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FEATURE ARTICLE

Responding to the Next Attack

Learning from the police response in Orlando and San Bernardino

Frank Straub, Jennifer Zeunik, and Ben Gorban

A VIEW FROM THE CT FOXHOLE

James Gagliano

Former FBI Hostage Rescue Team Counterterrorist Operator

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FROM THE EDITOR

In the early hours of June 12, 2016, an Islamic State-inspired gunman carried out the deadliest terrorist attack on U.S. soil since 9/11, shooting dead 49 people in an Orlando nightclub. The attacker was finally killed after a three-hour hostage standoff, leading to questions raised in the media over the police response. One year later, Frank Straub, Jennifer Zeunik, and Ben Gorban look at the lessons learned from the police response to the Orlando and San Bernardino terrorist attacks based on critical incident reviews they conducted for the Police Foundation. In our cover article, they outline how regular police units who were first to respond to the attacks were faced with chaos and "unimaginable devastation … with victims begging for help, people dying, and others who were already deceased" as well as adversaries armed with powerful weapons with explosives or making threats to use them against hostages. The authors argue that with the Islamic State calling for attacks in all 50 U.S. states, police forces across the country need to adapt their training and equipment to prepare for IED, suicide bombing, and hostage situations. Their review found that while Orlando police followed current best practices designed to avoid the deaths of hostages and unreasonable danger to police, new protocols may be necessary for terrorist hostage attacks. In our interview this month, James Gagliano, a former counterterrorist operator for the FBI Hostage Rescue Team, argues that with Islamic State-inspired hostage-takers seeking to kill as many as possible before being killed themselves, the new guidance in these cases should be for law enforcement to more quickly or immediately implement rescue plans to save as many hostages as possible.

John Horgan, Mia Bloom, Chelsea Daymon, Wojciech Kaczkowski, and Hicham Tiflati examine the Islamic State's older fighters. As the group finds it increasingly difficult to replace its fighters, preliminary evidence documented by the Georgia State University researchers suggests an emerging and increasingly aggressive role for older adults, especially as suicide bombers. Michele Groppi warns the terrorist threat to Italy may come to resemble that in France because of growing societal tensions. Franc Milburn provides an overview of Iranian Kurdish insurgent groups, who he argues may emerge as significant players in the region.

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CONTACT

Combating Terrorism Center
U.S. Military Academy
607 Cullum Road, Lincoln Hall
West Point, NY 10996
Phone: (845) 938-8495
Email: sentinel@usma.edu
Web: www.ctc.usma.edu/sentinel/

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The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and not of the U.S. Military Academy, the Department of the Army, or any other agency of the U.S. Government.

Cover: Local San Bernardino SWAT Team members storm a school after shooters engaged the police less than block away. (Ted Soqui/Corbis via Getty Images)

Lessons Learned from the Police Response to the San Bernardino and Orlando Terrorist Attacks

By Frank Straub, Jennifer Zeunik, and Ben Gorban

In the terrorist attacks in San Bernardino and Orlando, the first responders were patrol and traffic officers, investigators, and command personnel, not tactical units. This is also likely to be the case in future attacks. In both cases, the local law enforcement response required judgment calls in extremely volatile and difficult circumstances. While well-defined, well-developed, and practiced protocols equipped responding officers to perform effectively during these tragic events, vital lessons have also been learned, including how to confront attackers armed or claiming to be armed with high-powered weapons and explosive devices. Some traditional practices need to be realigned and enhanced to improve the survivability of victims and the safety of first responders in an increasingly complicated threat environment.

During the last decade, individuals motivated by a range of ideological beliefs and individual factors have engaged in horrific acts of mass violence targeting innocent civilians in communities across the United States. These attacks, according to a report by the Congressional Research Service in 2015, have increased in frequency as well as lethality.[1] This new reality has challenged law enforcement agencies to ensure their training, tactics, and operational procedures evolve effectively in order to confront offenders who kill and seriously injure defenseless civilians at movie theaters,[a] schools,[b] churches,[c] conference rooms,[d] nightclubs,[e] and iconic sporting events[f] as well as in mobile active shootings throughout a community.[g]

This article[h] focuses on the local law enforcement response to two acts of mass public violence— the terrorist attacks at the Inland Regional Center in San Bernardino, California, and the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Florida. These two events, perpetrated by individuals inspired by Islamist extremist ideology, claimed the lives of 63 innocent people and injured 75 others, shocking law enforcement officials and communities across the country.[i] In both instances, patrol and traffic officers, investigators, and command personnel—not tactical teams—were the first law enforcement personnel to arrive on scene. The situations they encountered were marked by chaos and unimaginable devastation, with overwhelming sights, sounds, and smells of human tragedy—victims begging for help, people dying, and others who were already deceased.

In both incidents, the terrorists targeted first responders with secondary devices or the threat thereof. Law enforcement personnel were challenged by the possibility that the perpetrators were wearing suicide vests and/or had placed them on hostages. Both incidents ended in a barrage of gunfire as officers put themselves in harm's way, confronting heavily armed suspects who fought until they were neutralized.

The San Bernardino and Pulse nightclub terrorist attacks were committed by "homegrown jihadis" inspired by the Islamic State, who planned and prepared their brutal attacks hidden from the community and law enforcement. Their chief asset was that their

Frank Straub is Director of Strategic Studies at the Police Foundation, a non-profit organization that studies ways to improve policing in the United States. Dr. Straub is a 30-year veteran of federal and local law enforcement, having served as the Police Chief in Spokane, Washington; the Public Safety Director in Indianapolis; the Public Safety Commissioner in White Plains, New York; and the New York City Police Department's Deputy Commissioner of Training. He also served as a member of the FBI-NYPD Joint Terrorism Task Force.

Jennifer Zeunik is Director of Programs at the Police Foundation. She has 20 years of experience working with public safety and non-profit organizations on law enforcement policy and practice. In her current role, Ms. Zeunik oversees the Police Foundation's Critical Incident Review Technical Assistance projects as well as programs that provide training and technical assistance to law enforcement agencies across the country.

Ben Gorban is Policy Analyst for the Police Foundation's Critical Incident Review Technical Assistance projects, including the ongoing review of the Orlando Pulse nightclub attack.

a Aurora Century 16 Theater, Aurora, Colorado, July 20, 2012.

b Sandy Hook Elementary School, Newton, Connecticut, December 14, 2012.

c Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, Charleston, South Carolina, June 17, 2015.

d Inland Regional Center, San Bernardino, California, December 2, 2015.

e Pulse nightclub, Orlando, Florida, June 12, 2016.

f Boston Marathon Bombings, Boston, Massachusetts, April 15, 2013.

g Meadows apartment complex, Seelye Kia dealership, and Cracker Barrel restaurant, Kalamazoo, Michigan, February 20, 2016.

h The Police Foundation's critical incident reviews of the San Bernardino and Orlando Pulse nightclub attacks were funded by the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS Office). The opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the U.S. Department of Justice and/or the COPS Office.

i Fourteen individuals were killed and 22 wounded in the San Bernardino attack. Forty-nine were killed and 53 wounded in the Pulse nightclub shooting.

plans were developed in secret, making it exceedingly difficult for law enforcement to detect or disrupt their attacks. In 2010, Yemeni-American terrorist cleric Anwar al-Awlaki gloated that "jihad is becoming as American as apple pie."[2] That seemingly absurd claim, it turns out, has some merit as "domestic terrorism from all sources is endemic and shows no signs of abating," according to research by the Southern Poverty Law Center.[3]

This article describes the San Bernardino and Orlando attacks, identifies lessons learned during the Police Foundation's reviews of law enforcement responses to the attacks, and highlights some of the challenges confronting the law enforcement response to terrorist events and other acts of mass public violence. Finally, the article discusses areas that require further attention so as to improve the safety of communities and first responders in the United States.

Inland Regional Center - San Bernardino, California

On the morning of December 2, 2015, San Bernardino County Public Health employees gathered in a conference room inside the Inland Regional Center (IRC) in San Bernardino, California, for training and a holiday party. During a short break, Syed Farook, a fellow public health employee who had left the meeting earlier, returned with his wife, Tashfeen Malik, dressed in dark tactical military-style gear to kill his co-workers.[j] Armed with high-powered semi-automatic rifles (AR-15s), the couple sprayed the conference room with approximately 100 .223 rounds as Farook's co-workers ran for cover, hid under tables and behind doors, lay motionless on the floor, or were gravely wounded or killed by the terrorists' bullets. Within minutes, Farook and Malik killed 14 and wounded 22 others. IRC employees, located on the floors above the conference room or in adjoining buildings, called 911 and described the attack to dispatchers as they hid from the assailants or fled the building. The first report of shots fired came in at 1058 hours.[4]

The first police officer arrived on scene approximately three and a half minutes after the initial dispatch went out. He was met by three other San Bernardino Police Department officers, all of whom heard the call and responded. None of the officers (one lieutenant, one patrol officer, one homicide detective, and one motorcycle officer) had worked or even trained together. The lieutenant quickly rallied the officers, organized the contact team into a diamond formation (a tactic they had learned during recent active shooter training), and entered the building.

Dozens of victims lay on the ground, many with devastating wounds—moaning and grabbing at the legs of the officers as they moved through the room and tried to focus on finding, apprehending, or neutralizing the assailants. "It was the worst thing imaginable. Some people were quiet, hiding. Others were screaming or dying, grabbing at your legs because they wanted us to get them out, but our job at the moment was to keep going," recalled one of the first officers to enter the conference room. "That was the hardest part, stepping over them."[5] The contact team also encountered water pouring from a pipe that had ruptured during the shooting, mixing water with the blood that covered the floor and further challenging the officers' ability to progress through the scene. The smell of gunpowder filled the air. The fire alarm blared, and the alarm's strobe lights added to the overwhelming sensory stimuli.[6]

As the initial contact team moved through the building, a second contact team, similarly diverse in composition, entered the building from the opposite side. The two teams met up and continued to search for the shooters. They cleared the first floor, working together as if they had done so in the past. SWAT team members and other officers joined the search, which was physically exhausting because of the number of locked hallway doors and rooms that had to be forced open, entered, and cleared. The heat as well as the tactical gear that some of the officers wore added to the physical challenges. Once officers gained entry to an area, they had to exercise weapons discipline and caution as frightened victims, who could have been mistaken for the shooter(s), ran toward them. Because the ad hoc search teams lacked a standardized way to mark cleared rooms, some rooms were searched more than once. Officers were unsure if they had been cleared because of their unfamiliarity with the markings left by a previous search team.

A cadre of responders followed the initial contact teams into the building, many of them county probation officers. The officers extracted victims who needed emergency medical treatment, loading them into vehicles and moving them across the street to a triage area. With no litters or tactical stretchers available, responders improvised with blankets, chairs, and other items. The officers noted that they lacked training and equipment to treat the severe bleeding and extensive trauma they encountered. Inside the conference room, a tactical medic triaged the wounded, identifying the most critically injured for removal and treatment.[k]

While victims were being treated and the IRC cleared, at some point after 1500 hours, San Bernardino investigators located the assailants' SUV in nearby Redlands after a police analyst linked the rented SUV to Farook and his residence in Redlands. Law enforcement officers from multiple jurisdictions engaged the suspect in a high-speed pursuit after the SUV failed to yield. During the pursuit, the assailants fired multiple rounds at the officers. The assailants stopped their SUV in an intersection near the IRC. Farook exited the vehicle, shooting at the police, while Malik directed unrelenting gunfire at the officers from inside the vehicle. Officers returned fire, directing at least 440 rounds at the terrorists, killing them. Together, the two suspects fired at least 81 rounds at officers. The shooting stopped at 1514 hours.

Responding to the traffic stop and the shootout, self-deployed officers parked their cars and blocked ingress and egress for other emergency vehicles. This issue has been identified in a number of after action reports—including those for Dorner,[7] Aurora,[8] Stockton,[9] the Navy Yard,[10] and Paris[11]—and should be addressed through policies, procedures, and training as it poses a risk to those who are injured and need lifesaving evacuation. Additionally, the bottlenecks can prevent important assets such as armored vehicles and Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) equipment from a timely arrival on scene to address or mitigate threats to officers and civilians.

Armored vehicles provided cover as officers secured the body of Farook and removed Malik's body from the vehicle. Police immedi-

j According to the federal criminal complaint against Enrique Marquez, Farook arrived at the IRC at approximately 8:48 AM, left an item on the table at approximately 9:05 AM, and left the IRC at approximately 10:37 AM. When law enforcement entered the IRC after the shooting, they found the bag with what was later determined to be an IED.

k Although the Rancho Cucamonga Fire District had a fully developed Rescue Task Force (fire medics trained to integrate with a SWAT team to treat and remove injured individuals from a scene), it was not deployed.

Law enforcement officers search for the suspects of the mass shooting in San Bernardino, California, on December 2, 2015. (Patrick T. Fallon/AFP/Getty Images)

ately searched their vehicle for explosives and evidence. As investigators searched the bodies of the deceased assailants and the inside of the vehicle, they found two .223-caliber rifles (one of which had been modified in an attempt to make it fully automatic); a 9mm handgun; multiple electronic devices (cell phone, tablet, and MP3 player); and approximately 1,879 rounds of .223 ammunition and 484 rounds of 9mm ammunition. The assailants had taped ammunition magazines together to make switching them out easier. Investigators also found in the vehicle what they believed was the trigger apparatus intended to be used to detonate the secondary device found at the IRC, as well as medical supplies (ibuprofen, quick-clot agents, tourniquets, emergency bandages, and adult diapers). The assailants had worn all black clothing, ski masks, load-bearing vests, and Airsoft neck guards; neither wore body armor.[12]

As FBI SWAT team members and local law enforcement officers searched and cleared the IRC, they found what appeared to be a remotely controlled improvised explosive device (IED) in a bag in the conference room. When discovered, the IED was armed and ready to detonate. It appears the IED was left for the purpose of injuring and/or killing first responders. The building was evacuated, and bomb squad officers rendered the device safe. The IRC was cleared and released to investigators at 2129 hours on December 2, approximately 11 hours after the first shots were fired.

Pulse Nightclub - Orlando, Florida

On June 12, 2016, approximately 300 patrons were at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Florida. The bartenders at the club's three bars had just announced last call when, at approximately 0200 hours, Omar Mateen, a 29-year-old American of Afghan descent entered the club and started shooting.[13] The small size of the nightclub and the high density of people inside made his gunfire even more devastating. Mateen fired more than 200 rounds from a .223 semi-automatic rifle and 9mm handgun during the initial minutes of the incident.[14] Club-goers ran for exits or a place to hide, fell to the ground, or were hit by bullets. In the end, 49 individuals were killed and 53 injured. What began as an active shooter incident transitioned into a barricaded suspect with hostages. It became the deadliest terrorist attack on U.S. soil since September 11, 2001.

An Orlando Police Department (OPD) detective who was working an off-duty detail at Pulse engaged the suspect immediately after the first shots were fired, and called for backup. OPD officers, including some from the SWAT Team, responded in less than a minute after the shots-fired call was put out over the police radio. As more OPD officers arrived, some took tactical positions around the club, and two contact teams formed and entered the club at 0208 hours—one through a patio entrance and one, led by a SWAT lieutenant, through a front window. Together, the teams were able to drive the suspect to the rear of the club where he barricaded himself in a bathroom in which some club-goers had hidden.[15] At this point, officers stopped hearing gunfire, indicating that the suspect had stopped firing his weapon, and the incident transitioned from an active shooter to a hostage situation.

As soon as the subject was contained, officers began evacuating the wounded. They set up a triage area and transported the critically injured to Orlando Regional Medical Center, which was a few blocks away, in police and personal vehicles. They rescued club-goers who had barricaded themselves in offices and other rooms inside the club and, they established a command post.[16] At approximately 0235 hours, Mateen called 911 and told the call-taker that he was responsible for the shootings and pledged his allegiance to the Is-

lamic State and its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.[17] After answering a return call from an OPD Crisis Negotiation Team sergeant at 0247 hours, he repeated this allegiance and further indicated that "there's some vehicles outside that have some bombs … [that] can take out a whole city block almost" and that he had at least one bomb vest.[18] At 0252, a victim advised 911 that the suspect had a bomb vest strapped to him.[19] There were several more short exchanges with negotiators over the phone, with Mateen telling police shortly before 0330 hours, "you're annoying me with these phone calls, and I don't really appreciate it."[20] There were no further contacts with Mateen after that call. At 0341, four performers were rescued from a dressing room inside the club.[21] At 0403, a K-9 alerted on Mateen's vehicle adding validity to his claim (which would prove false) that there were explosives inside.[22] At 0429 hours, eight victims who had hidden in a dressing room that adjoined the north bathroom where Mateen was contained, were rescued after SWAT officers removed an air conditioner.[23] Officers then received information from the brother of a hostage who received a text by the hostage at 0429 hours stating that the suspect intended to place bomb vests on four of the hostages in 15 minutes, adding validity to Mateen's earlier claim that he had at least one suicide vest.[24]

Concern that hostages inside the bathrooms might soon be targeted led to the decision by law enforcement leaders to breach the exterior wall to enter the south bathroom to rescue victims.[25] At approximately 0502 hours, the Orange County Sheriff's Office (OCSO) EOD squad detonated an explosive charge on the west wall, then broke through portions of the hallway wall between the north and south bathrooms. An OPD armored vehicle equipped with a ram was then used to breach the remaining portions of the hallway wall and quickly moved to the south bathroom wall. Breaches of the south bathroom wall were made, allowing some of the victims to escape. At 0514, the suspect began firing inside the north bathroom. OPD SWAT officers deployed two flashbangs through the hole in the hallway, and the armored vehicle began to breach the wall of the north bathroom. At 0515, as OPD and OCSO Hazardous Device Team (HDT) personnel prepared to enter the hallway, the suspect came out of the bathroom firing his weapons at officers. A SWAT officer was struck in his ballistic helmet. Officers returned fire, killing the shooter.[26]

Lessons Learned

In San Bernardino and Orlando, law enforcement officers demonstrated professionalism, dedication, and bravery as they confronted terrorists who had committed horrific acts of mass violence and remained a threat to the community and the first responders. Law enforcement officers, immediately upon arrival, formed contact teams, entered the locations, and began an active search to locate, contain, apprehend, or neutralize the terrorist(s), placing themselves in harm's way to save others. In doing so, they adhered to their training and to best practices in response to an active shooter situation, undoubtedly preventing further violence and saving the lives of critically injured victims. In fact, San Bernardino area law enforcement officers credited their response to the active shooter training they had received prior to the attack. One officer remarked, "Regional and realistic training was invaluable. Training came into play tenfold. We didn't have to think about how we should do it—we just did it."[27]

In the case of the Orlando attack, there was a certain amount of second guessing aired in the media about why police did not move to neutralize the shooter in the bathrooms sooner. It should

Police vehicles surround the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Florida, on June 12, 2016, following the worst terror attack in the United States since 9/11. (Mandel Ngan/AFP/Getty Images)

be stressed, however, that the police responding to the attack followed protocols and best practice for hostage situations. While a debate can be had about whether such protocols should change in the case of standoffs with Islamist terrorists seeking to kill and be killed, it is worth emphasizing that current best practices are designed to avoid the death of hostages and putting police officers in unreasonable danger. Recognizing that the threat of such extremist terrorism represents a continuing, if not growing threat, it may be appropriate to develop specific protocols for hostage events during terrorist attacks.

Law enforcement leaders in San Bernardino and Orlando acknowledged that they had studied, learned from, and implemented many of the lessons learned from after action reports that had been published following terrorist attacks and other mass public violence events. San Bernardino area command personnel acknowledged that they had rewritten policies, procedures, and practices in light of the response to the case of Christopher Dorner, an ex-Los Angeles Police Department officer responsible for a string of shootings who was killed in a 2013 standoff in the San Bernardino mountains, which was described in a critical incident review authored by the Police Foundation.[28] Similarly, Orlando commanders, SWAT leaders, and some patrol officers had reviewed after action reports—particularly those from Columbine, Aurora, Sandy Hook, and San Bernardino—and developed and implemented training scenarios based on the lessons learned. For example, consistent with best practices developed after Columbine, officers are trained to immediately form contact teams, enter the location under attack, and prioritize apprehending, containing, and/or neutralizing the assailant(s).[29] Following the actions taken in the Aurora theater shooting, officers were trained to quickly transport critically injured persons in police vehicles if the trauma center was nearby (in Orlando within a few blocks) and if rescue personnel were unavailable or unable to enter the "hot zone."[30] Additionally, officers were instructed to ensure ingress and egress were available for ambulances, fire apparatus, and other emergency vehicles.

Well-defined, well-developed, and practiced protocols have equipped law enforcement leaders and their personnel to perform at high levels in response to active shooter events to date. However, recent IED and active shooter incidents reveal that some traditional practices need to be realigned and enhanced to improve the survivability of victims and the safety of first responders in an increasingly complicated threat environment.[31] For example, as demonstrated in San Bernardino and as threatened in Orlando, single or multiple IED events targeting civilians and/or first responders represent an ongoing and growing threat from domestic and foreign individuals and groups.[32] In this regard, the Boston Police Department (BPD) is drawing on the U.S. military's experience with IEDs in Iraq and Afghanistan to train its tactical personnel. According to BPD spokesperson Lieutenant Michael McCarthy, "in terms of improvised explosive devices, it is imperative that we train for those types of threats. The [Boston] marathon bombing is a perfect example—the device was of a type widely used in Iraq and Afghanistan, which could very likely be used again in the U.S."[33]

Patrol officers, as demonstrated in San Bernardino, Orlando, Paris, and most recently in London,[34] are increasingly the first law enforcement personnel to arrive on scene. While significant emphasis has been placed on training SWAT and other tactical units to respond to terrorist attacks,[35] recent incidents have demonstrated that the actions taken by patrol and other non-tactical unit officers greatly impacts the outcome of the event. For example, the first officer to reach the worst of the carnage at the Bataclan concert hall in Paris was armed with only a service sidearm. The officer stalled the killing by shooting one attacker, resulting in the detonation of the terrorist's suicide vest.[36] In San Bernardino and Orlando, the first officers to arrive on scene immediately formed contact teams and entered the IRC and Pulse nightclub, respectively to "stop the killing and stop the dying."[37]

The presence of IEDs, suicide bombers, and/or hostages suggests that greater emphasis must be placed on providing training for patrol officers arriving on the scene of a terrorist attack. In addition to tactics, training should include decision-making and critical-thinking components in order to strengthen the patrol officer's ability to conduct a situational assessment and develop and execute an appropriate course of action in highly complex and volatile situations. In this regard, law enforcement agencies should create a stand-alone policy and/or training curriculum that addresses the response to IEDs, suicide bombers, and hostage situations. The policy and training must be consistent with the agency's use of force policies, procedures, and training as well as its active shooter protocols.[38] In developing policies, procedures, and protocols, agencies must recognize that terrorists are specifically looking to target first responders with secondary devices and that the emphasis on taking immediate action to stop the killing and dying may lead to some or all of the initial contact teams being critically injured or killed. Making decisions in how to respond in an increasingly hostile operating environment is neither simple nor easy. Protocols, policies, procedures, and training must be developed before an event happens and with the recognition that terrorists are studying the police response to incidents of mass public violence.[39]

The terrorist attacks in San Bernardino and Orlando, as well as other incidents in the West, have provided a number of additional lessons for police forces in the United States when it comes to command at the scene, communication, equipment, and medical capabilities.

Incident Command

A coordinated command and control strategy is critical as multiple units and/or agencies respond to acts of mass public violence and/or terrorist attacks. Incident command structures facilitate communication, situational awareness, operational coordination, resource allocation, and the delivery of services in chaotic environments. It is critically important to designate an incident commander as soon as practical to direct the initial phase of the response, make personnel assignments, and coordinate resources—many of which may be self-deployed—as they arrive on scene. A command post and staging areas should be established in secure areas that have been swept for IEDs and are protected from the threat. As senior personnel arrive on scene, the command structure should be expanded to include representatives from responding agencies and disciplines as well as specialists from intelligence, SWAT, EOD, Air Support, and so forth.

In addition to focusing on the immediate threat, it is also essential to maintain situational awareness regarding calls for services in other areas of the community. A senior command level officer should be designated to manage operations outside of the event and ensure that resources (either the agency's or those available through mutual aid agreements) are available to respond to in-progress calls for service. Law enforcement officials must also be prepared to re-

spond to secondary terrorist attacks as demonstrated in the Mumbai (2008) and Paris (2015) attacks. In both of these events, "small, well-armed bands of terrorists [struck] simultaneously and sequentially against multiple soft targets."[40] Regional capacity regarding incident command should be built and strengthened through interagency/multi-discipline protocols and training exercises.

Communication

Both internal and interagency communications during the San Bernardino terrorist attack proved challenging. The volume of police radio traffic limited the availability of radio bandwidth. Also, a number of officers reported difficulty identifying the appropriate radio channel to monitor. Some officers reported radio communication problems inside the IRC because of the buildings' construction and lack of repeaters to boost signals. Others felt uncomfortable using unencrypted communications to notify co-responding officers of law enforcement sensitive information during the search for the suspects.[41] Communications systems, including dispatch, should be load tested, and alternative protocols should be put in place should systems fail during a large-scale hostile incident. Radio discipline should be paramount during these incidents as well. Encrypted communications systems could prove extremely valuable in responding to terrorist incidents, enabling the safe sharing of sensitive information. In addition, the volume of calls from the cell phones of victims, witnesses, family and friends of victims, as well as the shooter himself in Orlando challenged the capabilities of the dispatch center. Orlando Police Communications Center staff was able to utilize their training to prioritize and delegate calls as necessary.

Equipment

Immediate access to, advanced training on, and use of appropriate equipment and technology is key to officer and community safety during mass public shootings and terrorist incidents. Some San Bernardino officers reported that they were ill-equipped to engage such heavily armed assailants. One of the first contact team members stated, "I felt so naked because we didn't have cover and concealment approaching the building. You know you are outgunned. It is going to be hard to beat an AR [AR-15 semi-automatic rifle] with a handgun, so I knew we needed good shot placement."[42] Adequate personal protective gear, including ballistic helmets and ballistic vests with ceramic plates, should be issued to protect officers from the rounds fired from high-powered rifles, as well as to shield officers from bomb fragments, shrapnel, and shock waves.

Armored vehicles provided protection to officers in San Bernardino and Orlando from rounds fired by the terrorists. In Orlando, a ram affixed to an armored vehicle was used to breach exterior walls for the purpose of rescuing hostages and neutralizing the assailant. EOD resources rendered the secondary device (IED) safe in San Bernardino and were used to search the IRC and the assailant's SUV. EOD resources were used in Orlando to search the assailant's vehicle and the nightclub for IEDs as well as in an attempt to breach an exterior wall for the purpose of rescuing victims and neutralizing the assailant.

Tactical Emergency Medical Training and Equipment

Although national law enforcement organizations[l] continue to recommend that police departments provide basic tactical medical training and equipment to their officers, many departments still have not made this available. Several of the first responding officers in San Bernardino commented that they were not adequately trained or equipped to provide lifesaving emergency medical care.

During interviews, one SBC Probation Officer stated, "I geared up and tried to give first aid, but our kits were insufficient to treat the wounds." In contrast, during the Aurora theater shooting, a police paramedic was able to get inside the theater quickly, triage victims, and help extract those who were critically wounded to a "warm zone" where fire department emergency medical technicians (EMTs) were able to treat them.[43] In Orlando, officers operating under the threat of IEDs and gunfire, removed severely injured victims and transported them to Orlando Regional Medical Center, which was within blocks of the nightclub, saving numerous lives.[44]

In 2013, a group of public safety personnel from fire, law enforcement, pre-hospital care, trauma care, and the military convened in Hartford, Connecticut, to develop consensus regarding strategies to increase survivability in mass public shootings.[45] Applying lessons learned from military battlefield injuries, the group of experts developed the acronym THREAT to address casualty management during high-threat tactical and rescue operations:

*T*hreat suppression
*H*emorrhage control
*R*apid *E*xtrication to safety
*A*ssessment by medical providers
*T*ransport to definitive care

Recognizing that IED and active shooter incidents represent an increasing threat of devastating injuries to civilians and public safety personnel, all first responders should be trained and equipped to provide basic lifesaving measures in response to explosive injuries and gunshot wounds.

Conclusion

Islamist and other homegrown extremists develop their plots in secret. Their tactics are constantly evolving, asymmetrical, more violent, and more devastating. They do not fit into traditional law enforcement prevention and response paradigms. Shifting to a law enforcement culture with an acute awareness of the domestic terror threat and the ability to respond will require a tremendous commitment on the part of law enforcement leaders and elected officials at the federal, state, and local level. Terrorist attacks and other instances of mass public violence, including those in San Bernardino and Orlando as well as the Islamic State's calls for attacks across all of the United States, demonstrate that no community is immune from the threat and that local law enforcement, in particular, must develop strategies that, in the words of former DHS Secretary Jeh Johnson, "anticipate the next attack—not the last one."[46]

Local law enforcement officers, particularly those assigned to routine patrol work, are the most important resource for identify-

l The International Association of Chiefs of Police and the President's Police Physicians Section, the President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing, and the National Tactical Officers Association have all recommended some version of tactical medical training and equipment for local law enforcement agencies.

ing, preventing, and responding to the threat. Routine patrol work places officers in neighborhoods where terrorists hide, plan, and attack, giving them the opportunity to gather critical intelligence as well as to identify potential threats. In addition to their role in preventing terrorist attacks, patrol and other officers working in non-tactical units must be properly trained and equipped to identify the threat, immediately engage the perpetrator(s), extricate and render aid to victims, assume incident command, and request appropriate public safety resources.

The local law enforcement response to the terrorist attacks in San Bernardino and Orlando demonstrated that well-defined, well-developed, and practiced protocols equipped law enforcement leaders and their officers to perform at high levels during these tragic events. Their bravery, professionalism, and dedication saved lives and revealed the character of the nation's first responders. However, it must be recognized that the threat continues to evolve and become more deadly. Faced with this reality, it is necessary to continuously evaluate the threat environment and ensure that U.S. law enforcement officers are prepared to prevent or respond to the next attack. CTC

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A View from the CT Foxhole: James A. Gagliano, Former FBI Hostage Rescue Team Counterterrorist Operator

By Paul Cruickshank

James A. Gagliano, a 1987 West Point graduate, joined the Federal Bureau of Investigation as a Special Agent in 1991. In 1997, Gagliano was selected for the FBI's Hostage Rescue Team and participated in numerous overseas deployments and high-risk tactical resolutions. In November 2002, he was selected as the Senior Team Leader of the 45-man FBI New York Office SWAT Team and also served as an attachment to Joint Special Operations Command units in Afghanistan in support of Operation Enduring Freedom between 2002 and 2003. In November 2005, Mr. Gagliano was named to head the FBI's Crisis Management and 24/7 Operations Center Programs in New York. Assignments included oversight of the SWAT Program, Crisis Negotiation, the Special Agent Bomb Technicians, and the Hazardous Materials Response Team. Between 2008 and 2015, Gagliano held a variety of positions to include Supervisory Senior Resident Agent for the Hudson Valley Resident Agency (HVRA), Acting Legal Attaché in Mexico City, Mexico, and Chief-of-Staff (Special Assistant to the Assistant-Director-in-Charge) for the FBI's New York Office. He is currently an adjunct assistant professor at St. John's University and frequently provides on-air analysis for CNN and Headline News. He and other SWAT Team colleagues were awarded the FBI's Medal for Bravery for their roles in the June 1993 apprehension of terrorists planning to bomb the Holland Tunnel and other New York City landmarks.

CTC: The terrorist attacks on a café in Sydney, a music hall in Paris, and a nightclub in Orlando all involved hostage standoffs culminating in assaults by law enforcement. When the decision is made to go in, what is the key to saving lives?

Gagliano: Effective hostage rescue requires four interrelated components for success, and these are, inarguably, speed, surprise, violence-of-action, and a failsafe breach. If you're unable to get in, you simply can't save hostages. If any of these principles get degraded, then you're forced to come in heavier and harder. It's all about momentum in this business. Every second counts. You can also add a diversion to supplement your tactics, but the four I listed are the most critical.

Let me provide you with an example from early in my career. In June 1993, I was a young shooter on the FBI SWAT team that moved in to arrest five terrorists who were part of a group linked to the "Blind Sheikh" Omar Abdel Rahman, which was planning to bomb the Holland Tunnel, Lincoln Tunnel, the FBI's New York office building, the United Nations, the George Washington Bridge, and the St. Regis Hotel. We effected entry into their "bomb factory" in a Brooklyn warehouse as they were literally stirring their "witch's brew"—as it was later described in media accounts—a drum of diesel fuel and fertilizer. One of the terrorists exited a side room and immediately confronted the entry team, with a SWAT operator immediately shouting, "Gun!" The bewildered bomb-builder wisely chose to hand the Kalashnikov-style assault rifle he was holding to our Number One man who was armed with a ballistic shield and a handgun.[a]

We needed to get to him and overwhelm him before he could think about raising the weapon. It was a textbook example of speed, surprise, violence of action, and successful mechanical breach. We didn't have an explosive breaching capability, so the team used mechanical tools, such as a pneumatic door-jamb spreader and a "Halligan Tool" to breach the doors at the front and the back of the warehouse. I was among those stationed at the back door. At the prearranged signal, our SWAT operators then converged on the suspects with great momentum and precision from both directions.

In hostage rescue or with any barricaded subject incident, as operators burst into a room, it's all about that split-second decision-making the bad guy has to make: fight or flight. We want them to give up on those two conditioned response options and force them to recognize there's nowhere to go and no way to defeat our team. Overwhelming force and momentum saves lives by changing the immediate calculus of the people you are up against.

In the Blind Sheikh case, we had several advantages as we knew who we were dealing with—the case squad had completed an exhaustive workup on the subjects—and we had time to painstakingly prepare in advance. We also had the warehouse wired up with audio and video feeds because we had a solid cooperating witness. The CCTV video feed accurately showed us in real time where people were positioned and where weapons were emplaced in the room, so we were able to make the entry with informational superiority. Knowledge, or intelligence, is power and a force multiplier. In situations where you are responding to an active shooter or a hostage standoff, you have much less time to appraise a kinetic situation. In those instances, rehearsals, standard operating procedures, and experience are what you rely on to augment the momentum necessary to effect a successful rescue.

As a responding tactical unit, the success of your action is always going to depend on your evaluation of the situation before going in, reducing as many variables as conceivably possible. The key here is to obtain what we call "speculative intelligence"—a profile assessment, if you will—to figure out how likely it is the hostage-taker(s) are going to kill the hostage(s). You need to understand the mindset, desperation level, and motivation of the attacker(s). In all cases, you need to come up with a "hasty assault plan" basically right away. That then forms the genesis of your "deliberate assault plan" as in-

a Editor's note: James M. Fox, the head of the FBI's New York Office, was quoted at the time as saying, "we entered so fast, some of the subjects didn't know we were in the bomb factory until they were in handcuffs." Robert McFadden, "Specter of Terror: The Overview: 8 seized as Suspects in Plot to Bomb New York Targets and Kill Political Figures," *New York Times*, June 25, 1993.

telligence improves and more resources are assembled.

CTC: As outlined in our cover article this month, in the Orlando terrorist hostage standoff, police gained entry to the part of the nightclub where Omar Mateen was barricaded in a bathroom by breaching an outer wall with an explosive charge as well as an armored vehicle equipped with a ram. Explain how important breaching is.

Gagliano: If and when you need to "go in," a failsafe breach is absolutely key. There are a number of techniques for this, including mechanical breaching, which we employed in the Blind Sheikh case, and may involve implementation of a hydraulic or pneumatic device to separate a door from its jamb and shotgun breaching, which involves the use of a short-barreled shotgun to blast open the lock on a door with a round comprised of dental plaster. But the most reliable way to enter is to apply a suitable amount of explosives. Explosive breaching is one of the key domain capabilities of the FBI's Hostage Rescue Team (HRT) at Quantico, Virginia, a team I was proud to be a member of once. It is also a capability that has been developed by a small number of police departments across the country, as illustrated in the response by the Orlando Police Department to the nightclub attack. But many local police forces and municipalities do not have explosive breaching capabilities in their department's tactical arsenal. Many are only armed with simple and rudimentary sledge hammers, crowbars, heavy battering rams, "Halligan Tools," and maybe a "rabbit"—pneumatic door-jamb spreaders—if they're lucky. All of these breaching accoutrements are similar to what most fire departments and emergency rescue units have in stock.

Neither the NYPD's Emergency Services Unit (ESU) nor the FBI tactical response teams in New York City have an explosive breaching capability. If and when a hostage situation were to occur in New York, on-scene command authorities would need to wait for the arrival of the FBI Hostage Rescue Team from Quantico to bring this capability to bear. That would likely take more than an hour or two, under the best set of circumstances. While there are reservations in some quarters about arming police departments and part-time SWAT teams with explosives, in my view the current terrorist threat, and ISIS's calls for attacks against soft targets all across the United States rather than just against high-profile, more traditionally hardened targets, means there are strong arguments for police forces around the country developing and maintaining this capability. As the current FBI director has repeatedly stated, the FBI has open cases against ISIS subjects in all 50 states. That's a lot of territory for law enforcement to cover and maintain a posture so that immediate entries into barricaded locations can be effected safely and expeditiously. Minutes, and seconds, in this business absolutely matter.

CTC: What makes a SWAT Team officer or Hostage Rescue operator good at their job?

Gagliano: Keeping calm is critical. As an operator, it's about controlling your own fears. Fear is a natural emotion. And while it is to be acknowledged and respected, it must be controlled and channeled properly. Left unchecked, it has a deleterious effect on the effectiveness of a unit. At the FBI Swat Team in New York and at the Hostage Rescue Team in Quantico, we weren't interested in bringing on people who said they'd never been scared. Fear is a rational response to impending danger, and those who sense it are more prone to make sensible decisions to protect themselves, their teammates, and the hostages they are trying to save.

James A. Gagliano

Being able to adapt and improvise in a kinetic situation is a necessary trait for counterterror operators and SWAT operators. They must be able to adapt to fluid circumstances against an unconventional enemy. Therefore, split-second reaction to an adversary's unanticipated action is a critical skillset for new team members. The countless hours spent training together as a tactical response team are vital because they allow individuals to react with muscle memory, on autopilot, which frees the mind to have a capacity to improvise in fluid and dangerous situations. This tactical choreography is what sets team members apart from their less skilled adversaries who don't have the same familiarity with each other. One example of an improvisation that likely saved lives was the use of a bomb disposal robot loaded with explosives to neutralize a gunman in Dallas, Texas, in July 2016.

Being able to learn from valuable experience is also crucial. In the units I was part of with the FBI, there was a huge focus on the After Action Report process so that best practices could be shared. Success shouldn't be accidental. And mistakes should never be repeated.

CTC: In an era when Islamist extremists are being instructed by the Islamic State to kill as many as possible before embracing death for heavenly reward, do protocols and best practices in hostage standoffs with Islamist terrorists need to change?

Gagliano: I think the short answer is yes, once you've established in a crisis situation that this is their motivation. The Orlando police received criticism for waiting some three hours, but they were properly following current protocols and best practices to slow down in standoffs when transitioning from active shooter to hostage rescue. Given those protocols and the fact I wasn't there, I don't want to Monday morning quarterback what happened in Orlando, but there are strong arguments for making changes to the protocols for first responders so that the best practice is determined to be to make entry sooner in Islamist terrorist hostage standoffs. The ISIS-inspired terrorists of today tend not to be interested in negotiating their way out.

Depending on the nature of the case, there is still obviously some potential utility in opening communications with suspects in hostage standoffs. These negotiations—talking it out, stalling for time—can play a role in slowing down their killing to help play for time as more resources can be brought to bear. Islamist terrorists, after all, have an interest in getting their message out, as was seen in the grievances they communicated to negotiators in the Orlando and Paris attacks. Communications with the suspect(s) can also play a role in pinpointing their location as well as provide opportunities to distract the perpetrators just before a planned assault. In the final phase of the Bataclan hostage standoff in Paris, when two of the terrorists had barricaded themselves with hostages in a corridor inside the venue, French RAID commandos placed a call to one of the attackers, as a distraction, moments before the assault. While the hostage-takers were taken down, no one else in that corridor was killed.[1]

Gagliano briefs a WMD exercise to New York and Chicago FBI SWAT Team members at the Hostage Rescue Team compound in Quantico, Virginia, in 2003.

All this means that while necessary adjustments need to be considered in how on-scene command elements tackle ISIS-inspired hostage-taking, it is not to say that the hostage negotiation component should be rendered obsolete. Quite the contrary. Not every hostage or active shooter case is identical. The individual mindset of each ISIS-inspired potential terrorist must carefully be weighed and considered, and tactical resolution elements should forever remain contiguous with negotiator units.

But when it comes to terrorism cases, I don't think it's an exaggeration to say that the era of drawn out, negotiation-heavy hostage standoffs is over. Let me give you a bit of a reflection on hostage rescue history. In the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, we witnessed a proliferation of aircraft hijackings, domestic terrorist attacks from radical leftist groups, and bank robberies that resulted in hostage-takings. But the emphasis in hostage situations was about "stall, stall, buy time, promise them the world, and for each thing we give them, we have to extract hostage capital from them in return."

This was encapsulated in the approach taken by Harvey Schlossberg, who founded the NYPD's Hostage Negotiating Team in 1973, and was key to developing many of the unit's protocols and practices. He stressed that listening was much more important than talking. One of his successors Jack Cambria, who retired from the NYPD in 2015, continuously reinforced the unit's motto to his charges: "Talk to me."

But while this approach worked with secularist Palestinian terrorist groups, and even as the 1990s drew to a close with the hijacking of Indian Airlines Flight 814 by a Kashmiri terrorist group linked to al-Qa`ida,[b] the 9/11 attacks and the later rise of ISIS have drastically changed the equation.

For ISIS and its sympathizers, the purpose of carrying out hostage attacks is to gain global headlines rather than to win concessions or even battlefield victories. They control the narrative, and any publicity for them is good publicity. The Orlando shooter, Omar Mateen, for example, showed no interested in negotiating when the police got through to him in several short calls.

When it comes to active shooter situations, a key turning point was the Columbine high school massacre in April 1999. As the two attackers went on a shooting rampage inside the school and tried to set off bombs, first responders formed a perimeter to try to assess and contain the situation, as was then the protocol. You were supposed to establish a wide perimeter before creating a smaller perimeter and executing a tactical assault. You were supposed to gather as much intelligence as you could. And you were also supposed to wait for the arrival of homogenous units to respond. While the shooting was going on, in a parking lot just outside the school, you had a sheriff's deputy assigned to work at the school who exchanged fire with one of the perpetrators from the parking lot but did not enter the school building. He called for backup and was joined by six other law enforcement officers while the attack progressed. Those who first arrived on the scene were from several agencies in the Denver area.[2] In that sort of situation, you're going to have maybe an FBI agent who lived nearby and heard the news on his police scanner and a few local uniformed police officers in range. The problem was there wasn't a consensus understanding of how to take a heterogeneous group of people, have them commingle, and then expect they'd work effectively to eradicate the threats by employing sophisticated and nuanced tactical resolution techniques.

The killing of 13 high school kids in an attack in which the attackers wanted to inflict maximum carnage understandably shook things up, forcing soul-searching. It led to law enforcement officers across all agencies and police forces training on Active Shooter Response tactics and adopting an improved inter-agency protocol to take immediate action to confront, rather than contain a threat.

b Editor's note: In late 1999, Kashmiri terrorists linked to al-Qa`ida hijacked an Indian passenger jet en route from Nepal to India. The plane eventually landed in Taliban-controlled Kandahar. After several days of negotiations, the hostages were released, after India acceded to demands to release several terrorists from prison. The attackers killed one hostage. Celia W. Duggar, "Hostages Recall Times of Terror Amid Boredom," *New York Times*, January 2, 2000.

This resulted in universal training and tactics so when various law enforcement agents find themselves responding to a shooting, they can work together more effectively than was the case at Columbine.

As a then member of the FBI's Hostage Rescue Team, the lessons learned from Columbine centered on the on-scene law enforcement's "paralysis by analysis." It describes the inherent difficulty in immediately coalescing disparate "parts" of "good guys," upon arrival, into a homogeneous tactical unit prepared to rapidly move toward the sounds of the guns, which in military terms translates to a full-speed, hyper-urgent movement to contact.

Just as the Columbine attack established new best practices for active shooter situations, the Orlando attack should be an impetus to a wholesale protocol review for hostage rescue. In cases where there is a jihadi terrorist motivation, in many cases the best "worst option" is now, inarguably, immediate hasty or deliberate plan implementation to neutralize the threat. This will ultimately save as many hostages as possible. In the immortal words of General George S. Patton, *"A good plan violently executed now is better than a perfect plan executed next week."*

The operational calculus turns into simple arithmetic. Go get the bad guys. Accept a higher level of risk for your trained professionals that comes with a dynamic entry. Save as many innocents as can be saved. Know that inaction can lead to even more deleterious results.

CTC: In several recent terrorist attacks, patrol cops—who don't have the same specialized training as tactical units—have been the first to respond. And in several recent terrorist incidents, most of the killing was done in the opening minutes[c] of the attack—including in the Bataclan, San Bernardino, and Orlando attacks—before tactical units had any realistic chance of arriving on the scene. Given what you have said about a need for speed in both active shooter and hostage rescue situations, what can be done to best equip local police and mitigate the risk to themselves, especially given that terrorists may seek to target first responders, including with explosive devices?

Gagliano: This is a significant problem. Most police forces do not have the budgets or available time to appropriately train all their personnel to confront terrorist active shooters and hostage-takers. And SWAT teams and tactical units belonging to local police departments will rarely be the first to arrive on scene. There are no easy solutions, but given that ISIS is encouraging sympathizers to attack everywhere in the United States, funds need to be found to provide local police forces more training to improve capabilities and expertise. Every time law enforcement "goes in" to try to neutralize a terrorist suspect, there is, as you point out, a risk they themselves may be deliberately targeted. That appears to have been the plan of the San Bernardino attackers who planned to remotely detonate an explosive device as police arrived. But at the end of the day, when you join the police or a law enforcement agency, you sign on to accept a higher personal level of acceptable risk. And for those joining tactical or hostage rescue units, that "acceptable risk" increases exponentially. On FBI New York SWAT and HRT, it was expected that the first operator to enter the door frame may draw bullets. HRT's motto is *Servare Vitas*—to save lives. We consider that duty sacrosanct.

"Just as the Columbine attack established new best practices for active shooter situations, the Orlando attack should be an impetus to a wholesale protocol review for hostage rescue."

What ultimately aids the local police forces, the tip of the tactical response spear in terrorist attacks, is giving these departments the capability to quickly marshal enough firepower to overcome increasingly better armed and equipped terrorists. When they employ vehicles as weapons or are outfitted with armor piercing rounds, how does one better protect responding officers? The Bataclan attackers, armed with Kalashnikovs, were able to easily outgun the two French cops who responded to the attack. And the San Bernardino attackers were armed with powerful AR-15s. There has been a lot of criticism in the media about the "militarization of the police." And that's a fair debate to have—about what is appropriate—but local forces need the tools to neutralize terrorist active shooters without putting themselves in unreasonable danger.

In the future, advances in robotics, surveillance drone technology, and miniaturization as well as other technologies could provide significant new capability to law enforcement agencies to have better "eyes on" the perpetrator(s) during hostage situations.

CTC: While at the FBI, you were assigned to Joint Special Operations Command for several short tours to Afghanistan. How did you assist in their missions, and what lessons did you take away from the experience?

Gagliano: Then FBI Director Mueller, a former Marine who served in Vietnam and who took over the helm of the FBI one week before 9/11, attached particular significant priority to establishing close relations with the military to aid the prosecution of the "war on terror." There were three critical things we were able to assist the military with in Afghanistan: interrogations/interviews; field-expedient fingerprinting, aided by advancements in digital technology; and DNA collection from high-value targets and dead enemy combatants. The military had very little experience at the time with these matters.

What I gained from my time in Afghanistan was better appreciation for just how the enemy fights, how the enemy thinks. I felt there were valuable lessons learned from witnessing U.S. Special Forces in action confronting the problem at the source, degrading their personnel resources there as opposed to here. These unique experiences left me convinced that cooperation was essential for this fight. It's why the U.S. military embeds officers on FBI JTTFs.

CTC: As the FBI's Crisis Management Coordinator for New

c Editor's note: Nearly all those killed in the Bataclan attack were killed in the first 20 minutes of the attack. The killing stopped after two local patrol officers entered the concert hall. The attackers responded by barricading themselves inside a corridor with hostages. See Paul Cruickshank, "The Inside Story of the Paris and Brussels Attacks," CNN, March 30, 2016, and Simon Piel, Emeline Cazi, and Soren Seelow, "Attentats de Paris: l'assaut du Bataclan, raconté heure par heure," *Le Monde*, December 30, 2015.

York between 2005 and 2008, overseeing the response to terrorist attacks that involved supervision of the SWAT Team and the Hazardous Materials Response Team, what kept you up at night?

Gagliano: Two things. One, a suitcase nuclear device set off in Manhattan, which, while very unlikely, is everyone's worst nightmare. And two, the detonation of a dirty bomb or radiological device. While this would not necessarily lead to significant loss of life, it would create panic, which would be very hard to manage. Beyond isolating and cleaning up the site, the most important part of the response to such an attack is good communication with the general public to reassure them about the threat. I also worried about chemical or gas attacks in New York. Another issue with such events was that before consequence managers could be brought in, our responding officers conducting tactical resolution would need to wear bio-hazard suits, which results in more difficulty in engaging in potential firefights with any terrorists remaining inside the crisis site.

What helps me to sleep at night now is the sheer numbers of professional law enforcement personnel in the city focused on the threats and prepared to immediately respond in New York. CTC

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A New Age of Terror? Older Fighters in the Caliphate

By John Horgan, Mia Bloom, Chelsea Daymon, Wojciech Kaczkowski, and Hicham Tiflati

Historically, terrorists have overwhelmingly been young adults. Direct involvement in terrorist attacks is associated with people in their 20s and 30s, with those in leadership positions slightly older (30s and 40s). The composition of the so-called Islamic State, however, defies the idea of even a generic demographic profile. While the Islamic State now manufactures child soldiers, preliminary evidence suggests an emerging and increasingly aggressive role for older adults (aged 60 and beyond), especially as suicide bombers. The Islamic State has produced not only the youngest suicide bombers in history, but now also the oldest. As pressure intensifies on the movement, this trend will likely continue.

On March 22, 2017, Khalid Masood killed four people and injured over 50 in the heart of London. Masood drove his vehicle into pedestrians on Westminster Bridge before crashing the car outside the British Parliament. He then stabbed a police officer who subsequently died of his wounds. Armed officers shot Masood dead before he could enter the Parliament building.

Questions immediately arose as to whether Masood was part of a cell or had acted alone. The next day, via its Amaq media service, the Islamic State issued a statement claiming Masood as a "soldier ... executing the operation in response to calls to target citizens of coalition nations."[1] Masood appears to have been known to the British security services as early as 2010 but "dropped off the radar" before the London attack seven years later.[2]

Two opposing narratives quickly emerged regarding Masood's radicalization. Some insisted Masood fit the standard profile of a British or European supporter of the Islamic State: a male Muslim convert with a history of anti-social behavior, including violence, and a criminal record.[3] The second narrative, however, suggested Masood was an atypical Islamic State-inspired terrorist. One of the main reasons was due to his age. At the time of the attack, Masood was 52— a whole 25 years older than the typical violent extremist in the United States charged with offenses related to the Islamic State (i.e. either involved in plots at home or traveling/attempting to travel abroad).[4]

A New Age of Terror?

In one of the most cited efforts to profile terrorists, Charles Russell and Bowman Miller[5] in 1977 described the average terrorist as "likely to be single, male, aged between twenty-two and twenty-four." In a study of over 400 Italian female terrorists, Leonard Weinberg and Bill Eubank[6] found active members to be mostly in their 20s. Paul Gill and John Horgan[7] examined 1,240 cases of IRA membership over a 30-year period, discovering that most were in their early to mid-20s. The same finding emerging from Marc Sageman's[8] sample of over 100 jihadi terrorists worldwide, while Emily Dyer and Robin Simcox's[9] 2013 study of 171 al-Qa`ida members also found that over half were under 30 at the time of their offense.

As expected, there are outliers. In cases of lone-actor terrorists of all ideological stripes,[10] a higher mean age (33) exists for those who perpetrated or engaged in acts of terrorism. But demographic profiles of terrorists across time, place, and context otherwise point to the same conclusion—terrorism has predominantly been a young person's game, with the clear majority engaging in their 20s.[11]

Differences emerge, however, in research that disaggregates terrorist leaders from followers. In studies across a variety of groups, leaders are older. Thomas Strentz's[12] analysis of American domestic terrorists in the 1960s and 1970s found that while followers were aged 20-25, leaders ranged from 25-40. Usama bin Laden was 44 at the time of the 9/11 attacks, and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the former leader of al-Qa`ida in Iraq, was 40 when he was killed in 2006. A leader of the Greek 17 November movement, Alexandros Giotopoulos[13] was 58 when captured on a remote Aegean island, and several figures in the Provisional Irish Republican Army occupied leadership positions well into their 60s and 70s.[14]

Less frequent has been the involvement of older adults in committing acts of terrorism. Notable examples include 60-year-old Somali-Norwegian Abdullahi Abdulle, the oldest suicide bomber deployed by al-Shabaab to date.[15] In Ireland, 66-year-old Donal Billings[16] was convicted in 2011 of planting a bomb on a bus to

John Horgan is a professor in the Global Studies Institute and Department of Psychology at Georgia State University. His most recent book, The Psychology of Terrorism, *is now in its second edition. Follow @drjohnhorgan*

Mia Bloom is a professor of Communication at Georgia State University and author of Dying to Kill: The Allure of Suicide Terror *and* Bombshell: Women and Terror. *Follow @miambloom*

Chelsea Daymon is a Ph.D. candidate in Communications and a presidential fellow in the Transcultural Conflict and Violence Initiative at Georgia State University. Follow @cldaymon

Wojciech Kaczkowski is a Ph.D. candidate in Community Psychology and a presidential fellow in the Transcultural Conflict and Violence Initiative at Georgia State University. Follow @WojKaczkowski

Hicham Tiflati is a senior research associate at Georgia State University. Follow @HTiflati

"The Islamic State has begun to use older adult suicide bombers and suicide car bombers with increasing frequency over the past six months."

coincide with a visit by Queen Elizabeth to Ireland. In the United States, 88-year-old white supremacist James Von Brunn[17] shot and killed a security guard at the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., making him the oldest lone-actor terrorist so far. In the U.S. state of Georgia, four members of an extreme right-wing group were arrested in 2011 for plotting a "biological weapon attack on American cities including Atlanta."[18] The four men ranged in age from 65 to 73.[19]

An area deserving of more research is how age correlates not just with broad roles (e.g. leader versus follower) but also with type of tactical engagement. Until recently, the oldest male suicide bomber was Rabah Bechla, aged 63 when he drove a truckload of explosives into a United Nations building in Algiers in December 2007,[20] but the oldest confirmed suicide bomber was 64-year-old Fatima Omar An-Najar,[21] a Palestinian grandmother (and widow) who blew herself up near Israeli soldiers in Gaza in 2006.

New data on Islamic State fighters suggests the need, not for the first time, to revise some commonly held assumptions about terrorists.

Older Adults in the Islamic State

Most implicated in Islamic State terrorism from western countries (that is, both those who have attempted to engage in local activities and those who have traveled or attempted to travel overseas on behalf of the Islamic State) are between 20 and 30 years old.[22] According to a George Washington University study,[23] the average individual implicated in Islamic State terrorism in the United States is 26 (recently revised to 27).[24] Equally comprehensive studies of Islamic State foreign fighter registration documents conducted by the Combating Terrorism Center and the New America Foundation have found that the average fighter at the time of joining the Islamic State was 26 to 27 years old, and according to the New America Foundation's Nate Rosenblatt was "single, had traveled to less than two foreign countries, had the educational equivalent of a high school degree, had basic religious knowledge, reported no previous fighting experience, and had the professional equivalent of someone between an unskilled laborer and a blue-collar worker."[25]

Looking even more broadly, foreign fighters in the Islamic State examined by The Soufan Group[26] find "most … in their 20s, but some [are] much younger." This last point is significant. If anything, recruitment to the Islamic State has skewed even younger as of late. In early 2017, Robin Simcox[27] highlighted how the group has exerted significant effort to persuade adolescent and pre-adolescent boys and girls in various ways to carry out acts of violence in the West. What is remarkable about such cases is how children engage in roles once presumed accessible only to adults.

Yet, evidence for another demographic shift may be emerging. New data obtained by the authors via the Islamic State's preferred encrypted platform Telegram suggests that membership has expanded to include both the very young and the very old. The first appearances of older adults in the data collection was Sheikh Abu Ali al-Anbari, whose death was announced by the Pentagon on March 25, 2016, and was featured in al-Naba magazine a few months later.[28] Sheikh Abu Ali (whose real name is reportedly Abdulrahman Mustafa al-Qaduli[29]) was a preacher and governor who purportedly traded in his leadership position to become a frontline fighter and died on the border between Syria and Iraq.[30] He was likely 59 years old at the time of his appearance in al-Naba, and he was considered a likely successor to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.[31]

Since then, the Islamic State has begun to use older adult suicide bombers and suicide car bombers with increasing frequency over the past six months, and as such, the group is recruiting frontline fighters across the entire spectrum of human development.

Methodology

Drawing from the expanding database of Islamic State members and activities, the authors have so far identified 27 older adults eulogized in the Islamic State's propaganda channels. In many western countries, 65 is the normal starting point for what is characterized as "old," though it is common for developmental researchers to distinguish 'young' old (i.e. 60-69) from other categories (e.g. 'old' old, or 80 and beyond). Here, the authors characterize older adult as 60+.

Eulogy images were collected primarily from the Islamic State's semi-official news agencies Amaq, Nashir, and Dabiq as part of their 'breaking news' output. The collection process involved downloading the images from Islamic State Telegram channels, collecting them for insertion into a database, and then coding them. Data collection began in August 2016, and the current dataset runs until March 31, 2017.

Downloaded images were initially coded based on information included in the eulogy in the form of a chyron describing the individual as a martyr, a self-martyr, *inghimasi* (commando), a foot soldier, or with the simple Arabic benediction "May God accept him." This phrase reliably designates a person as a martyr by the Islamic State. These individuals comprise those who have actively fought, rather than killed as non-combatants per se.[a]

If the information provided by the media agency specified self-martyr (suicide bomber or *istishhad*) but the individual was pictured next to or inside a vehicle, the authors coded them as a VBIED (Vehicle-Borne Improvised Explosive Device) operator,

a In one case, an individual named Ahmed Hussein was killed in a drone attack while working as the chief engineer of the Euphrates Dam. The eulogy did not include the benediction, and so he did not feature in the authors' database as a fighter for the Islamic State. While in the strictest sense of the word, a civilian casualty may be considered a martyr if they have been killed by the enemy (such as in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict in which casualties are given the status of martyr (*shahid*) but not self-martyr (*istishhad*)). Nevertheless, in its breaking news posts to social media and the eulogy posted by Amaq news, this phrase was absent for Ahmed Hussein. An older leader of the Islamic State in the Sinai Peninsula, Salaama Abu Adhan al-Tarabin was likewise killed by a drone, yet Sinai's media office included the phrase "May Allah accept him" in his eulogy. Additionally, he was given the special designation of "caravan of martyrs." Thus, the way in which someone dies does not in itself determine whether the Islamic State considers him/her to be a martyr. The authors concluded that the benediction "may Allah accept him" is reserved for its frontline combatants. In fact, several in the authors' sample were designated as part of a select martyr brigade in which "caravan of martyrs," written in ornate calligraphy, was added to images in post-production.

or suicide car bomber. To strengthen the validity of the data, the authors examined video material from the Islamic State media's special drone unit(s). The authors could validate the existence and identities of specific VBIED operators in their sample by watching the entire operation—from the image of their pre-attack pose posted to the network to the actual explosion. The media division often added branding to the videos, and a small window with the bomber's photo was presented in the corner of the screen. Any individual not photographed in a vehicle in the static images released by the Islamic State but who appeared in a martyrdom operation video driving a car/truck bomb was recoded as a VBIED operator upon the discovery of new information. In a video, "Procession of Light II," released by the Islamic State on April 9, 2017, two additional older adult suicide bombers are depicted. However, at the time of writing, neither individual had yet been verifiably associated with an *official* eulogy. Consequently, they are excluded from the authors' dataset. For four individuals in the dataset, the precise nature of their deaths remained unspecified, although they were designated by the group as martyrs. These are coded 'unspecified martyrs' with the understanding that the detailed videos of their operations may well eventually appear on the channels or chat rooms.

Two of the authors have previously published results in this publication about the Islamic State's use of children,[32] and this study largely reproduced the previous methodology for collecting images in which the Islamic State eulogized individuals as "martyrs" using the phrase "may God accept him." These images provided additional information about the location of the attack (which regional media office branded the attack), ranging from the individual's *kunya* (*nom du guerre*), nationality, location of death, and often target type, as well as additional information gleaned from visual analysis. The individual's *kunya* was used as a proxy for nationality. For example, *al-'Iraqi* denoted that they were Iraqi and *al-Suri* that they were Syrian. Recently, more specific locations have been used—for example, *al-Maslawi* meaning that the attacker originated from Mosul.

In addition to the images posted on Telegram, videos of attacks produced by the Islamic State's Al-Hayat media center and other outlets allowed the research team the opportunity to glean additional information about the attack, and differentiate the more general category of suicide bombers from suicide car bombers or foot soldiers. This allowed for simple data triangulation of the attacks as well as accurately determining the length of time between, for example, the initial posting of the eulogy image and the video release of the suicide car bomb attack (an average of six to eight weeks). Eulogies were further validated by comparing against the Islamic State's 'daily reports,' the English-language statements issued every day to communicate the execution of operations by the group. Finally, the authors used basic intercoder reliability checks for their classification such that five people (the authors) independently coded each image, reconciling discrepancies in project group meetings.

The Data

From August 2016 to March 31, 2017, the authors found 27 older adults, aged 60 and older, eulogized by the Islamic State.

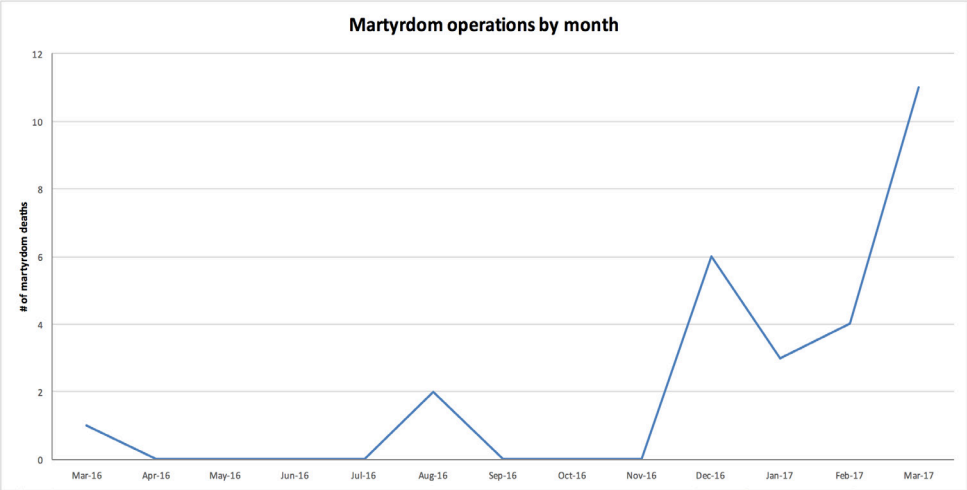

Figure 1: Frequency of older adult martyrdom operations by month

The location of the deaths indicated that most of the older martyrs were deployed in Nineveh province. Fifteen died in Nineveh (Mosul), five in Aleppo, three in Diljah, with one each in al-Baraka, al-Janub, Raqqa, and Sinai.

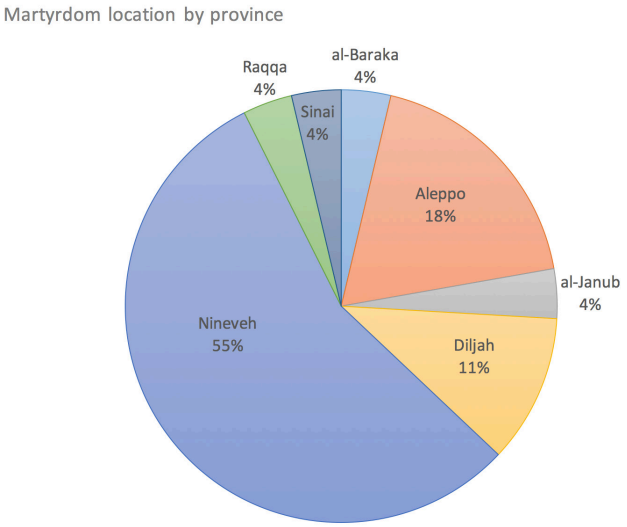

Figure 2: Provinces where older adult martyrs died

The origins of the fighters were such that 14 were Iraqi, four Syrian, two Iraqi/Syrian designated as Ansari, two Egyptian, one Jordanian, one Tajik, one Kazakh, and two currently unknown.

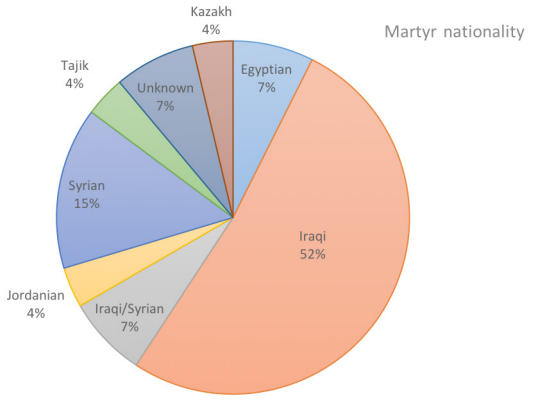

Figure 3: Nationalities of older adult martyrs based on kunya *identification*

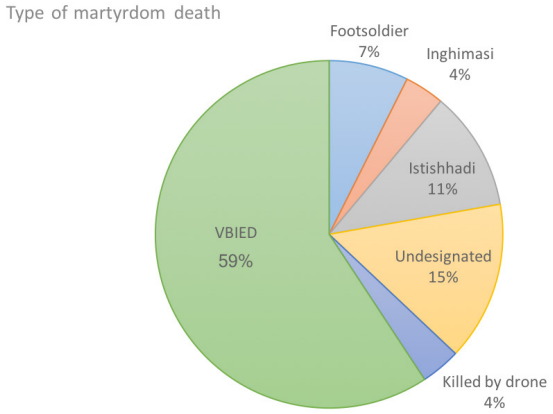

Figure 4: Specific types of martyrdom deaths for older adults

The Arab online news source Al Masdar News reported in March 2017, via research conducted by its contributor Ibrahim Joudeh, that 80 percent of suicide bombings in recent months were cumulatively perpetrated by both children and elderly recruits.[33] In December 2016, the Islamic State paired an older man, Abu Salman al-Tajiki, with one of its youngest bombers, a 10-year-old Yazidi boy named Abu Khattab al-Sinjari.

With the battle of Mosul, the Islamic State appears to have deployed older adult bombers with greater frequency. A systematic verification by the authors suggests that in January 2017, there were 35 adults, 51 children and youth, and three older adults eulogized as martyrs; in February 2017, there were 32 adults, 26 children and youth, and four older adults; and in March 2017, there were 34 adults, 23 children and youth, and 11 older adults. The number of older adults has increased, but in slight contrast to Al Masdar's claims, the authors' estimates suggest suicide bombing operations featuring seniors, youth, and children never exceeded 60 percent of the total.

The earliest appearance of older adults as bombers was in August 2016. Their deployment did not appear to gain momentum until December 2016. Though the numbers are small, these older bombers are gaining notoriety among members and supporters alike.

Of the 27 cases, 16 died detonating themselves in a vehicle-borne IED, two died as foot-soldiers, one as an *inghimasi* (commando), one was killed by a drone, three were described as *istishhadi* (self-martyrs or suicide bombers), and four were undesignated but listed as martyrs. (See Figure 4).

Some interesting perceptions exist of these older adults within the Islamic State itself. In an homage posted by Islamic State supporters about these older operatives—and using a montage of several of the bombers in the dataset—they included the following phrase: "In loving memory of our old men who's [sic] legs became heavy in old age, who were the real hero's [sic] (May Allah Accept Them)." (See Figure 5).

The older adults are venerated by the Islamic State as sources of emulation, while they have, in comparison, mocked men (derisively referring to them as "Sheikhs") on holiday in Turkey. (See Figure 6).

Other supporters contrast older men like 'Abu Fawaz' (see Figure 7), who are willing to sacrifice themselves for the caliphate, with men in other countries who are unwilling to make a comparable sacrifice. To this end, on the Dabiq Telegram news channel, Islamic State supporters posted an image that venerates the older bomber and mocks the other man, who is smoking (i.e. engaging in *haram* activity).

The comment in Figure 7 states: "Contrasting between those true fighters (who fight the evil doers) and those who bow down seeking the Rafidi (rejectionist's) approval."

Furthermore, some portrayals of older adults in combination with children reinforces the 'shaming' function to mobilize additional recruits. On April 4, 2017, the image shown in Figure 8 appeared in the Islamic State's Dabiq channel on Telegram.

The same day these images were released on Telegram, a spokesman for the Islamic State clarified the group's view about the involvement of older adults in operations. In an audio speech, Abu al-Hassan al-Muhajir proclaimed,[34] "The martyrdom-seeking attacks have not been restricted to youths, but include elders, as well. Everyone makes haste and races with his fellow. They are youths who see heroism in death. Elders with grey hair are seen in the battlefield." Decrying the United States' efforts to "eliminate the mujahideen," he continued, "All that you worked for went down the drain and your endeavors were halted. Here they are, those who

Figure 5: Image posted to the Islamic State's Telegram channel "Ghazwa" on February 28, 2017.

Figure 6: Image posted to the "Lions of Tawheed, War News/Ummah" Islamic State Telegram channel on March 31, 2017, contrasting older adult martyrs of the Islamic State with "sheikhs" on vacation.

saddle the steeds of sacrifice—their explosives-laden vehicles—and those who fight on the frontlines with grey beards and who long for having it stained with blood."

Figure 7: Image posted to the Islamic State's Dabiq Telegram channel on March 31, 2017.

Conclusions

The Islamic State has found a new use for its oldest members, which serves several simultaneous functions—from tapping into an additional pool of recruits when faced with increasing external pressure to transforming obvious physical limitations into the efficient delivery of bombs to serving propaganda functions like those fulfilled by the Islamic State's use of children—namely, shaming and goading any remaining non-participants into action.

Though initially featured in Telegram messages and in the occasional video, the Islamic State has begun to celebrate older adults much more systematically. The group's hour-long video "Procession of Light II," released on April 9, 2017, features older adults and young children prominently, with children filmed helping older adults prepare for their martyrdom operations. The viewer is also shown older adults preaching to children about what they need to do. One of the older adult martyrs initially discovered via Telegram images, Abu al-Yaman al-Urduni, is celebrated in this recent video. He is revealed to be physically disabled, shown in a wheelchair and lifted into the bomb-laden vehicle by his Islamic State comrades.

The data confirms that most of the older operatives who carry out attacks die in suicide bombing operations. The use of older

Figure 8: In this image, posted to the Dabiq channel on Telegram on April 4, 2017, the Islamic State contrasts its youngest and oldest bombers with a caption that reads: "Our youth see glory in war and our elders are experienced warriors. Death to you Oh America, A nation (ummah) whose youth and elders are racing towards death and sacrifice will not be defeated."

adults in this way is a new development. Whether it continues remains to be seen, but several reasons may explain their emergence. The Islamic State may be running low on younger suicide bombers in general. According to U.S. commanders, over 2,000 Islamic State fighters were killed in the battle of Mosul (which started on October 17, 2016) in the months leading up to the Islamic State's tactical innovation of using older combatants.[35] The majority of the older adult martyrs died between December 2016 and March 2017. This suggests older adults are used simply because of a shortage in fighters overall.

Related, but distinct, it may also be that older bombers are used as a substitute for younger bombers redeployed to other activities (or areas), perhaps as exigencies warrant. It is equally conceivable that when faced with mounting pressure in areas currently under Islamic State control, older adults simply join the fray in a last-ditch effort to maintain or project dominance. From a group perspective, faced with impending defeat, the opportunity to join in is simultaneously an opportunity for older adults to seize upon the rewards they believe are granted to martyrs in the afterlife. In "Procession of Light II," al-Urduni says to the camera and his young children: "So I love you, but I am leaving. By God I want to stay with you and see you growing up. I also love to fight, I love jihad. But I don't know whether there will be another opportunity or not. I ask Allah to forgive me, and to accept me, and to make me an example for the believers."

If other family members are already engaged in similar behavior, the pressure to act may be even greater for the older adult. But there are also subtler influencing factors likely at play. At an individual level, psychological development for older adults is typically characterized as a period of contemplation and retrospection.[36] Looking back on one's life can be fraught with risk. If doing so results in a person feeling that they have lived a full and meaningful life, then it helps them prepare for death in a productive, accepting way. If, however, a person instead feels that their life has been unremarkable, unsuccessful, and/or unsatisfying, such a realization can instigate a crisis. If unresolved, this quickly turns into despair and depression. Faced with a meaningless and largely insignificant death, what better opportunity for redemption and reward in the afterlife (as well as being immortalized in propaganda) than embracing martyrdom?

With up to 40,000 foreigners from over 120 countries joining locals in Syria and Iraq, the Islamic State boasts astonishing numbers in their ranks. Surely then, a few dozen older adults would not register as anything beyond an insignificant development? But it is worth recalling that the same assumptions surrounded initial reports in 2014 of a 'few' children appearing in Islamic State operations. Now, children routinely fight alongside adults, and child suicide bombers number in the hundreds.[37]

Using intuitive logic, observers can expect the use of older adults to continue. Ordinarily, jihad (used here in the sense of holy war) was reserved for men of military age. The legal doctrine of "defensive jihad" was designed for extraordinary circumstances that would theoretically permit nontraditional operatives (i.e. women, children, the elderly) to enter the fray. As is widely recognized, the Islamic State has discarded any of the usual norms of conflict, not just in terms of its own conduct, but also in terms of how children and the elderly are now recruited for frontline operational duty. Women are the only group still excluded from the individual obligation to perform 'jihad' for the Islamic State.[b]

As the Islamic State loses territorial control, it likely perceives itself on the defensive, no longer able to enjoy its aggressive expansion from just a few years ago. Furthermore, if the Islamic State has come to the realization that it may actually be losing, the concept of "defensive jihad" is likely to be fully brought into its strategic and tactical decision-making, at least locally. Under those conditions, *everyone* is obligated to participate—not just the men of military age.[38] It seems inevitable, therefore, that the group will continue to seek the mobilization of children, adults, and older adults to its cause. CTC

b When the Islamic State's predecessor, al-Qa`ida in Iraq (AQI), faced mounting pressure in the mid-2000s, the group began to use women in attacks. Given that the Islamic State is now using older men, it would not be entirely unexpected if the group eventually deployed women in this role. See Nelly Lahoud, "The Neglected Sex: The Jihadis' Exclusion of Women From Jihad," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26:5 (2014): pp. 780-802.

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The Terror Threat to Italy: How Italian Exceptionalism is Rapidly Diminishing

By Michele Groppi

Italy has not, so far, faced the same level of jihadi terrorist threat as European countries like France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and Belgium. This is attributable to a variety of factors, including the fact that Italy does not have as acute a radicalization problem, has seen lower foreign fighter flows to Syria, and has not been as active in the anti-Islamic State coalition. There are limits, however, to this Italian exceptionalism, and there are signs that it is rapidly diminishing. Italy has seen jihadi activity on its soil for decades, including the emergence in recent years of a number of clusters recruiting for and plotting attacks on behalf of the Islamic State. With societal tensions growing because of unprecedented, continued migrant flows from North Africa, the emergence of a second generation of Muslim immigrants that may be more vulnerable to the siren call of Islamist extremism than their parents, and pockets of urban areas starting to resemble the *banlieues* of France, the threat to Italy from jihadi terrorism is likely to grow more acute.

Unlike France, United Kingdom, and Germany, Italy has not, so far, suffered any major jihadi terrorist attacks. The problem of Islamist violent extremism is not as acute in Italy as in these countries, at least according to the leading indicator of the number of foreign fighters who have traveled to Syria and Iraq. Despite the rebranding of the Islamic State's propaganda magazine as Rumiyah (Rome) in September 2016 and the group's belief that Islamic armies will conquer the city near the end-of-times, Italy has been subject to far fewer threats from the group.

This article assesses the case for Italian exceptionalism when it comes to the global jihadi threat by drawing on a survey by the author of hundreds of Italian Muslims, interviews with Italian counterterrorism officials, and a review of open source information on recent terrorism cases. It argues that while the threat picture and degree of radicalization is not as acute as in some other European countries, the threat is nonetheless longstanding, serious, and growing. Italy is grappling with considerable societal challenges, which could lead to greater security challenges in the future.

Michele Groppi is a Ph.D. student at King's College London focusing on international relations and defense and security studies, with a major emphasis on Islamist radicalization in Europe and Italy. Follow @groppi_michele

Demographics

Italy has a significantly smaller Muslim population (roughly two million) than France, Germany, or the United Kingdom.[1] And although the Muslim population is nearly twice the size of Belgium, the numbers in per capita terms are significantly lower.[2] [a] The size of the Muslim community in Italy in both absolute and per capita terms is about the same as Spain, which has seen about the same number of foreign fighters leave for Syria.[3]

Aside from Rome, Italian Muslims mostly reside in the north, with almost 30% in Lombardy alone. Although a second generation is emerging, the majority of Muslims in Italy are first-generation, male immigrants from North Africa who have come to Italy seeking work. Although many Muslims are low-income, the majority of Italian Muslims, unlike many of their French counterparts, do not live in ghettoized "inner-city" areas afflicted by poverty, crime, and extremist Islamist proselytization.[4] While there are worrying signs that Italy is heading in this direction, there are no areas in which the situation has grown as serious as the French *banlieues*[b] like Saint-Denis or the Molenbeek district of Brussels or the Sparkhill district of Birmingham.[c]

Even though it is hard to quantify and compare levels of such a subjective concept as "integration," and more research is needed, factors that have contributed to a sense of alienation in some other European countries appear somewhat less present in Italy. In other European countries with much larger second- and third-generation Muslim populations, the children and grandchildren of immigrants tend to have higher expectations than those who first immigrated, but a lack of economic opportunities and discrimination has meant

a Although one might intuitively expect that lower proportions of Muslim citizens would reduce the general population's "fear of the other" and favor processes of integration, perception of Muslims in mainstream Italian culture ranks amongst the most negative in Europe, in spite of their relative minor per capita presence compared to some other E.U. countries. According to a 2016 Pew survey, almost 70% of surveyed Italians saw Muslims negatively. Such results are consistent with data collected by the author between July and December 2016, which confirmed Italian non-Muslims' negative views of fellow Muslim citizens and their overwhelmingly shared fear (70%) that acts of jihadi terrorism will occur in Italy as well. For more, see Richard Wike, Bruce Stokes, and Katie Simmons, "Europeans Fear Wave of Refugees Will Mean More Terrorism, Fewer Jobs," Pew Research Center, July 11, 2016. The statistical data on the Italian Muslim community and Italian non-Muslim responses in this essay is taken from the author's Ph.D. dissertation at King's College London, Defence Studies Programme. The dissertation will be completed soon and will be entitled "Islamist radicalization in Italy: Myth or Nightmare?"

b The term *banlieues* in French literally means suburbs. But in France, the term has come to also mean poor immigrant areas, with inner-city dynamics, on the peripheries of many of the country's cities and towns.

c This observation is based on published accounts of the challenges facing these areas. The author is not aware of any parts of Italy facing the same degree of challenges.

these expectations have often gone unmet, creating a sense of frustration and alienation with mainstream society.[5] In contrast, the still largely first-generation Italian Muslim population is still in the process of establishing their position and livelihood and therefore may be less vulnerable to the issues of alienation, identity crisis, and lack of purpose that can make individuals susceptible to radicalization. A majority say they look at the country favorably. According to a survey by the author, 81% of surveyed Italian Muslims claimed to love Italy and its culture.[6] [d] Among the representative sample of Italian Muslims surveyed by the author, unemployment rates amounted to 8%,[7] which is less than the country's 12% overall rate.[8] By contrast, British Muslims experience the highest levels of unemployment out of all religious and ethnic groups (12.8% vs. 5.4% of the general population).[9] And in contrast to Switzerland and Germany, the Italian state and the representatives of the Muslim community are about to finalize an *entente* that recognizes Islam as an official religion, granting Muslims valuable social and legal rights.[10]

Islamist Radicalization

According to Italian counterterrorism officials, radicalization is not as significant a problem in Italy as in some other European countries. There are fewer dangerous Islamist extremists on Italian soil in absolute terms than in France, Germany, or Belgium as well as fewer Islamist extremists as a proportion of the Muslim population than those countries.[11] There is also substantial anecdotal evidence that some other countries have a more serious radicalization problem. Unlike the reportedly significant numbers in France who refused to observe a moment of silence for the victims of the *Charlie Hebdo* attack,[12] Italian Muslims have been virtually unanimous in their condemnation of violence and terrorism in the name of Islam.[13] Italy has also, so far, been relatively immune to overt displays of Islamist extremism. Italian cities have never experienced the unofficial establishment of sharia patrols by local Muslims[14] nor have they dealt with Islamist extremists burning American and Israeli flags in front of their respective embassies.[15]

A significantly smaller number of foreign fighters have departed from Italy as compared to the United Kingdom, Belgium, France, and Germany. In Italy, 122 individuals have left to join the Islamic State and other jihadi groups,[16] a number comparable to the foreign fighter number for Spain.[17] By contrast, around 450 have departed from Belgium,[18] 1,300 from France, 850 from the United Kingdom,[19] and over 900 from Germany.[20]

While Italy has does not have as acute a radicalization problem as France, for example, there are limits to Italian exceptionalism. According to data collected by the author, it is not uncommon to find attitudes associated with violent extremism in Italy's Muslim community. Out of 440 subjects surveyed by the author between November 2015 and August 2016, 24% (105/440) stated violence in the defense of Islam is justifiable, 10% (44/440) endorsed al-Qa`ida, 13% (57/440) supported the Islamic State, and almost 30% (131/440) agreed with the duty to punish whomever insults Islam and its sacred tenets.[21]

As emerged in 200 follow-up interviews, the main reasons for accepting violence centered on the notion of a religious duty to defend oppressed fellow Muslims. "[Imagine] you are a Syrian citizen. Who is going to protect you? Assad? Putin? The West? No, only other true Muslims who are obliged to come protect you if you are in danger," one North African worker in Reggio Emilia told the author.[22] [e] For this reason, a Senegalese vendor in Naples described al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State as "the only defenders of oppressed people in Syria and the Middle East."[23] "If it weren't for them," said a Somali immigrant in Florence referring to the Islamic State, "there would be much more blood in the area."[24]

Interestingly, statistical analysis by the author revealed that in the Italian case, discrimination and outrage at Western foreign policy was not a driving factor in radicalization.[25] [f] This finding may be a reflection of the fact that Italy has played a much lower-profile role in the anti-Islamic State coalition than some other Western countries. Although Italy has provided training and logistical assistance to Peshmerga units in Erbil,[26] Iraqi police in Mosul,[27] and anti-Islamic State forces in the Libyan city of Misrata,[28] it has never been involved in active airstrikes or direct military confrontation.

By contrast, there was a powerful correlation between religiously framed violence and endorsement of an Islamic government. Fifty percent of the subjects who agreed that theocratic rule was better than democracy justified violence in defense of Islam, compared to 15% of those who did not agree with such rule.[29]

There was also a strong correlation between endorsing violence and belief in the duty to punish offenders of Islam. Eighty percent of those who agreed with such a stance also endorsed violence in the name of God, compared to only 15% in support of violence among those who disagreed with punishing offenders. This suggests that the view that insulting the Prophet Mohammad is unacceptable was a key premise for justifying violence in the name of God.[30] The fact that there have been relatively few Islamist terrorist plots and attacks in Italy despite the prevalence of such attitudes are a reminder that it is not possible to draw a straight line between attitudes associated with violent extremism and actual acts of Islamist terrorism. Nevertheless, they provide the context for the current threat environment, which could be negatively transformed in the future by a variety of factors, including greater prioritization of targeting Italy by Islamist terrorist groups like the Islamic State or societal changes in Italy that could harden these sentiments.

d Echoing similar remarks from Milan, Rome, and Naples, a Moroccan worker in Turin thanked Allah for "being in Italy and not in France. There [France], women cannot wear the veil, they have to undress if they go to the beach, Muslims are discriminated against, are poor, and the French government does not give a damn about them. Here, we can work, have a family, and be Muslim. For this, we love Italy." Author interview, Muslim resident of Turin, May 2016.

e Along the same lines, two barbers in Milan and a Pakistani family man in Naples, respectively, explained the sentiment as such: "There are lots of crazy people out there. If you decide to provoke them, it's your own risk because you know by now how bad insulting the Prophet is;" "Just like in your family, you have to discipline your children and punish them if they persevere in their mistakes; you have to do the same here. If you decide to write offensive caricatures [about Mohammad], and I tell you that insults me once, twice, three times, four times, etc., then maybe, if I slap you, you stop." Author interview, anonymous barbers in Milan, February 2016; author interview, anonymous Pakistani worker in Naples, May 2016.

f Although 73% of surveyed Muslims agreed with the statement that Western foreign policy toward Islamic countries is and has been unjust and frustrating, the variable the author labeled "outrage at Western foreign policy" in the regression models could not be statistically associated to support for Islamist-framed violence. That is, resenting Western foreign policy was not a significant factor in shaping attitude on endorsing violence in defense of faith, punishment of those who insult Islam, and support for al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State.

An Islamic State-linked cell, which was dismantled in Venice in March 2017, discussed attacking the city's Rialto Bridge (pictured here), according to Italian investigators. (Reinhard Dirscherl/ullstein bild via Getty Images)

Jihadi Activity in Italy

While Italy has largely escaped the scourge of Islamist terrorism, there has been longstanding jihadi activity on Italian soil. As illustrated in a report by Centro Militare di Studi Strategici, which is linked to the Italian Ministry of Defense, there has been a significant jihadi presence in Italy for two decades.[31] The country has served as a harbor for members of the GSPC,[32] Jamat-Islamiyya,[33] the Algerian GIA,[34] Ansar al-Islam,[35] and al-Qa`ida.[36] "Hamza the Libyan," Usama bin Ladin's messenger responsible for establishing al-Qa`ida's network in Europe, resided in Milan, for example.[37]

From Italy, terrorist cells linked to al-Qa`ida have orchestrated, facilitated, or backed attacks in Casablanca,[38] Madrid,[39] Baghdad,[40] and Peshawar.[41] Terrorists and sympathizers have engaged in fundraising activities,[42] petty crimes,[43] counterfeiting documents,[44] arms[45] and drugs trafficking,[46] and the facilitation of illegal immigration.[47] Since 2001, radical proselytization has been detected in 108 mosques, and 11 have been linked to terrorist activities.[48] In addition to the 122 fighters who have joined the Islamic State or other jihadi groups in Syria and Iraq, Italy had already exported 29 combatants to Iraq during the Iraqi insurgency after the U.S. invasion in 2003, some of them responsible for suicide operations that resulted in dozens of casualties.[49]

Italy has seen more than 20 jihadi plots and attacks since 9/11. Very few of the plots were at an advanced stage, and none of the attacks caused fatalities.[50] Among these, the country experienced six minor, unsuccessful attacks by individuals with no contacts in terrorist groups in Milan, Agrigento, Brescia, and Modena that featured no injuries or casualties. The only partially successful attack occurred in 2009 in Milan at the Santa Barbara Carabinieri Station when Mohammed Game attempted to detonate a rudimental device, but only he and a guard were ultimately injured.[51] Of the thwarted plots since 2001, the most well-known schemes included the 2001 al-Qa`ida-inspired failed chemical attack on the U.S. Embassy in Rome, which featured a plan to release cyanide concealed in tomato cans into the building's vent system;[52] the 2005 GSPC-inspired plot to crash a ship filled with explosives in Naples' port;[53] the 2006 plot by a cell associated with al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) to strike Bologna's Dome and Milan's subway;[54] the 2012 Islamic State in Iraq-inspired plot by Mohammed Jarmoune to target Milan's Jewish Synagogue;[55] the 2016 Islamic State-inspired plan by Moutaharrik Abderrahim to carry out a suicide bombing operation at the Vatican;[56] the 2016 plot by two Afghan citizens allegedly linked to al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State to attack the Colosseum and the Circus Maximus in Rome;[57] and the 2017 Islamic State-inspired alleged plan to attack Venice's famous Rialto Bridge.[58]

Except for the 2007 Ponte Felcino case in which investigators confiscated chemical substances allegedly meant for chemical war-

fare,[g] since 2001 no weapons or explosive devices were found in any of the Islamist terrorism plots thwarted by authorities.[59] The thwarted plots were mostly aspirational and not far advanced in their planning largely because legal preventive measures in Italy grant officials the right to execute environmental monitoring (e.g. wiretapping) and intervene at early stages of presumed criminal activities. In addition to the jihadi activity detailed above, there have been hundreds of arrests and deportations linked to terrorism investigations since 2001.[60]

Italian Foreign Fighters

Before the recent wave of departures to Syria and Iraq, a few dozen foreign fighters had left Italy for theaters of jihad in the Balkans in the 1990s and in Iraq following the breakout of the war in 2003.[h] During these first two waves, aspiring combatants gravitated to a mosque network (principally in Milan) and displayed preexisting ties with international actors. By contrast, Italian foreign fighters joining the Islamic State have not necessarily been frequent mosque-goers. Their radicalization process mostly occurred online, and their ties with international actors were established through virtual communities. Overall, social marginalization does not seem to be a notable driver of foreign fighter mobilization, as most fighters have been employed and at least outwardly integrated.[61] Unlike in the past, Italian converts[62] and women have been among the departees.[63] Attracted by the caliphate's lure of a perfect Islamic society, several entire families have decided to join the Islamic State from Italy, too.[64]

In addition to Giuliano Delnevo, the first Italian foreign fighter to perish in Syria, the two most renowned combatants are Anas el-Abboubi and Maria Giulia Sergio. Born in Morocco in 1992, el-Abboubi grew up in a small mountain town near Brescia. His family was integrated and respected in the local community, and Anas aspired to become a famous rapper. After radicalizing online, he created the Italian branch of Sharia4Italy, establishing contacts with other Western and international jihadis.[65] Anas was arrested in June 2013 for plotting attacks against Brescia's Goito military base, its train station, and one of the town's bridges.[66] Released from prison for lack of evidence, Anas then left for Syria in July 2013,[67] where he is still believed to be fighting.[68]

Another prominent Italian foreign fighter in Syria is Maria Giulia Sergio (Fatima), a convert from the Naples area residing in Milan who became radicalized online through Skype conversations with Haik Bushra, a female university student in Bologna.[69] Fatima, who was 27 at the time, became obsessed with going to Syria and married Aldo Kobuzi, an Albanian wannabe fighter, at the Treviglio mosque on September 17, 2014.[70] On September 21, the two traveled to Istanbul, reached the Syrian border at Gaziantep on the following day, and are presumed to have entered Syria on October 2, 2014.[71] Once in the country, Fatima gained attention for her enraged remarks and threats to Italy. "Here we behead unbelievers … Jihad for Allah's sake is a mandatory duty and who cannot come here [must wage] Jihad in *daarakufr* [the land of misbelief, that is] killing the infidels!"[72]

Target Rumiyah

Despite these plots, there have been relatively few conspiracies to attack targets in Italy. As Lorenzo Vidino's research has revealed, the key explanation for this is that al-Qa`ida and its affiliates mainly used Italy as a logistical platform.[73] Terrorist cells that gravitated to the mosque network (especially in Milan) were hierarchically organized and had physical links with other international actors. Underground recruitment was carefully planned and selective. Further, while plots to strike Italy existed, terrorist cells mostly gathered intelligence and resources destined for terrorist operations perpetrated abroad.

The Italian public began to grow concerned over the threat of jihadi terrorism in the wake of the Islamic State's deadly attacks in Europe. The Islamic State has made direct threats to Italy more frequently than other jihadi terrorist organizations now or in the past. It is true that in 2002 and 2003 bin Ladin himself threatened retaliation against U.S. allies, including Italy in the list of the mentioned countries.[74] While the Islamic State has threatened countries like France, Germany, and the United Kingdom more prolifically, it is nevertheless ironic that the group has repeatedly threatened Italy at a time when Rome's involvement in the Middle East has been marginal. Italy has not been conducting active airstrikes like the United Kingdom and France nor has the country flown reconnaissance sorties as Germany has.

One explanation for why Italy is mentioned so many times as a target in Islamic State propaganda is that "Rome" or "Rumiyah" has been used by the group as a catch-all term for Western Christendom. While not all these threats are designed to explicitly single out Italy, they serve to heighten the threat to the country. The Islamic State has been animated by a prophecy attributed to the Prophet Mohammed that predicts the conquest of Rome by Islamic armies near the end of time.[i] And in this context, threats against the home of Christianity serve an additional function of energizing and motivating its hardline support base around the world. The growing number of Islamic State attacks on Christians around the world and past plots targeting the Vatican suggest the Eternal City will continue to be a target.

Rome has been mentioned several times by the leaders of the Islamic State. In July 2014, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi released an audiotape telling followers "you will conquer Rome and own the world, if Allah wills."[75] In September of that year, after the United States launched air strikes in Syria, then Islamic State spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani stated in an audiotape, "With Allah's

g An al-Qa`ida-inspired cell gravitating around the local mosque was dismantled in Ponte Felcino, close to Perugia. At the time, investigators believed that the group, headed by the Moroccan imam Mostapha el-Korchi, was engaged in terrorist training (i.e. weapons use, one-on-one physical fighting, assembly of rudimental devices, etc.). The targets and the logistics of potential attacks remain unclear, but officials stated they averted imminent attacks allegedly meant to strike Morocco or Italy. For more, see "Al Qaeda: a Perugia una 'scuola del terrore,'" *Repubblica*, July 21, 2007, and "A casa dell'imam l'occorrente per ordigni," *Corriere della Sera*, July 22, 2007.

h A negligible number (only around a dozen fighters) left for Afghanistan to wage jihad against the Soviets. Around 30 fighters left for Iraq after the break of the 2003 war, and 122 subjects joined the Islamic State. This trend shows a progression in the involvement of Italian fighters in the global jihadi movement recruiting combatants for international theaters of jihad. Author interview, Claudio Galzerano, director of the International Anti-Terrorism Department in Italy's Ministry of Internal Affairs, April 2017.

i Prophecies related to the conquest of Rome are mentioned in various *hadith*. See, for example, https://sunnah.com/muslim/54/50.

permission, we will conquer your Rome, break your crosses, and enslave your women, by the permission of Allah, the Exalted. This is His promise to us."[76]

In the same vein, in February 2015, the Islamic State released a video of the beheading of 21 Egyptian Copts on a Libyan beach. One of the fighters warned on camera, "We are here, south of Rome. Soon we will conquer Rome with God's will."[77] Such warnings were undoubtedly also designed to pressure Italy not to deepen its involvement in Libya. Italy has so far only been involved in logistical support to recognized anti-Islamic State forces.[78] In 2015, a video featuring executions and beheadings was specially subtitled in Italian and stated, "You have declared war on me with the misbelieving alliance … the more you will fight, the more you will suffer."[79] One of the most explicit threats was made in April 2016 when an English-speaking fighter, featured in an Islamic State video showing footage of previous attacks, stated, "If it was Paris yesterday, and today Brussels, only Allah knows where it will be tomorrow. Maybe it will be in London or Berlin or Rome."[80]

Pro-Islamic State Clusters in Italy

Whereas extremist networks in Italy in the decade before 9/11 were composed to a significant degree of jihadis who were radicalized before they moved to Italy, they have become increasingly populated by individuals radicalized inside Italy.[81] As a series of articles in this publication has illustrated, throughout Europe clusters of extremists that have congregated around charismatic radical preachers have played an outsized role in recruiting individuals to travel to join the Islamic State or encouraging them to carry out terrorist activity in its name. This is true of Italy, even though the available evidence suggests these clusters are smaller and more localized than those that centered on extremist proselytizers such as Khalid al-Zerkani in Brussels,[82] Abu Walaa in northwest Germany,[83] and Anjem Choudary in London.[84]

Several small clusters of extremists have been detected in Lombardy and Veneto, making these regions arguably the epicenter of pro-Islamic State activity in Italy. One influential radicalizer was Musa Cerantonio, an Australian imam of Italian origin who preached in Brescia and Bergamo in August 2012.[85] He hit the headlines in the summer of 2014 when he posted a picture of himself waving the Islamic State flag in front of San Peter Dome, stating, "Allah willing, we will destroy the Vatican."[86] He was eventually arrested on charges of terrorism in the Philippines.[87]

Another radical preacher was Bilal Bosnic, a Bosnian linked to the Islamic State who previously toured northern Italy to recruit combatants for the Syrian front. Bosnic preached in mosques in the cities of Pordenone, Cremona, and Bergamo in July 2011. Particularly important were his remarks from a 2014 interview confirming both the presence of Italian foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq and the caliphate's interest in Italy's recruiting and ideological potential.[88] Imam Bosnic was eventually arrested in Bosnia in September 2014 on charges of being an Islamic State recruiter.[89]

Bosnic's efforts in northern Italy helped establish a small cluster supportive of the Islamic State in Veneto. Through the help of one of his acolytes, Ajhan Veapi, Bosnic reportedly indoctrinated and recruited Ismar Mesinovic and Minifer Karameleski, two Balkan workers residing in the town of Belluno in Veneto.[90] Officials later ascertained this cluster of extremists was linked to actors in Macedonia, namely Saban Asanoski and Adisen Mauslijoski, who traveled with the Belluno group to Syria. After reaching Syria in December 2013, Mesinovic was killed while fighting, and Karameleski is still presumed to be there.[91][j]

Similarly, although investigations are still in progress, authorities are assessing potential ties between Bosnic's network and an alleged Balkan terrorist cell that was dismantled in Venice in March 2017. This newer cluster was composed of four Kosovar citizens, all employed and residing in Venice's historic center. According to prosecutors, upon the return of Fisnik Bekaj—one of the cell's members who is believed to have fought for the Islamic State[92]—from Syria in 2016, the group began to "self-train" by consulting Islamic State content online and expressed a desire to pledge allegiance to the group. Investigators believe the cell aspired to launch attacks in Venice because in one intercepted conversation they mentioned the attaining of paradise by bombing the Rialto Bridge.[93]

Italian authorities have detected more recruitment activity for the Islamic State in Lombardy than any other region. The provincial capital Milan has long been a center of jihadi activity with one garage-turned-mosque—the Islamic Cultural Institute—being labeled "the main al Qaeda station house in Europe used to facilitate the movement of weapons, men and money across the world" by the United States Treasury Department shortly after 9/11.[94][k] Despite the dismantling of al-Qa`ida-linked cells in the years that followed, the region has supplied in more recent times the Islamic State with more than one-third of all Italian foreign fighters.[95]

Although they are not believed to still be active,[96] there were four clusters in Lombardy linked to jihadi groups, including the Islamic State in Syria, which caused Italian security services particular concern. One was the Cologno Monzese cluster, which was formed by a dozen Syrian citizens who radicalized following the breakout of the Syrian civil war. After engaging in acts of intimidation against Christian Syrians in Italy, at least five members of the group departed to join forces with the Free Syrian Army in 2012 and then with Jabhat al-Nusra in 2013,[97] forming the "Suleiman Battalion."[98] While the group's leader was filmed executing prisoners in Syria, those who remained in Italy have been accused of recruiting fighters.[99]

Another was the Inzago cluster, which gravitated around female Italian convert Fatima, her husband Kobuzi, and their two extended families. After converting herself and her family to Islam in 2008, Fatima left for Syria with her husband in 2014. During her stay in the caliphate, she has been allegedly trained to manage weapons and has fiercely pressured her family to move to Syria.[100] Indeed, from Milan and from Grosseto, Tuscany, Fatima's and Aldo's families were allegedly preparing their departure for the Middle East when they were arrested in July 2015.[101]

A third was the Varese-Lecco cluster, which was composed of five Moroccan citizens and one female Italian convert. After radicalizing, Alice Brignoli and her husband, Mohamed Koraichi, entered Syria with their three children. Their friends and relatives Abderahhim Moutaharrik (a former kickboxing champion); his wife, Salma Bencharki; Koraichi's sister Wafa; and Abderrahmane Khachia,

j The whereabouts of the other two fighters remain unclear.

k One imam at the mosque in the 1990s, Anwar Shabaan, a member of the Egyptian group Gamma Islamiya went on to lead the Mujahideen Brigade in Bosnia during the civil war there. Lorenzo Vidino, "The Evolution of Jihadism in Italy: Rise in Homegrown Radicals," *CTC Sentinel* 6:11 (2013).

brother of Ousamma Khachia who died in 2015 in Iraq,[l] were apprehended before they could take action. In April 2016, Moutaharrik was instructed through an audio message sent via Whatsapp by an Islamic State "sheikh" to strike Italy.[m] As authorities demonstrated, he was planning to target the Vatican.[102] Moutaharrik was arrested in April 2016 and was sentenced to six years in prison in February 2017.[103] This appears to be the first case known to Italian authorities in which the Islamic State has attempted to direct an attack in Italy over encryption apps.

Finally, the Brescia cluster was made up of four Kosovar citizens, whose leading figure was allegedly Samet Ishmiti, a former laborer from Brescia who radicalized online in 2011.[104] Even though it is not clear whether the group had real intentions to attack Italy, photos showed its members holding weapons while stating, "Francis will be the last Pope." What concerned authorities most were the cluster's proven, direct, personal ties with Lavdrim Muhaxheri,[105] aka "The Balkans' Butcher," one of the Islamic State's most brutal commanders and leader of the Balkan brigade in Syria.[106] [n]

Even though these clusters were mostly geared toward recruiting foreign fighters to join jihadi efforts in Syria and Iraq, some of their members did plan to bring terror to Italy. Others plotting terrorist attacks in the Lombardy region appear to have been radicalized online instead of being part of Islamic State-linked networks. One example was a pair of alleged terrorist plotters arrested in Brescia in July 2015. Italian investigators believe Briki Lassaad, a Tunisian extremist, and the Pakistani Muhammed Waqas were planning to attack a U.S. military base located in Ghedi and other targets in Italy, including the police. What particularly concerned Italian authorities was the fact that the duo had stable jobs and were seemingly well integrated into Italian society.[o] In 2016, the two were sentenced to six years in prison on charges of terrorism.[107]

The Threat Trajectory

Italy does not at this time face the same scale of threat as some other European countries like France, Belgium, Germany, and the United Kingdom. As outlined, this reality is likely due to a variety of factors, including a lower degree of radicalization inside the Muslim community, less anger among Italian Muslims over the country's foreign policy, and the fact that notwithstanding the repeated mentions of Rumiyah in Islamic State propaganda, Italy is not a priority target of international terrorist groups. Just as may have been the case with al-Qa`ida in the years before and after 9/11, it is possible that one factor making Italy a lower priority target is that jihadis continue to see it as a useful logistical hub. Furthermore, the governmental powers granted by Article 270 of the penal code may have indeed discouraged aspiring jihadis. Seizure of assets, mobility and occupational restrictions, and direct expulsions from Italy may, in fact, prove to be effective preventive measures, particularly if aspiring jihadis are first-generation immigrants seeking better conditions for their families.

There are a number of indicators, however, suggesting the threat could grow worse. Although racism and perceived inequality have not been significant drivers in relation to support for Islamist violence in Italy, 51% of Muslims in Italy questioned by this author did feel discriminated against. Likewise, 64% stated they have no voice, and 82% believed there is a media war to discredit Islam.[108] Such attitudes provide opportunities for radical proselytizers.

Furthermore, Italy's economy has still not recovered from the 2008 economic crisis, and it now finds itself overwhelmed with managing the humanitarian crisis, which in 2016 alone brought almost 200,000 migrants to its shores.[109] Resentment against the new arrivals and fears over terrorism has seen a sharp rise in anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant sentiments. Most worryingly, there are signs the experiences faced by the Italian Muslim community is moving in the direction of France. Italian cities that host large Muslim communities are starting to see the ghettoization of Muslim immigrants in certain neighborhoods. Examples include Via Padova in Milan, Torpignattara in Rome, and Machera in Turin, which, increasingly afflicted by high unemployment, crime, and poverty, could turn into something comparable to the French *banlieues*.

As the children of a first generation of immigrants who came to Italy to work come of age, there is concern second-generation Italian Muslims might also suffer from the identity crisis and feeling of alienation that have afflicted their counterparts in countries like France and the United Kingdom. In an increasingly polarized society, extreme Islamist ideology might offer a sense of meaning and purpose sought by those who feel victimized and frustrated.

In these circumstances, there is concern jihadi terrorist groups will attempt to worsen societal tensions by launching terrorist attacks in Italy. Given the surge in migrant flows to Italy from Libya, there is concern the Islamic State could infiltrate operatives into Italy amongst the larger refugee flows from the Middle East and North Africa. In 2016, 171,000 irregular migrants arrived in Italy from Libya and North Africa.[110] One of those who came back was Ben Nasr Mehdi, a Tunisian explosive expert linked to al-Qa`ida,[111] who had been previously incarcerated after being convicted of terrorism offences in Italy and deported to Tunisia. In October 2015, Mehdi attempted to reenter Italy by see from Libya with fake credentials seeking political asylum, but was discovered and deported back to Tunisia.[112] Italian security services suspect Mehdi is a key figure for facilitating jihadis' journeys towards Syria and Iraq.[113] While thus far only about 17 foreign fighters who fought in Syria and Iraq have returned to Italy,[114] the case of Mehdi highlighted concern that Italian or other foreign fighters migrating to Europe from Syria, Iraq or Libya, as pressure mounts on the Islamic State, might launch attacks in Italy.

There is also concern that irregular migrants arriving in Italy might be vulnerable to the message of radical proselytizers inside

l His affiliation to any specific group remains unclear.

m The investigating judge in the case described the sheikh as a "very important person in the terrorist organization." Bartolini, "Reclutatori Isis, combattenti e aspiranti kamikaze: il grande romanzo nero del jihad è in Lombardia;" Giovanna Trinchella, "Terrorismo, le intercettazioni – 'Caro fratello, ti mando il poema bomba'. Nel mirino l'ambasciata di Israele a Roma," *Fatto Quotidiano*, April 28, 2016; Luigi Ferrarella, "Esplora il significato del termine: Isis, così dava ordini lo sceicco: 'Non venire in Siria, fatti esplodere lì,'" *Corriere della Sera*, April 29, 2016.

n The Balkan Brigade is an alleged battalion within the Islamic State that is mainly composed of foreign fighters from the Balkans. Nicknamed the "Balkans' Butcher," Lavdrim Muhaxheri became the battalion's top commander due to his brutality executing prisoners. He is now believed to have returned to Kosovo with the intent to bring war on European soil. For more, see Marco Pacini, "Il ritorno del boia nei Balcani," *Espresso*, December 26, 2016.

o Their desire to launch attacks was shown by comments on their Twitter accounts. "We are in your streets. We are everywhere. We are focalizing our targets, waiting for the X hour." For more, see "Terrorismo, due arresti a Brescia. Gli investigatori: 'Volevano colpire base militare di Ghedi,'" *Repubblica*, July 22, 2015.

Italy, because of unmet expectations and unstable circumstances within rescue centers. A case in point is Anis Amri, who carried out the December 2016 Berlin truck attack. Amri was radicalized in prison in Sicily after arriving there as a young asylum seeker and being jailed for starting a fire at his refugee shelter.[115] Aware that prisons can serve as venues for radicalization, Italian authorities are currently monitoring 400 detainees presumed at risk of radicalization.[116] It is also likely the clusters linked to the Islamic State will try to capitalize off the growing jihadi footprint in the Balkans to expand in Italy. As outlined in this piece, several recent counter-terrorism operations in Italy have centered on Balkan nationals living in Italy. As is well recognized jihadi networks operate across national borders, complicating the task of European security and police services. Italian investigators are increasingly seeing linkages between radicals in Italy and other European countries, notably Germany.[p]

Al-Qa`ida remains part of the threat picture in Italy,[117] as the dismantling of two cells in Puglia and Sardinia demonstrated.[q] In short, Italy faces a complex, growing, and multi-generational threat from jihadi terrorism. While Italian security agencies have so far been successful at breaking up plots, they may be put under significant strain in the future. CTC

p One example was the 2015 arrest of Abdul Rahman Nauroz, a Kurd-Iraqi citizen residing in Merano, close to Bolzano, on charges of being an Islamic State recruiter. Investigations later revealed that while benefiting from the asylum status in Bolzano, Nauroz had allegedly established contacts with radical figures in France, Norway, and Germany. His contacts in Cologne and those in Turkey allegedly allowed him to facilitate foreign fighters' arrival to Syria. Another example was Nadir Benchorfi, who was arrested December 2016 before he could allegedly target a large shopping mall in Lombardy and was linked to a cell composed of 25 German foreign fighters he allegedly previously met when living in Germany. Finally, there was Berlin truck attacker Anis Amri, who was shot dead in Sesto San Giovanni close to Milan after attacking the German capital. In April 2017, Italian police announced they had helped German authorities break up a terrorist cell in Berlin linked to truck attacker Anis Amri. Two members of the cell—Lutumba Nkanga, 27, from Congo, and Soufiane Amri (not a family relation to the truck attacker), 22, from Morocco—were arrested in late December 2016 while transiting through Italy. Nkanga is still in custody, while Soufiane Amri was deported to Germany. For more, see Jimmy Milanese, "Quei legami tra la cellula jihadista di Merano e gli attentatori di Parigi," *Giornale*, November 27, 2015; Bartolini, "Reclutatori Isis, combattenti e aspiranti kamikaze: il grande romanzo nero del jihad e' in Lombardia;" "Terrorismo, contatti con Amri Un arresto e un espulso in Italia," *Corriere della Sera*, April 28, 2017; "Terrorismo, un arresto e un'espulsione a Brindisi: 'Militanti dell'Isis, avevano contatti con Berlino e con Anis Amri,'" *Fatto Quotidiano*, April 28, 2017; and "Italy claims to break up Berlin terror cell linked to Christmas market attacker," *The Local Deutschland*, April 28, 2017.

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Iranian Kurdish Militias: Terrorist-Insurgents, Ethno Freedom Fighters, or Knights on the Regional Chessboard?

By Franc Milburn

While the Kurds of Syria, Turkey, and Iraq have received significant attention from analysts following a perceived "Kurdish Awakening" as well as their key combat roles in Iraq and Syria, there has been less focus on Iran's Kurds. Long a source of concern to the Iranian regime, Iranian Kurdish militants, including a group designated a terrorist outfit by the United States, officially announced the renewal of their insurgent campaign against Tehran in 2016. Inspired by the increasing assertiveness of Kurds in neighboring countries and bristling under continued repression, these groups have shown some signs of increased cohesion and unity, making them potentially significant players on the regional chessboard.

In March 2017, Komala, the Iranian Kurdish Communist Party, announced that six armed Iranian Kurdish groups opposed to Iran (all labeled "terrorists" by Iran) and seeking Kurdish autonomy would develop cooperation between the parties "aimed at joint military activities."[1] Like their ethnic kin in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) and Syria, Iran's armed Kurdish groups have suffered disunity for decades, making this development potentially the most significant movement toward Iranian Kurdish unity since the short-lived Kurdish Mahabad Republic of 1946 and the 1979 Kurdish uprising against the Mullahs.

In 2016, Kurdish militant groups, which are now largely based in the KRI, rekindled an insurgency that had been largely dormant for decades, partly as a function of a regional Kurdish Awakening and partly because of continued Iranian repression against Kurds within Iran. Komala had effectively ended its insurgent campaign inside Iran in 1990.[2]

This article explores the following issues: the history of the conflict; the recent renewal of insurgency; the Iranian response; and the motivations, combat effectiveness, and unity of Kurdish groups fighting Iran, as well as their complex relationships with regional powers.

Franc Milburn is a strategic advisor, political risk analyst, and corporate security specialist. He has held senior oil and gas and security positions across the Middle East and North Africa, with three years living and working in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. He is an alumnus of the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst and holds a bachelor's degree in international relations from the London School of Economics.

The History of the Conflict

During 1979-1980, Komala fought alongside another principal Iranian Kurdish armed group, the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI).[a] The uprising was a response to the wave of Kurdish nationalism following the Iranian Revolution, a perceived opportunity to gain increased autonomy not available under the Shah, the relative disorganization and chaos surrounding the establishment of the Islamic Republic, as well as other armed uprisings against the Mullahs. The Kurds had been effectively excluded from the new constitution with no provision for autonomy. The uprising started in March 1979 when Kurds seized police and military barracks in the towns of Sanandaj, Paveh, Divandarreh, Saqqez, and Mahabad. It then morphed into a wide-scale uprising across northwestern Kurdish majority areas of Iran, which resulted in the brutal suppression and deaths of approximately 6,200 Kurds.[3]

"Iranian Kurdistan" and "Eastern Kurdistan" are unofficial names for the area inhabited by Kurds in northwestern Iran, bordering Turkey and Iraq. Kurds are present in the Iranian provinces of Kurdistan (Kordestan), Kermanshah, West Azerbaijan, and Illam, including the Zagros mountain range. Official Iranian counts of the Kurdish population are lacking or unreliable—likely out of a desire to underestimate the size of this minority—as are those of Kurdish nationalists for the opposite reason. One scholar from the region has put the Kurdish population in Iran as "somewhere around 10-12 million."[4] In the absence of reliable figures, this scholar estimated a ratio of 70-75 percent Sunni Kurds and 20-25 percent Shi`a, who are further subdivided into Twelver Shiism—the same as Iran's majority—and other sects that are "under serious repression."[5] Kurdish areas have been neglected by the central government for decades. Kermanshah province, with a population of one million, has repeatedly topped the list of the least developed provinces in Iran, according to Iranian government data.[6]

Iranian Kurdistan also became a theater of operations in the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War, with both countries using the Kurds for military and destabilization objectives. The mainly Sunni Kurds were seen as a subversive force ripe for exploitation by hostile external powers to strangle their new state. Saddam Hussein's regime provided arms to the KDPI in 1981 as part of its efforts to destabilize Iran and deny Iranian forces key terrain.[7] The KDPI hoped to use this support to create Kurdish liberated zones, but KDPI activities

a The KDPI was originally founded in Mahabad in August 1945, but many of its leaders were arrested or executed after the Imperial Iranian Army effectively ended the Kurd Mahabad Republic in August 1946. The KDPI fought periodically against the Shah's regime until the revolution of 1979. Komala, founded in 1969, was also repressed under the Shah.

were suppressed by Iranian forces.[b] Iran also played the Kurdish card against Baghdad, supporting the Iraqi Kurdish militias KDP and PUK.[8] Kurdish nationalist expectations that Iraqi and Iranian Kurds would cooperate were frustrated as a wedge was driven between the KDPI (a group assisted by Saddam) and KDP (a group assisted by Saddam's foes). The KDPI continued sporadic operations inside Iran until 1983, but their activities and those of other groups petered out as Iran regained control of Kurdish areas.

The KDPI renewed its insurgency from 1989 to 1996 in response to the 1989 Iranian assassination of its leader in Vienna[9] and to mass Kurdish demonstrations inside Iran in 1990. But targeted Iranian assassinations, cross-border military operations, and Tehran's cooperation with Turkey against Iranian Kurdish groups caused the KDPI to unilaterally end overt operations in 1996. Sporadic smaller-scale operations and clashes resumed through the period of 2014 to 2015.

In early 2016, the KDPI announced a resumption of conflict,[10] citing the repression of Kurds. In making the announcement, the group claimed it had already started operations some time earlier. A senior figure in the KDPI told Al Arabiya that "operations started a year ago in terms of hit-and-run-type opeartions, but now there will be larger and more coordinated operations."[c]

The Kurdistan Freedom Party (PAK), a left-leaning nationalist Kurdish political faction with close ties to the KDPI and good relations with the KDP and PUK,[11] followed suit, announcing that Iran was facing a widespread Kurdish uprising that would affect all Iranian cities. Iranian Kurd groups have engaged in hit-and-run tactics against Iranian forces, principally the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), in the towns of Sardasht,[12] Sanandaj,[13] and Shno.[14] Reports indicate Iranian Kurdish militant groups have only lost a few fighters during these operations.[15] [d]

Iranian Kurdish militant groups have largely use IEDs, RPGs, and small arms.[16] These have resulted in low casualty figures on the Iranian side (a dozen or less). There have been no reported civilian casualties as a result of attacks by Iranian Kurdish militant groups, although Iranian-Kurdish reprisals against spies and collaborators may have gone unreported. As of yet, there has been no evidence of sustained urban insurgency in Iranian cities proper.

The Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK)—a PKK offshoot composed mainly of Iranian Kurds opposed to Tehran—also initiated insurgent operations in 2016, including participating in various clashes with Iranian forces and attempting a close-quarter assassination on an Iranian MP. The PJAK was not among the six Kurdish groups announcing closer cooperation in March and does not closely cooperate with other groups, according to Kurdish security sources.[17] Accounts about the formation of PJAK vary. One is that Iranian Kurds established the party in Iran in the late 1990s and then sought refuge in the PKK-controlled Qandil Mountains where they adopted the tenets of the PKK and its figurehead Abdullah Öcalan. Others believe that the Iranian Kurdish faction split off from the PKK in 2004.[18] As with the Syrian YPG, the PKK and PJAK maintain extremely close relations in terms of ideology and fighters, and therefore intelligence. A complicating factor for the PJAK participating in an Iranian Kurdish alliance may be recently reported Iranian overtures to the PKK, which may incentivize the PKK to rein in the PJAK.[19]

Outside of official sources, the numbers on armed Iranian Kurds remain opaque and should be considered best-guess estimates and averages. The KDPI may have 1,000-1,500 fighters, Komala less than 1,000, and the PJAK 3,000 or less, according to the author's discussions with knowledgeable sources. Other groups are harder to estimate.[e]

Most of these fighters are believed to be concentrated in the Zagros mountain range on the Iraqi side of the Iran-Iraq border in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.[20] This allows them the advantage of conducting cross-border raids into Iranian territory without suffering all-out retaliation from Iranian forces. In launching attacks, it can be presumed based on operations in past campaigns that they link up with local sympathizers acting as scouts and forward operators. This contrasts to the 1980s Kurdish Iranian insurgency, which was launched by militant forces present inside towns and villages in Kurdish majority parts of Iran.

The rekindling of insurgent operations and the coalescing of the various Iranian Kurd armed groups around a shared goal to strike back at Tehran can be seen as a response to a number of factors. These include continued denial of political rights and economic opportunities to Iran's Kurds, coupled with arbitrary arrests,[21] Iran's greatly expanded role inside Iraq and Syria, and a perceived Kurdish Awakening across the region—from Turkey to Syria, the KRI, and Iran, which has seen the emergence of a de facto state in the KRI and the Syrian YPG taking control of swaths of northern Syria. Another reason for the renewal of the insurgency is what Kurdish activists said was the execution of hundreds of Iranian Kurdish activists and members of Iranian Kurdish opposition parties by the Iranian regime in 2015, an increase on previous years.[22]

There were also a number of factors that inspired Kurdish groups in Iran to more aggressively assert themselves. They were energized by political gains for Turkey's Kurds and advancement of Kurdish rights in the years before 2015. They were then angered by the Turkish government crackdown on Kurdish parties and offensive on the PKK that followed, exposing the limits to what Kurds could achieve in the region by political and peaceful means.

A key, galvanizing event for Iranian Kurds occurred in May 2015 when popular discontent against the regime escalated into riots by Iranian Kurds in the city of Mahabad. There, they set a hotel on fire to protest the unexplained death of an ethnic Kurd female. Local Kurds said the 25-year-old chose suicide over an alleged rape attempt against her by an Iranian government official. A brutal re-

b Saddam Hussein's support of the KDPI had a precedent. In the early to mid-1970s, the Shah, the United States, and Israel had supported Iraq's Kurds against Saddam. David Plotz, "The Kurds," Slate, September 28, 1996; Dexter Filkins, "The Fight of Their Lives," *New Yorker*, September 29, 2014.

c The KDPI also cited the Iran nuclear deal as a reason for the conflict, reportedly stating, "since Iran has signed the atomic agreement, Iran thinks whatever they do. The outside world does not care. That is why we were forced to choose this approach." The fear was that unless they acted, the Iranian position would grow stronger as a result of sanctions being lifted and an improvement of relations between the Iranian government and the United States. "Iran's nuclear deal forced us to end two-decade ceasefire, says Iranian Kurdish group," Rudaw, September 25, 2016.

d Casualty claims by Iranian Kurdish militant groups tend to be more accurate as they publicize their "martyrs."

e Editor's note: The Kurdistan Freedom Party (PAK) is estimated to have a few hundred fighters. Paul Cruickshank interview, Zana Gulmohamad, May 2017.

The Zagros Mountains as seen from inside the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (Franc Milburn)

gime crackdown brought an end to the civil unrest.[23]

Iranian Kurdish factions have a range of political views from socialism to Maoism, but what they all share is an ardent sense of Kurdish nationalism[f] and a desire for political and cultural autonomy within Iran.[34] Of all the groups, only the PJAK is designated a terrorist organization by the United States[25] [g] as a result of its close association with the PKK and U.S. sensitivity to its NATO ally Turkey; this is despite the fact that the United States has actively supported the YPG in Syria and shielded it from Turkish military action. PJAK has not publicly espoused enmity or violence against the United States or its Western allies as far as the author is aware, which stands in direct contrast to Iran, deemed by the United States to be a state sponsor of terror.[26]

Iran's Response

Iranian Kurdish groups accuse Iran of responding to the resumption of the Kurdish insurgency with a targeted bombing of KDPI headquarters in Koya, KRI, in December 2016.[27] Although no direct link has yet been established between Iran and the bombing, KDPI officials were quick to point the finger, especially given the fact that the twin IEDs against the KDPI headquarters occurred on the birthday of its late leader Abdulrahman Ghassemloo, who was assassinated in Vienna in 1989. Knowledgeable local sources contacted by the author concur that Iran is most likely the culprit, given the target's attractiveness, Iran's historical track record of assassinations, and the lack of other plausible enemies targeting the KDPI. One possibility is the attack was carried out by an Iranian proxy such as ethnic Kurdish members of an Iraqi Shi`a militia trained by the IRGC, Hezbollah, or Kurdish[h] members of a Sunni terrorist group backed by and based in Iran so as to provide Tehran plausible deniability.[28] Nevertheless, despite claiming to have arrested two of the alleged perpetrators,[29] the KRG has, months later,

f While the Iranian Kurdish groups are largely secular, one group that has traditionally operated in the Halabja area near the border with Iran is the Sunni jihadi group Ansar al-Islam. The group, which was aligned with al-Qa`ida in Iraq and then with the Islamic State, has included Kurds, Arabs, and some foreigners. Although, according to author interviews, U.S. Special Forces helped the PUK to root out the group from the Halabja area, the group found a degree of sanctuary on the Iranian side of the border. In 2014, much of the group aligned with the Islamic State while some continued to operate as Ansar al-Islam. For more on the group, see Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "A Complete History of Jamaat Ansar al-Islam," aymennjawad.org, December 15, 2015.

g The PJAK is also designated a terrorist organization by Turkey and Iran, but not by the European Union.

h The Parastin u Zanyari, a collective of the PUK and KDP's intelligence services, together with both parties' Assayish security police, are highly adept at HUMINT—and probably more so than some of their western counterparts in many respects. This is likely due to previous years of operations without sophisticated technical means, making use of ethnic Kurd operatives by Iran the most plausible scenario.

A view of the Zagros Mountains from inside the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (Franc Milburn)

yet to blame Iran directly or provide any details about the offenders.[i] What is clear is the bombing has led to greater unification of the various Kurdish militant groups in Iran because it was seen as an attack against them all.[j]

Early this year, Iran announced that it had greatly increased intelligence and surveillance activities in the KRI. Iranian public statements suggest they have grown increasingly concerned over the threat posed by Kurdish Iranian militant groups operating inside Iraqi territory. In February 2017, IRGC ground forces commander Muhammad Pakpour stated, "in the northeast [of Iran] and on the other side of the border [KRI], many consulates have been opened to revive the dead groupings and stir them against us."[30] Iran has long lambasted the Iraqi government and the KRG for failing to control its side of Iran's sensitive northwestern border and has accused Saudi Arabia[31] (and others) of funding and arming Iranian Kurdish groups, which the KRG and the Iranian Kurdish groups have consistently denied. Iran supporters in the Iraqi parliament's Shi`a State of Law block, headed by former Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, in early 2017 proposed a motion calling on the Iraqi government to disarm or expel Iranian Kurdish groups operating from the KRI against Iran.[32]

Iran's Enemies Eyeing Countermeasures?

What might make Iranian Kurd armed groups increasingly relevant to the regional chessboard are developing (or deteriorating) relations between Iran and external powers. In March 2017, General Joseph Votel, commander of United States Central Command, stated that "Iran poses the most significant threat to the Central Region and to our national interests and the interests of our partners and allies"[33] [k] while U.S. Secretary of Defense James Mattis has described Iran as "the single and most enduring threat to peace

i The KRG is extremely reluctant to offend Iran, given the latter's pivotal role in the fight against the Islamic State and the fact that Iran has traditionally backed the PUK against the KDP inside the KRI to stymie Iraqi Kurdish unity. The KRG, especially the KDP element, seeks a long-term military commitment by the United States to base military forces permanently in the KRI to offset Iran, Iraq, and Turkey—one of the KRG's strategic objectives—toward securing de jure independence and security from neighbors. The KRG also has to balance its stance and support toward Iran's Kurds, who are held in high estimation by the KRI's population and who have fought alongside KRG forces against the Islamic State.

j There have also been unsubstantiated press report sourced to the PJAK, which claim Iranian use of chemical weapons against them near the town of Salasbajani in Kermanshah province. The PJAK claimed 12 fatalities. Unlike the recent chemical attack in Syria in April 2017, there has been no independent verification of the claims. "Kurdish guerrillas suspect Iran used chemical weapons against them," Rudaw, October 11, 2016.

k General Votel noted a lack of "improvement in Iran's behavior" since the nuclear deal was finalized; that Iran aspires to be "a regional hegemon;" and that "its forces and proxies oppose U.S. interests" across the Middle East, Afghanistan, and Central Asia. "They also are working to subvert the GoI [government of Iraq] by establishing a long-term presence within Iraq's security forces … Iran exerts influence and a degree of control over the majority of the nearly 100,000 Shia militias within the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), Furthermore, Iran has expanded cooperation with Russia in Syria in ways that threaten U.S. interests in the region." "Statement Of General Joseph L. Votel, Commander U.S. Central Command Before The Senate Armed Services Committee On The Posture of U.S. Central Command," March 9, 2017.

and stability in the Middle East."[34] [l] U.S. President Donald Trump has also signaled a get-tough approach to Iran. In March 2017, a number of policy centers in Washington D.C. released reports arguing that the United States needed to explore a range of options to confront Iran. A report by analysts at the Institute for the Study of War stated that "a major US-Iran conflict is likely in the next five years" and recommended "lethal" options for dealing with Iran.[m] A report by analysts at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy similarly countenanced "direct action"[35] against Iranian proxies and supported militias and strengthening allies' "offensive and especially defensive capabilities."[36] A report by analysts at the Center for Strategic and International Studies suggested "covert action … to destabilize hostile states such as the Islamic Republic."[37] Aside from the United States, Iran has plenty of other enemies, including Israel,[38] Saudi Arabia,[39] Bahrain,[40] and the UAE,[41] who may be willing to consider unconventional warfare and some of whom are no strangers to supporting insurgency and covert activities against Iran.

Iran's Achilles' Heel

The Kurds have a saying: "No friend but the mountains." For Iran, however, geography presents real vulnerabilities, particularly the strategic, western Zagros Mountain range and the Kurdish armed groups that operate there. From the days of al-Eskandar to Saddam Hussein's invasion to the U.S. occupation of Iraq, the Zagros have been the Persians' Achilles' Heel. The Kurds of Iran straddle a region of vital importance to Iran for a number of reasons,[42] such as territorial defense from adjacent powers including U.S. forces in Iraq and KRI; the prevention of Kurdish autonomy inside Iran and KRG independence in Iraq; Tehran's hope of reestablishing a land corridor to allies Syria and Hezbollah;[43] the projection of terrorist proxies into Iraq,[44] and the facilitation of illicit oil and gas supplies in a re-imposition of sanctions scenario.

There is ample historical evidence for the combat effectiveness of Iranian Kurd groups operating in the mountains they know intimately. The PJAK blunted a major IRGC offensive in the summer of 2011 and has also operated deep inside Iran to interdict military supply convoys and sabotage infrastructure. The group also has a pool of motivated and experienced leaders and fighters to call upon, many of whom have recent combat experience fighting with the KRG, PKK, and YPG in Iraq, Turkey, and Syria.[45] The PJAK also have a relatively secure support base and source of funding in the KRG. Further evidence for the combat effectiveness of the PJAK and other Kurdish Iranian groups is the types of weapons they appear to have access to. Russian, Eastern Block, and locally manufactured small arms, RPGs, and heavy machine guns are featured in PJAK and other groups' propaganda photos and local media reports. They have access to heavy mortars and recoilless rifles, but there has been no recorded use of MANPADs.[n]

The head of the Kurdish-Iranian group PAK, Hussein Yazdanpana, told the Associated Press last September that the group had received training from U.S. military instructors between March and September 2015, when PAK fighters were deployed to the Kirkuk front against the Islamic State.[46] PAK may also have been present on the Mosul front.[o] If PAK fighters have indeed received training from the U.S. military, this would seriously concern Iran, where such training would bolster its capabilities against the government. The PAK has claimed good relations with the United States, but has denied being armed by the Americans.[47] Fighters from other groups are likely to have fought in KRG Peshmerga units against the Islamic State. Of all the groups, the PJAK is probably the most capable and experienced, given its close links with the YPG and PKK and its significant battles earlier this decade with the IRGC. Unlike the YPG, however, the PJAK, because of its designation as a terrorist group, would not have likely received U.S. equipment directly or had access to the kinds of government war stocks that the YPG obtained in Syria. The KDPI is not involved in the fight against the Islamic State and has reportedly not received the U.S. training claimed by the PAK.[48]

Conclusion

Iran's paradox is that as a state that came to power through revolution and insurrection, these are the very forces that it fears the most. It would be highly ironic, given Iran's preference for lower-cost, asymmetric warfare and operating in the grey zone short of conventional conflict with the United States, GCC states, or Israel, if its numerous enemies were to offer support to Iran's Kurds. Whether outside actors offer the Iranian Kurdish groups support or not, the Zagros Mountains will likely see an upsurge in insurgency as well as sabotage, assassinations, and civil unrest as the spring-summer military campaigning season gets underway.

Were outside actors to become involved, more advanced weaponry and equipment might be transferred to Iran's Kurds, which could turn the Zagros into even more hostile terrain for Tehran. Iran's Kurds present a much more formidable enemy to Iran when united than when acting independently. But it should be pointed out that since Komala's announcement last month that all anti-Tehran Kurdish-Iranian groups would develop joint military operations, there is not yet much open source evidence of coordinated

l General Mattis lists five Iran threats: nuclear, maritime, cyber, ballistic missile, and proxy. One might add cruise missiles to these. "The Middle East at an Inflection Point with Gen. Mattis," Center for Strategic and International Studies, April 22, 2016.

m The report notes that "Russia and Iran deny the US freedom of action in Syria and the Mediterranean and can threaten three of seven major global maritime trade chokepoints—the Suez Canal, the Strait of Hormuz, and the Bab al Mandab Strait—in the next five years." Jennifer Cafarella, Kimberly Kagan, and Frederick W. Kagan, "U.S. Grand Strategy: Destroying ISIS and al Qaeda, Report Four, America's Way Ahead In Syria," Institute for the Study of War, March 2017, p. 8.

n This is based on the author's analysis and knowledge of the local arms market and interviews with informed sources in 2017. It is quite possible that Iranian Kurdish groups have obtained more advanced anti-tank guided missiles (ATGMs), particularly with the region awash with new arms deliveries due to the ongoing campaign against the Islamic State.

o Editor's note: According to Zana Gulmohamad, who outlined the constellation of forces taking part in the Mosul campaign in an October 2016 article in this publication, there are a number of Iranian Kurdish armed groups opposed to the Iranian regime operating around Mosul, where they have fought alongside Kurdish Peshmerga and against the Islamic State. The locations where they have been present, according to Gulmohamad, include Bashiqa and the area around Kirkuk. One such group that has been fighting against the Islamic State in the Mosul campaign is the Kurdistan Freedom Party (PAK). Its presence has created tensions with Shi`a militias; the Pro-Iranian Shi`a militia "League of the Righteous" Asaib Ahl al-Haq (AAH) has threatened to attack them and have expressed anger against Iraqi Kurdish leaders (particularly the KDP) for allowing them to take part in operations. Paul Cruickshank interview, Zana Gulmohamad, May 2017.

activity.[p] In April 2017, a number of exiled Kurdish political parties jointly called for a boycott of the May 19, 2017, Iranian presidential election, suggesting continued cooperation among Iranian-Kurdish actors.[49] The jury is still out on whether Iranian Kurdish groups, as with their Iraqi Kurdish brethren, will find that conflict with Iran masks deeper political and ideological differences that cannot be reconciled over the long term.

The principal concern for the Iranian Kurdish militant groups in the coming years will be the question of continued support from the KRG. In a post-Mosul/caliphate scenario where the United States disengages again from Iraq, the KRG may find itself under increasing pressure from Iran and its allies in Baghdad to end support for Iranian Kurdish groups opposed to Tehran. CTC

p In April 2017, local media featured fighters from Komala and KDPI jointly preparing a defensive position in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. "Iran Kurdish party resumes armed struggle against Iran, third party to do so," Rudaw, April 30, 2017.

Appendix: Acronyms and Organizations

IRGC: Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps

KDP: Kurdistan Democratic Party, which rules Dohuk and Erbil provinces on the Kurdistan Region of Iraq; dominates the KRG.

KDPI: Kurdistan Democratic Party Iran, an Iranian Kurdish group seeking autonomy from Iran; sometimes referred to as PDKI.

Komala: Iranian Kurdish Communist/Maoist party

KRG: Kurdistan Regional Government based in Erbil and consisting of various Iraqi Kurdish political parties but dominated by the KDP

KRI: Kurdistan Region of Iraq; de facto statelet based on the provinces of Dohuk, Erbil, and Sulaymaniyah

PAK: Kurdistan Freedom Party, a left-leaning, nationalist Kurdish Iranian group with a presence in Kurdish areas of Iran and Iraq that has fought alongside Peshmerga against the Islamic State. It was previously called the Revolutionary Union of Kurdistan.

PMF: Popular Mobilization Forces, an umbrella group of Iraqi, mostly Shi`a militias, many of which are controlled by Iran

PJAK: Kurdistan Free Life Party; a PKK offshoot, composed mainly of Iranian Kurds opposed to Tehran

PKK: Kurdistan Workers Party, a far-left Kurdish group fighting Turkey and also active in Syria and the KRI; sister party to the PJAK and PYD.

PUK: Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, the KRI's other main political party with armed forces ruling Sulaymaniyah province. The PUK has much warmer relations with Iran than the KDP.

YPG: People's Protection Units, the armed wing of the Syrian Kurd PYD, an offshoot of the PKK

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