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FEATURE COMMENTARY

23 Years On: The Global Jihadi Terror Threat

EDMUND FITTON-BROWN

A VIEW FROM THE CT FOXHOLE

Rosalind Nyawira

FORMER DIRECTOR, NATIONAL COUNTER
TERRORISM CENTRE – KENYA

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FROM THE EDITOR

It has been 23 years since 9/11. In our feature article, Edmund Fitton-Brown, who for years coordinated the United Nations' monitoring of the global jihadi threat, examines the current threat outlook. He writes that "the period since 2017 will likely come to be regarded as one of calm and exceptional security, when CT agencies had a clear upper hand over the threat. Unfortunately, it is difficult to see any means by which that period will be long extended. Instead, we will have to get used to—as we have during previous periods—more frequent and more serious attacks in non-conflict zones. That is why a precipitous disinvestment from CT would be a tragic political mistake in present circumstances."

Our interview is with Rosalind Nyawira, the former director of Kenya's National Counter Terrorism Centre. "We feel a moral obligation to help others come up with proper strategies and start with prevention because that is where everyone should start," she says, adding that "insulating communities and empowering them is paramount in stemming radicalization."

Caleb Weiss and Lucas Webber look at the evolving threat posed by the Islamic State's Somalia branch. They write: "Over the last three years, the Islamic State's Somalia Province has grown increasingly international, sending money across two continents and recruiting around the globe. There are also growing linkages between the group and international terrorist plots, raising the possibility that Islamic State-Somalia may be seeking to follow in the footsteps of Islamic State Khorasan in going global."

"On July 16, 2024, Georgian national Mikhail Chkhikvishvili was indicted in the Eastern District of New York on four counts of conspiracy to solicit hate crimes and acts of mass violence. Court filings show Chkhikvishvili was acting on behalf of an organization known as ... a violent accelerationist network that originated in Russia and Ukraine," write Marc-André Argentino, Barrett Gay, and Matt Bastin in their profile of the group. "Chkhikvishvili's activities demonstrate that ... is pursuing alliances with threat actors in the West, including known leaders of RMVE organizations and online criminal networks," they assess, adding that "evidence shows that ... is intent on perpetrating a mass casualty event, with the hopes to do so in the United States."

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Cover: A U.S. flag is seen at the National September 11th Memorial on September 11, 2016, in New York City. (Dennis van Tine/Sipa USA via AP Images)

Commentary: The Global Jihadi Terror Threat in September 2024

By Edmund Fitton-Brown

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

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

9/11 was indeed a watershed moment, ushering in two decades

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Given these troubling circumstances that we now face, let us undertake a renewed *tour d’horizon* of the various arenas around the world in which salafi-jihadi groups pose or could come to pose a threat. To this end, this article will draw extensively on the latest report of the Monitoring Team (MT), published in July and covering the period January to June 2024.⁹ This article will take the regions and issues in the same order in which the UN Monitoring Team addresses them but will also feature reflections, insight, analysis, and predictions of my own and will also illuminate these with examples from a much longer period of recent history.

Eastern, Central, and Southern Africa

Starting with eastern, central, and southern Africa, an area that the Islamic State groups together in their regional organization, this has emerged as a major arena of jihadi violence over the past decade. Of course, Somalia has long been plagued with extremism, and al-Shabaab remains the single most capable affiliate of al-Qa`ida. Not only does al-Shabaab destabilize Somalia, but it threatens

“We may be on the verge of seeing a Sunni extremist-Shi`a extremist front emerging to fight Israel and the West.”

neighbors like Kenya. It is financially strong, remitting funds back to other parts of the al-Qa`ida network.¹⁰ Alarming, from a threat projection perspective, it has a history of attracting FTFs and has taken an interest in civil aviation pilot training, as evidenced by a plot to launch a 9/11-style attack in the United States thwarted in 2019.¹¹ Somalia depends on regional and wider assistance to fend off the threat from al-Shabaab, which is resilient enough to bide its time until international partners lose patience and leave.

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

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

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

Western and Northern Africa

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



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

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

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

The politics of Mali and Burkina Faso are increasingly fraught, with military coups undermining the legitimacy of Bamako and Ouagadougou. The military regimes' decisions (and the parallel decision of Niger) to abandon their reliance on the United Nations and the West, and to accept the less complicated demands of Wagner, Russia, and Iran, run the risk of accelerating the polarization and radicalization of their populations, while JNIM is shrewd enough to recognize this and present itself as more responsive to the needs of citizens than their governments. Two worst-case scenarios could flow from this: locally, in Nigeria, a contagion of organized

extremism in the northwest could effectively link the Lake Chad Basin and western Sahel theaters; and regionally, if Mali, Burkina Faso, and/or Niger collapse as effective jurisdictions, we could see an Afghanization of the Sahel that creates a new pole of attraction for FTFs and incubates an external threat capability that projects into North Africa and across the sea to Europe.

The Middle East

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

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

The deaths of al-`Adl's son and of AQAP leader Khaled Batarfi in early 2024²⁴ have not been satisfactorily explained and, if they were not just a coincidence of one illness and one accident, could possibly have resulted from a power struggle within AQAP over this strategic direction. The Houthis have much Yemeni Sunni blood on their hands, and not everyone in AQAP is likely to be ready to forgive

“In the medium-long term, Europe will probably face a more developed capability and higher threat than now.”

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

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

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

Other jurisdictions in the Levant are also affected by conflict and increasingly tense in the context of the Gaza war and the Iranian-orchestrated campaign against Israel and the West. Even Jordan, a relatively stable country with robust policy orientation, finds Palestinian anger, the proximity of Iraq, the subversive activities of Iran, and the abuse of its airspace by those directing projectiles at Israel very challenging. Lebanon is all but a failed state, held hostage by Hezbollah, and suffering like Syria and Iraq from disillusioned,

extremist Sunnis and displaced persons, some radicalized. There is a possibility of violence from various quarters in all of the countries surrounding Israel and the Palestinian territories, and that could be at Iran’s behest or could equally be terrorism inspired by the Islamic State or al-Qa`ida propaganda.

Europe

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

Central and South Asia

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

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

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

Zooming Out

It is true that al-Qa`ida-aligned groups do not pose a severe, immediate threat in non-conflict zones, partly because of a lack of capability and partly because sponsors such as the Taliban and Iran are cautious about being embarrassed and facing military consequences in the event of a major attack. But the Taliban's default setting of using blackmail to get their way in international affairs and their intemperate reaction to any perceived slight against Islam that occurs anywhere in the world make clear that any Taliban restraint on al-Qa`ida is temporary and conditional.

In view of the potential Afghanization of Somalia and the Western Sahel, the West is likely to face more failed states and more safe havens for terrorist groups. In the medium-long term, this could manifest as a much higher terrorist threat.

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

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

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A View from the CT Foxhole: Rosalind Nyawira, Former Director, National Counter Terrorism Centre – Kenya

By Kristina Hummel and Samuel Bowles

Rosalind Nyawira is a legal and security expert with over 20 years of experience in countering terrorism and preventing violent extremism. She is a specialist in international terrorism, and most recently has been engaged in preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE). She has excelled in counterterrorism theory and practice.

She was the Director of Kenya's National Counter Terrorism Centre for the last three years, a multi-agency body charged by law with the role of coordinating CT efforts in all of government and bilateral and multilateral efforts aimed at preventing violent extremism. She also guides policy and legal framework on P/CVE, undertakes research to identify vulnerabilities, liaises with international players in identifying knowledge gaps and providing tailor-made solutions, exchanges with foreign partners on good CT practices and represents Kenya in international CT fora.

She has wide experience formulating the National Counter-Terrorism Strategy and the National Strategy for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism, generating training programs and offering training for government officers and the private sector on the threat of terrorism, and guiding law and policy on terrorism matters. She holds a doctorate in law from the University of South Africa with a bias toward international human rights and humanitarian law. She is an adjunct lecturer at the National Defence University, Kenya, and is also an advocate of the High Court of Kenya. She is widely published in the field of law and terrorism.

Editor's Note: This interview was conducted just before Dr. Nyawira left her position as director of Kenya's National Counter Terrorism Centre.

CTC: Tell us about the work of the National Counter Terrorism Centre (NCTC). What is the Centre's mandate and mission, and how does NCTC complement the efforts of other parts of the Kenyan government focused on national security?

Nyawira: The Centre was set up 20 years ago, first by a cabinet policy, but later by an Act of parliament in 2014. It coordinates government agencies to detect, deter, and disrupt terrorist activities. The mandate includes building capacity for both the public and private sector—for them to understand the technicalities of the threat of terrorism and how to deal with it. We also carry out strategies to deradicalize those who are already radicalized and to disengage them from the violent extremism ideology. A lot of work is done is with the communities.

The Centre implements the National Strategy to Prevent and Counter Violent Extremism, which brings together state, non-state

actors, and communities to help them understand how terrorism manifests, why citizens get recruited, why they move to combat theaters and then come back and carry out attacks. It works also to remove stigma, especially among the families of people that have gone to terrorist theaters. The Strategy aims to build resilience within communities for them to know what to do, where to report, what to watch out for, and ensure that they're able to dissuade their kin from joining violent extremism.

The Centre is made up of agencies from all of government that deal with terrorism in various capacities. Some are investigative while some are operational. They advise the Centre on the tactical elements of the threat of terrorism, while the Centre itself does strategic analysis. The Centre advises government on policy and legal recommendations, but the information itself comes from all other agencies. The Centre is neither investigative nor operational. The role is advisory while dealing with other government agencies and coordinative when dealing with communities.

CTC: Does that include advising the military?

Nyawira: Yes, they are represented at the Centre.

CTC: Tragically, Kenya has had many years of experience confronting terrorism threats, from al-Qa`ida's bombings of the U.S. embassy in Nairobi in 1998 to al-Shabaab's attacks on the Westgate shopping mall attack in September 2013, Garissa University in April 2015, and the Dusit D2 hotel in January 2019, among others. Looking back on those attacks today, how would you describe the evolution of the terrorism threat that Kenya has faced, particularly over the last decade? How would you describe the evolution of Kenya's counterterrorism efforts against it?

Nyawira: The ideology that we have been confronting was alien to Kenya. It was brought in by al-Qa`ida, because Kenya had attractive targets that would earn al-Qa`ida publicity. Kenyan communities are predominantly very peaceful and interact well, and co-exist peacefully regardless of their religious inclination. As al-Qa`ida was gaining roots globally, they trained their eyes on East Africa. Remember, Usama bin Ladin once lived in Sudan, and he got interested in eastern Africa. So, the 1998 attacks were the first real terrorist attack that Kenya experienced. These attacks ushered in al-Qa`ida, and particularly a group dedicated to East Africa that called themselves [the] al-Qa`ida-East Africa cell. The 1998 attack was foreign planned and foreign executed. Around the same time, Somalia's government had collapsed; some of the perpetrators escaped to Somalia, and some were arrested and are still serving jail time.

Subsequently, the ideology spread, and as radicalization increased, locals got involved and took part in planning subsequent

attacks. Fast forward, more and more locals got recruited, went for training in Somalia, and came back to carry out attacks. And so naturally, because of the attacks, the first response was counterterrorism—to deal with the perpetrators. But eventually, the need to insulate the population led to the adoption of a preventive strategy. We realized sections of communities were being radicalized; some were more vulnerable than others. We had to study and understand why, and we found that we had to neutralize the foreign ideology that was being perpetuated.

The attacks would later involve foreigners and Kenyans. That is why insulating and immunizing communities and also addressing those who are already on the radicalization pathway to bring them back to the mainstream became paramount considerations.

CTC: Speaking of Somalia and moving to present day, al-Shabaab in Somalia is al-Qa`ida's largest and wealthiest affiliate.¹ The Islamic State's affiliate in Somalia, though smaller, is formidable, particularly given the Al-Karrar office is also located there.² When you look at the threat landscape, broadly speaking, that Kenya is facing and even the region more generally, what concerns you the most? What groups are you most concerned about?

Nyawira: Our biggest concern is still al-Shabaab. Having been active for almost two decades, al-Shabaab has established its own operational infrastructure, and so dealing with it is not necessarily that easy. It requires a variety of tactics to deal with them. They still pose the biggest threat to Kenya as far as the threat of terrorism is concerned. Of course, we do have concern over other growing groups. We call them Daesh. We don't call them Islamic State because they are neither Islamic nor are they a state, but we take cognizance of the upcoming nodes calling themselves Daesh affiliates in Africa and ensure that they do not set [up] base in Kenya. We are glad that Kenya has not been affected by these Daesh affiliates.

CTC: Following a U.S. airstrike against Islamic State militants in Somalia in late May, there was news reporting that the target of the strike, the leader of Islamic State-Somalia, Abdulqadir Mumin, had quietly become "the worldwide leader" of the Islamic State.³ None of that is confirmed. This is just reporting. But with Kenya's shared border with Somalia, can you talk about what you made of that news, about this reported shift in the leadership to Somalia, if it's true? Mumin's status is not clear, but if he was killed, what impact do you think that would have on the threat that Kenya and the region face from Islamic State-Somalia?

Nyawira: Like you said, it is still not clear if Mumin became the head of Daesh, but he has been the head of this small branch in Somalia. This group has really not grown much because of the operations against them and also, interestingly, because of al-Shabaab. Al-Shabaab will not let Daesh affiliates take a share of what they consider their turf. But one notable thing about these terrorist organizations is that their leadership is very fungible. When the leader is taken out, another one comes up. So, if indeed Mumin became the leader, it is yet to be seen what the effect will be of that, and if he died, we would believe that someone else would take it up. Maybe not someone strong, although we really don't

"Our biggest concern is still al-Shabaab. Having been active for almost two decades, al-Shabaab has established its own operational infrastructure, and so dealing with it is not necessarily that easy. It requires a variety of tactics to deal with them."

think even Mumin was strong. We think it's just that he is the oldest figure there and one that is publicly known. And so, it would be natural for him to get a lot of mention. But I must emphasize that this group has really not registered much growth in that region. It would be interesting to know why Daesh core would want to shift the leadership to a group that does not seem to grow, even in terms of resources or personnel. For the longest time, they have just stagnated. They make a few signature attacks, and then they disappear. And of course, any time they have tried to establish themselves, al-Shabaab pursues them. So, it is something we will have to assess as we get more information.

CTC: Speaking more broadly, analysts have described a geographic shift of the center of power for the Islamic State to Africa. What is your assessment?

Nyawira: Daesh and al-Qa`ida are different even in terms of their adherence to ideology. Al-Qa`ida had more ideologues: people that had some strategy, people that had a vision, and people that believed in this cause. Daesh is an opportunist group. Daesh identifies a criminal group that already exists and lends them their brand in exchange for publicity. Where there's already an existing conflict and a ready militia, then it is easy for Daesh to just adopt them. Some of the groups in Africa claiming to be Daesh affiliates are just criminals; they don't even have the kind of ideology associated with terrorism. They just take up the brand, and Daesh is happy with this symbiotic relationship. So, we opine that it is the same old criminals that fight over resources—some of them are seeking secession—that just adopt a brand. And as long as they use the *modus operandi* of terrorists, which is gruesome killing, then they are admitted as terrorists.

Some of these criminal groups in Africa would still kill people for political courses, even without the brand of Daesh, but with Daesh, they get more publicity. And Daesh also takes glory in that. And because Daesh is supposed to be feared, these groups taking on that brand allows them to be perceived as more than just criminal groups.

CTC: As you know, the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia, ATMIS, will conclude at the end of this year, with the phased withdrawal of forces—which includes Kenyan troops—well underway.⁴ Recent news reporting, however, has indicated that a new A.U.-led mission, the African Union Support and Stabilization Mission in Somalia, will begin operating there in January 2025.⁵ From your perspective, what impact will a new A.U. mission in Somalia have on the threats emanating from



Dr. Rosalind Nyawira

that country? How do you anticipate the threat picture might change for Kenya come January?

Nyawira: It is good that they're taking over when ATMIS is leaving so that we do not have a gap. But how the threat manifests will depend on their strategy and the success of their strategy. We will have to wait and assess any success because the enemy they'll be dealing with also has a way of adjusting—adjusting to security deployments, adjusting to strategies. The good thing is that, at least when there's another mission taking over, there isn't a vacuum; any vacuum would give terrorists more space to operate. Hopefully, with a good strategy, they can hold ground and be successful. We all hope that it will work well.

CTC: Let's talk about partnerships. Kenya's NCTC has a number of partnerships with entities in the private and public sectors as well as internationally. Chief among the latter, of course, is the United States. Can you describe NCTC's partnership with U.S. counterparts?

Nyawira: Yes, we have great partnerships because our approach involves all of society. We need everyone—state and non-state, public and private—all rallying together. Part of what we do with those partnerships is to build capacity for both public and private sector actors. We also ride on what those other institutions are doing to empower people. For example, if it is an institution that already has an audience, especially that is already interacting with the youth, then we take advantage and go enlighten the youth about violent extremism and what to watch out for and how to stay safe from the predators, especially online. We rely on their infrastructure as a force multiplier.

We don't do counterterrorism—we do prevention and countering violent extremism—so we work closely with USAID in strengthening communities, in doing research to understand the vulnerabilities and effectiveness of the response mechanisms. We also work a lot with civil societies that are supported by the U.S. government because they usually earn the trust of the

communities. Thus, seemingly, they have more believability, and therefore, we take advantage of that. We rely on their infrastructure to access communities. Ours is a very friendly approach: to let the communities know that they can trust us to empower them and, in turn, make them feel free to share information with us. So, we have partnerships with USAID and also other organizations that USAID is supporting. We have also received great support from USAID in reviewing our strategy to counter violent extremism, to make it more conducive to the morphing threat of terrorism.

CTC: What makes for a good CT partner from the perspective of Kenya's NCTC?

Nyawira: We are looking for partners that are willing to co-create and co-implement. We know the problems within communities from all the information we get from them, and so we're looking for partners that don't necessarily bring solutions but are able to work together with us and create and implement programs together. We have learned that we have to go to the local level and understand the local context for us to address this threat. We have to understand how communities are affected by the threat, how they react to it and that vulnerabilities are different from community to community. So, we look for partnerships that we can journey together on this.

CTC: Do you see any difference in approaches to counterterrorism from a Western perspective versus the perspective of African nations? What is a blind spot in Western understanding or approaches? What could those countries do better?

Nyawira: Let me answer your question by going back to where we started. As a country, we did not have many partnerships when we started engaging with the threat of terrorism because by then, al-Qa`ida terrorism was really a new phenomenon. We didn't even have a lot of people to benchmark with. But we have come to appreciate that what works for us is *localized* solutions to the *localized* problems. We realize that generic solutions will not work for all of us. So, when we look at the other people's practices, we consider them good practice. But when it comes to implementation, we have to go back and ask ourselves, 'Does this work for this community? How will this community perceive this intervention through the lenses of their traditions, their culture, the problems they're facing?' Templates from other theaters that should not be superimposed on different contexts, because this will make the work ineffective. This is true even with ourselves when we seek to partner with other African countries that are starting to interact with this threat.

We feel a moral obligation to help others come up with proper strategies and start with prevention because that is where everyone should start. But when we share with them, we remind them, 'We are only telling you what we see from our Kenyan context. You take what works for you, but you also have to generate solutions from your own communities and contexts.' Perceptions, cultures, and vulnerabilities are different, and even for us within this country, they are different from one county to another. Even the national strategy has been cascaded to the counties through action plans that differ from county to county. The action plans derive from the major concepts in the strategy, but they adopt the contexts within the counties, which differ from county to county.

CTC: In February, during the Global Counterterrorism Forum, you commented about the alarming intersection between climate change and terrorism.⁶ What does that nexus look like for Kenya in particular? How do you assess the intersection of those threats today and in the future? How can it be combated?

Nyawira: We are all grappling with the issue of climate change. We have seen prolonged droughts that were not occurring previously, which sometimes have the capability of causing conflict, especially over resources, within communities. We assess that violent extremists would want to take advantage of fractures within communities to recruit and radicalize—for example, claiming that ‘other communities are taking advantage of you because of resources.’ From our experience, conflict and terrorism are just two sides of the same coin. You’ll find that where there’s already an existing conflict, terrorism is likely to thrive, and the reverse is also true.

What we are investing in right now is to do research to find out whether communities that are negatively affected by climate change are more vulnerable to violent extremism. At this stage, we are collaborating with others in the research so that our interventions are evidence-based. But we can already see that where there is a negative climate change, then you are likely to have more conflict. When resources become very scarce, conflict increases, and then it is very easy to have a group that wants to defend its resources or even existing terrorist groups take advantage of that conflict. But at this point, we are investing a lot in research to understand exactly how that is likely to play out.

CTC: What is the CT best practice you feel has been the most effective or valuable and could serve as a lesson learned for other countries in the region? What has worked well for Kenya and why?

Nyawira: One of the things we are really proud of is that when we adopted the preventative approach, we came up with a strategy that devolves to the local level through the County Action Plans. These county action plans are implemented by a secretariat. This secretariat is actually made up of a cross-section of ground actors. They include civil society, community-based organizations, the media, educators, religious leaders, private sector, community leaders, and security actors who sit together in what we call the County Engagement Forum and discuss issues of violent extremism, how they manifest in the county, and propose solutions. NCTC only coordinates this and ensures that this conversation does not stop. It also advises communities on the level and the morphology of the threat of violent extremism conducive for terrorism. The Centre operates in an advisory capacity to strengthen communities, but really, this whole effort is driven by the communities. For me, this community ownership is a very big success.

Today, most of our community members, including children, are aware of violent extremism. We have tools like the Child Safety and Security Against Violent Extremism, which empowers educators to introduce the topic to school-going children so that they can understand even at their psychomotor level. Our good practices include bringing all of society together, community ownership, localized solutions to localized problems, deradicalizing those on the path of radicalization, and of course, observing human rights. That has really worked for our communities.

CTC: In April, Kenya’s NCTC launched a public portal with tools for countering violent extremism in communities—what you described as a way to empower “individuals and communities to identify and discredit violent extremist ideologies, facilitating public dialogue on the threat of violent extremism.”⁷ What are the goals for this initiative? How do you measure the efficacy of this effort and other CVE campaigns like it?

Nyawira: This portal’s purpose is to educate. It is a repository of resources on the threat of violent extremism and on the changes to the threat that people need to understand, such as exploitation of technology by terrorists. It’s also a way of highlighting global good practices so that others can learn from them. It is a means of engaging other actors that deal with violent extremism besides state actors—for example, civil society and showcase the good work that they are doing.

But most importantly, it’s a way of engaging our populations. We have an interactive section for people to give their views. It’s a very good way of measuring sentiment. We measure the level of success by the interactiveness and engagement, and that way we can detect a red alert amongst populations in certain areas—what’s troubling them, what is their opinion about what we are doing, the effectiveness of our responses, et cetera. This engagement and being able to collect sentiment that is very important. Sometimes, the work we do is hard to measure, but I would say that we have a way of engaging communities and trying to figure out what is working. We insist that the work that we do and the work that all the players in countering violent extremism do must make our society safer. We expect that violent extremism is going to manifest itself in different ways, and the role of the Centre is to determine this morphology.

For Africa, we believe that we have a responsibility to help each other not to be overwhelmed by this threat. If we had known what we know now when we started engaging with this threat, perhaps we would have saved more lives and resources. But now that we know, we want others to avoid the pitfalls and what can easily be a long, arduous journey, and just to let them know prevention is the starting point. Insulating communities and empowering them is paramount in stemming radicalization. **CTC**

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Islamic State-Somalia: A Growing Global Terror Concern

By Caleb Weiss and Lucas Webber

According to news reports citing several unnamed senior U.S. officials, the leader of the Islamic State's Somali branch quietly became the global head of the Islamic State last year. This is far from confirmed. But it is clear the group is growing as a threat. Over the last three years, the Islamic State's Somalia Province has grown increasingly international, sending money across two continents and recruiting around the globe. There are also growing linkages between the group and international terrorist plots, raising the possibility that Islamic State-Somalia may be seeking to follow in the footsteps of Islamic State Khorasan in going global. Not only was the group linked to a May 2024 shooting at the Israeli embassy in Sweden, but in February 2024, a Somali-American man was arrested for his prior involvement in Islamic State-Somalia and encouraging others online to conduct acts of terror in New York. Despite being relatively limited inside Somalia compared to its rival in al-Qa`ida's al-Shabaab, the Islamic State's Somalia Province is punching well above its weight internationally and has become one of the Islamic State's most important global branches.

In late May 2024, a U.S. airstrike reportedly targeted the global leader of the Islamic State in a surprising place: northern Somalia.¹ NBC News, citing three U.S. officials, reported that the man targeted was the founder of the Islamic State's Somalia Province, Abdulqadir Mumin, and that he was acting as the Islamic State's so-called caliph.² Though this latter claim remains wholly unconfirmed as of the time of publishing, U.S. officials have nevertheless stated that Islamic State-Somalia is a "growing threat"³ and that the United States is "watching ISIS-Somalia closely."⁴ Mumin is assessed by a Somali security source and local Somali media to have survived the strike

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against him.⁵

The authors are skeptical of the notion that the Islamic State's central shura council appointed Mumin as caliph. But the concerns expressed by U.S. officials over Islamic State-Somalia's growing capabilities, ambitions, and reach are entirely warranted. Over the last three years, the branch has grown in importance for the Islamic State's global operations. From sending money from across much of East Africa to the Middle East and beyond, to broader international recruiting, and growing linkages to international attack plotting, the Islamic State's small franchise based in the mountains of northern Somalia is proving it can punch above its weight. This transformation is not dissimilar to those seen with other Islamic State groups, namely the Islamic State's Khorasan Province (ISK), and illustrates how the Islamic State's weakened central leadership in the Middle East can rely on select global 'provinces' to carry out tasks previously reserved for the so-called 'core cadre' in Iraq and Syria.

This article examines this transformation and details just how international the Islamic State's Somalia Province has become, with it now acting as one of the most important global wings of the Islamic State as a whole. Starting with a brief background on the emergence of the Islamic State-Somalia, the article then turns to outlining the significance of Islamic State-Somalia to the Islamic State's global leadership, including discussing its key role in financing the Islamic State's African operations and beyond before examining its growing international recruitment efforts and how its ranks are increasingly made up of foreign fighters. Lastly, the article looks at the growing linkages between the group and international attack plotting, raising the possibility that Islamic State-Somalia may be seeking to follow in the footsteps of ISK by going global.

Background

Emergence of the Islamic State in Somalia

The Islamic State first appeared in Somalia in the second half of 2015 in two separate locations of Somalia when pro-Islamic State commanders within al-Qa`ida-affiliated al-Shabaab defected from that group and pledged allegiance to the Islamic State's then-caliph, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.⁶ The first to defect—in September 2015—were well-known al-Shabaab commanders in southern Somalia, including Bashir Abu Numan, Hussein Abdi Gedi, and Mohammad Makkawi Ibrahim. They were quickly wiped out by al-Shabaab.⁷ Some Somali Islamic State cells survived in Mogadishu and now constitute the most militant branch within Islamic State-Somalia.⁸

The second, and most important, Islamic State-loyal group to emerge in Somalia was a faction led by Mumin in Somalia's semi-autonomous northern region of Puntland. Mumin, once a prominent ideologue within al-Shabaab, defected and joined the Islamic State with a few dozen of his men in October 2015.⁹

Remaining operationally dormant for a year, Islamic State-

Somalia quickly shot to international attention when in October 2016 it briefly captured and occupied the northern port town of Qandala.¹⁰ Thereafter, in 2017, the group was made an official ‘province’ of the Islamic State.¹¹ Since then, its military prospects have shrunk due to a combination of military pressure from Somalia (both Puntland State and the Federal Government of Somalia in Mogadishu), the United States, and al-Shabaab. However, Islamic State-Somalia continues to maintain strongholds in Puntland’s Al-Madow Mountains (sporadically clashing with al-Shabaab’s fighters posted nearby¹²) and attack cells in Mogadishu.¹³ Other Islamic State cells have periodically popped up elsewhere, such as in the central city of Beledweyn in 2018 or near Kenya in 2019,¹⁴ though the Al-Madow Mountains and Mogadishu remain Islamic State-Somalia’s core areas of operation.

Though Mumin’s exact current role inside Islamic State-Somalia remains somewhat unclear, it is unanimously believed that he is one of its two top leaders. For example, the United Nations’ ISIL and Al-Qa’ida Sanctions Monitoring Team has long described Mumin as the emir of Islamic State-Somalia, with the United States’ National Counterterrorism Center stating the same.¹⁵ But in 2023, the U.S. Treasury Department described Mumin as just the emir of the Al-Karrar office, a regional administrative hub of the Islamic State,^a with Abdirahman Fahiye Isse Mohamad described as the current emir of Islamic State-Somalia.¹⁶ The aforementioned United Nations Monitoring Team now follows a similar tack of describing Mumin as both the emir of Islamic State-Somalia and of Al-Karrar, with Abdirahman Fahiye likewise the deputy emir of both entities.¹⁷ Despite the opaqueness of Mumin’s exact role within Islamic State-Somalia itself, he nevertheless continues to be an important figure within the larger organization (and possibly for the Islamic State globally).

Global Significance: Leadership and Finance

Increasing Importance within the Islamic State

As noted, several unnamed U.S. officials told NBC News in June that Mumin is the global leader of the Islamic State. An alternative theory has also surfaced. On June 18, three days after the NBC News story was published, Voice of America noted there were “a flood of rumors emanating from Somalia that the IS emir, Abu Hafs al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi, traveled from Syria or Iraq and then through Yemen to the semi-autonomous Puntland region of Somalia in

country’s northeast.” The outlet quoted a senior U.S. defense official stating that top Islamic State leaders “view Africa as a place where they should invest, where they are more permissive and able to operate better and more freely, and they want to expand ... so, they did bring the caliph to that region.” The official’s words suggest the caliph relocated, but is not Mumin.¹⁸

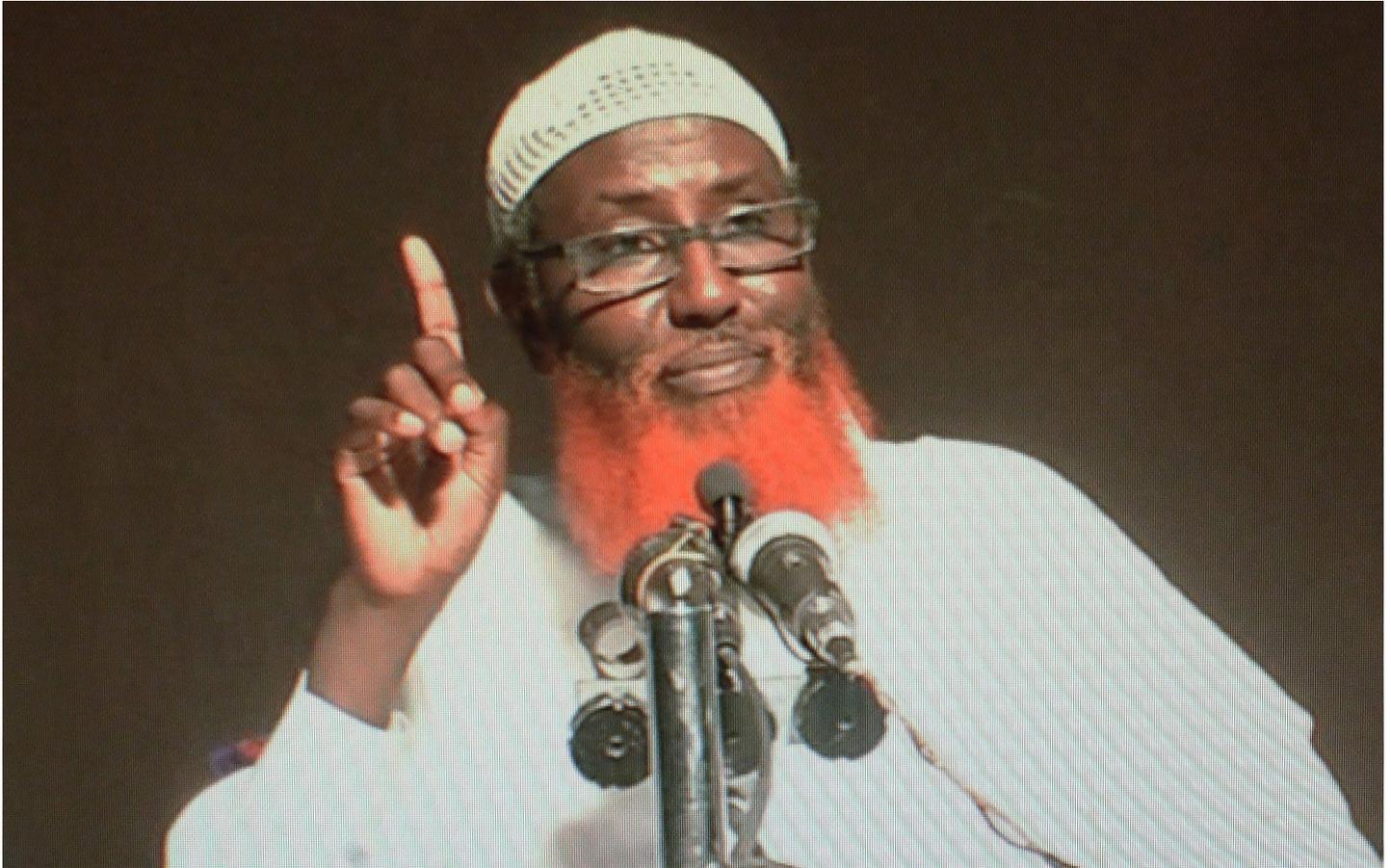
The idea that either Mumin himself is Abu Hafs or that Abu Hafs was moved from the Middle East to northern Somalia seems far-fetched to the authors. For the Islamic State, how would the Islamic State’s ideologues validate the necessary Qurayshi lineage of Mumin, a necessary religious condition for any potential caliph to be taken seriously by the group’s support base?^b Why would the Islamic State’s central shura council think Somalia would be a safer place for its caliph? And out of all of its global leaders, from Africa’s Sahel to the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, why would Mumin be specifically chosen? Even with these questions, it is possible that Mumin is instead the emir of the Islamic State’s General Directorate of Provinces (GDP), the Islamic State’s administrative structure that oversees and manages its so-called ‘provinces’ around the world,¹⁹ a point made in this publication by Austin Doctor and Gina Ligon.²⁰ Such a position is arguably more immediately relevant to the Islamic State’s operations than the caliph, as the emir of the GDP is directly responsible for managing all of the ‘provinces’ and is thus more active in day-to-day activities. Having Mumin as emir of the GDP would make him effectively the operational leader of the Islamic State,²¹ but would avoid the sticky ideological questions around the religious legitimacy of a non-Qurayshi Arab as caliph.^c Without knowing or examining the exact intelligence from which the United States is reportedly basing its assessment, however, it is impossible to know if this alternative hypothesis is indeed viable. According to a U.N. report, some member states have also expressed skepticism over the assertion that Mumin is Abu Hafs, but it is also unclear if these disagreements are politically motivated or actually based on disagreements in analysis.²²

Even with the exact role of Mumin being contested, his organization is certainly taking on more global importance for the Islamic State. The Islamic State’s Al-Karrar regional office has been based in Somalia since at least late 2018, just one of many such ‘offices’ under the GDP that function as regional command structures organized to help coordinate all of the Islamic State’s activities and operations in a specific area.²³ Al-Karrar’s purview includes all of eastern, central, and southern Africa, where it helps

a By late 2018, the Islamic State had restructured its organization to include the General Directorate of Provinces (GDP) and its subordinate regional offices around the world. These regional offices act as coordination hubs, helping to administer the Islamic State’s disparate provinces on behalf of the wider GDP. In addition to the Al-Karrar office in Somalia, there also exists: Ard al-Mubarakah, responsible for Iraq and Syria; Al-Furqan, which oversees Africa’s Lake Chad Basin, North Africa, and the Sahel; Al-Sadiq, overseeing South and Southeast Asia; Umm al-Qura, which is responsible for Yemen, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf states; Dhu al-Nurayn, which focuses on Egypt and Sudan (though this office may now be defunct); and Al-Faruq, which looks after Turkey, the Caucasus region, and Europe. Another office, Al-Anfal, also once previously managed the Islamic State’s activities in North Africa, but this has since been subsumed under the Al-Furqan office. See “Letter dated 11 July 2022 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee pursuant to resolutions 1267 (1999), 1989 (2011) and 2253 (2015) concerning Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Da’esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals, groups, undertakings and entities addressed to the President of the Security Council,” United Nations Security Council, July 15, 2022, p. 5.

b There is technically a way for the Islamic State to claim that Mumin is indeed a descendant of the Quraysh. For example, the larger Somali Darod clan to which Mumin belongs claims descent from Abdirahman bin Isma’il al-Jabarti, himself an alleged descendent of Aqil ibn Abi Talib, a cousin of the Prophet Mohammad and member of the Qurayshi Banu Hashim tribe. This alleged lineage, however, is rooted more in Somali culture and mythos rather than legitimate genealogy. As such, this proposed lineage still presents a challenge for the Islamic State, which previously had to deal with persistent rumors that one of its previous caliphs, Abu Ibrahim, was actually ethnic Turkmen and thus not of the Qurayshi lineage. On the legendary origins of the Darod, see I.M Lewis, *A Modern History of the Somali: Nation and State in the Horn of Africa* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2003), p. 5 and Mohamed Abdirizak Dol, *The Origin of the Darod Tribe in Somalia* (2019), p. 4.

c The Islamic State believes, as do many mainstream Muslims, that Islamic rulers must be of Qurayshi lineage, as stipulated by a Hadith [saying] of Prophet Mohammad as recorded by Sahih al-Bukhari. In appropriating this belief, the Islamic State has hoped to legitimize its state-building project. For the Hadith in question, see Sahih al-Bukhari, 3501.



*This picture, taken on September 1, 2016, shows a computer screen displaying an image of Abdulqadir Mumin.
(Simon Maina/AFP via Getty Images)*

oversee and manage all of the Islamic State's official 'provinces,' networks, and support activities.²⁴ These Islamic State branches routinely communicate with Al-Karrar, addressing current statuses, needs, and goals. As an example, leaked and recovered Islamic State documents have detailed Islamic State groups in both the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Mozambique sending routine status updates to Al-Karrar, while Al-Karrar has in turn "facilitated the movements of trainers, tactical strategists, and financial support" to both groups.²⁵ A degree of command-and-control also exists between Al-Karrar and its constituent groups and networks.

As another example, the United Nations previously reported that the Islamic State's Central Africa Province (ISCAP) in the DRC has received "guidance from Al-Karrar to recruit, expand the group [ISCAP], and develop strategic attacks."²⁶ Somali security sources have stated that Mumin, via Al-Karrar, is also in communication with other Islamic State groups on the continent.²⁷ Though the exact command Mumin exerts on the other groups outside of Al-Karrar's purview is unclear, Mumin's role within the GDP implies some degree of command.²⁸ For much of the African continent, however, it is quite evident that Islamic State-Somalia's Al-Karrar office is the preeminent leadership body of the Islamic State with Mumin as one of the Islamic State's most important leaders on the continent and likely beyond, regardless if he is actually caliph or not.

Involvement in Global Islamic State Financing

Beyond providing leadership, Al-Karrar is also one of the Islamic State's preeminent financial apparatuses around the world. Islamic State-Somalia itself generates the money that Al-Karrar uses to fund Islamic State networks across the world. As documented by the U.S. Treasury in July 2023, "in the first half of 2022, ISIS-Somalia generated nearly \$2 million by collecting extortion payments from local businesses, related imports, livestock, and agriculture."²⁹ According to the U.S. Treasury, Islamic State-Somalia generated at least \$2.5 million in 2021,³⁰ meaning that Islamic State-Somalia and thus Al-Karrar had close to \$5 million dollars (if not more as the U.S. Treasury 2022 estimate only accounts for half of that year) to utilize to fund Islamic State activities for those years. In early 2023, a U.N. report stated that Islamic State-Somalia was generating at least \$100,000 a month from its extortion activities in both northern Somalia and Mogadishu, though this was likely an undercount of its total available funding from all of its revenue streams.³¹ This number was expanded in July 2024, as another U.N. report suggested that Islamic State-Somalia makes around \$360,000 a month, primarily from extortion and illicit taxation. If true, this would account for at least \$4.3 million in annual income for the group, a significant increase from previous estimates.³²

The significance of Al-Karrar's funding—and Islamic State-Somalia's fundraising—is made evident by the extent to which it has funded Islamic State activity across eastern, central, and southern Africa. For instance, according to a June 2023 study by the Bridgeway Foundation, Al-Karrar facilitated the movement of almost \$400,000 between Somalia and nodes in South Africa

“In addition to taking on more of an outsized role within the Islamic State’s broader global leadership and operations, the Islamic State’s Somali Province has an increasingly international composition. Whereas previous reports once characterized Islamic State-Somalia as a group primarily consisting of Somalis, the group’s demographics today suggest that Somalis may now be outnumbered by foreign fighters. An increasingly wider international composition gives the group greater opportunities to plot international terror.”

from 2019 to September 2021.³³ On the orders of Al-Karrar, at least \$200,000 of this money was then transferred further down the line to Islamic State operatives across East Africa, including financial nodes for ISCAP and the Islamic State’s Mozambique Province.³⁴ The network detailed by Bridgeway, however, was just one such financial network and thus represents only a conservative fraction of the total money moved by Islamic State-Somalia’s Al-Karrar and transferred to other Islamic State nodes. The true total is likely significantly higher, as other networks have been established since the specific network detailed by Bridgeway was shut down in September 2021.³⁵

Furthermore, this funding has expanded beyond just Africa, underlining the global importance of Islamic State-Somalia and its Al-Karrar office. For example, in leaked Islamic State letters dated late 2018, Islamic State leaders in the Middle East ordered Al-Karrar to send funds to Islamic State nodes in both Turkey and Yemen via the Islamic State’s Al-Faruq and Umm al-Qura regional offices, respectively.³⁶ Further, in the network uncovered by Bridgeway, some of the money from Al-Karrar was shown to have also been moved to Islamic State operatives in the United Arab Emirates.³⁷ The United Nations additionally found in early 2023 that Al-Karrar was sending \$25,000 a month in cryptocurrency to ISK.³⁸ It is evident from this additional international funding that the Islamic State’s central leaders look to Islamic State-Somalia and Al-Karrar as a dependable source to fund its global activities. In fact, a July 2024 U.N. report explicitly states that Al-Karrar’s funding “is the top revenue source for the organization overall.”³⁹

All of the aforementioned financial activities were controlled and directed by Bilal al-Sudani. Originally a Sudanese member of al-Shabaab, al-Sudani (real name: Suhayl Salim Abd el-Rahman) was first designated as a terrorist by the U.S. government in 2012 for his role in facilitating the movement of people and funds for al-Shabaab.⁴⁰ Independent analysts believe that when al-Sudani defected to Islamic State-Somalia in late 2015, he brought most of his contacts with him, effectively enabling him to rise up the ranks

and quickly become one of the foremost leaders within Islamic State-Somalia.⁴¹ As the leader of Al-Karrar, it was al-Sudani who oversaw the aforementioned funding of various Islamic State groups across Africa and around the world. It was al-Sudani’s importance to the Islamic State that resulted in him being specifically targeted by U.S. special operations forces in early 2023.⁴²

Speaking after the raid that killed al-Sudani, U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin emphasized the Sudanese jihadi’s importance to the Islamic State writ large when he said that al-Sudani was “responsible for fostering the growing presence of ISIS in Africa and for funding the group’s operations worldwide, including in Afghanistan.”⁴³ For instance, some of the money that al-Sudani oversaw being transferred to Afghanistan assisted ISK’s deadly suicide bombing at Kabul Airport’s Abbey Gate during the hasty U.S. withdrawal from the country in August 2021.⁴⁴ Given al-Sudani’s outsized importance for the Islamic State not only in Africa but also around the world, it is very likely that al-Sudani was also considered by the Islamic State itself to be one of its key global leaders, thereby highlighting the growing global nature of Islamic State-Somalia and its importance to the Islamic State as a whole. It was noteworthy in this regard that al-Sudani guided the Islamic State’s West Africa Province in Nigeria on issues of governance, according to the U.S. Treasury, further indicating his high status and authority within the Islamic State beyond Somalia.⁴⁵

Al-Sudani’s prominent global role speaks to how the Islamic State has become reliant on the constituent bodies of the GDP, the so-called regional ‘offices,’ to undertake cross-provincial actions once reserved for the core cadre in the Middle East.⁴⁶ As noted by researcher Aaron Zelin, Al-Karrar’s integration with other ‘offices’ of the Islamic State, namely Al-Sadiq in Afghanistan, Umm al-Qura in Yemen, and Al-Faruq in Turkey, and possibly Al-Furqan in Nigeria, also point to growing organizational integration within the Islamic State’s total global network.⁴⁷

International Recruitment

In addition to taking on more of an outsized role within the Islamic State’s broader global leadership and operations, the Islamic State’s Somali Province has an increasingly international composition. Whereas previous reports once characterized Islamic State-Somalia as a group primarily consisting of Somalis,⁴⁸ the group’s demographics today suggest that Somalis may now be outnumbered by foreign fighters. An increasingly wider international composition gives the group greater opportunities to plot international terror.

To be clear, even from its beginning Islamic State-Somalia has always contained foreign fighters. Specifically, it has always touted members from Ethiopia,⁴⁹ d Djibouti,⁵⁰ and the Somali diaspora from both the West⁵¹ and from East Africa, primarily Kenya.⁵² Somali officials have long noted the presence of Yemenis among Islamic State-Somalia’s ranks.⁵³ Islamic State-Somalia’s ties to

d This includes the former deputy emir of Islamic State-Somalia Abu Zubair al-Habashi, who was killed at some point in 2020. This also includes Abu al-Bara al-Amani, who led Islamic State-Somalia’s combat operations until his death in January 2023. See “Letter dated 28 September 2020 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee pursuant to resolution 751 (1992) concerning Somalia addressed to the President of the Security Council,” United Nations Security Council, September 28, 2020, p. 19 and “News: Puntland State Police announce killing of Ethiopian-born Daesh militia leader,” *Addis Standard*, January 13, 2023.

Yemeni arms smugglers and the illicit economy inside Yemen likely helped it to attract fighters from the Arab country.⁵⁴ Other early Islamic State-Somalia foreign fighters included at least two American citizens and at least one Pakistani national, two of whom were former members of al-Shabaab.⁵⁵

In southern Somalia and northern Kenya, Islamic State-Somalia also once benefited from the short-lived Jabha East Africa, also known as Islamic State in Somalia, Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda (ISSKTU), a small grouping of pro-Islamic State members within al-Shabaab from the aforementioned countries that was active for several months in 2016.⁵⁶ Jabha East Africa offered the Islamic State a first opportunity to expand in sub-Saharan Africa. However, it remained small and became operationally defunct nearly as quickly as it emerged.^e Though Islamic State-Somalia benefited in the mid-to late 2010s from such international combatants, they remained a minority compared to the Somalis within Islamic State-Somalia's ranks, many of whom were from Mumin's Ali Saleebaan sub-clan of the wider Somali Darod clan family in northern Puntland.⁵⁷

Islamic State-Somalia also sought to capitalize on these early foreign fighters and mobilize supporters to incite attacks in the West and elsewhere. On December 25, 2017, the Islamic State released a video titled "Hunt Them Down, O Monotheists," encouraging violence against Christmas and New Year's gatherings and presenting high-profile targets such as in London and New York, and prominent religious figures such as Pope Francis.⁵⁸ The production features three militants, with one fighter speaking in accented English and two others from Ethiopia, calling upon Muslims, specifically those in East Africa, to join the Islamic State cause. Like Islamic State Central and ISK, Islamic State-Somalia sometimes includes foreign fighters as role models for those of similar ethnolinguistic and national backgrounds. One example was a January 2019 Islamic State-Somalia video eulogizing several foreign fighters who had traveled to join the group and fought in its ranks, including a purported Canadian doctor identified as Yusuf al-Majerteni. The majority of the militants shown were from Ethiopia, Djibouti, and various Somali clans.⁵⁹ One segment featured al-Majerteni encouraging foreigners and doctors to join Islamic State-Somalia. The third installment of the Islamic State's "Answering the Call" series, published in February 2020, featured Islamic State-Somalia jihadis training, as well as a long profile of an Ethiopian foreign fighter who had tried and failed to join the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria and later traveled to fight and die with Islamic State-Somalia. This was not the only video released by the group to entice Ethiopians to join the franchise.⁶⁰ More recently, in July 2022, Islamic State-Somalia published a 25-minute video titled "Upon the Path of the Conquerors" in Amharic with Arabic

subtitles.⁶¹ Amharic is spoken in parts of Somalia as well as Eritrea, and is the official language of Ethiopia.

Fast forward to today, however, and it is apparent that Islamic State-Somalia's ranks are increasingly international, with foreign fighters possibly outnumbering its Somali members (though to be clear, it is still recruiting Somalis). According to a Somali security source, Ethiopians are today the single largest demographic within the group, accounting for at least 200 people out of an estimated 500-700 members total.⁶² In addition to ethnic Somali-Ethiopians, the group has also recruited many ethnic Oromo and Amhara fighters into its ranks, while one senior leader in the group, Abu Farah al-Habashi, is himself allegedly an ethnic Tigrayan, according to the same Somali security source.⁶³ The recruitment of Ethiopians across their country's diverse ethnic landscape presents further unique security challenges, as all three aforementioned regions, Oromia, Amhara, and Tigray, are in the throes of their own conflicts.

Farther south, in sub-equatorial Africa, Islamic State-Somalia has also increasingly recruited Tanzanians. Recent defectors from Islamic State-Somalia stated the majority of new combatants being trained in the group's training camps were Ethiopians and Tanzanians.⁶⁴ The same defectors also noted significant numbers of Ugandans training with the group as well.⁶⁵ Importantly, Kenyan authorities arrested three Kenyan nationals in April 2023 attempting to travel to Somalia to join Islamic State-Somalia.⁶⁶ The three were previously wanted for terrorism offenses inside Kenya on behalf of al-Shabaab.⁶⁷ Furthermore, in late 2023, authorities in eastern DRC arrested two Congolese nationals who were being recruited into Islamic State-Somalia.⁶⁸ A recent Tanzanian detainee held by Puntland Security Forces has also stated the presence of Malawians inside Islamic State-Somalia, though this is so far uncorroborated elsewhere.⁶⁹

Some recruits have traveled from farther away in Africa. There are a growing number of North Africans within the ranks of Islamic State-Somalia. For example, at least a dozen Moroccan nationals have been detained over the last year in Puntland for their membership in Islamic State-Somalia.⁷⁰ According to the aforementioned recent defectors from Islamic State-Somalia, there are a large number of Tunisians within the group, though exact totals remain unknown.⁷¹

There are a significant number of Sudanese fighters in Islamic State-Somalia, with their number among the first foreign demographic to defect from al-Shabaab. One case in point was Sudanese national Mohamed Makkawi Ibrahim, a former al-Qa`ida in Sudan member who originally joined al-Shabaab before becoming an early convert to the Islamic State inside Somalia and an early so-called 'martyr' for the group.⁷² Another case in point was Bilal al-Sudani, who was killed alongside 10 other Sudanese Islamic State-Somalia fighters in early 2023.⁷³ A third case in point is Mohamad Ibrahim Daha, a senior Islamic State-Somalia commander who was captured by Puntland security in June 2023.⁷⁴

e Jabha East Africa was founded by a Kenyan member of al-Shabaab who then recruited a small cadre of other al-Shabaab foreign fighters from Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania. The new group subsequently pledged allegiance to the Islamic State in early 2016. A few weeks later, it conducted an attack against African Union forces in southern Somalia before conducting a series of other small operations in both Kenya and Tanzania throughout 2016. By early 2017, its networks were largely rolled up in Tanzania, and some of those within the former Jabha East Africa went to Islamic State franchises elsewhere, particularly Mozambique. The group thus served as the Islamic State's first attempt at expansion into deep sub-Saharan Africa, though it was never formally recognized as an official 'province.' Instead, it acted more as an informal arm of Islamic State-Somalia. See Brenda Mugeci Githing'u and Tore Refslund Hamming, "The Arc of Jihad: The Ecosystem of Militancy in East, Central and Southern Africa," International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation, November 2021, pp. 18-20.

f The total number of combatants within Islamic State-Somalia is highly contested, but it likely falls somewhere around or within that range. This number also represents a significant increase from earlier manpower estimates, further highlighting the group's expansion efforts. To note, the most recent United Nations estimate puts Islamic State-Somalia at around 300-500 combatants. See "Letter dated 19 July 2024 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee pursuant to resolutions 1267 (1999), 1989 (2011) and 2253 (2015) concerning Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals, groups, undertakings and entities addressed to the President of the Security Council," United Nations Security Council, July 22, 2024, p. 10.

Puntland officials have since continued to periodically report the capture of Sudanese Islamic State-Somalia fighters. According to a Somali security source, the Sudanese represent one of the largest cohorts within Islamic State-Somalia.⁷⁵ The high total of Sudanese is likely related to Islamic State misfortunes elsewhere. For instance, Sudanese were once among the largest foreign components of the Islamic State's Libya Province at its height between 2014-2016, with estimates that at least 150 Sudanese nationals fought for that Islamic State wing.⁷⁶ With that Islamic State branch today being all but defunct, it is likely that Somalia now offers the most attractive and/or easiest destination of choice for those Sudanese wishing to join the Islamic State. Given the large numbers of Tunisians that were also present with the Islamic State in Libya, this too could explain their reported presence in northern Somalia.⁷⁷

At least two Syrians joined Islamic State-Somalia, though it is unclear if either had prior ties to the Islamic State in their home country.⁷⁸ Israeli police and the Shin Bet also announced last month that they arrested a teen in Haifa before he could journey to join Islamic State-Somalia after being in contact with the group, underlining the broad geographic scope of Islamic State-Somalia's online recruitment efforts.⁷⁹ Unlike before, however, wherein the Islamic State showcased foreign fighters in Somalia through its media released from its Somali Province, this recent surge in foreign numbers to its Somali wing has not been touted by the Islamic State's central media at all. Rather than a specific strategic decision to not have Islamic State-Somalia film such fighters, this dearth in recent propaganda is likely more related to the decline in Islamic State propaganda videos across the board over the last almost two years.⁸⁰

Nevertheless, Islamic State-Somalia's increased international recruitment presents several potential implications. First, with rumors emerging that Somalia may attempt some form of negotiations with al-Shabaab (though denied by Somalia's government),⁸¹ any such negotiations could create disquiet among al-Shabaab's more radical foreign recruits (or even local recruits) who do not support such political endeavors and thus could bolster the ranks of Islamic State-Somalia by defecting. With increased manpower, this could help Islamic State-Somalia spread more geographically in Somalia. Second, any foreign jihadi fighters defecting to the group could gain instruction within Islamic State-Somalia's training camps and then return to their home countries to conduct acts of terror either on their own or as directed by the group. Tanzania especially faces a threat from any such returning foreign fighters because there is not only a Tanzanian contingent inside Islamic State-Somalia but there are also large Tanzanian components in the Islamic State's Mozambique and Central Africa

Provinces.⁸² Likewise, the large numbers of Ethiopians and Sudanese within the ranks of Islamic State-Somalia also pose a significant security challenge in that any potential returning cell threatens to exacerbate and complicate already intense conflicts in those countries.

Growing Linkages to International Terror

The international composition of Islamic State-Somalia's fighters provides it with opportunities to plot international terror, for example by sending foreign fighters to carry out attacks back in their home countries or having those foreign fighters provide online coaching to extremists back in their home countries to carry out attacks. As will be outlined below, there are indicators that Islamic State-Somalia is eyeing attacks outside Somalia.

Islamic State-Somalia's international ambitions were noticeable relatively early in its existence. In late 2018, just three years after Islamic State-Somalia's foundation, a 20-year-old Somali national identified as Omar Mohsin Ibrahim (known as Anas Khalil during his time fighting for the Islamic State in Libya) was arrested in the southern Italian city of Bari for plotting to bomb churches, particularly in Vatican City.⁸³ He was allegedly in contact with members of the Islamic State in Somalia, specifically "one of its operational cells."⁸⁴ The plan reportedly was to make rudimentary improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and place them in various churches around Italy, beginning with the bombing of St. Peter's Basilica.⁸⁵ According to the United Nations Panel of Experts on Somalia, the "Vatican plot represents the first instance in which ISIL elements in Somalia were directly linked to an attempted terrorist attack outside the country."⁸⁶ However, according to the same U.N. panel, "intercepted communications indicate that 'Anas Khalil' devised the plan to plant a bomb in St. Peter's Basilica in Rome on 25 December, Christmas Day, of his own accord and was not directly tasked by ISIL operatives outside the country."⁸⁷ Nevertheless, stored in Omar Mohsin Ibrahim's phone contacts were entries corresponding with several key leaders of Islamic State-Somalia ostensibly to seek guidance and support in this effort (though ultimately the exact nature of any conversations was unclear).⁸⁸ The stored phone contacts included Abdullahi

g Tanzania historically has faced recruitment and low-level terrorism incidents related to al-Qa`ida (largely via al-Shabaab) in the years since al-Qa`ida's 1998 suicide bombing on the U.S. embassy in Dar es Salaam. In the early 2010s, al-Shabaab recruited a significant number of Tanzanians and set up rudimentary training camps on Tanzanian soil. By the mid- to late 2010s, then Tanzanian President John Magufuli effectively suppressed or co-opted most of al-Shabaab's Tanzanian networks, including Ansaar Muslim Youth Centre, Muslim Renewal, and al-Muhajiroun. Though al-Shabaab still benefits from some Tanzanian recruitment today, by most indications the networks that survived Magufuli's purges and political co-option have largely switched allegiances to the Islamic State, as seen with the former Jabha East Africa networks. As such, Tanzanians are today primarily being recruited into the Islamic State's various affiliates across East and Central Africa. The concern is these recruits could return to launch attacks in their home countries. For more on the background of al-Qa`ida's/al-Shabaab's efforts and connections that set the groundwork for today's jihadism threat in Tanzania, see Andre LeSage, "The Rising Terrorist Threat in Tanzania: Domestic Islamist Militancy and Regional Threats," Institute for National Strategic Studies, September 2014 and Jay Radzinski and Daniel Nisman, "Key signs that Al Qaeda's Islamic extremism is moving into southern Africa," *Christian Science Monitor*, March 12, 2013. For more on how Tanzania, particularly under late President Magufuli, repressed these previous jihadi efforts, see Peter Bofin, "Tanzania and the Political Containment of Terror," *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, Hudson Institute, January 24, 2022.

“Given the growing relationship between Islamic State-Somalia’s media outlet and ISK’s Al-Azaim media outlet—a core component of ISK’s transformation—and current international plotting trends within Islamic State-Somalia, it should be anticipated that Islamic State-Somalia could emulate ISK’s strategy and change its doctrine to prioritize attacking foreign interests and nationals in East Africa, develop its external operations capabilities for attacks abroad, and ramp up efforts to incite and guide supporters ... to violence.”

Mohamud Yusuf, or Al-Majerteni (different from the other ‘al-Majerteni’ mentioned above), one of the top leaders in Islamic State-Somalia prior to his arrest earlier in 2018.^{89 h} So although it is probable that Khalil’s Vatican plot was not directly ordered by the Islamic State’s leaders in Somalia, it seems likely that its leadership, particularly Al-Majerteni, was in the know given the likely communication between the plotter and the group.

Several years later, there were renewed links between the group and global terror plotting. In March 2024, Swedish authorities arrested four individuals in the Stockholm suburb of Tyresö for preparing “terrorism offenses.”⁹⁰ A few weeks later, a Somali imam in the same city was arrested as part of the same attack plotting.⁹¹ Further investigations into this cell revealed links to Islamic State-Somalia,⁹² though it remains unclear at the time of publication if Islamic State-Somalia directly oversaw or tasked the cell with the attack plot. While the exact nature of what the cell was in the midst of planning is opaque, Swedish authorities stated this cell was also linked to a May 2024 shooting at the Israeli embassy in Sweden and was integrally connected to criminal gangs in Tyresö and its surroundings and actively seeking to recruit from them.⁹³ The Swedish cell was also reportedly in contact with and guided other pro-Islamic State individuals in Europe, specifically an individual

in Spain who sought to target Jewish individuals.^{94 i}

It is noteworthy that Abdalqadir Mumin himself once lived in Gothenburg, Sweden, in the early 2000s, where he was the imam at a local mosque and investigated there for extremism.^{95 j} Islamic State financial receipts reviewed by the Bridgeway Foundation also documented significant transfers from Sweden to East Africa between 2017 and 2018—by members of the Somali diaspora—which were also directed by the Islamic State nodes in both Kenya and the Middle East.⁹⁶ The Swedish case illustrates the potential for Islamic State-Somalia to use diaspora communities in the West to carry out attacks, much as al-Qa`ida used British Pakistanis for attack plotting in the United Kingdom in the 2000s and ISK has used Central Asians in Europe in recent years.

The ISK Playbook

There is concern that Islamic State-Somalia could follow ISK’s trajectory. In recent years and months, other Islamic State branches such as those in Pakistan and the Philippines have followed ISK’s lead in establishing in-house propaganda apparatuses, outside of Islamic State Central’s media infrastructure, and using these to build support, recruit, fundraise, and call for attacks inside their regions of operations and abroad using diaspora communities.⁹⁷ It is worth noting that ISK’s official branch propaganda outlet, Al-Azaim Foundation for Media Production (hereby shortened to just Al-Azaim), was operated externally to the branch by supporters before being taken under official control in 2021 when it was designated as the central outlet.

For Islamic State-Somalia, there too exists a supporting propaganda organ called al-Hijrateyn that publishes a high volume of video, audio, and print content across numerous social media sites and messaging applications in Amharic, Somali, Oromo, and Swahili that resembles Al-Azaim prior to its formal integration into ISK and subsequent expansion.⁹⁸ Moreover, Al-Azaim and al-Hijrateyn have deepened the formal Islamic State-Somalia-ISK relationship with al-Hijrateyn’s recent admission into the global pro-Islamic State media outlet umbrella coalition Fursan al-Tarjuma, which Al-Azaim was heavily involved with creating and making outreach to other branch-level and unofficial supporter outlets.⁹⁹ Within this umbrella, it is possible that administrators from Al-Azaim can cooperate with those from al-Hijrateyn to improve on its media operations and formalize potential joint media campaigns.

Before undertaking and guiding numerous attack plots in the West, ISK began its strategy of regionalization and internationalization by building up its propaganda apparatus. It prepared the information space by globalizing its narratives and messaging, taking aim at an expanded range of neighboring countries and others further abroad.¹⁰⁰ Given the growing relationship between Islamic State-Somalia’s media outlet and ISK’s Al-Azaim media outlet—a core component of ISK’s transformation—and current international plotting trends within Islamic State-Somalia, it should be anticipated that Islamic State-

^h Al-Majerteni is a veteran of the Islamic State in both Iraq and Libya and has traveled extensively around the Middle East and Africa working on behalf of the Islamic State. While stationed in Libya, he was in charge of its office for recruitment of foreigners. Al-Majerteni was later detained inside Somaliland from 2018-2021, with his current status and whereabouts unclear. See “Letter dated 1 November 2019 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee pursuant to resolution 751 (1992),” United Nations Security Council, November 1, 2019, pp. 19-20.

ⁱ The shooting on the Israeli embassy in Sweden and the plot to kill Jewish people in Spain also comes in a post-October 7th environment in which many jihadi groups are attempting to exploit collective anger over Israel’s actions in Gaza.

^j While Mumin was living in the United Kingdom following his stint in Sweden, he was also linked to the future perpetrator of the May 2013 Lee Rigby murder in London. See Colin Freeman, “British extremist preacher linked to Lee Rigby killer emerges as head of Islamic State in Somalia,” *Telegraph*, April 29, 2016.

Somalia could emulate ISK's strategy and change its doctrine to prioritize attacking foreign interests and nationals in East Africa, develop its external operations capabilities for attacks abroad, and ramp up efforts to incite and guide supporters—particularly Somalis and speakers of Amharic, Oromo, and Swahili from the surrounding region living in the West—to violence.¹⁰¹ ISK has incited such violence through its Central Asian media content and has used Central Asian diaspora members, Tajiks in particular, to plot and undertake terrorist attacks abroad.¹⁰²

As Islamic State-Somalia grows more international in character, more countries could be at risk, particularly in Western diaspora communities and across East Africa. If Islamic State-Somalia evolves similarly to ISK, it could theoretically utilize radicalized Somali (or other) diaspora communities to strike in the West if it chooses that path. Especially vulnerable are Somali communities in the United States and Canada, who have been the targets of jihadi recruitment campaigns in the past.¹⁰³

The potential threat to the United States was underlined when a Somali-American man was arrested in February 2024 for his involvement in Islamic State-Somalia and for encouraging others online to conduct acts of terror in New York City.¹⁰⁴ According to investigators, the American, identified as Harafa Hussein Abdi, originally traveled to Somalia and joined Islamic State-Somalia shortly after its formation in late 2015.¹⁰⁵ There, he received military training and became part of the group's media wing, helping it to produce propaganda videos and engage with supporters online.¹⁰⁶ U.S. prosecutors have also reported that Abdi appeared in one such propaganda video where he called on others to make *hijrah* (emigrate for jihad) to Somalia and explicitly encouraged Islamic State supporters in the United States to undertake shooting and bombing attacks in New York City.¹⁰⁷ Abdi left Islamic State-Somalia in 2017 and was initially arrested by an unnamed East African country where he had reportedly resided since leaving the group.¹⁰⁸ Abdi's case highlights not only the potential danger Islamic State-Somalia poses in encouraging terror plots abroad, but also showcases just how long the group has possessed such ambition.

As outlined above, Islamic State-Somalia has links to diaspora communities in Europe, particularly in Scandinavia, where it

could also plot attacks. In the near term, it is probably East African countries that are at most risk of Islamic State-Somalia terrorism. With its increased East African recruitment, particularly of Tanzanians, it is increasingly possible that Islamic State-Somalia provides these East Africans with the necessary training and experience to return to their home countries and perpetrate acts of terror.

Conclusion

Once a relatively small group based in the foothills of Somalia's northern mountains and relegated second fiddle inside the East African country by al-Qa`ida's al-Shabaab, the Islamic State's Somalia Province has significantly grown in importance for the Islamic State not only in Africa but increasingly for global Islamic State activities. While still relatively militarily contained inside Somalia itself, its ability to generate millions of dollars and command Islamic State activities across much of Africa via its Al-Karrar office has caught the attention of both the Islamic State's central leadership and counterterrorism officials around the world.

Unconfirmed reports that global Islamic State leadership now rests with Islamic State-Somalia come as the group is already expanding its international recruitment capabilities and pools and potentially looking to engage in international terrorism plotting via diaspora Somali communities. All of this points to Islamic State-Somalia growing on the global stage, somewhat mimicking the international growth of other Islamic State 'provinces,' namely the Islamic State's Khorasan Province. As the Islamic State continues to flounder in its historical strongholds of Iraq and Syria,^k the growing of regional 'provinces' such as Islamic State-Somalia into global actors offers the so-called 'core' group in the Middle East additional opportunities to retain its funding and leadership capabilities and further extend its brand of jihad in the name of "remaining and expanding." **CTC**

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Nihilism and Terror: How M.K.Y. Is Redefining Terrorism, Recruitment, and Mass Violence

By Marc-André Argentino, Barrett Gay, and Matt Bastin

On July 16, 2024, Georgian national Mikhail Chkhikvishvili was indicted in the Eastern District of New York on four counts of conspiracy to solicit hate crimes and acts of mass violence. Court filings show Chkhikvishvili was acting on behalf of an organization known as M.K.Y., a violent accelerationist network that originated in Russia and Ukraine. Chkhikvishvili's activities demonstrate that M.K.Y. is pursuing alliances with threat actors in the West, including known leaders of REMVE organizations and online criminal networks. This demonstrates the hybrid nature of the threat posed by this network. Hybrid threat, in this context, refers to the blending of different types of threats, tactics, and actors. Hybrid threats in violent extremist milieus involve a mix of various non-state actors, such as terrorists, organized crime groups, and violent extremists, who employ a combination of methods to achieve their objectives. Additionally, evidence shows that M.K.Y. is intent on perpetrating a mass casualty event, with the hopes to do so in the United States.

On July 16, 2024, a federal grand jury in the Eastern District of New York returned a four-count indictment that charged Georgian national Mikhail Chkhikvishvili with conspiracy to solicit hate crimes and acts of mass violence on New Year's Eve 2023.¹ Chkhikvishvili was arrested in Moldova on an Interpol Wanted Person Diffusion issued based on a criminal complaint filed in U.S. court. Chkhikvishvili "devised a scheme to murder racial minorities and others in New York City on New Year's Eve by dressing up as Santa Claus and handing out candy laced with poison."² Chkhikvishvili allegedly sent "The Mujahideen Poisons Handbook"^a to an undercover agent that had infiltrated the M.K.Y. network and instructed him that ricin would be the simplest poison to fabricate. According to court documents, the scheme was intended to cause violence in furtherance of Manyaki: kult ubiystva, aka Maniacs Murder Cult, aka M.K.Y.'s ideology.^b

The criminal complaint provides a far more complete portrait of the actions of Chkhikvishvili and his compatriots while in the United States. According to FBI sworn testimony, Chkhikvishvili's

activity pertaining to the United States began in July 2022.^c Chkhikvishvili allegedly served as the self-described leader of the neo-Nazi accelerationist network known as M.K.Y. Between July 2022 and the defendant's arrest in March 2024, Chkhikvishvili is known to have solicited multiple individuals to commit violent acts to further the goals of M.K.Y.^d This network is known to the FBI as a REMVE (racially or ethnically motivated violent extremist)³ group originating in Russia and Ukraine. M.K.Y. is known to have a militant accelerationist ideology,^e believing in the necessity of violent, nihilistic action to further the perceived collapse of Western

- c These and all subsequent dates are only "approximate and inclusive" to the greatest degree of accuracy possible. "Mikhail Chkhikvishvili Complaint," U.S. Department of Justice, April 22, 2024.
- d During this period, the defendant used a variety of pseudonyms, including Mishka, Michael, Commander Butcher, and Butcher. See "Mikhail Chkhikvishvili Complaint."
- e Militant accelerationism is predominantly neofascist and transnational, with three distinct yet overlapping activity types that include Active Resistance, Passive Resistance, and "The Movement." Adherents of militant accelerationism intentionally join, infiltrate, or otherwise influence pre-radicalized extremist spaces so as to intensify the mobilization of such ecosystems toward violence. Matthew Kriner, Erica Barbarossa, Isabela Bernardo, and Michael Broschowitz, "Behind the Skull Mask: Understanding Violent Online Extremism," GNET, March 2024.

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Matt Bastin is an early career researcher with industry and private sector experience focused on hybridized threat terrorist and violent extremist use of the internet and the resurgence of the Christian Identity movement. His areas of research interests include esoteric fascism, accelerationism, new religious movements, and online subcultures.

a The Mujahideen Poisons Handbook is an instructional document linked to jihadi groups and designated foreign terrorist organizations.

b Other names utilized by this network include M.K.Y., MKU, MMC, and Maniacs: Cult of Killing.

society. According to sworn testimony, the FBI is aware of M.K.Y. members both in the United States and “around the world.”⁴

M.K.Y.’s particular strain of militant accelerationist neo-fascist ideology is fairly unique among its peers. Rather than promoting a steady diet of ‘ideological education’ and utilizing small cells to plan and carry out acts of mass violence, M.K.Y. leans on the individual as the essential actor for its accelerationist goals. Although this may appear similar to the broader accelerationist milieu, there are key differences. Take, for example, the difference in M.K.Y.’s admission requirements for new members and the requirements found in ideologically similar groups. Rather than an interview,⁵ questionnaire,⁶ or other forms of vetting,⁷ M.K.Y. requires prospective members to carry out a violent or criminal act in order for them to be considered for membership.⁸ Other accelerationists do not openly record their crimes and use them as recruitment in this manner. For M.K.Y., the ideological impact of a prospective member’s action matters far less than the fact that they willing to carry out a violent act. The acts encouraged within M.K.Y. also differ from the preferred means and methods of the broader accelerationist milieu. Prospective members are encouraged to carry out these acts against those who have been deemed by M.K.Y. as “undesirables.”⁹ This category appears broad, encompassing racial and ethnic minorities, individuals experiencing homelessness and/or mental illness, and others.¹⁰ This focused targeting serves a dual purpose of furthering the ideology of M.K.Y., as well as decreasing the likelihood of law enforcement scrutiny. A key aspect of these inductive acts of violence is that prospective M.K.Y. members are expected to film or livestream and share the evidence of these acts.¹¹

According to FBI testimony, “M.K.Y. [Telegram] channels have been used to share videos depicting and encouraging acts of violence on behalf of M.K.Y.”¹² The main form taken by these acts of violence are beatings, stabbings, assaults, and arson. In the Telegram channels affiliated with the group, Chkhikvishvili allegedly made specific attempts to recruit individuals with experience/expertise in demolitions and/or chemical/biological weapons.¹³ It appears that Chkhikvishvili viewed a “graduation” from decentralized violence to mass casualty events as the next step that he would take M.K.Y. on.¹⁴

The criminal complaint against Chkhikvishvili outlines a comprehensive and deeply troubling account of his activities and intentions. His involvement in M.K.Y., his solicitation of violent crimes, his detailed planning of terror attacks, his use of encrypted communications to evade law enforcement,^f as well as his threats and boasts on social media all paint a picture of an individual who allegedly was committed to promoting nihilistic violence and terror. These details form the basis of the FBI’s investigation and the criminal complaint, leading to the request for an arrest warrant and highlighting the ongoing threat posed by Chkhikvishvili and groups like M.K.Y.

This article draws on a variety of publicly available sources related to the arrest of Chkhikvishvili and the broader M.K.Y. network to examine the network’s current scale, ideology, recruitment practices, and affiliations with Western threat actors. First, court filings and M.K.Y. publications provide a view into the

formation of the M.K.Y. network. Archives of Telegram channels operated by M.K.Y. affiliates demonstrate the network’s spread into Western nations, as well as the internal culture of these cells. The handbooks and other publications shared within these spaces also show the specific ideological dimensions of the M.K.Y. network. These publications also demonstrate the TTPs (tactics, techniques, and procedures) that are promoted internally by M.K.Y. Through these diverse sources, the authors hope to provide policymakers and stakeholders with a helpful assessment of the threat posed by this evolution in the hybrid threat space.

What is M.K.Y.?

M.K.Y. is a group that was first formed in Dnipro, Ukraine, and later spread into Russia, where it was involved in extremist activities across several Russian cities. The earliest M.K.Y.-like videos were posted on 2chan^g in 2018. However, the group’s origin might date back earlier as Chkhikvishvili, in the first edition of the *Haters Handbook*,¹⁵ claimed that M.K.Y. has been active since 2017.

In 2019, neo-Nazi VKontakte (VK) profiles and Telegram channels began sharing short videos of street fights and attacks on homeless people. These videos, which have been accessed and reviewed by the authors, reveal a dark and violent skinhead and accelerationist subculture where members committed various heinous crimes, often recording their actions and sharing them online. These videos were claimed by a group calling themselves M.K.Y. Based on the 38 M.K.Y. videos that were shared on Telegram and VK reviewed by the authors, there appears to have been 33 unique attacks that were perpetrated in Dnipro. Several of the attacks in the videos feature M.K.Y. leader Yegor Krasnov, aka Maniac. There are also likely three attacks linked to the group that were filmed in St. Petersburg by other individuals. In its propaganda, M.K.Y. has self-identified as terrorists and is ideologically rooted in both national socialist culture and esotericism. It holds to the accelerationist and xenophobic belief that adherents need to start a “Racial Holy War (RaHoWa).”^h As one of these authors (Argentino) has explained, “leadership and members promote the use of accelerationist TTPs as a means to achieve their goals. According to the group’s ideological manifesto posted in Telegram, reviewed by the authors, they believe in a more aggressive form

g 2chan (Futaba Channel) is a popular Japanese imageboard website founded in 2001. It serves as an online forum where users can post images and comments on a wide variety of topics anonymously. Known for its influence on internet culture and subcultures in Japan, 2chan has inspired similar websites worldwide and has been a significant platform for the sharing of memes, discussions on niche interests, and the development of online communities. Minoru Matsutani, “2channel’s Success Rests on Anonymity,” *Japan Times*, April 6, 2010; “What Parents Need to Know About ‘Incels’ and How Radicalization Happens: A Glossary,” CBS News, August 30, 2023.

h RaHoWa, an acronym for “Racial Holy War,” is a term used by the Creativity Movement, a white supremacist, neo-Nazi organization founded by Ben Klassen in the early 1970s. The term encapsulates the group’s ideology of an impending and inevitable racial conflict. The Creativity Movement, originally known as the Church of the Creator, promotes the belief in the superiority of the white race and advocates for the establishment of an all-white society. RaHoWa is a core concept in its doctrine, symbolizing the struggle against perceived threats from non-white populations and the goal of achieving racial purity. “Church of the Creator Timeline,” Southern Poverty Law Center, Intelligence Report, 1999, accessed August 4, 2024. However, the racial holy war imagined by M.K.Y. is ideologically rooted in nihilism and esotericism, rather than Klassen’s original description of the concept.

f According to the authors’ analysis of M.K.Y. communications, the group is known to have used Telegram, Wire, and Matrix to communicate with each other. Telegram was mostly used for recruitment and disseminating propaganda, whereas Wire and Matrix were used for private encrypted communications.

of national socialism rooted in the ‘Thule Society,’ⁱ misanthropy, Theistic Satanism,^j and esotericism¹⁶ as found in the Order of Nine Angles.¹⁷ Their propaganda and publications borrow heavily from the art style popularized by the neo-fascist figurehead known as Dark Foreigner.¹⁸ M.K.Y.’s recording of its offline activities have often been accompanied by horrorcore music, a genre combining aggressive electronic music, metal, and rap.^{k,19}

Overview of M.K.Y. Arrests

According to public reporting,²⁰ in January 2021, Russian Federal Security Services (FSB) in Moscow, St. Petersburg, Tambov, Voronezh, Gelendzhik, and Yaroslavl conducted searches and arrested around 20 suspected members of M.K.Y. The charges ranged from extremism to preparing terrorist acts. The following details stem from Kremlin media and the details around the arrests should be viewed through that lens as they were used for propaganda purposes.

In January 2021, a video surfaced showing the interrogation of 25-year-old Alexey Narzyaev in Moscow, revealing both his involvement with M.K.Y. as well as his refusal to carry out violent acts ordered by a person known as ‘Maniac,’ the leader of M.K.Y., from Dnipro, Ukraine.²¹ In February 2021, the FSB arrested three M.K.Y. supporters, accusing them of promoting neo-Nazism and mass murder.²² The investigation found them associated with the nationalist movement ‘Russian Corps.’ In March 2021, 14 individuals were arrested in Gelendzhik and Yaroslavl for attacking homeless people, filming the assaults, and posting the videos online.²³ In Tambov, 17-year-old Andrey S. shared extremist content and was arrested after authorities found bomb-making materials in his home.²⁴ His arrest video highlighted the intense interrogation methods used by the FSB.

Outside of Russia, there have been several arrests related to M.K.Y. One of these arrests occurred in Romania²⁵ where an adopted German teenager livestreamed himself murdering a 74-year-old woman on Discord. In April 2024, a U.K. teenager²⁶

linked to the 764 network^l was arrested and charged with plotting an act of terrorism. The 18-year-old was accused of ‘preparing for an attack against a single homeless individual,’ emulating the TTPs of M.K.Y.

The Arrest of Manic, aka Yegor Krasnov, Leader of M.K.Y.

‘In January 2020, Yegor Krasnov,²⁷ who was identified as Manic and the leader of M.K.Y. was arrested in Dnipro. His background reveals a history of violent behavior and involvement in neo-Nazi activities. The FSB, through state media,²⁸ claimed that M.K.Y. was set up by Yegor Krasnov, a Ukraine national, specifically for the purpose of spreading neo-Nazi ideas in Russia and committing acts of terror.’²⁹ The FSB claimed that Krasnov had been operating ‘under the auspices of the Ukrainian special services.’³⁰ The tropes here echo similar ones spread by Russia in their justification of the invasion of Ukraine and should be viewed skeptically.’^m

M.K.Y. Tactic, Techniques, and Procedures

The authors reviewed official Telegram channels, chats, and primary instructional material created by members of M.K.Y. between 2022 and 2024, as well as videos dating back to 2018.ⁿ The review of these materials helped the authors better understand the TTPs of the group. Any prospective member being recruited must pass a

^l ‘764 is an online child extortion group created by a Discord user named Bradley Cadenhead in 2021. 764 took inspiration from another Discord Community known as ‘Cvlt’ that forced children to perform sexual acts on camera, later using the recordings for sextortion. Unlike Cvlt, 764 does not only leverage the sextortion of minors but also animal torture, incest, rape, self-harm, and bestiality. 764 force victims to carry out four key types of harm that may be recorded and shared on social media platforms or disseminated internally. These include forced drug use and self-harm, such as non-suicidal self-injury with blades or needles, asphyxiation or burning. They also regularly encourage people suffering from mental health problems to kill themselves on camera or commit mass shootings. New members are also encouraged to engage in animal abuse, being forced to injure or kill personal pets or other animals. Sextortion and CSAM are also key dimensions of 764; victims are groomed to share intimate images to be used to subsequently sextort and doxx them, creating ‘LoreBooks’ filled with sexually explicit content to be shared with victims’ friends and family if they don’t comply.’ Marc-André Argentino, Barrett Gay, and M.B. Tyler, ‘764: The Intersection of Terrorism, Violent Extremism, and Child Sexual Exploitation,’ GNET, January 19, 2024.

In September 2023, the FBI published a public service announcement about the 764 network, warning about the ‘violent online groups deliberately targeting minor victims on publicly available messaging platforms to extort them into recording or live-streaming acts of self-harm and producing child sexual abuse material (CSAM). These groups use threats, blackmail, and manipulation to control the victims into recording or live-streaming self-harm, sexually explicit acts, and/or suicide; the footage is then circulated among members to extort victims further and exert control over them.’ ‘Violent Online Groups Extort Minors to Self-Harm and Produce Child Sexual Abuse Material,’ Federal Bureau of Investigation, September 12, 2023.

^m Russian claims about neo-Nazi influence in Ukraine did not begin just prior to the invasion of Ukraine this year. Putin and other Russian officials have been characterizing Ukrainians as neo-Nazi fascists since Russia invaded Crimea. The mass arrest of member of Maniacs Murder Cult was one of many examples of this type of Kremlin propaganda. Natalia Zinet, ‘Russia Arrests Ukrainian Neo-Nazis; Kyiv Denies Link to Them,’ Reuters, December 13, 2021; Kevin Liffey, ‘Russia’s FSB Says It Detained 60 Neo-Nazis Planning Attacks,’ Yahoo Finance, March 30, 2022.

ⁿ The publicly available Telegram data was collected by the authors using the Telegram API or the export function in public Telegram chats and channels. Videos associated with M.K.Y. were archived from Vkontakte, websites associated with the network, the internet archive, as well as Telegram.

ⁱ The Thule Society was a German occultist and nationalist organization founded in Munich in 1918, shortly after World War I. Named after the mythical Thule, which was believed to be the original home of the Aryan race, the society was known for its racist and anti-Semitic ideologies.

^j Theistic Satanism is the belief in and worship of Satan as a deity or supernatural being. In contrast to the atheistic or secular forms of Satanism, which generally makes use of Satan as a symbol for a person’s own rebellion and individualism, Theistic Satanism is the veneration of Satan as an actual entity possessing divine or supernatural characteristics.

^k Notably, Russian musician Skabbibal likely collaborated with Maniac, the leader of M.K.Y., on several tracks, adding a macabre soundtrack to the group’s violent videos. In the Haters Handbook (3rd Edition), Egor states that he listened to Skabbibal when committing acts of violence. Commander Butcher, ‘Haters Handbook,’ 3rd Edition, 2023, pp. 28, 33. There are also MP3 files and links to music hosting websites that feature songs by Egor Krasnov featuring Skabbibal.

vetting process. The prospective member must proceed to carry out a direct action with video or photo documentations of the activity.

There are several categories of activities that M.K.Y. will consider for the vetting process:

- *Direct Action Operations*: murders, beatings, arson, acts of terrorism, etc.
- *Cyberattacks and Coding*: the creation of malicious codes; programs and websites; swatting, doxing, and hacking
- *Recruitment/Agitation*: searching for and recruiting new participants online, stickering/flyering, graffiti, vandalism, slashing tires, creating propaganda and multimedia for the group
- *Bioterrorism*: the creation of biological weapons, chemicals, and poisons

The group emphasizes secure communications. Adherents are instructed to only use anonymous and secure methods of communication for internal communications such as Xabber, Element, Matrix, Threema, Protonmail, and Wire.³¹ “A member may only communicate directly with the leader or his first or second in command.^o An initiate of the group should not discuss their status within M.K.Y. to not attract attention to themselves and the organization.^{32,33}”

According to internal documentation the authors have reviewed, leadership of M.K.Y. have implemented a scoring system called “Murder Points” to evaluate the productivity of each group member. There is a minimum score that must be achieved to be considered an active member of M.K.Y. Those who fail to meet this minimum receive disciplinary action.^p Various activities earn different scores within this system.^q Additionally, murder points have been observed to correspond to a system of “levels,” ranks within M.K.Y. that are earned based on the crimes an individual has committed on the network’s behalf.

M.K.Y. Handbooks

M.K.Y. has published three ideological and instructional

“handbooks,”^r not only for its own group, but instructional documents that were shared into other Telegram terroristic and violent extremist (TVE) networks such as 764, Comm, Terrorgram, and other accelerationist milieus. There is a progression and evolution in the TTPs as well as an ideological evolution that is promoted in these instructional manifestos. As of the third edition of the Haters Handbook, there are alliances between M.K.Y., Satanic Front, National Socialist Order of the Nine Angles, and No Lives Matter that are mentioned, indicating the intermingling of a transnational threat actor like M.K.Y. with the threat landscape of the United States and its allies.

Short M.K.Y. instructional guides on planning manhunts and selecting bladed weapons are being circulated. Originally published in Russian, English versions began circulating in 2022, although they appear to be machine-translated. This follows the pattern observed in M.K.Y. chats and channels, where content is first released in Russian and then translated into English using automated tools.^s

“In terms of recruitment targets, the M.K.Y. handbooks seek out those who self-identify as sociopaths, murderers, and school shooters. However, it was not until the third edition of the of the Haters Handbook that there was a direct call to school shooters to carry out attacks in association with M.K.Y. The third edition of the Hater Handbook also contains a personal biography of the founder of M.K.Y., Egor Krasnov, that was not found in the prior two editions. This biography makes up most of the new material found in the third edition. In the third edition of the handbook it is claimed that M.K.Y. has been active since 2017 and that between then and 2023 was responsible for 50+ murders and 150+ ‘actions’— all the while hinting that there are more that have not been made public.”³⁴

M.K.Y. Ideological Dimensions

The two ideological cornerstones of M.K.Y. are national socialism and Satanism, which—per the group’s primary texts—are viewed as being the most “hateful” ideology and religion. It is key to note that followers’ adherence to these beliefs is often surface level at best and tends to focus primarily on the violent tenets or aesthetic associated with them. When describing their version of national socialism, what they are discussing is neofascist accelerationism. Regarding Satanism, they are referencing the practices and aesthetics of the Order of Nine Angles (O9A), in particular that of the Tempel ov Blood.^t Though they borrow their aesthetics from O9A, they do not

^o These details were found in an April 3, 2024, post made on Telegra.ph (minimalist online publishing tool created by Telegram) and shared in an official M.K.Y. Telegram channel that was reviewed by the authors. The post discusses the functionality of Maniacs Murder Cult, which contains basic operational security procedures members must take.

^p Only those in command can assign points for any given action. Similarly, only those in command can impose disciplinary action, the severity of which depends on the failure. For example, when a member fails to meet the minimum murder points without a legitimate reason, they will be fully isolated from the community for a first violation and cannot communicate with anyone for two weeks. A second failure to meet the minimum will lead to an expulsion of the group. The first offense sanctions have two roles: 1) isolate the individual (whom is usually already isolated from peers in the real world) and force them to use this time to obtain the points needed and 2) this reinforces the reality that M.K.Y. is about real-world actions, which is the only way to meet the minimum score. Violating the operational security of the group, snitching, leaking internal documents and information, and staging manhunts are all punishable by death. The authors reviewed official Telegram Channels, chats, and primary instructional material created by members of M.K.Y. between 2022 and 2024, as well as videos dating back to 2018.

^q Points acquired vary based on action, but also based on the quality of filming and brutality of the action. Photo documentation that includes agitating inscriptions, stickers, or leaflets in public places are also highly valued.

^r The first edition released in 2020 is 52 pages, the second edition is 54 pages long and was released in 2022, and the third edition is 122 pages released in 2023.

^s The authors reviewed official Telegram Channels, chats, and primary instructional material created by members of M.K.Y. between 2022 and 2024, as well as videos dating back to 2018.

^t The second significant strain within O9A is organized around the nexion known as Tempel ov Blood. ToB is most heavily associated with infiltrating neo-fascist accelerationist groups and inciting individuals to violence. ToB’s books, produced by its in-house publishing arm Martinet Press, contain graphic scenes depicting child sexual abuse, physical and sexual violence, and more, with the goal of desensitizing its audience against extreme abuse of others. Toward this goal of dehumanization for the purpose of generating terrorist violence, ToB’s training manual dismisses original O9A’s introspective actions for a totalizing focus on violence. “Dangerous Organizations and Bad Actors: The Order of Nine Angles,” Middlebury Institute of International Studies, April 2024.

appear to delve deeply into the esoteric practices associated with its philosophy. Rather, it is the perceived extreme nature of the O9A ideology that is attractive to this set of threat actors. At its core, a primary objective of M.K.Y. is for its adherents to be viewed as the most sadistic threat actors. The ideology itself is rooted in the idea of mobilizing adherents to carry out acts of misanthropic violence.

M.K.Y. worships and seeks to emulate serial killers and other mass murderers. Some examples include the 2019 Christchurch, New Zealand, attacker;³⁵ the Unabomber;³⁶ the Zodiac Killer;³⁷ the Racist Killer;³⁸ and the Dnepropetrovsk Maniacs.³⁹ M.K.Y., in its *Haters Handbook* and in propaganda shared in its Telegram channels reviewed by the authors, states that if more mass shooters livestreamed their attacks, there would be more individuals inspired to follow in their footsteps, and M.K.Y. requires adherents to record and share their violent and criminal activities. By pushing for the documentation and dissemination of their own violent acts, they aim to inspire and mobilize a new generation of extremists while terrorizing the general public. Further, the implementation of their scoring system not only incentivizes violence but also creates a competitive environment where members strive to outdo each other in brutality, further entrenching their extremist behaviors.

M.K.Y. Affiliations to Accelerationist Threat Actors in the United States

It is not publicly known how M.K.Y. first formed alliances with violent extremists in Western countries. Either M.K.Y. sought out these alliances in order to expand its network's reach or Western violent extremists sought to affiliate themselves with M.K.Y. in the hopes of attaching themselves to the group's specific brand of direct action. It is important to highlight that there is no way to determine the validity of these alliances through open sources. Although some of these affiliations may be 'official,' it is just as likely that they are the result of individuals claiming affiliations with these groups for their own status.

The first affiliation that will be examined is that of M.K.Y. and Satanic Front. Satanic Front is the newest iteration of the U.S.-based O9A nexus^u "Tempel Ov Blood." According to its own handbook and propaganda, Satanic Front has a stated goal of forming and training an operational unit that will be tasked to carry out "on the ground objectives as opposed to the whimsical 'esoteric' aims of most organizations and collectives." Satanic Front also believes in the "serial killer rite" as a key part of its doctrine; this rite bears many similarities to the "ultraviolence challenge submission" within M.K.Y. It is important to note that the rituals and rites practiced by these groups lack the sophistication of true ritualistic practice, suggesting that a propagandistic role is their true purpose.

The third edition of the *Haters Handbook* claims that there is a direct alliance between M.K.Y. and Satanic Front, as well as indication that the founder of Satanic Front has been in contact with members of M.K.Y. Contact has been observed by the authors on Telegram between users associated with these respective organizations, supporting the potential existence of an official alliance.

In addition to connections with Satanic Front, M.K.Y. has been observed disseminating content from the NSO9A (National

Socialist Order of Nine Angles) about the topic of "nihilistic national socialism."^v NSO9A formed as an O9A-influenced offshoot of the NSO (National Socialist Order), which itself was the successor to AWD (Atomwaffen Division). NSO9A is the end result of O9A's longtime ideological influence within AWD. In March 2023, the NSO9A website added a page dedicated to M.K.Y. This page shared videos of "direct actions" conducted by members of M.K.Y. between 2018 and 2019. This page on the NSO9A site is the first known instance of a North American threat actor amplifying M.K.Y.'s propaganda. Following this, NSO9A shared a post on its website that described what it calls the "Trident of Association." In this, M.K.Y. is named as both a "sinister sect" and "sinister affiliate" of the NSO9A. Sinister Affiliates are, to quote from the NSO9A, "groups within the NSO9A that break off to form another group at the behest of the Trident." NSO9A's website has been shut down since the end of 2023, and no activity has been observed from it in 2024.

The third edition of the *Haters Handbook* officially stated that an alliance had been formed between M.K.Y. and NLM (No Lives Matter). Chapter 8 of this edition is titled "Weapons of Anarchy" and contains a compilation of previous instructional materials disseminated by M.K.Y. Included in this compilation is a version of the document "NLM Terror Guide," now named "MMC/NLM Murder Guide." This guide contains a section titled "Just Terror Tactics Truck Attacks." It is the assessment of the authors that the phrasing of this title, as well as the description of the ideal vehicle and how to acquire it, is borrowed directly from issues #3 and #9 of the Islamic State publication *Rumiyah*. The second tactic described in the guide is how to carry out attacks with bladed or blunt weapons, which is adapted from issue #2 and #4 of *Rumiyah*. These are preferred by M.K.Y. due to how easy it is to obtain these weapons. The guide also suggests that individuals attempt to carry out a mass shooting or other large-scale terrorist attack, but it does not provide instructions on how to do so. As the guide continues, the tactics suggested become increasingly abstract and far-fetched. Some of the tactics suggested are more performative in nature to add an aesthetic of extreme terrorism, demonstrating that a "Maniac" is one who will do any nihilistic or misanthropic act to achieve their goals.

M.K.Y. Current Targets for Recruitment

M.K.Y.'s first connection to the 764 network is found in the form of No Lives Matter. NLM acts as the English language hub of M.K.Y., seeking to recruit and mobilize individuals from the English-speaking world. NLM has published three original instructional manuals in English, as well as many translated M.K.Y. documents. However, NLM's connection to the 764 network often creates tension with the core objectives of M.K.Y. NLM leaders have been observed to be far more concerned about their own clout and infamy than they are about the impact or frequency of their real-world actions.⁴⁰

^u The Order of Nine Angles consists largely of autonomous cells called 'nexions.' Connell Monette, *Mysticism in the 21st Century* (Wilsonville, OR: Sirius Academic Press, 2013), p. 88.

^v As described in the *Haters Handbook* (3rd edition), "nihilistic national socialism" involves the destruction of current systems and ideologies without adhering to any orthodox ideological framework, making actions unpredictable. The author of the *Haters Handbook* acknowledges a contradiction in Nihilistic National Socialism, comparing it to the notion that a person must be willing to risk their life to preserve it. The stated contradiction for NNS is that an adherent must be willing to transgress their own morals to implement them. The author of the handbook argues that embracing this contradiction is necessary for National Socialists to regain control, drawing parallels to other ideologies and groups that have sought power.

Recently, the authors have observed prominent members and leaders of NLM engaging in online arguments based around three points: 1) ownership of the Telegram channels linked to NLM, 2) whether or not NLM was an ideology of 764 until a specific user made NLM into a group, and 3) the fact that 764 and NLM should not be conflated as they are now two separate entities as NLM claims they will not associate with people involved in CSAM. This type of infighting around ownership and determining the originator of ideas are key identifying behaviors of those in the 764 network,⁴¹ as chasing and gaining clout through malicious activity is the main goal. These same behaviors are key to the point system M.K.Y. set in place, that indicates that individuals in the 764 networks are primed to react positively to that type of structural reinforcement. It is this same type of cultural structure that leads to gaining influence and notoriety in the 764 networks, and it is what determines whether an individual will be considered a predator or prey in this milieu. Though the NLM Telegram channels appear to be more interested in clout-chasing, they are still seeking to inspire others to mobilize to violence and criminality. In a May 2024 Telegram post, the leaders of No Lives Matter announced that the alliance that had existed between 764 and NLM had ended.^w In that same May 2024 Telegram post, NLM indicated that its only allies are Satanic Front and M.K.Y.

Membership requirements for those seeking to join NLM are similar to those enumerated in M.K.Y. documentation: acts of vandalism, animal abuse, and violent acts (beatings, stabbings, manhunts, and mass shootings). The animal abuse aspect is unique to NLM and has not been found in the other M.K.Y. materials discussed in this article. It is the authors' belief that this aspect of NLM's entry requirements originated within the 764 network, further lending credence to the idea of NLM as a 764 offshoot. Animal abuse also serves as a "behavioural marker" of interest to recruiters seeking individuals who are willing and able to carry out acts of real-world violence.

The 764 network's role as a fertile recruitment ground for M.K.Y. has only increased over the past six months. Individuals within the network have begun creating their own offshoot groups, which are far more interested in terrorism and violent extremism than in the network's traditional extortion.^x There have been Telegram channels dedicated to those from the 764 network and NLM willing to carry out real-world actions such as vandalism, slashing tires, "bricking" of car or home windows, and an arson attempt.

By April 2024, NLM had recruited individuals from the more extreme factions of the 764 network as well as from adjacent

accelerationist spaces.^y Examinations of chat records have demonstrated that in addition to targeted recruitment, many users are joining independently, seeking information about how to join, and how to carry out the requisite acts of criminality. It is probable that many of these individuals are trolls or larpers.^z However, a steady stream of violent content produced by individuals who appear to be affiliated with either NLM or the 764 network demonstrates that a sizable portion of these individuals are pursuing the criminal activity promoted by NLM and M.K.Y.⁴² It is essential not to underestimate the potential breadth and severity of the scripted violence promoted by these networks.

The final, central piece of understanding this network is the role of "clout" for participants. Action alone does not bring prominence within these spaces; members pursue infamy over material impact. This is why they openly advertise the crimes they commit and engage in constant doxxing of both allies and rivals. A common form of doxxing within these communities is the practice of sharing the "roster" of a specific channel/chat on Telegram. The goal of spreading this information is to generate more infamy for the participants, despite the fact that this practice provides outsiders with the names of the group owner, leadership, vetted members, and their alliances.

Takeaways for Counterterrorism Practitioners

In conclusion, the recent arrest of Mikhail Chkhikvishvili, in tandem with the proliferation of M.K.Y. into the United States, represents a major evolutionary step for the hybrid threats that counterterrorism practitioners face today where ideologically motivated criminality and nihilism overlap with RMVE.

It is important to understand the intricate and dangerous connections between transnational TVE networks such as M.K.Y. Although these groups operate primarily through decentralized and often clandestine means, their activities have real-world consequences. The complex interplay of their ideologies, which blend elements of esotericism, national socialism, and extreme misanthropy, underpins their violent actions and recruitment strategies. M.K.Y.'s evolution from offline extremism to a significant online presence, and its affiliations with Western TVE actors, highlights the transnational nature of this threat.

The hybrid threat paradigm that began to emerge with the 764 network, which utilized the hybridization of harms of CSAM and TVE, has aided M.K.Y. recruitment. M.K.Y. has also spawned copycat groups in the United States and Europe seeking to emulate their TTPs. Although the primary harm of the 764 network was

w The end of this alliance also demonstrates the power that M.K.Y. holds within communities of likeminded violent extremists in the West, causing NLM to abandon its "parent network."

x The authors have observed a shift in the past 13 months in the 764 network. Whereas 13 months ago, the focus of the community was on sextortion—as well as sharing child sexual exploitation material, animal abuse, and self-harm content—high-profile arrests of 764 founder Bradley Cadenhead, and other members, and the FBI's 2023 public service announcement on the network has had a chilling effect. Several of the communities and key influencers in the network have shifted away from child abuse material and sextortion, and began focusing on offline ideologically motivated criminality such as graffiti, tire slashing, brickings, arson, and assaults. The authors have observed that this behavioral shift has proven fertile ground for M.K.Y. recruitment attempts observed by the authors, as well as the wider acceptance of terroristic material and propaganda.

y The authors have been able to determine this by tracking accounts that have added an "NLM" tag to their usernames on Telegram, or by the official NLM rosters (images with the names of members and their ranks in the organization) that are published in NLM channels and chats.

z LARPing, traditionally associated with physical role-playing games, has evolved into digital spaces, including anonymous imageboards known as "chans" (e.g., 4chan, 8chan). Calling someone a "LARPer" or saying they are "LARPing" in an online dispute is typically a dismissive or derogatory way of accusing that person of being inauthentic, performative, or not genuinely committed to the position or identity they are portraying. It implies that the individual is 'role-playing' rather than sincerely holding the beliefs or characteristics they claim, similar to how a person in a Live Action Role-Playing game would act out a fictional character.

the online sextortion of minors,^{aa} many prominent members of the network were found to have close connections to the accelerationist milieus.^{ab}

The 764 network continues to evolve with astonishing rapidity. M.K.Y. is, in many ways, another step in this evolution. As stated in previous analyses by the authors,^{ac} court records of 764 prosecutions “consistently reveal inclinations toward acts of both interpersonal and public violence.”

The authors note that these networks are moving away from online sextortion—due to successful arrests and prosecutions of 764 figureheads—toward real-world acts of violence. It is important to remember the role of “clout” and notoriety within these networks. The central goal of the 764 network was and still is, much like M.K.Y., the accumulation of “clout” internal to the network, and the accumulation of infamy amongst victims and the public. The central role that clout plays to these networks is what facilitates their fluidity. Members of 764 have migrated so easily from producing CSAM to planning and executing acts of violence because, to them, they serve the same goal.^{ac}

As the 764 network has doubled down on this goal, the Comm network^{ad} has been expanding its operations. In an interview with the authors about the size of the Telegram network linked to Comm, 764, and M.K.Y., Jordan Wildon, CEO of Prose Intelligence, an open-source intelligence agency that specializes in researching Telegram, stated that “there are 1,967 unique accounts across 78 Comm Telegram groups. Beyond these, there are 303 additional

groups in the wider network. Across 50 of these groups, there were 17,420 members, resulting in an average of 348 members per chat.” Despite this, the average active unique accounts per chat is only 25, suggesting that only seven percent of Comm members are regularly active within the community. The main form this expansion has taken is the advent of various “X for hire” criminal services within the Comm. Swatting^{ae} is the most common service offered, although others include “bricking” (throwing a brick through the window of a target’s vehicle or residence), firebombing (also usually targeting residences or vehicles), and armed robbery (usually targeting an individual’s cryptocurrency).^{af} These services emphasize the shift from primarily online activity to engaging in offline criminal activities.

Practitioners should be aware of this rapidly evolving relationship between what is considered to be “traditional” criminal activity (i.e., gang violence, narcotics trafficking, etc.) and ideologically motivated violent extremism. Adherents of M.K.Y. and its related networks have shown a willingness to engage in criminal activity simply for the purpose of reinforcing the notoriety of their misanthropic ideology. An effective response to these hybrid threats is a holistic response, which treats these worlds as a mutually dependent network of threat actors and criminal activities, rather than as siloed communities. M.K.Y., Comm, and the 764 Network are representative of the growing hybridization of terrorism and violent extremism.

This requires coordination across various intergovernmental teams and levels of government, and international borders, as well as sectors. The goal is to create a resilient society that can withstand and recover from these threats, while effectively countering the actors and tactics involved. **CTC**

aa Sextortion of minors is a form of child sexual exploitation where children are threatened or blackmailed, most often with the possibility of sharing with the public nude or sexual images of them, by a person who demands additional sexual content, sexual activity, or money from the child. “Sextortion,” National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, n.d.

ab Many individuals associated with 764 initially became known to law enforcement following tips from individuals and/or institutions regarding plans to commit acts of mass violence similar to that promoted by M.K.Y. “Public Service Announcement: Increase in Sextortion Complaints Involving Children,” Federal Bureau of Investigation, September 12, 2023; “RCMP Reminds Canadians of Violent Online Groups Targeting Youth,” Royal Canadian Mounted Police, August 27, 2024; Argentino, Gay, and Tyler; “Dangerous Organizations and Bad Actors: Order of Nine Angles.”

ac Out of 30 arrests of individuals associated with the 764 Network and M.K.Y. reviewed by the authors, 11 of these individuals have moved toward planning and/or executing violence ranging from kidnapping, attempted murder, murder, planning school shootings, one foiled mass shooting at a school in Brazil, and three thwarted acts of terrorism (two in the United Kingdom and one in the United States). “Ouvido em Tribunal Jovem Suspeito de Instigar Massacres em Escolas do Brasil,” Rádio e Televisão de Portugal, May 3, 2024; Pocotilă, Andrei Udișteanu, and Ciprian Ranghel, “‘Am ucis pe cineva în video call’: Rețeaua globală de tineri care își câștigă popularitatea online prin crime, pornografie infantilă și automutilarea victimelor,” RTP Noticias, March 13, 2024; Jordan Reynolds, “Satanist Cameron Finnigan Charged with 764 Crimes,” *Independent*, April 3, 2024; Daniel De Simone, “Satanist neo-Nazi jailed over terror offences,” BBC, March 22, 2024; Diana Meseșan, “‘Am ucis pe cineva în video call’: Rețeaua globală de tineri care își câștigă popularitatea online prin crime, pornografie infantilă și automutilarea victimelor,” Recorder, March 13, 2024.

ad The 764 community does not exist in isolation; rather it is hyper-connected to a wider network of hybridized threats and threat actors called Comm, aka the Community. Comm, or “The Community,” is a nebulous network of Discord and Telegram channels administered mostly by minors involved in CSAM, sextortion, cyber stalking, hacking, swatting, gore, terrorism, school shootings, drugs, bricking, arson, and scams. The 764 network is the subset of Comm involved in sextortion. Marc-André Argentino, “When ‘Community’ Means Cruelty: An Introduction to the Criminal Networks and Behaviors of The Community, Comm, Com, and 764,” *maargentino.com*, May 9, 2024; Joseph Cox, “The Comm ACG Group Linked to Nationwide Swatting,” *Vice*, August 1, 2024.

ae “Swatting is a form of harassment to deceive an emergency service provider into sending a police and emergency service response team to another person’s address due to the false reporting of a serious law enforcement emergency. The individuals who engage in this activity use technology, such as caller ID spoofing, social engineering, TTY, and prank calls to make it appear that the emergency call is coming from the victim’s phone. Traditionally, law enforcement has seen swatters directing their actions toward individuals and residences. Increasingly, the FBI sees swatters targeting public places such as airports, schools, and businesses. Another recent trend is so-called celebrity swatting, where the targeted victims are well-known personalities.” Sandra Breault, “FBI Las Vegas Federal Fact Friday: The Dangers of Swatting,” Federal Bureau of Investigation, September 23, 2022.

af Some sense of the scale of these criminal services can be ascertained by looking at the prosecutions of individuals affiliated with Comm. Patrick McGovern-Allen, a 21-year-old from New Jersey, was arrested in August 2022 for carrying out a variety of violent, criminal acts for customers in the Comm, including firing a pistol into a Pennsylvania home, and throwing a Molotov cocktail into another home. Brian Krebs, “NJ Man Hired Online to Firebomb, Shoot at Homes Gets 13 Years in Prison,” Krebs on Security, October 2023. Alan W. Fillion, a 17-year-old from Florida, was arrested in January 2024 for running the massive, online “swatting for hire” service known as TORSwats. Fillion is accused of performing hundreds of swatting attacks across the United States that targeted schools and federal agents. Michael Kosnar and Zoë Richards, “California Teen Who Allegedly Targeted FBI Agents Was Arrested for Swatting,” NBC News, February 1, 2024. James McCarty and Kya Nelson were also both arrested for their participation in a swatting scheme, the aim of which was to intimidate/harass possible victims. Both members are believed to be involved in the Comm. McCarty is definitely known to be a participant in the Comm subgroup known as “ACG,” where he utilized the alias “ACG Aspertaine.” “Grand Jury Indicts 2 in Swatting Scheme That Took Over Ring Doorbells across U.S. to Livestream Police Response,” United States Department of Justice, December 19, 2022; “Public Service Announcement: Holiday Online Shopping Scams,” Federal Bureau of Investigation, December 29, 2020.

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