

The Threat to the United States from the Islamic State's Virtual Entrepreneurs

By Seamus Hughes and Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens

Among the most recent evolutions of jihadi terrorist tactics in the West has been the rise of the virtual entrepreneur. The increased use of social media, often paired with applications that offer the option of encrypted messaging, has enabled members of groups like the Islamic State to make direct and lasting contact with radicalized Americans. In some cases, these individuals direct terror plots, and in others, they provide encouragement and motivation for attacks. In the United States, there are 14 known cases of terrorist-related activity involving 19 U.S.-based individuals where the involvement of an Islamic State virtual entrepreneur has been documented. This outsourcing of terrorism has been a game changer in Islamic State efforts to attack the West.

Over the last year, a new term has entered the lexicon of American and European terrorism analysts, law enforcement, and national security journalists: the 'virtual plotter.'^a This phrase, and variations of it, describes members of jihadi terrorist groups, mainly affiliated with the Islamic State, who use social media and applications with encryption capabilities to reach out to and correspond with radicalized Westerners. The emergence of applications such as Telegram, SureSpot, Kik, and—since its recent offering of end-to-end encryption—WhatsApp has been a particular game changer for the Islamic State and its efforts in the West. In some cases, its members plot and direct attacks, helping to hone and focus the often undisciplined zeal of potential lone-actor terrorists so as to ensure that their eventual actions achieve either the maximum propaganda value or casualty impact.^a

More frequently, however, these virtual plotters have acted in a more auxiliary capacity, plugging their Western contacts into

^a The plots are often referred to as 'Islamic State-enabled.' While this typology is useful, it is also problematic as it may suggest that the plots are planned by the Islamic State leadership. It remains unclear if Islamic State virtual entrepreneurs are taking direction from senior Islamic State figures or acting independently.

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wider extremist milieus (both online and offline) and encouraging extreme beliefs, while offering suggestions and options for mobilization. Indeed, because of the variety of roles they play, the authors have chosen to refer to these individuals as 'virtual entrepreneurs,' thus allowing for a broader encapsulation of the different categories of their involvement. Out of a total of 38 Islamic State-inspired domestic plots and attacks in the United States between March 1, 2014, and March 1, 2017, at least eight (21 percent) have involved some form of digital communication with virtual entrepreneurs.^b The peak period for this activity was 2015, with virtual entrepreneurs involved in six separate plots. In addition, virtual entrepreneurs have also been involved in at least six other terrorism-related cases, including assisting with logistics related to traveling to join the Islamic State.^c This brings the total number of U.S. terrorism cases linked to Islamic State virtual entrepreneurs to 14, involving 19 U.S.-based individuals.

This development is a reminder that the strategies and tactics pursued by the modern global jihad movement, as part of its efforts to maintain an international presence and ability to conduct attacks, are varied and evolving. Jihadi strategists swiftly adapt to the constantly shifting environments around them while opportunistically exploiting new technologies. One of the benefits of such increased contact with radicalized Westerners is that it has given the Islamic State wider scope to claim ownership of attacks that it had little to do with in reality. This allows it to inflate its impact and reach, which is crucial to the group's propaganda efforts.

To some extent, the emergence of virtual entrepreneurs represents a hybrid between what are commonly seen as the two previous manifestations of the jihadi terrorist threat to the West: networked and inspired lone-attacker plots. The former relies on direct involvement by an organization in terms of training, direction, financing, and indoctrination. The lone-actor and now hybrid categories rely more on the creation of loosely connected milieus, often online, and the wide availability of an accessible form of global

^b The eight separate plots involved 13 individuals in total. They are Fareed Mumuni and Munther Omar Saleh (2015); David Daoud Wright and Nicholas Rovinski (2015); Munir Abdulkader (2015); Justin Nojan Sullivan (2015); Jalil Ibn Ameer Aziz (2015); Emanuel Lutchman (2015); Abdul Malik Abdul Kareem (2015); and Mohamed Bailor Jalloh (2016). The dates provided here reflect when the defendants were charged, as opposed to when the offense was carried out or contact was made with the virtual entrepreneur. Three individuals were killed either conducting their operation or during attempts to arrest them. Garland attackers Nadir Soofi and Elton Simpson were killed while conducting their operation. Usaamah Abdullah Rahim was killed when officers tried to arrest him. Soofi and Simpson committed the attack with assistance from Abdul Malik Abdul Kareem. Source: court documents.

^c They are Avin Brown (2014), Mohammed Hamzah Khan (2014), Nader Elhuzayel (2015), Ardit Ferizi (2015), Aaron T. Daniels (2016), and Abdul Raheem Habil Ali-Skelton (2016).

jihadi propaganda. Together, these help inspire individuals to carry out attacks on their own and in the name of the global jihad movement, or a specific group within it.

Law enforcement has understandably struggled to categorize this new development. Speaking at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, FBI Executive Assistant Director for the National Security Division Michael Steinbach offered some measure of clarity. He described the current threat picture as “a hybrid between directed and enabled ... individuals overseas using encrypted communications to elicit some type of assistance from somebody in the U.S.” He also pointed out that these figures often do not specifically direct attacks but rather help in “getting somebody ready to go ... getting them motivated, showing them a menu of targets and then saying, ‘hey, you take care of it.’”²

However, while the use of this tactic has increased as the Islamic State continues to exploit social media and online encryption technologies, the phenomenon of jihadi entrepreneurs making virtual connections with unaffiliated radicalized Westerners is certainly not new. As is often the case when discussing innovative jihadis, one need only look at the activities of the late Yemeni-American jihadi ideologue and recruiter Anwar al-Awlaki, who, via email, was in contact with a number of radicalized individuals in the West and who, in at least one case, helped plot a potential attack.⁴ Social media and encrypted messaging apps, along with an expansion of jihadi territories across the globe, are all factors that have nonetheless added a new dimension to such virtual communications.

One of the most devastating recent examples of this tactic come from Europe. In France, Islamic State member Rachid Kassim has been linked to at least two plots that were initially believed to have been carried out by inspired lone-actors with no oversight or direction from the Islamic State.³ He is also thought to have been the orchestrator of over half of the 17 total plots foiled by French authorities in 2016.⁴ Much of the planning was done through his Telegram channel ‘Sabre de Lumière’ (Sword of Light).⁵

In the United States, the impact of virtual entrepreneurs has not been as deadly as in Europe, but this is not for want of trying. The most sustained efforts to import this type of terrorism to the United States have come from a group based in Islamic State-held Raqqa, Syria, which the FBI has nicknamed ‘the Legion.’ Made up of around a dozen English-speaking and mainly Western Islamic State operatives, the group has systematically reached out to individuals in the United States using a mixture of direct messaging on Twitter and encrypted messaging.⁶ The Legion has presented such

d This was the case of British Airways employee Rajib Karim. For more, see Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, “As American as Apple Pie: How Anwar al-Awlaki Became the Face of Western Jihad,” *International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence*, September 11, 2011, and Scott Shane, *Objective Troy* (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2016).

e The membership of the Legion has yet to be fully identified. At the very least, it publicly consisted of British citizens Junaid Hussain (also known as Abu Hussain al-Britani) and his wife, Sally Jones (also known as Umm Hussain al-Britani); Reyaad Khan (also known as Abu Dujana); Raphael Hostey (also known as Abu Qaqa); and Trinidadian citizen Shawn Parson (also known as Abu Khalid al-Amriki). Based on conversations with individuals familiar with the group, the authors also strongly suspect that another British national, Omar Hussain (also known as Abu Sa’eed al-Britani), is also a member. Abu Sa’ad al-Sudani was not a member of the Legion but had close coordination with the group. For example, in at least one instance, Omar Hussain edited the online postings of al-Sudani.

a threat that, between 2015 and 2016, three of its members were killed in targeted strikes: Junaid Hussain, Reyaad Khan, and Raphael Hostey. While not a member of the Legion, Abu Sa’ad al-Sudani, another Islamic State virtual entrepreneur who was identified by the Department of Defense as a “member, recruiter and external planner,” was also killed in April 2016.⁷

Hussain, the most prominent member of the Legion, was a British foreign fighter and former hacker.⁸ In 2013, while on bail for hacking charges, Hussain traveled to Islamic State-controlled territory, assuming the *kunya* ‘Abu Hussain al-Britani.’⁹ Before his death in August 2015, which is thought to have been the result of a British operation codenamed ‘Illuminative’ carried out by a U.S. airstrike, Hussain had achieved celebrity status among the online English-speaking Islamic State community. Both he and fellow British national Khan were identified by the then-British Prime Minister David Cameron as being “involved in actively recruiting ISIL sympathizers and seeking to orchestrate specific and barbaric attacks against the West.”¹⁰ The other known British member of the Legion, Hostey (also known as Abu Qaqa), had traveled to Syria in 2013 and was mainly engaged in recruiting foreign fighters and creating English-language propaganda.¹¹ Little is known about al-Sudani, who was better known online as Abu Isa al-Amriki, though he has been connected to a number of failed attacks and, under the name ‘HoneyNTea,’ used Telegram to run an Islamic State terrorist cell in India.¹² In an online posting entitled Days of Sahawatt, al-Sudani describes himself as “merely a soldier [sic] from among many other better soldiers here in the Islamic State.”¹³

Virtual entrepreneurs are not only found in Syria. Another prominent figure is Mohamed Abdullahi Hassan, who has used various online aliases, including Mujahid Miski. A Somali-American from Minnesota, he traveled to Somalia in 2009 to join the al-Qa`ida-linked militia al-Shabaab and was indicted that year on charges of material support to terrorism. He has since claimed that he left al-Shabaab in 2013 due to its brutal treatment of Somali civilians. Miski has also stated in an interview that in late 2015, his home was raided by al-Shabaab, forcing him to flee and turn himself in to Somali authorities.¹⁴ It is likely that he was also targeted because of his support for the Islamic State.^f

Before Miski turned himself in, he too was active online and maintained contact with a number of Americans. Over the years, he acted as a key conduit between al-Shabaab and radicalized members of the Somali-American community in the Twin Cities. Following the rise of the Islamic State, he had also formed online relationships with American supporters of the group, helping them in a variety of ways.¹⁵

This paper analyzes the impact of virtual entrepreneurs in the United States and is among the first to use primary sources to do so. It is based on a review of court filings and interviews with law enforcement officials, reporters, and attorneys connected to the cases. To present a broader and more accurate picture of the threat, the authors have categorized exchanges between American-based Islamic State sympathizers and virtual entrepreneurs as either ‘direct

f Since early 2015, the Islamic State has attempted to coax, and later coerce, al-Shabaab to switch its allegiances from al-Qa`ida. The leadership has fiercely and violently resisted these efforts, imprisoning and killing any suspected Islamic State sympathizers.

plotting' or 'encouragement and facilitation.'³

Direct Plotting

Ultimately, virtual entrepreneurs have found themselves targeted by authorities not only because of their online conversations with radicalized Americans, but also their direct involvement in terrorist plots in the West. Among the most clear-cut examples of a virtual entrepreneur planning an attack is that of Ohio resident Munir Abdulkader, who pleaded guilty to a plot to attack U.S. government officers.¹⁶ His flirtation with the Islamic State began in July 2014 when he established Twitter accounts to voice his support for the group.¹⁷ Once he had plugged himself into the online Islamic State community, it was not long until he came across and reached out to Hussain who, in effect, became his handler in the spring of 2015. According to court documents, Abdulkader "was in electronic communication with at least one member of ISIL overseas named Junaid Hussain, and placed himself under the direction of ISIL and its overseas leadership."¹⁸ Initially, Abdulkader was interested in traveling to Syria, but according to Assistant U.S. Attorney Timothy Mangan, who prosecuted the case, "Hussain helped push him to a different course" and turn his focus to a domestic attack "when they decided it simply had gotten too dangerous to go to an airport."¹⁹

Over the course of their communications, Hussain "ultimately laid out ... an overall terrorist attack plan for Abdulkader ... to implement."²⁰ More specifically, he instructed Abdulkader to kidnap an American soldier and record his killing on camera, providing him with the target's name and address. The pair also discussed the best weapon to use and the need to record the attack for later propaganda dissemination.²¹ Following this, Hussain suggested that Abdulkader attack a police station in Cincinnati, Ohio. Abdulkader also drew encouragement from Hussain that helped increase his mettle to carry out a violent act. During one of their encrypted online discussions in May 2015, he recounted to Hussain his first experience at a shooting range, telling him it was a "whole new experience but did well. We used magnums, other pistols, m15 or m5 ... I love it! Got the targets in face or [stomach]," to which Hussain responded, "Next time ul [sic] be shooting kuffar [nonbelievers] in their face and stomach."²²

Among Hussain's main interests was inciting and directly planning attacks against people and groups seen as maligning the Prophet Mohammad. In mid-May 2015, David Daoud Wright, Nicholas Alexander Rovinski, and Usaamah Abdullah Rahim were in the advanced stages of a plan to kill an organizer of the Muhammad Art Exhibit and Contest, an event in Garland, Texas. Rahim, the senior member of the group, liaised with Hussain about possible attacks. The target was decided upon as a result of these conversations, during which "Hussain directly communicated instructions to Rahim with regard to the murder of [the] Intended Victim," which Rahim subsequently passed on to his accomplice, Wright.²³

Due to the contact between Rahim and Hussain and subsequent activities by the plotters—including Rahim's purchase of combat knives at the recommendation of Hussain "in case the 'feds' tried to arrest him"²⁴—they soon became the subjects of law enforcement surveillance. On June 2, 2015, Rahim was approached by investiga-

tors while walking through a parking lot in Roslindale, Massachusetts, and shot dead after attempting to attack them with a knife. Rovinski pleaded guilty, and Wright is currently awaiting trial on terrorism charges.

Junaid Hussain and Reyaad Khan had begun their attempts to direct plots in the United States as early as 2014, when they used social media to solicit Minnesota resident Abdul Raheem Ali-Skelton to "carry out an attack in the United States."²⁵ During the previous months, he had been interacting and debating with Islamic State members on social media and was soon referred to the two Legion members. Ali-Skelton refused their request, however, and was later arrested and convicted for lying about his contact with the Legion.

Encouragement and Facilitation

While it is in their roles as direct plotters that virtual entrepreneurs gain the most attention, much of their work has involved encouraging their contacts to take on more extreme positions and helping them make connections in real-world foreign fighter networks.

"Very soon carrying out 1st operation of Islamic State in North America," "TheMujahid" texted to his online contact. The response was quick: "Can u make a video first?"

"TheMujahid," it has since been revealed, was North Carolina native Justin Sullivan, and his Islamic State contact was Hussain, who was writing under one of several online monikers he was using.²⁶ According to documents from his case, messages found on Sullivan's cell phone showed that he "conspired and agreed with Junaid Hussain to commit such attacks on behalf of, and in support of, ISIL and in an effort to change United States policies against ISIL by avenging U.S.-coalition airstrikes against ISIL fighters."²⁷ Sullivan had converted to Islam in September 2014 and soon began reading Islamic State propaganda. In December 2014, he used his father's gun to murder his elderly neighbor, though the motive for this has never been fully established.²⁸

By mid-2015, Sullivan had planned to buy an assault rifle at a local gun show and expressed a desire to kill up to 1,000 people.²⁹ Perturbed by his son's behavior, which included destroying Buddha statues and other non-Islamic religious items, Sullivan's father called 911 and informed authorities of his suspicion that his son was becoming an Islamic State supporter.³⁰ After subsequently entering into conversations with an FBI undercover agent in which he discussed his intentions to carry out an attack, he was arrested in June 2015 and pleaded guilty to providing material support to terrorism. Sullivan's case is indicative of the wider impact of virtual entrepreneurs in the United States beyond direct attack planning.³¹ He was not only provided with the encouragement, reassurance, and comradery he needed, but he also received specific advice on how to ensure his attack could provide the most benefit to the Islamic State.

Another U.S. case that sheds further light on the multifaceted role of virtual entrepreneurs is that of Jalil ibn Ameer Aziz of Pennsylvania. Prior to his arrest in December 2015 on charges of conspiracy to provide material support to the Islamic State, Aziz was heavily involved in online extremist networks, creating at least 57 pro-Islamic State Twitter accounts.³² When authorities searched his house, they discovered a tactical-style backpack with multiple machine guns and other weapons.³³

Aziz helped connect would-be American Islamic State foreign fighters with Hussain and Khan. According to court filings, Hussain provided Aziz with a Turkish telephone number, which he was

g While such an approach is useful and necessary in order to better understand the threat, the levels of involvement of virtual entrepreneurs remain fluid and defy precise categorization.



Graphic produced by the Program on Extremism at George Washington University

then to share with a potential recruit so that he could communicate with them using encrypted messaging applications. Hussain also suggested to Aziz that if there were any problems, the recruit should contact another member of the Legion, Hostey, via a Twitter profile he provided.³⁴

Hostey also communicated with at least two other Islamic State supporters. One of them, Avin Brown, was the first American to be arrested for trying to travel and join the Islamic State. U.S. prosecutors charged him with providing material support to terrorism in March 2014 after he attempted to board a flight in North Carolina bound for Turkey.³⁵ Brown was friendly online with Hostey and helped connect him with another American Islamic State recruit, Mohammed Khan, from Chicago. In October 2014, Mohammed Khan and his two younger siblings were arrested at O'Hare Inter-

national Airport as they attempted to fly to Turkey in order to join the Islamic State, with Hostey allegedly providing the logistical support.³⁶

Between late 2015 and mid-2016, another domestic Islamist terrorist, Mohamed Bailor Jalloh, had been in communication with Islamic State virtual entrepreneur al-Sudani. Jalloh had traveled to Nigeria, via his native country of Sierra Leone, in June 2015 where he met an unnamed Islamic State facilitator with the intent of receiving assistance to join the group in Libya. He eventually decided against this and opted instead for a plan to attack the U.S. homeland. It was on his way back to the United States, while he was in Sierra Leone, that Jalloh first made online contact with al-Sudani. According to court documents, he was someone whom Jalloh "understood was an ISIL figure engaged in plotting attacks in the

United States.⁷³⁷

After his return to the United States, Jalloh communicated regularly with al-Sudani during the first half of 2016. On two separate occasions, al-Sudani arranged for a total of \$700 to be sent to him via a family member of Jalloh's in Sierra Leone, who gave the funds to a contact of al-Sudani's in the country. By March 2016, court records show that al-Sudani "was actively plotting an attack in the United States." As part of these efforts, he had put Jalloh in touch with another U.S.-based contact of his in the hope that they would plan an attack together.³⁸ Unbeknownst to al-Sudani, his contact was an FBI informant. Jalloh first met the informant in April 2016 in Virginia and began discussing with him various options for an attack in the name of the Islamic State. During the meeting, Jalloh claimed that he was constantly thinking about conducting an attack, and when asked to elaborate, he said "Nidal Hassan type of things. That's the kind of stuff I started thinking."³⁹ As a result of the investigation, Jalloh was arrested in July 2016 after attempting to buy a weapon in North Carolina that he intended to use for an attack. He was later sentenced to 11 years in prison for conspiracy to provide material support to the Islamic State.⁴⁰

Al-Sudani was also heavily involved in encouraging New York-based Islamic State supporter Emanuel Lutchman to plan an attack in the city. They began communicating online in December 2015 after Lutchman found al-Sudani's contact in an Islamic State-produced online document.⁴¹ During these discussions, Lutchman expressed his desire to travel to Libya in order to join the Islamic State, but he was told by al-Sudani that he first had to prove himself to the group by executing an attack in the United States. Al-Sudani also pointed out that due to his location "behind enemy lines," Lutchman's real utility to the Islamic State was as a domestic terrorist.⁴² He told Lutchman to plan an attack for New Year's Eve 2015, when he would have easy access to large crowds. He also offered Lutchman various pieces of advice both to ensure that the operation was as effective as possible and to avoid capture beforehand. Once the operation was complete, al-Sudani promised Lutchman he would vouch for him to the Islamic State after he arrived in Libya.

By late December, Lutchman—while maintaining regular contact with al-Sudani, who continued to offer advice and moral support—had begun plotting an attack with three accomplices. He was unaware, however, that all of these individuals were working for the FBI. On December 28, Lutchman identified a restaurant in Rochester, New York, as a target and began planning an attack that entailed taking hostages and executing them with a machete.⁴³ Two days later, he recorded the video al-Sudani had requested of him. Holding his index finger aloft, he pledged allegiance to the Islamic State and announced that "the blood that you spill of the Muslim overseas, we gonna spill the blood of the *kuffar* [unbelievers]."⁴⁴ He was arrested immediately afterward, and in August 2016, Lutchman pleaded guilty to conspiracy to provide material support to the Islamic State.

The virtual entrepreneurs of the Islamic State appear to be issuing similar sets of instructions to their American contacts, almost as if they are working from a common script. For example, al-Sudani asked two things of Lutchman that match what Hussain had advised Usaamah Abdullah Rahim and Justin Sullivan. Lutchman was told to carry a weapon with him at all times in case the authorities attempted to arrest him, so that if "something happens, kill them all."⁴⁵ Al-Sudani also asked Lutchman to send him a written message and videos announcing his *bay'a* (allegiance) to the Is-

lamic State, which could be released after the attack and allow the group to claim responsibility and "let the worlds know [ISIL is] coming."⁴⁶ While it is unclear if Islamic State virtual entrepreneurs are sharing information and tradecraft amongst themselves, this certainly would appear to be the case.

Figures like al-Sudani and Hussain gained such respect among English-speaking Islamic State supporters around the world that they were also sought out online in order to give their blessing for attacks, much in the same way that extremist sheikhs provided *fatwas* in the past. Around the same time that Ohio resident Munir Abdulkader was coordinating his attack with Hussain, a young man from New York was looking for approval for a "martyrdom attack."⁴⁷ According to court records submitted as part of a plea agreement, the man in question, Munther Omar Saleh, reached out to Hussain for advice on behalf of his friend Fareed Mumuni, stating "akh (a brother) who is planning on hitting a black car cop [police car] with a pressure cooker, the black car keeps following him, and he wants to avenge our akhs (brothers) who have been raided and blocked from hijrah. Is it permissible for him to do the attack and die purposely in the process?" Hussain responded, "Yes akhi (my brother) he can do an *isthishadi* (martyrdom) operation on the police akhi if he has no other way to fight them he can do it." Not one to miss an opportunity for propaganda production, Hussain also told Saleh to have Mumuni send any martyrdom video directly to him.⁴⁸ When the FBI arrived at Mumuni's house to execute a search warrant, he attacked one of the special agents with a knife, stabbing him repeatedly but failing to penetrate his body armor.⁴⁹ He was instructed to do so by Hussain, and this is consistent with the type of instructions he gave to Rahim and al-Sudani to Lutchman.

While Hussain provided instructions in a plot to attack the organizer of the Muhammad Art Exhibit and Contest, he was also, at the very least, on the periphery of a major conspiracy to attack the event itself. On May 3, 2015, Elton Simpson and his accomplice, Nadir Soofi, traveled to Garland, Texas, as part of a plot to use assault rifles to kill attendees. In the months preceding the attack, which ended in the deaths of both men before they could enter the venue, Simpson had been in direct contact with at least two virtual entrepreneurs using Twitter direct message and SureSpot.¹ Indeed, while he was willing to risk using the internet to communicate with fellow extremists abroad, Simpson was wary of discussing his violent plans via Twitter, once lightheartedly chiding one of his contacts for his lax protocols: "I expect a higher level of security from you my brother."⁵⁰

Shortly before Simpson attempted the attack, he logged on to Twitter and urged users to follow @_AbuHu55ain, one of the accounts operated by Hussain.⁵¹ In addition, an hour before the attack, Hussain himself tweeted a number of messages suggesting he was aware of the impending shooting, including: "The knives have been sharpened, soon we will come to your streets with death and slaughter!"⁵² Two days later, the Islamic State released a statement taking credit for the attack in what was its first of several claims of operations in the United States.⁵³ While the clues certainly exist,

h Although the court records do not explicitly name the 'ISIL Facilitator,' the U.S. attorney announced it was Junaid Hussain in remarks to the press.

i Elton Simpson's online discussions with Hussain were presented as evidence for the prosecution in *United States v. Abdul Malik Abdul Kareem* (2016).

there is no clear evidence that Hussain had a direct hand in plotting this attack, though there is no doubt he encouraged Simpson's extremism by offering moral support and helping validate his beliefs. While discussing Hussain's role in the Abdulkader case, however, Assistant U.S. Attorney Timothy Mangan told the judge that Hussain had boasted to Abdulkader about his involvement in directing the Garland attacks, telling him "there's more to come."⁵⁴ Furthermore, in December 2015, FBI Director James Comey claimed that on the day of the attack, one of the gunmen and "an overseas terrorist" exchanged 109 encrypted messages. The overseas terrorist was reportedly believed to be Hussain. The details of these exchanges are as yet unknown, with the FBI unable to access them.⁵⁵

It is often overlooked that Simpson's support for global jihadism was established before the rise of the Islamic State. In 2009, he attempted to join al-Shabaab in Somalia, a country that preceded Syria as the prime destination for Westerners wishing to make *hijrah*.⁵⁶ His interest in the broader movement led him to also reach out to Miski in the months before the attack in Garland.⁵⁷

In December 2014, Miski engaged with Simpson via Twitter direct messages during which both men discussed their support for the January 2015 attacks in Paris and their shared admiration for al-Awlaki. It appears that, among other things, Simpson was using Miski as a way to receive advice and information from a jihadi sheikh with connections to Miski. On December 7, 2014, Simpson, using his Twitter handle @birdofgreen, messaged Miski's account @Muhajir_1436_Miski: "Did the brother interpret the dream for you? Or not yet." Miski soon responded, telling Simpson that "he said the Hoor al-Ayn is waiting for you eagerly."⁵⁸ The Hoor al-Ayn are virgins that jihadi ideologues claim are promised to recruits who carry out suicide operations, and Miski's reference to this is telling. While it is not clear what Simpson's dream was about, it can be reasonably surmised that it was related to a possible operation he had discussed with Miski, who was all too happy to offer encouragement.

This dialogue was the first of at least two conversations about dream interpretation. In the second, Miski suggested to Simpson that while he will "lose [sic] an opportunity to do something good like Hijrah ... Allah will hold you back for something far better."⁵⁹ While cryptic, this too suggests that Miski was pushing Simpson in the direction of committing a domestic attack. This is further supported by another conversation days later when Simpson asked Miski, "I wonder what it means when one sees imam Anwar [al-Awlaki] in a dream," to which Miski responded, "Maybe he's telling you what he told Nidal," likely referring to the November 5, 2009, domestic terrorist attack carried out by Nidal Hasan in Fort Hood, Texas.⁶⁰

Miski and Simpson also communicated via Twitter about the gathering in Garland. In April 2015, a week before the attack, Simpson expressed his frustration about the event over Twitter, saying "When will they ever learn? They are planning on selecting the best picture drawn of Rasulullah (saws) [a reference to the Prophet Mohammad] in Texas." Miski soon retweeted the message and also posted his own statement encouraging Americans to attack the event, telling his followers that "The brothers from the Charlie Hebdo attack did their part. It's time for brothers in the #US to do their part."⁶¹ This was a reference to the January 2015 al-Qa`ida-linked killings at the offices of French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*, known for its frequent depictions of the Prophet Mohammad.

Miski's name has also surfaced in several other cases analyzed in

this article. It has been reported that he was in touch with Nicholas Rovinski, who was convicted for his role in the plot to kill an organizer of the Mohammad cartoon contest.⁶² He was also allegedly an online contact of the young New Yorker Saleh, although the nature of their discussions remains unclear.⁶³

In conjunction with the aforementioned American jihadis, court records related to the case of Abdi Nur, an American who successfully traveled to join the Islamic State in Syria, show that he too had extensive online conversations with Miski. They were both from the same area in Minneapolis, and one piece of advice that Miski, an experienced foreign fighter, imparted to his friend was to maintain close contact with fellow Americans in Syria. According to Miski, this was because "being connected in Jihad make you stronger and you can all help each other by fulfilling the duties that Allah swt (sic) put over you ... Like us in Somalia the brothers from mpls [Minneapolis] are well connected so try to do the same ... It is something we have learned after 6 years in Jihad."⁶⁴ Miski is also named as one of three co-conspirators with whom Keonna Thomas, a convert from Pennsylvania, discussed her desire to travel to Syria and become a martyr.⁶⁵

Beyond their various degrees of direct contact with a myriad of radicalized Americans, the impact of virtual entrepreneurs, while significant, is difficult to measure. Their activities and the public profiles they cultivated have nonetheless made them beacons of inspiration for their fellow Western jihadis, many of whom have no doubt been motivated after witnessing what they were able to achieve.

Conclusion

Social media, coupled with the ever-increasing availability of applications that offer encrypted messaging, has given virtual entrepreneurs the ability to both bypass Western counterterrorism measures and build close, trusting online relationships with recruits. As a result, virtual entrepreneurs have come to be seen by their followers as leadership figures from whom they can draw inspiration and take advice and instruction on how to act on their extreme beliefs.

Along with helping to inspire radicalized Westerners, the work of Islamic State virtual entrepreneurs has given the group new ways to take ownership of their attacks, ensuring that they continue to receive attention and media coverage. Crucially, virtual entrepreneurs require few resources and offer a very favorable balance between cost and benefit. This is particularly relevant today as the Islamic State continues to lose ground in Iraq and Syria but retains its desire to remain relevant while maintaining a significant online presence and capability to strike Western targets.⁶⁶

It is, therefore, no surprise that this trend is on the rise throughout the West. In Europe, the strengthening of security measures and increased military pressure have made it difficult for people to travel and join the Islamic State as well as for the group to train send operatives back home to conduct attacks. The resulting reduction in the flow of foreign fighters has seen virtual entrepreneurs favor encouraging more operations in European nations rather than helping to facilitate travel. In a recent analysis of 38 Islamic State-linked plots and attacks in Europe between 2014 and October 2016, 19 (50 percent) were found to have involved "online instruction from

members of IS's networks.^{3j}

The story is similar in the United States. Since 2015, as seen in the cases of Abdulkader and Lutchman, some have been directed away from their initial intention to join the Islamic State by virtual entrepreneurs who ask them to instead focus on domestic attacks due to difficulties associated with travel. The authors' current data shows that virtual entrepreneurs were involved in 21 percent of the total 38 plots in the United States in the same period as the European study.^k While this number is lower—and in 2016, there was only one documented instance of a virtual entrepreneur being involved in a domestic plot (compared to six in 2015)—it may change. Due to the time it takes for cases to go to court, it will be some time before additional details come to light. It is worth noting as well that three of the most influential members of the Legion—Hussain, Hostey, and Khan—were killed in 2015, while Miski was arrested that same year and al-Sudani was killed in mid-2016. Whether or not they can be replaced remains to be seen.

There are a number of factors that may influence this. The first of these is whether the Islamic State and other jihadi groups intent on striking the West maintain enough territory to continue harboring individuals with the capability to inspire and plan attacks via the internet. While virtual entrepreneurs can technically be just as effective while operating outside of jihadi-held territory, it is not so simple. They may, for example, lose credibility in the eyes of Western jihadis gained by the likes of Hussain and Miski who, due to their locations, were able to present themselves as legitimate members of terrorist organizations. This potential lack of safe havens would also likely make virtual entrepreneurs more vulnerable to interception by Western security services.

j According to the study, a further "twelve plots can with a high degree of certainty be linked to IS's section for international operations and the Abaaoud-network. Nearly all of [these twelve] involve returning foreign fighters." Petter Nesser, Anne Stenersen, and Emilie Oftedal, "Jihadi Terrorism in Europe: The IS-Effect," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 10:6 (2016).

k While the authors' dataset covers an additional five months (up to March 2017), this does not impact the figures.

Second, much will depend on how both Western states and technology companies deal with this issue. At present, it remains somewhat unclear how companies offering messenger apps with encryption services plan to respond. While Telegram announced in 2015 that it had shut down 78 Islamic State-related unencrypted channels, it also clarified that it had not interfered with any private, encrypted chats.¹ When asked about the use of Telegram by the Islamic State, the company's founder, Pavel Durov, responded by suggesting that it was a regrettable but nonetheless acceptable by-product of the more important issue of offering true privacy to internet users. "I think that privacy, ultimately, and our right for privacy is more important than our fear of bad things happening, like terrorism," he said.⁶⁷

In the traditional policy realm, Western states continue to struggle in their efforts to develop effective and coherent policies on combating terrorist use of the internet. In Europe, EUROPOL has set up the Internet Referral Unit (EU IRU). According to EUROPOL Deputy Director Wil van Gemert, it "detects terrorist and violent extremist online content, flags and refers such content to internet providers, and asks for its removal."⁶⁸ However, it is not clear if the EU IRU has begun to look into encrypted messaging applications. In the United States, policy is still taking shape. Under the previous administration, government officials repeatedly met with senior technology company executives, urging them to police their platforms further and more aggressively enforce their terms of service.⁶⁹

As the response to this threat develops, it is unlikely the world has seen the end of virtual entrepreneurs with the deaths of Legion members and others associated with them. Their recent successes could ensure that they will be central to jihadi groups' current and future efforts to strike the West while continuing to pose a complex challenge to counterterrorism authorities. **CTC**

1 The announcement was made on Twitter on November 18, 2015. Soon after, a user asked "Oh, so do you intercept conversations?" To which the official Telegram twitter account responded, "No. Channels are public and available to everyone by default."

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