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CTCSENTINEL

OBJECTIVE · RELEVANT · RIGOROUS | APRIL 2025 · VOLUME 18, ISSUE 4



FEATURE ARTICLE

Iraqi Oil and the Iran Threat Network

MICHAEL KNIGHTS

A VIEW FROM THE CT FOXHOLE

Charlie Winter

CO-FOUNDER, EXTRAC AI

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FROM THE EDITOR

In this month's feature article, Michael Knights illuminates the nexus between Iraq's oil sector and the Iran threat network. He writes: "The Iran threat network suffered grievous blows in Lebanon, Syria, Gaza, and Iran itself in 2024, and this has arguably made oil-rich Iraq even more important to the network. Facing renewed maximum pressure from the United States, Iran needs not only Iraq's terrorist fundraising potential but also its value as a 'laundromat' through which Iranian energy products can be fraudulently relabeled as Iraqi exports. Using their control of the al-Sudani government, Iran-backed terrorist groups and militias are developing significant new strands of threat financing using Iraq's oil sector, which combine to provide billions of dollars of illicit value each year. Iraq is thus emerging as Iran's best bet for neutering the Trump administration's renewed maximum pressure campaign." He notes that "U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organizations are no longer content to steal oil, only to have smuggling businessmen realize most of the profits. Instead, terrorist organizations have muscled into this value-addition segment of the oil market in recent years, with AAH [Asaib Ahl al-Haq] and KH [Kataib Hezbollah] leading the pack."

Our interview is with Charlie Winter, the co-founder and chief research officer of ExTrac AI, an AI-assisted intelligence platform that identifies, maps, and forecasts geopolitical risk, including in the counterterrorism space. He states: "Our USP pivots around accessing, ingesting, and processing high-relevance publicly available information and data from hard-to-reach parts of the internet that reflects the online and offline activities and psychological operations of various non-state and state threat actors. And through our platform, which is both a web and mobile app, we provide both access to that data and the ability to generate insight from it rapidly—and we do that using a range of different kinds of automation, machine learning, [and] artificial intelligence." He adds: "We essentially have built our system to let machines do what they do best and let human analysts do what they do best, and enable the analysts to spend a lot more time performing the highest-value tasks in the intelligence cycle."

Ayush Verma, Imtiaz Baloch, and Riccardo Valle examine the Baloch insurgency in Pakistan. They write: "The Baloch insurgency in Pakistan has intensified sharply since the beginning of 2025, marked by sophisticated attacks such as the Jaffar Express hijacking by Baloch Liberation Army-Jeeyand faction (BLA-J) on March 11, 2025, which resulted in the kidnapping of more than 400 passengers and death of at least 26 hostages. Groups like BLA-J, Balochistan Liberation Front (BLF), and Baloch Liberation Army-Azad faction (BLA-A) continue to deploy suicide bombers, including women, and temporarily seize territories, targeting Chinese nationals and China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) projects. The insurgency's regional spillover, especially into Iran, and competition for resources and prominence among factions of the insurgency further complicate Pakistan's internal security." They add: "Without a political resolution addressing long-standing grievances, the insurgency threatens to escalate, destabilizing both national and regional security."

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Cover: Flames rise from the burning of excess hydrocarbons at an oil and gas field in Iraq on May 9, 2018. (Haidar Mohammed Ali/AFP via Getty Images)

Iraqi Oil and the Iran Threat Network

By Michael Knights

The Iran threat network suffered grievous blows in Lebanon, Syria, Gaza, and Iran itself in 2024, and this has arguably made oil-rich Iraq even more important to the network. Facing renewed maximum pressure from the United States, Iran needs not only Iraq's terrorist fundraising potential but also its value as a "laundromat" through which Iranian energy products can be fraudulently relabeled as Iraqi exports. Using their control of the al-Sudani government, Iran-backed terrorist groups and militias are developing significant new strands of threat financing using Iraq's oil sector, which combine to provide billions of dollars of illicit value each year. Iraq is thus emerging as Iran's best bet for neutering the Trump administration's renewed maximum pressure campaign.

This study is the sixth in a series of *CTC Sentinel* articles since 2019 that have detailed the ongoing rise of the self-styled, Tehran-backed resistance (*muqawama*) factions in Iraq, and of Iran's growing dominance within the Iraqi state. The first three articles¹ in 2019-2020 focused on the how the *muqawama* had achieved one element of state capture by establishing, formalizing, and assuring Iraqi government funding for the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), Iraq's equivalent of the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).² The author's fourth³ and fifth⁴ co-authored *CTC Sentinel* studies in October 2021 and December 2023 focused increasingly on state capture by the militias. Iran-backed terrorists and militias lost the 2021 elections in Iraq yet ended up picking the prime minister anyway,⁵ taking charge of the world's fifth-largest oil producer.⁶ The December 2023 piece documented how the country's oil economy, its freedoms, and its intelligence services were being gutted by militias to ensure the permanence of their rule.⁷ The result has been the emergence of a terrorist-run state with greater resources than any of Iran's other proxy networks, hiding behind the façade of a sovereign country.⁸

This study will take forward the chronology of the evolution of the Tehran-backed *muqawama* factions in Iraq by drilling down specifically into the unparalleled terrorist threat financing potential of the Iraqi oil sector. Drawing on progressively larger networks of contacts, citizen journalism, and an enlarged analytic team, the

author's online collection effort is strongly supplemented by the same kind of detailed interview process with U.S. and Iraqi subjects that underpinned the prior *CTC Sentinel* studies referenced above.^a To this has been added a growing body of detailed investigative journalism from 2024 on oil-smuggling in and through Iraq, undertaken by *The Wall Street Journal*,⁹ *Economist*,¹⁰ Bloomberg,¹¹ Reuters,¹² S&P Global,¹³ Middle East Economic Survey,¹⁴ and Iraq Oil Report.¹⁵ Documents regarding oil-smuggling, leaked from the servers of Iranian government and commercial entities, have also been collected online¹⁶ and informed this study. Marine vessel threat analysis has also been utilized in the course of this report.^b

The overarching theme of this analysis is that closely monitoring Iraq's oil sector should be a priority for counterterrorism and sanctions analysts. The combination of Iraqi oil wealth, extraordinary corruption, and state capture by members of the Iran threat network has the potential to fatally undermine any maximum pressure effort on Iran's regime, most recently re-energized by the United States via NSPM-2.¹⁷ Part One of the study will briefly recap the history of Saddam-era and post-2003 militia appropriation of Iraqi oil, noting the recurrence of certain networks and methods across multiple periods. In Part Two, the article will then build on the author's co-authored December 2023 *CTC Sentinel* state capture piece by describing exactly how militias gained unprecedented full control of Iraqi oil since 2022 under the government of Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani. After explaining in Part Three how U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organizations and other militias evolved a system for sharing control between themselves, Part Four of the study will look at the mechanisms for purloining energy products and exporting them outside Iraq. Part Five will outline how Iran then often directly benefits itself by comingling Iranian energy products into unsanctioned Iraqi flows in order to sidestep U.S. sanctions implementation efforts. The final section—Part Six—will highlight emerging issues for intelligence analysts and energy industry regulators to pay attention to.

a Militia Spotlight's online blog and group profiles were established to track this process in detail and produce evidentiary building blocks, using legal standards of proof and certainty. The project collects militia statements in Arabic and other languages, archives evidence that risks being taken offline at a later point, and uses a data fusion process to synthesize information and analyze trends. The Militia Spotlight blog is at <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/series/militia-spotlight> and the Militia Spotlight profiles page is at <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/series/militia-spotlight-profiles>

b This category of services includes but is not limited to Automatic Identification System (AIS) vessel tracking sites such as MarineTraffic and VesselFinder. The AIS is a shipboard transponder, operating in the VHF maritime band, updating as often as every two seconds. When the system is working as designed, each ship "symbol" displayed by the system provides the actual ship name, course and speed, classification, registration number, size, position, and current loan of the vessel.

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Figure 1: The key oil-smuggling and sanctions evasion locations in Iraq's Basra province. Ports are marked with anchors. Asphalt plants are indicated by blue triangles and concentrations of oil storage tanks and lakes are shown in red shading.

Part One: Historical Oil-Smuggling Patterns in Iraq

Oil-smuggling has a long and rich history in modern Iraq. Iraqi oil was either embargoed or sold by the United Nations under sanctions in the 1990s,¹⁸ so the Saddam regime ran a parallel “off-the-books” oil smuggling operation¹⁹ that did not utilize Iraqi ports or the State Oil Marketing Organization (SOMO). Instead, oil transited the predominately Kurdish border areas of northern Iraq and utilized a vast fleet of oil tanker trucks to enable flows that reached hundreds of thousands of barrels per day (bpd)²⁰ to Turkey, Iran, and Jordan.^c Smaller quantities of oil were exported by sea, outside the U.N. system, and were opposed by a dedicated

multinational maritime intercept operation.^d

This system primed the pump for post-2003 oil smuggling in Iraq—no longer to allow the Saddam regime to circumvent U.N. sanctions, but instead to enable sub-state militias to exploit chaos in Iraq to smuggle stolen oil out of the country. Weak state control of oil infrastructure allowed numerous armed groups to purloin un-metered crude oil and oil products from oilfields and storage tanks²¹ and to transport it to oil bourses²²—informal trading markets—where it could be aggregated and sold to domestic users in fuel-hungry Iraq, or sold at a higher price in the more prosperous Kurdistan Region of Iraq or on international markets.²³

Unholy Alliance: Northern Smugglers and Iran-Backed Militias

Even after 2003, the smuggling system retained a strong Iraqi Kurdish component, being that the 1990s smuggling networks, expertise, and infrastructure had primarily transited Kurdistan

c Smaller illicit tanker flows went to Iran and Jordan, with the export of Iraqi crude being disguised within (then un-sanctioned) Iranian crude oil exports. Iraq was also able to cut deals with its erstwhile enemy, Iran, to disguise the origin of Iraqi oil shipments being shipped out of southern Iraq. Ghaith Abdul Ahad, “Oiling the wheels of war: smuggling becomes the real economy of Iraq,” *Guardian*, June 9, 2007. See also Robin Wright, “Iran Opens Key Isle to Iraqi Oil Smugglers, U.S. Says,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 3, 2000.

d Maritime Intercept Operations lasted from August 1990 to March 2003, and were used to enforce U.N. Sanctions Resolutions 661 (economic embargo), UNSCR 665 (calling for naval forces to enforce the embargo), UNSCR 687 (the Gulf War cease-fire; authorizing imports of food, medical supplies, and U.N.-approved goods), and UNSCR 986 (the so-called “Oil for Food” deal). See William H. Thiesen, “The Long Blue Line - 20 Years OIF: Coast Guard combat operations in Operation Iraqi Freedom,” U.S. Coast Guard, March 19, 2023.

on its way to international markets.^{24e} With the U.S.-U.K. military effort in 2003-2011 preventing mass-scale oil smuggling from the south,^f oil bourses in the Sulaymaniyah and Kirkuk provinces remained the most prolific aggregating hubs.²⁵ In the author's view, based on multi-year research,²⁶ this pedigree of oil-smuggling experience positioned Sulaymaniyah and Kirkuk businessmen as the ideal partners for Iran-backed militias as the latter gradually took over the Iraqi government during and since Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's second term (in 2010-2014).²⁷ Following the U.S. withdrawal in 2011, the power of Iran-backed militias such as Kataib Hezbollah (KH)²⁸ and Asaib Ahl al-Haq (AAH)^{29g} grew steadily. AAH in particular entered the parliament (from 2014 onward)³⁰ with a growing roster of MPs^{31h} and gained control of the Ministry of Industry and Mines (MoIM) since 2014-2018³² when the MoIM had an acting, part-time minister—today's Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani, who has a demonstrated close working relationship with the AAH leader, Qais al-Khazali.³³ⁱ AAH's well-documented exploitation of MoIM allowed it to corner the scrap metal market,^j then loot the Bayji refinery,³⁴ and finally dominate the private sector metals industry.^k

Once entrenched at MoIM,^l it was a short and logical step for AAH to get into fuel oil theft, exploiting the huge surpluses of this lower value product that built up in Iraq at the time.^m This was logical because Iraqi state-run industries receive allocations of heavily-subsidized fuel oilⁿ primarily transported by the Ministry of Oil's distribution arm, the Oil Products Distribution Company (OPDC).^o Initially focused on gaining access to stolen or subsidized oil and taking it to Kurdistan-based oil bourses,^p AAH developed an oil trucking and security unit under a fighter Mustafa Hashem Hashim Lazem al-Bahadli, also known as Abu Zahra.^q This part of AAH developed a close working relationship from 2011 onward with Sulaymaniyah native Motassam Akram, the long-time dual-hatted Iraqi Deputy Minister of Oil for Distribution and OPDC head, a central player feeding the oil bourses described above.^r

As Akram aged and faded away as a player in the late 2010s ahead of his retirement in 2020,^s the key partner to AAH became

e The ongoing operation of oil bourses and the key role of Kurdish smuggling families is confirmed by multiple reporting networks canvassed by the author, to the point of this being common knowledge and widely accepted. Author interviews, multiple Iraqi and Western contacts, 2023-2025; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

f This was not a simple or uncontested process, with well-armed smuggler clans often going toe-to-toe in firefights with Western forces. See Ben Lando, "Analysis: Iraq's oil smuggling," UPI, December 15, 2006, which begins with a U.K.-Danish raid on a smuggler clan.

g AAH was later designated by the United States as a foreign terrorist organization (FTO) in 2020. See "State Department Terrorist Designations of Asaib Ahl al-Haq and Its Leaders, Qays and Laith al-Khazali," U.S. Department of State, January 3, 2020.

h Asaib went from zero MPs in 2010 to one in 2014 and then to 15 in 2018.

i In the assessment of the Militia Spotlight team, it is reasonable to conclude that al-Sudani received strong and early backing from Qais al-Khazali as al-Sudani sought to become Iraq's premier. The period of al-Sudani's acting ministership at MoIM coincides with the period when AAH made its biggest strides in the ministry, and the post-2022 al-Sudani premiership is the period when AAH again made unprecedented strides in controlling the oil sector.

j Through these relationships, AAH cornered the market in scrap metal businesses, where AAH gained advantages that became increasingly useful as the counter-Islamic State war generated even larger quantities of scrap metal and large-scale looting opportunities—such as the wholesale removal of industrial metals and equipment from Bayji refinery, and the gathering of scrap metal in post-war Mosul. John Davidson, "Exclusive: Iran-backed groups corner Iraq's postwar scrap metal market – sources," Reuters, February 13, 2019.

k Domination of scrap metal transitioned into domination of the broader Iraqi metals industries, including securing fraudulent import exemptions via investment licenses to allow AAH to bring vast quantities of duty-free Iranian steel into Iraq at market-beating prices. AAH also used its shadow control of MoIM to block the creation of private sector metals business that could compete with AAH and with Iranian imports. This assessment is based on a synthesized intelligence process and is confirmed by multiple reporting networks canvassed by the author, to the point of this being common knowledge and widely accepted. Author interviews, multiple Iraqi and Western contacts, 2023-2025; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

l After al-Sudani came the 2018-2022 ministership of Saleh al-Jabbouri, a confederate of Sunni politician Abu Mazen, a U.S.-sanctioned Salah al-Din province politician who is also close to AAH and who was designated on charges of political corruption and abetting Iran-backed militias. Al-Jabbouri is a Mosul-trained chemical engineer and held a senior management position in the State Fertilizer Company of Iraq at Khor al-Zubayr, both of which may be interesting insights in relation to the description of AAH smuggling involving the port that is presented in this *CTC Sentinel* article. Multiple reporting networks claim that since losing the ministry in 2020, Saleh al-Jabbouri worked to protect subsidies and investment licenses granted to AAH-supported projects in the iron and steel industries, regularly lobbying government officials to expedite AAH-backed investment licenses. For the Abu Mazen designation, see "Treasury Sanctions Persons Associated with Serious Human Rights Abuse and Corrupt Actors in Iraq," U.S. Department of the Treasury, July 18, 2019. For the above insights on al-Jabbouri, see author interviews, multiple Iraqi and Western contacts, 2021-2025; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

m The oversupply of fuel oil versus domestic demand hovered around 100,000 barrels per day in 2009-2014, and lacking sufficient storage, Iraq began mixing it with crude oil exports (which lowered the specifications of Basra Light crude oil, incurring penalties and damaging buyer relations) or reinjecting it into oilfields (which often damages reservoirs). By the time of the Integrated National Energy Strategy in 2013, Iraq was desperate for solutions to the fuel oil conundrum. This is the author's assessment but is a mainstream interpretation of the events.

n This allocation process will be described in depth, but it is worth noting here that it is an open and longstanding Iraqi government policy and is widely understood.

o Some fuel oil is piped to end-users (such as refineries) by the Oil Pipelines Company (OPC), from whose depots the OPDC may then truck shorter distances to end-users close to the refinery. Author interviews, multiple Iraqi and Western contacts, 2023-2025; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

p AAH initially started in oil theft with small trucking operations. Author interviews, multiple Iraqi and Western contacts, 2023-2025; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

q This is an individual with recurring and current relevance to AAH's oil-smuggling arm. His real name is Mustafa Hashem Hashim Lazem al-Bahadli, and he is also known as "the magician" (al-Safer). Author interviews, multiple Iraqi and Western contacts, 2023-2025; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

r Motassam Akram is a legendary and widely recognized figure in the oil-smuggling scene, whose longstanding coordination of the industry is widely recognized. Author interviews, multiple Iraqi and Western contacts, 2023-2025; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

s Akram died in 2023. Author interviews, multiple Iraqi and Western contacts, 2020-2021; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

a different Sulaymaniyah Kurd known as Salim Ahmad Said^t was identified by a *Wall Street Journal* investigation in 2022³⁵ as a prolific smuggler and “the man behind the oil-blending operation.”^{36u} Salim Ahmed Said was identified in the investigation as the owner (which he denied)^{37v} of Al-Iraqia Shipping Services & Oil Trading FZE (AISSOT).^w In commercial prospectuses, Salem Ahmed Said has told potential partners that he controls a broader transportation network controlling more than a thousand trucks and 10 Very Large Crude Carrier (VLCC) oil tankers.^x

The AISSOT Scheme in 2017-2019

According to *The Wall Street Journal*, AISSOT was accused of “using ship-to-ship transfers of oil in waters that lie between Iraq and Iran and then forging documents to hide the origin of the cargo, according to corporate documents reviewed by *The Wall Street Journal*, shipping data and people familiar with the matter. By passing off the blended oil as Iraqi, those involved can avoid Western sanctions targeting Iranian oil.”³⁸ According to multiple reporting networks spoken to by the author of this *CTC Sentinel* report, AISSOT would load a fifth of the amount of the authorized Iraqi fuel oil export onto tankers that arrived already loaded with four-fifths of the export cargo made up of sanctioned Iranian oil.^y The smuggling network is alleged to have received a “cut” from Iranian state oil smugglers each time this was done.³⁹ It was assessed by *The Wall Street Journal* that transactions of this nature represented around 25% of Iran’s sanctions-busting oil exports in

2020.⁴⁰

The flow of Iraqi oil transported by AISSOT, into which Iranian oil was mixed, was itself controversial for a different reason. The Iraqi government of Prime Minister Adel Abdal-Mahdi, which was dominated by Iran-backed militias including AAH,^z switched the marketing of fuel oil away from the State Oil Marketing Organization and gave this task to the Iraqi Oil Tankers Company (IOTC).⁴¹ Multiple reporting networks claim that the IOTC then awarded AISSOT an exclusive, sole-source, no-bid, and low fixed-price contract to buy, transport, store, and export Iraqi fuel oil via the Khor al-Zubayr (KAZ) port in Basra.⁴² Minister of Oil Thamer Ghadban calculated that the net loss to Iraq of under-valuing the fuel oil sold to AISSOT was \$250 million per year.⁴³ The AISSOT scheme was shut down in 2019, just as the comingling of Iranian crude was noticed by the first Trump administration.⁴⁴ Despite death threats from AAH to Iraqi government figures,^{aa} the Ministry of Oil removed ministry officials implicated in the AISSOT scheme.^{ab} The government of Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi in 2020-2022 continued this trend, blocking the militias from gaining access to fuel oil or the marine export channels needed to export it.⁴⁵

Part Two: The New Politics of Oil-Smuggling since 2022

The October 2022 appointment of Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani breathed life back into the oil-smuggling schemes of Iran-backed terrorist groups and militias in Iraq. Two U.S.-designated terrorist movements, AAH and KH, were (and remain at the time of publication) key members of the Coordination Framework (CF) parliamentary bloc that nominated al-Sudani, with Asaib Ahl al-Haq having been his earliest backer for premier, dating back to al-Sudani’s cooperation with AAH as acting industry minister.⁴⁶ The Iran-formed Badr Organization was (and remains at the time of writing) another of al-Sudani’s coalition partners.⁴⁷ As was the case when Adel Abdal-Mahdi was appointed by the militias in 2018 (after which the AISSOT scheme gathered pace), the appointment of al-Sudani is alleged to have triggered a new acceleration of oil

t During the course of a multi-year research effort for this piece, including numerous interviews with Iraqi and Western oil industry experts, a consistent multi-sourced narrative has built regarding Salim Ahmed Said, giving the author the basis of evidence to reasonably believe that Salim Ahmed Said has been identified properly as the current oil-smuggling kingpin of Iraq. Based on consistent interviewee reporting, he is also known inside Iraq as Hajji Omaid Ahmad and sometimes as Dr. Salim. He holds Iraqi, British, and (unusually) Russian citizenships. He is the brother of Jalal Ahmad Said, the owner of the Kurdistan-based conglomerate, Rania Group. Like Motassam Akram, Salem Ahmed Said has an outsized reputation, and his name and influence is widely recognized by oil industry professionals working on Iraq. Author interviews, multiple Iraqi and Western contacts, 2023-2025; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

u Muhanad Alwan, former Operations Director at AISSOT, publicly accused Salim (in *The Wall Street Journal*) of being the true head of AISSOT and stated that Iran had a financial interest in the company.

v Muhanad Alwan, former Operations Director at AISSOT, publicly accused Salim (in *The Wall Street Journal*) of being the true head of AISSOT and stated that Iran had a financial interest in the company.

w AISSOT was a joint venture owned by the state-owned enterprise Iraqi Oil Tankers Company (IOTC) and the Arab Maritime Petroleum Transport Company (AMPTC), a pan-Arab company formed in 1973 in which Arab oil producers such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Kuwait hold a share. See Rania El Gamal, “Iraq sets up oil shipping, trading joint venture,” Reuters, August 16, 2017.

x The author has seen resumes and prospectuses forwarded by Salem Ahmed Said to potential partners. Multiple reporting networks state that Salem Ahmed Said also owns IKON Petroleum and Rhine Shipping DMCC. The Rania Group has extensive land transportation assets. Author interviews, multiple Iraqi and Western contacts, 2023-2025; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

y Thus, a 175,000-barrel allocation of Iraqi fuel oil might be split into five shipments of 35,000 barrels of actual Iraqi fuel oil, mixed each time with 140,000 barrels of Iranian oil already on the vessels. Author interviews, multiple Iraqi and Western contacts, 2024-2025; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

z In 2016-2018, the Ministry of Oil was led by Adel Abdal-Mahdi, who also had close relations with Qais al-Khazali, and who was then selected by the Iran-backed militias as Iraq’s next prime minister in 2018. During Adel Abdal-Mahdi’s tenure as Minister of Oil and then premier, AAH’s power within government grew considerably, particularly after AAH went from one to 15 seats in Iraq’s notoriously poorly monitored 2018 elections. See Michael Knights, “Embracing Asaib Ahl al-Haq: Pragmatism or Naïveté?” Hudson Institute, October 9, 2024.

aa For instance, when the AISSOT scheme was shut down the scheme on Ghadban’s orders, AAH threatened to kill one of Ghadban’s deputies involved in the issue, and Ghadban was forced to intervene directly with AAH leader Qais al-Khazali and with two successive prime ministers (Adel Abdal-Mahdi and Mustafa al-Kadhimi) to protect the official. Multiple reporting networks relay that for three years afterwards, the official continued to receive death threats against himself and his daughter from AAH, through intermediaries and in text messages, and he had a protective watch put on him by Iraq’s intelligence services. Author interviews, multiple Iraqi and Western contacts, 2023-2025; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

ab For instance, Khudair Abbas Abed, the director general of the Ministry of Oil Audit Directorate, was removed in 2019 for providing confidential information to Salim Ahmad Said and for falsifying audits to support AISSOT smuggling operations. Mohammed Mohsin Saadoun, the director of the shipping department at SOMO, was fired in 2020 for failing to report Iranian ship movements in the ship-to-ship transfer and fuel oil floating storage areas off Basra, after which Saadoun left Iraq to live in Iran. Author interviews, multiple Iraqi and Western contacts, 2023-2024; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

smuggling and Iran sanctions evasion schemes.^{48ac} But before oil smuggling could return at scale, the various armed factions within the CF needed to establish a pecking order and a way to share the spoils.

First-mover Advantage for Asaib Ahl al-Haq

When it comes to terrorist threat financing in Iraq, ministries are key terrain, and the most valuable “high ground” is the minister, his deputies, and the director-generals (DGs) who control the flow of authorization and paperwork.⁴⁹ In theory, within the late 2022 deal for government formation, former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki was the politician with “first rights” on decision-making within the Ministry of Oil.⁵⁰ Al-Maliki’s close confidantes had sought to emplace an oil official called Laith al-Shaher as minister but had to compromise,^{ad} with him instead being appointed as the new deputy oil minister for distribution, the pivotal role for fuel oil smuggling that Motassam Akram had filled for well over a decade. Yasser Sukhail al-Maliki, Nouri al-Maliki’s son-in-law, was unofficially positioned in late 2022 as a key overseer of the new oil minister Hayan Abdal-Ghani.⁵¹

Very quickly, however, it became apparent that AAH was unwilling to allow al-Maliki to dominate the oil portfolio. In early 2023, Laith al-Shaher was forced into retirement through a gambit engineered by AAH,⁵² being replaced as deputy minister by an AAH-adjacent oil ministry official called Ali al-Maarij.^{ae} This bureaucratic trick was allegedly suggested by Salim Ahmed Said, who had continued to build influence behind the scenes in Iraq during the two years since the collapse of the AISSOT venture.^{af} Maarij had built ties to Salim Ahmed Said and AAH during Maarij’s tenure as the head of the parliamentary oil and gas committee in 2017-2018.⁵³ The balance of available evidence suggests that a financial partnership was formed from 2021 onward in which Salim

Ahmed Said agreed to provide multi-million dollar payments^{ag} to AAH in return for the government approvals and support necessary to reconstitute an oil-smuggling scheme on-par with, or exceeding, the scale and ambition of the AISSOT venture.^{ah}

Salim Ahmad Said, Ali al-Maarij, and AAH moved very quickly in the first quarter of 2023 to control the parts of the ministry that generated the paperwork for auditing, loading, transporting, and unloading fuel oil.⁵⁴ The OPDC, the state-owned subsidiary that moves fuel oil and other oil products around Iraq, fell under the control of Hussein Talib Abboud, an official sponsored and protected by Asaib Ahl al-Haq.⁵⁵ AAH also gained pole position in the oil ministry’s Technical Directorate,^{ai} which recommends how much fuel oil to allocate to industry and which fell under the control of a second AAH-backed director, Hassanein Abdal-Latif.⁵⁶ The real power in the State Oil Marketing Organization began to move to a deputy director-general called Khudair Abbas Abed, an oil ministry official who previously lost his position heading the Audit Directorate (which accounts for the disposal of oil liquid) when the AAH-backed AISSOT scheme was shut down in 2019.^{aj}

Perfecting a Coordination Mechanism

By March 2023, a full-scale factional crisis was underway within the CF for control of the oil sector due to AAH’s runaway success in dominating Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani’s government.⁵⁷ This triggered strong pushback from the other two major powers in the CF—former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and Hadi al-Ameri, the head of the Iran-formed Badr Organization.⁵⁸ The answer was the creation of coordination councils at various levels to ensure other factions did not feel cut out by AAH and Salim

ac Multiple independent interviewees describe the access of oil-smuggling businessmen and militias to have increased greatly after the November 2022 government formation, with the rapid relaxation of al-Kadhimi-era controls on oil-smuggling and the well-orchestrated return of conditions that were highly conducive to profitable smuggling operations, as described in this CTC report.

ad Basra MPs in Iraq’s parliament have begun to demand that oil ministers are Basrawi, as the oil sector is dominated by Basra output. Laith al-Shaher was set aside on these grounds, while Basrawis make up the current Minister Hayan Abdal-Ghani and the senior Deputy Minister Bassem Mohammed Khudair. Author interviews, multiple Iraqi and Western contacts, 2022-2025; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

ae Ali al-Maarij is a Maysan-born oilman who was director of the Maysan Oil Company and then served on the Oil and Gas committee in parliament, before becoming head of contracts and licensing at the ministry of oil. Author interviews, multiple Iraqi and Western contacts, 2022-2025; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

af Multiple independent interviewees describe the removal of Laith al-Shaher to have been hatched by Salim Ahmed Said and Ali al-Maarij, the latter being a direct beneficiary of Laith’s removal. Author interviews, multiple Iraqi and Western contacts, 2022-2025; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

ag In the author’s view, as the result of a synthesized intelligence process, AAH intensified its historic relationship with Salim Ahmed Said in 2021, with both sides perhaps anticipating a major AAH win in the 2021 elections. AAH’s partnership offer returned Salim Ahmed Said to the center of Iraq’s illicit oil export mechanism. A single reporting network claimed that Salim Ahmed Said committed to pay \$200 million to AAH in commissions if it installed him as the “shadow oil minister” in Iraq. This was agreed. Multiple reporting networks concur that Asaib Ahl al-Haq leader Qais al-Khazali was the earliest backer of Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani, and subsequently became the dominant influence over the premier, and therefore cabinet subordinates such as Minister of Oil Hayan Abdal Ghani, who has been fully deferential to Salim Ahmed Said since his appointment in November 2022. Abdal-Ghani’s motivations are described by multiple reporting networks in a rather consistent manner: He is a soft character, keen to placate all interests, and somewhat sympathetic to pan-Shi’a movements including the PMF and the Iraqi *muqawama*. Author interviews, multiple Iraqi and Western contacts, 2022-2025; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

ah A single reporting network claimed that Salim Ahmed Said proposed a \$200 million payment to AAH for the facilitation of \$3 billion worth of fuel oil exports, calculated at six million metric tons. As will be discussed later in the Iran sanctions evasion section, this fits with the parameters of a reported Iranian debt recovery program in Iraq. Author interview, Iraqi oil industry contact, 2024; exact date, name, and place withheld at request of the interviewee.

ai The Technical Directorate of the Ministry of Oil recommends allocations of fuel oil to domestic users based on their assessed needs. This is the key directorate that must be controlled to ensure the flow of subsidized fuel oil to industries that, in reality, cannot justify the allocations and instead send the oil to smuggling. Author interviews, multiple Iraqi and Western contacts, 2022-2025; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

aj Khudair Abbas Abed had been removed as director general for audit in 2019 on suspicion of leaking ministry documents to Salim Ahmed Said in relation to the AISSOT scheme. Author interviews, multiple Iraqi and Western contacts, 2022-2025; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

Ahmed Said. Salem Ahmed Said is alleged by multiple reporting networks to have created a talking shop for oil smugglers^{ak}—or perhaps a loose kind of cartel^{al}—in which he was the first among equals but other smugglers (and their political sponsors) were able to air grievances and negotiate for market share. This oil smuggling council then communicates its orders to government agencies via intermediaries who are alleged to include Abdul-Qadr Abdal-Ghani, the personal secretary and close relative of Minister of Oil Hayan Abdal-Ghani,⁵⁹ Yasser Sukhail al-Maliki,⁶⁰ Deputy Minister of Oil for Upstream Bassem Mohammed Khudair,⁶¹ and Majid al-Saadi, the director general of security permits at the Ministry of Oil.^{am}

Alongside the creation of the smuggler cartel, changes in ministry decision-making have also aided power-sharing: For instance, the Economic Directorate of the Ministry of Oil lost most of its oversight function of sales prices, commercial models, bidding and sole-source contracting, and joint ventures—precisely the kind of oversight intended to detect and block AISSOT-type schemes.⁶² Since June 2023, the Ministry of Oil instead manages such issues on a case-by-case basis via hand-picked, closed-door committees of deputy ministers, DGs, and managers that include officials controlled by each of the major CF factions.⁶³ Further balancing of faction interests is done at the Prime Minister's Office, where Chief of Staff Ihsan al-Awadi and the PM's brother, Abbas al-Sudani,^{64 an} have both been highly active in oil matters.⁶⁵

These collective forums appear to have added a degree of stability to militia exploitation of the oil sector, with strenuous efforts made to keep the system in place.^{ao} This is not to say that

“The cartel and its political-militia nexus now brings together impressive capabilities: an extraordinarily potent blend of oil sector, smuggling, and terrorist financing capabilities. Incorporating some of Iraq’s most experienced oil technocrats—and combined with the CF’s control of Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani—today’s cartel is the oil-smuggling equivalent of the royal flush in poker.”

AAH has agreed to a level playing field with al-Maliki and Badr. Based on available evidence gathered by the author in an intensive multi-year research effort, AAH (typically fronted in oil disputes by strongman Laith al-Khazali and in ministry matters by Ali al-Maarij)^{66 ap} enjoys the most influence of any one faction.^{67 aq} In the author's assessment, what changed in mid-2023 is that non-AAH factions successfully vouchsafed their seats at the table, narrowly forestalling what might have become an exclusive AAH-Salim Ahmed Said monopoly—albeit with al-Maliki and Badr still present only as junior partners at this stage, and with the other oil smugglers falling in under Salim Ahmed Said.^{68 ar} In the author's view,⁶⁹ the cartel and its political-militia nexus now brings together impressive capabilities: an extraordinarily potent blend of oil sector, smuggling, and terrorist financing capabilities. Incorporating some of Iraq's most experienced oil technocrats—and combined with the CF's control of Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani—today's cartel is the oil-smuggling equivalent of the royal flush in poker.

Part Three: How Terrorists Access Oil in al-Sudani's Iraq

It is easier to reuse and refine successful and proven models than to reinvent the wheel or fix things that are not broken; in the author's experience, this is how Iranian and Iraqi terrorist organizations approach the oil-smuggling business in Iraq.⁷⁰ Today's oil-

ak Multiple independent interviewees describe an “oil council” or “a group” formed by Salim Ahmed Said to create greater cohesion among oil-smuggling operations. Multiple independent interviewees describe the council as including the famed oil-smuggling networks run by the Janabi and Kaissi families, mainly represented by Ahmad al-Janabi, plus other players such as the so-called Samarrai network and a long-term commercial partner to Salim Ahmed Said called Saad Faisal Ibrahim. Multiple, unconnected reporting networks describe these players as collectively being the key commercial network active in the obscuration, and trading of stolen Iraqi oil and sanctioned Iranian oil.

al The Merriam-Webster definition of a cartel is “a combination of independent commercial or industrial enterprises designed to limit competition or fix prices: a combination of political groups for common action.” In the assessment of the author, it is reasonable to conclude on the basis of multiple independent interviewees that the oil council led by Salim Ahmed Said is seen by all its members as providing some value, albeit reportedly being heavily lopsided in favor of its founder, with Salim Ahmed Said being, by far, the first among equals. Author interviews, multiple Iraqi and Western contacts, 2022-2025; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

am Majid al-Saadi has, for many years, been a notorious name within Iraq's oil sector, capable of monetizing his ability to block almost any appointee or project. Author interviews, multiple Iraqi and Western contacts, 2023-2025; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

an Multiple reporting networks stated that Abbas al-Sudani left the oil file in October 2024 after fleeing to Turkey for unspecified reasons. His stay in Istanbul was the subject of a mysterious unscheduled visit by PM Mohammed Shia al-Sudani on November 1-2, 2024. See “Erdoğan receives Iraqi Premier Al Sudani for talks in Istanbul,” Daily Sabah, November 1, 2024.

ao For instance, after suffering a life-threatening heart aneurysm in September 2024, Minister of Oil Hayan Abdal-Ghani wished to retire but was pressured by factions to remain in his role precisely to avoid infighting that might surround an effort to replace him. Author interviews, multiple Iraqi and Western contacts, 2023-2025; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees. See also “Iraqi oil minister stable after surgery in US, official says,” Reuters, September 14, 2024.

ap Laith al-Khazali is the brother of AAH leader Qais al-Khazali and the movement's main enforcer and business magnate. Laith is a U.S.-designated terrorist and serious human rights abuser. See “State Department Terrorist Designations of Asaib Ahl al-Haq and Its Leaders, Qays and Laith al-Khazali,” U.S. Department of State, January 3, 2020.

aq This is a reasonable conclusion because no other Iraqi terrorist or militia faction—and no technocratic or political player—was mentioned as stronger than AAH in any of the numerous interviewees in a multi-year research effort from 2023-2025.

ar This is a reasonable conclusion because Qais al-Khazali is (based on the author's numerous interviews with Iraqi politicians) the first-among-equals within the Coordination Framework, with more vigor than older figures like Hadi al-Ameri and Nouri al-Maliki. Laith al-Khazali is similarly described by most of the author's numerous interviewees as one of the most feared enforcers in the militia world. Salim Ahmed Said and Ali al-Maarij are similarly described as the most powerful forces within the Ministry of Oil since 2023.



The sun sets behind an oil refinery complex in Iraq on December 22, 2024. (Ahma Al-Rubaye/AFP via Getty Images)

smuggling and sanctions evasion activities in Iraq appear to be largely refinements to historic methods of stealing and comingling oil, particularly AISSOT's unprecedented efforts in 2017-2019 to get into the oil export business. These efforts are being carried out against the backdrop of a full-term al-Sudani government that is even more militia-dominated than the two-year premiership of Adel Abdul-Mahdi.⁷¹

At the most basic end of the spectrum, "hot tapping" of pipelines or robbery from open-air oil sumps and oil gathering stations inside oilfields does still occur in Iraq. This kind of theft requires the active support of officials from deputy ministers to field-level managers and security personnel, who collude to allow oil to be illegally removed from Iraqi state facilities.^{as} This sort of theft, the scale of which is unknown but is assessed by some industry journalists to already exceed 50,000 barrels per day (bpd),⁷² is valued at as much as \$100 million each month on global markets, with U.S.-designated terrorist groups such as KH and AAH the primary

beneficiaries.^{73at} According to multiple reporting networks, this kind of oilfield diversion by KH and AAH has been reported from well clusters and gathering stations at smaller oilfields such as East Baghdad, Qayyarah, Najma, Ajil, and Alas, which are run by partnerships of smaller foreign investors and Iraqi companies.^{au}

How Terrorists Monetize Oil Transportation inside Iraq

AAH and KH also control and tax the fuel oil distribution system at national and local levels.^{av} Multiple reporting networks agree that the allocation of fuel oil has been centralized under al-Sudani at the Prime Minister's National Operations Center (PM-NOC).⁷⁴

as Iraq's oilfields and storage depots—particularly the larger and longer-established ones—remain quite carefully regulated properties where observation posts and access permits make oil theft difficult without official collusion. This is the author's impression, based on all the available evidence and the author's analytic processes, including numerous visits within oilfields and interactions with oil protection forces in Iraq.

at It is the author's impression, at the end of a long multi-year interview process, that KH remains quite focused on the lower-sophistication outright theft end of the scale, having invested less effort in monetizing the oil sector, while AAH has gravitated to the paperwork fraud end of the spectrum. This feels like it is slowly equalizing, with KH elbowing its way into a broader range of ventures, as will be discussed below. Author's assessment based on all the available evidence and the author's analytic processes.

au Many of these smaller fields in northern Iraq have been under KH control since they were "liberated" from the Islamic State in 2015-2017. Iraqi government control has never fully returned to these areas, which are within what the author termed "the colonization zone" occupied by Shi'a militias in his August 2017 CTC study. See Michael Knights, "Predicting the Shape of Iraq's Next Sunni Insurgencies," *CTC Sentinel* 10:7 (2017).

av Iraq has a well-organized system for moving fuel oil from a producing refinery directly to provincial-level OPDC fuel oil depots, and then onward to the "licensed agent" (approved recipient) such as an asphalt plant, power station, brick factory, or other user. Author interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2023-2025; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

In the author's assessment, this is an end-to-end oil logistics system that services the interests of U.S.-designated terrorist movements, coordinated from the heart of the Prime Minister's Office.⁷⁵ Paperwork for "Fuel Movement Requests" are generated by the OPDC (which is run by an AAH-controlled DG Hussein Talib Abboud⁷⁶), specifying vehicle numbers, oil cargo volumes and specifications, and identifying information for each driver and vehicle.⁷⁷ The PM-NOC—and, according to two reporting networks, specifically the prime minister's brother Abbas al-Sudani⁷⁸—reviews requests, resulting in an approved Fuel Movement Request and a memo to allow the Oil Police to let individual vehicles through checkpoints at either end of the journey.⁷⁹ This kind of paperwork is needed to allow fuel oil to be loaded, transported, and unloaded at any government facility.⁸⁰

In addition to holding beneficial ownership stakes in the plants receiving (and then smuggling) fuel oil, both AAH and KH also operate "security companies" that tax the movement of the trucking contractors that carry fuel oil on behalf of OPDC.^{aw} In at least one case, KH and AAH may have worked with Salim Ahmed Said to successfully lobby the oil ministry to boost production at a northern Iraq oilfield, Qayyarah, for which Salim Ahmed Said is then alleged to have received the sole-source trucking contract to bring Qayyarah oil to his VS Oil Terminal in Basra.^{ax} A portion of the \$80 per metric ton trucking fee is reported to be kicked back to KH.^{ay} Such arrangements also give terrorist groups the ability to make oil disappear or change in volume and specification at the numerous points within its journey from initial loading point (at a refinery or oilfield) to its official unloading destination.^{az}

Fraudulent Fuel Oil Allocation to Terrorist Organizations

In the author's view, the apogee of legitimate-seeming transfer of oil to Iran-backed terrorists and militias is the allocation of fuel oil to Iraqi industries, whereupon the fuel oil is not used for its intended purpose but is instead illegally exported as a source of terrorist and militia fundraising.⁸¹ Iraq's cabinet, upon request from the Ministry of Oil, Ministry of Industry and Minerals, and Ministry of

Transport, approves the allocation of government-subsidized fuel oil to asphalt plants, brick factories, marine fuel bunkering, and power stations. As noted, distribution of the fuel oil is managed by the PM-NOC, and the OPDC and the Oil Pipelines Company. As the industrial ventures use only a small fraction (or none) of the subsidized feedstock,^{ba} the remainder disappears from the Iraqi inventory and is available as a form of threat financing. Investigative journalism undertaken by a number of Western news agencies between July and December 2024 has cast a detailed spotlight on the phenomenon.⁸² In particular, these investigations showed that the al-Sudani administration had reversed the aforementioned efforts undertaken by the al-Kadhimi government to reduce fuel oil smuggling following the AISSOT scandal.^{bb}

First, the al-Sudani team increased subsidies for industry, recreating the large margins (between the government price and the export price) necessary to cover smuggling costs and provide a profit.⁸³ Thus, while al-Kadhimi raised the government fuel oil selling price to industry from \$70 per metric ton to \$220 per metric ton, al-Sudani lowered it again to \$100-150 per ton.⁸⁴ Second, the al-Sudani team loosened oversight on state-run and private industrial off-takers of government fuel oil, making far more fuel oil available for smuggling operations. The al-Kadhimi government had surveyed the real capacity of asphalt plants in 2021^{85 bc} and drastically reduced their fuel oil allocation^{86 bd} (often below 20 percent of the prior allocation) to match actual demand levels. Under al-Sudani, the reverse occurred: the allocation of fuel oil to factories increased well beyond their proven needs.⁸⁷ Six completely non-

aw Multiple reporting networks suggest the trucking firms must pay U.S.-designated terrorist organizations such as KH and AAH a fee to facilitate the transport, with militias ensuring protection and also smooth passage through checkpoints and traffic lines. Author interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2023-2025; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

ax Multiple reporting networks suggest that Salim Ahmed Said was the only company to receive an offer for the trucking contract, fitting with his prior AISSOT-era experience of securing no-bid contracts. No other company was named during the course of a multi-year research effort as having been allowed to bid for the contract. Author interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2024-2025; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

ay If one were to suppose this facilitation fee were 10% of the \$80 per metric ton transit fee for heavy oil coming from northern Iraq, this would be \$8 per ton or about \$190 per truck. When it comes to servicing Qayyarah, with a flow of 30,000 barrels per day (150 truckloads), the notional security fee would generate \$28,500 per day or \$10.4 million per year.

az One well-informed reporting network noted: "Inside Iraq, it is now virtually impossible to verify that oil has arrived in the same quality and quantity as when it began its truck journey. The seals are always broken by the time they reach Basra." Oil may be transshipped and split up between companies. This facilitates a lot of theft and swapping out of liquid types, while keeping their original paperwork unchanged. The origin and specifications of oil being transported in this way cannot be tracked. Author interview, Iraqi oil trading contact, 2024; exact date, name, and place withheld at request of the interviewee.

ba The author has reviewed Iraqi government audits of actual versus claimed capacity of asphalt plants. In most cases, the plants had an actual throughput of 0-40% of their stated capacity—including many that were simply non-operational and never had been built to the point of becoming operational.

bb The period between May 2020 and the October 2021 elections was the fully empowered term of Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi. He remained acting prime minister (in a limited caretaker capacity) after the elections until the appointment of his successor, Mohammed Shia al-Sudani, in October 2022. For a clear description of this effort, see Michael Knights, "Extent of Terrorist and Militia Fuel Oil Diversion Exposed in Iraq," *Militia Spotlight*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, August 7, 2024.

bc On February 16, 2021, the Iraqi parliament's oil and gas committee held a session on the al-Kadhimi government's fact-finding investigation into the actual production levels (and thus fuel oil needs) of asphalt plants. The investigation found that MoI should halve the allocation of fuel oil due to the very low levels of actual operation at these plants, and the widespread practice of passing on more than half of the allocated fuel oil to so-called "aggregators," who are legally authorized to store the fuel oil and resell it to SOMO or to other domestic users. Author interviews, multiple Iraqi and Western contacts, 2023-2025; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

bd The allocation of fuel oil to SOMO exports was reduced from the al-Kadhimi-era minimum of 10 million tons per year (183,560 barrels per day) to 7 million tons per year (128,500 barrels per day), an unexplained delta of more than 50,000 barrels per day. Fuel oil allocations to factories were restored, regardless of actual operating capacity, with plants receiving 70-100% of nameplate capacity, despite the government review that found plants operating at 0-40% of nameplate capacity in reality. Author interviews, multiple Iraqi and Western contacts, 2023-2025; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

be In July 2024, the oil ministry told the government that 26 of 55 private-sector asphalt factories had no legitimate claim to receive fuel oil allocations. Nevertheless, these plants were scheduled to receive 60% (down from 70%) of their claimed requirements for fuel oil. "Iraqi Fuel Oil Export Surge Raises Smuggling Concerns," MEES, November 1, 2024. See also Knights, "Extent of Terrorist and Militia Fuel Oil Diversion Exposed in Iraq."

operational plants run by U.S.-designated terrorist groups saw their allocations restored in 2023.^{bf} Al-Sudani's government also rapidly expanded the licensing of asphalt plants, including 37 new projects in 2023-2024 (versus one under the al-Kadhimi government in 2020-2022), a near-doubling of the industry.⁸⁷ The Middle East Economic Survey reported that only when confronted by the U.S. government with evidence of rampant abuse of allocations in the second half of 2024 did the al-Sudani administration pause and review the free flow of fuel oil to industry.^{bg}

The net result for most of 2024 was a surge of fuel oil exports from Iraqi waters that were not reflected in official Iraqi government export volumes. The respected industry journal Middle East Economic Survey (MEES) noted in a November 1, 2024, investigative piece that fuel oil exports recorded by the data intelligence firm Kpler and the Joint Organizations Data Initiative (JODI) showed a major disparity between legitimate fuel oil exports by SOMO and actual tracked fuel oil exports leaving Iraqi waters. According to the MEES investigation, the proportion of unofficial fuel oil exports in January 2024 was 200% higher than official,^{88 bh} rising to 315% higher in March 2024.^{89 bi} In March 2024, the delta between the two was calculated at 300,000 bpd (or approximately 45,000 metric tons per day), with a value of approximately \$14 million per day.^{bj} This suggests fuel oil smuggling valued at around \$440 million in March 2024 alone.^{bk}

Significant evidence suggests that much of this multi-billion-dollar annual fuel oil smuggling trade is controlled by, or at least taxed by, U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organizations such as AAH and KH.^{bl} Asaib Ahl al-Haq has, since around 2014, had a powerful grip on the MoIM and its State Company for Mining

Industries (SCMI),^{bm} which are historically the main operators of government asphalt and flancote plants in Iraq and thus a major government off-taker of subsidized fuel oil allocations.⁹⁰ AAH also drove the expansion of the number of asphalt plants prior to the al-Kadhimi era and after,^{bn} emerging by 2024 as the terrorist group with the largest number of asphalt plants (18) receiving allocations of fuel oil.^{bo} One reporting network reported in 2024 that "Asaib gets you the oil from the ministry using paperwork, and they take a cut."⁹¹ Kataib Hezbollah meanwhile also operates a number of asphalt plants as a silent partner and may be a growing player in the industry after either being allowed into or muscling into AAH's relationships.^{bp}

For now, AAH seems to have pole position due to its longer investment in the oil industry. Multiple reporting networks also suggest that even aggregators not owned by AAH are forced to plug-in to AAH's overall oil-smuggling "system of systems."⁹² This is because AAH (advised by Salim Ahmed Said and ministry players like Deputy Minister of Oil Ali al-Maarij) has also cornered the market on downstream parts of the smuggling system. One aspect of this is storage and blending. Purloined fuel oil is often mixed together with crude oil and other petroleum liquids stolen from government sites, and AAH is the best equipped militia to undertake this blending.⁹³ AAH's blending capabilities are partly driven by its control of SCMI blending sites around Iraq.⁹⁴

Part Four: How FTOs Export Oil from Iraq

While stolen oil can be traded at fuel bourses inside Iraq, the heavily subsidized market inside the country means that profits from domestic sales are limited in comparison to the higher

bf Six plants assessed by the Iraqi government to be owned and operated by Asaib Ahl al-Haq, and assessed to be completely non-operational, lost their entire allocations of fuel oil under the al-Kadhimi-era review. A single reporting network claims that three were in Basra, one in Hillah, and two in other locations in northern Iraq. Allocations to these were all restored when al-Sudani took office. Author interviews, multiple Iraqi and Western contacts, 2023-2025; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

bg As MEES noted: "After receiving warnings from USG, MEES noted in what can be considered a tacit acknowledgment of the problem, the country's Ministerial Council For Economy later that month recommended a five-year halt in granting licenses to privately-owned facilities processing fuel oil, naphtha and kerosene, only permitting those involved in upgrading naphtha to gasoline." "Iraqi Fuel Oil Export Surge Raises Smuggling Concerns."

bh The January 2024 volumes were 305,000 bpd tracked exports versus 150,000 bpd of SOMO exports. "Iraqi Fuel Oil Export Surge Raises Smuggling Concerns."

bi The March 2024 volumes were 440,000 bpd tracked exports versus 140,000 bpd of SOMO exports. "Iraqi Fuel Oil Export Surge Raises Smuggling Concerns."

bj In 2024, S&P Global noted, Iraqi fuel oil sold for around \$320 per metric ton in international markets. The exactly equivalent of 300,000 bpd would be 44,776 metric tons, which multiplied by \$320 gives \$14,328,320 per day. Herman Wang with Staff Reports, "Smuggling weighs on prospects for oil industry in Iraq," S&P Global November 28, 2024.

bk Calculated as follows: \$14,328,320 per day multiplied by 31 days is \$444,177,920.

bl A Reuters investigative report citing five sources and two "Western intelligence reports" suggests over \$1 billion per year. Maha El Dahan and Yousef Saba, "Fuel Oil Smuggling Network Rakes in \$1 Billion for Iran and its Proxies," Reuters, December 3, 2024.

bm A single reporting network expanded on the importance of AAH control of the State Company for Mining Industries, relaying: "This company owns several heavy fuel oil blending facilities throughout Iraq—from the north to the south—and is authorized to transport fuel oil in between those facilities, which effectively means the whole of the country. It is also authorized to export its final product in the form of bulk flancoat through the ports of southern Iraq. The [joint venture] is tightly controlled by the AAH and its associates. It serves as the main cover for the official export of large volumes of fuel oil sourced directly from the MoO refineries." Author interviews, Iraqi contact, 2024; exact date, name, and place withheld at request of the interviewee.

bn A single reporting network claims that the seeds for AAH's expansion within the asphalt industry were laid in 2019, when Saif al-Din Ali Ahmed al-Azzawi, the MoIM's director general for the Investment Department, issued a written recommendation to the Economic Affairs Committee of Adel Abdal-Mahdi's cabinet to approve the accelerated licensing of new asphalt plants, and (in the meantime) to grant 25-year joint venture concessions and operational management contracts on existing MOIM State Company for Mining Industries plants to businesses under the control of Asaib Ahl al-Haq. Author interviews, Iraqi contact, 2024; exact date, name, and place withheld at request of the interviewee.

bo One reporting network reported in 2024 that the number of asphalt plants for which AAH is the beneficial owner has tripled since the new government formed in October 2022, from six to 18. AAH has focused its expansion in Basra, particularly in the area around Khor Al-Zubayr. Author interviews, Iraqi contact, 2024; exact date, name, and place withheld at request of the interviewee.

bp A minority of reporting networks have tended to describe many Basra asphalt sites as controlled by KH, while significantly more evidence links these sites to AAH networks. This perhaps reflects some sharing, which may have increased in scale in 2024. The only two sites consistently linked the author's multiple reporting networks to KH are the Al-Narjis and Al-Kawthar complexes in Basra. Author interviews, Iraqi contacts, 2024-2025; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

fuel oil sales prices that can be found abroad.^{bq} Thus, one of the most profitable stages of the smuggling value chain is exports to international markets. Unsurprisingly, U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organizations are no longer content to steal oil, only to have smuggling businessmen realize most of the profits.^{br} Instead, terrorist organizations have muscled into this value-addition segment of the oil market in recent years, with AAH and KH leading the pack.^{bs}

Traditional land trucking is undoubtedly still used for oil-smuggling. Major oil aggregating and trading bourses are run in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, mainly on the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan side of the region in militia-saturated areas such as Kalar, Kifri, and Tuz Khurmatu.^{bt} These trading hubs send visible queues of tanker trucks^{bu} into Iran and Turkey on a daily basis, and smaller and less obvious equivalents exist on the Iraqi borders with Syria and Jordan.⁹⁶ Some of the crude oil reaching these hubs comes from theft operations by AAH in Basra and by KH in northern oilfields, with the Basra oil being sent all the way up Iraq's eastern highways into the Kurdistan Region.⁹⁷ Though some oil enters Iran directly via Shalamchah (in Basra) or across Basra's smuggling trails,⁹⁸ or via Diyala province,⁹⁹ a near-consensus among oil industry insiders is that most of it seems to go to bourses in Kurdistan and then pass over into either Iran or Turkey—a long route but one that is trusted and customary. Oil then either passes to Turkey's Mediterranean ports or to Iran's Gulf export terminals such as Bandar Imam

“Unsurprisingly, U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organizations are no longer content to steal oil, only to have smuggling businessmen realize most of the profits. Instead, terrorist organizations have muscled into this value-addition segment of the oil market in recent years, with AAH and KH leading the pack.”

Khomeini.^{bv}

One reason that this route may have become customary—despite its apparent unwieldiness—is that it had been difficult to ship crude oil or fuel oil out of Basra's ports in the past due to Iraqi government vigilance in protecting the reputation of the country's State Oil Marketing Organization and the broader ministry—which provides the vast majority of Iraq's national income. Today, this is arguably changing, with Iran-backed terrorist groups and militias seeking to wring the maximum value out of state institutions, even at the risk of attracting U.S. sanctions onto Iraq's singular, indispensable national source of income.

Misuse of Legitimate Marine Export Channels

After the collapse of the AISSOT fuel oil marketing scheme in 2019, SOMO regained its monopoly as the only entity allowed to legally export crude or fuel oil from Iraq,^{bw} almost all of which moves by sea. The main mechanism for fuel oil smuggling outside of SOMO

bq For example, Iraq provides subsidized fuel oil to industry for anything from \$70 to \$220 per metric ton, while international sales prices are usually well above \$300 per metric ton. This underlines the importance of maintaining large subsidies in order to make smuggling profitable. Smuggling will thrive at the \$70 per metric ton price under Adel Abdal-Mahdi, struggle under the \$250 per metric ton price brought by al-Kadhimi, and recover at the \$100-150 per metric ton prices restored by al-Sudani.

br In the 2000s, militias were tapping pipelines and stealing other small volumes and selling it to aggregators, who would blend and bundle it onward to smugglers, only the latter of which made decent margins. Author interviews, Iraqi contacts, 2023-2024; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

bs No other *muqawama fasail* has ever been mentioned to the author as a powerful oil-smuggling militia or terrorist player in Iraq, though Badr may have a role.

bt These are traditional oil-smuggling entry points to the Kurdistan Region, and are controlled on one side by Shi'a Turkmen PMF units with strong connection to KH, AAH, and IRGC, such as the PMF 16th and 52nd brigades. For an introduction to these units, see Michael Knights, Hamdi Malik, and Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Honored, Not Contained: The Future of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, March 23, 2020.

bu This traditional trade is quite well understood and seemingly tolerated—judging by the fact that decades of visible trucking queues have never excited any U.S. reaction. This may be due to the involvement of U.S.-supported Kurdish political factions in the trade, combined with the limited volumes that can be carried by tanker trucks. This is the author's assessment but is a mainstream interpretation of the events.

bv During this multi-year research project, the author was struck by the strange phenomenon of Iraqi oil being trucked all the way north from Basra to Kurdistan, and then trucked all the way down Iran's western provinces to Iranian ports in areas on Iran's Gulf coast, quite close to Basra. Why is this done and how can it be profitable? First, some of this may be crude oil, a more valuable commodity that can better withstand as much as an \$80 per metric ton fee going north in Iraq and then a \$60 per metric ton fee going south in Iran. Second, Iran is (interestingly) a more secure and professional trucking route along which adulteration of oil is rare, so quality control can be superior. Third, some oil is not moving that whole distance. Fourth, the Kurdish oil bourses are where one smuggler turns in his oil and makes his profit, while another buyer (possibly from Iran) may take over and be able to eke out a margin. Fifth, there is perhaps additional incentive to put money in the hands of the IRGC-dominated oil tucking networks in Iran. Amazingly, some volumes of oil from southern Iraq may well then be shipped (mixed with Iranian oil) back into Iraqi waters for a brief reuniting with their native land, before being smuggled out of Iraq after being mislabeled ... as Iraqi oil! Author interviews, multiple Iraqi and Western contacts, 2023-2025; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

bw There are a limited number of mechanisms by which oil can currently be legally exported from Iraq by sea. The State Oil Marketing Organization still jealously guards its monopoly status as the only approved marketer and exporter of Iraqi crude oil and fuel oil. The oil ministry's Iraqi Oil Tanker Company and the transport ministry's State Company for Marine Transport bicker over which of them should be allowed to sell small volumes of marine fuel oil to visiting ships, with the latter (whose minister is from the Badr Organization) currently winning that argument. Author interviews, multiple Iraqi and Western contacts, 2023-2025; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees. The author has also seen Ministry of Oil documentation dated during 2025 in which the two companies undertake said “bickering.”

is the mislabeling of fuel oil as lower-value petroleum products that can be legally exported by government-registered private sector aggregators,^{bx} when licensed by the Ministry of Trade. These petroleum products include liquids such as vacuum residue (VR)^{by} naptha,^{bz} motor gas oil,^{ca} and vacuum gas oil.^{cb} The solid or semi-solid hydrocarbons such as bitumen^{cc} and the sheet construction material flancote^{cd} (both heavy oil products) are also legally allowed to be sold overseas by licensed aggregators; in the case of flancote, by MoIM's State Company for Mining Industries or their joint venture partners.

In the author's view, what Iran-backed terrorists and militias have done, with the expert assistance of oil-smuggling businessmen and under-control oil industry insiders, is to perfect flaws in the authorization and inspection of all of the above legal export routes in order to facilitate the international smuggling of Iraqi oil products. Once a terrorist or militia-controlled company has access to the paperwork authorizing even small quantities of legitimate exports, that sample paperwork, knowledge of procedure, and access to *some* oil can be leveraged to produce duplicated or doctored paperwork at scale, and to hide larger volumes of illegal cargos within authorized tanker and ship movements.¹⁰⁰

The Role of Aggregators in the Illegal Export Mechanism

Aggregators are licensed by Iraq's government to gather fuel oil into larger batches for resale. They are vitally important for

intelligence analysts to focus on because they partner with terrorist organizations and militias to store stolen oil at fuel storage tanks and truck parking yards. One of the most visible and vulnerable elements of the smuggling trade is the physical facilities that are needed to store stolen oil, particularly those clustered close to Basra ports such as Khor al-Zubayr (KAZ).^{ce} As real estate close to the Basra ports is expensive, it is also a competitive advantage to have preferential access to defunct or failing state-owned enterprises: factories that usually have functioning oil storage tanks and sufficient space for open-air oil sumps known as "oil lakes," which are clearly visible on satellite imagery.

AAH appears to have developed significant first-mover advantages over its rivals in all these areas. Asaib has tripled its operation of asphalt plants^{cf} and added at least one berth operatorship^{cg} and aggregators^{ch} since 2021. One source told the author in 2024: "Qais [al-Khazali, head of AAH] controls most of the aggregating companies in Basra and the main fuel oil export berth at KAZ. It is almost impossible to set up a new oil aggregating company, or build storage tanks outside of his system with Salim Ahmad Said."^{ci} A separate source added that AAH developed a "security division" (to fend off competition) and a "technical division" (to oversee paperwork fraud, transportation, and blending of oil)^{ci} that are anecdotally more sophisticated than the smuggling arms of other terrorist groups and militias.^{cj} A jewel in AAH's crown appears to be the aforementioned State Company for Mining Industries' Al-Thager Asphalt Industries Factory, 15 kilometers north of KAZ. This site is used by AAH as a fuel oil aggregating and

bx Iraq has long allowed aggregator companies to buy "excess" fuel oil from asphalt and brick factories, to consolidate small volumes of oil until they are of sufficient size to be useful as either packages of feedstock to resell to industry on terms competitive with government-provided fuel oil. This mechanism has historically been abused to allow stolen crude oil and petroleum products of all kinds to be mixed in to bulk out aggregated fuel oil, which is poorly monitored and metered. Author interviews, multiple Iraqi and Western contacts, 2023-2025; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

by VR is the bottom product from the vacuum distillation unit. SOMO is authorized to export it and has, in the past, gained permission from the Iraqi Ministry of Trade for private sector players to export it. Author interviews, multiple Iraqi and Western contacts, 2024-2025; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

bz Naptha is a fraction of crude oil that is used to reduce the viscosity and thus enable transportation of heavy oils. SOMO is authorized to export naptha and has, in the past, gained permission for private sector players to export it. Author interviews, multiple Iraqi and Western contacts, 2023-2025; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

ca Motor gas oil is a refined product used for lubricating engines. SOMO is authorized to export it and has, in the past, gained permission for private sector players to export it. Author interviews, multiple Iraqi and Western contacts, 2023-2025; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

cb Vacuum gas oil is a refined product used as a feedstock by refiners in fluid catalytic crackers to produce transportation fuels like gasoline and diesel. SOMO is authorized to export it and has, in the past, gained permission for private sector players to export it. Author interviews, multiple Iraqi and Western contacts, 2023-2025; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

cc Bitumen is the residue of heavy crude oil in the refinery distillation tower. Private sector exporters can be licensed to export bitumen in barrels. Author interviews, multiple Iraqi and Western contacts, 2023-2025; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

cd Flancote—also known as prime coat—is a waterproofing material that can be provided in liquid (paint, delivered in pots) or solid (sheeting, delivered in pallets). Private sector exporters can be licensed to export flancote. Author interviews, multiple Iraqi and Western contacts, 2023-2025; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

ce These have sprung up in abundance around the Khor al-Zubayr (KAZ) port in Basra since 2018, probably related to the surge in fuel oil smuggling. An hour or two spent looking at commercial satellite imagery will allow around two dozen sites with storage tanks and oil lakes created since 2017 to be identified. Of possible interest, many of these are not only clustered near to KAZ but are also often straddling local pipelines between Basra's refinery and the port.

cf Multiple reporting networks claim that since 2021, Asaib has increased the number of asphalt plants in controls from six to 18. Author interviews, multiple Iraqi and Western contacts, 2023-2025; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

cg Multiple reporting networks claim that Berth 9 is secured and controlled by AAH fighters. Author interviews, multiple Iraqi and Western contacts, 2023-2025; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

ch Multiple reporting networks claim that there are at least four known private aggregators with their own storage facilities who work directly with the AAH-Salim Ahmad Said network. These are identified as Anwar Baghdad and Kenos al-Rumailah Company (both fuel oil aggregators) and Rauaa Neft Company for Petroleum Services and Hyatt al-Janub (both naptha aggregators). Author interviews, multiple Iraqi and Western contacts, 2023-2025; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

ci AAH is described by a single reporting network as being the only Iraqi group to have an in-house chief chemist able to use chemical additives to more effectively disguise the provenance of Iranian oil being blended with Iraqi output. Author interview, Iraqi contact, 2024; exact date, name, and place withheld at request of the interviewee.

cj A separate single reporting network identified the key Asaib Ahl al-Haq personalities involved in administering the aggregation processes. Reporting directly to Qais al-Khazali and Laith al-Khazali is Sheikh Baqr al-Saeedi, the head of special operations in AAH and the day-to-day manager of AAH criminal operations. Under Sheikh Baqr is Abu Ameer al-Musawi (real name: Haider Kadhim), who has direct responsibility for all oil smuggling activities and who is a cousin of Qais and Laith al-Khazali. In charge of AAH's smuggling operations in Basra is Wissam Abdal-Amir al-Bazouni, the head of special operations for AAH in Basra and a direct report to Sheikh Baqr. Author interview, Iraqi contact, 2024; exact date, name, and place withheld at request of the interviewee.

bunkering site, where AAH technicians bunker and blend stolen or mischaracterized oil products before export.¹⁰²

How Ports and Shippers Mask Illegal Oil Exports

In addition to KAZ, there are three official marine export points for fuel oil in federal Iraq: Umm Qasr South (UQS), the newly operational VS Oil Terminal, and the fast-expanding Faw port. KAZ, UQS, and Faw are managed by the transport ministry's General Company for Ports of Iraq (GCPI), under its long-serving DG Farhan al-Fartousi.¹⁰³ GCPI has responsibility for "loading tankers, managing the port, and transporting [cargo] to the ship-to-ship transfer area."¹⁰⁴ Under licenses granted by the port authorities, berths are operated by private sector players, and these operators increasingly also operate new asphalt plants licensed in Basra, often adjacent to the port, which could be intended to economize the process of diverting fuel oil to export pathways.^{ck}

Port authorities, berth operators, and shipping companies are described by multiple reporting networks as facilitating oil-smuggling by Iran-backed terrorist and militia groups. Aggregators, GCPI, berth operators, and shippers knowingly load fuel oil cargos that are falsely labeled¹⁰⁵ as containing VR, naptha, bitumen, and flancote at Basra ports.^{cl} In many cases, even rudimentary testing of viscosity (as is required before export) would demonstrate that fraud was underway. In many cases, the fraud is obvious: For instance, it is inconceivable for port authorities and berth operators to be unaware that cargos labeled as flancote^{106 cm} that are delivered in tanker trucks are not carrying flancote, because flancote is never delivered in tankers, not being a liquid but rather being a very viscous paint (delivered in pots) or a solid sheet form (transportable on pallets).¹⁰⁷ It is unusual that officials would skip such a step in the risk-averse, "cover your behind" world of Iraqi bureaucracy, which is telling (in the author's experience): it implies that the officials know they will only lose their jobs (or suffer worse consequences) if they actually do their jobs properly.¹⁰⁸ This is the key sign of a deeply embedded corruption system.¹⁰⁹

The final stage in smuggling oil outside Iraq's territory via Basra is loading and carriage on small shallow-draught lightering

vessels,^{cn} chartered by the Iraqi government.^{co} These services are meant only to bring fuel oil out to a ship-to-ship transfer area within Iraqi waters, but some feeder vessels also engage ships inside and outside of Iraqi waters in suspicious ship-to-ship transfers.^{cp} Other times, the feeders even deliver oil all the way to regional ports and oil storage sites in the Gulf.^{cq} The shipping companies that operate the lightering vessels are mainly owned by powerful Iraqi oil-smuggling groups who themselves trade in fuel oil from their storage hubs in the UAE and Oman.^{110 cr} The monitoring responsibility of the SOMO Shipping Division and Products Division^{cs} may have been deliberately undermined in fuel oil exports by the complex layering of IOTC and SCMT in bunkering, plus its contracted shipping providers, which themselves lease the bunkering and lightering vessels.¹¹¹ In the original AISSOT scheme, as noted by *The Wall Street Journal*, the marketing of fuel oil was outsourced to Salim Ahmed Said;¹¹² in the current era, SOMO still markets fuel oil but has too little control over vessel monitoring and loading to track whether the correct volumes—or too much—is being delivered.¹¹³

Part Five: The Sanctions Evasion Angle

Oil-smuggling by U.S.-designated terrorist organizations in Iraq

ck Numerous other parties are beginning to crowd into the asphalt plant-owning space. One berth operator at KAZ—the Basra-registered Al-Duwaib for Marine Services and Contracting and General Trade and Oil Services and Transportation of Petroleum Products Ltd—has sought and secured a license to build an asphalt plant near KAZ (where they operate Berth 12). The Iraq-registered Ared Al Muheet Marine Import & Export Company & Customs & General Equipment LLC (Ocean Land), one of the operators of KAZ's Berth 11, is also building an asphalt plant near KAZ. Likewise, the Badr-controlled Ministry of Transport is seeking to build multiple large asphalt plants under its General Company for Transportation Projects. This list is based on a synthesized open-source intelligence searches of commercial data, checked against multiple reporting networks for accuracy.

cl A single reporting network neatly summarized the system: "Outside the formal SOMO supply chain, private Iraqi companies also aggregate unused government-subsidized fuel oil from asphalt plants and cement factories. These private Iraqi companies transport fuel oil to KAZ by tanker truck. They mislabel fuel oil as vacuum residue and bitumen to bypass SOMO regulations and sell to the international market." Author interview, commercial investigator contact, 2023; exact date, name, and place withheld at request of the interviewee.

cm The export of flancoat from Iraq is somewhat suspicious in the first place, as the demand for flancoat in Iraq is high and domestic production does not satisfy that demand.

cn Fuel oil is loaded at KAZ onto handysize class shuttle vessels with a shallow enough draught to travel up the Khor Al Abdullah waterway, which operates to a depth of 12 meters, enough to handle tankers of up to 50,000 deadweight tons (DWT). Author interview, Western due diligence and shipping contacts, 2023-2025; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

co IOTC and the Ministry of Transport's State Company for Marine Traffic (SCMT) are responsible for shuttling fuel oil from KAZ to the floating storage vessels. These state firms have overlapping responsibilities regarding shuttling, creating a complex dynamic offshore. They have also awarded contracts to private companies to support their shuttle operations. Author interview, Western due diligence and shipping contacts, 2023-2025; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

cp Commercially available shipping data shows that vessels managed by lightering companies not only discharge their cargo into the floating storage vessels after loading at Iraqi ports, but also engage in ship-to-ship transfers with each other and with unaffiliated oil product tankers bound for Gulf ports. Author interviews, Western due diligence and shipping contacts, 2023-2025; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees. These contacts have undertaken hundreds of hours of visual searches of marine traffic live-tracking and databases, as well as satellite imagery. The author has also viewed numerous (scores) of examples of AIS-tracking and satellite imagery showing suspicious ship-to-ship transfers.

cq In some cases, feeders delivering (or purporting to deliver) oil products into Iraq may leave after being reloaded with smuggled liquids. A single reporting network claims that these small vessels are often chartered to pick up 10,000-20,000 metric tons of product, which appears to be the size of cargos gathered by aggregators in their new storage sites near KAZ. Author interview, Iraqi contact, 2023; exact date, name, and place withheld at request of the interviewee.

cr These kinds of feeder shipping companies are being sanctioned by the United States with ever greater regularity. For instance, on April 10, 2025, the U.S. Treasury sanctioned one shipping company whose "vessels engage in high-risk ship-to-ship (STS) transfers of Iranian petroleum in waters off Iraq, Iran, the UAE, and the Gulf of Oman. These cargoes then reach other facilitators who blend the oil or fuel with products from other countries and falsify shipping documents to conceal links to Iran, allowing these cargoes to reach the international market." See "Treasury Targets Network Transporting Hundreds of Millions of Dollars' Worth of Iranian Petroleum," U.S. Department of the Treasury, April 10, 2025.

cs Once a certain volume aboard a floating storage vessel is reached and the cargo is sold, SOMO's Shipping Department manages the cargo offtake scheduling from the storage vessel to each buyer's vessel. Author interviews, Iraqi oil industry and Western due diligence and shipping contacts, 2023-2025; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

is obviously concerning and demonstrably delivers hundreds of millions of dollars per year to them in threat financing. Yet, as the 2019 AISSOT scheme showed, the smuggling of Iraqi-origin oil may be just the tip of the iceberg in terms of value to the Iran threat network. Under the al-Sudani government, a Reuters investigative report noted in November 2024,¹¹⁴ that the Iraqi offshore has once again become a “laundromat,” not only for smuggled Iraqi oil but also for sanctioned Iranian oil that gets laundered into—i.e., comingled with—Iraqi oil exports.

How Comingling Works in Practice

Comingling simply refers to Iraqi oil being intermixed at sea^{ct} with Iranian sanctioned oil, and then provided with fraudulent Iraqi government paperwork to show that the entire cargo is of Iraqi origin.¹¹⁵ Like the theft of fuel oil via paperwork fraud, the physical comingling of Iranian oil and Iraqi exports should be detectable and preventable by Iraq’s government agencies that monitor movements and shipping data—i.e., SOMO, the Basra Oil Company, the Iraqi Oil Tanker Company, and the transport ministry’s State Company for Marine Transport.

The whole point of comingling is for smuggled Iranian oil cargos to emerge “clean” as they leave Iraqi waters, able to show a certificate of origin that specifies the oil is Iraqi. Iraq’s state marketer is critical to the arrangement because SOMO’s Shipping Department runs the cargo offtake scheduling from the floating storage at Al-Muktaf.¹¹⁶ The product is then loaded onto buyer vessels by ship-to-ship transfer, notionally inspected and certified by the SOMO Shipping Directorate officials,^{cu} and provided by SOMO with an emailed certificate of origin specifying the Iraqi origin, volume, and specifications of the oil.¹¹⁷

Invoices from leaked documents^{cv} concerning Iranian government and sanctions evasion networks show that fake Iraqi documentation, including SOMO bills of lading, can be procured for around \$12,000 per cargo.^{cw} As Iraq’s own oil minister admitted in late March 2025,¹¹⁸ fraudulent SOMO paperwork is used to portray Iranian oil as Iraqi. Such paperwork has even been utilized to portray entirely Iranian cargos as Iraqi, without them even passing through Iraq’s territorial waters before such cargos headed to international markets.¹¹⁹ Such schemes are regularly supported by Automatic Identification System (AIS) spoofing that show the relevant tanker moving through Iraqi waters, not sailing out of an Iranian port.^{120 cx}

However, in many cases, Iranian oil appears to be physically “laundered” in Iraqi waters or in adjacent international waters in a manner that is intended to reinforce the apparent Iraqi origin of the oil if subjected to a basic AIS history check (i.e., did the delivering vessel transit Iraqi waters?).¹²¹ This behavior cannot be discounted as pure paperwork forgery and is detectable by Iraqi government agencies. Iraqi oil-smuggler networks,^{cw} working with the AAH-led “oil council,” are careful to limit their direct interface with sanctioned or Iran-linked vessels, but vessel traffic analysis quickly yields detailed understanding of their techniques. Before entering Iraqi waters, Iranian oil is often transshipped from a high-risk ship^{cz} (that carried the oil from Iran) via an intermediary

ct The consensus among industry experts consulted for this research across two years of interviews is that very little oil enters Iraq from Iran by tanker truck or via cross-border hoses, for export via Iraqi ports. This makes sense: It is more efficient to bring marine tankers of Iranian oil into Iraq’s “laundromat,” and large-scale trucking of oil would have been noticed long ago, as is the case on the Kurdistan-Iran border. According to the author’s interviews, some small volumes do enter Iraq this way—by truck, by cross-border rubber pipelines, and by small vessels crossing over the narrow waterways separating Iran from Basra—but these are idiosyncratic arrangements that mainly get loaded onto feeder vessels on Iraq’s Faw peninsula—either at the main Faw port or smuggler wharves like Abu Floos. Author interviews, multiple Iraqi and Western contacts, 2023-2025; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

cu Several reporting networks state that Iraqi officials in SOMO’s Shipping Department misreport volumes discharged from IOTC-chartered storage vessels. Mohammed Saadoun, the head of the SOMO Shipping Department, was removed in 2020 after being suspected of covering up Iranian ship-to-ship transfer activities in the Iraqi offshore, associated with the comingling of sanctioned Iranian oil into AISSOT’s exports of fuel oil. He thereafter went to work for a shipping network, Sea Crown, which makes up one part of Salim Ahmed Said’s smuggler cartel. Author interviews, multiple Iraqi and Western contacts, 2023-2025; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

cv On February 4, 2024, PRANA Network (an online hacking group) claimed to have hacked the email servers of an Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) front company called Sahara Thunder, which was later sanctioned by the U.S. Treasury on April 25, 2024. The Sahara Thunder leaks show that many smuggling vessels were ultimately owned by Iran’s Ministry of Defence Armed Forces Logistics (MODAFL) and used to transport sanctioned Iranian oil products. For the PRANA claim, see Crescent_of_Anor, “The Prana Network breached email servers . . .,” X, February 5, 2024. To see one example, search for ship name “Chem (IMO: 9240914)” in “Unmasking Sahara Thunder: Meet the MODAFL Front Hiding Behind an Iranian Trading Company Identity,” WikIran, February 2024.

cw A screenshot of a document includes a bill to Sahara Thunder to a fake bill of lading, the payoff being 4,282,991.60 AED, approximately \$1.2 million. Search for the ship named REMY at “Unmasking Sahara Thunder.”

cx One item worth watching is the delta between historic Iraqi current tracked volumes provided by data firms and adjusted datasets in which AIS spoofing has been sifted out. When this challenge is cracked, the delta may be a good pointer to the scale of spoofing activities in Iraq and elsewhere.

cw These are typically Iraqi-owned, registered in the UAE, and include a shipping arm (which services IOTC and SCMT fuel oil lightering requirements) and a trading arm (which happens to blend and trade exactly the same types of products that IOTC and SCMT pay them to lighter). Another noticeable feature of these vessels is that they almost always describe themselves as “partially laden,” even after berthing at Hamriyah Free Zone Port or other ports in the UAE. When they do offload their Iranian cargoes into onshore storage, it is mixed with Iraqi and Indian origin oil before being marketed as “Middle East Blend.” Author interviews, multiple Iraqi and Western contacts, 2023-2025; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

cz High-risk ships are vessels that regularly do not record all of their ship-to-ship transfers, and whose draught (i.e., cargo carried) changes regularly without explanation—sometimes 30-plus times before another transfer is recorded. This is the author’s assessment based on all the available evidence and the author’s analytic processes, including matching of AIS tracking and draft-change data with commercial satellite imagery showing ship-to-ship transfers.

vessel, then to the Iraqi oil-smugglers' owned or leased vessel.^{da} In some cases, less care is taken, with Iraqi oil-smugglers engaging directly with Iran-linked vessels.¹²² What matters most, however, is that Iraqi oil-smugglers' owned or leased vessels are *entering Iraqi waters partially loaded* after having engaged in suspicious ship-to-ship transfer activity, and that they are *leaving Iraqi waters with paperwork to show that their entire cargos are certified as Iraqi-origin oil*, which is hard to believe is an oversight by SOMO and Basra Oil Company.¹²³

The deliberate relaxation of inspections to check the national origin of Iraqi cargos appears to have been ordered by Minister of Oil Hayan Abdal-Ghani as early as April 2023,¹²⁴ which coincides with AAH's and Salim Ahmed Said's zenith of unopposed influence within the oil ministry.¹²⁵ Nor does SOMO and Basra Oil Company ring the alarm bell when impossibly large flows of oil are regularly being loaded in the absence of legitimate oil supply. For instance, Salem Ahmed Said's VS Oil Terminal is permitted by SOMO to load around 30,000 bpd of Qayyarah heavy crude oil onto its floating storage vessel and then to market this to off-takers on SOMO's behalf, while far larger volumes (i.e., seven times this number) are usually being lifted from the same floating storage.^{db} Merely gaining the authority to load *some* oil on SOMO's behalf is alleged to have effectively granted a licensed exporter the ability to load *any* amount of oil without being queried, due to the overall weakness and corruption of monitoring systems.^{dc}

The Value to Iran of Impersonating Iraqi Oil

The value of this sanctions evasion exercise is three-fold. First, it provides a major opportunity to get sanctioned Iranian oil volumes to market. The proportion of sanctioned Iranian crude to Iraqi-origin crude in such comingled shipments is described by multiple reporting networks as ranging from two-third Iranian to four-fifths Iranian.¹²⁶ The typical-sized tanker carrying comingled shipments carries about 47,000 metric tons or 398,000 barrels of fuel oil when full. If even one such ship were to enter the world market carrying two-thirds of one shipload (i.e., 31,000 metric tons) of smuggled Iranian fuel oil, the gain in value to Iran would be about \$3.29

million.^{dd} Furthermore, comingled oil is also some of the highest value fuel oil that Iran sells, being that the cargo is brought to market as undiscounted Iraqi fuel oil, as opposed to sanctioned (and thus discounted) Iranian product.¹²⁷ The delta of gained value for Iran and any Iraqi partners (versus Iranian-labeled oil) would be about \$70 per metric ton.^{de} This also means that major traders—including U.S. traders—may unknowingly receive sanctioned Iranian crude and sometimes import it into the United States.¹²⁸

In a given month, vessel traffic analysis can typically identify at least half a dozen examples of sanctioned or otherwise Iran-linked vessels directly or indirectly interacting with Iraqi oil-smuggler fleets.¹²⁹ The overall value to Iran of this annual scale of Iranian oil being laundered in Iraq is thus at least a billion dollar industry.^{df} Greater scrutiny of the comingling dynamic would likely result in a higher figure being demonstrated.¹³⁰

This author's understanding of Iran's sanctions-busting networks also suggests that the oil smuggled via Iraq is being monetized by Iranian security agencies¹³¹—who are typically U.S.-designated terrorist groups involved in malign activities that U.S. sanctions are expressly designed to constrict.¹³² Investigative journalism undertaken by a range of newspapers and industry press¹³³ has recently described in detail how Iranian security agencies receive allocations of oil to smuggle—from which they can derive funding to support regional partners and to undertake foreign procurement. For instance, a son of the former head of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, Rear Admiral Ali Shamkhani,¹³⁴ now coordinates a large portion of sanctions-busting on behalf of Iran's Ministry of Defence Armed Forces Logistics (MODAFL).^{dg}

Investigative reporting has also shed light on the Iraqi government's intention of use fuel oil as a means by which to repay multi-billion-dollar debts to Tehran for electricity and gas, which may be sanctionable activity. In January 2025, respected industry journal Iraq Oil Report learned from oil ministry insiders that the al-Sudani government had, from March-November 2024, been transferring 600,000-900,000 metric tons (3.7-5.7 million barrels) per month of fuel oil to Iran.¹³⁵ According to a March 2024 Iraq Oil Report story, the swap deal was initiated by al-Sudani's government as early as July 2023.¹³⁶ The mechanism described by Iraq Oil Report involved the Iranian embassy in Baghdad—which

da These "threesomes" can involve the intermediary vessel not actually receiving any oil, which is transferred by cargo hose straight from the high-risk carrier (that has been tracked in Iranian waters) to the Iraqi oil-smuggler's ship. At other times, the intermediary vessel takes on the Iranian oil, then moves and undertakes a separate ship-to-ship transfer with the Iraqi oil-smuggler's ship. Every so often, the intermediary ships are sanctioned by the United States and lose their value for this purpose. This is the author's assessment based on all the available evidence and the author's analytic processes, including matching of AIS tracking and draft-change data with commercial satellite imagery showing ship-to-ship transfers.

db Calculated as follows: VS Oil Terminal sent 35,000 bpd (2,000 metric tons) of authorized heavy oil per day to the offshore, yet the same floating storage loaded at least 263,000 bpd (four million metric tons) of liquids in nine months during 2024 (March through November, when Trump won re-election). The beginning of this scheme was uncovered in Lizzie Porter, Ben van Heuvelen, and Staff of Iraq Oil Report, "Iraq activates new deal to pay Iran for gas," Iraq Oil Report, March 22, 2024.

dc Multiple interviewees with who monitor Marine Traffic vessel tracking services report that once a company is licensed to export oil on behalf of Iraq's government, the exact amounts being exported are not closely monitored, nor is there a detailed reconciliation of authorities versus actual loadings, nor steps to prevent paperwork being duplicated and reused. This is the author's assessment based on all the available evidence and the author's analytic processes.

dd Calculated as follows: 47,000 metric tons multiplied by the illicit gain of \$70 per metric ton.

de Calculated as follows: Iraqi fuel oil sells for around \$460 per metric tons (sample date, April 1, 2025). If one applies a 15% "political discount" to fuel oil known to have come from Iran (15% is often cited by industry experts as about the discount on Iranian-origin crude oil), then the probable maximum price for Iranian fuel oil sales is 85% of \$460, or \$391 per MT. The delta of gained value by disguising the oil's provenance is \$69 per MT (\$460 minus \$391).

df Calculated as follows: 41,000 barrels per day multiplied by 365 days is 14,965,000 barrels per year. When multiplied by the international price of fuel oil \$460 per metric ton or \$68 per barrel (sample date, April 1, 2025), the result is \$1,017,620,000.

dg Sahara Thunder leaks show that many smuggling vessels were ultimately owned by Iran's Ministry of Defence Armed Forces Logistics (MODAFL) and used to transport sanctioned Iranian oil products. To see one example, search for ship name "Chem (IMO: 9240914)" in "Unmasking Sahara Thunder."

“Iran-nominated traders anecdotally do not seem to return all of the earnings to Iran in hard currency (perhaps because sanctions have made this very difficult), but instead hold some of it offshore as a kind of operational ‘slush fund’ for Iran threat network costs worldwide.”

is always led by an Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps official^{dh}—nominating off-taking companies for the fuel oil,^{di} which would then sell the oil, with the profit of the sales (i.e., minus the traders’ fee and costs) being made available to Iran and deducted from Iraq’s “debt pile.”¹³⁷

In the author’s experience, this kind of channel for repaying Iraqi debts to Iran (whether in the shape of AISSOT fuel oil marketing, or the 2024 swaps) is something that Iran’s government has long sought to covertly insert into Iraq’s oil export system.^{dj} Multiple reporting networks describe a “finder’s fee” of 10% for Iraqi official or smugglers who can help Iran recover such debt, which has piled up to beyond \$11 billion under U.S. sanctions.¹³⁸ According to multiple reporting networks, this finder’s fee was offered to Salim Ahmed Said, who tried to assist Iran once with AISSOT and now again, using his apparent kingpin position in Iraq’s energy sector.¹³⁹ Out of his commission for recovering Iraqi debts to Iran, Salim Ahmed Said is alleged to have paid AAH and Iraqi officials their dues.^{dk} This system represents a multi-billion-dollar back door in

U.S. sanctions on Iran.¹⁴⁰

An intriguing aspect of this trade is that the Iran-nominated traders anecdotally do not seem to return all of the earnings to Iran in hard currency (perhaps because sanctions have made this very difficult),^{dl} but instead hold some of it offshore as a kind of operational “slush fund” for Iran threat network costs worldwide.¹⁴¹ Iran can pay out funds to various parties who are able to produce oil “coupons” or “vouchers” stamped by the Iranian embassy in Baghdad.^{142 dm} This system may be intended as a means for Iran to transfer funds to a wide range of international recipients, from partner forces (terrorist groups such as Lebanese Hezbollah and the Houthis) to arms vendors.¹⁴³ Baghdad may now be the heart of this system.¹⁴⁴ Interestingly, the Saddam-era smuggling of oil through the UN embargo also relied upon a system of oil coupons, each of which represented a quantity of oil that could be redeemed from traders storing the smuggled oil outside Iraq.^{dn}

Part Six: Key Issues for Government and Industry

U.S. Presidential National Security Memorandum 2 (NSPM-2), issued on February 4, 2025, directs “that the IRGC and its surrogates be disrupted, degraded, or denied access to the resources that sustain their destabilizing activities.”¹⁴⁵ It furthermore notes the Secretary of Treasury shall “immediately impose sanctions or appropriate enforcement remedies on all persons for which the Department has evidence of activity in violation of one or more Iran-related sanctions” and that the Secretary of State shall “take immediate steps, in coordination with the Secretary of the Treasury and other relevant agencies, to ensure that the Iraqi financial system is not utilized by Iran for sanctions evasion or circumvention, and that Gulf countries are not used as sanctions evasion transshipment points.”¹⁴⁶ As written, this memo requires the Treasury to “immediately impose sanctions or appropriate enforcement remedies on all persons for which the Department has evidence of activity in violation of one or more Iran-related sanctions.”¹⁴⁷ Working toward U.S. Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent’s goal to “Make Iran Broke Again,”¹⁴⁸ the articles of NSPM-2 collectively represent very strong demand signals for additional intelligence on the Iran threat network’s use of the Iraqi energy sector.

The final section of this report looks at what intelligence agencies, regulators, and commercial entities need to watch out for within Iraq’s energy sector. Until Iran-backed militias can be removed from government, if such an outcome is even possible, Iraq should be one of the most closely monitored and safeguarded hydrocarbons sectors in the world. Put simply: Federal Iraq’s energy sector is already a minefield of foreign terrorist organization

dh All of Iran’s four ambassadors in Iraq since the beginning of the Iran-Iraq war—incumbent Mohammad-Kazem Al-e Sadegh, Iraj Masjedi, Hassan Danaeifar, and Hassan Kazemi Qomi—were IRGC appointees. See “Iran Appoints IRGC-Linked Official As Iraq Envoy,” *Iran International*, April 11, 2022.

di The emergence of the swap deal coincided with a loosening of SOMO’s longstanding rules for registering off-takers for Iraqi oil, which appears to have facilitated the allocation of Iraqi oil to traders nominated by Iran (as opposed to the custom of SOMO selling only to refiners who could not further sell on the oil). This kind of monopoly-erosion has similarities to Salim Ahmed Said’s AISSOT-era and recent efforts to break SOMO’s monopoly on oil marketing. This is the author’s assessment based on all the available evidence and the author’s analytic processes.

dj A recurring theme among reporting networks is lobbying undertaken by Iranian officials from their Baghdad embassy and Basra consulate to senior Iraqi politicians who may be in a position—or who can be maneuvered into such roles—to help Iran repatriate its gas and electricity earnings from Iraq. Author interviews, multiple Iraqi and Western contacts, 2023-2025; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

dk Multiple interviewees from within Iraq’s oil ministry and broader oil aggregating trade describe Salim Ahmed Said as receiving some form of commission payment from Iran for enabling sanctions evasion. Multiple interviewees from within Iraq’s oil ministry also describe lesser payments owed by Salim Ahmed Said to AAH in the course of arranging oil smuggling and sanctions evasion. (The payments received by Salim Ahmed Said for sanctions evasion are consistently reported as higher than the payments to AAH.) It is reasonable to conclude that Salim Ahmed Said may use AAH as a service provider and an operating cost in the sanctions evasion part of his business. Author interviews, multiple Iraqi and Western contacts, 2023-2025; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

dl A point of consensus among many accounts of Iranian oil smuggling via Iraq is that only part of the proceeds are returned to Iran, with a large share, perhaps a majority, retained outside the country for a variety of uses. Author interviews, multiple Iraqi and Western contacts, 2023-2025; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

dm Not all reporting networks use the same phrase (voucher, coupon, receipt) but they seem (to the author) to be describing the same system using different labels.

dn In Saddam’s system, two types of oil coupons were issued: silver coupons that entitled holders to nine million barrels of oil and gold coupons worth an unspecified higher number. See Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Eric Stakelbeck, “Uday’s Oil-for-News program,” *Weekly Standard*, May 17, 2005.

interests in which Western companies must tread very carefully. No foreign counterparty can credibly claim to be surprised that this is occurring. A number of lawsuits have targeted financial services partners to Iraq in relation to militia abuse of the financial system; similar liability lawsuits may one day be targeted on energy sector players who facilitated terrorist financing due to weaknesses in know-your-customer and supply chain integrity.¹⁴⁹ Even U.S. government fuel contracting in Iraq has probably inadvertently enriched foreign terrorist organizations due to the dominance of these militias within the fuel market.^{do} The below section will look at ways in which the threat can evolve and intensify.

Diversification Potential

The AAH-Salim Ahmad-Said system's unique strength has been its effective control of the PM-NOC, MoIM, and Ministry of Oil at the same time—combined with a mutually beneficial relationship with Iran's government. It would be logical that other Iraqi terrorist organizations—notably Kataib Hezbollah—and non-Iraqi terrorist organizations (from Lebanese Hezbollah to the Houthis to IRGC and other Iraqi agencies) are maneuvering to own their own segments of the Iraqi oil sector. Badr Organization—currently not a terrorist organization but under close consideration for designation^{dp}—may seek to claim a larger share of the Iraqi hydrocarbons sector in the coming years.¹⁵⁰ Though exposure of fuel oil diversion resulted in a temporary freeze on asphalt plant licensing in 2024, it should be expected that any Iraqi government dominated by militias will slowly reverse this ruling due to the sizable excesses of fuel oil that Iraq will need to dispose of in the coming years.^{dq}

Expansion of terrorist threat financing via Iraq's oil sector could happen through a dizzying number of mechanisms, most of which are already being debuted. Other parts of the value-addition chain of Iraqi oil may be accessed by terrorist and militia groups, particularly refining, inside and outside Iraq.¹⁵¹ The loosening of SOMO's certification requirements for oil off-takers is something that needs to be closely monitored and perhaps deterred.¹⁵² The weakening of Iraqi oil inventory management makes increasing

volumes of oil available for terrorist-linked off-takers to lift¹⁵³—though as the below section notes, electronic monitoring systems should also be viewed with suspicion until they are proven not to be themselves run by corruption networks. Iraqi terrorist groups can now, through control of the oil ministry, monetize their ability to push contract awards toward favored vendors in the oil and gas industries—for upstream contracts, engineering projects, and transportation.^{dr}

A broadening number of ports and berths also need to be monitored, aside from the notorious KAZ and Salim Ahmed Said's VS Oil Terminal. Umm Qasr South's three oil berths (7, 8, 9) deserve close watching as feeder vessels begin to export not only fuel oil but potentially crude oil from these locations.¹⁵⁴ As the new mega port at al-Faw expands, this area may become more important. In the future, any vessel lifting oil liquids (or Liquefied Petroleum Gas) from Iraqi ports should be subject to additional scrutiny by U.S. agencies: for instance, Lloyd List stated that a stunning 61% of LPG cargos sold as Iraqi were found by Lloyds List to actually be Iranian.¹⁵⁵ Overall, there may be rising demand for intelligence to support enforcement of the 2024 Stop Harboring Iranian Petroleum (SHIP) Act,^{ds} being that Iraq's entire port and offshore area is qualifying as a suspicious ship-to-ship transfer and sanctions evasion hotspot.¹⁵⁶ In this author's view, some of the focus being directed on Malaysia and Singapore's Eastern Outer Ports Limits (EOPL) area should be refocused on Iraqi loading facilities.¹⁵⁷

Risks of Digitizing Oil Exports

The various Iran-backed militia and terrorist actors in Iraq are likely to become more ambitious and inventive if they can hold onto their control of the Prime Minister's Office, the Ministry of Oil, MoIM, and Ministry of Trade.¹⁵⁸ The Badr-dominated Ministry of Transport may play a bigger part in the oil smuggling and Iranian sanctions evasion portfolio in the future.¹⁵⁹ Iraqi companies such as Al-Raiya are seeking to secure contracts to change the way that Iraq moves and accounts for crude oil and products. One initiative is the "Electronic Barrel System,"^{dt} which would replace many of the functions of the MoO Technical Directorate and Audit Directorate in terms of tracking oil movements and stocks throughout Iraq. Based on the proven risk of allowing other e-government systems—such as government payroll services—to fall into the wrong hands, an Electronic Barrel System needs to be closely watched. Likewise, Al-Raiya wants to take over vessel management and tracking services from Iraq's government.¹⁶⁰ Iraq's chaotic inventory and offshore monitoring systems clearly do need modernization, but all such efforts need to be thoroughly scrutinized by sanctions and threat financing analysts. As with electronic payment systems, multiple factions are likely to fight for control of such powerful

do The near-monopoly of AAH and KH in the fuel oil distribution industry means that the U.S. military and embassy in Iraq, both of which rely upon local fuel markets, may be drawn in as an unwitting user of the system. Author interviews, multiple Iraqi and Western contacts, 2024-2025; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

dp On December 3, 2020, U.S. Congressman Joe Wilson introduced a draft bill calling for Badr's designation. See Wilson Calls to Designate Iranian-Backed Militia as Terrorist Organization, U.S. Congressman Joe Wilson website, December 3, 2020. Then, on April 2, 2025, Wilson introduced a draft bill calling for the designation as a terrorist of Badr's leader Hadi al-Ameri. See the Free Iraq From Iran Act, discussed at "Wilson Introduces the 'Maximum Support Act,'" website of U.S. Congressman Joe Wilson, April 3, 2025.

dq There are strong indicators that fuel oil production in Iraq will continue to grow. Iraq has a professed ambition to raise its oil production capacity from the current 4.6 million barrels per day to 6-7 million bpd by 2027, and while the level of growth may be unlikely, there will be capacity increases beyond the current 4.6 million. With the development of more advanced refining units falling well behind schedule, Iraq's downstream sector will continue to yield about 60% fuel oil outputs (versus 40% other products such as gasoline or diesel, which newer units would create in greater proportions). Fuel oil production is likely to rise beyond the current 435,000 bpd on a sustained basis. Available fuel oil for industrial allocation or export is likely to also rise above the current range of around 140,000-235,000 bpd (21,000-35,000 metric tons per day). This is the author's assessment based on all the available evidence and the author's analytic processes.

dr This is a very strong emerging theme in commercial investigations in Iraq. Author interviews, multiple Iraqi and Western contacts, 2023-2025; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

ds The Stop Harboring Iranian Petroleum Act or the SHIP Act (H.R.3774) was enacted into law on October 19, 2023.

dt An Al-Raiya Group Instagram reel on the system notes: "Partnering with the Iraqi Ministry of Oil, Al-Raiya Group Company has launched a ground-breaking technological project that is set to revolutionize the oil industry in Iraq -the 'Electronic Barrel' project."

tools.^{du}

Threat Posed by Chinese Oilfield Services

Direct theft of oil by terrorist organizations could rise as greater proportions of Iraqi oilfields are serviced by non-Western oil service providers, particularly Chinese firms,¹⁶¹ which have very minimal anti-corruption standards^{162 dv} and which are already partnered with militia organizations in some cases.¹⁶³ In the author's view, a strong emerging trend worthy of study is Chinese engineering procurement and construction (EPC) contractors partnering with a politically exposed Iraqi companies (i.e., linked to Iran-backed groups).¹⁶⁴

As such projects proliferate across a growing number of provinces, including far-flung areas of Anbar, Nineveh, and Diyala controlled by Iran-backed Popular Mobilization Force (PMF) militias,^{dw} the scale of diversion of crude oil could rise significantly. Refineries and OPDC storage depots in militia-controlled areas are particularly valuable because they are highly vulnerable to intimidation and are typically poorly regulated.^{dx}

Particular attention should be directed by threat financing intelligence analysts and regulators onto the Iraqi joint venture partners selected by Chinese companies. Key indicators for concern can include the lack of track record and financing for the Iraqi partner, non-bid contract awards via the non-public Supreme Committee for Reconstruction and Development, and connections to Iraqi militia-adjacent businessmen.

A special focus should be directed on Chinese partnerships with the Muhandis General Company for Construction, Engineering, and Mechanical, Agricultural, and Industrial Contracting" (or the Muhandis General Company, MGC, hereafter). Named after the late U.S.-designated terrorist Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, MGC was formed in November 2022 as one of the first acts of the al-Sudani government and is an Iraqi version of IRGC's Khatam al-Anbiya conglomerate.^{dv} Owned by the terrorist-run Popular Mobilization

Forces, the MGC is being positioned to take government contracts in numerous segments of the Iraqi economy, including now oil.¹⁶⁵ Thus, MGC partnered with China Machinery Engineering Corporation in March 2024,¹⁶⁶ after which they jointly bid for a vital Iraqi export pipeline project in the \$1.5 billion range in October 2024.^{dz} MGC is now included in all major tenders issued by the Basra Oil Company, and multiple reporting networks suggest the MGC is given early warning of forthcoming tenders in order to preposition themselves with Chinese partners.

Analyst attention should also be focused on the possibility that such partnerships can include sanctioned Iranian engineering interests such as the Tadbir Energy Development Group,^{ea} which can be used as a means to illicitly procure oil industry technology for Iran or win contracts in Iraq. The U.S.-sanctioned National Iranian Oil Company—which could be struck by a “snapback” of U.N. sanctions later this year—has an office in the Iraqi Ministry of Oil that is specifically to facilitate this kind of business development in partnership with Iraqi officials.^{eb}

Onward Uses of Iranian Funds

As this analysis has shown, the Iraqi oil sector has a value to Iran and Iraqi terrorist organizations that can be characterized as reaching billions of dollars per year.¹⁶⁷ Some estimates already place the scale of this terrorist threat financing in the \$10-20 billion range annually,¹⁶⁸ and illicit abuse of the energy industry could certainly expand to reach these numbers if it has not already. For counter-threat financing professionals, identifying the repatriation mechanism for illicit income—following the money—is perhaps the Holy Grail. Much more work needs to be done on tracing how Iranian and Iraqi oil is converted into monetary value, and how that value is then utilized, partially outside of the formal, dollar-based global financial system.^{ec} The oil voucher model hinted at in this article should be investigated as it could offer operationally useful insights into the manner in which Iran recycles smuggled oil into threat finance for a range of overseas activities that the United States and other Western intelligence partners desire to put an end to.¹⁶⁹ **CTC**

du Iraq's government electronic payment system QiCard has been the subject of years of push-and-shove between Iran-backed militias and terrorist groups. Author interviews, multiple Iraqi and Western contacts, 2020-2025; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

dv The report notes: “corruption discourages Western firms, it seems to be proving advantageous for Chinese investment. Chinese companies leverage this culture of nepotism to further their business interests at the expense of Western international oil companies.” Yerevan Saeed and Sardar Aziz, “China's Rise in Iraq's Energy Sector: From Newcomer to Dominant Player,” Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington (AGSIW), October 23, 2024.

dw This is “the colonization zone” occupied by Shi'a militias noted in the author's August 2017 CTC study. See Knights, “Predicting the Shape of Iraq's Next Sunni Insurgencies.”

dx In one case, for instance, multiple reporting networks concur that Salim Ahmad Said, KH, and AAH colluded to seek raised production levels at exactly these kinds of northern fields in order to increase the output from which oil could be filched. Author interviews, multiple Iraqi and Western contacts, 2023-2025; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

dy This was the most successful state-owned company in Iran since 1990, receiving over \$50 billion worth of contracts for the Revolutionary Guard since its formation in 1991 and sanctioned by the United States, the United Nations, and the European Union as a commercial extension of the IRGC. Michael Knights, Hamdi Malik, and Crispin Smith, “The Muhandis Company: Iraq's Khatam al-Anbia,” Militia Spotlight, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, March 21, 2023.

dz The author has reviewed one such Basra Oil Company document from October 27, 2024, that identifies MGC and CMEC as bidding for this project as a consortia.

ea Tadbir Energy Development Group is part of the sanctioned Tadbir Economic Development Group, which are both owned by Execution of Imam Khomeini's Order (EIKO), a foundation reporting directly to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's office.

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- 94 This is the author’s assessment based on all the available evidence and the author’s analytic processes.
- 95 This is the author’s assessment based on all the available evidence and the author’s analytic processes.
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- 99 Author interviews, multiple Iraqi and Western contacts, 2023-2025; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.
- 100 This is the author’s assessment based on all the available evidence and the author’s analytic processes.
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- 122 This is the author’s assessment based on all the available evidence and the author’s analytic processes, including matching of AIS tracking and draft-

- change data with commercial satellite imagery showing ship-to-ship transfers.
- 123 This is the author's assessment based on all the available evidence and the author's analytic processes.
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- 125 This is the author's assessment based on all the available evidence and the author's analytic processes.
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- 127 This is the author's assessment but is a mainstream interpretation of the events.
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A View from the CT Foxhole: Charlie Winter, Co-Founder, ExTrac AI

By Paul Cruickshank

Dr. Charlie Winter is Co-Founder and Chief Research Officer of ExTrac AI, an intelligence platform that tracks conflict and information activities to identify, map, and forecast geopolitical risk. Before ExTrac, he worked in a range of academic positions in the United States and United Kingdom, researching what drives and perpetuates violent extremism in both online and offline spaces.

*His academic research was supported by the U.S. Department of Defense, the Global Internet Forum for Counter-Terrorism (GIFCT), Facebook, the UK Home Office, and the U.S. Department for Homeland Security, among others. He is an Associate of the IWM, an Associate Fellow at the International Centre for Counter Terrorism in The Hague, and a member of the RESOLVE Network's Advisory Board. He has published two books, *The ISIS Reader* and *The Terrorist Image*.*

CTC: Let's start with your professional journey and how you went from a mostly academic research focus to founding ExTrac. Can you describe that journey?

Winter: Across most of the 2010s, I spent a lot of my time lurking in parts of the internet that Islamic State supporters were also hanging out [in], and my academic research essentially pivoted around the data that I could collect from those spaces and then analyze with a view to understanding what made the Islamic State—tick. So, I spent a lot of time studying its propaganda in particular, and my PhD research focused specifically on the photo reports that it used to publish by the dozen back in 2015, 2016, and 2017.

It was really through that work that I got looped in with the practitioner community, working as an academic advisor to ongoing programs that were being implemented in the context of various stakeholders in the counterterrorism domain. And the work that I was doing in that capacity was essentially the same as what I was doing as an academic, but with the timeline truncated very significantly. Because while it's interesting to see what made the Islamic State tick in 2015, when you're a few years on, it's not necessarily useful from a practical or operational perspective. I found that [with] the work that I was doing, the timeline would get shorter and the analysis that I was being asked to provide would be not 'what are things looking like over the course of the last few years?' but 'what are things looking like over the course of the last few months, if not weeks, if not days?'

The question I increasingly found myself asking was how can you do something that's actually useful with this stuff [on a timeline] that matters and also improve on the technology side of things? For most of the 2010s, I was working in Excel, building out unwieldy spreadsheets and creating ugly visualizations of the data that would end up in academic research articles. I ended up teaming

up with an AI guy and an entrepreneur, and that's when it all really started to come together. Fast forward a few years, and we have quite a significant team that really joins up domain and technology expertise. What I am now able to do, and what we're able to do at ExTrac, is essentially take that data and analyze it, visualize it, mine it for insights at the time that it is most relevant—so as close to real time as possible, with as little latency as possible—so it can provide meaningful insight to practitioners when it matters and doesn't just remain something that's interesting to look at in retrospect.

CTC: What services does ExTrac provide?

Winter: We are a geopolitical intelligence platform that helps people make decisions faster, and from a base of real evidence. Whether they are in defense, tech, development, finance, or something else, it's about enabling decision-makers to get ahead of the threat, or indeed the opportunity. Our USP pivots around accessing, ingesting, and processing high-relevance publicly available information and data from hard-to-reach parts of the internet that reflects the online and offline activities and psychological operations of various non-state and state threat actors. And through our platform, which is both a web and mobile app, we provide both access to that data and the ability to generate insight from it rapidly—and we do that using a range of different kinds of automation, machine learning, artificial intelligence. But essentially, it's the data itself that we're providing to our users and then also the ability to extract usable information from it at pace. Everything is auditable. Everything is very visual. And we think very carefully about what data goes into the platform in order to make sure that for our users, when they access it, they are looking at stuff which is directly and invariably relevant to the use case that they have.

One point to draw out which is really important is that there's a lot of data that we don't go after. We actively and willfully are not interested in user data. We don't want to know who's saying what; we just want to know what they're saying or what kind of content is being shared, what kind of platforms are being used to engage in terrorism financing or what kind of documents—instructional materials—are being passed around, that kind of thing. It's the content and the attitude, the narratives, the manifestos, the ideas and how they relate to activity in the physical world that are most interesting to us. They provide layered cognitive and kinetic insight into what adversarial actors are getting up to on a day-to-day basis and also how their activities—their strategies, their tactics, their targeting parameters—adapt to or are forced into adapting to counterterrorism operations or other efforts to interdict what they're doing.

CTC: How do you identify helpful and relevant sources?

Winter: We are split between engineers and subject matter

experts, broadly speaking, in the team. The engineers deal with the front- and backend of what we do—the models that we use, broad functionality, and how everything comes together at the user end. The analysts we have are deep subject matter experts in a range of different things. There's jihadism, all of its various manifestations and guises. But we also have specialists in violent neo-Nazism and accelerationism, and same for the key players in most of the other places where there are live conflicts. Essentially, what we do is hardwire their expertise into what is available within ExTrac.

With my ISIS 'nerd' hat on, I know from my past and ongoing research where people in groups like ISKP [Islamic State Khorasan] or [Islamic State] Somalia province are getting together, sharing content, networking, and so on—and much of this stuff is happening in spaces that are technically publicly available is going on. We work on that same basis with the other analysts that sit within our team. Through their research, through the time that they spend and have spent absorbing and internalizing the dynamics that characterize how these actors are communicating with each other—we *use* that knowledge, that know-how to determine and delineate what sources are relevant and, as you say, helpful. And we keep it up to date, day-in, day-out, so when one platform or community goes out of fashion or is rendered inoperable, we—and our users—can follow the ecosystem's migration into the next one.

The bottom line is, when we bring data into ExTrac, we only bring data that is coming from spaces that we *know* to be relevant to the actors that our users and we are interested in understanding. And it's all predicated on the idea that there's loads of information available to us now: publicly available information, commercially available information, there's a flood of it. But unless you curate the sources that you're interested in, you end up with just a lot of noise. So, what we do is curate by source rather than by data point, and we provide a secure service which allows for high-signal, low-noise information to be streaming into the platform and made available to our users around the clock.

CTC: So, to sum it up, the 'nerds' focus the laser beam, and then you get all this data. How do you then parse it for insights that can be helpful to practitioners?

Winter: The data goes through a whole pipeline of cleaning, enriching, and tagging to organize it and make it readily searchable—that's where the AI first comes in. Once it's been ingested into our databases, we have a number of models and search functionality that helps our users find insight around aspects such as targeting trends and messaging. Core to the system is Co-Analyst, which is the agentic large language model integration we have that sits at the center of everything.

Essentially, the platform in which this all comes together works by enabling users to set up different dashboards that correspond to the different geographies, different actors, different use cases that they might have. And within each of those dashboards, you can set up communication streams or event streams along with associated mapping or analytics layers like topic modelling, salience analysis, or network graphs. We have an event detection model that sifts through all of the data points that we're ingesting—whatever the platforms we're ingesting it from—and looks for references to kinetic or conflict-adjacent incidents. This means you can see what SIGACTS are being reported by the actors in question—their members, their rank-level members, as well as in official



Charlie Winter

propaganda reporting, too. We then triangulate that with reporting we're ingesting from unaffiliated sources and use machine learning to identify the delta between the two. That all gets mapped and chrono-located as well so you can see, and be alerted in real time to, what the actors in question are saying at the official level, what their supporters and rank-level members are saying to each other about the world around them, and what the rest of world thinks, too—and then visualize it all through maps and time series graphs.

You can monitor, for example, how frequently threat actors are discussing shipping activity in specific locations, assess the nature of that conversation, identify indicators of imminent threats to commercial or naval vessels, and track chatter about the courses of action that these actors are most likely to pursue.

The key thing is that we are moving analysts away from having to scroll through a lot of data to try to figure out what the consensus view is about something within the ecosystem in which they're interested—because of how the artificial intelligence and specifically Co-Analyst enables the data to be parsed, analysts can use our LLM, which understands 245 languages, to monitor the strategic, tactical, operational, and cognitive environment at pace and in a manner that more accurately reflects what's happening at the coalface. Through our system, analysts are able to effectively process hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands of data points in a few seconds, rather than having to spend—as I used to do as an academic—days, weeks, or months coding an Excel spreadsheet to generate visualizations that would then be reflective of the interesting but old data behind them.

Everything we do is about using technology in a really, really constrained way and recognizing its limitations, but also recognizing the limitations that *analysts* have and the unending and invariable issue around time, resource, ability to juggle multiple intelligence requirements at any one point in time. We essentially have built our system to let machines do what they do best and let human analysts do what they do best, and enable the analysts to spend a lot more

“We essentially have built our system to let machines do what they do best and let human analysts do what they do best, and enable the analysts to spend a lot more time performing the highest-value tasks in the intelligence cycle.”

time performing the highest-value tasks in the intelligence cycle—figuring out the ‘so what,’ identifying implications, putting together assessments based on data that is both more expansive than what they’d be able to do if it was them working manually through the same data points—but also enabling them to use and apply quantitative methods in a way that doesn’t feel like quantitative methods to visualize and identify patterns and anomalies without needing to come to the table with a bunch of data science expertise.

CTC: So, you have, in a way, the best of both worlds because you’ve got people like you and other analysts who have, in your phraseology, ‘lurked around’ this stuff, scrolled through this stuff. You have a feel for this stuff as an analyst, and that has obviously contributed to the way that you’ve been able to focus the laser beam and the inputs you’ve put in on the AI. Is there a danger that as more and more analysts move to the high-level stuff, as you put it, that we lose something from that experience of actually having to go through it oneself. Is there a danger of missing stuff?

Winter: It’s a really good question. The fundamental thing that we are doing at ExTrac is making more, better, more relevant open-source data available to our users than they’d be able to access on the systems they have in the environments in which they’re working. We are enabling them to have much closer access and more engagement with threat actor ecosystems than they would otherwise have. All of the data that comes into the system, we identify and tag the sources that we ingest it from, and there is a total air gap between what happens in ExTrac and what happens in the outside world. So, you have people who normally would not be able to jump into the middle of a terrorist chatroom being operated from denied territory, for example, who now are able to engage with that data, see it in the wild—as it were—but then also analyze it in a way which is safe and much more ambitious than would have been possible before.

The other thing is the way that the technology enables us to work across languages. This means that you don’t need to be Arabic language-enabled or a Somali speaker to be able to dig really deeply into the information that we’re looking at. If anything, we’re providing better access, more access, deeper reach into these phenomena than was possible before we set up shop.

As a founder of ExTrac, obviously I’m doing lots of stuff that isn’t analysis, but fundamentally, I’m still an analyst at heart. I still spend a huge amount of my time in the system—probably too much time—using the system to dig into things and explore what’s in the realm of the possible just because I find it interesting to do so. And

in contexts in which I had no prior expertise or knowledge of before, I can go far; I can get deep into Swahili- or Tajik-language terrorist communications in a way that would never have been possible before.

Crucially, our offering isn’t just about being able to see the data and get a feel for the data. It’s also to enable and provide that quantitative element that I spoke about before: being able to actually visualize how salient a particular thing is or how far a piece of content has spread or how much a conversation about an imminent threat of violence might be to an embassy, say—being able to say and situate that particular data point within longitudinal data, to see that this thing is actually gathering a lot more momentum than at other points in the last 12 months where similar conversations have been had. That kind of thing just enables you to have a much better grasp of what’s going on in the mind of the adversary than was possible before.

CTC: Are you able to get more specific in terms of, over the last several years, where the biggest value added has been in looking at certain trends that you were able to help clients identify?

Winter: As well as identifying things that no one knows are about to happen, a key part of what we do is corroborating intelligence to make it easier to pass between organizations or allies for actioning. We do that based on stuff which is in open source or hard-to-reach publicly available sources. A good example of this from a while back was when the Taliban took over Kabul in the summer of 2021. Our system identified for us that there was, at that time, a meaningful change in the way that ISKP both at an organizational and supporter level was communicating—to such a degree that, in some previously busy online spaces, there was a total blackout. This wasn’t down to the sources themselves going dark; it was down to an organizational push on ISKP’s part, and it was 11 days before the attack on Kabul International Airport took place. The system alerted us to this change—which, it turned out, the intelligence community was also tracking but not yet talking about—so we could tell our customers that something was up, that something big was looking like it was going to happen. We were observing an ISKP that had, up until that point, been in a period of ascendancy suddenly shutting up shop. Crucially, this change wasn’t noticeable on a day-to-day basis—as in, if you’re looking at individual data on individual days—but when you take a step back and look at trends up to that point, it was clear that the operational environment was going to change in quite a profound manner.

In short, it was a change in both the information and kinetic posture of ISKP that was totally inconsistent with the shape of the previous 12 months’ worth of activity. That pause was something that directly preceded the attack on Kabul International Airport, but also in the days that followed it, the launching of an Afghanistan-wide campaign against the Taliban when it was in its first few weeks of ruling Afghanistan. And it’s that dynamic, that change in both operational and information posture, that we’re interested in furnishing our users with from an indicators and warnings perspective.

CTC: So, it’s an indicator for a potential beginning of either a very significant attack or series of attacks, and you were able to identify that in real time. But, of course, knowing that an attack campaign may be in the works is different from knowing where

and when a particular attack is going to happen.

Winter: It definitely is. So that ISKP experience—early on in ExTrac’s journey—was one of a few points at which we understood that there are indicators in communications data for stuff that will impact the offline environment, potentially very significantly. So, building on it, we trained deep learning models to identify similar lapses or anomalies or surges that were statistically significant. These have enabled our users in the years since to add to their assessment of both information and kinetic threats in relation to the positions, people, and assets that matter to them ahead of attempted or indeed successfully deployed incidents or campaigns taking place.

We also pick up and alert for indicators that are more blatant. When you are operating in the context of non-state actors, and specifically terrorist actors, their supporters actively share attack-planning materials and flag individual-level intent to engage in terrorist behaviors—whether that’s sending money to different parts of the global network, for example, or, on the more operational side, actively planning and discussing targeting of specific people or places with others in the ecosystem. In the terrorism context, these are the things that we’re able to essentially listen in on.

We also are able to identify what’s coming down the line in very dynamic, very live situations. When, for example, there’s a conflagration somewhere involving supporters of a particular threat actor, we can help our users understand what those supporters are gearing up to do. For example, when threat actors have in the past launched PSYOP campaigns online or raided diplomatic complexes offline, essentially looking to besiege and ultimately overrun embassy facilities, we’ve been able to pair up what’s happening on their side—what they’re saying, what their leaders are telling them to do—with our users, getting them, in an air-gapped environment, into the hard-to-reach but ultimately public chatrooms and channels that were being used to orchestrate these activities in the first place. They could see what these actors were saying about potential courses of action and factor that into the decision points to which they ultimately came, whether we’re talking about information operations or force protection. Essentially, we can make our users a fly on the threat actor’s wall, get them inside or close to the adversary ops room to enable them to listen in on conversations—happening in spaces that are hard to find and get to but publicly available—that are directly operationally relevant to decisions that they have to make without going near a secure system and put up with all the associated frictions.

CTC: When it comes to Yemen and the Houthis, talk about how your platform has been helpful.

Winter: In the context of Yemen, for the last few years, we’ve been doing a lot of work on the conflict there—capturing both what’s happening at an official level and also, crucially, at a rank level, as well as what the general populace is making of things. So there are various things that one can derive from that data, both in relation to the force posture and intent of threat actors but also how those same threat actors are managing the domestic political challenges they face as a response to external pressures. Our system essentially enables you to identify the degree of threat and likelihood of that threat being acted upon in relation to specific targeting efforts or broader campaigns like the maritime blockade. With each stage of

escalation, we’ve been able to determine both whether and when it was going to come to pass long before it happened and also determine that the threats were highly likely to be credible rather than just bluster.

This data essentially enables you to get deep into the mindset of these actors. We’re able to track how—almost from a battle damage assessment perspective—the extent to which deterrence is occurring, or not as the case may be, as well as the extent to which deterrence *could* occur in response to the use of military force. So when thinking about the way these actors conceptualize their standing and strategies, we’re able to provide insight that otherwise would be difficult to get to, about what impact (or lack of impact) a given campaign is having on morale, on intent, on decision points about continuing or not the activities that they’re engaging in.

CTC: When it comes to other elements of the Tehran-aligned threat network including Hezbollah and the militia groups in Iraq, talk through how you’ve been able to provide insights in that space? Syria obviously as well until relatively recently.

Winter: We have done and continue to do loads of work on Syria. It was, from an analytical perspective, fascinating to observe the tectonic shifts that were happening in December when the Assad regime was on the cusp of falling. Right at the time that the regime was disintegrating, we were able to see that the Iranian position was not going to be one of intervention, again before it became clear that that was case. We were able to see this by identifying changes in the way that key players were referring to Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham as it was then. Essentially, just before Assad left Syria, they stopped referring to HTS as ‘*takfiris*’ and instead started referring to them as ‘rebels.’ That softening of the stance at the official level, and also among sources associated directly with the broader bloc, was a very good indicator that the Iranians were not going to be shoring up the regime—let alone others in the network.

Similarly, in the context of Lebanon’s political landscape—another area in which we’ve done a huge amount of work in recent years—we’ve been able to track fragmentation within key factions at its earliest stages, as well as changes in sentiment across the broader environment. Through the mechanisms afforded to us by artificial intelligence, we’ve been able to identify anomalies and new trajectories of engagement when they are still nascent, encompassing both factions traditionally supportive of the status quo and those historically opposed to it, as well as actors occupying the middle ground. We could also identify how Israeli military pressure was impacting and affecting change from the outset of the campaign last September, not just from a material or leadership perspective, but from a fundamentally strategic standpoint, altering how key groups viewed their roles within Lebanese politics and the broader region, including their ties with Iran.

Right now, we’re using these same tools to gauge how steady the current ceasefire is, going beyond official rhetoric from the guys at the top to track how rank-and-file thinking has evolved, identifying trigger points and new red-lines for potential re-escalation.

CTC: Let’s pivot to sub-Saharan Africa and West Africa because you do a lot of work there as well. And obviously, it’s an area where when it comes to al-Qa`ida- and Islamic State-aligned groups, there’s a huge amount of concern. Talk about West Africa.

“ISIS, which has very deep foundations in Syria, is not flexing its muscles there yet. I worry that it is more a question of *when* rather than *if*”

Winter: West Africa is the *pièce de résistance* of ISIS these days in terms of the space about which it's happiest and most enthusiastic to publicize its activities in. Obviously, that's due to a lot of different reasons. It doesn't necessarily mean it's technically strongest there; it just means that the organization has determined that it is less operationally risky for it to highlight the activities of ISWAP [Islamic State West Africa Province] and ISGS [Islamic State in the Greater Sahara] in that part of the world than it is to highlight them in Afghanistan or Syria or Iraq.

When you bring time series communications data or SIGACT data to bear in that context, [it] enables you to see clear ebbs and flows in the strategic calculus of the likes of ISWAP and ISGS—and the same, incidentally, can be said in the context of groups like JNIM. It allows you to identify different target sets that are likely to be focused on and, through that, the degree of threat faced by, for example, the development and humanitarian organizations that operate in spaces co-located with ISWAP and ISGS. Again, there is an enormous amount of utility in being able to see a given data point—whether it's a communication or an act of violence—in the context of everything that's come before it, to see the extent to which it is part of an ongoing strategic trend that's been around for months, if not years, or if a particular attack in a particular part of Borno state, for example, indicates a change in posture, a change in strategy, or that something new could be underway.

So again, based on that kind of information, we've been able to help the development organizations we support to keep their people and their positions aware of the changing nature of the threat, both geographically and from a tactical perspective, from the likes of ISWAP and ISGS.

CTC: When it comes to the Islamist terror threat in the West, does this same approach work in terms of being able to see the direction of travel, with regard to the threat of directed, enabled, and inspired jihadi terrorism?

Winter: Absolutely. Just as people in Syria and Iraq who are supporters of jihadism are knocking around in online spaces, so too are people in the U.K., Germany, and elsewhere. There's a huge amount you can learn from digging into how, at an audience level, these communities are responding to developments on the global stage as well as at a very tactical level, when people are saying, 'I want to go and attack X, Y, or Z' on the basis that it's Ramadan and there's a massacre happening in Gaza. The way that jihadist terrorist ecosystems operate these days is you have geographically very dispersed communities that all operate within the same ecosystem. So, there's a push and pull with as much going into the Middle East as is coming out of the Middle East—especially when you're thinking about ISIS core.

In terms of intent to make *hijra* [migrate] to places like Afghanistan or Somalia or on occasion to Iraq and Syria as

well—a much rarer thing these days—it's possible to tap into the information domain and understand the extent to which people in the West are truly, actively, and genuinely considering whether *hijra* to these places is a good idea or not any more.

So, in terms of the threat faced to the U.S. or the U.K. or the West more broadly, there are absolutely indicators in publicly available parts of the internet. Yes, they may be hard to reach. Yes, you may need to know where to go to access them and identify them, but absolutely there are indicators of the intent and broader morale of these communities.

One thing that we've done a lot of work on lately is digging into the way that reports of the various ISIS leaders in Iraq and Somalia being killed have impacted at a rank level or at a supporter level in the broader ISIS ecosystem. We can dig into indications of dissonance or concern within these ecosystems to see whether there is any way to corroborate who these guys are and if they do hold the positions that they're said to hold. And more importantly, at a strategic level, we can examine the extent to which the disruption or degradation of the ISIS leadership has had or is having tangible impact on the group and its supporters—wherever they might be.

CTC: When it comes to the jihadi threat, based on all this data coming into you and your analysis of it, what are the geographic areas that are most concerning to you?

Winter: I would say, in no particular order—just because I can't rank them, because I think they're all very pressing—Syria, Afghanistan, and Somalia. Syria because it is in a period of extreme flux. The transition government is, I believe, making a meaningful effort to conduct a transition, but that's easier said than done when you have the pedigree that the transition government has. Easier said than done under the weight of sanctions that Syria still faces. But we're also in a period where we know ISIS, which has very deep foundations in Syria, is not flexing its muscles there yet. I worry that it is more a question of *when* rather than *if*.

CTC: Analysts have highlighted the fact that since the fall of the Assad regime in Syria there has been a significant drop in ISIS activity in Syria,^a and I think back to what you said about Afghanistan and the ISIS activity dropping there, before the attack at Kabul airport. So, what you're saying is 'don't assume that that lull is because they are a diminished force. It may well be that they are gearing up to something, and in fact, it sounds like your analysis is they *are* gearing up to something.'

Winter: I think it's always important not to ascribe too much credit to actors that may just fundamentally be failing, but I also think it's important not to misinterpret inactivity as a sign of weakness or incapacity. So, especially with the U.S. drawdown, especially with the prospect of further instability, fragmentation, and regional conflict more generally, I think we have to keep open to the idea that

a “In 2024, ISIS was resurgent in Syria, conducting an average of 59 attacks per month, but since Assad's departure on Dec. 8, 2024, its operational tempo has fallen by 80% — to just 12 attacks per month, on average. Even more significantly, the deadliness of ISIS's attacks has plunged by 97% — from an average of 63 killed per month under Assad in 2024 to just 2 per month since then.” Charles Lister, “ISIS is on the ropes in Syria. A successful transition in Damascus could deliver a knockout blow,” Middle East Institute, April 14, 2025.

“The city of Mogadishu and its environs is increasingly being cut off from the rest of FGS [Federal Government of Somalia]-held territory by concurrent al-Shabaab offensives in the areas around it.”

actors that may not be particularly active are *waiting*. We know that it's a time-worn thing that jihadist organizations in particular like to say that they don't operate in four-year democratic cycles. They can wait, and they do wait. So that's what concerns me about Syria.

With Afghanistan, everyone knows about the threat that ISKP presents from a global perspective, and absolutely, from a global perspective, it is extremely problematic. But I think there is more going on in Afghanistan than meets the eye in terms of what ISKP is getting up to. I don't think it's useful necessarily to think of organizations or movements like ISIS solely as militant actors. There's a lot of non-military, non-violent stuff that happens behind the scenes that ultimately facilitates the violence that we all hear about. In relation to Afghanistan, we have individuals in the U.K., for example, that have attempted to make *hijra* there in the *last year*.¹ You don't make *hijra* to somewhere where you can't make *hijra*. If you are a woman seeking to go there with your children and you are a believer in the ISIS creed and methodology and approach, you're not expecting to go and fight. You're expecting to go and live and participate in the civilian project that ISIS has undertaken. So, the fact that we still have people seeking to make *hijra* to a place like Afghanistan, where the Taliban are putting a lot of pressure on ISKP, to me suggests that there is more going on there than just the purely militant facade of the organization that we hear about either within Afghanistan itself or projecting itself into Iran, Russia, or the West.

Somalia, I think, is the clearest and easiest one to situate in this trio, just on the basis that al-Shabaab has been making very significant gains around Mogadishu over the course of the last few months—especially since the start of Ramadan—and we saw the attempted assassination of the Somali president a few weeks ago in Mogadishu itself.² But, more importantly, the city of Mogadishu and its environs is increasingly being cut off from the rest of FGS

[Federal Government of Somalia]-held territory by concurrent al-Shabaab offensives in the areas around it. So, my outlook for al-Shabaab isn't great—it is slowly and steadily making big gains in the context of a concurrent drawdown in support for the Somali security forces.

CTC: Let's get back to AI and the LLMs that you use and what you've learned about what the AI in this context does best, and what is best left to the analysts in your organization.

Winter: We hear a lot about how AI is changing the world, and sure, it is. But it's not any fix-all situation. It is not yet capable of human cognition or human expert-level analysis, but what it can do is enable an individual analyst to cut not in half but into 10 or 20 the amount of time it takes to generate a reasoned assessment of a dataset that would otherwise be impossible to—in an objective, replicable, and auditable way. Using AI in a constrained way to help parse, clean, process and visualize the hard-to-reach data we're getting our hands on opens up a world of possibility in terms of intelligence analysis that is—we believe and the people who we work with believe—so much more effective and fit for purpose than if your analysts are stuck collating others' assessments of data that they can't see or working with data that, by the time it reaches their facility or the place that they're working, is no longer relevant to what's happening in the here and now.

Being able to bring—again, in a constrained way—technology to bear in this environment is transformative. It minimizes the time spent on necessary but low-value tasks, such as individually coding data points or pulling together visualizations, and maximizes the opportunity for analysts to do the stuff that matters most, and that machines definitely can't and shouldn't be doing. That's where I think technology has really changed things.

Using ExTrac *now*, I could do my PhD in about five minutes, but it took me four years to do it not even 10 years ago. The key thing is the ability to parse data at scale while still being able to jump right back into the weeds and see, and audit, the raw, original data. What's more, the way we use technology means that anyone doing this kind of work today can do so in such a manner that the impacts of human error and subjectivity are mitigated—this is all enabled by mathematical processes that can be audited, that can be replicated, and that can be tested and calibrated to such a point that we know they are capturing and reflecting as much of the data as possible in as faithful a manner as possible. This is what technology enables now. **CTC**

Citations

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The Baloch Insurgency in Pakistan: Evolution, Tactics, and Regional Security Implications

By Ayush Verma, Imtiaz Baloch, and Riccardo Valle

The Baloch insurgency in Pakistan has intensified sharply since the beginning of 2025, marked by sophisticated attacks such as the Jaffar Express hijacking by Baloch Liberation Army-Jeeyand faction (BLA-J) on March 11, 2025, which resulted in the kidnapping of more than 400 passengers and death of at least 26 hostages. Groups such as BLA-J, Balochistan Liberation Front (BLF), and Baloch Liberation Army-Azad faction (BLA-A) continue to deploy suicide bombers, including women, and temporarily seize territories, targeting Chinese nationals and China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) projects. The insurgency's regional spillover, especially into Iran, and competition for resources and prominence among factions of the insurgency further complicate Pakistan's internal security. The Baloch Raaji Aajohi Sangar (BRAS) coalition among some of the major Baloch armed groups involved in the conflict enables large-scale, coordinated strikes, undermining counterterrorism efforts. Without a political resolution addressing long-standing grievances, the insurgency threatens to escalate, destabilizing both national and regional security.

The March 2025 Jaffar Express hijacking by the Baloch Liberation Army-Jeeyand faction (BLA-J) marked a major escalation in the Baloch insurgency, showcasing the group's growing operational sophistication and the ongoing security challenges facing Pakistan.¹ On March 11, BLA-J militants halted the Quetta-to-Peshawar passenger train in the Bolan Pass by detonating explosives, then took the passengers hostage—primarily targeting security personnel on leave who were traveling back from Balochistan to their homes—and issued demands for the release of Baloch political prisoners. While the actual number of passengers on board at the moment of the attack fluctuates and varies according to several sources, both official and unofficial accounts reported that more than 400 people were traveling.² However, according to the militants, they released civilians from the train while 214 off-duty security forces personnel were taken hostage for more than 48 hours before the subsequent rescue operation, “Operation Green Bolan,” led to the deaths of all 33 BLA-J militants.³ According to Pakistan's official statements, 354 hostages were released, while the operation also resulted in 30 casualties, including 26 passengers and four rescuers.⁴ The discrepancy between the number of passengers, hostages, and the casualties claimed by militants and Pakistan's security forces contributed to the lack of transparency surrounding the attack, fueling the kind of resentments among the local population that have resulted in the ongoing political turmoil in the province.⁵ From

a security perspective, the attack underscored the insurgency's capacity to disrupt national infrastructure, amplify its separatist agenda, and expose critical weaknesses in Pakistan's internal security.

Over the past three years, Pakistan has faced a rise in both the frequency and complexity of attacks in Balochistan, driven by various Baloch militant factions (see the Appendix for a table detailing the militant factions). While some groups conduct sporadic, small-scale operations, others have expanded their capabilities, launching daily attacks against security forces and executing large-scale operations involving dozens or even hundreds of militants. Since early 2025, in addition to the Jaffar Express attack, Baloch factions have carried out four suicide bombings—using both male and female attackers—along with three major operations that resulted in the temporary occupation of suburban areas.⁶ While the overwhelming majority of the attacks carried out by Baloch militant factions are concentrated within Balochistan province, a notable exception is Karachi, in Sindh province, where BLA-J and other militant factions have conducted devastating attacks, including suicide ones.⁷ Furthermore, some minor factions are active in other areas of Sindh province and, to a lesser extent, in the southern areas of Punjab province, where they attack gas pipelines and machinery related to mineral extractions.⁸

The growing number of attacks and their sophistication, including against ambitious targets and through complex tactics employed by militant factions, reflects a long-term approach to the insurgency. Some Baloch militant groups have consolidated their power and refined their tactics, while others, despite internal

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divisions, have managed to remain relevant within the context of the insurgency and compete with other factions for resources and image projection. Weaker factions, meanwhile, depend on broader alliances to maintain relevance within the insurgency.

Despite their differences, Baloch militant groups share common historical narratives that shape their campaigns and target selection. As a result, Chinese nationals and foreign investments in Balochistan remain priority targets across factions, with the groups also hostile toward political elections in the province and in Pakistan, as they are seen as instruments of repression by the Pakistani state. Attacks by Baloch militant groups have heightened tensions between Pakistan and neighboring countries, particularly as the insurgency expands into other areas traditionally considered part of “Greater Balochistan”—the historical geographical region that encompasses areas of modern-day Pakistan, Iran, and Afghanistan—reinforcing the conflict’s growing regional dimension.⁹ For instance, the recent April 12, 2025, attack in Iran that claimed the lives of eight Pakistani nationals was claimed by a Baloch militant faction that operates in both Pakistan and Iran.¹⁰

This article is structured into two parts. The first part, which contains three subsections, traces the trajectory of the Balochistan conflict up to 2025. Although it does not provide a comprehensive historical overview, the first subsection offers a brief background on the conditions that triggered the insurgency, laying the groundwork for an analysis in the second subsection of intra-group dynamics and the third subsection’s examination of the evolution of armed factions’ attack capabilities and political goals. Part Two includes four subsections and examines distinctive features of the Baloch insurgency. The first subsection explores the roots and violent expressions of anti-China sentiment among Baloch militant groups, including the use of suicide bombers. The second subsection discusses the deployment of female attackers in Pakistan’s militant landscape. The next two subsections turn to domestic and international dynamics. The third subsection reviews the militants’ repeated assaults on elections, while the fourth examines the cross-border dimensions of the insurgency in Pakistan and Iran, and its implications for Pakistan’s regional relations. The conclusion highlights persistent challenges in Pakistan’s counterinsurgency strategy and outlines possible future security scenarios.

The article draws on two main types of sources. A wide array of primary sources—including propaganda, public claims, and statements issued by armed groups, particularly over the past five years—are analyzed to track shifts in tactics and the scale of violence. Secondary sources are also used to provide historical context and evaluate the long-term evolution of militant factions.

Specifically, in terms of numbers of attacks, the authors decided to present the number of claimed attacks by militant organizations in order to highlight the magnitude of the growth of activity of the groups as the groups themselves have defined it. While these attacks cannot be entirely verified through official and secondary sources, a number of other sources, such as think tanks and research centers—including the Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS) and Global Terrorism Index (GTI)—reported on the increasing worsening deterioration of the security landscape in Pakistan and, specifically, in Balochistan province due to the attacks of Baloch separatists.¹¹ The authors also acknowledge that several sources have questioned the reliability of claimed attack data by Baloch militant groups. Furthermore, the authors are not aware of a systematic study that empirically evaluates the veracity of the

claims in relation to attacks recorded by neutral observers, as even data elaborated by ACLED tend to mix and overlap Baloch militant organizations and underreport their attacks.

Part One: The Trajectory of the Conflict

Background

The Baloch people, who inhabit the larger tripartite region of Balochistan spanning Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan—a resource-rich but underdeveloped province—have long felt marginalized by the central government of Pakistan.¹² This sense of marginalization has fueled separatist movements and armed insurgencies that have evolved over decades.¹³ The roots of the conflict lie in the post-partition era of the Indian Subcontinent, specifically with the accession of the Kalat State to Pakistan in March 1948.¹⁴ The treaty of accession, signed at the request of Pakistan’s founder Muhammad Ali Jinnah, prompted Agha Abdul Karim—brother of the Khan of Kalat, Mir Ahmed Yar Khan—to revolt against the decision and lead an armed insurrection from the Jhalawan region of the state, commonly known as the first phase of the Baloch conflict.¹⁵

Although the armed revolt ended a year later with the prince’s surrender, it planted the first seed of Baloch insurgency against the Pakistan state.¹⁶ The years between 1948 and 1955 saw the gradual incorporation of Balochistan into Pakistan’s state system through legislative measures. This period was described as a “long, complex, and essentially one-sided process of accession [to Pakistan] ... [leaving] a legacy of hostility, warfare and tensions that has served as a source of motivation for Baloch nationalists.”¹⁷

Another uprising in 1958 (commonly known as the second phase of the conflict) contributed to the consolidation of the Baloch people’s demand for self-determination and kept the insurgent movement alive.¹⁸ While the initial two phases were deeply rooted in traditional politics and closely linked to the Khan of Kalat, the third phase, beginning in 1963 with Sher Muhammad Marri’s Baloch People’s Liberation Front (BPLF), marked a shift.¹⁹ A new generation of leaders and commanders emerged, drawing on both the legacy of Balochistan’s independent past and Marxist-Leninist ideology.²⁰

The fourth phase of the insurgency emerged in the 1970s when Pakistani Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, influenced by concerns from the Shah of Iran over rising nationalist sentiments in Iranian Balochistan, dismissed Balochistan’s Chief Minister, Sardar Atta Ullah Mengal, and the provincial government led by the National Awami Party (NAP).²¹

After a period of relative calm in the 1990s, the fifth phase of the conflict developed due to escalating tensions between Baloch nationalist parties—weakened and incapable of forming a united political front—and the Pakistani state over persistent social and economic inequalities.²² Baloch people’s demands for greater political rights, control over resources, and increased autonomy intensified. Political confrontations in the early 2000s acted as catalysts for this renewed wave of conflict, after the issue of enforced disappearances of Baloch activists and their families by elements allegedly connected to Pakistan’s security apparatus emerged as the leading humanitarian issue and driver of the conflict.²³ Additionally, economic demands from Baloch society clashed with perceived exploitation of Baloch resources by the central government in Islamabad and, subsequently, by China in the context of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Chinese nationals and



A police personnel stands guard on the Jaffar Express passenger train as it resumes its services days after an attack by ethnic Baloch separatists at the Quetta Railway station in Quetta, Pakistan, on March 28, 2025. (Banaras Khan/AFP via Getty Images)

projects related to the CPEC became an important target, viewed by insurgents as symbols of external exploitation of Balochistan's natural resources by a so-called foreign power. The perception is exacerbated by the fact that while CPEC has been widely publicized as an opportunity for all the Baloch people to develop the province with the help of the central government and China and to increase their lifestyle, Balochistan remains an underdeveloped province marked by inequality.²⁴

Since the first phases of the insurgency, the Baloch militant leadership and its militants have matured a strong political vision of separation from Pakistan that has endured throughout the years. This vision rests on several socio-economic factors as well as perceived human rights violations and limitations of civil liberties lamented by several segments of Baloch society.²⁵ Political, economic, and social grievances intersect nationalist and separatist sentiments, continuously fueling the conflict.

Today, on the backdrop of solid national self-awareness, separatist, militant factions whose attack capabilities grew over the years are now gradually shifting from a guerrilla-centered insurgency to new tactics that combine guerrilla warfare and the temporary occupation of areas. These tactics are preparatory to the final goal of all Baloch militant organizations: the complete independence of Balochistan, from their perspective, or the eventual conquest of the province, from Pakistan. Differences between the scope of and approach to this goal remain, with some factions limiting their conflict only to Pakistan while others expanding it to neighboring countries that form the "Greater Balochistan:" Iran and, to some extent, Afghanistan.²⁶

Unity and Divisions within the Insurgency in Balochistan since the 2000s

During a police crackdown in the 1990s on a protest in Balochistan's capital city, Quetta, called by the pro-independence movement Haq-e-Tawar, a protester—Aslam Baloch—opened fire on the police as retaliation for using force against the peaceful protesters. This heralded a new phase of the Baloch insurgency as Baloch nationalists nurtured that any peaceful means of struggle can face hard handed response from the Pakistani government.²⁷ After Baloch nationalist Hyrbyair Marri founded the separatist group Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) in 1996, Aslam Baloch, also known as Aslam Achu, became first commander of BLA in the Bolan area of Balochistan.²⁸

After the inception of BLA, another name came to prominence:²⁹ Aslam Baloch, became a pivotal figure in the conflict. He is considered to be the father of the modern guerrilla warfare of the BLA and an influential figure between different factions of the insurgency. In 2018 Baloch became the head of the splinter group BLA-J after being expelled by the BLA over organizational disciplinary issues. In December that year he was mysteriously killed in Kandahar city, Afghanistan in December 2018³⁰ Aslam Baloch was a field commander of BLA who was later expelled by the group over organizational disciplinary issues, which led to foundation of BLA-J faction in 2018.³¹

In 1998, the nationalist government of Balochistan, led by Chief Minister Sardar Akhtar Mengal, was removed from power through a non-confidence motion backed by the then Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, and Hyrbyair Marri, the brain beyond the BLA, who served as the provincial Communications and Works Minister under Mengal's government, departed for the United Kingdom silently in 2000.³² In 2000, Nawab Khair Bakhsh Marri,

the father of Hyrbayir Marri and an ideologue of the new nationalist movement in Balochistan, was arrested in connection with the murder case of Justice Nawaz Marri, a senior judge of Balochistan's high court who was shot dead in Quetta.³³ This incident led to early confrontations between the Baloch and the Pakistani state, as the seeds of the Baloch insurgency movement had been sown in the province.³⁴ These events instigated the BLA to begin in 2000 with the guidance of some former fighters from the previous 1970s insurrection, mostly from the Marri tribes.³⁵ In its initial stages in early 2000, the group targeted government installations, railway lines, and communication and transmission lines in the province. The BLA also carried out rocket attacks, landmine explosions, and dynamite attacks against the Pakistani government's paramilitary group the Frontier Corps (FC).³⁶ In 2003, another faction of the Baloch insurgency emerged: the Balochistan Liberation Front (BLF). Essentially, the BLF was born as the sister organization of BLA, created with the support of the latter in order to expand the Baloch insurgency into traditionally Baloch middle-class areas, such as in Makran and Rakhshan divisions of Balochistan.³⁷

Between 2000 and 2005, the BLA and BLF became a major security concern for Pakistani security forces and international investors in Balochistan.³⁸ On May 3, 2004, three Chinese engineers working in Gwadar were killed by the BLF.³⁹ Similarly, Baloch insurgents fired rockets during President Musharraf's gathering in the Kohlu district on December 14, 2005, provoking a retaliation from the Pakistani state.⁴⁰ A political confrontation developed between the government and Baloch nationalist leader Nawab Akbar Bugti over the issues of employment and a land lease by the Pakistan Petroleum Limited (PPL), which was perceived to have been framed in bad faith over provincial shares of royalty by central government, resulting in economic exploitation.⁴¹ Soon, clashes occurred between Nawab Bugti and the Bugti tribe on the one side and security forces on the other, ultimately leading to Bugti's death in August 2006. Bugti's death marked a turning point, galvanizing support for the Baloch armed groups and strengthening the existing BLA and BLF insurgency, leading to the creation of a new organization called the Baloch Republican Army (BRA) and fueling anti-government attacks in the province.⁴²

The situation intensified when the then BLA leader, Balach Marri, son of Nawab Khair Bakhsh Marri, was killed in unclear circumstances in Afghanistan in November 2007.^a His death triggered the aggravation of an already volatile situation in Balochistan, including the capital city of Quetta, as Balach was a popular figure among the Baloch youth. His death instigated unrest and heightened the youth's inclination toward insurgency throughout Balochistan.⁴³

Meanwhile, in September 2008, the BLA, BRA, and BLF declared a ceasefire for the first and only time in the long-standing conflict, and Pakistani security forces scaled back their operations, hoping for political reconciliation in the province.⁴⁴ However, Pakistan did not respond.⁴⁵

Between 2008 and 2018, the insurgency remained relatively small in scale, with some exceptions. In December 2011, the BLA conducted its first and only suicide bombing, targeting Baloch politician Shafeeq Mengal in Quetta.⁴⁶ This remained the sole suicide attack in the Baloch insurgency until BLA's 2017 split, when one faction (BLA-J) resumed such operations, followed by the other (BLA-A) in 2025.⁴⁷

Fragmented Insurgency and Intra-group Rivalries

Organizational conflicts within the Baloch insurgency often stem from strategic rivalries, leadership disputes, class dynamics, class disparities, and power struggles. The current alliance between BLF and the BLA splinter group BLA-J, for example, was preceded by tensions between the two factions. Initially, BLA supported BLF's expansion, but as their areas of operation—particularly in southern Balochistan—began to overlap, competition over resources and recruits intensified. Tactical differences and tribal influences further deepened the divide, with BLF repeatedly rejecting integration into BLA, solidifying their distinct operational paths.⁴⁸

The first major split occurred in 2012 when the United Baloch Army (UBA) broke away from the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) amid allegations of financial fraud involving Hyrbayir Marri and Mehran Marri, a Baloch separatist leader and brother of Hyrbayir Marri.^b The rift led to their separation, deepening tensions between their factions and sparking conflicts over resources, including bloody clashes over equipment and resources in the early stages of disputes.⁴⁹

Organizational disputes within the Baloch insurgency have often led to further fragmentation. A key example occurred in 2017 when the BLA expelled commanders Aslam Baloch and Bashir Zaib Baloch over disciplinary issues, particularly Aslam's unauthorized visit to India for medical treatment.⁵⁰ This internal rift escalated into a major split, with BLA spokesman Azad Baloch publicly disowning both leaders.⁵¹ Subsequently, the group appointed Jeeyand Baloch as its new spokesman, while Bashir Zaib went on to lead a separate BLA faction.⁵² The split resulted in two factions: BLA-A and BLA-J.

One of BLA-J's first moves was reviving the Majeed Brigade suicide squad after seven years, intensifying violence.⁵³ c Aslam Baloch and Bashir Zaib's expulsion from BLA-A and foundation

a Balach Marri was the youngest son of Nawab Kahir Bakhsh Marri and was a member of Balochistan's provincial assembly when he was killed. The Pakistani media outlet Dawn reported that according to some sources, Marri was killed mistakenly "in an air strike by NATO forces in Gramshar area of Afghanistan's Helmand province." Marri had sought refuge in Afghanistan following a crackdown on militants in Balochistan. Saleem Shahid, "Balach Marri killed: Violence in Quetta, schools closed," *Dawn*, November 22, 2007.

b Mehran Marri has represented Baloch issues internationally, including at the United Nations. He has been linked to the United Baloch Army (UBA), which is banned in Pakistan and Switzerland, though he denies involvement in militancy. In 2017, Switzerland imposed a lifetime entry ban on him citing security concerns. He currently lives in the United Kingdom and remains active in the Baloch separatist movement. Murtaza Ali Shah, "Swiss slaps 'entry ban' on Baloch leader Mehran Marri," *News*, November 16, 2017.

c Founded by Aslam Achu, the Majeed Brigade is the suicide squad of the BLA and first became operational in December 2011 by conducting a suicide attack against Shafeeq Mengal, a local politician. The BLA's only suicide attack was in 2011. The unit went dormant for seven years, when in 2018 BLA-J reactivated the unit by claiming a suicide attack carried out by the "Majeed Brigade," after the group's 2017 split. Since then, BLA-J has frequently deployed the "Majeed Brigade" for conducting suicide attacks. However, in March 2025, the other faction of BLA, BLA-A, claimed an attack carried out by its own "Majeed Brigade," the first suicide attack claimed by this faction. BLA-A insisted that its "Majeed Brigade" is the heir of the BLA's original one, as opposed to BLA-J's claims. Shezad Baloch, "Balochistan insurgency: Blast near Baloch politician's home kills 13," *Express Tribune*, December 31, 2011; Abdul Basit, "The Majeed Brigade: The Baluch Liberation Army's Suicide Squad," *Terrorism Monitor* 20:13 (2022).

of BLA-J was followed by several field commanders and militants leaving BLA-A to join BLA-J, putting the future of BLA-A in jeopardy.^d BLA-J gained prominence through high-profile attacks, while BLA-A relied on lower-intensity tactics like ambushes, IED attacks, raids, and targeted killings. Notably, BLA-A distanced itself from major assaults, including the November 2018 Chinese consulate attack and the August 2018 Dalbandin bus bombing.⁵⁴

Another major split occurred around the same time within the Baloch Republican Army (BRA), a key faction within the Baloch insurgency, that has been active since 2006 following the death of Baloch nationalist leader Nawab Akbar Bugti in the same year.^e In 2018, BRA field commander Gulzar Imam broke away to form his own faction, BRA (Beebagr), named after its spokesman. Later, Imam allied with Sarfaraz Bangulzai, a former UBA commander expelled for disciplinary violations. Together, they established the Baloch Nationalist Army (BNA) in January 2022, marking a further fragmentation of the insurgency.⁵⁵ The newly formed organization also joined the BRAS umbrella (an alliance of Baloch insurgent groups that will be discussed in the next section).⁵⁶

In mid-2023, the arrest of Gulzar Imam by Pakistani security forces triggered a major split within the BNA, ultimately undermining the group's cohesion.⁵⁷ By April 2023, the BNA had fractured into two factions. Sarfaraz's faction accused BRAS of failing to properly investigate Imam's arrest, alleging that the BLF and BLA-J had manipulated the process to weaken the BNA.⁵⁸ As a result, Sarfaraz announced that his faction was abandoning BRAS.⁵⁹ On the other hand, a faction of the BNA led by Anwar Chakar remains loyal to BRAS and still operates with the coalition.⁶⁰ Hence, the two factions came to be known as BNA (Sarfaraz) and BNA (Anwar). In December 2023, Sarfaraz Bangulzai made a groundbreaking announcement, claiming that his faction had surrendered to the state.⁶¹ Meanwhile, BNA (Anwar) suffered from another internal rift when, in September 2024, a new obscure faction emerged, BNA (Beebarg), that started to claim attacks in Pakistan's Balochistan, Sindh, and Punjab provinces and in Iran's eastern Baloch provinces.⁶²

Unity Among Baloch Factions

Baloch Raaji Aajohi Sangar (BRAS) is an alliance of Baloch insurgent groups, formally announced on November 10, 2018, to unify militant activities and strengthen the insurgency.⁶³ It emerged from an initial alliance between the Balochistan Liberation Front (BLF) and Balochistan Liberation Army-J (BLA-J) in 2017, later

joined by the Baloch Republican Guards (BRG) in April 2018.^{64f} In May 2019, Gulzar Imam-led BRA (Beebagr) faction also announced it had decided to join BRAS, starting to take part in militant joint activities.⁶⁵ In July 2020, the Sindhudesh Revolutionary Army (SRA) became BRAS' final member, marking the inclusion of a non-Baloch group. BRAS and SRA claim to resist perceived Punjabi domination in Balochistan and Sindh.⁶⁶

A controversial aspect of the newly formed organization is that, despite advocating unity among different groups, BRAS has been accused of primarily serving the interests of the BLF and BLA-J. Notably, while BRA (Beebagr) and its successor BNA and the latter's offshoot, BNA (Anwar), have repeatedly claimed affiliation with BRAS, the alliance consistently recognizes only the BLF, BLA-J, BRG, and SRA as its members, omitting any mention of the BNA since the April 2023 split within the BNA and the creation of the BNA (Anwar) and BNA (Sarfaraz) factions. This exclusion, despite BNA's reported inclusion in 2022, may stem from the group's contentious origins and internal political frictions among its leaders.⁶⁷

Functioning as a key coordinator of insurgent operations, BRAS organizes large-scale attacks on symbolic dates, such as Pakistan's Independence Day (August 14, 2024), Baloch Martyrs' Day (November 13, 2024), and the anniversary of Balochistan's accession to Pakistan (March 27, 2025). On August 9, 2024, BRAS published a communique announcing that the coalition was going to intensify its attacks during August 14 celebrations as well as target the celebrations themselves, resulting in multiple attacks carried out by BLA-J and BLF between August 8 and 14.⁶⁸ BLA-J claimed some attacks specifically targeting celebrations and security forces guarding the events, while the BLF claimed 32 attacks against multiple and different targets.⁶⁹ Between November 12 and 13, 2024, BRAS directly claimed 45 attacks across 42 areas of Balochistan carried out by the entire coalition, while between March 27 and 30, the coalition released several statements claiming 88 attacks in different parts of Balochistan and publishing a video showcasing BLA-J and BLF fighters conducting searching operations and setting up checkpoints.⁷⁰ Meanwhile, on March 2, 2025, BRAS leadership announced plans to enhance technological and operational capabilities, adopt modern warfare tactics, and pursue diplomatic efforts, potentially signaling the intention of strategically escalating conflict with the state.⁷¹ Between 2018 and 2024, BRAS became an effective control room for cementing pre-existing alliances between groups while consolidating the power of its two major factions, BLA-J and BLF, and increasing the number of joint claimed attacks, reaching 204 in 2024.⁷²

The Attack Activities of Baloch Militant Factions

Currently, there are around 10 militant factions that operate within the Baloch insurgency. While groups like BLA-J, BLF, and BLA-A regularly claim attacks, primarily against Pakistani security forces, others such as the BRG, BNA (Anwar), and BNA (Beebarg) face significant operational constraints and have become less relevant in the insurgency. Finally, some minor groups, primarily the United

d For instance, in August 2019, BLA-A argued that the August and November 2018 attacks claimed by BLA-J—and rejected by BLA-A—were carried out by sincere Baloch youths “tricked” by Aslam and Bashir and recruited into BLA-J. See “BLA statement on United States of America,” *Baloch Liberation Voice* on Telegram, August 7, 2019. However, in other statements, BLA-A attempted to downplay the size of BLA-J manpower by arguing that BLA-J Majeed Brigade did not include affiliates of the original BLA but rather members of other organizations, such as BRA and BLF. See “We have not carried out the Karachi Stock Exchange attack. Baloch Liberation Army,” *Baloch Liberation Voice* on Telegram, July 1, 2020.

e It is important to note that BRA has not been officially active since around 2016 when internal rifts started to form and eventually erupted in 2018. However, in October 2024, BRA militants resurfaced in the Dera Bugti area of Balochistan carrying out two targeted assassinations. Author (Baloch) interview, local militant sources, October 2024. See also The Khorasan Diary, “ALERT: At least 2 people were shot dead in two separate firing incidents . . .,” X, October 13, 2024.

f It is important to note that BRG was initially formed in 2012 following the murder of the wife and daughter of Bakhtyar Khan Domki, the group's leader, who were also the sister and niece of Brahamdaght Bugti, the grand-nephew of Nawab Bugti. See S. Raza Hassan, “Domki family killing was a message,” *Dawn*, February 4, 2012.

Baloch Army (UBA), have become nearly defunct.

Since 2021, Baloch militant groups have escalated both the frequency and complexity of their attacks. Their primary targets include security forces, alleged informants, members of “Death Squads,” infrastructure linked to security forces and China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) projects, Punjabi workers, and Chinese nationals. The March 2025 attack on the Jaffar Express by BLA-J, for example, followed a pattern of smaller attacks on the same target by the BLA-A and BNA (Anwar) since 2023.⁷³ Currently, BLA-J and BLF vie for dominance, with the BLA-A as a key rival. These three groups have refined traditional tactics, introduced new strategies, and expanded their operational structures. Additionally, they have cultivated ties with smaller Baloch and Sindhi nationalist factions, solidifying their status as the leading forces of the insurgency. In the paragraphs that follow, the authors provide details on various Baloch separatist groups’ attack activities.

Baloch Liberation Army-Jeeyand (BLA-J)

BLA-J is currently the most dynamic Baloch militant group. Between 2019 and 2021, its activity followed a steady upward trajectory, with the number of claimed attacks rising from 50 in 2019 to 64 in 2020 and 88 in 2021.⁷⁴ Similarly, the use of suicide attackers (*fidayees*) remained limited to one deployment per year.^g However, since early 2022, BLA-J has rapidly expanded its operations, claiming 188 attacks in 2022, 247 in 2023, and 302 in 2024.⁷⁵ The number of suicide attacks also rose, with BLA-J claiming three in 2022, two in 2023, and a record six in 2024.

BLA-J currently conducts two intermittent special campaigns, Operation Zir Pahazag (Guarding the Coast) and Operation Herof, alongside targeted suicide attacks. In 2025, the group concluded Operation Dara-e-Bolan, one of its most ambitious campaigns, which began the previous year.⁷⁶ These operations indicate a long-term and evolving strategic approach to the insurgency, combining multiple tactics and an ever-more sophisticated application of the concept of guerrilla warfare. As recent publications of the group have revealed, BLA-J insurgency rests upon the dual concept of mountainous and urban guerrilla warfare.⁷⁷ BLA-J maintains constant pressure on Pakistani security forces through daily attacks on checkpoints and patrols, while periodically deploying suicide bombers and armed attackers against high-value targets, including Chinese nationals and military installations. Operation Zir Pahazag focuses on disrupting CPEC-related infrastructure along the coastline, directly challenging state control over resources. Meanwhile, Operations Dara-e-Bolan and Herof, which involve the temporary occupation of areas in Balochistan, align with BLA-J’s broader objective—the eventual conquest of Balochistan.

While expanding its complex operations, BLA-J has also enhanced the capabilities of its special units, which now play a central role in its strategy. The group’s special forces are divided into four units: Majeed Brigade, STOS (Special Tactical Operations Squad), Fateh Squad, and Zephyr Intelligence Research & Analysis

Bureau (ZIRAB). The first three have long been involved in special operations, often working together. Typically, the Majeed Brigade initiates attacks with suicide bombings, followed by STOS conducting intelligence-based operations and the Fateh Squad leading vanguard assaults. The existence of ZIRAB, BLA-J’s intelligence wing, was officially revealed in October 2024 during a suicide attack targeting Chinese nationals in Karachi.⁷⁸ Since then, every major attack has been carried out with ZIRAB’s preemptive intelligence support, signaling a growing emphasis on coordinated, high-impact operations.⁷⁹

In May 2019, BLA-J launched Operation Zir Pahazag (Guarding the Coast) with a suicide attack on the Pearl Continental Hotel in Gwadar, Balochistan.⁸⁰ BLA-J deployed four Majeed Brigade suicide attackers to target the Pearl Continental Hotel, aiming to destroy the building and kill Pakistani security forces and Chinese nationals linked to CPEC and deter Chinese and foreign investment in Balochistan.⁸¹ This operation continued the group’s anti-Chinese campaign, which began in 2018 with attacks on Chinese engineers in Dalbandin and the Chinese consulate in Karachi.⁸²

Operation Zir Pahazag remains active, with BLA-J executing four additional phases. In August 2021, a BLA-J suicide bomber targeted a convoy of Chinese nationals and security forces in Gwadar, while the group issued a warning for China to cease its economic activities in the region.⁸³ The next three phases of Operation Zir Pahazag took place in 2023 and 2024. In August 2023, two BLA-J suicide attackers ambushed a convoy of Chinese engineers in Gwadar, engaging Pakistani security forces in a prolonged battle.⁸⁴ The fourth and fifth phases of Operation Zir Pahazag took place on March 20 and 26, 2024, involving 12 Majeed Brigade members. The attackers targeted Gwadar’s Port Authority Complex and the Naval Air Base PNS Siddique in Turbat, Balochistan.⁸⁵

Operation Zir Pahazag remains the longest-running operation by BLA-J or any Baloch nationalist faction. While primarily targeting Chinese nationals and Pakistan’s coastal security infrastructure, it is not BLA-J’s only large-scale campaign. Between 2019 and 2025, the group conducted numerous suicide and special operations, echoing its 2018 attacks.

Beyond targeting Chinese nationals (see the next section), BLA-J also launched suicide attacks on military installations. In February 2022, the Majeed Brigade carried out Operation Ganjal, deploying two teams of suicide attackers against military camps in Noshki and Panjgur. This marked BLA-J’s first attempt to seize and hold territory for three days, signaling a tactical shift in its insurgency strategy.⁸⁶ In June 2023, BLA-J conducted its second female suicide bombing, setting a precedent that other Baloch insurgent groups would later follow.⁸⁷ In November 2024, BLA-J deployed a suicide bomber to attack non-commissioned officers at Quetta railway station as they awaited transfer to the Jaffer Express.⁸⁸

The year 2024 was a pivotal one for BLA-J, as it launched two major operations aimed at demonstrating its capability to seize and hold large territories and urban areas for extended periods. Operation Dara-e-Bolan, the first of its kind, involved 385 militants, including 12 Majeed Brigade members.⁸⁹ Between January 29 and 31, 2024, the group occupied urban areas around Macch and surrounding highways for two consecutive days, marking a significant escalation in its operational strategy.⁹⁰ BLA-J described Operation Dara-e-Bolan as the first phase of a broader strategy aimed at demonstrating its ability to seize key areas of Balochistan.⁹¹ The second and final phase, concluded in March 2025, involved a

g Baloch militant groups and specifically BLA-J refer to suicide attackers as “fedayeen,” or “self-sacrificing fighters” who engage in prolonged clashes with security forces until their ultimate demise. They also carry out suicide attacks by detonating explosive vests and vehicles. Miran Mazar, “TBP Report: Majeed Brigade – The Inside Story,” Balochistan Post, July 20, 2020.

two-day hostage crisis during the Jaffer Express attack and a suicide bombing targeting a military convoy in Noshki.⁹² While BLA-J exaggerated the reported casualties, the operation showcased the group's evolving tactical capabilities and underscored intra-group cooperation within the BRAS alliance, as the January 2024 phase was coordinated with other Baloch militant factions.⁹³

Like Operation Dara-e-Bolan, the August 2024 Operation Herof (Black Storm) aimed to seize control of major highways across Balochistan, including coastal routes, and temporarily occupy the Bela military camp. BLA-J deployed 800 fighters and seven suicide attackers, framing the assault as the first phase of a broader effort to reclaim key territories.⁹⁴ While the second phase has yet to be announced, in early January 2025, BLA-J briefly occupied Zehri, near Khuzdar, before retreating. The group claimed this incursion was a tactical exercise in preparation for the next phase of Operation Herof.⁹⁵

Balochistan Liberation Front (BLF)

While BLA-J and BLF report similar attack numbers, their insurgency strategies differ significantly. BLF has historically focused on frequent, lower-profile attacks rather than large-scale special operations, maintaining a steady attack rate with a sharp rise in 2023. The group claimed 176 attacks in 2021, 162 in 2022, and 284 in both 2023 and 2024.⁹⁶ This trend appears to continue, with 128 attacks recorded in the first three months of 2025.⁹⁷ As part of the BRAS umbrella, BLF closely collaborates with other militant groups, particularly BLA-J, supporting its efforts during Operation Dara-e-Bolan in January 2024.⁹⁸

Though BLF primarily focuses on sustained, low-intensity attacks, it has occasionally carried out special operations, particularly in 2024. In September 2024, the group launched a three-day operation against security forces and so-called "Death Squads" in Barkhan district. BLF claimed that the offensive was coordinated with BLA-J and BRG fighters, who provided support to its units.⁹⁹ In November 2024, BLF launched another special operation, targeting a military camp in Kech district. The attack was a coordinated effort involving its Intelligence Wing and Qurban Unit, demonstrating the group's tactical capabilities to integrate the activities of its different military branches and units.¹⁰⁰ Notably, BLF does not heavily publicize its special operations. Similarly, it reports its frequent attacks with minimal fanfare, even when targeting symbolic objectives such as CPEC-related machinery or police checkpoints in Karachi, Sindh province.^h

BLF does not publicly disclose details about its internal organization and forces. Its most prominent units are the Sniper Tactical Team (STT), the Qurban Unit, and the Intelligence Wing. While the STT has operated for a long time, BLF recently rebranded it.¹⁰¹ The Qurban Unit acts as a vanguard, operating as a fight-to-the-death force. BLF primarily deploys it for attacks on military convoys, installations, and bases.¹⁰² However, its details are kept secret, in contrast to the BLA-A Majeed Brigade and Fateh Squad.

Despite BLF's high activity, it has received less media attention than BLA-J, partly due to the lower profile of its media wing.

However, BLF has been more engaged in media production than many other groups, regularly publishing magazines and quarterly attack reports, whereas others typically release only statements and videos. In November 2024, BLF launched *Asper Magazine*, a monthly publication focused on media warfare. Featuring propaganda in both Balochi and Urdu, the magazine prominently emphasizes anti-China sentiments, dedicating three articles to "Chinese economic and military colonialism" in Balochistan.¹⁰³

Baloch Liberation Army-Azad (BLA-A)

The third major Baloch militant faction, BLA-A, emerged from a significant internal split within BLA in July 2017. This division led to the expulsion of commanders Aslam Baloch and Bashir Zaib, who then formed their faction, BLA-J, later forming BRAS with BLF. The original BLA, in turn, later became known as BLA-A, and today operates outside of BRAS. Unlike most other groups, BLA-A is not part of BRAS and has traditionally been weaker than BLA-J and BLF. From 2020, it maintained a limited operational scope, avoiding special operations and suicide attacks. However, in 2024, BLA-A dramatically escalated its insurgency. While it claimed six attacks in 2020, 20 in 2021, 46-50 in 2022, and 38 in 2023, its activity surged to 154 attacks in 2024.¹⁰⁴ The sharp rise in BLA-A's claimed attacks appears to be a response to BLA-J's evolution and its 2024 special campaigns. Growing competition between the two factions has thus led to outbidding between the two factions.

In early 2025, BLA-A further aligned its tactics with BLA-J. In late January, it launched Operation Kalat, briefly seizing parts of a military camp and the town of Manguchar before retreating.¹⁰⁵ This operation, though on a smaller scale, mirrored BLA-J's Operations Herof and Dara-e-Bolan, showcasing BLA-A's ambition to rival its counterpart through its new "Stay, Hit, and Run" strategy. On March 3, 2025, BLA-A conducted its first-ever suicide bombing, revealing that it had retained its own Majeed Brigade, which it claimed as the original BLA unit.^{106 i} The attack, carried out by a female suicide bomber, further underscored the growing rivalry, with BLA-A emulating BLA-J's complex operations and use of suicide attackers to gain prominence among the Baloch public.

Other Factions of the Baloch Insurgency

Beyond the three main factions, the Baloch insurgency includes several smaller groups that conduct attacks sporadically. Among them, BRG is the third most active within the BRAS coalition, though its role remains limited. It has primarily supported BLF and BLA-J through coordinated attacks. However, BRG appears to be in decline, possibly benefiting other factions. Its activity has gradually decreased, with 26 attacks in 2022, 28 in 2023, and 18 in 2024.¹⁰⁷ In early 2025, BRG claimed 10 attacks within three

^h For instance, BLF claimed five low-intensity attacks in Karachi in 2023, while BLA-J only one. See "Balochistan Liberation Front Operations - 2023," *Aashob BLF* on Telegram, January 2024, and "Dhakk - 2023," Hakkal Media, January 2024.

ⁱ For BLA-A, this marked the second suicide attack carried out the Majeed Brigade, as the group claims to be the original BLA. The group argues that the first attack carried out by the Majeed Brigade was in 2011 before the split. Since the Majeed Brigade was reactivated in 2018 by BLA-J, the latter faction has been conducting suicide attacks using the name of the Majeed Brigade, while BLA-A repeatedly stated that BLA-J had "hijacked" the name of the Majeed Brigade for conducting its own suicide attacks. Furthermore, BLA-A did not conduct a single suicide attack between 2011 and 2025, when they claimed their first ever suicide attack. BLA-A reiterated that it was carried out by the Majeed Brigade and that the Majeed Brigade had conducted only two suicide attacks: in 2011 and 2025. This is indirect criticism to BLA-J that has been conducting multiple suicide attacks since 2018 using the same name.

months, suggesting either an attempt to stay relevant by increasing operations or potential support from other Baloch factions to sustain pressure on security forces.¹⁰⁸

BNA (Anwar) and UBA have largely ceased operations despite maintaining their claims of resistance. Following its 2023 internal rift, BNA (Anwar) experienced a sharp decline in activity, with claimed attacks dropping from 34 in 2022 to around 20 between 2023 and early 2025.¹⁰⁹ The group's decline is evident, as it had claimed 106 attacks in 2021 under BRA before merging with a UBA faction.¹¹⁰ Today, the group is still part of BRAS, participating in major operations launched by the coalition. The last major attack claimed by BNA was before the split: the January 2022 bombing of a bank in Lahore, Punjab province.¹¹¹ However, BNA (Anwar) infiltration of Punjab continued to persist also in February 2023, with the group claiming an IED attack targeting the Jaffar Express in Chicha area of Faisalabad district, Punjab province.¹¹² On the other hand, the rather obscure BNA (Beebarg) appears to have more ambitious objectives, and has claimed more than 30 attacks between September 2024 and March 2025.¹¹³ In January 2025, the group also launched its special operation, Operation Gerok, that has targeted mostly communication towers, vehicles, and drones belonging to Iranian security forces.¹¹⁴

Recently, following the April 12, 2025, execution of Pakistani laborers in Iran claimed by BNA (Beebarg), BNA (Anwar) issued a statement denouncing the attack and accusing BNA (Beebarg) militants of being associates of BNA (Sarfaz) and tarnishing the reputation of BNA.¹¹⁵ The group—BNA (Anwar)—further stated that it was distancing itself from the attack and that its struggle was confined to Pakistan only, and not Iran, promising investigations into the rival faction.¹¹⁶ In contrast, between 2022 and 2024, the remaining independent faction of UBA that did not join BRA to form BNA claimed approximately 30 attacks, with only one relatively significant operation, Operation Bombur in February 2022.¹¹⁷ Today, UBA exists outside of BRAS.

Part 2: Distinctive Features of the Baloch Insurgency

CPEC and the Anti-China Campaign

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a flagship initiative under China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), was launched in 2015 with an estimated \$62 billion in investments. Designed to enhance infrastructure, energy production, and trade connectivity, CPEC primarily links Gwadar Port in Balochistan to China's Xinjiang province via an extensive network of roads, railways, and pipelines, granting China strategic access to the Arabian Sea.¹¹⁸

Despite its economic potential, CPEC has intensified the Baloch insurgency, exacerbating grievances over resource control, marginalization, and cultural erosion. The growing sophistication and frequency of attacks on CPEC-related targets underscores the persistence of the insurgency, which, if unaddressed through inclusive development and dialogue, threatens regional stability and the project's success.

In response to these perceived resentments, Baloch militant factions have launched different operations and have increasingly targeted Chinese nationals and investments, viewing them as enablers of exploitation. BLA-J has been spearheading the anti-China campaign with a series of deadly suicide bombings and attacks. Three out of five phases of Operation Zir Pahazag have specifically attacked Chinese interests and nationals. In the third

phase in 2023, crucially, BLA-J not only reiterated its threats against China but also issued a 90-day ultimatum to Beijing to withdraw its presence from Balochistan, otherwise, the group would increase its military activities against Chinese nationals and Pakistan's security infrastructures.¹¹⁹ While Operation Zir Pahazag was developing, BLA-J carried out other independent operations against Chinese nationals.¹²⁰ These include the June 29, 2020, suicide attack by four members of the Majeed Brigade who targeted the Pakistan Stock Exchange (PSX) in Karachi in Operation Stock Exchange.¹²¹ Later, in April 2022, BLA-J deployed its first-ever female suicide bomber, Shaari Baloch, who carried out the suicide attack against the Confucius Institute in Karachi.¹²² In October 2024, BLA-J deployed one suicide bomber who targeted a convoy of Chinese nationals and escorting security forces in Karachi, marking the last attack against Chinese interests in 2024.¹²³ Other key Baloch groups—BLF, BLA-A, BRG, SRA—have carried out low-intensity attacks mostly targeting CPEC machinery, gas pipelines, mineral trucks, and workers involved in the project.¹²⁴

The evolution of insurgent tactics from hit-and-run attacks to coordinated, high-profile operations reflects mounting resistance to CPEC. The growing sophistication of these attacks underscores insurgents' tactical capabilities and their opposition to perceived economic exploitation. In response, Pakistan has deployed extensive security forces to safeguard CPEC projects, further militarizing the region. The Pakistani government's heavy-handed counterinsurgency measures, including military crackdowns and unconventional measures, have deepened Baloch alienation, reinforcing perceptions of political and economic marginalization.¹²⁵ Instead of suppressing the insurgency, these actions have fueled local resentment, increasing sympathy for insurgents.¹²⁶

Pakistan has sought China's support in intelligence-sharing and counterinsurgency efforts, deepening Beijing's involvement in its internal security. This cooperation in the security sector risks increasing Pakistan's strategic dependency on China, granting Beijing influence over Pakistan's security policies and decision-making process within certain matters relating to CPEC.¹²⁷ Since 2024, following Baloch militant groups' attacks targeting Chinese interests and nationals, Pakistan-China security cooperations has been taking new steps, with a more robust Chinese participation in the security sphere of the CPEC project, specifically during the development of CPEC Phase II.¹²⁸ Currently, several Chinese nationals are engaged in work at the Thar Coal Block power projects in Sindh under CPEC.¹²⁹ Amidst the rumors of possible deployment of Chinese forces in Pakistan—that Islamabad has vehemently denied—in the innermost security perimeter surrounding these workers could spark domestic backlash, as China's expanding role may be perceived as infringing on Pakistan's sovereignty.¹³⁰ Insurgents may exploit this narrative, intensifying anti-China and anti-government sentiments.¹³¹

Female Suicide Attackers

The incorporation of female suicide attackers within Baloch insurgent groups, particularly BLA-J Majeed Brigade, marks a significant evolution in the tactics of the Baloch insurgency. This strategic shift not only broadens the operational scope of these groups but also serves as a potent propaganda tool, challenging traditional gender roles within the conservative Baloch society.

The first recorded instance of a female suicide bomber in the Baloch insurgency occurred in April 2022, when BLA-J operative

Shari Baloch, a 30-year-old mother of two, targeted the Confucius Institute at the University of Karachi. This attack resulted in the deaths of three Chinese instructors and their Pakistani driver, signaling a departure from previous operational norms.¹³² Subsequent incidents underscore the increasing role of women in such operations. On June 24, 2023, BLA-J female suicide bomber Sumaiya Qalandrani Baloch carried out a suicide attack targeting a Pakistani military convoy in Turbat, marking the second instance of a female suicide bomber in the Baloch insurgency.¹³³ At 25 years old, Sumaiya held a bachelor's degree in computer science and was actively involved in the media wing of the Baloch Liberation Army, Hakkal. She was engaged to Rehan Baloch, the son of General Aslam Baloch, the founding leader of the BLA.¹³⁴ In 2018, Rehan carried out a suicide attack targeting Chinese engineers near Dalbandin.¹³⁵ Additionally, her family reportedly faced state repression, with multiple male members forcibly disappearing during a military operation in Tootak in February 2011.¹³⁶

In a new development, in March 2025, BLA-A fielded its first female suicide bomber of the Majeed Brigade. Mahikan Baloch attacked a military convoy in Balochistan's Kalat district, killing and wounding several security personnel.¹³⁷

The fact that, since 2022, both BLA factions have increasingly fielded female bombers reflects a deliberate strategy to integrate women into militant activities. This trend indicates a calculated effort to diversify their tactics and personnel. The deployment of female suicide bombers offers several tactical advantages. Women can often bypass security measures more easily than men, exploiting societal norms and expectations. Furthermore, their involvement garners significant media attention, amplifying the psychological impact of the attacks and serving as a recruitment tool by portraying a broad-based resistance movement.

Anti-election Campaigns in Pakistan

Another specific trend is the Baloch insurgents' history of launching several operations during elections in Pakistan. Baloch insurgent groups consider parliamentary elections a tool of repression. As a result, insurgents have often targeted the election process since 2013.¹³⁸ The tactics employed by the Baloch insurgents included targeting poll stations, election candidates, and threatening election staff in the province. Particularly, since its inception in 2017, BRAS has been the main coordinator of anti-election violence staged by its factions. Repeatedly, the umbrella organization has issued various statements arguing that the coalition rejected elections in Balochistan and intended to boycott them by any means.¹³⁹

In the last general election of the province in 2024, the insurgents remained a significant challenge for the election process, as evidenced by their number of attacks in parts of Balochistan. The insurgents used light weapons and firecracker blasts to maintain fear among the participants, targeted killings, missiles, remote control bombs, and hand grenades.¹⁴⁰ Between January and February 2024, BLA-A launched a special operation aimed at disrupting Pakistan's political elections in Balochistan, claiming 70 attacks targeting polling stations, convoys, political candidates, and security installations.¹⁴¹ As a result, BLA-A remained a prime reason for the postponement of the election process twice in its stronghold in Kohlu.¹⁴² The operation was launched in response to BRAS' similar campaign in the same period that claimed 161 attacks carried out by the different factions belonging to the umbrella coalition in 22 areas of Balochistan and Punjab provinces.¹⁴³

The Regional Geopolitical Impact of the Baloch Insurgency

While the Baloch insurgency has its most vivid manifestation in Pakistan, the insurgency is a regional, heterogeneous phenomenon with ramifications in the countries that share a portion of the larger, Greater Balochistan area, including portions of Pakistan, Iran, and Afghanistan.¹⁴⁴ In Iran, the Baloch population inhabits the Sistan-va-Baluchestan province, including parts of Kerman and Hormozgan provinces. Historically, the Baloch communities living in Iran faced state discrimination due to a sectarian basis and economic disparities, contributing to the framing of a sense of grievance against the state, often leading to major confrontations between Baloch militants and the Iranian state.¹⁴⁵ As a result, Iranian authorities always remained concerned about any success of the Baloch uprising in the neighboring bordering areas. Despite the political contrasts between the then Shah and Bhutto regimes, in 1974, during the fourth phase of the Baloch insurgency in Pakistan, the Iranian regime provided logistic support to Islamabad in order to crush the uprising, due to the concerns in Tehran about potential spread of the conflict across the border.¹⁴⁶

However, the situation changed over time, and both Iran and Pakistan have repeatedly accused each other of providing safe havens to Baloch insurgents on both sides of the border.¹⁴⁷ The scenario has worsened due to the Jaishul Adl revamped insurgency in Iran since 2021, with an increase in attacks and complexity of operations in 2024, highlighting a regional trajectory of the Baloch insurgency.^j As a result, there is an evident growth of the Baloch insurgency on both sides of the border, with intersections between groups and areas.¹⁴⁸ In January 2024, following an Islamic State attack in Kerman province, Iran carried out airstrikes in Pakistan's Balochistan province, allegedly targeting Jaish ul Adl's military camps.¹⁴⁹ The group acknowledged that some family members of the group were indeed killed and injured in the cross-border strikes.¹⁵⁰ In an apparently controlled retaliation, Pakistan subsequently launched similar strikes targeting alleged BLA-A and BLF camps in Iranian Balochistan, prompting both factions to deny their presence on Iranian soil.¹⁵¹ Despite occasional tit-for-tat actions, it appears that Tehran and Islamabad have again reached a common understanding after January 2024, first appointing border liaison offices and then conducting joint border airstrikes at the Pakistan-Iran border targeting Jaish Ul Adl's positions, which the group acknowledged, in November 2024.¹⁵²

Furthermore, in the context of intra-group relations, the Iranian factor has played a major role in reciprocal accusations between different organizations. BLA-A has also repeatedly accused BLF of being a puppet of Iran and fueling divisions among BLA in 2017, while also accusing BRAS of being a project of Iranian intelligence.¹⁵³ Furthermore, BLA-A female suicide bomber, Mahikan Baloch, released an audio message before the suicide attack on March 3, 2025, targeting a military convoy. In the audio,

j Jaishul Adl is a Sunni jihadi militant organization whose members are predominantly ethnic Iranian Baloch. The group was founded in 2012 by the current leader Salahuddin Farooqi. The group's main goal is Sistan-va-Baluchestan province's independence from Iran and the collapse of the Iranian regime. After August 2021, the group has intensified its attacks in Iran, particularly during 2023 and 2024. Imtiaz Baloch, "Jaish ul Adl Profile and Post-Taliban Afghanistan Threats," World Anti Extremism Network 2024, November 2024; Daniele Garofalo, "Inside Jaish al-Adl Armed Struggle: Interview with the Spokesperson," Khorasan Diary, December 2, 2023.

she addressed the Iranian Baloch people in Sistan-va-Baluchestan province advocating for the Greater Balochistan region.¹⁵⁴ On the other hand, while BNA (Anwar) denied any activity in and against Iran, the BNA (Beebarg) faction has extended its activities also to Iran after the November 2024 Iran-Pakistan joint strike targeting Jaishul Adl's hideouts in Pakistan, marking a new phase of the anti-Pakistan Baloch insurgency.¹⁵⁵

Despite its weak operational capabilities, the latest attack claimed by BNA (Beebarg) highlights its regional aspirations. On April 12, 2025, the group executed eight Pakistani laborers in the Mehristan area of Iranian Sistan-va-Baluchestan Province, accusing them of cooperating with Iran and Pakistan against Baloch people "from Bandar Abbas [Iran], Dera Ghazi Khan [Pakistan's Punjab], or any other distant region that has been separated from the historical homeland of Balochistan."¹⁵⁶

Conclusion: A Restless Province

It is likely that Baloch militant organizations will continue to expand their attack capabilities. While Pakistan's security forces have obtained mixed results when reacting to Baloch militant groups' attacks, the prevention and containment of major operations and the overall expansion of the insurgency have not been affected by Pakistan's counterterrorism efforts, with an increasing deterioration of the security environment in the province since 2018. On the other hand, while Baloch militant groups tend to inflate the number of attacks and, specifically, inflicted casualties, 2024 and 2025 have been pivotal for the Baloch insurgency and the development of new ambitious tactics, posing new challenges for the Pakistani state not only on the ground but also from a mediatic standpoint.¹⁵⁷ Hence, the media warfare framed by Baloch militant groups continues to erode the general perception of the efficacy and validity of counterterrorism strategies developed by the Pakistani state.

The new phase of the conflict poses several questions on specific issues. The mounting threats to Chinese interests in Pakistan have increased the likelihood of possible deployment of Chinese security forces in Balochistan, likely deepening perceptions of foreign exploitation. In March 2025, rumors surfaced that three Chinese private security firms were tasked with overseeing security operations in a collaborative effort, with 60 Chinese security personnel stationed at two CPEC power projects in Sindh province.¹⁵⁸ While this could strengthen counterinsurgency efforts, it risks increasing Pakistan's dependence on China for economic and security spheres. India, in turn, may view this as a cyber and surveillance threat, further complicating regional security dynamics.

Another geopolitical dilemma concerns relations between Iran, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, especially after the return of the de facto Taliban government and the recent tensions between Kabul and Islamabad. As the Baloch insurgency reveals its transnational dimension, security cooperation between Pakistan and Iran seems to follow established security patterns with short-term gains in joint operations but the lack of a long-term settlement of the border security dynamics. On the other hand, antagonistic relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan over the issue of reciprocal accusations of sponsoring terrorism is expanding from the jihadi realm to nationalist groups, deepening the divide between the two countries.¹⁵⁹ Opting for non-cooperation will only favor militant groups, such as Islamic State Khorasan (ISK) and Islamic State Pakistan (ISP), which might take advantage of the precarious security situation within Balochistan to expand their capabilities, potentially further eroding Islamabad's security efforts and increasing threats to all regional countries beyond Pakistan.¹⁶⁰

Ultimately, the Baloch insurgency stems from long-standing grievances deeply rooted in the troubled post-partition era in the subcontinent. The conflict has been exacerbated by several political, economic, social, and humanitarian factors over the years to the extent that today, there is a consolidated anti-state narrative over perceived and factual grievances that kinetic actions and traditional counterinsurgency efforts cannot tackle alone. A key aspect of the conflict that fuels its complexity and uncertain status is the absence of a comprehensive and independent system to monitor trends in the insurgency. The Baloch insurgency suffers from a data problem that poses a core challenge to the understanding of the evolution and current dynamics of the conflict, hampering efforts to properly assess the situation. However, this gap could also present an opportunity for the CT community that can better monitor and map Baloch militant activity by increasing its presence in Balochistan via a number of local sources who can cross-check information coming from official and pro-militant sources.

A sustainable resolution requires more than military action. It is the view of the authors that ideally, counterterrorism and other security-focused measures should be confined only to security issues while the Pakistani government should adopt a political strategy toward humanitarian concerns within the legal framework of the constitution. Baloch concerns over core issues should also be addressed, with accountability being among the first priorities, providing the population with adequate space for expressing them. Without first adopting such a new vision over the conflict in Balochistan, the province will likely remain a breeding ground for resentments against the Pakistani state. **CTC**

Appendix

Factions of the Baloch Insurgency

Acronym	Name	Description
BLA	Baloch Liberation Army	The first modern Baloch separatist faction founded in 1996 by Hyrbyair Marri. Today, the group is divided into its two factions: BLA-A and BLA-J.
BLA-A	Baloch Liberation Army (Azad)	The original BLA, today known as BLA-Azad from the name of its spokesman. After the December 2017 internal split of BLA, BLA-A became the weaker faction but recently displayed growing attack capabilities.
BLA-J	Baloch Liberation Army (Jeeyand)	The BLA faction was founded by commanders Aslam Baloch and Bashir Zaib after their expulsion from BLA in December 2017. The faction came to be known as BLA-Jeeyand from the name of its spokesman. It is the strongest of the two BLA factions. Its leader is Bashir Zaib.
BLF	Balochistan Liberation Front	Believed to have been founded in 2003, BLF is one of the major factions of the Baloch insurgency and a close allied of BLA-J. Its leader is Allah Nazar.
BNA	Baloch Nationalist Army	The faction was founded in January 2022 by Gulzar Imam and Sarfaraz Bangulzai. It was crippled by multiple splits and surrenders. Today, the group is divided into two factions.
BNA (Anwar)	Baloch Nationalist Army (Anwar)	One of the two active BNA factions. Set up in April 2023 after the BNA internal split, it is led by Anwar Chakar. The faction is part of BRAS and carries out attacks solely in Pakistan.
BNA (Beebarg)	Baloch Nationalist Army (Beebarg)	One of the two active BNA factions. Believed to have been set up between January and September 2024 after the surrender of BNA (Sarfaraz) in December 2023, the faction is not part of BRAS. It has carried out attacks in Pakistan and Iran.
BNA (Sarfaraz)	Baloch Nationalist Army (Sarfaraz)	BNA faction led by Sarfaraz Bangulzai that surrendered in December 2023. The faction was the result of the split with BNA (Anwar) after Gulzar Imam's arrest in April 2023.
BRA	Baloch Republican Army	Emerged in 2006 after the death of Nawab Akbar Bugti and is believed to be linked to Brahamdagh Bugti. BRA has not been active in the conflict since rifts within its ranks in 2016, though it briefly resurfaced in October 2024.
BRA (Beebagr)	Baloch Republican Army (Beebagr)	Splinter faction of BRA. BRA (Beebagr) was founded by Gulzar Imam in October 2018 after frictions emerged between him and the BRA leadership and he was expelled by the organization. BRA (Beebagr) was disbanded after Gulzar Imam formed BNA with Sarfaraz Bangulzai in 2022.
BRAS	Baloch Raaji Aajohi Sangar	Established in November 2018, BRAS is an umbrella coalition that today includes BLA-J, BLF, BRG, SRA, and, possibly, BNA (Anwar). It is a military and political platform used by the militant factions to launch coordinated attacks across Pakistan.
BRG	Baloch Republican Guards	Formed in 2012, BRG was established by Bakhtyar Khan Domki after his wife and daughter were killed in Karachi.
SRA	Sindhudesh Revolutionary Army	Founded around 2010 and headed by Syed Ashgar Shah, SRA is a Sindhi separatist militant organization active in the Sindh province of Pakistan that is also part of BRAS.
UBA	United Baloch Army	UBA was established in 2012 after it split from BLA over differences between Hyrbyair and Mehran Marri. A minor faction, it is believed to be linked to Mehran Marri, though the latter has denied his involvement.

Factions of the BRAS alliance, current and inactive

Faction	Joined in
Baloch Liberation Army - Jeeyand (BLA-J)	November 2018 - Present
Balochistan Liberation Front (BLF)	November 2018 - Present
Baloch Republican Guards (BRG)	November 2018 - Present
Baloch Republican Army - Beebagr (BRA-Beebagr)	May 2019 - January 2022
Baloch Nationalist Army (BNA)	January 2022 - April 2023
Baloch Nationalist Army - Anwar (BNA-Anwar)	April 2023 - Present (Not officially acknowledged)
Sindhudesh Revolutionary Army (SRA)	July 2020 - Present

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