori was previously a member of MUJAO before being arrested by French forces in early 2014. Later that year, he was released in a prisoner exchange for French AQIM hostage Serge Lazarevic. It is unclear when exactly Chafori joined ISGS. See “Frontière Niger-Mali : mettre l’outil militaire au service d’une approche politique,” *International Crisis Group*, June 12, 2018.

least three individuals from al-Qa`ida's ranks were identified by the United Nations as having acted as liaisons to al-Sahraoui's ISGS. In August 2018, the UN Panel of Experts on Mali identified Abdallah Ag Albakaye, a senior leader based in Talataye within JNIM's constituent group Ansar Dine, as a coordinating official between JNIM and ISGS in the Gao region of northern Mali.²⁸ Several ISGS fighters arrested by a joint force of French soldiers and Tuareg and Dawsahak militiamen also said that they received orders from Talataye and specifically mentioned Abdallah Ag Albakaye.²⁹ Another commander and senior aide of JNIM emir Iyad Ag Ghaly, Malick Ag Wanasnate, was in charge of these liaison efforts near In-Delimane in Mali's Menaka region until his death in early 2018, according to the United Nations.³⁰ Following Wanasnate's death, the United Nations reported that Faknan Ag Taki, a JNIM commander in northern Menaka, took over this responsibility.³¹

Another JNIM commander, Almansour Ag Alkassoum, who acted as JNIM's emir in the Gourma region,³² has also played a role in facilitating meetings with ISGS. For example, a summit in late 2017 between ISGS figures and Alkassoum related to ending what JNIM regarded as ISGS' excessive civilian-targeted violence against Imghad Tuareg and Dawsahak communities amid the jihadi groups' conflict with two pro-government Tuareg militias.³³ Following this meeting, Iyad Ag Ghaly, the overall emir of JNIM, appeared in a video in July 2018 and warned against "killing fellow Muslims," referring to the various ethnic battles being fought across Mali.³³

Another individual known as Fally Ould Kadana, a member of ISGS, was named by a former Malian rebel fighter as an intermediary working with JNIM commander Inkarouta Ag Nokh in Mali's Menaka region.³⁴ And in early November 2018, French forces arrested a jihadi commander known as "Marouchet," a longtime veteran in al-Qa`ida's ranks in the Sahel, near In-Ates, Niger.³⁵ Reporting suggests he was heavily tied to both ISGS and JNIM,³⁶ illustrating the fluidity between the two organizations.

In addition to liaisons and meetings between JNIM and ISGS, the two groups, according to the authors' assessment, found it easier to find common ground because of crossovers of personnel. The Sahel's long history of militancy, in which armed groups have often

drawn from a common pool of fighters,^k has allowed for a greater fluidity of militants among the region's many armed groups. Individuals without any defined allegiance, who act as what could be termed 'armed group nomads,' often shift from group for hyper-localized tribal dynamics or transactional purposes. The networks from which JNIM and ISGS are constituted are exceptionally complex with ethnic and tribal interconnections often transcending local, regional, and global jihadi affiliations, therefore making JNIM and ISGS (at least for a while) somewhat resistant to the forces driving al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State apart in other parts of the world.

One such 'armed group nomad' cited in a recent U.N. report is Najim Ould Baba Ahmed (or Nweijam), who is frequently mentioned in the context of militant activities in the Mali-Niger borderlands. He has, at various times, been called a member of MUJAO, Al-Mourabitoun, and of several militias such as the loyalist and ex-rebel factions of the Arab Movement of Azawad and the High Council for the Unity of Azawad (HCUA).³⁷ Interchangeably described as a commander and facilitator, Nweijam is suspected of leading a group of 30-40 Fulani Tolebe combatants that is believed by the United Nations to have carried out several attacks against local and foreign forces in the area of In-Delimane.³⁸ It is likely that Nweijam has also facilitated attacks for ISGS given his stronghold within the group's zone of influence.^m

Coordinated Actions

Beyond the amicable personal relations and exchanges of personnel as described above, joint and coordinated actions also help forge the special relationship between the groups. Though more may exist, at least five instances of ISGS-JNIM cooperation in raids can be cited. Significantly, in none of these instances were there dual or competing claims by the groups, unlike for other attacks discussed later in this section. Instead, in each of the five instances, the attack was claimed by one of the groups while independent reporting later found that militants from both ISGS and JNIM took part in the raid. First, in November 2017, the two groups launched a coordinated assault on a joint MINUSMA and Malian military grouping in the area of In-Delimane, located between Ansongo and Menaka

j On June 1, 2017, a joint force composed of French Barkhane forces as well as Movement for the Salvation of Azawad and Imghad Tuareg and Allies Self Defense Group militiamen, in coordination with Malian and Nigerian regular forces, carried out an ambush in Tissalatene on an ISGS convoy returning from Abala, Niger, where the Islamic State militants had attacked a gendarmerie camp. The involvement of the militias in this operation pushed ISGS and JNIM to ally up to fight them in Gao and Menaka. The ambush infuriated ISGS emir Al-Sahraoui who issued a *fatwa* against the Imghad Tuareg and Dawsahak, rendering it "halal" to seize their belongings and livestock. JNIM, which likely did not agree on the legal basis for the *fatwa* because as a group it has been more focused on building broad popular support, opposed the move. In the wake of al-Sahraoui's *fatwa*, attacks and abuses against Imghad and Dawsahak civilians escalated, spurring JNIM to send a delegation led by Alkassoum to ISGS in late 2017, a summit that resulted in heated arguments between the camps. Notably, Alkassoum and his aide Hamada (also present at the reported meeting) originate from the Imghad and Dawsahak communities, respectively, indicating that the JNIM commanders likely responded to complaints from their respective communities. Héni Nsaibia interview, local area expert from Gao, Mali, May 2019.

k Drawing from a common pool of fighters produced commonalities between groups in the Sahel, making cooperation easier. One example of this was JNIM and the High Council for the Unity of Azawad (HCUA), which originated from a splinter of Ansar Dine that left the group in 2013 following the French intervention in Mali. As a result of shared tribal affiliations and origins, militants belonging to HCUA were, as of 2019, alleged to still be maintaining ties to and cooperating with JNIM. See Arthur Boutellis and Marie-Joelle Zahar, "A Process in Search of Peace: Lessons from the Inter-Malian Agreement," International Peace Institute, June 2017, p. 10, and "Letter dated 6 August 2019 from the Panel of Experts established pursuant to resolution 2374 (2017) on Mali addressed to the President of the Security Council," United Nations Security Council, August 7, 2019, pp. 23, 26-27.

l The trajectory of Nweijam may also reflect the difficulties smaller tribes and their allies face in positioning themselves vis-à-vis stronger tribes and the often-predatory armed groups operating in the areas they inhabit.

m For instance, the ISGS force that struck the Nigerien military base in In-Ates in a July 2019 attack is believed to have prepared for the assault at a checkpoint in Mali run by Nweijam. See "Niger: l'attaque d'Inates aurait été préparée depuis un checkpoint situé au Mali," RFI, August 18, 2019.

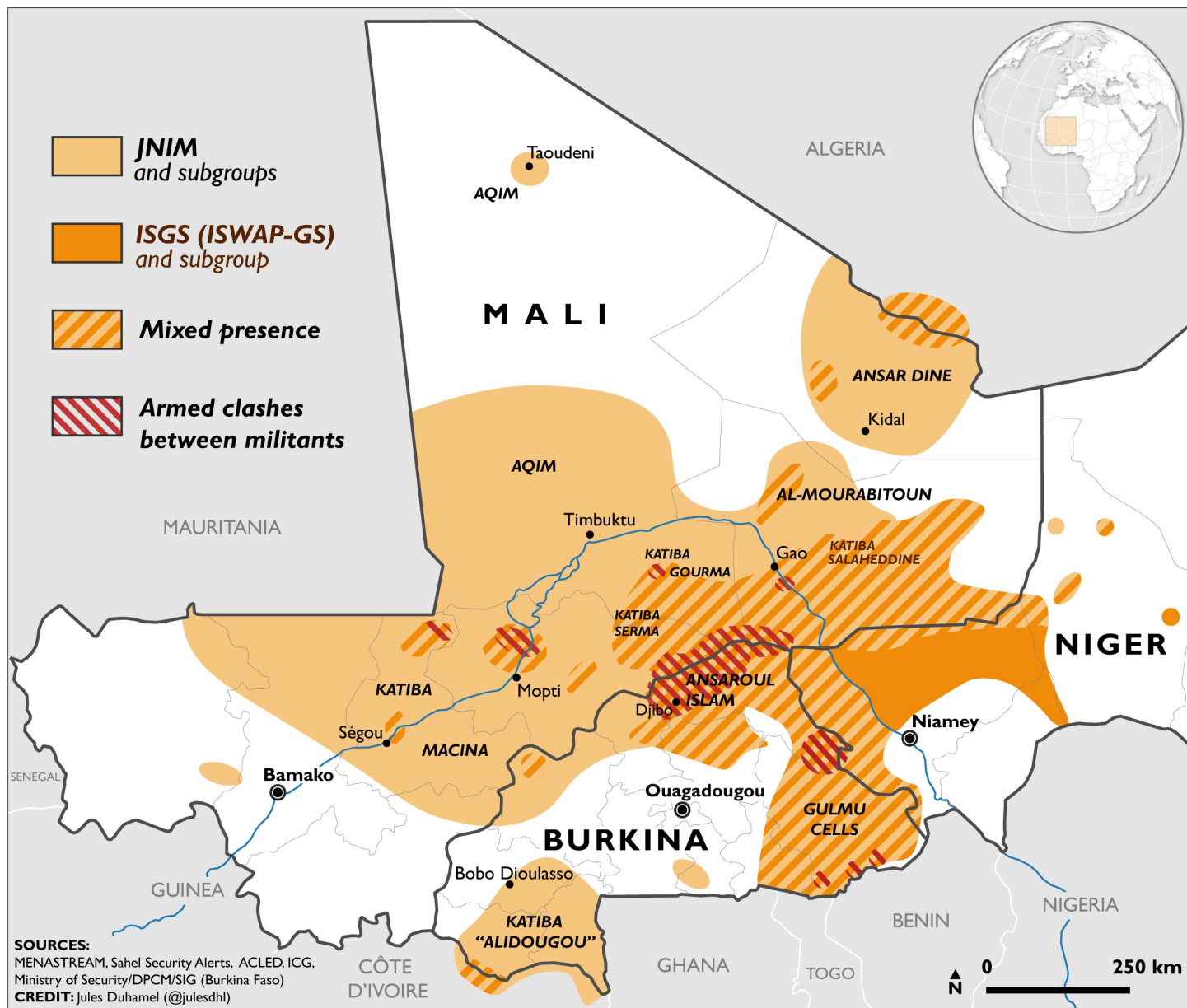


Figure 1: Insurgent Area of Operations in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Western Niger (January 2016-June 2020). The map illustrates where both JNIM, as well as its constituent groups, and ISGS have historically operated in the Sahel since January 2016. (Jules Duhamel)

in northeastern Mali.³⁹ Then, on May 14, 2019, ISGS fighters carried out a complex ambush near Tongo Tongo, Niger, which killed almost 30 Nigerien troops.⁴⁰ It was later indicated that a JNIM commander identified as Inkarouta Ag Nokh (or Abu Alghabass) reportedly provided fighters for the operation, after which spoils were shared between the organizations.⁴¹

Not long after that assault, ISGS carried out another large-scale attack against a military outpost in Koutougou, Burkina Faso, in August 2019.⁴² However, the French researcher Mathieu Pellerin assessed in a December 2019 report that it was likely another joint assault with JNIM.⁴³ A month later, JNIM claimed a near-simul-

taneous assault against a Malian national guard camp in Mondoro and the base of the regional G5 Sahel Force in Boulkessi, both situated in central Mali's Mopti Region along the border with Burkina Faso.⁴⁴ Similarly to Pellerin, a coordinator for a Sahel-based NGO made the observation to one of the authors that ISGS fighters took part in the double attack.⁴⁵

Finally, on December 10, 2019, ISGS launched the single deadliest attack on security forces recorded in Niger, killing more than 70 soldiers.⁴⁶ Afterward, Malian media reported that two of the fighters killed in jihadi ranks were members of the Malian rebel group HCUA, but they were locally identified as actually affiliated with JNIM, indicating that the raid was likely supported by JNIM.⁴⁷ It is evident that these instances were part of a larger coordinated offensive in the Liptako-Gourma (or tri-state border area of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso) in which numerous military outposts were successively overrun by both groups. This forced the militaries of

n While JNIM claimed responsibility for the In-Delimane attack, an ISGS lieutenant based in In-Ates from the Tuareg Imouchag tribe provided fighters for the assault. Héni Nsaibia interview, local area expert from the Tuareg community in Niger, November 2018.

each respective country to tactically withdraw from their respective border areas, leaving previously contested areas under JNIM and ISGS control.⁴⁸

In some instances, operations claimed by each organization appeared to show some levels of coordination between the franchises—though without partaking in joint raids. Take, for example, when ISGS militants assassinated Hamid Koundaba, the mayor of Koutougou, Burkina Faso, on April 8, 2018.⁴⁹ On the very next day, JNIM claimed responsibility for an IED on Burkinabe forces who were sent to reinforce the area following the assassination.⁵⁰ This type of coordination was also seen in the intermittent conflicts between the jihadis and a variety of groups such as the pro-Bamako Tuareg and Dawsahak militias, the Imghad Tuareg, the Allies Self Defense Group (GATIA), and the Movement for the Salvation of Azawad (MSA) in the Menaka region of Mali. In early 2019, JNIM trumpeted being at war with MSA and GATIA by claiming a series of attacks in the Gao and Menaka regions.⁵¹ These attacks were occurring simultaneously with assaults by ISGS against the militias.⁵² The United Nations has also confirmed specific instances of where JNIM and ISGS have cooperated, including the aforementioned attacks on GATIA and MSA in Menaka.⁵³

As outlined above, there have been several instances of JNIM and ISGS cooperation in Mali. In Kidal in northern Mali, JNIM leader Ag Ghaly's historical stronghold,⁵⁴ ISGS was able to operate unimpeded as shown by several attacks in Algeria just across the Algeria-Mali border, likely indicating a certain degree of acceptance on the part of JNIM. In fact, these attacks indicate ISGS continued to have a presence in the area until at least late 2019, months after clashes began between the groups in other regions.⁵⁵

The two groups also may have coordinated a hostage-taking operation in Benin. In May 2019, two French tourists were kidnapped by jihadis in northern Benin who then took the pair to Burkina Faso where they were to be transited to northern Mali.⁵⁶ The two were later freed in a French special forces operation in Burkina Faso, during which two French soldiers were killed.⁵⁷ After the raid, French officials stated that the group that sponsored the operation was JNIM's Katiba Macina without referring to the group actually holding the hostages.⁵⁸ But it was reported by the French publication *Le Monde* that Burkinabe intelligence found that the kidnapping in Benin was performed by militants linked to ISGS who were then going to transfer the French nationals to Katiba Macina.⁵⁹

Cooperation between JNIM and ISGS has also been reported by French and U.S. military officials. For instance, General Bru-

o Several ISGS fighters relocated from Gao to the area around Kidal in the 2018-2019 period. One of them was Aboubacar Ould Abidine, successor and cousin of Sultan Ould Bady, MUJAO's co-founder who in 2013 created his own group, Katiba Salaheddine, in Mali's Gao region. The Algerian military killed Ould Abidine in an air-supported operation on November 18, 2019, in Tawendert, Algeria. See, for instance, Menastream, "#Algeria-#BREAKING: Aboubacar Ould Abidine (aka Abu Zoubeir), cousin & Katiba Salaheddine/#ISGS lieutenant of #MUJAO ...," Twitter, November 21, 2019.

p To date, it has not been confirmed that ISGS militants were the hostage-takers in this operation. The authors believe this may be explained by Burkinabe authorities underestimating Katiba Macina's influence in the area concerned. The Burkinabe intelligence assessment may also have been influenced by reports that a Beninese tourist guide was shot dead and beheaded during the hostage-taking, a modus operandi that Burkinabe authorities probably viewed as indicative of Islamic State militants being the perpetrators. See "Bénin : Le guide a été tué par balle et décapité, selon un source locale," France24, May 6, 2019.

no Guibert, the former overall commander of France's Operation Barkhane in the Sahel, confirmed in 2018 that JNIM and ISGS have launched joint assaults across the Sahel, though he cautioned against the idea of any grand alliance between the groups.⁶⁰ For his part, Brigadier General Dagvin R.M. Anderson, commander of U.S. Special Operations Command Africa, noted in an interview published in February 2020 that the United States had identified instances where JNIM and ISGS have cooperated and coordinated in attacks.⁶¹

General Anderson was speaking after clashes had erupted between ISGS and JNIM but before the relationship between them had fully deteriorated. His view at the time was that "JNIM provides unity of purpose, unity of effort but not necessarily unity of command. JNIM and ISIS-GS operate together and even coordinate attacks together."⁶² Anderson also stated that JNIM and ISGS were "less concerned about who has complete control locally, focusing instead on propagating their extremist ideology and working toward the greater cause of establishing an Islamic State."⁶³ Like his French counterpart, he stopped short of implying a grand merger between al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State in the Sahel.

Indeed, it should be noted that there were several instances of dual claims wherein both groups claimed responsibility for the same attacks. This includes a February 2018 IED attack against a Barkhane convoy near In-Delimane that was initially claimed by JNIM,⁶⁴ for which ISGS later took credit.⁶⁵ Almost a year later, several attacks were separately claimed by both JNIM and ISGS in the Mansila area in Burkina Faso's Yagha Province in January 2019.⁶⁶ And a March 2020 ambush against the Malian army near Boulkessi was also claimed by both organizations with identical statements.⁶⁷ While dual claims may signal competition, it could also indicate difficulties JNIM and ISGS face in distinguishing themselves from one another, especially with regard to how their respective chains of command identify actions by the rank-and-file.⁶⁸

In sum, while it was always very unlikely that JNIM and ISGS would merge, it was evident the groups oftentimes coordinated their efforts against shared enemies and even had designated commanders in various areas across the region to facilitate this relationship.

Thus, as shown above, ISGS and JNIM's historically non-violent relationship has been the product of more than mere non-aggression: instead, as evidenced from personnel exchanges and participation in multiple attacks together, the non-violent armistice between them was in part the result of occasional cooperation, not merely ignoring one another.

Part Two: Descent into Open Warfare

The special relationship between ISGS and JNIM forged by common origins, personal connections, crossovers of personnel, and coordinated actions eventually gave way to the same levels of hostility seen elsewhere between the Islamic State and al-Qa`ida. Part two of this article first documents the clashes between ISGS and JNIM that began in the summer of 2019. It then explains the collapse of the special relationship by identifying and examining several drivers toward conflict.

The Clashes Between ISGS and JNIM

Based on data compiled by the authors, ISGS and JNIM have physically clashed at least 46 times across the Sahel beginning in July 2019 in the Mali-Burkina Faso border region. Since then, the

fighting has shifted from Mali's Inner Niger Delta and the Gourma Region of Mali and Burkina Faso, to areas of Burkina Faso's eastern provinces along the borders with Niger and Benin.

According to estimates by the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), more than 300 jihadis have been killed on either side as the result of these armed engagements since the start of the clashes.⁶⁹ The International Crisis Group also stated in an April 2020 briefing that fighting in Burkina Faso's Soum Province alone that month "left at least 100 [jihadis] dead."⁷⁰ As such, it is clear that the "Sahelian exception" once enjoyed by both JNIM and ISGS is now over.

The war between JNIM and ISGS began in earnest in July 2019 after a firefight in the Burkinabe border village of Ariel.⁷¹ Another confrontation was reported in Mali in September 2019 in Haoussa-Foulane between Gao and Ansongo.⁷² In December 2019 and January 2020, clashes between the groups were reported in southern Mondoro (Douentza), Dogo (Youwarou), and In-Abelbel (Gourma-Rharous).⁷³ The clashes intensified in 2020. In March 2020, fighting between JNIM and ISGS was reported near the Mauritanian town of Fassala, which sits on the border with Mali.⁷⁴ Except for Haoussa-Foulane and In-Abelbel, all of these locations sit within the areas of operation for JNIM's Katiba Macina, showing that this conflict largely began within its zone of influence as it tried to push ISGS away from the Inner Niger Delta before spreading to other areas and other *katibas*.

Despite these clashes, it was not until a May 2020 issue of the Islamic State's weekly Al Naba newsletter that either side openly acknowledged the violent clashes between them in the Sahel. The Al Naba article discussed fighting between the two jihadi heavyweights in both Mali and Burkina Faso, as well as the Burkina Faso-Niger border region over the previous month. In central Mali, the Islamic State reported that its men "repulsed two attacks" by JNIM in Mali's Mopti region. It also specifically mentioned the area near Nampala, which sits close to the borders with Mauritania, and the areas "east of Macina" in the Segou region.⁷⁵ Local media reported fighting between the jihadi groups in these same areas over the few prior weeks, adding some credence to the Islamic State's claims. For instance, in early April 2020, clashes were reported in the localities of Dialloubé,⁷⁶ Koubi, Diantakaye, and Ninga in the Mopti region.⁷⁷

The Islamic State's May 2020 newsletter also makes notes of further clashes south of Boulkessi, Mali, in the weeks prior.⁷⁸ Much like the jihadi-on-jihadi fighting in Mali's Mopti region, battles have also been widely reported in the Gourma area of Mali and Burkina Faso. For instance, on April 13, 2020, the Islamic State launched an attack on JNIM's men near the locality of Tin-Tabakat.⁷⁹

q The clashes between JNIM and IGSS in Dogo received significant attention as two ISGS fighters were killed and eight others taken prisoner, which caused JNIM a minor media imbroglio. A fake claim of responsibility attributed to JNIM was released online that was reported on by local media. This caused the group to then release an official statement calling the previous claim fake and denying any responsibility for the clashes in Dogo. It also took the opportunity to declare that it does not generally target Muslim or Christian populations, including marketplaces and churches. This was a way of distinguishing itself from, and subtly putting the blame for such attacks on, ISGS. See Amachagh, "Dans un communiqué publié par @Az_Zallaqa sur son compte sur la plateforme #Tamtam le 27.1.2020 ..." Twitter, February 18, 2020, and Menastream, "#Mali: #JNIM refutes a fake statement attributed to the group related ..." Twitter, February 20, 2020.

Three days later, another skirmish between JNIM and ISGS was reported by Al Naba near the village of In-Tillit in Mali's Gao region.⁸⁰ While this claim was not backed by local reporting, the United Nations has noted that the Islamic State has increased its presence inside Gao earlier this year, making this instance entirely plausible.⁸¹

On April 18, 2020, one of the largest battles so far between the two reportedly took place in the Ndaki area of Mali's Gossi commune. According to local media, a large contingent of JNIM fighters targeted the Islamic State's men in four different villages in the area.⁸² Malian and Burkinabe media stated that as many as 40 vehicles were in the JNIM convoy. The Islamic State appears to have confirmed these events, albeit on a different date. According to the group, JNIM targeted Islamic State positions in the Boula area, west of Korfooueyouey^r on the Mali-Burkina Faso border area, with "dozens of motorcycles and vehicles" on the Islamic calendar date corresponding to April 26, 2020. The Islamic State further contended that its men gained the upper hand during the battle following a suicide car bomb against al-Qa`ida's men.⁸³ It also claimed to have captured 40 motorcycles and three vehicles from JNIM.⁸⁴

On April 20, 2020, another firefight was recorded near the locality of Pobe inside Burkina Faso's Soum province,⁸⁵ while another occurred in Kerboule in the Koutougou department of the same province.⁸⁶ Further battles near the Burkina Faso towns of Arbinda and Nassoumbou have also been reported.⁸⁷

Another issue of Al Naba, released in June 2020 made the first explicit reference to clashes with Ansaroul Islam.⁸⁸ In the June 2020 newsletter, the Islamic State claimed that Jafar Dicko, the leader of Ansaroul Islam, founded with support from JNIM's constituent groups,⁸⁹ allegedly lost over 170 fighters in clashes in late May 2020 with the Islamic State's men in the border region between Mali and Burkina Faso.⁹⁰ Another clash in Burkina Faso between JNIM and ISGS was reported near Ghana in the aforementioned June 2020 Al Naba issue,⁹¹ which likely correlates to a confirmed incident near Pama, Burkina Faso, on May 28, 2020.⁹² Fighting in Burkina Faso's Yagha Province, which is close to the border between Burkina Faso and Niger, was also reported in late May 2020.⁹³

Al-Qa`ida channels on Telegram had a different version of events, however. The al-Qa`ida loyalists argue that Al Naba's retelling of events were lies, while adding that JNIM had killed several ISGS members in Burkina Faso in recent weeks.⁹⁴ Another statement posted by pro-al-Qa`ida sources alleged that Abdelmalek Droukdel ordered JNIM to "eradicate the Islamic State and eradicate them from land of the mujahideen," implying that Droukdel's role in the fighting between Islamic State and al-Qa`ida franchises in the region was much deeper than previously thought.⁹⁵ But the details in both of these statements have not been confirmed. And as of the time of publishing, official al-Qa`ida channels have so far not publicly commented on the fighting between both groups.

The Drivers Toward Conflict

What factors then led a once amicable—and cooperative—relationship to turn into outright violence? The growing tensions between ISGS and JNIM were, the authors assess, the result of several different factors. One likely driver is the longstanding ideological differ-

r The Boula area is the local Fulani name for the waterhole-filled areas stretching from Gountouré in Burkina Faso to Tin-Tabakat in Mali.

ences between the groups. Whereas previously these were glossed over, in recent months—as will be described below—they have been increasingly starkly articulated by both sides, further cementing the ideological divide. A second likely factor that drove the two groups toward conflict, and that helped cement the ideological divide, was ISGS formally becoming a regional subunit of the Islamic State’s West Africa Province in March 2019, with Islamic State Central taking over ISGS’ media output from that time onward.⁹⁶ This presumably resulted in Islamic State Central pushing its satellite toward confrontation and taking a more confrontational approach as evidenced by the increasingly hostile discourse in its propaganda. A third likely factor was the growing ambition shown by ISGS after it formally became part of ISWAP. Another likely driver was their sharply different treatment of the local population. A fifth likely factor was the fallout from defections. As will be outlined, given these forces pulling the groups apart, attempts to mediate between them failed.

Ideology

As time went by, it was perhaps inevitable that the deep-seated ideological differences that always existed between ISGS and JNIM would challenge their special relationship. In recent months, JNIM and ISGS have released several pieces of propaganda that have addressed the ideological differences plaguing the two organizations.

The first in this volley of propaganda was a series of pamphlets released by JNIM in early 2020.⁹⁷ Penned by Qutaybah Abu Numan al-Shinqiti, a Mauritanian religious scholar affiliated with AQIM,⁹⁸ the booklets were addressed to both JNIM’s detractors though neither explicitly mentions ISGS by name.⁹⁹

The first pamphlet, which was addressed to those who have criticized JNIM’s implementation of sharia law, argues for what it portrays as al-Qa`ida’s slower and more calculated approach in its implementation as a counter to the Islamic State’s quick and often heavy-handed approach. The second booklet can be viewed as a call to restore unity among JNIM and ISGS. The booklet, entitled “Year of the Group,” recalled the story of the historical Hasan-Muawiyah treaty as an analogy for the current challenges in the Sahel.⁵ In Shinqiti’s retelling of the story, the ideologue makes an appeal to jihadis in the Sahel to also come together to prevent further clashes and disagreements.

Around the same time as the pamphlets, several audio messages from JNIM commanders were released in local languages, including Tamachek, Fulfulde, and Arabic, which focused on doctrinal divergences between JNIM and ISGS. One such audio message in Tamachek (or Tuareg language) was representative of the other messages in its warning against the recent arrival of the “*khawar-*

ij” in the Sahel, describing the Islamic State’s arrival “as a test for the mujahideen in order to separate the true [believers] from the false.”¹⁰⁰

This exact sentiment would again surface following severe clashes between JNIM and ISGS. In an unofficial video produced for local consumption dated June 1, 2020, JNIM showcased purported spoils of war seized in fighting with ISGS.¹⁰¹ Throughout the clip, one of the jihadis featured repeatedly refers to the adversary [ISGS] by the pejorative term “*khawarij*.”

A Push Toward Confrontation by Islamic State Central

In March 2019, a photo was released online showing Islamic State fighters in Burkina Faso branded as the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP).¹⁰² This photo was intended to denote that ISGS had formally been subsumed under the Islamic State’s West Africa Province, which is largely based in and around northeastern Nigeria. This restructuring in effect produced two regionally distinct subgroups within the Islamic State province, with ISGS becoming more integrated into the Islamic State’s overall structure, including its media apparatus. For example, at some point in 2019 following the rebranding under ISWAP, an ISGS cell was created along the border between Mali and Algeria.¹⁰³ Anecdotal evidence has since suggested that this cell may have been an attempt by Islamic State Central to establish operational oversight by using Islamic State-Libya operatives as middle management.¹⁰⁴ With likely greater control over its affiliate, Islamic State Central was seemingly able to push it to take the same confrontational approach toward al-Qa`ida in the Sahel as the Islamic State had globally. In turn, this likely led to spiraling tensions and the groups to not only starkly articulate their ideological differences in a war of words, but also to go to war with each other in some parts of the Sahel.

Prior to March 2019, ISGS primarily relied on its own rudimentary media infrastructure to produce its propaganda as its communications with the Islamic State’s central media remained sporadic at best.¹⁰⁵ Following the formal restructuring of ISGS under the Islamic State West Africa Province brand in March 2019,¹⁰⁶ most media statements including videos and photos produced by ISGS have been released through the Islamic State’s official media apparatus.¹⁰⁷ This has allowed the Islamic State to push the messaging toward more hostile criticism of JNIM to suit its general narrative. The subsuming of ISGS into the West Africa Province and the more confrontational tone likely antagonized JNIM with ISGS no longer viewed as a junior ally to the Sahelian al-Qa`ida franchise, but now a potent competitor challenging its hegemony, which needed to be confronted.

The Islamic State sharpened its criticism of JNIM after Qutaybah Abu Numan al-Shinqiti’s opening salvo earlier this year. Just a few months after al-Shinqiti’s pamphlets were released, the Islamic State began to incorporate the local Sahelian tensions into its global propaganda. For example, the Islamic State highlighted the

s That treaty, which occurred in the early days of Islam, stipulated that Hasan (the grandson of Muhammad and son and successor to Ali as caliph following the former’s assassination) would abdicate as caliph in favor of his father’s rival Muawiyah. That peace accord was originally designed to prevent further conflict between the two rival camps. See “The Terms of the Peace Treaty,” Al Islam.

t This term references an early extremist sect of Islam that defected from the Caliph Ali and that would later assassinate him. In Muslim countries, this has become a popular insult against the Islamic State and is often used by jihadis hostile to the group, including al-Qa`ida. See, for instance, Mohamed Bin Ali, “Labelling IS Fighters: Khawarij, Not Jihadi-Salafis,” RSIS, April 4, 2018, and Thomas Joscelyn, “Al Qaeda ideologue justifies Shabaab’s war with the Islamic State in Somalia,” FDD’s Long War Journal, January 23, 2019.



ISGS fighters in Burkina Faso, seemingly during a pledge ceremony to the Islamic State, in an undated picture obtained by the authors in April 2018

tensions in the Sahel in a video released by its Yemen Province in April 2020, which accused al-Qa`ida of “deviating” following the Arab Spring protests.¹⁰⁸ In regard to the Sahel, the video strongly denounced AQIM’s actions in the 2012 jihadi takeover of northern Mali and condemned AQIM and its then leader, Abdelmalek Droukdel, for working with “apostate movements,” namely the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad, in the occupation.^u

Just a few weeks after the Islamic State branch in Yemen’s broadside, the Islamic State Central media apparatus expanded on its criticisms of al-Qa`ida in the Sahel, going so far as to argue that the latter had started a war in the region.^v In the aforementioned Al Naba newsletter, which for the first time acknowledged the violent clashes between the groups in the Sahel, the Islamic State said that al-Qa`ida “never misses the chance for treachery.”¹⁰⁹ The newsletter also made clear that these criticisms were directly aimed at two of JNIM’s top leaders, Amadou Kouffa and Iyad Ag Ghaly, in that

^u This statement made by the Islamic State harkens back to an earlier letter penned by Abu Walid al-Sahraoui’s Mujahideen Shura Council in Gao during al-Qa`ida’s takeover. That statement, which was published in late 2012, also denounced the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad for being secular and refusing to “implement Islamic Sharia.” See Majlis Shura al-Mujahideen in Gao, “To the People of the Cities in Northern Mali about the reason for its fight with the MNLA (secular movement),” November 26, 2012.

^v It is important to note that these criticisms came from outside the region and have been coordinated by the Islamic State’s central media apparatus. This fits with how the Islamic State has been able to coordinate its media and propaganda efforts around the world. See Daniel Milton, *Pulling Back the Curtain: An Inside Look at the Islamic State’s Media Organization* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2018).

the two had “planned the war long ago.”¹¹⁰ Moreover, it also echoed earlier complaints made by ISGS field commanders over JNIM’s purported willingness to negotiate with the Malian government, though JNIM has insisted this would only happen after French troops leave the region.¹¹¹

The most senior Islamic State criticism of JNIM came on May 28, 2020, in a speech by the Islamic State’s official spokesman, Abu Hamza al-Quraishi. In his address, al-Quraishi explicitly accused al-Qa`ida’s men of working with the Malian government to kill the Islamic State’s men in the region.¹¹² The spokesman went on to further criticize JNIM’s alleged willingness to negotiate with the Malian government before calling JNIM “guard dogs” for Algeria and accusing it of working with “nationalist and secular groups.”^{113w} He even alleged that JNIM has “prevented others from fighting it [Algeria].”

According to al-Quraishi, the fighting between ISGS and JNIM across the Sahel began after JNIM “got upset by the news of the Islamic State’s conquests” in the region.¹¹⁴ The spokesman then lambasted JNIM for its handling of defections within its ranks, stating that “their backs broke when a large grouping of their followers joined the Islamic State.”¹¹⁵ As a result, he stated “they are today killing those who left their movement to join the Islamic State in West Africa.”¹¹⁶ Highlighting the fluid nature of armed groups in northern

^w The phrase “nationalistic and secular groups” is likely a reference to the various Tuareg and other ethnic militias that have fought against the Islamic State, mainly in Mali. In June 2020, an Al Naba issue was more specific in this reference, accusing JNIM of working with the Coordination of Azawad Movements, a grouping of Tuareg and Arab nationalist groups, against the Islamic State. See Al Naba, Issue 238, June 11, 2020.

Mali, al-Quraishi also noted that JNIM “does not stop its followers from joining the apostate factions from the secular, to the national, or others, and they see them as their brothers in religion.”¹¹⁷ At one point, al-Quraishi took offense at the use of the term “*khawarij*” used by JNIM leaders in local audio messages.^x

The Growing Ambition of ISGS

ISGS, as it has grown in strength, has increasingly sought to usurp its position in relation to its historically dominant counterpart in JNIM. Its drive for dominance was heightened by its rebranding under ISWAP, which has likely afforded Islamic State Central more authority over ISGS. As previously discussed, the more formal integration of ISGS into the Islamic State’s fold has also likely meant that directives from Islamic State Central have caused ISGS to be more aggressive on the ground. This can be seen in at least three respects: increased expansion in central Mali, large assaults on military positions across the Sahel, and contestation over natural resources. Firstly, in central Mali, ISGS has taken advantage of internal dissent within JNIM to make inroads in the historical al-Qa`ida stronghold of the Inner Niger Delta.¹¹⁸ As will be discussed more in depth later, internal squabbling within JNIM’s Katiba Macina has allowed ISGS to poach members from JNIM in the region. This has, in turn, afforded ISGS more influence in the area. Secondly, ISGS has conducted a series of major assaults across the Sahel since the more formal integration into the Islamic State. In just the past year alone, ISGS has committed some of the deadliest attacks in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, indicating its growing capabilities.¹¹⁹ Lastly, ISGS’ growth has allowed it to challenge JNIM over control for several strategic areas across the Sahel, many of these areas rich in natural resources. For instance, in the Inner Niger Delta, ISGS is vying for influence over pastureland.¹²⁰ In the Gourma, it has sought more influence in areas near artisanal mining sites, such as gold mines.¹²¹ Whereas in Burkina Faso’s east, it has challenged JNIM’s dominance over wildlife and hunting reserves.¹²²

Differing Treatment of the Local Population

At the heart of the current competition between JNIM and ISGS is how each respective organization deals with the local communities in which they operate and recruit. As both groups are vying for power and influence amidst various communal conflicts within the Sahel,¹²³ each franchise has taken a different approach in order to exploit these conflicts for their own respective benefit.

At the organizational level, JNIM has followed a community-based approach based on al-Qa`ida’s *modus operandi* whereby local grievances are exploited and local militants are transformed into allied groups.¹²⁴ JNIM has attempted to embed itself within the local fabric of the Sahel,¹²⁵ often portraying itself as a communal defender to such ethnic groups as the Fulani of central Mali.¹²⁶ Conversely, ISGS has posited itself as a more uncompromising alternative to JNIM and preys on more violent or vengeful individuals to exacerbate communal conflicts.¹²⁷

These differences in how both JNIM and ISGS have interacted

x In al-Quraishi’s speech, he explicitly referred to the use of ‘*khawarij*’ in reference to members of the Islamic State’s West African Province (ISWAP), under which ISGS operates. However, he mentioned this in the context of the fighting between JNIM and the Islamic State’s men in the Sahel, making this a reference to the audio messages from JNIM.

with local communities have been at the forefront of tensions between the organizations. For instance, ISGS leaders have openly voiced their criticisms over JNIM’s Katiba Macina and how its leader, Amadou Kouffa, is open to agreements with ethnic Bambara and Dogon militias and negotiations with the Malian government.¹²⁸ ISGS’ second in command, Abdelhakim al-Sahraoui, has been particularly vocal in his criticism of JNIM’s alleged openness to negotiations with the Malian government and agreements reached with Bambara Donsos^y in the Macina (Inner Niger Delta).¹²⁹

Additionally, land disputes among the Fulani of central Mali have also bled into the competition between JNIM and ISGS. As outlined by researcher Yvan Guichaoua, JNIM and ISGS have differed on the institution of taxes and regulations on pastures used by Fulani pastoralists in the areas under their influence.¹³⁰ In conjunction with the groups’ increasingly close geographic proximity to each other because of their expansion in the region, this has contributed to the increased tensions.

The Fallout from Defections

As ISGS has grown in the region, JNIM has faced several rounds of defections to its rival, with the fallout contributing to tensions between the groups.

In one of the first such instances of defections from JNIM to ISGS, in the summer of 2017, a group of Tolebe Fulani fighters in central Mali belonging to Katiba Macina defected to ISGS.¹³¹ Around the same time, Katiba Salaheddine, a jihadi outfit led by Sultan Ould Bady that was loosely within al-Qa`ida’s orbit in the Sahel, also joined ISGS.^{132 z}

These desertions were not lost on JNIM, as it eventually indirectly responded to these events in a propaganda video released in November 2018. In that video, Amadou Kouffa, JNIM’s leader in the Macina [Inner Niger Delta], ostensibly called on Fulani across West Africa and beyond to wage jihad in the Sahel. However, the speech appeared to be more a call for unity amid the aforementioned defections to ISGS.¹³³ In the speech, Kouffa addressed all Fulani jihadis or “mujahideen” in the region, without being specific to any particular group or movement. At one point in the video, Kouffa even explicitly stressed that they (the Fulani jihadis) should “come together and unite.”¹³⁴

Despite the early efforts by JNIM to stem the tide of defections to ISGS, it is clear that the initiative failed. Throughout 2019 and 2020 in neighboring Burkina Faso, segments of Ansaroul Islam also saw defections to ISGS in the Centre-Nord region,¹³⁵ Seno Province,¹³⁶ and in other areas near the border with Mali.^{137 aa} These defections from Ansaroul to ISGS were the culmination of attempts by ISGS to wrest influence over the group away from JNIM since

y Donsos are members of traditional hunter fraternities in Mandé-speaking communities across West Africa. These groups have formed community-based militias in Mali and Burkina Faso, united in their pro-government stance and campaign against Fulani groups. The Bambara are one of the largest ethnic groups in Mali.

z Interestingly, Abu Walid al-Sahraoui had previously rebuked Sultan Ould Bady and his Katiba Salaheddine for leaving MUJAO in 2013 and joining Ansar Dine. See “Formation of the new Katibat Ansar al Sunnah and Four Sarayyas,” Al-Murabitun Foundation for Media Production, January 5, 2013.

aa With these defections, it is clear that Ansaroul Islam’s loyalties were divided between a pro-JNIM camp and a pro-ISGS camp. Given the defections to ISGS, it is unclear if Ansaroul Islam is still operating on an independent basis or if it has been more formally subsumed by JNIM.

Ansaroul Islam's inception in 2016.¹³⁸ Starting in late 2019, Katiba Macina also saw defections to ISGS in Burkina Faso's Kossi Province.¹³⁹ Then by January 2020, another unit belonging to Katiba Macina near Nampala, Mali, also left JNIM for ISGS.¹⁴⁰ And another set of Fulani fighters also left al-Qa`ida's ranks in the same general area not long after.¹⁴¹

Katiba Macina, specifically, has faced sharp internal debates between local and non-local fighters over usage fees for access to lavish pastureland, *zakat* collection (or alms giving), and booty-sharing. These issues combined have caused a perception of marginalization among non-local fighters in the Inner Niger Delta, consequently spurring defections to the Islamic State.^{142 ab}

While JNIM, through its silence on the clashes, may be trying to play down mounting tensions, ISGS has continued to try to poach JNIM combatants, undoubtedly antagonizing JNIM.

Failed Attempts at Mitigating Tension

Clashes erupted and intensified between JNIM and ISGS despite attempts by the two groups to work out agreements and establish deconfliction zones. For example, representatives from both JNIM and ISGS, facilitated by veteran al-Qa`ida leader Sedane Ag Hitta,^{143 ac} who also serves as JNIM's local military commander, reportedly met to discuss such issues in Boughessa in Mali's Kidal region in February 2019.¹⁴⁴ Following the February summit, violent clashes broke out between the jihadi camps that prompted at least two more meetings in June 2019¹⁴⁵ and October 2019, with the latter taking place in the Tinzaouatène area of Kidal, as documented by the United Nations.¹⁴⁶

Future Outlook

Notwithstanding the violent clashes between JNIM and ISGS, concern has grown about the threat the groups pose to the region. In July 2020, the U.N. monitoring team that tracks the global jihadi threat stated that "ISIL franchises in West Africa and the Sahel continued to enjoy operational success in early 2020, as have those of Al-Qaida, heightening international concern about stability in the region."¹⁴⁷ Since 2017, both ISGS and JNIM have rapidly expanded across the Sahel.¹⁴⁸ The two groups are pushing into new territory deeper in Burkina Faso, southwestern Niger, and southern Mali, while remaining a constant threat in central and northern Mali and western Niger.¹⁴⁹ JNIM's constituent groups have penetrated deeper into Burkina Faso, now directly threatening the security of several West African states like the Ivory Coast, Benin, and Togo.¹⁵⁰

In other areas, such as in eastern Burkina Faso, both JNIM and ISGS are controlling or contesting significant swaths of territory.¹⁵¹

ab The arguments were mainly between those fighters local to southern Mali and those regional fighters who came from areas outside of central Mali, not necessarily fighters from other countries. Local fighters have been given preference over their non-local counterparts, leading to the marginalization of the latter group of militants.

ac Ag Hitta, also known as Abu Abdel Hakim al-Kidali (or "al-Qayrawani"), was the founder of AQIM's Katibat Youssef ibn Tachfin in northern Mali. Despite leaving the jihadi ranks for a short period in 2013, he rejoined a few months later to continue to play a role in AQIM's activities in the Sahel and now acts in a leadership role for JNIM. See Benjamin Roger, "Visuel interactif : le nouvel organigramme d'Aqmi," *Jeune Afrique*, October 25, 2013; "Mali: ces Touaregs qui ont choisi le jihad," *RFI*, May 22, 2015; and Menastream, "#Mali: Probably not seen before in the #OSINT domain, #JNIM military commander in ...," *Twitter*, December 7, 2019.

French military officials have posited ISGS as the biggest security threat in the Sahel.¹⁵² This is further indicated by significant French military action taken against the group relative to raids against JNIM.¹⁵³ At the same time, however, U.S. officials have maintained that JNIM remains the most potent jihadi group in the region.¹⁵⁴ The truth is likely somewhere in the middle.

In early June 2020, al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb's overall emir, Abdelmalek Droukdel, whom Iyad Ag Ghali and JNIM had the most immediate loyalty to, was killed in a French operation in northern Mali. The operation reportedly took place near the locality of Talhandak in Mali's far north.¹⁵⁵ His death was undoubtedly a major blow to al-Qa`ida's overall efforts in North and West Africa given his long-standing role in al-Qa`ida's international network.¹⁵⁶ His death also represented a major loss to al-Qa`ida's overall global leadership, as the French Ministry of Defense has referred to Droukdel as the "third deputy" to al-Qa`ida's emir, Ayman al-Zawahiri.¹⁵⁷ But it remains to be seen what effect, if any, Droukdel's death may have on JNIM and its rivalry with ISGS. While JNIM had sworn *bay`a* (allegiance) to Droukdel, it is unclear how much control he wielded over JNIM's day-to-day activities. It is also unclear what role Droukdel played in the current fighting between JNIM and ISGS in the region.^{ad}

This article has shown that the peaceful relationship in which JNIM and ISGS used to exist was the product of more than mere non-aggression: on various occasions, the two groups made clear and conscious efforts to cooperate on the ground. Owing to the complex nature of the Sahelian militant landscape, both JNIM and ISGS were able to leverage personal ties between various commanders to facilitate this cooperation. But as both organizations have grown in the region, sources of tension, including notions of how to treat local populations and divergences in ideology, have caused this special relationship to sour. Disagreements over core issues gradually pushed the groups apart, overwhelmed personal relationships, and outmatched their shared objectives. The growing ambition of ISGS in this co-inhabited territory set the scene for a widespread turf war.

But despite the ongoing battles in various parts of Mali and Burkina Faso, JNIM and ISGS are still apparently able to coexist in other areas of the Sahel, such as Mali's Menaka region, most of Niger's Tillaberi region, and other parts of Burkina Faso, especially in the Center-North. These areas have likely so far been saved from the violence between the two jihadi groups thanks to what the authors assess to be the particularly close ties between jihadis in both JNIM and ISGS there. But as this conflict continues, it is possible that these relative sanctuaries may also succumb to the

ad While the circumstances around Droukdel's presence in northern Mali remain unclear, some French media outlets reported that his arrival to the area was recent, while local Malian sources have stated that JNIM's Iyad Ag Ghali had recently called for a meeting with Droukdel and other leaders. The topic of this purported meeting is unclear, though it is indeed heavily likely it was intended to address the current fighting between JNIM and ISGS and other situations across the Sahel. See Benjamin Roger and Farid Aliat, "Comment le chef d'Aqmi Abdelmalek Droukdel a été tué au Mali," *Jeune Afrique*, June 6, 2020; Pierra Alonso, "Comment l'armée française a mené son raid contre le chef d'Aqmi," *Libération*, June 11, 2020; "Pourquoi la mort du chef d'Al-Qaida au Maghreb islamique est une étape importante," *L'Express*, June 6, 2020; Alexandre Sulzer, "Aqmi : avec la mort de Droukdel, la France remporte une victoire mais pas la guerre," *Parisien*, June 6, 2020; and Housseyn Ag Issa, "#Sahel #Mali. Une source très proche de #JNIM confirme le meurtre de Droukdel ...," *Twitter*, June 8, 2020.

intra-jihadi battles.

The fighting between the two camps elsewhere stands to negatively impact the already perilous security situation in the Sahel by increasing the levels of violence. While some argue that fighting between jihadi groups is positive for the counterterrorism landscape, it is also possible that the two groups are in effect engaging in a process called “outbidding,” wherein a group aims to show “greater resolve to fight the enemy than rival groups.”¹⁵⁸ Some scholars have

found that fighting between jihadi groups can also contribute to the groups’ longevity via new innovations and incentives that arise from the competition.¹⁵⁹ In both cases, this could lead to further violence and entrenchment on the ground for both JNIM and ISGS. As some of the fighting between the two groups has a sectarian dimension, communal and ethnic violence could also be exacerbated by this conflict. **CTC**

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A View from the CT Foxhole: Chris Costa, Former Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for Counterterrorism

By Seth Loertscher and Nick Kramer

During the first year of the Trump administration, Colonel (Ret) Chris Costa was detailed to the White House as the Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for Counterterrorism. Costa's 34-year government career included 25 years in counterintelligence, human intelligence, and with special operations forces (SOF) in the United States Army. He served in Central America, Europe, and throughout the Middle East and Afghanistan. He ran a wide range of intelligence and sensitive operations in Panama, Bosnia, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Colonel (Ret) Costa earned two Bronze Stars for sensitive human intelligence work in Afghanistan. Assigned to the Naval Special Warfare Development Group with Navy SEALs, he served as the first civilian squadron deputy director. In 2013, he was inducted into the United States Special Operations Command's Commando Hall of Honor for lifetime service to U.S. Special Operations. Colonel (Ret) Costa has been the executive director of the International Spy Museum in Washington, D.C., since 2018.

CTC: You served as the Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for Counterterrorism during the first year of President Donald Trump's administration. Can you discuss what your team's responsibilities were and where the team was situated within the NSC's [National Security Council's] organizational structure?

Costa: First of all, I want to say that I inherited an extraordinary team of professionals, something I recognized before I even stepped into the NSC. Our mission was to provide options for the president of the United States as it related to counterterrorism (CT) and hostages. As the Senior Director for Counterterrorism, I was the convening authority for the Counterterrorism Security Group (CSG)—the body that pulls together the interagency, at the assistant secretary level, and develops options for the President for dealing with CT issues. These issues would come from our office—and the CSG—to deputies, to a principals committee, and, ultimately, to the president for consideration.

My team was composed of 15 people at its highest point and consisted of professionals from across the interagency, including the FBI, State Department, Department of Justice, National Security Agency, Central Intelligence Agency, the Department of Defense (DoD), and the National Counterterrorism Center. I also had military officers that were detailed to the office from Army Special Operations and Naval Special Warfare.

Our team was part of the broader NSC, which consisted of about 12 other directorates, when I was there. Typically, the other directorates are either geographic or functional in focus, but ours was both. It was, essentially, a hybridization of the national security structure within our directorate and was responsible for providing options for the president across seven different priority areas. The first was protecting the homeland and overseas interests, including

embassies. Two individuals on my team focused on identifying terrorist threats worldwide and mitigation strategies for those respective threats, to include threats to commercial aviation. Additionally, I had a team that was focused on defeating ISIS, because, at that time, taking away the physical caliphate remained a significant priority. To be clear, they were focused not just on Syria or Iraq, but also on the affiliates and branches of ISIS, which were developing and coalescing worldwide. The third priority for our directorate was continuing to focus on both core al-Qa`ida and but also al-Qa`ida affiliates, groups like al-Shabaab, al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), and Hay'at Tahir al-Sham.^a We also recognized that we were going to put significant pressure on Iranian proxies. We were going to put pressure on Iran as a state, and we wanted to focus on Hezbollah. We recognized that it wouldn't be kinetic necessarily, but this was our fourth priority area. Fifth, we wanted to focus on countering terrorists' use of the internet, which is also related to counter-radicalization.

Another of our priorities was hostage recoveries and strategies. I was responsible for convening the Hostage Response Group (HRG), another interagency body, in concert with the Hostage [Recovery] Fusion Cell, housed at the FBI,¹ and the Office of the Special Presidential Envoy for Hostage Affairs at the Department of State. The hostages our team was concerned with were Americans held by terrorists, in addition to those held by countries that wouldn't acknowledge holding U.S. citizens, like Iran holding Robert Levinson, or Syria's detention of Austin Tice, among others.^b This was important because the unique tools of CT can be artfully employed

a Editor's note: Al-Qa`ida's Syrian affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra rebranded in July 2016, taking the name Jabhat Fateh al-Sham and ostensibly dropping its links with al-Qa`ida. In January 2017, it merged with other groups, taking the name Hay'at Tahir al-Sham. There is a debate among analysts about how close it remains to al-Qa`ida. In May 2018, the U.S. Department of State designated Hay'at Tahir al-Sham an alias of Jabhat al-Nusra, essentially labeling the new group a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO). See Aymenn al-Tamimi, "The Formation of Hay'at Tahir al-Sham and Wider Tensions in the Syrian Insurgency," *CTC Sentinel* 10:2 (2017) and "Amendments to the Terrorist Designations of al-Nusra Front," U.S. Department of State, May 31, 2018.

b Editor's note: Robert Levinson, a former FBI agent, disappeared in Iran in 2007 while reportedly on a CIA operation and was suspected of being held by the Iranian government. In March 2020, it was revealed that he had died in captivity. Austin Tice, a freelance journalist, was detained in 2012 in Syria after being stopped at a checkpoint south of Damascus. The identity of his captors remains unclear, though in March 2020, President Trump appealed directly to the Assad regime for his release. See "For First Time, Iran Says Case Is Open on Missing C.I.A. Consultant," Associated Press, November 9, 2019; Adam Goldman, "Ex-F.B.I. Agent Who Vanished on C.I.A. Mission to Iran Is Most Likely Dead, U.S. Concludes," *New York Times*, March 25, 2020; Nisan Ahmado, "Parents of US Reporter Missing for 7 Years in Syria Still Await His Return," *VOA News*, November 14, 2019; Carol Morello, "Trump asks Syrian government to 'work with us' to free journalist who disappeared," *Washington Post*, March 19, 2020.

to support recovery options.

Lastly, we also focused on foreign fighters and terrorist detention issues. For instance, developing strategies for dealing with ISIS foreign fighters who were being held by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the future disposition of GITMO [Guantanamo Bay Detention Facility].

It was a relatively small team covering down on all those areas of concern. I think, though, our team was well equipped for two reasons. One, because I was extraordinarily lucky, just like my predecessors, to have a professional team of incredibly talented individuals; and two, because their job was not to exclusively 'own' these issues but to work collaboratively with the interagency to generate and deliver appropriate policy options for the president—options that translated the overall strategy into policy and 'operations,' executed by departments and agencies. My goal was to avoid 'tacticization' from the White House; I didn't want us to be in the tactical fight. When we had to think about diplomatic options, we worked with the State Department. When we were considering military options, we worked closely with the Pentagon. When thinking about the sanctions that we could employ and other financial tools, we worked with Treasury and State. Our job was to coordinate with the interagency to ensure that we had strategy and policy alignment and to make sure the interagency had consensus to the extent that we could. When we didn't have consensus, we had to flag that to our leadership, which for me was the Homeland Security Advisor and the National Security Advisor. All this, I want to note, included constant engagements with our foreign partners. They wanted to know, what were we doing, how our policy options might impact South Asia, for example. What was our strategy going to look like when it was published? What was our position on Guantanamo Bay? We had to also engage with the diplomatic community in D.C. and our intelligence partners when they came to the NSC. All of that coordination happened, with regard to CT and hostages, with our 12 to 15 people in the directorate.

I also think that it's important to highlight that we worked hard to keep politics out of the CT process. We recommended policy outputs that were well informed by sound intelligence. That's one place where I had an advantage as a policymaker after all those years being an intelligence officer. I was well taken care of by the interagency and by the intelligence community. I knew who to talk to and what questions to ask. At the same time, I was well informed and I felt like I was on very firm ground when I made recommendations, which were informed by intelligence.

CTC: What did the threat picture look like as your team took over in January 2017?

Costa: At the end of 2016, and the beginning of 2017, there were attacks happening in Europe.² Some were ISIS-directed, complex attacks and some were ISIS-inspired, but it's important to remember that there were a dizzying number of attacks taking place in Europe. ISIS still controlled Raqqa, arguably their center of gravity.³ There was a completely disrupted landscape from the Sahel to the Maghreb to the Horn of Africa, and from Afghanistan to the Philippines. ISIS was expanding outside Syria. There were affiliates and branches that were growing. We knew that we were going to have to accelerate our [counter-]ISIS campaign.

With that background, I want to talk about what I call 'day one, week one problems.' The Monday after Inauguration Day, we had



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four significant issues within the directorate, day one, week one. First, we had to make a decision that first week on whether U.S. Special Operations Forces were going to conduct a raid against AQAP in Yemen.^c Second, we had a persistent, pervasive, and dangerous threat to commercial aviation. We knew groups like AQAP wanted to bring down commercial airliners, and we knew, because there was continuity between the administrations, that this was a significant problem and we were going to have to handle it. It was not an easy problem, and it required complex policy decisions to mitigate that threat, along with actions that had to happen over-

c Editor's note: In late 2016, a raid was being considered to gather intelligence in order to "gather the information needed to map out [AQAP] and to prevent future foreign terrorist attacks." The operation was initially planned under the Obama administration but, when its execution was delayed, was considered and approved by the Trump administration. The raid, conducted by U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF) in January 2017, resulted in the deaths of one U.S. Navy SEAL, 14 AQAP operatives, and a number of civilians, including 8-year-old Nawar al-Awlaki, a U.S. citizen and the daughter of the previously killed AQAP leader Anwar al-Awlaki. See William M. Arkin, Ken Dilanian, and Robert Windrem, "Inside the Navy SEAL Raid in Yemen Targeting al Qaeda," NBC News, February 2, 2017, and Terri Moon Cronk, "U.S. Raid in Yemen Garners Intelligence," DoD News, January 30, 2017.

seas.^d

All of this was wrapped in, within the first week, the need to accelerate the campaign against ISIS.^e As I mentioned, we did not want to manage that campaign from the White House, but we did see a need to accelerate the campaign and had to make sure the right tools and authorities were given to General [Joseph] Votel [then Commander of U.S. Central Command] in order to do that. The last issue that we were dealing with revolved around hostage recovery. We had hostages in Africa that we wanted to bring home, we had hostages in the Middle East that we wanted to bring home, and, of course, we had hostages in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border area that we wanted to bring home. Those were some of the problems that we were dealing with just in the first week.

CTC: What were some of the basic assumptions that underpinned your effort to craft the framework for the Trump administration's counterterrorism strategy?

Costa: Going into the administration, I really hoped we would write the National Strategy for Counterterrorism (NSCT) during our first year, under my tenure. Ultimately, we didn't do that, but what we did do was operationalize and test CT concepts. We were new as a team, so during that first year, we ended up framing the debates that the NSC and interagency would address. In the end, I'm glad we didn't finish [the strategy] that first year, because I think the time we took to think through and debate the issues made it a better product.

My first assumption walking in was that we could no longer focus on just kinetic activities, although, to be clear, we had to spend a great deal of time that first year focused on direct action. If there was one major policy success my team had, in that first year, it was policy work on direct action.^f I will say, however, that the flip side of that is that I recognized we couldn't spend all of our effort on kinetic activities, so the strategy was going to have to focus on other instruments of national power. It was going to have to focus on strategic communication and on different, innovate ways of countering radicalization and focusing on terrorism prevention.

^d Editor's note: In March 2017, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security announced a ban on carrying select electronic devices onboard flights from several Middle Eastern and North African airports to the United States. This threat, described as "very sophisticated, real, and targeted at certain airports" by then Secretary of Homeland Security John Kelly, required coordination with intelligence agencies, DHS, and foreign countries to ensure the explosive devices could be detected. See Ewen MacAskill, "Laptop ban on planes came after plot to put explosives in iPad," *Guardian*, March 26, 2017; John Kelly, comments at "Securing the Homeland in the Post-Post 9/11 Era," moderated by Pete Williams, Aspen Institute, July 19, 2017.

^e Editor's note: The U.S.-led campaign against the Islamic State began in 2014. President Donald Trump pushed to accelerate that campaign and the total destruction of the caliphate and organization. See Karen DeYoung, "Under Trump, gains against ISIS have 'dramatically accelerated,'" *Washington Post*, August 4, 2017, and "Trump to Explore Military Options for Defeating Islamic State," Associated Press, January 27, 2017.

^f Editor's note: The U.S. government defines direct action as "lethal and non-lethal uses of force, including capture operations, against terrorist targets outside the United States and areas of active hostilities." "Procedures for Approving Direct Action Against Terrorist Targets Located Outside the United States and Areas of Active Hostilities," The White House, May 22, 2013.

The second assumption I had going in was that our approach to CT was going to be evolutionary and not revolutionary and that I needed to set expectations accordingly. I had to go to my bosses, look them in the eye, and say, "if there are big new ideas to win this fight, I do not know what they are." I had to explain to them that there was going to be continuity between our approach to CT and previous administrations. We were going to build on lessons learned from pre-9/11, through 9/11, through post-9/11, and through my immediate predecessor [Jen Easterly]. At times, my bosses, the National Security Advisor and the Homeland Security Advisor, were looking for something that was markedly different from what we had done in the past. I knew, though, that we had been successful, as a nation, in preventing another 9/11-scale attack, so while there were some ways that we could make the strategy different, it would also build on the success of the past. That was a very important assumption.

Third, I knew, and my team knew, that we couldn't go it alone. We were going to need a wide range of partnerships. We just can't do CT independently; foreign partners are absolutely crucial. The fourth assumption was related to everything we've talked about so far; the threat landscape had changed. The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant^g [the Islamic State's predecessor] was not mentioned in the 2011 National Strategy for Counterterrorism [the previous NSCT] because they did not exist yet, but it was very much focused on one jihadist-AQ-threat strain.^h Initially, I contemplated that we could stay focused on ISIS and perhaps publish an ISIS-specific strategy and then publish a broader CT strategy. I'm glad we didn't go down that path. While the strategy took longer to publish, when it was published, it covered down on a greater array of threats and more accurately reflected the environment. If we tried to publish the strategy in the first year, we wouldn't have met the very objectives that I wanted to attain, so I give a lot of credit to the team that followed, because they did the hard work of getting the 2018 NSCT across the finish line. But, because we broadened the strategy, we ended up focusing on groups that we'd never talked about in our history of fighting terrorists, like white supremacists.

CTC: You've mentioned in other forums that the 2018 National Strategy for Counterterrorism represented a "staying arc of continuity" between administrations, but also that you felt it is the "best [CT] strategy the nation has ever had."⁴ What aspects of CT policy were crucial to maintain across administrations, and what were some of the most important changes your team made?

Costa: First and foremost, and this isn't reflected in the CT strategy directly, but I inherited a great team and systems for addressing CT

^g Editor's note: The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) was formed in April 2013, when Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announced the merger of the Islamic State of Iraq (previously al-Qa`ida in Iraq) with Jabhat al-Nusra, a decision that was not sanctioned by al-Qa`ida. This announcement led to a public rift between AQ and ISIL, ultimately leading to ISIL's independence from al-Qa`ida. See Bryan Price, Daniel Milton, and Muhammad al-Ubaydi, "The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant: More than Just a June Surprise," *CTC Sentinel* 7:6 (2014).

^h Editor's note: The 2011 National Strategy for Counterterrorism was written to outline "an approach that is more focused and specific" than previous strategies and claimed that the United States was "at war with a specific organization – al-Qa`ida." See "National Strategy for Counterterrorism," The White House, June 2011.

issues. The first thing I wanted to maintain was the CSG [Counterterrorism Security Group] process. I wanted to ensure that [the CSG] maintained its integrity and that there was continuity in how we approached CT problems as an interagency team. I also adopted some of the human resource processes. These things might not sound important but I think they were for continuity. I could have made adjustments to the CSG process, for example, but it worked so efficiently and effectively I wanted to maintain that continuity so the actors within the interagency knew the mechanisms we'd be using to deal with CT issues. As far as my team, I wanted to ensure that we had nothing but professionals, who focused on the art and tools of the unique discipline that is CT. We genuinely needed to understand the multi-dimensional threat environment we were dealing with, and I wanted to maintain the professional ethos that included, among other things, how we used intelligence, no cherry-picking of intelligence, and no politicization of CT issues. As I mentioned before, I was really committed to the idea of evolutionary, not revolutionary CT policy, and organizational continuity was an important part of that.

We also had the chance to operationalize Presidential Policy Directive 30, the Obama administration's reorganization of the U.S. government's hostage recovery enterprise. We brought home Caitlin Coleman and her children after being in captivity for five years.ⁱ That's a great example, in that first year, of continuity as we operationalized the strategy and directives that were published. I think that's some good news that the American public needs to know.

Despite all the continuity, there were places we felt like the CT strategy needed to evolve. There were three important changes that grew out of the debates we had as we framed the issues and that the team subsequently built into the 2018 strategy. The first one was that we wanted to include domestic terrorism by white supremacists and we wanted a greater focus on state-sponsored terrorism, which included Iran. Arguably, we had never placed as much emphasis on state-sponsored terrorists before in a national CT strategy. We had primarily focused on al-Qa`ida. We had to include racially motivated violent extremists, which has become a term of art, but it gets to the heart of the far-right white supremacists that might employ violence. Take, for instance, the Russian Imperial Movement. That's a great example of a white supremacist organization that has a nexus to overseas political violence and planning, and broadening the scope of the 2018 NSCT allowed the administration to take action against them.^j

Second and related, as I already mentioned Iran, we wanted to focus more attention on proxies like Hezbollah, but not kinetically.

i Editor's note: Caitlin Coleman and her Canadian husband Joshua Boyle were kidnapped in 2012 and held for five years, probably by the Haqqani network, U.S. officials told Reuters. Caitlin and Joshua, along with three children born in captivity, were freed by Pakistani military forces. *The New York Times* reported U.S. officials urged Pakistan to carry out the operation after the family was located by a CIA drone in northwest Pakistan. See David Brunstrom and Jonathan Landay, "CIA chief says U.S. Canadian couple held for five years in Pakistan," Reuters, October 19, 2017, and Adam Goldman and Eric Schmitt, "Navy SEALs Were Ready if Pakistan Failed to Free Family Held as Hostages," *New York Times*, October 17, 2017.

j Editor's note: In April 2020, the U.S. Department of State designated the Russian Imperial Movement (RIM) as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT) entity, making it the first white supremacist group to be designated as a terrorist organization by the United States. See Michael Pompeo, "United States Designates Russian Imperial Movement and Leaders as Global Terrorists," U.S. Department of State, April 7, 2020.

Our implementation strategy included putting pressure on Hezbollah with sanctions, Rewards for Justice,^k and other non-kinetic tools. From a CT standpoint, Hezbollah is cash starved right now and operating on a shoestring budget.^l This is a result not just of the strategy, but of actions taken during that first year, to expand focus on Hezbollah while still focusing on ISIS and al-Qa`ida.

The third change was that we wanted to broaden our work on counter-radicalization. I inherited a term, "countering violent extremism" (CVE), that we knew were going to get rid of because it was too politically charged. I came on board a believer that we had to do counter-radicalization work, unquestionably. But we also knew that we needed to get rid of that term and assess what the previous administration did. The Department of Homeland Security, at the time it was [led by Secretary of Homeland Security] General (Ret) John Kelly, was going to assess those programs on CVE. While those assessments were taking place, we framed the argument that we needed to focus more on a prevention architecture, and that's been institutionalized in the 2018 strategy.^m That's a very important point and its framing in the 2018 strategy contributed to the U.S. intelligence community and DHS trying to understand the nexus between right-wing extremists and foreign actors.⁵

CTC: You mentioned wanting to broaden the administration's work on counter-radicalization, but also said that a great deal of your time was taken up with the application of kinetic counterterrorism pressure against the Islamic State. What are the other non-kinetic tools that you think the United States should be investing in?

Costa: We have to continue working on strategic communication and counter-messaging. The government is not going to solve all CT problems. NGOs and in some cases the private sector have to be involved with these programs. We instead have to rely on partners in countries like Jordan to counter malign jihadist messaging. King

k Editor's note: Rewards for Justice is a Department of State counterterrorism program designed to "bring international terrorists to justice and prevent acts of international terrorism against U.S. persons or property." The program provides monetary rewards for information that leads to the arrest of terrorist leaders, terrorists plotting attacks against U.S. persons, or that disrupts terrorist financing. See "Program Overview," Rewards for Justice.

l Editor's note: The increase in non-kinetic U.S. government pressure against Hezbollah began in 2015 under the Obama administration with the passage of the Hizballah International Financing Prevention Act of 2015 and the designation of 21 Hezbollah-affiliated individuals as Specially Designated Global Terrorists in 2015 and 2016. Under the Trump administration, the pressure intensified through increased U.S. sanctions against Iran and designations of the group's members and affiliated financial institutions. This pressure, described by Hezbollah's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, as a "form of war," has reportedly strained the group's finances. See Seth Loertscher, Daniel Milton, Bryan Price, and Cynthia Loertscher, *The Terrorist List: An Examination of the U.S. Government's Designation of Terrorist Groups and Individuals* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, forthcoming); Bassem Mroue, "US sanctions squeezing Iran-backed Hezbollah in Lebanon," Associated Press, October 4, 2019; and Ben Hubbard, "Iran's Allies Feel the Pain of American Sanctions," *New York Times*, March 28, 2019.

m Editor's note: The 2018 NSCT lists one of its priority actions as institutionalizing "a prevention architecture to thwart terrorism" under the "Counter Terrorist Radicalization and Recruitment" lines of effort. See "National Strategy for Counterterrorism of the United States of America," The White House, October 2018.

Abdullah [of Jordan], for instance, has a private sector and civil society foreign partner forum to discuss the terrorism content on the internet.⁶ Those are the kind of engagements we need to encourage.

One project that I am personally involved as a private citizen now deals with former terrorists who have served their time in the U.S. prison system. We need to think about how we're going to engage with those individuals in the long term, after they're released. We're going to have some four hundred jihadists that have been prosecuted in the United States. In the next few years, scores of them are going to be released. I have interviewed Bryant Viñas, the first American post 9/11 to become a member of al-Qa`ida,ⁿ and Najibullah Zazi, the would-be [New York City] subway bomber,^o to understand their path to radicalization, but also to leverage what they told me and get the word out on the false promises of waging violent jihad, either via podcasts or in published articles.⁷ It is really important to chip away at jihadist messaging—so letting terrorists, former terrorists, in their own voice, counter that messaging. These are things that I want to see more energy focused on in the future.

To the point about being so focused on kinetic targeting, I did come into the administration hopeful that we could focus more on counter-radicalization. But given the problems that we had, our priority first was taking away ISIS' physical caliphate. But even that, in essence, is an important strategic message, that ISIS lost their so-called caliphate. In doing that, you're taking away an important message from ISIS themselves.

CTC: Partnership with the Syrian Democratic Forces has been important for U.S. efforts to defeat the Islamic State. Some have argued that this type of “surrogate warfare” will continue to be employed as states seek to pursue national interests in an increasing complex 21st century security landscape.⁸ Why was the decision to work with a partner force so central to the “defeat ISIS” campaign?

Costa: The first point is that the U.S. is moving away from large-scale deployments. I don't think this president, in particular, will support large deployments of the U.S. military, and I think his sensibilities are right. Americans do not want endless wars. So, in cases where the U.S. national interests dictate kinetic action, the conflicts will require surrogates.

Secondly, the United States can't solve every problem. It's not going to be the U.S. providing whatever comes in the aftermath of a more settled Syria or Iraq. These issues are long-term, and when

n Editor's note: Bryant Viñas was the first American to be recruited into al-Qa`ida after 9/11. He was captured and eventually turned on the group. See Mitchell Silber and Bryant Viñas, “Al-Qa`ida's First American Foreign Fighter after 9/11,” *CTC Sentinel* 11:8 (2018).

o Editor's note: Najibullah Zazi traveled to Pakistan to join the Taliban and while there was convinced by al-Qa`ida to conduct attacks in the United States. In 2009, he and others planned an attack on the New York subway system, but Zazi was arrested after the plot was discovered. He has since cooperated with the U.S. government. In September 2019, CNN reported that Zazi had been released from jail after serving his 10-year sentence. See Emily Saul and Laura Italiano, “Would-be NYC subway bomber Najibullah Zazi to be released on time served,” *New York Post*, May 2, 2019, and Erica Orden, “Najibullah Zazi, who plotted to bomb the New York subway, gets a second chance,” CNN, September 28, 2019. For more on the plot, see “Al Qaeda Operative Convicted by Jury in One of the Most Serious Terrorist Plots Against America since 9/11,” U.S. Department of Justice, March 1, 2012.

CT operations happen, they will likely be executed with a small U.S. footprint and partner forces, which I think is consistent with the goal of having less U.S. troops deployed.

The third point is that these discrete CT campaigns, what I call wars within wars, are part of broader non-kinetic fights for influence that some refer to as grey zone conflict.⁹ It took a year at the NSC to fully process and recognize that. There are whole other dimensions, aside from the CT fight. There were dangerous political faultlines; Iranians were in the battlespace, Russia was on the ground, Israel had significant concerns with Hezbollah. Syria was certainly operating inimical to U.S. interests, plus they held American hostages. The president also had to worry about Turkey, and at the same time, we had to balance not having a precipitous withdrawal. That isn't an environment where large deployments of U.S. forces are going to be useful. It's instructive to look at what we were authorized to do. We were authorized to work with partners, to give the SDF the equipment they needed to ramp up their efforts in Raqqa.¹⁰ This NSC, however, did not focus on the day-to-day tactical fight, but rather on monitoring the grey zone conflict that was playing out and to ensure that we were postured to keep pressure on ISIS. Now, I'm happy to say that there remains a small U.S. footprint on the ground in Syria.

CTC: What were some of the challenges of trying to work through a partner force to achieve such an important U.S. priority? How did you mitigate those challenges?

Costa: There are a number of challenges working through partner forces, and it's easy to get caught up in the tactical challenges of those partnerships. We had trust, however, that General Votel [then CENTCOM Commander] and General Dunford [then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff] were handling those challenges with regional partners. They were engaged with the SDF, with the Kurds in particular, and were engaging with the Turkish military and had open lines of communication with the coalition against ISIS. As all of that was playing out, our job at the NSC was to oversee regional security, to ensure lines of communication with partners remained open, and to focus on the broader geopolitical issues. It can be hard to maintain that high-level focus with CT, which often looks incredibly tactical.

One challenge in particular was the regional implications of arming our partner force, the SDF, which was heavily Kurdish. We knew, obviously, that Turkey would be disturbed by that, so we had to carefully generate options for the president to consider what type of support we would provide. What type of equipment, what type of weapons, what type of ammunition? We had to generate policy options that would allow the SDF to conduct operations to defeat the Islamic State, yet also not create undue regional tension. Ultimately, the president was going to sign off on equipping the SDF, so it became important to develop a plan to communicate that to our regional partners, Turkey especially.¹¹ Those were the types of problems, in concert with the interagency, that our directorate had to work on.

CTC: How do you think about the balance between risk, political and strategic, and providing latitude for military commanders to pursue a campaign that allows for maximum initiative? Special operations forces are designed to shape the strategic environment, so how do you hedge against decisions or failures

that can have significant strategic implications while keeping tactical decision-making out of the National Security Council?

Costa: We had to deal with that in the first week with the raid against AQAP. I was responsible for having discussions with the National Security Advisor, and other deputies and decisionmakers, while the planning was playing out. President Obama made a concerted effort, evidently, not to make the final decision to authorize the operation against AQAP because it was unfair for it to play out in the middle of a transition, literally around Inauguration Day. We understood that we inherited an operational plan that the new administration had to decide on.¹²

All of that said, I did what I had learned cumulatively over a career. First, I received the operational plan at a macro level. I've made points previously about eschewing the tactical aspects of operations at the NSC, but in this case, as a policymaker, I needed to better understand the overarching plan so I could contemplate the risks. Second, once I understood the broad contours of the operation, I was prepared to discuss those risks with the National Security Advisor so he could lay it all out for the president.

Third, I understood my role if something went awry. When I was woken up by a call from the Situation Room in the early hours of the morning, I made my way into the White House and called my counterparts at the Pentagon and simply asked them if there was anything they needed from my office. If not, I wanted them to know I'd be there for the rest of that Sunday. If they needed to call me, needed me to push any information to the president through my chain, I was there. What I didn't do was ask for constant updates; I didn't insert myself. I wanted them to do the appropriate notifications. I wanted them to assess the intelligence that was taken from their sensitive site exploitation on the ground in Yemen. I had to focus on other strategic issues. What were the implications of this with the Yemeni government? Would the United States still be able to conduct operations on the Arabian Peninsula? What other impact would this operation have in the region? These are the things I had to focus on, and it was difficult to do, it was gut-wrenching. I remembered Ryan Owens [the U.S. Navy SEAL killed]; I knew others who were there on the ground. There is a human dynamic to policy decisions.

I think that operation, how we handled it, set the tone for our partners in the interagency because we trusted them to do their jobs and didn't ask them to push us a lot of data. How do you strike the balance between understanding the risk without squashing initiative? I think you arm yourself with as much information as you need to be cleareyed about the risk, ensure you communicate that risk, and once a decision is made, support the organizations responsible for the operation. I think it was the cumulative years of managing and mitigating risk that allowed me to do that.

CTC: One of the debates in counterterrorism revolves around how much of a CT policy to make public.¹³ In implementing its CT strategy, the current administration has reduced some of the reporting requirements for counterterrorism operations.¹⁴ As someone who has had experience in both classified, compartmentalized units and, now, in a public-facing organization, what do you think the right balance is between secrecy and transparency in CT policy and operations?

Costa: When we wrote the National Counterterrorism Strategy, we

wrote it for multiple audiences. We're writing to our adversaries, we're communicating to our strategic partners, and, of course, we are writing to the American public. We all unquestionably decided that the CT strategy needed to be a public-facing document, to provide its trajectory and share the president's CT strategy for the nation. At the same time, however, we all recognized that some of the work would not be made available to the public because of classification. The question becomes, how do you strike the balance of secrecy and transparency? I think every administration does it differently, and we recognized a need to be more opaque on some details than the previous administration.¹⁵ We decided we did not want to communicate our techniques and procedures for how we conduct direct action, for example. We did not want to 'telegraph our punches' to our adversaries. Some argued that our foreign partners would insist on seeing the details and that our strategic relationships could suffer, but those concerns were overblown.

The American public generally does not want to know the details of direct-action work. What they should know is that it's working well and that the U.S. is not dismissing our obligations for proportionality and protecting non-combatants. I can't speak to the reporting of civilian casualties, but I will tell you that the direct-action policy is a sound policy. We have significantly streamlined the process. The policy overall is effective and efficient.

CTC: There have been a number of recent developments that have reduced the pressure the Islamic State is feeling, with a metrics study published in the May 2020 issue of *CTC Sentinel* finding that the group has "recovered from its territorial defeats since 2017" and is mounting "a strong and sustained resurgence as an insurgent force inside Iraq."¹⁵ How do you think about the threat from the Islamic State over the next few years?

Costa: I am cautiously optimistic that we have taken away the message of the caliphate, by that I mean that we've destroyed the physical caliphate, which has taken away one of the group's main messaging narratives. At the same time, however, I am absolutely confident that some group, whether an offshoot from ISIS or some other group, will emerge out of the ashes. That's what happened with al-Qa`ida in Iraq when we pulled our forces out [in 2011], which I think was done precipitously. So, we must consider that there will be some resurgent group that organizes clandestinely and builds on the work that ISIS did. Terrorism is not going to go away. It sounds cliché, but this is a generational fight and we can never declare the mission completely accomplished, which is why it's more like the metaphor of a disease. It is not going to go away, but we can treat it, we can focus on it. But at the end of the day, it is going to continue.

We can enjoy partial success, on some level, in the fact that whatever group emerges is likely to be more localized. It will be a pri-

p Editor's note: In May 2013, President Obama approved a presidential policy guidance on direct action and laid out the basics of his administration's counterterrorism framework during a speech at the National Defense University. The presidential policy guidance on the use of direct action in counterterrorism operations was declassified and published in 2016, preempting a court order requiring the guidance be made available for review in a Freedom of Information suit brought by the American Civil Liberties Union. See "Remarks by the President at the National Defense University," The White House, May 23, 2013, and Josh Gerstein, "Obama releases drone strike 'playbook,'" Politico, August 6, 2016.

marily regional issue. That's where we are going to have to rely on foreign partners, like the government of Iraq. They'll have seen this cycle before and understand what happened when they did not nip a burgeoning ISIS in the bud. Look at Mosul in 2014, for instance. This is where it goes full circle and where we're going to have to redouble our efforts to work with foreign partners. We're also going to have to maintain HUMINT capabilities, meaning networks of sources reporting on the ground. Our SOF forces and other intelligence agencies will have to continue to develop sources and be the connective tissue with the right actors on the ground.

Of course, we have to balance all of that with other intelligence problems, such as the [COVID-19] pandemic, dealing with a China that is acting more threatening than they have historically, and a Russia that will continue to test us. But we're a great nation and we can do more than one thing at a time.

CTC: The shift toward near-peer competition as exemplified in the 2018 National Defense Strategy has led to funding, policy attention, and resources flowing away from counterterrorism, both in the military and intelligence agencies. Additionally, the COVID-19 crisis may put further pressure on counterterrorism budgets because of the bleak economic outlook and the overwhelming need to tackle the current global public health emergency.¹⁶ Given these new parameters, how do you think counterterrorism operations and focus will change over the next several years to support the pivot to near-peer competition as CT forces operate in a constrained environment while still meeting the threats from terrorism actors you've discussed?

Costa: In short, the bottom line is there are going to be some budget cuts, there will be some reapportioning of resources. That's just natural in light of a pandemic, North Korea, and other priorities. At the same time, however, we are at a greater risk of overcorrecting

on the CT front. People have argued that there is a "terrorism trap" with people like me saying "if you take away our resources there is going to be a 9/11." Conversely, here's what I actually argue: There hasn't been another 9/11. There have been attacks, but for all intents and purposes, we've been successful at preventing another attack on that scale. If what we have built works, and it's not broken, then we should continue, at a consistent level, with how we have operated, because it has protected the nation. Yes, some resources might need to be reapportioned. There might be more fat that can be cut from the CT budget, but I think the greater risk is overcorrection. And the CT enterprise works. The National Counterterrorism Center works. Small-footprint SOF operations, working with local partners, working with foreign partners, these things work. HUMINT, as well, is important and, relatively speaking, is inexpensive. I think it's important to identify and reinforce the successes we've had in the CT sphere.

The other point I'd like to make is that everywhere I went, from France to Israel to Jordan to the Palestinian Authority, in all those places CT is a currency. Everyone wanted to talk about it. It's important even to countries that are not always happy with our broader foreign policy. It evens the playing field, so to speak. Virtually all nations worry about vulnerabilities to terrorist attacks. Whether from violent right-wing extremists, violent left-wing extremists, or something in between, everyone worries about violent extremists and terrorism.

All of that said, I think we can do both CT and rebalance for other threats at the same time. Our nation has tremendous resources. I think the answer is working with foreign partners; focusing on our robust intelligence capabilities, HUMINT in particular; and leveraging our special operations forces. Our rebalancing can't be binary; it can't be an either/or proposition. We can't, for instance, focus on North Korea or China and forget about CT. We're going to have to figure out a way of doing both. **CTC**

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The Threat from Europe's Jihadi Prisoners and Prison Leavers

By Robin Simcox and Hannah Stuart

Two databases maintained by the authors shed light on the nature and scale of the threat posed by jihadi prisoners and prison leavers. Drawing from a database on terror activity in Europe, a new qualitative analysis of 12 alleged terrorist plots or attacks in Europe involving jihadi prisoners and prison leavers helps explain the nature of the threat, finding that both those thwarted in their attempts to participate in foreign terrorist fighting and those who returned from actually doing so were—from this limited sample—commonly involved in such attacks. This often manifested itself in specifically targeting the police or prison guards. There was no typical timeframe for terrorist reengagement or recidivism. Where the data was available, average time lag was three years, nine months and the median was two years, six months. A comprehensive second dataset of Islamist terrorism convictions and attacks in the United Kingdom between the beginning of 1998 and the end of 2015 provides a quantitative case study into recidivism and reengagement. New calculations by the authors support recent findings pertaining to Belgium by Thomas Renard by finding terrorist recidivism among U.K. offenders who are convicted of multiple terrorism offenses on separate occasions is low. However, if individuals who had a prior criminal record for criminal behavior interpreted as extremism-related but not terrorism-related are included, the rate of recidivism posed by jihadi prisoners/prison leavers—and subsequent scale of the threat—is appreciably higher.

In December 2018, Gilles de Kerchove, the European Union's Counter-Terrorism Coordinator, declared "prison leavers" to be the third-most serious threat Europe faced from Islamist terrorism. (Homegrown radicalization and returning foreign fighters were one and two, respectively.)¹ Two incidents in the United Kingdom in recent months bore out de Kerchove's concerns.

In November 2019, Usman Khan stabbed two people to death and injured three others during a terrorist attack in and outside Fishmonger's Hall overlooking London Bridge in central London.

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Khan's attack was disrupted by nearby civilians before he was shot and killed by the police. In February 2012, Khan had been convicted over a plan to travel to Kashmir to establish a training camp that would produce terrorists to carry out attacks there, with the possibility of returning to carry out future attacks in the United Kingdom. The broader cell he was part of—which was arrested in December 2010—had proposed attacking the London Stock Exchange.²

Then, in February 2020, Sudesh Amman stabbed two civilians in Streatham, south London, before being shot and killed by the authorities.³ Amman had previously pleaded guilty in November 2018 to both possession and dissemination of terrorism-related documents.³

Similar incidents will inevitably arise in the future. According to a United Nations Security Council report, "[a]s many as 1,000 foreign terrorist fighters imprisoned on return to Europe prior to 2015 are expected to be released in Europe in 2020."⁴ This figure does not even factor in those jailed across Europe for terrorism offenses not related to foreign fighting who will also be released this year. Furthermore, a July 2020 study by the Center for the Analysis of Terrorism (CAT) in Paris found that 60% of those who left France to fight jihad in Afghanistan, Bosnia, or Iraq between 1986 and 2011 went on to commit a fresh terrorist offense upon their return.⁵

Yet in a recent study on terrorist recidivism^b in this publication, Thomas Renard stated that some of the public discourse on the threat was "overblown," arguing that "Khan and Amman are more likely to be eye-catching outliers than a harbinger of things to come." Renard's analysis demonstrated that when looking at terrorist recidivism and reengagement statistics in Belgium between

a Such attacks have led to significant debate within the United Kingdom on terrorist reengagement, recidivism, and prison radicalization. One manifestation of this was the January 2020 announcement of a joint Home Office and Ministry of Justice review of the Multi Agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPA) designed to supervise released terrorism and terrorism-related offenders. Another was the scrapping of automatic release for terrorists serving fixed sentences. The Terrorist Offenders (Restriction of Early Release) Act 2020 was passed by the U.K. Parliament in February 2020, meaning that offenders who receive determinate sentences for relevant terrorism-related offenses—as well as existing prisoners—are no longer released automatically at the halfway point and must appear instead before the Parole Board at the two-thirds point. The government fast-tracked the legislation in the wake of the Streatham attack, in part because of concerns about terrorist offenders due for automatic release that month. See Terrorist Offenders (Restriction of Early Release) Bill 2019-2020, House of Commons Library Briefing Paper No. 8821, February 11, 2020.

b Renard defined terrorist recidivism as "two convictions for distinct terrorist offenses over distinct periods of time, separated by a clear period of disengagement (commonly imprisonment)." In this article, terrorist recidivism is understood as individuals who are convicted on two separate occasions for at least one terrorist offense each time.

1990-2019, less than 5% of convicted terrorists returned to terrorist activity. However, as Renard also acknowledged, “even a small number of recidivists can still constitute a most serious threat in the short- to longer-term.”⁶

This article seeks to broaden Renard’s assessment of the threat picture in Belgium.

In part one, it presents case studies from across Europe of individuals previously convicted of terrorism offenses who subsequently go on to plan or carry out a terrorist attack after a period of disengagement, typically imprisonment, both after and prior to release. The authors acknowledge that data for this section is not exhaustive. Therefore, part one of this study seeks to present a qualitative analysis on the nature of the terrorist threat posed by prisoners and prison leavers, not an overall sense of the scale.

The article uses open-source material to provide key details about the attacks or alleged plots, including where they took place geographically and whether they were committed by those who had left prison or those who were plotting while still incarcerated.

It then looks at the geographic scope of previous terror activity by the individuals included in this study as well as which of them had previous convictions pertaining to either foreign terrorist fighting or being ‘frustrated travelers’ who were unsuccessful in their attempts to access a conflict zone.

This analysis then explores the individuals’ trajectory of offense, examining whether their initial offense involved the intent of violence, as well as the timespan for reengagement between this initial offense and the actual alleged plot or attack.

It goes on to assess whether the individuals profiled in this study had declared an allegiance to a foreign terrorist organization; the extent to which—if at all—they were under surveillance by authorities at the time of their alleged plot or attack; and questions raised by the management of terror offenders, including the effectiveness of rehabilitation and reintegration efforts.

Part two of the article uses an additional, comprehensive dataset of Islamist terrorism convictions and attacks in the United Kingdom between the beginning of 1998 and the end of 2015, which was previously compiled by one of the authors, to provide a quantitative, country-specific case study of the extent to which broader recidivism and reengagement by convicted terrorists is common. Therefore, this section is more concerned with the scale of the threat this cohort poses. The terrorist recidivism rate for all U.K.-based Islamist terrorism convictions and attacks during this timeframe is calculated. The article also provides an assessment of how those previously convicted of terrorist activity both in the United Kingdom and overseas, and terrorist offenses carried out by individuals with previous convictions interpreted as extremism-related, are relevant to the recidivism threat picture.

Part One: What 12 European Terror Cases Reveal about the Nature of the Prisoner Threat

This section provides qualitative data on 12 alleged jihadi terrorist plots/attacks that helps demonstrate the nature of the threat from jihadi prisoners and prison leavers in Europe.

Inclusion Criteria

This study analyses 12 alleged jihadi terrorist plots/attacks^c that occurred in Western Europe between January 2014 and April 2020 in which at least one of the alleged plotters/attackers had been convicted in Europe of a previous terrorism-related offense.^d This includes individuals killed during their attack as well as those convicted of—or awaiting trial for—planning an attack. These plots/attacks were extracted from a personal database of over 300 plots in Europe maintained by one of the authors.^e

As the purpose of this database was to track the threat to Europe following the rise of the Islamic State, January 2014 was chosen as the starting point. Therefore, the database includes Islamist attacks that took place since that date; thwarted plots that led to convictions of those planning attacks in Europe; arrests of those suspected of planning attacks;^f those assessed to be planning attacks who were subsequently deported on national security grounds; and a small number of incidents where a demonstrable Islamic State inspiration led to the targeting of different faiths, religious sects, and/or practices. To qualify for inclusion in this database, the violent act had to be focused on targets in Europe itself, as opposed to, for example, a plot targeting European embassies in the Middle East or Africa.

This database was compiled using open-source material. While the author attempted to be exhaustive, this data is unlikely to be so as there was neither the resources nor the language skills to monitor all terror cases across Europe. Furthermore, there will be cases where the sensitivity of how the intelligence was gathered means that terror suspects were never brought to trial and, subsequently, received no media coverage. Difficulties surrounding the categorization of violent incidents involving Islamists in prison may also mean there were incidents with potential terrorist intent that were not considered such by certain governments and therefore may be less likely to receive media attention. Therefore, this study is not exhaustive: there have potentially been more plots/attacks since 2014 involving individuals previously convicted of terrorism offenses.

While all individuals included in this study have planned, or al-

c In using the formulation “alleged plots/attacks” in this article, the authors are referring to (1) actual terrorist attacks and (2) terrorist attack plots (alleged or proven in court) that did not result in attacks.

d The broader dataset (from which this study is built) starts from January 2014, and so this article only considers cases in which the second offense occurred after this date. Pre-2014 examples across Europe of an individual convicted of a terrorism-related offense and then planning a terrorist attack, either after or prior to release from prison, are not covered by this study. The study excludes Russia.

e The theme of jihadi recidivism outside Europe has also been explored by scholars. For an analysis of this phenomenon in the United States, see Christopher Wright, “An Examination of Jihadi Recidivism Rates in the United States,” *CTC Sentinel* 12:10 (2019).

f If these allegations are shown to be unfounded, or lead to acquittals in court, the individuals in question are subsequently removed from the dataset. For example, a Syrian refugee called Hasan A. was included in the dataset upon his January 2017 arrest, as German authorities had discovered he was attempting to acquire money from the Islamic State in order to—Hasan A. told the Islamic State—carry out a series of bombings in Germany. At trial, however, it emerged that he had no intention of carrying out an attack and was actually trying to defraud the terrorist group. Hasan A. was subsequently removed from the dataset. See “Court finds defrauding Islamic State is a crime in Germany,” Reuters, August 14, 2017.

legedly planned, a distinct act of terrorist violence—either inside^e or outside of prison—from January 2014 onward, the offense that led to that individual being incarcerated for the first offense occasionally occurred before 2014. The authors did not set a time limit regarding the date of the first offense, but the earliest arrest for terrorist activity among those profiled was 2003. The cut-off point for the second offense was April 30, 2020.

The study only looks at alleged jihadi terrorist plots/attacks involving individuals previously convicted in a civilian court in Europe of at least one terrorism related offense before being involved in a plot (alleged or otherwise) or attack in Western Europe. These criteria therefore excluded individuals convicted of a second terrorism offense that was not related to attack planning, for example, fundraising for terrorist purposes or possession of terrorist material. They also excluded the likes of Osamah Abed Mohammed, who was convicted in Zurich in March 2016 as part of an Islamic State-inspired Iraqi cell planning attacks in Switzerland.⁷ Mohammed was suspected of having previously been detained by U.S. forces in Iraq, after admitting to carrying out attacks on coalition forces.⁸ However, these suspicions were never tested in a European court.

The authors have chosen to focus, therefore, on a narrowly defined subset of terrorist reengagement. The cases are limited to planned or actual terrorist attacks involving Islamist extremists who had previously been convicted—and imprisoned—for a terrorism-related offense.

This approach led to a small sample size limited to 12 alleged plots/attacks. (See Table 1.) While this is a limitation to the study, it also enables a closer look at certain cases that have been of high concern to the security services and about which the press and the public have asked politicians what more could have been done to prevent their occurrence.

The Findings

The 12 alleged plots/attacks studied took place in three separate countries: France (eight cases), the United Kingdom (three cases), and Germany (one case).^h Three attacks resulted in deaths (two attacks in France, one attack in the United Kingdom) and six attacks resulted in injuries (three attacks in France, two attacks in the United Kingdom, one attack in Germany). The remaining three plots were foiled, meaning there were no casualties.

Therefore, of the 12 alleged plots/attacks studied, there were victim casualties (either injuries or deaths) in nine incidents. In total, terrorists were responsible for 16 deaths and 28 injuries in these nine plots. The other three plots were thwarted by security services or the police.

While nine of 12 alleged plots/attacks leading to victims is a high percentage, as this study is not exhaustive, it should not be assumed that this is reflective of the overall likelihood that plots carried out by recidivists or those reengaging are likely to be successful.

Eight plots involved individuals who either acted alone or were arrested alongside others against whom charges were either

dropped or charges of planning a specific act of terrorism in Europe were not pursued.ⁱ Four plots involved multiple perpetrators, some of whom had a prior (non-terrorist) criminal record.^j

These 12 alleged plots/attacks involved 20 Europe-based individuals (i.e., the attacker, or an individual currently facing charges in relation to a plot). Of those, 13 had previously been convicted in Europe of terrorist activity. That meant there was only one alleged plot in the dataset in which individuals previously convicted of terrorism activity together.^k

All 13 were male.

Prison Leavers

Seven alleged plots/attacks were committed by at least one individual who had been released from detention (four in France, two in the United Kingdom, one in Germany).^l

The highest-casualty attack committed by those in this study was the attack on the *Charlie Hebdo* offices in January 2015, which led to 12 deaths and 11 injuries. One of the perpetrators, Cherif Kouachi, had previously been convicted of a terrorism-related offense in France.^m Kouachi had been arrested in January 2005 as he prepared to leave the country and head to Iraq to take part in the fighting there.⁹ According to the French prosecutor in the case, Jean-Julien Xavier-Rolai, the '19th arrondissement cell' that Kouachi was part of in Paris at the time had sent approximately a dozen individuals to Iraq to join up with Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the emir of al-Qa`ida in Iraq.¹⁰

While awaiting trial, Kouachi spent one year and eight months in prison and was then released under judicial supervision. When convicted at a 2008 trial, he was sentenced to three years but was immediately freed due to time served.¹¹

Most prison leavers either carried out or planned to carry out their attacks alone. In the United Kingdom, Usman Khan and

i The eight alleged plots/attacks in question involved Rafik Mohamad Yousef (Germany); Youssef Ettaoujar, Larossi Abballa, Bilal Taghi, Christian Ganczarski, and Mohammed Taha El Hannouni (France); and Usman Khan and Sudesh Amman (United Kingdom).

j The four alleged plots/attacks in question relate to Cherif Kouachi, who plotted alongside Said Kouachi (see "Charlie Hebdo attack: Three days of terror," BBC, January 14, 2015); Mohamed Chakrar, who allegedly plotted alongside Alexandre Benon, Karim Bendjehal, Anis Mesroua, and Khamid Sidiev (see "Attack foiled against the Elysee Palace: a fifth suspect arrested in Strasbourg," *Parisien*, May 7, 2019); Zoubeir C. and Matthieu C., who allegedly plotted alongside Sylvain D. (see Jérémie Pham-Lê, "In prison, detainees suspected of planning attacks in France," *Parisien*, July 31, 2019); and Brusthom Ziamani, who plotted alongside Baz Macaulay Hockton (see "HMP Whitemoor prison officer attack: Inmates in court," BBC, March 4, 2020).

k Allegedly, Ziamani's attack also involved another prisoner, Baz Macaulay Hockton, who was in jail for committing a violent offense but—as Hockton is not listed on the Crown Prosecution Service's online resource of post-2016 counterterrorism prosecutions—likely not one linked to terrorism. See "Knife attack by inmates wearing fake suicide vests treated as terrorism," Sky News, January 10, 2020; "The Counter-Terrorism Division of the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) - Successful prosecutions since 2016," Crown Prosecution Service.

l These seven alleged plots/attacks involved Cherif Kouachi, Youssef Ettaoujar, Larossi Abballa, Mohamed Chakrar (France); Sudesh Amman, Usman Khan (United Kingdom); and Rafik Mohamad Yousef (Germany).

m Kouachi was convicted of "association with wrongdoers with the intention of committing a terrorist act." See Ben Mathis-Lilley, "The Details of Paris Suspect Cherif Kouachi's 2008 Terrorism Conviction," *Slate*, January 7, 2015.

g As noted later in the article, what constitutes a terrorist attack inside a prison warrants careful consideration.

h These are the three European countries that, according to one of the author's database, have been most commonly targeted by Islamist terrorists. See Robin Simcox, "European Islamist Plots and Attacks Since 2014—and How the U.S. Can Help Prevent Them," *Heritage Foundation Backgrounder* No. 3236 (2017).

Sudesh Amman were examples of this. However, there were also prison leavers operating as part of broader cells with those not previously convicted of terrorism-related activity.

France saw the largest alleged cell involving an individual previously convicted in Europe for terrorist offenses. In April 2019, Mohamed Chakrar was arrested as part of a five-person cell alleged to be planning a firearms attack against the Élysée and against French police, specifically in Seine-Saint-Denis, Paris.¹² Chakrar outlined his allegiance to the Islamic State while in custody and stated that he wished to die as a martyr.¹³

Previously, Chakrar had been just 15 years old when, in February 2017, he was arrested while attempting to travel to Syria.¹⁴ He told French investigators that his plan was to join the Free Syrian Army, fight against Bashar al-Assad's regime, and undertake humanitarian work.¹⁵ However, many Western travelers to Syria at that stage were aspiring to live in Islamic State-controlled territory;¹⁶ and a search of Chakrar's iPhone revealed he possessed *nasheeds* calling for the death of non-Muslims, accessed jihadi Telegram channels, researched 9mm bullets, and possessed a video showing French police officers.¹⁶

As a result of this attempted travel, Chakrar was sentenced in 2017 to three years detention (two of which were suspended) and put on probation.¹⁷

The Threat Inside Prisons

Concerns about incarcerated terrorism offenders carrying out fresh acts of ideologically motivated violence deliberately targeting prison staff is increasingly relevant in Europe.

In August 2016, the Ministry of Justice in the United Kingdom published its findings of a review into "Islamist extremism in prisons, probation and youth justice." Led by Ian Acheson, himself a former prison officer, one of Acheson's key findings was "a more coordinated and rehearsed response to violent incidents" within prisons was required as "[s]ome prisoners sentenced under the Terrorism Act 2000 and its successors ... aspire to acts of extreme violence which require not only action within prisons but oversight and direction from experienced operational staff working centrally." The review went on to state that one of a variety of ways that Islamist extremism potentially manifested itself in prison was threats being made against staff.¹⁸

Acheson found this was not a problem distinct to the United Kingdom. Following visits to prisons in the Netherlands, France and Spain, the Ministry of Justice review emphasized the need for the "primacy of the police in resolving prison-based counter-terrorism incidents."¹⁹

This study found four alleged plots/attacks (all resulting in actual violence) that occurred within prison by those previously convicted of terrorist activity and subsequently targeting prison staff (three in France, one in the United Kingdom).^o Attacks inside prison by incarcerated terrorist convicts should not be assumed to be terrorist incidents, but as will be outlined below, all four attacks had an

alleged or apparent terrorism dimension.^p

The attacks perpetrated while in prison follow a familiar template: the construction and subsequent concealing of makeshift weapons used to stab prison employees (and, in one case, use of a fake suicide vest). In September 2016, for example, Bilal Taghi stabbed two supervisors at the Osny prison in France, where he was incarcerated, after he had sharpened the hinge of his cell window into a sharp object.²⁰ Following the attack, Taghi said that he had intended to kill a representative of the French government in tribute to the Islamic State, making clear the terrorism dimension to the incident.²¹ He was sentenced to 28 years in prison for this attack.²² Taghi had been jailed the year before due to an unsuccessful attempt to travel to Syria to join the Islamic State.²³

Similarly, Mohammed Taha El Hannouni allegedly used a piece of broken mirror and a table leg from his cell to injure two prison guards in June 2019. He was subsequently charged with "attempted assassinations on persons holding public authority in connection with a terrorist enterprise."²⁴ He was initially convicted for having gone to fight in Syria in 2014. Media reporting did not specify which group El Hannouni aligned himself with in Syria, instead reporting that he visited "jihadist fighting zones."²⁵

A slightly unusual case involved Christian Ganczarski, a former associate of Usama bin Ladin, who allegedly used a razor blade and either a chisel or pair of scissors (reports conflict) to injure three prison guards at Vendin-le-Vieil prison in northern France in January 2018.²⁶ Ganczarski was a member of al-Qa`ida who was jailed for 18 years in France in February 2009 for "complicity in attempted murder in relation to a terrorist enterprise."²⁷ This pertained to his involvement in an April 2002 truck bombing of a synagogue in Tunisia that led to 21 deaths.²⁸

Ganczarski was due for release in February 2018. However, he would then have become eligible for extradition to the United States where, in January 2018, he had been charged with "conspiracy to kill United States nationals, providing and conspiring to provide material support and resources to terrorists, and conspiring to provide material support and resources to al Qaeda."²⁹ Upon learning this, Ganczarski was recorded in a telephone call saying that he would take action to prevent his departure from France.³⁰ His apparent ploy worked: following his alleged attack on the prison guards, Ganczarski remained in France, newly charged with "attempted assassinations on persons responsible for public authority in connection with a terrorist enterprise."³¹

Finally, the most recent example occurred in the United Kingdom, in January 2020, when two prisoners at a Cambridgeshire prison injured four prison guards with 'shank' weapons they had constructed out of plastic and metal. Both men were wearing fake suicide vests at the time and were subsequently charged with attempted murder and assault.³² London Metropolitan Police stated they were treating the incident as a terrorist attack³³ and one of the alleged perpetrators—Brusthom Ziamani—was serving a 19-year sentence after being found guilty in February 2015 of a plot to behead a British soldier.

Discussing his motivations for this earlier plot against a soldier, Ziamani said he was a supporter of the Islamic State and it was his "duty to help my brothers and sisters" in Syria. He said that

n This included Western teenagers. See Katrin Bennhold, "Jihad and Girl Power: How ISIS Lured 3 London Girls," *New York Times*, August 17, 2015.

o The four alleged plots/attacks in question involved Bilal Taghi, Mohammed El Hannouni, and Christian Ganczarski (France); and Brusthom Ziamani (United Kingdom).

p More discussion is warranted in the terrorism studies community on what criteria should be used for labeling attacks inside prison as terrorist attacks.

“Because I have no means ov [*sic*] there I will wage war against the british [*sic*] government on this soil ... this is ISIB Islamic State of Ireland and Britain.” Ziamani went on to state that “heads will be removed and burned...my fellow muslim brothers these people want war lets kill them slaughter them and implement sharia in our lands and UK [*sic*].”³⁴

Plotting Inside Prison for a Terrorist Attack Outside of Prison

One nebulous plot in France, disrupted in July 2019, was allegedly planned from inside prison but was to be executed on the outside. In this case, the alleged protagonist was Matthieu C.,^q a convert jailed for the offense of apology for terrorism—in other words, “presenting or commenting favourably on terrorist acts.”³⁵ Matthieu C. had been housed at a variety of prisons, one of which was Châteaudun in northern France. There, he encountered Zoubeir C. (housed in the same prison but in a different building to Matthieu C.), jailed for six years for heading to Syria for six months in 2014, where he joined up with the then al-Qa`ida affiliate, Jabhat al-Nusra.³⁶

Zoubeir C. was due to be imminently released, and Matthieu C. allegedly hoped he would commit a terrorist attack upon release. Matthieu C. allegedly attempted to pass messages to Zoubeir C. via another prisoner, including details of an individual on the outside who could provide him with weapons. Allegedly one of the potential targets discussed was prison wardens.³⁷ However, the National Prison Intelligence Service (*Bureau Central du Renseignement Pénitentiaire*, or BCRP) had been monitoring Matthieu C. and bugged his cell. Both Zoubeir C. and Matthieu C. were subsequently charged with criminal association in July 2019.^r

Geographic Scope of Previous Terror Activity

Of the 13 individuals studied in the 12 cases, only two individuals' convictions for their first offense specifically pertained to planning specific acts of violence in the country in which they resided.

One was Brusthom Ziamani, who was convicted in the United Kingdom for having planned to kill a British soldier.

The other was Rafik Mohamad Yousef in Germany. Yousef was part of a cell plotting to assassinate then Iraqi Prime Minister Ayad Allawi during a trip to Berlin in December 2004.³⁸ After the plot was discovered, Yousef was jailed for eight years for membership in a terrorist group and attempted conspiracy to commit murder. (According to German authorities, the plot was insufficiently developed to charge Yousef's cell with attempted murder.)³⁹ He was freed in 2013 and, in September 2015, stabbed a police officer in Berlin before being shot and killed by a fellow member of the police.⁴⁰ No terrorist group claimed responsibility for this attack.

Conversely, Christian Ganczarski was convicted in France for an attack that occurred in Tunisia; and though several of Usman Khan's co-accused pleaded guilty to plotting a pipe-bomb attack inside the London Stock Exchange,⁴¹ his guilty plea specifically related to a plan to establish and recruit for a training camp on land owned by his family in Kashmir. The purpose of establishing the camp was to carry out terrorism acts, initially in Kashmir but with

the possibility of returning to carry out attacks in the United Kingdom in the future.⁴²

Frustrated Travelers and Foreign Fighters

Six individuals' initial convictions for terrorist activity pertained to either their thwarted attempts to travel to a conflict zone in order to participate in foreign terrorist fighting; or successful travel to these conflict zones and subsequent participation in the fighting.

In 2011, Larossi Abballa was arrested for being part of a network facilitating jihadi travel from France to the Afghan/Pakistan border. In September 2013, Abballa was convicted in France of criminal association with a view to preparing terrorist acts. Abballa was sentenced to three years in prison (with six months suspended) and two years of probation.⁴³ He was released immediately, having been on remand since 2011.⁴⁴ In June 2016, Abballa stabbed a police officer to death at his property in the town of Magnanville, northwest of Paris, and then fatally slit the throat of the officer's partner.⁴⁵

Three individuals who were part of alleged plots/attacks had previously been thwarted in their attempts to take part in the fighting in Syria and one in Iraq (Cherif Kouachi, who had attempted to travel there in January 2005⁴⁶). Two individuals—Mohammed Taha El Hannouni⁴⁷ and Zoubeir C.⁴⁸—had successfully managed to travel to Syria (on both occasions from France), returned, and were subsequently convicted. Both allegedly planned or committed fresh acts of violence while in prison for this offense.

The Syrian jihad therefore played a prominent—but not ubiquitous—role in the trajectory of the jihadi attackers and plotters in Europe previously convicted there of terrorism-related offenses. Travel or attempted travel to Syria—between 2012 and 2017—formed the basis of the initial convictions for five of the 13 individuals involved in the 12 plots analyzed. It shows that there has already been some ‘blowback’ in Europe from frustrated travelers and foreign fighters.

Targets

Nine of the 12 alleged plots/attacks involved Islamist attacks upon security forces that succeeded in causing casualties.

As has been demonstrated, this manifested itself with ideologically motivated attacks on prison guards within the prison itself on four occasions (three times in France and once in the United Kingdom). Terrorist attacks on prison guards were also allegedly discussed in the alleged plot that was being formulated in prison but to be executed outside, involving Zoubeir C. and Matthieu C.⁴⁹

Yet the police were also specifically targeted on three occasions outside of the prison setting: twice in France and once in Germany. Rafik Yousef stabbed a police officer in Germany; Larossi Abballa specifically targeted law enforcement in the Magnanville stabbings; and Mohamed Chakrar's cell was suspected to be planning to target police officers for attack in a suburb of Paris.

There was an occasion where even though police were not the primary target of the plot, it still led to the death of an officer: during the Kouachi brothers' attack on *Charlie Hebdo*, a police officer named Ahmed Merabet was murdered by the terrorists as he attempted to prevent their escape.⁵⁰

Six of the nine plots that targeted police or security forces involved individuals who were known to have either been thwarted in their attempts to participate in foreign terrorist fighting; or had successfully managed to do so and subsequently returned to Europe. Four cases related to Syria (Chakrar, El Hannouni, Taghi, Zoubeir C.); one to Afghanistan (Ganczarski); while Cherif Kouachi was thwarted in his attempts to travel to Iraq but was likely able to later

q These individuals' names were changed in the media reporting.

r A third incarcerated man, Sylvain D., was also charged as part of the plot. However, as he is not known to be incarcerated for having committed a previous terrorism offense, he did not meet the criteria for inclusion in this study. Jérémie Pham-Lê, “In prison, detainees suspected of planning attacks in France,” *Parisien*, July 31, 2019.

visit Yemen to receive training [see *Allegiance to Foreign Terrorist Organizations* section].

While the sample of cases in this study is small, it suggests that 'blowback' from foreign fighter travel among prisoners and prison leavers could commonly manifest itself in specifically targeting security figures: be it the police or prison guards.

This mirrors instructions given by the senior Islamic State terrorist Abu Mohammed al-Adnani in September 2014, who encouraged supporters to "[s]trike their police, security, and intelligence members, as well as their treacherous agents."⁵¹ However, calls to target the police are not unique to the Islamic State: in the spring 2014 edition of al-Qa`ida's English language magazine *Inspire*, the terror group told readers that, "US, UK and French police force are not used to a frontline-type war. They cannot withstand a bang of a grenade, let alone a full car bomb blast."⁵²

Trajectory

The initial offense committed (i.e., that which led to the first conviction) was generally less serious than the second offense (i.e., the alleged plot or attack).

However, the general trajectory should not be described as individuals moving from non-violence first to then allegedly plotting/committing a violent offense second. For almost all the 13 individuals, the first offense involved or allegedly involved the intent of violence in some way.

Furthermore, while, by definition, almost all terrorism offenses involve some kind of violent intent, nine of the 13 were involved cases with a very close proximity to violence. This manifested itself in actual attack planning (Ganczarski, Yousef, Ziamani); an attempt to participate in foreign fighting (Chakrar, Eттаoujar, Kouachi, Taghi); or successful travel to participate in foreign fighting (El Hannouni, Zoubair C.).

Three individuals were involved in cases where the proximity to violence was less pronounced: the facilitation of foreign fighting (Abballa); facilitation of training (Khan); and possession and dissemination of a document likely to be useful to a person committing or preparing an act of terrorism (Amman).

There was only one individual for which the first conviction did not involve the intent of violence: Matthieu C., who had been jailed in France for crimes related to being an apologist for terrorism.

Timespan

The timespan for recidivism and reengagement was also calculated. For the alleged plots/attacks outside of prison, this was measured by the time between the date of release from prison for the first offense and the date of the second arrest or attack; and for the alleged plots/attacks carried out inside prison between the date of arrest for the first offense and the date of the second alleged plot/attack.⁵

For the 11 alleged plots/attacks for which data was available, the time lag between the first and second offenses ranged from 14 years, seven months (Christian Ganczarski) to 11 days (Sudesh Amman). The average time lag was three years, nine months and the median was two years, six months. The average time lag varied when calculated for the different types of alleged plots/attacks. For alleged plots/attacks outside of prison, the average time lag was two years,

two months rising to six years, four months for alleged plots/attacks carried out inside prison. The spread for both types of alleged plots/attacks can be seen in Figure 1.

While such a small sample (n=11) should be treated with caution, it suggests that there is no typical pathway or timeframe for terrorist reengagement or recidivism. The findings differ from those in Renard's study. From his dataset of jihadi terrorism convictions in Belgium between 1990 and 2019, Renard identified 27 cases of terrorist recidivism and (suspected) terrorist reengagement,¹ 17 of which information about the date of release from prison and the beginning of the second offense or engagement was available. Renard reported that the majority of these 17 individuals reoffended or reengaged within nine months, whereas the authors found that only two of the 11 alleged plots/attacks analyzed in this study saw reoffending within this timeframe. However, seven of the 11 alleged plot/attacks in the authors' study saw reoffending within three years of the first offense. A further three occurred between an interval of three and seven years and one outlier (Christian Ganczarski's attack on French prison guards) took many years for subsequent attack planning to come to fruition. It should be noted that unlike Renard's Belgium study, the authors' survey is not exhaustive, but the findings suggest that for Western Europe as a whole, most of the risk of terrorist recidivism or reengagement may occur within the first few years rather than months, particularly for alleged plots/attacks outside of prison. A comprehensive study of terrorist recidivism in Europe would shed more light on this question.

Moreover, Renard questioned whether some of those individuals in his dataset would have recidivated were it not for the Syrian jihad on the basis that most offenders had at least one offense, typically the second, relating to the conflict there.

The Syrian jihad played a significant role in the trajectory of the five individuals involved in the 12 plots analyzed in this study who were first convicted in relation to their attempted travel to Syria, suggesting that while the conflict may have acted as a pull for recidivism, it also served as an incubator for recidivist attack planning across Europe.

Allegiance to Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs)

The declaration of the Islamic State's caliphate in June 2014 led to predictions of al-Qa`ida's demise, as potential recruits and donors gravitated toward what for a number of years became the more powerful outfit.⁵³ However, from the albeit limited dataset available, this was not entirely reflected with the offenders studied here. Instead, there is a mix of those loyal to the Islamic State, those loyal to al-Qa`ida or groups in its orbit, and those with whom there is a degree of ambiguity.

One perpetrator—Cherif Kouachi—explicitly acted on al-Qa`ida's behalf despite the rise of the Islamic State. The Kouachi brothers were responsible for the *Charlie Hebdo* massacre. Al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) claimed responsibility for this attack.⁵⁴

In January 2015, Yemeni officials told Reuters that Kouachi and his brother Said Kouachi headed to Yemen in 2011 to receive

s The plot inside prison for a (foiled) attack outside of prison has been omitted from this timespan analysis owing to the authors' uncertainty over the dates of the two alleged attackers' initial conviction.

t This included found 13 cases of terrorist recidivism, 10 cases of reengagement, and four cases where reengagement was subject to discussion. Taken together, Renard found a terrorist recidivism and (suspected) reengagement rate of 4.8%.

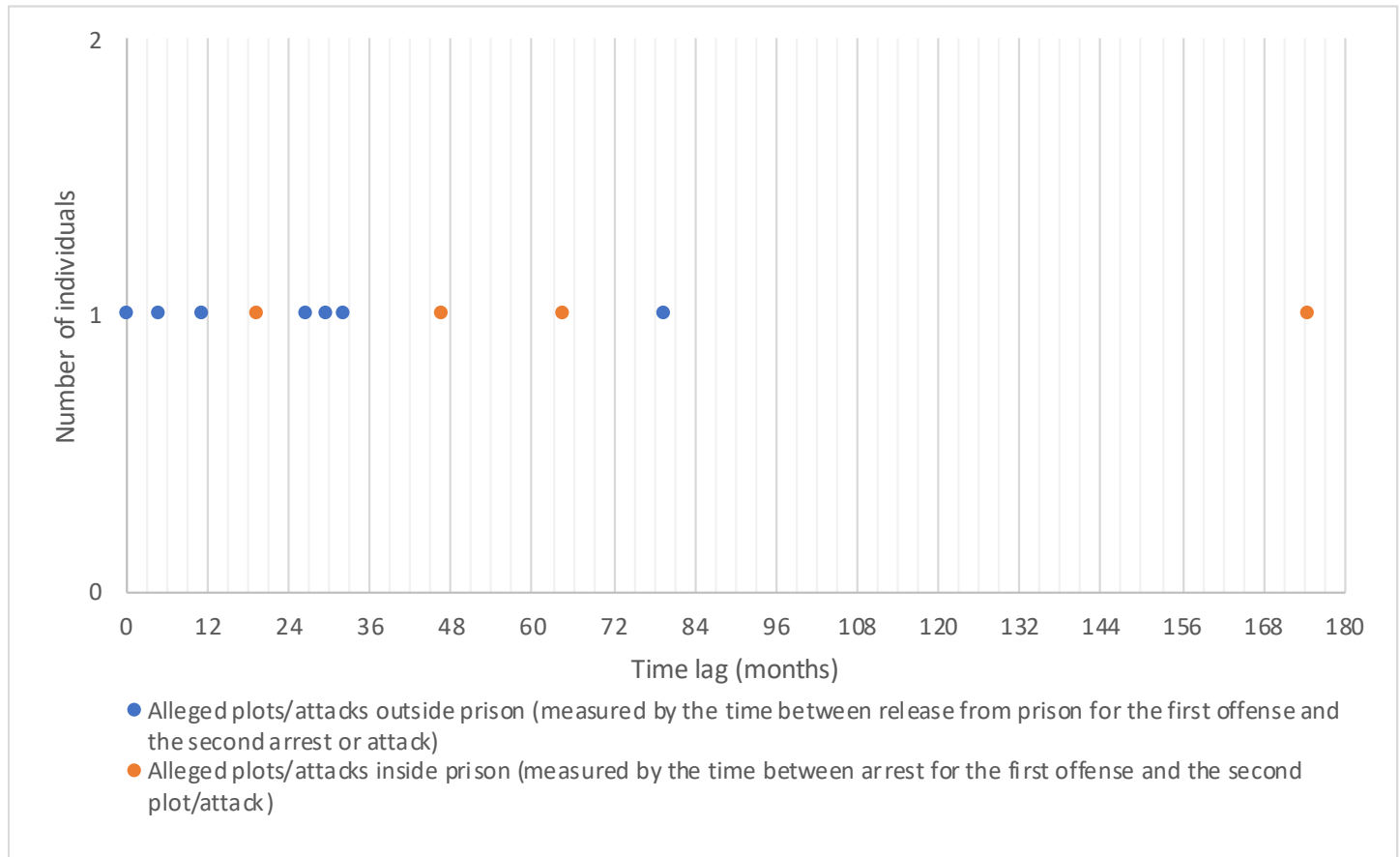


Figure 1: Timespan for terrorist recidivism or reengagement (n=11)

training from AQAP.⁵⁵ This was an assessment shared by French and U.S. officials speaking to *The Wall Street Journal*.⁵⁶ Subsequent reporting has pinpointed this as being in the summer of that year.⁵⁷

In the aftermath of their operation, Cherif Kouachi told French television (while on the run) that, “I was sent ... by al Qaeda in Yemen ... Sheikh Anwar al Awlaki financed my trip.”⁵⁸ This is a reference to AQAP’s influential American Yemeni cleric Anwar al-Awlaki, who was killed in a U.S. drone strike in September 2011. Before his death, al-Awlaki directed several terrorist plots in the West, and between his death and a 2016 study for this publication, Scott Shane found evidence of the cleric’s influence in more than half of U.S. jihadi terrorism cases.⁵⁹

There were also those who acted on the Islamic State’s behalf. This included Bilal Taghi, who stabbed two prison supervisors during his incarceration and explicitly stated that he wanted to target a symbol of the French state in tribute to the Islamic State.⁶⁰

There was also one individual who had demonstrated at least some ideological alignment with al-Qa`ida previously but who then carried out an attack in the name of the Islamic State. Larossi Abballa possessed al-Qa`ida literature at the time of his 2011 arrest for facilitation of travel to Afghanistan⁶¹ and Pakistan.⁶² However, after murdering a police officer and his partner in Magnanville, Abballa broadcast a Facebook live video stating that he had sworn

allegiance to then Islamic State emir, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.⁶³ He claimed to have pledged allegiance to al-Baghdadi three weeks prior to the attack taking place.⁶⁴ The Islamic State subsequently claimed credit for the attack.⁶⁵

News reports have outlined that Abballa was potentially tied to—and influenced by—Rachid Kassim,⁶⁶ a French terrorist who used the caliphate as a base from which to direct a series of plots in France via social media.⁶⁷ A month prior to Abballa’s attack, the Islamic State’s external operations chief, Abu Mohammed al-Adnani, had encouraged domestic attacks rather than travel to the caliphate. Al-Adnani stated that “the smallest act you do in their lands is more beloved to us than the biggest act done here; it is more effective for us and more harmful to them.”⁶⁸ This may have resonated with Abballa, who seems to have already expressed some frustration prior to his first conviction that the efforts of his cell were being directed toward the jihad overseas rather than domestically. Abballa had texted another member of the cell, “Do you really think they need us over there (in Pakistan)? ... Allah ... will give us the means to raise the flag here.”⁶⁹

While Abballa serves as an example of an individual whose first offense was more closely aligned with al-Qa`ida and his second offense tied to the Islamic State, this is not the only direction of travel. For example, it was reported in the U.K. press a month prior to the attack that he allegedly committed in prison, that Brusthom Ziamani had defected from a prison gang loyal to the Islamic State to one aligned with al-Qa`ida.⁷⁰ (The reason why is unclear.)

There were also cases where the influence of one group over another was ambiguous. For example, Usman Khan’s November 2019 attack was claimed by the Islamic State.⁷¹ Indiscriminate stabbing

u However, there is some ambiguity over this, as al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula’s review of the assault in *Inspire* magazine only refers to Said Kouachi being trained. See Thomas Joscelyn, “AQAP’s *Inspire* magazine contains ‘military analysis’ of Charlie Hebdo massacre,” *FDD’s Long War Journal*, September 11, 2015.

is certainly a method favored by those loyal to the Islamic State. Furthermore, the network he was part of in the United Kingdom—the proscribed terrorist organization al-Muhajiroun (ALM)⁷²—was known to have supplied fighters for the Islamic State in Syria.^v The head of ALM, Anjem Choudary, was found guilty in July 2016 of “inviting support for a proscribed organisation” (specifically, the Islamic State).⁷³

However, there is no evidence that has publicly emerged showing that Khan was in contact with the Islamic State, and unlike others who committed attacks in Europe, he had not arranged for a statement to be posthumously released declaring fealty with the Islamic State and its leadership.⁷⁴ Furthermore, Khan’s 2012 conviction was as part of an al-Qa`ida-inspired cell, one where he had been recorded discussing bomb-making instructions that had been published in the al-Qa`ida English-language Inspire magazine.⁷⁵

Ultimately, with perpetrators such as Khan, it is a challenging task to assess where al-Qa`ida’s influence ends and where the Islamic State’s influence begins.

Finally, in Germany, there was one attack with a link to Ansar al-Islam, a terrorist group based in northeast Iraq. Rafik Mohammad Yousef, who was involved in a potential plot to assassinate the Iraqi Prime Minister, was a member of Ansar al-Islam, a group that has had ties to both al-Qa`ida founder Usama bin Ladin and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the founding father of the Islamic State.⁷⁶

Surveillance

The imbalance between a growing terrorism threat and limited state resources is familiar to European security services. Shortly after the *Charlie Hebdo* attack, Andrew Parker, the then director-general of MI5, warned: “My sharpest concern ... is the growing gap between the increasingly challenging threat and the decreasing availability of capabilities to address it.”⁷⁷ Some of the cases analyzed here reflect that dilemma. In others, however, covert surveillance allowed the authorities to interdict planned attacks.

Cherif Kouachi was the only confirmed instance analyzed of a perpetrator reengaging without being still monitored in some way,

by virtue of being in prison, on probation, or under surveillance.^w Even this, however, was not down to ignorance about his potential threat. In fact, Kouachi’s surveillance had been stepped up after his brother returned from Yemen at the end of 2011, but with no evidence of new terrorism-related activity, it was discontinued in July 2014—six months before his attack—in favor of suspects deemed to be of higher risk.⁷⁸ Both brothers were on the U.S. government’s central database of known or suspected international terrorists, as well as a smaller “no fly” list barring them from boarding flights to or in the United States.⁷⁹

Several of the plots involving prior terror offenders were thwarted by covert surveillance.

Having been released from prison in October 2015 after trying to reach Syria (a crime for which he was sentenced to five years, with one suspended), Youssef Ettaoujar was put under house arrest as part of the French state of emergency and was closely monitored by the Directorate General of Internal Security (DGSI) for a month before his arrest in March 2016.⁸⁰ Ettaoujar was eventually jailed for 12 years for planning a firearms attack on an unspecified target in France.⁸¹

Ettaoujar’s previous conviction related to when he and an associate, Salah-Eddine Gourmat, tried to travel to Syria in 2012. This unsuccessful attempt led Ettaoujar to be jailed for five years, with one year suspended. In March 2014, Gourmat made another attempt—this time successful—to travel to Syria. French authorities suspected Ettaoujar and Gourmat remained in contact once the latter had made it to the caliphate. Gourmat was eventually killed in a drone strike in Raqqa in December 2016.⁸²

Teenage alleged Islamic State supporter Mohamed Chakrar was arrested in April 2019 in an educational center in Seine-Saint-Denis, Paris, where he had been detained on probation following his sentencing in January 2019 for attempted terrorist travel to Syria two years beforehand when he was aged 15. The cell he was allegedly part of had been under surveillance by the DSGI since February 1, 2019.⁸³ Three of his alleged accomplices were arrested in Paris on the same day as Chakrar after two of them were reportedly observed repurposing Kalashnikovs they had acquired as part of their alleged foiled plan to attack the Élysée and French police.⁸⁴ A police source reported a lack of supervision at Chakrar’s educational center and

v For example, Siddhartha Dhar was listed as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist and member of the Islamic State by the State Department in January 2018. Dhar was a former al-Muhajiroun spokesperson. See “State Department Terrorist Designations of Siddhartha Dhar and Abdelatif Gaini,” U.S. Department of State, January 23, 2018. Furthermore, according to a Michael Kenney study into al-Muhajiroun, among 48 individuals “involved in the activist network” that he interviewed between 2010-2015, “[f]our ... activists were later reported in the media as being killed in Iraq or Syria. At least one has reportedly returned to the United Kingdom. Five more respondents tried to leave Britain for Iraq and Syria but were caught before they made it and sent home by the authorities.” See Michael Kenney, “What is to be Done about al-Muhajiroun? Containing the Emigrants in a Democratic Society,” Commission for Countering Extremism, 2019.

w In France, Cherif Kouachi’s monitoring had lapsed six months before his attack. See Katrin Bennhold and Eric Schmitt, “Gaps in France’s Surveillance Are Clear; Solutions Aren’t,” *New York Times*, February 17, 2015. Youssef Ettaoujar was being closely monitored by French intelligence at the time of his plot. See “Paris attack project: who is Youssef Ettaoujar?” *Europe 1*, March 17, 2016. It is unclear whether Larossi Abballa remained under phone surveillance (in relation to a wider investigation into travel to Syria) at the time of his attack. See Josie Ensor, David Chazan, and Henry Samuel, “French cop-killer says he was answering Isil’s call for lone wolf attacks during Ramadan,” *Telegraph*, June 14, 2016. Mohamed Chakrar and his cell were being monitored by French authorities at the time of their alleged plot. See “Attack foiled against the Elysee Palace: a fifth suspect arrested in Strasbourg,” *Parisien*, May 7, 2019. In Germany, Rafik Mohammad Yousef’s electronic tag had been removed hours before he carried out his attack. See Justin Huggler, “Islamic terrorist shot dead after Berlin attack on policewoman,” *Telegraph*, September 17, 2015. In the United Kingdom, Usman Khan was being monitored by British authorities, including partial surveillance by MI5, at the time of his attack. See Kim Sengupta, “Usman Khan: London Bridge attacker was ‘being monitored by MI5, but not under constant watch,’” *Independent*, November 30, 2019. Sudesh Amman was under 24/7 armed surveillance at the time of his attack. See Vikram Dodd and Dan Sabbagh, “Streatham attacker was released amid fears he felt terrorism ‘justified,’” *Guardian*, February 3, 2020.

he was alleged to have met up with his accomplices in person on several occasions.⁸⁵ Chakrar was also reportedly friends with a fifth accomplice, arrested in Strasbourg 11 days later for his alleged planned role broadcasting a video of allegiance to the Islamic State on behalf of the cell.⁸⁶

There were also those for whom surveillance or electronic monitoring did not prevent an attack. In Germany, Rafik Mohamad Yousef removed an electronic ankle-monitoring device on the day he stabbed a police officer who had been called to a district in Berlin after members of the public reported that a man with a knife was acting aggressively and threatening passers-by in the area.⁸⁷ Sudesh Amman was another example. Having been released automatically from prison in the United Kingdom—where his behavior had already caused concern—he was placed under full surveillance. Within days the officials monitoring Amman were ordered to be armed. The following week, they shot him dead as he began stabbing passers-by on a London High Street with a knife he stole in a shop.⁸⁸

It is not clear whether Magnanville attacker Larossi Abballa was still under surveillance at the time of his fatal stabbing of a French police commander and his partner in June 2016. Having been convicted in 2013 of aiding a group that had been recruiting fighters for jihad in Pakistan, Abballa was released owing to time spent in jail awaiting trial and was placed under surveillance until November 2015. He was later placed under phone surveillance as part of an investigation that began in February 2016 into a group believed to be traveling to Syria, with police sources stating that while the evidence collected suggested he was radicalized, it had not indicated that he was preparing to carry out an attack.⁸⁹ However, it is unclear whether this investigation had been completed by the time of his attack and therefore it is unclear whether he remained under surveillance.^x

The Management of Terrorism Offenders

The cases of alleged plots/attacks inside prisons illustrate recurrent policy questions in Europe on the management of terrorism offenders. Brusthom Ziamani and Mohammed Taha El Hannouni were each separately able to mount attacks on prison guards from within the mainstream population, in the latter case prompting calls from French prison unions for radicalized prisoners to be moved to “specialised establishments.”⁹⁰ Bilal Taghi’s attack on prison officers, by contrast, occurred on a dedicated counter extremism wing that was piloting the segregation of offenders who were known to be radicalized but who were also assessed to not present the highest security

risk.⁹¹ Christian Ganczarski’s alleged attack on guards in a French high security prison occurred while he was in isolation ahead of his (now delayed) extradition to the U.S.⁹²

They also raise difficult questions about the effectiveness of efforts to rehabilitate and reintegrate ideologically motivated offenders. London Bridge attacker Usman Khan was monitored by MI5 after he left prison, although not under the same level of day-to-day scrutiny as Amman.⁹³ He was in central London to attend a conference on rehabilitation organized by Learning Together, an educational initiative that brought students from Cambridge University together with current and former prisoners to discuss criminal justice. Khan had previously worked with the group and appeared in their promotional literature as a case study to show how they helped rehabilitate terrorists.⁹⁴

Following Khan’s attack, the psychologist who helped design the United Kingdom’s deradicalization programs acknowledged: “[W]e have to be very careful about ever saying that somebody no longer presents a risk of committing an offence. I don’t think you can ever be sure.”⁹⁵

Part Two: What U.K. Data Reveals about the Scale of the Prisoner Threat

This section expands upon a comprehensive dataset of Islamist terrorism convictions and attacks in the United Kingdom between the beginning of 1998 and the end of 2015 to provide a quantitative study of the extent to which broader recidivism and reengagement by convicted terrorists is common in that country. It provides the terrorist recidivism rate for all U.K.-based Islamist terrorism convictions and attacks during this timeframe. Whereas part one of this study was more focused on the nature of the threat, part two uses a country-specific case study in an attempt to explore the scale.

Inclusion Criteria

Instances of convicted terrorists reengaging in the form of a planned or attempted attack—as narrowly defined by the authors—are uncommon. The database on which part one of this study is drawn contained only 12 incidents of individuals previously convicted of terrorism-related offenses who went on to allegedly plan or carry out a terrorist attack either after or prior to release from prison. One important caveat: the purpose of the database was to track the threat to Europe following the rise of the Islamic State rather than a study on terrorist recidivism, and so while attempts were made to be as exhaustive as possible, there have potentially been further examples of plots/attacks involving individuals previously convicted of terrorism offenses.

However, data previously collected by one of the authors suggests that broader recidivism and reengagement is complex and that there are overlapping areas between terrorist recidivism narrowly conceived as two distinct convictions for terrorist activity and broader crime-terrorism recidivism, understood as including individuals who are convicted on two separate occasions for at least one terrorist offense during one of those convictions. This section draws on a comprehensive dataset of 269 Islamist terrorism convictions and attacks in the United Kingdom between the beginning of 1998 and the end of 2015 that was produced for the U.K. Home Office and published by the Henry Jackson Society in 2017.⁹⁶ Cases were identified through open-source material including news and legal archives and monitoring police and Crown Prosecution Service statements and social media, as well as court records and

x *The Telegraph* reported that Abballa “was under surveillance and his phone was tapped.” However, *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, and BBC News reported the fact that he had been under phone surveillance earlier in the year without clarifying whether that surveillance continued or not. These outlets respectively reported: “More recently, Mr. Abballa came to the attention of the French law enforcement authorities when he was among several people questioned in a counterterrorism inquiry that Mr. Molins’s office began on Feb. 11 into a group believed to be planning to go to Syria;” “[Abballa] had been under phone surveillance this year in connection to an inquiry about another man leaving for Syria;” and “Abballa had reportedly been the subject of a recent anti-terrorist investigation into a Syrian jihadist group, including having his phone tapped.” See Josie Ensor, David Chazan, and Henry Samuel, “French cop-killer says he was answering Isis’s call for lone wolf attacks during Ramadan,” *Telegraph*, June 14, 2016; Alissa J. Rubin and Lilia Blaise, “Killing Twice for ISIS and Saying So Live on Facebook,” *New York Times*, June 14, 2016; Angélique Chrisafis, “French prime minister defends security forces after Isis-linked murders,” *Guardian*, June 15, 2016; and “Who was French police killer Larossi Abballa?” BBC, June 14, 2016.

indictments that were obtained on request.^y

Between 1998 and 2015, there were 10 cases of individuals who, at the time of arrest for the second (and, in one case, third) U.K. terrorist offense, had already been convicted of a terrorist offense in the United Kingdom within this timeframe. An increased policy focus on jihadi prisoners and prison leavers led the author to calculate and publish here for the first time the terrorist recidivism rate in the U.K. dataset: 3.7%. Here, terrorist recidivism is understood as individuals who are convicted on two separate occasions for at least one terrorist offense each time.

This terrorist recidivism rate is low, especially compared to recidivism generally. It also falls within the range of terrorist recidivism rates from 12 terrorism studies between 2004 and 2020 compiled by Renard for his study for this publication, which ranged from 0% in a number of studies (including Marc Sageman's study of 172 jihadis in 2004) to 8.3% in a 2013 study in Indonesia.

None of the 10 cases in the author's U.K. study, however, involved attack planning, with the perpetrators typically favoring fundraising for terrorist purposes, or inciting murder. Six of these 10 cases involved members of the proscribed U.K.-based terrorist group al-Muhajiroun.⁹⁷

The author identified a further three cases of individuals who, at the time of their arrest for the U.K.-based terrorist offense that warranted their inclusion in the dataset, had previously been convicted of terrorist activity overseas. These cases involved two individuals convicted in absentia in 2003 and 2011 for alleged bomb attacks in Morocco and Bahrain, respectively, and an individual convicted of an illegal border crossing in Indian-controlled Kashmir while allegedly fighting with the Kashmiri separatist group Harakat-ul-Mujahideen.^z Including these cases, which are questionable owing to the lack of judicial independence in these countries, would raise the terrorist recidivism rate to 4.8%, which coincidentally is also the fig-

y The study used a quantitative methodology for data collection. To be included, individuals had to have been convicted for terrorism offenses or have committed suicide attacks in the United Kingdom, and in addition, they must have been demonstrably motivated by Islamism. Alongside keyword searches and open-source research, findings were cross-referenced with annual reports by the Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation and Home Office counterterrorism statistical bulletins. However, due to the length of the period studied and changes in internal recording of terrorism offenses, there may have been a small number of cases that are not included in this dataset.

z Al-Bashir Mohammed al-Faqih, convicted in the United Kingdom in 2007 of possessing information likely useful for terrorism, had previously been convicted for involvement in suicide bombings in Morocco. See Secretary of State for the Home Department v AV [2009] EWHC 902 (Admin), April 30, 2009, para. 1; "Treasury Designates UK-Based Individuals, Entities Financing Al Qaida-Affiliated LIFG," U.S. Department of the Treasury, February 8, 2006. Abdul Raouf Al Shayeb, convicted in the United Kingdom in 2015 of possessing information likely useful for terrorism, had previously been convicted for involvement in a bomb attack in Bahrain. See Hannah al-Othman, "Man found with memory card of military files is convicted of terror offences," *Evening Standard*, December 16, 2015; "Chief of Public Security statement on Abdul Raouf Al Shayeb sentencing," Bahrain News Agency, December 17, 2015. Rangzieb Ahmed, convicted in the United Kingdom in October and December 2008 of a variety of terrorist offenses, including directing terrorism and membership of al-Qa`ida, had previously pleaded guilty in India to an illegal border-crossing offense after having been arrested allegedly fighting with Harakat-ul-Mujahideen. See R v Ahmed & Anor [2011] EWCA Crim 184, February 25, 2011, para. 12; "Al-Qaeda terror trial: Rangzieb Ahmed was highest ranking Al-Qaeda operative in Britain," *Daily Telegraph*, December 18, 2008; Testimony of Rangzieb Ahmed, Cageprisoners, undated.

ure for terrorist recidivism and suspected reengagement calculated in Renard's Belgium study.^{aa} This new statistic demonstrates that solely looking at domestic terrorist convictions can only provide an insight into part of the overall problem.

The author identified a further 12 U.K. terrorist offenses within this timeframe (beginning of 1998 to end of 2015) that had been committed by individuals who had a prior criminal record for non-terrorism activities that the author of the dataset interpreted as containing an extremism-related motivation or element. These were typically for public disorder (such as harassment and threatening behavior) or low-level criminal damage, often in relation to public al-Muhajiroun activism or other extreme networks.

Three of these 12 cases were planned or attempted attacks in the United Kingdom.^{ab} In the three cases, the prior convictions had been for minor (albeit suspected extremism-related) public order offenses.

The first case was Waheed Mahmood, who was jailed for his role in an al-Qa`ida-directed 2004 fertilizer bomb plot. During the trial, Mahmood's Islamist convictions were reported by the media, including that during the 1990s he had attended radical political meetings in Crawley and Luton and that, in 1993, he had received a conditional discharge for using "threatening, abusive or insulting words during a Muslim demonstration."⁹⁸

The second case was Shah Rahman,^{ac} who was convicted alongside London Bridge attacker Usman Khan in 2012. During sentencing, the judge stated that while the cell was under surveillance Rahman had drawn attention to himself by being arrested for a "minor, jihadist inspired, public order offence" in London.⁹⁹

The third case was Michael Adebolajo, who was jailed for killing Fusilier Lee Rigby in 2013. Adebolajo had assaulted a police officer during an al-Muhajiroun solidarity rally for a terrorism suspect in 2006.¹⁰⁰

These combined 25 cases—of terrorist offenses being committed by individuals with previous convictions for terrorist activities or what the author interpreted as extremism-related activities—account for 9.3% of U.K. terrorism convictions between 1998 and 2015. The authors acknowledge that categorizing criminal behavior as extremism-related is a fine judgment, but nonetheless consider it a useful area for further research.

A further 44 terrorist offenses were carried out by individuals with previous convictions that did not include terrorist activities or behavior that the author interpreted as extremism-related. These were for a variety of offenses, notably public disorder, theft, assault, drug-related, and possession of offensive weapons or firearms. Tak-

aa The authors acknowledge that this is not a direct comparison given several differences between the inclusion criteria for each dataset.

ab The others typically involved facilitation, such as fundraising or inciting terrorism, or were aspirational offenses, such as possessing information likely useful for terrorism.

ac Rahman was also among those in the U.K. dataset who went on to commit an ideologically motivated attack in prison following conviction for a terrorism-related offense. In April 2014, Rahman and two other terrorism offenders—Manu Kwaku Asiedu, convicted for his role in the attempted London Underground bombings on July 21, 2005, and Jewel Uddin, convicted for his role in an attempted bomb plot against an English Defence League protest in Dewsbury in 2012—physically attacked former army lieutenant and convicted murderer Jeremy Green, in what the prosecution later alleged was revenge for the latter's service in Afghanistan against the Taliban. The incident was not treated as terrorism. See "Terrorists attacked murderer at gym in Wakefield jail," *Yorkshire Post*, October 22, 2015.

en together, therefore, one in six (16.4%) U.K. terrorist offenses between 1998 and 2015 was committed by an individual with a prior, non-extremism or terrorism-related criminal record.

The relationship between terrorism and criminality is an increasing area of focus in academia. Furthermore, it encapsulates the fears of many Western policymakers over the nature and scale of radicalization in prisons, particularly when this involves a criminal offender being reconvicted for a terrorism-related offense. Data on current prisoners assessed as radicalized illustrates the potential scale of the problem. In the United Kingdom, there are 238 people in custody for terrorism-related offenses,¹⁰¹ however, up to 800 prisoners are managed by a counterterrorism specialist case management process at any one time.¹⁰² In France, as of the end of 2018, 500 detainees convicted of terrorism charges were in prison, with a further 1,200 reported to have been radicalized.¹⁰³ Approximately 90% of those 1,700 people will be released by 2025.

Conclusion

After studying decades' worth of data in Belgium, Thomas Renard's study contended that the threat posed by terrorism recidivists to Europe may be exaggerated. Using the United Kingdom as a reference point, this study supports Renard's finding of a low rate when assessing recidivism among U.K. offenders convicted of multiple terrorism offenses on separate occasions within the United Kingdom itself.

However, when other factors are considered—individuals who at the time of their arrest for the U.K.-based terrorist offense had

previously been convicted of terrorist activity overseas; and terrorist offenses carried out by individuals with previous convictions that the author interpreted as extremism-related—the rate grows appreciably.

Furthermore, as an increased number of individuals who supported the Islamic State are released across Europe, this may lead to an increase in recidivism and reengagement. After all, what applied to jihadis' conflicts of the past may not hold in the era of the caliphate. As Aimen Dean, a former member of al-Qa`ida who became a spy for British intelligence, has written, "I look back in to my time in Bosnia and the Philippines, even my first visit to Afghanistan, as almost innocent expeditions in pursuit of an ideal" in contrast to the gruesome brutality of modern jihadi conflicts.¹⁰⁴

The precise nature of the threat posed by those soon due for release having previously committed a previous terrorism offense will only become clear in the months and years ahead. Yet, as Renard acknowledges, it is unlikely that the problem set posed by 'prison leavers' will disappear entirely. The internal threat to prisons posed by radicalized prisoners will also likely endure. Governments will need to be able to mitigate both trajectories simultaneously.

While much of this study has focused on attack planning, it is also important for policy makers to broaden their horizons beyond acts of violence. Convicted terrorists who use their gravitas and credibility to recruit others to the Islamist cause—inside or outside of prison—are clearly still a national security concern, even if they are not breaking the law or planning a fresh attack themselves.

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Table 1: Dataset (ordered by date of secondary offense)

Name	Date of initial arrest	Nature of offense	Country of conviction	Outcome	Date of secondary offense/alleged offense	Nature of offense/alleged offense	Country of conviction/accusation	Outcome
Cherif Kouachi	January 2005	Attempted terrorist travel (Iraq)	France	Spent one year, eight months in prison, then released under judicial supervision. Eventually sentenced to three years (time served, released immediately)	January 2015	Firearms terrorist attack (<i>Charlie Hebdo</i> office, police officers)	France	Killed by French police
Rafik Mohamad Yousef	December 2004	Attempted murder of Iraqi Prime Minister during a visit to Germany; membership of a terrorist group	Germany	Sentenced to eight years in prison; released in 2013	September 2015	Edged weapon terrorist attack (police officer)	Germany	Killed by German police
Youssef Ettaoujar	May 2012	Attempted terrorist travel (Syria)	France	Sentenced to five years in prison (one year suspended); released in October 2015	March 2016	Preparation for an attack of unspecified nature	France	Jailed for 12 years in August 2019
Larossi Abballa	2011	Facilitation of terrorist travel (Afghanistan and Pakistan)	France	Sentenced to three years in prison (six months suspended, two years of probation)	June 2016	Edged weapon terrorist attack (police officer, civilian)	France	Killed by French police
Bilal Taghi	January 2015	Attempted terrorist travel (Syria)	France	Sentenced to five years in prison	September 2016	Edged weapon terrorist attack (prison guards)	France	Found guilty; jailed for 28 years
Christian Ganczarski	June 2003	Complicity in attempted murder in relation to a terrorist enterprise (Tunisia)	France	Sentenced to 18 years in prison	January 2018	Edged weapon terrorist attack (prison guards)	France	Charged with attempted murder

Mohamed Chakrar	February 2017	Attempted terrorist travel (Syria)	France	Sentenced to three years in prison (two years suspended)	April 2019	Firearm terrorist attack (police)	France	Awaiting trial
Mohammed Taha El Hannouni	2015	Terrorist travel (Syria)	France	Sentenced to seven years in prison	June 2019	Edged weapon terrorist attack (prison guards)	France	Awaiting trial for attempted murder with a terrorist association
Zoubeir C.; Matthieu C.	Unspecified, post-2014 (Zoubeir C.); unspecified (Matthieu C.)	Terrorist travel (Syria, Zoubeir C.); apology for terrorism (Matthieu C.)	France	Sentenced to six years in prison (Zoubeir C.); unspecified sentence in France (Matthieu C.)	July 2019	Planned explosives attack (various targets discussed, including prison guards)	France	Charged with criminal association; further details unknown
Usman Khan	December 2010	Engaging in conduct in preparation for acts of terrorism (Kashmir)	United Kingdom	Sentenced to 16 years in prison with a five-year extended licence period (reduced from an indeterminate sentence on appeal)	November 2019	Edged weapon terrorist attack (civilians)	United Kingdom	Killed by British police
Brusthom Ziamani	August 2014	Preparation for an act of terrorism (United Kingdom)	United Kingdom	Sentenced to 19 years in prison with a five-year extended licence period (reduced from 22 years on appeal)	January 2020	Edged weapon terrorist attack (prison guards)	United Kingdom	Charged with attempted murder, actual bodily harm, and common assault; awaiting trial
Sudesh Amman	May 2018	Possession and dissemination of terrorism-related material	United Kingdom	Sentenced to three years and four months in prison	February 2020	Edged weapon terrorist attack (civilians)	United Kingdom	Killed by British authorities

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The QAnon Conspiracy Theory: A Security Threat in the Making?

By Amarnath Amarasingam and Marc-André Argentino

The QAnon conspiracy theory, which emerged in 2017, has quickly risen to prominence in the United States. A survey of cases of individuals who have allegedly or apparently been radicalized to criminal acts with a nexus to violence by QAnon, including one case that saw a guilty plea on a terrorism charge, makes clear that QAnon represents a public security threat with the potential in the future to become a more impactful domestic terror threat. This is true especially given that conspiracy theories have a track record of propelling terrorist violence elsewhere in the West as well as QAnon's more recent influence on mainstream political discourse.

Generally speaking, law enforcement and public policy attention with respect to terrorism and political violence in North America tends to focus on jihadi or far-right extremism.¹ At first glance, QAnon, the bizarre assemblage of far-right conspiracy theories that holds that U.S. President Donald Trump is waging a secret war against an international cabal of satanic pedophiles seems to present a far lesser threat to public security. However, QAnon has contributed to the radicalization of several people to notable criminal acts or acts of violence. In light of these events, this article attempts to take stock of the violence this bizarre set of conspiracy theories has engendered thus far and asks whether it should be seen as a security threat in the making.²

Though less organized than jihadi or far-right extremists, the authors argue that QAnon represents a novel challenge to public

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security. This is consistent with a May 2019 report by the United States Federal Bureau of Investigation, which details the increasing influence of anti-government, identity-based, or fringe political conspiracies, including QAnon, on motivating criminal or violent activity. The report, as presented by Yahoo News, claims that “based on the increase volume and reach of conspiratorial content due to modern communication methods, it is logical to assume that more extremist-minded individuals will be exposed to potentially harmful conspiracy theories, accept ones that are favorable to their views, and possibly carry out criminal or violent actions as a result.”³

Further, the report emphasizes that the internet allows for a “crowd-sourcing” effect wherein “conspiracy theory followers themselves shape a given theory by presenting information that supplements, expands, or localizes its narrative.”⁴ This effect appears particularly salient with QAnon, where followers are directed to take interpretation and action into their own hands, rather than at the explicit direction of the anonymous user (known only as Q) behind the movement. QAnon is thus markedly different from other far-right extremist groups and jihadi groups, as it lacks both a clear organizational structure and a centralization of interpretive duties.

In this article, the authors provide further context on the emergence of QAnon, a summary of five criminal cases with a nexus to violence motivated by QAnon, including one case that resulted in a guilty plea on a terrorism charge. The data presented here was collected by the authors from various sources from 2018 to the present, including QAnon community messaging pages, social media pages of individuals radicalized to criminal or violent activity, and publicly accessible news reports.

What is the QAnon Conspiracy?

The QAnon conspiracy⁵ emerged on Saturday, October 28, 2017, on 4chan's^a /pol/ (politically incorrect page) in a thread called “Calm Before the Storm,” when an anonymous user signing off as ‘Q’ stated that “Hillary Clinton will be arrested between 7:45 AM - 8:30 AM EST on Monday - the morning on Oct 30, 2017.”⁶ Q's *nom de plume* is in reference to “Q” clearance, a clearance level in the United States Department of Energy.

However, QAnon finds its origins a year prior in the Pizzagate conspiracy theory,⁷ which alleges coded words and satanic symbolism purportedly apparent in John Podesta's emails, hacked during his tenure as chair of Hillary Clinton's 2016 U.S. presidential cam-

a According to News Guard, which rates the credibility of news and information sites, “4chan is an anonymous— users never need to make an account or pick a username, even a pseudonymous one— image board.” From a functional perspective, “it is broken up into threads where users can discuss different topics; moderation on the platform is virtually non-existent. 4chan is rife with pornography and other posts that many would consider shocking or inappropriate, such as violent imagery and racial imagery.” “4chan.org,” News Guard Tech, Accessed July 2020.



A QAnon flag is held by a protester at the Governor's Mansion, in Salem, Oregon, on April 25, 2020, during a rally against economic-closure efforts aimed at minimizing the impact of COVID-19. (John Rudoff/Sipa USA/Sipa via AP Images)

paign, point to a secret child sex trafficking ring at a pizza restaurant in Washington, D.C., called Comet Ping Pong. Pizzagate came to a head in December 2016 when Edgar M. Welch (whose case is discussed in detail below) traveled from North Carolina “to the popular DC pizzeria Comet Ping Pong with a handgun and an assault rifle to ‘self-investigate’ the validity of the 4chan conspiracy.”⁸ QAnon, beginning in 2017, thus originated out of the Pizzagate conspiracy theory, retaining the central belief that a cabal of powerful elites control the world, using their power to covertly abuse children.

Q’s claim on 4chan to have special government access and that he/she is part of a wider “anon genre” of government officials with top secret information is not entirely novel. Before Q, several 4chan posters asserted they had special government access, including FBI-Anon⁹ and HLIAnon¹⁰ in 2016, and CIAAnon¹¹ and WHInsider-Anon¹² in 2017. QAnon devotees, many of whom may be familiar with this “anon genre,” thus are familiar with Q’s apparent need for anonymity and presumably take it as a sign of credibility.

In July 2020, nearly three years following Q’s emergence, there remains no consensus on who the original Q was and who manages the account today. However, there is a fair amount of evidence that demonstrates how QAnon grew to prominence from the narrow

confines of 4chan and 8chan.^b According to how one news outlet summed up a 2018 NBC News investigative report, the original Q post “would have gone mostly unnoticed if not for three people – Tracy Diaz, a YouTube vlogger, and 4chan moderators Pamphlet Anon, identified as Coleman Rogers, and BaruchtheScribe, a South African man named Paul Furber.”^{13*} NBC News reported that Rogers and Furber reached out to Diaz, asking her to leverage her large YouTube following to promote the first ‘Q’ posts. Without sharing the 4chan thread with Diaz’ viewership, QAnon may never have grown beyond its small following on the image board site.

The authors have observed that QAnon supporters purport that their claims are empirical and do not ask that their assertions be

^b According to News Guard, which rates the credibility of news and information, “8chan bills itself as ‘the Darkest Reaches of the Internet.’” Furthermore, “anyone can anonymously post text, videos, images, and other files as well as links to external websites. Content appears on ‘boards,’ which anyone can create.” “8ch.net,” News Guard Tech, Accessed July 2020. In 2019, 8chan was used to announce deadly attacks at mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand; a synagogue in Poway, California; and a Walmart in El Paso, Texas. In March 2019, as the New Zealand gunman live-streamed his rampage, 8chan allowed the grisly footage to reach millions. Subsequently, 8chan was taken down in August 2019. 8chan returned as 8kun in November 2019, with several boards dedicated to QAnon. Benjamin Goggin, “8chan — the website connected to mass shootings and conspiracy theories — has relaunched as 8kun,” Business Insider, November 3, 2019.

* This sentence was amended after publication to make clear the direct quote was from a summary by another news outlet (see endnote 13) of the reporting by NBC News.

taken at face value. The QAnon community is guided by the oft-repeated maxim, “do your own research.”¹⁴ Imitating source citation and evidence presentation in academic scholarship, QAnon followers regularly engage in elaborate presentations of evidence to substantiate their claims. In this vein, they often self-identify as investigative journalists or conspiracy researchers.¹⁵

QAnon also represents a militant and anti-establishment ideology rooted in an apocalyptic desire to destroy the existing, corrupt world to usher in a promised golden age.¹⁶ This position finds resonance with other far-right extremist movements, such as the various militant, anti-government, white nationalist, and neo-Nazi extremist organizations across the United States. In February 2020, Omega Kingdom Ministries, in effect a QAnon church, was established in the United States and other countries where the QAnon conspiracy acts as an interpretive lens for the Bible and vice versa, and in which adherents are subjected to formalized religious indoctrination into QAnon.^c QAnon followers share roots with conspiracy theories that have fed other anti-government movements, such as the 90s militias that feared the “New World Order,” or the anti-government apocalypticism and religious fervor of the Branch Davidians.¹⁷

Recent criminal cases with a nexus to violence involving QAnon followers show how QAnon has contributed to the radicalization of *ideologically motivated violent extremists* (IMVE).¹⁸ According to the FBI, QAnon and other fringe conspiracy theories could “very likely motivate some domestic extremists, wholly or in part, to commit criminal and sometimes violent activity” and noted that “one key assumption driving these assessments is that certain conspiracy theory narratives tacitly support or legitimize violent action.”¹⁹ Below, the authors provide a chronological summary of five criminal cases with a nexus to violence motivated, in part at least, by QAnon radicalization. They start with the aforementioned Edgar Maddison Welch, whose armed search of the Comet Ping Pong pizzeria predated QAnon but represents an ideological precursor to other QAnon-motivated actions.

Notable Cases with a Nexus to Violent Crime Linked to the QAnon Conspiracy

The authors now outline five criminal cases below with a nexus to violent crime linked to the QAnon conspiracy.^d

c Omega Kingdom Ministries (OKM) is part of a network of independent congregations (or ekklesia) called Home Congregations Worldwide (HCW). It has online services at the moment due to the COVID-19 pandemic. OKM, however, has central hubs in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Germany, Japan, and Australia where in-person meetings and trainings take place. Its infrastructure is different than a traditional church as the services in non-pandemic times take place in the home of a leader with 10 to 12 other individuals. During these services, the first hour is dedicated to a liturgy where QAnon conspiracy theories are reinterpreted through the Bible. In the second hour, during an analysis of Qdrops, QAnon serves as a lens to interpret the Bible itself. Marc-André Argentino, “The Church of QAnon: Will conspiracy theories form the basis of a new religious movement?” Conversation Canada, May 18, 2020.

d The inclusion criteria for selected cases is whether there is a nexus to violent crime. See “Violent Crime,” National Institute of Justice. The authors have excluded criminal cases where this was not apparent. Jessica Prim, though not charged with a violent crime, was included due to the apparent threats she made in her livestream against presidential candidate Joe Biden.

Edgar Maddison Welch

Edgar Maddison Welch, a then 28-year-old from Salisbury, North Carolina, entered the Comet Ping Pong pizza restaurant in Washington, D.C., on December 4, 2016, with an AR-15 rifle and .38 revolver²⁰ to potentially attempt to free children he believed might be trapped in the building as part of a sex-trafficking ring.²¹ Welch, a volunteer firefighter with two children,²² had a criminal record for incidents involving minor drug possession and driving under the influence of alcohol in 2007 and 2013, respectively.^e

Welch entered Comet Ping Pong with his AR-15 visible, causing employees and patrons to flee, to search for evidence of child trafficking.²³ Finding none, he shortly thereafter surrendered himself to the police on scene.²⁴ Welch also admitted that there was a loaded shotgun and ammunition in his car.²⁵ An FBI affidavit notes that, “the evidence from Welch’s cellphone also suggest that Welch attempted to recruit at least two other people to join him,” though he was unsuccessful.²⁶

Evidence found on Welch’s cellphone indicates he watched several YouTube videos describing the ‘Pizzagate’ conspiracy theory in the days preceding his confrontation.²⁷ Upon arrest, Welch corroborated that he had heard ‘news’ reports that there was a child-sex trafficking ring in Comet Ping Pong restaurant.²⁸

Welch was charged with federal and local weapons violations and pleaded guilty to a federal charge of interstate transportation of a firearm and ammunition and a D.C. charge of assault with a dangerous weapon.²⁹ He was sentenced to four years in prison in June 2017, with three years of supervised release following his term in prison.³⁰ Welch remains in prison and has expressed regrets about his actions but maintains elements of the Pizzagate theory are true.³¹

Matthew Philip Wright

On June 15, 2018, Matthew Philip Wright, a 30-year-old, unemployed Marine veteran from Henderson, Nevada,³² drove an armored truck onto the Mike O’Callaghan-Pat Tillman Memorial Bridge near the Hoover Dam.³³ Wright parked his vehicle on the southbound lanes, blocking traffic,³⁴ and stood outside the vehicle with a sign calling for the release of the “OIG Report,”³⁵ which CNN reported was an “apparent reference to the US Justice Department’s internal watchdog report on the department’s handling of the Hillary Clinton email probe.” The 568-page report had been released the previous day, making Wright’s message unclear.³⁵ QAnon followers expected that the document would contain revelations about nefarious government actors, suggesting Wright had engaged with QAnon theories.³⁶

e Welch also allegedly hit and seriously injured a 13-year-old with his car in 2016, though the authors were not able to determine whether the investigation, which remained open during his arrest for the Comet incident, resulted in charges. Jonathan Drew and Tom Foreman Jr., “DC pizza shop gunman regrets actions, still believes fake Hillary Clinton child sex ring story,” Global News, December 8, 2016.

f Q and QAnon influencers hyped up the OIG report in question with the belief it would reveal incriminating evidence that would bring down the Democrats. QAnon adherents were thoroughly disappointed when the report was released, as it did not contain the revelations they expected. ‘Q’ responded to the OIG report, claiming there were multiple versions of the OIG report but the one that had the incriminating evidence was not the one that was publicly released. Will Sommer, “QAnon, the Crazy Pro-Trump Conspiracy, Melts Down Over OIG Report,” Daily Beast, June 19, 2018.

After a 90-minute standoff with police, Wright drove away, refusing to stop for law enforcement until he drove over tire strips and came to a stop.³⁷ Upon arrest, law enforcement found in his vehicle two assault-style rifles and two handguns, 900 rounds of ammunition, and a flashbang device.³⁸

Following his arrest, Wright wrote letters to senior government officials and politicians, as well as a letter to President Trump.³⁹ In the letter to the president, Wright used the term the “Great Awakening”—QAnon language that refers to the reckoning Trump is thought to bring to what they see as the “Cabal” that has infiltrated the U.S. government.⁴⁰ In these letters, Wright used the QAnon phrase, “For Where We Go One, We Go All.”⁴¹

Wright was charged with obstruction of a highway, endangerment, unlawful flight from law enforcement, misconduct involving a weapon, and terrorist acts.⁴² He later pleaded guilty to making a terrorist threat (designated as non dangerous), an aggravated assault charge, and fleeing from law enforcement under a plea agreement with prosecutors, but the court recently rejected the agreement for delivering too lenient of a prison term.⁴³ A future hearing date has been set to determine next steps, and Wright appears to remain in Mohave County Jail.⁴⁴

Anthony Comello

While Wright’s actions received some media coverage, Anthony Comello’s alleged murder of mafia leader Frank (Francesco) Cali, a senior member of the Gambino crime family, garnered massive national attention. On March 13, 2019, Comello, a 24-year-old from Staten Island, New York, allegedly shot and killed Cali outside his family home.⁴⁵ Comello, who lived with his parents in Staten Island at the time, worked periodically in construction.⁴⁶

The month before the incident, Comello entered a federal courthouse in Manhattan, requesting the arrest of Nancy Pelosi and Mayor Bill de Blasio.⁴⁷ The next day, February 22, 2019, Comello was spotted at the Gracie Mansion, the official mayoral residence, asking officers to arrest high-profile Democrats, including Maxine Waters, Adam Schiff, and Nancy Pelosi.⁴⁸ On March 13, 2019, Comello allegedly drove to Cali’s family home, rang the doorbell, and engaged in a conversation with Cali. Comello allegedly then pulled out a 9mm pistol and shot Cali several times.⁴⁹ Comello was charged with one count of murder, criminal possession of a weapon, and assault.⁵⁰

In his first court appearance on March 18, 2019, Comello wrote a large ‘Q’ in pen on his palm alongside several phrases suggesting support for President Trump, such as “MAGA Forever.”⁵¹ In a submission to the court, Comello’s lawyer, Robert Gottlieb, stated that Comello did not drive to Cali’s house intending to kill him, but to perform a citizen’s arrest as he believed Cali was part of a purported deep state.⁵² Gottlieb claimed Comello shot Cali after he resisted the ‘arrest’⁵³ and that Comello believes he is “Trump’s chosen vigilante.”⁵⁴

Following President Trump’s election in 2016, Comello reportedly became more interested in far-right conspiracy theories, and later became obsessed with QAnon.⁵⁵ Gottlieb maintained this QAnon obsession led to Comello’s February 2019 quest to perform citizen’s arrests.⁵⁶ Gottlieb submitted evidence to the court that Comello was posting about far-right conspiracies on his Instagram account, and

engaging with QAnon accounts.⁵⁷ According to Gottlieb, Comello came across posts that alleged the New York mafia was part of a purported deep state alongside the Democrats.⁵⁸ Four days following his arrest, Comello confessed to the NYPD that he believed the mafia had been infiltrated by the CIA and that the government was spying on him.⁵⁹ On June 3, 2020, Comello was deemed mentally unfit to stand trial and was ordered to be transferred to an Office of Mental Health facility for examination.⁶⁰

Eduardo Moreno

Just over a year after Comello’s alleged murder of Cali, 44-year-old train engineer Eduardo Moreno, allegedly derailed a train in San Pedro, California, on March 31, 2020, to draw attention to the nearby USNS Mercy naval ship and the government’s response to COVID-19.⁶¹ The USNS Mercy was stationed in San Pedro to treat COVID-19 patients.⁶² Moreno allegedly derailed the train by refraining from breaking near the end of the track, causing the train to smash through several fences before coming to rest near the USNS Mercy.⁶³ In post-arrest interviews with the FBI, he claimed derailling the train was not preplanned.⁶⁴

It is unclear whether Moreno was inspired specifically by QAnon theories. Court documents note that in post-arrest interviews, Moreno stated that “they are segregating us and it needs to be put in the open.”⁶⁵ The court filing notes that, “Moreno is suspicious of the U.S.N.S. Mercy and believes it had an alternative purpose related to COVID-19 or a government takeover.”⁶⁶ It has not been determined that he was particularly motivated by QAnon-related theories. Further, posts by Q before the derailling do not explicitly mention the USNS Mercy.

However, many of Moreno’s comments following his arrest seem related to QAnon. Q’s first post about COVID-19 was on March 23, one week before Moreno allegedly derailed the train. Q insinuated in the post that China developed the virus to harm President Trump’s presidency and ensure Joe Biden wins the next election.⁶⁷ On March 28, 2020, Q claimed “[t]hey [the Cabal] want you [the American people] divided” by religion, sex, political affiliation, and class so “you pose no threat to their control.”⁶⁸ Moreno’s comments to the LAPP (Los Angeles Port Police) after his arrest that “they are segregating us and it needs to be put in the open” perhaps were made in this light.⁶⁹ Moreno also claimed “the whole world is watching,”⁷⁰ quite similar in phrasing to another Q post on March 28, 2020, which begins, “the entire world is watching.”⁷¹ Finally, according to an LAPP affidavit, Moreno admitted to derailling the train to “wake people up,”⁷² similar to Q’s repeated references to the “Great Awakening”—a mass realization about the truth of the world⁷³—which Q also posted about on March 28, 2020.⁷⁴ These connections made by the authors, however, are speculative, and more information is needed to confirm if Moreno had any relationship with QAnon. On April 1, 2020, the Department of Justice announced Moreno had been charged with one count of train wrecking.⁷⁵ As far as the authors can determine from their tracking of court proceedings, he has yet to enter a plea.

Jessica Prim

To better explicate the threat QAnon poses to public security, the authors now describe, in greater detail, the apparent radicalization to violence of Jessica Prim. Prim, a 37-year-old feature dancer from Peoria, Illinois, was arrested in New York City on April 29, 2020, after allegedly driving onto a pier with a car full of knives.⁷⁶ Prim was

charged upon arrest with possession of marijuana and 18 counts of criminal possession of a weapon. She also livestreamed this two-day trip from Illinois to New York City and in it threatened to kill Joe Biden (without making it clear when or where) for his supposed involvement in a ‘deep state’ sex trafficking ring, in line with QAnon narratives.⁷⁷

Prim had allegedly attempted to get close to US Naval ship USNS Comfort, a hospital ship sent to New York City for treating COVID-19 patients,⁷⁸ as she drove up a service road on Pier 86.⁷⁹ However, she had mistaken USS Intrepid, a former aircraft carrier, for USNS Comfort.⁸⁰ QAnon followers thought the USNS Comfort was being used to rescue children from the “Cabal.” According to her social media posts and video livestreams as she headed to New York City, Prim alternated between believing this and that the children may be being held hostage on the ship.⁸¹

What stands out with this case is the rapidity with which Prim apparently radicalized to violence. From her first contact with QAnon propaganda, apparently on April 9, 2020—based on her Facebook posts, which the authors reviewed in detail—20 days passed until she made threats of offline violence while in transit to New York City.

Prim first started posting about QAnon in a closed Facebook group named Pizzagate Investigations Worldwide. On April 9, 2020, she replied to a post in the group, and on April 14, she shared the link to the QAnon “documentary” *Out of Shadows* to the page. Prior to April 9, 2020, there is no evidence Prim was familiar with or interacting with QAnon content. Her social media feeds from 2016 onward do not provide any evidence that she engaged with Pizzagate conspiracy content, or the Comet Ping Pong altercation in December 2016. The authors’ review of Jessica Prim’s social media postings found that she did not post regularly about domestic politics or on her social media prior to April 2020.⁸²

How did an individual who only recently discovered QAnon apparently radicalize to violence so fast? Her hours of livestreams, which are a rich source of personal information, suggest some possible answers. Radicalization is an individual process, and as such, some anecdotes Prim recounts in her videos indicate what may have made her vulnerable to radicalization to QAnon-related violence.

Since 2012, Prim has regularly posted content related to missing children, child abuse, and arrests of child abusers. This is very likely central to her susceptibility to QAnon narratives that feature a global sex-trafficking ring. Her social media content and livestreams reflect the significance of this narrative in her conversion to QAnon ideology.⁸³

It is unclear what caused Prim to spiral out of control in the 20 days preceding her arrest. One element, however, emerges in a Facebook video she posted on April 28, 2020, at 12:35pm: her relationship with QAnon, she stated in the video, began when one of her clients recommended she watch *Fall of the Cabal*, a QAnon documentary by Dutch conspiracy theorist Janet Ossebaard.⁸⁴ In this livestream, Prim claims this video motivated her to research Pizzagate, and later, QAnon. Prim’s first Facebook post about QAnon being on the Pizzagate Investigations Worldwide page is consistent with this claim.

Her sharing of the link to the QAnon documentary *Out of Shadows* is consistent with this hypothesis, as the documentary also focuses on QAnon claims about a global child sex trafficking ring. Since she began radicalizing into the QAnon ideology, Prim has posted about a wide range of related conspiracy theories regarding

sex trafficking rings and the supposed Deep State government’s tyrannical attempts to control its population.⁸⁵

According to the authors’ review of statements in her livestream and Facebook posts, Prim also apparently believes that she is the “whore of Babylon” mentioned in the Book of Revelation, and is apparently convinced she has a role in bringing about the ‘storm’ that Q promises.^{86 h} Further, Prim claims she *is* the coronavirus (what this means is unclear) and that President Trump speaks to her directly in press conferences and over social media.⁸⁷ A document Prim apparently posted on her Twitter account reveals she was diagnosed with a “brief psychotic disorder” following her arrest on April 29, 2020.⁸⁸

The authors’ review of Prim’s social media postings and livestreams indicated that she had experienced significant trauma⁸⁹ and appears to have been in crisis at the time of her arrest. In her apparent turmoil, it appears Prim latched on to QAnon, especially its child sex trafficking ring conspiracy. In the livestream from the day of her arrest, she repeatedly claimed that she cannot sit at home while children are suffering in her view because of former Vice President Joe Biden and Hillary Clinton.⁹⁰ It is highly likely that QAnon conspiracy theories radicalized her to an apparent desire to commit violence, in light of the trauma that made her vulnerable.

Less than three weeks elapsed between Prim’s first QAnon post and her arrest. In this brief period, Prim went from watching online child trafficking conspiracy documentaries to offline violence-threatening behavior. Prim is a fascinating case study of how ideologically motivated violent extremist communities and ideologies can radicalize vulnerable individuals. The COVID-19 pandemic has shown that conspiracy theories and fringe movements are especially dangerous in times of social upheaval and could pose a public security threat.⁹¹

Conclusion

In this article, the authors have sought to contextualize QAnon ideology and its role in radicalizing several individuals to alleged high-profile criminal or violent acts. The recent case of Jessica Prim, on which the authors present original data, particularly evinces the role the QAnon ecosystem may play in radicalizing uniquely vulnerable individuals with experiences of trauma or mental illness and the consequent threat QAnon could pose to public security.

The February 19, 2020, Hanau, Germany, shisha bar attack by Tobias Rathjen is a recent example of how conspiracy theories could play a role in radicalization to terrorist violence.⁹² According to a study of the attack in this publication by Blyth Crawford and Florence Keen, conspiracy narratives “indicate that Rathjen was deeply entrenched within online conspiracy communities. Drawing upon Barkun’s model of conspiracy belief, it is therefore possible to suggest that Rathjen was a supporter of a number of isolated conspiracy theories, which, when compounded, may have influenced his broader sense of paranoia and anti-establishment mindset.”⁹³ The material consumed by Rathjen could possibly elucidate aspects of his radicalization, as the conspiracy theories espoused by Rathjen and other conspiracy theories rely on the rejection of the

h Her social media accounts were operated under a pseudonym, but the authors were able to establish that the accounts very likely belonged to her because she referred to herself by her real name and broadcast video of herself on them. See also Marc-André Argentino, “29/ According to Prim God had awakened her to the fact that she is ...,” Twitter, May 1, 2020.

mainstream explanation for their own and the demonization of the other.⁹⁴ As Crawford and Keen state, “this overlaps with online conspiracy communities suggests that the influence of Rathjen’s attack may be felt in spheres beyond those traditionally associated with the far right.”⁹⁵ Rathjen’s deep involvement in online conspiracy theory communities and subsequent attack evinces the potential for future instances of larger scale violence motivated by QAnon.

Moreover, QAnon continues to gain traction in American popular culture. For example, QAnon followers have recently absurdly alleged on social media that Oprah Winfrey, Ellen DeGeneres, and other celebrities are under house arrest for their participation in child sex trafficking rings. These posts have circulated widely online, with some celebrities even responding to the allegations.⁹⁶

QAnon is not destined to remain on the periphery of political discourse either. CNN reported that former national security adviser Michael Flynn posted a video on July 4, 2020, which showed him and a group repeating an oath of office before saying the common QAnon phrase, “Where we go one, we go all.” The post also included the hashtag #TakeTheOath, apparently referencing a social media trend by QAnon users from earlier in the week.⁹⁷ Flynn’s lawyer Sidney Powell told *The Washington Examiner*, “The slogan comes from an engraved bell on JFK’S sailboat—acknowledging the unity of mankind. The oath is obvious—the federal oath in support of our Constitution. He wanted to encourage people to think about being a citizen. Don’t read anything else into it.”⁹⁸

Further, as reported by Alex Kaplan at Media Matters as well as in *The New York Times*,⁹⁹ more than 60 candidates who have run for Congress in 2020 appear to have expressed some degree of support for QAnon (mostly Republicans and Independents; two of the 66 were Democrats), and Marjorie Taylor Greene,ⁱ a QAnon follower running for a Georgia seat in the House of Representatives, is favored to win the Republican nomination as well as the general election.¹⁰⁰ Jo Rae Perkins, a QAnon follower,^j recently won the Re-

i According to reporting from Media Matters in 2018, Greene posted on Facebook about an “awesome post by Q.” See “Marjorie Taylor Greene Facebook QAnon2,” Media Matters. She has posted the QAnon slogan on Facebook (see “Marjorie Taylor Greene Facebook QAnon 1,” Media Matters) and on Twitter (see “Marjorie Taylor Greene Twitter QAnon 2,” Media Matters), the latter in response to a tweet defending the legitimacy of “Q” where she also wrote, “Trust the plan” (another catchphrase QAnon supporters use). Greene also has tweeted the QAnon-connected hashtag “#GreatAwakening” to far-right conspiracy theorist Alex Jones. She has also appeared in a video where she discussed following QAnon, calling “Q” a “patriot” and “worth listening to.” See Travis View, “Marjorie Taylor Greene, candidate for congress, also happens to be a QAnon follower,” Twitter, June 6, 2020. According to *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, Greene “has posted a series of tweets defending QAnon, including one”—now deleted—“encouraging her followers to message her with questions so she can ‘walk you through the whole thing.’” Jim Galloway, Greg Bluestein, and Tamar Hallerman, “The Jolt: When industry and neighborhoods mix, trouble often follows,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, August 2, 2019.

j According to reporting from Media Matters, “Perkins has repeatedly tweeted in support of QAnon and posted the QAnon slogan on Twitter, and both her personal and campaign Facebook pages. See Jo Rae Perkins, “The MG Show -236- 5/1/20 ‘Information warfare.’ Imagine that ...,” Twitter, May 4, 2020, and Jo Rae Perkins, “Congratulations to @laurenboebert We need more #Patriots like Lauren ...,” Twitter, July 2, 2020. Perkins has also said she follows the “Q team.” See “Jo Rae Perkins January 2 Facebook video,” Media Matters. See also Alex Kaplan, “Here are the QAnon supporters running for Congress in 2020,” Media Matters for America, updated July 23, 2020.

publican nomination for U.S. Senate in Oregon, though she appears likely to lose in the general election.¹⁰¹

Already, then, QAnon supporters are trying to have an increased impact on mainstream discourse in the United States. With this mainstreaming, as well as the impending presidential election that seems likely to only increase QAnon’s salience, an increasing frequency of criminal or violent acts by QAnon supporters seems possible, even likely.¹⁰² While the aforementioned criminal acts seem largely motivated by QAnon, only Matthew Philip Wright has been charged with a terrorism offense. However, the 2020 Hanau shisha bar attack presents one example of how conspiracy theories can help propel larger-scale terrorist attacks.¹⁰³ If more individuals with greater organizational skills and operational acumen seek to pursue QAnon’s agenda, it could eventually lead to more significant threats to public security and become a more impactful domestic terrorism threat, though this potential development appears, at present, to be far on the horizon.

However, the threat to public security that QAnon presents is not exclusive to the movement and the cases described above, but rather, is representative of broader currents in the American information landscape. The increased consumption and circulation of misinformation on social media, as well as its negative consequences, is evinced especially by QAnon, but its effects on public safety are not limited to it. The emergence of future (related or unrelated) conspiracy theories that may be effective at radicalizing individuals to terrorist violence should thus not be ruled out as threats to public security.

Regulation of QAnon content by social media companies, activity which would be guided and governed by the adherence of QAnon supporters to respective platforms terms of service, may present one pathway to decreasing the likelihood of individual radicalization to violence.¹⁰⁴ This could operate similarly to Facebook and Twitter regulation of jihadi content by the Islamic State and al-Qa`ida affiliates. On July 21, 2020, Twitter announced¹⁰⁵ that it will be taking action against QAnon in light of “coordinated harmful activity.” Already Twitter has suspended 7,000 accounts and will be limiting 150,000 more.¹⁰⁶

However, regulation of QAnon content could simply result in platform migration and further reinforce QAnon’s cosmology that sees a cabal of pedophiles lurking behind every corporate or governmental decision.¹⁰⁷ This is to be considered carefully, based on the authors’ observation of QAnon activity on Telegram, there is a growing overlap between QAnon channels and more extremist channels affiliated with the proud boys,¹⁰⁸ paramilitary groups, and white supremacists.¹⁰⁹ Additionally, the law enforcement community and researchers need to consider the growing transnational dimensions of QAnon.¹¹⁰ QAnon is arguably no longer simply a fringe conspiracy theory but an ideology¹¹¹ that has demonstrated its capacity to radicalize to violence individuals at an alarming speed. **CTC**

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