Commentary: The Global Jihadi Terror Threat in September 2024

By Edmund Fitton-Brown

The terrorist threat from jihadi groups was progressively degraded by counterterrorism measures after 9/11. The military defeat of the Islamic State ushered in a period from about 2017 of unusually low threat in non-conflict zones around the world, followed by some disinvestment from CT by Western governments. However, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the Gaza war have seen a collapse of international unity of purpose on CT. Meanwhile, the underlying factors driving violent jihadi extremism are growing more acute, and the success of the Islamic State and al-Qa`ida in conflict zones is generating safe havens for them to revive their external operations capabilities. The global jihadi threat has already risen and is likely to increase further. Attacks should be expected in the West, and it would be a mistake for governments to disinvest further from CT.

As we pass yet another anniversary of 9/11, let us think back briefly to the eve of that watershed moment: In the 1990s, this author worked on counterterrorism issues in London, Cairo, and Kuwait. There was a lot going on: attacks on tourists in Egypt, the early days of what became al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula. But international CT efforts were unsophisticated with objectives that were variable and not always clear. In those days, it was the norm (albeit infuriating) for one government to lie to another about in-country terrorist threats and hold back information except in the immediate aftermath of major attacks. State sponsorship of terrorism was also common in those days, and it was difficult to achieve international consensus on how to react in such cases. If all that sounds familiar, it is because we now find ourselves dealing with those same unpropitious circumstances. Since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia in 2022 and Hamas' attack on Israel just under a year ago, international CT cooperation is the weakest it has been in 23 years.

9/11 was indeed a watershed moment, ushering in two decades of exceptional international cooperation on CT. It was an attack on a scale not seen before, with a huge strategic impact. With the Cold War apparently over, 9/11 brought salafi-jihadi-takfiri terrorism to the forefront as the most conspicuous international threat, one where there was little state sponsorship once the Taliban had been ejected from power in Afghanistan, and where there was a high level of international agreement on the need to tackle and suppress it. The Islamic State later refined the art of repelling the international community with its gleeful savagery. This explains the generally smooth working of the 1267 Committee of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), charged with sanctioning the authors of 9/11, al-Qa`ida, and later the Islamic State.[a] From 2018 to 2022, this author led the al-Qa`ida, ISIS, and Taliban Monitoring Team that supported that committee, and witnessed first-hand how strong the consensus on CT was, and then how it started to break down.

We seem in some ways to have gone through two distinct eras since 9/11 and now to be facing a third, and it is the nature of the global threat we now face that this piece examines. The threat during the decade or so after 9/11 came mainly from al-Qa`ida, and it saw many deadly attacks, especially in Europe. Then there was a period of Islamic State domination of the jihadi scene, with its own signature achievement that rivaled even the impact of 9/11: the establishment of a 'caliphate' in large parts of Iraq and Syria and the attraction of tens of thousands of extremists who migrated to become part of this experiment in extreme Islamist governance, with large numbers of them becoming foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) for the caliphate. The virulence of the Islamic State led to its defeat in Iraq in 2017 and in Syria in 2019 by international military CT forces.

By the end of the decade, the Islamic State had been forced to adapt to this reality by setting up regional networks of its provinces around the world, with this "global virtual caliphate" sustained by its heavy investment in online activity and propaganda. Meanwhile, after about 2017, with the Islamic State and al-Qa`ida both under intense CT pressure, the threat level from jihadi terrorism in the West and other non-conflict zones fell to its lowest level since the 1990s. The threat was further suppressed from March 2020 onward by the widespread shutdown caused by the pandemic, which made traveling and meeting for terrorist purposes even harder. The forces of CT seemed to have won and, just as we approached the 20th anniversary of 9/11, policymakers started to argue that scarce resources were needed to meet other strategic challenges. But fast

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a This refers to the committee established in 1999 by U.N. Security Council resolution 1267 charged with monitoring global jihadi groups. The group's remit was expanded by subsequent U.N. Security Council resolutions 1989 and 2253 in 2011 and 2015, respectively. The committee currently tracks the threat around the world posed by both the Islamic State and al-Qa`ida and their various affiliates, branches, and sympathizers.

forward to the present and CT professionals now warn of the risks from under-investment in CT at a time when the threat appears to be reviving.

So, what are the components of this reviving threat? Apart from the collapse of international consensus on CT and most other issues that were mentioned earlier, the key drivers in this author's assessment include:

1. Global economic stress. This comprises the economic slowdown caused partly by COVID-19, along with other after-effects of the pandemic, but also the impacts of population growth, environmental issues such as climate change, and the reality and perception of widening global inequality of wealth and opportunity. There is latent anger in much of the developing world and also among large swathes of the populations of wealthier countries. Economic stress is a key driver of conflict and migration, which in some cases creates vulnerable communities who can be preyed upon by criminals and extremists, and in parallel feeds extremist narratives that tend to polarize and radicalize people, with potential CT consequences. If a pole of attraction for jihadi extremists analogous to the 'caliphate' arose today, it would likely mobilize large numbers of people from around the world.

2. Political and social stress and the impacts of social media, artificial intelligence, and disinformation. The anger and destructiveness of much political discourse in the West is aggravated by technology, and this makes it harder to combat extremist narratives that use disinformation to feed upon and accentuate political polarization. This undermines consensus around liberal democratic values that have traditionally reinforced law and order and opposition to political violence.

3. Diversion of CT resources onto other priorities. CT was probably over-resourced in the two decades following 9/11. It should never have been treated as more important than all the other goals, but now there is a risk of over-correction. The pandemic, environmental concerns, and geostrategic threats are all competing with CT for a share of shrinking official budgets.

4. The example of Afghanistan. Just as complacency set in among the general public about the CT battle, just as the 20th anniversary of 9/11 approached, the United States and NATO withdrew from Afghanistan, and the Taliban took back control of the country by force. The writing was on the wall from the moment President Trump agreed to the disastrous Doha agreement in February 2020. The Taliban takeover has placed the resources of a state in the hands of a group responsible for harboring terrorists. Explicitly internationally oriented terrorist groups are using Afghanistan as a safe haven; still others, like al-Shabaab in Somalia, have taken the Taliban's triumph as an inspiration and an example to be emulated.

5. Poverty and polarization in Africa. Issues related to climate, over-population, corruption, crime, sectarian and inter-communal tensions and violence, and poor governance have severely hampered the emergence of developing economies in Africa from poverty and conflict. This has allowed the Islamic State, al-Qa`ida, and other violent extremist groups to grow dramatically in significance over the past decade in Africa, which also shows a worrying overlap between terrorism and organized crime.

6. Geostrategic rivalry at the expense of good governance and long-term security. Here, the collapse of international consensus, and especially the rivalry between the West and countries such as Russia that define themselves largely in opposition to Western values, feed directly into instability in the developing world, and especially in Africa. Online disaffection in and with the West is also a factor in this, undermining the credibility of European and North American states as mentors and partners. Weak jurisdictions in Africa have seen a series of military coups that have led to successive regimes that are ever more out of touch with the needs of their citizens, while militias and terrorist groups have seized the opportunity to present themselves as more responsive and more relevant. Lacking legitimacy and abandoning aspirations to good governance, coup regimes have increasingly turned to foreign mercenaries such as what used to be known as the Wagner Group[b] that offer a no-questions-asked enforcement service, taking money or resources to kill enemies of the state. But this does not offer lasting security;[1] it will ultimately fail and could enable terrorist groups to take over large swathes of territory and probably entire states—the Afghanization of the African Sahel.

7. The collapse of credibility of the United Nations. This follows on from the rejection of Western values and influence and the expulsion of European and North American CT forces and advisors. The United Nations has made the mistake of wholeheartedly embracing a Western progressive agenda that does not even command consensus in most Western countries. It has refused to cooperate fully with Iraq against the Islamic State because Iraq has the death penalty (and yet three of the five permanent members of the UNSC also have the death penalty). Aspects of its doctrine on governance and best practice are seen by developing countries as preachy and unrealistic, bringing to bear the preoccupations of Western liberals on societies that do not understand or accept them. The United Nations has been expelled from Mali,[2] and other countries are feeling increasingly emboldened to reject its tutelage. This accentuates the problem of juntas relying on foreign mercenaries for support. The United Nations, for all its faults, can offer important support to countries such as Mali, and the United Nations also has CT resources that can help build resilience.

8. Anger in the Islamic world at conflict in the Middle East. This has been a perennial feature in past surges of terrorist activity, but it has taken on a slightly different character since the Hamas attack on Israel last year and the consequent Israeli military campaign in Gaza. Al-Qa`ida was quick to recognize this as an opportunity to ride a wave of Muslim indignation, devoting much of its propaganda since to inspiring attacks on Israel and its allies.[3] Thus far, this has not had much practical success, but Western CT authorities assess that the jihadi terror threat has increased.[4]

b The Wagner Group has now morphed into Russia's Africa Corps. As noted by analysts, "Africa Corps differs from Wagner primarily in its official government status. The informal and private aspects of [Wagner Group founder Yevgeny] Prigozhin's company have been largely removed, leaving a core expeditionary force intact. With this shift, Russia's interventions on the continent are emerging out of the shadows of private initiative and into the limelight of official state project." John A. Lechner and Sergey Eledinov, "Is Africa Corps a Rebranded Wagner Group?" *Foreign Policy*, February 7, 2024.

9. The aftermath of past conflicts and CT campaigns. This article has discussed Afghanistan, which continues to serve as an inspiration for Islamic extremists. But Syria, too, remains broken ever since the Arab Spring deteriorated into civil war, and there seems little hope of an inclusive political settlement that will allow for stabilization and regeneration. Meanwhile, the sore of the camps and prisons in northeastern Syria continues to fester. Their total population has probably been halved in the past five years, down to about 40,000,[5] but this is still far too many people, including many children, to be kept in limbo. Babies have grown into children, children into adolescents in conditions conducive to desperation, disillusionment, indoctrination, and radicalization. The true legacy of the 'caliphate' may only become apparent over the course of a generation, when we discover what proportion of its graduates (including those who have already returned to their countries of origin and may have completed prison sentences) resume or start some form of jihadi activity.

10. The revival of state sponsorship of terrorism, especially by Iran. This is a major development and ties in to some degree with the Gaza factor mentioned above. Here, we should take note of a fact quite well known but not yet sufficiently understood: that the presumed leader of al-Qa`ida, Saif al-`Adl, is hosted by Iranian intelligence in Tehran.[6] His predecessor, Ayman al-Zawahiri, was killed by a U.S. drone in Kabul two years ago. Al-`Adl was already in Iran, with other members of the al-Qa`ida leadership, and he decided to stay. The impact of a leading salafi-jihadi terrorist group having the world's leading Shi`a state as its protector has started to take effect. It started in Yemen, where al-`Adl's son was (until his recent death) a key member of al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).[7] AQAP had previously been fighting against the Houthis, Iran's local proxy, in the Yemeni civil war. Over the past couple of years, that fighting has stopped and the groups have deconflicted, even cooperated.[8] In the context of the conflict surrounding Israel at present, and the "Axis of Resistance" that Iran coordinates (including Hamas, Lebanese Hezbollah, the Iraqi Shi`a militias, and the Houthis), we may be on the verge of seeing a Sunni extremist-Shi`a extremist front emerging to fight Israel and the West. Of course, the Islamic State, which takes a much harder line in insisting that the Shi`a are *kafirs* and also rejects Islamist nationalism, will have nothing to do with this front.

Given these troubling circumstances that we now face, let us undertake a renewed *tour d'horizon* of the various arenas around the world in which salafi-jihadi groups pose or could come to pose a threat. To this end, this article will draw extensively on the latest report of the Monitoring Team (MT), published in July and covering the period January to June 2024.[9] This article will take the regions and issues in the same order in which the UN Monitoring Team addresses them but will also feature reflections, insight, analysis, and predictions of my own and will also illuminate these with examples from a much longer period of recent history.

Eastern, Central, and Southern Africa

Starting with eastern, central, and southern Africa, an area that the Islamic State groups together in their regional organization, this has emerged as a major arena of jihadi violence over the past decade. Of course, Somalia has long been plagued with extremism, and al-Shabaab remains the single most capable affiliate of al-Qa`ida. Not only does al-Shabaab destabilize Somalia, but it threatens neighbors like Kenya. It is financially strong, remitting funds back to other parts of the al-Qa`ida network.[10] Alarmingly, from a threat projection perspective, it has a history of attracting FTFs and has taken an interest in civil aviation pilot training, as evidenced by a plot to launch a 9/11-style attack in the United States thwarted in 2019.[11] Somalia depends on regional and wider assistance to fend off the threat from al-Shabaab, which is resilient enough to bide its time until international partners lose patience and leave.

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The Islamic State has accepted pledges of allegiance from local jihadi groups in Mozambique (Ahl ul Sunna Wal Jam'a - ASWJ) and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (the Allied Democratic Forces – ADF). These now fit within an Islamic State regional structure, Islamic State Central Africa Province or ISCAP, that is coordinated from Somalia by the Al-Karrar office (AKO).[12] The AKO is one of five important offices of the Islamic State General Directorate of Provinces (GDP) that became key to sustaining the Islamic State after its defeat in Iraq and Syria.[13] The others are Iraq province, Syria province, the Khorasan region in Asia (the al-Siddiq office – ASO),[14] and the western and northern Africa region (the al-Furqan office – AFO).[15]

AKO is headed by Abdulqadir Mumin, who split from al-Shabaab to form Islamic State-Somalia, of which he is also the chief.[16] Although much smaller than al-Shabaab, hosting AKO gives Islamic State-Somalia strategic importance, especially with regard to Islamic State finance.[17] AKO's ability to move money extends outside ISCAP and has become key to funding the Islamic State elsewhere in Africa and even as far afield as Afghanistan. U.S. special operations forces successfully launched an operation in January 2023 to remove Mumin's deputy, Bilal al-Sudani, from the battlefield and reportedly tried to kill Mumin earlier this year.[18] But AKO continues to grow in importance, to the point where Mumin is now widely reported to have taken over either as chief of the entire GDP,[19] or even as the global "caliph" of the Islamic State.[20]

What this signifies in threat terms is growing violence and instability in a range of countries, including Mozambique, DRC, Uganda, Rwanda, Kenya, and Sudan. With increasing numbers of FTFs, mainly from the region, drawn to Somalia, Mozambique, and DRC, this will likely spread to other countries. But the threat is unlikely to be projected beyond these African conflict zones in the near future. That said, the principal human factor in the success of AKO, the Somali diaspora, extends widely in Africa and throughout the world. It is Somali *hawaladars* and expatriates that make AKO such an effective network and that could rapidly transform into an active threat facilitated or carried out by Somalis in the West.

Western and Northern Africa

Western and northern Africa are also grouped together by the Islamic State, with the AFO being rewarded for its effectiveness and success by being given responsibility beyond its original Lake Chad Basin arena. First, the area considered part of Islamic State-West Africa Province or ISWAP was extended to include the western Sahel and Islamic State-Greater Sahara or ISGS; then the

Police stand near the scene of the attack during celebrations in Solingen, Germany, on August 23, 2024. (Gianni Gattus/picture-alliance/dpa/AP Images)

GDP office in Libya was mothballed and AFO took on oversight of North Africa as well. This was driven partly by ISWAP operational prowess, where Nigerian forces have been unable to suppress it in large swathes of northeastern Nigeria and it has been able to pose a cross-border threat into Chad and eastern Niger. ISGS, in turn, once it managed to deconflict with the local al-Qa`ida affiliate, became increasingly effective in the tri-border area of Mali, Burkina Faso, and western Niger. It will be interesting to see whether AFO tutelage sees a revival of the largely quiescent Islamic State cells in North Africa, but for now, as in the other half of Africa, the threat is not projected outside the region.

However, the trajectory of the jihadi threat in West Africa and the western Sahel should still alarm us. The most instructive group to study here is the local al-Qa`ida-affiliated coalition, Jam'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), which has grown steadily in power and reach in recent years. It is a measure of how effective CT measures have been in North Africa that one component of JNIM, al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb or AQIM, has been marginalized in Algeria but is part of an effort further south that threatens to collapse fragile jurisdictions in the Sahel. JNIM was originally centred mainly on Mali, and it continues to challenge the authorities there, but its growth has been more striking in Burkina Faso,[21] while it also projects influence now across the Malian and Burkinabe borders into Niger, Togo, Benin, Senegal, and potentially also northwestern Nigeria.[22]

The politics of Mali and Burkina Faso are increasingly fraught, with military coups undermining the legitimacy of Bamako and Ouagadougou. The military regimes' decisions (and the parallel decision of Niger) to abandon their reliance on the United Nations and the West, and to accept the less complicated demands of Wagner, Russia, and Iran, run the risk of accelerating the polarization and radicalization of their populations, while JNIM is shrewd enough to recognize this and present itself as more responsive to the needs of citizens than their governments. Two worst-case scenarios could flow from this: locally, in Nigeria, a contagion of organized extremism in the northwest could effectively link the Lake Chad Basin and western Sahel theaters; and regionally, if Mali, Burkina Faso, and/or Niger collapse as effective jurisdictions, we could see an Afghanization of the Sahel that creates a new pole of attraction for FTFs and incubates an external threat capability that projects into North Africa and across the sea to Europe.

The Middle East

Moving to the Middle East, there are many causes for concern in the Levant, Iraq, and the Arabian Peninsula. Regarding the last-mentioned, there is some good news in that all of the GCC countries seem more stable and better organized to meet contemporary challenges than in the past. Some, such as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), are even confident enough to project influence that may prove valuable in easing conflict elsewhere in the region. The Saudis are certainly trying to promote a peaceful outcome in Yemen, although it can be argued that Houthi aggression in the Red Sea suggests they cannot safely be allowed to dominate Yemen more than they do already.

Yemen itself remains highly problematic, a fragmented, failed state that incubates terrorist groups like the Houthis and AQAP and projects threat within the neighborhood and (in the case of AQAP) retains global threat aspirations. The Islamic State is notably weak and generally despised in Yemen, but the impact of deconfliction and potential partnership between the Houthis and AQAP could be serious. Saif al-`Adl's bowing to the agenda of his Iranian hosts and driving a deconfliction between Iran and al-Qa`ida, even to the point of positioning al-Qa`ida as part of the Iran-led Axis of Resistance, is playing out interestingly in Yemen.[23]

The deaths of al-`Adl's son and of AQAP leader Khaled Batarfi in early 2024[24] have not been satisfactorily explained and, if they were not just a coincidence of one illness and one accident, could possibly have resulted from a power struggle within AQAP over this strategic direction. The Houthis have much Yemeni Sunni blood on their hands, and not everyone in AQAP is likely to be ready to forgive

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them. It will be important to see how the new chief, Saad ben Atef al-Awlaqi, positions the group. Batarfi was a Saudi national, and it may be that al-Awlaqi, a Yemeni, will be more viscerally hostile to the Houthis.

The Levantine and Iraqi heartland of the Islamic State is more complex than the Peninsula. Here, the Islamic State remains the most embedded jihadi group, and its unbending hostility to all other ideologies, and especially toward Iran and the Shi`a, creates a complicated threat landscape. One of the risks inherent in Iranian pressure on the Iraqi government to sever its CT relationship with the United States is that the Islamic State retains strong support in northern and western Iraq and has not forgotten that Iraqi forces were no match for it when it surged to create the 'caliphate' last decade. If Baghdad can maintain its balancing act between Tehran and Washington, and balance Kurdish, Arab Sunni, Arab Shi`a, and minority sect interests inside Iraq, the Islamic State can be held in check. It has not been able to carry out strategically significant attacks in Iraq in recent years. But if Baghdad lurches toward Iran and Shi`a sectarian interests, the Islamic State will likely resurge.

The prognosis in Syria is worse than in Iraq, as Syrian demographics argue conclusively against the revival of the fragile national consensus that Hafez al-Assad built around Alawite rule that guaranteed the rights of minorities against the large Arab Sunni majority. The Arab Spring and subsequent civil war have fractured inter-communal relations to the point where Sunni extremists such as the Islamic State, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), Hurras al-Din, and the many foreign extremist groups and fighters are prepared to hold out despite enduring hardship and brutality at the hands of Bashar al-Assad and his Russian, Iranian, and Hezbollah allies. They will likely be able to find safe haven for a long time among an alienated population. With no political solution in sight, no prospect of stabilization and reconstruction, they will likely hold out for a Sunni victory, however many years or decades that takes. This is why HTS has proved so difficult to defeat in the northwest and why the Islamic State remains a threat despite the best CT efforts of their opponents. When it comes to the camps in northeastern Syria containing Islamic State detainees, there is a constant risk of jailbreak-type operations and long-term radicalization and training risk. From the perspective of international CT, there is a need to watch carefully for the incubation of a new threat projection capability in Syria, either by the Islamic State or the al-Qa`ida-affiliated groups.

Other jurisdictions in the Levant are also affected by conflict and increasingly tense in the context of the Gaza war and the Iranian-orchestrated campaign against Israel and the West. Even Jordan, a relatively stable country with robust policy orientation, finds Palestinian anger, the proximity of Iraq, the subversive activities of Iran, and the abuse of its airspace by those directing projectiles at Israel very challenging. Lebanon is all but a failed state, held hostage by Hezbollah, and suffering like Syria and Iraq from disillusioned, extremist Sunnis and displaced persons, some radicalized. There is a possibility of violence from various quarters in all of the countries surrounding Israel and the Palestinian territories, and that could be at Iran's behest or could equally be terrorism inspired by the Islamic State or al-Qa`ida propaganda.

Europe

Inspiration derived from propaganda is also a concern in Europe including Russia, where the threat of jihadi violence is assessed as having increased since the Hamas attack on Israel last October.[25] This assessment is based largely on the perception of popular anger over Palestinian casualties and the reluctance of Western governments to break with Israel over this. Al-Qa`ida reacted adroitly to the attack, focusing its media on the importance of opposing Israel and the West (another possible fruit of the Iran-al-`Adl relationship, as al-`Adl's son was in Yemen and AQAP has the global lead on al-Qa`ida propaganda).[26] Most attacks and foiled plots in Europe have been associated more or less closely with Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISK), but the Solingen attack in Germany in August was carried out by a Syrian.[27] European CT agencies were particularly sensitive to the heightened threat this summer because of the high-profile sporting events being hosted in Germany (soccer) and France (the Olympics). Ultimately, there were no major attacks. The European CT agencies acknowledge that the threat is still far more rudimentary than what they faced from the Islamic State last decade and al-Qa`ida the decade before, when the organizations were systematically resourcing and projecting a threat into non-conflict zones. Neither has yet recovered that capability, and so the main threat comes from inspired lone actors, sometimes with limited facilitation. In the medium-long term, Europe will probably face a more developed capability and higher threat than now.

Central and South Asia

Turning to Central and South Asia, and specifically Afghanistan, the story of the short-term threat picture is all about ISK and its associated GDP entity, the al-Siddiq office (ASO). The trajectory of ISK since the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan is concerning: Initially, it was preoccupied with fighting the Taliban domestically and its efforts at cross-border activity into Uzbekistan and Tajikistan were feeble. But it became increasingly effective at operating in Pakistan and, this year, has carried out major attacks in Iran and Russia.[28] As with the Somali diaspora in the case of AKO activity, ISK/ASO operational activity usually exploits networks of ethnicities associated with the former Soviet Union (FSU): principally Tajiks but also Uzbeks, Chechens, Dagestanis, and others.

The large FSU communities providing labor for the Turkish economy are a population susceptible to Islamist radicalization and recruitment. Similar diasporas of guest workers exist in Moscow and St. Petersburg; and there are also large communities of Central Asian origin in Germany, Scandinavia, and elsewhere in Europe, as well as North America. Many attacks that have occurred and plots that have been disrupted in non-conflict zones in 2023-2024 have been inspired and/or facilitated by ISK and have included Tajik operatives. Western CT agencies consider ISK to be the most likely source of the next major terrorist attack in Europe or America. If it develops a more sophisticated external operations capability, that will become even more likely.

If ISK is the main short-medium term concern, the possibility of an even more serious threat incubating in Afghanistan under the Taliban must be taken seriously. Here, it is important in this author's view for the United States to set aside partisan wrangling over what went wrong, because both political parties are to blame and both should focus on addressing the current and evolving threat. The fact is that al-Qa`ida and a range of other terrorist groups have safe haven in Afghanistan, and Saif al-`Adl has even called for extremists to migrate there.[29] The Taliban remain allied with these groups, especially TTP (the Pakistani Taliban), and are complicit not just in their presence and ability to train and organize, but also in TTP cross-border terrorist activity in Pakistan. Al-Qa`ida has been encouraged by the Afghan Taliban to assist and operate alongside TTP, just as it remains aligned with other ethnic extremist groups hostile to Afghanistan's other neighbors.

Zooming Out

It is true that al-Qa`ida-aligned groups do not pose a severe, immediate threat in non-conflict zones, partly because of a lack of capability and partly because sponsors such as the Taliban and Iran are cautious about being embarrassed and facing military consequences in the event of a major attack. But the Taliban's default setting of using blackmail to get their way in international affairs and their intemperate reaction to any perceived slight against Islam that occurs anywhere in the world make clear that any Taliban restraint on al-Qa`ida is temporary and conditional. In view of the potential Afghanization of Somalia and the Western Sahel, the West is likely to face more failed states and more safe havens for terrorist groups. In the medium-long term, this could manifest as a much higher terrorist threat.

This does not factor in the implications of a more active operational partnership between Iran and al-Qa`ida, if that proves to be sustainable.[30] In the event of a serious escalation between Israel and Hezbollah; Israel and Iran; or indeed the United States and the "Axis of Resistance," we will face a wholly different threat landscape, especially in Europe. The sheer numbers of European citizens who would likely be sympathetic to the Iranian side and hostile to any likely position adopted by the United States, United Kingdom, NATO, and major European powers will mean that a diversity of threats motivated by hatred of Israel (and straightforward antisemitism)—supported by Iran and other malign state and quasi-state actors, and whipped up by the full range of jihadi propaganda by the Islamic State, al-Qa`ida and others—would proliferate and potentially overwhelm CT defenses.

In conclusion, the period since 2017 will likely come to be regarded as one of calm and exceptional security, when CT agencies had a clear upper hand over the threat. Unfortunately, it is difficult to see any means by which that period will be long extended. Instead, we will have to get used to—as we have during previous periods—more frequent and more serious attacks in non-conflict zones. That is why a precipitous disinvestment from CT would be a tragic political mistake in present circumstances. CTC

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