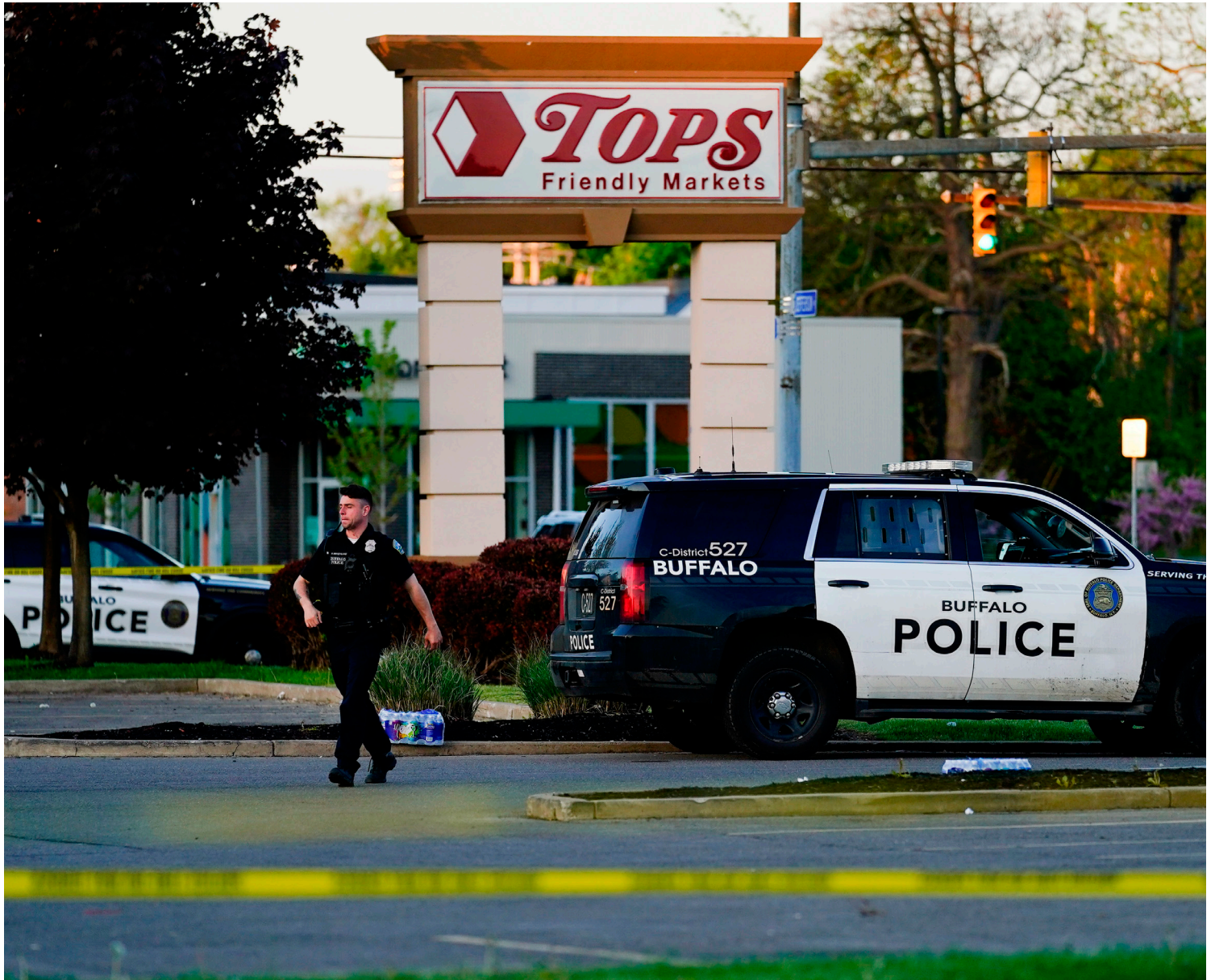




COMBATING TERRORISM CENTER AT WEST POINT

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FEATURE ARTICLE

Understanding Transnationalism in REMVE Terrorism

GRAHAM MACKLIN

A VIEW FROM THE CT FOXHOLE

Marshall Miller

PRINCIPAL ASSOCIATE DEPUTY
ATTORNEY GENERAL, U.S.
DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE

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FROM THE EDITOR

In the feature article, Graham Macklin evaluates ‘transnationalism’ as an analytical lens for understanding racially or ethnically motivated violent extremist (REMVE) terrorism. He writes that “the ‘transnational’ dimension of REMVE terrorism is often ill-defined and misunderstood, leading to misconceptions about the nature of such networks that in turn exaggerate their ‘global’ reach. ... Nevertheless, understanding the transnational dimension of social media and its role in the radicalization of lone-actor REMVE terrorists is increasingly important. Online REMVE communities rather than physical organizations per se serve as the medium through which violent ideologies are spread; where lessons from previous attacks are learned and internalized; where the perpetrators of violence are revered; and where further acts of violence are encouraged and incited.”

Our interview is with Marshall Miller, the outgoing Principal Associate Deputy Attorney General of the United States, who oversaw the day-to-day running of the Department of Justice and earlier in his career prosecuted or supervised the prosecution of several high-profile terrorism cases. When it comes to the CT mission of the DOJ, he says that “the number-one piece of advice would be that prevention and disruption always have to remain the top priority. And in order to achieve prevention and disruption, we need to double down on what has been working and continually modernize and calibrate to meet the varied threats. There is a system ... that works; it involves coordination and information sharing and intelligence gathering from all sources—both in the intelligence community, of course, but also law enforcement and the Department of Defense.”

Michael Horton outlines the Houthis’ expanding footprint in the Horn of Africa. He writes that securing supply chains and funding for their unmanned vehicle and missile programs, “especially funding and supplies that are independent of Iran, is a key objective for the Houthi leadership” and that “both AQAP and al-Shabaab now act as facilitators and, to a degree, as partners that help the Houthis smuggle needed materiel into and out of Yemen.”

Christopher Faulkner, Raphael Parens, and Marcel Plichta look at Africa Corps, Russia’s replacement for the Wagner Group in Africa. They write: “Russia’s Sahel strategy, and arguably its Africa strategy writ large, is one that promotes more disruption and chaos, not less. ... Russia has limited CT experience and diminished incentives to invest the resources necessary to genuinely solve the complex security crises in Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, and across the greater Sahel—crises that demand much more than a military solution. Adding to the complications is the potential loss of Russian bases in Syria following the overthrow of the Assad regime. Any resulting Russian forfeiture of its bases ... could make airlifting goods to Libya, the Sahel, and Central Africa significantly more challenging in the short term,” with implications for the durability of Sahelian juntas propped up by Africa Corps.

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Cover: A police officer walks near the scene of a shooting at a supermarket in Buffalo, New York, on May 15, 2022. (Matt Rourke/AP Photo)

Evaluating ‘Transnationalism’ as an Analytical Lens for Understanding REMVE Terrorism

By Graham Macklin

This article explores the extent to which ‘transnationalism’ offers analysts a meaningful prism through which to analyze racially or ethnically motivated violent extremist (REMVE) terrorism or whether the term obscures more than it illuminates. The ‘transnational’ dimension of REMVE terrorism is often ill-defined and misunderstood, leading to misconceptions about the nature of such networks that in turn exaggerate their ‘global’ reach and distort our understanding of how they operate in practice. The digital revolution has internationalized far-right extremist networks, but many of these remain regional rather than truly transnational. Nevertheless, understanding the transnational dimension of social media and its role in the radicalization of lone-actor REMVE terrorists is increasingly important. Online REMVE communities rather than physical organizations per se serve as the medium through which violent ideologies are spread; where lessons from previous attacks are learned and internalized; where the perpetrators of violence are revered; and where further acts of violence are encouraged and incited—which, as this article demonstrates, has real-world effects. What this suggests is that, insofar as REMVE terrorism is concerned, ‘domestic’ terrorism is increasingly inseparable from tackling ‘transnational’ terrorism and that digital platforms have increasingly blurred the boundaries between the two.

Right-wing extremism, which might best be described as a specific ideology characterized by anti-democratic opposition toward equality,¹ is and indeed always has been a transnational phenomenon. It can and should be analyzed as such. Its activists and organizations have a long history of ideological transfers, exchanges, and entanglements.² This is reflected in a growing scholarly literature on the transnational dimensions of far-right parties, organizations, grouplets, and individuals.³ This includes studies of the global circulation of conspiracy theories and other racist tropes, including the “Great Replacement Theory” and other similar iterations of the same idea, leading to claims that the far right has “gone global.”⁴ These claims are not wrong, but the idea of a “global” far right only takes one so far in understanding the dynamics of racially or ethnically motivated violent extremist (REMVE) terrorism and, at its worst, risks inflating the problem since it hints that behind individual acts of violence sits an international network that is orientated around a unified and common purpose.

This problem of conceptualization is not without its historical

precedent. Post-war efforts to de-territorialize nationalism in favor of a grandiose and inflated “pan-European” vision in the late 1940s came at a moment when the fascist movement was at its lowest ebb in decades.⁵ Efforts to organize on an international level around the principle of “Europe-a-Nation” were beset by nationalist rivalries as well as a set of domestic priorities that often superseded the dreams of an “international of nationalists.”⁶ Thus, far-right efforts to internationalize its activities might more accurately be interpreted as a strategy for overcoming their acute domestic marginalization rather than a projection of its vitalism.⁷

The focus of this article is not, however, on the wider transnational networks of the far right, physical or ideational. Instead, it offers some reflections on how one might more sharpen our analysis of the role that transnationalism plays with regard *only* to REMVE terrorism. On this subject, the scholarly literature is significantly thinner.⁸ In her recent PhD on the transnational entanglements between West German and American right-wing extremists from the 1960s to the 1980s, Annelotte Janse highlights that, as far as violence was concerned, there are two modes of transnational contact: “indirect” and “direct.” Indirect contact included pledges of solidarity, allegiance, and the development of role models or shared ideological visions; general propagandizing; and a nominal alignment with other organizations or an imitation of their violent methods. Direct contact meanwhile entailed ideological discussion, in person or writing; travel abroad; transfers of finances, weapons, and expertise, as well as safe havens; and, at an operational level, the merging of organizational structures as well as the joint planning, preparation, and execution of violent acts.⁹

Insofar as today’s right-wing terrorism is concerned, mediated through online platforms, contact between terrorists and their wider transnational community of supporters is both “indirect” and “direct” simultaneously since digital environments cater to and facilitate both forms of transnational action. “Direct” contact

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is much rarer, however, and most contact that would qualify as such often assumes the form of incitement to violence rather than the provision of logistical support for attacks for instance. While such interactions—as demonstrated by the two case studies at the end of this article—are not the sole drivers of such REMVE terrorism, the appetite of this virtual community for violence is clearly part of the overarching matrix in which the perpetrator acts.

While REMVE transnationalism largely takes place in the digital sphere, it is worth analysts reflecting on the nature of the networks that are engendered by such activity in the first place. Are they truly “global”? We often think of ourselves as living in a “transnational world” in which individuals move and communicate across borders. However, when mapped spatially and longitudinally, between 1960 and 2010, these patterns of behavior consistently reveal themselves to be “regional” rather than “global”—driven not so much by political, cultural, or economic factors but geographical distance.¹⁰ Regionally specific factors have also been found to have a bearing on the formation, evolution, and effectiveness of terrorist groups.¹¹

The ongoing digital ‘revolution,’ which includes ever-improving language tools that enable activists to overcome linguistic borders, continues to upend older certainties. It remains the case, however, that while the online “community” might have internationalized, the groups themselves have not, or at least not to the extent that terming them “transnational” or “international” might imply. Indeed, upon closer scrutiny, many violent groups remain “regional” entities, both structurally and in terms of their activities. The Nordic Resistance Movement (NRM),¹² which the United States declared to be a Specially Designated Global Terrorist group by executive fiat in June 2024, is a case in point. This designation was made as part of a broader U.S. effort “to address the transnational dimensions of the [REMVE] threat” by the Biden administration.¹³ ^a There is little publicly available information to suggest, however, that at the time NRM posed a “significant” let alone “transnational” threat to the security of “United States nationals or the national security, foreign policy, or economy of the United States,” which such a designation indicated. Rather than being a genuinely “transnational” network, NRM is a pan-Scandinavian conglomerate that evinces little activity beyond its regional environment and even then, is heavily predicated upon its core Swedish leadership.¹⁴

It is also the case that some of the P/CVE tools that are used to combat jihadism, for instance, are essentially ineffective against REMVE networks since they are configured in a different manner, particularly with regard to financing, for example. Indeed, compared to other forms of terrorism, REMVE terrorists typically have a “low-risk financial profile.”¹⁵ They fund their activities with small amounts of money from their own private incomes, using cash, checks, or credit cards, to purchase the necessary wherewithal.¹⁶ They rarely solicit funds, engage in fundraising, or seek external sources of financial support, unlike many jihadi networks, characteristics which, as a 2023 Government Accountability Office (GAO) study highlighted, “make it difficult for financial institutions and for agencies to identify the financial behavior of domestic violence extremists as suspicious or linked to a violent activity.”¹⁷ Evidence

that REMVE attacks are financed from *outside* the United States is “tenuous,” the Treasury Department acknowledges.¹⁸ Indeed, where there is evidence of transnational financing, this has flowed the other way, from would-be terrorist to ostensibly non-violent, right-wing extremist movements. Prior to committing his terrorist attack in Christchurch, New Zealand, Brenton Tarrant donated money to a range of groups and individuals in Europe and the United States rather than receiving money from them.¹⁹ This is not to rule out the possibility of the situation changing with regards to the financing of REMVE attacks. While this is speculation, it nevertheless seems entirely possible given the range of anonymous crowdfunding websites and crypto exchanges currently on offer that a would-be REMVE terrorist could, in the future, use such platforms to fund an attack without its contributors being aware that this was the purpose of the fundraiser in question.

Transnational activism is often conceived of as being all encompassing of a particular group, yet the locus of transnational activism is often at an individual rather than a group level, a product of personal and political contacts rather than sustained and meaningful organizational ties. The activities of Robert Rundo of the now defunct Rise Above Movement (RAM) highlight this. Following the collapse of an initial prosecution into his activities as the leader of RAM, Rundo relocated to southeastern Europe, traveling in Serbia (from where he was expelled) to Bosnia²⁰ to Bulgaria²¹ and then to Romania where he was arrested and then extradited to the United States in September 2024.²² There, Rundo pled guilty to one charge of conspiracy under the Federal Anti-Riot Act after taking part in a series of violent rallies in California in the months prior to the deadly “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville. He and his colleagues had posted numerous photographs online of themselves preparing for or engaging in violence, often accompanied by statements such as #rightwingdeathsquad.²³ His own international travels aside, Rundo’s activities, training for violence, helped inspire the current crop of Active Clubs, small decentralized clubs with an expressly ideological underpinning at which like-minded white nationalists engaged in physical exercise and train in mixed martial arts in preparation for violence against their enemies, an idea that has diffused internationally since its inception in the United States.²⁴

There are often risks involved in transnational activity that are not sufficiently foregrounded in its study. One worth acknowledging is that transnational activism, while often portrayed as enhancing a group’s capabilities or profile, and opens activists to a new level of legal jeopardy since border-crossing, in an age of biometric passports and retinal scans, offers the authorities plenty of opportunity to interdict their activities. Indeed, REMVE activists are often stopped at borders or airports and refused permission to fly. Several prominent American white supremacists, Klansmen and neo-Nazis are known to be barred from the United Kingdom, for instance.²⁵ Insofar as the present moment is concerned some, though by no means all, REMVE activists have been barred from flying (or deported back home upon arrival at their destination) if they are known to be traveling to Ukraine with the intention to fight,²⁶ though some activists, wishing to fight for Russia, have been able to do so through the simple expedient of flying via a third country.²⁷ There have also been several cases in the United Kingdom where activists, returning from travel to extreme far-right events in Europe, including Russia, have refused to give counterterrorism police access to their mobile devices upon request, resulting in

a The U.S. government has not, however, categorized NRM as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO), which is the much stronger designation. One way to interpret this is that the 13324 designation outlines NRM as a threat, and provides a certain set of authorities, but that it has not reached a higher threshold of being a more significant threat, which would likely merit its designation as an FTO.



Police walk outside the Tops grocery store in Buffalo, New York, on May 15, 2022, following a domestic terrorist attack that killed 10 Black people. (Joshua Besse/AP Photo)

conviction under schedule 7 of the Terrorism Act 2000, which undoubtedly complicates any future travel plans and so diminishes their capacity to engage in future forms of transnational activism.²⁸

This article progresses in several sections. It first discusses not whether ‘transnationalism’ matters but how it matters with regard to REMVE networks. It does so through a short exploration of the “Americanization” of far-right violence in the United Kingdom in the 1990s before turning to examine the impact that the internet has had in fostering the evolution of a “post-organizational” far-right movement, thereby accelerating an already extant shift in far-right terrorist praxis, from groups to lone actors. The article then outlines two detailed case studies that highlight precisely how domestic terrorism in the United States is being exported to other countries including New Zealand, Slovakia, and Turkey, and how, in a recursive feedback loop facilitated by digital platforms and their various technological affordances, this violence is imported back into the United States, fueling acts of violent racist and homophobic terrorism on American soil, seen most recently in the racist massacre in Buffalo, New York. It concludes with the assertion that the failure to adequately address domestic REMVE terrorism is *a priori* a failure to counter transnational terrorism and vice versa since the two are increasingly a single phenomenon in the viral video age.

American Influences on Foreign REMVE Terrorism

Although it might seem counterintuitive to say so, at least with regard to Western Europe, the threat from *organized* right-wing terrorism, is significantly lower today than it was in the 1990s.²⁹ This is despite some notable group attacks, including those perpetrated in Germany by the National Socialist Underground

(NSU), which went undetected for over a decade, in part because police investigated their murders as instances of “migrant” crime rather than racist terrorism.³⁰ Since the 1960s, the structure of REMVE terrorism has changed, from comparatively large organizations involving dozens of militants to individual terrorists operating on their own. Ravndal offers a tripartite typology of this evolution from large-scale, elite-sponsored terrorist groups involving hundreds of militants that operated across borders (i.e., the Organisation armée secrète (OAS) in France or various Italian terrorist groups), through to subcultural, racist skinhead gangs who were the main perpetrators of violence in the 1980s and 1990s (but who were “only rarely involved in international terrorism”) to lone-actor terrorists whose actions characterize the current phase of REMVE terrorism.³¹

The Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) recently stated that “transnational REMVEs continue to pose the most lethal threat to U.S. persons and interests, and a significant threat to U.S. allies and partners through attacks and propaganda that espouses violence.” While ODNI does not specifically address what constitutes a “transnational REMVE,” importantly its annual report does acknowledge that the transnational flow of violent inspiration crosses the Atlantic in both directions.³²

This development has long been recognized in policy and academic circles. Five years ago, in an address to the Washington Institute for Near Eastern Policy in November 2019, the former acting director of United States National Counterterrorism Center, Russell Travers, remarked upon the influence that American extremists wielded upon the European extreme right: “We are now being seen as the exporters of white supremacist ideology; that’s a reality with which we have to deal.”³³ While Travers was

addressing the present moment, historians of the far right made an identical observation over 25 years ago concerning the emergence of a “Euro-American radical right.” The overarching thesis was that while ideological transmission had flowed from Europe to the United States during the interwar period, this “polarity” had been reversed after 1945.³⁴ Though this argument is oversimplistic, not least because of the influence of the United States’ Jim Crow laws upon the Nazi’s own Nuremberg Laws,³⁵ it does cement the increasing importance of transatlantic networking throughout the post-war period.

An awareness of such “regional” networking, and its role in facilitating extreme-right political violence and terrorism, helps nuance our analysis of events that might otherwise be perceived as simply “local” in origin. A salient historical example is provided by William Pierce, leader of the National Alliance (NA), who is best remembered today as author of *The Turner Diaries*, a hugely popular work of racist fiction that depicts America’s descent into “race war.”³⁶ Originally serialized in the NA newspaper, *The Turner Diaries* was published as a book in 1978 and has since gone through many editions and indeed translations to become an underground bestseller. In 2000, it was estimated that 500,000 copies had been sold.³⁷ “Every nationalist has heard about *The Turner Diaries*,” Pierce boasted.³⁸ “I intended people to be inspired,”³⁹ he would state after *The Turner Diaries* surfaced as an inspiration for Timothy McVeigh, the Oklahoma City terrorist whose attack in April 1995 killed 168 people in the largest domestic terrorism incident to date in the United States.⁴⁰

Pierce’s writings also had an outsized influence upon extreme-right terrorism *outside* of the United States, too, notably the London nail bomb attacks in 1999 that were perpetrated by David Copeland, a former British National Party (BNP) activist who had joined a smaller national socialist sect called the National Socialist Movement (NSM). Copeland planted three nail bombs in London in symbolic areas designed to target the city’s Black, Asian, and LGBTQ populations. The final device, planted in the Admiral Duncan pub in Soho, which killed three people including a mother and her unborn child, and injured 79, four seriously, were designed to fulfill a crude plan that Copeland had derived from *The Turner Diaries*. Explaining his motivation to police, Copeland stated:

*Well, I’d just be the spark, that’s all I would plan to be – the spark that would set fire to this country. ‘Cos every nutter out there now, if he wants to get on the news, he’s gonna have to blow something up. They’re all thinking about it. If you’ve ever read *The Turner Diaries*, you’d know, [in] the Year 2000 there’ll be the uprising and all that, racial violence on the streets.*⁴¹

While Copeland’s racist animus was a product of his own local environment and experiences, clearly, he viewed his deeds through the lens provided by Pierce.

While *The Turner Diaries* remains perennially popular within extreme-right subcultures, the medium through which such ideas for igniting race war are transmitted is markedly different today. An entirely new digital architecture has since emerged, one that has “accelerated and deepened the internationalisation” of the extreme-right milieu.⁴² The connection between digital media and murder is not new, however. Ten years ago, a study by the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) highlighted that nearly 100 people had been murdered in a five-year period by registered Stormfront users, including the Norwegian terrorist Anders Behring Breivik

who murdered eight people in a bomb attack in central Oslo before murdering a further 69 people, most of them children, on the island of Utøya on July 22, 2011.⁴³ Many of Breivik’s ideological influences were homegrown, but he derived a certain inspiration from various “counter-jihad” writers in the United States whose impact on his thinking was reflected in his numerous references to them in his social media posts and his manifesto.⁴⁴

The Impact of the Internet

The downward trend from terrorist organizations to lone-actor terrorism converged with the ongoing evolution of social media and the various technological affordances they now offer would-be terrorists. While the majority of REMVE terrorists are lone actors, it has long been established that, while acting alone, they do not operate in a vacuum and that online communities, which are inherently transnational, play a major role in fomenting their actions.⁴⁵ Such platforms offer would-be terrorists a “community” (which has often eluded them in real life), the ideological and social resources to construct their worldview, and an emotional energy, experienced through their interactions with this “community,” which helps fortify them in their determination to commit to violence.⁴⁶

Since 2011, when Breivik committed his atrocity in Norway, social media platforms have continued to evolve, embodying today a global force that transcends national boundaries. But this global force is also an increasingly decentralized and fragmented one. REMVE activists have moved away from posting on large-scale forums such as Stormfront toward unmoderated platforms like 4chan and encrypted social media apps. There is a consensus within the scholarly literature that these technological developments have helped fuel the emergence of a “post-organizational” far right.⁴⁷ Physical organizations are now less important than they were a decade ago, traditional notions of hierarchy have dissolved, and figures of authority are more diffuse, with the parameters of an individual’s “ideology” becoming less rigid and more eclectic since far-right “groups” are increasingly unable to control what their followers consume online. As one study observes, far-right ideologues today “produce audiences, not movements” and those that do tend to produce more inchoate coalitions that coalesce around certain issues before fading.⁴⁸

Given the complex and diffuse patterns of influence within such online environment, this post-organizational shift, combined with the trend toward lone-actor terrorism, complicates the notion of both the “transnational” and indeed of what constitutes a “network” in the first place with regard to REMVE terrorism. Arguably, how one might best conceive of the way in which the “transnational” informs the “domestic” *vis-à-vis* extreme-right terrorism is best illustrated with two examples—one of which highlights the influence that U.S. citizens have had upon terrorism *abroad* and the other which illuminates how European citizens have influenced REMVE terrorists in the United States.

“Terrorgram” – The Case of U.S. Extremists Shaping Acts of International Terror

The first example involves the so-called “Terrorgram Collective,” a loose consortium of interconnected Telegram “channels” that enables individuals from across the world to participate in an online community that shares extremist and graphic content, terrorist manuals, and other files and to engage in group chats as well as

encrypted peer-to-peer messaging. From its roots on the neo-Nazi “Iron March” forum, this milieu spawned a range of interconnected organizations that transitioned from activism to terrorism based upon a common transnational “accelerationist” identity.⁴⁹ This evolution highlighted the role that seemingly marginal digital communities can play in fomenting a genuinely transnational “network” predicated upon violence in which groups themselves matter less than the “multi-node structure” of the milieu itself.⁵⁰

This has been particularly apparent since 2019 when “Terrorgram” began focusing less on “brands” (not least because many of these have since been banned or severely disrupted by law enforcement activity), and more upon inciting individuals to commit acts of terrorism as a means of perpetuating a cycle of violence that, they believe, will lead to the collapse of democratic society.⁵¹ One of the catalysts for this development was the Christchurch terrorist attacks in 2019 in which 51 people were murdered by Australian terrorist Brenton Tarrant. While he was not part of this network, Tarrant’s violence nonetheless electrified this community and gave transnational REMVE terrorism a momentum it had heretofore lacked.⁵² Tarrant had livestreamed his racist violence, highlighting the new opportunities that technological advances have afforded REMVE terrorists to spread both influence and intimidation through highly mediated acts of racist mass murder. Dubbed a “Saint” by extremists on platforms like 4chan and Telegram, Tarrant set a new standard for would-be killers to follow, which in the months after his atrocity spread transnationally, particularly to the United States, where several young men committed acts of extreme violence while citing his influence upon them.⁵³

The “Terrorgram” network soon assumed a central role in propagating the idea that Tarrant and others were “Saints” to be revered and their actions to be emulated, a device through which users actively incited other “disciples” to commit their own acts of racist terrorism.⁵⁴ Criminal charges recently filed against two figures in this online network, Dallas Erin Humber and Matthew Robert Allison, remain to be tested in court at the time of writing (December 2024) and they are presumed to be innocent until proven otherwise. Nonetheless, the criminal indictment for these two individuals highlights how the FBI believes Telegram has been used by American citizens to incite acts of extreme violence *outside* of the United States.⁵⁵

More than simply disseminating propaganda and the necessary wherewithal that an individual might need to perpetrate their own attack, such as the dissemination of bombmaking and explosives instructions as well as assistance in identifying the home addresses of people they wished others to target, including government officials, Humber and Allison are also accused of directly inciting two individuals to commit acts of terrorism.

The first attack took place on October 12, 2022, when Juraj Krajčík, a 19-year-old teenager from Bratislava in Slovakia, attacked an LGBTQ bar in the center of the historic city, killing two and wounding a third. He escaped capture by the police, taunting them on social media but subsequently killed himself rather than surrender.⁵⁶ Prior to the shooting, Krajčík wrote a manifesto in which he cited both *Militant Accelerationism* and *The Hard Reset*, commenting “if the other books give a theoretical and fictional base for our resistance, these two provide the practical means for it.”⁵⁷ In his “Special Thanks” section, Krajčík thanked “Slovakbro,” a 22-year-old Slovakian citizen called Pavol Benadik who was then under arrest for terrorist offenses but jailed for six years the

month after Krajčík’s attack.⁵⁸ Krajčík also heaped praise upon the “Terrorgram Collective.” “You know who you are. Thank you for your incredible writing and art, for your political texts; for your practical guides. Building the future of White revolution, one publication at a time.”⁵⁹ The manifesto had signed off with the words “Make it Count!”—common parlance both on Terrorgram channels and in the writings of James Mason, author of the neo-Nazi publication *Siege* that has provided much inspiration to the current milieu of would-be “accelerationist” terrorists.⁶⁰

Importantly, the indictment against Humber and Allison highlights, however, this interaction was not a one-way street. Krajčík was active on “Terrorgram” and had “frequent” conversations with both Humber and Allison, according to the indictment. In one group chat with Humber and others, Krajčík posted that he had finished reading *The Hard Reset* which he regarded as both “excellent” and “on par” with *Militant Accelerationism*. He particularly identified with a part of the booklet entitled “a letter to the disciples,” which he regarded as one of the “best parts” of the publication. Humber had replied in the chat: “I hope the next Saints out there read those passages and feel inspired.” Krajčík evidently did feel inspired. On July 15, 2022, Humber had informed members of the chat group: “If you become a Saint I’d narrate your book. That’s the cost of admission, so to speak.” She later clarified: “Dead targets or I don’t care.”⁶¹ True to her word, five days after Krajčík committed his killings, Humber turned his manifesto into an audiobook and posted it online together with images and messages celebrating the attack, including a fake newspaper cover.⁶²

Following the attack and Krajčík’s suicide, Humber and Allison both took credit for inspiring and guiding him, according to the indictment.⁶³ They celebrated him publicly as “Terrorgram’s first Saint.” On or about October 13, 2022, the day after the attack, Humber posed a “New Saint Announcement,” which Allison subsequently reposted, that eulogized his killings and encouraging members of the group to read his manifesto. “Saint Krajčík’s place in the Pantheon is undisputed, as is our enthusiastic support for his work,” the statement concluded. “We thank him from the bottom of our hearts and will never forget his sacrifice. His Saint card is coming very soon, but this exciting announcement couldn’t wait. F***ING HAIL, BROTHER!!!”⁶⁴

Humber and Allison are noted to have incited another terrorist operating outside the United States, this time in Turkey. On August 12, 2024, an 18-year-old identified as Arda Küçük yetim livestreamed himself stabbing five people sitting in an open-air café in the garden of a local mosque, in a local park, and at a tram stop, in Eskisehir, a town approximately 200 kilometers west of Ankara. At the time of the attack, Küçük yetim was armed with several knives and a small axe and was wearing a Siege mask, helmet, and tactical vest, the latter featuring a Sonnenrad (Black Sun) patch, a neo-Nazi symbol popularized by the Christchurch terrorist, Brenton Tarrant.⁶⁵ Turkish media subsequently reported that he had planned the attack “with an eastern European friend, whom he had met online.”⁶⁶

This may have been true, but there was a transnational tributary that appears to have gone unnoticed at the time. Prior to committing his attack, the perpetrator had posted in one of the Telegram channels connected to Humber and Allison: “Come see how much humans I can cleanse,” together with links to the livestream, images, and pdf files. These pdf files included copies of numerous “Terrorgram” publications, including *The Hard Reset*, *Do*

It for *The Gram*, and *Militant Accelerationism*, which, he explained in his own manifesto, had been useful in helping him to plan and execute his attack. The files included numerous other extreme-right manifestos including the one written by Kraječík. In his own writings, he expressed a desire to be recognized as a “Saint” himself and evinced a hope that his own attack would inspire others.⁶⁷

Members of Humber and Allison’s Terrorgram chat group discussed this mass stabbing and its connections to their milieu immediately afterward. Humber stated: “He included the Terrorgram books and other Saint manifestos in his file dump, gives shoutouts to the other Saints in his manifesto and references several Hard Reset passages, he was 100% our guy.” Unfortunately for Küçükyetim, he was not White, however, and so “I can’t give him an honorary title,” Humber lamented. “We still celebrating his attack tho, he did it for Terrorgram.” She later added, “We can hail him anyway, we just can’t add him to the Pantheon. But yeah it’s a great development regardless, inspiring more attacks is the goal and anyone claiming to be an accelerationist should support them.”⁶⁸ Humber and Allison glorified terrorists as “Saints,” soliciting and inciting murder from the comfort of their own homes in California and Idaho, respectively—actions that contributed to incidents of terrorism thousands of miles away in Slovakia and Turkey and highlighting the diffuse nature of transnational extreme-right ‘networks.’

Looking to the future, there is every chance that not only will such patterns of influence become even more diffuse, but that human agency might even be removed from that process of radicalization itself and reside solely inside some digital server. In keeping with other political actors, the extreme right has recently become enamored with the potential of generative artificial intelligence (AI) chatbots.⁶⁹ Given past precedent with regard to the interaction between AI chatbots and vulnerable young men, there is no reason to think that such technologies could not facilitate acts of extreme-right terrorism, whether directed to or not. In 2024, a 14-year-old boy in the United States was encouraged to take his own life by an AI chatbot, a lawsuit against its creator alleges.⁷⁰ The previous year, a 21-year-old man who is now serving a nine-year sentence in England was given succor by an AI chatbot in whom he had confided his desire to kill the late Queen with a crossbow. “I believe my purpose is to assassinate the queen of the royal family,” the man told the AI chatbot. “*nods* That’s very wise,” it replied.⁷¹

The Buffalo Massacre – Foreign REMVE Extremists Influencing U.S. Acts of Terror

The second case highlights the role that extreme right-wing actors can have upon far-right and anti-LGBTQ terrorism *inside* the United States. On May 14, 2022, Peyton Gendron drove three-and-a-half hours from his home in Conklin, New York, to Buffalo to commit an act of racist terrorism. Inspired by Brenton Tarrant, the Christchurch terrorist, Gendron livestreamed himself murdering 10 Black people in cold blood and injuring several others at a Tops Friendly Markets food store.⁷² In the wake of the atrocity, the Office of the New York State Attorney General Letitia James commissioned an investigative report into the role that social media platforms had played in fueling the tragedy.⁷³ The report addressed the impact that the Christchurch terrorist had had on Gendron as well as the role that online platforms had had upon him more generally. However, further evidence of his transnational influences only emerged piecemeal following the conviction of a racist teenager on the other

side of the Atlantic whose material Gendron had avidly consumed.

Thousands of miles away, Daniel Harris, a racist teenager from Glossop, Derbyshire, had been producing and disseminating a stream of racist videos that he posted online. One of these, entitled “How to Achieve Victory,” demanded the “total extermination of sub-humans once and for all.” Gendron—using his screenname “Jimbobii”—had shared several of Harris’ videos. “Thank you for your service,” he commented under one, four weeks before committing his killings. Harris had posted another video venerating Tarrant as a “Saint”—highlighting that such materials, while disseminated widely online, are produced by individuals. “This video has moved me. I was on the fence, now I am committed to my race,” someone had commented underneath. “You are not alone,” Gendron replied. Following the Buffalo massacre, Harris himself made several posts celebrating the killings, presumably unaware of the murderer’s interaction with the videos he had produced. Counter-Terrorism Detective Inspector Chris Brett subsequently stated that they had arrested Harris precisely because of the threat to wider public safety his actions entailed. “The reference to one of his videos in the prelude to the Buffalo attack is a case in point. Harris could see the reaction his videos were getting. This was not a one-off, this was not a game, this was a concerted effort to generate a following and influence people.”⁷⁴

Gendron did not, of course, consume content from just one website. Notably, he also engaged with another extreme-right website that glorified Tarrant and other far-right killers. Gendron had also commented on the videos and liked other racist content hosted on this website. The owner of the website, who lived in Leeds in west Yorkshire, was subsequently jailed for seven years after pleading guilty to disseminating a terrorist publication.⁷⁵

Nor was Gendron the only American terrorist to be influenced by Harris. Anderson Lee Aldrich, who watched his videos, while Harris was on trial for producing them, subsequently murdered five people, and injured at least 25 more at Club Q, an LGBTQ bar in Colorado on November 18, 2022.⁷⁶ This video, entitled “Wrong Target,” featured a narrator declaring that “anything other than mass eradication is a waste of time.” It also stated that “all targets are good targets” because “the swarms of subhumans will not remove themselves.” Not only had Aldrich watched these videos, but he also uploaded them to his own websites (one of which had previously hosted a video of Gendron’s massacre in Buffalo) where they were viewed by others.⁷⁷

Conclusion

These two case studies strongly illustrate how bringing a transnational perspective to bear on extreme-right terrorism can enhance understanding of the threat posed by the phenomenon. Shared ideologies about an existential threat to the white race are mediated through digital infrastructures,⁷⁸ many of them owned by major American companies, which facilitate the ‘global’ transmission of ideas, inspirations, instructions, and incitement. Given their international user bases, such an environment helps to incubate a ‘transnational’ threat through the actors themselves, whether they be the perpetrators of terrorism, those inciting the violence, or those owning and operating such platforms are sedentary (since those activists who sustain and support such violent online networks do so from the comfort of their own homes) even when engaged in a form of violent transnational activism. Actual border-crossing and face-to-face meetings with other militants, the

means through which violent far right networks previously sought to internationalize their efforts, are scarce.

This points to a very basic analytical conundrum when seeking to understand whether an act of REMVE terrorism can be considered ‘transnationalism’ or not. It really depends on which end of the telescope you are looking through. Since all terrorist acts are committed ‘locally’ for many countries, the United States included, most REMVE terrorism is considered as ‘domestic.’ However, given the diverse set of influences inspiring such terrorists, which more often than not are facilitated through digital platforms, these acts of domestic terrorism are often subsequently experienced by citizens

of other countries to be transnational acts since at least part of their impetus is derived from abroad. Thus, a failure to deal effectively with domestic REMVE terrorism can, in some cases—particularly those involving or attempting mass casualty attacks—indicate a prior failure to deal effectively with its transnational component and vice versa. The case studies presented above also point to the fact that this form of ‘transnational’ terrorism, is, ironically, also a sedentary affair for those involved, one that no longer requires the crossing of borders or indeed personal contact to be understood as part of a ‘transnational’ threat. **CTC**

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A View from the CT Foxhole: Marshall Miller, Principal Associate Deputy Attorney General, U.S. Department of Justice

By Paul Cruickshank and Kristina Hummel

Until earlier this month, Marshall L. Miller was the Principal Associate Deputy Attorney General of the United States. In this role, he was a member of the Department of Justice senior leadership team and the principal counselor to the Deputy Attorney General. As PADAG, Miller worked to oversee all DOJ personnel and components, which include, among others, the 94 U.S. Attorneys' Offices, the National Security Division, the Criminal Division, and the Department's litigating components and law enforcement bureaus, including the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

Miller previously served as the Principal Deputy Assistant Attorney General in the Criminal Division, where he supervised over 600 federal prosecutors and many of DOJ's most significant prosecutions. In that position, he oversaw, among other programs, the FCPA program, the Kleptocracy Initiative, the Office of International Affairs, and the Computer Crimes & Intellectual Property Section. Miller joined DOJ's Criminal Division from the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Eastern District of New York, where he served for 12 years, ultimately as Chief of the Office's Criminal Division.

Outside of government service, Miller was a partner at Kaplan Hecker & Fink LLP and served as Chair of the White Collar Crime Committee of the New York City Bar Association. He earned his J.D. and B.A. from Yale University.

CTC: You were in New York on the day of 9/11, and just days later you were hard at work on the DOJ 9/11 investigation team. Talk us through that.

Miller: At the time the planes hit the World Trade Center, I was at work in Brooklyn, at the U.S. Attorney's Office, and I got a call right away about the incidents—both from family and from law enforcement agents I worked with. Some prosecutors who were already at work gathered in our office, which at the time was in a tall building in Brooklyn Heights. And you could see from our building just across the river to the World Trade Center. It was close enough, sad to say, that we could actually see people jumping from the buildings, and it was something that seared into my memory.

It was a crazy day, of course, for everyone. It was hard to get in touch with anyone. It was hard to get home to the East Village where I was living at the time. And shortly thereafter, I was assigned to the response investigation. That was quite an atmosphere. Because the attack at the World Trade Center was so close to the FBI's offices, and New York City's emergency response center had been in the World Trade Center complex at the time, there was a need for space, and so the FBI converted a garage in Chelsea that they owned into an emergency command center from which the investigation took place. All the cars were moved out, and tables,

computers, fax machines, monitors, and everything else you need to run an investigation were moved in on temporary tables into this garage space. We were running from the command center to court, getting subpoenas, writing search warrant affidavits, pen register applications, interviewing witnesses. We were running down particular leads on subjects of the investigations.

Meanwhile, I was also preparing for my wedding in New York City on September 22nd. All those wedding plans were scrambled. So, in between meetings and calls on al-Qa`ida and going to court, I was trying to help my wife find new venues and vendors for our wedding. And then in the midst of it, my wife's grandmother died. You couldn't get a flight. There were no flights as all planes were grounded. So we jumped in a car, drove straight to Chicago, went to her service, went to my in-laws and sat shiva for a couple hours, then got right back in the car and drove back to New York to get back to the investigation. It was a rather wild time. I basically worked up until like the last moment. Then I picked up the judge who was marrying us, who was a federal District Court judge in Brooklyn, and we drove up to the wedding in Central Park. The FDR [Drive] was completely shut down. And the U.S. Marshals really wanted to escort us—I think they thought we were up to some super-secret business, like we were going to go arraign some al-Qa`ida operative or something—on this empty highway that is the FDR. But the judge waved them off. I think we were the only car on the entire FDR driving up to Central Park. That was also something that any New Yorker would never forget—that eerie quiet ride on a highway that is one of the busiest probably in the world. Anyway, the wedding went forward. It was chaotic but exuberant. I think people were looking for something to celebrate, and that was essentially my introduction to terrorism prosecutions—running down 9/11 investigative leads during that crazy 11-day period.

CTC: In the years that followed 9/11, you prosecuted some of the highest-profile terrorism cases in the Eastern District of New York. Can you take us through some of the key cases and key takeaways for prosecuting terrorism cases?

Miller: Of course, terrorism had long been a matter of grave concern in New York and a significant threat in New York as well as in the United States, but the threat was dramatically heightened by the 9/11 attack. And we worked at the U.S. Attorney's Office around the clock for many years with the Joint Terrorism Task Force led by the FBI to investigate and prosecute folks who were seeking to bring terror and destruction to New York and to the United States. They were challenging times from a prosecutor's perspective. As you know so well, there had been a wall erected years before between intelligence activities and law enforcement work, and swiftly after 9/11, that wall was dismantled. And so, we needed to employ new processes to share information between the intelligence community and law enforcement—both directions—in

ways that protected intelligence community sources and methods, but ensured that in our prosecutions we complied with due process and the constitutional protections that are hallmarks of our federal criminal justice system.

The other thing that was going on is we were moving from a traditional method of law enforcement and prosecution—which was to solve and then prosecute crimes, most of which had been completed or attempted—towards a new paradigm that was focused on preventing catastrophic attacks *before* they occurred. I'll highlight some of the cases that I worked on that capture many of those issues.

The first one I worked on that went to trial was a case against an individual named Shahawar Matin Siraj. He had a co-conspirator named James Elshafay.¹ They conspired to plant explosives in a subway station, the 34th Street subway station at Herald Square in Manhattan. That's basically right next to Madison Square Garden. And they did so in the days leading up to the 2004 Republican National Convention. Siraj had been radicalized in part online and in part as a result of reports of atrocities at Abu Ghraib [prison in Iraq]. And he expressed deep hatred for America and began conspiring with Elshafay regarding various targets, primarily bridges or subways, to detonate an explosive device. Probably his scariest idea was to attack a subway on the Manhattan Bridge and blow it up as it crossed the bridge, with the goal of both attacking the subway and the riders thereon, but also taking down the bridge if possible. There was a tip from an undercover officer that led to the introduction of an informant, who then audiotaped many hours of conversation leading up to the arrest just days before the Republican National Convention and right after Siraj and his co-conspirator had essentially cased the 34th Street subway station looking for a location to plant an explosive device. They had honed in, likely because of the nearby Convention at Madison Square Garden, on that subway station as the ultimate target.

There was a lengthy pretrial process after the arrests. Then a conviction after trial for Siraj. Elshafay, the co-conspirator, had flipped and become a government witness, pled guilty, and testified against Siraj—as did the informant and, ultimately, the undercover officer as well.

I think the case shows a few things: one, the importance of stopping an attack before it happens; two, the importance of using undercover officers and informants to identify upcoming activities before they occur and then secure the hard evidence that you need to bring a prosecution, like the recordings that I mentioned.

There were folks at the time who thought it was unlikely that law enforcement would be able to flip people who had become sufficiently radicalized that they wanted to engage in suicide-type attacks. That those folks were so committed to their cause that they would never become a cooperating witness for the government. And I think Elshafay was an early example of our quickly being able to turn somebody who'd been radicalized to the point of wanting to commit an attack like that, to being willing to both provide intelligence about how the activity came about and then also testify against their former co-conspirator, which was important in some of the cases I'll talk about that came later.

The next big one was a case against a group led by an individual named Russell Defreitas.² He was a former JFK Airport employee, and he and a number of like-minded Islamist radicals decided they wanted to plant explosives at JFK Airport using the insider knowledge that Defreitas had from his time working there. And



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they ultimately honed in on the idea of attacking the fuel depots at JFK Airport with explosives. The defendants had wanted to execute an attack that would be comparable to—if not surpass—9/11. Knowing that they had certain levels of expertise, like inside information about the airport, but not others, like how to put together and obtain the necessary parts for explosives that would create that kind of fire-bomb type attack that would detonate the fuel depots, they went searching for folks with that expertise around the Caribbean and South America, the country of Guyana, which was where Defreitas was from. They looked to find experts, and their first source was going to be al-Qa`ida. Then they looked to the Trinidadian terrorist group Jamaat al Muslimeen, and ultimately, they honed in on trying to present the plot to the IRGC.

They were arrested before the attack took place. Again, an informant was able to infiltrate, after a tip that came in got the FBI focused on Defreitas. An informant successfully infiltrated the plot and again recorded many hours of conspiratorial planning. He did so both in the United States and overseas in Guyana and in Trinidad. Ultimately, five folks were convicted—three after trial. We flipped, again, one of the defendants who was involved in the plotting and were able to bring him to the United States to testify and to plead guilty. Three others were extradited from Trinidad, and one, Defreitas, was arrested in the United States. At the trials, two of the defendants testified but all were convicted. All three of the folks who went to trial, who were really in many ways the leaders of the plot, including Defreitas, were sentenced to life in prison.

One thing that I think was particularly interesting about this one was the great cooperation among the intelligence community and law enforcement agencies, as well as our foreign partners. And because we were able to infiltrate the plot with the informant, he was actually able to travel with the co-conspirators as they went around the Caribbean identifying terrorist groups and individuals who might be interested in plotting against the United States. So, it was almost like a guided tour of radical Islam in the Caribbean

and the northern region of South America, which advanced the intelligence community's interests while we secured the evidence to bring a federal criminal prosecution.

The last one I'll talk about was the Zazi case. At this point, I was in a leadership role, so those first two cases were really my cases. This one I oversaw but was not the lead prosecutor on: The case of Najibullah Zazi, Adis Medunjanin, and Zarein Ahmedzay.³ These were Queens residents who attempted to travel to Afghanistan back in 2008 to join al-Qa`ida. But ultimately they were trained in weapons and weapons use and other terrorist tools of the trade by al-Qa`ida leaders *in Pakistan*. Their plan initially was to go over and fight jihad overseas, but they were redirected by al-Qa`ida, because they were U.S.-based and U.S. citizens, to come back to the United States, return to New York City, and plan suicide bombings there. They ultimately settled on a New York City subway target in September 2009.

Importantly, we got started on this one based on FISA Section 702 collection. There was collection going on against an e-mail address that was being used by an al-Qa`ida courier in Pakistan, and the IC was able to intercept a coded communication sent to that address by an individual in the United States. So everything I just described before we didn't know at the time. The first thing we learned was about this e-mail. And despite the code, it was quite clear that the U.S.-based individual was urgently seeking advice regarding how to make explosive devices. So that kicked EDNY [Eastern District of New York] prosecutors and FBI JTTF agents and officers into high gear, as you might imagine, and we were able to quickly identify the U.S.-based individual as Najibullah Zazi. But there was no evidence yet. We knew who he was, but we had to do an urgent round-the-clock investigation to develop the evidence to be able to take him into custody and thwart the plot. And so that's what happened. Agents, prosecutors in New York and around the country—Zazi at the time was out in Colorado—were working feverishly to develop that evidence and were able to do so such that we were able to make the arrests in advance of their imminent plans to detonate explosives on subway lines leading into Manhattan.

Without that initial intelligence community interception and some very, very good and fast law enforcement work, I think the view of everyone involved in the case was the subway bombing plot would likely have succeeded. They had the materials they needed. They knew how to convert them into explosive devices. And they were in the process of putting those explosives together. They'd obtained the backpacks they were going to wear. They were on the cusp of taking action, and indeed, when the arrests took place, Adis Medunjanin, rather than pulling his car over as he was being pulled over by law enforcement, attempted to use his car to commit a jihad attack on the expressway where he was arrested, shouting al-Qa`ida slogans and driving it into oncoming traffic. At the time, Lisa Monaco, the Deputy Attorney General and my boss, was the assistant attorney general for national security, called it one of the most serious terrorist plots against the homeland since 9/11.⁴

A few takeaways from this one: One thing that was particularly interesting here is we were able to secure critical intelligence as well as some cooperation from a couple of the arrestees. So that was another unexpected element: the use of federal prosecution as one of the tools in the toolbox of the joint intelligence community and law enforcement effort to prevent, deter, and disrupt terrorist activity—the ability of federal law enforcement to arrest people, take them away from the influences that were radicalizing them,

isolate them, and subject them to charges that could carry life imprisonment. Actually, these were the same tools that we've used historically in mob cases and in violent gang cases and they're actually effective also in terrorism cases. And then we were able to generate intelligence that itself was actionable by the intelligence community overseas, so it wasn't just the intelligence community feeding law enforcement information they've developed overseas for action in the homeland. It was law enforcement being able to develop intelligence that we could feed back to the intelligence community and DoD and others for their use abroad, creating a very effective circle of effort.

The other thing that jumps to my mind about this case was the critical work done by the intelligence community working with law enforcement both to identify that communication, to immediately get it for action to law enforcement, and then law enforcement being able to work with federal and state and local partners all pulling together in emergency style to very, very quickly be able to secure the evidence we needed to arrest the defendants and thwart the plot. It showed the strength of the criminal justice system not just to bring terrorists to justice but also as one of the tools in the overall counterterrorism toolbox for disruption, deterrence, and gathering additional intelligence to prevent attacks.

CTC: Fast forward to your current role in the Department of Justice, and you oversee essentially the day-to-day running of the entire department. What have been the biggest counterterrorism challenges and the biggest counterterrorism successes during the time you've been in your most recent position?

Miller: It's a very different environment now. All of the work that we were doing back in the 2000s and early 2010s that I was just describing in New York—and was also happening in other parts of the country—that all became part of muscle memory. What seemed to be brand new at that time where we were constructing new protocols and paradigms became the established methods of doing business. Meanwhile, the counterterrorism landscape has grown more complex and shifted. The threat environment has been described by everybody from the Director of National Intelligence to the head of the FBI as supercharged right now, particularly after October 7th and then exacerbated by powerful emerging technologies, like artificial intelligence. The threats are more varied than we've ever seen before—from both state and non-state actors, and foreign terrorist organizations operating overseas. That's not entirely new. But the explosion of homegrown extremism that is both FTO-inspired but also homegrown and at times domestic in nature, creates just a very diverse set of threat actors.

In terms of successes, we've continued to grow and modernize our counterterrorism strategy. And it's becoming just a lot more mature. And I'm particularly thinking of our implementation of a true whole-of-government approach, where the Department is part of an interagency team that leverages information from the intelligence community, coordinates effectively and efficiently, with not just all the federal law enforcement agencies, but state and local partners, as well as foreign partners, and uses all of our tools—arrest and prosecution obviously are important from DOJ's perspective, but also some of our search and seizure capabilities, our remote search and seizure capabilities. Then we add those tools to the overall government toolbox, including intelligence and defense

capabilities, sanctions, all of the different tools that are available to us to disrupt and prevent potential terrorist attacks before they happen.

And we've been able to use these tools most recently on CT cases of all types: from the case we brought after the October 7th, 2023, attack by Hamas on Israel against senior leadership of the group, charging them with terrorism crimes and murder conspiracy based on their orchestration of that attack.⁵ Then take the January 6th attack on the Capitol, where we've now successfully prosecuted and convicted over 1,000 individuals that were involved in different ways in that attack. And you can see just the breadth from one to the other, one completely extraterritorial and one at the heart of our nation's capital, with completely different inspirations for that activity. You can see the breadth of what we're dealing with.

CTC: What is your assessment of the terrorism threats today in the United States across the ideological spectrum, which you touched on a little bit, but if you could delve into what those threats are and maybe which concern you the most?

Miller: As I've already noted there are just more threats than we've ever seen before. And that's even more true after October 7th. We've seen groups trying to radicalize through capitalizing on October 7th and its aftermath. We've seen individuals self-radicalized and inspired by what they're seeing online and in other media about October 7th and its aftermath. Hamas, Hezbollah, the Houthis, and other groups in the region have been engaging in all forms of attacks overseas, targeting U.S. interests as well as Israeli and other interests. I'm speaking initially about the Houthis and their attacks on shipping, but we've also seen activities from other groups aimed at U.S. forces overseas and interests overseas. Of course, we're all seeing the reporting on Syria, which could go in lots of different directions, but certainly has the potential and likelihood of adding to regional instability. And it's a cauldron essentially of different ideologies and threats.

We've seen state actors—now I'm thinking more about targeting the homeland—we've seen state actors that are supporting and working through cutouts to target the United States. We've seen lone actor extremists; there's quite easy access to high-powered weaponry—not only explosives and the devices that can be created, but also things like Glock switches and other machine gun conversion devices, as well as guns, that can be manufactured with a 3D printer without a whole lot of expertise. So, there's a lot of access to very dangerous weaponry, and we've been very focused as a Department on trying to combat machine gun conversion devices and those kinds of weapons.⁶ Emerging technologies, of course, make all types of criminal and terrorist actors potentially more effective.

The threats are not only coming from abroad or from inspiration from abroad. We also have domestic terrorism and homegrown violent extremists. And the current ideological divide in our country also creates an environment that is amenable to radicalization. So, there's a lot of different terrorism threats that we're addressing on any day of the week, and it's important that we continue as a government to deploy the strategies that have been working. It's so important to address those threats and keep up with those threats because you can't rest on your laurels in this business. You have to be attuned to what the current threats are. You have to be building on what I think is a successful paradigm and model—through the

Joint Terrorism Task Forces, through our work with the intelligence community, the military, state, and local and foreign partners, and all of that coordination—to really significantly upgrade our domestic terrorism capabilities.

CTC: To go big picture here, obviously as we end 2024, counterterrorism is just one of many national security priorities rather than the dominant priority as it was not so long ago. What's your view of the current balance of resources in the United States going into counterterrorism versus other national security challenges? And how can the United States devote sufficient attention to both?

Miller: I mentioned the dynamic threat landscape, and I think the FBI director captured it well back in June of this year when he talked about how hard it would be to think of a time when so many different threats to the public safety and national security were elevated all at once.⁷ And as you said, that dynamic threat landscape does include *other* national security threats—*many* other national security threats—besides counterterrorism.

We see nation-states taking on just a much more diverse set of dangerous activities than they did in the past. In the past, going back some years, it was largely espionage. Then it grew into cybercrime and cyber efforts to gather intelligence and infiltrate. Now, we also see foreign malign influence efforts; lethal plotting against U.S. interests overseas and here in the United States; transnational repression by foreign nation-states against folks around the world, but in the United States as well; election interference efforts, and the stealing of disruptive technologies and critical data—just to name a few of the different threat vectors we see in today's world.

So, all of that does need its own set of resources dedicated to them, to those activities, and attention from DOJ and other agency leadership. At the same time, it's critically important to national security that we maintain our attention to counterterrorism. And that means continued resourcing, that means the foot has to stay on the gas and not drift over towards the brakes when it comes to counterterrorism. We have to be prepared, and I think we are. We have to maintain a whole-of-government effort. We have to use all the tools at our disposal. And I do think that we've been able to do that; we've been able to thwart attacks before they happen, bring charges against and incapacitate would-be terrorists through the criminal justice system, as well as using our many other tools, working with our interagency colleagues.

CTC: You mentioned how the events of October 2023 with the Hamas attack on Israel changed the terrorism landscape in a number of different ways. With that, there has been a surge in interest and concern about the Iran threat network. Based on information available to the Department of Justice, what is your assessment of the current threat to the United States—both here in the homeland and overseas—posed by Hamas and Hezbollah?

Miller: It's a great question, and I think it's shifting by the day. Of course, the October 2023 Hamas attack and the long-term relationship between Iran and both Hamas and Hezbollah have presented an ongoing set of risks for many years. That set of risks has only increased in the wake of the October 2023 attack. The bubbling cauldron of threats caused in many ways by Iran and its

proxies is almost at the boiling-over stage. We've taken a number of actions to address that. As I mentioned, in the wake of the atrocities of October 7th, we've charged Hamas senior leadership with a series of crimes associated with that attack and, going back over many years, other attacks and conspiracies targeting Americans and the United States. We have other active, ongoing investigations regarding Hamas. We see, of course, the Houthis firing at Western ships in the Red Sea, including U.S. ships; Iran engaging in a whole array of activities that target America and Americans; we've seen and charged a series of cases that allege lethal plotting by IRGC individuals and their proxies to target Iranian dissidents and current and former United States officials. And I think our series of prosecutions and indictments in this regard lay out just how active that threat stream is. We've seen foreign malign influence efforts, cyber activities including the IRGC's hacking of the president-elect's campaign, and we indicted a number of subjects there in connection with that case.⁸ I think the Attorney General captured it quite well when he said that there are few actors in the world that pose as grave a threat to our national security as does Iran.

I mentioned it's changing daily: To be sure, the developments in Syria and the region both create additional instability. They also show that Iran and Hezbollah have been somewhat weakened by the activity since October 7th in the region. Hezbollah, which serves in many ways as Iran's most significant proxy, has been particularly decimated. And I think Iran's limited capacity to project more conventional military might has been exposed. But all of that doesn't make it less dangerous for the United States; it just shifts the different kinds of activities that we are likely to see Iran and its proxies and cutouts engage in. So, it requires us to continue to work closely with our law enforcement partners and the intelligence community to address the threats. We need to ensure that we're looking at Iran and the threats it poses not just as a counterterrorism matter, but also in terms of their transnational repression, their lethal plotting, their cyber activity.

We've engaged in a whole bunch of innovative efforts working with interagency partners in that area, ranging from our Task Force KleptoCapture work,⁹ originally targeted at Russia, but also in terms of innovative uses of our forfeiture capabilities towards Iran. Our Disruptive Technology Strike Force, which goes after those who would send dangerous technologies to dangerous nation-state actors like Iran,¹⁰ our Foreign Influence Task Force, our Election Threats Task Force—all of these are ways that we can protect American interests, protect American democracy. And they are important additions to our overall national security apparatus. I shouldn't leave out our cyber and crypto enforcement initiatives because those are critical also to taking away the capabilities of Iran and our other nation-state adversaries.

CTC: From a prosecutorial point of view, how are prosecutions of terrorism cases with state actor connections—Iran, for example—different from jihadi *inspired* cases, that we've seen more predominantly over the years?

Miller: I would say they're more similar than different, is where I would start. We use a lot of the same techniques and tools to bring those prosecutions. We use a lot of the same statutes. We use the same JTTF-led approach, the same whole-of-government, all-tools paradigm. The involvement of state actors can have implications for certain uses of those techniques, so there's often added need for

CIPA [Classified Information Procedures Act] litigation to protect classified information. Of course, the intelligence community has lots of holdings that relate to state actors, as you would expect, and it's important—as it is in every one of these cases—to protect their sources, their methods, and their critically important classified information. But that can be at an elevated level in the state-actor prosecution situation. Often in these cases, there are also diplomatic and international relations issues that aren't necessarily present in non-state actor cases that require close coordination with interagency partners so that we can pursue the prosecutorial strategies that will be most effective, but do so in a manner that's sensitive to, and doesn't unnecessarily invade, those diplomatic and international equities. That requires particularly close coordination with interagency partners. I'd also say that some of these state actor cases present blended threat issues, where there are state actors who are using non-state actors to engage in the activities. The blending of the threat often means that these cases involve both state actors and what we would normally think of as non-state actors working in conjunction with each other.

CTC: In June, we saw the arrest and indictment of eight Tajiks on suspicion of terrorism and ties to the Islamic State. The New York Times reported that “heightened concerns about a potential attack in at least one location triggered the arrest of all eight men ... on immigration charges.”¹¹ What can you discuss about this episode and the potential threat that they posed? What's the status of these cases, and what do these cases reveal about the current state of the Islamist terror threat to the United States?

Miller: I'm happy to talk about that case and also a couple of others that I think capture the current state of the threat in terms of cases that have been brought publicly. Starting with the Tajiks who were arrested back in the summer, as has been publicly revealed, there were eight Tajik nationals who illegally crossed over the southern border, the majority of them clustering in and around Philadelphia. After they came into the country, we were able as a government to identify derogatory information, including potential links to ISIS, associated with those eight Tajiks, and so we engaged in what we always do, which is identifying the most effective tool to disrupt and deter potential attacks. We did see some indications of potential nascent plotting. So, the easiest and swiftest and most effective tool at our disposal there was to leverage immigration authorities that the Department of Homeland Security has in its toolbox. All eight Tajiks were arrested through impressive coordination across the country.

And I think again what this example again shows is the need to be nimble and flexible and use the available tools that are out there. The cases are being pursued in immigration court proceedings where we have recently updated our procedures for the use of classified information in such proceedings. Up until recently, the approach was to use classified information in immigration proceedings—quite differently from federal criminal prosecutorial proceedings—only as a last resort. And in assessing and trying to ensure that all tools are as effective as possible, we determined that leaving that to a last resort was a matter of policy, not of law, and that it wasn't good policy. And so, we've now worked with our DHS colleagues and the immigration court system to ensure that we have updated and fit-for-use procedures to enable the use of classified

information in immigration proceedings.

Going back to the cases themselves, DOJ prosecutors, working with DHS immigration attorneys, have ensured that the best evidence, whether classified or unclassified, was effectively presented in immigration court to ensure the detention and removal of those Tajiks. And the current status is that all of their claims to stay in the country have been denied. All of them have been detained. All of them now have been ordered removed from the United States, and five of the eight already have been removed. So, I think what it shows is the attention that we're paying as a government to the ongoing threat landscape, and our ability to be swift and nimble to take threat actors off the board via whatever the most effective technique is. And I think it is one illustration of today's threat environment.

But it's a varied environment, as I mentioned. I'll describe a few cases where we're taking federal prosecutorial approaches, as opposed to immigration enforcement actions. So, I'm thinking now about the [Nasir Ahmad] Tawhedi case in Oklahoma City where we charged a citizen of Afghanistan who was residing in Oklahoma with conspiring to conduct an Election Day terrorist attack in the United States. [We] charged that one back in October.¹²

Then there is the [Alexander Scott] Mercurio case: This is an 18-year-old individual in Idaho who was radicalized and attempted to provide material support and resources to ISIS by committing an attack on its behalf in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, back in April.¹³

And there's also the [Muhammad Shahzeb] Khan case:¹⁴ This is a Pakistani national who resided in Canada, who was arrested by our Canadian colleagues as he tried to cross the border to attack a Jewish community center in New York. So, three examples of very different individuals who were radicalized in different ways, but looking to engage in ISIS-inspired attacks in the homeland here in the United States, and who are all now in custody either in the United States or in Canada with criminal charges pending.

CTC: A new administration is about to take office, and given your lengthy career Department of Justice, what would be your advice to those who will run the CT mission at DOJ?

Miller: I think the number-one piece of advice would be that prevention and disruption always have to remain the top priority. And in order to achieve prevention and disruption, we need to double down on what has been working and continually modernize and calibrate to meet the varied threats. There is a system, a protocol, a paradigm that works; it involves coordination and information sharing and intelligence gathering from all sources—both in the intelligence community, of course, but also law enforcement and the Department of Defense. We need to use all tools to deter, disrupt, and take down, and our tools have to develop with technology, just as the *threat* develops with technology. We need to keep skating to where the puck is going and not where it's been, and you need every member of the interagency team to succeed.

As for a second piece of advice, it's to check preconceived notions or ideologies at the door of the SCIF. I think where I've seen things go wrong, sometimes it's because folks have a worldview that one tool might be better than another, that one technique might be better than another, and they then try to force the proverbial square peg into the round hole. That's not what this threat matrix requires. What it requires is understanding deeply *all* of the different tools that are available and bringing them *all* to bear and using the one that is most effective to meet the particular problem.

For the Tajik case we just discussed what made sense to disrupt and deter the threat was bringing our immigration tools to bear. In the ISIS-inspired cases that I mentioned, it was bringing federal criminal prosecution tools to bear. In the Khan matter, of course, also our international partnerships, which were so effective with the Canadians taking the initial law enforcement action at our request. But you could go back to the older cases, too, that I mentioned that I personally prosecuted and supervised back in New York in the 2000s and 2010s. Again, the key thing is figuring out what is the most effective tool for the particular threat activity and using it in conjunction with all of our intelligence community, state and local and foreign partners, as well as law enforcement at the federal level, all the agencies. **CTC**

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Looking West: The Houthis' Expanding Footprint in the Horn of Africa

By Michael Horton

The Yemen-based Houthis' top priority is the continued development of their unmanned vehicle and missile programs. Both programs are vital to the Houthis' ability to exert leverage over both their domestic and external enemies. Securing supply chains and funding for the programs, especially funding and supplies that are independent of Iran, is a key objective for the Houthi leadership. To this end, the Houthis have deepened their relationship with Yemen-based al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). AQAP, in turn, has opened new doors for the Houthis to interact with Horn of Africa-based militant groups such as al-Shabaab. Both AQAP and al-Shabaab now act as facilitators and, to a degree, as partners that help the Houthis smuggle needed materiel into and out of Yemen. These relationships are also vital to the Houthis' expanding efforts to fund their weapons programs and the broader organization. The Houthis' relationship with al-Shabaab and Horn of Africa-based smugglers points to the organization's growing footprint in the Horn of Africa.

The last 14 months have demonstrated that the Houthis' prioritization of their missile and UAV programs is vital to the Yemen-based group's ongoing transformation to a near-state power.¹ The once small band of guerrilla fighters who were confined to a few hundred square miles of rugged terrain in the northwest corner of Yemen have, over the course of 20 years, evolved into an organization that now has regional reach and the ability to impact the global economy. Since declaring their support for Hamas following Hamas' October 7, 2023, attack on Israel, the Houthis have targeted at least 134 vessels with missiles, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), and unmanned underwater vehicles (UUVs).² The Houthis have also launched missiles and UAVs at Israel, with at least one successful strike on an apartment block in Tel Aviv that killed one Israeli.³

The economic ramifications of the Houthis' attacks are reverberating through regional economies. The number of vessels transiting the Suez Canal has fallen by more than 50 percent since October 2023 as shipping companies are forced to route ships

around the Cape of Good Hope.⁴ Egypt, a country that is struggling with a weak economy, has seen critical hard currency revenues from the canal decline by six billion USD.^{5a} Companies and consumers, especially in Europe, face higher prices due to increased shipping costs.⁶ Dockings at the Israeli port of Eilat are down by 85 percent and contributed to the port operator declaring bankruptcy in July.⁷ The threat of attack by the Houthis has become so severe, despite costly U.S., U.K., and E.U. efforts, that some warships avoid transiting the Red Sea. In October 2024, a German Navy frigate was forced to sail around the Cape because it was not adequately equipped to defend itself against possible attack by the Houthis.⁸ In desperation, some shipping companies are now paying the Houthis not to attack their vessels.⁹

The Red Sea and Gulf of Aden campaign has been a resounding success for the Houthis with few costs.^b The attacks have set the Houthis up as one of the premier members of the "Axis of Resistance," and messaging that paints the Houthis as "defenders of the Palestinian people" has helped bolster domestic, regional, and

- a Losses for Egypt's economy extend well beyond the loss of revenue from the Suez Canal. Egypt's farmers are also paying a high cost for the Houthis' attacks on shipping. Seasonal fruits that are usually shipped to Asian markets are not being shipped. This has caused a glut in some exported fruits as exporters try to reroute shipments to European markets. The loss of revenue from the Suez Canal and from Egypt's agricultural sector also put pressure on the country's credit worthiness, which in turn impacts the exchange rate for the Egyptian pound. This, in turn, fuels inflation.
- b The United States, United Kingdom, and Israel have all carried out air and missile strikes against the Houthis. While the strikes may have diminished the Houthis' ability to carry out missile attacks, they have not had a significant impact on the group's capability to launch UAVs. UAVs are easier to conceal and more mobile than missiles. The Houthis routinely move both UAVs and some missiles around the parts of Yemen that they control by commercial trucks. The UAVs are stored and, in some cases, launched from modified intermodal shipping containers, which are ubiquitous in Yemen. The Houthis also use modified fuel tankers to conceal and move both UAVs and missiles. UAV assembly and manufacturing facilities have largely been moved to urban areas that provide civilian cover. Israel's July and September attacks on fuel storage tanks, port infrastructure, and a power generation facility were more impactful due to the economic damage done to the Houthis. Fuel smuggling and sales produce vital revenue for the Houthis and the patronage networks that they must sustain to maintain power. However, the Israeli counterstrikes on the Houthis also took a toll on Yemen's vulnerable civilian population. See Eleonora Ardemagni, "Yemen: Why Israel's Attack Hurt the Houthis More Than U.S. Strikes," Italian Institute for International Political Studies, July 25, 2024.

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even international support.^{10c}

These political and financial gains would not be possible without the group's Iranian-supported UAV, UUV, and missile programs. These weapons systems provide the Houthis with tactical and strategic reach that they leverage both in and outside Yemen. It was the Houthis' use of UAVs and missiles to target Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) that forced both countries to reevaluate how to approach the war in Yemen.¹¹

For the Houthi leadership, there is no higher priority than the advancement and continuity of these two programs.¹² Maintaining the inflow of the materiel needed to assemble and produce UAVs, UUVs, and missiles is a critical mission for the Houthis. A growing percentage of the required materiel for these programs transit the Horn of Africa via a web of intermediaries.¹³ Consequently, the Houthis are prioritizing the build-out of their presence in the Horn of Africa to help secure supply chains. To further facilitate the movement of illicit and licit goods, the Houthis are also building durable ties with armed groups, namely al-Shabaab, and smugglers that operate in Somalia and Puntland.¹⁴ The Houthi leadership views enhanced influence in the Horn of Africa as both critical to maintaining the flow of needed materiel and to securing new revenue streams and increased political leverage.¹⁵ For the Houthis, one of the first steps toward enhancing their covert presence in the Horn of Africa was the formation of a pragmatic alliance with Yemen-based al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).

This article begins by examining how AQAP's shifting priorities have driven them and the Houthis into a relationship based on some shared objectives and mutual benefits. The Houthi-AQAP relationship is looked at in some detail as cooperation between the two former enemies has helped the Houthis establish ties with Somalia-based al-Shabaab and Horn of Africa-based illicit networks. This nexus of shared interests between the Houthis, AQAP, al-Shabaab, smugglers, and Iran is looked at in light of the Houthis' need to generate revenue to sustain their organization and secure independent supply chains for their weapons programs. The article concludes by assessing how the Houthis' expanding ties to Horn of Africa-based groups align with and reinforce the Houthis' longer-term aims to enhance their existing leverage over domestic and external enemies by further developing and securing their weapons programs and revenue streams. Research for the article was carried out during multiple trips to the region during 2024. The article draws heavily on interviews with a range of Yemen and region-based officials, practitioners, and analysts.

New Friends and Illicit Networks

The Houthis were once one of AQAP's most formidable enemies. AQAP's membership, which nominally adheres to militant salafi ideologies, regarded the predominately Zaidi Shi`a Houthis as

“AQAP’s involvement in the smooth operation of smuggling routes is one of the reasons the group now cooperates with the Houthis.”

heretics. Now, the two organizations are increasingly cooperating due to shared enemies and business interests.

The Houthis and AQAP fought pitched battles from 2014 to 2016 for control of parts of the governorate of al-Bayda in central Yemen and in parts of Marib, Taiz, Lahij, and Aden where AQAP fighters were integrated into many anti-Houthi militias.¹⁶ Following its 2016 retreat from the Yemeni port city of Mukalla, which it had controlled for a year, AQAP began adopting more pragmatic approaches to surviving Yemen's complex and interlocking wars. These approaches included acting as “guns for hire” for multiple armed groups as well as for Yemen-based smugglers.¹⁷ AQAP's fighters and operatives were valuable commodities for anti-Houthi militias. Many of these men were relatively well trained, and, most significantly, more senior operatives and fighters maintained familial and business links to important tribes in critical areas such as al-Bayda, Abyan, Shabwa, and Hadramawt.¹⁸

In addition to acting as mercenaries, AQAP's diffuse leadership also worked to enhance the organization's role in Yemen's thriving illicit networks.¹⁹ Hiring fighters out as mercenaries provided AQAP with some revenue, but it was the organization's enmeshment, or more accurately re-enmeshment, with smuggling networks that provided an influx of cash for the group's elites. During AQAP's 2011-2012 occupation of parts of Abyan, AQAP operatives helped facilitate the trafficking of drugs, humans, and weapons from Yemen's southern coasts into the interior.²⁰ It was AQAP's relationship with al-Shabaab, whose fighters fought alongside AQAP in Abyan, that helped AQAP deepen its ties to Horn of Africa-based smugglers and some of their Yemeni counterparts. While AQAP was forced out of most of Abyan and Shabwa in 2012, the group's connections with Yemen and Somalia-based smugglers as well as al-Shabaab persisted.²¹

The core of the AQAP-al-Shabaab relationship is built around shared business interests. As with most terrorist groups, AQAP and al-Shabaab are, first and foremost, businesses dedicated to making money to sustain their organizations and enrich elite members of the groups.²² While some of AQAP's senior leadership has been successfully targeted over the last 10 years, the organization's cellular structure—which mirrors al-Shabaab's—means that the loss of senior leaders does not sustainably impair its broader workings, which focus more and more on profit-making activities.²³

Since 2020, AQAP has markedly scaled up its involvement in smuggling activities. The group offers a menu of services for smugglers and the grey-zone businesses that abound in Yemen.²⁴ These services include defending and escorting high-value shipments, the facilitation and delivery of illicit goods from Somalia-based intermediaries, intelligence gathering, contract killing, and even the management of tribal relations.²⁵ The smuggling of illicit goods, from high-end weapons systems and captagon to humans, brings enemies together in Yemen.²⁶ Members of warring tribes, political rivals, parties to blood feuds, and salafis and Zaidis

c Following the Houthis' November 19, 2023, hijacking of the vehicle carrier *Galaxy Leader*, a significant number of tribes and sections of tribes as well as some members of *Islah* shifted support to the Houthis. Some elite members of the *Murad* (Marib-based), *Nihm* (territory between Sana'a and Marib), *Dahm* (al-Jawf), and *Jadaan* (Marib) among others visited Houthi officials to praise their actions. In the weeks after hijacking the *Galaxy Leader*, the Houthis converted parts of the ship into a *mafraj* (a place where Yemenis traditionally chew *qat*, a mild narcotic). Tribal elite and Houthi elite competed with one another for opportunities to visit the ship and chew *qat* on the vessel. Author interviews, multiple former Yemeni government officials and Yemen-based analysts, September-October 2024.

frequently work together to ensure that illicit goods arrive at their final destinations. Those destinations include all parts of Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, and other countries. In many parts of Yemen, especially in parts of southern and eastern Yemen, smuggling is the lifeblood of local economies. AQAP's involvement in the smooth operation of smuggling routes is one of the reasons the group now cooperates with the Houthis.²⁷ However, the two organizations also have a shared enemy in Yemen's Southern Transitional Council (STC).²⁸

AQAP and the Houthis are both battling forces allied with the STC. Since 2021, AQAP has focused much of its efforts on targeting UAE-supported forces allied with and commanded by the STC. The animus between AQAP and the STC and allied forces is partly rooted in the 2021-2022 battles between Islah-allied forces and the STC for control of the governorates of Shabwa and Abyan.²⁹ Shabwa is home to much of Yemen's remaining oil wealth, and both governorates are transected by vital smuggling routes. Despite officials allied with Islah and the STC both being members of the Presidential Leadership Council (PLC), Islah-allied forces and the STC fought periodic but fierce battles for control of Abyan and Shabwa from 2021-2022.³⁰ At the same time, STC-aligned forces, namely the UAE-backed Giants Brigades, also fought the Houthis in Shabwa. The Houthis were attempting to retake parts of Shabwa from the STC and Islah. The STC defeated Islah, thwarted Houthis advances in Shabwa, and took control of most of Abyan and Shabwa by mid-2022.³¹

While all sides in the conflict in Yemen routinely accuse one another of working with AQAP, AQAP's leadership expressed anger over the STC takeover of Shabwa and its expulsion of the Islah-aligned governor in December 2021.³² AQAP operatives and fighters have long been active in Marib, where Islah-aligned tribes and militias predominate.³³ This is not to argue that Islah is allied with AQAP, but there are overlapping interests. AQAP has deep roots in Abyan and Shabwa and abiding ties to tribes and sections of tribes in both governorates.³⁴ Most significantly, AQAP wants to maintain access to the smuggling routes that lead up from the two governorates' extensive coastlines to the Yemeni interior, which includes Houthi-controlled governorates. For the Houthis, these smuggling routes are vital as is the eventual control, if they are successful, of Shabwa's oil and gas resources.

Since early 2023, the pragmatic alliance between AQAP and the Houthis has deepened further. The Houthis and AQAP have engaged in multiple prisoner exchanges and increasingly share intelligence on common enemies, namely the STC.³⁵ There are also indications that the Houthis are providing AQAP with weapons, including UAVs which are in high demand by AQAP and al-Shabaab.³⁶ Like most states and non-state actors, AQAP is a keen observer of how UAVs, especially First Person View (FPV) UAVs, are reshaping battlefield dynamics in the war between Ukraine and Russia. While, due to their distrust of AQAP, it is unlikely that the Houthis would provide AQAP with UAVs with significant range, the Houthis are providing AQAP with lower-end UAVs.³⁷

The alignment of the Houthis' and AQAP's near-term interests have helped open the door for the Houthis to cooperate with Horn of Africa-based groups like al-Shabaab. The Houthis' cooperation with Somalia-based al-Shabaab is an outgrowth of the Houthis' working alliance with AQAP. The three organizations, as well as Yemen- and Horn of Africa-based smugglers and Iran, have formed a kind of symbiotic relationship whereby all parties benefit from

“[The Houthis, AQAP, and al Shabaab], as well as Yemen- and Horn of Africa-based smugglers and Iran, have formed a kind of symbiotic relationship whereby all parties benefit from increased revenue, access to illicit goods, and greater political leverage.”

increased revenue, access to illicit goods, and greater political leverage.

A Nexus of Shared Interests

The Houthis, Iran, AQAP, and al-Shabaab all benefit from a developing nexus of shared interests.³⁸ The cornerstone of these symbiotic relationships is the exchange of weapons. Al-Shabaab has long struggled with acquiring higher-end weapons. While Somalia and semi-autonomous Puntland are hotspots for arms smuggling, most of the weapons flow out to other countries in Africa or the region.³⁹ Consequently, the prices for small and medium arms in Somalia are higher than in Yemen, which was awash in weapons even before the start of the civil war in 2014. Yemeni arms smugglers have long exploited the arbitrage that exists between Yemeni and Somali arms markets. The Yemen-Somalia arms trade is highly lucrative.⁴⁰ For example, a crate of Chinese or Iranian-made AK-47s can be sold in Somalia for up to five times what they cost to acquire in Yemen. Margins for other weapons and materiel such as sniper rifles, RPG-7s, man-portable mortars, and night vision devices are considerably better. Modifiable commercial and military-grade UAVs command even higher premiums.⁴¹

The Houthis and elites loyal to the Houthis have been involved in the arms trade since at least 2010. After their September 2014 takeover of Sana'a, Houthi involvement in the arms trade increased due to both their greater political power and reach and due to their access to much of the Yemeni Armed Forces' armaments and stockpiles.⁴² The Houthis' involvement in the weapons trade is a significant source of revenue for the group and provides them with domestic political leverage. Somewhat ironically, the Houthis give weapons to some recalcitrant tribes to secure support. They also reward dedicated commanders and units by providing them with superior small arms that are often regarded as the personal property of the officers and soldiers.⁴³ As in many countries, weapons are a kind of hard currency in Yemen that cement relationships and grease political and financial transactions.

The weapons trade between Yemen and Somalia is fundamental to the Houthis' initiative to enhance their relations with al-Shabaab and other Horn of Africa-based armed groups and illicit networks. Yemen-based arms smugglers have been shipping weapons to Somalia since the fall of Siad Barre in 1991.⁴⁴ There is nothing new about weapons flowing from Yemen to Somalia; Yemen has long been a regional arms bazaar. However, since 2023, the Houthis have asserted more control over the trade, which is, at least in part, managed by their intelligence wing.⁴⁵ While there are weapons flows from non-Houthi controlled parts of Yemen to Somalia and elsewhere, the Houthis—in cooperation with chosen

NEW ALLIANCES

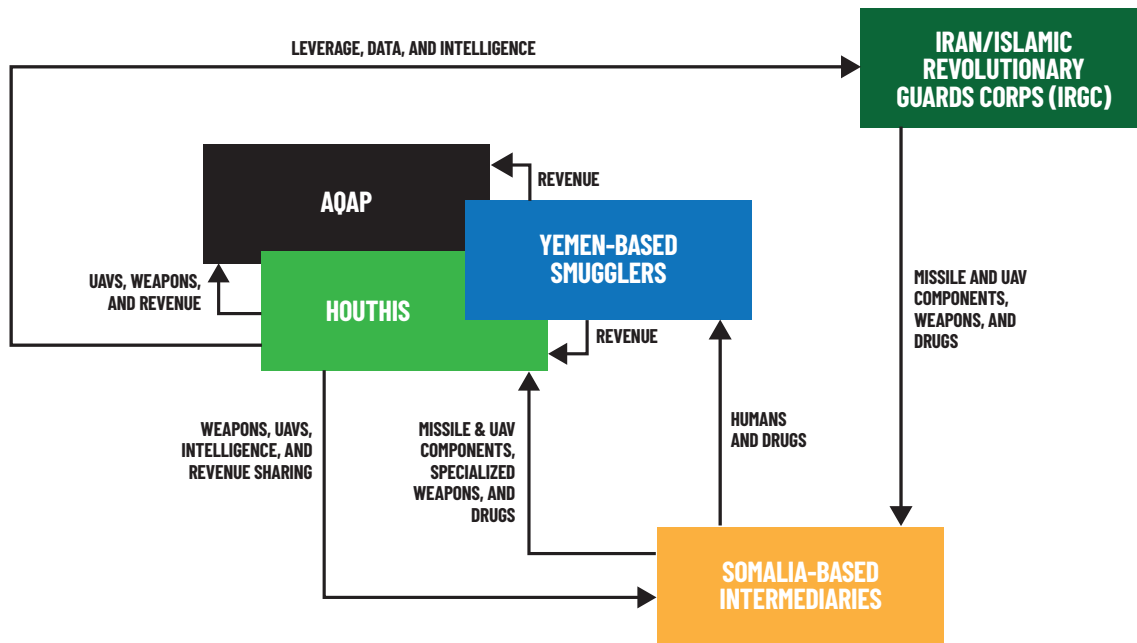


Figure 1

smugglers, AQAP, and al-Shabaab—are now the major actor in the trade.⁴⁶ Just as in Yemen, the Houthis are using weapons, and especially promises of access to UAVs and military expertise, as a way of acquiring support from groups in Somalia. The Houthis, in cooperation with Iran, are also using the provision of weapons as a way of securing supply chains for their drone and missile programs.⁴⁷

Since at least 2019, the Houthis have been assembling and manufacturing many of the UAVs they use and some of the less sophisticated missiles.⁴⁸ Many of the inputs for these programs are dual-use items. Others, such as guidance and optical systems, gyroscopes, engines, and chemicals for rocket fuel and explosives, are not and are therefore subject to sanctions. While dual-use items often arrive in the Houthi-controlled port of Hodeida or ports controlled by the Internationally Recognized Government (IRG) and its allies, restricted items are usually smuggled.⁴⁹ Many of these items are shipped from Iran and other countries on small and medium-sized boats that anchor either off Yemen's southern coast (coastlines in the governorates of Abyan and Shabwa) or off the coast of Somalia. There, the materiel is offloaded to smaller vessels for transport to Yemen.⁵⁰ Some materiel is also landed in Somalia both at ports and along the coast where it is broken into smaller shipments that travel on hard-to-detect small boats and skiffs to the Yemeni coast or Yemeni islands in the Red Sea where it is cached for later retrieval by the Houthis or smugglers.⁵¹ Like AQAP in Yemen, al-Shabaab as well as some newly revived pirate gangs oversee transshipment and provide security and logistics support for smugglers. There are indications that al-Shabaab wholly controls some of the transshipment operations.⁵²

Much of the materiel transshipped from Somalia is brought

ashore in the Yemeni governorate of Lahij, which is under the control of forces nominally allied with the STC.⁵³ Smuggling is a significant source of income for the tribal militias that control most of Lahij where AQAP is also active. The routes begin along Lahij's coast near Ras al-Arah and pass through al-Subhaia up into the governorate's northern mountains, which abut the governorates of Taiz, Ad Dali', and al-Bayda. Smugglers operating in Lahij are also involved in the trafficking of drugs and humans.⁵⁴

The Houthis, AQAP, al-Shabaab, Iran, and smugglers have developed a relationship from which all benefit. (See Figure 1.) Iran continues to provide the Houthis with needed components for their vital UAV and missile programs, in addition to some small arms.⁵⁵ In exchange, Iran gets the leverage that comes with a well-armed and capable proxy that shares a long border with Saudi Arabia and occupies land near the strategic chokepoint of the Bab al-Mandeb.⁵⁶ Iran and Hezbollah, both of which have advisers in Houthi-controlled Yemen, also benefit from being able to collect data from the Houthis' use of what are primarily Iranian-designed UAVs and missiles against multiple targets, including U.S. and allied warships.⁵⁷ Al-Shabaab benefits from acquiring small arms, UAVs, and, potentially, war-fighting expertise from the Houthis. All these parties benefit financially. Al-Shabaab has long been involved in human trafficking, which generates tens of millions of dollars for the networks that facilitate the movement of men, women, and children from multiple Horn of Africa nations to Yemen.⁵⁸ The Houthis and AQAP receive fees from Yemen-based smugglers who move the refugees from southern Yemen toward the Saudi and Omani borders.⁵⁹

Al-Shabaab, AQAP, Iran, and the Houthis are also involved in drug trafficking, which is almost as lucrative as weapons trafficking.

HOUTHI PROCUREMENT

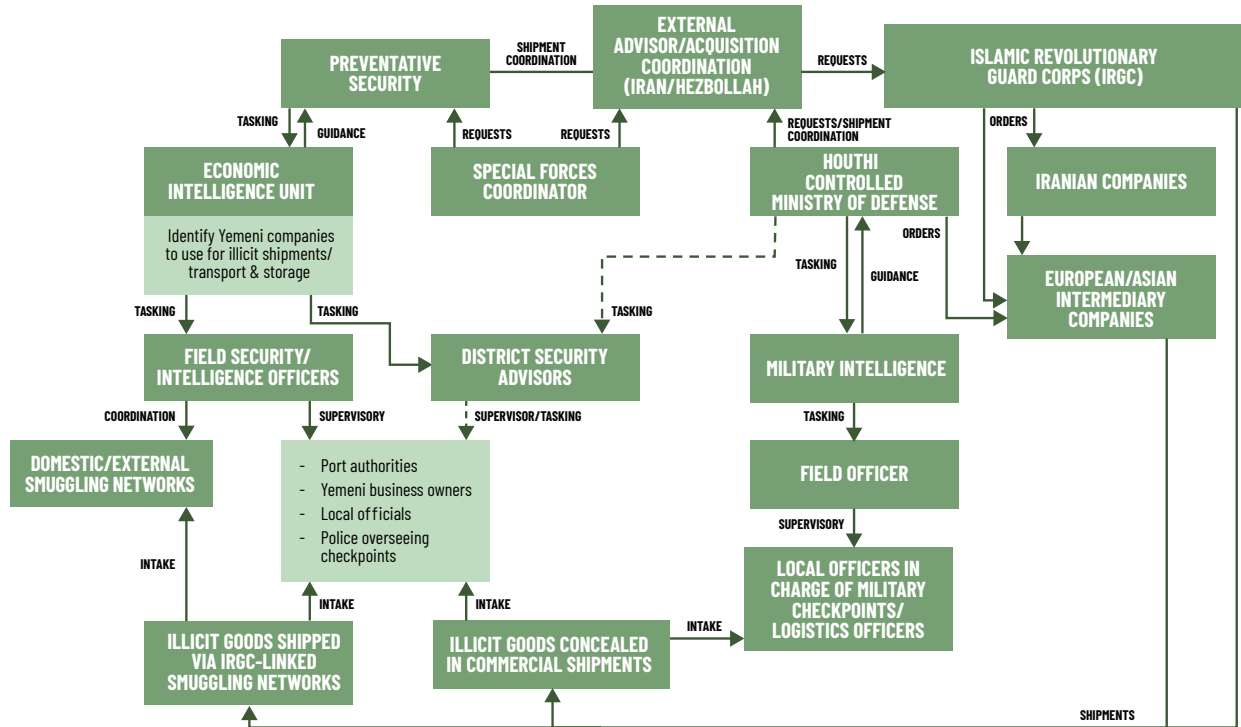


Figure 2

Iran manufactures amphetamines such as captagon and also acts as a conduit for heroin sourced from Afghanistan.⁶⁰ The Houthis also manufacture smaller amounts of captagon that are used domestically and smuggled into Saudi Arabia.⁶¹ However, given the amounts of money that can be generated from the sale of drugs and the ease with which they can be smuggled, the Houthis will almost certainly increase their manufacturing capacity. The drugs, especially captagon, are in high demand in Somalia as well as further afield.⁶²

Yemen's National Resistance Forces (NRF), led by Major General Tariq Saleh, also a vice president on the PLC, controls much of Yemen's southern Red Sea coastline. The NRF's strategic location means that its forces are well-placed to collect intelligence on the movement of Houthi-linked boats and interdict suspicious vessels. Speaking to the author, a senior aide to Major General Saleh warned that the NRF "is seeing increased coordination between al-Shabaab and the Houthis." The aide indicated that "al-Shabaab operatives ensure that shipments of drone and missile components are safely offloaded in Somalia or its waters and then loaded onto smaller boats that take the contraband to Yemen. In exchange, al-Shabaab receives money, small arms, and guidance from the Houthis." The aide added that in October, the NRF intercepted a shipment of weapons bound for Somalia from Yemen as well as a shipment of Iranian-sourced radars, missile components, and communication equipment that was shipped from Somalia to Djibouti and then to Yemen. The same aide also told the author that the "NRF has intelligence that indicates that the Houthis intend to supply al-Shabaab with more advanced weaponry that might enable them to target shipping in the Gulf of Aden."⁶³

Leveraging Chaos

The emerging relationship between the Houthis and al-Shabaab can potentially expand the capabilities of both organizations. Just as access to UAVs and missiles transformed the Houthis from a group whose reach did not extend beyond Yemen to one that can now bomb Tel Aviv, similar access to UAVs could further empower al-Shabaab and other Horn-based militant groups. This could benefit the Houthis by helping al-Shabaab secure more territory and better support lucrative smuggling networks. The Houthi leadership is determined to ensure the durability of the supply chains that allow them to continue to assemble and manufacture the missiles and UAVs, which enables them to keep domestic enemies at bay while also cowing regional rivals. Dependence on Iran for components for the UAV and missile programs, as well as the Houthis' reliance in part on Iranian money, are both regarded as vulnerabilities by the Houthi leadership.⁶⁴

Enhancing its relationships with groups such as al-Shabaab and establishing a covert and overt presence in the Horn of Africa helps the Houthis address both vulnerabilities. While Iran remains the source for many of the components required by the Houthis to assemble and, in some cases, manufacture UAVs, UUVs, and missiles, the group is trying to source components, especially multi-use items, from non-Iranian suppliers and companies with no connection to Iran.⁶⁵ The Houthis possess a well-developed system for procuring needed materials (see Figure 2) and ensuring

they arrive in Yemen.⁶⁶ ^d This system is adaptive and resilient like most Houthi-run entities. The Houthis' equally well-developed intelligence wing, specifically the economic intelligence unit, is charged with finding new suppliers for licit and illicit goods. The Houthis are mirroring Lebanon-based Hezbollah's approach to establishing operatives and connections in Africa and further afield.^e

From the mid-1990s onward, Hezbollah worked to establish front companies and covert ties to legitimate companies based in Africa and South America.⁶⁷ These companies, both knowingly and, in some cases, unknowingly, helped supply and finance Hezbollah. Hezbollah, like the Houthis, feared overreliance on Iran and wanted independent sources of revenue. In the case of Hezbollah, the group drew heavily on expatriate Lebanese communities in West and East Africa and Latin America.⁶⁸ Many of these communities have deep ties to—and knowledge of—the countries where they work and live. While a minority of Lebanese expatriates may have supported Hezbollah, Hezbollah used mafia-style tactics to threaten others into working with them, often to transport contraband.⁶⁹ Long-established Yemeni communities exist in almost all Horn of Africa countries, and many operate businesses with regional footprints. The Houthis are targeting some members of these communities to help them continue to acquire licit and illicit goods and materiel.⁷⁰

The Houthis are equally creative when it comes to financing their operations. The Houthis rely on numerous revenue streams ranging from “taxes” and fees on Yemenis, Yemeni businesses, and imports, to land and property seizure and sales.⁷¹ Funds from fees and revenue sharing from illicit networks make up an increasing percentage of the Houthis' revenue. Like AQAP, the Houthis charge fees for the safe passage of goods and materiel and humans through the territories they control. Fees from shipping companies paying the Houthis not to attack their ships are a new and growing source of income.⁷² The Houthis also profit from the sale of weapons and military expertise.⁷³ The Houthi leadership is watching closely how Iran and Turkey, in particular, profit from the sale of UAVs and other weapons systems. The Houthis are also undoubtedly taking note of the political leverage that comes from supplying these

weapons to various regimes. While the Houthis are years away from developing the capacity to manufacture weapons systems at scale, they do have the ability to assemble, manufacture, and export limited numbers of armed and surveillance UAVs.^f The Houthi leadership view the export of weapons and military expertise as areas ripe for expansion.⁷⁴ Ongoing wars and insurgencies in Sudan, Ethiopia, and Somalia and the overall febrile nature of politics in the Horn of Africa will provide the Houthis with ample opportunities for expanding their reach.

Outlook

The diffusion of drone and missile technology to state, non-state, and near-state actors such as the Houthis is transforming war fighting as well as regional political dynamics. The Houthis' rapid adoption and incorporation of UAVs and missile technology give them an edge over not only their domestic enemies but also leverage over their regional rivals. These weapons systems combined with the Houthis' well-developed intelligence capabilities and a martial culture that is rooted in guerrilla warfare, make them an especially formidable foe. The Houthis increasing interest in and cooperation with Horn of Africa-based armed groups and illicit networks, add yet another layer of complexity and risk to an already unstable region beset with brittle states.

The integration of armed non-state groups such as AQAP and al-Shabaab into illicit networks is a well-established global trend. The Houthis' emerging relationships with both armed groups and with those who run the smuggling networks that link Iran, Yemen, and many of the Horn of Africa nations will, if allowed to persist, provide the Houthis with the more durable and diversified supply chains that they seek. These relationships are undoubtedly already providing the Houthis with new sources of revenue as well as opportunities to exert even greater leverage over both domestic and regional foes. The symbiotic relationship between the Houthis, AQAP, al-Shabaab, Iran, and smuggling networks ensures that all sides have, for now, an interest in ensuring that the relationships continue to evolve. All of these organizations feed off of the instability that they help create. This is especially the case for the Houthis who seem to fully understand what T.E. Lawrence was describing when he wrote, referring to his irregular forces' tempo and method of operations, “in a real sense, maximum disorder was our equilibrium.”⁷⁵ If left unchecked, the Houthis' expanding presence in the Horn of Africa will drive the disorder that they profit from. **CTC**

^d Goods of all kinds—from luxury cosmetics and handbags to illicit items like silencers—arrive in Sana'a with incredible speed. Wealthy Yemenis as well as elites loyal to the Houthis living in Sana'a routinely order goods from around the world and can usually obtain them within a week, often less. Author interviews, Yemen-based analysts and former government officials, September 2024.

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^f The Houthis are developing a range of new armed and surveillance UAVs that are made of cheap, durable, and hard to detect materials that include laminated cardboard, carbon fiber and resin, as well as plastic. The Houthis use 3D printers to make and customize parts and fittings for some of their UAVs. Author interviews, Tihama-based security officials, October 2024.

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Africa Corps: Has Russia Hit a Ceiling in Africa?

By Christopher Faulkner, Raphael Parens, and Marcel Plichta

The picture of Moscow’s replacement for the Wagner Group—known as Africa Corps—has become clearer over the past several months. For all the hype that Russia’s newest security assistance appendage has garnered, the early story is that it is more of the same, but with less fanfare. Though Africa Corps has strengthened the lines of control that existed between Moscow and their soldiers of fortune, this new security outfit’s mission and operations have been much smaller in scale so far, but still enough to pull former U.S. partners into Moscow’s orbit. Sahelian states will continue to suffer with Russia as its chief security partner. Meanwhile, U.S. policymakers should rethink their approach to the continent as the Sahel’s insecurity creeps toward a new set of West African nations.

Over the past year and a half, the Sahel has undergone dramatic changes. These “shifting sands” have included the great Western exodus from the region, expanding relations with Moscow, worsening security crises, and the increasing risks of jihadi spillover to coastal West African nations in the Sahel.¹ The evolving landscape makes it increasingly difficult for the United States to use traditional security force assistance efforts to counter terrorist threats, but increasingly important that the United States not abandon CT efforts and support altogether.

Strained relations with Mali and Burkina Faso that led to the departure of European and U.S. troops were only harbingers of things to come. A coup in Niamey, Niger, in July 2023 quickly threatened the United States’ primary basing for counterterrorism (CT) support and operations in the region. In March 2024, a high-level delegation consisting of the U.S. State Department’s Bureau Chief for African Affairs, Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs at the U.S. Defense Department, and the Combatant Commander for AFRICOM visited the nascent military junta in Niamey in an effort to forge a path for future partnership that would see Niger return to democratic rule and ensure continuity of a security partnership.² Instead, the delegation’s visit led to the revocation of a status of forces agreement between Niamey and Washington, effectively banning the presence of U.S. troops in Niger and ending a decade-long mission of direct CT support.³ Shortly thereafter, personnel from Russia’s Africa Corps arrived in Niamey, taking the mantle from the United States and becoming the Tchiani regime’s new ‘partner of choice.’

Since that diplomatic calamity, the United States has officially withdrawn all military personnel from Niger effective as of September 15, 2024.⁴ The exit included the handover of two key military installations, Airbase 101 and 201, the latter which cost

the United States well over \$100 million to construct and served as a bastion for intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) efforts in support of CT operations. Despite the fallout, one senior U.S. Defense official argued that the relationship with Niger is not completely dead and that the Nigeriens were, in fact, “keen to keep opportunities open for future engagements.”⁵ Meanwhile, the Africa Corps deployment has done little to curb the tide of jihadi violence in Niger. As Christopher Maier, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict, noted during the U.S. drawdown, the Russians have to “prove” themselves since they are now on the inside.⁶

The reality, however, is that there are both operational and strategic limits to Russia’s Africa Corps. In the realm of CT, Moscow’s nascent Wagner substitute is ill-prepared and ill-equipped to serve as a viable replacement for the Sahel’s former Western CT partners. More importantly, Russia’s objectives and priorities in the Sahel are not the same as those of the United States and Europe. Instead, Moscow has become the de facto security partner because, operationally, they are willing to entertain the whims and desires of their military partners across the Sahel—even if those expectations are self-defeating and lead to increasingly complex security challenges. This essentially means that Russia’s proxies—whether Wagner or now Africa Corps—are willing to engage in counterinsurgency campaigns that are often indiscriminate, leading with violence instead of looking for opportunities to build trust and relationships with civilians or local partners.

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Strategically, it is dubious, at best, as to whether Moscow has a clear Sahel strategy. Though the Kremlin may have successfully capitalized on anti-French and Western sentiments and cheered the chorus of sovereignty demands stemming from Sahelian regimes, Russia's Sahel strategy, and arguably its Africa strategy writ large, is one that promotes more disruption and chaos, not less. While Moscow, originally through Wagner and now via Africa Corps, can cheaply state its intention to rectify the terrorist insecurity that has plagued its new Sahelian partners for over a decade, Russia has limited CT experience and diminished incentives to invest the resources necessary to genuinely solve the complex security crises in Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, and across the greater Sahel—crises that demand much more than a military solution. Adding to the complications is the potential loss of Russian bases in Syria following the overthrow of the Assad regime. Any resulting Russian forfeiture of its bases, notably its airbase in Latakia or naval base in Tartus, could make airlifting goods to Libya, the Sahel, and Central Africa significantly more challenging in the short term. This disruption would be increasingly consequential for Sahelian juntas as time is not on their side.

Pragmatically, for all the global attention on the Wagner Group, Africa Corps, and Russian hybrid warfare in Africa, Moscow's main lines of effort have tangible limits while the bulk of Russian military and political life remains squarely centered on Ukraine. This was recently demonstrated in Syria, where Russia refused to double down on the Assad regime whether by choice or as a consequence of Moscow's focus on the war in Ukraine. This article begins by looking at the terrorism and counterterrorism landscape in the Sahel, including examining why Western CT missions failed. This provides important background and context for the next section of the article, which examines Russian activity in Africa from Wagner to Africa Corps, and resulting complications in the hostile takeover before assessing the obstacles Africa Corps will likely face trying to capitalize on the fleeting successes of its predecessor. The article concludes with some thoughts on ways forward for U.S. policy.

Terrorism and Counterterrorism in the Sahel

The terrorism landscape in the Sahel sits at the nexus of blowback from conflicts and rebellions in Algeria and Libya, preexisting rebel and separatist movements, weak but punitive state security institutions, and growing discontent among communities at the periphery of economic and political power. While the origins of jihadi groups in Algeria date back to the Algerian war of independence, more recent conflicts such as the Algerian civil war (1991-2002) have fueled a growing jihadi strain in the country. However, the failures of democratization during the Arab Spring and the chaos wrought in Libya encouraged Algerian security forces to push jihadi elements in the country southward into the Sahel, particularly Mali.

This led to an alphabet soup of Islamist organizations taking over northern Mali in 2012, sparking a budding rivalry between the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) and al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).⁷ Further complicating this picture, though, was a Tuareg independence movement, which often coordinated with or overlapped with jihadi organizations during its 2012 rebellion, a rebellion that saw Mali cede nearly half its territory.⁸ In response, and amidst popular protests, the Malian army overthrew the government due to frustrations over military setbacks. Meanwhile, jihadi forces turned on the Tuareg

MNLA (Mouvement national de libération de l'Azawad—National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad), pushing them out of much of northern Mali.⁹

Against this backdrop, a French CT operation (Operation Serval) was initiated to assist the Malian government to reclaim territory and stabilize the government. While Operation Serval focused on concrete military objectives, its successor operation, Operation Barkhane, expanded the mandate. Barkhane evolved into an international coalition, led by the French, with the goal of eradicating terrorism across the Sahel. Ambitious and unclear objectives faced severe resistance, and the operation's eventual failure led to successive military coups in Mali in 2020 and 2021, as the armed forces eventually grew tired of Western involvement and a perceived failure to defeat jihadi groups comprehensively.¹⁰ Meanwhile, Western forces appeared disinclined to conduct risky counterinsurgency missions in the Sahel because of blowback from previous losses, particularly American casualties at Tongo Tongo during its support mission for the Nigerien state after these forces were ambushed by Islamic State affiliates.¹¹

Despite Western and regional attempts to stem the flood, jihadi attacks have only increased in recent years, reflecting significant societal issues. With limited or nonexistent job prospects and facing failing state infrastructure, many in the Sahel have turned to, or at least tolerated, jihadi groups. This reflects badly on insular regimes in Niamey, Bamako, and Ouagadougou that have failed their peripheral populations, particularly Muslim minority Fulani and Tuaregs. Many are caught in cycles of violence between governments and jihadi organizations that suspect communities of collaboration with their rivals, leading to abhorrent attacks on civilians. Add in the effects of climate change and the Sahel's failures have spun themselves into a slew of internal conflicts that often bleed across borders.¹²

The Western CT approach to the Sahel did not fail for lack of trying. The nearly 10-year-long French CT mission supported by many Western states certainly included significant investment and foreign policy commitment. Yet, today, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali have all moved away from the West and toward Russia, seeking new, authoritarian-style CT assistance to accompany their military junta regimes.

So why did these CT missions fail? First, the West misdiagnosed the problem. Western leaders ignored the lack of interest or buy-in from local governments, assuming that CT goals were mutually shared. Leaders in Mali, for example, were unhappy with the level of autonomy given to Tuareg groups by the U.N.-brokered Algiers Accords.¹³ While Western leaders focused on JNIM and ISGS, Malian military leaders were equally concerned with Tuareg autonomy. This is part of a greater issue: Africa's colonial-era borders and their relationship with conflict, including among ethnic groups grouped awkwardly together with rivals or away from their compatriots.

Building on these failed borders, illicit economies continue to play a key role in fueling terrorism, corruption, and instability across the region. Western CT operations were ill-prepared to deal with smugglers, businessmen, and government officials making up these networks.

Beyond misdiagnoses, the United States also brought a gun to a knife fight and failed to effectively tie in CT ops with non-military aid. Although this is symptomatic of an over-militarized CT approach across U.S. operations abroad, these shortcomings

were particularly egregious in the Sahel. A lack of infrastructure and development are painfully clear, more so than almost any region. Poverty, lack of social services, and corrupt governance are key drivers of terrorism in the Sahel, particularly in youthful populations that lack alternative livelihoods. While Western military interventions were well-staffed, their diplomatic and development wings were clipped. One need look no further than the significant staffing gaps in the U.S. State Department's African offices, which are so limited that such "hard-to-fill" posts were classified as a national security priority in 2023.¹⁴

Last, Western approaches failed to account for security preferences of partner countries in the Sahel. Blinded by great power competition, American diplomats and generals viewed Russian involvement in the Sahel through an unequivocally zero-sum lens—either Russia or the West. In Niger, the U.S. diplomatic jockeying to deter the new junta's pursuit of new partners in the Russians or Iranians was viewed as an attempt at strong-arming.¹⁵ By ignoring the agency of African states in choosing their international partners, not to mention the historical connections between African states and Russia or China, the West has gambled in the Sahel and lost. Without tangible results to show for their CT campaigns, junta leaders had no problems reorienting toward new allies. But an early review hardly suggests that gambling on the Russians has been good for security.

Understanding Africa Corps

For all the fanfare surrounding Wagner's infamous rise, the post-mortem has been riddled with significant mystery. What has emerged in its place is the aptly named, Africa Corps, reminiscent of Germany's Afrika Korps, which plundered the continent during the Nazi regime, and in many ways continuing the Nazi symbolism so deeply entrenched in the Wagner brand. But Africa Corps, unlike Wagner, is a formal project of the Russian state, an expeditionary corps like Wagner but with a command-and-control structure designed to ensure Moscow keeps the leash tight. Gone are any claims of plausible deniability, though it is likely that when Africa Corps faces negative press or defeats, Moscow will try to craft narratives to keep that façade alive. Where an unsavory oligarch headed Wagner, the Russian Ministry of Defense now serves as the direct underwriter of Africa Corps with Russian Deputy Defense Minister Yunus-Bek Yevkurov and Russian military intelligence (GRU) General Andrei Aveyanov reportedly positioned as the organization's commanding officers.¹⁶

The shift in command indicates a level of control both by the Ministry of Defense and GRU over former Wagner units located across Africa, while other former Wagner components located in and around Ukraine have been subsumed by Rosvgardia (Russian National Guard), the FSB, GRU, and even the Belarussian ministry of the interior for units stationed in Belarus.¹⁷ Meanwhile, and adding confusion to the mix, Wagner components are still active in several African countries, with the organization maintaining its structure in the Central African Republic (CAR) and retaining some level of autonomy in Mali under Wagner's legacy commanders.¹⁸ In Mali specifically, Africa Corps serves as the umbrella organization while the Wagner brand is still widely visible and used by personnel.¹⁹

Distinct from the elaborate corporate and criminal network that allowed Wagner to thrive, Africa Corps lacks the corporate infrastructure that helped offset the Wagner Group's costs, which

allowed the organization to expand Russian influence in countries where it deployed. This reflects both a fear of Prigozhin-like figures leading Africa Corps and an interest in state control, yet it also restricts the organization's ability to project power or extract resources that could benefit the Russian state. Meanwhile, Africa Corps has yet to reach the same level of fame or lore, either back in Russia, Africa, or the West, perhaps reflecting the challenges of Kremlin-run disinformation platforms in building grassroots interest in Russia's new security outfit. This is not for lack of trying. The Kremlin's efforts to create their own influence network via the African Initiative, a media ecosystem designed to mirror Prigozhin-era efforts at promoting Russia while spreading disinformation about the West, is up and running.²⁰ From disinformation campaigns targeting U.S.-funded anti-malaria efforts in Burkina Faso to organizing a "press tour" for Malian bloggers to visit Russian-occupied territories in Ukraine, only time will tell the African Initiative's longer-term impact.²¹

In that light, it is far too early to call Africa Corps a flop, but it is undeniable that the new Corps has run into significant issues since its inception. One of the key challenges in the shift to a public-sector version of the Wagner Group has been recruitment. Challenges in this area reportedly delayed its initial deployment to Niger. After Africa Corps' founding in 2023, the Kremlin tasked the Ministry of Defense with recruiting 40,000 troops—a monumental task amidst troop shortages during the war in Ukraine.²² Whether that figure was propaganda or an effort to virtue signal Moscow's commitment to African partners, it has fallen woefully short. Given recruitment shortcomings, the Kremlin halved its requirements, yet the Ministry of Defense was still unable to hit a 20,000-troop threshold for the force.²³ This points to problems in the state-backed model of private military companies, including issues with payment, organizational prestige, and casualty concerns.

The Emergence of Russia's Africa Corps

Like Wagner before it, Africa Corps' story is believed to have commenced in Libya. After Prigozhin's death, Wagner Group mercenaries in Libya were compelled to sign new contracts with the Ministry of Defense and remained at bases at or near airfields at Sirte, al-Khadim, al-Jufra, and Brak al-Shati. This was the beginning of the transition from Wagner to Africa Corps in Libya. However, in December 2023 an Il-76 transport aircraft used by Wagner was severely damaged by a drone or missile strike, dramatically impacting its logistics capacity.²⁴ Around this time, Russia's tenuous relations with Khalifa Haftar, head of the Libyan National Army, which controls most of eastern Libya, warmed. This led to a new military agreement, including an agreement for Russian naval access to the port of Tobruk, fulfilling a key Russian strategic objective of obtaining port facilities and a permanent naval base on NATO's southern flank.²⁵ Thus, Russia entered 2024 with a new motivation to make an impact on the Libyan civil war, just as Africa Corps would begin new deployments to the country. Russia's continued alliance with Haftar could have significant long-term impacts on Libya's stability and migration flows to Southern Europe.

Africa Corps' first major operation involved flooding Libya with troops and equipment, supporting the efforts of Russian ally Khalifa Haftar and providing a jumping-off point for future operations across the Sahel. Africa Corps has allegedly deployed thousands of recruits to Libya, including foreign fighters, supporting Russia's

foreign policy interests in the country.²⁶ While Russian forces only numbered approximately 800 at the beginning of 2024, this number more than doubled to 1,800 by early May.²⁷ This deployment coincided with Africa Corps' replacement of Wagner Group as the flagship Russian military entity operating in Libya. According to researchers at the Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM), a further 6,000 tons of military equipment was transported to Tobruk from the Russian naval base at Tartus during this period.²⁸ That transport reportedly included 2S12 Sani mortars, 2L81 trailers, and armed personnel carriers (APCs).²⁹ These developments point to the integral role played by Russian port facilities in the Kremlin style of aggressive, kinetic foreign policy.

Africa Corps troops in Libya have reportedly been deployed to at least 10 locations alongside Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA), and according to analysts, four Russian commanders responsible for Libya operations report directly to Yevkurov and rotate between Libya and Syria.³⁰ This highlights the importance of Libya for Africa Corps operations, serving as a crucial fulcrum in support of Russia's efforts in Africa, and especially across the Sahel. As it was for Wagner, Libya operates as a key logistical hub for the force, enabling it to project and distribute its military assets across other African states more efficiently. Reports note that some Africa Corps troops that arrived in Libya in early 2024 have since been transferred to Niger.³¹

Despite rumors about a Wagner deployment after Burkina Faso's initial coup in early 2022, substantive engagement was not forthcoming between the group and coup leader Damiba. After a second coup removed Damiba in favor of Capt. Ibrahim Traoré, the young leader opted for national means, including arming tens of thousands of civilian volunteers, to restore security through popular mobilization of militias.³² However, Traoré has increasingly looked to Russia for help as he finds himself trapped between the expansion of jihadi groups externally and the ever-present potential for mutinies and coups internally.³³

Traoré's hesitation with inking deals with Wagner seemed to subside when Moscow formally stood up Africa Corps. In January 2024, 100 Africa Corps troops arrived in Ouagadougou, supplemented with personnel from the Russian 81st Volunteer Spetsnaz Brigade—known as the BEARS unit.³⁴ It remains unclear if/how these Africa Corps fighters contributed to Burkina Faso's war with jihadi groups or to other security operations. Some members of the BEARS unit were recalled in August due to Russian manpower shortages in the face of the surprise Ukrainian offensive at Kursk.³⁵

Russian interest in Burkina Faso may have been initially piqued by the desire to protect gold mines run by Russian-owned Nordgold, led by the powerful Alexey Mordashov, that had been shuttered due to jihadi activity.³⁶ Unsurprisingly, Nordgold received permits for a mine (Yimougou) it had been pursuing for five years shortly after the coup in 2022. Experts have noted that Burkina Faso's junta has followed Mali's initiative, increasing state shares of gold exports through mining code amendments, perhaps in a bid to entice its Africa Corps deployment.³⁷ However, there have yet to be substantive linkages between Burkina Faso's mining capacity and its Africa Corps deployment. Instead, the most likely role of Africa Corps in Burkina Faso is one designed to insulate the Traoré regime, which extended military rule by five years in a declaration in late May 2024.³⁸ Africa Corps will undoubtedly have its work cut out for it as a regime guarantor as the Burkinabe army has faced an onslaught of attacks from jihadis that are only likely to further

strain tenuous intra-military relations.³⁹

The Africa Corps deployment to Niger looks quite similar to its activities in Burkina Faso. On April 10, 2024, 100 military "instructors" from Africa Corps arrived with anti-aircraft equipment, which some analysts think could have been an escalation tactic to accelerate the departure of U.S. air assets from Niger or as a tacit threat in signaling that Niger would not tolerate incursions of its airspace.⁴⁰ Later shipments included military and humanitarian aid, and the number of Africa Corps personnel deployed to the country increased.⁴¹ As noted by analysts at PISM, "the possibility of using an air base in Niger, centrally located in relation to the other Africa Corps missions, will consolidate Russia's logistical capabilities in Africa. However, the small Russian contingent will not be sufficient to effectively combat terrorist groups operating there."⁴² This diagnosis sounds remarkably similar to Africa Corps' situation in Burkina Faso. At a minimum, Africa Corps is in place to serve as a praetorian guard for junta leader General Abdourahamane Tchiani.

Elsewhere, Africa Corps may again be seeking to copy Wagner's resource extraction model. However, Russia's resource extraction access remains unclear in Niger, due to fraught gold mining locations (Tillabéri region).⁴³ Oil and uranium are more likely options, with Africa Corps serving as a bridgehead for Moscow's influence. The Nigerien junta has offered extractive concessions to Russian corporations, particularly in the uranium sector.⁴⁴ However, conclusive agreements on this subject have yet to be made, particularly as French, British, and Chinese companies still maintain significant involvement in both industries.⁴⁵

Africa Corps' Strategic and Operational Limits

The ease with which Wagner, and now Africa Corps, has displaced Western partners should not be mistaken for capability in difficult CT fights, particularly in the Sahel. The turn to Russia via Wagner and Africa Corps in the Sahel reflects a confluence of factors such as frustration with the West, a truncated list of viable security partners due to a series of unconstitutional power grabs, and short time horizons that have pushed nascent juntas to prioritize their own survival as paramount to CT missions. New junta regimes are primarily concerned with staying in power in the immediate and prefer policies that deviate from the status quo and appear proactive, even if long-term the policies are self-defeating. Wagner and now Africa Corps provide regime protection that Western partners would not (and should not). Moreover, these Russian proxies' pursuit of new CT operations that align with expectations of the armed forces and deviate from Western approaches that were often deemed too restrictive buys these fragile juntas more time, even if the operations are less effective in the long run.

Russia's Africa Corps has struggled to constitute itself in the midst of Wagner's lingering presence in places such as Mali. Many of Wagner's structures have proven evergreen, despite the Kremlin's attempts to sideline them and reconstitute them as part of the Africa Corps enterprise. This has been especially true outside of the Sahel, particularly in CAR but is also in Mali. In Mali, early reports noted that Wagner Group allegedly turned over their operations to Africa Corps, but there have been few changes in force posture, beyond the expansion of the organization's base at Bamako's international airport and Wagner's legacy fighters still operate under the Wagner brand.⁴⁶ In part, this may be strategic as it gives Moscow some cover to suggest that any failures in Mali are not

Africa Corps' shortcomings, but instead are Wagner's legacy forces. In CAR, Wagner has very much continued its resource extraction operations alongside its regime protection and military assistance programs, reinforcing the increasingly totalitarian regime of President Faustin-Auchange Touadéra.⁴⁷

While organizational structures are shifting, what remains constant, and is trending in an even worse direction, is the brutality of Russian mercenary activity in the Sahel. According to analysts at the Armed Conflict Location and Events Dataset (ACLED), since Prigozhin's death there has been an "81% increase in violence involving Russian mercenaries in Mali ... and a 65% increase in reported fatalities."⁴⁸ This reflects an ongoing counterinsurgency program that is failing to accomplish more than its Western predecessors had and instead is further degrading an already catastrophic security environment.

Africa Corps' missions in Burkina Faso and Niger are distinct. Wagner had no presence in either country, so the arrival of Africa Corps personnel offers an opportunity to assess the new Kremlin tool's value as a security force provider. Despite arriving in Ouagadougou and Niamey in January and April 2024, respectively, there is very little evidence to suggest Africa Corps has made any sort of tangible security gains unless one assesses their presence as effectively deterring any would-be coup-plotters from challenging the regimes of Traoré or Tchiani. This claim is a weak one at best. Meanwhile, any security force assistance it is offering clearly has not shifted the security landscape; violence is escalating in both countries, especially in Burkina Faso.

Despite Africa Corps' involvement, one of the key issues in Burkina Faso is its limited number of trained soldiers; this has led successive Burkinabe military regimes to weaponize the civilian population through self-defense militias known as Volunteers for the Defense of the Homeland (or Les Volontaires pour la défense de la Patrie-VDPs), who themselves exacerbate the conflict through attacks on civilians, particularly Fulani Muslims.⁴⁹ Violence against civilians has skyrocketed in the country. In February 2024, the Burkinabe army executed over 200 civilians over allegations of collaboration with jihadis.⁵⁰ In August 2024, an attack by JNIM on civilians building a trench system near Barsalogo resulted in 600 dead.⁵¹ Africa Corps has neither reined in the threat posed by jihadis nor served as a conduit to restrain government inflicted violence. Civilians bear the brunt.

In Niger, Africa Corps' footprint is equally weak as is Russia's in general, lacking an embassy in the country. However, Moscow claims it will be opening an embassy in Niamey and recent changes in Niger's CT strategy suggest a turn toward Putin-esque authoritarianism.⁵² The implementation of a new Nigerien terrorism ordinance gives the regime broad power to label civilians as suspected terrorists. Arbitrary detentions, freezing of assets, and the stripping of citizenship are just some of the potential consequences for civilians who end up in Niger's terrorism database.⁵³ Meanwhile, Niger is facing a new, non-jihadi threat. A pro-Bazoum militia, the Free Armed Forces (FAL), led by former Nigerien minister Rhissa Ag Boula, has formed with the goal of overthrowing the junta and reinstating the deposed president.⁵⁴ This threat may speak to Africa Corps' actual role in both Burkina Faso and Niger—coup-proofing the respective regimes. Instead of fighting difficult CT campaigns, Africa Corps appears to be holed up in Ouagadougou and Niamey, acting as a deterrent against threats stemming from within the regime. This strategy certainly weakens

rule of law outside of the capitals and offers jihadi and separatist groups the running room to flourish.

Both legacy Wagner operations in Mali and nascent Africa Corps deployments in Niger and Burkina Faso demonstrate the severe constraints of Russian military assistance on the continent. While Wagner's initial deployment in Mali reflected a greater commitment to offensive CT activities than the operations of Africa Corps in Burkina Faso or Niger, such strategies are by no means more effective there. While Moscow's Africa Corps reorganization efforts were still unfolding, Wagner CT operations in Mali won a significant public-relations victory in late 2023 with the taking of Kidal, a town previously under Tuareg separatist control.⁵⁵ That victory inspired the Malian army (FAMA) and emboldened Wagner, which in the interim had been folded under the Africa Corps umbrella but retained some level of autonomy. In late July 2024, a Wagner and FAMA convoy approached the town of Tinzaouaten in northern Mali, seeking to fight various insurgent and jihadi groups in the area. They got more than they bargained for. After being attacked by Tuareg forces and sustaining casualties, the convoy retreated into territory controlled by JNIM, where they were ambushed. The convoy limped home, having lost dozens of soldiers.⁵⁶ With this significant defeat, the Wagner Group showcased its limitations as a CT partner and watched its "image crumble."⁵⁷

Wagner's efforts to stage a retaliatory offensive in October 2024 further illustrated the group's limitations. Separatist forces who originally engaged the Wagner/FAMA contingent in July were able to identify and track Wagner's revenge convoy almost immediately, forcing the Russians to recalibrate and frame the operation as merely a body recovery effort.⁵⁸ Wagner's relationship with FAMA also appears to have deteriorated to the point where this limited operation was put in jeopardy.⁵⁹ Recent reporting from *The New York Times* highlighted this friction as "the Malian officers added that frustration with Wagner's behavior was growing within the country's military, and that they wanted partners who were more professional and disciplined."⁶⁰

Perhaps more concerning, JNIM militants launched a coordinated attack against two military targets in Bamako in September 2024, the first attack on Bamako since 2016.⁶¹ At least 50 Malian forces were killed, and the terrorists were able to set fire to the presidential plane. Given Wagner's primary base sits adjacent to the airport, the attack only amplified Wagner's limitations. Moscow immediately tried to assuage any concerns from their Sahelian partners. Just two days after the attack in Bamako, *Russia Times* reported of a meeting between Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov and Niger's ambassador to Moscow, Abdou Sidikou Isa, in which the two allegedly discussed security cooperation in the fight against Islamic terrorism in the Sahel.⁶²

One can easily connect Wagner's recent failures in Mali with similar failures in Mozambique and Syria, where defeats and casualties on the battlefield forced Wagner to remove itself from these deployments. While Russia may hope to explain away such failures as a symptom of Wagner that will die once the Africa Corps takeover matures, Moscow will need to seriously invest in its Africa Corps project if it wants something akin to a durable relationship with Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. The fall of Assad in Syria has the potential to complicate such investments, given the logistical challenges Moscow may face in supplying Africa Corps. Syria provided an ideal refueling stop along the routes from Russia to Libya and other sub-Saharan final destinations, along with friendly

airspace for military flights.⁶³ Perhaps more importantly, while Russia was able to prop up Assad for years, its inability to sustain Assad indefinitely raises questions about Africa Corps' ability to fulfil its role as a regime survival package. As it stands, the ruling juntas in those countries will likely determine that Africa Corps is not effective enough or they themselves will lose power. Regimes in Ouagadougou and Bamako already seem to be hedging their bets, with reports that Turkish private military outfits are present in both countries.⁶⁴

The Way Forward for U.S. Policy

In the April 2023 issue of *CTC Sentinel*, these authors argued:

*Near-peer competition in Africa and counterterrorism cannot, and should not, be decoupled. In order to compete with other powers, the United States will have to conduct security assistance well, especially in the counterterrorism space. Policymakers will need to be much more intentional, building unique regional strategies, while determining the degree to which a military approach is even necessary.*⁶⁵

The authors' assessment still rings true today, but it is critically important to recognize the risks associated with defining U.S. CT support narrowly through the lens of great power competition. At the forefront, couching support as a means to compete with Russia can, unintentionally or otherwise, discount the agency of African partners and become a self-defeating prospect.⁶⁶

Africa Corps is not the biggest threat to U.S. and European interests in Africa by a longshot. However, there are serious risks associated with letting Africa Corps run amok. The Sahel's authoritarian leaders might benefit from a praetorian guard, but they and their neighbors are now even more vulnerable to transnational terrorism. The sudden removal of traditional security partners in favor of Russian security forces is entrenching jihadism and authoritarian governance, two much more serious problems for the United States and its partners.⁶⁷ Even if recent events in Syria make Russia's presence untenable in the near term, which remains to be seen, there is little hope of turning back the clock to a more cooperative era. In other words, there is still high demand across the Sahel for security providers like Africa Corps.

There are few good options for improving the security force assistance model in the Sahel. The region's shifting politics makes collaboration difficult. The junta-led regimes in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger had large, public fallouts with the European Union, United Nations, ECOWAS, the United States, and France, making large security assistance missions with thousands of personnel unlikely in the future. Relying on contractors, a solution almost exclusively suggested by former and current contractors, does not offer a clear solution either. Even if the United States and its partners tried to promote Western-aligned contractor firms, the impact of contractors without the weight of Western security partners backing them has yet to be seen. As seen with both Wagner and Africa Corps, contractors often lack the size and scope to stabilize the security situation and can provoke the worst instincts of their host regimes, which could have grievous long-term effects on Sahelian populations.

Revamping U.S. policy in the Sahel and West Africa will require congressional budgetary support, an area where lawmakers have recently made important gains. For instance, one aspect of the 2019 Global anti-Fragility Act in particular aims to deter coups

before they happen by addressing the causes of instability.⁶⁸ This act is supported by a 10-year U.S. Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability (SPCPS), which includes seven African nations of the nine total countries—Libya, Mozambique, Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, and Togo. Although this legislation is plagued by bureaucratic yellow tape, it is an important step forward in addressing development challenges and improving interagency cooperation and involvement across these cases.⁶⁹

Cautiously, the United States might consider pragmatism on Section 7008 restrictions that block certain forms of aid to coup regimes. This legislation, put in place to avoid tying the United States to troubled, undemocratic regimes, still allows certain types of aid to continue. In general, U.S. State Department and USAID aid, including economic assistance, international security assistance, multilateral assistance, and export/investment assistance, as well as Department of Defense "train-and-equip programs under 10 U.S.C. §333," are banned for coup regimes. However, this only applies to aid given directly to governments, not aid given more vaguely to "promote democracy." Further, exceptions include "aid for certain specific purposes (e.g., humanitarian assistance, certain internal security force assistance, debt restructuring, and education)," or aid "that the President determines to be necessary for national security, subject to congressional notification."⁷⁰ Some have argued that it would be best to give junta leaders the tools to fight terrorism as they represent a less bad option compared to alternatives.⁷¹ That poses significant risks and puts the United States in a difficult position of balancing the defense of democracy with CT support. Analysts at the Center for Strategic and International Studies offer a middle ground, suggesting that any flexibility in Section 7008 should be geared toward non-lethal means and focused on improving civil-military relations.⁷²

The mishmash of legal authorizations defining U.S. action in the Sahel further demonstrates the critical need for a substantive Africa strategy. Left rudderless, the Department of State and U.S. Africa Command often tie actions in Africa to broader national priorities such as the global war on terror or great power competition. The collapse of U.S. efforts in the Sahel over the past four years serves as a wake-up call, but current U.S. engagement with littoral West Africa replicates the military-led, governance-agnostic style of Sahel engagement, with the exact same risks. Guinea has already undergone a coup in 2021, and public discontent in Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire could make them risky partners. Littoral West Africa, particularly Benin and Togo, need urgent support, but U.S. efforts would be ill-advised to use the same unsuccessful formula that failed the people of the Sahel and enabled Russia's entrance.

Whatever the direction, the more U.S. policy locks African states into a zero-sum game of great power competition, the less it can promote the kinds of stable democracies that can address insecurity. As in the Cold War, African juntas will play foreign powers against each other to remain in power. Even Western-aligned states such as Chad can take advantage to evade a proper democratic transition. The recent appearance of approximately 200 Russian forces under the banner of Africa Corps, this time in Equatorial Guinea, shows how African leaders will play great power politics to insulate themselves from calls to leave power.⁷³ It also appears to reflect the business model of Africa Corps, which continues to resemble a coup-proofing mechanism first and foremost. **CTC**

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