FEATURE ARTICLE

Houthi Command and Control

MICHAEL KNIGHTS, ADNAN AL-GABARNI, AND CASEY COOMBS

FEATURE COMMENTARY

A Pragmatic Strategy to Counter Domestic Political Violence

BRIAN MICHAEL JENKINS

Contents

FROM THE EDITOR

With a truce in Yemen that had lasted six months elapsing in early October, there is concern that Yemen will once again be plunged into civil war and that the Tehran-allied Houthi militants will once again threaten Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates with drones and ballistic missiles. In this month's feature article, Michael Knights, Adnan al-Gabarni, and Casey Coombs provide a "fuller understanding of the Houthi political-military leadership, its core motivations, and the nature and extent of Iranian and Lebanese Hezbollah influence within the movement." Their study argues that "the Houthi movement is now more centralized and cohesive than ever, in part due to close mentoring from Lebanese Hezbollah and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps." They conclude that "the Houthi Jihad Council is emerging as a remarkable partner for Iran, and the Houthi-Iran relationship should no longer be viewed as a relationship of necessity, but rather a strong, deep-rooted alliance that is underpinned by tight ideological affinity and geopolitical alignment. The emergence of a 'southern Hezbollah' is arguably now a fact on the ground."

In this month's feature commentary, Brian Michael Jenkins thinks through what elements are necessary for a pragmatic and non-partisan strategy to counter domestic political violence. He writes that "Americans appear to reside in separate cultural and political camps. Increasing threats against public officials and displays of public hostility have prompted growing apprehension of future political violence. It is in this fragile and fraught environment that any efforts to contain politically motivated violence will have to operate." He stresses that it is important to recognize "the limits of what law enforcement can do while addressing the greater challenge of national reconciliation."

Our interview is with Air Vice-Marshal Sean Corbett, the founder and CEO of IntSight Global, a management consultancy within the intelligence and security sector with a focus on open-source intelligence. During his 30-year service in the Royal Air Force, Air Vice-Marshal Corbett worked in key leadership roles, including as Chief of U.K. Intelligence in Afghanistan and was the first non-U.S. Deputy Director of a major U.S. intelligence agency in serving in Washington, D.C., at the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA).

Paul Cruickshank, *Editor in Chief*

The Houthi Jihad Council: Command and Control in 'the Other Hezbollah'

By Michael Knights, Adnan al-Gabarni, and Casey Coombs

A fragile U.N.-brokered ceasefire between the Houthis and their military opponents in Yemen's Presidential Leadership Council (PLC) held from April to October 2022 but has now lapsed. The Houthis hold the key to an enduring ceasefire in Yemen, and can threaten the stability of Red Sea shipping lanes and the security of the United States and its partners in the Middle East. All these considerations necessitate a fuller understanding of the Houthi political-military leadership, its core motivations, and the nature and extent of Iranian and Lebanese Hezbollah influence within the movement. This study argues that the Houthi movement is now more centralized and cohesive than ever, in part due to close mentoring from Lebanese Hezbollah and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. The Houthi Jihad Council is emerging as a remarkable partner for Iran, and the Houthi-Iran relationship should no longer be viewed as a relationship of necessity, but rather a strong, deep-rooted alliance that is underpinned by tight ideological affinity and geopolitical alignment. The emergence of a 'southern Hezbollah' is arguably now a fact on the ground.

In September 2018, one of the authors of this article published an analysis of the military evolution of the Houthi movement[a] in *CTC Sentinel*, noting the group's very rapid five-year development from an insurgent group fielding roadside bombs to a state-level actor using medium-range ballistic missiles.[1] Since then, the Houthis have further consolidated their hold over the Yemeni capital, Sana'a, and the Red Sea coast port city of Hodeida, and nearly won the civil war with a sustained (but ultimately indecisive) military offensive against Yemen's oil and gas hub at Ma'rib.[2] On January 19, 2021, the outgoing Trump administration designated the Houthi organizational institution Ansar Allah as a foreign terrorist organization (FTO), a step that the Biden administration almost immediately revoked on February 16,

2021.[3] Some Houthi leaders remained covered by older sanctions[4b] (and additional Houthi military leaders continue to be added to U.S. sanctions lists) for posing a "threat to the peace, security, or stability of Yemen."[5]

A fragile U.N.-brokered ceasefire between the Houthis and their military opponents in Yemen's Presidential Leadership Council (PLC)[6] held from April to October 2022 but has (at the time of writing) lapsed,[7c] and the path to long-term conflict resolution remains unclear. As a rebel force now in control of much of the Yemeni state, the Houthis will likely be required to give up some of their gains in return for an enduring peace, and such a peace may not be welcomed by the Houthis' strongest backers in the war—namely Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah.[d] The Houthis continue to pose a military and counterterrorism threat to the United States

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a   Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells noted that the Houthis are known by a variety of names: "the 'Huthis' (al-Huthiyin), the 'Huthi movement' (al-Haraka al-Huthiya), 'Huthist elements' (al-'anasir al-Huthiya), 'Huthi supporters' (Ansar al-Huthi), or 'Believing Youth Elements' ('Anasir al-Shabab al-Mu'min)." Barak Salmoni, Bryce Loidolt, and Madeleine Wells, *Regime and Periphery in Northern Yemen: The Huthi Phenomenon* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2010), p. 189.

b   The U.S. government noted: "Ansarallah leaders Abdul Malik al-Houthi, Abd al-Khaliq Badr al-Din al-Houthi, and Abdullah Yahya al-Hakim remain sanctioned under E.O. 13611 related to acts that threaten the peace, security, or stability of Yemen." "Revocation of the Terrorist Designations of Ansarallah," U.S. Department of State, February 12, 2021.

c   The truce was up for renewal on October 2 but had not (at the time of publication) been renewed immediately and thus lapsed, perhaps temporarily.

d   The Saudi and Gulf military commitment in Yemen gives a competitive advantage to Iran, forcing Gulf missile defenses and other resources to be deployed away from the Gulf littoral shared with Iran and toward a new western and southern front. The Yemen war is a geopolitical lever on the Saudis that Iran, through its support to the Houthis, may be in a position to manipulate. See Gerald M. Feierstein, "Iran's Role in Yemen and Prospects for Peace," Middle East Institute, December 6, 2018, and Thomas Juneau, "How Iran Helped Houthis Expand Their Reach," War on the Rocks, August 23, 2021.

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and its partners in the region,[e] as well as a menace to global commerce in the Red Sea.[f] All these considerations necessitate a fuller understanding of the Houthi political-military leadership, its core motivations, and the nature and extent of Iranian and Lebanese Hezbollah influence within the movement.

In this new article, an enlarged and strengthened team with extensive on-the-ground access in Houthi-held areas[g] will look in-depth at the structure and composition of Houthi military leadership. An excellent anthropological and socio-political literature already exists on the Houthis thanks to ground-breaking studies by RAND[8] and the writings of academics such as Marieke Brandt.[9] This article builds on this literature by updating the RAND study and focusing more attention on military aspects and on the proven roles of Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah in Houthi military affairs. In the opening section, the article reviews the genealogical, social, political-religious, and environmental (i.e., wartime) drivers for the emergence of the current generation of Houthi military and security leaders. It next examines command politics under the Houthis' current leader Abdalmalik al-Huthi. It then looks in-depth at the Jihad Council established by the Houthis to centralize military and security decision-making using a mechanism adapted from Lebanese Hezbollah. Then the article looks at the role within the Houthi Jihad Council of the IRGC Jihad Assistant and his Lebanese Hezbollah Deputy. The next section explores the Houthi administrative takeover of Yemen's military institutions and the gradual mobilization and indoctrination of a new generation of active service soldiers and reserves. In the penultimate part, the article looks at how the Houthis employ armed forces and which commanders have operational control of key geographic commands and praetorian or specialized forces. The article concludes with analytic findings concerning which segments of the Houthi war machine might support conflict termination and which elements are most likely to continue to threaten the peace, security, or stability of Yemen.

Generational Change in the Houthi Leadership

The composition of the Houthi movement has changed throughout its lifespan, demonstrating (in the view of the authors) both a remarkable openness to an ever-broadening general membership but also, under the surface, an obdurate refusal to share real power beyond a small set of male antecedents related to religious scholar Badr al-Din al-Huthi, a *sadah*[10] (descendant of the Prophet) and

influential Zaydi[h] preacher until his death (by natural causes) in 2010.[11] Of critical importance, Badr al-Din and his sons were members of the minority Jarudi sect of Zaydism,[i] the denomination of Zaydism closest to Shi`a Islam in political theology.[j]

Badr al-Din was thus the root of today's Houthi movement, which is still dominated by his sons and other male relatives.[12] The four marriages of Badr al-Din[13] created the foundation of the Houthi movement in the Sa`ada province of northern Yemen. Badr al-Din had 13 sons who reached maturity.[14] Of these 13, most married at least once. This created a baseline force consisting of circles of tribal protection for Badr al-Din and his sons. As noted by Marieke Brandt, the preeminent anthropologist of the Houthi area, the Khawlan tribal confederation of northern Yemen was "the first incubator of the Houthi movement."[15]

Husayn Badr al-Din al-Huthi built upon this base to form the first generation of the Houthi paramilitary movement in the 1980s and 1990s.[16] He had his father's gift for oratory and religious studies, and he was highly political.[k] Born in either 1956 or 1959, Husayn

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e   As earlier footnotes detail, the Houthis have been designated as a threat to the peace and stability of Yemen. They have also fired anti-shipping missiles at U.S. naval vessels, kidnapped American citizens, fired missiles and drones at Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and threatened Israel. For a review of the case for designating the Houthis as terrorists, see Lucy van der Kroft, "Yemen's Houthis and the Terrorist Designation System," International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague (ICCT), June 2021, pp. 11-16.

f   For instance, then president of the Houthi Supreme Political Council Saleh al-Samad, said the Houthis would "cut international navigation," and the Houthi television channel Al-Masirah added that al-Samad threatened to "block the Red Sea and target international navigation." See Ali Mahmood, "Houthis threaten to block shipping traffic in Red Sea," *National*, January 9, 2018.

g   Al Masdar Online and the Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies both operate extensive contact networks and research capabilities focused on (and present in) Houthi-held northern Yemen.

h   The Zaydi branch as a whole cannot be clearly defined as Sunni or Shi`a. Qom-trained theologian Mehdi Khalaji reflects a mainstream view that Zaydi jurisprudence is most similar to the Hanafi and Shafei (Sunni) schools of Islamic law. Like Sunni branches of Islam, most Zaydis do not reject Abu Bakr, Omar, and Uthman as the Prophet Mohammad's rightful successors. Yemeni Zaydism differs from prevalent "Twelver" Shi`a Muslims dominant in Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon because Twelvers see the proper line of descent from Prophet Mohammad running via one descendent (the fifth imam, Mohammed al-Baqir) to a messianic 12th imam, while the "Fiver" Zaydis believe in a different line of descent and method of succession branching from their preferred fifth imam, Zayd. See Mehdi Khalaji, "Yemen's Zaydis: A Window for Iranian Influence," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, February 2, 2015. See also "Appendix B: Zaydism" in Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, pp. 290-294. See also "From Insurgents to Hybrid Sector Actors? Deconstructing Yemen's Huthi Movement," Instituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale, April 2017.

i   Badr al-Din's family are adherents to the Jarudi sect of the Zaydi branch of Islam (with the other contemporaneous sects being Sulaymaniya, Jaririya, Butriya, and Salihiya). Houthi news sources tend to downplay this fact, but even their own leaders occasionally reference it. Mohammed Azzan, a co-founder of Believing Youth and a leading mainstream Zaydi revivalist, identifies the Houthi movement as "a political movement with a religious background belonging to the Zaydi sect, especially the Jarudi current." See Mohammed Azzan, "The Houthis directed the path of 'believing youth' to an extremist project," Alameenpress.net, accessed on October 11, 2022. For broader studies on the Jarudi aspect of the Houthi movement, see Nasser Abdullah Al-Qafari, "Zaydi Innocence from the Houthis," *Al Bayan Magazine* 337 (2015) and also the following two Arabic books: Ahmed Mohammed al-Daghshi, "The Houthis: A Comprehensive Methodological Study," Arab House of Sciences, December 2009 and Suleiman al-Saleh al-Ghosn and Suleiman Bin Saleh Bin Abdulaziz, "The Truth About the Houthis," King Fahd National Library, 2010.

j   The Jarudi are the closest of any Zaydi sect to mainstream "Twelver" Shiism practiced in Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon. Unlike other Zaydis, and in keeping with mainstream Shiism, the Jarudis reject Abu Bakr, Omar, and Uthman as usurpers of Ali's right to be Prophet Mohammad's rightful successor. On Jarudi beliefs, see the excellent tables and discussion in "Appendix B: Zaydism" in Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, pp. 290-294. See also Nadwa Al-Dawsari, "The Houthis' endgame in Yemen," Al Jazeera Opinion, December 21, 2017, and Noman Ahmed and Mahmoud Shamsan, "Analysis: Origins of the Houthi supremacist ideology," Commonspace, August 23, 2022.

k   Husayn embraced all forms of political Islamic activity. He was briefly a member of Yemen's parliament for a year. He broke with mainstream Zaydism by proselytizing and propagating his political beliefs in a manner that was unusual for Zaydis. Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, p. 290. See also Marieke Brandt, *Tribes and Politics in Yemen: A History of the Houthi Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 150.

was a young and politically receptive twenty-something when the Islamic Revolution unfolded in Iran. Far from reluctant or recent partners of Iran, Badr al-Din and Husayn's family enthusiastically embraced Khomeinism and the example of the Islamic Revolution.[l] As Morteza Mohatwari, a senior Zaydi cleric, said in 2010, for Zaydis of Husayn's generation the Iranian regime's version of Twelver Shiism is the true Zaydism because it mobilizes the masses to confront foreign powers and unjust rulers.[m] His father Badr al-Din visited Iran (and Beirut) for intermittent stays between 1979 and Badr al-Din's death in 2010,[17] usually taking Husayn and later some of his other sons with him, notably his fifth son, Mohammed (born around 1965),[18] and his ninth son, Abdalmalik (born around 1979),[n] both of whom were avid religious students produced by Badr al-Din's unions with *sadah* families.[o]

By the early 1990s, Husayn had two main political influences: Iran's first Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and Usama bin Ladin, both of whose speeches he followed with particular fascination due to their willingness to stand up to Israel and to American "arrogance."[p] In 1994, Badr al-Din and Husayn began sending 40 religious students a year to Qom[q]—a flow that would eventually produce around 800 Qom-trained students,[r] some of whom are reported to have been groomed by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) with paramilitary training.[19] In 1999-2000, Husayn Badr al-Din spent a year undertaking religious studies in Khartoum[20] at a time when Sudan was the most active IRGC and Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) outstation on the Red Sea.[21] Husayn then went from Sudan to Iran, and when he returned from this retreat, he introduced the now infamous slogan that supercharged the Houthi movement, "the scream" (*al-shi'ar*): "Death to America, Death to Israel, Curse upon the Jews, Victory to Islam."[22]

Scholars disagree on the fundamental drivers of Husayn's political ambitions: One theory is that Badr al-Din and Husayn were primarily pursuing a so-called *hadawi*[23] agenda, a doctrine that held *sadah* (collectively the Ahl al-Bayt, the descendants of the Prophet) to be superior to other Yemenis and the only caste fit for leadership.[24] In the *hadawi* theory, Badr al-Din and Husayn sought a return of some form of imamate or other system of governance under *sadah* leadership (which had been the long preeminent form of government in parts of northern Yemen from around 897 AD until 1962 AD).[25] Others see a combination of social mobility and dynastic agendas,[26] with Badr al-Din and Husayn outmaneuvering longer-established and richer Zaydi *sadah* families through the dynamic use of a Lebanese Hezbollah-type Zaydi-Shi`a revivalist movement (called "Believing/Faithful Youth" (*Muntada al-Shahabal-Mu'min*)) that employed summer camps, social programs, and a political party.[27] Still others assess that Badr al-Din and Husayn were surreptitiously introducing Jarudi Zaydism and related Iranian Twelver aspects to the broader Zaydi practice of Islam[28] [s]—what Oved Lobel characterized as "a neo-Twelver core carved out of the Zaydi revival."[29] All, some, or none of these motives for Badr al-Din and Husayn's activism may have been operative at the same time, but what the authors of this study assess can be said with a higher degree of certainty is that Husayn and his father were intent on breaking the mold of northern Yemeni political Islam and that they looked to the Islamic Revolution in Iran and to Lebanese Hezbollah for inspiration, ideas, and support.[t]

All of the above factors shaped the composition of the Houthi leadership that emerged under Husayn and entered the first of the six wars that raged between the Yemeni government and the Houthi movement in 2004-2010.[30] Husayn now commanded a sizable

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l   Qom-trained theologian Mahdi Khalaji noted that "Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution, led by a Twelver Shiite jurist, was a theological surprise for Zaidis in Yemen because they had believed that such uprisings were what differentiated them from Twelvers. Subsequently, the Twelver branch became so appealing to Yemeni Shiites that many of them traveled to Iran to learn more about it." See Khalaji.

m   Khalaji quotes Hassan Zaid, the leader of the Houthi political party Al-Haq, as telling him: "We believe that Khomeini was a true Zaidi. Theologically our differences with Hezbollah and the Iranian government are minor, but politically we are identical." Khalaji.

n   Abdalmalik's birthdate is variously given as between 1979 and 1982, depending on the source. The authors assess, based on the preponderance of anecdotal reporting, that Abdalmalik's birthdate is closer to 1979. Drawn from details from interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request. See also "Yemen designations," U.S. Department of Treasury, April 14, 2015.

o   For years after the war, Husayn berated Yemen's government for fighting the Islamic Republic of Iran. See this audio recording: Husayn Badr al-Din, "A rare clip of the founder of the Houthi movement, Hussein al-Houthi, in which he threatens to punish the Yemeni army for its participation against Iran," YouTube, May 8, 2017, available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UZZt810mvFE

p   Husayn used to repeat the phrase that "the nation will not defeat America and Israel without the leadership of Ahl al-Bayt," meaning the *sadah*, seeing himself as a Hashemite version of Usama bin Ladin. For instance: "On the day [Osama] appeared, and we saw many people thinking that he would be the savior of the nation, we would say: 'No, that will never be achieved through his hands … The nation's salvation from the mid guidance it is experiencing will only be at the hands of the family of the Messenger of God.'" See Husayn Badr al-Din al-Houthi, "Lessons from the guidance of the holy Quran: The responsibility of Ahl al-Bayt, peace be upon them," Huda.live.com, December 21, 2002.

q   Forty students per year were paid for by the Iranian authorities, a flow that continued from 1994 to the blockade of Yemen after the Houthi coup in September 2014. Drawn from an interview for this study. Names of interviewee, and date and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

r   Forty students per year in the 20 years between 1994 and 2014 equals 800 individual students.

s   Brandt notes: "To many Zaydis, the new dynamic, self-assertive Zaydi activism, which had emerged from the confrontation with Sunni extremism, was quite unfamiliar; some suspected that the Houthi movement was in fact not a revival of Yemeni Zaydism, but rather an externally operated movement influenced by Iranian Twelver Shiism." Brandt, p. 146. Jarudism and Twelver rituals were hidden in the 1980s as the Yemeni government persecuted Jarudis and Twelvers for their connection to Iran, which Yemen fought in the Iran-Iraq War as an ally to Iraq. See Khalaji. Today in Houthi-controlled areas, Twelver religious practices such as the public commemoration of Ashura are becoming widespread in a way that is foreign to mainstream Yemeni Zaydism. See Cameron Glenn, Garrett Nada, and Mattisan Rowan, "Who are Yemen's Houthis?" Wilson Center, July 7, 2022.

t   The 2010 RAND study took a muted view of Iran's influence on the Houthis. See Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, pp. 120-123, 170-171. Over time, more evidence has emerged showing the longevity of Iran's covert operations in Yemen, including through leaked documents. For instance, see the interesting document archive stretching back to the 1980s at "Houthis in special documents(2): Comprehensive intelligence report on Iranian efforts to find a foothold in Yemen since the 1980s," Al Masdar Online, April 16, 2020. See also the detailed revisionist text: Oved Lobel, "Becoming Ansar Allah: How the Islamic Revolution Conquered Yemen," Report No. 20, European Eye on Radicalization, March 2021.

cohort of Khawlan bir Amir confederation tribesmen, including hundreds of religious students sent to Qom seminaries and well over 10,000 young men sent through Believing Youth summer camps and social or educational programs under his stewardship inside Yemen.[31 u] This initial Houthi cadre demonstrated some of the enduring characteristics of Houthi command and control.

First, in the authors' assessment, the movement preferred the membership of fighters who were with Husayn since the start of the six wars in 2004. In the authors' view, this cadre had advantages over all later joiners due to the longevity of their loyalty and their war service.[32] Examples of these elevated early joiners include key *sadah* military commanders Yusuf al-Madani (who married a daughter of Husayn)[v] and Abdullah Yahya al-Hakim (Abu Ali),[w] who Houthi movement historiographer Marieke Brandt characterized as Abdalmalik's military second-in-command in the years leading up to the Houthi takeover of the government in 2014. Non-*sadah* leaders of this status were rare, the exception being Husayn's closest friend and ally prior to Husayn's death in 2004, Abdullah Eida al-Razzami, a *qabili* politician of similar age who served as his right-hand man in the first Houthi-government war in 2004.[33]

In the authors' assessment, the struggle to replace Husayn as the Houthi leader in 2005 spotlighted the second key characteristic of Houthi command and control arrangements—that is, Badr al-Din's strong preference for *sadah* leadership drawn only from the

ranks of his relatives.[x] As noted, northern Yemen has a deep-seated caste system, topped by the *sadah*, following by other castes—the tribal sheikhs and administrators (*qadi*), and the "third type" (*ahl al-thuluth*), such as artisans, shopkeepers, restaurateurs, and merchants.[34] When Husayn was killed by the Yemeni government in 2004, Badr al-Din moved swiftly to personally hold the leadership of the Houthi movement[35] in order to prevent leadership from passing outside his family, even to a longstanding *qabili* loyalist such as Abdullah Eida al-Razzami or a *sadah* in-law such as Yusuf al-Madani.[36]

The selection of Abdalmalik, then a young man in his early twenties, as the supreme military commander of the wartime Houthi movement shines light on a third trend in Houthi command and control—that is, the dominance of leaders with a special connection to Iran and Hezbollah. Setting aside the imprisoned Mohammed[y] and the exiled Yahya,[37] Badr al-Din bypassed five eligible sons older than Abdalmalik when Husayn died: Abdalqader, Ahmad, Hamid, Amir al-Din, and Ibrahim.[38] Indeed, in the authors' reading of events, Badr al-Din did not hesitate to risk alienating the most senior tribes loyal to the Houthis and his elder sons at a critical moment in the movement's struggle with the Yemeni government in 2005-2006. Badr al-Din threw his weight behind Abdalmalik, the oldest child of his second *sadah* bride and his ninth oldest son, who had joined him on more visits to Iran than any other son except Husayn and who was a gifted religious scholar and orator.[39] In the authors' assessment, this showed that the man entrusted with leadership of the Houthi movement had to share the same vision and experiences as Badr al-Din and Husayn—that is, pursuit of an Islamic Revolution modeled on Iran and Hezbollah.[40]

Command Politics under Abdalmalik
In the view of the authors, the Houthi movement's current leader

> "The selection of Abdalmalik, then a young man in his early twenties, as the supreme military commander of the wartime Houthi movement shines light on a third trend in Houthi command and control—that is, the dominance of leaders with a special connection to Iran and Hezbollah."

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u   The RAND study notes that "around 15,000 boys and young men had passed through Believing Youth camps each year," adding that the Believing Youth were an ideal mechanism to groom a fighting cadre, noting: "that demographic base—or their younger siblings—went on to provide a recruitable hard core, susceptible (or vulnerable) to the masculine assertion furnished by resistance and armed activity … the rituals or gatherings appropriated by the Houthis—where adolescents and young adults congregate together with 'adult' fighters—make ideal environments for socialization and recruitment of youth." Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, p. 254.

v   Al-Madani was born in 1977 in Muhatta, in Hajjar governorate, but he spent his youth as one of the most promising students of Husayn Badr al-Din al-Huthi in Sa`ada. He married one of Husayn's daughters (a *sharifa*, or daughter of a *sadah*) and gained a powerful reputation as a commander in all the six wars and the fighting since then. His brother Taha al-Madani, another very senior Houthi field commander, was killed in 2016, seemingly in Lahj. On May 20, 2021, al-Madani was sanctioned by the United States for threatening the peace, security, and stability of Yemen, followed by the United Nations on November 9, 2021. See "Treasury Sanctions Senior Houthi Military Official Overseeing Group's Offensive Operations," U.S. Department of Treasury, May 20, 2021, and "Yusuf al-Madani," United Nations Security Council, November 9, 2021. Details gathered from interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

w   Abu Ali is believed to have been born in 1984-1986 to a *sadah* family (al-Moayyed) from Dahyan, Sa`ada. His early arrest by the Saleh government in May 2005 for undertaking assassination and roadside bomb attacks in Sana'a suggests that (even in the early years of the war against the government) he had received covert operations training of a kind different from most Houthi tactical commanders. See "Houthis in Special Documents(6) .. Report from the Counter-Terrorism Center on the crime for which Abu Ali al-Hakim, Fouad, Mohammed al-Imad and others were imprisoned," Al Masdar Online, May 9, 2020. See also his U.N. and U.S. government sanctions designations at "Abdullah Yahya al-Hakim," U.N. Security Council, November 7, 2014, and "Yemen-related designations," U.S. Department of Treasury, November 10, 2014.

x   *Sadah* leadership (through religious authority) of *qabili* social groupings is an old and tested formula in northern Yemen. Adel Dashela, "Northern Yemeni Tribes during the Eras of Ali Abdullah Saleh and the Houthi Movement: A Comparative Study," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, February 16, 2022, pp. 3, 12, 13.

y   Mohammed was only released in 2006. Brandt, p. 172. Omar al-Amqi related from his interview with Mohammed Badr al-Din: "When I asked Mohammed why he didn't take over the leadership of the organization, he replied smiling: 'I was in prison, and my brother Abdulmalik was a lieutenant of my father and close to him, and I was not released from prison until the situation is like this as you can see.'" See Omar al-Amqi, "Why didn't the Houthi leadership devolve to Mohammed Badreddine?" Al Masdar Online, April 11, 2010.

Abdalmalik al-Huthi has demonstrated personal leadership qualities that are without doubt impressive: He is ruthless, pragmatic, unemotional, charismatic, and effective at building networks of personal loyalty and control.[41] In Abdalmalik's style of public talking, it is clear that he models himself closely on Lebanese Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah.[z] The second to sixth wars against the Yemeni government in 2005-2010 saw Abdalmalik progressively develop and perfect his grasp over the military command structure.[42] He toured the expanding frontlines of the war, and he successively sidelined older Houthi leaders of Husayn's generation and disowned involvement in their tribal feuds.[aa] Instead, Abdalmalik cultivated a clique of younger "field commanders" (*qa'id maydan*)[43] closer to his own age but often (significantly) just younger than him and thus less senior than him in years as well as religious education.[ab] These commanders were typically students of Husayn who had known each other in the Believing Youth camps and shared the formative experience of fighting in the six wars.[44]

One of the better known field commanders was the aforementioned Abdullah Yahya al-Hakim (Abu Ali),[45] Abdalmalik's military second-in-command after the sidelining of the *qabili* commander Abdullah Eida al-Razzami by 2006.[46] Even accounting for some hyperbole and Abu Ali's active intimidation of the press (which may generate hagiographic treatment),[47] Abu Ali was (in 2006-2014) an unequaled military-political player with a track record of battlefield success.[48] Abu Ali gained in importance throughout the six wars[ac] and then took on a pivotal role in the Houthi consolidation of power[ad] after the collapse of the Yemeni government in the Arab Spring uprisings in 2011.[ae] Abdalmalik also overcame Yusuf al-Madani's rivalry[49] and kept him and Yusuf's capable brother Taha as key field commanders, and Abdalmalik also

eventually thawed hard feelings with Abdallah Eida al-Razzami by supporting the ambitions of al-Razzami's eldest son, Yahya.[af]

Thus, Abdalmalik built a cohesive and trusted command group by the end of the sixth war in 2010—almost all young men (like Abdalmalik) in their late twenties or early thirties, with very similar religious backgrounds cultivated in the Believing Youth movement, and with strong personal intra-group affinity within the *sadah* elite, forged from childhood and through war.[50] Others drawn from this "war generation" are Abdalmalik's full brother Abdalkhaliq, a few years younger than him,[51] and Mohammed Ali al-Houthi, a close first cousin of Abdalmalik, born just after Abdalmalik, who also emerged as a key advisor to Abdalmalik on social and political matters.[52]

In the authors' assessment, this command cadre—the war generation, molded in their twenties as the six wars raged—are today the heart of the Houthi military and regime security command and control structure. They did not have much memory of the Zaydi revivalist movement before Husayn, before the Believing Youth camps, before Iranian and Lebanese Hezbollah military support, and before the "the scream" (*al-shi'ar*).[53] In that sense, they are exactly what Husayn named them: the "followers of the slogan" (*Ashab al-Shi'ar*).[54]

Abdalmalik kept these men alongside him as the Houthi movement transitioned from insurgents in 2010 to co-equals in the post-Arab Spring National Dialogue Conference between March 2013 and January 2014,[55] and finally to the rulers of northern Yemen after their September 2014 coup against the U.N.-backed government.[ag] Yet, Abdalmalik also kept three influential older men in his military and security decision-making circle, and these may be particularly influential. One was Ahmed Mohammed Yahya Hamid (known as Ahmed Hamid or Abu Mahfouz), a

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z   In the authors' assessment, Abdalmalik deliberately uses the same calm tone as Nasrallah, inflecting and raising his voice only in specific phrases to fire up the audience in a way that mimics the Hezbollah leader. In addition to rhetorical similarities, they both wear a ring on the little finger of their right hands, often appear in front of the same blue background, and constantly praise each other in letters. For an example of similar rhetorical styles, see "Hezbollah and Ansar Allah, the Soldiers of God that strike in the ground," YouTube, October 12, 2016. Qom-trained theologian Mehdi Khalaji has also noted Abdalmalik's apparent fascination with Nasrallah. See Khalaji.

aa   For instance, in March 2005-June 2007 (2nd to 4th war) feuding between al-Razzami and the Al Mahdi clans, Abdalmalik distanced himself and explicitly did not support his father's friend, al-Razzami. Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, pp. 185, 309. See also Brandt, pp. 122, 129-130.

ab   In the authors' collective view, this is significant. Age is important in the Arab world. Even a few years' seniority in age between men gives a kind of precedence that can be exploited by the elder man.

ac   Abu Ali was in prison in 2005, before breaking out on January 27, 2006. See Brandt, p. 189. Thereafter, Abu Ali was critical in many fronts, especially late-war fighting in 2009-2010 in Manabbih. See Brandt, pp., 297, 304-305.

ad   Abu Ali is also believed to have played a major role in establishing the Houthi tactic of setting up local supervisors (*mushrifeen*) across all districts in Yemen and within all ministries and major military units, akin to a political commissar system of surveillance and parallel authority. See Adnan al- Gabarni, "Who are the Houthis? The hidden structures and key leaders who actually run the organization," Al Masdar Online English, March 14, 2022.

ae   Abu Ali was described by Brandt as the key military player in post-2010 Houthi takeovers and tribal fighting in Dammaj, Amran, and Sana'a. See Brandt, pp. 279-280, 334-335.

af   Yahya appears to have been born in 1987, making him in his mid-thirties now, while his father Abdullah Eida al-Razzami is in his mid-sixties. See Gregory D. Johnsen, "The Kingpin of Sana'a – A Profile of Ahmed Hamed," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, May 18, 2021. In May 2022, Yahya was appointed head of a Houthi delegation sent to Amman, Jordan, to negotiate with the internationally recognized government over the reopening of roads in Taiz, as part of the U.N.-brokered truce that started in April 2022 (and which has lapsed since October 2, 2022, at the time of writing). Adnan al-Gabarni, "Why did al-Houthi choose Yahya al-Razami as a representative in the negotiations to lift the siege of Taiz?" Al Masdar Online, May 27, 2022.

ag   As Al Masdar Online has chronicled in great detail, the Houthi shadow government represents a parallel system of supervisory bodies in which real policy-making authority is vested, under which the formal Yemeni government architecture exists to execute Houthi orders. Under Abdalmalik's Office of the Sayyed, there is the General Council, Executive Council Supreme Political Council, Government Work Authority, Governorate Affairs Council, Judicial Council, and Tribal Cohesion Council. These are almost all run by Abdalmalik's hand-picked cadre of thirty-somethings: for instance, a close confidante Safar al-Sufi at the General Council; groomed Abdalmalik loyalist Qassem al Humran at the Executive Council; Abdalmalik's friend Mahdi al-Mashat at the Supreme Political Council; Mahmoud al Junaid at the Government Works Authority; plus Mohammed Abdalsalam and Abdalmalik al-Ajri as his foreign representatives and spokesmen. As with any rule, there are exceptions—one being the involvement of Husayn-era leaders like Mohsen al-Hamzi (Judicial Council head) and Saleh Mesfir Farhan al-Shaer (judicial guardian of confiscated properties) under Abdalmalik. See al-Gabarni, "Who are the Houthis?" Details also topped up with interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

key follower of Husayn[ah] who is the director of the President of the Supreme Political Council Mahdi al-Mashat's office and the powerful Government Works Authority,[56] and is a few years older than Abdalmalik.[ai] According to Gregory Johnsen's research, it was Ahmed Hamid who lobbied for Badr al-Din to hold open the leadership role for Abdalmalik in his early years as the 'prince regent' of the Houthi movement in 2005-2010.[57] The second older advisor with direct access to Abdalmalik is Ahsan al-Humran (detailed below), who is Abdalmalik's Preventative Security (*al-Amn al-Waqa'i*) chief[58] and oversees the Houthi intelligence agencies.[59] A third older figure—and the only one drawn from outside Abdalmalik's circle—is Abdalkarim Amir al-Din, a much younger brother of Badr al-Din[aj] and thus an uncle to Abdalmalik who is about 14 years older than him.[ak] Abdalkarim is the Minister of Interior in the Houthi-controlled Sana'a government with close ties to the IRGC and Lebanese Hezbollah.[60] But even in this case, Abdalmalik's people seem to be slowly taking over: The Ministry of Interior (MoI) has been brought under the supervision of Ahsan al-Humran, and one of Husayn's own sons, Ali, is positioned to succeed Abdalkarim at the MoI.[al]

Abdalmalik's Jihad Council

The first three years of Houthi control of Sana'a and northern and western Yemen in 2014-2017 represented an uneasy partnership between the Houthis and their co-conspirator in the 2014 takeover, ousted president Ali Abdullah Saleh.[61] This changed in December 2017 when long-standing tensions boiled over between Saleh's forces and the Houthis, with Saleh being killed by Houthi forces on December 4, 2017,[62] allowing the Houthis full and unfettered control of the Sana'a-based government and military for the first time.[63]

In the reorganization that followed, the Houthis' Jihad Council, the movement's supreme command authority, became more

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ah Greg Johnsen says Ahmed Hamid was born in 1972 and was the key backer of Abdalmalik as the successor to Husayn, energizing others to push Abdalmalik's takeover. See Johnsen.

ai The United Nations reported in 2021 that Ahmed Hamid leads the Supreme Political Committee of the Houthi movement (its politburo, in effect) and the Houthi-controlled Supreme Council for the Management and Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (SCMCHA), where he oversees "intimidation of opponents, corruption activities including the diversion of humanitarian aid." See "Letter dated 22 January 2021 from the Panel of Experts on Yemen addressed to the President of the Security Council," United Nations Security Council, January 25, 2021, p. 17. See also Johnsen.

aj Badr al-Din al-Huthi was born in the early 1920s while his brother Abdalkarim was born around 1965, making him slightly younger than (his nephew) Husayn Badr al-Din (born in 1956 or 1959). Brandt, p. 172; Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, p. 106.

ak Abdalkarim is regularly mentioned as one of the top three power blocs within the Houthi movement. See Johnsen. See also Abdalkarim's involvement with the *mushrifeen* system in "The Houthi Supervisory System," Yemen Analysis Hub, ACAPS, June 17, 2020, p. 3. One report places Abdalkarim as Abdalmalik's designated successor. See "Abdel Malik al-Houthi Chooses His Uncle to Succeed Him," Asharq Al-Awsat, September 16, 2018.

al Colonel Ali Husayn al-Huthi, Husayn Badr al-Din's son, is currently the commander of police forces, which is a deputy ministerial role that typically leads to appointment as minister. Details provided in interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.


"The Houthi Jihad Council bears an unmistakable similarity to Lebanese Hezbollah's own Jihad Council, including the centralization of intelligence and counter-intelligence functions at Jihad Council level."

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visible.[64] This body had existed since 2010 or 2011, coincident with the sixth Sa`da war (and growing IRGC and Lebanese Hezbollah involvement).[65] It was a well-kept secret until around 2018, when testimony of its existence started to slip out with Saleh loyalist defectors and enhanced scrutiny of the Houthi leadership.[66] With Saleh dead, the Jihad Council, consisting of approximately nine members, now exercised its authority without disturbance by its former ally. The Houthi Jihad Council bears an unmistakable similarity to Lebanese Hezbollah's own Jihad Council,[67] including the centralization of intelligence and counter-intelligence functions at Jihad Council level.[68] Like Hezbollah's Jihad Council (which is loosely overseen by Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah),[69] the Houthi Jihad Council is formally led by the overall movement's leader, in this case Abdalmalik al-Huthi, who has been styled "the Leader of the Quranic Procession."[70] In the authors' assessment, there is a lot of anecdotal evidence that Abdalmalik rarely—if ever—physically meets with all the Jihad Council due to the stringent security precautions he takes, in which the leader remains distant and meets almost no other Houthi leaders[am] except perhaps Ahmed Hamid and Ahsan al-Humran.[71]

The Houthi Jihad Council has a small secretariat, the Jihad Office, which is led by an Abdalmalik loyalist known as (secretary general or rapporteur) Abu Mohammed.[an] Aside from an Iranian and Lebanese representative (see below), the remaining full members of the Jihad Council include an observer from the General Council (who also represents the Executive Council); the Operations Official; the Military Regions Official; the Jihad Preparation Official; the Special Forces Official; and the Security

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am "Distant" is a word that recurs in interviews with Yemenis who have insight into Abdalmalik's leadership style since he formally replaced Badr al-Din as the Houthi leader in 2010. Based on the preponderance of evidence from interviews, all major military and security decisions go to Abdalmalik for approval via the Jihad Office secretariat, the General Council, and the Office of the Sayyed. Physical threat may be a factor because of the increased risk of geo-location and targeting by precision weapons when Saudi Arabia became directly involved in fighting the Houthis. Iranian and Hezbollah protective security training may be a related factor as well. Security protocols surrounding Abdalmalik are extraordinarily thorough, rivaling and resembling those around Lebanese Hezbollah commander Hassan Nasrallah. According to Marieke Brandt, these precautions began in December 2008, which is logical as it was just ahead of the sixth war and at a point when the Houthis were attracting more support from Lebanese Hezbollah. See Brandt, pp. 309, 314. Some details also provided in interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

an Abu Mohammed is known to be a former student of Husayn Badr al-Din al-Huthi and a *sadah* from the Houthi home province of Sa`ada. Details provided in interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.
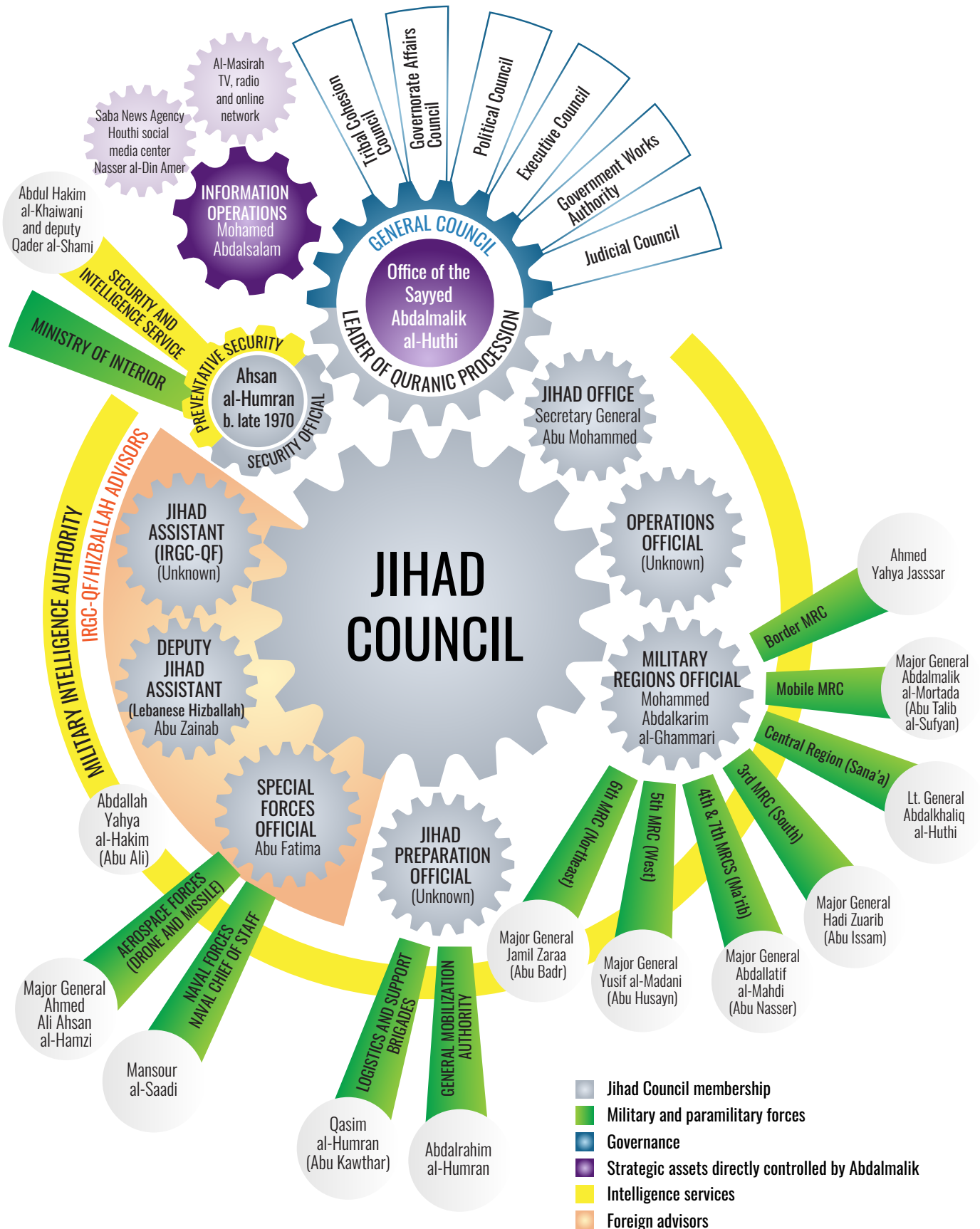
Organizational structure of the Houthi military and security apparatus
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Official.[72] As later sections will detail, the Operations and Military Regions officials assist with operational coordination functions across the different geographic military zones.[73] Also discussed in following sections below, the Jihad Preparation Official focuses on recruitment, indoctrination, and force generation issues.[74]

Mohammed Abdal Salam,[ao] a close contact of Abdalmalik al-Huthi, sometimes attends the Jihad Council, seemingly in his non-public role as the head of Houthi media operations.[75] Known best as the primary (Oman-based) point of contact between the Houthi movement and foreign journalists and think-tanks,[76] Abdal Salam is the founding father of Houthi propaganda and disinformation capabilities.[77] Working closely with the Iran-established Islamic Radio and Television Union (IRTVU)[78] and Lebanese Hezbollah media organs,[79] Abdal Salam and Houthi Information Minister Dhaif Allah al-Shami[80] have built out what the authors' assess to be one of the most powerful Houthi strategic attack capabilities, namely its raft of television, radio, and social media broadcasters.[81] As well as controlling and censoring landline and cellular mobile internet inside Houthi-controlled Yemen,[ap] the Houthis have developed a powerful offensive capability aimed at controlling the international narrative surrounding the conflict in Yemen, which has sometimes achieved decisive strategic results.[aq] In addition to strong support from most of IRTVU's members in television and radio,[ar] the Houthis directly control their own Beirut-based Al-Masirah satellite television station and the Sana'a headquarters of Yemen's SABA News agency.[82] Abdal Salam has a deputy, SABA News director Nasser al-Din Amer,[as] who heads up social media operations via a dedicated social media center.[at] This operation includes the centralized creation of messaging and hashtag campaigns, with well-managed "Twitter banks" of prepared content for crowds of supporters to draw upon and amplify, including with instructions of how to avoid being detected as bots by Twitter content algorithms.[83] As is the case in Iraq,[84] Lebanese Hezbollah's Arabic-fluent media advisors seem to have played a long-standing role in building out Houthi information operation capabilities.[au]

The Special Forces Official represents the so-called "qualitative forces" such as missile and drone forces, naval capabilities, and technical training programs.[85] These are strategic capabilities that are commanded directly by the Jihad Council.[86] Historically, these Special Forces Officials are only usually identified after their death: One was Hamud al-Ghumran, who died in combat around 2017;[87] the next was Hasan al-Jaradi[88] (Abu Shahid[av]), a combat veteran from the very heart of Sa`da who was killed in Hodeida in 2018;[aw] and a final official called Mohammed Abdalkarim al-Humran was killed on the Marib frontline (at Sirwah) in 2020.[89] The current Special Forces Official appears to be known only as Abu Fatima.[90]

The aforementioned Security Official (Ahsan al-Humran)[91] appears to be dual-hatted as the head of the Preventative Security body, which oversees all the other intelligence agencies[ax] (with the

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ao His real name is Abdal Salam Salah Falita. Provided in interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

ap The Houthis control the .ye domain through their physical control of internet landlines entering Yemen at Hodeida and the backbone inside northern Yemen. They employ sophisticated censorship tools (such as Netsweeper). See Elias Groll, "The Other War in Yemen—for Control of the Country's Internet," *Foreign Policy*, November 28, 2018, and Robert Muggah, "Yemen's Parallel War in Cyberspace," *Foreign Policy*, January 6, 2022.

aq In the authors' collective experience, Houthi information operations and strategic propaganda efforts were ultimately more effective than the Houthi armed forces in stopping the UAE-backed Hodeida offensive in 2018. While Houthi defenses were crumbling on the ground, the real pressure that stopped the anti-Houthi advance came in the way the fighting was framed and presented to U.S. congressional leaders via the media and think-tanks (i.e., as a threat to humanitarian access and an insurmountable military challenge). This is the authors' collective conclusion, based on their synthesis of the known facts.

ar Notably Iranian state television and radio, plus Hezbollah's Al-Manar, Al-Mayadin, and Al-Sahat. A comprehensive listing is provided in Abdo Albahesh, "The Relations of Houthis with Iran and Hezbollah," Medium, November 4, 2018.

as Amer is also the Undersecretary of Yemen's Ministry of Interior. Details provided in interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

at Twitter is the Houthi's most prolific social media type, followed by Facebook, YouTube, and other websites, and lastly Telegram. See Groll.

au Lebanese Hezbollah liaison officers appear to be (at the time of publication) led by Hezbollah operative Husayn al-Dirani, who has supported Houthi information operations for many years and who works closely with two Yemenis: Amer al-Amer al-Marani, a former deputy director of the National Security Bureau under the Houthi, and Mohammed Ghali al-Battal. Al-Dirani is reported by the authors' contacts to be an assistant to senior Lebanese Hezbollah member and U.S.-designated terrorist Khalil Yusif Harb (Abu Mustafa). In 2013, Lebanese Hezbollah member Khalil Yusif Harb was added to the Specially Designated Nationals List for terrorism through Executive Order 13224. See "Treasury Sanctions Hizballah Leadership," U.S. Department of the Treasury, August 22, 2013. Other details on al-Dirani, al-Marani, and al-Battal provided in interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

av Abu Shahid is an unusual *kunya*, meaning "father of the martyrs." In a movement where nearly every fighter had lost family members, this is a remarkable honor. Abu Shahid apparently lost his father, brothers, and son before he himself died. Details provided in interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

aw Abu Shahid was from the Juma'ah area of Sa`ada, the exact wellspring of Badr al-Din al-Huthi's family networks. Abu Shahid fought in some of the six wars, then at Tai'zz in 2015, and against the Saleh forces in 2017. Details provided in interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

ax The Houthis folded the two long-standing intelligence agencies (Political Security organization or PSO, and the National Security Bureau or NSB) into a single agency called the Security and Intelligence Service in September 2019. The Security and Intelligence Service is led by former Deputy Minister of Interior Abdul Hakim al-Khaiwani and his deputy, former PSO chief Qader al-Shami. On December 10, 2020, both men were designated by the U.S. Department of the Treasury under Executive Order (E.O.) 13818 and the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act for "serious human rights abuse." See "Treasury Sanctions Serious Human Rights Abusers on International Human Rights Day," U.S. Department of the Treasury, December 10, 2020.

possible exception of Military Intelligence[ay]). Preventative Security serves the same specialized leadership protection and regime security role as the Protective Security in Lebanese Hezbollah's Jihad Council.[az] Ahsan al-Humran was a young loyalist to Husayn Badr al-Din who is just a few years older than Abdalmalik.[ba] He is one of many Humran family members in Husayn and Abdalmalik's inner circles.[92] (The Humran are a *sadah* family that traces descent to the Prophet.[93]) Ahsan al-Humran, one of the earliest Houthi commanders, replaced Abdalmalik's long-term Preventative Security chief Abu Taha[bb] when the latter was removed during the intelligence reorganization in September 2019.[bc]

The IRGC Jihad Assistant and his Lebanese Hezbollah Deputy

It is no secret that the IRGC-QF (Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force) and Lebanese Hezbollah supported Houthi territorial expansionism and military operations: In addition to U.N.[bd] and U.S.[be] statements to this effect, the IRGC-QF itself admits to its support.[bf] Alongside Abdalmalik, the IRGC-QF "Jihad Assistant" and his Lebanese Hezbollah deputy make up a triad at the heart of the Houthi war machine.[94] IRGC-QF uses the same moniker—"Jihad Assistant"[bg]—in Iraq to describe its senior liaison officer with the top-tier Iraqi Shi`a terrorist group Kata'ib Hezbollah.[95] Also similar to the Houthi case, the Jihad Assistant in Iraq has a Lebanese Hezbollah deputy, suggesting a kind of rough template in IRGC-QF interactions with partners and proxies.[96] (In Lebanon, the Jihad Assistant is Lebanese[bh] and the title of the IRGC-QF senior advisor is unclear.) The key point is that the Jihad Assistant is always the senior military advisor to the leader,[bi] and in the case of Abdalmalik al-Huthi, this is an Iranian IRGC-QF officer with a Lebanese Hezbollah deputy.[97]

The exact nature of the relationship between Abdalmalik and

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ay　In the authors' collective assessment, it seems unlikely that the current head of the Military Intelligence Authority, the veteran fighter Abdullah al-Hakim (Abu Ali), is taking orders from anyone below Abdalmalik al-Huthi. He has an unrivaled record in solving tribal disputes and is probably one of the Houthi leaders who is left to manage his own affairs, which are focused on regime security engagements with tribal leaders. That being said, almost no one is a "direct report" to Abdalmalik due to operational security concerns, suggesting that Abdullah al-Hakim (who does not sit on the Jihad Council as a full member) may be represented in that forum by Ahsan al-Humran, the key intelligence official. Abu Ali's deputy at the Military Intelligence Authority is Mohammed Husayn Hashem (Abu Huriya). Details provided in interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

az　Lebanese Hezbollah holds leadership protective security, counter-intelligence, central information datasets, and surveillance capabilities at Jihad Council level. Matt Levitt, "Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of Lebanon's Party of God," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, March 4, 2013, p. 14.

ba　Ahsan al-Humran appears to have been born in the late 1970s. Details provided in interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

bb　Abu Taha's real name is reported by multiple contacts to be Abdulrab Jarfan, the Houthi leader placed over the National Security Bureau (NSB) when Sana'a fell to the Houthis in 2014. He is reported to have run protective security for Houthi leaders after Husayn's death. He is reported to have married a niece of Abdalmalik. Details provided in interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

bc　According to local contacts, NSB head Abu Taha (Abdulrab Jarfan), NSB deputy head Abu Imad (Mutlaq al-Marani), and Political Security Organization chief Qader al-Shami were all removed due to chronic infighting and their services merged under new leadership (though al-Shami was retained in a new deputy intelligence chief role). Details provided in interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

bd　According to the United Nations, Iran is responsible for both financial and weapons transfers to the Houthis. For instance, based on the design of the UAVs and the tracing of component parts, the U.N. panel of experts on Yemen concluded that the material necessary to assemble the Qasef-1s "emanated from the Islamic Republic of Iran." "Letter dated 26 January 2018 from the Panel of Experts on Yemen mandated by Security Council resolution 2342 (2017) addressed to the President of the Security Council," United Nations Security Council, January 26, 2018, p. 32. See also Carole Landry, "UN panel finds further evidence of Iran link to Yemen missiles," Agence France-Presse, July 31, 2018.

be　To give a recent example, Tim Lenderking, U.S. envoy to Yemen for the Biden administration, noted in April 2021: "What I see is continued aiding and abetting an army of Houthis by the Iranians so that they can continue attacking Saudi Arabia, and unfortunately those attacks have risen quite strongly in the last couple of months." Michelle Nichols and Jonathan Landay, "Iran provides Yemen's Houthis 'lethal' support, U.S. official says," Reuters, April 21, 2021.

bf　IRGC-QF assistant commander Rostam Ghasemi explained the advisory effort in some detail to Russian Today TV on April 21, 2021. See "Qods Force Official Rostam Ghasemi: Iran's Friends In The Region Have Retaliated Against Israel And Will Continue To Do So; We Have A Few Military Advisors In Yemen And Have Provided Weapon-Manufacturing Technology To The Yemenis," April 21, 2021. One Houthi commander, Abdullah al-Mahdoon, also spoke publicly about Iranian provision of military equipment and training. Al-Mahdoon noted that "local [Yemeni] trainers were trained in Lebanon and Iran on how to collect and construct the pieces of missiles and how to manufacture mines." He added that "external experts and trainers from the Lebanese Shiite Hizbollah, and al-Qods legion of Iran supervise local Yemeni cadres." Al-Mahdoon also said that "there are several secret centers for manufacturing weapons and many other centers for training." He confirmed that "these centers are equipped with modern machines to manufacture all kinds of weapons." See Albahesh.

bg　For instance, the IRGC-QF Jihad Assistant for Iraq is Brigadier General Hajji Hamid Nasseri. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, multiple sessions with significant detail, 2021, exact dates, name, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

bh　Imad Mughniyeh and then Mustafa Badreddine held the role. Shimon Shapira, "The Struggle between Israel and Hizbullah, 1982-2020," Tablet, August 11, 2020.

bi　Some Iran-backed groups also describe the main assistant to the military leader as the jihad assistant. See Basra-based MP Faleh al-Khaz'ali, who acts as the jihadi assistant for Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada. Another Iraqi individual called Adnan al-Bendawi is the jihadi assistant to Iraqi Shi`a militia Hezbollah Harakat al-Nujaba. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, multiple sessions with significant detail, 2021 and 2022; exact dates, name, and places withheld at request of the interviewees. For a profile of Hezbollah Harakat al-Nujaba, see Michael Knights, "Profile: Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba," Militia Spotlight, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, April 27, 2021.

the Jihad Assistant is obviously a well-guarded secret, but careful interviewing with persons at the edges of the Houthi security establishment can begin to build an intriguing picture.[98] Though the exact identity of the current Jihad Assistant is not yet publicly known, a previous IRGC-QF official to play the role was IRGC-QF Brigadier General Abdalreza Shahla'i.[bj] As in Iraq, the Jihad Assistant is a brigadier general. His role is to advise the Houthi leader in "the path of strategic jihadist and military actions" and to "be a partner in making military decisions."[99] In terms of Iranian influence over key Houthi strategic decisions—such as entering or leaving ceasefires, or undertaking strategic attacks on Gulf States—there is no reliable data. In the authors' assessment, Iran's Jihad Assistant and Abdalmalik's inner circle have strong incentives to conceal any evidence of Iranian influence in order to avoid damaging Abdalmalik's credibility as a free-standing Yemeni leader.[100] Where Iran uses its influence, it may often be to preach caution and the avoidance of over-reach and anecdotal evidence suggests Iran does tend to look nervously on major Houthi offensive actions.[bk]

The Jihad Council format was developed by Lebanese Hezbollah in order to communicate lessons learned across the group,[101] and it might reasonably be expected to play this role in Yemen as well.[102] The council might also logically provide a safe, economical, and unobtrusive way for the IRGC-QF to advise the Houthi movement.[bl] The Jihad Assistant also decides what kind of Iranian and Hezbollah technical assistance and hardware to provide, both using in-country training teams and stores, or by requesting new specialists or materiel from Iran and Lebanon.[103] A small IRGC-QF and Lebanese Hezbollah staff, now reportedly numbering in the tens, not the hundreds,[104] manages the practical arrangements, including advising on the operation of a small set of military industries.[105]

Lebanese Hezbollah's deputy Jihad Assistant on the Houthi Jihad Council—currently an officer known as Abu Zainab[106]—has a more prominent role in practical training and equipping tasks.[107] As noted by one of the authors (Knights) in a 2018 *CTC Sentinel* article on Houthi military operations,[108] Lebanese Hezbollah advisors have long had more freedom of movement in Houthi areas of Yemen than Iranians.[109] The Houthis appear less sensitive about Hezbollah involvement than about Iranian presence, possibly because Hezbollah is seen as an (elder) sister organization to Ansar Allah,

> **"The Jihad Council format was developed by Lebanese Hezbollah in order to communicate lessons learned across the group, and it might reasonably be expected to play this role in Yemen as well. The council might also logically provide a safe, economical, and unobtrusive way for the IRGC-QF to advise the Houthi movement."**

while Iran is a foreign nation.[110] Hezbollah's Arabs (as opposed to Iranian Persians) can also blend in more easily with Houthi hosts and seem to have fewer operational security restrictions, allowing their advisors to visit the frontlines and move around the military zones.[111]

Overall, analysts might profitably reassess the longevity of Hezbollah military support to the Houthis, looking further back prior to 2010. Hezbollah itself has spoken of providing military advice to the Houthis as far back as 1992,[bm] but the major intensification might logically have occurred after the Hezbollah tactical victories over Israel in the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah war and the skyrocketing of Hezbollah's regional reputation.[112] IRGC-QF appears to have based its earliest military assistance efforts to the Houthis out of Lebanon under the leadership of an IRGC-QF representative known as Abu Hadi[113] and in partnership with Lebanese Hezbollah senior operative Khalil Yusif Harb.[114][bn] There are scattered but growing indicators of Iranian and Lebanese Hezbollah sponsorship of the Houthis in the fourth, fifth, and sixth wars against the Yemeni government in 2008-2010.[bo] These

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bj Abdul Reza Shahla'i (also known as Yusuf Abu al-Karkh and Hajji Yusef) has been designated by the United States for threatening the peace and stability of Iraq (in 2008) and then as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist (in 2011) for aiding attacks on the United States. The United States offered a $15 million bounty for Abdul Reza Shahla'i in December 2019 and tried to kill Shahla'i with an airstrike on January 3, 2020. See "Rewards for Justice: Abdul Reza Shahla'i," U.S. Department of the Treasury, and James Gordon Meek, Luis Martinez, and Elizabeth McLaughlin, "US tried to kill Iranian commander in Yemen same night as Soleimani strike: Officials," ABC News, January 10, 2020.

bk For instance, in advising caution when the Houthis wanted to surge forward and attack Sana'a, Aden, and Ma'rib in 2014-2015. Details provided in interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

bl Considering operational security and political concerns (i.e., Houthi sensitivity to being seen to be foreign-advised), the Jihad Assistant and his team will likely seek to keep a low profile and not be widely seen or met. This is the authors' collective conclusion, based on their synthesis of the known facts.

bm Matthew Levitt ascribes Unit 3800, Hezbollah's external special operations arm, with taking on an advise and assist role in Yemen after the Arab Spring in 2011. Levitt, pp. 288, 381, 395. The U.S. government likewise described a Hezbollah advise and assist effort from 2012 onward. See the National Security Advisor's comments in 2012 in Karen DeYoung, "Europe Should Label Hezbollah a Terrorist Group, U.S. Urges," *Washington Post*, October 26, 2012.

bn In 2013, Lebanese Hezbollah member Khalil Yusif Harb was added to the Specially Designated Nations list for terrorism through Executive Order 13224. See "Treasury Sanctions Hizballah Leadership," U.S. Department of the Treasury, August 22, 2013.

bo These include sophisticated propaganda and media operations; rapid evolution of commando raiding tactics and offensive mining techniques from the fourth war onward; growing reports of maritime arms deliveries; movements of Iranian mother ships in the Red Sea; and Yemeni government detention of Lebanese and Iranian personnel in Houthi areas. See Michael Knights, "The Houthi War Machine: From Guerrilla War to State Capture," *CTC Sentinel* 11:8 (2018). One Houthi leader, Abdullah al-Mahdoon, spoke of arms and funds arriving in time for the fourth war (in 2006-2007). See Albahesh.

appear to be the leading edge of Hezbollah advising[bp] and IRGC-QF equipping[bq] of Houthi fighting units. Indeed, upon taking over Sana'a in September 2014, an early Houthi priority was the release of Hezbollah captives from government prisons, as well as Iranian nationals seized while delivering arms to the Houthis in 2013.[br]

Administration of the Houthi-controlled Military

When the September 21, 2014, Peace and National Partnership Agreement was signed on the day the Houthis seized Sana'a as a last ditch effort to save the post-Arab Spring peace process,[115] the Houthis sought the integration of around 40,000 Houthi fighters into the state security forces, and the emplacement of a Houthi with familial links to the army, Zakaria al-Shami, as the deputy chief of staff of the Yemeni Ministry of Defense (MoD).[116] After overrunning Sana'a in the coup of September 2014, the Houthis went further, directly controlling the MoD and MoI for the first time.[bs] In the latter, a slow-burning struggle for control of the police forces began between loyalists of Ali Abdallah Saleh, eventually ending with Saleh's death at the hands of the Houthis in December 2017 and the appointment of Abdalkarim al-Houthi as Minister of Interior in 2019.[117] In the MoD, the Houthis progressively co-opted Saleh-era generals[bt] to serve alongside (and quickly under) senior Houthis.

The most famous turncoat was the Houthi-installed Minister of Defense (at the time of publication) Staff Major General Mohammed Nasser al-Atifi,[bu] who attended Houthi ideological re-education, swore an oath of allegiance on the Qur'an, and plays an active part in Houthi propaganda operations.[bv] Of interest, the Houthis have not made sudden or sweeping changes to the Yemeni military and go to some lengths to portray this national institution as unchanged,[bw] an effort of uncertain success to hide the influence of the Jihad Council and minimize negative reaction from the military classes and other nationalists.[118]

The power behind the minister's throne at MoD appears to be Staff Lieutenant General[bx] Mohammed Abdalkarim al-Ghammari (informally known as Hashim al-Ghammari),[119] who was designated by the United States and the United Nations in 2021 for threatening the peace and stability of Yemen through his role in procuring and deploying explosives, drones, and missiles against targets inside and outside of Yemen.[by] Born in 1981,[bz] al-Ghammari

bp Baraa Shaiban claims: "In late 2011 and early 2012, Iran initially handed the 'Yemeni file' over to Lebanon's Hizbollah to manage it, as Hizbollah is more familiar with the Arab world. Hizbollah then started organizing seminars and conferences for Yemeni youth activists. The Houthis were the main point of contact on the ground for Hizbollah's recruiting efforts of Yemenis from all backgrounds. In Lebanon, the handler of the Yemeni delegations is a man called 'Abu Mustafa.' His real name is Khalil Yusif Harb." Baraa Shaiban, "Yemen's Clash of Two Revolutions," Hudson Institute, April 4, 2021.

bq As noted in one of the author's (Knights) September 2018 *CTC Sentinel* article: "The January 2013 interception of the Jihan-1 dhow suggests a powerful post-2011 effort by Iran to arm Ansar Allah in the same manner Iran has armed Lebanese Hizballah." See Knights, "The Houthi War Machine" and also "Yemenis intercept 'Iranian ship,'" BBC, October 27, 2009, as well as Oren Dorell, "Iranian support for Yemen's Houthis goes back years," USA Today, April 20, 2015, and C. J. Chivers and Robert Worth, "Seizure of Antiaircraft Missiles in Yemen Raises Fears That Iran Is Arming Rebels There," New York Times, February 8, 2013. See also "Final Report of the Panel of Experts Established Pursuant to Resolution 1929 (2010)," United Nations Security Council, June 2013, pp. 14-15.

br For instance, Abdulaziz Mahrous, who Al Masdar reported as leading smuggling operations in the Gulf of Aden in 2021, "was among the crew arrested during the capture of the Iranian ship 'Jihan-1' in 2013. The Houthis released him four days after seizing control of Sana'a in a coup d'etat in late September 2014." Fares al-Suraihi and Alkhatab Alrawhani, "Special Report: How Iran smuggles weapons to Yemen," Al Masdar Online English, May 9, 2021.

bs Even critics of the post-2015 war in Yemen call the Houthi takeover a "coup." For example, see Mareike Transfeld, "Peace and State Fragmentation in Yemen," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, November 22, 2019.

bt With enough digging, some patterns appear in the practice of co-option. More trusted Saleh-era officers may come from families connected to the Khawlan tribal areas in Sa`ada (one example being serving Minister of Defense Mohammed Nasser al-Atifi). One deputy chief of staff of the MoD (Yahya Mohammed al-Shami) was trusted because his father (Major General Mohammed Abdalmalik al-Shami) died in the same March 20, 2015, mosque bombing as many Houthi officers. Zakaria al-Shami, an early Houthi embed at MoD prior to the Houthi coup in 2014, was linked by his father to the Yemeni army. Details gathered in interviews and data collection for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

bu Major General Mohammed Nasser al-Atifi was one of Saleh's most trusted and capable commanders, in command of the elite Missile Batteries Group, controlling Yemen's medium-range ballistic missiles and accurate short-range ballistic missiles. Charles Caris, "Yemen Order of Battle," Institute for the Study of War, February 23, 2015.

bv Houthi Minister of Defense Mohammed Nasser al-Atifi said in the IRGC-affiliated Tasnim, a few days after a drone attack on Abu Dhabi, that "painful and terrifying strikes" were to be expected in the "strategic, military and economic depth of the coalition countries." See Maryam Sinaee, "Houthi General Tells IRGC-Linked Website Of Coming Attacks On UAE," Iran International, January 30, 2022. Details also topped up with interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

bw For instance, many Houthi senior military commanders (such as Abdullah al-Hakim (Abu Ali) and Yusif al-Madani) have taken to wearing formal uniforms and obeying rank conventions—for instance, not wearing red staff 'tabs' (epaulette) if they have not attended staff college. (Abdalmalik is an exception, wearing staff tabs on his field marshal's uniform.) Equally interesting, the Houthis seem to have inflated the general officer rank structure one level—meaning that Yemeni officers wearing, for example, brigadier general rank badges are now one level higher (i.e., brigadier generals are referred to as major generals). This grants a promotion and salary and pension benefits to remaining serving and retired Saleh-era officers. Thus, a Houthi general wearing the same rank badges as a general of the U.N.-backed PLC is almost always reported to be one rank higher. Authors' survey of articles showing imagery of tank badges and text description of ranks.

bx Al-Ghammari is an example of the inflation of general officer ranks: He wears insignia of a major general, but is accorded the rank of lieutenant general. Authors' survey of articles showing imagery of tank badges and text description of ranks.

by The U.S. Treasury assesses: "As the Head of the General Staff of the Houthi armed forces, the most senior commander within the Houthi military leadership structure, Al-Ghamari is directly responsible for overseeing Houthi military operations that have destroyed civilian infrastructure and Yemen's neighbors, specifically Saudi Arabia and the UAE. He directs the procurement and deployment of various weapons, including improvised explosive devices, ammunition, and UAVs [Unmanned Aerial Vehicles]. Al-Ghamari has also overseen Houthi UAV and missile attacks against Saudi Arabian targets. Al-Ghamari reportedly received his military training in Houthi militia camps run by Lebanese Hezbollah and Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps." See "Treasury Sanctions Senior Houthi Military Official Overseeing Group's Offensive Operations."

bz Al-Ghammari's birthdate is variously given as between 1979 and 1984. The authors believe, based on their contacts, that it is 1981. Drawn from details from interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

is one of Abdalmalik's generation, who was born in Al-Ahnum (then in Hajja governorate, but now in Amran) but grew up in Sa`da and received subsidized tuition from Husayn Badr al-Din al-Huthi at the Believing Youth camps.[ca] Interestingly, al-Ghammari had long been a beneficiary of the MoD as his father had died (accidentally, in a fire)[120] while serving as a civilian in the MoD, meaning that he held an honorary rank simply to continue drawing his father's income for the family.[121] At the same time, in actuality, al-Ghammari was serving with the Houthi forces throughout the six wars, specializing in the production of landmines and improvised explosive devices in Sa`da, and having received Iranian training in explosives-handling.[122] From 2014 onward, he worked at senior levels in MoD and became the senior Houthi in the ministry, working with a team of deputies led by Major General Ali Hamud al-Moshaki, a Houthi from a *sadah* family in Dhamar governorate.[123]

Yemen's MoD was hardly a model of efficiency in the best of times,[124] let alone under post-2014 conditions of blockade and with the ministry's functions bifurcated between Houthi-held and government-held areas.[125] Nevertheless, the ministry still has utility as a cover for the Jihad Council and is allowed to claim public credit for some enabling functions: personnel, training, and equipping and sustaining armed forces. In the authors' collective view, the most important of these is the illicit procurement of military materiel from abroad, in violation of the U.N. arms embargo.[126] By combining the pioneering research undertaken by Al Masdar Online[127] with new interviews,[128] a quite full picture can be constructed regarding the leadership of Houthi procurement and smuggling activities. Working directly with Mohammed Abdalkarim al-Ghammari is his assistant for military logistics, Major General Saleh Mesfer Farhan al-Shaer (Abu Yaser),[129] a U.N. and U.S.-sanctioned Houthi official[130] from Al-Safra district in the east of Sa`da.[131] Al-Shaer not only heads up MoD logistics, including smuggling operations, but also plays the role of "Judicial Custodian" of an estimated $100 million worth of confiscated assets,[cb] some of which are made available for military use.[cc]

Under al-Shaer operates what appears to the authors to be a remarkably effective system for smuggling donated Iranian arms, technology, and fuel into Yemen,[132] as well as providing the Houthis with a mechanism to control the profitable smuggling of civilian items like medicine, food, cigarettes, spare parts, consumer goods, fertilizers, and pesticides.[133] Al Masdar Online[134] and various U.S. and U.N. reports[135] have done a perfectly good job of describing these operations in detail, so here, the authors will instead focus on command and control. Under al-Shaer is his deputy for procurement, Major General Mohammed Ahmed al-Talbi (Abu Jafar).[136] At the Iran end, two Houthi liaison officers play a major role in procurement: An enigmatic figure known only as "M. S. al-Moayad" was described in the Al Masdar Online research as "the top coordinator of the smuggling operations based outside of Yemen."[137] Said al-Jamal, another Yemeni residing in Iran, was sanctioned by the United States on June 10, 2021, for running a sanctions-evasion network involving shipping and money exchange companies.[138] A Yemen-based Houthi official Akram al-Jilani appears to coordinate a network of smuggling chiefs for the Red Sea (Ahmed Hels), the Gulf of Aden (Abdallah Mahrous), and the Gulf of Oman (Ibrahim Helwan and Ali al-Halhali).[139]

Onshore, al-Talbi has a transshipment network that handles trucking of smuggled goods to their storage locations. This network appears to be led by Akram al-Jilani, plus an Iranian-trained Yemeni logistician Mansour Ahmed al-Saadi,[140] [cd] and (until his reassignment in September 2020)[ce] an Iranian-trained former bodyguard of Abdalmalik's called Major General Hadi Mohammed al-Khawlani (Abu Ali).[cf] Little is known in the unclassified realm about the exact laydown of the Houthi warehousing and transshipment system, but judging by numerous Saudi airstrikes on such locations, the system is extensive.[cg] Iran, Lebanese Hezbollah, and the Houthis seem to have optimized the system to minimize the number of critical components that must be smuggled from Iran (complete weapons systems, ballistic missile fuel, guidance units, and quality high-explosives)[141] and maximize local sourcing of military and dual-use materials.[142] As noted in *CTC Sentinel* in September 2018, the military industries are likely limited to a few dozen warehouses, drone and missile workshops, landmine and sea mine production facilities, and training sites.[143]

A final interesting aspect of MoD's role under the Houthis is

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ca Al-Ghammari is described by interviewees and in Yemeni media articles as being prominent in Houthi bomb-making and training establishments since the first Sa`ada war, and having attended training camps in Iran, Lebanon, and Syria during and since the six Sa`ada wars. See "Mohammad al-Ghammari; the Houthi Leader Who conveyed the Iranian 'Revolutionary Guards' Experience to Yemen," Al-Estiklal Newspaper, September 19, 2022. Details also gathered in interviews and data collection for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

cb "Major General Saleh Mesfer Alshaer, a close ally of Houthi leader Abdul Malik al-Houthi, serves as both the commander of the Houthi-controlled military logistics support organization, where he assisted the Houthis in acquiring smuggled weapons, as well as the officer responsible for managing all assets and funds confiscated by the Houthis." "Treasury Sanctions Senior Houthi Military Officer Overseeing Group's Seizure of Opposition Property," U.S. Department of the Treasury, November 18, 2021.

cc Al-Shaer handles the mobilization of confiscated assets like vehicles, spare parts, fuel, consumables, tents, and many basic logistical items from his stores of confiscated material. Details from interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

cd Al-Saadi was designated by the United States for threatening the peace and security of Yemen under Executive Order 13611 on March 2, 2021. At the time of his designation, he was described as "the Houthi Naval Forces Chief of Staff," and he has been a well-known Houthi commander on the Red Sea coast since 2015. See "Treasury Sanctions Key Military Leaders of the Ansarallah Militia in Yemen," U.S. Department of Treasury, March 2, 2021.

ce Al-Khawlani was moved to an internal security role in Ibb during September 2019. Details from interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

cf An Al-Yemen Now investigative report has a very useful image of al-Kahlani as one of Abdalmalik's bodyguards and then again as a logistics official more recently. See "Who is the Houthi terrorist called Abu Ali Al-Kahlani?" Al-Yemen Now, December 13, 2018.

cg One Al Masdar Online report suggests there have been dozens of drone and missile storage warehouses and workshops in recent years: "From that date until December 2021, the investigation team monitored nearly 50 operations that the coalition announced in Houthi-controlled areas 'to target and destroy an integrated network of Houthi drone capabilities and logistical facilities and the locations of foreign experts.' Of these, about 40 operations were in Sana'a, while the rest were distributed in Saada, Hodeidah and Mahwit governorates." See Fares al-Suraihi, "How Iran infiltrates the skies of Yemen to threaten the region and the world," Al Masdar Online English, February 4, 2022.

its growing involvement in mass mobilization.[144] Somewhat akin to the state adoption of militias under Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces,[145] the Houthis have folded a number of their militias into the MoD administrative structure in order to provide them with legitimacy, payment, and support.[146] Some of these so-called "Popular Committees" existed before 2014,[ch] and others are newer militias raised to give paid fighting jobs to Houthi-aligned tribes.[ci] Houthi sub-units are also nested within surviving Houthi-run Yemeni Army brigades, typically small cadres that stick with a Houthi commander as he is transferred between MoD postings.[147] Since 2014—and particularly since the 2017 break with Ali Abdallah Saleh and his generals—the Houthi-run MoD has encouraged professional officers and personnel to take extended, partially paid home leave.[148] The large resultant gaps in manpower have then been filled by a new General Mobilization Authority within MoD with an estimated 130,000 recruits from the poorer segments of society,[149] for whom even a minimal payment (around $30 per month) is preferable to unemployment and complete poverty.[150]

The (unnamed) Houthi Jihad Preparation Official (also known as the Official of the Central Committee for Recruitment and Mobilization) is deputized by Abdalrahim al-Humran,[151] who runs the General Mobilization Authority, which instructs local Houthi governorate supervisors, "neighborhood affairs managers," and "neighborhood sheikhs"[cj] to comb households for military-age males.[152] Jihad Preparation operates a basic three-tier military human resources system that recommends recruits for either special forces, technical specialist roles, or general military training.[153] The entire MoD force is subjected to varying degrees of ideological indoctrination that was not common before 2014[ck]—and indeed a narrowing band of soldiers even remember the pre-2014 military.[cl] Thus, in the authors' assessment, the Houthis truly do now control a military that is largely of their own crafting after just a few years of uncontested dominance.[154]

Most recently, the Jihad Preparation Official is also developing

"Somewhat akin to the state adoption of militias under Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces, the Houthis have folded a number of their militias into the [Ministry of Defense] administrative structure in order to provide them with legitimacy, payment, and support."

what appears to be a parallel mobilization reserve akin to Iran's Basij forces.[155] So-called Logistics and Support Brigades[156] are being filled out and publicly paraded,[157] and these appear to be reservist formations that include older or less capable recruits, often men who already have a civilian government or academic job.[158] These brigades are being developed by Qasim al-Humran (Abu Kawthar),[159] who previously oversaw the Ministry of Youth and Sports and worked under Yahya Badr al-Din, a full brother of Husayn, when Yahya was Yemen's Minister of Education.[160] When placed alongside each other, the various actions of the Jihad Preparation Official look, in the view of the authors, very much like similar IRGC or Lebanese Hezbollah efforts to militarize society and create the infrastructure for permanent mobilization.[161]

Operational Control of Combatant Units

As the Houthi movement progressively swallowed up many of the military forces in Yemen in 2014-2017, it began to improvise operational control and tactical control systems for employing much larger forces on an unprecedented number of frontlines.[cm] To some extent, the Houthi movement was used to fighting on multiple geographically separated fronts at the same time from the six Sa`da wars but not at the scale, expanse, complexity, or intensity of the fighting against the Saudi-led coalition from 2015 to the time of publication.[162] Nor was the movement used to holding an operational reserve or allocating specialized enabler units from one widely separated front to another as needed.[cn] RAND's excellent early study of the Houthi military organization rightly stresses the concept of *qabyala*, or "group and individual autonomy over stringent group solidarity," meaning a highly decentralized fighting system.[163] As the six Sa`da wars blended into state capture and the intense multi-front war against the Saudi-led coalition, the authors of this paper assess that a more professional and centrally coordinated system of operational control emerged, partly due to the assimilation of Saleh-era officers as well as due to IRGC-QF and Lebanese Hezbollah advice.[164]

ch Examples include the Hamedan Axis of Abdallah Eida al-Razzami and the al-Hadi, al-Qasim, and Imam Zayd units. Details from interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

ci Newer post-2015 units include the Wahbi Brigades in al-Bayda, al-Mahawit Brigades in al-Mahawit, the Shaheri Brigades in Ibb, the Fateh Brigades in Midi, Hajjar and Hodeida, and the Samad Brigades on the Red Sea fronts and Tai'zz. Details from interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

cj The Arabic title of these neighborhood authorities is Aqil (singular). Although the position existed long before the war, it has become particularly powerful under Houthi rule, essentially the neighborhood-level equivalent of Houthi supervisors (mushrifeen). Authors' collective knowledge of the location situation in Houthi-controlled areas. Details from interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

ck One identified Houthi religious guidance commander for the armed forces is Brigadier General Abed bin Mohammed al-Thair, variously described as "the Deputy Chief of the Ideological Department of the Houthi armed forces" and "deputy head of the Spiritual Guidance Department (Ideological) of the Yemeni armed forces." Sinaee. Details also gathered in interviews and data collection for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

cl An 18-year-old fighter today was 10 years old when the Houthis seized Sana'a, and was seven years old when the Ali Abdallah Saleh government fell.

cm The Houthis moved from fighting in northern Yemen only to new offensives on the Red Sea coast, the south coast of Yemen, and Ma'rib in the east. By the authors' rough calculation using mapping tools, the Houthi frontline expanded from about 700 kilometers in early 2014 to over 1,500 kilometers by the summer of 2015. The area occupied by Houthi forces increased from around 30,000 square kilometers to 120,000 square kilometers.

cn There is no evidence of a Houthi operational reserve during the six wars: All troops were allocated to a frontline at all times. This is the authors' collective conclusion, based on their synthesis of the known facts.

On the Jihad Council, there is both an Operations Official and a Military Regions Official,[165] and these closely linked roles are critical to operational control and coordination of the multi-front war.[166] The Operations Official is nominally a Houthi commander called Brigadier General Ismail Awadh[167] and his deputy Ibrahim al-Mutawakkil,[co] who are more important than the official MoD head of operations (G-3), former Saleh loyalist Major General Mohammed al-Miqdad.[168] On a regular basis, Ibrahim al-Mutawakkil relocates an operations room[169] that tracks the frontlines and movements of Houthi and enemy forces.[170]

Alongside the Operations Official is the Military Regions Official who engages directly with the major geographic commands—the Military Region Commands (MRCs)—to track their needs and the allocation of "enablers" to each MRC, such as drones, missiles, intelligence capabilities, armor, and artillery.[171] At the time of publication, the preponderance of evidence suggests that the current Military Regions Commander is the dual-hatted MoD chief of staff, Mohammed Abdalkarim al-Ghammari, supported by a well-hidden assistant known only as "Sajjad."[172] The primary focus of this operations staff in the last two years has been coordinating the multi-axis campaign by MRCs 3, 4, and 6 (and the Central Region) to take Ma'rib city and its adjacent energy sites, with the close supervision (and sometimes over-involvement[cp]) of Abdalkhaliq al-Huthi, Yusif al-Madani, and Mohammed Abdalkarim al-Ghammari.[173]

The MRCs are a system created by the U.N.-backed government after the fall of the Saleh government in 2012, a slight adjustment of the Saleh-era Military Districts.[174][cq] By the end of 2016, the Houthis had attained complete control of all the MRC headquarters and retained their basic structure as an organizing principle for the military.[cr] At the time of publication, the Houthi MRCs are led by the following officers:

- Third MRC (Ma'rib) is led by Major General Hadi Zuraib (Abu Issam)[cs] and his influential aide, Brigadier General Naji Rabid.[175] This MRC appears to be a very small command that operates under the overarching authority of the Central Region headquarters (see below) headed by Abdalkhaliq al-Huthi.[176] The MRC often uses attached reinforcements when it is called upon to attack Ma'rib and its standing forces are reputedly smaller than other MRCs due to the small amount of terrain currently held by the Houthis in Ma'rib.[177]

- The "Middle Region," Saleh-era nomenclature that is used by the Houthis to cover the post-2012 Fourth and Seventh MRCs (the south, headquartered in Dhammar), covers the southern arc of governorates of Al-Bayda, Ibb, Ta'izz, Dhammar, Al-Dhale, Lahj, Shabwa, and Abyan.[178] The overarching Middle Region comes under the control of Fourth MRC commander Major General Abdallatif Hamud al-Mahdi (Abu Nasser).[ct] Under al-Mahdi is the Seventh MRC (a sub-command covering Dhammar, Ibb, and Al-Bayda) commanded by Major General Nasser al-Mohammadi (Abu Murtadha al-Munabbahi).[cu] The southern front is largely a political and tribal engagement front,[cv] with active military operations in Ta'izz and Al-Bayda, at the western and eastern ends of the command's frontage.[179]

- Fifth MRC (the west, headquartered in Hodeida) covers Hodeida, Hajjar, Al Mahawit, and Raymah governorates, and was (until recently) actively led by veteran combat

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co Al-Mutawakkil is a very prominent Zaydi and *sadah* family, which was a dominant force in the imamate. See Brandt, pp. 21-29, 40-44. Today, Taha al-Mutawakkil is the Houthi health minister. Al-Gabarni, "Who are the Houthis?" Adel al-Mutawakkil heads the University of Science and Technology. "Houthi official says over $13bn of Yemen's oil wealth 'looted' over 5 years," Middle East Monitor, August 24, 2022. Issam al-Mutawakkil is the spokesman for the Yemeni Petroleum Company, the state-run national oil company. Romy Haber, "The Houthis and the Hijacking of Yemen's Education Sector," Euro-Gulf Information Centre, February 9, 2021.

cp In the authors' collective view, Ma'rib became an overwhelming obsession for the Houthi military leadership. Third MRC assaulted from the west in Sirwah, Sixth MRC sought to envelop Ma'rib from the north, and Fourth MRC attempted an envelopment from the south. The offensive finally collapsed in January 2022 following a strong counterattack against the southern flank of the offensive. As in any operation, 'too many cooks spoil the broth'—meaning that too many intervening senior commanders and too many command changes can negatively affect operations. For a good overview of the campaign, see Alex Almeida and Michael Knights, "Breaking Point: Consolidating Houthi Military Setbacks in Yemen," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, January 19, 2022.

cq Note that the 1st and 2nd MRCs in Hadramawt and the 4th MRC in Aden still exit, but these areas are clear of Houthi forces and the Houthis have not created headquarters for these locations. This is the authors' collective conclusion, based on their synthesis of the known facts.

cr The gradual purging of Saleh commanders from the MRCs and the Presidential Guard Brigades in 2016-2017 was the proximate cause of the Saleh-Houthi showdown in December 2017. This is the collective assessment of the author team, reflecting the strong consensus on this issue from interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

cs Zuraib is a veteran fighter from the six Sa`ada wars who was obscure in post-2011 Houthi affairs until called upon to command the Third MRC, which is a kind of "sub-command" of the Central Region (as the Houthis have thus far failed to conquer Third MRC areas in Ma'rib and Shabwa). Al-Gabarni, "Who are the Houthis?"

ct Abu Nasser gained notoriety for his very active insurgent operations in southern Sa`ada during the six wars, mainly on the northernmost frontlines adjacent to Saudi Arabia. He has a connection to Mohammed Abdalkarim al-Ghammari. Abu Nasser's effective stewardship of the whole southern front—a quiet but very long frontline—suggests he is an especially important commander. Abu Nasser has big shoes to fill as Abdallah al-Hakim (Abu Ali) previously held the southern fronts. Abu Nasser focuses mainly on Ta'izz and Ma'rib-focused operations (in Al-Bayda). Details from interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

cu Al-Mohammadi appears by his tribal name to be from the extreme west of Sa`ada governorate, in one of the areas that fell to Houthi control at the very end of the six wars. He does not appear to be one of the more successful Houthi commanders and is closely supervised by Abu Nasser. Details from interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

cv In an example of this, the Houthis have raised new tribal auxiliary forces to give work and patronage to local tribes, with new brigades appearing with names such as Nasser and Quds (Dhamar and Ta'izz), Wahbi (Al-Bayda) and Shaheri (Ibb). In the case of the four Nasser brigades (numbered 1, 2, 3, 4), these entirely Houthi-built and fully indoctrinated units eventually gained the honorific descriptor "nukhba" (elites) due to their credible battlefield performance on the Red Sea coast frontlines. Details from interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.
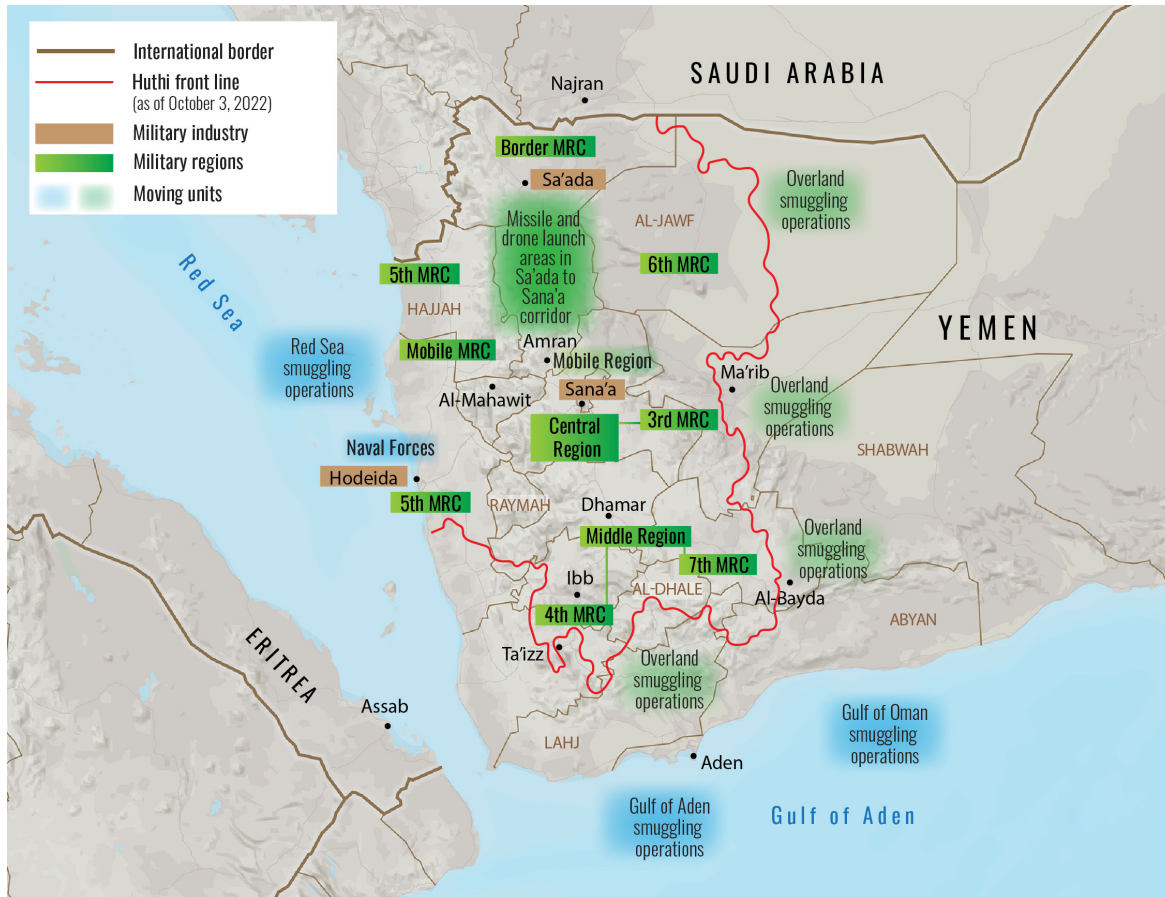
Houthi Military Regional Commands and geographic zones of military activity
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leader Major General Yusif al-Madani (Abu Husayn[cw]). The command now appears to be led in an acting or transitional capacity by Madani's former MRC deputy commander Hamza Abu Talib, a low-profile fighter who seems to have been groomed to hold the role.[180] Like the southern front, the Red Sea coast is now mainly a tribal engagement and holding action by local auxiliary units raised by the Houthis to spread patronage among the tribes and coastal communities.[cx]

- Sixth MRC (the northeast) covers Al-Jawf, Amran, and Sa`da, and is led by Major General Jamil Yahya Mohammed Zaraa (Abu Badr).[cy]

- Border Region covers northern Sa'da, and is led by Ahmed Yahya Jassar, a Houthi official who formerly worked in the Jihad Office.[181] Facing Saudi Arabia, the border region seems to have a special sub-regional command and to employ a number of long-established[cz] and new tribal auxiliary units.[da]

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cy Zaraa is quite an obscure commander, even by Houthi standards, and has no known significant combat pedigree from the six wars. He is considered a mentee of senior Houthi leader Saleh al-Sammad, one of Abdalmalik's close circle, who was killed by a Saudi drone strike on April 19, 2018. Details from interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request. See also "Yemen war: Houthi political leader Saleh al-Sammad 'killed in air raid,'" BBC, April 23, 2018.

cz One of these is Abdullah Eida al-Razzami's Abdallah Hamedan axis (Kitaf and Buqa) which is now led by his son Yahya. Other old "Ansar Allah Brigades" from the Sa`ada area include Al-Hadi, Qasim and Imam Zayd. Details from interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request. See also al-Gabarni, "Who are the Houthis?"

da For instance, the Jizan brigades are one of the newer "Ansar Allah Brigades" that focus on the northwestern border of Sa`ada governorate. They are led by Major General Ahmed Yahya Jassar, one of the Houthi leaders who worked in the secretariat of the Jihadi Office. Details from interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request. See also al-Gabarni, "Who are the Houthis?"

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cw Abu Husayn is identified as al-Madani's *kunya* by the United Nations here. "Yusuf al-Madani," United Nations Security Council, November 9, 2021.

cx The Houthis have raised new tribal auxiliary forces—"Ansar Allah Brigades"—in the Fifth MRC to give work and patronage to local tribes, with new brigades appearing with names such as Sammad (*Hodeida*), Al-Mahawit (*Al-Mahawit*), and Fateh (*Hajjah*). Details from interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

Praetorian Units in the Sana'a Area

There are two geographic commands in the vital Sana'a area. One is the so-called Central Region, which is again recycled Saleh-era nomenclature for the capital Sana'a and Sana'a governorate (plus parts of western Ma'rib), and is commanded by Abdalkhaliq al-Huthi (Abu Yunis),[db] the full brother of Abdalmalik.[dc] In the authors' collective view, Abdalkhaliq exercises tactical control[182] over all military forces in Sana'a, most importantly the Reserve Forces (four Presidential Protection Brigades and the Missile Brigades Group).[183] Abdalkhaliq is not necessarily a skilled commander,[dd] but he leans on a number of capable subordinates, including the Central Region deputy commander Mohammed Abdallah (Abu Mahdi), who has held day-to-day command authority for Central Region forces since the removal of Saleh loyalists in December 2017.[de]

The Presidential Protection Brigades were the post-2012 renaming of the Saleh-era Republican Guards, who continued to serve under Saleh and his nephew Tareq Saleh until the Houthi-Saleh showdown in December 2017.[184] In the months leading up to and immediately after Saleh's death, the Presidential Protection Brigades were purged of Saleh loyalists and bolstered with Houthi recruits.[185] The Presidential Protection Brigades are led by Houthi fighter Abdallah Yahya al-Hasani (Abu Mohammed al-Razehi), a veteran of the six wars who is similar in age to Abdullah al-Hakim (Abu Ali).[186] The backgrounds of the four unit commanders of the Presidential Protection Brigades largely remain obscure, but at least one of the four commanders is a Houthi and has been in place as far back as 2014.[df] After seven years of re-staffing and indoctrination under overall Houthi control, the authors assess that the Presidential Protection Brigades today likely represent a fusion of Saleh-era elite materiel,[dg] select Republican Guard officers, Houthi supervisors and fighters, and Houthi-recruited troops who can only dimly remember a pre-Houthi era.[187]

A final elite reserve that appears to be cantoned in the northern Sana'a area[188] is the so-called Mobile Region (also variously known as the Mobile Zone, the Mobile Forces, and the Central Intervention Forces).[189] This is led by a Houthi commander called Abdalmalik al-Mortada (Abu Talib al-Sufyan), a veteran combat commander from the six wars.[dh] The Mobile Forces—a reputedly large strike force[di]—is centrally located and appears (in the authors' assessment) to be postured to intervene against local uprisings, almost in the manner of a national (paramilitary) police force.[190]

Other elite forces are under the supervision of the aforementioned Special Forces Official (SFO) who is only known by the *kunya* Abu Fatima.[dj] The Special Forces Official's area of responsibility seems to be the Houthi units that directly draw upon Iranian and Lebanese Hezbollah support,[191] and the SFO role is closely associated with the IRGC-QF Jihad Assistant and his Hezbollah deputy and seems to work directly to the Jihad Council.[192] The Special Forces Official manages a network of safe houses, stores, and workshops in the Sana'a and Sa`da areas at which imported weapons are made ready or where smuggled components are integrated with in-country materials.[193] There are indications that Abdallah al-Hakim (Abu Ali) and his Military Intelligence Authority have special responsibilities

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db As noted above, Abdalkhaliq also exercises control over operations on his eastern flank, via the Third MRC in Ma'rib, which is under his influence. Details from interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request. See also al-Gabarni, "Who are the Houthis?"

dc Abdakhaliq was designated by the United Nations and the United States in November 2014. See "Abd Al-Khaliq Al-Houthi," United Nations Security Council, November 7, 2014, and "Yemen-related designations." In January 2021, Abdalkhaliq was listed as a specially designated global terrorist. See "Designation of Abdul Malik al-Houthi, Abd al-Khaliq Badr al-Din al-Houthi, and Abdullah Yahya al Hakim as Specially Designated Global Terrorists," Federal Register, January 19, 2021. Less than a month later, the SDGT designation was revoked. See "Revocation of the Designations of Ansarallah, Abdul Malik al-Houthi, Abd al-Khaliq Badr al-Din al-Houthi, and Abdullah Yahya al Hakim (and Their Respective Aliases) as Specially Designated Global Terrorists," Federal Register, February 16, 2021. Despite the SDGT revocation, Abdulkhaliq remained "sanctioned under E.O. 13611 related to acts that threaten the peace, security, or stability of Yemen." See "Revocation of the Terrorist Designations of Ansarallah."

dd Abdalkhaliq has often been involved in the more ambitious and high-profile Houthi offensive operations, including the successful but later reversed Aden offensive in 2015, the successful Nihm offensive in 2019, and the near-success at Ma'rib in 2020. It is unclear, however, whether he simply shows up at major offensives to gain credit or whether his input has real bearing on these campaigns. Authors' own collective analysis of the relative success and failure of Houthi offensives in the Yemen war, 2015-2020.

de Until December 2017, a Saleh loyalist Mehdi Miqulah led the Reserve Forces, and was preceded by Major General Ali bin al-Jaifi, who died in a Saudi airstrike in October 2016. Details from interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

df Three of the Presidential Protection Brigades (PPB) commanders are largely anonymous: Colonel Mohammed al-Shuaibi (1st PPB); Colonel Mohammed al-Jabiri (2nd PPB); and Colonel Abdallah Abbas (4th PPB). The 3rd PPB commander, Fouad al-Imad, has been in position since November 2014 and is a Houthi. Details from interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

dg For instance, the authors have watched video of Presidential Protection Brigade parades that include T-80 and T-72 tanks. Recently, an August 12, 2022, parade in Sana'a showed T-80BV tanks with Explosive Reactive Armor in the service of the Presidential Protection Brigades. These tanks were drawn from the 3rd Republican Guard brigade stocks. YouTube video URL available upon request. For a gazetteer of ground combat systems inherited by the Houthis in 2014, see "Handbook Of Pre-War Yemeni Fighting Vehicles," Oryx website, September 20, 2015.

dh Abu Talib is quite enigmatic at this point but reputedly led Houthi forces of around 200 fighters in the six wars and ended that period as the field commander in the important Harf al-Sufyan area. He is a low-profile operator who has, in the words of one investigator, "grown in the shadows." Details from interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

di The Mobile Region is described as numbering 15,000-20,000 forces, which may be inaccurate and seems too large for a newly raised force. More likely, either the force is much smaller or it is a command staff that can call upon allocated units from the MRCs and the Central Region when offensive or counter-offensive operations require the deployment of a concentrated force. Details from interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

dj Abu Fatima appears to be from Hajjah and is a member of a *sadah* family. Details from interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

for the movement and security of Iranian and Lebanese advisors.[dk] One IRGC-QF unit associated with the Houthi qualitative forces is Unit 340,[194] whose remit is to enable the transfer of military capabilities to partner forces.[dl]

The two main classes of elite forces that have been identified are "qualitative forces" and "special forces."[195] The so-called "qualitative forces" are split into two main sections:

- Aerospace forces (drone and missile) are led by Yemen Air Force and Air Defense commander Major General Ahmed Ali Ahsan al-Hamzi, a Houthi from a *sadah* family who received military training in Iran according to the U.S. Treasury.[196] Al-Hamzi is supported by a fast-rising young Houthi known as Zakaria Abdullah Yahya Hajjar,[197] another Iranian-trained drone and missile specialist who is drawn from a *sadah* family from the Bani al-Harith area of Sana'a.[dm] The Houthi chief of staff Major General Mohammed Abdalkarim al-Ghammari and Minister of Defense Staff Major General Mohammed Nasser al-Atifi, the former head of the Missiles Brigade Group, work alongside the Special Forces Official to support the aerospace units.[198]

- Naval forces (mines, missiles and boats) are led by the Naval Forces chief of staff Mansour al-Saadi, a long-standing Houthi commander on the Red Sea coast since 2015.[199] According to the U.S. Treasury, al-Saadi "masterminded lethal attacks against international shipping in the Red Sea" and received military training in Iran.[200]

Perhaps surprisingly, the grouping and organization of light-infantry-type ground "special forces" in the Houthi order of battle is more of a mystery. Since at least the sixth Sa`da war, there has been a noted similarity between Houthi commando operations and Hezbollah border-raiding tactics against Israel.[201] As noted in the September 2018 *CTC Sentinel* article by one of the authors (Knights), "Houthi forces have achieved great tactical success

against Saudi border posts through offensive mine-laying[dn] on supply routes and ATGM [anti-tank guided missile] strikes on armored vehicles and outposts."[202] Yet, it is less clear how elite light infantry forces are organized and grouped. Certain Houthi ground forces units have been framed as elite light infantry[do] and land special forces commanders appear to have been identified in the past after being killed.[203][dp] Though most accounts of specifically named Houthi "special forces units" appear apocryphal,[dq] there does seem to be a training program to enhance the capabilities of land forces commanders, staff officers, and tactical operators in light infantry fighting and to reinforce ideological fervor.[204] One example of units that appear to have received such strengthening are the Nasser brigades on the Red Sea coast, which attained a kind of honorific status (*nukhba*, meaning elites) after receiving such training. The aforementioned Mobile Region could be another example of an effort to develop elite light infantry strike forces.[205]

Analytic Conclusions
The Houthi movement is an evolving subject, and the trendline, in the authors' view, is toward a centralization of command and control, and greater coercive power in the hands of the top leadership.[206] When RAND undertook its pioneering study of the Houthis in 2010,[207] based on evidence available then, it was absolutely right to describe the Houthi movement as a "heterogeneous" organism that appeared decentralized and non-cohesive, with its leaders cloistered in rural redoubts and unable or unwilling to take authoritarian control of the movement.[208] The RAND authors Barak Salmoni, Bryce Loidolt, and Madeleine Wells presciently anticipated that the movement might move beyond a fighting style of "unconnected fighting groups" to form "a coordinated, synchronized fighting force."[209] Likewise, anthropologist Marieke Brandt correctly portrayed the traditional role of the *sadah* as dependent on tribal protection, turning their weakness (versus tribal groups) into a strength by playing the historic role of mediator and arbiter of tribal law and social peace.[210]

The situation described above has arguably changed. Abdalmalik al-Huthi and his inner circle of *sadah* followers are now anything but weak mediators, bolstered now by over a decade

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dk This would make sense as Abdallah al-Hakim (Abu Ali) is probably the most respected Houthi military commander and is senior enough to operate across MRC boundaries with overarching authority. In other environments, intelligence and security agencies are used to move and hide Iranian and Hezbollah advisors. In Iraq, for instance, this role is carried out by the Amn al-Hashd, or the Popular Mobilization Forces Security Directorate. Details from interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

dl Unit 340 is the IRGC-QF Technical Department. According to Israel's Intelligence Research Division (IRD), Unit 340 enables Iran's partner forces to develop and field military technology and military industries; the IRD unit commander Aman Saar noted: "I like to give the example of Unit 340 of Quds Force, which does design at cost to weapons … They understand that you cannot build a missile with Iranian technology and then expect the Yemenis to accept and operate it, so they are suitable for the Yemenis with a relevant plant." Veteran Israeli defense journalist Amos Harel describes Unit 340 as "responsible for the research and development that serves all the terrorist and guerilla organizations operating with Tehran's patronage and financing … The knowhow gained by the Iranians is quickly and effectively relayed to their proxies throughout the region." See Jennifer Bell, "Iran making 'significant developments' in building its weapon arsenal: Israeli media," Al-Arabiya English, March 18, 2021.

dm Zakaria Hajjar is reported by interviewees to work alongside a third Houthi missile and drone commander called Ahmed Mohammed Ali al-Jowhari, about whom nothing is currently known. Details from interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

dn These include Explosively-Formed Penetrator, large 120mm-diameter shaped charges, directional charges and claymore warheads, repurposed naval mines, plus anti-tank and anti-personnel mines. Author (Knights) interview, Gulf coalition explosives ordnance technicians; names of interviewee, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

do In 2020, one unit on the Ma'rib front was described in one press report as "an elite brigade trained by militants from the Lebanese group Hezbollah." "Senior rebel commander killed in Yemen amid fierce battles," Arab News, May 8, 2020.

dp The head of Houthi land special forces, Mohammed Abdalkarim al-Hamdan, was reported killed in May 2020 on the Ma'rib front. Ibid.

dq One of the authors (Knights) has previously described such units as the Katibat al-Mawt (Death Battalions), Katibat al-Ashura (Ashura Battalions), but these appear to be normal Houthi units attributed elite-sounding names in specific operations—in essence, a psychological operation. Knights, "The Houthi War Machine." The same author just completed writing on a book about the battle of Aden in 2015, in which Katibat al-Ashura Battalions is also mentioned by interviewees as a unit that was present during major offensive operations by the Houthis. Whether this is an actual fixed-name unit or whether the moniker is applied to any major Houthi offensive force remains unknown.

> "Iran sees the Houthis as a remarkable asset, on par with Lebanese Hezbollah, albeit at an earlier stage of development. In the authors' assessment, based on investigative work in both Iraq and Yemen, the Houthis are respected by IRGC-QF to a greater extent than Iraqi militias because the Houthis have proven themselves to be more capable, cohesive, and disciplined."

of internal security advice and procedures provided by Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah.[211] Whereas RAND rightfully doubted (based on data available in 2010) that the Houthi leaders could rule by "authoritarian control of physical coercion,"[212] [dr] the coercive machine that is available today is far more capable of suppressing dissent.[213] As Adel Dashela noted in a 2022 study on tribal dynamics in Houthi-controlled northern Yemen,[214] [ds] the Houthi movement now employs "a totalitarian mindset, applying a logic of oppression and dominance towards the northern tribes" that has allowed the temporary subjugation of tribal power.[215] Even skeptics of Iranian involvement such as Marieke Transfield draw attention to strong "parallels in the Hizballah takeover of West Beirut in 2008 and the Houthi grab of power in 2014 [that] also suggest some exchange on military strategy."[216]

Likewise, previous scholarship was absolutely right to point to a lack of strong public evidence of Iranian mentorship in the Houthi movement,[217] but this has been rendered moot by subsequent events and outpaced by the gradual release of materials on the growing role of the IRGC-QF and Lebanese Hezbollah during the years in which the Houthi movement became extraordinarily successful on the battlefield, namely from the fourth Sa'da war in 2007 to the present day.[218] Badr al-Din, Husayn, and Abdalmalik, as well as many other Houthi commanders, drew heavily on the examples and the political and military models of the Islamic Republic of Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah. In the formation of the Jihad Council, the Houthis deliberately adopted Hezbollah's organization model, and in the acceptance of an IRGC-QF Jihad Assistant at the heart of Houthi military strategy, the Houthis adopted the same mentoring model as Iraqi terrorist group Kata'ib Hezbollah. The Houthi military has adopted many features of IRGC and Lebanese Hezbollah counterparts, including top-level command and control architecture, preventative security arrangements, information operations, training, covert procurement, military industrialization, drone and missile forces, and guerrilla naval operations, to name a few.[219] Indeed, the process is not yet finished: The Houthi-controlled military is still in chrysalis form—part way through its metamorphosis into what the authors assess to be a very close clone of the IRGC and Lebanese Hezbollah military and security systems, with the birth of a Basij-type mobilization and internal security system already coming into view.[dt]

Is it possible that IRGC and Lebanese Hezbollah provided this transformative support but sought no influence over the Houthi decision-making system? Based on the authors' collective investigation, Iranian leaders do utilize a very soft touch, but this is precisely because their alignment of ideology and goals is already so close to Abdalmalik and his inner circle.[220] As noted earlier in this piece, conflict and terrorism analysts may find it profitable to look harder and further back for the beginnings of IRGC-QF and Lebanese Hezbollah interactions with the Houthi leaders. It may also be worth re-examining the drivers of the Houthi-IRGC and Houthi-Hezbollah relationships. Were these mainly relationships of necessity, driven to unintended levels by the wars in Yemen, or were they highly intentional relationships of choice from the outset, based on a common worldview?

Whenever and however the Houthi relationships started with IRGC-QF and Hezbollah, these relationships now appear to be exceedingly strong and stable.[221] In the assessment of the authors, Iran sees the Houthis as a remarkable asset, on par with Lebanese Hezbollah, albeit at an earlier stage of development.[du] In the authors' assessment, based on investigative work in both Iraq and Yemen, the Houthis are respected by IRGC-QF to a greater extent than Iraqi militias because the Houthis have proven themselves to be more capable, cohesive, and disciplined.[222] The Jihad Assistant oversees a relationship with the Houthis that is reputedly warm, discreet, respectful, and highly valued by both sides.[223] According to the authors' collective research, Lebanese Hezbollah's relations with the group appear similarly respectful, egalitarian, and brotherly, which (again) is often not the case between Lebanese

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dr RAND noted: "Much like the tribal shaykh who relies on soft power to maintain influence over individuals and cannot sustain authoritarian control, both the central commanders and [local area leaders] within the Houthi organism must rely on local prestige to mobilize their subordinates. Thus, instead of leading through intimidation, the Houthi commander—whether Husayn or 'Abd al-Malik—must cultivate loyalty and obedience through influence and persuasion. Such methods are congruent with long enduring local norms according to which authority and prestige do not emanate from authoritarian control or physical coercion." Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, p. 224.

ds Dashela notes: "The Houthi movement used an array of policies toward the tribes, including violence, and altered tribal customs and traditions to serve its war project, and this led to depletion of the tribes' human resources. The Houthi movement is an ideologically driven military group with a totalitarian mindset, applying a logic of oppression and dominance toward the northern tribes. In other words, it lacks a base of popular support in tribal communities, which have been largely coerced into expressions of solidarity, including participation in the Houthi war effort. While tribes enjoyed social and political privilege during the Saleh regime, they have been stripped of this during the Houthi era, and they are no longer the cohesive tribal entity they once were." Dashela, p. 13.

dt Indeed, the authors have found in their interviews that key Houthi commanders like Abdallah al-Hakim (Abu Ali) and Yusuf al-Madani are being focused on internal security missions and the development of local reserve forces. Details from interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

du The relationship has long legs also: Houthi leaders are comparatively young, often still in their thirties, forties, and fifties. They might be good partners for Tehran for decades to come. This is the authors' collective conclusion, based on their synthesis of the known facts.

and Iraqi groups.[224] [dv] Neither Iran nor Hezbollah appear to play in the internal politics of the Houthis to a measurable extent, in part because the movement—unlike Iraqi militias—has a unity and discipline that both Iran and Hezbollah appreciate in a partner.[225]

Iranian and Lebanese interaction with the Houthi leadership is so narrowly focused on Abdalmalik and the Jihad Council that it is, in the authors' collective assessment, probably invisible to most Houthis and to Yemenis and the world at large.[226] Though it is not possible to identify any Houthi command decisions in which IRGC-QF or Hezbollah forced the Houthis to decide differently than they might independently have, it is assessed as probable that Iran has built up sufficient goodwill and credit with the Houthi leadership that it can selectively call on the Houthis to serve Iranian interests in ways that may incur new costs or difficulties for the Houthis.[227] If Abdalmalik and his inner circle decide to cede certain strategic decisions to Iran, almost no one would know it had happened and no one would be in a position to protest within the centralized totalitarian structure of today's Houthi movement.

Therefore, even if the Houthi relationship with Iran and Hezbollah is not that of a proxy, this article argues that the connection is arguably that of a strong, deep-rooted alliance that is underpinned by tight ideological affinity and geopolitical alignment.[228] This suggests that the relationship will only grow closer, regardless of whether fighting in Yemen waxes or wanes, and that the Houthis may play an integrated role in future Iranian and Lebanese Hezbollah military campaigns.[dw] If a key Houthi supporter of close relations with Iranian and Lebanese Hezbollah, such as Abdalmalik, were to die or be otherwise replaced, there is now a broad-based set of leaders whose whole ideological and political upbringing will predispose them to continue this beneficial and warm relationship.[229] In the authors' view, the risk that a 'southern Hezbollah' might emerge is arguably now a fact on the ground.   **CTC**

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dv   Again, Knights (and co-authors) detected tensions between Iraqi militias and Lebanese Hezbollah that does not seem to exist between the Houthis and Hezbollah. This reflects the balance of evidence from interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request. See also Michael Knights, Crispin Smith, and Hamdi Malik, "Discordance in the Iran Threat Network in Iraq: Militia Competition and Rivalry," *CTC Sentinel* 14:8 (2021).

dw   In essence, this process has begun already. To give two examples, the Houthis claimed both the May 2019 drone attack on Saudi Arabia's East-West oil pipeline and the September 2019 cruise missile and drone attacks on the Abqaiq and Khurais oil processing facilities, even though both attacks were shown to have originated in Iraq (May 2019) and Iran and Iraq (September 2019). See Michael Knights and Tim Michetti, "How to Present Evidence of Iranian Involvement in the Saudi Attack," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, September 26. 2019. For evidence of Iraqi militia fundraising efforts for Houthi operations, see Hamdi Malik and Michael Knights, "Kataib Hezbollah Behind 'Grassroots' Iraqi Fundraising for Yemen," Militia Spotlight, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, February 1, 2022. The Kataib Hezbollah spokesman noted "the honorable sons of Iraq had to ... support their Yemeni brothers. Therefore, we will launch a big campaign under the slogan amwalokum mosayarat [your money will turn to drones] ... to gather money for the Yemeni people to buy drones." Worthy of a separate lengthy article, ties between the Houthis and the Iraqi Shi`a militias are growing quickly. This is the authors' collective conclusion, based on their synthesis of the known facts. See also Katherine Zimmerman, "Yemen's Houthis and the expansion of Iran's Axis of Resistance," American Enterprise Institute, March 2022.

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3   See "Revocation of the Terrorist Designations of Ansarallah," U.S. Department of State, February 12, 2021.

4   Ibid.

5   "Treasury Sanctions Key Military Leaders of the Ansarallah Militia in Yemen," U.S. Department of Treasury, March 2, 2021; "Treasury Sanctions Senior Houthi Military Official Overseeing Group's Offensive Operations," U.S. Department of Treasury, May 20, 2021; "Treasury Targets Key Houthi Finance Network in Coordination with Regional Gulf Partners," U.S. Department of Treasury, February 23, 2022.

6   See Peter Salisbury, "Behind the Yemen Truce and Presidential Council Announcements," International Crisis Group, April 8, 2022.

7   "Yemen's fate hangs in balance as truce collapses," *Straits Times*, October 3, 2022.

8   Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells.

9   An extraordinarily detailed and useful text is Marieke Brandt, *Tribes and Politics in Yemen: A History of the Houthi Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

10   Ibid., pp. 21-23.

11   Christopher Harnisch and Katherine Zimmerman, "Profile: Al Houthi Movement," American Enterprise Institute, January 28, 2010.

12   Both Salmoni et al and Brandt provide fulsome reviews of Badr al-Din's background and development of a family powerbase. See Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, pp. 102-107 and Brandt, pp. 139-144.

13   Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, p. 104.

14   "Letter dated 26 January 2018 from the Panel of Experts on Yemen mandated by Security Council resolution 2342 (2017) addressed to the President of the Security Council," United Nations Security Council, January 26, 2018, p. 91. See also Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, p. 106 and Brandt, p. 140.

15   Brandt, p. 144.

16   Ibid., pp. 117-125.

17   Oved Lobel, "Becoming Ansar Allah: How the Islamic Revolution Conquered Yemen," Report No. 20, European Eye on Radicalization, March 2021, pp. 10-11. Also drawn from details from interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

18   Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, p. 106.

19   Drawn from an interview for this study. Names of interviewee, and date and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

20   Lobel, pp. 10-11. Also drawn from details from interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

21   "Sudan and Terrorism: Hearing before the subcommittee on African affairs of the committee on foreign relations," United States Senate, May 15, 1997; Jonathan Schanzer, "The Islamic Republic of Sudan?" *Foreign Policy*, June 10, 2010; Giorgio Cafiero, "Is a Sudanese-Iranian rapprochement possible?" Middle East Institute, May 19, 2019.

22   Lobel, pp. 10-11. See also Brandt, pp. 132-134.

23   Brandt, p. 126.

24   Ibid., p. 126.

25   Ibid., pp. 101-103 on *hadawism*. See also Michael Knights, "The Houthi War Machine: From Guerrilla War to State Capture," *CTC Sentinel* 11:8 (2018).

26   Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, pp. 102-105.

27   Ibid., pp. 5-6, 99. See also Brandt, pp. 116-118.

28   Brandt, p. 146.

29   For a full-throated and documented making of the case for long-term Iranian and Lebanese Hezbollah involvement, see Lobel.

30   For an account of the six wars, see "Part III: The Six Sa'da Wars" in Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, pp. 129-242. See also "Part Two: The Sa'dah Wars (2004-2010)" in Brandt, pp. 153-336.

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33   Brandt, pp., 122-123.

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40   This is the authors' collective conclusion, based on their synthesis of the known facts, and explored further through this text.

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90   Details provided in interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

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this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

92   Based on the authors noting the repeated incident of the Humran family name in sensitive roles. These include Executive Committee member and mobilization official Qasim al-Humran, Preventative Security head Ahsan al-Humran, General Mobilization Office head Abdalrahim al-Humran, and former Special Forces Official Hamud al-Humran. Details provided in interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

93   Details provided in interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

94   This is the authors' collective conclusion, based on their synthesis of the known facts.

95   Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, multiple sessions with significant detail, 2021, exact dates, name, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

96   Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, multiple sessions with significant detail, 2021, exact dates, name, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

97   This is the authors' collective conclusion, based on their synthesis of the known facts.

98   Details from interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

99   Al-Gabarni, "Who are the Houthis?" Details provided in interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

100   This is the authors' collective conclusion, based on their synthesis of the known facts.

101   DeVore, Stähli, and Franke, pp. 32-33.

102   This is the authors' collective conclusion, based on their synthesis of the known facts.

103   Details provided in interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

104   Details from interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

105   Details from interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

106   Details from interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

107   Details from interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

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110   This is the authors' collective conclusion, based on their synthesis of the known facts.

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120   Details gathered in interviews and data collection for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

121   Details gathered in interviews and data collection for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

122   Details gathered in interviews and data collection for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

123   Details gathered in interviews and data collection for this study. Names of

interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request. All details in his paragraph are drawn from interview data.

124   This is the authors' collective conclusion, based on their synthesis of the known facts. The authors have extensive on the ground experience in the Yemeni security sector, before and since the Arab Spring.

125   This is the authors' collective conclusion, based on their synthesis of the known facts.

126   This is the authors' collective conclusion, based on their synthesis of the known facts.

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129   Details provided in interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

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131   Details gathered in interviews and data collection for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

132   This is the authors' collective conclusion, based on their synthesis of the known facts.

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141   This is the authors' collective conclusion, based on their synthesis of the known facts.

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149   Al-Qodasi and al-Gabarni.

150   Details from interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

151   Details from interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

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161   This is the authors' collective conclusion, based on their synthesis of the known facts. For a good summary of the basij system, see Alfoneh.

162   This is the authors' collective conclusion, based on their synthesis of the known facts.

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164   This is the authors' collective conclusion, based on their synthesis of the known facts.

165   Al-Gabarni, "Who are the Houthis?" Details provided in interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

166   This is the authors' collective conclusion, based on their synthesis of the known facts.

167   Details provided in interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

168   Details from interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

169   Details from interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

170   Details from interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

171   Details from interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

172   Details from interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

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178   Al-Gabarni, "Who are the Houthis?"

179   Details from interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

180   Al-Gabarni, "Who are the Houthis?"

181   Details gathered from interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

182   This is the authors' collective conclusion, based on their synthesis of the known facts.

183   Caris. Note that Caris uses Presidential Protection Forces, but on the ground, the more usual Houthi nomenclature is Presidential Protection Brigades. In the non-Houthi areas, the remaining loyalist presidential guards are often known as Presidential Protection Forces. This is the authors' collective conclusion, based on their synthesis of the known facts.

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187   This is the authors' collective conclusion, based on their synthesis of the known facts.

188   Details from interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

189   Details from interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

190   Details from interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and

191   Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request. See also al-Gabarni, "Who are the Houthis?"

192   Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request. See also al-Gabarni, "Who are the Houthis?"

193   Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request. See also al-Gabarni, "Who are the Houthis?"

194   Details from interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

195   Details from interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

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197   Details from interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request. See also "The Kingdom designates five individuals for their association with activities in support of the Iranian-backed terrorist Houthi militia," Sabq Online Newspaper, August 31, 2022.

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205   This is the authors' collective conclusion, based on their synthesis of the known facts.

206   This is the authors' collective conclusion, based on their synthesis of the known facts.

207   Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells.

208   Ibid., pp. 219-220, 227. See also Brandt, p. 201.

209   Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, p. 238.

210   Brandt, pp. 21-23.

211   This is the authors' collective conclusion, based on their synthesis of the known facts.

212   Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, p. 224.

213   Dashela, pp. 3, 12, 13.

214   Ibid., p. 13.

215   Ibid.

216   Transfeld, "Iran's Small Hand in Yemen." See also Brandt, pp. 334-335.

217   Transfeld, "Iran's Small Hand in Yemen."

218   This is the authors' collective conclusion, based on their synthesis of the known facts.

219   These factors have been discussed in this article and in Knights' previous article in this publication. See Knights, "The Houthi War Machine."

220   This is the authors' collective conclusion, based on their synthesis of the known facts.

221   This is the authors' collective conclusion, based on their synthesis of the known facts.

222   One of the authors (Knights, with co-authors) has tracked growing IRGC-QF disappointment with Iranian-supported Iraqi militias. See Knights, Smith, and Malik. For a comprehensive look at the Houthis' integration into the Iran-led Axis of Resistance, see Katherine Zimmerman, "Yemen's Houthis and the expansion of Iran's Axis of Resistance," American Enterprise Institute, March 2022.

223   This reflects the balance of evidence from interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

224   This reflects the balance of evidence from interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at

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dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request. The provisional assessment of the internal security role for the Mobile Region is the authors' collective conclusion, based on their synthesis of the known facts.

interviewees' request.

225   This is the authors' collective conclusion, based on their synthesis of the known facts.

226   This reflects the balance of evidence from interviews for this study. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.

227   This is the authors' collective conclusion, based on their synthesis of the known facts. Interesting "mobilizations of bias" (i.e., decision-making cases) that might be explored more closely by future scholars include

Houthi decisions on cross-border attacks into Saudi Arabia and the UAE, Houthi attacks on U.S. shipping, and Houthi engagement in ceasefire talks.

228   This is the authors' collective conclusion, based on their synthesis of the known facts.

229   This is the authors' collective conclusion, based on their synthesis of the known facts.

Feature Commentary: Elements of a Pragmatic Strategy to Counter Domestic Political Violence

By Brian Michael Jenkins

Americans appear to reside in separate cultural and political camps. Increasing threats against public officials and displays of public hostility have prompted growing apprehension of future political violence. It is in this fragile and fraught environment that any efforts to contain politically motivated violence will have to operate. This commentary outlines a determinedly pragmatic and non-partisan approach to address this threat that recognizes the limits of what law enforcement can do while addressing the greater challenge of national reconciliation. The intent of the essay is not to be prescriptive, but rather to set down a framework for further discussion.

"Violence in America has risen to alarmingly high levels ... This high level of violence is dangerous to our society. It is dividing our people into armed camps ... jeopardizing our most precious institutions ... poisoning the spirit of trust and cooperation essential to their functioning ... corroding the central political processes of our democratic society ... substituting force and fear for argument and accommodation."

Many Americans in 2022 would agree with this sober assessment of the country's situation, but, in fact, these quotes appeared more than a half century ago in the 1968 "Report of the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence."[1] The Commission had been created to address the situation during one of the most turbulent decades in modern American history. The United States in the 1960s was divided by race, cultural attitudes, ideology, politics, and growing opposition to the war in Vietnam.

The decade had witnessed the assassination of President John F. Kennedy; a violent reaction to the civil rights movement that included church burnings and the murder of civil rights workers; the assassination of civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. and of JFK's brother, senator and presidential candidate Robert F. Kennedy; widespread race riots; growing anti-war protests, and street battles at the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago.

In 1968, George Wallace, the governor of Alabama, launched a third-party presidential campaign aimed at denying both the Democratic and Republican candidates a majority of electoral votes, thereby throwing the election into the House of Representatives where he could broker his support to protect the segregationists' cause. The same year saw the Hong Kong flu pandemic, which killed between one and four million people worldwide and as many as 100,000 people in the United States. The decade closed with the

beginning of the domestic terrorist campaigns that would increase in the 1970s.

The campaigns represented an array of causes. Some far-left groups like the Weather Underground opposed the war in Vietnam; others like the New World Liberation Front and United Freedom Front rejected capitalism or opposed U.S. policies in Central America. The Black Liberation Army took up arms against the government and capitalism, and for self-determination of Black people. The *Fuerzas de Liberacion Nacional* (FALN) sought independence for Puerto Rico. Far-right anti-Castro groups bombed countries and corporations doing business with Fidel Castro. Violent elements within the Ku Klux Klan and neo-Nazis attacked minorities and communists. The primary tactic was bombings, but the groups also carried out armed robberies and assassinations.

While it is perhaps comforting to be reminded that Americans have been here before and the republic survived, the current situation in the United States in some respects seems more worrisome. A half century after the tumultuous 1960s, Americans appear even more divided in their attitudes about race and racism, ideology, and federal authority. Americans increasingly reside in separate cultural and political camps, reflecting different perceptions of reality. The COVID-19 pandemic has further polarized society and contributed to greater radicalization.[2]

Increasing displays of public hostility have prompted fears of political violence. Public opinion polls indicate that a growing number of Americans believe political violence is justified under some circumstances.[3] But many are also alarmed by the appearance of heavily armed men at public protests; the assault on the U.S. Capitol by a violent mob; the increasingly bellicose language of national leaders and influencers on television, radio, the internet, and social media; the growing volume of threats against public officials at all levels of government; and the reported increase in hate crimes. Some even fear that the United States is heading

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toward another civil war.[4]

This article outlines the elements of a strategy—a determinedly pragmatic approach—to address the threat of political violence by domestic extremists, specifically how a country as divided as ours can prevent domestic political violence from spinning out of control. It is written from a personal perspective, expanding upon my 2021 testimony before Congress, essays written during the past two years, and briefings on domestic political violence.[5] It draws on decades of my own research on terrorism and that of my colleagues at the RAND Corporation and elsewhere. It is important, however, to emphasize that these are my own thoughts. They do not necessarily reflect those of the RAND Corporation, the U.S. government, the U.S Army, the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, the Combating Terrorism Center, or any other institution.

Part One of the article examines the evolution of the problem set when it comes to domestic political violence in the United States. This section begins by looking back at efforts since 9/11 to protect the country against attacks directed or inspired by foreign terrorist organizations. Although overshadowed by the cost in lives lost and trillions of dollars spent in what was initially called the "Global War on Terror" and came to be seen as "forever wars" abroad, efforts to prevent further jihadi attacks on U.S. soil—although marred by initial missteps and injustices—could be described as largely successful and a source of lessons to be learned. This section then outlines how dealing with domestic political violence will be different, why it is likely to be more difficult, and therefore, why we need to rethink strategy before implementing new laws and policies. The section then turns to a more detailed analysis of the political terrain in the United States and the current threat of domestic political violence. This section also speculates about why the country has not seen the escalation or surge of terrorist violence as many anticipated immediately after the January 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol.

Part Two reviews recent official documents and pronouncements that comprise the current U.S. strategy for dealing with domestic violent extremism. The multifaceted nature of what government is trying to achieve raises questions about definitions, vocabulary, roles, and missions.

Part Three then lays out the basic elements that I believe should guide U.S. strategy in dealing with U.S. domestic violent extremism. This is not a prescription, and it will certainly not be the last word. Its purpose is to provoke further comment and discussion.

Part One: The Evolving Problem Set of Domestic Violent Extremism

The Campaign against Homegrown Jihadis
For the past quarter century, U.S. authorities have focused on defending the country against the terrorist threat posed by a distant jihadi enterprise. In 1996, al-Qa`ida announced it was declaring war on the United States and launched an escalating global terrorist campaign, culminating in the 9/11 attacks. Fearing further, even worse terrorist actions, the U.S. government responded with an unprecedented international campaign directed against a non-state organization. Military operations abroad scattered al-Qa`ida's central command and cadre, and made it increasingly dangerous for them to travel or even communicate. Diplomatic efforts built a new international coalition to combat al-Qa`ida's global enterprise. Improved intelligence and increased international cooperation steadily degraded al-Qa`ida's operational capabilities. Unable

to launch attacks on the United States from abroad, the group increasingly relied on its affiliates and appeals to homegrown jihadis to carry on its war.

Organizational and procedural changes in how intelligence was collected and shared, plus new counterterrorism legislation ultimately led to a better informed and more focused national effort that succeeded in containing the threat. Authorities did not prevent every attack in the United States, but they were able to uncover and thwart more than 80 percent of the homegrown jihadi plots.[6] This is not to say that every single plot, if not uncovered, would have led to an attack; some would have. In the more than 20 years since 9/11, homegrown jihadis by one count killed a total of 105 people in the United States—an average of approximately five deaths per year.[7] While every single death is tragic, it was a toll far less than feared in the immediate dark shadow of 9/11.

Perhaps the single most important reason why the United States did not suffer higher levels of jihadi terrorist activity was the fact that jihadi ideology gained little traction in America's Muslim communities, which had no tolerance for violent radicals and would report these people to the FBI. There was no jihadi underground, no jihadi terrorist groups, no continuing jihadi terrorist campaigns. Almost all attacks were carried out by lone attackers or, in a few cases, by tiny conspiracies.[8] The jihadi terror threat in the United States was mostly characterized by inexperienced operators, the absence of organization, limited resources, and one-off attacks. Some of the jihadis died in their attacks. The majority of the attackers along with almost all of the plotters were apprehended, convicted, and sentenced to long prison terms. Many of the American Islamist extremists who aspired to leave the United States to join jihadi fronts abroad were intercepted. Of those who managed to evade arrest and join a jihadi group, at least half subsequently died while carrying out terrorist operations abroad or were killed by U.S. military attacks or, in some cases, by their own comrades as a result of deadly quarrels within a group.[9]

While marred by initial missteps and blunders, the effort against homegrown jihadis can be judged a strategic 'success,' although jihadi armed struggles continue abroad and the danger of further jihadi attacks on American targets persists. Permanent improvements in U.S. domestic counterterrorism capabilities—if maintained—diminish that threat.[10] The history of the American campaign offers a source of lessons to be learned, and some of the same principles will apply to new terrorist challenges. The experience does not, however, provide the prototype for efforts to deal with the current threat posed by today's domestic violent extremists.

The Harder Challenge of Dealing with Domestic Terrorism
The domestic terrorist threat differs from that posed by homegrown jihadis in many respects, and dealing with it, for a number of reasons, will be more difficult.[11]

The nation has not been united or galvanized by a major domestic terrorist attack. The magnitude of the 9/11 terrorist attacks brought the country together in a fervent national effort to prevent further terrorist events. Domestic extremist attacks historically have not had the same unifying effect. The 1995 Oklahoma City bombing—the second-worst terrorist attack in the United States—did not unite the country in common cause, nor has the January 6, 2021, assault on the Capitol Building. The country remains deeply divided, even in how to describe the event, with

some calling it an insurrection while others claim it was "legitimate political discourse."[12] Indeed, America's political differences appear to have become more intense, which could hamper federal efforts to counter future political violence.

Domestic extremists have a sympathetic base. In contrast to the homegrown jihadis who faced national hostility and could not count on much sympathy from American Muslims, the beliefs driving today's domestic extremists are deeply rooted in American history and society. Right now, this is probably truer of far-right extremists than of those on the far left, although both belief systems have been around for more than a century.

Domestic extremists have bigger numbers. It is always difficult to estimate the membership of extremist groups. The numbers are elastic and depend on their source and definition of membership. Counting sympathizers on the internet, groups may claim thousands of members while those willing to show up in person at protests may number in the hundreds. The Proud Boys, who describe themselves as "Western chauvinists" but who are described by others as "white nationalists," have more than 100 chapters in almost all 50 states. Their total membership may be as high as 6,000.[13] The Boogaloo movement may have (or had at one time) up to 10,000 "members."[14] The Oath Keepers' membership lists 38,000 names, although the organization probably has far fewer active members.[15]

One chapter alone of the extreme far-left Youth Liberation Front claims 36,000 followers on Twitter, but that does not mean it has that many members.[16] Antifa, whose ideology does not reject violence and which President Trump said the federal government would treat as a terrorist group,[17] is better described as a universe of like-minded activists rather than a group.[18] Many of the other entities on the ideological extremes are more fabrics of belief than organizations. Estimates of membership for all of these groups, far right and far left, are as slippery as the labels applied to them.

Domestic extremists are better organized than homegrown jihadis. Both extreme far-right and extreme far-left activists have adopted the concept of "leaderless resistance,"[19] [a] often avoiding a hierarchical structure and instead relying on local autonomous cells to carry out attacks on behalf of their cause. This deliberate avoidance of centralized organization is intended to prevent infiltration by government informants. Far-left extremists generally appear less organized than far-right extremists, some of whom parade publicly in a semblance of uniforms.

Continued violence begets organization. More than 90 percent of the nationwide Black Lives Matter protests against police killings in 2020 were peaceful.[20] In a number of cases, however, protests were exploited by well-organized looters or a core of violent extremists who showed up to promote their own political agendas. They were joined by provocateurs wanting to escalate the confrontation or conduct false flag operations intended to discredit the protesters.[21] In cities where protests turned into nightly battles with police, the violent interlopers became dominant, street tactics were refined, daily decisions were required, and organization emerged.[22]

The same period saw right-wing extremists traveling across the country to participate in various protests, including the January 6 assault on the Capitol. That required coordination, logistics, and financing. The shared experiences expanded contacts and contributed to coalescence. Even while adhering to leaderless resistance strategies, organizationally these groups may be maturing, a point we will return to below.

Right-wing extremists in the United States have easy access to powerful firearms. Extremists of all persuasions have far easier access to fire-arms, including assault rifles, in the United States than they do in Europe and other Western countries.

Some right-wing extremists have military or police experience. Gunning down unarmed civilians requires fanaticism, not advanced training, but to move beyond a lone shooter attack would require some tactical skills. A few American jihadis had served in the military and more had sought to join the army, but for the most part, they were untrained. There are concerns that domestic extremist groups have recruited veterans and that their ideologies have to an unknown degree penetrated the armed forces and police departments.[23]

Preventing radicalization may not work. The Obama administration promoted the idea of intervening before a person was ready to commit a crime as an alternative to a purely law enforcement approach—that is, preventing radicalization and recruitment instead of incarcerating those who became terrorists. These efforts—aimed primarily at heading off would-be jihadis—provoked resentment in Muslim communities, and it is not clear how effective they were.[24] They may be even more controversial in the domestic environment. As the author has noted elsewhere, "The idea of the federal government patrolling ideology to identify dangerous beliefs will provoke outrage and raise civil liberties concerns on both the left and the right."[25]

The environment for intelligence collection will be less permissive. Domestic intelligence collection in a democracy is always a delicate undertaking. Historically, the United States has seen the pendulum swing between aggressive (and sometimes extra-legal) programs against ideologies and organizations deemed subversive and revelations of abuses and the imposition of constraints that go too far, then back again in the face of new threats. As previously noted by the author, the "material support statutes and the fact that the public and courts viewed jihadists as part of a foreign threat (even though the majority were U.S.-born citizens) gave authorities unprecedented latitude in their investigations."[26] Containing jihadi terrorism in the years after 9/11 was, for the most part, achieved through intelligence, although many aspects of the Patriot Act remain controversial. Law enforcement cannot count on the same degree of latitude in monitoring domestic extremists.

A Deeply Divided Country

The French political scientist Alexis de Tocqueville noted after touring the United States nearly two centuries ago—when democracy was still an unusual form of government—that what gave the United States strength was Americans' strong sense of community.[27] "Today, the catalog of trends currently eroding that sense of community is depressingly long."[28]

As the author has previously stated, "the increased polarization of our political system tops the list. It is a long-term trend, beginning in the 1970s, according to research at the RAND Corporation, that now manifests itself in the demonization of political opponents as

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a   Although leaderless resistance is associated primarily with right-wing extremist groups, environmentalist and animal rights extremists as well as others on the far left have adopted similar decentralized approaches. Brent L. Smith and Kelly R. Damphousse, "American Terrorism Study: Patterns of Behavior, Investigation and Prosecution of American Terrorists, Final Report," via the National Criminal Justice Reference Service, March 27, 2002.

primal enemies—tyrants, traitors, terrorists."[29]

As previously noted by this author, political discussion has descended "into crude insults, ad hominem attacks and the notion that profanity displays authenticity. Contemporary political rhetoric is seemingly intended to inflame passions ... Some news channels and the internet (along with foreign influence operations) stoke the differences, and facts are often irrelevant. This uncivic culture makes vicious attacks and harassment of public officials common, discouraging ordinary people from entering public service[30] ... Irreconcilable differences on social issues reinforce the political divide. Differences over racial injustice, abortion, gun control, immigration and LGBTQ rights increasingly determine whom one is willing to associate with, reinforcing self-segregation along political lines as we group with like-minded friends and partners."[31]

As the author has noted elsewhere, "Even within communities, Americans do fewer things together. Church attendance is declining.[32] Membership in civic organizations and lodges has been decreasing for decades.[33] PTA membership has dropped by nearly half of what it was in the 1960s.[34] Bowling leagues have almost disappeared. And the shared national experience of military service disintegrated with the abolition of conscription in 1973. Meanwhile, self-proclaimed citizen militias—driven mainly by far-right conspiracy theories—have surged since 2008, and especially in the past five years."[35]

This is a fragile and fraught political environment, so partisan that almost every issue cleaves along party lines. Millions of Americans believe—or profess to believe—that the 2020 presidential election was "stolen" and refuse to recognize the declared winner as the legitimate president of the United States.[36]

Yet, for all these faultlines, the United States in 1860 was more neatly divided than it is today. "For all the implied homogeneity in 'red' states and 'blue' states, they are more-complex mosaics—in terms of race, ethnicity, religion, and politics—than north versus south ever was."[37] That, at least, bodes against a binary breakdown.

But it is against the backdrop of a polarized nation that any efforts to contain political violence will have to operate, and it directly affects the formulation of any domestic counterterrorism strategy. This includes efforts to prevent radicalization and recruitment into the ranks of violent extremists, the collection of domestic intelligence, and the prosecution of violent offenders.[38]

Galaxies of Grievance

Threats of domestic political violence come from both the extreme far-left and the extreme far-right. Neither extreme is monolithic. Historically, those on the extreme far-left tend to reflect specific issues, including the protection of organized labor, women's liberation, equal rights for persons of all races and sexual orientations, opposition to nuclear weapons or the Vietnam War, protection of the environment, anti-capitalism, opposition to police shootings, and anti-fascism. These causes are sometimes expressed in a Marxist rhetoric, and within these movements, there are hardcore left-wing components. Today, it appears more anarchist than old-fashioned socialist, and for many young, self-styled anarchists, the ideology may be little more than a philosophical pretension to dress in black and raise hell.

Similarly, the extreme far-right reflects an assemblage of attitudes and overlapping causes rather than a single ideology. These include white nationalism or white supremacism, anti-Semitism, anti-Muslim sentiment, fears of replacement by imported

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minorities, opposition to immigration, anti-feminism, anti-gay sentiment, anti-abortion sentiment, opposition to restrictions on private gun ownership, and—above all—fervent opposition to the federal government. Collectively, some of these prejudices are part of a continuing current in American history, extending back to the beginnings of the republic. The current broadens in response to societal stress. More recent additions include involuntary celibates and those propelled by conspiracy theories on the internet, while the pandemic has led to a growing coalescence between anti-vaxxers or those opposing COVID-restrictions and the extreme far-right, who see each other as reinforcements against a tyrannical government.[39]

Although collectively labeled "fascists" by their foes, there are few in these right-wing movements who understand let alone subscribe to an actual fascist philosophy, just as there are not a lot of traditional "communists" on the left. These are epithets, tossed around on Twitter and other social media, not deep descriptions of belief systems.

Economic grievances fuel both extremes. The net worth of a typical white family in America is 10 times greater than that of a Black family.[40] Globalization and automation has impacted all blue-collar workers. Those with a high school diploma or less—whether Black or white—have been left behind economically, lacking access to jobs that would enable them to support a family. Inequality is growing. Just getting by has become harder. While deeply held prejudices are hard to change, increasing opportunities to improve the immediate economic outlook for many, while increasing education and vocational training to enhance long-range prospects, could drain some of the animus underlying the political divide. This is not to say that poverty causes political violence; it causes resentment, which can be exploited.

What we would today categorize as incidents of domestic terrorism, assassinations and bombings, go back to the 19th century. Anarchists and extremists within the labor movement were responsible for the assassination of President William McKinley and most of the major bombings from the 1880s into the 1920s. After the Civil War, the Ku Klux Klan and other white supremacist groups carried on campaigns of terror that continued into the 1870s, killing thousands between 1865 and 1876,[41] never entirely ceasing, but escalating again in the late 1920s, and again in the 1960s. An economic crisis affecting farmers in the Midwest prompted another wave of terrorist violence in the 1980s.[42]

Domestic terrorist attacks, primarily bombing campaigns

carried out by far-left extremists, increased sharply in the late 1960s and continued into the 1970s. Since then, the volume of domestic terrorist activity has declined; the 1970s still account for almost half of the total number of domestic terrorist attacks that occurred in the following 50 years.[43]

Terrorist analysts point out that while the first two decades of this century were dominated by concerns about homegrown jihadis inspired by al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State, domestic extremists were actually responsible for more attacks and deaths. According to statistics published by New America, attacks by homegrown jihadis resulted in 107 fatalities in the United States between 9/11 and the end of 2021, while attacks by violent extremists on the far right were responsible for 114 deaths. During the same period, misogynist ideology accounted for 17 deaths, Black nationalists or separatists killed 12, and far-left extremists killed one.[44]

The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) reports 893 incidents of domestic terrorism (counting both plots and attacks) between 1994 and May 2020. Its published statistics show domestic terrorism generally trending upward after 2006, with far-right extremists accounting for a growing share of the total. According to CSIS, far-right extremists accounted for 57 percent of all terrorist plots and attacks in the United States during this period (1994-2020) while left-wing extremists accounted for 25 percent.[45]

The Fallout from January 6

The January 6 invasion of the Capitol Building raised legitimate concerns about threats to democratic institutions and the potential for further political violence, but it also complicates any strategy to deal with that violence. The assault on the Capitol Building was an attempt to interrupt the transfer of power and overturn the results of the presidential election. More than 900 participants have been arrested and charged with crimes varying from misdemeanors like demonstrating in a Capitol building to felonies like criminal assault causing bodily injury.[46] Sixteen persons have been charged with seditious conspiracy.[47]

The assault involved violence: People were killed; many were injured. Greater violence was threatened, including chants of "Hang Mike Pence."[48] The purpose of the assault was to affect the conduct of government and advance the political goals of the perpetrators. Some defendants believed—and still believe—they were following President Trump's instructions.[49]

Concurrent with the investigations and criminal proceedings conducted by the Department of Justice, a Congressional Select Committee has conducted a parallel investigation.

As a result of its findings, the committee may refer matters to the Department of Justice, which will decide whether the former president (or anyone else) should be charged with a crime—as of mid-June 2022, 58 percent of Americans thought he should be.[50] The Department of Justice must then determine whether there is sufficient evidence to bring a criminal charge against the former president, and the likelihood of a conviction. What effect it would have on the American body politic, and whether this should even be a consideration, are additional questions. While no one is above the law, is prosecuting the former president in the best interest of the country?

The approach recommended in this essay is to keep law enforcement and the legitimate suppression of violence separate from the country's bitter political differences. To the extent that enforcement of the law is seen as politically motivated, then political violence directed against the government will appear to be more

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justified. Measures to legally suppress violent extremists will have greater public support if they are kept strictly in the arena of crime.

Many anticipated that the January 6 assault would inspire a wave of domestic terrorism. That has not occurred, at least, not yet. CSIS reported that the number of domestic terrorist plots and attacks dropped in 2021, although the number of fatalities increased from five to 30.[51] According to the Global Terrorism Index published by the Institute for Economics and Peace, there were eight incidents and seven deaths.[52] New America reported that for the first time since 9/11, there had been no successful mass terrorist attacks in the United States in 2021.[53] (One notes that the numbers are slippery.) A number of mass shootings had occurred, but none of these appeared to have been politically connected. (The killing of eight workers at massage parlors in Atlanta by a shooter who claimed to have a "sex addiction" could have been categorized as a hate crime because the victims were Asian-Americans. However, prosecutors decided to go into court with eight counts of murder.[54])

Daniel Byman has suggested that the absence of mass terrorist attacks in the wake of January 6 by right-wing extremists reflected pressure by federal authorities, the lack of organization on the extreme far-right, and possible public revulsion after the assault on the Capitol and mass shootings like that in El Paso.[55] I would agree that intense law enforcement pressure in the months following January 6 may have persuaded extremists to keep their heads down, especially since it was reported on January 27, 2021, that the leader of the Proud Boys had been a longtime informer for federal and local law enforcement.[56]

Even earlier, it was clear from October 2020 arrests that the FBI also had informants inside the alleged plot to kidnap the governor of Michigan.[57] These revelations may be fueling paranoia among extremists that any new terrorist plots could be lures by government *agents provocateurs* aimed at rolling up extreme right-wing networks.

While fears of infiltrators, may partly explain why far-right extremists have not launched terrorist campaigns, it may also be that a traditional terrorist strategy may not fit the far-right extremists' circumstances and strategy. The far-left extremist bombers of the 1970s wanted to draw attention to themselves and their causes. Today's far-right extremists already have national

Storm clouds roll over Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C., on July 21, 2022. (Tom Brenner for The Washington Post *via Getty Images)*

attention, supportive national media outlets, not insignificant popular support, and even the presumed approval of some political leaders. Therefore, they have less 'need' for terrorist attacks, which could alienate public support, leave them more vulnerable to government pursuit and prosecution, and force them to go underground. Demographic differences between the left-wing radicals of the 1970s and today's right-wing extremists may also discourage personal decisions to drop out and 'go underground.' The extreme right can build a national movement without the terrorism seen in previous waves.

The aura of violence is still present in the display of firearms, the military trappings and preparation for action, the semblance of uniforms—these are overt group activities. The exaltation of violence is also reflected in the bellicose rhetoric on the internet, online genocidal fantasies and plots, and in the growing volume of threats to public officials at all levels.[58]

This is a strategy based on intimidation and threats rather than the domestic terrorism of the 1970s. It is aimed less at altering national policies and more at scaring off its foes and taking power. It is far more of a political movement than the far left had in the 1970s, and more difficult to deal with than chasing handfuls of terrorist bombers.

More nihilistic elements that want to provoke a race war or civil war, individual actors pursuing personal agendas, and wannabes on the fringes seeking notoriety and approval pose the greatest immediate danger. There are also the gangs of thugs that assemble to engage in street brawls with targeted populations.[59] This is behavior similar to that of the squads of Italy's fascist Blackshirts,

who beat up socialists, Republicans, Catholics, Jews, and union members in the 1920s.

Part Two: An Evolving U.S. Strategy

Dealing with domestic terrorism has historically been a no-go area for the U.S. government. To liberals, it conjured up recollections of the FBI's discredited COINTELPRO campaigns exposed in the 1970s. In the 1980s, as left-wing bombers faded from the scene, conservatives feared that government campaigns against domestic extremists would be used to tarnish legitimate conservative causes. These differences were on display even after the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995.

The Senate hearings that followed the 1995 bombing revealed a deep reluctance by both sides of the political spectrum to support any expansion of domestic intelligence efforts, although for different reasons. No national commission was created to review the event and identify lessons learned or recommend new measures. An entity calling itself the Oklahoma Bombing Investigation Committee, comprising a member of the Oklahoma House of Representatives and three businessmen, conducted its own 'investigation' and issued its final report six years later.[60] Its recommendations were essentially an attack on the federal government agencies, in particular, "overzealous federal agents and prosecutors." It accused the government of misconduct and abuse of power, also evident, it noted, in the sieges at Ruby Ridge and Waco. Its final chapter is a blistering broadside on federal authority. It is worth quoting as it reflects sentiments that motivate many of today's right-wing extremists.

When group rights and individual rights are not protected, the situation becomes intolerable and the people rise up against their Government. Apparently, this is the point McVeigh had reached … It is only because people feel powerless against the Government and fear its abuses that they bond together to protect themselves from it … If individual rights were respected, if Government agents were punished when they step on people's rights or break laws … there would be no more acts of internal terrorism, no perceived need to stockpile weapons … Militia membership would dwindle and simply go away.[61]

The senior Department of Justice official coordinating the prosecution of Timothy McVeigh was current U.S. Attorney General Merrick Garland. Prosecutors knew the trial would be complicated by the intense emotions created by the carnage, the sharp political differences, the likelihood that the defendant would use the trial to promote his extremist views, and the inevitable conspiracy theories that would arise. The multitude of investigative paths pursued, many ending nowhere, and the mountains of evidence collected could, by their sheer volume and complexity, confuse a jury. The challenge was to keep the jury focused on the main legal question before it: Was McVeigh responsible for the bombing that caused the death of eight federal officials—a specific criminal charge that carried the death penalty? The jury agreed he was.[62]

Today's political partisanship has made the subject of domestic political violence even more perilous to address than it was in the 1990s. It is only in the past five years that the federal government has re-entered this politically fraught territory.[b] Although still overshadowed by jihadi attacks, domestic terrorist attacks were already increasing by then. Research indicates that the gradual and then sharper increase in the frequency of domestic terrorist attacks, in particular those carried out by right-wing extremists, can be correlated with the re-election of President Obama in 2012 and the election of President Trump in 2016.[63] Both elections reflected the increasing polarization of American society, especially on matters of race.[64]

Alarm, however, increased with the August 2017 "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, which mobilized a gathering of white supremacist, neo-Nazi, Ku Klux Klan, militias, and others to protest the removal of the statue of a confederate general. The event was viewed as an ominous demonstration of how brazen racist extremists had become. The effort to rid southern cities of monuments glorifying the confederacy had been given impetus by the 2015 murder of nine African-Americans at a historic Black

church in Charleston, South Carolina, by a self-radicalized white supremacist.[65]

In the following five years, a number of official documents have reflected growing government concern and the evolution of strategy. These include the 2018 *National Strategy for Counterterrorism*,[66] the 2019 *Department of Homeland Security Strategic Framework for Countering Terrorism and Targeted Violence*,[67] and the 2021 *National Strategy for Countering Domestic Terrorism*.[68]

The 2018 *National Strategy for Counterterrorism*

The 2018 *National Strategy for Counterterrorism* remains focused on radical Islamist groups, but recognizes that the threats come from "individuals mobilized to violence by a range of *domestic and foreign* ideologies."[69] The domestic component of the threat is spelled out in a single paragraph:

Lastly, the United States has long faced a persistent security threat from domestic terrorists who are not motivated by a radical Islamist ideology but are instead motivated by other forms of violent extremism, such as racially motivated extremism, animal rights extremism, environmental extremism, sovereign citizen extremism, and militia extremism. Such extremist groups attempt to advance their agendas through acts of force or violence. Notably, domestic terrorism in the United States is on the rise, with an increasing number of fatalities and violent nonlethal acts committed by domestic terrorists against people and property in the United States. The economic harm caused by domestic terrorists has also increased sharply as domestic terrorists have continued to destroy property, disrupt business, and perpetrate financial crimes that are designed to damage certain sectors of the United States economy.[70]

Although it claims to mark a shift in the American approach, the 2018 *National Strategy* continued the themes and efforts that had characterized the U.S. counterterrorism campaign since the 9/11 attacks. The priority actions described in the 2018 *National Strategy* mainly addressed the threat from abroad.[71]

The 2019 *Strategic Framework for Countering Terrorism and Targeted Violence*

The *Department of Homeland Security Strategic Framework for Countering Terrorism and Targeted Violence* published in September 2019 recognized domestic terrorism as a growing threat.

There has been a concerning rise in attacks by individuals motivated by a variety of domestic terrorist ideologies, such as racially- and ethnically-motivated violent extremism, including white supremacist violent extremism, anti-government and anti-authority violent extremism, and other ideological strains that drive terrorist violence.[72]

The 2019 *Strategic Framework* provides a far more detailed discussion of the threat posed by domestic terrorists, focusing on white supremacists. This reflected what were recent events. In March 2019, a gunman killed 51 Muslim worshippers at mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand. In his online manifesto, he claimed to have had brief contact with Anders Breivik, a white supremacist who in 2011 killed 77 people in Norway.[73] Breivik's manifesto highlighted the "Great Replacement Theory,"[74] the threat that white Europeans were being demographically and culturally replaced by Muslim immigrants.[75] White supremacists and nationalists have broadened the definition of the threat to include all immigrant populations other than those of white European heritage. Replacement theory

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b   Domestic terrorism has always been politically perilous territory for analysts and government agencies. Nonetheless, the FBI publicly reported on disruptions of plots and attacks by domestic terrorists into the early 2000s. By then, jihadi terrorism commanded most attention. Fearful of a return to the abuses of the FBI's counterintelligence programs (COINTELPRO), which targeted communists, the Socialist Workers Party, White Hate groups, Black nationalists, and the New Left in the 1960s, civil libertarians were reluctant to endorse any new monitoring of domestic groups. Conservative politicians condemned anything that suggested targeting of citizens on the basis of their views on issues such as the Second Amendment, immigration, or abortion. A 2009 DHS report, Rightwing Extremism: Current Economic and Political Climate Fueling Resurgence in Radicalization and Recruitment, prompted strong criticism from the Senate. The Secretary of Homeland Security apologized, and the report was withdrawn. See Liz Halloran, "Napolitano Apologizes, But Why?" NPR, April 16, 2009. It was not until the late 2010s that significant government attention to the domestic threat was renewed.

underpinned contemporary white supremacist grievance in the United States.[76]

The *Strategic Framework* noted that several months after the attack in New Zealand, a gunman opened fire at a Walmart store in El Paso, Texas, killing 23 and wounding 26. The gunman also mentioned replacement theory in his manifesto.[77] In October 2018, another gunman opened fire at a Jewish synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, killing 11. His online messages accused a Jewish charity of resettling refugees into the United States "that kill our people."[78] Another gunman attacked a Jewish synagogue in California, citing in his online posting the Christchurch and Pittsburgh killings as inspirations for his attack.[79]

The 2019 *Strategic Framework* also made reference to an anarchist claiming affiliation with antifa, who in 2019 attempted to ignite a propane tank at a federal facility in Tacoma, Washington. The armed attacker was killed by police arriving at the scene. The incident led to President Trump later stating that antifa should be designated as a terrorist group.[80]

The 2019 *Strategic Framework* added one further element to the discussion of the threat, noting that "hate crimes and *non-ideologically motivated large-scale or disproportionately lethal acts of mass violence* [italics added], including mass attacks, round out the picture of terrorism and targeted violence afflicting the Homeland."[81] This was a more controversial inclusion. It reflected the country's growing outrage at mass shootings following the October 2017 shooting in Las Vegas, Nevada, in which a gunman on a hotel balcony fired into a crowd watching a music festival killing 60 people and injuring 867 others, including 411 by gunfire, before killing himself. Investigators have yet to find an explanation for the attack, which does not appear to have any connection to an ideology, political agenda, or known prejudice.[82]

The Department of Homeland Security now refers to such acts as "targeted violence," in which "a known or knowable attacker selects a particular target prior to the violent attack. Unlike terrorism, targeted violence includes attacks otherwise lacking a clearly discernible political, ideological, or religious motivation, but that are of such severity and magnitude as to suggest an intent to inflict a degree of mass injury, destruction, or death commensurate with known terrorist tactics."[83] Targeted violence can take place at schools, places of worship, transportation systems, indeed any public gathering.

Deconstructing the meaning and intent of this new language shows how official thinking has evolved over the years. The term "targeted violence" comes from a 1995 paper prepared for the National Institute of Justice,[84] suggesting that law enforcement officers should go beyond their traditional role of gathering evidence, identifying and apprehending perpetrators, and assisting in the prosecution. They should also, the authors of that paper argued, acquire the skills to deal with possible future crime, specifically threat assessment—"the set of investigative and operational techniques that can be used by law enforcement professionals to identify, assess, and manage the risks of *targeted violence* and its potential perpetrators."[85]

Threat assessment would arise when police learn about communicated threats or behavior that is menacing. This appears to be the origin of the phrase "a known or knowable attacker." Some large police departments today have threat management units that are called upon to deal with cases involving stalking, hostile former employees, threats to former spouses, and similar threatening situations where violence is possible. The Los Angeles Police Department's Threat Management Unit, often working with the LAPD's Mental Evaluation Unit, handles hundreds of such cases a year.[86]

The notion of intervening to prevent targeted violence fits with post-9/11 pressure on authorities dealing with terrorism to actively intervene before an attack occurs. Traditional criminal investigations after a terrorist attack were not satisfactory. If the duty of law enforcement is to protect, not just punish, police had to detect and thwart terrorist attacks before bombs exploded—or, in police parlance, operate "left of the boom."

In the wake of 9/11, a large percentage of terrorist plots in the United States were, in fact, thwarted by FBI and police stings. Those who, due to threats or boasting of their readiness to take violent action, were judged to be bent upon harm could be introduced to an undercover agent pretending to be a terrorist operative. The undercover agent could not act as a provocateur to entrap the subject but could test whether the individual—if given the opportunity—was willing to participate in a terrorist attack, in this case, a controlled event that never endangered the public. Active participation proving intent sufficed to warrant prosecution under the material support provision of the federal criminal code, which carried a severe penalty.

While stings were effective in thwarting would-be terrorists, such operations often were criticized on grounds that, absent government intervention, the defendant would never have become a terrorist for want of an opportunity or competence. Preet Bharara, a prominent former federal prosecutor who handled some of these cases, points out, however, that if the authorities had not intervened, the defendant could have found their way to a genuine terrorist group.[87] As for competence, an individual ready to act could decide at any moment to use a truck or a machete to carry out mass murder. Competence was not a prerequisite to mass murder.

An alternative to stings was to push even further upstream to intervene even before an individual radicalized to the point of contemplating violence. A number of countries had developed programs aimed at deradicalizing those already incarcerated for terrorism-related crimes, enabling them to be released. Preventing radicalization to violence was the flip side of de-radicalization. Programs were created to inform relevant communities of the dangers of radicalization or that terrorist radicalization and recruitment were going on in their communities so that they could intervene to dissuade those at risk from following paths to destruction.

Those manifesting signs of radicalization could be directed toward off-ramps in the form of professional assistance. In 2011, the Obama administration released a strategic implementation plan with the goal of "preventing violent extremists and the supporters from inspiring, radicalizing, financing, or recruiting individuals or groups in the United States to commit acts of violence."[88] The plan, called *Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism in the United States*, sought to assure America's Muslim communities that they are part of the American family; nonetheless, countering violent extremism (CVE) clearly focused on the threat of extremist Islamist ideology, not surprisingly on the 10th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks and following an upswing in jihadi terrorist attacks and plots.

Programs to prevent radicalization seemed to be a more benign approach than prosecution and lengthy incarceration, but they still caused controversy. In the United Kingdom, which pioneered one of the more ambitious prevention programs, legislation required that

public officials working in schools, universities, hospitals, and local councils report individuals showing radical tendencies.[89] In the United States, where free speech is guaranteed by the constitution, such interventions by the federal government would raise First Amendment issues. The U.S. strategy was to stay out of direct involvement and instead offer federal grants to community and non-government groups engaged in preventing radicalization.[90] This came with assurances that CVE was not intended to be discriminatory. Still, the federal government's adoption of an indirect role did not blunt criticism.

From their inception to the present, civil libertarians have claimed that CVE programs have resulted in discrimination and infringement of the rights to equality, freedom of speech, and freedom of religion—and they have been racist. "By viewing American communities through a threat-based security lens," the American Civil Liberties Union wrote recently, "these programs have targeted and harmed Black and Brown people, particularly Muslims."[91] Activists in American Muslim communities have complained about being singled out by intelligence programs and about prevention efforts being used by the authorities to recruit informants.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of CVE programs was their expansion of the scope of prevention. Preventing targeted violence, as presented in the 1995 National Institute of Justice paper, was based upon the presumption that police will be informed of specific situations that they must evaluate and manage.[92] CVE was an effort to counter radicalization at the community level by alerting and educating members of the community, by enlisting local influencers, and by "identifying signs of violent extremism and 'off-ramping' susceptible individuals before they mobilize to violence."[93] Preventing targeted violence looks *at* cases; CVE looks *for* cases.

The Department of Homeland Security was well aware of the criticism that countering violent extremism was perceived as anti-Muslim. It noted in the 2019 *Strategic Framework* that "DHS training should provide guidance on privacy, civil rights, and civil liberties concerns that non-government partners may have in partnering with law enforcement for countering violent extremism (CVE) activities."[94] (It is the only time the term CVE appears in the 2019 *Strategic Framework*.) Substituting the more anodyne term "preventing targeted violence" to encompass all premeditated acts of violence, thereby diluting the role of ideology as a motivation, offered a way to chuck the unwanted baggage that came with "CVE" while at the same time responding to public pressure to address what was perceived as a dramatic increase in mass shootings.

State governors were equally sensitive to the criticisms that cooperating with the federal government on CVE programs exposed them to. In a January 2021 issue brief entitled "Preventing Targeted Violence," the National Governors Association was even more explicit in explaining the shift from CVE to preventing targeted violence:

> Since 9/11, usage of the term "CVE" has come to be associated with interventions understood as anti-Muslim and targeting populations based on their religious beliefs. As such, we use "preventing targeted violence," or "PTV," to refer to a new approach focused on preventing violence rather than potential motivations. This approach can promote greater awareness among stakeholders about the various, evolving motivations behind such violence and help dispel the misconceptions that only al-Qaeda- or ISIS-inspired individuals are motivated to such acts of violence.[95]

If CVE expanded the scope of prevention, combining preventing targeted violence with terrorism broadened the horizons. The 2019 DHS *Strategic Framework* noted that "the threats of terrorism and targeted violence increasingly intersect with one another, and there is likewise some alignment in the tools that can be used to counter them. Thus, rather than dealing with terrorism and targeted violence as distinct phenomena, this Strategy addresses the problems, and the tools that can be wielded to address them, together."

The 2019 *Strategic Framework* was not asserting that large-casualty events are a variant of terrorism, even though the public and news media often see them as such. In a mass shooting, say on the scale of the Las Vegas attack or other large-scale casualty event, DHS might be required to take action before it was known whether or not it was an act of terrorism. Depending on the nature of the attack and scale of violence and casualties, the motivation of the perpetrator or perpetrators could be irrelevant to the response. If, for example, there were a large-scale bombing, chemical, or biological attack, DHS would be part of the response. It would be the responsibility of law enforcement to determine whether the attack was politically motivated, a hate crime, or conceivably carried out by a "mad scientist." A plane crashing into a building could be the work of terrorists or a suicidal pilot suffering from severe depression; the response to the event would remain the same.

The 2019 *Strategic Framework* did not precisely define "severity and magnitude," but indicated it meant something "commensurate with known terrorist tactics." But that is an elastic definition. Terrorist attacks in the United States have resulted in between zero and nearly 3,000 deaths on 9/11. Presumably, DHS had in mind mass killings like the shooting in Las Vegas, which DHS defined as an act of targeted violence. Targeted violence implies the Las Vegas shooter picked his targets for a reason, although no one knows what the shooter's motivation was or the reasoning behind the selection of his target. The *Strategic Framework* further blurs the lines by mixing in the term "active shooter," which the federal government defines as "an individual actively engaged in killing or attempting to kill people in a populated area."[96]

The FBI defines a mass shooting as any incident in which four people (excluding the shooter) are killed with a gun. Congress in 2013 set forth the criterion of three. Other definitions of mass shootings require only multiple injuries, which could add hundreds of episodes a year.[97] (While many of the databases focus on gun violence, since 1970, terrorists in the United States have caused four or more deaths using bombs on four occasions, anthrax on one occasion, and more recently a vehicle in a ramming attack.[98] In 2014, a depressed high school student stabbed 20 of his classmates and a security guard, although all survived.[99])

That DHS may play a role in responding to large-casualty events that overwhelm local capabilities regardless of motivation is understandable. Where the role of DHS becomes more questionable, in my view, is in preventing such attacks. The 2019 *Strategic Framework* implies that its role in targeted violence is not limited to response. Going back to the document's introduction, it states that "the *threats* of terrorism and targeted violence increasingly intersect, and there is likewise some alignment in the tools that can be used to *counter* them [italics added]." The footnoted reference to these introductory remarks refers specifically to the 1995 National Institute of Justice article entitled "Threat Assessment: An Approach to Prevent Targeted Violence."[100] The 2019 *Strategic Framework*, therefore, is apparently talking about

prevention, not just response.

Federal sponsorship of community programs to prevent radicalization and recruitment to terrorist violence is legitimate, although it can be controversial, as pointed out previously. The prevention of targeted violence, where there is no obvious ideological or political nexus, raises questions of practicality and mission.

Of course, it is desirable to look for ways to prevent violence, whatever its motivation, but whether this is feasible and whether it is the mission of DHS prompted some debate within the department. In discussions with the author, some DHS officials described it as a "kitchen sink" approach that leads not only to definitional problems, but puts DHS in a gray area that could result in loss of focus and dilution of resources.

The years following the September 2019 publication of the *Strategic Framework* witnessed dramatic events that altered perceptions of U.S. domestic security. These included a number of mass shootings, four of them resulting in eight or more fatalities; an alleged plot by extremists to kidnap the governor of Michigan;[101] and the January 6, 2021, mob assault on the Capitol. These events were reflected in the October 2020 *Homeland Threat Assessment*,[102] the first of its kind, and the May 2021 *Strategic Intelligence Assessment and Data on Domestic Terrorism* as well as ultimately the June 2021 *National Strategy for Countering Domestic Terrorism*.

The 2020 and 2021 Assessments

The 2020 *Homeland Threat Assessment* noted that violent extremists will exploit public fears associated with COVID-19 and social grievances "driving lawful protests to incite violence, intimidate targets, and promote their violent extremist ideologies."[103] Elsewhere in the assessment, DHS mentioned incitement, indicating its awareness that violent extremists infiltrate and exploit broader protests. The assessment warned that "DVEs and other violent actors might target events related to the 2020 presidential campaigns, the election itself, election results, or the post-election period. Such actors could mobilize quickly to threaten or engage in violence." The assessment also stated that, "Among DVEs, racially and ethnically motivated violent extremists—specifically white supremacist extremists (WSEs)—will remain the most persistent and lethal threat in the Homeland."[104]

The May 2021 *Strategic Intelligence Assessment and Data on Domestic Terrorism*, a document prepared by the FBI and DHS, is more of a guidebook, informing members of Congress and the public how the federal government addresses the issue of domestic terrorism, than it is an assessment.[105] It reviews strategic intelligence assessments for 2017, 2018, and 2019, but does not offer assessments for 2020 or 2021 since the congressional requirement for the reporting was part of the 2020 National Defense Authorization Act, which became law in December 2019.

It provides a taxonomy of the various categories of domestic violent extremists (DVEs). These include racially or ethnically motivated violent extremists (RMVEs), anti-government or anti-authority violent extremists (AGAAVEs), anarchist violent extremists (AVEs), militia violent extremists (MVEs), Sovereign Citizen violent extremists (SCVEs), abortion-related violent extremists, and animal rights/environmental violent extremists— the last two categories are subsets of AGAAVEs and the report does not give them their own acronyms.

The summaries in the May 2021 document of the 2017, 2018, and 2019 assessments specifically identify white supremacists as the most dangerous source of violence, accounting for a majority of the lethal attacks and 42 (nearly three-quarters) of the 57 deaths during the three-year period.

The June 2021 *National Strategy for Countering Domestic Terrorism*

The *National Strategy for Countering Domestic Terrorism*,[106] which was published in June 2021, repeated an earlier threat assessment prepared by the intelligence community and released in March 2021. This earlier assessment warned of an elevated threat posed by domestic violent extremists "motivated by a range of ideologies and galvanized by recent political and societal events."[107] These include enduring biases against minority populations and perceptions of government overreach and newer developments such as the narratives of fraud in the 2020 election and the emboldening assault on the U.S. Capitol, protests related to the COVID-19 pandemic, and conspiracy theories promoting violence.[108]

Racially motivated and militia violent extremists were identified in the March 2021 document as the most lethal domestic threats. Self-radicalizing lone offenders or small cells were considered more likely to carry out attacks than groups. However, the MVE threat, which increased in 2020, was assessed as likely to remain elevated "because of contentious sociopolitical factors."[109]

The 2021 *National Strategy* focused "specifically on violence and factors that contribute to it;" in other words, this was not about political partisanship. "The overarching goal of this Strategy is preventing, disrupting, and deterring" violence.[110]

It went on to say that:

> *It is critical that we … confront domestic terrorism regardless of the particular ideology that motivates individuals to violence. The definition of "domestic terrorism" in our law makes no distinction based on political views – left, right, or center … We must disrupt and deter those who use violence to intimidate racial or religious minorities … So too must we disrupt and deter those who launch violent attacks in a misguided effort to force change in government policies that they view as unjust.[111]*

How is this to be achieved? The 2021 *National Strategy* lays out "four pillars" encompassing eight "strategic goals." Pillar One is to understand and share domestic terrorism information. That means enhancing research, sharing information, and illustrating transnational connections. Pillar Two aims at preventing recruitment and mobilization to violence. It has two strategic goals: strengthening prevention sources and services and addressing online terrorist recruitment.

Pillar Three aims at disrupting and deterring domestic terrorism. The strategic goals indicate that this is primarily to be done by the Department of Justice and FBI. The document envisions the Department of Homeland Security playing a role in analyzing and assessing the threat and educating and assisting state and local law enforcement in threat analysis. It envisions that DHS will support efforts to improve media literacy as a mechanism for strengthening user *resilience* to online disinformation—the word "resilience" here is used in a novel fashion, meaning skepticism, resistance, or rejection.

The 2021 *National Strategy* envisions DHS playing a major role in government efforts aimed at identifying and preventing terrorism recruitment by providing funding to local community prevention programs and by ensuring that such efforts are driven by data. According to this vision, DHS, working with the FBI, would try to

enhance the public's understanding of the assistance that can be provided to those in need, including how mental health experts are complementing traditional law enforcement. The Department also would have the task of developing potential indicators of terrorist mobilization and recruitment.

Despite the emphasis on prevention, the 2021 *National Strategy* confirms the short shelf life in official documents of the term, "preventing targeted violence." The 2019 *Strategic Framework* mentioned targeted violence 110 times. The 2020 *Homeland Threat Assessment* mentioned targeted violence three times and targeted attacks once. The most recent document laying out government strategy, the 2021 *National Strategy for Countering Domestic Terrorism*, mentions it only twice.

The second strategic goal under the 2021 *National Strategy*'s Pillar Three addresses possible legislative reforms and screening. The 2021 *National Strategy* remains cautious—in my view, appropriately—about new criminal laws to counter domestic terrorism. The final strategic goal under Pillar Three addresses the need for screening and vetting of government employees, including those in the military and law enforcement at the federal, state, local, tribal, and territorial level.

Pillar Four addresses long-term contributors to domestic terrorism.

> *That means tackling racism … It means protecting Americans from gun violence and mass murders. It means ensuring … early intervention and appropriate care for those who pose a danger to themselves or others. It means ensuring that Americans receive the type of civics education that promotes tolerance and respect for all … And it means ensuring that there is simply no governmental tolerance … of violence as an acceptable mode of seeking political or social change.[112]*

While this language seems sadly necessary in today's America, it could be the most contentious part of the national strategy. In the current partisan environment, those already hostile to the federal government see this as putting the federal government into the realm of patrolling thought, seeking out those who might commit crimes, or intervening in school curricula.

The 2021 *National Strategy* identifies the mission-set identified in Pillar Four as *national* goals, but it also makes it clear that the federal government cannot achieve them alone, and for some is not the appropriate lead. It repeatedly talks about partnership with state, local, and territorial governments. Those already suspicious of federal government overreach unwarranted by a negligible threat miss the caveats, however.

The Arc of Threat Perception

Taken together, these documents trace the shift from concern about homegrown jihadis to domestic violent extremists. The threat perception changes incrementally, tentatively. Clearly defined jihadi adversaries are joined by an array of domestic extremists lumped together in the 2018 *National Strategy for Counterterrorism*. The 2019 *Strategic Framework for Countering Terrorism* recognized domestic terrorism as a growing threat, focusing on violence by white supremacists. The 2020 *Homeland Threat Assessment* identified white supremacist extremists as the most persistent and most lethal threat. The 2021 *National Strategy for Countering Domestic Terrorism*, as its title indicates, deals exclusively with the threat of violence by domestic extremists who threaten the democratic process. In doing so, it communicates its awareness that

the country is politically divided.

The strategies and strategic frameworks discussed have been attempts to put a complex national effort into a coherent whole, which is their greatest utility. But these are public documents, not secret wartime strategies. They inform a huge government enterprise and a vast national audience about what the government is doing and where the nation should go. They respond to public concerns, signal commitment, lay out goals, identify priorities, and provide assurances. They catalogue what is needed or wanted, not precisely how it is to be obtained. They sometimes slide into desiderata and exhortation.

They are products of an interagency process. They reflect political concerns and constraints. They are written by committees seeking consensus. They bridge differences with compromise language. They try to avoid offending or needlessly provoking any particular group, especially in these times of heightened sensitivities. Expression can at times be anodyne.

Part Three: Elements for Countering Domestic Political Violence

The following elements are not intended to be an alternative to the current national strategy. Instead, they attempt to go a step further and address a number of specific issues in greater detail. They emphasize a pragmatic approach.

Some may argue that the elements described below do not address the broader ills that currently afflict American society and its government: the absence of agreement on almost anything, the dismissal of facts, tribal politics that supplant national interests, congressional dysfunction, the demonization of political opponents, the loss of comity and the insulting and violent rhetoric that have replaced political discourse, the prospect of forever contested elections, settling scores rather than setting a course for the future. I agree that these are national problems and should be addressed. Containing political violence is essential, but by itself will not fundamentally alter the social and political landscape. That is a matter for civic culture and political leadership.

Do no harm. Right now, the country is fragile. American society is deeply divided. Its divisions are fueled by polarized politics, online poison, post-pandemic pessimism, hair-trigger sensitivities, a declining sense of community, eroding trust in institutions, and loss of goodwill in our political process. In the country's current critical condition, *even the most benign interventions to curb domestic extremism may easily escalate tensions and make things worse*. Maintaining national cohesion is vital to success.

Avoid overreaction and overreach. The assault on the U.S. Capitol offers ample warning that domestic violent extremists pose a threat. As outlined above, since the 9/11 attacks, domestic extremists have killed more people than homegrown jihadis, but both sets of numbers are small and below the level of terrorist violence seen in the 1970s when there were 50 to 60 terrorist bombings a year in the United States.[113] It is tempting to ignore the issue altogether as a spasm of violence resulting from pandemic shutdowns, public protests, and a hotly contested election. The United States has a high tolerance for individual violence. Overreaction could exacerbate the situation. However, the long-term trend of domestic political violence has generally been upward over the last decade. Armed defiance is on greater display. *We are still at the front end of potential terrorist campaigns and can head extremists off before matters get worse, but we must do so cautiously.*

Set realistic, achievable objectives. As with all counterterrorism efforts, the primary goal will be to protect lives by preventing terrorist attacks.[114] To sustain a functioning democratic government, authorities need to devote special attention to protecting U.S. officials against assassination, sieges, and other assaults. Public officials are already dealing with increased threats as a consequence of the pandemic and the contested results of the election.[115] This will have a corrosive effect on the democratic process, discouraging many from seeking office or entering public service, leaving the field open to those comfortable with politics as scorched earth warfare. *Above all, the objective of the effort should be to preclude normalizing political violence in American society.*

Combating domestic terrorism means maintaining the legal guardrails against ideologically or politically motivated violence. It means enforcing the law; it cannot become the continuation of politics by other means. Countering terrorism includes efforts—primarily by law enforcement—to deter or bring to justice those responsible for violence combined with national efforts to remove or reduce the causes of the violence. Governments may give greater weight to one or the other, depending on the circumstances. The first is a traditional law enforcement role; the second may aim at ultimate reconciliation, but could also include education and psychological operations to reduce recruiting, preventive interventions, de-radicalization programs aimed at altering destructive patterns of behavior, and other efforts. *Given the current levels of distrust in government institutions and vulnerability of other efforts to misunderstanding and misrepresentation, it may be better to operate mainly in a traditional law enforcement role*, which is the appropriate mission of the FBI as well as state and local police.

A counterterrorism campaign is not an instrument to ensure racial equity and social justice. These obviously remain national goals, but they ought to be broader tasks for the entire nation, from voters to the Oval Office. Those who are dissatisfied by what they see as timidity in dealing with domestic extremists may quarrel with this, but *government cannot strip mine every seam of bigotry in American society.* White supremacism, anti-Semitism, animosity toward immigrants, hostility toward the federal government, and other resentments represent continuing dark currents in American society that widen during periods of economic and social stress. Deeply embedded in American society, prejudice will not be banished by legislation and cannot be eradicated by law enforcement.

Don't blur the mission. Countering domestic terrorism is not about preventing gun violence or mass shootings. Domestic terrorism is a component of "targeted violence," but this is a broader category that includes workplace violence and attacks on schools, places of worship, public events, and transportation systems that lack a clearly discernible political, ideological, or religious motivation.[116] These events usually involve shooters engaged in carefully planned assaults in a public place. Most aim at causing mass casualties; victims are often randomly selected. The attacks may look like terrorism, but there is no terrorist link or discernible political motive. *While terrorism and targeted violence overlap as public security concerns, they should not be conflated.* Angry employees 'going postal,' doom-obsessed adolescents, and deranged killers are not domestic violent extremists.

Isolate violent extremists from their presumed constituencies. This means going after the violent fringe without

"The long-term trend of domestic political violence has generally been upward over the last decade. Armed defiance is on greater display. We are still at the front end of potential terrorist campaigns and can head extremists off before matters get worse, but we must do so cautiously."

making half the population enemies of the state. A small percentage of those arrested for invading the U.S. Capitol were members of violence-prone extremist groups bent upon subverting a democratic process. But many were ordinary people convinced they were taking patriotic action to prevent an election from being stolen. They broke the law but should not be portrayed as terrorist associates. *The goal in dealing with domestic violent extremists is to isolate them from potential constituencies, not broaden the target.*[117]

Avoid standoffs and trigger events. Standoffs and sieges like Ruby Ridge and Waco should be avoided. Some extremist elements are determined to provoke a race war or civil war. Standoffs and sieges can trigger further acts of violence and provoke deep political crises. One can only imagine the political crisis that could have occurred if the invaders of the Capitol on January 6 had decided to take hostages to hold off National Guardsmen clearing the building. Adequate security based upon intelligence and responding rapidly can reduce the possibility that things will spin out of control. The 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia; the armed protests at the Michigan statehouse and in other state capitals in 2020 and 2021; the invasion of the U.S. Capitol Building on January 6, 2021; and the 2022 occupation of downtown Ottawa and similar actions by truckers in the United States[118] suggest that the authorities must be prepared for large-scale protests, any one of which could quickly escalate into an armed standoff.

Impede recruiting. Revulsion in reaction to bloody terrorist attacks will erode public sympathies as it did in the immediate wake of the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing. If the extremist diehards move from protest marches and street brawls to clandestine terrorist campaigns, that also will impede organizational recruiting: Fewer people are prepared to abandon their ordinary lives and "go underground" to live on the run or lead a double life. The prospects of criminal prosecution will peel off some potential recruits. Publicized revelations that some of the extremist leaders may have been government informants and breaking up terrorist plots that have been infiltrated can have a further chilling effect. Prevention programs potentially can further reduce recruiting. This will not stop lone actors and tiny conspiracies from plotting attacks, but it will sow distrust and hamper organizational growth and collaboration.

Recalibrate existing programs to prevent radicalization. In response to a continuing jihadi threat, authorities worldwide sought ways to identify and divert those vulnerable to radicalization. This was new territory. Until recently, these programs focused on would-be jihadis. Whether they were effective is hard to judge.[119] Nor is it clear that they can be usefully employed to deal with would-

be domestic terrorists. Preventing the radicalization of domestic extremists, whose views may be acquired early in life and may draw on greater community support, could differ significantly. *Ongoing research is expanding our knowledge of how domestic terrorists radicalize and can inform new efforts.*[120] These programs angered America's Muslim communities. Even greater push back should be anticipated as they are extended to other communities. This is an area where local communities should take the lead, but DHS can support the effort with knowledge and funding.

Avoid the appearance of politicization in law enforcement and prosecution. Keep the Department of Justice, the Department of Homeland Security, the intelligence community, the FBI, and police departments out of politics and culture wars. *The core mission of law enforcement is to control crime, a mission that has wide public support.*[121] Departures from this mission create uncertainty for law enforcement officials and bring public controversy.

The current lexicon does not always help us. For example, the January 6 invasion of the U.S. Capitol has been described as meeting the definition of *terrorism*; analysts debate the point. Calling ordinary criminals terrorists is an upgrade. Others describe the January 6 event as an attempted *coup* or a *putsch*, both foreign words and neither of which appears in the U.S. Criminal Code. The current favored term is *insurrection*, which does appear in the code, although it is hard to find anyone prosecuted as an "insurrectionist" in the last 150 years. As with the label of terrorism, the question is not whether the invasion of the Capitol meets the legal definition of insurrection. The word itself seems obsolete, pretentious, and from some perspectives even high-minded. What term is *strategically* useful? *Violent mob* may be more accurate, invokes less support, and it carries less political freight.

I have used the terms *terrorism* and *political violence* interchangeably, although in my view, terrorism is a more emotive term. The key element is always violence. The term *terrorism* may also cause officials to look for tactics that match past terrorist campaigns while domestic violent extremists, instead of attention-getting bombings, may be following a strategy of intimidation aimed at incremental eventual takeover. Counterterrorism should be presented as what it basically is—law enforcement aimed at ordinary criminals.

Don't make martyrs. Both ends of the political spectrum push for throwing the book at their adversaries on the other side. Progressives have expressed discontent with what they perceive as timidity on the part of the attorney general and Department of Justice in going after white supremacists and other far-right extremists, especially the leaders. Conservatives claim that the federal government has failed to appropriately prosecute and punish those responsible for violence during the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests. In my view, Attorney General Garland, a seasoned jurist who successfully coordinated the prosecution of the Oklahoma City bombers, has the experience and savvy to steer an apolitical course.

Thus far, the prosecution of the participants in the January 6 invasion of the Capitol has been carefully calibrated to fit the crime. Most defendants have faced comparatively minor charges and plea bargains have been being pursued, resulting in modest penalties, but also depriving defendants from opportunities to grandstand or portray themselves as political prisoners.[122] More serious charges have been brought against a small number of individuals whose plans and actions posed a greater threat, and here again, plea bargains may preclude the kinds of divisive trials like those

> **"Avoid the appearance of politicization in law enforcement and prosecution ... The core mission of law enforcement is to control crime, a mission that has wide public support. Departures from this mission create uncertainty for law enforcement officials and bring public controversy."**

of anti-war protesters in the late 1960s or white supremacists and seditious conspiracy trials in 1988 and 2012.[123] Prosecutors make strategic decisions on how they portray the actions of the accused. Researchers examining the outcomes of terrorist trials after 9/11 concluded that when prosecutors sought to emphasize the political motivations of the defendant, the case was more likely to go to trial and more likely to result in a dismissal or acquittal; the highest plea bargain and conviction rates were among defendants facing traditional criminal charges.[124] In other words, invoking the terrorism enhancement, while increasing the possible penalty, could imperil conviction.[125]

Preserve intelligence capabilities. Robust domestic intelligence collection, always difficult in a democracy, will be necessary. It must be accompanied by rigorous oversight to prevent abuses, creating a tension between necessity and constraint. Historically, the United States has tended to overreact in response to intelligence failures and to overreact in response to revelations that authorities have overstepped their bounds. The pendulum swings back and forth, often going too far.

The United States currently faces a more complicated threat matrix that includes a continuing threat posed by homegrown jihadis, domestic extremists, and an array of individual actors motivated by various issues. At the same time, intelligence efforts currently face growing headwinds. The memory of 9/11 has faded; authorities were successful in preventing most further tragedies (largely due to intelligence); and the homegrown jihadi threat has diminished. A revisionist history now unfairly seeks to portray the entire counterterrorism campaign as a malevolent enterprise and domestic intelligence collection as an Islamophobic, racist program aimed at stigmatizing a religion, immigrants, and Black and brown communities.

It is not difficult to find examples where people exploited the jihadi threat to expand executive authority or promote other political objectives. Unquestionably, there is a record of inevitable errors, understandable excesses, and inexcusable crimes. At the same time, some conservative white communities and groups fear that current government efforts to contain domestic political violence are aimed specifically at disarming and destroying them. Between these two extremes, the center is hollowed; there is a diminished pro-intelligence constituency. Predictably, it will be difficult to preserve existing intelligence collection authorities, including those that are vital to successful disruptions.

The most contentious area includes surveillance, specifically Section 702 of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act passed after 9/11, that allows the government to target the communications

(phone calls and emails) of foreign persons located outside the United States, including their communications with Americans.[126] Civil libertarians consider this a back door to warrantless surveillance of Americans.[127] The provision is due to expire in 2023. Government monitoring of social media, which has led to arrests of terrorists, has also attracted opposition.[128]

And there is opposition to local police sharing certain kinds of information with federal authorities. Some groups demand that local police departments, among other things, end participation in federally funded countering violent extremism efforts and remove their officers from the FBI's Joint Terrorism Task Force operations.[129] The national network of fusion centers has also come under fire. Some are excellent, but in my view many are mediocre and need adequate staffing and more training to improve their capabilities and ensure that their activities remain within constitutional boundaries. Disbandment is the alternative.

These initiatives against intelligence operations reflect legitimate concerns, heightened by broader distrust of police as well as the federal government on both ends of the political spectrum. The dynamic is not new. Civil libertarians and right-libertarians share suspicion of federal authority. As threats evolve, regular review of domestic intelligence authorities and methods is appropriate. Domestic intelligence programs and practices need not be defended on all fronts.

A more pragmatic course would be to identify a core of intelligence capabilities and programs that should be preserved. Using actual cases as much as possible, it should be publicly explained why they are essential and how they have contributed to public security—avoiding the word 'algorithm.' That also means accepting that the ability to uncover plots and prevent attacks may decline as investigations return to a traditional reactive mode; this is a national choice. It means reversing the push toward prevention, which has driven national efforts since the 1990s, and especially after 9/11, and accepting that some attacks may occur and will be investigated after the event as terrorist bombings of the 1970s were.

Use informants judiciously. In dealing with domestic terrorism, authorities have always relied heavily on the recruitment of informants and undercover agents. Informants are a critical component of intelligence. Informants can operate in communities where undercover agents would be easily identified. They facilitate disruptions and assist in criminal investigations after attacks. Knowing there may be informants impedes recruiting and may deter criminal action. Fear of FBI infiltration was the reason why organizations, especially white supremacist groups like the Ku Klux Klan and neo-Nazis adopted a strategy of "leaderless resistance," relying on action by autonomous small cells and inspired individuals.[130]

The recruitment and utilization of informants is subject to federal and local guidelines. Determination to avoid perpetuating prejudices has made the country acutely sensitive to any hint of bias. The recently promulgated counterterrorism strategies aim at identifying potential violent actors while repeatedly reassuring the public that intelligence efforts are not aimed at any specific sector of society that might feel offended. While this sensitivity is understandable and critical, it is the nature of the threat that should drive intelligence efforts, not the biases or political preferences of the law enforcement agency.

America is not a police state. It does not—and should not—support a vast network of informants monitoring fellow citizens for any hint of subversive thought. Whether related to organized crime or political violence, the appearance of impartiality is not assured by targeting every sector of society equally.

Most members of the Sicilian Mafia who referred to their organization as Cosa Nostra were Italian. Most members of MS-13 are Central American, especially Salvadorans. The FBI did not look for violent Klansmen in the NAACP or the B'nai B'rith. Support for the terrorist campaigns waged in the 1980s by the Justice Commandos of the Armenian Genocide and the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia—not surprisingly—came from individuals in Armenian communities in Europe and the United States. The anti-Castro Cuban bombers of the 1960s and 1970s were based mostly in Miami. The focus of intelligence activities in these cases was not about bias; it simply reflected the threat.

The FBI's penetration of the plot to kidnap the governor of Michigan[131] and the revelation that the leader of the Proud Boys was a government informant[132] suggest that the bureau has informants in far-right extremist groups. Federal investigators, however, are likely to have less latitude than for international terrorism in investigating domestic extremist groups or introducing evidence obtained through informants in court. Intelligence operations will have to adjust to minimize predictable backlash. The failure of prosecutors to initially obtain convictions in the alleged plot to kidnap the governor of Michigan points to the challenges of prosecutions depending on informant testimony.[133]

Address the handling of intelligence regarding the January 6 assault. Regardless of whether one views the events of January 6 as a planned invasion of the Capitol or a protest that turned violent, security preparations were inadequate. It appears to have been not so much an intelligence failure as a failure to heed the intelligence. Why, despite intelligence available from various police departments, including the District of Columbia Police, fusion centers, some FBI field offices, and other federal agencies, was it not put together in an intelligence warning that mobilized necessary resources? Was this the result of reluctance at the federal level? Were agencies inhibited by the political environment? Were the warnings not heeded because of biases on the part of those charged with security? What happened or did not happen, and why?[134]

Accept that prevention may be more difficult and certainly more controversial. The public and political leadership will continue to demand prevention, but disruptions may be harder to achieve while early interventions may preclude successful prosecutions, intensifying what is often a source of tension. A traditional investigative approach like that which dealt with the terrorist bombers of the 1970s where authorities most often responded to events that had already occurred would obviate proving intent. Even jurors sympathetic to the accused would have to confront the reality of victims, making it harder to ignore the fact of an attack.

The authorities could be pushed by current political realities to wait longer before intervening. Although it sounds Machiavellian, government could decide to adopt a more reactive approach as a matter of strategy (at least initially). Investigations after the fact of violence are easier to justify. It reduces room for doubt and allows prosecuting solely on ordinary criminal charges, leaving aside motivation and intentions. It allows prosecutors to achieve more widely accepted convictions. When it is clear that criminal action appears imminent and lives are at stake, authorities must intervene regardless of worries about divisive trials or calculations

of successful prosecution. Often, however, the circumstances of any case are murkier.

Public officials must be protected without surrounding them with onerous physical security measures that burden their families and isolate them from the public they serve. The protection of the president is not a viable model here. Instead, threat assessment and threat management capabilities will have to be expanded so that security can be flexibly applied. *It is not just a matter of protecting people against actual attack, but against insidious intimidation.* That may require reexamining laws against communicated threats.

Expose foreign connections and instigation. Domestic political extremists can have foreign connections.[135] Often, they are part of broader international movements that share ideology and communicate with one another. These are not hierarchies with a centralized command element, but still connected communities. While harder to understand and portray, the foreign connections can sometimes facilitate domestic investigations. The extensive network of cooperative relationships forged between governments to deal with the jihadi threat can also serve to deal with domestic violent extremists; exchanging information and sharing analysis can lead to more effective countermeasures. As in the case of homegrown jihadis, domestic violent extremists are also subject to information operations and exhortations from abroad. These can provide another source of intelligence.

Passing a new domestic terrorism law is unnecessary and distracting. There are continuing calls for a new domestic terrorism law to raise attention and close a "moral equivalency gap" with international terrorism.[136] Enthusiasm for such legislation has dimmed for the moment, but any new attack will reignite the fervor. There is good reason to be wary. Passing a new domestic terrorism law is unnecessary. *Past government caution in dealing with domestic extremists reflected the lack of political consensus, not the absence of criminal statutes*, and while agreeing that laws reflect moral values, it may be preferable to avoid the inevitable polarization that will come with renewed debates about the definition of terrorism and who the terrorists are.[137]

What many proponents of a domestic terrorist law are looking for is the equivalent of the material support provision of the Patriot Act, which made it a crime to provide any type of assistance to a designated foreign terrorist organization. It was used extensively to prosecute homegrown jihadis. To enact the domestic version of the material support provision would require authorities to designate domestic terrorist organizations, and that is where the problem lies. As previously noted by the author, "in the current environment … congressional agreement on the definition of terrorism, let alone who's a terrorist, seems unlikely.[138] Satisfying the views of both sides could lead to vague criteria, producing a list of hundreds of 'terrorist groups,' or—worse—political horse trading—we'll give you antifa if you give us Proud Boys. Some of the names mentioned are not even organized groups, but rather broad movements or simply shared attitudes."[139] In any case, in my view, the greatest threat of terrorism is more likely to come from unaffiliated actors.

Keep investigations, arrests, and prosecution narrowly focused on crime. Portray and treat violent offenders as ordinary criminals. Prosecutors may sometimes use the heavier penalties that a terrorism enhancement to a criminal charge brings in order to persuade the defendant to plead guilty rather than risk a conviction and long imprisonment. They may also

> ## "Passing a new domestic terrorism law is unnecessary. Past government caution in dealing with domestic extremists reflected the lack of political consensus, not the absence of criminal statutes, and while agreeing that laws reflect moral values, it may be preferable to avoid the inevitable polarization that will come with renewed debates about the definition of terrorism and who the terrorists are."

choose to portray the crime as terrorism, hoping it will provoke the jury's outrage and increase the odds of a guilty verdict. In dealing with domestic terrorism defendants, that course can backfire. *In domestic terrorism cases, some defendants define themselves as American patriots, a perspective to which some members of the jury might be sympathetic.* At a minimum, it takes the jury into the more complicated arena of motives. *Why give the defendant a platform for his political pretensions? He only has to persuade one juror.*

The Department of Homeland Security should play a strategic role in countering domestic political violence. A number of DHS' component agencies—for example, the Secret Service and the Transportation Security Administration—have specific missions that involve countering terrorism and political violence. The department also has broader strategic roles. These include protecting the nation's critical infrastructure, which includes the election infrastructure and in understanding, assessing, and countering foreign influence operations conducted via the internet. In dealing with threats, DHS promotes and supports information-sharing through the national network of fusion centers that connect state and local police departments and federal agencies.

DHS was never intended to operate as the equivalent of the British MI5, a national gendarmerie, or federal Special Branch. Outside of its specific component agencies, the department does not directly collect domestic intelligence or conduct its own criminal investigations. DHS assembles information passed on to it from other federal agencies and state, local, tribal, and territorial police. The most critical function of DHS in this area is the strategic analysis of threats and providing assessments and warnings. The FBI remains the operational arm of the federal government for domestic intelligence collection and criminal investigations. Since 9/11, the FBI's analytical capabilities have increased, but by tradition and institutional culture, the bureau is case-driven, which also happens to be the best posture for avoiding the appearance that it is a political instrument. To the extent that DHS and the FBI analysis may overlap, it is not unhealthy.

DHS comprises many components, each of which have specialized roles, authorities, and capabilities. In order to increase efficiency, some support the idea that the authorities and resources of the various components are interchangeable and can be combined, creating a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. In other words, according to this vision, the Secret Service, Customs

and Border Protection, Immigration and Customs Enforcement, Transportation Security Agency, and other DHS entities would become units of a larger DHS force. (DHS already has the largest law enforcement contingent in the federal government.) The DHS response to the 2020 riots in Portland, Oregon, provided a preview. There may or may not be legal barriers to how far this can go, but it would alter the perception of DHS, bringing it closer to a European-style ministry of interior, emphasizing law enforcement, with a national gendarmerie as an enforcement arm.[140] The shape of DHS and how it defines its mission going forward is beyond the scope of this essay, but it will be critical in the new environment.

The military has very little role in countering domestic political violence. Keep it that way. Federal forces have been deployed throughout American history to put down rebellions, prevent disorder, and—in some cases where local authorities are defiant—enforce federal law, for example, the desegregation of schools. The National Guard, under state control, serves as the principal backup in dealing with riots when local law enforcement is overwhelmed. In most recent cases, troops were sent in at the request of local authorities to quell riots and prevent looting. However, short of reinforcing local police and the National Guard in large-scale riots or protecting its bases or its armories against theft, the U.S. military does not have an operational role in domestic counterterrorism. The U.S. armed forces cannot be used for law enforcement without the approval of Congress.

Beyond these circumscribed missions, which must be ordered by the president and in some cases approved by Congress, the American military does not do politics. It does not challenge civilian authority, but it is not a Praetorian Guard and will resist being used to serve as anyone's political instrument. *Military leaders are acutely aware of the dangers to the country and to the military institutions themselves of politicizing the armed forces.* It is true that former officers—representing their own views—have engaged in political rhetoric that borders on sedition while others while still in uniform have publicly expressed political views. These cases are rare.

Widespread protests in 2020, some of which led to violence, and the 2020 presidential elections, which the then president claimed were fraudulent, strained relations between the president and the armed forces. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark Milley later publicly apologized for appearing with the president at a photo opportunity amidst protests in Washington, D.C., because, in his words, it "created the impression of the military involved in domestic politics."[141] When, following the elections, there were concerns that the then president might use the military to stay in power, General Milley in a Veterans' Day speech pointed out that "we are unique among militaries. We do not take an oath to a king or queen, a tyrant or dictator. We do not take an oath to an individual. No, we do not take an oath to a country, a tribe, or religion. We take an oath to the Constitution."[142]

It became clearer weeks later what kinds of concerns had motivated General Milley's words when some of the then president's supporters, including a former three-star general who earlier had served as the president's national security adviser, publicly argued that the then president should suspend the constitution, declare martial law, and order the military to run new elections.[143] My own assessment is that military participation in such a scenario remains highly unlikely, and that active military involvement in dealing with domestic political violence, while adding little, would risk the sacrosanct notion of a politically neutral military.

Let the military determine how to keep extremists out of the ranks. Keeping the military out of politics is one concern. Keeping political extremists out of the military is a second. The presence of veterans and a few active-duty personnel in the January 6 mob or some of the right-wing extremist groups has raised questions about whether there are anti-government, white supremacist, or other dangerous extremists present in the ranks. Again, this is not a new issue. Oklahoma bomber Timothy McVeigh was an army veteran, and several homegrown jihadis were active-duty military personnel.[c] Responding to recent cases, the Pentagon has reviewed its policies and clarified the rules, but leaves enforcement to unit commanders.[144] One possible criticism is that unit commanders have other concerns and are unqualified to assess some of the secret signs and codes used by extremists.

Noting that the Pentagon's review of extremism among service members found prohibited extremist activity among service members to be rare—just 100 cases out of 2.1 million active and reserve personnel—the Senate Armed Services Committee in its report to accompany the National Defense Authorization Act for FY 2023 stated its view that spending additional time and resources is inappropriate and "should be discontinued by the Department of Defense immediately."[145]

My own assessment here is that the military is aware and determined to address the issue without undermining combat readiness.[d] Greater scrutiny can be carried out during recruiting. Another possible approach may be to incorporate some instruction in civics—how the government works and what it means to be a soldier into military training. Although any such effort is likely to provoke intense scrutiny in today's culture wars, it is not "woke" to include the kind of basic civics course that used to be mandatory in high school. As a final measure, *the Pentagon could explore ways in which it might psychologically assist recently discharged personnel as they make the sometimes difficult transition to civilian life, where they may be targets of extremist recruiting.*

Enforce the law in a patently even-handed way. While protecting the right of protest, application of the law must be equal. American society has traditionally tolerated a wide range of behavior in political protest, even as participants crossed the line from lawful to unlawful and peaceful to violent. If conduct becomes bad enough—as in aggravated assaults or looting—ordinary criminal laws can be applied. It is not considered terrorism, although some say it should be. However, application of the law should be equal. Continuing violent assaults on a federal courthouse in Portland cannot be ignored while members of a mob invading the U.S. Capitol are brought to trial. In fact, depending on sources, between 14,000 and 17,000 arrests were made during the Black Lives Matter

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c   Nidal Hasan was an active-duty Army major when he opened fire on soldiers at Fort Hood, Texas, in 2009. Katharine Poppe, "Nidal Hasan: A Case Study in Lone-Actor Terrorism," Program on Extremism, George Washington University, October 2018. Naser Abdo was an Army private convicted of plotting to kill soldiers near Fort Hood in 2011. "Naser Jason Abdo Sentenced to Life in Federal Prison in Connection with Killeen Bomb Plot," U.S. Attorney's Office, Western District of Texas, U.S. Department of Justice, August 10, 2012.

d   In the interest of full disclosure, the author discloses that he spoke with and shared his views with members of the Pentagon working group updating its procedures for handling extremism.

protests.[146] Most were on minor, non-violent charges, but hundreds were charged with burglary and looting.[147] As of May 26, 2022, more than 900 participants in the January 6 assault on the Capitol have been charged, again most of them on comparatively minor charges; 298 have entered guilty pleas.[148] Sixteen individuals have been charged with seditious conspiracy; as of October 6, four have pleaded guilty.[149]

Promote police review. Trust in local police may sometimes be an issue. This is not entirely new territory. FBI agents investigating the murders of civil rights leaders in the 1960s had to sometimes operate with local police officials whose personal views, connections, and loyalties made them uncooperative with federal investigations. It is not clear whether these concerns will arise again as federal authorities investigate political violence threatened or carried out by groups drawing on local sympathies.

For a variety reasons beyond the scope of this essay, many police understandably feel under siege right now. Public attitudes toward police are evolving, although there is little public support for dismantling the criminal justice system or eliminating police departments; calls to do so should be rejected. At the same time, police organizations themselves have to review their recruitment, education, training, protocols, and personal behavior in a challenging environment. It is not a matter of creating "woke" departments. It is a matter of living up to an obligation to uphold the law and protect the public. It is in the oath.

Review the law governing incitement. U.S. law is highly protective of free speech, including advocacy of violence. The courts have set a very high bar to prove incitement. However, the internet and social media make it easy to advocate violence, facilitate the repetition of messages, and can potentially reach an audience of millions, thereby increasing the likelihood of violent action. The courts have not addressed this.[150]

Address the role of the internet. The internet plays a significant role in radicalization and facilitates the formation of online communities of like-minded extremists and conspiracy theorists. While free speech—including hate speech—is protected by the First Amendment of the constitution, some contend that it is not necessarily protected if it directly calls for violence. Under public and government pressure to reduce harmful content, many online social media platforms have been exercising increasing control over content and accounts, but the platforms claim that this is technically difficult to do and requires a significant investment in human resources.[151] It is true that language is supple, although the same platforms seem to have less difficulty in creating sophisticated algorithms that detect sales opportunities among users, leading some to suspect that control measures are simply not consistent with social media business models.

There are several paths open. One is for the government to impose limitations on content as a number of European countries do. This mean prohibiting certain expressions—words and symbols—or "the advocacy of discriminatory hatred that constitutes incitement to hostility, discrimination, or violence."[152] Such a law in the United States would run head on into the First Amendment.

A second approach is to revise Section 230 of the 1996 Communications Decency Act and legally make social network platforms like publishers responsible for content on their sites.[153] Right now, these platforms are allowed to control who can use their sites and moderate content, but are shielded from legal liability. For different reasons, some members of both political parties have threatened to remove this protection. This would oblige platforms to prevent what government cannot.

A third theoretical approach would be to alter the laws on incitement. Over the past century, the position of the Supreme Court has evolved on this issue, initially upholding restrictions on speech where it creates "a clear and present danger."[154] In 1969, however, the court concluded that government could only punish advocacy that "is directed to inciting or producing imminent lawless action and is likely to incite or produce such action."[155] In 1982, the Supreme Court seemed to go further, ruling that for an individual's speech to fall under the unprotected category of incitement to imminent lawless action, the speech had to actually lead to lawless action. "An advocate must be free to stimulate his audience with spontaneous and emotional appeals for unity and action in a common cause. When such appeals do not incite lawless action, they must be regarded as protected speech."[156] In other words, the incitement had to succeed.

These decisions were reached before the internet existed, which enables a user to post messages that may be read by thousands, potentially millions, thereby increasing the likelihood that they could lead to action. Legislation might address this, or future events might lead to further cases, obliging the courts to address it.

These are First Amendment issues and must be approached with great care. There is no perfect solution. Hate groups are already adopting communications tactics to counter controls, by altering speech slightly, or by migrating to more permissive platforms or to the dark web.[157]

Political leaders need to set a better example. Domestic violent extremism is not a continuation of partisan politics by other means. The most important role of political leaders may not be in the realm of legislation, but as role models. *Politics can arouse passions, but bellicose rhetoric, sly encouragement to already angry audiences, cynical allegations that deepen divisions are playing with fire and can pose a clear and present danger to the republic.* Politicians and the public need to exert pressure on all officials to curb violent and abusive rhetoric. Admittedly, this particular element falls in the realm of exhortation. Private scorecards kept by objective observers may identify serial offenders—the trash-talkers and smash mouths—but it may not discourage ugly behavior any more than fact-checking has diminished patent fabrications. Nor will it affect who the voters in some districts choose to represent them and allow to reflect their values. Ultimately, the quality of leadership is up to the voters.

Seek to understand the extremists' mindsets. This is different from the collection of operational intelligence discussed above. Understanding the extremists' worldviews, motivating grievances, and mindsets informs law enforcement—and broader political—strategies to counter political violence. Their diversity must be recognized. How do extremist movements or groups on the far right or far left view their struggle? How do they differ from one another in beliefs, strategies, recruiting, and *modus operandi*? What distinguishes the Proud Boys from the Oath Keepers or the Boogaloo Bois from the Three Percenters? How do far left extremists differ from those on the far right? How fluid is the membership? Considerable research in being done outside of government, and more can be done. The challenge for government is to assemble and communicate the findings to operators, planners, and policymakers.

Reduce anger where possible by addressing legitimate

"The campaign to defeat domestic political violence will take many years. Indeed, it could take decades."

grievances. While there can be no compromise with ideologies antithetical to unalienable rights, government can address the conditions stoking the anger that extremists exploit; efforts can be made to reduce some of the stress created by economic conditions. Research cannot prove that poverty causes terrorism or creates terrorists, although economic stress contributes to political stress. Those who are left behind, who lose control over their economic fate, whose self-esteem is crushed by unemployment or salaries inadequate to support families are fertile recruiting grounds for extremist beliefs on the left and right.

Historically, the United States has dealt with domestic terrorism by prosecuting the violent offenders and at the same time by coopting their potential constituencies. As indicated already, that will be more difficult given the hardline views of many domestic extermists today. *A government cannot coopt or appease hatred, but it can address the conditions that contribute to hopeless and anger which, in turn, feed prejudice.*[158]

A portion of American society—mainly middle-aged and younger white males without college education—has been left behind by technological developments, globalization, and insufficient investment in physical and human infrastructure. Deprived of decent wages, unable to support their families, marginalized, dismissed, and disparaged, many are turning to drink or drugs; some commit suicide.[159] Facing a bleak future and angry at the political and economic system, they are prey for extremist ideologues that would direct their blame toward minorities, immigrants, foreigners—above all, the federal government.[160] They may not resort to violence themselves, but they may nod in agreement. While investments are being made in needed physical infrastructure, greater investments in education are required. This is something that government can and should do, not as a component of a counterterrorism strategy, but because it is in the national interest, and most of all, because fellow Americans need some help.

Useful analysis will require better databases. Tracking domestic terrorism for many years has been a 'third rail' for government agencies, discouraging the compilation of publicly available databases. Annual public reports of attacks and disruptions by the FBI and other law enforcement agencies will be essential, but are unlikely to make available the detail necessary for analysis. New government databases will have to be developed. As in the past, chronologies of events and statistics can also be carried out by government-contracted research organizations. NGOs and activist groups will also compile and publish databases, which can contribute to our understanding, however, it must be kept in mind that some of these organizations have their own political agendas, which can affect how they define events and lead to reporting biases.

Accept that the campaign to defeat domestic political violence will take many years. Indeed, it could take decades as we saw in counterterrorism campaigns against the Irish Republican Army in Northern Ireland or violent Basque separatists in Spain. In the United States, it took more than 10 years to run down the small groups of far-left bombers that emerged in the 1970s. Anarchists have been around since the late 19th century. The persistent prejudices and violent spasms of the far right go back even further and have been building for decades. American institutions are durable; law enforcement will do its duty. With any shared sense of national purpose, our democracy will prevail. Without unity, domestic terrorists may be the least of our problems.

Mistakes will be made. Learn from them. Given the state of the union, the challenge of containing political violence will not be easy. Even with oversight, errors of judgment and execution are perhaps inevitable. When they are, they must not be covered up, but addressed forthrightly and sensibly. Course direction must be reexamined periodically.

A Final Note. These are the elements of a pragmatic strategy to combat domestic political violence. They are mainly cautionary, especially as they apply to the role of federal law enforcement. I do not believe that we are heading toward civil war, but the political situation in the United States right now is perilous. It is painful to see the bellicose language and violent imagery, proliferation of personal threats and vows to settle scores so infect national discourse. We have seen in Europe, the Balkans, in the Middle East, and elsewhere how quickly people who have lived side by side for decades can turn on one another, exhibiting levels of savagery not seen on battlefields. A single incident can set off a destructive prairie fire, to use an old phrase that propelled terrorist bombers of the 1970s. The divisions are deeper now. The destruction would be greater, hence the necessity of a prudent approach that recognizes the limits of what law enforcement can do while addressing the greater challenge of national reconciliation. CTC

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A View from the CT Foxhole:
Air Vice-Marshal Sean Corbett

By Nakissa Jahanbani, Eugene Lee, and Don Rassler

Sean Corbett is the founder and CEO of IntSight Global, a management consultancy within the intelligence and security sector with a focus on open-source intelligence. He retired from the Royal Air Force (RAF) in September 2018 after a 30-year career as a professional intelligence officer. He served tours of duty in Northern Ireland, Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, the Balkans, Libya, and Central America. He commanded at every rank level, including a tour as Commander of the Joint Service Signals Organisation, as the Head of Intelligence at the U.K.'s Permanent Joint Headquarters and as the Chief of U.K. Intelligence in Afghanistan. Corbett also served as Principal Staff Officer to the Deputy Supreme Commander, Europe, and as the Deputy U.K. Military Representative to NATO. His last appointment in the military was two years at the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) in Washington, D.C., as the first non-U.S. Deputy Director of a major U.S. intelligence agency. His primary role there was to optimize intelligence sharing with U.S. allies by developing and implementing a transformational change program throughout the U.S. intelligence community.

On his departure from the RAF, Corbett established a Defence, Security and Intelligence Directorate within the geospatial intelligence company Earth-i, where he advanced innovative AI applications to earth observation data, optimized for the defense and security sector. He also currently serves as a Senior Associate Fellow at the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) and the Co-Chair of the Strategic Advisory Group at Janes. He is also co-host of the Janes podcast "The World of Intelligence."

CTC: Can you tell us a little bit about your background, your military career, and the work you've done over the past several years? Specifically, how did you come into OSINT (open-source intelligence) work?

Corbett: I joined the Royal Air Force in 1988, as a photographic interpreter—shortly before the specialization expanded into the RAF intelligence branch. After my first tour at the U.K.'s strategic imagery analysis headquarters, I went to Belize on an operational tour, which is where I first started working with a U.S. agency, albeit 'informally.' Working alongside and within the U.S. intelligence community has been a theme of my entire career. You tend to find that when you're trusted within the U.S. intelligence organizations and you get enhanced clearances, both sides say, 'Oh yeah, we'll use him in that role because he's trusted and he's a safe pair of hands.' One of my follow-on tours, for example, was as the collection manager in JTF-SWA [Joint Task Force Southwest Asia] in Saudi Arabia—in the U.S. SCIF [Sensitive Compartmented Information Facility]. I've also completed operational tours in Northern Ireland, Somalia, Iraq, Afghanistan, the Balkans, and Libya. I was the U.K. J2 in Afghanistan for a year, working very closely with the U.S.

J2 Joint Staff Intelligence, and as the J2 in our Permanent Joint Headquarters [PJHQ][a]—our unified combatant command, if you like, we only have one. I also have deep experience with signals intelligence (SIGINT), as I ran the military element of GCHQ [the U.K. equivalent of the NSA] where I was responsible for nine locations globally, several imagery analysis-related tours, and some out-of-branch appointments (as you're expected to do to grow career-wise), including as the deputy U.K. military representative to NATO at NATO headquarters, and I was also the executive officer for DSACEUR [Deputy Supreme Allied Commander Europe] for a while as well in SHAPE [Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe]. The culmination of my military career was being nominated as the Deputy Director for Commonwealth Integration [DDCI] within the DIA [Defense Intelligence Agency]. I was the first-ever non-U.S. citizen to be a deputy director of an intelligence agency in the U.S. [It was an] incredible experience, of which I am tremendously proud. It was a huge responsibility, extremely demanding, but a huge privilege. Overall, therefore, I've had a pretty varied career; I've loved every minute of it and been lucky enough to have worked with some incredible people.

In terms of how I became an advocate of OSINT, this was more of an evolution over a period of time than a specific trigger moment. For example, in my tours within the J2 at PJHQ, we had to maintain a pretty broad awareness of global security threats, and it was impossible to cover all of them through dedicated, exquisite collection capabilities. But if you asked me for one thing that brought the need to embrace OSINT into stark relief, I would have to say the Ebola pandemic in West Africa in 2014. It was very much an intelligence-led problem set, from understanding its spread and regional impact to the security consequences (reaction of populations, civil unrest, etc.). Almost all of the available information was at the unclassified level, and I think we as a *community* were not well equipped to operate at this level. To be honest, we really struggled with the problem set. Following the lessons learnt process, we therefore established an open-source cell within the J2 to provide that addition layer of unclassified intelligence.

And the trend towards OSINT has only increased. There's so much happening in the world right now that government intelligence organizations can only focus on so many priorities. You've got to start looking elsewhere for some of your information sources and getting reflections that you wouldn't normally consider. It was really challenging early on, if not for any other reason other than the culture within the intelligence community and a general

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a   Editor's Note: The U.K. J2 concerns matters of operational intelligence and is stationed at the Permanent Joint Headquarters (PJHQ), which concerns joint and multinational military operations for the British Ministry of Defense. For more information, see "Permanent Joint Headquarters," gov.uk

belief that anything that was unclassified couldn't or shouldn't be used as an intelligence source.

CTC: Can you speak a little bit about what you have done since your retirement in service? Because when we talk about OSINT, there's a lot of interesting components to what you've done during the second part of your career.

Corbett: To be honest, following my DIA appointment, the military in the U.K. didn't really have anything to offer me after that. I'd already smashed through my glass ceiling as an intelligence professional. They say that you know when it's time to move on from the military, and I think that's true. When I returned from the States, I was put in a holding pattern for another two-star role should a suitable one become available, but during that period, I started to take closer look at some of the emerging open-source capabilities. I was lucky enough to be approached by an Earth observation company that was developing some innovative capabilities using video and imagery from commercial satellites, which was really appealing and so I made a fairly rapid transition.

The great thing about that was they gave me the freedom to start developing some technical techniques based on commercially available satellite imagery to support the defense, security and intelligence sector. Specifically, I'm talking about developing machine learning algorithms and artificial intelligence to apply to imagery such as automated object recognition. This can be a real force multiplier for the intelligence analyst. For example, if you are monitoring an airfield with a number of different types of aircraft on it, you can develop the algorithms that could automatically identify not just the numbers of aircraft present, but also the specific types. We were able to do that to a very high degree of accuracy and sophistication, and at the time, this was fairly cutting-edge stuff. Now, that in and of itself isn't necessarily a game changer, but if you can do that at scale with lots of different airfields, then it frees the analyst to focus on what they *should* be doing and that's focusing on the *'so-what.'* For instance, you can set alerts within specified parameters that will flag up anomalies, such as when there is an unusual level of air activity. The analyst can then engage to assess the significance of the anomaly. At that stage, probably the defense community—certainly in the U.K.—wasn't ready to embrace that sort of technology, and certainly not to rely on the commercial sector. But nonetheless, it was good to realize what could be achieved technically and then applied to real-life intelligence problems and I learnt a lot going through the process.

One big lesson was the ability to develop a capability rapidly, something that is extremely challenging in the military research and development community. By sitting down and working closely with the data scientists, coders, and developers so they knew exactly what we were trying to achieve, we were able to meet the requirement rapidly and accurately. Too often in the military community, we fail to articulate the need in the right amount of depth, or remain constantly engaged throughout the process, and are then surprised when the final product falls short.

Another lesson I learnt early on was how many skills are transferrable from the military to the commercial sector. For example, strong leadership, and good communications skills are absolutely essential, as is having a strategy in which a clear vision is translated into an output, where the ends, ways and means are cohered. What are you trying to achieve? How are you going do it?

> **"There is so much data out there, and methods to collect, wrangle, manage, and make it available for the analysts are so good that we are almost at what I call 'the coming of age of OSINT.'"**

What resources have you got and what additional resources do you need? And then maintaining that aim as much as possible, testing and adjusting when the need arises. This is second nature in the military but often surprisingly absent in the commercial world. In today's information age, another lesson that can be applied both to the miliary and the commercial world is to use AI as a tool at the appropriate moments, but not to be governed by it and make it an end it itself.

I'll always be grateful for my time as an employee in a commercial company, but after a couple of years, I realized that I could probably go it alone just as well in terms of setting my own work, understanding what the market needed, and applying my military experience to the commercial sector to help them optimize their outputs, which is why I set up my own consultancy at that stage.

CTC: How would you describe the evolution of OSINT over the course of your career?

Corbett: Certainly 10 years ago, OSINT really wasn't leveraged in defense to any great extent. We used to use things like BBC Monitoring Service to add a little bit of flavor or to help fill the odd intelligence gap, but it was really an afterthought. But now, however, we're getting to the stage—that OSINT cannot be ignored as a legitimate source for the intelligence analyst. There is so much data out there, and methods to collect, wrangle, manage, and make it available for the analysts are so good that we are almost at what I call 'the coming of age of OSINT.' That, of course, doesn't mean that exquisite (and expensive) government collection capabilities can be replaced, or that you don't need the skilled analyst to provide the analysis and assessment. With my imagery background, a good case in point is the quality of commercial satellite imagery that's available now. I would have been absolutely delighted to have had that within the military domain when I first joined in the late 1980s. And it's not only the resolution, but the different sensors (electro-optical, synthetic aperture radar, and even RF) that have proliferated but also, with the development of constellations, the revisit rate has also improved.[b] One of the limitations of imagery in particular is that you've got to wait for the satellite to be in the right orbit to collect against an area of interest. The larger your constellation,[c] the faster your revisit rate.

In addition to developments in collection techniques is the ability to manage all of that data: things like doing a certain amount of the

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b   Editor's Note: The "revisit rate" refers to the gap in time for the satellite to revisit the same area again.

c   Editor's Note: In this context, "constellation" refers to a satellite constellation, or a group of satellites working together as a system.

processing onboard the satellite as opposed to having to download it all, which requires the satellite to link to a ground station. This adds to the immediacy of the information that's available.

CTC: You're an avid angler.

Corbett: I am.

CTC: Does the world of fishing offer any lessons to us about the evolution of OSINT? So when you think about the world of fishing and your love of that area and your OSINT world and your work there, is there a spot where these two domains meet?

Corbett: That's an interesting question, and you might be surprised to say hear me say yes, 100 percent actually. When people ask me why I fish—because I'm also a big rugby man, and the two don't seem compatible—I describe fishing as an exercise in problem solving, where you've got an infinite amount of variables. Any time you go fishing, the variables will have changed. You've got to work out within the conditions—whether it's environmental conditions, the weather, what the fish are doing, what time of year it is—the best approach to fishing. You've got to hone down the different data points and aggregate them to work out what you should be doing: where you should be putting your bait, how you should be presenting it, and so forth. So in that respect, there are some similarities between fishing and the intelligence process. There's also a lot more science and technology involved in fishing these days. For example, some people use sonar, which is probably cheating in some ways, to locate under water features and therefore where the fish are likely to be lying.

The other great thing about fishing for me, especially the type of fishing I do (which can involve sitting out for long periods waiting for a bite from a big fish), is that it gives me time to actually sit down, away from the clutter and the noise of the internet, social media and all the rest of it, with a stack of reading. I do a lot of my research, and even some of my reporting and analysis on the lake bank.

CTC: What role do you think OSINT has played in understanding Russia's invasion of Ukraine?

Corbett: I think quite an important one, actually. In many ways, the Ukraine example has accelerated an understanding by the intelligence and defense communities, and the commercial sector, of the power that OSINT can actually bring. I started doing a little bit of talking-head engagements with the BBC when the invasion first started, and I was a little bit concerned that the granularity of my understanding would be nothing like what it was when I was within the community. But actually, the amount of open-source intelligence out there that you could cross-refer and validate was really strong, so I could put a narrative together that was credible and I had a high level of confidence in it. That proved to be the case in hindsight.

I think you can therefore use open sources to build a good picture about what's actually happening in a crisis situation and assess what you think is going happen there. The narrative and the reporting and the assessment that have come from some of the mainstream media in past conflicts have frankly been quite shocking. It is now a lot more mature and they are starting to ask people like myself

Air Vice-Admiral Sean Corbett

the right questions. That has been facilitated by the proliferation of trusted OSINT providers.

I think another key role for OSINT in the Ukraine crisis has been around the information campaign, which is of course still running and is highly significant. I don't know, but I would be very confident that intelligence organizations have been using open-source intelligence to verify messaging that they wouldn't have otherwise been able to provide the public. Defense intelligence in the U.K. has been putting out a daily sit rep [situation report] about what's going on. It's not particularly deep, and it's not particularly analytical, but it keeps an official narrative going at the unclassified level. And it's good enough for the general population to have the awareness that they should have. Are there still challenges? Yes, there are. The question is how seriously and how enduringly has the community embraced open-source intelligence, and that's a big question right now.

CTC: It was interesting to see how much information was released in advance of Russia's invasion, from particularly the U.S. intelligence community. The amount of corroborating OSINT that was available probably made it easier for the intelligence community to release that type of information, which seems to be a real shift, at least on the U.S. side.

Corbett: There's two elements to that: There's the messaging in terms of 'we know what you're doing,' and then there's the influencing of 'don't do it because we know what you're going to do.' Now, the Russians have been doing that for years. Everybody considers them to be masters of information/disinformation

campaigns, but actually, they've been a little bit found out because some of their information operations around Ukraine have been very clunky to say the least. For example, you see pictures of allegedly dead civilians from attacks by Ukrainians, but then the camera continues to roll on and these people get up and walk away. We've seen that happen on a number of occasions. I think some of the bubbles have burst there, but you do need to be—with open-source intelligence as with any form of intelligence—cognizant of the misinformation and disinformation piece.

CTC: So, how do we navigate the credibility of online information with the rise of disinformation campaigns and the spread of misinformation?

Corbett: It's big business now, and I don't think it's a problem that's confined to open-source intelligence. It's all forms of both intelligence and information and particularly common in social media. There's a big difference between misinformation, which is people just repeating what they have heard, misunderstanding or putting something that's wrong out there, and disinformation, which is deliberately putting out false information to influence elements of the populations or to try and change behaviors. It's actually a very important and very complex issue, but the very quick answer in terms of mitigating both misinformation and disinformation is establishing and following good tradecraft.

What do I mean by tradecraft? It's setting analytical standards whereby you ensure your sources are credible and accurate. It requires cross-referring more than one source to make sure that it is validated, and it is making sure also that you use all of the information, not just some of it. You'll hear the phrase 'all-source intelligence' bandied around a lot within the community. It rolls off the tongue easily, but how many people really do all-source intelligence as opposed to multi-source intelligence? It's being able to assure the information you get to say, 'We think this is right because ...' and be able to back it up with evidence. If you really want to conduct all-source intelligence analysis, then you have to consider assured OSINT as a valid source.

It's probably worth mentioning the difference between information and intelligence at this stage. Information comprises known data points, often disparate and seemingly unconnected, but it only becomes intelligence when it is applied to a particular problem set, often with an incomplete set of data. That's the art of intelligence: taking disparate pieces of information and putting it into an assessment without necessarily all the building blocks. I look at intelligence as if you've got about three different jigsaw puzzles all scrambled up: Some of the pieces are missing, some of the pieces of the image are also missing, and you're trying to come up with what it is you're seeing. Open-source intelligence has a role to play in that, by providing more pieces of the jigsaw.

There has to be analytical rigor and the methodology and evidence that you can go back to, and then you've got a chance. There are a number of techniques, when you start getting into social media and some of the analytics, for example, that you can assess whether a piece of information (data point) is genuine. That might be through analyzing the metadata, cross-referring images against known locations, or even analyzing a raft of unconnected tweets or other social media commentary referring to the same event. It all helps to add to the degree of confidence you have. So yes, there are ways to mitigate disinformation and misinformation, but you do

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need people that know what they're doing.

CTC: Regarding OSINT, are there any specific technologies or capabilities that you're most excited about? Are there any core obstacles the intelligence and defense community faces in maximizing how new OSINT-related technologies and capabilities are utilized?

Corbett: In terms of technology, we've covered some of that already, but I think that an ability to effectively collect, manage, and process the data in an automated manner is the most exciting thing. There's so much data out there that it's almost impossible for a human being to cognitively take it all in and sort it in a structured way that leads to an ability to assess what it all means. Being able to scrape disparate data—whether it's off the internet or whether it's imagery, telecoms interactions, or whatever—to make it manageable and relevant for the analyst, it has to be effectively processed and sorted. At Janes, for example, they have been able to automatically interconnect millions of data points because they've labeled and tagged all of their data regardless of where they're from, over the last number of years. If you're an analyst, that is gold dust in terms of time saving and efficiency. If you talk to an intelligence analyst anywhere, they will say probably their greatest effort in terms of time is actually collating data into something that they can then use to conduct what they should be spending most of their effort on: providing the *'so what'*—the analysis and assessments. So developing and applying AI tools to manage the data is the key thing for me.

In terms of challenges, I would say they are not so much technical—although there's still a lot to be done in refining with the data management—but cultural. Firstly, in the intelligence community, there are a lot of very good deep specialists out there, but a lot of them will have been stove-piped into their own individual area of expertise, whether it's SIGINT, HUMINT, GEOINT, each has its own tradecraft, which don't yet incorporate OSINT. And there's still people that say, 'Hang on a minute. open-source intelligence is not actually intelligence. Therefore, I'm not going to use it.' As much as anything, it's about trust in the data. You still see a little bit of that, although not so much anymore. I think the question that is important, though, is, 'How do I integrate open-source data with classified?' Because you've still got to protect

your information, existing security mechanisms make it really hard to integrate different security layers. It's a difficult challenge. There are ways to ingest open-source onto the high-side, but they are still not that efficient.

The other cultural thing is that open-source can be seen as a threat to the analyst. There is almost an assumption that if we've got all these really good algorithms, if we've got all this huge amount of automatically collected, publicly available data, we can get rid of some of the analysts. And, of course, turkeys don't vote for Thanksgiving. And so there are people that will think, 'Why would I embrace this?' That's not just an open-source intelligence issue, of course, and trust in AI remains a complex challenge. I personally don't see AI as a threat. There is so much happening in the world that the more we can get the analysts to look at the 'what are we seeing here and what does it mean' rather than the collating the data, the better I think.

I think there's also an ownership issue. We are quite insular within the intelligence community. There is no question that open-source intelligence is increasingly recognized as having a role, but with a 'we'll do it ourselves' approach. 'Why would we go to really expensive commercial providers when we could develop in-house now?' Without getting too political, defense is littered with good ideas that originated in the commercial sector, but were then brought into the core, into defense, into procurement, into capability development, and then, five to 10 years later, having spent lots and lots of money, without achieving the intended outcome, they went, 'OK, show us how you do it.'

CTC: You've talked about how integration has been key to how open source as a discipline has evolved and of it being the intersection between public and private. Or even just on the government side of interagency cooperation, multinational cooperation, seeing how we optimize or maximize our use of OSINT and the related capabilities and technologies. When you think about the future of OSINT, in terms of integration and collaboration, what comes to mind for you? It just seems like a field that in order for it to advance even further, it needs to continue to play in that integrated space, even more so than it already has.

Corbett: There is definitely a requirement for as much collaboration as possible and whether that is between commercial and military, whether that's just between nations, and even, dare I say, intelligence agencies who tend to jealously guard their own data. It's absolutely essential because otherwise you don't get—back to the jigsaw analogy—you don't get the fullest picture available. And so, you will miss things. And I think 9/11 taught us that in hindsight—and I've been through the 9/11 Commission report with the lessons identified—a lot of the information was there: a) if you knew where you were looking, and b) if it was all brought together. Now, that's easier said than done because of the sensitivity of some of the information, because of how it's derived and how it's collected, and the fact that agencies do have different sources, methods and even IT systems. You add open-source intelligence on top of that, and it makes it incredibly complicated.

So, the really key question is, how do you integrate all that information into one place that is coherent and that actually ticks all the boxes for the security requirements, particularly in the age where you've got so much data. For instance, if you want to

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downgrade some classified piece of information, there is so much out there, how do you go through the process of downgrading each individual data point when there are literally millions of them? You can't do it manually. And that's where you apply AI and cloud computing: The problem then comes, of course, if you then start trying to integrate open-source data points, that then integrates into the classified domain. There's a lot of work going on there. It is really complex, and I don't think there's an easy solution for it. I think it's imperative, though, because our adversaries probably aren't as constrained by security protocols as we are, and the last thing we want is for them to gain an information advantage.

There's also an issue about aggregation of data. There is an argument that states that even if something is unclassified, it can still be sensitive. If you amalgamate lots of unclassified things together, then that could actually make it make it classified. I don't fully subscribe to that view personally because I think if you're only [bringing] publicly available information together to make the assessment, it's what anyone could do. The key is not to reveal intelligence gaps. So integrating the data is a hugely important question, and one we're going to have to address soon as we start increasing our cloud computing capabilities and reliance.

CTC: The evolution of OSINT and supportive technology has increasingly been a key resource and tool for defense and national security communities and has enhanced how allied nations collaborate. What concerns, if any, do you have about the adversarial use of OSINT both by non-state actors and state actors, or proxies?

Corbett: This is something that we really do need to concern ourselves with because, as I said, as much as we're developing some good techniques and open-source capabilities, the adversaries are as well. You can be sure that the Russias and the Chinas and terrorist organizations of this world are not just copying us, but they are doing it at scale and without necessarily applying the ethics or to the same degree of rigor that we would go through.

What do you do about it? I think there's inevitability that you just have to accept it in some ways, but I think also that it really drives home the requirement that we, as individuals and organizations need to protect our own information. A lot of OSINT is derived from social media, whether it's people bragging, whether it's somebody just taking a photograph of a Russian tank going past or where you've got civilians posting reflections of specific events. So that

while this kind of information helps us, there is the potential for it to also work against us. Take the example of the Strava incident.[d] When people, like myself, ran around deployed secure military facilities, you tended to activate your fitness app. But that sort of data is easily accessible and can be used against you. A simple example, but it does make the point that every individual within our own organizations has an imperative to, as much as possible, protect our own information.

One of the areas I was involved with while serving was the information assurance piece. I used to run an organization that used to monitor our own side to see what the OPSEC [operational security] was like. And many times, it was absolutely shocking. Now this goes back a few years, and the secure communications weren't always in place. Sometimes, there was an operational imperative to pass on sensitive information in the clear. Things have moved on since then, of course, with better secure communications and even commercial apps such as signal and Wickr which are hard, if not impossible, to decrypt, but OPSEC and COMSEC [communications security] remain very much dependent on individual vigilance.

With regards to intelligence sharing, there's a real balance to be struck between protecting your own information and sharing it to the extent necessary to be useful. That's a conundrum that we've been through for many years, and something that I was very involved with when I was the DDCI at DIA. There are so many advantages to sharing intelligence with allies and partners, but they have to be balanced with the need to protect sources and methods. OSINT can again play a role here, by using unclassified data that has been corroborated with that from classified sources. And so it's the degree of risk you wish to take, but also the processes and procedures that are in place to mitigate that risk. It's a really complicated issue, but an area in which we do need to improve.

CTC: As you mentioned earlier, you have your own consultancy practice. How did you come to set it up? What advice would you offer to someone who's seeking to set one up as well?

Corbett: I learned a lot from the commercial sector, but after about 18 months, I reached a stage in which wanted to take OSINT in a direction where I was very comfortable doing what I thought would support the defense and intelligence sector best and in the way that I wanted to do it. Establishing my own business gave me the freedom to pick and choose. I was lucky because I'm at a stage where I can pick and choose what I want to do.

In terms of what I would advise somebody in setting up a consultancy, the first thing is, understand very clearly upfront the level of risk that you're prepared to take: financial risk, personal risk in terms of how hard you're going to work, and whether there is a need and an appetite and a market for what you have to offer. You need to do the research, develop networks and seek advice, but you'll never really know that until you take the plunge. So ultimately, there has to be a leap of faith, and to reach a moment where you

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commit, 'I'm going to do this anyway.' I started negotiating my first contracts about three weeks before COVID hit. I thought at that stage, I was dead in the water because you couldn't get out and meet people and develop relationships. But I was quite lucky as I had already done much of the groundwork and could do a lot of my work remotely.

The second thing is, be very clear in what your expertise is and where you can add value. Again, I'm lucky because of my broad experience and relatively high profile within the community. So with my contacts and my understanding of the IC, in the U.K. and U.S., and the international piece as well, I was aware of the environment. If somebody asked me a question about NATO, for example, I'd have a good understanding of what was required and where the challenges lay. I think the other requirement common to probably any endeavor is honesty and integrity. In the commercial world, there does seem to be a little bit of a gray area, which in my view can impact the level of trust between industry and government. It's the Richard Branson quote, to [roughly] paraphrase, 'Just say yes to anything they offer you and then work out how to do it afterwards.'[e] That's fine, but it's got to be within the art of the possible and you need the tools and resources to meet the need. Personally, my reputation is the most important thing I have. Once you lose that, you'll never get it back. By reputation, I mean if you say you can do something you need to be able to do it, and to the degree that needs to be done.

There's another element to that as well, and that is the morality piece. There were a couple of cases where I was approached by some big, international companies, who said, 'Can you do this? It's a long piece of work; six months-worth of good revenue.' And while I could have done the work, what they were trying to achieve working with certain defense organizations, I knew the requirement wasn't yet developed and the money wasn't there. So instead of taking the

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d   Editor's Note: AVM Corbett is referring to the fitness tracking app Strava releasing a heat map visualization collected from its users in November 2017. It unknowingly released the structure of military bases and other sensitive structures due to personnel who used the app and worked on those installations. For more information, see Alex Hern, "Fitness tracing app Strava gives away location of secret US army bases," *Guardian*, January 28, 2018.

e   Editor's Note: The British entrepreneur Richard Branson has tweeted, "If somebody offers you an amazing opportunity but you are not sure you can do it, say yes – then learn how to do it later!" Richard Branson, "If somebody offers you ...," Twitter, January 24, 2018.

contract, doing all the work, and then putting the money in my pocket, I said, 'I will do a six-day piece of work that tells you why you would be wasting your time and effort and money doing this or why it's more challenging than you think it will be, and where best to invest instead.' Now, that is not the most profitable way of doing business, but when I produced that paper, this particular company went, 'We are so grateful. You have saved us considerable investment, effort, and time.' I'd like to think that in the future, they'll see me as a trusted source and maybe use me again. So for me, the morality side and the ethics is really strong, and I think there is a correlation, not always, but there is a correlation between those companies that are honest and have got integrity, and success. I would also never do any work, even if legally allowed, for a nation or organization that I thought may be acting against our values and principles or collective national security. I remember being approached by representatives from a fractured nation that effectively wanted me to provide them with a kinetic targeting campaign. Needless to say, I declined the very lucrative offer.

CTC: A final question, and it's one we often ask senior leaders who sit across our table: What keeps you up at night?

Corbett: In terms of the global strategic environment, there's not a lot of good news out there right now. One of my biggest concerns with the West is short-termism in politics. It's the internal politics about 'how do I stay in power? It's all about me' as opposed to grand strategy. That is nowhere to be seen. It seems to me there is very little genuine strategic thinking within western governments, which has been the case for a while. We should have been paying far more attention to Putin's Russia following Georgia and then Crimea, and should have recognized China as a strategic threat far earlier. The question now is, how do we demonstrate collective resolve and maintain the global strategic balance without tipping us over into wider scale conflict with global consequences?'

If you then put together our failure to enact a robust response to the Russian annexation of Crimea and the chaotic way that we withdrew from Afghanistan, which demonstrated a lack of coherence at best and a lack of multilateralism at worst within NATO, and certainly between the U.S. and its closest allies and the Western response to the COVID pandemic, suddenly you're back to Westphalia and it's all about the individual state. It shouldn't really be all that surprising therefore that Putin acted as he did: 'Now's my opportunity because they're [the West] in disarray, its each nation for itself, there's no political will. There's no plan and no coherence.'

I think at the macro level, you've got an increasingly belligerent China that's increasing its rhetoric regarding Taiwan and global aspirations; you've got the Arctic that's another potential flash point; you've got unrest in Iran and the breakdown of the Joint Comprehensive Plan Of Action (JCPOA); North Korea, which is becoming more belligerent, as well as non-traditional threats like climate change, food insecurity, all the rest of it. There is so much going on that if we take short-term view, then we will really fail.

In terms of the tactical level, I am concerned that the defense and the intelligence community is not embracing open-source intelligence as quickly, as effectively, and in as an integrated manner as it could be yet. We have to keep on educating. We haven't had the sophisticated discussion with government about how we integrate OSINT fully into what we do. There is still a deep mistrust between defense and the commercial sector, and in some cases for good reasons. Defense sees the commercial world as just trying to steal their money from them and not deliver what's required, and the commercial sector sees defense as leading them along, getting them to develop capabilities without paying for them, seeing what's best, and then ditching them when it's not quite right. It's getting better, and there is an understanding that improvements are needed. But we've got to be much more agile and develop a level of trust that can encourage true partnerships to the benefit of all. Only then will we be well positioned to address the many security challenges that I have just outlined.   **CTC**