Twenty Years After 9/11

A Special Issue of CTC Sentinel

Reflections

Michael Morell, Joseph Votel, Dell Dailey, Ali Soufan, and Alex Younger

Analysis

Asfandyar Mir, Charles Lister, Elisabeth Kendall, Tricia Bacon, Jason Warner, and Colin Clarke

Contents

FROM THE EDITOR

It has been 20 years since 9/11. In the wake of the attacks, the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point (CTC) was established to provide cadets and policymakers with best-in-class research so that they could better understand and confront the threat. With the Taliban returning to power in Afghanistan, with Africa emerging as the new epicenter of global jihadi terror, and with it likely becoming more difficult for the intelligence community to track threats in jihadi conflict zones from which the United States has withdrawn militarily, objective and rigorous open-source research is more critical than ever.

To mark the 20th anniversary of 9/11, this special issue of *CTC Sentinel*, supported by the Recrudescence Project, features interviews with five former officials who have made immense contributions to the counterterrorism enterprise: former Acting Director of the CIA Michael Morell, former CENTCOM Commander Joseph Votel, former State Department Coordinator for Counterterrorism Dell Dailey, former FBI Special Agent Ali Soufan, and former Chief of the U.K. Secret Intelligence Service (MI6) Sir Alex Younger. Their reflections on 9/11 and their lessons learned across key parts of the counterterrorism spectrum—intelligence; military; diplomacy; law enforcement—and across the Atlantic are essential reading. Video highlights of several of the interviews are available on the CTC website.

The special issue also features five articles by leading scholars on the evolving global terror threat landscape. Asfandyar Mir focuses on Afghanistan. Charles Lister examines Syria. Tricia Bacon and Jason Warner look at Africa. Elisabeth Kendall surveys Yemen and Saudi Arabia. And Colin Clarke evaluates the future of the global jihadi movement.

On this anniversary, our deepest sympathies are with those who have lost loved ones to terrorism. Responding to this threat, as General Votel puts it, has been a noble undertaking. We deeply appreciate those who have served. Their sacrifices have saved countless lives.

Paul Cruickshank, *Editor in Chief*

Twenty Years After 9/11: Reflections from Michael Morell, Former Acting Director of the CIA

By Paul Cruickshank, Don Rassler, and Kristina Hummel

Michael Morell served 33 years with the Central Intelligence Agency, the last three-and-a-half as Deputy Director, a position from which he ran the day-to-day operations of the Agency. Morell also served as the Director for Intelligence, the Agency's chief analyst; as the Executive Director, the CIA's top administrator; and as Acting Director twice. He is a senior fellow at the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point.

Editor's Note: The following is the transcript of an oral interview conducted ahead of the 20th anniversary of 9/11. It has been lightly edited by CTC Sentinel.

CTC: On September 11, 2001, you were President Bush's CIA briefer and would later serve as the deputy and acting director of the CIA. Can you talk us through how that day, 9/11, was for you? The sense of purpose it created in you and your colleagues, and the ways you were able to contribute to the counterterrorism mission in the months and years that followed? And when you reflect on the last 20 years and the range of actions that have transpired across that time, what are some of the key issues, themes, or moments that stand out to you personally? What are your most memorable highs and lows?

Morell: I was with President Bush on 9/11. I was his daily intelligence briefer for one year, from January 4th, 2001, to January 4th, 2002. Briefed him six days a week, every morning, no matter where he was in the world—Oval Office, Camp David, his ranch in Texas, traveling domestically or internationally. So that put me on Air Force One on September 10th when it went wheels up for what was a political trip to Florida. I briefed him that morning [of September 11, 2001] from 8:00 to 8:30. Contrary to some speculation that you'll see from time to time on the internet, there was nothing in that briefing at all with regard to al-Qa`ida or an attack or to terrorism in any way. Most of the briefing that day was about the Second Intifada between the Palestinians and the Israelis.

It was during that briefing, of course—and we didn't know it at the time—that the first transponder on one of the four flights was turned off. Obviously, we had no idea that that was happening. When the briefing was over at 8:30, we went down to the motorcade and drove to the school, [the Emma E. Booker Elementary School], where the president was going to do one of these events. And it was during that drive that the first plane hit the first tower, and it was right after we got there that the second plane hit the second tower. When the first plane hit, everybody's assumption, including mine, was that [it] must be bad weather in New York, must be a small plane, must be an accident. But that view of the world started to unravel when we heard that the first plane was a large commercial jet. And then obviously when the second plane hit, you knew this was terrorism. And I knew instantly that this was al-Qa`ida, and

this was bin Ladin.

The rest of that day for me was a mixture of the intensity of doing my job with the surreal. An example of the intensity of doing my job is [that as] we were flying from Barksdale Air Force Base in Louisiana—where Air Force One had landed to take on food and water, and to kick a lot of people off the plane because we didn't know how long we'd be flying around—to Offutt Air Force Base in Omaha, Nebraska, the president asked to see me, alone. So, it was the president, it was his Chief of Staff Andy Card, and it was me in his small office on Air Force One. [The] president looked me in the eye, and he said, "Michael, who did this?"

And I told him that I had not seen any intelligence that would take us to a perpetrator, but I'd be happy to give him my best assessment, and he said, "I understand the caveat. Now, move on." It's very much of a George Bush thing to say.

So I told him that there were two state sponsors of terrorism, Iran and Iraq, that had the capability to do this, but that in my view, neither one of them had anything to gain and both of them had everything to lose from doing something like this. And so I said I did not believe it was one of those countries. I said, "I believe when we get to the end of the trail, Mr. President, we're going to find al-Qa`ida, and we're going to find bin Ladin." And I told him that I was so confident of that that I would bet my children's future on it.

He then looked me in the eye again, and he said, "When will we know?" which is kind of a question you get from a president for which there is no answer obviously. So I fell back on what analysts are trained to do, which is to provide context. So I thought back about a handful of terrorist attacks on the United States previously and how long it took us to find out. So I told him the East African embassy bombings, it took us two to three days to figure out that it was al-Qa`ida. The bombing of the USS Cole off the coast of Yemen, I told them it took us several months to link that back to al-Qa`ida in Afghanistan. And then I told him the Khobar Towers attack in Saudi Arabia, it took us a full year to link that to Saudi Hezbollah and back to Tehran and the Iranians. So when you put all that context together, I told him, "Mr. President, we may know soon, and then again, it may take some time."

Later that evening, when we were flying back to Andrews Air Force Base, the CIA sent me a piece of intelligence that had been provided to us by a West European intelligence service. And its message was quite frankly stunning, and George Tenet, then the director of Central Intelligence, wanted me to show it to the president. You couldn't tell from the piece of intelligence what its sourcing was, so you couldn't give it any credibility, but what it said was the attack that day was the first of two waves of attacks on the United States. So here I was, sitting with the president of the United States who had just suffered the worst attack in the history of our country, and here was his intelligence briefer telling him that this was going to happen again.

So that's two examples of the intensity of doing my job that

"I saw the president transform in front of my eyes, from a president whose presidency was kind of drifting a little bit to the commander in chief, to a president who knew exactly what his mission was going forward."

day. An example of the surreal: as we were landing at Andrews Air Force Base that night, the president's military aide, the carrier of the 'nuclear football,' was looking outside the windows on the left side of the aircraft. He saw me looking at him—we had become friends over the previous nine months—and he waved me over to the windows, and I went over and he said, "Look out." I looked out, and there was an F-16 on the wingtip. He told me that that was from the D.C. Air National Guard, that it was an F-16, and that there was another one on the other wing tip. That plane, that F-16 was so close that you could see the pilot, you could see the pilot's facial features, and you could see the pilot looking at us. And then the military aide told me something that still sends shivers up my spine, which I think kind of defines the surrealism of the day: He said, "Do you know why they're there?" And I'm not a military guy, I didn't know, and it was a particularly difficult question because every commercial flight in the United States had been grounded. So the only planes that were in the air that day at that time were military aircraft, so there was no risk of anybody flying aircraft into us. So I said "No, I don't know," and he said, "Well, they're there in case somebody shoots a surface-to-air missile at us on final approach. Their job is to put themselves between that missile and the president of the United States."

So the day for me was that mixture of the intensity doing my job and the surreal. And for me, it was like it was yesterday. I remember every single detail. You know, people have asked me, "Did you think about the historic moment? That this was going to define the future for some considerable period of time?" and I always say, "No, I didn't because I was working." And I was focused on the moment. But the one thing I will say is, I saw the president transform in front of my eyes, from a president whose presidency was kind of drifting a little bit to the commander in chief, to a president who knew exactly what his mission was going forward, that it had been defined as clearly as you can define something, right? To not let this happen again.

And I think that over the next few weeks at CIA, that's what happened to that organization too. To me, 9/11 was a national failure. It was an intelligence failure; it was a policy failure; and it was a national failure in that the airlines knew what they needed to do to better protect aircraft, and they didn't want to do it because they didn't want to inconvenience their passengers. So this was a national failure. But part of that was an intelligence failure. We had provided significant strategic warning going back to 1996 about this guy named bin Ladin and what he wanted to do and what he wanted to achieve and that he wanted to attack the United States and that he wanted to get his hands on weapons of mass destruction, that he wanted to drive us out of the Middle East. We knew all of this back to 1996. And we had warned about this over and over again in the Clinton administration and the Bush administration.

So there was ample strategic warning, but there was not what we

call tactical warning. There was not: Here's what they want to do on this particular day, here's where they want to do it, and here's how they want to do it. That's tactical warning. That's the kind of warning that allows you to stop an attack. So this was half an intelligence success and half an intelligence failure, but that failure part of it was a tremendous motivation for the organization not to let that happen again. And I can't tell you how strong that feeling was at the Agency after 9/11. And then the political criticism that came and the political criticism that was aimed at CIA and FBI just reinforced that drive not to let it happen again. You know, I always found it to be a deep, deep irony that really the only two organizations—the CIA and the FBI—that were really paying attention to al-Qa`ida prior to 9/11 were the ones to take the political criticism for 9/11. It's a really disappointing moment for me, watching our politicians do that.

But all of that combined to a drive not to let it happen again, so CIA was essentially restructured overnight, with hundreds of more people working on terrorism and working on al-Qa`ida, taking people from different parts of the Agency who had never worked on al-Qa`ida or terrorism. They're working on, say, Indonesia one day, and the next day, they're working on al-Qa`ida. Literally hundreds of people, billions of dollars invested in counterterrorism. So, post 9/11, counterterrorism becomes for the Agency what the Soviet Union was for the Agency during the Cold War. Virtually everything that everybody is doing in some way is touching counterterrorism.

And the post-9/11 history is a mixture of significant success: the destruction of al-Qa`ida in Afghanistan, the capture of senior al-Qa`ida leaders, the stopping of additional plots against the homeland, of which there were dozens. So post-9/11, we not only provided strategic warning, but we provided that tactical warning that I talked about earlier over and over and over and over again. Literally, you can count on three or four hands, how many homeland al-Qa`ida plots we stopped. So literally a huge success post-9/11 in both stopping attacks and degrading the organization.

Now, there were some ups and downs in degrading the organization. We did an extraordinarily good job in the immediate aftermath in Afghanistan of degrading the organization. As you know, the first place that al-Qa`ida went was to pre-arranged safe houses in Pakistan. We and the Pakistanis did a good job of degrading the organization when they were in those safe houses, made a lot of arrests. Then al-Qa`ida moved to the FATA, to the federally administered tribal areas, and it was a combination of them moving there and the difficulty of getting at them from an intelligence perspective and then the Iraq War, which drew a lot of resources away from al-Qa`ida, really allowed al-Qa`ida to rebound. And so by 2005, 2006, they're carrying out attacks again. They carried out the London attacks, the Madrid attacks. They came very close to bringing down 10 to 15 airliners flying from Heathrow Airport to the United States in August of 2006, and so they needed to be degraded again. And the Bush administration started that, and the Obama administration finished it. So, a string of successes with really a couple of controversies—the whole enhanced interrogation technique controversy and then the controversy over drones—but in large part, very, very significant success.

The moments for me that I remember in particular: my last briefing for George Bush as president was on January 4th, 2002, as I mentioned earlier, and it was at that briefing that I had to tell him that we had learned that bin Ladin had escaped from Tora Bora. And so not only was I with him on 9/11, but I was with him when

we found out that bin Ladin had escaped. And the president was not happy. It was the angriest that I had ever seen him. In fact, it was the *only* time that I had seen him angry. He was so angry that he 'shot the messenger.' He 'shot' me, asking me questions about "How did *you* let this happen? What is *your* plan now?" So, that's something I won't forget. But certainly on his part, I felt his anger was justified. That was crystal clear.

I was in London for the London attacks. I was there that day. So I'll never forget that. I was part of the CIA leadership team for stopping the so-called liquids plot, the 10 to 15 airliners—Pakistan, the United States, the United Kingdom all working together to stop that attack.

I was deputy director for the bin Ladin operation. In relation to that, there were three days that I'll never forget, the first was in August of 2010 when the chief of our counterterrorism center said to Director [Leon] Panetta and to me, "I need to see you guys alone." And it was in that meeting that he told us that they had found who they thought was a bin Ladin courier and that they had found this extraordinary home that he lived in, described the home to us. Nobody at that meeting said that bin Ladin might be there, but given the links between this person and bin Ladin prior to 9/11 and given what this home looked like and its security features, the hair on the back of my neck stood up in this meeting. Then a month later, I remember our first meeting, our first briefing of this information for President Obama in late September 2010—basically the same information and a little bit more that we were able to gather that the director and I were told about in August. And I remember President Obama giving us two orders: One was "Leon, Michael, find out what is going on inside that compound," number one; and number two, "Do not tell anybody. Do not tell [the] Secretary of Defense. Do not tell the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs. Do not tell the Director of the FBI. Do not tell the Attorney General. Do not tell the Secretary of State. Do not tell anybody. This information stays in this group."

And it stayed that way until late December, January. And that's how tight it was. This was the best-kept secret that I have ever been involved in in government. It was only in January [2011] when the president wanted the military brought in so that we could talk about finish options.

And then the last thing I remember, again as if it was yesterday, was President Obama, knowing that I was with President Bush on 9/11, asked me to go to Dallas after the bin Ladin operation and brief President Bush on it. So I took with me the senior analyst from the counterterrorism center to brief the intelligence story, and I took with me the JSOC J3 [joint operations], who explained the military raid. We spent two and a half hours with the president. He was like a kid in a candy shop. He wanted to know every detail. He was particularly interested in those things in the intelligence story that happened while he was still president. In fact, he remembered then Director of the CIA Mike Hayden's briefing him on some of those parts of the story. We stayed with him for two and a half hours; at the end of the two and a half hours, he said, "You know, Laura and I were gonna go to the movies tonight, but this is better than any movie you could possibly ever see. So we're staying home." And then I remember he got up and walked over to his desk, and he took out three of his commander-in-chief challenge coins, and he gave one to each of us. And when he slapped one into my hand and I looked into his eyes, I could see closure that I had not seen since 9/11.

"Terrorist groups, with the right intelligence, are exceptionally easy to degrade, but they're also really easy to rebuild. That's the history; the history is sort of a sine wave. They get very dangerous, you degrade them, they weaken, you take your eye off them, and they rebound. And I don't think that pattern is going to stop."

So, that's kind of my story here. This issue dominated the second half of my career. I was with the Agency for 33 years, and al-Qa`ida dominated the last half of it, probably almost 15 years of it. Al-Qa`ida today is significantly degraded; ISIS today is significantly degraded. There are parts of the world that I'm worried about right now. I worry about al-Shabaab in Somalia. I worry about ISIS in West Africa. But still they're overall much more degraded than they were several years ago. But terrorist groups are funny things. Terrorist groups, with the right intelligence, are exceptionally easy to degrade, but they're also really easy to rebuild. That's the history; the history is sort of a sine wave. They get very dangerous, you degrade them, they weaken, you take your eye off them, and they rebound. And I don't think that pattern is going to stop. I think we're going to see this for quite some period of time. I think my children's generation and my grandchildren's generation are still going to be dealing with this issue.

CTC: Over the past 20 years, the United States has developed an impressive array of investigative expertise, new tools, methodologies like F3EAD,[a] operational capabilities, and partnerships, such as the Global Coalition to Counter ISIS, that have been integral to the counterterrorism fight. Over the same span of time, the United States has successfully prosecuted many terror offenders and also demonstrated its ability to deploy new or enhanced capabilities and tools tactically and operationally, around the world in precise and impactful ways. How would you describe the evolution of U.S. counterterrorism over the past two decades? What stands out to you? And when you think about the future of U.S. counterterrorism over the next five to 10 years and its future evolution, what does that picture look like?

Morell: All of the government's focus was on this issue. I talked earlier about the intelligence failure, right? The difference between strategic and tactical. There was a policy failure as well. The policy failure was in not responding to the strategic warning. The policy

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a   "Find, Fix, Finish, Exploit, Analyze, and Disseminate (F3EAD), pronounced 'F-three-e-a-d' or 'feed,' is a version of the targeting methodology utilized by the special operations forces (SOF) responsible for some of the most widely-publicized missions in support of overseas contingency operations." "F3EAD: Ops/Intel Fusion 'Feeds' the SOF Targeting Process," *Small Wars Journal,* January 31, 2012.

Michael Morell

failure was not going after bin Ladin prior to 9/11. And the difference between post-9/11 and pre-9/11 was that post-9/11, the entire U.S. government and all of its resources and all of its relationships around the world—diplomatic, military, intelligence—everything was focused on going after al-Qa`ida and then going after ISIS. And when you have that kind of focus, you can develop amazing capabilities. And that's exactly what we did; that's just what you described. And we developed those techniques and those tactics that we wouldn't have if we hadn't had that focus and those resources. The upside is all of that prevented another homeland attack. All of that delivered in what it was supposed to deliver. The downside is that because we were so focused on al-Qa`ida—and on ISIS, we were not able to focus on our peer competitors. So for 20 years, we fought a counterterrorism war and a counterinsurgency war that flowed from the counterterrorism war, and we were focused on *that*, and China and Russia were focused on *us*. And in particular, they were focused on figuring out how we fight wars and figuring out ways of countering that.

And so the Chinese developed anti-access/area denial weapons, because the Chinese studied us and watched us and figured out that we don't have our forces forward. When we need to fight, we take some time to put our forces in place and then we fight. And so the Chinese figured out that, what we just need to do is prevent the United States from moving forward with any speed at all and finish our job before the United States can get there. And so, the Chinese and Russians have built these incredible capabilities to fight us, and we have an awful lot of catch-up to do. So somehow in the next five years, 10 years, we have to figure out how to walk and chew gum

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at the same time. We have to figure out how to refocus on our peer competitors, particularly China, while at the same time not taking our eye off the terrorists because they will come back.

I'm 100 percent certain that al-Qa`ida is going to gain considerable strength from our withdrawal from Afghanistan, for example, and that if we don't deal with them, if we don't collect intelligence on them, and if we don't figure out a way to reach out and touch them and degrade them from a military perspective, we're going to be facing a homeland threat again. So we have got to figure out how to focus on China and Russia while not forgetting how to deal with terrorism. So I think the future is going to be, how do we balance those two things? How do we develop intelligence capabilities that are at some distance from the target? And how are we going to develop military capabilities to deal with terrorists that are some distance from the target a lot further than we're used to? I'm confident that if we stay focused, we can achieve that. I think the challenge is going to be staying focused when it appears that the terrorists for the moment are significantly weakened.

In the wake of the fall of Kabul, my assessment is that the Taliban will welcome al-Qa`ida, they will provide it safe haven, and al-Qa`ida will start to reconstitute immediately. In addition, the al-Qa`ida leaders in Iran may well be allowed by the Iranians to rejoin their colleagues in Afghanistan, and other al-Qa`ida extremists around the world will go to Afghanistan to be part of the victory celebration. The reconstruction of al-Qa`ida's homeland attack capability will happen quickly, in less than a year, if the U.S. does not collect the intelligence and take the military action to prevent it.

CTC: At a time of ongoing, transformative technological change in fields such as synthetic biology, drones, and artificial intelligence, and as the United States emerges from a global pandemic that has renewed concern over biological threats, what are the potential threats from terror groups and non-state actors that most concern you over the next 10 years or so?

Morell: That's a great question. With one exception really, they've tried to exploit the technology available to them. Going back to even prior to 9/11 and the research that al-Qa`ida was doing with chemical and biological weapons, the research they were doing with anthrax prior to 9/11, their interest in acquiring nuclear weapons, ISIS' capabilities with regard to chemical weapons, that they were able to develop in university labs that were sitting on the geography

of the caliphate, they've always been interested in technology. The use of drones as attack vehicles. The one thing they've never really shown a lot of interest in is cyber attacks. I think they'd rather see deaths than the lights go out or gasoline shortages. They've never shown the interest in cyber that a lot of people thought they would. Maybe they will someday. But they really haven't to date.

My greatest worry remains weapons of mass destruction. It wasn't only al-Qa`ida that had those ambitions; it was ISIS as well. There's no doubt in my mind that while a nation state can have nuclear weapons but really can't use them, no doubt that a terrorist organization would use them. They don't face the same mutually assured destruction that a nation state faces. Among the weapons of mass destruction, the one I worry most about is biological weapons. I think the technological advances in synthetic biology have made it so easy for even amateur synthetic biologists, bio engineers, chemists to develop biological weapons that are capable of killing millions of people. So, I think that we as a government and our partner governments in this large coalition that we have fighting extremism really needs to focus on collecting intelligence on the synthetic bio issue, preparation for a synthetic bio attack, that needs to be a central focus going forward.

CTC: What is the most important personal lesson you have learned over the course of your lengthy career that you think would be helpful for the many men and women in the United States and our partner countries around the world who will lead and take part in the next generation of counterterrorism efforts?

Morell: I don't know if it's a personal lesson, but it's a certainly a lesson. And that lesson is that when it comes to actions that are politically divisive—whether it be enhanced interrogation techniques by CIA or by the U.S. military post 9/11 ... people forget the U.S. military used enhanced techniques as well as CIA—and when it comes to controversial issues like drones, I think there's a real danger in keeping those kinds of things secret. I think the government would be much better off being transparent about those kinds of things. Briefing Congress in secret, and getting Congress' approval is not the same thing as being transparent with the American people and allowing a debate to take place about whether you should be doing those kinds of things or not. I remember Barack Obama once talking about one of these kinds of things, and I remember him saying, "We need to be able to be transparent about this because this is something that we're going to have to do for a long time. This is something the United States is going to have to do probably for a generation or two. And we can't do that unless we have the support of the American people and we at least have international acquiescence. And the only way to get those two things—the support of the American people and international acquiescence—is to be able to talk about it, be able to talk about it publicly, be able to talk about why you're doing it, to be able to talk about your success, to be able to talk about your failures, and what you're going to do to make sure those failures don't happen again." So I think that's the most important lesson. I think the only place we got in trouble post 9/11 is when we did things—ordered by the president, briefed to Congress, right? Everything was done by the book—but we didn't talk to the American people about it and that

> **"The only place we got in trouble post 9/11 is when we did things—ordered by the president, briefed to Congress ... by the book—but we didn't talk to the American people about it and that I think is a really important lesson ... transparency is a lot better than a lack of transparency."**

I think is a really important lesson for any significant action the United States is going to take that you're going to have to do for some period of time. I think transparency is a lot better than a lack of transparency.

CTC: As we take stock 20 years on from 9/11, is there anything else you would like to add?

Morell: An intelligence officer has a lot of different jobs. The main job is to accurately describe a situation that a president and his or her national security team, the country faces, to accurately describe that in all of its detail, in all of its complexity. But they also have another job, and the other job is to be able to accurately describe the way the adversary looks at the situation, to be able to tell President Biden, "Here's how President Putin sees the world. Here's how President Putin sees you. Here's how the terrorists see the world. Here's how the terrorists see us."

So as I've been listening to people talk about the 20th anniversary of 9/11 and I've been listening to people talk about the great success we had post 9/11 in preventing another attack, and when I listen to *myself* make that argument, my training as an intelligence analyst leads me to ask, "Well, if bin Ladin were still alive today, how would he see the world? How would he see the movement he started?" And I think if he were alive and he kind of surveyed the landscape, he'd be pretty happy with where the movement stands. I think his assessment would be, look, on September 10th, 2001, there were a couple hundred terrorists, Islamic extremists in one country in the world; maybe a few others scattered here and there, but essentially in one country in the world, in Afghanistan. Today, there's thousands of extremists scattered in dozens and dozens of countries, from West Africa up all the way to East Africa, through the Middle East into South Asia and all the way into Southeast Asia. And the United States, while not out of the Middle East the way that bin Ladin had hoped, this did lead us to fight two wars—one, the longest war in American history, one that we won in Iraq ultimately, and one that we lost, quite frankly, in Afghanistan. And I think he would look at us and say, "I significantly weakened them."

So I think he'd be pretty happy with the state of affairs, and he would share the view that I have that this fight's not over, that this fight is in some ways just beginning. So I think it's important to look at it from the perspective of the adversary.　**CTC**

Twenty Years After 9/11: Reflections from General (Ret) Joseph Votel, Former Commander of U.S. Central Command

By Paul Cruickshank, Don Rassler, and Kristina Hummel

General Joseph L. Votel is a retired U.S. Army Four-Star officer and most recently the Commander of the U.S. Central Command, responsible for U.S. and coalition military operations in the Middle East, Levant, and Central and South Asia. During his 39 years in the military, he commanded special operations and conventional military forces at every level. His career included combat in Panama, Afghanistan, and Iraq. Notably, he led a 79-member coalition that successfully liberated Iraq and Syria from the Islamic State Caliphate. He preceded his assignment at CENTCOM with service as the Commander of U.S. Special Operations Command and the Joint Special Operations Command.

Votel graduated from the United States Military Academy in 1980. He is the Class of 1987 Senior Fellow at the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point.

Editor's Note: The following is the transcript of an oral interview conducted ahead of the 20th anniversary of 9/11. It has been lightly edited by CTC Sentinel.

CTC: 9/11 shaped your service. You went on to serve as the deputy commander of the 82nd Airborne Division in Afghanistan. You then led Special Operations Command. As the head of Central Command, you led the fight that liberated large areas of Syria and Iraq from the Islamic State. Can you talk us through how that day, 9/11, was for you, the sense of purpose it created in you and your colleagues, and the way you were able to contribute to the CT mission in the months and years that followed? And when you reflect on the last 20 years and the range of actions that have transpired across that time, what are some of the key issues, themes, or moments that stand out to you personally? What are your most memorable high and low points?

Votel: It's a great question. Let me just start at the day of September 11th, and I think like many, it was shocking to see the images of that morning. At the time, I had just become the Ranger Regiment commander, only been in command for about a month, and there [was] this kind of disbelief in what I was seeing—trying to understand the confusion, shock of what was happening—but almost simultaneously, an instant recognition that everything was changing for us. And as we collectively gained this appreciation, not fully knowing where this was going to go, I think all of us in uniform knew that something had changed for all of us, and that this would change the direction of our organizations and the direction of our country for the foreseeable future. So a morning of initial confusion, but a moment of clarity afterwards that this attack on our nation had changed everything.

My participation after 9/11 started with our initial combat operations into Afghanistan in October of 2001, which I would describe as limited operations focused on disruption of the AQ Taliban leadership and the al-Qa`ida network. Over time, these limited operations gave way to actual campaigning. And, of course, we saw this not just in Afghanistan, but we saw it in Iraq after our incursion in 2003, and especially in the fall of 2003 when the insurgency really started to change things on the ground. Eventually, we were conducting large-scale, conventional counter-insurgency operations with integrated special operations capabilities while also sustaining unilateral CT operations throughout all of this period.

Along the line, we began to really focus in on targeted CT operations. One of the early challenges that I think we had—and I can remember talking about this with other commanders and with my higher-level commanders—is the idea of man hunting. How do we go about doing that? Al-Qa`ida represented this very unique, human-centered network that we had to go after, and we knew we had to identify the people and go after them. It really led us to a man-hunting approach, as we began to understand it better.

As well, we began to recognize the importance of partnerships, how we worked with different people—not only with our international partners but really within our own government—these campaigns really forced people to begin to work together. There were dichotomies between the Department of Defense's CT approach and the intelligence community's CT approach. And so those had to be reconciled over time, and these were issues that we grappled with for years. And, of course, all of this ultimately resulted in much better-defined CT strike policies, processes, and approaches that I think were largely very, very successful for us.

The one thing that I would share with you is that as somebody who was involved in this right after 9/11 and then really up through 2019 after the completion of the military campaign against the caliphate, our ability to work together, not just with other partners but really within our own government, just improved significantly. As I look back on it and then as I look forward, this is something that I hope we're able to maintain; this was so important to us, and it presented our national leadership with such great capabilities, when we could all come together and leverage the unique capabilities that we had.

Along the way, there were high points and low points. For me, one of the high points was the campaign we prosecuted against the ISIS caliphate in Iraq and Syria. I had a front row seat to that as the CENTCOM Commander. Just very, very proud of the way that we learned from our previous experience doing counterterrorism operations and brought them forward into this campaign. From a military standpoint, we did a very, very good job, and I think we accomplished what we were asked to do by the national leadership.

And, of course, there were lows along the way. Certainly all of us who have been involved in this for a long time have lost friends and others that we've served with. We've seen the impact on families and on individuals after repeated tours. And again, those are things that

we'll always continue to live with.

For me, I think the most difficult point came in August of 2011 and specifically in the early morning hours of August 6th when Extortion-17, a helicopter that was conducting an operation under my command, was shot down in the Tangi Valley and, with it the loss of 37 operators, Afghan partners, and crew members. This shootdown occurred in enemy-held terrain. It was a really, really difficult challenge for us. But even in that difficulty, I can point to the signs of increased cooperation and support from all of our partners on the battlefield. We had conventional forces that came to our assistance, literally helped us fight into that area and secure the location, so we could recover our fallen heroes from enemy-controlled terrain. And, of course, we had all the support we needed to get these heroes back into the arms of their families in the United States.

CTC: This past May marked the 10th anniversary of the daring counterterrorism operation that ended up killing Usama bin Ladin in Pakistan. Over the past decade, as you well know, there has been a considerable amount of debate about the state of al-Qa`ida and the broader al-Qa`ida network, especially its capabilities, status, and ability to endure. What is your assessment of the United States' campaign to degrade and defeat al-Qa`ida and the nature of the threat posed by the group today? And what areas have the United States and its allies achieved some level of 'success' or 'won'? In what areas has the United States performed less well with challenges still remaining? Given the U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan and the late summer 2021 Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, what is your level of concern that al-Qa`ida may bounce back as a major threat to U.S. security?

Votel: This is also something which is important to reflect [on] and talk a little bit about as well. As I look at the campaign to degrade and defeat al-Qa`ida, I do believe we've had a large amount of success against them. We've certainly been successful in disrupting and suppressing this network over a long period of time; we've prevented places like Afghanistan, a variety of other places from being platforms from which al-Qa`ida could continue to pursue their externally focused attack plans against the United States and other Western powers. It hasn't been absolute in terms of that and there have been certainly some external attacks that have taken place and certainly some attempts that have taken place since 9/11, but certainly nothing on the scale of what we saw on 9/11. And largely over the last number of years, their external capabilities have been really diminished to a degree that we have the ability to keep them in check at this particular point. So, I think we've been successful from that standpoint.

Where we have not been as successful is in addressing the underlying issues and reasons for the rise of organizations like al-Qa`ida. This still exists. I mean, we saw this in spades in 2011, 2012, 2013 with the emergence of ISIS in the Levant and the impact that that organization had, and while they started out maybe loosely aligned with al-Qa`ida, they sprung off in a different and much more violent direction. So the underlying reasons that give rise to organizations like al-Qa`ida, a lot of those still remain. We still have challenges with areas of no or poor governance. We still have corruption. We still have disenfranchisement of populations. We still have a problem with education and employment. We have

> "With the Taliban's strategic alliance, I think the conditions are very, very favorable for a resurgence of al-Qa`ida and other groups in Afghanistan. Vacuums are always going to be filled, one way or the other. In this case, I think we have to recognize that there's a very real possibility that these groups will rise again."

disparities in terms of the economics in many of these areas. All of these things are the underlying reasons that create great motivation for people to seek organizations like this. It was always interesting to me when we were trying to learn about ISIS that what ISIS basically did for the people that came to it [is] it provided them a job, it provided them belonging, and it provided them a family. Now, the way they went about that certainly wasn't in any way to be admired, but they were addressing basic needs of these people that were moving to the areas where ISIS was operating, and that still exists. We have to be very, very concerned about it.

In places like Syria, you have these large encampments where we are holding ISIS fighters, where we are holding ISIS families, and I think in all of this are the seeds that are going to germinate the next terrorist group that we're going to deal with. And so, we have got to see this through. It's more than just military pressure. We've got to do more with our partners to address these underlying issues that contribute to this particular problem.

The images of the last few weeks have been very disturbing. I'm disappointed and angry that our departure from Afghanistan is coming without achieving our strategic objectives and with an apparent level of humiliation that will have strategic effects for a while. As the CENTCOM Commander, I was really focused on trying to create the conditions for reconciliation between the Taliban and the government of Afghanistan. Of course, that has not been achieved, and the Taliban is back in power. I can't help but think that this will come back to haunt [us] and at the worst possibly will require that we respond with military power. With the Taliban's strategic alliance, I think the conditions are very, very favorable for a resurgence of al-Qa`ida and other groups in Afghanistan. Vacuums are always going to be filled, one way or the other. In this case, I think we have to recognize that there's a very real possibility that these groups will rise again.

The threat from terror organizations will remain. We have to continue to look at ways that we keep pressure on these networks, directly or indirectly. We have to be concerned about these ungoverned spaces and trying to address the voids that they create that allow organizations to arise out of this. And we've got to look at our partners, and we've got to get long-term, sustainable approaches in place to help them secure themselves with modest assistance and support from us. So I am concerned about this. We made some progress in this. We worked well with our intelligence community partners against al-Qa`ida, and I think we've largely nullified their external threat capability for the time being, but

Joseph Votel

again, these organizations can come back. And if we take our thumb off them for too long, I believe that they will.

CTC: To follow up further on the subject of CT evolution, over the past 20 years, the United States has developed an impressive array of investigative expertise, new tools, methodologies like F3EAD,[a] operational capabilities, and partnerships such as the global coalition to counter ISIS that have been integral to the CT fight. Over that same span of time, the United States has successfully prosecuted many terror offenders and also demonstrated its ability to deploy new or enhanced capabilities and tools tactically and operationally around the world in precise and impactful ways. How would you describe the evolution of U.S. CT over the past two decades? What stands out to you? When you think about the future of U.S. CT over the next five to 10 years, what does that picture look like?

Votel: I think there's a variety of things that we learned over time that really improved our approach to counterterrorism operations. Certainly the idea of a network to fight a network was a really important recognition. It took us a little bit of time to figure that

out, but once we did, we recognized this isn't just about going after fighters; it's about going after the leadership, it's about going after the finance, it's about going after the media aspect. It was about going after the other external support resources that enable these organizations, and ultimately, it's about taking away the terrain that allows them to plot, prepare, and operate from. So it's multi-dimensional, and we have to make sure that our full network of partners and capabilities is leveraged. This was really a fundamental thing for us to understand.

But, of course, there were a variety of other things: the integration with our interagency partners, in particular with the intelligence community, and with our very, very good partners as well, was absolutely key. We developed a number of ways and techniques that we could work better together, integrated in new operations, and we managed to get over our concerns with who was getting credit and who [was] going to take responsibility for doing actions. And we began to look more at how we leverage the inherent strengths of each of the various partners: what the U.S. military brought, what our intelligence community brought to this, what our international partners brought to this.

When I came back into Iraq—I had been there in 2003 and then stepped out for a couple years—I was surprised by the proliferation of interagency task forces and JIATFs [Joint Interagency Task Forces] and entities that we created that were designed to bring people together. These were really, really important developments along the way. And, of course, technology played a big role here. I can remember being in the JOC [Joint Operations Command] in 2001, and we had like one Predator [drone] supporting our operations and we were relying heavily on national intelligence means and imagery, depositories that we could call back on to get pictures that were taken in the past. When you look at it now, it was absolutely prehistoric in terms of some of the things that we were doing. But if you just look at drone technology and how that evolved over the course of the last 20 years, I think that's a really good way of looking at how we have moved this forward—the proliferation of these, the adding of sophisticated ISR pods and capabilities on them, the integration of fire support platforms on them, and then being able to work those in unmanned-manned operations, and really ultimately creating, as General McChrystal's described, the 'unblinking eye,' that really gave us this very, very distinct advantage as we conducted our operations.

Our drive for technology has only increased over time, and when you look at cyberspace, you look in the information space, and you see we've continued to move forward in these areas. These have all been really great developments that helped our CT effort. They've more broadly helped our overall national security approach and made us safer as a nation because we've harnessed these things. We've begun to understand, and we certainly have a long ways to go, but we generally have done really, really, really well in this.

We've learned how to partner better. We've made mistakes in this area in terms of taking on too much, taking on too little, trying to create forces in our own image as opposed to trying to really reinforce their inherent cultural strengths. This is one of the things that I think I'm most proud of about the campaign against ISIS in Iraq and Syria, not only with the Iraqis the second time around; we [were] really about building them back up and getting them out there to fight. We didn't try to over-organize them. We let them fight the way that they did, and we provided them the necessary support and advice. We helped them rebuild after their collapse.

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a   "Find, Fix, Finish, Exploit, Analyze, and Disseminate (F3EAD), pronounced "F-three-e-a-d" or "feed," is a version of the targeting methodology utilized by the special operations forces (SOF) responsible for some of the most widely-publicized missions in support of overseas contingency operations." "F3EAD: Ops/Intel Fusion 'Feeds' the SOF Targeting Process," Small Wars Journal, January 31, 2012.

"What terrorist organizations have probably learned over the course of the last 20 plus years is that there are a variety of tools that are available to them, and their approaches may be trying to combine these to create the greatest overall effect—the death of a thousand cuts, so to speak. It forces you to pay attention to it, to divert resources when you really want to be someplace else."

But if you look across the border into Syria, what we did with the Syrian Democratic Forces is a real maturing of how we looked at partnered operations. The 'by, with, and through' approach that we applied with them really represented the high point of our learning about how we most effectively partner with people on the ground. And then understanding both the strengths and weaknesses of that. The fact that they own this after the operations: this is a great strength that we built into this approach. It also means that they're going to control the timeline, they're going to have a vote in this, and they're not going to do things exactly the way we might do them as U.S. or Western forces, but that's OK, we can work through that. So this idea of partnering is another area where we've seen a lot of improvement, and all of these things have not only improved our CT approach, but they've really helped in other areas of our military security operations and made us better as a military, and hopefully will help us as we continue to move forward and address the threats of today.

But CT is not going away, and it's something that we're going to continue to deal with in the future. There are a lot of things we've got to get our head around. I recently traveled to Israel; I was there just a couple of weeks after the latest Gaza flare-up. I had a lot of opportunities to talk to our Israeli partners there about that, and I was quite struck with how they are now integrating artificial intelligence into their operations and the impact that that is having on their targeting cycles and their ability to generate usable information that makes them more effective and at the same time I think helps them conduct operations with greater care to collateral damage. It's never going to be perfect in terms of this, but this was certainly foremost in their minds as they were conducting these operations.

As we move forward, how we deal with the large amounts of data out there, the information that is available from so many sources, the so-called publicly available information, is going to be an area we will continue to contend with. I do think one of the other areas we have to pay attention to is our global reconnaissance. One of the concerns that I have as we pull back from places like Afghanistan and maybe a little bit more from Iraq and other places where we have dealt with terrorist threats is that we will lose sustained visibility into those areas.

So I do think the future will be dominated by those who

understand it the best, whether it is through publicly available information sources, managing large data, or whether it is the ability to see and understand what is happening in areas so that it preserves our decision space and informs our policy choices. To me, these are the areas that we will need to be thinking about in the future as we continue to contend with more sophisticated terrorist threats. I think as we have learned, they have learned as well. And we should expect that they're going to become more sophisticated, and so we will need to work hard to stay a step ahead of them as we continue on in our counterterrorism efforts.

CTC: It's been said there was a "failure of imagination" to anticipate the threat that materialized on 9/11 and today at a time of ongoing, transformative technological change in fields such as synthetic biology, drones, and artificial intelligence, and as the United States emerges from a global pandemic that has renewed concern over biological threats, what are the potential threats from terror groups and non-state actors that most concern you over the next 10 years?

Votel: Certainly the pandemic has redefined for all of us how we think about things like weapons of mass destruction, when you see the impact that a virus can have, not just on our population but literally around the globe, and the impact that it has economically, socially, culturally, politically in all of these countries. Observant adversaries looking at this have got to be thinking, 'How do we exploit this going forward?' as they watched not just the United States, but literally every country around the world struggle with how they dealt with a virus like this.

I'm thinking very hard about this particular question right now, and it would be great to be able to tell our listeners that, 'Yes, I think we're going to see terrorists go this direction or we're going to see them move more towards biological things or more towards this particular type of attack.' But I don't know that it is that clean. I think what terrorist organizations have probably learned over the course of the last 20 plus years is that there are a variety of tools that are available to them, and their approaches may be trying to combine these to create the greatest overall effect—the death of a thousand cuts, so to speak. It forces you to pay attention to it, to divert resources when you really want to be someplace else. Or [it forces you to] make hard decisions not to apply forces or other elements of national power. This is what concerns me.

We've seen in our own country and other places: attacks on infrastructure and the impact that that can have on economies and politics.

We've seen the impact of large refugee moves. Anybody who isn't heartbroken by watching the images that we saw in 2013, 2014 of thousands of people exiting Syria in search of some place to be safe and the chaos that that created in Europe and in all the countries along the way there and the death toll that took place. It is playing [out] in Kabul as we speak.

We've seen the impacts of kidnapping and hostage-taking. When you look back at our own counterterrorism capability, it is through readiness for these missions that we really developed some of our most exquisite capabilities. That is still, I think, a real significant concern for us as we move forward.

We've seen the impact of cyber ransomware. I don't know exactly what we're seeing with some of these ransomware attacks that take place, but in most cases, it looks like they're organizations

that are principally financially motivated. What happens when effective ransomware capability falls into the hands of those who are ideologically motivated, not financially motivated? This to me represents a different threat.

And, of course, just attacks on U.S. interests in a variety of different areas—whether it's our embassies, whether it's our people, whether it's our economic vitality in overseas locations, these things are all vulnerable.

So the picture that I'm trying to paint for you here is that I think what we have to think about in the future is that the terrorist organizations will look at the things that have been successful in the past and has caused disruption to the United States and other Western countries.

We have to look at how they may combine these things to actually achieve this death of a thousand cuts, presenting us with multiple dilemmas that require different responses to safeguard our own people and protect our own interests. This is what I'm really, really concerned about as we move forward and as we necessarily shift to our strategic competition with China. We have to be prepared to address the CT threat as well. What we should expect is a more sophisticated enemy who is going to apply a variety of approaches and strategies—not just IEDs and physical attacks—to disrupt our way of life and our interests.

CTC: What is the most important personal lesson that you have learned that you think would be helpful for the many men and women in the United States and our partner countries around the world who will lead and take part in the next generation of counterterrorism efforts?

Votel: One of the things that we have to really appreciate, particularly as we watch what's happening in Afghanistan right now, is the limits of our military capabilities and our military effort. There's no doubt we have the greatest military in the world, and perhaps the greatest military that has ever walked the face of the earth, but even with that, without being able to bring other things to bear, we can't be as successful as we want to be. I think it's important that we understand the limits of military power as we step forward and recognize that none of this gets done just by the military. It takes diplomats, it takes economic work, it takes the power of our information and our ideas to do this, it takes partners that we leverage along the way to do all of this. And all of this needs to be wrapped together in a coherent, long-term strategy that transcends presidential administrations. Frequent changes in policy and strategy not only complicate military efforts but they also weaken our overall approach, confuse our partners, and make it difficult to preserve our interests.

Corollary to all this is sorting out our approach to partnership. Over the last several years, we have sent confusing signals to our partners on the ground and in capitals around the world. We simply are better when we have a long list of allies and partners.

CTC: In the face of competing strategic priorities, including the geopolitical rivalry with China and Russia, and rebuilding at home in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, how can the United States ensure that it maintains a long, sustained focus on the global jihadi threat as it also seeks to prioritize other challenges with the continued rise of countries like China?

Votel: First off, I think it's important to make sure that we maintain

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our capabilities, some very exquisite capabilities we have. We have to have the ability to respond quickly. This is something that's really been a cornerstone of our counterterrorism operations for a long period of time, and we have to maintain that. We can't think that this is something we're not going to deal with in the future, even as we begin now to necessarily move our focus to strategic competition with China. We have got to maintain our exquisite CT capabilities. That doesn't mean everything that we have in the inventory needs to be maintained right now. It means there needs to be a very thoughtful look at the capabilities that we have, the benefits they are providing to us, and then the maintenance and the sustaining of those things going forward. And that's both platforms and organizations that we've developed over time. I think this is a big challenge for U.S. Special Operations Command in the future. There is a real need for special operations capability in strategic competition. SOF is going to need to come to grips with how it provides capabilities for both CT and strategic competition. And it will mean that we have to not only have the support of our leadership in the Department of Defense and across the administration, but also in Congress. We've got to make sure we're very clear-eyed about these threats and what it takes to address them, and that the maintenance of high-quality capability is the surest way that we can address these things quickly and effectively as we move forward. So, first and foremost is making sure we maintain the right capabilities.

Second of all, I think we've got to look at our security cooperation programs, particularly in places like the Middle East. It's been my view that as we begin to draw down in places like Afghanistan, Iraq, and other places and we have less of a physical military footprint on the ground, security cooperation programs become more important. These are the touchpoints with our partners out there, and we have some really great examples of it out there. They're much more economical. It is an economy of effort, so to speak, but what you can do with hundreds of troops that support security cooperation programs can offset the need for thousands to be present. And so we have to look at our security cooperation programs and make sure that these become the cornerstone of our approach in places like the Middle East, Levant, Central/South Asia where we won't have large forces on the ground any longer but where we will still have U.S. interests that we'll have to address, and

I think the security cooperation programs give us the best platform for doing this. They're naturally linked to the ambassador, and they bring along the full power of the U.S. country team, and I think that's an important aspect of it. And so, I really think we have to look at how security cooperation gets done: how we make decisions about selling or providing equipment to our partners, making sure we give them what they need and not just what they want, and then putting the onus on them to achieve the capability to look after their own security interests. And then very closely related to that is the development of our partnership capabilities out there.

As I mentioned earlier, I believe we've taken a hit in our partnership approach over the last couple of years with some of our policy decisions and stepping back in some areas, in some cases leaving our partners who have fought and bled for us in the lurch. We should look at that and how we begin to build that back to make sure that we can be viewed as a very reliable partner in the future. This is incredibly important. In a place like the Middle East where I've spent most of my time, every country I went to wants to be aligned with the United States; they want to have a strong relationship. Good security cooperation programs are a key ingredient to partnership. When we look at things like CT, we've also had some very good, very small programs in countries like Yemen, Somalia, Lebanon, Jordan, and a variety of other places where we worked with host nation and indigenous CT forces with a very finite U.S. footprint. These are highly effective programs, and we need to continue to preserve these kinds of authorities and approaches as we move forward. These will pay off for us in the long run.

It's been said, I think by leaders down at U.S. Special Operations Command recently, that combating terrorism is a form of strategic competition. Being good at this, demonstrating our value to partners in this particular area, building relationships around this is really important. And I think there are direct and perhaps maybe even indirect ways that we support the overall great power competition approach that we are taking about, and I think that's how we have to look at it. We've been talking a lot about the Middle East because that's my experience, but if you look out in the Pacific and you look at parts of Africa, other parts of the globe, this threat of terrorism is ever present, and this is an area where we have some great capabilities and we have some proven success, particularly at the operational level. And partners want to learn from us. Just look at the proliferation of special operations forces by our international partners. I mean, this is the surest sign that they appreciate and value what we've been able to do for ourselves with that. This is

"Combating terrorism is a form of strategic competition. Being good at this, demonstrating our value to partners in this particular area, building relationships around this is really important."

something we should be building on as we move forward. And so I actually look at combating terrorism as another way to compete and another way to demonstrate our own value and influence—not just in the Middle East, but in a variety of areas.

CTC: Do you have any further thoughts that you might like to add for our readers?

Votel: With the developments in Afghanistan over [recent] weeks, I think we are at a strategic inflection point. Our entire national security enterprise needs to take a serious look at strategy, partnerships, and strategic communication to the American people and our partners and adversaries abroad. I think we lack coherence right now, and it is undermining our national security interests.

I would also add that recently many people have asked me "Have our efforts been worth it over the last 20 years?" And what I would say is, "Yes, they have been." Afghanistan may not have turned out the way we wanted it to turn out, but it's not been used as a platform to attack our countries or our friends and allies. We have done a good job of suppressing these terrorist threats out there. We provided the Afghan people with hope and opportunity—and a knowledge that there is a better life for them. The fact that things have not turned out as we wished does not diminish the service and sacrifice of many of whom answered the nation's call and served honorably and nobly in a variety of causes.

I still remember the feeling getting onto an MC-130 as we were getting ready to parachute into Afghanistan in October of 2001 and the feeling of pride of every Ranger that we were doing something right and good for our country. I think it's important that we never lose sight of why we did all this; it was for a noble purpose.   **CTC**

Twenty Years After 9/11: Reflections from Ambassador (Ret) Dell Dailey, Former Coordinator for Counterterrorism, U.S. Department of State

By Paul Cruickshank, Don Rassler, and Kristina Hummel

Ambassador Dell Dailey served as the Coordinator for Counterterrorism for the U.S. Department of State from June 2007 to April 2009, charged with coordinating and supporting the development and implementation of U.S. government policies and programs aimed at countering terrorism overseas. As the principal advisor to the Secretary of State (Rice and Clinton) on international counterterrorism matters, he was responsible for taking a leading role in developing coordinated strategies to defeat terrorists abroad and in securing the cooperation of international partners to that end.

Dailey served over 36 years on active duty in the United States Army. He took command of the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) in 2000 and led initial combat operations in Afghanistan during the Global War on Terror. He reached the rank of Lieutenant General as the Director of the Center for Special Operations (CSO), U.S. Special Operations Command, at MacDill Air Force Base, Florida, between 2004 and 2007. Dailey graduated from the United States Military Academy in 1971. He currently serves as the Distinguished Chair at the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point.

Editor's Note: The following is the transcript of an oral interview conducted ahead of the 20th anniversary of 9/11. It has been lightly edited by CTC Sentinel.

CTC: 9/11 shaped your service, and you would go on to play a key role in Operation Enduring Freedom with a former West Point Superintendent describing you as "the unsung hero of Afghanistan" and "pivotal in pulling together the campaign plan."[1] You would later serve as the coordinator for counterterrorism for the State Department. Can you talk us through how that day, 9/11, was for you, the sense of purpose it created in you and your colleagues, and the ways you were able to contribute to the counterterrorism mission in the months and years that followed? And when you reflect on the last 20 years and the range of actions that have transpired across that time, what are some of the key issues, themes, or moments that stand out to you personally? What were your most memorable high and low points?

Dailey: First, I'd like to express our condolences to the families of folks who died on 9/11 in the towers and in the Pentagon and on the hillside in Pennsylvania. Our hearts go out to them. And I'd like to express our gratitude to our fallen comrades. They helped defend our nation in a unique way. But they did not come home, so we should always remember them.

On the day of 9/11, [in my capacity as JSOC commander] I was in Budapest, Hungary, for [a] quarterly full command, joint staff, no notice exercise. Our scenario was to go through multiple countries chasing about a dozen or so terrorists, and we would go through the challenges of international coordination and whatnot. That day, we went to the sixth floor of the U.S. Embassy; I was met by a young major named Scott Miller, the four-star [general] who [in July 2021] turned Afghanistan back over to Central Command. Scott immediately started briefing, and he showed us a TV shot of the first aircraft going into the tower, and right after that, I said, "Hey, wait a second, that's not part of our scenario." At that point, he showed the second one hitting, and he said this was real.

And all of a sudden, things had changed dramatically in what we were doing and how we were thinking. With the first [plane hitting], we thought it might have been accidental. But when the second one hit, we knew for sure it was real. It was some kind of terrorism. We immediately realized that we, JSOC, would be the key response force, and most importantly, we were out of position. Our critical National Response Command team was split. We had some in the United States and some in Europe. The leadership team in the United States was not at Fort Bragg. They were up in Maine doing a briefing. I agreed to cancel the exercise. We notified the EUCOM commander to get his permission and redeploy it to the States. I did that personally. Then we started a redeployment for the exercise forces. We contacted the rear command of Fort Bragg, and they moved into a combat mode for planning, obtained intelligence and found out as much as they could. For sure we, JSOC, knew we were going to be a responding force in some size, way, or shape. Because this was a deliberate, planned, intentional, and international attack. JSOC was the primary U.S. military counterterrorism force. We were at war with someone or something. In the days that followed, we found out it was al-Qa`ida, supported by the Taliban, [and] bin Ladin, and they were located in Afghanistan.

I remained in JSOC for two more years after 9/11, and we've continued to deploy and deploy rapidly troops in a global fashion in search of terrorists and supporting countries going after the terrorists. We were successful in this effort in multiple different areas, in multiple different venues. After my time in JSOC, I went to SOCOM headquarters in Tampa, and there became the deputy commander for the operational arm of SOCOM. I held that position for three years, and during that time, we built the J2, the J3, and the J5 in a very, very integrated manner, so that we'd be more focused and laterally effective in fighting globally and combating the terrorists. And this supported the combatant commanders also. We prepared, presented, and defended a global CT plan for the U.S. DoD forces. It was approved by Secretary of Defense [Donald] Rumsfeld, presented to President Bush, and then we actually started to implement it as I left.

After retiring after 36 years in the army, I served as the Coordinator for Counterterrorism for the Department of State at their CT Bureau from 2007 to 2009, working directly for Secretary [of State Condoleezza] Rice for the first 18 months [or so] and then

for Secretary [of State Hillary] Clinton for the next six months [or so].

At the State Department, we accomplished four significant things. First was the enhancement of a newly started regional support program for like-minded countries. We became a driving factor for a regional CT program on a global basis. We had multiple regional meetings, provided ideas, and U.S. support in intelligence and communications and funding to those countries that were interested. In most cases, this was a modest effort because they too were not that interested in revealing the inside of their ops, but they all had—one way, shape, form, or another—some type of terrorist activity, so that drew them together, and it was a pretty well-worked, fast, stood-up regional CT program. Second, I traveled to 30 different countries and assisted with CT strategy and funding and intel.

Third, the foreign terrorist organization list—(FTO) belonged to the CT Bureau—and we started a process to take the [Iranian dissident group] MEK off that and put the Taliban onto it. Over time, the office succeeded in getting the MEK off,[2] and over time, they put the Haqqani network of the Taliban onto the FTO list, but the irony is that, still today, the Taliban are not on the foreign terrorist organization list.

Fourth, we had a very, very good program at the State Department for combating terrorism operations in Somalia. Prior to that, the U.S. forces would be ready to hit a target, they'd have to get permission and go to the State Department, and it would take hours or days or even weeks for the political decision to be made. We facilitated the process by having myself, the ambassador to Kenya, the envoy to Somalia, who was also located in Kenya, the Assistant Secretary for Africa get on the phone, and we eventually sometimes had decisions made in as fast as 15 minutes. That really allowed the combating terrorism forces folks to move out and move rapidly on targets in and around Somalia.

CTC: When you reflect on the last 20 years and the range of actions that have transpired across that time, what are the key issues, themes, or moments that stand out to you personally? Your memorable high points and low points?

Dailey: Probably the most significant initial point with regards to Afghanistan that I recall was the initial opening [special forces] mission into Afghanistan, which was 18-19 October 2001. We needed to wait that long—from 9/11, almost six weeks to our first attack—because we had little information on Afghanistan. We had to plan, in our eyes, a significant, audacious, fast effort to go after who we thought were the perpetrators of the 9/11 [attacks]. So in that time frame, we planned and organized and rehearsed. The mission was, in fact, similar to Desert One[a] where U.S. forces took off from an island in the western Indian Ocean, flew into Iran, flew over the mountains, flew over the plains, landed, reorganized, and were going to go into Tehran. The distances were the same, flying off of the aircraft carrier was the same, the nasty weather was the

Dell Dailey

same. So we wanted to make sure none of the problems for [the Desert One mission] affected us. And frankly, none did. We had a weather entity out ahead of time to tell us if there was a haboob, which is a huge 6,000 to 10,000-foot dust storm coming, which happened in Desert One. It did not happen with us, but it had the potential to do so. We had an airborne operation into Kandahar that night, and that was done by our Special Forces folks.[b] They had no problems. They landed at Mullah Omar's home, right in the backyard of Afghanistan, right in the backyard of the Taliban leader who allowed al-Qa`ida to [carry out] that mission against us. Our forces included the 75th Ranger Regiment, commanded by then-Colonel Joe Votel. We were in and out in one night. Tragically, one of our quick reaction force aircraft had a dust landing, lost control, and rolled over. The doors were open, two of the occupants fell out, and the aircraft rolled onto them. These were the only casualties for the entire operation.[3]

Several days later, we heard in a discourse between Taliban leaders, "Oh my God. Oh my God. The Americans have flown into our backyard, into our homes. If they can do that, what else can they do?" And words to the effect of 'woe is us, woe is us.' That mission that night was far more than going after individuals. That was a

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a   Editor's Note: In 1980, a Delta Force operation to rescue American hostages held in the U.S. Embassy in Tehran culminated in failure before the operators reached the embassy. For more, see Mark Bowden, "The Desert One Debacle," *Atlantic*, May 2006. See also "'Desert One': Inside the failed 1980 hostage rescue in Iran," CBS News, August 16, 2020.

b   Editor's Note: On October 19, 2001, "in the first acknowledged action by U.S. ground forces in Afghanistan, Army Rangers and Special Forces seized an airfield in the south and attacked Mullah Mohammed Omar's headquarters near Kandahar. One helicopter on a supporting mission crashed in southern Pakistan, killing 2 soldiers. The Defense Department denied Taliban claims that the helicopter had been damaged over Afghanistan and that the U.S. raiders had been quickly driven off. [Chairman of the Joints Chief of Staff] Gen. Myers later said that there were no U.S. casualties, resistance had been light, Taliban losses were unknown, no Taliban leaders were on the premises, but potentially useful information had been captured." "The United States and the Global Coalition Against Terrorism, September 2001-December 2003, Historical Background," Office of the Historian, Bureau of Public Affairs, U.S. Department of State.

signal, and they read the signal perfectly. We can go anywhere and do anything. The United States is that powerful and that well organized and equipped. In those six weeks, we found multiple targets and had them bombed very fast. We knew we had to do something important. We knew we had to get boots on the ground into Mullah Omar's home; [that] was absolutely the right thing to do.

What also stands out to me is that post 9/11, the United States developed and improved our relationships. The Five Eyes Intelligence alliance (United States, the U.K., Canada, Australia, and New Zealand) came back into full activity. We dealt with Russia on a regular basis on matters related to combating terrorism. And with China ahead of the Beijing Olympics.

The SOCOM staff was reorganized to bolster their counterterrorism capacity. Increased training and funding and resources allowed the global TSOCs—Theater Special Operations Commands to become an extremely effective tool in the CT fight.

A high point was finding and killing bin Ladin, and then discovering in his files the following comment: "West Point Combating Terrorism Center," he said, "everything they print, I want to see."[4] So that's a pretty powerful statement that bin Ladin was looking at U.S. CT at the academic level, and he was intrigued.

The low moments for me have been every time an American soldier, sailor, airman, Marine, or official has fallen in the line of duty. We owe them an immense debt of gratitude.

CTC: This past May marked the 10th anniversary of the daring counterterrorism operation, which you just referenced, that ended up killing Usama bin Ladin in Pakistan. As you well know, there has been a considerable amount of debate about the state of al-Qa`ida and the broader al-Qa`ida network, especially its capabilities, status, and ability to endure. What is your assessment of the United States' campaign to degrade and defeat al-Qa`ida and the nature of the threat posed by the group today?

Dailey: We have been successful in severely degrading al-Qa`ida. Al-Qa`ida is no longer an international, U.S., or allied threat today. So as a result of what we've done to them, we've pushed them around and they're now sprinkled in other countries—but fundamentally, what they do today is only local. They don't currently have the potential to take over a country or to come to the United States to carry out an attack. And their leader [Ayman al-Zawahiri] is clearly isolated and fundamentally ineffective.

I'm pretty confident that we've got the tools to continue keeping al-Qa`ida down in whatever location they are present. They're currently not strong in Afghanistan, although we'll need to remain vigilant given the U.S. troop withdrawal and recent gains made by the Taliban. Al-Qa`ida are present in some parts of Asia and Africa, but they have a local focus there. The U.S. and allies have degraded and limited the operations of al-Qa`ida and ISIS. And now despite whatever their aspirations might be, they are for the most part just local threats.

CTC: In what areas has the United States performed less well?

Dailey: In doing the kind of nation building necessary for true change in places like Afghanistan. When we have gone into one of these CT battlefields, we have brought in significant and sizable

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military forces to defeat that threat. We have trained the host nation military in that process, and we have been somewhat successful in this enterprise. But take Afghanistan. Despite all the efforts we made on the military side, we didn't provide sufficient help with their education system, commerce, healthcare, agriculture, transportation, and other aspects of nation-building that were necessary for true change to take place. Like in Vietnam, the result was that our military efforts did not last.

I realize it's expensive to do proper nation building. But that's the only way lasting change will happen—to get that whole nation going the right direction and let them go on their own.

The lesson from Afghanistan may be that nation-building is too expensive and difficult. In the future, if our aim is to only carry out a military operation to degrade terrorist actors, then I think we need to set lower goals, go in, accomplish those goals, announce the due date, and move out. But if we're going to do something that's really powerful and meaningful over time, then more resources should be diverted to the nation-building side. If our goal was just to militarily degrade al-Qa`ida, we should probably have withdrawn from Afghanistan after the death of bin Ladin.

CTC: Given the U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Taliban takeover of Kabul, what is your level of concern that al-Qa`ida may bounce back as a threat to U.S. security?

Dailey: Al-Qa`ida is not coming back to Afghanistan, not in the size of the force that was [there] beforehand because the Taliban understand one thing: they understand the United States came in there and were present in their country for 20 years. If al-Qa`ida comes back and the Taliban hosts them, then they will have air strikes on an indefinite basis like we did in Iraq. So I don't think the Taliban are going to let al`-Qa`ida come back in. But they *will* reimpose their values, their religion, and their culture. But I do not think they would allow or host another attack on the United States.

Here's something that is ironic: Decades after our time in Vietnam, we have reengaged with [the government there]. I'm very comfortable that despite Afghanistan having been again taken over by the Taliban, decades from now or maybe sooner, we'll reengage with them. They'll possibly ask for some modest presence or assistance, and I suspect like we did for Vietnam, we'll forgive and forget. And that's probably the right direction to go. So I do not think al-Qa`ida will bounce back. It's no longer a major terror threat to the United States. I just plain don't see it. They may exist

"I think we all have to demand that our country have the best information collection capability ever ... intelligence collection, intelligence analysis, and intelligence usage clearly, unequivocally are the most important things to [prevent] the next potential surprise attack on the United States."

in very modest, discreet locations, but their extreme aspect of Islam, it just doesn't sell for the [vast majority of Muslims], and I think they'll be marginalized as a result of that.

CTC: Over the past 20 years, the United States has developed an impressive array of investigative expertise, new tools, methodologies, operational capabilities, and partnerships such as the global coalition to counter ISIS that have been integral to the CT fight. Over that same span of time, the United States has successfully prosecuted many terror offenders and also demonstrated its ability to deploy new or enhanced capabilities and tools tactically and operationally around the world in precise and impactful ways. How would you describe the evolution of U.S. CT over the past two decades? What stands out to you?

Dailey: Let me describe the four lessons learned that have been extremely helpful. The first is intelligence collection and verification on CT activities. We have to have intel, and we really have grown [our intel capabilities] dramatically. We've got [better] tools, processes, understanding [and intel has been better] distributed. You can't use a force without good intelligence. It is absolutely the most important [element]. In the CT effort, unlike in many other government arenas, we have been able to build up horizontal connectivity between agencies, which is critical and invaluable. And since 9/11, we have gotten much better at sharing information between these agencies. The days of finding out that somebody knew this and someone else knew that and nobody knew this, those days are gone. Area number two is international cooperation through agencies and direct. International cooperation is absolutely essential because you don't want to have to [interdict terrorists] when they're in your country. You want to get them when they're in another country.

Next we've got to keep our intellectual, scientific, and technical skillsets growing in leaps and bounds, like they do commercially,

we need to be able to [achieve] that governmentally and what I'm looking at is collection techniques, information technology, machine learning, cutting-edge concept of verification, production, distribution, and then sharing. That mechanical tool set needs to stay on [the] cutting edge and relevant. Fourthly, to respond to unforeseen events, we also need to be able to quickly carry out operations that we have not planned or contemplated. To do that, you've got to maintain an exercise program and a rehearsal program. [You need to routinely] exercise [with] international partners. [Also crucial are] real-world prep and experiences, [and you need to] take those lessons learned and retain them, improve them, and integrate any new equipment on a routine basis.

CTC: What is the most important personal lesson that you've learned over your many years that you think would be helpful for the many men and women in the United States and partner countries around the world who will lead and take part in the next generation of counterterrorism efforts?

Dailey: I think we all have to demand that our country have the best information collection capability ever. I don't want it to violate our Bill of Rights, our Constitution, our personal privacy and whatnot, but that doesn't go to people outside the United States. So the most important personal lesson is that intelligence collection, intelligence analysis, and intelligence usage clearly, unequivocally are the most important things to [prevent] the next potential surprise attack on the United States. And if we are better than good in those three areas, we won't have another surprise attack. So to sum it up: Intelligence.

CTC: In the face of competing strategic priorities, including the geopolitical rivalry with China and Russia, and rebuilding at home in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, how can the United States ensure that it maintains a long and sustained focus on the global jihadi terror threat?

Dailey: [We need to] keep SOCOM resourced, manned, and connected [to others involved in the U.S. and international CT enterprise] as best as possible, because for both detection on the intelligence side and [for] operational acts on the OPS side, SOCOM's got the right culture now, the right access now, and clearly the right mission statement now.

So when the rest of the [U.S. military] is wrestling with the MDOs—major military domain operations—or whatnot [to be in a position to defeat a near peer adversary], SOCOM can stay focused 100 percent and fundamentally, at a modest price on terrorism [in the] international arena. So [we need to] keep SOCOM resourced, manned, and connected internationally and nationally as we can and let the major [U.S.] forces take on Big China and Big Russia. **CTC**

Citations

1   Robin Wright, "Dell Dailey: Soldier, Counterterrorism Warrior," *Washington Post*, August 24, 2007.

2   Editor's Note: See Scott Shane, "Iranian Dissidents Convince U.S. to Drop Terror Label," *New York Times*, September 21, 2012.

3   Editor's Note: "Special Operations troops in commando raid," CNN, October 19, 2001.

4   Editor's Note: For the quote ("Please send all that is issued from the combating terrorism center of the American military"), see "Request for Documents from CTC," Declassified Material - May 20, 2015, Bin Laden's Bookshelf, Office of the Director of National Intelligence.

Twenty Years After 9/11: Reflections from Ali Soufan, Former FBI Special Agent

By Paul Cruickshank, Don Rassler, and Kristina Hummel

Ali Soufan is the chief executive officer of The Soufan Group. As an FBI Supervisory Special Agent, Soufan investigated and supervised complex international terrorism cases, including the East Africa embassy bombings, the attack on the USS Cole, and the events surrounding 9/11. He is the author of Anatomy of Terror: From the Death of bin Laden to the Rise of the Islamic State *and the* New York Times *top-10 bestseller* The Black Banners: The Inside Story of 9/11 and the War Against al-Qaeda, *winner of the 2012 Ridenhour Book Prize. He had a distinguished career in the FBI, including serving on the Joint Terrorism Task Force, New York Office, where he coordinated both domestic and international counterterrorism operations. He often operated out of hostile environments and carried out sensitive extraterritorial missions and high-level negotiations, and he has received numerous awards and commendations for his work. He has authored several feature articles for* CTC Sentinel, *including the authoritative profile of deceased IRGC-Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani. Twitter: @Ali_H_Soufan*

Editor's Note: *The following is the transcript of an oral interview conducted ahead of the 20th anniversary of 9/11. It has been lightly edited by* CTC Sentinel.

CTC: On September 11, 2001, you were an FBI special agent with experience investigating complex international terror cases, including the East Africa embassy bombings and the attack on the USS Cole. Can you talk about how that day, 9/11, was for you and the sense of purpose it created in you and your colleagues, and the ways you were able to contribute to the CT mission in the months and years that followed? And when you reflect on the last 20 years and the range of actions that have transpired across that time, what are the key issues, themes, or moments that stand out to you personally? What are your most memorable high and low points?

Soufan: Al-Qa`ida wasn't something new on 9/11, and the attacks did not materialize out of thin air. Maybe for most of the world and most of Americans, Usama bin Ladin and al-Qa`ida were new, they were not household names, at least. But they were not to us in the intelligence and law enforcement community. I was part of a team that had been tracking them for years. As you mentioned, we had the East African embassy bombings in 1998, the USS Cole in 2000, many plots that we disrupted in between, in Albania, in the U.K., in Morocco, you name it, in Jordan with the millennium plot. So we were very familiar with al-Qa`ida and its capabilities.

My immediate thoughts after the attacks were that we are at war, that this is [the] Pearl Harbor of our generation. At the very beginning, we needed to find out who exactly was behind the attacks; that's first. And second, we needed to do whatever [was necessary] to disrupt any further attacks. At that time, I was in

Yemen working on the USS Cole investigation. My team made the connection with al-Qa`ida following an interrogation with Usama bin Ladin's personal bodyguard, a guy by the name of Abu Jandal.[a] We found out that seven al-Qa`ida members from photos that we had in our investigations were all on the planes; we knew then that [that] was the very first evidence linking Usama bin Ladin and al-Qa`ida to the attacks of September 11th. The mission immediately became to find those responsible and to destroy their networks and their infrastructure. So getting intelligence for our troops before they invade Afghanistan and walking in the footsteps of a lot of the previous great officers and agents who worked al-Qa`ida before, we were trying to prevent another attack from occurring. Those were the two priorities.

CTC: Talk a bit about how it was for you personally being involved in that mission, in that aftermath period. Obviously, like many other people, you had this emotion of what had happened in the United States. How were you able to proceed in a cool, calm, and collected way to do what you needed to do to advance the mission?

Soufan: It was such a difficult situation. Here we are, far away from home; we had no idea what was going on in New York. At the time, we thought many of our colleagues had perished in the World Trade Center. At the time, people were saying there is probably 50,000 people who are killed in downtown Manhattan.

It was a very difficult time, but we [got] our instructions and we needed to find out who was behind that attack. We needed evidence that our government can take to allies, to countries around the world, saying this is the harsh, hard evidence that bin Ladin and al-Qa`ida were behind 9/11. And we were able to obtain that.

It was such a difficult time. So many emotions, so many raw feelings that we still have until today, I still have personally until today. 9/11 for me is an event that did not happen 20 years ago; it just happened yesterday. And every time you talk about it, you remember these things that you experienced first-hand, but you remember also that determination that we had as a team to continue with the mission to find out who was behind the attacks, to identify individuals who are directly connecting to the plot, to get the intelligence that we needed in order to go to Afghanistan, in order to destroy the infrastructure of al-Qa`ida. It was a difficult moment. The emotions were so overwhelming at the time, but also the sense of rising up to the occasion and doing what the American

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a   Editor's Note: Nasser al-Bahri, also known as Abu Jandal, was Usama bin Ladin's bodyguard in Afghanistan in the late 1990s. He later renounced al-Qa`ida and died in Yemen in 2015. "Bin Laden's former bodyguard Nasser al-Bahri dies," BBC, December 28, 2015; Raoul Wootlif, "Bin Laden's former bodyguard dies in Yemen," *Times of Israel*, December 28, 2015.

Ali Soufan

people expected us to do. We lost friends, we lost colleagues, I lost my mentor that day, John O'Neill. But we were able to provide the intelligence and the evidence needed by our own government. We were able to identify al-Qa`ida operatives as being part of the 9/11 attacks.

CTC: This past May marked the 10th anniversary of the daring counterterrorism operation that ended up killing Usama bin Ladin in Pakistan. Over the past decade, as you well know, there's been a considerable amount of debate about the state of al-Qa`ida and the broader al-Qa`ida network, especially its capability, status, and ability to endure. The Soufan Center have helped shape some of that debate and conversation. What is your assessment of the United States' campaign to degrade and defeat al-Qa`ida and the nature of the threat posed by the group today? In what areas have the United States and its allies achieved some level of 'success' and 'won'? And in what areas has the United States performed less well with challenges still remaining? Given the U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan and the August 2021 Taliban takeover of Afghanistan and the capital Kabul, what's your level of concern that the terror group [al-Qa`ida] may bounce back as a major threat to U.S. security?

Soufan: Al-Qa`ida today is nothing like the group that attacked us on September 11, 2001. Al-Qa`ida's core has been weakened after a period of high leadership attrition, but its regional affiliates worldwide still pose a threat, particularly the Yemen-based al-Qa`ida of the Arabian Peninsula, Shabaab in Somalia, various groups in the Sahel region in West Africa. And jihadis now are even opening new fronts in part of Central Africa, like in Mozambique and the DRC. Al-Qa`ida has evolved considerably over the last 20 years or so, yet it remains very dangerous. The network today is like a hydra, a serpent with many heads. It is more geographically

dispersed. It has branches all over the Muslim world, whereas on 9/11 it was mainly relegated to operating in and around the Taliban-controlled territories in Afghanistan. The group today is focused on local issues throughout its branches and affiliates and franchises, but that focus could change.

Al-Qa`ida continues to have international aspiration, make no mistake about it. So just because today's al-Qa`ida haven't targeted the U.S. or the West does not mean that cannot change. We cannot get stuck in a conventional mindset; we cannot have a failure of imagination again. Unfortunately, we continue sometimes to repeat past mistakes at a great peril. The conditions that gave rise to the September 11 attacks are resurfacing in places like Iraq, like Syria, like the Sahel and now definitely in Afghanistan, which will allow groups like al-Qa`ida to grow in strength. We've also failed so far to deal with the ideology. The next attack won't be something we did *not* predict, but likely the manifestation of something we did not *learn from* in the past or we are not effectively addressing today.

Let's take Afghanistan, for example. The withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan certainly provides an opportunity for al-Qa`ida to regrow its capabilities, to grow its operation within the country. If Afghanistan once again descends into civil war, if Afghanistan becomes like it used to be before, most probably it will again be a magnet for foreign fighters from the region and from beyond. So frankly, back to square one.

However, this time, the Taliban is likely to rule differently than it did in the past. If the Taliban learns lessons from other violent non-state actors, and instead of destroying the state and its existing institutions, they manage to absorb it from within—similar to what the Houthis did in Yemen or the Hashd[b] did in Iraq—then we might be dealing with a larger problem. This is a group that remains highly cognizant of what is at stake geopolitically, as evidenced by its relationship with Turkey, Iran, China, and other regional players. If the Taliban is able to behave in a less reactive, and a more pragmatic manner, it will likely acquire increased political legitimacy within Afghanistan. With the Taliban gaining effective control of the country, it will be an absolute boon for groups like al-Qa`ida, which have been loyal to the Taliban and their relationship is sealed with a religious *bay`a*. In turn, al-Qa`ida is going to expect some room to maneuver in Afghanistan, allowing it to recruit, fundraise, and train.

CTC: Over the past 20 years, the United States has developed

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b   Editor's Note: The Hashd al-Sha'abi (Popular Mobilization Forces, or PMF) are a Shi`a-dominated constellation of militia groups in Iraq. They played a significant role in Iraqi efforts against the Islamic State and are now "officially and legally organs of the Iraqi state." Crispin Smith, "Iraq's Legal Responsibility for Militia Attacks on U.S. Forces: Paths Forward," Just Security, March 10, 2021.

"With the Taliban gaining effective control of [Afghanistan], it will be an absolute boon for groups like al-Qa`ida, which have been loyal to the Taliban and their relationship is sealed with a religious *bay`a*. In turn, al-Qa`ida is going to expect some room to maneuver in Afghanistan, allowing it to recruit, fundraise, and train."

an impressive array of investigative expertise, new tools, methodologies like F3EAD,[c] operational capabilities, and partnerships such as the global coalition to counter ISIS that have been integral to the CT fight. Over that same span of time, the United States has successfully prosecuted many terror offenders and also demonstrated its ability to deploy new or enhanced capabilities and tools tactically and operationally around the world in precise and impactful ways. How would you describe the evolution of U.S. CT over the past two decades? What stands out to you? And when you think about the future of U.S. CT over the next five to 10 years, what does that picture look like?

Soufan: Too often, the U.S. has remained fixated and focused on enhanced capabilities that have provided significant tactical benefits but that do little to helping round out a comprehensive and effective counterterrorism strategy that deals with all aspects of the counterterrorism threat. The United States has cutting-edge technology and world-class special operators, but decapitation of terrorist organization is a tactical innovation. It cannot do much in addressing the jihadi narrative, for example, or the ideology behind that narrative.

We have had significant successes in creating partnership in helping others stand up for themselves and fighting the extremists, like with the ISIS coalition. We have done a great job—the FBI and other law enforcement entities—in prosecuting terrorists here in the United States. But all these successes are because of the amazing intelligence officers that we have, the amazing law enforcement agents that we have, the amazing military that we have.

But the solution has to be a strategic solution that's outlined by our political leadership. Unfortunately, we have failed in that. Tactically, we have been successful every step of the way. Strategically, I think if you look at the threat matrix today and how it's spread across the Muslim world, it's just a significant blaring indication of the strategic failure that you cannot blame [on] the people in the field. The people in field and the military do not set

the agenda. That's a political agenda.

Another evolution that we cannot overlook is the complete moral and security failure in some elements out of the war on terrorism—for example, enhanced interrogation techniques, or some people call it the torture program. From all perspectives, from a security perspective, from a counterterrorism perspective, from a legal perspective, from a moral perspective, as mentioned by the CIA's Inspector General, or the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence report, or the Armed Services Committee report, that program has been a complete failure and affected our reputation around the world and helped the terrorists recruit. We have terrorists now in Guantanamo Bay with American blood on their hands, who have been waiting trials for years and years, but because of torture, because of that program, many families and victims will not get accountability or justice. This is not a success, and I hope it will never be repeated by the U.S. It is why I fought so hard to un-redact information concerning this program so now the American people can read what really happened and they can learn from the lessons of the past, and so that these lessons would forever be in the public record.

CTC: When you think of the CT mission over the last 20 years, how would you summarize the key lessons learned in terms of keeping the United States safe from the kind of catastrophic attack we saw 20 years ago?

Soufan: We have to learn our lessons and ensure we do not repeat the mistakes of the past. I spent years tracking, analyzing, and trying to understand and disrupt terrorist groups and organizations. And today, I see many similarities between the rise of global salafi jihadist ideologies in the '80s and '90s and the rise of global white supremacist ideology in recent years. What most surprised me is how we can overlook the parallels between the rise of these two movements, how we cannot learn the lessons over two decades of the War on Terror. We completely and totally overlook the threats to the homeland from within, and we have not heeded any of the lessons about the rise of domestic threats and the threats that these kind of groups pose to our society. So our current counterterrorism framework was set up in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 to deal almost exclusively with foreign terrorist groups, groups like al-Qa`ida. But our threat landscape has changed, and so too must our thinking and our response.

CTC: At a time of ongoing transformational technological change in fields such as synthetic biology, drones, and artificial intelligence, and as the United States emerges from a global pandemic that has renewed concern over biological threats, what are the potential threats from terrorist groups and non-state actors that most concern you in the years ahead?

Soufan: I am drawn to Sun Tzu's saying: If you know your enemy and know yourself, you will win a hundred times in a hundred battles. We talked about failure of imagination before with 9/11; that was a conclusion the 9/11 Commission came with in describing 9/11. Our imagination is always very limited. It's limited by our perceptions, limited by our knowledge, limited by our experience, and now even with our partisan politics. But one area where we have failed repeatedly is in the battlefield of narratives and the battlefield of diplomacy. Fighting an ideology is a long process, one

c   "Find, Fix, Finish, Exploit, Analyze, and Disseminate (F3EAD), pronounced 'F-three-e-a-d' or 'feed,' is a version of the targeting methodology utilized by the special operations forces (SOF) responsible for some of the most widely-publicized missions in support of overseas contingency operations." "F3EAD: Ops/Intel Fusion 'Feeds' the SOF Targeting Process," Small Wars Journal, January 31, 2012.

in which progress may not always be immediately apparent. After 9/11, it was common to hear analysts testify that they simply could not imagine someone flying a plane into a building. In Afghanistan, we had no idea what to do after the military victory. I recall listening to high-level administration officials back in 2003 saying we could not imagine it will take more troops to secure Iraq after Saddam than it will take to take out Saddam. We could not imagine—we heard that so many times—we could not imagine we will be in Afghanistan for 20 years.

In terms of the main [likely future] threats, I would draw attention to three key areas that [are] shaping the terrorism landscape right now, and which will continue to shape it, I believe, in the foreseeable future. First, the enduring threat from salafi jihadi-inspired terrorism. Second, the rising threat from anti-government, violent groups and racially or ethnically motivated violent extremists. And three, the prevalence of conspiracy theories and disinformation online *and* the corresponding effect offline.

As for that possibility of a biological terror attack, our CBRN defense apparatus was significantly bolstered after the anthrax attacks in 2001, which particularly blindsided us because it happened shortly after 9/11. Whether or not this is a type of attack that law enforcement and federal entities can interdict without substantial preventive measures is less clear, especially with the possible implications of emerging technology—for example, on potential CBRN terrorism. The possibility of a CBRN attack rightfully gets a great deal of attention because an attack with biological or chemical weapons could be a tremendous shock to society, a tremendous shock to the perception of safety that we aim to protect. It's also important to keep in mind that there are still significant institutional and intellectual barriers keeping terrorists from replicating chemical and biological weapons. However, technology is changing faster than regulators can keep up, and we've been apprehensive about the possibility of a CBRN attack for decades. Chemical and biological attacks pose a significant threat. If terrorists are successful in launching a CBRN attack, even if not a highly lethal event, it will still have a profound psychological impact.

CTC: What is the most important personal lesson that you've learned over your many years working in counterterrorism that you think would be helpful for the many men and women in the United States and partner countries around the world who will lead and take part in the next generation of counterterrorism efforts to know?

Soufan: We need to learn from the past. We need to keep our eye on the ball. The threat is not gone yet, and now we see a lot of people trying to make this false dichotomy between counterterrorism and great power competition. I think the United States can and *must* do both. There are significant areas of overlap and conversions between counterterrorism and between great power competition, including, for example, with the Iranian-sponsored proxy groups. You have the Houthi in Yemen, Lebanese Hezbollah, you have Hamas, you have the Shi`a militias in Iraq, the Russians assistance to separatists in eastern Ukraine. What we are seeing more and more is a violence conducted by non-state actors—in some places, they are terrorists; in others, they are insurgents or militias—they are using sophisticated weaponries and technology supplied by state actors who also provide tacit knowledge transfer through

"We need to learn from the past. We need to keep our eye on the ball. The threat is not gone yet, and now we see a lot of people trying to make this false dichotomy between counterterrorism and great power competition. I think the United States can and *must* do both."

hands-on training. Also, let's keep in mind that the threat from both the Islamic State and al-Qa`ida—now they are operating in various regions—that threat remains potent. The U.S. will continue to require the capacity to retain counterterrorism capabilities and partnerships with reasonable proximity to these areas that have a threat.

We've learned that we cannot just focus on the threat in our own backyard, as global threats will eventually threaten our own security here at home as seen on 9/11. The U.S. has always been the leader in this realm, and we should try to keep hold of that position, even after the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. Apart from Pakistan, for example, Central Asia is a region that has historically served as a key hub for U.S. military, logistics, and intelligence capabilities during the global war on terrorism. That region has been flagged as a possible location for U.S. presence. A more robust U.S. presence in Central Asia could result in a closer partnership between China and Russia, already influential in that region. This is another area where we see the convergence of counterterrorism and great power competition.

With regard to the new generation of counterterrorism folks, they have never dealt with a significant crisis management situation like we had after 9/11, but they've seen the pandemic. And I think there is a possibility—we're still a ways from understanding the full impact and predict the full impact of the pandemic on terrorism—but there will be some second- and third-order effects that we're not necessarily prepared for or even ready to respond to. There is no doubt that the pandemic has heightened social, economic, cultural, political divides. There's no doubt that the pandemic further isolated individuals and pushed them towards groups and echo chambers online, even more than usual. These dynamics have ripened future opportunities for radicalization.

With the pandemic, it wasn't just one thing that went wrong. We had confusing public messaging, shortages of PPE [personal protective equipment], problems with supply chains, varying lockdown requirements. We need to have a close evaluation of that response to understand what we can do better. For decades, we told ourselves that pandemics were real and that we were prepared. But we were not. This crisis was not a failure of imagination, but a failure of preparation. We have witnessed a global phenomenon of politicization of mask wearing and the vaccines. It has become a sense of politics or even identity, in many cases, to shun precautionary measures. We now have to factor in disinformation and misinformation when it comes to response and future planning. The impact of disinformation campaigns,

the impact of misinformation campaigns and conspiracy theories, underpinned by this wave of anti-government rhetoric, should be a significant cause of concern. Our crisis management down the road must contend with an information climate that's defined by polarization and lack of trust. Our preparedness must now account for this, unfortunately. It's also something that our adversaries have recognized and seize upon and frequently use against us. Some of these adversaries might be non-state actors and terrorist organizations and groups.

CTC: You've had the experience of sitting across the table from people like Abu Jandal and dozens of al-Qa`ida members during your FBI experience and different moments of your career. What do you think al-Qa`ida has learned from these past 20 years?

Soufan: Al-Qa`ida has been able to evolve in the past 30 years, from one group to another. Al-Qa`ida in Sudan wasn't the same as al-Qa`ida in Afghanistan before 1998. Al-Qa`ida after 1998 was a little bit different than al-Qa`ida on 9/11 and al-Qa`ida after 9/11 was very different than al-Qa`ida in Afghanistan, and it continued to evolve. And I think the Arab Spring changed the calculus of al-Qa`ida. So they started to focus more on dealing with local conflicts and taking advantage of these local conflicts in order to prevent anybody else from filling the vacuum that existed because of the fall of dictators like Ali Abdullah Saleh or Muammar Qaddafi or the civil war in Syria, and so forth. So they change their calculus in order to go from one stage in their strategy to another stage.

Al-Qa`ida has a strategy called the "management of savagery." Phase one, you do terrorism to disrupt the regional and global order. Phase two, you prevent anybody else from filling the vacuum, and establish relationships and alliances with other groups, tribes, members of the population. And phase three, you establish a state, and then you take all these states together and you combine them under a caliphate. And if you look at the map, you see them doing this strategy in the Sahel. You see them trying to do the strategies in areas in Yemen. You see them trying to do it also in East Africa. You see them trying and failing in one way or another to do it in Syria. And now with us pulling [out] from Afghanistan, their calculus is also, I believe, going to change. Their calculus is, the main goal of al-Qa`ida has been accomplished. In 1989, the mujahideen defeated one of two superpowers, the Soviet Union. On September 11, 2021, they defeated the second superpower, the United States. And this is going to be a huge propaganda tool for al-Qa`ida, which is going to help them further spread their message not only [in] Afghanistan but also with sympathetic groups in Pakistan and Tajikistan, and all across the Muslim world.

CTC: There's this belief that we're in maybe the end of the fourth quarter when it comes to the fight against terrorism. There's this fatigue with terrorism. The public is tuning out. There's a desire in Washington, London, other capitals to move on to great power competition. Obviously, reality sometimes intervenes, and it seems to be intervening at rapid speed right now in Afghanistan and parts of Africa. With that analogy of a football game, where are we at with this struggle against the global jihadis, to include the struggle between moderates and extremists in Muslim societies?

Soufan: We always think that terrorist groups have a timeline.

> **"We always think that terrorist groups have a timeline. They don't. We create these timelines and start focusing on them even though they mean nothing to groups like the Taliban or al-Qa`ida or ISIS. They are not working on a timeline. They are working to accomplish their mission."**

They don't. We create these timelines and start focusing on them even though they mean nothing to groups like the Taliban or al-Qa`ida or ISIS. They are not working on a timeline. They are working to accomplish their mission, and they see—if you look at the map today, if you look at the situation in the Sahel, in Mali, in West Africa, if you look at Yemen, if you look at Libya, if you look at Chad, if you look at what's happening in Syria, if you look at Iraq, and yes, if you look at Afghanistan—they're going to see themselves winning. Their strategy shifts. They are like a snake, like a serpent. It's shifted from place to place.

Al-Qa`ida has this McDonalds approach to jihad. They look at the al-Qa`ida branch in the Sahel, and they say, "Hey, do whatever you want to do regionally in order to become popular in order to recruit." Their strategy might be very different than the one in Syria or very different than the one in Afghanistan. It's not as centralized as it used to be, but however, we have to remember that each one of these affiliates—the leaders of their affiliates and each member of the affiliates—gave *bay`a* to the leader of al-Qa`ida, whoever the leader of al-Qa`ida is going to be. So this is a situation that we have to keep in mind. The threat is still there. I believe the threat is probably more dangerous today than it used to be in 1996 or 1998 when bin Ladin started operating in Afghanistan. We have a lot of things that we need to be careful about. And yes, we've pulled out of Afghanistan, but we need a safety net. We need a plan B to contain that threat in Afghanistan and prevent al-Qa`ida and prevent the Taliban and prevent other terrorist organizations [from using] Afghanistan like they used it before—[and in the case of al-Qa`ida] to plan the East Africa embassy bombings, to plan the USS Cole, to plan 9/11. Do we have a plan to do so? This is not a military decision. This is not [a] law enforcement decision. This is not [an] intelligence community [decision]. This is a political decision. This is a whole-of-government approach [that is necessary for] dealing with this.

As for the great power competition, there is significant overlap between both. Now we see so many countries around the world—to include Russia, to include regional powers like Iran and Turkey—using non-state actors to accomplish their regional missions. We talked about Iran and their relationship with the Shiite militias in Iraq or the Houthis in Yemen or Hezbollah in Lebanon or Hamas in the Palestinian territories and Gaza. We saw mercenaries being used in Libya and even during the Nagorno-Karabakh war between Armenia and Azerbaijan. We see Russia using non-state actors in Ukraine and using the Wagner Group in Syria and different places in Africa, to include Libya.

So in the last 20 years, the United States established significant

amount of partnership with regional groups, with local entities to counter terrorism, and we cannot just walk away from these groups in order to follow a new strategy about great power competition. The world is a messy place. It's not [like] we can pick and choose. The world operates differently, and we need to deal with the world *as it is*, not as some analysts in Washington believe it ought to be.

We have [a] significant amount of threats to deal with today, and I think the counterterrorism strategy of the last 20 years, specifically the part of establishing partnerships and establishing training relationships or engagement with countries around the world, is going to be very significant to help us, even with the great power competition strategy.   **CTC**

Twenty Years After 9/11: Reflections from Alex Younger, Former Chief of the United Kingdom's Secret Intelligence Service (MI6)

By Raffaello Pantucci

Sir Alex Younger was a career intelligence officer in Britain's Secret Intelligence Service, MI6, for 30 years. He served in Europe, the Middle East, and Afghanistan. He was appointed as Director of Counter Terrorism in 2009, and as Chief from 2014 to 2020. Prior to SIS, he served in the British Army as an infantry officer.

Editor's Note: *The following is the transcript of an oral interview conducted ahead of the 20th anniversary of 9/11. It has been lightly edited by* CTC Sentinel.

CTC: Take us back to 9/11. You were already working in SIS (the Secret Intelligence Service, MI6) at the time. How much of a shock was the attack to SIS and to U.K. intelligence more broadly?

Younger: Clearly, it was a shock, and it was designed to shock. Visually, it was an extraordinarily traumatic and shocking sight, and that was the point. The attack was designed to be the ultimate provocation, and that was the effect that it had. It also engendered huge uncertainty because at the time we had none of the knowledge we now have with hindsight, and it seemed eminently probable that this was the first of a number of such attacks. To this day, I am pleasantly surprised that it did not lead to a series of similar outrages. In fact, on that day, I remember thinking that the very building I was sitting in could be on the list. So it also had a very personal effect. And it was clear that it did change everything.

CTC: How did 9/11 change the work and thinking at SIS? Did change occur immediately after the attack itself, or did it take some time for it to filter through the organization?

Younger: No, it was pretty quick. I think if you looked at the situation on the day before September 11, by and large terrorism was still treated as a discrete set of regional but probably even national phenomena rather than something strategic. When you looked at our version of terrorism in the U.K., for example, it felt very different to what was being faced in France. By and large, it was our domestic colleagues [at MI5] who were in the lead on all of this in the U.K. International partnership was less important. Secondly, and this may have been a failure of imagination as much as anything else, people did not conceive of things going on in far off places, like in failed states like Afghanistan, as actively threatening their homelands. That connection wasn't considered adequately. It was obviously there theoretically, but I do not think it was properly internalized.

Bear in mind that we, as the U.K., were somewhat ahead of the pack in many respects for the very sad reason that we had dealt with terrorism for decades generated by the IRA [Irish Republican Army]. That was a quintessential domestic, politically orientated problem—all the things that the attack of September 11 was not.

So the main changes were two-fold. One, a pretty instant ovenight understanding that what happened in Afghanistan obviously mattered to the security of our people, and that, of course, put my service properly into the fight. And then secondly, an understanding of the premium on partnership. We realized that, by and large, we all had the same problem and it was coming from similar places. The days where you could take a not-my-problem or, worse, beggar my neighbour approach to terrorism were well and truly over.

CTC: You are one of many SIS officers who served in Afghanistan. You've stated that after 9/11, you and your colleagues had a "profound impulse to step forward into the line of danger" and that you felt that your organization was "one of the few that could make a difference, faced with a wholly new, and open-ended, threat from international terrorism."[1] Talk us through the role SIS played in going after al-Qa`ida in Afghanistan and has played in detecting and [working to thwart] jihadi terrorist plotting around the world.

Younger: It's an odd thing to say, but in some ways, we were the lucky ones; terrorist attacks are awful things, but we are in a position to do something about them. I think one of the most difficult experiences after something like 9/11 or 7/7 [the al-Qa`ida attack of July 2005 on London's transport system] must have been a sense of helplessness in the face of this hidden menace, set against [the] very human wish and need to get involved and do something. In SIS, we had the privilege, if you can call it that, to be in a position to do something about attacks in however small a way. That also, of course, conferred a frightening responsibility, which I would not pretend was a light burden for anyone. Our mission intensified in this new and difficult context. But it was our traditional mission. Put simply, we discovered that groups of people in far-off lands, predominantly in failed states which constituted a permissive environment for terrorists, were organizing to kill our citizens. It was our job specifically to get inside those groups, to reveal what was going on, and to work in partnership to stop it—a task, albeit in different contexts, that is as old as SIS.

CTC: How shocking was it to discover that there were British nationals involved in these networks? The July 7 attacks of 2005 were the archetypal example of this link, but there were also many other plots, as well as Brits fighting with the Taliban when the Americans went into Afghanistan. How much did that particular community become a focus of work?

Younger: It was not a shock in the sense that we had already seen al-Qa`ida rather successfully—the ideology, that is—appear within communities that should otherwise call the United Kingdom home.

People born here and who nonetheless conceive for various complex reasons to be in a state of war with their own country. So, it was not intellectually out of kilter, but speaking as a British citizen, someone who lives here and cherishes the values the U.K. espouses, it still remains a profoundly shocking fact. I am a huge beneficiary of all of the things that are good about this country, and I make it a principle of life to try to put myself in other people's positions to try to understand their choices. But I nonetheless find it extraordinary that a country that has provided succor to people is turned upon in this way.

But what I think is not the important thing. The important thing is for us to properly understand the thought processes and conditions that lead to people making these choices. To deal with this problem in the longer term, we have to understand these underlying issues and deal with them. We in the CT [counterterrorism] community working in the Pursue strand of our strategy[a] are not the solution here. What we are is the means for buying time and a way to suppress the problem, to provide space so that the political, psychological, social, and cultural aspects that lie at the heart of this problem can be fully addressed.

CTC: Beyond Afghanistan, were there any parts of the world SIS was particularly focused on when it was going after the threat?

Younger: I always thought we had two jobs. One was to join the community of nations in bearing down on the networked jihadi threat; be part of a networked solution to a networked threat. Additionally, I was very conscious of our need to play our part as a globally engaged power across the globe in dealing with these problems. Things that happened in far-off countries affected us and others. It was very difficult to isolate the terrorist problem to a specific geography, and it was our job to be making a contribution to counter the problem.

But I also felt that we are a medium-sized power, and it would be a huge mistake to set ourselves up as a global policeman. We are just not suited for that, and I do not think there is a particular appetite within the U.K. to play that role. It simply is not practical. So our priority needed to be to bear down on places and people that were generating a direct threat, either to the U.K. or to our citizens and allies. The most forbidding and essential aspect to a successful counterterrorism campaign is to prioritize. You naturally prioritize on the threats to the lives of our citizens and those of our allies. So that takes you to places where we have a contiguous geography in all senses of the word, not just physical but human and societal, and so in particular South Asia: India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. Our links to that whole region are profoundly enriching for our country, but sadly, there is a negative aspect. These links are exploited by extremists.

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a   Editor's Note: The United Kingdom's counterterrorism strategy (called Contest) has four pillars:
    Prevent: to stop people becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism
    Pursue: to stop terrorist attacks
    Protect: to strengthen protection against a terrorist attack
    Prepare: to mitigate the impact of a terrorist attack

> **"Effective CT ... is one percent inspiration and 99 percent teamwork ... counterterrorism forced us to rapidly shift to a dare-to-share principle. It became evident that the risks of not sharing frequently in counterterrorism were far more forbidding than the risks of sharing. It was a complete inversion of our normal paradigm."**

CTC: How did SIS change its practices of working with other agencies and allies in the United States and elsewhere as a result of 9/11? What were the most significant changes you observed in its wake?

Younger: To extend my recipe about effective CT, I would say it is one percent inspiration and 99 percent teamwork. Suddenly, and bear in mind intelligence services are broadly configured around the need-to-know principle, counterterrorism forced us to rapidly shift to a dare-to-share principle. It became evident that the risks of not sharing frequently in counterterrorism were far more forbidding than the risks of sharing. It was a complete inversion of our normal paradigm.

We embarked—it has to be said, led by the United States—in an aggressive pursuit of effective partnership with the countries where the threat was coming from. Which, of course, immediately generated a set of really serious ethical and legal considerations because normally you are partnering with a country that's very different from a prototypical Western liberal democracy, and this brings a whole set of challenges with it. And that was the thing that hit us pretty quickly. There was a lot that was familiar about the task, which for SIS since 1909 has been about finding out what is going on and doing something about it. But there is something about counterterrorism and the need to share to be effective, and the need to do something with what you find while remaining consistent with your laws and values, that brought with it a set of really new and very difficult disciplines into play almost overnight. That was tough because it was matched with the impulse I described in the speech you mentioned earlier, which is to do stuff. And our absolute impulse, which I'm still proud of, was to get out there and be shoulder to shoulder with the United States, which had suffered the most grievous attack.

CTC: 9/11 happened as we were on the cusp of the current information revolution. Al-Qa`ida was quite an early adopter of the internet. Could you talk us through the complexities of adopting to this new world and how it might have impacted intelligence collection and counterterrorism in particular?

Younger: I think it was most important on the CT capability side: information sharing, data discovery, recognizing that huge

Sir Alex Younger

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holdings of data would very rarely make any sense unless they were compared with other huge holdings of data. That was the really big issue and change. It was actually on our side of the fence rather than the terrorists' where the data and technology was most important. When it comes to our adversaries, it is worth remembering this was 2002. The internet as a means of propagating ideas was still pretty nascent. You have to fast forward to Daesh [the Islamic State] before you get to the profoundly internet-enabled terrorist phenomenon that is such a major preoccupation today. And there wasn't any cyber component to the threat; I think there were a couple of small attempts at cyber-terrorism, but I don't think anyone seriously attempted that with any great effort or impact.

Predominantly for me, the bigger change was the astonishing revolution that took place in the latter part of my career where we had access to abundant information, technical data, and other things, and struggled to figure out how to manage and decipher it all. The real issue was, again ensuring it was done in a manner that was lawful and consistent with our values, using that information to get the right answer before terrorists acted.

CTC: With the Arab Spring and the death of Usama bin Ladin, there was a sense 10 years ago that the global jihadi terror threat was waning. But within just a few years, the Islamic State had taken control of vast swaths of Syria and Iraq and embarked on a global terror campaign. Was SIS surprised by the speed and extent of the rise of the Islamic State? What for you are the lessons learned for the future when it comes to identifying and confronting such gathering threats as early as possible?

Younger: I don't think the phenomenon of Daesh itself was a surprise insofar as you could see in the situation in Iraq a sort of textbook environment for radicalization. The speed of it was absolutely a surprise, and the asymmetric success that Daesh enjoyed in 2014 was pretty stunning. I am sure you will remember those images. That was a shock. However, a significant galvanizing factor was quite particular to that time and place. Essentially, hardline elements of Saddam's former intelligence apparatus rapidly changed sides and brought a pretty hardcore level of security expertise to what I think otherwise would have been quite a disparate insurgency. It was a really evil combination of a rapidly intensifying and mutating jihadist ideology galvanized in a pretty cynical way by a lot of former Soviet-trained Iraqi operatives. And that produced what we subsequently saw, which was an incredibly intractable and difficult security problem. Allied to this was the more modern phenomenon that we have just been talking about, which is their realization and capacity to conduct a digital campaign and propagate the jihadist single narrative in a far more sophisticated way than had been possible hitherto.

It was also profoundly worrying to see the caliphate set up as a working example of the jihadist ideology on earth, operating and to the extent that it did. And that success, while it lasted, pulled people in, which was a significant source of threat to us as those people were pulled from their host communities, including here in the U.K., and retained links back home alongside the capacity to use those links. I remember thinking at the time that this was an open-ended, toxic, and extraordinarily dangerous situation. One of the things I am most proud of is the role we played in removing the caliphate from Syria. It remains in many important ways an unfinished and very open situation, but if I cast my mind back to, say, 2014 and you had told me we would ultimately prevail over the caliphate, that would have been, in my mind, a very good outcome. Not least because specific British operators within Daesh were very prominent in the group's campaign and a source of extreme national shame and embarrassment.

CTC: Could you tell us a bit more about the indicators you saw for the rise of the Islamic State? Looking at that experience, are there any other parts of the world where you could envision something similar happening?

Younger: I remember at the time being very concerned about the way that [Syrian leader Bashar al-] Assad was behaving towards his own people and the brutality he was meting out. I think this in large part was what would feed the Daesh phenomenon. But even with hindsight, we can't beat ourselves up for failing to see the speed and scale with which it happened, because it is quite a dramatic butterfly effect, in the sense that small changes to the inputs made a large difference to the outputs. There were several different, unrelated factors that coincided to put Daesh's development at the worse end of anybody's expectations of what might happen. In large part, this surprise is why they were so militarily successful, because they were just moving so much faster than anyone's understanding of the threat.

CTC: What is interesting looking back is that in the end, the United Kingdom did not face the same sort of threat as continental Europe from the Islamic State terrorist organization in Syria and Iraq. What plots we did see were of a much smaller magnitude than, for example, the November 2015 Paris attacks. It could be that you and your colleagues were just doing a fantastic job and that's what kept the threat away, but I wonder was there anything else to it. Was there anything about the way the United Kingdom was connected to the battlefield that seemed different to the earlier wave of al-Qa`ida-linked threats from South Asia? Can you tell us why you think the United Kingdom did not end up with the same sort of threat?

Younger: Well, I think we had a head start in terms of doing counterterrorism for decades and learning some very hard lessons in part through mistakes. We learned early the importance of being joined up within our various security services, which placed us ahead of the pack. We therefore likely did pose a more difficult environment for terrorists to operate in than the average in Europe. But I would not want to exaggerate that lead. The reality is that we were all vulnerable and we all faced this phenomenon together.

Looking back, however, the role of charismatic and prominent individuals should not be underestimated, so part of the reason that brought the particular intensity of threat to both France and Belgium was that their nationals happened to be in influential and capable positions within the caliphate. And so in that sense, for them it was really a case of bad luck. But that's how it was. And if you take that reality alongside the fact that those countries are not islands and that firearms are therefore more accessible than they are in the U.K., then you have some part of the answer to the question. We will not ever, of course, absolutely know the answer, but I would also highlight that European counterterrorism capabilities at that time were growing much more effective and continued to [do] so.

CTC: Twenty years on from 9/11, there is again this sense that the global jihadi threat is in retreat. What is your assessment? Have you been surprised by the growth of the Islamic State in Africa in particular? Where do you think we may see jihadi threats coming from next?

Younger: It is really difficult to speculate. Broadly speaking, I would say that the threat is less than it was, and I would link that to the successes we have had in terms of suppressing the networks in Syria and Afghanistan. This is combined with a much more effective counterterrorism machine across the technical, foreign,

> **"Terrorism is now more spontaneous and delegated, but that does not mean it is less dangerous ... But terrorism of this sort is a different type of problem, and in some ways, it has now reverted to being much more conditioned or sensitive to the domestic conditions in the target country, rather than being primarily something that is directed from abroad."**

and domestic spaces that are much better integrated than they were. Our counterterrorism capability is an order of magnitude more effective and capable than it was in the past.

Set against this reality are two issues. One, as the Manchester attack illustrated,[b] a spontaneous, non-directed attack is just as devastating as networked plots. Terrorism is now more spontaneous and delegated, but that does not mean it is less dangerous, something the Manchester attack sadly showed. But terrorism of this sort is a different type of problem, and in some ways, it has now reverted to being much more conditioned or sensitive to the domestic conditions in the target country, rather than being primarily something that is directed from abroad (in the U.K. at least). It is still fundamentally underpinned by a single narrative, which is very effectively propagated online by groups like Daesh and al-Qa`ida.

Yet, at the same time, it is also at the moment pleasing to see that international terrorist networks, both al-Qa`ida and Daesh, are to some extent in abeyance because we have been successful against them. There is no real cause to pause and celebrate that fact because Africa and the Sahel are looking dangerous and difficult. In addition, there is, of course, Afghanistan.

CTC: MI5 Director General Ken McCallum recently warned that terrorists will seek to take advantage from the U.S. and NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan.[2] In the wake of the fall of Kabul, how concerned are you by this, and what needs to be done to ensure that Western intelligence is best placed to detect and thwart any future international attack plotting from the country?

Younger: The sudden collapse of the Afghan government was brought on by [a] set of unforgivable unforced errors. Trump's inexplicable decision to abandon any political conditionality in his withdrawal "negotiations," his immoral pact with the Taliban that essentially made it OK to attack Afghans, if Americans were left alone, creating a dynamic that led directly to the collapse of the Afghan Army. And the Biden administration's tactical missteps: the

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b   Editor's Note: On May 22, 2017, 22 people were murdered when Salman Abedi detonated a bomb in a crowd leaving a music concert at Manchester Arena. "Manchester attack: Who were the victims?" BBC, June 17, 2021.

abrupt removal of all enablers, and the decision to do this in the middle of the fighting season. All without any meaningful allied consultation.

The consequences are [evident]: harrowing scenes at the airport; Afghans who chose to support us left behind; and the loved ones of our fallen soldiers asking what it was all for.

And they are strategic: this sends a damaging message. It is a humiliation for the "West" and represents encouragement for despots and autocrats everywhere who know they can simply wait for Western democratic resolve to weaken with the passage of time. I was in Afghanistan in the period after the Soviets left. Najibullah's government proved to have far more staying power [than] the one we chose to underpin at vastly higher cost. What does that say?

Even in these circumstances, though, it is important to retain some balance. The idea that this somehow represents the end of American power is grossly overdone. When it comes to counterterrorism, we would be wise to remember that U.S. agencies, particularly the CIA, have been at the forefront of developing the most powerful global CT network ever known; there are people alive in all of our countries who would not be, were it not for their efforts. Their work, capability, and partnership will become more important, not less.

Most importantly, however cross U.S. policy might appear, it does represent a welcome if belated realization that there is rarely a pure military solution to a terrorist problem. The causes are ultimately political, and so must be the end game. It became obvious a number of years ago that nation building, Western style, was either wholly impracticable or beyond the resources allied nations were prepared to commit. A way had to be found to integrate politically the powerful Pashtun nationalist faction represented by the Taliban. But the leadership to do this, including in Afghanistan, was not there. I do believe that the comparatively light Western military presence could have been maintained much longer and used much more effectively as a bargaining chip. But it was not the solution.

What does this mean for the threat? That depends on what the Taliban do next. They have sought to project a reassuring message, but history teaches us to approach this with caution. We discussed earlier what it was like in 2001/2002: how stunning it was to discover the degree of terrorist infrastructure that existed in Afghanistan, specifically in the Tora Bora complex. There had been a wholesale state capture by al-Qa`ida of Afghanistan, to a degree that none of us could have really imagined. Right there you have a worked example of what happens when Afghanistan is left unsupported and to its own devices. The Taliban took over and were wholly permissive to al-Qa`ida, who, in turn, organized at almost military-scale capability to attack our countries. You have to ask yourself why that wouldn't happen again, because obviously it could as it has happened before. There are a few factors that make the current situation different. Clearly the Taliban are not stupid and will have noticed what happens to them when they allow people to operate out of their territory in the manner that al-Qa`ida did before 2001. So while they might be conflicted, I imagine this will weigh on their considerations. Afghanistan itself is also a very different place and the population has very different expectations than they would have had in the 1990s. So not everything is the same, making a clean comparison complicated.

My main plea is that we remain engaged across the intelligence, defense, security, diplomatic, humanitarian piece. That's much more difficult if you do not have a security or even diplomatic presence on the ground, but history shows us what happens when

"There is rarely a pure military solution to a terrorist problem. The causes are ultimately political, and so must be the end game. It became obvious a number of years ago that nation building, Western style, was either wholly impracticable or beyond the resources allied nations were prepared to commit."

you turn your back on Afghanistan.

Above all, we need an approach by regional states that rises above their narrow struggle to assert sectoral interests that it has been Afghanistan's tragedy to host.

CTC: With the U.S. and NATO militarily withdrawal from Afghanistan and the resulting Taliban takeover of the country, how do you think regional powers like China, Russia, Iran, and of course Pakistan will react going forward? What is their long-term view of Afghanistan and the terrorist threats there, and how do you think they will try to mitigate them?

Younger: I think this is a very good example of 'be careful what you wish for.' All of those powers in their different guises have been campaigning for NATO to leave for some time, and we are now where we are. They will undoubtedly enjoy the reputational damage that this causes the Western coalition, but beyond that, I cannot see how this is going to improve their security situation in any way. Most obviously, China has a border with Afghanistan. We do not have any physical border there. We are a long way away, and yet we have been the ones essentially being custodians of security. Clearly, there is going to be a lot of thought going on in Beijing about how what is now an open flank is going to be dealt with. There has been a lot of speculation about how Belt and Road [Initiative] can be used to exploit what at one level is a new opportunity in Afghanistan, but the reality is that this is a highly unstable and radicalized place that borders one of China's most sensitive regions.

With Russia and Iran, it is a pretty similar story. With Pakistan, we have just seen exactly the successful, radicalized, Pashtun Islamist takeover [in Afghanistan], that much of their security apparatus has facilitated and worked for over years, seeing, as they did, a stable Afghanistan as a source of strength to India. Wiser heads have pointed out that Pakistan's stability depends on successful control of its own radicalized Pashtun elements, a task that will be rendered close to impossible with a radicalized Islamist takeover of their western neighbor.

CTC: In this era of great power competition, there is concern that countries might start to use (or increase their use of) terrorist groups as proxies to strike against each other, especially in a situation with an asymmetrically powerful United States. How do you see this issue? To what degree might shifting prioritization away from counterterrorism to great power competition impact counterterrorism capability?

Younger: I think states and terrorism have always been intertwined to some degree because terrorism happens in geographies. You could also argue that the al-Qa`ida phenomenon distorted all of our longer-term security priorities, but most specifically those of the United States. When the history is written, you will probably see that the U.S. response to a rising China was more muted because it was prioritizing the terrorist threat posed by al-Qa`ida. I think we're still a bit too close to that to be able to really judge this balance. But what is certain is that great power competition introduces a potential existential threat in a way that counterterrorism does not. What terrorism does, which is almost as difficult and certainly as pernicious, is undermine the social fabric of our countries. This is why governments take it so seriously and why there is so little tolerance of it. But clearly when it comes to conventional destructive power, an international conflict is a far more significant issue.

To look at the question of use of terrorist proxies: With the advent of hybrid warfare, states, and most prominently non-democratic states, have become adept at integrating all aspects of national power into their security toolkit. Relationships with militant groups can and have become another of those tools. You cannot rule out the possibility of these things being used to attack us. Look at the way Russia has used militant groups in the Ukraine.

CTC: The recent U.K. Integrated Review stated that "It is likely that a terrorist group will launch a successful CBRN attack by 2030."[3] According to a May 2021 report by an U.N. investigative team looking at Islamic State activity in Syria and Iraq, "evidence already secured indicates that ISIL tested biological and chemical agents and conducted experiments on prisoners as part of [a biological and chemicals weapons] programme, causing death."[4] Given the intelligence you saw come out of Syria and Iraq, how concerned are you about this threat vector?

Younger: These are difficult attacks to mount, so I would say they are unlikely, but they are very high impact. So it is a classic example of low-likelihood, high-impact threat, which is the sort of problem that is very difficult to deal with. That is, however, our life in the intelligence business. Particularly the issue of how you prioritize your effort against that specifically is hard. My way of getting out of that conundrum is to observe that, broadly speaking, it is the same individuals who are involved in the broad range of all terrorist activity. So insofar as your strategy needs to, and I believe it does need to, be focusing on key individuals and networks and key geographies, I do not think that this approach is invalidated by any expectation of the CBRN threat being more or less likely. You could, if it got sufficiently serious, take the completely opposite view and start going after it as a particular category of problem and look at it in those terms, but I think my advice would still, broadly speaking, be it is the same thing and the same people coming to attack us, just in a very wide variety of different ways, which will include CBRN. Clearly, they are hankering after the most spectacular impact they possibly can achieve.

CTC: In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been renewed concern that terrorists or other bad actors could obtain or engineer and then deploy a more dangerous virus than even SARS-CoV-2. As the 2018 U.S. Strategy for Countering WMD Terrorism noted, "advances in biotechnology could theoretically allow even a single individual working in a laboratory to engineer pathogens that could have catastrophic

> "With the advent of hybrid warfare, states, and most prominently non-democratic states, have become adept at integrating all aspects of national power into their security toolkit. Relationships with militant groups can and have become another of those tools. You cannot rule out the possibility of these things being used to attack us."

effects."[5] What is your assessment of the biological threat landscape and what role can intelligence agencies play in preventing an engineered pandemic from materializing?

Younger: Clearly you have got a worked example in front of us. I have no idea if terrorist leaders noticed and wanted to do something similar, but I would be very surprised if that thought has not occurred to them. I would have thought, though, that the same logic applied as we were just discussing about CBRN threats more broadly. Having said that, we clearly do not want to suffer from a lack of imagination about what might happen, as arguably was the case before 9/11. We need to conceive that something like that could happen, but sadly, that is all too easy to do. I hope that as our intelligence services are collecting throughout the world, they are staying highly sensitized to this possibility, but what the signatures of that activity would be and if they would essentially be different to all the stuff that we ordinary do, I do not know.

CTC: In the wake of the events of January 6, there has been growing concern around the world about the threat posed by far-right extremism and its increasing transnational interconnectivity. According to MI5 Director General McCallum, "Of the 29 late-stage attack plots disrupted [in the United Kingdom] over the last four years, fully 10 have been Extreme Right Wing."[6] To what extent has going after violent extreme far-right networks been a priority for SIS, and do you think it will be a priority in the future?

Younger: I think it is incredibly serious. The concerns I have about terrorism writ large, but hitherto Islamist terrorism, are the effect that they have in degrading trust between citizens. It is trust that underpins our democracy and our social cohesion. So it is nothing to be taken lightly. In some ways, maybe the rising extreme right is the reaction that terrorists have sought to precipitate, but I actually think it is much broader than that and a function of a whole set of phenomena that we see in the modern age—most specifically, the internet.

The extreme right would become an issue for people like me while I was working for SIS if it was predominantly organized overseas and was done in an organized way, and unless those two facts are true, frankly there is not a lot we can bring to the party. My view is that it probably is not the situation at the moment. So in that sense, and you will have heard it from what Ken said, it remains a

really significant and rising domestic preoccupation.

CTC: The lack of much external direction and links makes it less of a focus and role for SIS?

Younger: Were we to see a replica of the scenario we saw in 2001, when a group of terrorists that were organizing in a failed state, successfully radicalizing people within the U.K. to carry out attacks here, that would change things undoubtedly and bring it front and center for SIS. But that's not how I would characterize it at the moment. There have been some individuals going to foreign battlefields like Ukraine, and we saw the same thing happen with elements of the Yugoslavia civil war. I am not ruling it out as a possibility, but I do not think at the moment we see that.   CTC

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1   Alex Younger, "MI6 'C' speech on fourth generation espionage," U.K. Foreign & Commonwealth Office, Secret Intelligence Service, December 3, 2018.

2   "Director General Ken McCallum gives annual threat update 2021," MI5, July 14, 2021.

3   "Global Britain in a Competitive Age: the Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy," Cabinet Office, updated July 2, 2021.

4   "Sixth report of the Special Adviser and Head of the United Nations Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes Committed by Da'esh/Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant," United Nations Security Council, May 3, 2021, p. 9.

5   "U.S. National Strategy for Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction Terrorism," December 2018, p. 1.

6   "Director General Ken McCallum gives annual threat update 2021."

Twenty Years After 9/11: The Terror Threat from Afghanistan Post the Taliban Takeover

By Asfandyar Mir

President Biden's decision to withdraw U.S. forces from Afghanistan depended on a critical assessment of the terrorism landscape in Afghanistan. At the time of his decision, he argued that the terrorism threat from Afghanistan was both low and manageable for the foreseeable future. This article argues that the Biden administration's assessment of the terrorism threat was flawed, and with the Taliban's return to power, the threat is growing. Afghanistan's dynamic terrorism landscape is dotted by the significant presence of al-Qa`ida and its local units, the Islamic State in Afghanistan, the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan, Central Asian jihadis, anti-India jihadis, and anti-China jihadis. Part of this landscape benefits from the Taliban's support to a number of groups in the country, as well as the ties of some of the groups with each other. The perception of the Afghan Taliban's total takeover of the country amid a humiliating U.S. withdrawal is iconic for jihadis, and it is likely to substantially bolster their morale and strength. Contrary to claims of the Biden administration, U.S. counterterrorism capacity in the region is likely to remain weak for the foreseeable future. Twenty years after the 9/11 attacks, the terrorism threat from Afghanistan endures for the United States and the rest of the world.

Early in his presidency, President Joe Biden faced a major decision on Afghanistan: to end America's involvement in the war that started due to the 9/11 attacks 20 years earlier, or to keep U.S. military forces in the country. Having long defined the core U.S. goal in Afghanistan as countering terrorism, Biden's decision came to depend on a critical assessment of the terrorism landscape in Afghanistan.[a] His administration appears to have made four major judgments. First,

the terrorism threat from Afghanistan to the United States was assessed as being minimal.[b] Second, future threats may emerge on a long enough time horizon that they can be dealt with by utilizing offshore counterterrorism approaches.[c] Third, the Afghan Taliban can be compelled into complying with their commitment to not provide safe haven to jihadis.[d] Finally, the United States can afford to be indifferent to locally and regionally focused threats in and around Afghanistan.[e] With these judgments, Biden decided in favor of withdrawing U.S. military forces from Afghanistan.

As will be argued in this article, these judgments by the Biden administration were flawed, and the Taliban's return to power has exacerbated the terrorism threat beyond the level that existed when the decision to withdraw the U.S. forces was made. A close look at Afghanistan reveals that the United States has left the country with a dynamic terrorism landscape posing local, regional, and transnational threats. Much of this situation benefits from the Taliban's enduring relationships with various jihadi groups in the country despite the Taliban's commitments to curtail terrorist groups under the February 2020 U.S.-Taliban agreement. Groups that benefit from the Taliban's support include al-Qa`ida and its local units, Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), various Central Asian jihadis, anti-India jihadis, and anti-China jihadis like the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP). There is also a sizable cadre of foreign fighters across various groups, including in the ranks of al-Qa`ida.[1] Separately, the Islamic State of Afghanistan, a rival of the Taliban, appears to be recovering after military losses—and remains committed to targeting Afghan civilians. Most of these groups face constraints, but they retain important strengths despite years of

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a　According to President Biden, "I believed that our presence in Afghanistan should be focused on the reason we went in the first place: to ensure Afghanistan would not be used as a base from which to attack our homeland again." "Remarks by President Biden on the Way Forward in Afghanistan," The White House, April 14, 2021.

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b　According to a senior Biden administration official, "We judge the threat against the homeland now emanating from Afghanistan to be at a level that we can address it without a persistent military footprint in the country and without remaining at war with the Taliban." "Background Press Call by a Senior Administration Official on Afghanistan," The White House, April 13, 2021.

c　According to Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin, "we will maintain the over-the-horizon capabilities to be able to address this threat or any threat if it emerges. You heard me say a while back that, you know, my rough estimate was that it would take two years for them to develop that kind of capability and it was a medium risk." Lloyd J. Austin III, Mark Milley, and John F. Kirby, "Secretary of Defense Austin and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Milley Press Briefing," U.S. Department of Defense, July 21, 2021; Julian E. Barnes and Eric Schmitt, "Will Afghanistan Become a Terrorism Safe Haven Once Again?" *New York Times*, April 12, 2021.

d　According to Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin, "The Taliban early on committed to not providing a safe haven for Al-Qaida. We expect for them to meet that commitment." Austin, Milley, and Kirby.

e　According to a senior Biden administration official, "They do not currently present an external — or do not currently possess an external plotting capability that can threaten the homeland. But this is something that we have to focus on: its potential for reemerging in the years ahead." "Background Press Call by a Senior Administration Official on Afghanistan."

"The U.S. withdrawal and the Afghan Taliban's takeover of Kabul are iconic milestones for global jihadis, and both are likely to bolster their morale and strength substantially. This will increase the threats groups in Afghanistan pose locally, regionally, and to the United States."

U.S. counterterrorism pressure. This overall landscape does not lend to the interpretation of major terrorist degradation that the administration has offered.

Looking ahead, the U.S. withdrawal and the Afghan Taliban's takeover of Kabul are iconic milestones for global jihadis, and both are likely to bolster their morale and strength substantially. This will increase the threats groups in Afghanistan pose locally, regionally, and to the United States. Additionally, factors like weak U.S. counterterrorism capacity, the Afghan Taliban's enduring relationships with foreign jihadis, inter-militant competition, China's growing regional footprint, Pakistani state policies, and great power competition are likely to further aggravate the threat landscape. Twenty years after the 9/11 attacks and the U.S. decision to topple the Afghan Taliban regime, not only is the Taliban back in power but also the terrorism threat from Afghanistan endures for the United States and the rest of the world.

These arguments are developed in three steps. First, the article describes the Afghan Taliban's position on, and politics toward, jihadi activities in Afghanistan, particularly in light of the February 2020 U.S.-Taliban agreement. Second, the article assesses the terrorism threat emanating from Afghanistan. Third, the author identifies factors that will likely worsen the threat landscape going forward. The concluding section discusses the implications for counterterrorism policy. The author draws on a combination of open-source materials and interviews in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the United States conducted between 2018 to 2021, including on a research trip to Afghanistan and Pakistan in July 2021.

The U.S. Withdrawal and Politics of the Afghan Taliban

With the Afghan Taliban having taken control of Afghanistan, the future of the terrorism landscape in the country depends on the Taliban's political preferences and policies toward terrorist groups in the country.[2] Amid plans to withdraw U.S. military forces from the country over the last few years, American policymakers have recognized this fact. One major argument has suggested that the Taliban have learned their lesson on giving refuge and support to terrorist groups, and that they will not allow terrorist groups to operate from Afghanistan. Some policymakers point to the guarantees the Taliban have provided against international terrorists as part of the February 2020 U.S.-Taliban agreement.[3] The agreement contains a number of detailed commitments on actions the Taliban must take to prevent the use of Afghanistan's territory by terrorist groups. In the language of the agreement:

The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban will not allow any of its members, other individuals or groups, including al-Qa'ida, to use the soil of Afghanistan to threaten the security of the United States and its allies.

The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban will send a clear message that those who pose a threat to the security of the United States and its allies have no place in Afghanistan, and will instruct members of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban not to cooperate with groups or individuals threatening the security of the United States and its allies.

The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban will prevent any group or individual in Afghanistan from threatening the security of the United States and its allies, and will prevent them from recruiting, training, and fundraising and will not host them in accordance with the commitments in this agreement.

The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban is committed to deal with those seeking asylum or residence in Afghanistan according to international migration law and the commitments of this agreement, so that such persons do not pose a threat to the security of the United States and its allies.

The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban will not provide visas, passports, travel permits, or other legal documents to those who pose a threat to the security of the United States and its allies to enter Afghanistan.

U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad, who negotiated the U.S.-Taliban agreement, has been a leading proponent of the view that the Taliban are receptive to American concerns on terrorism and remain on track to comply with the counterterrorism provisions of the U.S.-Taliban agreement. During a congressional hearing in September 2020, he observed that the Afghan Taliban were implementing some of their counterterrorism commitments: "… with regard to terrorism and al-Qaeda, in this setting, what I can say is the Talibs have taken some steps, based on the commitment they have made, positive steps, but they have some distance still to go."[4]

Some analysts tie apparent Afghan Taliban efforts to uphold their counterterrorism commitments to their desire for international legitimacy, as well as the costs that being perceived as enabling international terrorism create for their domestic political agenda.[5] A proponent of this view is analyst Thomas Ruttig, who served with the United Nations in Afghanistan during the Taliban's last stint in power before 9/11. Writing in this publication, he argued that the Taliban understand that "they cannot afford for Afghanistan to again become a security threat to the international community and cannot rule Afghanistan against the international community, particularly when they openly cooperate with internationalist-

Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid (center) speaks to the media at the airport in Kabul on August 31, 2021. The United States completed its military withdrawal from Afghanistan on August 30. (Wakil Kohsar/AFP via Getty Images)

jihadi terrorists."[6] He further adds that the "Taliban are primarily a movement of a 'national Islamist' character, and that their project is to run Afghanistan as an 'Islamic' state. Support for wider jihadi aims would bring them into an undesired antagonism with the international community again and actually jeopardize the implementation of their (still unclear in detail) home agenda."[7]

Yet, an enduring puzzle for this argument is that major international terrorist groups have remained in the country during the Afghan Taliban's insurgency, often co-located with the Afghan Taliban's battlefield cadres or operating in areas under the Afghan Taliban's strong influence. In addition, a variety of evidentiary sources suggest that the Afghan Taliban both shield and instrumentalize relationships with various jihadi outfits, including al-Qa`ida and its South Asia affiliate al-Qa`ida in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), the Pakistani Taliban (TTP), and anti-China jihadis such as the Turkistan Islamic Party. Recently, in a bid to assert control, Taliban leadership has reportedly sent instructions to various groups of foreign fighters, including al-Qa`ida, to register them, which on the one hand indicates the Taliban's willingness to apply some constraints on terrorist groups in the country but also points to the presence of foreign fighters.[8]

This pattern of Taliban alignment with jihadi groups in the country is concerning as it has prevailed despite intense U.S. and international pressure on the group. Both the U.S. government and the international community have offered the Taliban multiple off-ramps for disassociating from jihadis in general and al-Qa`ida in particular, notably during the negotiations that preceded the February 2020 Doha agreement. Since the agreement, Taliban

leadership publicly insist that they will not allow Afghan territory to be used as a safe haven for terrorist plotting against other countries. But they do not clarify why they were not able to uphold such a commitment before 9/11.[f] They also offer little clarity on their current relationships with various jihadis and, in particular, why al-Qa`ida and other jihadis continue to pledge allegiance and remain in Afghanistan, often co-located with the Taliban. According to the International Crisis Group, "the Taliban have made no public demonstration or assertion that they have acted on commitments to prevent their membership from interacting with or hosting al-Qa`ida figures – a number of whom have been killed in airstrikes and raids in the company of Taliban fighters since the agreement in February [2020]."[9] And according to the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency's last report before the collapse of the Afghan government, "Taliban continued to support al-Qaeda" and there was "no change in the relationship between the Taliban and al-Qaeda."[10]

American interlocutors who have engaged with the Taliban's senior leadership in recent years note with concern that the Taliban remain resistant to any meaningful crackdown against foreign jihadis, especially al-Qa`ida. A Kabul-based Afghan political intermediary assisting with the U.S.-Taliban negotiations in 2019 told the author that, during the negotiations over Taliban ties with al-Qa`ida, the discussion broke down with the Afghan Taliban

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f   The United States pressed the Taliban to expel Usama bin Ladin over 30 times before the 9/11 attacks. See "U.S. Engagement with the Taliban on Usama Bin Laden," U.S. Department of State, July 16, 2001.

insisting that there is no proof that al-Qa`ida carried out the 9/11 attacks.[11] Ever since, while the Taliban condemn the 9/11 attacks themselves, they are careful to not link them to al-Qa`ida in their public remarks. More recently, the Afghan Taliban leadership has taken a more explicit approach. Senior Afghan Taliban leader and a member of the Taliban negotiating team in Doha, Amir Khan Motaqi, has noted that the Taliban are not going to break with al-Qa`ida, or any group, under U.S. or international pressure.[12] And in an interview to Tolo News, the Afghan Taliban's battlefield spokesman, Zabihullah Mujahid, noted that the Doha agreement does not require the Taliban to break from al-Qa`ida.[13]

Another counterterrorism concern is that a breakdown in the political cohesion of the Afghan Taliban could affect Afghanistan's future terrorism landscape. Some analysts argue that the group is deeply factionalized, and these cleavages are likely to calcify with the Taliban's return to power.[14] There are various scenarios of Taliban fragmentation. One scenario foresees some fragmenting Taliban factions joining forces with the Islamic State, paralleling the 2014-era trajectory of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. A different scenario foresees select Taliban leaders who support individual jihadi groups and leaders housing them in their local fiefdoms. A third potential scenario is that of a power struggle in which various Taliban factions may jostle for the political backing of major jihadi entities, like al-Qa`ida, for legitimacy purposes.

For now, though, the Afghan Taliban leadership appears to have kept a lid on factionalism. The Taliban's conduct suggests substantial internal political strength, with the leadership able to manage various factions. Publicly available indicators suggest that the Taliban leadership is able to forge consensus among major political and military elites on key issues—for example, the terms of the withdrawal of U.S. forces, the sequencing of the intra-Afghan peace process, and military strategy. Significantly, there have not been any signs of major dissent. Yet, given previous instances of Taliban infighting during a major transition, fragmentation risks remain.

The Threat From Afghanistan

What are the specific terrorism threats emanating from Afghanistan in the wake of the Taliban takeover? Which threats deserve continued international attention? Who is threatened, and why? Four Afghanistan-based jihadi threats in particular are salient and require sustained attention: 1) the persistent al-Qa`ida presence, 2) the resurging TTP, 3) metastasizing regional jihadis, and 4) a revived Islamic State.

1. Al-Qa`ida in Afghanistan

Many accounts suggest that al-Qa`ida in Afghanistan is either too weak or inconsequential to play a significant role in the terrorist network's fight against the United States. Some policymakers and analysts point to the lack of al-Qa`ida attacks and plots in the West in recent years that can be traced back to Afghanistan as evidence.[15] Yet, 20 years since the 9/11 attacks, al-Qa`ida not only remains in Afghanistan but also considers the insurgency the Afghan Taliban successfully waged against U.S. forces and the Afghan government to have been a critical component of its broader strategic objective of eroding U.S. hegemony.[16] On August 31, 2021, al-Qa`ida released a statement hailing the Taliban's return to power, praising it "for breaking America's back, tarnishing its global reputation and expelling it, disgraced and humiliated, from the Islamic land of

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Afghanistan." It also called upon the "Islamic Ummah" to extend "its total support" to the Taliban.[17] On March 12, 2020, al-Qa`ida's "general leadership" released a statement hailing the U.S.-Taliban deal as a "great historical victory" for the Taliban and al-Qa`ida.[18] After the Taliban's takeover of Kabul on August 15, 2021, multiple al-Qa`ida affiliates also issued statements lauding the Taliban's return to power and victory over the United States.

The discernible activities of al-Qa`ida's central organization and regional affiliates in Afghanistan suggest that it is doggedly persistent despite sustained U.S. counterterrorism pressure over the last two decades and with the Taliban's return, poised to benefit from ongoing developments in Afghanistan. For one, al-Qa`ida Central's top leadership is in Afghanistan. It is assessed that al-Qa`ida chief Ayman al-Zawahiri, despite being ill, has remained in Afghanistan for some years now. In June 2020 and July 2021, respectively, U.S. Central Command's General Kenneth McKenzie[19] and the United Nations[g] stated as much. Additionally, while a number of al-Qa`ida Central senior leaders remain in Iran, other senior leaders continue to remain in Afghanistan. Until his reported targeting in the province of Ghazni last year, senior al-Qa`ida Central leader Husam Abdur-Rauf was operating from eastern Afghanistan, from where he was coordinating with al-Qa`ida affiliates in the Middle East.[20] [h]

Although there are no signs of Western al-Qa`ida foreign fighters currently in Afghanistan, independent sources the author has spoken to in Afghanistan and U.S. government sources suggest the continued presence of senior Saudi and Egyptian leaders in the country. These sources suggest that a top leader of al-Qa`ida Central in Afghanistan after al-Zawahiri is Saudi citizen Awab bin Hassan al-Hassani, also known as Qahtal. In 2019, the United

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g   According to the United Nations, "Al-Qaida leader Ayman al-Zawahiri is assessed by Member States to be alive but ailing in Afghanistan." See "Twenty-eighth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2368 (2017) concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities," United Nations Security Council, July 21, 2021, p. 14.

h   As per a January 2021 Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction report, "His death was also significant because he was in Ghazni Province, about 100 miles south of Kabul, in an area reputed to be under Taliban control near the border with Pakistan. He was not the first al-Qaeda leader to be killed in Taliban-controlled areas." See "Quarterly Report to Congress," Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, January 30, 2021.

Nations reported the presence of al-Qa`ida Central leaders Ahmad al-Qatari, Sheikh Abdul Rahman, Husam Abdur-Rauf, and Abu Osman. With Abdur-Rauf's 2020 targeting in Ghazni, part of this information was proven correct.[21] In 2020, according to the United Nations, a special al-Qa`ida Central unit, Jabhat al-Nasr, also operated on Afghan soil under the leadership of an operative named Sheikh Mehmood.[22] In July 2021, Afghan government sources offered even more specific details. They asserted that one of the senior leaders of the organization for Afghanistan is Sheikh Farooq Masri.[23] Other al-Qa`ida Central leaders who remain in the country include Maulvi Farooq, Sheikh Abu Omar Khalid, Shaikh Nasir Gillani (aka Abu Ibrar), Sheikh Abu Yusuf (liaison to Ayman al-Zawahiri), Abdullah Iraqi, Abu Omar Khittab, and Abu Sulaiman Qureshi.[24] Separately, a Pakistani government source told this author that senior Pakistani al-Qa`ida Central leaders, such as Khalid Maqashi, move between Afghanistan and Karachi.[25]

Additionally, since the Taliban's takeover, the strength of al-Qa`ida's central leadership has increased due to the release of al-Qa`ida prisoners from Pol-e-Charkhi, Bagram Air Base, and Nangarhar prisons by the Taliban. Following the release of prisoners by the Taliban, former CIA counterterrorism chief for South Asia Douglas London noted that "Bagram Air Base included a number of al Qaeda personalities."[26] One leader plausibly released is Abu Ikhlas al-Masri, an Egyptian al-Qa`ida financier and advisor who moved between Afghanistan's Kunar province and Pakistan's Bajaur agency until his arrest in 2010.[27]

Relatedly, al-Qa`ida's South Asia affiliate AQIS' leadership is also reported to be in Afghanistan. The group was founded in Pakistan and, in 2014, attempted an audacious attack to capture multiple Pakistani naval frigates to attack U.S. naval assets. Over the last six years, it has focused most of its efforts in Afghanistan. The founding leader of AQIS, Asim Umar, was targeted and killed in Musa Qala, Helmand, in 2019.[28] Another senior leader of AQIS, Mohammad Hanif Abdullah, was killed in Farah province in November 2020.[29] The current leader of the group, Osama Mehmood, is reported to be in Afghanistan.[30] In a June 2020 message, Mehmood applauded the Afghan Taliban for forcing the U.S. government to sign the Doha agreement, calling it a document of America's "humiliation and defeat."[31]

Most available indicators suggest that al-Qa`ida has improved its political strength by focusing on internal cohesion, countering rivals, and supporting the Taliban's overall political strategy.[32] First, al-Qa`ida Central in Afghanistan and AQIS have not splintered. There have been no reported surrenders or demobilizations of al-Qa`ida cadres over the last few years in Afghanistan. Second, both the central and AQIS leadership continues to affirm their loyalty to the leader of the Afghan Taliban, Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada. AQIS leader Osama Mehmood reiterated this allegiance in his post-Doha agreement message published in June 2020.[33] Third, AQIS forces have worked to reduce the influence of the Islamic State in Afghanistan, including by participating in the Taliban's military operations against the Islamic State in Afghanistan.[34] Fourth, al-Qa`ida has concealed its presence and calibrated its overall operational tempo to support the Taliban's political strategy of securing a U.S. withdrawal. According to the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency, "al-Qaeda leaders support the U.S.-Taliban agreement because it does not require the Taliban to publicly renounce al-Qaeda and because it includes a timeline for U.S. and coalition forces' withdrawal, the latter of which accomplishes one

> **"Geographically, al-Qa`ida had a spread-out presence across various provinces before the Taliban's takeover of the country. From these outposts, it was able to support the Afghan Taliban's insurgency."**

of al-Qaeda's main goals."[35]

Geographically, al-Qa`ida had a spread-out presence across various provinces before the Taliban's takeover of the country. From these outposts, it was able to support the Afghan Taliban's insurgency. The United Nations Security Council's monitoring team estimates that the group has recently operated in at least 15 provinces.[i] Some analysts question the judgments of the U.N. monitoring team due to what they believe is its reliance at least to some degree on information provided by the former Afghan government.[36] Yet, notably, al-Qa`ida's own sources have asserted a substantial presence of the group to support the insurgency of the Taliban in a number of provinces. According to dozens of essays in al-Qa`ida's publications, Hiteen, Nawa-e-Afghan Jihad, and Nawa-e-Ghazwa Hind, the group actively supported the Afghan Taliban insurgency in Paktika, Kandahar, Ghazni, Zabul, Uruzgan, Nangarhar, Kunar, Helmand, and Nimroz.[37] Furthermore, in raids against al-Qa`ida leadership over the last few years, U.S. and Afghan forces have killed senior al-Qa`ida leaders in Paktika, Farah, Helmand, and Kunar.[j]

Size-wise, too, al-Qa`ida has been resilient despite sustained leadership targeting and losses. Pre-9/11, al-Qa`ida's core membership was reportedly only 170 members, even though, in its camps, it trained thousands of fighters who remained formally unaffiliated with the group.[38] While the number of fighters is an imperfect measure of strength, today's reported figures are higher than earlier years. The United Nations estimates that al-Qa`ida strength in Afghanistan is in the range of several dozen to 500 persons.[39] The former Afghan government assessed that the total number of al-Qa`ida fighters in Afghanistan was between four and

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i   According to the United Nations, "Al-Qaida is present in at least 15 Afghan provinces, primarily in the eastern, southern and south-eastern region." See "Twenty-eighth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team," p. 14.

j   Al-Qa`ida leaders killed in these provinces include Farooq Qahtani killed in Kunar in 2016, Asim Omar killed in Helmand in 2019, Mohammad Hanif Abdullah killed in Farah in 2020, and Husam Abdur-Rauf killed in Paktika in 2020. On Qahtani, see Wesley Morgan, *The Hardest Place: The American Military Adrift in Afghanistan's Pech Valley* (Random House, 2021), p. 471. On Omar, see "Asim Umar: Al-Qaeda's South Asia chief killed in Afghanistan," BBC, October 8, 2019. On Abdullah, see "Top Al-Qaeda leader killed in Farah: NDS," Ariana News, November 10, 2020. On Abdur-Rauf, see Nick Paton Walsh and Evan Perez, "How a deadly raid shows al Qaeda retains global reach under Taliban 'protection,'" CNN, May 28, 2021.

five hundred;[40] the Russian government offered a similar estimate;[k] the U.S. government's Defense Intelligence Agency estimated that there were around 200 members of the group at the end of 2020.[41]

With the release of al-Qa`ida members by the Afghan Taliban, the group's numbers have likely gone up. If the size of al-Qa`ida forces is close to 500, that is significant since al-Qa`ida has never sought to build up a mass army. Instead, it has operated as a vanguard, seeking to guide and mentor local jihadi factions while leaning on these factions' manpower. In the post-9/11 period, it leaned on fighters from Pakistani tribal areas, including from forces of the Pakistan Taliban.

Al-Qa`ida in Afghanistan appears to have continued sources of cash. By the end of 2020, al-Qa`ida Central continued to raise cash to support AQIS and pay off the Afghan Taliban. According to the U.S. Treasury, al-Qa`ida in Afghanistan draws on "donations from like-minded supporters, and from individuals who believe that their money is supporting humanitarian or charitable causes."[42] Additionally, according to a well-positioned independent researcher, al-Qa`ida and the Afghan Taliban cooperate in drug and weapons trafficking through networks operating out of major black markets in southern Afghanistan, largely to support the Taliban's operations. This revenue is also believed to be a source of funds for al-Qa`ida.[43]

Beyond manpower and funding, al-Qa`ida retains key combat capabilities in Afghanistan, some of which allow it to project power outside the country as well. As per al-Qa`ida's magazine Nawa-e-Ghazwa Hind, AQIS has provided specialized personnel and technical capacity to support the Taliban's anti-Islamic State campaign.[44] Capabilities provided by AQIS reportedly included night operations advisors and experts for placement of mines and development of IEDs.[45] There is also some evidence that al-Qa`ida fighters trained in Afghanistan have traveled as far as Indian-controlled Kashmir to take part in fighting against Indian forces in recent years.[l]

Al-Qa`ida also retains a chemical, radiological, biological, and nuclear (CRBN) cell in Afghanistan-Pakistan border areas, which was created before 9/11 under Abu Khabab al-Masri. As per interviews conducted by this author, this cell is reportedly led by Luqman Khubab, who is the son of Abu Khabab al-Masri, and as recently as 2017 attempted to trade in the black market for loose

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nuclear materials and appears to be still at large.[46] [m]

Separate from the CBRN issue, of particular concern, al-Qa`ida also has personnel capable of moving material aid and manpower via geographic routes through Iranian territory into Afghanistan and Pakistan.[47] The group may have also obtained access to some of the military equipment and materials left behind by the Afghan government and military.[48]

Al-Qa`ida is well-positioned to ramp up its capabilities in Afghanistan. The question is how visible those capabilities may or may not be, and what strategy the group might use these capabilities for. International terrorism plots directed against the United States and Europe, which al-Qa`ida prepares for years in advance, are one of multiple options the group has at hand.[49] There are no indicators that the group has engaged in plotting against U.S. territories from Afghanistan in recent years. Until his death in 2016, al-Qa`ida's Kunar-based senior operative Farouq Qahtani concerned U.S. policymakers for potential involvement in transnational terrorism plotting, partly because he was hosting Pakistani recruits with British passports—a plausible capability for external operations. The current status of such Western foreign fighters is not clear.[50]

Al-Qa`ida's external plotting strategy could change, though, as the centrality of the fight against the United States remains an abiding feature of al-Qa`ida's political direction.[51] The Taliban's return to power provides al-Qa`ida one of the more permissive environments since the pre-9/11 era to build up an external operations capability. In addition to the Taliban's willingness to restrain al-Qa`ida, there is also a question over the Taliban's capability to rein in al-Qa`ida. Parts of the U.S. government believe that the Taliban may not have the capability to restrain

k   As per the Russian government, "According to our estimates, and the Americans agree with this, there are now about five-hundred Al-Qaeda members in Afghanistan." See "O talibah, mirye i boodooshshyem Afganistana: bol'shoye intyerv'yoo s Kaboolovim [On the Taliban, peace and the future of Afghanistan: a great interview with Kabulov]," Sputnik, February 17, 2021.

l   The February-April 2021 issue of Nawa-e-Ghazwa Hind provided a biographic sketch of AQIS member Shah Mati ur Rehman Siddiqi. As per the sketch, Siddiqi joined al-Qa`ida in Kandahar and later joined Ansar Ghazwat-ul-Hind (AGH) in Indian-administered Kashmir before being killed by Indian forces in December 2020 on his way back to Pakistan. See Nawa-e-Ghazwa Hind Magazine, February-April 2021, pp. 81-87.

m   According to the author's interviews in Pakistan, until at least 2017 this cell was being run by Luqman Khubab and AQIS leader Omar bin Khatab in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region and had the assistance of some personnel of the TTP. On U.S. government concerns regarding CRBN materials and dirty-bomb activities in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region in 2009, see Joby Warrick, *The Triple Agent: The Al-Qaeda Mole Who Infiltrated the CIA* (New York: Anchor, 2012), p. 64. On the presence in Afghanistan of loose nuclear material like uranium canisters in 2012, see CENTCOM declassified intelligence report at "Taliban and Hezb-e-Islami Gulbuddin Cooperation: Markings of Possible Uranium Container," CENTCOM FOIA Library.

al-Qa`ida. According to the Defense Intelligence Agency, "… the compartment nature of al-Qaeda's command and control structure will likely make it difficult for the Taliban to monitor and curtail their activities effectively in the future."[52] In case al-Qa`ida decides to attack from Afghanistan, the group may not claim attacks in order to help the Taliban work around its commitments under the Doha agreement. The Taliban may also argue that any operation was planned by al-Qa`ida cells in Pakistan or that there is no proof of al-Qa`ida's role in the attack/presence in Afghanistan. With such denials, the Taliban may be able to claim compliance with the Doha agreement.

2. The Resurgence of the TTP

After some years of relative inactivity, the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (also known as the Pakistani Taliban), currently the largest armed group in Afghanistan after the Afghan Taliban, is becoming a major threat with a range of capabilities.[53] The group appears committed to a jihadi campaign against the Pakistani government, though its near-term goal remains unclear. Much of its messaging suggests the group wants to overthrow the Pakistani government and take control of the entire country, but recent comments by the group's leadership suggests that it wants to create its own state in the Pakistani tribal areas.[54]

Founded in 2007 in Pakistan's tribal areas, the TTP launched a brutal campaign of violence in Pakistan, killing thousands of civilians.[55] By 2014, U.S. drone strikes and Pakistani military operations had degraded the TTP, and much of the group's surviving organization moved to Afghanistan where it continued to splinter.[56] Over the last two years, though, the TTP has regrouped and regenerated in eastern Afghanistan, amassing per one estimate a 6,000-strong fighting force based in Khost, Kunar, Nangarhar, and Paktika.[57] The group achieved these numbers by engaging in a series of mergers and by reintegrating splinters and inactive factions, both of which have enormously boosted its political and material strength. It has also limited the attrition of its senior ranks, currently dominated by its chief appointed in 2018 Noor Wali Mehsud, and senior leaders Mufti Tariq Mehsud (known as Abu Hasham), Ahmed Hussain (known Ghat Haji), and Abdul Wali Mohmand (known as Umar Khalid Khurasani).[58] In Pakistan, which is the group's central theater of operations, the TTP has expanded its geographic presence beyond the Pakistani tribal areas, integrating units from Baluchistan, Karachi, and, more recently, establishing a chapter in the northern Gilgit Baltistan region.[59]

Under its current chief, Mufti Noor Wali, the Pakistani Taliban retains a range of relationships in the region, which give it capabilities for regional operations. For one, the group has long retained a strong relationship with the Afghan Taliban. TTP fighters have been co-located with Taliban bases in Paktika, Nangarhar, and Kunar.[60] After the Taliban took Kabul, TTP leaders, including a former leader of TTP Bajaur (and close associate of al-Qa`ida's leadership in and around Kunar province) Maulvi Faqir Muhammed, and a large number of TTP fighters imprisoned by the former Afghan government were released.[61] Additionally, senior leaders of the TTP, including its chief Mufti Noor Wali and Faqir Muhammed, have reiterated their pledge of allegiance to the Afghan Taliban.[62]

The group has also maintained its relationship with al-Qa`ida, though its recent public position is to deny the ties.[63] This is relevant to U.S. policymakers for two key reasons. For one, after 9/11, the

> ## "The TTP has strongly resurged and is mounting a major campaign of violence against Pakistan. The Pakistani government appears to be leaning on the Afghan Taliban to restrain the TTP."

TTP hosted al-Qa`ida's external attacks operations, top central leadership, and a large contingent of foreign fighters in Waziristan. In 2009, the TTP cooperated with al-Qa`ida on a complex suicide bombing of a CIA forward operating base in eastern Afghanistan, which led to the largest loss of life the agency had experienced in its history.[64] Furthermore, much like in the years after 9/11, the TTP's zones of influence in eastern Afghanistan and northwestern Pakistan offer potential insurance to al-Qa`ida in the event that the Afghan Taliban abandons them under international pressure. For its part, al-Qa`ida continues to see the Pakistani Taliban as an important partner in the region.[65]

The TTP has also displayed an ability to forge other relationships, operate in new geographic locales against novel targets, and conduct some external plotting. It has maintained an important relationship with the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), which it first developed in Pakistan's Waziristan region.[66] It has collaborated with the Baluch insurgent group the Baluchistan Liberation Army from bases in Afghanistan, though the overall extent of the partnership remains unclear.[67] At one stage, it reportedly sought state support from both the Afghan and Indian governments, and there were some meaningful exchanges between the former Afghan government and the TTP.[68]

Moreover, the TTP has engaged in cross-border violence across Pakistan's tribal areas, and some of its units have moved to the tribal areas and mainland Pakistan. Much of the TTP's violence is geared toward Pakistani state targets, but a new and dangerous facet of the TTP's platform is the targeting of Chinese personnel and officials.[69] In April 2021, a TTP suicide bomber hit a hotel in the Pakistani city of Quetta where the Chinese ambassador to Pakistan was staying. The ambassador survived the attack and later the TTP spokesman denied that he was the intended target. Other targets have not been so lucky though. In July 2021, an IED attack in northern Pakistan killed 12 Chinese engineers—an operation the Chinese government assesses was carried out by the TTP with the TIP.[70] Although not recently, the TTP has a history of limited external plotting. In 2008, it collaborated with al-Qa`ida on a plot to bomb the subway in Barcelona, Spain, and as per investigation, planned follow-up attacks in Germany, France, Belgium, Portugal, and the United Kingdom.[71] And, in 2010, the TTP attempted a bomb attack on Times Square in New York City without al-Qa`ida's approval or help, though the bomb failed to detonate.[72]

Most notably, the TTP has strongly resurged and is mounting a major campaign of violence against Pakistan. The Pakistani government appears to be leaning on the Afghan Taliban to restrain the TTP.[73] In addition to regular raids along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border and some artillery shelling, Pakistani authorities have also offered demobilization and financial compensation to

Members of the Taliban Badri 313 military unit arrive at the airport in Kabul on August 31, 2021, after the United States withdrew its military from Afghanistan. (Wakil Kohsar/AFP via Getty Images)

wean away senior and mid-ranking leaders of the TTP from the group.[74] However, these efforts have not been able to dent the TTP's political and military recovery. More violence by the group in Pakistan, including from bases in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region, appears likely.

3. Metastasizing Regional Threats

Several other regional terrorist groups continue to persist and metastasize in Afghanistan. One of the most significant regional threats is the anti-China East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM), also known as the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP). The group maintains a robust relationship with the Taliban, as well as al-Qa`ida and the TTP in Afghanistan.[n] Senior leaders of the group Abdul Haq, Abdullah Mansoor, and Haji Furqan are reported to be in Afghanistan.[75] The group is estimated to possess several hundred members according to the United Nations.[76] These members are located primarily in northern and eastern Afghanistan.[77] A 2019 estimate by analyst Franz Marty put foreign fighters under the

command of Haji Furqan between 160 and 400 in the Badakhshan province.[78] The TIP is also reported to move its fighters between northwestern Syria and Afghanistan.[79] Independent sources in Afghanistan's Paktika province confirm the presence of TIP fighters, as well as the arrival of fresh cadres from Syria over the last year; there are TIP units in the provinces of Kunduz and Logar as well.[80] Since the Taliban's takeover of the northern Badakhshan province, Uighur militant fighters have been spotted alongside the Taliban.[81]

Central Asian jihadis with political aims against Uzbekistan and Tajikistan continue to persist in Afghanistan, sometimes working in concert with the Afghan Taliban. A major group is the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). With hundreds of fighters, the group includes some defectors from the Islamic State and has a presence in northwestern Afghanistan.[82] Led by Jafar Yuldashev, the son of IMU founder Tahir Yulduchev, the group continues to work with the Afghan Taliban, but the relationship is not without problems. Since the IMU's switching back to Taliban allegiance after remaining allied with the Islamic State for a period of time, the Afghan Taliban does not trust the IMU and is less accommodating of the group.[83]

Among other Central Asian jihadi organizations, the most significant is Katibat al Tawhid wal Jihad (KTJ). Founded by Kyrgyz citizen Abu Saloh al-Uzbeki in 2014, KTJ has maintained operations in both Syria and Afghanistan. After founding the group, Saloh focused its platform against both the United States and Russia: "Today in Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq are based the military of the United States and Russia. They polluted these countries. Our task is to purify the sacred land of Islam from 'garbage' ... we are conducting a jihad against the Crusaders in

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n   According to the U.S. Department of the Treasury, ETIM/TIP chief Abdul Haq is on al-Qa`ida's Shura Council. See "Treasury Targets Leader of Group Tied to Al Qaeda," U.S. Department of the Treasury, April 20, 2009. See the following essay by AQIS chief Osama Mehmood: "China is not our friend!!" Hiteen, 2019. See also Mahmooda Beyomi Aromchi, "We are fighting with China!" Nawa Afghan Jihad, 2019, as well as "Twelfth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2557 (2020) concerning the Taliban and other associated individuals and entities constituting a threat to the peace stability and security of Afghanistan," United Nations Security Council, June 1, 2021, pp. 19-20.

Afghanistan and Sham."[84] The group's current leader Abdul Aziz Uzbeki is reported to be a veteran of the Islamic Jihad Union in Afghanistan, managing its operations in Syria and Afghanistan. KTJ also maintains a steady stream of funds for its cadres in Afghanistan, and in late 2020, the Russian government claimed to have foiled a plot linked to the KTJ.[85] Relatively smaller groups, like the IMU breakaway Khatiba Imam al-Bukhari, Islamic Jihad Group, Jandullah,[o] and Jamaat-Ansarullah are also reported to be present in Afghanistan.[86] Additionally, Uzbek militant fighters supported the Taliban's military offensive in summer of 2021 in northern Afghanistan against the Afghan government.[87] There are reportedly political proposals to unify Central Asian jihadis in Afghanistan, including potentially as an affiliate of al-Qa`ida, under influential Islamic Jihadi Group leader Ilimbek Mamatov.[88]

A third major grouping is of anti-India jihadis. The main anti-India group in Afghanistan is Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), which has long been supported by Pakistan.[89] Founded in the eastern province of Kunar, Lashkar-e-Taiba continues to operate in parts of the east and south of the country, draws from salafi constituencies in Kunar and Nangahar provinces, and supports the insurgent forces of the Afghan Taliban.[90] In the past, the group has carried out attacks against India's diplomatic outposts in Afghanistan.[91] In 2020, the United Nations reported that LeT had a strength of around 1,000 fighters in Afghanistan, with nearly 800 in Nangarhar province and 200 in Kunar; this number was higher than the estimate provided by the U.S. military of 300 LeT fighters in 2019.[92] Anti-India groups with a smaller presence in Afghanistan include Jaish-e-Muhammed,[p] which operates in the east of the country, as well as Tanzeem Selfiha (Al-Badr).[93]

4. The Islamic State in Afghanistan

From 2016 to early 2020, the Islamic State in Afghanistan (also known as Islamic State–Khorasan, or ISIS-K) suffered back-to-back losses due to U.S. and Afghan military operations in the eastern provinces of Kunar and Nangarhar. This military pressure was compounded by the Afghan Taliban's political and military onslaught against the group. As a result, the group suffered from the loss of leaders and rank-and-file fighters, shrinking territory, and the fragmentation of battlefield allies, such as the IMU.[94]

But over the last year, the Islamic State's decline has plateaued. In fact, several indicators suggest that the Islamic State has been able to reduce its losses and is once again starting to build back up. First, the group's violent attacks have steadily increased. In the first four months of 2021, claimed and attributed attacks by the Islamic State nearly tripled relative to the comparable period in 2020.[95] Some of these attacks have been very brutal. In May 2020, gunmen wearing suicide vests attacked a maternity ward, killing newborn babies and mothers. The U.S. government attributed the attack to the Islamic State.[96] In August 2020, the group conducted a complex attack against the Nangarhar prison to secure the release

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o   Jandullah is a jihadi group from Tajikistan, led by Engineer Mustafa, with presence in the northern provinces, such as Badakhshan, Takhar, and Baghlan.

p   The U.S. State Department's 2018 and 2019 terrorism reports noted that Jaish-e-Muhammed operates in Afghanistan, in addition to India and Pakistan. See "Country Reports on Terrorism 2018," U.S. Department of State, November 1, 2019, and "Country Reports on Terrorism 2019," U.S. Department of State, June 24, 2020.

"Over the last year, the Islamic State's decline has plateaued. In fact, several indicators suggest that the Islamic State has been able to reduce its losses and is once again starting to build back up."

of hundreds of its prisoners, and it later claimed responsibility for the operation.[97] On August 26, 2021, amid the American effort to evacuate U.S. citizens and vulnerable Afghans from the Hamid Karzai International Airport after the Taliban's takeover, the Islamic State carried out a suicide bomb attack targeting U.S. and allied military soldiers and Afghan civilians at the airport, killing 13 U.S. soldiers and at least 170 Afghan civilians.[98]

Second, the Islamic State has not suffered leadership attrition over the last year , which has allowed the group to hone in on its Taliban-rejectionist political agenda. In early 2020, the group's chief Abu Umar Khurasani and senior leader Aslam Farooqi were arrested.[99] Since then, Shahab al-Muhajir has remained the leader, and he is positioning the group through a stepped-up media campaign targeting salafi constituencies across northern and eastern Afghanistan as "the sole pure rejectionist group in Afghanistan to recruit disaffected Taliban and other militants to swell its ranks."[100] In line with that, an August 29, 2021, statement by the group condemned the Afghan Taliban as an "ally of the US," adding the group has "deviated from the true jihadist path." The statement also invited Afghan jihadis and Taliban fighters to "pursue the implementation of true Sharia" in Afghanistan by joining the Islamic State.[101]

Third, the group's geographic area of operations has expanded compared to the last 12 to 18 months. In addition to the group's core strength of 1,500 to 2,200 fighters in Kunar and Nangarhar provinces, it has also been active in parts of Badakhshan, Faryab, Kunduz, Parwan, and Sar-e-Pol.[102] Moreover, the group has a sizable cadre of foreign fighters, including Afghans, Pakistanis, Indians, Uzbeks, Tajiks, Russians, Frenchmen, and Turks.[103] After the Taliban's takeover of Kabul, Islamic State members imprisoned in Pol-e-Charkhi, Bagram Air Base, and National Directorate of Security (NDS) prisons were able to flee. One report suggests that out of the 2,000 ISIS prisoners who fled, around 150 were killed, including the group's former leader Abu Umar Khurasani.[104] As per some reports, Khurasani and some of the prisoners were killed by the Taliban.[105]

Finally, the Islamic State in Afghanistan remains a central node for the group's regional strategy. Islamic State Central's Al-Sadiq office—which covers the "Khorasan" region of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, the Maldives, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and the Central Asian republics—is based in Afghanistan and actively works with the Islamic State in Afghanistan. According to Islamic State in Afghanistan senior leader Aslam Farooqi's testimony, at least until his arrest in early 2020, the group was receiving financial support from the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.[106] Separately, the Islamic State in Afghanistan continues to house and protect cadres of the Islamic State in Pakistan, in addition to conducting cross-

> ## "The Islamic State in Afghanistan continues to espouse transnational attack ambitions. There are indicators that the group has also plotted transnational attacks from Afghanistan."

border attacks into Pakistan against the leadership and associates of the Afghan Taliban.[107 q]

The Islamic State in Afghanistan continues to espouse transnational attack ambitions. There are indicators that the group has also plotted transnational attacks from Afghanistan. In July 2018, the United Nations reported that "recent plots detected and prevented in Europe had originated from [the Islamic State] in Afghanistan."[108] In 2019, the coordinator of the United Nations Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team noted continued transnational plotting by the group from bases in Afghanistan.[109] In April 2020, the German government announced that it had foiled an Islamic State terrorist plot to attack U.S. and NATO military facilities by arresting four Tajik nationals who were in contact with senior Islamic State leaders, including a leader in Afghanistan.[110 r]

Factors Affecting the Threat Landscape

This is a dangerous threat landscape with the potential to threaten not just the United States and its allies, but also various regional governments. Several factors already in play are likely to worsen these trends.

Weak U.S. Counterterrorism Capacity

The U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan has created substantial space for jihadis in Afghanistan. For years, the U.S. military presence in the country was a major source of intelligence collection—which depended on the infrastructure of the U.S. military—and counterterrorism pressure against a range of threats. The withdrawal has directly affected intelligence collection by reducing both technical and human sources. Before the collapse of the Afghan government, senior Afghan officials told this author that American and Afghan counterterrorism systems had already been scaled back—and the Taliban's gains over the last six months reduced intelligence collection on major threats.[111] Now, with the closure of the U.S. embassy in Kabul due to the Taliban's takeover, the CIA's intelligence gathering and targeting capacities has been reduced even further.[112] As a result, counterterrorism pressure against terrorism threats in eastern, northern, and southern Afghanistan is at its lowest point in the last 20 years.

Future counterterrorism help from inside Afghanistan is likely to be highly constrained. In July 2021, Afghan officials noted that the feeling of American abandonment in the counterterrorism community was pervasive, due to which the willingness of important battlefield leaders to support American counterterrorism was down—including among those who are positioned to help covertly in the future.[113] Key operatives and many members of strike forces who worked on counterterrorism were potentially evacuated in the U.S.-led evacuation effort after the Taliban's takeover. As a result, there are few counterterrorism partners for the U.S. government to work with in Afghanistan, and building up a covert counterterrorism footprint inside the country will be enormously challenging.

The U.S. government also does not have a robust external counterterrorism capability based outside the country to monitor and target threats in Afghanistan, at least for now. The Biden administration is redirecting capabilities like high-endurance drones to bases in the Middle East for conducting operations in Afghanistan.[114] But given the limited number of high-endurance drones, vast geographic scale of land-locked Afghanistan, and non-availability of a strong liaison providing intelligence from the ground, meaningful surveillance to detect threats is likely to be very constrained.[115] Proximate military bases for counterterrorism assets can potentially offset such logistical challenges, but there appears to have been no breakthrough on obtaining bases in Central Asia, with Russian President Vladimir Putin rejecting President Biden's request for U.S. counterterrorism bases in the region.[116] The status of U.S. negotiations with Pakistan for a basing arrangement is uncertain after Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan's public opposition to hosting U.S. counterterrorism bases in-country.[117] Even if a covert agreement is reached between the United States and Pakistan at the intelligence level, fear of exposure in Pakistani domestic politics will constrain the size and level of activity of any Pakistan-based posture, which will limit its efficacy.

The Politics of the Afghan Taliban

The Afghan Taliban's rise to power in Afghanistan in general and its political priorities in particular will enable aligned jihadis in multiple ways. On the one hand, as noted earlier, the Afghan Taliban remain supportive of several terror groups despite guarantees to the U.S. government under the U.S.-Taliban Doha agreement. While they see the Islamic State and groups associated with it as a major threat and are open to taking military action against it, their approach toward al-Qa`ida, TTP, TIP, and various Central Asian jihadis is much more conciliatory. This may partly be because some of these groups have pledged allegiance to the leader of the Afghan Taliban. Consequently, they likely do not plan on either expelling or cracking down on jihadis inside Afghanistan, which will create a highly permissive environment for these groups to gain further strength. To be sure, they may take further steps to formalize control of groups of foreign fighters—or give the appearance that they are taking such steps—in an attempt to allay international concerns.

Another factor, in some ways even more important, is that the Taliban's return through a successful military campaign and the conditions-less U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan are iconic

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q   The latest major example is the Islamic State's targeting of a senior Taliban military commander from Nangarhar in Peshawar. The Islamic State central media outlet claimed responsibility for the attack. See Tahir Khan, "Third Taliban leader killed in Peshawar in past 4 months," Arab News, April 20, 2021.

r   As noted by the analyst Nodirbek Soliev in this publication, "German prosecutors have described the cell's contact in Afghanistan as a high-ranking Islamic State member and 'religious preacher,' who gave a series of radical lectures to the Tajik cell via the encrypted communication platform Zello. According to court documents, this militant issued 'specific guidelines' for 'the attack' planned by the cell in Germany." Nodirbek Soliev, "The April 2020 Islamic State Terror Plot Against U.S. and NATO Military Bases in Germany: The Tajik Connection," CTC Sentinel 14:1 (2020).

political moments for jihadis across the world. The withdrawal is widely perceived as a victory for them. As noted in a BBC report on global jihadi reactions to the announcement of the U.S. withdrawal:

Jihadists in general and al-Qaeda in particular seem to be dazzled by the example of the Taliban, who 'forced' the US to negotiate and sign a peace deal ... that stipulated the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan and the release of all Taliban prisoners.[118]

Jihadis are likely to leverage the Taliban's return for propaganda purposes in order to convey to their bases of support that if defeating a powerful adversary like the United States on the battlefield is possible, then their respective state governments might also be within reach. This is likely to open new avenues of material and political support for jihadi factions around the world in general, and in Afghanistan in particular. There are signs that such an invigoration of jihadis worldwide is already underway.[119] From Hayat Tahrir al-Sham in Syria's Idlib region to Hamas in Gaza to the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region, major jihadi and militant groups have offered effusive praise for the Taliban, proclaiming its methods a model for other groups to follow.[120] Critically, al-Qa`ida's central leadership and major affiliates/aligned groups like al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula, al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghrib, Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimin, Hurras al-Din, and al-Qa`ida in the Indian Subcontinent have praised the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan.[121]

Finally, factional politics in the Afghan Taliban remain to the benefit of regional and transnational jihadis. Senior Taliban leaders, such as Sirajuddin Haqqani and Ibrahim Sadr, remain sympathetic to groups of foreign fighters, including al-Qa`ida.[122] The Taliban have appointed Haqqani as the country's interior minister, which is a powerful position in the Taliban's new government.[123] Additionally, the gaining of power of non-Pashtun Taliban leaders such as Qari Fasihuddin, Maulvi Amanuddin, Qari Salahuddin, and Qari Shamsuddin is to the advantage of jihadis, as some of these leaders have direct association with groups of foreign fighters.[124] With more power and territory than ever before, each of these leaders are positioned to make their own decisions, including regarding how to deal with jihadis.

What, if anything, might ultimately push the Taliban toward fragmentation is challenging to project. Irrespective of the cause, the role of foreign jihadis can be crucial to any internal political struggle in the Taliban. For example, if factionalism worsens, major Taliban factions may seek al-Qa`ida and other regional jihadis' allegiance. There is precedent for this. In 2015, when then-Taliban chief Maulvi Akhtar Mansoor faced an internal revolt after taking charge of the group, he publicly recognized the allegiance of al-Qa`ida chief Ayman al-Zawahiri.[125]

Concurrent to policies that may enable other jihadis, there are some signs that the Afghan Taliban will continue to see the Islamic State as a major rival and might step-up efforts to limit the space for the group in Afghanistan. The Taliban may undertake targeted attacks against leaders and cells of the Islamic State as it has in the past. In Kunar and Nangarhar, where the Islamic State has territorial influence, the Taliban may even undertake military operations to combat the group. As already noted, imprisoned ISK leader Abu Umar Khurasani was reportedly killed by the Taliban after the Taliban took control of the prisons following the collapse of the Afghan government on August 15, 2021.[126]

> **"Jihadis are likely to leverage the Taliban's return for propaganda purposes in order to convey to their bases of support that if defeating a powerful adversary like the United States on the battlefield is possible, then their respective state governments might also be within reach."**

Pakistan's Support of the Afghan Taliban

The Pakistani state strategy of sorting its jihadi landscape into allies and rivals continues to complicate the terrorism landscape.[127] So does Pakistan's support and shielding of the Afghan Taliban. Firstly, it will likely undermine international efforts to pressure the Afghan Taliban, especially on their relationship with jihadi actors. Pakistan's political support provides the Afghan Taliban—relatively insensitive to most forms of international opprobrium and sanctions—with crucial space to sustain its policies. Second, it will likely strengthen the jihadi threat against Pakistan itself. A major indirect beneficiary of Pakistani policy is the Afghan Taliban's anti-Pakistan ally, the TTP. Over the last five years, the TTP has used many geographies under the influence of the Afghan Taliban to recover and re-strategize against Pakistan.

If the TTP continues to escalate its violence against Pakistan, it can create an additional complexity for the international community to convince and coerce Pakistan. A Pakistan imperiled by jihadis will be harder for the international community to pressure out of fear of the prospect of outright Pakistani state failure. For instance, in the critical period of the U.S. military surge in Afghanistan from 2009 to 2012, U.S. policy struggled to pursue the contradictory objectives of stabilizing violence-riven Pakistan, on the one hand, and fighting the Pakistan-allied Afghan Taliban on the other, thereby limiting U.S. and international options.

Militant Competition

Inter-militant competition remains intense in Afghanistan, which is likely to aggravate terrorism threats. Scholars argue that when terrorist groups experience an increase in competition, they can adopt more offensive strategies, including through an escalation of violence, to "outbid" their competitors.[128] They may do so to distinguish their brand from militant competitors, poach from rivals, or gain resources from fence sitters and supporters.

With the Afghan Taliban's rise to power, the Islamic State may also ramp up violence against the Taliban and Afghan civilians—similar to the group's August 26th attack at the Kabul airport against U.S. military personnel and Afghan civilians. It may do so to prove the group's imprimatur as a major jihadi movement in Afghanistan, weaken the Taliban preemptively, and rally resources and recruits. If the Islamic State can sustain such violence, it will bring pressure on the Taliban to take even more extreme positions on issues that may otherwise expose it to criticism in the jihadi milieu, including on treatment of religious minorities in the country and ties with

foreign jihadis. The Islamic State may put pressure on groups like al-Qa`ida and the TTP to demonstrate their relevance by escalating both the level of violence and the scope of their targets. Finally, given that the Taliban are giving assurances to the international community on not allowing anyone to use Afghanistan's soil for terrorist attacks, nervous jihadis such as Central Asian jihadi groups in Afghanistan may seek an insurance against Taliban abandonment through a relationship with the Islamic State.

The Rise of China
Jihadis are increasingly drawn toward fighting China. Beijing has been a longstanding feature in jihadi propaganda for its repression of the Uighur Muslim population, which has intensified as of late.[129] It is also a rising global power with a major presence through its Belt and Road Initiative in South and Central Asia, which brings China in closer contact with Afghanistan-based jihadis. Therefore, China presents an important target for jihadis in Afghanistan that some groups are keen to exploit to shore up their ranks and rally resources. In addition, there are indications that groups like the TTP want to continue targeting the Chinese—even though TTP denies this publicly—for its support of the Pakistani government.[130]

The Chinese government's emerging relationship with the Taliban is an important pressure point against the group. For now, the Chinese government is conditioning the future of the bilateral relationship on the Taliban's "clean break" from terrorist groups.[131] If it enforces the condition, the Taliban might take steps to rein in at least some jihadi groups, like the Turkistan Islamic Party and parts of the TTP interested in targeting Chinese personnel and assets. In the best case from the Chinese perspective, this may reduce the terrorism threat substantially. Another potential trajectory is of the threats shifting to alternative safe havens, either in Central Asia, the Middle East, or Pakistan.

Great Power Competition
Intensifying great power competition between the United States, China, and Russia presents an opportunity for terrorists globally in general, and in Afghanistan in particular. Stepped-up competition limits the kind of military options that the U.S. government is willing to engage in inside Afghanistan, as well as the geopolitical compromises it may be willing to make to build and sustain a robust counterterrorism posture for Afghanistan. The geopolitical competition is also likely to impede international counterterrorism cooperation. In the past, counterterrorism efforts have benefited from bilateral and multilateral cooperation, especially intelligence-sharing. Sanctions and condemnations via the United Nations have also been important counterterrorism tools—which intensifying geopolitical rivalries could undermine.

Moreover, intensifying competition can open avenues that facilitate active—even if selective—state support for jihadis in Afghanistan, ranging from inaction by one or more states against specific jihadis to material aid. The Iranian government's support to al-Qa`ida Central's leadership inside Iran is another key comparative data point on direct state support.[132] Even the perception of state support for an armed adversary may prove to be divisive and trigger escalatory spirals of political and material support to geopolitical rivals' jihadi adversaries. Some U.S. intelligence officials with recent experience working on Russia believe that material aid by Russia to anti-U.S. terrorists is likely.[133] The Chinese government openly speculates that the U.S. government is interested in backing Uighur

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jihadis.[134]

Implications
Usama bin Ladin returned to Afghanistan in May 1996 amid a raging civil war with little in terms of military capabilities.[135] He firmed up his partnership with Afghan Taliban chief Mullah Omar by early 1997. By August 1998, he had bolstered the camps and units of foreign fighters that had existed in the country since the days of the jihad against Soviets, attracted foreign fighters and built new camps, and pulled off mass casualty attacks against two major U.S. embassies in Africa. Put differently, it took bin Ladin around two years to consolidate and project serious transnational terrorism capabilities from Afghanistan.

The bin Ladin timeline and trajectory in Afghanistan is instructive for the current moment. Of course, 2021 is not 1997—in more ways than one. American and international counterterrorism is stronger and poses a major barrier to international terrorism. Still, jihadis in Afghanistan today, at the least, have similar political momentum, capabilities, and experience than what bin Ladin had by early 1997. The iconic status enjoyed by the Taliban due to their late summer 2021 return to power in Afghanistan is to the benefit of jihadis in Afghanistan in general and al-Qa`ida in particular. Finally, the broader strategic environment is creating opportunities for jihadis to work around international pressure.

Al-Qa`ida and other associated jihadis can leverage this opening in varied ways. They can step up the use of terrorism capabilities against more proximate state and regional adversaries, as some such as the TTP are already doing. Al-Qa`ida and its allies are strongly positioned to leverage improving capabilities against U.S. interests and assets in the region, as well as against the U.S. homeland in the future.[136] Rival jihadis, such as those from the Islamic State, may also ramp up local, regional, and transnational violence to compete with the Afghan Taliban and outbid al-Qa`ida and associated jihadis. For now, the American counterterrorism posture for the region does not appear to be robust enough to forestall these possibilities.

Given such an enduring threat, what indicators do U.S. policymakers need to watch as they assess the intent and level of a regenerated threat from Afghanistan? For one, policymakers need

to seriously consider the political significance of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan. The narrative of jihadi victory is likely to become entrenched in jihadi circles, and current policy assessments arguably overlook its significance. Second, if the jihadi victory narrative sets in, there is a strong possibility that the flow of material support from individuals and groups for the Taliban and its jihadi allies in Afghanistan will increase. The flow of foreign fighters from the region, the Middle East, and the West to Afghanistan will also be crucial to watch and contain. Movement of fighters from Afghanistan to other regions will be equally significant. A new factor to consider is the acquisition and build-up of emerging and traditional technologies in Afghanistan. In the late 1990s, bin Ladin and al-Qa`ida devoted capital to building up biological and chemical weapons in Afghanistan. There are signs that the current generation of non-state groups has its eyes set on newer forms of technology, such as more sophisticated drones.[137] The chaotic American withdrawal and rapid collapse of the Afghan government has endowed the Taliban and terror groups with a range of technologies and capabilities, which are important to watch.

Policymakers should also attend to cross-border dynamics and regional spillovers of the situation in Afghanistan. Groups based in Afghanistan remain positioned to secure not just safe havens inside Afghanistan but also move outside, including to Pakistan and Central Asia. Cross-border terrorism operations can also escalate into regional and geopolitical hostilities. There is the potential for violence in Kashmir or attacks by jihadis in mainland India. Another India-Pakistan crisis due to attacks by terrorists based in Afghanistan and Pakistan remains plausible. Finally, the Taliban's relationship with the international community, including major powers like China, will shape the group's ties with foreign jihadis. If the Taliban's tenuous relationship with the international community breaks down, the Taliban may even overtly seek support from jihadi constituencies.

On the other hand, policymakers should be open to the possibility of a break in Taliban-foreign jihadi ties, even if that appears unlikely. Among indicators that might suggest the Afghan Taliban are taking a different approach toward jihadis would be meaningful criticism by al-Qa`ida and its ecosystem of the Afghan Taliban. If the Afghan Taliban renounce or reject the bay`a of al-Qa`ida, that too would constitute a major step. A crackdown like Abu Muhammed al-Julani-led Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham's imprisonment of the al-Qa`ida loyalist Hurras al-Din cadres in northwest Syria would also be an important signal. Covert Taliban help through intelligence provision on international terrorism plots and against high-value jihadi leaders may also indicate a shift in Taliban strategy, though the political circumstances of the information provided will be important to consider.

The Biden administration must maintain high vigilance in Afghanistan, including through the development of strong counterterrorism platforms in South and Central Asia. The Taliban's return to power has increased the stakes of such vigilance. Top al-Qa`ida central and regional leaders, as well as local hardliners espousing aspirations of plotting against the United States and regional states, need to be proactively contained through targeting, intelligence-sharing, and multilateral coordination, including sanctions. This requires compromises with geopolitical adversaries like China and Russia. To that end, the Biden administration should recognize that it does not have unconstrained leeway in pivoting away from counterterrorism. A strong counterterrorism regime is essential to keeping terrorist threats off-balance—and that requires ongoing commitment and persistence.   CTC

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Twenty Years After 9/11: The Fight for Supremacy in Northwest Syria and the Implications for Global Jihad

By Charles Lister

Over the past decade, nowhere in the world has exerted as profound and transformative an impact on the global jihadi landscape as Syria. For al-Qa`ida, Syria had once been the source of its greatest hope, where dozens of its most experienced leading operatives were dispatched to enhance prospects of building a jihadi state. But in recent years, al-Qa`ida's Syrian affiliate distanced itself and then broke away altogether, establishing a new locally oriented movement: Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). In pursuit of local dominance and ultimately survival, HTS has broken one jihadi taboo after another, including turning against al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State and dealing crippling defeats to both in Syria's northwest. The implications and consequences of these developments are manifold. On the one hand, not only does HTS no longer represent the international terrorism threat that its predecessor once had, it has also almost entirely squashed the global threat posed by its more extreme rivals and played a role in maintaining the longest ceasefire in a decade of war in Syria. On the other hand, however, HTS' de facto rule of northwestern Syria threatens to 'mainstream' a local jihadi model that looks set to experience a substantial boost by the Taliban's surge to power in Afghanistan. Should conditions dramatically change, it could also come to represent a strategically significant terrorist safe haven once again—on Europe's doorstep.

O ver the past decade, nowhere in the world has exerted as profound and transformative an impact on the global jihadi landscape as Syria. It was on Syrian soil that the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) first emerged in 2013 and where its behavior then sparked its expulsion from al-Qa`ida. That break-up and the Islamic State's mid-2014 unilateral declaration of a caliphate caused shockwaves worldwide, catalyzing a split of the jihadi community into two rival and later globally hostile movements. As the world collectively mobilized against the Islamic State, al-Qa`ida was left reeling when faced by the Islamic State's unprecedented challenge to its authority.

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In response to the Islamic State's transnational challenge, al-Qa`ida chose Syria as the focal point for its push back, dispatching many of its most senior and experienced operatives there to reinforce al-Qa`ida's standing, through its affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra. While the arrival of the so-called "Khorasan Group" drew U.S. counterterrorism strikes, it also catalyzed internal tensions and an erratic process of introspection within Jabhat al-Nusra that eventually led to its departure from al-Qa`ida in 2017 and the advent of a third model of salafi-jihadi activity: Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and its nationally oriented effort.

The subsequent consolidation of HTS as the de facto governor of northwestern Syria, thanks in large part to its cooperation with Turkey, would have been considered controversial enough within al-Qa`ida's global movement, but the fact that it was achieved while aggressively and effectively cracking down on al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State has stirred intense reaction. Syria and the conflict that has persisted there since 2011 has therefore fostered not two but three worldwide jihadi currents—and the nature of all three, and how they emerged and how they have engaged with each other since, has had significant consequences for the kinds of threats and challenges presented by jihadism across the world.

As a result of events in Syria and indeed elsewhere, today's global jihadi landscape differs significantly from the threats faced in 2001 when the U.S. homeland was hit so dramatically by al-Qa`ida on September 11. In fact, while the United States and its allies may have become particularly adept at the kinetic aspects of counterterrorism, success in that regard has amounted to a string of tactical victories but continued strategic failure. Two decades later, the challenge posed by jihadi terrorism and ideology has never been more diverse, globally distributed, better experienced, or present in so many conflict theaters. Far from defeating terrorism, we have won many battles, but we are losing the war.

This is a story of al-Qa`ida in Syria and how an affiliate's pursuit of self-preservation catalyzed its eventual exit from the global movement and evolution into something altogether new. Through its embrace of local jihad, or 'revolutionary Islamism,' HTS has broken many taboos within the salafi-jihadi world, but created a modus operandi now being replicated in the Middle East, Africa, and further afield. With a semi-technocratic governing body and an active desire to engage external actors, HTS seeks legitimacy, but remains autocratic and politically authoritarian. For al-Qa`ida, Syria might have represented its most promising front of operation five years ago, but its former affiliate is now its local conqueror, having methodically subjugated and later crippled its operations in Syria. The counterterrorism implications and lessons to be learned from developments in northwestern Syria are many, and they relate directly to troubling emerging trends in Afghanistan, Mali, and elsewhere.

This article is composed of two core sections, the first of which is an in-depth analysis of HTS' emergence in January 2017 and how

the movement has sought to methodically consolidate its rule and dominance ever since. From initially pre-empting threats posed by mainstream members of Syria's armed opposition to taking the consequential decision of acquiescing to Turkey; countering HTS' jihadi competitors, al-Qa`ida, and the Islamic State; establishing and empowering a semi-technocratic governing body known as the Salvation Government; and restricting dissent and employing sophisticated attempts to control narratives within its territories, HTS' comprehensive and taboo-busting strategy to dominate northwestern Syria is laid out in detail. Second, the article turns to assessing the emergence and subsequent downfall of Tanzim Hurras al-Din (HAD), a faction established by veteran al-Qa`ida loyalists as a counter to HTS. HAD's creation represented a determined attempt by al-Qa`ida to reassert itself in Syria, but HTS swiftly enforced severe restrictions on its ability to operate and later added to that with a campaign of arrests, killings, and then full-blown hostilities. By mid-2020, HAD had been driven to ground and HTS had begun turning its attention to weakening HAD allies.

Through deep research, interviews with actors involved, and extensive monitoring of jihadi social media material, this article is a tale of jihadi rivalries, adaptations, and intra-jihadi and geopolitical intrigue. HTS' pursuit of local dominance saw it evolve in ways few might have expected and, for now, seal its survival. Al-Qa`ida's intransigence, on the other hand, and its absolutist view against change appear to have secured its downfall in the Syrian context, especially when confronted with the more flexible and opportunistic HTS. Ultimately, as the article's concluding section states, this might have dealt a substantial blow to any international terrorist threat emanating from Syria, but it also raises troubling dilemmas for counterterrorism.

Part One: Consolidation of HTS

Today in September 2021, HTS stands as the unchallenged, de facto governor of opposition-controlled northwestern Syria, a small pocket of territory that constitutes roughly three percent of the country but contains 3.5 million people, or more than 20 percent of the in-country population. Within the Syrian context, HTS' significance is therefore considerable, particularly as it controls the most populous region of Syria outside of regime control, the fate of which will almost certainly play a key role in determining the viability and shape of any future political process. Moreover, HTS' evolution and the decisions and actions it has taken to consolidate its control in Syria's northwest have had a profound impact on the Islamist *and* jihadi milieu worldwide.

As this author explained in *CTC Sentinel* in February 2018,[1] Jabhat al-Nusra's methodical integration and assimilation into Syria's broader opposition movement, combined with Russia's 2015 intervention and the resulting decline in opposition fortunes on the ground created conditions that led to Jabhat al-Nusra's evolution away from al-Qa`ida and transition into Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (JFS) and then HTS. There can be no doubt that self-preservation and opportunism played key roles in driving this transformation. HTS is unquestionably a very different organization to Jabhat al-Nusra, but the extent to which that is sustainable remains to be seen.

Ultimately, HTS' emergence and continued adaptation fit within the group's longstanding and overriding quest to subjugate rivals and exert unilateral dominance. The path that led to today was far from straight, and the strategy that facilitated it could best be

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described as a constant balancing act, managed and forced forward by its longstanding leader, Abu Mohammed al-Julani. Whether balancing complex internal dynamics unique to the group (local versus foreign, hardline versus opportunistic or pragmatic); inter-factional relationships (with the Free Syrian Army, mainstream Islamists, salafis, and groups linked to the Islamic State and al-Qa`ida); or geopolitics involving the West, the Gulf, Turkey, Russia, and Iran, al-Julani's strategy of balancing had always been oriented toward minimizing internal and external threats, while sustaining group advancement.

Until late 2016, al-Julani's guiding agenda had been to achieve legitimacy in the eyes of Syria's opposition while retaining at least a semblance of credibility within the al-Qa`ida-aligned jihadi community. By then, however, accomplishing progress on both of those tracks was no longer a tenable objective, and as such, the formation of HTS in January 2017 represented not just the final nail in its relationship with al-Qa`ida, but also the most consequential step taken in pursuit of supremacy within territories still controlled by Syria's armed opposition.

Preempting Threats

The decision in January 2017 to rebrand for a second time and establish HTS appears to have represented the beginning of the end of al-Julani's balancing strategy. After months of negotiations, HTS' desire to force a broad merger of armed factions in the northwest had repeatedly hit brick walls. In January 2017, it lashed out, pre-emptively attacking opposition groups deemed to be possible threats and coercing the most vulnerable to subsume themselves into the newly formed HTS.[2]

Despite its best attempts to frame HTS' establishment as a "unity" initiative, it was nothing of the sort. By undertaking such an aggressive reformation, HTS burned years of hard-won trust in many opposition circles, abruptly earning the moniker, "Hitish"—a verbalization of the HTS acronym that by design sounded like the opposition's derogatory use of "Da'ish" to refer to the Islamic State. The term "Julani or we burn the country" caught on across opposition circles too, as a play on a phrase embraced by regime loyalists since 2011 to threaten their opponents: "Assad or we burn the country."

With HTS established, the broad spread of opposition groups

Syrian fighters attend a mock battle in anticipation of an attack by the regime on Idlib province and the surrounding countryside, during a graduation of new Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) members at a camp in the countryside of the northern Idlib province on August 14, 2018. (Omar Haj Kadour/AFP via Getty Images)

in the northwest pulled together. Leading figures within Jabhat al-Nusra's most consistent opposition ally, Ahrar al-Sham, began taking to the streets clutching the revolution's 'green' flag alongside Free Syrian Army (FSA) representatives.[3] Even the U.S. State Department sought to stir the pot, issuing a letter in Arabic from then Special Envoy Michael Ratney declaring that HTS was a terrorist organization and Ahrar al-Sham (a group founded by veteran salafis with links to al-Qa`ida) was a "dedicated protector of the revolution."[4] By the summer of 2017, tensions boiled over for good, and after a swift spate of fighting in July 2017, HTS vanquished Ahrar al-Sham altogether, before cracking down on several other factions in the weeks that followed, including Harakat Nour al-Din al-Zinki, which had defected from HTS in protest at its assault on Ahrar al-Sham.[5]

Though Jabhat al-Nusra had attacked and defeated a number of FSA-branded factions as far back as 2014, the dramatic about-turn from 2016's pursuit of mergers to 2017's all-out assaults on what were previously longtime allies caused shockwaves. One senior Ahrar al-Sham leader described the effect of their losses at the time as "more than military defeat, much more"[6]—indicating that the impact was felt far beyond Ahrar al-Sham itself.

By late 2017, HTS had ruthlessly asserted itself across the opposition-controlled northwest, establishing de facto military dominance and control of key urban centers, border crossings with Turkey, and the region's main roadways. Having dealt with rival groups as a whole, it then stood widely accused of running a covert campaign of assassinations targeting influential detractors both inside the group and previously part of the group, critical of HTS' attacks on the likes of Ahrar al-Sham. In September 2017,

prominent clerics Abdullah al-Moheiseni and Musleh al-Alyani had quit HTS,[7] along with the formidable military commander Abu Saleh Tahhan and his Jaish al-Ahrar fighters.[8] Though he chose to remain within HTS, Jaish al-Ahrar's leader, Abu Jaber, then resigned from his post as HTS' overall leader in October, clearing a path for al-Julani to reassert himself once again.[9]

In many ways, 2017 was a formative period that could be described as 'the great sorting out,' in which others within HTS with especially hardline positions defected in protest against its perceived betrayal of al-Qa`ida. Though al-Julani has since expressed some purported regret for such inter-factional strife, he has also made clear that such actions were pursued "to avoid harm and to fend off threats,"[10] underlining that self-interest was the primary driver. In fact, given the context in which this all took place, a 'great sorting out' was precisely in al-Julani's interests.

Acquiescing to Turkey
Having quelled any and all possible opposition challenges to its authority, HTS' next step in its pursuit of self-preservation and geographical supremacy was to accede to a relationship with Turkey. A Russian-pushed diplomatic initiative earlier in 2017 had established northwestern Syria as one of four so-called de-escalation zones, with Turkey as a guarantor.[11] For Ankara, Idlib was a source of substantial strategic interest and security concern. To its east, the largely Kurdish-commanded Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) had established itself as a formidable and expanding actor, thanks in large part to support from the U.S.-led anti-Islamic State coalition. Idlib itself, meanwhile, offered Turkey a strategically significant zone of influence, but a spike in hostilities there threatened to

catalyze an uncontrollable refugee flow toward its border, which had the potential to deal a hammer blow to President Erdogan's domestic political standing.

Given Ankara's concerns and its role as a guarantor, it declared its intent to deploy troops into Idlib using private channels with HTS in the late summer of 2017. On al-Julani's instruction, HTS commanders and the group's Political Office, led by Zaid al-Attar, swiftly entered into negotiations with officers from Turkey's National Intelligence Organization (MIT), and in early October 2017, HTS fighters escorted the first convoys of Turkish troops into Idlib, where they began establishing observation posts to monitor the de-escalation process. Hundreds and later thousands of Turkish troops subsequently deployed into Idlib, where their presence was at first permitted and later guaranteed by HTS itself.[12]

Of all the decisions HTS has taken since 2016, this was arguably the most consequential. Within the jihadi community worldwide, Turkey and its president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, are widely perceived as an unofficial government front for or ally of the Muslim Brotherhood—a movement whose pivot into nation-state politics is understood by the likes of al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State to have placed it into apostasy.

For HTS to talk with Turkey would have been controversial enough but entering into a form of military-to-military relationship was enormously contentious. While Jabhat al-Nusra's rebrand to JFS and then HTS, and HTS' attacks on longtime Islamist allies may have initiated a 'great sorting out' within and around HTS, the decision to accept Turkish troops within its midst put that process on steroids. By all accounts, this was the decision that broke HTS out of the salafi-jihadi mold altogether—into something al-Julani himself has called "revolutionary Islamism."[13] Leading al-Qa`ida commentators have been unanimously brutal in condemning HTS' decision to side with Turkey, with one prominent figure, Adnan Hadid, labeling al-Julani "Jolanov"—a reference to the similarity between his perceived betrayal of the cause and that of Ramzan Kadyrov in Chechnya, who "submitted" to Russian President Vladimir Putin.[14]

By mid-2021, Turkey had somewhere between 7,000-15,000 troops[15] deployed inside Syria's HTS-dominated northwest, operating out of at least 71 military bases and observation posts.[16] Following an aggressive Assad regime offensive in February 2020 that posed an existential threat to HTS-ruled Idlib, the Turkish military launched an unprecedented five-day air and ground military intervention that killed hundreds of Assad regime troops and destroyed at least 83 regime tanks, armored vehicles, and artillery pieces.[17] A fragile ceasefire has held ever since, offering HTS ample opportunity to further consolidate its position and seal its ties with Turkey. One likely sign of that has come in the form of images of HTS training and military operations from 2020 and 2021 showing its personnel operating Turkish-provided (U.S.-made) M114 howitzers[18] and M113 armored personnel carriers,[19] as well as Turkish-made MKE mortars.[20]

Countering the Jihadi Competition

Turkey's entry into Idlib may have helped HTS consolidate its position of supremacy, but it did not come without conditions, or expectations. While Turkey officially considers HTS a terrorist organization, security threats posed by the Islamic State and al-Qa`ida are perceived to be far more significant and immediate. From a Turkish perspective in mid-2017, despite fervent Russian

> ## "While the establishment of HTS sealed the break from al-Qa`ida and sparked a bitter and very public falling out, accusations of betrayal and apostasy did not translate into hostility—at least not immediately."

objections, HTS arguably presented the most viable—albeit complicated and controversial—option for maintaining a semblance of internal stability inside Idlib *and* for confronting or containing both the Islamic State and al-Qa`ida there. This is not to say that HTS was Turkey's only partner in northwestern Syria—Ankara maintained close working ties with Islamist opposition factions like Faylaq al-Sham and the remnants of Ahrar al-Sham—but HTS was the actor most capable of securing ends that met Turkish interests.

Having achieved factional dominance in 2017, the next phase of HTS' military consolidation was to tackle covert threats, beginning with the Islamic State. Beginning in July 2017 but gaining speed through 2018, HTS launched a sustained campaign of armed raids targeting Islamic State sleeper cells across Idlib. From mid-June to late August 2018 alone, elite HTS fighters conducted more than 60 such operations.[21] HTS also imposed a complete ban on the ownership or distribution of Islamic State propaganda across Syria's northwest.[22]

Although Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi died in a raid by U.S. Special Operations Forces in the village of Barisha in Idlib's northernmost tip, HTS was also reportedly searching for him in the days and weeks leading up to his death in October 2019. One HTS raid had been launched in pursuit of al-Baghdadi in the Idlib town of Sarmin in August 2019 and another raid sometime after that captured a close aide of al-Baghdadi, Abu Suleiman al-Khalidi.[23] In the immediate aftermath of al-Baghdadi's killing, non-HTS-aligned journalists in Idlib cited an HTS leader as claiming that HTS had been actively searching for him in the Barisha area the day before the U.S. raid.[24]

The fact that the Islamic State's territorial caliphate was living its final months in 2018 meant it was no surprise that some of its operatives would have sought to hide in Idlib and HTS' longstanding hostility to the Islamic State dating back to early 2014 explains why it sought to uproot Islamic State cells from the beginning.

HTS' dynamic with al-Qa`ida was different, however. While the establishment of HTS sealed the break from al-Qa`ida and sparked a bitter and very public falling out, accusations of betrayal and apostasy did not translate into hostility—at least not immediately.

Beyond a months-long war of words,[25] HTS' initial approach to al-Qa`ida loyalists was to treat them as potential challengers of its authority. The formation of Tanzim Hurras al-Din (HAD) in February 2018 by a network of prominent al-Qa`ida veterans and loyalists was the first official gauntlet laid down as a challenge to HTS. After months of resulting negotiations, HTS forced through a one-sided agreement with HAD in March 2019 stipulating that HAD permanently dissolve all of its sharia and security-related facilities (courts, prisons, checkpoints, training camps); submit all of its arms stores to HTS control and oversight; and relinquish any

"HTS, through its crackdown on HAD and sustained campaign against Islamic State cells, has now arguably established unchallenged hegemony in the opposition-controlled northwest. In so doing, it has demonstrated a clear willingness to combat globally oriented terrorist organizations, which, though clearly driven primarily by self-interest, correlates with the changed—or reformed—image that HTS is currently attempting to sell to the international community."

right to plot operations outside of Syria.[26] HAD's presence was also restricted to seven frontline posts and 16 bases or facilities in the Jisr al-Shughour district, in Idlib's northwest.[27]

Despite enforcing such restrictive conditions upon HAD, the al-Qa`ida-affiliated group continued to push the limits of the deal and tensions steadily increased over time, interspersed with periodic HTS arrests of HAD figures accused of criminality or Islamic State links.[a] Those tensions began to finally boil over in the spring of 2020, following Turkey's dramatic military intervention that stalled a major regime offensive and ultimately forced a region-wide ceasefire negotiated in Moscow.

That Turkish-Russian deal did not just pause fighting; it paved a path for the de facto surrender by HTS and rebels of Idlib's strategically crucial M4 highway by way of a demilitarized zone to its north and south and then joint Turkish-Russian military convoys patrolling the roadway. HTS conveyed its agreement to the deal along private channels to Ankara[28] and then in public, issued a statement on March 7, 2020, that critiqued the deal, but did not reject it.

Despite HTS' attempt to publicly blur its stance toward the ceasefire, its clear refusal to reject it—as all other notable jihadi groups did—was sufficient evidence for al-Qa`ida's loyalists to prove their suspicions: HTS had in their minds fully capitulated and become a tool of foreign agendas. Tensions continued to escalate, further added to by the initiation of joint Russian-Turkish patrols of the M4, under the watchful eyes of HTS. Weeks later, HAD launched a major behind-enemy-lines assault on the village of Tanjara in northern Hama on May 9, 2020, killing at least 21 Assad regime soldiers.[29]

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a   For example, the arrest of HAD's Abu Yahya al-Jazayri was covered up, and he is unmentioned in a Syrian Salvation Government (SSG) statement reporting on the security raid targeting criminals in which he was arrested. The statement by the SSG (the HTS-backed proto-government in rebel-controlled Idlib) is available on the SSG's Facebook page, July 26, 2020. His arrest in this raid was revealed in media reporting; for example, "[Hayat Tahrir al-Sham implements a campaign of security detentions in Idlib and arrests leaders of Hurras al-Din]," Step News Agency, July 29, 2020.

That attack was the straw that broke the camel's back and effectively broke the March 2019 agreement between HTS and HAD altogether. In so dramatically violating the Idlib ceasefire, HAD had made a bold statement, both of intent and total opposition to HTS-defined rules. A month later, in June 2020, HAD led the formation of a consolidated al-Qa`ida-aligned military operations room known as *Fa'ithbitu* (Be Steadfast), which triggered a series of HTS arrests of high-level HAD-linked figures and an intense week of fighting (to be expanded upon below in "Demise of Hurras al-Din") in late June 2020 that left HAD in tatters—with no territory, no bases, and no meaningful sources of financial income.[30]

In short order, HTS had to a significant degree dismantled al-Qa`ida's newly formed Syrian affiliate and in the months that followed, it pursued an aggressive security campaign that placed dozens of HAD-linked commanders in HTS detention.[31] The HTS net was cast wider too, to include well-known Western activist-type personalities, including American journalist Bilal Abdul Kareem,[32] British aid worker Tauqir Sharif,[33] and French journalist Moussa al-Hassan.[34]

Within this context, a spate of U.S. drone strikes through 2020 and 2021 that killed senior al-Qa`ida operatives such as Khalid al-Aruri,[35] Saleh al-Karuri (Mohammed al-Sudani),[36] and Bilal Khuraysat (Abu Khadija al-Urduni)[37] sparked widespread allegations that HTS, or elements within HTS, were leaking the whereabouts of individuals for foreign targeting.[38] Al-Qa`ida loyalists have also alleged that some arrested by HTS and held in detention in Idlib—like French national Omar Omsen, for example—have been interrogated by officials from their countries of origin.[39] Others like Sirajuddin Makhtarov (Abu Saloh al-Uzbeki) were allegedly detained by HTS in an attempt to negotiate a financial reward in exchange for deportation[40]—in Makhtarov's case, to Russia, where he is wanted for involvement in the 2017 Saint Petersburg metro bombing.[41]

By early 2021, what remained of HAD's leadership was operating in hiding, forced to issue only periodic audio and written statements[42] calling on its supporters to remain committed to the cause. Some had allegedly fled to the comparatively lawless northern Aleppo region, controlled by a hodgepodge of Turkish-backed FSA militias.[43] As of early September 2021, HAD continues to be an actor of negligible relevance in northwestern Syria. Although HAD's claim of responsibility for a bomb attack on a military bus in Damascus on August 4, 2021,[44] illustrated its capacity to operate covertly behind enemy lines, the attack was both minor in scale and likely a one-off.

While it took four years to accomplish, HTS, through its crackdown on HAD and sustained campaign against Islamic State cells, has now arguably established unchallenged hegemony in the opposition-controlled northwest. In so doing, it has demonstrated a clear willingness to combat globally oriented terrorist organizations, which, though clearly driven primarily by self-interest, correlates with the changed—or reformed—image that HTS is currently attempting to sell to the international community.

It was therefore no surprise that HTS' subsequent step—initiated in the summer of 2021—was to begin pressuring smaller jihadi outfits to merge into HTS or disband and/or depart Idlib altogether. While these so-called "independent" jihadi factions had long avoided involvement in inter-factional strife, their continued existence nonetheless represented a potential threat to HTS. Some of the groups, like the Uighur-rooted Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), were engaged gently and due to their not insignificant size, afforded

some leniency provided they submit to HTS rules.[45] Smaller groups like Kataib al-Sahaba, Jund Allah, Ajnad al-Kavkaz, and the Chechen-led Junud al-Sham were pressured more aggressively in a methodical campaign of intimidation.[46] As it had done frequently during its crackdowns on al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State, HTS' justification for pressuring these factions was framed around alleged corruption and criminality[47]—though such allegations were clearly a cover for HTS' pursuit of total hegemony and its attempt to demonstrate to the likes of Turkey and Russia that it can be a constructive or useful actor in the hornets' nest that is Idlib.

The 'Salvation Government'
Given the geopolitics surrounding the fate of Idlib, HTS' military subjugation of rival opposition factions and ruthless containment of al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State were steps toward self-preservation, but only part of the necessary path. To assuage Turkey's concerns about Idlib's stability, to deter or undermine the Assad regime's instincts to reinitiate hostilities, and to rebuild some trust with the local population, HTS also needed to enhance preexisting levels of governance and service provision.

Whereas al-Julani had explored the feasibility of establishing an Islamic emirate in Idlib in early 2016, through extensive consultation with the region's Islamic community,[48] his tone shifted with the formation of HTS and the resulting break with al-Qa`ida. By mid-2017, al-Julani had begun discussing the prospects for electing a "Prime Minister of Liberated Northern Syria," according to three Idlib notables who met with him at the time.[49] That shift in rhetoric, while likely tailored to specific audiences, translated in part into the establishment of the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG) in November 2017 and the election of its first prime minister, Dr. Mohammed al-Sheikh,[50] who until then had been president of Idlib University.

Initially comprising 11 different ministries, the SSG was a largely technocratic body run by individuals from the educated middle class, almost all of whom had little or no link to HTS or its predecessors. Among its leadership were academics such as Taher Samaq and Mohammed Bakkour of Aleppo University; civil society figures like Salah Ghaffour, Yahya Naema, and Abdulmoneim Nassif; independent Islamists like Bassam Sahyouni and Farouq Kishkish; and a host of local businessmen.[51]

The SSG's creation presented a formidable challenge to the Syrian Interim Government (SIG), an opposition governmental body largely based in Turkey that enjoyed recognition by many foreign governments, but only limited financial support. Over time, a persistent SSG pressure campaign managed to effectively expel or neutralize the SIG's influence in Idlib and subjugated the region's local councils either directly or into de facto SSG control.[52] Though there is no evidence to suggest that HTS personnel were directly involved in these non-military coercive efforts—enforced through public deadlines, economic and service cut-offs, and political rhetoric—the clear linkage between HTS and the SSG undoubtedly empowered the SSG's calls for authority. When tensions developed between the SSG and local council bodies, difficulties frequently arose in parallel between HTS and local armed opposition factions—lending the SSG its necessary advantage.[53] That was unlikely to have been a coincidence.

The SSG, often acting in cahoots with HTS, has also invested heavily in tribal engagement as a method of acquiring localized legitimacy and backing in parallel to preexisting council structures.[54] As a non-state actor with limited resources, neither HTS nor the

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SSG actually *controls* Idlib per se; they exert unchallenged influence over it. To do so requires not just respect through fear, but also an extent of credibility versus any other viable alternative. Given HTS' challenged ties with mainstream opposition groups, societal structures such as tribes and clans have offered HTS and the SSG their best chance of acquiring and maintaining that control.

In addition to achieving control over much of the local council network, the SSG also focused attention squarely toward service provision and particularly to taking control over critical sectors linked to the local economy. Oil and gas came first, in 2018, when HTS fronted the establishment of Watad Petroleum (a business front created to control the import of oil and gas into northwestern Syria, in coordination with the SSG, at a value of roughly $1.5 million per month[55]) and transformed the HTS-linked Al-Wasit *hawala* company into what would become Idlib's de facto central bank, Sham Bank.[56]

The most lucrative and strategically vital source of revenue—and broader influence—was HTS' control of the Bab al-Hawa crossing with Turkey, estimated to be worth $15-20 million of monthly customs duties. While governed on paper by the SSG, the crossing was in practice managed by HTS and specifically by HTS magnates Mohammed Zeineddine and "al-Mughira."[57] Financed in large part by crossing income, HTS developed through 2020 and 2021 a complex network of business entities, fronts, and individuals through which it steadily acquired a near-monopoly over Idlib's economy writ large, from construction, agriculture, and transportation to local industry, food production, and internal trade.[58]

In 2019, telecommunications came under the SSG's radar, with the establishment of the SSG Department of Telecommunications and the expansion of fiber optic cabling along areas close to the Turkish border and the construction of telephone towers in several rural areas across HTS-controlled western Aleppo and Idlib.[59] As the Syrian Pound (SYP) collapsed in early 2020 and Turkey further deepened its position in Idlib following its military intervention and ceasefire agreement with Russia, the SSG moved to remove the SYP from Idlib's market altogether and replace it with the Turkish lira.[60] Within hours of it announcing the currency switch, truckloads of

Turkish lira began arriving in Syria's northwest from Turkey, via Afrin.[b] Shortly thereafter, the SSG announced that all salaries province-wide would be issued in Turkish lira.[61]

The embrace of Turkey's currency served to underline the SSG's methodical move to integrate Idlib with core components of Turkish infrastructure—such as telecommunications and also electricity supply[62]—and Turkey's clear willingness to facilitate it.[63] In each sector in which Turkish products are extended into Idlib, the SSG has provided monopoly control to an HTS front—Sham Bank controls the Turkish Lira;[64] Watad manages oil and gas[65] (though later diversified by the addition of "Kaf Trading" and "al-Shahba Petroleum"[66]); and "Green Energy" controls Turkish electricity.[67]

That HTS and the SSG have focused most heavily on revenue-generating sectors is no surprise, given their lack of external sources of financial backing, the need to support a level of service provision necessary to avoid an uncontrollable rise in popular opposition,[c] and in all likelihood, to funnel funds to HTS itself. The SSG's lack of resources has also translated into its divestment of control to foreign non-governmental organizations (NGOs) of sectors such as health and education. Idlib's provincial health service has been almost entirely sub-contracted to external actors, many initially funded by Germany's Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ).[68] The Education sector, meanwhile, is run largely on a volunteer basis in coordination with at least 20 local and foreign NGOs, including Qatar Foundation, which provides teaching materials and textbooks based on U.N.-approved curricula across much of HTS-controlled territories.[69] As a reflection of its lack of resources as well as a pragmatic investment in tribes, the SSG has also devolved Idlib's justice sector almost entirely to tribal bodies.

Beyond generating income, managing core service provision, and devolving secondary services to external parties, the SSG's "General Security Service" has also been the primary actor responsible for countering organized crime and both al-Qa`ida and Islamic State inside HTS areas. Though this force is distinctly separate from HTS in terms of manpower, it remains associated and heavily—albeit covertly—influenced by HTS.[d] Inside Idlib, the SSG's General Security Service presents itself as an elite force whose mission is intelligence and law enforcement-related, rather than military.

Narrative Control and Restricting Dissent

To close the circle, HTS' broad-spectrum approach to consolidating its influence in Idlib has included a focused effort to control narratives and restrict dissent. In contrast to the likes of al-Qa`ida

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b   Social media imagery shared on June 11, 2020, showed shipments of Turkish lira deposited in Aleppo and Idlib governorates earlier that day. For example, On the Ground News, "#Idlib The Turkish lira is being sent into the liberated parts of rural Aleppo and Idlib …," Twitter, June 11, 2020.

c   HTS and the SSG have faced waves of popular protest and persistent discontent due to insufficient or wavering service provision, as well as the unaffordable cost of staple goods, as mentioned, for example, here: Lyse Mauvais, "As winter sets in, HTS faces popular discontent around fuel prices," Syria Direct, December 20, 2020; "Twenty-eighth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team concerning Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals, groups, undertakings and entities," United Nations Security Council, July 21, 2021.

d   In its latest report, the United Nations' monitoring team tracking jihadi terror threats reported that HTS "controls the general security service of the de facto local authorities in Idlib." "Twenty-eighth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team."

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The SSG's Directorate of Information was established in 2019 in large part to monitor and control the existence and output of the wide range of opposition and civil media outfits existing across Syria's northwest. While no explicit blanket ban was served, the SSG and HTS exerted a mostly unstated opposition to outlets presenting views that critiqued or opposed HTS and the SSG's work or vision. Those who most visibly contravened those expectations were duly detained and many reportedly tortured. One local media activist, Samer al-Salloum, died in HTS custody in early 2019, more than a year after his arrest.[70] The assassination of internationally renowned activist and humanitarian Raed Fares is widely blamed on HTS.[71]

Meanwhile, HTS-linked media outlets have enjoyed unchallenged access, as the group has sought to control the information environment. The Ebaa News Network has long been the group's most consistent and high-volume outlet, along with dedicated accounts on Telegram managed by distinct SSG bodies that update on construction, trade, security, and similar issues. However, Ebaa went silent on July 19, 2021, and appears to have been replaced by the preexisting Amjad Media Foundation, which released HTS' Eid al-Adha message on July 19 (for the first time, instead of Ebaa), as well as an August 18 statement congratulating the Taliban on their victory in Afghanistan.[72]

In 2021, speculation surrounded a new and expanding media organization known as "Creative Inception," whose output includes news as well as television shows and movies. Headquartered in the northern town of Sarmada, Creative Inception has branched out

A member of the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) alliance holds the group's flag as others parade with their flags and those of the Taliban's declared "Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan" through the rebel-held northwestern city of Idlib, Syria, on August 20, 2021. (Omar Haj Kadour/AFP via Getty Images)

across Idlib and also into SNA[e]-controlled northern Aleppo, where HTS is not officially active. Beyond its standard media production, the SSG granted the company a monopoly over advertising banners along Idlib's road network in July 2021 amid an unprecedented Creative Inception recruitment drive targeting Idlib's youth. The company has since been labeled "a new front" of HTS in an extensive investigation by local journalists.[73]

On the religious side, HTS and the SSG have maintained a far less interventionist posture. The SSG is reportedly responsible for over 1,200 mosques across Idlib, most of which remain in the same hands as they were prior to the SSG's creation.[74] As influential SSG Sharia Council member Anas Ayrout has explained, "Sufism is the religious orientation with which most preachers and the general public identify. We are not going to war with them when people really have other concerns."[75]

HTS and the SSG remain salafi in orientation and in northwestern Syria have exerted a monopoly in terms of the authority to determine the boundaries of what is acceptable, such as banning *takfir* (excommunication) and prohibiting the dissemination of Islamic State propaganda and the writings of critics of HTS like Abu Mohammed al-Maqdisi. While smoking is technically prohibited in HTS territories, that law is rarely if ever enforced, as is the case regarding female dress.[76] All *fatwas* produced in Idlib must be passed through HTS' Sharia Council.[77]

But rather than issuing Islamic State or al-Qa`ida-style judicial dictums on the legality of menial issues like purchasing a Western product, for example, HTS is far more likely to focus its energies on dictatorially cracking down on acts of political opposition. On August 24, 2021, HTS took the bold step of banning one of the Syrian opposition's most well-resourced television and online news outlets, Orient News, from operating within Idlib – accusing it of "violations," including the illegitimate use of the words "armed militias" in its descriptions of HTS itself.[78]

In taking the approach described above, HTS is operating in a grey zone for jihadis. Some have explained HTS' approach as an example of Ibn Taymiyya's concept of *al-siyasat al-shari'a*, or sharia-compliant politics[79]—a blending of flexible political positions within a loosely defined religious construct. To justify and maintain this approach, HTS leader al-Julani has required an intensely loyal and dependable leadership circle. HTS' senior leadership in 2021 resembles a command structure composed of individuals with profiles well suited to a more locally oriented, less 'jihadi' movement.

At the top of the pyramid is Ahmad al-Shara'a (al-Julani), a chameleon-like leader in his mid-30s; clearly intelligent, ideologically flexible, and demonstrably unafraid of taking controversial steps necessary to protect HTS' (and his) interests. Al-Julani's deputy and HTS' chief of security, Anas Hassan Khattab (Abu Ahmed Hudud), has been by his side since being one of Jabhat al-Nusra's seven founding members in late 2011.[80] In his pre-2011 role as the Islamic State of Iraq's (ISI) emir of the Syrian border region, Khattab was willing to maintain covert ties with Syrian military intelligence.[81] Years later, it is widely claimed that Khattab has maintained ties with intelligence officials from several Gulf

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e   The Syria National Army (SNA) is an umbrella formed with Turkish facilitation and support to unite Free Syrian Army (FSA) factions operational in northwestern Syria. The SNA has become a wholesale proxy of the Turkish government, and it has been directly involved in Turkish military incursions across northern Syria since 2017.

states since 2011.[82]

Another key figure in HTS is Abu Muhjen al-Hasakawi, a native of Syria's northeastern city of Qamishli who worked in the United Arab Emirates before returning to Syria in 2011, is known for his brutality (as a lead interrogator in HTS' infamous Oqab Prison in Idlib), his willingness to turn on former allies (in coordinating HTS' assault on HAD's stronghold in Arab Said), his dedication to securing Russian-Turkish patrols of the M4 highway, and as a suit-wearing participant at SSG-convened conferences.[83] Opportunists who have elevated themselves by way of absolute loyalty to al-Julani, such as Abu al-Khayr Taftanaz, Huzayfa Badawi, and Abdulqader Tahhan, will most likely remain stalwart defenders of HTS' evolving approach, while HTS' general military commander, Abu Hassan al-Hamawi (also known as Abu Hassan 600), is widely known for advocating a closer relationship with Syria's mainstream opposition while fighting the likes of al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State even more aggressively.

That latter narrative—of openness to recovering HTS' relations with components of Syria's moderate armed opposition—has provided space for veteran senior HTS leaders such as Abu Tawfiq, Maysar Ali Musa al-Juburi (Abu Mariya al-Qahtani), and Jihad Issa al-Sheikh (Abu Ahmed Zakour) to remain engaged in secret channels of dialogue with FSA factions based in neighboring northern Aleppo, in search of a mutually beneficial détente.[84]

Maintaining such a loyalist cadre will be critical if al-Julani is to have any hope of sustaining HTS' evolution *and* hegemony in Idlib. Preserving HTS interests only seems possible if the group continues to evolve away from its Jabhat al-Nusra past, but transforming in that direction will necessitate increasingly controversial steps. The intensification of secret negotiations with a number of influential FSA groups in northern Aleppo in mid-2021 appears aimed toward some form of formalized agreement, which would trigger an earthquake far more powerful than the furor that surrounds HTS' ties to Turkey. Some substantial progress was allegedly made in these talks in early August 2021, with at least two leading SNA groups expressing an interest in some form of cooperation with HTS.[85] Similarly, according to two sources, Turkey is inserting itself more aggressively into HTS' military wing—not just by allegedly providing small quantities of weaponry, but also attending new recruit graduation ceremonies and inspecting HTS' weapons development facilities.[86]

Part Two: The Rise and Fall of Hurras al-Din
HAD's emergence in February 2018 represented the culmination of over a year of deliberations within al-Qa`ida and its loyalist community in northwestern Syria. Jabhat al-Nusra's rebrand to JFS and then HTS had catalyzed a steady stream of defections by those who saw al-Julani's opportunism as evidence of his unauthorized breaking of *bay`a* and for some, of his apostasy. Among the earliest defectors, in the fall of 2016, were Iyad Tubasi (Abu Julaybib al-Urduni), Abu Khadija al-Urduni, and Abu Hammam al-Suri as well as at least 11 other senior, veteran al-Qa`ida figures.[87] By late 2016, moves had already begun to create a counter-faction and once HTS came into existence in January 2017, the impetus to do so intensified markedly.

Bitter recriminations built up steadily through 2017, amid rumors of al-Qa`ida's plans to establish a new loyalist faction and an escalating, bitter public feud between leading figures loyal to al-Julani and al-Qa`ida. Those tensions culminated in HTS' arrest of Tubasi and Jabhat al-Nusra's former sharia chief and de facto

> **"While HAD's creation was clearly a direct response to Jabhat al-Nusra's rebrands, it was also a natural conclusion to a far longer but less visible internal tension between al-Qa`ida's most loyal contingent (and their globalist tendencies) and the largely Syrian circle surrounding al-Julani."**

deputy leader Sami al-Oraydi in November 2017 in an attempt to prevent the formation of the widely rumored new group. Within days of those arrests, Ayman al-Zawahiri publicly revealed his outright opposition to Jabhat al-Nusra's rebrands, labeling them as a betrayal of *bay`a*—a great sin.[88] Then on January 7, 2018, a statement by al-Qa`ida's General Leadership made it official, declaring for the first time that al-Qa`ida's presence in Syria was distinct from HTS.[89]

While HAD's creation was clearly a direct response to Jabhat al-Nusra's rebrands, it was also a natural conclusion to a far longer but less visible internal tension between al-Qa`ida's most loyal contingent (and their globalist tendencies) and the largely Syrian circle surrounding al-Julani. Those strains began in early 2013 as a wave of senior al-Qa`ida veterans began arriving in northwestern Syria following an order from central leadership[90] to reinforce al-Qa`ida's standing in Syria amid the challenge posed by the Islamic State.

The earliest arrivals included al-Qa`ida Shura Council member Abdulrahman Mohammed al-Jahani, as well as Abdulmohsen Abdullah al-Sharikh (Sanafi al-Nasr), Mohsen al-Fadhli, Abu Layth al-Yemeni, Haydar Kirkan, Abu Yusuf al-Turki, and Said Arif.[91] Though al-Julani did accede to al-Qa`ida pressure to restructure Jabhat al-Nusra's leadership—by replacing deputy leader Maysar Ali Musa Abdullah al-Juburi (Abu Mariya al-Qahtani) with hardline ideologue Sami al-Oraydi[92] and appointing Samir Hijazi (Abu Hammam al-Suri) as military chief and Radwan Nammous (Abu Firas al-Suri) as spokesman—he was reportedly opposed to the group's embrace of more severe theological rhetoric and behaviors,[93] but largely powerless to prevent it.

As Jabhat al-Nusra's internal dynamic grew increasingly strained in late 2014, al-Julani moved aggressively to block newly arrived al-Qa`ida figures from joining the group's Shura Council. Four sources from within Idlib's jihadi community told the author that Sanafi al-Nasr played an instrumental role in a short-lived plot to encourage an internal coup aimed at unseating al-Julani, while other al-Qa`ida loyalists allegedly wrote to Iran-based al-Qa`ida senior leader Saif al-`Adl calling for al-Qa`ida's permission to make a move against al-Julani, a request that could feasibly have come to something had al-Zawahiri not been unreachable through late 2014 and early 2015.[94]

The initiation of a U.S. air campaign targeting the newly arrived clique of al-Qa`ida's loyalists—labeled the Khorasan Group—in northwestern Syria in September 2014 proved to be a double-edged sword for al-Julani—killing off a handful of powerful rivals

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but offering his opponents what they claimed was evidence of his complicity. As American precision strikes continued to kill senior al-Qa`ida operatives known to be in open disagreement with al-Julani, a purported Jabhat al-Nusra investigation accused veteran French al-Qa`ida member Abu Abdullah al-Fransi of being a spy.[95] He was subsequently captured, interrogated, and according to some, executed, though others claim he remains alive in HTS custody as of mid-2021.[96]

While the Khorasan Group was effectively neutralized by U.S. strikes by late 2015, senior al-Qa`ida leaders continued to flock to Syria's northwest. Some months after their release by Iran in March 2015 and after a brief visit to Iraq,[97] the arrival of Abu al-Khayr al-Masri (who was appointed as the deputy leader of al-Qa`ida) and Khalid al-Aruri (Abu al-Qassam al-Urduni), not to mention the likes of Mohammed al-Sudani, Abu Abdulkarim al-Masri, and al-Qa`ida Shura Council member Mohammed al-Ahmed (Shaqran al-Urduni)[f] continued to reinforce the widening gap in visions held by al-Julani and al-Qa`ida's most loyal supporters in Syria and beyond. That gap sustained itself through 2016 and provided the kindling that was set alight following the emergence of JFS and then HTS.

HAD and al-Qa`ida Assert Themselves

HAD's creation was al-Qa`ida's attempt to forcefully reassert itself in Syria and the decision to appoint Samir Hijazi (Abu Hammam al-Suri)—a Syrian with years of experience within Jabhat al-Nusra's leadership—as its overall leader underlined its intention to compete with HTS. Originally from Damascus' outer agricultural region of Eastern Ghouta, Abu Hammam had traveled to Afghanistan in 1998 and, thanks to his close relationship with fellow Syrian Mustafa Setmariam Nasar (Abu Musab al-Suri), had risen to become chief trainer at al-Qa`ida's Al-Farouq Camp near Kandahar. Like many in Afghanistan at the time, Abu Hammam fled to Iran in late 2001 following the U.S. invasion, and after brief periods in detention in Iran and Syria, he moved to Lebanon, where he was arrested and reportedly imprisoned until 2012.[98]

Once in Syria, Abu Hammam joined Jabhat al-Nusra in the Qalamoun and then the central Badiya desert, before linking up with arriving al-Qa`ida leaders in the northwest late in 2013, where he was propelled into Jabhat al-Nusra's military leadership.[99] As has been documented by HTS detractors, Abu Hammam was rarely in agreement with al-Julani, and by mid-2015, he had effectively

been frozen out of his command position and isolated alongside surviving members of the Khorasan Group. Though Abu Hammam did not officially leave until JFS' formation in mid-2016, the author was told he had been the target of two attempted assassinations in 2015, which allies blame on al-Julani—one in March 2015, which he exploited to fake his own death, and another in April 2016, which killed Abu Firas al-Suri and left Abu Hammam wounded.[100]

Alongside Abu Hammam, HAD's leadership was a 'who's who' of veteran al-Qa`ida operatives, including:[101]

- Khalid al-Aruri
- Shaqran al-Urduni
- Abu Abdulrahman al-Urduni
- Abu Khadija al-Urduni
- Sari Shihab (Abu Khallad al-Mohandis)
- Mohammed al-Sudani
- Abu Yahya al-Uzbeki
- Abu Abdullah al-Suri
- Abu Hurayrah al-Masri
- Sami al-Oraydi
- Abu Dhar al-Masri
- Abdulrahman al-Turki
- Abdulrahman al-Fransi
- Sayfullah al-Fransi
- Bilal Khoraysat
- Abu Ahmed al-Raqawi
- Abu Zayd al-Urduni
- Abu Abdulkarim al-Masri
- Bilal Sanaani

Just as Jabhat al-Nusra had sought to do in its earlier years, HAD surrounded itself with a loose web of allied factions, such as Ansar al-Tawhid,[g] Ansar al-Islam, Ansar al-Din, Liwa al-Muqatilin al-Ansar, and Tansiqiyat al-Jihad. Many of these groups were led by former Jabhat al-Nusra commanders, including Abu Abdullah al-Shami[h] and Abu Malek al-Talli.[i] HAD also formed coalitions—most notably, the Incite the Believers operations room in October 2018—to enhance and protect its position vis-à-vis HTS.[102]

Yet such strategic positioning did not prevent HTS from forcing, after months of negotiations, a disadvantageous arrangement upon HAD in March 2019, whereby the group was permitted to operate in Idlib on the condition that it renounce external operations; dismantle all sharia courts, prisons, and security checkpoints; and limit its military activities to seven frontline posts and to 16 facilities.[103] Perhaps most constraining of all, HTS was granted oversight over all HAD arms storage and money exchange houses.[104]

HAD largely acquiesced to HTS' terms, but disagreements

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f   Al-Urduni's presence in Syria is mentioned frequently in online commentary by jihadis in northwestern Syria (as monitored by this author).

g   Ansar al-Tawhid is a jihadi group associated operationally with al-Qa`ida loyalists that was established in March 2018 by former members of Jund al-Aqsa—a hardline jihadi group accused by its opponents of Islamic State-links. Ansar al-Tawhid is a small group based primarily in Sarmin, the hometown of its founding leader, Abu Diab al-Sarmini. The group's operations and propaganda are aligned with HAD, and despite longstanding allegations of Islamic State links, the group has never demonstrated or admitted as such. "Details on 'Ansar al-Twhid,' a recently established military faction in Idlib province," Aleppo 24, May 1, 2018; Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, "Ansar al-Tawheed Statement on Independent Status: Translation and Analysis," Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi blog, May 30, 2020; Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, "Hurras al-Din: Relations with Other Factions and Internal Dynamics (Interview)," Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi blog, February 17, 2020.

h   The leader of Ansar al-Islam

i   The leader of Liwa al-Muqatilin al-Ansar

mounted throughout 2019. A particular point of contention surrounded the increasingly unsustainable threat posed by the Syrian regime's continued shelling and attacks on HTS-opposition frontlines in northern Hama. HTS' virtual monopoly over frontline commands and its jurisdiction over HAD movements and supplies presented a dilemma for HAD, whose most extreme members opposed any contribution to any frontlines controlled by HTS.

In June 2019, a group of HAD ultra-hardliners—led by Abu Yahya al-Jazayri, Abu Dhar al-Masri, Abu Amr al-Tunisi, Abu Yaman al-Wazzani, and Abu Musab al-Libi—banded together in protest against HAD's role in fighting the regime under HTS tutelage, with Abu Yahya al-Jazayri publishing a *fatwa* explicitly forbidding it.[105] An internal feud within HAD swiftly erupted and the group's ultra-hardline detractors were expelled[106] and forced to relocate to Aleppo's western countryside, where they were then killed in a U.S. drone strike on June 30, 2019—the first such strike since March 2017.[107]

For some within al-Qa`ida's loyalist community, the timing and target of the June 30, 2019, U.S. strike was too much to be coincidental, and it heightened suspicions about moles. When senior al-Qa`ida figure Sari Shihab (Abu Khallad al-Mohandis, Saif al-`Adl's father-in-law) was killed by a bomb concealed inside his vehicle in Idlib city on August 22, 2019,[108] those suspicions rose further and continued to as a spate of U.S. strikes hit high-level al-Qa`ida operatives across Idlib throughout late 2019 and into 2020.[109]

The sudden resumption of U.S. precision strikes in Syria's northwest—many utilizing the state-of-the-art 'flying ginsu' R9X inert bladed missile[110]—was a clear indication of HAD being a U.S. counterterrorism priority. In January 2019, the annual U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) report had, for the first time, acknowledged HAD as al-Qa`ida's Syrian affiliate, and in a map detailing al-Qa`ida's network of branches, HTS had intriguingly gone entirely unmentioned. Months later, in late 2019 and early 2020, U.S. officials told this author on background that HAD was internally assessed at the time to represent the most significant external attack threat worldwide.

That assessment aligned with multiple independent claims conveyed to this author by members of Idlib's Islamic community between late 2018 and mid-2019 that HAD members had repeatedly raised during large gatherings the importance of broadening the aperture of the Syrian jihad to include striking the far enemy. Though such recommendations were, according to the sources, swiftly refuted by others in attendance, the mere fact that HAD operatives were willing to raise the issue in public, in company largely unaligned with global jihad, spoke volumes about HAD and its potential threat.

It was therefore not a surprise when then-U.S. Special Envoy for Syria and Special Envoy to the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, Ambassador James Jeffrey, stated in September 2019 that HAD plots had been foiled "on the spot" and "far away,"[111] while the U.S. government formally designated HAD as a terrorist organization[112] and offered $5 million rewards for information on Abu Hammam, Sami al-Oraydi, and Abu Abdulkarim al-Masri.[113] As HAD rose rapidly in global stature, al-Qa`ida reportedly maneuvered to have Khalid al-Aruri appointed as HAD's military leader—a role that according to reports at the time thrust him into an unacknowledged position of co-leader, alongside Abu Hammam.[114]

> **"The sudden resumption of U.S. precision strikes in Syria's northwest ... was a clear indication of HAD being a U.S. counterterrorism priority. In January 2019, the annual U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) report had, for the first time, acknowledged HAD as al-Qa`ida's Syrian affiliate."**

HAD's Precipitous Fall

Given HTS' well-established insistence on control in Idlib, HAD's rise as a global concern and its apparent presentation of an international terrorism threat contributed to a perpetual rise in tensions. As mentioned earlier, these tensions boiled over following HTS' de facto accession to a Turkish-Russian ceasefire agreement, which effectively surrendered the strategic M4 highway and accepted joint Turkish-Russian military patrols. Enraged by HTS' further submission to Turkey, HAD members began issuing threats to Russian and Turkish forces.[115] HAD's dramatic assault on the regime-held village of Tanjara on May 9, 2020,[116] illustrated for the first time that HAD was not just openly critical of HTS, but an active and aggressive threat to its ability to sustain the newly established delicate dynamic in the northwest.

The Tanjara attack severed the March 2019 HTS-HAD deal. And tensions would then get worse between the groups. HAD's creation of the *Fa'ithbitu* (So Be Steadfast) operations room on June 12, 2020—alongside Ansar al-Islam, Jabhat Ansar al-Din, Liwa al-Muqatilin al-Ansar, and Tansiqiyat al-Jihad—represented a direct challenge to HTS' status quo. Two days after *Fa'ithbitu*'s emergence, al-Aruri was killed in a U.S. drone strike alongside Syrian HAD commander Amin al-Assi (Bilal al-Sanaani).[117]

Al-Aruri's killing was a major loss, not just for HAD but for al-Qa`ida's global movement, and his death intensified longstanding allegations of HTS complicity. According to multiple pro-al-Qa`ida sources, al-Aruri had been aware of HTS trailing his movements and had confronted HTS' Abu Mariya al-Qahtani for allegedly photographing his vehicle.[118] One week after that encounter, al-Aruri's vehicle was targeted by a road-side bomb, which wounded him and his wife,[119] and sometime thereafter, he was struck from the air by an American R9X missile, whose blades tore a hole clean through the windshield, killing him and al-Sanaani.[120] Additionally, al-Qa`ida loyalists have lodged allegations against HTS' political chief Zayd al-Attar, accusing him of having maintained ties with foreign governments (since his previous post was to lead Jabhat al-Nusra's "external affairs"[j]) and of bringing sophisticated tracking

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j   Zayd al-Attar—sometimes referred to as Abu Aisha and Hossam al-Shafi— was Jabhat al-Nusra's lead negotiator with Iran, in talks that took place primarily in Turkey and Qatar and resulted in the so-called Four Towns Agreement in 2017. Anton Mardasov, "Why was deal to evacuate Syrian towns brokered by Qatar and Iran?" Al-Monitor, April 6, 2017.

devices into Idlib for use against al-Qa`ida operatives.[121] The same set of accusations describe HTS deputy Anas Khattab as the central figure in the tracking of high-level al-Qa`ida figures.[122]

Just over a week later on June 24, 2020, HAD's chief of military logistics, Mohammed Khattab (Abu Adnan al-Homsi), was killed in another U.S. strike,[123] two days after HTS-linked SSG security forces had arrested Jamal Hassan Zayniya (Abu Malek al-Talli), who had recently defected from HTS and aligned himself with *Fa'ithbitu*.[124] The capture of Abu Malek was the latest in a series of HTS arrests targeting *Fa'ithbitu* figures, including Sirajideen Makhtarov (Abu Saloh al-Uzbeki) and Abu al-Abd al-Ashida. That night, in response, HAD mobilized its forces in its stronghold of Arab Said and began establishing checkpoints in northern areas of Idlib city and along roadways leading to Idlib's SSG-controlled central prison.[125]

Although Ayman al-Zawahiri and Saif al-`Adl had both reportedly conveyed orders to HAD *not* to engage HTS in any form of conflict,[126] the escalatory tit-for-tat dynamic in motion since early 2020 virtually guaranteed hostilities. HTS swiftly responded to HAD's mobilization in Arab Said, and fighting broke out late on June 22, 2020, focused primarily around Arab Said, where HAD was commanded by Abu Omar Manhaj.[127] As HTS brought its force to bear and HAD began to buckle under the pressure, Sami al-Oraydi demanded a ceasefire on June 24, 2020, in a statement[128] released seemingly in coordination with another issued by al-Qa`ida's General Command, which condemned HTS and called for calm.[129]

Despite a flurry of attempted mediation initiatives,[k] HTS pushed forward, and by June 27, 2020, HAD had been broken and forced out of all of its military bases and populated towns (Arab Said, Armanaz, Darkush, Yacoubiya, Hamameh, Harem, and Jisr al-Shughour).[130] The group's fighters swiftly dispersed into largely unpopulated areas in central and northeastern Idlib, as well as northwestern Latakia and western Aleppo's countryside, while HAD's leadership went into hiding.[131] Although Arab Said's local population protested against HAD's expulsion, HTS retained control.[132] After HAD's striking rise, its rapid incapacitation by HTS in a matter of days was a crippling blow to al-Qa`ida's aspirations in Syria.

Having paralyzed HAD and blunted *Fa'ithbitu* as a meaningful entity, HTS sustained its pressure against al-Qa`ida's loyalist community, primarily through an arrest campaign led by the SSG's Public Security Apparatus and General Security Service. According to critics, HTS and the SSG now have more than 170 al-Qa`ida commanders and senior figures in detention and the whereabouts of more than 100 others is unknown.[133] Among those reported to be in HTS detention are 12 members of al-Qa`ida's international leadership, including global Shura Council members like Abu Hamza al-Darawi and Mohammed al-Ahmed (Shaqran-Urduni), and other veteran leaders like Abu Abdulrahman al-Makki, Abu Sulayman al-Libi, Abu Yahya al-Jazayri, and Abu Basir al-Shami.[134]

Beyond figures of global command, HTS and the SSG have also captured HAD's general administrator Abu Abdullah al-Suri (the son of Abu Firas al-Suri), sharia chief Abu Hurayrah al-Masri (the son of Abu Dhar al-Masri), and dozens of mid-level commanders—

"After HAD's striking rise, its rapid incapacitation by HTS in a matter of days was a crippling blow to al-Qa`ida's aspirations in Syria."

many of them of European origin—since mid-2020.[135] HTS (rather than the SSG) has also gone after influential foreign individuals operating in the media and humanitarian space, such as Bilal Abdul Kareem (American),[136] Tauqir Sharif (British),[137] and Moussa al-Hassan (French),[138] detaining them for months at a time while accusing them of conspiring with HAD-linked factions.

A plethora of HAD figures have also been killed by the SSG's General Security Service, including Aby Zayd al-Urduni, Abu Ahmed al-Raqqawi (Khalid al-Aruri's chief aide), Abu Yunus al-Almani, Abu Muaz al-Fransi, Abu Aisha al-Tajiki, Abu Abdulrahman al-Uzbeki, and the notorious Abu Abdulrahman al-Tunisi,[139] who was accused of directing a plot to kill the SSG's Minister of Education, Dr. Faiz al-Khalif.[140] Other senior al-Qa`ida operatives, including Saleh al-Karuri (Abu Mohammed al-Sudani),[141] Abu Yusuf al-Maghrebi,[142] and Abu Yahya al-Uzbeki,[143] have been lost to additional U.S. drone strikes through late 2020 and early 2021.

While many arrests have gone largely unreported, most of the deadly raids have been described by HTS and the SSG as targeting criminal gangs and Islamic State cells[144] in an apparent attempt to conceal the continued crackdown on al-Qa`ida to try to blunt inevitable criticism. The SSG's General Security Service have released bountiful imagery detailing weapons, explosives, cash, and other equipment seized during the raids, but rarely has HAD been named, even though subsequent revelations as to the identities of those killed swiftly connects them to the group.[145] The reality behind this HTS-SSG campaign has therefore been palpably clear, and the effect has been to place HTS in a likely irreversible state of animosity with al-Qa`ida.

With the exception of an unusual HAD suicide raid on a Russian military base in rural Raqqa in January 2021 and a minor attack on a bus in Damascus in August 2021, HAD and its allies have conducted little of note militarily since June 2020. HAD and its *Fa'ithbitu* allies have taken to social media to launch recruitment drives and calls for financial donations,[146] in clear signs of their struggles. Since its military defeat in mid-2020, the only HAD leader to appear publicly has been Sami al-Oraydi, in a video address released on May 12, 2021.[147] An HAD video released on January 24, 2021, to mark its attack in Raqqa did, however, contain old footage of prominent al-Qa`ida figures, including Ibrahim al-Qusi, Abu al-Yazid, and notably at the end, Khalid Batarfi, who in the footage called for supporters to conduct attacks in the West on al-Qa`ida's behalf, the first public acknowledgment by HAD of its support for such actions.[148]

HAD Allies Suppressed

With Syria's opposition subjugated, the Islamic State contained, and HAD driven to ground, HTS and the SSG's security services began to pivot toward cracking down on HAD allies in the spring of 2021. Throughout the first year of the Russian-Turkish negotiated ceasefire, which came into force in March 2020, jihadis opposed

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k   Including a notable initiative proposed by a group of nine scholars led by Abdulrazzaq al-Mahdi on June 25, 2020.

to HTS' rule and policies had initiated and sustained a shadowy guerrilla insurgency responsible for attacks against the Turkish military and HTS itself. At least six mysterious groups have been engaged in these attacks: Ansar Abu Bakr al-Siddiq,[149] Tanzim al-Tali'a al-Mujahida,[150] Kataib Khattab al-Shishani,[151] and Kataib al-Shaheed Marwan Hadid[152] against the Turkish military, and Jamaat Abdullah bin Unais[153] and Katibat al-Nuzza min al-Qaba'il[154] against HTS.

While their precise identities remain unknown and none have been concretely linked in public to other better-known groups, their existence and persistent operations have posed a consequential challenge to HTS' outward claims of control. Given that the primary driver responsible for much of HTS' decision-making in recent years has been self-preservation, the existence of a covert insurgency capable of killing and injuring Turkish troops inside Idlib has catalyzed a response. Some of that HTS reaction has been realized through the SSG's campaign of raids targeting "criminality" and "terrorism" (al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State), but it has also extended in 2021 to a coordinated pressure campaign against smaller jihadi groups like Kataib al-Sahaba, Jund Allah, Ajnad al-Kavkaz, and the Chechen-led Junud al-Sham.[155]

Though technically 'independent,' these groups represent low-hanging fruit in HTS' continued push of hegemony in Syria's northwest. As such, they have been the target of an aggressive and methodical campaign of intimidation, justified by HTS as part of its quest to fight corruption and criminality.[156] Much of this activity has taken place away from the public eye, but al-Qa`ida loyalists continue to accuse HTS of maneuvering against its allies in Syria.[157]

On June 10, 2021, pro-al-Qa`ida Telegram account Rad Udwan al-Bughat alleged that HTS was moving to destroy Ansar al-Islam,[l] the one member of *Fa'ithbitu* to have remained at least minimally and publicly operational. According to the account, HTS had severed Ansar al-Islam's sources of funding and was "arbitrarily" arresting its leadership[158]—the latter accusation aligning with reports that among those in HTS detention were Ansar al-Islam military leader Abdulmateen al-Kurdi and senior leaders Abu Shihab al-Kurdi, Ammar al-Kurdi, Abu Abdulrahman al-Shami, and Abu Ali al-Qalamouni.[159] Forty-eight hours before Rad Udwan al-Bughat's allegations emerged, SSG forces raided the headquarters of Jund

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l   Ansar al-Islam was established by al-Qa`ida-linked operatives in northern Iraq in 2001 and came to play a noticeable role as an insurgent group fighting the U.S.-led coalition and Iraq government. The group dispatched a small number of fighters to Syria after 2011 to join the armed uprising against Bashar al-Assad's regime, and when much of Ansar al-Islam's surviving Iraq-based contingent pledged allegiance to the Islamic State in 2014, those in Syria remained independent, retaining the Ansar al-Islam name. In Syria, Ansar al-Islam maintained close operational ties with Jabhat al-Nusra, until its rebranding to JFS and then HTS—prompting it to establish closer linkages to al-Qa`ida loyalists in HAD, with whom it coordinated in multiple military operations rooms. Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, "A Complete History of Jamaat Ansar al-Islam," Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi blog, December 15, 2015; Thomas Joscelyn, "Ansar al-Islam raids Assad regime position in Latakia," Long War Journal, July 11, 2018; "Military groups calling them the 'finest factions of the Levant' form join operations room," Syria Call, October 15, 2018.

> "Each and every step taken by JFS-HTS and the SSG against its rivals since 2016 has further consolidated its dominance and de facto hegemony inside Syria's northwest."

Allah, capturing six commanders.[m]

Beyond these and similar efforts, HTS' attempt to force the dissolution of nine-year-old Chechen-led group Junud al-Sham caused a storm in June-July 2021. Despite its relatively small contingent of several hundred fighters, Junud al-Sham's reputation for military dedication and non-involvement in social or political matters made its victimization a source of considerable controversy. Junud al-Sham was founded in early 2012 by Murad Margoshvili (Muslim al-Shishani), a longtime veteran of the Chechen jihad who fought alongside Shamil Basayev and was a one-time aide to notorious Saudi commander Samir Saleh al-Suwailem (commonly known as Khattab, Ibn al-Khattab, and "Emir Khattab").[160] Amid northwestern Syria's many spates of inter-factional fighting, Junud al-Sham has consistently remained a neutral actor, but on June 22, 2021, the SSG's Public Security Apparatus delivered a written directive to Junud al-Sham's headquarters commanding Muslim al-Shishani to present himself to an HTS Security Office in Jisr al-Shughour the following day.[161]

Though virtually every detail that followed remains disputed, al-Shishani met with HTS on June 23, 2021, and according to him, "they asked me to dismantle the group and leave Idlib." According to HTS' Jordanian spokesman, "Taqi al-Din Omar," al-Shishani was accused of harboring individuals "involved in security and criminal cases," which HTS-linked sources have claimed include an Islamic State-linked cell broken up by the SSG; another terror cell responsible for a deadly attack on HTS; and a squad of burglars known for targeting jewelry stores while dressed as women.[162] For his part, al-Shishani has acknowledged the existence of criminal elements formerly part of Junud al-Sham, but refuted allegations that they remained members of his group. That, however, was contradicted by video confessions of several Junud al-Sham members, including Murad Jandamirtash and Sayfullah Abdullah al-Daghestani, whose testimonies—feasibly under duress—were leaked by HTS sources on July 6, 2021.[163] Despite HTS' denial that it was seeking Junud al-Sham's coerced dissolution, Junud al-Sham was reported to have at least partially dissolved on July 8, 2021,[164] and following several HTS raids on July 15, 2021, al-Shishani all but admitted to his apparent ordered expulsion from HTS territories.[165]

The Good and Bad News for the Global Jihadi Threat

The Junud al-Sham crisis sparked a significant furor, with some

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m   Jund Allah is a small group founded by a jihadi known as Abu Fatima al-Turki, who was reportedly killed in a previous U.S. drone strike in Idlib, according to: @MzmjerSh, "A security force affiliated with Hayat Tahrir al-Sham …," Twitter, June 8, 2021; @MzmjerSh, "According to a source from within al-Jund …," Twitter, June 27, 2021.

HTS critics labeling the group "a criminal mafia" and others warning not so subtly that when "a dangerous group of people with nothing to lose" are pushed into a corner, "bad things can happen."[166] Nevertheless, it was hard to ignore the reality: each and every step taken by JFS-HTS and the SSG against its rivals since 2016 has further consolidated its dominance and de facto hegemony inside Syria's northwest.

At no point throughout those five years has HTS been meaningfully challenged, and the only actor arguably capable of doing so from the inside—Turkey—appears to have become closer to HTS and to be operating more directly in coordination with it than ever before. Given the nature of Ankara's concerns in Idlib, it is hard to envision a strategic reason that would drive it to challenge today's status quo—hence, HTS' continued push to solidify its dominance. Despite the disquiet and uncertainty that HTS' intimidation campaign created for some, the consolidation of a wider 'new normal' of HTS rule may have encouraged an apparent resumption of limited foreign fighter flows to northwestern Syria. For example, the Uzbek-majority Tavhid va Jihod showed off a contingent of 16 newly trained arrivals in a July 2021 photo release,[167] illustrating a trend experienced by other groups in 2021.[168]

HTS' violent suppression of al-Qa`ida in northwestern Syria is a remarkably consequential development, especially considering the previously largely unchallenged investment the al-Qa`ida movement had made there in waves since 2013. That the principal driver of al-Qa`ida's strategic defeat in Syria has been a group once part of the al-Qa`ida movement makes this all the more significant—and the ripples will continue to be felt worldwide for years to come. With the Islamic State sustaining a persistent, though still relatively low-level insurgency across swathes of Syria and Iraq, al-Qa`ida looks to be decidedly struggling in the regional race for jihadi supremacy.

While some longtime jihadi ideologues associated with al-Qa`ida, like Abu Mohammed al-Maqdisi, have launched an onslaught of criticism[169] against HTS and its leader, al-Julani, others have slowly come around to the idea that HTS' model of operation might possibly represent the most effective path forward. A notable example of this latter group has been Abu Qatada al-Filistini and his prominent student, Ismail Kalam (Abu Mahmoud al-Filistini).[170] Al-Maqdisi, for his part, has experienced a meteoric collapse in credibility among jihadis in recent years.[171] HTS went as far as to prohibit al-Maqdisi's writings altogether in Idlib, accusing him of being unqualified, deviant, having Islamic State sympathies, and being a "platform from which the odors of extremism, takfir and the causing of failure emanate."[172]

Beyond HTS' effect upon al-Qa`ida, the list of those killed in U.S. drone strikes in Syria in recent years is a 'who's who' of the group's most dedicated and experienced veteran generation. Notwithstanding the ongoing allegations that HTS, or elements within HTS, have been complicit in facilitating U.S. strikes—for which there continues to be no evidence that has been publicly disclosed, though the possibility is not beyond the realm of reality— the U.S. intelligence community has likely achieved a remarkable penetration of the very highest levels of al-Qa`ida's senior command in the region, whether through human sources or other tactics, techniques, or procedures.

Despite its real challenges in Syria, indications of HAD's close integration within al-Qa`ida's central leadership in Afghanistan and Pakistan have repeatedly emerged, making the group's demise

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even more consequential. Claims in late 2020 that al-Zawahiri had perished[173] originated in HAD circles, when the group found its communication channels to al-Zawahiri silent. Furthermore, when al-Qa`ida's de facto media chief, Hossam Abdul Raouf (Abu Mohsen al-Masri), was killed in Afghanistan in mid-October 2020, encrypted direct communications to Syria were discovered on his computers, and within 10 days, two senior al-Qa`ida operatives (Abu Mohammed al-Sudani on October 15, 2020; Hamoud Sahara, on October 22, 2020) were killed in U.S. strikes in Syria.[174]

While Syria was clearly al-Qa`ida's favored strategic fallback option for many years after the Arab Spring,[n] that no longer appears to be a viable option. With al-Zawahiri dead or very sick,[o] al-Qa`ida has an existential succession crisis on its hands, as the highest-ranking leader in line to take over from al-Zawahiri is Saif al-`Adl, who, according to U.S. intelligence[175] and the United Nations,[176] currently resides in Iran. The other two known members of al-Qa`ida's trio of top deputies—Abu Mohammed al-Masri and Abu al-Khayr al-Masri—are both dead, killed in Iran in 2020[177] and Syria in 2017,[178] respectively. While Saif al-`Adl's leadership

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n   Indicated by the unmatched volume and seniority of al-Qa`ida veteran leaders dispatched by central leadership to Syria from 2013 onward, amid the challenge presented by the Islamic State and strategic opportunities available in Syria itself. For details and context, see Charles Lister, "Al-Qa`ida Plays a Long Game in Syria," *CTC Sentinel* 8:9 (2015); Charles Lister, "Jihadi Rivalry: The Islamic State Challenges al-Qaeda," Brookings Doha Center, January 2016; and Charles Lister and Colin Clarke, "Al-Qaeda is Ready to Attack You Again," Foreign Policy, September 4, 2019.

o   In its latest report, the United Nations monitoring team tracking the global jihadi terror threat stated that "The status of Al-Qaida leader Ayman al-Zawahiri is unknown. If alive, several Member States assess that he is ailing" and that "Aiman Muhammed Rabi al-Zawahiri (QDi.006) is assessed by Member States to be alive but unwell." "Twenty-eighth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team concerning Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals, groups, undertakings and entities."

credentials and jihadi credibility are arguably unrivaled,[179] it remains difficult to imagine, should he remain in Iran, that even he could be capable of exerting meaningful command over a network of increasingly decentralized affiliates that if anything, have grown more distrustful and hostile to Iran in recent years.

In the process of JFS-HTS breaking from al-Qa`ida, senior leaders from JFS-HTS had repeatedly made clear their inherent suspicion surrounding orders originating from Iran, and ultimately, they refused to abide by any of them.[180] Seeing that dynamic go global would be potentially catastrophic for al-Qa`ida. Iran is also unlikely to remove its current travel restrictions on Saif al-`Adl, given the invaluable source of intelligence, control, and diplomatic leverage that it affords. In all likelihood, al-Qa`ida will have to look to another individual to eventually take over from al-Zawahiri, most likely a senior operative based in Afghanistan, where a hurried U.S. withdrawal and the fall of Kabul to the Taliban has created conditions that the jihadi group could only have dreamt of a year or two ago. Who that alternative candidate might be remains unclear, but with multiple Haqqani network leaders being promoted into positions of national command in Afghanistan,[p] al-Qa`ida looks all but guaranteed to have the space to consider its options.

Judging by the response from al-Qa`ida's global movement, the Taliban's victory is unsurprisingly seen as a historic victory.[q] For HTS, the Taliban's achievements in Afghanistan are not just a "great victory" against "occupiers," but also an example of the kind of "steadfastness" that it believes it is attempting to accomplish in Syria.[181] In the wake of the Taliban's capture of Kabul, HTS fighters took to the streets distributing sweets to civilians, and senior HTS leader Abu Mariya al-Qahtani went as far as not just to celebrate, but to hint at a newly emerging Islamic entente tying together activities of Turkey, Pakistan, the Taliban, and others.[182] The Taliban's victory in Afghanistan may reveal a further benefit to HTS in offering an attractive alternative theater for al-Qa`ida loyalists and 'independent' foreign fighter factions. In the spring of 2021, small numbers of TIP fighters were already departing northwestern Syria, en route to Afghanistan.[183]

From a strictly counterterrorism perspective, the most significant consequence of HTS' pivot away from and then turn against al-Qa`ida is that the global jihadi threat emanating from Syria has been dramatically reduced. All recent evidence in northwestern Syria lends a great deal of credibility to the otherwise provocative claim that "HTS's hegemonic project is not an incubator of global jihad; it is its gravedigger."[184] In current conditions, the mere existence of a meaningful external terror threat based in northwestern Syria would pose a potentially existential challenge to HTS' survival. Such a dynamic would have been hard to imagine five years ago.

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p   Including Khalil Haqqani, as chief of security in Kabul; Anas Haqqani, who has led much of the Taliban's engagement and negotiation with former government officials; and Mohammad Nabi Omari, as governor of Khost.

q   By late August 2021, statements of celebration were issued by al-Qa`ida's General Command, al-Qa`ida in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), and al-Qa`ida media outlet the Global Islamic Media Front (GIMF). See, for example, "Al-Qaeda in South Asia hails Taliban for Afghanistan takeover," BBC Monitoring, August 24, 2021, and "Al-Qa`ida Statement on Taliban Victory in Afghanistan," August 31, 2021, translated by Aymen al-Tammimi, Aymenn's Monstrous Publications, Substack.

> **"From a strictly counterterrorism perspective, the most significant consequence of HTS' pivot away from and then turn against al-Qa`ida is that the global jihadi threat emanating from Syria has been dramatically reduced."**

More broadly however, HTS hegemony is far from an encouraging development. The 'Gazafication' of Idlib, as a semi-besieged, densely populated territory controlled by a locally oriented jihadi outfit, might possibly promise a semblance of stability when compared to its other alternatives, but the threat of debilitating hostilities will be ever present. HTS is also a decidedly dictatorial actor, determined to use its position of supremacy to subjugate any and all who are willing to challenge its authority, to include not just al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State but also civilian journalists and progressive civil society groups. It is therefore, in many ways, remarkably similar to the many politically and socially dictatorial regimes now in place across the Middle East, in terms of its exploitation of a wide range of constituents to maintain its rule while brutally cracking down on those willing to stand or speak against it.[185]

The 'mainstreaming' of al-Julani's "revolutionary Islamism" model, if sustained or eventually legitimized in some form, will undoubtedly be replicated by others and should thus be viewed as representing a challenge of international significance. In earlier years of Syria's crisis, Ahrar al-Sham used to portray parallels to its vision with that of Afghanistan's Taliban,[186] and in 2021, HTS appears to be pursuing a very similar path. In doing so, the operationalization of sustained territorial control appears to have catalyzed an organic and self-sustaining process of forced pragmatism, induced by dynamics that produce decisions that run contrary to terrorism, hardline extremism, or exclusivism, but encourage authoritarian and despotic tendencies in their place.

For HTS' model to survive, the group will almost certainly need to continue along its current path of evolution. Though it may have achieved de facto hegemony inside Syria's northwest, the external threat posed by the Assad regime and its Russian and Iranian allies persists, as illustrated bloodily by the marked uptick in aerial and artillery strikes against the area through the summer of 2021.[187] While rumors persist that an increasingly confident and publicly visible al-Julani may have received (via intermediaries) some form of assurance of his personal safety from Western counterterrorism strikes,[188] his position as HTS leader arguably remains vital to the group's current form. As the face *and* mind behind HTS' localization, al-Julani's death would present a formidable challenge to HTS' ability to remain united and would almost certainly re-incentivize a return to a more extreme, global posture. That scenario would be of particular value to the Assad regime, Russia, and Iran—actors that could also benefit from a gradual squeezing or dramatic assault on HTS-held Idlib and the damage that would do to HTS' dedication to a strategy of localism.

Clearly aware of the delicate nature of its current predicament, HTS has visibly welcomed the opening of Idlib to foreign media

in 2020 and 2021, with visits made by PBS,[189] *The New York Times*,[190] *The Washington Post*,[191] CNN,[192] and several European outlets[193]—some of whom were provided access to al-Julani and a host of senior leaders. HTS has done the same, though privately, for Western researchers. This encapsulates a surge in the soft power—or propaganda—aspect of HTS' attempt to sell its new identity to the world.

Whether this will be enough to protect HTS, and northwest Syria's more than three million civilians, from perpetual attack and eventual assault remains to be seen. While HTS' survival, let alone success, therefore remains on a delicate and uncertain path, significant aspects of the model it embraced to get to where it is today are clearly being replicated by a number of al-Qa`ida affiliates. From forming alliances with irreligious bodies, mediating local conflicts, espousing non-violent tactics for political gain, seeking to engage nation-state governments, establishing semi-legitimate business interests,[r] and most notably de-prioritizing or doing away altogether with any external agenda, affiliates in Yemen,[194] the Sahel,[195] the Maghreb,[196] and elsewhere have at times decidedly not been operating according to the globalist guidance of al-Zawahiri. Even some branches of the Islamic State appear to be orienting their activities and front-facing postures to decidedly local audiences and goals.[s]

It is hard to argue against the contention that the last five years of interplay between HTS and al-Qa`ida in Syria has played a role in encouraging the increasingly visible embrace of localism and its various associated tactics by much of al-Qa`ida's movement and by at least some of the Islamic State's network. Should this trend

sustain itself, locally oriented jihadis are likely to reap a great many gains, especially so given the other dominant trend that is emerging in parallel: the desire by much of the West to disengage from theaters of conflict involving the likes of al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State. The rapid Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021 was a stunning example of the gains that can be made possible when locally oriented jihadis demonstrate strategic patience, outlasting or outfighting local governments and the West. Weak government actors, like in Mali and Somalia, lack the capacity to fill the vacuums caused by the withdrawal of Western forces and should similar withdrawals eventually occur elsewhere, a similar picture will almost certainly follow.

While the jihadis that stand to benefit from this emerging trend may be locally focused and invested in consolidating local control, the proliferation and growth in scale of jihadi-controlled zones raises the very real risk of safe havens from which small groupings of externally focused extremists can exist and plot terrorism. The September 11, 2001, attacks developed from just such an environment and to see one redevelop in Afghanistan in time for the 20-year anniversary of the attacks is a particularly bitter moment.

It is not enough for policymakers to proclaim that the U.S. homeland is safer today from a spectacular terror attack than at any time since 9/11 *and* therefore, the counterterrorism job is done. That is a prescription for dangerous complacency. Moreover, the proliferation of local safe havens and the persistence of the jihadi movement represents one of the most dynamic fronts in the battlefield of great power competition. To argue that counterterrorism should be de-prioritized in favor of great power competition is illogical—and actually doing so only serves to provide the United States' peer competitors with additional opportunities to undermine it.

In reality, the threat posed by jihadi terrorism has never been more diverse, globally distributed, better experienced, or present in so many conflict theaters as it is today. Far from defeating terrorism, the terrorists have adapted to operate in more sustainable ways, creating a false sense of security. To back off now and fail to adapt to the new challenge laid out in this article would be a recipe for eventual disaster.   CTC

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Twenty Years After 9/11: The Jihadi Threat in the Arabian Peninsula

By Elisabeth Kendall

Al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) has changed. So too must the counterterrorism community's approach to it. Beset by infighting, riddled with spies, decimated by drones, and instrumentalized by Yemen's warring parties, the jihadi movement in the region has fragmented. The conventional labels of al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State have started to lose meaning, and this necessitates a new typology of jihadi militants to account for splinter groups that have forged alliances that may seem contradictory. AQAP is degraded but not defeated, and conditions favor its resurgence. A ceasefire in the overall war will not prevent, and may even fuel, a comeback. The transnational threat persists, with a maritime attack one possible scenario.

The Arabian Peninsula was the place of origin of 17 of al-Qa`ida's 19 9/11 hijackers. Two decades later, al-Qa`ida remains the Arabian Peninsula's dominant jihadi group, having proven resilient to both the challenge posed by the Islamic State and the long and intense war on terror spearheaded by the United States. The group is significantly degraded and divided in this region, but it persists, with Yemen as its main base. There are several reasons for Yemen's continuing suitability as a jihadi hub. These include the perennial problems of political instability, formidable topography, weak state control, endemic corruption, marginalized regions, growing poverty, and a youth explosion. More recently, a prolonged and ongoing war has exacerbated the humanitarian crisis, displaced millions, fueled sectarianism, proliferated armed militias, introduced controversial foreign intervention, and sparked new cycles of revenge. All of this provides local conditions that are ripe for exploitation by al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).

Defining who or what constitutes AQAP is more challenging today than it was a decade ago. As Yemen's internationalized civil war has fragmented, different AQAP splinters have emerged, some of them no more than mercenary gangs. The strongest common thread between them is no longer religious ideology, but rather

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links to organized crime and profiteering in Yemen's thriving war economy. Traditional AQAP elements, who believe they are fighting jihad on the path of Allah against infidels, still exist. However, the considerable pressures they have faced from counterterrorism efforts, particularly from 2016 onward, have forced them to adapt. Decapitated by relentless drone strikes, they have become increasingly guided by political and financial rather than religious considerations. The need to survive allows pragmatism to overshadow ideology, at least temporarily. As a result, Yemen's 'holy warriors' have increasingly turned into guns-for-hire, whether by genuine preference or merely as a survival strategy. Either way, it would be rash to equate this pragmatic development with deradicalization or capitulation. It should be viewed as a temporary shift, not a long-term transition.

Sunni extremists do not hold a monopoly on terrorism in the Arabian Peninsula. Pockets of Shi`a extremists also engage in terror tactics in parts of Bahrain,[1] eastern Saudi Arabia,[2] and, arguably, northern Yemen among radical elements of the Houthi insurgency, whose supremacist ideology has grown in tandem with its increasing military assistance from Iran and Hezbollah.[3] However, the 'terrorist' label is more properly used to describe the tactics of small militant elements among wider Shi`a insurgencies than entire movements. This is not the case with Sunni extremist groups such as al-Qa`ida or the Islamic State, for whom militant transnational jihad is both a tenet of faith and a way of life. It is on these Sunni jihadi groups that this article focuses.

There are significant challenges to researching jihad in Yemen today. Fake news abounds, few independent local media outlets remain, and many apparent citizen journalists are in reality paid and trained to support political agendas. As a result, the AQAP and Islamic State labels are instrumentalized to fit political narratives in ways that can be hard to spot in both mainstream and social media sources. These include massaging the facts around genuine events, adding extremist markers to opposition footage, placing old jihadi footage into new contemporary contexts, or simply false-flagging attacks to jihad groups to provide cover for political motives. It is also important to acknowledge that jihad groups too are learning and adapting. As their loyalties and paymasters change, so too must analysts rethink how to understand them.

This article begins with a rapid outline of AQAP's evolution during the first decade and a half since 9/11, before zooming in on the past four years. It examines how the Islamic State in Yemen (ISY) rose, fell, was reinvented, then disappeared. It next explores AQAP's fragmentation from 2017 onward, its rivalry with ISY, and the instrumentalization of both groups by parties to the Yemen conflict as part of a broader political power struggle. Next, it redefines AQAP, offering a new typology of militants, with the contradictory priorities and range of alliances this may bring. Questions are then raised about AQAP's current and future leadership, before moving into a discussion of the continuing

transnational threat posed by AQAP. Lastly, the article looks at how extremism in Saudi Arabia has evolved, and ends by offering some conclusions and a look ahead.

Rise and Fall, 2001-2016

Yemen was al-Qa`ida's most active branch for most of the two decades following 9/11. Much has already been written about the group's activities in the years leading up to the current Yemeni civil war, which became internationalized in 2015. The most important milestones in the group's evolution during that period included: a Saudi crackdown on jihadis in the years immediately following 9/11 that pushed many to flee over the border into Yemen; an infamous 2006 jailbreak, in which 23 jihadis escaped from Sanaa's maximum security prison to give the group a new lease of life; the 2009 merger of its Saudi and Yemeni branches to form AQAP; the instability generated by the 2011 'Arab Spring' uprising, which facilitated AQAP's declaration of Islamic emirates in parts of Abyan and Shabwah in 2011-2012; the lightning rise of the Islamic State, which announced its Yemen province in 2014, forcing AQAP to reassess its own position; and the 2014 Houthi power grab, which precipitated the slide into war. This provided the perfect conditions for AQAP to resurge.

AQAP's big break came in 2015 when Saudi Arabia intervened militarily in Yemen, heading a coalition of nine Sunni countries in an attempt to restore the government ousted by the Iran-backed Houthis. AQAP framed the political conflict in sectarian terms that chimed with its own narrative of global jihad and recruited fighters, exploiting southern fears of a northern takeover. It took advantage of the governance vacuum to stage another jailbreak, seize military hardware, rob the central bank, and establish a proto-state, which it ran out of the eastern port city of Mukalla. For an entire year, AQAP was able to exercise influence over vast territory and resources in the south of the peninsula. It implemented community development projects, distributed aid, held festivals, engaged in youth outreach, and took a deliberately relaxed approach to the implementation of sharia law.[4] As Khalid Batarfi, then AQAP emir in Hadramawt and now its overall leader, pointed out at the time, "Contrary to what some people think, we are not just an armed organization or fighting group. We are a part of these Muslim populations, and we offer them the best we can in the developmental, societal and service sectors."[5] By the time AQAP was eventually ousted from Mukalla and its environs by special forces sent by the UAE and its western allies in 2016, it had put down strong roots. Hence, its ouster was a retreat, not a defeat. AQAP was to prove a persistent, long-term problem.

To the outside world, Islamic State in Yemen (ISY) has often seemed a greater threat than AQAP, owing to its slick propaganda, headline-grabbing attacks, and professionally produced videos. ISY did enjoy an initial wave of enthusiasm in Yemen and officially announced its Yemen province in late 2014. It attracted both new recruits, who were impressed by what they saw as its thrilling ascent in Syria and Iraq and were keen to be part of its success story, and AQAP defectors, fed up with waiting for their own caliphate to be declared. Ultimately, however, ISY was no match for AQAP's deep roots and long experience.[6] It never held territory, and its support quickly dwindled. Yemenis balked at its indiscriminate brutality, arrogant leadership style, poor understanding of local dynamics, lack of culturally attuned narratives, foreign leaders, and weak religious credentials.[7] By late 2016, ISY was largely relegated to a

> ## "ISY was no match for AQAP's deep roots and long experience. It never held territory, and its support quickly dwindled."

rugged corner of al-Bayda' in central Yemen. A year later, in late 2017, it was all but wiped out when the United States obliterated its two main training camps in airstrikes[8] and, together with the Gulf Cooperation Council, slapped sanctions on its top leaders and froze their assets.[9]
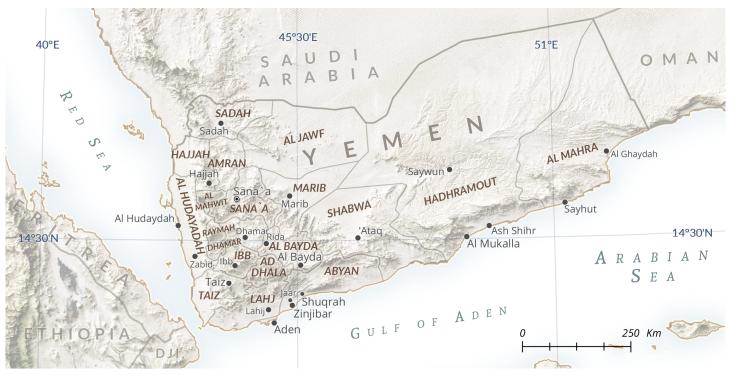
ISY's cultural clumsiness and savagery in fact worked to AQAP's advantage, allowing the latter to position itself as 'the good guy of jihad.' During the heyday of its Mukalla 'state,' AQAP vowed not to bomb public places,[10] paid blood money to tribes when it accidentally killed their kinfolk,[11] took care to introduce sharia law gradually, ensured the optics looked 'statesmanlike' for the few public executions it did conduct, and apologized for past excesses. AQAP also tried to position itself favorably vis-à-vis Saudi Arabia. While the Saudi-led coalition was dropping bombs in and around Sanaa, AQAP was fixing infrastructure and improving public services in and around Mukalla.[a] When this author interviewed Mukalla community leaders at the height of the AQAP state in late 2015, they grudgingly acknowledged that AQAP was dealing with long-standing local grievances. Ironically, they also complained of an influx of northerners seeking shelter in AQAP-controlled areas from both Saudi airstrikes and Houthi incursions.[12] When the United Nations in 2016 briefly added Saudi Arabia to an annual blacklist of states and armed groups that violate children's rights during conflict, for its killing of children in Yemen,[13] AQAP, which was also on the list, was quick to exploit the moment by issuing a statement clarifying that it would not target the family homes of its enemies.[14][b]

Fragmentation and Infighting, 2017-2021

After losing its 'state' in 2016, AQAP was forced to revert to guerrilla tactics, which peaked in 2017 with over 270 operations, albeit mostly small scale and all domestic.[15] An accompanying uptick in counterterrorism operations took its toll on the group as it struggled against not only new local forces recruited by the UAE across the south but also informers inside AQAP itself. A steady stream of drone strikes, including over 120 in 2017 alone,[16] continued to pick off its leaders and proved it had a spy problem. AQAP responded by imposing a cell phone and internet ban[17] and launching an extensive internal investigation, which it showcased in a series of feature-length videos entitled "Demolishing Espionage" (2018-2020). The extent of its spy problem became clear when AQAP decided in 2019 to offer amnesty and full anonymity for all spies and informers who came forward and confessed.[18] As the challenges piled up, AQAP

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a   Fifty-six percent of tweets from AQAP's governance feed were about community development projects. Elisabeth Kendall, "How can al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula be defeated?" *Washington Post*, May 3, 2016.

b   This overrode an earlier statement that had deemed enemy homes legitimate targets.

Yemen (Rowan Technology)

was forced to narrow its operational focus to two main areas: Abyan in the south, where it targeted the new UAE-backed pro-southern separatist forces, and al-Bayda' in central Yemen, where it targeted the Houthis and so-called ISY.

From mid-2018 until 2020, AQAP became heavily distracted by an all-out war with a new incarnation of so-called ISY in al-Bayda' that appeared to rise out of the ashes of the U.S. airstrikes on Yemen's original ISY. The new ISY was maniacally focused on provoking AQAP into open conflict rather than battling Houthis. AQAP partisans complained of ISY driving through their checkpoints at high speed, setting up camp directly behind them, and slashing open their tents at night yelling "Apostates!"[19] The final straw came when ISY abducted a group of AQAP fighters on their way back from the front against the Houthis. Months of tit-for-tat attacks ensued. Until early 2020, both ISY and AQAP focused almost exclusively on killing each other. There is some evidence to suggest that the new ISY in fact maintained close links to the Houthis, despite the nominal enmity between them.[20] This supports the broader suspicion that various parts of both ISY and AQAP have been instrumentalized by regional rivals (or factions within them) and their domestic partners as part of a broader political power game.[21]

By early 2020, AQAP infighting, suspicion, and leadership issues had led to major schisms. AQAP's footprint in al-Bayda' shrank as some factions fell back to safe havens in Ma'rib while others moved south to join new battle fronts where government forces were clashing with southern separatist forces.[22][c] Most serious

was the desertion of at least 18 AQAP militants, and likely many more, led by Mansur al-Hadrami, AQAP's commander in Qayfa who was relieved of his post, and Abu 'Umar al-Nahdi, AQAP's former emir in Mukalla.[d] The rift began when Qasim al-Raymi was still overall leader but worsened under his controversial successor, Khalid Batarfi, who was appointed in February 2020 after al-Raymi was killed in a U.S. strike. The breakaway group doubted Batarfi's judgment, and possibly even his loyalty, as ever more of their colleagues were executed on flimsy spying charges.[23] The final straw came when Batarfi and his right-hand man, Sa'd Atif al-Awlaqi, ignoring requests for global al-Qa`ida leader Ayman al-Zawahiri to intervene, pressed ahead with the execution of the highly respected jihadi ideologue Abu Maryam al-'Azdi on spying charges, which many both inside and outside AQAP consider ludicrous.[24]

Although initial information about the rift came from sources hostile to AQAP, it is clear that it is real and serious because AQAP decided to address it and justify its actions in an unprecedented 18-page statement, its longest ever.[25] There are hints that the rift reflects factions that are pro- and anti-Islah,[26] Yemen's version of the Muslim Brotherhood that is aligned with the Hadi government and has its own militias. The infighting, rivalries and disobedience are also alluded to throughout a 2021 lecture series by AQAP's top judge, Abu Bishr Muhammad Daramah, but only ever in general terms.[27] It is impossible to unravel the precise loyalties at play. What is certain is that AQAP has fragmented and that the way in which analysts approach and define it must change accordingly.

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c   Although it can be challenging to distinguish between the various militias opposing STC power in the south, it is likely that some are aligned with AQAP elements. The STC is Yemen's separatist Southern Transitional Council.

d   The rift was first exposed by Islamic State-linked al-Taqwa media, "al-I'tizal al-Kabir li-Tanzim al-Qa'ida fi al-Yaman," February 6, 2020. It is known that the rift occurred because AQAP later tried to give its side of the story.

"**Different AQAP splinters may forge different alliances at different times. These ebb and flow according to circumstance, such that seemingly contradictory partnerships can actually become logical. It is entirely possible, for example, that parts of AQAP might collaborate with certain Houthi factions when circumstances dictate.**"

Defining AQAP

The AQAP label has started to lose meaning, owing not only to the group's fragmentation but also to the label's fast and loose adoption both in the media and on the ground. Broadly speaking, as this author has previously described,[28] so-called AQAP militants now fall into one of six categories: spurious, fake, former, pragmatic, committed, and active.

Spurious AQAP refers to those wrongly assumed to be jihadis on the basis of family, tribal, or friendship ties,[29] or falsely denounced as jihadis by opponents or rivals. Fake AQAP refers to mercenaries who claim false AQAP links to inflate their price[30] or ordinary military forces whose acts are deliberately false-flagged to AQAP to cover for political motives. Former AQAP are militants who have genuinely lost interest in jihad in favor of fighting for a political cause or a more lucrative paycheck. Pragmatic AQAP refers to militants who have adapted to prevailing conditions and genuinely fight under a new banner, but in whom jihadi ideology may still lie dormant. Committed AQAP are militants who claim to fight under a new banner but are merely suppressing their jihadi identity to bide their time for a comeback. Finally, active AQAP are those jihadis who continue to operate as themselves but who may at times forge alliances of convenience with other conflict parties. There may be splinters even within this active AQAP category. It is likely that only the operations of this latter group (or particular splinters within it) are currently claimed by AQAP's official media outlet, known as Al-Malahim.

This typology of so-called AQAP militants helps to explain the mismatch between the low number of operational claims published on AQAP's official Malahim wire relative to the higher number claimed by local media outlets, informal AQAP groups on platforms like Telegram, and al-Qa`ida-linked media organizations like Thabat or al-Khayr. This is particularly true for operations in Yemen's south. While it is tempting to attribute the mismatch to AQAP's own poor communications, in fact its formal wire is both prolific, pumping out regular video footage of talking heads. It is therefore more likely that AQAP deliberately ignores some operations while acknowledging others, depending on whether or not it deems the perpetrators to be bona fide AQAP. It is also worth noting that while AQAP is quick to react to relevant events

of international consequence,[e] it can be surprisingly slow to pick up on events on the ground at a local level. Even for its own operations, the time lag between execution and publication of a claim can be several days, particularly in the south, and the details furnished tend to be sparse. This may imply that AQAP, or a faction of it, is no longer leading, but rather following, with another warring party now calling the shots.

There are different reasons for why local media and informal al-Qa`ida fan media over-attribute attacks to AQAP. First, those local media organizations still remaining in the south tend to be partisan and may have political motives for labeling all attacks as terrorism. Second, it is genuinely challenging to distinguish between jihadi militancy and political militancy, given the considerable overlap in their objectives.[f] Third, some AQAP splinters have likely blended with the various Saudi-backed Islahi militias and UAE-backed salafi militias.[31] Indeed, it is possible that some of the fighters themselves are unsure precisely whose grand design they are part of, and they may not even care, as long as they are fighting their immediate enemies and earning a wage.

Alliances

Different AQAP splinters may forge different alliances at different times. These ebb and flow according to circumstance, such that seemingly contradictory partnerships can actually become logical. It is entirely possible, for example, that parts of AQAP might collaborate with certain Houthi factions when circumstances dictate, despite the group having built its public reputation on fighting the Houthis whom it casts as Shi`a infidels, stressing at times their collaboration with Iran and at others with the United States. There is historical precedent on both sides for such pragmatism.[g]

Al-Qa`ida's relationship with the Houthis stretches back to the 1990s. The transcript of a 2010 interrogation with Ibrahim al-Banna, who is now AQAP's security chief,[h] is revealing. Al-Banna, a leading militant in Egypt's Islamic Jihad in the 1980s, moved to Yemen in the early 1990s to build its militant jihad network there. Al-Banna recounted, "We established a good network of relations with the sheikhs of bedouin tribes, especially the Houthis. We used to sell them weapons and seek their help in arranging shelter for members of the group [Egyptian Islamic Jihad] and then the organization

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e   AQAP's formal wire issued statements on clashes in east Jerusalem (May 2021) and the death of Yemen's former Grand Mufti (July 2021) within a day of these events occurring.

f   Even al-Qa`ida-linked Thabat Media hedges its bets by attributing some operations in Yemen simply to "mujahidun" and others to "Ansar al-Sharia mujahidun" (i.e., specifically AQAP).

g   The most striking example of Houthi pragmatism is the unlikely alliance forged in 2014 between the Houthis and former President Ali Abdullah Saleh who had spent much of the previous decade engaged in six rounds of war against them. AQAP also collaborated with the Saleh government when it suited. See Elisabeth Kendall, "Jihadi Militancy and Houthi Insurgency in Yemen," in Michael A. Sheehan, Erich Marquardt, and Liam Collins eds., *Routledge Handbook of U.S. Counterterrorism and Irregular Warfare Operations* (Oxfordshire, U.K.: Routledge, 2021), pp. 83-94.

h   AQAP bills Ibrahim al-Banna as "Head of Security" in its video series "Tahdim al-Jasusiyya," 2018-2020.

A militant suspected of being a member of al-Qa`ida mans a checkpoint in Azzan in the southern Yemeni province of Shabwa on March 31, 2012. (STR/AFP via Getty Images)

[al-Qa`ida], until recently."[32] [i] He added that the Houthis helped smuggle jihadi operatives into Saudi Arabia. Al-Banna also revealed that when Nasir al-Wuhayshi became leader of al-Qa`ida in Yemen following the 2006 jailbreak, Muhammad 'Umayr al-Awlaqi (who, according to al-Banna, preceded al-Wuhayshi as leader, a position that was not previously clear) was tasked with bolstering al-Qa`ida's relationships with the Houthis. Significantly, however, al-Banna specifically rejected the suggestion of any operational collaboration between al-Qa`ida and the Houthis; the relationship is cast as one of purely pragmatic cooperation.

Lines of communication between the Houthis and AQAP clearly still exist because they have succeeded in conducting recent prisoner swaps.[j] This relationship may have proven useful in summer 2020 when the Houthis swept through al-Bayda' in a much-publicized counterterrorism operation. The operation was doubtless designed by the Houthis in part to improve their negotiating position ahead of anticipated peace talks by presenting themselves as a credible counterterrorism partner while also providing cover for their expansionist ambitions. On the surface, the 2020 Houthi operation

looked successful. Both ISY and AQAP were duly impacted. ISY vanished, though this was likely through a combination of being conspicuously killed and surreptitiously dismantled.[k] AQAP, by contrast, appeared simply to melt away. Some local sources reported that AQAP had reached an agreement with the Houthis to retreat.[33] It would certainly be in Houthi interests to grant AQAP safe passage south where they could focus on driving a wedge between Saudi-backed and UAE-backed sides of the anti-Houthi coalition. Assuming al-Banna remains at large, as AQAP's security chief with Houthi relationships spanning nearly three decades, he would be in a good position to strike the deals necessary to ensure AQAP's survival.

In the south, AQAP appears focused on targeting UAE-backed separatist forces. There are four main reasons for this. First, AQAP regards the separatists as godless socialists seeking to restore the former state of South Yemen, which was the Arab world's first and only Marxist state prior to Yemen's unification in 1990. Second, AQAP does not recognize man-made borders inside the umma. Third, it was southern separatist forces, rather than government forces, that pursued a relentless campaign to drive AQAP out of its southern strongholds after it was ousted from Mukalla in 2016.

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i   One analyst at the time advised caution regarding the veracity of al-Banna's transcript, pointing out that it suited the Yemeni government to frame the Houthis as al-Qa`ida collaborators. See Hassan Abbas, "Former AQAP Intelligence Chief describes Egyptian role in al-Qa`ida," *Terrorism Monitor* 8:43 (2010). However, the categorical denial of any military collaboration lends authenticity to the transcript.

j   Some of the Houthi-AQAP prisoner swaps have even been acknowledged by al-Qa`ida-linked media (e.g., al-Malahim Media Photoset, September 14, 2019; Thabat Media announcement, January 29, 2021).

k   Houthi war propaganda wires posted dozens of photos of alleged ISY corpses. Many were the same scenes taken from different angles, so the actual number of different corpses was low. For the complex relationship between the Houthis and the group calling itself ISY post-2018, see Elisabeth Kendall, "ISIS in Yemen: Caught in a Regional Power Game," Newlines Institute for Strategy and Policy, July 2020.

Fourth, the separatist forces are backed by the UAE, which AQAP condemns for pursuing its own commercial interests in south Yemen,[34] hosting the Pope,[35] and signing the Abraham Accords with Israel.[36] Hence, AQAP has issued several statements specifically apostatizing southern separatist forces.[37]

It is likely that AQAP, weakened and fragmented, is making common cause with more mainstream militias who share its animosity toward southern separatists. However, it is wise to be wary of jumping to obvious conclusions. There are numerous factions within all of the main warring parties, both inside and outside Yemen, who would be pleased to act as spoilers in the south, stall peace, perpetuate the war economy, stoke tensions in the coalition, and see the 2019 Riyadh Agreement collapse.[l]

Leadership

AQAP has a leadership problem. Khaled Batarfi is nominally in charge, but different splinters have gone their own ways and forged their own alliances. This is unsurprising, given the current pressures. Watching colleagues being picked off by drone strikes at an alarming rate fuels suspicions, which are left to fester and grow, owing to the challenges of communicating safely. Although new leaders can always be found to fill the shoes of colleagues killed in drone strikes, the pool of experienced and high-caliber candidates has shrunk dramatically. There are few remaining veterans of the Afghan jihad, nor is it any longer practically possible for Yemen's jihadis to run training camps to provide military expertise, spiritual guidance, and religious grounding. One AQAP sheikh bitterly complained that young jihadis are now "more hooked on nashids (anthems) than on the Qur'an."[38]

The leadership problem is clearly visible in AQAP's recent media output. In mid-May 2020, AQAP's official Malahim media wire fell silent following a U.S. strike that killed 'Abd Allah al-Maliki, the Pensacola shooter's go-between and likely also AQAP's main media operative running Malahim under the pseudonym 'Abd Allah al-Mujahid.[m] When the wire eventually sprang back to life in earnest

> ## "It is likely that AQAP, weakened and fragmented, is making common cause with more mainstream militias who share its animosity toward southern separatists. However, it is wise to be wary of jumping to obvious conclusions."

in late August 2020[n] (the same time that the Houthis took over AQAP enclaves in al-Bayda'), the content was markedly different. The ever-present phrase "Allah be praised," which had previously ended all operational claims, was inexplicably dropped during the next six months. Even stranger was that "new" videos started to flood onto the wire in 2021. Although most of the footage was previously unseen, it tended to favor old monologues, many of them by leaders who were already dead, packaged into new episodes of long-dormant lecture series.[o] It is as though someone stumbled upon a hard drive archive of AQAP outtakes from the past decade, and was busily splicing them together into "new" products. This had the superficial effect of making AQAP seem like an independent and growing concern, whereas in reality it betrays either desperation or external interference.

There is no indication in AQAP's official media output of any rising stars moving up the leadership ranks, although this may be different in various splinter groups. There are four senior AQAP leaders who still remain on the U.S. State Department's Rewards for Justice list with multi-million-dollar bounties on their heads: Khalid Batarfi, Sa'd Atif al-Awlaqi [Saad bin Atef al-Awlaki], Ibrahim al-Qusi, and Ibrahim al-Banna. Batarfi, AQAP's overall leader, was reportedly captured in a raid in the eastern al-Mahra governorate in October 2020.[39] However, his subsequent appearance in the video "America and the Painful Seizure," in which he gloated over the storming of the U.S. Capitol Building in January 2021, demonstrates either that he was not captured or that his current captors are collaborators. Nevertheless, as both a hunted man and a controversial leadership figure, Batarfi's days are likely numbered.

It is unclear if any of his three colleagues on the State Department's rewards list has the necessary qualities to succeed him. On the surface, al-Awlaqi appears the obvious successor, if still alive. Significantly, he is Yemeni (al-Qusi is Sudanese and al-Banna is Egyptian), and he has a broad network, including in tribal areas, not just in the south where his al-Awlaqi kinship ties have broad reach, but in northern Yemen as well. He was AQAP's emir in

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l   The Riyadh Agreement was signed in November 2019 between the internationally recognized Yemeni government, backed by Saudi Arabia, and Yemen's separatist Southern Transitional Council (STC), backed by the UAE. It followed an attempt by the STC to move toward establishing an independent state in southern Yemen. The agreement has still not been fully implemented, but in the short term, it has prevented the Saudi-led coalition from falling apart.

m   AQAP's official Malahim wire had been posting almost daily until a drone strike in Ma'rib around dawn on May 13, 2020, local time, after which it fell silent for six weeks. This coincided with FBI Director Christopher Wray and U.S. Attorney General William Barr's May 18, 2020, announcement that the United States had recently conducted an operation targeting the AQAP go-between who had posted the claim to the Pensacola operation. It was AQAP's Malahim wire, which operates under the pseudonym 'Abd Allah al-Mujahid (literally, 'the jihadi servant of Allah'), that posted the claim. "Attorney General William P. Barr and FBI Director Christopher Wray Announce Significant Developments in the Investigation of the Naval Air Station Pensacola Shooting," U.S. Department of Justice, May 18, 2020; "FBI Director Christopher Wray's Remarks at Press Conference Regarding Naval Air Station Pensacola Shooting Investigation," FBI National Press Office, May 18, 2020. The drone strike around dawn in Ma'rib on May 13, 2020, was reported by various local groups, including a media outlet close to al-Qa`ida.

n   After the U.S. drone strike on 'Abd Allah al-Maliki in mid-May 2020, the Malahim wire fell silent for six weeks. Thereafter, a few posts trickled through, but it only began to post regularly again in late August 2020. Interestingly, however, no operational claims were posted for five full months between April 4 and September 21, 2020.

o   The years 2020-2021 saw the revival of the following AQAP video series: "Mafahim" (2015-2016), "Min al-Midan" (2014-2015), "Sharh Kitab 'Mukhtasar Siyasat al-Hurub' li-l-Harthimi" (2017-2018), and "Ta'ammulat fi Suratay al-Nur wa-l-Hujurat" (2020).

Shabwah and is thought to have become AQAP's overall second-in-command after al-Raymi's death. However, he is a military man and lacks religious credentials. He is the only one of the four leadership figures who is not introduced as "sheikh" in AQAP media. There is also uncertainty over whether he is still alive. A U.N. report claimed he was killed in the 2020 Mahra raid.[40] Although AQAP issued a statement categorically denying both Batarfi's capture and al-Awlaqi's death,[41] al-Awlaqi has not appeared in any AQAP media since, and a renewed information drive by the U.S. Rewards for Justice Program in mid-2021 focused only on Batarfi, al-Qusi, and al-Banna.[42] Al-Awlaqi was inexplicably ignored.

Of the remaining two figures on the State Department list, Ibrahim al-Banna may be the one to watch. Although Ibrahim al-Qusi has a higher media profile, his religious credentials, network, and experience in Yemen are inferior to those of al-Banna. Al-Banna holds the key AQAP position of Chief of Security and was trusted to head the highly sensitive investigation into internal spies.[43] He is a formidable figure for four main reasons. First, he has a jihadi pedigree spanning four decades beginning with Egyptian Islamic Jihad in the 1980s, during which he worked directly alongside some of al-Qa`ida's most eminent leaders, including 'Abd al-Mun'im al-Badawi (aka Abu Ayyub al-Masri and Abu Hamza al-Muhajir),[44] who took over from Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi as leader of al-Qa`ida in Iraq, and Ayman al-Zawahiri, the current head of al-Qa`ida globally. Al-Banna's resounding praise of the 9/11 attacks and vow to continue targeting the United States appeared in English in Inspire magazine.[45] Second, he has deep roots in Yemen, having arrived there nearly three decades ago in the early 1990s when he focused on nurturing local relationships, including among the Houthis.[46] Third, he has long experience building networks, supervising, and training in the jihad movement.[47] Fourth, he has strong religious credentials, having graduated from Cairo's highly prestigious Al-Azhar University.[48]

Other key AQAP figures who are not on the State Department rewards list are: 'Ammar al-San'ani, Rayyan al-Hadrami, 'Abd Allah al-Hadrami, and Abu 'Usama al-'Awlaqi, all of whom were selected as mediators to try to heal the current rifts in AQAP, with the latter two holding appointments as judges;[49] Hamad al-Tamimi, an ideologue who has written prolifically on jihadi doctrine and was picked to announce the leadership succession from al-Raymi to Batarfi in February 2020; and Abu Bishr Muhammad Daramah, AQAP's top judge, who recovered from a 2018 drone strike thought to have killed him, although he was reportedly captured by government forces in Ma'rib in January 2021.[50] There are also leading figures in breakaway factions such as Abu Dawuud al-Say'ari, Mansur al-Hadrami, and Abu 'Umar al-Nahdi.

The Transnational Threat

AQAP has been significantly degraded, but its ambition to strike the United States and its allies remains. Even the domestic tangle of Yemen's current conflicts has been spun to fit its transnational ambitions. At first sight, AQAP's view of the current war landscape appears highly contradictory. It accuses the United States of being in cahoots with the Iran-backed Houthis fighting the Saudi-led coalition. At the same time, it accuses the Saudi-led coalition of being agents of the United States. The only way for AQAP to square this awkward circle is by subsuming all enemies—Sunni or Shi`a, Israeli or Arab, Western or Eastern—into an over-arching Zionist-Crusader plot against true Islam, led by Israel's primary backer, the

> **"AQAP has been significantly degraded, but its ambition to strike the United States and its allies remains. Even the domestic tangle of Yemen's current conflicts has been spun to fit its transnational ambitions."**

United States.

AQAP-linked attacks in the West are well-known. These range from those inspired by its English-language Inspire magazine and the online sermons of Yemeni-American preacher Anwar al-Awlaqi (who was killed by a U.S. strike in 2011), such as the 2009 Fort Hood shooting and the 2013 Boston marathon bombing, to thwarted plots like the printer cartridge bombs intercepted on cargo planes in 2010, to operatives trained directly by AQAP, such as the 'underwear bomber' who attempted to blow up an airliner over Detroit in 2009 and one of the perpetrators of the 2015 *Charlie Hebdo* massacre in Paris.

It is unlikely that AQAP is currently in a position to exercise direct command and control over attacks in the West. But it can certainly still inspire, and possibly even provide some direction. The United States remains the ultimate target. The Pensacola Naval Base shooting in December 2019 is a stark reminder that the threat persists. The Saudi shooter was hosted by the United States as part of a joint Saudi-U.S. military training program, despite having been radicalized already by 2015 and then, while in the United States, maintaining direct contact with AQAP.[51] AQAP made much of the attack in a gloating video message from its former leader Qasim al-Raymi, in which he praised the patient and careful planning,[52] although in reality, the attack was relatively unsophisticated. Al-Raymi himself was killed in a U.S. strike days before the release of his triumphal video, and the shooter's go-between, 'Abd Allah al-Maliki, was killed just three months later in a further U.S. strike in Yemen.[53]

The threats and warnings to the United States and its allies in AQAP media persist. The last issue of Inspire magazine was devoted to encouraging train derailment operations and included a map of the U.S. rail network.[54] [p] Although Inspire magazine fell dormant from 2017, new Inspire-branded products have appeared and AQAP has started consistently producing in-house translations into English and sometimes also French of those media products aimed at a broader international audience. A lengthy Inspire-branded article titled "Who is the Victor?" was released to celebrate the 2020 anniversary of 9/11. It pulled together unfavorable data on the U.S. military, economy, business, and health sectors, which it claimed proved the attacks were victorious. The article took a final swipe at the United States by presenting its struggle with COVID-19 as a punishment from Allah.[55]

AQAP's preoccupation with the United States has flourished

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p   AQAP partisan groups were quick to celebrate an Amtrak derailment in Washington State just four months later as a jihadi operation, but provided no evidence to support this claim.

through 2021, despite or perhaps partly to compensate for its own domestic troubles. AQAP resurrected its series of Inspire Guides, urging Muslims to attack Americans anywhere, but preferably on American soil, pointing to slack U.S. gun laws as a distinct advantage.[56] Half of AQAP's Inspire Guides to date have been dedicated to analyzing attacks on U.S. soil they present as being carried out by jihadis: the 2016 Orlando nightclub massacre, the mall stabbing in Minnesota,[q] and the failed attacks carried out by the "Chelsea" bomber in New York and New Jersey in September 2016, and the 2021 Boulder, Colorado supermarket shooting.[r] AQAP's intention is to encourage future operations and improve their lethality.

The storming of the U.S. Capitol in early 2021 provided an ideal opportunity for AQAP to release a bombastic video message attributing the United States' political turmoil, civil strife, racial tensions, and COVID fatalities to Allah's divine intervention.[57] The optics were designed for maximum insult. Images of the 9/11 attacks decorated the backdrop, and the message was delivered by none other than AQAP leader Batarfi himself, who had been confirmed as captured in a U.N. Security Council report released just seven days earlier.[58] AQAP also pinned ultimate blame for the May 2021 clashes between Israel and Palestine on the United States, "the chief of unbelief, without whose support and protection the Jews would never have dared [to commit] such atrocities."[59]

France, too, has resurfaced as a preferred target over the past year. In 2020, AQAP capitalized on both the French government's crackdown on Islamist 'separatism' and the decision by *Charlie Hebdo* magazine in Paris to republish cartoons of the Prophet Mohammad. It released various trilingual statements in Arabic, English, and French calling for revenge attacks and the "complete elimination" of France,[60] the economic boycott of French goods,[61] and more operations against the French in Mali.[62] AQAP told Muslims it was time to choose sides between the Prophet and the French state,[63] in an apparent echo of U.S. President George W. Bush's speech shortly after 9/11 when he told the world "Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists."[64] Meanwhile, AQAP's partisan wire, Kifah Media, continues to churn out French translations of inspirational material and spiritual guidance from the AQAP archive. This material clearly has the potential to fuel new jihad battlefronts that have opened in French-speaking Africa, where the French military has been heavily engaged, as well as to inspire attacks in France itself, where up to nine percent of the population is Muslim.[65]

Israel, of course, remains a perennial enemy for the terrorist group. Jerusalem's al-Aqsa mosque looms large as the favorite backdrop for AQAP talking heads, even in videos that do not deal with Israel or Palestine directly, and every AQAP video ends on a

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q   The Minnesota mall attacker was at least partially motivated by "radical Islamic groups," the then FBI Director James Comey testified to the House Judiciary Committee after the attack. Nora G. Hertel, "A year later, Crossroads mall stabbings investigation drags on," *St. Cloud Times*, September 15, 2017.

r   The motive for the March 2021 Boulder, Colorado, attack is not clear, and no evidence has been publicly presented of a jihadi nexus to the case. It was reported that "at his first court appearance, [the alleged shooter's] public defender said her team needed time to evaluate 'the nature and depth of (his) mental illness.'" Shelly Bradbury, "Boulder shooting suspect faces 43 new charges of attempted murder, weapons violations in King Soopers attack," *Denver Post*, April 21, 2021.

> **"Aside from Yemen, the only other state on the Arabian Peninsula to suffer a persistent threat from Sunni Islamist extremism is Saudi Arabia ... The extremist threat is leveled in two directions: outward-facing, with the export of Saudi extremists to jihad theaters outside the kingdom; and inward-facing, when blowback generates plots inside the kingdom itself."**

landing page bearing the slogan/threat "O Aqsa, we are coming." This slogan was also used as the title for a bold, three-day festival that AQAP held in Mukalla to celebrate its flourishing proto-state in early 2016. At times, the festival seemed more like a rock concert, with *nashids* (anthems) blaring out over loudspeakers while fighters performed synchronized combat moves on stage to cheering crowds under neon lights. AQAP leaders delivered speeches remotely over giant open-air screens, volunteers handed out proselytizing leaflets, and competitions were organized for the kids with fabulous prizes.[66] Locals who likely never concerned themselves much beyond their own communities were suddenly encouraged to see their domestic woes as part of a Zionist-Crusader conspiracy.

Recent events have sparked furious reactions by AQAP against Israel and its allies. In a video message following the U.S. decision to move its embassy to Jerusalem, Batarfi told Muslims it was their "duty to kill every Jew by driving over him, stabbing him, using a weapon, or setting fire to their houses."[67] Other AQAP messages have dealt with the normalization of relations with Israel,[68] the alleged establishment of an Israeli-UAE spy base on Socotra Island,[69] and the eruption of hostilities between Israel and Palestine in 2021.[70]

Saudi Arabia

Aside from Yemen, the only other state on the Arabian Peninsula to suffer a persistent threat from Sunni Islamist extremism is Saudi Arabia. There are a number of factors behind this, including the kingdom's position as the guardian of Islam's two holiest sites in Mecca and Medina, its historical pact empowering the purist Wahhabi religious establishment, its promotion of sectarian narratives to combat Iranian influence and justify the repression of Shi`a activism in its restive eastern province, its vast financial deals with Western companies, and its military cooperation with the U.S. and other Western governments. The extremist threat is leveled in two directions: outward-facing, with the export of Saudi extremists to jihad theaters outside the kingdom; and inward-facing, when blowback generates plots inside the kingdom itself.

The outward-facing threat has a strong history, with Saudi extremists generally opting to wage jihad abroad rather than at home for both ideological and practical reasons. Even those Saudi Islamist scholars who have advocated militant jihad as a means to effect political change abroad have tended to support the political

status quo at home. Saudi foreign fighters started traveling to Afghanistan in the 1980s, then also to fronts in Bosnia, Yemen, and Iraq in the 1990s and 2000s. From 2010, thousands of Saudis traveled to join the growing Islamic State enterprise in Iraq and especially in Syria. Official Saudi sources estimate that in 2013 and 2014 alone, over 2,000 Saudis traveled to Syria.[71] Analysis of leaked Islamic State documents detailing early cohorts of fighters seeking to join the group in Syria reveals how the Islamic State tailored its recruitment narratives to suit its Saudi audience.[72] It plugged into existing sectarian faultlines and the historical enmity between Saudi and the Iran-backed Assad regime. Indeed, Syria was the only 'Arab Spring' country where Saudi Arabia was actually in favor of toppling the regime.

The internal threat from militant Islamist extremists is also material.[73] During the first decade following 9/11, the greatest challenge came from al-Qa`ida, whose activities peaked between 2003 and 2006, after which a security crackdown drove many militants across the border into Yemen.[74] During the second decade after 9/11, it was the Islamic State that posed the greater threat as its early recruitment drive for Saudis to join its nascent state came back to bite the kingdom. In November 2014, the Islamic State announced the establishment of three provinces in Saudi Arabia. Within three years, it had carried out over 30 attacks.[75]

Islamic State-linked operatives in Saudi Arabia have targeted both military and religious establishments, the latter focused mainly on the Shi`a community, which they consider to be heretics—a view that has been fueled by years of state-sponsored sectarian rhetoric against the Shi`a.[76] Several high-profile security operations have helped mitigate the threat, although the very broad Saudi definition of terrorism makes the true extent of the extremist problem hard to discern.[77] In July 2016, Saudi Arabia arrested 19 Islamic State-linked jihadis after a spate of attacks inside the kingdom, including suicide bombings at the Prophet's mosque in Medina and the U.S. Consulate in Jeddah. Seven of those arrested were Saudi nationals.[78] Just two months later, the Saudis dismantled three further terror cells with links to the Islamic State. This time, all but three of the 17 militants captured were Saudi nationals. The security operation reportedly succeeded in thwarting four further attacks on military and religious targets, including inside Riyadh.[79] The recovery of a significant cache of explosives and suicide vests suggested the possibility of a wider network with broader ambitions and indeed, by March 2021, at least 45 further Islamic State-linked operatives had been uncovered.[s]

Over time, however, it is likely that al-Qa`ida, not the Islamic State, will prove the more persistent challenge. Its roots run deep, and it continues to voice ambitions to attack Saudi Arabia, although it differs from the Islamic State in that it focuses on the regime and its allies, not the Shi`a community. As the Islamic State started to struggle in its heartlands of Syria and Iraq, al-Qa`ida issued a series of six documentary-style videos designed to refocus jihadi attention on al-Qa`ida's mission to 'liberate' Saudi Arabia. Narrated by Usama bin Ladin's son, Hamza, "Dominion of the Best Ummah" (2016-18) traced the kingdom's modern history under what it

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depicted to be the treacherous, corrupt, profligate, and profane House of Saud.

The series looked to be an attempt to bolster Hamza's leadership credentials within al-Qa`ida and present him as a rallying figure to inspire a new generation of jihadis in Saudi Arabia, where al-Qa`ida's elderly and uncharismatic Egyptian leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, has struggled. Episode Two even bestowed on Hamza the title of "sheikh," despite the fact that he was still in his 20s and lacked any religious qualifications. This may have provoked some pushback in the extremist hierarchy as the rest of the series reverted to calling him "brother." In the final episode (March 2018), Hamza called on Saudis to train with AQAP in Yemen in order to prepare for their own revolution in Saudi Arabia. He urged Saudis to rise up to defend their land from Saudi corruption, American occupation, and Iranian encroachment. But in addition to these well-rehearsed religious, political, and moral imperatives for revolution, he raised a further explosive economic incentive: wealth redistribution.[80]

In September 2019, the United States confirmed that it had killed Hamza bin Ladin but did not specify when. Although Hamza was not yet a pivotal religious or military leader inside al-Qa`ida, his loss is significant. He had the potential to become a lightning rod for young militants, owing to his revered lineage, his desire to take forward his father's legacy, and his growing skills as a speaker and poet.

Al-Qa`ida continues to lash out at Saudi Arabia, and its outrage stems almost exclusively from the close Saudi relationship with the United States. Its al-Nafir occasional bulletin (2015-ongoing) has devoted several issues to criticizing the ruling House of Saud and Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman specifically. They are condemned for supposedly collaborating with the CIA,[81] spending colossal amounts on U.S. deals and investments,[82] cracking down on religious scholars,[83] forming an Islamic counterterrorism alliance that it calls "a new Crusader alliance in Saudi robes,"[84] failing in the Yemen war despite huge spending on U.S. military hardware,[85] and Americanizing society through social reforms, particularly new freedoms for women.[86]

It is this latter controversy, the introduction of liberalizing social reforms while also eroding the powers of the religious establishment, that has generated the loudest response from al-Qa`ida. Bin Salman's reforms have granted women limited liberties by modifying rules on veiling, male guardianship, employment, and driving, as well as opening up the entertainment sector by relaxing rules on live music, cinemas, and the mingling of men

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s   Five were sentenced to death, while the others were killed in security operations. Mohammed al-Sulami, "5 Daesh members sentenced to death for assassinating officer, blowing up mosques in Saudi Arabia," *Arab News*, March 11, 2021.

and women. In tandem, the regime has locked up radical clerics, reined in the religious police, purged school textbooks of incendiary material,[87] and, most recently, begun introducing awareness units in universities to guard against extremism.[88][t]

Al-Qa`ida has sought to capitalize on the anger and alarm these changes have generated among religious conservatives. In late 2018, its global leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, released a video message called "The Zionists of the Peninsula" in which he vehemently condemned Saudi Arabia's imprisonment of clerics, social liberalization, and increasingly cozy relationship with Israel as the latest crimes in a long history of Saudi treachery. He urged Muslims in Arabia to rise up.[89] Concern over U.S. influence on education reforms was raised in a slick production entitled "The Unpardonable Crime," which featured former U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson outlining U.S. involvement in plans to replace Saudi school textbooks and train imams.[90] These various anti-Saudi drives by al-Qa`ida represent its attempt to mop up salafi jihadi support and reinsert itself in the Saudi debate as the Islamic State flounders.[91]

AQAP and MBS
AQAP adopted a generally light touch toward Saudi Arabia during the early years of the Yemen war as both fought the mutual Houthi enemy. After AQAP's ouster from Mukalla in 2016, its stance toward the coalition became more aggressive, but its ire was directed mainly at the UAE and the local forces it was recruiting across Yemen's south, rather than at Saudi Arabia and Yemeni government forces under commander-in-chief Ali Muhsin. From 2017, however, with President Donald Trump's visit to Saudi Arabia and the Crown Prince's liberalizing reforms, AQAP's attitude toward the Saudi regime hardened.

AQAP warned of the slippery slope of the Crown Prince's Westernizing agenda, although its choice of gripes was at times bizarre. It worried that the English and French languages would eclipse Arabic and hence impair knowledge of the Qur'an and Islamic history. AQAP also condemned Saudi women's freedom to play sports, then spent considerable airtime angrily describing Saudi women's great achievements, from participating in the Rio Olympics to conquering Everest, and from boxing to diving.[92]

Of particular concern to AQAP is Saudi Arabia's increasing control over education because it recognizes that influencing young hearts and minds is crucial to al-Qa`ida's own longevity and sustainability. It issued a joint statement with al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in September 2017 titled "Warning of Doom on Saudi Rulers."[93] The jihadis slammed Saudi Arabia for supposedly allowing the United States not only to plunder Muslim resources but also to influence the reform agenda and hence brainwash the next generation against Islam. They were particularly concerned by the arrests of eminent religious scholars and plans to overhaul school textbooks. As Khalid Batarfi, now AQAP's overall leader, acknowledged in a rare 2018 interview: "There is no successful jihadi movement without a clear role for religious scholars at its center."[94]

But AQAP's deepest ire was sparked by the infiltration of their networks by spies recruited, they believed, by Saudi intelligence.

> **"AQAP is far from dead. It has been buoyed by the Taliban's lightning takeover of Afghanistan, and may well enjoy friendly ties to Taliban elements given that AQAP's current leader Khalid Batarfi trained and fought alongside them in Afghanistan before arriving in Yemen in 2002."**

AQAP laid out in some detail the results of its spy investigation in the documentary video series "Demolishing Espionage" (2018-2020). It alleged Saudi Arabia's preferred recruitment method to be blackmail and denounced in particular what it claimed was the exploitation of children[95] and what it alleged was the use of health professionals to drug and then video the rape of AQAP members' wives and daughters during medical check-ups to use as leverage over them.[96]

Conclusion and Outlook
During the two decades since 9/11, militant jihad in the Arabian Peninsula has been heavily concentrated in Yemen, despite an initial flare up inside Saudi Arabia in the early 2000s and occasional sporadic attacks since. There are several reasons why Saudi Arabia has managed its threat better than Yemen. Unlike Yemen, Saudi Arabia benefits from civil stability, an integrated state, and strong governance, all underpinned by its oil wealth. As such, it has been able to mitigate its terrorist problem through a combination of sophisticated intelligence systems, robust security measures, repression, and well-funded terrorist rehabilitation programs. Nevertheless, despite the oft-quoted failure of jihad in Saudi Arabia,[97] it is important to remain vigilant, particularly as Saudi Arabia faces a youth surge[98] coupled with unemployment and economic challenges generated by an unstable oil price, fallout from the pandemic, and a crippling war in Yemen.

Yemen will very likely remain the locus of terrorist activity in the Arabian Peninsula. AQAP has been severely degraded since the heyday of its proto-state in Mukalla in 2015-2016. It has been decimated by drone strikes, infiltrated by spies, and splintered by infighting. But AQAP is far from dead. It has been buoyed by the Taliban's lightning takeover of Afghanistan, and may well enjoy friendly ties to Taliban elements given that AQAP's current leader Khalid Batarfi trained and fought alongside them in Afghanistan before arriving in Yemen in 2002.[99] Following the fall of Kabul in August 2021, AQAP released a euphoric statement congratulating the Taliban on their victory over the United States and NATO.[100] AQAP's stated takeaways were that steadfast jihad is the best route to achieving one's goals, that democracy is no more than a fleeting mirage, and that a new era of Islamic rule is dawning, with broader jihadi victories to follow.[101] On a domestic level, AQAP's legacy of local partnerships, smuggling networks, and youth outreach endures despite its loss of territory. AQAP's continuing ability to garner support and enter practical alliances is helped by the government's ongoing failure to address local grievances, by

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t   It is not clear how well these policies are succeeding. See Yasmine Farouk and Nathan J. Brown, "Saudi Arabia's Religious Reforms are touching Nothing but changing Everything," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 7, 2021.

the anger and misery generated by the persistent war, and most seriously perhaps, by regional powers' exploitation of local conflict faultlines as they vie for influence on the ground.

However, AQAP is changing. Counterterrorism pressures and the shifting war landscape have resulted in AQAP splintering, blending, and (re)aligning in ways that now make the group harder to define. Six categories of AQAP militants were identified above: spurious, fake, former, pragmatic, committed, and active. Yet the precise alliances, drivers, and paymasters behind the various splinters remain opaque. What is certain is that extremist groups are being instrumentalized by other warring parties to further their agendas in Yemen. This may occur for a range of different reasons, depending on the actor. These include to justify expansionist advances, to cover for politically motivated attacks, to disrupt peace efforts, to strengthen organized crime networks, to keep the United States engaged, and to sow discord in the Saudi-led coalition. The co-option of extremist groups should not be viewed as a solution or dilution of the extremist problem. For a fragmented and weak AQAP, it may be a short-term survival mechanism and could serve to perpetuate the group.

AQAP's ultimate goals have not changed, but they appear broader. These are the establishment of a borderless Islamic nation (*umma*) ruled by sharia law; justice for Palestine and other oppressed Muslims, from France to Myanmar; and an end not just to the U.S. military presence but to all meddling by 'unbelievers' and their alleged agent Arab regimes in the affairs of Muslim lands. Acts of terror are no longer pitched primarily as a means to an end, with the emphasis on creating the necessary leverage to achieve a goal. They are increasingly becoming an end in themselves, with the emphasis on revenge and humiliation. The strongest focus currently is on the United States, Israel, France, and the regimes of the UAE and Saudi Arabia.

A headline-grabbing international attack remains a potent ambition, particularly as AQAP tries to restore its reputation and unity after the degrading challenges of the past three years. In 2021, it revived its Inspire-branded jihad guide, and it continues to direct explicit threats at the West. Yet despite AQAP's clear involvement in the 2019 Pensacola shooting and its attempts to insert itself in recent Muslim blowback against France for supposedly insulting the Prophet Mohammad, it has become increasingly unfeasible for AQAP to launch attacks outside Yemen, and there are few remaining international targets inside Yemen. There is, however, a steady stream of international maritime traffic that passes along Yemen's considerable coastline.

A maritime attack remains a real possibility for several reasons. First, maritime traffic represents perhaps the only international target left within practical reach as Yemen's almost 1,200-mile coastline is notoriously difficult to police. Second, AQAP has valuable experience in this domain, having launched maritime attacks against USS The Sullivans and USS Cole, both in 2000, and the French oil tanker Limburg in 2002. It has learned from its failures (the Sullivans attack skiff sank) and its successes (the Cole attack skiff killed 17 sailors and injured around 40). Third, there are clear signs that a maritime attack remains an aspiration. In August 2020, an AQAP bard released a new poem and *nashid* (anthem) praising the Cole attack and vowing fresh attacks under Batarfi's leadership.[102] AQAP is fully aware of the benefits such an attack would bring. These were laid out in considerable detail by al-Qa`ida

in the Indian Subcontinent in a long article that ends with a photo of an aircraft carrier and its support ships captioned "We will be back soon, insha'Allah [sic.]".[103] A maritime attack would generate worldwide media attention, disrupt international shipping, expose Western vulnerability, raise insurance premiums, spike the oil price, and create economic volatility. Fourth, these are outcomes that would also suit some other parties to the Yemen conflict, in case partnerships are required to facilitate an operation. The year 2020 saw at least four unexplained instances of small skiffs making aggressive approaches or attempted attacks on ships off the south coast of Yemen.[u] While the Houthis have been responsible for several maritime attacks, these tend to have been unmanned and confined to the Red Sea. Attacks launched from Yemen's south coast, from Mahra in the east to Aden in the west, cannot easily be attributed to the Houthis, at least not without local partners.[v]

The outlook is bleak, whether or not a ceasefire is reached in the overall war. A 2021 briefing to the United Nations Security Council by the U.N. Special Envoy for Yemen painted a rosy vision of the day after a ceasefire: guns fall silent, roadblocks disappear, and people return to work.[104] However, it is unclear how representative the warring parties are of people on the ground, or how in control they are of their local forces. Batarfi has already spoken out against any U.N.-brokered peace, telling Yemenis "to reject and abort any plots hatched in the name of peace or under the guise of the UN, the Security Council and other organizations."[105] In reality, there will be many who feel excluded, who have scores to settle, little experience beyond fighting, no prospects, and no life to go back to. Hence, even peace represents an opportunity for al-Qa`ida.

Ultimately, countering terrorism in Yemen is best achieved by removing the drivers not only behind people joining the movement, but behind desperate local communities tolerating it. This will require a strong understanding of local dynamics, including power struggles, marginalization, patronage structures, the informal economy, negative incentives, exclusion, corruption, and under-development. These imperatives accord with the results of a broader study across the Middle East conducted by RAND, which concluded that the United States' own counterterrorism interests would be better served by focusing more on development, governance, and investment, and less on military solutions.[106] This may come with some short-term risks, but it would lead to better long-term results. Otherwise, Yemen has all the ingredients for AQAP to rise again: a fragmenting state, poor governance, marginalized regions, the proliferation of armed groups, a collapsing economy, a generation of poorly educated youth, corrupt elites, and an angry and impoverished society polarized by war.   **CTC**

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u   These were the Gladiolus off the coast of Mahra (March 3, 2020), the Stolt Apal off the coast of Hadramawt (May 17, 2020), the Echo Leader south of the Red Sea (May 20, 2020), and the Hasan off the coast of Mahra (December 4, 2020). A fifth aggressive approach toward the Andromeda off the coast of Hadramawt (October 4, 2020) was attributed to a UAE attempt to block the tanker's export of oil, but this was not formally confirmed. Author's own log of maritime attacks.

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Twenty Years After 9/11: The Threat in Africa— The New Epicenter of Global Jihadi Terror

By Tricia Bacon and Jason Warner

While Africa was scarcely a generator of jihadi violence at the dawn of the 21st century, today, 20 years after 9/11, the continent is the global epicenter of jihadi violence. Four phenomena—the persistence of al-Qa`ida affiliates, the rise of Islamic State partners, the endurance of facilitating domestic African social conditions, and ineffective counterterrorism efforts—have led to this alarming outcome. Despite the United States' desire to shift toward near-peer competition, abandoning the fight against the jihadi groups that now proliferate on the continent runs counter to U.S. interests. Jihadi violence will hinder the United States' ability to effectively compete with other great powers while also destabilizing partner nations on the continent. Indeed, retaining a commitment to countering such violence is complementary to—not in competition with—securing viable partnerships in Africa that will improve the U.S. position vis-à-vis China and Russia. Yet, clearly, the failures of the last 20 years have shown that more of the same is not acceptable: adjustments are necessary in U.S. objectives in Africa, its political to military ratio in counterterrorism efforts, its assessment of al-Qa`ida and Islamic State affiliates, its posture toward negotiations, and its integration of great power politics and counterterrorism goals.

The metrics are grim. In 2020, over 13,000 people were killed in nearly 5,000 acts of violence. Seventeen designated Foreign Terrorist Organizations affected at least 22 countries.[a] Such statistics might well be expected to come from South Asia (Afghanistan or Pakistan) or the Middle East (Iraq and Syria), regions that have historically served as the central locations of violence from salafi-jihadi groups linked to al-Qa`ida or the Islamic State. Instead, these statistics reflect the current state of jihadism on the African continent. Once a theater seen by many as peripheral, the continent has emerged as the new center of gravity for jihadism.

The presumed marginality of Africa in U.S. national considerations—the continent having long been considered a "backwater" in the United States' security calculus[1]—ceased to hold at the beginning of the U.S.-led "Global War on Terror." As counterterrorism became the United States' top national security priority, post-2001, fighting terrorism came to define U.S. relationships with African governments. Specifically, U.S.-led efforts initially sought to stymie the ability of international jihadis, presumed to be fleeing from Afghanistan, to exploit the "under-governed" spaces in Africa to serve as havens for their activities.[2] This new U.S. outlook spurred a flurry of new initiatives. In the Sahel, in 2002, the United States launched the Pan-Sahel Initiative, intended to train and equip six company-sized partner nation rapid-reaction counterterrorism forces—three in Mali and one each in Chad, Mauritania, and Niger—with the goal of enhancing regional cooperation, securing borders, tracking terrorist groups' movement, and deterring the establishment of jihadi terrorist safe havens in the Sahel.[3] Driven by a similar concern on the other side of the continent, the United States erected its first and only permanent military base on the continent in Djibouti in 2002. In 2003, it then initiated the East Africa Counterterrorism Initiative, which focused on improving police and judicial counterterrorism capabilities in Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda.[4] Both initiatives grew in size and scope over time.

Reality proved that the U.S. focus on preventing the migration of terrorists to Africa was a miscalculation. Rather than global jihadis fleeing Afghanistan and finding haven in Africa, instead locally minded Islamist and jihadi groups began to coalesce and proliferate within Africa, eventually entering the orbit of al-Qa`ida and later the Islamic State. This reality led to a U.S. reconceptualization of the counterterrorism challenge it faced: it began a shift away from seeing Africa as primarily a haven for non-African jihadis and instead, toward countering homegrown, African jihadi groups in their own right. By 2007, the U.S. Department of Defense stood up its own combatant command for the continent, Africa Command (AFRICOM), which, though based in Germany, was a recognition of

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a   The designated Foreign Terrorist Organizations are: Gama'a al-Islamiyya, al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), al-Shabaab, Ansar al-Dine, Boko Haram, Ansaru, al-Mulathamun Battalion (AMB), Ansar al-Shari'a in Benghazi, Ansar al-Shari'a in Darnah, Ansar al-Shari'a in Tunisia, ISIL-Sinai Province (formerly Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis), Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant's Branch in Libya, ISIS-West Africa, ISIS-Greater Sahara, Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin, ISIS-DRC, and ISIS-Mozambique. This list uses the spellings and names as they appear on "Foreign Terrorist Organizations," U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Counterterrorism, accessed August 9, 2021.

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"the growing strategic importance of Africa" and the need to develop enduring partnerships on the continent.[5] By 2019, the number of U.S. military personnel on the continent had more than doubled from 2008,[6] and the number of military exercises, programs, and engagements there had risen dramatically.[7] As of August 2021, the United States has approximately 5,100 U.S. service members and about 1,000 Defense Department civilians and contractors in AFRICOM's 15 'enduring' bases and 12 less-permanent 'non-enduring' or 'contingency' bases.[8] The majority of U.S. forces are located in Djibouti with an additional 2,000 soldiers conducting training missions in some 40 countries around the continent.[9]

However, beginning in 2018, another re-posturing was under way. With the 2018 release of the U.S. National Defense Strategy, the Department of Defense articulated that "Inter-state strategic competition, not terrorism, is now the primary concern in U.S. national security."[10] Competing with so-called "great powers" or "near-peer competitors," namely China and Russia, became the new U.S. priority, not the threats posed by al-Qa`ida or the Islamic State. That proclamation proved to be actionable on the continent. In December 2020, the United States declared that it would move all of its troops out of Somalia[11]—there to train, advise, and assist in the effort against al-Shabaab—a move emblematic of the broader zeitgeist of fatigue with "forever wars" motivated by counterterrorism in Iraq but especially Afghanistan. France has conveyed a similar weariness: in July 2021, it announced that it would scale back its Barkhane counterterrorism mission in the Sahel.[12] But as priorities shift 20 years after 9/11, have U.S. and international efforts against African jihadi actors been effective?

To the contrary. Twenty years after 9/11, jihadi violence on the African continent has experienced a meteoric rise, putting African civilians, African states, as well as U.S. and especially partner interests on the continent in far greater danger than before September 11th. Despite the efforts to minimize jihadi violence, 20 years after 9/11, the African continent is the new leading epicenter of jihadi terrorism in the world today. Alarmingly, the jihadi threat in Africa has not merely worsened: it has reached historically unprecedented levels at the same time that the United States and its partners' appetite to counter it has waned, creating a perfect storm for the situation to further deteriorate. Even as the U.S. posture shifts away from combating jihadi terrorism in Africa, the authors argue that the United States and international community cannot turn their attention from the dire situation. And yet, more of the same is clearly not the solution.

This article proceeds in four main sections. In the first section, the authors outline how, 20 years after 9/11, the prevalence of violence from African jihadi groups has risen dramatically to never-before-seen levels. In the second section, they highlight four interconnected phenomena underpinning the rise of jihadi violence on the continent and discuss why these factors will persist. The third section makes the argument about why the United States should care about the growing jihadi threat in Africa. The authors conclude in the fourth section by proposing policy changes to countering jihadism and the threat it poses within Africa.

The New Epicenter of Jihadi Terror

The prevalence of jihadi violence on the African continent has spiked dramatically in the 20 years since the Global War on Terror began.[13] To be sure, Africa was no stranger to jihadism during the 1990s. For its part, Sudan played host to Usama bin Ladin from

> **"Twenty years after 9/11, jihadi violence on the African continent has experienced a meteoric rise, putting African civilians, African states, as well as U.S. and especially partner interests on the continent in far greater danger than before September 11th. Despite the efforts to minimize jihadi violence, 20 years after 9/11, the African continent is the new leading epicenter of jihadi terrorism in the world today."**

1991 to 1996, where he lived after his fallout with the Saudi royal family. Egyptian jihadis, most notably Ayman al-Zawahiri, bin Ladin's future deputy and successor, joined bin Ladin in Sudan to launch a campaign against Egypt.[14] Nearby, al-Qa`ida had trained Somali militants in the early 1990s and encouraged them to target the U.S. presence during Operation Restore Hope, the U.S.-led and U.N.-backed humanitarian-focused security mission in 1992-1993.[15] Most notably, in 1998, al-Qa`ida orchestrated dual bombings of the U.S. embassies in Nairobi, Kenya, and Dar es Salam, Tanzania, collectively killing 224 (of which 12 were Americans).[16] And, for its part, Algeria was the site of a bloody campaign by jihadis against the state throughout the 1990s. However, by the end of the 1990s, things had quieted, relatively. With bin Ladin's departure, much of al-Qa`ida had moved to Afghanistan, and the Egyptian and Algerian governments had made major gains against their jihadi adversaries. To that end, in 2000, the year before 9/11, the U.S. State Department did not include any jihadi attacks in Africa among its list of "Significant Terrorist Incidents."[17][b]

Fast forward 20 years, and the story has changed drastically: jihadi violence in Africa has seen a profound rise, particularly in the past decade. According to ACLED, 2020 saw 4,958 violent attacks perpetrated by African jihadi actors.[18] In the last decade alone, jihadi violence on the continent has increased 17-fold: the 4,958 violent events in 2020 stand in stark contrast to "only" 288 violent jihadi events in 2009 according to ACLED.[19] A rise in attacks has led to a concurrent rise in deaths. African jihadi groups were responsible for an estimated 13,059 deaths in 2020 alone.[20] These occurred primarily across five major theaters of instability: Lake Chad, the Sahel, Egypt, Somalia, and Mozambique.[21] Twenty-two African countries—nearly half of the continent—now faces violence from jihadi groups.[22]

This profound rise in jihadi violence over the past 20—but especially past 10—years has catapulted the continent into the

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b   While the State Department opted not to highlight any jihadi incidents in Africa, an inclusive approach to counting jihadi attacks in the Global Terrorism Database points to approximately 83 such attacks, mostly in Algeria.

Al-Qa`ida-linked al-Shabaab recruits walk down a street on March 5, 2012, in the Deniile district of Somalia's capital, Mogadishu, following their graduation. (Mohamed Abdiwahab/AFP via Getty Images)

new global epicenter of jihadi violence, a lamentable position that has become clear 20 years after 9/11. For its part, START's 2020 overview on the state of global terrorism underscored that seven of the 10 countries with the greatest increases in terrorism in 2019 were in Africa. In the same year, the continent had the second highest number of terrorism-related deaths in the world, following only South Asia.[23] Yet the arrival of the African continent as the greatest global generator of jihadi violence arguably came in the summer of 2021. In June 2021, the Global Coalition to Defeat the Islamic State surprised those not paying attention by declaring Africa as the new global priority region in which to combat the Islamic State; it proposed the creation of a new task force to combat Islamic State groups there and emphasized the importance of bringing in new African members into the anti-Islamic State coalition.[24] The next month, July 2021, saw the African Center for Strategic Studies note that the past year over year review of violence by African Islamist groups showed an unprecedented, record-setting level of violence.[25] Furthermore, later that month, the U.N. team charged with monitoring the global jihadi threat found—in what it called "the most striking development of the period under review"—that during the first half of 2021, the African continent was the world region most afflicted by jihadi terrorism, with the greatest number of global casualties caused by U.N.-designated jihadi groups.[26]

Four Reasons for the Surge of Jihadi Violence and Why it Will Persist

What factors caused violence to proliferate so dramatically over the past 20 years? Most of all, domestic social conditions on the continent led to the rise of jihadism and helped al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State to become entrenched. The presence of groups allied with al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State simultaneously ensured that the United States and global partners were concerned about threats on the continent, while also leading to "jihadi myopia" by global policymakers. While local African insurgencies' links to global jihadi organizations are important, focusing on them led to overly securitized counterterrorism policies, which have failed to mitigate—and arguably even contributed to—the precipitous rise of violence evidenced on the continent today. The piece now explores in more detail four factors that have contributed to the rising jihadi threat in Africa.

1. Al-Qa`ida: A Durable and Pernicious Presence

The first factor that contributed to the surge in violence in Africa was al-Qa`ida's implantation and recruitment of affiliates in the East, North, and Sahel. The affiliates have provided the global jihadi group with a capable and enduring presence on the African continent. At various points, al-Qa`ida has provided its formal and informal affiliates in Africa with guidance, reputational cachet, and resources; importantly, however, such assistance from al-

Qa`ida core has not been central to its African affiliates' longevity. Instead, their resilience primarily comes from their effectiveness at exploiting local and regional conditions.

Al-Qa`ida was no stranger to Africa before 2001. It was al-Qa`ida's most important hub in the 1990s: as noted, the group enjoyed safe haven in Sudan, trained local militants in Somalia, and conducted its first major operation in the simultaneous bombings of the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998. However, by 2001, al-Qa`ida's presence in Africa had dwindled to encompass only a residual network in the Horn. While it retained businesses in Sudan and a network of veteran local operatives in East Africa, by this point, much of the organization was already ensconced in Afghanistan.[27] Nonetheless, al-Qa`ida still had enough reach on the continent post-9/11 to orchestrate attacks in Djerba, Tunisia, in April 2002 and Mombasa, Kenya, in November 2002, and to support one in Casablanca, Morocco, in May 2003.[28]

Several years later, al-Qa`ida fully reasserted its presence on the continent by cultivating formal affiliate alliances with existing jihadi groups. One of the groups involved in the insurgency in Algeria during the 1990s, the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), became al-Qa`ida's official branch in North Africa, renaming itself to al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in 2007. In Somalia, al-Shabaab privately gained affiliate status in 2010 and then was publicly acknowledged as al-Qa`ida's official branch in East Africa in 2012, though did not adopt an "al-Qaeda" tag in its name.[29] Later, and through AQIM, al-Qa`ida strengthened its presence in the Sahel in 2017 with the formation of JNIM, a merger of four local jihadi groups, which declared fealty to al-Qa`ida.[30]

Over time, al-Qa`ida core has offered its African branches guidance on governance, strategy, and targeting, as well as advice on managing counterterrorism pressure.[31] And even though al-Qa`ida's affiliates in Africa have not always heeded its counsel—most notably in terms of limiting the deaths of fellow Muslims[32]—their alliances have been sustained despite challenges posed by domestic and international counterterrorism pressures, leadership losses, and the rise of a rival in the Islamic State.

Al-Qa`ida's East African affiliate, al-Shabaab, is one major reason for the rising jihadi violence in Africa writ large. Not only is al-Shabaab al-Qa`ida's strongest global affiliate, it is the most dynamic militant group on the continent. Indeed, despite 15 years of international military pressure and investment in the Somali government (including in both cases by the United States), al-Shabaab has consistently conducted the most attacks each year of any jihadi group in Africa.[33] Part insurgent group, part terrorist organization, part shadow government, and part mafia, al-Shabaab effectively combines provisionary and punitive governance to regularly outperform the Somali government. On the provisionary side, it provides harsh but relatively predictable order in the areas it controls and justice through its shadow governance in areas it does not directly control. In contrast, the government is at best absent and at worst unpredictable and predatory. Even people residing outside of al-Shabaab's territory choose to use its judicial system and its roads. Its courts have a reputation for being more efficient, effective, and fair than the government's.[34] At its checkpoints, the group charges set tolls and provides receipts, while government checkpoints charge arbitrary amounts at multiple points on the same road.[35] On the punitive front, its extortion racket is coercive and widely resented, but it extracts funds from all sectors of the

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economy, giving the group reach throughout southern Somalia and a budgetary surplus.[36] In addition to its military and governance "successes" in Somalia, al-Shabaab has a robust and increasingly capable wing in Kenya.[37]

On the other side of the continent, before the GSPC became AQIM, the former group was on life support. Many members had accepted Algerian government amnesties after years of brutal violence, and interest was low for others to join to replace GSPC's defecting members.[38] But affiliation with al-Qa`ida helped breathe new life into the organization.[39] By becoming an al-Qa`ida affiliate, the former GSPC gained greater recruitment appeal and expanded its targets and tactical profile.[40] Its success would also lead it to becoming a force multiplier for other jihadis; AQIM, for instance, provided training to Boko Haram.[41] Over time, AQIM increasingly moved out of Algeria and southward, into the Sahel, where it forged ties and enhanced the capability of local jihadis, culminating in a jihadi takeover in northern Mali in 2012. The resultant French intervention led AQIM-affiliated jihadis to scatter throughout the region, eventually leading to a reconstitution and subsequent alliance of several local jihadi groups, with AQIM support, to form JNIM, which pledged allegiance to al-Qa`ida, in 2017.[42] Since then, JNIM has effectively leveraged ethnic and communal tensions and Sahelian government inefficiencies to embed into society, including exploiting criminal networks.[43] The results are clear: violence in the region has grown exponentially each year since 2017. While violence by JNIM is currently centered in Mali and Niger, it has expanded as a threat to states previously unaffected by jihadism prior to 9/11, to include most notably Burkina Faso, but also Senegal, and Côte d'Ivoire.[44]

Though these groups—AQIM, al-Shabaab, and JNIM—are fundamental generators of the violence currently seen in Africa, it is important to emphasize that their al-Qa`ida affiliations do not define them. Rather, local conditions have been more central to their resilience than their connections with al-Qa`ida. For those seeking to combat these groups, their al-Qa`ida affiliations have proven a double-edged sword. On the one hand, these groups' relationships with al-Qa`ida have been precisely the links that mobilized international resources to counter these organizations; in the absence of links to al-Qa`ida, they may have received little attention. On the other hand, in emphasizing these three groups' existence as part of the broader al-Qa`ida orbit, national governments and regional and global powers have responded with overly securitized approaches. Over time, such kinetic counterterrorism measures

have produced significant tactical gains, eliminating key leaders and reducing groups' territorial holdings. Yet, 20 years after 9/11, al-Qa`ida's affiliates remain deeply entrenched and their alliances with al-Qa`ida have persisted despite adversity. Now, they have received a morale and ideological boost from the Taliban's takeover in Afghanistan; after all, al-Qaida's affiliates swear *bay`a* to the Taliban's leader as well as al-Qaida's.[45] Going forward, they will remain capable of inflicting significant levels of violence in the Sahel and East Africa, while even their affiliation with al-Qa`ida may not be enough for international governments to continue investing in efforts to counter them.

2. The Emergence and Spread of the Islamic State

While al-Qa`ida set the stage for the long durée of jihadism on the continent, in the past seven years, the Islamic State has taken up the mantle.

Islamic State Central has actively worked to stand up, create, and support various regional groupings (which it grandiosely calls "provinces") around the continent, whose members carry out violence in its name. Beginning in 2014, jihadi insurgent groups around the continent began pledging allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and the Islamic State, becoming new *wilayat*, or provinces, of the Islamic State in Africa. While each province undertook Islamic State-approved activities—violence against their adversaries and varying degrees of attempts at governance and territorial control—one unifying theme was their mutual commitment to the ideals, at least ostensibly, of a global caliphate.

As of September 2021, the Islamic State boasts six official African provinces. These are found in Libya (created in 2014), Algeria (2014), Sinai (2014), West Africa (2015), Somalia (2018), and Central Africa (2019). However, because the West Africa Province has two "wings"—one in the Lake Chad Basin (ISWAP-Lake Chad) and one in the Sahel (ISWAP-Greater Sahara)—as does the Central Africa Province—with "wings" in Mozambique and the Democratic Republic of Congo—the Islamic State has touchpoints in at least eight African locations.[46] In addition to these formal provinces, the Islamic State has supporters around the continent who, though not part of official Islamic State provinces, have undertaken attacks in its name in places ranging from Tunisia to Morocco to Kenya to South Africa. The Islamic State's six formal provinces (or eight branches) reflect its critical role in the proliferation of African jihadism in the post-9/11 period.[47] Underscoring how important an area of operations Africa has become for the Islamic State, an estimated 41 percent of all global deaths inflicted by Islamic State militants in 2019 occurred in Africa.[48]

Beyond the mere creation of administrative units on the continent—which broadly parallel al-Qa`ida's affiliates—Islamic State Central has, to varying degrees, provided its African provinces various types of support that have served to generate and exacerbate violence. In the case of its Libya province, the Islamic State sent emissaries from Iraq to help locals and returned foreign fighters to stand up its branch there,[49] offering them blueprints for governance, some financial transfers, and advice on strategy and tactics. Similarly, Islamic State Central has facilitated financial transfers to the Islamic State in West Africa (ISWAP-Lake Chad),[50] Somalia,[51] and Central Africa (DRC).[52] In Sinai, financial transfers and weapons transfers came from Islamic State Central.[53] The Islamic State has also offered advice to its provinces, giving guidance on strategy and tactics (ISWAP-Lake Chad),[54] reconciling with its rivals (ISWAP-Lake Chad),[55] or standing up to them (ISWAP-

> "Underscoring how important an area of operations Africa has become for the Islamic State, an estimated 41 percent of all global deaths inflicted by Islamic State militants in 2019 occurred in Africa."

Greater Sahara).[56] It has encouraged foreign fighters to come to different regions of the continent (for example, Libya),[57] and has highlighted attacks by its provinces on the African continent in its media releases.[58] Its advice has often been heeded, and when it is ignored, it usually has been done diplomatically. While there have been no notable instances of public dissent about Islamic State Central's directives from its African provinces, cases have arisen where its provinces have been non-obedient: most notable was the tendency of Abubakar Shekau, the one-time leader of ISWAP, to continue using child suicide bombers against Islamic State Central's demands.[59] However, directives of Islamic State Central—beyond requirements for all media to be centrally released by the Islamic State[60]—have not been particularly demanding. Indeed, most of the successes of the African Islamic State provinces (the early days in Libya being an exception) have been more a product of their own making than because of the guidance or assistance of Islamic State Central.[61]

Arguably more important than directed assistance from Islamic State Central has been the informal changes that have come about as a result of its emergence. While assistance from Islamic State Central tended to be ad hoc and infrequent, simply by becoming provinces, groups often adopted the informal "norms" of the Islamic State. Most notably, provinces engaged in new, often more brutal tactics, like beheadings[62] and suicide bombings,[63] carried out prison raids as advocated by the Islamic State,[64] attempted to govern and hold territory,[65] and encouraged sectarian tensions.[66] Thus, even when not aided directly in these pursuits by Islamic State Central, its African provinces' desire to more closely resemble the Islamic State Central of its heyday in 2014-2017 led to their perpetuation of its *modus operandi*.

Beyond the hierarchical role that Islamic State Central plays, the existence of this network of provinces has created a lateral support system between the Islamic State's regional branches that has facilitated increased violence. Its African provinces have waged propaganda campaigns to encourage other insurgent groups to pledge *bay`a*,[67] facilitated others' pledges of *bay`a*,[68] and provided training for one another.[69] At Islamic State Central's request, some of its provinces oversee other provinces (Somalia over Islamic State Central Africa Province (ISCAP), for example),[70] and members have traveled between provinces.[71] Indeed, even as Islamic State Central's own global fortunes declined further in 2019 with the loss of its last territory in Syria and the death of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, its African provinces actually increased their violence, with new provinces emerging and others undertaking retaliatory violence in the name of Islamic State Central, not least due to these mutual support systems.[72] In looking to the future, the salafi-jihadi violence that currently proliferates on the African continent shows no signs of abating, not least because of the mutual support provided by

these networks.

3. Salience of Jihadi Narratives in the Face of Domestic African Challenges

Above all, local social, political, and economic dynamics within African states have created the void that jihadi actors have exploited post-9/11, and these conditions show no signs of improving. Without the failures of African states, al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State would not have found such viable partners in these states' citizens. Lack of economic opportunity; ethnic, tribal, and religious grievances; as well as unresponsive state structures have allowed groups affiliated with al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State to co-opt local social and political networks, leveraging jihadi narratives to speak to local societal grievances, and in many cases, establish legitimacy among local populations that rival states themselves.[73]

Across sub-Saharan Africa, nearly every second person lives in poverty, due to a combination of poor macroeconomic policy,[74] corruption,[75] and lack of external investment,[76] among other factors. Jihadi groups have capitalized on the lack of economic opportunities in the region to outbid governments and other rival jihadi groups. One group that has been particularly adept at exploiting such grievances has been ISWAP-Lake Chad. Indeed, given that about 40 percent of Nigeria's population lives in poverty[77]—the areas of its conflict-ridden north and northeast being the poorest—ISWAP sought to govern in ways that leave local civilians economically better off under its control compared to its now significantly weakened rival,[78] "Boko Haram," in addition, more importantly, to outperforming the Nigerian state in some ways.[79] In contrast to government extortion, cargo seizures, and crackdowns on trade,[80] ISWAP's taxation of goods is generally accepted by civilians. Some of the population in the Lake Chad area even credit ISWAP with fostering a better environment for business, primarily in the trade of rice, fish, and dried pepper.[81] Furthermore, while rival "Boko Haram's" methods of generating funds have been opaque and exploitative,[82] ISWAP's collection of *zakat* (religious taxes on the wealthy to distribute to the poor) are collected systematically. And the results are lucrative: ISWAP claimed its "Zakat Office" collected about $157,000 during Ramadan and the month prior in the Islamic State's May 2021 Al Naba bulletin. Besides the financial benefit for the group, the collection of *zakat* "allows ISWAP to present themselves as justice-minded Muslims to a majority-Muslim local population."[83]

Throughout Africa, inter-communal ethnic violence has long inflamed tensions and undermined security. In the past two decades, al-Qa`ida- and Islamic State-affiliated groups have exploited such grievances. Perhaps most notably, ISWAP-Greater Sahara has taken advantage of conflicts between Fulani and Tuaregs in the Mali-Niger border area, primarily targeting Tuaregs in several attacks on civilians in 2017 and 2018.[84] On top of capitalizing on long-standing grievances between Fulani herders and Dogon farmers in central Mali, JNIM members have also acted as mediators in local conflicts,[85] increasing their clout among certain communities. Jihadi leaders have taken up the mantle of mobilizing adherents across tribal, ethnic, and racial cleavages by employing jihadi rhetoric to preach unity among Muslims against common threats.[86] Most notably, JNIM leader Iyad Ag Ghali, a prominent leader of the Tuareg rebellion in 2012, departed from earlier tradition and called for all Muslims in northern Mali—whether Tuareg, Arab, Fulani, Songhai, or Bambara—to fight against "Western crusaders" and their local allies.[87] By utilizing existing local conflicts in the Sahel,

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ISWAP-Greater Sahara and JNIM are able to tap into a steady supply of individuals ready to take up arms against rival groups or government forces.[88]

Jihadi groups have also exploited states' unresponsiveness and dysfunction, often serving as viable fill-ins when African states cannot or will not provide social services required of a state to their citizens. Nowhere has this been more apparent than in Somalia, where decades of international efforts to erect a viable central government are as fragile as ever, and where, in such an absence, al-Shabaab has filled in. Rather than prioritizing efforts to provide services to the population (or combating al-Shabaab, which is working to offer such services), the Somali Federal Government has recently been preoccupied by infighting with Federal Member States, strife that erupted into armed clashes on the street of Mogadishu earlier this year.[89] Meanwhile, al-Shabaab has erected a shadow government with reach throughout most of southern Somalia that outperforms the government, especially in dispute resolution and the provision of a semblance of order.[90] Indeed, the scholar Mohamed Haji Ingiriis went so far as to say that "Insecurity under al-Shabaab is far better than security under the federal government."[91]

Another example of jihadis' exploitation of unresponsive state structures occurred in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. The Islamic State exploited the security vacuum in Libya after the fall of the Qaddafi regime, briefly carving out control over some coastal cities, especially Sirte, in 2014.[92] The looting of state arsenals also provided an abundant supply of weapons that destabilized the Sahel in the following years,[93] when young Tuareg revolutionaries—some who had returned from Libya after Gaddafi's fall in 2011—joined the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad[94] and laid the foundations for the 2012 Tuareg rebellion in Mali.[95] This dynamic of weak state structures facilitating the transnational movement of arms and ideas is not new, but it is particularly salient in a region where population groups often enjoy closer ties across state borders than to their own governments in distant capitals.[96]

While the above examples highlight specific economic, communal, and state vulnerabilities, the reality on the ground is much more fluid: the proliferation of jihadi violence on the continent has grown precisely because of groups' abilities to manipulate a wide array of local issues to advance their goals. It is an intersection of global, local, and individual level factors that have all contributed to the "wildfire of terrorism" that is, according to the commander of United States Africa Command General Stephen

Townsend, now sweeping across Africa.[97] These enabling conditions show few signs of improving and may deteriorate further. The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic are likely to erode some of the gains in economic and human development of the past decades.[98] As governments in Africa face yet another wave of COVID-19 with less than three percent of the population vaccinated,[99] jihadi groups will have further opportunity to exploit economic hardship, existing grievances, and lackluster institutional responses.

4. Ineffective Counterterrorism Approaches

The fourth phenomenon contributing to rise of terrorism on the continent has arguably been the rise in efforts to combat it: Africa is, in some ways, worse for the fix.

To combat jihadi threats on the continent, the United States has conducted some airstrikes and special operations missions, most notably in Somalia and Libya. However, more often it has worked to counter African jihadi groups by supporting other countries' military interventions and participating in training, advising, and equipping missions that have sometimes escalated into direct U.S. interventions.[100]

Overall, direct Western interventions have produced numerous tactical accomplishments. France's Operation Serval in the Sahel helped roll back jihadis' gains in Mali and subsequent operations from its Operation Barkhane eliminated AQIM's leader and senior JNIM figures.[101] In East Africa, U.S. airstrikes and special operations in Somalia killed some of the most veteran and capable attack planners in Somalia, including East African al-Qa`ida operatives and several of al-Shabaab's founding leaders.[102] In Libya, U.S. airstrikes were instrumental in dislodging the Islamic State from its stronghold in Sirte in December 2016.[103] Unfortunately, despite these accomplishments, in both Mali and Somalia, there has been little, if any, long-term strategic progress against al-Qa`ida- or Islamic State-affiliated groups, the Libya example arguably notwithstanding.[104] Moreover, while some military pressure is essential, the limitations of such action in the absence of political and governance improvements have become clear. Unfortunately, that realization has come as international forces have grown weary of such military commitments, especially in light of changing national security priorities.

Though direct kinetic actions receive the most headlines, they have not actually been the centerpiece of the U.S.-led counterterrorism effort in Africa.[c] Rather, the post-9/11 diagnosis that "under-governed" spaces in Africa could lead to the growth of jihadi threats produced a U.S.-led effort to build African governments' counterterrorism capacity, such as the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership and the Partnership for Regional East Africa Counterterrorism.[d] Such efforts, initiated before the threat had metastasized in either region, were intended to build local capability to prevent and counter the threat. On this score, U.S.-led counterterrorism efforts have clearly fallen short, for five

> **"Rather than treating jihadism as a complex combination of transnational affiliations and local drivers, capacity building efforts focused on the former, resulting in an emphasis on building security and military capability. But this investment was not matched by effective capacity building to improve governance and address underlying grievances. In other words, capacity building may have built some local government capacity to *fight* jihadism but not to address what *fueled* it."**

main reasons.

First, the West's investment was insufficient given the scale of the need. Africa—and the numerous regions and countries that the continent contains—has not been the top priority in the U.S.-led counterterrorism campaign, falling well behind the Middle East and South Asia in terms of attention and investment.[e] For example, the U.S. military spends less than one percent, a mere 0.3 percent to be precise, of its budget on Africa.[105] Yet the shortfalls in Africa were equally, if not more, acute and the spread of jihadism on the continent has rivaled and now surpasses conditions in the two aforementioned regions.[106]

Second, U.S.-led counterterrorism capacity building approaches have been too greatly shaped by groups' al-Qa`ida or Islamic State affiliations. Rather than treating jihadism as a complex combination of transnational affiliations and local drivers, capacity building efforts focused on the former, resulting in an emphasis on building security and military capability. But this investment was not matched by effective capacity building to improve governance and address underlying grievances. In other words, capacity building may have built some local government capacity to *fight* jihadism but not to address what *fueled* it.[f] For example, the 2002 Pan-Sahel Initiative focused on building military capability of the four Sahelian countries, driven by concerns that these "under-governed spaces" could become a safe haven. Though the Trans-Sahara

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c   Of note, the authors are looking specifically at counterterrorism engagement in this article. In terms of broader U.S. engagement, the Congressional Research Service reports that "assistance to Africa primarily focuses on addressing health challenges, notably relating to HIV/AIDS, malaria, maternal and child health, and nutrition." *Sub-Saharan Africa: Key Issues and U.S. Engagement* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, 2021), p. 15.

d   These were successor programs to the Pan-Sahel Initiative and the East Africa Counterterrorism Initiative, respectively.

e   For example, in the 2011 U.S. counterterrorism strategy, East Africa and the Sahel/Maghreb were listed as the fourth and seventh priorities, respectively, in the Areas of Focus section. The 2018 U.S. CT strategy references Africa only once in the document, though it also flags Boko Haram as a "radical Islamist terror group."

f   Admittedly, as the Congressional Research Service noted, "comprehensive regional or country-level breakouts of U.S. assistance are not routinely made publicly available in budget documents, complicating estimates of U.S. aid to the region." *U.S. Assistance to sub-Saharan Africa* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, 2020), Summary and pp. 8-9. Thus, it is hard to directly compare funding levels for military/security versus prevention in efforts to counter jihadism. Nonetheless, given the proliferation of jihadism, the efficacy of prevention efforts, specifically the lack thereof, is clear.

Ivorian soldiers take part in the inauguration of the International Academy for Combating Terrorism (AILCT) in Jacqueville, Ivory Coast, on June 10, 2021. (Issouf Sanogo/AFP via Getty Images)

Counterterrorism Partnership had a more expansive mission, in Mali—which would prove to be the linchpin in the region for jihadi growth—more than half of the spending was on military projects.[107] More to the point, these years of investment did not prevent the subsequent jihadi takeover and insurgency in Mali.

Third, some capacity-building resources went to local partners that were opportunistic, predatory, and corrupt, and thereby produced limited, if any, improvements in governance on the ground. Some African leaders self-servingly saw the United States' counterterrorism focus as a means to secure their power or stifle opposition. In addition, being a "good" African counterterrorism partner—i.e., being willing to target or detain suspected terrorists—allowed African governments to enjoy strong bilateral relationships with the United States while sidestepping democracy and human rights concerns. For instance, the abuses wrought by Algeria's notoriously brutal counterinsurgency campaign in the 1990s were overlooked immediately after 9/11 as the country became hailed as a regional bulwark against jihadism.[108] Furthermore, African governments perceived to be "good" U.S. counterterrorism partners have had little incentive to reform or improve governance, and some of their actions taken in the name of counterterrorism actually exacerbated radicalization.[109] In a 2020 report, the United Nations Mission in Mali accused Malian and Nigerien troops of scores of extrajudicial killings.[110] In 2015, Amnesty International reported that the Nigerian military had arrested at least 20,000 young men since 2009, arbitrarily or in mass 'screening' operations.[111] In the 2014 Operation Usalama Watch, Kenyan security forces arrested and relocated thousands of Somalis, exacerbating grievances al-Shabaab used to recruit.[112] Finally, in Mozambique, where the Islamic State is touting its newest affiliate, some local youths have joined the insurgency in response to abuses by security forces.[113]

Fourth, capacity building did not produce the desired results

because some local governments simply did not share the West's view that combating jihadism was their number one concern. In fact, many of the African governments that the United States has assisted would not have placed combating jihadism at the top of their domestic agendas absent U.S. pressure. From their perspective, myriad other security, health, and governance concerns were deemed equally, if not more, pressing. While they sought and accepted assistance to combat jihadism, their true priorities lay elsewhere. For example, in the years after 9/11, the Malian government was more concerned about further Tuareg unrest in the north than the GSPC's activities there, which consisted primarily of smuggling.[114]

Finally, the U.S.-led diagnosis that expanding the reach of central African governments into contested areas was the best solution to "under-governed" spaces[g] had drawbacks. The United States and other international actors emphasized building central governments' capacities to expand their writ, but central governments were not necessarily well positioned to counter the rise of jihadism in those places. A greater central government presence sometimes meant the extension of corrupt, oppressive, or predatory actors into already disenfranchised communities. Building central governments' capacity to expand their writ often meant increasing their security apparatuses in places that had been "under-governed" at least in part because of center-periphery tensions.[115] Rather than communities welcoming a greater central government presence, they sometimes saw the increase in security forces as encroachment

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g   For example, the 2003 U.S. Counterterrorism Strategy commits that "The United States will work in concert with our international and regional partners to ensure effective governance over ungoverned territory, which could provide sanctuary to terrorists." "National Strategy for Combating Terrorism," The White House, February 2003, p. 22.

"Given the exponential increase in the threat from jihadis in Africa, it is clear that counterterrorism measures to date have been, at best, insufficient."

by a rival ethnic, tribal, or religious group. Building on the previous discussion on northern Mali, the limited central government presence there was the result of the Tuareg rebellion in the 1990s, and the exertion of greater central government authority in the name of counterterrorism reactivated suspicions of the central government among Tuareg communities, especially in light of their perception that the Malian government had under-invested in public services.[116] In Kenya, an increased security presence in the predominantly Muslim coastal areas of the country fueled grievances about mistreatment by the "Christian" government. For example, in 2012 and 2013, riots broke out in Mombasa after the killings of radical clerics suspected of supporting al-Shabaab.[117] The clerics' supporters saw the Kenyan police as being behind their deaths, while a Kenyan government task force could not establish culpability.[118]

Given the exponential increase in the threat from jihadis in Africa, it is clear that counterterrorism measures to date have been, at best, insufficient. Perhaps most alarmingly, the dramatic worsening of the jihadi threat in Africa came while counterterrorism was the top U.S. priority in Africa. Now, its attention has shifted, raising concerns that the threat in Africa will further worsen. Why should the United States care?

Five Reasons Why the United States Should Care

As the African continent became embroiled in violence over the past 20 years, U.S. government officials working to counter the phenomenon have recognized the dire trends outlined above. A December 2019 Department of Defense Inspector General report noted that in the Sahel, the problem of jihadi-linked violence had grown so intractable that the Defense Department had "shifted its strategy from 'degrading' VEOs [violent extremist organizations] to 'containing' them."[119] Fast forward two years, and in June 2021, the commander of AFRICOM, General Stephen Townsend, stated that: "Despite all of our best efforts ... terrorism [on the African continent] continues to spread ... The spread of terrorism has continued relatively unabated."[120] In no uncertain terms and according to all measures, the threat from jihadis on the African continent has dramatically worsened since the U.S.-led efforts to minimize it began 20 years ago. Below, the authors outline five reasons why, beyond threats to people and states on the African continent, the United States should care.

1. The Direct Impact on Americans and U.S. interests

The violence has directly affected U.S. interests through high-profile, though infrequent, attacks on Americans. Perhaps most widely known, in September 2012, U.S. Ambassador to Libya, J. Christopher Stevens was one of four Americans that were killed when Libyans associated with Ansar al-Sharia (Libya) raided a U.S. consulate in Benghazi.[121] Protests and attacks on U.S. embassies occurred in Egypt[122] and Tunisia[123] as well. Another attack against a U.S. diplomatic facility occurred in October 2016, when an

individual inspired by the Islamic State stabbed a Kenyan guard at the U.S. embassy in Nairobi, Kenya.[124] In addition to striking U.S. diplomatic facilities, African jihadis have also targeted U.S. military personnel. For example, in October 2017, the Islamic State in Greater Sahara ambushed a joint U.S. and Nigerien convoy in the village of Tongo Tongo, Niger, killing four U.S. Green Berets. In January 2020, al-Shabaab attacked a military base housing U.S. and Kenyan troops in Manda Bay, Kenya; three Americans were killed.[125] Elsewhere, there have been attempted or thwarted attacks against U.S. facilities on the continent; for instance, in April 2017, Nigerian authorities revealed that they had thwarted a plan by "Boko Haram" to attack the U.S. embassy in Abuja.[126] Such attacks and plots are almost certain to persist in the future. In addition to the direct toll on American personnel from jihadi violence, such violence has imposed an intangible cost on the U.S. posture in Africa. With the proliferation of jihadi groups and their violence, American officials have increasingly been forced to seclude themselves in heavily fortified embassy compounds, limiting their ability to engage with the governments, organizations, and civilians who are central to the effort to reverse the tide.

Fortunately, American citizens in Africa have only rarely experienced the full brunt of escalating African jihadi violence to date. Since 9/11, only one American, Jeffery Woodke,[127] is definitively known to have been kidnapped by an African jihadi group (the Islamic State in West Africa Greater Sahara, ISWAP-GS); he remains in captivity as of this writing. Other American civilians have been victims of jihadi-linked African groups, though evidence does not suggest that they were targeted for their citizenship directly. For instance, in January 2013, members of AQIM attacked the In Amenas gas processing facility in Algeria, killing three Americans.[128] An American was killed when al-Shabaab struck the Dusit hotel and office complex in Nairobi in January 2019,[129] and more were wounded when the group attacked the Westgate Mall in 2013.[130] And yet, while American citizens have largely been spared in the jihadi violence wracking the continent, this will likely change if the current trends are not reversed.

The direct threat to the U.S. homeland from African jihadi groups has historically been limited and is likely to remain so. While African jihadi groups have occasionally demonstrated interest in attacking the United States, it has only ever been a secondary or tertiary goal for African jihadis. Most notably, in 2019, authorities arrested a Kenyan man, Cholo Abdi Abdullah, in the Philippines on weapons charges for planning a "9/11 style attack" inside the United States at the behest of al-Shabaab.[131] In addition, ISWAP (Lake Chad)—the most powerful Islamic State branch in Africa—is reportedly devoting resources to attacking "Western homelands," though it is not assessed to currently possess such capabilities.[132] AFRICOM Commander General Stephen J. Townsend stated in congressional testimony in January 2020 that most African jihadi groups "seek to strike at the U.S. in the region" and some "aspire to strike the U.S. homeland."[133]

2. Great Power Competition

The United States has made clear its fatigue with the "long wars" associated with counterterrorism and a concomitant desire to shift to great power competition, including in Africa. Unfortunately, left unchecked, jihadi groups will pose an increasing threat to U.S. interests in Africa and will thereby disrupt the United States' ability to compete effectively with other great powers. The United States' closest African partners—ones it certainly wishes to retain

in the competition with China and Russia—are among those most affected by jihadi violence. Thus, one important way to build lasting partnerships with governments and be the most desirable great power partner is to take seriously the threats facing these countries; though certainly not all countries' primary concern, threats from jihadism have emerged as a major threat in nearly half of the continent.

3. The Stability of Africa
In addition, the United States has been and will remain far more of a target for jihadis than China or Russia, both in Africa and globally. In fact, the limited, albeit consequential, number of attacks on U.S. interests in Africa over the past 20 years partially reflects the United States' heightened security posture there. Of the 30 U.S. diplomatic facilities worldwide designated as High Threat, High Risk posts, 15 are in Africa.[134] China now has three more embassies in Africa than the United States,[135] but perhaps more importantly, its personnel do not face the same degree of threat from jihadi actors. The growing threat to U.S. interests in Africa from jihadi groups will continue to constrain the U.S. diplomatic, development, and military engagement, which will in turn hinder its ability effectively compete with other great powers. In other words, in order to compete effectively with great powers in Africa, the United States must continue investing in efforts against jihadi violent actors.

In addition to the U.S. interest in countering jihadi threats in order to be effective in great power competition, it has an interest in preventing the growing destabilization caused by these groups. Jihadi violence has reached the point that it not only threatens the stability of individual countries, it also threatens the broader stability of much of the continent. Such violence now affects at least five regions on the continent and 22 countries, including several that had no history of jihadism prior to 2001, such as Mozambique and Burkina Faso. It is poised to spread further. The threat from jihadis destabilizing regions comes at a time when such stability is already a major problem. In its 2020 report, the Fund for Peace rated all but one of the countries experiencing a jihadi threat in Africa as in the "elevated warning," "high warning," "alert," and "high alert" and "very high alert" categories, the five least stable ratings of the 11 possible categories.[h] More broadly, 14 of the world's top 20 most fragile states are in Africa.[136] These trends show no signs of abating unless the jihadi threat is addressed, and as General Townsend summed it up: "Simply put, a secure and stable Africa is essential for America's security."[137] Indeed, a more permissive environment for jihadis in Africa, especially when coupled with one in Afghanistan, is a recipe for a broader jihadi resurgence.

4. American Economic Interests
The United States also has economic motivations to counter the jihadi threat. Africa is strategically important in the increasingly globalized world, and its economy is increasingly consequential with a dozen of the world's 25 fastest growing economies.[138] Already, many leading U.S. industries and Fortune 500 companies are investing in Africa, "contributing to U.S. jobs and increasing the revenue base for several cities."[139] Africa is an increasingly important part of U.S. companies' global portfolios.[140] As Grant Harris, the

"Jihadi violence has reached the point that it not only threatens the stability of individual countries, it also threatens the broader stability of much of the continent. Such violence now affects at least five regions on the continent and 22 countries, including several that had no history of jihadism prior to 2001, such as Mozambique and Burkina Faso. It is poised to spread further."

Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for African Affairs at the White House from 2011-2015, has argued, "In the long run, the strength of the US economy will, in some way, depend on the interest and capacity of American businesses to operate in Africa."[141] And jihadis can threaten such investment. Nowhere has that become clearer than in northern Mozambique where a U.S. and European energy partners' plan to invest approximately $50 billion in liquid natural gas is being jeopardized by the growing jihadi insurgency of the Mozambican wing of the Islamic State's Central African Province.[142]

5. Broader Geopolitical Considerations
More broadly, as the United States seeks to remain a global leader in an increasingly multi-polar world, Africa has growing political and economic power, making threats to African states of consequence to the United States. One way Africa's sway has become clear is in international organizations. As the analyst Judd Devermont, who from 2015-2018 led the U.S. intelligence community's analytic efforts on sub-Saharan African issues, has pointed out, "It is difficult to advance a UN Security Council resolution without the support of Africa's three non-permanent members ... It is also important to win over African delegations in the UN General Assembly where the continent has the largest and most unified voting bloc."[143] More broadly, Harris captured Africa's strategic importance, saying "The preservation of US global influence requires the advancement of American values abroad and, more directly, cultivating and deepening relations with African states if the United States is to maintain its international standing... The African continent, with its fifty-four countries and over a billion people, will play a growing role in shaping the international order, and will affect the role and vitality of US leadership therein."[144] In short, Harris went on to sum up why the United States should remain invested in Africa:

> A review of Africa's importance to US national security emphasizes two key messages: first, that the United States ignores Africa—replete with vexing transnational threats as well as massive economic opportunity—at its peril; and second, that Africa's geopolitical and economic importance will only grow over time.[145]

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h   The exception was Tunisia, which received a "warning" rating. "Fragile States Index – Annual Report 2021," Fund for Peace, May 20, 2021.

Conclusion: Maintaining a Focus on Countering Jihadism, Adjusting the Strategy

No matter how one looks at it, the effort to counter jihadism in Africa is at a dangerous crossroads. The threat has reached unprecedented levels with no signs of abating. While the United Nations and Global Coalition to Defeat the Islamic State have recognized the need to prioritize Africa, international investment in countering the threat is rapidly diminishing. The combination of a metastasizing threat paired with reduced interest from the major international actors that have sought to mitigate violence portends dangerous times ahead in Africa. Unfortunately, there is no silver bullet now that the threat has deepened and spread as significantly as it has.

In looking back over the past 20 years, did the U.S.-led efforts to minimize the threats of violence by jihadi actors on the African continent succeed? Unfortunately not. Jihadi violence in Africa has significantly increased in size, scope, and depth, and is now at a level far beyond what it was prior to September 11. Moreover, the continent is more unstable and more dangerous than it was before. To explain this alarming situation, the authors have suggested four phenomena—the resilience of al-Qa`ida affiliates; the introduction of Islamic State branches; the enduring socio-political climates in many African countries; and unsuccessful counterterrorism approaches—that underpin the worsening of jihadi violence on the continent.

What then should be done? Above all, though it runs counter to the current political winds, the authors argue that it is premature and unwise to reduce investment in countering jihadi groups in Africa in favor of prioritizing great power competition. The already unprecedented threat from jihadism to U.S. interests in Africa, other Western governments, as well as partner nations in Africa is poised to increase further. In fact, the authors maintain that the United States will struggle to effectively compete with other great powers if it does not prioritize countering jihadism in Africa.

While the focus on jihadism should persist, there is a need for a serious reevaluation of the way the United States and its partners seek to counter the threat in Africa. Given the inability of policies over the past 20 years to successfully mitigate the threat, recommending "more of the same" is a recipe for a worsening situation. Instead, the authors propose five changes to the approach of the past two decades.

1. Fully Pursue More Realistic Goals

First, in light of the above recognition that more of the same offers little hope, in moving forward, it is essential to define a clear and achievable metric of just what "success" might reasonably entail when addressing African jihadi groups. Twenty years after 9/11, it has become clear that wholesale "defeat" of such groups is impossible. Conversely, allowing their unfettered proliferation is likewise unimaginable. The authors' view is that given the track record of the past two decades, "success" in countering the next 20 years of African jihadi violence requires the United States and international partners to contain the level of violence from such groups to a "tolerable" or "manageable" level, an admittedly substantial feat in the current situation. Indeed, there is already some recognition of the need for such a middle-ground metric of success. The 2019 AFRICOM Posture Statement articulates that the combatant command seeks a situation where such threats "are reduced to a level manageable by internal security forces,"[146] though

> "The approach of the past 20 years has highlighted that although some military operations will be needed to counter threats from al-Qa`ida- and Islamic State-affiliated groups, a security-centric strategy failed to stem the exponential growth of jihadism."

even this more modest goal remains well out of reach for the states most affected by jihadism today. By reframing goals to be more in line with the possible, a reduction in the expectations gap—what is expected and what can be done—of citizens and policymakers from the United States and the continent will help help sustain commitment to the mission and prevent disillusionment.

2. Shift Military Actions to be in Support of a Political-Centric Strategy

Second, to bring the level of jihadi violence on the African continent to a manageable—rather than unconstrained—level, the United States should rebalance its counterterrorism approach to prioritize political and economic engagement over the traditional military and security emphasis that it has held. The approach of the past 20 years has highlighted that although some military operations will be needed to counter threats from al-Qa`ida- and Islamic State-affiliated groups, a security-centric strategy failed to stem the exponential growth of jihadism. In January 2020, AFRICOM acknowledged that "The international community is not making durable progress to contain priority VEOs [Violent Extremist Organizations] in Africa, mainly because... [of a] lack a 'whole of coalition' balance between military and non-military investments."[i]

On the other hand, the current U.S. and French military drawdown comes at the worst possible time. Instead of swinging the pendulum so dramatically, military operations should continue but shift into being only one facet—a *supporting* facet—of what would essentially be a political surge, rather than military actions being an end unto themselves or the centerpiece of any strategy. Instead, efforts to improve governance, in particular adherence to the rule of law, anti-corruption initiatives, security sector reform, and an equitable and reliable provision of justice, should be the central focus.

Ultimately, African governments countering jihadi groups need to be seen as legitimate by the populations from which these organizations recruit. This gets back to a basic notion: to the extent that other organizing social paradigms can supersede the utility of membership in jihadi groups, they should be encouraged. The goal, more plainly, is to reduce the appeal of jihadi ideology. In addition, economically, the provision of sustainable livelihoods and economic opportunities can lessen the appeal of membership in such groups.

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i   Priority VEOs are those jihadi groups affiliated with al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State. Stephen J. Townsend, "2020 Posture Statement to Congress," Testimony, Senate Armed Services Committee, January 30, 2020, p. 10.

3. Strike a Nuanced Approach to al-Qa`ida and Islamic State Affiliations

Third, it is necessary to strike a balance on how to view jihadi groups in Africa going forward: policies should not overemphasize the importance of these affiliations, while not minimizing the importance of such branding to local groups themselves. On one hand, their affiliations with al-Qa`ida or the Islamic State are the primary reason that the United States and other Western countries invest in combating these groups; indeed, there was little interest in countering the Allied Democratic Forces in the DRC until the group became part of the Islamic State in the Central Africa Province. On the other hand, however, viewing African jihadi groups associated with al-Qa`ida or the Islamic State primarily through the lens of their transnational affiliations misses the far more influential dynamics of their local conditions, which drive such groups' day-to-day activities more than al-Qa`ida Core or Islamic State Central. Moreover, focusing acutely on their transnational affiliations can also create an uncompromising, military- and security-centric approach to countering them, an approach that has fallen well short.

4. Consider Undertaking Negotiations

Fourth, with an outlook that prioritizes political engagement and views African jihadi groups with more nuance, negotiations with such groups can be a reasonable approach to lessen their violence, if not resolve broader conflicts. To date, the West has been reluctant to engage in or support negotiations with jihadi groups in Africa in no small part because of their al-Qa`ida or Islamic State affiliation and the corresponding military-centric responses. Western reluctance has effectively prevented African governments from engaging in negotiations as well.

There is some merit to this hesitancy now. The United States' deal with the Taliban, military drawdown, and the Taliban's subsequent takeover of Kabul and almost all of Afghanistan have quickly become synonymous with jihadi victory, an outcome that risks energizing the broader global movement. As that case makes clear, negotiations as a pretext to military withdrawal are clearly a failed approach to conflict resolution. But the failures in Afghanistan need not discredit the potential to engage in negotiations with some jihadi elements in Africa, especially those elements driven by more local conditions and grievances, without an artificial timeline or looming plan to withdraw.

Through negotiations—the composition of which should vary based on the particulars of each conflict—it can become clear whether groups have demands and grievances that can and maybe even should be addressed or whether some are truly irreconcilable, something impossible to determine based on rhetoric alone. Negotiations can also divide groups or foster internal tensions, as some elements will refuse to come to the table at all, which can both weaken groups and help to focus military efforts on the irreconcilable. Relatedly, off ramps that allow individuals or factions to renounce violence can be an important tool. A number of the jihadi groups in Africa use coercion as part of their recruitment strategies; thus, more viable avenues for exit can help to peel away some members. Defections are unlikely to produce major gains, but they can be a valuable tool when coupled with negotiations and a political-centric strategy.

5. Recognize the Complementarities Between Near Peer Competition and Counterterrorism

While the authors recommend that countering jihadism remain a priority, a final point is that fighting jihadism and countering international competitors on the continent are not mutually exclusive goals; to the contrary, they are highly complementary. General Townsend's 2020 Senate testimony noted that "building African partner capacity *is* global power competition,"[147] and this applies to counterterrorism assistance more specifically. It remains the case that the United States has a comparative advantage over its two primary rivals in the counterterrorism space on the continent. As China seeks to become a more entrenched security actor and Russia deploys its private military contractors across the continent, the United States could reasonably leverage its experience in counterterrorism as one of many avenues of security engagement with African partners. To be sure, seeking to engage with African states *primarily* through the lens of countering African jihadi groups as a primary fulcrum of engagement to counter China or Russia is inadvisable. At the same time, competing with near peers presents some of the same temptations as countering terrorism has: African governments can use these priorities to cozy up to the United States while ignoring necessary governance reforms. In pursuit of both priorities, the West would do well to think about the criteria for being a good ally so that governance, democracy, and human rights are a prominent part of the equation.

On the 20-year anniversary of 9/11, the prognosis in Africa is grim. The growth in the number of jihadi groups, the number of attacks, the number of casualties, and the number of countries affected point to the need for a continued focused on jihadism with a modified approach toward the new epicenter of jihadi terrorism in the world.   **CTC**

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Twenty Years After 9/11: What Is the Future of the Global Jihadi Movement?

By Colin P. Clarke

Twenty years after 9/11, with the United States withdrawn from Afghanistan, the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, and a shift in focus and resources to great power competition, jihadi terrorism appears to have been demoted to a second-tier priority. But complacency is dangerous. While al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State have been weakened, their affiliates and branches remain active. And even though the violent excesses of Islamic State rule in Syria and Iraq disgusted very many Muslims, jihadi ideology continues to resonate throughout the Arab and Islamic world, fueled by a lack of political and economic progress and sectarian animosities. The fall of Kabul, and the perception of a dramatic victory over a second superpower in Afghanistan, has sent a jolt of energy through the global jihadi movement. With new battlefields in Africa and the potential for Afghanistan now back under Taliban control to once again become a magnet for foreign fighters, there is a significant risk of a jihadi resurgence. In the future, a range of advancing or emerging technologies from autonomous weapons to artificial intelligence to synthetic biology may offer small groups of jihadi terrorists the potential to carry out highly destructive and even catastrophic terrorism, while climate change looks set to create the destabilized conditions in which jihadis thrive.

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Are we serious about dealing with the al Q[a]ida threat? … Is al Q[a]ida a big deal?" Those were questions posed by Richard Clarke, the National Counterterrorism Coordinator at the National Security Council (NSC), to National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice just one week before the al-Qa`ida terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.[1] Clarke went on to explain that there were two schools of thought within the U.S. government about the threat posed by al-Qa`ida prior to 9/11—one school saw al-Qa`ida as little more than "a nuisance" while the other school believed that the terrorist network was "the point of the spear of radical Islam."[2] Twenty years after that initial debate—with blood and treasure

spilled in pursuit of defeating al-Qa`ida and the Taliban militants who hosted them once again in control of Afghanistan—the same questions are being asked.

Speaking in mid-April 2021, U.S. President Joe Biden offered the following assessment of the global terrorism landscape: "Over the past 20 years, the threat has become more dispersed, metastasizing around the globe: al-Shabaab in Somalia; al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula; al-Nusra in Syria; ISIS attempting to create a caliphate in Syria and Iraq, and establishing affiliates in multiple countries in Africa and Asia."[3] President Biden offered these remarks as a justification for his administration's policy of withdrawing the remaining 3,000 U.S. troops from Afghanistan. In early July 2021, President Biden offered more remarks on the withdrawal, noting that in addition to "delivering justice" to al-Qa`ida leader Usama bin Ladin, the United States also achieved its secondary objective, which was "to degrade the terrorist threat to keep Afghanistan from becoming a base from which attacks could be continued against the United States."[4]

Once again, there is a debate within the U.S. government, various intelligence agencies, and the broader counterterrorism and national security community about the magnitude of the threat posed to the U.S. homeland and American interests abroad by al-Qa`ida and the global jihadi movement. Both the Trump and Biden administrations were in favor of a U.S. troop withdrawal from Afghanistan. In defending the Trump administration's overtures to the Taliban to kickstart talks for a negotiated settlement in Afghanistan, President Trump's Secretary of State Mike Pompeo stressed in March 2020 that "Al Qaeda is a shadow of its former self."[5] Subsequently, Representative Adam B. Schiff (D-CA), chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, noted that "the terrorism threat from the Afghan region is not zero, but, at the moment, it's less than it is in other parts of the world."[6]

The Taliban takeover of Kabul in the late summer of 2021 has prompted a reevaluation of the threat. While in June 2021, the Pentagon assessed groups like al-Qa`ida may be able to regenerate and pose a threat to the U.S. homeland within two years of a U.S. military withdrawal, it was reported that "officials now believe terror groups like al-Qaida may be able to grow much faster than expected."[7] Even despite these new concerns, to many it may seem that, after two decades of the Global War on Terrorism, the United States has successfully navigated the challenges posed by the global jihadi movement, which is more of a problem that needs to be managed rather than a growing threat capable of catastrophic destruction. But this set of interpretations fundamentally misunderstands the resiliency and determination of a movement that has grown in size, sophistication, and geographic expanse and looks wholly different than it did merely two decades ago. The opening section of the Biden administration's interim national security strategic guidance notes that global dynamics have shifted

and the world is at "an inflection point."[8] Later in the document, it notes, "We must adapt our approach to counterterrorism, including by aligning our resources to evolving threats."[9] This resource realignment relegates terrorism to a second-tier threat, which risks squandering hard-fought gains against groups like al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State.

In looking at the future of the global jihadi movement, this article proceeds in four parts. First, it assesses the current balance sheet, taking stock of 20 years of terrorism and counterterrorism and laying out where the movement has succeeded and where it has failed. Second, it maps out areas where the global jihadi movement will likely look for new geographic opportunities. Third, it examines the potential future technology of jihadi terror, by looking at how Islamist terrorists may leverage advancing and emerging technologies. Fourth, it concludes with an overview of where things could be headed next and what developments might unfold in the short and long term.

Part One: The Balance Sheet

It is difficult to measure 20 years of progress and setbacks in fighting terrorism and especially difficult to do so in the immediate aftermath of potentially one of the biggest setbacks of all, the recapture of Afghanistan by the Taliban. The United States and its allies have made significant strides in combating salafi jihadis, their organizations, and their networks. Counterterrorism assessments are always perilous endeavors, since not all factors and variables deserve equal weight. Ultimately, for both the United States and its allies on the one hand, and the global jihadi movement on the other, the result is a bit of a mixed bag for both sides. For the jihadis, the conflict with the West has always been a long game, measured in generations, not years. And nearly every positive indicator for the United States and its allies comes with potential drawbacks, negative implications, and second-order effects. For example, the United States has done an admirable job in attacking core al-Qa`ida and Islamic State, only to see these groups develop branches and affiliates in far-flung corners of the globe. In a sense, decentralization has been a relief valve to handling U.S. counterterrorism pressure. In many parts of the world, the situation more closely resembles a stalemate. But if the United States and its allies are indeed locked in a draw with the jihadis, it is the former that is prepared to blink first. The two sections below attempt to measure the current state of affairs by touching upon wins and losses on each side of the ledger.

For all of the critiques leveled against the United States over the Global War on Terrorism and notwithstanding the potentially significant setback of the late summer 2021 Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, the United States has achieved several important milestones. Above all else, there has been no attack on U.S. soil anywhere near equivalent to what occurred on September 11, 2001. The U.S. government—including the intelligence community, federal law enforcement, and the military—has constructed a worldwide counterterrorism apparatus to dismantle terrorist organizations, deny terrorists entry into the country, and disrupt terrorist plots both at home and overseas, especially those targeting U.S. and allied interests.[10] There is danger in taking a victory lap, but there should also be an acknowledgment that protecting the U.S. homeland has remained a top priority across several administrations.
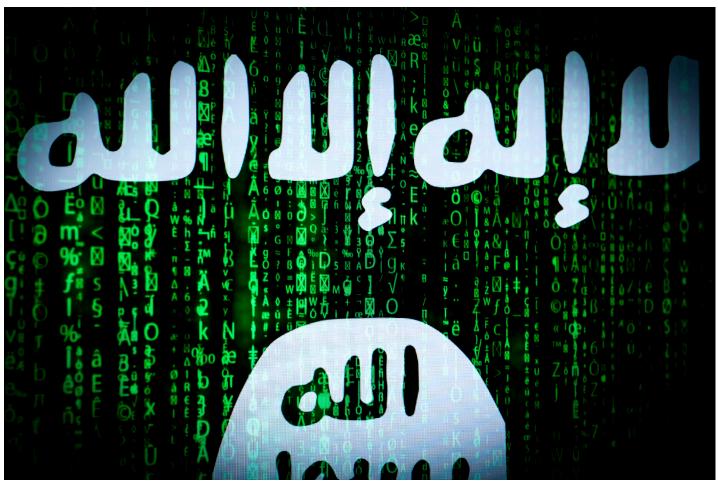
Decapitation operations have successfully eliminated a succession of high-value targets, including Abu Musab al-Zarqawi

> **"For the jihadis, the conflict with the West has always been a long game, measured in generations, not years. And nearly every positive indicator for the United States and its allies comes with potential drawbacks, negative implications, and second-order effects ... In many parts of the world, the situation more closely resembles a stalemate."**

(2006), Usama bin Ladin (2011), Anwar al-Awlaki (2011), Abu Yahya al-Libi (2012), Ahmed Abdi Godane (2014), Abu Khayr al-Masri (2017), Hamza bin Ladin (2019), Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (2019), Qasim al-Raymi (2020), and Abu Muhammad al-Masri (2020). The strongest jihadi groups are limited operationally, and in many cases, jihadi franchise groups are preoccupied with local and regional conflicts and civil wars.[11] Neither al-Qa`ida nor the Islamic State has developed into a mass movement, as the vast majority of Muslims worldwide still harbor negative views of jihadi organizations according to polling data.[12]

Indeed, al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State seem no closer to their ultimate goal of creating a durable caliphate. Al-Qa`ida has always envisaged this as a long-term project. When the Islamic State attempted to create a caliphate, it was crushed, deflating hardline Islamist extremists worldwide. And its horrific violence was put on display for all to see, leaving very many, including in the Muslim world, in disgust. This strengthened the hands of moderates in many parts of the Muslim world in their ideological battle with the extremists and ensured that the prospects of a jihadi takeover in the heart of the Levant remains fairly dim. However, the stunningly rapid Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in the late summer of 2021 restored significant luster to the jihadi cause, with the perception of a dramatic victory over a second superpower in Afghanistan, sending a jolt of energy through the global jihadi movement. And although al-Qa`ida is still a long way from its goal of creating a caliphate, it again has an "Islamic Emirate" in which to operate.

After a whirlwind period between 2014 and 2019 that saw the Islamic State capture and control vast swaths of territory in the Levant while attracting more than 40,000 foreign fighters from over 100 countries,[13] its physical caliphate was finally destroyed in March 2019 as the Syrian town of Baghouz fell to U.S.-led coalition forces.[14] With the Islamic State's core leadership focused on survival, its command-and-control has been attenuated and its core

The Islamic State logo is seen on a computer screen in this photo illustration. (Jaap Arriens/NurPhoto via Getty Images)

leadership mostly contained.[a] The same fate that befell al-Qa`ida in the early 2000s is now playing out for the Islamic State: its once powerful *wilayats* in North Africa and South Asia are struggling to rebuild. The decentralized model that al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State have adopted is manifestly less effective in successfully executing external operations and spectacular attacks, and as a result of relentless Western counterterrorism operations, these groups' networks have (in practice, if not on paper) atomized into smaller, more numerous groups. For example, in parts of northern and western Africa, al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)[b] morphed into a collection of several smaller groups, although Ansar al-Din, al-Murabitoon, and al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb's (AQIM) Sahara branch then linked up to a create a loose-knit al-Qa`ida super grouping in the Sahel known as Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM).[c]

While the operational tempo of jihadi groups, taken as a whole, has declined in recent years, various affiliates have become more active while others have grown semi-dormant. After climbing steadily between 2009 and 2016, the aggregate number of attacks by the Islamic State and al-Qa`ida and their affiliates has declined each year beginning in 2017, leveling off between 2018 and 2020.[15] Lone actor attacks in the West—namely, North America, Europe, and Australasia—inspired by the Islamic State peaked in 2017, but have tapered off over the past several years.[16] The decline in lone actor attacks is likely due to two main factors. First, when the Islamic State lost its physical caliphate, its ability to produce and disseminate propaganda and directives encouraging its supporters to conduct attacks was also attenuated. Second, as noted by the United Nations Security Council monitoring team in a report published in July 2021, the COVID-19 pandemic has "artificially suppressed" the threat of terrorist activity and that attacks are likely to pick up again once travel restrictions are eased.[17]

For all of the gains that the United States and its allies have made against jihadi groups, most have been tactical and many fleeting, rarely rising to the level of strategic and sustained. Moreover,

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a   According to a United Nations report published in July 2021, "ISIL command and control over its provinces has loosened, although it still functions in terms of the provision of guidance and some financial support," while "Delegation of authority to the provinces continues." "Twenty-eighth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2368 (2017) concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities," United Nations Security Council, July 21, 2021.

b   AQIM itself evolved from the ashes of the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), a longtime Algerian jihadi group.

c   JNIM also absorbed the Macina Liberation Front (Macina Battalion), an Ansar al-Din affiliate in central Mali. "Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM)," Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS).

what appear upon first glance to be "victories" are, in reality, often more complicated outcomes with second- and third-order effects. For example, while some consider the decentralized nature of the global jihadi movement an ineffective alliance, there are upsides to this structure for these groups: no center of gravity means there is no catastrophic vulnerability. Decentralization of the global jihadi movement also results in an increasingly diverse set of actors. Entire regions have developed into jihadi hubs, catalyzed by al-Qa`ida or Islamic State branches, but extending to include local groups and front organizations. For foreign fighters and roving jihadis, the decentralized structure translates to an array of options when deciding which insurgencies to join or travel to next.[18] The fact remains, an important part of U.S. military and counterterrorism efforts has been to prevent jihadis from threatening Americans and American facilities, as well as U.S. allies and interests overseas. But like a malignant tumor that has been morcellated, cancerous cells have been scattered to far-flung locales and polities, infecting new areas and perpetuating the illness represented by an ideology and worldview that advocates violent jihad.

The Sahel is the epitome of jihadis realizing so-called 'glocal' (global and local) ambitions, as al-Qa`ida has made crucial headway with local tribes in the region, successfully marrying local grievances with al-Qa`ida's global ambitions.[19] The jihadi threat in North and West Africa has mostly remained local and regional, although those dynamics could change.[20] JNIM propaganda regularly singles out France,[21] and it is not entirely inconceivable that Sahelian jihadis could set their sights on Paris or other Western targets at some point. Moreover, there have been important examples of terrorist group alliances within these regional hubs, with the Sahel once again proving instructive. Notwithstanding the fighting between them, JNIM and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) have been known to cooperate at various points.[22] When terrorist groups form alliances, it can provide opportunities for increased operational effectiveness, while also enhancing the reputation, legitimacy, and stature of some of these organizations.[23]

Competition and cooperation between jihadi groups will look different in different parts of the world. What happens in the Horn of Africa and the Arabian Peninsula might be the inverse of what unfolds in the Levant or the southern Philippines. What is certain, though, is that the global jihadi movement will continue to adapt, transform, and evolve, as some groups splinter while others form anew. By some estimates, there are four times as many jihadis today than there were on September 11, 2001, a massive increase by any measure.[24] The global al-Qa`ida network alone, to say nothing of the Islamic State, operates in more countries now than it did on September 11, and can call upon nearly 20,000 fighters.[25][d] When many analysts predicted that the Arab Spring would be a death

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d   This figure includes approximately 3,500 to 5,000 fighters in Syria; 7,000 each in Somalia and Yemen; and another 400-600 in Afghanistan.

In its most recent report, the U.N. monitoring team tracking the global jihadi threat stated that it "continues to estimate the number of foreign terrorist fighters to be approximately between 8,000 and 10,000, mainly comprised of individuals from Central Asia, the north Caucasus region of the Russian Federation, Pakistan and the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region of China, among others. Although the majority are affiliated foremost with the Taliban, many also support Al-Qaida. Others are allied with ISIL or have ISIL sympathies." "Twelfth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2557 (2020)," United Nations Sanctions Monitoring Team, June 2021.

> **"What is certain ... is that the global jihadi movement will continue to adapt, transform, and evolve, as some groups splinter while others form anew. By some estimates, there are four times as many jihadis today than there were on September 11, 2001, a massive increase by any measure."**

knell for jihadis, the opposite was true, as these groups capitalized upon the ensuing instability to insert themselves as key actors in civil wars and sectarian conflicts.[26]

As others have noted, less pressure tends to equal more terror.[27] According to the U.N. monitoring team report published in July 2021, "the United States military withdrawal and the partial drawdown of the African Union Mission in Somalia left Somali special forces struggling to contain Al-Shabaab without strategic support," while in the Sahel, JNIM is expanding as France reduces its military effort against the jihadis.[28] As Western counterterrorism efforts subside, with resources shifted to great power competition, the global jihadi movement is capable of mounting a comeback. The chaotic scenes that followed the Taliban takeover of Kabul will be used by jihadis to evoke images of the Soviets departing the "graveyard of empires" more than 30 years ago. Usama bin Ladin's assessment of the United States as a 'paper tiger' following the U.S. withdrawal from Somalia in the early 1990s will receive new attention. And the Taliban's late summer 2021 takeover of Afghanistan will be offered as proof that by staying the course, al-Qa`ida and its jihadi allies have prevailed, bleeding the United States economically and setting the conditions for U.S. disengagement from the Arab and Islamic world, something that bin Ladin and his jihadi contemporaries have long declared among their top priorities through an endless stream of propaganda and information operations. Indeed al-Qa`ida Central in congratulating the Taliban for their takeover of Afghanistan stated that "the rubbing of the nose of America and NATO in the mud of Afghanistan has ended the era of American and European arrogance and their ambitions for military occupation of Muslim lands."[29]

Part Two: The Future Geography of Jihadi Terror

Two decades of Western-led counterterrorism efforts have dealt a serious blow to both al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State. If current trends continue, even further decentralization of both organizations should be expected, with affiliates balancing local and global objectives, with local grievances, including economic stagnation, high rates of youth unemployment, and demographic pressures, a daily reminder of the failed expectations that have contributed to recruitment and mobilization among Muslim youth in the past. Demographics, socioeconomic conditions, youth culture, geopolitical context, and (poor) governance all matter as drivers of extremism.[30] As noted by a RAND Corporation study looking at the next generation of salafi-jihadis, "the underlying grievances that

drove radicalization in past generations of Sunni Muslims remain salient in Gen Z."[31] And while local grievances may initially serve to motivate interest in potentially joining a jihadi group, distinct online recruitment strategies, as evidenced by the Islamic State, speak directly to potential recruits and engage in a process of "grooming" to inculcate followers and work to shape individuals' worldviews.[32]

The result of further decentralization will likely be weaker organizations and groups, but more numerous and still lethal offshoots that have the potential to metastasize into menacing threats in their own right. Instead of two blazing infernos, the result is likely to be dozens of more contained, smaller fires, each capable of growing into a more widespread conflagration. Jihadi groups, especially al-Qa`ida, have been adroit in adapting along tactical, operational, and strategic lines. The structure of these organizations allows them to transition between terrorism, insurgency, and guerrilla warfare with relative ease. When counterterrorism pressure becomes difficult to bear, many of these groups have proven adept at operating clandestinely, and shifting resources from attack planning to proselytizing and making inroads with local clans and tribes.

For the United States and its allies, the tradeoff of less intense fires but a greater number of smaller ones may be acceptable. In an ideal world, al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State would have been thoroughly extinguished as threats, their respective support and logistical nodes vanquished, and jihadi ideology sufficiently undermined. But the reality is quite different. Still, given the choice between the two, dealing with decentralized networks with weakened core apparatuses and degraded command-and-control is preferable. Jihadi affiliates will still be able to destabilize regions like the Sahel and the southern Philippines, but in their current state, it is far more difficult, though not impossible, for al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State to plan spectacular attacks on Western interests or launch external operations in major European capitals. Jihadi propaganda will still inspire attacks in the West from lone actors and small cells, many with no connections whatsoever to terrorist organizations. Between September and late November 2020, there were six terrorist attacks in Europe inspired by jihadi ideology.[33]

The decentralization of al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State makes particular countries and regions that received less attention from the U.S. counterterrorism community far more important in the overall strategic picture. Sub-Saharan Africa, for example, is now a major arena for near-peer competition, and many analysts see it as a region where jihadi groups are poised to thrive over the coming months and years.[34] With the Taliban seizing control of Afghanistan after the withdrawal of U.S. troops, it is possible that the country could once again become a major hub for foreign fighters and jihadis from around the world. The worry is this could lead to international terror again being plotted from the Afghanistan-Pakistan (AFPAK) region. One of the lessons of the last 20 years is that wherever jihadis have found significant sanctuaries—in Afghanistan before 9/11 and then in the tribal areas of both Pakistan and Yemen, and most recently in Iraq and Syria—major terrorist attacks or plots against the West directed from these regions have followed.

According to one tally, over the first six months of 2021, the Islamic State claimed 1,415 attacks worldwide, an average of just under eight attacks per day.[35] The analyst who compiled the tally compared the data with data from the same period in previous years. The comparison[36] suggests that based on figures from 2020,

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several affiliates have gained momentum—Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), Islamic State Central Africa Province (ISCAP), and Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISK) in Afghanistan—while Islamic State branches in Egypt's Sinai Peninsula and the Islamic State in East Asia (ISEA) have experienced a marked decrease in activity. There has also been a near complete drop-off in attacks by Islamic State franchise groups in both Yemen and Libya, although a claimed Islamic State attack in Zillah, southern Libya, in August 2021 could indicate the group's opening stages of a campaign to revive its organization in that country.[37]

This section now examines the trajectory of jihadi terrorism in several regions of the world.

Sub-Saharan Africa

According to a recent report by the United Nations, "the most striking development" of the first half of 2021 "was the emergence of Africa as the region most affected by terrorism, and in which the largest numbers of casualties inflicted [by jihadi terror groups] occurred."[38] Nowhere is the situation deteriorating faster than in sub-Saharan Africa. From Mali to Mozambique, jihadis are on the march, as al-Qa`ida and Islamic State affiliates seek to take advantage of sub-Saharan Africa's porous borders, weak security forces, and ethnic and tribal tensions. Many of the same drivers that enabled the growth of violent jihadi groups, including poor governance, still exist and in some cases are more poignant. The Islamic State in particular has made expansion in sub-Saharan Africa one of its overarching priorities, devoting more strategic direction and material assistance to a region previously neglected by the group.[39] The results speak for themselves, and will likely encourage further investment of manpower and resources in African affiliates.[40] In August 2020, ISCAP in Mozambique captured the port city of Mocimboa de Praia in Cabo Delgado province, launching the group to prominence and setting the stage for future attacks.[41] Seven months later, in March 2021, ISCAP launched an attack on the town of Palma in northern Mozambique, taking over territory for four days, killing dozens, and beheading some of the victims.[42] The militants behind the attack belong to Ahl al-Sunnah wa al Jamma'ah (ASWJ), one of the two branches that comprise ISCAP.[43] The Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) in the

Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) constitute the second branch of ISCAP.[44] In late June 2021, ISCAP's DRC-based affiliate claimed responsibility for its first suicide bombing in the country, raising fears of a growing insurgency that increasingly mimics core Islamic State tactics and strategy.[45]

Al-Qa`ida affiliates, including JNIM in the Maghreb and al-Shabaab in Somalia and East Africa, have demonstrated impressive resilience, honing their operational and organizational capabilities, including recruitment, propaganda, and targeting. In parts of the Sahel, both al-Qa`ida and Islamic State militants have sought to gain control over gold mines in order to finance their operations and organizations.[46] If the United States and its allies, including France, continue to draw down forces throughout Africa, it could lead to security vacuums that will be immediately contested by a range of jihadi groups. The concern is such that the Biden administration is reportedly considering[47] a Pentagon proposal to send dozens of Special Forces trainers back to Somalia, reversing a policy decision taken by the Trump administration in January 2021.[48]

Al-Shabaab remains a threat in Somalia and the surrounding region, having first explored cross-border attacks with a 2010 attack in Uganda during the World Cup.[49] Over time, al-Shabaab developed a regional strategy that included several high-profile terrorist attacks in Kenya. A complex attack targeted the Westgate Mall in Nairobi in September 2013 and a coordinated attack at a university in Garissa, Kenya, followed in April 2015. These attacks foreshadowed al-Shabaab's evolution into an organization with the capabilities to strike throughout the region.[50] In January 2019, al-Shabaab launched spectacular attacks against an office complex and hotel in Nairobi, Kenya, killing 21 people and injuring 28 more in a siege that lasted overnight.[51] In a two-week span at the end of 2019 and the beginning of 2020, al-Shabaab's resurgence became impossible to ignore, with the group launching a spate of attacks in Mogadishu and northern Kenya. In early January 2020, in an al-Shabaab attack on Manda Bay, a Kenyan military base hosting U.S. personnel, three Americans were killed.[52]

Al-Shabaab may also be expanding its focus beyond East Africa. Between 2007 and 2010, al-Shabaab successfully recruited dozens of Somali-American youth, one of whom served as a suicide bomber.[53] In 2019, authorities foiled a terrorist attack that led to the arrest of a Kenyan al-Shabaab operative in the Philippines. The plot featured a 9/11-style plan to hijack an airplane in the United States and crash it into a building.[54] As noted by the most recent U.N. monitoring team report, al-Shabaab has man-portable air defense systems (MANPADs) in its arsenal, has increased its use of drones, and maintains both the intent and capacity to launch attacks against aircraft and civil aviation infrastructure.[55] In 2016, al-Shabaab detonated a bomb concealed inside of a laptop, blowing a hole in a Somali passenger jet.[56] And while Somalia is primarily dominated by al-Shabaab, the Islamic State has managed to maintain a foothold in the country, especially in Puntland.[57] The Islamic State's presence in Somalia is also beneficial because of the Al Karrar office, which acts as a liaison with ISCAP in Mozambique.[58]

The threat is also high on the other side of Africa. In late May 2021, Mali suffered its second coup in less than a year, complicating the French counterterrorism mission in the region.[59] The following month, French President Emmanuel Macron announced that France would be ending Operation Barkhane, which includes 5,100 French troops operating across Chad, Mali, Niger, Mauritania, and Burkina Faso.[60] The departing force is expected to be supplanted

> **"No matter the size of Western counterterrorism forces on the ground, if dysfunctional governance and regional instability remain the norm, jihadis will exploit these opportunities to their own advantage. ISGS, ISWAP, and JNIM have each displayed a remarkable propensity to capitalize on recent political developments throughout the Sahel."**

by a more international force, but concern is growing throughout the region that whatever replaces Barkhane may not be enough. No matter the size of Western counterterrorism forces on the ground, if dysfunctional governance and regional instability remain the norm, jihadis will exploit these opportunities to their own advantage. ISGS,[e] ISWAP, and JNIM have each displayed a remarkable propensity to capitalize on recent political developments throughout the Sahel.[61] Jihadi activity is spreading throughout the region, now impacting or putting at risk countries such as Togo, Benin, Ghana, Senegal, Cote d'Ivoire,[62] and Burkina Faso.[63] Of the top 10 countries impacted by Islamic State and al-Qa`ida attacks in 2021 (as of July), seven are located in sub-Saharan Africa: Somalia (95 attacks), Nigeria (65 attacks), Cameroon (30 attacks), Mozambique (29 attacks), Niger (22 attacks), Mali (19 attacks), and Kenya (19 attacks).[64] The situation remains dangerous, with Western counterterrorism strategy in flux at the same time that the region is experiencing a surge in jihadi-driven violence.[65]

In late May 2021, ISWAP claimed credit for an operation that led to the death of longtime Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau.[66] The attention-grabbing operation could propel ISWAP to further gains in the region, as it seeks to consolidate territory and poach fighters from other jihadi groups. ISWAP is also undergoing an organizational restructuring, delineating semi-autonomous leadership between four geographic locales, including the Sambisa Forest, Alagarno Forest, Tumbuma, and the Lake Chad islands. To this end, ISWAP has already begun appointing leaders in the Shura Council and the various "caliphates."[67] Terrorist groups like ISWAP have taken advantage of the COVID-19 pandemic to go on the offensive, particularly as African militaries are repurposed to help deal with the public health response.[68] The Lake Chad region, which is believed to have between 3,000 and 5,000 ISWAP fighters,[69] could be high on the list of territories that the Islamic State seeks to control, and it could potentially use the area as a model for future growth throughout the rest of the continent. ISWAP is currently in a phase focusing on consolidation of territory and expansion of its

e   In the organizational schema of the Islamic State, the Sahel-based ISGS has been made a second, additional "wing" of ISWAP. The geographically separate core wing of ISWAP operates in the Lake Chad area and the northeastern part of Nigeria. For more, see Jason Warner, Ryan O'Farrell, Heni Nsaibia, and Ryan Cummings, "Outlasting the Caliphate: The Evolution of the Islamic State Threat in Africa," *CTC Sentinel* 13:11 (2020).

ranks. When this phase reaches maturity, ISWAP could reassess its priorities and, if sufficiently encouraged by core Islamic State, alter its calculus to begin looking to target the homelands of Western countries directly.

South Asia

The U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan underlines the pivot the United States has made from counterterrorism to great power competition. Core al-Qa`ida has suffered major setbacks, including a high number of leadership losses, but it retains an ongoing relationship with the Afghan Taliban,[70] and their late summer 2021 takeover of Afghanistan could serve to breathe new life into the group just as it is looking to rebound.[71]

ISK has launched several high-profile terrorist attacks, including attacks against a maternity ward[72] and a school for girls, and targeted Shi`a Hazaras over the past two years.[73] And in late August 2021 it carried out a suicide bombing outside Kabul's international airport killing as many as 170, including 13 American troops. Without the presence of U.S. troops, ISK may be well positioned to stage a comeback, with the United Nations assessing that ISK has strengthened its positions around Kabul, Afghanistan's capital, and that it has made the recruitment and training of new members a top priority.[74] In May 2021, ISK reported 15 times as many attacks as it did during this same time period in 2020, which corresponded to the early part of the COVID-19 pandemic.[75] However, the coming months may be challenging for ISK because jihadis may bandwagon around a victorious Taliban and the Taliban may move to stamp out the rival group.[f] Yet, if the Taliban pursues more moderate policies than before 9/11 and attempts to build bridges inside and outside Afghanistan, ISK may see opportunities. A June 2021 report from the U.N. Taliban Sanctions Monitoring Team concluded that "by positioning itself as the sole pure rejectionist group in Afghanistan," ISK could benefit by recruiting disaffected Taliban members and other militants to join its organization.[76]

In a scenario that should concern all members of the international community, with the Taliban's recent overthrow of the Afghan government and tightening grip on key cities and large parts of the country, Afghanistan could once again become a magnet for foreign terrorist fighters.[77] The Taliban's victory has been celebrated by a large number of jihadi groups all over the world,[g] from Gaza to Idlib; this is an issue that has resonated widely and has the potential to catalyze the global jihad. As noted by one analyst, "many al-Qaeda supporters distributed a message from a jihadist calling [the] Taliban victory a watershed moment akin to

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9/11, a moment that vindicates the view that 'what was taken by force can only be recovered by force.'"[78]

If Afghanistan again becomes a major global hub for foreign terrorist fighters, there will be serious international security ramifications. Since the rise of the Islamic State in 2014, Western nations have dedicated significant resources to preventing an outflow of their citizens to combat zones in order to join terrorist groups. Many of the laws and policies put in place over the past seven years would likely prevent a similar migration of European citizens to Afghanistan, although the issue of so-called "frustrated" foreign fighters—those prevented from leaving but who subsequently seek to conduct attacks at home—will remain a pressing issue for policymakers and intelligence services.[79] And while any outflow of foreign fighters from Europe and other Western countries to Afghanistan would likely be smaller than what occurred with the rise of the Islamic State, many of Afghanistan's neighbors and other countries in the region are either unable or unwilling to enact similar laws to prevent their citizens from seeking out new conflicts. A revived ISK in Afghanistan would also threaten Iran, which might then redirect more Liwa Fatemiyoun (Shi`a militia) fighters, battle-hardened from Syria, to Afghanistan with the specific mandate of protecting Afghan Shi`a and fighting Sunni jihadis.[80] The more violent non-state actors involved in a civil war, the lengthier and deadlier these conflicts tend to be, which in turn contributes to destabilization in neighboring countries.[81]

Instability in Afghanistan would also have an impact across the border in Pakistan, where the Pakistani Taliban, also known as Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), is enjoying something of a revival, as well as further north in Central Asia. Starting in approximately 2009 and continuing for the next several years, the TTP was beset by internal divisions, splintering, and counterinsurgency operations by the Pakistani military and from 2015 competition with ISK.[82] Yet, since the summer of 2020 TTP has absorbed numerous jihadi groups in Pakistan, including erstwhile rival groups, and has done so in a process reportedly moderated by al-Qa`ida.[83] Over a four-month period in mid- to late 2020, the TTP conducted more than 100 cross-border attacks, and its current fighting strength is estimated to be somewhere between 2,500 and 6,000 militants.[84] And while most of the analysis looking at what happens next in

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f   There have been indications of the Taliban moving against the Islamic State in Afghanistan (ISK) in solidifying their control over Afghanistan. It was reported that, according to his family, ISK former chief Zia ul Haq (aka Abu Umar Khurasani) was killed by the Taliban in Pul-i-Charki prison in Kabul after the Taliban took control in August 2021. Ab. Sayed, "ISKP former chief Zia ul Haq aka Abu Umar Khurasani, was killed …," Twitter, August 16, 2021.

g   It should be noted that many Islamic State supporters were not enthused by the Taliban taking back control of Afghanistan in the late summer of 2021. As noted by one analyst, "the dominant argument" made by Islamic State supporters "is that the Taliban is an agent of the US and that the US has handed over Afghanistan to the Taliban through a political deal, which in their view delegitimizes the Taliban," and Islamic State supporters are "reiterating past accusations against the Taliban that in their view undermines the group's religious credentials." Mina Al-Lami, "Observations on #Taliban messaging and jihadist reactions to its capture of …," Twitter, August 17, 2021.

> **"Although it gets far less media attention than it has in the past, the Islamic State continues to operate throughout Iraq and Syria, and could very well stage a revival in the Levant."**

Afghanistan has focused on al-Qa`ida, the Taliban, and ISK, there has been less attention paid to the TTP, which could benefit tremendously from a more permissive environment in Afghanistan. Extortion, smuggling, and taxation have all contributed to the TTP's increased coffers, and the group seems to be gaining momentum and absorbing smaller groups in preparation for a full-throated comeback in the near future. Other parts of South Asia might also see an uptick in jihadi activity, including Bangladesh, the Maldives, Sri Lanka, and the disputed Kashmir region. Additional attacks in India could be a way for jihadis to use sectarianism as a cudgel to drive a wedge between Muslims and non-Muslims throughout the subcontinent.

Middle East

One of the most important developments in countering transnational terrorist groups has been the recent move by jihadis toward localization. The most poignant example has been the strategy pursued by al-Qa`ida, wherein its affiliates seek to embed themselves within regional social movements. Al-Qa`ida has done so successfully in Yemen and North Africa with AQAP and AQIM, respectively.[85] In Syria, al-Qa`ida's affiliate went so "native" that it broke with its former, parent group. As Charles Lister has observed, al-Qa`ida today is far less hierarchical than in the past, with its organizational structure giving way to "a loosely networked movement, comprising likeminded but regionally distinct groups, each pursuing local agendas."[86] Indeed, over time, authority has shifted from core al-Qa`ida senior leadership to branches and affiliates, which in turn have developed greater autonomy, which is reflected in target selection and propaganda tailored more toward local grievances than global jihad.[87]

The case of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) is, in fact, instructive in this regard. Headed by veteran jihadi Muhammad al-Julani, HTS is the result of several iterations of what was *initially* al-Qa`ida in Syria—first through Jabhat al-Nusra, subsequently rebranded as Jabhat Fateh al Sham (JFS).[88] The rebranding caused a rift between JFS and al-Qa`ida leadership.[89] The tension between local and global objectives was a major source of the breakup, and JFS rebranded once again as HTS, officially marking its break from al-Qa`ida.[90] What this development portends is the possibility for other branches to undergo a similar transformation, moving away from al-Qa`ida core and its globally oriented agenda to focus more on local issues, governance, and consolidating political legitimacy among tribes, clans, and local populations, relying on social service provision combined with coercion, intimidation, and violence. As the journalist Rania Abouzeid observed in a recent PBS Frontline documentary about al-Julani, he recognized that if he was attempting to gain political influence in Idlib province, there were practical reasons to distance his group from al-Qa`ida. Without linkages to al-Qa`ida, al-Julani would be more successful

in managing relations with external patrons, including Turkey, which is reported to have provided various forms of support.[91]

The challenge this development presents to counterterrorism practitioners is significant. Jihadi groups that are able to ingrain themselves in the social fabric of local and regional communities, much as HTS has done in Syria's Idlib Province, can blur the line between terrorists and local political actors. From a counterterrorism point of view, the tradeoff is dealing with organizations with more localized objectives, but an enhanced potential for longevity and durability. Over time, as Hezbollah has done in Lebanon, terrorist groups can become inextricably linked, yet still autonomous from the state, morphing into hybrid entities with political, military, social, cultural, and economic responsibilities.[92]

Another important development to continue monitoring will be how geopolitics in the Middle East impact the trajectory of support for transnational Islamist terrorist groups. Fierce fighting between Hamas and the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) in May 2021 thrust the Arab-Israeli conflict back into the spotlight. But the conflict itself and sympathy for the Palestinians is no longer the *cause célèbre* it once was in many parts of the Arab and Islamic world. Following the so-called Abraham Accords, several countries—Bahrain, Morocco, Sudan, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE)—entered into "normalization" agreements with Israel.[93] Al-Qa`ida was quick to denounce any country entering into an agreement with Israel, and may look to refocus its propaganda efforts on the plight of the Palestinians in an effort to generate more support for its global jihad. Often critical of Hamas in the past for its decision to enter elections, following the most recent round of fighting, al-Qa`ida was quick to praise the group for its "victories" against Israel and called for expanding the battlefield beyond Palestine to the rest of the Islamic world, moving to "liberate" other mosques, in addition to al-Aqsa in Jerusalem.[94] Al-Qa`ida's détente with Hamas could even improve its relationship with Iran, which has been tense and transactional, but which has also provided benefits for both parties.[95]

And although it gets far less media attention than it has in the past, the Islamic State continues to operate throughout Iraq and Syria, and could very well stage a revival in the Levant. Deir ez-Zor province in Syria remains a hotbed of Islamic State activity, with jihadis conducting hit-and-run attacks, assassinations, and kidnapping for ransom (KFR) operations with relative impunity.[96] As the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) are preoccupied with operations in Aleppo and Hasakah, the Islamic State has taken advantage by reconstituting the *hisba*, or religious police, in parts of northeastern Syria.[97] Across the border in Iraq, the Islamic State is waging a largely rural insurgency and remains active in large swaths of the country.[98] As evidenced by a July 2021 bombing at a market in Baghdad, the Islamic State also still retains the ability to launch spectacular attacks in Iraq's capital.[99]

Part Three: The Future Technology of Jihadi Terror

The rise of the Islamic State coincided with a trend in jihadi tactics that saw a greater focus on opportunistic attacks. Islamic State leaders encouraged their followers to conduct vehicle attacks, which a number of terrorists did—in Nice, Berlin, Stockholm, and New York City, among other places—with significant lethality. "If you are not able to find an I.E.D. or a bullet, then single out the disbelieving American, Frenchman or any of their allies," Islamic State spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani urged in a speech

from September 2014. "Smash his head with a rock, or slaughter him with a knife, or run him over with your car."[100] By turning airplanes into suicide vehicles, al-Qa`ida displayed a penchant for realizing the previously unthinkable. The Islamic State adopted more of a "kitchen sink approach"[101] to terrorism, just as content to claim a small-scale knife attack in Finland as it was a meticulously planned, multi-person operation in Sri Lanka.

To continue to up the ante and achieve greater shock value, terrorists will very likely seek out emerging technologies and weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and creatively engineer novel weapons or ways to kill in their indefatigable pursuit of inflicting psychological fear on civilian populations. A plot that was disrupted in Germany in April 2020 combined both of these aspirations. The Tajik Islamic State cell, which was responsible, allegedly researched chemical artillery shells and using drones to drop munitions.[102] As the barriers to entry for access to newly emerged and emerging technologies, including sophisticated systems, continue to be lowered, the counterterrorism community should expect to see more violent non-state actors attempting to harness these technologies. As Audrey Kurth Cronin has observed, "the degree of systems integration and command-and-control that emerging technologies are providing has never before been within reach of individual actors of small groups."[103]

Terrorist groups have traditionally been early adopters of cutting-edge technologies and used them in ways that serve as a force multiplier of sorts for their organizations.[104] The terrorist behind an October 2019 far-right extremist attack targeting a synagogue in Halle, Germany, during Yom Kippur used homemade firearms with 3D-printed components.[105] [h] Jihadis likely took notice, and could soon follow suit in working to develop a similar capability. As former U.S. national security official Mary McCord warned in 2018, "worldwide availability of the blueprints for printing plastic guns means that would-be terrorists could make undetectable and untraceable firearms for use against Americans here in the homeland."[106] The manufacture of 3D-printed explosives is likely to follow just behind the interest in firearms.[107]

Terrorist groups including the Islamic State, Hezbollah, Hamas, and Jabhat al-Nusra have all demonstrated an increasing interest in weaponizing drones.[108] The Islamic State has even gone so far as to establish a dedicated unit to drones, known as the "Unmanned Aircraft of the Mujahideen."[109] Drones can be used for surveillance and reconnaissance, or to film attacks that can later be edited and packaged as part of propaganda; they also provide non-state actors with additional tactical capabilities and a greater range of operations.[110] Drones can bring an added operational and psychological element to otherwise orthodox terrorist attacks.[111] The widespread availability of drones and sensors could be a boon for terrorist groups, especially those more adept at exploiting bureaucratic, legal, and policy seams.[112] The Islamic State, in particular, has demonstrated that when it comes to drones, it is resourceful, solution-seeking, and has adopted a do-it-yourself (DIY) mindset among those militants assigned to the program.[113] The DIY community offers extensive information on how to

construct and modify drones, something that could be exploited by individuals with nefarious intent.[114]

In the future, it is not inconceivable that more technically advanced terrorists, insurgents, and militias could leverage the power of artificial intelligence (AI) and autonomous technologies to enhance existing capabilities. By leveraging AI, in the near future terrorists may be able to unleash drone swarms or rig a self-driving vehicle to be deployed as a driverless car bomb.[115] As AI matures, along with the further development of lethal autonomous weapons, terrorists will be attracted to the relatively low cost, more difficult to trace, and likely effectiveness of these weapons.[116] In many cases, the technology for terrorists to commit acts of mass destruction already exists.[117] Indeed, as lethal autonomous weapons become more readily available, it is not states and superpowers that stand the most to gain, but rather terrorist groups and small rogue states—many states already possess advanced conventional capabilities but these weapons would close the asymmetry gap between states and non-state actors in some cases.[118] The integration of AI into current and future weapons will expand the potential pool of actors capable of conducting an attack, the speed at which an attack can take place, and the overall number of viable targets.[119]

As cryptocurrencies become more ubiquitous in everyday society, it will provide terrorists with an opportunity to send funds to operatives abroad anonymously. In other words, terrorist adoption of cryptocurrencies will likely mirror adoption patterns by the general public.[120] Recent advances in cryptocurrencies have made them attractive for terrorists seeking to move, store, or launder funds beyond the purview of the licit financial system.[121] In August 2020, the U.S. Department of Justice announced the largest-ever seizure of terrorist organizations' cryptocurrency accounts, when terrorist financing cyber-enabled campaigns by al-Qa`ida, the Islamic State, and Hamas's military wing, the al-Qassam Brigades, were dismantled.[122] In the constant cat-and-mouse game of terrorist financing, it is inevitable that these terrorist groups, and others as well, will continue to seek ways to avoid scrutiny by authorities while adapting to the cyber age. U.N. member states have echoed these concerns about a growth in the use of cryptocurrencies by terrorists.[123]

Terrorists have made tremendous strides in improving the resonance and reach of their propaganda, enabled by common technologies, including smartphones and social media apps.[124] With greater access to commercial-off-the-shelf (COTS) technology, a bevy of violent non-state actors can now livestream propaganda from virtually anywhere in the world, in real-time or near real-time. The Islamic State considered social media so important that the group specifically recruited individuals with a background in

> **"In the future, it is not inconceivable that more technically advanced terrorists, insurgents, and militias could leverage the power of artificial intelligence (AI) and autonomous technologies to enhance existing capabilities."**

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h   It should be noted that none of the weapons constructed by the attacker were entirely 3D-printed, and "3D printed components used in the design were non-critical to the operation of the firearms." Beau Jackson, "Interview with ICSR: A 3D Printed Gun Was Not Used in the Halle Terror Attack," 3dprintingindustry.com, October 18, 2019.

information-related capabilities, including production, graphic design, and editing.[125] And while it would be a mistake to conflate the ability to produce and disseminate slick propaganda with higher-end capabilities like offensive cyber-attacks, groups like the Islamic State will continue to look for innovative ways to leverage digital capabilities.[126] The availability of encrypted communications will likely continue to see terrorists adopt attack models like the "virtual plotter" approach fashioned by the Islamic State, an innovation that has "revolutionized jihadist external operations."[127]

And after witnessing the death and destruction wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as disruptions to society more broadly, it should be expected that terrorists and extremists will pursue WMD, including chemical and biological weapons, with newfound zeal.[128] Foreign terrorist organizations, domestic extremist groups, and state sponsors of terrorism have demonstrated an interest in acquiring and using chemical, radiological, and nuclear weapons.[129] Of these, acquiring and using a nuclear weapon remains currently beyond the reach of terrorist organizations, in the absence of large-scale state support. Meanwhile, chemical weapons and radiological weapons, although fear-inducing, pose considerably less danger of mass destruction than nuclear bombs.

On the other hand, the threat of bioterrorism, or even a clandestine, state-sponsored biological attack, has intensified because of miniaturization, proliferation, and the manipulation of genetics, all of which diminish the probability of detection and enhance plausible deniability for potential attackers. The 2018 National Strategy for Countering WMD Terrorism[130] stated that "in contrast to chemical, radiological, and nuclear weapons, some biological agents are contagious and may thus spread in an uncontrolled manner. Furthermore, such agents are the only other class of WMD that has the potential to match nuclear weapons in the scale of casualties they produce." The U.S. strategy document also stated that "advances in biotechnology could theoretically allow even a single individual working in a laboratory to engineer pathogens that could have catastrophic effects."[131] Lone individuals can have an outsized influence for terrorist groups, particularly those who have experience working with pathogens and other biological agents.

As already noted, the societal devastation wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic has likely accelerated terrorists' efforts to harness the capabilities to conduct a biological attack, as they watch with great interest and monitor ongoing developments related to the coronavirus.[132] One nightmare scenario is that terrorists engineer or obtain a virus more dangerous than COVID-19 and unleash it on the world. Advances in biotechnology, combined with technologies that are more accessible and available, have increased the likelihood that bad actors will be able to create biological agents and pathogens that could be used in an attack.[133] An article in this publication on the potential threat posed by the "rapidly developing and diffusing technology" of synthetic biology concluded that 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."[134]

Moreover, the ability of the United States, its allies, partners, and other sovereign states to limit access to potentially lethal biological agents is minimal, as these are increasingly pervasive throughout the medical and research worlds. In the scenario of a bioterrorism

> **"The global jihadi movement has survived an onslaught from arguably the most powerful military coalition in modern history, led by the United States, and while its transnational stature has been diminished, the movement has gained both local and regional influence. It remains a determined foe, and jihadi ideology continues to resonate."**

attack occurring on U.S. soil, there is more to consider beyond the death toll or physical impact. As General Michael Nagata has stressed, due to the novelty of a bio-weapon attack and the resulting public fear, stoked in part by around-the-clock media coverage, such an attack will likely "create strategic effects completely out-of-proportion to how many, if any, actual casualties result from it."[135]

A bioterrorism attack could be conducted surreptitiously by a relatively small group with catastrophic effect, especially considering the challenges in managing the aftermath, which could include contagion of humans or animals, or contamination of food and water sources or medicines.[136] There will be serious challenges posed by physical-to-digital conversion technologies—for example, gene sequencing technology and the ability to send genome sequences by e-mail. Being able to send these sequences by e-mail means that terrorists in far-reaching corners of the globe could collaborate, potentially utilizing technologies like CRISPR (Clustered Regularly Interspaced Short Palindromic Repeats) to create viruses, crop-destroying plagues, or "killer mosquitoes" that spread disease.[137] This is another area where barriers to entry are being lowered, offering more opportunities for nefarious individuals and small groups to do harm.

Part Four: What Happens Next?

The global jihadi movement has survived an onslaught from arguably the most powerful military coalition in modern history, led by the United States, and while its transnational stature has been diminished, the movement has gained both local and regional influence.[138] It remains a determined foe, and jihadi ideology continues to resonate, providing, as Ali Soufan notes, a "renewable resource."[139] Despite jihadi terrorists' battlefield losses, their ideology still inspires homegrown violent extremists in the West to launch attacks, occupying substantial bandwidth of Western security services and intelligence agencies.[140] This concluding section will look at the prospects for the continued evolution of the global jihadi movement over both the short and long terms.

Short-term trajectory

Even as the jihadi threat persists, and will continue to for the foreseeable future, the zeitgeist in the United States is "ending endless wars." This is essentially a euphemism for bringing the two-decades-long Global War on Terrorism to a close. But far from withdrawing from the world and flirting with isolationism,

Washington is transitioning its focus to great power competition with a rising China and a revanchist Russia.[141] This transition will have an immediate impact on counterterrorism operations against al-Qa`ida, the Islamic State, and their respective affiliates.

The way the current debate is often framed, the choice for the United States is great power competition *or* counterterrorism, with the former taking precedence. And although, as Sam Mullins has noted, this choice is a "false dichotomy,"[142] there are important implications for the reallocation of resources away from counterterrorism strategy. The conventional wisdom in the Beltway suggests that the United States can save hundreds of billions of dollars by pivoting away from counterterrorism missions while still keeping terror threats in check. Still, as Brian Michael Jenkins has noted, "the potential savings by cutting counterterrorism expenditures in future defense budgets is likely to be relatively small," and "cutting too deeply will have adverse strategic effects" in protecting the United States against terrorism.[143]

The pendulum has swung completely in the other direction, away from an obsession with non-state actors and back toward the centrality of the nation-state. Besides Beijing and Moscow, some expect Iran and North Korea to occupy more of the United States' bandwidth than al-Qa`ida or the Islamic State in the decade to come.[144] There are some who see this as a much-needed course correction, arguing that the United States overreacted to the attacks of September 11, 2001, by placing counterterrorism at the center of American grand strategy. And while there may be more than a grain of truth to that assertion, continuing to invest significant resources in counterterrorism operations is the most surefire way to prevent another major attack on U.S. soil or against key partners overseas. In the past, there have been periods when the U.S. government sought to shift resources from counterterrorism to great competition, including during the Obama administration during its "Pivot to Asia," when counterterrorism resources in Africa were downsized.[145]

Leaner security cooperation programs with partner nations in volatile regions and a less robust Western counterterrorism presence in fragile states are already providing jihadi groups with the opportunity to regenerate their networks, recruit new members, and control large swaths of territory that could be used to plan terrorist attacks outside of their borders. This is apparent in Mali and the broader Sahel as the French draw down, and in Somalia in the wake of the U.S. military withdrawal.[i] When violence raged in Mozambique, the weak counterterrorism response from the Mozambican state further emboldened jihadis.[146]

Even where terrorism remains a concern, the Biden administration has made it clear that dealing with domestic terrorism and the threat posed by far-right extremists on U.S. soil will be high up on the agenda. Some counterterrorism analysts are growing concerned of an overcorrection. In other words, Washington should not narrowly focus just on domestic terrorism at the expense of jihadi organizations like al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State, which, while weakened, still comprise a significant threat, both to the United States and globally as well.[147]

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i   According to the report by U.N. monitors published in July 2021, "The United States military withdrawal and the partial drawdown of the African Union Mission in Somalia left Somali special forces struggling to contain Al-Shabaab without strategic support." "Twenty-eighth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team."

"Leaner security cooperation programs with partner nations in volatile regions and a less robust Western counterterrorism presence in fragile states are already providing jihadi groups with the opportunity to regenerate their networks, recruit new members, and control large swaths of territory that could be used to plan terrorist attacks outside of their borders."

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic will inevitably require a change in priorities, with more resources allocated to public health preparedness and emergency response, shifting attention and manpower to dealing with recovering from the current pandemic and preparing for future crises.[148] The impact of COVID-19 will be felt in both the short and long-term, nearly certain to be a major factor in creating enabling conditions for jihadis in some of the hardest hit parts of the developing world. The COVID-19 pandemic has already, and will continue to provide a host of opportunities to terrorist groups. In Lebanon, Hezbollah filled a governance void and gained public support by fulfilling a public health role in the midst of the pandemic.[149] In Pakistan, Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Muhammad have provided critical assistance to citizens impacted by COVID-19.[150] All over the world, terrorists, insurgents, and other violent non-state actors are taking advantage of the COVID-19 pandemic to discredit governments, recruit new members, and spread propaganda. As the world emerges from the worst of the pandemic and people begin to gather in larger groups, it could provide a plethora of soft targets suddenly vulnerable once again to being attacked.

Counterterrorism fatigue is evident throughout the West more broadly, and reflected in the international community's seeming disinterest in dealing with tens of thousands of Islamic State members and their families being held in Al-Hol, a detainment camp located in northeastern Syria.[151] COVID-19 has further compounded the challenges associated with the prosecution, rehabilitation, and reintegration of individuals associated with the Islamic State, and the conditions in these camps leave thousands vulnerable to the prospects of further radicalization and extremism.[152] As a recent U.N. report assessed, Al-Hol is "a major security threat owing to its visible ISIL presence and the ongoing indoctrination of residents, including children."[153]

Long-term trajectory

The failure to resolve longstanding conflicts in Syria, Yemen, Somalia, Libya, and Mali will fuel future jihadi recruitment, especially over the long term. Civil wars and sectarianism continue to plague large sections of the Arab and Islamic world, leading to a dearth of social services, high levels of poverty, a lack of education, corruption, and weak governance—all drivers of radicalization

and enabling conditions that will very likely fuel jihadi ideology and push people to join violent extremist groups. If the region-wide struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran continues to fuel sectarianism, the most extreme jihadi groups will benefit.[154]

The Islamic State in particular was able to leverage its virulent brand of sectarianism to recruit new members into its ranks and to appeal to hardcore *takfiris*.[155] Between 2006 and 2014, the "vengeful sectarian clientelist politics" of Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki alienated Iraq's Sunni community and contributed to the rise of the Islamic State.[156] During the rise of the Islamic State's caliphate, localized geographic recruitment hotspots in the Middle East and North Africa developed into jihadi foreign fighter hubs—three-quarters of Islamic State foreign fighter recruits from the Middle East hailed from areas comprising merely 11 percent of its total population.[157]

In the long-term, the future of the global jihadi movement rests on the outcome of the ongoing struggle within Islam between moderate Muslims and radicals, epitomized by jihadis and their supporters. This is a struggle that has unfolded over decades, and it could be decades more until a resolution is reached. The rise and fall of the Islamic State was detrimental for the radicals. The caliphate was characterized by wanton violence, rape, slavery, and the use of child soldiers in battle, creating a powerful backlash against it in the Muslim world.

There is also a war-within-a-war that has been unfolding within jihadi circles, and how this internecine fighting plays out will also impact the strength of the radicals. For the past several years, al-Qa`ida and Islamic State ideologues have engaged in a back-and-forth, trading barbs and accusations over a range of topics, including the legitimacy of targeting Shi`as, and at one point the legitimacy of declaring a caliphate.[158] The rivalry goes beyond mere rhetoric, however, and has been seen most vividly on various battlefields throughout the world. In East Africa, the Islamic State and al-Shabaab have been fighting for the past several years, with the latter exerting its dominance and holding the upper hand. In the Arabian Peninsula, AQAP and Islamic State Yemen have repeatedly clashed, battling over territory and access to recruits.[159] The Taliban-al-`Qaida alliance in Afghanistan has continuously fought with ISK, although the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan could impact intra-jihadi dynamics in that country. In the wake of the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, the possibility that al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State will make amends seems as distant as ever.

In the editorial of Al Naba issue 300, published after the Taliban entry into Kabul, the Islamic State accused the Taliban of being a "fake Muslim group" that the United States is deliberately using to mislead Muslims.[160] The Islamic State has long considered the Taliban's Deobandi ideology misguided, but the latest war of words has intensified the rivalry. The Islamic State also said it is preparing for a new phase of jihad, which could signal a plan to intensify its focus on the Afghan theater in the coming months. Even in the Sahel, where al-Qa`ida and ISGS seemingly coexisted for years, in part due to personal relationships between commanders in the respective groups, as already noted, fighting has broken out between them in Mali and Burkina Faso.[161] Rapprochement between al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State seems unlikely, but if it occurs, it could be a tremendous boost to the global jihadi movement and significantly improve its prospects for success in its struggle with moderate Muslims.

Finally, the impact of climate change on the future of the global jihadi movement will likely be an important trend to monitor. Humanitarian disasters, flooding, droughts, wildfires, and numerous other climate-related issues will likely lead to a steady stream of irregular migration that will crisscross borders and cause regional upheaval. This instability is likely to manifest in already vulnerable states that lack the infrastructure to protect populations from the most extreme effects of climate change. Economic distress and tensions over finite resources could further destabilize some of the fragile states in which terrorists already thrive.

In summary, the long-term effects of climate change could be completely devastating, leading to a dramatic upsurge in conflict and violence while sustaining and amplifying the drivers of terrorism that plague weak and failed states today. State failure and civil war provide jihadis no shortage of options. Jihadis have also proven undeterred when their proto-states are crushed. Over the past three decades, jihadis have announced the formation of Islamic emirates in Afghanistan, Pakistan, the Caucasus, Yemen, Somalia, Iraq, Gaza, Sinai, Cairo, Libya, Syria, and northern Mali.[162] None of these proto-states have lasted long, yet jihadi ideology has adjusted to the losses, demonstrating flexibility in the face of new circumstances.[163] Physical territory has been revoked, but the ideology remains resilient. With the Taliban retaking control of Afghanistan, a re-energized global jihadi movement has another inflection point, with the opportunity to reinvent itself and thrive yet again.   CTC

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