



COMBATING TERRORISM CENTER AT WEST POINT

# CTCSENTINEL

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FEATURE ARTICLE

## Calibrated Counterterrorism

NCTC senior analysts examine today's international terrorism landscape and implications for counterterrorism

FEATURE ANALYSIS

## The Enduring Threat of ISK

AMIRA JADOON, ANDREW MINES &  
ABDUL SAYED

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## FROM THE EDITOR

As we enter a new era of calibrated counterterrorism 22 years after 9/11, in this month's feature article senior analysts at the U.S. National Counterterrorism Center provide a unique window into the U.S. government's continuing efforts to suppress international terrorism. NCTC director Christine Abizaid writes: "It is clear to me that Americans at home and abroad would be confronted with a more severe terrorism threat if it were not for the sustained and focused efforts of the entire U.S. CT community over the past 22 years. As we approach another 9/11 anniversary, I asked senior analysts from NCTC to share more with the public and academic community about the constant, behind-the-scenes work of CT professionals across the government. It is my hope that, through this product, others can gain a greater degree of insight into what this community regularly confronts in its mission to protect innocent civilians from persistent terrorist adversaries."

In the second feature article, Amira Jadoon, Andrew Mines, and Abdul Sayed examine the enduring threat posed by Islamic State Khorasan (ISK). They write: "An analysis of ISK's operations, outreach, and clashes with the Taliban indicate that the organization remains capable of strategic adaptation and is only broadening and deepening its influence in the region, posturing to become a truly regional organization. And while the Taliban have demonstrated some capacity in targeting ISK commanders, any security gains are unlikely to hold in the absence of sustained counter-ISK operations."

With the Islamic State earlier this month announcing the appointment of its fifth caliph, Abu Haf's al-Hashimi al-Qurashi, Aymenn Al-Tamimi examines what little is known about the group's recent paramount leaders. He writes: "Despite the fact that the group's caliphs are now very much 'men of the shadows,' there is little evidence pointing to the prospect of the group's fragmentation in Iraq, Syria, or elsewhere around the world, with the group's affiliates seemingly willing to accept successor caliphs about whom little or nothing is publicly known."

Lucas Webber and Alec Bertina profile the Russian Imperial Movement (RIM) and its paramilitary wing, the Russian Imperial Legion (RIL), tracing their involvement in the Ukraine conflict since 2014. They write: "With the Wagner Group's resources waning, there may be an opportunity for RIM/RIL to deepen its involvement in Russia's efforts in Ukraine. This could bolster the group's recruitment, paramilitary capabilities, and thus increase the broader threat it poses. However, the organization may face sanctions in the future from the Russian state if the Kremlin continues to clamp down on Russian pro-war ultra-nationalist elements."

**Paul Cruickshank, Editor in Chief**

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*Cover: A U.S. flag waves next to the memorial of two columns of light, known as the 'Tribute in Light,' at Ground Zero on September 11, 2003, in New York City. (Stephen Chernin/Getty Images)*

# Calibrated Counterterrorism: Actively Suppressing International Terrorism

By NCTC's Senior Analysts

The National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) is the U.S. government's lead agency for integrating, analyzing, and sharing international terrorism information. As the Director, I am privileged to see the inner workings of the whole counterterrorism (CT) enterprise, not just that of NCTC. It is clear to me that Americans at home and abroad would be confronted with a more severe terrorism threat if it were not for the sustained and focused efforts of the entire U.S. CT community over the past 22 years. As we approach another 9/11 anniversary, I asked senior analysts from NCTC to share more with the public and academic community about the constant, behind-the-scenes work of CT professionals across the government. It is my hope that, through this product, others can gain a greater degree of insight into what this community regularly confronts in its mission to protect innocent civilians from persistent terrorist adversaries.

—Christine Abizaid, NCTC Director

**Terrorism may no longer be at the top of most Americans' minds, but the U.S. counterterrorism (CT) community remains dedicated to protecting the United States, our people, and our allies from terrorist violence. To succeed in this still-critical mission, our CT practitioners will need to retain the agility, expertise, and tools to detect, warn of, and disrupt global terrorist threats as terrorist tactics and tradecraft evolve. Our CT architecture will need to remain nimble enough to quickly identify new threats and overcome enduring challenges that might allow space for terrorists to advance attacks.**

**F**oreign terrorist groups generally have less capability to orchestrate mass casualty attacks in the United States than at any time since September 11, 2001, because of the efforts of the United States and our partners to create and maintain an adaptive and effective counterterrorism (CT) enterprise. The U.S. government has painstakingly developed its ability to detect and disrupt plots at early stages, suppress the capabilities of terrorist networks, and deter or thwart potential attacks through defensive security measures, while safeguarding the privacy and civil liberties of the American people. Nevertheless, many terrorist adversaries still have the ability to inflict devastating human and economic costs. The CT enterprise is dedicated to preventing that harm from materializing and keeping the nation's focus on other national security priorities. In this article, we aim to

share details of what the overarching picture looks like by providing NCTC's assessment of the current terrorism threat and highlighting key challenges for shaping a sustainable and nimble CT architecture going forward in a period of more constrained resources.<sup>a</sup>

## The Evolving International Terrorism Landscape

When explaining the general state of the international terrorism threat, regardless of classification level or audience, we often highlight four broad themes that characterize our leading CT challenges: regional expansion of global terrorist networks alongside degradation of their most externally focused elements; the growing danger from state involvement with terrorism; the reality that lone actors are the most likely to succeed in carrying out terrorist attacks; and the risks posed by terrorist innovation.

**Regional Expansion Amid Degraded External Threats:** Probably most notable—and a change steadily achieved over the past two decades—is that the United States is safer because the overall threat from foreign terrorist groups is at a low point with the suppression of the most dangerous elements of Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham's (ISIS') and al-Qa`ida's global networks. Thanks in large part to U.S. and regional partner CT operations, both organizations have suffered significant losses of key personnel, and sustained CT pressure is constraining their efforts to rebuild in historic operating areas.

These losses have been partially offset by an increased threat from ISIS-Khorasan in Afghanistan—which has become more intent on supporting external plots—and the expansion of ISIS and al-Qa`ida networks across Africa. ISIS-Khorasan's increased external focus is probably the most concerning development. However, the branch has so far primarily relied on inexperienced operatives in Europe to try to advance attacks in its name and, in Afghanistan, Taliban operations have for now prevented the branch from seizing territory that it could use to draw in and train foreign recruits for more sophisticated attacks. Al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), despite its own losses of key personnel and resources, probably remains al-Qa`ida's most dedicated driver of external plotting. Remaining senior members of the Yemen-

<sup>a</sup> NCTC serves as the primary U.S. government organization for analyzing and integrating all intelligence possessed or acquired by the U.S. government pertaining to international terrorism and counterterrorism. NCTC also provides support to the Department of Justice, including the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and the Department of Homeland Security as the lead U.S. government agencies for assessments on domestic terrorism. NCTC focuses its support on understanding connections to international, including transnational terrorism, and defers to these Departments on purely domestic terrorism matters. This article highlights information and data from a range of U.S. government-collected sources that report on international terrorism, including publicly available sources. NCTC analysts applied qualitative and quantitative analytic methods to develop the judgments explored in this assessment.



## The Persistent Global Drumbeat of Terrorism Threats

On a typical day, NCTC receives and sifts through approximately 15,000 intelligence and media reports to find information that aids our mission of protecting the United States and Americans worldwide from international terrorism. Intelligence Community (IC) officers identify hundreds of reports every day that contain noteworthy information about global terrorism, dozens of which will require follow-on analysis or investigative steps by our interagency partners. Below are just some of the many credible threats at home and abroad that the U.S. CT enterprise was working to evaluate and disrupt around this time last year:

- Analysts observed fragmentary information that ISIS members in Syria were aware of a U.S. person who was willing to carry out a suicide operation for ISIS and an ISIS supporter who sought to travel from the Middle East to the United States.
- Iranian intelligence and security services continued to try to assassinate current and former U.S. officials as revenge for the U.S. strike on Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force (IRGC-QF) commander General Qassem Soleimani in January 2020 as well as to silence regime critics by targeting dissidents in the United States and Europe.
- ISIS tried several approaches to attack the 2022 FIFA Men's World Cup in Qatar, including potential plots targeting Americans and Europeans. Collaborative international CT efforts, including the arrest of potential operatives abroad, probably disrupted ISIS' attempts.
- The IC investigated multiple ISIS supporters willing to carry out attacks in Europe, some of whom may have had access to funding or guidance from ISIS leadership. In November, French authorities detained seven individuals, foiling a potential plot in Strasbourg.
- A Slovakian violent extremist—claiming inspiration from a transnational online network and a racially motivated violent extremist attack targeting black Americans in Buffalo, New York—shot and killed two men and injured a woman outside an LGBTQ+ bar in Bratislava, Slovakia, on October 13, 2022. He left a manifesto in English seeking to motivate others to commit similar attacks in other countries, including the United States.
- Militant groups aligned with the Iranian government planned and launched terrorist attacks against U.S. personnel in Syria.
- ISIS-West Africa advanced plans for attacks in or around Abuja, Nigeria—where approximately 17,000 U.S. citizens reside—leading the U.S. Embassy to issue a public security alert warning of an elevated risk of terrorist attacks.
- Al-Shabaab persistently targeted civilian, government, and military locations in East Africa where U.S. and other foreign personnel and citizens are located. On October 29, 2022, al-Shabaab detonated two car-bombs outside the Somali Ministry of Education, killing at least 120 people and injuring 300 more.
- Al-Qa`ida's local affiliate pursued attacks against regional and international economic enterprises in multiple West African countries. Meanwhile, ISIS-West Africa continued to encourage kidnap-for-ransom operations in central and southern Nigeria.

based group continue to produce media reinforcing cohesion of al-Qa`ida's global network as well as calls for attacks against U.S. interests globally.

### ***More Aggressive State Involvement with Terrorist Activity:***

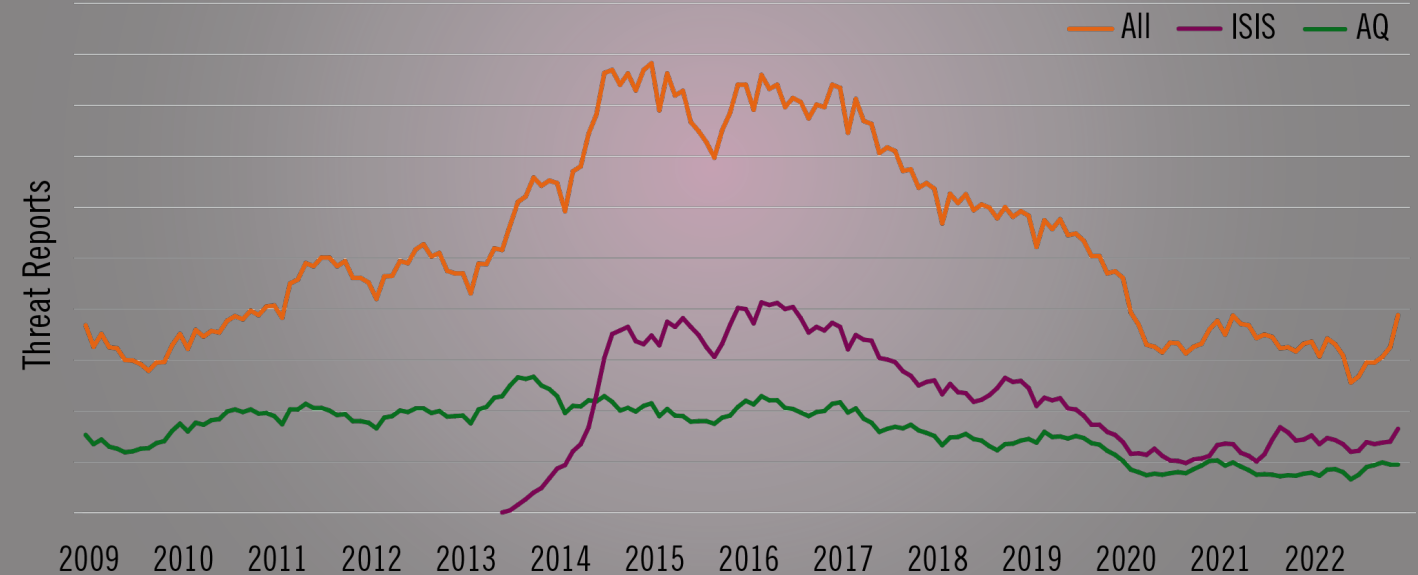
We anticipate that rising global strategic competition will lead to increased state support to terrorist actors as a foreign and security policy tool. The end of the Cold War, the subsequent rise of a U.S.-centered global order, and the forceful U.S.-led global response to al-Qa`ida's attacks of September 11, 2001, helped suppress the kinds of state support for terrorism seen in the 1970s and

1980s. Yet, the increasingly brazen and persistent activity of the Iranian government during the past four years, including support for terrorist operations inside the United States, exemplifies the spectrum of challenges still posed by state support to terrorism. Iranian intelligence and security services—which have pursued several dozen lethal plots and assassinated at least 20 opponents across four continents since 1979—are advancing plotting against the United States, other Western interests, and Iranian dissidents more aggressively than they have at any time since the 1980s.

The Iranian government has become increasingly explicit in its threats to carry out retaliatory attacks for the death of IRGC-

## Overview of Terrorism Threat Reporting – 2009-2022

The body of terrorism threat reporting in U.S. government channels shows enduring intent to carry out violence. This graph shows trends in the aggregated number of reports tied to potential threats from international terrorism that NCTC officers processed since 2009, including a peak during ISIS' control of geographic territory in Iraq and Syria. It includes information from U.S. government and foreign partners that has been evaluated as having a tie to terrorism threats.



QF Commander Qassem Soleimani in 2020. Iranian officials have created lists of dozens of current and former U.S. officials that it blames, including as primary targets a series of former senior U.S. government officials it holds primarily responsible for Soleimani's death.

Militant groups aligned with the Iranian government periodically conduct rocket and unmanned aircraft system (UAS) attacks against U.S. facilities in Syria and have threatened to resume more complex or frequent attacks in Iraq. From 2003 to 2011, the Iranian government and Lebanese Hezbollah supplied explosively formed projectiles that killed 196 U.S. personnel in Iraq and wounded 861. The potential threat posed by the provision of more lethal and sophisticated capabilities by the Iranian government remains a serious concern for U.S. personnel in the Middle East.

### ***The Enduring Challenge of Extremist Violence by Lone Actors:***

Violent extremists who are not members of terrorist groups remain the most likely to successfully carry out attacks in the United States, and we expect this trend to persist for the next several years. Plotting by these individuals—typically lone actors—is often difficult to detect and disrupt because of the individualized nature of the radicalization process and use of simple attack methods. Since 2010, violent extremists influenced by or in contact with ISIS, al-Qa`ida, and other foreign terrorist organizations have conducted 40 attacks in the United States that have killed nearly 100 and injured more than 500 people.

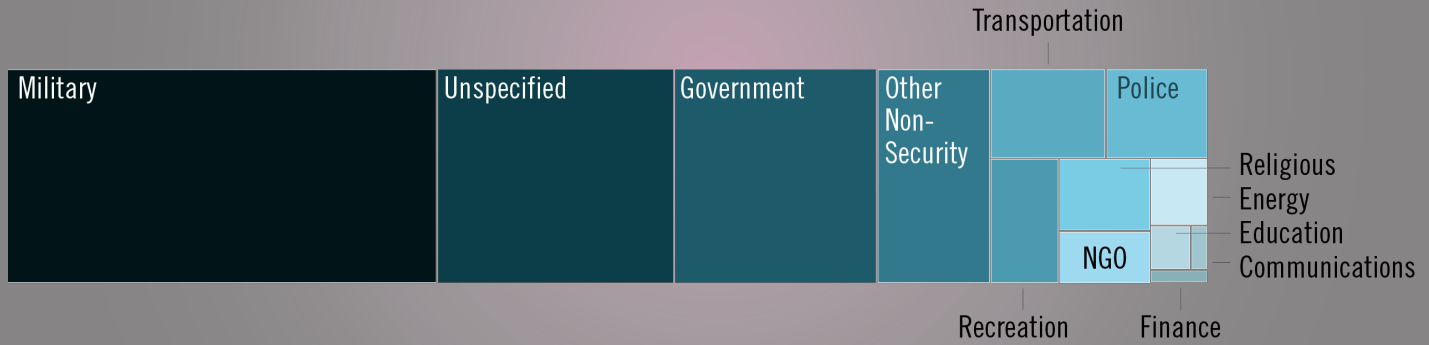
Racially or ethnically motivated violent extremists (RMVEs) who have a transnational influence or connectivity also pose a sustained threat of violence to the U.S. public. These RMVEs have conducted

some of the gravest acts of mass violence in years, including the shooting that targeted black Americans at a supermarket in Buffalo, New York, last year and the attack at a Walmart in El Paso, Texas, in 2019 that targeted immigrant populations. The Buffalo shooter highlights the transnational nature of the RMVE threat. The attacker—who killed 10 and injured three—acted alone but clearly took inspiration from the manifestos and social media posts of past influential RMVE attackers and plotters abroad, particularly the Norwegian attacker in 2011 and the Australian attacker in New Zealand in 2019. These foreign RMVEs have been particularly influential for likeminded individuals globally, with at least six subsequent RMVE attackers worldwide claiming inspiration from the writings of the Norwegian attacker and at least four citing the Australian attacker, including his use of social media to livestream his violence.<sup>b</sup> These attackers are part of an international ecosystem of individuals who share violent extremist messaging, mutual grievances, manifestos of successful attackers, and encouragement for lone actor violence.

<sup>b</sup> RMVE attacker manifestos have provided RMVEs globally with a common set of foundational documents for reference and have championed the idea that only violence can prevent the death or marginalization of the white race or Western Christians. To understand that reach, NCTC completed comparative qualitative and quantitative analysis on the manifestos of RMVE attackers who committed violence in multiple countries since 2011. We found common core narratives and a range of thematic content that we assess helps sustain the transnational RMVE movement as they circulate online.

## Top Targets Identified in Terrorism Threat Reports – 2009-2022

Although much terrorism information points to attacks pitted against varying military and security forces, threat reporting regularly indicates terrorists also aim for soft targets that increase the risk to civilians in the United States and worldwide.



**Emerging Technologies and Terrorist Innovation:** Although most terrorist attacks continue to use long-available methods, many of the most dangerous terrorist plots have sought to exploit novel tactics and new technologies. Commercially available technology has dramatically improved terrorist groups’ ability to communicate securely, recruit privately, and conduct surprise attacks. Terrorists across the globe, including those in remote areas, are now able to obtain and use technology such as UAS for attacks or 3D printers for weapons manufacturing. We are also concerned about shifts in tactics such as increased terrorist targeting of critical infrastructure.<sup>c</sup> And we remain alert for indications that malign actors are using emerging platforms, such as virtual or extended reality, to broaden their violent extremist networks and conduct training or advances in generative artificial intelligence to enhance propaganda campaigns and potentially boost technical expertise.

### A Nimble Global CT Architecture Is Key to Success

In 2023, U.S. CT efforts benefit from more than 20 years spent building a multi-layered CT architecture including law enforcement, military action, screening capabilities, and CT partnerships. This system is suppressing the threat of large-scale terrorist attacks against U.S. interests at home and abroad through strong collaboration with state and local colleagues, with the private sector, and with allies and other partners around the world. In recent years, we have seen terrorist groups advance fewer sophisticated plots, as compared to disruptions in previous decades of multiple innovative efforts by ISIS and al-Qa`ida such as to bypass aviation security measures by hiding explosives in personal electronic devices, in larger shipped or checked devices to mask screening, or developing plots using non-metallic bombs.

A sample of the actions taken to mitigate the threats from late 2022 highlighted at the beginning of this article demonstrates

<sup>c</sup> Authorities have disrupted several violent extremist plots against power grids in Western countries since 2020. Terrorists and militants overseas have maintained high rates of attacks targeting electricity infrastructure. Meanwhile, attacks against electric power substations in the United States have also increased substantially since 2017, according to Department of Energy data, including several unattributed incidents that led to power outages. We are working with federal, state, local, and industry partners to help them prepare for such threats.

the broad range of tools that the United States and our partners have developed to detect and disrupt plots, degrade terrorist group capabilities, and enable defenses to deter or thwart attacks. Prioritizing public safety, the U.S. government shared intelligence leads with domestic and international law enforcement to enable the arrest and prosecution of likely terrorist operatives. Where law enforcement was not an option, the IC informed potential military operations to mitigate threats. We identified previously unknown terrorists and their associates in part by developing new connections within our intelligence holdings and ensured this information fed into the U.S. government’s screening systems. The United States issued public and private statements informing those at risk to take precautions, possibly deterring some would-be attackers. Our response to all of these involved focused intelligence collection and cooperation across the U.S. CT enterprise as well as with foreign partners.

**Law Enforcement and Civil Justice:** The value of legal interventions including arrests, prosecutions, and sanctions as an integral part of collaboration across the CT enterprise—including federal, state, local, and international agencies—is highlighted by the detection, exposure, and disruption of plotting during the last two years by a range of terrorist adversaries. In July, arrests by German and Dutch authorities disrupted an ISIS fundraising network connected to the group’s branch in Afghanistan that was seeking weapons for attacks in Germany. In January, U.S. federal prosecutors charged three Iran-connected members of an eastern European criminal organization for plotting to murder an Iranian-American journalist based in New York. In August 2022, the Department of Justice announced charges against an IRGC member for offering to pay a confidential human source \$300,000 to kill a former U.S. National Security Advisor in the United States. And, in May 2022, cooperation between U.S. and European law enforcement agencies led to the arrest of a Slovakian RMVE for his involvement in terrorist activities.

**Military Action:** Looking more broadly, terrorist networks are weakened by the removals of key figures from the battlefield that often happen as a result of military operations. This includes the loss of leaders who drive the intent of organizations to pursue

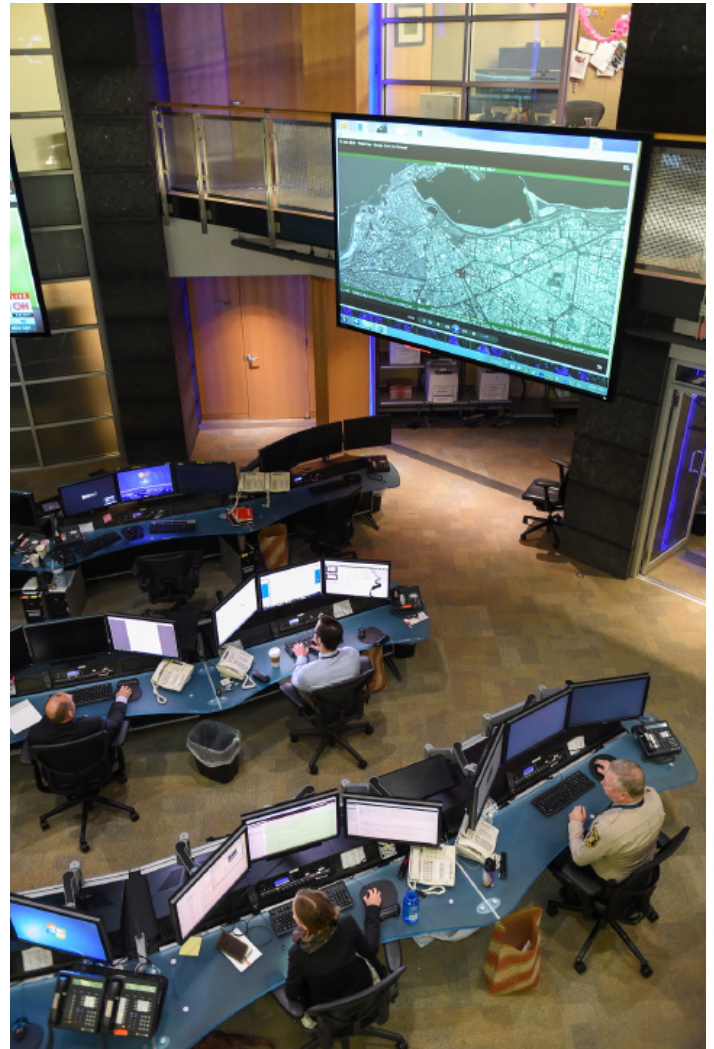


external operations as well as individuals with operational and specialized expertise who have advanced innovative plots. ISIS has lost three overall leaders and at least 13 other senior figures in Iraq and Syria since early 2022—including two in April who had been planning attacks in Europe or other locations—contributing to a loss of expertise and a decline in ISIS attacks in the Middle East. Additionally, al-Qa`ida has suffered significant setbacks in recent years in Yemen, Syria, and South Asia, including the death of its leader Ayman al-Zawahiri in a U.S. airstrike in 2022. The detention of high-value terrorist prisoners has also reduced threats to U.S. interests, but we are also mindful that some figures—absent successful disengagement programs—could still rekindle that danger should they be released or escape from confinement.

Short-term effects of leadership removals are most evident, but consistent pressure has always been required to degrade terrorist capability over the longer term. Without this, terrorist groups can reconstitute in their historical strongholds or expand in other locations where they can draw on local conflict or militant elements to gain a foothold. Half of ISIS' branches are now active in insurgencies across Africa where they already pose a local threat to U.S. persons and facilities and may be poised for further expansion. Captured enemy material collected by U.S. forces during a January 2023 operation in northern Somalia that killed a key ISIS financial facilitator reinforces that networks in Africa have the potential to fund and help lead ISIS' global enterprise. Africa is also al-Qa`ida's most promising area of growth. Al-Shabaab is now al-Qa`ida's largest, wealthiest, and most lethal affiliate, while Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin increasingly threatens attacks in urban areas of West Africa and has used ransoms of international hostages to help fund the network.

**Screening and Vetting Capabilities:** The U.S. government's multi-layered CT infrastructure also relies on a robust screening system that protects the nation by using the information and knowledge we have developed to track the movements of terrorist plotters and prevent their entry into the United States. For example, NCTC maintains the Terrorist Identities Datamart Environment (TIDE), which is the U.S. government's central and shared repository of information on known or suspected international terrorists and international terror groups. Our screening and vetting support efforts in collaboration with partners such as DHS, FBI, and the Department of State (DOS) make it more difficult for actors with ill intent to receive visas, board international flights, or cross borders. NCTC reviews about 30 million new travel and immigration applications annually—in addition to about 120 million continuous reviews—to enable DHS and DOS to prevent terrorist travel to the United States.

**CT Partnerships and Information Sharing:** Success in disrupting threats and degrading terrorist networks depends on international CT cooperation now more than ever. Deepening our relationships with longstanding partners while developing new CT partnerships will give us insight in places that no single country can develop on its own. We must track plot details over extended periods—sometimes spanning months or years—to understand terrorists' evolving actions. Cases such as the 2019 arrest of Kenyan national Cholo Abdi Abdullah, who was charged with conspiring to provide material support to a designated foreign terrorist organization, prove the point. U.S. intelligence and law enforcement entities in



*The operations center at the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC)*

collaboration with Philippine and Kenyan authorities uncovered information that a senior al-Shabaab leader in 2016 had directed Abdullah to obtain pilot training in preparation for a terrorist attack, according to the now-public U.S. District Court indictment.<sup>d</sup> Obscuring those terrorist ties, Abdullah traveled from Africa to the Philippines, enrolled in flight school, and took pilot training during 2017-2019. While earning his pilot's license, Abdullah also conducted research on the means and methods to hijack a commercial airliner, gathered information on the tallest building in a major U.S. city, and searched for how to obtain a U.S. visa. Persistent CT tracking and partnerships brought together the disparate pieces of information to thwart a potentially catastrophic attack.

CT efforts to degrade the media output and appeal of terrorist groups, coupled with public and private measures to limit their ability to exploit popular online platforms, have contributed to

<sup>d</sup> The activity is presented here as alleged in the indictment in the United States District Court for the Southern District of New York case, *United States v. Cholo Abdullah*. For additional details, please see this indictment unsealed by the U.S. Department of Justice on December 16, 2020.

decreases in attacks inspired by foreign terrorist organizations. There were two such attacks and roughly a dozen foiled plots in the United States in 2022, reflecting a decline since 2015 and the height of ISIS' English-language messaging efforts. Even as technology companies improve their capabilities to detect and respond to violent content online, terrorists find new methods to spread their message, underscoring the persisting challenge. For example, a tech platform removed the livestream of the May 2022 Buffalo attack within two minutes after the violence began—the fastest livestream removal to date—and yet, original and altered video clips were still widely shared by users globally on other platforms that are less able or inclined to take action.

In the area of CT finance, we remain focused on terrorists' methods for raising, moving, storing, and spending their funds. Since 2015, we have noted increased sophistication in the methods terrorist groups are using, particularly the adoption of cryptocurrencies. Identifying terrorist support networks and highlighting key facilitators is paramount to stemming group expansion and external attack plotting. To accomplish this mission, we analyze data from a variety of sources to discover networks, identify new trends and emerging technologies being used in terrorism financing for senior decisionmakers, as well as highlight potential disruption and investigative opportunities for our partners.

The U.S. CT architecture is developed to vigorously protect the American public from terrorist threats while safeguarding privacy and civil liberties and maintaining the trust of the American people. The U.S. government takes seriously protections for the lawful exercise of rights secured by the Constitution and other laws of the United States, including those guaranteed by the First Amendment. For example, all elements of the IC comply with procedures approved by the Attorney General pursuant to Executive Order 12333 governing intelligence activities, including heightened protections for the collection, retention, use, and dissemination of information about U.S. citizens and legal permanent residents. Legal, privacy, and civil rights and civil liberties officials also make up a critical part of the CT enterprise, providing active support and engagement to ensure the mission is executed while protecting Americans' civil liberties and privacy rights.

### Keeping Sufficient CT Pieces on the Global Terrorism Chess Board

Maintaining our high performance in a period of decreasing resources as other national security priorities take center stage requires prudent effort. We must retain a nimble and flexible CT enterprise that is able to detect threats in real time, interpret what is happening, and then position our pieces to counter or proactively prevent our opponents' moves. In many ways, that combination of strategic planning and tactical detail is similar to engaging in multiple chess games, where understanding your opponents' intentions requires a keen focus on how each move may signal developing threats. The CT enterprise must cultivate complementary capabilities that can maintain our defenses while still being agile enough to introduce new ways to thwart terrorists.

**Maintaining Strong Opening Strategies:** Our gains—wins big and small to curtail violence and remove key players from the battlefield—are impressive yet fragile. To mount our strongest possible offense, we must maximize use of all of the international terrorism information available from technical, geospatial, and human sources while also continuing to evaluate the best ways to fill information gaps by better exploiting other data already in U.S. government holdings. This rigorous exploitation furthers our collective ability to share intelligence leads with mission partners, advances international CT investigations and operations, drives new intelligence collection, and informs strategic analysis for policymakers. And better knowing what we have positions us to develop the next-generation collection capabilities—enabling us to better anticipate and thwart future changes in terrorist plotting.

**Ensuring Our Pieces Can Work Together:** Because terrorist threats morph, we must regularly evaluate how our understanding of terrorist behaviors and networks matches the global terrorism landscape. CT watchers must be alert for when terrorists alter their tactics and explore new paths—such as using technology in novel ways—to try to gain an advantage. Capitalizing on the need for a flexible, learning posture is at the heart of how the U.S. government has succeeded in actively suppressing an evolving terrorist threat by institutionalizing information sharing, collaboration, and innovation by a diverse workforce from across federal, state, and local partners. And we will build the CT workforce of the future by continuing to enhance our cadre's technical and analytic skills to keep pace with the terrorism landscape.

**Learning from Others:** Tapping into global CT expertise is a critical part of remaining vigilant. Success in disrupting threats and degrading terrorist networks often relies on CT partnerships at home and abroad. As new social constructs, platforms, and data emerge, we strengthen our understanding by building ties to outside partners. Although maintaining connections with foreign governments will always be important, terrorism containment over the longer term will benefit from deeper awareness of and connections to private sector companies and outside researchers whose CT work supplements the government's efforts. Building relationships with private sector companies whose hardware or online platforms may be used by terrorists to advance violent aims can help us understand and predict the most important factors at the core of the terrorist-counterterrorist match-up.

**Anticipating Adversaries' Possible Moves:** CT practitioners must chase leads until we know which are real, often against threats that persist over years. As we survey the ebbs and flows in terrorism worldwide, we must also be mindful of how changes in the information we are using—including in volume and type—affects our analytic assessments and operational decision-making. Shifts in our information on terrorist actors changes our ability to evaluate threats and identify opportunities to deter terrorist actions, and we must be mindful of how those gains and losses change our assessment of the threat.

### Conclusion

Our successes against terrorism are not a done deal. We are proud that today's environment presents fewer large-scale, transnational terrorism plots than we faced in the recent past because of the active



and ongoing efforts of the U.S. government and our global partners to detect, disrupt, deter, and defend against threats. We recognize that we must remain agile and attentive against the diverse challenges posed by global terrorist networks, state involvement with terrorism, lone or loosely connected violent extremists, and terrorist innovation. In an era of more constrained resources, we

must thoughtfully nurture our capabilities to gather, exploit, and inform on terrorism developments to enable the best whole-of-government CT action. Our mission to protect the U.S. homeland also serves to ensure that the strategic surprise of terrorist violence does not again dominate our national security agenda and divert our focus from other national priorities. **CTC**

# The Enduring Duel: Islamic State Khorasan's Survival under Afghanistan's New Rulers

By Amira Jadoon, Andrew Mines, and Abdul Sayed

**Starting around February 2023, a wave of Taliban operations against Islamic State Khorasan (ISK) led some observers to herald the Taliban's "counterterrorism" capabilities and declare ISK a defeated, or at least irrelevant, organization. Across the Durand Line, however, in July 2023, ISK perpetrated one of its deadliest attacks since its official formation in 2015, which left over 100 casualties in Bajaur, Pakistan. Since the Taliban's return to power, ISK attacks, media output, and recruitment operations in the region have significantly expanded and diversified, which alongside its attack in Bajaur, defy claims of ISK's defeat and irrelevance. Leveraging the authors' years of study of ISK as well as new data, this article discusses the group's operational strategy and persistence in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, underscoring that despite a drop in its Afghanistan-based attacks in 2023, ISK remains a potent threat. An analysis of ISK's operations, outreach, and clashes with the Taliban indicate that the organization remains capable of strategic adaptation and is only broadening and deepening its influence in the region, posturing to become a truly regional organization. And while the Taliban have demonstrated some capacity in targeting ISK commanders, any security gains are unlikely to hold in the absence of sustained counter-ISK operations.**

A devastating suicide bombing struck an election rally in Pakistan's Bajaur district on July 30, 2023, killing over 60 and wounding well over 100 people.<sup>1</sup> The violent assault, which targeted the religious political party Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam-Fazal led by Fazlur Rehman, bore all the trademarks of a suicide attack characteristic of Islamic State Khorasan's (ISK's) operations and was subsequently claimed by the group.<sup>2</sup> The incident not only sent shockwaves throughout Pakistan—a country already plagued by political and socioeconomic turmoil—but it dispelled any notions that ISK had been neutralized by the Taliban in the early months of 2023. Instead, it illuminated an undeniable reality: ISK still retained the ability to modify its operational strategy and tactics to withstand mounting counterterrorism pressure, and orchestrate deadly cross-border attacks in pursuit of its regional ambitions. The attack also revealed glaring vulnerabilities in intelligence gathering, border security, and detection around the movement of militants in both Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Despite years of internationalized counterterrorism and counterinsurgency efforts in Afghanistan and Pakistan, conducted

largely within the framework of the U.S.-led war on terror, political violence and terrorism continue to plague the South and Central Asian region. As demonstrated by ISK's suicide attack in Pakistan, one of the most potent threats housed within the decentralized yet networked jihadi landscape is the persistent presence of the Islamic State's affiliate in Afghanistan, Islamic State Khorasan. The year 2023 marks the ninth year of operation for ISK as the organization continues to navigate rivalries with actors such as the Taliban, al-Qa`ida, and the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)<sup>a</sup> while simultaneously forging deep alliances with sectarian organizations like Lashkar-e-Jhangvi. In this complex milieu of violent non-state actors, ISK has risen and faltered more than once, but has continued to adapt to changing circumstances since its official emergence in early 2015.

This article provides an overall assessment of ISK's evolving strategy since September 2021 under the Taliban regime and situates the recent decline in its Afghanistan-based attacks within a broader strategic context that accounts for ISK's organizational characteristics as well as regional dynamics. The article focuses on four key factors that appear to have contributed to ISK's current

a Since the Taliban's takeover of Kabul, the once somewhat covert rift between ISK and the TTP has deepened, as evident in their media clashes. The TTP's denouncement of ISK's assault in Bajaur framed the attackers as "Khawarij" and agents of Pakistani intelligence. In retaliation, ISK depicted the TTP, similar to the Afghan Taliban, as nationalists and alleged collaborators with state actors. Despite this, the TTP, mirroring the Afghan Taliban's strategy, has been downplaying the threat posed by ISK and avoid mentioning it directly, and instead, has been insinuating that their attacks are schemes of Pakistani intelligence, (especially evident in their reactions to the Bajaur attack). Meanwhile, rumors suggest the TTP assisted the Afghan Taliban in curbing ISK's influence along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border post the Taliban's ascendancy in Kabul. These insights are based on various discussions and interviews with local sources undertaken by author Abdul Sayed during the years 2022 and 2023. See also Amira Jadoon with Andrew Mines, *The Islamic State in Afghanistan and Pakistan: Strategic Alliances and Rivalries* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2023).

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trajectory and endurance, despite mounting pressure from the Taliban. First, the article discusses key shifts in ISK's operational activities, highlighting the expanding scope of its targets as well as key geographical shifts in its areas of operation. Second, the authors discuss notable changes in the magnitude and themes of ISK's media output and what these reveal about its growing regional ambitions. Third, ISK's growing international nexus is examined, which has raised serious concerns about ISK's capacity to strike across the region but also in the West. And finally, the article discusses the effectiveness of the Taliban's approach to combat ISK since the former's takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021. To conduct their analysis, the authors draw upon their previous research,<sup>3</sup> original datasets,<sup>4</sup> primary propaganda materials, and other secondary sources.

Overall, the authors' analysis indicates that since September 2021, ISK has grown more ambitious and aggressive in its efforts to gain notoriety and relevance across the South and Central Asian region. It has expanded the type of warfare it conducts, while also engaging in targeted assassinations of Taliban leaders. At the same time, the group's outreach and propaganda dissemination has reached unprecedented levels in terms of form, volume, and the number of languages—clearly in an effort to recruit from both the South and Central Asian fronts. And matching its words with deeds to motivate its diverse body of fighters and supporters, and to mobilize potential recruits, in 2022, ISK also claimed cross-border attacks in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan,<sup>5</sup> and Iran<sup>6</sup> while targeting Chinese<sup>7</sup> and Russian<sup>8</sup> nationals in Afghanistan in late 2022. Some Afghanistan-watchers remain convinced that the Taliban are capable of countering ISK, and indeed, efforts undertaken by the Taliban since September 2022 have yielded some success, as discussed in this article. However, the recent decline in ISK's attacks in Afghanistan in 2023 is likely to be an intentional strategic slowdown rather than a sustainable operational degradation. Regardless of any short-term shifts in ISK's attack tempo, as discussed in this article, ISK remains a resilient organization, capable of adapting to changing dynamics and evolving to survive difficult circumstances. Given ISK's recent attack in Bajaur, the crackdown on ISK in Afghanistan mostly appears to have triggered a strategic shift in ISK's focus across the border to Pakistan's northwestern region.

### Operational Activity, September 2021 - June 2023

#### *Expanding Nature of Warfare*

In the post-U.S. withdrawal environment, ISK has undertaken several types of attack operations that appear to be modeled on Islamic State Central's insurgency doctrine.<sup>9</sup> ISK currently views itself as engaged in the phase of destabilization (*tawwahu*),<sup>10</sup> where it seeks to gradually implement a system of control through politico-military operations that challenge the Taliban's declared monopoly on violence in Afghanistan. Most of these operations have multiple and often mutually reinforcing strategic logics—with the overarching goal of depicting the Taliban as a weak and incompetent governing entity. While the intensity of different types of operations has shifted over the last two years, each represents a key tool in ISK's terrorist insurgency toolkit. Table 1 summarizes six key types of ISK's operations (non-exhaustive), their accompanying logics, and related examples.

**Table 1: ISK Attack Operations in the Post-U.S. Withdrawal Landscape**

Operation Type	Logic of Violence	Examples
1. "Economic Warfare"	- Bleed enemy resources	- Destruction of electricity pylons <sup>11</sup> - Attacks on oil tankers <sup>12</sup>
2. Attacks on International Presence/ Foreign Nationals & NGOs	- Purify the country - Cement in-group identity	- Pakistani and Russian embassies, hotel frequented by Chinese nationals - Anti-humanitarian campaign <sup>13</sup>
3. High-Profile Assassinations	- Whittle enemy ranks and morale - Encourage defections from enemy rank-and-file - Refocus enemy security resources on senior leadership and open alternative targets	- March 2023 assassination wave against multiple Taliban officials <sup>14</sup> - Killing of Rahimullah Haqqani, prominent Afghan cleric <sup>15</sup> - June 2023 assassination of Taliban deputy governor for Badakhshan <sup>16</sup>
4. Rural Guerrilla Warfare	- Whittle enemy ranks and morale - Establish safe havens - Compete for historical stronghold communities - Intimidate and extort civilians	- Targeting Taliban security personnel and convoys in former Nangarhar strongholds <sup>17</sup>
5. Urban Sectarian Warfare	- Destroy social cohesion - Refocus enemy security resources on urban areas and away from rural communities	- 2021 bombings on Shi'a mosques, notably the Sayed Abad mosque in Kunduz <sup>18</sup> and Bibi Fatima mosque in Kandahar <sup>19</sup> in October - June 2022 attack on Kabul Sikh temple
6. Cross-border Attacks	- Mobilize supporters and expand regional recruitment	- Attacks claimed in Uzbekistan, <sup>20</sup> Tajikistan, <sup>21</sup> Iran, <sup>22</sup> and Pakistan <sup>23</sup>

In the nearly two years since the Taliban's takeover, ISK's attacks increased immediately in the aftermath but then gradually declined, especially in 2023. ISK's suicide attack on the Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul on August 26, 2021<sup>24</sup>—and



the intense attack campaign that followed—left many international observers concerned about the ISK threat.<sup>25</sup> Many, including the Taliban, U.S. officials, and the former Afghan government, had deemed ISK to be a defeated organization with some remnants in early 2020. ISK's attack on the Kabul airport and the subsequent escalation in its attacks under the Taliban's rule alarmed regional states, as well as the international community.

ISK's revived attack campaign following the August 2021 Kabul airport attack initially focused on Nangarhar in Afghanistan, but soon spread to 15 provinces in the ensuing 12 months through to September 2022.<sup>26</sup> In the four months after the Taliban's takeover, ISK claimed 119 attacks in nine provinces, 62 (52 percent) of which occurred in Nangarhar alone. From September 2021 to September 2022, ISK claimed 274 attacks, averaging about 23 attacks a month.<sup>27</sup>

As discussed further below, ISK's rising levels of activity eventually prompted action from the Taliban, which would usher in important losses for ISK's networks and trigger a notable decline in the group's aggregate attack numbers toward the end of 2022. ISK-claimed attacks dropped from an average of 23 per month in the first year of Taliban rule to just four per month in the months between September 2022 and June 2023. Over this period, ISK claimed only 37 attacks in eight Afghan provinces, and the group claimed a mere 10 attacks in the first half of 2023, the majority (six) of which have been suicide attacks. The decline in ISK attacks can in part be attributed to the Taliban's increased targeted operations against ISK's hideouts and some of its top leaders since late 2022 (discussed further below). However, whether the lull in ISK attacks is a strategic slowdown or represents a lasting operational degradation remains uncertain. Other analysis of ISK's activity also indicates a decline in ISK's attacks in the second year of the Taliban's rule, in part driven by the Taliban's security operations.<sup>28</sup><sup>b</sup> However, despite the recent decline in its attacks in Afghanistan, ISK has maintained its ability to strike high-profile targets including against foreign actors on Afghanistan soil, and conduct successful suicide missions in 2023.<sup>29</sup> Collectively, these trends indicate that ISK has intentionally pivoted to conducting fewer but high-impact attacks after exploiting the chaos that ensued in the months immediately after the Taliban's takeover.

Another relatively recent development in ISK's operations has been a strategic shift to targeting the citizens and diplomats of countries it considers crucial for enabling Taliban rule in Afghanistan. Notable examples include an attack on the Russian embassy in Kabul in September 2022,<sup>30</sup> and three months later, attacks on the Pakistani<sup>31</sup> embassy and a Kabul hotel frequented by Chinese nationals in December 2022.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, ISK claimed cross-border attacks in Pakistan,<sup>33</sup> Iran,<sup>34</sup> Tajikistan,<sup>35</sup> and

Uzbekistan<sup>36</sup> from Afghan soil. The Islamic State-claimed attack in Shiraz, Iran, in October 2022 was the first ever attack in the country attributed to ISK,<sup>37</sup> and the suicide attack in March 2022 on a Shi'a mosque in Peshawar, Pakistan, was the group's bloodiest attack in the northwestern Pakistan province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa since ISK's official formation in January 2015.<sup>38</sup> These attacks showcase the Taliban's failures to prevent Afghanistan from becoming a terrorist staging ground, as well as their inability to account for basic state security provisions as a new de facto governing authority. ISK's cross-border and anti-foreigner attack campaign also serves to further harden its reputation as a force seeking to 'purify' the country from foreigners and paint the Taliban as merely the latest puppet rulers in Afghanistan.

### **Geographical Expansion**

Leading up to and immediately following the Taliban takeover in 2021, ISK operations largely centered around its traditional strongholds in Nangarhar province and in and around Kabul. Virtually all of ISK's 83 attacks in 2020 and two-thirds of its 334 attacks in 2021 occurred in these two areas.<sup>39</sup> However, starting in 2022, ISK expanded its attack campaigns into two additional strategic regions—northern Afghanistan (Kunduz, Balkh, Takhar, and Badakhshan) and northwestern Pakistan in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province. About 27 percent of ISK's 217 attacks in 2022 occurred in Kabul, 22 percent in KP province, and 15 percent in northern Afghanistan.

ISK's re-expansion in KP province is particularly noteworthy. Islamic State networks in KP province, as with the rest of Pakistan, were siphoned away from ISK in May 2019 and reconsolidated into a separate branch for Pakistan, known as Islamic State Pakistan Province (ISPP).<sup>40</sup> However, in July 2021, ISPP emir Abu Muhamud announced that Islamic State networks in KP province would be *merged back* into ISK.<sup>c</sup> Since then, ISK attacks have significantly increased in KP province, even as attacks have declined more recently in Afghanistan. ISK's July 30, 2023, suicide attack in the Bajaur district of Pakistan that targeted an election underscores the group's evolving geographic emphasis. Islamic State-claimed attacks in KP province increased from nine in 2020 to 20 in 2021, to 47 in 2022, and 12 attacks during the first six months of 2023.<sup>41</sup> Essentially, ISK-claimed attacks in KP province jumped from 22 percent of its total attacks in 2022 to 55 percent of its total attacks in the first half of 2023.

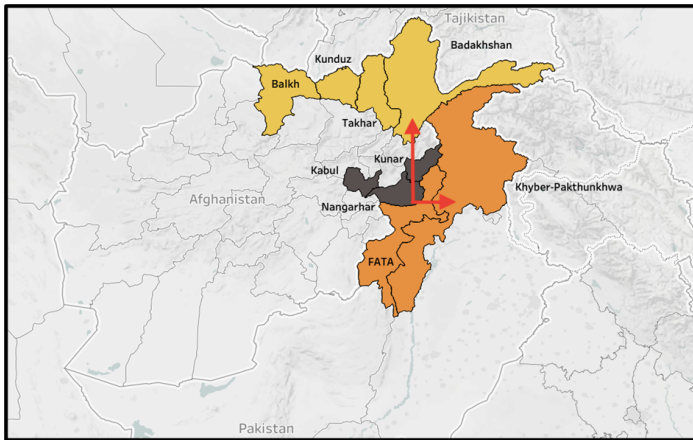
Moreover, KP province is also important to ISK for several other reasons. It hosts a substantial portion of over two million-strong Afghan diaspora, as well as an extensive network of Afghan salafi seminaries.<sup>42</sup> These seminaries were established in KP province dating back to the 1980s, and offered an important vehicle through which salafism spread across Afghanistan.<sup>43</sup> Over the course of the Afghan-Soviet War and two decades of Taliban insurgency against the U.S.-led coalition, KP province also served as a key support base for jihadis of many stripes. Additionally, many of the jihadi groups with which ISK has cooperated in various forms since its

b The analysis of ISK's activity by BBC Monitoring indicates a notable fall in ISK's activity during the second year of the Taliban's rule in Afghanistan, with only 12 attacks conducted in 2023, representing a decline of 83% compared to the first year under Taliban's rule. Similar to the authors findings, analysis by BBC Monitoring also suggests that the fall in ISK's attacks is likely to be an intentional strategic shift by the group whereby it focuses on conducting fewer but high-profile attacks. The analysis points to high-profile plots by ISK, such as suicide operations, targeted assassinations of foreign actors and Taliban commanders, as indicators of ISK's continued ability to strike. For example, suicide operations in 2023 increased both in the total number conducted, and as a proportion of total attacks by ISK. "Analysis: IS Struggles in Afghanistan on Second Anniversary of Taliban Return," BBC Monitoring, August 15, 2023.

c Pro-ISK channels on Telegram released a one-page Urdu letter attributed to Islamic State Pakistan (ISPP) emir Abu Mahmud who announced the Islamic State Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province network merger with ISK. This letter was dated July 16, 2021. Since then, the Islamic State Central's Al Naba weekly newsletter attributed the Islamic State attacks in KP to ISK instead of ISPP.

official emergence in 2015 are focused in and around KP province.<sup>44</sup> In sum, KP province has historically been a crucial hub for ISK recruitment and coordination, and these latest trends in attack data offer glaring warnings of the group's future trajectory.

ISK's expansion (and in some cases re-expansion, as seen in Figure 1)<sup>45</sup> across Afghanistan's northern provinces is also a significant development. 'Showing up,' competing for influence, and cementing an operational footprint in the north can help ISK recruit and garner other forms of material support from local non-Pashtun opponents of the Taliban. Many of these communities view ISK as a potent power against the Taliban, going so far as to publicly express these views in social media posts and public gatherings held after the Taliban takeover in 2021.<sup>46</sup> The northern provinces also sit at key cross-border junctures not only for prospective foreign fighter travel (see ISK's international nexus below), but also for humanitarian, economic, and critical infrastructure-related routes into Afghanistan from neighboring countries. Compared to other areas in ISK's attack portfolio, the group's operations in the northern Afghan provinces are still nascent. Nonetheless, a more active and competitive ISK insurgency along the northern borders of Afghanistan could have devastating consequences for the country and its Central Asian neighbors.



*Figure 1: The (re-)Expansion of ISK Attack Operations. This graphic shows the (re-)expansion of ISK operations out of its core areas of operation (black) and into KP province and tribal areas (orange) and north (yellow) toward the border with Central Asian countries.*

### Outreach and Media Operations: Persuade, Justify, and Intimidate

Generally, the propaganda strategy and media operations of ISK consistently mirror its operational context, acting as a significant indicator of its dynamic strategy and practical tactics. And its audiences include active and potential supporters within and beyond the region, adversaries like the Taliban, regional government actors, as well as general civilian populations. Since its inception, ISK has demonstrated a sophisticated and multifaceted approach to planning and conducting media operations. Like many other prominent jihadi groups—and of course, its parent organization, Islamic State-Central—ISK has leveraged various forms of media in pursuit of its multiple goals, including propagating its ideology, providing justifications for its violent activities while vilifying opponents, casting a broad recruitment net, and of course, staying politically relevant.<sup>47</sup> ISK's propaganda has consisted of both official

and unofficial channels. The latter has consisted of local language media offices that operated independently of Islamic State Central such as Khalid Media, al-Millat Media and Nidaa-e-Haq, and al-Qitaal (although many of these are no longer operational due to the Islamic State's consolidation of its media outlets).<sup>48</sup> At present, ISK's most important (and official) media outlet is its al-Azaim Foundation, which typically publishes long-form narratives, books, and magazines but also videos on topics ranging from sharia and other religious issues to social and political matters.<sup>49</sup>

### Three Waves

ISK's propaganda narratives and media operations have generally evolved in *three key waves*, reflective of its changing organizational goals and strategic environment. The first wave was the period between ISK's emergence and its first operational decline, 2015-2019, while the second was when ISK struggled to remain relevant after significant losses as the United States and Afghan Taliban negotiated for a peace deal between 2020 and mid-2021. The third (and current) wave emerged soon after the United States' unconditional withdrawal and the subsequent takeover by the Taliban and the collapse of the Afghan government in August 2021. ISK adjusted its narratives in response to changes in its territorial dominance, organizational power, technical capabilities, and strategic objectives.

During the first wave, ISK's outreach efforts were largely focused on its core strongholds in Nangarhar, Afghanistan. In late 2015, the Islamic State established a radio station in eastern Nangarhar called Khilafat Ghag (Voice of the Caliphate), which by the following year was providing daily broadcast services in Dari, English, and Pashto.<sup>50</sup> Beyond religious discussions and other related topics, these broadcasts largely focused on anti-government and anti-Taliban narratives, and recruitment.<sup>51</sup> In its nascent years, ISK used its then-held territories as a stage to depict life under its rule to boost recruitment. However, during the second wave, as ISK began to experience territorial and manpower losses, its narratives lost any specific geographic references and focused more on vilifying the Taliban by linking them to the United States in the context of the peace negotiations. Moreover, ISK also refocused its efforts, after suffering losses, on instilling fear and signaling its resolve for survival; in the months leading up to the Taliban's takeover, ISK's output increasingly focused on the group's military activities, the destruction caused by its attacks, and the killing of captives.<sup>52</sup>

ISK's third wave of outreach and media operations is arguably its most aggressive campaign, one which emerged in an environment that was expected to provide the group with a unique opportunity to reinvigorate its violent campaign following years of significant manpower and territorial losses. For the first time, ISK did not confront multilateral counterterrorism operations and instead faced a Taliban rival that was preoccupied with additional priorities beyond fighting, such as governance and law enforcement. Similarly, the Taliban's staunch allies, most notably the TTP, refocused on their own goals of waging jihad in Pakistan,<sup>53</sup> while other militants previously aligned with the Taliban (such as Tajik, Uzbek, and Uyghur jihadis) were left in need of a new umbrella group to pursue their own agenda. To exploit these opportunities, ISK has double-downed on the proliferation of its propaganda to disseminate its beliefs, justify its deeds, and instill fear in its opponents.

In this new phase, especially under current ISK emir Shahab al-Muhajir's leadership, the following three developments have been

the most notable.

**Targeting the South and Central Asian fronts:** The increase in ISK's regional approach has been remarkable in its third wave of outreach and media operations. The organization clearly perceives the environment in a Taliban-ruled Afghanistan to be conducive to its mission of expanding its influence into South and Central Asia more broadly. This is marked by the vast number of languages that have been featured in ISK's propaganda, which in recent years have expanded drastically to not only include the traditional releases in Arabic, Pashto, and Dari but also output in Urdu, Hindi, Malayalam, Bengali, Uzbek, Tajik, Russian, Farsi, and English.<sup>54</sup> In September 2022, Tawhid News, a pro-ISK Uzbek-language outlet, officially announced the expansion of ISK's jihad into Central Asia, with a focus on targeting Chinese investments and infrastructure.<sup>55</sup> Other unofficial Islamic State-affiliated channels have consistently produced and distributed materials in South Asian languages through outlets such as Nida-e Haqq (Islamic State Pakistan Province), Al-Qitaal, and Al-Burhan (Islamic State Hind Province), respectively, while the Weekly Khilafat presents translations of Islamic State Central's Al Naba weekly newsletters in Urdu and Hindi.<sup>56</sup> In 2022, the group also started publishing an English-language magazine, Voice of Khorasan, in an attempt to expand its influence beyond its traditional audiences, and to perhaps appeal to younger and more educated populations who may be disillusioned or harbor grievances against local governments.

**Disparaging the Taliban, and targeted criticism:** Another important characteristic of ISK's revived outreach and propaganda dissemination is its increased and sharper focus on criticizing the Taliban's activities as Afghanistan's governing entity, especially given the latter's rhetorical efforts to distance itself from terrorists and attract investors. Since the U.S. withdrawal, ISK has framed the Taliban's overtures to foreign governments as "abandonment of true jihad."<sup>57</sup> While anti-Taliban narratives have long pervaded ISK's propaganda, the timing of ISK's releases has grown more responsive to current events. For example, soon after the Taliban engaged in bilateral discussions with India in June 2022,<sup>58</sup> ISK unleashed a series of releases criticizing the Taliban's engagement with the Indian government, exploiting controversy surrounding Indian politicians' statements about the Prophet Mohammad.<sup>59</sup> Seemingly in an attempt to match its words with deeds, in June 2022, an ISK fighter targeted a Sikh temple in Kabul.<sup>60</sup> ISK's aspirations in India also appear heightened; in 2023, ISK claimed that the attacks conducted in Tamil Nadu and Mangalore in India in late 2022 were conducted by Islamic State-affiliated militants.<sup>61</sup> And while Islamic State Hind Province (ISHP) has failed to gain much traction thus far, the goal to recruit Indian Muslims and incite attacks within India remains steadfast. Similarly, ISK's critiques of the United States have become more targeted, with specific mentions of recent events and references to the Biden administration.<sup>62</sup> In parallel, ISK's propaganda releases have retained their focus on maligning regional government actors, referring to Pakistan as a cancerous tumor, blaming its leaders and armed forces for the current socioeconomic and political volatility in the country, while issuing direct threats to its multi-billion dollar investments with China.<sup>63</sup> With regard to China, ISK has attempted to showcase the government's atrocities toward the majority-Muslim Uyghur ethnic group in China's province of Xinjiang—a concern for Chinese leaders looking to invest in Afghanistan. In a recent U.N. report, some member states noted operational and logistical cooperation between the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM, also



*ISK fighters pledging allegiance to the Islamic State's fifth caliph. The subtitles state: "The pledge of allegiance of the soldiers of the caliphate to the Commander of the Faithful, Sheikh Abu Hafs al-Hashimi al-Qurashi" (Muharram 1445). Photo published by Amaq Media on August 3, 2023.*

known as Turkistan Islamic Party) and ISK, including exchange of personnel and planning of joint operations.<sup>64</sup> In January 2023, a new pro-Taliban media group emerged, al-Mersaad, which appears to be intended to counter ISK's messaging and discredit its operations.<sup>65</sup>

**Increased audience segmentation:** Related to its apparent goal of gaining regional influence and networks is ISK's increasingly sophisticated marketing campaign. In its bid to recruit individuals who are dissatisfied with the governments of China, India, Pakistan, Iran, Russia, and various Central Asian governments, ISK carefully embeds national or ethnic themes within its overarching ideological narratives. For example, in its inaugural issue of the Voice of Khorasan, one of the articles states "numerous meetings and visits have been already made to the biggest enemies of Islam such as China, Iran and Russia. While the Taliban considers the eradication of the Uighur Muslims as an internal matter of China, the mass murders committed by the Russian, Iran regime and its proxies on the Ahlul Sunnah of Iraq and Sham is also considered something outside of their jurisdiction."<sup>66</sup> As an alternative, ISK offers its own platform to battle the "enemies of Islam slaughtering the Muslims."<sup>67</sup> But it goes further than that: Some of its propaganda directed at Tajik militants, for example, directly threatens the Tajik government, singling out its president, Emomali Rahmon.<sup>68</sup>

ISK's extensive propaganda reveals the group's resolute attempts to not only tarnish the Taliban's reputation but also boost the Islamic State branch's reach and influence across the region. So far, these propaganda efforts seem to have achieved some success in spreading ISK's message and attracting fighters of different nationalities. The extent to which the Taliban's nascent counter-messaging efforts via al-Mersaad can diminish the influence of ISK's propaganda and outreach efforts remains to be seen.

## International Nexus

Since the Islamic State's global province expansion campaign first started in 2014, ISK has been one of its most successful affiliates in forging a truly international nexus. Regarding attack plots, ISK is second only to its parental namesake, the Islamic State, in Islamic State-related threats to U.S., Western, and allied interests. In addition to ISK-claimed cross-border attack plots in the immediate region against Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Iran, and Pakistan, the group has been linked to several international attack plots, including the



2020 plot against U.S. and NATO bases in Germany.<sup>69</sup> According to reporting by *The Washington Post*, U.S. intelligence identified 15 ISK-linked external attack plots by February 2023, with specific efforts to target embassies, churches, business centers, and the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar.<sup>70</sup> According to this report, ISK has been prioritizing the same ‘virtual entrepreneur’ model used by the Islamic State and al-Qa`ida in the past,<sup>71</sup> connecting its operatives with online supporters to provide direction and instruction. Other evidence of ISK’s virtual networking include: statements by former CENTCOM Commander General Joseph Votel in 2019 that warned about ISK using its members’ social media contacts to plot attacks on U.S. targets;<sup>72</sup> the July 2023 arrests of a number of alleged ISK-affiliated conspirators in Germany and the Netherlands, who were nationals of Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan and arrived via Ukraine;<sup>73</sup> and a counterterrorism arrest in Istanbul earlier this year alleging a connection to ISK,<sup>74</sup> among others.<sup>75</sup>

Furthermore, while the virtual planning model may be a short-term priority, the vacuum created by the U.S.-led withdrawal has presented ISK with unique opportunities to re-expand its training camps despite pressure from the Taliban (see below). Reported ISK training camps and strongholds now line Afghanistan’s borders not just in traditional ISK strongholds along the eastern border with Pakistan, but also along the northern borders with China, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan.<sup>76</sup> Over time, without substantial counterterrorism pressure, ISK training camps can potentially provide the critical mass for a more deadly, sustained campaign of violence not just in Afghanistan and the immediate region, but internationally as well. While ISK is focused on expanding within its immediate region for now, it is possible that ISK’s ultimate goal, as noted in March 2023 testimony by CENTCOM Commander General Michael Kurilla, is to strike on the U.S. homeland, though he noted attacks on Europe and other regions remain more likely than the United States.<sup>77</sup>

Beyond expanding ISK’s international attack-plotting capabilities, a stronger training camp infrastructure could offer ISK the necessary abilities to take in and process more foreign recruits. Since its official formation in 2015, the group has received travelers from Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, China, France, India, Iran, Iraq, Kazakhstan, the Maldives, the Philippines, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkey, and Uzbekistan.<sup>78</sup> If one includes failed and foiled travelers, the list grows to include the United States, Australia, the United Kingdom, and others.<sup>79</sup> As the authors noted in a previous 2022 article, part of ISK’s resurgence strategy under current leader Sanaullah Ghafari (aka Shahab al-Muhajir) was to showcase its diverse regional fighter base in attack claims and propaganda in order to continue widening and deepening its recruitment pool.<sup>80</sup> Analysis of more recent English-language propaganda, such as the 2022-23 issues of ISK’s *Voice of Khorasan* magazine, show that this strategy has continued. As ISK’s competition for an increasingly international base evolves, the role of camps and other foreign fighter processing infrastructure—as well as how ISK’s network of alliances can be leveraged to support those efforts—will become increasingly vital.

### Taliban’s Counter-ISK Strategy

Since their takeover, the Taliban have engaged in various efforts to constrain ISK’s activities, while signaling to the international community that the group does not pose a serious threat. Their efforts appear to have yielded some notable successes in 2023, especially as concerns about ISK have increased internationally. In



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*Photo published by Amaq Media on August 3, 2023.*

the first half of 2023, the Taliban General Directorate of Intelligence reportedly carried out around 35 raids against ISK in 11 provinces of Afghanistan.<sup>81</sup> These efforts have resulted in the successful killing of senior ISK commanders, examples of which are provided below:

- ISK’s military chief Qari Fateh was targeted in Kabul February 2023<sup>82</sup>
- The founding emir for Jammu and Kashmir, Abu Usman Kashmiri, was targeted in Kabul in February 2023<sup>83</sup>
- ISK’s senior leader and influential ideologue Abu Saad Muhammad Khurasani was targeted in the northern Balkh province in April 2023<sup>84</sup>
- Senior commander “Dr. Hussain” was targeted in Herat in April 2023<sup>85</sup>
- Deputy leader for Kabul, known as “Engineer Umar,” was killed in Kabul in May 2023.<sup>86</sup>

Overall, these operations demonstrate that the Taliban have met with some degree of success in conducting intelligence-led targeting of prominent ISK figures, which are likely to have contributed to a notable decline in ISK’s attacks in Afghanistan in 2023. In particular, Qari Fateh’s and Khurasani deaths (February 2023 and April 2023, respectively) constitute significant losses for the organization, with implications for both ISK’s short-term trajectory and general morale. Khurasani was one of ISK’s most influential ideologues; he was the primary author of key publications released around the time of the group’s difficult rebuilding phase in 2020, in the lead up to ISK’s forthcoming phase of war with its main rival, the Taliban. Khurasani was also ISK’s interim emir before al-Muhajir’s appointment in May 2020.<sup>87 d</sup>

For a group that was considered to be largely defunct, the remarkable increase in ISK’s attacks in the aftermath of the U.S. withdrawal was perhaps startling and eye-opening for the Taliban—or at the very least, the Taliban were unprepared for such an onslaught of ISK violence. Prior to their takeover, the Taliban had openly claimed that ISK was a proxy or tool of the former Afghan government and U.S. forces, to be used against the Taliban. The extent to which Taliban leaders actually believed this

d The GDI also claimed that Khurasani served as ISK’s interim emir. Directorate General of Intelligence-GDI, “[The present (so-called governor) was previously the interim governor ...],” X, March 26, 2023.

remains unclear, but at least publicly, some of their leaders adhered to this narrative, such as the current intelligence chief, Abul Haq Wasiq, who stated in an interview in late August 2021 that ISK was no longer a threat after the U.S. withdrawal.<sup>88</sup> ISK's immediate rise after the Taliban's takeover not only further undermined their quality of governance, but also served as an international embarrassment, resulting in denials by Taliban leaders about the gravity of the threat. A series of publicly claimed assassinations of the Taliban's top-most leaders by ISK, and concerns raised by U.S. leaders about ISK's capability to target the West,<sup>89</sup> also likely provided the impetus for the Taliban to engage in a concerted and strategic effort to counter ISK.

Overall, while the Taliban's recent efforts against ISK have yielded some success, leading to a decline in ISK's attacks during the second year of the Taliban's rule, the sustainability of these efforts remains highly uncertain given the tremendous pressure on the Taliban to govern Afghanistan. ISK's growth into northern Afghanistan, strengthened foothold in KP province, consistent ability to execute suicide missions, and broad domestic and international outreach efforts all underscore its resilience and strategic adaptability. And if history is an indicator of ISK's future trajectory, until counterterrorism pressure on the group is expanded and sustained, there are no guarantees of a suppressed ISK.

## Conclusion

ISK's agenda and narratives have long transcended national boundaries, given its commitment to the Islamic State's goal of creating a caliphate, acquiring physical territories, and its deep linkages with other militant factions. In terms of opportunities to exploit in its immediate environment, ISK arguably is better positioned than ever before to evolve into a truly regional organization, one which effectively fuses transnational jihadi narratives with South Asian and Central Asian narratives, recruits from within and outside the region, collaborates with like-

minded militants, and contributes to the resiliency of regional militant infrastructures. Given the current security void in the region—especially in light of the Taliban's limited governance and counterterrorism capabilities, and resurgent sectarian and anti-government militancy in Pakistan—ISK's evolution into a regional organization appears likely. Constraining its capabilities to conduct attacks, leverage militant networks, and propagate for influence and recruitment should be a top priority for regional governments and the international community.

ISK's increasingly networked and regional nature and its ability to recover from losses in the absence of sustained counterterrorism pressure necessitate a coordinated regional security approach. Cooperation is especially important for effective use of intelligence to disrupt ISK's plots and also to constrain its members from cross-border movements. Regional governments may seek to provide limited counterterrorism capacity-building support to the Taliban to allow them to target ISK's leadership and infrastructure with more precision, but the second- and third-order effects of such support must be carefully weighed. In light of ISK's ability to generate and disseminate an immense volume of propaganda targeting different populations in several regional languages, government actors need to work closely with the technology sector to support deplatforming efforts, especially in non-English language propaganda where content moderation efforts are still wanting. Finally, governments need to work with civil society actors to address the underlying grievances that ISK seeks to exploit, and which make civilians vulnerable to false narratives and conspiracy theories, such as poor human security, repression, sectarian discrimination, and intolerance toward minorities.

In the absence of a comprehensive policy response, unfortunately, ISK is likely to continue to reverse any limited short-term counterterrorism successes, as it has done so in the past, and continue to leverage existing security gaps to revive and expand.

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# Caliphs of the Shadows: The Islamic State's Leaders Post-Mawla

By Aymenn Al-Tamimi

**This article explores what is known regarding the Islamic State's leaders since the killing of the group's second caliph Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi (conventionally dubbed "al-Mawla" for shorthand) in February 2022. In contrast with the group's first caliph, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the organization has publicized little information on his successors, who have released no audio messages of their own. Despite the fact that the group's caliphs are now very much 'men of the shadows,' there is little evidence pointing to the prospect of the group's fragmentation in Iraq, Syria, or elsewhere around the world, with the group's affiliates seemingly willing to accept successor caliphs about whom little or nothing is publicly known.**

**O**n August 3, 2023, the Islamic State's al-Furqan Media publicized a teaser announcement of a forthcoming speech by one "Abu Hudhayfa al-Ansari," described as being the spokesman for the Islamic State. Considering that the previous spokesman was one "Abu Omar al-Muhajir" and the group had said nothing until then about his fate, it was predictable that the speech was going to announce that something had befallen its spokesman, and possibly its caliph as well.<sup>1</sup> Sure enough, Abu Hudhayfa announced that the previous spokesman had been taken captive, and that the group's caliph Abu al-Husayn al-Husayni al-Qurashi had been killed. He also announced that a new caliph—Abu Hafsa al-Hashimi al-Qurashi—had been appointed in Abu al-Husayn's place, continuing a line of faceless caliphs. Despite the fact that these caliphs are shrouded in a veil of obscurity, the group insists that its fighters and Muslims around the world declare allegiance to them.

What might now be called the 'dark age' of caliphs contrasts markedly with the public face of the group's first caliph, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. When the Islamic State first rose to global prominence in June 2014 with its seizure of territory spanning the borders of Iraq and Syria and the declaration of the caliphate under then leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, there was understandably much interest in the person leading the organization. Indeed, the Islamic State was keen to highlight a public face for its caliph, who had released

audio messages prior to being named caliph and continued to do so during his tenure as caliph up to the time of his death in 2019. He also made two visual appearances: Once in a video released in July 2014 showing al-Baghdadi in the al-Nouri mosque in Mosul, and then an appearance in a video released in April 2019 following the end of the group's territorial control in Iraq and Syria, showing him consulting with figures who were presumably part of the group's top leadership.<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, Turki al-Binali, who essentially served as the Islamic State's leading mufti in running the *fatwa*-issuing and research department that was created following the declaration of the caliphate, had written a pamphlet entitled "Stretch forth the hands to pledge allegiance to al-Baghdadi,"<sup>3</sup> which included some biographical information about the would-be caliph, such as establishing his background in Islamic studies, his work as an imam and preacher in mosques in Iraq, his membership of the Majlis Shura al-Mujahidin (a predecessor group to the Islamic State of Iraq) and his leadership of the Shari'i committees and judiciary in the Islamic State of Iraq prior to his appointment as leader of the Islamic State of Iraq in 2010.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, thanks to the high public profile of the Islamic State and its leader, widespread interest in the group and the available variety of sources of information, a fairly detailed picture of al-Baghdadi's life and career inside the Islamic State emerged, despite some errors that gained prominence early on.<sup>a</sup>

Following al-Baghdadi's death in October 2019 in a U.S. raid on his hideout in the area of Barisha in northern Idlib countryside, the group announced the appointment of Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi as his successor, a move that was portrayed as being in accordance with al-Baghdadi's "counsel," implying that al-Baghdadi had recommended him to be his successor.<sup>5</sup> While Abu Ibrahim made no speeches or public appearances during his tenure of around 28 months as caliph and the group has never given its own account of who he was, testimonies that emerged from Islamic State dissidents and defectors and Islamic State leaders in Iraqi detention correctly suggested that he was to be identified with Hajji Abdullah (al-Hajj Abdullah Qardash), who had served as a top deputy of al-Baghdadi and was known to intelligence services tracking the organization.<sup>6</sup> As such, like al-Baghdadi, a good deal of information emerged as to who Abu Ibrahim was, including from interrogations

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a For example, one early story claimed that al-Baghdadi was in U.S. custody until 2009 and supposedly told his captors that he would see them "in New York." U.S. officials speaking to the media quickly cast doubt on this story. See, for example, "ISIS Leader's Ominous New York Message in Doubt, But US Still on Edge," ABC News, June 16, 2014. Moreover, prison records reviewed by this author show that al-Baghdadi was released from custody by the end of 2004. For detail that aligns with this chronology, see Daniel Milton and Muhammad al-'Ubaydi, "Stepping Out from the Shadows: The Interrogation of the Islamic State's Future Caliph," *CTC Sentinel* 13:9 (2020).

while he had previously been in U.S. custody,<sup>7</sup> and the identification of him with one “Amir Muhammad Sa’id Abd al-Rahman al-Salbi”<sup>b</sup> was essentially confirmed when President Biden announced that he had been killed in a U.S. raid in February 2022 and the organization then announced his death the following month.<sup>8</sup>

**Table 1: The Islamic State’s Caliphs**

<i>Islamic State Caliph</i>	<i>Tenure<sup>c</sup></i>	<i>Duration</i>
1. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi	June 2014 to October 2019	64 months
2. Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi (aka al-Mawla)	October 2019 to February 2022	28 months
3. Abu al-Hasan al-Hashimi al-Qurashi	March 2022 to October 2022	7 months
4. Abu al-Husayn al-Husayni al-Qurashi	November 2022 to April 2023	5 months
5. Abu Hafsa al-Hashimi al-Qurashi	August 2023 to present	N/A

The death of Abu Ibrahim, however, has essentially marked the end of the era of the group’s ‘known caliphs.’ Since his death, two successors have already been appointed and killed: namely, Abu al-Hasan al-Hashimi al-Qurashi and Abu al-Husayn al-Husayni al-Qurashi, both of whom only lasted several months each and similarly made no public appearances and released no audio messages of their own. Moreover, the U.S. government has not come forward to affirm the identity of either of these figures, and the organization has had little to say about who they were.

This article explores in more depth what is known about these two successors to Abu Ibrahim and the circumstances surrounding their deaths, and considers the future of the organization in light of the seeming rapid rate at which the group’s caliphs are being eliminated.

### Abu al-Hasan al-Hashimi al-Qurashi

If there is one thing that can be ascertained with certainty regarding Abu al-Hasan’s identity, it is who he was definitely not. Shortly after the killing of Abu Ibrahim and prior to the announcement

of Abu al-Hasan’s appointment, the journalist Hassan Hassan published an article for New Lines Magazine suggesting that the likely successor would be one Bashar Khattab Ghazal al-Sumaida’i.<sup>9</sup> According to Hassan, al-Sumaida’i joined the Islamic State in 2013 and had previously been a member of the Iraqi jihadi group Ansar al-Islam, which is now largely confined to northwest Syria where it operates as a small independent faction under the watch of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). In addition, Hassan said that al-Sumaida’i served in a judicial capacity and had been close to Abu Ibrahim, though he had been based in Turkey for some time before returning to Syria in 2021.<sup>10</sup>

While this account of Sumaida’i was interesting, his supposed identity as Abu Ibrahim’s successor was never affirmed by U.S. intelligence, and doubts about the story began to emerge after Turkey arrested Sumaida’i in May 2022. Despite initial hype that Turkey had captured the Islamic State caliph,<sup>d</sup> Turkish authorities were subsequently unable to confirm that this figure was in fact Abu al-Hasan, but perhaps more importantly, the Islamic State released an editorial in its Al Naba newsletter in which the group mocked unspecified “analysts” for holding to fanciful wishes and hopes and trying to prove them to be true.<sup>11</sup> The editorial gave as an example those who hoped that the caliph had been taken prisoner, and then added after mention of the caliph: “may God protect him.”<sup>12</sup>

The implication of these words was clear: Abu al-Hasan had not been taken prisoner by Turkey. If he had been taken prisoner, the group would likely have said so and either have launched a campaign to free him if it had believed that it was feasible to free him, or have simply appointed a successor, thus transferring the position of the caliph to another individual. This dual choice with regard to the fate of an imprisoned caliph derives from Islamic jurisprudence,<sup>13</sup> and there is no reason to suppose the Islamic State

b His full name is also sometimes given as “Amir Muhammad Sa’id Abd al-Rahman al-Mawla” or “Amir Muhammad Sa’id Abd al-Rahman al-Salbi al-Mawla.” It should be clarified here that al-Mawla refers to the larger tribe to which he belonged, while Salbi is the sub-branch of al-Mawla. For comparison, Amir’s brother Aamer, who was assassinated in March 2011 and worked at Mosul University and was an Iraqi Turkmen activist, was widely known as Aamer Muhammad Sa’id Salbi, but his name also appears on an academic paper as Aamer Muhammad Sa’id Abd al-Rahman al-Mawla. See Feras Kelani, “Amid the cracks of sectarianism and extremism: the Dawla organisation ‘remains’ under the leadership of a caliph without a caliphate,” BBC Arabic; “The Brother of the Deceased Islamic State Leader and Iraqi Turkmen Activism: Historical Documents,” *aymennaltamimi.substack.com*, February 8, 2022; and Aamer Muhammad Sa’id Abd al-Rahman al-Mawla, “The effect of using certain skill exercises to develop speed endurance and some functional variables for football players,” *College of Basic Education Researches Journal* 8:3 (2009): pp. 447-467. For the names listed in Amir’s U.N. designation, see U.N. Security Council Press Release, May 27, 2022.

c The beginning of the dates of tenure refers to when the caliph was publicly announced by the Islamic State, while the end refers to when the caliph was killed.

d What appears to have happened is that when Turkey arrested al-Sumaida’i in May 2022, Turkish security officials thought that they had captured Abu al-Hasan and there was probably preparation to make that announcement to the world pending verification. Their subsequent interrogations and investigations into al-Sumaida’i over the following months then likely made them realize that he was not the caliph, and thus Turkey announced in September 2022 that it had only caught someone who had been a senior official in the organization, and did not go so far as to assert that he was Abu al-Hasan. For the original Turkish-language report on Abu al-Hasan’s supposed capture, see “Dünya Odatv’den öğrenecek... IŞİD lideri İstanbul’da yakalandı,” ODA TV, May 26, 2022. For an example of the subsequent Turkish reports, see “Senior executive of Daesh/ISIS terror group captured in Türkiye,” Anadolu, September 8, 2022. Voice of America reported that in “May [2022], Turkish security officials said they had captured Abu al-Hussein’s predecessor during a raid in Istanbul. U.S. and Western intelligence officials later determined that the claim was overstated, and that the captured IS official was Bashar Hattab Ghazal Al Sumaidai, a senior leader in the organization.” Jeff Seldin, “US Not Backing Turkish Claims Islamic State Leader is Dead,” Voice of America, May 1, 2023.

would deviate from these norms with regards to its own caliphs.<sup>e</sup>

Doubts about the identification of Abu al-Hasan with al-Sumaida'i were further solidified by the surprise announcement by the Islamic State on November 30, 2022, about the death of Abu al-Hasan and the appointment of his successor Abu al-Husayn.<sup>14</sup> The announcement came via an audio message of then spokesman Abu Omar al-Muhajir on al-Furqan Media, and said little about the precise circumstances of his death beyond the fact that Abu al-Hasan died a violent death through fighting the “enemies of God.”

Hours later, however, U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) released a statement claiming that Abu al-Hasan had been killed in mid-October 2022 in a clash with the “Free Syrian Army” in Syria’s southern province of Dar’a, which is officially under Syrian government control.<sup>15</sup> The CENTCOM statement did not capture the full nuance in that it was not the “Free Syrian Army” that killed Abu al-Hasan but rather, as will be outlined below, local militiamen, some of whom may have previously been part of the “Free Syrian Army”-brand insurgent groups that received backing from the United States, some European states, Jordan, and Gulf countries.<sup>16</sup>

An analysis by this author of local reports from the time suggests that Abu al-Hasan was likely killed during an offensive launched by local militiamen against Islamic State cells in the north Dar’a countryside town of Jasim,<sup>17</sup> a conclusion also reached by the United Nations.<sup>18</sup> This offensive was backed by artillery support from the Syrian army, and only came about after the head of Syrian military intelligence in the province seriously threatened to storm the town if action was not taken in cooperation with government forces against Islamic State cells, whose presence was repeatedly doubted in pro-opposition activist media.<sup>19</sup> It seems likely that neither the Syrian government nor the local militiamen were aware or certain that Abu al-Hasan had been killed during this offensive. Rather Arabic-language reports at the time only noted that an individual going by the names of “(Abu) Abd al-Rahman al-Iraqi” and “Sayf Baghdad” (“Sword of Baghdad”) had been killed.<sup>20 f</sup> While U.S. intelligence

may have received some information at the time suggesting Abu al-Hasan had been killed, it probably could not verify the details and thus waited for the Islamic State’s own announcement for full confirmation.

Although the precise details of Abu al-Hasan’s apparent demise in the Jasim offensive have not been confirmed by the Islamic State, the group has nonetheless confirmed the broader point that Abu al-Hasan was killed in southern Syria fighting against forces that had backing from the Syrian government. In the announcement of Abu al-Husayn’s death, Abu Hudhayfa al-Ansari confirmed that Abu al-Hasan had been based in southern Syria, where he fought against the “Nusayris” (a derogatory term for Alawites, and thus referring to the Syrian government and its forces) and their “agents” (i.e. local militiamen working with the Syrian government) and was subsequently killed.<sup>21</sup>

All of these elements provide confirmation that Abu al-Hasan was not al-Sumaida'i. In response to the growing doubts following the announcement of Abu al-Hasan’s death, Hassan and other defenders of the al-Sumaida'i theory suggested that Abu al-Hasan was originally al-Sumaida'i but that the identity was transferred to another person following al-Sumaida'i's capture. There is little basis to accept this hypothesis. Indeed, the Islamic State implicitly mocked it in an editorial released after Abu al-Hasan’s death,<sup>22</sup> stating that if the group had wanted, it could have continued using Abu al-Hasan’s name for the caliph after his demise, just as it could have continued using the name of the previous spokesman Abu Hamza al-Qurashi, the killing of whom had not been claimed by any side and was only revealed to the outside world via Abu Omar al-Muhajir in the announcement of the appointment of Abu al-Hasan as successor to Abu Ibrahim.<sup>23</sup>

Yet, the upshot of all the foregoing is simply to establish a negative: that Abu al-Hasan was not al-Sumaida'i. Establishing this negative reveals virtually nothing about who Abu al-Hasan actually was. To date, there are only two other accounts as to who he might have been, with nothing to provide confirmation either way. One claim is that Abu al-Hasan was a brother of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi,<sup>24</sup> while another account offered by the journalist Wa'il 'Isam claims that Abu al-Hasan’s real name was Nour Karim Mutni, originally from the Albu 'Ubayd tribe in Rawa in western Anbar.<sup>25</sup>

According to Wa'il's account, Mutni’s career in jihadism began after his brother and some other relatives were killed in the al-'Adhamiya neighborhood in Baghdad in 2005 by the “Wolf Brigade,” which was affiliated with the Interior Ministry and gained notoriety for sectarian violence against Sunnis.<sup>26</sup> Initially working in logistical support, Mutni became involved in the administration of the Islamic State’s “Baghdad wilaya” (Baghdad province), and thus, according to Wa'il, acquired the nickname of “Sword of Baghdad,” which was one of the nicknames of an “(Abu) 'Abd al-Rahman al-Iraqi,” killed during the Jasim offensive and has been identified with Abu al-Hasan. There is little information as to Mutni’s career in the Islamic State following his involvement in the administration of the Baghdad wilaya, except the claim in Wa'il’s reporting that he moved to the town of Albukamal on the border with Iraq in 2014.<sup>27</sup>

### Abu al-Husayn al-Husayni al-Qurashi

The figure of Abu al-Husayn is even more obscure than his predecessor, Abu al-Hasan, though according to Voice of America, U.S. officials have claimed Abu al-Husayn was “not part of the group that founded IS [Islamic State] and is, instead, among the

e It is true that one of the group’s predecessors—namely, the Majlis Shura al-Mujahideen (January-October 2006)—engaged in a form of ‘deception by omission’ when it publicized a message from its leader Abdullah Rashid al-Baghdadi (later widely known as Abu Ali al-Anbari) eulogizing Abu Musab al-Zarqawi’s death in June 2006, while omitting that al-Anbari was imprisoned. It was only much later that the matter was effectively clarified in the two biographies of al-Anbari written by the Islamic State and al-Anbari’s son, respectively. The reason for the omission of Abdullah’s fate in the Majlis Shura al-Mujahideen propaganda at the time can be readily understood. Revealing his imprisonment might have made his identity known to his captors, who did not necessarily know his significance in the organization. It may also be that the Majlis Shura al-Mujahideen initially had optimistic hopes of freeing him and thus initially allowed him to continue in his role as head of the group. But as the months passed, such hopes faded, and by the time the Islamic State of Iraq was formed, it could not have been feasible to designate the imprisoned al-Anbari as leader of the group, and thus Abu Omar al-Baghdadi was appointed instead. For more on the matter, see Craig Whiteside, “Lying to Win: The Islamic State Media Department’s Role in Deception Efforts,” *RUSI Journal* 65:1 (2020): pp. 130-141.

f According to the United Nations, “the former leader was identified by a few Member States under the aliases ‘Abdal-Rahman al-Iraqi’ and ‘Sayf Baghdad’; the identity behind those aliases was reported as Nur al-Din Abdul'ilah Mutni.” “Thirty-first report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2610 (2021) concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities,” United Nations, February 13, 2023, p. 11. This article further discusses Mutni, who was identified by the United Nations, as an Iraqi, later.



first of a new generation of leaders.<sup>28</sup> What precisely this means though is not clear: does it mean that Abu al-Husayn only joined after June 2014 when the caliphate was officially declared, or that he was not part of the generation of veterans going back to the days of the Islamic State's predecessors such as Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's al-Qa'ida in Iraq?

The announcement of his appointment might offer a slightly different picture. From that announcement, it can be inferred that he had probably not been recommended by his predecessor Abu al-Hasan, since no mention was made of implementing Abu al-Hasan's counsel in the appointment of Abu al-Husayn. This is not to say that implementing the previous caliph's counsel is necessarily required. Ultimately, the requirement for appointing a caliph is that the 'people of binding and dissolution' should come to an agreement through consultation on the appointment of a person who fulfills the various conditions required for a caliph (e.g., being of Qurashi lineage), and said person should be willing to accept the position. A predecessor's recommendation can help in selecting the successor, but complying with the recommendation is not obligatory on those with the authority to appoint him. Thus, it may be that Abu al-Hasan recommended someone besides Abu al-Husayn and the group's leadership chose not to go along with the recommendation, or perhaps Abu al-Hasan had not made any recommendation, which may be because he had not taken the time to consider the matter, or he did not think he could make a recommendation. Of course, it cannot be ruled out he did make the recommendation, but the Islamic State did not publicly reveal this fact in their announcement.

It can also be inferred that Abu al-Husayn was a veteran of some standing in the organization, as he was described as being among the "veterans of the mujahideen." However, the group refused to say anything else about him, with then spokesman Abu Omar al-Muhajir affirming that "what you see from his deeds- if God wills- will suffice for you instead of mentioning his biography and deeds."<sup>29</sup> Clearly then, the organization felt that for security reasons, it could not disclose any detailed information about Abu al-Husayn's identity, for fear that it might lead to the group's enemies deducing his whereabouts and real identity. It may be that the group feared that revealing too much about his background might have allowed for intelligence agencies—especially U.S. intelligence—to identify him as someone they held derogatory information on, an issue that came to light with al-Baghdadi's successor, Abu Ibrahim, and his interrogation files.<sup>30</sup> This may explain why the Islamic State said virtually nothing about Abu Ibrahim's background when he became caliph.

Until now, no account has emerged as to what Abu al-Husayn's real name might have been. An account active on the social media site TamTam and entitled "Channel to expose the servants of al-Baghdadi and al-Hashimi," which provided advance notification on the deaths of Abu al-Hasan and Abu al-Husayn prior to their being announced on al-Furqan Media, suggests that Abu al-Husayn must have been Iraqi. The account claimed in a post in January 2023 that the figure of Abd al-Raouf al-Muhajir (aka Abu Sara al-Iraqi),<sup>31</sup> who (according to this same account) occupied the position of head of the office for the administration of the wilayat at the time<sup>32</sup> and was subsequently killed, was in control of the group's Majlis Shura (consultation council) and thus controlled the appointments of the caliph, and he supposedly would not allow non-Iraqis to hold the position of caliph.<sup>33</sup>

The first claim of the killing of Abu al-Husayn emerged on April 30, 2023, when Turkey's president Erdogan announced that Abu al-Husayn had been killed in an operation conducted by Turkish intelligence, which had supposedly discovered that he was present in the area of Jindiris in the Afrin region of Aleppo province and that he was planning to change location.<sup>34</sup> On April 29, the Turkish intelligence launched an operation targeting his supposed safehouse, which consisted of multiple stories and had a concealed underground bunker, and called on him to surrender. With no response received, the house was raided and the individual inside allegedly blew himself up.<sup>35</sup>

The Turkish media reports offered no biographical details on Abu al-Husayn apart from saying that he had joined the group in 2013.<sup>36</sup> The same claim of joining in 2013 had been made in Hassan Hassan's account of who Abu al-Husayn's predecessor Abu al-Hasan was.<sup>37</sup> It is possible that this alleged detail regarding Abu al-Husayn's career is a coincidence, but perhaps it was mistakenly lifted by Turkish media from Hassan Hassan's account of Abu al-Hasan. The Turks subsequently identified the deceased individual as a Syrian-born individual, holding the alias of Abdul-Latif, but U.N. member states were not able to confirm the dead man was the Islamic State leader, with some sceptical that a non-Iraqi would have been leading the group.<sup>8</sup> For its part, the United States did not provide a confirmation of the Turkish claims, indicating the extent of the U.S. uncertainty about Abu al-Husayn's identity.<sup>38</sup>

It was not until some three months later that the Islamic State commented on the matter, releasing Abu Hudhayfa al-Ansari's speech announcing the death of Abu al-Husayn and the appointment of Abu Hafs as his successor.<sup>39</sup> This time, specific details were offered as to the circumstances of Abu al-Husayn's death, aimed at refuting the "Turkish theatrics" publicized in media. By the group's own account, rather than being killed by Turkish intelligence, Abu al-Husayn was supposedly killed in a confrontation with "the Hay'a of apostasy and collaboration, the agents of the Turkish intelligence agencies, in one of the localities of Idlib countryside." The reference here is to HTS, which evolved out of the al-Qa'ida affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra and has developed a working relationship with Turkey in northwest Syria,<sup>40</sup> effectively enforcing a freeze on the military frontlines between the Syrian government and the insurgent groups in the region since the ceasefire negotiated between Turkey and Russia in spring 2020. HTS has also gone after Islamic State cells in the region for years.<sup>41</sup>

According to the Islamic State, following Abu al-Husayn's death, HTS handed over his body to the Turkish government, allowing Erdogan to use Abu al-Husayn's killing to bolster his chances of re-election. Yet, in response to Abu Hudhayfa's speech, the spokesman

g A July 2023 report by the U.N. Monitoring Team tracking the global jihadi threat stated the following: "On 30 April, Türkiye reported killing ISIL leader, Abu al-Husain al-Husaini al-Qurashi, in Afrin, subsequently identifying him as a Syrian-born individual, holding the alias of Abdul-Latif. Member States could not confirm the leader's death, with one identifying the deceased as only the security leader in the group's Syrian branch. Some Member States dismissed the possibility of a non-Iraqi overall ISIL leader. The operation was undertaken by Türkiye following indications that he aimed to relocate to another Syrian region and had started to take extreme safety measures following Abu Sara's death. The real identity of Abu al-Husain remains unconfirmed by Member States." "Thirty-second report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2610 (2021) concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities," United Nations, July 25, 2023, p. 12.

for the “General Security Service” (GSS), which is nominally independent but is in fact affiliated with HTS, denied that the GSS had killed Abu al-Husayn and handed him over to Turkey, affirming on August 4, 2023, that if they had in fact killed him, they would have declared so publicly.<sup>42</sup>

The conflicting claims raise the obvious question as to which account should be believed: Turkey’s claim to have killed Abu al-Husayn in an operation in Jindiris, or the Islamic State’s claim that HTS killed him and then handed his body over to Turkey. On balance, the Islamic State’s account seems more credible, though the Turkish account cannot be definitively excluded as of the time of publication. The reason for lending the Islamic State’s account more credibility is simply the fact that the group has less motive to mislead people on the matter. There would be no shame or loss for the group to admit that its leader had been killed at the hands of Turkish intelligence as opposed to HTS. After all, both entities are seen as “apostates” by the Islamic State, and it is considered an honor for the caliph to die fighting these supposed enemies of God.

In contrast, if the Islamic State’s account of events is correct, then it can be seen as constituting a source of embarrassment for Turkey, whose actions can be interpreted as cooperating with HTS on combating the Islamic State, despite the fact that HTS is designated as a terrorist organization by Turkey.<sup>h</sup> For HTS, there is a motive for the group to have cooperated with Turkey in handing over his body and potentially bolstering Erdogan’s chances at re-election, for the Turkish elections were characterized by increasing talk, especially from the opposition to Erdogan, about the prospect of normalization of relations with the Syrian government—a development, which, if actually realized, would have negative implications for the future of the HTS-controlled enclave in northwest Syria.

Thus, for HTS, if it handed over Abu al-Husayn’s body to Turkey, that would have had the advantage of bolstering the group’s status as a security partner against terrorism and instability in the eyes of the counterterrorism community, and the advantage of bolstering the chances for the re-election of Erdogan, who was less inclined toward normalization of relations with the Syrian government. In other words, if HTS’ actions were such as claimed by Islamic State spokesman Abu Hudhayfa, they would fit in rationally with HTS’ long-term strategic goal of preserving its enclave in northwest Syria through cementing its partnership with Turkey in the region. It can also be seen why HTS may have wanted to keep silent about the matter and then deny any involvement: The behavior could be interpreted as working with a Western ally/NATO member against other Muslims, and interpreted as electioneering for Erdogan, whereas HTS continues to reject the practice of democracy in its areas of control.<sup>43</sup>

It is possible that the Turkish raid on the house in Jindiris took out an individual who was another high-ranking member of the Islamic State, and it is also possible that HTS may not have realized that it had killed Abu al-Husayn but had handed over his body to Turkey as he was suspected of being a high-rank member of the Islamic State and so HTS decided to allow Turkey to verify his identity. It must be acknowledged however that no definitive account exists yet for the demise of Abu al-Husayn.

## The Appointment of Abu Hafis al-Hashimi al-Qurashi and the Future of the Islamic State

As already outlined, the same speech announcing the death of Abu al-Husayn also announced his successor as one Abu Hafis al-Hashimi al-Qurashi. Here, too, as with Abu al-Husayn’s appointment, no mention was made of implementing the predecessor’s “counsel” in Abu Hafis’ elevation to the caliphate. Rather, it is only said that the “people of binding and dissolution” (those with the authority to appoint a new caliph) in the Majlis Shura “came together, deliberated, consulted and mutually agreed on appointing” him, suggesting that no recommendation had been made by Abu al-Husayn as to the appointment of a successor. The speech had little specific detail about Abu Hafis’ biography other than to suggest he is a veteran of the Islamic State who has lived through the group’s lowest fortunes, as he has been “bolstered by adversities, and made experienced by severe trials of fate,” with a track record of fighting the “Crusaders and apostates.”<sup>44</sup>

Some of the initial analysis of the speech has focused on its elaboration of the obligation to pledge allegiance to the caliph and its citations of the medieval authorities of Imam al-Mazari (d. 1141 CE) and Imam al-Nawawi (d. 1277 CE) on the conditions for the validity of the allegiance to the imam (in other words, to the caliph). Specifically, M. Nureddin of the Arabic-language channel al-Aan, which provides extensive coverage of jihadi groups and likes to highlight internal problems and disagreements within them, has suggested that the citation of al-Nawawi in particular hints at internal disagreements within the group on the appointment of Abu Hafis.<sup>45</sup>

Yet, there is no compelling reason to think this is the case. The same speech in fact emphasizes that the “people of binding and dissolution” in the group’s Majlis Shura *mutually agreed* on appointing Abu Hafis. The same process of the coming together, consultation, and mutual agreement between them was highlighted in the speech on Abu al-Husayn’s appointment. While it is true that the citation of al-Nawawi in Abu Hudhayfa’s speech states that not all the people of binding and dissolution have to give allegiance to an imam for that allegiance to be valid, in this author’s assessment that was not the main point behind the Islamic State’s citation of him. Rather, as with the citation of al-Mazari, the common thread is to emphasize that not everyone has to come and profess allegiance to the caliph *in person* for that allegiance to be valid, thus justifying the validity of allegiance to the Islamic State’s leader while he remains behind a veil of obscurity for security reasons.

Insofar as there is any significance behind citing al-Nawawi for the notion that not all the people of binding and dissolution have to give allegiance for it to be valid, it is only to say that the mutual agreement of the people of binding and dissolution in the Islamic State’s Majlis Shura was sufficient for Abu Hafis to be made caliph and for allegiance to him to be valid. In this context, it should also be noted that when al-Binali wrote his pamphlet on the validity of allegiance to al-Baghdadi, he too emphasized that not all the people of binding and dissolution had to give allegiance for it to be valid, but only those of them who could, and he cited the same excerpt from al-Nawawi.<sup>46</sup>

The primary takeaway from the Islamic State’s loss of two of its caliphs within the span of months is that the security environment of ‘Islamic State Central’ in Iraq and Syria is currently a difficult one for the group’s top leadership to operate in. The group has no meaningful control of territory, and the military forces and security apparatuses of its enemies are constantly on the lookout for Islamic

h These designations are not merely symbolic. In May 2023, for example, the U.S. Department of Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets took joint action with Turkish authorities to designate two financial facilitators of HTS and its Uzbek affiliate, Katibat al-Tawhid wa al-Jihad. See “Treasury Designates Terrorist Financing Facilitators Jointly With Türkiye,” U.S. Department of the Treasury, May 2, 2023.

State cells, and in the process, they may even kill the caliph or other top leaders of the Islamic State without fully realizing who they actually are. Despite these difficulties facing ‘Islamic State Central,’ it seems unlikely that Abu Hafis or whoever succeeds him upon his death will relocate outside of the Iraq-Syria area. Indeed, among the Islamic State’s fighters whom Abu Hudhayfa urged to continue the fight, the new spokesman addressed the “soldiers of the abode of the Caliphate in Iraq and al-Sham,”<sup>47</sup> suggesting that Iraq and Syria remain ‘Islamic State Central,’ despite the collapse of the territorial caliphate there and the far greater success now enjoyed by affiliates in the Sahel and West Africa.<sup>i</sup>

While the Islamic State may not have a large supply of people who could fill the position of caliph, the group’s fighters around the world seem willing for now to accept the idea of a ‘caliph of

i According to a July 2023 report by the UN Monitoring Team tracking the global jihadi terror threat, when it comes to Syria and Iraq, “ISIL is assessed to remain resilient, commanding between 5,000 to 7,000 members across the two countries, most of whom are fighters.” “Thirty-second report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team,” p. 12.

the shadows’ and the validity of allegiance to him, something emphasized in the group’s propaganda highlighting allegiance pledges from around the world to Abu Hafis,<sup>48</sup> just as was the case with Abu al-Husayn and before him, Abu al-Hasan. The group has also sought to counter the idea that the repeated loss of the caliph somehow makes the Islamic State’s caliphate invalid, stressing for comparison the short terms of the Rashidun caliphs who immediately succeeded Muhammad and whom the Islamic State seeks to emulate, while also noting that three of them (‘Umar, ‘Uthman, and ‘Ali) met violent deaths.<sup>49</sup>

Meanwhile, the threat from the group remains. As noted by the United Nations in a July 2023 report, “despite significant attrition of the ISIL (Da’esh) leadership in Iraq and the Levant, the group remains resilient and the risk of resurgence should counter-terrorist pressure ease is real.”<sup>50</sup> According to the same report, “the role of the overall leader has become less relevant to the group’s functioning.”<sup>51</sup>

In short, the Islamic State is still weathering the storm facing its central leadership, and one should be cautious about hopes for the group’s imminent demise with the loss of Abu al-Husayn. **CTC**

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# The Russian Imperial Movement in the Ukraine Wars: 2014-2023

By Lucas Webber and Alec Bertina

**The Russian Imperial Movement has taken advantage of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine to further its revanchist goals of conquering the Donbas and “Novorossiya” while expanding its international footprint both politically and militarily. The Russian Imperial Movement gained useful combat experience through the participation of personnel from its paramilitary arm, the Russian Imperial Legion, in the invasion. With the Wagner Group’s resources waning, there may be an opportunity for RIM/RIL to deepen its involvement in Russia’s efforts in Ukraine. This could bolster the group’s recruitment, paramilitary capabilities, and thus increase the broader threat it poses. However, the organization may face sanctions in the future from the Russian state if the Kremlin continues to clamp down on Russian pro-war ultra-nationalist elements.**

The outbreak of post-Maidan<sup>a</sup> hostilities in 2014 saw Ukraine become a hotspot for ideological militias on both sides of the conflict, and Russia’s February 2022 invasion brought this to a whole new level. Russian President Vladimir Putin created a storm of controversy when he declared “de-Nazification” as one of the “Special Military Operation’s” objectives. Putin was referring to hardline nationalist fighters from Azov, Freikorps, Right Sector, and other formations. However, many were quick to point out the irony of his statement, considering Russia has various far-right elements fighting in and alongside its armed forces, including the neo-Nazi

a The Maidan Uprising occurred after Ukraine’s president, Viktor Yanukovich, in November 2013 “refused to sign the long-awaited Association Agreement with the European Union, shortly thereafter receiving a loan from the Kremlin.” See Alisa Sobolieva, “EuroMaidan Revolution,” *Kyiv Independent*, August 18, 2023.

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Rusich organization and volunteers from the Russian Imperial Movement (RIM).<sup>1</sup> RIM had been active in Ukraine since 2014, when it deployed its paramilitary arm, the Russian Imperial Legion (RIL), to support separatist forces in the Donbas.

According to RIM’s telling of its organizational history, the group’s combatants were in Ukraine from 2014 to 2017.<sup>2</sup> After time spent operating in Syria, Libya, and possibly the Central African Republic, the Russian Imperial Legion returned to Ukraine in 2022 to join the invasion and continue frontline operations.<sup>3</sup> RIM views the Russian war effort as an opportunity to help reconquer “Novaya Rossiya” (New Russia), a large swath of eastern and southern Ukraine. “RIM describes itself as an imperialist, ultra-reactionary, Russian Orthodox, fascist, anti-liberal, and anti-communist organization.”<sup>4</sup>

RIM and its Partizan training organization have links to some of these groups fighting on the Russian and separatist side, including the neo-Nazi Rusich Sabotage Assault Reconnaissance Group. In fact, Rusich leader Alexey Milchakov apparently met his friend and second in command Yan Petrovsky while volunteering with the Imperial Legion-linked Aid Coordination Center of Novorossiya (KTsPN) in June 2014.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, on Milchakov’s Vkontakte social media page, he stated that he and Petrovsky formed Rusich after going through the Partizan paramilitary training program in 2014.<sup>6</sup> The findings of an analysis by New America Foundation found significant online overlap between members and supporters of RIM, Rusich, and two of Russia’s VDV airborne paratrooper units as well as geolocation evidence that RIL and Rusich share training grounds in Saint Petersburg.<sup>7</sup> Partizan Center described the shooting range used by both as under the control of the “the Ministry of Emergency Situations.”<sup>8</sup> A post on Rusich’s VK page once announced a coalition of “Right-wing detachments on guard of the Russian spring,” which was composed of six groups to include the Imperial legion.<sup>9</sup>

Further, RIM has built a robust online and real-world propaganda apparatus to recruit, fundraise, and broadcast its members’ battlefield heroics.<sup>10</sup> It is an organization that has connections to the Russian Ministry of Defence and a new policy requires RIM and other volunteer detachments to sign contracts to comply with the Russian state.<sup>11</sup> The Imperial Legion has developed relations with the military establishment as well as Donbas separatist groups and irregular formations such as Wagner and Rusich.<sup>12</sup>

Photos posted by the organization show RIL fighters operating near Vulhledar in Donetsk Oblast and elsewhere.<sup>b</sup> Aside from its links to hard-right separatist militias in the Donbas, RIM reportedly has transnational relations with extreme far-right European organizations such as the Nordic Resistance Movement

b A post on the Imperial Legion’s VK page posted pictures of its fighters in trenches with weapons and called for more “political and religious nationalists” to join RIL.

and has trained members of such groups from Denmark, Slovakia, Germany, and elsewhere.<sup>13</sup>

This article will add original research to the existing literature and fill open-source knowledge gaps related to RIM and RIL's roles and history in Ukraine's 2014 post-Maidan conflict and since the February 2022 invasion. A significant number of Russian-language materials were used for this study, with an emphasis on primary sources from the VK and Telegram pages and channels used by RIM, RIL, and the Partizan training network. It will examine RIM's origins, history, leadership, ideology, and involvement in the Donbas War and the subsequent February 2022 invasion. Along the way, it will look at RIM/RIL's propaganda activities, international influence operations, and the potential threat its members and allies pose abroad.

RIM emerged in the early 2000s as a political movement and later expanded its international ties and created its paramilitary branch, RIL. Two figures, Anatolyevich Vorobyev and Denis Valliullovi Gariyev, are examined as they are essential to understanding the rise of RIM and RIL. The Russian Imperialist Movement's revanchist ideology is likewise important in understanding why the organization and its armed wing are aligned with Moscow's war efforts in Ukraine, despite its suspicions of the Kremlin. Stanislav Vorobyev sees "the stability of anti-Russian regimes on all the territory inhabited by the Russian ethnos" as the greatest threat to Russia.<sup>14</sup>

Certain events, too, have influenced the evolution of the organization, including the 2014 Maidan Revolution and the subsequent Donbas conflict as well as Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Put together, these aspects and details inform a threat analysis based on RIM's working relationship with the Russian government, its ideology and intent, as well as its operational capacity.

## Origins and History

The Russian Imperial Movement was formed around two decades ago but gained increased attention from Western security officials and researchers in the mid- to late 2010s, with the group being designated as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT) entity by the U.S. Department of State and the Canadian government in April 2020.<sup>15</sup> Individual designations were placed on RIM leaders Stanislav Anatolyevich Vorobyev, Denis Valliullovi Gariyev, and Nikolay Nikolayevich Trushchalov.

These designations arrived in the broader context of rising concern over Russian meddling in Western political affairs and the emergence of the semi-state Wagner Group (which are unrelated as organizations) to further Kremlin interests abroad. As the designation itself outlined, RIM itself has expanded its influence beyond Russian borders and has possibly trained foreigners, including two members of Sweden's Nordic Resistance Movement (NRM), who, between November 2016 and September 2016, went on to bomb a cafe and tried to bomb a migrant center and attempt to blow up a refugee camp site.<sup>16</sup> During the trial, Swedish prosecutors said the perpetrators may have learned bomb-making at RIM's Partizan training center. A RIM leader spoke at an NRM-hosted event called "Nordic Days" in 2015, and RIM has reportedly provided financial support to the NRM.<sup>17</sup> In September 2017, a RIM representative also spent time networking in the U.S. with the national socialist Traditionalist Worker Party.<sup>18</sup>

RIM and its military wing, Russian Imperial Legion (RIL),

have developed a robust online media apparatus, a real-life on-the-ground networking campaign, and a sizable and growing Internet following within Russia and internationally.<sup>6</sup> This includes websites, VK pages, and Telegram channels for RIM, RIL, and the still active Partizan training network that are geared to recruit, spread messages, fundraise, and show its members' activism, training, and battlefield activities.<sup>4</sup>

Russia has a diverse ecosystem of ideologically extreme far-right paramilitary groups, including the overtly neo-Nazi Rusich, the survivalist network WPRS (White Power Rangers Squad), the hooligan formation Espanola, followers of the Russian National Unity movement, RIM/RIL, and more.<sup>19</sup> While RIM is sometimes labeled as a neo-Nazi movement, the outfit more accurately describes itself as an imperialist, ultra-reactionary, Russian Orthodox, fascist, anti-liberal, and anti-communist organization.<sup>20</sup> RIM certainly appeals to white identity in wanting a "mono-ethnic state" and some of its members may harbor neo-Nazi beliefs, but efforts are made to distinguish its ideology, which is most focused on reviving and fighting to protect the Russian people and the Orthodox faith both at home and abroad. RIM aspires for a political system based on Tsarist Russia rather than Nazi Germany.<sup>21</sup> With this said, RIM certainly works with an international coalition of neo-Nazi groups.<sup>22</sup>

RIM has overtly stated its ambitions to "continue to establish contacts with right-wing, traditionalist and conservative organizations around the world" to "share the experience of political [and] information warfare and joint squad tactics training."<sup>23</sup> RIM uses both activism and military means to project power and influence abroad.<sup>24</sup> To increase its reach, RIM has aligned with the Russian political party Rodina (The Motherland-National Patriotic Union) to establish the World National-Conservative Movement (WNCM) conference series to rally against the values of "liberalism, multiculturalism, and tolerance."<sup>25</sup> In 2015, the movement brought together 58 organizations from North America, Europe, and even Chile, Japan, Mongolia, Syria, and Thailand.<sup>26</sup> One commonly circulated photo from a conference shows Rusich leaders Alexey Milchakov and Yan Petrovsky posing with American extreme far-right "race realist" Jared Taylor.<sup>27</sup>

RIM has been somewhat critical of the Kremlin for quite some time, but the relationship seems to be getting closer in ways—especially since the invasion—as the Imperial Legion further expanded its role in Russian-involved armed conflicts.<sup>28</sup> The Imperial Legion deepened connections with Russia's military establishment through its role in Ukraine, Syria, Libya, and unconfirmed reports of operations in the Central African Republic.<sup>29</sup>

c RIM and RIL have actively posted on their affiliated social media accounts throughout the time this article was researched and written.

d RIM has two Telegram channels: One was created in April 2023, since gaining over 250 subscribers, while its main channel has grown to 2,700 subscribers. The Imperial Legion's Telegram channel was created in March 2023 and has grown to over 2,000 followers. The Partizan training camp Telegram channel has over 3,910 subscribers. On VK, Partizan has almost 60,000 followers, RIM has 22,100 followers, and the Imperial Legion has 6,800 followers.

e Researcher Heidi Beirich of the Global Project Against Hate and Extremism told Voice of America that the Russian government has a relationship with RIM, although at times the group's symbols and propaganda have been banned. Veronica Balderas Iglesias, "How Russia Uses Neo-Nazi Groups to Spread Chaos," Voice of America, June 23, 2022.





*RIM Leader Stanislav Vorobyev (right) wearing a uniform with a Russian Imperial Legion patch on his shoulder in a picture posted on the RIM Telegram Channel on May 18, 2023. The accompanying RIM Telegram post claims that RIL members who temporarily returned from the front have been presented awards (as shown in this picture).*

Despite this, frustrations exist. On June 11, 2023, RIM complained on Telegram about Russian President Vladimir Putin continuing his policy of not killing Ukraine's political elite and Western leaders visiting the country—in that case, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.<sup>30</sup>

In regard to Ukraine, RIM took part in counter-revolutionary activism during Maidan, joined early in the war in the Donbas, set up a training center in Ukraine for local separatists, and is involved in the ongoing Russian aggression in Ukraine. Moreover, the organization has long identified the “Jewish oligarchs in Ukraine” as high-ranking enemies.<sup>31</sup> The Ukraine campaign fits seamlessly with the group's imperialist mindset to reconstitute “Novaya Rossiya” (New Russia), a sweeping area of eastern and southern Ukraine. RIM has confirmed taking casualties during the war and is positioned in southern Ukraine and the Bakhmut area, where it is involved in defensive operations against Ukraine's ongoing offensive.<sup>32</sup>

The Russian Imperial Movement claims its true roots emanate from the First Congress of the All Russian Party of the Monarchist Centre, which occurred in 1991.<sup>33</sup> This event happened in the Kschessinska Mansion built for Mathilde Kschessinska, a ballerina of the Imperial Ballet who likely owed her wealth to the romantic affairs she had with three Grand Dukes of the Romanov family, including the future Tsar Nicholas II.<sup>34</sup> The Congress was likely held at the mansion due to its association with the Russian Empire.<sup>35</sup>

RIM's predecessor organization, Russian National Salvation Front, was founded in 1992 but according to RIM was banned in 1994 by the Boris Yeltsin government.<sup>36</sup> In 2002, RIM was formed as a successor organization to the All-Russian Party of the Monarchist Center.<sup>37</sup> This was when the movement replaced its title of the ‘All-Russian Party of the Monarchist Center’ with the ‘Russian Imperial Movement.’<sup>38</sup> In the same year, the Russian Imperial Movement also started publishing its magazine, *Imperial Courier* (renamed *Imperial View* in 2010).<sup>39</sup>

In 2007, RIM established an international department and

began to conduct its first foreign missions.<sup>40</sup> It is unspecified what this at the time entailed, but one can assume this referred to efforts by the organization to establish links with foreign far-right organizations and enlarge its reputation abroad. An expansion of these departments eventually occurred between 2015-2018 into France, Germany, Bulgaria, Spain, and Sweden.<sup>41</sup> Thereafter, RIM further intensified its activity in supporting likeminded movements in the United States.<sup>42</sup>

### Leadership

The Russian Imperial Movement is best encapsulated as an organization with firstly political elements and secondly paramilitary elements in the form of the Russian Imperial Legion (RIL). While the former is a necessary component that provides the ideological basis to enlarge its reach within Russia and across the world, the latter has been invaluable in establishing its role within many of Russia's military interventions. In examining the Russian Imperial Movement and the Imperial Legion, it is essential to look at the two figures that lead them.

#### **The Political Leader: Stanislav Anatoloyevich Vorobyev**

RIM leader Stanislav Anatoloyevich Vorobyev was born on June 2, 1960.<sup>43</sup> At the age of 22, he graduated from the Faculty of Law at St. Petersburg State University, which was known as Leningrad State University at the time.<sup>44</sup> It is during this period that he may have begun to work in the Russian prosecution service and then at a law firm.<sup>45</sup> He was also a member of the national committee for the ultra-nationalist movement (which translates to “State Power”) and a former chairman of its Leningrad regional branch.<sup>46</sup>

Before becoming the lead figure within RIM, Vorobyev was an executive director on the board of its predecessor organization, the All-Russian Party of the Monarchist Center. Vorobyev is currently a member of the Main Council of the Union of Russian People and editor-in-chief of RIM's numerous papers. Vorobyev has claimed to have been imprisoned for his political activities within RIM, including for taking part in protest marches and other gatherings with ideologically aligned individuals.<sup>47</sup>

Vorobyev's dogmatically ideological predisposition is a defining feature of his role as a founding figure and the intellectual core of RIM. His belief in Russian Orthodox Christianity is demonstrated by the content of his written material and his common practice of singing prayer hymns before the start of certain interviews, including with figures such as Colonel Vladimir Kvachkov, a former GRU Spetnaz and military intelligence officer who is a reactionary figure with a close relationship with RIM and who has lectured at its Partizan training center.<sup>48</sup> Vorobyev's reactionary and monarchist views are also evident in interviews and written works, in which his critical views of the Putinist political system appear. Vorobyev's criticism has included allegations of Russian elections being rigged and heavily influenced by government corruption.<sup>49</sup>

Vorobyev has strong views about various geo-political matters. He believes the battle for the “Russian Spring” (a term used to refer to the start of so-called Russian separatist activity in eastern Ukraine in 2014) was not lost due to the resistance of Ukrainian forces or the U.S. State Department, but because of Kremlin treachery. Vorobyev argues this treachery was the reason Russia did not annex territory outside of Crimea.<sup>50</sup> He has also claimed that socialism and liberalism are destructive ideologies that the West intends to export to Russia and use to destroy it.<sup>51</sup>

Vorobyev has been connected to an array of figures that fomented radical sentiment in Russia and participated in military activities within Ukraine since 2014. He has shared platforms with Colonel Vladimir Kvachkov.<sup>52</sup> Another Vorobyev close associate is a notorious former FSB officer and commander of so-called separatist forces in eastern Ukraine, Igor Ivanovich Strelkov.<sup>53</sup> Their association can likely be explained by the fact that Strelkov shares Vorobyev's reactionary and imperialist views and may have commanded forces fighting for RIL in eastern Ukraine.<sup>54</sup>

### ***The Paramilitary Leader: Denis Valliullovich Gariyev***

Few details exist on RIL leader Denis Gariyev's early life. He was born on March 11, 1978. It is also likely that he graduated from the Faculty of History at St. Petersburg State University, though it is unclear when his studies concluded. Gariyev may have worked as a secondary school teacher during the early 2000s and possibly owned a chain of fitness businesses. He appears to have experience as a hand-to-hand combat instructor, though it is hard to establish when this began.<sup>55</sup>

Gariyev is a RIM coordinator and the highest-ranking figure in RIL, where he serves in a command role. Gariyev was likely to have joined RIM at the time of its founding in 2002 and became the head of its youth department in 2008.<sup>56</sup> Gariyev was eventually made the Assistant Head of the Representative Office State Humanitarian Support Committee of the so-called Donetsk People's Republic in Russia,<sup>f</sup> but it is unclear whether he occupies this role presently.<sup>57</sup>

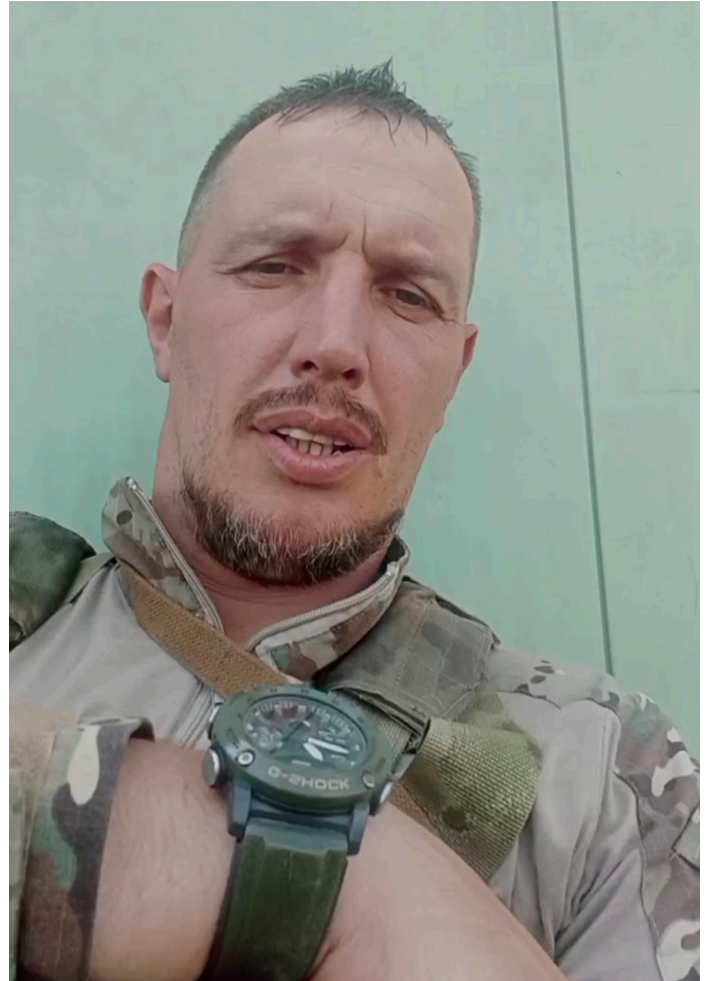
Unlike Vorobyev, Gariyev seems to be less engaged with RIM's political activism and is instead more involved in training individuals in hand-to-hand combat, handling legally acquired firearms, and instructing military courses run by RIM's training center.<sup>58</sup> Gariyev's experience likely led to his participation in RIL operations within eastern Ukraine from 2014–2015 and, since Russia's widened invasion, training many members in 'Partizan.'<sup>59</sup>

### **Ideology**

RIM is best conceptualized as an ideologically anachronistic and extreme far-right entity. A central feature of RIM's dogma is a staunch commitment to monarchism in the model of Tsarist Russia. This is made clear by the political program of RIM advertised on its website. According to it, the "highest form of government is the Empire" and "the imperial (royal) power that is the ideal of state structure in Orthodoxy." The latter appears to allude to the belief in the divine right of kings as a central source of authority for a monarch installed in a remade Russian Empire.<sup>60</sup>

Naturally, the commitment to the reforging of the Russian Empire also makes RIM an expansionist and militaristic organization at its core. As shown by RIL's involvement in Ukraine, RIM is committed to the restoration of all lands that belonged to the Russian Empire in the past, referring to them as 'Malo-Rossiya' or 'Lesser-Russia.'<sup>61</sup> Unsurprisingly, this has informed RIM's support for the Russian invasion of Ukraine that began in 2014, as well as RIL's involvement in it.

The central narrative within RIM's texts and videos is anti-communism. The Russian Revolution is depicted as a mortal blow



*RIL leader Denis Gariyev. This screen capture is from a video posted on RIL's Telegram channel on July 26, 2023.*

to Russian society by its members, who believe that Bolshevism has "held back and corrupted" the "fatherland."<sup>62</sup> Moreover, RIM has claimed that Marxist theorist Karl Marx was the greatest example of "Russophobic scum."<sup>63</sup> As is common for extreme far-right organizations, RIM's anti-communism also incorporates elements of anti-Semitism.<sup>64</sup>

Like many other extreme far-right organizations, RIM's members have also displayed other traditionally reactionary political views, including xenophobia toward migrants from Central Asia to Russia, especially Muslims.<sup>65</sup> These concerns are the result of religious intolerance toward Muslims, (RIM text often intentionally and inaccurately refers to them as Wahhabists), racism toward non-white people, and concerns about the demographic replacement of ethnic Russians. RIM is explicitly pro-natalist, frequently citing concerns about high abortion rates in Russia. RIM has also made numerous associations between homosexuality and satanism.<sup>66</sup> In terms of organizational culture, there is an emphasis on fitness and mixed martial arts (MMA) as seen with other hard-right groups such as the Ukrainian Azov Brigade and the Russian Volunteer Corps.<sup>67</sup> This, together with Partizan's ban on alcohol and cursing, is geared toward instilling discipline.<sup>68</sup>

### **Post-Maidan Ukraine Involvement**

There is a limited amount of open-source information regarding the

<sup>f</sup> The Donetsk People's Republic is an illegitimately formed region of eastern Ukraine shortly after the 2014 annexation of Crimea and Russia's low-intensity invasion.





*RIL personnel in Kharkiv Oblast. The picture was posted on RIM's Telegram channel on August 8, 2022.*

involvement of RIM in the events leading up to the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the group's initial involvement in eastern Ukraine. When Maidan kicked off, prominent RIM figure Stanislav Vorobyev expressed concern about the actors involved being “anti-Russian [antiruskii]” and a threat to the Ukraine’s Russian population, with this leading him to see the instability as an opportunity to exploit the situation as part of the revival of Russia as a “great power.”<sup>69</sup> In RIM’s words, it was proactively involved in supporting various anti-Maidan and pro-Russian movements within Kyiv in February 2014.<sup>70</sup> However, it is unclear which exact organizations it worked with. Some assume RIM has been involved more directly in the annexation of Crimea, but the extent and scope of that involvement remain unclear.<sup>71</sup>

Curiously, RIM claimed it helped organize Russian separatists in Sevastopol, Crimea, and Simferopol in March of 2014, just after Crimea was annexed.<sup>72</sup> Thereafter, it went on to establish the “Homeland” party movement for “New Russia/Greater Russia” in April of the same year.<sup>73</sup> Before May 2014, the general trend of RIM’s involvement in the fomenting of instability within Ukraine seemed relegated to that of engaging in radical politics. Yet, from May 2014 onward, RIM’s involvement in Ukraine departed from what previously appeared to be just political involvement. May 2014 saw RIM form a training center for those wishing to fight in eastern Ukraine and the formal organization of RIL fighters that were later deployed there.<sup>74</sup>

RIM senior operative Alexander Zhuchkovsky was one of the earliest members to arrive in Ukraine to fight alongside separatist leader Igor Girkin’s men and others on May 18, 2014. Zhuchkovsky headed operations to supply Russian guerillas and separatists with cell phones, uniforms, radios, and more.<sup>75</sup> From the time he arrived in mid-May 2014, Zhuchkovsky described how RIM’s “Right View” website was able to raise money for a BTR-80 and two BRDM-2s and give the armored personnel carriers to the DPR militiamen.<sup>76</sup> He also claimed that RIM recruited, trained, equipped, and sent approximately 20 groups to fight in the Donbas War.<sup>77</sup> He noted that one of these RIM groups even arrived early enough to fight in

the conflict’s initial big formal battle in Slavyansk.<sup>78</sup>

RIL’s first recorded losses were reported to be in the fighting that took place during the siege of Slovayasnk—the nascent phase and cradle of the Donbas War—in 2014.<sup>79</sup> It is highly likely that they were involved in operations in the area and commanded by then-FSB agent Igor Strelkov.<sup>80</sup> Sometime in February 2015, other RIL fighters were reported to have died during the Battle of Debaltseve against Ukrainian forces.<sup>81</sup>

Later in 2015, RIL withdrew from Ukraine, but many of its fighters may have joined various LPR/DNR pro-Russian forces to continue their involvement in the region.<sup>82</sup> There are a range of reasons why this may have occurred. In an interview, RIL leader Gariyev stated that he “stopped travelling to Ukraine” in 2015 because of the belief that the conflict became co-opted by the government and oligarchic interests in Russia, Ukraine, and the West.<sup>83</sup> An alternative reason for RIL’s withdrawal may have resulted from measures taken by the Russian state to consolidate control over LNR/DNR territories by removing semi-autonomous militant groups like RIL and installing fully-controlled ones in their place. Supporting evidence of this may exist in reports concerning the alleged purging of “rogue” separatist commanders by Russian intelligence services.<sup>84</sup>

It is worth noting that RIL is believed to have operated in several other countries before 2022. According to RIM’s social media posts, RIL personnel were involved in operations in Syria, the Central African Republic (CAR), and Libya from 2015-2022.<sup>85</sup> Though details are absent regarding the nature and extent of RIL’s involvement in operations in CAR, there is evidence suggesting its involvement in Syria and Libya.<sup>86</sup> In its own words, RIL deployed in Syria as part of its “Crusade” to protect the Christian faith against “Islamist hordes.”<sup>87</sup>

Little known is about RIL’s possible presence within Syria in the past, but based on the reports of one combatant who died in Libya, RIL was involved in fighting within Palmyra and convoy protection.<sup>88</sup> According to Gariyev, some personnel trained at Partizan went on to fight in Syria as part of various private military companies (PMCs).<sup>89</sup> Even fewer operational details exist regarding RIL’s involvement in Libya, but it is likely that any involvement of its personnel involved the support of Russian-backed General Khalifa Haftar and his Libyan National Army (LNA) since this faction was receiving support from the Russian state and the Wagner Group.<sup>90</sup> Posts by RIL’s Vkontakte social media account suggest that at least two RIL combatants were killed while fighting in Libya.<sup>91</sup>

### **Role in Russia’s “Special Military Operation”**

RIM and its RIL military arm have expanded operations and influence inside Ukraine since Russia’s February 2022 invasion deeper into Ukraine.<sup>92</sup> RIL is estimated to have trained several hundred fighters, runs training programs outside St. Petersburg, and is still, and seemingly more deeply, connected to the Russian state.<sup>93</sup> RIM seemingly maintains ties with the Russian military and intelligence apparatus,<sup>94</sup> and, as an example, the Legion posted a photo of former Russian Spetsnaz Colonel Vladimir Kvachkov—an associate of the notorious Donbas separatist commander and ex-FSB officer Igor Strelkov—giving a lecture and military-tactical instruction to RIL trainees at the organization’s Partizan training camp in early April 2023.<sup>95</sup>

On June 10, 2023, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu announced the desired implementation of a policy “requiring all



‘volunteer detachments’ to sign contracts with the Ministry of Defense.<sup>96</sup> This would further integrate groups like Wagner, Rusich, and the Imperial Legion into Russia’s official military apparatus. Indeed, this move by Shoigu is likely one contributing factor that led to Wagner engaging in its June 2023 mutiny against the Russian state, before it aborted its march on Moscow. Interestingly, some RIL members have been documented expressing a rather negative view toward the June 10, 2023, policy change. For example, RIL combatant Vladislav Efremov voiced his frustration with the Defense Ministry’s poor management of Russian regular forces and its aim to consolidate control over volunteer formations previously outside its control.<sup>97</sup>

Efremov’s criticism was not limited to the matter of volunteer formations signing contracts with the MoD. Supposedly speaking from personal experience, Efremov claimed RIL “looked insanely good” compared to mobilized individuals in the 155th Separate Marines Brigade during offensive operations in Vuhledar during the time of January and February 2023.<sup>98</sup> Disparaging comments were also made by Efremov about the near-suicidal nature of service in the Russian military, the need for GRU units to acquire drones through “humanitarian means,” and the absence of unencrypted communications systems.<sup>99</sup>

Though Efremov’s comments may not uniformly represent the views of all RIM or RIL members, they do follow a pattern of broader criticism by RIM/RIL of the MoD and the Russian state, more recently taking the form of lambasting the government for the arrest of ‘legendary’ separatist leader Igor Girkin and the Ministry of Defence’s disregard for the value of the lives of Storm-Z units made up of convicts.<sup>100</sup> RIM and Girkin have close ties, and when the organization was sanctioned by the U.S. government, he showed his solidarity, saying “I take the opportunity to congratulate my esteemed comrade-in-arms of [RIM] on receiving a high award — official recognition of their ‘terrorist organization’ by the enemies of Russia and the Russian people.”<sup>101</sup> It is also worth noting that prominent RIM leader Alexander Zhuchkovsky arrived in Slovyansk on May 19, 2014, to fight alongside Igor Girkin and his men in the early days of the Donbas conflict.<sup>102</sup>

Noteworthy, RIM’s members were quick to make remarks regarding Wagner’s mutiny in mid-June 2023 against the Russian state. While not fond of the MoD, RIM has also been critical of Wagner’s recently deceased founder Yevgeniy Prigozhin. Prigozhin was described on RIM’s blog shows as having no desire to change the “Russophobic regime” in charge.<sup>103</sup> Additionally, in a video commenting on the situation, Gariyev suggested that Prigozhin was either “willingly or unwillingly” contributing to the instability needed for the West to succeed against Russia regarding the invasion of Ukraine. He also claimed that, despite the likelihood of such an attempted mutiny occurring, neither the MoD nor the FSB was adequately prepared to deal with it. He emphasized in the video that this was all the byproduct of an increasingly corrupt and failing Russian state with no ideological foundation except for the pursuit of wealth.<sup>104</sup> Despite this, after Prigozhin was killed on August 23, 2023, in a suspiciously timed plane crash, RIM credited him with “perhaps being the only effective manager in the entire

Putin regime” and that “Putin, consciously or unconsciously, lost, in fact, his only military support ... who, on his orders, without hesitation would perform any, even the dirtiest work.” RIM stated that they were not grieving over Prigozhin’s death, but noted that Kremlin infighting was making the Russian government weaker.<sup>105</sup>

RIM emphasizes the importance of combat and partisan skills, sending its fighters to participate in and network at shooting competitions.<sup>106</sup> RIL shooters placed second in a May 2023 competition hosted by Academy Tactical in Serpukhov.<sup>107</sup> RIL is well-armed and operates heavy weaponry and armored vehicles. Its arsenal includes a range of mostly Russian military-standard automatic, sniper, and recoilless rifles, shotguns, pistols, rocket and anti-tank launchers, infantry fighting vehicles with mounted cannons, tanks, multiple rocket launcher (MLRS) systems, and anti-drone weapons.<sup>108</sup> Partizan also runs a course that trains drone operators with the purpose of sending some graduates to Ukraine.<sup>109</sup>

RIM seems to receive various forms of support from the Russian Department of Defense, but what is certain is that the group has multiple income streams and fundraising campaigns to help sustain its battlefield operations. Insight Intelligence has noted how:

*RIM’s resources come primarily from public donations from identity-based support networks. Fundraising activities include a public concert organized by the group in 2016. Online channels also appear to help RIM gather donations. One of RIM’s leaders, Alexander Zhuchkovsky, “has repeatedly used his account on Russia-based social media platform VK, formerly known as VKontakte, to fundraise and recruit for RIM.”<sup>110</sup>*

RIM has fundraised on its VK and Telegram channels and has solicited donations from supporters in the Russian diaspora community in France and Russian parishes.<sup>111</sup> RIL has also fundraised for medical supplies for Ukraine that according to the group were previously useful during time spent fighting in Syria. In addition, fundraising was done to equip fighters in Ukraine and those set to deploy from Partizan. Items purchased include helmets, thermal imagers, camouflage nets, weapon cleaning supplies, lights for trenches, food, hygiene products, and even vehicles.<sup>112</sup> RIL has used Russia’s Sberbank for financial activities and often purchases equipment through the Russian website combat-center.<sup>113</sup> Zhuchkovsky, who was sanctioned by the United States as a RIM member in June 2022, has also promoted Project Terricon to collect cryptocurrency donations for Donbas militia groups.<sup>114</sup>

RIL participated in important battles such as that for Bakhmut, according to its social media posts and Partizan.<sup>115</sup> RIL has generally operated within the Donbas in both offensive and defensive operations during the widened invasion of Ukraine. RIL performs diverse military activities and has made posts about sniper teams on the frontline and photos of its fighters in trenches during battle.<sup>116</sup>

RIL also participates in online discourse within the Russian military sphere. For instance, on May 31, 2023, the Imperial Legion’s Telegram channel commented on the Russian Volunteer Corps (RVC) and Freedom of Russia Legion’s raid of Russia’s Belgorod

g On July 26, 2023, RIM posted an image on its Telegram channel complaining about Girkin being in prison while the Azov leaders who had been taken prisoner during the siege of Mariupol were set free.

h In September 2014, Zhuchkovsky told *Der Spiegel* he had raised more than 30 million rubles, the equivalent then of 630,000 euros, through the internet since the spring. Pavel Lokshin, “Putin ist eine Marionette des Westens,” *Der Spiegel*, September 7, 2014. See also Robyn Dixon, “Inside white-supremacist Russian Imperial Movement, designated foreign terrorist organization by U.S. State Department,” *Washington Post*, April 13, 2020.

region.<sup>1</sup> RIL called the Freedom of Russia Legion and RVC “traitors of [the Russian] people and the Orthodox Faith,” threatening that “sooner or later, we will meet them.”<sup>117</sup> Interestingly, the overall commander of the Freedom of Russia Legion, Maximilian Andronnikov, was a former member of RIM.<sup>118</sup>

RIL has continued to build local ties in Russian-occupied territories. The fighters attend church services in these areas and interact with parishioners and residents.<sup>119</sup> Furthermore, RIL has posted photos showing its fighters delivering humanitarian aid funded and provided by the group’s supporters to locals.<sup>120</sup>

In May 2022, the German news magazine *Der Spiegel* obtained a confidential intelligence report that was shared with German ministries by the BND (German foreign) intelligence service on the presence and activities of Rusich and RIL fighters operating alongside Russian forces in Ukraine.<sup>121</sup> According to *Der Spiegel*, the BND did not know “Whether this decision [to join the conflict in Ukraine] was made at the request of or in consultation with the Russian leadership.”<sup>122</sup> RIL leader Denis Gariyev told his fighters to “be patient” in early March 2022, announcing the group’s intent to enter the war. By mid-March 2022, a RIM flag was being flown in occupied Donetsk.<sup>123</sup>

*Der Spiegel* reported that the BND stated that Gariyev, his deputy, and two other RIL/RIM members were wounded in the invasion’s early phase.<sup>124</sup> RIL was deeply involved in the assault on Vuhledar, in which Russian forces suffered heavy losses.<sup>125</sup> Its Telegram channel commemorated a RIL fighter who had trained in the organization six years prior and died during the local offensive on the town in March 2023.<sup>126</sup>

## Conclusion

As a result of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, RIM has again expanded its military footprint in the region. RIL, its military wing, has gained significant battlefield experience. Moscow’s war aims largely align with RIM’s interests and ideology as it provides the opportunity to formally annex “Novaya Rossiya.” Though critical of the Russian establishment, RIM views the “Special Military Operation” as a war to protect the Russian Orthodox religion and the ethnic Russian

people who must be brought back under the wing of what the group views as their homeland.

As the conflict continues, more and more fighters have been recruited and gone through the Partizan training camp, growing RIL’s ranks. Adding to its regional ties from the post-Maidan civil war, RIL has also deepened its roots in local communities within occupied Ukrainian territory and has sought to spread its ideology within the broader Russian military sphere. RIM views the conflict as part of the “rebirth” of the Orthodox faith and Russian people, recently calling for more chapels to be built in occupied Ukrainian territory to accelerate this process.<sup>127</sup>

Given RIM’s international reach, the organization could pose a continued or greater threat to Europe and the West. RIM is well-suited for gray zone warfare: it is nationalistic, has war-trained fighters and an intelligence apparatus, and fiercely dislikes NATO. Like Wagner in its earlier days, RIM is an irregular formation that could provide some plausible deniability. If the war ends badly for Moscow and it concedes its current—and possibly future—occupied territories, RIM may even become a security threat to the Russian state itself. RIM has staked a hardline stance in demanding that all of Novaya Rossiya be conquered and integrated into Russia. Its diverse criticisms of the Russian government may be a sign of things to come. On the other hand, if Russia is successful in annexing the Donbas or “Novorossiya,” RIM could become hero-type figures and attract more reverence.

RIM poses a multifaceted threat to Ukraine and the West. The organization is in a position to enable terrorism by training Western individuals and groups using the experience accrued by RIL personnel. The organization can transfer knowledge to Western extreme far-right groups to utilize that knowledge (as they possibly did with the Nordic Resistance Movement).<sup>128</sup> RIM has established links with other extremist groups to push out its message and enable a broader wave of radicalization in the West. This could allow it to radicalize Russian diasporas in places such as Germany, eastern Europe, and elsewhere.

With the Wagner Group’s resources waning, there may be an opportunity for RIM/RIL to deepen its involvement in Russia’s efforts in Ukraine. This could bolster the group’s recruitment, paramilitary capabilities, and thus increase the broader threat it poses. **CTC**

i RVC and the Freedom of Russia Legion are organizations made up mostly of Russian dissidents. See Tom O’Connor, “Meet the Russian Rebel Groups Waging War from within Putin’s Own Borders,” *Newsweek*, April 13, 2023.

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