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FEATURE ARTICLE

Al-Qa`ida's First American Foreign Fighter after 9/11

BRYANT NEAL VIÑAS AND MITCHELL D. SILBER

A VIEW FROM THE CT FOXHOLE

Kevin McAleenan

COMMISSIONER, U.S. CUSTOMS AND BORDER PROTECTION

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FROM THE EDITOR

Seventeen years after 9/11, the threat posed by jihadi terrorist groups is in a state of flux. The demise of the Islamic State's territorial 'caliphate' has demoralized some of its supporters and eroded some of the group's ability to direct attacks in the West. But the Islamic State still has a large sympathizer base, a significant presence in Syria and Iraq, and dangerous nodes in other parts of the world. Meanwhile, al-Qa`ida and its network of affiliates and allies have grown in strength in some regions and could pivot back to international terror. Worryingly, both groups in the years to come may be able to draw on an 'officer class' of surviving foreign fighters who forged personal bonds in Syria and Iraq.

In our cover article, Bryant Neal Viñas, the first American to be recruited into al-Qa`ida after 9/11, writes about his experiences for the first time in the hope that his case study sheds light on the foreign fighter issue. Viñas was convicted for his actions and recently completed his prison sentence. His article is co-authored by Mitchell Silber, who supervised analysis and investigation of his case at the NYPD Intelligence Division. During his time in the Afghan-Pakistan border region between 2007 and 2008, Viñas came into contact with a variety of jihadi groups, was trained by al-Qa`ida, and spent time with several of the group's most senior figures. After his arrest, Viñas immediately started cooperating with U.S. authorities and contributed significantly to the near destruction of al-Qa`ida in the tribal areas of Pakistan.

Our interview this month is with Kevin McAleenan, the commissioner of U.S. Customs and Border Protection. Drawing on extensive field reporting, Michael Knights documents how Houthi forces in Yemen metamorphosed in just five years from guerrilla war fighters into a powerful military entity capable of deploying medium-range ballistic missiles. His article provides a case study of how an ambitious militant group can capture and use a state's arsenals and benefit from Iran's support. Audrey Alexander and Rebecca Turkington find mounting evidence that women engaged in terrorism-related activity receive more lenient treatment by the criminal justice system than their male counterparts. Derek Flood reports on how the Islamic State's cave and tunnel complexes in the Hamrin Mountains are helping it sustain insurgent attacks in northern Iraq.

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Cover: An American flag is unfurled on the side of the Pentagon to commemorate the anniversary of the 9/11 terror attacks on September 11, 2017, in Arlington, Virginia. (Alex Wong/Getty Images)

Al-Qa`ida's First American Foreign Fighter after 9/11

By Bryant Neal Viñas and Mitchell D. Silber

Bryant Neal Viñas was the first American to be recruited into al-Qa`ida after 9/11. This is the first time he is writing about his experiences, and he does so in conjunction with Mitchell Silber, who supervised analysis and investigation of his case at the NYPD Intelligence Division. It is their hope that this case study provides insights into and understanding of the ongoing issue of Western foreign fighters. During his time in the Afghan-Pakistan border region between 2007-2008, Viñas came into contact with a variety of jihadi groups, was trained by al-Qa`ida, and spent time with several of the group's most senior figures. After his arrest, Viñas immediately started cooperating with U.S. authorities and contributed significantly to the near destruction of al-Qa`ida in the tribal areas of Pakistan.

Six years after the attacks of 9/11, on September 10, 2007, Bryant Neal Viñas, a 24-year-old American, departed the United States with the express intention of joining a Sunni fighting group in Afghanistan and the outside hope of joining al-Qa`ida. One of the most important influences on his fateful decision to travel to the badlands of North Waziristan was *Inside the Jihad: My Life with Al Qaeda* by a Belgian of Moroccan descent, Omar Nasiri.¹ The book, published in 2006, read like a John le Carré novel and provided a gripping account of Nasiri's adventures as a secret agent working for European intelligence services and his infiltration of al-Qa`ida's Afghan training camps. For Viñas, at a crossroads in his life, living in suburban Long Island and already an avowed risk taker, attempting to join al-Qa`ida to follow in Nasiri's footsteps was the challenge he sought.²

Bryant Neal Viñas is an American citizen who traveled to Pakistan in 2007 to fight U.S. and coalition forces present in Afghanistan. He ultimately joined al-Qa`ida, received basic training from the group, participated in al-Qa`ida military operations in Afghanistan and discussed a plot to attack the Long Island Rail Road before being captured in late 2008 in Pakistan. He subsequently cooperated with the U.S. government and its allies and is considered to have been one of the most prized sources of actionable intelligence against al-Qa`ida. He recently completed his prison sentence for his actions.

Mitchell D. Silber is the former Director of Intelligence Analysis at the New York City Police Department and is currently an adjunct professor at Columbia University's graduate School for Public and International Affairs.

The relevance and utility in analyzing Bryant Neal Viñas in 2018 is that he was an early harbinger of the wave of Westerners, including Americans, who would later be attracted to a wide spectrum of jihadi movements and destinations overseas, which would include Pakistan, Somalia, Yemen, and most recently and with the most frequency, Syria-Iraq, where 69 Americans have traveled to since 2011.³ Viñas is a case study of what life was like as a soldier in al-Qa`ida's jihadi army. At the time Viñas joined the group, the phenomenon was so new that the terminology 'foreign fighter' did not exist, networking happened in person rather than over encrypted communications, and al-Qa`ida was the only global jihadi group.

Yet, the case is important for analysis because Bryant Neal Viñas was able to join al-Qa`ida, receive paramilitary training, meet the members of the organization's inner sanctum, participate in set piece attacks against U.S. forces in Afghanistan, and even discuss potential terrorist plots against New York City.

After his capture, Viñas continued to follow Nasiri's path and became one of the most valuable intelligence assets for the West against al-Qa`ida. In fact, Assistant U.S. Attorney, Richard Tucker, representing the government, told the judge at his sentencing, "to say that the defendant provided substantial assistance to the government is an understatement. [Viñas was the] single most valuable cooperating witness about Qaeda activities spanning his time in Afghanistan and Pakistan."⁴

Mitchell Silber, the co-author of this article, was Director of Intelligence Analysis at the NYPD during the time of Viñas' travel abroad and subsequent early years of his incarceration. With access to his debriefings and their results, he submits that based on the critical insights and tactical intelligence Viñas provided about al-Qa`ida's operations, Viñas changed from an agent of al-Qa`ida to a devastating instrument of al-Qa`ida Core's destruction.⁵

Background

Viñas was born in Queens in 1982 and raised in Medford, Long Island. Although he was raised Catholic, he did not attend church regularly. There was turmoil at home, and his parents, both of South American descent, ultimately divorced. Viñas had not been a practicing Christian for many years when he was exposed to and intrigued by Islam through a friend in 2000 during his senior year in high school. Viñas considered converting to Islam in 2001 but then held off in the wake of the attacks of September 11, 2001.⁶

Following 9/11, as a 19-year-old, Viñas, enlisted in the U.S. Army as a petroleum supply specialist, but was discharged weeks later. He was given a Chapter 11 discharge—failure to adapt to the military. According to Viñas, he took basic training very seriously and had no problem with any of the physical challenges. However, he grew frustrated with the collective punishment that the drill sergeants meted out when other recruits, who did not take training seriously enough "screwed up repeatedly."⁷

Attempting to figure out what was next for him, Viñas transi-

tioned through a number of jobs, working as a truck driver, forklift operator, taxi cab driver, and employee at a car wash. Dangerous travel (twice to Cuba when it was still illegal for Americans) and boxing were two of his main interests. The physical exertion of boxing was a satisfying outlet for Viñas.⁸ In January 2004, after a few years of informally observing the traditions of Islam, including fasting for Ramadan, during an attempt to make a charity donation (*zakat*) at a mosque in Astoria, Queens, he met a group of parishioners and spontaneously recited the call to Islam, the *shehahdah*, and officially became a Muslim.⁹

After 2004, what began as a religious conversion and desire to find meaning in life became politicized to malign effect. By the fall of 2007 and with his departure to Pakistan, Viñas' goal had become to die what he saw as an honorable death on the battlefield, fighting an invading army in a Muslim country, which was how he viewed U.S.-allied Western coalition forces in Afghanistan.¹⁰

Viñas notes that during that time period, "I spent a lot of time watching documentaries on U.S. foreign policy, learning about Palestinian treatment by the Israeli government, reading independent news coverage of the U.S. military-industrial complex and its relations with U.S. corporations in Iraq and Afghanistan and of the corruption that was alleged."¹¹ Viñas also detoured into the world of conspiracies, doing research on secret societies like the Freemasons, Illuminati, Skull and Bones, and the Bilderberg Group. "All the while, news coverage of Iraq and Afghanistan was dominant, as well as [what he saw as] the problematic actions of the Bush administration in the Middle East."¹²

At a mosque in Selden, Long Island, Viñas became good friends with a young man, Ahmed Zarinni, of Afghan descent, who studied at the local Stony Brook University.¹³ Zarinni was part of the Islamic Thinkers Society, a New York City-based Islamist organization that was directly focused on the very issues where international politics and Islam mixed. Although Viñas considered Zarinni to be his close friend, he never joined the group and thus did not cross the FBI-NY or NYPD Intelligence Division's radar, despite their ongoing investigations into the group.¹⁴

From religious studies, Viñas turned to political Islam for an appropriate response to what he viewed as America's war on Islam and began to study where and how military jihad was perceived to be a legitimate response. Not surprisingly, he turned to where so many English-speaking Westerners subsequently have: the audio sermons of Anwar al-Awlaki. If jihad and defense of Muslim lands was obligatory on all Muslims, then it was time for a new challenge and adventure, he thought. Viñas had already successfully circumvented U.S. law when he traveled to Cuba. As far as he was concerned, Pakistan was just another forbidden zone.¹⁵

Travel to Pakistan

Three friends in New York, of Pakistani descent, assisted Viñas, despite not being fully aware of his plans. One friend helped him plan his trip, another arranged for relatives in Lahore, Pakistan, to receive him and find him a hotel, and the third friend introduced him to an Afghan family in Lahore who, through a cousin, ultimately enabled the connection for him with the commander of a Sunni fighting group in Afghanistan.¹⁶

"My cover story to my friends in New York was that I was going to study there. I used a travel agency that a friend told me about, which took care of the visa process, and I bought a round-trip ticket to hide my one-way intentions. I then made plans to meet up with

my friend from New York who was in Lahore. There would be no mention of 'J,' or jihad, until I was there. Didn't want to scare him off."¹⁷ His plan, utilizing *Inside the Jihad* as his playbook, was, "I would eventually try to find a madrassa, which is an Islamic school, and eventually befriend a local Pashtun, hoping that that person would eventually have contacts with militants to go into Afghanistan."¹⁸

Viñas departed New York City on September 10, 2007, leaving from JFK airport and flying to Abu Dhabi and then to Lahore, Pakistan. He chose Lahore as his point of entry with a specific idea in mind. "I landed in Lahore and went to the hotel to wait for my friend to arrive. My plan was to not fly directly into Peshawar or Islamabad where I might be more likely to be suspected, hence Lahore."¹⁹

Getting into the Fight

Upon arriving in Lahore, Viñas found a place to stay and almost immediately tried a couple times to make connections to get into the fight in Afghanistan, but he was unsuccessful. "Then, through my friend, I met an Afghan family in Lahore that had a cousin, named 'F' who took me to Peshawar. He introduced me to another person (and there were five introductions in total) before I was ultimately able to connect with and get into the Shah-Shab group, which turned out to be a Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI)- and Taliban-associated group that had fought E.U., NATO, and Afghan forces in Afghanistan. So, after about a week and half of being in country, I had joined a Sunni jihadist fighting group."²⁰

As Viñas notes, "it was an ISI-affiliated group, and many of its members had been trained by Lashkar-e-Taiba. These were youngsters with religious intentions that the Pak government used to do their 'dirty work'. Some had combat experience from Kashmir. This group was focused on Kunar Province in Afghanistan. They wanted to destabilize Kunar to prevent a dam from being built on a river that flows from Kunar into Pakistan. I didn't realize that they had ISI connections when I joined. I would have not have joined them if I had known that."²¹

According to Viñas, the role that Pakistani ISI plays in the fight in Afghanistan against U.S and NATO forces cannot be overstated. "They have a role all throughout Afghanistan and Pakistan. Everyone there knows it. They watch the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan. They have informants everywhere. And they are taking advantage of America. U.S. aid to Pakistan is being used to train young religious Pakistani militants to go into Afghanistan to fight and kill U.S. soldiers, and American officials know it."²²

First Combat

"At the end of September [2007], about two weeks after arriving in Pakistan, I crossed into Afghanistan from the Mohmand Agency, a district along the Afghan border north of Peshawar with [a] group of about 10 to 20 men. There was one European among the group, a Dutch guy. Crossing the border there was the most physically demanding thing that I ever did in my life because of the steepness of the climb and altitude."²³

This was all part of an operation to attack one American and one Afghan base in Afghanistan. "We divided our men into two squads. Communications up until then had been in person amongst each other, but for the operation, the senior guys used cell phones with long antennae and walkie-talkies. A group of us would cross the mountains to the Afghanistan border. We would go to Kunar

Province. One group would splinter off and fight an Afghan base; another group would go and set up a mortar attack for a U.S. base. The first team led a small-arms ground attack with guns and rocket propelled grenades (RPGs) against the Afghan base, and a second group, which I was in, planned to climb the mountains and stockpile ammunition (mortar) at a selected meeting point to launch a second attack on the American base. However, our second squad ultimately decided not to launch the attack because American planes were circulating over the region, and we were fearful of being attacked and wiped out.²⁴ So, Viñas and the Shah-Shab group returned to Pakistan. “Going on a mission had been such a relief from the terrible boredom, but in the end, I was disappointed that the operation was unsuccessful.”²⁵ However, his group was fully intact; nobody was killed or injured during the mission.²⁶

After the return from the Mohmand Agency in Pakistan to Peshawar, Viñas was asked to become a candidate for a suicide bombing by a member of the group called ‘C.’ Viñas accepted the mission because “I was having a difficult time with the altitude. I was getting very sick, so I felt that it would be easier to do a martyrdom operation. Also, then you would be considered a martyr. That’s the highest, most honorable death in jihad.”²⁷ However, “I was told a phony reason that I didn’t have enough religious training and knowledge to go on suicide operations.” He was subsequently sent to receive more “religious knowledge” at a madrassa linked to Shah Shab’s group in Peshawar.²⁸

Despite Viñas’ attendance of the madrassa, Shah Shab and his associate, Shaikh Ameenullah, continued to tell him that he would still need more religious experience before he could become a suicide bomber. Viñas sensed that he was being manipulated and ultimately left the madrassa. “I later learned that I was being used like a mascot—the Shah Shab people would show me off and raise money saying that they were taking care of me.”²⁹

Nevertheless, Viñas stayed in that group’s system and went to another village under the care of a young man in his 20s named Khattab. “I was supposed to join yet another madrassa in Swat,

but the day before I was supposed to leave, it was attacked by the Pakistani military. So I was stuck with Khattab.”³⁰

Viñas vented his frustrations to Khattab about not going on other operations. After weeks of inactivity, Khattab told Viñas that he would advocate for him, and the two men traveled back to the Mohmand Agency base to try to go on an operation. But a senior leader stopped him, saying, again, that he wasn’t trained enough.³¹ Despite telling the senior commander in front of other fighters that he was ready to train right then and there for as long as it would take, it never happened. Meanwhile, Khattab, who was permitted to go on an operation, traveled into Afghanistan and then came out to find Viñas wasting time in Mohmand, “still doing nothing.” Khattab picked him up, and they left for Peshawar.³² “The only thing I learned there, with that commander, was how to disassemble and re-assemble a Russian Takarov pistol. That was it.”³³

Upon his return to Peshawar, Viñas sought to stay over at a madrassa. However, due to the school season, they had no space for him. He did meet a student, though, who offered to provide him temporary housing, and through that connection, Viñas reconnected with a man he had met during his travels with Khattab. This man, Huzayfa, offered to introduce him to a Pakistani Pashtun in his late 20s named Saleem who had a different fighting group. Meanwhile, in December 2007, Viñas had his smallest toe amputated on his right foot from a fungal infection. After he recovered, Huzayfa connected him to Saleem who was on his way out of Peshawar to Waziristan and his fighting group. Viñas left Khattab and Peshawar behind in early 2008, vowing never to return.³⁴

Getting to al-Qa`ida

Once in Waziristan, he and Saleem stayed at a safe house for a few days, where he met some of Saleem’s Arab fighters. Among them was a man who would become one of his closest friends, “Zubair Kuwaiti.” Viñas joined Saleem’s group, which was composed of about 10 to 20 fighters.³⁵ According to Viñas, “he [Saleem] took me under his wing. And he had a couple of weapons that he let me



Pakistan's North Waziristan tribal area (John Moore/Getty Images)

fire off. I fired off an AK-47, PK machine gun, an RPG-7, and some Soviet pistols.³⁶

In early January 2008, Saleem dropped Viñas off in a house in North Waziristan and told him to wait for him. He would come back, he said, to get Viñas in three months and make arrangements to take him to Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, to meet with his friends there and work with them on financial networking. However, during the weeks spent at the house waiting for Saleem, who ultimately could not get him into Saudi Arabia, Viñas crossed paths with some Arab fighters who he had met before. They were ‘S’ from Yemen, ‘T’ from Yemen, ‘AR’ from Yemen, and ‘T’ from Saudi Arabia. They asked about his activities, and after Viñas explained his situation and his goals, they offered to get them into their group.³⁷

In late March, Zubair Kuwaiti took him to meet an older Tunisian man, Haji Sabir, who spoke Italian and therefore could converse with Viñas, who spoke Spanish, which was a pleasant surprise for Viñas. Not long afterward, Haji Sabir recommended Viñas for paramilitary training, and Viñas headed to a house near Miram Shah in Waziristan. There, training alongside another Kuwaiti, “I asked [this second Kuwaiti] what group this was. The Kuwaiti told me that the group that he was actually in now was al-Qa`ida. Up until that moment, I had had no idea it was al-Qa`ida.” This was around March 2008, and soon afterward, Viñas began his own training with al-Qa`ida.³⁸

Joining al-Qa`ida (Informally)

The informality of joining al-Qa`ida is something that many terrorist analysts and law enforcement personnel have struggled with understanding. However, as Viñas describes the process, “the majority of brothers who went to Pakistan to fight alongside or with al-Qa`ida started their indoctrination in Waziristan. The fighters filled in forms that identified their family members, adopted *noms de guerre* or *kunyas*, and handed over their forms of identification to al-Qa`ida. Each fighter surrendered their passport since it [is] better not to have one in the event of being interrogated by the police.”³⁹

Moreover, Viñas noted that “there was no ceremony or contract to join al-Qa`ida. Certain figures asserted their allegiance to al-Qa`ida or UBL [Usama bin Ladin], but many did not do so and were part of the organization all the same.” He added, “for example, I never had to go through any type of ritual or test to prove myself to get into AQ. You did need someone to vouch for you, and the word of Haji Sabir, [the] older Tunisian, was sufficient reference for me.”⁴⁰

After his capture and arrest, Viñas notes that, “U.S. authorities, including the JTTF, had a difficult time understanding and accepting this. They had the mentality of looking like AQ as a gang or organized crime family. I had to educate them that AQ is not like that. This preconceived notion of al-Qa`ida made it difficult for the JTTF members to understand how I was able to just make it into AQ like that. I never swore allegiance or *bay`a* to anyone in Afghanistan or Pakistan. Maybe if you wanted to rise in the ranks, that vow of loyalty might be necessary, but for me, who was content in being a regular fighter, it was not necessary.”⁴¹

For al-Qa`ida, it was what you did, rather than an oath, that mattered. “Once a brother had joined a combat organization like al-Qa`ida, he was totally committed. What characterized you being an al-Qa`ida member was the fact you followed orders given to you by the leaders, you had undergone al-Qa`ida supervised training, had a weapon provided by al-Qa`ida, and lived in a house with oth-

er members who had undergone the same process,” notes Viñas.⁴²

Al-Qa`ida Training

Between March 2008 and July 2008, Viñas took three mandatory al-Qa`ida training courses—basic training, explosives theory, and projectile weapons theory. Each class comprised of 10 to 20 students and an instructor.⁴³

The first course resembled a traditional basic training course boot camp, with push-ups as penalties for infractions, regular guard duty assignments, and classroom sessions. However, the training was conducted indoors in order to shield the recruits from observation by drones. As Viñas notes, “the mudbrick house was big enough to accommodate about 20 people. [The] walls were made out of mud, there’s no carpet, there’s no wood floors. Just mud, dry mud. The roof is made out of tree branches.”⁴⁴

The instructor used a dry erase board, and he taught Viñas and his group how to take apart, clean, and reassemble AK-47 rifles, PKs (a 7.62x54mm general-purpose machine gun designed in the Soviet Union), rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) launchers, heavy machine guns, and handguns. Students spent several hours on each weapon, learning their history, capacity, and characteristics. The lessons also included day- and night-navigation training and covered basic theory of explosives and use of heavier weaponry. There were some outdoors demonstrations of C3 and C4 explosives, and on the last day of the course, Viñas and his fellow trainees fired the AK-47, PK machine gun, and pistols as well as threw grenades. Some students were allowed to shoot RPG-7s and a Soviet-type RPG weapon.⁴⁵

The second course, which also took place inside a mudbrick house, covered the theory and techniques of explosives. It lasted 15 days. During the training sessions, between 15 and 20 other students were trained in how to prepare and place fuses, test batteries for explosives, use voltmeters, and build circuitry for a bomb. The students became accustomed to seeing, smelling, and touching different explosives such as TNT, C3, C4, cortex, RDX, gun powder, and Semtex. However, none of the students actually built a bomb. Physically creating bombs only took place in a more advanced al-Qa`ida training session on bomb building. That said, the course also taught the students the rudiments of how to make bomb vests for suicide bombers using ball bearings, explosive material, and glue.⁴⁶

When a mid-level Saudi al-Qa`ida leader, Sheikh Nasrulah, visited the class, he explained the organization’s philosophy of suicide operations. He stressed that these operations only took volunteers, and if one volunteered, he would have to expect long periods of waiting. Patience was paramount in al-Qa`ida’s philosophy around suicide operations. The 1998 U.S. Embassy bombings, he reminded the students, took more than nine months to plan and execute.⁴⁷

The third course also took place indoors, but in a larger mudbrick building, which one could walk around inside of. It focused on the theory of rocket-based or propelled weaponry. Viñas had been told by his friend ‘AS,’ who was ahead of him in training, that once he completed this training, “all the students would have to undergo a written examination that were kept in their personal files.” However, Viñas never saw these files.⁴⁸

Viñas thought that basic training provided useful information, but the other two classes were not particularly helpful or interesting because they were too theoretical. There were other, more advanced courses that one could sign up for, but as Viñas remembers it, “some

of these classes actually required tuition. The rich Arabs could afford that, which seemed unfair. Most fighters, like me, had no money.” Some of these other courses or training that al-Qa`ida made available included advanced electronics training, training for snipers, use of anti-aircraft guns, assassination, poisons, kidnapping, false documents and forgery, and advanced bombing making.⁴⁹

Life in al-Qa`ida

Life in al-Qa`ida was a let-down to Viñas and not what he imagines most Westerners would expect. “We lived in mudbrick houses, and the food was bad—mainly rice, potato stew, or okra stew. The rich Arabs had money to buy goats, sheep, and chickens, but that was about as exotic as it got.” In addition, Viñas characterized being in al-Qa`ida as “extremely boring.” “There are days when you do absolutely nothing. There is common frustration amongst many AQ guys about the amount of inactivity. There were few operations to participate in, and even those weren’t very good so the body was not in prime fighting condition for ‘mountain fighting’ when a fighting mission appeared.” Viñas could not understand why al-Qa`ida was organized this way. “The only other option was to take classes for missions outside of Pakistan/Afghanistan, but I never knew anybody who took those or went, and I was wary to do so.”⁵⁰

That said, training camp had been different. There had been a fixed routine. The morning started off with morning prayers, then Qur’an recitation practice, and afterward, morning exercise, breakfast, morning lessons, early afternoon prayers, lunch, afternoon lessons, break, prepare for late afternoon prayers, kitchen duty, sunset prayer, dinner (clean-up) if it was one’s turn for kitchen duty, night prayer, sleep and/or security night watch, again when it was one’s turn.⁵¹ When not in training, to pass the time during long periods of inactivity, Viñas would talk with his fellow recruits. “If I was with someone who spoke English, then I would talk with them. Because of the lack of anything productive to do, we would talk a lot about our lives before we got to Waziristan. Other than talking about our personal lives, the day was made up of praying, eating, cooking, sleeping—that is what we would do. On occasion, we would get radio signal from BBC radio, and I remember listening to Usain Bolt’s race at the Beijing Olympics, news about the 2008 Obama-McCain election campaigns, and updates on the surprising Philadelphia Phillies World Series victory.” The most surprising part of the experience, Viñas says, was seeing how rich Arabs would choose to live this uncomfortable life in no man’s land as opposed to the life of luxury they could be living back in the world.⁵²

One of Viñas’ best friends was a Belgian citizen of Moroccan descent, Hicham Zrioul. The two stayed in the same house and would take walks in the mountains nearby and talk. In Belgium, Zrioul had been a taxi driver, part-time imam, and fast-food chain worker. Back home, he had a wife and three children, whom he told Viñas he missed. Nevertheless, Zrioul took lessons on how to build circuit boards that could be used for improvised electronic devices and suicide jackets, and on one occasion, he spoke about the merits of attacks that would foreshadow the Islamic State attacks of 2015-2016 in Belgium and France. Zrioul discussed the merits of an attack on the Belgian underground (metro) because it was poorly protected as well as an attack on a European soccer stadium, but he did not have any specific plans or details for these plots.⁵³

A Soldier in al-Qa`ida’s Army

Following the completion of his training in July 2008, Viñas was

qualified to participate in al-Qa`ida military operations. He and his fellow recruits then spent time waiting in Waziristan for orders of deployment. The first opportunity arose in September 2008. Viñas’ group of fighters were notified that they would participate in missile attacks against NATO and Afghan bases. The orders originated from the military head of al-Qa`ida in Afghanistan and Pakistan, an Egyptian known as Mustafa Abu al-Yazid. Al-Yazid, who was in his 50s, was the key intermediary between al-Qa`ida and the Afghan Taliban, and was “third in command” in al-Qa`ida. He had been one of al-Qa`ida’s founding members and had direct access to both Usama bin Ladin and Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri, as well as the Taliban’s leader, Mullah Omar.⁵⁴

As Viñas remembers clearly, it was toward the end of Ramadan 2008, on orders from Mustafa Abu al-Yazid, that Viñas left the town he had been in and joined another group of fighters led by Abu Yahya al-Libi at an assembly point near the Afghan border.⁵⁵ Al-Libi was a Libyan, formerly a member of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, who had traveled to Afghanistan almost two decades earlier. He served as al-Qa`ida’s top military commander for the Pakistan-Afghan region and, thus, was Viñas’ emir.⁵⁶ Viñas’ fighting group’s mission was to accompany this other group of al-Qa`ida fighters and launch a rocket attack against an American base in Afghanistan.⁵⁷ The base, U.S. Forward Operating Base Tillman, had been named after Pat Tillman, the former NFL Arizona Cardinals safety who had joined the U.S. Army in the wake of 9/11 and died near that area in a friendly-fire event.⁵⁸

“I was part of a group that was to launch Hawk 20 rockets from Pakistan across into Afghanistan at a U.S. base. The first time that I went [out], our spotter was not answering his radio so we couldn’t launch any that day. But we went back a second day, and we were able to launch four rockets. However, the operation was a failure.⁵⁹ The first attack was not launched because of radio communications problems, and the second attack, which involved firing rockets, didn’t reach the base. They had been fired from the Pakistani side of the border.” Nevertheless, Viñas had earned his *bona fides* as an experienced al-Qa`ida fighter.⁶⁰

It is worth acknowledging here that Viñas’ deployment to the frontlines might surprise some observers since it might be expected that a Western recruit who showed up on al-Qa`ida’s doorstep and was willing to serve as a suicide bomber would be an ideal potential external operations attacker for the group and not somebody who might be sacrificed in a traditional combat role. In fact, it might be expected that al-Qa`ida would try to ‘save’ someone like Viñas for an operation back in the West. Certainly, al-Qa`ida did try and did succeed in ‘turning around’ various volunteer Western travel groups like several of the 2005 London (July 7, 2005, and July 21, 2005) bombers as well as the 2009 Zazi New York City subway plotters. However, the Viñas case shows that not all Western recruits were channeled toward launching attacks back in the West. From Viñas’ account, one would only participate in international operations if one volunteered.⁶¹ The takeaway here, applicable still to this day, is that not every foreign fighter is necessarily going to be groomed to become an attack operative in the West.

Despite the operation’s failure to achieve its aims, Viñas gained new status as an American who had proved himself willing to go into battle under the flag of al-Qa`ida and garnered increased attention from senior leadership of the organization. Separately, he met briefly with both commanders from the failed attack, Mustafa Abu al-Yazid and Abu Yahya al-Libi, as well as the emir for external

operations, Saleh al-Somali, and another senior ranking member of al-Qa`ida, Younis al-Mauritani.⁶² According to Viñas, he met al-Qa`ida's number three, al-Yazid, when he sought, but did not initially receive permission to send money to his girlfriend in Cuba via Western Union. There had been security concerns expressed by senior al-Qa`ida leaders, and it would take al-Yazid's approval for it to be allowed.⁶³ Viñas' first meeting with al-Yazid was a success, and with al-Yazid's permission, he was allowed to go to Peshawar to send money to his girlfriend in Cuba via Western Union.⁶⁴

Viñas' second meeting with al-Yazid was more fortuitous than it was planned. Viñas was in the town of Dagon in North Waziristan to pick up medicine for a stomach ailment when he heard that al-Yazid was coming to the guest house near where he was staying. Subsequently, Viñas received an impromptu invitation to join him for dinner. Viñas' memory of al-Yazid was that he seemed like a "sweet old man."⁶⁵

When Viñas met Abu Yahya al-Libi, his emir, the Libyan was disappointed that Viñas' Arabic was not better. Nevertheless, Viñas remembers it was a special honor to meet him as he had legendary status because of his breakout from the U.S. detention facility at Bagram in 2005.⁶⁶

"The first time I met Saleh al-Somali, the emir of external operations for al-Qa`ida, I didn't even know who he was. We were both at a safe house that had the nickname 'the airport' because it was a house that we used as a transit point. I shook his hand and greeted him, but that was it."⁶⁷ The next time Viñas saw him was at a dinner. "He was trying to convince me to eat the food, and I didn't want to because I was recovering from another stomach problem. Moreover, he had been the one interfering in my plans to try to go back to Peshawar to send money. So, I didn't like him."⁶⁸

Plots vs. the West

It was during the late summer of 2008, in Pakistan, after the failed mission to attack U.S. troops in Afghanistan, that despite his lack of interest in international operations, Viñas had detailed conversations with a key leader of al-Qa`ida about potential terrorist attacks on the West, including the United States. It was there that he had the infamous Long Island Rail Road discussion.⁶⁹ What triggered the discussion and Viñas' change of heart from just wanting to fight defensive jihad to contemplating an attack on his hometown was a U.S. drone strike. "While traveling with Saleem in Waziristan, I had accompanied him to a short meeting at an orphanage. Sometime later, that orphanage was struck and destroyed in a drone strike. That desensitized me."⁷⁰

The idea of the attack on the Long Island Rail Road was never more than a theoretical, 'campfire plot' discussed inside an al-Qa`ida safe house during the dinner with Younis al-Mauritani, a senior al-Qa`ida operative who aspired to be the next "emir of external operations," a role held at that time by Saleh al-Somali.⁷¹ As Viñas notes, "it was only at the talking stage. I was captured not long after that, and so was Younis."⁷² To my knowledge, it never got put into motion.⁷³ Nevertheless, the fact that the conversation was conducted with al-Mauritani, a senior al-Qa`ida leader who had a supervisory role in al-Qa`ida's external operations until 2011, made the discussion an issue of grave concern to the U.S. government.⁷⁴ Before his capture, al-Mauritani was believed to be involved in operational planning for "a Mumbai-style" plot in Europe.⁷⁵

In court in 2012, Viñas testified, "I drew a map of Long Island and I explained to him [al-Mauritani] that all the trains, all the train tracks going into Manhattan merged into one tunnel, and he

felt that the best attack plan would be to have a martyrdom operation conducted while the train was still inside the tunnel to damage the tunnel. If the tunnel was damaged it would cause a very big economic hit to New York." Viñas was not expected to take part in the attack, but would serve as an advisor to al-Mauritani.⁷⁶

The only other significant external plotting discussions Viñas was aware of involved a Westerner called 'A' who was a Moroccan born in France, came from a rich family, and lived near the Swiss border near the town where Evian water is produced. 'A's' intention was to wage jihad against the E.U., NATO, and Afghan forces in Afghanistan. However, 'A' also signed up for international operations training, which lasted for several days and was overseen by 'AH.' The subject of the course had been how to organize attacks, recruit, and set up terrorist cells outside of Pakistan and Afghanistan. However, ultimately 'A' turned down the opportunity to participate in an external operation because he preferred to fight in Afghanistan. Viñas did not know anyone who had been sent outside of Afghanistan or Pakistan to participate in al-Qa`ida's international operations.⁷⁷

Capture and Turning Against al-Qa`ida

Viñas stayed at the frontier until October 2008, when he decided to return to Peshawar to find a wife and was arrested soon afterward. As Viñas notes, "between the boredom, cold, and end of the fighting season, it made sense to go and try and find a wife. And I had a friend living in Peshawar, and I asked him if I could spend the winter there, and also to ask him if he could help me find a wife."⁷⁸

Following his arrest by Pakistani police almost immediately after arriving in Peshawar, which Viñas ascribes to the Pakistani ISI, he was turned over to U.S. law enforcement. "At that point, I knew I was in deep trouble, and I decided to cooperate with U.S. authorities."⁷⁹ He disclosed a variety of important time-sensitive and tactical pieces of intelligence, including the discussion of the idea of a plot against the Long Island Rail Road, the identities of people living in New York who he thought would be of interest to the FBI, how he had joined al-Qa`ida as well as its structure, communications systems, operational planning, training, and tactics.⁸⁰ Moreover, despite being only an 'aspirational' plot, Viñas' warning of a potential threat against Long Island commuter trains triggered a public warning during that Thanksgiving and subsequent weekend.⁸¹

His former comrades-in-arms felt the effects of his decision to turn back to the American side rapidly, as C.I.A.-operated drones demolished the places where he had trained and lived. One of the potentially most vital pieces of intelligence involved his contact with the next in line to be al-Qa`ida's chief of external operations, Younus al-Mauritani, and the chief of external operations at the time of his arrest, Saleh al-Somali.⁸²

One of al-Somali's deputies was a British-Pakistani named Rashid Rauf, who had been the operational manager of the thwarted 2006 plot to bring down seven North America-bound airliners over the Atlantic simultaneously and both the July 7 (successful) and July 21 (failed) 2005 London suicide bombings attack. Viñas says he did not meet Rauf.⁸³ Nevertheless, it is unclear if there is a direct connection between Viñas' information and the U.S. missile strike that killed the heretofore elusive Rauf in Pakistan on November 21, 2008, which was only days after Viñas had been captured and provided detailed accounts about camps and leaders. Interestingly, both al-Somali and his deputy Rauf had been directly involved in the plotting for what would become the September 2009 al-Qa`ida New York City subway plot, led by Najibullah Zazi.⁸⁴

Viñas served as a valuable intelligence source for the United States and a significant number of other allied countries over the next eight years, taking part in 100 interviews, reviewing 1,000 photographs, and assisting in more than 30 law enforcement investigations.⁸⁵ In the spring of 2012, he testified for the United States and helped convict a senior al-Qa`ida operative in the 2009 Zazi subway bomb plot, Adis Medunjanin. His testimony helped to establish that Medunjanin had met with al-Qa`ida's leaders.⁸⁶ At his sentencing in 2017, Viñas stood and addressed the court in Brooklyn and repented fully. "I understand that there is no excuse that would justify what I did; I accept full responsibility," he said. "I blame no one but myself." Furthermore, he added, "[I would like to] turn a bad thing into a good thing."⁸⁷ Among other vocational goals, Viñas told the court that he would like to be a "counterterrorism analyst."

In May 2017, Viñas was sentenced to time served and three more months in prison and subsequent supervision. He was released in late 2017.⁸⁸

Conclusions

The Bryant Neal Viñas story is instructive even as the wave of Western volunteers seeking to fight overseas with al-Qa`ida, and more recently the Islamic State, has subsided. Unfortunately, recent history has demonstrated that as one terrorist safe haven in an ungoverned territory loses its appeal as a destination for Western foreign fighters, another location inevitably crops up as a new field of jihad for wannabe warriors. Such has been the recent history with Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia, Yemen, Iraq, and Syria.

Viñas' story demonstrates how a combination of newfound identity through increased religiosity, coupled with its subsequent politicization on issues relating to Western foreign policy in the Muslim world, can be the grievances that mobilize prospective foreign fighters in the West to volunteer to fight overseas in what they view as 'legitimate defensive jihad' to protect Muslim lands. The Viñas case demonstrates how the push and pull factors of recruitment lead to travel in order to join a terrorist group.

In some cases, as detailed in "The Travelers: A Statistical Profile by the GW University Program on Extremism,"⁸⁹ it is a network that helps the Westerners 'get into the fight' overseas, and in other

cases self-propelled loners who, through persistence and some luck, can very quickly win the cooperation and acceptance by foreign terrorist groups. Viñas linked up with al-Qa`ida hierarchy despite not having the advantages of many of those who later joined the Islamic State. Many of these later Islamic State recruits from the West were already in touch with extremists in the caliphate before traveling to Syria and Iraq and took advantage of the organized pipeline through Turkey.

Then there was life in general in a terrorist group, which Viñas found boring and the role of fate, which, as Viñas demonstrated, put him in unique locations with surprising access. This element is similar to stories from Westerners who traveled to Syria and found themselves in this guest house or that guest house or this part of the Islamic State or that part of the Islamic State based on a somewhat random set of encounters.

There is also the critical role that external operations (against the West) play and the mechanism by which al-Qa`ida went about interviewing Viñas for his insight about vulnerabilities in the New York City transit system and similarly, his Belgian comrade-in-arms about Brussels. Though the intention of Westerners going overseas may be to fight the defensive jihad to protect invaded Muslim lands, many jihadi organizations—whether they be al-Qa`ida, the Islamic State, or others to come—will almost inevitably, at some point, set their sights on a delivering a terrorist blow against the West and seek to use Westerners who arrived on their doorstep as a source of intelligence and potentially even as operatives to carry out that attack. In that sense, Viñas was more of an exception, given his unwillingness to participate in such an attack.⁹⁰

Finally, there is the evolving understanding among Western intelligence and law enforcement agencies that terrorist 'drop-outs' or recently arrested Westerners can be a treasure trove of operational intelligence that, if used in a timely manner, can help to devastate an overseas terrorist organization. Viñas' case also demonstrates how helpful it can be to rapidly win the cooperation of foreign terrorist fighters and that, despite the discomfort it provokes, offering incentives for cooperation can be worth it for both returning foreign fighters and the agencies charged with thwarting future terrorist attacks. **CTC**

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A View from the CT Foxhole: An Interview with Kevin McAleenan, Commissioner of U.S. Customs and Border Protection

By Brian Dodwell and Paul Cruickshank

Kevin K. McAleenan was sworn in on March 20, 2018, as Commissioner of U.S. Customs and Border Protection. Prior to his confirmation, Mr. McAleenan had served as the Acting Commissioner from January 20, 2017. As the agency's chief executive, Mr. McAleenan oversees 60,000 employees and manages a budget of over \$13 billion, working to uphold CBP's mission to protect national security while promoting economic prosperity. McAleenan previously served as Deputy Commissioner from November 2, 2014, until his appointment to Acting Commissioner. Prior to that, McAleenan held several leadership positions at CBP and one of its legacy agencies, the U.S. Customs Service. From 2006 to 2008, Mr. McAleenan served as the Area Port Director of Los Angeles International Airport, directing CBP's border security operations at one of CBP's largest field commands. In December 2011, Mr. McAleenan was named acting Assistant Commissioner of CBP's Office of Field Operations. In 2015, McAleenan received a Presidential Rank Award, the nation's highest civil service award.

CTC: How does CBP's mission and the activities of CBP contribute to the field of counterterrorism?

McAleenan: CBP was created as the Unified Border Security Agency with the priority mission of preventing terrorists and terrorist weapons from entering the country. That was our galvanizing call after 9/11, when we were created under the leadership of Commissioner Robert Bonner, who had a very clear picture of the importance of the border security agency in preventing the next 9/11 or preventing a foreign terrorist entry into the U.S. to mount an attack. So we play a multifaceted role, ensuring we address risk of travel to the United States, both of course at the immediate border but also through our National Targeting Center in supporting risk assessment of people that are applying for visas, people that are applying into the visa waiver program, or seeking that permission to travel to the United States.

So we do that with partners in the Department of State and with Immigration and Customs Enforcement's Homeland Security Investigations' Visa Security Unit, which has that responsibility alongside State and foreign embassies to assess risk of those applying for visas. It's our data and our analytics and our mission to support partners in making these decisions. At the immediate border, we have the responsibility to interview and inspect all travelers and make decisions on whether they present a risk. And between the ports of entry, we have to stop and interdict all illegal activity crossing between ports of entry.

On the cargo side, we're trying to identify risk and prevent it from even heading into the global supply chain to the U.S. borders. Starting after 9/11, we implemented the Container Security Initiative where we partner with 58 sea ports around the world from where the vast majority of cargo heads to the U.S., working with

foreign partners to assess cargo for risk and make inspection decisions before it's even leaving on a vessel destined to the U.S. And then, from lessons learned from the [October 2010] Yemen air cargo plot, we developed a similar capability, an air cargo assessment system, which we've just formalized in regulation this year, to do that for parcels headed to the U.S. using advanced data targeting partnerships with the air cargo industry, to examine those for risk before they board aircraft.

CTC: You mentioned the Yemen cargo plot targeting U.S.-bound cargo planes back in October 2010. In the summer of 2017, an alleged plot in Australia was thwarted where the allegations were that the Islamic State airmailed a partially assembled explosive device all the way to a cell in Australia who were in touch with the Islamic State and were planning to take out a passenger jet there with the device.^a How much of a wake-up call for your agency and U.S. agencies was that plot?

McAleenan: Well, actually, it's a threat that we've been very focused on, along with our partners at TSA, really since 2010 [the Yemen air cargo plot]. That was our wake-up call in terms of the risks of a potential device in a small parcel in an aviation environment, whether on all-cargo aircraft as it was then or potentially a passenger aircraft like we've seen more recently. But I do think [the Australia plot] galvanized international attention in partner agencies in Europe and elsewhere to focus on this threat. From my perspective, it starts with getting good data, what's entering the supply chain, and having those partnerships with foreign governments on the intel exchange so that we're seeing the risk in the same way and we can together make good decisions about what should be leaving on aircraft, what should be inspected before it goes, and making sure that we have the highest common denominator on our aviation security standards as well.

So that's an area where CBP has that hybrid responsibility. We're a security agency, but our regulatory authority allows us to collect data in a way that we can support aviation security and counterterrorism investigations in partnership with other agencies in the United States and internationally

CTC: A big part of this is the foreign fighter travel concern. Thousands of Islamic State veterans are believed to have survived the collapse of the territorial 'caliphate.' What are you doing in your agency to identify these individuals and to prevent them from traveling into the United States? And what are you doing internationally with partner countries?

a Editor's note: For more details on this case, see Andrew Zammit, "New Developments in the Islamic State's External Operations: The 2017 Sydney Plane Plot," *CTC Sentinel* 10:9 (2017).

McAleenan: This is an area we've been focused on since the outset of the conflict in Syria and Iraq with ISIS, and just as you articulated in the question, both trying to identify potential foreign terrorist fighter travel to the U.S. through visa application, through the visa waiver country partner, through their ESTA application [Electronic System for Travel Authorization^b] but also very importantly, helping partner governments build the capacity to identify risk in those travel cycles. Two very important U.N. Security Council resolutions over the last two and a half years, 2178 and 2396, both have focused on the need for that global capacity-building to identify high-risk travel.

We can't have a situation where one government has information on a potential foreign terrorist fighter, has shared it with a partner government, and the ball is dropped because they haven't built a capacity to check at their border or upon international air travelers entry to their country and actually interdict and address that threat. So we've tried to really offer our lessons learned since 9/11, not only our own Automated Targeting System Global [ATSG], which is a system that we've offered to support partners around the world—we have over two dozen partnerships right now with ATSG—but also an open-source cloud protocol called the Global Travel Assessment System [GTAS] that we've created to really support capacity-building with any interested partners that want to augment the source code or really get in depth. It's cloud-enabled. It's something that we want to continue to improve and integrate with partners.

We take our capacity-building responsibility in this area very seriously and have had a lot of successes after the focus at the global level on foreign terrorist fighters and the U.N. Security Council resolutions. We've also had a role in partnering with our European friends in looking at their systems, ranging from the development of their ETIAS system,^c which is going to be an ESTA-type system for electronic visas, to supporting their development of their own organic reservation data analysis systems, as many countries in Europe have gone to under the PNR [Passenger Name Recognition] Directive, to really supporting good watch list checking at their external borders. These developments have been positive enhancements to our net security.

The challenge we face going forward is how can we share information while respecting privacy and civil rights and civil liberties, and distinctions in partner countries' domestic law? I think technology is the answer there as well, with anonymized data sharing that's going to allow watchlists to interact with transactional data in a way that professionals can make decisions while protecting the privacy of their citizens. That's the next frontier that we really need to work on.

CTC: Have Western countries, including the United States, identified most of the foreign fighters who traveled to Syria and Iraq in recent years?

^b Editor's note: ESTA is an automated system that determines the eligibility of visitors to travel to the United States under the Visa Waiver Program.

^c Editor's note: The European Travel Information and Authorisation System, which the European Commission hopes to put into operation by the end of 2021, "will carry out pre-travel screening for security and migration risks of travellers benefiting from visa-free access to the Schengen area." "Security Union: Commission welcomes the European Parliament's adoption of the European Travel Information and Authorisation System (ETIAS) and a stronger EU-LISA Agency," European Commission, July 5, 2018.

McAleenan: I think there's a sense that most have been identified, through U.S. efforts, through foreign partner efforts, and on the battlefield. In terms of determining which identify they might be using and how their travel looks, that's where we need to continue to focus the effort. It wasn't so many years ago when we faced skepticism when working with European counterparts on whether a foreign terrorist fighter would enter through a refugee process. The [November 2015] Paris attack and subsequent attacks have proven that's a methodology that the terrorists are willing to utilize.

So I think we know who most of the foreign fighters are. It's a matter of working together to make sure we understand their movements, what risks that additional training and battle-hardening produces for Western governments.

CTC: What has been the importance of CBP's National Targeting Center in U.S. counterterrorism efforts?

McAleenan: The National Targeting Center has become a really fundamental capability that supports the interagency counterterrorism effort, especially as it relates to the movement of people and goods or finance that could present a risk. The National Targeting Center was built out of the imperative after 9/11 to identify potential risky travel and cargo coming to the United States. But it's become a great deal more. When it comes to building out that capability, we've seen partner agencies take advantage of it for their related mission sets, to include Immigration and Customs Enforcement's Homeland Security Investigations for their visa assessment; our Coast Guard partners, who are assessing the risk presented by crewmen on a cargo vessel or a cruise ship coming toward the United States; and the Department of State for their visa application and recurrent visa vetting. If someone's added to the watchlist after they've been issued their visa, the National Targeting Center helps identify that risk and ensures that that visa could, if necessary, be revoked and any necessary action can be undertaken by Department of State.

The National Targeting Center is an essential component supporting all those interagency missions. And that's why we've been asked to build on the foundation of the National Targeting Center to create the National Vetting Center, which will be a distinct entity and create a common set of tools and processes for our interagency partners to use to vet and identify security threats and create a center of excellence, including intelligence community data with transactional data so that we can take our threat identification to the next level.



Commissioner of the United States Customs and Border Protection, Kevin K. McAleenan, (pictured center) at the Nogales Port of Entry earlier this year (CBP)

CTC: Turning to another tool in your toolkit—the Tactical Terrorism Response Teams deployed at U.S. ports of entry.^d How have they helped counter terror threats?

McAleenan: Let me provide you with some context to explain the key role they play. In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, the U.S. Customs Service established an office of anti-terrorism. I was the second permanent director of that office. And what we did was really focus on building the policies and protocols to make sure that we were identifying and addressing potential terrorist risks at the border effectively. We were already building on strong foundations. Our field operations, which oversee ports of entry, had a well-developed capability for narcotics detection, both being brought by travelers as well as in cargo, and we were able to take that existing targeting capability and apply it to a new priority mission relatively quickly. And then, of course, make it mandatory on some of the

regulatory data collection.

That process started in the field, teaching our officers how to do counterterrorism interviews, which they were well-suited to as professional interviewers, but then when we built out the targeting capability, it became a very headquarters-driven function. There was a sense that headquarters had the best awareness of the intelligence, that they could apply risk algorithms in a way that would give a broader sense of what might be coming at us. And with the creation of the Terror Screening Center and the National Counterterrorism Center process, targeting became a headquarters-run mission set.

The Tactical Terrorism Response Team concept was a conscious effort by the Office of Field Operations to get back to that mission imperative in the field, to take advantage of those instincts and encounters that our officers have with travelers to make decisions based on risk for people that might not be known on a watch list, might not be a known security threat, and they've been a tremendous success in identifying previously unknown individuals that present a security risk and in denying entry to folks that were not watch listed prior to their travel. So it's been a real way to galvanize our counterterrorism mission and ensure field officers remain engaged.

CTC: You mentioned the Tactical Terrorism Response Teams have had significant success. What metrics does your agency use to assess the effectiveness of this and the broader enterprise? Because that's always been the challenge for every CT agency, how you measure effectiveness.

McAleenan: We use a variety of metrics, both hard data on individuals that were not watchlisted that were determined to be security risks during a border interview or inspection and were denied entry,

^d Editor's note: Tactical Terrorism Response Teams are "deployed at U.S. POEs and consist of CBP Officers who are specially trained in counterterrorism response. TTRT Officers utilize information derived from targeting and inspection to mitigate possible threats. TTRT officers are immersed in the current and developing threat picture through the continuous review of information, and are responsible for the examination of travelers identified within the Terrorist Screening Database, and other travelers suspected of having a nexus to terrorism who arrive to a POE." "Written testimony of DHS Office of Policy Acting Assistant Secretary for Border, Immigration and Trade Michael Dougherty, CBP Office of Field Operations Deputy Executive Assistant Commissioner John Wagner, and ICE Homeland Security Investigations Assistant Director for National Security Investigations Division Clark Settles for a House Committee on Homeland Security, Task Force on Denying Terrorist Entry into the United States hearing titled "Preventing Terrorists from Acquiring U.S. Visas," U.S. Department of Homeland Security, May 3, 2017.

that's one fairly obvious measure. But also watchlist nominations that devolve from a good interview at the border. That's a second one we utilize. Then on the positive side, we have a lot of people traveling to different regions of the world that want to offer information to the government about security risks that they saw in their foreign engagements. Being able to offer that information to agency partners is another way we measure our success.

CTC: The Novichok attack in Salisbury in the United Kingdom earlier this year really focused attention on the CBRN threat. When it comes to protecting the U.S. homeland from the entry of radioactive material, chemical agents, nerve agents, biological agents, what steps are you taking to further build capability on that front?

McAleenan: We maintain a world-leading regime for detecting and responding to radiological and nuclear isotopes that might cross our border. Nearly 100 percent of seaborne and landborne as well as air cargo containers are inspected for radiological and nuclear materials present. And we resolve thousands of alarms every year through an advanced teleforensics process and very disciplined protocols. The key is to make sure this strong regime is maintained. Many of our radiation portal monitors are coming up on their end of life. We've been able to extend their effective life with advanced algorithms that are giving us an even better sense of reducing both the false alarms and ensuring that we identify potential threat material. So that's something we need to maintain and continue to invest in.

When it comes to chem-bio threat detection, recent experiences abroad and just the ongoing threat where we've learned from ISIS' development of this kind of capability on the battlefield and potentially other terrorist groups' interest in it as well, means we need to stay out in front of it. I think we're getting a kind of live test with the high-potency synthetic opioids that we're currently seeing. Part of building an effective inspection regime is you have to have the opportunity to interdict things and detect them to build that muscle tissue, if you will, with the field professionals and with our protocols. Our ongoing experience with dealing with fentanyl and the risk it presents, even in very tiny amounts, to our personnel, to our canines, and the fact that we're now making thousands of pounds of seizures a year on fentanyl, which is potent in droplet size, is going to position us well for chemical threats in the future.

I'm also very excited to see the development of the Countering WMD office at the Department of Homeland Security. I think that focus will help galvanize the overall departmental mission. It will be able to work with our DHS science and technology directorate and galvanize the R&D funding we need for that kind of pre-release detection capability. I'm also looking at it through the lens of advantages in computed tomography on the aviation security side, how we can apply that with the right algorithms to see what's in the small packages we're dealing with due to the growth of e-commerce and how that can apply to the chem-bio threat detection piece.

CTC: When it comes to radioactive materials potentially entering the United States, the United States is widely recognized as a world leader in its radiation detection systems. But when you get to something like Novichok, which was widely reported [in the Salisbury case] to have been stored in a perfume bottle, the worry is that it would raise few questions and be easy to trans-

port.¹ How important does that make the intelligence side?

McAleenan: Even on the air cargo side, we've seen the imperative of intelligence. That's how the Yemen air cargo plot was disrupted—good intelligence partnered with friendly services working together. Otherwise, we wouldn't have been able to do that. So I think good intelligence on terrorist groups that are developing this capability, how they might seek to deploy it, and from my perspective, we always go back to the operative. Operatives need to move generally in commercial flows. If we build global capacity to identify high-risk travel and work together to share information, we're going to be able to address multiple types of threats through that process.

CTC: What types of counterterrorism activities are CBP employees around the world conducting? How does that fit in with your broader posturing, if you will, that pushes the U.S. border out?

McAleenan: On the one hand we've got the large programmatic approach to identifying and partnering on interdicting risk as it moves through the global travel cycle or the supply chain. We talked about our Container Security Initiative. On the other hand, in terms of the travel environment, it's pre-clearance. It's the ability to work together before a plane even takes off for the U.S. to identify risk on that aircraft and make decisions in partnership with foreign authorities to secure that aircraft on its route to the U.S. We think that's the safest way to travel; it also happens to be the most convenient. Our pre-clearance location in Dublin has grown two and a half times since we went to full pre-clearance. Abu Dhabi was only 200,000 travelers a year. It's now well over 600,000 since we went to full pre-clearance four years ago. And we think those flights are some of the most secure in the world because we have that full TSA compliant aviation security, and CBP's capability, along with host country authorities.

Pre-clearance is a program we're seeking to expand broadly. It will benefit not only our security but also commerce. It is an operational partnership program that requires a government-to-government agreement. We're helping to expand that in Europe, in South America, and Asia.

We then have immigration liaison officer programs—the U.K., Australia, and other countries maintain them as well—which we think is a very effective way to share information. We also have police liaison efforts, at places like Europol and Interpol where we can sit next to law enforcement officers from around the world and share information on a case by case basis. That allows us to address some of the privacy concerns, looking at a specific threat in the context of a joint case as opposed to looking at sharing huge amounts of information. For that larger information flow, I think we'll need that anonymized solution I talked about.

Another important area is capacity building, which we already talked about in the passenger analysis environment, but we're also doing that in the customs environment. We're doing that in terms of vetted units for patrolling borders in Central America and elsewhere. That international work is absolutely essential to improving our security and extending our zone.

CTC: We would be remiss if we didn't ask about the presidential proclamation, the enhanced vetting programs, particularly the

ones targeting certain countries.^e I wondered if you could speak to how your organization is implementing that. And then, more specifically, how you assess the effectiveness of that program as a CT tool.

McAleenan: The presidential proclamation that's in effect on travel from certain countries is really focused on the integrity of the document issuance by that foreign partner. And the way the Department of Homeland Security has applied it—and it's not a CBP function—is to really assess the validity of those document issuance authorities, the security features of the document itself, and whether that document can be trusted as someone applies for a visa or seeks to travel internationally. So I think it's fairly limited in scope. It's very targeted. One of the countries has already achieved compliance and been removed from that list.^f But CBP's responsibility, especially as we work toward the second executive order on a national vetting center, is to build out our ability to do individualized risk assessment effectively. If you have the right system for assessing the risk presented by an individual, it can be applied without requiring a country-based approach. And we think that's most effective.

CTC: More broadly, how do you handle CBP's dual mission of keeping dangerous people and things out but also safeguarding and expediting lawful trade and travel. The vast majority of travelers don't pose a threat. How do you balance these two things, which could be seen to directly conflict with each other?

McAleenan: Our central purpose is ensuring and facilitating lawful trade and travel while preventing risk from coming into the country. So we've described it as a balance. We've described it as two sides of the same coin. We like to start with a good foundation on the intelligence side, a good understanding of the risk presented that we need to interdict. But then we try to make the haystack smaller. We really try to build our trusted population. That's a philosophy we've taken in terms of our travelers as well as our trade partners. On the travel side, global entry has grown to almost seven million people having access to the program. It's 10 to 12 percent of travel. That means we trust these individuals. And it's not just U.S. citizens. We have partnerships with 10 foreign governments on trusted traveler programs, so U.S. citizens can benefit traveling to foreign countries as well. That gives us a leg up in knowing more about those travelers and making it an expedited process upon arrival.

The same principle applies in the trade environment. About 55 percent of the volume of trade to the U.S. goes through our customs/trade partnership against terrorism, which mean we vetted and verified their supply chain, we audit it, we have rigorous security standards that these private-sector companies meet for not only the border-crossing elements but their entire supply chain from manufacturer to import in the U.S. So reducing the size of the hay-

stack. Then, we have to apply good analytics. We have to have the right data coming in on those transactions; we have to have it verified and audited in terms of the accuracy. And then we have to apply the right risk algorithms. They're based on operational experience; they're based on intelligence; and now we're using more advanced analytic technologies to help us make good risk-assessment decisions on people and goods crossing.

The last part is relying on our people, training them effectively, empowering them with the technology solutions to make good decisions and to do good interviews at the border. Because economic security is national security. One of the three pillars in the national security strategy of the United States is trade and economic strength. CBP plays a critical role in that, especially in terms of travel facilitation and trade facilitation. Travel exports are the largest component of our export economy. We want to welcome foreign visitors. Their presence is critical. Their contribution to our economy is essential. And in terms of international trade, \$4 trillion moves across our border every year. The vast, vast majority of that is compliant with all laws and regulations. We need to get out of the way of that lawful commerce while doing our best to, first of all, stop any security threats, but also to address contraband and then trade violations. It's a multifaceted strategy. It's our central charge as a border security, border management agency, and we work very hard at it.

CTC: You mentioned engagement with the private sector. On the one hand, they have a vested interest in complying and ensuring the security of trade because it keeps business going, but on the other hand, security can be costly. How do you work with the private sector to ensure their participation in this mission?

McAleenan: It's a critical partnership for us. We just had our trade symposium in Atlanta with over 1,200 representatives, the biggest American importers and exporters, customs brokers, foreign partners, foreign manufacturers, air carriers, really across the board of private-sector businesses that we need to relate to do our mission effectively. We try to find that sweet spot where compliance produces benefits economically in terms of the ease of border crossing, in a way that enhances security of the system. They can maintain their certainty and predictability on their supply chains, and we can work together to have a much better system overall. That's the sweet spot that we're looking for in our private-sector partnerships.

One way we're applying that, just in the air environment, for instance, is the advances in facial comparison technology. We have the entry-exit mandate that CBP was given in 2014 to ensure biometric exit is captured for anyone leaving the country. We have an Oversight report where we have good biographic confirmation for air and sea. We've been instructed to extend that to biometric confirmation. The ability to compare pictures in a database against a picture of a traveler expeditiously and accurately has just advanced dramatically over the last five years. So we tested this technology with over 600,000 travelers and got a 98 percent match rate.

We can make matches because we've got existing photos on over 97 percent of the traveling public, including U.S. persons via their passport pictures and foreign visitors who should have had a picture captured on entry. So we're able to not only make that security confirmation, we're able to partner with our air carriers to expedite the boarding process. An A380 at LAX right now for Lufthansa or British Airways is boarding in half the time. You don't have to take

e Editor's note: Under a Presidential Proclamation issued in September 2017, entry restrictions were placed on nationals from Chad, Iran, Libya, North Korea, Somalia, Syria, Venezuela, and Yemen. "Presidential Proclamation Enhancing Vetting Capabilities and Processes for Detecting Attempted Entry Into the United States by Terrorists or Other Public-Safety Threats," White House, September 24, 2017.

f Editor's note: In April 2018, Chad was taken off the list of countries subject to entry restrictions. "U.S. lifts travel ban on Chad citizens: White House," Reuters, April 10, 2018.

out a QR code.⁵ You don't have to fumble with a boarding pass. You simply walk up. Your picture's confirmed. And you're boarding that aircraft. And it protects privacy as well. So as we find that sweet spot, "Hey, we can enable your traveler. We can provide a better customer experience for your boarding process, and turn that around and make your international arrivals more efficient. And we're meeting our security mandate, and we're protecting privacy at the same time." That's the kind of partnership on the security side that we're looking for.

CTC: Thinking forward to not just the next couple of years, but the next 20 years, with biometrics, with facial recognition, with all these new technologies becoming available, how do you see your agency best using those technologies to speed up the entry process and to better protect the public?

McAleenan: I think the first and most fundamental aspect that's going to be transformed is that important process of confirming identity at the time of border crossing. That family of four that's going for their third trip to Orlando to go to Disney World from Germany, we'd like them to walk up, have their picture taken together, and be able to confirm their arrival, assess risk, and do an interview very quickly. So you take a 10- to 12-minute process and reduce it to two minutes with higher security, and you're empowering that law enforcement officer to do their mission as opposed to administrative tasks with documents and swipes and statements. So confirming identity expeditiously in a way that reduces wait time and increases security is probably the fundamental thing that we think biometrics is going to deliver.

We also believe we can get to that fidelity with entry and exit. The U.S. did not invest in departure control approaches. We don't have the staffing going outbound at airports. We don't do two-way border crossings like many countries do. We do, however, want to get to the point where we can use biometrics to know who's in and who's out of the country. We think they'll enable that beyond the air environment and certainly in the sea environment but also in the land border. So the biometric potential, for us, is very powerful. Doing it in a way, with facial, it's privacy-protected because you don't have to take your travel document out and hand it to a number of different people in your process. The system confirms it, we have the picture on file, we don't have to make new collections for U.S.

^g Editor's note: A QR code is a matrix barcode providing the ability to check in to a flight via a mobile device.

travelers. So it's a very powerful technology that we think we can apply effectively.

CTC: The United Nations is developing best practices for the responsible use and sharing of biometrics between members in counterterrorism.² How important is coming up with global standards on this?

McAleenan: One of, I think, the important developments in the U.N. Security Council Resolution 2396 is the affirmative statement that these systems should be developed by national governments. There should be a biometric capability for border crossing. I think that's the next challenge that you outlined that we need to tackle, is how can we take these national capabilities and make them more effective on the international side while protecting privacy and civil rights and civil liberties. There are very strong regimes in Europe, in the U.S., in Canada, in many countries in Asia. We need to find a way to share that information across borders to facilitate travel and protect people at the same time. That's the next challenge. I think technology is the answer to that challenge, too, in terms of protecting privacy.

CTC: You've had a great amount of experience in U.S. counterterrorism thinking about possible threats. The 9/11 Commission report famously called the failure to anticipate and prevent 9/11 "a failure of imagination." What keeps you up at night when you look at the threat picture from terrorism, and what do you see as the greatest challenges in the future?

McAleenan: I'm concerned about potential terrorism threats attempting entry in the regional migration flow toward the U.S. southern border. We need to be vigilant of potential security threats created by global human smuggling organizations who are offering access to the United States, including to individuals coming from conflict zones in the Middle East and East Africa, and bringing them all the way to our border through South America.

From a CT perspective, that is what keeps me up: known threats exploited.

And there's a final layer of the challenge that we haven't talked about, and that is the increasing expectation of travelers, in terms of the customer-service side. So even as we increase our security and even as we try to keep up with five-percent growth a year in international travel, we need to provide better service because that's what our citizens and international visitors expect. That dynamic creates a lot of pressure on border agencies. **CTC**

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The Houthi War Machine: From Guerrilla War to State Capture

By Michael Knights

The Houthi rebels have been at war with the Yemeni government almost constantly since 2004. In the first six years, the Houthis fought an increasingly effective guerrilla war in their mountainous home provinces, but after 2010, they metamorphosed into the most powerful military entity in the country, capturing the three largest cities in Yemen. The Houthis quickly fielded advanced weapons they had never before controlled, including many of Iranian origin. The story of how they moved from small-arms ambushes to medium-range ballistic missiles in half a decade provides a case study of how an ambitious militant group can capture and use a state's arsenals and benefit from Iran's support.

The Houthi movement¹ refers not only to the Houthi family (a clan from the Marran Mountains within Sa'ada province) but also to a broader tribal and sectarian alliance operating mainly in northern Yemen. The Houthi clan are *sadah* (descendants of the prophet), and their modern patriarch was a respected religious scholar, Badr al-Din al-Huthi, an influential preacher until his death (by natural causes) in 2010.² The Houthi family are adherents to the Zaydi branch of Islam, which venerates Ali as the legitimate heir to the prophet. Zaydis are doctrinally closest to Fiver Shi'a Muslims (as opposed to the more prevalent Twelver Shiism dominant in Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon).³ The Houthis rose to prominence in the aftermath of the fall of the Zaydi imamate (which ruled northern Yemen from 897 AD until 1962 AD) and at the time of the Islamic Revolution in Iran⁴ and the growth of Saudi-backed salafism in northern Yemen.⁵

By the 1980s, the Zaydi and *sadah* decline was answered with a new call for Zaydi revival, championed most actively by Badr al-Din al-Huthi and taken up by his prominent sons Hussein, Yahya, Mohammed, and Abdulmalik. The Zaydi revival was part social-revolutionary and part sectarian, calling for a reversal of government neglect of rural northern Yemen and limitation on the cultivation of anti-Zaydi salafism in the area.⁶ In the 1990s, Badr al-Din al-

Huthi and his sons built a powerful, cross-cutting social network around the Zaydi revivalist movement that included intermarriage with tribal and *sadah* families, "Believing Youth" (Muntada al-Shahabal-Mu'min) summer camps and social programs, and a political party.⁷

The Houthi movement became more vocal in foreign and border issues from 2000 onward, ostracizing Yemen's main allies—Saudi Arabia and the United States—and risking a clash with the government. By 2000, the movement was tapping into traditional xenophobic tendencies and fears of foreign domination in northern Yemen, in particular Saudi Arabia's handling of border disputes.⁸ Always opposed to Israeli and Western security actions in the Arab world, the Houthi movement reacted furiously to the Palestinian Second Intifada and later to U.S. military interventions in Afghanistan, Yemen, and Iraq. In late 2000, the Houthi movement adopted its slogan, "the scream" (al-shi'ar): "Death to America, Death to Israel, Curse upon the Jews, Victory to Islam."⁹ Explicit criticism of U.S.-Yemeni counterterrorism cooperation by the Houthis was a proximate cause for the commencement of hostilities by the Yemeni government in June 2004.

Guerrilla Wars: 2004-2010

In the first Houthi war, fought from June 22 to September 10, 2004, the rebels were unable to even defend cave complexes in their native Sa'ada province, with the result that their charismatic military leader Hussein Badr al-Din al-Huthi was captured and summarily executed on the battlefield in September 2004. By 2010, the same organization was able to fight the Yemeni government to a standstill in four provinces, seize and hold strategic towns, force entire surrounded brigades into surrender, and carve out tactical footholds inside Saudi Arabian border settlements.¹⁰ In the author's assessment, this evolutionary transformation was arguably largely due to the counterproductive tactics of the Yemeni government, plus incremental improvements on the traditional soldierly qualities of northern Yemeni tribesmen.

In 2004, the Houthi movement's armed cadres appear to have been small, numbering in the low hundreds—largely the family, friends, and students of Hussein Badr al-Din al-Huthi.¹¹ From 2005 onward, the numbers of Houthi movement fighters swelled in response to government errors. The first was to progressively alienate Zaydis. After Hussein Badr al-Din al-Huthi's death, the government posted images of his body on walls in Sa'ada, inadvertently chiming with Shi'a themes of martyrdom, elevating him to saint-like status, and agitating the Zaydi tradition of rising up against unjust rulers.¹² Consolidation of co-religiosity was reinforced by the sacking of Zaydi shrine towns such as Dahyan and major population centers

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State Capture and State Sponsorship: 2011-2014

The sixth Houthi war in 2009-2010 underlined the failing strength of the Yemeni government, which quickly succumbed to widespread Arab Spring protests from January 2011 onward, with President Ali Abdullah Saleh being ousted in November 2011. Setting aside previous rivalries between Houthi commanders,^c the Houthi leadership took full advantage of this period of government collapse, extending a network of forces across northern Yemen to neuralgic locations that one Houthi field commander termed “hegemony points.”³³ By March 2011, the Yemeni military had been expelled from Sa’ada and dissenting tribes were suppressed.³⁴ In 2011, the Houthi movement adopted a formal name for the first time—Ansar Allah (Partisans of God)^d—and developed a Beirut-based television station, Al-Masirah (The Journey), with Lebanese Hezbollah support.³⁵

By the end of 2012, Ansar Allah controlled almost all of Sa’ada province and large parts of the adjacent governorates of Amran, al-Jawf, and Hajjah, “the largest part of Upper Yemen’s Zaydi heartland” as Marieke Brandt noted in 2013.³⁶ These moves were informed not only by the Houthi clan’s historic skill as tribal mediators but also by some organized intelligence collection either undertaken by the movement or seized from government records. One deep expert on Yemen told the author, “the Houthis arrived in districts with files on tribal networks and local structures.”³⁷ As Brandt noted in 2013:

“The Huthi rebellion works through carefully developed plans and brilliant moves on the chessboard. They rely on alliances, both secret and openly visible ... The Huthi strategy is based on a precise knowledge of the local tribes and on widespread social presence in their areas; they set up a tight network of checkpoints and patrol in the hamlets in operations that local sources describe as Huthi operations to feel the tribe’s pulse.”³⁸

Alongside opportunistic territorial expansion, Ansar Allah worked to capture the armaments of the state and to draw on direct support from Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah. In a first step toward state capture, as one of the anti-government protest factions, the Houthi movement coopted officials within the transitional governing structure, particularly the Ministry of Defense. The Houthi movement also worked with the ousted Ali Abdullah Saleh to position itself for the takeover of the capital, which eventually unfolded as a smoothly executed coup on September 21, 2014. In addition to the absorption of entire brigade sets of tanks, artillery, and anti-aircraft weapons, Ansar Allah also seems to have used its alliance with Saleh to coopt Yemen’s strategic missile^e and coast-

al defense forces, as well as national intelligence agencies.^f As the Houthi movement seized power in Sana’a, it inherited as many as six operational 9M117M launchers and 33 R-17E Elbrus (NATO name SS-1C Scud-B) short-range ballistic missiles, a system with a range of 310 miles.³⁹

In addition to coopting Yemen’s war machine, Ansar Allah appear to have taken advantage of help proffered by Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah in the aftermath of the Arab Spring uprisings, which, as noted, was a moment of unsurpassed opportunity for the Houthis. Lebanese Hezbollah appears to have mentored the group, with Mareike Transfeld noting that “parallels in the Hezbollah takeover of West Beirut in 2008 and the Houthi grab of power in 2014 also suggest some exchange on military strategy.”⁴⁰ Iran’s interest in Yemen seems to have been piqued when Riyadh entered the sixth war in late 2009, at which time an Iranian intelligence-gathering ship took up station in the Red Sea near Eritrea’s Dahlak Islands, on the same latitude as the Saudi-Yemeni border and the Yemeni port of Midi.^g Two arms shipments were intercepted on their way to the Houthis in October 2009 between Eritrea and Houthi agents in Midi and Hodeida ports,⁴¹ with the Yemeni government claiming that five “Iranian trainers” were aboard one ship.⁴² The Houthis gained full control of Midi port in November 2011.^h

There is no telling how many shipments of arms and personnel entered Yemen via this Houthi-friendly port, but the January 2013 interception of the Jihan-1 dhow suggests a powerful post-2011 effort by Iran to arm Ansar Allah in the same manner Iran has armed Lebanese Hezbollah. Intercepted by the *U.S.S. Farragut* off Yemen’s coast, the Jihan-1 carried the same kinds of Iranian-provided arms that Israel had previously intercepted off the coasts of Lebanon.⁴³ These included 122-millimeter Katyusha rockets; Iranian-made Misagh-2 man-portable air defense system (MANPADS) rounds and battery units;ⁱ 2.6 tons of RDX high explosive; and components identical to Iranian-provided Explosively-Formed Penetrator

f The Political Security Organization (PSO) and National Security Bureau (NSB). In 2013, the PSO released all of the Lebanese foreign nationals it was holding for suspicion of ties to Lebanese Hezbollah. Author interview, Yemen expert A, spring 2018. Name of interviewee, and date and place of interview withheld at interviewee’s request.

g The current Iranian ‘mother ship’ on station is *Saviz*, located in Eritrea’s contiguous waters. It has a crew complement of 20 but usually has around 60 personnel on board, many of whom wear Iranian naval uniforms, despite the fact that the ship is registered as a civilian vessel. The ship has signals intelligence domes and antennae. It is visited by all Iranian ships moving through the Red Sea, nominally to coordinate anti-piracy measures. At least three speedboats are based on deck, which are used to ferry personnel to Yemen. The author interviewed a number of Gulf coalition naval personnel with regard to *Saviz* and reviewed imagery of the vessel. Author interview, Gulf coalition naval personnel. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees’ request.

h Previously, Arabic news reporting suggested Iran had tried to invest in Midi port in 2009. See “Tehran Aims to Turn Yemen into a Regional Arena for Conflict, as Part of Its Ongoing Dispute with Several Countries in the Region,” *Al-Watan*, October 31, 2009.

i The Misagh is an Iranian copy of the Chinese QW-1M, which is itself a copy of the U.S. Stinger. What is notable is that the Jihan-1 did not carry MANPADS gripstocks (the trigger mechanism), indicating that these may already have been present in Yemen. “Frontline Perspective: Radio-Controlled, Passive Infrared-Initiated IEDs: Iran’s latest technological contributions to the war in Yemen,” Conflict Armament Research, March 2018, p. 10.

c Marieke Brandt suggests that historical rivalry between Abdulmalik al-Houthi and Abdullah Eida al-Razzami was put on hold during 2011 to allow the movement to maximize its gains. See Marieke Brandt, *Tribes and Politics in Yemen: A History of the Houthi Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 186.

d Houthi military units had used the name Ansar Allah as early as 2007 in Al-Jawf governorate. See Brandt, *Tribes and Politics in Yemen*, p. 188.

e These included the Missile Batteries Group and Missile Research and Development Center. See Tom Cooper, “How Did the Houthis Manage to Lob a Ballistic Missile at Mecca?” *War is Boring*, January 2, 2017.

(EFP) mines used in Iraq and Lebanon.⁴⁴ The vessel also carried Yemenis covertly moved in and out of Iran (i.e., not having gone through any immigration procedures).⁴⁵ The United Nations Panel of Experts on Iran, which investigated the incident, found that “all available information placed the Islamic Republic of Iran at the center of the Jihan operation.”⁴⁶

Days before Ansar Allah overran the Yemeni government’s fallback capital of Aden in March 2015, Tehran announced the commencement of an air bridge⁴⁷ between Iran and Sana’a with a twice-daily shuttle service operated by Mahan Air, a government-controlled airline used by the IRGC Quds Force to ferry trainers and equipment to warzones.⁴⁸ Leaders who were present in Sana’a in late 2014 suggest that Lebanese Hezbollah and Iranian trainers entered on these flights and up to 300 Yemenis were sent to Iran for training.⁴⁹ At the same time, in March 2015, both Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya news networks reported that an Iranian cargo ship had unloaded 180 tons of military equipment in the Red Sea port of Al-Saleef under conditions of tight security.⁵⁰ According to Lebanese government officials, Iran supplied a small number of pilots to the Houthi movement in 2014 for unknown reasons.⁵¹ The capture of Yemen’s largest ports, airport, and its military establishment was complete, and Ansar Allah was readying to attempt a killing blow against the Yemeni government.

The Ansar Allah War Machine: 2015-2018

When the Houthis took Aden in March 2015, the 180-mile lunge was the longest-ranged offensive action ever undertaken by the group, and it coincided with a number of other offensives toward Mar’ib, Hodeida, Ta’izz, Ibb, Bayda, and Shabwah. Though most of these offensives failed to fully dislodge the defenders, the effort was an indication that the Houthi military was a much larger and more capable organization than it had been in 2010. The involvement of military units loyal to ousted president Ali Abdullah Saleh was one factor, particularly in enabling long-range helicopter-carried and ground forces to seize Aden,⁵² but from the outset, Ansar Allah did not trust Saleh networks and forced the demobilization of the Republican Guard, missile forces, and special forces units that would not operate under Houthi leadership.⁵³ Indispensable individuals, such as the Missile Batteries Group commander Staff Brigadier General Mohammed Nasser al-Atufi, were coopted, and specialist personnel were retained.⁵⁴ Overall, though, Ansar Allah’s priority was to bring all critical capabilities ‘in-house’ and to disarm all potential opposition, even if this meant greater near-term reliance on Iranian and Lebanese Hezbollah advisors.¹

Since becoming a state-level actor with powerful international allies, the Houthi movement has been effective in recruiting, motivating, and training forces to fight the Yemeni government and the Gulf coalition. The remaining resources of northern Yemen⁵⁵—tax-

es, printing of currency,⁵⁶ and manipulation of fuel markets⁵⁷—are poured into sustaining Ansar Allah’s manpower, including an estimated \$30 million per month of donated Iranian fuel.⁵⁸ Charismatic leadership remains at the core of the movement, with group solidarity reinforced by chanting and sermons at a proliferating series of festivals, workplace gatherings, summer camps, and classroom indoctrination sessions.⁵⁹ Ansar Allah exploits the deaths of Houthi leaders, the foreign-backed nature of the Yemeni government, and the use of southern troops in northern Yemen to tap into cultural drivers to broaden and boost recruitment.⁵⁷ The Houthi movement classifies new recruits with limited indoctrination and training as *mutahawith*, which roughly translates to “Houth-ized” fighters.⁵⁸ A significant proportion of these fighters are under 18 years of age, classifying them as child soldiers.⁵⁹ According to Amnesty International, Ansar Allah imposes recruiting quotas in the areas it controls and will discipline clans who default.⁶⁰ A mixture of indoctrination, machismo, material sustenance,⁶¹ and threats have kept the Houthi movement well-supplied with new fighters across nearly a dozen major battlefields in Yemen for over three years of war.

Another factor that supports the sustainment of so many battlefields simultaneously is the very low force-to-space ratio that Ansar Allah employs, in part to mitigate the effects of total enemy air superiority. Fortification and defensive minefields are the cornerstone of this effort.⁶¹ Use of cave systems, trenches, and nocturnal raiding were its traditional means of blunting air attacks, but new methods have needed to be adopted since 2009, when the Royal Saudi Air Force and other modern air forces entered the fray. Trench systems continue to evolve, now including zig-zagging lines (to limit lateral spread of explosions); mortar pits with removable camouflage lids; arms caches and communications hubs at key junctions; and solar-powered communication systems. Fighting outside their native mountains, Ansar Allah uses “green zones” (vegetated *wadis*) to build bunkers under trees. Buildings are used as command hubs and arms caches, especially bridges, hospitals, and schools, which are known by the Houthis to be on restricted target lists or “no target” lists. Decoys and smoke canisters are used to complicate air surveillance and targeting.

m The Houthi clan shared fuel imports into northern Yemen via Hodeida and Saleef ports until the death of Ali Abdullah Saleh, at which point the last 14 fuel-importing companies not under their control were absorbed into their network. Author interview, Yemen (economic) experts B and C, spring 2018. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees’ request.

n The United Nations is reported to be investigating provision of around \$30 million per month of fuel to Ansar Allah by Iranian shell companies. See Carole Landry, “UN panel finds further evidence of Iran link to Yemen missiles,” *Agence France-Presse*, July 31, 2018. The author found that numerous interviewees from the Gulf coalition naval forces and even from the humanitarian community were convinced that the Houthis were receiving “gratis” fuel transfers from Iran as a form of untraceable threat finance.

o The RAND 2010 study noted the Houthi development “groupness” relied heavily upon chanting of the Houthi slogan at celebrations including al-Ghadir Day, the Prophet’s Birthday, International Jerusalem Day, and the Commemoration of Martyrs Day. See Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, pp. 219 and 236.

p Being a fighter displaces the burden of feeding a youth from the family onto Ansar Allah. Families also receive around \$80-120 per month if a child becomes a martyr at the frontline. See “Yemen: Huthi forces recruiting child soldiers for front-line combat,” *Amnesty International*, February 28, 2017.

j The Jihan-1 carried a consignment of passive infrared sensors and nearly 2,000 electronic components used in the manufacture of RCIEDs. See “Frontline Perspective: Radio-Controlled, Passive Infrared-Initiated IEDs: Iran’s latest technological contributions to the war in Yemen,” *Conflict Armament Research*, March 2018, p. 10.

k Senior Yemeni leaders present in Sana’a were able to discern the presence of Hezbollah and Iranian trainers, despite efforts taken to hide these personnel.

l This was a common feature across the author’s interviews of Yemeni military officials who were present in Houthi-held areas in 2014-2017.

The Houthis are effective at reducing signatures that could betray their location. Emissions control has become good since 2009, with limited use of electronic communications other than low-power Motorola phones.⁶² q Houthi fighters are renowned for being able to stay immobile under cover for long periods at hide sites, showing great discipline.⁶³ In order to minimize their movements, Ansar Allah oversupplies posts with ammunition and water, and uses special rocket-assisted canisters to deliver food to outposts, delivering raisins, dates, corn, and fortified baby milk formula, and, of course, daily provision of qat, the chewable narcotic leaf.⁶⁴

Another means of avoiding air attack is dispersion and tactical movement that is indiscernible from civilian movement. As one Gulf coalition officer noted, “they are very good at adapting to air threat with tactical movement, dispersing and moving with civilians.”⁶⁵ Whereas Houthi forces operated in platoon- and company-sized warbands in 2004-2009, they have since atomized into tactical groups no bigger than three to five fighters.^r Far back from the frontline, troops will be loosely managed by a very rudimentary Ansar Allah operations room under a district local area leader who is personally loyal to the Houthi family—a “Houthi Houthi” in Yemeni parlance.^s This nominal headquarters will split reinforcements into tiny, largely autonomous cells, which are never bigger than the passenger capacity of a normal civilian car or frequently a two-man trail bike. The moving troops will often not have weapons, which complicates the positive identification requirements of air targeting, and will instead link up with cached weapons at the frontline. Their aim, which they have reached with a high amount of success, is to be indistinguishable from civilians.

To aid the economy-of-force effort, all defensive positions are covered by chaotically laid harassment minefields and trip wires, and any lost ground will be hastily booby-trapped before evacuation, even civilian homes, farms, and schools.^t In defense of a trench complex, a single fighter will be expected to move from position to position, firing a machine-gun in one, a sniper rifle in another, and a B-10 recoilless rifle, medium mortar, or even an anti-tank guided missile (ATGM) in a third. Each fighter might have a one- to three-kilometer front to defend, and will be expected to defend the area successfully or die trying. Houthi fighters use Captagon-type amphetamine-based stimulants to reinforce morale in battle and use female contraceptive pills to aid blood-clotting if wounded.^u As one Yemeni officer noted, “they take one tablet to stop them [from]

bleeding and one to make them crazy.”⁶⁶

In a 15-kilometer sector, there will thus be a thin outpost screen of highly determined and quite skilled marksmen. (The set-up does not appear to be greatly different in urban defense schemes, with the Houthis preferring to defend locales with long lines of fire rather than manpower-intensive street-by-street defenses.^v) Behind this screen will be a pool of substitutes able to move forward quickly, not carrying weapons, to replace frontline fighters. Sometimes a veteran tactical reserve akin to a quick reaction force is kept back with the local area leader. The swarming of operational-level reserves to threatened points (such as Hodeida in May 2018) are triggered by national-level Houthi leaders, whereupon, as one Yemeni officer noted, “the trickle becomes a flood.”⁶⁷

Houthi forces are notably less capable of advancing against enemy defensive positions that are covered by airpower. Though Ansar Allah excelled at the aforementioned slow wrestle to dominate geographic “hegemony points,”⁶⁸ the movement has a poor record of dislodging alerted enemy defenses. In Aden at the start of the war, weak resistance forces backed by less than 10 UAE Special Forces blunted numerous Houthi battalion-sized assaults aided by pro-Houthi Republic Guard elements with tanks. Likewise, as recently as March 2018, a large Ansar Allah offensive involving around 1,000 attackers^w tried unsuccessfully to break through Yemeni lines on the Nihm front, east of Sana’a, suffering heavy casualties. This last case is a rare example of Ansar Allah using one of its named elite units^x—in that example, the Katibat al-Mawt (Death Brigade)⁶⁹—to attempt an operational maneuver.

Where Ansar Allah has been notably more successful has been in the raiding war along with Saudi Arabia border, where it has fought a Hezbollah-style harassment campaign⁷⁰ against Saudi border forces. Houthi forces have achieved great tactical success against Saudi border posts through offensive mine-laying on supply routes and ATGM strikes on armored vehicles and outposts.⁷¹ The Houthi military has sustained more than three years of continuous raids and ambushes, demonstrating its resilience and depth of reserves. Ansar Allah is now one of the premier practitioners of offensive mine warfare in the world, utilizing a range of explosive devices,^y

q Though it is beyond the scope of this study, Houthi leadership use of Telegram and other messaging applications has become more sophisticated since 2015, though rural frontline tactical communications remain largely unchanged. Drawn from the author’s interviews with coalition intelligence personnel.

r This trend was apparent by December 2009.

s This phrase seemed to be widely in use among Yemeni and Gulf coalition forces to describe Houthi fighters who were actually from the Houthi home province of Sa’ada.

t The author spoke to multiple Gulf coalition explosive ordnance technicians and Yemeni civilians with direct exposure to Houthi booby-trapping of civilian homes, farmlands, and schools. The very vindictive and inventive concealment of explosive booby traps inside children’s toys and furniture is difficult to reconcile with the Houthis’ apparent desire to be viewed as victims in the war.

u References to Houthi uses of an amphetamine-based combat drug and a blood-clotting drug were widely made during the author’s interviews with Yemeni and Gulf coalition forces.

v For instance, individual Houthi fighters will often snipe from a mined-in water tower, rooftop, or pylon until killed. In the author’s interviews with Gulf coalition troops, such fighters were often compared to Second World War-era Japanese diehards or Vietnam-era Vietcong.

w The author was able to visit this sector around a week after the offensive and interview commanders in spring 2018. Yemeni commanders describe burying around 300 Houthi fatalities and capturing 60 wounded fighters. The Houthi troops, largely described as teenagers, were repelled with very heavy use of airpower.

x As well as Katibat al-Mawt, there has historically been reference to Kataib Badr (in the fourth war in 2007) and the Kataib al-Hussein (a three-battalion praetorian force); and a discipline battalion. The author worked in Yemen previously (during the fourth and fifth Houthi wars) and gathered some of this data during interviews then, backed up by further interviews of Yemeni commanders on the Nahim front in 2018.

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

concealment tactics,^{72 z} and initiation methods.^{73 aa} The Houthis make very effective propaganda use of video from such raids, with a dedicated cameraman attached to all raiding parties, irrespective of size.^{ab} By March 2018, the Houthi movement had also fought a long-running deadly ‘cat-and-mouse’ game of rocket launches under Gulf coalition aerial surveillance, launching 66,195 short-range rockets into Saudi Arabia, killing 102 civilians, wounding 843, and depopulating several hundred small villages.⁷⁴

Advanced Houthi Weaponry and Capabilities

Alongside tactical evolution influenced by Lebanese Hezbollah, the Ansar Allah movement has debuted a range of advanced weapons systems since 2015 with direct assistance from Iran. The clearest example of this is the Burkan 2-H medium-range ballistic missile, which the Houthis have used since May 2017 to strike Riyadh and Yanbu, around 600 miles distant from launch points in northern Yemen. In January 2018, the U.N. Panel of Experts on Yemen found conclusively that Iran produced the Burkan-2 missiles fired from Yemen, which were “a derived lighter version” of Iran’s Qiam-1 missile^{ac} designed specifically to achieve the range capable of striking Riyadh. Wreckage from 10 Burkan missiles suggests that they were smuggled into Yemen in pieces and welded back together by a single engineering team, whose fingerprint non-factory welding technique was found on all the missiles.⁷⁵ Iranian components were also integrated into repurposed Yemeni SA-2 surface-to-air missiles to produce the Qaher series of surface-to-surface free-flight rockets, which were used to strike targets up to 155 miles inside Saudi Arabia on over 60 occasions between 2015 and 2017.⁷⁶ Though Ansar Allah gained control over some capable Yemeni engineers from 2014 onward, the Houthis’ smooth absorption of new missile systems suggest that Iranian training and technical assistance supported the missile campaign. First, there was no apparent learning curve that would suggest experimental deployment of entirely new rockets and missiles.^{ad} Second, Ansar Allah did not rely upon the Saleh-era Missile Batteries Group for missile operations and quick-

ly developed an independent capacity^{ae} to launch missiles, with one Yemeni military informant present in Houthi-controlled Yemen in 2014-2017 noting, “[the Houthis] didn’t trust us. The missiles were moved from Sana’a to Sa’ada early on. [The Houthis] were quickly self-sufficient and didn’t need the Republican Guard or missile forces.”⁷⁷

Other less advanced but nonetheless important new weapons systems have also been debuted in the Houthi arsenal since 2015.^{af} One is Ansar Allah’s Qasef-1 unmanned aerial vehicle, which the United Nations stated was “virtually identical in design, dimensions and capability to that of the Ababil-T, manufactured by the Iran Aircraft Manufacturing Industries.”⁷⁸ Based on the design of the UAVs and the tracing of component parts, the panel concluded that the material necessary to assemble the Qasef-1s “emanated from the Islamic Republic of Iran.”⁷⁹ An average of six Qasef-1 UAVs with explosive warheads have been launched each month since April 2017 by Ansar Allah, initially aimed at Gulf coalition Patriot missile batteries (to disrupt defenses ahead of surface-to-surface missile strikes) but increasingly against command centers (with unitary warheads at ranges up to 60 miles using GPS guidance) and even frontline troops (with bomb-releasing reusable UAVs under radio control).⁸⁰

As with strategic missile systems, the Houthis took control of Yemen’s coastal missile batteries and then integrated them into an Iranian-supported salvage and modernization program. Since 2015, Ansar Allah has attacked shipping with naval mines and anti-ship missiles that were already in the Yemeni arsenal,^{8g} to which it has added the use of boat-mounted ATGMs.⁸¹ The Houthis developed around 30 coast-watcher stations,^{8h} “spy dhows,” drones, and the maritime radar of docked ships to create targeting solutions for attacks.⁸² Ansar Allah has also undertaken combat diver training on Zuqur and Bawardi islands in the Red Sea.⁸ⁱ The most significant technological development undertaken by the Houthis in coastal

z These include off-road concealment within synthetic rocks, concealment within fabricated kerbstones, elevated in trees, surface-laid under patched tarmac, and surface-laid in culverts.

aa These include passive infrared, radio-control, pressure plate, and crush wire.

ab One Saudi officer noted, “they always have a combat cameraman, even if he is one out of three men in the group.” Author interview, Gulf coalition senior officer A, spring 2018. Name of interviewee, and date and place of interview withheld at interviewee’s request.

ac The United Nations concluded that the “internal design features, external characteristics and dimensions [of the remnants] are consistent with those of the Iranian designed and manufactured Qiam-1 missile.” “Letter dated 26 January 2018 from the Panel of Experts on Yemen mandated by Security Council resolution 2342 (2017) addressed to the President of the Security Council,” p. 28.

ad Iran has been converting SA-2 missiles into Tondar-69 ballistic missiles since the 1990s, which likely informed the rapid fielding of Qaher-1. The United Nations confirmed that Iran produced the components used in the Burkan-2H, and these components are not owned by any country other than Iran. The creation of an entirely new extended range version of the Qiam-1, and its smooth operational adoption in Yemen, suggests four to six months of development work in Iran, followed by the training of Yemeni or Iranian assemblers and operators for what was a new weapons system. Author interviews, three weapons inspectors with direct access to multiple Burkan 2H missiles. Names of interviewee, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees’ request.

ae Houthi-shot video viewed by the author does show some missile systems such as the OTR-21/SS-21 Scarab system being fired using rudimentary procedures by non-uniformed Houthi fighters—uncovering the device from within a false water tanker, raising it on a hydraulic arm, and firing it using electric charge from car batteries.

af Other innovations include Russian-made, heat-seeking air-to-air missiles into truck-launched anti-aircraft weapons and Iranian virtual radar receivers that passively gather air traffic control signals to derive targeting solutions for air-defense batteries. See Farzin Nadimi and Michael Knights, “Iran’s Support to Houthi Air Defenses in Yemen,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, April 4, 2018.

ag Likely older P-21 “Styx II” (and its HY-2 Chinese version) and C-801 missiles, but potentially also C-802 systems provided by Iran or Lebanese Hezbollah. See Alexandre Mello, Jeremy Vaughan, and Michael Knights, “Houthi Antishipping Attacks in the Bab al-Mandab Strait,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, October 6, 2016.

ah Ansar Allah training videos viewed by the author showed vessel identification classes focusing on Saudi Arabian Al-Madinah class frigates and UAE Baynunah-class corvettes.

ai Ansar Allah training videos viewed by the author show a section of 10 trainees wearing Beuchat diving suits and receiving training on mission planning.

defense was the conversion (with Iranian support^{aj}) of coast guard speedboats into the self-guiding Shark-33 explosive drone boat, which can be programmed to follow a course or home in on a target using electro-optical television guidance.^{ak} This kind of device was used to successfully attack a Saudi frigate on January 30, 2017, (using television guidance) and unsuccessfully to attack a Saudi oil loading terminal on April 26, 2017 (using GPS guidance while maneuvering at 35-45 knots).⁸³ The Shark 33 has been employed by the Houthis in a triangular formation, with the attack boat forward, a command boat nearby, and a media boat (to capture combat footage) further away.⁸⁴ On one occasion, a Shark 33 was camouflaged by being loaded with fish.⁸⁵

The accumulated balance of evidence strongly suggests that Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah have developed powerful military and technical advisory missions in Yemen since 2014. According to Yemeni leaders present in Sana'a between 2014 and 2017, IRGC advisors were confined to Sana'a and to a missile construction site in Sa'ada. These advisors were "like a diamond to the Houthis" and were "kept in safe places to help give operational and strategic advice and guidance on tactics and procedures."⁸⁶ Lebanese Hezbollah operatives were more numerous and were not only kept in Sana'a and Sa'ada but also allowed forward as far as command posts and the Red Sea coastal defense sites.⁸⁷ Hezbollah provided mentoring and training in infantry tactics, ATGM operations, offensive mine warfare, and anti-shipping attacks.⁸⁸ A number of small-scale military industries have been established since 2014 to support the Houthi war effort and maximize domestic reuse and production capabilities, in order to minimize the effect of the international arms embargo on the Houthi movement. A land-mine production facility was established in Sa'ada, feeding around 20 tons of mines per day to distribution hubs in Sana'a, Hodeida, and Dhamar.⁸⁹ A separate EFP fabrication facility was established in Sana'a.⁹⁰ As mentioned earlier, a missile construction hub was transferred from Sana'a to Sa'ada. In Hodeida, a drone workshop operates, drawing on a supply of rolls of fiber-glass to make airframes.⁹¹

Outlook and Implications

The above analysis demonstrates that the rise of Houthi military power is neither solely the result of its own successful effort to capture the state, nor solely Iranian support, but rather a combination of the two. The Houthi family has proven to be politically prodigious and very adept at seizing opportunities. In their view, they have restored the ousted thousand-year Zaydi imamate, achieving the aim of Zaydi revivalism championed by the family's patriarch, the late Badr al-Din al-Huthi. They will not willingly give up their control of Sana'a or a Red Sea coastline.⁹² Though Ansar Allah has been fought out of many parts of southern and eastern Yemen, these were the outer bulwarks of its defense, while the more defensible northern highlands remain almost entirely under its control. It does not feel defeated.⁹³ Even if Hodeida and the Red Sea coast should fall to the Yemeni government and the Gulf coalition, the Houthi movement will probably fight on and will be very hard to defeat in a second phase of the war in northern Yemen.

The Houthi movement has proven itself to be a very tough military opponent. Fourteen years of conflict has strengthened it, and it thrives under the conditions of war. At a tactical level, as one Gulf coalition officer noted, echoing a common sentiment, "they are tough, willing to die, they're organized and they're getting better with time."⁹⁴ In 2010, a RAND study posed the question of whether the Houthis could move beyond a fighting style of "unconnected fighting groups" to form "a coordinated, synchronized fighting force," and this is exactly what they have done, weaving micro-warbands into a cohesive war effort capable of defending in depth.⁹⁵ At the strategic level, the Houthis (likely with mentoring from Iran) have learned how to pull geopolitical levers through medium-range ballistic missile strikes on Riyadh, threats to close the Bab al-Mandeb Strait, and deft use of propaganda to vilify the Gulf coalition and the Yemeni government.

Iran does not appear to control the Houthi leadership, but it did ramp up its support to the Houthis at precisely the moment that their ambitions broadened not only to control northern Yemen but also to build defensive bulwarks far outside the traditional Zaydi heartland. The Houthis could arguably have taken northern Yemen without Iran's help, and there are indications Tehran warned against this step. But Iran has provided critical aid in allowing the Houthis to slow down the Gulf-backed Yemeni government recapture of terrain. The relationship between Iran and the Houthis could remain transactional or it could deepen. Iran, Lebanese Hezbollah, and Ansar Allah share a strikingly similar worldview opposing the United States, Israel, and Saudi Arabia, as underlined by the Houthi slogan: "Death to America, Death to Israel, Curse upon the Jews, Victory to Islam."⁹⁶ Hardliner military commanders within the Houthi movement such as Abdullah Eida al-Razzami and Abdullah al-Hakim (Abu Ali)⁹⁷ may be more susceptible to IRGC influence than other parts of the Houthi hierarchy, and this wing of the movement could be strengthened over time, particularly if the current war continues. As one expert on Yemen told the author, "some Houthi leaders think the Saudis want to exterminate them down to the last man, woman and child, and they want to continue the war to Makkah"⁹⁸ (in Saudi Arabia). Though it clearly lacks the capacity to take such offensive action, Ansar Allah is more than capable of becoming a "southern Hezbollah" on the Red Sea, flanking Saudi Arabia and Israel from the south, a factor that continues to drive the Gulf coalition's efforts to deprive the Houthis of a coast through which to draw on Iranian and Hezbollah assistance in the future. **CTC**

aj Forensic evidence from a captured Shark 33 and arms interdictions show that Shahid Julaie Marine Industries, Iran's main builder of drone boats, provided key components in the Shark 33, while the computer hard drive inside the Shark-33 held over 90 sets of coordinates for locations in Iran, Yemen, and the Red Sea, including the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Self-Sufficiency Jihad Organization labs in Tehran, which were also captured in a test shot of the onboard camera. See Michael Knights, "Making the Case against Iranian Sanctions Busting in Yemen," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, December 15, 2017.

ak The author was provided with access to the Shark 33 onboard computer and electro-optical systems, and saw a demonstration of the electro-optical tracking and had a chance to interview a U.S. weapons intelligence analyst in fall 2017 about the system. Name of interviewee, and date and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.

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- 2 Marieke Brandt, *Tribes and Politics in Yemen: A History of the Houthi Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 7, 21, 114.
- 3 Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, p. v. See also Eleonora Ardemagni, "From Insurgents to Hybrid Sector Actors? Deconstructing Yemen's Huthi Movement," Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale, April 2017.
- 4 Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, p. v.
- 5 See the dedicated chapter on this theme in Brandt, *Tribes and Politics in Yemen*, pp. 75-97.
- 6 Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, p. v.
- 7 Ibid., pp. v and 99. Also see Brandt, *Tribes and Politics in Yemen*, pp. 116-118.
- 8 Brandt, *Tribes and Politics in Yemen*, pp. 75-97.
- 9 Ibid., pp. 132-133.
- 10 Ibid., pp. 75-97.
- 11 Ibid., p. 199.
- 12 Ibid., pp. 166-170.
- 13 Ibid., pp. 230-231.
- 14 Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, p. 8.
- 15 Brandt, *Tribes and Politics in Yemen*, p. 295. Also see Marieke Brandt, "The Irregulars of the Sa'dah War: 'Colonel Shaykhs' and 'Tribal Militias' in Yemen's Huthi Conflict (2004-2010)," in Helen Lackner ed., *Why Yemen Matters: A Society in Transition* (London: Saqi Books, 2014), p. 114.
- 16 Brandt, *Tribes and Politics in Yemen*, pp. 171, 177, and 199.
- 17 Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, p. 254.
- 18 This Paul Dresch translation of *asabiyyah* is quoted from Brandt, "The Irregulars of the Sa'dah War," p. 114.
- 19 Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, p. 254.
- 20 Ibid., p. 252.
- 21 See the chapter on the six Houthi wars in Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, pp. 200-204, 231.
- 22 Ibid., p. 209.
- 23 Ibid., p. 134.
- 24 Brandt, *Tribes and Politics in Yemen*, p. 323.
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- 27 Simon Henderson, "Small War or Big Problem? Fighting on the Yemeni-Saudi Border," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, November 10, 2009.
- 28 Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, pp. 200-204.
- 29 Brandt, *Tribes and Politics in Yemen*, pp. 244 and 268.
- 30 Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, pp. 219-220.
- 31 Brandt, *Tribes and Politics in Yemen*, p. 212.
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- 33 Quoted by Brandt, *Tribes and Politics in Yemen*, p. 187.
- 34 Ibid., p. 333.
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- 38 Author interview, Yemen expert A, spring 2018. Name of interviewee, and date and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.
- 39 See Tom Cooper, "How Did the Houthis Manage to Lob a Ballistic Missile at Mecca?" War is Boring, January 2, 2017.
- 40 Transfeld.
- 41 Brandt, *Tribes and Politics in Yemen*, p. 315.
- 42 See "Yemenis intercept 'Iranian ship,'" BBC, October 27, 2009, and Oren Dorell, "Iranian support for Yemen's Houthi goes back years," *USA Today*, April 20, 2015.
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- 44 "Frontline Perspective: Radio-Controlled, Passive Infrared-Initiated IEDs: Iran's latest technological contributions to the war in Yemen," Conflict Armament Research, March 2018, p. 10.
- 45 See pages 14 and 15 of "Final Report of the Panel of Experts Established Pursuant to Resolution 1929 (2010), S/2013/33," United Nations Security Council, June 2013.
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- 48 "Treasury Targets Supporters of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and Networks Responsible for Cyber-Attacks Against the United States," U.S. Treasury, September 14, 2017.
- 49 Author interviews, Yemeni political and military leaders present in Sana'a in 2014-2017. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.
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- 51 Ibid. Dorell quotes David Schenker, director of Arab politics at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, who said that Lebanese officials hosted Iranian military pilots in Beirut "where they received Lebanese passports and then traveled to Yemen to join the fighting in advance of the Houthi takeover earlier this year."
- 52 Author interviews, Yemeni political and military leaders present in Sana'a in 2014-2017. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.
- 53 Author interviews, Yemeni political and military leaders present in Sana'a in 2014-2017. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.
- 54 Author interviews, Yemeni political and military leaders present in Sana'a in 2014-2017. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.
- 55 "Letter dated 26 January 2018 from the Panel of Experts on Yemen mandated by Security Council resolution 2342 (2017) addressed to the President of the Security Council," see Annex 45, pp. 186-188.
- 56 See "Treasury Designates Large-Scale IRGC-QF Counterfeiting Ring," U.S. Treasury, November 20, 2017.
- 57 Author interview, Yemen expert A, spring 2018. Name of interviewee, and date and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.
- 58 Author's interviews, Yemen experts and coalition military officials. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.
- 59 As defined by the U.N. Charter, Chapter IV (Human Rights), Part 11 (Convention on the Rights of the Child), November 20, 1989.
- 60 See "Yemen: Houthi forces recruiting child soldiers for front-line combat," Amnesty International, February 28, 2017.
- 61 This paragraph draws on extensive interview material. Michael Knights, interviews and embedded observation with Gulf coalition targeting officers in spring 2018. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request. The author met and talked with a number of former Houthi-controlled child soldiers also in spring 2018.
- 62 For a review of Houthi communications practices before 2010, see Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, p. 196.
- 63 Author interviews and embedded observation, Gulf coalition targeting officers. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.
- 64 Author interviews, Jizan front Gulf coalition commanders and officers. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.
- 65 Author interviews, Gulf coalition intelligence personnel. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request. The author can attest to the care and ingenuity with which Houthi forces move in civilian guise, having watched many hours of live and recorded surveillance footage.
- 66 Author interview, Yemeni military officer, spring 2018. Name of interviewee, and date and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.
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- 73 Author interview, Gulf coalition explosives ordnance technicians, spring 2018. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.
- 74 Author interview, Gulf coalition humanitarian operations personnel, spring 2018. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.
- 75 Author interviews, three weapons inspectors with direct access to multiple Burkan 2H missiles. Names of interviewee, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.
- 76 See Michael Knights, "Making the Case against Iranian Sanctions Busting in Yemen," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, December 15, 2017, and Michael Knights and Katherine Bauer, "How Europe Can Punish Iran's Missile Smuggling While Preserving the Nuclear Deal," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, February 27, 2018.
- 77 Author interviews, Yemeni political and military leaders present in Sana'a in 2014-2017. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.
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- 82 Author interview, NGO worker based in Yemen, spring 2018. Name of interviewee, and date and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.
- 83 Author interview, Gulf coalition naval officers with direct involvement in repelling the oil loading terminal attack, spring 2018. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.
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- 85 Author interview, Gulf coalition naval officers with direct involvement in repelling the oil loading terminal attack, spring 2018. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request.
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- 87 Author interviews, Yemeni political and military leaders present in Sana'a in 2014-2017, spring 2018. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request. Some senior interviewees have met unnamed IRGC advisors in Sana'a in 2014-2017.
- 88 Author interviews, Yemeni political and military leaders present in Sana'a in 2014-2017, spring 2018. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request. Some senior interviewees have met unnamed IRGC advisors in Sana'a in 2014-2017.
- 89 Author interviews, Yemeni political and military leaders present in Sana'a in 2014-2017. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request. Some senior interviewees have met unnamed IRGC advisors in Sana'a in 2014-2017. These findings are broadly echoed by weapons intelligence experts (interviewed by the author) who have hands-on access to Houthi munitions, which shows signs of being mass-produced at one hub and being distributed sub-nationally afterward.
- 90 Author interviews, Yemeni political and military leaders present in Sana'a in 2014-2017. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request. Some senior interviewees have met unnamed IRGC advisors in Sana'a in 2014-2017. These findings are broadly echoed by weapons intelligence experts interviewed by the author, who have hands-on access to Houthi munitions.
- 91 Author interviews, Yemeni political and military leaders present in Sana'a in 2014-2017. Names of interviewees, and dates and places of interviews withheld at interviewees' request. Some senior interviewees have met unnamed IRGC advisors in Sana'a in 2014-2017. These findings are broadly echoed by weapons intelligence experts interviewed by the author, who have hands-on access to Houthi munitions.
- 92 Author interview, Yemen expert A, spring 2018. Name of interviewee, and date and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.
- 93 Author interview, Yemen expert A, spring 2018. Name of interviewee, and date and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request. This is the sense among most Yemen analysts consulted for this study.
- 94 Author interview, Gulf coalition officer, spring 2018. Name of interviewee, and date and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.
- 95 Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, p. 238.
- 96 Ibid., pp. 132-133.
- 97 Author interview, Yemen expert A, spring 2018. Name of interviewee, and date and place of interview withheld at interviewee's request.
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Treatment of Terrorists: How Does Gender Affect Justice?

By Audrey Alexander and Rebecca Turkington

From arrests and sentencing to post-conflict reintegration, mounting evidence suggests that men and women engaged in terrorism-related activity receive differential treatment from government institutions. Though myriad factors shape the result of any case, the evidence suggests gender has unjustly affected formal responses to individuals involved in crimes motivated by violent extremism, both inside and outside of judicial frameworks. By drawing from multiple sources, ranging from in-depth case studies to expansive datasets, this article shows that terrorism-related offenders who are women are less likely to be arrested, less likely to be convicted, and receive more lenient sentences compared to men; these findings are consistent with research on the unwarranted effects of gender on sentencing outcomes writ large.

I am not an evil or malicious person,” Keonna Thomas reportedly explained to the judge at her sentencing hearing in September 2017, months after she pleaded guilty to attempting to provide material support to the Islamic State, “I was, I guess at one point, impressionable.”¹ Though undoubtedly grounded in some truth, Thomas’ explanation mimics the language surrounding most women charged with Islamic State-related criminal offenses in the United States. From news media to defense attorneys, commentators regularly cast female terrorism offenders as naïve, gullible, susceptible targets of violent extremism, even when they admit their culpability by pleading guilty.² While unsurprising, given that portrayals of women in terrorism tend to be misleading,³ it is crucial to examine the effects such rhetoric has on confronting women’s participation in the myriad manifestations of

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violent extremism. While the data suggests that women often receive differential treatment within the criminal justice system, this discussion explores the disparate treatment of terrorist offenders as it pertains to gender, both inside and outside of conventional legal frameworks.

Although defendants in terrorism cases are not immune to the broader effects of discrimination within the criminal justice system, discrepancies in the punishment of women compared to men in these cases appear consistent with differences in sentencing for non-terrorism-related criminal offenders. In the United States, formal sentencing guidelines are designed to achieve fair outcomes and prevent unnecessary disparities by keeping characteristics about a defendant, like gender, race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, out of sentencing considerations.⁴ Despite this safeguard, evidence suggests that the federal court system in the United States is broadly more lenient on female defendants than their male counterparts, even when controlling for legal characteristics like criminal history.⁵ A 2015 study of felony cases found that women were 58 percent less likely to be sentenced to prison than men, and posits that judges were inclined to treat female defendants differently when they conformed to traditional gender roles.⁶ A few years earlier, a 2012 review of a swath of federal criminal cases discovered a considerable gender gap in sentence length distribution, which the author ascribes to a “winnowing” of defendants created by discretionary decisions at each procedural stage.⁷ Both patterns of judicial discretion and the process of sifting out women offenders at each encounter with the criminal justice process mirror the terrorism cases reviewed in this article. The following data and analysis indicate that women involved in crimes motivated by violent extremism are less likely to be arrested, less likely to be convicted, and finally sentenced at unequal rates. The abovementioned case of Keonna Thomas, among others, shows how gender dimensions become a part of legal proceedings.

Evidence presented in court filings shows that Thomas, a Philadelphia woman, was a vocal advocate for the Islamic State online for more than a year before her April 2015 arrest, using platforms like Twitter and Skype to advance its agenda.⁸ As early as August 2013, prior to the Islamic State’s official declaration of its caliphate, Thomas shared a picture of a child clad in camouflage wearing tactical gear and firearm magazine holsters with the caption, “Ask yourselves, while this young man is holding magazines for the Islamic state, what are you doing for it? #ISIS.”⁹ In private communications with three alleged separate co-conspirators, Thomas expressed her resounding support of the group and desire to travel to the region, as well as articulating her interest in becoming a martyr.¹⁰ An affidavit reveals authorities knew of Thomas’ electronic communications with a known “Somalia-based violent jihadi fighter originally from Minnesota,” a known “overseas [Islamic State] fighter,” and a “radical Islamic cleric located in Jamaica.”¹¹ News reports and a legal document identified these co-conspirators as

Mohamed Abdullahi Hassan (“Miski”), Abu Khalid Al-Amriki, and Sheikh Abdullah Faisal, respectively, three alleged established players in the Islamic State’s extensive virtual networks.¹² As a testament to her support for the Islamic State and its fighters, Thomas married Abu Khalid al-Amriki online and arranged plans to meet the alleged Islamic State fighter Shawn Parson, who was believed to be a Trinidadian, in Syria.¹³ In electronic communications, after Parson said, “u probably want to do Istishadee (martyrdom operations) with me,” Thomas responded, “that would be amazing ... a girl can only wish.”¹⁴

Between February and March 2015, Thomas prepared for her journey to Syria: she obtained a passport, researched indirect routes to Syria by way of Spain and Turkey, acquired a Turkish visa, and purchased plane tickets to fly from Philadelphia International Airport to Barcelona, Spain, on March 29, 2015. A mix of court documents shows that authorities derailed Thomas’ travel plans by conducting a search warrant of her belongings two days before her scheduled departure, seizing her passport and other relevant possessions.¹⁵ Following her arrest, Thomas initially pleaded not guilty.¹⁶ Months later, however, she admitted her culpability with one count of attempting to provide material support to a terrorist organization.¹⁷ For this offense, Thomas faced up to 15 years in prison. At the time, one of her defense attorneys said Thomas “look[ed] forward to putting this behind her and being a mother to her two young children.”¹⁸ Their specific mention of her children is interesting given that a review of literature regarding the sentencing of federal offenders notes that “having dependents (more specifically, dependent children) creates leniency at sentencing, especially for women.”¹⁹

By September 2017, U.S. District Judge Michael Baylson sentenced her to eight years, crediting the time she served while the justice system processed her case. In media coverage of her hearing, it is easy to find instances where news producers ruminate over Thomas’ gender and contextualize her case with clichés about women in terrorism.²⁰ Anecdotally, reports most often cast Thomas as naïve, misled, and out-of-touch with reality. They also suggest that her desire for love and romance drove her to extremism. While problematic, these framing patterns are not wholly surprising as gender-related biases in media coverage of women in terrorism is an established phenomenon.²¹

Arguably more concerning are instances where Thomas’ defense drew on similarly biased tropes about women in extremism to obtain a reduced sentence for their client. Specifically, one article quotes a sentencing memo to the U.S. District Judge by Thomas’ lawyers, Elizabeth Toplin and Kathleen Gaughan, who advocated for a reduced sentence by explaining, “Ms. Thomas was a lonely, depressed, anxiety-ridden mother who spent too much time on the internet ... By attempting to relocate to [Islamic State]-held territory and marry an [Islamic State] fighter, she never gave [the Islamic State] anything of value – except her love.”²² While considering the job of defense attorneys and federal defenders—to fight for the best interests of their client—it is crucial to examine the extent to which gender-linked biases might intentionally or inadvertently seep into the logic and outcome of legal decisions for terrorism-related crimes. Although sentencing guidelines are designed to act as a safeguard against unwarranted considerations regarding a defendant’s personal characteristics, it is fair to question the efficacy of such measures when Thomas’ defense rhetorically instrumentalized her gender.

Examining Broader Trends in the United States

Realistically, the process of measuring the effects of potential gender biases on the judicial proceedings of terrorism cases is easier said than done. In the United States, a range of procedural and logistical considerations complicate the process for punishing terrorism-related offenses at the federal level. Aside from the obvious effects of two federal material support statutes,²³ with guidelines that offer judges some latitude in sentencing, factors like going to trial, facing additional charges, entering plea agreements, and cooperating with authorities can undoubtedly influence the time an individual serves for their crimes. These conditions allow the justice system flexibility in its treatment of vastly different terrorism cases, but make it difficult to impose consistent punishments for each individual. Again, flawed applications of the law that unjustifiably weigh gender are not unique to terrorism cases, but a growing body of evidence, like the case of Thomas, suggests that a concerning relationship exists between the gender of a terrorist offender and the nature of their interactions with the legal system.

A thorough review of Thomas’ case, paired with a comparative analysis of broader trends regarding the nexus of gender and terrorism-related crimes, offers a lens to identify vulnerabilities and refine the legal responses to violent extremism in America. While Thomas pleaded guilty and received an eight-year sentence as punishment, male Islamic State supporters in the United States traditionally face longer sentences for their crimes. According to the Extremism Tracker, a monthly infographic produced by the George Washington University’s Program on Extremism, the average duration for sentenced cases (male and female) in the “Islamic State in America” dataset was 13 years as of summer 2018.²⁴

Although inferences are limited due to the size of the dataset, which includes 87 male cases and just nine female cases of sentenced individuals, further analysis reveals that Thomas was hardly unique in acquiring a shorter-than-average punishment: every woman sentenced in the Program on Extremism’s dataset received less than 13 years. While the average punishment for men amounted to 13.8 years,^a the average period of incarceration for women was only 5.8 years.^{b c}

Returning to Thomas’ case and her corresponding court filings, it is crucial to note that her defense attorneys explicitly urged the court to issue a shorter punishment, asking for a sentence between two and four-and-a-half years to “avoid an unwarranted sentence disparity between Ms. Thomas and other women convicted of [Is-

a The five number summary, plus mean, for women’s sentences in the dataset by months: Minimum: 24, Quartile 1: 26, Quartile 2: 54, Quartile 3: 96, Max: 144, Mean: 70. The five number summary, plus mean, for men’s sentences in the dataset by months: Minimum: 0, Quartile 1: 66, Quartile 2: 120, Quartile 3: 240, Max: 582, Mean: 166.

b Researchers used the Wilcoxon Sign-Rank test after separate histograms of sentence length (in months) by gender revealed that the distributions for men and women were not symmetric. The Wilcoxon Sign-Rank test produced the following results: Test Statistic=191.5, p-value= 0.01198. This outcome suggests a statistically significant difference exists between the sentence lengths of women compared to the sentence lengths of men.

c Compared to individuals (both men and women) that were exclusively guilty of attempting to provide material support to a foreign terrorist organization, and not guilty of any other charges, Thomas received about two years less than the average sentence of approximately 10.3 years (as of summer 2018). The sample size in this category makes it difficult to assess whether this is a statistically significant difference.

lamic State]-related offenses.”²⁵ In the same sentencing memo, which the defense filed in August 2017, her attorneys say, “Ms. Thomas is among a handful of women who have been prosecuted (and sentenced) for [Islamic State]-related crimes between March 1, 2014 and May 8, 2017. These sentences range from two to twelve years’ incarceration, the median sentence being four years.”²⁶ The memo presents the five relevant cases in a table (pictured below) and argues, “Only two of the women above faced charges stemming from conduct similar to that underlying Ms. Thomas’s conviction: Heather Elizabeth Coffman and Daniela Greene. Their sentences must serve as the benchmark for Ms. Thomas’s sentence.”²⁷

Defendant	Personal Background	Statute(s) of Conviction	Circumstances of Conviction	Sentence Imposed
Shannon Maureen Conley	19 at time of arrest, U.S. citizen, nurse’s aide.	18 U.S.C. § 371; 2339B (conspiracy to commit an offense against the U.S., namely, material support to ISIL)	Arrested at airport en route to Syria; desired to provide nursing assistance to ISIL fighters.	Four years’ prison, three years’ supervised release.
Jasminka Ramic	42 at time of arrest, naturalized U.S. citizen, Bosnian immigrant.	18 U.S.C. § 371; 2339B (conspiracy to commit an offense against the U.S., namely, material support to ISIL)	Helped raise money for ISIL and other so-called Islamic terrorist organizations.	Three years’ prison, three years’ supervised release.
Heather Elizabeth Coffman	29 at time of arrest, U.S. citizen, mother.	18 U.S.C. § 1001(a)(2) (false statement re: international terrorism)	Cultivated online, romantic relationships with ISIL fighters in Syria and recruited a foreign national to join ISIL.	Four-and-one-half years’ prison, three years’ supervised release.
Daniela Greene	38 at time of arrest, naturalized U.S. citizen, ex-FBI agent w/top secret security clearance.	18 U.S.C. § 1001(a)(2) (false statement re: international terrorism)	Cultivated romantic relationship with a notorious and well-connected ISIS fighter. Traveled to Syria and married the operative before giving up.	Two years’ prison, three years’ supervised release.
Jaelyn Young	19 at time of arrest, U.S. citizen, college student.	18 U.S.C. § 2339B(a)(1) (material support to a designated terrorist organization)	Arrested at airport en route to Syria along with her boyfriend, both sought to join ISIL.	Twelve years’ prison, 15 years’ supervised release.

Table presented by Thomas’ defense attorneys in the defendant’s sentencing memorandum and request for downward variance

In response to the argument made by Thomas’ defense, the U.S. Attorneys prosecuting Thomas pushed back on the defense’s logic for a shorter sentence, noting that the cases the defense cited as similar to Thomas’ case did not involve convictions under 18 U.S.C. § 2339B, the statute regarding material support to foreign terrorist organizations. Rather than comparing Thomas to other female defendants with terrorism-related cases, the government explains, “well-rounded analysis of convictions and sentences under 18 U.S.C. § 2339B reveals that terrorism defendants in Thomas’s position do generally receive lengthy sentences of incarceration.”²⁸

Cases like Heather Coffman, a Virginia resident who pleaded guilty to making a false statement involving international terrorism,²⁹ demonstrate similar trends regarding the strategic use of gender framing in terrorism cases. In essence, Coffman shared her support for the Islamic State online and encouraged others to fight for the group, then provided false information to federal agents investigating her behavior.³⁰ In a sentencing memo produced by Coffman’s defense,³¹ which asked for a lesser sentence, her attorney noted that her criminal activity “reflects a young, naïve woman who got caught up in a cause.” In discussing her relationship with fellow Islamic State sympathizers online, the memo noted that Coffman had “always been attracted to ‘bad boys.’” The defense also explained that Coffman was drawn to the Islamic State “like the forbidden fruit” and said that she “became obsessed with [the Islamic State]

like she had become obsessed with the preppy and goth trends.”

By way of contrast, it is interesting to note that the government’s corresponding document about sentencing,³² which was authored by the prosecuting attorneys, addressed the mobilization of women in a completely different manner. The prosecutors argue, “this is an extremely serious offense where the defendant aligned herself with an extremely violent terrorist organization and tried to facilitate others’ attempts to join” the Islamic State in Syria. In a concluding paragraph, the document quoted Jayne Huckerby, a subject-matter expert, who said, “[the Islamic State] has been on a very strong female recruitment drive, and women are joining [the Islamic State] for a variety of reasons, many of which are the same as men.” The attorneys go on to explain that “Coffman is not an outlier. Other women must be deterred from helping terrorist groups via the internet.”

The differing appraisals of Coffman’s contributions to the Islamic State, which were supportive and facilitative in nature, exemplify the difficulty in discerning reality and responding proportionally to the participation of women in terrorism. One analysis of female jihadis in the United States finds that women can make meaningful contributions to the efforts of violent extremist groups without engaging in violence.³³ In this capacity, functions such as cooking, smuggling, teaching, fundraising, childbearing, and proselytizing contribute to the morale, strength, and survival of an organization. In the limited purview of the Islamic State in U.S. cases, the gender of a defendant factors into some legal assessments about the severity of an individual’s crime and even discussions regarding sufficient punishment for terrorism-related offenses. In order to examine the extent to which this sliver of evidence reflects broader trends, it is useful to draw from a larger dataset.

Analysis of data assembled by the University of Maryland’s National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) adds meaningful, quantitative insights that further contextualize the discussion of gender and violent extremism.³⁴ Specifically, the Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States (PIRUS) dataset “contains deidentified individual-level information on the backgrounds, attributes, and radicalization process of over 1,800 violent and non-violent extremists who adhere to far right, far left, Islamist, or single issue ideologies in the United States” from 1948-2016.³⁵ The sample includes cases of people who radicalized to the point of committing ideologically motivated illegal acts, joining a designated terrorist organization, or associating with an extremist organization.

The PIRUS dataset, comprised of 1,685 male profiles and 182 female profiles, categorizes and documents case-specific details such as the severity of an individual’s criminal activity, as well as their role in and membership to a group. Although men and women differ in their numerical rates of participation, the precise nature of their respective activities share some critical features. A side-by-side comparison of the results for radicalized men and women, proportional to their genders, allow researchers to identify relevant similarities and flag instances where the experiences of extremists diverge. Relative to their genders, men and women striving to conduct plots demonstrate similar rates in their acquisition and possession of related materials, and attempts to carry out a plan. In fact, the data shows that 26 percent of men in the dataset and 26 percent of women successfully executed plots. Both demographics were equally prone to hide or conceal plot-related information, and the same proportion of men and women shared a connection with extremist groups prior to engaging in ideologically motivated

radical behaviors.

Although men conspired or conducted violence against others at slightly higher rates, including armed robbery and assault with a deadly weapon, women participated in violence against property, including arson, and acts like illegal protesting and criminal trespassing proportionally more than their male counterparts. A similar percentage of men and women sought training experience or offered material support to a violent extremist organization. Both showed similar rates for other actions including white-collar crimes, threatening others, and recruiting others for violent groups, and even non-criminal activity. Even with marginal, gender-linked caveats in mind, the evidence broadly suggests that radicalized men and women are not so different in the severity of their crimes.

Despite some striking parallels between radicalized American men and women, evidence indicates that these demographics receive different treatment by authorities. For example, authorities arrested and indicted approximately 73 percent of men in the PIRUS dataset, compared to 66 percent of women, for ideologically motivated crimes. This factor likely adds to the disparity in conviction rates between the genders, as courts convict about 38 percent of men compared to 29 percent of women. Although the precise causes require further examination, the PIRUS dataset suggests that the average rate for arrest, indictment, and conviction differs between males and females. Though myriad factors likely contribute to these results, not exclusively gender, the phenomenon requires further discussion beyond legal responses to radicalized individuals in the United States.

Transcending Borders and Conflicts

First and foremost, assumptions that women are naïve or duped into supporting political violence are not confined to the United States. A policy brief by the PRIO Centre on Gender, Peace, and Security notes that high-profile court cases in Western Europe show a similar pattern where female defendants received lesser punishments than the average sentences in their respective countries.³⁶ “This seems to indicate a potential tendency towards women not being prosecuted for membership in [the Islamic State] to the same extent that men are.” Moreover, the brief argues that the effects of this inclination to make light of women’s involvement is vital to recognize, as preconceived notions about gender and conflict inform political and judicial responses to terrorism, potentially creating vulnerable security gaps.

Sensationalized misnomers like “Nazi bride,” “black-widow,” and “jihadi bride” flow across media reports and skew perceptions as they enter discourse surrounding women’s participation in extremism.³⁷ In both public opinion and a court of law, this vocabulary may paint women as mere accessories to, rather than perpetrators, facilitators, and supporters of violent extremism, reinforcing narratives that diminish the culpability of an offender. In Germany, the case of Beate Zschäpe, a member of the Nationalist Socialist Underground, serves as one illustrative example. On trial for plotting 10 murders, two bombings, and 15 robberies in a grisly series of racially motivated attacks, Zschäpe’s defense attorneys portrayed her as “merely the submissive lover of two murderous men.”³⁸ In a separate case in the United Kingdom, Farhana Ahmed pleaded guilty to four counts of encouraging terrorism and disseminating terrorist publications but was spared jail time after her lawyer argued she was a “good mother” who was led astray. After handing down a suspended sentence, the judge told Ahmed, “the sooner you are returned to your

children, the better for all concerned.”³⁹

Problematic and inconsistent approaches to women fighters and supporters spread beyond the realm of domestic terrorism cases, extending to full-blown insurgencies and civil wars. Some of the starkest examples of differential treatment of men and women in violent political groups come from Disarmament, Demobilization and Rehabilitation (DDR) programs, which are conventionally designed to separate people from extreme networks. In Sierra Leone, for example, eligibility for entry into the DDR program was contingent on presenting a weapon to exchange, effectively barring women who served as spies, logisticians, or care workers whose operational responsibilities did not include wielding guns.⁴⁰ DDR program language referred to Sierra Leonean women soldiers as “wives” or “camp followers,” ignoring the broader operational roles they played in the war.⁴¹

Just as it is difficult to draw a line between support roles and operational roles, the division between victims and perpetrators is not always clear-cut. In some cases, women forced into a group come to embrace their position as supporters or violent actors. In *Women and the War on Boko Haram*, Hilary Matfess, reflecting on interviews with female affiliates of the group, notes that female members of the sect often claimed to be ignorant of the organization’s use of violence to deflect accountability.⁴² Regardless, political, military, and humanitarian responses to Boko Haram fail to acknowledge gender-linked complexities in a serious manner. Matfess explains that “this oversight not only prevents effective counter-insurgency strategy, but also puts women at a disadvantage in the post-conflict era of demobilisation and reintegration.”⁴³

Numerous studies and analyses show that similar interlocking factors draw men and women to terrorism, including ideology, personal ties, discrimination, and a desire for belonging.⁴⁴ Overarching discrepancies in the responses to men and women’s participation in violent extremism point to a worrying pattern that indicates that political and legal systems are not applied equally, even when individual paths to radicalization and actions in support of extremist groups are either comparable or complementary.⁴⁵ Ultimately, noting the existence and prevalence of this broader phenomenon is not to say that all women with alleged ties to extremist groups are guilty of grave offenses and deserve harsh prosecution or robust deradicalization programming. In the case of the Islamic State, many women connected with the movement are indeed victims of coercion and force as a result of a strategic and systematic campaign of sexual violence.⁴⁶ These experiences warrant responses that make appropriate considerations for the conditions of an individual’s membership. However, blanketly perpetuating a narrative of female victimhood ignores the agency of women like Keonna Thomas, the Philadelphia woman who expressly and repeatedly proclaimed her intent to advance the Islamic State agenda and planned to travel to Islamic State-controlled territory.⁴⁷

Those advocating for more just responses to participation in violent extremist groups must weigh the implications of such findings in recommendations for enduring challenges, namely the processing of alleged Islamic State members on trial in Iraq. At present, it is unclear how gender disparities are playing out on the ground. A recent news article about the notoriously short Iraqi terrorism trials notes that “in rare cases, individuals have been returned to their home countries, such as a group of four Russian women ... after Iraqi authorities concluded they had been tricked into coming to Islamic State territory.”⁴⁸ Without in-depth knowledge of the cases,

it is impossible to discern the authenticity of each woman's claims, but the narrative is consistent with the overarching argument that female supporters are treated as less responsible for their involvement in terrorist groups.

There are serious concerns about Iraq's legal response, such as lack of due process and harsh sentencing for men and women.⁴⁹ At the same time, recommendations from human rights organizations that sidestep the roles and motivations of female supporters can create counterproductive practices for dealing with women in the group. One Human Rights Watch researcher makes the case that Islamic State trials are unjustly harsh in their treatment of women and implores Iraqi authorities "to prioritize the prosecution of those who committed the most serious crimes."⁵⁰ The article suggests, "for those suspected only of membership in [the Islamic State] without evidence of any other serious crime, the authorities should consider alternatives to prosecution," pointing to women who receive harsh sentences "for what appears to be marriage to an [Islamic State] member or a coerced border crossing" as instances where Iraqi courts should focus on other priorities.⁵¹ While likely well-meaning and pragmatic in processing the deluge of cases facing the Iraqi government, this recommendation will be unlikely to address entrenched problems at the nexus of gender and prosecution for terrorism-related offenses.

Implications

In the United States, authorities have already released some of the women serving short sentences for Islamic State-related crimes while others are nearing the end of their time in prison. This is worrisome given the lack of infrastructure to support these individuals, as few formal deradicalization and reintegration initiatives exist. Furthermore, if the criminal justice system struggles to recognize instances where extremist women pose credible threats and fails to facilitate meaningful interventions and rehabilitation for such offenders, it is hard to know if efforts to provide an alternative to legal recourse will prove fruitful. A powerful illustration of this problem is the abovementioned case of Heather Coffman, whose defense attorney once compared her commitment to the Islamic State to past interest in "preppy and goth trends." After serving a four-and-a-half year sentence, authorities released Coffman from prison. According to a news report, Coffman's views "had scarcely moderated" during her incarceration, and she resumed posting pro-Islamic State materials and ultra-conservative content online.⁵² As the cases of female jihadis in the United States suggest, differen-

tial treatment sets a counterproductive precedent for gender and extremism; this response could allow women to face fewer consequences for their contributions to terrorist groups or slip through the cracks when they need support.

While inconsistencies are most apparent in the legal system's treatment of female terrorists, the roots of this problem extends far beyond defense attorneys, prosecutors, and judges. News media that sensationalize women in terrorism, or exoticize them as transgressive or misled enigmas, misguide public opinion. Academics who ignore gender in their studies of radicalization and recruitment dynamics produce incomplete analyses of current trends. Policy-makers who exclusively cast women as victims of conflict create blind-spots in strategies to counter terrorism and violent extremism. Concurrently, the efforts of humanitarian and human rights groups struggle to grapple with situations where women are both perpetrators and victims of violence. Consequently, the responsibility for creating more equitable and practical approaches to address violent extremism lies with every sector. By comprehending how gender dynamics weave into the fabric of different organizations, including those that relegate women to support functions, entities tasked with preventing terrorism can more adeptly and sustainably confront violent extremist networks in their entirety.

From arrest to sentencing to post-conflict reintegration and disarmament programming, evidence suggests that governments tend to be less responsive to women in terrorism compared to their male counterparts. Such disparities in treatment have numerous consequences for justice, security, and the prevention of violent extremism and subsequent conflict. Equal and proportional applications of the law require courts to confront stereotypes regarding gender, race, religion, and citizenship, among other factors. In the processing of alleged extremists, the criminal justice system must transcend facile gender stereotypes and come to a better understanding of how both men and women engage with violent extremism. Falling back on tropes of female victimhood, rather than applying the law on a case-by-case basis, has real implications for processing potentially threatening actors. When it comes to terrorism cases, bias in the judgment of women offenders undermines the promise of uniform treatment under the law and poses potential threats to national security. Regardless of gender, disparate treatment of terrorist offenders is a disservice to defendants, their communities, the criminal justice system, and broader efforts to confront violent extremism in the United States and abroad. **CTC**

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From Caliphate to Caves: The Islamic State's Asymmetric War in Northern Iraq

By Derek Henry Flood

Cave and tunnel complexes, which the Islamic State started constructing in the Hamrin mountain region well before the collapse of the caliphate, have become key to the group's insurgent campaign in northern Iraq. With a new government yet to form following parliamentary elections in May 2018, there is a risk that focus in Baghdad will ebb on clearing out these mountain safe havens straddling Kirkuk, Salah ad-Din, and Diyala governorates.

Cave and tunnel complexes that the Islamic State started constructing well before the collapse of the caliphate have become a core element of the group's asymmetric war fighting strategy. In the Hamrin mountain region, an area that straddles Diyala, Salah ad-Din, and Kirkuk governorates, the Islamic State has put considerable effort into constructing vast rural tunnel networks with weapons depots and foodstuffs well ensconced in both natural and man-made caves.¹ The cave complexes, insulated with USAID tarps once intended for Iraqi internally displaced persons, are being discovered throughout this region.² The caves serve as rugged redoubts from which the group wages guerilla war against the Iraqi state and its affiliated militias. As Iraqi and local ground forces supply geolocations, Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR) has been carrying out airstrikes aimed at dismantling the Hamrin tunnel network along with outlying bunker positions to smash the infrastructure undergirding the insurgency.³

This article is based in part on the author's field reporting in Iraq in early 2018. Iraqi and pan-Arab news outlets have also reported on the ongoing counterinsurgency operations in the Hamrin Mountains. It is an area where al-Qa`ida in Iraq (AQI) in the last decade had a significant freedom of movement, even with a large U.S. troop presence in Iraq. It is now a significant safe haven for the Islamic State.⁴

In their efforts to flush out Islamic State militants, Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) and Shi`a militiamen incorporated under the Hashd al-Shaabi umbrella have been reaching the Hamrin foothills by Humvee and Toyota Hilux and then dismounting to scale higher elevations on foot while backed up by Iraqi Army helicopters.⁵ Sunni Arab tribal militias, known as Hashd al-Asha`iri, are also involved in security efforts around the Hamrin Mountains. In contrast to

many Shi`a Arab fighters in Hashd al-Shaabi militias, Hashd al-Asha`iri are most often of local origin and allied to regional tribal leaders; they provide both indigenous intelligence and credibility in insurgency-affected districts of federally controlled northern governorates where fighters from the Shi`a-majority south are viewed as outsiders while also enlarging the security footprint of the ISF and the Hashd al-Shaabi. The current conflict in the greater Hamrin region is primarily a shadow war with little direct kinetic contact between opposing forces. Holding the high ground, jihadi militants have been able to retreat deeper into the hills as ISF and Hashd al-Shaabi expeditionary forces have approached at a distance from the lowlands.⁶

Difficult Terrain

The topography of the Hamrin range, a ripple of the Greater Zagros Mountains located in western Iran, demarcates a natural boundary between northern and central Iraq.⁷ The range runs along a diagonal axis from northwest to southeast. Its northern reaches begin in the northeastern part of Tikrit district in Salah ad-Din Governorate. It then runs along the southwestern periphery of Al-Hawija and Daquq districts in Kirkuk Governorate (see Map 1) before reaching its southern limit at Lake Hamrin in Diyala Governorate's Khanaqin district (see Map 2). On October 7, 2017, ISF and Hashd al-Shaabi announced that they had gained control of the mountains just two days after the liberation of Hawija.⁸ Although Iraqi state and paramilitary forces may have temporarily cleared the area, militants who had been using the Hamrin for logistics as well as weapons storage and disbursement quickly reemerged. Via its Amaq News Agency propaganda arm^a in June 2018, the Islamic State featured masked caravan members living a semi-nomadic existence in the Hamrin.^b A notable component of Baghdad's interest in clearing the Hamrin of militants is its desire to open up new trade links with Tehran after Kurdish forces were pushed out of Kirkuk in October 2017. The al-Abadi government has sought to secure the Hamrin mountain region and the adjacent Lake Hamrin basin in northeastern Diyala Governorate in order to transport crude oil by truck from Kirkuk's abundant fields to the Iranian refinery of Kermanshah via the border gate of Khanaqin.⁹ Furthermore, Iran's petroleum minister Bijan Namdar Zangeneh stated that Tehran desires a pipeline to be constructed through this region from Kirkuk directly to Iranian territory.¹⁰

The difficult-to-reach Hamrin mountain terrain is being used

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a The Amaq News Agency is an official node of the Islamic State's media arm. See Daniel Milton, *Pulling Back the Curtain: An Inside Look at the Islamic State's Media Organization* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2018).

b Islamic State militants are also active in the nearby Makhoul Mountains, located between Baiji and Shirqat due west of the Tigris River in Salah ad-Din Governorate.



Map 1: Northeastern Iraq (Rowan Technology)

by Islamic State militants to train and organize attacks in nearby areas of northern Iraq.^{11c} Islamic State commanders and fighters have maintained training camps along the Hamrin range to learn and maintain the skills of their jihadi recruits.¹² Additionally, Islamic State fighters have reportedly built medical facilities in the mountains to treat their wounded.¹³ Vulnerable oil infrastructure in the fields abutting the Hamrin range is often a target of the group's asymmetric attacks.¹⁴ The Islamic State employs sabotage tactics meant to inflame issues in Iraq that have remained unresolved since 2003. For example, on May 24, 2018, militants damaged power lines in the village of Barimah located north of the Bajji-Kirkuk road, which resulted in cutting off power to the Sunni Arab majority cities of Hawija and Tikrit in the midst of a heat wave.¹⁵ Public anger over power shortages^d has been further stoked by Islamic State mil-

itants sabotaging energy infrastructure in the Kirkuk-Diyala-Salah ad Din belt to further widen the rift between average Iraqis and the central government.¹⁶ The attack on an otherwise significant village like Barimah signifies that the Islamic State cells that sought refuge in the Qori Chai river valley northeast of the Hamrin Mountains are now regularly launching operations out of this rugged area on an assortment of vulnerable targets in Kirkuk's under-policed hinterlands. Militants launch nighttime attacks in villages where the Federal Police presence is either minimal or nonexistent.¹⁷

Digging In

The Islamic State's construction of cave and tunnel complexes in northern Iraq began well before the demise of the Islamic State's territorial caliphate, with many completed before that time.¹⁸ The Hamrin have a history as an insurgent redoubt. AQI, along with Ansar al-Sunna, and Jaish Rijal al-Tariqa al-Naqshabandiyya, used the mountains in a chaotic post-2003 Iraq in a manner analogous to the Islamic State's current use.¹⁹ ISF and Hasd al-Shaabi brigades have discovered tunnels nestled deep in the mountains with generator-rigged electrical systems and makeshift water lines that they torch once they have been discovered and inspected²⁰ to discourage the jihadis from returning to the area.²¹

Accurate ground intelligence by indigenous forces in locating the tunnels that are naturally concealed by the Hamrin range's geo-

c Islamic State fighters who conduct attacks in Kirkuk Governorate's settled areas have visually dissimulated into Iraqi society by shaving their beards and dressing like ordinary citizens while no longer traveling in convoys with brash Islamic State insignias. Mustafa Saadoun, "Islamic State awakens sleeper cells in Iraq's Kirkuk," *Al-Monitor*, July 5, 2018.

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Map 2: Diyala province, Iraq (Rowan Technology)

logic formations is vital in coordinating supporting airstrikes. As an indication of the Islamic State's longer-term planning, in February 2018, the ISF discovered a tunnel complex 20 kilometers south of Baquba, the seat of Diyala Governorate, outfitted with refrigerators with several months' worth of food and washing machines all powered by a hidden solar grid above ground.²² The meticulousness with which the tunneling is carried out and the network's food stores and ammunition caches indicate that the Islamic State laid the groundwork to sustain a protracted guerilla war while world attention focused on the Stalingrad-like battle for Mosul to the northwest. Well before Mosul fell to the ISF, Islamic State fighters were already launching attacks from their Hamrin hideouts in Diyala and Salah ad-Din governorates.²³

In fact, the Islamic State's tunneling efforts in some parts of Iraq long predated the battle for Mosul. In Diyala Governorate in particular, the Islamic State reverted to insurgency soon after its rapid territorial conquest of northern Iraq.²⁴ Diyala was declared—at least publicly—entirely freed of Islamic State control by Staff Lieutenant General Abdulmir al-Zaidi on January 26, 2015, after the militants had been holding territory there for approximately six months.²⁵ Likely calculating that its grip there was tenuous, the Islamic State bored tunnels in the Diyala sector of the Hamrin range as it occupied towns in the Lake Hamrin basin²⁶ in the second half of 2014. In May 2015, Saraya Ansar al-Aqeedah, a Shi'a militia group under

the banner of Hashd al-Shaabi, posted a video to its social media of Islamic State tunnels they were discovering in Diyala only months after ISF had declared the territory liberated.²⁷

From the Mountains, a Mounting Insurgency

The tunnel and cave complexes formed part of wider preparations for the Islamic State's insurgency. As the group was cleared at the village level—at least officially—in the governorates spanning the belt from Diyala to Ninewa connecting Iran to Syria between January 2015 and October 2017,²⁸ the militants left booby-trapped homes in their wake, making numerous villages extremely perilous²⁹ for returning IDPs as well as ISF not properly trained in high-risk ordinance removal. This IED-laying tactic has proven effective in making the region difficult to pacify. This security vacuum allowed the Islamic State the space to revert quickly to insurgent tactics in Diyala while it was busy establishing administrative control in Mosul and other key cities elsewhere in Iraqi lands it had seized. The strategy the Islamic State had already implemented in Diyala was replicated in northern districts of Salah ad-Din and southern districts of Kirkuk once the key towns of Shirqat and Hawija were declared freed of Islamic State control in early fall of 2017.³⁰

In many ways, Diyala has acted as an ethno-sectarian microcosm for security dynamics for the whole of Iraq. Its proximity to Baghdad, as well as the Iranian frontier, made it a priority for the

al-Abadi government and Hashd al-Shaabi's Iranian sponsors to control. Diyala was, for a time, the easternmost declared *wilaya*, or province, of the then-incipient caliphate project. It was the first significant area the Islamic State lost to state and sub-state forces in Iraq. Today, militants employ the Hamrin Mountains as a logistical lifeline stretching from Diyala to Kirkuk via Salah ad-Din.³¹

In July 2018, former Iraqi Minister of Interior Baqir Jabr al-Zubeidi said that he estimated the Islamic State controlled some 75 villages in Kirkuk, Salah ad-Din, and Diyala.³² These areas were never entirely taken under full control by the central government after the liberation of Hawija in early October 2017. In early 2018, frontlines hardened between the Islamic State and Federal Police in a string of agricultural villages southwest of Daquq town in Kirkuk Governorate.³³

This past summer, vulnerable populations faced regular attacks in Kirkuk Governorate's southern sub-districts.³⁴ Religious minorities such as the Sufis³⁵ and followers of the secretive syncretic Kakai faith³⁶ along with local Sunni Arabs the Islamic State deems collaborators for cooperating with ISF³⁷ continue to be at great risk from attacks by jihadis based in the low-slung Hamrin Mountains and the Qori Chai river valley, which begins near the tiny villages of Dabaj and Qaryat Tamur to the north of the Hamrin Mountains. The Qori Chai was described to the author as a "militant highway" whereby jihadis can traverse from the plains below the Hamrin northward to attack cities and towns in Kirkuk Governorate, which begins near the tiny villages of Dabaj and Qaryat Tamur to the north of the Hamrin Mountains.³⁸

The Islamic State has been mounting regular assaults on pro-Baghdad Sunni Arab tribal militias across Kirkuk, Diyala, and Salah ad-Din governorates.³⁹ In areas like Dibis district in northern Kirkuk Governorate that had been largely secured by Peshmerga until late 2017, the Islamic State claims to be launching nighttime raids against poorly funded Hashd al-Asha'iri encampments.⁴⁰ The Islamic State's assaults on minorities is patterned after past AQI tactics whereby vulnerable communities in the vicinity of the Hamrin Mountains and Lake Hamrin basin perceive themselves to be insufficiently protected by ISF, and ethno-sectarian tensions are further exacerbated as a result.⁴¹

A Delicate Political Environment

The ongoing religio-political violence is taking place against the backdrop of the widely disputed May 12, 2018, parliamentary election, which saw Muqtada al-Sadr's Sairoon Alliance receive the highest vote share. Sairoon ran on a nationalist platform focused on a long hoped for anti-corruption drive and the delivery of services to ordinary Iraqis in a coalition comprised primarily of the Sadrist Movement and Hizb al-Shwiyu'i al-Iraqi (Iraqi Communist Party). Sairoon then controversially formed a post-election alliance with the pro-Tehran Fatah alliance of Hadi al-Amiri, the leader of al-Badr organization, which forms the backbone of the Hashd al-Shaabi militia.^e

When the al-Sadr-led Sairoon and al-Amiri's Fatah allied themselves for a time in June 2018⁴² as a matter of sheer pragmatism within Iraq's fissured political spectrum, questions arose about the future of Hashd al-Shaabi. Two of Iraq's most powerful men have

starkly divergent views on the umbrella organization's core task and purpose. This has potential implication for counterinsurgency efforts in the Hamrin Mountains given that the Hashd al-Shaabi have played a key role in these operations.

Al-Sadr espouses comparatively broader Iraqi nationalism blended with local Iraqi Shi'a identity politics while al-Amiri and other Shi'a militia leaders under Fatah have considerable fealty to Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali al-Khamenei and the revolutionary ideology of Wilayat al-Faqih ('Guardianship of Jurist').⁴³ In the months since the election, the various blocs—primarily Sairoon, Fatah, Nasr, and former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's State of Law Coalition—vying for power have failed to form a new, effective coalition government.

The political turmoil extends far beyond Baghdad. In post-KRG Kirkuk, the allegations of electoral fraud were perhaps most acute. There have been demonstrations from Arab and Turkmen communities alleging irregularities and demanding a recount⁴⁴ after the late Iraqi president Jalal Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan won the largest share of the Kirkuk vote even though Asayish^f and Peshmerga forces withdrew from the city and the bulk of the governorate in mid-October 2017 following a reported deal between the Talabani family and Major General Qassem Soleimani, commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' Quds Force.⁴⁵

The ongoing political stalemate in Baghdad coupled with anti-corruption protests in Iraq's Shi'a-majority southern governorates⁴⁶ has already, inevitably, diverted some focus away from the Hamrin operations as forces ranging from the elite Counter Terror Service to Hashd al-Shaabi's Badr Organization have been dispatched to Basra to protect infrastructure and disperse protesters.⁴⁷ Lacking the same visceral, unifying existential threat the territorial caliphate once posed to Iraqi Shi'a identity, the *raison d'être* for some of the most prominent pro-Iranian Hashd al-Shaabi leaders has shifted from war-fighting in northern and western Iraq toward an increased focus on evolving political and economic interests.⁴⁸ Although ISF, Hashd al-Shaabi, and Hashd al-Asha'iri⁴⁹ brigades have continued counterinsurgency operations in the Hamrin Mountains and other contiguous districts of northern Iraq, the current febrile political environment risks deprioritizing the fight against remaining Islamic State cells in the Hamrin Mountains.

Conclusion

Political turmoil in Baghdad risks taking the focus of Iraqi political leaders away from clearing militants from the Hamrin mountain range, which has emerged as key redoubt for Islamic State fighters and a launching pad for the group's insurgency in northern Iraq. Baghdad lacks a coherent strategy for dealing with militants hiding in the depths of the Hamrin and nearby Makhoul Mountains, the Lake Hamrin basin, and the craggy Qori Chai river valley northeast of the Hamrin Mountains. It is in these remote areas and this difficult terrain that the jihadis have survived to fight another day in a battlespace far less familiar to their opponents. As political elites in Baghdad and Najaf jockey to form a new government, the

e Fatah is essentially a political extension of the pro-Iranian wing of the Hashd al-Shaabi militia network.

f In contrast to the Peshmerga who function as the KRG's forward military force, the General Security Directorate operating under the KRG's Ministry of Interior, known as the Asayish, is responsible for security and intelligence gathering regarding terrorism and other threats to the wider Iraqi Kurdish-controlled region. See "General Security (Asayish)," Kurdistan Region Security Council website.

still-serving al-Abadi government's low-intensity war is making little headway.

In a further possible distraction to tackling militants in the Hamrin Mountains, ISF and Hashd al-Shaabi are also contending with a burgeoning protest movement railing against endemic

corruption and power shortages in cities across the underserved southern governorates.⁵⁰ The stakes are high. If the Islamic State continues to strengthen its position in the Hamrin Mountains, its insurgency could spread wider across Iraq's federally administered northern governorates. **CTC**

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