



COMBATING TERRORISM CENTER AT WEST POINT

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FEATURE ARTICLE

## The Fragility of the Good Friday Peace

The persistence of terrorism in Northern Ireland

AARON EDWARDS

A VIEW FROM THE CT FOXHOLE

## Edmund Fitton-Brown

ISIL (DAESH)/AL-QAIDA/TALIBAN  
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UNITED NATIONS

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## FROM THE EDITOR

The murder earlier this month of journalist Lyra McKee in Northern Ireland on the night before Good Friday illustrates the fragility of peace in a region in which terrorist violence has persisted. In our cover article, Aaron Edwards writes that this was “the latest in a series of incidents that have raised the specter of a surge in terrorist violence in Northern Ireland.” In examining the evolution of the threat from militant groupings on both sides of the sectarian divide, he notes there has been a “blurring of the concepts of terrorism and criminality that challenges orthodox perspectives on the security landscape in Northern Ireland.”

Our interview is with Edmund Fitton-Brown, the Coordinator of the ISIL (Daesh)/Al-Qaida/Taliban Monitoring Team at the United Nations.

This issue features the concluding article of a two-article series focused on IED and WMD network convergence. The first article, published in our February 2019 issue, warned there was a high risk that profit-minded suppliers within vast, transnational IED networks may expand in the future into WMD proliferation. In the second article, Major Stephen Hummel, Lieutenant Colonel Douglas McNair, Colonel F. John Burpo, and Brigadier General James Bonner examine in greater detail the ways this could happen.

Audrey Alexander and Bennett Clifford examine the threat posed by Islamic State-affiliated hackers and hacking groups. Through “analysis of several U.S. prosecutions of Islamic State-affiliated hackers and their networks, proficiencies, and activities,” they argue that “very few of these actors demonstrate advanced hacking or cyberterrorism capabilities.”

Caleb Weiss examines the evolution of the threat posed by the Islamic State in Somalia, noting the group, “which is believed to only number in the low hundreds of fighters, appears to have significantly expanded its operations across Somalia, albeit from a relatively low base.” He argues the resulting reignition of tensions with the much larger al-Qa`ida affiliate al-Shabaab means “it is far from clear whether the Islamic State in Somalia will be able to sustain its operational expansion.”

Paul Cruickshank, *Editor in Chief*

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*Cover: Armed police in Creggan,*

*Londonderry, Northern Ireland, on April 18,*

*2019, after shots were fired and gasoline*

*bombs were thrown at police. (Niall Carson/*

*Press Association via AP Images)*

# The Fragility of the Good Friday Peace: The Persistence of Terrorism in Northern Ireland

By Aaron Edwards

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**The murder of a journalist, a recent car bombing in Northern Ireland, and a series of parcel bombs sent to key transport hubs in London and to the University of Glasgow have raised the specter of a renewed terror campaign by militant Irish Republicans. Commentators have been quick to tie the attacks to the United Kingdom's planned exit from the European Union. However, this assertion obscures more than it reveals. Since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement peace deal in 1998, militant Ulster loyalists have been responsible for slightly more security-related deaths than republicans. The continuing presence of violent groups on both sides of the ethno-national divide, therefore, points to broader imperfections in the peace process. Moreover, the challenge posed by these groupings is significantly different than it was 25 years ago when the paramilitary ceasefires were announced. There has been a blurring of the concepts of terrorism and criminality that challenges orthodox perspectives on the security landscape in Northern Ireland.**

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*The author wishes to dedicate this article to the memory of Lyra McKee, an extraordinary journalist and a dear friend whose reporting did so much to shed light on the challenges still facing Northern Ireland.*

**T**he murder of the journalist Lyra McKee in Northern Ireland on the night before Good Friday illustrates the fragility of peace in a region in which terrorist violence has remained persistent. Dissident Republicans<sup>a</sup> were blamed for shooting her during rioting after police searches in Derry/Londonderry's Creggan area on the night of April 18, 2019.<sup>1</sup> It was the latest in a series of incidents that have raised the specter of a surge in terrorist violence in Northern Ireland.

On January 19, 2019, a bomb exploded outside the courthouse in

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a Editor's note: In the Northern Ireland context, Republican refers to a political movement seeking to create an independent and united Ireland.

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Derry/Londonderry. It was a busy Saturday night in the city center, and a number of civilians, including young children, narrowly escaped injury. A group calling itself the IRA (Irish Republican Army, or *Óglaigh na hÉireann* in Gaelic) later claimed in a statement that it had carried out the attack in Northern Ireland's second-largest city. The van used in the attack had been hijacked a short time prior to the explosion.<sup>2</sup> A statement issued to *The Derry Journal* newspaper by this 'New IRA' was redolent of old IRA rhetoric, suggesting, in typically verbose language, that it would "continue to strike at crown forces and personnel and their imperial establishment." The group warned those "who collaborate with the British that they are to desist immediately as no more warnings will be given." Interestingly, the group claimed that "all this talk of Brexit, hard borders, soft borders, has no bearing on our actions and the IRA won't be going anywhere. Our fight goes on."<sup>3</sup>

On March 5, 2019, a series of parcel bombs were discovered at the Compass Centre near Heathrow Airport, Waterloo railway station, and City Aviation House at London City Airport. The next day another suspect package was received at the University of Glasgow, where bomb-disposal officers carried out a controlled explosion.<sup>4</sup> The New IRA again claimed responsibility for sending these devices.<sup>5</sup>

Police in Northern Ireland have stated they believe the New IRA were also likely responsible for the murder of the investigative journalist Lyra McKee during rioting in the Creggan estate late on the evening of April 18, 2019. The Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) stated that a gunman fired shots toward police officers and that they were treating the attack as a "terrorist incident."<sup>6</sup> The BBC reported, "Mobile phone footage taken by a bystander during Thursday night's rioting appears to show a masked gunman crouching down on the street and opening fire with a handgun," mortally wounding McKee who was standing near a police vehicle. According to the BBC, police had entered the Creggan estate in an intelligence-led operation to search for weapons and ammunition out of concern "they could be used in the days ahead to attack officers."<sup>7</sup> A riot had ensued in which more than 50 gasoline bombs were thrown.<sup>8</sup>

While disturbing, this latest spike in terrorist activity must be seen in its broader context. Dissident republican activity has been ongoing ever since the dominant Provisional IRA split in 1986 over whether it should take its seats in Dáil Éireann (the lower house of the Irish Parliament).<sup>9</sup> Several of its members left to form Republican Sinn Féin, a group that sprouted an armed group in the form of the Continuity IRA when the Provisionals later called a ceasefire in 1994. While negotiating terms of entry into the peace process, the Provisionals broke their ceasefire in February 1996 with a huge bomb attack on London's financial district. After reinstating their truce in July 1997, the Provisionals then split again, prompting the formation of the Real IRA, which killed 29 people and two unborn children in a car bomb attack in the small Northern Irish town of



*A burning car on April 18, 2019, in Creggan, Londonderry, Northern Ireland, after gasoline bombs were thrown at police. (Niall Carson/Press Association via AP Images)*

Omagh a year later.<sup>10</sup> Despite the signing of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement in 1998, which brought an end to major hostilities between the mainstream loyalist and republican factions, both the Continuity IRA and Real IRA continued to reject the peace process and remain unbowed in their objective of ending British rule in Ireland by violent means.<sup>11</sup>

In 2012, the Real IRA merged with a loose confederation of smaller splinter groups, including the so-called Republican Action Against Drugs vigilante grouping, to form the New IRA.<sup>12</sup> The New IRA is regarded as the deadliest of all of the militant republican organizations operating in Northern Ireland today. Responsible for over 40 attacks since its formation, it also sprouted a political party in 2016 known as Saoradh. According to the outgoing chief constable of the PSNI, George Hamilton, there is “significant overlap between the leadership of both the New IRA and Saoradh ... They are not quite one and the same. There are a number of people who are very senior in the New IRA who are also senior in the leadership of Saoradh.”<sup>13</sup> In January 2019, *The Times* reported that the United Kingdom’s security service MI5 had more than 700 officers stationed in Belfast to tackle the threat posed by dissident republican terrorism, with the chief threat seen as coming from approximately 40 members of the New IRA.<sup>14</sup> And MI5’s numbers were reportedly being boosted further ahead of this Easter (Sunday, April 21) because of concern the group might carry out attacks to mark the IRA’s Easter Rising.<sup>15</sup>

In light of the heightened media attention surrounding the activities of armed groups like the New IRA, this article provides an analysis of the Northern Ireland security situation. It examines the recent activity of militant Irish Republican groups, arguing that their violence is best understood not as a by-product of the uncertainty generated by Brexit but as a symptom of the imperfections in the peace process. Moreover, it makes the case that the persistent threat of terrorism in Northern Ireland must be assessed as a phe-

nomenon that emanates from *both* Irish republicans *and* Ulster loyalists.

### **New IRA, Old Terrorism**

Militant Irish republicans have been using explosives to draw attention to their radical agenda ever since dynamite was first used by members of the Fenian Brotherhood in London in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>16</sup> The car bomb was first used by the IRA in the early 1970s, with the group’s then Chief of Staff Sean MacStiofáin calling it a weapon of the “utmost ferocity and ruthlessness.”<sup>17</sup> Like other terrorist groups around the world, the bomb offered the Provisionals “a dramatic, yet fairly easy and often risk-free, means of drawing attention” to their cause.<sup>18</sup> The location of the January 2019 attack in Derry city center had echoes of the Provisional IRA’s first major commercial bombing blitz in the city almost half a century earlier. Under the direction of the Officer Commanding of the Derry IRA, Martin McGuinness,<sup>19</sup> the campaign succeeded in causing massive disruption to the local economy, until the group realized that those most affected by the violence were the city’s dominant nationalist community. Throughout the period 1968-1994, during what is euphemistically known as “The Troubles,” McGuinness remained the towering IRA figure in the city.<sup>20</sup> Highly revered by supporters,<sup>21</sup> he was characterized as a hawk until his attitude softened in the 1990s and he eventually led negotiations between the IRA and the British Government aimed at ending the armed conflict.<sup>22</sup>

Martin McGuinness would later serve as the deputy to First Minister Ian Paisley, the then Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) leader, in the Northern Ireland Executive reconstituted in May 2007. His new role was indicative of the peaceful transition made by Irish Republicans from war to peace. In 2009, he led condemnation of the Real IRA’s murder of two off-duty soldiers and a police officer by referring to those who carried out the attacks as “traitors to the island of Ireland.”<sup>23</sup> McGuinness eventually resigned from

his post in January 2017, citing the arrogance of senior DUP leaders in their handling of allegations of high-level corruption.<sup>24</sup> This move effectively pulled down the power-sharing system. However, McGuinness's death in March 2017 also inadvertently removed a key opponent of the continuation of physical force republicanism.<sup>25</sup> The subsequent concentration of a tiny rump of New IRA members in Derry and the northwest of Northern Ireland in recent years,<sup>26</sup> highlights the difficulty of consigning this militant tradition to atrophy. According to academic Jonathan Tonge, "Irish republicanism has taken many forms and no single organisation can claim monopoly." Rather, it is the "product of a fusion of ideology, historical interpretation and contemporary circumstances"<sup>27</sup> that will remain a threat as long as there is a British presence in Ireland. In order to fully understand why such militancy continues, it is necessary to see it both as the product of history and of the imperfections inherent in the ongoing peace process.

### Northern Ireland's Imperfect Peace

It was the outbreak of intercommunal violence between Protestant unionists and Catholic nationalists in the late 1960s that saw the emergence of more sustained terrorist campaigns. During The Troubles, almost 4,000 people were killed and 10 times as many injured. In a relatively small population of 1.5 million people, republican paramilitaries were responsible for the largest number of deaths. They killed 2,057 people in contrast to the 1,027 killed by loyalists and 363 by British Security Forces.<sup>28</sup> For much of this period, the Security Forces regarded the IRA as the major threat to national security.<sup>29</sup> Loyalists were perceived differently, as a secondary concern.<sup>30</sup> The two principal loyalist groupings are the Ulster Defence Association (UDA), formed in 1971, and the older Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), formed in 1965, prior to the outbreak of The Troubles. The vast majority of loyalist killings (74.1 percent) between 1966 and their ceasefires in 1994 were of Catholic civilians.<sup>31</sup> While the IRA eventually disarmed in 2005, as a result of gaining political concessions from the British, it would take a further four years for loyalist paramilitaries to end their respective armed campaigns.<sup>32</sup> Meanwhile, disenchantment with the emerging political dispensation manifested itself in violent ways, most notably when the UDA and UVF orchestrated large-scale civil disturbances in 2005 and 2011.<sup>33</sup>

More significantly, a loyalist demonstration against the removal of the Union Flag from Belfast City Hall in early December 2012 sparked months of leaderless protests, mostly organized on an ad hoc and opportunistic basis via social networks.<sup>34</sup> The total cost of the policing operation to contain the protests was £21.9 million.<sup>35</sup> Arguably, these protests had multiple drivers, ranging from alienation, frustration, and anger to a disconnection with the local political institutions.<sup>36</sup> Unsurprisingly, loyalist paramilitaries moved quickly to harness this discontent by recruiting young people into their ranks and thereby deepened their coercive control over local communities.<sup>37</sup>

The failure to tackle the scourge of loyalist paramilitarism has undoubtedly ensured it remains a clear and present danger to community safety long after the leaderless protests subsided. Indeed, the steady rate of politically motivated killings in Northern Ireland over the past 20 years supports this assertion.<sup>38</sup> Since the signing of the 1998 agreement, there have been over 156 deaths linked to the security situation.<sup>39</sup> In terms of attribution, militant republicans

account for less than half of these murders,<sup>40</sup> while militant loyalists have been responsible for 78 deaths.<sup>41</sup> Admittedly, from the peak of political killings in 1998, when 71 people lost their lives, there has been a recognizable decline in attacks, with only two security-related deaths, 37 shooting incidents, and 15 bombings recorded by police in the 12 months prior to March 2019.<sup>42</sup>

In terms of the overall picture today, the threat level for Irish terrorism in Northern Ireland is currently set at "severe," meaning an attack is highly likely, while it remains at the more downgraded "moderate" level in Great Britain.<sup>43</sup> The responsibility for setting threat levels sits with the Joint Terrorism Analysis Center (JTAC), a cross-government and interagency grouping housed in MI5's Thames House headquarters in central London. Additionally, between January 1, 2014, and December 31, 2018, 833 people were arrested in Northern Ireland under the United Kingdom's Terrorism Act (2000), with 551 of these released unconditionally.<sup>44</sup> A report completed by the PSNI and MI5, concluded that dissident Republicans "pose a severe threat to NI's [Northern Ireland's] security and stability."<sup>45</sup> Amidst the overall decrease in activity, the government has said that maintaining "vigilance in the face of this continuing threat remains essential."<sup>46</sup>

### Counterterrorism Responses

Throughout The Troubles and the peace process, it was the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) and its successor, the PSNI, backed by the British Army and MI5, that spearheaded counterterrorism operations. Since 2007, MI5 have taken the lead in combating all Northern Ireland-Related Terrorism (NIRT).<sup>47</sup> According to the security agency, the "majority of current national security resources and attention is focused on dissident republicans as these groups pose the greatest threat," with loyalist paramilitary groups thought to "pose further public order challenges for the PSNI."<sup>48</sup> At the end of March 2016, NIRT accounted for around 18 percent of MI5's total operational and investigative resources, with some 64 percent directed at International Counter Terrorism (ICT) efforts.<sup>49</sup> One year later, the allocation of MI5 resources directed toward NIRT had risen to 22 percent, with ICT-related tasking remaining constant.<sup>50</sup>

Much of the successful containment of NIRT has been achieved through the use of covert human intelligence sources or "agents."<sup>51</sup> MI5 regards agents as the "most significant information gathering assets" at its disposal.<sup>52</sup> In the period 2009-2013, the PSNI spent £414,228.75 on agents.<sup>53</sup> While a sizable amount, it contrasts sharply with the much larger figure the RUC was spending 30 years earlier at the height of The Troubles. Historically, agents have been employed against republicans (and to a lesser extent loyalists). Given the fact that the United Kingdom's domestic agent-running agency, MI5, has been in the lead on NIRT, it may be safely assumed that the recent ceasefire declared by *Óglaigh na hÉireann* (known colloquially as "ONH"), a dissident Republican group formed in 2005,<sup>54</sup> was achieved with the aid of human intelligence, even if it is impossible to say whether its use was decisive.<sup>b</sup> In January 2018,

b The three principal forms of intelligence gathering traditionally utilized in Northern Ireland have been surveillance, interrogation, and the use of agents and informers. See Bradley Bamford, "The Role and Effectiveness of Intelligence in Northern Ireland," *Intelligence and National Security* 20:4 (2005): pp. 581-607.

its leadership announced that it was suspending all “armed actions against the British state,” claiming they remained “unbowed and unbroken.”<sup>55</sup> The group had sporadic successes, including carrying out a car bomb attack on a Catholic police officer in 2010 and another on Palace Barracks, the British Army’s base in Belfast, which, perhaps as symbolically, is also home to MI5 in the region.<sup>56</sup> In all, ONH, the New IRA, and the Continuity IRA have carried out between 15 and 40 such attacks each year since 2000.<sup>57</sup> A key question arising from this discussion, therefore, must be: Why do these groups continue to do what they do?

### From Terrorism to Dark Networks

As indicated above, the end of major armed hostilities in Northern Ireland in the late 1990s did not lead to the complete termination of terrorism or criminality.<sup>58</sup> While political parties close to both republican and loyalist paramilitary groupings signed up to the emerging peace process, their respective armed wings appeared to undergo a metamorphosis into criminally motivated organizations as the political context increasingly rendered their original utility obsolete.<sup>59</sup> Additionally, loyalism has been much more fragmented since the UVF and UDA called a halt to their armed campaigns in 2009. As indicated above, this led to the development of a radical echo chamber on social networking sites where younger loyalists became increasingly radicalized, with some 700 arrested for riotous behavior around the ‘flag protests’ in 2012-2014.<sup>60</sup> This has challenged loyalist political parties, like the Progressive Unionist Party (PUP), enjoying close links to the UVF, which have attempted to harness discontent. PUP leader Billy Hutchinson has repeatedly stressed the need to politically educate young loyalists, though there is little evidence of a softening of attitudes amongst those born in the years since the ending of major hostilities.<sup>61</sup>

How are such changes to be understood? Perhaps the most useful conceptual lens available to help explain these changes can be found in the literature on the crime-terror nexus.<sup>62</sup> Simply put, this is where terrorism and criminality intersect and often become blurred.<sup>63</sup> Scholars have observed how “collectives” or “cartels” frequently “come together in post-conflict or transitional environments in order to survive, not only thrive in and promote chaotic and unstable situations, but become dominant actors in shadow economies.”<sup>64</sup> With the decline in the state-sponsorship of terrorism in the post-Cold War era, terrorists increasingly turned to forging alliances with criminals. The crime-terror nexus and—more recently—the work on dark networks demonstrate that there is much more synchronization between terrorists and criminals than was previously acknowledged.<sup>65</sup> The pioneering scholarly work of Victor Asal and others has added considerable nuance to analysts’ understanding of how and why these militant groups do what they do. In a major quantitative-based study of 395 terrorist groups worldwide, Asal et al contend that terrorist activity should be analyzed in the context of both organizational attributes and environmental factors.<sup>66</sup> They have defined dark networks as organizations that are “both covert and illegal and are driven by two key imperatives: the need to exist and the need to act.”<sup>67</sup>

Such convergences have taken many forms, with the changing context prompting the emergence of a variety of new threats, including leaderless protests and the fragmentation of centralized paramilitary control. The idea of “leaderless resistance” has manifested itself in both right-wing extremism and also Islamist forms of terrorism for decades.<sup>68</sup> Central to the concept is the strategic

decision by militants to encourage and foment individual acts outside an organized set of structures. In the case of the flag protests, senior figures within the East Belfast UVF grouping used the cover of leaderless protests to continue their criminal activities while the PSNI tied up its resources in dealing with civil unrest.<sup>69</sup> The extent of these criminal activities were again exposed following the murder of a loyalist, Ian Ogle, in the east of the city on January 27, 2019.<sup>70</sup> By continuing their criminal activities, the East Belfast UVF have pitted themselves against their centralised leadership in West Belfast.<sup>71</sup> Based on the Shankill Road, the UVF “peace leadership” has openly supported the peace process and the rule of law since disarming in 2009.<sup>72</sup> Locally based groupings like the East Belfast UVF, however, have morphed into what the Chief Constable of the PSNI calls “mid-level crime gangs.”<sup>73</sup>

Furthermore, the alteration of organizational attributes and environmental factors locally can also be traced to a shift in major geopolitical reconfigurations, like Brexit or a bump in right-wing populism, triggering other reactions that have not yet bordered the horizon. Only by recognizing that these groups are no longer the same entities that once fought major terror campaigns can counterterrorism practitioners hope to fully appreciate and respond to the challenge these dark networks pose.<sup>c</sup>

### Conclusion

The murder of a journalist on the night before Good Friday in 2019 was a reminder of the fragility of peace in Northern Ireland. On the surface, the persistence of terrorism in Northern Ireland is indicative of centuries-old grievances that have remained remarkably unchanged. At its heart is a competition between the British state and its militant Republican adversaries who violently oppose the continuing presence of British governing institutions in Ireland. Yet, it is also ground contested by loyalist paramilitaries who wish to maintain the status quo. However, delving deeper into the phenomenon, it is possible to see dramatic changes in all of these groups. Violence may remain an ever-present danger, though there continues to be a large gap between those wedded to physical force and those supportive of the democratic process. For as long as this remains the case, these groups will lack a favorable political climate in which resorting to armed actions could be justified in any way.

The continuing uncertainty surrounding Brexit has the potential to further destabilize the security situation.<sup>74</sup> In an assessment of the likely impact of a No Deal Brexit, the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee in the U.K. Parliament warned of the potential for community tensions to be heightened, particularly as rival militant groups “seek to exploit gaps in law enforcement and any eventual divergence between Northern Ireland and Ireland, which may lead to increases in smuggling and associated criminality.”<sup>75</sup> Although it remains to be seen whether this will come to pass, there can be no doubt that the continued absence of a deal—as well as functioning power-sharing government in Belfast—provides the context within which instability continues to thrive. **CTC**

c Scholars such as Richard English and Geir Ulfstein make the case that terrorism is often most effectively dealt with through patient police work and pursuing such illegal activity via criminal prosecution. If this is indeed the case, then perhaps it is worth considering how law enforcement agencies might be reconfigured to deal with the threat posed by ‘dark networks.’ Richard English, “Countering Twenty-First Century Terrorism,” *Political Insight* 6:3 (2015): p. 23; Geir Ulfstein, “Terrorism and the Use of Force,” *Security Dialogue* 34:2 (2003): p. 165.

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# A View from the CT Foxhole: Edmund Fitton-Brown, Coordinator, ISIL (Daesh)/Al-Qaida/Taliban Monitoring Team, United Nations

By Paul Cruickshank

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*Editor's Note: This interview was conducted before the Easter Sunday 2019 terrorist attacks in Sri Lanka.*

## **CTC: What role does the Monitoring Team play?**

**Fitton-Brown:** Our mandate from the United Nations Security Council goes back to 1999 when sanctions were first imposed on the Taliban and al-Qa`ida, and then after 9/11, an analytical support and sanctions monitoring team was established to support the committee. Later, that evolved when they split the Taliban committee from al-Qa`ida and when they added ISIL to the al-Qa`ida committee. We're an entity that is subordinate to the Security Council and specifically to the committees that deal with al-Qa`ida and ISIL and the Taliban. As part of that mandate, we have two essential functions: one of which is to provide a threat assessment report twice a year on ISIL, al-Qa`ida, and once a year on the Taliban. The other essential part of the mandate is the maintenance of the sanctions list and dealing with that business, the technical advice that's required for member states and for the committee to add and remove individuals, entities, and groups from the sanctions list.

## **CTC: What is your process for making the threat assessment?**

**Fitton-Brown:** We are specifically mandated by resolution to liaise in confidence with member states' CT agencies. We do not conduct investigations; we do not run sources. Our job is quite tidily encapsulated within that consultation with member states, and more specifically their CT agencies, on the threat and on the sanctions list. And of course, the two go together because it tends to be the CT agencies that are the repositories of the relevant information, whether it's about the threat or whether it's about specific individuals. We also do supporting work. We'll go to conferences, give addresses, interviews. We will train or participate in capacity-building to help member states' officials implement the sanctions.

In terms of our main mandate, we collectively as a team decide where we need to go in order to answer the key outstanding questions of the day. So, for obvious reasons, given that we serve the

1988 Committee<sup>a</sup> as well, we visit Afghanistan frequently—maybe approximately three times a year. We are a group of only 10 experts, which means that our time is somewhat scarce, and global coverage is hard work. So, we don't always get to countries as often as we would like. The kind of countries that we're always keen to go to would be firstly countries that had outstandingly good insights into global terrorism, and that would obviously include, for example, the United States. We conduct regular consultations in Washington, which is a relatively easy thing to do when you're based in New York. And then secondly, there are so many key countries [that] are either affected by terrorism or are very knowledgeable about terrorism—for example, the current chair of our committee, Indonesia. Pakistan would be another good example. Iraq, Turkey, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Nigeria, for example, would have particularly valuable insights for us in certain areas.

**CTC: As you are interfacing with counterterrorism agencies in many member states, presumably the art in making your assessment is using your expertise to weigh up what would be sometimes differing and even conflicting assessments from different member states.**

**Fitton-Brown:** Yes. We have to triangulate effectively, and we don't use open-source but we're informed by open-source. We obviously read pretty widely. As you know, in addition to *CTC Sentinel*, there's an awful lot of source material out there, and we have to have a clear understanding of what is in the public domain because we need a threshold where we say, "OK, this is what's widely understood to be the case." Then we need to establish from our confidential consultations whether it is, in fact, the case. But equally, we can't be completely reliant upon a single member state because some member states may either have inaccurate understandings or may have politically driven perspectives.

**CTC: In its 23rd report submitted in December 2018, your Monitoring Team concluded that while the Islamic State still has the ability to inspire terrorism in the West, "for now the ISIL core lacks the capability to direct international attacks." With the group recently losing its last small piece of territory in Syria and Iraq, does this optimism continue?**

**Fitton-Brown:** I characterize it as qualified optimism and also a reminder, I think, to member states that there's not going to be a world without terrorism. And they need to have an accurate understanding, and indeed their populations need to have an accurate

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<sup>a</sup> Editor's note: The U.N. Security Council Committee established pursuant to Resolution 1988 (in 2011) oversees the sanctions measures imposed by the Security Council.

understanding, of what success looks like in counterterrorism. Of course, a huge amount of effort went into the military defeat of ISIL, and perhaps because the CT community are professional pessimists and I lean that way myself, sometimes you almost have to force yourself not to allow yourself to be a lazy pessimist. I noticed that certain people said, “Ah, it’s terrible because now that ISIL have been defeated militarily, they’re really unpredictable. And everything is worse than it was.” Now, I was very keen for us accurately, based on the insights we’re given by member states—statistics and things of that sort—to issue a corrective of that, and say, “No, it’s not worse than it was. It’s better than it was.” People shouldn’t sound like nothing is ever good news. The defeat of ISIL militarily is incredibly good news both in terms of removing a monstrous pseudo-state from the face of the earth but it has also been a major boon for counterterrorism.

Now, what does that look like in detail? Yes, the threat is still there. Of course it is. We have to live with an ambient threat. That’s the modern world, I think. I don’t see that going away anytime soon, no matter how effectively member states or the international community conduct counterterrorism business.

The first key component of this reduced threat was that when ISIL had its back to the wall, starting really in 2017 and lasting all the way through 2018 and into 2019, they, for survival purposes, folded up their external terrorist attack planning capability in Iraq/Syria. That was, I think, essentially for survival purposes, but they also did it, I think, because they considered it was not very effective. Now, of course, how effective it was was probably a function of the circumstances in which it was operating. Its external attack apparatus probably was reasonably effective in 2015, to some degree in 2016. But as ISIL started to lose ground, to lose the planning space, the safe space in which to consider its global agenda and try and produce operational plans to support it, they started to see that function as ineffective.

When they were then facing being militarily eradicated in Iraq and subsequently in Syria, they made a conscious decision to wind it up, to fold it up, and to say, “that’s no longer something that we have to have as an essential function. There are other things that are essential functions: security, finance, logistics, doctrine, media, all these things. But that one we don’t need because we’ve just got to weather this storm.” Now, at the same time, there was massive attrition of senior ISIL figures; a lot of their operational planners, a lot of key figures in ISIL leadership were killed. And these two dynamics happening at the same time decimated their external operational planning capability. And if you look at the statistics for directed attacks by ISIL, the statistics in 2015 and 2016 compared to the statistics in 2017/2018, it can be statistically termed a collapse.

So, we’re in a position where ISIL at the moment is not capable of directing complex international attacks. Now, that’s not to say there won’t be ISIL attacks because there will be. But they’re likely to be inspired attacks. This is where the message is being put out online; the propaganda is saying, “Go ahead and do these various things.” It’s angry, radicalized individuals responding to something they’re seeing online.

**CTC:** So, in terms of having infrastructure on the ground in Syria/Iraq to plan international terror, there’s intelligence that’s come in indicating that the Islamic State wound that up.

**Fitton-Brown:** Yes. But of course, when you say “on the ground,”

the question is “what ground?” They didn’t have much choice. They were losing ground. So, what you then have is this attempted shift from a pseudo-state to a covert, networked terrorist group/quasi-insurgency. They’re preparing to bed down. They’re preparing to be relatively less visible. But they’re also conscious—and this is very clear from what they say and the insights that we have into them—that they have to demonstrate relevance. In other words, they may have wrapped up one department for the purposes of survival—you sort of fit yourself for survival—but their aspiration still is the so-called ‘caliphate.’ They talk sometimes about it as the caliphate of the mind or the virtual caliphate.

They occasionally get optimistic about developments in different parts of the world. At one point, they talked about the caliphate of East Asia, about Marawi, hoping that the insurgency in the southern Philippines was going to gather momentum. But, all of the time, they are conscious that their credibility; their brand depends on showing some kind of success. So, they took a conscious decision to become reliant upon inspired attacks. But they also know that those inspired attacks are not at the level that they really need. This is where we get to the qualified optimism. The optimism says that at the moment, we have an operational lull in terms of international-directed attacks. The qualifier to the optimism is that they have an established ambition to resurrect that capability as and when they have the breathing space or the permissive operational space in which to do so. And in order to do it, of course, they have to re-invest, they have to rebuild that capability. But they’ve got people with experience, and therefore, the rebuilding of that capacity, given the right location and circumstances to do so securely, is absolutely to be expected.

**CTC:** And we know from studying the history of terrorism that it only takes a few skilled operatives— people like Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, for example—to organize international terror attacks. And so, an international attack infrastructure can really sometimes only amount to a few individuals with access to the appropriate resources. Which brings us onto another qualifier to the optimism that is out there, namely the assessment in your 23rd report that the Islamic State still has access to \$50 million to \$300 million in funds, stored inside Syria and Iraq, smuggled outside of those countries, and invested in legitimate businesses.<sup>2</sup> That’s a lot of money, which may allow the group to do lot of different things in the future, including resurrecting this global terror campaign, especially when you consider the 9/11 plot only cost only about \$500,000.<sup>3</sup>

**Fitton-Brown:** Yes, and it’s a good segue because in both of these instances, both the operational capability and the finance, what ISIL faced inevitably was a massive grinding of gears to go from one model to another and under that intense military pressure in which people were being killed all around them. They were basically thinking, “How do we survive?” And at the same time, “How do we transfer into this new model.” Because they thought about “what do we need to do in order to survive? What do we need to do in order to be ready to resurge at some point?” So that grinding of gears also applied to the money. They had a lot of money, unprecedented amounts of money because of the kind of assets that they controlled. They then embarked on a process of trying to make sure that they were able to preserve some of that for future use. The billions of dollars that they had as a pseudo-state, of course, they also needed

to spend because they were a pseudo-state with all the liabilities and all of the expenditures that that implies.

Of course, if you go to a different model, in which you don't have to pay so many people, then you don't have those liabilities and those financial responsibilities, and the question is "how much have you preserved and how accessible is it?" And I think it's fair to say that the international perspective on this is not as well informed as it needs to be. In other words, the \$50-\$300 million figure that we give is a kind of triangulation of a number of member state estimates, kind of the best sort of narrowing down that we could do of what we understood to be quite widely varied estimates of member states. And you could perhaps say it's somewhere in that range. Then there's the whole question of where the money is. There is very little information on that apart from generic stuff such as information that it is invested in legitimate companies, invested in real estate, invested in agriculture, fisheries, automobile businesses, a whole range of other things, and also stored in caches.

**CTC:** What countries are they investing and storing this cash in?

**Fitton-Brown:** Within Syria and Iraq and outside. Money absolutely was moved outside as well. And caches of money and gold were transferred to other locations.

There's also a question that arises over how far antiquities could be a continuing source of revenue for ISIL. The general consensus is they probably operated a sort of licensing system whereby people were allowed to take antiquities out and presumably store them somewhere outside Iraq and Syria. You might expect these items to emerge onto the world's antique markets but not for a very long time, of course, because you can't simply turn up somewhere with something that was recently looted from Iraq or Syria. But because some of what was taken was freshly excavated and therefore never catalogued, we don't know the full extent of what's out there. We also don't know whether items of high value have been stored by ISIL themselves.

So, there are lots of questions when it comes to the question of ISIL finances, and the \$50-\$300 million really is quite an approximate estimate. The one thing I think we can say for sure is that for the purposes of directing international terrorism, it's more than enough.

**CTC:** As you noted in your most recent report, there were over 40,000 foreign terrorist fighters who joined the so-called caliphate.<sup>4</sup> These were historic, unprecedented numbers. Many were killed. Some have returned to where they came from. And some are still there. And some are now in other parts of the world, but there is an incomplete picture about where all the surviving foreign fighters are. Out of the 40,000, how many do you assess are still a potential threat?

**Fitton-Brown:** It's really hard to estimate. We deliberately cited an example in our 23rd report from the Western Balkans because we thought it was quite instructive. You had approximately 1,000 who traveled to the conflict zone in Syria and Iraq and 100 reported killed, 300 returned and that was interesting because that suggested 600 unaccounted for. But of course, that doesn't mean that those 600 out of the original 1,000 are all still alive.<sup>5</sup>



*Edmund Fitton-Brown, Coordinator of the ISIL (Daesh)/ Al-Qaida/Taliban Monitoring Team at the United Nations*

**CTC:** So, when you scale the Western Balkan numbers to the 40,000+ foreign fighters, it would be fair to assume that there are thousands of foreign fighters who are still a potential threat.

**Fitton-Brown:** Yes.

**CTC:** Or even tens of thousands?

**Fitton-Brown:** So, put it this way, I've never heard a credible allegation that three-quarters of these 40,000 plus people are dead. So, we must be talking about much more than 10,000 who are alive. In fact, between the people confirmed killed and the people who were killed but not confirmed—I think we must be talking about an attrition rate in terms of fatalities over a quarter. So, we could have anything up to nearly 30,000 who remain alive, but nobody knows the true figure.

**CTC:** And out of those who survived some have no doubt 'retired,' so to speak, and want no further part in all this. And so, it's very difficult to assess how many are still a potential active threat.

**Fitton-Brown:** Exactly. We don't know how many have died. But we can assume that at least 50 percent survive. My personal guess is more, I think probably one would be looking at more like a one-third attrition rate or something of the sort. So, you've then got a lot of survivors.

But as you say, what does this mean in terms of future threat? And also, even if there's future threat, how deferred is that future threat? Some people have talked of a blow-back ratio: what proportion of people get this sort of thing out of their system and never want anything more to do with it? And what proportion are hardened, determined, longer-term terrorists? And then also, at what

point does that threat manifest? Because if there's a prolonged term in detention, then maybe there's no threat for a while, but maybe the threat doesn't go away and it manifests when the person is released from prison. Or maybe the person goes into some sort of holding pattern, some kind of hiding. We talk about detainees. We talk about returnees. We talk about relocators. We talk about frustrated travelers, which is another category slightly outside this one, although they may be people who started off for the so-called caliphate but never got there. So, it's a complicated picture. The message we're trying to put across is that the best thing you can do is look at how this threat manifested from al-Qa`ida after the Taliban regime was toppled after 9/11, where you had the very same sort of combination of how many were killed, how many continued wanting to pose a threat, and then remember that the pool, the original pool in terms of numbers, is vastly higher with ISIL. So, one assumes the threat and the after effects are also significantly multiplied. And of course, we are still living with the aftermath of al-Qa`ida in Afghanistan now, 20 years on, which suggests that these effects that we're talking about are things that we will be having to worry about as far ahead as, let's say, 2040.

**CTC:** It's a multigenerational threat. There's a lull right now, as the Islamic State regroup, as al-Qa`ida figures out its next steps. But to assume that that lull will continue indefinitely would be far too optimistic, given that the surviving foreign fighters are potentially the officer class in future terror networks. And an officer class that is connected given all that mixing, the social bonds that were built up in Syria and Iraq by being on the ground together. We're talking about people with the capability to murder and the organizational skills to pull it off on a significant scale.

**Fitton-Brown:** Yes, we're talking about a generation of fighters with the credibility and credentials to make them leaders in the future.

**CTC:** In your December 2018 report, you assessed there were between 14,000 and 18,000 Islamic State 'militants' still active in Syria and Iraq total.<sup>6</sup> Has there been downward pressure since?

**Fitton-Brown:** I think the answer is yes, almost certainly downward. And indeed, it was downward in the 23rd report from what we said in the 22nd report. And I think you can clearly see that with ISIL losing its last pockets of territory, the numbers must have reduced. But these numbers are very elusive. It's striking how people studying this from a position of knowledge can actually differ sharply with each other about numbers. So, we have widely varying numbers about Syria and also about Iraq. And when we came, again, to that 14,000-18,000 range, it was a little bit like our \$50 to \$300 million assessment for its financial resources, it was a triangulation of figures, and that was what we considered to be credible across Iraq and Syria.

It also remains important to say, "Well, what is a fighter? And if a fighter ceases to be a fighter, is that a stable state or is that temporary?" So, fighter by one definition would have been when you were dealing with the Hajin pocket, these would have been people with guns, suicide vests, and whatnot fighting an active military campaign. But already in Iraq, it was a little different from that. Already, these were fighters who had gone back into a more covert

environment, an environment in which they were looking to carry out a sort of terrorist campaign. And what we see, I think, in Syria is the same scenario that played out in Iraq in 2017 now playing out in Syria. And the evolution of ISIL in Iraq back into a covert network, that also now is what we're seeing in Syria. I think we have been seeing it for a while. So, in Syria, you had this very much reduced presence of territorial control in the far east of the country. But already elsewhere, they'd started to go to ground and do what they were doing in Iraq. So now I think we will see more of this.

Now, if somebody's put their gun down but has it stashed somewhere, are they still a fighter? By our definition, yes they are. So, we're trying to use that; we're trying not to get too hung up on the definitions. We sometimes say fighters. We sometimes say militants. We sometimes say sympathizers. We sometimes say members, whatever a member is. This is really tricky. I think we have to regard sympathizers as something different. But the fighter/militant/member/terrorist, those terms sort of morph one into the other. I wonder if, in fact, as we now put the military campaign behind us, I wonder if we just have to, in fact, use the word "terrorist."

**CTC:** You noted in your most recent report, "ISIL is still led by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, with a small, dispersed, delegated leadership group, which is directing some fighters to return to Iraq to join the network there. This network is being established at the provincial level with a cellular structure mirroring the key functions covered by the central leadership. The objective is to survive, consolidate and resurge in the core area." You also noted that surviving leaders are multitasking by taking up multiple functions.<sup>7</sup> The picture is of group on the backfoot having to decentralize. How do you see all of this evolving in terms of the group's structures, the way they're led, the role of al-Baghdadi?

**Fitton-Brown:** It's a really good question. I think it's important that we recognize success or qualified optimism where we can, and there has been this brutal grinding of gears that they've had to go through, and there is no strategy that you can devise that means that a catastrophic military defeat under extreme fire can just be smoothly rolled out. It's not as simple as saying, "Come on, let's go back to being a covert terrorist group again." That's their objective, but how they get there and how successfully they get there, that's not clear. Baghdadi, we think, has been injured. We don't know his exact physical condition and obviously we don't know his location.

**CTC:** You think he's been injured?

**Fitton-Brown:** We believe he was injured, yes.

**CTC:** Because there's been a lot of skepticism among analysts on some of the reporting on al-Baghdadi.

**Fitton-Brown:** Well, then, what does injured mean anyway? I mean, that's what we're saying. We've heard that he was perhaps injured, perhaps injured seriously. But I mean, that could mean that he's being kept alive with great difficulty in some basement somewhere, or it could mean that he's recovered and he's OK. So, I don't want to make too much of that.

**CTC:** Any sort of notion on where he may be believed to be?

**Fitton-Brown:** We just don't know. But the logic would probably

be where does ISIL have the most developed covert capability and the most coherent potential support structure around it. I would be inclined towards thinking in Iraq or Syria, but that's just guess work. What's important, we think he's alive and we think that he's still regarded as being in charge.

People say, and again this is assessment by member state agencies, that his death would be a significant blow to the cohesiveness and the future capability of ISIL. Now that's an interesting statement in itself because you would think that this would be something that ISIL must have prepared for. You don't want to have a single point of failure. And if you have one leader and that leader's death is going to be massively damaging to your group's capability, then that's actually a design fault, isn't it? Nevertheless, that's what we're told, that ISIL's morale, and to some degree its strategy, its ideological cohesiveness, is still very much embodied in the leadership of Baghdadi. So that's an interesting point. Then you've got the dispersed leadership group. ISIL identified key functions, the things the organization cannot survive without. They have to have money. They have to have logistics, including the ability to move people and to accommodate people so that people can be kept safe or to store money or ammunition or things of that kind. So, finance, logistics, security to them, that's essential. There's obviously also the whole function of ensuring them against spies and against ideological fissure and that sort of thing. Media is very important to them as well. Making sure that their message is getting out there. And they've held onto that in spite of the pressure that they're under.

Nevertheless, I think they do find it difficult when so much ISIL-related propaganda these days is locally generated way outside the core area. And a lot of that stuff is of poor quality, and the claims of responsibility for attacks are of poor quality. They used to be known for their very accurate claims of responsibility. These days, there's a sort of fanboy industry out there, and I think that has somewhat distorted their message. And I think they're ambivalent about that. They don't know what to do about it. In a way, it keeps the dream alive. But also, if you spend an awful lot of time, talking about how you're going to disrupt the Russian World Cup, you're going to have a star player in a jumpsuit and a political leader in a jumpsuit having their heads cut off, and then absolutely nothing happens, and the Russian World Cup is a glorious, joyous success, you look pretty stupid afterwards. We understand that they have looked at that and said, "We look like we're all talk and no action."

Now to get back to your question about the evolution of the ISIL structures, they recognized that the functions had to be combined. There's just a few people who can do these things, who were trusted and who've survived and we don't know where they are, but we're pretty sure they're not all together. Hence, the leadership has become dispersed, and authority has been delegated.

In our most recent report, we noted, "In Iraq, ISIL has already started to organize cells at the provincial level, identifying suitable personnel and locations for training and military manufacturing, and replicating key leadership functions. While some funding is available from the center, provincial networks must plan to become financially self-sufficient." What we're seeing in Iraq, and I think it's going to be increasingly visible in Syria, is that same group of core functions that were previously centralized are going to be the nucleus around which these provincial-level cells are built.<sup>8</sup>

And take it all the way to the Sahel, and when you see instances of operational cooperation between JNIM [Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin] and ISGS [Islamic State in the Greater Sahara] in

the Sahel and then you ask yourself, "was that the product of some kind of instruction somehow conveyed from Baghdadi?" I doubt it. Communications must be difficult; command and control must be weak.

**CTC: With al-Baghdadi, has there been any succession plan in place that has been detected?**

**Fitton-Brown:** Not that we're aware of.

**CTC: Which would be a big problem for them, given all the credentials Islamic State militants, for theological reasons, believe the next 'caliph' should have.**

**Fitton-Brown:** And also given that they had theological problems, ideological problems because there were significant differences within the group about how hard you went on *takfir*.

**CTC: And that has produced tension, which has continued to play out, according to research we've featured in CTC Sentinel.<sup>9</sup> All this raises the possibility that if they lose their top leader, this *fitna* spirals, which from an international community point of view would be a very welcome thing.**

**Fitton-Brown:** That *fitna* may well may be helpful in some ways. But it also represents a potential threat. If you're a foreign terrorist fighter and you've left the conflict zone and you've still got the fire to "carry on the fight," you may well have by now dismissed the ISIL experiment as having been ill-advised, reckless, in the same way that Zawahiri has argued. And this could end up with highly capable fighters joining al-Qa`ida franchises.

**CTC: While we're still on the subject of the Islamic State, I was very interested in this line in your 22nd report from June 2018: "One Member State reports that some recent plots detected and prevented in Europe had originated from ISIL in Afghanistan."<sup>10</sup> That really jumped out at me at the time because we haven't really seen much international attack planning from Afghanistan since 9/11. Last decade, the epicenter for such plotting was Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal region (FATA), and more recently it has been Syria/Iraq. Can you elaborate on the nature of this Islamic State international attack plotting in Afghanistan?**

**Fitton-Brown:** There's not much I can say because it's a somewhat operational point. It's not just something from last year but something that continues. We believe that the phenomenon persists.

How consistent is this with the fact that ISIL cannot direct complex, international attacks? We're not talking here about direction of complex international attacks. Anywhere that people can get breathing space, they may in a more secure environment be able to stop and think about "are we here just to survive? What else could we do?" Afghanistan is that kind of place. A place where security is weak and where you've got sort of concentrations of people who have a little time on their hands to think about what they might want to be doing with themselves over the longer term.

And, of course, in some cases you're going to have people who have foreign links of one sort or another. Either they themselves have been abroad or they have a relative living abroad or they have

some established communication with people abroad. And this is what we saw on the micro level. It was not a case of an external operations department putting together a planned complex operation. It's more of a case of individuals trying to generate trouble in Europe.

**CTC: The al-Qa`ida approach in FATA in the mid- to late 2000s was to grab Europeans or Americans who wanted to go fight in Afghanistan, train them up, and persuade them to return back to Europe or the United States to launch attacks. Is that the same approach the intelligence suggests is being replicated by ISIL in Afghanistan?**

**Fitton-Brown:** It's more informal than that. You could say that if there's one person in one place trying to tell a contact of theirs in another place to get out there and do something nasty, you can call that a directed attack if you like. We're talking about somebody talking to somebody that they know.

**CTC: So, what you're talking about here is people in Afghanistan pushing people in Europe toward terrorism.**

**Fitton-Brown:** Yes. Exactly.

**CTC: And rather than sort of camp infrastructure, training, sending back, it's more kind of a bunch of guys in Afghanistan getting in touch with their contacts back in Europe, and saying, "you need to do something."**

**Fitton-Brown:** Exactly. And I would expect that that probably is a phenomenon that's repeated elsewhere. But this is the example we saw.

**CTC: With regard to Afghanistan, there have recently been peace talks between the U.S. government and the Taliban. In March 2019, during this dialogue, a Taliban spokesman stated: "A core issue for the American side is that the soil of Afghanistan should not be used against the Americans and against its allies."<sup>11</sup> The problem, as is well documented, is there have historically been strong ties between al-Qa`ida and the Taliban, with al-Qa`ida three years ago renewing its allegiance to the leader of the Taliban.<sup>12</sup> Moreover in 2015, Sirajuddin Haqqani, who is believed to have close ties with al-Qa`ida, was elevated to become a deputy leader of the Taliban.<sup>13</sup> How difficult will it be to ensure Afghanistan does not again become a launching pad for international terrorism?**

**Fitton-Brown:** The first thing to say is that the 1988 Committee always has been fundamentally designed to support the peace process in Afghanistan. The whole point of separating al-Qa`ida from the Taliban in sanctions regimes was to say that whereas the Taliban are sanctioned as a threat to peace and stability in Afghanistan, the Talibs who show that they're actually interested in some kind of national negotiated outcome would not need to be sanctioned. Therefore, a lot of our attention is now currently devoted to facilitating travel by the Taliban who are traveling to take part in the peace process because we don't want to see a situation where people are willing to talk peace but they aren't able to travel because they're sanctioned.

The second part of this, of course, is the U.S.-Taliban dialogue. Now that is not something that I have direct insight into, but ob-

viously I follow it with great interest. I think the Americans would argue that to the extent they have identified significant common ground with the Taliban in terms of the American desire not to have endless troop deployment in Afghanistan and the Taliban's willingness not to see Afghanistan used in the future as a launching pad for international terrorism, that is worth something. But it's not the end of the story. There's a huge amount that has to follow from that. Of course, above all, what has to follow from that is an Afghan-Afghan peace process. And that Afghan-Afghan peace process has been very enthusiastically driven by the Afghan government by President Ghani, particularly starting from the Kabul Declaration,<sup>14</sup> for more than a year now. President Ghani has been pushing very hard to try and start an Afghan-Afghan peace process. He's made an offer to the Taliban. He's declared unilateral ceasefires. This is very important that people don't forget this, that the whole context of the talks between the United States and the Taliban was a really serious push from the Kabul government to try to end this war. This sense of exhaustion in Afghanistan is hard to overstate.

I think you saw when you had that Eid ceasefire last summer between the government<sup>15</sup> and the Taliban and the joy that erupted on the streets from people just saying "this is what it would be like if we weren't living in fear of our lives all the time. If we weren't constantly focused on trying to kill our fellow Afghans." And that was very visible on both sides. Ordinary Talib fighters were celebrating Eid together and embracing in the streets with people they would have otherwise regarded as enemies. That was a shock to the Taliban leadership. It suggested to them that the level of popular consent to their uprising is not very high. And I think that's true. I rather doubt if the Taliban had to fight an election in Afghanistan, they would get very many votes. So, at some point, they're going to need to recognize that they can't simply impose themselves by force. The Americans have been very clear that while they can play an enabling role, eventually this will have to become an Afghan peace process.

That's what will have to happen. Obviously, we want to see it succeed, but we're not going to pretend for a minute that it's going to be easy. But we should applaud the people who are trying to move things forward because it's a moment of opportunity. Moments of opportunities are created by all sorts of political factors. And right now, the stars are relatively well aligned for some prospect of this succeeding. With regard to the CT issue, which is the threat from a sort of safe haven in Afghanistan projected outside the Afghan borders, the one thing that I must say for the Taliban is that regardless of what you think of their ideology or you think of their propensity for violence, the fact is the Taliban has shown an iron self-discipline in recent years in not allowing a threat to be projected outside the borders of Afghanistan by their own members or by groups who are operating in areas they control. You've got a lot of Central Asian extremists, for example, present in Afghanistan, some of which will have private aspirations to attack the Central Asian republics. But credit where credit is due, it seems to me that the Taliban with an absolutely resolute focus on their ambitions inside Afghanistan are not willing to let those ambitions be derailed by activity outside Afghanistan. And that at least gives grounds for hope that what the Americans are trying to achieve in these talks could be achieved.

**CTC: What is your assessment of the current threat posed by al-Qa`ida and its affiliates?**

**Fitton-Brown:** I think al-Qa`ida was clearly very badly wrong-footed by the explosion onto the scene of ISIL. That was difficult for

them. To some degree, they held their nerve and said, “No, we think that our greater strategic patience is still the right thing.” But there must have been times when that was very challenging for them when nobody was talking about al-Qa`ida and everybody was talking about ISIL. They had a slump, but al-Qa`ida is a pretty adaptable beast. One of the things that they’ve always done is give autonomy to the affiliates. There hasn’t been an attempt to micro-manage the affairs of the affiliates. And one of the consequences of that is the affiliates have burrowed down into various local disputes wherever they’re located. And you see this in parts of Africa and elsewhere as well where they become local players. Syria was in some respects an example of this.

They’re still showing resilience in Yemen, and while the country remains in a state of civil war, they will likely continue to find space there. Al-Qa`ida trusts their Arabian Peninsula affiliate (AQAP) with playing a strong role in communications and propaganda for which they still have significant capacity and for years had that fear factor because of their bomb technician Ibrahim al-Asiri. They’ve been through a few iterations of trying to hold territory, which have not gone particularly well. Where they’ve had more success is embedding with tribes, embedding with youth movements, with social organizations and things of that sort. And blurring the line between tribal identity and a terrorist identity. This has not been helpful for the Yemeni peace process because of accusations made about overlap between appointees of the government of Yemen and people associated with AQAP.

There’s a very weak IS [Islamic State] presence in Yemen. And perhaps a little bit like Somalia with al-Shabaab, there’s a temptation for the bigger group to think “we can crush these interlopers.” Now, whether they can really do that, I don’t know. If you look at some of the more recent fighting between AQAP and ISY [Islamic State in Yemen], it’s not absolutely clear that AQAP are always getting the better of it. And given the groups are also under fire from other forces, how wise is it to be involved in fighting each other? I would expect ISY to remain rather small and weak in Yemen and AQAP to remain bigger and stronger than ISY.

**CTC: You mention Ibrahim al-Asiri. In your 22nd report submitted in June 2018, you noted that “some Member States report that explosives expert Ibrahim al-Asiri may have been killed during the second half of 2017. Given al-Asiri’s past role in plots against aviation, this would represent a serious blow to operational capability.”<sup>16</sup> Some observers have expressed skepticism over the possibility he is dead because AQAP has not released a eulogy as might be expected.<sup>17</sup> What is your updated assessment of his status?**

**Fitton-Brown:** We still think he’s dead. We still think he was killed in 2017. But I’m not going to say 100 percent because we’ve been proved wrong before, so you always have to add a caveat. You asked the question of why they didn’t release a eulogy. My answer to that would be, it’s such a major blow to their capability that they wouldn’t want to acknowledge it. In other words, if people think “this guy was a sort of bomb-making genius, an innovator who produced some of the most threatening terrorist plots of recent times,” they would actually not want that to be known, that he was gone.

Another question that arises—and we don’t know the answer to this—is how successfully might he have passed on his expertise to others. Are there any operatives in AQAP which thanks to his teaching now have his skill-set? I do know that the assessment is prob-

ably not. Probably he would have tried, he would have been doing that at various points and there may be people who have benefited from exposure to what he knew. But because he was a genius of sorts, he will be hard to replace. It’s one thing to replace somebody just because they occupy an office and then you just put somebody else in that office and they may be not as good or they may be just as good or they may be better. But when you’ve got somebody with that kind of talent and inspiration and creativity, it’s harder. And so, the assessment is probably not. So, if he’s dead, the fear of some new, very creative explosive technology threat emerging from AQAP may now be somewhat mitigated.

**CTC: This is very interesting because while there was concern for years that he was training operatives in bomb making,<sup>18</sup> that does not mean any apprentices became a master bomb maker like him.**

**Fitton-Brown:** Exactly. The thing about trying to clone yourself is you might be partially successful, but in the case of al-Asiri was it enough for it to single out that franchise of al-Qa`ida as still posing a unique threat in that area? If you frame the question in those terms, the answer is probably not.

Bearing in mind that ISIL also has an established interest in attacking civil aviation, again, if I were guessing, if we were to see a terrorist attack on civil aviation, where is it most likely to emanate from? I would still put my money on ISIL.

**CTC: There was, of course, significant concern in 2017 after it emerged that the Islamic State was working to develop laptop bombs. And then there was the July 2017 aborted plot to target a passenger jet leaving from Sydney in which the Islamic State airmailed what amounted to a partially constructed explosive device to an alleged terrorist cell it was in touch with in Australia.<sup>19</sup>**

**Fitton-Brown:** It’s not surprising that they would be creative and innovative in coming up with ways to try to defeat these sorts of precautions that they knew that they would be facing. And of course, in that respect, so was al-Qa`ida. A lot of the efforts that were made that were driven by Asiri were also innovative in that respect. But I believe al-Qa`ida has probably lost the genius that gave them an edge. ISIL is numerically much larger than al-Qa`ida, so you’ve got this long-term worry about people with explosives skills.

We know that the attrition of ISIL planners and seniors has been extremely damaging to their capability. But to go further and say that all of the know-how and appetite that was assembled under the so-called caliphate is now somehow or other dispersed for all time, I think that’s not a supportable conclusion. I think that would be complacent. So that’s why I think the threat to aviation is still more likely, at the moment, to come from ISIL.

**CTC: What is your assessment of comparative threat posed by al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State across Africa?**

**Fitton-Brown:** AQ is stronger than ISIL in east, west, and parts of north Africa. In Somalia, al-Qa`ida is overwhelmingly stronger than ISIL. In Mali and the Sahel, JNIM, the al-Qa`ida-associated coalition of groups, is much stronger than ISGS. And the only significant exception to this is in the Lake Chad Basin where ISWAP [Islamic State West Africa Province] is a large, significant, and ac-

tually increasingly threatening franchise of ISIL. What I think is interesting—and this kind of thing gets back to your question about what is the threat from AQ—is this innovation, this ability to adapt to the circumstances in West Africa and the Sahel. I think it's caught the interest of Zawahiri. It's caught the interest of the group. The fact that they've been very successful, they've been able to sustain a significant insurgency in central Mali and started to encroach on Burkina Faso with significant attacks where they appear again to be able to join up with the local groups broadly aligned with al-Qa`ida there. And the fact that ISGS also is not seeking to rival JNIM but occasionally shows signs of working with it or at the very least exhibiting a mutual tolerance. And ISGS, of course, is much smaller than JNIM. So, you've got a sort of business model in West Africa that's caught the interest of Zawahiri.

There was always this question mark with al-Qa`ida of to what extent do you get embedded in local issues. And Zawahiri was always extremely cautious about that, as we saw in Syria. Nevertheless, I think he sees an opportunity when local franchises start to threaten to overturn nation-states, which they could do in the Sahel with these relatively fragile nation-states, because you then have the possibility of creating safe space for terrorist organizations.

Now whether the dynamics we see playing out in Africa and other parts of the world lead to a sort of a reboot of al-Qa`ida or whether it ends up creating some completely new mutation, I don't know. We didn't really see ISIL coming in the shape it eventually took. It's possible that we'll see some third mutation or brand emerge. But a lot of our interlocutors are taking an interest in what sort of spins out of this embedding of al-Qa`ida in some of these local disputes in some of these fragile states. One particular area of concern is the Sahel. How serious is the threat to destabilize the government in Burkina Faso? How vulnerable are the bordering regions of the Atlantic littoral states? What could this mean in due course for Ghana, for Benin, for Togo? And then of course, if this destabilization is happening in Mali, Niger, on the borders of Nigeria and you've also got militants in the northeastern corner, the Lake Chad Basin, the border with Chad and the border with Cameroon, and you've got ISWAP, and in northwestern Nigeria you've got Shekau's Boko Haram, then it's starting to look like these ink spots of extremism are spreading, and if there's an area where that sort of ink spot map looks rather threatening, it really is precisely in that area.

**CTC:** In your 23rd report, you noted “al-Qaida could take advantage of the lull in ISIL strategic terrorist activity by mounting a major attack of its own.”<sup>20</sup> How do you assess the evolving international terrorism threat posed by the al-Qa`ida terrorist network?

**Fitton-Brown:** I think they're still strategically patient, and I think we say in our report that the group overwhelmingly most likely to launch the next complex international terrorist attack with strategic impact is ISIL, not al-Qa`ida. That's still our view. Nevertheless, as I said, ISIL at the moment is in a rut, and can't currently direct complex attacks. It may take some time, and it's not entirely clear when or where they regenerate that capability. But it's still, in my assessment, more likely it will be them than al-Qa`ida.

Al-Qa`ida is playing a longer game, and it seems to be willing to extend its influence. But of course, it could come to a point where it generates a safe space from which it's possible to do something similar to what it did years ago in Afghanistan. Now, that then brings us back to Syria, Hurras al-Din and, of course, HTS [Hayat Tahrir

Al-Sham]. It's a really interesting dynamic in northwestern Syria. What does HTS represent in terms of threat? Well, certainly it's a big threat to the authorities in Damascus. Certainly, it is a large, very well-armed, and motivated group, which has been able to hang on in really very adverse circumstances in northwestern Syria. And it's certainly designated by our committee as an al-Qa`ida-affiliated terrorist group. So, it's a troubling phenomenon; it's probably also true to say its main focus is still primarily on holding space in Syria. And that, of course, is what Zawahiri didn't like about them. He felt that they had strayed away from the whole point of al-Qa`ida and that they had gone down a deviant path. So, he and [HTS leader Abu Muhammad al-Julani] fell out quite badly. And it was partly Zawahiri's influence that led to defections from HTS and the coalition of a number of rather more purist al-Qa`ida groups into Hurras al-Din.

We assess Hurras al-Din to have 1,500 to 2,000 fighters and aspirations to mount international attacks. Certainly on the individual level, there are people in Hurras al-Din who are thinking about international ambitions. But then you have to factor in what they're having to deal with. How successfully are they managing to hold their ground against HTS? Because HTS is much bigger. And if anything, the dynamic of some of the maneuvering and struggling in that rather sort of constrained area in northwest Syria has been that, if anything, HTS has probably grown relatively stronger. So, I wonder whether Zawahiri really sees this as the most promising place to have a dedicated international terrorist group? Or is Hurras al-Din, in fact, going to get one way or another, heavily disrupted either by HTS or by any subsequent fighting that may break out between the Damascus authorities and their allies on the one side and the terrorist groups on the other side?

**CTC:** And al-Julani revealed in an interview in 2015 that al-Zawahiri had instructed him not to use Syria as a launching pad for attacks in the West.<sup>21</sup> So, if these are still al-Zawahiri's instructions, you'd expect the ultra-loyalist Hurras al-Din to also hold off from launching international attacks.

**Fitton-Brown:** Exactly. The key questions [are]: what does he want them to do? Where does he want them to go? Is he looking for them at some point to start to disperse and go elsewhere to more promising environments? Or does he think that actually the authorities in Damascus will not be able to reassert their control in significant swaths of Syrian territory? And that these people will therefore be able to bed down successfully in Syria, and then over time become a significant asset for al-Qa`ida. I imagine all of those questions must be occurring to him. If forces loyal to the Syrian government had moved into Idlib, I wonder how much of that operational capability would have been wiped away.

Overall, I think we can say that al-Qa`ida has, first of all, survived the ISIL challenge; secondly, its belief in being strategically patient has been, in their view, vindicated; and thirdly, their aspiration to project international threat is unchanged and will therefore reemerge at some point. But I still think it's more likely that the next big attack will come from ISIL.

**CTC:** The United States recently issued a \$1 million-dollar reward with regard to Hamza bin Ladin,<sup>22</sup> who many believe is being lined up to take over as the paramount leader of al-Qa`ida.<sup>23</sup> What is your assessment of the danger he poses?

**Fitton-Brown:** Yes, now Hamza bin Ladin obviously is very visible. He has charisma, and he carries his father's name. So, he matters to al-Qa`ida. There's been some speculation in open source that he might be Zawahiri's successor, but I've seen no evidence of that at all. I've seen evidence of him as an important and prominent member of al-Qa`ida, but not that he would necessarily be Zawahiri's successor. Indeed, as al-Qa`ida is structured, he wouldn't be Zawahiri's successor. They have a succession in place.

**CTC: Do we know who the next person next in line would be? Is that something there's been analysis of?**

**Fitton-Brown:** My understanding is that Egyptian jihadi veterans Abu Muhammad al-Masri and Saif al-`Adl are next in line. These guys to some degree have a shared background with Zawahiri.

**CTC: In your 23rd report, you warned that "threats from unmanned aerial systems used in terrorism are likely to increase**

**owing to the exponential rise in the number of drones purchased by hobbyists and the decreasing cost of the technology. Rapid advancements in the technology of drones, including advances in speed, payload, fuel cells and resistance to radio interdiction, will further make countering the threat costlier and more difficult."**<sup>24</sup> **What can be done to address these threats?**

**Fitton-Brown:** The international community needs to do its best to increase standards and controls around this just because it is a unique technology that has wonderfully positive applications, but also it can be turned to be very destructive if used by the wrong people. I think we need to also look out for West Africa because ISWAP have already got a reconnaissance drone capability, which begs the question of how long it takes them to decide to use it for offensive purposes. **CTC**

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# Profit-Minded Suppliers: The WMD Pathways and Combating Convergence

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

Knowledge, materials, infrastructure, personnel, finances, and lines of communications are all components of both a weapons of mass destruction (WMD) proliferation network and an improvised explosive device (IED) facilitation network. Convergence describes occasions when profit-minded suppliers of an IED facilitation network use their transnational linkages to proliferate the critical components for WMD development and facilitate their employment by non-state actors. Convergence, however, does not necessarily lead immediately to a non-state actor possessing a WMD. There are several gaps that must be overcome that are dependent on the type of WMD involved and its delivery mechanism. Upon examining the risk associated with convergence of nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons networks, it is unlikely that profit-minded suppliers will be able to overcome the acquisition hurdles for obtaining the special nuclear material required to make a nuclear device. Convergence will, however, assist non-state actors in developing and employing biological and chemical weapons of minimal complexity, with its biggest contribution likely in propagating raw materials and knowledge similar to current IED proliferation. Combating the convergence of WMD and IED networks is difficult because much of the critical material and information required for the development of a WMD is not illegal.

Convergence in this article refers to profit-minded suppliers<sup>a</sup> of an improvised explosive device (IED) facilitation network using their transnational linkages to proliferate the critical components—whether material, knowledge, or a technically skilled individual—required for weapon of mass destruction (WMD) proliferation.<sup>b</sup> There is a multitude of transnational networks, such as narcotics trafficking or human smuggling networks, that could support convergence for WMD proliferation; IED employment has been

a The concept of 'profit-minded suppliers' in relation to IED/WMD network convergence was first described by John Caves. See John Caves, "Globalization and WMD Proliferation Networks: The Policy Landscape," *Strategic Insights* 5:6 (2006).

b 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 differ 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).

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growing and expanding, with incidents occurring in 48 countries and territories in 2016 alone.<sup>1</sup> This prevalence and possibility for convergence is directly related to the wider “dissemination of [the] knowledge, technology, and material required to manufacture and employ an IED worldwide.”<sup>2</sup>

In terms of IED facilitation, the U.K.-based non-governmental organization Action on Armed Violence (AOAV) examined the transnational dissemination of material, knowledge, and funding supporting actions by groups such as the Islamic State, Boko Haram, al-Qa`ida, the Taliban, and al-Shabaab. The following examples from AOAV’s findings highlight the depth and breadth of these networks. For material, in one example, the Islamic State was able to “rapidly obtain chemicals, detonators, and other precursor materials in an often entirely legal manner.”<sup>3</sup> For one specific IED precursor, the report found that the Islamic State used “three different companies in Brazil, Romania, and China, and [the material] was later imported by three different Turkish companies.”<sup>4</sup> Additionally, while some knowledge was self-taught, according to AOAV, there was an exchange of information between terrorist groups regarding manufacturing and employment of IEDs.<sup>5</sup> Financial support was vast, derived from such sources as simple donations, kidnapping for ransom, extortion, and taxation on goods, such as cocaine smuggled through West Africa. One estimate in the report states that AQIM’s taxation on drugs traveling through West Africa from Colombia, Peru, and Bolivia to Europe generated \$800 million annually.<sup>6</sup> While these are just a few examples of components of an IED facilitation network, they demonstrate the scope and scale of the networks that could potentially converge for WMD proliferation.

The threshold for development and employment of both chemical and biological weapons agents has been lowered over time, as illustrated by chemical weapon agent use by both Aum Shinrikyo in 1995 and more recently by the Islamic State and when it comes to biological weapons, the higher number of ricin incidents worldwide.<sup>7</sup> The proliferation of the knowledge, material precursors, and

technology to develop and employ a WMD is, consequently, a concern. This article, which builds upon an article on profit-minded suppliers published recently in this journal, examines the critical nodes required for non-state actors to develop nuclear, biological, and chemical (NBC) weapons. It also highlights the risk associated with IED facilitation networks providing the necessary support to lower the threshold for WMD proliferation.

## Proliferation Networks

The scope and depth of assistance required to develop and employ an NBC weapon are significant. Convergence with an IED facilitation network is one mechanism to overcome the complexities of WMD proliferation, and the scope of convergence is dependent on three key factors. The first factor is the type of WMD: nuclear, biological, or chemical. Even within these overarching categories, there are varying levels of complexity, as seen in Figure 1. The second critical factor is the starting point for the weapon that a non-state actor may be able to access. This starting point, ranging from raw materials to a nearly assembled device, is heavily dependent on the financial resources available to the non-state actor and access to the materials. And the third factor is the delivery system. Non-state actors, for example, do not have access to intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM) for long-range delivery of a nuclear weapon, consequently a device must be smuggled to the target location.<sup>c</sup>

### Nuclear Weapons

The critical obstacle for a nuclear weapon is not the warhead design

c Some might argue that SpaceX is a non-state actor and that its ability to deliver goods to the international space station demonstrates the ability of a non-state actor to possess an ICBM. Nevertheless, rocket development by companies like SpaceX have, thus far, proceeded with support from the U.S. government (in the form of approval and contracts in support of the International Space Station) and do not represent a terrorist threat.

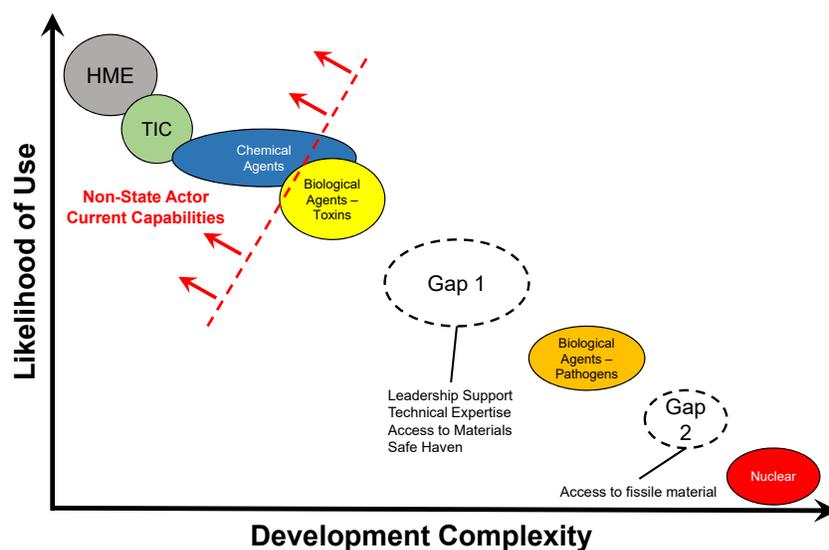


Figure 1. The relative complexity for weaponization and likelihood of use for nuclear, biological, or chemical weapons. The red dotted line highlights that space in which non-state actors currently operate. HME refers to homemade explosives and TIC refers to toxic industrial chemicals, such as chlorine. (Hummel)

but acquisition of special nuclear material (SNM), which is either Uranium-235 (U-235) or Plutonium-239 (Pu-239). To produce a weapon, a terrorist needs a significant quantity of SNM, which the International Atomic Energy Commission (IAEA) has described as 25 kg of U-235 and 8 kg of Pu-239.<sup>8</sup> There are two general pathways to gain possession of a significant quantity of SNM: production or acquisition.

Production of either U-235 or Pu-239 is extremely difficult. Uranium naturally exists in two forms, or isotopes, with the predominant isotope being U-238 at 99.3% as compared to U-235 at 0.7%. Consequently, the uranium must undergo a separation process, known as enrichment, to produce a sufficiently significant quantity of U-235. Under ideal enrichment conditions, it takes a little over 3,500 kg of natural uranium to make a single weapon.<sup>4</sup> No enrichment process is perfectly ideal, however, and so more uranium is required in reality. There are several methods for achieving enrichment, but all require tremendous amounts of time, infrastructure, raw material, and knowledge in the fields of chemistry, chemical engineering, and physics.

Plutonium does not occur naturally and is only produced during a nuclear reaction. When U-238 absorbs a neutron and undergoes fission, one of the potential decay products is Pu-239. The most common place for this reaction to occur is in a nuclear fuel rod. When extracted from a reactor core, these rods are radioactive and require time in a spent fuel pool for the hot, short-lived isotopes to decay. Only after a cooling period, typically over 90 days, is it possible to extract the Pu-239 through reprocessing.

The infrastructure footprint and technical requirements for reprocessing are less difficult than enrichment but hardly insignificant. If not conducted in a radiation-shielded room (commonly referred to as a hot-cell), reprocessing exposes personnel handling the rods to lethal doses of radiation. A hot-cell requires feet of concrete, leaded glass, and remote-control manipulators to move the rods to protect the handlers. This infrastructure would also emit a radiation signature that could be identified with remote sensors. Reprocessing also requires large quantities of commercially available chemicals such as nitric acid and tributyl phosphate. These chemicals would impose specific handling requirements due to their corrosive and reactive nature. Production of a significant quantity of Pu-239 via reprocessing would also require detailed knowledge in chemistry, chemical engineering, and metallurgy.

Regardless of the skill and depth of the proliferation network, it is not likely that a non-state actor would be able produce special nuclear material undetected by the international community. The infrastructure, technical, and economic requirements are too significant for non-state actors. Many states, such as Libya, Iraq, and Egypt, have attempted to develop their own nuclear weapons program and were unsuccessful for a variety of reasons.<sup>9</sup>

Subsequently, a non-state actor would, in all likelihood, attempt to acquire the SNM via theft or purchase it from a nuclear weapons state. While SNM is heavily secured, there have been 21 incidents of attempted theft, acquisition, and diversion of highly enriched uranium (13), plutonium (3), and plutonium beryllium (5) from 1993 to 2015.<sup>10</sup> One such incident occurred in November 2007, when intruders breached a 10,000-volt security fence and stormed the

emergency control center at the Pelindaba facility in South Africa where “supplies of weapons-grade uranium are stored” from the country’s former nuclear weapons program.<sup>11</sup> This group of men accessed an electrical box and “circumvented a magnetic anti-tampering mechanism, disabled the alarms, cut the communications cable, and shut down power to a portion of the fence and to alarms on a gate just 250 feet away—opening a path for a vehicle to exit,” while a second group of men breached the facility.<sup>12</sup> The men were unable to reach the uranium storage area, however, having run into an on-site firefighter who was able to keep the intruders at bay while calling for help. No one was ever arrested, and no terrorist organization ever claimed responsibility for the incident. If the material had been stolen, however, it could have been smuggled, like IED precursors, out of the country. And while SNM is the critical obstacle, a non-state actor would still face several knowledge and material hurdles, if the material were acquired.

The alternative acquisition option for non-state actors, therefore, would be via transfer from a state actor. There are not many states that currently possess nuclear weapons, so the threat of this option is low. Additionally, the scarcity of SNM makes attribution unavoidable. The 2018 U.S. Nuclear Posture Review highlights the nuclear forensics attribution program as a critical component of U.S. national strategy for deterrence.<sup>13</sup> Attribution uses the chemical and radiological isotope fingerprints that become embedded in the SNM through its production method. These fingerprints are traceable back to the material’s origin regardless of whether or not it is highly enriched uranium or plutonium. The ability to trace material back to a state makes it unlikely that a state would willingly provide a non-state actor with a nuclear weapon since the consequences of attribution back to the state are too high.

In summary, the requirements to develop a nuclear weapon are currently so great that a non-state actor would not be able to develop one on his/her own. It is also not probable that a state would provide a significant quantity of special nuclear material, let alone a weapon, to a non-state actor. The risk of attribution to both the non-state actor and the supplying state is too high.

### *Biological Weapons*

Similar to nuclear weapons, which require fissile material, biological weapons require an agent. The agent can be a toxin, virus, or bacterium.<sup>e</sup> Unlike nuclear weapons, however, acquisition of a biological agent is not the most difficult or time-consuming issue. The truly difficult hurdle for biological weapon production is developing large quantities of the desired agent at a sufficiently high

d Calculation for amount of natural uranium: (25 kg U235)/(1 kg natural uranium / 0.007 kg U235) = 3,571 kg natural uranium.

e The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention delineates biological weapons agents into three categories, or levels, based on the risk they pose to national security. Level A agents make up the highest level and are agents that can be easily disseminated or transmitted person to person, have a high mortality rate, and present the greatest possible impact to public health. These agents include but not limited to Anthrax, Ebola, Smallpox, and Botulism. Level B agents are moderately easy to disseminate, have what are considered moderate morbidity rates, and low mortality rates. Level B agents include Ricin toxin, Glanders, and Q fever. Finally, Level C agents are characterized as emerging pathogens that could be engineered for use as a WMD and are categorized based on their availability and ease of production and dissemination, along with high potential for mortality. This includes Nipah virus and Hantavirus. “Biodefense Agents / Diseases,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

purity threshold for the resulting weapon to be employed. Both viruses and bacteria are pathogenic, and the required complexity to weaponize these agents is greater than toxins. Weaponization of any biological agent, however, takes knowledge, technical skill, and specific infrastructure.

Each agent has its own advantages and disadvantages. A toxin, such as ricin, is easy to extract from castor beans; however, to do so at sufficient purity and at a large scale is difficult. Additionally, it is not easy to disseminate this toxin across a large population, and consequently, it is better 'suited' for targeted assassination by a terrorist organization. Furthermore, the potential agent dictates the possible employment methods since some agents cannot be aerosolized so ingestion is required.

All biological agents are naturally occurring.<sup>f</sup> While it is not necessarily difficult to acquire a biological weapon agent, employment is difficult. Anthrax, for example, can be found in soil worldwide and particularly in agricultural areas. These rod-shaped, gram-positive bacteria, however, are in its spore, or dormant, form. Anthrax spores become "activated" once ingested by an animal where it begins to grow using surrounding nutrients.<sup>14</sup>

A terrorist might easily obtain Anthrax spores from a soil sample, but a single sample is not enough to be effective. Anthrax is not contagious like the flu virus where it is passed via human-to-human contact. A single Anthrax spore if inhaled or ingested can be fatal, but the probability of inhaling that single spore is extremely low. Consequently, the density of spores in the air needs to be dramatically increased in order for it to be used as a weapon. Scientific knowledge and a laboratory are required to activate the Anthrax, allow it to replicate, and then return the bacteria to its spore form in order to disseminate it.

Infrastructure is critical for developing a biological weapon agent, particularly in terms of controlling the environment, as are personal protective measures such as supplied air and hoods. Unlike Anthrax, most viable weapons agents do not have a dormant phase and will die outside of a host for a variety of reasons, including temperature variation, ultraviolet light (sun) exposure, oxygen/carbon dioxide concentrations, and lack of access to nutrients. At a bare minimum, a lab requires incubators, containment hoods, refrigeration and freezer capabilities, pipettes, benchtop centrifuges, growth medium, and glass/plastic flasks. The specific quantities and capabilities of the equipment are all dependent on the scale of production as well as the agent itself. That said, a graduate-level microbiology lab would have all of the necessary equipment.

The knowledge and technical skill required to manipulate and grow an agent is just as important as infrastructure. Simply reading a few scientific articles would not suffice. The procedure outlined in a scientific journal, for example, would fail to highlight the nuances that can affect the efficiency of reagents—such as ambient environmental factors as pressure and humidity—that a trained professional would understand. Direct knowledge of and experience with the laboratory equipment are critical; bacteria and viruses are living

organisms that can quickly degrade if not maintained properly.

Figure 1 highlights the gap between toxin and pathogenic agents that non-state actors encounter. As demonstrated by the abundance of incidents worldwide, ricin is perhaps the easiest biological toxin for non-state actors to acquire. A few notable ricin producers that demonstrate the ease of production and the minimum amount of technical skill required for weaponization include Shannon Richardson, a part-time actress from Texas in 2013, and James Dutschke, a karate instructor from Tupelo, Mississippi, in 2014.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, Sief Allah H. was arrested by German officials in June 2018 on suspicion of planning an "Islamic-motivated attack" after he tested ricin on a hamster.<sup>16</sup> Pathogenic biological agents have rarely been employed by non-state actors—the two notable exceptions being the 1984 Rajneeshee attack in Dalles, Oregon, and the Aum Shinrikyo's 1993 Anthrax release in Tokyo. While the Rajneeshee attack hospitalized hundreds for "food poisoning," the Anthrax attack failed to injure anyone due to the strain of Anthrax the group aerosolized.<sup>17</sup>

In summary, due to the technical skill, knowledge, and infrastructure required to develop pathogenic biological weapons agents, there remains a hurdle that non-state actors, such as the Islamic State, are not able to overcome. This gap, however, is not insurmountable, particularly if proliferation of these agents is assisted by profit-minded suppliers.

#### *Chemical Weapons*

Akin to biological weapons agents, chemical weapons agents can be characterized by their weaponization complexity. Blister agents, such as sulfur mustard, are easier to develop and employ than nerve agents, like VX and sarin. While there are less requirements for chemical weapons development than nuclear and biological weapons, there are still the obstacles of leadership support, knowledge, technical skill, and materials. The Islamic State was able to manufacture and employ sulfur mustard, a blister agent, on multiple occasions from 2013 to 2017 against civilian and coalition targets.<sup>18</sup> Comparatively, Aum Shinrikyo was able to develop and employ sarin, a nerve agent, in the Tokyo subway in 1995.<sup>19</sup>

The attacks by the Islamic State and Aum Shinrikyo highlight the different levels of technical skill, knowledge, and infrastructure available to each group. In terms of technical skill, knowledge, and leadership, Aum Shinrikyo's primary personnel for its chemical weapons program were Seiichi Endo and Masami Tsuchiya. Seiichi Endo was the cult's "health and welfare minister." He was a virology graduate student at Kyoto University when he joined the cult and reportedly began working on its biological and chemical weapons program as early as 1990.<sup>20</sup> Masami Tsuchiya, the lead chemist for Aum Shinrikyo, received his master's degree in physical and organic chemistry from the University of Tsukuba in Japan. According to Judge Satoru Hattori, Masami Tsuchiya "made all of the chemical weapons used in the [sarin] attack."<sup>21</sup>

While it is clear that Aum Shinrikyo possessed the requisite personnel with both the knowledge and skill to develop chemical weapons, the group also needed infrastructure, which in this case was a clandestine laboratory. Authorities discovered two such laboratories belonging to the cult: one on a farm in Australia and the other in a small village near Mount Fuji. At the Australian farm, chemicals were manufactured and then subsequently tested on sheep. The Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) reported that "the South Australian Forensic Science

<sup>f</sup> There is one exception. Smallpox was eradicated through a World Health Organization vaccine program in the 1970s. The virus was declared eradicated in 1980 with the last known case to have occurred in 1977 in Somalia. Currently, the only two known samples of Smallpox are stored at the Center for Disease Control and Prevention in the United States and State Research Center for Virology and Biotechnology in Russia. "Smallpox," World Health Organization.

Laboratory detected sarin hydrolysis products from soils and sheep wool,”<sup>22</sup> meaning Aum Shinrikyo was testing its nerve agent on animals in preparation for use. The laboratory near Mount Fuji was found to have a network of thick pipes, three cooling towers, and the “ventilation system and fixtures ... said to be those of a modern laboratory, with computer-controlled systems.”<sup>23</sup> The sophisticated environmental controls at the Mount Fuji laboratory enabled the facility to go unnoticed by the surrounding population, while the remoteness of the Australia lab itself provided that facility with its protection.

The Islamic State and its chemical weapons program faced different challenges that directly affected its access to infrastructure, raw materials, technical skill, and knowledge. It is these challenges that likely limited the Islamic State’s chemical weapons program to producing sulfur mustard, which is less complex chemically than nerve agents. The Islamic State recruited those whom it could find on the battlefield. Suleiman al-Afari was a 49-year-old geologist for Iraq’s Ministry of Industry and Minerals in Mosul when militants appeared.<sup>24</sup> According to reporting by *The Washington Post*, al-Afari had hoped to keep his regular job, but was instead offered the opportunity to “help us [the Islamic State] make chemical weapons.”<sup>25</sup> While not a chemist, al-Afari did have a STEM<sup>g</sup> background and could contribute knowledge and some technical skill. His story is not unique. The Islamic State developed its chemical weapons program in “university laboratories and manufacturing facilities with a cadre of scientists and technicians.”<sup>26</sup>

The different paths to chemical weapons for Aum Shinrikyo and the Islamic State highlight the level of support required. Aum Shinrikyo had skilled and knowledgeable personnel within its organization, whereas the Islamic State struggled in this regard. Aum Shinrikyo also had access to both money and infrastructure that enabled it to develop its sarin clandestinely in Japan and Australia. Even though the Islamic State had access to money, it lacked the ability to set up the requisite infrastructure in the towns and villages of Iraq and Syria in order to build an effective chemical weapon.<sup>27</sup> Consequently, the Islamic State’s sulfur mustard, though deadly, was crude and contained impurities that degraded its effectiveness.<sup>28</sup>

The Islamic State was likely dependent on a transnational network that supplied components for its IEDs to also provide the disulfur dichloride, a precursor for sulfur mustard. This compound is used in the manufacture of synthetic rubbers and dyes and when reacted with ethylene can produce sulfur mustard and equal quantities of sulfur impurities.<sup>29</sup> There is little difference in the requirements for moving chemical precursors for an IED and the precursors required to make a chemical weapon. Thus, potential for convergence between an IED facilitation network and the development of chemical weapons is high.

### Risk of Convergence

While gaps currently exist for non-state actors to develop nuclear, biological, or chemical weapons, the threshold for some is being lowered. Convergence of an IED facilitation network supplying the personnel, material, infrastructure, and financial support is lowering that threshold. There are more opportunities for the profit-minded supplier via transnational networks to illicitly circumvent treaty and trade restrictions meant to stop the proliferation of WMDs. And as stated in the first profit-minded supplier article,

“while the taboo associated with WMD may deter some suppliers, other are likely to remain focused on the profits.”<sup>30</sup> Regardless of convergence, nuclear weapons will likely remain out of the hands of non-state actors. The requirements for producing SNM are too great for a non-state, nor is a state likely to part with its SNM.

Convergence, especially when driven by the opportunity for profit, can and will directly assist non-state actors in developing their own biological and chemical weapons. Certain types of weapons, such as nerve and pathogenic agents, will remain out of the grasp of non-state actors due to their manufacturing requirements and will remain beyond the grasp of all both the most sophisticated non-state actors. Other types such as toxins and blister agents can be easily developed and employed. Perhaps, the biggest limitation for development of nerve and pathogenic agents is not a lack of convergence but a willingness and understanding of the requirements of non-state actors. Convergence can lower the hurdles for the development of chemical and biological weapons and will continue to do so.

### Conclusions

Knowledge, materials, infrastructure, personnel, finances, and lines of communications are all components of both a WMD proliferation and IED facilitation network. All of these components can be acquired for the right amount of money. And while convergence with transnational networks for WMD proliferation can help non-state actors overcome some of the hurdles required for WMD development and employment, it will not overcome all of them. There is a risk of exposure and potentially attribution from the international community that both the profit-minded supplier and the non-state actor consider when conducting business. To reduce the risk of exposure, it is likely that the non-state actor desiring the WMD will use multiple transnational networks in order to reduce the acquisition signature visible to the intelligence community.

Convergence will likely take the path of least resistance that maximizes the profits for the supplier. Specifically, the acquisition of special nuclear material required to make a nuclear weapon is too difficult to overcome, but the ease of moving chemical precursors is minimal, especially considering the dual-use nature of most chemicals. Convergence will assist non-state actors in developing and employing biological and chemical weapons with minimal complexity. Its biggest contribution is likely to be raw materials and knowledge similar to current IED proliferation.

Combating convergence of these two networks is difficult because much of the critical material and information required for development of a WMD is not illegal, such as knowledge of a chemical process or possession of precursors such as disulfur dichloride. No single entity within the U.S. government alone, for example, will be able to combat convergence and WMD proliferation single-handedly. There are programs, such as the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) and the Australia Group along with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1540, designed to fight WMD proliferation, yet proliferation has still occurred.<sup>h</sup> As technology progresses and information disseminates worldwide, the threshold limiting WMD

g Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics.

h United Nation Security Council Resolution 1540, which was passed in 2004, states that “all 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.” This resolution also requires States to “adopt and enforce appropriate laws to this effect.”

proliferation will be lowered. As stated in the authors' previous 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."<sup>31</sup> **CTC**

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# Doxing and Defacements: Examining the Islamic State's Hacking Capabilities

By Audrey Alexander and Bennett Clifford

**The activities of Islamic State-affiliated hackers and hacking groups continue to garner substantial media attention and public concern. In turn, threat assessments and predictions of the capabilities of these actors frequently rely on 'what-if' scenarios, overestimate technical skill, and conflate multiple, separate cyber activities. Through analysis of several U.S. prosecutions of Islamic State-affiliated hackers and their networks, proficiencies, and activities, this article argues that very few of these actors demonstrate advanced hacking or cyberterrorism capabilities. Lacking the know-how, resources, and ingenuity for complex computer network operations, the entities analyzed here turned to methods like doxing, website defacements, social media account hacks, and minor intrusions. A pertinent example is the case of Ardit Ferizi, the Kosovar national arrested in 2015 for illegally obtaining personally identifiable information from a U.S. company's server and providing it to the Islamic State.**

Popular conceptions of 'hackers' or 'cyberterrorists' evoke images of inexplicably hooded figures, lurking behind laptops and coding unimaginably detrimental software. From the public conscious to political rhetoric, this misconception places a wide array of digitally coordinated terrorist-related activities into a homogenous category, making it difficult to parse the nuances of varying networks and tactics. In the case of the Islamic State, inflated perceptions of the group's capabilities can sometimes eclipse the reality.

The digital capabilities of the Islamic State, much like the virtual efforts of competing and preceding terrorist groups, are difficult to measure yet consistently elicit a great deal of public concern. In a 2012 article titled "The Cyber Terror Bogeyman," Peter Singer explained that fear and perceptions of the cyberterrorist threat often blur the realities of terrorist capabilities, at least in part because of elusive conceptions of the term "cyberterrorism."<sup>1</sup> While the Federal Bureau of Investigation offers a relatively specific definition that is

predicated on select efforts that result in violence,<sup>a</sup> other discussions of cyberterrorism tend to "sweep all sorts of nonviolent online mischief into the 'terror' bin."<sup>2</sup> This appears to result in the inflation of perceptions of cyberterrorism and the dangers it invites.<sup>b</sup>

The prolific nature of Islamic State propaganda online, paired with a piqued but murky comprehension of cyber threats by the public, creates an environment where actors with ties to the group are presumed to pose a genuine threat to national security, and possibly critical national infrastructure.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, this logic "conflates the ability to produce and disseminate targeted propaganda with the ability and intent to carry out destructive cyber attacks."<sup>4</sup> While the flow of terrorist content online and the feasibility of attack planning remain critical problems that require political and legal interventions, each threat-type is distinct and bears different degrees of risk from other methods. Since the sophistication of operations also varies, even among efforts such as hacking, doxing,<sup>c</sup> defacements, and distributed denial of service attacks (DDoS), it is useful to consider the technical capabilities each method requires, the nature of the target, the likelihood the plan comes to fruition, and the material and perceptual impact of an attack.<sup>5</sup>

Assessing cyber measures in this manner can help contextualize online threats by highlighting the gap between perception and reality while flagging strategic and operational implications for policymakers and practitioners. The well-publicized 2015 hack of the United States Central Command's (CENTCOM) social media accounts by actors claiming links to the Islamic State offers one opportunity to leverage this approach. In short, hackers compromised CENTCOM's Twitter and YouTube accounts, and posted threats, propaganda, and military documents.<sup>6</sup> Although this intrusion was jarring, subsequent investigation revealed that no classified information was disseminated, and that "virtually all of the documents posted were publicly available online."<sup>7</sup> Even though the hacking

a The FBI defines cyberterrorism as a "premeditated, politically motivated attack against information, computer systems, computer programs and data which results in violence against non-combatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents."

b To offer an example, a February 2016 Gallup poll found that 73 percent of Americans regarded cyberterrorism (which the poll defined as "the use of computers to cause disruption or fear in society") as one of the most critical threats to the United States. For context, cyberterrorism ranked slightly below the development of nuclear weapons by Iran, but above the spread of infectious diseases around the world, the conflict in Syria, and the military power of North Korea. Justin McCarthy, "Americans Cite Cyberterrorism Among Top Three Threats to U.S.," Gallup, February 10, 2016.

c Doxing (also spelled 'Doxxing') is the act of gathering and disclosing or publishing an individual's personally identifiable information (PII) online with the intent of harming a target with acts like public humiliation, stalking, identity theft, or harassment. For more information, see "How to Prevent Online Harassment from 'Doxxing,'" Department of Homeland Security, April 2017.

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group intended to cast its effort as a large-scale data breach, commentators suggested that compromising CENTCOM's social media accounts required far less sophistication than hacking into CENTCOM's computer systems.<sup>8</sup> In the end, this event was a nuisance and public relations problem for the U.S. government, military, and law enforcement, but various analyses and a statement from the military narrowly regarded the hack as a case of web defacement and "cyber vandalism."<sup>9</sup>

Beyond capability, intention, and impact, the genuine nature of the relationship between online operatives and terrorist groups, and the attribution of attacks, are also elements that require further consideration. Much like terrorist attacks around the world, claims of responsibility for targeted efforts in the virtual arena are not always stated or discernible. In November 2014, the email of a person affiliated with Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently (RSS), a Syrian media group critical of the Islamic State, was targeted with social engineering and malware designed to reveal their location.<sup>10</sup> After analyzing the attack, researchers at The Citizen Lab assessed that "[Islamic State] can't be ruled out" as a possible source of the malware, but were ultimately "unable to connect this attack to [Islamic State]" or other supporters of the organization.<sup>d</sup> To complicate matters more, cyber groups that appear associated with the Islamic State and conduct campaigns that benefit the Islamic State are not necessarily connected to the Islamic State and its leadership.<sup>e</sup> In February 2017, for example, the Tunisian Fallaga Team conducted a website defacement campaign that targeted the NHS websites in the United Kingdom with graphic photos of the Syrian Civil War; some media reports covering the attack described Fallaga Team as "[Islamic State]-linked."<sup>11</sup> Ultimately, even though Fallaga Team leverages some political imagery linked to the Islamic State in defacement campaigns, it is crucial to remember that it has "not made any official declaration of loyalty" to the Islamic State or online groups that are pro-Islamic State.<sup>12</sup> These attacks, among others,<sup>f</sup> show that affiliation and attribution to Islamic State in the digital sphere is not always clear-cut. In practice, such nuances can dictate the courses of action viable to law enforcement authorities tasked with countering and preventing terrorism and other criminal activities.

To confront this elusive problem, it is vital for policymakers, practitioners, and scholars to tether the issue to genuine appraisals

of the threat and disaggregate the capabilities and intentions of the actors involved.<sup>13</sup> By counterbalancing speculation about the worst-case cyberterrorism scenarios with concrete examples of the actions jihadi-inspired actors take in cyberspace, this article attempts to shed light on some of the 'hooded figures' by examining various uses and implications of hacking and doxing tactics among Islamic State supporters. As noted earlier, the case of Ardit Ferizi, one of the better-known hackers with links to the Islamic State, is an instructive example to discuss the capabilities, methods, and networks of pro-Islamic State hackers.

### Ferizi and the August 2015 'Kill List'

Beginning in April 2015, Kosovar national and hacker Ardit Ferizi provided support to the Islamic State by transmitting personally identifiable information (PII) of U.S. and Western European citizens to Islamic State members in Raqqa, Syria.<sup>14</sup> Ferizi, a computer science student at a Malaysian university, led a group of ethnic Albanian hackers known as "Kosova Hacker's Security," which compromised over 20,000 websites throughout Eastern Europe, Israel, and the United States.<sup>15</sup> He also managed penvid.com, an online file-sharing service that hosted Islamic State propaganda.<sup>16 g</sup>

According to U.S. court documents, the first known online interactions between Ferizi and Islamic State members occurred via Twitter in April 2015. Using the handle @Th3Dir3ctorY, Ferizi sent a direct message to @Muslim\_Sniper\_D, an account operated by Hamayun Tariq, a British Islamic State fighter.<sup>17 h</sup> In his message, Ferizi explains, "Brother i have 4 million data of kuffar countrys (sic) which attacking islamic state," and attached screenshots of credit card and account information from over 60 citizens of Western countries.<sup>18</sup>

Hamayun Tariq directed Ferizi to contact another Islamic State member, Abu Hussain al-Britani, telling Ferizi that "[he] is my friend he told me a lot about u."<sup>19</sup> Abu Hussain al-Britani was the *kunya* of Junaid Hussain, a notorious British Islamic State member who directed attacks in Western countries through the use of digital communications technologies.<sup>20</sup> Prior to traveling to Islamic State-controlled territory in 2013, Hussain, like Ferizi, was a politically motivated hacktivist. Under the pseudonym TriCK, Hussain was part of a hacker's collective named TeaMp0isoN, which coordinated hacks against select targets, including the U.K. gov-

d In its discussion about the attribution of this particular malware attack, The Citizen Lab report identifies "at least three possible sources for this malware attack: pro-regime/regime-linked malware groups, [Islamic State-linked hackers], or other, unknown hackers." John Scott-Railton and Seth Hardy, "Malware Attack Targeting Syrian ISIS Critics," Citizen Lab, December 18, 2018.

e One article explains, "while hacking groups such as Fallaga Team, Team System Dz, and the UCC carry out cyber campaigns in support of [the Islamic State] and create an appearance of projecting cyber-power from which [the Islamic State] benefits, there is no evidence that [the Islamic State] itself is coordinating or perpetrating cyber campaigns." Rose Bernard, "These are not the terrorist groups you're looking for: an assessment of cyber capabilities of Islamic State," *Journal of Cyber Policy* 2:2 (2017).

f Another possible example is the 2015 case of TV5Monde, a French television station that was reportedly compromised in an attack claimed by a group called the "CyberCaliphate," though subsequent investigation uncovered links to another politically motivated hacking group. For more, see "Cyber Operations Tracker – Compromise of TV5 Monde," Council on Foreign Relations, April 2015.

g While slightly outside the scope of this article, which focuses on Ferizi's hacking efforts on behalf of the Islamic State, investigators found that Ferizi coordinated with Islamic State sympathizers to host the organization's propaganda on penvid.com. His initial intention in creating the site was to create a dedicated hosting platform without terms of service (ToS) enforcement to store Islamic State media permanently. The FBI later accessed the site, which Ferizi lacked the resources to maintain, using the Wayback Machine. "Criminal Complaint," *USA v. Ardit Ferizi*, United States District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia, Case: 1:15-mj-515, 2015; Erin Joe and Ammar Barghouty, "Understanding Cyberterrorism: The Ardit Ferizi Case," presented at RSA Conference 2018, April 19, 2018.

h To avoid confusion, please note that U.S. court filings call Hamayun Tariq by the name "Tariq Hamayun." These variances reference the same person. For more on Hamayun Tariq, see Shiv Malik, "Briton claiming to be former Taliban bomb expert 'joins Isis,'" *Guardian*, November 20, 2014, and Aimen Dean, Paul Cruickshank, and Tim Lister, *Nine Lives: My Time as MI6's Top Spy Inside al-Qaeda* (London: Oneworld, 2018): 'My Eighth Life' and 'Reflections.'

ernment.<sup>21</sup> After joining the Islamic State, Hussain supported some hacking-related and doxing efforts under the banner of the Islamic State Hacking Division.<sup>j</sup> In March 2015, for example, Hussain posted a 'kill list' comprised of the names and addresses of 100 members of the U.S. military.<sup>22</sup>

On June 13, 2015, aware of and possibly inspired by the March 2015 Islamic State Hacking Division kill list,<sup>k</sup> Ferizi illegally obtained "system administrator-level access" to the servers of an Illinois-based company and accessed customer records databases, containing the PII (including phone numbers, email addresses, physical addresses, and passwords) of approximately 100,000 store patrons.<sup>23</sup> Refining his search to entries with a .gov or .mil email address, Ferizi compiled a list of 1,351 U.S. government or military personnel.<sup>24</sup> The same day, Ferizi contacted Junaid Hussain on Skype and provided him links to lists of .gov and .mil email "dumps" that he pulled from the database. Hussain replied, "Akhi [brother] this will hit them hard ... we will make a good message to the kuffar."<sup>25</sup>

Two months later (in August 2015), "in the name of the Islamic State Hacking Division," Hussain tweeted a link to the information Ferizi stole alongside the post: "NEW: U.S. Military and Government HACKED by the Islamic State Hacking Division!"<sup>26</sup> The 30-page document contained the PII of the 1,351 U.S. persons with .gov and .mil addresses, preceded by a brief threat from the Hacking Division: "we are in your emails and computer systems ... we are extracting confidential data and passing on your personal information to the soldiers of the khilafah, who soon with the permission of Allah will strike at your necks in your own lands!"<sup>27</sup>

After Ferizi breached the company server in June 2015, an employee of the company contacted the FBI and reported a breach of access by an unknown administrative account bearing the name "KHS," referring to Ferizi's hacking outfit Kosova Hacker's Secu-

rity.<sup>28</sup> After providing the account details to the FBI, the employees and server technicians tried to remove the DUBrute.exe malware, the IP scanner, and the KHS account that Ferizi used to gain top-level access to the server.<sup>29</sup> Ferizi responded on August 19, 2015, by regaining access and emailing the company, threatening to release the full 100,000-plus user database if they deleted his files again. He also demanded payment in bitcoin.<sup>30</sup> By that time, however, the company had already given the FBI consent to examine all contents of the server, including the IP addresses of those who accessed the server.<sup>31</sup>

The FBI found that someone using a Malaysian IP address used Structured Query Language injection (SQLi) to access the company's server illegally. Ferizi logged into a Facebook profile, a Twitter account that he used to communicate with Hamayun Tariq, and the Skype account he used to message Junaid Hussain from that same IP address.<sup>32</sup> While authorities prepared for Ferizi's arrest, U.S. intelligence and military officials targeted and killed Hussain in late August 2015<sup>33</sup> as Hussain reportedly left an internet cafe in Raqqa.<sup>34</sup>

Back in Malaysia, Ferizi attempted to digitally clear evidence by reformatting hard drives and deleting files off the two laptops that he used for hacking jobs.<sup>35</sup> On September 10, 2015, however, Ferizi used his Facebook accounts to send himself a spreadsheet titled "contact.csv" with 100,001 PII records.<sup>36</sup> The FBI obtained a search warrant, accessed that account and file, and determined that it matched the company's illegally accessed records. The Royal Malaysia Police arrested Ferizi at Kuala Lumpur International Airport on September 15, 2015, as he attempted to leave the country for Kosovo with two laptops.<sup>37</sup> After his eventual extradition to the United States, Ferizi pleaded guilty to unauthorized access and material support violations in the Eastern District Court of Virginia.<sup>38</sup>

### Islamic State Doxing and Kill Lists

Ardit Ferizi's hacking efforts resulted in the publication of one of the best-known 'kill lists' released by Islamic State sympathizers, and to date, it remains one of the more sophisticated computer network operations on behalf of the group. Compiling the PII of U.S. persons, publishing the information (doxing), and calling for attacks is an established mode of operations for hacking groups aligning themselves with facets of the Islamic State's agenda.<sup>39</sup> In a 2017 interview in this publication, Lisa Monaco, former assistant to President Barack Obama for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism, discussed the Ferizi case, noting how it demonstrated that the Islamic State can sometimes "outsource" tasks like hacking to criminal actors instead of amassing such capabilities within its ranks.<sup>40</sup> It seems, however, that sympathetic hackers range in their level of connection to central Islamic State external operations and media apparatuses, as well as their technical and tactical proficiency in hacking.<sup>41</sup> Doxing efforts and the dissemination of kill lists may be attractive to aspiring online operatives because these measures are relatively feasible at the tactical level, even without expert-level hacking skills, and successfully instigate fear.<sup>42</sup>

The first reported 'kill list' distributed by individuals aligned with the Islamic State, which arguably popularized the technique, occurred in March 2015.<sup>43</sup> Hussain and the Islamic State Hacking Division accessed information on members of the U.S. military from open-source research, tracking down addresses and emails from social media, accounts on major websites, and other publicly available sources.<sup>44</sup> According to an FBI agent who worked on the

i In 2011, after gaining access to the personal email of an advisor to former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, TeaMpOisoN posted Blair's address book online. "'Team Poison' hacker who posted Tony Blair's details is jailed," *Telegraph*, July 27, 2012.

j The status of the Islamic State Hacking Division as an "official" outfit within the Islamic State, similar to the status of many hacking collectives sympathetic to the Islamic State, is subject to legitimate dispute. To offer examples, three interpretations exist: that the Hacking Division was part of the Islamic State's external operations wing; that Islamic State officials permitted Junaid Hussain to manage the division but did not officially charter it; and that Islamic State officials disapproved of Hussain's initiative to start the Hacking Division. The Islamic State's official and unofficial media have distanced the Islamic State from several other hacking collectives, including the United Cyber Caliphate and Caliphate Cyber Army. For more on these trends, see Bernard; Laith Alkhoury, Alex Kassirer, and Allison Nixon, "Hacking for ISIS: The Emergent Cyber Threat Landscape," Flashpoint, 2016; Catherine Theohary, Kathleen McInnis, and John Rollins, "Information Warfare: DOD's Response to the Islamic State Hacking Activities," *CRS Insight*, Congressional Research Service, May 10, 2016.

k Although it is difficult to discern Ferizi's motives for accessing private information for a kill list, it is interesting to note that he was aware of the March 2015 Islamic State Hacking Division kill list and defended the approach in communications with another individual before illegally accessing the Illinois-based company and contacting Hussain about that effort. See "Attachment B," particularly the conversation with 'Individual A' on May 6, 2015, in "Position of the United States with Respect to Sentencing," *USA v. Ardit Ferizi*, United States District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia, Case: 1:15-mj-515 2016.

Ferizi case, the FBI assessed that the PII on the March 2015 kill list “didn’t [come] from any type of [Computer Network Operations] attack, but [Junaid Hussain] was very good at open-source research ... he even paid for some services like Lexis-Nexis to get actual home addresses.”<sup>45</sup> The Hacking Division’s efforts resulted in the release of approximately 100 names and addresses that Hussain believed to belong to U.S. Air Force personnel at two bases in the Middle East.<sup>46</sup> In conversations with Ferizi, Hussain claimed that the March 2015 effort was the inspiration for future efforts, including the August 2015 hitlist: “we will only release mil and gov ... like u know the hitlist i made with addresses ... we will make message to the kuffar and release the .mil and .gov.”<sup>47</sup>

Since March 2015 especially, other hacking collectives claiming affiliation to or supporting the Islamic State attempted to dox targets and publish kill lists. According to one study, Islamic State sympathizers released at least 19 separate kill lists, including the PII of European and American citizens, between March 2015 and June 2016.<sup>48</sup> The majority were released by three separate groups: the Islamic State Hacking Division (ISHD), the Caliphate Cyber Army (CCA), and the United Cyber Caliphate (UCC).<sup>49</sup> Broadly speaking, these targeted civilians, government employees, members of the military, and law enforcement.<sup>50</sup> Evidence suggests that they varied in originality and authenticity, as further analyses discovered that some lists repackaged information from existing public sources.<sup>51</sup> While threatening, such efforts do not require advanced cyber capabilities: “the publication of these lists only demonstrates an understanding of how to collate information and release it in such a way as to create the impressions of power.”<sup>52</sup> Extending beyond the capabilities of these pro-Islamic State cyber groups, it is interesting to highlight the observation “that few groups appear to have explicitly expressed intent to target critical national infrastructure using cyberattacks.”<sup>53</sup>

The response to the release of kill lists of U.S. persons by Islamic State-affiliated hackers understandably evokes a great deal of concern from policymakers, practitioners, the public, and of course, the individuals on the lists.<sup>54</sup> However, it is important to differentiate low- and medium-sophistication efforts (ranging from doxing attempts from open-source information to compromising government social media accounts and breaching the servers of private companies) from those that require drastically more resources and skills, like computer network operations targeting critical infrastructure or other large-scale cyber-enabled attacks. By recognizing the likelihood of certain attack types, and reducing the impact of low-level efforts, the counterterrorism community can proportionally respond to groups’ demonstrated abilities rather than hypothetical ones.<sup>55</sup>

Anecdotally, discerning the actual impact of these releases on attack plots in the United States is difficult. Cases involving reports of an American Islamic State sympathizer who, using the PII of individuals available on known kill lists, attempted to locate and attack them are problematic, but not especially common.<sup>56</sup> In September 2015, for example, the now-convicted Virginia resident Haris Qamar told a confidential witness that the addresses of individuals named on one kill list were located near his home.<sup>57</sup> Qamar told the confidential witness that he noticed undercover police cars near those residences, and based on those comments, authorities working on the case believed that “Qamar likely drove past those residences after their occupants were included on the ‘kill list.’”<sup>58</sup> Authorities arrested Qamar in 2016, and he pleaded guilty later

that year to attempting to provide material support to the Islamic State.<sup>59</sup> Meanwhile in 2016, Maryland resident Nelash Mohamed Das was accused of plotting attacks against U.S. military personnel.<sup>60</sup> Before receiving a fake target from an FBI confidential human source, he allegedly accessed one of the 2015 United Cyber Caliphate kill lists and selected an individual that lived nearby.<sup>61</sup> Ultimately, the FBI arrested Das before he allegedly had the chance to carry out his plot, and a federal grand jury charged him with attempting to provide material support to the Islamic State.<sup>62</sup> Das pleaded not guilty, and at the time of writing, his case is still pending.<sup>63</sup>

More U.S. prosecutions involve individuals who rebroadcast kill lists on social media rather than carrying out their instructions themselves. Between May and August 2015, the subsequently convicted Buffalo, Missouri, resident Safya Yassin posted the PII of several individual targets inside the United States alongside direct threats, culminating in her retweeting of the August 2015 Ferizi-Hussain list.<sup>64</sup> In a similar case, Ohio resident Terrence McNeil solicited the murder of U.S. military personnel by reposting the March 2015 list of 100 servicemembers onto a Tumblr page he operated, alongside a direct call to murder the individuals on the list.<sup>65</sup> Later that year, McNeil posted additional kill lists online and reiterated calls for the targeting of U.S. service members. He was subsequently convicted.<sup>66</sup>

Finally, authorities arrested Kentucky resident Marie Castelli after she distributed a five-page document containing PII onto a pro-Islamic State Facebook group in October 2015.<sup>67</sup> Interestingly, there is evidence indicating that Junaid Hussain’s widow Sally Jones played a role in collating this document and disseminating it online, demonstrating that doxing efforts continued after Hussain’s death.<sup>68</sup> Castelli pleaded guilty to communicating threats in interstate commerce in late 2017.<sup>69</sup>

Looking beyond their immediate results, doxings and kill lists represent a method for Islamic State sympathizers with limited cyber proficiencies, resources, technical capabilities, and direction to make an outsized impact. Sympathizers that merely repost this information require even fewer skills and resources. To date, very few of these attempts required the groups behind them to conduct advanced computer network operations; Islamic State-affiliated hacking groups instead used information that is largely available to the public to garner the information for lists. Whether Islamic State sympathizers will attempt to continue doxing operations into the future remains unclear, but it is likely that those with interest in online operations will gravitate toward efforts that create, from their point of view, a similarly high return on relatively low investment.

### Other Hacking Efforts by American Jihadi Sympathizers

To further contextualize Ferizi’s acts of cyberterrorism within other manifestations of hacking-related and terrorism-oriented cases in the United States and abroad, it is productive to look to other individuals who used hacking techniques to advance their causes, with varying degrees of success.

In some instances, individuals might conduct lower-level hacks into social media accounts to achieve operational security<sup>70</sup> with the goal of promoting pro-Islamic State materials and tactical information clandestinely. Waheba Dais, a Wisconsin woman who recently pleaded guilty to attempting to provide material support to the Islamic State, hacked into several “private social media platforms,” namely Facebook accounts, to communicate with others and share

propaganda.<sup>71</sup> There is evidence that Dais and individuals in her network adopted this method to communicate with each other while avoiding detection by law enforcement.<sup>72</sup> Although Dais engaged in other problematic behaviors online, including facilitating access to poison and bomb-making instructions and assisting in attack planning, the intent of her hacking efforts differs from some of the other cases discussed in this article.<sup>73</sup> Here, hacking individual social media accounts served as a means to achieve operational security, and subsequently promote the objectives of a group. While undoubtedly troublesome, such efforts are less sophisticated and impactful than illegally accessing a company server to steal information and publish a kill list.

By way of contrast, the ongoing case of Chicago resident Ashraf Al Safoo and his pro-Islamic State online media network shows that some sympathizers may hack accounts to optimize their influence online and counteract the effects of account suspensions and removals by social media providers.<sup>m</sup> Al Safoo, who authorities charged with conspiracy to provide material support in October 2018, allegedly worked with a range of online co-conspirators to produce, coordinate, and disseminate propaganda across multiple social media platforms.<sup>74</sup> Since such activities required regular access to active accounts, Al Safoo and other members of the Khattab Media Foundation purportedly “took steps to acquire access to as many accounts as possible” for sympathizers in their cohort.<sup>75</sup> These efforts included creating “account ‘banks’” and “hacking the accounts of legitimate social media users.”<sup>76</sup> In a group chat, one contributor articulated their preference for hacked accounts, arguing that they stayed open longer than new accounts.<sup>77</sup> Although Al Safoo and his contacts regularly emphasized the importance of operational security in their online activities, court filings indicated that the rationale behind hacking into accounts on various social media platforms appears motivated by the desire to broadcast their messages as opposed to masking their identities.<sup>78</sup>

As an entirely different illustration of how jihadi-inspired individuals may use hacking-related techniques to advance their causes, it is useful to discuss the American John Georgelas’ ventures prior to traveling to Syria and joining the Islamic State.<sup>79</sup> While his current whereabouts are unknown, as a teenager, Georgelas joined a hacktivist group called “Global Hell,” which gained notoriety for some high-profile online intrusions that resulted in the prosecution of several of its members.<sup>80</sup> Evidence from a formal investigation revealed that Georgelas expressed support for al-Qa`ida in private communications with a Canadian woman, and “provided technical support to a pro-jihad website, jihadunspun.com,” which served as “a propaganda vehicle to promote Osama Bin Laden and Al Qaeda.”<sup>81</sup> As a young professional, Georgelas worked as a Datacenter

Operations Technician at Rackspace, a server company with facilities in Texas. In 2006, during his time with the company, he gained unauthorized access to another computer server to identify the login credentials for the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC.org), a client of Rackspace.<sup>82</sup> Georgelas later admitted to investigating authorities that “he acted knowingly and intentionally exceeded his authorized access” and “intended to cause damage to the AIPAC.org website.”<sup>83</sup> Seemingly compelled by ideological reasons, Georgelas’ aspirations for vandalizing the AIPAC site never came to fruition. Even so, Rackspace incurred more than \$44,000 in damages as a result of Georgelas’ actions.<sup>84</sup>

## Conclusion

Despite attracting a great deal of attention, particularly from mass media, experts largely agree that the Islamic State and the range of cyber actors and hackers that claim affiliation to the organization do not exhibit especially advanced cyberterrorism capabilities.<sup>85</sup> In a 2017 interview, for example, Lora Shiao, then the National Counterterrorism Center’s acting director for intelligence, explained that the Islamic State “has minimal hacking skills.”<sup>86</sup> Shiao elaborated, noting that members “are able to deface websites” and publish “hit lists” of personally identifiable information on westerners, but this is primarily for intimidation.<sup>87</sup>

In truth, while most pro-Islamic State hacking, doxing, and defacements efforts lack sophistication, these methods can effectively intimidate the public, cause reputational damage, and ignite fears about the threats posed by terrorism and cyberterrorism. Even if individual attacks have limited effects, the sum of events and the lack of clarity regarding attribution to the Islamic State inflates perceptions of cyber actors’ intent and technical aptitude. In recent years, “the omnipresence and professionalization of internet use by [Islamic State supporters] have led to a conflation of their presence online with a capability to undertake cyberattacks.”<sup>88</sup> While matters concerning propaganda or terrorists’ use of technology for attack planning are undoubtedly serious, the Islamic State’s proficiency in strategic communications is not a good indicator of the organization’s ability to conduct offensive cyber operations. Moreover, the use of tactics like hacking, doxing, and defacements by pro-Islamic State actors does not suggest that the Islamic State or its online supporters are interested in, must less capable of full-fledged cyberattacks targeting critical national infrastructure.

To date, these tactics remain relevant to those tasked with countering terrorism in the virtual arena. In March 2019, the FBI arrested Kim Anh Vo, a resident of Georgia and a reported member of the UCC-affiliated hacking collective called “Kalachnikv E-Security Team.”<sup>89</sup> Vo, whose case is pending, claimed to the FBI during an interview that she worked primarily as a recruiter for the UCC, but also helped translate the group’s media releases and deface websites.<sup>90</sup> In April 2017, Vo allegedly coordinated the publication of a kill list with UCC members in several countries, including Norway, the Netherlands, and Iraq. UCC hacktivists collected the PII of over 8,000 individuals during a website intrusion into a U.S.-based business.<sup>91</sup> Using a Telegram group to facilitate communications between the UCC members and distribute the list, the UCC published it alongside a YouTube video, which threatened the individuals identified in the list.<sup>92</sup>

Although it is difficult to quantify the impact of Vo’s contribution, the continued use of these methods, from virtual vandalism to doxing, suggests that they remain favorable tactics among cyber groups today. In subsequent evaluations of the threats posed by cy-

l Although Dais initially pleaded not guilty in 2018, she entered a guilty plea in March 2019. See “Plea Agreement,” *USA v. Waheba Issa Dais*, U.S. District Court in the Eastern District of Wisconsin, 2019.

m Al Safoo pleaded not guilty in November 2018, and his trial is still pending. *USA v. Ashraf Al Safoo*, U.S. District Court in Northern District of Illinois, Court Listener.

n According to court filings, Al Safoo and his co-conspirators online served as members of “Khattab Media Foundation,” which pledged an oath of allegiance to the Islamic State and worked to create and disseminate Islamic State propaganda online across multiple platforms. While coordinating propaganda in groups online, members of the Khattab Media Foundation acted at the “direction and control” of the Islamic State and the Islamic State’s media office. “Affidavit,” *USA v. Ashraf Al Safoo*, U.S. District Court in Northern District of Illinois, 2018.

berterrorism and terrorists online, it is vital to remain rooted in how terrorist organizations and individuals leverage various technologies and the internet.<sup>93</sup> Since the complexity of operations vary, even among efforts such as hacking, doxing, and defacements, the counterterrorism practitioners responding to these threats must work to discern the technical capabilities each attack type requires, the nature of the target, the likelihood attacks come to fruition, and the material and perceptual impact of an attack. While it is useful

to stay vigilant and prepared to cope with the worst-case scenarios, focusing on terrorists' use of the internet, along with other criminal enterprises, can help prepare for the most likely scenarios.<sup>94</sup> Even though the Islamic State does not demonstrate extensive offensive cyber capabilities, operational security and more defensive measures to remain online are priorities for the organization and its supporters.<sup>95</sup> **CTC**

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# Reigniting the Rivalry: The Islamic State in Somalia vs. al-Shabaab

By Caleb Weiss

**Beginning in 2018, the Islamic State in Somalia, which is believed to only number in the low hundreds of fighters, appears to have significantly expanded its operations across Somalia, albeit from a relatively low base. The group was even, for the first time, recently linked to terrorist activity in the United States and Europe. The Islamic State's growing assertiveness reignited tensions with its much larger and stronger rival, al-Qa`ida's branch al-Shabaab, with violence again breaking out between the groups. The push-back from al-Shabaab means it is far from clear whether the Islamic State in Somalia will be able to sustain its operational expansion.**

Since becoming the dominant jihadi actor in Somalia in 2007, al-Shabaab has effectively maintained its supremacy over jihadi violence across the Horn of Africa. However, beginning in 2015, al-Shabaab, the avowed al-Qa`ida branch in East Africa, has attempted to stave off an aspirational challenger in the form of the Islamic State in Somalia (ISS). Beginning as a disparate clump of pro-Islamic State cells,<sup>1</sup> ISS eventually coalesced into an organized group in October 2015, led by former al-Shabaab commander Abdulqadir Mumin,<sup>a</sup> in Somalia's northern Puntland region. Despite a tumultuous start, ISS eventually grabbed international headlines when it seized the port city of Qandala a year later.<sup>2</sup> Since then, ISS activity has increased not only in Puntland, but across Somalia as a whole. As this article will outline, ISS, despite its small stature with a few hundred members,<sup>3</sup> has been able to grow and expand its operations in southern Somalia, specifically Mogadishu, and form operational cells in central Somalia.

This expansion has not gone unnoticed by al-Shabaab, as the group has been keen to maintain its monopoly on jihadi violence in the country. The rivalry between al-Shabaab and ISS began as a war of words before devolving into a cavalcade of arrests, executions, assassinations, and clashes between the groups in 2015 at the height of the infighting.<sup>4</sup> These clashes were not openly publicized to jihad-

a Mumin was a well-known ideologue who appeared in several of al-Shabaab's videos including some that outlined the group's operations in the Golis Mountains of the northern Sanaag Region, as well as in the Lower Shabelle and Bay regions. He was also involved in the recruitment of fighters in Puntland.

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is outside Somalia by the groups, with both sides officially keeping tight-lipped about the conflict. But as ISS continues to grow more active inside Somalia, the competition between al-Shabaab and ISS has again reached a boiling point with both sides openly declaring war on each other for the first time in late 2018.<sup>5</sup>

This article draws on metrics based on ISS attack data<sup>b</sup> and independent reporting. It also examines the propaganda released by both ISS and al-Shabaab to examine the evolving rivalry between the groups. This article first provides a brief timeline and synopsis of the infighting between the jihadi groups before 2018. It then examines how the Islamic State has expanded its operations inside Somalia and the group's emergent links to international terrorism, before examining how the ISS' growing assertiveness set the stage for a renewal of conflict with al-Shabaab in late 2018. The final section of the article assesses the sustainability of the Islamic State expansion inside Somalia.

## The Rivalry Before 2018

To better understand the renewed fighting between ISS and al-Shabaab, it is important to first look at the history of the rivalry between the two. Starting in 2015, propaganda released by the Islamic State began to focus on encouraging members of al-Shabaab to defect and join its cause. In a piece published in this publication in November 2017,<sup>6</sup> this author and researcher Jason Warner identified the earliest known call to al-Shabaab to join the Islamic State's so-called caliphate as occurring in February 2015, when Islamic State propagandist Hamil al-Bushra penned an article for the Global Front to Support the Islamic State media.<sup>7c</sup>

Following the first article, more pieces were released through various outlets<sup>d</sup> before the Islamic State's media office for its Iraqi "province" of al-Furat released the first video addressed to Somalia in May 2015.<sup>8</sup> Over the course of four days in October 2015, six videos were then released from Syria,<sup>9</sup> Iraq,<sup>10</sup> Yemen,<sup>11</sup> and the Sinai<sup>12</sup> attempting to persuade al-Shabaab to join its cause. Two weeks later, a video was then released from Nigeria,<sup>13</sup> while in January 2016, another was released from Libya.<sup>14</sup>

While al-Shabaab as a whole did not succumb to the Islamic State's calculated pressure, the jihadi group was able to attract several prominent commanders and disgruntled foot-soldiers within al-Shabaab. As researcher Christopher Anzalone succinctly noted,

b An interactive database of Islamic State-claimed attacks in Somalia maintained by the author and the Long War Journal is available at <https://public.tableau.com/profile/fddmaps#!/vizhome/SomaliaClaims/Dashboard1>

c The Global Front to Support the Islamic State Media was an unofficial outlet that produced pro-Islamic State propaganda.

d The Islamic State's unofficial media outlets of Al Battar and Al Wafa both released a series of articles in September 2015 imploring al-Shabaab to switch sides and join the Islamic State's cause.

“Though the Islamic State’s ideology, or aspects of it, are attractive to some members of al-Shabaab, the emergence of such a competitor [in the Islamic State] ... provides those disgruntled members [of al-Shabaab] a way to challenge the status quo” of al-Shabaab’s operational culture.<sup>15</sup>

This was not lost on al-Shabaab’s leadership, however, as it began to quickly release internal memos and addresses about the situation via its local radio stations. This includes statements reaffirming its loyalty to al-Qa`ida,<sup>16</sup> as well as calling for the death of anyone who “promoted disunity.”<sup>17</sup> A speech by al-Shabaab’s spokesman Ali Mahmud Rage was also broadcast via al-Shabaab’s Radio al Andalus around this time, which carried the simple point that those who supported the Islamic State will be “burnt in hell.”<sup>18</sup>

While the propaganda war was occurring, al-Shabaab’s internal security service, the Amniyat, was busy arresting, skirmishing with, and sometimes executing known or suspected Islamic State-loyal members in southern Somalia. Dozens of al-Shabaab members were killed or arrested by the Amniyat during this period.<sup>19</sup> Additionally, as Abdulqadir Mumin’s group in Puntland solidified, at least one known clash occurred between it and al-Shabaab’s forces in December 2015.<sup>20</sup>

Following the height of violence in 2015, the tensions between the two groups largely died down with only sporadic incidents occurring in 2016 and 2017. For instance, in November 2016, the Amniyat arrested more pro-Islamic State members in southern Somalia.<sup>21</sup> In March 2017, five Kenyan foreign fighters within al-Shabaab were executed for having switched their allegiances.<sup>22</sup> A month later, two more prominent al-Shabaab commanders were also killed for siding with the Islamic State.<sup>23</sup> The relative calm between the two sides would then last until late 2018 when clashes again flared up. However, the renewed tensions did not occur in a vacuum.

In the aforementioned November 2017 article in this publication by the author and Jason Warner, it was assessed that despite the efforts up until that point by ISS, al-Shabaab maintained its dominance over the jihadi landscape in Somalia and did not face a significant challenge from ISS.<sup>24</sup> While al-Shabaab has since maintained its dominant position, increased ISS activity in the country has caused al-Shabaab to change its calculus to a more aggressive stance against the rival jihadi organization.

## Causes of ISS Expansion

### Taxes

Starting in 2018, the Islamic State in Somalia appears to have greatly increased its operational tempo. According to a database kept by this author for the Foundation of Defense of Democracies’ Long War Journal, ISS claimed 66 total operations during 2018.<sup>25</sup> While this number is relatively low compared to other theaters in which the Islamic State operates, this was more than the number of claims made by the group in Somalia in 2016 and 2017 combined. To caveat, not all ISS claims can be independently verified, and the Islamic State only rarely produces photographic evidence for its attacks in Somalia. However, independent reporting has also confirmed the expansion in operational tempo of ISS in 2018.<sup>26</sup>

In August 2018, Somali news outlet Garowe Online reported that ISS began collecting taxes on several businesses in Bosaso,

utilizing methods of extortion to procure funds.<sup>27</sup> While ISS had already been collecting taxes from locals, this had previously been confined to the rural areas of the Puntland region.<sup>28</sup> Garowe cited Puntland security officials as saying that ISS is able to make \$72,000 a month from these taxes. But this was not the first time that ISS’ extortion tactics have been reported in Puntland, as an ISS defector told local intelligence officials this was occurring in the Puntland countryside in 2017.<sup>29</sup> The fact that ISS has been able to run extortion rackets in Bosaso, the commercial hub of Puntland, shows that the jihadi group has become confident enough to operate in urban areas and not just rural ones.

### Clan Support

Moreover, clan support has also been beneficial to ISS’ operations and survival in Puntland. According to the Mogadishu-based Hiraal Institute, the Ali Salebaan sub-clan—to which Abdulqadir Mumin (ISS’ emir) belongs—maintains strong support for Mumin’s enterprise.<sup>30</sup> For its part, ISS claims to have members from the various clans and sub-clans of Somalia, thereby giving it the illusion of a wide recruiting base that transcends Somalia’s complex clan dynamics.<sup>f</sup>

### Geography of ISS Expansion

But ISS expansion is not restricted to Somalia’s north.<sup>g</sup> Indeed, ISS was able to make significant inroads in southern Somalia, including Mogadishu, in 2018. Prior to late 2017, ISS claims were primarily confined to Puntland.<sup>31</sup> Starting in earnest in 2018, its violence shifted further south with the majority of its attacks taking place in southern Somalia.<sup>32</sup> Based on data collected by the author, ISS claimed 39 attacks (58 percent of overall claims) in Mogadishu in 2018;<sup>33</sup> this represents a significant increase in activity as the prior two years combined only saw 14 ISS claims in the Somali capital.<sup>34</sup>

This increase was also present in the Mogadishu suburb of Afgoye. In 2018, ISS claimed 12 operations in Afgoye, compared to just eight in the combined previous two years.<sup>35</sup> This increase in attacks in southern Somalia was also noted by the United Nations in a November 2018 report by its Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea.<sup>36</sup> The report noted that between October 2017 and November 2018, ISS had claimed 50 assassinations in Mogadishu.<sup>37</sup> This tracks with the expansion of ISS activity in the area noted above.

The northern Puntland region also witnessed an increase in ISS claims in 2018.<sup>38</sup> ISS claimed 13 operations in Puntland last year, while in the previous two years combined, it only made 12 claims for the region.<sup>39</sup>

ISS has also been able to make some headway in expanding into

f In a January 2019 video, the Islamic State eulogized several members of its Somalia branch, claiming membership from the Majeerteen, Lailkase, Sheekhaal, Rahanweyn, Marehan, Gaalje`el, Abgaal, Hawadle, and Mahamuud Saleban clans and subclans. Foreign fighters from Canada, Ethiopia, and Djibouti were also eulogized in the same video. For more, see Caleb Weiss, “Islamic State Somalia eulogizes foreign fighters,” FDD’s Long War Journal, January 23, 2019.

g Northern Somalia in this context refers to the semi-autonomous Puntland region, which incorporates much of Somalia’s northeastern coast and ends with the north-central region of Mudug. Central Somalia refers to the regions north of Mogadishu, such as Galgaduud, Hiraan, and the Middle Shabelle regions. Southern Somalia refers to Mogadishu, its surrounding environs, and those regions south of the city, such as Banadiir, Lower Shabelle, Bay, Bakool, Gedo, and Lower and Middle Juba regions.

e This includes prominent commanders such as Bashir Abu Numan, Hussein Abdi Gedi, and Muhammad Makkawi.

central Somalia as well. For example, since December 29, 2018, it has claimed eight attacks in the central town of Beledweyne, an area that is a traditional al-Shabaab stronghold.<sup>40</sup> Prior to December, ISS had not claimed any operation within central Somalia, indicating the clear presence of an operational cell in central Somalia. So far in 2019, Beledweyne is actually outpacing more traditional areas of operations for ISS such as the Mogadishu suburb of Afgoye. Since January 1, 2019, ISS has only claimed three operations in Afgoye, while Beledweyne has been the focus in seven claims.<sup>41</sup>

It is unclear at this stage if the creation of an ISS cell in Beledweyne is the result of the shifting of resources from other areas in the face of increased operations against the group,<sup>h</sup> persecution from al-Shabaab or other groups,<sup>i</sup> or if ISS has been successful in persuading al-Shabaab members to defect in the area. The existence of an active ISS cell in Beledweyne is all but confirmed, however, as it produced the only claim for the December 28, 2018, bombing of a former Somali official in the town.<sup>42</sup>

Much like the expansion in northern Somalia, ISS' southern expansion has been independently reported. Somali intelligence

h Both Somali and Puntland intelligence and security personnel have mounted several operations against Islamic State members in both Mogadishu and in the mountains near Bosaso in Puntland. See Caleb Weiss, "Somali intelligence agency arrests two Islamic State members in Mogadishu," FDD's Long War Journal, May 24, 2018, and Puntland Security, "Ciidanka Amniga Puntland (PSF) waxay maanta 11 February 2019, hawlga ka sameeyeen Buuraleyda iyo Toggaga #Gaaca.#Guban iyo #Moqor ee Koonfurta Bari ee magaalada Bosaso," Twitter, February 11, 2019.

i For instance, the Ahlu Sunnah wal Jamaa (ASWJ) coalition of anti-al-Shabaab clans have also claimed to have targeted pro-Islamic State militants in central Somalia in the past.

personnel have arrested several ISS members in Mogadishu.<sup>43</sup> The U.N. Monitoring Group for Somalia has also confirmed the existence of ISS units based in southern Somalia and Mogadishu.<sup>44</sup> For his part, Voice of America reporter Harun Maruf also noted in December 2018 that ISS has increased its activities in southern Somalia.<sup>45</sup>

### *Expansion Claims in Propaganda*

Interestingly, the spread of ISS into southern Somalia has also been claimed in both Islamic State and al-Shabaab propaganda. In the Islamic State's weekly Al Naba newsletter released on November 15, 2018,<sup>46</sup> the group relayed a series of then-recent events in which several members of its group were killed or arrested by al-Shabaab in southern Somalia.<sup>47</sup> Indeed, these events likely ring true as al-Shabaab itself advertised the execution of an alleged ISS member in southern Somalia just a month prior.<sup>48</sup> Just days before the Al Naba article, it also executed an Egyptian fighter it claimed had defected to ISS.<sup>49</sup> And while not officially claimed by al-Shabaab, the group is widely suspected of being behind the October 2018 execution of Mahad Maalin in Mogadishu, who was then the deputy leader of ISS.<sup>50 j</sup>

### *Emergent International Terror Links*

Not only did ISS' operational tempo grow within Somalia in 2018,

j Maalin had reportedly been in Mogadishu in an effort to organize ISS activity in the city, which further shows the group's increased activity in the area. However, the reported nature of his trip to Mogadishu has not been confirmed. Abdi Guled, "Deputy chief of IS-linked group in Somalia killed: Officials," Associated Press, October 23, 2018.



*Members of Islamic State in Somalia clash with al-Shabaab fighters in the northern Puntland region in December 2018. (Amaq video, released in December 2018).*

but it was also linked for the first time to terrorist activity in the West. In December 2018, Italian authorities arrested a Somali citizen in the southern city of Bari on terrorism-related charges after a month-long investigation.<sup>51</sup> According to Italian police, the man was in contact with ISS and discussed potential bomb plots with an ISS individual,<sup>52</sup> but it is unclear if he was acting on any direct orders from any external operations planners from the group. However, this marked the first European terrorism case with any reported links to the Islamic State's Somali wing.<sup>53</sup>

A month later, three U.S. citizens were arrested in Lansing, Michigan.<sup>54</sup> According to the FBI, all three had professed allegiance to the Islamic State, while one individual was arrested just prior to embarking on a convoluted journey to join the Islamic State in Somalia.<sup>55</sup> While Americans, especially of Somali descent, attempting to join jihadis in Somalia is not new,<sup>k</sup> and indeed Somali-Americans joining the Islamic State elsewhere has been observed,<sup>56</sup> this case shows that ISS now has some international appeal. With the Islamic State losing its last vestiges of territory in Iraq and Syria, it is possible that other individuals looking to join the Islamic State may look to Somalia as a destination to wage jihad.

It is clear that as ISS expanded its operations last year, it grew more confident in its ability to challenge al-Shabaab and spread to new territory. Several of its actions in late 2018 clearly demonstrated this newfound tenacity.

## Renewed Conflict

### *ISS Asserts Itself*

ISS' aspirations to challenge al-Shabaab were made clear in the aforementioned November 15, 2018 Al Naba newsletter. In relaying cases of its members being killed or imprisoned by al-Shabaab, it explicitly warned its rival. "As we record these crimes, we do not do so as a complaint or out of weakness, but to teach people," the article states, "especially our people in Somalia, what the al Qaeda branch in Somalia has done, because the response from the Islamic State is coming."

Al-Shabaab did not have to wait long to find out what the response would be. Almost exactly a month later on December 16, the Islamic State claimed its men ambushed a grouping of al-Shabaab's members near B'ir Mirali, to the southwest of Qandala in the northern Puntland region.<sup>57</sup> It further claimed it killed 14 al-Shabaab fighters, a claim that may have been inflated because the subsequent video released by the Islamic State did not show that many bodies.<sup>58</sup> The warning and subsequent ambush were an indication that as ISS expanded its activities and operations across Somalia, it grew more assured in its ability to openly chastise and target the al-Qa`ida branch.

During the height of the tensions between the two in 2015, neither the Islamic State nor al-Shabaab publicly highlighted the infighting to jihadis outside Somalia.<sup>59</sup> However, ISS' ambush of al-Shabaab fighters in December 2018 forced al-Shabaab to respond officially, suggesting a shift in how seriously it is taking the Islamic State's threat.

### *Al-Shabaab Responds*

On December 20, 2018, al-Shabaab released a statement from Ali Mahmud Rage in which he authorized al-Shabaab members to target Islamic State-loyal individuals in Somalia. "The leadership of the Harakat al Mujahideen [al-Shabaab's full name] orders all the Mujahideen in all the Islamic states [referring to all areas in Somalia] to strongly oppose the prevalence of the disease in the Jihad," Rage says in his diatribe.<sup>60</sup>

In addition to Rage's speech, an 18-page treatise was released by al-Shabaab's general command,<sup>61</sup> which offered the group's sharpest rebuke of the Islamic State to date. "They violated the Book [meaning the Qur'an] and the Sunnah [customs of Islam] and sought to corrupt the Mujahideen, their religion and their world, and brought them fitna [sedition], they corrupted the religion and the mind of those who followed them, and became a reason for their disobedience," al-Shabaab's leadership says of the Islamic State.

Al-Shabaab's leadership went even further in the treatise by outlining specific crimes committed by the Islamic State, including "spilling the blood of Muslims," "looting the Muslims' money," "spreading lies and rumors," and "establishing suspicious relationships with infidel regimes." Under each accusation, al-Shabaab lists several Qur'anic verses or quotes from Islamic authorities that prohibit these things, thus appearing as having the religious and moral high-ground.<sup>62</sup>

In turning to the Islamic State branch in Somalia specifically, al-Shabaab stated "we have examined the situation of their followers in Somalia and we probed their orders and we searched for their doctrine and examined their news and what we found was but lying in the speech and immorality in the rivalry and treachery in covenants and charters." The leaders also said they tried to be patient with ISS and its members, but the clash in December had changed their calculus. Instead, al-Shabaab's leaders effectively declared war on ISS by urging "all loyal and honest soldiers [of al-Shabaab] to cure this disease with effective medicine," as well as "to confront it with force and wisdom."<sup>63</sup>

### *A New Phase of the War Begins*

Since al-Shabaab's declaration of war on December 20, 2018, there has been a renewed flurry of clashes and assassinations between the two. On December 23, 2018, Mareeg, a local Somali publication, reported that al-Shabaab members clashed with Islamic State-loyal militants near the town of El Adde in southern Somalia near the Kenyan border.<sup>64</sup> In mid-January 2019, al-Shabaab militants gunned down Yahya Haji Fiile, a pro-Islamic State figure who was once a prominent commander within al-Shabaab.<sup>65</sup>

On January 28, 2019, al-Shabaab targeted ISS members near Mirali,<sup>66</sup> while three days later ISS members struck al-Shabaab members as they were lecturing locals on al-Shabaab in Puntland.<sup>67</sup> In retaliation, al-Shabaab then clashed with ISS fighters in the village of Dhadaar.<sup>68</sup> On February 22, 2019, the clashes continued with the two sides fighting near Af-Garar, also in Puntland.<sup>69</sup> On March 2, 2019, Puntland intelligence officials reportedly claimed that al-Shabaab militants attacked and subsequently took over a major ISS base in the Dasaan area of Puntland.<sup>70</sup>

So far, the open conflict has not had a discernible impact on

k Americans in al-Shabaab have included several prominent figures such as Alabama native Omar Hammami, Wisconsin native Jihad Serwan Mostafa, and several suicide bombers such as Shirwa Ahmed, Farah Mohamad Beledi, and Abdisalan Hussein Ali. Also see Pierre Thomas and Jason Ryan, "Congressional Report: 40 Americans Training in Somalia Are 'Direct Threat' to U.S.," ABC News, July 27, 2011.

the Islamic State's claims inside Somalia.<sup>1</sup> While it is hard to independently verify, since December 20, 2018, ISS has claimed 30 operations ranging in locations from Bosaso to Beledweyne to Afgoye and Mogadishu.<sup>m</sup> During this time, the Islamic State's central media also released a propaganda video from Puntland.<sup>71</sup> On a similar but unsurprising note, the renewed war with ISS has also not affected al-Shabaab's operations elsewhere in the country.<sup>72</sup>

## Implications

The Islamic State's expansion inside Somalia carries significant implications for the overall security of the country. Civilians, especially private enterprises, will likely continue to be extorted if ISS continues to grow its operations. Additionally, Somali personnel will most likely continue to be assassinated by both ISS and al-Shabaab in various population centers across the country.

The renewed infighting between the two also does not bode well for civilian security if these clashes move closer to urban centers. So far, the majority of the clashes have been confined to the Puntland countryside, but this could change if ISS continues to make inroads in southern Somalia. For its part, Puntland security forces have worked to exploit the infighting by targeting jihadi fighters in the mountains near Bosaso.<sup>73</sup>

As with the fighting that occurred in 2015, it is not likely that the Islamic State in Somalia will be able to make any significant gains against al-Shabaab militarily. Moreover, al-Shabaab's Amniyat has a proven track record of effectively targeting any anti-al-Shabaab dissent within the group. That said, ISS was able to weather al-Shabaab's targeted campaign back in 2015. It is possible that calculated withdrawals may help ISS survive the renewed onslaught from al-Shabaab. But given al-Shabaab's harsh ideological critique of the Islamic State and its branch in Somalia, it is unlikely that any *grand-scale* negotiated settlements will occur between the jihadi groups in the foreseeable future.

There have, however, been a number of *small-scale* settlements between the two groups. In a December 2018 report to the U.N. Security Council on al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State, U.N. monitors found, via member state information, that ISS and al-Shabaab co-

operated on the ground to some degree in Puntland between 2017 and mid-2018.<sup>74</sup> The United Nations noted that the Amniyat wings of both groups had cooperated, while in mid-2018, al-Shabaab released foreign ISS members it had detained in the region.<sup>75</sup> It is likely, however, that the renewal of the conflict between the two groups in late 2018 interrupted such cooperation.

In the November 2017 article by Jason Warner and this author, it was assessed that future clashes could lead to splintering within al-Shabaab between those resistant to the Islamic State and those quietly sympathetic to it.<sup>76</sup> So far, the renewed fighting has not resulted in any clear or public indications of splintering within the al-Qa`ida branch. Additionally, the article noted that increased funding from the Islamic State and recruiting within ISS would make it more competitive to al-Shabaab. While it is currently unknown if more money has flowed into ISS coffers from Islamic State financiers, it is clear that ISS has recruited locally and has even attracted regional and global foreign fighters.<sup>77</sup>

If al-Shabaab is able to strike a major blow at ISS leadership, it is possible the latter group will become more decentralized across the country. While the aforementioned U.N. report notes that Abdulqadir Mumin directed other ISS operatives to establish cells in southern Somalia,<sup>78</sup> the exact nature of the relationship between the core ISS group in Puntland and the cells elsewhere is opaque. It is possible that a disruption between the core group and the other cells could cause a rupture in what unity ISS has across Somalia. In addition, barring missteps from al-Shabaab, such as moves that would harm its standing among the local clans or severe military blunders, the al-Qa`ida branch will likely continue to have the upper hand in its war with ISS.

Since the Islamic State lost its last major Syrian holdout of Baghuz in March 2019, it is important to remember that its branches elsewhere in the world are continuing its fight. Indeed, the loss of physical territory in Iraq and Syria, the longtime center of the Islamic State's operations, has so far not impacted ISS activities in Somalia. As claims relating to Somalia are still being released by Amaq<sup>79</sup> and the Islamic State's central media apparatus, communication with its Somali wing appears intact.

The Islamic State's expansion inside Somalia in 2018 presents some important implications for overall Somali security, especially as the dominant jihadi actor in Somalia, al-Shabaab, has renewed its conflict with ISS by declaring war on it late last year. But given ISS' small stature in the country and al-Shabaab's track record of dealing with any potential challenger, the Islamic State's growing operations inside Somalia may soon stall. **CTC**

l This is based on propaganda output as well as local reporting about its activities. It is possible that financial or manpower losses have occurred within the organization since al-Shabaab's declaration of war against it.

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