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FEATURE ARTICLE

## A Hollow Victory in Syria?

The high risk of jihadi revival in  
Deir ez-Zor's Euphrates River Valley

HASSAN HASSAN

A VIEW FROM THE CT FOXHOLE

## Shaun Greenough

CASE STRATEGY AND MENTOR  
SUPERVISOR, THE UNITY INITIATIVE

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#### FROM THE EDITOR

In Syria, the Islamic State has now been reduced to a few vanishing pockets in Deir ez-Zor's Middle Euphrates River Valley as a result of two separate military offensives on opposite sides of the river by Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and forces loyal to the Assad regime. But while Deir ez-Zor has now been essentially liberated from the Islamic State, securing and stabilizing the region will likely prove much harder. In our cover article, Hassan Hassan writes the "long period it took the overstretched SDF to liberate the east side of the Euphrates afforded the Islamic State time to create sleeper cells." He argues the fact that the west side is again under Assad regime control will likely provide opportunities to both the Islamic State and the al-Qa`ida offshoot Hayat Tahrir al-Sham to tap into local Sunni anger to rebuild their operations. Hassan warns there will be even more opportunities for jihadis to rebound if the Assad regime exploits what will likely be a vacuum left by soon-to-depart U.S. forces to take control of the areas liberated by the SDF. All this, he warns, creates a very real risk that the border region between Syria and Iraq could emerge as a long-term threat to global security, just like the border area between Pakistan and Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban.

Our interview is with Shaun Greenough, the Case Strategy and Mentor Supervisor at The Unity Initiative (TUI), a specialist intervention consultancy based in the United Kingdom that focuses on rehabilitating individuals convicted of terrorist offenses and tackling absolutist mindsets in the wider community. Greenough previously served in a variety of counterterrorism roles including managing aspects of the U.K. police investigation into the 2006 transatlantic airline plot.

Major Stephen Hummel, Colonel F. John Burpo, and Brigadier General James Bonner, the Commanding General of the U.S. Army's 20th CBRNE Command, warn there is a high risk that profit-minded suppliers within vast, transnational IED networks may in the future expand into WMD proliferation. They write "the convergence of these two seemingly separate networks does not mean that an IED facilitation network will suddenly market WMD, rather that non-state actors could employ these networks to gather the knowledge, people, materials, finances, and infrastructure required for WMD development and employment." Ross Dayton assesses the threat posed by the ELN terrorist group, which in January 2019 carried out an apparent suicide bombing on the national police academy in Bogotá, Colombia, that killed over 20 police cadets. "The ELN now operates in 12 Venezuela states with virtual impunity under the Maduro government," he writes, allowing "ELN fighters to escape the jurisdiction of Colombian security forces and exploit opportunities for illicit financing and recruitment."

Paul Cruickshank, Editor in Chief

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Cover: U.S. Army vehicles support the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in Hajin, in the Deir ez-Zor province, eastern Syria, on December 15, 2018. (Delil Souleiman/AFP/Getty Images)

# A Hollow Victory Over the Islamic State in Syria? The High Risk of Jihadi Revival in Deir ez-Zor's Euphrates River Valley

By Hassan Hassan

**As a result of military offensives on opposite sides of the Euphrates River by Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the Assad regime, the Islamic State has now been all but territorially defeated in the Middle Euphrates River Valley. While the area has now been liberated from the Islamic State, securing and stabilizing the region will likely prove much harder. There is a very great risk of a jihadi revival in a region with a geography that is difficult terrain for counterinsurgents. The long period it took the overstretched SDF to liberate the east side of the Euphrates afforded the Islamic State time to create sleeper cells. Additionally, the fact that the west of the river is now under Assad regime control and the possibility that the whole region will fall under regime control now that the United States has announced it is pulling troops out of Syria will likely provide opportunities for both the Islamic State and the al-Qa`ida offshoot Hayat Tahrir al-Sham to tap into local Sunni anger to rebuild their operations in Deir ez-Zor. If they manage to do so, the region could emerge as a jihadi safe haven that threatens Iraq, Syria, the wider region, and global security.**

**N**ow that the Islamic State has been territorially defeated in its last significant safe haven in the Middle Euphrates Valley in Deir ez-Zor, attention is turning to securing and stabilizing the area. Drawing on extensive communications with local residents in Deir ez-Zor, U.S. officials involved in coalition efforts, SDF commanders, local citizen journalists, and tribal figures among other sources, this article argues there is a high risk of a significant jihadi revival in the area.

Removing the Islamic State from Deir ez-Zor was always going to be a significant challenge, especially because unlike in Iraq, the United States has had to work exclusively with a non-state actor to liberate, secure, and stabilize territory that had been seized from the Islamic State. By the summer of 2017, that force, the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), had expelled the Islamic

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State from much of northeastern Syria and reached its second center in Raqqa.<sup>1</sup> At that point, the SDF had already become stretched to the limit.<sup>a</sup> The Kurdish YPG, or the People's Protection Units, was operating farther away from its strongholds in the north and thus relying heavily on U.S. firepower to drive the group out of the city.<sup>2</sup>

The situation for the SDF was further complicated as the U.S.-led coalition advanced south to the governorate of Deir ez-Zor, the final major battleground against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, because it is the only province in eastern Syria that has no indigenous Kurdish communities. The SDF's limited capabilities—in terms of manpower, training and local knowledge—allowed jihadis to survive and melt into the local population.<sup>3</sup> It also caused the battle to drag on for twice as long as the fight in Mosul, providing the Islamic State with more time to prepare for a future insurgency and terrorism campaign by establishing sleeper cells.<sup>4</sup>

The slow campaign against the Islamic State in northeastern Syria by the U.S.-backed coalition also allowed the Assad regime to get a 'head start' in the race to 'liberate' Deir ez-Zor, with pro-Assad forces back in control of the west side of the Euphrates River by late 2017. As this article will outline, the return of regime control has provided fertile conditions for the Islamic State and the al-Qa`ida-linked Hayat Tahrir al-Sham to tap into local Sunni anger to rebuild their operations in the region.<sup>b</sup>

Finally, the announced pull-out of U.S. troops from Syria<sup>5</sup> will only make it more difficult to secure and stabilize the area because U.S. disengagement risks the entire region falling back under Assad control. It risks creating even more fertile conditions for a jihadi revival.

## The Islamic State's Last Territorial Stand

On September 5, 2017, the Assad regime backed by relentless Russian firepower broke a siege that the Islamic State had imposed around Deir ez-Zor's provincial capital for nearly three years.<sup>6</sup> Forces loyal to the government had maintained control of several neighborhoods inside the city, against all odds. At its zenith in 2014-2015, the Islamic State had been in control of the rest of the province to the south, west, and east of the garrison, in addition to

a A senior U.S. official involved in the fight against the Islamic State told the author that the Kurdish leaders of the SDF were not keen to fight in Deir ez-Zor, especially after the grinding fight in Raqqa. Such reluctance could be explained by the lack of interest in a province regarded as outside the Kurdish ancestral homelands, often referred to as Rojava, but the Kurdish-led force ultimately agreed to lead the fight in Deir ez-Zor. Author interview, U.S. official, March 2018.

b Deir ez-Zor was a key stronghold for the HTS predecessor group Jabhat al-Nusra from 2012 to 2014, when the Islamic State defeated it and drove it out of the province. Aron Lund, "Syria's al-Qaeda Wing Searches for a Strategy," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 18, 2014.

Hasakah and Raqqa to its north. Despite being equipped back then with an army of suicide bombers, the group had failed to drive out the regime forces from this critical part of eastern Syria. This had resulted in a stalemate, the regime unable to break the siege despite repeated attempts.

The siege was broken after Damascus was able to turn its full attention to the province, with intensive air cover from Russia and heavy ground support from Iranian-backed militias.<sup>7</sup> The regime and its allies benefited from reduced fighting elsewhere in the country due to de-escalation agreements brokered by Russia, Iran, and Turkey, which enabled it to allocate resources to the battle in Deir ez-Zor Governorate.<sup>8</sup> Four days after the Russian-backed forces broke the siege, the U.S.-backed SDF hastily launched a campaign to clear the Islamic State from Deir ez-Zor, even though the battle in Raqqa was still ongoing.<sup>9</sup>

After the siege was lifted in the town of Deir ez-Zor, the Assad regime's campaign there was concluded in just two months.<sup>10</sup> Given the long, grinding campaign by the SDF on the eastern side of the Euphrates in the region, it is yet to be fully explained why forces loyal to Assad were able to take back control of the western side so quickly, especially since all of the Deir ez-Zor Governorate's urban centers except one are situated on that side.<sup>11</sup>

As forces loyal to Assad advanced on the western side, the Islamic State seemingly did little fighting and just melted away.<sup>12</sup> By contrast, it has now been fighting against the SDF in the rest of Deir ez-Zor for 17 months, a period nearly twice as long as its battle to keep control of Mosul in Iraq and more than four times longer than the fight to hang onto Raqqa.

The U.S.-backed SDF launched its operation in Deir ez-Zor on September 9, 2017, advancing from southern Hasakah near the Syrian-Iraqi borders along a dead tributary of the Euphrates known as the Khabour River.<sup>13</sup> The forces headed west toward the Euphrates River and then south into the small town of Hajin and the border town of Abu Kamal, two miles from the border with Iraq.<sup>c</sup>

The SDF's operation initially made quick gains, despite its rushed start before the end of the Raqqa campaign.<sup>14</sup> Around mid-November 2017, the SDF liberated all the areas situated along the Khabour tributary and started to move south along the Euphrates River. By then, the first in a series of military pauses had slowed progress.<sup>15</sup> Even so, by late 2017, the Islamic State appeared to be crumbling in the face of the U.S.-backed forces and had lost control of the west side of the river to the Assad regime.

As the Islamic State withdrew from the western side of the river, the group concentrated its war effort on the SDF side.<sup>16</sup> Its numbers there were swelled not only by this but also Islamic State fighters who had moved to the eastern side of the Middle Euphrates River Valley from other areas the Islamic State had previously controlled in Iraq and northern Syria.<sup>17</sup> With most of the villages east of the river emptied of its original residents, the areas the SDF were trying to liberate had become a sanctuary for Islamic State militants and their families.<sup>18</sup> As the SDF advanced slowly south in the period up to late 2017 and in the period that followed, Islamic State fighters moved their family southward from one village to another.<sup>19</sup>

c With the exception of Hajin, this part of Deir ez-Zor is largely rural and its population is concentrated in the fertile lands along the river. The SDF area of operations also includes most of the governorate's oilfields and gas plants.

In early 2018, the SDF resumed fighting and took control of the so-called Shaytat towns—three villages named after the Shaytat tribe and the victims four years previously of the single worst massacre carried out by the Islamic State in Syria.<sup>20</sup>

As it pushed further southward, the SDF, which had already been stretched thin during the battle of Raqqa, relied heavily on U.S. airstrikes.<sup>21</sup> The airstrikes intensified in Hajin and even more so in the villages to its south. Locals newly recruited by the SDF in Deir ez-Zor were poorly trained, and the Islamic State killed numerous fighters in its frequent raids on SDF positions, whether in the desert during poor weather or inside towns at night.<sup>d</sup>

The final stage of the operation to liberate the so-called Hajin pocket (the area stretching southeast from Hajin to the border town of Abu Kamal) began on September 11, 2018. The town of Hajin itself was finally announced as liberated in mid-December 2018.<sup>22</sup> Kurdish commanders had expected the operation in the Hajin pocket to end the previous month, but the fighting in the town and in the villages to the south dragged on longer.<sup>23</sup>

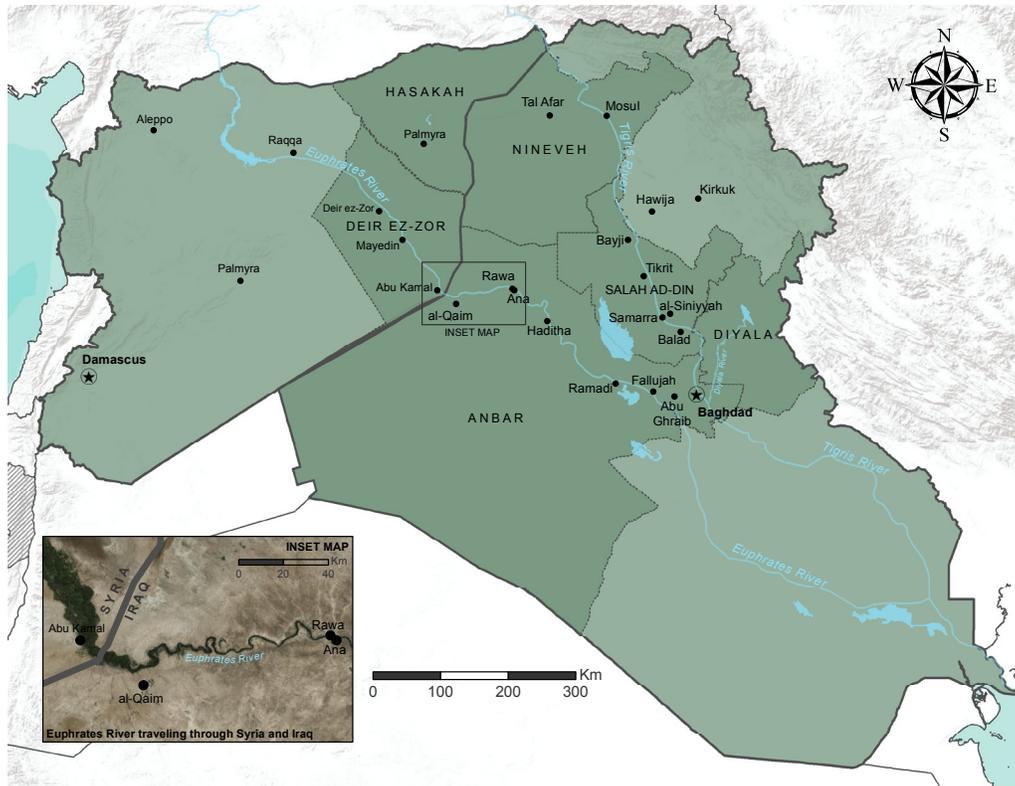
South of Hajin, airstrikes by the U.S.-led coalition blunted the Islamic State's ability to fight an intensive final battle against the Kurdish-led force. In the villages that remained under Islamic State control, there were by late 2018 thousands of Islamic State fighters along with their families. Speaking to the SDF after being captured, an Islamic State fighter from Canada explained that the group became almost paralyzed as the airstrikes intensified and targeted "strategic places" outside the frontlines in Sousa and Baghouz, two major villages south of Hajin and closer to the Iraqi border.<sup>24</sup> He said that the Islamic State, which according to him then still had fighters numbered "in the thousands," had stored large amounts of food and prepared to defend that last pocket of land. However, he said, the increase in airstrikes had led the militants to move along tunnels and trenches, and not fight in the open. When this article went to press in mid-February 2019, the Islamic State presence on the eastern side of the Euphrates River had shrunk to one neighborhood in the village of Baghouz near the river.<sup>25</sup> In the early part of 2019, a significant number of fighters surrendered to Kurdish forces with others trying to flee the area to reach Turkey through human smugglers.<sup>26</sup> It is possible a significant number managed to slip into areas controlled by the regime.

### Difficult Terrain for Counterinsurgency

The stakes for securing and stabilizing Deir ez-Zor are particularly high. This is because the governorate's geography creates difficult terrain for counterinsurgents. In this regard, Deir ez-Zor has three distinct topologies. The first is the city of Deir ez-Zor and adjacent towns, extending south to the Deir ez-Zor airport. Beyond that part, the rest of the governorate is tougher terrain. Even when the Assad regime was still strong in 2012, it steadily gave up its bases in the rest of the governorate because it could not sustain a presence in the hostile rural environment. If jihadis regroup, a similar pattern is likely.

The town of Abu Kamal and its environs southeast of Deir ez-Zor form their own region that is largely separate geographically from the rest of the governorate. Rather than include it in

d Kurdish fighters, who tend to be better trained, generally were not stationed inside populated areas. Author interviews, SDF fighters and local contacts, over the course of the campaign in Deir ez-Zor in 2017-2019.



*Syria and Iraq (Brandon Mohr; service layers from Esri, USGS, DigitalGlobe, and NOAA)*

its Wilayat al-Kheir (the Deir ez-Zor Province), the Islamic State linked it to the Iraqi border town of al-Qa'im to form its Wilayat al-Furat (the Euphrates Province) because the two towns are closer to each other. The counterinsurgency challenge in Deir ez-Zor is further complicated by the fact that it is surrounded by desert and includes a long stretch of border with Iraq, meaning it will require a large fighting force to secure and hold it, which the regime does not currently have.<sup>e</sup>

Another factor that might complicate the situation for the Islamic State's enemies is that in the town of Abu Kamal specifically, the river passes through the Syria-Iraqi border. At that location, three items favorable to a potential future jihadi insurgent campaign converge: the river, the Syrian and Anbar deserts, and the borders. Ideally, this area should be now be controlled by a force or a group of forces that work closely with each other, a senior U.S. official told the author.<sup>27</sup> Instead, the Euphrates River now serves as a demarcation line separating Russian-backed pro regime and U.S.-backed SDF, with the SDF operating east of the river and pro-Assad forces mostly west of the river.<sup>28</sup> The terrain for counterinsurgency is made more difficult still because the extensive tracts of desert that lie between the river and the Syria-Iraq border.

In this context, the Islamic State and other jihadis will likely find

gaps that could be difficult to suppress, especially given the United States is set to draw down forces. Such gaps include the ability to move through the river, the deserts, and the borders, especially since these areas are usually only lightly governed and contain porous borders. Additionally, the growing presence of Shi'a militias along the Iraqi borders, instead of the U.S.-allied Iraqi Army, could further complicate the United States' future ability to conduct and coordinate operations in those areas from Iraq.<sup>29</sup> The Islamic State has a history of successfully using rivers and areas adjacent to them as hideouts and for mobility, even when the United States was heavily present inside Iraq after its troop surge in 2007. The Middle Euphrates River Valley includes lush river reeds and palm orchards that make it easier for militants to hide and survive.

### The Residual Islamic State Presence

While the geographic terrain of Deir ez-Zor presents challenges to counterinsurgents, the demographic terrain provides opportunities to jihadis. On both sides of the river, there are already indicators of a vacuum in Deir ez-Zor. Villages and towns on the regime's side are still largely empty or ruined, with a few exceptions. Locals' reluctance to return to their towns reflects widespread fears of regime retribution and rejection of its legitimacy.<sup>30</sup> Mass exodus from the areas west of the river started before the regime's campaign and continued afterward, especially with the heavy Russian bombing

<sup>e</sup> While the regime has been able to secure itself, the conflict in Syria is not over yet. One-third of the country remains outside of the government's control, either under Turkish influence in the northwest or the SDF in the east. The regime forces also have a superficial hold on much of the country, outside the major urban centers. There is a vast arc of vulnerable areas that Damascus probably cannot sufficiently secure—a rough terrain of deserts and river valleys extending from the Israeli borders in the southeast to Iraq in the east and then to Turkey in the northwest.

<sup>f</sup> After announcing the U.S. troop withdrawal from Syria in December 2018, President Trump suggested U.S. troops in Iraq could be used for operations that proved necessary in Syria. Paul Sonne and Tamer El-Ghobashy, "U.S. forces will stay in Iraq and could reenter Syria from there, Trump says," *Washington Post*, December 26, 2018.

of civilians in Mayadin in October 2017.<sup>31</sup>

Sizable numbers of the population relocated from the west side of the Euphrates to SDF-held areas.<sup>32</sup> This trend speaks to the deep popular suspicion toward the regime and the relative popularity of the SDF, which many view as less corrupt and brutal.<sup>33</sup> However, incidents on the ground and information provided to the author by sources in the region suggest that the Islamic State still has loyalists among the population living under the SDF and even operating within the SDF.<sup>34</sup> Tribal figures complain, for example, that the SDF has set free local members of the Islamic State, and many of those were incorporated by the SDF into low-key security activities, such as manning checkpoints and patrolling in newly-liberated areas.<sup>35</sup> The reason cited by the tribal figures for this policy is the SDF's attempt to appease local clans, especially those with whom they had pre-existing contacts. Those former Islamic State members incorporated into security structures reportedly vouch for locals who ostensibly joined the Islamic State for non-ideological reasons.<sup>36</sup>

There are clearly merits in trying to rehabilitate such individuals. For example, a notable case in Hasakah involved a former senior member of the Islamic State who had served as part of its tribal outreach.<sup>37</sup> He was jailed for two months but then released after Kurdish commanders learned that he had originally been compelled to join the group after the militants threatened to punish his son. Locals also testified that he enabled the release of civilians jailed or accused by the Islamic State. Notwithstanding this example, multiple sources from Deir ez-Zor, in speaking with the author in late 2018/early 2019, have questioned the loyalty of former associates of the group.

All of this raises concern over the Islamic State's residual support and clandestine membership in Deir ez-Zor. As noted above, the limitations on the capabilities of the SDF as a counterinsurgent force and the slow pace of their push southward along the Euphrates into Deir ez-Zor afforded the Islamic State opportunities to preserve fighters and establish sleeper cells on the east side of the river. The Islamic State's swift withdrawal from the western side of the Euphrates, the widespread urban destruction, and the reluctance of people to return to their homes on the western bank of the river provide favorable conditions for a future resurgence of the group. On the east side of the river, the coalition-backed campaign also created hardships for the local population, with a senior French military officer publicly arguing that the approach taken by the coalition in the Hajin pocket had "prolonged the conflict" and "massively destroyed the infrastructure ... leaving behind the seeds of an imminent resurgence of a new adversary."<sup>38</sup> There are already recurrent night-time attacks by Islamic State militants in SDF-held areas.<sup>39</sup>

### The Consequences of U.S. Disengagement

Although there have been mixed messages about the timetable for U.S. withdrawal, it seems unlikely the region will be secured and stabilized before the last contingents of U.S. troops are expected

to leave.<sup>8</sup> As reported by several U.S. media outlets, the Pentagon assessed in late January 2019 that the Islamic State could take back territory in Syria within months if the United States did not maintain military pressure on the group.<sup>40</sup>

One possible scenario for when U.S. troops draw down is that the SDF remains in control of the parts of Deir ez-Zor east of the river, but without close guidance, oversight, and support from the U.S.-led coalition. This would likely further weaken its ability to secure the area. In mid-February 2019, General Joseph Votel, commander of U.S. Central Command, told CNN that the SDF "still require our enablement and our assistance."<sup>41</sup> There is a risk that the Islamic State will regenerate in an accelerating way as the military pressure against it subsides.

In recent years, as outlined by Michael Knights in this publication, the Islamic State was able to regenerate in multiple areas in Iraq after they were liberated from the group, including Salah ad-Din where the group gradually returned to conduct ambushes, targeted killings, and small raids.<sup>42</sup> It is noteworthy that the Islamic State was able to regenerate in parts of Iraq despite the fact that forces battling the Islamic State in Iraq are more numerous and battle-hardened than in eastern Syria.

Another possible scenario is the regime takes over the rest of Deir ez-Zor once U.S. forces depart because the Kurds come to an arrangement with Damascus<sup>43</sup> or prove unwilling to sustain the burden of operations on the east side of the Euphrates. A regime takeover of the eastern side of the Euphrates could create favorable conditions for jihadi militants for several reasons. One, it could drive more people from their homes, as already happened in the regime's side, creating a greater population of internally displaced people from which jihadi groups can recruit. Two, it could push locals to more closely align with the Islamic State because of deep-seated animosity among the Sunni population in the area toward the regime. Finally, a transition from SDF to Assad regime forces could open new space for the militants to operate.<sup>44</sup> A similar situation took place in the Iraqi province of Kirkuk when pro-government forces expelled the Kurdish peshmerga and took over in October 2017.<sup>45</sup> The Islamic State subsequently regrouped in Kirkuk and since then has waged a steady insurgency against the Iraqi forces there.<sup>46</sup>

### An Opportunity for al-Qa`ida

If regime forces return to eastern Deir ez-Zor, this could provide an opportunity for al-Qa`ida's offshoot, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), to revive its presence in an area that once served as its most significant pocket inside Syria,<sup>47</sup> before the Islamic State expelled it from the region in the summer of 2014.<sup>48</sup>

HTS up until 2016 went by the name Jabhat al-Nusra. Unlike in Raqqa and Hasakeh, most Jabhat al-Nusra fighters in Deir ez-Zor remained cohesive and did not 'defect' to the Islamic State.<sup>49</sup>

g In December 2018, President Trump announced U.S. troops would leave within 30 days, before tweeting the withdrawal would take place "slowly." *The New York Times* subsequently reported that the draw-down period had been extended to several months. In mid-February 2019, CENTCOM Commander General Votel stated U.S. troops would begin pulling out in the coming weeks but did not give a date for their complete withdrawal. Eric Schmitt and Maggie Haberman, "Trump to Allow Months for Troop Withdrawal in Syria, Officials Say," *New York Times*, December 31, 2018; Gordon Lubold, "U.S. Mideast Commander Sees Syria Withdrawal 'Right on Track,'" *Wall Street Journal*, February 10, 2019.

Hundreds of HTS' members come from the governorate, and the group has a broader network that it could utilize to return as a committed force against the regime.<sup>50</sup> Given the group's rebranding, the perception that it remains a viable force against the regime, and its less aggressive approach, even non-jihadis might welcome such a formidable former ally in the fight against the regime in their areas.

As noted above, the return of the whole of Deir ez-Zor to Assad regime control would make it especially vulnerable to a jihadi resurgence. HTS has extensive networks closer to the regime areas within Deir ez-Zor, while the Islamic State has more experience operating in the deserts around Deir ez-Zor, which connect the governorate with central and southern Syria. The Islamic State also likely has a significant number of sleeper cells within Assad regime-controlled areas in central and western Syria, which could be awoken as the militants regroup in other areas of Deir ez-Zor. According to the account of a senior member of the Islamic State to Iraqi media, the group maintained cadres operating discreetly in regime-held areas.<sup>51</sup>

### The High Stakes in Deir ez-Zor

For now, the Islamic State as a territorial entity in Iraq and Syria is over, and the military momentum against it continues to hold. The organization has lost the last pocket of land it held in the Euphrates River Valley, where many of its most hardcore fighters who descended from other battlefields in Iraq and northern Syria were ostensibly preparing for a sustained final battle.<sup>52 h</sup>

h In one of its publications last year, the Islamic State complained that many of its members had become dormant and unwilling to conduct insurgency tactics in their areas. "If more precautions restrict the individual's mobility and ability to achieve what's required of him, these precautions turn into a mechanism that obstructs jihadi work instead of facilitating it ... which could affect its success, continuity and ability to grow," the publication stated. Hassan Hassan, "We have not yet seen the full impact of ISIS sleeper cells coming back to life," *National*, April 18, 2018.

But while Deir ez-Zor has now been liberated from the Islamic State, the region is far from secured and stabilized. The U.S. draw-down has created the possibility of a worse-case scenario in which the Assad regime takes back nominal control of the whole of Deir ez-Zor, risking a powerful jihadi revival in the border region between Syria and Iraq.

The author previously warned in this publication in late 2017 that there was a high risk that the Syria-Iraq border area that stretches into Deir ez-Zor along the Euphrates could become a long-term jihadi safe haven that threatens not only Iraq and Syria, but also the wider region and global security:

*"This contiguous terrain in Iraq and Syria is akin to the region along the Afghan-Pakistani border that previous U.S. administrations dubbed 'AfPak' and treated as a single theater requiring an integrated approach. The 'Syraq' space, which stretches from the areas near the Euphrates and Tigris river valleys in northern and western Iraq to Raqqa and Palmyra, looks set to be the Islamic State what AfPak has been to the al-Qa`ida and Taliban factions, providing a hospitable environment and strategic sanctuaries."<sup>53</sup>*

Despite the fact that the Islamic State has lost control of its territory in the border region, the very real risk of a jihadi revival means there continues to be a significant risk that the region emerges as a long term jihadi safe haven. In such circumstances, Deir ez-Zor would likely become key to the Islamic State's mobility and connectivity between central and southern Syria, the Syrian-Iraqi border region, and through the Syrian and Anbar deserts, as well as providing the Islamic State with a sanctuary to sustain its campaign of international terror attacks. **CTC**

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# A View from the CT Foxhole: Shaun Greenough, Case Strategy and Mentor Supervisor, The Unity Initiative

By Paul Cruickshank

*Shaun Greenough is the Case Strategy and Mentor Supervisor at The Unity Initiative (TUI), a specialist intervention consultancy based in the United Kingdom that focuses on rehabilitating individuals convicted of terrorist offenses; training prison, probation, and police staff; tackling absolutist mindsets in the wider community; and advising governments on counterterrorism strategies. Prior to joining TUI, Greenough served in a variety of counterterrorism roles and managing operational and intelligence aspects of the investigation into the 2006 transatlantic airline plot for the Thames Valley Police Special Branch. When this unit was subsumed into the Southeast Counter-Terrorism Unit in 2009, Greenough managed intelligence gathering and was involved in efforts to protect the 2012 Summer Olympics. In 2013, after 30 years of service as a police officer, he began working on the Prevent pillar of the U.K. counterterrorism strategy, including between 2017 and 2018 as a regional manager of Prevent referrals in the Southeast region. Earlier in his career, Greenough was involved in several police investigations of the IRA.*

*Editor's note: Paul Cruickshank advises TUI on counterterrorism issues.*

**CTC:** You recently left government to begin work with TUI, a specialist intervention consultancy founded by Muslims that focuses on rehabilitating individuals convicted of terrorist offenses; training prison, probation, and police staff; tackling absolutist mindsets in the wider community; and advising governments on countering-extremism strategies. We previously featured the insights of both Usman Raja and Angela Misra, the husband-and-wife team who founded the organization, in this monthly interview feature.<sup>1</sup> What led you to make the switch?

**Greenough:** I got to know Usman and Angela back in 2013. I was at the time working on Channel cases within the Southeast Counter-Terrorism Unit and part of my role then was to commission interventions, and I got to know them through commissioning them to take on intervention cases for us. What struck me with Usman and Angela was that the way they approached things was very different, and it involved not just trying to change a bit of view point here or a bit of a view point there. The work they did was much more holistic in that it looked to totally strip back people's understanding of faith and then rebuild it in a much more holistic kind of way in terms of how they fit in in the wider community, [with] respect for everybody. TUI is focused on providing mentoring for individuals to give them a better perspective of how they fit into the wider community and give them a better ability to become a fully integrated member of wider society. I was extremely impressed with the deeper, holistic way that they worked. By approaching it in this way, it seemed to me, they had a better chance of having a

sustained result.

Some of the cases that I got them into were some of the more difficult and slightly more complex cases that were slightly more long-term and needed much deeper work. I was impressed with what they were able to do, and they had an impressive ability to easily resonate and interact with people. TUI has worked with difficult individuals with deep-seated extremist worldviews who have been involved in extremist groups such as al-Muhajiroun.

Fast forward to 2018 and I'd reached a point where I thought that I might move on from the police side of things. Usman asked me if I fancied a change and work for them. I thought he was joking at first, but it became evident that he wasn't. I decided that I'd make the jump and get a different perspective on everything.

Since joining TUI, I've been trying to get new jobs off the ground, where they've been referred to us. The work is actually very similar. I'm interfacing with police forces and engaging with our mentors on the same kind of issues I was working on within the Southeast Counter-Terrorism Unit. It's dealing with the same people and the same agencies, but it's just from a slightly different perspective and a different link in the chain from where I was before. TUI works independently, but alongside some of the other agencies involved.

The role I play is the jigsaw; I do a lot of the interacting with the agencies who may be stakeholders in the case. For example, we've got a lot of cases where probation service is involved, so I'll be liaising with probation, I'll be going to new case review meetings, I'll be helping get new cases off the ground and working with the new voluntary strand cases, looking at how we get those cases off the ground. I work behind the scenes coordinating things, going to the case review meetings, and helping support TUI's team of mentors with any issues as well.

**CTC:** From your perspective, why has TUI been so successful in rehabilitating individuals?

**Greenough:** In a nutshell, it revolves around having individuals who are fully committed to making a difference with this type of work. When you put the amount of work in that Angela and Usman do, you couldn't do that unless you were fully committed to what you were doing and fully believed in it. They're fully committed to what they're doing, they know what they're doing works, they can have a real impact on people's lives, but also by doing this work, they—and we as a group—are building a more inclusive and safer society for all of us. They have a lot of credibility due to their work in the wider community over many years; this means that they are respected by everyone, even some of the extremists.

I'm committed to try and help them sort of take it all forward. We're now building a new community strand, which requires a slightly different perspective and can be slightly more tricky in terms of getting it off the ground, and I think there is room for more work in prisons. The community strand involves working with

individuals on a voluntary basis. Some of these people have been in trouble with the authorities for various reasons.

It's a growing field of work. They've become extremely skilled in what they're doing. They've got some really good people working for them now as mentors. And they've got some very significant cases ongoing, so it's about trying to continue with this work and continuing to try to grow it.

**CTC: More recently, you worked as a referrals manager for the Prevent<sup>a</sup> dimension of U.K. counterterrorism efforts in the southeast of England. What did this entail?**

**Greenough:** We basically had every single referral to Prevent for the whole of the southeast of England, excluding London (or in other words, Surrey, Sussex, Kent, Hampshire, and Thames Valley), coming through our department. So, every referral from every source—whether it was a counterterrorism hotline referral, whether it was a referral from social services, whether it was a referral from the school, or whether it was a member of the public ringing in about somebody—every single one of those referrals that came from the southeast came through our department.

Our role was to assess the referrals. That involved having a look at them and asking, firstly, “does this amount to a Prevent concern?” because sometimes you would get things put through which were concerns about other matters. Secondly, we would ask ourselves “is it proportionate to deal with it in this way?” As part of this process, we would liaise with all the other agencies involved in making initial inquiries in a particular case. Once we got access to some initial inquiries around a particular referral, we would then package it up and get it out to the Prevent team based in the local area in question.

Once we got our initial assessment to the teams on the ground, they would potentially take a further look at it and potentially carry out further inquiries with other agencies. If the view was that the case needed to go to Channel,<sup>b</sup> we'd then help set it up to go to the Channel panels.<sup>c</sup> The local Prevent team on the ground would then be involved in working directly with the Channel panels.

- a Editor's note: Prevent is one of the pillars of the United Kingdom's counterterrorism strategy (CONTEST). It aims to stop people becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism. The three other pillars of CONTEST are Pursue (to stop terrorist attacks), Protect (to strengthen protection against terrorist attack), and Prepare (to mitigate the impact of a terrorist attack). “Counter-terrorism strategy (CONTEST) 2018,” U.K. Home Office, August 20, 2018.
- b Editor's note: Channel is the most intensive layer of Prevent. It involves individuals assessed to be vulnerable to radicalization in a way that makes them a potential counterterrorism concern. See “CONTEST: The United Kingdom's Strategy for Countering Terrorism June 2018 Presented to Parliament by the Secretary of State for the Home Department by Command of Her Majesty,” June 2018, p. 26.
- c Editor's note: According to the U.K. government, “for those referrals where the police assess that there is a risk of radicalisation, a Channel panel—which is chaired by the local authority and made up of representatives from different safeguarding areas including health, education and the police—will meet to discuss each case and carefully assess the extent of the potential vulnerability of the individual. ... Participation in Channel is entirely voluntary.” “CONTEST: The United Kingdom's Strategy for Countering Terrorism June 2018 Presented to Parliament by the Secretary of State for the Home Department by Command of Her Majesty,” June 2018, pp. 38-39.

nel panels are now all local authority-led.

We would then be working alongside other stakeholders as part of a multi-agency panel. And you would try to come up with a multi-agency solution for that particular case, depending on what the specific issues were.

**CTC: So, all this gives police eyes into the process from the beginning of any case that rises to the level of a counterterrorism concern.**

**Greenough:** Yes. Because my office in the Southeast Counter-Terrorism Unit is involved from the get-go, and then the police are an intrinsic partner at the table in the Channel panels.

**CTC: The U.K. government recently announced an independent review of Prevent.<sup>2</sup> Critics have, for years, alleged that the program is ineffective and discriminatory toward Muslims and therefore counterproductive.<sup>3</sup> It came under an especially strong critical spotlight<sup>d</sup> when it emerged that Ahmed Hassan, an 18-year-old Iraqi child asylum seeker had been referred to a Channel panel before he attempted to bomb a London Underground train at Parson's Green tube stop in 2017.<sup>e</sup> Another case that has been highlighted is that of 2018 Oxford Street attack plotter Lewis Ludlow<sup>f</sup> who was advised by a terror contact to “fake it” with those he was engaging with in Prevent.<sup>f</sup> In an interview last month, U.K. Security Minister Ben Wallace defended the Prevent program by stating that 500 people “who could have caused harm on our streets” had been through the Channel process in the past two years that “we are no longer worried about.”<sup>5</sup> What's your view of the strengths and weaknesses of Prevent?**

**Greenough:** It's obviously a complex issue. Yes, there are a few cases like the two you mentioned. But you've got hundreds of cases which have successfully been put through the program, some of whom were individuals who quite possibly could have gone on to

d Editor's note: The U.K. parliament's Intelligence and Security Committee stated, “the litany of errors that resulted in HASSAN's attack planning passing unnoticed, despite his being an active Channel case, highlight deep-rooted issues in the administration of the Prevent strand of CONTEST.” “The 2017 Attacks: What needs to change?” Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament, November 22, 2018, pp. 3-4.

e Editor's note: According to *The Financial Times*, “Ahmed Hassan, an 18-year-old Iraqi who had arrived in the UK two years before as a child asylum seeker ... told immigration officials processing his asylum application that he had been groomed by Isis and ‘trained to kill,’ so he was referred to his local Prevent team in Surrey ... [and was eventually] referred to the Channel process but Surrey County Council, which was managing him, did not convene a panel for six months, during which time Hassan's mental health deteriorated. His foster carers reported that he was going missing, but this was not considered noteworthy by the police who were reporting to Channel. Ten days before the attack, the panel met and discussed closing Hassan's case.” Helen Warrell, “Inside Prevent, the UK's controversial anti-terrorism programme,” *Financial Times*, January 24, 2019.

f Editor's note: According to *The Financial Times*, “The prosecution revealed that one of Ludlow's terror contacts advised him to ‘be polite’ with Prevent personnel, telling him: ‘Even if u don't believe it, fake it.’ Ludlow, a former postman, was later found to have scouted out sites for an attack on Oxford Street just hours after a session with his Prevent mentor.” Warrell.

get involved in terrorism. I've seen many very successful outcomes with Channel. Because of the nature of what we're dealing with, you will get a few cases which don't go the way that you would have wanted, but we will always learn from those cases.

And, more fundamentally, what would the alternative be if we were not trying to do this? And is it not better to try to turn people away from becoming involved in violent extremism/terrorism? In my view, it's far better to try and intervene, engage, and try to turn potential violent extremists away from carrying out attacks than not doing anything and just dealing with them once they've committed an offense. I think Prevent is an extremely worthwhile element of counterterrorism policing, which complements all the other elements. It's become fashionable to knock Prevent, but critics rarely come up with any viable alternative.

It is often portrayed in the media that there is deep opposition among Muslim communities for Prevent, but the reality on the ground is different. That notion of wide hostility has been propagated by certain groups, which are very anti-Prevent like CAGE, who make a lot of noise, but these groups are not reflective of the community as a whole. When our Prevent officers worked in the community, very rarely were doors closed on us.

With regard to the Lewis Ludlow case, he did indeed have a history of engagement with Prevent whilst building up towards his attack plotting, and this is one of the challenges—trying to assess whether an individual is just telling you what they think you want to hear or whether they are still an extremist. In his case, because of ongoing concerns, staff from our counterterrorism unit were able to identify this, and he was subsequently arrested by staff from our unit and prosecuted and convicted.

#### **CTC: Do you think Prevent has saved lives?**

**Greenough:** It's always difficult to know because you can't predict what may or may not have happened, but in some of the cases we [the Southeast Counter-Terrorism Unit] have been involved in, you had individuals who were involved with groups like the Islamist extremist group al-Muhajiroun and the right-wing extremist group National Action, for example, who've been on a pathway potentially towards violence who we've managed to pull off of that pathway and change their point of view.

#### **CTC: Where can improvements be made?**

**Greenough:** There's always room for improvement, including when it comes to winning the trust of all segments of society. It's important that everybody carries on looking for ways for better understanding of what we're dealing with, working together in an even more integrated way with other agencies. Prevent is not just about policing. You've got lots of agencies—from local authorities, social services, probation, as well as the police—all working together.

**CTC: Assistant Commissioner Neil Basu, now the U.K. National Lead for Counter Terrorism Policing, told this publication a year ago that he thought Prevent should be taken completely outside central government and that it should be a communi-**

**ty-led and grassroots-up process.<sup>g</sup> What's your view?**

**Greenough:** In an ideal world, maybe it would be. But I think we've probably got a long way to go before that could be the emphasis of it all. There's a growing emphasis on Prevent being a safeguarding rather than policing effort. The notion that we are safeguarding vulnerable individuals from being drawn into something in the same way as you might be talking about a young person being drawn into involvement with gangs, drugs, and sexual grooming. I think the direction of travel is for Prevent activities to be mainstreamed into other safeguarding activities, which local authorities do already, and for local authorities to take on a greater role.

**CTC: Turning to the challenge posed by extreme right-wing radicalization, which the Prevent program also works to tackle. Following the murder of British MP Jo Cox in 2016 and a terrorist attack targeting Muslims near Finsbury Park mosque in 2017, the threat posed by far-right extremists has received growing attention in the U.K. And the number of Prevent referrals related to right-wing extremism has been increasing.<sup>h</sup> What is the nature of the challenge the U.K. is facing?**

**Greenough:** It is a growing area of work. When I was working in Prevent, we were seeing a growing proportion of our referrals as right-wing related. It's a very complex landscape, which morphs and changes almost on a monthly basis with a wide spectrum of groups involved and different groups constantly coming into the picture. One such group, National Action, has now been banned in the U.K. Another group of concern is the System Resistance Network,<sup>6</sup> which has been showing up online and gathering a bit of pace.

The landscape in the U.K. is influenced by right-wing extremists in Europe, where they have a growing extremism scene. You've got a big right-wing music scene in Europe that reaches across a lot of people. A lot of people involved in these activities in the U.K. follow the extreme-right scene in the United States, and you get quite a few cases in which people are interacting with people in the United States and following online blogs and following discussions on internet sites, including Stormfront.<sup>i</sup>

g Editor's note: Then Deputy Assistant Commissioner Basu stated, "Prevent, at the moment, is owned by the government, but I think it should be outside central government altogether. I think people who are running their local communities should be taking the lead. ... Communities should be talking about protecting themselves from the grassroots up. When you see Prevent working on the ground brilliantly, that's where it's working, and largely unsung and un-talked about. Substantial community resilience is produced by that sort of work." Raffaello Pantucci, "A View from the CT Foxhole: Neil Basu, Senior National Coordinator for Counterterrorism Policing in the United Kingdom," *CTC Sentinel* 11:2 (2018).

h Editor's note: See Graham Macklin, "The Evolution of Extreme-Right Terrorism and Efforts to Counter It in the United Kingdom," *CTC Sentinel* 12:1 (2019). According to Macklin, "Statistics for the year to March 2018, the latest for which there are figures, show that out of a record 7,318 Prevent referrals, 1,321 (18%) related to right-wing extremism. This represents a 36% increase compared to the previous year-long period. By contrast, Islamist referrals decreased 14% between the two periods."

i Editor's note: According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, Stormfront was "created by former Alabama Klan boss and long-time white supremacist Don Black in 1995 ... [and] was the first major hate site on the Internet." Southern Poverty Law Center Profile of Stormfront.

One of the projects I'm working on in TUI is setting up their Right-Wing Division. With their credibility and experience, I believe they will become a market leader in tackling XRW [right-wing extremism] in a short space of time.

**CTC: And just like with Islamist extremism, this is all being fueled by social media, by this radical virtual echo chamber.**

**Greenough:** Yes. The role social media plays in far-right extremism is very large. A lot of youngsters in particular don't get it that once they start liking something on Twitter or Facebook or wherever, they then get bombarded with other similar material.

Then there are interesting dynamics with social media in terms of who's putting a lot of this stuff out there and what their ulterior motive is. There's an interesting phenomenon with Twitter regarding where some of those accounts are actually hosted. You've got accounts with individuals who purport to be an individual from America who are retweeting and liking something that somebody might have said, but if you actually have a look at where that account is, you find it's not in America at all, but it's hosted somewhere like Russia. Russia has been working on the power of using social media for anything they possibly can to kind of cause social unrest in Western countries, including the United States. They've become very, very proficient at using social media to their own advantage. How much of an impact it's having in aggravating the problem of right-wing extremism in the U.K. is still being analyzed, but there's no doubt it's having an impact.

TUI is also looking to move into this field of work. We are currently recruiting and training mentors to work with XRW cases. Potentially, this is a growing area of work that is just as important as the Islamist extremism work.

**CTC: You managed aspects of the investigation into the 2006 al-Qa`ida plot to blow up multiple transatlantic airliners departing from Heathrow. It remains the most serious terrorist plot thwarted since 9/11. How big and challenging an investigation was it?**

**Greenough:** It was the biggest counterterrorism police investigation we had ever had in the U.K. At the time, I was working for what was then the Thames Valley Police Special Branch, and I helped manage the intel and ops side of the investigation into the airline plot locally.

What made it so complex was that you had quite a large number of individuals involved in the plot, with many of the suspects spread out in the area northeast of central London, but also some in our area to the west and northwest of the capital. That made it difficult to coordinate because this was before the days of an integrated national counterterrorism police network. The Metropolitan Police Counter Terrorism Command was looking after the overall investigation, but we had a corner of the job, which revolved around a number of individuals who lived in our police area including one of the key suspected plotters who lived in the High Wycombe area. In regards to those individuals, there was a requirement for a lot of work around intelligence gathering and tying in with all the agencies involved. We had to mount and coordinate a massive effort to cover the individuals who lived in our area and feed back to the overall effort. For a number of individuals on our end, this involved a 24-hour surveillance effort for a sustained period of time; we're

talking beyond weeks.

It was extremely taxing, keeping it all going. We had to get a lot of help from all over the country in terms of resources to be able to fulfill what was needed. We were dealing with the absolute highest stakes. We were all acutely aware you couldn't afford to get anything wrong. And the pressure was on all the time. We were having to have three meetings a day, quick 20-minute meetings, just to keep on top of what we'd got done, what we'd been tasked [with], and what remained to be done. And as I said, this went on for some period of time. So, the amount of effort that our staff put in was absolutely phenomenal with some people having to work 24 hours straight on numerous occasions to get bits of work done.

When everything came to a head, we had to deploy all our resources very rapidly because there were some events worldwide which led to it becoming necessary to arrest some of the individuals very quickly,<sup>j</sup> with a couple hours' notice to tie in with other events which were happening worldwide and nationally. It was a very hectic job from start to finish.

**CTC: When you're talking about 24-hour surveillance, what is the manpower required to monitor a single suspect?**

**Greenough:** To mount full 24-hour surveillance of just one suspect, you could be talking three teams of people, each covering one shift for mobile surveillance, and at least three static surveillance teams with each covering a shift, because you may have more than one sort of static view on it. You might have two or three teams just doing static surveillance to enable your mobile surveillance to be able to then do their job. So, you're talking a vast amount of manpower, depending on how many vehicles and all the other bits of kit you've deployed on your mobile surveillance. You could be talking up to 20 people just doing the surveillance on one shift.

**CTC: And when you're dealing with a period that stretches for a significant period of time like for the transatlantic airline plot, it's difficult to sustain that level of effort for any police service.**

**Greenough:** Yeah, it's extremely difficult to sustain that level of effort because what you've got to remember is all those people working on that type of operation. Because of the size of it, you're talking about bringing in staff from all over the country to help. All those people have got to be put up somewhere. They're all going to need X, Y, Z. You're going to need the capability to brief them all, debrief them all. It's a phenomenal effort.

**CTC: You had a managerial role when it came to overseeing the operations and intelligence side of investigating the transatlantic airlines plot. What insights can you share about getting the most from your team in such a high-stakes investigation?**

<sup>j</sup> Editor's note: It has been widely reported that the arrest of the suspected coordinator of the plot in Pakistan forced British police to make arrests sooner than had been anticipated. Don Van Natta, Jr., Elaine Sciolino, and Stephen Grey, "Details Emerge in British Terror Case," *New York Times*, August 28, 2006; Daniel Sanford, "Airline plot: Al-Qaeda connection," BBC, September 7, 2009; Habibullah Khan, Nick Schifrin, and Brian Ross, "US Kills Al Qaeda Mastermind of Airline Liquid Bomb Plot," ABC News, November 22, 2008.

**Greenough:** Keeping those regular meetings going was critical to making sure everybody knew what their job was. In the early part of it, what became obvious very quickly is we consumed a lot of our key individuals up quite quickly and then had to pull them out of what we'd got them doing to get other people who had come in from other parts of the country to do those roles. This was necessary in order to free our people up to best use their skills and local knowledge. When you've got a really big job on like that, it's important that everybody knows their role, that they're trained to a high standard, and that you can put your trust in them. Because when you get a job of that size, you have to delegate work out. You have got to be able to trust your staff to do the job properly and then make sure that you're on top of everything and that everything is being coordinated. I was blessed with some very good people who were very good at their jobs, who got stuff done in a very professional manner.

Training for big jobs like that is key so that people understand what they're doing and that everything ties together naturally. Training and exercising are always important to make sure that if anything happens at any given time, people understand what their roles are. But you also need flexibility so that if something doesn't quite fit into what you've trained for, you're flexible enough to think of a solution and find a work-around. You've got to be able to think laterally and be flexible, and sometimes you have to take a step back, take a deep breath to try to see the bigger picture, and then step forward again and potentially reorganize things to make sure everything's working efficiently.

It's also important not to lose focus when there is not a big investigation ongoing. People working in counterterrorism always need to be at the top of their game because any job which doesn't look

like much on the face of it can turn into something significant. This makes it absolutely critical that people are switched on and [at] the top of their game all the time.

**CTC: From your vantage point, how has the nature of the jihadi terrorist threat in the U.K. evolved since the transatlantic airline plot?**

**Greenough:** The threat landscape has changed significantly. Back then, it was almost all AQ-directed or -inspired plots, which frequently had a level of complication involving cells plotting towards committing some sort of fairly large and impactful attack. It's now almost the polar opposite where you've got groups like ISIL instigating the most basic kind of attack, where they're encouraging people just to take a knife and go out to some crowded place and attack people in the simplest possible way. That's extremely difficult to interdict because you potentially need very little organization or equipment or plotting. Even if the individual concerned is somewhere on the radar already, figuring out when a particular person is going to move from radical thought to radical action can be very difficult.

When it comes to lone-actor cases, there are often very complex factors involved. Frequently, there are layers of different issues, including mental health issues and behavioral and learning difficulties. Trying to assess and predict what they may or may not do is very difficult, and just because you assess somebody this month does not present a risk, does not mean that in 12 months' time that something will not change in the complex mix of issues with them that makes things very different. **CTC**

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# Profit-Minded Suppliers: Convergence of IED Facilitation and WMD Proliferation Networks for Non-State Actors

By Stephen Hummel, F. John Burpo, and James Bonner

The elements that comprise a network that facilitates the development of improvised explosive devices (IED) are not dissimilar from the elements that lead to the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). IED employment has burgeoned in recent years, with over 16,000 incidents worldwide in a 12-month period, while there have been over 500 WMD incidents by non-state actors in the last 26 years. The possibility of the profit-minded suppliers within vast, transnational IED networks expanding into WMD proliferation is high due to the opportunity for profits at relatively low additional risk. The convergence of these two seemingly separate networks does not mean that an IED facilitation network will suddenly market WMD, rather that non-state actors could employ these networks to gather the knowledge, people, materials, finances, and infrastructure required for WMD development and employment. This potential convergence of IED facilitation networks and WMD proliferation networks should be better understood in order to prevent greater proliferation of WMD.

**D**uring the 12-month period between September 1, 2017, and August 31, 2018, there were “approximately 16,300 reported” improvised explosive device (IED) incidents worldwide, not including those within the United States.<sup>1</sup> These attacks caused over 25,000 casualties. Of these incidents, roughly 37 percent (approximately 6,000) occurred outside of Iraq and Afghanistan in countries like Nepal, Colombia, and India. The number of incidents worldwide highlights the growth of IED facilitation networks by—as John Caves, Deputy Director of the Center for the Study of Weapons of Mass Destruction at National Defense University, put it—“profit-minded suppliers” to meet the demand.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, there has been a growth in the number of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) incidents by non-state actors.<sup>3</sup> According to the Global Terrorism Database (GTD), between 1990 and 2016, there were 525 such events—of which 400 were chemical, 107 were biological, and

18 were nuclear.<sup>3b</sup> Between 2013 and 2016, the last year for which

b While no non-state actors were able to acquire a nuclear device, these 18 incidents represent distinct attempts where non-state actors were thwarted in acquiring significant quantities of special nuclear material, which are Uranium-235 and Plutonium-239. These two specific isotopes are the fissile material required to make a nuclear weapon.

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a Weapons of mass destruction are commonly characterized as nuclear, chemical, and biological, and can provide “states or sub-national groups the ability to inflict damage that is wholly disproportionate to their conventional military capabilities.” Even within the WMD realm, both destructive capability and the requirements to develop and employ the weapons differs greatly. Randall Forsberg, William Driscoll, Gregory Webb, and Jonathon Dean, *Nonproliferation Primer: Preventing the Spread of Nuclear, Chemical, and Biological Weapons* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999).

such information is available via GTD, the planned use or actual use of a chemical, biological, or nuclear device was on the rise.<sup>c</sup>

The increasing rate of WMD incidents associated with non-state actors demonstrates their desire to possess a WMD, whether developed internally or acquired externally. IED facilitation networks, however, have been far more successful in disseminating the knowledge, technology, and material required to manufacture and employ an IED worldwide. There is growing concern among counterproliferation practitioners and policy makers that an IED facilitation network with an already existing, diversified, and far-reaching structure could converge with a WMD proliferation network, leading to wider dissemination of WMD to non-state actors—that is, the merging of “terrorists with profit-minded suppliers exploiting the opportunities created by globalization.”<sup>4</sup> Convergence between IED facilitation and WMD proliferation networks could potentially lower existing thresholds, making proliferation of WMD not only easier but more widespread.

## Background

In the context of discussing threats, former European Command Commander Admiral James G. Stavridis defined convergence as “the merger of a wide variety of mobile human activities, each of which is individually dangerous and whose sum represents a far greater threat.”<sup>5</sup> The concept of network convergence relates to one network crossing over and enhancing the capabilities of another, instead of contributing a specific technology. For example, the international human smuggling networks that typically smuggle criminals, fugitives, terrorists, trafficking victims, and migrants overlap and link with drug trafficking networks in certain areas.<sup>6</sup>

The United States, spearheaded through the Department of Defense in conjunction with other agencies, has sought to counter IED facilitation networks to prevent their presence on the battlefields of Iraq and Afghanistan. The organization dedicated to this mission is the Joint Improvised-Threat Defeat Organization (JIDO), formally known as Joint Improvised Explosive Device Defeat Organization (JIJEDDO), which is a component of the Defense Threat Reduction Agency. In 2013, then JIJEDDO Director Lieutenant General Michael Barbero, during a seminar at Johns Hopkins University, highlighted that IED facilitation networks are transnational, composed of human capital—ranging from financiers, smugglers, training camps, technical experts, and propagandists—and utilize readily available material and dual-use technology.<sup>7</sup>

## IED Networks

Improvised explosive device proliferation can occur, simplistically speaking, in two ways. The first is through consolidated proliferation, where the process is centralized such that IEDs are manufactured internally and then dispersed for employment. The second method of proliferation is disparate. Raw components and knowledge are disseminated to the tactical/employment level where IEDs are manufactured and deployed. The first method enables leadership to maintain control of the process and knowledge required for manufacturing, while the second relinquishes control and knowl-

edge down to numerous semi-independent subgroups.

From the vantage point of terrorists, both means of proliferation have their advantages and disadvantages, and regardless of the method, both require the same components, which are dual-use in nature and transported internationally on a daily basis. The components of an IED are relatively basic: an explosive main charge, initiating system, and casing. Frequently, particularly with non-state actors, the main charge consists of a homemade explosive, typically derived from ammonium nitrate fertilizers. Companies legally ship tons of fertilizer all over the world to assist farmers in both developing and developed countries. Ammonium nitrate fertilizers themselves are harmless but can be easily modified into an explosive. A Conflict Armament Research report found that Islamic State forces, or intermediaries acting on their behalf, acquired IED components including “chemical precursors such as fertilizer, containers, detonating cord, cables, and wires ... manufactured or sold in Turkey” and transferred them to Iraq.<sup>8</sup> Within the United States, Timothy McVeigh acquired the same type of materials domestically to bomb the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City in 1995.

The initiating system of an IED has a few subcomponents, including a power source, switch, and initiator, which can be a simple safety fuse or piece of explosive cord. The initiation system receives an electronic signal and then uses the power supply to trigger the initiator, which propagates the signal into the main charge. The casing is simply the outer elements that hold the main charge and initiation system together. The shape and material of the casing can assist in directing the explosive force of the detonation.

All the elements of an IED are dual-use components and can be acquired virtually anywhere in the world. Although the knowledge required to modify these precursors and materials into a device is not common, it does not require an advanced degree in chemistry or physics. Indeed, organizations such as al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State have propagated this knowledge to their followers around the world via the internet and hands-on training.<sup>9</sup>

## WMD Networks

An article by Amy Frumin, Tracy Moss, and David Ellis published in National Defense University’s *PRISM* deconstructs WMD proliferation networks into their basic components.<sup>10d</sup> (See Figure 1 for a visualization of this deconstruction.) Networks are composed of people, material, infrastructure, money/finance, information, and lines of communications, which can be both physical and virtual. As highlighted in the *PRISM* article, ‘people’ can refer to scientists, brokers, workers, and engineers in the network. ‘Material’ can range from parts and raw materials to weapons, tools, and chemicals. ‘Infrastructure’ can be either physical (lab or reprocessing facility) or virtual (cyber). Money is simply the financial resources required to develop the WMD. Information is the data, knowledge, orders, and facts. Lines of communications can be both physical and virtual, and pertain to the movement of information, money, and material.<sup>11</sup> Depending on the terrorist organization and potential support from a state sponsor, WMD proliferation can occur either under central leadership or through informal and disperse relationships.

c According to the Global Terrorism Database, there were 18 chemical, biological, or nuclear attacks in 2013, 24 in 2014, 29 in 2015, and 31 in 2016. Global Terrorism Database, National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), University of Maryland.

d Within the Department of Defense (DoD), the counter-WMD role shifted between Combatant Commands in 2017 from U.S. Strategic Command to U.S. Special Operations Command, as highlighted in DoD Directive 2060-02.

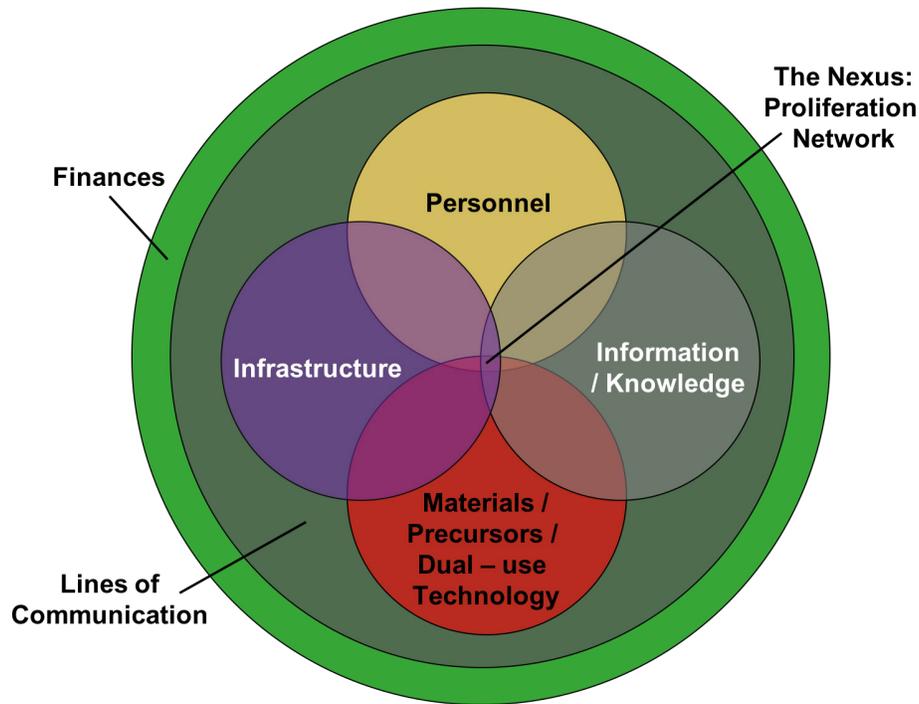


Figure 1: Adopted from Frumin et al's components of a WMD proliferation network. The figure highlights interrelationship between finances, lines of communication, infrastructure, materials, knowledge, and personnel for a proliferation network to exist. (Hummel)

While the threshold for IED proliferation in terms of knowledge, materials, and skill is low, the WMD proliferation threshold by non-state actors has been relatively high. The type of WMD and desired method of employment contribute to the proliferation threshold. As previously mentioned, there have been 525 WMD incidents by non-state actors in a 26-year period, to include recent incidents with chemical weapons by the Islamic State and individuals within the United States who possessed the toxin ricin. In examining the network requirements outlined by Frumin, Moss, and Ellis, it is possible to deduce that WMD proliferation is heavily dependent on several factors such as knowledge, skilled personnel, infrastructure, and dual-use technology, with the exact dependence dictated by the type of WMD to be developed.

Perhaps the most notable WMD proliferation network was Abdul Qadeer Khan's nuclear technology network. Through a series of unconnected real and fake companies around the world, forged end-user certificates, unwitting shipping companies, and ignorant customs officials, A.Q. Khan was able to sell weapon designs, centrifuges, and raw materials to multiple states including Iran, Libya, and North Korea. As David Albright, Paul Brannan, and Andrea Stricker have highlighted, "the A.Q. Khan network demonstrated that it is possible for a shady transnational network of engineers, industrialists, and businessmen to sell turn-key nuclear weapons production facilities ... The conditions that led to the network remain: buyers with cash and people with access to classified nuclear know-how experience at designing as well as building nuclear facilities, and trafficking skills."<sup>12</sup> While A.Q. Khan's network sold materials to state actors, he could have just as easily sold the material to non-state actors. This does not imply that a terrorist could easily develop and employ a nuclear weapon, but rather that there are profit-minded suppliers willing to sell components to them.

While Molly MacCalman states "the link between trans-national illicit networks and nuclear proliferation thus remains central since

most countries, and certainly most terrorist organizations, will depend for the foreseeable future on illicit trade for the acquisition of nuclear equipment, material, and expertise," the dependence on these networks holds true for both chemical and biological weapons development as well.<sup>13</sup> Turkish Member of Parliament Eren Edrem, for example, claimed that chemical precursors necessary for the Islamic State to make sarin were smuggled through Turkey.<sup>14</sup> While there is no evidence that the Islamic State ever made the nerve agent sarin, findings by the organization Conflict Armament Research showed that the Turkish domestic market plays a predominant role in supplying chemical precursors for homemade explosives (HME).<sup>15</sup> While these precursors tend to be used for manufacturing homemade explosives, there is little difference between some HME precursors and a chemical weapon agent precursor. Similar to the vast majority of international shipments that occur daily, there is nothing illegal about shipping these raw materials themselves, especially since they have a dual-use in legal industries. It is the potential trans-loading, redirection, and end use of these proliferation components that result in the illegal development of chemical, biological, and possibly nuclear weapons.

In another example, there have been several ricin incidents in Western countries, including the United States and Germany, in the past few years—for example, several letters containing the toxin sent to U.S. government officials in October 2018.<sup>16</sup> Ricin is a simple toxin that can be extracted from castor beans and requires little knowledge to create but great skill to weaponize effectively, along with a few critical materials. The extraction is not the most complex process—one that a biochemist or molecular biologist might do on a daily basis, for example—but for the untrained, it can prove difficult. There is nothing illegal about possessing castor beans, possessing the knowledge of protein extraction and purification, or possessing equipment required to complete the process, but it is rare that a single individual or group would have all three

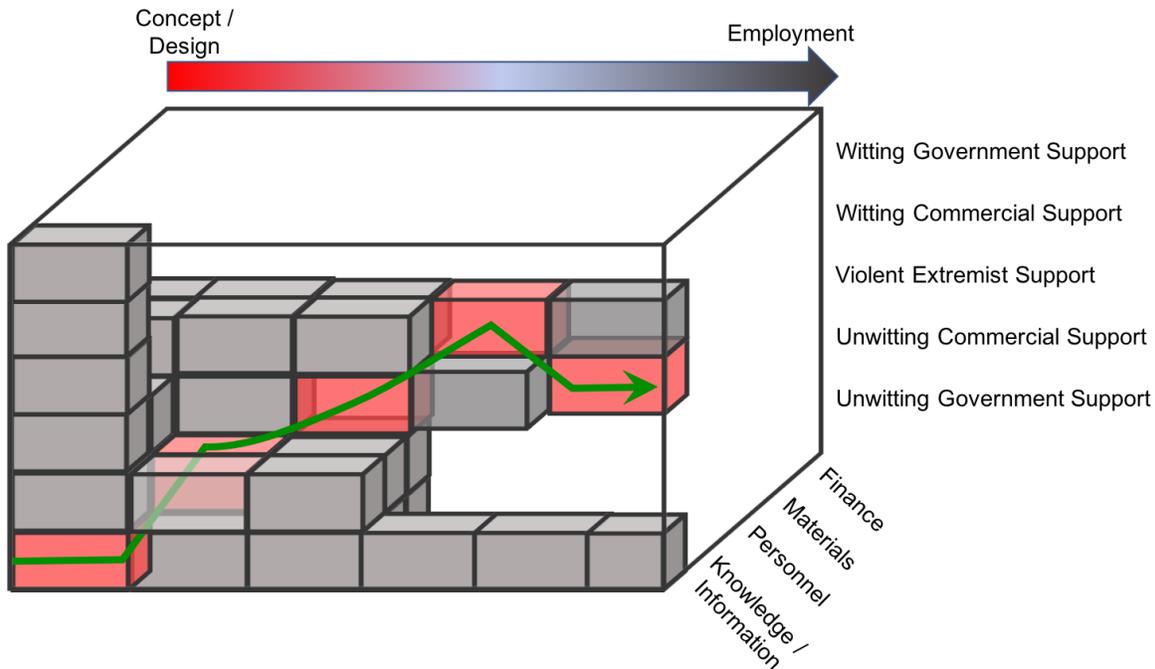


Figure 2. The pathway for proliferation—moving from concept and design (left) to employment (right)—is not linear (green line). Obstacles (grey boxes) range from financial constraints, possession of the necessary material, appropriate personnel, and scientific knowledge. For proliferators, there are opportunities (red boxes) to overcome these obstacles through government and commercial support, whether witting or unwitting, as well as assistance from other extremist organizations. It is these obstacles that enable interdiction of the network in order to deny or disrupt the proliferation of either IED or WMD. (Hummel)

readily available. The non-state actor generally requires a network to provide these materials and capabilities, regardless of whether the network is actively conspiring with the actor (illicit networks) or an unwitting accomplice (licit networks).

As highlighted in Figure 2, the pathway to WMD proliferation, like that of IED proliferation, is not linear. It is rare that a single individual would have the financial means and access to knowledge, materials, and infrastructure to single-handedly proliferate IEDs, let alone WMD. The Islamic State, for example, had only 109 (2.7%) members with any sort of STEM<sup>e</sup> background listed in 4,100 captured personnel records, and yet it was able to develop and employ sulfur mustard agent in several locations.<sup>17</sup> There are many factors and obstacles that must be overcome in order to move from concept and design to an employable weapon. Each step in the process can be seen as a discrete opportunity for interdiction. The path for employment is further complicated by the type of IED or WMD. Some simple IEDs merely repurpose artillery shells while others, such as the explosively formed projectile, require precise molding of a copper cap in order for it to transform into a molten slug capable of penetrating armor.

The complexity of the designed weapon dictates the intricacy of the proliferation network. The necessity for secrecy, resulting from

U.N. Security Council Resolution 1540,<sup>f</sup> the nuclear non-proliferation treaty, the bioweapons convention, and the chemical weapons convention, also makes the proliferation pathways more convoluted.

## Conclusion

Despite the different end-states of these two networks, IED or WMD, the elements of each are similar. It is this similarity that poses the risk and potential ease for an IED facilitation network to converge with a WMD proliferation network.<sup>18</sup> If such convergence happens, in an effort to push materials, information, financial support, personnel, and equipment more quickly and efficiently, WMD proliferation to and among non-state actors will be considerably easier. To be clear, convergence does not relate to a specific piece of knowledge, material, or person, but rather describes the occurrence of one network crossing over and enhancing the capabilities of another network, such as the proliferation materials capable of WMD production. In this instance, profit-minded IED facilitators could easily begin pushing WMD proliferation components. While the taboo associated with WMD may deter some suppliers, others are

e Science, technology, engineering, and mathematics.

f This U.N. Security Council Resolution from April 2004 states that “states shall refrain from providing any form of support to non-State actors that attempt to develop, acquire, manufacture, possess, transport, transfer or use nuclear, chemical or biological weapons and their means of delivery, in particular for terrorist purposes. The resolution requires all States to adopt and enforce appropriate laws to this effect as well as other effective measures to prevent the proliferation of these weapons and their means of delivery to non-State actors, in particular for terrorist purposes.” “UN Security Council Resolution 1540,” United Nations, April 28, 2004.

likely to remain focused on the profits, especially since the increased risk can correspond to increased profits. This may be too tempting for some suppliers to resist.

Given the potential threats discussed in this article, there are strong arguments for expanding ongoing efforts that address IED

facilitation networks, including applying lessons learned, to anticipate the potential for these same networks to proliferate the knowledge, material, financing, and access to infrastructure required for WMD development and employment. **CTC**

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# The ELN's Attack on the National Police Academy in Bogotá and Its Implications

By Ross Dayton

**The Colombian National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional, or ELN) conducted an apparent suicide car bombing in the capital city of Bogotá, an unprecedented tactic for the group. The attack also marked the end of the contentious peace talks between the Colombian government and the ELN. The ELN's decentralized structure enables hardline factions to carry out attacks that undermine peace talks, often against the will of its leadership. These factions have been enabled by growing illicit trafficking operations and expansion within Venezuelan territory.**

**O**n January 17, 2019, the Colombian National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional, or ELN) conducted a car bomb attack on the General Santander National Police Academy in Bogotá, effectively bringing the peace talks between the Colombian government and the ELN to a halt. The attack sparked condemnation throughout Colombia and from the international community. Thousands of Colombians marched in the streets to protest the attack on the following day.<sup>1</sup> Colombian President Iván Duque reinstated the arrest warrants for the 10 members of the ELN's negotiation delegation in Havana, Cuba.<sup>2</sup>

Peace talks<sup>a</sup> between the Colombian government and the ELN in past years were tumultuous. Often regarded as the last left-wing guerrilla force in Colombia after the 2016 peace agreement with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia, or FARC), the ELN proved to be a more difficult negotiating partner. Unlike the FARC, whose leadership was capable of reining in the majority of its cadres into supporting the peace process, ELN leaders pushing for negotiations often could

a Secret talks between the Colombian government and the ELN began in 2014 to set an agenda for peace negotiations. Peace talks were publicly announced in March 2016, but the negotiations that followed were slow and contentious due to vague goals, demands for the ELN to release its hostages, and ELN attacks on Colombian security forces. Peace talks were suspended after right-wing President Iván Duque was inaugurated in 2018. "The Missing Peace: Colombia's New Government and Last Guerrillas," International Crisis Group, July 12, 2018; "Iván Duque dice que solo explorará paz con ELN si libera a 'todos' sus rehenes," *Comercio*, September 8, 2018.

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not control their more militant factions.<sup>3</sup>

## Bombing in Bogotá

On January 17, 2019, the ELN conducted a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED) attack on the General Santander National Police Academy. The attack was the deadliest Bogotá had experienced in years, killing 21 police cadets and injuring 68 more. Colombian authorities tied the attack to the Domingo Laín Front, a belligerent ELN division based in Arauca Department.<sup>4b</sup> The bomber, José Aldemar Rojas Rodríguez, drove a 1993 Nissan Patrol carrying 80 kilograms of pentolite<sup>c</sup> to the academy.<sup>5</sup> Rojas died while carrying out the attack, but it is not known if it was an intentional suicide VBIED (SVBIED) attack.<sup>6</sup> Colombian investigators found that the bomb was triggered by a car alarm, which could have been triggered by Rojas or someone else within a 500-meter range.<sup>7</sup>

The ELN claimed responsibility for the academy attack on January 21. According to the ELN, the attack was in retaliation of a Colombian military bombing on one of its bases during a unilateral ceasefire in late December 2018.<sup>8</sup> However, Colombia's Attorney General Néstor Humberto Martínez claims that planning had started at least 10 months before the academy attack.<sup>9</sup> Rojas bought the vehicle in Arauca under his own name in May 2018.<sup>10</sup> Colombian authorities determined that the vehicle was brought to the neighborhood of Usme in Bogotá in order to load the pentolite and the IED onto it.<sup>11</sup>

On the day of the attack, Rojas drove the vehicle approximately 10 kilometers north to the academy.<sup>12</sup> CCTV footage released by Spanish newspaper *El País* reveals that two individuals riding on a motorcycle followed Rojas throughout most of the trip.<sup>13</sup> Initial reports claimed that the VBIED had alerted a bomb-sniffing dog at the entrance of the academy, but this was debunked by the Colombian Ministry of Defense.<sup>14</sup> Rojas sped through the northern entrance of the academy campus after two unrelated motorcycles entered, which alerted security officers on the campus.<sup>15</sup> According to Colombian media reports, Rojas drove around the campus for 42 seconds while passing groups of cadets and officers.<sup>16</sup> He then drove to the eastern gate of the campus, where he was stopped by an armed security officer.<sup>17</sup> Rojas reversed and drove back into the campus before the VBIED detonated.<sup>18</sup>

According to open source SVBIED researcher Hugo Kaaman, the graduation ceremony taking place at the academy that day was

b Colombia is made up of 32 departments and a capital district. Arauca Department is located in the northeast of the country on the border with Venezuela.

c Pentolite is a highly explosive material consisting of PETN and TNT. It is used for both military and non-military purposes. The amount of pentolite in the VBIED would have been enough to destroy a four- to five-story building. "Con carga explosiva del atentado se podía derribar edificio de 5 pisos," *Tiempo*, January 18, 2019.



*Police cars and a fire truck are seen outside General Santander Police Academy in Bogotá, Colombia, on January 18, 2019, the day after a car bomb attack killed 21 people. (Daniel Muñoz/AFP/Getty Images)*

the most probable target of the attack.<sup>19</sup> The detonation occurred in an open area close to the location of the ceremony.<sup>20</sup> The fact that Rojas drove past several groups of cadets and police before the VBIED was detonated suggests that Rojas was seeking out a specific target.<sup>21</sup> Kaaman believes that Rojas drove to the eastern gate of the academy in an attempt to abort the mission after not locating the intended target.<sup>22</sup> Additionally, it seems unlikely that the VBIED was detonated remotely due to Rojas' movements throughout the campus. Therefore, Rojas most likely detonated the bomb by the nearest group of cadets out of desperation from being discovered.

### The ELN's First Suicide Bombing?

While VBIED attacks are commonly conducted by Colombian guerrilla and criminal groups, the academy attack appears to be the first suicide bombing of its scale in the country. Previous IED attacks by the ELN did not involve the death of the bomber. The University of Chicago's Suicide Attack Database does not list any suicide attacks in Colombia before the end of its dataset in June 2016.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, the deliberate use of SVBIED tactics would be an unprecedented development for the ELN that would have significant implications for Colombian security forces.

There are reasons to doubt that the Bogotá attack was intentionally planned as a suicide attack. It seems unlikely that someone of the rank of Rojas would be selected for a suicide mission. At 56 years of age, Rojas had been a member of the Domingo Laín Front since 1994.<sup>24</sup> He became an explosives expert who allegedly taught explosive techniques to ELN cadres in Venezuela.<sup>25</sup> Rojas eventually rose in the ranks of the ELN organization and served in the security detail of ELN commander Nicolás Rodríguez Bautista (aka Gabino).<sup>26</sup> Rojas briefly commanded the Camilo Cienfuegos Commission under the Eastern War Front in 2015 before being promoted as an intelligence chief.<sup>27</sup> Someone of Rojas' experience and expertise would have undoubtedly better served the guerrilla group alive.

While suicide terrorism is typically associated with jihadi movements, suicide bombing tactics have been used by secular nation-

alist groups, such as the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), as a means of fighting the perceived foreign occupation of their homelands.<sup>28</sup> However, this does not apply to the ELN as it neither represents a distinct ethno-national group in Colombia nor holds secessionist aspirations. Furthermore, the ELN does not have a tradition of martyrdom or cult of personality that the PKK, LTTE, and other suicide terrorist groups practice.<sup>29</sup> Additionally, with a month having now elapsed since the attack, the ELN's main website contains no posts honoring Rojas as a martyr, so it does not appear that the ELN is adopting a suicide-martyrdom culture.<sup>d</sup>

Nonetheless, the possibility of the attack being a planned suicide mission cannot be entirely dismissed. The General Santander Police Academy was a high-value target for the ELN. The ELN claimed that the academy was a legitimate military target with no non-combatants,<sup>30</sup> and the scheduled graduation ceremony ensured the presence of a large number of security personnel. In addition, heightened security at the academy would make it difficult for the bomber to enter or escape without raising suspicion. Suicide bombing tactics can all but guarantee the success of an attack and maximize the number of casualties. Suicide terrorism scholar Robert Pape claims that suicide attacks typically inflict much higher casualties, with the average suicide attack killing 10 people and the average non-suicide attack killing one.<sup>31</sup>

### The ELN's Structure and Methods of Operating

The ELN has a decentralized command structure consisting of the Central Command ("Comando Central" in Spanish, or COCE) at its head, six regional "War Fronts," and multiple subdivisions and units

<sup>d</sup> Many of the ELN's social media accounts were suspended after the academy attack. However, the ELN website remains operational and active. "¿Cómo define Twitter cuándo bloquea una cuenta?" *Tiempo*, January 18, 2019.

underneath.<sup>32</sup> With operations in over 112 municipalities across Colombia,<sup>33</sup> local ELN fronts can practice a significant degree of local autonomy.<sup>34</sup> While its decentralized structure has helped the ELN remain resilient against attacks from Colombian security forces, it has also made it difficult for the group to reach a consensus in the peace negotiations. This was on display with the academy attack, as ELN commander Pablo Beltrán claimed that the ELN's leadership in Havana did not have prior knowledge of the attack.<sup>35</sup> If true, it indicates that the attack was carried out unilaterally by the Domingo Laín Front.

The Domingo Laín Front, the largest and wealthiest militia in the ELN, is headed by COCE leader Gustavo Aníbal Giraldo Quinchía (aka Pablito). Pablito is often regarded as the most belligerent commander in the ELN.<sup>36</sup> Although he does not outright reject peace talks with the Colombian government, Pablito is the most critical of the negotiations among the ELN leadership.<sup>37</sup> Under Pablito's command, the Domingo Laín Front has carried out multiple attacks on Colombian security forces that have undermined the peace talks. In 2015, the Domingo Laín Front launched an attack on Colombian security forces in Boyaca that left 11 soldiers and one police officer dead.<sup>38</sup> The Domingo Laín Front is also believed to have been responsible for a bombing attack in Bogotá's financial district in 2015.<sup>39</sup> In 2016, the Domingo Laín Front launched another attack on a military base in Fortul less than four months after the Colombian government and the ELN publicly announced peace talks.<sup>40</sup>

The Domingo Laín Front, under the Eastern War Front, is based in Arauca, Colombia. Arauca is a largely rural department adjacent to the eastern border with Venezuela that is rich with natural resources, including oil. The Domingo Laín Front often targets multinational oil companies operating in Arauca with infrastructure attacks, extortion, and kidnappings.<sup>41</sup> According to the Domingo Laín Front, the presence of foreign oil companies in Arauca is exploitative and destructive to the local environment and economy.<sup>42</sup> The group promotes a narrative of nationalistic resistance against multinational oil companies in order to gain local support for its activities.<sup>43</sup> Extorting oil production is also a key source of income that has helped the Domingo Laín Front establish itself as the dominant non-state armed group in the region.<sup>44</sup> Since 2016, the Domingo Laín Front has expanded its territory along the border in Arauca and the neighboring Venezuelan state of Apure, including areas previously controlled by the FARC.<sup>45</sup>

The Domingo Laín Front is not the only ELN division to attack the Colombian government to the detriment of the peace talks. The Western War Front, an ELN division based in Chocó on the Pacific Coast, is also known for carrying out attacks and kidnappings that have undermined negotiations. The kidnapping of former congressman Odín Sánchez is a notable example. The Western War Front's initial refusal to release Sánchez caused delays in the peace talks in October 2016.<sup>46</sup> Peace talks did not resume until Sánchez was finally released in February 2017.<sup>47</sup> According to General Mauricio Moreno, the head of operations against the faction, the Western War Front is "completely detached" from the peace talks.<sup>48</sup> The Western War Front's involvement in local drug trafficking makes it resistant to negotiations, as greater revenues embolden it to take a more belligerent stance.<sup>49</sup> Similarly, the Southwestern War Front, an ELN division based in the Department of Nariño, a major cocaine production hub, is also reportedly opposed to the peace talks.<sup>50</sup>

In addition, the ELN has a dedicated unit for conducting attacks in major cities called the Urban War Front. The Urban War

Front's most notable attack was on a police station in Barranquilla on January 27, 2018, that killed five police officers and left 40 injured.<sup>51</sup> Founded in 2014, the Urban War Front operates in Bogotá, Medellín, Cucúta, Cali, Barranquilla, Bucaramanga, and Popayán.<sup>52</sup> The Urban War Front, like other War Fronts, has its own command and subdivisions in each of the aforementioned cities.<sup>53</sup> While the larger and older ELN Fronts based in rural areas already have operational cells in several major Colombian cities, the creation of the Urban War Front demonstrates that the ELN is making urban attacks a greater priority.<sup>54</sup> It is not clear if the Urban War Front's Bogotá cell, the Jorge Eliecer Gaitan Front, was involved in the academy attack. However, the cell is responsible for up to 17 attacks in the nation's capital since 2014.<sup>55</sup>

### The ELN in Venezuela

While the Venezuelan and Colombian governments cooperated against the ELN before Hugo Chávez came into power in Venezuela in 1999,<sup>56</sup> the ELN now operates in 12 Venezuelan states with virtual impunity under the Maduro government, including states that border Guyana and Brazil.<sup>57</sup> Operating in Venezuelan territory allows ELN fighters to escape the jurisdiction of Colombian security forces and exploit opportunities for illicit financing and recruitment. Corrupt Venezuelan government and military officials have created ties with the ELN over the years and support its cross-border illicit trafficking operations.<sup>58</sup> Venezuelan government officials are allegedly supporting the ELN in taking over illegal mining operations from local criminal groups.<sup>59</sup> According to Américo De Grazia, a Venezuelan National Assembly representative for the State of Bolívar, the Maduro government regards the ELN as a more organized and dependable partner in the illicit enterprise than the local criminal groups.<sup>60</sup>

Additionally, Arauca's border with Apure serves as an important entry point for the ELN into Venezuela.<sup>61</sup> The Domingo Laín Front's Border Commission controls cross-border drug trafficking and illicit smuggling into Venezuela.<sup>62</sup> Colombian intelligence officials believe that Pablito commands the Eastern War Front from Apure.<sup>63</sup> Over the past three years, the Eastern War Front expanded from Apure into the Orinoco mining arch region in the states of Bolívar and Amazonas to exploit illegal mining.<sup>64</sup> In addition, alleged negotiations between the ELN and FARC dissident groups to coordinate their activities have reportedly taken place in Apure.<sup>65</sup>

As the political and economic crisis in Venezuela worsens, the Maduro government may come to rely more on the ELN and other Colombian guerrilla groups for support against the Colombian government. The government has created paramilitary groups called "border security *colectivos*" that allegedly recruited former FARC members into their ranks.<sup>66</sup> The border security *colectivos* reportedly work alongside the ELN and other groups in the border states of Apure, Táchira, and Zulia.<sup>67</sup> The *colectivos* were allegedly deployed at the Colombian border in Táchira to support the Venezuelan police and military's efforts to block humanitarian aid requested by opposition leader and declared interim president Juan Guaido.<sup>68</sup>

### Future Prospects for the Peace Process

In essence, the academy attack in Bogotá brought the already deteriorating peace talks to an end. Colombian President Duque broke with the negotiation protocols agreement, reinstated arrest warrants for ELN leaders, and called for the ELN negotiators in Havana to be extradited back to Colombia.<sup>69</sup> In response, the Cu-

ban government called on the Colombian government to continue respecting the negotiation protocols.<sup>70</sup> Cuba has refused to hand over the ELN negotiators until their safety is guaranteed, as the protocols require.<sup>71</sup> While the Cuban government condemned the attack in Bogotá, it still seeks to preserve the peace talks and continue serving as a mediator between the Colombian government and the guerrillas.

The ELN peace talks were already struggling under Duque's right-wing government. Duque was a vocal critic of the FARC peace deal; during his election campaign, he promised to implement stricter measures on former FARC members and take a tougher stance when negotiating with the ELN.<sup>72</sup> In addition, Duque is the protégé of former President Álvaro Uribe, who was known for his heavy-handed approach toward the guerrillas.<sup>73</sup> Duque has demanded that the ELN release all of its hostages and cease its illegal activities before continuing the peace talks.<sup>74</sup> Furthermore, Duque claims that his government is not obliged to follow negotiation protocols agreed upon by his predecessor, Juan Manuel Santos.<sup>75</sup>

The regression of the FARC peace deal has also made ELN militants skeptical of peace negotiations. An increasing number of former FARC members are becoming disillusioned with the peace deal due to lack of protection from attacks by various right-wing paramilitary groups and criminal organizations.<sup>76</sup> At least 75 former FARC members have been killed since the group demobilized in 2016.<sup>77</sup> Many former FARC members feel that the government has not kept its promises of providing healthcare, education, or water.<sup>78</sup> Up to 2,800 former FARC fighters, or approximately 40 percent of the FARC's total force before the peace deal, are taking up arms again and forming dissident groups.<sup>79</sup>

Additionally, the Colombian government is failing to fill the void that the FARC left in many rural areas, resulting in a race between guerrilla and criminal groups to take over their old territories and drug trafficking operations.<sup>80</sup> The ELN in particular has gained significant ground since the FARC demobilized, with its presence

expanding in more than 16 municipalities since 2016.<sup>81</sup> However, right-wing paramilitary and cartel groups have also expanded into territories left behind by the FARC.<sup>82</sup>

Furthermore, the total number of human rights activists and civil society leaders killed throughout Colombia since the FARC peace agreement is alarmingly high. Since the FARC peace deal went into effect in November 2016, more than 439 social leaders have been assassinated.<sup>83</sup> According to the Colombian Commission of Jurists (CCJ), the killing of social leaders is a targeted, systematic effort meant to stop community organizing.<sup>84</sup> The CCJ claims that the killings are not being committed by any single group, but represent a "paramilitary phenomenon" involving a wide range of armed actors with ties to the government and criminal organizations.<sup>85</sup> The ELN often cites the rampant killing of social activists as justification for its militant activities,<sup>86</sup> and these unchecked murders make it less likely for ELN fighters to agree to demobilization.

## Conclusion

The academy attack highlights the difficulties of bringing the 54-year conflict in Colombia to a definitive end. Militant ELN factions are increasingly emboldened by illicit financing, the takeover of the FARC's former areas of operation, and expansion in Venezuela. Growing skepticism of peace talks with the Colombian government also dissuades ELN guerrillas from engaging in talks to demobilize.

The ongoing crisis in Venezuela will continue giving guerrilla groups such as the ELN and FARC dissidents a place for refuge and opportunities for financing and recruitment. The Venezuelan government may possibly provide greater support to Colombian guerrillas as tensions rise with the United States and Colombia. Furthermore, the popular outrage against the academy attack has given President Iván Duque a stronger mandate to take a harder approach against the ELN and reject attempts at peace negotiations. **CTC**

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