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FEATURE ARTICLE

## The Cologne Ricin Plot

FLORIAN FLADE

A VIEW FROM THE CT FOXHOLE

## Hamish de Bretton-Gordon

FORMER COMMANDER,  
U.K. CBRN REGIMENT

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### FROM THE EDITOR

Concern is rising over the threat of chemical and biological terror. Last month, the British newspaper *The Sunday Times* reported that staff at soccer stadiums in the United Kingdom were being advised on how to respond to attacks using poison gas and hazardous substances following concerns that Islamic State-inspired extremists may seek to carry out such attacks on crowded venues. There are signs the group is seeking to export expertise built up in Syria and Iraq. Last summer, an alleged terrorist cell based in Sydney that was in communication with a senior Islamic State controller allegedly plotted to build a poison gas dispersion device to potentially attack crowded places in Australia. As Florian Flade reports in our feature article, this past June, German authorities allegedly thwarted a ricin attack by a Tunisian extremist being advised on how to make the biological agent by an Islamic State-linked operative overseas. Before he was arrested, he was allegedly able to produce a significant quantity of ricin. A threshold had allegedly been crossed. Never before has a jihadi terrorist in the West successfully made the toxin.

Our interview this month is with Hamish de Bretton-Gordon, who previously led U.K. and NATO efforts to counter CBRN threats. He warns the huge disruption caused by the "Novichok" attack in Salisbury earlier this year may inspire jihadi terrorists to launch bio-chem attacks. He argues the better informed and prepared the public and emergency responders are, the less likely such attacks will lead to large-scale panic.

In late June, European security agencies thwarted a plot allegedly orchestrated by an Iranian diplomat to bomb an Iranian opposition conference near Paris attended by Newt Gingrich, Rudy Giuliani, and 4,000 others. Matthew Levitt outlines how Iranian agents have used diplomatic cover to plot terrorist attacks in Europe over the past several decades. Geoff Porter looks at the terrorist threats facing Mauritania. Jason Warner and Charlotte Hulme provide best estimates for the numerical strength of the nine Islamic State groupings active in Africa.

This month, we mourn the loss of Ambassador Michael Sheehan, who worked tirelessly throughout his professional life to protect the United States from terrorism. As the former Distinguished Chair and current Senior Fellow of the Combating Terrorism Center, he inspired a new generation of military leaders and researchers and was a strong champion of this publication. He will be greatly missed.

**Paul Cruickshank, Editor in Chief**

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*Cover: Police officers of a special unit wear protective clothes and respiratory masks during an operation on June 12, 2018, in Cologne's Chorweiler district, western Germany, where police found toxic substances after storming an apartment. (David Young/AFP/Getty Images)*

# The June 2018 Cologne Ricin Plot: A New Threshold in Jihadi Bio Terror

By Florian Flade

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**In June 2018, German security services uncovered an alleged terrorist plot involving ricin by a Tunisian extremist living in Cologne suspected of being inspired by and in touch with the Islamic State. It was the first time a jihadi terrorist in the West has successfully produced the toxic biological agent. The case illustrates the existing threat of bioterrorism in Europe. It also shows the importance of electronic surveillance to uncover plots by radicalized individuals using the internet to obtain deadly material.**

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**O**n June 12, 2018, heavily armed German special forces police with gas masks raided a residential building in the city of Cologne (North Rhine-Westphalia) in Western Germany.<sup>1</sup> A Tunisian national named Sief Allah H., who lived at the premises, was arrested. His wife, a German convert to Islam named Yasmin H., was also taken into police custody and was later accused of helping her husband in a terrorist plot. Police investigators and bio-chemical experts of the Robert Koch Institute, wearing full protective gear, then entered the residential block and searched several apartments.<sup>2</sup> They were looking for the poison ricin.

Terrorist suspect Sief Allah H. had been monitored by German security services for a number of weeks prior to his arrest. Investigators discovered Sief Allah H. had ordered suspicious material and believed he was working to build an explosive device containing the deadly substance ricin. German intelligence had learned that Sief Allah H. had bought various materials via the internet, including more than a thousand castor beans and an electronic coffee grinder. During the police raid, a powdery substance was found, which subsequently tested positive for ricin.<sup>3</sup> Holger Münch, head of Germany's Federal Criminal Police Office (BKA), stated shortly after the raid, "There were pretty specific preparations for such a crime, using, if you want, a bio-bomb. This is a unique case, at least for Germany."<sup>4</sup>

## Previous Ricin Plots

Ricin is a by-product of castor beans (the seeds of the *Ricinus* plant) from which castor oil can be produced with uses in various industries and products. Ricin can be lethal to human beings when ingested or if introduced to the blood stream because it interferes with protein production. According to the Center for Disease Control, as a warfare agent "ricin could be used to expose people through the

air, food, or water."<sup>5</sup>

In 1978, ricin was used in the assassination of the Bulgarian dissident and journalist Georgi Markov. On Waterloo Bridge in London, an agent for the Bulgarian secret police shot a ricin pellet into Markov's leg from a modified umbrella. He died several days later.<sup>6</sup>

Jihadi terrorists have also shown an interest in carrying out attacks with ricin. In January 2003, a British counterterrorism operation was launched against a suspected al-Qai`da-linked cell allegedly plotting to carry out an attack on U.K. streets with ricin and other poisons. Twenty-two castor beans were retrieved from an address in Wood Green, in north London, as well as the equipment needed to produce ricin and a recipe for ricin.<sup>7</sup> The main suspect, Algerian Kamel Bourgass, was later sentenced to 17 years in prison for "conspiracy to cause a public nuisance by the use of poisons and/or explosives to cause disruption, fear or injury." Bourgass had already been sentenced to life imprisonment for the murder of detective Stephen Oake, whom he stabbed to death during his arrest in Manchester. All other suspects charged were either acquitted<sup>8</sup> or had their trials abandoned.<sup>9</sup>

In August 2011, *The New York Times* reported that U.S. counterterrorism officials were "increasingly concerned" that al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) was "trying to produce the lethal poison ricin, to be packed around small explosives for attacks against the United States."<sup>10</sup>

There have also been a number of plots, including by extreme right-wing groups to carry out ricin poisonings in the United States.<sup>11</sup> Weaponizing ricin into a component of an improvised explosive device is nevertheless regarded as very difficult.<sup>12</sup>

## The Cologne Case

If the allegations are proven, the Cologne case would be the first time a jihadi terrorist in the West successfully produced ricin. The main suspect, Sief Allah H., was born in Tunisia. Little is known yet about his path to alleged radicalization. While still living in Tunisia, he met a German woman on the internet. In October 2015, the pair married in Tunisia. Sief Allah H. legally entered Germany for the first time on November 24, 2016,<sup>13</sup> and moved into an apartment in the Osloer Straße in Cologne-Chorweiler with his wife. At the time of their arrest, the couple had two children.

The first time Sief Allah H. appeared on the radar of German counterterrorism forces was on December 12, 2017, when city officials in Cologne informed police that he had reported he had lost his Tunisian passport. The suspicion was that Sief Allah H. had traveled to a conflict zone and was seeking to replace passports that might contain entry stamps or visas in order to hide terrorist activities.<sup>14</sup> At some point after Sief Allah H. came onto the radar, German authorities asked Tunisian authorities for additional information on him and were told that while living in Tunisia, he was suspected of being a follower of salafi ideology.<sup>15</sup>

Germany's Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution

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(BfV), the country's domestic intelligence agency, at some point learned that Sief Allah H. had, in the fall of 2017, twice tried to travel to Syria—probably to join the Islamic State—but had been stopped in Turkey on both occasions.<sup>16</sup> According to the General Federal Prosecutor's Office, Sief Allah H.'s wife, Yasmin H., had initially planned to travel to Syria as well. She allegedly was concerned about her children's safety and instead only bought the plane tickets for Sief Allah H.<sup>17</sup>

There was an apparent dispute between the couple in the weeks that followed. On January 8, 2018, Yasmin H. contacted Cologne police and filed a legal proceeding against her husband for “domestic violence” in three cases since 2017.<sup>18</sup> Yasmin H. claimed an argument between them relating to how Islam should be interpreted was the reason for the attacks by her husband. The same day, police came to the couple's apartment and ordered Sief Allah H. to leave for at least 10 days.<sup>19</sup>

On January 25, 2018, Yasmin H. and Sief Allah H. came to the police station for questioning. During the interview, Yasmin H. withdrew the complaint and stated the problems with her husband had been resolved.<sup>20</sup>

On June 1, 2018, the BfV called for a meeting of the working group “Operative Information Sharing” within the Gemeinsame Terrorismus Abwehrzentrum (GTAZ) in Berlin. The Bundesnachrichtendienst (BND), the Federal Criminal Police Office (BKA), the Federal Police (Bundespolizei), the German Federal Office GBA, the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF), and various other security agencies took part in the meeting.<sup>21</sup> At this meeting, the BfV had new information to share. After Sief Allah H. had come onto the radar screen of authorities for his missing passport, the BfV had received a tip-off from the public that he was probably a radicalized individual sympathizing with the Islamic State.<sup>22</sup>

On June 11, 2018, the working group “Operative Information Sharing” met again at GTAZ and discussed the case.<sup>23</sup> This time,

BfV presented more detailed information regarding Sief Allah H. allegedly preparing for a possible terrorist attack using the poison ricin.

At some point in the preceding weeks, a British intelligence agency had warned the Bundesnachrichtendienst (BND) about suspicious online shopping activities by a Tunisian living in Germany. The British had discovered the purchases through some form of electronic surveillance.<sup>24</sup> Further investigation established that this individual was Sief Allah H. In May 2018, he had bought at least 1,000 castor beans and an electronic coffee grinder via Amazon Marketplace.<sup>25</sup>

After the British tip-off, German security agencies started to monitor Sief Allah H.'s activities. His phone was wiretapped, and he was put under 24/7 surveillance. Not long afterward, BfV and BKA came to the conclusion that Sief Allah H. had probably obtained material that could be used to build an improvised explosive device (IED).<sup>26</sup>

Initially, investigators believed Sief Allah H. was “hiding his activities from his wife.” Sief Allah H., for example, sometimes stayed in a second unoccupied apartment in the same building he had access to, probably to store material.<sup>27</sup> But German authorities subsequently alleged Yasmin H. helped Sief Allah H. order the material he needed by knowingly giving him access to her PayPal account, and she had bought plane tickets to Turkey when he had allegedly attempted to join the Islamic State. According to German authorities, the couple even bought a hamster to test the ricin on a living being. When German police raided the apartment, they found the hamster alive in a cage. Investigators believe Sief Allah H. tested some of the toxin on the animal. They believe the animal's survival was due to the nature of the test. According to a German security official, the ricin that was produced by Sief Allah H. was potentially lethal.<sup>28</sup>

Furthermore, investigators found out that Sief Allah H. had



*Police officers of a special unit wear protective clothes and respiratory masks during an operation on June 12, 2018, in Cologne's Chorweiler district, western Germany, where police found toxic substances after storming an apartment. (David Young /AFP/Getty Images)*

bought a sleeping bag and an additional battery (power-bank) via the internet. He also asked his wife for 1,000 Euro in cash (which he never got).<sup>29</sup> This behavior led to the conclusion that the suspect was probably preparing to travel—with concern that he was perhaps planning to flee the country after carrying out an attack in Germany.<sup>30</sup>

On June 12, 2018, at 8:10 AM, Cologne police created a so-called “Besondere Aufbauorganisation” (BAO)<sup>a</sup> to deal with the imminent threat of a potential bomb plot.<sup>31</sup> And Germany’s Public Prosecutor General filed a case for “Preparation of a serious violent offence endangering the state”<sup>32</sup> against Sief Allah H. At around 7:00 PM the same day, Sief Allah H. left the residential building in Osloer Straße in Cologne-Chorweiler and was then arrested by police and taken into custody. Later in the evening, the apartments he used were searched.

By the time police launched the raid, Sief Allah H. had already allegedly started producing ricin. Investigators found 84.3 milligrams of already-produced ricin and 3,150 castor beans.

This was a greatly larger number than the 22 castor beans retrieved from the Wood Green residence in London in 2003. Of the castor beans retrieved in Cologne, 2,100 were bought via the internet. The origin of the other beans is still unknown. Two hundred fifty small metal balls, two bottles of nail polish remover containing acetone, light bulbs, cables, and 250 grams of a grey powder (aluminum powder and substances from fireworks).<sup>33</sup>

Three mobile phones were also confiscated during the investigation. On two of these phones the BKA discovered around 180,000 images, 2,000 video and audio files, and around 33,000 text and chat messages. More than 9,000 chat messages, 11,000 contacts, and several files containing bomb-making manuals were stored on one of the devices.<sup>34</sup> Amongst the content, allegedly, was a certain amount of jihadi propaganda, including items related to the Islamic State.<sup>35</sup> According to the German Public Prosecutor General, Sief Allah H. had been in contact with supporters and probably even members of the Islamic State since the fall of 2017.<sup>36</sup>

## The International Link

According to sources close to the investigation, Sief Allah H. was most likely following online video instructions on how to make and weaponize ricin posted by a jihadi terrorist group in 2016.<sup>37</sup>

The same online video manual was allegedly found during an investigation against two Egyptian brothers in France.<sup>38</sup> On May 11, 2018, French counterterrorism police arrested two terrorist suspects in the northern 18th arrondissement of Paris. French Interior Minister Gerard Collomb said that two men had been arrested for “preparing to commit an attack, with either explosives or ricin, this

very powerful poison.” According to authorities, the suspects had communicated via the messaging app Telegram. “They had tutorials that showed how to make ricin-based poisons,” Collomb said. “We were able to detect them, detect this attack plan and were able to arrest them.”<sup>39</sup> One of the Egyptian brothers, named as Mohamed M., was later charged with “association with a terrorist enterprise”<sup>40</sup> by the French anti-terrorism prosecutor.<sup>41</sup>

There is no indication Tunisian Sief Allah H. was in contact with the two terrorist suspects in France. But, as already noted, according to the German Public Prosecutor General, Sief Allah H. had communicated with Islamic State-linked suspects overseas since the fall of 2017.<sup>42</sup> According to a German security official, those operatives were suspected to be based in North Africa or Syria.<sup>43</sup> Earlier this month German authorities publicly alleged Sief Allah H. was in contact via Telegram with at least two people suspected of being associated with the Islamic State. One of these persons allegedly gave him advice on the ricin production and the other one sent him information on how to build an explosive device.<sup>44</sup> In early August 2018, the Tunisian Ministry of Interior stated two terrorist suspects had been arrested in connection with the Cologne ricin plot. Both men are suspected of being linked to Sief Allah H.<sup>45</sup> It is unclear whether the two suspects arrested in Tunisia are the same two people who were allegedly providing advice on how to make ricin and explosives.

The investigation into the ricin plot in Germany is still ongoing. Some of the confiscated material was taken to the Robert Koch Institute for further examination. Sief Allah H. and his wife, Yasmin H., remain in custody.

## Conclusion

The Cologne case saw a new threshold reached for the jihadi bio terror threat in the West. If the allegations are proven, Sief Allah H. would be the first jihadi terrorist suspect in the West to successfully produce ricin. Equally troublingly, the case suggests radicalized individuals are indeed able to produce a biological weapon using internet tutorials. Though the Islamic State is in rapid decline in Syria and Iraq, the manuals and how-to instructions for explosives and other weapons are still available online. This material, which is being shared via Telegram channels and other forms of communication, still has the potential to inspire jihadis across the globe.

In addition, German security officials are still very concerned about Islamic State operatives who survived the territorial collapse of the caliphate using social media to recruit and instruct possible attackers.<sup>46</sup>

Furthermore, the Cologne ricin case highlights the importance of electronic surveillance to uncover such plots. It was only because Sief Allah H.’s online purchases were flagged by intelligence services that police were able to prevent a possible attack. **CTC**

a BAO is a police organization structure set up to deal with specific cases.

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# A View from the CT Foxhole: An Interview with Hamish de Bretton-Gordon, Former Commander of U.K. CBRN Regiment

By Paul Cruickshank

*Hamish de Bretton-Gordon (OBE) is a highly operationally experienced CBRN practitioner and a leading expert in chemical and biological counterterrorism and warfare. He was the commanding officer of the U.K. Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear (CBRN) Regiment between 2003 and 2007 and NATO's Rapid Reaction CBRN Battalion between 2005 and 2007. A veteran of the First Gulf War and tours in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Balkans, he retired from the British Army in 2011. He advises the British Ministry of Defence and the Foreign Office as well as the Kurdistan Regional Government on CBRN issues and is the managing director of CBRN at Avon Protection, which designs, develops, and manufactures CBRN respiratory protection products. In recent years, he has made several trips to Syria to document chemical weapons attacks and continues to help the CBRN Taskforce (which was set up by Syrian medical NGOs in 2014) collect evidence inside the country. He is a director of Doctors Under Fire and an adviser to the Union of Medical Care and Relief Organisations (UOSSM) in Syria.*

**CTC:** What are your greatest concerns when you look at the spectrum of CBRN threats?

**De Bretton-Gordon:** There are three major things which concern me. The first is the continued active use of chemical weapons against civilians in Syria. I'm part of a fairly small number of CBRN weapons experts who have spent time on the ground there and can attest to a *modus operandi* by the Assad regime in which they use chemical warfare agents in besieged rebel areas they find difficult to seize. The regime has primarily been using sarin and chlorine for this purpose. It was the use of chlorine barrel bombs by pro-Assad forces that broke resistance during the four-year siege of Aleppo in December 2016. It was the use of chlorine and sarin by the regime that broke resistance in the sieges of Harasta and Ghouta, Damascus suburbs, in early 2018. It was the use of chlorine and sarin that broke resistance during the siege of Douma in April this year.

The only large area not under regime control is now Idlib province. My number-one concern for Syria now is the regime will use chemical weapons in its upcoming attempt to defeat rebel forces there. We're taking about a very small area just 50 miles long and 40 miles wide with five million trapped inside with the remnants of the jihadis, probably a fighting force of about 5,000 fighters.

My second big concern is that terrorists will deploy CBRN weapons in the West and internationally. I don't think the turmoil that is being caused by the Salisbury Novichok attack in the U.K. in March 2018 has gone unnoticed by the jihadis. There are a number of warning signs. Jihadis have been working on chemical weapons for some time, and they have been perfecting their ability to use them. We've seen widespread use of chemical weapons in Syria and Iraq by the Islamic State. We've seen jihadis trying to develop chemical weapons in Australia. We've recently seen a potential ricin attack

thwarted in Cologne, Germany, in which the quality of the toxin—ricin in this case—was extremely high.

My third big concern relates again to the Novichok attack in Salisbury. We now know that the Russians have an asymmetric capability in Novichok that overmatches NATO's ability to defend against it. If the Russians used it tomorrow, we would certainly be found wanting and that will continue to be the case until we've got necessary defensive measures in place. To make the issue hit home, let's compare it to what is going on in Syria. The Assad regime is mixing sarin with chlorine and using it at the lowest tactical level. They're even putting it into hand grenades. If there was an East-West confrontation, and the Russians decided to use chemical weapons, not only would it be a strategic weapon for them but it also would be a tactical weapon. We've never envisaged this and how one would defend against it.

**CTC:** There is an ongoing murder investigation into the Novichok poisoning by British counterterrorism police. The British government has stated "to a very high assurance"<sup>1</sup> that the Russian State was behind the attack that nearly killed former Russian spy Sergei Skripal and his daughter. Last month, a British woman died after coming into contact with the nerve agent in a discarded perfume bottle.<sup>2</sup> What are your main takeaways?

**De Bretton-Gordon:** Number one, it was a really professional attack that went way beyond the capabilities of non-state actors. It's worth recalling that the Japanese death cult Aum Shinrikyo spent years and millions of dollars to make a relatively small amount of poor-quality sarin. Novichok is in a whole different ballgame.

I'm absolutely convinced from all the intelligence I've seen that the Russians were responsible. As I understand, the Novichok used in the assassination attempt was 100-percent pure, which is why the British government has been so confident in saying Russia was responsible, and this is where the comment from U.K. Prime Minister Theresa May [on] "military-grade" nerve agent comes from. If you had the precursors and were going to combine it in anywhere else apart from a sophisticated laboratory, you would get some contamination there. You couldn't *not*.

It seems the most likely scenario is the Novichok was transported from Russia in a sealed perfume container. It would raise few questions and be easy to transport.

The attack has revealed a great deal to Western intelligence services about Russian capabilities. There was very little known about the Novichok threat before the attack. The discovery of the perfume bottle is a goldmine for them—not least, of course, for the likely DNA from the surface of the bottle.

The survival of the Skripals was down to a huge amount of luck. Salisbury is very near to the British CBRN research center at Porton Down. There were two doctors on duty who had just done their CBRN course at Porton Down who very quickly thought it

was nerve agent. So they were pumped full of atropine. The other thing is Salisbury hospital is configured to deal with any accident at Porton Down. One of the reasons Salisbury hospital was not contaminated was because they know what to do.

**CTC:** We know through various accounts that al-Qa`ida was developing CBRN capabilities, especially on the chemical side, in Afghanistan before 9/11. We know that the Islamic State and its predecessor groups, including al-Qa`ida in Iraq, worked to further develop those capabilities.<sup>3</sup> And we know that the Islamic State launched a significant number of sulfur mustard and chlorine attacks in Syria and Iraq between 2014 and 2017.<sup>4</sup> What worries you about the capability of jihadis to use these kind of weapons?

**De Bretton-Gordon:** We've always looked at a chemical weapon attack in the West as being massive impact but low probability. I think we're now looking at massive impact and high probability. One reason is that jihadi terrorists in Syria and Iraq have developed and deployed chemical weapons. And even though they have lost hold of much of their territory, that expertise almost certainly remains, and they may judge they have less to lose by carrying out such attacks internationally. It is likely that those who remain are some of the most resilient and hardline who will have no philosophical issues with using these deadly weapons against civilians in the West. Another is that the quality of jihadi chemical and biological weapons efforts has increased, as evidenced by the alleged ricin terrorist plot in Cologne, Germany, broken up in June 2018.

What makes chemical weapons attractive to groups like ISIS is the terrible psychological impact of chemical weapons. I've witnessed how these chemicals have frightened even experienced doctors in Syria and Iraq, deterring them from responding to such



*Hamish de Bretton-Gordon in the Turkey-Syria border area analyzing samples after a suspected chlorine attack in Syria (Photo supplied by Hamish de Bretton-Gordon)*

attacks.

I fear terrorist groups will look at the cost-benefit of using toxic industrial chemicals like chlorine or cyanide or ammonia and conclude it's a dead easy decision to make. It takes no great preparation to produce crude chemical weapons out of such substances, and there's no great control over them. Although these toxic chemicals aren't terribly poisonous, they still will kill or injure people and terrify millions. The Salisbury attack showed jihadis how easy it is to transport chemical warfare agents. Nerve agents are at the higher end of the difficulty scale for jihadi groups to produce and may currently be beyond their capability, but the Salisbury attack demonstrated to jihadis the fact that you only need a very small amount of nerve agent to create havoc. It basically shut down six blocks for six months.

I recently ran a conference in New York City for the agencies there, which focused on the potential danger from chemical weapons attacks to the area. The disruption caused by interfering with transport networks, particularly underground transport networks and air networks, would be very significant. I think it's very good that we're now thinking about this and putting mitigation in place to counter it, but that is why I think it's so attractive to the terrorists.

**CTC:** We know from the account of Aimen Dean, a former MI6 spy inside al-Qa`ida's WMD program, that the terrorist group was developing a capability to carry out poison gas attacks with what they called a *mubtakkar* device, a poison gas dispersal device that they were working on perfecting in Afghanistan before 9/11. And we know from that account that al-Qa`ida planned in 2003 to deploy the devices in a poison gas attack in the New York City subway before calling off the plot. And we know that technology got into the hands of al-Qa`ida affiliates in Saudi Arabia and Iraq.<sup>5</sup> Fast forward to the summer of 2017, and there is an alleged plot thwarted in Australia to disseminate hydrogen sulfide via a poison gas dispersion device in which the plotters were talking about possibly targeting "crowded closed spaces potentially public transport."<sup>6</sup> Australian authorities have publicly alleged that terrorist cell in Sydney was under 'remote-control' instruction from a senior Islamic State operative in Syria/Iraq and that "there was a lot of conversations ... between one of persons charged and the overseas controller in relation to how to create the [dispersion] device how to create the chemical reactions, indeed the amount of chemicals that would be used to create the most amount of damage within a confined space ... and ... they indeed experimented with getting some components of that reaction done."<sup>7</sup> Even though they were not yet close to making an actual functioning chemical dispersion device when they were arrested,<sup>8</sup> how big of a wake-up call was the Sydney plot?

**De Bretton-Gordon:** As you note, the technology to disperse poison gas has been at the fingertips of jihadi groups for almost two decades, and it appears their capability is improving. Aimen Dean has described to me the *mubtakkar* device al-Qa`ida developed in Afghanistan before 9/11, a poison gas dispersal device which could be configured to release hydrogen cyanide, which is a blood agent. From what I understand from those involved in the investigation, the device the terrorist cell were aspiring to build in Sydney had similarities in concept and structure. It's almost certain that the *mubtakkar* technology is in the hands of a variety of jihadi groups,



including the Islamic State now. The concern is that the technology behind these devices is fairly simple and the chemicals needed to produce such gasses are relatively easy to obtain and transport but difficult to detect.

The jihadis have been trying very hard to produce some very good-quality CW and BW. Some of the sulfur mustard I saw in Iraq with the peshmerga, probably three years ago now, was very poor. But the ricin that was going to be used in Germany only recently, as I said, was very high quality. And that is a concern.

We know that the Islamic State had a development capability within Mosul University, which we then know moved to Raqqa. One of their key people was Abu Malik, who was one of Saddam's key [chemical weapons] people. He was killed [by a coalition airstrike] a couple years ago.<sup>9</sup> But it's evident that others took up the mantle, and as you say, they are giving orders from Syria on what to do and transmitting the expertise. The proliferation of knowledge is something that needs to be stopped by every effort.

#### **CTC: What chemical weapons threats most concern you?**

**De Bretton-Gordon:** I did some work at the end of last year on the threats to U.S. mainland. The number-one scenario that we came up with was a chemical agent being dispersed by a drone in a public space. It might not kill many people, but the panic probably would. If you envisage a drone with, say, very pure chlorine on it crashing into a big sporting stadium with, say, 80,000 people in it, it might only kill one person, but it's going to panic the 79,999 other people. That is going to cause deaths and injuries far above the original attack.

Sports stadiums need to have a plan in place so that they can react if that drone with some chlorine does fly in there. Chlorine, fortunately, is very non-persistent (it lasts only seconds) and only has a small downwind hazard of about five meters by two meters, for say one liter, which means the casualty count will be only limited. So people in the sports stadium need to know not to panic. A stampede would be far more deadly than the actual attack. The key is to have a plan in place to react.

**CTC: As you just alluded to, one of the things that most worries counterterrorism officials about chemical weapons attacks is that while an attack might not kill many people, it's going to create a great deal of panic and potentially stop people from wanting to take public transport or go to crowded venues. How can one prepare the public psychologically for this sort of attack to mitigate a panic response that might ensue?**

**De Bretton-Gordon:** I think the number-one thing is information. It's the lack of information that creates panic. We've found from long experience in Syria that it's best to give the people all the information we have. It was a mistake for British authorities in Salisbury when the Chief Medical Officer was put up in front of the press and said, "Wash all your clothes if you've been in the area," and people are going, "Why am I doing that?"<sup>10</sup> What she failed to say is why you're doing it. So I think number one is information. And also giving people basic ideas on what to do in the event of attack.

During the Cold War, instructions were provided to the public about what to do in a nuclear attack, and I think we need to prepare the public the same way in the West for possible terrorist CBRN attacks. One of the basic things in Syria, everybody knows

is CW is heavier than air. It sinks to the ground pretty quickly. So your first instinct should be to get to higher ground. And the other thing that everybody knows in Syria or understands is the idea of a downwind hazard. This stuff blows on the wind. So we try to make sure that people are always aware of where the wind is, and if there is an attack, you either run across the wind or move into the wind because you will be going away from whatever threat. So in Syria, we say simply get to higher ground and get upwind. This has been very effective for people who have no respirators or other types of protection.

Of course, in Syria, we're assuming pretty much that it will be a non-persistent agent. Chlorine lasts seconds, and sarin lasts minutes. Mustard agent is more persistent but goes to ground very quickly and you can avoid it. Mustard is also an incapacitant rather than a killer, so unless you ingest it, you are unlikely to die with proper medical help. Education of the population is key and the information with that.

#### **CTC: What can security services in the West do to prevent chemical attacks?**

**De Bretton-Gordon:** They need to prevent chemical warfare agents from coming in, but my worry is when it comes to these toxic industrial chemicals, at least in the U.K., there's very little regulation about them. And the only regulation is coming through at the moment because we have this epidemic of acid attacks. I think we need better control of our toxic substances. I think security services also need to be watchful over returning jihadis from Syria and Iraq who might either be transporting substances or have expertise in making them.

**CTC: Turning now to the ricin plot in Cologne, which was thwarted this June. It was the first time that jihadi terrorists in the West have ever allegedly successfully managed to produce ricin. Back in 2003, U.K. counterterrorism police thwarted an aspirational plot to make ricin by seizing 22 castor beans from a residence in Wood Green in London. No ricin was successfully produced in that case. By point of comparison, according to German authorities, the alleged terrorist plotter in Cologne obtained over 3,000 castor beans and managed to produce 84mg of ricin.<sup>11</sup> How serious a development was this?**

**De Bretton-Gordon:** Very serious. There have been a lot of "white powder" threats over the years particularly in the United States, but the vast majority were hoaxes—many thousands since the Amerithrax attack in 2001.<sup>a</sup> It's very easy to say, "There's ricin in this letter. It's going to kill you." It's very difficult to actually weaponize it. One particle of ricin is enough to kill you. It's incredibly toxic stuff, but the challenge is weaponizing it. Or in other words, getting the particle small enough that it can be ingested. My understanding is the suspect in Cologne managed to make weaponized ricin of a very high quality. This would mean he was able to grind the particles to

a Editor's note: As the FBI later recounted, "Soon after the terrorist attacks of 9/11, letters laced with anthrax began appearing in the U.S. mail. Five Americans were killed and 17 were sickened in what became the worst biological attacks in U.S. history. The ensuing investigation by the FBI and its partner was code-named 'Amerithrax.'" "Amerithrax or Anthrax Investigation," Famous Cases and Criminals, FBI website.

the size required to weaponize it. That is the real skill that nobody in jihadi circles in the West appears to have perfected before. It shows the level of expertise and professionalism that I think hitherto we didn't think the jihadis operating in the West had.

The amount of ricin he [allegedly] made—84 mg—would contain millions of particles. So it could have been a very, very serious event. It's a little bit a game changer that they can produce so much of this stuff of such purity. It had the potential to kill a lot of people if they were to ingest it.

**CTC: Ricin is, of course, a biological agent. There is concern that terrorists could eventually take advantage of rapid advances in biological know-how, for instance, in gene editing<sup>12</sup> to unleash diseases and pathogens.**

**De Bretton-Gordon:** I see these as tomorrow's threats. Biological engineering is advancing fast and the know-how is spreading wider and wider, so it's a scenario we ignore at our peril. But I think, today, the most concerning threat is the chemical weapons that we've talked about. We need to mitigate that and then, of course, look at the long game for any terrorist biohackers that are likely to emerge in the future.

**CTC: We've talked about the threat from CBRN weapons. Let's now talk about the response. For Western countries like the U.K., the United States, where are we at right now in terms of our capability to respond to a terrorist attack using these kinds of weapons? And what have been the learning experiences from Salisbury?**

**De Bretton-Gordon:** It was a big wake-up call. NATO countries including the U.K. have only paid lip service to CBRN defense since the end of the Cold War. This has now rapidly changed. In the U.K., there is a lot of work underway to recover capability that we let go of after the Cold War. For instance, the [CBRN] regiment I commanded was disbanded as a cost-saving in 2011. That now seems like a ridiculous decision given the current threat. But in 2011, the threat was not there. Like all militaries, they have to spend money on what are the higher threats. From a U.K.'s perspective, there is massive catch up that is necessary. The United States is somewhat better prepared. U.S. agencies have been thinking about these scenarios and creating the capability to respond to them. When it comes to capabilities, I think the NYPD and other agencies in NYC are really leading the way, especially when it comes to protecting 'mega-cities.'

In terms of lessons learned from the Novichok attack, virtually every bit of military capability in the CBRN defense area was deployed to Salisbury, and a lot of it is still there. A quarter of an egg cup of Novichok has required the mobilization of almost all Britain's military's CBRN defensive capability. And that creates a vulnerability because if there were another CBRN event, U.K. authorities would likely be stretched too thin. In the U.K., the local police forces do not have a meaningful CBRN capability.

One of the key lessons relates to detection. Detection will be key to mitigating the loss of life in any chemical attacks in the West. In Syria, we often don't know we've had a chemical attack until people start dying. The tell-tale sign is not seeing other injuries. Chemical weapons that are lobbed over in a mortar or rockets are generally not rigged up to explode because they learned if they did

that, it would destroy the chemicals. Detecting what kind of chemical weapons attack has taken place is not straightforward. There's a very big difference between a chlorine attack and a nerve agent attack. We've had issues in Syria where our hospitals thought they were under a chlorine attack and have reacted as if it were chlorine, but in fact, it was mustard agent, sulfur mustard—and they've taken casualties. So quickly detecting what chemical agent you are dealing with is very important.

The other huge challenge that Salisbury highlighted was the issue of cross-contamination. The problem is that if you don't know you've been exposed to a chemical attack, you'll spread things around. Decontamination will be key to mitigating the casualty count in a chemical attack in the West. In the Salisbury incident, five people became contaminated but only one person was targeted. In Syria, after the major sarin attack in Ghouta on August 21, 2013, we [UOSSM] had nine doctors working in our hospital in Ghouta, and seven of them died because of secondary contamination.

Decontamination is absolutely crucial, and I'm concerned that from a CBRN response point of view, we've only paid lip service to it. If you are first responder, it's all very well surviving an attack thanks to a gas mask if you then die from touching a respirator or something else that's contaminated.

From a military perspective, there needs to be careful thinking about standard operating procedures and how we react. When I was with the peshmerga in the suburbs southeast of Mosul over the last few years, it was very hot. The thought of wearing your full MOPP<sup>b</sup> set-up was just crazy. Soldiers just can't operate in it. We worked out the main chemical weapons threat from the Islamic State was either from chlorine or from mustard. The Islamic State didn't have any nerve agent or use it. The key with chlorine was not to breathe it in. You just protect your airways, and that's fine. And we also agreed that the mustard agent was not going to kill you unless you breathed it in. If you got mustard agent on your skin, it'd produce a nasty blister, burn, and be painful, but was not going to kill you. So we prioritized wearing respirators over full body protection.

Wearing a full CBRN suit and lots of kits is not sustainable over a long period, and we need to address that. In responding to the Novichok attack in Salisbury, the British military was operating at no longer than 20 minutes at a time in kit. Recent technological advances like 'Powered Air,' which forces cool air into your respirator, allows you to work for much longer in hot conditions, and this kit is now being delivered to U.S. warfighters and the British SAS, for instance.

The other thing the Salisbury attack highlighted was the importance of evidence collection. The issue that we've had in Syria is the restrictions put on the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW). They can only go in and investigate if they're invited in, and in Syria, they can only go into the areas the Syrian regime takes them. But, of course, most of the attacks have been in rebel-held areas, which they have not been able to get access to.

The evidence that we've [CBRN Task Force] managed to smuggle out has been a bit flaky. Not surprisingly, the Syrians and the Russians questioned it. So we're taking steps to address that. I just got back from a trip to the northern Syria area training people how to collect evidence properly and giving them the right sort of equip-

b Mission Oriented Protective Posture gear

ment to do that. Because unless you collect the evidence, whoever is the perpetrator is never going to be brought to book. I want Assad to know that this time, if he uses chemical weapons to attack civilians in Idlib, which we think is highly likely over the next few months, we now have a robust system to get that evidence to the U.N. very quickly. Part of the reason that chemical weapons have proliferated is firstly because the international community didn't react more forcefully when they started to be used in Syria and the 100-year taboo on their use was broken. That made it easier for others to start to use them. Secondly, I think if people think they can get away with it, not just at the time, but in future, then that makes it even more attractive. The 'bang' for your 'buck' with chemical weapons is massive. Just look at the Salisbury attack, which is still transfixing the globe five months later.

So the collection of evidence, like any war crime, is absolutely key. We're trying to be as comprehensive as possible. First of all, teaching people how to avoid becoming casualties, and then after that, collecting the evidence so that the chain of evidence, the way it's treated, is exactly the same way the OPCW would do it, including video cameras constantly filming the kits, so that it is admissible to the OPCW and the U.N. Security Council and others. We hope that by getting the evidence out, those who use chemical weapons will be brought to justice and deterred from further using them.

**CTC: How big a threat do radiological devices or "dirty bombs" pose?**

**De Bretton-Gordon:** The radiological threat is of particular concern to the insurance industry because of the decontamination implications. Basically, if you get radiological isotopes imbedded in your building's 'skin,' as it were, you might need to knock the building down and rebuild it. There's a great deal made about the

threat from dirty bombs, but the radiation is unlikely to kill you. But it is likely to contaminate areas. And of course, these isotopes are very readily available. There have been several stories of them going missing in Mexico, for example.

One thing which makes dirty bombs more difficult for terrorists to deploy is that they are very easy to detect. Whilst it's challenging to detect chemical weapons being moved, when it comes to dirty bombs, most big cities like New York City and Washington and London have their detection systems for radiation at their ports of entry. So it's quite difficult to move this stuff around. I'd be surprised if the jihadis go down the dirty bomb route.

I'm more concerned about the impact of a terrorist group deploying an improvised nuclear bomb. Producing a basic gadget gun device for an improvised nuclear weapon is not as insurmountable as many think. Jihadis have looked into buying highly enriched uranium (HEU) on the black market, even though it would cost tens of millions of dollars. Earlier this decade, the FBI and Moldovan police interdicted several attempts by Russia-linked criminals to sell radioactive material to extremists in the Middle East. One case involved a scheme to sell HEU at \$40M per kilo.<sup>13</sup> At its peak, ISIS certainly had the funds to buy the 20 KGs they needed for a device, which could yield two kilotons and the expertise. At least now, they [the Islamic State] neither have the funds or expertise, but we must not be complacent.

As well as the black market emanating from the stockpiles in former Soviet states, I'm concerned that North Korea might be willing to sell plutonium or enriched uranium to jihadis. I'm also worried about North Korea because we know that they have a very large stockpile of VX nerve agent, and there's always concern the North Koreans might sell some of their VX to jihadists, particularly jihadis who are willing to pay millions of dollars for it. **CTC**

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# Iran's Deadly Diplomats

By Matthew Levitt

**With the July arrest of an Iranian diplomat in Germany for his role in an alleged plot to bomb a rally of Iranian dissidents in Paris, U.S. officials have warned allies to be vigilant of Iranian terrorist plotting elsewhere. Indeed, there is ample precedent for such concern. For decades, Tehran has been dispatching operatives to Europe to carry out assassinations and other acts of terrorism.**

**T**hough it had all the makings of an espionage thriller, the event was anything but fiction. An Iranian diplomat accredited to Tehran's embassy in Vienna, Austria, is arrested in Germany and charged with conspiracy to commit murder and activity as a foreign agent. Authorities suspect the diplomat, Assadollah Assadi, hired an Iranian couple living in Belgium to carry out a bomb plot targeting a rally of about 4,000<sup>1</sup> Iranian dissidents at the Villepinte Congress Center<sup>2</sup> near Paris and provided them with 500 grams of TATP explosives at a meeting in Luxembourg in late June 2018.<sup>3</sup> The target was the annual meeting of the Paris-based National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI), which is the umbrella political organization including the Mujahedeen-Khalq, or MEK, a group once listed as a terrorist group by the United States and European Union. Among the VIPs attending the event on June 30 were former New York City mayor and Trump lawyer Rudolph Giuliani and former House Speaker Newt Gingrich, among others.<sup>4</sup> When that same day the couple was stopped in a leafy suburb of Brussels, Belgium, authorities say they found powerful explosives and a detonation device in their car and they were arrested "just in time."<sup>5</sup> Three people were subsequently arrested in France, and the operation to arrest Assadi and three others at a highway rest stop was taken so seriously by German authorities that they shut down the highway for the period of time it took to make the arrest.<sup>6</sup>

According to German prosecutors, Assadi was no run-of-the-mill diplomat but rather an Iranian intelligence officer operating under diplomatic cover. In a statement, prosecutors tied Assadi to Iran's Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS), whose tasks

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"primarily include the intensive observation and combatting of opposition groups inside and outside Iran."<sup>7</sup>

U.S. officials are pointing to this latest case as they seek to mobilize allies to counter Iran's support for terrorism around the world. Speaking on background with members of the press en route to Belgium from Saudi Arabia, one senior State Department official made Washington's concerns very clear:

*"The most recent example is the plot that the Belgians foiled, and we had an Iranian diplomat out of the Austrian embassy as part of the plot to bomb a meeting of Iranian opposition leaders in Paris. And the United States is urging all nations to carefully examine diplomats in Iranian embassies to ensure their countries' own security. If Iran can plot bomb attacks in Paris, they can plot attacks anywhere in the world, and we urge all nations to be vigilant about Iran using embassies as diplomatic cover to plot terrorist attacks."<sup>8</sup>*

In fact, this is just the latest example of how active Iranian intelligence operatives have been in Europe as of late. In June 2018, an investigation by Dutch intelligence led to the expulsion of two Iranian diplomats based at the Iranian embassy in Amsterdam from the Netherlands.<sup>9</sup> This followed the assassination several months earlier of an Iranian Arab activist who was gunned down in the Dutch capital.<sup>10</sup> In March 2018, Albanian authorities arrested two Iranian operatives on terrorism charges after being caught allegedly surveilling a location where Iranian New Year (Nowruz) celebrations were about to begin.<sup>11</sup> In January 2018, after weeks of surveillance, German authorities raided several homes tied to Iranian operatives who reportedly were collecting information on possible Israeli and Jewish targets in Germany, including the Israeli embassy and a Jewish kindergarten. Arrest warrants were issued for 10 Iranian agents, but none were apprehended.<sup>12</sup> And just a month before that, the German government issued an official protest to the Iranian ambassador following the conviction of an Iranian agent for spying in Germany. In that case, the agent scouted targets in 2016, including the head of the German-Israeli Association.<sup>13</sup>

In other cases, Iranian diplomats involved in terrorism or surveillance of possible targets for attack were quietly arrested and deported. In April 2013, for example, two Iranian intelligence officers posted to Bosnia and Herzegovina as diplomats were expelled from the country after being involved in espionage and "connections to terrorism," according to information prepared by the National Counterterrorism Center. And in 2012, four IRGC-Qods Force operatives were found trying to attack Israeli targets in Turkey, and another was arrested in Sofia, Bulgaria, where he was conducting surveillance of a local synagogue.<sup>14</sup> According to a 1987 U.S. intelligence community assessment, several organizations within the Iranian government are involved in terrorism. That appears to remain the case today. The 1987 intelligence report offers some specific examples:

*"Department 210 of the Foreign Ministry serves as a primary*

operations center for coordination with Iranian intelligence officers abroad, and is often used to instruct intelligence officers about terrorist operations. The Revolutionary Guard, which is the principal agent of Iranian terrorism in Lebanon, uses its own resources, as well as diplomatic and intelligence organizations, to support, sponsor, and conduct terrorist actions.<sup>15</sup>

The Assadi arrest is, therefore, just the most recent alleged example of Iranian state-sponsored terrorism in which Tehran uses visiting government officials or accredited diplomats to plot terrorist attacks. Iranian diplomats were deeply involved in the 1992 and 1994 bombings of the Israeli embassy and AMIA Jewish community center, respectively, in Buenos Aires.<sup>16</sup> But they have a long track record of just this kind of activity across Europe as well.

### Looking Back at Iran's Dissident Hit List

Immediately following the founding of the Islamic Republic, the Iranian leadership embarked on an assassination campaign targeting individuals deemed to be working against the regime's interests. Between 1979 and 1994, the CIA reported that Iran "murdered Iranian defectors and dissidents in West Germany, the United Kingdom, Switzerland, and Turkey."<sup>17</sup> Overall, more than 60 individuals were targeted in assassination attempts.<sup>18</sup> In many cases, Hezbollah members functioned as the logistics experts or gunmen in these plots.

The first successful assassination of an Iranian dissident in Western Europe occurred in 1984. On February 7 that year, General Gholam Ali Oveissi and his brother were fatally shot on a Paris street by what French police described as "professional assassins." Police claimed there were "two or three men involved and that one or two of them had fired a 9-millimeter pistol at the victims who were walking on Rue de Passy."<sup>19</sup> Oveissi, the former military governor of Tehran under the shah who was known as the Butcher of Tehran, distinguished himself by responding to protests with tanks. Just before his death, Oveissi claimed that he had assembled a small counterrevolutionary army to retake Iran. Hezbollah's IJO and another group, the Revolutionary Organization for Liberation and Reform, claimed responsibility for the killings. The day after the attack, the Iranian government described the event as a "revolutionary execution."<sup>20</sup>

Oveissi's assassination ushered in a period of great danger for Iranian dissidents in Europe. On July 19, 1987, for example, Amir Parvis, a former Iranian cabinet member and the British chairman of the National Movement of the Iranian Resistance, suffered a broken leg, cuts, and burns when a car bomb exploded as he drove past the Royal Kensington Hotel in London. Several months later, on October 3, 1987, Ali Tavakoli and his son Nader, both Iranian monarchist exiles, were found shot in the head in their London apartment.<sup>21</sup> Both attacks were claimed by a previously unknown group, the Guardians of the Islamic Revolution, which according to a March 3, 1989, report by the *Times* of London, "is believe[d] to be closely linked to the Hezbollah extremists in south Beirut, but all its London-based members are Iranian."<sup>22</sup>

On July 13, 1989, Dr. Abdolrahman Ghassemlou, secretary-general of the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (PDKI); Abdollah Ghaeri-Azar, the PDKI's European representative; and Fazil Rassoul, an Iraqi Kurd serving as a mediator, were assassinated in a Vienna apartment while meeting with a delegation from the Iranian government. Although forced underground after the



Former Mayor of New York City Rudy Giuliani attends the annual gathering of Free Iran-Alternative 100 ASHRAF at the Villepinte exhibition North of Paris, France, June 30, 2018. (Siavosh Hosseini/NurPhoto via Getty Images)

1979 revolution, Ghassemlou and the PDKI were informed after the Iran-Iraq War that the Iranian government was open to conducting talks. On December 30 and 31, 1988, Ghassemlou had met with an Iranian delegation headed by Mohammad Jafari Sahraroudi, the head of the Kurdish Affairs Section of the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence. The two met regularly until July 13 the following year, when a meeting was held that included Sahraroudi; governor of the Iranian province of Kurdistan Mostafa Ajoudi; an undercover Iranian agent, Amir Mansour Bozorgian; and the victims. At one point during the meeting, Rassoul and Ghassemlou proposed a break and suggested that the negotiations resume the next day. Soon after, gunshots were heard. In the shooting, the three Kurds were killed and Sahraroudi was injured. Investigators found a blue baseball cap in Ghassemlou's lap, the same call sign that was left at the scene of the murder of an Iranian pilot, Ahmad Moradi Talebi, in 1987 and the 1990 murder of resistance leader Kazem Rajavi.<sup>23</sup> Bozorgian was taken into custody; however, he was later released and fled the country, along with several other suspects.<sup>24</sup>

Just one month after the Vienna assassination, on August 3, 1989, a Hezbollah operative by the name of Mustafa Mahmoud Mazeh died when an explosive device he was preparing detonated prematurely inside the Paddington Hotel in London. His target was Salman Rushdie, whose 1988 publication of *The Satanic Verses* prompted Ayatollah Khomeini to issue a *fatwa* condemning the writer, his editors, and his publishers to death, and to place a \$2.5 million bounty on his head. Mazeh, a Lebanese citizen born in the Guinean capital of Conakry, had joined a local Hezbollah cell in his teens. Though he was being watched by security agencies, he succeeded in obtaining a French passport in Abidjan, Ivory Coast, from an official later arrested by the French authorities in Toulouse. Mazeh apparently went to Lebanon and stayed in his parents' village before traveling to London through the Netherlands.<sup>25</sup>

Later, speaking about Khomeini's *fatwa* against Rushdie, a Hezbollah commander would tell an interviewer that "one member of the Islamic Resistance, Mustafa Mazeh, had been martyred in Lon-

don.”<sup>26</sup> According to the CIA, attacks on the book’s Italian, Norwegian, and Japanese translators in July 1991 suggested “that Iran has shifted from attacking organizations affiliated with the novel—publishing houses and bookstores—to individuals involved in its publication, as called for in the original *fatwa*.”<sup>27</sup> Today, a shrine dedicated to Mazeh still stands in Tehran’s Behesht Zahra cemetery with an inscription reading, “The first martyr to die on a mission to kill Salman Rushdie.”<sup>28</sup>

Less than a year after the Vienna assassinations and the abortive attempt on Rushdie’s life in London, Kazem Radjavi, former Iranian ambassador to the United Nations and brother of the leader of the Iranian opposition group MEK, was assassinated. On April 24, 1990, his car was forced off the road in Coppet, Switzerland, by two vehicles, after which two armed men exited one of the vehicles and opened fire. Again, a blue baseball cap was left at the scene, marking the third use of this call sign at the site of a suspected Iranian assassination.<sup>29</sup>

According to the report of the Swiss investigating judge, evidence pointed to the direct involvement of one or more official Iranian services in the murder. All in all, there were 13 suspects—all of whom had traveled to Switzerland on official Iranian passports.<sup>30</sup> One report indicated that “all 13 came to Switzerland on brand-new government-service passports, many issued in Tehran on the same date. Most listed the same personal address, Karim-Khan 40, which turns out to be an intelligence ministry building. All 13 arrived on Iran Air flights, using tickets issued on the same date and numbered sequentially.” International warrants for the 13 suspects’ arrests were issued on June 15, 1990.<sup>31</sup>

No death, however, shook the Iranian expatriate community more than the assassination of Chapour Bakhtiar, former Iranian prime minister and secretary-general of the Iranian National Resistance Movement. On August 6, 1991, Bakhtiar and an aide were stabbed to death by Iranian operatives in Bakhtiar’s Paris apartment.<sup>32</sup> Previously, in July 1980, Bakhtiar had been targeted in another assassination attempt led by Anis Naccache, which killed a policeman and a female neighbor. One reason Hezbollah abducted French citizens in Lebanon was to secure the release of Naccache, who was imprisoned in France for the attempted killing.<sup>33</sup>

In a 1991 interview, Naccache recalled, “I had no personal feelings against Bakhtiar ... It was purely political. He had been sentenced to death by the Iranian Revolutionary Tribunal. They sent five of us to execute him.”<sup>34</sup> Hezbollah, for its part, pushed hard for Naccache’s release and on July 28, 1990, finally got its wish. Naccache was released and deported to Tehran in a bid to improve relations with Tehran that would lead to the release of French hostages held in Lebanon.<sup>35</sup>

### Death at the Mykonos Restaurant

The most daring and public assassinations Hezbollah carried out at the behest of its Iranian masters occurred on September 17, 1992, when operatives gunned down Dr. Sadegh Sharafkandi, secretary-general of the PDKI—the biggest movement of Iranian Kurdish opposition to Tehran—and three of his colleagues at the Mykonos restaurant in Berlin.<sup>36</sup> This operation also involved Iranian diplomats.

In its findings, a Berlin court ruled that the attack was carried out by a Hezbollah cell by order of the Iranian government. In delivering the opinion, presiding judge Frithjof Kubsch said the judges were particularly struck by Iranian leaders’ assertions that they

could “silence an uncomfortable voice” any way they pleased. To strengthen his point, he cited a television interview given by Iran’s intelligence minister, Ali Fallahiyan, one month before the Mykonos attack, in which Fallahiyan bragged that Iran could launch “decisive strikes” against its opponents abroad.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, on August 30, 1992, Fallahiyan admitted in an interview with an Iranian television reporter that Iran monitored Iranian dissidents both at home and abroad: “We track them outside the country, too,” he said. “We have them under surveillance ... Last year, we succeeded in striking fundamental blows to their top members.”<sup>38</sup>

Much of the information surrounding the Mykonos plot was relayed by an Iranian defector named Abolghasem Mesbahi, who claimed to be a founding member of the Iranian Security Service. According to him, the decision to carry out the attack was made by the Committee for Special Operations, which included President Rafsanjani, Minister of Intelligence Fallahiyan, Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati, representatives of the Security Apparatus, and, most significantly, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei.<sup>39</sup>

The “attack group,” organized by Fallahiyan, arrived in Berlin from Iran on September 7, 1992. It was headed by Abdolrahman Banihashemi (also known as Abu Sharif, an operative for the Ministry of Intelligence and Security who trained in Lebanon), who also served as one of the attack’s two gunmen and who has been implicated in the August 1987 assassination of a former Iranian F-14 pilot in Geneva.<sup>40</sup> The operation’s logistics chief, Kazem Darabi, was a former Revolutionary Guard and Hezbollah member who had been living in Germany since 1980 and belonged to an association of Iranian students in Europe. According to Argentine prosecutors, “UISA [Association of Islamic Students in Europe] and the associations that belonged to it worked closely with extremist Islamic groups, particularly Hezbollah and Iranian government bodies such as the embassy and consulate. UISA was the main organization from which Iran’s intelligence service recruited collaborators for propaganda and intelligence activities in Iran.”<sup>41</sup>

In a statement to German prosecutors, Ataollah Ayad, one of Darabi’s recruits, made clear that Darabi was “the boss of Hezbollah in Berlin.”<sup>42</sup> Moreover, Darabi would also be linked to an attack at the 1991 Iran Cultural Festival in Dusseldorf. Before the festival, German intelligence reportedly intercepted a telephone call in which Darabi was instructed by someone at the Iranian cultural center in Cologne with ties to Iran’s Ministry of Intelligence to enlist some “Arab friends” from Berlin and head to Dusseldorf. Armed with pistols, gas, guns, and mace, Darabi and his accomplices assaulted members of the Iranian opposition group MEK, who were exhibiting books and pictures at the festival. Several MEK members were seriously injured. Eyewitnesses later testified that Darabi appeared to be the leader of the assault.<sup>43</sup>

Already concerned about Darabi’s activities in their country, German officials attempted to deport Darabi in June 1992. However, the Iranian government intervened and asked Germany to allow Darabi to remain in the country.<sup>44</sup> The second gunman, Abbas Rhayel, and one of the co-conspirators, Youssef Amin, “were members of Hezbollah,” according to Argentine prosecutors, adding they received training at an IRGC center near Rasht in Iran.<sup>45</sup> According to German prosecutors, when the “Hit Team” arrived in Berlin and command was transferred from Darabi to Banihashemi, two of the co-conspirators who were not members of Hezbollah “were shut out of the immediate involvement in the act.”<sup>46</sup>

The operational stage of the Mykonos attack began on the morn-

ing of September 16, 1992, when Rhayel and Farajollah Haider, another Hezbollah member of Lebanese origin, received an Uzi machine gun, a pistol, and two silencers. The source of these arms was never identified but was suspected to be linked to Iranian intelligence. German investigators later traced both the pistol and silencer to Iran. On the next morning, September 17, Rhayel and Haider purchased the bags they would use to conceal the weapons as they entered the Mykonos restaurant.<sup>47</sup>

On the night of September 17, 1992, Banihashemi and Rhayel entered the restaurant at 10:50 PM, while Amin waited outside to block the door. Haider and an Iranian known only as Mohammad, who had previously been tasked with keeping the targets under surveillance, waited several blocks away with the getaway car. The car had been purchased several days earlier by Ali Dakhil Sabra, who had served with Amin and Rhayel in Lebanon and then come with them to Germany. When the targets emerged into view, Banihashemi shouted, “You sons of whores” in Persian and opened fire. Rhayel followed Banihashemi inside and shot both Sharfkandi and Homayoun Ardalan, the PDKI’s representative in Germany. Between the two assassins, 30 shots were fired. The assailants then fled on foot to the getaway vehicle.<sup>48</sup>

The police investigation quickly revealed Iranian involvement in the attack. On September 22, 1992, the bag containing the weapons and silencers was discovered, and tests revealed significant similarities between these weapons and those used in the assassination of Iranian dissidents Akbar Mohammadi in Hamburg in 1987 and Bahman Javadi in Cyprus in 1989. The police also matched the serial number on the pistol used by Rhayel to a shipment delivered by a Spanish dealer to the Iranian military in 1972. Rhayel’s palm print was discovered on one of the pistol magazines, the blood of one of the victims was identified on the pistol itself, and Amin’s fingerprints were found on a plastic shopping bag inside the getaway vehicle.<sup>49</sup>

According to German prosecutors, Abdolraham Banihashemi “left the city by airplane after the crime and went via Turkey to Iran. There, he was rewarded for his role in the attack with a Mercedes 230 and participation in profitable business transactions.”<sup>50</sup> The others were not so fortunate. Darabi and Rhayel were sentenced to life in prison in Germany in April 1997, while Amin and Mohammad Atris, a document forger who assisted the attackers, were given terms of 11 years and about five years, respectively.<sup>51</sup> While Amin and Atris served out their shorter terms, in December 2007 Darabi and Rhayel were released from prison and returned to Iran. Germany’s *Der Spiegel* news magazine suggested they were released in exchange for a German tourist arrested in Iran in November 2005. Germany, it appears, was not the only country seeking collateral for Darabi and Rhayel’s release; Israel had hoped to bargain for an early release in return for information about Ron Arad, an Israeli aviator shot down over Lebanon in 1986.<sup>52</sup>

The brazen assassination in public of four Iranian dissidents at Mykonos, in the opinion of Germany’s highest criminal court, signaled culpability for terrorism at the highest levels of the Islamic Republic. The court judgment rejected the premise that the attack was executed by “mavericks,” concluding that “the assassination [was] put into action much more through the powers in Iran.” By identifying President Rafsanjani and the Supreme Leader himself as the orchestrators of the assassination, the judgment found that “Iranian powers not only allow terrorist attacks abroad ... but that they themselves set in action such attacks.” When the Tehran regime

encountered political opposition, the court determined, its solution was simply to have the opponents “liquidated.”<sup>53</sup>

### Contending with Iranian Terrorism

And yet, the German court ruling in the Mykonos case did not translate into durable and tangible action against Iran or Hezbollah. Iran responded to the placement of a plaque memorializing the victims of the Mykonos attack by displaying one of its own near the German embassy in Tehran denouncing Germany for arming Saddam Hussein with chemical weapons during the Iran-Iraq War. Apparently concerned over the diplomatic ramifications, the German ambassador to Iran distanced his government from the original plaque’s assertion of Iranian responsibility for the Mykonos attack.<sup>54</sup> While many European nations withdrew their ambassadors from Iran following the ruling, this diplomatic freeze lasted only months. And along with the release of perpetrators Darabi and Rhayel, none of the Iranian leaders identified in the court judgment—Rafsanjani, Fallahian, Velayati, or Khamenei—were ever held to account for their roles in the attack.

Indeed, several of these officials—in particular, Velayati—were involved in a number of international terrorist plots. Argentinean officials have requested Velayati’s arrest and extradition multiple times as he has traveled the world as a senior Iranian official. The most recent request was made to Russia, where Putin hosted Velayati on July 12, 2018, just a day after Assadi, the arrested Iranian diplomat was formally charged in Germany. Similar requests for his arrest made to the governments of Singapore and Malaysia were also ignored.<sup>55</sup> As U.S. authorities have long assessed, without coordinated international action, Iran is unlikely to be deterred from carrying out such operations again in the future. In the wake of Iranian terrorist plots abroad in the late 1980s, the U.S. intelligence community concluded that “over the long term, Iran is likely to be deterred from terrorism only if evidence of its culpability results in strong, unified action by the international community, including a willingness to impose sanctions. This could include the breaking of relations, or the recall of ambassadors.” But to date, that has not been the case.<sup>56</sup>

Today, law enforcement agencies around the world—and especially in Europe—are cooperating much more closely to deal with Iran and Hezbollah’s global terrorist and criminal activities. For example, the U.S.-led Law Enforcement Coordination Group (LECG) has met six times in various locations around the world to address Hezbollah’s terrorist and criminal activities worldwide. The latest meeting, held in Quito, Ecuador, was convened by the United States and Europol and held under the auspices of Ameripol.<sup>57</sup> The LECG will next meet in Europe in late 2018, where more than 30 governments—along with officials from Europol and Interpol—will convene to compare notes on Hezbollah activities in their far-flung jurisdictions and strategize on how to best cooperate to counter Hezbollah terrorist and criminal operations.

As a result of Iran’s direct involvement in this latest plot—and with the benefit of hindsight into Iran’s long history of such active operations in Europe—LECG officials are likely going to consider expanding their focus to include the full range of Iranian agents and proxies deployed by Tehran to carry out attacks abroad, including Iran’s diplomats and diplomatic facilities. There would be utility in that, not only because of Iran’s own attack plans but because of the support Iranian agents provide time and again to Hezbollah plots. Consider, for example, the series of 1985 Paris bombings or the hi-

jacking of TWA flight 847, both carried out by Hezbollah but with the logistical support of Iranian agents, according to the National Counterterrorism Center.<sup>58</sup>

The international response to Iran's international terrorist activity should not be limited to law enforcement action alone. Regulatory action would also be helpful, and it is worth noting there have been calls for the European Union to designate not just Hezbollah's military wing as a terrorist group but to include the organization in its entirety, as well as expanded financial and diplomatic sanctions. European states should consider designating more Iranian institutions and personnel involved in Tehran's illicit conduct, but they should also consider working to isolate Iran diplomatically so long as Tehran continues to abuse diplomatic privilege and use its

representatives abroad to murder people on foreign soil.

To that end, in the wake of the Assadi affair, the State Department released timelines and maps depicting select incidents of Iranian-sponsored operational activities in Europe from 1979 to 2018, including both incidents involving Iran's proxy, Hezbollah, as well as those carried out by Iranian agents themselves.<sup>59</sup> Developing an appreciation for the extent of Iranian operations in Europe over the years is important, and not just as some kind of academic exercise. As authorities in Austria, Belgium, France, and Germany dig deeper into the Assadi affair, they are likely to determine fairly quickly, as investigators invariably did in previous Iranian plots, that these are not rogue actions, but the actions of a rogue regime. **CTC**

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# The Renewed Jihadi Terror Threat to Mauritania

By Geoff D. Porter

**A decade ago, terrorism was rampant in Mauritania, but then it stopped, even as terrorist activity was rapidly proliferating all around it. Instead of being a target of terrorism, Mauritania became a node of passive jihadi activity. Various explanations were proffered as to why this was happening: Mauritania was good at counterterrorism; the government had made a deal with the devil; jihadi groups respected Mauritania's neutrality. On May 8, 2018, however, al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb issued a communiqué that specifically mentioned Mauritania in a call for attacks, signaling a possible renewed jihadi terror threat to the country.**

In December 2017, a European diplomat spent a holiday weekend with his family and some colleagues at a remote fish camp a couple of hours north of Nouakchott. Far from the Mauritanian capital's dust and hustle, the Europeans swam in the Atlantic and lazed in the sun during the day. At night, they gathered round drinking beer under the stars while the diplomat's young children watched Pixar's *Monsters, Inc.* projected onto the side of a tent.

The weekend was seemingly unremarkable. But on his way up to the fish camp from Nouakchott, the European diplomat and his family passed the very same spot on a sandy stretch of macadam where eight years earlier—nearly to the day—al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) kidnapped three Spanish aid workers.<sup>1</sup> The aid workers' kidnapping was but one in a series of AQIM incidents that rocked Mauritania from 2007 to 2011. But since 2011, AQIM and other terrorist organizations in the Sahel and Sahara have avoided Mauritania. In fact, even as the number of terrorist organizations and the pace of terrorist activity in the Sahel and Sahara has increased exponentially,<sup>2</sup> Mauritania has remained calm and immune.

But while Mauritania remains free of terrorist attacks, it is hardly free of terrorist activity. To the contrary, while AQIM's offensive activities take place outside of Mauritania, the country is a central node for passive activities for the group. And worryingly, a May 8, 2018, AQIM communiqué suggests that this may change, with AQIM encouraging its members and sympathizers to undertake attacks from Libya to Mauritania.

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## The Heyday of Jihad in Mauritania

Coinciding with the 'Algerianist' salafi Group for Preaching and Combat's (GSPC) transformation into the more 'globalist' AQIM in 2007, Mauritania became a central node for AQIM's activities. One attack followed another followed another. Even prior to officially changing its name to AQIM, the GSPC had dispatched one of its Mauritanian fighters, Khaddim Ould Semmane, to Nouakchott from a training camp in northern Mali to set up a cell to carry out future attacks. It then sent another Mauritanian fighter, Sidi Ould Sidna, to scout for potential targets.<sup>3</sup> In 2005, presumed GSPC members attacked a Mauritanian military base in the north of the country, killing 17 Mauritanian soldiers.<sup>4</sup> In December 2007, AQIM members, including Ould Sidna, murdered four French tourists near the southern Mauritanian town of Aleg, and three days later, they killed three Mauritanian soldiers in Ghallawiya.<sup>5</sup> A little more than a month after the Ghallawiya attack, presumed jihadis attacked the Israeli Embassy in Nouakchott.<sup>6</sup> In April 2008, Nouakchott witnessed a sustained firefight between security forces and alleged members of AQIM who had participated in the Aleg murders.<sup>7</sup> In June 2009, AQIM claimed responsibility for the murder of an American aid worker who was shot early in the morning on a Nouakchott street.<sup>8</sup> On August 8, 2009, Mauritania experienced its first suicide attack near the French Embassy in Nouakchott.<sup>9</sup>

The next month, AQIM and Mauritanian forces joined battle at Hassi Sidi.<sup>10</sup> Two months later, the aforementioned Spanish aid workers were kidnapped on the Nouakchott/Nouadhibou road, and on the opposite side of the country near the Malian border, AQIM kidnapped an Italian couple.<sup>11</sup> In August the following year, AQIM claimed responsibility for an attack against a Mauritanian military barracks in Nema in southeastern Mauritania. And then in February 2011, AQIM targeted the Mauritanian president himself in a failed assassination attempt in Nouakchott's outskirts.<sup>12</sup>

But then terrorism in Mauritania stopped.

## Conventional Counterterrorism Measures

One explanation is that President Ould Abdelaziz effectively employed conventional counterterrorism measures. Mauritania was one of the first countries in the region to leverage partner capacity-building programs offered by U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM), which was stood up in 2008, the same year that Abdelaziz came to power. In particular, it was an early and central participant in the U.S.-initiated Trans Saharan Counter Terrorism Partnership (TSCTP), whose objectives included "improving basic infantry and special forces skills ... increasing communications and logistics capabilities ... improving partner nation capacity to synchronize intelligence ... facilitating conferences ... [and] participating in Flintlock, an annual AFRICOM-sponsored JSOTF-TS-conducted regional counterterrorism exercise."<sup>13</sup>

From the outset, President Ould Abdelaziz's willingness to engage with partners to augment Mauritania's counterterrorism capa-



Road connecting Nouakchott to Nema, Sahara desert, Mauritania. (DeAgostini/Getty Images)

bilities paid dividends. According to the scholar Anouar Boukhars, the government had simply “driven the most hardened militants out of the country and some would-be jihadists have voluntarily left.”<sup>14</sup> In 2009, Mauritania created a rapid reaction force specifically to boost its interdiction capacity.<sup>15</sup> In 2010, Abdelaziz redoubled his efforts and initiated a wide-ranging restructuring of the entire Mauritanian military.<sup>16</sup> A 2014 evaluation of the TSCTP’s effectiveness credited Mauritania’s increased counterterrorism capacity in 2010 and 2011 directly to Abdelaziz’s outreach to allied countries for help.<sup>17</sup> Nouakchott’s ties with Washington reached their zenith in 2013, when Mauritania hosted the 2013 iteration of AFRICOM’s Operation Flintlock.<sup>18</sup>

Ould Abdelaziz also took advantage of European partner capacity-building programs. In particular, the 2011 European Union “Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel” identified Mauritania as a core focus for its efforts to combat violent extremism and radicalization, saying “the situation in Mauritania is particularly worrying in terms of risks of radicalisation and recruitment of youth by AQIM.”<sup>19</sup>

Alongside conventional counterterrorism approaches, Ould Abdelaziz also embraced a nuanced approach to terrorism, introducing deradicalization programs and limited amnesties for convicted members of terrorist organizations. For example, in 2010, to mark the end of Ramadan, President Ould Abdelaziz pardoned 35 AQIM members and released them from prison where the men had participated in a deradicalization program spearheaded by the government in conjunction with Mauritanian religious leaders.<sup>20</sup> Ould Abdelaziz also initiated a deradicalization program that relies on reinterpreting jihadis’ preferred religious texts in ways that steer them away from violence and toward forgiveness.<sup>21</sup> The program subsequently received support from the TSCTP.<sup>22</sup>

However, in 2016, evidence emerged that pointed to a more nefarious explanation for the reduction in terrorist violence than simply the Ould Abdelaziz government successfully deploying a full spectrum of counterterrorism measures. After all, plenty of oth-

er countries threatened by jihadi terrorism had taken the same or similar steps as Ould Abdelaziz but failed to achieve the same neat results. In 2016, the United States’ Office of the Director of National Intelligence declassified a letter that was recovered from al-Qa`ida leader Usama bin Ladin’s Abbottabad compound.<sup>23</sup> The letter reveals that AQIM leadership in Algeria sought guidance from al-Qa`ida’s central leadership about the legality of striking a truce with the Mauritanian government. The letter argued that a truce would be helpful because it would allow AQIM to “put cadres in safe rear bases available in Mauritania” and let it “focus on Algeria.”<sup>24</sup> AQIM would refrain from attacking targets in Mauritania, and Nouakchott would pay “between 10 to 20 million euros annually, so long as the contract is in effect or upon renewal if the time had expired.”<sup>25</sup>

Curiously, evidence indicates that the proposal was broached within al-Qa`ida sometime in the first half of 2010.<sup>26</sup> There is no indication whether al-Qa`ida signed off on AQIM’s proposal or not, nor is there any indication that Nouakchott entered into any agreement with AQIM. Nevertheless, 12 months after AQIM raised the notion of extorting Nouakchott to sue for peace, terrorist attacks in Mauritania ceased.

### The Proliferation of Jihadi Groups in the Sahel and Sahara

At the same time that terrorism in Mauritania stopped, jihadi activity was intensifying dramatically in neighboring Mali. Cyclical unrest in northern Mali was being catalyzed by the outflow of weapons and fighters from Libya, which had disintegrated in the aftermath of the 17 February (2011) revolution there. In Mali, jihadi groups began to proliferate beyond just AQIM to include Ansar Dine, the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), al-Mourabitoun, and the Macina Liberation Front. In 2017, all of these groups were brought under the umbrella of *Jama’a Nusrat al-Islam wa al-Muslimin* (Islam and Muslims’ Support Group or JNIM), with the motto “one banner, one group, one emir.”<sup>27</sup> Groups affiliated with or with an affinity for the Islamic State also began to

appear, including the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara and the Islamic State in West Africa. These groups carried out attacks in Mali, Niger, Libya, Algeria, Burkina Faso, and the Ivory Coast, and there were reports of possible attacks in Senegal as well.<sup>28</sup> Yet despite all this activity, there were still no jihadi attacks in Mauritania.

### Mauritania as a Locus of Passive Jihadi Activity

Mauritania, however, is a very important country for regional jihadi organizations. It is an ideological wellspring. It is a source of personnel. And it is a communications channel.<sup>a</sup>

Mauritanian jihadis like Mahfouz Ould Walid (aka Abu Hafsa al-Mauritani), Abd al-Rahman Ould Muhammad Hussein Ould Muhammad Salim (aka Younis al-Mauritani), Ahmed Ould Norman, Ahmed Ould Abdelaziz, Mohamedou Ould Salahi, and Ould Sidi Mohamed all played core leadership roles within al-Qa`ida.<sup>29</sup> Mauritians also held key roles in al-Qa`ida's regional affiliates and allied groups. The Mauritanian Mohamed Lemin Ould al-Hasan (aka Abdallah el-Chinguetti) was considered one of AQIM's chief ideologues. He was killed in February 2013 and replaced by another Mauritanian, Abderrahmane (aka Talha). Another Mauritanian, Hassan Ould Khalil (aka Jouleilib), was al-Mourabitoun leader Mokhtar Belmokhtar's right-hand man and one of the original al-Mourabitoun lieutenants. He was killed in November 2013.<sup>30</sup> Hamada Ould Mohamed Kheirou, from southern Mauritania along the border with Senegal, joined AQIM as a bomb technician, and worked alongside Tayib Ould Sidi Ali, another Mauritanian. Kheirou eventually founded MUJAO in 2011.

And it was not just a question of Mauritians leaving Mauritania to join al-Qa`ida and its affiliates. Al-Qa`ida leaders had spent time in Mauritania. Al-Qa`ida ideologue and potential bin Ladin successor Mohamed Hassan Qaid (aka Abu Yahya al-Libi) had gone to Mauritania for religious training in the 1990s.<sup>31</sup> Others also went to Mauritania for the same reason, including a young Canadian who was eventually arrested on terrorism charges in 2011. The man in question, Aaron Yoon, traveled to Nouakchott and then to a Qur'anic school at Boutilimit in the countryside. Yoon's recruiter was allegedly Mohamed Hafez Ould Cheikh, who was reportedly the cousin of Hassan Ould Khalil, Mokhtar Belmokhtar's aforementioned associate.<sup>32</sup> Yoon's companions, two other Canadians, traveled on from Mauritania, ultimately linking up with Mokhtar Belmokhtar's Mouaqiou bil-Dam and participating in the terrorist attack at the Tigantourine Gas Plant in In Amenas, Algeria in 2013.<sup>33</sup>

The FBI has also identified Americans who displayed jihadi sympathies while in the United States and subsequently traveled to Mauritania only to drop off the radar and disappear.

Mauritania's appeal for bona fide and would-be jihadis alike is at least in part due to its reputation for rigorous religious education. Among jihadis, Islamic education in Mauritania is seen as legitimate both because of the authenticity of the curriculum and the austerity of the locale. Mauritania's *mahadras* (madrasas) restrict themselves to a narrow canon of classical texts.<sup>34</sup> In addition, jihadis deemed Mauritanian learning more authentic because of the privation students suffered in Mauritanian *mahadras* where authoritative knowledge is seen to correlate with the degree of suffering

endured to acquire it.<sup>35</sup>

### Communications

Saharan and Sahelian jihadi groups consistently use Mauritanian media outlets to broadcast communiqués and propaganda videos. Alakhbar.info, Sahara Médias, and l'Agence Nouakchott d'Informations (ANI) have all relayed communiqués from al-Qa`ida and related groups for more than a decade. For example, ANI's Mohamed Mahmoud Aboumaali interviewed Mokhtar Belmokhtar in November 2011<sup>36</sup> and then again in October 2012, just prior to the launch of France's Operation Serval in Mali (and in the midst of planning for the Tigantourine Gas Plant attack). Belmokhtar's group subsequently used ANI as a communications channel during the Tigantourine attack itself.<sup>b</sup> In 2016, Yahya Abu al-Hammam used an interview with al-Akhbar.info to articulate a new al-Qa`ida strategy for the Sahara.<sup>37</sup> In 2017, Sahara Médias, headed by Abdallah Mohamedi, published a message allegedly from Belmokhtar urging support for al-Mourabitoun.<sup>38</sup> More recently, ANI was the first outlet to confirm that the Islamic State of the Greater Sahara claimed responsibility for the attack on U.S. Special Forces soldiers in Tongo Tongo, Niger.<sup>39</sup>

The question then is why Saharan jihadi groups use Mauritanian media outlets instead of media outlets in the countries in which they operate like Mali or Niger. One explanation is that it is easy: many spokesmen for Saharan and Sahelian jihadi groups are Mauritanian like Abdallah el-Chinguetti and Jouleilib; regional jihadi groups have been using Mauritanian media outlets for more than a decade and that breeds a sense of trust and familiarity; regional jihadi groups know that their messages will reach both Francophone and Arabic-speaking audiences because Mauritanian media is typically bilingual French and Arabic; and lastly, Mauritanian news outlets have historically not edited or censored jihadi communiqués and have redistributed them as is. According to this explanation, there is no ideological affinity between Mauritanian news outlets and jihadi groups; it is simply a matter of convenience.

According to ANI's Aboumaali, jihadi groups' use of Mauritanian media outlets is due to the legwork Mauritanian journalists put into reporting on Saharan and Sahelian jihadis. Aboumaali himself began investigating Mauritanian jihadis who went to northern Mali after the 9/11 attacks, which then allowed him to establish a network of sources and correspondents in the region long before the outbreak of trouble in northern Mali in 2011.<sup>40</sup> The way he puts it, jihadis turn to Mauritanian media outlets because they know the journalists.

### Is a Change Afoot?

Until recently AQIM communiqués conveyed via Mauritanian media outlets rarely mentioned Mauritania itself. Mauritania was a

a Whether jihadi groups use Mauritania for other activities, like fundraising, training, and logistics is less clear, although rumors abound in Nouakchott.

b Of special interest is the outlet l'Agence Nouakchott d'Informations (ANI), which was founded in 2008 by the Mauritanian press group Mauritanienne de Presse, d'Édition, de Communication et d'Impression (MAPECI). MAPECI also owns two other news outlets: the French Nouakchott Info and the Arabic Akhbar Nouakchott. ANI is run by Mohamed Mahmoud Ould Aboumaali, who is also MAPECI's executive director. MAPECI is owned by Cheikhna Ould Nenni, whose niece is married to Mauritanian President Mohamed Ould Abdelaziz's Army Chief of Staff Mohamed Ould Ghazouani. Justine Spiegel, "Mauritanie: le jeu dangereux d'ANI et Sahara Média avec Aqmi," *Jeune Afrique*, April 22, 2013.

conduit for AQIM's animosity, not the target of it. This changed on May 8, 2018. In a communiqué, AQIM specifically identified western companies, and especially French ones, in Mauritania as privileged targets.<sup>41</sup> The communiqué defined the "Islamic Maghreb" as being from Libya to Mauritania.

The specific mention of Mauritania could be dismissed as AQIM's need to define a geographic area that does not readily correspond to the borders of any modern nation-state. (This is something that jihadi organizations do the world over, referencing historical regions instead of contemporary states as a way to underscore their opposition to the very notion of modern nation-states.)

However Aboumaali, the ANI reporter, argues that the mention of Mauritania and its inclusion on AQIM's list of viable targets was due to Nouakchott's participation in the G5 Sahel—the coalition of Mali, Chad, Niger, Burkina Faso, and Mauritania—that is intended to restore stability in the Sahel and Sahara.<sup>42</sup> The G5 Sahel concept was initially broached in 2014 and formalized in the summer of 2017, but it only started to gain traction in the spring of 2018. According to Aboumaali, as long as Mauritania remained on the sidelines of Operation Serval and then Operation Barkhane, the two French-led military operations to combat jihadi groups in Mali, then AQIM left Nouakchott unmolested. However, with Mauritania's entrance into the G5 Sahel, AQIM's views of Nouakchott's neutrality changed and Mauritania for them became a permissible jihadi target. Aboumaali suggests that AQIM's intention in singling out Mauritania was not to carry out attacks there, but to warn it away from participating in the G5 Sahel. If this was indeed the case, Mauritania has seemingly dismissed AQIM's warning. On July 12, 2018, General Hanena Ould Sidi, Mauritania's Deputy Chief of Staff of Army, was appointed to lead the G5 Sahel initiative.<sup>43</sup>

There is another possible reason that Mauritania is now in the crosshairs. It is a fraught time politically in Mauritania, with presidential elections slated for 2019, and it is still unclear whether Ould Abdelaziz will seek to run again. The outcome of the elections could alter Mauritania's attitude toward combating AQIM beyond its borders, and Mauritania's inclusion in the AQIM communiqué could

be AQIM's way of reminding Mauritania of its precarious circumstances. After all, the spate of AQIM attacks and kidnappings that rocked Mauritania were less than 10 years ago.

Lastly, Mauritania is experiencing an unprecedented influx of foreign direct investment (FDI) from foreign companies, including prominent international oil companies as well as other extractive industries firms and logistics, security, engineering, procurement, and construction companies. Hitherto, there has only been limited offshore investment in Mauritania's oil and gas sector, and the mining sector has been concentrated in the northwest of the country, particularly around Tasiast and Zouerate. It is not known whether Mauritania's FDI windfall prompted AQIM's changed disposition toward Nouakchott, but along with FDI comes a flurry of high-value targets including expatriate personnel and the expansion of critical infrastructure, particularly the kind that AQIM identifies in its communiqué. Moreover, AQIM has shown a penchant for attacking the natural resources sector, including the Tigantourine Gas Facility at In Amenas<sup>44</sup> and Krehba at In Saleh<sup>45</sup> in Algeria and Areva's Arlit facilities in Niger.<sup>46</sup>

## Conclusion

Terrorist organizations evolve and adapt as circumstances change, and this may be the case with AQIM's communiqué regarding Mauritania. After a steady pace of destructive operations in the mid-2000s, AQIM's priorities shifted elsewhere. Conditions in Mauritania became more difficult. New fronts opened. But Mauritania remained an important passive node for jihadi activity in the Sahel and Sahara. Now, however, after nearly a decade, AQIM may be looking to reactivate its Mauritania networks as circumstances change yet again. The emergence of new targets and potentially a new president who may have different approaches to combating terrorism raises the prospect of a return to a country in which jihadi organizations have very deep, but currently latent, roots. The May 8, 2018, communiqué signals the possibility that what has been a conduit and mouthpiece for Saharan and Sahelian jihadi groups for nearly a decade could once again become a battleground. **CTC**

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# The Islamic State in Africa: Estimating Fighter Numbers in Cells Across the Continent

By Jason Warner and Charlotte Hulme

**To date, little work has been undertaken to analyze the Islamic State's presence in Africa from a comparative perspective. In an effort to begin to understand the broader landscape of the Islamic State's existence in Africa, this article presents the first overview of the approximate number of fighters in various Islamic State cells in Africa as of July 2018. Leveraging a compilation of best available open-source data along with interviews with subject matter experts, the authors' best estimates suggest the presence of approximately 6,000 Islamic State fighters in Africa today, spread over a total of nine Islamic State 'cells.'**

**W**hen Jund al-Khilafa, or the "Soldiers of the Caliphate," pledged allegiance to the Islamic State in Algeria in September 2014, the first African Islamic State affiliate was born. One month later, in October, the Shura Youth Council, a band of 300 fighters in the city of Derna, Libya, comprised largely of Libyans who had fought in the Battar Brigade in Syria's civil war, followed suit, pledging allegiance to the Islamic State.<sup>1</sup> From Nigeria to Somalia, Tunisia to Egypt, and Algeria to the Sahara, between 2014 and 2016, various other Islamic State 'cells'<sup>a</sup>—either official *wilayat* or unofficial affiliated groups—emerged on the African continent.

While the presence of these cells has caused concerns in its own right, they have received more attention, at least in popular discourse, following the late 2017 collapse of the caliphate in Syria and Iraq after the liberation of Mosul.<sup>2</sup> Still, with few exceptions,<sup>3</sup>

a The authors use the word 'cells' very consciously. Due to the varying degrees of 'officialness' of these groups to the Islamic State, 'cells' here is an umbrella term to refer to those groups that are both official, recognized *wilayat* of the Islamic State and those groups that are not officially affiliated but have pledged allegiance to the Islamic State and act on its behalf. Others have referred to these more incipient proto-Islamic State territories as 'colonies.' See Aaron Zelin, "The Islamic State's First Colony in Libya," Washington Institute, October 10, 2014.

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there has been little analysis of the strength of the Islamic State's African cells from a comparative perspective. Leveraging a compilation of best available open-source estimations along with interviews with subject matter experts, this article puts forward the first-ever overview of the approximate number of fighters in various African Islamic State cells today.

## The Islamic State Fighter Landscape in Africa

Before delving into data, it bears asking: what accounts for the relative lack of comparative study of Islamic State cells in Africa? More acutely, why, despite the fact that some of these cells have existed for nearly four years, is so little known about fighter numbers? Several explanations can be offered. First, there is an overall scarcity of detailed open-source data on many—though not all—Islamic State cells in Africa. While much writing has been on done on the Islamic State in Libya and in Egypt (Sinai), as well as on the Islamic State's West Africa Province (formerly Boko Haram), journalistic accounts of smaller Islamic State cells are rare, and existing work only occasionally reports on fighter numbers. While it can be surmised that more detailed estimates exist in classified spaces, data available to journalists, researchers, and academics is conjectural at best, and often relayed in the form of passing comments in written pieces or as broad estimates in press conferences by military spokespeople.<sup>4</sup> Second, when open source accounts *do* provide estimates on numbers of fighters, there are methodological issues surrounding how these estimates were derived. In general, it is difficult to arrive at estimates, particularly for small groups, because fighter numbers are constantly changing in environments in which there is already poor information, and groups often try to prevent information about their sizes from becoming public. Thus, estimates may be derived from rough calculations of initial size, casualties, arrests, movements, size of the area of operation, or changes in the methods of operation. These estimates also often fail to disaggregate a cell's active fighters from its non-fighting supporters.

Bearing in mind these limitations, the authors gathered open-source information from news organizations, think-tanks, governments, and international organizations, identifying minimum and maximum estimates of the number of fighters in various Islamic State cells for all months for which data was available, from an individual cell's founding to the present (July 2018). Importantly, they attempted to present a representative "universe" of fighter estimates at various points in time, even if, occasionally, they were not wholly convinced that these estimates were accurate. The authors then conducted informal interviews with subject matter experts in order to formulate the best current estimate of fighter numbers. The estimates presented below are for Islamic State fighters involved in active fighting as opposed to individuals involved in non-kinetic operations, such as supporters, recruiters, financiers, or those living under the rule of an Islamic State affiliate.

The resulting estimates are tentative at best. Even for the in-

telligence-collection agencies of advanced nations like the United States, estimating numbers of fighters is notoriously difficult. Using only the open source domain—and relying to a significant degree on the authors’ own judgments as subject matter specialists—means that these attempts are far more the result of an art than a science. Thus, given the data’s limitations and the challenges of drawing inferences about fighter numbers from a narrow set of indicators, this is only an incipient attempt at understanding the comparative threat of Islamic State cells in Africa. A brief overview of the findings is presented in Figure 1, followed by a discussion of the evolution and current state of fighter numbers of various Islamic State cells in Africa, from largest to smallest.

### Islamic State West African Province (ISWAP)

Since 2009, Boko Haram, under the leadership of Abubakar Shekau, became infamous for its deadly insurgency in the Lake Chad Basin of West Africa and for its 2014 kidnapping of the 276 Chibok girls. In March 2015, Shekau pledged allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and the Islamic State; five days later, Baghdadi recognized the pledge. Thus, at least on paper, Boko Haram—as the world had previously known it—ostensibly ceased to exist.<sup>b</sup> In its place, the Islamic State West African Province (ISWAP) was set up.<sup>5</sup> This pledge provoked great concern within the international community—some called Boko Haram’s subsumption into the Islamic State a “marriage from hell”<sup>6</sup>—a rightful worry in 2015, as the former Boko Haram group increased its violence, especially its suicide bombings, particularly those conducted by women and children.<sup>7</sup>

By August 2016, tension in the relationship between ISWAP and Islamic State ‘Central’ became apparent, primarily due to the latter’s disdain for ISWAP’s (in their view) overly sweeping interpretation of *takfir*, or the justification to target and kill apostate Muslims. To rid ISWAP of Shekau, a shrewd but uncontrollable ideologue of whom it disapproved,<sup>8</sup> the Islamic State announced in August 2016 that it had replaced Shekau with Abu Musab al-Barnawi, the son

of Boko Haram’s founder, Mohammad Yusuf.<sup>9</sup> For his part, Shekau has rejected the notion that he has been replaced. Thus, today, ISWAP is led by Barnawi and operates primarily in the Lake Chad Basin region. Shekau, whose group operates alternatively under the international name of Boko Haram or the local name Jama’at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Da’wah wa’l-Jihad (JAS) but is also sometimes referred to as a second branch of ISWAP, operates near the Sambisa Forest further south.<sup>10</sup>

When assessing ISWAP’s estimated fighter numbers, the authors only take into account those fighters in Barnawi’s ISWAP group, even though no evidence exists that Shekau has ever fully renounced his affiliation with the Islamic State.<sup>c</sup> In making this methodological choice, the authors rely on fighter estimates from the U.S. Department of Defense, which in April 2018, put the membership of the Barnawi faction at 3,500.<sup>11</sup> (If one were to count Shekau’s faction, this would add another 1,500 fighters, according to the same source.<sup>12</sup>) As of July 2018, Barnawi’s ISWAP faction is unquestionably the largest Islamic State grouping in Africa, with roughly three and half times as many fighters as the next largest Islamic State cell in Africa, Islamic State-Sinai (in Egypt), and more fighters than all other Islamic State cells in Africa combined.

Yet, despite its still relatively large fighter base, Barnawi’s ISWAP cell today has (as would be expected) lower fighter numbers than when the Barnawi and Shekau groups—which today are highly distinct in various ways<sup>13</sup>—were unified under the moniker of Boko Haram before their 2016 split. In spring 2014, the U.S. Department of State estimated that the number of Boko Haram fighters, before the group had pledged allegiance to the Islamic State, ranged from “hundreds to a few thousand.”<sup>14</sup> When Boko Haram emerged on most people’s ‘radar screens,’ following the April 2014 Chibok kidnappings, estimates of fighter numbers verged on the ludicrous: the Cameroonian Ministry of Defense suggested in July 2014 that the group had between 15,000 and 20,000 fighters; a Nigerian journalist suggested that it had 50,000 fighters.<sup>15</sup> By the end of 2014,

b However, despite the fact that Shekau’s pledge ostensibly transformed “Boko Haram” into “ISWAP,” most observers still continue to refer to both of the group’s current factions—the al-Barnawi faction and the Shekau faction—as “Boko Haram.”

c While the Shekau cell has only questionable affiliations with the Islamic State, no evidence exists to suggest that he has ever fully renounced his affiliation with the group. Author correspondence, Marc-Antoine Perouse de Montclos, July 2018.

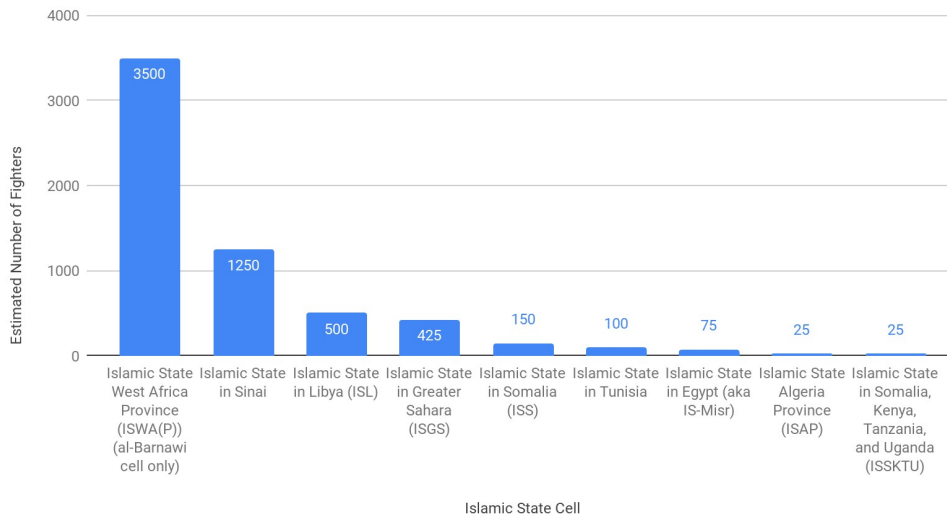


Figure 1: Estimated Numbers of Islamic State Fighters in Various African Cells (July 2018)



Boko Haram had surpassed the Islamic State to become the world's deadliest terrorist group, with estimates from February 2015—just prior to Shekau's pledge—placing Boko Haram at between 7,000 to 10,000 fighters<sup>16</sup> by one estimate in which the group was perhaps speciously compared to “other, similar groups,” and a lower 4,000 to 6,000 “hard-core fighters” the same month, according to estimates from U.S. intelligence officials.<sup>17</sup> For their parts, researchers Daniel Torbjörnsson and Michael Jonsson note that in interviewing security officials in Nigeria in May 2017, consensus existed that the Barnawi faction was significantly larger than the Shekau faction, with an estimated 5,000 fighters compared to Shekau's 1,000 fighters.<sup>18</sup> As previously noted, the authors take 3,500 as the best estimate of the Barnawi faction's number of fighters as of July 2018.<sup>19</sup>

### Islamic State in Sinai

Ansar Beit al-Maqdis (ABM), or “Supporters of Jerusalem,” is an Egypt-based insurgent group founded in the aftermath of Hosni Mubarak's ouster as president in early 2011 during the Arab Spring. ABM—which would eventually become the Islamic State in Sinai three years later, in November 2014—had initially declared itself al-Qa`ida's wing in the Sinai, although it never became a formal affiliate of al-Qa`ida.<sup>20</sup> After conducting a series of attacks against Israel during the conflict in Gaza in July 2014, ABM shifted its focus back to attacking Egypt.

ABM pledged *bay`a* to the Islamic State in November 2014.<sup>21</sup> Its pledge was accepted three days later, marking the swiftest recognition of any pledge made by an African organization to the Islamic State. Since then, the Islamic State in Sinai has launched several significant attacks, most notably claiming credit for the October 2015 downing of Russian Metrojet Flight 9268, which killed all 224 passengers and crew members.<sup>d</sup> The Islamic State in Sinai appears to have had, at the time, relatively close links with Islamic State Central, when compared to other African Islamic State groupings, serving as one of the few African cells believed to have received funding, weapons, and tactical training from Islamic State Central.<sup>22 e</sup>

With an estimated 1,000 to 1,500 fighters, the Islamic State in Sinai is the second-largest African Islamic State cell,<sup>f</sup> smaller only than the Islamic State West Africa Province (Barnawi faction). Interestingly, it seems as though ABM's November 2014 pledge to the

Islamic State helped boost its fighting force: while reports suggest that ABM had an estimated 700 to 1,000 fighters in January 2014<sup>23</sup> (before it had pledged allegiance to the Islamic State) as of July 2018, best estimates—which, as detailed below, have remained consistent for years—suggest that the Islamic State in Sinai has about 50 percent more fighters, at between 1,000 to 1,500. Indeed, what is particularly striking is the relative consistency in the Islamic State in Sinai's fighter numbers. With few exceptions,<sup>g</sup> the vast majority of open sources agree that the group has maintained between 1,000 and 1,500 fighters, with estimates suggesting this range in November 2015,<sup>24</sup> January 2016,<sup>25</sup> May 2016,<sup>26</sup> October 2016,<sup>27</sup> November 2017,<sup>28</sup> and May 2018.<sup>29</sup> For the purposes of arriving at a single number for the group's current fighting force, the authors took the average, settling on 1,250.

### Islamic State in Libya

Perhaps no other Islamic State affiliate in Africa has attracted as much concern as the Islamic State in Libya. Indeed, various Islamic State communications portrayed it as the most important space for the Islamic State outside of Iraq and Syria.<sup>30</sup> One result of which is that data on its fighter numbers is more robust and comprehensive when compared to what is known about other African cells.

More than any other Islamic State cell in Africa, the Islamic State in Libya has experienced as a result of fighting in Syria a profound rise and subsequent fall in its estimated fighter numbers. The group emerged in Derna in April 2014, when a band of just 300 fighters—many of whom had returned from fighting in Syria in the mostly Libyan-composed Battar Brigade—returned to Libya and allied with members of pre-existing jihadi groups, like Ansar al-Sharia, calling themselves the Islamic Shura Youth Council (Majlis Shura Shabab al-Islam). Though they emerged in Derna in April 2014 and expressed ideological affinity with the Islamic State in June 2014, it was not until October 2014 that the Islamic Shura Youth Council pledged allegiance to al-Baghdadi. In return, al-Baghdadi recognized the pledge one month later and then announced the formation of three branches of the Islamic State in Libya: Cyrenaica, Fezzan, and Tripolitania.<sup>31</sup>

By November 2014, a month after its inception, the three Islamic State branches in Libya had a combined total of an estimated 500 fighters.<sup>32</sup> However, by summer 2015, when the group scored a major victory with the June takeover of Sirte after losing Derna to al-Qa`ida-aligned militias, its ranks had nearly tripled, to 3,000 fighters, according to one estimate from *The Washington Post*.<sup>33</sup> By November and December 2015, the United Nations estimated the Islamic State in Libya to number some 2,000 to 3,000 fighters,<sup>34</sup> while *The Wall Street Journal*, relying on estimates from Libyan intelligence officials and civilians, reported that its forces were 5,000-strong.<sup>h</sup> By April 2016, the U.S. Department of Defense estimated that there were between 4,000 and 6,000 fighters.<sup>35</sup> These numbers held steady throughout the summer of 2016, with the CIA estimating the group had a fighting force of between 5,000 and

d Oded Berkowitz notes that one of the few attacks in mainland Egypt that was ever partially attributed to Wilayat Sinai was the December 2016 St. Peter and St. Paul's Church bombing, which was connected via the publishing of a photo of the suicide bomber who perpetrated the attack under the “Islamic State Sinai” title. However, the photo was ultimately removed by official Islamic State sources and replaced with a claim that the attack had been undertaken by Islamic State-Misr, not Islamic State-Sinai. The two other mainland attacks claimed by Islamic State-Sinai were the September 2015 assassination of Khaled Khalaf Malk, a Bedouin tribal leader in Obour City, and the July 2015 kidnapping of Tomislav Salopek, a Croatian topographer, who was beheaded in August 2015. Author interview, Oded Berkowitz, July 2018.

e Even prior to its November 2014 pledge, representatives from the group traveled to Syria to seek support and counsel from Islamic State leadership. Observers also note that Ansar Beit al-Maqdis adopted beheadings as a punishment, mirroring the Islamic State, before the establishment of the Sinai wilayat.

f The Council on Foreign Relations offers 1,000-1,500 as the most recent estimate. See “Instability in Egypt,” from CFR's Global Conflict Tracker, updated May 25, 2018.

g In November 2014, a *New York Times* article estimated its strength at “hundreds to thousands.” See David Kirkpatrick, “Militant Group in Egypt Vows Loyalty to ISIS,” *New York Times*, November 10, 2014.

h It should be noted that this 5,000 includes an unspecified number of ‘administrators and financiers’ for the cell. Tamer El-Ghobashy and Hassan Morajea, “Islamic State Tightens Grip on Libyan Stronghold of Sirte,” *Wall Street Journal*, November 29, 2015.

8,000 Islamic State fighters in June 2016<sup>36</sup> and the BBC, relying on unspecified sources, reporting 5,000 fighters in August 2016.<sup>37</sup>

By December 2016, a coalition of Libyan forces, combined with a concerted U.S. airstrike campaign, had expelled the Islamic State from major cities, including Sirte. Although observers feared that Libya would become one of the most popular destinations for fighters fleeing defeat in Syria and Iraq, throughout 2017, one journalist, citing U.S. officials, pegged the number of fighters in Libya at 200, while another journalist, citing Libyan officials, put it at 500.<sup>38</sup> Currently, the authors' best but tentative estimate is 500.

### The Islamic State in Greater Sahara

While the largest three cells discussed above represent roughly 87 percent of the total fighters belonging to African Islamic State cells (5,250 out of 6,050 fighters), here the authors consider a number of smaller cells that, despite their size, nonetheless pose threats, beginning with the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS).

The Islamic State in Greater Sahara came to rise, at least nominally, in May 2015 when Adnan Abu Walid Sahraoui, a senior leader for an al-Qa`ida-aligned group known as al-Mourabitoun, pledged allegiance to al-Baghdadi.<sup>j</sup> The overall leader of al-Mourabitoun, Mokhtar Belmokhtar, rejected the notion that Sahraoui's pledge was undertaken on behalf of al-Mourabitoun; instead, he said Sahraoui's pledge was his alone. Sahraoui and dozens of fighters thus left al-Mourabitoun and formed their own Islamic State grouping, the Islamic State in Mali, which later came to be known as the Islamic State in Greater Sahara. While ISGS launched several notable attacks in 2016—including an attempted October 2016 Koutoukale Prison break in Niamey—it was the group's October 2017 Tongo Tongo ambush, which resulted in the deaths of four U.S. service members and five Nigeriens, that brought ISGS to global attention.<sup>39</sup> As of June 2018, ISGS has claimed 15 attacks, though is presumed to be responsible for many more.<sup>40</sup>

Perhaps as a result of its increased international profile since the Tongo Tongo attack, best available estimates (speculative and sometimes wildly fluctuating though they are<sup>k</sup>) suggest that as of July 2018, ISGS boasts its largest number of fighters to date. Estimates at the group's emergence in May 2015, based on a video of Sahraoui and his followers pledging allegiance to al-Baghdadi, placed its fighter count at 40.<sup>41</sup> At the date of the Tongo Tongo attack in October 2017, one journalist, citing a senior U.S. counterterrorism official, put its numbers only slightly higher, at 40 to 60.<sup>42</sup> As of April 2018, the U.S. Department of Defense estimated the group



Screen capture from video of Islamic State in the Greater Sahara leader Adnan Abu Walid Sahraoui's bay`a to the Islamic State

as having as many as 300 fighters,<sup>43</sup> while various subject matter experts in June 2018 suggested that the number was between 200 and 300.<sup>44</sup>

Héni Nsaibia of the security consultancy Menastream has estimated that as of late July 2018, ISGS has approximately 425 fighters. These are composed of 300 in ISGS—including 100 from Fulani Toleebe, a group composed Katiba Macina defectors<sup>45</sup>—plus another 125 fighters from Katiba Salaheddine, an ISGS affiliate, which joined the group in mid-2017.<sup>46</sup> From the authors' perspectives, this is the most reliable and comprehensive estimate to date, thus the authors employ Nsaibia's estimates.

### The Islamic State in Somalia

The Islamic State in Somalia (ISS) emerged in October 2015, when former al-Shabaab ideologue Abdul Qadir Mumin pledged allegiance to the Islamic State. Though the pledge has never been formally recognized, the Islamic State in Somalia have increased their operational tempo throughout 2018: according to data from FDD's Long War Journal, as of July 25, 2018, the Islamic State in Somalia had claimed 67 attacks,<sup>47</sup> though it still does not have the capacity to challenge al-Shabaab for jihadi hegemony.<sup>48</sup>

When it comes to the Islamic State in Somalia's numbers of fighters, when the group first emerged with Mumin's breakaway from al-Shabaab in 2015, data reported by FDD's Long War Journal suggested that it had as few as 20 members.<sup>49</sup> There were estimates that its numbers were fewer than 100 fighters by August 2016, according to the same source.<sup>50</sup> In October 2016, just after it launched its most notable attack—the takeover of the port town of Qandala, which it held from October to December 2016—Voice of America's Harun Maruf, relying on intelligence provided by a former Puntland Intelligence Agency official, suggested that the Islamic State in Somalia had between 200 and 300 fighters.<sup>51</sup> After it was dislodged from Qandala, fighter numbers seemingly declined: by December 2016, local observers like Mohamed Olad Hassan estimated that the group had only between 100 and 150 fighters.<sup>52</sup> By June 2017, a defector from Islamic State Somalia told a local news outlet that the group had only around 70 fighters.<sup>53</sup> However, due to an increased recruiting drive—which includes targeting children as young as 10 years old<sup>54</sup>—in addition to its recent spate of attacks as described above, anecdotal evidence suggests that ISS's numbers are again on the rise, though not drastically. While one Somali journalist, Abdirisak Mohamud Tuuryare, suggested that there were 300 ISS fighters in May 2018,<sup>55</sup> another local Somali journalist put ISS' numbers at

i As of August 2016, the Counter Extremism Project reported numerous open source estimates of several hundred to 2,000.

j ISGS pledged allegiance to the Islamic State in May 2015, but its pledge was ignored until October 2016. This 17-month delay represents the biggest gap between pledge and recognition dates among African Islamic State cells that have been recognized.

k Interestingly, one outlying—but notable—estimation of ISGS fighter numbers was offered in June 2018 by one of the only known live captives of the Islamic State in Greater Sahara. Abdoul Wahid, one of two Nigerien soldiers kidnapped and held hostage during the Tongo Tongo attacks of October 2017, told *The Guardian* that he estimated that he had seen some 600 ISGS soldiers while in captivity. For their part, his captors told Wahid that he had seen only half of their fighters, thus suggesting that, if true, ISGS would have closer to 1,200. However, no observers of the group take this number seriously. See Ruth Maclean, "Niger Islamic State Hostage: 'They want to kill foreign soldiers,'" *Guardian*, June 5, 2018.

“not more than 100” in July 2018.<sup>56</sup> For his part, Caleb Weiss, who studies the group, suggested between 150 and 200 in July 2018.<sup>57</sup> The authors take a middle estimate of 150.

### The Islamic State in Tunisia

Another smaller African cell is the Islamic State in Tunisia, which emerged when a group called Jund al-Khilafah, or Soldiers of the Caliphate, (JAK-T) pledged allegiance to central Islamic State leadership in a proclamation that was never acknowledged by the latter. While exact estimates vary, consensus remains that the group is small. Two subject matter experts independently assessed fighter numbers of 25<sup>58</sup> and 30<sup>59</sup> in June 2018. However, according to Tunisia expert Matt Herbert as of June 2018, best estimates put the Islamic State in Tunisia at between 90 and 100 fighters, which came as a result of shifts of fighters, especially in western Tunisia, away from AQIM and toward the Islamic State.<sup>60</sup> The organization's small profile is particularly notable given that Tunisia has been one of the most common country of origin for foreign fighters flowing into Iraq and Syria.<sup>61</sup> The authors employ Herbert's upper estimate of 100 fighters.

### The Islamic State in Egypt (IS-Misr)

The Islamic State in Egypt—distinct from the Islamic State in Sinai, as it is based in the Egyptian mainland—emerged in July 2015. While the organization never pledged allegiance to the Islamic State, it received attention in a May 2017 edition of the weekly magazine published by the Islamic State, which included an interview with an unnamed individual identified as the “Emir of the Caliphate's Soldiers in Egypt.”<sup>62</sup> Among other larger-scale attacks, the Islamic State in Egypt attacked the Italian consulate in Cairo with a car bomb in July 2015, gaining additional notoriety for its ability to attack government and foreign targets in a city otherwise tightly surveilled by security services.<sup>63</sup> More notably, Islamic State-Misr was responsible for the deadly twin 2017 Palm Sunday bombings at two Coptic Christian churches, occurring in Tanta and then Alexandria, which killed an estimated 45.<sup>64</sup>

Islamic State-Misr's current fighter numbers have declined from its peak of late 2015 to early 2016, when the group was estimated to have around 150 fighters.<sup>65</sup> Throughout 2016 and 2017, Islamic State-Misr sustained losses and does not seem to have been able to replace them through local recruitment efforts.<sup>66</sup> While one anonymous expert estimated in May 2018 the group had 100 fighters,<sup>67</sup> Oded Berkowitz, regional director of Tel Aviv-based Intelligence in MAX Security Solutions, has argued that Islamic State-Misr's current fighter numbers are closer to 50 and 75 fighters.<sup>68</sup> However, Berkowitz has also said that it could be the case that significant numbers of Islamic State-Misr fighters are not currently located on the Egyptian mainland, instead having possibly crossed into Libya and linked up with Islamic State-Libya's desert brigades or having joined the comparatively more powerful Islamic State-Sinai.<sup>69</sup> The authors take Berkowitz's high-end estimate of 75 fighters.

### The Islamic State Algeria Province

The Islamic State Algeria Province (ISAP) was the first African Is-

lamic State cell to emerge, but was also one that fizzled out quite quickly. ISAP was founded by a former high-level member of AQIM, Abdelmalek Gouri, whose September 2014 pledge of allegiance to al-Baghdadi was accepted two months later. ISAP made headlines for its 2014 killing of French hiker Hervé Gourdel, whom it captured and beheaded on video in retribution, it claimed, for airstrikes by France in Iraq. Since then, the group has attracted recruits from at least four other AQIM splinter groups, and has launched attacks in Jijel, Constantine, Tiaret, the outskirts of Algiers, Skikda, and Annab, with the latest attack occurring in August 2017.<sup>m</sup> It also succeeded in running a short-lived outpost in Jabel Ouahch, overlooking the city of Constantine in northeastern Algeria, from which it launched several assassinations, IED ambushes and at least one (failed) suicide bombing.<sup>70</sup> However, throughout the course of ISAP's existence, it has faced sustained and often intense pressure from Algerian security forces, on one hand, and antagonistic elements of AQIM, on the other,<sup>71</sup> limiting its growth.

At the time of Gouri's death in 2014, *The New York Times*, citing unnamed sources, estimated that ISAP had fewer than 30 fighters. However, the decapitation of its leader, Gouri, who was killed by Algerian security forces after Gourdel's death, likely contributed to the subsequent unraveling of the group.<sup>72</sup> A year later, in 2015, Algerian forces killed 21 more of ISAP's members,<sup>73</sup> seemingly neutralizing a significant portion of what was already a shrinking group. Today, subject matter experts question whether the ISAP's presence is significant enough to warrant meaningful discussion at all.<sup>74</sup> Based on all this, one can conclude that the active Islamic State ‘fighter’ presence in Algeria is minimal, at fewer than 25.

### The Islamic State in Somalia, Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda

In April 2016, a grouping called the Islamic State in Somalia, Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda (ISSKTU), or Jabha East Africa, pledged loyalty to al-Baghdadi,<sup>75</sup> though again, the pledge was never recognized. A breakaway from al-Shabaab, the group was formed by Mohamed Abdi Ali, a medical intern from Kenya who was arrested in May 2016 for plotting to spread anthrax in Kenya to match the scale of destruction of the 2013 Westgate Mall attacks.<sup>76</sup> As its name suggests, the group—small as it is—has a multinational composition. As is the case of the Islamic State in Algeria Province, ISSKTU seems to exert more of a nominal presence than an actual one. Beyond a notable June 2016 attack on an AMISOM convoy, the group's violence has been limited.<sup>77</sup> At this point, it is not entirely clear that the one-time Islamic State cell still exists. As such, the authors assume it to have fewer than 25 fighters, if any.

### Comparative Analysis

The authors have come up with their best estimate of the approximate number of fighters in various Islamic State cells throughout Africa, but it is also useful to compare these metrics against a sample<sup>n</sup> of other jihadi and non-jihadi organizations in Africa. If

m According to Berkowitz, these groups are, per the chronology of their affiliations with ISAP, Skikda Brigade, Saraya al-Ghuraba, al-Ansar Brigade, Katibat al-Fath, and Jamaa Hamah al-Dawah al-Salafiyah. Author interview, Oded Berkowitz, July 2018 and Héni Nsaibia, July 2018.

n The selection of these three groups is not intended to be exhaustive but rather represents a cross-section of well-known violent extremist organizations in Africa without connections to the Islamic State.

l By the fall of 2017, almost 3,000 Tunisian foreign fighters were believed to have traveled to Syria and Iraq. See Richard Barrett, “Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees,” Soufan Center, October 2017.

the Shekau faction of ISWAP is, as before, excluded, al-Shabaab, al-Qa`ida's branch in Somalia, is the largest violent extremist organization on the African continent. The Council on Foreign Relations estimated al-Shabaab to have a membership of between 3,000 and 6,000 in January 2018,<sup>78</sup> while the U.S. military estimated the range to be between 4,000 and 6,000 fighters in April 2018.<sup>79</sup> The authors use 4,500 as an estimate.

The next-largest non-Islamic State affiliated jihadi group is the coalition of Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimi (JNIM) based in the Sahara, al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)'s affiliate in Mali, which was estimated to have 800 active fighters in April 2018 by the U.S. Department of Defense,<sup>80</sup> a figure in line with an estimate by subject matter expert Héni Nsaibia in early July.<sup>81</sup> The authors settle on a flat 800.

Finally, though the group is now mostly defunct, it bears noting that the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), which was led by Joseph Kony, now has an estimated 100 fighters or fewer.<sup>82</sup> The authors included these non-Islamic State groups' fighter numbers in Figure 2.

### The Future of the Islamic State in Africa's Fighters

In this article, the authors have presented what they judge to be the best available estimates for the number of fighters in nine Islamic State cells in Africa. In the main, the authors estimate that there are approximately 6,000 Islamic State fighters spread across nine cells across the continent, which themselves vary dramatically in size. The largest, the Islamic State West Africa Province (al-Barnawi group), has an estimated 3,500 fighters, while cells of the Islamic State in Algeria and the Islamic State in Somalia, Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda, each have fewer than 25 fighters, the authors estimate.

Before closing, it bears asking just what factors might be at play in explaining the significant variation in size among various Islamic State factions in Africa. While space does not permit an extensive discussion on this front, in general, a group's number of fighters may depend on a complex set of factors including the extent to which it is capable of recruiting; its sources and amount of funding; the extent and nature of competition with proximate militant groups; the effectiveness of counterterrorism efforts against the group; and a group's transnational linkages with other organizations; among

many others.

Two plausible factors worth highlighting are whether and when a group's pledge to Islamic State Central was accepted, and second, the nature of the flow of foreign fighters to Iraq or Syria from a group's home country or region. First, having a pledge of *bay`a* accepted by Islamic State Central may have bolstered the Islamic State cells' reputations, helping them attract and retain fighters, and the authors' intuition is that groups whose pledges were accepted earlier on, before Islamic State Central was pushed onto the defensive in 2015, likely benefited in attracting more fighters. Second, Islamic State African groups may be smaller if more of the country or region's fighters left to go to Iraq and Syria, whereas those places with higher numbers of Islamic State sympathetic fighters *not* traveling to Iraq and Syria might have been able to grow larger as a result. The potential relationship between African group size and foreign fighter flows is particularly complex, and the authors especially welcome additional research into how this factor might operate in the cases presented in this piece.

Given the above, what does the future hold for the Islamic State's fighter presence in Africa? While answers remain conjectural, none of the largest Islamic State cells strike the authors as likely to experience significant growth. The Islamic State West Africa Province is increasingly on the back foot with the more or less effective counterterrorism tactics undertaken by the Nigerian government and the Multinational Joint Task Force, and the Egyptian regime's brutal counterterrorism tactics against the Islamic State in Sinai—which are now causing a humanitarian catastrophe, according to Human Rights Watch<sup>83</sup>—likely will dissuade others from moving to join the Islamic State-Sinai. In Libya, geography and the presence of rival militant organizations are oft-cited barriers to Islamic State expansion.<sup>84</sup> Instead, the authors imagine that the greatest opportunities for growth are in the smaller cells in Sub-Saharan Africa: namely, the Islamic State in Greater Sahara and the Islamic State in Somalia. Precisely because these cells are small and under-targeted, the presence of even dozens of additional fighters has the potential to engender significant proportional growth. Already, both ISGS and ISS have proven themselves to be capable of meaningful violence. With fewer than 200 fighters, the Islamic State in Somalia occu-

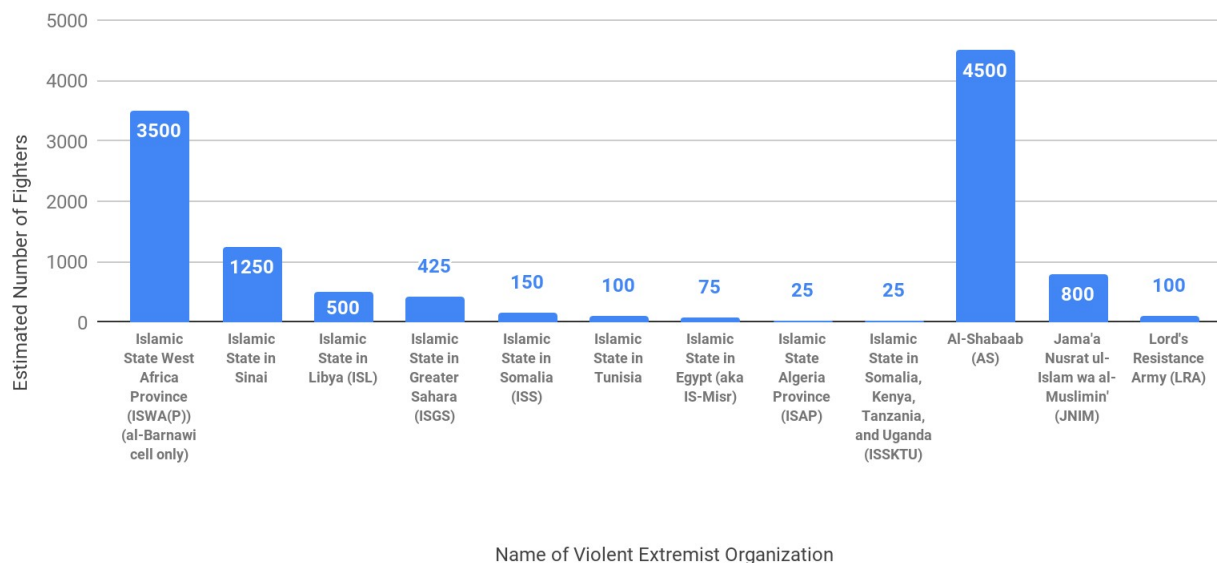


Figure 2: Estimated Numbers of Fighters in Various Violent Extremist Organizations Across Africa (July 2018)

ped the Somali port town of Qandala for nearly two months from October to December 2016, while just a handful of the Islamic State in Greater Sahara's soldiers were responsible for the deaths of four U.S. service members in the Tongo Tongo ambush in October 2017, marking the biggest U.S. military loss in Sub-Saharan Africa since the 1993 Black Hawk Down attack. However, while *proportional* growth may occur, neither of these cells is likely to match the Islamic West Africa Province or the Islamic State-Sinai in *absolute* fighter numbers.

The authors recognize that other phenomena besides fighter numbers—including power of message, sympathy of host communities, outside funding, and capacity to hold territory—are also salient components of understanding a terrorist group's strength. Appreciating fighter numbers from a comparative perspective, however, represents a crucial first step to better understanding both the landscape of the Islamic State's presence in Africa and the future of the Islamic State more broadly. **CTC**

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