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FEATURE ARTICLE

## Iran's Expanding Militia Army in Iraq

MICHAEL KNIGHTS

A VIEW FROM THE CT FOXHOLE

## Suzanne Raine

FORMER HEAD, U.K. JOINT TERRORISM ANALYSIS CENTRE

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## FROM THE EDITOR

In our feature article, Michael Knights draws on six research visits to Iraq in 2018 and 2019 to document the expanding footprint region-by-region of pro-Iranian militias in Iraq that were previously labeled "Special Groups" by the United States and in some cases designated as terrorist organizations. Knights assesses "that the Special Groups (not including 18,000-22,000 Badr troops) currently have 63,000 registered personnel ... 15 times the size of the Special Groups in 2010, when there were probably as few as 4,000 Special Group operatives in Iraq (again not including Badr personnel in 2010)." He notes a key driver for their growth in manpower and popularity in Iraq was their role in fighting the Islamic State and liberating Sunni population centers under Islamic State control. He writes that "a pantheon of smaller, newer pro-Iran militias is arguably closer to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps than larger and older pro-Iranian militias such as Badr and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq" and identifies Kata'ib Hezbollah led by U.S.-designated terrorist Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis as the greatest threat to U.S. interests. With pro-Tehran militias expanding their presence across Iraq and U.S. influence in Iraq reduced since its 2011 troop withdrawal, he argues the United States "needs to be parsimonious and pragmatic if it wishes to push back effectively."

Our interview is with Suzanne Raine, who was the head of the United Kingdom's Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre (JTAC) between 2015 and 2017. She outlines to Raffaello Pantucci the lessons learned from her work in counterterrorism and the threat landscape as she sees it. Two articles in this issue focus on the Western Balkans. Adrian Shtuni provides a qualitative and quantitative assessment of the security threats posed by foreign fighters and homegrown jihadis from the region. Kujtim Bytyqi, the Acting Director of the Department for Analysis and Security Policies at the Kosovo Security Council Secretariat, and Sam Mullins outline Kosovo's experience dealing with returning foreign fighters. Finally, Ross Dayton documents how the Maduro regime in Venezuela has increased its reliance on paramilitary groups, including the Colombian left-wing guerrilla group ELN, which was responsible for the suicide car bomb attack on the National Police Academy in Bogotá, Colombia, in January 2019.

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*Cover: In this June 8, 2018, photo, Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces march as they hold their flag and posters of Iraqi and Iranian Shiites spiritual leaders during "al-Quds" or Jerusalem Day, in Baghdad, Iraq. (Hadi Mizban/AP Photo)*

# Iran's Expanding Militia Army in Iraq: The New Special Groups

By Michael Knights

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**Pro-Iranian militias in Iraq—excluding Badr—have swollen from as few as 4,000 personnel in 2010 to over 60,000 in 2014 when they plugged into government funding through the Popular Mobilization Forces raised to fight the Islamic State. Large, new pro-Iran militias such as Kata'ib Al-Imam Ali deserve more attention from the analyst community, as do new Kata'ib Hezbollah leaders such as Abu Zaynab al-Lami, who are emerging as challengers to the movement's leader Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis. A pantheon of smaller, newer pro-Iran militias is arguably closer to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps than larger and older pro-Iranian militias such as Badr and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq. Key behaviors for analysts to monitor include corrupt money-making, control of the Iraq-Syrian border, human rights abuses, and development of exclusive bases outside Iraqi state control.**

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**T**he Iraqi state has drawn upon militia-like reserve forces throughout its history to defeat internal and external threats.<sup>1</sup> The use of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF, *Hashd al-Sha'abi* in Arabic), raised in 2014 by a combination of executive orders and religious fatwa, is merely the latest example of this trend. Within the PMF—forming its core, in fact—are older pro-Iranian militias that were previously labeled “Special Groups”<sup>a</sup> by the United States and designated as terrorist organizations in some cases. A broader range of Special Groups now exist than when the U.S. military left Iraq in 2011, underlining the diversification of actors that the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' Quds Force (IRGC-QF) works with in today's Iraq. Unlike previous militias that were tolerated and

controlled by the state, the Special Groups are already operating outside the state's ability to monitor or discipline them. Building on six research visits to Iraq in 2018 and 2019, where the author interviewed senior Iraqi political and military figures, this article will provide new data on the state of Iranian-backed Special Groups in Iraq today.

Coming out of the main combat stage of the war against the Islamic State, the Special Groups are growing in economic and political power and are attacking foreign entities on Iran's behalf. A dozen attacks have been launched on U.S. military, diplomatic, and commercial targets in Iraq so far in 2019.<sup>2</sup> Then on May 14, 2019, two Saudi oil pumping stations were struck by long-range explosive drones launched from Jurf as-Sakr,<sup>3</sup> the Baghdad outskirts base of the most powerful Iranian-backed Special Group, Kata'ib Hezbollah (KH), led by U.S.-designated terrorist Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis,<sup>4</sup> who is also sought by Interpol and Kuwaiti authorities.<sup>5</sup> The coordinated drone attacks underline KH's graduation as the third major militant force alongside IRGC-QF and Lebanese Hezbollah in Iran's “axis of resistance.” Iraq's large population, weak government, and powerful level of IRGC-QF penetration make Iraq the most consequential and fastest-growing arena for Iran's expansion of malign influence in the Middle East.

## Pro-Iranian Militias after the U.S. Withdrawal

The Syrian civil war and the interrelated war against the Islamic State in Iraq breathed life back into the Special Groups after the removal of U.S. forces from Iraq in 2011. As U.S. forces departed, Special Groups like KH harried the withdrawing U.S. presence until the very end but faced a future in which their commonly understood *raison d'être*—the removal of the U.S. occupation—had expired. In late 2011, the Islamic State's predecessor group, the Islamic State of Iraq, appeared to be defeated and the Iraqi security forces appeared to be robust.

The 2011-2014 period of the Special Groups is important to understand at a time when today's Iran-backed militias are also looking beyond their prior mission, the main combat phase of the war against the Islamic State. Back in 2011-2012, the Special Groups immediately began deploying to a new battlefield as the United States was leaving Iraq. Providing an Iraqi foreign fighter cadre to the Iranian intervention in Syria provided one outlet for militancy and most of the Special Groups contributed, including KH, Kata'ib Sayid al-Shuhada (under U.S.-sanctioned terrorist Abu Mustafa al-Sheibani<sup>6</sup>), and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH).<sup>7</sup> Within Iraq, the Special Groups remained ready to support Iran in the case of an Iranian clash with the United States, the Gulf States, or Israel. On March 27, 2012, a 12-rocket attack was partially undertaken (nine misfired) during the lead-up to the first post-Saddam Arab League summit in Baghdad. AAH, meanwhile, focused on assassinating its militia rivals in Moqtada al-Sadr's Promised Day Brigades (forerunner to today's Saraya Salam) and negotiating with the government

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a The original “Special Groups” were breakaways from Moqtada al-Sadr's Jaish al-Mahdi such as Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq and breakaways from Badr, such as the Sheibani network and Kata'ib Hezbollah. For further discussion, see Michael Knights, “The Evolution of Iran's Special Groups in Iraq,” *CTC Sentinel* 3:11-12 (2010): p. 2.

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to release its detained members.

As the security situation in Iraq worsened in 2012-2014, the Special Groups began to mobilize more strongly. Their Syrian deployments—which violate Article 9 of the Iraqi Constitution,<sup>b</sup> undertaken without approval, but overlooked by the government of Iraq<sup>c</sup>—required larger-scale recruitment and resulted in the injection of new, intense battlefield experience into the movements. Inside Iraq, then Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki began to draw small units of Special Group fighters into “Sons of Iraq” forces, and he accelerated his planning to raise larger Popular Defense Brigades (Saraya al-Dif‘a al-Sha‘abi) to operate under the prime minister’s command, alongside the conventional armed forces.<sup>8</sup> On June 13, 2014, following the fall of Mosul to the Islamic State, the highest Shi‘a authority in Iraq, Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, issued a fatwa (religious edict), the al-Jihad al-Kifa‘i (collective obligation)—calling for able-bodied male citizens to “volunteer and join the security forces.”<sup>9</sup>

### The PMF and War Against the Islamic State

The resultant Hashd al-Sha‘abi Commission of the Prime Minister’s Office (the PMF) reflected al-Maliki’s vision<sup>10</sup> of a predominately Shi‘a reserve army that contained both new recruits and what al-Maliki called “mujahedeen” from Special Groups such as KH, AAH, and Kata’ib Sayyid al-Shuhada, plus new pro-Iranian militias like Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba (led by U.S.-designated terrorist Akram Kaabi<sup>11</sup>), Kata’ib al-Imam Ali (led by U.S.-designated terrorist Shibl al-Zaydi<sup>12</sup>), and Kata’ib Jund al-Imam. From the outset, however, the key leader in the PMF was Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the most inveterate opponent of the United States among the Special Group leaders, and al-Muhandis worked assiduously to develop the PMF into an organization that was neither subject to full prime ministerial command nor subordinate to the conventional security forces.<sup>d</sup>

The PMF phenomenon and the war against the Islamic State greatly altered the political and military profile of the Special Groups. Prior to 2014, a figure like Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis was an obscure former MP in Iraq with little public profile.<sup>13</sup> Likewise, opinion polling from pre-2011 Iraq shows that Iraqis frequently found it hard to differentiate or remember differences between groups like Promised Day Brigades, Kata’ib Hezbollah, or Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq.<sup>14</sup> Respondents were often unaware of the tight connections between Special Groups and the Iranian government.<sup>15</sup> In 2011, only 15.5% of respondents had high or very high confidence that militias could provide security, versus 65.8% for the Iraq army.<sup>16</sup>

b Article 9 of the Iraqi Constitution states that all armed forces are commanded by the Prime Minister.

c The author has asked numerous senior Iraqi leaders, in the course of interviews in 2015-2019, whether the Iraqi government authorized, opposed, or simply ignored the issue of Iraqi fighters traveling to Syria to participate in the Syrian civil war. They are almost unanimous that the government turned a blind eye, even though such deployments contravene constitutional provisions about the exclusive authority of the government over foreign policy and the exclusive authority of the prime minister to involve Iraqis in armed conflict.

d In all the author’s interviews with Iraqi leaders in 2014-2019, al-Muhandis has always been recognized as the most dominant individual within the PMF. PMF Commission chairman Falah Fayyadh concentrates on his role as National Security Advisor and leaves the PMF entirely to the deputy PMF chairman al-Muhandis.

Much of this changed after 2014: militia leaders and individual armed groups (fasa’il in Arabic) gained widespread name recognition.<sup>e</sup> In opinion polling, members of the public express differentiated views on KH, AAH, Kata’ib Al-Imam Ali, Kata’ib Sayyid al-Shuhada, and Badr.<sup>17</sup> Compared to pre-2014, following the PMF role in liberating many Sunni cities, the Iraqi public has considerably more faith that militias within the PMF structure are positive contributors to local security—91% among Shi‘a respondents in 2017 and 64.5% in Sunni areas in 2017, far greater than 15.5% for all respondents in 2011.<sup>18</sup>

### Growth of the Special Groups

The Special Groups also militarily transformed as a result of the Syrian civil war and the anti-Islamic State fighting in Iraq. First, more Iran-backed Special Groups were formed, and each grew larger than in the pre-2011 period due to their adoption as government-paid fighters under the PMF Commission.

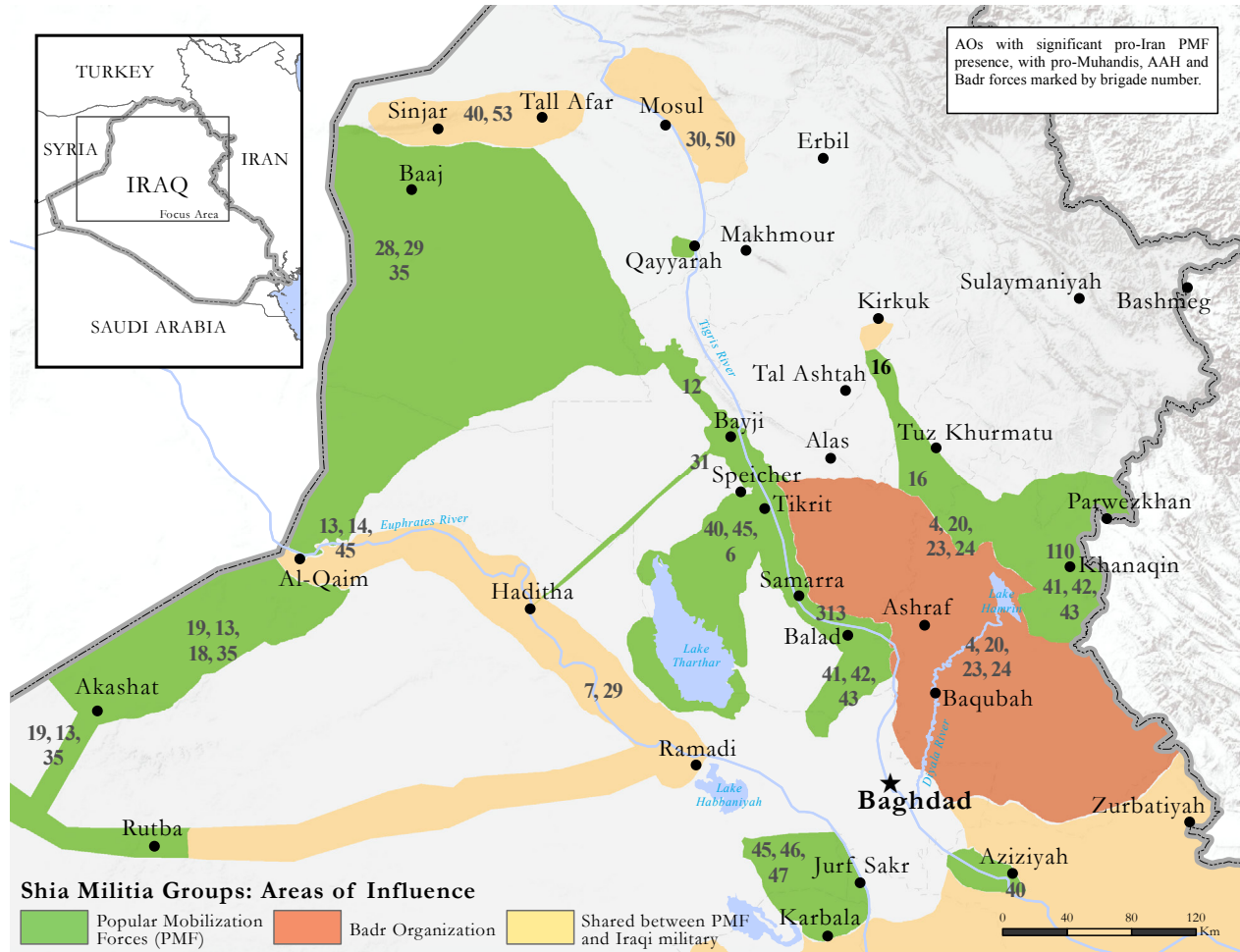
- In 2011, KH was assessed to have 400 active members in Iraq,<sup>19</sup> while today KH (PMF brigades 45, 56, 57) maintain around 7,500 fighters assigned to Iraqi operations, 2,500 fighters assigned to Syria, for a total of 10,000.<sup>20</sup>
- AAH (PMF brigades 41, 42, 43) has likewise swollen from a small Sadrist splinter militia of under 3,000 members in 2011<sup>21</sup> to an equivalent KH-size three-brigade force of around 10,000.<sup>22</sup>
- Kata’ib Al-Imam Ali (PMF brigade 40) has expanded from a tiny Sadrist splinter group to an 8,000-strong PMF mega-brigade with deployments across Iraq.<sup>23</sup>
- Kata’ib Jund al-Imam (PMF brigade 6) has around 5,000 registered fighters,<sup>24</sup> Kata’ib Sayyid al-Shuhada (PMF brigade 14) and Saraya Talia al-Khurasani (PMF brigade 18) each have around 3,000 fighters,<sup>25</sup> and even the small Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba (PMF brigade 12) now boasts more than 1,500 fighters—nearly four times the KH membership in 2011.<sup>26</sup>
- Newer Special Groups assessed to be primarily loyal to Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis and willing to provide material support to IRGC-QF include (from most militarily capable to least) Harakat al-Abdal (PMF brigade 39), Saraya al-Jihad (PMF brigade 17), Liwa al-Tafuf (brigade 13) and the less capable Liwa al-Muntadher (brigade 7), Ansar Allah al-Tawfiya (brigade 19), Saraya Ansar al-Aqeeda (brigade 28), Kata’ib Ansar al-Hujja (brigade 29), Quwwat al-Shahid al-Sadr al-Awwal (brigade 25), Quwwat al-Shahid al-Sadr (brigade 35), and Kata’ib al-Tayyar al-Risali (brigade 31).<sup>27g</sup>

Newer Special Groups listed here have, by the author’s tally of figures provided by Iraqi contacts, 22,500 registered personnel.

e As of mid-July 2019, AAH leader Qais al-Khazali had 226,912 Twitter followers. Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis had 36,799 followers for his official Facebook page. Kata’ib Al-Imam Ali celebrity fighter Abu Azrael alone has 15,377 Facebook followers.

f Sadrists are those who identify Mohammed Sadiq al-Sadr, the father of Moqtada al-Sadr who was murdered in 1999 by the Baathist regime, as their object of emulation.

g The assessment of relative military capability is judged by the author based on combat experience of the unit, its ability to source heavy weapons and surveillance drones, and its access to Iranian and/or Lebanese Hezbollah training and advisory support. The author would like to thank Philip Smyth and Aymenn al-Tamimi for their advice on this section.



*Main areas of operation for Iran-backed militias in Iraq, annotated with PMF brigade numbers (Brandon Mohr)*

Adding in all the other bulleted groups above, the author assesses that the Special Groups (not including 18,000-22,000 Badr troops<sup>h</sup>) currently have 63,000 registered personnel.<sup>i</sup> According to the author's calculation, this is 15 times the size of the Special Groups in 2010, when there were probably as few as 4,000 Special Group operatives in Iraq (again not including Badr personnel in 2010).<sup>j</sup>

The expanded pantheon of Special Groups adopted medium and heavy weapons, attained significant battlefield experience, and openly absorbed training and embedded advisers from IRGC-QF

and Lebanese Hezbollah within Iraq.<sup>28</sup> Each established "economic offices" in Baghdad, southern provinces, and in areas of sustained battlefield presence, which serve as hubs for local organized crime activity.<sup>29</sup>

Special Groups answering primarily to Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis and willing to provide material support to IRGC-QF are scattered across Iraq. Unlike an Iraqi Army division, the Special Groups deploy detachments in many different areas of operation (AOs), but it is nonetheless possible to discern areas of concentration for some of the groups.<sup>30</sup>

### Western Anbar

This area refers to the swath of Iraqi-Syrian border between Walid border crossing and Al-Qaim district. This area is of critical importance to the Special Groups because it contains the Baghdad-Damascus highway crossing—currently blocked by U.S.-backed forces at Tanf, Syria—and also the workaround tracks from the Akashat area to the highway systems north of Tanf.<sup>31</sup> The Akashat sub-sector is garrisoned by brigades Allah al-Tawfiya (brigade 19), Liwa al-Tafuf (brigade 13), and Saraya Talia al-Khurasani (PMF brigade 18).<sup>32</sup>

At the eastern end of this sector is the Husaybah border crossing on the Euphrates, facing the Albu Kamal areas in Syria. Iraqi Special Groups such as Kata'ib Hezbollah (brigade 45), Kata'ib Al-Imam Ali (brigade 40), and Harakat al-Abdal (PMF brigade 39) maintain combat forces in Albu Kamal (in Syria).<sup>33</sup> The Hu-

<sup>h</sup> Badr has around 18,000 to 22,000 troops registered within the PMF, based on a tallying of the author's interview data. Authors interviews, multiple Iraqi political and security figures in 2018 and 2019, exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

<sup>i</sup> This assessment is based on a tallying of the author's interview data. Authors interviews, multiple Iraqi political and security figures in 2018 and 2019, exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees. The author would like to thank Philip Smyth and Aymenn al-Tamimi for their advice on this section.

<sup>j</sup> This assessment was based on a tallying of an estimate of 3,000 Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq fighters, 400 Kata'ib Hezbollah fighters, and 600 others. These figures were derived from interview material gathered by the author from a range of Iraqi security force intelligence and operational personnel in Iraq during visits in 2008, 2009, and 2010, exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

saybah/Al-Qaim sub-sector is garrisoned mainly by Liwa al-Tafuf (brigade 13).<sup>34</sup> The Euphrates River Valley leading down to eastern Anbar is garrisoned mainly by a mix of Iraqi Army forces and Liwa al-Muntadher (PMF brigade 7) and Kata'ib Ansar al-Hujja (PMF brigade 29).<sup>35</sup> Within their areas, 122mm rockets are assessed by U.S. government agencies to have been fired by Iran-backed militias at the U.S. advisor site at Al-Asad airbase on February 2, 2019.<sup>36</sup>

Qasim Muslih, the commander of Liwa al-Tafuf, is also the head of the PMF Western Anbar Axis, the sector headquarters for all PMF operations along the border and in Rutbah.<sup>37</sup> The axis headquarters is based in Al-Qaim, and there is a sub-sector headquarters in Rutbah, on the Baghdad-Damascus highway.<sup>38</sup> In collaboration, Liwa al-Tafuf and Kata'ib Hezbollah control all cross-border smuggling and commerce.<sup>39</sup> Kata'ib Hezbollah operatives buttress each of the garrison forces along the border, maintaining checkpoints on the border road (Highway 20).<sup>40</sup> Kata'ib Hezbollah also controls the Husaybah Point of Entry, where it clears its military vehicles to enter and leave Iraq without being inspected by customs.<sup>41</sup> Akashat border crossings—where no customs personnel are present—are coordinated via a KH base at the H-3 airfield, near Rutbah.<sup>42</sup>

### Southern Baghdad Belts

Formally, there is no PMF operational headquarters for Baghdad province,<sup>43</sup> but in practice, the Special Groups have emplaced substantial bases in Baghdad's rural 'belts.'

Kata'ib Hezbollah has carved out an exclusive principality in Jurf as-Sakr, 40 kilometers southwest of Baghdad. This area was liberated in late 2014, when it was celebrated as the first major liberation undertaken by the PMF. Since then, KH has strongly consolidated a "no-go" zone in which displaced Sunni residents cannot return<sup>44k</sup> and where only KH forces operate,<sup>45</sup> complete with private prisons (holding well over 1,000 illegal detainees).<sup>46</sup> In March 2019, Iraqi air traffic control was instructed by KH to prevent U.S. drone overflights of Jurf as-Sakr, and as noted previously, it was from this site on May 14, 2019,<sup>47</sup> that two explosive drones were launched toward Saudi Arabian oil pipeline pumping stations.<sup>48</sup> According to Iraqi government contacts, KH has even acquired land use rights from the government, making its areas private property.<sup>49</sup>

Kata'ib Al-Imam Ali is trying to build out a similar redoubt in the southeastern Baghdad belts, between Suwayrah and Aziziyah, around 50 kilometers southeast of the capital. A former Iraqi military base was improved in 2018 with the aid of 27 mechanical diggers.<sup>50</sup> Kata'ib Al-Imam Ali's leader, U.S.-designated terrorist Shibl al-Zaydi, is one of the richest Special Group leaders, with broad involvement in legitimate business and property in Baghdad.<sup>51</sup>

### Northern Baghdad Belts and Salah al-Din

Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq is dominant in the swathe of northern Baghdad belts and southern Salah al-Din, including Taji, Dujail, and Balad.<sup>52</sup> Within this area, AAH's Ali Haj Safa al-Saadi leads the PMF Salah al-Din Operations Command, nominally covering all of the Tigris

River Valley inside Salah al-Din.<sup>53</sup> In practice, AAH allows other militias their own sub-sectors of Salah al-Din. Moqtada al-Sadr's militia, Saraya Salam, exclusively controls the shrine city of Samarra.<sup>54</sup> Camp Speicher, a large, unused military base west of Tikrit where 1,700 Shi'a cadets were taken from before being massacred by the Islamic State in June 2014,<sup>55</sup> is dominated by KH, Kata'ib Al-Imam Ali, and Kata'ib Jund Al-Imam (PMF brigade 6).<sup>56</sup> Kata'ib al-Tayyar al-Risali (PMF brigade 31) has leadership of the sector in Bayji, where it has concentrated its activities.<sup>57</sup> Alas oilfield is presently controlled by militias, who divert quantities of oil for trucking to Iran (and the Gulf ports) via the Kurdistan Region.<sup>58</sup>

AAH is the dominant economic and political actor only from Samarra to Baghdad.<sup>59</sup> In July 2018, Sunni tribal groups were forced to push back muscularly on AAH intimidation and extortion in this area.<sup>60</sup> AAH criminal rackets resulted in the complete destruction by looting of Iraq's largest refinery<sup>61</sup> and have even targeted U.S. contractors<sup>62</sup> and stolen major equipment supporting the Iraqi F-16 program at Balad airbase.<sup>63</sup> Rockets are assessed by U.S. government agencies to have been fired by AAH at the U.S. advisor sites in Taji on May 1, 2019, with two AAH operatives arrested by local security forces in connection with the attack.<sup>64</sup>

### Mosul and Rural Nineveh

All PMF units in Nineveh are nominally supposed to answer to the PMF Nineveh Operations Command, which is dominated by al-Muhandis appointee Ali Kadhim al-Musawi and his powerful deputy, Kata'ib Al-Imam Ali operative Hajj Ali Kerwei.<sup>65</sup> In practice, Nineveh is another area where a patchwork of local and outsider militias are largely doing their own thing.

The Nineveh-Syria border and connected wadis in central Nineveh are garrisoned by a collection of smaller pro-Iran units such as Saraya Ansar al-Aqeeda (brigade 28), Kata'ib Ansar al-Hujja (brigade 29), and Quwwat al-Shahid al-Sadr (brigade 35).<sup>66</sup> KH and Kata'ib Al-Imam Ali advisors are occasionally visible.<sup>67</sup> This segment of Syrian border is presently of limited interest to IRGC-QF due to the presence of U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces on the other side.<sup>68</sup>

In Sinjar and Tal Afar, KH and Kata'ib Al-Imam Ali advisors work with Liwa al-Hussein (PMF brigade 53) and Lalish (PMF brigade 36), which are each staffed by local Yazidis and Shi'a Turkmen.<sup>69</sup>

In the Nineveh Plains and eastern Mosul city, two local militias draw on support from al-Muhandis to refuse legal orders from the Iraqi government to redeploy away from Christian areas.<sup>70</sup> One is Liwa al-Shabak/Quwat Sahl Nineveh (PMF brigade 30), led by Waad Qado, and the other is Babiliyun (brigade 50), led the Rayan Khaldani.<sup>71</sup> Both leaders were sanctioned by the United States for human rights abuses under the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act.<sup>72</sup> These militias have also dominated the tolling of trucks on the Erbil-Mosul highway and the large-scale scrap metal business in Mosul.<sup>73</sup>

### Badr's Stronghold in Southern Diyala

The fifth major AO for PMF forces covers essentially all the areas east of the Tigris River in Diyala, the Jallam desert east of Sa-

k The issue of Sunni mass displacement and blocked resettlement at Jurf as-Sakr (which militias renamed Jurf an-Nasr after the 2014 battle) is widely discussed and accepted as fact by all major politicians. In the author's interview program with Iraqi politicians and security leaders in 2018-2019, a number of Sunni politicians justified their cooperation with al-Muhandis-linked forces in terms of an effort to negotiate the return of hostages held in Jurf as-Sakr and the broader right to return for their displaced persons in Jurf and elsewhere.

marra and Tuz Khurmatu district, and Kirkuk.<sup>l</sup> Much of this area has historically been the preserve of the Badr organization, which was originally created as a formation of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps during the Iran-Iraq War.<sup>74</sup> Led by Hadi al-Ameri, Badr remains the “first among equals” in this AO, particularly in al-Ameri’s native southern Diyala.<sup>75 m</sup>

The PMF Diyala Operations Command is led by Talib al-Musawi, a Badr commander<sup>76</sup> based at Camp Ashraf, which is the old encampment of the Iranian oppositionist Mojaheddin-e Khalq Organization—Badr’s most bitter foes during the Iran-Iraq War.<sup>77</sup> Badr’s local forces—Badr-leaning Iraqi Army brigades plus PMF brigades 4, 20, 23, and 24—are all under al-Ameri’s effective command<sup>78</sup> and are almost all focused on southern Diyala and the adjacent Jallam Desert.<sup>n</sup>

### Shi`a Turkmen Militias Lean Toward al-Muhandis

Digging deeper, it is clear that neither al-Ameri nor Badr has a monopoly of control in areas east of the Tigris.<sup>79</sup> In Abu Sayda, in northeastern Diyala, AAH militiamen have unsuccessfully contested Badr’s control of the town.<sup>o</sup> In Jalula, adjacent and to the northeast of Abu Sayda, AAH has developed a foothold by building out local Sunni-manned militias from the Kerwei tribe,<sup>80</sup> who were displaced from the area by the Kurds based on the high number of Islamic State fighters provided by the Kerwei in 2014.<sup>81</sup> AAH manages these tribal fighters out of Jalula’s Cobra camp (an old U.S. forward operating base).<sup>82</sup> The arming of these Kerwei militias, who include many former Islamic State members, coincided with the rise in anti-Kurdish insurgent attacks in the same areas, south of Khanaqin, since May 2018.<sup>83</sup> AAH’s involvement also places it astride one of the busiest Iran-Iraq trade arteries, a lucrative tolling opportunity.<sup>p</sup>

Shi`a Turkmen communities in Tuz Kurmatu and Kirkuk were some of the hardest hit by the Islamic State in 2014 and 2015,<sup>84</sup> and their leaders have gravitated toward Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis and IRGC-QF.<sup>85</sup> Tuz Khurmatu and Kirkuk are controlled by the

PMF Northern Axis, which is led by Abu Ridha Yilmaz al-Najjar, a Shi`a Turkoman primarily loyal to Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis.<sup>86</sup> In Kirkuk, Shi`a Turkmen militias look to Mohammed Mahdi al-Bayati, another Shi`a Turkoman primarily loyal to Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis.<sup>87</sup> While often identifying organizationally with Badr, Quwwat al-Turkmen (PMF brigade 16, based in Tuz and Kirkuk) looks toward al-Muhandis and Iran first for direction and support.<sup>88</sup> Al-Muhandis has also placed loyalists within Kirkuk’s governor’s office.<sup>89</sup>

As a result of the special penetration of the Shi`a Turkmen community in Tuz and Kirkuk, Iran-backed Special Groups have been particularly active in smuggling and the provision of material support to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.<sup>q</sup> For instance, IRGC-QF leaders have used Tal Ashtah dispersal airfield—just west of Jawwalah (Rashad), 35km southwest of Kirkuk city—for a variety of purposes.<sup>r</sup> On October 16, 2017, this is where IRGC-QF intermediaries including IRGC-QF Colonel Haj Ali Iqbalpour (the long-standing Kirkuk area liaison<sup>90</sup>) met with Kurdish and Iraqi leaders to broker the handover of Kirkuk to federal forces.<sup>91</sup> This is also where IRGC-QF launched and recovered surveillance drones<sup>92</sup> to designate targets for the September 8, 2018, precision rocket strike on the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI) headquarters in Koya, in Iraqi Kurdistan, which killed 14 and wounded 42 oppositionists.<sup>93</sup>

In Tuz Khurmatu, where Badr has failed to rein in criminal Shi`a Turkmen mafias backed by al-Muhandis, oil is being extracted from the small number of producing wells in Pulkhana field and smuggled into Iran (and thereafter to the Gulf) by local Turkmen militias.<sup>94</sup> The field—sitting astride an area contested by the Islamic State, Shi`a Turkmen forces, and multiple Kurdish groups—has created strange bedfellows who mutually profit from the still-contested area,<sup>95 s</sup> and this has given outlaw groups<sup>96</sup> breathing space to survive outside the reach of Iraqi government and coalition forces.

### Presence in Baghdad City and the South

The PMF was raised to fight the Islamic State, which renders conspicuous the presence of PMF units in peaceful areas of southern Iraq. The PMF Commission maintains administrative offices in each Iraqi province outside Kurdistan, providing a necessary link to wounded fighters and families, as well as a recruitment hub and contact point for off-duty members.<sup>97</sup> Less logically, the PMF also maintains two operational commands in southern Iraq: the PMF Rafidain Operations Command (in Maysan and Dhi Qar) and the

l This area essentially encompasses the old Iraq Tigris Operations Command AO, a now defunct Iraqi Army headquarters sector that Badr has taken over. Author interviews, multiple Iraqi political and security figures in 2018 and 2019, exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

m This remains the case today, as the author’s interviews with Iraqi security officials in 2019 suggests. Hadi al-Ameri continues to head local mediation efforts in southern Diyala whenever inter-tribal or inter-militia tensions spike. Badr leader Hadi al-Amiri personally accompanied 400 Sunni families returning to Mansouriyah in May 2016. See “Diyala Governor Splits Sunnis to Defeat Impeachment Bid,” *Inside Iraqi Politics* 134, July 11, 2016.

n The exception is in Khanaqin district, where the local Shi`a Kurdish (Fayli) PMF brigade 110 is a Badr unit tied to al-Ameri. Author interviews, multiple Iraqi political and security figures in 2018 and 2019, exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

o On September 21-26, 2016, Badr paramilitaries and AAH paramilitaries were fighting for control of the sub-district center of Abu Sayda. In Tuz Khurmatu, meanwhile, Badr moved against AAH locations within the town. All incident data is drawn from the authors’ geolocated Significant Action (SIGACT) dataset. The dataset brings together declassified coalition SIGACT data plus private security company and open-source SIGACT data used to supplement and extend the dataset as coalition incident collection degraded in 2009-2011 and was absent in 2012-2014.

p The Perwez Khan/Muntheriya point of entry and the Iran-Baghdad highway in Diyala (Highway 5) are a major artery for trucking and pilgrim traffic, both of which can be tolled by militia checkpoints.

q In addition to being especially brutalized by the Islamic State, Iraqi Turkmen have experienced intense violent factionalism and a search for external sponsors to help them minimize Kurdish influence in places like Tuz Khurmatu and Kirkuk. The traditional Badr leadership of Hadi al-Ameri stressed deal-making with the Kurds and tried to mount crackdowns on new, highly criminalized Shi`a Turkmen militias. Al-Muhandis and IRGC-QF delivered military victories against the Kurds and have shielded militias from crackdowns. Author interviews, multiple Iraqi political and security figures in 2018 and 2019, exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

r The airfield is located in a zone garrisoned by Federal Police formations, but easily accessible to Liwa a-Turkmen (PMF brigade 16) forces.

s Multiple interviewees have told the author since 2018 that the reason an insurgent pocket still exists in the small and surrounded enclave in Pulkhana is corruption involving Kurdish forces and Iraqi PMF, all of whom trade in oil, goods, and money to facilitate local ceasefires, smuggling of oil, and movement of people and goods.



*Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, left, a commander in the Popular Mobilization Forces, and Adel Abd Al-Mahdi, right, then Minister of Oil and now Prime Minister of Iraq, attend the funeral of Iraqi politician Ahmad Chalabi, in Baghdad, Iraq, on November 3, 2015. (Karim Kadim/AP Photo)*

PMF Basra Operations Command, both led by Badr commanders.<sup>98</sup> These commands appear to be maintained by Badr in readiness for any of a number of contingencies: the deployment of Badr PMF units to restore order during electricity-related or secessionist rioting, to deliver civil engineering and disaster relief, or to crack down on uncontrolled militias.<sup>t</sup>

Militias in Baghdad and southern Iraq also undertake less savory behavior. On September 7-8, 2018, after the burning down of Iran's local consulate, a rash of rocket attacks triggered the closure of the U.S. consulate in Basra,<sup>99</sup> and on July 6, 2019, a roadside bomb detonated in Basra on a logistical convoy hauling supplies to the U.S. embassy in Baghdad.<sup>100</sup> Baghdad has also witnessed repeated rocket launches toward U.S. diplomatic facilities, most recently in September 2018, December 2018, and May 2019.<sup>101</sup> In Basra, some piers at Umm Qasr port and the Shalamchek land border crossing to Iran are militia-controlled smuggling routes for Iraqi crude oil gathered by militias from oilfields such as Qayyarah and Alas.<sup>102</sup>

Most individual PMF units, including Iran-backed Special Groups like KH and Kata'ib Al-Imam Ali, also maintain local offices in numerous parts of Iraq for fundraising and recruitment. The concentration of unauthorized unit-level economic offices is highest in Baghdad city, where non-PMF Iran-backed militias such as Quwwat Assad Allah al-Ghalib and Qaeda Quwwat Abu Fadl al-Abbas also have economic offices.<sup>103</sup> Within Baghdad, individual militias have carved out zones of dominance: Palestine Street for Kata'ib Hezbollah, Sadr City for Saraya Salam and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, Badr and Kata'ib Al-Imam Ali for Karradah and Jadiriyyah. Within these

t These forces have provided back-up to Hadi al-Ameri's political effort to demonstrate leadership as a form of "Basra reconstruction czar." See Ali al-Aqily, Jassim al-Jabiri, Samya Kullab, and Staff of Iraq Oil Report, "Hadi al-Ameri appointed czar of Basra," Iraq Oil Report, April, 2019.

areas, most real estate transactions and business enterprises are taxed by the dominant militias.<sup>104</sup> The presence of economic offices have caused so much concern within the Iraqi government due to their racketeering and predatory control of real estate that Prime Minister Adel Abd'al-Mahdi chose on June 18 and July 1, 2019, to issue successive orders for the closure of all PMF unit offices by July 31, 2019.<sup>105</sup> (On July 30, the PMF released a letter asking for two more months to comply.<sup>106</sup>)

### **The Centrality of al-Muhandis, KH, and Kata'ib Al-Imam Ali**

The central nervous system of IRGC-QF influence in Iraq is Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis and Kata'ib Hezbollah, which maintains a stranglehold over most of the key relationships and posts in the PMF structure.<sup>u</sup> As this author noted in this publication in November 2010,<sup>107</sup> KH emerged as the primary IRGC-QF proxy in Iraq when larger and more disparate networks—Badr and splinter groups from Moqtada al-Sadr's Jaish al-Mahdi—proved too unwieldy and prone to infighting for IRGC-QF to control.<sup>v</sup> From the IRGC-QF perspective, a smaller and centrally controlled force was no doubt required<sup>108</sup> to manage and provide Iranian signature weapons (like Explosively Formed Penetrators, or EFPs) to groups that used them effectively against U.S. forces in line with Iranian guidance, rather than against Shi'a rivals.<sup>109</sup> Higher-quality Iraqi proxies may have been required by the IRGC-QF due to the difficulty of moving IRGC-QF and Lebanese Hezbollah trainers inside Iraq.<sup>110</sup> KH's 'touch points' with the broader Shi'a insurgent networks were the most anti-American and progressively more pro-Iranian splinter groups from Badr and Sadrist militias.<sup>111</sup>

Those touch points have today become the extensions of al-Muhandis' system of control in the much larger PMF structure. Though the most obvious example of this kind of proxy is Abu Mustafa al-Sheibani (U.S.-sanctioned leader of Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada, PMF brigade 14<sup>112</sup>), a more urgent threat is arguably posed by the rapidly expanding powerbase of Shibl al-Zaydi<sup>113</sup> and Kata'ib Al-Imam Ali. The group qualifies as the new Special Group that has experienced the most prolific growth since 2014.<sup>114</sup> IRGC-QF appears

- u This is another point of consensus in all the author's interview programs with Iraqi political and military leaders in 2018-2019. Al-Muhandis is feared and respected above all other militias' leaders and above most Iraqi politicians, including successive Iraqi prime ministers since 2014, due to his very strong backing from Qassem Soleimani of IRGC-QF.
- v The U.S. Army's history of the Iraq War makes a similar assessment, stating "Kata'ib Hizballah was designed as a small, disciplined, specially equipped organization of a few hundred highly trained fighters. It remained under the tight control of the Quds Force." See Joel Rayburn and Frank Sobchak (eds.), *The U.S. Army in the Iraq War, Volume 2: Surge and Withdrawal, 2007-2011* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute and U.S. Army War College Press, 2019), p. 66.
- w The most dramatic cases were the internecine assassinations of two provincial governors and two provincial police chiefs in the latter half of 2006, all Shi'a-on-Shi'a political killings using Iranian-provided Explosively Formed Penetrators (EFPs). Author interviews, multiple Iraqi political and security figures in 2018 and 2019, exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.
- x U.S. seizures of senior IRGC-QF and Lebanese Hezbollah officers in Iraq in 2007-2008 hastened the transition to reliance on small, higher-quality Iraqi proxies. Author interviews, multiple Iraqi political and security figures in 2018 and 2019, exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.



to have put special effort into cultivating al-Zaydi while ensuring that al-Muhandis provided Kata'ib Al-Imam Ali with a very large number of paid billets within the PMF payroll system, growing the unit to a size on par with al-Muhandis' own KH.<sup>y</sup> In addition to very slick propaganda—including the development of the celebrity fighter Abu Azrael, who carries a samurai sword<sup>z</sup> and boasts of spit-roasting Islamic State captives<sup>115</sup>—Kata'ib Al-Imam Ali has the same dispersed training and advising presence at many strategic points as KH.<sup>116</sup> The group has a stronger financial base than any other militia in Iraq through property holdings, legitimate investments, and corrupt influence within the Ministry of Transport and Communications.<sup>117</sup> In the view of this author, Kata'ib Al-Imam Ali looks very much like a parallel first-tier IRGC-QF proxy that is intended to reduce overdependence on KH. The movement—and its business connections—deserves much closer scrutiny.

Another body that merits closer attention is the Central Security Directorate (CSD) of the PMF Commission.<sup>118</sup> This is the part of the PMF that is sanctioned by al-Muhandis to discipline PMF leaders, a powerful internal affairs agency with its own well-equipped special forces and intelligence capabilities.<sup>aa</sup> The CSD is led by Abu Zaynab al-Lami (real name: Hassan Falah), an associate of Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis and a KH member from Baghdad.<sup>119</sup> The first deputy director is Abu Ali al-Zaydi, and the second deputy director is Abu Wahab al-Maliki.<sup>120</sup> Al-Lami is emerging as a very powerful and widely feared figure who has a direct line to IRGC-QF leader Qassem Soleimani, independent of Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis.<sup>121</sup> It is possible that Abu Zaynab al-Lami is being groomed to eventually supplant al-Muhandis at the top of the Special Group structure in Iraq, and he was already floated as one candidate for the highly influential deputy minister of interior for intelligence role in the Iraqi government in June 2019.<sup>122</sup> The CSD is believed by Iraqi politicians to operate a technical intelligence branch under an official known as Abu Iman, focused on developing compromising material on politicians, ministry directors, and security personnel.<sup>123</sup>

Al-Muhandis' position at the heart of the PMF Commission has historically allowed him to control the purse strings that dictate how many paid billets each unit is allocated, resulting in very significant influence over local leaders, who directly benefit from

skimming off unit salaries.<sup>124ab</sup> Now the PMF Commission is claiming that the PMF payment, pension, and benefits system has been audited through a biometric registration system about which no details are available.<sup>ac</sup> PMF salaries may, in the future, move from cash payments to the popular QiCard<sup>ad</sup> electronic debit cards to allow easy transfer of money into bank accounts or cash issued by banks. Indications from within the Iraqi power structure suggest, however, that the registration process remains in the hands of al-Muhandis and thus is not an independently verified system.<sup>125</sup> Movement to independent auditing and electronic payment would reduce much of the potential for al-Muhandis to massage the real number of active fighters at unit level, which is his key means of maintaining influence over PMF unit commanders.<sup>126</sup>

### The Role of Badr

Another cross-cutting capability that influences all the PMF units—including the Iran-backed Special Groups—is the Badr organization's function as the most experienced military force in the PMF, with continual operation of a division-sized armed force since the mid-1980s.<sup>127</sup> In today's PMF, Badr is the main provider of expertise and manpower in the PMF "enabler" units, such as the armor, artillery, and missiles directorates.<sup>128</sup> Badr members are in charge of liaising with the Sunni Tribal Mobilization Forces (U.S.-supported elements of the PMF), and they occupy the positions of PMF chief of staff, chief of operations, and head of the training and religious instruction directorates.<sup>129</sup> At the local level, Badr provides the leaders for two operational commands (Basra and Rafidain) and the PMF administrative heads in Basra, Dhi Qar, Qadisiyah, Kirkuk Muthanna, and Wasit.<sup>130</sup> Badr is the heart of the PMF, but not its head, which is Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis.

As noted previously, Badr was a unit of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps in the Iran-Iraq War, so its ties with Iran run very deep. Badr membership is threaded throughout the DNA of many of the non-Badr units in the PMF, such as KH, Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada, Kata'ib Jund al-Imam, and Saraya Talia al-Khurasani.<sup>131</sup> Badr units such as PMF brigade 9 and 10 have operated in Syria in support of Iranian policy.<sup>132</sup> Iran has provided significant material support to Badr units through the transfer of high-end systems like T-72 tanks and HM-20 and HM-27 multiple-barrel

y As noted previously, based on multiple interviewees, Kata'ib Al-Imam Ali has paid billets from around 8,000 fighters, not far short of KH's 10,000 billets. Author interviews, multiple Iraqi political and security figures in 2018 and 2019, exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

z Abu Azrael is irresistible "clickbait" for today's electronic media. For example, see "The 'Archangel of Death' fighting Islamic State," BBC Trending, March 18, 2015.

aa Large amounts of imagery exist of the CSD special forces due to the PMF Commission's keenness to demonstrate that it is purging criminality from the PMF. Troopers wear black jumpsuits and wear insignia and equipment that is very hard to distinguish from Iraqi Counter-Terrorism Service troops. Modern night-vision equipment is often clipped to CSD helmets during night raids. For an example of CSD imagery, see Kosar Nawzad, "Iraqi militias crack down on several 'fake headquarters,'" *Kurdistan 24*, February 12, 2019.

ab Units receive their monthly salary allocation in cash, and commanders often skim around 30% of each volunteer's salary off for a "unit fund" that nominally pays for life support but also serves as a method of corrupt fundraising by individuals and factions. Author interviews, multiple Iraqi political and security figures in 2018 and 2019, exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

ac On March 25, 2019, the head of finance for the Hashd Hussein Ismael Khalil announced a biometric (fingerprint) enrollment process for the Hashd that began in October 2018, and which by March 2019 had registered "80,000 out of nearly 160,000" members. See "Financial crowd issues a statement on salaries," *Wataniq*, March 25, 2019.

ad QiCard was developed by International Smart Card, a company owned by Iraq's two biggest state-owned banks, Rafidain Bank and Rasheed Bank, together with the Iraqi Electronic Payment System. See the company website at <https://qi.iq/>

rocket launchers.<sup>ae</sup> Badr-linked local auxiliary units like Babiliyun (PMF brigade 50) and Liwa al-Turkmen (PMF brigade 16) are involved in a range of criminal activities, human rights abuses, and material support to IRGC-QF.<sup>133</sup>

Disentangling Badr networks from al-Muhandis and IRGC-QF networks is thus not a simple proposition. All this being said, however, it is also arguable that Hadi al-Ameri's camp within Badr would prefer not to be digested whole and dissolved into the al-Muhandis-led Special Group structure.<sup>134</sup> As the above sections have detailed, cracks have emerged in al-Ameri's control of Badr<sup>135</sup> (mainly in far-flung auxiliary units) and al-Ameri's profile as the most visible Shi'a militia leader has been diluted by the rise of al-Muhandis, Qais al-Khazali (of AAH),<sup>136</sup> and Shibl al-Zaydi.<sup>137</sup> IRGC-QF leader Qassem Soleimani did not support al-Ameri's bid for the Iraqi prime ministership after the 2018 elections, nor did he secure al-Ameri the interior minister's job after the 2014 elections. Now al-Muhandis and up-and-comers like Abu Zaynab al-Lami get Soleimani's attention, while al-Ameri's practical ideas on PMF professionalization—backed by decades of military experience—are sidelined.<sup>138</sup>

### A More Precise U.S. Policy Toward Today's Special Groups

As the above assessment makes abundantly clear, the pro-Iranian militias within the PMF do not represent all—or even most—of the Popular Mobilization Forces. As a result, this author has argued,<sup>ag</sup> that U.S. officials would be wise to never *publicly* use the words PMF, Hashd, Shi'a militias, or any other collective descriptor because the popular mobilization, as a societal experience and as an institution, is viewed with reverence and respect by many Iraqis.<sup>139</sup> Many average citizens have relatives who fought honorably in the PMF structure primarily for the benefit of Iraq, not Iran or pro-Iranian militia leaders. The U.S. government arguably alienates potential allies when it publicly criticizes the PMF phenomenon in a generalized manner.

Even behind closed doors, none of the old descriptors (Shi'a Extremist Groups, Shi'a Militia Groups) make sense due to the multi-ethnic composition of the Iraqi components of Iran's threat network. There is a very strong argument for a new descriptor for

ae Imagery and videos of the Badr-provided PMF artillery and armor directorates is widespread because the PMF is proud to show off its capabilities. For a good description of Badr equipment holdings, see Nader Uskowi, *Temperature Rising: Iran's Revolutionary Guards and Wars in the Middle East* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), p. 100. Also see Michael Knights, "The Future of Iraq's Security Forces," Al-Bayan Center for Planning and Studies, March 2016, p. 78.

af In a number of the author's interviews, Iraqis expressed the possibility that there will soon no longer be "one Badr." Author interviews, multiple Iraqi political and security figures in 2018 and 2019, exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

ag This author wrote: "First, whether Iraq has an institution called the Popular Mobilization Forces is none of our concern. The movement itself has a cherished place within the hearts of millions of Iraqis. Every time a U.S. leader publicly references the Popular Mobilization Forces as a whole, they set back our overall policy in Iraq, especially if these references are negative. Instead, the United States should only discuss our legitimate and specific concerns as a security cooperation partner and donor to Iraqi counterparts behind closed doors." See Michael Knights, "How the U.S. government should think about Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces," Fikra Forum, Washington Institute, May 9, 2019.

those groups with primary loyalty to U.S.-designated terrorist Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis and who are willing to provide material support to IRGC-QF and other sanctioned entities including but not limited to Lebanese Hezbollah. What Iraq faces today are effectively the new 'Special Groups' of the Iraqi militia scene—'special' in that, like their forerunners in 2006-2011, they are not under government control and they provide material support to IRGC-QF and other sanctioned Iranian entities.

### The Main Threat: Kata'ib Hezbollah

The United States does not have the same influence it did in Iraq prior to 2011, and it therefore needs to be parsimonious and pragmatic if it wishes to push back effectively on today's Iran-backed Special Groups. The first step in the process of addressing the challenge posed by today's Iran-backed Special Groups is to clearly define—and continually refine—identification of the main threat group. That main threat is Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis and Kata'ib Hezbollah. A key challenge is that al-Muhandis dominates the finances of the PMF. If Iraq chooses to place a second deputy chairman of the PMF Commission alongside al-Muhandis, as was unsuccessfully attempted in 2016,<sup>ah</sup> this could be a start in diluting his influence.

At the same time, the analyst community needs to put significant effort into understanding how the main threat will evolve. Al-Muhandis may try to use a PMF reform process to consolidate his power, providing other factions (like Badr, Saraya Salam, and shrine PMF units) with long-term geographic cantons and salary allocations while keeping the more important core functions of the PMF Commission for himself. Alternately, the analyst community should also watch for the potential evolution of Special Groups beyond al-Muhandis and KH. The rising power of Kata'ib Al-Imam Ali has been overlooked for too long. The rising star of CSD director Abu Zaynab al-Lami is worthy of close attention in the analyst community, particularly in light of sanctionable activities.

### Targeting Second-Tier Special Groups

Beyond these main threat groups, U.S. government analysts should continue to refine the criteria for prioritizing urgent threats to U.S. citizens and U.S. interests, Iraqi stabilization and economic well-being, and the human rights of Iraqis. As PMF units are likely to shed their public use of unit names (for instance, Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada) in the near future,<sup>140</sup> the United States would be wise to always refer to such units using their brigade numbers, as this article has done, which may outlive their faction names. The most capable pro-Iran militias may not be the best known. For instance, Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada (PMF brigade 14) was formed by, and remains led by, Abu Mustapha al-Sheibani, a U.S.-designated terrorist, so it is an obvious target for U.S. sanctions. Yet, newer militias such as Kata'ib Jund al-Imam (PMF brigade 6), Harakat al-Abdal (PMF brigade 39), Saraya al-Jihad (PMF brigade 17), and Liwa al-Tafuf (PMF brigade 13) are larger, are present on the Syrian border, and

ah Retired Mohsen al-Kaabi was appointed by then Prime Minister Abadi on February 17, 2016, with responsibility for finances and administrative monitoring. He mysteriously withdrew from the position in under a month, and his resignation was announced first by Kata'ib Hezbollah. See "Abadi Assigned Mohsen al-Kaabi as Deputy Head of the PMF," Al-Ghad Press, February 7, 2016. See also "Al-Kaabi withdrew from his post as deputy chairman of the Popular Authority for Administrative Affairs," Al-Masalah, March 10, 2016.

may be equally or more valuable to IRGC-QF as proxy forces.

There is a value to sanctioning leaders of smaller militias as a warning to the leaders of larger ones to amend their behavior, but the United States would be wise to make this choice deliberately and not due to a mis-assessment of the threat posed by groups. For instance, Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba (PMF brigade 12) is one of the loudest, most anti-Israeli and anti-U.S. groups in Iraq,<sup>141</sup> led by U.S.-designated terrorist Akram Kaabi, and it was duly sanctioned in March 2019.<sup>142</sup> What few observers realize is that Nujaba is one of the smaller and less capable Special Groups at the moment.

The United States should also continue to explore non-terrorism authorities for sanctioning militia leaders. The recent linking of sanctions to corruption and human rights abuses was recently done with the leaders of PMF brigades 30 and 50.<sup>143</sup>

As was the case with these latter brigades, it was their leaders—not their rank and file—that were initially targeted, which may be replicated with future measures. Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq may be a particularly relevant case for the targeting of mid-level commanders. The behavior of some elements of AAH toward other Iraqis remains deplorable—ranging from intimidation of common people all the way up to the Baghdad provincial council chairman<sup>144</sup> and the head of the Shi`a Endowment, appointed by Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sis-

tani.<sup>ai</sup> This offers a wide variety of non-terrorism issues that could be highlighted in targeted sanctions against mid-level AAH commanders in the future.

### Denying IRGC-QF Deniability

When U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo visited Baghdad on May 7, 2019, he brought a simple and strong message for Iraqi and Iranian ears: any attack by Iran-backed militias that harmed American citizens in Iraq would be considered to be an Iranian attack, triggering a U.S. military response against Iranian interests in Iraq.<sup>145</sup> The demarche appears to have reinforced a pre-existing IRGC-QF preference that harassment of U.S. bases remain non-lethal in nature, corresponding with an “aim to miss” pattern visible in rocket strikes in late 2018 and early 2019.<sup>146</sup> <sup>aj</sup> Providing clear and sharable evidence of Iranian and militia malfeasance to support such demarches may become a more important priority for intelligence collectors and analysts. **CTC**

ai Alaa al-Musawi, the Sistani-appointed head of the Shi`a Waqf (religious endowment), suffered a home invasion by AAH forces on July 10, 2019, and continues to shelter in the Prime Minister's guesthouse at the time of writing. See “Storming the residence of the head of the Shiite Waqf for refusing to take over the Grand Mosque,” Kitabat, July 11, 2019.

aj Both the U.S. Embassy complex in Baghdad and the U.S. consulate in Basra are large enough that highly experienced militia rocketeers ought not to entirely miss these facilities unless they intend to do so.

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# A View from the CT Foxhole: Suzanne Raine, Former Head of the United Kingdom's Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre

By Raffaello Pantucci

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*Suzanne Raine worked for the U.K. Foreign & Commonwealth Office from 1995 until 2019, specializing in counterterrorism. Between January 2015 and September 2017, she was head of the United Kingdom's Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre.*

**CTC: What role does JTAC play in U.K. counterterrorism efforts?**

**Raine:** JTAC stands for the Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre. It was established in response to the 2002 Bali bombings, with the aim of having one central place within the U.K.'s system where terrorism threat assessments are made. It is staffed by analysts from about 16 different government departments who are brought together in a single place. These individuals are linked back into their own systems, reading all of the information available from all of their respective departments and feeding it into their assessments. This makes [for] a system which is greater than the sum of its parts and provides a way of pushing information in both directions. This helps support the threat assessment both in immediate tactical terms in the U.K. and abroad, but also the strategic development of the threat picture and trends within it. Its closest equivalent in the American system is NCTC [National Counterterrorism Center]. JTAC is also responsible for operating the U.K.'s national threat level system. It makes independent judgments free of any political influence, which informs the response posture either in advance of or after a terrorist attack.

**CTC: What is your current evaluation of the threat from the Islamic State, especially in the wake of the Easter 2019 attacks in Sri Lanka? Did those particular attacks change your general assessment of the group's trajectory?**

**Raine:** It is a good time to ask that question because it is now five years since the declaration of the caliphate, and that should give us a moment to pause. It is quite a startling fact that the territorial caliphate survived that long. Not many things last five years. At the end of it all, just at the point where we were declaring territorial defeat, up pops Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in a video to say, 'I'm still here, guys.'<sup>1</sup> It is an uncomfortable reminder that there still is a strategic mind at the heart of the group. It is not just a group engaged in a war in the desert, but it is an organization with leadership, structure, and organizational goals, however disrupted they have been.

Territory is nice for a terrorist group to have but is not a prerequisite. The establishment of the caliphate enabled them to become a massive global phenomenon, but territory brings with itself its own problems. It requires governance, policing, and defense, all of which requires lots of resource. The challenge for ISIS will be how they manage the transition away from [a] guerrilla state without disintegrating. Al-Baghdadi turning up five years later is their way

of starting to think that through.

In terms of the threat from ISIS, the U.K. had a horrible year in 2017, and 2018 was much better. But this is sometimes an illusion. The question if we look at this five-year period and analyze it properly is, what does that show? To do this, we need to go back to the first three years of the group's caliphate, which were a significant challenge for those of us whose job it was to counter it because it was growing so quickly; they had the impetus and the initiative. It is not true to say that the scale of the problem in 2015-17 took us by surprise, because we had watched it develop in 2013-14, but it is true to say that the way it changed, mobilized young people, generated spontaneity and common cause were exceptionally challenging to deal with. That put real demands on the instruments that we had at our disposal. A lot of things subsequently happened in response, but it took time and finally the coalition efforts in Syria and Iraq have pushed them back and kept them firmly on the back foot over the last couple of years. But it has been at significant cost to the coalition, and there is a huge debt of gratitude to the Syrian Kurds without whom it would not have been possible to push ISIS from their territory in Syria. Now ISIS is on the back foot; their media machine has been significantly disrupted; they've lost a lot of operational planners and have been substantially degraded.

In addition to this, we started to get on top of their networks in the West, leading to a lot of disruptions. This makes it much more difficult for them to conduct the kind of attacks they were conducting earlier on.

But there is a long legacy that the group has left behind. It can be categorized in two ways: their media and their network of foreign fighters. They have had more than five years as a group of living and fighting together, and we are talking about an unprecedented number of nationals from an unprecedented number of countries, including both men and women. The women are equally significant in this regard because I reject any suggestion that the women are less responsible for their decisions and actions than the men are. Foreign fighters are going to continue to pose a huge problem for the international security community because we are going to have to track them as well as find ways to monitor the effect that the inspirational ideas have on our domestic populations.

However weakened ISIS may now be, they are still a truly global movement, and we are globally vulnerable. Paradoxically, nothing should surprise us about what happens next, but we need to be prepared to be surprised. Sri Lanka is a good example of that, because whatever their exact connections, they were clearly inspired and connected to ISIS' ideology at the very least. What Sri Lanka also showed was the difference between a lone-actor and a multiple-actor attack. There is no straightforward equation that says a lone actor will cause lower casualties and do less physical damage, but you can see from Sri Lanka that an attack with multiple actors who conduct their attack simultaneously is very effective. This is something that we see with alarming regularity in places like Afghani-

stan. We are going to continue to face both the lone-actor inspired attacks, as well as multiple-actor. The threat picture continues to contain almost every sort of threat within it.

**CTC:** Given the Islamic State is a globalized threat as you describe, are there any places that are of greater or lesser concern? Where might the next Sri Lanka come from?

**Raine:** There are multiple different factors at play. One is how many of the foreign fighters are left and whether they get home. And we still don't really know the answer to how many we are talking about in total when it comes to those who left or survived, nor where they are. Local conditions are going to be a determining factor in how they settle. North Africa is clearly of concern, not least because of the numbers of foreign fighters from North Africa, but also as historically the region has tended to produce amongst the most committed and battle-hardened fighters. The environment is one into which they are able to return—either to continue the fight they started in Syria and Iraq, fit into existing groups, or start up something new. This is very concerning. I also continue to worry about Afghanistan, where returning fighters are an additional dimension to the political quagmire. It is possible that a deal done with the Taliban becomes not actually very useful anymore because, in fact, the problem is a whole new generation of people who have been radicalized by a different kind of extremist group. This might lead to new fighting and new groups. It is not a given that this is what is going to happen, but it has to be a concern. And then clearly there are a large number of fighters from Southeast Asia who are going to return somewhere and pose a threat. And finally, I worry about Syria and Iraq because once they cease to pose an international threat, the interest and resource will shift elsewhere while the internal problems remain as complex as they were before the war.

**CTC:** Part of the threat spectrum facing Western countries has been instigated or inspired attacks. The Islamic State's use of this methodology was not new. Al-Qa`ida used to use it. But how was the Islamic State able to weaponize it so effectively?

**Raine:** As you point out, it is not new. AQAP [al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula] ideologue Anwar al-Awlaki was brilliant at it. He was an incredibly powerful voice in the British community and beyond because of his ability to speak in English about modern things. ISIS has upgraded this approach for the modern generation. They've been exceptionally innovative at exploiting the explosion of new ways of using social media that we use in society today. They had an army of young, dextrous, tech-savvy people who spoke multiple languages and who knew how to speak to people in their home countries. This was a major advantage they had over Anwar al-Awlaki since he only had a very small group of people supporting him. They were able to communicate directly, sitting together building a critical mass in the media center where they would learn from each other and experiment. A fascinating aspect was that they were communicating with us all the time as well. We were not always attentive to what was being said. I was often struck by the amount of humor and mischief they would use in their messaging. One well known example which resonated with a British audience was the Islamic State Health Service, for example, when the group took the National Health Service (NHS) logo and turned it into their own. It was creative and appealed to people.



*Suzanne Raine*

The genius of what they did with the inspired attack was to elevate it into a sort of art form, so that anyone who did anything anywhere in the world that fitted their paradigm could be claimed by them. This created an idea of a mass movement without them actually needing to have one. And once you have this fictive mass movement, it gives greater appeal to the group. You create the impression of an organization that is bigger than it is. For those potential recruits sitting at home living their 'boring' lives, seeking 'meaning,' wanting to be part of something bigger and better, this provides them with a substantial organization to join.

At its height, ISIS had a media machine that was able to publish in 10 languages simultaneously. It has been significantly damaged through a concerted effort in both military and disruptive online terms by multiple actors. But it still exists, and one of the problems we have is that whenever an attack is conducted and a claim is issued, it is rebroadcast all over conventional media. All the group needs to do is get the claim out to create a sense of responsibility around the act without having to have done much work themselves. Sri Lanka was notable in this regard.

The other difference with al-Qa`ida was that ISIS was not afraid to use their media machine and to broadcast rapidly. During the first three years of the caliphate, they took particular advantage of this, as their media broadcasters were in far less danger than al-Qa`ida's. Al-Qa`ida's messengers learned that if you stand there with a telephone, somebody is going to bomb you. Anwar al-Awlaki had to go to enormous lengths to get Inspire magazine out there because he had to hide his identity and hide his location. The chaos in Syria meant that ISIS broadcasters were able to hide much more easily. For as long as they were not afraid, they could do it with real confidence, and they were able to maintain a strong voice in the public domain. This helped them create an identity online which they still take advantage of today. It is obviously not the same now, but it was an element of their game plan which took us a little bit of time to adapt and respond to.



**CTC: Do you think the group's brand was degraded because of spurious attack claims? For example, they claimed Stephen Paddock's October 2017 Las Vegas massacre, an attack that clearly had no link to the group. How long can you claim such random things without people losing belief in you?**

**Raine:** It is certainly true that in the early years, they did not make false claims. They put effort into making sure and verifying that attacks were conducted by their adherents. And then they became a bit sloppier. The only explanation I can offer is that while we may have noticed that their claims are no longer very accurate, the people who support them did not notice. All their claim does, however spurious, is create a hook into the public conversation. An ISIS claim reminds people about the organization's presence and existence, even if they didn't actually do it. And by the time everyone has proved that the claim was indeed spurious and the incident had nothing to do with them, everyone has forgotten and moved on to the next thing. The group, however, still gets some brief resonance in the public space.

**CTC: There are some indications of a possible al-Qa`ida resurgence.<sup>a</sup> How is that materializing in terms of threats to the West? Where is the actual threat that we see from al-Qa`ida? And to tie into a bigger question, how do we ever know when a terrorist campaign is over?**

**Raine:** This is a problem. One of the biggest difficulties we have with al-Qa`ida is latency—the ability of the group to exist without necessarily being constantly active and visible. We know al-Qa`ida is a thoughtful organization that has demonstrated strategic patience. The leadership has been absolutely consistent about its objectives for a very long time. And although they have been significantly degraded over the last nearly 20 years by a very persistent campaign against them, some of the key leaders are still around and hidden in very difficult to get to places like Yemen, Syria, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and North Africa. We cannot be sure that we know what they are doing or even what their new generation looks like. We are aware of the group's continued ability to exist, its committed leadership, but we are not clear on what the new generations are like or what they think.

Their experience in Syria has been a real roller coaster ride. On the one hand, it has given them a new purpose at various stages of the conflict and, of course, a lot of new recruits, including a lot of Britons who were always al-Qa`ida supporters, as well as other nationalities, like Chechens. And just as the ISIS foreign fighters have been with the group for around five years now, the al-Qa`ida ones have as well. On the other hand, al-Qa`ida is now completely bogged down with factional in-fighting about who is governing Idlib. This is just indicative of the difficulties of being in Syria. It has given al-Qa`ida a platform, and it has given them a massive headache. And we have insights into what is going on with the group with infighting and governance challenges, but we just don't understand the whole picture.

This highlights the really big challenge for those working in counterterrorism, which is that we know they are there, we know their intent has not changed, we know they have got capability, and the underlying conditions in many parts of the world where they operate are no different now to how they were pre-9/11. In fact, in some parts of the world, they are worse. We know that we cannot get the kind of information that we would want around the group, so how do we interpret the lack of information? How will we know when the absence of information means that an attack is not being planned, or whether it is just that we are not good enough at collecting information on attack plans? And for me, this is the difficulty that we have got ourselves into with the War on Terror because the phrase implies at some point there is going to be a winner and a loser, closure and an end, a treaty. And I just do not see and cannot imagine the point where we are going to be confident enough to say: 'they are still there, but we are confident that they do not mean us any harm.'

**CTC: Is al-Qa`ida or the Islamic State the greater long-term threat to the United Kingdom?**

**Raine:** Rather than one group or another being the long-term threat, the danger comes from the likelihood that they persist and expand—by which I mean, how receptive their target audience is in the long term to the alternative form of governance or ideology that they offer, which is based on a higher belief system and justification for action that is very different to that which secular Western governments offer. Rather than our political system, built on gradual change and reform, they offer a violent and rapid answer, which will consistently be a challenge for us because it is an alternative that will appeal to some people.

We also need to recognize how long some of the participants on their side, be it AQ or ISIL or whomever, have been involved in this fight already. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi is my age, as is Abdulmalek Droukdel. Ayman al-Zawahiri and Saif al-`Adl are even older. Qasim al-Raymi is relatively young at the age of 41. And if we think about it at a rational human level, very few of us have fundamentally changed our core beliefs in decades, so why should we expect individuals involved in ideologically motivated groups to? And their children and grandchildren are being brought up with this mentality and ideology around them.

I absolutely agree with the need to prevent, de-radicalize, and counter the narrative that these groups espouse in whatever way we can. But I also feel very strongly that this is a very difficult thing to do, and I still can't think of any significant examples where de-radicalization has been successful in serious numbers. Because we are trying to tell people to believe something other than that which they believe. And that's really hard.

In terms of al-Qa`ida or ISIS posing the longer-term threat, it is not so much the groups but the conditions in the world at the moment which pose the threat. Syria, in particular, has created an environment where a whole new generation of threat can emerge. And that will ultimately express itself differently in different places. It may be for the moment that the individuals linked to ISIS or al-Qa`ida stay aligned to the local groups that already exist in the various contexts that they are operating in. It may be that returnees or off-shoots of these groups end up being subsumed into more local conflicts on the ground. Or it may be that they end up becoming

<sup>a</sup> Editor's note: See, for example, Tim Shipman, "Al-Qaeda terror group returns to target airliners and airports," *Sunday Times* (U.K.), December 23, 2018, and Jami Forbes, "Does al-Qa`ida's Increasing Media Outreach Signal Revitalization?" *CTC Sentinel* 12:1 (2019).

part of groups which play a role in proxy conflicts in different parts of the world—for example, the Kashmiri groups that we have long seen active in South Asia, but there are plenty of others. We are likely entering a phase of everything been thrown up into the air. It will eventually settle down again, and we will have to adjust to whatever form that takes.

There are clearly going to be tactical problems dotted around. Somalia is an example of a tactical problem which is a long-term headache because of al-Shabaab, but also because there are ISIS supporters there. North Africa is really interesting because there is a lot of fluidity between groups across the entire region. While I am not a North African specialist, what is striking is the commitment to the ideology in that particular context, and then the pragmatic decision-making about how to act, which is hugely effective. I think we will see tactical, pragmatic, local reshaping, and then we have to bear in mind something that was noted in Ed Fitton-Brown's recent interview with this publication,<sup>2</sup> which is that it does not take very many people to come up with the big plot. The question for us is where they will be located when they decide that they want to launch an attack and where it will ultimately be that they find the time and space to plan something on that scale, rather than simply become subsumed into a local conflict.

**CTC: You touched briefly on state-sponsored threats. Do you think they are going to become more significant than al-Qa`ida or Islamic State threats? Or will they merge? How will that relationship develop, and what is your assessment of what will become a greater threat going forward?**

**Raine:** The two types of threat have co-existed for a long time. For example, LeT [Lashkar-e-Taiba], the Kashmiri group behind the Mumbai attack, grew out of the jihad in Afghanistan and was linked initially more with Abdullah Azzam and UBL [Usama bin Ladin] before it became more focused on state-supported jihad in Kashmir. The dangerous bit is the overlap between the local and the global. For the U.K., the fusion that was seen in Kashmir was a particular problem, as the struggle in Kashmir provided a strong, local call to action that resonated deeply with Kashmiri diaspora communities in the U.K. At the same time, on the ground in South Asia, these groups were close to al-Qa`ida and ultimately became the connection that produced a series of terrorist plots in the U.K. It is entirely possible that the development of this sort of link could be a product of what emerges from what we have been observing in Syria.

The danger of these sorts of threats, and the many flashpoints in which they exist, is that if they become much more active conflicts, they can become places that draw more people in. The Kashmiri one is the obvious flashpoint that could really draw people in if the violence and conflict were to escalate. The Middle East is another source of potential danger in this regard and has numerous proxy groups and conflicts. In a way, the Syria war is a massive proxy group war, and the war in Yemen is another proxy group war. At the same time, the conflicts become a draw for outsiders and create an environment in which terrorist groups can fight, learn, and plot. States use terrorist groups for their own ends, but don't forget that terrorist groups also use states for their own ends.

**CTC: In a recent issue of this publication, Edmund Fitton-Brown, the Coordinator of the ISIL (Daesh)/Al-Qaida/**

**Taliban Monitoring Team at the United Nations, highlighted the large numbers of foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) that are still around.<sup>b</sup> Young and old, they all pose a potential risk. How do you manage a generational struggle of this scale?**

**Raine:** This is a time bomb problem. To start with, none of us really know the exact figures of people who have gone out there and might still be there. It is difficult to know, as I mentioned earlier, the degree to which the threat they pose is something that is blended into a local threat picture or something new and different. What we do know is that there is nothing to suggest that many of them have changed their minds, and there is nothing to suggest that if we do nothing, they will change their mindset. So, we have got to do something. The big challenge for the global counterterrorism community is how do we create a globally coordinated response when we have all got our own domestic considerations and our own legal systems. In Western-allied countries, we have ended up managing this problem largely through defense and security, with the closest possible collaboration we can have. This means sharing data, which enables us to identify potential terrorists who can be disrupted before they do anything, and doing this according to our liberal values, which limits the amount of intrusion into people's privacy or the length of time that people can be locked up.

There are other countries with different values that are applying different solutions to the problem of both foreign terrorist fighters and the broader problem of radicalization at home. The Chinese are locking up, if we believe the reports, around a million Uighurs.<sup>3</sup> The Russians have taken some quite punitive measures in the Caucasus. Then there is a serious question about places which just remain completely lawless—though if we are honest, there is no such thing as an ungoverned space; rather it is governed by someone we do not like. Libya is an example of a place where Western governments have to cooperate with a confusing group of actors on the ground to ensure that the ungoverned spaces are not exploited by Islamist extremists. Then there are countries which are themselves making a complicated series of calculations about how to deal with terrorist problems which have deep local roots, as well as external links. Pakistan and Turkey would fall into that category. The West needs them to be a partner to deal with threats that we are worried about, but they are also trying to manage their own local dynamics. And then finally, there are the countries which cannot cope with these threats, need international support, and need to be part of a global counterterror coalition but are not. We are far from having a unified international response.

The problem is further complicated by the inevitability that the different sets of responses going on around the world will create different sets of unintended consequences. For example, it is not clear what effect repression of the Uighurs will have in terms of the globalist narrative that extremist groups use. It may well be that China's response suppresses the problem to the extent that they are unable to respond, but it may well be that they then fight back in different ways. Or it may be that other groups will take up their

<sup>b</sup> Editor's note: According to Fitton-Brown, out of the over 40,000 foreign terrorist fighters who joined the so-called caliphate, "We could have anything up to nearly 30,000 who remain alive, but nobody knows the true figure." See Paul Cruickshank, "A View from the CT Foxhole: Edmund Fitton-Brown, Coordinator, ISIL (Daesh)/Al-Qaida/Taliban Monitoring Team, United Nations," *CTC Sentinel* 12:4 (2019).

banner. This highlights how there is a particular context in which we have to work together, but at the same time, this is rendered almost impossible nowadays because of the geopolitical environment in which we are operating.

A second question for us as liberal democracies is how we do this while also staying true to our values. So, for example, we struggle to convict those we suspect of terrorism-related crimes at home because we cannot collect evidence to the standards we would require in a war zone. At the same time, we expect other countries to manage them without the evidence. We end up asking more of other countries than we ask of ourselves. Additionally, we are rightly prohibited from sharing information with countries where there is too great a misalignment of our legal systems—which could be construed as lack of due process—or where there is a possibility that mistreatment will occur. We cannot cooperate with another state if the outcome might be an act which we would consider unlawful. How do we forge safe partnerships with countries whose approach to human rights is very different from our own without creating legal jeopardy for ourselves? We have not had the kind of conversation we need to about that.

The other big issue these longer-term threats throw up is predictability, something particularly illustrated by the Easter attack in Sri Lanka. People want to know what is safe and what is not. Sri Lanka demonstrated that it is impossible to have certainty. And this is a perennial problem. For example, it is very difficult to say that the conditions which allowed the October 2002 Bali bombings to happen in Indonesia have completely gone away or not been exacerbated by current conflicts in the region or elsewhere. But we cannot tell everybody not to go to Indonesia on holiday just because something bad might happen. This means that the strain of mitigating these risks is taken by protective security measures, and this requires increasing resources to manage these issues in a broad range of places, like North Africa, Turkey, or Southeast Asia to ensure that people are safe when they go there. But the result is that changes the way we live.

### **CTC: Looking into the future, what terrorist ideologies are of greatest concern to you?**

**Raine:** Islamist terrorism is not going to go away. It might change and become more local, fueled by proxy wars, but the underlying causes that drive these groups and ideologies have not changed and indeed go back a long way.

In addition to this, over the last few years, we have seen—certainly across the English-speaking and Western world—an increase in seriousness and coherence of extreme right-wing groups. It used to look like the extreme right was made up of political movements, and when they conducted violent acts, it was often a lone actor. What we are seeing now is groups of likeminded individuals coming together and talking in a type of language and approach that is used by violent Islamists, using words such as “embracing martyrdom.”

In part, this is a response to the broader political context. The far-right parties and movements now have an increasingly coherent narrative, and stronger links to a shared philosophy. Books which espouse this extreme right-wing philosophy are readily available on Amazon, where they have multiple five-star reviews, very few negative reviews, and through algorithms lead the reader to other similarly extreme material. We have not yet worked out, as we did previously with violent Islamist material, what is and is not acceptable on the extreme right-wing side of the ideological equation. The New Zealand attack demonstrated this very clearly when he titled his manifesto “The Great Replacement,” drawing on a French right-wing philosophical tract of the same name.

But in many ways, my biggest concern with the future of terrorism is what we do in response to it. I am concerned that there is an expectation that this can be stopped, but we’re a long way from working out what the tools are that will enable us to deliver that outcome. Instead, we go through very predictable cycles of intervention and non-intervention overseas, with unclear results. We are committed to liberal values, but then how do we deal with people who we can’t lock up and whose minds we can’t change? In many ways, the challenge of getting our response right is as big as the problem itself.

### **CTC: Are there terrorist tactics that you’ve seen develop over your time in government and since that seem to be growing into more worrying problems?**

**Raine:** There have been big changes in the threat picture. The inspired threat is a change that has already happened and is still happening. Then there are things which have not changed—for example, the determination to conduct a spectacular attack against aviation, something that is just a huge challenge for governments and the aviation industry. You don’t want to put people off flying by being overly protective. But global coordination of effective aviation security has been very slow. The recent conviction in relation to the 2017 Sydney passenger jet plot is a good example of the persistent nature of this threat.<sup>4</sup>

The two new things that everybody talks about are drones and chemical/biological weapons. The likelihood of their use has increased as a result of the war in Syria and as technology develops, because in Syria a significant amount of people have been able to experiment with both types of weapons on the battlefield. We saw in the United Kingdom what disruption drones could do to airports earlier in the year. But at the same time, while we can sometimes get carried away with our creativity about what terrorists might do, they still seem to revert to type. While the panic and disruption caused by the drones at Gatwick airport were hugely damaging,<sup>5</sup> terrorists seem to continue to prefer incidents that cause horrible deaths and injuries. Notwithstanding the availability of new technology, they still continue to like to focus on trying to blow things up. **CTC**

## Citations

- 1 “Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi: IS leader appears in first video in five years,” BBC, April 30, 2019.
- 2 See Paul Cruickshank, “A View from the CT Foxhole: Edmund Fitton-Brown, Coordinator, ISIL (Daesh)/Al-Qaida/Taliban Monitoring Team, United Nations,” *CTC Sentinel* 12:4 (2019).
- 3 Stephanie Nebehay, “U.N. says it has credible reports that China holds

million Uighurs in secret camps,” Reuters, August 10, 2018.

4 “Australian guilty of plane bomb plot involving meat grinder,” BBC, May 1, 2019.

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# Western Balkans Foreign Fighters and Homegrown Jihadis: Trends and Implications

By Adrian Shtuni

**Over 1,000 adult male foreign fighters, women, and minors from the Western Balkans spent time in Syria and Iraq and around 500 from the region are still there, including children born in theater. After seven years of fighting and at least 260 combat deaths, the last active jihadi unit from the Western Balkans in Syria and Iraq is a modest ethnic Albanian combat unit fighting with Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham in Idlib. The rest of those remaining in Syria and Iraq, mostly minors, are held in Kurdish-controlled IDP camps. Some 460 others have gradually returned home, making the Western Balkans the region with the highest concentration of returning foreign terrorist fighters in Europe and creating a long-term security challenge compounded by inadequate resources and the threat posed by homegrown jihadi militants.**

The Western Balkans emerged as a meaningful source of European foreign fighters in the Syrian conflict.<sup>1</sup> Although it appeared suddenly, this jihadi mobilization wave did not materialize in a vacuum. It was and remains the most visible manifestation of a wider religious militancy phenomenon in the region. This article will examine both parts of the phenomenon: the current state of the Western Balkans foreign fighter contingent<sup>a</sup> and the complex challenge they

a In this article, "Western Balkans foreign fighter contingent" encompasses—without prejudice to participation in armed combat or implication (direct or indirect) in terrorist activity—all nationals of Western Balkans countries reported by law enforcement authorities to have spent time in areas controlled by designated terrorist organizations in Syria and Iraq from 2012. It is important to emphasize that minors are a distinct, largely noncombatant subgroup considered part of this contingent due to national affiliation and association with their adult parents. Nevertheless, it is also important to note that many children and minors of all nationalities who have transitioned into adulthood while in Syria and Iraq have systematically received ideological and military training in camps for "the cubs of the Caliphate" and, in some cases, have directly participated in armed combat, execution of prisoners, and suicide attacks. See John Horgan, Max Taylor, Mia Bloom, and Charlie Winter, "From Cubs to Lions: A Six Stage Model of Child Socialization into the Islamic State," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, September 10, 2016. See also Asaad Almohammad, "ISIS Child Soldiers in Syria: The Structural and Predatory Recruitment, Enlistment, Pre-Training Indoctrination, Training, and Deployment," ICCT, February 2018.

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represent as well as the scope and significance of the homegrown jihadi pool in the region. The metrics provided in this article have been compiled from data that was last updated in early to mid-2019 and was provided or released by Western Balkans law enforcement agencies and/or collected from a wide range of reports released by international organizations and academic institutions.

## Part One: Exploring the Western Balkans Foreign Fighters Contingent

### *Data and Observed Trends*

Since 2012, about 1,070 nationals<sup>b</sup> of Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Albania, Serbia, and Montenegro traveled to Syria and Iraq, primarily joining the ranks of the Islamic State and in lesser numbers the al-Qa`ida affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra—most recently rebranded Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). This unprecedented outflow of foreign fighters from the region peaked in 2013-2014 and almost grinded to a halt by 2016,<sup>2</sup> although aspiring jihadi militants continued their largely unsuccessful attempts to cross into Syria well into 2017.<sup>3</sup> About two-thirds of the contingent, or 67 percent, were male adults at the time of departure, 15 percent women, and 18 percent children.<sup>c</sup> Kosovo contributed the region's largest number of men (256),<sup>4</sup> whereas Bosnia and Herzegovina contributed the highest number of women (61) and children (81).<sup>5</sup>

Due to new births between 2012 and 2019, the number of children of foreign fighters from the Western Balkans in Syria and Iraq has sizably increased. According to official data, the number of children born in theater to Kosovan and Bosnian parents as of

b Total number compiled based on data from each of the six Western Balkans countries. For Albania, see "Commission Staff Working Document, Albania 2018 Report," European Commission, April 17, 2018, p. 36; for Kosovo, see "Commission Staff Working Document, Kosovo\* 2018 Report," European Commission, April 17, 2018, p. 32; for North Macedonia, see "Commission Staff Working Document, The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia 2018 Report," European Commission, April 17, 2018, p. 38; for Bosnia and Herzegovina, see "Commission Staff Working Document, Bosnia and Herzegovina 2018 Report, European Commission, April 17, 2018, p. 25; for Montenegro, see "2019 Transitional Action Plan for the Continued Implementation of Activities in the Strategy for Countering Violent Extremism 2016-2018," Government of Montenegro, January 2019, p. 38; for Serbia, see Joana Cook and Gina Vale, "From Daesh to 'Diaspora': Tracing the Women and Minors of Islamic State," ICSR, 2018, p. 16.

c The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child defines child as "a human being below the age of 18 years."

early 2019 stood at 155.<sup>d</sup> These new births have further increased the size of the Western Balkans contingent who have spent time in Syria and Iraq to at least 1,225.<sup>e</sup>

In the last seven years, about 260 of those who traveled to Syria and Iraq from the Western Balkans have been reportedly killed in armed hostilities, or, in a few cases, died of natural causes. That represents almost one-quarter of the original contingent of 1,070 individuals. Some 460 others have returned to their countries of nationality or residence.<sup>f</sup> The majority had returned by 2015.<sup>g</sup> A few others were transferred to North Macedonia by the U.S. military in 2018<sup>6</sup> after being captured by the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), thus making that country one of the first in Europe to publicly repatriate Islamic State fighters detained in Syria.<sup>7</sup> The repatriation continued in April 2019 with Kosovo accepting the transfer of 110 individuals, of whom 74 are children, 32 women, and four alleged male foreign fighters. This was one of the largest repatriations of its kind so far.<sup>8</sup> Bosnia and Herzegovina repatriated only one alleged foreign fighter.<sup>9</sup>

The author estimates the size of the Western Balkans contingent of foreign fighters and family members remaining in Syria and Iraq stands at over 500 individuals, made up one-third by male combatants and two-thirds by children (including those born in theater)

- d According to interviews with representatives of law enforcement agencies and investigative journalists from the two countries, as of early 2019, the number of children born to Kosovan nationals was 78 and that of children born to Bosnian nationals was 77. Author interviews, early 2019. For Bosnia and Herzegovina, see also Admir Muslimovic, "Authorities Negotiating the Return of Fighters, Women and Children from Syria," Detektor, February 2, 2019.
- e The reason it was at least this number (and likely higher) is because at the time of this publication, there was no official data available for newborn children of citizens of Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia in Syria and Iraq.
- f These numbers are derived by the author from various sources. For Albania, see "Commission Staff Working Document, Albania 2018 Report," p. 36; for Montenegro, see "2019 Transitional Action Plan for the Continued Implementation of Activities in the Strategy for Countering Violent Extremism 2016-2018," p. 38; for North Macedonia, see "Commission Staff Working Document, The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia 2018 Report," p. 38, and also Ryan Browne, "US transferring some ISIS detainees from Syria to their home countries," CNN, August 7, 2018; for Bosnia and Herzegovina, see Daria Sito-Sucic, "Bosnian women struggle to return female relatives, children from Syria," Reuters, March 8, 2019; and for Kosovo, see "Commission Staff Working Document, Kosovo\* 2018 Report," p. 32, and Taulant Qenaj, "The Hard Reintegration of Returnees from Syria," Radio Free Europe, May 7, 2019. Updated information was also received directly from Western Balkans law enforcement representatives in early 2019.
- g About 300 foreign fighters and family members had returned to the Western Balkans by the end of 2015. This figure is derived by the author from a number of sources. For Bosnia and Herzegovina, see "Bosnia To Shut Down Radical Muslim Groups After Imam Threatened," Radio Free Europe, February 27, 2016; for North Macedonia, see Lirim Shabani, "Spasovski: The Returnees Are Being Monitored," Telegraf, March 25, 2016; for Albania, see Aleksandra Bogdani, "Albania faces 'Jihadi Fighters in the Shadows' Threat," BalkanInsight, March 23, 2016; and for Kosovo, see Adrian Shtuni, "Dynamics of Radicalization and Violent Extremism in Kosovo," *United States Institute of Peace Special Report 397* (2016).

and women.<sup>h</sup> They are mostly being held in Kurdish-controlled prisons and camps for displaced people while a smaller number continues to be embedded with the organizations they joined in Syria and Iraq.<sup>10</sup> At least two foreign fighters, one from North Macedonia and one from Kosovo, are serving life sentences in Turkey.<sup>11</sup> Nationals of Bosnia and Herzegovina currently compose the largest group of the Western Balkans contingent remaining in the conflict theater.<sup>i</sup>

As of mid-2019, the largely mono-ethnic Islamic State-affiliated units of Western Balkans foreign fighters appear to no longer be active in the conflict theater. This is mostly due to successful targeting of their leadership by U.S.-led coalition airstrikes and considerable battlefield casualties that have caused a significant drop in the presence of active Western Balkans foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq, likely to the lowest point since the beginning of the jihadi outflow in 2012.<sup>12</sup>

The last active jihadi presence from the region in Syria is an ethnic Albanian unit within HTS. Xhemati Alban is a *katiba* (combat unit) composed of ethnic Albanian fighters operating in and around the northwestern Syrian province of Idlib. Combatants of other Western Balkans ethnicities continue to fight with HTS, but ethnic Albanians appear to be the only ones from the region to still operate a mono-ethnic unit with its commanding structure.<sup>13</sup> This may be indicative of both a sufficiently large number of fighters and adequate military capabilities. Research by the author<sup>j</sup> and linguistic idiosyncrasies from propaganda footage indicate that these fighters originate primarily from North Macedonia and Kosovo. Video and photographic propaganda material released between 2017-2018 by an affiliated media outlet suggest the unit may have up to two dozen active fighters in its ranks.<sup>k</sup> Other martyrdom propaganda footage indicates that the unit may have suffered at least 18 combat deaths,

- h This number is derived by the author from various sources with the assumption that individuals not reported as dead or returned are still in Syria and Iraq. It is likely that some foreign fighters relocated to other countries or have slipped back home without being detected by local authorities. For Albania, see "Commission Staff Working Document, Albania 2018 Report," p. 36; for Montenegro, see "2019 Transitional Action Plan for the Continued Implementation of Activities in the Strategy for Countering Violent Extremism 2016-2018," p. 38; for Bosnia and Herzegovina, see Sito-Sucic; for Serbia, see Maja Živanovic, "After ISIS Collapse, Serbian Women Trapped in Syria," BalkanInsight, April 25, 2019; and for Kosovo, see "Commission Staff Working Document Kosovo\* 2019 Report," European Commission, May 29, 2019, p. 38.
- i Starting from 2012, Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina with 358 and 323 nationals, respectively, were the two main contributors of Western Balkans foreign fighters to Syria and Iraq. As of mid-2019, Kosovo has experienced 242 returns (including 110 in April 2019). By comparison, Bosnia and Herzegovina has experienced only about 60 returns, of which single digit were children. Given the much smaller number of Bosnian returnees and information provided by Bosnia's prime minister in mid-March that 102 Bosnian adults remained in theater, it follows that Bosnian nationals currently compose the bulk of the Western Balkans contingent remaining in Syria and Iraq. For Kosovo, see "Commission Staff Working Document Kosovo\* 2019 Report," p. 38; for Bosnia and Herzegovina, see "Commission Staff Working Document, Bosnia and Herzegovina 2018 Report," p. 25, and also Cook and Vale, p. 16, and Amina Bijelonica, "The Returnee From Syria Cufurovic Was Transferred to Zenica Prison," Voice of America, April 22, 2019.
- j The author monitored their social media channels and discussed the subject with law enforcement contacts from the Western Balkans.
- k This propaganda was tracked by the author between 2017-2018 on a Telegram messaging channel affiliated with Xhemati Alban.

one after a SVBIED attack during an offensive in Aleppo in late February 2016.<sup>14</sup> The latest martyrdom announcement was issued by the unit's official propaganda channel on May 13, 2019.

The unit's commander is Abdul Jashari, a 42-year-old ethnic Albanian citizen of North Macedonia, going by the *nom de guerre* Abu Qatada al-Albani. Jashari is an influential figure and close military advisor to Abu Muhammad al-Julani, the leader of HTS, who appointed Abu Qatada al-Albani in the summer of 2014 to lead the organization's military operations in Syria.<sup>15</sup> The U.S. Treasury Department designated Jashari a terrorist on November 10, 2016.<sup>16</sup> His name appeared recently in HTS communiqués as one of the members of a high committee tasked with leading reconciliation efforts with Hurras al-Din, a jihadi faction affiliated with al-Qa`ida.<sup>17</sup>

As part of Xhemati Alban's continued engagement and propaganda efforts via social media channels targeting audiences in the Balkans, in August 2018, the group released a 33-minute video entitled "Albanian Snipers in the Lands of Sham."<sup>18</sup> This high-quality propaganda video, narrated in Albanian with English subtitles, documents various stages of training, planning, and combat efforts of the unit's sniper squad, which appears to be self-sufficient both at weapons craftsmanship and tactical training. Its members use customized, high-precision rifles with relatively expensive scopes and craft-made suppressors.<sup>19</sup> The skillsets displayed in the video indicate possible ex-military or paramilitary background and affiliation.

### *The Complex Challenge of Returnees*

From the start of the Syrian armed conflict, Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and North Macedonia experienced some of the highest rates in Europe for mobilization into jihadi terrorist organizations relative to population size.<sup>20</sup> A similar trend has characterized the reverse flow, where according to official data about 460 individuals from the region have returned home from Syria and Iraq, 242 of whom to Kosovo.<sup>21</sup> By comparison, the countries of the European Union, with a cumulative population size of 500 million, have received about 1,500 returnees.<sup>22</sup> As data indicates, the Western Balkans is currently the region with the highest concentration of returned foreign fighters in Europe. With some 500 other adult male combatants, women, and minors still in Syria, it is not inconceivable that the number of returnees may double in size in the future. Kosovo, with its 134 returnees per million nationals, tops the chart, followed by North Macedonia with 42 per million. The United Kingdom, by comparison, has reported about 6 returnees of "national security concern" per million, whereas Germany and France about four per million.<sup>1</sup> The scale of the Western Balkans challenge in dealing with the long-term social and national security implications of this considerable wave of returnees becomes clearer when considering the very modest resources and capacities available in the region compared to the rest of Europe.

The emerging practice of stripping citizenship or permanent residence to foreign fighters that is gaining traction in some European

countries might complicate things further for the Western Balkans, as it shifts the burden of prosecuting and handling dozens of returnees with dual nationality to countries already overburdened and ill-equipped to do so both in terms of resources and expertise.<sup>m</sup> In October 2018, Kosovan authorities accepted the transfer from Turkey of an ethnic Albanian Islamic State fighter and his three children. He was born in Germany to parents that had emigrated there from Kosovo.<sup>23</sup> That was after Germany revoked his permanent residence permit although he had lived all his life in Germany, had reportedly been radicalized there, and fought in Syria with the so-called "Lohberger Brigade," a German-speaking jihadi unit.<sup>24</sup> He was swiftly indicted, tried, and found guilty in Kosovo within a three-month timeframe for "organizing and participating in a terrorist group."<sup>25</sup> Though, after pleading guilty, he received a five-year prison sentence, that was only for the crime of joining a terrorist organization rather than possible crimes committed during the four years spent fighting with the Islamic State in Syria.<sup>n</sup>

Despite significant capacity and resource challenges, the Western Balkans countries have tried and sentenced a significant number of returning jihadis. Kosovo has been at the forefront of these efforts with 73 successful prosecutions of male returnees as of early 2019, which is more than all the other countries of the region combined.<sup>26</sup> That is six out of every 10 returnees. By comparison, the United Kingdom has prosecuted one in 10 jihadis returning from Syria, for a total of about 40 individuals.<sup>27</sup> Courts in North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina—the other two countries with the largest numbers of returnees in the Western Balkans—have issued guilty verdicts against 32 and 18 of their foreign fighter nationals, respectively.<sup>28</sup>

Yet, due to generally lenient sentencing regimes<sup>29</sup> in the countries of the Western Balkans, often based on plea bargains, the prison sentences in terrorism-related cases have largely ranged from one to six years with few exceptions in cases of prominent recruiters.<sup>30</sup> For example, in Kosovo, the average sentence in terrorism-related cases

m Determining the size of the pool of Western Balkans foreign fighters and homegrown jihadis with dual nationality or residence in Western countries is beyond the scope of this article. Yet, information provided in various publications appears to indicate that the size is not insignificant. According to the U.S. State Department's "Country Reports on Terrorism 2016," of the 300 Austrian foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq and those prevented from departing, ethnic Bosnians represent the second-largest group after the Chechens who had entered Austria as asylum seekers over the past decades. Furthermore, a recent study by the Zurich University of Applied Sciences on 130 Swiss-based jihadis—including 72 foreign fighters—monitored by the Swiss intelligence service FIS revealed that about one-third of them have a Western Balkans background. For more, see Miryam Eser Davolio, Mallory Schneuwly Purdie, Fabien Merz, Johannes Saal, and Ayesha Rether, "Updated review and developments in jihadist radicalization in Switzerland – updated version of an exploratory study on prevention and intervention," June 2019.

n Recent research has emphasized the legislative and practical challenges of collecting admissible forensic evidence for the successful prosecution of crimes that may have been committed in foreign war zones by returning foreign fighters. For more on this, see Christophe Paulussen and Kate Pitcher, "Prosecuting (Potential) Foreign Fighters: Legislative and Practical Challenges," International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague, January 30, 2018.

o There are many possible reasons determining the number of successful prosecutions in each country, including the different standards and rules of admissible evidence in court that vary across legal systems and the different use of negotiated agreements such as plea bargains.

1 These numbers are calculated by the author from the tabulation of foreign fighters per country in Richard Barrett, "Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign fighters and the threat of returnees," Soufan Center, October 2017 as well as other sources reporting on the most recent transfer of foreign fighters in the Western Balkans. For North Macedonia, see "Commission Staff Working Document, The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia 2018 Report," p. 38, and also Browne; for Kosovo, see "Commission Staff Working Document, Kosovo\* 2018 Report," p. 32, and Qenaj.



*Xhemati Alban - Albanian HTS katiba. The banner indicates this cohort of fighters is an “infiltration unit.” Date posted: October 18, 2017 (Source: Telegram)*

has been 3.5 years.<sup>31</sup> As a result, about 40 percent of those sentenced for terrorist offenses in Kosovo in the past few years have already been released from prison.<sup>p</sup> In Bosnia and Herzegovina, sentencing leniency has gone even further. In one criminal proceeding, a defendant holding dual Bosnian and Austrian citizenship entered a guilty plea for providing recurrent financial support to the Islamic State and settled with the court to pay a fine of about \$15,000 in lieu of a one-year prison sentence.<sup>32</sup> Another returning foreign fighter was sentenced in late 2016 to one year in prison after admitting that going to Syria was a mistake.<sup>33</sup> On average, the 25 individuals prosecuted and sentenced by a court of appeals verdict in Bosnia and Herzegovina have received prison sentences of one year and 11 months for terrorism-related activities, including fighting in Syria.<sup>34</sup>

Overall, the sentences handed down in the Western Balkans for terrorism offenses are among the most lenient in Europe. The average sentence in the European Union for terrorism-related offenses was five years in 2017.<sup>35</sup> The average increased to seven years in 2018.<sup>36</sup> By comparison, the average sentence for criminal offenses related to the Islamic State in the United States in mid-2019 stood at 13.5 years in prison.<sup>37</sup> Yet, while E.U. countries have the resources, capabilities, and practical experience required to develop and implement prison-based rehabilitation and post-incarceration aftercare programs—including employment assistance and socioeconomic incentives—that is not the case in the Western Balkans. Uneven progress has been made to date toward putting in place any meaningful rehabilitation and reintegration programs for returning foreign fighters, women, or minors.<sup>38</sup> Although detailed strategies and action plans have been drafted across the region, inadequate allocation of funding has hampered their implementation and impact.<sup>39</sup>

Another concern related to foreign fighter returnees is the likeli-

<sup>p</sup> According to information issued by Kosovo judicial authorities and obtained by the author as of March 2019, Kosovan authorities have successfully prosecuted and sentenced 73 returning foreign fighters and 33 individuals found guilty for recruiting, providing support, and engaging in terrorist activities domestically. Of the 106 convicted individuals, 42 had been released after serving their sentence.

hood that some may have returned to the region with the assistance of support networks without being detected by the authorities, or at least have been able to evade them for some time. An alleged Kosovo-born Islamic State recruiter and a U.S. permanent resident at the time of travel to Syria in 2013, relocated to Bosnia and Herzegovina in January 2017 using fake travel documents. He was able to hide in Sarajevo for about six months using numerous fake identities before being arrested, at which time he was reportedly found in possession of passports from six countries.<sup>40</sup> He was extradited to the United States in October 2017 where he has been indicted. While the purpose of his relocation to Bosnia and Herzegovina remains unclear, he could face a life sentence in the United States if found guilty.<sup>41</sup>

In another case, a former Islamic State foreign fighter of Kosovo citizenship was arrested in February 2019 by the Albanian customs authorities while attempting to board a ferry to Italy using a forged North Macedonian passport. In January 2017, a court in Kosovo had sentenced him to two years and six months in prison, but the police had been unable to locate him following the completion of the trial until he resurfaced in Albania.<sup>42</sup> Both of these cases illustrate the ability of these returning foreign fighters to evade law enforcement authorities, travel and relocate abroad, and obtain travel documents under false identities. In other cases, returnees under house arrest absconded and returned to Syria.<sup>43</sup> All the above is unlikely to have happened without the logistic and financial assistance of support networks with criminal connections.

## Part Two: Examining the Scope and Significance of the Homegrown Jihadi Pool

The unprecedented jihadi mobilization wave of the last decade in the Western Balkans may have been sudden in its manifestation, but it did not occur in a vacuum.<sup>44</sup> As such, the foreign fighters are only the most visible manifestation of a wider phenomenon of religious militancy in the Western Balkans, the size and threat of which is not easily measured. Numerous counterterrorism operations resulting in hundreds of arrests, convictions, and various foiled terrorist attacks have revealed the instrumental role of well-integrated radicalization, recruitment, and mobilization networks organized around salafi enclaves, ‘unofficial’ mosques, and a variety of faith-

based charities, movements, and associations run by local fundamentalist clerics and religious zealots.<sup>45</sup>

In essence, observed radicalization and mobilization patterns are similar to those elsewhere in Europe, where known salafi organizations like Sharia4Belgium, Millatu Ibrahim, and Die Wahre Religion have been heavily linked to foreign fighter flows to Syria and Iraq. In 2015, for example, a court in Belgium found 45 members of the salafi organization Sharia4Belgium guilty of sending fighters to Syria and other terrorist-related offenses.<sup>46</sup> In 2016, Germany banned Die Wahre Religion (The True Religion) known for its proselytizing campaign “*Lies!*” (Read!) that was also active in the Balkans—about 140 of the group’s supporters are known to have traveled to Syria and Iraq.<sup>47</sup> One key difference, nonetheless, is that in the Western Balkans, the proliferation of ultraconservative organizations with political agendas was enabled by the post-Balkans conflict environment, where these entities were able to exploit societal vulnerabilities and rifts, mixing humanitarian aid with salafi indoctrination and militantism.<sup>48</sup>

While the contingent of Western Balkans foreign fighters is only the most visible manifestation of the terrorist threat in the region, questions abound as to the size of the less visible component of the problem: the contingent of radicalized individuals that has often provided ideological, logistical, or financial support to foreign fighters and at times has been responsible for plotting terrorist attacks. In a way, terrorism-related arrests and failed plots make some aspects of this problem set more visible. Although no official data exists for these countries, data and trends observed elsewhere in European countries may provide a general indication of the possible size of the problem in the Western Balkans.

According to a report on the terrorist threat in France presented to the French Senate, as of March 2018 the French intelligence services had identified 1,309 French nationals or residents who had traveled to Syria and Iraq since 2012.<sup>49</sup> The same report indicated that as of February 2018, the “Fichier de traitement des Signalements pour la Prévention de la Radicalisation à caractère Terroriste,” (FSPRT) a database used by French security services to monitor and assess the magnitude of the domestic terrorist threat posed by Islamist extremists,<sup>q</sup> had 19,725 “active profiles/entries” of radicalized individuals, 4,000 of which considered “particularly dangerous.”<sup>50</sup> In France therefore, the number of radicalized individuals considered to pose a potential national security threat is about 15 times higher than the number of known foreign fighters.

Similarly, the British MI5 has over the years identified 23,000<sup>51</sup> onetime jihadi extremists living in the United Kingdom, 3,000 of whom were the focus of 500 ongoing terrorism investigations or

monitoring operations in early 2017.<sup>5</sup> By comparison, the number of reported British foreign fighters in July 2017 stood at about 850,<sup>52</sup> making the number of the homegrown jihadi—posing either a residual or active national security threat—about 27 times higher than the number of foreign fighters.

It is very possible the divergence between the French and United Kingdom ratios is because the FSPRT list and the MI5 list are based on different criteria. But based on the similar trends observed in France and the United Kingdom regarding the much larger size of the homegrown jihadi population relative to the foreign fighter contingent, it would not be inconceivable to assume at least a 15:1 homegrown jihadi to foreign fighter ratio in the Western Balkans context.<sup>t</sup> Nevertheless, it is important to emphasize that methodologies for measuring terrorist radicalization and national security threat differ from country to country. Also, while similar in some ways, jihadi radicalization trends are not uniform across countries as they result from the interplay of a variety of socio-political, historical, and ideological variables that are largely country and region specific.

Two other indicators point to the existence of a robust and ideologically committed contingent of jihadi militants operating in the Western Balkans: the persistent activities of ‘social media jihadis’ who openly support and disseminate the ideology and propaganda of terrorist organizations, and the unprecedented number (as far as the region is concerned) of both foiled terrorist attacks and arrested homegrown terrorists in recent years. Following the clampdown on accounts disseminating jihadi content by Facebook, local ‘social media jihadis’ have partially migrated over the past years to other social media platforms such as the messaging application Telegram, which has a relatively less aggressive content removal policy.<sup>u</sup>

Research conducted for this assessment on the week of March

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- s This contingent of 23,000 individuals is considered by the authorities to pose different levels of security risk. Following the May 22, 2017, Manchester Arena bombing the United Kingdom’s Security Minister Ben Wallace announced that 3,000 “subjects of interest” were the focus of 500 active terrorism investigations whereas 20,000 “former subjects of interest” who were previously investigated were considered to constitute a residual risk. It is likely that some of the previously investigated individuals no longer pose a threat. Yet, the Manchester Arena bomber, Salman Abedi, was a “former subject of interest,” which exemplifies the challenge of accurately assessing the level of threat posed by each subject of interest. For more on this, see Raffaello Pantucci, “Britain on Alert: The Attacks in London and Manchester and the Evolving Threat,” *CTC Sentinel* 10:7 (2017).
- t The 15:1 projection is based on the smaller homegrown jihadi to foreign fighter ratio per available information in the case of France; the projection would be higher if the ratio of the United Kingdom is applied. It should be pointed out that due to the very dynamic nature of terrorist radicalization, the databases of radicalized individuals considered to pose a potential terrorist threat may contain false positives but also miss cases of terrorist radicalization. In the case of France, according to a recent study by GLOBSEC, about 80 percent of the individuals behind 22 terrorist incidents were on terrorist watchlists. The rest were not previously known to the authorities. See Ken Dilanian, “Report: Nearly all terror attacks in France carried out by suspects already known to police,” NBC, January 6, 2019. A more precise assessment of the actual size of the pool of radicalized individuals posing a potential national security threat in the Western Balkans would require more specific research.
- u This migration of Western Balkans ‘social media jihadis’ to Telegram followed a broader trend shift of the Islamic State and other terrorist groups’ communication strategy worldwide. For more on this, see Bennett Clifford and Helen Powell, “Encrypted Extremism, Inside the English-Speaking Islamic State Ecosystem on Telegram,” George Washington University’s Program on Extremism, 2019.

q Editor’s note: FSPRT contains only radical Islamists, while the Fiches S (another list maintained by French authorities) includes other types of threats to the national security. FSPRT is specific to Islamist radicalization. Jean-Charles Brisard communication to this publication, July 2019.

r These 4,000 individuals categorized as “particularly dangerous” met at least one of the following criteria: demonstrated a strong desire (verified instead of assumed) to travel abroad to wage jihad; had a proven link to a terrorist activity or network; and/or were reported as a dangerous Islamist radical.



11, 2019, identified 27 active (not requiring membership) Telegram channels/pages in the Albanian language and 6,352 subscribers/accounts that followed one or more of these pages operated by militants and/or fighters of the Islamic State (13 channels), HTS (six channels), or generic jihadi supporters (eight channels).<sup>v</sup> The content circulated through these channels focused on promotion of jihad; sharing news bulletins from official media channels of jihadi organizations operating in various conflict theaters; salafi literature; sermons of local and foreign salafi clerics generally imprisoned for terrorism-related activities; propaganda videos and infographics; and jihadi *nasheeds*.<sup>w</sup>

While in the past couple of years there has been a drop in jihadi media output in Western Balkans' languages,<sup>x</sup> an avid cadre of committed 'social media jihadis' continue to engage regularly with audiences online, disseminate jihadi propaganda, recruit, incite violence, and even plot attacks. In late 2017, a court in Kosovo sentenced an Islamic State supporter to one year and six months in prison for using social media platforms to incite attacks against Kosovan government institutions and foreign embassies.<sup>53</sup> A few months later, another Islamic State supporter, the sibling of a Kosovan Islamic State suicide bomber, received a sentence of 200 hours of community service for inciting vehicular attacks via social media.<sup>54</sup> In October 2018, they were both found guilty on additional charges, the first for attempting to enlist support and funding for a suicide attack and the other for not reporting the case to the police.<sup>55</sup>

Terrorist plots have been successfully disrupted by counterterrorism operations in the past three years in Kosovo, Albania, North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia. In a 2016 foiled plot involving an advanced Islamic State-directed plan to carry out simultaneous attacks in the region, including one on the Israeli national soccer team visiting Albania, nine Kosovan citizens were found guilty.<sup>56</sup> According to the prosecution, one of the perpetrators had previously fought in Syria and some of the plotters were taking directives on the attack from their compatriots in leadership positions within the Islamic State.<sup>57</sup>

v The total number of subscribers to the 27 channels may not necessarily represent unique individuals/followers.

w Despite efforts by Telegram to suspend these channels, they are quickly reactivated by their administrators under slightly different names. Hundreds of subscribers would follow the reactivated channels within a short time. During the timeframe of monitoring, despite fluctuations, the number of channels and subscribers remained roughly the same. In the same timeframe, the active Facebook account of an ethnic Albanian foreign fighter posting from Syria had 1,150 followers, while the account of another ethnic Albanian returned and incarcerated Islamic State foreign fighter had over 2,700 followers.

x This trend observed by the author may have resulted from a number of reasons, including the aggressive policies adopted by social media platforms and the decimated capacities of Islamic State media outlets.

In 2015, two soldiers were killed in the capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina by an armed Islamist gunman who blew himself up after carrying out the attack. Notes glorifying the Islamic State were found in his house.<sup>58</sup> In June 2018, Kosovan authorities reportedly foiled another attack targeting NATO forces stationed in Kosovo.<sup>59</sup> One of the plotters was arrested previously for attempting to travel to Syria and another one was expelled from Italy.<sup>60</sup> The latest foiled attack was reported in North Macedonia on February 15, 2019, where the police arrested 20 alleged Islamic State supporters.<sup>61</sup>

In sum, some returnees from Syria and Iraq have reportedly been involved in terrorism-related activities and found in possession of illegal firearms and explosives upon their return.<sup>62</sup> Yet, the foiled terrorist plots have largely involved individuals not known to have traveled to Syria and Iraq, although in many cases they were related to or associated with known foreign fighters. Judging from this perspective, the homegrown jihadis have so far been a more significant source of domestic security threat than foreign fighters.

## Conclusions

This assessment has found that the presence of Western Balkans foreign fighters currently active in Syria and Iraq is likely at the lowest point since 2012 and the remaining contingent of about 500 individuals is made up for two-thirds by minors and women. While already the region with the highest concentration of returning foreign fighters in Europe, additional repatriations are bound to compound the Western Balkans' long-term social and security challenge further.

In light of the sizable wave of returnees from Syria and Iraq, special attention and resources should be dedicated to assessing, monitoring, and actively countering the robust jihadi networks in the region. The considerable numbers of terrorism-related arrests, convictions, and foiled attacks in the Western Balkans clearly indicate that the countries of the region have stepped up their CT efforts in response to a heightened terrorist threat. Yet, unless adequately augmented, scarce resources and capacities will likely continue to hamper the scope and effectiveness of these efforts. Prison sentences that are not matched by substantive prison-based rehabilitation and post-incarceration supervision and support efforts are unlikely to duly mitigate the social and security risks posed by returnees and homegrown terrorist offenders.

Policy makers should consider proactively adjusting national security responses to the demographic shifts observed in the composition of the remaining Western Balkans contingent in Syria, currently dominated by noncombatants. The "children of the Caliphate," including those from the Western Balkans, will likely represent a long-term challenge with national security implications. As such, there is a strong case for prioritizing efforts addressing this complex challenge. **CTC**

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# Returnee Foreign Fighters from Syria and Iraq: The Kosovan Experience

By Kujtim Bytyqi and Sam Mullins

**Drawing upon the first author's position within the Kosovo Security Council Secretariat and utilizing internal government reports and statistics, this article provides an overview of the Kosovan experience dealing with returnee 'foreign fighters' from Syria and Iraq. So far, at least five returnees have been involved in planning domestic attacks, thus reaffirming academic analyses and recent reports suggesting that it is a minority of returnees who present an immediate terrorist threat. Nevertheless, a small number of returnees remain highly radicalized and are both willing and determined to attack at home. The Kosovan approach to managing this risk is discussed, to include challenges and lessons learned.**

As of mid-2019, there are still around 2,000 alleged foreign fighters and close to 14,000 foreign women and children being held in overcrowded detention camps in Syria.<sup>1</sup> Naturally, there is widespread concern that these individuals may present a significant threat to national security. Consequently, many countries—most notably those in Western Europe—have been reluctant to bring their citizens home and appear to be delaying the repatriation process as long as possible. In contrast to this, others, including Russia, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkey, and Kosovo, have taken a more proactive approach in facilitating the return of large numbers of mostly women and children.<sup>2</sup>

Drawing upon the first author's position on the Kosovo Security Council Secretariat, which grants him unfettered access to government officials and returned foreign fighters and their families alike, this article seeks to shed light on the Kosovan experience dealing

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with returnees from Syria and Iraq. The article begins with a brief overview of Kosovar foreign fighter activities, followed by an examination of those who returned home between 2013 and 2018, and those who were repatriated in April of this year. In the final section, the discussion focuses on challenges and lessons learned from trying to manage the risk associated with these individuals.

## The Foreign Fighters

Between 2012 and 2015 a total of 355 Kosovars—consisting of 256 men, 52 women, and 47 children—are believed to have traveled to Syria and Iraq.<sup>a</sup> (See Table 1.) This is one of the highest per capita rates of 'foreign fighter' outflows<sup>b</sup> anywhere in the world. Forty-five percent of these individuals left Kosovo before the Islamic State declared its caliphate in June 2014. To begin with, they joined the Free Syrian Army, Jabhat al-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham, or Kataib al-Muhajirin and were largely focused on the overthrow of Assad.<sup>3</sup> However, the majority of those who stayed subsequently transitioned to the Islamic State. Those who traveled after the declaration of the caliphate (which, along with an increasing amount of jihadi propaganda, was translated into Albanian) mostly joined the Islamic State directly.

**Table 1. Foreign fighters from Kosovo, 2012–2019<sup>t</sup>**

	Men	Women	Children	Total
Total travelers	256	52	47	355
Children born in Syria	N/A	N/A	76	76
Killed	92	6	1	99
Still in Syria	40	8	42	90
Returned home	124	38	80	242
Involved in domestic terror plots	5	0	0	5
Successfully prosecuted	85	0	0	85

a Note that another 76 children were born to Kosovan parents in the conflict zone, bringing the total number to 431. On top of this figure, an additional 30 men, eight women, and two children have been prevented from traveling. Data provided by the Kosovo Police Counter-Terrorism Department.

b This term will be loosely defined here as individuals who traveled to Syria and Iraq and joined with militant organizations such as the Islamic State, regardless of their activities or status within the conflict zone.

By far, the most prominent Kosovar to join the fight in Syria was Lavdrim Muhaxheri, who is previously said to have worked at NATO bases in Kosovo and Afghanistan before radicalizing and traveling to the warzone in 2012.<sup>5</sup> Muhaxheri first stepped into the spotlight in October 2013 after appearing in an Islamic State recruitment video posted on YouTube in which he called on Albanian Muslims to join the fight against Assad and other “infidels.”<sup>6</sup> He went on to appear in grisly execution videos and became the leader of a group of Albanian Islamic State fighters, while maintaining a fairly prolific presence on social media.<sup>7</sup> Together with another high-profile Islamic State leader from Kosovo named Ridvan Haqifi, Muhaxheri played an important role in promoting the Islamic State in the Balkans and facilitating travel to Syria.<sup>8</sup>

Not content with encouraging others to follow in their footsteps, Muhaxheri and Haqifi turned their attention to inciting attacks at home. In June 2015, Haqifi appeared in an Islamic State video in which he warned that “black days” were coming to Kosovo. “You will be frightened and terrified in your dreams as you sleep,” he declared. “We will kill you with the permission of Allah. We will come with explosive belts.”<sup>9</sup> The following year, police arrested 19 individuals on suspicion of planning attacks against targets in Kosovo, as well as a soccer match between Albania and Israel that was scheduled to take place in the city of Shkodër, northwest Albania, in November 2016. It soon transpired that the group, which was in possession of more than 2.5 kilograms of explosives, was being jointly coordinated from afar by Muhaxheri and Haqifi.<sup>10</sup> Both men are now believed to be dead,<sup>11</sup> but thanks to their seniority and prominence both as instigators and facilitators they surely left an indelible mark on the foreign fighter phenomenon in Kosovo. In particular, by going beyond merely issuing threats to actually orchestrating a major attack plot, they helped transform it from a movement that initially was very much externally focused to one that also presented a significant threat at home.

### The Returnees (2013–2018)

By 2018, 132 Kosovars who went to Syria (37% of the total) had returned home, consisting of 120 men, six women, and six children. The majority of this cohort made their way back from Syria prior to 2015, with only a handful returning in 2016 and 2018, respectively (thus marking the end of the first wave of returnees).<sup>c</sup> Although authorities in Kosovo have chosen not to prosecute women or children, most of the adult males (71% of those who returned by 2018) have been charged, convicted, and imprisoned on terrorism-related offenses (more on this later).<sup>d</sup>

Returnees have displayed a range of different attitudes toward authorities, along with varying levels of continued commitment to jihadi groups and ideological concepts (including acceptable use of violence against ‘enemies’ of Islam, and the relative importance attached to establishing a ‘true’ Islamic State). Many appear to be genuinely disillusioned and repentant, particularly those who returned home during the early stages of the conflict in Syria and Iraq. Albert Berisha, for example, went to Syria in October 2013. There, he came into contact with Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State before

joining with Ahrar al-Sham but quickly became disillusioned by widespread in-fighting within the Syrian opposition and returned home after just nine days. Although convicted in Kosovo for membership in a terrorist organization, he insists this was never his intention and together with another Kosovar returnee named Liridon Kabashi, he established the Institute for Integration, Security and Deradicalization (INSID), an NGO dedicated to the rehabilitation and reintegration of former foreign fighters.<sup>12</sup> However, regardless of their views on groups like the Islamic State, few returnees appear to accept that their actions should be punishable under law. As one returnee remarked, “I went there [to Syria] for purely humanitarian reasons. I wanted to help people and contribute with my warfare experience. That’s not a crime.”<sup>13</sup> Similarly, many believe that being imprisoned is an added hindrance to their (future) reintegration.<sup>14</sup> Accordingly, there is considerable resentment of the government of Kosovo.

More concerning still are those who continue to adhere to violent, extremist ideologies and have adopted an overtly hostile stance toward prison authorities and the state. ‘Abu Albani,’ who first traveled to Syria in 2013 while still in his early twenties, refused to cooperate with the deradicalization program in prison, and appeared to strengthen his commitment to the Islamic State, despite having become disillusioned with them while in Syria. When interviewed several months after his release, he remained deeply resentful of the government of Kosovo (even though it helped him to get a job) and was also openly supportive of terrorism and violence as a means to achieve a “true” Islamic State.<sup>15</sup>

Of course, showing signs of radicalization and actually following through on such sentiments are two different things. Nevertheless (as indicated in Table 1), at least five returnees so far have been accused of planning attacks. In November 2013, police arrested a total of six individuals in Pristina and Gjilan on suspicion of planning domestic attacks. Reportedly linked to Jabhat al-Nusra, two members of the group, Ardian Mehmeti and Genc Selimi, had recently returned from fighting in Syria.<sup>16</sup> Worryingly, the men were in possession of a sniper rifle, handguns, and explosive-making material and were in the process of trying to acquire additional weapons from undercover police officers at the time of their arrest.<sup>17</sup> The leader of the group, Mehmeti, was eventually convicted and sentenced to seven years’ imprisonment, while Selimi—who was the only member of the group convicted of an additional charge of inciting hatred and disunity—received a term of four years and six months.<sup>18</sup>

In a second case uncovered in July 2015, counterterrorism police arrested a group of five men in possession of a Kalashnikov rifle, military uniforms, masks, and an Islamic State flag near Badovc Lake in the Gollak mountains, not far from the nation’s capital.<sup>19</sup> Again, two of those arrested had formerly fought in Syria. Besnik Latifi had been there twice, returning most recently in April 2014, while Gazmend Halili had returned to Kosovo a month later.<sup>20</sup> Because Badovc Lake is one of the main sources of drinking water for Pristina, it was initially thought that the men had been planning to poison the city’s water supply or perhaps destroy the dam. Although prosecutors soon realized that there was no evidence to support this particular theory, the group was still initially convicted of plotting domestic attacks.<sup>21</sup> Just six weeks prior to the group being arrested, Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi had called on Muslims to either “migrate to the Islamic State or fight in his land wherever that may be.”<sup>22</sup> In court, it was shown that the men were planning

c No returnees from Syria and Iraq are known to have come back to Kosovo in 2017. Information obtained by first author as part of professional duties.

d For adult males who could not be prosecuted, this was mainly due to lack of evidence.

to record a video declaring an oath of allegiance to al-Baghdadi, in preparation for which they had written a script swearing “obedience and adherence... accepting every sacrifice.”<sup>23</sup> Ultimately, this was all that could be proven, and following a retrial, the suspects were sentenced to between three-and-a-half and four-and-a-half years in prison for “attempted incitement for terrorist acts.”<sup>24</sup> Despite being unable to prove more serious allegations in a court of law, prosecutors remain convinced that attacks of some sort were in the pipeline.<sup>25</sup>

The third and final case—the aforementioned plot to attack international targets in Kosovo and a soccer match between Albania and Israel—provides the clearest example of attack planning by returnee foreign fighters in Kosovo to date. As already noted, the plot was orchestrated from overseas by Muhaxheri and Haqifi using Telegram. Muhaxheri had even sent €1,350 to help finance the operation.<sup>26</sup> Additionally, at least one and possibly two members of the group in Kosovo were also veterans of the war in Syria. Lulzim Gashi initially admitted that he had been there, and although he later retracted this, according to the prosecution, he had fought for Jabhat al-Nusra for a period of two weeks.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, although it has not been proven in court, Kosovar authorities suspect that the leader of the group, Visar Ibishi—who was the key point of contact for Muhaxheri—had likewise been to Syria.<sup>28</sup> In recognition of their lead roles, a judge in Pristina sentenced Ibishi to 10 years in prison, while Gashi was jailed for six.<sup>29</sup> Their co-defendants received sentences of between one-and-a-half and five years, while a final member of the group was merely fined.<sup>30</sup>

Fortunately, none of these plots came to fruition. They nevertheless demonstrate that a small number of returnees remain highly radicalized and are both willing and determined to attack either at home and/or the Balkan region. In the case of Latifi and Halili, both men had been arrested shortly after returning to Kosovo but were released due to lack of evidence and were clearly undeterred by this experience.<sup>31</sup> It was also more than a year after their return that the conspiracy developed and was uncovered (largely, it seems by chance), thus demonstrating that threats may take time to unfold and may not be immediately detectable. It is also noteworthy that the handful of returnees who engaged in domestic attack plots appear to have had considerable recruitment power and acted as leaders, bringing with them important skills as well as connections to Islamic State cadres overseas.

Of course, five or six individuals from 124 (adult male) returnees represents less than five percent of the total number of foreign fighters who spent time in Syria and Iraq and returned to Kosovo thus far. According to the estimation of the first author of this article (who is responsible for monitoring the implementation of Kosovo’s National Strategy on Prevention of Violent Extremism and Radicalisation Leading to Terrorism), approximately 87% of male returnees are low risk, nine percent are medium, and four percent are high.<sup>e</sup> If this is accurate, it is indeed only a small minority of returnees who are likely to plan and attempt attacks. Nevertheless, the fallout from even one successful terror attack conducted

in Kosovo by a local foreign fighter who traveled to Syria and/or Iraq would be highly significant, especially given that Kosovo has not experienced this type of event before. Moreover, it is extremely difficult to identify *which* specific individuals are most likely to become violent and *when* they might act.

### The Repatriated (April 2019)

Very few foreign fighters returned to Kosovo from 2016 through 2018. Then in April 2019, the government of Kosovo—assisted by the United States—repatriated 110 of its citizens (four men, 32 women, and 74 children) who were being held in Kurdish detention camps in Syria. When these more recent cases are added to the first wave of returnees, the total number of individuals rises to 124 adult males, 38 adult females, and 80 children who are now back in Kosovo from Syria. (See Table 1.) These 242 individuals amount to 56% of the overall total of 431, including children born in the conflict zone. The recently repatriated men were placed in detention immediately upon arrival, pending prosecution. Meanwhile, the women and children were initially held at an asylum center near Pristina for a period of 72 hours. During this time, they were given medical examinations and assessments of psychological and other needs. Many were judged to be exhibiting symptoms consistent with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and depression.<sup>32</sup> Following this initial assessment, women and children were allowed to return home together, with the women being subject to house arrest (initially for one month but since extended for all cases).<sup>33</sup>

Repatriated women and children continue to receive support from the Division for Prevention and Reintegration, which was specially created by the government of Kosovo for this purpose and is composed of officials from the Ministry of Internal Affairs, Ministry of Health, and Ministry of Education, as well as social workers, psychologists, local level representatives, community police, religious experts, and others.<sup>34</sup> As part of the approach to preparing the children for reintegration, they are being given additional classes and assistance to help them catch up in the hope that at least some will be ready for the new school semester in September 2019.<sup>35</sup> Here it is important to note that of 74 children (all from the 2019 repatriation), 54 are under the age of six, which it is hoped will give them a better chance to (re)integrate back into society. On the other hand, those who are older and have never been to school before are expected to be more problematic to work with.<sup>36</sup> Women, too, are given special educational classes as deemed appropriate and supported financially by way of vouchers for food, clothing, and other necessities, which are provided by an international NGO.<sup>37</sup>

In addition to the various forms of support that they are given, both women and children are also monitored by law enforcement.<sup>38</sup> While none of the earlier and much smaller cohort of female returnees (who did not receive the same level of assistance) has been charged with terrorism-related crimes, it is nevertheless recognized that a potential threat exists, particularly among those who stayed in Syria for longer periods of time. Moreover, authorities have substantial evidence indicating that some recently repatriated women were indeed part of the Islamic State, meaning that prosecutions are now a far more likely prospect than in the past and criminal trials of female returnees can be expected.<sup>39</sup>

e Note that this is roughly comparable to data released by the Belgian Coordination Unit for Threat Analysis (OCAD), which stated that 75% of male returnees, and 90% of females, had distanced themselves from radical ideas. See Guy van Vlierden, “Teruggekeerde Syrië-strijders zijn de grootste zorg niet meer,” *De Morgen*, January 15, 2019.

## Managing the Risk: Challenges and Lessons Learned

As already noted, Kosovar authorities have taken a fairly aggressive approach to prosecuting adult male returnees, most of whom have been convicted of terrorism-related offenses under the criminal code.<sup>40</sup> Although lack of evidence from the conflict zone has sometimes proven to be a problem, the rate of prosecution is relatively high (almost 70% of all adult male returnees, compared to an overall rate of about 10% in the United Kingdom.<sup>41</sup>). It should also be noted that in 2015 (by which time the bulk of returnees had already come home), Kosovo enacted a new law prohibiting its citizens from joining armed conflicts outside of state territory. Besides direct participation in extraterritorial conflict, the law criminalizes organizing, recruiting, and financing, as well as encouraging, leading, or training others for “the aim of joining or participating in a foreign army or police ... [or] in any other form of armed conflict outside the territory of the Republic of Kosovo.”<sup>42</sup> Since this does not depend upon definitions or designations of terrorism, this law may increase the chances of successful prosecution in the future, including of female returnees.

That being said, imprisonment also comes with certain drawbacks, most notably the added resentment that it creates among returnees, plus the added stigma associated with having a criminal record, which may reduce the chances of successful reintegration. Moreover, despite the fact that some terrorism offenses in Kosovo carry prison terms of up to 20 years, most sentences that have been handed down are for a period of less than five years.<sup>8</sup> In fact, by mid-2019, half of the imprisoned returnees had already been released. Of the 85 returnee foreign fighters who have so far been prosecuted, the average prison sentence is 3.5 years.<sup>43</sup> This has serious implications for rehabilitation efforts within the prison system and, therefore, also for reintegration post-release. Systematic efforts by the Ministry of Justice to rehabilitate terrorist inmates in Kosovo only began in March 2018.<sup>44</sup> As a result, there has been insufficient time to implement tailored rehabilitation and reintegration programs, which have been put in place for just 18 of 43 returnees released from prison.<sup>45</sup> As noted above, some of these individuals remain highly radicalized (though none so far have been involved in planning attacks).<sup>46</sup>

Families and members of local communities have posed an additional set of challenges. In some cases, family members also hold extremist beliefs and may have negative influence over imprisoned or recently released returnees.<sup>47</sup> There are also some families and community members who have effectively disowned their extremist relatives or friends and do not want them to return home, leaving the individuals in question bereft of social support. As one returnee complained, “I have lost contact with aunts and uncles whom I used to bring together in the past. They distanced from me after the me-

dia covered my story [facilitation of terrorist activities in Kosovo] continuously for five straight days. They say I brought shame to the family.”<sup>48</sup> It is up to the Division for Prevention and Reintegration, and those who support its work, to manage such issues by engaging with communities as well as returnees themselves.<sup>49</sup>

On a more positive note, families have also proven to be valuable partners and often play an important role in the reintegration process. In recognition of this, the government of Kosovo, assisted by international donors, has been providing financial assistance to the families of returnees as well as those who were killed or are still in Syria.<sup>h</sup> This has generated a tremendous amount of goodwill, including among still imprisoned returnees, some of whom were so grateful that their families were being taken care of that they approached officials to ask if there was anything they could do in return.<sup>50</sup>

## Conclusion

Although it is still too early to assess comprehensively either the threat that returnees from Syria and Iraq pose or the measures that the government has put in place to manage it, the Kosovan experience thus far still provides a valuable point of reference. In particular, this is because a relatively large number of foreign fighters are already back in the country and because the government has been very proactive, both in terms of repatriating citizens detained in Syria and implementing risk-management strategies. This stands in contrast to most other countries, which have not experienced the same level of mobilization relative to population size, have not been faced with such a high proportion of returnees, and have generally been reluctant to bring their citizens home.

In terms of the threat, the experience in Kosovo seems to confirm both academic analysis and recent reporting from other countries dealing with returnees from Syria and Iraq, which suggest that it is only a small minority of these individuals that are likely to plan terrorist attacks in the short-term (and this risk may diminish as time goes on).<sup>51</sup> As already noted, however, the threat is still significant and will continue to evolve. Furthermore, Kosovan authorities still do not have a good idea of how many individuals continue to play non-violent support roles—in particular, spreading the ideology that sustains groups like the Islamic State—which may unfold over a much longer period of time. This is particularly true regarding female returnees.

In terms of response, it seems that the Kosovan approach to investigations and prosecutions has thus far been successful, judging by the high rate of convictions in Kosovo compared to countries such as the United Kingdom. More detailed comparative analysis is needed to determine exactly why this has been the case. Moreover, looking beyond the number of prosecutions, it is unclear how effective this approach really is, given that imprisonment has generated substantial resentment against the Kosovan state, including among low-risk returnees.<sup>52</sup> Low sentencing also remains a problem and has stymied efforts to rehabilitate foreign fighters in prison and reintegrate them back into society. This highlights the need for better understanding of the sometimes contradictory relationship between punitive and rehabilitative measures, which should ideally be planned and implemented as part of a coordinated package that takes both individual needs and institutional capacity into account.

f Of course, this does not necessarily automatically imply that one system is better than the other. Different prosecution rates between countries are due to a complex set of factors, including different laws, procedures, and guidelines concerning what can be produced as evidence at trial. It is beyond the scope of this article to delve further into these issues.

g As noted earlier, leaders of attack plots do tend to receive longer sentences, but even these are often reduced on appeal. The longest sentences for terrorism offenses in Kosovo have been handed out not to returned foreign fighters or attack plotters, but to influential recruiters such as Imam Zeqerija Qazimi. Labinot Leposhitica, “Kosovo Jails Hard-line Imam for 10 Years,” *BalkanInsight*, May 20, 2016.

h As with female returnees, this assistance comes in the form of monthly vouchers.

Additional challenges experienced on release—particularly those of either extremist, or unforgiving, family members and communities—further increase the complexity of the reintegration process and must be carefully assessed and managed.<sup>53</sup> This calls for a holistic approach to managing the risk associated with returnees from Syria and Iraq that deals not only with the individual returnee, but their immediate and wider social environment as well. Finally, there is the need to be pragmatic, as evidenced by the added trust and goodwill that has been gained by providing returnees and their families with limited (non-monetary) financial support. By itself, this does not provide a solution, but it seems it can be effective as part of a multi-faceted approach—particularly in countries such as

Kosovo where unemployment is high.

All of the challenges highlighted in this article are ongoing, and Kosovo does not presume to have all of the answers. Indeed, many of the efforts described are still in their infancy, and the country faces a host of additional hurdles to overcome, not least of them limited financial resources and institutional capacity. With this caveat in mind, this article represents a modest contribution to the literature on returnee foreign fighters from Syria and Iraq, the challenges that they pose, and some of the policy options available for managing the threat. Others who are grappling with similar issues can hopefully learn from this and will perhaps also be motivated to share their own experience. **CTC**

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# Maduro's Revolutionary Guards: The Rise of Paramilitarism in Venezuela

By Ross Dayton

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**The government of Nicolas Maduro has increased its reliance on armed non-state actors as Venezuela's political and economic crisis deepens. Paramilitarism developed under Maduro and his predecessor, Hugo Chávez, as a result of the erosion of the military, expansion of corruption and criminal networks in the government, and the devolution of state power to local loyalist groups. Colombian guerrillas have developed ties with the Venezuelan government and armed 'colectivo' groups as they expand into Venezuelan territory. As a result, the Colombian guerrillas have taken over state functions in parts of the country and have a vested interest in supporting the Maduro regime. Expansion into Venezuela has enabled the Colombian guerrillas to carry out attacks in Colombia and withstand blows from Colombian security forces, which could undermine future prospects for peace negotiations.**

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**A**rmed non-state actors are propping up Nicolas Maduro's government as Venezuela faces the worst political, economic, and humanitarian crisis in the Western Hemisphere. International news media have highlighted the role of *colectivos*, a catch-all phrase for armed pro-government civilian groups,<sup>1</sup> using lethal force against civilian protesters. According to the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the *colectivos* were key contributors to the killing of 5,287 people by the pro-government forces in 2018.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to the *colectivos*, Colombian left-wing guerrilla groups such as the National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional, or ELN), the Popular Liberation Army (Ejército Popular de Liberación, or EPL), and former members of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia, or FARC) are expanding their presence in Venezuela, forging close ties with the Maduro regime and pro-government groups, and recruiting Venezuelans into their ranks.<sup>3</sup> The expansion of Colombian guerrillas' networks in Venezuela bolsters them to carry out attacks in Colombia, as illustrated by the ELN's car bomb attack on the General Santander National Police Academy on January 19, 2019, which Colombian authorities labeled a

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“terrorist act.”<sup>4</sup> The Colombian guerrillas' ideological affinity and transnational criminal networks with pro-government forces in Venezuela effectively make them paramilitary groups with a vested interest in supporting the Maduro regime.

Paramilitarism arose in the early years of Hugo Chávez's presidency (1999-2013).<sup>5</sup> Chávez set the stage for paramilitary groups to ensure that he and his “Bolivarian Revolution” would remain in power. This article outlines how from the beginning of his presidency, Chávez eroded the hierarchy of the military, bolstered loyalist militant structures that run parallel to traditional military and political institutions, and allowed transnational criminal networks to expand within the government. The article also outlines how Maduro (2013-present) has reinforced these practices to remain in power as the national crisis worsened.<sup>6</sup> The development of the *colectivos*, a main component of Venezuelan paramilitarism, and their relationship with the government is also analyzed. Finally, the ties between the Venezuelan government and Colombian guerrillas and the implications of Venezuelan paramilitarism for regional security are discussed.

## Defining Paramilitarism

Defining the term “paramilitary” can be difficult due to the informal usage of the term and varying academic definitions. Paramilitary groups exist across different countries, ideologies, and systems of government. Julie Mazzei, a U.S.-based researcher on paramilitary groups, defines paramilitaries in the Latin American context as “political, armed organizations that are by definition extra-military, extra-State, non-institutional entities, but which mobilize and operate with the assistance of important allies, including factions within the State.”<sup>7</sup> Mazzei further adds that “paramilitaries are offensive, not defensive in nature; their very purpose is to eliminate those who are perceived as threatening the socioeconomic basis of the political hierarchy.”<sup>8</sup> Paramilitarism can be considered as the “sub-contracting” of the state's monopoly of violence to non-state actors.<sup>9</sup> In Venezuela, the groups that exemplify this definition of paramilitarism are the *colectivos*, the Colombian guerrilla groups present in Venezuelan territory, and other pro-government armed groups.

Paramilitarism is often considered as a sign of state weakness, with localized groups taking over state functions in areas that have been neglected.<sup>10</sup> However, states with strong militaries also employ paramilitary groups; paramilitary groups can use irregular tactics not used by conventional security forces and create plausible deniability for human rights abuses and war crimes.<sup>11</sup> In authoritarian regimes, paramilitaries can provide an effective means of conducting surveillance over their civilian populations and repressing political dissidents.

Paramilitarism has been common in contemporary Latin American history. Throughout the Cold War, governments in the region often employed paramilitary groups to fight left-wing insurgents. Chávez received inspiration for paramilitary groups from Pana-

ma's Dignity Brigades (local civilian militias trained in insurgent tactics).<sup>12</sup> Right-wing paramilitaries in Colombia with close ties to political and economic elites fought against the anti-government guerrillas.<sup>13</sup> The paramilitaries have often targeted social activists and community leaders and have drawn funds from illicit trafficking.<sup>14</sup> After the United Self-Defense Groups of Colombia (Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia, or AUC), the country's largest coalition of right-wing paramilitary groups, was disbanded in 2006, many paramilitary groups continued operating illegally and financing themselves through transnational criminal activities.<sup>15</sup> In Nicaragua, *turbas sandinistas*—armed pro-government civilian groups that closely resemble Venezuela's *colectivos*—have been repressing protesters and targeting dissidents since mass protests against Daniel Ortega's government began in 2018.<sup>16</sup>

**Table 1: Acronyms**

AUC	Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (United Self-Defense Groups of Colombia)
CDR	Comités de Defensa de la Revolución (Committees for the Defense of the Revolution)
CLAP	Comité Local de Abastecimiento y Producción (Local Supply and Production Committee)
CTR	Comando Táctico de la Revolución (Tactical Command for the Revolution)
ELN	Ejército de Liberación Nacional (National Liberation Army)
EPL	Ejército Popular de Liberación (Popular Liberation Army)
FAES	Fuerzas de Acciones Especiales (Special Action Forces)
FARC	Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia)
FBL	Fuerzas Bolivarianas de Liberación (Bolivarian Liberation Forces)
GNB	Guardia Nacional Bolivariana (Bolivarian National Guard)
OHCHR	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
PDVSA	Petroleos de Venezuela
PNB	Policía Nacional Bolivariana (Bolivarian National Police)
PSUV	Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela (United Socialist Party of Venezuela)
SEBIN	Servicio Bolivariano de Inteligencia Nacional (Bolivarian National Intelligence Service)

## The Erosion of the Military and the Proliferation of Criminal Networks

In Venezuela, the erosion of military institutions through politicization and corruption under Chávez and Maduro helped lay the groundwork for paramilitarism.<sup>17</sup> Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, the Venezuelan military regularly intervened in domestic

politics.<sup>18</sup> Fears among “*Chavistas*”<sup>a</sup> that the military would oust Chávez and his “Bolivarian Revolution” from power were almost realized in the 2002 coup attempt.<sup>19</sup> Additionally, a politically independent military may resist orders, as demonstrated when Chávez ordered the military to put down mass demonstrations prior to the 2002 coup attempt.<sup>20</sup> Increasing corruption and politicization within the military not only ensured its loyalty to Chávez's government, but also weakened the military's ability to deter the creation of parallel armed groups that can counterbalance it and carry out extrajudicial activities on the regime's behalf.<sup>21</sup>

After winning the presidency in 1998, Chávez promoted a “civic-military union” that would integrate the armed forces into society and his broader political project.<sup>22</sup> Chávez passed “Plan Bolívar 2000” in 1999, which put the military in charge of various social and economic programs and gave military officials more political influence and greater access to public funds.<sup>23</sup> Military officers were both promoted to higher ranks and appointed to public offices based on loyalty to Chávez's party, the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela, or PSUV), while dissident senior officers were discharged.<sup>24</sup> The military command structure became more dispersed as the number of regional and local command centers grew.<sup>25</sup> As a result, the military's leadership would, by 2019, balloon to “as many as 2,000 admirals and generals... as much as twice the top brass as the U.S. military – more than 10 times as many flag officers as existed when Chávez became president.”<sup>26</sup> Like his predecessor, Maduro further expanded the appointments of military officers to public office positions, including to the state oil company Petroleos de Venezuela (PDVSA).<sup>27</sup>

As part of his vision of the civic-military union to make “every soldier a citizen and every citizen a soldier,” Chávez promoted incorporating the populace into a “Bolivarian National Militia.”<sup>28</sup> Chávez claimed that this militia would be integral to defending the nation and the Bolivarian Revolution from foreign powers, especially the United States.<sup>29</sup> Maduro claimed that the Bolivarian Militia had 1.6 million soldiers as of December 17, 2018.<sup>30</sup> However, members of the militia are, for the most part, not professionally trained soldiers; militia members featured in training videos are often civilians of middle and senior age.<sup>31</sup> Local militia branches are often informally incorporated into local *colectivo* groups as *colectivo* members are often enlisted into their ranks.<sup>32</sup> Militia members also allegedly help the regime conduct intelligence and counterintelligence on the general population.<sup>33</sup>

Criminal networks within the armed forces proliferated under Chávez and Maduro.<sup>34</sup> These networks, often collectively referred to as the “*Cartel de los Soles*” (Cartel of the Suns), first became public in 1993 when two National Guard generals were investigated for their involvement in drug trafficking.<sup>35</sup> Since then, top military and government officials have become actively involved in drug traffick-

a “*Chavismo*” is a catch-all phrase for ideologies and policies inspired by Hugo Chávez. Chávez promoted his political movement as a “Bolivarian Revolution,” named after Venezuela's founding father Simon Bolívar, with the aim of building “21st century socialism” in Venezuela. Chávez implemented social welfare programs to support the lower classes and spewed highly critical rhetoric against the United States. The Maduro regime claims to continue the legacy of *Chavismo*. Supporters of Chávez and Maduro are often called “*Chavistas*.” Rory Carroll, *Comandante: Myth and Reality in Hugo Chávez's Venezuela* (London: Penguin Press, 2013), pp. 150; Katy Watson, “Venezuela Crisis: Why Chavez's followers are standing by Maduro,” BBC, March 4, 2019.

ing and other forms of illicit financing.<sup>36</sup> Senior military officers and government officials have built relationships with Venezuelan and Colombian drug trafficking organizations, including *colectivos*, Colombian guerrillas, and other transnational criminal organizations.<sup>37</sup>

### Devolution of Power to Communal Organizations and the ‘Colectivos’

The devolution of state authority to local community organizations empowered paramilitary groups throughout Venezuela, including the *colectivos*. Venezuelan paramilitarism takes a strong inspiration from Cuba’s Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (Comités de Defensa de la Revolución, or CDRs) and the Rapid Response Brigades. The CDRs, in theory, are grassroots communal organizations meant to encourage openness and public participation in local governance.<sup>38</sup> In practice, the CDRs serve as the eyes and ears of the Castro government and maintain surveillance on dissidents.<sup>39</sup> The Rapid Response Brigades, local militias consisting of members of the Cuban Communist Party and its controlled social organizations, are deployed alongside regular Cuban security forces to repress protesters.<sup>40</sup> However, the *colectivos* and other Venezuelan paramilitaries differ from the CDRs and Rapid Response Brigades in having greater autonomy from the state, less formal organization, and more pronounced criminal characteristics.<sup>41</sup>

Chávez’s government supported community organizations for social outreach and to devolve state functions to local levels. In 2001, Chávez established the “Bolivarian Circles” in order to build grassroots support for his movement. The Bolivarian Circles provided social services and allow local communities to address socio-economic and political concerns.<sup>42</sup> Additionally, the Bolivarian Circles had a direct line of contact to the Presidential Office for requesting resources.<sup>43</sup> Chávez’s opponents immediately compared the Bolivarian Circles to Cuba’s CDRs.<sup>44</sup>

Pro-Chávez leaders allegedly provided the Bolivarian Circles with arms to attack anti-Chávez protesters before and during the 2002 coup attempt.<sup>45</sup> The Tactical Command for the Revolution (Comando Táctico de la Revolución, or CTR) was formed in response to growing anti-Chávez protests; among the CTR leadership was Freddy Bernal, then mayor of Caracas and an important organizer of the Bolivarian Circles.<sup>46</sup> As protests outside of the Miraflores Presidential Palace grew, General Manuel Rosendo, the commander of the Venezuelan military at the time, received word from Captain Michael O’Byrne, Rosendo’s personal assistant, and Vice Admiral Bernabé Carrero that Bernal had been ordered by the Minister of Defense to arm Bolivarian Circles members with rocks, sticks, and knives to intimidate protesters.<sup>47</sup> As protesters marched toward Miraflores, hundreds of Chávez supporters and Bolivarian Circle members gathered alongside National Guard troops assembled for Chávez’s defense.<sup>48</sup> Video footage from April 11, 2002, shows known Chávez supporters and members of the Bolivarian Circles firing pistols at protesters with live ammunition from Llaguno Bridge.<sup>49</sup> A total of 19 people were killed during the events of that day.<sup>50</sup>

The Bolivarian Circles became the basis for what are now called *colectivos*, a term originally used for left-wing urban guerrillas in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>51</sup> In 2006, the *colectivos* were incorporated into communal councils, local institutions meant to serve as grassroots alternatives to municipal and state governments.<sup>52</sup> Despite

their stated democratic intent, the communal councils were tied to the central government and often became rife with political favoritism and corruption.<sup>53</sup>

The term “*colectivo*” refers to *Chavista* armed groups that vary in terms of size, organization, methods of operating, and arsenals.<sup>54</sup> Many *colectivos* trace their origins to events before Chávez’s rise to power, such as left-wing insurgencies and urban guerrilla movements in the 1960s.<sup>55</sup> *Colectivos* often espouse far left-wing ideologies that are more militant than the PSUV’s party line.<sup>56</sup> Many *colectivo* leaders are members of security forces and often commit crimes in the open with impunity.<sup>57</sup>

*Colectivo* groups often preside over entire neighborhoods in the place of state authorities.<sup>58</sup> The 23 de Enero neighborhood in Caracas, an emblematic *Chavista* stronghold, is controlled by up to 46 *colectivo* groups.<sup>59</sup> The abolition of the Caracas Metropolitan Police in 2011 left the *colectivos* as the de facto authorities in many neighborhoods.<sup>60</sup> The *colectivos* provide social services and control economic life in the communities over which they preside.<sup>61</sup> The Colectivo Alexis Vive in 23 de Enero has even issued its own currency in order to deal with national hyperinflation.<sup>62</sup> The *colectivos* raise funds through criminal means, including drug trafficking, gambling, extortion, kidnapping, and selling scarce supplies on the black market.<sup>63</sup>

Security forces and *colectivos* often operate jointly. Video footage of anti-Maduro protests from 2014 to 2019 regularly show the Bolivarian National Guard (GNB) and Bolivarian National Police (PNB) allowing *colectivos* to physically assault and fire live ammunition at protesters with impunity.<sup>64</sup> *Colectivos* have also worked alongside the Special Action Forces (Fuerzas de Acciones Especiales, or FAES), a PNB unit notorious for extrajudicial killings and other human rights violations.<sup>65</sup> In addition to repressing protesters and dissidents, the *colectivos* also worked alongside security forces in Operation Popular Liberation (Operación Liberación del Pueblo), a series of police raids in urban centers throughout Venezuela since July 13, 2015, meant to combat crime that have resulted in civilian massacres and human rights violations.<sup>66</sup>

Despite their support for the Maduro government, *colectivos* still maintain autonomy from the PSUV and have even taken action at times to oppose it. Indeed, many *colectivo* members are openly critical of Maduro’s handling of the nation’s crisis.<sup>67</sup> In 2010, the Movimiento Revolucionario Carapaicas (simply known as the Carapaicas)—one of the most well-armed *colectivos* in Caracas—released a video accusing the government of deviating from the Bolivarian Revolution and called on Chávez to dissolve the government and military.<sup>68</sup> Tensions between the *colectivos* and security forces came to a head in October 2014 when several *colectivo* members and leaders were killed in police raids.<sup>69</sup> Multiple *colectivos* called for the

b The Movimiento Revolucionario Tupamaro (often simply referred to as the Tupamaros) is a Marxist-Leninist *colectivo* that dates its founding back to 1979. The Colectivo La Piedrita, which is notorious for its violent attacks on political dissidents and the press, was founded in 1985 in order to combat crime in 23 de Enero. “The Devolution of State Power: The ‘Colectivos,’” InSight Crime, May 18, 2018.

c A notable example of the *colectivos* operating alongside the FAES was the raid against Venezuelan rebel leader Óscar Pérez, in which Heiker Vázquez, a leader of the Colectivo Tres Raíces from 23 de Enero, was killed. Giancarlo Fiorella and Aliaume Leroy, “We are going to surrender! Stop shooting!”: Reconstructing Óscar Pérez’s Last Hours,” Bellingcat, May 13, 2018.

resignation of the Minister of the Interior and head of Bolivarian National Intelligence Service (Servicio Bolivariano de Inteligencia Nacional, or SEBIN) as a result of the incident.<sup>70</sup> Maduro placed Freddy Bernal in charge of police reform to help quell tensions.<sup>71</sup>

Bernal has remained one of the most influential PSUV figures among the *colectivos* since 2002. As the head of the Local Supply and Production Committee (Comité Local de Abastecimiento y Producción, or CLAP), Bernal coordinates food distribution with local *colectivos*.<sup>72</sup> Bernal is also a commissioner in the SEBIN.<sup>73</sup> Appointed as “protector” of the state of Táchira on the Colombian-Venezuelan border in 2018, Bernal founded the “Border Security Colectivo.”<sup>74</sup> On February 23, 2019, members of the *colectivo* shot at civilians with live rounds in San Antonio del Táchira to prevent humanitarian aid from crossing the border from Colombia.<sup>75</sup>

### Colombian Guerrillas as Venezuelan Paramilitaries

The proliferation of Colombian guerrillas in Venezuela is a development of paramilitarism under Chávez and Maduro. Despite the government’s official denials of any relationship, the Colombian guerrillas have built close political, ideological, and criminal ties with the military, government officials, and *colectivo* groups, allowing them to operate throughout Venezuela with little impediment.<sup>76</sup> Venezuela gives Colombian guerrillas sanctuary from Colombian security forces as well as opportunities for illicit financing and recruitment.<sup>77</sup> In return, the Colombian guerrillas have a vested interest in supporting the Maduro regime and may act to defend it if needed. Indeed, the ELN has already claimed that it is ready to come to Maduro’s defense from foreign intervention.<sup>78</sup>

Colombian guerrillas provide several advantages to the Maduro regime as paramilitary forces. Having spent decades operating along the porous Colombian-Venezuelan border,<sup>79</sup> the Colombian guerrillas have access to transnational criminal networks in the region and extensive know-how for illicit trafficking. The Colombian guerrillas also have more combat experience and are better organized than paramilitaries of Venezuelan origin.<sup>80</sup> Their expertise in guerrilla warfare tactics can enhance the capabilities of domestic pro-government groups. Colombian guerrillas have allegedly provided training for multiple Venezuelan armed groups. FARC computers confiscated in 2011 revealed that the FARC provided military training to hundreds of members of the Carapaicas, Tupamaros, and the Bolivarian Liberation Forces (Fuerzas Bolivarianas de Liberación, or FBL).<sup>81</sup> d According to the Táchira-based human rights NGO “Fundación Redes,” FARC dissidents have joined and are commanding the Border Security Colectivo.<sup>82</sup> e

**Table 2: The most prominent Venezuelan paramilitary groups and known locations**

Name	Entity Type	Known Locations in Venezuela
ELN	Colombian guerrilla	The states of Táchira, Zulia, Apure, Trujillo, Anzoátegui, Lara, Falcón, Amazonas, Barinas, Portuguesa, Guárico, Bolívar, and Delta Amacuro <sup>83</sup>
FARC dissidents	Colombian guerrilla	The states of Táchira, Zulia, Apure, Trujillo, Lara, Falcón, Amazonas, Barinas, Portuguesa, Guárico, and Bolívar <sup>84</sup>
EPL	Colombian guerrilla	The State of Táchira <sup>85</sup>
FBL	Domestic pro-government guerrilla	The states of Táchira, Zulia, and Apure <sup>86</sup>
Movimiento Revolucionario Tupamaros	Colectivo	In Caracas (State of Libertador): 23 de Enero, Sucre (Catia) <sup>87</sup>
La Piedrita	Colectivo	In Caracas (State of Libertador): 23 de Enero, Sucre (Catia), San Juan, El Paraíso, Santa Rosalía, San Agustín <sup>88</sup>
Alexis Vive	Colectivo	In Caracas (State of Libertador): San Jose, Santa Teresa, Santa Rosalía <sup>89</sup>
Tres Raíces	Colectivo	In Caracas (State of Libertador): 23 de Enero, Sucre (Catia) <sup>90</sup>
Border Security Colectivo	State-created colectivo	The states of Táchira, Zulia, and Apure <sup>91</sup>

**Note:** There are *colectivo* groups present across 16 states in Venezuela (Miranda, Aragua, Carabobo, Lara, Portuguesa, Yaracuy, Falcón, Mérida, Trujillo, Táchira, Zulia, Sucre, Guárico, Bolívar, Monagas, and Anzoátegui); *colectivos* control up to 10 percent of all urban towns and cities nationwide. Therefore, the *colectivo* groups listed are not necessarily limited to Caracas. See “The Devolution of State Power” and Patricia Torres and Nicholas Casey, “Armed Civilian Bands in Venezuela Prop Up Unpopular President,” New York Times, April 22, 2017.

The ELN is reportedly present in up to 13 Venezuelan states.<sup>92</sup> Colombian guerrilla groups and the FBL employ approximately 15,000 Venezuelans along the Colombian border.<sup>93</sup> In addition to illicit trafficking, the ELN has forcibly taken over illegal mining operations from local criminal groups with the support of the government, including operations in the mineral-rich “Orinoco Mining Arc.”<sup>94</sup> Colombian guerrillas actively recruit Venezuelans who are often desperate for food and income. According to Colombian military officials, up to 30 percent of guerrillas in eastern Colombia and 10 percent nationwide are estimated to be of Venezuelan origin.<sup>95</sup>

d The FBL is an armed pro-government militia based near the Colombian border that models itself after Colombian guerrillas. The group first gained notoriety in the 1990s by carrying out assassination attempts on allegedly corrupt public officials. However, the FBL has supported *Chavismo* since 1998 and has not fought against the Chávez or Maduro governments. “FBL/FPLN,” InSight Crime, July 15, 2019.

e Freddy Bernal, who founded the Border Security Colectivo, is sanctioned by the U.S. government for facilitating arms sales between the Venezuelan government and the FARC in 2011, demonstrating the nexus between the Venezuelan government, the *colectivos*, and Colombian guerrillas. “Treasury Designates Four Venezuelan Officials for Providing Arms and Security to the FARC,” United States Department of the Treasury, September 8, 2011.

The ELN established five radio stations in Venezuela to promote its ideology and conducts outreach at Venezuelan schools in order to attract young recruits.<sup>96</sup>

In some areas in Venezuela, guerrillas have reportedly taken over functions of the state. The ELN taxes local residents and businesses in areas it controls for protection from local criminal groups.<sup>97</sup> The ELN also provides local communities with weapons, political education, military training, and food supplies.<sup>98</sup> Fundación Redes found that Colombian guerrillas distribute food supplies through the government's CLAP program in 39 municipalities.<sup>99</sup> The ELN often enforces its rules ruthlessly to keep local communities under its control, including conducting executions for petty crimes and consuming drugs and alcohol.<sup>100</sup> Local community leaders who opposed the ELN have also been killed.<sup>101</sup> Multiple massacres in mining towns have been attributed to the ELN and its quest for territorial expansion in Venezuela.<sup>102</sup>

## Conclusion

Paramilitarism in Venezuela will have long-lasting consequences for the entire region. Transnational criminal networks will continue operating throughout Venezuela with the Maduro government and its paramilitary groups acting as intermediaries. As tensions with Colombia and the United States grow, the Maduro government may provide greater support to Colombian guerrillas under its auspices. The crisis in Venezuela also increases the risk of armed groups obtaining coveted weapons and military equipment, including the 5,000 Russian Igla-S portable anti-air missile systems that the Venezuelan military has stockpiled.<sup>103</sup>

The expanded sources of revenue and recruits from Venezuela enable the ELN and other Colombian guerrillas to escalate attacks on Colombian targets and withstand the brunt of Colombian se-

curity forces, as exemplified by the ELN's car bomb attack on the General Santander National Police Academy in Bogotá on January 19, 2019.<sup>104</sup> The Domingo Laín Front, the powerful ELN division responsible for the attack, operates between the border of the Colombian Department of Arauca and the Venezuelan State of Apure.<sup>105</sup> Colombian intelligence believes that the Domingo Laín Front's leadership is headquartered in Apure.<sup>106</sup> Additionally, the suicide bomber in the Bogotá attack is alleged to have taught bomb-making skills to other ELN members in Venezuela.<sup>107</sup> Former FARC members disillusioned with the Colombian peace process and FARC dissident militias are turning to Venezuela as a refuge.<sup>108</sup> Therefore, Colombian guerrilla activity in Venezuela will continue to frustrate future peace negotiation attempts and counterterrorism efforts in Colombia.

Uprooting paramilitary groups will pose a significant challenge for any post-Maduro government. Indeed, many pro-government groups have sworn to start insurgencies if *Chavismo* is removed from power.<sup>109</sup> Venezuela ranks the lowest in Latin America on the AS/COA and Control Risks' Capacity to Combat Corruption Index in terms of legal capacity as well as democratic and political institutions.<sup>110</sup> With weak and heavily politicized institutions, the ties between paramilitaries and security forces will not disintegrate quickly or entirely. As the economic situation remains dire, it is unlikely that any government could take back control of all territories controlled by paramilitaries and provide the economic support and security that local communities need. While some paramilitaries may be willing to reach an agreement with a new government to disband, groups with stronger ideological convictions and deeper involvement in illicit financing will more likely remain resistant.

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