



COMBATING TERRORISM CENTER AT WEST POINT

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FEATURE ARTICLE

## The Buffalo Attack

The cumulative momentum of far-right terror

AMARNATH AMARASINGAM, MARC-ANDRÉ ARGENTINO,  
AND GRAHAM MACKLIN

A VIEW FROM THE CT FOXHOLE

## Nitzan Nuriel

FORMER DIRECTOR OF THE COUNTER-  
TERRORISM BUREAU IN THE PRIME  
MINISTER'S OFFICE OF ISRAEL

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### FROM THE EDITOR

In this month's feature article, Amarnath Amarasingam, Marc-André Argentino, and Graham Macklin examine the May 2022 extreme far-right live-streamed terrorist attack at a grocery store in Buffalo, New York, in which 10 Black Americans were murdered "in one of the deadliest racist massacres in recent American history." Their article examines the perpetrator, his pathway to violence, how he plotted the attack, and his writings. They argue that "the Buffalo massacre was not an isolated phenomenon. Indeed, one can only fully comprehend it when considered within a continuum of self-referential extreme-right terrorism inspired by the March 2019 terrorist attack on two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand," that had "a catalytic effect upon extreme-right actors, sparking a chain reaction of mass shootings."

Our interview is with Nitzan Nuriel, the former director of the Counter-Terrorism Bureau in the Prime Minister's Office of Israel. It is the second in a series of articles and interviews examining the terrorist threat landscape in Israel and the lessons other countries can learn from Israel's counterterrorism efforts. The series is a joint effort between the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point (CTC) and the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT) at Reichman University in Israel.

Rodger Shanahan "uses data from Australian terrorism trials in the Islamic State era to examine the degree to which mental health issues exist among terrorism offenders and whether there is any causal link." His findings "support the view that Islamist terrorists' mental health is largely the same as the general population and finds that there is little evidence to support any causal link between mental health and terrorism." Matteo Pugliese profiles convicted Islamic State terror planner Muaz al-Fizani, whose jihadi career "spanned two decades and three continents" taking the hardline Tunisian extremist from Italy to Bosnia and Afghanistan and from Tunisia to Libya, from where he helped plan a wave of terror in Tunisia in 2015 that resulted in the deaths of many Western tourists.

**Paul Cruickshank, Editor in Chief**

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*Cover: A man is overcome with emotion on May 19, 2022, at the scene of the shooting at a supermarket, in Buffalo, New York, that occurred on May 14, 2022. (Matt Rourke/AP Photo)*

# The Buffalo Attack: The Cumulative Momentum of Far-Right Terror

By Amarnath Amarasingam, Marc-André Argentino, and Graham Macklin

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Since the deadly terrorist attack on two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, in March 2019, there has been a chain reaction of extreme right-wing violence targeting religious and ethnic minorities. On May 14, 2022, 18-year-old Payton Gendron allegedly murdered 10 people in a grocery store in Buffalo, New York, in one of the deadliest racist massacres in recent American history. This article examines the Buffalo terrorist atrocity, its perpetrator, his pathway to violence as well as the techniques, tactics, and practices that underpinned his attack, which counterterrorism practitioners can only fully understand if considered within this wider cumulative momentum of extreme-right transnational violence.

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**O**n the afternoon of Saturday, May 14, 2022, an 18-year-old committed one of the deadliest racist massacres in recent American history at a grocery store in Buffalo, New York.<sup>1</sup> The alleged gunman, Payton Gendron, killed 10 African-Americans and wounded three with a rifle at a Tops Friendly Markets.<sup>2</sup> The shooter was wearing military gear and a helmet with a GoPro Hero 7 camera attached.<sup>3</sup> After exiting his car, the gunman shot four people outside of the store, three fatally.<sup>4</sup> Upon the gunman's entry into the store, a security guard fired multiple shots at him, but they did not have an effect on his bulletproof armor.<sup>5</sup> The perpetrator then killed the security guard before shooting other victims throughout the store.<sup>6</sup> In total, 11 of those he shot were Black and two were white. All 10 who lost their lives were Black.<sup>7</sup> Once the police arrived, the gunman put the rifle to his neck and appeared to be about to commit suicide, but the police talked him into dropping his gun before arresting him.<sup>8</sup>

The weapon in the shooting was a second-hand Bushmaster XM-15 semi-automatic rifle that was purchased from a licensed dealer and then illegally modified so that high-capacity magazines could be loaded into it.<sup>9</sup> In the months before the attack, Gendron used a private Discord server as a personal diary chat log to document his attack planning.<sup>10</sup> In the chat log, Gendron noted that he had two backup weapons—a legally purchased shotgun and another rifle.<sup>11</sup> He also explained how he planned to deliberately load heavier rounds to penetrate the glass at the front of the supermarket before loading lighter rounds to target shoppers.<sup>12</sup>

Aside from the Discord chat log, a 180-page manifesto published by Gendron has emerged, which discusses the 2019 Christchurch, New Zealand, mosques shooter, the extreme far-right Great Replacement theory, and explains that the Tops Friendly Markets was selected because it was frequented by large numbers of Black residents within driving distance from his hometown.<sup>13</sup> It also

appears that the gunman had plans to continue driving down Jefferson Avenue to shoot more Black people and to possibly attack another location if he had not been stopped.<sup>14</sup> Gendron had originally posted the manifesto to Google Docs at 8:55 PM U.S. Eastern time, Thursday, May 12, two days before the attack.<sup>15</sup> It

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was subsequently posted to 8chan “moe”<sup>a</sup> and 4chan<sup>b</sup> as well, the latter credited by Gendron with initially influencing his racist views.<sup>16</sup> The shooter used the camera on his helmet to livestream on the video livestreaming platform Twitch for about 30 minutes, including his drive to the store and the first two minutes of the attack.<sup>17</sup> The stream was seen by 22 users before being taken down,<sup>18</sup> but as will be outlined below, many more would eventually see it. Approximately 30 minutes before the attack, Gendron invited a number of Discord users to join his private, invite-only server; it was then that other people were given access to view his diary chat log for the first time.<sup>19</sup> Fifteen users accepted the invitation before the attack started.<sup>20</sup>

Since Gendron’s arrest, he has pleaded not guilty to all 25 charges brought against him by the Erie County Court in Buffalo, New York, which includes one count of a domestic act of terrorism, 10 counts of first-degree murder, 10 counts of second-degree murder as a hate crime, three counts of attempted murder as a hate crime, and one count of criminal possession of a weapon in the second degree.<sup>21</sup> On June 15, 2022, the Department of Justice also added federal hate crime charges, which, if Gendron is convicted of, could mean life imprisonment or the death penalty.<sup>22</sup> On July 14, 2022, a federal grand jury indicted Gendron on 27 counts, including 14 hate crimes charges and 13 firearms charges. On July 18, he pleaded not guilty to all 27 counts.<sup>23</sup>

The details presented in this article are considered allegations based on court documents filed by prosecutors and press reports, as well as materials (including Gendron’s manifesto and Discord diaries) obtained by the authors. As of the time of publication in July 2022, these allegations have yet to be proven in court, however.

The first section of this article investigates the perpetrator’s pathway to violence, taking particular account of his growing social isolation and immersion in internet “chan culture” before turning to address the influence that a long continuum of previous extreme right-wing terrorism had upon his thoughts and deeds. It also charts his own self-stated inner compulsion to commit a mass atrocity as well as his own struggle with suicidal ideation. The article then explores the perpetrator’s tactics, techniques, and procedures in preparing and conducting the attack and—of particular concern to counterterrorism practitioners—the lengths to which he went both in planning his attack and disseminating what he learned to others. It concludes with a discussion of the implications of the Buffalo attack and more broadly the ongoing chain reaction of extreme right-wing terrorism for counterterrorism practitioners.

## Gendron’s Radicalization: Takeaways for Counterterrorism Practitioners

Unlike most previous attackers, the Buffalo shooter left a wealth

of writing behind, which provides an important window into his planning, ideological commitments, as well as what he wanted his legacy to be. His official manifesto is 180 pages, the large majority of which is directly copied and pasted from the manifesto of Brenton Tarrant, who killed 51 and injured 40 at two Christchurch mosques on March 15, 2019.<sup>24</sup> The rest of the manifesto is a kind of meticulous instruction manual for others who want to follow in his footsteps, outlining everything down to the best socks to wear during a mass shooting. Unlike previous attackers, however, the manifesto is also accompanied by a 673-page Discord diary or chat log,<sup>c</sup> where Gendron posted several times a day between November 18, 2021, and May 12, 2022, two days before the attack. It is important to note that while the diary is not akin to his manifesto, Gendron instructed those in his Discord network to make it public after the attack. Seen in this light, the diary serves an important purpose: to give future attackers a window into his emotional journey, how he was almost caught a few times, his self-doubt, his suicidal ideations, and his months-long dedication to carrying out the attack. According to Gendron’s discussion of his own radicalization, there are several key nodes that are worth unpacking: his growing isolation from friends and family, the impact of 4Chan and “Chan” culture, the influence of Brenton Tarrant and the Christchurch massacre, and his growing sense that he “can’t even turn back” from his attack plans.

### *Growing Isolation and Chan Culture*

While much of Gendron’s writings seek to inspire future attackers and to explain why he is planning an attack, and meticulously outline his choice of weapons, shooting practice, and livestreaming tools, elements of his personal life are mentioned throughout. On May 5, 2022, nine days before the attack, he engaged in a longer reflection regarding his radicalization. He noted that people generally made him feel “so uncomfortable” and that he had “probably spent actual years of my life just being online.”<sup>25</sup> He mentioned several of his friends and cousins growing up, and good times he had with them, but noted that he had lost touch with almost all of them. He described being somewhat heavily involved in gaming and gaming communities over the years and noted that “the problem with video games is that it leaves you with a false sensation of progress. In reality, you haven’t changed anything in the real world. Plus, it can be addictive when it is your only escape.”<sup>26</sup> With respect to his years in school, he noted that he was never close with his classmates, and that he had had some “bad experiences with black people,” such as getting in trouble for calling a Black student the N-word in sixth grade and being harassed by another student. “These experiences didn’t make me racist against blacks though,” he wrote, “maybe uncomfortable around the majority of them, since I only relate them to trouble.”<sup>27</sup>

According to Gendron’s own account, his turn toward racism was linked to his immersion in 4Chan. He became convinced by the “facts” he encountered on 4Chan and incorporated into his manifesto and Discord logs a barrage of screenshots relating to Holocaust denial, purported Jewish control of the world, the contribution of white people to America’s economy and culture, random charts about the supposed contribution of Black people to the crime rate, IQ differences, and the need for racial segregation. He argued that there are genetic differences between Blacks and

a 8chan “moe” is an alternative image board launched in the wake of 8chan’s original closure, following the Christchurch and El Paso mass shootings. It paints itself as an anti-8kun image board, due to 8kuns affiliation to QAnon, but it is controversial among many image board users due to hosting a board that permits discussion about pedophilia. 8kun is a rebranded version of 8chan that was launched in October 2019. For more on 8chan, see footnote B in Amarnath Amarasingam and Marc-André Argentino, “The QAnon Conspiracy Theory: A Security Threat in the Making?” *CTC Sentinel* 13:7 (2020).

b 4chan is an anonymous and unregulated image board site on which anyone can post images and comments.

c Both terms will be used interchangeably in this article.



A person visits a makeshift memorial on May 19, 2022, near the scene of a shooting that took place on May 14, 2022, at a supermarket, in Buffalo, New York. (Matt Rourke/AP Photo)

whites, and that Blacks were having more children than whites because they were receiving “700000 dollars from government support.”<sup>28</sup> One of the ways he justified his anti-Black racism, and the attack itself, was through the adoption of pseudo-scientific theories of race, such as those pushed by Michael Woodley,<sup>29</sup> Robert Sepehr,<sup>30</sup> and others.<sup>31</sup>

Much of what Gendron presented in his writings was provided with no context or citation and was simply a rehashing of racist tropes that have circulated on 4Chan for some time. Spending more time on 4Chan led to a seamless incorporation of anti-Semitism into his growing anti-Black racism. As he wrote, “Then I saw how the Jews brought them over as slaves, how Jews funded leftism and how they teach us to be ashamed of our heritage.”<sup>32</sup> According to Gendron, it is through 4Chan that he became more deeply immersed in the discourse around the Great Replacement theory and a belief in ‘white genocide.’ The term “great replacement,” coined by French writer Renaud Camus, neatly encapsulated the long-running belief in extreme far-right thinking that the white race was facing imminent extinction.<sup>33</sup> “It seemed like there was no hope for us,” Gendron wrote in his Discord diary nine days before the attack. “We are doomed by low birth rates, a hedonistic, nihilistic, individual culture, and a growing population that wants us dead.”<sup>34</sup> He stated that, not wanting to see the white race stagnate and die, he had almost committed suicide several years previously.<sup>35</sup> Then came the March 2019 Christchurch attack.

### **The Influence of Past Attackers**

The Christchurch attack, for Gendron, was a major turning point. By his own account, the attack moved Gendron from thinking about

suicide as a solution to the plight of the white race to revolutionary action. He stated that after the Christchurch attack, “I realized that hope is not over, that our replacement can be overturned.”<sup>36</sup> Reading more about the Christchurch attack also led him to learn more about El Paso shooter Patrick Crusius,<sup>37</sup> Charleston church shooter Dylann Roof, Poway synagogue attacker John Earnest,<sup>d</sup> and others, who were, he wrote, “white men fighting for me.”<sup>38</sup> Gendron cited as particularly influential a section in Christchurch attacker Tarrant’s manifesto where he asks, three times, “Why won’t somebody do something?” in reference to the purported destruction of the white race. In Tarrant’s screed, the third time the statement is written, the phrase changes to “why don’t I do something?”<sup>39</sup> For Gendron, this changed the way he saw the problem, shifting his perception of himself from a dejected spectator to a heroic protagonist. As he wrote:

*It was then I realized that I could fight our replacement myself, finally I felt awakened. No longer will I just accept this. I will take the fight to the invaders myself. I will stand up to defend my race from the decay. From the replacers, from the Jews that take from us, from the elite that exploit us. I will dedicate my life to this cause ... that’s how I was radicalized,*

d Earnest attacked the Chabad of Poway synagogue in the San Diego area on April 27, 2019, fatally shooting a female worshiper and injuring three others. A social media post attributed to the killer indicated that he had planned to livestream the attack like Tarrant, though this did not happen. See John Wilkins, Kristina Davis, and Terie Figueroa, “One dead, three injured in Poway synagogue shooting,” *San Diego Union Tribune*, April 27, 2019.

*I learned the truth.*<sup>40</sup>

As the authors show further below, Tarrant's influence on Gendron was multi-faceted, from being an object of ideological inspiration to providing tactical blueprints. Gendron initially chose March 15, the anniversary of the Christchurch attack, as the date of his own attack, and like Tarrant, Gendron wrote the names of previous attackers on his weapon and wanted to have music playing during his livestream. There is a kind of "wiki effect" to these attacks, with each individual attacker contributing to the larger product of the far-right extremist movement. Gendron, perhaps more than other attackers, is most explicit about this feature of contemporary extreme far-right attacks. For instance, his manifesto is 67 percent identical to Tarrant's manifesto, with large ideological chunks plagiarized directly from the Christchurch attacker.<sup>41</sup> As he writes, "I stole lots of info from Tarrant because I can't say it any better."<sup>42</sup> In other words, at least in the view of the Buffalo shooter, the ideological foundation for future attacks has already been "perfected" by Tarrant. Where Gendron felt that he could contribute was with tactical advice.

Indeed, just three days before the attack, Gendron wrote on Discord:

*I need you guys to do a deep analysis of all mistakes I made and how to fix them ... mistakes will be made. [Halle, Germany, synagogue shooter] Stephen [sic] Balliet<sup>e</sup> and [Poway, California, synagogue shooter] John Earnest are examples. They had the right intentions but still it went wrong for them. What's important is to honor these men who at least tried, and to learn from their mistakes.*<sup>43</sup>

Accordingly, almost all of Gendron's original writing in the manifesto, as well as hundreds of pages of his Discord logs, deal, ad nauseam, with the mechanics of his planned attack, from preparing his automatic weapon and helmet to his diet and even the type of socks he planned to use during the attack. The banality of this preparation conveys the sense that there was a "cruise control" element to his attack planning that, as the authors argue below, provides an important additional window into Gendron's radicalization.

### 'Can't Turn Back'

One of the interesting elements of Gendron's Discord logs is the number of times he wrote about the doubts he was having. While it is hard to say whether this was also part of the performative aspect of his Discord logs, it seems the daily posts instilled in Gendron a sense that he had started down a path he could not turn back from. Having decided to eventually make the diary public made him feel like his future audience was supporting him in the present, creating a sense of obligation. For instance, when he was forced to change the date of the attack several times, he wrote, "I'm sorry guys I have to delay the attack again. All because of me being a retard as usual."<sup>44</sup> As far as the authors are aware, there was no real-time audience

for Gendron's private Discord chat. Rather, he had internalized the *potential* disapproval and disappointment expressed by a *future* audience, which pushed him to stay on the path.

This is a key point because it is overwhelmingly clear from Gendron's Discord diary that there were repeated moments during which he wanted to cancel the attack or when he thought about killing himself instead. Notwithstanding these hesitations, he stated over a dozen times in his diary that he could not turn back. For example, on February 26, 2022, he wrote, "I don't want to kill them like this but this is the only way. I can't even turn back now. I am trapped to this fate, I can't back out, I have to do this."<sup>45</sup> A month later, on March 16, 2022, he wrote, "I can't tell you how much I don't want to do this attack. My only other choice is suicide I can't go back."<sup>46</sup> He appears to have felt an overwhelming obligation to his audience, the Chan community, and to fellow white people who he felt were being "replaced," and had convinced himself that he had been called upon to carry out an attack. On March 17, 2022, for example, he wrote, "Anything I do it leads me to the same fate, I can't escape. In fact, this attack existed before I was even born." On March 30, 2022, he wrote, "Whenever I think that I'd prefer suicide instead I tell myself its over anyways, might as well at least try to fight for your people."<sup>47</sup>

There is a lot more that will likely be learned about Gendron's radicalization as the case winds through the courts. For instance, what he does *not* talk much about in the over 800 pages he left behind is striking. There is relatively little mention of his childhood, his family life, or his relationship with his mother and father (aside from a few scattered mentions). It is of course likely that, as with other attacker manifestos, Gendron believed that much of his past was no longer relevant in the context of his racial awakening. Nevertheless, these gaps will be important to fill in order to get a fuller picture of the process of his radicalization to violence.

### Gendron's Roadmap for Terror: Takeaways for Counterterrorism Practitioners

Ideologically, Gendron is not very creative, as mentioned above; he is a product of the ecosystems he inhabited online, crediting 4chan for his radicalization and Brenton Tarrant for opening his eyes. More notably, but not uniquely, Gendron provided in the writings that he posted online a detailed guide of tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) on how to carry out mass shootings to any potential future mass shooter. Given the copycat nature of extreme far-right attacks and case after case of individuals drawing inspiration from the likeminded terrorist actors who preceded them, this is of significant concern to counterterrorism practitioners.

Gendron demonstrates the use of malevolent creativity, which is a form of creativity that "is deemed necessary by some society, group, or individual to fulfil [sic] goals they regard as desirable, but [which] has serious negative consequences for some other group, these negative consequences being fully intended by the first group."<sup>48</sup> In the context of the Buffalo mass shooting, it refers to both Gendron's violent activities (for example, his detailed notes on his attack planning and deployment of the plan) and his non-violent activities (for example, financing an attack, reconnaissance, streaming strategies, and analysis on armor and weapons).<sup>49</sup>

According to the criminal complaint from the U.S. District Court of New York, in the seven months prior to the attack, Gendron "wrote a self-described manifesto containing a detailed plan to shoot and kill Black people at the Tops at 1275 Jefferson Avenue,"<sup>50</sup>

<sup>e</sup> Balliet tried and failed to attack a synagogue in Halle, Germany, on October 9, 2019, on Yom Kippur. Having tried and failed to gain access to the premises, he subsequently turned his gun on two random targets of opportunity, murdering a female passerby and a man eating his lunch in a nearby kebab house. He wounded two others while fleeing. Balliet used the streaming service Twitch to broadcast his violence. See Daniel Koehler, "The Halle, Germany, Synagogue Attack and the Evolution of the Far-Right Terror Threat," *CTC Sentinel* 12:11 (2019).

and “chronicled the progress and development of his plan on his Discord account in the months leading up to the attack.”<sup>51</sup> According to Gendron, the manifesto “is what I want you to really take home”<sup>52</sup> in order to understand his ideology and motivations; the Discord logs are for those who “want to see memes and learn and understand how I got to the point I am today.”<sup>53</sup>

Gendron composed a total of 853 pages in preparation for the attack. He stated several times in his writings that these documents were aimed at his imagined audience that would be reading them after the attack, as well as any future mass shooters. He highlighted how he acquired his firearms, ammunition, firearm magazines, body armor, GoPro camera, and other supplies for the attack. He was meticulous in detailing his testing and modification of the firearms, testing of ammunition, modifying firearm magazines, and how he planned to livestream the attack. Finally, his Discord chat logs detailed how he made his selection of the Tops grocery store as the target of the attack based on his analysis and reconnaissance.

Gendron’s use of Discord was unique. He used Discord, a voice over IP and instant messaging social platform popular with gamers, to log daily the progress and development of his plan. The use of Discord, though innovative, was not surprising because he was familiar with the platform; according to his Steam profile,<sup>f</sup> he had logged over 2,000 hours gaming with his friends, and he made a reference to being in several Discord servers in his logs. What we can learn from this attack, is that Discord offered him pseudonymity,<sup>g</sup> as well as total privacy as there was no one else in this server until he sent invites to friends around a half hour before the attack. In the past, when alt-right leaders used Discord, such as for planning the 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, the vulnerability was the amount of people in the chat that could leak information, as well as the ease with which activists were able to infiltrate the servers.<sup>54</sup> Without anyone to report the server and its content, Gendron was able to continue his activities without hindrance, even though he shared terrorist manifestos and videos that had been hashed into the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism<sup>h</sup> (GIFCT) hash-sharing database.<sup>55</sup> Gendron highlighted a flaw in Discord’s passive monitoring and trust and

f Steam is a large digital distribution platform for PC gaming. As part of the service, users have their own personal profile, which allows them to use its social network service and chat with one another.

g “Pseudonymity is the near-anonymous state in which a user has a consistent identifier that is not their real name: a pseudonym.” “Pseudonymity,” Tech Target, n.d.

h The Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT) is an NGO designed to prevent terrorists and violent extremists from exploiting digital platforms. Founded by Facebook, Microsoft, Twitter, and YouTube in 2017, the forum was established to foster technical collaboration among member companies, advance relevant research, and share knowledge with smaller platforms. Since 2017, GIFCT’s membership has expanded beyond the founding companies to include over a dozen diverse platforms committed to cross-industry efforts to counter the spread of terrorist and violent extremist content online. See “About,” Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism, n.d.

i The GIFCT hash-sharing database is a secure industry database of “perpetual hashes” that denote terrorist content as defined by GIFCT’s own taxonomy. “Tech Innovation,” Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism, 2022.

safety technologies,<sup>j</sup> with the concern being that other would-be mass shooters or racially and ethnically motivated violent extremists (REMVE) actors might choose to emulate his approach for operational security purposes.

Livestreaming of attacks is an important example of cross-ideological malevolent creativity between REMVE threat actors and jihadi terrorists who have incorporated some element of livestreaming into their attacks (e.g., the Magnanville terrorist in France in June 2016).<sup>56</sup> Brenton Tarrant livestreamed his terrorist attack on Facebook,<sup>57</sup> and following in his footsteps a few months later, Stephan Balliet livestreamed his attack on Twitch.<sup>58</sup> Gendron put a fair amount of his time and resources into making sure that he would have the right technology and methods to stream his attack. The livestreaming, he stated in his Discord logs, would be as important as his writings, because “I most likely wouldn’t even know about the real problems in the world if Brenton Tarrant didn’t livestream his attack.”<sup>59</sup> He further stated that though Dylann Roof’s manifesto was “not bad,” Roof had not broadcast it and so limited his impact. With his own forthcoming attack in mind, Gendron stated, “livestreaming this attack makes a 1000x greater impact.”<sup>60</sup> Having wide ranging impact was the ultimate objective for Gendron, as he desired to inspire others to copy him in preventing what he feared was the “Great Replacement.”

When it came to livestreaming his attack, Gendron initially wanted to use Facebook, emulating Tarrant. “Livestreaming via go pro on Facebook live would be very nice, and I’ll use my computer to livestream the Facebook link on discord, and that is connected via hotspot or WIFI, and that would be in my own car. So people can watch on Facebook or discord. Not a bad plan Making a music playlist would be fun.”<sup>61</sup> A few days later, however, he decided to use Twitch “because only boomers actually have a Facebook account nowadays and I’m pretty confident that you will have to have an account with them to watch the livestream, and on Twitch you don’t.”<sup>62</sup> Gendron spent not only a fair amount of time going over how he was going to set up his livestream but also troubleshooting issues that came up as he tested it over seven months.<sup>k</sup> Ultimately, his choice to use Discord and Twitch to stream his attack limited initial viewership of the livestream to 22 individuals.<sup>63</sup> One of these individuals, though, downloaded and spread the video<sup>l</sup> through platforms like Streamable, where it was, according to reporting, seen more than three million times before being taken down.<sup>64</sup>

j Passive monitoring is an automated way of silently analyzing network traffic to identify various signals and behavioral patterns associated with potential breaches of the terms of service or to have content flagged for human review. Discord and other social media platforms use various algorithmic methodologies to passively monitor their platforms and services. Tech Against Terrorism, “GIFCT Technical Approaches Working Group Gap Analysis and Recommendations for deploying technical solutions to tackle the terrorist use of the internet,” Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism, July 2021.

k Gendron discussed such challenges as bandwidth issues and how to resolve them, connectivity issues between his phone and GoPro, how to play music while livestreaming, etc. On March 5, 2022, 10 days before the initial date he chose for his attack, he was having issues with his livestream and bemoaned how he might have to use Facebook as he was having issues with Twitch. Payton Gendron, Discord chat logs, March 5, 2022.

l Based on videos of the Buffalo attack found on open source by the authors, only one 4chan user who was watching the stream archived it and released a 6:52 minute long video of the 24:36 livestream. This user decided not to release the full stream, for reasons unknown to the authors.

This made the viewership of the video roughly comparable to that of Tarrant whose own video was uploaded 1.5 million times to Facebook in 24 hours, though 1.2 million were blocked at the point of upload.<sup>65</sup> Soberingly, there were a large number of views of the Buffalo video despite the best efforts of the GIFCT. According to the GIFCT debrief from the Buffalo Content Incident Protocol, GIFCT was able to rapidly coordinate across platforms and hash the video to reduce its dissemination.<sup>66</sup>

Research and reconnaissance are another key TTP that Gendron highlighted in his logs, and it is something he could have borrowed from Tarrant who used a drone to scout one of the mosques he targeted.<sup>67</sup> Gendron spent months researching the Black population density in and around Buffalo, New York, using census data, public databases, and physical reconnaissance to determine when and where there would be the most Black people at a specific place to achieve the highest body count, which led him to choose the location of the attack. Though Buffalo did have the highest Black population closest to his place of residence (Conklin), there were also gun laws and restrictions in New York state to consider, which he discussed in his Discord diaries. He fretted about running into anyone with a concealed carry firearm who might kill him before his attack had begun.<sup>68</sup>

Using Google Maps and Google reviews, Gendron considered several potential locations for his attack: a synagogue, a church, a mosque, an elementary school, a specific college, various other specific supermarkets and stores, an athletic center, and a specific barbershop. Ultimately, he settled on Tops, which according to his chat logs (which contains both pictures and notes he took), he traveled to several times: March 8, May 13, and May 14, 2022. During these scouting missions, Gendron created sketches of the layout of Tops, noted where the security guards were, counted the number of Black people in the store, and scouted locations to put on his gear and park his car.<sup>m</sup> According to the criminal complaint, Gendron went to Tops “only two and a half hours before the attack, and observed a ‘healthy amount of old and young’ Black people in the store and noted where the security guard was positioned.”<sup>69</sup>

An important takeaway for counterterrorism practitioners from the Buffalo shooting is the capacity for attackers like Gendron to not only learn from others but to pass on lessons through their writings. For instance, as Gendron stated in his logs:

*Protip: Test your equipment and make sure they work properly. John Earnest apparently had a jam in his gun that he didn't even shoot before. Stephen [sic] Balliet's luty<sup>n</sup> didn't function properly as well. Brenton [Tarrant] had one failure to extract but he was quite smart and got it out quickly. Also look at what people did before you, I'm trying to find info on other mass shooters and see what they did and what to improve on ... Imagine if I went in on March 15 not knowing*

*my gun wasn't properly lubed and I had a failure to feed on every shot I took, that would be quite embarrassing.*<sup>70</sup>

Gendron delayed his attack time and time again. Part of the reason for this was because he was dealing with issues with his gear, which he was modifying. These delays may have contributed to his ability to execute his attack.

Gendron also wrote extensively about body armor, weapon options and costs, and ammo choices based on the situations he envisioned encountering. Gendron was obsessed with guns and armor, as well as the technological innovation behind them. There is a longwinded banality behind the number of pages in his manifesto and logs that he spent talking about helmets, gloves, socks, plate carriers, and underwear. Gendron spent significant time on weapons and armor-related boards and subreddits. In his logs, he explained how he modified his AR15 to make it fully automatic, as well as provided links to the information he used to do this at home. The logs also contain information on the issues he faced with his kit and the sources he used to overcome them, as well as where items could be purchased. Gendron purchased his armor on eBay,<sup>o</sup> but also suggested that Facebook and Instagram marketplaces were a viable option. He also suggested several subreddits where users can swap or sell tactical gear. In his own words, “I think you guys will be able to use my body armor section to fit your needs.” Gendron also went over how he self-financed his attack, which according to analysis by Jessica Davis, cost approximately \$10,500.<sup>71</sup> Davis highlighted that even though the attack was far more expensive than most lone-actor attacks, financial constraints placed on Gendron might have reduced the lethality of the attack.<sup>72</sup>

## Conclusions and Implications

The Buffalo massacre was not an isolated phenomenon. Indeed, one can only fully comprehend it when considered within a continuum of self-referential extreme-right terrorism inspired by the March 2019 terrorist attack on two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, which left 51 men, women, and children dead. That terrorist attack, committed by unemployed Australian gym trainer Brenton Tarrant, itself drew ideological and tactical succor from previous extreme-right terrorists. Tarrant's principal inspirations included Pittsburgh synagogue shooter Robert Bowers,<sup>73</sup> Dylann Roof, and Anders Behring Breivik, the Norwegian killer who murdered 77 people in a bomb attack and mass shooting in Oslo and on the nearby island of Utøya, where a Labour party youth camp was taking place in July 2011.<sup>74</sup>

The Christchurch attack had a catalytic effect upon extreme-right actors, sparking a chain reaction of mass shootings.<sup>75</sup> Shortly after the Christchurch attack, extreme-right terrorist attacks took place in Poway, California (April 2019); El Paso, Texas (August 2019); Bærum, Norway (August 2019);<sup>p</sup> and Halle, Germany

m From Gendron's Discord chat logs: “At 2:00 I went inside Top's and made the second map, then I noted there were 45 blacks inside, 8 white inside, and 10 blacks on the outside of the store I then traveled to the spot on Sherman St and noted my best route to Top's from there, including roads I would go on. I found another good spot to gear up at 2:38, as seen below. This is off of Mohican Drive.” Payton Gendron, Discord chat logs, March 9, 2022.

n The “Luty” is a reference to the plans for manufacturing a homemade firearm that Balliet followed, which had originated with Philip Luty, an English gunsmith who opposed the United Kingdom's strict gun control measures.

o Gendron's Discord logs contain screen captures of the eBay auctions he purchased items from and their final price.

p The Bærum perpetrator, Philip Manshaus, murdered his 17-year-old adoptive sister and then tried to attack the Bærum mosque on August 10, 2019. Two worshippers overpowered him, however, and restrained him until police arrived to arrest him. Manshaus wore a helmet camera during his assault on the mosque and filmed his shooting, but failed to broadcast the attack online. See “Norway court jails mosque gunman Manshaus for 21 years,” BBC, June 11, 2020, and Anders Hammer, *Terroristen Fra Bærum* (Oslo: J. M. Stenersens Forlag, 2022).



(October 2019). By the end of 2019, five individual extreme right terrorists had killed a total of 78 people, in four countries, on three separate continents.<sup>76</sup>

Each of these attacks, and dozens of smaller instances of violence and attempted violence, followed what sociologist Ralph Larkin called (with regard to school shootings referencing Columbine) a “cultural script.”<sup>77</sup> In each instance, this crop of extreme-right terrorists who claimed inspiration from the Christchurch attack have sought to exceed its death toll, incite further violence, and honor the attacks with their own violence. The Buffalo terrorist attack conformed to all three of these aspirations.

In his manifesto, Gendron claimed that Tarrant had directly inspired him and that his livestreamed mass murder in New Zealand in March 2019 “started everything you see here” in Buffalo.<sup>78</sup> Carefully constructing a narrative that emphasized Tarrant’s importance while simultaneously deliberately trying to manufacture a link to Tarrant from which he could derive status, Gendron stated, “without his livestream I would likely have no idea about the real problems the West is facing.”<sup>79</sup> According to his Discord diary, watching the video of Tarrant murdering worshippers at the Al Noor mosque made Gendron believe he could do something to reverse the plight of the white community. Thereafter, he found Tarrant’s manifesto, claiming that its “most influential” section was Tarrant’s exhortation to “do something,” which he allegedly experienced as an awakening.<sup>80</sup> He also copied Tarrant in seeking to situate himself within the wider community of extreme-right terrorists in the United States by referencing Dylann Roof, Patrick Crusius, and John Earnest, perpetrators of the Charleston, El Paso, and Poway attacks, respectively, as people who dedicated their lives to fighting for the white race.<sup>81</sup>

The Buffalo terrorist’s ideological affinity with the Christchurch attacker extended to copying his *modus operandi* and attack aesthetics. Gendron’s own impending atrocity was announced online prior to its perpetration accompanied by a “manifesto” and thereafter a livestreamed broadcast of racist murder. Beyond the violence itself, the Buffalo terrorist attack, like the Christchurch atrocity, was in itself an act of racist propaganda designed to inspire further attacks. Uploading a manifesto and livestreaming the horror in the knowledge that both would be widely disseminated throughout the extreme-right digital ecosystem was intended to leave as big a digital footprint as possible so that others could easily find inspiration and justification for their own violence in the future. Gendron’s Discord “diary” also conformed to this increasingly familiar pattern. While invaluable for researchers for documenting his personal pathway to violence, it too was an act of propaganda, “designed to be consumed” rather than representing simply “an unfiltered internal monologue.”<sup>82</sup>

The production of a manifesto prior to a terrorist assault is an increasingly ritualized part of extreme-right terrorism. The growing number of such manifestos since 2019 and other digital fragments, such as those left by Robert Bowers and Dylann Roof to justify their attacks, has created a corpus of ‘literature’ upon which extreme-right assailants can draw for intellectual and practical instruction.<sup>83</sup>

The Buffalo attack underscores the need for researchers, analysts, and policymakers to consider such manifestos collectively rather than singularly since, in essence, they constitute part of the same body of work regardless of their individual authorship. The chain reaction of extreme-right terrorism since March 2019 has highlighted that these manifestos are not static texts. They are

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“living documents”<sup>84</sup> that follow the basic template adumbrated by Tarrant but have been continuously altered and adapted to suit the needs and capabilities of each individual attacker.

Gendron’s manifesto represented another stage in the ongoing crystallization of this trend. “Most of my general thoughts came from Tarrant’s manifesto,”<sup>85</sup> Gendron admitted in his Discord diary. “I’m going to copy and paste much of his writings into my own,” he admitted in February 2022, “because we both seem to have the same views, and why write it again when you can use him as a source?”<sup>86</sup> As already noted, the following month he stated, “I can’t say it any better,” though he also admitted being embarrassed that he had cut and pasted so much of Tarrant’s manifesto into his own document.<sup>87</sup> The Christchurch killer was not the only source of inspiration. Gendron also followed Breivik in plagiarizing the small parts of Ted Kaczynski’s manifesto attacking “leftists.”<sup>88</sup> Gendron’s plagiarism also extended to copying the self-interview format that Tarrant had employed (which he himself had borrowed from Breivik who in turn had adapted it from celebrity interviews).<sup>88</sup> Gendron’s desire to provide a how-to-guide for future attackers also found its echo in Breivik’s manifesto, the third section of which Breivik wrote to provide “militant nationalists” with the tools that they needed to follow in his footsteps regarding information on weapons acquisition and bomb making; the latter included Breivik’s thoughts on how he was actually able to build a viable explosive device despite a number of obstacles.<sup>89</sup> Tarrant, by way of comparison, offered little such guidance in his manifesto.

There were significant differences, however, concerning the racist motivations articulated in each of these manifestos, highlighting that the “Great Replacement” conspiracy theory is in essence an empty vessel that its adherents can fill with their own particular racial animus. This explains the heterodox nature of the racist target selection seen during this ‘wave’ of extreme-right

q Gendron directly copied 139 words from Ted Kaczynski’s manifesto, according to analysis by the authors completed through Copy Leaks. See also “The Unabomber and the Norwegian mass murderer,” BBC, May 28, 2016.

terrorist attacks since 2019. Gendron targeted Blacks; Tarrant chose Muslims. A decade earlier, Breivik had drawn upon his own anti-Muslim racism to target government officials and teenage Labour party activists instead, believing them to be “traitors” for facilitating Muslim immigration and multiculturalism in the first place.<sup>90</sup> Tarrant’s own acolytes targeted a similarly diverse array of ethnic and religious minorities: Jews (Poway), Mexicans (El Paso), and Muslims (Bærum), each of whom, in the idiosyncratic worldview of the individual killer in question, fulfilled the role of occupier and usurper.<sup>91</sup> The Halle attacker had initially targeted Jews but having failed to gain entry to a synagogue, turned to targets of opportunity—murdering a female passerby and a man eating lunch in a kebab shop instead.<sup>92</sup>

These ideological variations aside, which reflect the diversity and intersectionality of extreme-right prejudices, there is also a significant structural difference between the Buffalo and Christchurch manifestos. While Gendron largely regurgitated the format and ideological content of *The Great Replacement*, unlike Tarrant, he married these ideas with a detailed “how-to” guide for other would-be killers to follow in preparing their own future attacks. This was not new, however. Patrick Crusius had offered his readers rudimentary advice on firearm selection. The practical dimensions of Gendron’s manifesto were more reminiscent of Breivik’s painstaking documentation of his own preparations in 2011. However, the complexity of Breivik’s attack—and moreover, the ease with which military-grade firearms can be legally purchased in the United States—has so far obviated the need for subsequent extreme-right terrorists to follow Breivik’s plans for committing a bomb attack in tandem with a mass shooting.<sup>93</sup> Within a much shorter timeframe, Tarrant’s example has proven the more durable template for committing carnage and achieving online “sainthood.”<sup>94</sup>

Technologically, Gendron achieved what the Poway and Bærum terrorists failed to do in their attempts to mimic Tarrant: He succeeded in livestreaming his violence. This was likely because he had spent some seven months contemplating and preparing his attack, according to his Discord diary, which the two aforementioned terrorists conspicuously did not. Their own attacks were comparatively more spontaneous and took place after only a modicum of planning and preparation had been undertaken.

Instead of using Facebook Live, as Tarrant had, Gendron transmitted his killings via Twitch, the online gaming platform that the Halle terrorist had also utilized to broadcast his attack. The Buffalo terrorist’s visual aesthetic mirrored Tarrant’s, however. He too painted his weapons with the key ideological reference points, individual inspirations, and racial slurs, while, in the commission of his violence, he dressed, like Tarrant, in combat gear as part of his self-delusion that he was a military “partisan” fighting against an occupying force.<sup>95</sup>

The massacre in Buffalo highlighted once more that the threat of extreme-right terrorism comes from individuals rather than from groups. However, it is important to note that while all of these extreme-right terrorists, including Gendron, acted alone, each of them was immersed in a shared online ecosystem from which they derived their ideas and inspirations (though one should not ignore their offline pathways to violence). This is no longer a particularly novel development. In the lead up to his 2011 attack, Breivik had submerged himself in the online world of “counter-jihad” politics.<sup>96</sup> While the digital platforms have changed in the

intervening years, virtually every extreme-right lone-actor terrorist since has been embedded, at some level, within this nebulous online social movement, which, for many, has replaced the physical group or party as the principal point of contact for engaging with extreme-right ideologies.<sup>97</sup> Academic literature has highlighted this post-organizational shift in the REMVE space,<sup>98</sup> whereby membership in and support for different groups have become less clear, and online activity has made it easier for transnational movements to grow and change. Attacks are carried out by people who have very weak or no ties to specific groups. Instead, violent extremists draw on a shared culture and set of beliefs.<sup>99</sup>

Earlier this year, the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD), in working with government partners and the GIFCT, developed the taxonomy of post-organizational violent extremism and terrorism (POVET) to describe the phenomenon of terrorism and violent extremism where the influence or direction of activity is ambiguous or loose.<sup>100</sup> The ISD highlighted that the shift to a POVET taxonomy is necessary as “post-organizational dynamics strain responses which focus solely on the proscription of specific organizations,”<sup>101</sup> which in turn leads to whack-a-mole policy dynamics where governments and private sectors need to constantly recalibrate. The White House in its June 2021 National Strategy for Countering Domestic Terrorism highlighted that religiously and ethnically motivated violent extremists “take on a variety of forms, from lone actors and small groups of informally aligned individuals to networks exhorting and targeting violence toward specific communities, to violent self-proclaimed ‘militias.’”<sup>102</sup>

Countries such as Canada,<sup>r</sup> Australia,<sup>s</sup> and New Zealand<sup>t</sup> have also adopted similar language about ideologically motivated violent extremism, which moves beyond the boundaries of proscribed groups. The shift of the counterterrorism landscape to a POVET one has important implications as these types of groups and content are extremely challenging to develop policies around due to the use of cultural and ideological materials that are not always explicitly linked, without subject-matter understanding, to REMVE mobilization and ideologies. As ISD has highlighted, “creating

r “Proponents of ideologically motivated violent extremism (IMVE) are driven by a range of influences rather than a singular belief system. IMVE radicalization is more often caused by a combination of ideas and grievances resulting in a personalized worldview that is inspired by a variety of sources. IMVE includes gender-driven, xenophobic, anti-authority, and other grievance-driven violence.” “Protecting National Security in Partnership with all Canadians,” Government of Canada, last modified June 28, 2022.

s “Ideologically motivated violent extremists—specifically nationalist and racist violent extremists—remain focused on producing propaganda, radicalising and recruiting others, and preparing for an anticipated societal collapse. They are security-conscious and adapt their security posture to avoid legal action. Nationalist and racist violent extremists are located in all Australian states and territories. Compared with other forms of violent extremism, this threat is more widely dispersed across the country—including in regional and rural areas. The emergence of nationalist and isolationist narratives globally is normalising aspects of ideologically motivated violent extremist ideology, including nationalist and racist, and specific-issue violent extremism.” “ASIO Annual Report 2020-2021,” Australian Security Intelligence Organisation, September 2021.

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responses to such material will thus require responses which go beyond individual pieces of content and instead attempt to

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# CTC-ICT Focus on Israel: A View from the CT Foxhole: Brigadier General (Reserves) Nitzan Nuriel, Former Director of the Counter-Terrorism Bureau in the Prime Minister's Office of Israel

By Stevie Weinberg

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*Editor's Note: This interview is the second in a series of articles and interviews examining the terrorist threat landscape in Israel and the lessons other countries can learn from Israel's counterterrorism efforts. The series is a joint effort between the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point (CTC) and the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT) at Reichman University in Israel.*

**CTC/ICT: You spent more than 30 years in Israeli's security establishment, and you are still serving in the IDF reserve. What led you to such a distinguished career in the military? During your career, what was your biggest achievement? What was the most challenging moment?**

**Nuriel:** I believe that not many Israelis know what they want to do in life when they enlist at 18 years old or what they are going to do for the next 35 years. It is a gradual process: You start your military service because it is mandatory, and then you see that you can be an officer. After that, you move up the ladder, and you become a platoon commander. And after a while, you are battalion commander. And then, you see that this is not just a career; this is a life mission.

During my military service, I believe that my biggest achievement was that I never lost a soldier in combat. I conducted many operations, I was wounded twice, but I never lost a soldier in combat.

Regarding the most challenging moments, I know that many people are looking for an answer that includes combat description and bravery. But no, not at all. The most difficult moments: having to pick the team that will go with me behind the enemy's line to conduct one of these operations. You are sitting in your tent or in your office and you have to pick the 20 individuals that you will take with you, and by picking them, you know that you may put them at a very high risk. They may not come back home, and this is not a feeling that you can prepare for.

**CTC/ICT: In 2001, you served as the IDF Military Attaché at the Israeli Embassy in Washington, D.C. What role, if any, did Israel play in assisting the United States in the establishment of its Global War on Terror post-9/11?**

**Nuriel:** I had the honor to serve as the Israeli military representative in Washington, D.C., at the time of the overall American military efforts against the Taliban in Afghanistan and later against the Baath regime in Iraq. At the same time, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) was created with Governor [Tom] Ridge as its first secretary. I was part of the team that supported and advised him. From that aspect, we provided him with all the knowledge we had. We sat down several days a week, every week, and provided him and his staff with the Israeli counterterrorism and homeland security experience.

I've always told my counterparts that you cannot take the Israeli structures and doctrine as they are. You have to adapt; you have to see what is relevant and what is less relevant. From that perspective, we provided, on the military side as well as on the civilian side, everything we had. No secrets, no boundaries, no limits. Everything was on the table.

For example, on the military side, at that time we spoke a lot about how to counter IEDs. We shared our methodologies and technology. On the civilian side, we spoke a lot about what the right counterterrorism apparatus should be; what the tasks and boundaries between the police, firefighters, first aid are; how to create a command-and-control concept in times of disaster. Ultimately, I believe that we helped the United States realize that they needed a different security structure.

More generally, we have very good cooperation with our Americans allies on the intelligence, operational, as well as technological side. And with those connections, we dramatically increased efforts to deal with the money behind terrorism, which is a keystone. Without money, you will not be able to conduct terror attacks. And for that, we need to keep increasing cooperation not only with the United States, but also with other countries.

On the technology side, the concept has been that if there is one agency on the Israeli side and one agency on the U.S. side that are looking for technological solutions to a problem, we will invest both of us, the American and Israelis, in order to find solutions. And that mechanism worked for many years. I had the privilege to lead that mechanism through the Technical Support Working Group (TSWG), and all in all, we provided good answers to some of the challenges that both Israel and the United States were facing.

It has also been important to share lessons learned. When something happens—for example, the April 2022 terror attack on Dizengoff Street in Tel Aviv—it is important to present it to our allies overseas and think together, *what are the relevant shared*

*lessons learned?*<sup>2</sup>

**CTC/ICT:** How would you assess the evolution of Israel's counterterrorism policy? Where has Israel been most effective and least effective?

**Nuriel:** During my tenure as the director of the Counter-Terrorism Bureau, I launched an initiative to have an Israeli-written counterterrorism strategy. It took me a while to convince the prime minister and his staff that it was needed. They provided me with a small budget and allowed me to start the process. Unfortunately, it was never completed because of various political limitations. We had a team, we started writing these concepts, and after a year or so, we received a red light (i.e., “we don't want you to write a policy.”). I believe that the political echelon was afraid to have a policy that may have forced them to take certain decisions when they favored a status quo.

Looking into the tools we have in our counterterrorism basket, I believe that the most successful approach we have had is in the way we counter suicide attackers. Actually, if you look at the numbers, we succeeded in moving from approximately 20 events a month down to zero; from 100 casualties to zero. And today in Israel, the threat of suicide attackers has significantly diminished. Because of a set of concepts (preventive arrests, intelligence dominance, the security fence), intelligence cooperation, and because of technology, we succeeded in reducing suicide terrorism so that it is almost no longer a relevant threat in Israel's threat landscape.

**CTC/ICT:** You served as the director of the Counter-Terrorism Bureau in the prime minister's office? Can you tell us a bit about the history, role, and evolution of the CTB?

**Nuriel:** The Counter-Terrorism Bureau was established in 1996, after we started facing a wave of suicide attacks and the increasing need to better coordinate the responses of different security agencies (Mossad, ISA,<sup>a</sup> IDF, police, etc.). When I was appointed in 2007, I told the prime minister that beside coordinating between the agencies, I believed the bureau should also examine future threats and try to guide the security apparatus on how to be better prepared for such next threats. Besides that, at that time, we had several other new challenges, like protecting the rigs in the Mediterranean and preventing Iran from taking actions against the State of Israel after the [2008] killing of [Hezbollah's international operations chief] Imad Mughniyeh. We had, at this time, many challenges that couldn't be led by a single agency. And the Counter-Terrorism Bureau in Israel led these issues and gave different options to political leaders tasked to deal with those threats.

**CTC/ICT:** A major aspect of your role as director of the CTB was coordinating the efforts of different security agencies. These agencies had institutional egos, different priorities, and were often competing for intelligence sources and budget funds. What were the main challenges in this regard?

**Nuriel:** I must admit that there is probably a lot of ego among the



*Nitzan Nuriel*

different agencies, but when it comes to the security of the Israeli citizens, they are willing to adapt and one day work under the leadership of the police and the day after under the command of the ISA, etc. As such, organizations could change positions based on the need of the mission. My main challenge as the director of the CTB was to select the agency that [would] lead the mission. For example, in 2010, Israel faced the challenge to counter flotillas that were trying to break the Israeli blockade on Gaza. The question on my desk was which agency to assign as the lead against such a threat. Should it be the Mossad because the threat is coming from overseas? Is it the IDF because the threat comes from the sea? Is this the ISA because the flotillas wanted to enter Israel's territory? Ultimately, you make a decision and the agencies follow it.

According to Israeli law at that time, if one of the head of the agencies had something to say, he needed to go to the prime minister. They never did.

**CTC/ICT:** Given the spring 2022 wave of terrorism in Israel,<sup>b</sup> how do you evaluate the ‘inspired lone actor’ threat to the country?

**Nuriel:** Unfortunately, we do not always have the time to answer these questions. We must deal with the problem. And many times, first the problems start, then you are thinking how to solve it, how to prevent it. The most effective tool is based on a concept that we call preventive arrest operations. Every night, based on very good intelligence, we are conducting preventive arrest operations led by the IDF and other special forces units, led by the ISA, and we arrest those who, based on good intelligence, are part of the terror arena. We arrest them, interrogate them, and they provide us more names.

Is this enough? The answer is no. Because you can miss something, you can find someone who is smarter than you and he succeeds to sneak between the available intelligence. As such, and as a foundation, you need to build strong deterrence.

I believe that you can deter terrorism even though an individual is willing to commit suicide. If he understands that for sure he will be captured and maybe sent to Israeli jail forever, he or she will think twice. So, the most effective approach is a combination of

<sup>a</sup> Editor's Note: The Israeli Security Agency (ISA) focuses on domestic security and is referred to as Shin Bet or Shabak.

<sup>b</sup> “During the spring of 2022, Israel suffered six attacks by lone actors or local networks—at least three inspired by Palestinian organizations and at least two by the global jihad—and a multitude of thwarted plots.” Boaz Ganor, “CTC-ICT Focus on Israel: What Can We Learn from the Spring 2022 Terror Wave in Israel,” *CTC Sentinel* 15:6 (2022).

preventive arrest operations as well as deterrence. If something happens, then it is necessary to shut down the threat as soon as we can, even if that requires intervention of civilians who are carrying weapons and, by that, to minimize the number of casualties. I don't want to criticize anyone, but just as an example, in May there was a school shooting in Uvalde County in Texas in which 21 were killed. In Israel, in events like that, the numbers will be much lower. Mainly because the first responders are very quick. It can be security forces, it could be citizens, it could be soldiers that are on vacation. But the concept is to make sure that you can shut down the threat as soon as you can.

**CTC/ICT: In the last few decades, there seems to have been a similar pattern with Hamas in Gaza: sporadic launches of rockets and waves of inspired attacks, IDF retaliations that are followed by more rockets and more attacks, which are followed by military operations (Defensive Shield [2002], Summer Rains [2006], Pillar of Defense [2012], Protective Edge [2014], Guardian of the Walls [2021] just to name a few). How do you break away from this vicious cycle?**

**Nuriel:** I'm not sure, and I don't think there is a magical solution. And yet, by observing what's going on right now in Gaza, the results of the last year's operation—Guardian of the Walls—maybe we created a new level of deterrence. Based on the intelligence, and I cannot share everything with your readers, Hamas is very disturbed and it's doing almost everything it can to avoid its organization and its supporters opening fire against us and is also preventing others from doing so. How long is it going to stay like that? I don't know; it's too soon to say.

The concept is to make sure that the other side, Hamas and [Palestinian] Islamic Jihad [PIJ], understand that if they do something, they will pay a very high price. But this is not sufficient. We need to speak about structural solutions. I believe, for example, that the workers that are coming from the Gaza Strip to work in Israel are part of the mechanism that can help reduce the level of threats. Conveying a message that if it is going to be quiet, we will have another 500 workers. And then every week to increase the number of workers based on the level of quiet. Again, how long is it going to take? Some time. It also depends on us because if there is an incident and we make a mistake that Hamas or [PIJ] cannot accept—for example, in the Temple Mount—then things may again spiral out of control.

**CTC/ICT: More than 20 years ago, you took part in the planning and command of the IDF's retreat from southern Lebanon [in 2000]. Today, the situation is more and more fragile in Israel's "northern front" with the threat posed by Hezbollah. Many Israeli security analysts say that the next war in the north is not a question of if, but when. What is your assessment? What should Israel's counterterrorism strategy be *vis-à-vis* Hezbollah?**

**Nuriel:** I believe that the most problematic dilemma we have is, what should come first? We believe that there are strong connections between Iran and Hezbollah. Iran is very close to nuclear capabilities. Hezbollah already has thousands of rockets. And now you have to make the decision what should come first: attacking Iran in order to prevent them from having a nuclear weapon while being aware that Hezbollah can respond and launch

thousands of rockets towards Israel; or launch a preventive attack against Hezbollah and take care of Iran after. This is the major dilemma we have today. I also believe that it is a question of when and not if, with regard to Israel needing to take action against both Iran and Hezbollah. What should come first is a tactical and operational question. I don't know what the Iranian response will be if Israel attacks Hezbollah, and I don't know what Hezbollah's response will be in case Israel attacks Iran. We need to be prepared to deal with those two fronts at the same time even though we all know that Israel cannot fight and win on two fronts at the same time. So, when it becomes necessary to act, we have to make a decision [about] who comes first.

But it not solely these two fronts. We are speaking today about six fronts at the same time: Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Iran, the Gaza Strip, and Yemen, and then add potential domestic disturbance. Therefore, the Israeli air defense system, with very strong U.S. cooperation, is trying to build up a very strong umbrella with very robust detection capabilities as well as interception capabilities.

**CTC/ICT: In the wake of a surge in missile launches in the early months of 2022 from pro-Tehran militias in Yemen and Iraq targeting Saudi Arabia and the UAE, what is your assessment of the threat to Israel and Israel's Gulf allies by an Iran threat network, which includes Lebanese Hezbollah, pro-Tehran militias in Iraq, and the Iran-backed Houthis in Yemen?**

**Nuriel:** We are living in an era—and the war between Russia and Ukraine proves it again—in which there is significant vulnerability to ammunition coming from the sky (e.g., drones and other UAVs, missiles). Like with many other threats, you have to develop concepts and technology that enable you to deal with these aerial threats. We do have some solutions, but if you take any Israeli heavy armor vehicle, it is vulnerable from aerial threats. And we are now developing both concepts and technology on how to provide those vehicles better protections from being targeted from above. So, the threat is real, and we are working very hard to come up with solutions.

**CTC/ICT: If the talks in Vienna result in a restoration of a nuclear deal with Iran, what do you see as the implications for the regional threat posed by the Iran threat network?**

**Nuriel:** We need to look at the economy. And here as well, it is impacted by the Russian-Ukrainian War. If the 2015 deal provided the Iranians with a lot of money, now it will be much more in light of the current oil prices. The Iranian economy did not really fully recover after the JCPOA in 2015.<sup>c</sup> It helped them a lot, but it has not changed their life. I believe that today, if there is a new agreement which allows them sell of oil or natural gas, the positive effect on the Iranian economy will be dramatic, and therefore, the option of increased aggressiveness in the Middle East will increase as well. From that perspective, I am a bit concerned.

c Editor's Note: The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was "a detailed, 159-page agreement with five annexes reached by Iran and the P5+1 (China, France, Germany, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States) on July 14, 2015." See "The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) at a Glance," Arms Control Association, last reviewed March 2022.

**CTC/ICT:** There has been concern over what are perceived to be Iranian efforts to build a “land bridge” between Iran and Lebanon through Iraq and Syria, with questions remaining “about whether this land corridor is a corridor of influence, or one of weapons trafficking, or part of a wider permanent trade route that will combine Iranian-backed militias with alliances on the ground and a kind of highway of power stretching to Lebanon.”<sup>2</sup> What is your view of this issue?

**Nuriel:** Iran uses Israel as an excuse in its bid to dominate the Muslim world. They did it in 1982 when they established Hezbollah. Hezbollah was created as an excuse for fighting against Israel, which in turn was a way to assert Iran’s leadership in the Muslim world.

Hezbollah still exists even though Israel is not in Lebanon anymore. So, why does Hezbollah still exist? Who needs Hezbollah? The Iranians need Hezbollah to control Lebanon and, through that, to threaten Israel. Why is Iran trying to increase their presence near Israeli borders? They do it in Lebanon, they do it in Syria, they do it in the Gaza Strip. They want to create deterrence against us: *If you attack us (Iran), our response will be immediate and along all Israeli borders.* But that is only part of the story. Tehran sees their confrontation with Israel as helping their bigger plan to dominate the region. The Iranian message is the following: In the Muslim world, there is a huge friction between Sunnis and the Shiites. And the Iranian Shiite regime is telling the Sunnis: *You tried to destroy the State of Israel many times and you failed: 1948, 1956, 1967, 1973—all the big wars. Now it’s our turn; follow us.*

Last but not least, let’s talk about the nuclear issue. The Iranian nuclear program is less about Israel and more about leadership of the Muslim world. The Sunni world already has the Pakistani nuclear bomb, so Iran believes that it too needs to get nuclear weapons if it is ever to lead the Muslim world.

Iran uses the nuclear issue in order to lead the Muslim world and control the Sunni states. And Israel is a great excuse. Therefore, the Israeli policy regarding the Iranian ambition to get military nuclear capabilities is clear cut: We will not allow them to pass the military nuclear threshold.

One scenario I am worried about is Iran controlling things on three of Israel’s borders. They already do so in Lebanon and Syria, and if you understand the Iranian approach, you can ask yourself, who is next in line?

**CTC/ICT:** Jordan?

**Nuriel:** Yes. And this is something that we cannot accept. The longest border among the Israeli borders is Jordan. And another Iranian player sitting on the Jordanian borders will be too much for us to handle.

**CTC/ICT:** Let’s move to the international arena. With the rise and fall of al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State, as well as the increasing number of far-right terrorist attacks in Europe and the United States, what are the major counterterrorism threats you are most concerned with?

**Nuriel:** I’m very much concerned with something that has not really been part of the game this far: non-conventional terrorism.<sup>3</sup> Are we near a breaking point and about to see non-conventional attacks? And frankly, our responses are not there yet. Given the

catastrophic effects of COVID-19, terrorists may seek to cause an even worse pandemic. It would take us a while to understand what it would be all about and it would already be too late. In my view, terrorist organizations are very close to deciding to try to develop non-conventional capabilities because of their poor achievements in the last few years. The last dramatic event, September 11, took place 21 years ago, and since that date, they’ve failed to launch something of such proportion. Some among their number may be calculating that by developing non-conventional capabilities, they can instill huge fear and create a dramatic effect on our societies and economies.

**CTC/ICT:** In recent years, we have seen shocking far-right terror attacks targeting Jews in Europe and the United States, including attacks on synagogues in Halle, Germany,<sup>4</sup> and Pittsburgh.<sup>5</sup> According to the Anti-Defamation League, reports of assaults, vandalism, and harassment against Jewish communities and individuals in the United States were the highest on record in 2021, with its director recently stating that Jews living in America are experiencing the most anti-Semitism they have witnessed in the past 40 years.<sup>6</sup> What can be done to help protect the Jewish community and stem this tide of violent far-right anti-Semitism in the West?

**Nuriel:** First, I believe that in many places there is a strong connection between anti-Semitism and anti-Israelism. And because of that, the number of events is very high. What can be done? First and foremost, we need to increase the cooperation between Jewish communities and the local police stations, the local police commanders, because they have the responsibility. And we need to build up some kind of cooperation between local community guards and the police. And together, to build up layers of defense. Obviously, technology should be a part of it—cameras and some other tools such as smart sensors that will give us early warnings. The combination of technology, first responders’ team, and the police can provide us with a strong layer of defense. And yet, we all know that unfortunately there is no 100 percent security.

**CTC/ICT:** From a counterterrorism perspective, what are the issues that most concern you when it comes to Israeli security moving forward?

**Nuriel:** You may be surprised to hear that what I’m most concerned about are riots and massive demonstrations. Now, think about the Shuafat crossing in East Jerusalem. All protestors must do is just walk in massive numbers toward West Jerusalem. The Israeli police and the IDF will not open fire. We are not going to open fire against innocent civilians, even though a scenario like the one I just mentioned is very dangerous for Israel.

I believe that we need to develop, with the Americans, and hopefully with other states, non-lethal capabilities that will be able to put a stop to such massive demonstrations within a minute. Technology can provide us with better tools, better material, and that should be the concept: have something that within a second can neutralize a massive threatening demonstration without any damage to people.

Another worry I have is Hamas moving its military capabilities to the West Bank. This must be prevented. **CTC**



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## Citations

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- 1 Editor's Note: For a perspective on the lessons learned from the recent terror wave in Israel, see Boaz Ganor, "CTC-ICT Focus on Israel: What Can We Learn from the Spring 2022 Terror Wave in Israel," *CTC Sentinel* 15:6 (2022).
- 2 Seth J. Frantzman, "The images and maps behind Iran's 'land bridge,'" *Jerusalem Post*, August 23, 2019.
- 3 Editor's Note: For a recent focus on non-conventional threats, see *CTC Sentinel's* April and May 2022 special issues on the biological threat.
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# Real or Imagined? Evidence Concerning the Mental Health-Terrorism Nexus from Australian Terrorism Trials

By Rodger Shanahan

**A commonly held view regarding terrorists and their actions is that, by and large, they do not exhibit any greater degree of mental health conditions than the general population. Yet, this has often been based on unchallenged evidence as to the presence of mental health conditions. This article uses data from Australian terrorism trials in the Islamic State era to examine the degree to which mental health issues exist among terrorism offenders and whether there is any causal link. The findings support the view that Islamist terrorists' mental health is largely the same as the general population and finds that there is little evidence to support any causal link between mental health and terrorism.**

**A**s more individuals come before courts on charges relating to support for the Islamic State, additional reliable information has come to light about their backgrounds. A range of claims surrounding their actions have been tested during trial or agreed to as part of a plea deal, allowing terrorism researchers to rely on more accurate datasets to study certain aspects of attackers' background.

This article uses data from Australian terrorism trials in the Islamic State era to examine the degree to which mental health conditions exist among terrorism offenders and whether there is any causal link between their condition and their offending. The article first outlines key previous scholarship on the mental health-terrorism nexus. Researchers have often had to rely on media reports, interviews with family members, or the offenders themselves to glean the presence of mental health issues; the challenges that this creates for reliability of the data are discussed in the second section of the article, with the author arguing that court proceedings and inquests by coroners provide more robust data than previous methods. The third section presents findings from such proceedings in Australia.

## Previous Scholarship

In the process of radicalization, mental health may be simply one

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of a number of causative factors. The link between mental illness and Islamist terrorism, however, is an issue that has attracted a degree of media and academic attention over the years even though there is actually quite limited research regarding the subject.<sup>1</sup> There have been broader studies on the psychology of terrorism, including John Horgan's book of the same name. Yet, this research has been much broader than the jihadi terror problem set in its treatment of terrorism and the aspects of psychology that it addresses. The best-known study into the motivation of jihadi terrorists prior to the emergence of the Islamic State was perhaps Marc Sageman's 2004 *Understanding Terror Networks*, which examined 172 Islamist terrorists to gain an appreciation of their backgrounds, motivations, and means of organizing.

Rebutting the idea that terrorism could be explained by psychological factors, Sageman railed against the lack of empirical data regarding psychological research into terrorists. His analysis of psychological factors among the terrorist cohort was confined to a subset of 10 from his overall study group of 172. They were chosen because there was a greater degree of biographical information available for them, including court records. Sageman observed that there was an absence of any major mental disorders among his small sample of 10, thereby reinforcing the standing research view that there was no significant pattern of mental illness among terrorists.<sup>2</sup> As a consequence, a conventional wisdom emerged that terrorism was "basically another form of politically motivated violence that is perpetrated by rational, lucid people who have valid motives."<sup>3</sup>

After the emergence of the Islamic State, its concomitant attraction of Western Muslims, and increased focus on attacks against targets in the West, the desire to understand the motivation and background of an increasingly large problem spawned a range of more contemporary studies that sought to better understand the nexus between mental health and terrorism. The most recent work on this issue identified 25 studies, most of which occurred after 2013, that measured the rates of mental health problems amongst a range of violent extremists.<sup>4</sup> The prevalence rates differed significantly between studies, reflecting the different definitions of mental health problems to be included, data collection methods and sample sizes.

Some of these post-2013 studies began to challenge the belief that Islamist terrorists were "rational, lucid" actors. A 2017 Dutch study, for example, used a comparison of police records of known or suspected jihadis with the medical records held by several healthcare providers—one of these providers estimated the proportion of jihadis with mental health issues to be approximately 60 percent (of whom a quarter suffered from severe mental health problems), well above the general global population's rate of 25

percent.<sup>5 a</sup> While this figure is initially alarming, it also appears anomalous, as generally speaking most research to date appears to support the contention that terrorists are not more prone to mental illnesses than the general population.

In a study published in *CTC Sentinel* the same year, Emily Corner and Paul Gill examined 55 terrorist attacks involving 76 individuals where media reports indicated there was a link to the Islamic State. Using this data, they found that psychological instability was present in 27.6 percent of the individuals, comparable to the current worldwide average. These results were noted as being “extremely preliminary” given they relied on data sources from the lower end of reliability.<sup>6</sup>

## Research Challenges

Corner and Gill’s reference to source reliability is one of the reasons why it has been difficult for researchers to reach a coherent or consensus view of the link between mental illness and terrorism. There are a range of challenges in researching issues surrounding mental health and terrorism. The first issue is establishing a consistency of what is being measured. Some studies examined terrorist sub-categories, such as suicide bombers or lone-actors, to better understand whether mental disorders were more likely to account, in part or in whole, for their actions.<sup>7</sup> Still others have sought to categorize the type of mental disorders that terrorists may have in order to understand if there is any correlation between the type of disorder a terrorist may suffer from and the terrorist action they undertake.<sup>8</sup>

There are also differences in the type of data that studies have relied upon and the qualifications of those reviewing it. Gaining access to individual medical records is a difficult proposition, as is gaining access to an individual interview subject. Then there is the level of training of the researchers themselves, their understanding of, or qualifications in, mental health. Because of these challenges, researchers have often had to rely on media reports, interviews with family members, or the individuals themselves in order to gather information. Such methods, however, are unlikely to reveal much by way of objective evidence given the dangers in accepting information gathered during interviews at face value. Where terrorists have been killed in the course of their attack, there are also a number of limiting factors that may contribute to over-diagnosing mental illness.<sup>9</sup>

The main challenge, though, is understanding exactly what is being measured. The use of the words ‘presence’ and ‘impact’ is particularly important when researching the issue of mental health and terrorism. Whether someone suffers from a disorder or a serious mental illness is something for psychiatrists and psychologists to determine, yet even here there can often be differing opinions between mental health professionals. A challenge for researchers is to determine the degree to which such diagnoses are, in fact, valid.

The same goes for the extent to which mental health issues and the terrorist act are linked. Correlation, for instance, does not equate to causation, yet many studies assume this to be the case

because diagnoses or reports from open sources are often accepted at face value. Decision-making bodies such as courts offer perhaps the only opportunity where these diagnoses are contested and linkages between the condition and the terrorist action made. A criticism of research relying on court records is that officials such as judges and coroners are not themselves qualified in the area of mental health. Yet, their job is not to make a diagnosis; it is to make decisions based on the totality of the evidence presented. Because of this, their judgments should give a better indication of the true rate of mental health conditions among jihadis and the link between their condition and their actions.

This study seeks to provide data for both the presence and the influence of mental health conditions among Australia’s Islamic State jihadi cohort, and reflects the approach taken by the courts, which are interested in apportioning responsibility and imposing sentences that reflect the need for personal and general deterrence, and that also take into account the mental health history of the offender when relevant.

## *The Value of Court Data*

The data used in this study has been sourced from court judgments and the findings of coronial inquests. Courts require that where there are claims of mental health issues made by offenders or their consulting psychologists or psychiatrists during trial or the post-trial sentencing process, those claims are examined and may be contested. In this study, there are some instances where the judge gave little weight to mental health claims made on behalf of the defendant, and in other cases, they were taken into consideration during sentencing. The same principle holds for coronial inquests where the coroner must take into account the mental health of the deceased and any impact it had on the action that he took.

It is this contestability and contextualization that sets court judgments and coronial inquests apart from other forms of data-gathering in this area. Researchers are able to obtain evidence regarding the mental health state of individuals based on the opinions of mental health professionals who may offer contrasting diagnoses that a court must apportion weight to. Given the potential pitfalls that exist in uncritically accepting statements given by individuals to mental health professionals when they may do so for personal benefit, as well as the fact that psychologists and clinicians may offer differing opinions regarding the same person, the role of the judiciary is critical in evaluating the validity of this type of data. This was reflected in one judge’s remarks during a bail hearing for a minor accused of a terrorism funding offense when he noted that there was “a need for caution in cases where examining psychologists act upon self-reporting.”<sup>10</sup>

The sentencing remarks of judges in a number of terrorism trials in Australia have also shown the inherent difficulties in relying on uncontested evaluations of an offender’s mental health to determine whether there is a connection between the offense and any mental illness. For example, in the case of Amin Mohamed who was stopped from trying to travel to Syria, the judge remarked that the mental health specialist’s assessment of Mohamed “was largely based on what you (Mohamed) told him and parts of that narrative are at odds with the jury’s verdict.”<sup>11</sup> And in the trial of Hamdi al-Qudsi, the architect of one of the foreign fighter facilitation networks in Australia, the judge noted that al-Qudsi’s state of mind recorded in his treating psychologist’s report was “so much at odds with his life as established by other evidence that I cannot place any weight

a It is unclear why the Dutch study came up with such a figure, although possible explanations may be because the sample included ‘suspected,’ as well as known jihadi radicals, as well as definitional issues given the scope of mental health issues considered was very broad and took into account psycho-social issues such as relationship and parental problems.

on it.<sup>12</sup>

To date, the main problem with using judicial evidence in determining the connection between mental health issues and Islamist terrorism has been the paucity of records. As Corner and Gill pointed out in their 2017 study in this publication, most of the incidents they examined had not yet gone to court.<sup>13</sup> Yet, as more individuals have come before courts charged with terrorism offenses and those trials have concluded, there is now a much richer body of evidence available to researchers to examine the link between mental health and Islamist terrorism offenses. The much larger numbers of potential research subjects as a consequence of the Islamic State's ability to attract recruits from the West, however, must be tempered against the realization that many of those who traveled to Syria or Iraq were killed there. And unless they had a previous trial record, their data will never be captured.

Additionally, those killed while undertaking attacks in their home country will not always have mental health conditions that can be verified. Hassan Khalif Shire Ali, for example, who was killed after carrying out an attack in central Melbourne in November 2018 was alleged by his family to have had mental health issues; his general practitioner prepared a mental health treatment plan for him, but he never attended an appointment with a psychologist. The coroner later concluded that he was never formally diagnosed with any mental health condition.<sup>14</sup> In the case of Man Haron Monis, who was killed by police in 2014 after taking hostages in the Lindt Café in central Sydney, an appraisal of his mental health was difficult because in the decade prior to his act, he had several healthcare providers, gave them incomplete and different histories, and did not tell them who else he had seen. The coroner in Monis' case found that he was not suffering from a diagnosable psychiatric disorder at the time of his offense.<sup>15</sup>

Regardless of the significant numbers who died on the battlefield or the potential that domestic attackers may not have verified mental health conditions prior to their death, the fact remains that when legal proceedings eventually conclude for all those repatriated from Syria, the dataset relating to the mental health condition of contemporary terrorist offenders available to researchers will still be significant.

## The Data from Australian Courts and Coroners

This article focuses on the Australian experience of those guilty of terrorism/terrorism-related<sup>b</sup> offenses in the Islamic State era.<sup>c</sup> The vast majority of these individuals had connections with the Islamic State, although there are a number who did not favor a particular group, or who supported al-Qa`ida-linked groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra. At the time of writing, 84 men and women have been charged in Australia with Islamist terrorism/terrorism-related offenses since 2013. Of these, 67 have pleaded or been found guilty and 17 still await trial and are therefore excluded from the dataset. In addition to those charged, two others were killed during their acts of terrorism, and their actions were subject to coronial inquiries

b Terrorism-related offenses in these Australian cases normally refer to criminal matters handled by counterterrorism authorities; these may include foreign incursion, 'entry into proscribed area,' or other related offenses.

c In all cases studied in which court proceedings were completed, the defendant either pleaded or was found guilty.

that have concluded and the reports issued. This means that court or coronial proceedings have concluded<sup>d</sup> for 69 offenders, of which there is data regarding the presence and influence of mental health issues for 60 individuals from their legal processes regarding the presence and impact of mental health on their actions.

In cases of this nature, Australian courts normally draw on assessments from mental health professionals who have examined the offender. The judge will normally, but not always, refer to the offender's mental health circumstances when handing down a sentence. Whether, and the degree to which, the evidence of the medical professionals is referred to in the written judgment is at the discretion of the judge. The reason that nine cases were not included in this study is because the sentencing document was not publicly available (three cases) or because there was not enough information in the publicly available sentencing document to determine whether mental health was considered a relevant factor or not (six cases).

## Findings

Based on the trial outcomes and coronial findings regarding these 60 individuals, judges accepted mental health professionals' reports that 15 individuals had mental health conditions. This represents 25 percent of the Australian sample group, which is nearly the same percentage arrived at in the 2017 *CTC Sentinel* study by Corner and Gill using broader data. Those conditions varied, with the most commonly mentioned being depressive or anxiety disorders, followed by substance abuse disorders. The figure arrived at in this study is a slightly higher proportion than the general Australian population who, according to the National Health Survey, reported a 20 percent rate of mental health disorders.<sup>16 e</sup>

The existence of a mental health disorder alone, however, reveals little about the nexus between mental health and the terrorism/terrorism-related offense for which the individual was found guilty. Defense arguments that a mental health condition was the substantive reason the offense was committed have proven to be quite rare. Out of the 60 cases examined, a defense of not guilty due to reasons of mental impairment was only put forward in two cases. Neither was successful.

The first of these was the case of Ihsas Khan, who was sentenced to 36 years in prison for a knife attack against an innocent passerby in Sydney's western suburbs in September 2016. While the judge accepted that Khan suffered from a mental illness at the time of the attack (Crown and defense expert witnesses differed over whether it was schizophrenia or obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), he noted that "it was not, in any way, causally connected to his offending."<sup>17</sup> The other case involved Moudasser Taleb, who was found guilty by a jury of preparing to travel to Syria in 2017 to join the Islamic State. In Taleb's case, there was a dispute between two psychiatrists over whether the offender was schizophrenic at the time of offending, and the judge noted the Crown and defense's contestation of the testimony of the respective psychiatrists. This is yet another example of the difficulty in verifying the correctness of data when examining mental health issues in the terrorism field.

d This excludes appeals; however, to date, no appeal has successfully overturned a guilty verdict, nor have they substituted a different view of the nexus between mental health and the offense.

e This was based on self-reporting.



*Armed tactical response officers stand ready to enter the Lindt cafe during a siege in the central business district of Sydney, Australia, on December 16, 2014. (Glenn Nicholls /AP Photo)*

The judge in this case noted that he both accepted and rejected parts of both psychiatrists' reports, even though he also noted they were doing their best to assist the court.<sup>18</sup>

The jury found in the Crown's favor and convicted Taleb. The judge remarked that while Taleb was mentally ill, he knew that what he was doing was illegal as evidenced by his furtiveness and his willingness to go along with a cover story suggested to him by an undercover police officer. Nevertheless, the judge placed great weight on the role that his mental illness played in reducing his moral culpability and sentenced him to a five-year good behavior bond. Taleb was subsequently placed under a Firearms Prohibition Order by the New South Wales (state) police. He was arrested in April 2021 for breaching that order when a loaded double-barreled, sawed-off shotgun was located in the bedroom of his home in Sydney.<sup>19</sup>

While in Taleb's case the judge took into account his mental health conditions in imposing his sentence, it has not been a common course of action among Australian courts. In only five of the 60 cases was the impact of the mental health condition considered to have been relevant to the offense and therefore taken into consideration during sentencing, representing only 8.3 percent of those offenders. It is important to note that this does not necessarily mean that there was a causal link, only that their mental health condition could have reduced their moral culpability, made incarceration more onerous on the person, or could reduce the significance of deterrence on the individual.

The following are two cases where the judge did take into account the mental health of the offenders in sentencing. In the case of Alo-Bridget Namoa, who was convicted in 2018 along with

her 'Islamic law' husband Sameh Bayda of 'acts in preparation for a terrorist act,' the judge considered that her history of mental health problems "materially contributed to her engagement with militant Islamic ideas and hence the commission of the offence," making "it inappropriate to penalise her at a level which might otherwise have been called for by way of deterrent [sic] to others."<sup>20</sup> She was sentenced to three years and nine months for conspiring to undertake an act in preparation for a terrorist act. In sentencing another offender, Blake Pender, who was charged with one terrorism offense but whose actions were an extension of a long history of mental illness and violence, the judge was moved to note the need "to discriminate between individuals who would wish harm upon the Australian community and those whose words and actions are in all probability and to a significant extent the product of a disordered mind."<sup>21</sup> Pender was sentenced to four years behind bars and subsequently became the second person in Australia subject to a one-year continuing detention order, which meant that he remained in prison for a year after the expiration of his sentence.<sup>22</sup>

### Conclusion

The issue of mental health and terrorism is a challenging research area because of the difficulty of establishing exactly what aspects should be measured and gathering sufficiently robust data in order to measure it. With a significant number of court proceedings related to Islamic State-linked terrorism now completed, researchers are today able to utilize court records as a means of data-gathering. Unlike other more subjective sources, offenders' self-reported claims of mental health issues can be examined and if necessary contested by subject matter experts.

Using this approach, the Australian dataset has reinforced previous research findings that the incidence of mental health issues among Islamist terrorism offenders is similar to the population at large. In the case of Australia, 25 percent of jihadi terror offenders exhibited some form of mental health condition, as opposed to the national average of 20 percent. What the dataset has shown, though,

is that the presence of a mental health issue is quite different from a causal link between mental health and acts of terrorism. In the case of the latter, while nobody was acquitted due to reasons of mental impairment, a link between mental health and terrorism, if only to reduce their moral culpability, was acknowledged by the court in just over eight percent of jihadi terrorism offenders. **CTC**

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# The Relentless Terrorist: A Profile of Muaz al-Fizani

By Matteo Pugliese

Muaz al-Fizani's jihadi career spanned two decades and three continents, taking the hardline Tunisian extremist from Italy to Bosnia to a jihadi chemical weapons program in Afghanistan. After being detained in Bagram for the better part of a decade after 9/11, al-Fizani was acquitted in a terrorism trial in Italy and then returned to North Africa to pursue his terrorist career. In 2018, he was handed a 30-year prison sentence in Tunisia in connection with his help in planning, from Libya, the Islamic State's March 2015 Bardo museum attack and his involvement in the June 2015 Sousse beach attack. His jihadi career testifies to the long-lasting commitment of certain jihadi terrorists, the attraction the Islamic State held for some of the veterans of the Afghan camps, and the global nature of the jihadi terror threat. It also illustrates how the United States' decision to detain a significant number of jihadi terrorists outside the U.S. judicial system during the early years of the U.S. "war on terror" could create unintended consequences. Had al-Fizani been tried and convicted on serious terrorism charges in a U.S. court after 9/11, his terrorist career would have been short-lived.

**T**he analysis of individual career patterns in the jihadi community may help qualitative research on how terrorism networks work. Muaz al-Fizani is one of the few surviving top commanders of the Islamic State in Libya and Tunisia who contributed to shaping the group's strategy in North Africa. Al-Fizani (alternative transliteration Moez Fezzani) was born on March 23, 1969, in Tunis to Fatima Shehawi and Abdelkader al-Fizani.<sup>1</sup> He spent his childhood in Ezzahrouni, a neighborhood on the outskirts of the capital. Although he is a Tunisian national, he is of Libyan descent, and according to some sources, he even holds dual citizenship.<sup>2</sup> When questioned by Italian investigators in 2010, he said, "I, myself, feel Libyan."<sup>3</sup>

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## From Italy to Bosnia to Afghanistan: The Makings of a Jihadi Terrorist

In 1989, al-Fizani emigrated to Italy in search of a better life. He initially worked as a day laborer near Naples and in the northwestern Valle d'Aosta region. For a short period, he joined his brother, a drug dealer, to sell hashish and heroin in the northern city of Bolzano and in Milan. Later on—as he told Italian investigators—he regretted being involved in drug trafficking and became “a pious man.”<sup>4</sup> After more than three years in prison, al-Fizani settled in Milan and found employment as a construction worker. He shared an apartment in a housing project on Via Pier Alessandro Paravia in the San Siro western suburb.<sup>5</sup> This apartment would later become a notorious hub for the Islamist network in Milan, called “the Tunisians’ house.” Al-Fizani’s roommate was Lassaad Sassi, a member of the Tunisian Islamic Front (FIT)<sup>a</sup> who in 2006 became the leader of Jund Asad Bin al-Furat, better known as the Soliman Group.<sup>6</sup>

The two Tunisians radicalized together in part as a result of the influence of the Egyptian preacher Anwar Shaaban, an “Arab-Afghan” veteran and imam of the Islamic Cultural Institute on Viale Jenner, who became the emir of the El Mudžahid detachment (also referred to in English as the Mujahideen Battalion) in the Bosnian conflict.<sup>7</sup>

Al-Fizani traveled to Bosnia in November 1994 and stayed there until March 1996.<sup>8</sup> After a short training, he took part in three battles against the Serbs: Operation “Clear Victory – Black Lion” in May 1995, the “Dignity Battle – Operation Miracle” in July 1995, and in September “Operation Badr.” The jihadis carried out horrific tortures and beheadings of Serbian prisoners of war.<sup>9</sup> His experiences in Bosnia made him a war veteran with respectable credentials in the jihadi milieu.

After his return to Milan from Bosnia, al-Fizani prayed in the then-radical mosques of Viale Jenner and Via Quaranta in Milan, both led by salafi preachers connected to al-Qa`ida and the Egyptian Al-Gamaa al-Islamiya.<sup>10</sup> Before they took different paths, al-Fizani and Sassi hosted several North African militants who lived in Milan and in Bologna. Their apartment was known as “the Tunisians’ house” because it served as a sort of informal recruiting

a The Tunisian Islamic Front was created in 1986 by hardline Islamists, but due to government repression, many TIF members left Tunisia for Afghanistan or exile in Europe. See Fabio Merone and Francesco Cavatorta, “Salafist mouvance and sheikh-ism in the Tunisian democratic transition,” Working Papers in International Studies, Dublin City University, 2012.

center for those who wanted to join the foreign fighters in Bosnia.<sup>11 b</sup>

In May 2001, Sassi left Milan and traveled to Algeria to join the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC). In 2002, a Tunisian court sentenced Sassi in absentia to 20 years in prison for terrorism offenses.<sup>12</sup> In 2005, Italian authorities issued an arrest warrant for Sassi on charges of arms trafficking and terrorism.<sup>13</sup> Yet, despite being a wanted man, in April 2006 Sassi and five other militants infiltrated Tunisia from the Algerian border,<sup>14</sup> and the following month, Sassi set up three jihadi camps for his Jund Asad Bin al Furat group in the mountains south of Tunis.<sup>15</sup> Sassi trained recruits mostly from the town of Soliman, which gave the group its more well-known name, and prepared attacks against the American and British embassies in the capital.<sup>16</sup> From December 2006, Sassi's band of jihadis engaged in firefights with Tunisian security forces and took shelter in their hideouts,<sup>17</sup> but by mid-January 2007, they had all been killed, including Sassi.<sup>18</sup>

In 1997, al-Fizani was investigated by the Italian police for money laundering of counterfeit banknotes in Milan and Cremona.<sup>19</sup> While seemingly a minor offense, it was, in fact, connected to terrorism financing. Indeed, from 1997 to 2000, a group of Tunisians in Milan linked to al-Fizani and Sassi sold counterfeit banknotes to fund the GSPC in Algeria and future attacks in Italy.<sup>20</sup> According to Milan's prosecutor, the group was considering plans against the Carabinieri barracks of Via Moscova, the police headquarters in Milan, Linate Airport, the railway station, the Tunisian consulate, and the NATO base in Mondragone. Thanks to counterterrorism investigations and a series of detentions, these attacks never took place.<sup>c</sup>

Al-Fizani left Italy on August 19, 1997. When he landed in Peshawar, Pakistan, he was arrested for his forged visa.<sup>21</sup> He was later released and married an Afghan or Pakistani woman named Rhail, who would give birth to three children.<sup>22</sup> Using the *kunya* of Abu Nassim, al-Fizani spent some time managing a safehouse in Peshawar and sending Tunisian recruits to the Afghan training

camps.<sup>23</sup>

In the fall of 1997, al-Fizani moved to the Darunta camp run by Egyptian explosives expert Midhat Mursi al-Sayyid Umar, also known as Abu Khabab.<sup>24</sup> The former al-Qa`ida member and MI6 spy Aimen Dean was in Darunta at that time and described Abu Nassim as a sociopath.<sup>25</sup> According to Dean, al-Fizani "had a gentle voice and shy eyes when in conversation but took great pleasure in torturing the animals on which we experimented and held extreme *takfiri* views."<sup>26</sup> When Abu Khabab's apprentices started considering chemical weapons by extracting nicotine poison from cigarettes, Dean recalls in his memoir: "Our psychopath, Abu Nassim, talked about lacing banknotes with the poison inside letters."<sup>27</sup> Al-Fizani also tried to make botulinum toxin and experimented with hydrogen cyanide on rabbits.<sup>28</sup> When, after al-Qa`ida's bombings of two U.S. embassies in East Africa in August 1998, an apprentice proposed a new chemical weapon, al-Fizani was excited and said, "This will change everything. Imagine if we'd used poison gas in Nairobi and Dar es Sala[a]m."<sup>29</sup>

The Tunisian spent the next several years going back and forth between Peshawar and Abu Khabab's facility in Darunta, training in a large variety of chemical weapons and IEDs. Although it is unknown whether al-Fizani formally joined al-Qa`ida, he can be considered a follower of the so-called Jalalabad school because some of his views were considered extreme even for the jihadi milieu at that time. The Jalalabad school formed in Afghanistan among hardline jihadis, and some researchers identify a strong ideological connection between it and the later doctrine of the Islamic State.<sup>30</sup>

In 1999, al-Fizani also met the future al-Qa`ida in Iraq leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who was training at the Darunta camp. Abu Khabab's team invented a device capable of releasing the poison gases hydrogen cyanide or cyanogen chloride, called *al-mubtakkar al-farid* (the unique invention), and according to Dean, al-Fizani said, "Imagine seeing the enemy suffer like this. It brings joy to our heart. Several at once could kill many people in a confined space – like a subway or cinema."<sup>31</sup> In late 1999, Jordan's security services thwarted a plot to release hydrogen cyanide in an Amman movie theater.<sup>32</sup> Dean wrote that he believed that al-Zarqawi had the capacity to create a *mubtakkar* after his training in Darunta and that perhaps the decision to target a cinema was inspired by al-Fizani.<sup>33</sup>

In late 2001, al-Fizani was captured in Pakistan and imprisoned in Bagram, Afghanistan.<sup>34</sup> He spent almost a decade in U.S. custody, and it is possible this experience further radicalized him. Later, he claimed he had constantly been chained to the wall and emphasized his resistance: "I was like Roman gladiators."<sup>35</sup> Following an agreement in June 2009, Italy accepted three prisoners from the U.S. authorities.<sup>36</sup> Two were Tunisians from Guantanamo, Adel Ben Mabrouk<sup>37</sup> and Mohamed Ben Riadh Nasri,<sup>38</sup> and the third was al-Fizani.<sup>39</sup> Ever since 2007, Italian prosecutors had wanted to

b The multi-ethnic suburb of San Siro gathered a number of Algerians, Libyans, Tunisians, Moroccans, and Egyptians who spread across the globe in the following decades. At least three Tunisians from al-Fizani's circle died as suicide bombers in Iraq. See Paolo Biondani, "Il tunisino di Milano, jihadista da 25 anni," *L'Espresso*, July 29, 2015. Others were arrested in 2007 during the counterterrorism operation "Rakno Sadess," while allegedly planning attacks in Milan. See "Milano: arrestati sospetti terroristi islamici," *Corriere della Sera*, June 8, 2007. Nine of the 13 Tunisians detained in Guantanamo had connections to the Milan jihadi network or to a Bologna jihadi network, six specifically with the Islamic Cultural Institute in Milan, and four had fought in Bosnia. Just at the corner of al-Fizani's Milan street of residence (Via Paravia) is Via Matteo Civitali, the street where a man named Mohamed Game used to live. Game was a Libyan immigrant who radicalized and in 2009 attempted a suicide bombing in the nearby Santa Barbara Army barracks; his IED caused only minor injuries. See Lorenzo Vidino, "Il jihadismo autoctono in Italia: nascita, sviluppo e dinamiche di radicalizzazione," ISPI, 2014, and "Libyan hurt after throwing bomb at Milan barracks," Reuters, October 12, 2009.

c This Tunisian's group predilection for violence had emerged already in 1996. That year, during a gathering at the Viale Jenner mosque, Abu Imad, the personal assistant to Anwar Shaaban who had been killed in Bosnia in December 1995, claimed the role of imam, supported by around 10 Tunisians from the group linked to Sassi and al-Fizani. The Egyptians, more numerous, supported instead a preacher called Abu Khadija. The Tunisians locked Abu Khadija in the toilet [bathroom] and threatened his supporters with a Kalashnikov that was hidden in the mosque. The frightened Egyptians ran away, and Abu Imad became the new imam. See "Gip Salvini, Aouadi e altri," Milan Court Order: Tribunale di Milano, Ordinanza 17 maggio 2005 [May 17, 2005].





*Muaz al-Fizani (Source: Tunisian police)*

question al-Fizani and put him on trial.<sup>d</sup>

In 2010, al-Fizani was put on trial in Italy for membership of a terrorist organization, but he was acquitted in 2012.<sup>40</sup> The government then ordered his deportation to Tunisia.<sup>41</sup> In April 2012, while he was being escorted to Milan's Malpensa airport, al-Fizani attacked the policeman sitting next to him, managed to open the car door and jumped from the moving car on the highway. He escaped through the fields and was captured only days later, at a friend's house in Varese. Before boarding the flight, he told the police: "You will hear about me again."<sup>42</sup> He would not be wrong.

### From Tunisia to Syria to Libya: The Makings of an Islamic State Attack Planner

Back in post-revolution Tunisia in 2012, al-Fizani joined the salafi group Ansar al-Sharia (AST),<sup>43</sup> which between 2011 and 2013 was afforded significant freedom to operate under the Ennahda-led government.<sup>44</sup> He then traveled to Libya, where he supervised a training camp of Tunisian fighters hoping to join Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria, located at the farms of al-Fateha on the eastern outskirts of Derna, Libya.<sup>45</sup> In 2013, he managed to reunite in Libya with his three children from Pakistan and married a Tunisian woman named Hajar al-Kafi, who gave birth to two sons.<sup>46</sup>

In 2013, al-Fizani moved to Syria for a period of time, fighting for Jabhat al-Nusra and the Libyan group Katibat al-Battar.<sup>47</sup> Following the April 2013 split between Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's Islamic State and Abu Muhammad al-Julani's Jabhat al-Nusra, al-Fizani joined the former and became a senior figure in Katibat al-Battar. According to the journalist Daniele Raineri, al-Fizani pledged allegiance to the caliphate in Sirte in late 2014, likely in front of Abu Mughirah al-Qahtani, the emir of the Islamic State in Libya, who was killed on November 14, 2015.<sup>48</sup> Like many other Katibat al-Battar fighters, al-Fizani returned to Libya to establish an



*Muaz al-Fizani (Source: Italian police)*

Islamic State *wilaya* (province) there.<sup>49</sup> He would presumably have run into many compatriots in the country as many AST members had fled to Libya after the Tunisian government designated AST as a terrorist organization in August 2013.<sup>50</sup> Al-Fizani became one of the leaders of the Islamic State camp in Sabratha, west of Tripoli.<sup>51</sup> In 2014, the Court of Appeal in Milan sentenced him in absentia to six years for terrorism charges, reversing his earlier acquittal.<sup>52</sup>

The Islamic State in Libya reached its peak in 2015, by establishing the *wilayat* Tarabulus and Barqah with several cadres in Sirte, Sabratha, and Derna.<sup>53</sup> As Aaron Zelin has highlighted, both of the large-scale attacks in Tunisia—at the Bardo museum in Tunis in March 2015 and at the beach in Sousse in June 2015—were directly connected to the Islamic State's infrastructure in Libya, particularly the town of Sabratha.<sup>54</sup> Sixty people, mostly tourists, were killed in the Bardo and Sousse attacks and significant numbers were wounded.<sup>55</sup> Among the key organizers were al-Fizani and Nouredine Chouchane (also transliterated Nur al-Din Shushan). On July 19, 2015, Chouchane ordered the kidnapping of four Italian workers in Sabratha. On March 3, 2016, two of them died in a shootout between the Islamic State kidnapers and Sabratha's militias; the remaining two were rescued.<sup>56</sup> It is possible that al-Fizani, given he was a close associate of Chouchane in Sabratha, had a direct role in the kidnapping.<sup>57</sup> The wife of a hostage received a phone call from a kidnapper who spoke Italian, although this might have been Chouchane himself, having spent years in Italy.<sup>58</sup> Allegedly, al-Fizani was also involved in the kidnapping of the Italian doctor Ignazio Scaravilli, abducted in south Tripoli on January 6, 2015, and released on June 9, for a ransom of over 100,000 Euro.<sup>59</sup>

Al-Fizani, already twice married, married as many as four more women during this period. It is unclear how long each of these marriages lasted, but given traditional jurisprudence about the maximum number of wives allowed under Islam, it is very unlikely he was married to more than four women at any one time. He reportedly married three Libyan women, two of whom were named Nadia and Latifa.<sup>60</sup> This aspect remains unclear, but it is reported that he got married to one of them in early 2015 in Sirte.<sup>61</sup> Another new wife was Imene Mechri, a former Tunisian prostitute who worked in Libyan hotels and wanted to 'settle down,' so someone recommended her "a rich Tunisian man."<sup>62</sup> Apparently, she did not know about her husband's terrorist affiliation. When in 2016 Libyan security forces arrested her, they found half a million Euro in cash, and according to Tripoli's intelligence, this was part of the 13 million Euro ransom paid to free the four Italians.<sup>63</sup> Al-Fizani's marriage with the Tunisian Hajar al-Kafi appears to be the most enduring

<sup>d</sup> Some press reports and analysts confuse al-Fizani and Mabrouk. In February 2011, Mabrouk was released and returned to Tunis, but he joined Jabhat al-Nusra and was killed in 2015 fighting in Syria. See Domenico Quirico, "Watching Bin Laden's end (from Tunisia) with a Guantanamo survivor," *La Stampa*, May 6, 2011, and Domenico Quirico, "Io jihadista, vi racconto la mia guerra santa contro gli infedeli," *La Stampa*, November 12, 2015. In 2016, Fox News wrongly reported that al-Fizani was a former Guantanamo prisoner. "Former Gitmo Detainee Arrested. Charged With Being Top ISIS Recruiter," Fox News Insider, August 20, 2016.

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Between 2015 and 2016, al-Fizani was active in Sabratha and Sirte, likely to contribute planning to the Bardo and Sousse attacks. In late December 2015, he became a mastermind of the planned takeover of Ben Gardane, a Tunisian town close to the Libyan border. On February 8, 2016, the Tunisian Interior Ministry issued a search warrant for al-Fizani.<sup>64</sup> Eleven days later, on February 19, Nouredine Chouchane was killed in a U.S. airstrike on Sabratha.<sup>65</sup> The attack on Ben Gardane by 200 Islamic State fighters began on March 7, 2016, but after fierce clashes, local security forces repelled the jihadis by March 10, 2016.<sup>66</sup> The failed plan to establish the *wilaya Tunis* in Ben Gardane had been developed by the Tunisian Islamic State leadership in Libya: al-Fizani, Chouchane, Miftah Manita, Adl Ghandri, and Shukri Abd al-Qawi.<sup>67</sup>

From what is known about him, in the Islamic State's Libyan strategy, al-Fizani seems to have been in charge of planning, training, and financing rather than a frontman for propaganda or personally involved in operations in the field. After the fiasco in Ben Gardane, in April 2016 he fled first to Benghazi and then to Sirte, where he witnessed the Islamic State's last stand against Libyan militias.<sup>68</sup> In July 2016, when the jihadi stronghold was falling, al-Fizani managed to escape the siege.<sup>69</sup> On August 17, 2016, *The Libya Herald* reported that al-Fizani had allegedly been arrested by Zintani militias, between the towns of Jumayl and Ragdelin, on his way to Tunisia,<sup>70</sup> but a few days later, the militia leaders from Zintani denied his capture.<sup>71</sup> In the summer, al-Fizani likely reached the southern oasis of Kufrah and, reportedly carrying a fake British passport, crossed the border into Sudan.<sup>72</sup> This route was often used for smuggling jihadis into Libya, but now al-Fizani headed in the opposite direction.<sup>73</sup>

In September 2016, when most of Sirte was liberated, Tripoli's militias found a list of seven Tunisians, including al-Fizani, in charge of sending Islamic State members to Italy.<sup>74</sup> During the fall of 2016, he remained at large in Sudan, but the Italian domestic intelligence (AISI) reportedly tracked his phone calls to three Islamists in Milan, to solicit money transfers from them.<sup>75</sup> In November, the Italian external intelligence (AISE) reportedly located al-Fizani in Khartoum and carried out a joint operation with the Sudanese authorities to capture him.<sup>76</sup> He was arrested on November 14, 2016, and extradited to Tunisia along with his wife Hajar al-Kafi and their two sons on December 23, 2016.<sup>77</sup> Tunisian State media reported that al-Fizani stood accused of being a senior figure within the Islamic State and helping plan the Bardo attack.<sup>78</sup>

In Tunis, al-Fizani was placed in solitary confinement and accused of several terrorism charges in connection with his involvement in the Bardo museum and Sousse attacks in 2015, as well as the 2013 foiled suicide attack against the mausoleum of President Bourguiba in Monastir.<sup>79</sup> In 2017 and 2018, he repeatedly refused to leave his cell and appear in court. On January 2, 2018, the judge decided to postpone once again his trial for this reason.<sup>80</sup> Reportedly, al-Fizani confirmed his relations with the leader of

Ansar al-Sharia Tunisia, Abu Iyadh.<sup>81</sup> On February 23, 2018, al-Fizani was sentenced to 30 years in prison by the Tunis Court of First Instance in connection with his involvement in the 2015 Bardo museum and Sousse beach attacks, and for radicalizing several Tunisians.<sup>82</sup> Al-Fizani was also on trial for the training of Tunisian recruits in Libyan terrorist camps between 2013 and 2015. In May 2019, the Fifth Criminal Chamber of the Tunis Court of First Instance postponed this hearing due to al-Fizani's refusal to appear in court.<sup>83</sup> But in March 2021, the court finally handed al-Fizani a six-year sentence and four years for his wife on that charge.<sup>84</sup> He is being held in solitary confinement in a Tunis prison, to avoid the risk of radicalizing other inmates.<sup>85</sup>

## Conclusion

The career of Muaz al-Fizani is significant because he witnessed the evolution of global jihad in several hotspots, including Bosnia, Afghanistan, Syria, and Libya. He used his personal network to secure a prominent position within the Islamic State, despite being previously detained by the United States and Italy for years. For whatever combination of reasons, the threat posed by al-Fizani was underestimated. One question that is difficult to assess is the degree to which information was shared between American, British, and Italian agencies and whether greater information sharing might have improved the chances of convicting him in Italy in his 2010-2012 trial or interdicting him in the years that followed. Had al-Fizani been tried and convicted in a U.S. federal court after his capture after 9/11 rather than being detained in Bagram, his jihadi career would have been much abridged.

Al-Fizani's jihadi career spanned two decades and three continents, testifying to the long-lasting commitment of certain jihadi terrorists, the attraction the Islamic State held for some of the veterans of the Afghan camps, and the global nature of the jihadi terror threat. In Bosnia and Afghanistan, al-Fizani was nothing but a foot soldier of the jihadi movement. During this period, he was described as a psychopath and a *takfirist*. His aggressive temperament was confirmed by his breakout in Italy. In Libya, by contrast, he was dealing with financing, training, logistics, and planning, though he did not appear in propaganda videos or directly participate in terrorist attacks or military operations. He even married a former prostitute, not usually recommended for a devout salafi.<sup>e</sup> Nevertheless, he rose through the ranks of the Islamic State's hierarchy and played a major role in shaping the group's strategy in Libya and Tunisia. Strong adaptation skills, maintaining a low profile, and a cynical approach allowed him to stay undetected and gain a senior position in the organization. **CTC**

e Although Abd al-Rahim al-Nashiri, the al-Qa'ida mastermind of the USS Cole bombing, reportedly at one point lived with a prostitute in Dubai. See Ali Soufan, *The Black Banners: Inside the Hunt for Al Qaeda* (London: Allen Lane, 2011).

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