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FEATURE ARTICLE

The Islamic State Crime-Terror Nexus in the United States

RAPHAEL MARCUS

A VIEW FROM THE CT FOXHOLE

Robert Hannigan

FORMER DIRECTOR, GCHQ

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FROM THE EDITOR

In this month's feature article, Raphael Marcus, a supervisory intelligence research specialist at the NYPD Intelligence Bureau, examines the nature of the crime-terror nexus in the United States based on a dataset of 237 U.S. Islamic State defendants and perpetrators. He writes that although seemingly less pronounced than for racially and ethnically motivated violent extremists, "the crime-terror nexus in the United States is observable in about one-third of Islamic State cases and had an impact on defendants' pathway to terrorism." He notes that "the prevalence of prior violent crime in 20 percent of U.S. Islamic State defendants may provide indicators to law enforcement related to the propensity for violence of a subject exhibiting signs of extremism" and that "in the United States, there appears to be little organizational overlap between gangs and Islamic State extremists despite some similarities related to recruitment patterns and underlying mechanisms that draw individuals to such groups." He adds that "in prison, relationships formed by U.S. Islamic State inmates only occasionally had plot relevance, but exposure to charismatic or high-profile terrorist inmates was a key factor in the cases of prison radicalization."

Our interview is with Robert Hannigan who served as Director of GCHQ, the United Kingdom's largest intelligence and security agency and NSA equivalent, between 2014 and 2017. Prior to that, Hannigan's service also included working as the Prime Minister's Security Adviser from 2007-2010, giving advice on counterterrorism and intelligence matters.

Michael Duffin, a senior advisor on countering violent extremism at the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Counterterrorism, examines the evolution of the violent far-right in Poland. He writes: "Along with Hungary and Serbia, Poland has become a point of interest for white supremacists globally for being a predominantly homogeneous country of white Christians led by a socially conservative government. One of the biggest draws for international violent far-right groups is the Independence Day march organized by Polish far-right groups in Warsaw every November 11. Since the early 1990s, Poland has also been a popular destination for a range of violent far-right activities, including neo-Nazi concerts, 'whites only' mixed martial arts (MMA) tournaments, and paramilitary training. The hate these groups direct toward racial and ethnic minorities, immigrants, members of the LGBTQI+ community, and other perceived enemies such as anti-fascists and liberal politicians is part of a growing trend of polarization across Poland."

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CONTACT

Combating Terrorism Center

U.S. Military Academy

607 Cullum Road, Lincoln Hall

West Point, NY 10996

Phone: (845) 938-8495

Email: ctc@westpoint.edu

Web: www.ctc.westpoint.edu/ctc-sentinel/

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Cover: A flashing blue police light is pictured.
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The Islamic State Crime-Terror Nexus in the United States: Developments and Wider Relevance

By Raphael D. Marcus

Among the United States' 237 Islamic State-linked federal cases to date, the nexus between crime and terrorism has a subtle but vital impact on law enforcement's counterterrorism efforts, and provides both challenges and opportunities. Drawing from new and old cases, this article examines the criminal history of every federal Islamic State defendant and deceased attack perpetrator and highlights the consistent prevalence of past violent crimes. It evaluates criminality that was integral to the financing or logistics of Islamic State activity in the United States, and assesses the role of gangs and prison on defendants' and perpetrators' pathways to terrorism. Moving beyond the Islamic State, the crime-terror nexus appears more pronounced in other parts of the ideological spectrum, particularly for racially and ethnically motivated violent extremists in the United States, underscoring its potential wider salience for practitioners and researchers.

Jason Brown, the leader of the Chicago-area "AHK" street gang that was heavily involved in drug trafficking, was sent to prison for a June 2016 gang-related firearms offense. Search warrants obtained for Brown's seized phones revealed extensive communication with Jamaican jihadi ideologue Sheikh Abdullah el-Faisal, and that Brown regularly visited Faisal's extremist "Authentic Tauheed" online forum in the month prior to his firearms arrest.¹ Brown's time in a Georgia state prison and his communication prior to that with Faisal both reportedly contributed to his radicalization.² Upon his release from prison in June 2018, Brown, who also used the name Abdul Ja'Me, forced fellow gang members to convert to Islam and distributed Islamic State propaganda to them while using his leadership position to

Raphael D. Marcus is a supervisory intelligence research specialist at the NYPD Intelligence Bureau, where he oversees a team of analysts that support counterterrorism investigations that focus primarily on the Middle East and South Asia. He is also a non-resident research fellow in the Department of War Studies at King's College London, where he received his Ph.D. He is the author of Israel's Long War with Hezbollah: Military Innovation and Adaptation Under Fire published by Georgetown University Press in 2018.

The views expressed in this article are strictly the author's and do not necessarily represent the views of the NYPD.

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recruit and radicalize new gang members to support the Islamic State as part of his own personal "jihad."³ Brown, who had plans to travel to Syria, was ultimately arrested in November 2019 for sending money overseas that he believed was intended to support the Islamic State, while six fellow gang members were concurrently arrested for drug trafficking.^{4,5} Brown's case is a vivid U.S. example of the nexus between crime, prison, gangs, and terrorism seen more often in the European context.

Extensive prior research has revealed that those involved in devastating Islamic State attacks in Europe in the last decade often had lengthy criminal records and were involved in criminal networks that fundraised for an attack or facilitated travel of aspiring foreign fighters.⁵ Prior involvement in crime provided perpetrators with plot-relevant know-how, and relationships forged through street crime, gangs, or in prison were instrumental in the recruitment, radicalization, planning, and preparation for attacks. Some of Europe's most lethal Islamic State attacks have been the result of the convergence of criminal and terrorist networks at the grassroots level.⁶

This phenomenon differs from formal organizational collaboration or alliance formation between criminal and terrorist groups often found in areas of weak state governance.⁷ It is more individualized, fluid, and unstructured than formalized organizational collaboration.⁸ Salman Abedi, the perpetrator of the 2017 Manchester Arena suicide bombing, was aided by associates who were members of a British-Libyan drug trafficking gang in south Manchester. One gang member allowed Abedi to store a vehicle packed with explosive materials at his residence; another "wiped down" the vehicle in the wake of the bombing; and two others, each with extensive criminal pasts and one of whom was later arrested for fraud, allegedly assisted Abedi in the research and procurement of chemicals used to build the bomb.⁹ Several members of the gang allegedly had combat experience in Libya's civil war, others had visited a convicted Libyan jihadi imprisoned in the United Kingdom prior to the attack, while Abedi's father had reported ties to senior Libyan jihadi figures.¹⁰ Abedi and his brother also likely used a student loan and public benefits fraud to fund the attack.¹¹ At the official government inquest after the bombing, it was revealed that the security services had expressed concern with the "close proximity" of gangs and violent extremists in south Manchester and the difficulty distinguishing gang-related drug-dealing and fraud from that of national security interest.¹² Elsewhere, the perpetrators of the November 2015 Paris attacks leveraged a fraudulent document ring led by a criminal

a As of August 2022, Brown's case is still pending in federal court. Defendants are presumed innocent until proven guilty in a court of law. In addition to official court records, a useful resource for tracking the judicial disposition of U.S. federal Islamic State-related cases is George Washington University's Project on Extremism "Extremism Tracker."

underworld figure to procure identity cards used to travel, wire funds, rent getaway vehicles, and acquire safehouses for preparing the attack.¹³ In December 2020, a French court convicted 14 people for involvement in the January 2015 attacks in Paris on the Charlie Hebdo office and the Hypercacher kosher supermarket. At least seven of those 14 were also found guilty of being members of criminal networks in Lille, France, and Ardennes, Belgium, that procured firearms used in the attack or provided logistical or financial support to the perpetrators.¹⁴

Based on Europe's experience, the crime-terror nexus can be conceptualized as involving four components. First, those involved in terrorist activity often had a prior criminal record. Second, crime was utilized to finance or logistically support terrorism. Third, some of those involved in terrorist activity were involved with street gangs; and fourthly, some served time in prison—often regarded as “melting pots” where criminal and terrorist networks converge—where relevant skills were acquired, members were radicalized, and relationships of utility for the future attack were developed.¹⁵

While the prevalence of criminal history and plot-relevant criminal activity in the U.S. Islamic State cases is indeed less pronounced than in Europe, a number of important trends and practical considerations are evident that inform the crime-terror nexus. This article updates a larger study by the author that assessed the interplay of crime and terrorism in U.S. Islamic State cases and ultimately illustrated how the U.S. experience acts as a counterpoint to Europe.¹⁶ This article updates the original dataset, which examined the criminal past of every publicly identified individual charged in U.S. federal court for activity associated with the Islamic State up until June 1, 2020, by including two more years of cases. The updated dataset comprises 237 individuals, including all 227 federal Islamic State defendants and all 10 individuals killed by law enforcement while carrying out Islamic State-related attacks in the United States, from the first case brought by the U.S. Department of Justice in March 2014 to June 1, 2022.^b All data and defendant criminal records were ascertained from Justice Department documents, official court records, and open-source accounts.^c

This article reviews developments in the crime-terror nexus, drawing from new and old Islamic State cases. It provides an updated examination of the criminal histories of U.S. Islamic State defendants, looks at the recurrence of repeat criminal offenders, and highlights the consistent prevalence of violent crimes, especially

“In the United States, 31 percent of Islamic State defendants and perpetrators killed in an attack have a prior criminal record, defined as having at least one arrest by a law enforcement agency (73 of 237). This trend has remained relatively consistent as the number of Islamic State cases rose between March 2014 and June 2022 (though the rate of cases has slowed in recent years as the group has declined in Syria).”

domestic violence and firearm offenses, among individuals in the dataset. It examines criminality that was integral to the financing or logistics of Islamic State activity in the United States and assesses the role of gangs and prison on defendants' pathways to terrorism. Moving beyond the Islamic State, it suggests that the crime-terror nexus appears more pronounced in other parts of the ideological spectrum, particularly for racially and ethnically motivated violent extremists (REMVEs) in the United States. While a systematic examination of right-wing extremist cases is beyond this article's scope, it intends to highlight avenues for future research so that scholars and practitioners may endeavor to better understand the relevance and wider salience of the crime-terror nexus in the United States. This article will now examine, in turn, the four components of the crime-terror nexus relating to U.S. Islamic State cases before discussing the crime-terror nexus in U.S. REMVE cases and providing some practical implications and conclusions.

Criminal History

In the wake of a terrorist incident, a dreaded realization for counterterrorism practitioners may be that the perpetrator was “known to law enforcement” due to the presence of a criminal record or prior interactions with police. It is conventional wisdom in law enforcement that while prior arrests do not directly predict a subject's risk, arrest records are a valuable tool and source of information for counterterrorism analysts and investigators that can shed light on prior violent behavior.¹⁷ Criminologists have long regarded criminal history to be one of the best predictors of future criminal activity.¹⁸ One of the few studies to explore the relationship between criminal history and involvement in terrorism (published in *Criminology* in 2018) found that those with a criminal record were more likely than those with no criminal record to engage in violent political extremism (terrorism), and ultimately concluded that a criminal history is a reliable predictor for future engagement in violent extremist behavior.¹⁹

In the United States, 31 percent of Islamic State defendants and perpetrators killed in an attack have a prior criminal record, defined as having at least one arrest by a law enforcement agency (73 of 237). This trend has remained relatively consistent as the number of Islamic State cases rose between March 2014 and June

b Even though 10 of those in the dataset were not charged in connection with their terrorist crimes because they were killed by law enforcement, this article refers to the entire group of 237 individuals as “U.S. Islamic State defendants.”

c The dataset primarily includes cases related to the Islamic State where the defendant is arrested and charged with a “federal crime of terrorism” (which includes statutes associated with international terrorism as codified in U.S. law). Defendants charged with “general crimes” not inherently associated with international terrorism are included (statutory violations such as firearm offenses, making false statements, and obstruction of justice), but only when the Department of Justice specifically alleges a link to the Islamic State. It is important to note that defendants are often (but not always) charged with both categories of offenses. The study only includes cases where the Islamic State association is publicly alleged in official court records, and excludes defendants arrested on purely criminal charges whose terrorism association is not publicly revealed, or when an indictment is filed “under seal” without it becoming public record. The small number of Islamic State cases prosecuted outside the U.S. federal system (i.e. state, county, or juvenile court) are not included.

2022 (though the rate of cases has slowed in recent years as the group has declined in Syria): In 2016, 28 percent of all Islamic State defendants had prior criminal histories;²⁰ in 2017, 26 percent;²¹ and in 2020, 32 percent.^d As of June 2022, more than half (53 percent) had no criminal history. The records of the remaining 16 percent could not be determined due to a lack of open-source data.

Many U.S. Islamic State defendants were repeat criminal offenders: 63 percent (38) of defendants with a criminal record^e had more than one prior arrest, which means there is a likelihood of recurrent contact with law enforcement that provides additional data points for counterterrorism investigators attempting to gain an understanding of a subject of concern's propensity for violence. The average number of prior arrests per U.S. Islamic State defendant with a criminal record remains approximately three per defendant. A non-trivial percentage of U.S. Islamic State defendants appear to have a fairly lengthy criminal background, with 28 percent (17) of those with a criminal record having at least three arrests, which includes 10 defendants with more than six arrests and several with 11-14 arrests.^f

Criminological studies that examined the prevalence of a criminal record over different timeframes in the general U.S. adult population found that roughly one-quarter to one-third had at least one arrest.²² This indicates that the prevalence of a criminal record in U.S. Islamic State cases (31 percent) does not differ significantly from national averages in the United States. However, not all criminality should be considered equal. The nature and type of criminal history of an individual exhibiting signs of extremism or radicalization can be a more important diagnostic indicator for counterterrorism investigators than the presence of criminal history alone, and may enable investigators to paint a more complete picture of a subject, recognize signs of mobilization, and better gauge the subject's propensity for violence.^g

Twenty percent (47) of *all* U.S. Islamic State defendants have a history of violent crime. This signifies that two-thirds (64 percent) of defendants with a criminal record have at least one previous

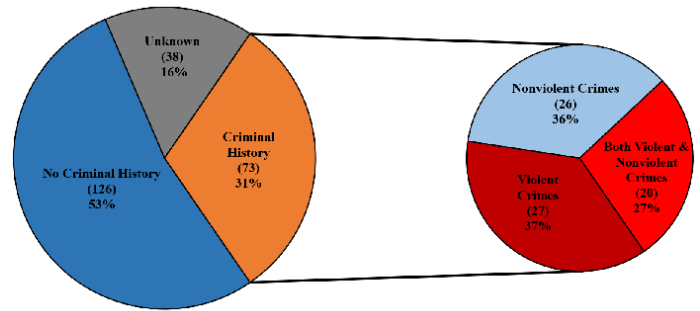


Figure 1: Criminal history of all Islamic State defendants and attack perpetrators (March 2014-June 2022)

arrest for a violent crime.^h Many defendants were arrested for both violent and non-violent crimes. One-third (36 percent) of defendants with a criminal record had previously been arrested for only non-violent crimes.

Nationwide, federal repeat offenders with prior violent offenses recidivate at a higher rate and are more likely than repeat offenders with non-violent prior offenses to commit a violent offense in the future.²³ For law enforcement, the prevalence of violent crime in the Islamic State dataset has analytical and investigative importance, as an individual's demonstrated proclivity to resort to violence may suggest an enhanced risk of future violence.²⁴ This is informed by existing criminological research that found that violent criminal history is predictive of subsequently more severe behavior.²⁵ The 2018 *Criminology* study that examined the relationship between crime and terrorism found that individuals with a criminal history prior to radicalization (regardless of whether the crime was violent or non-violent) are more likely to attempt or commit an act of violence post-radicalization.²⁶

Domestic Violence

Several violent crimes remain consistently prevalent in the criminal history of the U.S. Islamic State defendants. One-third (36 percent) of all Islamic State defendants with a criminal history had prior arrests for domestic abuse and/or assault, which correlates to 11 percent of *all* Islamic State defendants.ⁱ Domestic violence appears to be somewhat correlated with *additional* criminal history: In all but one case, a defendant with a domestic violence history had at least one additional arrest for another violent crime.^j Academic literature on the psychology of terrorism has pointed to the pervasiveness of domestic abuse and family violence in the personal history of terrorist offenders.²⁷ The National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) has noted that "outbursts/fights with family, peers, or authority figures, while advocating violent extremist ideology"

d This article revises and abridges sections of an earlier study: Raphael D. Marcus, "ISIS and the Crime-Terror Nexus in America," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 2021.

e The data on repeat offenders is drawn from a subset of 60 U.S. Islamic State defendants where the exact number of prior arrests was available. Thirteen defendants (out of 73 with a criminal record) were excluded from the statistics on repeat offenders only due to imprecise information concerning the total number of prior arrests. All other statistics relating to criminal records in the study are drawn from the 73 defendants with a criminal record.

f Twenty-two U.S. Islamic State defendants (37 percent of those with a criminal record) had only one arrest. Twenty-one defendants (35 percent) had two prior arrests. Seventeen defendants (28 percent) had at least three arrests.

g The National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) noted that such indicators "may involve constitutionally protected activities and might be insignificant on their own. However, when observed in combination with other suspicious behaviors, these indicators may raise suspicion in a reasonable person. ... Law enforcement action should not be taken solely based on the exercise of constitutionally protected rights, or on the apparent or actual race, ethnicity, national origin or religion of the subject, or on any combination of these factors." *Homegrown Violent Extremist Mobilization Indicators* (Washington, D.C.: National Counterterrorism Center, 2019), p. 2.

h Thirty-seven percent of 73 U.S. Islamic State defendants with a criminal record committed only violent crimes. Twenty-seven percent of these 73 defendants committed both violent and non-violent crimes. The sum totals 64 percent.

i Twenty-six individuals were arrested for assault or domestic violence or both. Fourteen U.S. Islamic State defendants had arrests for domestic violence, and 18 had arrests for assault. Six of these defendants had arrests for both domestic violence and assault.

j The one exception is Safya Roe Yassin who was arrested only once and charged with criminally threatening the father of her children in a 2001 domestic incident. *USA vs. Safya Roe Yassin*, "Government Sentencing Memorandum," June 1, 2018, pp. 10-11.

and “outbursts or behavior, including violent behavior, or advocacy that results in exclusion or rejection by family or community” are both observable long-term indicators of concern.²⁸

Ahmad Rahami, the perpetrator of the 2016 bombings in New York City and New Jersey who was sentenced to life in prison, was previously involved in two domestic incidents, including one called in to local police in Elizabeth, New Jersey, by his own father. In the 2014 dispute, Rahami stabbed a family member in the leg with a knife, which resulted in a three-month imprisonment. The incident occurred three months after Rahami returned from a year-long trip to Pakistan and coincided around the time Rahami’s father raised concerns to the FBI about his son’s possible radicalization.²⁹

Just a few hundred miles away in Lackawanna, New York, Arafat Nagi, who in 2018 was sentenced to 15 years in prison for attempting to provide material support and resources to the Islamic State,³⁰ had been involved in two domestic incidents. In the second incident which occurred in 2013, he threatened to kill and behead his daughter while brandishing a military-style knife outside the family home.³¹ In 2014, around a year after the second domestic incident, a community member reported to the FBI that Nagi spoke often about violent jihad and that he commonly got into verbal disputes over his jihadi beliefs with community members. His history of domestic violence (and specific statements regarding beheadings) provides context to the accusations. It was later revealed that Nagi had pledged allegiance to the Islamic State, traveled to Turkey in 2012 and 2014 to meet Islamic State members, and had purchased military combat items.³²

In 2021, NCTC updated its assessment of violent extremist mobilization indicators, highlighting “a history of notable noncompliance with restrictions, boundaries, or laws,” which may, but need not, be reflected in a subject’s criminal history. More concretely, this may be coupled with “a history of stalking, harassing, threatening, or menacing behavior,” and/or a “history of violence (not necessarily related to terrorism),” which are all indicators of concern.³³ An FBI report that examined lone offender terrorists from across the ideological spectrum noted most offenders had previously exhibited behavior that was hostile or aggressive, and more than half engaged in physical battery or violence as reflected in their arrest history or in accounts of individuals close to the offender.³⁴ For practitioners, one challenge is that the crimes that appear to be most prevalent in the Islamic State cases—assault and domestic violence—are chronically underreported to law enforcement, and therefore may be underestimated and difficult to detect.³⁵

Firearms

The prevalence of prior firearms offenses is another important trend observed in the criminal history of U.S. Islamic State defendants. Nineteen percent (14) of all defendants with a criminal history had prior arrests for firearm offenses, including criminal possession of a firearm, firearm trafficking, or firearm-related violence. The pervasiveness of prior firearms offenses by the U.S. Islamic State defendants is significant, as firearms are the preferred weapon of choice in a large number of plots. The NCTC noted that while “it is important to consider the totality of circumstances when observing potential indicators, as some factors may increase the risk of extremist violence in a given situation,” one possible factor is the “possession of, access to, or familiarity with weapons or explosives.”³⁶

“At least 11 U.S. Islamic State defendants with prior felony convictions (15 percent of all defendants with a criminal history) attempted to purchase a firearm as part of their plot, and were subsequently arrested and charged specifically with ‘possession of a firearm as a felon’ as part of their terrorism prosecution. Evidently, for law enforcement, this strategy has yielded results.”

Terrorism offenses are difficult and complex charges to prosecute, which may contribute to law enforcement’s pursuit of firearms charges as a means to disrupt a terrorist plot. Islamic State defendants with a criminal history are roughly twice as likely to be charged specifically with firearms offenses as part of their terrorism prosecution compared to those Islamic State defendants with no criminal history. Specifically, 10 of 13 defendants (77 percent) with a history of firearms offenses were later charged with firearms offenses as part of their terrorism prosecution, often related to attempts to obtain a firearm for use in an attack.^k This suggests that a subject’s prior familiarity with firearms may impact a subject’s weapon choice for use in an attack.

The prevalence of prior firearm offenses by the U.S. Islamic State defendants provides one specific opportunity for law enforcement: Prior felons are generally prohibited from possessing a firearm under federal law.^l At least 11 U.S. Islamic State defendants with prior felony convictions (15 percent of all defendants with a criminal history) attempted to purchase a firearm as part of their plot, and were subsequently arrested and charged specifically with “possession of a firearm as a felon” as part of their terrorism prosecution. Evidently, for law enforcement, this strategy has yielded results.

Highlighting its utility for law enforcement nationwide, the number of convictions for possession of a firearm as a felon has risen steadily over the last several years.³⁷ Illustrating the usefulness of the charge to interdict would-be attackers, in 2015 Yusuf Wehelie, a Somali-American from Virginia, met an undercover officer as part of a cigarette trafficking operation. In the meeting, he expressed

k The 10 cases are Donald Ray Morgan, Marchello McCain, Leon Nathan Davis, Miguel Moran Diaz, Abdul Malik Abdul Kareem, Amir Said Rahman Al-Ghazi, Khalil Abu Rayyan, Dayne Antani Christian, Yousef Mohammad Ramadan, and Muhammed Momtaz Al-Azhari.

l 18 U.S.C. § 922(g) is the federal statute that “prohibits certain persons from shipping, transporting, possessing, or receiving a firearm or ammunition while subject to a prohibition from doing so, most commonly because of a prior conviction for a felony offense.” See “Quick Facts – Felon in Possession of a Firearm” (FY 2019), U.S. Sentencing Commission, May 2020.

his desire to shoot up a military recruitment center on behalf of the Islamic State and willingly agreed to transport firearms. Wehelie, who had previously been placed on a “no fly” list by the federal government due to possible ties to jihadi groups in Yemen,³⁸ had a felony criminal history related to a past burglary conviction, and was ultimately arrested in 2016 and convicted for illegally transporting firearms as a convicted felon rather than on terrorism charges.³⁹ Elsewhere, Ohio native Amir al-Ghazi, who had a lengthy felony criminal record including nine drug convictions, pledged his support to the Islamic State in 2014 on social media and expressed his desire to carry out a beheading, perpetrate an attack on a police station, and derail a train in the United States.⁴⁰ Al-Ghazi was later arrested after purchasing an AK-47 assault rifle as a felon from an undercover officer in order to carry out an attack. He was also concurrently engaged in the sale and distribution of narcotics.⁴¹ He later pleaded guilty to providing material support to the Islamic State, as well as possession of firearm as a felon.⁴²

The Utility of Crime

Criminality has been an integral component of the financing or logistics of at least 15 Islamic State cases (five percent) in the United States. Some of those planning to perpetrate attacks, join the Islamic State overseas, or materially support the group have engaged in criminal activity to support their plans. Nine defendants engaged in various kinds of financial fraud to fund their plans. Only a small number of cases involved other types of criminality such as armed robbery, drug dealing, or illegal firearms sales. These findings are corroborated by recent findings that appeared in this publication that highlighted Islamic State supporters’ use of financial fraud to fundraise for the group.⁴³

Counterintuitively, most plot-relevant criminality has been perpetrated by individuals *without* any criminal history. For example, nearly all defendants who engaged in financial fraud to materially support the Islamic State in the United States had no criminal history.^m Conversely, in the small subset of Islamic State defendants with prior arrests for financial fraud, three out of the four did not utilize fraud as part of their terrorist activity. While the subset is indeed small, this suggests the possibility that the U.S. Islamic State defendants generally do not use their “old skills” acquired from a criminal past as part of terrorist activity, which differs from the European experience.^{44 n}

Financial fraud may be appealing because it requires few resources, little know-how, is not dependent on personal interactions with co-conspirators, and can be done remotely via computer.⁴⁵ Zoobia Shahnaz, a 27-year-old Pakistani-American female from Long Island, New York, who pled guilty in 2018 to providing material support to the Islamic State, obtained a fraudulent loan for \$22,500, used dozens of fraudulently obtained credit cards to purchase \$62,000 of cryptocurrencies, and then wired \$150,000 to Islamic State shell entities in Pakistan, China, and Turkey.⁴⁶ Amer Alhaggagi from Berkeley, California, claimed to an undercover officer that he purchased poison online with a stolen credit card as part of an aspirational plan to distribute poison-laced cocaine

“There are a small number of important cases where Islamic State defendants with a prior gang membership did eventually gravitate to terrorism, often after prison time. Notably, nearly all Islamic State defendants with a prior gang affiliation made a clean break from criminal life and withdrew from the gang upon their radicalization.”

in San Francisco on behalf of the Islamic State, and sought to use a fake identity he procured to obfuscate his real identity in order to perpetrate an attack. He was convicted of terrorism offenses, and two years of his 15-year sentence were for identity theft and credit card fraud.^{47 o} At least four other defendants with minimal to no criminal history utilized fraud specifically related to their federal student financial aid to materially support the Islamic State.

Research has noted the small financial footprint of the U.S. Islamic State members who have generally fundraised legally via donations, asset sales, or new credit lines.⁴⁸ Within a cohort of Somali-American teens from Minnesota that sought to join the Islamic State, travel to Syria was funded by both legal means and fraudulent use of federal student aid, highlighting the complexity of the task for law enforcement in detecting criminal activity or other observable behaviors that indicate a subject’s terrorist intent.⁴⁹

A few cases sought to use other types of criminality to fund terrorism, such as armed robbery; however, criminal activity was rarely “outsourced” to unaffiliated criminal networks. Marchello and Douglas McCain, brothers from San Diego who both had violent criminal histories, were part of a like-minded network that raised funds obtained from theft to support the travel of North Americans to Syria.⁵⁰ The network was led by Abdullahi Ahmed Abdullahi, a fellow San Diegan who moved to Edmonton, Canada, and who encouraged members of the network to commit crimes against “infidels.”⁵¹ Douglas McCain, who became one of the first Americans to die fighting for the Islamic State in 2014, received \$3,100 from an armed robbery of a jewelry store in Edmonton perpetrated by Abdullahi.⁵² Abdullahi was eventually extradited to the United States in October 2019 for facilitating the travel of at least five North American foreign fighters, and pled guilty in 2021 to funding Islamic State activity in Syria.⁵³ Marchello McCain, who planned to join his brother in Syria, pled guilty in 2016 to possessing nine firearms as a felon and making false statements involving international terrorism concerning his visit to a gun range with Douglas before his departure.⁵⁴

Gangs

Some research has suggested that the Islamic State has broad

m Those cases are Muhanad Badawi, Guled Ali Omar, Akram Musleh, Mahmoud ElHassan, Amer Sinan Alhaggagi, and Zoobia Shahnaz.

n Those defendants with prior arrests for financial fraud are Yousef Wehelie, Houcine Ghoul, Youssef Mohammad Ramadan, and Kim Vo.

o It was never conclusively proven in court that the credit card fraud supported his acquisition of materials for the attack.

organizational similarities to street gangs, as both thrive in marginalized areas with weak social trust or cohesion.⁵⁵ In the United States, similar group dynamics, community characteristics, and underlying mechanisms draw individuals to extremist groups and gangs, but they generally do not share the same recruitment pool and there is only occasional transition of members between groups.⁵⁶ A study that examined jihadi recruits and human trafficking gangs in the Somali-American community found that both groups shared some common push and pull factors, especially related to recruitment.⁵⁷ However, it appears there was generally little organizational overlap. This highlights that the “mere coexistence” of terrorists and criminals in the same physical space does not always indicate a genuine connection or alliance.⁵⁸ A 2018 *Justice Quarterly* study noted that since 1980, 6.5 percent of violent extremists from across the ideological spectrum had a history of gang involvement, which indicates the possibility of links between gangs and extremists, though at a relatively low rate.⁵⁹ There were also significant demographic differences related to age and ethnic background between both groups.⁶⁰

There are a small number of important cases where Islamic State defendants with a prior gang membership did eventually gravitate to terrorism, often after prison time. Notably, nearly all Islamic State defendants with a prior gang affiliation made a clean break from criminal life and withdrew from the gang upon their radicalization.^p For example, Sajmir Alimehmeti joined a Bronx street gang as a teenager called the “Albanian Boys, Inc.”⁶¹ He was arrested several times and subsequently radicalized while serving a state prison sentence for assault. He rejected members of his former gang upon his release from prison, and later sought to join the Islamic State and was in contact with a network of Islamist extremists overseas. He was later arrested for his attempts to assist an individual who was purportedly traveling from New York to Syria to fight with the Islamic State, and pleaded guilty to providing material support to the Islamic State in 2018.⁶² Elsewhere, Yosvany Padilla-Conde of Milwaukee was arrested at age 17 for armed robbery as a member of the “Rolling 60’s Crips” gang and later converted to Islam in prison under the influence of his friend Jason Ludke.⁶³ Padilla-Conde left the gang and reestablished his life after his release from prison, but Ludke later sought out and radicalized him, leading to their plot to travel to Syria together to join the Islamic State.⁶⁴ Both men were later convicted of providing material support to the Islamic State.⁶⁵ The case of Chicago gang leader Jason Brown, as described in the introduction, who sought to radicalize fellow gang members by distributing Islamic State propaganda is an intriguing outlier, and the most vivid example of a direct association between gang membership, radicalization, and terrorism.

Prison

Prison has been described as a “melting pot” where vulnerable criminals are radicalized and where terrorist and criminal networks converge to transfer knowledge, learn new skills, or develop relationships that can be leveraged upon release.⁶⁶ Prisons have played a role in a select number of Islamic State cases in

“To contextualize the relatively low prevalence of criminal history among Islamic State defendants, an FBI study that assessed the typology of U.S. lone offender terrorists’ from across the ideological spectrum found that 70 percent had a prior criminal history, which is more than double the 31 percent of Islamic State cases identified in this study.”

the United States.^q The prison experience has contributed to the radicalization of several subsequent U.S. Islamic State defendants and has occasionally solidified relationships later relevant to a terrorism plot. For context, more than half never previously served time in prison. Of those defendants with a criminal history, at least 40 percent (29 defendants) were previously incarcerated at least once, which corresponds to around 12 percent of *all* U.S. Islamic State defendants. The length of prior prison time varies widely.

A reexamination of the subset of U.S. Islamic State defendants who previously served time in prison affirms that at least five radicalized inside prison, representing 17 percent of the 29 U.S. Islamic State defendants who previously served time in prison on criminal convictions. Furthermore at least two other incarcerated defendants radicalized others.^r A recurring trend helps explain this phenomenon, as each case of prison radicalization in the U.S. Islamic State dataset can be partially attributed to the role of a charismatic, non-isolated terrorist prisoner who acted as a key radicalizer of other inmates. Overall, it must be stressed that the number of prisoners in the general U.S. prison population who radicalize and gravitate to terrorism remains low.⁶⁷

According to a 2020 Federal Bureau of Prisons audit, there are approximately 500 incarcerated inmates with a known nexus to

q According to the U.S. Department of Justice, jails are confinement facilities usually administered by a local law enforcement agency for confinement before and after adjudication. Inmates sentenced to jail usually have a sentence of one year or less. “Compared to jails, prisons are longer-term facilities owned by a state or by the federal government. Prisons typically hold felons and persons with sentences of more than 1 year. However, sentence length may vary by state. Six states (i.e., Connecticut, Rhode Island, Vermont, Delaware, Alaska, and Hawaii) have an integrated correctional system that combines jails and prisons.” See “Frequently Asked Questions,” “What is Prison?” Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice. In this article, when discussing radicalization while incarcerated, the term “prison radicalization” is used generally for the sake of simplicity.

r The seven cases are Ahmad Rahami, Sajmir Alimehmeti, Jason Brown, Mohamad Ibrahim Ahmed, Clark Calloway, Casey Charles Spain, and Alex Hernandez. All defendants were convicted except for Jason Brown, whose case is still pending.

p The four cases with confirmed gang affiliation are Jason Brown, Emanuel Lutchman, Yosvany Padilla-Conde, and Sajmir Alimehmeti.

domestic or international terrorism.⁵ The United States generally concentrates its terrorism offenders in high-security facilities despite skepticism among critics of its benefits.⁶⁸ In the United States, when terrorism inmates (regardless of ideology) were not isolated and given opportunities to interact with other inmates, there is evidence that some of these high-profile offenders acted as charismatic figures inside prison and became nodes of radicalization that successfully inculcated other inmates who later became involved in terrorist activity.⁶⁹ A charismatic leader in prison who inherently derives authority and credibility from fellow inmates is assessed by criminologists to be more important than other prison “push” factors associated with radicalization such as overcrowding, poor conditions, or a lack of rehabilitative programs.⁷⁰ In fact, recent high-profile attacks by those who radicalized in prison has led to the United Kingdom to announce plans to separate “charismatic” or influential terrorist prisoners from the general inmate population.⁷¹

Overall, few U.S. Islamic State plots were directly reliant on personal relationships forged inside correctional facilities. Several U.S. Islamic State defendants were discovered to be plotting attacks while incarcerated during their court proceedings or while serving their terrorism sentences. Most of these plots consisted of violent attacks against prison staff. For example, 28-year-old New Yorker Ali Saleh was sentenced in 2021 to 30 years in prison for material support to the Islamic State after attempting to travel to join the group on four occasions between 2014 and 2015. He also funded the travel of a Mali-based Islamic State supporter to Syria, and had researched making explosives from fireworks and purchased 29 machetes. While detained at the Metropolitan Detention Center in Brooklyn, Saleh assaulted correctional officers, crafted weapons from materials in prison, broke cell windows, initiated false emergency alarms, and set fires, and was cited for more than 90 disciplinary infractions, including slashing a correctional officer with an improvised knife, to which he pleaded guilty.⁷² Europe has experienced a similar trend, as there have been at least six attacks planned inside prison by Islamic State inmates between 2016 and 2020 that typically targeted prison guards, and were usually carried out by offenders with violent pasts.⁷³ A recent *CTC Sentinel* study found that several European offenders imprisoned for extremist-related offenses were later involved in attacks on prison staff that had an apparent terrorism dimension.⁷⁴

Most U.S. Islamic State plots planned from inside prison were thwarted by other inmates notifying prison officials, often motivated by self-interest and reduced prison time for cooperation. At least five U.S. Islamic State inmates made attempts to kill the undercover officer or cooperator who contributed to their prosecution.⁷⁵ Former New York resident Fabjan Alameti was arrested in 2019 for plotting an attack against army recruitment facilities, federal buildings, and a gay nightclub after moving to Montana, where he believed it would be easier to obtain explosives.⁷⁶ Prior to his sentencing after pleading guilty for making false statements relating to international terrorism, another inmate informed prison officials that Alameti had asked about getting guns and explosives while inside Crossroads Correctional Center in Shelby, Montana. During

“As the number of Islamic State defendants has increased in the United States, albeit at a slower rate in recent years as the group has declined, criminal trends have remained consistent.”

a search of Alameti’s cell, officers found extremist messages written on his walls and a razor blade hidden in a book.⁷⁷

Most plots by incarcerated U.S. Islamic State defendants from inside prison were relatively primitive, and overall, there is generally little indication of a meaningful knowledge or skills transfer inside prison that contributed to a plot. However, there are outlier cases where Islamic State defendants attempted to plan more ambitious attacks while incarcerated for terrorism offenses. Amer Alhaggagi (referenced earlier) researched retaliatory plots to blow up a federal building in San Francisco from inside jail and sought to arrange the killing of police officers.⁷⁸ Alex Hernandez, an inmate at Old Colony Correctional Center in Massachusetts serving a sentence for state firearms offenses, plotted to kill President Obama and sought to obtain false travel documents to flee the country after the attack. Hernandez, a convert to Islam, claimed to have researched explosives, wanted to become a member of the “mujahedeen” and a martyr, and sought to kill the president who was targeting the “brothers [who] are fighting to uphold the laws and structure of the caliphate in the Middle East.” Items discovered in Hernandez’s cell included Islamic State propaganda.⁷⁹ He was later sentenced to 37 months of additional prison time for threatening to kill and inflict bodily harm on the U.S. president.⁸⁰

A Comparison with Racially and Ethnically Motivated Violent Extremists

The four components of the crime-terror nexus—criminal history, the utility of crime, gangs, and prison—may have wider relevance beyond the Islamic State experience. On a different part of the ideological spectrum, there are several noteworthy areas for future research pertaining to racially and ethnically motivated violent extremists (REMVEs), defined by the FBI as those who use the “threat of force or violence in furtherance of ideological agendas derived from bias, often related to race or ethnicity, held by the actor against others or a given population group.”⁸¹

To contextualize the relatively low prevalence of criminal history among U.S. Islamic State defendants, an FBI study that assessed the typology of U.S. “lone offender terrorists” from across the ideological spectrum found that 70 percent had a prior criminal history, which is more than double the 31 percent of Islamic State cases identified in this study.⁸² This stark discrepancy may be because more than half (54 percent) of the FBI sample were anti-government, racially motivated extremists advocating the superiority of the white race, or anti-abortion violent extremists.⁸³ This compels an exploration of the wider relevance of the crime-terror nexus to extremists across the ideological spectrum.

Several well-regarded academic studies have similarly noted that right-wing violent extremists are more likely to be less educated and have a criminal history than their Islamist extremist counterparts.

⁵ Of these inmates, 431 were classified as international terrorists, and 103 were classified as domestic terrorists. See *Audit of the Federal Bureau of Prisons’ Monitoring of Inmate Communications to Prevent Radicalization* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of the Inspector General, 2020), p. 5.

Paul Gill and his co-authors examined sociodemographic characteristics and antecedent behaviors of lone-actor terrorists from across the ideological spectrum and found that al-Qa`ida-inspired lone actors were less likely to have criminal convictions (26.9 percent) than their extremist right-wing counterparts (50 percent), and were also 10 years younger, better educated, and more likely to have a professional job.⁸⁴ In an analysis of lone-actor terrorists, Mark Hamm and Ramon Spaaij argued that historically, white supremacist movements have tended to produce terrorists from the lower classes, while “religious” terrorist groups such as al-Qa`ida appear to draw from all classes and may be better educated.⁸⁵ It appears that socioeconomic and educational differences between Islamist extremists and right-wing extremists may impact the prevalence of prior criminal history.

In several high-profile REMVE cases in the United States, dozens of defendants were heavily involved in crime and had extensive criminal histories. For example, as part of a massive federal investigation of the Aryan Brotherhood of Texas and associated groups’ role in organized crime, 89 group members were arrested and prosecuted in 2017. The Justice Department noted that in some instances, “the white supremacy ideology of each of these groups had taken a backseat to traditional criminal ventures such as drug-dealing.”⁸⁶ In fact, an internal debate within the Aryan Brotherhood about the group’s primary identity as a crime syndicate versus a white supremacist group remains unresolved and has been hotly debated among members inside Texas prisons since the 1980s.⁸⁷

Highlighting the pervasive criminal background of some REMVEs, based on publicly released law enforcement information, the 89 Aryan Brotherhood defendants arrested in the 2017 federal takedown were previously convicted of a combined 736 crimes: 234 were drug-related offenses, 76 were violent offenses; 36 were gun offenses, 37 were burglaries, seven were sex or child abuse offenses, and one was a murder conviction. Some defendants were career criminals with more than 25 prior convictions, while only six of the 89 (6.7 percent) had no prior criminal history.⁸⁸ It was noted elsewhere that the Aryan Brotherhood was responsible for at least 33 murders in Texas between 2000 and 2015 that were carried out for traditional criminal motives, internal killings of suspected informants or rules-breakers, and hate-related (ideological) motives directed against minorities.⁸⁹

The Aryan Brotherhood case raises many interesting questions pertaining to the role of criminal history in recruitment, retention, and acculturation of REMVEs into extremist groups. However, the picture is not so clear-cut, as high-profile REMVE attack perpetrators at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh in 2018 and Chabad Jewish Center of Poway, San Diego in 2019 had no criminal record.⁹⁰ Complicating things further, the racially motivated 2022 Buffalo supermarket shooter was “known to law enforcement” but never formally arrested; he underwent a mental health evaluation by New York State Police after making a school shooting threat in June 2021, and spent two days in a mental hospital, but was never charged with a crime.⁹¹ Further exploration of divergent trends concerning the contrasting criminal past of older REMVE gang members and the recent wave of internet-inspired extremist youths radicalized in online forums could be a fruitful initiative. It would also shed light on differences in criminal history between lone attack perpetrators and REMVE group members, and would provide nuance to understanding the diagnostic importance of criminal history on extremists’ mobilization to violence.

The lack of a federal domestic terrorism statute often means that REMVEs, even those who are actively plotting ideologically motivated crimes or have perpetrated an attack, may only be prosecuted for purely criminal offenses, rather than terrorism offenses more frequently seen in Islamic State cases (given “material support to a foreign terrorist organization” by definition is not applicable to domestic groups). Barring changes to federal law, prosecutors will continue pursuing criminal charges against REMVEs, highlighting the interplay between crime and terrorism, but also underscoring the challenges for law enforcement in prosecuting future domestic terrorism and racially motivated crimes.

White supremacist criminal gangs are prolific in the United States, with at least 100 groups active inside the nation’s prison system.⁹² The influence of gangs and prison on the pathways of REMVEs appears more pronounced than in the U.S. Islamic State cases. The prison system is often a primary gateway for recruitment into white supremacist gangs, as recruits are often motivated by poor or dangerous conditions inside prison and are seeking protection.⁹³ For example, in Florida, 16 members of “Unforgiven,” a white supremacist prison gang guided by Aryan philosophy that partly sought to rebel against the perceived victimization of white inmates, were charged in 2021 with racketeering, murder, kidnapping, robbery, and obstruction of justice.⁹⁴ Elsewhere, 20 members of the Alaska-based neo-Nazi prison gang “1488” were charged with murder, narcotics, and weapons trafficking in 2019-2020, and also explicitly recruited prospective extremists by offering protection to white inmates.⁹⁵

REMVEs, including white supremacist and “skinhead” motorcycle gangs, have a longstanding documented involvement in narcotics and firearms trafficking in the Midwest to fund their illegal activities. For example, in Utah, 21 white supremacist gang members who were members of groups such as Soldiers of Aryan Culture and Silent Aryan Warriors were charged in 2020 with firearms trafficking and methamphetamine production. Many of the defendants had extensive criminal histories which allowed for federal sentencing enhancements of prior felons.⁹⁶ Much like the utility of the “Felon in Possession of a Firearm” charge in interdicting would-be Islamic State attackers, REMVE felons’ engagement in firearms trafficking has clear implications for the crime-terror nexus. While such high-profile cases are only illustrative of a much wider and deeper phenomenon, it is evident that criminal history, gangs, and prisons are important elements of the crime-terror nexus across the ideological spectrum, and further comparisons to the U.S. Islamic State cases and an exploration of associated challenges and opportunities would be fruitful.

Conclusions

As the number of Islamic State defendants has increased in the United States, albeit at a slower rate in recent years given the group’s decline, criminal trends have remained consistent. The prevalence of prior violent crime in 20 percent of U.S. Islamic State defendants may provide indicators to law enforcement related to the propensity for violence of a subject exhibiting signs of extremism. Criminal history may also occasionally offer clues about ideological leanings, but rarely on terrorist intent. In the United States, there appears to be little organizational overlap between gangs and Islamic State extremists despite some similarities related to recruitment patterns and underlying mechanisms that draw individuals to such groups.

Most U.S. Islamic State defendants with a gang affiliation withdrew from the gang upon radicalization, and there were few concrete examples in the United States of any attempted “outsourcing” of critical aspects of an Islamic State terrorist plot to unaffiliated gangs or criminal networks. In prison, relationships formed by U.S. Islamic State inmates only occasionally had plot relevance, but exposure to charismatic or high-profile terrorist inmates was a key factor in the cases of prison radicalization.

The REMVE prison-gang ecosystem is vast and appears to run comparatively deeper in the United States, although the criminal pasts of perpetrators of REMVE attacks varies. Lone-actor REMVEs with no criminal past who radicalize on the internet with few in-person ties pose a different challenge than hardened career criminals who are part of white supremacist prison gangs involved

concurrently in narcotics trafficking and racially motivated violence against minorities and law enforcement. Further research should also explore how the criminal past of lone-actor extremists differ from those with more formalized ties to extremist groups across the ideological spectrum, though it is more useful to view such ties on a continuum of connectivity to a group.⁹⁷

The crime-terror nexus in the United States is observable in about one-third of Islamic State cases and had an impact on defendants’ pathway to terrorism. While seemingly less pronounced compared to REMVEs, criminal history, gang membership, and prison time are important elements of the crime-terror nexus—pertaining to the Islamic State and beyond—and demand attention as to how each fits into the larger picture regarding drivers of radicalization and mobilization to violence across the ideological spectrum. **CTC**

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A View from the CT Foxhole: Robert Hannigan, Former Director, GCHQ

By Raffaello Pantucci

Robert Hannigan was Director of GCHQ, the United Kingdom's largest intelligence and security agency and NSA equivalent, between 2014 and 2017. He established the United Kingdom's National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC) and was responsible with military colleagues for the United Kingdom's national offensive cyber program.

He was Prime Minister's Security Adviser from 2007-2010, giving advice on counterterrorism and intelligence matters. Prior to that, he worked as principal adviser to Prime Minister Tony Blair on the Northern Ireland peace process. He was awarded the U.S. Intelligence Distinguished Public Service Medal in 2017 and honored by Queen Elizabeth for services to U.K. national security in 2013.

Robert is currently Warden of Wadham College, Oxford, and European Chairman of the cyber security company BlueVoyant. He is a Senior Fellow at the Belfer Center, Harvard; Fellow of the Institution of Engineering & Technology; and Distinguished Fellow of the Royal United Services Institute.

CTC: Shortly after you were appointed the director of GCHQ (Government Communications Headquarters) in 2014, the Islamic State declared a caliphate after taking control of large swaths of Iraq and Syria. When you retired as director in 2017, the group was well on the path to territorial defeat in Syria and Iraq. How would you describe the contribution GCHQ made to the global campaign against the Islamic State and protecting the United Kingdom from the group's terrorism? How did GCHQ evolve to focus on the Islamic State threat, and what were the lessons learned?

Hannigan: There were two things in particular about ISIS that made it different. One was obviously the geographical hold: the fact that it had territory in northern Syria and northern Iraq—whether you want to call it a caliphate or not—which made it almost inaccessible from the ground in practice.

The other thing that made it different was generational. This was a group that understood the power of media, and particularly new media, in a way that previous Islamist extremist groups had not. Those were two big challenges. From GCHQ's point of view, counterterrorism was at that stage the biggest single mission. There were, of course, lots of other missions, too, but [CT] was a huge investment of resources, for obvious reasons. To some extent, GCHQ was using the lessons it had learnt in Afghanistan, which had been a very strong counterinsurgency/counterterrorism effort where GCHQ had been embedded with the military. It was building on those lessons, but of course the SIGINT environment in Syria and Iraq was very different.

In Afghanistan, essentially the Allies owned the communications

space, just as they owned the air space. That wasn't the case in northern Syria, so it was a different kind of challenge. But a lot of the techniques and international cooperation had been well exercised in Afghanistan. To some extent, the first part was a traditional mission of 'how do you disrupt and destroy a terrorist organization from its leadership downwards,' but the second bit was genuinely new in the sense that ISIS was obviously trying to project attacks back, as well as recruit heavily from the West to travel into the caliphate. Both of those ISIS objectives, which were interconnected, were things which we needed to disrupt, and so a lot of the task was about understanding how ISIS media worked and trying to disrupt that. I cannot say how this was done from a U.K. perspective, but there is a great deal of media reporting and academic work on this available in the U.S.

ISIS were doing two things through their media campaigns. One was inspiring people and then actively grooming those they had inspired to either come to join the group or launch attacks. And both of the stages really needed disrupting. Disrupting global ISIS media was a much broader challenge, of course, but trying to prevent individual grooming and attack planning was traditional MI5 territory, supported by GCHQ. It would not be right to go into the details of how it was done, but I do not think there was anything conceptually different about how we went about doing that from disrupting traditional recruitment and attack planning. The big difference was that it was all at one remove.

I think there were two advantages [for ISIS] to having territory: one was the propaganda value and the fact that you can present, as you saw endlessly in Dabiq and the other glossy publications, what life in the caliphate was like. That gave them a romantic propaganda advantage to be able to say, 'Here we have built this wonderful land for you, where you can live a religiously pure life.' But it also gave them a safe place from which to mount operations, and all they needed apart from connectivity was the understanding of how to do that: How do you inspire, radicalize, and then manipulate people? So in a sense, it was a psychological campaign as much as a physical one.

CTC: How would you describe the counterterrorism cooperation between GCHQ and U.S. agencies such as the NSA as well as other members of the Five Eyes^a and European allies?

Hannigan: It is incredibly close and always has been, in particular with the NSA. But I think what happened over the ISIS campaign was that counterterrorism really drove the cooperation between SIGINT agencies in Europe. Cooperation amongst European partners has always been good on particular cases, but I think

^a The Five Eyes (FVEY) is an intelligence alliance of Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

the pressures of terrorism really drove that in a very constructive way. So now the SIGINT agencies are [working] closer together, probably more than they have ever been as a result of terrorism, and there was very active cooperation right through the attacks in Europe and beyond, as well as cooperation with other services around the world.

Fortunately, with European partners, Brexit did not make much of a difference in terms of maintaining cooperation, partly because of the threat of terrorism; these joint efforts were too important to be damaged. Different Five Eyes partners will have slightly different relationships with different European countries. But for the U.K., the French and German relationships, for example, were very important. And the U.K.'s traditional military and intelligence relationships with the Scandinavian countries have remained very strong and strengthened in the context of Russia.

CTC: What for you have been the key lessons learned in balancing democratic liberties with intelligence gathering in counterterrorism in the 21 years since 9/11?

Hannigan: It's always been a balance. Access to data is the key for SIGINT in particular, but probably for all the agencies, and what's changed is that there's been an exponential rise in the amount of data being produced by the private sector on citizens. This gives undemocratic states new possibilities to do surveillance, and it's right that in a democratic society you need to have an active and constant debate about whether you've got the balance right. In the U.K., the [2016] Investigatory Powers Act was an attempt to do that after the revelations by Edward Snowden, though I think the legislation was coming anyway at the time, probably accelerated a bit by Snowden. In the U.K. context, that legislation seems to strike a balance that people are comfortable with.

It's quite interesting that very quickly after the Snowden revelations, the debate moved on, because terrorism, then the resurgence of Russian aggression, and what the tech companies were doing with data really made what governments had access to seem quite secondary. Of course, it is very important that government should be held to a higher standard, and I think that it is a debate that needs to be had all the time, particularly as data processing and data holding in the private sector changes. But it does feel like the public debate has moved on, moved on to what companies like Facebook/Meta and the other tech companies are doing.

So I think the lesson for the intelligence community is not to be afraid of the public debate. Probably one of the mistakes made towards the end of the last century, and at the beginning of this one as the internet became available widely, was not to have that debate openly enough. Because consent is crucial to intelligence operations in democratic countries, and I think there was probably an assumption that everyone understood what was happening within this context and I am not sure people did. So one of the lessons is to get better at having that debate more often, especially as it is not a static thing and you are never going to come to a conclusion on the issue, rather it has to be a dynamic debate. Ultimately, we want the minimum necessary powers for agencies. But as the technology evolves, you have to evolve in response.

CTC: If we could pull on a few threads there, what was the impact of Edward Snowden's revelations on counterterrorism



Robert Hannigan

capability, and how responsible do you think the social media platforms have been in keeping terrorists and extremist content off their platforms?

Hannigan: There was a clear reaction from terrorist groups and hostile states in particular, to the revelations, and yes, there were specific counterterrorism consequences, which at the time my predecessor Iain Lobban and his counterpart at the NSA Keith Alexander talked about.^b There were things going dark that probably wouldn't have gone dark otherwise.

With the tech companies, things have changed, but when I came into the job in 2014 I had a go at the companies¹ (something that was unusual at the time). I thought they were at that point being irresponsible, and we were in a slightly ridiculous position where the agencies were having to ask a company's permission effectively to help on particular operations. The companies would decide whether this met their threshold for what constituted terrorism, and there seemed to be something completely anti-democratic about that. For all their failings, governments at least get elected. Tech companies are not, and they do not have any expertise in this, so it is quite weird to be expecting a bunch of probably well-meaning people in Silicon Valley to make decisions about what is and what is not terrorism in a far-flung part of London.

^b Editor's Note: In a November 2013 hearing before the UK Parliament's Intelligence and Security Committee (that provides oversight of the UK's intelligence agencies), Sir Iain Lobban revealed "we have actually seen chat around specific terrorist groups, including close to home, discussing how to avoid what they now perceive to be vulnerable communications methods or how to select communications which they now perceive not to be exploitable." "Uncorrected Transcript of Evidence Given By, Sir Iain Lobban, Mr Andrew Parker, Sir John Sawers," November 7, 2013.

And, to be fair to the companies, I think they felt deeply uncomfortable, too. They are money-making enterprises. Most of them are effectively advertising companies, if we are honest; Meta is a massive advertising company, and so was part of Google. That is their business, and they did not really want to be drawn into CT, which is where the narrative about them being neutral conduits and just platforms with no editorial control came from. I think they actually believed that narrative, and they really did not think they were enabling terrorist activity.

I think over the years—under public pressure but also as a result of terrorism and other serious crime—they have realized that they are not neutral and they have to take some kind of position on this, and they have to find a better way of doing it. Every major country is now looking at legislating on this; in the U.K., through the Online Safety Bill.^c The manipulation of democratic institutions and elections has accelerated the feeling that we have to do something and put even more pressure on the tech companies.

So it does look very different now from when I said those things about ‘big tech.’ It was unfashionable to have a go at tech companies back in 2014; now everybody piles in and, if anything, it is a little one-sided. I think they are, on the whole, trying to address the problems, with varying degrees of success. But nobody quite has the answer. We know in the West that we do not want state control of these things, but neither do we want an unregulated private sector-driven landscape.

CTC: GCHQ has long been associated with signals intelligence. But in recent decades, there has been an information revolution with deep implications for intelligence gathering and analysis. Not only is there vastly more information (and dis- and mis-information) to sift through than ever before but open-source intelligence has become much more important and “the government’s ability to collect and analyze information is nowhere near dominant compared to what it used to be.”² How have and should agencies like GCHQ be adapting? How important is AI and machine learning (ML) in this new era? Given “secret agencies will always favor secrets,” and given the calls for an open-source agency to be set up in the United States,³ does the United Kingdom now need a dedicated open-source agency, a new sort of BBC Monitoring?

Hannigan: Well, it’s interesting you mentioned BBC Monitoring as the Americans had the Open Source Center, which was a much larger version of that. It has now changed and become the Open

Source Enterprise.^d It was taken very seriously by the U.S. and did a great job. As does BBC Monitoring, though it has gradually been pared down over the years, and in any case was traditionally more focused on broadcast media than on new media or social media.

[Dis/mis-information] is a huge challenge but is highlighted not so much by terrorism but by the attempts to subvert democratic processes by Russia. The U.K. and lots of countries were really caught napping here because there wasn’t any structural part of government whose responsibility was to monitor this. There were two reasons for this, I think. One is that the secret agencies have a lot of other things to do—countering terrorism, for example—and have limited resources. But secondly, it’s very uncomfortable for intelligence agencies to be doing open-source monitoring, particularly where social media is concerned. There is something instinctively difficult about secret agencies looking at mass social media use. The idea [of having] GCHQ or MI5 all over everybody’s Facebook accounts smacks too much of a surveillance state and would be unacceptable in a democratic society.

As a result, for both those reasons, lots of governments, including the U.K., have shied away from looking at this and attempted to do it in a tactical, well-meaning but arguably ineffective way in the Cabinet Office^e or somewhere like that, where they are trying to get a small group of people to have a look at this information flow.

To me, the answer has to be a better use of the private sector. Most of this open-source material is being generated by the private sector. Look at Ukraine and the low-orbit satellite imagery that is being generated; it’s absolutely phenomenal, better in many cases than the military equivalent and available in theory to everybody. [The same applies to] the monitoring of social media trends. So I think the answer has to be government agencies using [private sector-generated data and analytics] better.

There are still lots of datasets that are secret, of course, and there are statutory-based accesses to data, which other people don’t have outside government. Focusing on that and what is genuinely secret and hidden is a much better use of agency time.

The real advantage comes from washing the secret and the open-source data together. In other words, you are, as a secret agency, doing your secret thing but you’re also washing that against the results of open source, and that’s where you get something particularly valuable and that’s where you ought to be able to spot some of the things we failed to spot: for example, Russian intervention in elections. But if I am honest, I do not know how much progress Western governments have made on this. The U.S. probably comes the closest because they have invested in it, but I think most governments have just danced around it, partly for resource reasons, but also because it is politically and ethically a

c Editor’s Note: The Online Safety Bill is a wide-ranging piece of legislation currently under consideration by the UK Parliament that will provide government with powers to regulate online content, as well as impose large fines on companies for failing to fulfill their responsibilities. The draft bill under consideration was submitted in May 2021 and can be found at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/985033/Draft_Online_Safety_Bill_Bookmarked.pdf

d Editor’s Note: In October 2015, the Open Source Center (OSC) was “redesignated the Open Source Enterprise and incorporated in CIA’s new Directorate of Digital Innovation. The Open Source Center, established in 2005, was tasked to collect and analyze open source information of intelligence value across all media – print, broadcast and online. The OSC was the successor to the Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS), which gathered and translated world news coverage and other open source information for half a century.” Steven Aftergood, “Open Source Center (OSC) Becomes Open Source Enterprise (OSE),” Federation of American Scientists Blog, October 28, 2015.

e Editor’s Note: The Cabinet Office is a central U.K. government function that supports the Prime Minister and his Cabinet, drawing on input from across government to help deliver on policy goals.

very difficult area.

The answer is probably to use the private sector mechanisms that are there already and that are quite open; there are NGOs like Bellingcat that are already doing some extraordinary work in the public domain. They are not the only ones; there are plenty of academic NGOs and journalistic organizations who are doing really interesting work here and it is every bit as good as what governments do. So I do not think we need some huge new bureaucracy in government to look at open-source material; rather, we should synthesize what is already out there and use it intelligently with the secret insights that agencies generate to deliver some more effective results.

CTC: Another key part of this, which brings in the private sector, is encryption, and you regularly hear from politicians and serving security officials that end-to-end encryption is a danger that protects, among others, terrorists. What is your sense of the counterterrorism concerns around this?

Hannigan: The GCHQ view on this has always been slightly unusual because GCHQ is an agency that delivers strong encryption and, indeed, in the 1970s was involved in inventing some of the strongest encryption that is currently in use. So we think encryption is a good thing. It protects everybody—protects governments and protects business. I have always resisted the temptation to say encryption is bad somehow, and law enforcement and government should be given the key to everything, partly because I do not think that would be healthy and partly because it's not practical. You cannot uninvent end-to-end encryption. It is a mathematical invention; it's not something you can suddenly say is not going to be there.

What you have to do is keep it in proportion. Yes, it is misused by criminals and terrorists, but it is predominantly used by honest citizens and businesses who are protecting themselves, so we shouldn't let the security tail wag the dog. As always, criminals and terrorists will use good technology for bad purposes. There are some ways around this. One is to work with the companies, as they themselves have offered to different degrees to do things that are short of decryption because, of course, they cannot decrypt it themselves if it's genuinely end-to-end, but there are things they can do to help with the data around it. It is probably not helpful to go into the details here, but they themselves have said it is not all about the content.

Better relations between the companies and governments help. And there are some macro proposals that have been put out there but so far they have not found favor with the privacy lobby in the United States. And whatever you do, you will always have criminals who will use something else, move away from the big platforms and use something different, so you might just end up pushing the problem elsewhere. You already see a bit of that now, with, for example, a lot now coalescing around Telegram and away from some of the traditional Western platforms.

The short answer is that there is not an easy answer. And efforts should be focused on particular targets rather than trying to do anything at scale. I know some law enforcement people still hanker after large-scale solutions, but there is, frankly, no way that companies are going to give any kind of blanket access to law enforcement or governments in the future. And I cannot see any legislation that would actually compel them to do it. Of

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course, there are some countries that ban end-to-end services, for this reason. But I cannot see democracies agreeing to that, and I think it would be disproportionate. The task for the agencies in cooperation with the companies is to go after specific targets and help each other do that, where there's general agreement that these are legitimate targets.

CTC: In July, FBI Director Chris Wray and MI5 Director Ken McCallum did a series of events in London in which, among other things, they identified the lone-actor threat as the heart of the terrorist threat both faced.⁴ Would you agree with this assessment, and how do you characterize the journey of how we got here?

Hannigan: They are much more current than I am on this, but it has been a trend for a while. In fact, it was ISIS and [Abu Bakr] al-Baghdadi himself that promoted the lone-wolf idea and propagandized it through their various channels, so it's not unexpected. It was a perfectly logical response to better intelligence and law enforcement disruption because it's extremely difficult to spot, disrupt, and prevent genuine lone actors. The thinking of the al-Baghdadi model was 'we don't need to control this. We do not even need necessarily to know who you are; if you go out and do something for ISIS, then you are part of the struggle.' That's quite a new departure for terrorist groups. They have always tended to be control freaks: The study of terrorist bureaucracy and leadership is instructive. By contrast, ISIS was crowdsourcing in quite an innovative way. The demise of the 'caliphate' made the lone wolf approach even more compelling for ISIS.

I would not write off organized terrorism in the future; I think there's plenty of evidence that it has not gone away, but lone-actor terrorism does seem to be the trend at the moment and the thing that is hardest for agencies to spot. All I would say is, if you look at the lone wolves who have been successful or mounted successful attacks in a number of countries, they are very rarely completely 'lone' or completely unknown to their government agencies. And so it comes back to the age-old problem of prioritization. Most of them appear amongst the ranks of the many thousands of people of interest to police and law enforcement and intelligence agencies, and probably the task is to use data better to prioritize better.

Some of the criticisms around, for example, the London Bridge

attacks^f were about failures to do that and failures to use data better to understand where the priorities are and where the tipping points are. But all of this is very easy to say and very difficult to do, and it is never going to be [got] completely right. It is a constant struggle for MI5 in particular, but for all agencies to prioritize out of the thousands of people who might be a worry, who are the ones that you need to focus on now, and deploy your very, very limited surveillance resources on, because we all know how much it costs and how difficult it is to do.

But the reality is that even lone wolves usually display behavior and patterns of life [notwithstanding encrypted communications and the end-to-end problem] that says something about them; they are in touch with other people, even if they're not involved in joint attack planning. The challenge has to be to use data to try to work out when they have reached a tipping point. You will never be successful 100 percent of the time, but it's about trying to raise the percentage of success.

CTC: Not only does the West currently face the challenge of Russian aggression in Ukraine, but Directors Wray and McCallum identified China as the biggest long-term national security threat.⁵ Given the shift in resources on both sides of the Atlantic to great power competition, is there a danger of counterterrorism being underfunded? Where do you see the intersections between great power competition and counterterrorism?

Hannigan: It is a perennial problem of governments that you veer from one crisis to another, and [then] something has to be deprioritized. We have seen what happened after we deprioritized Russia after the Cold War. The ambition should be to try to reduce investment in particular areas without giving up your core capability and eroding the skills and knowledge that you have had on that subject. This applies to counterterrorism, too, because the threat hasn't gone away.

It is clearly right to focus on China and Russia. When I started at GCHQ, I said I thought the two big challenges for the next 50 years in the West were managing a declining Russia and a rising China. We are seeing the declining Russia problem in the lashing out, and the nationalism, and the economic failure to reform, and the kleptocracy that has emerged as a result. We are experiencing that in Ukraine, and it's a big challenge to confront and contain it, but I think it is a much easier challenge than a rising China, which is a complex mixture of opportunity and challenge. But there is a lot of threat there as well, as Wray and McCallum rightly said. So we should be focusing on that, and it is the right top priority, but that doesn't mean we can neglect CT. There will have to be a difficult discussion about to balance resources. Quite a lot of the great power strategy is outside the remit of agencies. A lot of it is about

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industrial policy, investment decisions, and regulation. Regulating Chinese tech and Chinese tech ambition is not core intelligence work, so it doesn't all fall on the agencies.

On the question of crossover, that is a potential worry because states obviously have used all sorts of proxies in the past. In the cyber world, they use criminal groups. And they have also used terrorist groups as proxies. It is not hard to imagine that in the future, they will do the same again to put pressure on Western countries either by using terrorist groups in whichever part of the world the conflict might be taking place, or even to target us at home. I do not know that we're seeing a sudden upsurge in that yet, but it is certainly a concern for the future, and the more desperate a country like Russia gets, the more likely it is to be happy to foment that.

CTC: You led the creation of the United Kingdom's National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC), oversaw the country's pioneering Active Cyber Defense Program, and helped create the United Kingdom's first cyber security strategy.⁶ When it comes to cyber, much of the concern has focused on state actors such as China as well as criminal groups and the threat to critical infrastructure. How would you characterize the cyber threat posed by terror groups, including jihadi terror groups? Have we yet seen a cyber terror attack?

Hannigan: There have always been great scare stories about this, partly because the media loves the idea of cyber terrorism and terrorists being able to take down an entire infrastructure or electricity grid or something. Whether we have seen it or not depends on how you define it. You could say Hezbollah [cyber] attacks against Israel are cyber terrorist attacks.^g You could say that

^f Editor's Note: On June 3, 2017, three terrorists launched a knife and van ramming attack on London Bridge and in the nearby area of Borough Market, murdering eight before dying themselves. On November 29, 2019, Usman Khan, a formerly incarcerated terrorist attacked and murdered two people at an event at Fishmonger's Hall, before being shot by police on the nearby London Bridge. In both attacks, subsequent investigations revealed that authorities were aware of the individuals and may have failed to prioritize the level of threat that they posed. For more on the 2017 attack, see the inquest page at <https://londonbridgeinquests.independent.gov.uk/> and the 2019 attacks, its own inquest page at <https://fishmongershallinquests.independent.gov.uk/>

^g Editor's Note: For instance, “over the past decade, companies in the US, UK, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Israel and the Palestinian Authority have been targeted by a hacker group called ‘Lebanese Cedar’, also known as ‘Volatile Cedar’, which seems to be linked to Hezbollah, ClearSky Cyber Security announced” in January 2021. Tzvi Joffre, “Israel targeted by Hezbollah hacker group, remained unnoticed for 5 years,” *Jerusalem Post*, January 28, 2021.

Iranian attacks on water treatment plants in Israel^h are a potential attack by a nation-state designed to instill terror.

So, it is certainly not unimaginable, but cyber is not necessarily the best weapon for terrorists to use. Firstly, it does require quite a degree of long-term commitment and knowledge. And terrorists in the past have been rather traditional in wanting spectacles of one sort or another, so their mindset may not be geared towards it. This may change with the new generation. We certainly saw that with [their ability to exploit] social media, so there is a logic to saying, 'Well, they might get good at this in the future.' It has also got much cheaper and easier to do because [the technology] is something you can now buy as a service or commodity and use it. So, the trajectory suggests that it ought to be easier to do cyber terrorism in the future.

The other point, though, is that while you can disrupt things and you can make people's lives difficult [through cyber-attacks], it is quite difficult to do destructive activity that is really long lasting. Having said that, I did notice that one of the American consultancies on tech that issues reports every so often, and is usually quite a cautious organization, projected that by 2025 operational technology would be weaponized to cause death.⁷ They were certainly thinking of nation-states rather than terrorists, but the fact that they were saying this is interesting.

These kinds of destructive cyber effects will be accidental for the most part. The first cyber homicide that I can think of is the case in Germany two years ago where a woman was being transferred to a hospital that had been paralyzed by ransomware and so she was diverted to another hospital and died on the way. German police decided to treat this as cyber homicide.⁸ Those sorts of things—ransomware out of control—might well cause people's deaths, either through interfering with operational technology that is running power, water, or healthcare, or just by accident. But all of that is more likely than a planned cyber-terrorist event. But it is not unimaginable, and it is not unimaginable for the nation-state to find it convenient to false flag something [it has perpetrated against an adversary], to mask a cyber attack as a terrorist attack. We have, of course, seen the Russians doing that in their [2015] attack on [the French television station] TV5,ⁱ which they flagged as a terrorist attack.⁹ So cyber terrorism is not unimaginable but probably not top of the list of worries at the moment.

CTC: In the September 2021 issue of *CTC Sentinel*, former acting CIA Director Michael Morell assessed that following the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, “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.”¹⁰ It’s been a year since the Taliban assumed power. How do you assess the international terror threat from jihadi groups operating on its soil?

^h Editor's Note: Iran reportedly attempted to trick computers to increase chlorine levels in the treated water for residential areas during an April 2020 cyberattack against Israel's water systems. Mehul Srivastava, Najmeh Bozorgmehr, and Katrina Manson. "Israel-Iran attacks: 'Cyber winter is coming,'" *Financial Times*, May 31, 2020.

ⁱ Editor's Note: In April 2015, TV5 Monde was taken off air in an attack carried out by a group of Russian hackers. It was reported that they "used highly targeted malicious software to destroy the TV network's systems." Gordon Corera. An Islamic State-linked group going by the name the Cyber Caliphate had first claimed responsibility. "How France's TV5 was almost destroyed by 'Russian hackers,'" BBC, October 10, 2016.

“The successful U.S. attack on al-Zawahiri this summer seems to me to be about a determined long-term manhunt: It does not imply great understanding of Afghanistan in general. In addition, there are so many other things going on in the world that even if we had some insight, I doubt it’s top of the list for most governments.”

Hannigan: My biggest concerns are, do we know what the threat is and how would we know if it is growing? We have lost most of our insight into what's going on in Afghanistan, for all the obvious reasons, and the biggest worry is we simply won't see a problem—from ISIS in particular but also al-Qa`ida—until it's well formed and mature. Now, I may be wrong; maybe we have great insight. But I have not seen it, and I doubt it is actually there. The successful U.S. attack on al-Zawahiri this summer seems to me to be about a determined long-term manhunt: It does not imply great understanding of Afghanistan in general. In addition, there are so many other things going on in the world that even if we had some insight, I doubt it's top of the list for most governments. So I think it is a real concern from an intelligence point of view as to who actually knows what the CT threat emerging or growing in Afghanistan is, and how much of it might be projected outwards. Most of it is currently focused internally, but these things have a tendency to get externally directed over time.

CTC: According to the 2021 U.K. government integrated review, “It is likely that a terrorist group will launch a successful CBRN attack by 2030.”¹¹ In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, what is your assessment of the CBRN terror threat?

Hannigan: It is a bigger worry to me than cyber terrorism by a long way. Partly because organizations have seen the chaos you can cause through CBRN, and whether it's pandemics, chemical weapons in Syria, or the near disasters in Ukraine through radiological mismanagement during the war, there must be people thinking, 'Well, if I want to cause an enormous amount of suffering and disable a country, this is a better route to go.' A key problem is that the global instability tends to make the control of the substances more difficult. We have been pretty effective [in past decades] in having organizations like the OPCW [Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons] that could control and monitor the materials you need to conduct such an attack. However, in a world of chaotic great power relationships, that gets much harder, and so the opportunity to get hold of this material, or to manufacture it, becomes easier. Afghanistan is one of those places where we have seen in the past, and could certainly see in the future, terrorist programs to this end. It is certainly a bigger worry to me than cyber terrorism.

CTC: Given the strong nexus to far-right extremism of Russian

paramilitary groups involved in the fighting in Ukraine and given the history of such ties also on the Ukrainian side,¹² do you see any terrorist or foreign fighter threat emanating from the war in Ukraine?

Hannigan: One of the lessons we should learn from ISIS is relevant to this discussion. One of the reasons the lone wolves or more often the small groups who were effective in launching attacks—for example, in [Paris in November] 2015—were so effective was that they were battle-hardened and they knew what to do. They knew how to withstand firefights. They were not just ideologically hardened; they actually had battlefield experience. You have to assume that the same could be true of other kinds of extremists returning from any conflict. We have seen similar things emerging from Chechnya in the past as well. It seems plausible that the many current theaters of conflict may produce battle-hardened and radicalized individuals.

CTC: What is your assessment of the current security outlook in Northern Ireland?

Hannigan: We obviously underestimated, in around 2007, the resilience of dissident Republicanism, and I think that was partly because nobody foresaw the economic downturn. People assumed that there would be a great tidal wave of economic benefits and a peace dividend for lots of communities that did not materialize. But you cannot just pin it all on economics. There is a cyclical side to Republican violence in Irish history that is unlikely to ever go completely away, but the problem now is that the politics can get destabilized relatively quickly. I do not foresee a sudden return to violence, but I think the more the politics frays, the more instability there is, and the more you tinker with what was a political settlement that everybody could just about buy into, the more you run the risk of the fringes becoming violent again. And all of this might start successfully radicalizing young people. It was never a particular concern that the older generation of dissidents were still there—diehards who never signed up to the peace process and were never going to change their minds—but what was concerning was young people being recruited in their teens and 20s into dissident

activity. That's much more worrying. It is the key thing you have to guard against for the future. And clearly, the best way to do that is through political stability and political progress.

CTC: What were you most proud of in your work in counterterrorism? From a CT perspective, what worries you most today?

Hannigan: I am very proud of what GCHQ did in preventing attacks in the U.K., with MI5 and others. Most of those are not seen because they are prevented, but that was great work that I do not take any personal credit for, but was done exceptionally well. Personally, the thing I found most rewarding in counterterrorism was in Northern Ireland because this was a domestic threat where pretty much all the levers were in the U.K.'s hands—security and intelligence, economic and political. It was probably the last time that the U.K.'s top national security threat, as it was then, was a domestic one. It taught me a lot about terrorism, not least through talking to members of the Provisional IRA and other organizations, which gave me a greater understanding of how terrorist organizations think and work, and how individuals are motivated. In the end, it was, over a 30- to 40-year period, a successful process. There were, of course, mistakes, but it was a good marriage of security policy and political process, that addressed the underlying causes of the Troubles and, partly through good CT work, created space for politics to work.

I do not think Islamist extremism has gone away and the rise of the extreme-right is clearly a concern, but terrorism will continue to bubble up in all sorts of areas that may not yet have been predicted: where people feel either disenfranchised or disadvantaged, or feel that their identity is threatened. In a chaotic international environment, where outrage can be generated and manipulated on a larger scale than ever before, not least through technology, there will be more of this, and it will be more unpredictable. Right-wing extremism is just the latest [threat to gain prominence], but in reality, it has been around a long time. I suspect there may be all sorts of new causes, and people may resort to violence more quickly than they did in the past. **CTC**

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Poland's Evolving Violent Far-Right Landscape

By Michael Duffin

Since the fall of communism in 1989, violent far-right actors in Poland have not committed a mass-casualty attack in the country. But this fact belies the relevance of this Central European country of 38 million people as both a source of and destination for violent far-right groups. Along with Hungary and Serbia, Poland has become a point of interest for white supremacists globally for being a predominantly homogeneous country of white Christians led by a socially conservative government. One of the biggest draws for international violent far-right groups is the Independence Day march organized by Polish far-right groups in Warsaw every November 11. Since the early 1990s, Poland has also been a popular destination for a range of violent far-right activities, including neo-Nazi concerts, “whites only” mixed martial arts (MMA) tournaments, and paramilitary training. The hate these groups direct toward racial and ethnic minorities, immigrants, members of the LGBTQI+ community, and other perceived enemies such as anti-fascists and liberal politicians is part of a growing trend of polarization across Poland. With the easing of travel restrictions related to COVID-19, violent far-right activities in Poland have the potential to match or even exceed pre-pandemic levels. This article provides an overview of violent far-right groups in Poland and outlines why international violent far-right actors find the country so appealing for their activities.

After more than two decades of countering Islamist terrorist groups such as al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State, many counterterrorism policymakers, practitioners, and scholars have become accustomed to associating the threat level in a country with the number of mass-casualty terrorist plots that were successful, thwarted, or failed. Beyond some prominent examples of successful

Michael Duffin is a senior advisor on countering violent extremism at the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Counterterrorism and a non-resident fellow at Ghent University's Institute for International Research on Criminal Policy.

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attacks perpetrated by violent far-right individuals in Canada, Germany, New Zealand, Norway, and the United States, a majority of violent far-right groups since 9/11 have perpetrated low-level attacks that either do not result in a significant loss of life (if any) or are not categorized as hate crimes and/or acts of terrorism.¹ This conundrum is best exemplified in Poland, which since the fall of communism in 1989 has been a source of and destination for violent far-right actors who are more likely to assault their victims with knives, clubs, and fists than with bombs or guns.

Despite extensive reporting about individual incidents, there has been little analysis published to date about the regional and global counterterrorism implications of a potentially growing violent far-right threat in Poland.^a This article, which is intended to encourage more scholarship on this topic, begins with an overview of the complex threat environment. It then outlines the connections some violent far-right individuals and groups in Poland have had to Russia. It will then look at two elements commonplace with most violent far-right ideologies in Poland: nationalism—including its role in stoking polarization^b—and anti-Semitism. Next, the article will explore how nationalism and anti-Semitism in Poland have contributed to violent far-right activities, including the murder of Gdansk Mayor Pawel Adamowicz in 2019 by a man inspired by a sustained campaign of hate against the mayor by violent far-right groups and ultra-nationalist commentators on Polish media; and the annual Independence Day march in Warsaw, which at its pre-pandemic peak attracted 200,000 people in 2019, including members of violent far-right groups outside of Poland. The article will then explain why violent far-right groups across Europe travel to Poland, including the perception that Poland is a more permissive environment for their activities than their home countries and the allure of Poland being a mostly homogeneous country of white Christians with a socially conservative government. Finally, the article will discuss information gaps and emerging challenges posed by violent far-right groups in Poland.

The description provided here of relevant violent far-right activities in a mostly racially and religiously homogeneous Central European country of 38 million people^c draws on an extensive review of open-source material and background interviews with dozens of researchers, journalists, and policy makers, and articulates

- a The Berlin-based Counter Extremism Project has previously published reports on violent far-right groups in Central and Eastern Europe and has compiled an upcoming report on the Independence Day march in Warsaw.
- b In her 2020 book, Anne Applebaum calls Poland “one of the most polarized societies in Europe.” See Anne Applebaum, *Twilight of Democracy: The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism* (New York: Doubleday, 2020).
- c According to the CIA's World Factbook, ethnic Poles comprise 96.9 percent of the population in Poland, with 84.8 percent of the population belonging to the Roman Catholic Church (12.9 percent of Poles included in this data are listed as “unspecified”).

why violent far-right movements in Poland should garner more attention from the global counterterrorism community.

A Complex Threat Landscape

In Poland, violent far-right groups are disparate, including but not limited to neo-Nazis, neo-fascists, ultra-nationalists, and racist soccer hooligans.^d The first post-communist violent far-right attack occurred in 1989 against the Warsaw office of the Polish Socialist Party.² Restrictive gun laws have hampered the ability of violent far-right actors from Poland to carry out mass-casualty attacks, with the Polish government interdicting multiple plots over the past decade.³ In November 2012, for example, Polish security services arrested a man with links to Norwegian mass murderer Anders Breivik who planned to ram a vehicle with explosives into parliament; he was later sentenced to 13 years in prison for this plot.⁴ Donald Tusk, the prime minister at that time, said, “This is a new and dramatic experience. This should be a warning.”⁵ On November 10, 2019, Polish security services raided a Warsaw home and arrested two men who allegedly planned a “Christchurch-style”^e attack against a mosque.⁶

Political rhetoric, particularly during the lead up to parliamentary elections, has contributed to a rise in support for violent far-right extremism since at least 2015—the next parliamentary elections are in fall 2023. With fewer than 10,000 Muslims living in Poland at that time,^f debate in July 2015 about the government potentially admitting tens of thousands of Syrian refugees shifted the focus of parliamentary elections that October to xenophobic hyperbole, which contributed to the election of the ruling Law and Justice (PiS) party on a socially conservative platform.⁷ In the lead-up to parliamentary elections in 2019, PiS officials depicted LGBTQI+ rights as a dangerous foreign idea that undermines traditional values—such rhetoric was blamed in part for violent counter-protestors at Pride parades across Poland.⁸ In July 2019, racist soccer hooligans and other violent far-right groups attacked marchers at a Pride parade in Bialystok, the largest city in northeastern Poland, with flash bombs, rocks, and bottles.⁹ In

d Racist incidents had been so ubiquitous at Polish soccer matches that UEFA provided funding for anti-racism campaigns targeting Polish soccer fans in the lead up to the 2012 European Football Championship co-hosted by Poland and Ukraine. In recent years, some Polish soccer supporters have displayed banners and scarves honoring Janusz Walus, a Polish national in prison in South Africa for the 1993 murder of a prominent Black anti-apartheid figure. “UEFA Demands Tough Stance on Racism,” CNN, June 11, 2012.

e In March 2019, a violent far-right extremist attacked two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, killing over 50 people. See Graham Macklin, “The Christchurch Attacks: Livestream Terror in the Viral Video Age,” *CTC Sentinel* 12:6 (2019).

f According to a survey by the Pew Research Center, Poland’s Muslim population was less than 10,000 in 2016. Some sources have estimated that as many as 38,000 Muslims live in Poland, including a 2019 paper by the Brookings Institution that used data from 2016, but two experts on Poland who reviewed this paper suggested that the Pew data was more likely to be accurate than higher estimates. A few weeks before the October 25, 2015, parliamentary elections, Politico reported that PiS head and former Prime Minister Jaroslaw Kaczynski told rally-goers that Poland could be forced to resettle more than 100,000 Muslim refugees, including those who carry “parasites” and other diseases. Jan Cienski, “Migrants Carry ‘Parasites’ and ‘Protozoa,’ Warns Polish Opposition Leader,” Politico, October 14, 2015.

September 2019, a man and woman were arrested at a pride parade in Lublin in southeastern Poland for possession of crudely made explosive devices they had planned to detonate at the event.⁸ The organizers of the event said they received death threats, and police arrested 30 counter-protestors before the parade even began.¹⁰

Russia: A Comrade for Segments of Poland’s Violent Far-Right

Unlike Hungary and Serbia, anti-Russia sentiment is rampant across Poland, including among PiS leadership, because of the historical legacy of Polish-Russia relations as well as accusations by some in the government and their allies that Russian officials played a role in the 2010 plane crash that killed President Lech Kaczynski and 95 others in Smolensk, Russia.¹¹ Despite widespread antipathy toward Russia, some violent far-right groups are pro-Kremlin. In February 2018, three Poles from the pro-Russia Falanga organization were arrested for firebombing a Hungarian cultural center in Ukraine.¹² Hired by a Kremlin-aligned member of Germany’s Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) party, the perpetrators were attempting a “false flag” operation to reinforce Russian claims that Ukraine had been overrun by violent far-right groups.¹³ Polish nationals have also sought training from the Russian Imperial Movement (RIM), which the United States designated as Specially Designated Global Terrorists in 2020.^h In November 2017, an extreme far-right conference held the day before the annual Independence Day march in Warsaw featured Denis Nikitin, the Russian founder of the white nationalist clothing brand White Rex.¹⁴

Russian hostilities in Ukraine have led to divisions among violent far-right groups in Poland. Many of those who are pro-Russia believe President Vladimir Putin’s authoritarianism and far-right policies serve as a model for Poland.¹⁵ Russian propaganda and disinformation have also been credited for stoking anti-American and anti-E.U. sentiment among those Poles who feel like they have been excluded from the prosperity promised by E.U. membership.¹⁶ The first known formal engagements between Polish and Russian violent far-right actors occurred in August 2000 when neo-Nazis from Poland visited Russia.¹⁷ One member of this delegation, Mateusz Piskorski, was elected to parliament in 2005 and served a single term.¹⁸ He was arrested on espionage charges in May 2016 for his connections to Russia and was released on bail in 2019 pending trial, which remains in limbo awaiting a court review of the charges.¹⁹

The Intersection of Nationalism and Polarization

Beyond violent far-right groups, far-right political figures have contributed to polarization in Poland by demonizing religious and ethnic minorities, immigrants, and others they believe undermine their socially conservative agenda, such as those who support

g The man and woman were each sentenced to one year in prison. The short length of sentence and the fact that they were not charged with terrorism reportedly received some criticism. Daniel Tilles, “Polish Couple Who Took Homemade Explosives to Protest Against LGBT Parade Sentenced,” Notes from Poland, February 23, 2020.

h In announcing the Russian Imperial Movement as Specially Designated Global Terrorists, the U.S. State Department noted that the organization provided training to Polish nationals. See “United States Designates Russian Imperial Movement and Leaders as Global Terrorists,” U.S. Department of State, April 7, 2020.



The green flags of the National Radical Camp (ONR) were in evidence during the November 11, 2021, 'Independence Day March' in Warsaw, Poland, organized by far-right organizations. (Attila Husejnow/SOPA Images/Sipa USA via AP Images)

abortion, the human rights of LGBTQI+ persons, and Poland's membership in the European Union. Many followers of the country's far-right movement trace their roots back to the late Roman Dmowski, a politician and ideologue who in the interwar period argued that only Catholics make good Poles.²⁰ One of Dmowski's ideological heirs is Radio Maryja, a far-right Catholic media company founded in 1991 by Father Tadeusz Rydzik, a Catholic priest who has pushed back against Vatican attempts to rein in his divisive and overtly political rhetoric.²¹ The U.S. Department of State's International Religious Freedom Report has cited instances of anti-Semitism featured on Radio Maryja programming several times, most recently in the 2017 report.²²

While far from monolithic, the base of support for nativist groups in Poland often comes from older, conservative Poles and those who live in economically depressed rural regions in the south and east.²³ Even before the massive influx of refugees from Ukraine as a result of Russia's invasion of Ukraine earlier this year, Poland had transitioned from "a country of emigration to a country of immigration."²⁴ As an E.U. member with a relatively low cost of living, Poland attracts workers and students from around the world. It is estimated that 10 percent of Poland's 300,000 tech sector jobs, for example, are occupied by foreigners.²⁵ The top source country for temporary stays in Poland from 2018-2020 was Ukraine, and other countries high up on the list included China, India, and Vietnam.²⁶

The League of Polish Families, while no longer attracting many voters, was instrumental in bringing xenophobia, anti-Semitism, and homophobia into Poland's mainstream political discourse in the 2000s.²⁷ In 2006, Polish media exposed senior party members' involvement in neo-Nazi activities, including the head of All Polish

Youth, its youth wing.²⁸ The ruling PiS party, which absorbed many of the League of Polish Families' voters, has been criticized by the opposition for allegedly trying to appease and even co-opt far-right groups.²⁹ On the centennial of Poland's independence in 2018, for example, President Andrzej Duda and high-ranking PiS members walked along the same march route in Warsaw as violent far-right organizations.³⁰ Pushing back against criticism that they were participating in an unsanctioned event organized by violent far-right activists, senior government officials marched a few hundred yards ahead of other marchers and claimed it was a separate event.³¹ PiS has also provided funding to Radio Maryja and other far-right organizations, including the organizers of the Independence Day march in Warsaw.³² In addition, there have been multiple examples of people with ties to violent far-right groups being appointed to senior government positions.³³

Anti-Semitism and the Legacy of the Holocaust

Anti-Semitism is a prevalent theme in violent far-right rhetoric in Poland, despite it being a mostly homogeneous country of ethnic Poles who are predominantly Roman Catholic. Prior to World War II, Poland, under its previous borders, was a multi-ethnic state with Europe's largest Jewish population, which had lived in this territory for about 1,000 years after fleeing religious persecution in Western

ⁱ In a 2010 book, the scholar Rafal Pankowski wrote that the frequency of appointments of members of the violent-far right to government positions "took on systemic dimensions." See Rafal Pankowski, *The Populist Radical Right in Poland: The patriots* (New York: Routledge, 2010), p. 181.

Europe.^{34j} Adolf Hitler's Third Reich and their collaborators killed 90 percent of Poland's Jews, about three million people.³⁵ Fewer than 10,000 Jews live in Poland today.³⁶ The Jews who remained in Poland after the war, including those who were resettled from the Soviet Union, were subjected to persecution by some ethnic Poles who accused them of blood libel—a debunked conspiracy theory that Jews ritualistically sacrificed Christian children—and collaboration with the ruling communist government.³⁷ These accusations resulted in several well-documented *pogroms*—a form of community-based ethnic cleansing—including the barbaric murder of dozens of Jewish men, women, and children by their neighbors in the town of Kielce on July 4, 1946.³⁸ As Polish-American scholar Jan Gross chronicled in his 2006 book *Fear: Anti-Semitism in Poland After Auschwitz*, greed was likely a prevailing factor for many of the perpetrators of this violence as ethnic Poles had claimed property and other possessions of their Jewish neighbors.³⁹ The communist government in Warsaw, for its part, questioned Polish Jews' loyalty and implemented anti-Semitic policies. In 1968, for example, amidst student protests against state censorship and repression, Poland's communist government declared Polish Jews an "enemy of the state" and pressured thousands to leave under duress.⁴⁰ Israel received a majority of those who were expelled or fled, with others settling in the United States and other countries.⁴¹

Anti-Semitism in modern-day Poland is symptomatic of general antipathy toward diversity and democracy.⁴² Rarely does this hatred result in physical attacks on Polish Jews—partly due to their small numbers—but instead is manifested through neo-Nazi and neo-fascist marches and rallies and other forms of harassment.⁴³ A 2018 survey by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights found that only seven percent of Polish respondents said their government combats anti-Semitism effectively.⁴⁴ There has been an uptick in anti-Semitic vandalism at Jewish cemeteries and even some of the historic Holocaust sites in Poland, including former Nazi concentration and extermination camps such as Auschwitz, Belzec, Sobibor, and Treblinka. These crimes are frequently committed by foreign violent far-right individuals, including a renown American white supremacist who was reportedly arrested in August for violating Article 13 of the Polish Constitution, which bans "racial or national hatred."⁴⁵

Discussion about Poland's role in the Holocaust has become a politicized topic in recent years. PiS declarations about World War II often focus on the six million Polish nationals killed during the conflict, deemphasizing that three million of them were Jews.⁴⁶ The Polish government is still seeking compensation from Germany for the damage the Third Reich caused Poland, including Polish Jews' deaths and the destruction of their property.⁴⁷ Poland, however, passed a law in 2021 restricting restitution or compensation for private property seized by Nazi Germany and communist

“Anti-Semitism in modern-day Poland is symptomatic of general antipathy toward diversity and democracy. Rarely does this hatred result in physical attacks on Polish Jews—partly due to their small numbers—but instead through neo-Nazi and neo-fascist marches and rallies and other forms of harassment.”

authorities, including property of Holocaust victims.^{48 k} This law was preceded by another law in February 2018 that criminalized any assertion of the complicity of the Polish nation or state in the Holocaust.⁴⁹ Debate about this bill prompted members of the violent far-right group National Radical Camp (ONR) to rally outside of the presidential palace in Warsaw in support of the legislation.⁵⁰ Discussion of this controversial law was also believed to have contributed to an uptick in harassment of Polish Jews, particularly online.⁵¹ After significant international outcry, the law was downgraded from a criminal to a civil offense, but not rescinded.⁵² In February 2021, a district court in Warsaw ordered two historians to issue an apology to the descendants of a deceased mayor for writing critically about his actions during the Holocaust, though the sentence was later overturned.⁵³

Discussion about the complicity of some Poles in the Holocaust, which had been suppressed by communist leaders, increased as a result of the publication of the book *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* by Jan Gross. This book discussed how ethnic Poles in a village in northeastern Poland murdered dozens of their Jewish neighbors following the invasion of the Third Reich. At the time of publication in 2000, this book provoked debate and renewed scholarship in Poland about the Holocaust. Laws adopted since then have made it harder to have such open conversations. There have even been attempts to pass laws giving government-appointed authorities the ability to restrict NGOs from speaking at public schools about issues deemed controversial, such as gender; such laws would have potentially also limited NGOs' ability to conduct educational programs about the Holocaust at Polish schools.⁵⁴

The 2019 Murder of Gdansk's Liberal Mayor

Like many cities across Poland, the port city of Gdansk on the Baltic coast has a complicated history. Often mentioned in history books by its German name (*Danzig*), Gdansk was one of the territories Germany ceded under the Treaty of Versailles following the end of World War I. Comprised mostly of ethnic Germans, the "Free City

j Poland's borders have been dramatically altered over the centuries through war and political alliances. For a comprehensive overview of these dynamics from 1939-1945, see Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Basic Books, 2010).

k "Poland is the only European Union nation that has not established formal procedures to resolve claims made by people whose property was seized during the Holocaust, according to a new report by the European Shoah Legacy Institute, based in Prague." Nina Siegal, "Holocaust Survivors in Poland Find Restitution Claims 'Like a Carousel,'" *New York Times*, May 10, 2017.

of Danzig,” as it was called during the interwar period, was one of the first territories the Third Reich seized when it invaded Poland in 1939. After World War II, Poland reclaimed Gdansk, and most of the ethnic Germans fled or were expelled. In August 1980, Polish shipbuilders and other trade workers from Gdansk formed the Solidarity trade union, which would play a leading role in Poland’s peaceful overthrow of communism in 1989.⁵⁵ This symbolism factored into the violent far-right Polish group ONR’s decision to march through Gdansk’s historic old town on April 14, 2018, to celebrate the 84th anniversary of the founding of the original ONR, which was an interwar fascist party.⁵⁶ The organizers of this rally were also sending a message to Gdansk Mayor Pawel Adamowicz, who along with other liberal mayors in Poland was lobbying for the banning of ONR and other violent far-right groups.⁵⁷ A week after the rally, Adamowicz organized a counter-rally that attracted about 1,500 people.⁵⁸ At this event, he admonished Poles who admired Nazis in spite of the destruction the Third Reich waged upon Poland.¹ That event, along with Adamowicz’s opposition to the ruling PiS party’s policies, led to a sustained campaign of hate against him and other liberal politicians by ultra-nationalist commentators on government-run media.⁵⁹ Even before then, the violent far-right group All Polish Youth issued a fake death certificate for Adamowicz.⁶⁰ Violent far-right groups in Poland had been issuing hitlists for decades, including by the local chapters of the international violent far-right organizations Blood & Honor and Combat 18.⁶¹

On the evening of January 13, 2019, Adamowicz was accosted onstage at a televised charity concert in Gdansk by a man recently released from prison who had obsessively followed the negative media coverage of the mayor.⁶² Armed with a military-grade knife, the attacker stabbed Adamowicz several times. He then grabbed a microphone and told the crowd that he committed this act of violence because of the role the mayor’s former party had allegedly played in his imprisonment for armed robbery.⁶³ The 53-year-old Adamowicz, who had been Gdansk’s mayor for more than two decades, died from his injuries the next day. Many details about the incident remain unresolved—specifically the attacker’s mental health and his motivation—due in part to delays in the trial, which began in March.⁶⁴ While it is unclear if the attacker held sympathies for violent far-right groups, the assassination highlighted the nebulous nature between societal polarization and violent far-right movements in Poland.^m Magdalena Adamowicz, the mayor’s widow, said the government-controlled media’s “hate speech influenced the killer to choose (him) as a victim.”⁶⁵ In the wake of Adamowicz’s murder, *The New York Times* editorial board criticized PiS for contributing to polarization that has separated “liberal cities like Warsaw and Gdansk from the conservative countryside and generating a climate of vicious hatred across the land.”⁶⁶ Adamowicz’s murder drew parallels with the 1922 assassination of Gabriel Narutowicz, the Polish Republic’s first president, who was shot at an art exhibition in Warsaw following anti-Semitic allegations by nationalists that he was controlled by Jews.⁶⁷

l Adamowicz was also responding to media reports of Poles in another part of the country celebrating Adolf Hitler’s birthday the previous day.

m The alleged murderer’s trial is ongoing, but there are reports that he became obsessed with media coverage of Adamowicz. Author interview, Katarzyna Wlodkowska, March 2022.

“Many violent far-right groups across Europe travel to Poland because it is a predominantly homogeneous country of white Christians, and because they perceive it to be a more permissive environment for their activities than their home countries.”

The Far-Right Independence Day March in Warsaw

As the scholar Cas Mudde has noted, marches and protests serve a critical function in helping far-right groups organize, educate, and indoctrinate their followers.⁶⁸ Since 2009, far-right groups have organized an unsanctioned march in Warsaw every November 11 to commemorate Poland’s Independence Day.⁶⁹ By appropriating this national holiday—there had been no large government-sanctioned event in Warsaw before then—march organizers have acquired a prominent platform for their ultra-nationalist agenda, drawing families and other peaceful Poles who simply want to display their patriotism. According to a statement by the violent far-right Polish group ONR: “the March for Independence wants to unite all those people who do not agree with the current situation, but want the creation of a greater Poland.”⁷⁰ Despite efforts by Warsaw Mayor Rafal Trzaskowski to ban the march, it has only been canceled once—in 2020, due to COVID-19—and even then a group of dedicated marchers gathered along the route.⁷¹ Described by one Polish researcher as an “annual hate-fest,” the march has attracted as many as 200,000 people, with fights breaking out some years between a small but prominent number of hard-core marchers on one side and police and counter-protestors on the other.⁷² In 2020, a building caught fire when marchers threw a flare at an apartment displaying a pride flag.⁷³ The 2021 march included marchers chanting xenophobic and homophobic rhetoric.⁷⁴

Organized by ONR, All Polish Youth, and the far-right party National Movement, the march has helped Poland’s violent far-right groups establish contacts and credibility with counterparts around the world. In 2019, representatives of violent far-right groups across Europe and the United States attended the march, including Patriot Front and the American Identity Movement.⁷⁵ The Italian neo-fascist group Forza Nuova (New Force) has attended the march multiple times, including in 2021.⁷⁶ Warsaw is not the only Polish city where violent far-right groups march on Independence Day. On November 11, 2021, hundreds of people marched through the city of Kalisz in central Poland, some of them chanting “Death to Jews.”⁷⁷ Marchers also burned a copy of the Treaty of Kalisz, which was the medieval document welcoming Jews to Poland.⁷⁸

A Hub for Violent-Far Right Groups

Many violent far-right groups across Europe travel to Poland because it is a predominantly homogeneous country of white Christians, and because they perceive it to be a more permissive environment for their activities than their home countries.⁷⁹ These groups often fall under three general categories: pan-Slavic, pro-German, and/or white identity.⁸⁰ Since the 1990s, violent far-right actors from the Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, Slovakia,

and other nearby countries have traveled to Poland for neo-Nazi concerts (including neo-Nazi skinhead rock and National Socialist Black Metal), “whites only” mixed martial arts (MMA) tournaments, and paramilitary training.⁸¹ Neo-Nazi music festivals, once held at state-owned cultural centers, served as some of the first post-communism violent far-right events held in Poland to attract an international audience.⁸² A series of events in 2014–2015 led to Poland’s elevated stature among far-right groups globally: the European migration crisis that led Poland and Hungary to reject “refugee quotas” recommended by the European Union; the formation of a socially conservative government led by PiS; and the growth of paramilitary activities in response to the conflict in neighboring Ukraine.⁸³ The first two events also contributed to the rise in prominence of the Independence Day march in Warsaw, with the most fervent marchers’ nativist and xenophobic messaging amplified by international press coverage.⁸⁴ A recent report alleged that a security training facility in Wrocław in southwestern Poland has provided weapons training to members of violent far-right groups from Poland and other countries, despite pledges from company officials that they vet all their clients.⁸⁵ This report followed another report from 2018 about the same facility, which allegedly trained members of a violent far-right group from Ukraine.⁸⁶ Commercial gun ranges in Poland and Slovakia have come under criticism for reportedly having lax security procedures, with the racially motivated murder of 10 people in Hanau, Germany, in February 2020 perpetrated by a German man who obtained firearm training at a facility in Slovakia.⁸⁷ Since Russia’s invasion of neighboring Ukraine in February, interest in weapons training has soared in Poland, with the government contributing funds to encourage more Poles to participate in shooting sports as a way of boosting national defense.⁸⁸

While the Polish government has been hesitant to rein in the nefarious elements of the Independence Day march in Warsaw, they have not hesitated to arrest violent far-right actors who pose an imminent threat. In 2019, Poland expelled Swedish national Anton Thulin (previously affiliated with the Nordic Resistance Movement) who attempted to obtain weapons training.⁸⁹ In 2020, Polish authorities arrested a German man suspected of being a member of a violent far-right group for possession of firearms, a grenade, and 2.6 pounds of explosive material.⁹⁰ While not arrested or detained in Poland, Brenton Tarrant, who murdered 51 Muslim worshippers in Christchurch, New Zealand, on March 15, 2019, visited the country in December 2018 and mentioned Poland twice in his 87-page manifesto.⁹¹ Claims by Tarrant that he met with the “Knights Templar Order International” group in Poland were deemed by New Zealand’s official investigation to be false.⁹² Many

violent far-right actors from Western countries find Poland and other countries in the region attractive destinations because they are predominantly white and Christian, and they perceive that their racist and xenophobic views are more tolerated there than their home countries.⁹³

Information Gaps and Emerging Challenges

There is no reliable data from the Polish government on the number of people injured and killed by violent far-right actors in Poland. An article from Vice News in 2012 reported that at least 40 people had been killed “over the past few years.”⁹⁴ Never Again, a Warsaw-based NGO that tracks anti-Semitism and other forms of hate across Poland and other countries in Central and Eastern Europe, has attempted to provide an overview of significant violent far-right incidents in its “Brown Book.”⁹⁵ More research is also needed, including how violent far-right groups in Poland have evolved since 1989 and the nature of their ties to similar groups in neighboring countries and the global Polish diaspora.⁹⁶ The ideology that underpins this movement existed before 1989, but the fall of communism in Poland, Czechoslovakia (now the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic), the German Democratic Republic (pre-reunification), and Hungary created greater opportunities for transnational connectivity. It remains to be seen how these transnational connections among violent far-right groups and actors will impact security in Poland and beyond.

Several veterans of Poland’s neo-Nazi scene have formed political parties, run for office, and/or have been appointed to prominent government positions. This includes the appointment of a representative of the League of Polish Families with an anti-Semitic past to be Minister of Education in 2006; the appointment of a former editor of a neo-Nazi magazine to be deputy chairman of Poland’s public television network in 2006; and the appointment of a former ONR member to a senior position in the state historical research institution in 2019.⁹⁶ More research is needed concerning the correlation between these far-right political groups and actors and violent far-right groups.

The impact on Poland’s violent far-right from Russia’s war of aggression against neighboring Ukraine is another gap: Will concerns about the threat of Russia invading Poland lead to a significant uptick in paramilitarism in the country?⁹⁷ While there is no authoritative data on the overall number of Polish nationals fighting in Ukraine, the documented number of violent far-right actors who have traveled to the conflict zone to date is relatively small.⁹⁷ Further, what impact will the millions of refugees from Ukraine now residing in Poland have on the violent far-right and vice versa?⁹⁸ Even before the current conflict, tensions were high between some ethnic Poles and Ukrainian nationals who came to

n Poles who want to partake in weapons training or purchase a firearm must obtain a police-issued permit, with the annual number of such licenses more than doubling since 2014 (7,110 in 2014 and 19,939 in 2021). Natalia Parzygnat, “Gun Ranges in Poland Report Boom in Interest Amid War in Ukraine,” Notes from Poland, March 25, 2022.

o The State Department designated Anton Thulin as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist on June 15, 2022.

p According to the “Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Terrorist Attack on Christchurch Masjidain on 15 March 2019,” when Brenton Tarrant arrived in New Zealand on December 28, 2018, he told immigration officials that Poland was the country that he had spent the most time visiting during his recent travels.

q Research by the Anti-Defamation League has documented the spread of anti-Semitism between violent far-right groups in Poland and the Polish diaspora in the United States. “Hate Group Symbols/Logos: National Rebirth of Poland,” Anti-Defamation League.

r This topic was explored in the Counter Extremism Project’s June 2021 report “Looks can be Deceiving: Extremism Meets Paramilitarism in Central and Eastern Europe” in which author Kacper Rekawek argued that the growing support of paramilitary activities in Poland did not necessarily overlap with support for violent far-right groups. He stated that while such groups organize summer camps for its younger members, these activities focused more on fitness and ideology than weapons training.

“Poland is not unique in its challenges with far-right violence ... But unlike countries such as Canada, Germany, Norway, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States, there is far less research and data about the nature of this threat, especially the unique drivers that contribute to radicalization, recruitment, and mobilization in specific regions, cities, towns, and villages where far-right violence has occurred.”

Poland as economic migrants.⁹⁹

Once faced with a labor shortage due to emigration, unskilled Polish laborers now must compete with economic migrants from nearby countries for low-paying jobs.¹⁰⁰ While an overwhelming number of Poles support providing refuge to those fleeing Russia's war against Ukraine, far-right groups have tried to stoke tensions by blaming Ukrainians on overcrowding and rising prices.¹⁰¹ The northern border has also been a focus of the violent far-right, with Belarus attempting to sow discord in Poland and the European Union writ large by pushing refugees and migrants from Afghanistan, Syria, and other Muslim-majority countries into Poland.¹⁰² With the easing of travel restrictions related to COVID-19, it is possible that violent far-right activities in Poland will return to or exceed pre-pandemic levels.

There is a dearth of data about the online activity of violent far-right actors in the Polish language.^s Those who track racism and anti-Semitism in Poland have reported online harassment, including being placed on violent far-right groups' hitlists.¹⁰³ One Polish researcher also said social media companies have been unresponsive when hateful and threatening postings are reported that violate the terms of service for their platforms.¹⁰⁴ Some experts interviewed for this article mentioned difficulty distinguishing between hate and anti-Semitism from authentic users based in Poland and Russian propaganda. This observation was affirmed by a report released in June by the NGO Moonshot, which analyzed anti-Ukrainian and anti-refugee sentiment in Polish-language spaces online in the first month of Russia's invasion of Ukraine (February 24 to March 23), finding significant examples of “inauthentic and Russian-linked activity on Polish-language pages or accounts, including” narratives such as “Poles are struggling to access affordable housing, while Ukrainians are being ‘given places to stay’ and ‘government subsidies;” that “Hospital beds are available to Ukrainians but ‘none were free’ for Poles;” and that “those fleeing Ukraine were not refugees, but instead that the

s This observation is based on email exchanges the author had with representatives of the NGOs Moonshot and the Institute for Strategic Dialogue in late August 2022; both organizations specialize in tracking online hate and violent extremism.

influx of Ukrainians to Poland was part of an ongoing ‘demographic replacement’ or ‘Ukrainisation’ of Poland.”¹⁰⁵

Beyond misinformation and disinformation, there are reports of “a growing antisemitic narrative appearing in the public sphere,” including online.¹⁰⁶ A 2018 report by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights included an interview with a Polish Jew who provided the anecdotal view that “(anti-Semitism) has grown a lot over the last two years” and that “People have stopped being ashamed that they are racists and antisemites.”¹⁰⁷ A survey from this same report found that 84 percent of Polish respondents consider anti-Semitism in political life to be a problem.¹⁰⁸

Conclusion

Poland is not unique in its challenges with violent far-right extremism, with the obvious exception of the annual Independence Day march, which has grown in size since 2009 from a small local gathering to an international spectacle attracting violent far-right groups and far-right politicians from around the world.^t But unlike countries such as Canada, Germany, Norway, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States, there is far less research and data about the nature of this threat, especially the unique drivers that contribute to radicalization, recruitment, and mobilization in specific regions, cities, towns, and villages where far-right violence has occurred. Support for violent far-right groups in Poland appears on the surface to be more pervasive than those countries, but Poland has conversely not seen the shootings and bombings from such individuals and groups that other Western countries have.^u This is also true of many of the formerly communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe, including the Czech Republic, Hungary, Serbia, and Slovakia.¹⁰⁹ Similar to Poland, there is evidence of support for violent far-right groups in each of these countries, but they have not experienced mass-casualty far-right attacks in the past decades. The difference between Poland and these countries, however, had been the lack of a significant minority population in Poland,^v although that has now changed with millions of Ukrainians residing in Poland following Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Instead of lumping all of Poland's violent far-right groups together, it is important to recognize that there are factions within

t The most comparable, albeit smaller, event in the region has been the “Day of Honor” march, which had been held in Budapest, Hungary, every February 12. This event, which had been organized by Hungarian violent far-right groups, commemorated the Nazi-aligned soldiers from Germany and Hungary who fought in the “Siege of Budapest” in 1945. The march was banned this year by the Budapest Police Department following a ruling by the Hungarian Supreme Court, which cited concerns for violence. Dan Verbin, “Hungary Bans Annual Neo-Nazi Parade in Budapest,” *Israel National News*, February 2, 2022.

u In his June 2021 Counter Extremism Project report, “Looks Can Be Deceiving: Extremism Meets Paramilitarism in Central and Eastern Europe,” Kacper Rekawek argues that Polish violent far-right militant groups are less likely to commit violence than their European counterparts as they are “more ideological and less violent militant in nature.” Kacper Rekawek, “Looks Can Be Deceiving: Extremism Meets Paramilitarism in Central and Eastern Europe,” Counter Extremism Project, June 2021.

v According to the CIA's World Factbook, ethnic Poles comprise 96.9 percent of the population in Poland; ethnic Czechs comprise 57.3 percent of the population in the Czech Republic; ethnic Hungarians comprise 85.6 percent of the population in Hungary; ethnic Serbs comprise 83.3 percent of the population in Serbia; and ethnic Slovaks comprise 83.8 percent of the population in Slovakia.

this milieu that are staunchly independent and ideologically opposed to joining forces with others, including political parties that would want to co-opt their movement.¹¹⁰ On the surface, language would appear to be a barrier to in-depth research on violent far-right movements in Poland, particularly for Western counterterrorism analysts who do not speak Polish, but the number of knowledgeable and dedicated Polish scholars and journalists consulted for this article, as well as others who were sourced here, indicates that there is a dedicated and underutilized community of experts who want to conduct additional research and collaborate with counterparts outside of Poland.

One issue not fully discussed here is the societal polarization that has essentially divided Poland between those who are socially conservative, inward looking, and anti-European Union, and those who are liberal, outward looking, and pro-European Union. It is this divide—similar to the one currently faced by the United States—which has helped to swell the ranks of the annual Independence Day march in Warsaw and provides fertile ground for far-right violence. Socially conservative political parties in Poland recognize that it is easier to co-opt participants of the annual Independence Day march in Warsaw and other similar events than it is to rein them in. These political parties have also promoted polarizing narratives in the lead up to parliamentary elections in 2015 (Muslim refugees) and 2019 (anti-LGBTQI+), with the next one scheduled for fall 2023.

Beyond Poland, the larger question is how to approach the challenge posed by far-right extremism given that it is often a political issue as much as a national security issue; this grey area has impeded efforts in several countries with far-right violence

to meaningfully understand, track, and evaluate the evolution of the political and security challenges. It is easier to crack down on groups that condone violence when they are not aligned to a viable political movement, after all.

Another challenge in articulating why extremist dynamics in Poland merit more attention than they have received to this point is the lack of a successfully perpetrated mass-casualty attack by violent far-right actors in Poland. However, it is arguably appropriate to compare violent far-right groups in Poland with, for example, the Proud Boys and the Ku Klux Klan in the United States. While both groups spread hate and intimidate their adversaries, neither officially sanctions violence. Several of the Polish researchers who track far-right extremism in their home country interviewed for this article argued that violent far-right groups in Poland have simply lacked targets, especially with a socially conservative government in power on the national level and so few racial, ethnic, and religious minorities.¹¹¹ But with more than three millions Ukrainians now residing in Poland and parliamentary elections scheduled for fall 2023, which could lead to a liberal government taking power, it is possible that far-right violence could become more profound or increase.^w These factors, combined with international far-right groups' fascination with Poland, indicate that the global counterterrorism community should pay more attention to this Central European country of 38 million people. **CTC**

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