

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

By Paul Cruickshank and Madeline Field

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**CTC:** You've just finished a nearly five-year stint as the monitoring team coordinator for tracking the evolution of the global jihadi terror threat, the Afghan Taliban, and other problematic groups in Afghanistan, as well as maintaining the U.N. sanctions list. Your reports have been essential reading. Given the informational challenges in tracking terror groups and sometimes competing assessments from Member States, what precepts have guided you in synthesizing and presenting information?

**Fitton-Brown:** It starts from the point that we are specifically mandated to liaise with Member States, intelligence and security services, and counterterrorism agencies. We are *always* talking to Member States. We don't run sources; we don't use open source. It's both a strength and a weakness that we rely on Member State information. Of course, the quality of Member State information can be fantastically good. If you're talking to a well-resourced intelligence service, you're going to get the best information there is, and that's the strength of it. The weakness of it, that you perhaps imply in the question, is, what if people disagree? What if people put forward a point of view that is politically motivated rather than fact based? And so of course we have to deal with that consideration.

Our main guiding principle is unanimity within the team, so the team is 10 experts from 10 different countries, and that includes one from each of the P5 countries. So if we, as an editorial group, agree on something, it probably won't be politically slanted because there's likely to be someone in the group who's going to cry foul and say, 'Come on, that sounds like this Member State trying to get at that Member State.' So there's a reasonably good safeguard within the editorial process.

In fact, there's a very strong sense of common purpose. And that's because of the subjects that we deal with; if you're thinking about groups like al-Qa`ida and ISIL, these are groups that nobody likes or supports. And so the fundamental proposition that we're trying to add to the international counterterrorist cause is very unifying and means that the group works really well together. That's also been true in relation to Afghanistan. It's not as if anybody has any bright ideas to impose a national agenda upon Afghanistan. Enough

countries have broken their heads on that one in the past. And so there is a genuine sense, the first four years that I was there, of how to support peace and security in Afghanistan. And then, even since the Taliban takeover, there's no real sort of agenda that's taken over. Our job remains to tell the unvarnished truth as we understand it about what's happening in Afghanistan, because without that, people are going to make bad policy decisions on how to address it.

It all works surprisingly well, and I give enormous credit to my colleagues for that because they do act as independent experts and they're not politically influenced. We have a vital role to perform here, and we must perform it in good faith. There's also the need to triangulate because intelligence services get it wrong regularly. In talking to us, many of them have been quite good about saying, 'Well, you know, we're sure about this, but we're not so sure about that.' And so if we've got something that sounds interesting but we can't triangulate it, can't gain the necessary confidence based on hearing the same conclusion from different services with different sets of sources and can't rule out it is circular reporting, then we may not perhaps use that information. Unless it's incredibly important to flag it, in which case we might, as you occasionally see in one of our reports, say, 'One Member State says ...' When we say that, we are very pointedly saying that this is something that we think we want to draw people's attention to as a possibility, but we are not saying that we are convinced that it's true. So we've got that option when it's an important but controversial point.

We travel to do our work. It's difficult to do this kind of work online. There are some countries who are reasonably good at that and willing to do it, but there are many who are very nervous about it. As professionals, we don't want to try and force the states to talk on an open line about things when they're not comfortable doing that. So we need to travel, and we design the travel accordingly. We will aim to make sure that we are balancing perspectives; particularly with Afghanistan, you're trying to make sure that we get to Central Asia and to Pakistan and India and that we're getting the input from the P5 and others. We design engagement with Member States to give us the kind of triangulation needed to produce material on which one can be reasonably confident. Occasionally, we do get it wrong. I'm always very keen that if we do get it wrong that we actually own up to that or try and track down what's gone wrong. We know that we're not infallible, but the accuracy rate is high, I think.

**CTC:** Shortly after 6:00 AM, Kabul time, on Sunday, July 31, al-Qa`ida leader Ayman al-Zawahiri was killed on the balcony of his Kabul residence by a U.S. missile strike.<sup>1</sup> What is your assessment of the significance of the fact that al-Zawahiri was in Kabul?

**Fitton-Brown:** The significance of Zawahiri being in Kabul is substantial. The monitoring team had already reported that we

understood from Member States that he was present in Afghanistan. We didn't know that he was in Kabul, which obviously is a little different from being in the mountainous remote border areas of Afghanistan. It implies a different level of Taliban or Haqqani network collusion with him. Of course, we have reported regularly on the close relationship between al-Qa`ida's senior leadership and the Taliban and in particular the Haqqani network. We have reported particularly on the relationship of Sirajuddin Haqqani, the de facto Interior Minister of Afghanistan, with al-Qa`ida and with Zawahiri, but still I was surprised that he had been found in Kabul.

The point we made in our report about the increased frequency and ease of Zawahiri's communication since the Taliban took over in Afghanistan just under a year ago of course now, with the benefit of hindsight, makes sense. As the U.S. has stated, he was recording videos in this safe house in Kabul.<sup>a</sup> He had, in recent times, been able to communicate from a situation that was more comfortable, more secure, and more conducive to releasing videos that were more current. We said in our last report<sup>2</sup> that this had led to very recent proof of life, evidence of Zawahiri communicating about recent events. Knowing, as we now do, that he was in Kabul, you can see how his ability to communicate would have been much better than when he was accommodated in more remote and challenging circumstances in the past.

The significance is that it proves the Taliban are providing al-Qa`ida with a safe haven in Afghanistan as we have said in all of our recent reports. Yes, it feels a bit strange to talk about a safe haven for someone who has just been killed by a U.S. counterterrorism operation, but nevertheless, the fact that he was being looked after in Kabul by members of the Haqqani network with his family, that shows the kind of safe haven that the Taliban and the Haqqani network are providing to al-Qa`ida in Afghanistan.

**CTC: According to the White House, "senior Haqqani Taliban figures were aware of al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri's presence in Kabul" and "Haqqani Taliban members took actions after the strike to conceal Zawahiri's former presence at the location."<sup>3</sup> How troubling do you find this?**

**Fitton-Brown:** It's troubling, but it is also good to have that clarity made public. Because there were people who were in denial about the level of partnership of the Taliban, and especially the Haqqani network, with al-Qa`ida. Let's be clear: This was a facilitated presence in Kabul. Zawahiri's presence was facilitated by the Haqqani network. It was facilitated after they took over Afghanistan and when they were caught out and the Americans killed Zawahiri, they then went about their business of trying to conceal all of the

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traces as far as they could.<sup>b</sup> I presume within the Taliban, within the Haqqani network, they will be engaged in some form of damage control operation and trying to work out what this means for their immediate future dealings with the international community.

**CTC: In a report published in July 2021, you noted that according to U.N. Member States, al-Zawahiri's most probable successor would be the Egyptian al-Qa`ida veteran operative Saif al-`Adl and that al-`Adl was based in Iran.<sup>4</sup> Is al-`Adl still believed to be in Iran, and what is your current assessment of the succession dynamics?**

**Fitton-Brown:** Yes, Saif al-`Adl is still believed to be the likely successor, and he is believed to be in Iran. The monitoring team has reported on this repeatedly over the last few years, the presence of certain senior al-Qa`ida figures in Iran. This is based on Member State reporting, which agrees overwhelmingly that this is the case. It's not unanimous. It's not that all Member States agree on this. But the great majority do. Our understanding, which you can see from our latest report,<sup>5</sup> is that the leadership of al-Qa`ida from one to five in order of seniority at the time we wrote the report was 1) Ayman al-Zawahiri, the leader in Afghanistan; 2) Saif al-`Adl in Iran; 3) Abdal-Rahman al-Maghrebi in Iran; 4) Yazid Mebrak (aka Yusuf al-Anabi), the Algerian head of al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and overall, indirect chief also of Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM) who is in charge of al-Qa`ida's interests in northwestern Africa and the western Sahel; 5) Ahmed Diriye of al-Shabaab in Somalia.

So we have a possible frame of reference for the succession, and the expectation would be that Saif al-`Adl would take over from al-Zawahiri. But of course the question is, could he really do that while based in Iran? Would he have to leave Iran? Would he move to Afghanistan? Or would he move somewhere else? And if he wanted to leave Iran, would he be allowed to leave Iran because, of course, there is some element there of control over him and Iran may not want to allow him to go and take over al-Qa`ida elsewhere and then start to make trouble. So there are a lot of unanswered questions about how this would work.

Al-Maghrebi, the next on the list after al-`Adl, faces the same

a Editor's Note: According to a senior Biden administration official, "Zawahiri continued to produce videos once he arrived at the safe house. And indeed, given the way in which al-Qaeda produces videos, we should not be surprised if Zawahiri filmed additional videos that may be released subsequent to his death." "Background Press Call by a Senior Administration Official on a U.S. Counterterrorism Operation," White House, August 1, 2022.

b Editor's Note: After the strike against al-Zawahiri a senior Biden administration official stated: "We are also aware that Haqqani Taliban members took actions after the strike to conceal Zawahiri's former presence at the location. We have identified a concerted effort to restrict access to the safe house and the surrounding area for hours after the strike. The safe house used by Zawahiri is now empty. The Haqqani Taliban members acted quickly to remove Zawahiri's wife, his daughter, and her children to another location, consistent with a broader effort to cover up that they had been living in the safe house." See "Background Press Call by a Senior Administration Official on a U.S. Counterterrorism Operation."



*Edmund Fitton-Brown*

issues because he is also believed to be in Iran, so it does not seem very likely that they would pass over al-`Adl for him. That could then bring the Algerian Yazid Mebrak (aka al-Anabi) into play as the new head of al-Qa`ida. This will be interesting to watch. Whoever takes over, the question is where will they be based? Judging from the evidence that we've seen over the past year, Afghanistan is a safe haven for al-Qa`ida, and the Taliban and the Haqqani network have no problem with having the leader of al-Qa`ida in Afghanistan. So you'd have to say that Afghanistan is the most likely destination unless what happened with Zawahiri operates as a significant deterrent and changes the view of the Taliban leadership about the wisdom of allowing the new leader of al-Qa`ida to come to Afghanistan.

**CTC: The focus of this issue is on Afghanistan one year into Taliban rule. In a May report to the Security Council, you noted, "There has been little discernible change in the behavior of the Taliban, with many Member States observing that they are, in large part, the same Taliban movement that was deposed in 2001."<sup>6</sup> What is your assessment of the Taliban as a governing entity a year after their takeover of Kabul?**

**Fitton-Brown:** Not very encouraging, I would say; lots of challenges, especially given Zawahiri was being hosted in Kabul. I suppose in terms of setting realistic expectations, I don't think anybody expects that the Taliban will not be there in the near to medium term. And so, the international community has had to get used to the idea of trying to make sense of the situation where you have them administering the country. I think what's been troubling has been—some people were optimistic, perhaps, that the Taliban would show much more flexibility in this new guise of running the country—but I don't think they have shown a great deal of

flexibility. In their interface with the international community, they sometimes speak in a way that seems relatively reasonable, but it's very hard to point to any meaningful compromises that they have made in order to govern more responsibly or more consensually or more inclusively.

**CTC: In your May 2022 report to the U.N. Security Council, you assessed "the Taliban's core identity of a Pashtun nationalist cause dominated by southern Taliban has again come to the fore, generating tension and conflict with other ethnic groups." You also wrote that the Kandahari Taliban are "assessed to be in the ascendancy among the Taliban's leadership," that the Taliban's leader Hibatullah Akhundzada "is said to have become more autocratic and dismissive of dissent," and that there has been some pushback even against the Haqqanis.<sup>7</sup> What is your assessment of the evolving internal Taliban power dynamics?**

**Fitton-Brown:** This is not an organization where you're going to have extensive discussion and then some kind of agreed, reasonable outcome. On issues that are of importance to Hibatullah, he will rule, and his ruling will not be subject to challenge. There's a dynamic in which some of what could be called the "pragmatic" Taliban have ideas of accommodation and compromise and trying to work in a way that is reassuring to the international community, reassuring to their neighbors. But Hibatullah will decide on certain points of principle, and once that decision is taken, that then is going to be the end of the matter.

**CTC: Let's come back to the Haqqani network. You briefed the Security Council that notwithstanding some pushback, "the Haqqani Network's securing of key positions increases its capability to work with the foreign terrorist groups that are its traditional allies."<sup>8</sup> You also noted that "several Member States have expressed concern at the Haqqanis' control over the issuing of identity papers" with Member States concerned that Afghan citizenship is being granted to foreign terrorist fighters.<sup>9</sup> Can you speak to the evolving power of the Haqqani network and also speak to the counterterrorism concerns?**

**Fitton-Brown:** It's important to remember that the Haqqanis are very skilled at using their autonomy to pursue their tactical objectives. So when you're trying to manage a power structure of the kind that we've just been discussing, then the question is, how good are you at working within the latitude that you have from the leadership, from Hibatullah? The Haqqanis have had long experience with that, and they're very effective at it. They're part of the Taliban, they've always pursued the strategic interests of the Taliban, but they have the latitude to do that by whatever tactical means they see fit. They've continued to do that in power as they used to before. Not always getting it right. Sometimes they have bumped up against other power centers. The relationship between Sirajuddin Haqqani, [the acting Interior Minister hereafter sometimes referred to as Siraj], and Mullah Yaqoob, [the Acting Defense Minister and son of Mullah Omar], is sometimes one of accommodation, almost of making common cause on some issues; sometimes defining themselves in alignment with each other and against [acting Deputy Prime Minister] Mullah Baradar, for example. But still, there is some rivalry there. Siraj is believed to support Mullah Yaqoob as the most likely successor to Hibatullah

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when the time comes, but they are in competition regarding the resourcing and reach of their respective de facto ministries.

What we've seen that was really critical in the past year was the way that the Haqqani network was so quick to secure the portfolios that they considered to be of most importance. And again, they have the sense and the pragmatism not to challenge the authority in Kandahar, but to work with it and to continue to be useful and not to create unnecessary standoffs, because they might lose influence if they were to define themselves in any kind of opposition to Taliban leadership or to Hibatullah. But with Siraj getting the interior portfolio and with them also securing the refugees portfolio, the passports, identity documents, they seem to have positioned themselves to have a great deal of authority in anything to do with citizenship, nationality, travel. And I think that's not an accident. The question is, what is their intent with that? That's where you come to the CT point. Up to now, we don't have evidence that there is any nascent international attack capability that is starting to blossom in Afghanistan, but given the history of that network, the history of al-Qa`ida, the close relationship between the two, it is obviously concerning for the international community that this could be a longer game plan that will lead to the regeneration of the external operational capability in Afghanistan and ultimately may lead to international terrorist operations being generated from Afghanistan.

**CTC:** And so with the Haqqani network in control of passports and identity papers, then there's a worry that international terrorists might find that useful, in terms of getting the documents they need to travel.

**Fitton-Brown:** Absolutely. And one of the things that makes us pessimistic about the direction of the Taliban is their unwillingness to be honest about the situation inside the country. They have always denied—both before they took over and since—the presence of foreign terrorist fighters in their ranks; they've denied the presence of foreign terrorist groups in areas they control, and now in Afghanistan. They play down the threat from ISIL-Khorasan as well. But they certainly have always issued denials about the presence of the various foreign terrorist groups and al-Qa`ida figures in Afghanistan, even when it was very easy to prove the reverse, when there were regular counterterrorism operations that were actually killing significant al-Qa`ida figures on Afghan soil co-located with the Taliban. So they're basically maintaining a completely indefensible falsehood. That is very troubling because they talk about the possibility of being partners for the international community and they're trying to build relations with their neighbors who are concerned about terrorists and extremists on Afghan soil, but if they won't be honest about what's happening, then it's very hard to see where that conversation will ever lead. And, of course,

the point about passports and identity documents, it could be that the intent is to naturalize foreign fighters and foreign groups in Afghanistan. You could effectively create a situation where there aren't any foreign terrorists in Afghanistan because they've been given Afghan nationality.

**CTC:** In your May report, you briefed the Security Council that “Member State assessments thus far suggest that Al-Qaida has a safe haven under the Taliban and increased freedom of action.”<sup>10</sup> What is your assessment of al-Qa`ida's network's current strength in Afghanistan?

**Fitton-Brown:** We're unable to substantiate whether al-Qa`ida has grown materially stronger since last August; it definitely has greater freedom of movement, freedom of action. I think one of the most striking indicators was the transformation, as I've already discussed, of Ayman al-Zawahiri's communications in the months before his death in a U.S. missile strike in Kabul. We have believed for some time that Zawahiri was in Afghanistan, and we had stated this in our reporting to the Security Council.<sup>c</sup> For a long time, his ability to communicate seems to have been very uncertain. Usually his video communications would be very dated and even gave rise to some analysts wondering whether he was still alive. That was not good for al-Qa`ida's morale, for the credibility of the leadership. But that was completely transformed after last August. Up until his death, al-Zawahiri was communicating more frequently, more currently, and more comfortably. So that was a major change, which we can only conclude was facilitated by the change in Afghanistan.

You've got al-Qa`ida senior leadership—small numbers—and their immediate entourage, and that's not a very large component. Of course, we don't know exactly where they are. But you've also got al-Qa`ida in the Indian Subcontinent [AQIS], which is a franchise of al-Qa`ida and is present in Afghanistan in numbers of several hundred, and that includes Afghans, but it also includes Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, and Indians. AQIS is a group with definite external intent in South Asia, and it's a group also that has fought alongside the Taliban. In some cases, it's been quite difficult to distinguish exactly where the Taliban end and where AQIS begins. And so AQIS has a great deal of credibility, having helped the Taliban in its takeover of Afghanistan. And so the question is, what will become of them? There is some reporting that suggests the Taliban may intend to, effectively, incorporate them into Taliban armed forces. And again, you've got both Mullah Yaqoob and Sirajuddin Haqqani building up their armed forces, but they're struggling with financing that because the Taliban's finances are tight. I should caveat this point by noting that whether Haqqani and Yaqoob's intent to build up armed forces is delayed by limited finances, or whether it is not fully established intent is not absolutely clear.

**CTC:** In the September 2021 issue of *CTC Sentinel*, former CIA Acting Director Michael Morell sounded the alarm on

<sup>c</sup> Editor's Note: For example, in a report published in July 2020, the U.N. monitors stated, “According to Member States, Al-Qaida is covertly active in 12 Afghan provinces and Aiman al-Zawahiri remains based in the country.” “Twenty-sixth 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, July 23, 2020.

al-Qa`ida in Afghanistan following the Taliban takeover. He said, “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.”<sup>11</sup> But in your most recent U.N. report, you state, “al-Qa`ida is not viewed as posing an immediate international threat from its safe haven in Afghanistan because it lacks an external operational capability and does not currently wish to cause the Taliban international difficulty or embarrassment.”<sup>12</sup> Back in May, in your report focusing on the Taliban, you stated that “neither ISIL-K nor Al-Qa`ida is believed to be capable of mounting international attacks before 2023 at the earliest.”<sup>13</sup> Given the much greater difficulty in obtaining intelligence in Afghanistan since the Taliban takeover, how worried are you about *what we don’t* know? What do you think will determine the trajectory of the international terror threat emanating from Afghanistan moving forward?

**Fitton-Brown:** Certainly the quality of intelligence on Afghanistan is less than it was. Before last August, you had international forces with very significant intelligence capabilities, and they were embedded with the Afghans who themselves had very significant intelligence capabilities. So you had a very rich picture of the situation on the ground inside Afghanistan. And that has obviously been significantly compromised. Not entirely removed, but very much reduced. One of the key points that is sometimes made by U.S. CT specialists is that with the over-the-horizon capability, it’s not that it doesn’t exist, but it’s just that it’s less certain and it’s less concentrated, less reliable than used to be the case. So you can’t maintain a tempo of counterterrorism from over-the-horizon. But you don’t lose *all* information. The July 31 drone strike which killed Ayman al-Zawahiri in Kabul is testament to that.<sup>d</sup>

From the point of view of the monitoring team, which does counterterrorism analysis, there were a lot of very rich sources still. The U.K., the U.S., other significant global players retain very strong intelligence capabilities. Reduced, yes, but they’re not negligible. And we also continued to talk to a whole range of neighboring countries that have direct national interests exposed in Afghanistan and remain very concerned about what the Taliban is doing and the direction the Taliban is going. So it means that when we wrote our report in April, the one that was published in May,<sup>14</sup> we were heavily reliant on the *modus operandi* that we have used with our ISIL and al-Qa`ida reporting. Instead of traveling to Afghanistan and having extensive engagement with Afghans, we were relying on third-country information. But when you get high-quality third-country information and you’re able to triangulate it, you can still develop a fairly rich picture of what is happening. But yes, it was a reduced picture.

With regard to how quickly a terrorist capability could be regenerated in Afghanistan, I think it could be very quick. But what we’re trying to factor into this is the degree to which the Taliban is

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obliged to inhibit it. We see the Taliban as being close to al-Qa`ida and in the case of the Haqqani network and al-Qa`ida a close embrace between ideologically compatible groups.

Of course, there are ideological differences between al-Qa`ida and the Taliban. But there is a long history of working together and a strong belief in each other, with al-Qa`ida regularly restating its allegiance to the Taliban. The relationship between al-Qa`ida and the Taliban is a partnership; it’s friendship ties of shared battlefield experience. But there’s an element of it also being a controlling embrace. The Taliban want to be sure that nothing is going to happen that will damage their own interests. And within the Taliban, there are some differences as to what those interests are, which I don’t think are fully resolved. Certainly, the Haqqanis see al-Qa`ida as being an asset, but there are some members of the Taliban who are not so sure. In present circumstances, where the Taliban is gradually (if not yet successfully) pushing towards international recognition and trying to develop increasingly functional relations with its neighbors, the one thing that they don’t want to happen is for some international terrorist attack to occur with fingerprints on it that lead directly back to Afghanistan. So when there are different assessments about the speed at which a terrorist capability could regenerate there, you could explain the differences according to how much you see the Taliban inhibition continuing to operate. We see that operating at least into 2023. But then all bets are off at that point because if the Taliban don’t achieve recognition, if they continue to behave in a way that tends to alienate their potential partners, if there are fallings-out with the neighbors, then the Taliban will resort pretty quickly to thinking, ‘Well, there’s always the blackmail option.’

We were confident enough of the Taliban’s trajectory in terms of its own self-interest to say that we don’t see any likelihood of an international attack emanating from Afghanistan in 2022. Oddly enough, that also applies to ISIL-Khorasan because ISIL-Khorasan is struggling to hold its ground in Afghanistan. And so there, you see some danger of cross-border activity. As we noted in our most recent report, “in April 2022, ISIL-K claimed it had fired rockets into Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Although both countries denied that rockets had reached their territory, the risk of similar attacks remains.”<sup>15</sup> However, you can’t see a more distant international threat from ISIL-Khorasan this year. And that’s why we identified 2023 as the year when there will be much more uncertainty.

**CTC: Does what you describe as the Haqqani network’s facilitation of al-Zawahiri’s presence in Kabul raise concern that Afghanistan could again emerge as a major terror safe**

<sup>d</sup> Editor’s Note: According to a senior U.S. official, “In the last year, we had been watching for indications of al Qaeda’s presence in Afghanistan. This year, we identified that Zawahiri’s family — his wife, his daughter, and her children — relocated to a safe house in Kabul. We then identified Zawahiri at the location in Kabul through layering multiple streams of intelligence.” See “Background Press Call by a Senior Administration Official on a U.S. Counterterrorism Operation.”

## haven under the Taliban?

**Fitton-Brown:** People are worried about that and with good reason, but it's also important not to assume that you move from zero threat to massive threat or indeed vice versa because of the Taliban being in control or not of the country. It's more nuanced than that. It's important to look at the trajectory and the trends. Certainly the Taliban taking over Afghanistan and the Haqqani network taking over key portfolios within the de facto authorities in Afghanistan has been troubling in terms of what it implies for the potential regeneration of a directed international terrorist threat from al-Qa`ida from Afghanistan, but that is not to say that that threat already exists and it is not to say that the threat will be regenerated quickly. The Taliban will have to worry about the implications for their credibility of what just happened with Zawahiri. As I've already noted, al-Qa`ida is not in a position to launch sophisticated attacks from Afghanistan because at the moment they don't have the capability as we have made clear in our recent reporting. At the same time, as I've already alluded to, another restraint operating on al-Qa`ida is that the Taliban does not want to be directly embarrassed when it claims that al-Qa`ida is not present in Afghanistan. It's very embarrassing for them that the leader of al-Qa`ida was so publicly killed in Kabul. What that also means is that even if and when al-Qa`ida develops the enhanced capability that might enable them to once again direct attacks from Afghanistan, whether al-Qa`ida would actually use it, or how it would be used or how al-Qa`ida would maintain deniability about operations emanating from Afghanistan remains an issue because the Taliban would still have to manage international relations, which they need for the purpose of trying to control the country.

So it's a complicated picture, and one of the questions which is begged by the killing of Zawahiri is, how do the Taliban react to that? Do the Taliban take that as a deterrence from continuing to shelter and facilitate the activities of al-Qa`ida in Afghanistan, or do they take it as a provocation and something they consider a violation of their sovereignty? That is not clear. I'm not sure how the Taliban is going to respond to this. Yes, the Taliban's first reaction was to condemn the drone strike that killed Zawahiri as a violation of the 2020 agreement with the United States. That was to be expected.<sup>16</sup> But the point about deterrence still stands. It would be much more difficult for the Taliban to try to brazen things out if, for example, a major terror attack took place in the United States or against U.S. interests with clear Afghan fingerprints on it. So, there is a potential deterrent point here. It's one thing to be hosting al-Qa`ida—the Taliban never admitted it, but everybody knew it was true—but you can make a case, as some analysts have, that they are also restraining al-Qa`ida. The idea here is that if you hug someone, are you protecting them or are you controlling them?

**CTC:** It would appear, putting all this together, that the West is now quite dependent on the Taliban when it comes to restraining al-Qa`ida and preventing international terrorism being launched again from Afghanistan. Is that a fair approximation of the position the West now finds itself in?

**Fitton-Brown:** In a way. The Taliban dominate Afghanistan, and you have al-Qa`ida in Afghanistan and you have ISIL-Khorasan as well. So you can sort of extrapolate from that and say that the Taliban become an important factor in counterterrorism. But the

**“It would be much more difficult for the Taliban to try to brazen things out if, for example, a major terror attack took place in the United States or against U.S. interests with clear Afghan fingerprints on it.”**

difficulty is, as demonstrated by Zawahiri's presence in Kabul, that the Taliban have not shown themselves to be trustworthy in terms of just being honest about what's happening inside Afghanistan. People in the past were keen to talk about the possibility of doing counterterrorism work with the Taliban, but the monitoring team has said that it would be very difficult to undertake counterterrorism work with a partner that will not tell the truth about the terrorism situation in the area that it controls. So it'll be interesting to see whether in the wake of the strike against Zawahiri in Kabul, the Taliban stop this absurd lie that al-Qa`ida is not present in Afghanistan and foreign terrorist fighters are not present in Afghanistan, and shift towards speaking more openly and honestly to international interlocutors.

Up till now, when it comes to the Taliban, there's much more of a 'give us lots of support and capability, and don't worry because we'll sort it out.' That's not a counterterrorism partnership. That's a rather different proposition. And of course, when the Taliban themselves are so hopelessly compromised in terms of being so close to al-Qa`ida and give no grounds for confidence that they will suppress al-Qa`ida in the long term, then when it comes to the al-Qa`ida threat, it's rather odd to say we depend on the Taliban to counter that. It may be that it has to be done by other means. In the case of ISIL-Khorasan, it and the Taliban are at odds. ISIL-K attacked the Taliban. The Taliban have taken violent enforcement measures against ISIL-K. But there's still some complexity there as well because when ISIL-K has attacked certain types of targets—for example, religious minorities or in ethnic minority areas—there have sometimes been questions over whether that is perceived by the Taliban as a problem. Do the Taliban actually commit themselves entirely to trying to stamp that out, or is there a Machiavellian calculation by the Taliban that in some way such attacks strengthen their hand? Because the more the international community worries about ISIL-Khorasan, the more the international community will be tempted to work with the Taliban.

**CTC:** To pick up on the foreign fighter thread that was broached earlier, in your May report, you stated, “despite fears of an influx of foreign extremists to Afghanistan after August [2021], Member States report that only a small number have materialized, almost all with preexisting Afghan links.”<sup>17</sup> Why do you assess this to be the case? Do you think that we could see significant foreign fighter travel flows to Afghanistan in the future?

**Fitton-Brown:** The main point here is that I think the international community can be a little bit prone to underestimate the difficulties of relocation of foreign fighters. People said, 'Oh, ISIL will be defeated in Iraq and Syria. And then they'll all pop up in

Afghanistan.’ There really was an almost cartoonish picture that was painted of relocation: You hit a ‘scatter’ button, and then suddenly everyone turns up in Somalia, turns up in Afghanistan, turns up in the Lake Chad Basin, or wherever. And of course, it’s just not that easy. These are human beings who are trying, in many cases desperately trying, to get out of a place where they’re being hunted down. And the best chance they have of getting out of that situation may be just to cross one border and then lie low. That’s what happened with so many people who left Iraq and Syria, but that is a very long way from suddenly turning up in eastern Iran and crossing into Afghanistan or finding your way there through Pakistan or through Central Asia. We saw some instances of people leaving Syria and *saying* to their jihadi comrades that they were on their way to Afghanistan because, ‘Hey, the Taliban have taken over and that’s where it’s happening now.’ But once they got out of Syria, it turned out that their intent was always just to get out of Syria and actually they were so sick of living under siege that all they were looking for was somewhere where they could try to resume some kind of normal life. And you know, in some cases these are people with small families. And all they wanted was to try and find somewhere safe where they could earn money and support their families. So there were some cases where it was deliberate disinformation or deliberate dissimulation to say, ‘I’m on my way to Afghanistan,’ when what they were doing was running away from the battlefield, understandably.

The other point is proximity. One of the features of the whole influx into Syria was that it was just so easy to get to Turkey and then across the border into Syria; people were getting on buses and trains and things like that from Paris and Berlin. But it’s a very different proposal to get to Afghanistan. And then it’s important to remember the historic, iconic status of Syria. If you’re building a so-called caliphate, it’s obvious why you would want to do it in Syria or Iraq. And while Afghanistan is significant to them and they take a lot of pride in al-Qa`ida’s history there, the draw has been very slow. Some people have gone, but mainly those with preexisting Afghan links. It’s also important to remember these trends take time. There are still more jihadis in Syria with Afghan backgrounds than jihadis in Afghanistan with Syrian backgrounds. So the flow had been in that direction. Now, whether there is a gradual flow in the other direction, I can’t be sure. I certainly regard it as a concern that people will come to Afghanistan. But I think the numbers have not been what some people were fearing or expecting.

It’s interesting that the Taliban have been unwilling to make a public statement to say, ‘Don’t come. We have enough problems trying to stabilize and manage this country. We don’t need foreign fighters turning up and looking for a new frontline.’ They could have done that if they wanted to generate some level of confidence in the international community, but they have been unwilling to do it.

**CTC: One year into renewed Taliban rule, how do you assess the strength of Islamic State Khorasan (ISK)? How serious have the Taliban been in confronting ISIL-K? Is ISIL-K in a position to regain territory they’ve lost in eastern Afghanistan, and could ISIL-K eventually emerge as a significant international terror threat?**

**Fitton-Brown:** In terms of strength, we think that ISIL-Khorasan has grown stronger since last summer, and a big part of that was the reckless release of prisoners that took place as the Taliban

## “We think that ISIL-Khorasan has grown stronger since last summer.”

advanced across Afghanistan. We believe that that probably swelled the ranks of ISIL-K by at least several hundred fighters. Then you had a recognition from ISIL core that this was an important thing for ISIL to invest in, so they allocated money. Initially, we reported a specific allocation of half a million U.S. dollars, last autumn, to ISIL-Khorasan, but we think it’s probably more than that by now. Subsequently, we’ve seen funds making their way from ISIL core to ISIL-Khorasan.

So there has been a definite strategic global recognition by ISIL core of the importance of ISIL-Khorasan. And of course, it’s also true that ISIL-Khorasan is co-located with one of the most active regional offices of ISIL, the Al-Siddiq office, which is headed up by a guy called Sheikh Tamim, who works, it seems, quite efficiently and cordially with Sanaullah Ghafari, who’s the head of ISIL-Khorasan. So, what you’ve got is an important franchise in Afghanistan, but also a coordination office that is responsible for ISIL interests in the wider region of Central and South Asia. When you look at ISIL’s fortunes around the world, you would say that ISIL-Khorasan is one of its bright spots, along with ISIL-West Africa Province in the Lake Chad Basin.

All of that said, ISIL-Khorasan has probably only just about recovered to the fighting strength that it had back in 2017, 2018, when we used to talk about 3,000 to 4,000 fighters. They might be up to 3,000 by now. There’s probably been some recruitment. The Taliban tried to create a narrative that in the wake of their takeover there were lots of former ANDSF, Afghan security personnel joining ISIL-Khorasan. We haven’t seen much evidence of that. There are probably a few, but I don’t think those numbers are particularly high. The regeneration of ISIL-K ranks is more about the fact that they’ve got money. They’ve received this funding, and apparently, they can pay their personnel. And meanwhile, the Taliban are struggling with finance, struggling to make these very ambitious increases in their armed forces. So there has been some success in ISIL-K of recruiting people from other groups, including some people who’ve left the Afghan Taliban. This has been partly caused by the Afghan Taliban, as noted earlier, being very Pashtun-centric, Pashtun-chauvinist. And this has alienated Uzbek Taliban and Tajik Taliban. And some of those have apparently defected to ISIL-Khorasan. And then of course, there’s always been a flow of TTP, Pakistani Taliban, to ISIL-Khorasan. That was the main feeder group coming into ISIL-Khorasan when it was undergoing its big expansion five years ago. These are reasons ISK is gaining strength. Of course, all this is quite threatening to the Afghan Taliban; they don’t want to see their allies bleeding manpower that then joins ISIL-Khorasan.

You asked about regaining ground. We talked a lot about the areas in which ISIL-K now operate in our report published in May.<sup>18</sup> There was a period when ISIL-Khorasan held a lot of ground in Nangarhar and some in Kunar and some ground in Jawzjan in the north. But before the fall of the previous Afghan government, ISIL-K was under a lot of pressure—both from the Afghan government and its international allies, and also from the Taliban—and there were turf battles, particularly in Nangarhar. They got squeezed and were

ultimately more or less driven out of those significant territorial holdings that they had that were primarily in the Achin district of Nangarhar province. Some of them were driven into Kunar, but then a lot of them were defeated there or surrendered there in the winter of 2019-2020. After that, they more or less ceased to be a territorially based group and were much more focused on sort of a city strategy and trying to mount attacks primarily in Kabul.

But we see some signs of ISIL-K establishing footholds based on salafist communities, some in inaccessible parts of eastern Afghanistan, again primarily in Nangarhar. The thing that we've drawn attention to in our most recent 1988 report<sup>e</sup> is that when they were being dislodged from some of these pockets or safe havens, it was very much with the aid of air power, which the former Afghan government and its international allies had. The Taliban does not have air power, and therefore, dislodging ISIL-Khorasan from strongholds in inaccessible valleys in these districts may be very difficult for them to achieve. There seems to be some betting on the ISIL-Khorasan side that they would be able to gain these footholds and hold on to them. How that then develops as an international threat, that's less clear to me. Again, that's why I don't see ISIL-K as posing a significant international threat until next year at the earliest, and then of course a lot depends on whether ISIL-Khorasan does hold its own against the Taliban or not. And I think the jury is still out on that. But, as I said earlier, ISIL-Khorasan nevertheless wants to pose an at least cross-border threat. You see some evidence of that, on the Pakistani border and the Tajik border and the Uzbek border.

**CTC: In your May report to the Security Council, you noted that “assessments of Taliban appointments since 15 August [2021] suggest that 41 United Nations-sanctioned Taliban individuals now hold de facto cabinet and senior-level positions in the new de facto administration.”<sup>19</sup> Can delisting be used as a carrot by the international community to push the Taliban toward a more inclusive and moderate approach?**

**Fitton-Brown:** Yes. And this is a really important point. It is striking that so many longtime sanctioned individuals have been put in these positions. It's interesting to speculate—although we can't be sure of this—that this is a function of the Taliban valuing experience over ability. One of the criticisms of the Taliban is that rather than using some younger and more capable people, some of the people who've they put in these positions really are there just by dint of longevity.

It is also interesting to speculate that the Taliban may have put these sanctioned individuals front and center as a challenge to the international community. The Taliban dispute the legitimacy of the U.N. sanctions. They called it the blacklist. They claim that the United States agreed to have it annulled as part of the Doha

## “The Taliban may have put these sanctioned individuals front and center as a challenge to the international community.”

agreement. Of course, the United States is just one Member State in the Security Council, so the Taliban claim does not make sense. But regardless of what they thought they understood, it's not that simple for the 1988 sanctions to be lifted. Anyway, it's an interesting question as to whether the Taliban wanted to put the international community in the position of constantly bumping up against sanctioned individuals—Sirajuddin Haqqani being a particularly striking example of somebody who is now in an extremely powerful and critical de facto role with the Taliban calculation being that the international community will have no choice but to work with the interior ministry and with him. So, you could make a case for this being a deliberate challenge to the international community.

The question is, what value could holding out the possibility of delisting have? And I think it's a question of whether the international community is willing to use the leverage. There is leverage here, definitely. The Taliban care about the sanctions; they dislike them intensely. They want to see them lifted. And it was interesting that when the U.N. 1988 committee extended the travel ban exemption recently, for the Taliban—it has to be renewed every three months—they deliberately excluded two people who were previously travel ban exempt and the travel ban is now back in force for them.<sup>20</sup> That's an example of some nuanced leverage potentially where you're effectively saying, 'Look, if you're going to behave in a way that is just grossly hostile to peace and security in the region, to inclusivity in Afghanistan, to good governance in Afghanistan, then maybe you will not benefit from something like an exemption.' And of course, you could extend that much more widely. It's quite a large list, the 1988 list, and you could start to parse between the members of the Taliban on the list and say, 'Well, here's somebody who probably should be delisted because they seem to be dedicating themselves to broadly constructive activity in one way or another.' And then, 'Here's somebody else who should stay on the list but maybe could be exempt from the travel ban.' And 'here's somebody who shouldn't be granted any exemptions.' You could even find somebody and say, 'Here's somebody who could be listed on 1267<sup>f</sup> because they're so closely associated with al-Qa`ida.' So there is scope for the Security Council to use the 1988 sanctions for leverage, but the difficulty in doing that is that you have to have a strong common understanding of what you're trying to achieve and then the ability to come together on the mechanics of it. And of course, business in the Security Council at the moment is not always that straightforward.

**CTC: Given there's a possibility that eventually the Taliban may**

<sup>e</sup> Editor's Note: U.N. monitors' reports focusing on the Afghan Taliban, al-Qa`ida, the Islamic State, and other groups constituting a threat to the peace, stability, and security of Afghanistan are sometimes referred to as 1988 reports. In 2011, U.N. resolution 1988 created the current framework for monitoring these actors in Afghanistan. For the most recent report, see "Thirteenth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2611 (2021) concerning the Taliban and other associated individuals and entities constituting a threat to the peace stability and security of Afghanistan," United Nations, May 26, 2022.

<sup>f</sup> Editor's Note: The 1267 Sanctions list relates to individuals listed because of their links to the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Da'esh), al-Qa`ida, and associated individuals, groups, undertakings, and entities. The separate 1988 Sanctions list relates to individuals linked to the Afghan Taliban.

gain recognition from a P5 Security Council member<sup>g</sup>—some people think that might be China<sup>21</sup>—how do you see the United Nations handling this moving forward in terms of renewal of the monitoring team’s mandate to track the activities of the Taliban in Afghanistan? What are the current dynamics?

**Fitton-Brown:** Obviously, the Taliban is pushing towards recognition, and it’s had certain limited successes in that area. And you’ve got a fairly strong neighbors’ group, those countries who have borders with Afghanistan, they’re going to feel the need to safeguard their national interests as best they can. In a sense, you can make a distinction between these neighboring countries and the interests of a country like Britain, which has interest as a global player and strong concerns about Afghanistan and a strong history of engagement in Afghanistan, but it’s not a neighbor. It’s not forced to say, ‘There’s a Taliban patrol just across the river. And if we don’t talk to that Taliban patrol, then what happens if a drug operation is making its way across the border?’ So I think it’s important that people respect the complexity of the situation as viewed from the neighboring countries. That’s why it’s quite interesting to watch the way that Uzbekistan is managing its relationship with the Taliban. They’re looking for some kind of constructive engagement there.

If the Taliban do enough to reassure their neighbors that they are serious about addressing their concerns and, more than that, provide indications that they will ultimately be constructive partners, it seems to me that this is where the international engagement with the Taliban will grow from and probably *should* grow from. But it seems likely that the Taliban also will keep disappointing and annoying the international community because they seem to be perversely rejectionist, saying ‘we don’t care what anyone else thinks of us. We’ll do things our way. We won’t be told about women’s rights. We won’t be told about ethnic inclusivity.’ That is also alienating to the neighboring states, particularly to Tajikistan, which has particular difficulty with how badly the Afghan Tajiks are being treated in Taliban-run Afghanistan. So, I think that dynamic has to play out, and it’s not impossible that the Taliban, as happened in the 1990s, never get recognized because they are just never willing to behave in a way that brings enough people together in favor of recognition. It’s unusual for one country just to say, ‘I don’t care what anyone else thinks. I’m going to recognize the Taliban because I think our relationship needs to be strong.’ That’s a difficult thing for any country to do alone. Countries tend to move in concert. And the question is whether the Taliban are capable of generating sufficient acceptance for some countries to recognize them as the government of Afghanistan in concert and then for a critical momentum to develop, which eventually leads to more widespread recognition. It’s unclear whether it’s going that way.

When we look at the mandate of the monitoring team on 1988, it’s on a year-to-year renewal, and it was last renewed in December 2021. So if it is renewed again, it will have to be renewed in December of this year. If I were a betting man, I would say I think it will be renewed because I think that the Security Council is going to conclude that it is too useful to have every available insight on what’s happening in Afghanistan and to have an honest and unvarnished account of what’s going on, particularly with the

**“The sanctions regime will continue until such time as a Security Council resolution has passed to abolish or amend it.”**

various terrorist groups. To give up that illumination wouldn’t make any sense. But a lot will depend on the dynamics in the Security Council come December.

The other aspect is the 1988 *sanctions* themselves. To change that—either to abolish them or substantially amend them—would also require a Security Council resolution that could happen at any time. But for any U.N. Member States wanting to make a change here it is an uphill task. They would need to ensure that the resolution gets through and is not defeated or vetoed. And this speaks to my point about Member States not liking to act in isolation, of the need for some consensus.

This brings up the question if you do get to the point where you think 1988 sanctions are no longer fit for purpose, do you adapt them? The 1988 sanctions actually arose out of the 1267 sanctions. It was separated out in 2011, so that previously sanctions that had been grouped together against al-Qa`ida and the Taliban, you then had a sanctions list on al-Qa`ida—later including ISIL—and then a separate sanctions list on the Taliban. So would you look at possibly remerging them? To say, ‘The only grounds for keeping people sanctioned who are sanctioned on 1988 would be if it could be argued they were sanctionable on 1267.’

So, there will be thinking about all these things, including using delisting as leverage. Achieving agreement on how to move forward on this is not going to be easy, and a lot will depend on how judiciously the Taliban behave.

**CTC: Just to drill down, any attempt at the U.N. to stop the sanctions against the Taliban could be vetoed by any P5 member, yes?**

**Fitton-Brown:** The first point is that the sanctions will not lapse if people simply stop paying attention and fail to renew them. So, the sanctions regime will continue until such time as a Security Council resolution has passed to abolish or amend it. For that to pass, it’s the usual rules in the Security Council: It doesn’t have to be unanimous, but there are five countries that have the power of veto. So yes, any one of the P5 could veto a resolution.

**CTC: So that makes it likely some kind of sanctions list against the Taliban will stay in place for the foreseeable future, given it’s likely that at least three of the P5—namely, the U.S., U.K., and France—would want to see some kind of list sustained in the absence of a big change in behavior from the Taliban. In terms of the mandate for the monitoring team when it comes to the Taliban, because you actually need that to be renewed and you need the requisite majority on the Security Council—you**

<sup>g</sup> The five permanent (P5) members of the United Nations Security Council are the United States, China, Russia, France, and the United Kingdom.

need to avoid a veto,<sup>h</sup> and so that might be in a little bit more jeopardy, correct?

**Fitton-Brown:** That's true. The monitoring team mandate could end simply because of the decision not to pass a new resolution. It could just be timed out. So it's a different calculation, but I have to say that when they renewed the mandate with Resolution 2611 last December,<sup>22</sup> I was impressed by the general sense of 'we need to make this continue.' Of course, there was negotiation, but it didn't look to me as if it was ever in any real danger of a breakdown. And then, of course, not only that, they successfully passed 2615,<sup>23</sup> which was the humanitarian resolution aimed at making sure that humanitarian action in Afghanistan would not fall foul of sanctions, to give assurance to humanitarians that their work was fundamentally protected. And again, that was a more complicated resolution because unlike a rollover of a mandate—where you can just update it—this one actually had to be drafted anew. But again, that was done with a high level of common purpose.

**CTC:** Broadening out our discussion to look at the global jihadi terror threat picture, what is your overall assessment of the global Islamic State threat today as it stands? What has the monitoring team learned about the condition and circumstances of Islamic State Core leadership? What has the monitoring team learned about the structure of the Islamic State's regional networks and offices, and how those nodes interact with the core?

**Fitton-Brown:** ISIL, as an entity, as a global threat, is much diminished from what it was in 2015, 2016. You can see that in the statistics of their verifiable, claimed operations. In 2015, 2016, there was a lot of high-impact, directed, sophisticated international attacks, and really starting in 2017 and continuing, they've really been unable to mount those kind of attacks in non-conflict zones. They're still blazing away in lots of conflict zones, but they don't get the kind of impact on public opinion or the reputational boost they're seeking from that. If you look at their propaganda, they feed heavily on these atrocities that they're able to inspire or to commit—in parts of Africa especially, in Afghanistan as well, and to some degree in other conflict zones—but from their point of view, it's important to see this as a cycle. ISIL rose and it had its territory that it held, and it had the resources of a pseudo-state, and it was a major presence in everybody's considerations for that period in the middle of the last decade. And then it was militarily defeated. The military defeat was crucial, as was the very sophisticated, effective counterterrorism activity outside the military operations, limiting the effectiveness of the group. And the group itself had to design a model for surviving military defeat, and they did. They had time to think about it because they were defeated in Iraq in 2017 and in Syria in 2019, and during that period, they conceived of and to some degree laid out the foundations of the global network and how it would survive and what they sometimes call the virtual caliphate.

**“Counterterrorism is a diminishing share of a diminishing pie, and if you add complacency into that mix, you are on a short route back to a major threat.”**

That's what I've witnessed in my time with the monitoring team, this decline and then the extent to which they've been able to sow the seeds of recovery.

That recovery is still very limited. You don't walk around New York or London or Kuala Lumpur thinking, 'Is there going to be an ISIL attack?' They're not capable at the moment. The only thing that they can hope for is that some inspired individual who's usually been self-radicalized online reading their propaganda and has managed some basic instruction about how to wreak mayhem in a very limited way, whether it's using a bladed weapon or hiring a vehicle and driving it into a crowd, or that sort of thing, and these things are horrible when they happen—it's not to diminish or trivialize the tragedy—but the fact is that they actually show that the group has very limited options. This is where the global network becomes very important. Leadership is also important, and they keep losing leaders. The last leader of ISIL was killed in February.<sup>24</sup> Then you have a new ISIL leader announced, Abu al-Hasan al-Hashemi al-Qurashi, and at the moment, there's been some inconclusive reporting saying maybe he was arrested in Turkey.<sup>25</sup> As a matter of fact, I don't think he was. But, for now, the leadership of ISIL feels very uncertain. It feels as if they can't catch a break. There was a killing of a significant very senior ISIL leader in Syria in July.<sup>26</sup> This is what effective counterterrorism does. It just pulls on the leads, and it never lets go. ISIL can't get away from it, and so I think they're in real trouble at the leadership level.

However, what helps ISIL retain some strength in the core area is the elusiveness of peace and stabilization in Syria and to some degree in Iraq. Without that resolved, they will continue to find a safe haven in Syria and Iraq, and will be able to generate support from people who aren't happy with the political outcomes or political chaos there. Therefore, even with their leadership in great difficulty there, their resilience in Iraq and Syria is a major worry, and it suggests that they will be with us for the foreseeable future.

Then you get the regional networks, which we discussed a great deal in our latest report.<sup>27</sup> I've mentioned the Al-Siddiq office in Afghanistan. The Al-Karrar office in Somalia is also very important and significant and the Al-Furqan office in the Lake Chad Basin likewise. ISIL have willed into being a global network, and to some degree, what they've done is they've lowered their barriers for inclusion. People who wanted to pledge allegiance used to be turned down in some cases. Then they basically said, 'we welcome all comers.' A number of pre-existing militia groups and extremist groups have then hoisted the ISIL flag and become part of these regional networks.

This is a work in progress for ISIL. Some of these networks will flourish and some of them will wither. But the idea, from ISIL's point of view, is to exploit conflict zones, to bed down in them, and if one of these networks is successful enough, it may then become a source of resilience for the global network. You may

<sup>h</sup> "Resolutions are adopted when supported by a majority of vote of nine out of fifteen votes [on the U.N. Security Council]. Permanent member States also have the right to veto. Any decision of the Council is rejected if one of the permanent member State uses it." "The Security Council of the United Nations," Permanent mission of France to the United Nations in New York, last modified June 9, 2022.

get an external operations capability, for example, germinating somewhere like Somalia or Afghanistan or the Lake Chad Basin perhaps. It's the trajectory that we must be careful of here. Right now, there is a risk that security services and governments in non-conflict zones are going to relax too much and say the threat has been neutralized. But the threat is still latent. It's been neutralized by effective counterterrorism action. And if you stop that effective counterterrorism action, the threat will revive. If I were saying, 'Where will the threat be in three years' time and five years' time?' I would say with regret that I'm fairly certain it will have risen significantly.

**CTC:** Because of the international community prioritizing other things and potentially taking their eye off the ball.

**Fitton-Brown:** Yes. The underlying factors that have generated al-Qa`ida, then ISIL, they're all there still. The conflicts are going on. The issues of marginalization or injustice or alienation, polarization that takes place around the world, all of that is still there. You can't think of a single underlying driver of al-Qa`ida terrorism and then ISIL terrorism that has been successfully and harmoniously resolved. In other words, the impulse is there. So the question is, as you say, 'will people take their eye off the ball?' There are three major reasons to worry about that. One is the complacency that sets in when you think you've won. And there has been a bit of a siren narrative in the West saying, 'Are these guys really that big of a problem anymore?' So there's that, there's complacency. There is the competition for resources, and that is where other strategic priorities kick in. If you think about geostrategic priorities, if you think about climate change, if you think about public health, then this is a world in which counterterrorism has to fight for resources, and it will get a diminishing share of the pie. The third point is the size of the pie, and that is going to be impacted by the tail of COVID and by the Ukraine crisis. For the foreseeable future, the global economy is not going to be flourishing, government revenues will not be flourishing, and payments to international organizations will not be flourishing. So counterterrorism is a diminishing share of a diminishing pie, and if you add complacency into that mix, you are on a short route back to a major threat.

**CTC:** Can you talk a little bit about Africa? What's your worry set there?

**Fitton-Brown:** Again, we've already covered that quite well from an ISIL point of view. It's really striking in Africa how effective al-Qa`ida is as well. Al-Shabaab is one terror group I want to flag as a major concern. The resilience of al-Shabaab over many years is not that dissimilar to the resilience of the Taliban. And al-Shabaab was majorly inspired by what happened in Afghanistan last year. They think they can do that in parts of Somalia. So, again, it is very important that the resolve of the international community doesn't waver on that, that the counterterrorism activity and other support to Somalia doesn't diminish.

Remember, al-Shabaab has a long history of attracting foreign fighters as well. It's always worth looking at a conflict and say, 'is it attracting foreign terrorist fighters? Is it a potential source of international threat?' And I think al-Shabaab is. There was an individual who was arrested who had obtained pilot training in the Philippines. He was a Kenyan national indicted by the U.S. for

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conspiring to hijack aircraft to conduct a 9/11-style attack in the United States.<sup>28</sup> To me this is an obvious indication of al-Shabaab's international terrorist aspirations. Al-Shabaab regularly restates its allegiance to al-Qa`ida, and it's a significant source of funding for al-Qa`ida as well. Al-Shabaab has a very resilient, robust funding model because they control so many resources and they're able to extort and otherwise generate revenues in Somalia.

Then you've got JNIM, an al-Qa`ida coalition that is primarily based in Mali. The thing with the al-Qa`ida groups, they show a lot of intelligence in the way they operate. Al-Shabaab is a highly intelligent group and highly effective. JNIM is much smaller, doesn't have the ability to dominate territory in the way that al-Shabaab does. JNIM has very successfully exploited preexisting political and cultural fault lines in that area of the Sahel. And it's worked on radicalization of society. It's deliberately sought to intimidate and drive out moderating influences, people in administrative posts who have influence—educators, people like that. So you see Mali feeling ever more precarious; Bamako doesn't feel as if it has much reach outside the capital. Ouagadougou doesn't feel like it has much reach in Burkina Faso. There's some spread of jihadi terror activity to the littoral states; you see some contagion into Senegal, some contagion into Cote d'Ivoire, and potentially also farther round to the east, the Gulf of Guinea. So that's a major worry, and that's where the international response needs to be very well joined up. But at the moment, it isn't. There's been a falling-off of the previous CT arrangements, with a falling out between Mali and France, for example. And in that part of the world, you've got a lot of coups or attempted coups, and the risk is that you end up with basically destabilized countries in which the terrorist groups are able to achieve disproportionate influence, and that I think is very worrying.

Then it's worth mentioning the Lake Chad Basin because the jihadi terror threat has a slightly different manifestation there. The whole Boko Haram ISIL-West Africa Province picture is complicated. It's not a threat to the stability of Nigeria because Nigeria is big, strong and rich enough to navigate the threat, it's more a threat to its reputation, it damages civil peace in Nigeria, it damages the credibility of the Nigerian authorities because they can't seem to project stable or successful governance into parts of the country and particularly into the far northeast. There is cross-border movement and terrorist reach between northeastern

Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad, Niger and even Libya. It may be that this increasingly strong ISIL affiliate (West Africa Province and ISIL's Lake Chad Basin Al-Furqan office) is where some kind of new international attack capability develops.

**CTC:** There has been a lot of concern about the far-right terror dimension, a lot of concern that it's increasingly internationally interconnected. The U.N. has not really engaged in this space. A year ago in our publication, your colleague Raffi Gregorian, the director of the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism, said, "We ought to be doing this. We have a legal basis to do it. It would be nice to have a clear political signal to do it. I think we'll get it."<sup>29</sup> Do you think that a U.N. monitoring team along the lines of the "1267" global jihadi threat monitoring effort should be set-up to track the transnational extreme far-right threat?

**Fitton-Brown:** It's a great question, and I think Raffi is excellent on this. He speaks with great authority. He's also been a key figure in generating the necessary debate on this. One of the things that's important for UNOCT [United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism], CTED [the U.N.'s Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate], and the other parts of the U.N. CT architecture is to be something of a brains trust for emerging threats. CTED is particularly good at this. They have a very strong global research network, which they use to produce trends reports. Where we are at the moment is wanting to have thought this through to the point where we could give good advice in the event that there was a strategic-level attack by one of these groups with significant international dimensions. Because I think the jury is out on the extent to which these are primarily domestic threats, which are best managed through more conventional intelligence and police work, or whether some new transnational threat is emerging that is actually coordinated. The thing that drove 1267 was the sense that al-Qa`ida was becoming this coordinated international threat that was able to let off bombs in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998 at the same time, and then of course, that was massively reinforced by 9/11 just three years later.

We have had for 20 years a very strong international consensus around al-Qa`ida and now around ISIL as an international menace that needs to be dealt with by international action—justifies regular Security Council resolutions, justifies Chapter 7 activity,<sup>i</sup> justifies imposing new obligations on Member States so that they have to legislate in response to Security Council resolutions in order to address adequately problems like terror finance or foreign terrorist fighters. It's become an international threat that is addressed through international mechanisms.

But even the nomenclature is difficult when it comes to the far-right/white supremacist terror threat. We talk about white supremacists; we talk about far-right extremists; we talk about religious and ethnically motivated terrorists, xenophobia, and a whole range of terms that have fed into the nomenclature. And that tells you something. It tells you that you have a definitional problem. Who exactly are the groups who are caught within this?

And if the terminology does capture a group on which a country is divided about whether it should be regarded as extremist, what exactly does that mean in terms of the ability to talk about them in an international context, when they are regarded as a primarily a political issue within that country?

This definitional issue illustrates why the steps being taken at the moment are a little tentative. But I think what we were driving at and what Raffi was driving at was that if you get your 9/11 moment, God forbid—if you get the sort of the massive, sophisticated, unforeseen international attack with huge strategic ramifications, and then the Security Council comes together and says, 'What are we going to do about this then?' That's the point at which you need to have done all the initial thinking about this. What is the shape of this? What are the emerging trends, and what might we expect this to look like in five years' time? At that point, you would have a Security Council resolution, and you would probably establish some form of sanctions regime and some kind of group of experts to support that. You would end up with a monitoring team operating in that sphere. Some people have said, 'Well, could you even include this under 1267? Could you actually have just a bigger monitoring team and a bigger sanctions regime?' I tend to think that if you have a cohesive mission like 1267, it's probably best leaving it on its own because it's functioning, rather than complicating it with things that don't sit easily with it. So in the scenario this strain of terror becomes a priority for the Security Council, I think you should probably create something equivalent to 1267 and try to make that equally cohesive and equally effective. So I hate to say that there's an element of waiting for the worst, but it's often major events that drive the level of international unity that's needed to establish the mechanisms that we now have on ISIL and al-Qa`ida.

**CTC:** You were appointed to coordinate the monitoring team in 2018, and we last interviewed you not long after the beginning of your term.<sup>30</sup> What aspect of your work was the most challenging?

**Fitton-Brown:** The most challenging is the sanctions regimes. The sanctions regimes are tough because sanctions are controversial. Are they absolutely necessary? I can't think of anybody who would seriously argue that the world should abolish all sanctions and proceed without them. But sanctions were conceived of, to a large degree, as a last resort, short of kinetic action. So you had sanctions because you were trying to reach an outcome to drive behavior change, to produce a new stable status quo short of going to war. Putting somebody on a sanctions list is obviously a far milder action that can be taken without losing as much sleep, as I'm sure people do, over kinetic action against terrorists—the fear of getting it wrong, getting the wrong person, collateral damage, and the political side of it, 'Are you doing something that is going to cause significant problems with your international partners?'

And yet, sanctions are actually a very harsh action to take against a person or a country. So we *are* very concerned about the due process aspect of this. It's rightly time-consuming because when you're looking at designating an individual you want to pull together a compelling case, and it should be subject to proper challenge. Furthermore, the 1267 sanctions regime has an ombudsperson. This is important to us, and I can honestly say that it was a particular concern of the Europeans. They didn't want to be successfully challenged in court. You put somebody in a situation where they

i Editor's Note: Chapter 7 of the U.N. Charter defines the U.N. Security Council's remit with respect to what it assesses to be threats or breaches to peace and acts of aggression. "Chapter VII: Action with Respect to Threats to the Peace, Breaches of the Peace, and Acts of Aggression (Articles 39-51)," United Nations, n.d.

can't travel and they can't freely use their assets, then there needs to be a confidence that that's done with a level of justification, and the office of the ombudsperson ensures due process for complaints. Still, it is important to recognize that the level of the threshold for putting somebody on a sanctions list is much lower than the threshold for bringing a criminal prosecution and so attention needs to be continually paid to the inclusion criteria.

Then there's the more mundane question which is, 'Are we using the sanctions regimes effectively enough?' In a sense, we've already covered that on Afghanistan, so I won't go into that, but it's more 1267 where I might offer a couple of points. There's an interview that I gave that will eventually form part of a study on whether the 1267 regime is significantly underutilized, and you may also have seen that Matt Levitt also got involved in a related debate, and he and some colleagues produced a really excellent piece<sup>31</sup> about whether the international community is making enough use of the sanctions regime.

Part of this conversation revolves around foreign terrorist fighters. Think about this category: those you know are alive and you know are still in play, but they've not yet been processed by either the judicial system or social services or whatever. We can easily imagine that there could be thousands of people who are in that category. And yet the sanctions list only includes a few hundred

entries. It raises that question about whether the sanctions list is really only the tip of the iceberg: is it actually targeting the right people?

I think the most challenging part of the job is trying to give good advice on how to make the sanctions more effective as well as just. In that respect, I always say that I feel like we're rolling a rock up a up a hill. Frankly, in 2005 or even 2010, I don't think we were very far up the hill at all; the sanctions list at that time still felt very rudimentary. A lot of list entries were not very data rich. You had a lot of false positives because people were listed with inadequate identifiers. We're steadily working to improve that. There's an annual review process through which the committee and the monitoring team have engaged with the Member States on sanctioned individuals, and gradually, they're improving the quality of the list entries. We're removing deceased individuals from the lists, and new designation proposals are increasingly thoughtful and thorough. And so I think now we're maybe halfway up the hill of getting sanctions regime as effective and as well used as it could be. It just takes time. It has to go through a consensus process in the committee. But I believe in the sanctions. I think they are a valuable tool of international counterterrorism. The challenge is just to keep working extremely hard at making them more effective. **CTC**

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