



COMBATING TERRORISM CENTER AT WEST POINT

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FEATURE ARTICLE

## The Future Threat of Synthetic Biology

J. KENNETH WICKISER, KEVIN J. O'DONOVAN, MICHAEL WASHINGTON, STEPHEN HUMMEL, AND F. JOHN BURPO

A VIEW FROM THE CT FOXHOLE

## Gilles de Kerchove

EU COUNTER-TERRORISM  
COORDINATOR

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## FROM THE EDITOR

The COVID-19 pandemic has renewed concerns over bioterror threats, with Microsoft founder Bill Gates recently warning that a bioterror attack involving a pathogen with a high death rate “is kind of the nightmare scenario” facing the planet. In this month’s feature article, J. Kenneth Wickiser, Kevin J. O’Donovan, Lieutenant Colonel Michael Washington, Major Stephen Hummel, and Colonel F. John Burpo assess the potential future threat posed by the malevolent use of synthetic biology. They write that synthetic biology “is a rapidly developing and diffusing technology. The wide availability of the protocols, procedures, and techniques necessary to produce and modify living organisms combined with an exponential increase in the availability of genetic data is leading to a revolution in science affecting the threat landscape that can be rivaled only by the development of the atomic bomb.”

The authors, who all serve at, or are affiliated with, the Department of Chemistry and Life Science at the United States Military Academy, note that synthetic biology has “placed the ability to recreate some of the deadliest infectious diseases known well within the grasp of the state-sponsored terrorist and the talented non-state actor” and that “the techniques used to propagate bacteria and viruses and to cut and paste genetic sequences from one organism to another are approaching the level of skill required to use a cookbook or a home computer.” They argue that “an effective response to the threats posed by those using synthetic biology for nefarious purpose will require vigilance on the part of military planners, the development of effective medical countermeasures by the research community, and the development of diagnostic and characterization technologies capable of discriminating between natural and engineered pathogens.”

In our interview, Gilles de Kerchove, the European Union’s longtime Counter-Terrorism Coordinator, speaks to Raffaello Pantucci. Nuno Pinto presents a detailed case study of an alleged Portuguese Islamic State network with strong connections to the United Kingdom that sheds significant light on the foreign fighter recruitment pipeline between Europe and Syria in the last decade. Tomasz Rolbiecki, Pieter Van Ostaeven, and Charlie Winter examine the threat posed by the Islamic State across Africa based on a study of its attack claims. They write: “As the second half of 2020 unfolds, it is critical that military and counterterrorism policymakers recognize what is at stake in Africa. The Islamic State is not just fighting a low-grade insurgency on the continent; in at least two countries, it has been able to seize and hold territory and subsequently engage in pseudo-state activities.”

Paul Cruickshank, *Editor in Chief*

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

*Cover: A picture taken in a laboratory shows a biohazard sticker on the entrance of a room. (Thomas Samson/AFP via Getty Images)*

# Engineered Pathogens and Unnatural Biological Weapons: The Future Threat of Synthetic Biology

By J. Kenneth Wickiser, Kevin J. O'Donovan, Michael Washington, Stephen Hummel, and F. John Burpo

**Recent developments in biochemistry, genetics, and molecular biology have made it possible to engineer living organisms. Although these developments offer effective and efficient means with which to cure disease, increase food production, and improve quality of life for many people, they can also be used by state and non-state actors to develop engineered biological weapons. The virtuous circle of bioinformatics, engineering principles, and fundamental biological science also serves as a vicious cycle by lowering the skill-level necessary to produce weapons. The threat of bioengineered agents is all the more clear as the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the enormous impact that a single biological agent, even a naturally occurring one, can have on society. It is likely that terrorist organizations are monitoring these developments closely and that the probability of a biological attack with an engineered agent is steadily increasing.**

**T**he COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated that significant biological threats can and will emerge from nature without warning, demonstrating that a single viral strain can have a profound impact on modern society. It has also demonstrated that infectious diseases can rapidly spread throughout a population without human engineering making them the ideal substrates from which to develop engineered weapons. Viruses and bacteria have been used as weapons for millennia.<sup>1</sup> Historically, biological weapons were derived from natural sources, such as anthrax from herbivores and domesticated animals, and smallpox from rodents. Those pathogenic organisms that were found to be suitable for weaponization were cultured directly from the environment; they were then isolated, purified, stored, propagated,<sup>a</sup> and used to fill biological munitions.<sup>2</sup> The most recent of example of this was the production and stockpiling of numerous agents by the biological weapons program of the former Soviet Union. In this program pathogens were selected for specific characteristics directly from the natural environment, propagated, and stored for later use.<sup>3</sup> While these pathogens have evolved in nature for the purpose of persisting, they are not optimized for maintenance, storage, and deployment in a military setting. Consequently, while biological agents have not been widely employed as strategic or tactical weapons by state or non-state actors, there are some examples of their use in conflicts. The most significant of these is the well-documented use of crude bacteriological agents by

the Japanese army against China during the Second World War.<sup>4</sup>

Recently, the convergence of advances in computer science, engineering, biological science, and chemistry have made it pos-

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*LTC Michael Washington currently serves as an Assistant Professor in the Department of Chemistry and Life Science at USMA. He has a PhD in Emerging Infectious Disease with an emphasis in Immunology from the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences.*

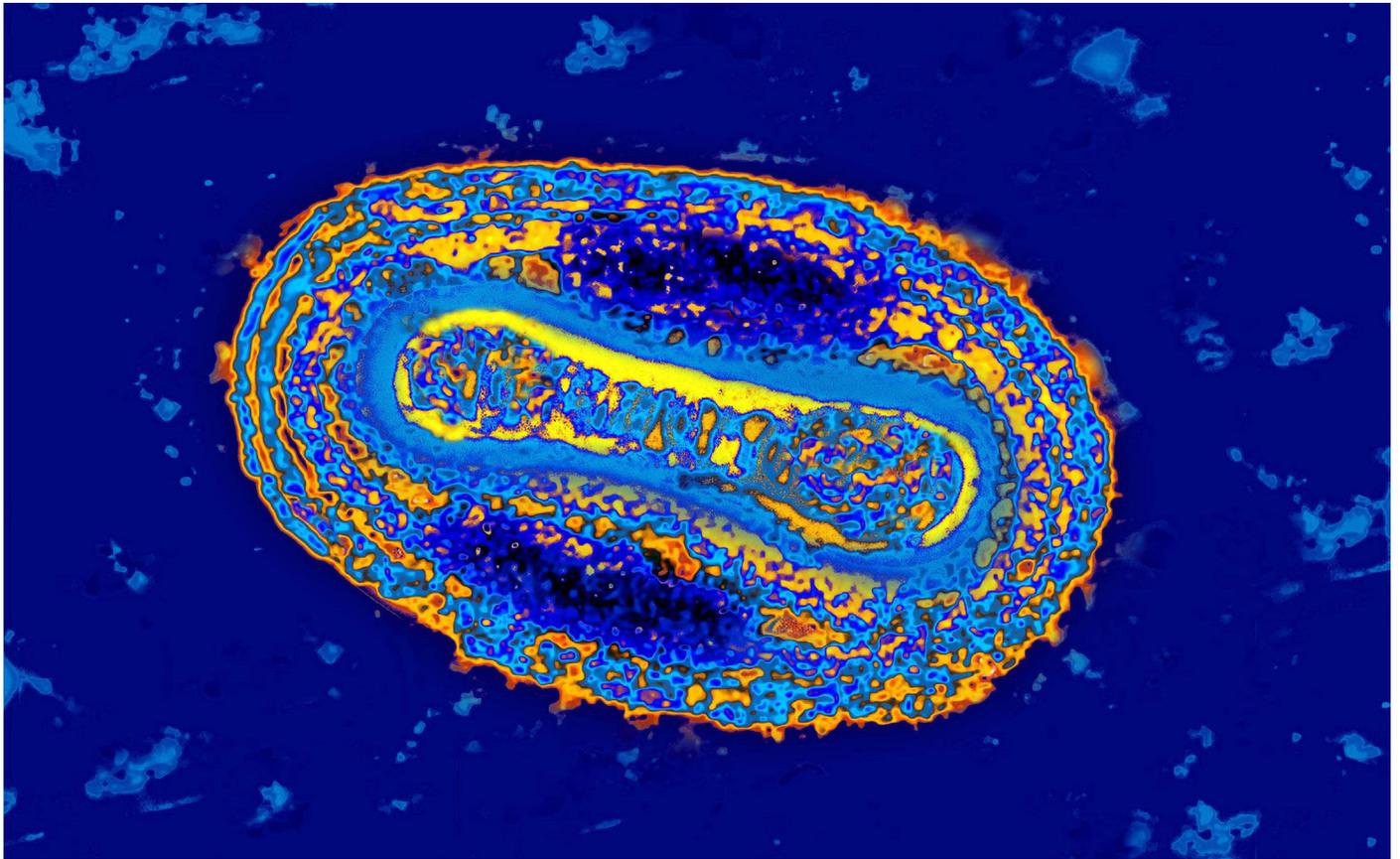
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*The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Combating Terrorism Center, United States Military Academy, Department of Defense, or U.S. Government.*

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a Propagation of bacteria means to provide nutrients so that the bacteria can reproduce and be maintained as a viable entity.



*Electronic Microscope X150000, Variola (Smallpox) virus (BSIP/UG via Getty Images)*

sible to engineer living systems to optimize growth and increase pathogenicity (the propensity to cause disease). This interdisciplinary approach to providing novel biological functionality has had a positive impact on the biotechnological and biopharmaceutical industries. At the same time, these engineered bacteria and viruses can be co-opted for belligerent purposes. Indeed, the use of designer biological weapons could theoretically give a state or non-state actor an asymmetric advantage over an adversary that favors conventional weapons.

Synthetic biology (SynBio) is the scientific discipline that encompasses all aspects of the engineering of biological systems.<sup>5</sup> Beginning with the discovery of the chemical structure of DNA<sup>b</sup> in the 1950s, SynBio tools such as recombinant DNA technology<sup>c</sup> and genome editing tools<sup>d</sup> have developed at a fast pace as the fundamental molecular mechanisms underlying biology are discovered. These SynBio tools are lowering the education, training, cost, time, and equipment threshold required to modify and employ pathogenic organisms as biological weapons. The asymmetric threat posed

by biological weapons will continue to increase as new tools and techniques are developed and as terrorist organizations become aware of and inspired by the society-wide economic, emotional, and government-destabilizing impacts caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>e</sup> Indeed, it can be argued that the total cost of this pandemic—including the loss of life and the stress to the economy—could be rivaled only by the deployment of an atomic bomb. Therefore, developments in SynBio should be continually monitored and reassessed within the context of technological change and its capacity to shift the geopolitical paradigm. In this article, the authors describe how biological systems' modular nature makes them amenable to engineering, the recent advances in synthetic biology, the impact of synthetic biology on the threat landscape, and the potential policy responses to the maturation of biotechnology in general, and synthetic biology in particular. This article has been developed using both primary and secondary literature sources recently published in peer-reviewed scientific papers.

b Deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA) is the genetic material in all living organisms whereas RNA can serve as the genetic material for some viruses.

c Recombinant DNA technology refers to widely employed techniques to manipulate DNA segments and, in the process, modify genes and organisms.

d Genome editing tools refers to several now widely utilized enzyme toolkits—e.g., TALEN (transcription activator-like effector nuclease) and CRISPR (clustered regularly interspaced short palindromic repeats)—to precisely modify viral, bacterial, and eukaryotic genomes to achieve a desired outcome.

e Juan Zarate, who served as Deputy National Security Advisor for Combating Terrorism from 2005 to 2009, recently noted in this publication that "the severity and extreme disruption of a novel coronavirus will likely spur the imagination of the most creative and dangerous groups and individuals to reconsider bioterrorist attacks." Paul Cruickshank and Don Rassler, "A View from the CT Foxhole: A Virtual Roundtable on COVID-19 and Counterterrorism with Audrey Kurth Cronin, Lieutenant General (Ret) Michael Nagata, Magnus Ranstorp, Ali Soufan, and Juan Zarate," *CTC Sentinel* 13:6 (2020).

## The Inherent Modularity of Biological Systems

Modularity is essential to the purposeful engineering of biological systems to create weapons. In general terms, modularity refers to the ability to replace or update a piece of equipment. For example, a set of interchangeable parts is what allows an individual to modify or optimize a complex piece of equipment, such as a home computer or an automobile. The genetic material (DNA or RNA) of any organism contains all of the information required for its proper functioning and is comprised of many modular components. Specific genes can be removed from one pathogen and inserted into another as a means of altering the activity of the recipient.<sup>6</sup> This modularity enables a measure of predictability of the effects on the complex network of genes when employing molecular engineering methods to insert a foreign gene into a host genome. For example, the modular nature of the non-pathogenic vaccine-strain of the poliovirus genome is what enables it to acquire pathogenicity genes from other viruses and revert to a pathogenic state (horizontal gene transfer).<sup>7</sup> It has been postulated that molecular modularity evolved as a natural genomic tool, allowing biological systems to rapidly adapt to changing environmental conditions.<sup>8</sup> While the process of a virus acquiring pathogenicity has been occurring naturally through horizontal gene transfer for as long as these biological agents have existed, the use of SynBio molecular engineering tools provides a pathway to purposeful and precise changes in genomes on fast timescales not found in nature. Modular genes can be mixed and matched to increase the speed with which organisms can evolve and adapt, producing the type of functionality required of a given environment and providing the organism with a selective advantage compared to its competitors. There is currently an effort underway to identify the minimal genome necessary for the survival of the simplest strain of bacteria.<sup>9</sup> Once it is determined what genes are necessary for survival and reproducibility in bacteria, it may be possible to swap-out non-essential genes for genes conferring any number of desired characteristics. An increased understanding of the modularity of biological systems will impact the fields of biosecurity and military medicine by providing a “molecular toolkit” which can be used for peaceful purposes or by adversaries to design and manufacture biological agents.

## Synthetic Biology Enables the Design and Development of Biological Weapons

In 1997, a team of accomplished scientists within a group known as the JASON<sup>f</sup> group met to discuss the future of biological warfare.<sup>10</sup> They identified six emerging biological threats that needed to be monitored by military planners and strategists: (1) the development of binary weapons,<sup>g</sup> (2) the construction of designer genes, (3) the use of gene therapy as a weapon, (4) the development of viruses that evade the immune response of the host, (5) the use of viruses that

f Founded in 1960, JASON is a group of American scientists dedicated to producing reports of value to the U.S. federal government. The organization's relationship with the Department of Defense changed in 2019 when the Assistant Secretary of Defense (Research & Engineering) (ASD (R&E)) cut ties with it. “Update: Legislator asks Pentagon to restore contract for storied Jason science advisory group,” *Science Magazine*, April 11, 2019.

g Binary biological weapons are organisms or biological products that are non-lethal when separated and only become lethal upon mixing the separate components together.

**“As the molecular engineering techniques of the synthetic biologist become more robust and widespread, the probability of encountering one or more of these threats is approaching certainty.”**

can move between insects, animals, and humans, and (6) the development of designer diseases. These threats were once considered to be futuristic and speculative. Advances in SynBio techniques, however, have moved many of these predicted contingencies from the realm of speculation into the realm of reality. As the molecular engineering techniques of the synthetic biologist become more robust and widespread, the probability of encountering one or more of these threats is approaching certainty.

The extent and impact of SynBio on future state-on-state conflicts and terrorist violence will increase as the tools and techniques of this discipline continue to mature and diffuse throughout the scientific community, as well as among the novice citizen-scientists in the do-it-yourself biology labs that have emerged around the world in recent years.<sup>11</sup> The ability to produce custom-designed bacterial and viral pathogens will enhance the ability of hostile state and non-state actors to develop and deploy relatively inexpensive and efficient biological weapons. Additionally, some of these weapons will likely be engineered with increased pathogenicity, environmental stability,<sup>h</sup> and the ability to withstand the shock of the rapid changes in temperature and pressure that may accompany delivery by explosive warhead. Below are several notable 21st century examples where scientists employed emergent SynBio techniques to rediscover or recreate pathogenic microorganisms.

In 2002, scientists from the State University of New York at Stony Brook chemically synthesized the complete poliovirus genome, highlighting the transformative potential of SynBio.<sup>12</sup> While this effort was accomplished by experienced professional scientists over the course of years in well-equipped laboratories, the playbook is now freely available and the tremendous advances in molecular engineering techniques since then have only reduced the complexity of this once-monumental effort. This achievement was followed by the first chemical synthesis of a much larger bacterial genome in 2008 and the development of an entirely synthetic cell in 2010.<sup>13</sup> The use of SynBio tools has endowed scientists with the ability to purposefully dissect the inherently complex series of coupled chemical reactions that compose fundamental cellular metabolism. These networks of reactions can be engineered using modular genes and molecular tools to enhance synthetically produced organisms with desired biochemical properties.<sup>14</sup> Significantly, by combining standard molecular and cellular laboratory techniques with cellular selection (or evolution) strategies, which are accomplished daily by high school and college students in biology classes and research competitions across the world, detailed knowledge of the nature of

h Environmental stability refers to the ability of a pathogen to survive outside of a host where it is exposed to UV light, reactive oxygen species, and other elements that could degrade or destroy the pathogen.

each chemical reaction is not required to achieve the desired outcome for the engineered biological agent.<sup>15</sup>

In 2005, a group of researchers from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC), the Mount Sinai School of Medicine, the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology, and the Southeast Poultry Research Laboratory reconstructed the 1918 pandemic influenza virus. This was a particularly striking example of how the modular nature of a viral genome could be used to manufacture a pathogen.<sup>16</sup> The reconstruction was performed by first determining the genomic coding sequences of the virus from lung tissue specimens obtained from pandemic victims who were preserved in permafrost.<sup>17</sup> The relevant DNA sequences were then inserted into a set of circular DNA strands known as plasmids, which were subsequently used to infect host human kidney cells. As predicted, fully functional and replicative viral particles emerged from the kidney cells. The pathogenicity of the reconstructed virus was evaluated in mice, ferrets, and non-human primates, and it was found that the 1918 influenza strain was significantly more lethal than modern strains.<sup>18</sup> It produced severe damage to the lungs, it stimulated an aberrant immune response, and it led to the development of high viral titers (levels of virus) in both the upper and lower respiratory tracts.<sup>19</sup> The reconstruction procedure was conducted in a standard molecular biology laboratory setting, and all the materials needed for the construction of this viral particle are present in many university biology laboratories. The methods that were employed are not beyond the means of the talented amateur and therefore not beyond the means of a dedicated, well-resourced terrorist organization.<sup>20</sup>

More recently in 2016, a small Canadian research group was successful in constructing infectious horsepox virus directly from genetic information obtained solely from a public database for the relatively modest sum of \$100,000 in U.S. currency.<sup>21</sup> Horsepox is a genetically distinct relative of the now extremely rare smallpox virus. Smallpox was once a highly feared pandemic disease that either permanently disfigured or ended the lives of millions of people worldwide. The same techniques used to construct horsepox can easily be adapted to construct smallpox with a minimal investment of time and money. SynBio has therefore placed the ability to recreate some of the deadliest infectious diseases known well within the grasp of the state-sponsored terrorist and the talented non-state actor.

The International Genetically Engineered Machine (iGEM) competition provides another striking example of the ease by which genetic engineering can be mastered at the undergraduate level.<sup>22</sup> The iGEM competition was initiated by a group of non-biologist researchers at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) who wanted to develop and use synthetic biology tools similar to the way electrical engineers use a breadboard<sup>i</sup> and a set of interchangeable and scalable parts such as resistors and capacitors. These scientists and engineers wanted to develop an easy-to-use system to genetically engineer bacteria by swapping genetic parts around to create unique genes and gene sets that produce novel and useful proteins and to force the organisms to perform tasks that they normally would not accomplish. At its heart, the iGEM competition is an agreed-upon set of molecular engineering techniques and a large

library of DNA parts that are accessed by the competitors in their bid to create novel cellular tools, biological circuits, and gene products. As the competition progressed over the years, the participants have taken advantage of nascent SynBio tools to improve the complexity of their designs. Today the sophistication of the high school and undergraduate student research projects has matched that of many highly trained personnel who were working in advanced laboratories less than a decade ago. While it has been claimed that the young student competitors directed by a responsible Principal Investigator are not truly independent,<sup>23</sup> it is important to note that the iGEM competition has a loose minimum age requirement,<sup>24</sup> so the high school students are inexperienced with lab procedures and have only a thin understanding of biology at the outset of the competition. Yet by the time these students defend their work at the Jamboree (international science fair held each fall), they have either attained a full understanding of the work or they are judged poorly. iGEM has helped democratize the science and engineering of biological systems for the benefit of mankind. The organization has dedicated significant resources to biosafety, bioethics, and biosecurity efforts<sup>25</sup> drawing from the expertise of leaders in academia and industry. Defense leaders need to take note of the spread of this information because both state and non-state actors with nefarious intent can benefit from the good work of these young scientists.

A case study in the dual-use nature of these activities can be found in the 2017 winning project. A team from Lithuania created a tool to improve the rate of inheritance of genetically altered sequences throughout generations of microbes. While this tool may eventually be used by thousands of researchers for peaceful purposes, there is a possibility that it could be harnessed to develop engineered biological weapons by rapidly altering the genomes of the starting material. The Lithuanian team was just one of 295 teams competing that year. There were 125 from Asia, 84 from North America, 74 from Europe, 10 from Latin America, and two from Africa. This competition and these technologies are truly global in nature, and while they are intended for peaceful and mutually beneficial purposes, the science and tools created may be manipulated by those with bad intentions.<sup>26</sup>

## The Impact of Synthetic Biology on the Threat Landscape

The threat landscape is constantly evolving as advances are made in materials, computational power and speed, and the bioengineering of viruses and cells. While there are challenges to weaponizing a biological system, including contending with the analog nature of biology, the advantages of bioweapons compared to relying on conventional explosives or nuclear weapons include their self-generating properties and the ease in creating a binary weapon allowing for safe production and assembly.<sup>27</sup> Thus, it is possible for an unsophisticated adversary to design biological weapons with enhanced virulence and infectivity. As already noted, one challenge to weaponizing a biological system is the analog nature of most metabolic circuitry (compared to the digital signals governing much of the electronic world). Further challenges are the presence of significant noise in the normal operation and response of these biochemical circuits and the difficulty in optimizing synthetic pathways while retaining the viability and reproducibility of the living system.<sup>28</sup> However, the use of natural selection techniques in the lab preclude the need for detailed rational design so that an amateur scientist member of a terrorist organization can simply employ SynBio tech-

i A breadboard is a base platform used in custom-designing electronic circuits. Resistors, capacitors, and other electrical engineering components are plugged into the breadboard to form a circuit to perform a desired function.

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**“The techniques used to propagate bacteria and viruses and to cut and paste genetic sequences from one organism to another are approaching the level of skill required to use a cookbook or a home computer.”**

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niques for a large number of cells and select those that perform to the desired effect.

Cells are the fundamental unit of life containing all the molecular architecture required to engage in metabolism (transfer energy), grow, adapt to their environment, respond to stimuli, reproduce, and evolve. Under the right conditions, cells will replenish and increase their numbers if there exists enough food and space. A scientist who has engineered a cell with novel properties can keep producing that system by simply feeding the cells, clearing out the waste products, and harvesting cells when desired. Cell-based systems have co-evolved with viruses that target very specific cell types using lock-and-key-like receptor proteins on both the virus and cell. While viruses rely on cells to reproduce, it is standard lab practice to produce significant quantities of viruses using their cognate cells [cells taken over by the viruses] as hosts. Unlike conventional weapons, biological weapon development requires all the work up front and then the system will reproduce and provide the bad actor with a supply of the weapon as long as the growth-permissive environment is maintained.

SynBio also facilitates the development of binary biological weapons. Although the design and production of binary biological weapons may have been difficult in the past, the ability to engineer and ‘boot-up’ entire genomes has revolutionized the process. With modern synthetic biology tools, an undergraduate student could conceivably engineer and produce two related, non-lethal viruses that are individually harmless. However, following host infection with the two viruses, mixing of the two strains allows for a full restoration and production of highly infectious, pathogenic viruses. Importantly, such genetic mixing has also been documented in nature wherein two or more non-pathogenic poliovirus vaccine strains can recombine to form pathogenic recombinants.<sup>29</sup> Thus, it is not difficult to imagine a non-state actor developing binary weapons consisting of components stored separately for safety in transport and then brought together in a biological munition prior to delivery.

The advances in SynBio have not occurred in isolation. The increase in the understanding of biological systems and the development of the tools of molecular biology that occurred in the late 20th and early 21st centuries were paralleled by commensurate developments in automation, engineering, computer science, and information technology. In particular, the ease of scaling-up the production of bacteria and viruses has increased exponentially in recent decades due to the availability of inexpensive instrumentation for the growth, or culture, of biological material, and the development of standardized reagents such as bacterial growth media by commercial laboratories.<sup>30</sup> Once the purview of scientists with doctorates in microbiology, genetic engineering is practiced every day in high schools and colleges across the world. The in-

structions, or protocols, for these processes are freely available on the internet and in undergraduate microbiology and cell biology textbooks. Many of the difficulties faced by early microbiologists and cell biologists in the culturing of microorganisms have lessened; indeed, many advanced placement biology programs in high schools across the United States include blocks of instruction on culturing and engineering *Escherichia coli* (*E. coli*) and other benign bacterial species.<sup>31</sup> Some authors have argued that the skills and abilities developed over the course of a career in the biological sciences are not available to the amateur and that this may hinder the widespread use of synthetic biology for the development of biological weapons.<sup>32</sup> While this argument may be true for some of the more complex techniques in biochemistry and molecular biology, the techniques used to propagate bacteria and viruses and to cut and paste genetic sequences from one organism to another are approaching the level of skill required to use a cookbook or a home computer. A vast amount of knowledge would be necessary to describe in detail the biochemistry, genetics, and physiology of baker’s yeast, but anyone with a cookbook, flour, yeast, and sugar can bake bread. Similarly, understanding the algorithms necessary to manipulate images on a computer screen requires expert knowledge, but anyone can point at an icon with a mouse to open it. As technology increases and spreads, those with a simple home laboratory system may be able to manipulate bacterial and viral genes without expert training or years of experience.

### **Policy Responses to the Potential Threats Posed by Synthetic Biology**

An effective response to the threats posed by those using synthetic biology for nefarious purpose will require vigilance on the part of military planners, the development of effective medical countermeasures<sup>j</sup> by the research community, and the development of diagnostic and characterization technologies capable of discriminating between natural and engineered pathogens. A 2002 biological warfare counterproliferation study identified six key basic biological research areas that should be emphasized to protect against the threat: human genomics; immunology and the development of methods for the boosting the immune response; bacterial and viral genomics; bacterial and viral assay development;<sup>k</sup> vaccine development; and the development of novel antiviral agents and antibiotics.<sup>33</sup> A continued research and education effort within the Department of Defense will be required to develop and maintain expertise in each of these areas.

The rapid availability of experienced civilian and military personnel is a prerequisite for effective incident response. Therefore, training and education in SynBio, biological engineering, and related disciplines should be emphasized and funded. Many organizations already exist to meet the threat of natural, man-made, and weaponized biological material. These organizations include the Defense Threat Reduction Agency (DTRA); the Chemical and

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j According to the U.S. government, “Medical countermeasures, or MCMs, are FDA-regulated products (biologics, drugs, devices) that may be used in the event of a potential public health emergency stemming from a terrorist attack with a biological, chemical, or radiological/nuclear material, or a naturally occurring emerging disease.” “What are Medical Countermeasures?” [fda.gov](https://www.fda.gov), accessed August 27, 2020.

k Viral and bacterial assay development refers to generating new methods for the rapid detection and identification of viral and bacterial pathogens.

**“The wide availability of the protocols, procedures, and techniques necessary to produce and modify living organisms combined with an exponential increase in the availability of genetic data is leading to a revolution in science affecting the threat landscape that can be rivaled only by the development of the atomic bomb.”**

Biological Center (CBC) at Edgewood, Maryland; the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA); the Biomedical Advanced Research and Development Authority (BARDA); the National Institutes of Health (NIH); the Centers for Disease Control (CDC); and United States Department of Agriculture-Agricultural Research Service (USDA-ARS) within the United States. The World Health Organization (WHO), a specialized organization within the United Nations, and several research and response organizations in other countries have historically served similar purposes. Each of these entities deal with systems rooted in the

natural world, and while some organizations restrict their focus to naturally occurring threats, they all deal—in one way or another—with the extraordinary pace of technology development unique to the biomedical community. Every advancement in biomedicine is dual-use, and so it is incumbent upon those privileged to work in the scientific field to predict the ways that these technologies might be used for nefarious purpose and to develop the technologies and systems necessary to undermine the efforts of those who might use these unique biological entities as weapons.

### Conclusion

SynBio is a rapidly developing and diffusing technology. The wide availability of the protocols, procedures, and techniques necessary to produce and modify living organisms combined with an exponential increase in the availability of genetic data is leading to a revolution in science affecting the threat landscape that can be rivaled only by the development of the atomic bomb. As the technology improves, the level of education and skills necessary to engineer biological agents decreases. Whereas only state actors historically had the resources to develop and employ biological weapons, SynBio is changing the threat paradigm. The economic and social impact of COVID-19 has highlighted the broad and lasting effects that can result from the spread of a novel biological agent. This collective experience has increased the chance that terrorist organizations will attempt to use biological agents to asymmetrically attack the United States and its allies. This possibility should be anticipated and planned for at all levels of government. **CTC**

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# A View From the CT Foxhole: Gilles de Kerchove, European Union (EU) Counter-Terrorism Coordinator

By Raffaello Pantucci

*Gilles de Kerchove has been the EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator since September 2007. From 1995 to 2007, he was Director for Justice and Home Affairs at the Council Secretariat. From 1999 to 2000, he was deputy secretary of the convention that drafted the charter of the fundamental rights of the European Union. Between 1986 and 1995, he worked for the Belgian government. He is also a European law professor at the Catholic University of Louvain, the Free University of Brussels, and the Université Saint Louis-Brussels, and has published a number of books and articles on European law and security issues.*

## CTC: What role does the European Union's Counter-Terrorism Coordinator play?

**De Kerchove:** The position was created by the Heads of State and Government in the wake of the 2004 Madrid bombings, and I am the second incumbent, having been in the job for 13 years. The aim is to contribute to the implementation and evaluation of the E.U.'s counterterrorism strategy as well as to ensure coordination between the various relevant policy strands. This implies, on the one hand, to support coherence between the E.U.'s internal and external counterterrorism (CT) policies and to foster better communication and cooperation between the E.U., third countries,<sup>a</sup> and international organizations such as U.N., NATO, IMF, WB, etc.; and, on the other, to present policy recommendations and propose priority areas for action to the European Council and to the Council,<sup>b</sup> informed by threat analysis and reports not least from INTCEN<sup>c</sup> and Europol.<sup>1</sup>

Heads of State and Government wanted someone to look into every aspect of CT and identify loopholes in cooperation, not only at the E.U. institutions level in Brussels, but also between Brussels and member states. Additionally, they wanted an independent voice to assess policy and inject new ideas as well as identify and anticipate problems. I have always tried to spot looming problems to allow the system to start to prepare. I think I was probably the

a Editor's note: Defined by the European Union as "a country that is not a member of the European Union as well as a country or territory whose citizens do not enjoy the European Union right to free movement."

b Editor's note: The European Council consists of "the heads of State or Government of the 27 EU Member States, the European Council President and the President of the European Commission" and "defines the EU's overall political direction and priorities." See <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/european-council/>. The 'Council' (full name: The Council of the E.U.) "is the institution representing the member states' governments. Also known informally as the EU Council, it is where national ministers from each EU country meet to adopt laws and coordinate policies." See <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/council-eu/>

c Editor's note: INTCEN is the EU Intelligence and Situation Centre, a central intelligence collection and assessment body that works with the European Union's foreign service, the European External Action Service (EEAS).

first to raise the issue of foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) within an E.U. context, and I presented a package of ideas as early as 2013. Now I am focusing on what I call the effect of disruptive tech and extremist ideology, but I will explain that later. Our goal in the EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator's office is to alert the system and come up with relevant policy proposals.

In doing so, I am engaging with many different communities (intelligence, law enforcement, criminal justice, diplomats, development, humanitarian, Defence, Finance, private sector, non-profit sector, academia) inside Europe with its 27 member states, close allies, international organizations, as well as other external partner nations.

I do not really have a single counterpart in the American system. My counterpart in Washington could be said to be within the State Department, but when I visit, I also have meetings with senior officials in several other departments, depending on the issues: DOJ (access to digital evidence, encryption, cooperation between the FBI and Europol), DHS (aviation security, access to travel data (PNR,<sup>d</sup> API<sup>e</sup>), counter violent extremism), Treasury (sanctions, terrorism financing). And then I also interact with the relevant parts of the intelligence community, including the ODNI [Office of the Director of National Intelligence], the NCTC [National Counter Terrorism Center], and the relevant counterterrorism person within the White House.

At the end of the day, I am not involved in operations but am rather looking at policy. But it is extremely important to be very close to the operational people, from intelligence, law enforcement, and prosecution. When I visit member states of the E.U., I always see the head of police, the head of the prosecution service, the head of the internal security service, and sometimes the head of the external intelligence service as well. The difference between the U.S. and E.U. is that the E.U. is not a federal state, as most of the policies in the areas that I am looking at are in the member states' hands. The role is one that is very much in support of member states, but it has transformed a great deal in the past five years. After the Daesh [the Islamic State] attacks in Paris and Brussels, member states asked for a much more ambitious involvement of the E.U. in CT, which led to an increase in my office's role and responsibilities to help coordination, as those attacks highlighted deficiencies in the system.

## CTC: What is the biggest terrorist threat you see to Europe at the moment?

**De Kerchove:** The threat from terrorist organizations like Daesh and al-Qa`ida remains high, but it has morphed in different forms. The fact that the number of Daesh-inspired attacks has declined in

d Editor's note: Passenger Name Recognition

e Editor's note: Advance passenger Information



*Gilles de Kerchove*

the E.U. does not mean that the threat has disappeared. It primarily means that we have got better at detecting and breaking up terrorist plots, as demonstrated by continuing arrests of terrorist suspects in E.U. member states. Home-grown radicalization remains a challenge. Daesh's presence on the internet remains strong. Extremist Islamist proselytization and violent right-wing propaganda create a fertile ground for terrorism. There are several additional risks which are of growing concern such as the hundreds of prison leavers convicted for terrorism-related offenses but who have served short sentences, FTF returnees, and FTFs and families still in Syria and Iraq, who—be they E.U. nationals or otherwise—need to be prevented from entering the E.U. undetected.

Over the course of the last two or three years, we have become increasingly concerned about the rise of attacks perpetrated by right-wing violent extremists. In 2019, Europe faced several terrorist attacks motivated by right-wing violent extremism. We're also witnessing a dramatic rise of right-wing violent extremist propaganda on the internet and increasing cross-border connectivity (notably online) between right-wing violent extremists. Right-wing extremist terrorists in Norway, Germany, the United States, and New Zealand have all referenced previous atrocities and attempted to broadcast their own attacks online.

Finally, I worry about instability in Europe's immediate neighborhood in the Middle East and North and West Africa, especially in Syria and Iraq as well as in Libya and the Sahel because the presence of terrorist groups there constitutes a threat to the EU's security.

The threats from violent separatists in Europe is much reduced. In Northern Ireland, there is still a low level of what the British call national security incidents (attacks on police and prison officers), but these threats do not seem to have extended across the sea to Great Britain. Whilst the numbers of incidents have been low in recent years, the level of capability retained by terrorist groups in Northern Ireland remains serious. There was a concern that the

potential reestablishment of a border between the north and the Republic of Ireland would maybe have a negative impact on security and inflame tensions; this has not materialized significantly to date, but concerns remain and recent arrests indicate that police and security services continue to work hard to keep the threat under control. The Spanish terrorist group ETA is completely over as an entity, thanks to the relentless efforts of the Spanish security apparatus. Two E.U. instruments have helped in this fight: the European Arrest Warrant (EAW), which changed completely the way Spain was able to secure arrests and deal with Basque terrorists hidden in other member states, and the Joint Investigation Teams (JITs), which facilitated the way in which the French and Spanish were able to crack down on the organization.

And I hope that I am wrong, but we may see the development of other forms of extremism like technophobia or something like that in the coming years. With the development of disruptive technologies, some people may feel disenfranchised or marginalized by this rapid evolution of technology and its impact on society, and they might react violently. We have maybe already started to see this develop during the COVID crisis, where we have seen 5G masts being burned<sup>2</sup> and the offices of telecom companies being attacked. This is something that we have to monitor; it may evolve in a more worrying direction. And let us suppose that it is linked to environmental violence, people who believe that the world is close to collapsing and government is not taking the right decisions to address the warnings on global warming. They might believe that they need to use violence to wake the government up. You could see developments around this technophobia linked with some sort of ecological extremism. But this is not the core of the threat, which remains foremost violent Islamists and to a much lesser extent the rising right-wing violent extremism.

**CTC: Thousands of Europeans are believed to have joined the Islamic State or al-Qa`ida-affiliated terrorist groups as foreign terrorist fighters (FTF) in Syria and Iraq. How is the European Union working to manage the potential threat they pose?**

**De Kerchove:** This is a priority for me. Tens of thousands of people have left their own countries and joined Daesh, including about 5,000 Europeans. About 25 percent of them have returned to Europe and another 25 percent have died on the battlefield, but others could in the future perpetrate terrorist attacks at home or in third countries.

Internally within the European Union, we are working to implement agreed arrangements on our border security to ensure that known foreign terrorist fighters (both E.U. citizens and non-citizens) are detected and stopped at the EU's external borders. Furthermore, as part of an interoperability project, the E.U. is connecting six centralized E.U. databases in the fields of security, migration, and borders so that border guards and police officers can, under precisely defined circumstances, check data in a comprehensive fashion, detect identity fraud, and hence better spot third-country terrorist suspects. The E.U. is also strengthening the use of biometric data in this context. For those who already returned, E.U. supports sharing of good practices (through a Rad-

icalisation Awareness Network (RAN)<sup>f</sup> handbook). And a number of member states have specialized programs for children.

The E.U. has also been working on better access to battlefield information to support investigations, prosecutions of FTF returnees, and border security. We must ensure that foreign terrorist fighters can be investigated and tried in a court of law. To this end, we are studying how information gathered by coalition armed forces on the battlefield in Syria and Iraq can be made available to investigators and prosecutors, in ways that are useful during trial procedures. For the material collected by the Iraqi forces, we have been pushing a program for all the information collected to be indexed and digitalized so that it can be analyzed and processed properly. One of the reasons our member states are so wary of repatriating FTFs is a lack of evidence of the acts they committed on the battlefield in Syria and Iraq, which can be used against them in a court of law. If someone gets back to Europe and we do not have enough evidence, the best you can secure is three or four years in prison for the crime of participation in a terrorist organization, even if, based on intelligence information, you know he or she may have killed people. So, it is very difficult to tell the population that you are bringing back someone who is a real murderer and he will be back on the streets of Paris, Brussels, or Madrid three years after his return. The more we can get access to evidence, the more likely we will be to secure long-term sentences and the more likely the public and governments are to accept repatriation.

As this is material and information primarily collected by coalition military personnel on the battlefield, it is not easy for investigators and prosecutors in Europe to locate it and then introduce it into criminal proceedings in courts in member states. Prosecutors and judges are used to a specific forensic treatment of material, which battlefield information often lacks as it is not collected by police officers who are forensically trained but rather is picked up in a battle situation. The material or information is often fragmented and can only be used as a lead or supplement to other evidence. U.S. authorities have gained a lot of experience in the use of battlefield information in criminal proceedings since 9/11. In addition, the U.S. military has been able to collect battlefield information from important theaters such as Afghanistan and Iraq. For these reasons, the U.S. government is an important partner for us in this particular issue.

It is also important to address the legacy of the caliphate in Syria and Iraq. Member states are deciding on repatriations on a case-by-case basis; the E.U. is not involved. Some member states do seek to repatriate children but on a case-by-case basis, and they try to start with orphans. But the problem here is that sometimes the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces do not want to repatriate the children alone and want to send them back with their mothers.

Several member states are working to find a solution so that their nationals can be tried in the region where they committed their crimes. There is currently an ongoing negotiation between these member states and Iraq to try them in Baghdad courts. There are numerous challenges: the death penalty, fair trial, what to do post-conviction, who will detain them, and who will pay for all of

this. The Kurds in Syria recently suggested they could do it themselves. They want to get international support to set up a court themselves, but this is not something the E.U. is involved in.

While we wait for an outcome of this negotiation or possible repatriation, the E.U. is exploring how to improve the situation in the camps and prisons in Kurdish-held territory in northeastern Syria. It is indeed important to reduce radicalization in the camps, in particular Al-Hol and its international annex, which is in the hands of the most radical women, and prevent them from becoming a time bomb for radicalization. The camps are a mess, and there is some money that is coming in through crowdfunding so the women can bribe the guards and arrange escapes. The kids are forced to follow sharia classes and are getting more and more radicalized in some cases. We should focus on trying to reduce these particular problems, as some of these children may end up going home one day and they will be a lot more radicalized than they were at the beginning. In addition, the sanitary conditions in the camps and prisons are very bad, including problems around tuberculosis, and we are very worried that COVID-19 may enter.<sup>3</sup> This may lead to riots and prison breaks. We know Daesh is very keen to support flights and prison breaks.

The E.U. has just adopted a support package for the prevention of radicalization in northeastern Syria, which does include support for the camps. The following additional measures are currently being analyzed. First, we are trying to find ways to decongest Al-Hol by helping the return of Syrian women and children to their Sunni tribes in northeast Syria. There is a system of sponsorship for their return, similar to something that was run in Afghanistan, and we can support that process. I am also in contact with senior officials in Iraq to see if we can speed up the return of some of the Iraqi women and children currently in Al-Hol to Iraq. Second, we have been working to encourage a Prevent-type program<sup>g</sup> in Al-Hol through NGOs, focused in particular on children. Third, we are working to improve the detention conditions in the prison, something that the International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC) in particular has asked us to do. There are currently several hundred young people detained with adults. They should never have been placed in a prison facility. The global coalition suggests that an existing youth rehabilitation center is expanded to be able to receive these young people. Fourth, an evaluation of the women in the international annex of Al-Hol would allow us to obtain a better picture of what is actually going on and to separate the most radicalized women from the rest, and offer more assistance, including psycho-social support and rehabilitation to the less radicalized women and their children.

There is still a window of opportunity to act right now. A new escalation could lead to the dispersal of terrorists, including possible travel of some FTFs to Europe. My efforts are focused on what we can do in the short- and medium-term to make sure the situation does not worsen.

The E.U. is also providing assistance to third countries to deal with FTF returnees and their families, including via the U.N. We have developed several programs to help Tunisia, the Western Balkans, and many other countries to do that in the best way possible.

<sup>f</sup> Editor's note: The Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) is an E.U.-sponsored network of practitioners across Europe that seeks to bring together best practices in counterterrorism and countering violent extremism (CVE) work.

<sup>g</sup> Editor's note: "Prevent" is the pillar of the U.K. counterterrorism strategy that seeks to stop people from becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism.

**CTC: In April 2020, German authorities thwarted a plot against U.S. military facilities by a network of Central Asians who, according to prosecutors, had contacts with high-ranking Islamic State figures in both Syria and Afghanistan.<sup>4</sup> Can you talk us through how this plot fits into your sense of the threat in Europe, including from the Islamic State in Afghanistan?**

**De Kerchove:** This plot shows, once again, that we should remain vigilant about the threat of Daesh attacks in Europe and that the threat does not come only from individuals who are inspired by terrorist propaganda online and act independently. Daesh continues to seek contact with potential attackers in Europe whenever it spots an opportunity to do so, to guide them in their attack plans. This should inform our response as well. The threat from Daesh remains diverse, and we need to prepare for a range of attack methodologies with widely divergent levels of sophistication and for attackers whose profiles vary a great deal.

Afghanistan does not represent the same level of terrorist threat to Europe as Syria. That said, we should never be complacent about the threat of armed terrorist groups, even if they are located far away from the E.U. Many Daesh and AQ affiliates do not currently focus on attacks in the West but would not hesitate to support or facilitate one if they had the chance. This applies to Daesh in Afghanistan, but also to Daesh and al-Qa`ida affiliates in Africa.

We have been working on the Central Asian threat picture for some years. Part of the problem of why a lot of Central Asians were joining Daesh in Syria and Iraq was that a lot of them were working in Russia and lost their jobs because of the economic crisis there. Many of the Central Asian countries they come from are not wealthy, making it difficult for them to return home to find employment or continue to support their families remotely with remittances. When these individuals lost their jobs and became disenfranchised, they started to become attracted by Daesh rhetoric. There was a very active Russian language propaganda effort from Daesh in Syria and Iraq, which drew some people there. That was not the E.U.'s top priority in 2015. The main focus was on the E.U.'s immediate neighborhood. Now there is a wide consensus to do a lot more in Central Asia. We have deployed a CT expert in the region, we have supported a number of UN projects in the region, and I have myself visited many of these countries.

**CTC: There has long been concern about al-Qa`ida reemerging as a global threat, and it appears the group's Yemeni affiliate had a significant role in the December 2019 shooting in Pensacola, Florida.<sup>5</sup> What kind of threat does al-Qa`ida pose today? Would you place it as a higher or lower risk than the Islamic State or an ideology like the extreme right-wing?**

**De Kerchove:** This is an important question because we sometimes underestimate the continuing threat from al-Qa`ida. AQ remains an important threat to Europe today. Core AQ, as well as affiliates such as AQ in the Arabian Peninsula, have long planned for mass-casualty attacks in the West, notably on aviation. Core AQ is still present in Afghanistan. Admittedly, the peace agreement between the Americans and the Taliban has explicitly foreseen that the link between AQ and the Taliban should be completely severed, but I do not know if this will happen. History shows that the Taliban have always lied on that front, so it is still a concern. AQ in the Islamic Maghreb and the organizations it controls are killing

European soldiers in the Sahel through sophisticated attacks. They constitute a serious threat to countries in the region. In some regions, AQ's branches are often stronger than Daesh affiliates.

Ranking the threat of terrorist organizations is not an exact science. There is little point in stating that one terrorist group represents a slightly higher threat than another. My general assessment is that the threat from Daesh and AQ to Europe remains high and that the threat from right-wing violent extremism has risen quite significantly.

The current threat within Europe is mainly from people who have no formal link to Daesh or al-Qa`ida and are inspired by the ideology. For these groups, attacks by people who endorse their ideology and who they later praise represent a low-cost attack strategy. The threat now comes more from inspired attacks rather than the kind of directed attacks we saw in the 2015 and 2016 attacks in Paris and Brussels.

In the past, the threat from AQ in the Arabian Peninsula, in particular to aviation, was very strong. At the moment, my assessment is that neither AQ nor Daesh have the capability to launch a major attack in Europe, but they still have the intent. They will not hesitate to attack if we let down our guard. There is still a threat to European citizens when they travel to other countries, and of course, there is a threat to the countries themselves where the groups are still active. If they are able to destabilize and make countries such as Mali and Burkina Faso ungovernable, it would pose a serious problem for everyone. This is why we have to help countries overseas to address the threats from al-Qa`ida and Daesh.

There are several places around the world where AQ keeps developing, and in fact, they have learned from their mistakes and become much more patient than Daesh. They understood that using extreme and indiscriminate violence was not the best way to attract hearts and minds. In the period when we focused on Daesh, AQ continued building, focusing on local grievances.

In Syria, and Idlib in particular, where HTS [Hayat Tahrir al-Sham] and Hurras al-Din are active, there are a lot of violent people who are AQ related. And of course, you have AQ affiliated al-Shabaab in East Africa.

**CTC: There is a lot of talk of a reemergent extreme right-wing as a major threat, yet the attacks we have seen remain predominantly lone-actor type attacks. Can you sketch out whether you see the potential for this escalating into something more organized?**

**De Kerchove:** Right-wing violent extremist groups realize that lone-actor terrorism is more beneficial to them than any form of violence that they organize themselves. Structured right-wing violent extremist groups often know exactly how far they can go in their statements and in their activities to remain just within the limits of what is legal. In the meantime, they leave it to 'fanboys' on the internet to take action by themselves, without any risk to the organization.

Unorganized right-wing violent extremists, who used to get together at concerts, motorcycle gatherings and other events in the past, now meet online. I do not know whether the spate of lone-actor attacks could escalate into something more organized, but I think that—from the perspective of the violent right-wing extremist scene—a sustained campaign of lone-actor attacks can be far more effective. I am certainly expecting more of those.

In recent years, we have witnessed a growing number of right-wing violent extremist attacks. The extent of violent acts motivated by racism, xenophobia, and other forms of bigotry may actually be underestimated in Europe, as we do not have a uniform method of classification. Some attacks are counted as hate crimes; others are treated as ordinary forms of criminality. At [the] E.U. level, we need to agree on a methodology to systematically count and classify these attacks in order to appreciate the extent of the problem and to combat it better.

We see increased international connectivity between right-wing extremists, notably via the internet. Individual right-wing violent extremists often imitate and reference previous attackers when carrying out a violent act. A formerly disparate group of marginal extremists thus increasingly turn themselves into a well-connected movement with a coherent ideology structured around the notion of the “Great Replacement.”

There are some differences between the right-wing violent extremism in the U.S. and Europe, but I think they all share the common rhetoric with the *Great Replacement* book written by Renaud Camus.<sup>6</sup> It is also notable how much jihadi rhetoric and ideology share with right-wing violent extremism rhetoric. It is often about misogyny, with Incel<sup>7</sup> a good example of this particular aspect of the phenomenon. It is a lot about a rejection of globalization. It is often about projecting a black-and-white vision of the world, hatred of Jews and anti-Semitism. Anti-Semitism is not just linked to the right-wing, by the way; Islamist extremism is a case in point, but there is a strong strain of anti-Semitism on the far left as well, but this is linked to anti-Zionism and an anti-Netanyahu feeling rather than the exact same strands of ideology linked to the far right. There are some survivalists amongst those on the far right, and I acknowledge there is a wide diversity of elements in the right-wing violent ideology, but what is interesting is that there are some key ideas that tie them together—hatred toward Arabs and Jews, misogyny, anti-globalization, for example.

There are also foreign powers that are playing into this and extending their outreach into Europe as part of a hybrid warfare, which focuses on destabilizing Europe. There is an interesting confluence in online ideas at the moment. Terrorism speech, hate speech, and disinformation are all coming together. Disinformation has been pushed both by state actors and non-state actors. One of the policy answers I draw from that is that we need to have a greater coordination between various strands of policy work in the online space. We currently have three separate dialogues with internet companies: one on terrorism speech, which we will soon result in legislation; a separate one on hate speech; and a third one on disinformation. To be more efficient in our dialogue with technology companies, we should be bringing these three together, as the strands and necessary responses are likely interlinked.

We have not looked enough at the phenomenon of foreign fighters going to Ukraine. I was very impressed by the figures produced by the Soufan Center recently about the many hundreds of right-wing Europeans who had gone to fight in Ukraine on both sides of the conflict.<sup>8</sup> There are more and more people traveling in Europe to rally and train around right-wing violent extremism groups in different parts of Europe. Fears around globalization, migration, “the Great Replacement,” and the threat to the white community are key elements that tie the right-wing violent extremists together on both sides of the Atlantic.

**CTC: What other ideologies do you see on the horizon or at the**

**moment that have the potential to pose a major terrorist threat to Europe?**

**De Kerchove:** The potential future rise of new forms of terrorism, rooted in conspiracy theories and technophobia, is a cause for concern. Disinformation is not necessarily rooted in political ideologies, although it is often amplified by right-wing and left-wing extremists. We have already seen small-scale acts of violence caused by a belief in conspiracy theories—for example, as I already noted, against telecom masts—and given the amount of disinformation online, we could see more serious examples of this in the future. I am also concerned about increasingly violent ecologist and animal rights groups.

In parts of Europe, left-wing violent extremism is already a threat. Left-wing violent extremists are responsible for a large number of non-lethal attacks. Depending on how the economic crisis develops in the wake of the health crisis we are currently facing, inequality is going to be exacerbated, and this might inspire more violent left-wing extremism that could have the potential to become more lethal and more geographically dispersed than it currently is.

**CTC: What indicators do you see of these kind of threats that are developing as a result of the impact of COVID-19?**

**De Kerchove:** I do not have many indicators around these threats at the moment. But if I take only my country, Belgium, it is one which is always split along the border between the Flemish part and the Walloon. It is interesting to see that telecom company Proximus has had a lot of problems trying to deploy 5G in the southern part of the country, in contrast to the more economically dynamic northern part. This could be an interesting indicator.

We are just at the beginning of a major change in society. I do not think we realize how different the world will be in five years’ time thanks to artificial intelligence. A lot of it we can see coming very quickly and will have deep-reaching impacts. The way justice will be delivered in the future will no longer be the same. The delineation between law enforcement and intelligence might be a bit blurred, and the digitalization of everything will have an impact across society and security.

In the last two decades, the left-wing violent extremism menace was more located in Italy and Greece, and we still have some groups there, but the truth is Europe is not homogenous when it comes to left-wing and right-wing violent extremism. Right-wing violent extremism is, for the time being, a major concern in the northern part of Europe, Scandinavia, Germany, and the U.K., on top of what is happening in the United States, where some assess it is now a bigger threat than jihadism. Other countries, like France, emphasize left-wing violent extremism, like the ultra-gilets jaunes, the violent segment of the group.<sup>h</sup>

It is interesting because there was something like that going on just before 9/11, in the form of a very active anti-globalization movement. This was the main topic on the agenda when discussing emergent extremisms in Europe. You had groups of violent left-wing extremists traveling all over Europe to disturb G7 meetings, meetings of the European Council, and so on, and it was definitely a growing movement. And then 9/11 happened, and this disappeared

<sup>h</sup> Editor’s note: The *gilets jaunes* (literally, yellow jackets) are a protest movement active across France.

completely for many years. But now we can see left-wing violent extremism coming once again. We have seen it in Germany last year, we see it at some big international events, and the French in particular are raising the issue as one of growing concern. And we may see, but of course this is just speculation for the time being, that it starts to grow once again because of the COVID-19 crisis and the economic fallout. I am in the midst of doing some work on this, in much the same way as I did some work on the right-wing violent extremism threat before. It is not at the same level of intensity as the right-wing violent extremism, but if you take the economic concerns and add those to some of the criticism that we see online with the debate around COVID-19 tracing apps and the perception that there is a big-brother society that is gathering data on people to control everything, we could maybe see this develop into something more coherent and growing dramatically.

**CTC: We are entering a moment of great-power tension. This can have repercussions in the non-state actor space through the use of proxies. Do you see a rising threat in Europe from state-supported terrorist actors? For example, from Russia or Iran?**

**De Kerchove:** No. But that is not to say that there are no violent consequences resulting from some third countries' deliberate interference to weaken our democracy and undermine the European Union. While they do not use terrorist proxies, some foreign powers deliberately spread disinformation and conspiracy theories to divide us. Their support to ultra-nationalist and right-wing extremist worldviews indirectly fosters violence because this sort of propaganda also fuels the actions of violent extremists and terrorists.

The current stance of the E.U. is that we only placed the military branch of Hezbollah in Lebanon on the E.U. list of terrorist organizations in the wake of the attack in Burgas and a plot in Cyprus.<sup>i</sup> Some of our member states have chosen recently to go further than just the military branch.<sup>9</sup> In Germany, it is not a formal listing, like in the U.S., but a ban, which is legally a bit different. I am not sure we would follow our American friends and expand to a listing for the whole organization, but it is important to note that the E.U. proscription is not a precondition for prosecution and anyhow we are active and vigilant on the organized crime aspect of the organization. The organization is indeed collecting money from all over the world with sophisticated money-laundering schemes with links to Africa, Latin America, using drugs and the like. Europol, working closely with the American law enforcement agencies, conducted a

major operation called Cedar<sup>j</sup> a few years ago in which millions, if not hundreds of millions, of euro being laundered between cartels in America, Latin America, Europe, and Africa were traced and linked to the Lebanese Hezbollah group. We are not soft on the organization, but there is no unanimous decision to list the whole organization.

On Iran, the E.U. put a directorate within the Ministry of Intelligence [and Security] (MOIS) on the list of terrorist organizations, as well as two members of the Iranian government.<sup>10</sup> This was done after a foiled attempt to murder an exiled Iranian from the Arab Struggle Movement for the Liberation of Ahvaz (ASMLA)<sup>k</sup> in Denmark, and the disruption of a plot to blow up the yearly meeting of the Mujahedeen-e-Khalk (MeK)<sup>l</sup> in Paris, which was due to be attended by Rudy Giuliani, President Trump's close adviser. This is a new development, placing a part of the State of Iran and officials of Iran on the EU's list. We have had several recent cases of proxy fights between Gulf States and Iran in the Scandinavian countries.<sup>11</sup> This does not quite qualify as terrorism, but it is criminal behavior. It is, of course, unacceptable that other states use European soil as a place to target each other by proxy.

As to Russia, we have had several cases of major concern around killings of Chechens in Europe. The Germans are currently prosecuting someone for the killing of a Chechen commander on their soil.<sup>12</sup> And there are cases like Sergei Skripal.<sup>m</sup> But these again are cases which do not meet the criteria of being terrorism. They are not done to influence the population or the host government into changing its policy. These incidents and attacks are more about internal Russian and Iranian domestic politics, targeting dissidents, with Europe simply the location where they are taking place.

j Editor's note: According to congressional testimony by analyst Emanuele Ottolenghi, "DEA revealed the full extent of Hezbollah's terror-crime nexus and its centrality to Hezbollah's organizational structure in 2016, when it announced multiple Hezbollah arrests across Europe in an operation, codenamed Operation Cedar, involving seven countries. According to a former U.S. official familiar with the case, the targeted ring involved shipments of cocaine to Europe, which were paid for in euro, and were then transferred to the Middle East by couriers. Hezbollah made more than €20 million a month selling its own cocaine in Europe. It also laundered tens of millions of euro of cocaine proceeds on behalf of the cartels via the Black Market Peso Exchange, retaining a fee." Emanuele Ottolenghi, "State Sponsors of Terrorism: An Examination of Iran's Global Terrorism Network," Testimony Before the House Homeland Security Committee Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence, April 17, 2018.

k Editor's note: The Arab Struggle Movement for the Liberation of Ahvaz (ASMLA) was established in 1999 seeking to establish an independent Arab state from Iran's southwest. Iran classifies ASMLA as a terrorist group, and it has been linked to violent incidents within Iran, as well as in Europe where a number of the group's members reportedly reside. For more information, see "The Story behind Iran's 'murder plot' in Denmark," BBC, October 31, 2018, and Nada Bashir, Euan McKirdy, and Kara Fox, "Denmark arrests suspect over Iranian 'assassination' plot," CNN, October 31, 2018.

l Editor's note: MeK is an Iranian group that opposes the regime in Tehran.

m Editor's note: Sergei Skripal, a former Russian intelligence officer recruited by the British as a spy, was, according to the U.K. government, targeted for assassination by Russian military intelligence agents in the United Kingdom, but he survived the attempt to kill him with a military grade nerve agent. "UK blames Russian military intelligence agents for Skripal attack," *Financial Times*, September 5, 2018; Michael Schwartz and Ellen Barry, "A Spy Story: Sergei Skripal Was a Little Fish. He Had a Big Enemy," *New York Times*, September 9, 2018.

i Editor's note: In July 2012, a Hezbollah-linked suicide bomber targeted a busload of Israeli tourists in Burgas, Bulgaria, killing seven, including the bomber. The same month, Israel accused Hezbollah of plotting to attack Israeli citizens in Cyprus. Angel Krasimirov, "Bulgaria says clear signs Hezbollah behind Burgas bombing," Reuters, July 18, 2013; Dan Williams, "Israel PM accuses Hezbollah of Cyprus attack plot," Reuters, July 15, 2012.

### **CTC: Could you talk us through some of the impact of Brexit on European counterterrorism?**

**De Kerchove:** It is always a bit difficult for me to express myself on this topic because we are in the middle of a difficult negotiation and I do not want to say anything which could have a negative impact on these negotiations. The starting point is what former Prime Minister Theresa May said, “Brexit means Brexit.” Brexit has consequences. Once you are no longer a member state, this means you no longer have the same rights as a member state. So that is the starting point, and I am sorry for that. The relationship will have to be different to that of other non-E.U. states who are in Europe like Norway or Switzerland as they are part of the Schengen free-movement space within Europe.

The second aspect, a lot of what we have been developing over the past 20 years in the field of justice and home affairs, like mutual recognition of criminal justice decisions or the availability of information, have only been able to develop as a result of very strong safeguards in place, and these safeguards are linked to human rights. We have the charter of fundamental rights, the human rights convention, and very strong rules on data protection and privacy. Some believe we are going too far in this direction, but that is where we are. And so it is difficult to have the same agreements in place with non-E.U. members who might not have the same safeguards in place in the future.

Having said this, I have spent the last 25 years of my life working in the field of security and justice in transatlantic affairs, going back to when Janet Reno was the U.S. Attorney General. During that time, we have built an amazing amount of cooperation between the U.S. and Europe. I would be very surprised if we did not do the same with the U.K. outside the European Union. I do not see why the U.K. would end up in a lesser position than the U.S. in this regard. So, it could be a U.S.-type relationship, and it is in our mutual interest to have a strong relationship. But there are legal constraints on what we can do, and I am sorry for that.

It is worth noting that intelligence is outside the E.U. framework. The E.U. 27 member states plus Norway, Switzerland, and the U.K. are working outside the E.U. framework already through the Counter-Terrorism Group (CTG) where they all meet. They have developed common platforms and databases, and there will not be any impact on this from Brexit. So, on the intel front, I do not see any impact. Where we will lose something—and I hope the negotiator will find a smart way to compensate for this—is the outstanding and very impressive input of the Brits on the policy side. I have myself worked very closely for the past 13 years with the U.K. in this regard, with numerous Home Secretaries, National Security Advisers, MI5, MI6, and others. In terms of ideas and shaping the policy, they were very creative and helpful. But we will keep talking to each other.

The U.K. has been and will remain an important partner in the fight against terrorism. Counterterrorism depends on swift and effective exchange of information, and on close operational and political cooperation. The E.U. and the U.K. are currently negotiating their future relationship, including a framework for cooperation in law enforcement and judicial cooperation in criminal matters, which will be the basis for future CT cooperation between the E.U. and the U.K. as a third country.

A lot of technical details are being addressed in the negotiations. Many E.U. instruments relevant for CT are based on the principles of mutual recognition and availability of information, which require certain essential safeguards (such as equivalent data protec-

tion standards, respect of the E.U. Charter of Fundamental Rights, supervision by the European Court of Justice), some of which are redlines for the U.K., which means that different ways for cooperation need to be found. As I already noted, there are models for cooperation with third countries in a similar situation, such as the U.S., where we have created a strong CT partnership over time. The Union’s ambition is clearly that the counterterrorism relationship with the U.K. will remain strong; it is in the interest of both sides.

### **CTC: You recently wrote a paper for the Council of the European Union looking at how terrorist threats were evolving as a result of COVID-19. What are the key takeaways?**

**De Kerchove:** While the current health crisis appears to have had only a limited impact on the terrorist threat to date, there is an increased risk of terrorism in the future. We must prevent the current health and economic crisis from becoming a security crisis as well.

The terrorist threat depends on three factors: intent, capabilities, and resilience. Terrorists had the intent to stage mass-casualty attacks long before the current crisis. The diminished resilience of targeted countries as a result of the pandemic is already a cause for concern, and this could reinforce terrorists’ capabilities in the longer term. Extremist propaganda could resonate more as a result of the economic and sanitary crisis, strengthen terrorists’ morale, and expand the breeding ground for radicalization. COVID-19 might result in a diminished focus on CT among our law enforcement and armed forces and disrupt military and intelligence operations.

Right-wing violent extremism and terrorism was already on the rise before the pandemic. Violent right-wing extremists have been particularly shrewd in exploiting the coronavirus crisis, blaming minority groups, and spreading disinformation. Right-wing extremist hate speech and incitement to violence on the internet has increased dramatically since the start of the coronavirus crisis. Violence against minorities—particularly Jews—has increased during the pandemic. We need to tackle these problems and counter anti-Semitic hate speech and violence.

The pandemic has also sparked conspiracy theories that have no direct link to existing extremist ideologies. As I’ve already noted, as a result of such theories, telecommunications masts have been set on fire in several member states. The motivation behind this is linked to a movement of technophobes with indirect links to right-wing and left-wing violent extremists, which is gaining in strength.

### **CTC: Do you think there will be a reduction in CT and CVE (countering violent extremism) funding and attention post-COVID-19?**

**De Kerchove:** I acknowledge that allocating the same level of resources to CT and CVE post-COVID-19 might be challenging, but I hope that policymakers will recognize that the prevention of terrorism remains crucially important. The E.U. is analysing the impact of COVID on terrorism and security more broadly in our neighborhood and beyond, and is providing COVID-related additional assistance. Given the probable rise in radicalization resulting from the health and socio-economic crisis, prevention and CVE will be even more important than before. Money spent on CVE is money well spent, especially in a time of crisis. Health, the economy, and security influence each other. Hence, we should prevent the emergence of a vicious circle of mutually reinforcing sanitary, socio-economic, and security problems.

**CTC: Technology continues to advance rapidly, with disruptive technologies increasingly the norm from online innovations, artificial intelligence, quantum computing, robotics, novel materials, the internet of things (IoT), space, and more. These are impacting our daily lives with ever greater frequency. How do you think this will impact the terrorist threat picture and E.U. response?**

**De Kerchove:** Around three years ago, I began to worry that at the E.U. level, not necessarily at the member state level, we may have overlooked the impact of digitalization and disruptive tech on security and criminal justice. We have not properly assessed the threats that they potentially pose. Nor have we understood or yet maximized the opportunities they provide for delivering security and justice in the future.

Disruptive technologies can be indeed looked at under three different angles: the threat that they create/amplify, the potential they offer to increase the effectiveness of the law enforcement agencies/justice, and the impact they have on the way we will provide security and justice in the future. It is important therefore that the security community devotes more attention to these techs.

From a *threat perspective*, terrorist and violent extremist groups are harnessing new technologies. For example, those groups use increasingly cryptocurrencies to raise funds in an undetected way. Online gaming is another new field which deserves to be looked at. The scale is unbelievable, with about two billion people playing games online, who could be potentially targeted by terrorist and violent extremist propaganda. Another example, COVID may inspire people to use bioweapons, having seen the impact that the virus has had.<sup>13</sup> If I were the head of a terrorist organization, I would say, that is clearly the best way to cause chaos and disrupt the West. But at the moment, it is quite difficult to weaponize the virus. You may send some ricin or anthrax by letter, which people have tried, but with COVID, this is going to be much harder.

But I do not exclude that in the coming years, it will be possible for a lone actor to mount an attack with catastrophic consequences. The current assessment is that the lone actor will just use a knife or a car and mount a low-cost attack. But for someone with the relevant education, armed with the democratization of knowledge, it might be much easier to process a virus in a cloud lab.<sup>n</sup> So, when you look at the convergence of these threats, you see a quite dangerous potential threat on the horizon. Someone could process a virus in a cloud lab, take a drone and use a GPS geolocation system to steer the drone, and go to a football stadium to spread the virus created and kill 50,000 people. So, my point is that we need to properly assess every possible threat that these new disruptive techs might pose.

At the same time, the *opportunities* provided by big data analytics, notably to find weak signals on the internet, artificial intelligence, facial recognition technology, robots, drones, and more are already helping police as well as justice, and will likely do more in the future. From a European perspective, the key will be to make sure this takes place across the E.U.

There is also the *transformative impact*. For instance, within

five years, we might lose a significant percentage of the workforce in the field of justice because machines will do some jobs better than humans. I have worked hard to try to convince E.U. institutions to invest a lot more on this, because we were a bit lagging behind.

Disruptive techs raise several huge *challenges*. First, we should ensure that law enforcement and the judiciary maintain their lawful tools of interception. On 5G, the E.U. is working towards ensuring that lawful interception remains possible, and is active in standardizing processes for such interception across the continent. The E.U. has worked on encryption for several years, in particular device encryption, via Europol and the European Commission's JRC.<sup>o</sup> I believe there is a need for a more comprehensive, legislative solution.

Second, we see more and more the importance of data protection and privacy, with consequences on security. The question is, how much can we rebalance this relationship? One of the reasons why the Americans or the Chinese are much more advanced in AI than Europe is because every day, their firms get billions of data points from you and me. They get this information for free and can process it to help with their machine learning. In Europe, it is much harder for companies to get access to the volume of data necessary to train their algorithms because they are protected by GDPR [the European Union General Data Protection Regulation]. GDPR is a great achievement to curb the loss of control on personal data by Europeans, but its implementation should at the same time seek to foster innovation. It is then important to work closely with regulators and supervisors of data protection and fundamental rights, to take full profit of GDPR's flexibilities to experiment, through regulatory sandboxes and testing facilities (where companies can test out new potentially disruptive technologies, and reflect on adapting/adopting regulation), [and] see how this might be used in the justice space as well as putting oversight mechanisms.

Third, disruptive techs also raise issues of sovereignty, and where information and data are kept. The COVID crisis has highlighted what current supply chains and dependencies look like with greater clarity, and in particular how dependent Europe had become on non-E.U. countries like China. To some degree, we are lagging behind the Americans and Chinese in most of these disruptive techs, and there is therefore a need to bolster transatlantic cooperation on this. Fortunately, this European Commission has decided to invest a lot into research technology and digitalization to catch up.

Turning back again to the threat that disruptive technologies create/amplify, there is a direct impact from internet companies and the degree to which social media companies have amplified the jihadist and right-wing violent extremist propaganda. We have started working on this, but not enough.

I'm worried by what I call algorithm amplification, whereby these companies—YouTube, Facebook, TikTok, and so on—design their algorithm in a way that they keep you online as long as possible because their business model is based on watch time for selling ads. And the issue is to hook people by giving them a lot more problematic content. I am not suggesting illegal content, but a lot more conspiracy theories, a lot more titillating material. It is like junk food. It is not by coincidence that junk food is full of salt to keep you coming back. It is the same with the internet; they bring stuff that is exciting and interesting and will draw you in. If you are interested in violent, hateful speeches, you will get more of the same and often more and more extremist content. It creates a common dynamic

n Editor's note: Cloud labs refer to automated labs using AI to synthesize genetic sequences that can become the basis to produce a toxin or a bio-agent. See Eleonore Pauwels, "The new geopolitics of converging risks - The UN and prevention in the era of AI," UN University, 2019.

o Editor's note: The European Commission's Joint Research Centre (DG JRC)

between disinformation, hate speech, and terrorist content.

There is a lot more we can do in this space. I have been working with the European Commission on looking at how we can bring the law enforcement and criminal justice community more into all these files and create an innovation hub at Europol which brings together all the interior and justice ministries from member states, as well as all the many European agencies that cover related security issues (Europol, Eurojust,<sup>p</sup> Frontex,<sup>q</sup> CEPOL,<sup>r</sup> eu-LISA,<sup>s</sup> etc.), with the ambition to later connect to cyber, space, and defense actors. We need people (at policy as well as operational levels) who understand all of the different issues to be able to deal with them.

**CTC:** There has been considerable debate about the threat posed by terrorist recidivism and whether prison sentences for terrorism offenders should be extended. A recent study in this publication by Thomas Renard that focused on Belgium argued that the phenomenon of terrorist recidivism, while a problem, has been “overblown.”<sup>14</sup> What is your view on this issue?

**De Kerchove:** It is good that Thomas Renard has systematically looked at recidivism rates among terrorist convicts. His conclusions are reassuring, but of course, any terrorist attack committed by somebody previously convicted for a terrorist offense is one too many. In this context, it should also be borne in mind that terrorist acts have a very serious impact on society—more serious, in fact, than most ordinary crimes.

The fact that several hundred inmates convicted for terrorist-related offenses will be released from European prisons in the very near future also compels us to prioritize rehabilitation and disengagement efforts. Even if only a small number of them reoffend, then the sheer magnitude of the wave of prison releases still creates a significant additional security risk and pressure on security forces.

That is why I think the EU Council conclusions of 6 June 2019 on “preventing and combatting radicalisation in prisons, and on dealing with terrorist and violent extremist offenders after release”<sup>15</sup> are important. The E.U. is supporting risk assessment and rehabilitation programs in prisons in member states and sharing of good practices and lessons learned.

**CTC:** What is the role of mental health and other personality disorders, and how does this affect the threat picture and response?

**De Kerchove:** This is a subject that attracts increasing attention among CT practitioners and policymakers, including at E.U. level. There is no clear profile or prototype of a terrorist. It is clear that mental disorders do not cause terrorist acts, but they sometimes influence terrorist behavior in connection with other—political, sociological—factors. There may be a greater than average prevalence of mental disorders notably among lone-actor terrorists. A number of lone actor terrorist attacks in Europe in the last two years—for example, in France, the U.K., and the Netherlands—were committed by lone actors with underlying mental health problems.

Given the increase in lone-actor attacks in the West, we should pay more attention to mental health issues in our policy response. The COVID-19 crisis, which is likely to exacerbate mental health problems in some individuals and to make them spend more time online, makes this an even more important topic.

How can we use knowledge on mental health in CT? We can, for instance, look at risk assessment tools: while psychopathology in itself is not predictive of terrorist behavior, mental health issues play a useful role in risk assessments, in combination with other factors. It is worth looking at it in rehabilitation and disengagement programs—using customized treatment to rehabilitate former terrorists or to achieve disengagement of radicalized individuals.

I know that much research on the role of mental health issues in radicalization and terrorism has been conducted with regard to jihadist radicalization. But we need to understand better what role mental health problems play in driving the men responsible for right-wing violent extremist attacks as well. The E.U.-sponsored Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) recently published a very useful handbook for practitioners on dealing with mental health in the context of CT.<sup>16</sup>

Finally, I am concerned about the mental health of the women and children in the camps in northeastern Syria with a risk of future radicalization and involvement in terrorism. I already talked about what we’re doing to prevent this from happening and why. On a case-by-case basis, member states are repatriating minors from the camp. It is important that they receive good psychiatric and psychological care.

**CTC:** What do you see as the biggest outstanding problems in CT and CVE?

**De Kerchove:** I have touched upon several of the biggest outstanding issues in CT during this interview. The fight against the rising threat of right-wing violent extremism and terrorism is certainly one of those. Contrary to the U.S., the E.U. legal framework applies to all forms of terrorism. I expect that the EU Internet Referral Unit at Europol will soon start flagging violent right-wing extremist content in addition to its current work on jihadi content. We also need to look into ways to curtail financing of right-wing violent extremist propaganda and step up prevention, rehabilitation, and exit programs; some member states have an interesting experience in this context.

We have been working for many years in the area of prevention of terrorism. The E.U. has been funding projects, for instance, among vulnerable youngsters to prevent radicalization. The E.U. is facilitating exchange of best practices between policymakers and practitioners (such as teachers, social workers, police personnel, etc.). We have always included all forms of radicalization in these programs, but we need to focus even more on right-wing and left-wing violent extremism in the near future.

Additionally, we need to do more to counter the ideologies that fuel terrorism, in particular Islamist extremism. While there is a range of factors that drive people to become terrorists, terrorism would not exist at all without underlying extremist ideology. Hence, we should not avoid this difficult subject, but talk about it. Many mainstream Muslims are worried about Islamist extremism dominating the dissemination of Islamic religious texts, supported by wealthy donors from the Gulf area. This is a problem for integration in the E.U., which the E.U. has started to analyse within its borders and beyond, and has initiated a dialogue with relevant third coun-

<sup>p</sup> Editor’s note: European Union Agency for Criminal Justice Cooperation

<sup>q</sup> Editor’s note: European Union Border and Coast Guard Agency

<sup>r</sup> Editor’s note: European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Training

<sup>s</sup> Editor’s note: European Union Agency for the Operational Management of Large-Scale IT Systems in the Area of Freedom, Security and Justice

tries. It is important to take note of the many European Muslims raising concern about extremist Islamist influences which challenge the values, fundamental rights, and rule of law which bind Europe together.

We should do more to combat terrorist content, hate speech, and disinformation online while protecting the right to free speech. The E.U. is working on a new Regulation on Terrorist Content Online, which will oblige digital companies to block terrorist content within one hour when they are alerted to such content. At the same time, digital companies should do more to enforce their own terms and

conditions on hate speech and disinformation. They need to stop the amplification of sensationalist hateful content via algorithms aimed at generating as much user traffic as possible.

Last but not least, the many threats that stem from the rapid digitalization of our society and the quick development of disruptive technologies, as I have explained above, call for a major investment of the security community in this field. The excellent communication on the EU Security Union Strategy that the European Commission adopted at the end of July<sup>17</sup> illustrates the strong determination of the E.U. to rise to the challenges. **CTC**

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# Inside the Foreign Fighter Pipeline to Syria: A Case Study of a Portuguese Islamic State Network

By Nuno Tiago Pinto

A detailed case study of a Portuguese Islamic State network with strong connections to the United Kingdom sheds significant light on the foreign fighter recruitment pipeline between Europe and Syria. Several of the men involved in the network made two trips to Syria. On January 9, 2013, British authorities informed their Portuguese counterparts that at least two Portuguese citizens were involved in the (first) kidnapping of British journalist John Cantlie in Syria. That information opened a seven-year investigation, recently closed, in which the Portuguese Judiciary Police were able to follow in real time the preparations, contacts, and final travel to Syria of a group of Islamist extremists, including their wives and children, who would join what became the Islamic State. Investigators established how they financed themselves through the creation of fictitious applications for student loans and welfare benefits in the United Kingdom. They used that money to travel but also to recruit and help young British extremists make their way into Syria, using Lisbon as transit point. But investigators were not able to shut down the pipeline because foreign fighter travel would only become a crime under Portuguese law in 2015, underlining the importance of such legislation. Several members of the network are presumed dead, while others face trial in Portugal. The most senior alleged member of the network, Nero Saraiva, was transferred from Syria to Iraq where he could face trial or extradition to Portugal. Saraiva allegedly became close to the Islamic State group known as the “Beatles” and appears to have had advanced knowledge of the execution of the American journalist James Foley.

**M**essage to America. The Islamic State is making a new movie. Thank u for the actors.” Posted on Twitter and Facebook on July 10, 2014, by Nero Saraiva, a self-professed Portuguese Islamic State fighter already on the radar of Western security services, the cryptic message received little attention.<sup>1</sup> But 40 days later, it gained an entire new meaning. On August 19, 2014, the Islamic State published a four-minute, 40-second English video on the internet.<sup>2</sup> Its title: “Message to America.” Its content: the shocking murder of American journalist James Foley.

British and Portuguese intelligence officials eventually came to the conclusion that Saraiva’s post on social media was no accident, but that he had advanced knowledge of James Foley’s fate and might have been involved in the production of Islamic State videos.<sup>3</sup>

Saraiva had arrived in Syria in April 2012<sup>4</sup> as one of the first Eu-

ropean foreign fighters to join the conflict. He allegedly became part of a group responsible for a wave of kidnappings of Western citizens<sup>5</sup> and became close to the British jihadis known as the “Beatles”<sup>a</sup> led by Mohammed Emwazi, the Islamic State executioner known as ‘Jihadi John.’<sup>6</sup> While in Syria, Saraiva maintained several social media accounts where he shared images of his daily life in the jihadi battleground: pictures of weapons, armored cars, and Islamic State flags were mixed in with mundane images of landscapes, cats, horses, and food.<sup>7</sup>

In Syria, according to the author’s investigative reporting and court documents, Saraiva was the most senior member of a jihadi network of Portuguese nationals who joined the Islamic State.<sup>8</sup> The group had bonded in London, to where they start moving in the early 2000s, and had become radicalized under the influence of hate preacher Anjem Choudary<sup>9</sup> and the online preaching of Yemeni-American cleric Anwar al-Awlaki.<sup>10</sup> The network included several sets of brothers<sup>b</sup> and childhood friends, all with roots in former Portuguese colonies in Africa. According to court documents, in the United Kingdom they had lived on welfare state benefits and had been able to create a scam that allowed them to obtain thousands

- a The group of four British jihadis of the Islamic State were dubbed the “Beatles” by their captives due to their accent. They were nicknamed “John,” “Paul,” “Ringo,” and “George” like the famous rock band. They were identified as Mohammed Emwazi, Aine Davis, Alexandra Kotey, and El Shafee Elsheikh, respectively. Tara John, “What to Know About the ISIS ‘Beatles’ Captured in Syria,” *Time*, February 9, 2018; Charlie Savage and Eric Schmitt, “Trump Officials Reconsider Prosecuting ISIS ‘Beatles,’” *New York Times*, January 31, 2020.
- b There are numerous examples of siblings being recruited into terrorist networks. Four pairs of brothers were involved in the August 2017 attacks in Catalonia. In addition, siblings were involved in the 2013 Boston bombings, the January 2015 Charlie Hebdo attacks, and the November 2015 Paris attacks. Fernando Reinares and Carola García-Calvo, “Spaniards, You Are Going to Suffer: The Inside Story of the August 2017 Attacks in Barcelona and Cambrils,” *CTC Sentinel* 11:1 (2018): p. 7; Mohammed M. Hafez, “The Ties that Bind: How Terrorists Exploit Family Bonds,” *CTC Sentinel* 9:2 (2016).

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of pounds in state subsidies, which they used to travel to Syria, recruit several British jihadis, and support Nero Saraiva's activities in Syria.<sup>11</sup>

Aside from Nero Saraiva, the other key figures in the Portuguese jihadi network were Sadjo Turé, a recruiter and treasurer;<sup>12</sup> Edgar Costa, an ideologue and trainer;<sup>13</sup> and his brother Celso Costa, who appeared in several Islamic State propaganda videos.<sup>14</sup> Edgar Costa, Celso Costa, and Sadjo Turé first traveled to Syria in April 2012 with Nero Saraiva.<sup>15</sup> But while Saraiva stayed in northern Syria, the two Costa brothers and Sadjo Turé returned to Europe in August that year.<sup>16</sup> The network would then expand to include Portuguese nationals Fabio Poças and Sandro Marques, who were also living in London at the time and were unknown to the authorities.<sup>17</sup> Between 2013 and 2014, the five of them traveled to Syria with their respective wives and children and were reunited with Saraiva.<sup>18</sup> Two other alleged members of the network, Cassimo Turé and Rómulo Costa, remained behind, in Portugal and the United Kingdom, respectively.

All eight (see Figure 1) were charged with terrorism-related offenses by prosecutors in Lisbon and are expected to be put on trial in September 2020, with all but two likely to be tried in absentia.<sup>19</sup> Rómulo Costa is currently detained in Portugal; Cassimo Turé is awaiting trial while at liberty in the United Kingdom.<sup>20</sup> Sadjo Turé, Edgar Costa, Celso Costa, Sandro Marques, and Fábio Poças have died while fighting for the Islamic State, intelligence and police au-

thorities believe.<sup>21</sup> But without conclusive evidence of their deaths, prosecutors decided to charge them in absentia.<sup>22</sup>

Saraiva was also charged in absentia. Despite being the first to arrive in Syria, Saraiva was apparently the only one of the adult male travelers to survive the fall of the Islamic State. In March 2019, he was arrested by the Syrian Democratic Forces after he left Baghouz severely injured.<sup>23</sup> Then, in early 2020, he was transferred to coalition forces' custody in Iraq<sup>24</sup> and is considered a key element to clarifying what happened to Western hostages like British photojournalist John Cantlie and American reporter James Foley.<sup>25</sup> He could face the death penalty in Iraq or be extradited to Portugal to stand trial for his crimes.<sup>26</sup>

This article provides detailed insight into how one group of European foreign fighters operated prior to their travel to Syria and their contacts, plans, relationships, and lives in the Islamic State. It starts by explaining how a group of childhood friends from the outskirts of Lisbon became radicalized in the United Kingdom and how they proceeded with their intentions to join a jihadi group by traveling first to Tanzania and then to Syria in early 2012. It will detail how one of them remained in Syria while the others returned to Europe where they became the target of a police investigation in Portugal and the United Kingdom and how the then absence of legislation in Portugal criminalizing foreign fighter travel allowed several to return to Syria to join what would become the Islamic State. This article will also describe how investigators were able

## The Alleged Eight Members of the Portuguese Islamic State Network



Figure 1: The Alleged Eight Members of the Portuguese Islamic State Network. The photographs and the alleged dates of travel to Tanzania, Syria, Portugal, and the United Kingdom are sourced from Portuguese court documents.

to track their steps and status in Syria through online monitoring, shedding light on the environment in which such foreign fighters operated. The article concludes by examining the foreign fighter recruitment pipeline between Europe and Syria and the challenges counterterrorism officials had in shutting it down.

The information presented here is the result of six years of investigative reporting by the author in Portugal, the United Kingdom, and Finland,<sup>27</sup> and is based on more than 10,000 pages of judicial documents, as well as interviews the author conducted with counterterrorism and intelligence officials, witnesses, one alleged member of the network (Poças) while he was with the Islamic State, and several relatives of the eight-man group.

### The UK Radicalization of a Portuguese Friendship Group

Sadjo<sup>c</sup> and Cassimo<sup>d</sup> Turé, Sandro Marques,<sup>e</sup> and the brothers Rómulo,<sup>f</sup> Edgar,<sup>g</sup> and Celso Costa<sup>h</sup> were childhood friends. They lived in the county of Sintra in the outskirts of Lisbon, went to the same school, and shared a love for soccer and music. In the late 1990s, Sadjo Turé and the three Costa brothers were part of a hip-hop group called Greguz du Shabba<sup>28</sup> and spent afternoons in their family apartment, improvising rhymes about racism, poverty, and social exclusion, while practicing break dance moves.<sup>29</sup>

The Costa brothers, who were Portuguese nationals of Angolan descent, and Sandro Marques, a Portuguese national of Cape Verdean descent,<sup>30</sup> were raised in Catholic families.<sup>31</sup> Sadjo and Cassimo Turé, Portuguese nationals whose family originated from Guinea-Bissau, were the only ones in the alleged eight-man network raised in a Muslim family.<sup>32</sup> One by one, the Sintra group started immigrating to the United Kingdom to study and work. The first to move was Sadjo Turé, around 2003.<sup>33</sup> He went to live in an apartment on Creighton Road in north London, in a building mostly occupied by immigrants, and would later move to a tower block in the east London district of Leyton.<sup>34</sup> In 2005, he was joined by his older brother, Cassimo Turé.<sup>35</sup>

Sandro Marques and Rómulo and Celso Costa followed them not long after.<sup>36</sup> Edgar Costa stayed in Portugal until after he finished his marketing degree in Porto, and by 2007, he had also moved to London, along with his girlfriend.<sup>37</sup>

It was in the British capital that some years later the Sintra group

met Nero Saraiva<sup>i</sup> and Fábio Poças.<sup>j</sup> Both, like the Costa brothers, had Angolan origins.<sup>38</sup> Born in Angola, Saraiva at age three moved to Portugal with his mother to escape civil war.<sup>39</sup> He went to a Catholic school until his mother moved to the United Kingdom<sup>40</sup> where his name appears on the electoral roll from 2003.<sup>41</sup> Poças was the youngest of the group. Born in Angola, he was raised in the outskirts of Lisbon. At 16, he went to live with an aunt in London<sup>42</sup> to study arts and play soccer.<sup>43</sup> He enrolled in a Muay Thai gym where he met the rest of the group.<sup>44</sup>

The Portuguese London friendship group would gather to play soccer in public parks and watch Portuguese soccer games in a Portuguese café.<sup>45</sup> The circumstances are not clear, but at some point, the non-Muslim members of the group converted to Islam. Very little is known about how the group as a whole became radicalized.

Sadjo Turé, who had resided in London the longest, at a certain point came to admire the hate preacher Anjem Choudary,<sup>46</sup> and the rest of the Portuguese group came to share these views.<sup>47</sup> In a later search of the Costa family residence in Lisbon, the police found CDs and DVDs with preachings and writings by the Yemeni-American cleric Anwar al-Awlaki and, among others, a PDF copy of *Join the Caravan*, the book authored by Abdallah Azzam, the Palestinian cleric who led the mobilization of Arab fighters to Afghanistan in the 1980s.<sup>48</sup>

The Portuguese group stopped drinking alcohol, going out at night, and playing music.<sup>49</sup> Gradually, they drifted away from the remaining Portuguese community in Leyton. “They spent a lot of time talking about religion and reading the Quran. They stopped playing soccer with us and started playing with each other. They started to learn Arabic and from time to time they came to us talking about religion,” a person who had once been friends with them told the author.<sup>50</sup> What is certain is that by around 2010, most of them were already radicalized<sup>51</sup> and had two goals in mind: to join a jihadi movement<sup>52</sup> and to marry and have children.<sup>53</sup>

### Travel to East Africa and Syria

According to court documents, in early 2010, Edgar Costa traveled to Tanzania and stayed for two years.<sup>54</sup> While living in Dar es Salaam, he met through Facebook<sup>55</sup> and married<sup>k</sup> then 18-year-old Fatuma Majengo<sup>l</sup> who was later described by Saraiva in recorded conversations as “the best wife” because she was “quiet” and “obedient.”<sup>56</sup> In Tanzania, Portuguese authorities believe, Edgar Costa enrolled in terrorist training camps connected to al-Shabaab and became an instructor.<sup>57</sup> According to recorded conversations, one of those he trained was his friend from London Nero Saraiva, the first of the Portuguese group to join him in East Africa.<sup>58</sup>

In the summer of 2010, at an East London mosque, Celso Costa was introduced to Reema Iqbal,<sup>m</sup> then 21 years old, who had come to take Islam more seriously after a failed relationship left her with

c Sadjo Turé, born December 12, 1979, Guinea-Bissau. Also known as Abu Yusha Al Andalus. All footnotes listing date/place of birth and (where applicable) the aliases of individuals mentioned in this article are based on information from Portuguese court documents. Departamento Central de Investigação e Ação Penal, judicial inquiry 5/13.1JBLSB.

d Cassimo Turé, born July 12, 1975, Guinea-Bissau.

e Sandro Alexandre Silva dos Santos Marques, born November 4, 1978, Lisbon; also known as Mohamed, Prímheiro, and Abu Yaminah Al Portughal.

f Rómulo António Céu Rodrigues da Costa, born March 22, 1979, Lisbon, Portugal.

g Edgar Augusto Céu Rodrigues da Costa, born July 27, 1983, Lisbon, Portugal; also known as Abu Zakarya Al Andalus.

h Celso Emanuel Céu Rodrigues da Costa, born April 15, 1986, Lisbon, Portugal, also known as Abu Isa Al Andalus.

i Nero Patricio Contreiras Saraiva, born August 16, 1986, Luanda, Angola; also known as Abu Yakoub Al Andalus.

j Fábio Ricardo Dias Neiva Poças, born August 26, 1992, Benguela, Angola; also known as Abdurahman Al Andalus.

k On January 6, 2011. Departamento Central de Investigação e Ação Penal, judicial inquiry 5/13.1JBLSB, p. 1,372.

l Fatuma Athumani Majengo, born November 20, 1993, Singida, Tanzania.

m Reema Iqbal, born October 7, 1988, Pakistan; British national, also known as Umm Ibrahim Pakistani and Sakiha Ahmad Mahmud.

a broken heart.<sup>59</sup> They married weeks later at the Iqbal family home, with the women separated from men.<sup>60</sup> Celso Costa then suggested that his wife's best friend, Shima Essanoor, ought to marry his best friend, Sadjo Turé.<sup>61</sup> Shima agreed, and soon the four were living together in a council flat in the London neighborhood of Walthamstow that belonged to Nero Saraiva,<sup>62</sup> who had left to join Edgar Costa in Tanzania.

The Costa-Turé household appears to have been an echo chamber of extremism: non-Muslims were described as “pigs” and “kuffar” and Shima later told *The Sunday Times* that they would switch off mobile phones and put them in another room to avoid monitoring.<sup>63</sup>

When Shima became pregnant with twins, she told the newspaper the group started to talk about going abroad for jihad, and there was hope she would give birth to sons so that her twins would become “future warriors.”<sup>64</sup> “That’s when I knew they had lost it,” Shima said.<sup>65</sup> On December 26, 2010, she woke up early and ran away and later reported everything she knew to United Kingdom counterterrorism police.<sup>66</sup> Shima only saw Sadjo Turé once after fleeing, when the twins were two days old.<sup>67</sup>

Soon after Shima left him, Sadjo Turé married Zara Iqbal,<sup>n</sup> Reema’s middle sister. The elder Iqbal sister Shamila Iqbal<sup>o</sup> was married to a newly appointed NHS doctor named Shajul Islam.<sup>p</sup> Shajul, Celso Costa, and Sadjo Turé became close, with the Portuguese referring to their British friend in recorded conversations as “the doc.”<sup>68</sup>

Some of the Walthamstow circle would soon follow in the footsteps of their friends Edgar Costa and Nero Saraiva. According to court documents, during 2011, Sadjo Turé, Celso Costa, and their respective wives moved to Tanzania where Portuguese authorities believe they enrolled in terrorist training camps connected to al-Shabaab.<sup>69</sup> Their presence in the country is well documented. In a later search of the Costa family residence in Lisbon, the police found receipts of medical assistance for Reema Iqbal, issued by the Regency Medical Center in Dar es Salaam on November 23, 2011; December 16, 2011; and March 15, 2012.<sup>70</sup> On February 9, 2012, Zara Iqbal gave birth to her first child with Sadjo Turé in Dar es Salaam.<sup>71</sup>

Soon after, the group began to relocate to Syria. In early April 2012, Nero Saraiva and Edgar Costa departed to Turkey, through Sudan.<sup>72</sup> They took a flight to Istanbul and then a bus to Hatay, and finally to Reyhanli where they settled for two weeks before entering Syria with an Ahrar al-Sham<sup>q</sup> member.<sup>73</sup> They crossed the border on April 14, 2012.<sup>74</sup> Six days later, on April 20, Celso Costa and Sadjo Turé arrived in Turkey.<sup>75</sup> They followed the same path and joined Nero Saraiva and Edgar Costa in Syria.<sup>76</sup> The wives (of Edgar, Celso, and Sadjo) allegedly stayed on the Turkish side of the border: in

Lisbon, authorities later found receipts of lab analysis in the name of Reema Iqbal, issued by the Reyhanli Hospital on May 21, 2012, and June 20, 2012.<sup>77</sup>

According to Saraiva’s Islamic State file,<sup>78</sup> his recruiter was “Abu Muhammad al-Absi.” This was the *kunya* (jihadi fighting name) of Firas al-Absi,<sup>79</sup> a Saudi-born onetime dentist who fought in Afghanistan and met Abu Musab al-Zarqawi there.<sup>80</sup> Years later, in Syria, al-Absi formed a group closely aligned with Jabhat al-Nusra, the Majlis Shura Dawlat al Islam, which became notorious for kidnapping Westerners and raising an al-Qa`ida flag over the Bab al-Hawa border crossing between Turkey and Syria on July 19, 2012.<sup>81</sup>

On that same day, British photographer John Cantlie, Dutch journalist Jeroen Oerlemans, and their local guide were taken hostage near Bab al-Hawa<sup>82</sup> by al-Absi’s group.<sup>83</sup> While attempting to escape, the two men were shot and wounded, but their guide made a break and managed to raise the alarm. They were freed by a group of fighters Oerlemans assumed were part of the Free Syrian Army on July 26, 2012, and returned to Europe.<sup>84</sup>

In the United Kingdom, John Cantlie recalled his ordeal in several media interviews and described his kidnapers as a group of jihadis from around the world, with as many as 15 appearing to be from the United Kingdom.<sup>85</sup> He also mentioned being treated by a doctor who “spoke with a south London accent and was using saline drips with NHS logos on them.”<sup>86</sup>

Less than three months later, on October 9, 2012, Scotland Yard detectives made the first arrests in “Operation Architrave,” the code-name for the British investigation into the abduction of John Cantlie and Jeroen Oerlemans<sup>87</sup> when a newly qualified NHS doctor and his wife landed in Heathrow on a flight from Cairo.<sup>88</sup> They were Shajul Islam and Shamila Iqbal.<sup>r</sup> One month later, another suspect, Jubayer Chowdhury,<sup>s</sup> was also detained at Heathrow airport after arriving from Bahrain.<sup>89</sup> The third and last wave of arrests related to John Cantlie’s kidnapping came on January 9, 2013; three men, including Shajul’s older brother Najul Islam,<sup>t</sup> were detained at separate addresses in east London.<sup>90</sup> A fourth suspect, Sadjo Turé, was arrested that same day at Gatwick airport, as he was about to take a flight to Lisbon.<sup>91</sup>

## The Portuguese Investigation

That same afternoon, January 9, 2013, chief inspector of the Judiciary Police Counter Terrorism National Unit João Paulo Ventura signed a two-page report that initiated one of the biggest terrorism investigations in Portugal.<sup>92</sup> According to the document, British authorities informed their Portuguese counterparts that they believed two Portuguese nationals had been involved in the abduction of journalists John Cantlie and Jeroen Oerlemans<sup>u</sup> in Syria in July 2012.<sup>93</sup> One was Sadjo Turé,<sup>94</sup> and the other was Celso Costa, who was then living in Portugal.<sup>95</sup> Sadjo and Celso were described as

n Zara Iqbal, born November 21, 1989, Pakistan; British national, also known as Umm Yusha Pakistani and Aisha Ahuma Mahmud. Departamento Central de Investigação e Ação Penal, judicial inquiry 5/13.1JBLSB, p. 9,094.

o Shamila Iqbal, born May 25, 1986, Pakistan. Departamento Central de Investigação e Ação Penal, judicial inquiry 5/13.1JBLSB, p. 89.

p Shajul Islam, born March 18, 1986. Departamento Central de Investigação e Ação Penal, judicial inquiry 5/13.1JBLSB, p. 90.

q At the time, Ahrar al-Sham was one of the main Islamist groups fighting the Syrian government.

r U.K. authorities suspected that Shajul Islam traveled to Turkey and then crossed into Syria where he allegedly joined the jihadi group responsible for the abduction of John Cantlie and Jeroen Oerlemans. “Syria kidnap case against doctor dropped by prosecution,” BBC, November 11, 2013.

s Jubayer Chowdhury, born July 15, 1988.

t Najul Islam, born February 15, 1981.

u Oerlemans was later killed while reporting in Libya in 2016. “Dutch photojournalist Jeroen Oerlemans shot dead in Libya by sniper,” Associated Press, October 2, 2016.

Muslims who lived together in London where they became radicalized.<sup>96</sup> An additional individual was mentioned as a person of interest: Edgar Costa, Celso's brother.<sup>97</sup>

During the afternoon and evening of January 9, 2013, Portuguese investigators acted swiftly: they collected the suspects' ID files, addresses, and phone numbers in Portugal and requested permission to initiate wiretaps and video surveillance.<sup>98</sup> At 7:45 PM, the requests received the agreement of the Public Prosecutor Vitor Magalhães<sup>99 v</sup> and were approved by a judge that same evening.<sup>100</sup>

As they started monitoring the suspects, the Judiciary Police tried to fill in the blanks and understand where the man had been in the preceding months. They quickly found that on August 2, 2012, a few days after the release of Cantlie and Oerlemans, Celso and Edgar Costa had taken a flight from Istanbul to Lisbon.<sup>101</sup> They discovered that Sadjo Turé had stayed in Turkey a little longer to register his newborn son at the Portuguese embassy in Ankara. After doing so on August 9, 2012,<sup>102</sup> he went back to the United Kingdom that same day.<sup>103</sup> Nero Saraiva remained in Syria and for that reason was then not on the counterterrorism radar of Portuguese authorities.<sup>104</sup>

The news of Sadjo Turé's detention at Gatwick on January 9, 2013, spread quickly among the Portuguese group after his brother, Cassimo, who was with him when he was stopped at the airport, proceeded with his travel to Lisbon and spread the word.<sup>105</sup> In the Portuguese capital, Celso and Edgar Costa expressed concern they might be under investigation, according, ironically, to conversations between them recorded by the Portuguese police<sup>106</sup> on January 16, 2013, after Celso's wife Reema called from the United Kingdom to say that Sadjo Turé had been released without charges.<sup>107</sup> The phone interceptions were hard for investigators to interpret. With African origins, the suspects sometimes spoke in Creole.<sup>108</sup> Additionally, they adopted security measures, being careful to speak in code over the phone. They referred to Syria as "Susana," Turkey as "Tomas," Sudan as "Sudas," money as "ball," police as "bonga," and the jihadi group they had allegedly been with as "the company."<sup>109</sup>

Their connection to "the company" was clear during a recorded conversation between Sadjo Turé and Edgar Costa on January 26, 2013. While talking about a possible return to Syria, Sadjo Turé mentioned that there was "going to be a thing on February 10, 11, 12 or 13" but that it did not have anything to do "with kidnaps." It was the "company's international day" in which a lot of people were participating, he said.<sup>110</sup>

Also clear from their conversations was their desire to each marry a second woman and have many children.<sup>111</sup> They discussed their favorite nationalities of women (mentioning Bosnia, Morocco, Mexico, Brazil, Germany, and the Netherlands) and whether it was better to marry a recently converted Muslim or one that was raised in the faith. They stressed how important it was that candidates for marriage would be willing to travel abroad for jihad.<sup>112</sup> In their search for additional wives, they created profiles on muslima.com and connected with potential brides through Facebook.<sup>113</sup>

Edgar Costa was the most active in searching for a new wife. In September 2013, after striking out several times, including flying

all the way to Mexico City to meet a would-be bride,<sup>114</sup> he connected through social media with a woman from the United States. They spoke over the phone, exchanged text messages, and he even sent her \$560 to finance her travel to Lisbon, a trip she never took.<sup>115</sup>

The funds available to the Lisbon group was a concern to police. The Costa brothers had no job and spent most of their days at home, online, playing soccer, and working out in local gyms.<sup>116</sup> But they did not lack money.<sup>117</sup> The authorities even intercepted a picture Celso Costa sent his wife that featured packs of banknotes of €10, €20, and €50 spread over his bed.<sup>118</sup>

Edgar Costa, Celso Costa, and Cassimo Turé often went to money transfer shops to collect funds sent from the United Kingdom by Sadjo Turé.<sup>119</sup> As they investigated this, Portuguese police learned Sadjo had been detained again in the United Kingdom on February 10, 2013, on suspicions of fraud and fraudulent use of credit cards.<sup>120</sup> His house was searched, his ID and passport were taken from him along with £280. He was released a few days later, but he had to present himself at the police station every Tuesday and Thursday and was not allowed to leave the United Kingdom.<sup>121</sup> In an intercepted phone conversation with Celso Costa, Sadjo Turé seemed confident, saying that the police took his computer and mobile phone but that "it had nothing." Cryptically, Turé said that if he were to go to prison one day, it would be "for this and not for that big thing."<sup>122</sup>

The reason for Sadjo Turé's detention became clear to Portuguese investigators in late March 2013. According to court documents, the Metropolitan Police informed their Portuguese counterparts that they had collected evidence that Sadjo Turé acted as a mediator and facilitator in the process of fraudulently obtaining subsidies and loans available in the United Kingdom to foreign students.<sup>123</sup> To obtain the funds, he allegedly used real or fake IDs and forged Portuguese qualification certificates. British police also believe he was involved in fraudulent operations in order to get other social benefits.<sup>124</sup> The scheme had allegedly been going on for years. According to Shima Essanoor, Sadjo Turé former wife, while in the United Kingdom in 2010, the wider group had all "claimed jobseeker's allowance," a benefit once described by Anjem Choudary as "jihad-seeker" allowance, and had "loads of council houses in different people's names," as well as student loans and a scheme in which Sadjo Turé generated cash by taking out mobile phone contracts in other people's names and selling the phones for up to £800.<sup>125</sup> To maintain all these alleged schemes, the group had a "book" with a list of names they used to obtain social benefits as well as the email accounts created to be sent the necessary codes to receive the funds.<sup>126</sup>

These alleged schemes continued after Portuguese police opened their investigation. Once Sadjo Turé received the codes, he would get the money and send some of it to his friends in Portugal through Western Union and Unicambio. According to Portuguese court documents, after Turé realized he was on the British police radar because of his detention at Gatwick airport on January 9, 2013, he was helped in making these remittances by Fabio Poças, a new addition to the Portuguese extremist network.<sup>127</sup>

Between January and July 2013, the money transfers to Lisbon surpassed 27,000 euros.<sup>128</sup> The funds were used to pay daily expenses and travels but was also sent from Lisbon to other countries including Turkey, Mexico, Gambia, and Tanzania.<sup>129</sup> According to court documents, during the period in question, more than €6,000 was sent from Portugal to Turkey to someone who was referred over the phone as "the fat guy."<sup>130</sup> According to court documents,

v Magalhães was also the Public Prosecutor in charge of the Portuguese investigation that helped dismantle an Islamic State European cell. Nuno Tiago Pinto, "The Portugal Connection in the Strasbourg-Marseille Islamic State Terrorist Network," *CTC Sentinel* 11:10 (2018); Nuno Tiago Pinto and Carlos Rodrigues Lima, "Ministério Público acusou oito jihadistas portugueses de terrorismo," *Sábado*, December 17, 2019; Nuno Tiago Pinto, "Acusado de recrutar para o Estado Islâmico," *Sábado*, March 28, 2018.

in March 2013, this person was identified by British authorities as Portuguese national Nero Saraiva, then an active member of Kataib Al-Muhajireen.<sup>131</sup> As Magnus Ranstorp documented in this publication, Turkey (and especially its border region with Syria) was at the time a key hub for the flow of funds to Syria for terrorist use.<sup>132</sup>

## Return to Syria

Contrary to his friends Sadjo Turé, Edgar Costa and Celso Costa, who returned to Europe in early August 2012, Nero Saraiva remained in Syria, where the situation changed almost daily. In August 2012, Saraiva's recruiter Firas al-Absi was executed by another rebel faction,<sup>133</sup> and his younger brother, Amr al-Absi (who was known by the *kunya* Abu Atheer al-Absi) merged his own group, Katibat Usood al-Sunna, with Majlis Shura Dawlat al-Islam, renaming this conglomeration al-Majlis Shura Mujahideen.<sup>134</sup> Amr al-Absi continued to attract foreign jihadis, and like his brother, he oversaw the kidnapping or obtention from other kidnapers of journalists and aid workers, including James Foley and John Cantlie in late 2012.<sup>135</sup> For that, Amr al-Absi earned the moniker of "kidnapper-in-chief."<sup>136</sup>

Nero Saraiva kept himself in the company of other European jihadis he met in the Aleppo region, notably from the United Kingdom, Finland, and Sweden, and in 2013, he was spotted in Hraytan (a town just to the north of the city of Aleppo),<sup>137</sup> where Katibat al-Muhajireen (KaM) was based under the command of Tarkhan Batirashvili, the Chechen jihadi known as Abu Omar al-Shishani.<sup>138w</sup>

In Syria, Saraiva married a onetime Finnish nurse who had converted to Islam<sup>139</sup> and who had traveled to Syria in November 2012. The former nurse had three children with Saraiva (born in September 2013, September 2015, and November 2017).<sup>140</sup>

In the 2012-2013 period, Saraiva was part of a group of European jihadis, which included several recruits from Finland.<sup>x</sup> Initially, he allegedly operated as a sniper,<sup>141</sup> but he eventually became the leader of this European group.<sup>142</sup>

Their group was moving at the time between Hraytan, Anadan, and Atme in northern Syria, near the Turkish border. Saraiva acted as a guide for the Finnish newcomers: he would introduce them

w Tarkhan Batirashvili was a former Georgian military officer who traveled to Syria in 2012 where he led Jaysh al-Mujahireen wal-Ansar (Army of Emigrants and Supporters). Following his *bay`a* (oath of allegiance) to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, he became the Islamic State's overall on-the-ground military commander. Hassan Hassan and Michael Weiss, *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror* (New York: Regan Arts, 2015), pp. 123-125; "Tarkhan Tayumurazovich Batirashvili," United Nations Security Council.

x One was the Finnish-Namibian jihadi Muhammed Shuuya, also known by his *kunya* Abu Salamaj al-Finlandi. Saraiva's wife, the former Finnish nurse, was close friends with Shuuya's wife (also a convert) who traveled with Shuuya to Syria in the summer of 2013. In Syria, Shuuya and Saraiva became close friends, and according to information provided to Finnish police by Islamic State returnees, at a certain point they all lived together. Shuuya was the emir of the group of Europeans until his death in July 2013, after which Saraiva took his place. Saraiva was also connected to Hassan Al Mandlawi, a Swedish jihadi sentenced to life in prison for participating in the beheading of two prisoners in the Aleppo region in 2013. He and Saraiva were pictured together. Nuno Tiago Pinto, "O mais perigoso terrorista português do Estado Islâmico preso na Síria," *Sábado*, August 29, 2019; Sami Sillanpää, "ISIS-VAIMO JA SEN MIES," *Helsingin Sanomat*, September 1, 2019; Gothenburg Court of Law, case number B 9086-15; Mika Viljakainen, "Espoolainen lähihoitaja Antti tuli uskoon vuonna 2012, kaksi vuotta myöhemmin hän oli Isis-taistelija – tässä koko uskomaton tarina," *Iltta-Sanomat*, January 18, 2020.

to people, show them the area, and help them to find houses and allegedly weapons.<sup>143</sup>

The Finnish jihadis did not seem to like Saraiva much. One of them later told the police "he lacked Islamic manners and information. He was stubborn and did not want to learn. He also interfered with other people's behavior on Islamic issues, even though he didn't know anything himself."<sup>144</sup> The former Finnish foreign fighter added, "Saraiva was very arrogant. He was driving around and if he saw some local smoking tobacco he might pull the car and have a conversation about how we can get Allah's help." He also said that Saraiva used his hard reputation to keep the newcomers' equipment and cars for himself.<sup>145</sup>

Saraiva was in permanent contact with his Portuguese friends in Lisbon and London. He would ask them for money, transmit instructions given by Omar al-Shishani, or brag about his accomplishments.<sup>146</sup> In May 2013, Saraiva asked for money to buy a car, and in August 2013, he told Sadjo Turé his group would need "100,000 [presumably euros] to buy the big chili for sparrows," which was interpreted by Portuguese police as an anti-aircraft gun. That month, Saraiva described the sieges of Aleppo's prison and airport: "It's very heavy, a lot of things, there are many people shooting at us."<sup>147</sup> In June 2013, Saraiva mentioned a scheme used by jihadis to get new cars to the group: rent them and cross the border.<sup>148</sup> "This is order from ... the taller one ... with the red hair, red beard [Abu Omar al-Shishani according to court documents]. He told me yesterday that, everyone who comes from Eurojutssto [the code they used for Europe], if they can do that they should. We need good vehicles ... good stuff to clean the pigs."<sup>149</sup>

During the summer and fall of 2013, members of the Portuguese network started to return to Syria and were reunited with Saraiva there. On June 22, 2013, Celso Costa, his wife Reema Iqbal, and their newborn son, together with Zara Iqbal (Sadjo Turé's wife) and her son boarded a flight to Istanbul.<sup>150</sup> However, upon arriving, Celso Costa was prevented from entering Turkey because he had passed the visa term (90 days) when he was there in 2012, and he returned to Lisbon the next day.<sup>151</sup> The women carried on with the children, and after a couple of days in Istanbul waiting for instructions, they took a bus to Reyhanli where Saraiva helped them cross the border.<sup>152</sup>

The women's behavior in Syria, while living in his six-room house along with nine adults and eight children, displeased Saraiva.<sup>153</sup> On a long phone call recorded on July 28, 2013, he expressed his discontent to Celso Costa: "I'm responsible for them and they are going shopping with another brother and his wife without telling me. What the hell is that? We come here to do things right and they bring democracy to my place? ... You have to speak with them or else I tell them to go somewhere else."<sup>154</sup>

Celso Costa assured him he was going to speak with his wife.<sup>155</sup> At the same time, he was working on a plan that would allow him to enter Turkey under a false ID.<sup>156</sup> According to court documents, on August 10, 2013, Fabio Poças traveled to see Celso Costa in Lisbon in order to deliver the passport of Celso's older brother Rómulo, to whom Celso resembled.<sup>157</sup>

On August 16, 2013, Celso Costa boarded a flight to Sofia, Bulgaria,<sup>158</sup> and then a bus, entering Turkey easily after presenting Rómulo Costa's passport at the border.<sup>159</sup> In Istanbul, he bought a new phone and took another bus to Hatay where he contacted Saraiva, who helped him cross the border.<sup>160</sup>

In Lisbon, Fatuma Majengo gave birth to her first child with Edgar Costa. While waiting for the boy to be old enough to trav-

el, Edgar Costa continued to work with Sadjo Turé on behalf of “the company.” In early August 2013, they allegedly started preparing the journey of two British nationals recruited by Sadjo Turé in London: Khavar Masood<sup>y</sup> and Taroughi Haydari,<sup>z</sup> whom Edgar instructed to travel with “western clothes” and a “new passport.”<sup>161</sup>

On August 21, 2013, Edgar Costa booked two plane tickets for the British duo from the United Kingdom to Portugal with 794.58 euros sent by the London-based Sadjo Turé.<sup>162</sup> The next day, Masood and Haydari arrived at Lisbon airport, where they were picked up by Edgar Costa and Sandro Marques and taken to the Costas’ family apartment. There, they received their final instructions: once in Istanbul, they should buy new phones and separate bus tickets to Hatay where someone would pick them up to cross the border.<sup>163</sup> On August 23, 2013, after being escorted to the airport by Edgar Costa, Masood and Haydari departed to Turkey.<sup>164</sup>

Subsequently, Saraiva sent word that the two had safely arrived in Syria.<sup>aa</sup> In London, Sadjo Turé was pleased: he complimented Edgar Costa in Lisbon and promised to send him more recruits. “The program continues,” he said.<sup>165</sup> Through the group’s efforts, Lisbon had now become a transit hub for British foreign fighters traveling to Syria, a route that was likely to trigger less scrutiny than directly flying from the United Kingdom to Turkey. There were several reasons for this. Police in Portugal did not have legal grounds to stop such travel as it was not then a crime. Portuguese authorities were less concerned about foreign fighter travel because the Muslim community in the country was small and well-integrated. And the fact that Portugal had a relatively minor foreign fighter problem meant that arrivals from the country in Turkey likely received less scrutiny. By contrast, the United Kingdom had a much larger foreign fighter problem, with hundreds believed by the end of 2013 to have traveled to Syria.<sup>166</sup> And as the Portuguese network knew all too well from the 2012 investigation into the Cantlie-Oerlemans abduction, U.K. police had started to make arrests in relation to jihadi activity in Syria.<sup>ab</sup>

Despite Lisbon now being used as a transit hub, Edgar Costa would not remain in Portugal much longer. In early October 2013, he was ready to travel with his wife and son. The plan was for Fábio Poças and his wife to make the trip with them. But when Poças headed to London Luton airport to take a flight to Lisbon with his pregnant British wife, he was approached by the Metropolitan Police and prevented from traveling.<sup>167</sup> During questioning, he told

British police he was Catholic and that he did not have an opinion about the situation in Syria because he had different priorities in life.<sup>168</sup> Police took possession of his five mobile phones, a laptop, and £2,600 before letting him go.<sup>169</sup>

Four days later, Poças took a flight to Faro and then a bus to Lisbon. He stayed in Edgar Costa’s apartment. The plan was that his wife would travel separately and meet him in Turkey, but she changed her mind because she was not willing to travel alone and pregnant to an unknown country. During a heated argument over the phone, she asked for a divorce because he was going to jihad and would not be able to support her.<sup>170</sup>

On October 11, 2013, Edgar Costa, his wife Fatuma, and their son, accompanied by Poças, departed from Lisbon airport to Istanbul on different flights.<sup>171</sup> Once in Turkey, they followed the same route to Syria as the others had.<sup>172</sup>

With most of the group now in Syria, Sadjo Turé received what for him was good news regarding his case in the United Kingdom. On November 11, 2013, his alleged co-conspirators in the kidnapping of John Cantlie and Jeroen Oerlemans in Syria in the summer 2012—Shajul Islam, Najul Islam, and Jubayer Chowdhury—were released and all charges against them dropped.<sup>173</sup> It was publicly stated by authorities that the prosecution had relied wholly on John Cantlie and Jeroen Oerlemans’ testimony but had been unable to call either of them to testify.<sup>174</sup> <sup>ac</sup> During a phone call, Sadjo Turé remarked to his brother Cassimo, “the doc and his brother” got out because there was no evidence. “The journalists said nothing.”<sup>175</sup> <sup>ad</sup>

Around the same time, in the United Kingdom, Sadjo Turé recruited another candidate to jihad and sent him to Lisbon, asking his older brother, Cassimo, to buy plane tickets to Istanbul for the recruit and look after him while in Portugal.<sup>176</sup> However, when the young British man arrived in Turkey, he was prevented from entering the country.<sup>177</sup>

Soon, the only two members of the Portuguese network still in Europe joined their friends in Syria. On February 26, 2014, Sandro Marques, his wife Mayibongue Sibanda,<sup>ae</sup> and their daughter boarded a flight to Istanbul.<sup>178</sup> They entered Syria through Tell Abyad on March 7.<sup>179</sup> Finally, according to court documents, in late March 2014, Sadjo Turé was able to elude surveillance by authorities in the United Kingdom and get to France.<sup>180</sup> He entered Syria on April 1, 2014.<sup>181</sup> Like the others before them, he and Sandro Marquez allegedly joined Jaish al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar.<sup>182</sup>

Why, despite the active Portuguese investigation, was the group allowed to travel to Syria? According to Portuguese law at the time of their departure, it was not a crime to travel to a conflict zone with the purpose of joining a terrorist organization or obtain military training. It was only in June 2015 that the anti-terrorism law was

y Khavar Usman Masood, born October 4, 1992, in Barking, United Kingdom. Departamento Central de Investigação e Ação Penal, judicial inquiry 5/13.1JBSB, p. 2,592.

z Taroughi Haydari, born January 1, 1996, Jalalabad, Afghanistan. *Ibid.*, p. 2,592.

aa The current status and location of the British duo is not publicly known.

ab It is important to note that the United Kingdom had yet to crack down hard on foreign fighter travel to Syria. A study published in late 2013 noted that “like their continental counterparts, British authorities face problems when it comes to the prosecution of fighters. Only a few returnees have been arrested. A famous case involved the kidnapping of a British freelance photographer, John Cantlie, and a Dutch journalist, Jeroen Oerlemans, for a week in Syria in July 2012. ... However, besides these arrests, which were clearly connected to a very specific offence, namely kidnapping, ‘others who have been taking part in the armed struggle against the Assad regime are not deemed to be doing anything illegal.’” Edwin Bakker, Christophe Paulussen, and Eva Entenmann, “Dealing with European Foreign Fighters in Syria: Governance Challenges & Legal Implications,” ICCT, December 2013, p. 20.

ac John Cantlie returned to Syria in November 2012 and was abducted for the second time. He was then with American journalist James Foley. Cantlie would only resurface again in an Islamic State video in September 2014. According to *The Times*, Oerlemans “refused to give evidence for fear that it would further endanger” Cantlie. James Gordon Meek and Rhonda Schwartz, “Missing British Hostage John Cantlie Surfaces Alive in New ISIS Video,” ABC News, September 18, 2014; Catherine Philp and David Brown, “Kidnap trial doctor treats gas victims,” *Times* (London), April 7, 2017.

ad Following his release, Shajul Islam returned to Syria where he started to work as a doctor in Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham-controlled areas. Shamila Iqbal’s location is not publicly known. Philp and Brown.

ae Mayibongue Sibanda, born November 13, 1990, Zimbabwe, British citizen. Departamento Central de Investigação e Ação Penal, judicial inquiry 5/13.1JBSB, p. 9,095.

changed to criminalize traveling abroad to join a terrorist group and also the public apology of terrorism.<sup>183</sup> Soon after the change in law, Portuguese authorities issued European and International Arrest Warrants against all eight male members of the Portuguese Islamic State cell.<sup>184</sup> The case underlined how important such legislation was in providing European countries powers to stem the tide of foreign fighter travel.

### Online Monitoring

There was much change in Syria during the course of 2013. In March 2013, KaM had merged with two other groups to become Jaish al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar. In November of that year, its leader, Omar al-Shishani, swore allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of what was then called the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).<sup>185</sup> The group of Portuguese followed suit.<sup>186</sup>

After the Portuguese group returned to Syria, investigators were only able to track their activities and whereabouts by monitoring social media and their irregular phone calls to their families in which they would usually say they were working in Turkey<sup>187</sup> as well as intelligence provided by Western allies.<sup>188</sup> On his Facebook page in early 2014, Fabio Poças identified himself as a “mujahid/foot soldier/sniper” of “Dawlah Islamiyah fi Iraq wa Shaam” living in Aleppo.<sup>189</sup> He would show himself in Al Bab, and in January 2014, he posted pictures on a “150 cars convoy traveling throughout the desert.”<sup>190</sup> He called it “Dawla Convoy” going from Aleppo to Raqqa.<sup>191</sup> That same month, ISIL fought other rebel groups in Raqqa and took definitive control of the city, making it its capital.<sup>192</sup>

On April 1, 2014, a video of a Western jihadi wearing a black balaclava standing on the banks of the Euphrates was posted on FISyria.com,<sup>193</sup> the official website for Abu Omar al-Shishani’s faction.<sup>194</sup> In the video, he was identified as Abu Isa Andaluzi from Dawlat al Islamiyah, (or in other words ISIL). Speaking in English, he appealed for Ukrainian Muslims to support jihad in Syria and asked Muslim women to travel to the region where sharia law was being implemented. Portuguese authorities immediately recognized him as Celso Costa.<sup>195</sup>

Around this time, Fabio Poças, Celso and Edgar Costa, Sadjo Turé, and Sandro Marques had settled in Manbij with their families.<sup>196</sup> On June 11, 2014, Poças posted a video on Facebook showing ISIL militants in Manbij celebrating the group’s conquest of the city of Mosul.<sup>197</sup> He was the most active on social media, regularly posting pictures of himself, face uncovered, alone or in the company of known jihadis like the former German rapper Denis Cuspert.<sup>198</sup> af

Nero Saraiva allegedly continued to play a senior role within ISIL. Information shared with Portuguese authorities by intelligence agencies on May 26, 2014, indicated that he held a leadership role within the organization, which allowed him to actively participate “in planning, and execution, of all actions perpetrated by ISIL, namely the ones directed against western targets, including hostage taking, kidnaps and eventually other actions against targets or interests outside Syria.”<sup>199</sup> According to the same information, his group had been relocated to Raqqa.<sup>200</sup>

Two months later, on July 10, 2014, Saraiva shared his cryptic post on Twitter and Facebook: “Message to America the Islamic State is making a new movie. Thank u for the actors.”<sup>201</sup> Forty days later, on August 19, 2014, the Islamic State published the execution video of James Foley with the title “Message to America.” As already

outlined, Saraiva’s tweet gained a new meaning. For intelligence and police officers, it was clear he had advance knowledge of James Foley fate.<sup>202</sup> And he was soon connected by Western intelligence services to the group of Mohammed Emwazi, the terrorist known as Jihadi John.<sup>203</sup>

When the James Foley execution video was released, Saraiva was living in Manbij. According to *The Sunday Times*, Ahmad Walid Rashidi, one of the few Western hostages held captive by the Islamic State to be freed alive, believes that during the summer of 2014 he saw Saraiva at a police and judicial building used by the terrorist group in Manbij: “He had a gun at the office,” he stated.<sup>204</sup>

Saraiva’s cryptic “Message to America” on social media was not immediately reported on by media organizations. But when his tweet was quoted in the press in November 2014,<sup>205</sup> Saraiva disappeared from social media as his accounts on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram were blocked.<sup>206</sup> His whereabouts became unknown. Fábio Poças described him as a “lone wolf” to whom he had no access.<sup>207</sup> His family outside the conflict zone lost track of him.<sup>208</sup> For the next four years, he would be mentioned occasionally in reports shared by intelligence agencies when a prisoner or an Islamic State repentant claimed to have seen him in a certain place.<sup>209</sup>

### The Fate of the Network

As the international campaign to defeat the Islamic State developed, the Portuguese Judiciary Police started to receive unconfirmed reports that Sandro Marques had died in coalition bombings in August 2014.<sup>210</sup> In early September 2015, authorities intercepted several conversations in which the mother and father of Sadjo Turé talked with relatives about their son’s death in Syria.<sup>211</sup>

Two months later, on November 12, 2015, the eve of the Paris terrorist attacks, the Costa brothers appeared in an Islamic State propaganda video published online by Furat Media, face uncovered.<sup>212</sup> According to the video, the images were recorded during the Eid al Adha celebration that took place between September 23 and 27, 2015. “We sacrifice the sheep according to the Sunnah, but we also kill kafir,” Celso Costa said, with his brother at his side.<sup>213</sup>

By the time the Syrian Democratic Forces freed Manbij in August 2016, Edgar Costa, Celso Costa, and Fábio Poças had left the town with their families and moved to Raqqa.<sup>214</sup> The Costa brothers contacted their father and older brother, Rómulo Costa, in order to organize an escape from Islamic State territory, along with their wives and children.<sup>215</sup> Both brothers had taken second wives in Syria.<sup>ag</sup>

As for Poças, he never showed any intention to leave.<sup>216</sup> Like his friends, Poças had married in Syria, in his case to Angela Barreto,<sup>ah</sup> a Portuguese-Dutch woman who had traveled alone to Syria to meet him in August 2014.<sup>217</sup> They had a son and a daughter while in Syria. Poças also managed to convince his first wife, Ruzina Khanam,<sup>ai</sup> to join him in October 2015 with their child.<sup>218</sup> When the SDF launched the offensive to take Raqqa in June 2017, Poças and his

ag During their second trip to Syria, both Costa brothers took second wives. Celso Costa married a German woman named Sabina Tafilovij while Edgar Costa married an Indonesian named Seri Kejiki. Departamento Central de Investigação e Ação Penal, judicial inquiry 5/13.1JBLBSB, p. 9.246.

ah Angela Sofia Barreto Dionísio, born August 2, 1995, the Netherlands. Departamento Central de Investigação e Ação Penal, judicial inquiry 5/13.1JBLBSB, p. 9.247.

ai Ruzina Khanam, born January 26, 1992, United Kingdom. Departamento Central de Investigação e Ação Penal, judicial inquiry 5/13.1JBLBSB, p. 9.247.

af Denis Cuspert, known as Deso Dogg and Abu Talha al Almani.

wives and children moved to the Al Mayadeen area.<sup>219</sup> When that town was taken, they ran from village to village. Eventually, the group split. Fabio Poças was killed while he was crossing the Euphrates, a family member told the author.<sup>220</sup> Ruzina Khanam and her daughter's fate is unknown. Angela Barreto and her children then stayed under Nero Saraiva's responsibility and went to live with him and his family in Saffa.<sup>221</sup> She and Saraiva would eventually marry and move to Baghouz in late 2018.<sup>222</sup>

In early August 2018, the Judiciary Police received through international cooperation channels information about Edgar Costa presence along the Euphrates, near the Iraqi-Syrian border.<sup>223</sup> That same intelligence mentioned he was establishing contacts with the Islamic State hierarchy and his intention to leave Syria.<sup>224</sup> At the time, he had sent to Portugal a list of names of women and children so that his father could buy plane tickets for them all. The plan was for them to travel directly to Angola, where the family patriarch had business interests related to oil exploitation.<sup>225</sup> But his father had problems understanding the Arabic names and was not able to deliver the tickets.<sup>226</sup> Eventually Edgar and Celso Costa's contact with their family in Portugal and the United Kingdom stopped.<sup>227</sup> In September 2018, Portuguese authorities received information through international cooperation channels that Edgar and Celso Costa had been killed.<sup>228</sup> Their wives and children were captured by the SDF and sent to Roj and Ain Issa camps.<sup>229</sup>

Returning Edgar and Celso's wives and children to Europe became a priority for the Costa family. The patriarch, Manuel da Costa, discussed it several times on the phone with his son, Rómulo, who was living in London and who for several years had not been allowed to leave the United Kingdom because he was suspected of terrorism financing.<sup>230</sup> But in June 2019, with all charges dropped, he traveled to Portugal for the first time in almost 10 years—only to be detained<sup>231</sup> and charged later with terrorism support and financing.<sup>232</sup> The Judiciary Police and the Public Prosecutor believe that, back in 2014, he willingly gave his passport to his brother Celso Costa, so that the later could travel to Syria.<sup>233</sup> Rómulo Costa denies all charges<sup>234</sup> with his lawyer, Lopes Guerreiro, arguing that there is no concrete evidence of his alleged crimes, only "suppositions."<sup>235</sup> Rómulo Costa remains in detention while awaiting trial, with proceedings scheduled to start on September 8, 2020.

As already outlined, also among those charged and facing trial is Cassimo Turé, Sadjo Turé's older brother. The Portuguese Public Prosecutor charged him for support of a terrorist organization, recruitment, and terrorism financing for what is alleged to be his role in obtaining money from fraudulent schemes and his help in receiving in Lisbon the recruits sent to Syria.<sup>236</sup> Cassimo Turé denies all charges and claims he was just doing his brother a favor, not knowing Sadjo's exact goals.<sup>237</sup> Due to his cooperation with authorities, Cassimo Turé was allowed to await trial while living at liberty in London.<sup>238</sup>

In the end, Nero Saraiva, the first to arrive in Syria, was the only one of the adult male Syria travelers to survive. In early 2019, while walking among the tents in a makeshift Islamic State encampment in Baghouz, he and his most recent wife, Angela Barreto, were hit by bomb shrapnel. Saraiva was severely injured in his legs. Angela was hit in her head. A few days later, while in their tent, they were hit again by coalition bombing: this time, the Portuguese jihadi was injured in his head and shoulder, and collapsed.<sup>239</sup> A daughter of Angela's was also hit by shrapnel in her head.<sup>240</sup>

With the injured allowed to leave Baghouz, they left in March 2019. Angela was sent with the children to the Syrian Democratic

Forces-run Al-Hol camp, where her older daughter died from her injuries.<sup>241</sup> Saraiva was taken to a prison hospital.<sup>242</sup> Debriefed by coalition forces, he claimed to have five wives and ex-wives and a total of 10 children.<sup>243</sup>

Six months later, fully recovered from his injuries, he was interviewed by a Kurdish news agency and confirmed what Portuguese investigators already knew about his steps until he entered Syria in 2012.<sup>244</sup> During that interview, Saraiva claimed that in late 2014, he was part of a unit of foreigners called Katibat Musab al-Zarqawi and that for three months, he was tasked with registering new recruits that came from Europe.<sup>245</sup> He claimed that he then changed jobs and started doing reconnaissance "in all areas."<sup>246</sup> He also claimed that following an injury, he spent almost one year in Mosul for treatment, before returning to Raqqa and reverting to his reconnaissance duties until 2016.<sup>247</sup> After this, he claimed he stayed most of the time at home or on the run from airstrikes. He never mentioned any involvement in terrorist activities, fighting, kidnappings, or the executions of foreigners.<sup>248</sup>

Following his capture, Saraiva remained under SDF detention in Syria until he was transferred to coalition forces' custody in Iraq.<sup>249</sup> He has been questioned there several times in the last few months (spring/summer 2020) about his role within the Islamic State and his knowledge about Western citizens' kidnappings and executions<sup>250</sup> and is considered one of "the most high value suspected ISIS detainees."<sup>251</sup>

During that period, he asked Portuguese authorities to be repatriated to Portugal via the International Red Cross.<sup>252</sup> With the international arrest warrant issued for him by Portuguese authorities, he could be extradited to Portugal to stand trial and answer for his alleged crimes. Alternatively, he could face trial and the death penalty in Iraq.<sup>253</sup> A key question will be whether he eventually reveals what he knows about the fate of Western hostages.

## Conclusions

This case study sheds significant light on the foreign fighter pipeline that operated in the last decade between Europe and Syria and the challenges authorities faced in stopping the flow. The foreign fighter pipeline to Syria involved networks that transcended national borders in Europe with Lisbon becoming a transit hub for British fighters. But different laws in different countries when it came to foreign fighter travel hampered authorities' ability to slow or shut down the pipeline. The case highlights the importance of legislation against foreign fighter travel as Portuguese investigators were previously powerless to stop the travel, only granted those powers in 2015 when the anti-terrorism law was updated to criminalize travel to a conflict zone and apology for terrorism. Notwithstanding the legal limitations placed on Portuguese authorities, questions should be asked about whether more could have been done to stop the members of the network moving back and forth between Syria and Europe.

The case study underlines the fundamental role in information sharing between countries in investigating and dismantling terrorist networks. Portuguese authorities only became aware of the existence of a Portuguese jihadi network when they were informed by their British counterparts.

The case study also illustrates the importance of fraudulent schemes to raise money to finance foreign fighter travel from Europe to Syria, especially the apparent ease with which they managed to obtain state subsidies and loans available to foreign students in

the United Kingdom.<sup>aj</sup> As outlined above, the network was able to send thousands of euros to Turkey and Syria through money transfer agencies, even after they had been put under investigation.

The case study also points to the foreign fighter mobilization to Syria being self-propelled to a significant degree. The Portuguese extremists profiled in this case study exhibited much self-initiative and had to make ad hoc arrangements to get to Syria without raising attention. They tended to find the cheapest way to travel, learning over time how to identify different routes and points of entry in Turkey.

Once on the ground in Syria, Europeans tended to group together and recruit friends they left behind in Europe, according to the picture painted by this case study. The ones who arrived in Syria in early 2012 and 2013 ended up playing key roles within the Islamic State. They moved between different locations, mostly between Hraytan, Manbij, and Raqqa.

The case study illustrates how foreign fighter networks created connectivity between extremists in Europe and jihadis on the ground in Syria/Iraq, with in this case Saraiva allegedly functioning

aj A variety of fraudulent schemes have been observed in European countries with respect to Islamic State-linked individuals. Magnus Ranstorp, "Microfinancing the Caliphate: How the Islamic State is Unlocking the Assets of European Recruits," *CTC Sentinel* 9:5 (2016); Mette Mayli Albæk, Puk Damsgård, Mahmoud Shiekh Ibrahim, Troels Kingo, and Jens Vithner, "The Controller: How Basil Hassan Launched Islamic State Terror into the Skies," *CTC Sentinel* 13:5 (2020).

as a magnet drawing back members of the network to the jihadi battleground. The fact that the network was composed of several sets of brothers and childhood friends illustrates the importance of kinship and friendship bonds in European jihadi networks.<sup>254</sup>

Women had an important role in this foreign fighter network as well and appear to have been willing to travel to a conflict zone, with almost all bringing their children. One of the women traveled while her husband was under surveillance in the United Kingdom, and another proceeded with her journey even when her husband was stopped at the Turkish border. The case illustrated their importance and that women joined the jihad out of their own free will rather than, as sometimes is assumed, forced by their husbands to travel. To the contrary, the wives also help propel the jihadi journey of their husbands.

The case illustrates the importance of social media to gather evidence not merely on foreign fighter presence in Syria, but also of their activities. There is a fundamental need for social media companies to cooperate with national authorities who are looking to build judicial cases against their respective foreign fighters.

Finally, the Portuguese case might provide an example regarding what to do to the thousands of European jihadis detained in Syria and Iraq. Nero Saraiva, the most senior alleged member of the network, is the subject of an international arrest warrant issued by Portuguese authorities and is set to go on trial in absentia in September. There seems to be no reason why that warrant could not be carried out so that he could stand trial for his crimes. **CTC**

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# The Islamic State's Strategic Trajectory in Africa: Key Takeaways from its Attack Claims

By Tomasz Rolbiecki, Pieter Van Ostaeyen, and Charlie Winter

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**The Islamic State's global insurgent brand increasingly depends on the activities of its affiliates in Africa, according to a new analysis of its attack claims in Africa. Two streams of data—the first, an 83-week aggregation of attack statistics published in the Islamic State newspaper *Al Naba* between December 28, 2018, and July 31, 2020; the second, an exhaustive collection of Africa-focused attack reports prepared and distributed by the Islamic State's Central Media Diwan in 2019—shed significant light on the scale and nature of the Islamic State threat to Africa. In particular, they highlight the Nigeria-based faction of Islamic State West Africa Province as a key strategic threat, noting that per the Islamic State's own claims, it is engaging in a significantly higher intensity war than any other affiliate of the self-proclaimed caliphate, including those based in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere.**

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In March 2019, the Islamic State was declared defeated after it was routed by the coalition-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in the town of Baghouz in eastern Syria.<sup>1</sup> In the time that has elapsed since, the fallacy of this declaration of defeat was rendered apparent countless times—whether by mass-casualty terrorism or the Islamic State's expansion into new lands.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, by the summer of 2020, it had become resolutely clear that the Islamic State was a changed organization, but by no means a beaten one.

This has been most apparent on the continent of Africa. The

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Islamic State has had an active presence in north, west, and east Africa for years, but in 2019, the military potential of its affiliates there—especially in west and central Africa and the Sinai Peninsula—surpassed that of its residual core in the Levant. This is most starkly the case in northeastern Nigeria, where its supporters have been engaging in attacks that have exceeded the scale and complexity of those being deployed by their counterparts in Syria and Iraq for at least a year now.

Exploring the group's insurgent prospects in Africa, this article makes an operational assessment of the Islamic State's provincial and non-provincial affiliates on the continent based on two streams of data—the first, an 83-week aggregation of attack statistics published in the Islamic State newspaper *Al Naba* between December 28, 2018, and July 31, 2020; the second, an exhaustive collection of Africa-focused attack reports prepared and distributed by the Islamic State's Central Media Diwan in 2019 via an outlet called the Nashir News Agency. Through the lens of these data streams, the authors evaluate the geographic, tactical, and targeting characteristics of the Islamic State's presence across Africa, identifying its key hotspots, emergent strongholds, and potential future trajectory.

The article proceeds as follows. After a brief discussion of the data collection and analysis methodology, the authors disaggregate the data by wilaya (province), focusing first on West Africa and the Sahel, before moving on to the Sinai Peninsula, Somalia, Central Africa, and Libya, Tunisia, and Algeria (which are considered collectively due to the comparatively low amount of Islamic State-reported activities in them).<sup>3</sup> For each location, the authors describe contemporary attack trends (based on the December 28, 2018, to July 31, 2020, *Al Naba* dataset), contextualize the recent history of the affiliate in question, and identify key operational dynamics (based on attack reports from 2019).

The conclusion considers the implications of this data in aggregate, holding that the Islamic State's forays into Africa are no longer a sideshow to its operational core in Syria and Iraq. Rather, its brand as a globalized insurgency is dependent now more than ever on the military activities of its affiliates there.

## Methodology

This assessment is based on two complementary datasets, both of which were drawn from the Islamic State's official propaganda output. The first dataset, which is used for high-level quantitative analysis of Islamic State attack trends in Africa between 2019 and 2020, is drawn from the aggregated weekly statistics the Islamic State publishes in its newspaper *Al Naba*. In accordance with the

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a Note that while Tunisia was one of the first territories outside of Syria and Iraq in which the Islamic State claimed to have an official presence, the organization has so far refrained from establishing a province there. The reasons for this are unclear.

Al Naba publishing cycle, its start date is December 28, 2018. Because the authors use this dataset to track trends through both 2019 and 2020, its end data is July 31, 2020. This dataset is henceforth referred to as “the Al Naba dataset.”

The second dataset comprises every operation claim published via Nashir, the group’s official media distribution channel, in relation to Africa in 2019. Its start date is January 1, 2019, and end date December 31, 2019. For sake of clarity, this dataset is henceforth referred to as “the Nashir dataset.” This dataset was used to quantify attacks in 2019 and for the qualitative analysis of Islamic State attacks (location, type, scale, and target, etc.) deployed in/by the different wilayat.<sup>b</sup>

### The Al Naba Dataset

The authors use the Al Naba dataset to ascertain Islamic State attack trends in Africa during the 83-week period between December 28, 2018, and July 31, 2020. This dataset relates how many attacks, according to the Islamic State, occurred on a weekly basis in a given wilaya in Africa. Besides total kill and casualty counts, it does not provide specific details as to what exactly those attacks looked like. That is because this dataset was drawn from already-aggregated statistics prepared and distributed by the Islamic State in its weekly newsletter, Al Naba. Specifically, these numbers originally appeared in the “Harvest of Soldiers” infographic series, which has been running on a weekly basis since July 2018.<sup>3</sup>

The Al Naba dataset’s start date is December 28, 2018, because each issue of Al Naba provides aggregated statistics for the seven days preceding its publication. Issue 163, which appeared on January 3, was the first issue of Al Naba to be published in 2019. Hence, that issue covers the period between December 28, 2018, and January 3, 2019.

Visualized in Figures 6 and 7, this dataset shows high-level attack trends in Africa in 2019 and 2020.<sup>c</sup>

### The Nashir Dataset

The authors use the Nashir dataset—which, disaggregated by wilaya and relating detailed information about individual attacks claimed by the Islamic State, is rich with tactical, geospatial, and targeting data—to develop an understanding of the full spectrum of Islamic State operations in Africa in 2019. This spectrum includes anything from its affiliates’ sporadic raids in southern Libya to their more consistent, higher impact operations in northeastern Nigeria. The authors are able to do this because this dataset comprises a complete sample of detailed Islamic State operation claims relating

b The authors draw on two datasets rather than one because the Al Naba dataset covers a significantly longer period of time and is, consequently, more up to date. The Nashir dataset, while smaller, is more detailed and therefore allows for a much higher degree of analytical granularity. In working with these complementary datasets, it builds on other recent scholarship on the Islamic State in Africa like Jacob Zenn, “ISIS in Africa: The caliphate’s next frontier,” Center for Global Policy, May 26, 2020, and Wassim Nasr, “ISIS in Africa: The end of the ‘Sahel exception,’” Center for Global Policy, June 2, 2020.

c Figures 6 and 7 are derived solely from the Al Naba dataset and contain no data from the Nashir dataset. But, as Figure 1 indicates, there is a high degree of correlation between the Al Naba dataset and the Nashir dataset. This suggests that, notwithstanding the fact that Al Naba usually reports a higher number of attacks than Nashir, the statistics it quotes are grounded in more than just rhetoric.

to Africa in 2019, all of them prepared by its Central Media Diwan (i.e., not the provincial affiliates themselves, which, as officially designated affiliates of the Islamic State, do not have their own media presence).<sup>4</sup>

These claims were collected by the third author exclusively from Telegram, a privacy-maximizing social media platform favored by violent extremists for propaganda distribution (among other things).<sup>4</sup> In 2019, two outlets were charged with distributing all official Islamic State communications: the Nashir network, which was tasked with disseminating materials produced by central and provincial media units; and the Amaq News Agency, which essentially acted as its newswire service. Operating alongside these was a separate, supporter-run dissemination hub called the Nashir News Agency (note: despite the name, this entity is distinct from the Nashir network, which is internal to the Islamic State).<sup>5</sup> The Nashir News Agency aggregated all posts from both Nashir and the Amaq News Agency on a minute-by-minute basis. It was from this hub, the Nashir News Agency, that the Nashir dataset was compiled.

Prior to the analysis, the authors filtered the Nashir dataset so that it only contained operation claims published in 2019 in relation to Africa. This involved removing all photo, audio, and video files. This was done to help avoid duplication. Photo, audio, and video content only cover a small number of attacks and only provide supplementary coverage of attacks claimed in statements. Moreover, until June 2020 when the Amaq News Agency stopped publishing news bulletins altogether, the Islamic State almost always issued duplicate claims for its attacks—one prepared by the Central Media Diwan and one by the Amaq News Agency. To avoid accounting for duplicates, all Amaq News Agency claims were also removed from the dataset. In total, this cleaning process resulted in the exclusion of some 5,248 pieces of content from the corpus, leaving 453 Central Media Diwan-prepared and Nashir News Agency-disseminated operation bulletins relating to Islamic State activities in Africa in 2019. Each of these was then manually processed by the authors to make sure that no duplicates reports found their way into the dataset.

After this, each bulletin was coded according to several criteria, among them:

- Week and date of the attack;
- Longitude and latitude of the attack location (as visualized in Figure 2);
- Wilaya, country, and region to which the report relates (as visualized in Figures 2, 3, and 4);
- Weapons used in the attack;
- Attack type (i.e., ambush, assault, assassination, bombing, etc.);
- Target (i.e., Nigerian Army, Egyptian Federal Police, etc.);
- Target type (i.e., military, intelligence, civilian, government,

d It is worth noting that this stream of data was not affected by Europol’s joint action to disrupt Islamic State networks on Telegram in November 2019. While the Islamic State supporter ecosystem was left severely depleted by those actions, the Nashir News Agency’s ability to provide a continuous flow of Islamic State news and propaganda was left unimpeded. For more on the Europol action, see Amarnath Amarasingam, “A View from the CT Foxhole: An Interview with an Official at Europol’s EU Internet Referral Unit,” *CTC Sentinel* 13:2 (2020). For more on how Telegram is used by VEOs and their supporters in the West, see Bennett Clifford and Helen Powell, “Encrypted Extremism: Inside the English-Speaking Islamic State Ecosystem on Telegram,” GWU Program on Extremism, June 2019.

etc.) (as visualized in Figure 5); and

- When mentioned, number of kills reported.

This data from the posts on the Nashir News Agency is visualized in Figures 1 to 5.

### Correlating the Datasets

While the two datasets are structurally distinct and of a moderately different size (453 attacks are recorded in the Nashir dataset versus 595 in the Al Naba dataset), they correlate closely, as indicated in Figure 1. The Islamic State's explanation for the numerical discrepancy is that not all attacks are separately claimed through Central Media Diwan bulletins for reasons of operational security.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, some attack claims in the Nashir dataset mention two or more different locations. In the Al Naba dataset, they are listed separately.<sup>7</sup>

Notwithstanding this variance, the correlation between the two datasets is clear from Figure 1. Based on it, the authors are confident that the two datasets are reflective of each other with regard to the quantitative evolution of the threat during the period the datasets overlap.

### Validity of the Data

Given the provenance of both sets of data, it is important to approach them with a highly critical eye. They were, after all, disseminated by the Islamic State with a distinct strategic intent in mind: to demonstrate the reach of its global affiliates and amplify their kinetic capabilities. That being said, it would be wrong to dismiss them simply because they are 'propaganda.' As the U.S.-led Combined Joint Task Force Operation Inherent Resolve, which was formed in 2014 to combat the Islamic State, has itself conceded, the Islamic State's attack reporting is largely accurate as an indicative measure,<sup>8</sup> even if it obfuscates at times and exaggerates at others. Hence, provided they are treated as strategic indicators of activity

trends and not definitive evidence of specific operations, the utility of these data points as analytical markers is significant.

### Analysis

#### West Africa Province

It is in West Africa and the Greater Sahara that supporters of the Islamic State, fighting under the banner of Wilayat Gharb Ifriqiyya (West Africa Province, henceforth ISWAP), have the largest and most sophisticated presence. In 2019, attacks claimed under that moniker occurred in no fewer than six countries—Nigeria, Niger, Cameroon, Chad, Mali, and Burkina Faso.

As shown in Figure 6, ISWAP's reported activities occurred at a steady pace across 2019 and the first six months of 2020. The relatively steady trajectory of its attacks data indicates that it deployed operations with a high degree of regularity throughout the 18 months in question. While the cumulative casualties line in Figure 7 is less regular, it too climbs at a fairly consistent pace. (The occasionally steep inclines indicate points at which ISWAP carried out particularly impactful operations, like its June 9, 2020, massacre in Gubio LGA (local government area), in which it killed dozens of civilian non-combatants as a punishment for their purportedly starting a self-defense unit in order to protect their community from attacks and cattle from being stolen.<sup>9</sup> In any case, it is clear that in late 2019, there was a jump in the tempo of ISWAP attacks and the rate of casualties inflicted by the group, which has since been sustained as shown by a steeper gradient since then in the West Africa curves in Figures 6 and 7. Even though it is nominally a single, unified entity, ISWAP consists of two distinct elements that are defined by the geographical remit of their operations; one is active around the area of Lake Chad, and the other, which is also known as Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), is active in southeastern Mali, western Niger, and northeastern Burkina Faso (the area known as Liptako-Gourma). The first originated in 2002

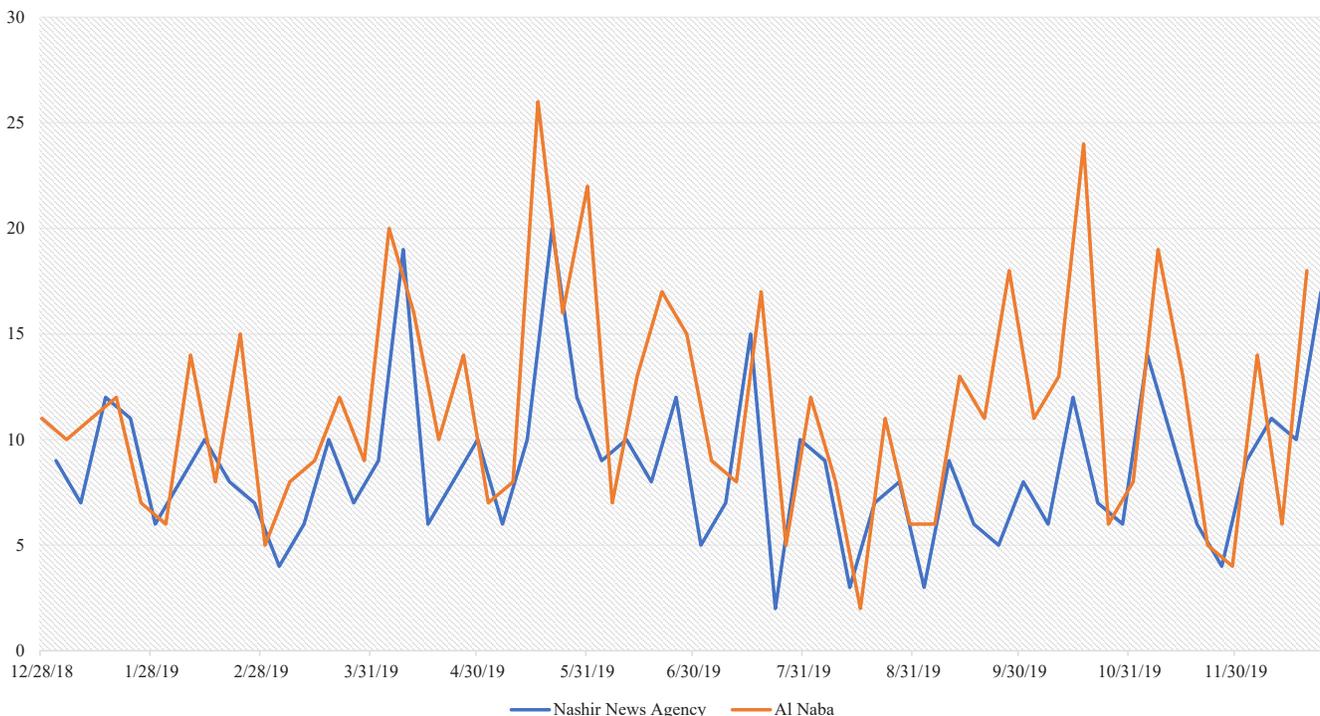


Figure 1: Correlation between the Nashir dataset and the Al Naba dataset with regard to number of weekly attacks in Africa during period of overlap

as Jama'at Ahl al-Sunnah li-Da'wah wa-l-Jihad (JAS, also known as Boko Haram).<sup>10</sup> When its then leader Abubakar Shekau pledged allegiance to then Islamic State caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in March 2015, JAS became a part of the Islamic State.<sup>11</sup> In August 2016, Abu Mus'ab al-Barnawi (a son of JAS' founder, Muhammad Yusuf) deposed Shekau and became ISWAP's leader, leaving Shekau and some loyal fighters to continue on as JAS.<sup>12</sup> In the 18 months that followed, ISWAP was greatly weakened. Indeed, it took it over a year to rebuild its strength and once more conduct strategically significant attacks against local security forces. In March 2019, Abu Mus'ab was replaced by Abu 'Abdullah al-Barnawi as *wali*, but unlike Shekau, the former Barnawi did not leave to create a new faction.<sup>13</sup> Currently, the Lake Chad-centric faction of ISWAP is active primarily in the areas around the lake in the northeastern Nigerian states of Borno and Yobe, and as of February 2020, its size was estimated by the United Nations to be around 5,000 fighters.<sup>14</sup> Note

that this figure excludes those in Shekau's post-ISWAP offshoot.

The origins of the Liptako-Gourma subgroup, which is also commonly referred to as ISGS, can be traced back to May 2015, when one Adnan Abu Walid Sahraoui and his Mali-based faction of fighters pledged allegiance to al-Baghdadi.<sup>15</sup> Notably, the pledge was not recognized until October 2016 and was not formally accepted by the Islamic State's central leadership until April 2019.<sup>16</sup> Once it was, al-Sahraoui's group was folded into ISWAP. It claimed its first

e However, in March 2019, prior to al-Baghdadi's acceptance of the pledge, the Islamic State's Central Media Diwan published a photo of seven fighters, titled "Soldiers of the Caliphate in Burkina Faso." This was the first indication of a possible integration of ISGS into the Islamic State's structure. See Héni Nsaibia and Caleb Weiss, "The End of the Sahelian Anomaly: How the Global Conflict between the Islamic State and al-Qa'ida Finally Came to West Africa." *CTC Sentinel* 13:7 (2020).

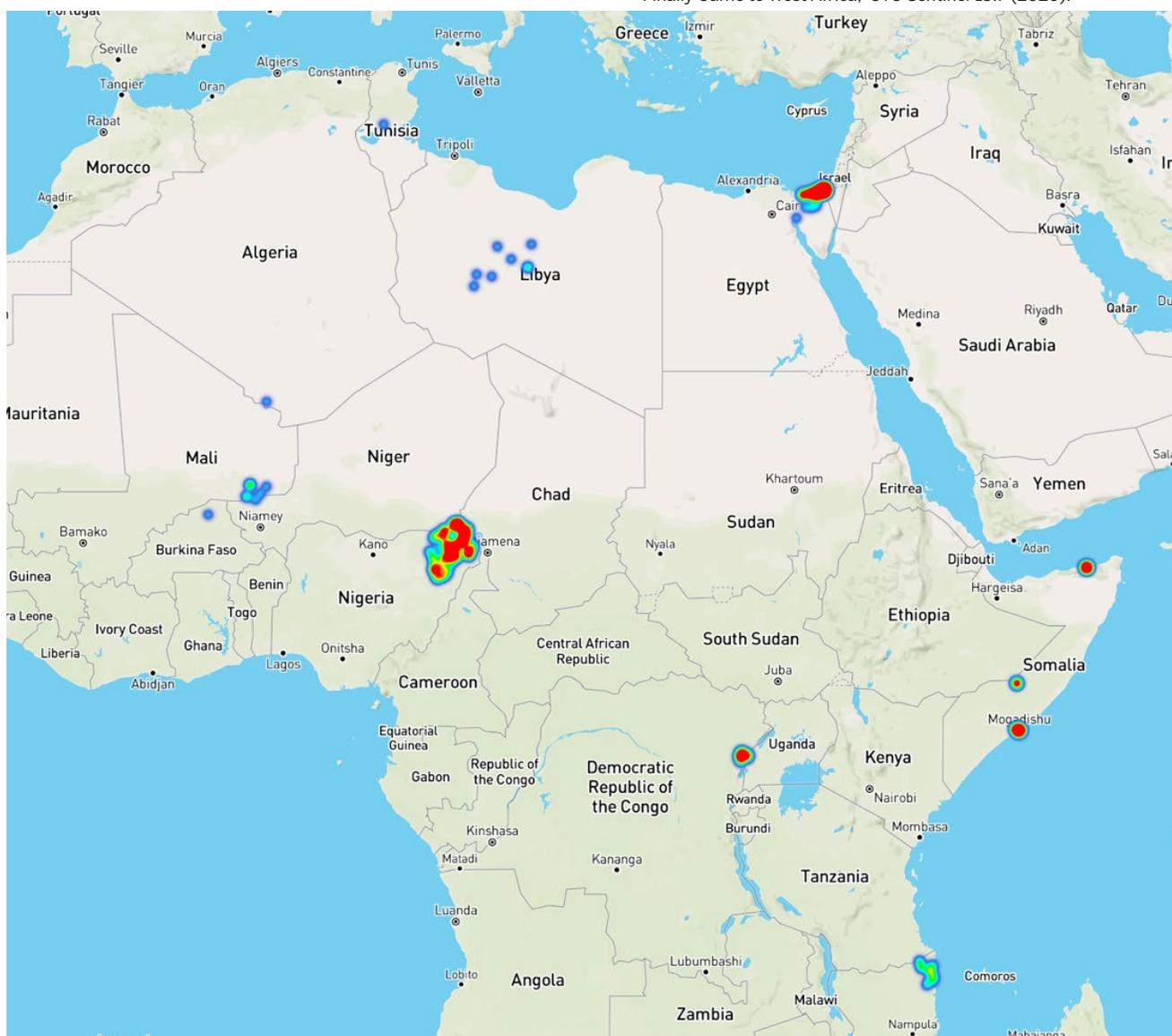


Figure 2: Heat map showing attacks reported by the Islamic State in Africa in 2019 (Source: Nashir dataset). The size of the clustering indicates the spread of the attacks claimed by the Islamic State, while colors of the clustering indicates the concentration of the attacks (with blue for low concentration, with green and yellow in that order the next two rising levels of concentration, and red for high). The southern part and northwestern edge of Africa is cropped off this map because no Islamic State attacks were claimed in these areas during the period in question. © Mapbox © OpenStreetMap

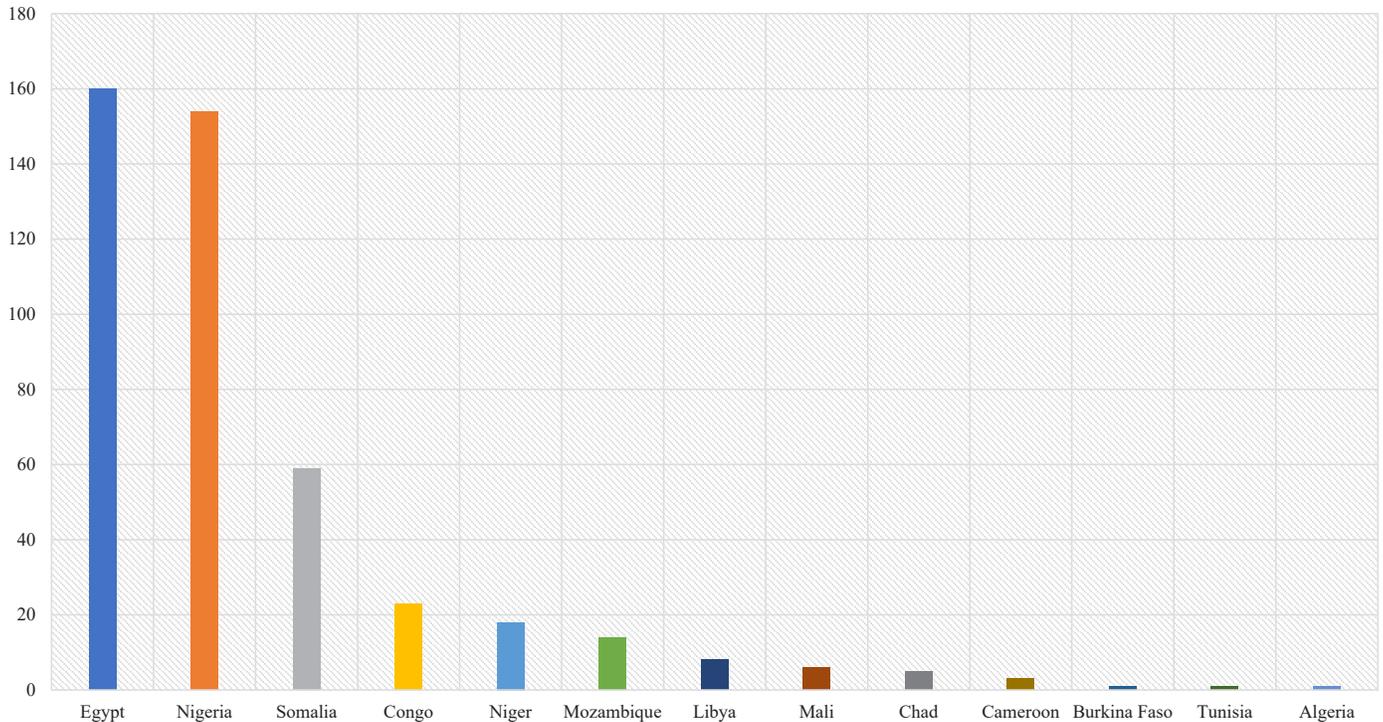


Figure 3: Attacks reported in Africa in 2019 (by country) as reported by the Islamic State (Source: Nashir dataset)

attack under this banner on April 12, 2019. Due to the fact that its theater of operations was distinct from that of the Nigeria-based ISWAP faction, it is still commonly referred to as the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara, even though, in the bureaucratic nomenclature of the Islamic State central authority, it is part and parcel of ISWAP.<sup>17</sup> In any case, after its inception, it launched several deadly attacks across the region, but it was not until its ambush on U.S. special forces near the village of Tongo Tongo in Niger in October 2017 that it gained global notoriety.<sup>18 f</sup> Writing in the August 2018 edition of *CTC Sentinel*, Jason Warner and Charlotte Hulme estimated its size to be around 425 fighters.<sup>19</sup> Based on the recent tenor of its operations, though, it would appear to be a good deal larger now.

Per the authors' data, ISWAP—that is, both the Lake Chad-based faction and the Mali-Burkina Faso-Niger-based faction—claimed some 186 attacks in 2019. Of these, 177 occurred in the area of Lake Chad at the hands of Barnawi's faction and the remaining nine were deployed farther west, in the Sahel, at the hands of Sahraoui's subgroup. In any case, the collective total constitutes 41 percent of all attacks in Africa claimed by the Islamic State that year. The claims were distributed fairly evenly over the course of the year, though there was a slight decrease in reported activities in July, August, and September 2019, in which just six, 10, and 11 attacks were reported, respectively. This could have been due to the fact that seasonal rains encumbered ISWAP operations, or it may have been a result of a temporary change of strategy. In any case, in the majority of ISWAP's attacks (94 percent), its fighters reportedly targeted local military forces. Notably, though, Christians were overtly targeted

nine times toward the end of 2019, with a spike of attacks around Christmas. This came on the back of a declaration at the end of September 2019 that a new front would be opened against Christians residing in Borno state in particular.<sup>20</sup>

In terms of their tactical characteristics, most of ISWAP's operations were conventional and semi-conventional assaults on military bases. Suicide bombings took place only as suicide vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (SVBIEDs). In total, five such attacks were claimed in 2019—three in Nigeria, one in Burkina Faso, and one in Niger. Judging by the Islamic State's claims over the number of people killed, ISWAP was by far the most impactful in terms of numbers of individuals killed or injured of all the Islamic State's African affiliates, something indicated starkly in Figure 7. Indeed, on no fewer than 28 occasions, it reported the killing of at least 15 people.

Geographically speaking, there are few discernible patterns in relation to ISWAP's Greater Sahara faction, the activities of which were fairly sporadic and widely dispersed throughout 2019. However, in the context of its Nigeria-based counterpart, the story is markedly different, with attacks tightly clustered throughout northeastern and southwestern Borno State and, to a lesser degree, in the eastern part of Yobe State. This kind of clustering, which is simultaneously concentrated and locally dispersed, suggests that in 2019, ISWAP fighters in that part of Nigeria enjoyed greater freedom of movement than most other locations in which the Islamic State has an operational presence in Africa. This is likely due to two reasons: one, ISWAP, due to the historic activities of its previous iterations, has been active in Borno State for many years now and, hence, is deeply entrenched in the region and familiar with its unique human and geographic topology; and two, in the second half of 2019, it was able to take advantage of the Nigerian military's newly minted "super camp" strategy, which meant the army secured bigger towns and cities in the region with a hefty military presence but left their

f The footage from the Tongo Tongo ambush was later used in the Islamic State's propaganda release. See Islamic State, "Then It Will Be For Them A [Source Of] Regret - Wilayat Gharb Ifriqiyyah," via Jihadology, January 10, 2020.

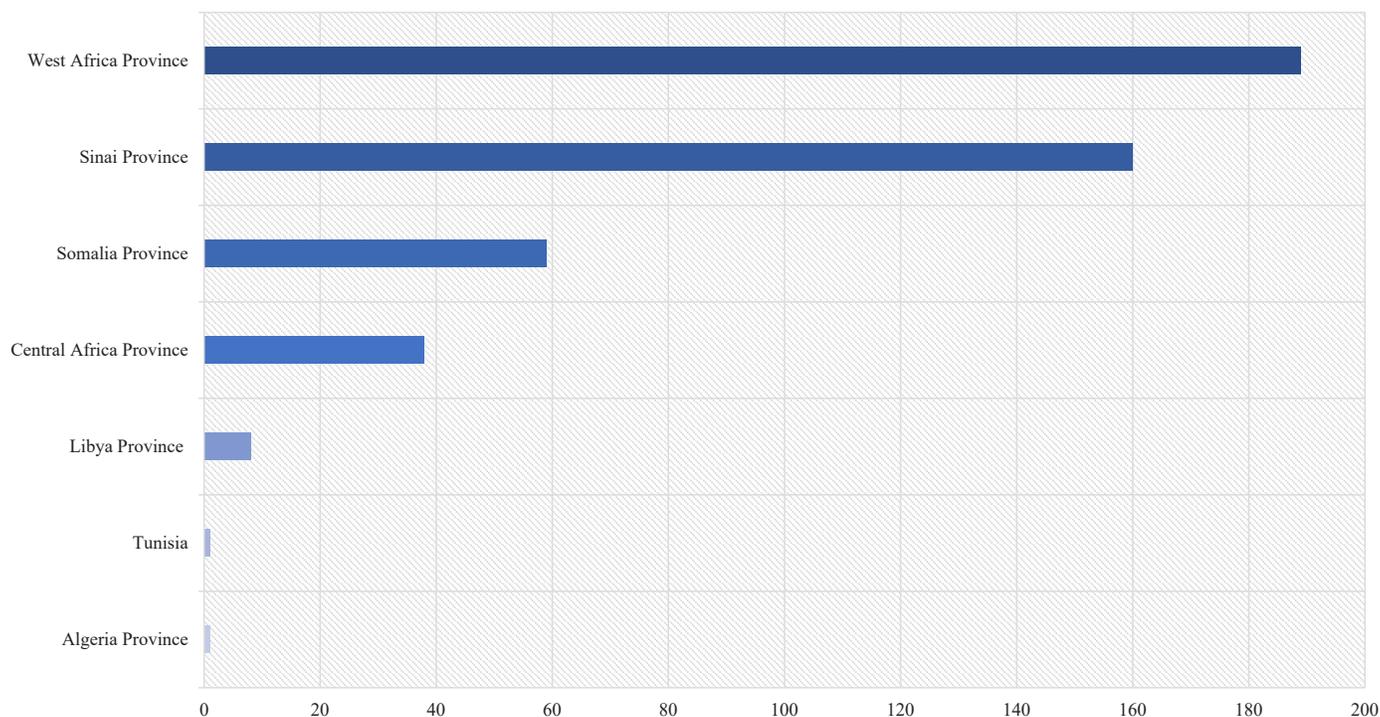


Figure 4: Attacks reported in Africa in 2019 (by wilaya) as reported by the Islamic State (Source: Nashir dataset)

rural environs relatively unchecked and vulnerable to ISWAP attacks.<sup>21</sup>

### Sinai Province

After ISWAP, the Islamic State's Wilayat Sayna<sup>8</sup> (Sinai Province, henceforth IS-SP) was the group's second-most active provincial affiliate in Africa in 2019. Notably, this meant that the single country in Africa with the most amount of Islamic State-reported attacks was Egypt. As Figure 6 shows, moving into 2020, IS-SP's reported activities continued at a regular pace, though with much less consistency than their equivalent at the hands of ISWAP. This suggests that its operational roster may have been driven more by a greater degree of opportunism than in the context of West Africa, something that would be consistent with the historically less conventional, lower-intensity nature of its operations on the Peninsula. Notably, while IS-SP generally reports a similar amount of activity to ISWAP, the reported impact (i.e., the number of killed and injured) of its operations has consistently been significantly lower, as indicated in Figure 7. Notwithstanding this substantial discrepancy in average reported casualties, the fact that quite so much activity—moreover, activity that shows no signs of abating—is being claimed by the Islamic State in the Sinai Peninsula cannot be ignored.

Egypt has an exceedingly long pedigree when it comes to jihadism. It is, after all, the place where Sayyid Qutb's *takfiri* ideology first originated and the birthplace of innumerable jihadi ideologues—among them, current al-Qa`ida leader Ayman al-Zawahiri and doctrinal heavyweight Abu 'Abdullah al-Muhajir.<sup>22</sup> From a kinetic standpoint, the region most affected by jihadi insurgency in

recent years has been the Sinai Peninsula, wherein a group calling itself Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis (ABM) was formed in January 2011 to fight against the Egyptian state.<sup>23</sup> In November 2014, ABM pledged allegiance to the Islamic State, making it one of the group's first wilaya outside of Syria and Iraq.<sup>24</sup>

Since then, IS-SP has consistently been one of the self-proclaimed caliphate's most active provincial affiliates. In the last five years alone, it was responsible for several deadly terrorist attacks, including the 2015 bombing of Metrojet Flight 9268, where 224 people were killed, and the assault on a Sufi Mosque in Rawda in 2017, causing more than 300 deaths.<sup>25</sup> In 2019, according to Islamic State claims, it carried out some 160 attacks—that is, 35 percent of the entire 2019 Nashir dataset. Most of these attacks targeted the Egyptian Armed Forces (EAF) or federal police, though in three cases the target was not explicitly stated. Contrasting sharply with the reported impact of ISWAP's attacks, 10 or more casualties were reported by the Islamic State in just six of these attacks. This reflects the fact that IS-SP's operations were almost exclusively limited to roadside ambushes and improvised explosive devices (IEDs). Indeed, there were only eight complex assaults reported over the entirety of 2019. Geographically speaking, based on the Islamic State's own claims, the vast majority of IS-SP's attacks were deployed in and around the cities of Rafah and 'Arish in northeastern Sinai near the border with the Gaza Strip. On only one occasion that year did IS-SP attack further south near the city of Suez.

Throughout 2019, the locations of attacks claimed by IS-SP implied an expansion of the area of operations toward the west, around the city of Bir al-Abd. In June 2020, this area became a new stronghold of the group after deadly clashes near the village of Rabaa (20 kilometers west of Bir al-Abd). IS-SP continues to hold four villages despite the Egyptian Air Force launching airstrikes targeting its positions.<sup>26</sup> This marks a big change in terms of capturing and holding territory, as prior to that date, it has not appeared to

g Although, technically speaking, the Sinai Peninsula is part of Asia, the authors are including it in the current analysis because Egypt is an African country.

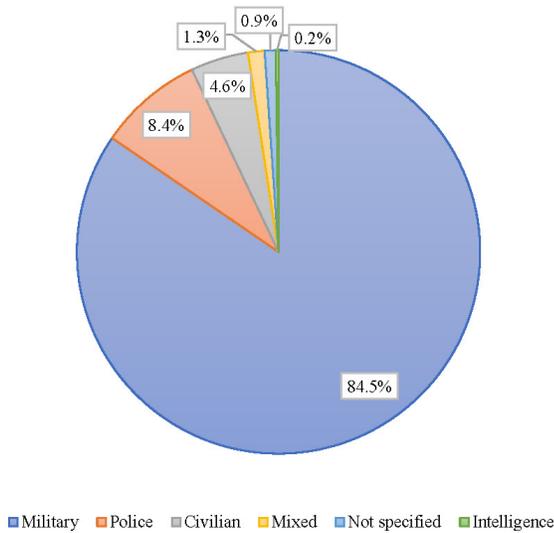


Figure 5: Targets in attacks in Africa in 2019 as reported by the Islamic State (Source: Nashir dataset)

seek a long-term control over controlled areas.

**Somalia Province**

Officially acknowledged as an overseas territory of the Islamic State in December 2017, Wilayat al-Sumal (Somalia Province, henceforth IS-S) comprises a small grouping of former supporters of Harakat al-Shabab al-Mujahidin (HSM) who defected under the leadership of ‘Abd al-Qadir Mu’min.<sup>27</sup> Believed to number in the low hundreds of active fighters, IS-S has remained a steady but small presence in Somalia in the years since its inception, primarily targeting—with a small number of exceptions—members of the local government and the Somali security forces. Its relatively small size has not, however, stopped the Islamic State from investing a significant amount of

time and energy in amplifying its activities,<sup>28</sup> which throughout its existence have primarily been confined to the coastal region of Bari in northeastern-most reaches of Somalia, and Mogadishu and its environs.<sup>29</sup>

As Figures 6 and 7 indicate, based on the tenor of its activities through 2019 and the first six months of 2020, it would appear that IS-S has reached what is for now its growth capacity. That is to say that it is engaging in, relative to other Islamic State affiliates at least, a low-intensity insurgency focused on consolidating resources and supporters in remote regions while simultaneously signaling resolve and presence through a low impact but (thanks to the Islamic State’s Central Media Diwan) highly visible roster of attacks.

Across 2019, IS-S was reported by Islamic State media to have deployed some 59 attacks, which constitutes 13 percent of the total set of claims issued by the Islamic State in relation to Africa that year, according to the Nashir dataset. The only notable trend in terms of how they were distributed was that they occurred regularly but in low numbers—that is to say, there was a steady trickle of attack reports with no clear period of intensification or deceleration. From a targeting perspective, IS-S’ operations in 2019 were primarily geared toward striking local police forces—specifically, 36 attacks (61 percent) were launched against the police—with a further 13 (22 percent) hitting military and intelligence assets and 10 targeting civilians and local government officials. For the most part (57 percent of the time), these attacks were characterized by fairly crude methods, something that was enabled by the fact that they tended to target specific individuals, often when they were unarmed and off-duty.<sup>30</sup>

**Central Africa Province**

The Islamic State’s officially designated Wilayat Wasat Ifriqiyya (Central Africa Province, henceforth IS-CAP) is composed of two separate factions active in two separate regions, the easternmost reaches of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and northern

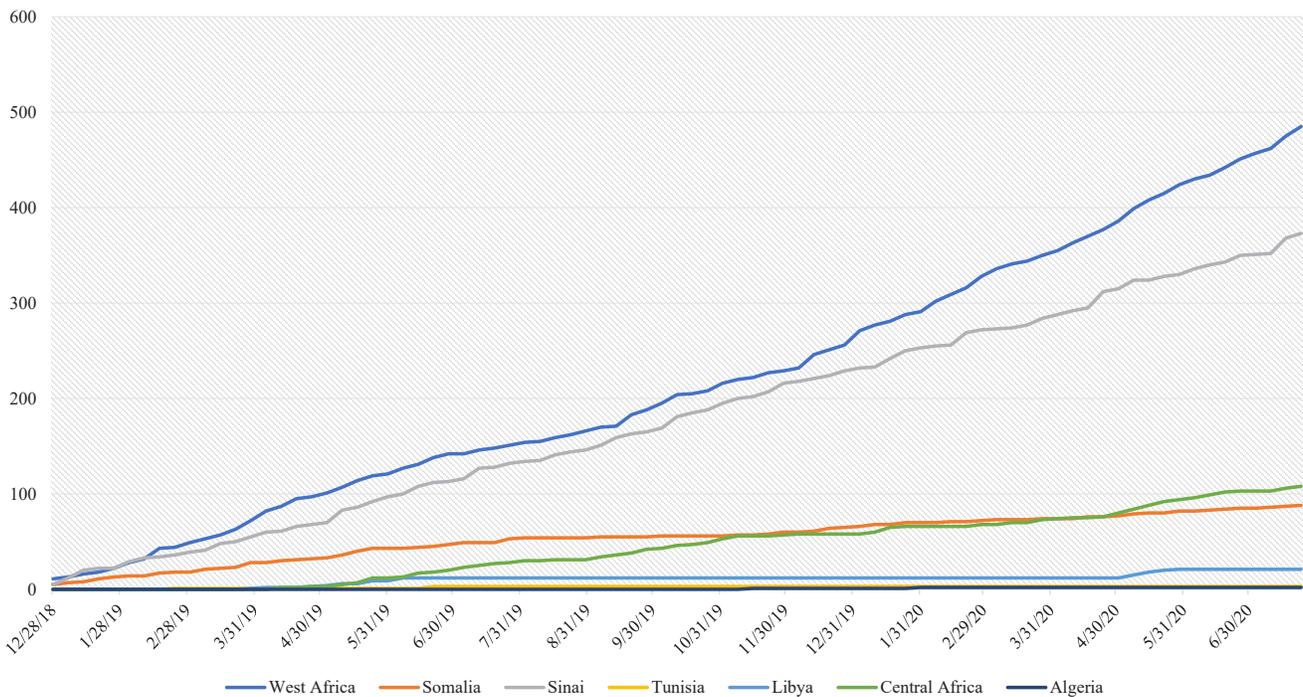


Figure 6: Cumulative attacks in Africa, December 28, 2018-July 31, 2020, as reported by the Islamic State (Source: Al Naba dataset)

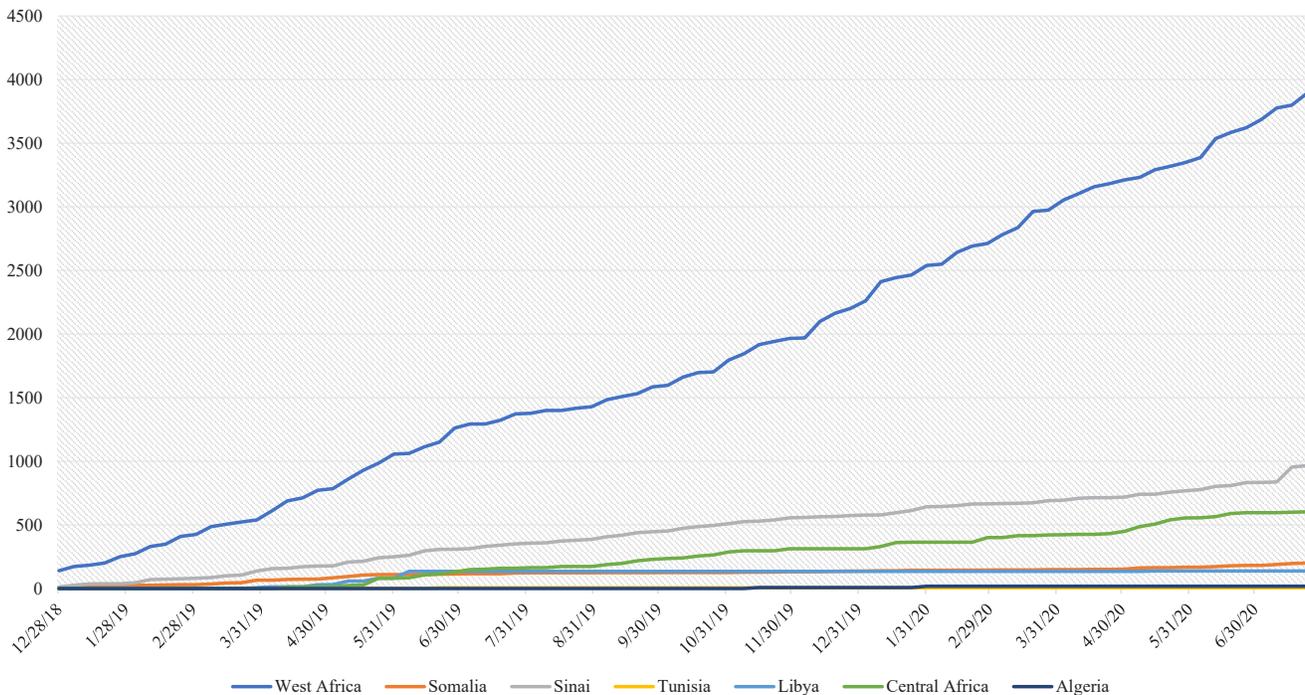


Figure 7: Cumulative casualties (fatalities and injuries caused) in Africa, December 28, 2018-July 31, 2020, as reported by the Islamic State (Source: Al Naba dataset)

Mozambique.<sup>31</sup>

Figures 6 and 7 indicate that IS-CAP's reported activities occurred through 2019 and the first six months of 2020 at a fairly regular pace, intensifying slightly in the months of April and May 2020. Consistent with this, there was simultaneously a moderate increase in the number of casualties (killed and injured) being reported. It would appear then that the threat posed by IS-CAP was beginning to consolidate by the summer of 2020, having slowly built momentum in both the DRC and Mozambique in the course of the previous 12 months.

While IS-CAP was only formally recognized by the Islamic State's central leadership in April 2019, its roots can be traced back to October 2017 when a video emerged in which militants identifying themselves as members of *Madinat al-Tawhid wa-l-Muwahhidin* ("The City of Monotheism and Monotheists") (MTM) claimed to be part of the global Islamic State insurgency. As pointed out by Caleb Weiss in FDD's *Long War Journal* at the time, despite its lofty ambitions, the group seemed to be operationally marginal and geographically isolated.<sup>32</sup> Just under 18 months later, what had long appeared to be nothing more than an embryonic threat had metastasized into an officially recognized and active wilaya of the Islamic State.

It was not until April 2019 that the Islamic State's Central Media Diwan issued the first IS-CAP activity report, relating details about an attack in the DRC, specifically near the city of Beni.<sup>33</sup> Beni is the municipal center of a region in the northeast of the DRC near the border of Virunga National Park and Uganda. Remote, largely impoverished, and still wracked by outbreaks of the Ebola virus, it is fertile ground for insurgents seeking to establish a foothold. Accordingly, across 2019, almost all of IS-CAP's attacks in the DRC claimed in Islamic State media were located in the Beni region.

In the context of Mozambique, IS-CAP's presence was only formally conceded in June 2019, when it issued a report on its first-ever attack in the country: an assault on the Mozambique Defence Armed Forces (FADM) in Mitopy in the Mocimboa da Praia Dis-

trict.<sup>34</sup> Though the Mozambican government at the time denied there was any presence of the Islamic State in the country, IS-CAP claimed another attack there one month later on July 5, 2019, when it reported that its fighters had launched a complex assault on an FADM base in Nangade, killing and wounding a number of soldiers and seizing a significant amount of weapons. In the months that followed, according to the Islamic State's own claims, IS-CAP attacks continued to occur in Mozambique with relative regularity.

In total, eight percent of all the Islamic State's reported attacks in Africa in 2019 were carried out by IS-CAP. Five percent took place in the DRC, with a further three percent occurring in Mozambique, bringing the collective total to 37 attacks between April that year, when IS-CAP's existence was made public, and December that year (23 in the DRC and 14 in Mozambique). In the DRC, all 23 attacks targeted the Armed Forces of the DRC (FARDC), and there was a relatively low degree of tactical variance, with ambushes on convoys and assaults on military bases occurring most of the time. In Mozambique, IS-CAP primarily targeted the FADM (with all the attacks on the military occurring in the district of Cabo Delgado), attacking it on 10 out of 14 occasions (71 percent of the time) in 2019, according to the Islamic State's own claims. The attacks mostly comprised assaults on army bases. Islamic State statements made clear that the other four operations (29 percent) were directed against both combatants and non-combatants in what were described as "Christian" villages.

#### **Libya Province, Algeria Province, and Tunisia**

In addition to the above geographies, the Islamic State also reported limited activities in Libya, Tunisia, and Algeria in 2019 and 2020. Due to the extreme irregularity with which they occurred, they are considered on a collective basis for the purposes of this assessment. Before proceeding, it is worth noting that Libya and Algeria emerged as provinces (*Wilayat al-Tarablus*, *Wilayat al-Barqah*, and *Wilayat al-Fezzan*) and province, respectively, in 2014. Libya's three were consolidated into one in 2018, with Algeria essentially becom-

ing defunct aside from a few sporadic activities. While the Islamic State's network in Tunisia explicitly surfaced as far back as 2014, it never bestowed upon them provincial status.<sup>35</sup>

In total, the Islamic State claimed eight attacks in Libya, one in Tunisia, and one in Algeria in 2019.<sup>36</sup> As Figures 6 and 7 indicate, this low level of activity continued into the first six months of 2020, during which just 10 attacks were reported by Al Naba (nine in Libya and one in Algeria). Whether their collective inactivity across most of the last two years was borne of internal decision-making or a result of external military pressures remains to be seen, but it would be imprudent to dismiss the Islamic State's Libyan capabilities anytime soon.

In any case, in 2019, aside from some temporal clustering of attacks in Libya—seven of which reportedly occurred within the same five-week period—there were no other distinct patterns in the rate at which these incidents occurred, suggesting that they were driven by opportunism as much as anything else. In terms of targeting, there was a clear trend in the data, with all incidents reported by the Islamic State to have struck military assets, not targeting any civilians, primarily with light arms. Consistent with this opportunistic quality, all operations were marked by a comparatively low degree of complexity.

As things stood by the end of 2019, the Islamic State seemed to be on the back foot in Libya, at least compared to 2014–2016, with inactivity also characterizing its presence in Tunisia and Algeria. While the Islamic State drew many thousands of recruits from Tunisia, it has always had an ambiguous stance as to its presence in the country—it has not, for some reason, declared its own province there even though it officially recognized its presence in Tunisia as far back as 2014.<sup>37</sup> In view of this, its relative inactivity there is not especially surprising. The same is true of Algeria, wherein its active support base has always been small and confined to remote parts of the country. In the context of Libya, though, it would appear that a measure of strategic restraint is being applied at present. Having once been considered a 'back-up' option should the caliphate project fail in Syria or Iraq,<sup>38</sup> Libya ceased to present the Islamic State with meaningful opportunities in 2016–2017 when its fighters were defeated in the cities of Benghazi and Sirte and forced to go to ground in the southern desert region of Fezzan.<sup>39</sup>

## Conclusion

Contrary to what some claimed in the months since the last vestiges of the territorial caliphate in Syria were liberated in 2019, the Islamic State is far from defeated. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Africa, where for several (but not all) affiliated groups there has been a marked upward curve of claimed cumulative attacks and casualties. (See Figures 6 and 7.)

The above assessment contends that this dynamic is especially clear in northeast Nigeria and the surrounding region, where ISWAP is engaging in operations that are increasingly audacious, staggeringly brutal, and worryingly akin to what ISIL, as it was

known at the time, was doing in Syria in early 2014.<sup>h</sup> Moreover, while IS-SP's operations are generally less lethal than those of ISWAP, they are almost as regular and showed no signs of abating through the first half of 2020. While the IS-CAP's efforts to agitate in Mozambique and the DRC are currently occurring at a lower tempo than its West African counterparts, the strategic threat posed by its network in the region is increasingly undeniable.<sup>i</sup> And that is not to mention the collective capabilities of the Islamic State's affiliates in North and East Africa, which, while they are—for the time being at least—less intense and lower impact than what is occurring in West and Central Africa, suggest they remain a persistent, albeit more limited, strategic challenge.

As the second half of 2020 unfolds, it is critical that military and counterterrorism policymakers recognize what is at stake in Africa. The Islamic State is not just fighting a low-grade insurgency on the continent; in at least two countries, it has been able to seize and hold territory and subsequently engage in pseudo-state activities.<sup>40</sup> In Nigeria, for example, ISWAP is known to have major presence in the town of Baga, a place that, per the official Nigerian government line, was recaptured in January 2019.<sup>41</sup> However, after the convoy of Borno State Governor Babagana Zulum was attacked in July 2020, it was revealed that the Nigerian soldiers were present only in a local military base.<sup>42</sup> Similarly, in Mozambique, IS-CAP is gaining more strength by the month. In March 2020, it managed to take over two towns in Cabo Delgado Province in just 48 hours, a clear sign that it enjoys more than just a foothold in the area.<sup>43</sup> This became even clearer in August 2020, when the port city of Mocimboa da Praia, with its population of over 100,000, was seized by IS-CAP after days of clashes with Mozambican soldiers.<sup>44</sup> In the Sinai Peninsula, the situation is similarly troubling. In July 2020, IS-SP attacked, seized, and held onto four villages near the city of Bir al-Abd in the north of Sinai Governorate.<sup>45</sup> In late August 2020, after a weeks-long standoff with the Egyptian military, IS-SP remained in control of at least two of the villages.<sup>46</sup> Notwithstanding the fact that this area is relatively small, the fact that the Islamic State currently controls it should not be undervalued, as it could easily serve as either a staging area for other attacks, a safe zone for it to fall back on, or a place to indoctrinate locals in the ideology of the group—if not all three of these options.

On account of the persistent threat posed by these three African wilayat—not to mention the relatively stable presence of the Islamic State's affiliates elsewhere on the continent—it is paramount that strategic policymakers and military practitioners consider the threat posed by the Islamic State in Africa as a priority, not just a sideshow of the activities of its remnants in Iraq and Syria. **CTC**

h Consider, for example, two of the attacks ISWAP conducted in the space of just four days in June 2020. In the first, which took place on June 9, it raided a village near the city of Gubio (as mentioned above), killing dozens of civilian non-combatants. In the second attack, which occurred on June 13, it assaulted the city of Monguno, seizing control of large swathes of it for a period of a few hours. These are just two of the more than two dozen operations ISWAP reported in the month of June alone. See "Fighters kill dozens, raze village in Nigeria's Borno state," Al Jazeera, June 10, 2020, and ICRC, "Operational update on Monguno attack: 16 civilians evacuated to Maiduguri for surgical care," reliefweb, June 15, 2020.

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