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FEATURE ARTICLE

## Somalia at a Crossroads

DAISY MUIBU AND YAYEDIOR MBENGUE

A VIEW FROM THE CT FOXHOLE

## Christine Abizaid

FORMER DIRECTOR, NATIONAL  
COUNTERTERRORISM CENTER

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## FROM THE EDITOR

In the May 2025 feature article, Daisy Muibu and Yayedior Mbengue examine the evolving counterterrorism challenge in Somalia. They write that “nearly three years after the Somali government launched its offensive against al-Shabaab, the security landscape remains precarious. Al-Shabaab has resurged, coordination between federal and Puntland forces is limited despite Islamic State-Somalia’s growing global remit, and the future of the African Union mission is uncertain. These trends are driven by political discord, a fragmented national landscape, donor fatigue, operational challenges, and al-Shabaab’s resilience.”

Our interview is with Christine Abizaid, the former director of the U.S. National Counterterrorism Center. She emphasizes that: “The CT business is still a needles-in-the-haystack business; it’s still one piece of information that can open up a whole new threat network. You have to be digging into and accessing multiple sources of information, collaborating with multiple partners who see things in different ways.”

Aymenn Al-Tamimi charts the rise, fall, and dissolution of al-Qa`ida’s loyalist group in Syria Hurras al-Din. He writes that: “The primary ongoing concern from a counterterrorism perspective is that regardless of Hurras al-Din’s own weakness, individuals who were members of the group, particularly leading figures, may try to coordinate with other members of al-Qa`ida or other jihadis outside Syria for the purpose of organizing terrorist attacks abroad.” Saif Tahir and Amira Jadoon examine the geographical origins, mobility patterns, and demographic characteristics of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) militants through an analysis of 615 profiles from the organization’s own martyrdom commemorative publications spanning 2006-2025. Julika Enslin outlines the evolution of the Islamist terror threat landscape in Germany since 2020 by taking an in-depth look at all nine executed Islamist terrorist attacks and the 20 publicly reported thwarted attack plots during that time.

A personal note: Over the last 10 years, it has been the privilege of a lifetime to serve as the Editor-in-Chief of *CTC Sentinel* to showcase the best and brightest scholars and practitioners in our field. It’s time for me to pass the baton. The publication will be in great hands with my brilliant colleagues Kristina Hummel and Don Rassler. I look forward to continuing my close association with the Combating Terrorism Center and *CTC Sentinel*. The faculty and staff at the center, past and present, are the very best of America. I greatly appreciate the trust that directors Colonel Sean Morrow, Brian Dodwell, and Lieutenant Colonel (Retired) Bryan Price placed in me. Above all, I would like to express my thanks to our extraordinary contributors. They have greatly helped the counterterrorism enterprise. Who thinks wins.

**Paul Cruickshank, Editor in Chief**

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*Cover: Al-Shabaab photo showing its fighters in Somalia in mid-April 2025.*

# Somalia at a Crossroads: Resurgent Insurgents, Fragmented Politics, and the Uncertain Future of AUSSOM

By Daisy Muibu and Yayedior Mbengue

Nearly three years after the Somali government launched its offensive against al-Shabaab, the security landscape remains precarious. Al-Shabaab has resurged, coordination between federal and Puntland forces is limited despite Islamic State-Somalia's growing global remit, and the future of the African Union mission is uncertain. These trends are driven by political discord, a fragmented national landscape, donor fatigue, operational challenges, and al-Shabaab's resilience. This article offers a comprehensive overview of current security efforts and evaluates the drivers shaping Somalia's precarious trajectory, concluding that political compromise is essential to effectively counter the dual threats posed by al-Shabaab and Islamic State-Somalia.

**O**n March 18, 2025, an improvised explosive device (IED) was remotely detonated at a junction near Mogadishu. The intended target was the president of the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS), Hassan Sheikh Mohamud. The perpetrator was al-Shabaab, one of al-Qa`ida's most successful affiliates. The president

survived, but the attack, one of the deadliest in recent months,<sup>a</sup> signaled a growing concern that some observers, practitioners, and researchers have been echoing over the past few months: Al-Shabaab is resurging, advancing ever closer to the Somali capital, and, as a result, Mogadishu may not be safe.<sup>1</sup> The possibility of al-Shabaab encircling or even overrunning Mogadishu has also been raised. However, differences in opinion exist, with some analysts more cautiously concluding that the group may not be interested in and/or lack the capacity to seize Mogadishu at this time.<sup>2</sup> Where there is agreement is that al-Shabaab is exploiting a divided political environment to strike and reverse the government's gains in central Somalia. Whether or not al-Shabaab is currently positioning itself to seize control of Mogadishu in the near term, what the recent attempt on President Mohamud's convoy does demonstrate is a significant departure from the optimistic narratives that characterized the first few months of his administration's offensive against the group in late 2022.

Meanwhile, in the northeastern Puntland region of the country, Islamic State-Somalia, once regarded as a marginal player overshadowed by the more dominant al-Shabaab, has been making international headlines. The group has evolved from a small, localized breakaway faction of the al-Qa`ida-affiliated al-Shabaab

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<sup>a</sup> This was the first attack since 2014 to directly target the president. See Adam Daud Ahmed, "From Insurgency to Power Grab: Al-Shabaab's deadly advance on Mogadishu signals Somalia's descent into disaster," *Addis Standard*, March 21, 2025.



into a key player in the Islamic State's broader global network.<sup>b</sup> In the U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) 2025 Posture Statement to the Senate Armed Service Committee, General Michael Langley confirmed that the Islamic State is directing its global operations from Somalia, further emphasizing the threat posed by the group.<sup>3</sup> However, despite its growing global remit, national efforts by Somali federal forces to counter Islamic State-Somalia have been limited. In fact, the most robust efforts against the group are being led by the forces of the semi-autonomous region Puntland, with little ground support from either the FGS or African Union forces.

As efforts against these two insurgent-terrorist actors continue, they are occurring against a backdrop of uncertainty over the future of the new African Union Support and Stabilization Mission in Somalia (AUSSOM). Funding shortfalls and an unclear path forward for securing stable and predictable funding past June 2025<sup>4</sup> raise concerns over AUSSOM's ability to support efforts to degrade al-Shabaab, achieve its milestones, and prevent security gaps that the insurgent group could exploit.

In light of these developments, it is important to reflect on the factors that have contributed to the resurgence of al-Shabaab, a Puntland-led response to Islamic State-Somalia with little FGS support, and the uncertainty that surrounds the AUSSOM mission. By assessing the factors that led to this situation, one can better inform the path forward. This article is organized in two parts. The first provides an overview of the background and current status of national efforts against al-Shabaab and Islamic State-Somalia, and AUSSOM's current status. The second part assesses the factors that have contributed to the current situation.

## Part 1: The Evolving Fight Against al-Shabaab, Puntland's Efforts Against Islamic State-Somalia, and AUSSOM's Precarious Future

Launched in August 2022, only a few months after President Mohamud was reelected into office, the FGS' offensive against al-

Shabaab was initially met with much optimism. Fighting alongside clan militia<sup>c</sup> (known as Ma'awisley) in central regions of the country, and receiving support from U.S. and Turkish drones, federal forces were taking the lead in fighting al-Shabaab.<sup>5</sup> In doing so, they managed to recover significant amounts of territory held by al-Shabaab in Hiraan (located in Hirshabelle) and Galgaduud (located in Galmudug). Much of these gains occurred between August and December 2022, and an Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) report from April 2023 indicated that the Somali forces within the first phase of the offensive had managed to regain control of over 215 locations, mostly in Hirshabelle and Galmudug.<sup>6</sup>

However, the tides began to shift against the government in 2023. Though the offensive maintained some momentum at the beginning of that year, it also experienced a string of attacks from al-Shabaab that slowed its pace. By June 2023, the government's ambitious plans to launch a second phase of the offensive against al-Shabaab's southern strongholds, dubbed Operation Black Lion,<sup>d</sup> had to be postponed. Setbacks in Hirshabelle and Galmudug forced government forces to remain focused on central Somalia instead of pivoting south.<sup>7</sup>

Despite maintaining some of its gains in Hiraan and Middle Shabelle (Hirshabelle State), and parts of Mudug (Galmudug), by August 2023 a deadly attack in the village of Cowsweyne in Galgaduud revealed shortcomings and obstacles in the government's offensive that undermined and stalled its efforts into 2024.<sup>8</sup> The attack not only inflicted heavy losses on Somali National Army (SNA) brigades, but also resulted in the collapse of the government's frontline in southern Galmudug.<sup>9</sup>

By January 2024, al-Shabaab remained a persistent threat while the government's offensive had stalled in Galgaduud. Over the year, the FGS on several occasions indicated it was about to resume its offensive operations against al-Shabaab, but other than episodic engagements in Hirshabelle, there was not much offensive activity against the group when compared to the previous years.<sup>10</sup> Where there was meaningful activity was farther south in Jubaland's Lower Juba region. Here, between March and July 2024, SNA and Jubaland regional forces, supported by U.S. airstrikes, targeted al-Shabaab positions and seized villages and towns such as Bulo Haji (also spelled Buulo Xaaji), Harboole, and Mido that surround Kismayo city.<sup>11</sup> Overall, however, the federal government found

<sup>b</sup> Islamic State-Somalia poses much less of a threat in Somalia than al-Shabaab. However, its outsized role within the Islamic State's global network is noteworthy. The Islamic State affiliate has gained significance through its coordination office, al-Karrar, which plays a strategic role in overseeing the financing of other Islamic State affiliates and directing funds to support their operations. This office has been linked to facilitating the movement of trainers, finances, and operational support to other Islamic State affiliates in Mozambique, the Democratic Republic of Congo, the United Arab Emirates, Yemen, Turkey, and Afghanistan. When compared to al-Shabaab, Islamic State-Somalia's estimated size (600-700, though some estimates put the force at 1,600) is significantly smaller. However, the group has attracted foreign fighters from countries such as Yemen, Tanzania, Libya, Algeria, Tunisia, Sudan, Morocco, Ethiopia, and Syria. See Caleb Weiss and Lucas Webber, "Islamic State-Somalia: A Growing Global Terror Concern," *CTC Sentinel* 17:8 (2024); Jason Warner, Ryan O'Farrell, Héní Nsaibia, and Ryan Cummings, "The Islamic State in Somalia," *The Islamic State in Africa: The Emergence, Evolution, and Future of the Next Jihadist Battlefield* (online edition) (Oxford: Oxford Academic, 2022); Tricia Bacon and Austin C. Doctor, "The Death of Bilal al-Sudani and Its Impact on Islamic State Operations," GWU Program on Extremism, March 2023; Caleb Weiss, Ryan O'Farrell, Tara Candland, and Laren Poole, "Fatal Transaction: The Funding Behind the Islamic State's Central Africa Province," GWU Program on Extremism, June 2023; Tore Hamming, "The General Directorate of Provinces: Managing the Islamic State's Global Network," *CTC Sentinel* 16:7 (2023); Daisy Muibu, "Islamic State in Somalia: A Global Threat and Efforts to Counter the Militants," Orion Policy Institute, March 6, 2025; "The Islamic State in Somalia: Responding to an Evolving Threat," International Crisis Group Briefing No. 201, September 12, 2024; and Mary Harper, "Why Trump is on the warpath in Somalia," BBC, February 6, 2025.

<sup>c</sup> Antagonized by al-Shabaab's predation, coercion, and repressive tactics, local clans—particularly the Haber Gedir/Saleeban sub-clan of the Hawiye clan family (of which President Mohamud is a member)—mobilized against al-Shabaab. The federal government's offensive was launched months after these clan uprisings in Hirshabelle and Galmudug, as well as an attack launched by al-Shabaab in August 2022 against a well-known hotel in Mogadishu. See "Sustaining Gains in Somalia's Offensive against Al-Shabaab," International Crisis Group, March 21, 2023; James Barnett, "Faltering Lion: Analyzing Progress and Setbacks in Somalia's War against al-Shabaab," Hudson Institute, September 28, 2023; Daisy Muibu, "Operation Black Lion: Challenges That Lay Ahead of Somalia's Second Phase of the Offensive," Soufan Center, October 30, 2023; and Daisy Muibu, "Somalia's Stalled Offensive Against al-Shabaab: Taking Stock of Obstacles," *CTC Sentinel* 17:2 (2024).

<sup>d</sup> Operation Black Lion was conceived as a lightning advance against al-Shabaab's southern strongholds in the member states of Jubaland and South West State (SWS). The intention was to conduct the operation in collaboration with the country's federal member states, South West State and Jubaland, and neighboring countries (Kenya, Ethiopia, and Djibouti). See Barnett, "Faltering Lion;" Muibu, "Operation Black Lion;" and "Navigating Security in Somalia with Rashid Abdi," Sahan Pathfinders podcast, August 14, 2023.

it difficult to recapture the momentum that characterized the initial phase of the offensive in 2022 when it was able to ensure coordination at the federal, state, and local level.

By the beginning of 2025, the offensive against al-Shabaab appeared to have reached a stalemate. However, since February, a little before Ramadan, al-Shabaab began to resurge, launching a counteroffensive primarily focused in Middle Shabelle.<sup>e</sup> Aiming to recover the territory it lost in Middle Shabelle, al-Shabaab managed to recapture several locations, including strategic towns such as Adan Yabaal in April 2025,<sup>f</sup> that served as the group's regional center of operations in Middle Shabelle before government forces captured it in December 2022.<sup>12</sup>

By mid-May 2025, al-Shabaab had managed to recapture most of the territory it lost in Middle Shabelle since 2022. Meanwhile, government forces continued to face increased pressure to push back against the insurgents in Middle Shabelle, while clan militia (Ma'awisley) in Hiraan, particularly those from the Hawadle clan, had been reportedly fighting al-Shabaab on their own due to a decline in federal military support in the region and the government's preoccupation with pushing back against the insurgents in neighboring Middle Shabelle.<sup>13</sup> However, the situation remains fluid, with some territories in rural areas changing hands between the government and al-Shabaab on a regular basis.<sup>14</sup>

In addition to its efforts in Middle Shabelle, al-Shabaab has also conducted attacks in Lower Shabelle, including launching mortal rounds into Afgooye town's SNA base, about 30 kilometers from Mogadishu, and attacks in and around Mogadishu.<sup>15</sup> The most high-profile of these attacks was the IED attack on President Mohamud's convoy in the streets of Mogadishu in March 2025.<sup>16</sup>

The government, for its part, has dispatched forces and weapons to Middle Shabelle, with the president himself traveling back and forth from the frontline as part of a broader effort to mount a counteroffensive against al-Shabaab.<sup>17</sup> The government has managed to hold some of the territory it captured during the initial phases of its offensive, and so far its position has not collapsed in the face of al-Shabaab's attacks. Meanwhile, Turkey and the United States have supported the FGS with airstrikes, with Washington recently loosening its restrictions on airstrikes and increasing their tempo inside Somalia.<sup>8</sup>

The beginning of 2025 also saw an uptick in activity from Islamic State-Somalia and efforts to counter the group in Puntland. According to reports from ACLED, January saw the Islamic State affiliate detonate at least seven IEDs and successfully conduct two drone attacks against Puntland security forces.<sup>18</sup> The

surge in Islamic State-Somalia's activities comes as a result of Puntland's efforts to crackdown on the group. Following months of preparations, in January 2025 Puntland's authorities launched Operation Hilaac (meaning lightning). Mobilizing roughly 3,000 forces<sup>h</sup> against Islamic State-Somalia in the Al-Miskaad mountains in the Bari region, Puntland security forces have been successful in the first phase of the operation.<sup>i</sup> Islamic State-Somalia has been pushed out of key supply routes and bases during this period.<sup>19</sup>

Intending to build upon January's momentum, on January 30, 2025, Puntland's President Said Abdullahi Deni announced the launch of the second phase of the government's operation. The objective is to push Islamic State-Somalia out of its remaining stronghold in the Al-Miskaad mountains.<sup>20</sup> As of May 2025, these operations remain ongoing. Despite early successes, pushing Islamic State forces out of the mountains and its complex cave system will be challenging.<sup>21</sup>

Puntland has been fighting Islamic State-Somalia for years, often with little support from the FGS, A.U. forces, or external actors such as Turkey. However, on February 1, 2025, the United States conducted its first major military operation under the new administration, and the target was Islamic State-Somalia in Puntland, signaling the group's growing role as a global threat.<sup>j</sup> The United States, as well as Puntland's longtime external partner, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), has continued to launch airstrikes in support of the domestic operations.<sup>22</sup> Meanwhile, Ethiopia and Kenya have also aided Puntland's efforts.<sup>23</sup> Despite this external support, "Puntland has been leading much of the ground offensives against the militants."<sup>24</sup>

Meanwhile, questions over the future of AUSSOM in Somalia remained a point of conversation over 2024 given the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS) deadline for a full drawdown at the end of that year. Past delays in ATMIS troop withdrawals in 2023 drew into focus the lack of Somali forces preparedness to takeover after December 2024. It is for this reason that the Somali government in December 2023 requested a follow-on mission to replace ATMIS during the Somalia Security Conference in New York and subsequently submitted a proposal to the African Union Peace and Security Council (AUPSC) in March 2024 and to the United Nations Security Council in April 2024.<sup>25</sup> The FGS' initial proposal outlined a plan for a new mission with a limited mandate, scope, and size, with the FGS anticipating a follow-on force not

e It is important to note also that al-Shabaab waited until after ATMIS' drawdown was complete before launching its offensive in Middle Shabelle. "The Enemy Gets A Vote," *Somali Wire Issue* 820, May 9, 2025; "Between Islamic State and Al-Shabaab: An Embattled Mogadishu?" Soufan Center, April 2, 2025; "April 2025 Monthly Forecast: Somalia," Security Council Report, March 31, 2025; Boswell and Mahmood, "Which Way Will Trump Go on Somalia?"

f Al-Shabaab reportedly recaptured Adan Yabaal on April 16, 2025. See "Al-Shabaab Captures Key Town of Aadan Yabaal in Middle Shabelle After Fierce Assault," *Horn Observer*, April 17, 2025, and "Al Shabaab captures strategic Somalia town as it presses offensive," Reuters, April 16, 2025.

g According to the FDD's Long War Journal, in just the first three months of President Trump's second term, the United States has launched at least "16 manned aircraft or drone strikes inside Somalia." See Caleb Weiss, "Trump admin ups the tempo of airstrikes against jihadist groups in Somalia," FDD's Long War Journal, March 30, 2025.

h The 3,000 forces mobilized are composed of the following actors: Puntland's Maritime Police Force (PMPF), its Presidential Guard, Daraawiish, alongside militia. See "Inside Operation Hilaac," *Somali Wire Issue* 772, January 10, 2025.

i Part of the reason for Puntland's early success has been the support and engagement of local communities, particularly the Ali Salebaan sub-clan that Islamic State-Somalia depends on. For more on the successes of the operation, see Muibu, "Islamic State in Somalia;" "Operation Hilaac Advances in Puntland," *Somali Wire Issue* 783, February 5, 2025; and Ido Levy, "How the small autonomous region of Puntland found success in battling Islamic State in Somalia," *Conversation*, April 7, 2025.

j This is not the first time the United States has targeted Islamic State-Somalia. Washington first authorized a strike against the group in November 2017. Other notable attacks include the January 2023 military operation that resulted in the death of Bilal al-Sudani, a key figure in Islamic State-Somalia's operations, as well as the May 2024 airstrike targeting Abdulqadir Mumin, leader of the Islamic State-Somalia, and rumored global head of the Islamic State. See Harper; Muibu, "Islamic State in Somalia;" "The War in Somalia New America, n.d.; and Bacon and Doctor.

exceeding 10,000 personnel covering 14 forward operating bases (FOBs) with a mission timeframe corresponding to the FGS' three-to five-year plan to build up its capacity to independently provide security to key population centers.<sup>k</sup>

On August 1, 2024, the AUPSC adopted the Concept of Operations (CONOPs) for AUSSOM, and in late December 2024, the United Nations Security Council through Resolution 2767, endorsed the AUPSC's decision. Replacing ATMIS, AUSSOM was set to begin functions on January 1, 2025, with up to 11,911 personnel,<sup>l</sup> including civilian and police personnel, and operate for five years.<sup>26</sup>

Despite being declared *de jure* operational as of January 1, several outstanding concerns remained unresolved about the AUSSOM mission. At the beginning of the year, uncertainty over the size and location of pending troop contributions meant that there was also a lack of clarity on the mission's operational set-up, mission design, command and control, and ultimately its capabilities. In February 2025, following a series of bilateral and multilateral consultations, the FGS and African Union agreed on the number of troop contributing countries (TCCs) for the mission.<sup>27</sup> The new arrangement allocated the following troop numbers to: Uganda (4,500), Ethiopia (2,500), Djibouti (1,520), Kenya (1,410), and Egypt (1,091).<sup>m</sup>

However, during a summit held by the heads of state and governments of the TCCs in Kampala, Uganda, on April 25, 2025, the TCCs "stressed the need to increase troop strength by at least 8,000 additional personnel to address the prevailing security challenges."<sup>n</sup> Recognizing the deteriorating security situation, and resurgence of al-Shabaab, the TCCs further concluded the urgency to, beyond the additional troop surge, deploy bilateral troops to augment AUSSOM.<sup>28</sup> These requests not only made clear the precarious security situation, but that the A.U. troop drawdowns over the past years had "not been replaced with Somali forces as planned, resulting in major gaps that Al Shabaab has been able to exploit to regain territories."<sup>29</sup> While TCCs urged for sustainable funding to support the mission, uncertainty still remains.

As the AUPSC noted in its report to the February 2024 A.U. summit, the ATMIS mission was already experiencing a funding

shortfall estimated to be "over \$100 million by the time the ATMIS forces exit on 31 December 2024" as a result of extensions placed on troop drawdown.<sup>o</sup> The total amount required to cover the financial costs for the AUSSOM mission between January to June 2025 is estimated to be approximately U.S. \$96 million.<sup>30</sup> "With only less than 20% of the funding required for the period of January to June 2025 mobilised," it is clear that the mission is experiencing major funding shortfalls and uncertainty looms for continued funding beyond June 2025.<sup>31</sup> There has been conversation about possibly funding AUSSOM using United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2719 (2023), which provides a framework for peace operations led by the African Union and authorized by the UNSC to access U.N. funding through assessed contributions.<sup>p</sup> However, there are divergent views within the U.N. Security Council on how to finance the mission, with the United States reluctant to apply the resolution to the Somalia case.<sup>32</sup>

To summarize, what started as an optimistic offensive against al-Shabaab in 2022 is now recognized as a deteriorating security situation. Meanwhile, as already noted, Puntland forces are making progress in their operations against Islamic State-Somalia with little direct support from or coordination with federal forces. Finally, uncertainty looms over AUSSOM's funding as well as its ability to meet its mandate within the prevailing security challenges. These developments raise the question of how we arrived at this moment and situation in the first place.

## Part 2: The Drivers of the Current Security Dynamics

Several factors have shaped the current dynamics in Somalia. These factors include political infighting; regional tensions and external actor influence; growing donor fatigue; persistent logistical challenges and force generation concerns; and al-Shabaab's resilience and propaganda.

### Political Infighting

The slowdown in the FGS' offensive against al-Shabaab in 2024 can largely be attributed to national and regional political tensions. As these tensions escalated over the course of the year, they diverted attention away from counterinsurgency efforts, undermined progress, and created space for al-Shabaab to regroup. This section will discuss these national-level tensions, followed by an examination of those tensions at the regional level.

At the national level, a political crisis emerged following the FGS'

k Moreover, the March 2024 proposal suggested that the 10,000 strong follow-on mission be deployed to 14 FOBs within four sectors: Sector 1 (comprising of Mogadishu City and Banadir Region and Lower Shabelle), Sector 2 (comprising of Lower and Middle Juba and Gedo), Sector 3 (comprising of Bay and Bakool) and Sector 4 (comprising of Middle Shabelle, Hiraan, and Galgaduud regions). See "Strategic Planning for Post ATMIS: A proposal from the Federal Government of Somalia," Federal Government of Somalia, March 2024, and "Analytical briefing on the Strategic Planning for Post-ATMIS Somalia," Amani Africa, April 2, 2024.

l The 11,911 personnel would comprise 85 civilians, 11,146 military and 680 police personnel, deployed in four sectors. See "Updated 'Insights on the PSC' on the consideration of the Concept of Operations for the post-ATMIS mission," Amani Africa, July 31, 2024.

m Noticeably absent is Burundi, which has served as part of A.U. missions since the first mission was launched in 2006. Burundi opted out due to disagreement over the troop number allocated to Burundi as part of the new mission. See Harun Maruf, "AU, Somalia agree on troop numbers for new mission," Voice of America, February 25, 2025, and Harun Maruf, "Breaking: Somali officials disrespected us, says a Burundian diplomat . . .," X, December 29, 2024.

n TCCs also emphasized the need to enhance their air capabilities, as well as intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance. "Briefing on the Situation in Somalia and AUSSOM," Amani Africa, April 28, 2025.

o The outstanding liabilities owed to TCCs for 2002-2004 total "\$93.9 million, including Uganda (\$34.5 million), Kenya (\$15.7 million), Ethiopia (\$17.2 million), Djibouti (\$8.3 million) and Burundi (\$18.1 million)." See the following for more information: "Update Briefing on The Status and Operations of The AU Support and Stabilisation Mission in Somalia," Amani Africa, April 10, 2025; "The new AU Somalia mission (AUSSOM) is ATMIS by another name but with more problems," Amani Africa, February 5, 2025.

p The federal government of Somalia—in its March proposal to the AUPSC and later to the UNSC—proposed funding the follow-on mission using assessed contributions, as outlined in U.N. Security Council resolution 2719 (2023). Through this arrangement, the United Nations would pay 75% of the budget, leaving 25% for the African Union and its partners to finance. However, there have also been debates about what types of missions should be funded under the resolution, whether AUSSOM is the type of mission that should be funded, and if 75% of the mission's funding is paid by the United Nations, who should pay the remaining 25%. Omar Mahmood and Paul Williams, "What to Expect from the New AU Mission in Somalia" in "The Horn," International Crisis Group podcast, January 16, 2025.



decision to amend four of the 15 chapters of Somalia's provisional constitution<sup>q</sup>—a move critics saw as unilateral and an attempt by the federal government to centralize power. The amendments expanded the powers of the president; abolished the post of prime minister, replacing it with a vice president; established a multi-party system; and introduced universal suffrage to replace the indirect voting process<sup>r</sup> currently used at the federal and member state levels.<sup>s</sup>

On March 30, 2024, these amendments were approved by Somalia's bicameral federal parliament, sharply dividing opinion in Somalia and triggering criticism from various political stakeholders. Some of the strongest critics have included former Somali presidents Mohamed Abdullahi Farmaajo and Sharif Sheikh Ahmed; former prime ministers Hassan Ali Khaire and Omar Abdirashid Ali Sharmarke; some parliamentarians within the national legislature; and regional administrations such as Puntland and Jubaland.<sup>33</sup> The main criticism has been the perception that the reforms are aimed at consolidating power within the federal executive and were introduced and adopted without adequate consultation.

Since he came back to office, President Mohamud has convened platforms for national dialogue, political coordination, and consensus-building such as the National Consultative Council (NCC) that bring together leaders of the FGS and the federal member states (FMS). However, rather than serving as a mechanism to hammer out the crucial details of the federal model, finalize the provisional constitution, and coordinate efforts to combat threats such as al-Shabaab and Islamic State-Somalia, critics have argued that the forum has instead served as a mechanism for elites at the national and regional levels to postpone elections and battle over electoral strategies and models that are self-serving.<sup>34</sup>

Moreover, since January 2023, Puntland has not participated in the NCC meetings. The semi-autonomous region announced that it would act independently from the federal government until a constitution is agreed upon by a referendum in which Puntland participates.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, the NCC meeting held on October 2, 2024—during which the FGS presented its plans to introduce universal suffrage at both the national and regional levels, and proposed extending the terms of FMS presidents by one year to accommodate the transition—ended in a stalemate.<sup>36</sup> Jubaland's president, Ahmed Mohamed Islam "Madobe," rejected the FGS' proposals, withdrew from the meeting, and, a month later,

announced the suspension of working relations with the federal government.<sup>37</sup>

Jubaland's leadership proceeded with their own plans to hold indirect elections through a parliamentary vote. In November 2024, the long-serving President Madobe was reelected.<sup>1</sup> Jubaland's decision to hold indirect elections was supported by Puntland and some members of the opposition, but the FGS firmly rejected it.<sup>38</sup> The FGS accused Jubaland of violating electoral agreements, particularly those related to the implementation of universal suffrage, and subsequently questioned the legitimacy of the regional election.<sup>39</sup>

These developments set the stage for violent clashes between federal and Jubaland forces that may have provided opportunities for al-Shabaab to exploit. Shortly after the Jubaland elections in late November 2024, federal forces from the Turkish-trained Gorgor unit were airlifted to Ras Kamboni, located in the southernmost region of Somalia near the Kenyan border in the Lower Juba region of Jubaland.<sup>40</sup> Jubaland also deployed its forces to the same region, resulting in an armed confrontation.<sup>u</sup> The clashes spilled into December, with several federal forces reportedly captured and others fleeing across the border into Kenya.<sup>41</sup>

Over this period, al-Shabaab attacked Jubaland forces in Bullo Haji, a town regional forces had captured earlier in the year. Though the attack was repelled, Jubaland officials have warned that "Al-Shabaab has been regrouping in the region and could exploit the ongoing political row between Mogadishu and Kismayo."<sup>42</sup>

At the beginning of 2025, relations between the federal government, the regional authorities in Jubaland and Puntland, and the political opposition remain strained. Despite lacking political and clan consensus, the FGS continued to pursue its plans to hold local elections in June 2025, using the one-person, one-vote model, ahead of presidential elections scheduled for 2026. All the while, political tensions significantly undermined efforts to build the political consensus needed to effectively counter al-Shabaab.<sup>v</sup>

Throughout 2024, the government has made attempts to revive clan support for its counterinsurgency efforts in central Somalia but has faced challenges.<sup>43</sup> During the first two phases of its offensive, political infighting and clashes between sub-clans and political figures within states like Hirshabelle undermined its efforts.<sup>44</sup> Over the last year, and especially since al-Shabaab launched a new offensive in February 2025, President Mohamud has been having a difficult time rallying support from his fellow Abgaal (sub-clan of

q Somalia has had a provisional constitution since 2012. Two previous federal administrations have failed to finalize the constitution, while the current FGS began a process to amend and approve it back in 2023.

r Instead of a universal suffrage model, Somalia employs a clan-based, indirect electoral system in which elders and clan representatives select members of parliament, who then elect the president. Political representation is allocated through the "4.5 formula," which distributes power among the four major Somali clan families—Hawiye, Darood, Digil-Mirifle, and Dir—and a coalition of minority clans comprising the remaining 0.5.

s The amendments also expanded the president's ability to appoint and dismiss the prime minister before the position is replaced with a vice president during the next presidential elections, scheduled for 2026. Previously, the provisional constitution gave the parliament the power to dismiss a prime minister. The amendments also extended the term of office from four to five years for constitutional bodies such as the president, vice president, and FMS leaders, while referring to the FMS presidents as leaders. See Mohamed Olad Hassan, "Somalia's Parliament Approves Historic Constitutional Amendments," *Voice of America*, March 30, 2024, and "Somalia: Dispute Over Constitutional Amendment and Increased al-Shabaab Attacks," *ACLED*, April 26, 2024.

t This marked President Madobe's third term in office, following a constitutional amendment passed by the regional parliament in July 2024 that removed the presidential two-term limit. See Abdirisak Shino, "Ahmed Madobe Wins Third Term as Jubaland President Amid Constitutional Changes," *Horseed Media*, November 25, 2024, and "December 2024 Monthly Forecast: Somalia," *Security Council Report*, December 1, 2024.

u The standoff escalated further in late November 2024 when the federal government issued an Interpol Red Notice for the arrest of Jubaland's president, prompting the Jubaland First Instance Court to retaliate by issuing an arrest warrant for President Mohamud. See "Somalia requests Interpol Red Notice for Jubaland leader Ahmed Madobe," *Hiiraan Online*, November 28, 2024.

v However, it is worth noting that on April 26, 2025, Puntland's president announced that the semi-autonomous region intends to send its troops to southern Somalia to support federal efforts against al-Shabaab once it has concluded its ongoing operations against Islamic State-Somalia. See "Puntland leader says region will send forces to southern Somalia to fight militants," *Somali Guardian*, April 26, 2025.

the Hawiye), some of whom are prominent voices in the opposition based in and around Mogadishu.

Recognizing the need for political concessions, domestic stakeholders and external partners such as the United States and United Kingdom have pushed for a national dialogue and have encouraged national unity.<sup>45</sup> As a result, the FGS called for an NCC meeting.<sup>w</sup> After being delayed twice, in large part due to key FMS—Puntland and Jubaland—boycotting the process,<sup>x</sup> the NCC finally kicked off on May 6, with leaders from Galmudug, Hirshabelle, South West State, and the newly recognized FMS SSC-Khaatumo State in attendance, while Puntland and Jubaland remained noticeably absent.<sup>46</sup>

The decisions that emerged from the May NCC conference drew a lot of domestic and international criticism given the absence of Jubaland and Puntland.<sup>47</sup> One of the resolutions from the NCC pertained to Jubaland, with the federal government pledging to have the ministry of interior draft a legal framework to investigate the constitutional status of the regional member state given its recently concluded indirect elections in November 2024—a move that Jubaland's authorities and other member of the opposition rejected as an effort to politically interfere in the affairs of a regional administration.<sup>48</sup> Political tensions also escalated on May 13, 2025, when President Mohamud launched a new political party, the Justice and Solidarity Party, with him as the elected chairman in an effort to press forward with electoral plans for universal suffrage.<sup>49</sup> Critics saw the move by the federal government as an attempt to further consolidate power and undermine federalism.<sup>50</sup> At the time of publication, the political situation remains fluid with concerns that tensions could rise further as the FGS pushes forward with its election and constitutional amendments plans.

### ***Regional Tensions and External Actor Influence***

At the regional level, the announcement of a memorandum of understanding (MoU) on January 1, 2024, between Ethiopia and Somaliland set off a crisis in the Horn of Africa that reverberated beyond the region. Though details of the MoU remained opaque, the surprise memorandum reportedly would grant Somaliland recognition as an independent country in exchange for providing Ethiopia with access to the sea.<sup>51</sup> There was significant outrage in Mogadishu. Viewing the move as a violation of its sovereignty and territorial integrity, President Mohamud engaged in an intense diplomatic campaign to block the MoU's implementation and Somaliland's formal recognition.<sup>52</sup> Though President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud and Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed signed a joint declaration in Ankara, Turkey, on December 12,

2024, to resolve their dispute,<sup>y</sup> the almost year-long diplomatic rift raised critical questions for efforts to counter al-Shabaab, including regarding Ethiopia's military presence in Somalia.

Since 2006, Ethiopia has deployed thousands of troops to support the federal government in Somalia and combat al-Shabaab, both through bilateral arrangements and as part of A.U. missions. As relations between Mogadishu and Addis Ababa worsened during 2024, the FGS insisted that unless Ethiopia withdrew from the MoU, its troops would have to leave the country by the end of December and not participate in AUSSOM.<sup>53</sup>

Citing its shared border and national security concerns, Ethiopia for much of 2024 emphasized its right to self-defense against al-Shabaab, suggesting that its military presence in Somalia was necessary to protect its interests.<sup>54</sup> This triggered concern and speculation over whether Ethiopian forces would leave on their own, be pushed out, or stay in the country without permission. The ultimatum from the FGS also divided opinions across the country. Some officials from Jubaland and South West State expressed concerns over a potential Ethiopian exit, warning that such a move would only benefit al-Shabaab.<sup>55</sup>

The MoU also prompted the FGS to rally as much international support as it could to pressure Ethiopia to relent, including through the Arab League, the United Nations, and the African Union. Mogadishu also pursued bilateral actions. This has involved expanding security cooperation with longstanding partners, such as Turkey,<sup>z</sup> as well as with states such as Egypt.<sup>aa</sup> Eager to capitalize on the dispute to undermine its longstanding rival (i.e., Ethiopia), Egypt has pursued greater engagement with Somalia, culminating in a defense pact agreed to by both countries in August 2024 that escalated tensions between Somalia and Ethiopia.<sup>56</sup>

The Egypt-Somalia defense pact and calls for Ethiopian troops to exit Somalia became closely interlinked with the conversations about AUSSOM. The Ankara joint-declaration certainly eased concerns and helped to avert fears that Ethiopia could pull out and that a security vacuum could result along the Ethiopia-Somalia

w The last meeting was in October 2024.

x Initially, the NCC was set for May 2, 2025, but was later rescheduled to May 5, then finally held on May 6. See "Uncertainty Looms Over Somalia's NCC in Mogadishu Amid Delays and Boycotts," Garowe Online, May 5, 2025, and "Somalia delays key national talks again as rift over president's new party deepens," Somali Guardian, May 6, 2025.

y It is worth noting that uncertainties regarding the implementation of the Ankara Declaration remain a concern. Although the declaration does underscore mutual respect for the territorial integrity, unity, and sovereignty of the two countries, it does not directly address Ethiopia's interests in maritime basing on the Red Sea. The declaration does stipulate that the two countries would work together to ensure Ethiopia's commercial access to the Red Sea, and technical negotiations between the two countries have begun. But it is unclear whether Ethiopia will abandon its controversial naval base agreement with Somaliland. See Eliab Taye, "Ankara Declaration: A Positive Development Imbued with Regional Risks," African Arguments, January 13, 2025; Micheale Kihishen Gebru, "The United Arab Emirates Engagement in Ethiopia Implications for the Horn of Africa's Geopolitical and Security Landscapes," *Megatrends Afrika Policy Brief* 35, March 2025; and "Statement on the First Round of Technical Negotiations between Somalia and Ethiopia within the scope of the Ankara Process," Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, February 18, 2025.

z In February 2024, Turkey and Somalia signed a comprehensive maritime and defense agreement. See Kiran Baez, "Turkey signed two major deals with Somalia. Will it be able to implement them?" Atlantic Council, June 18, 2024, and Alan Boswell and Omar Mahmood, "Somalia amid a Swirl of Regional Tensions" in "The Horn," International Crisis Group podcast, September 19, 2024.

aa To be clear, President Mohamud had, prior to the MoU, pursued closer relations with Egypt compared to his predecessor. See Boswell and Mahmood, "Somalia amid a Swirl of Regional Tensions."



border.<sup>ab</sup> However, the almost year-long diplomatic spat not only drew significant attention away from coordinating offensive efforts against al-Shabaab, but also undermined effective planning over AUSSOM's troop contributions, operational set up, mission design, and capabilities.<sup>57</sup>

Beyond the MoU, other developments involving external actors have also contributed toward the fragmented manner in which counterinsurgency efforts have been undertaken in Somalia, most notably in the case of Puntland's offensive against Islamic State-Somalia. It is broadly recognized that the number of foreign actors engaged in Somalia's security arena has increased over the past decades, as has the number of security assistance initiatives in Somalia that lack unity.<sup>58</sup> The result has been fragmented Somali military forces at the national and regional levels, with limited command and control, and poor coordination.

Though Puntland has been fighting Islamic State-Somalia with limited external support for years, the large number of external powers engaging Somalia on a bilateral basis has enabled the FMS to engage these actors directly without having to always coordinate their actions through Mogadishu or rely on multilateral initiatives such as the AU Mission, for additional support. In the case of Operation Hilaac, which was launched in January 2025, Puntland's authorities have been able to leverage their bilateral relationships, particularly with the UAE, to support its forces.<sup>59</sup> In the case of U.S. airstrikes against Islamic State-Somalia, however, AFRICOM has indicated that the strikes were taken in coordination with the FGS.<sup>60</sup> Though Puntland is having success against Islamic State-Somalia at the moment, in the long-run coordinated efforts will be needed to address threats including al-Shabaab.

### *Growing Donor Fatigue*

Donor fatigue and concerns over funding remain perennial issues that continue to cast uncertainties over the future of the A.U. mission and its ability to support efforts to degrade al-Shabaab. Long-standing external partners—particularly from the West—who have provided humanitarian and security assistance in Somalia for decades are increasingly concerned about the sustainability of funding amid competing global priorities. Some also feel their contributions are not producing lasting results and are being taken for granted.<sup>61</sup>

The European Union, which has shouldered “the bulk of direct mission costs” for AUSSOM's predecessor missions,<sup>ac</sup> has reiterated its support for multilateral peacekeeping, but has also advocated for a more balanced distribution of financial responsibilities

among international partners.<sup>ad</sup> In fact, the European Union has been in favor of a hybrid funding model, as outlined in UNSCR 2719. However, the United States has over the past year supported a transitional funding mechanism instead of fully implementing UNSCR 2719, arguing that it was premature to apply the resolution.<sup>62</sup> The current U.S. administration has come down even stronger against applying assessed contributions to the AUSSOM case, introducing a bill that prohibits U.S. contribution to the mission under UNSCR 2719.<sup>63</sup>

Donor fatigue among these traditional partners can be partly attributed to broader global events. The war in Ukraine and the conflict in Gaza have drawn much of Europe and the United States' focus in the last few years. Moreover, divisions over UNSCR 2719 reflect broader divisions over multilateralism and burden sharing among global powers that have been brewing for several years.<sup>64</sup>

Political dynamics within Somalia have also played a significant role in driving the decline in support. While there is broad consensus on the need for a new A.U. mission to prevent a security vacuum in Somalia, donors and external partners widely agree that the conflict with al-Shabaab cannot be resolved through military means alone.<sup>65</sup> To ensure gains against al-Shabaab, there is also the need for political agreement within Somalia between the FGS, FMS, and other key stakeholders. Somali leaders should, through consensus, finalize the key elements of the federal system, including the constitution, the national security architecture, and the mechanisms for coordinated action against al-Shabaab.<sup>66</sup> The difficulties that successive federal and member state administrations have experienced in building political consensus and achieving lasting political reconciliation have undermined traditional donor confidence in the country's ability to unite against al-Shabaab and, more recently, Islamic State-Somalia.

With funding under UNSCR 2719 increasingly uncertain, AUSSOM facing a substantial financial shortfall, and outstanding reimbursements still owed to TCCs, there is a serious risk that troop morale and the mission's ability to meet A.U.-U.N. joint roadmap benchmarks could be compromised unless a sustainable financing solution is secured.<sup>67</sup> The United Kingdom has pledged an unspecified amount,<sup>68</sup> while China, Japan, and Korea have contributed US\$ 1 million, US\$ 3 million, and US\$1.6 million, respectively.<sup>69</sup> Meanwhile, the AU Peace Fund has made progress in meeting its endowment target of US\$400 million, and has committed US\$10 million to AUSSOM.<sup>70</sup> However, the amount required to fund peace support operations such as AUSSOM would certainly deplete the fund.<sup>71</sup>

Questions have been raised about the possibility of Gulf State actors and Turkey pursuing more multilateral approaches to Somalia. A donors conference was expected to be hosted in Doha, Qatar, in April 2025. Observers have acknowledged that

ab A major concern around Ethiopia's possible exit was the absence of a compelling alternative TCC and/or bilateral actor to replace the Ethiopia National Defense Force (ENDF). For a discussion on concerns related to an Ethiopian troop exit, see Boswell and Mahmood, “Somalia amid a Swirl of Regional Tensions.”

ac Since 2007, the European Union has invested close to €2.7 billion in Somalia's security, including paying A.U. soldiers' stipends, as well as provided further support to civilian and police components for AMISOM and ATMIS. “Reforming the AU Mission in Somalia,” *International Crisis Group Briefing* No. 176, November 15, 2021; “Will the possible end of the AU Mission in Somalia open new opportunities for peace?” *Amani Africa*, May 23, 2025; “EU Statement: UN High Level Meeting on ATMIS Financing and Resourcing for the Somali Security Transition,” *European External Action Service*, March 22, 2023; Rossella Marangio, “Dawn or doom? The new AU mission in Somalia and the fight for stability,” *European Union Institute for Security Studies*, March 27, 2025.

ad In fact, in the last few years, the European Union has substantially reduced its contribution in support of ATMIS, cutting its funding of the military component from Euro 140 million for 2022 to 85 million for 2023. In 2024, the European Union contributed Euro 70 million to ATMIS. See “One year of ATMIS Operations: Progress, Challenges and Funding,” *Amani Africa*, April 28, 2023; “EU Calls for Fair Burden-Sharing in Somalia Peacekeeping Mission,” *European Times*, February 10, 2025; and “EU support to Somalia: Council approves further support under the European Peace Facility to the Somali National Army and to the military component of the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia,” *Council of the European Union*, April 16, 2024.

such a summit would have been a useful opportunity to engage Gulf countries and Turkey in a multilateral manner, however the conference was postponed from late April 2025 to the end of May 2025.<sup>72</sup> As of May 23, there has been no confirmed date for the event, raising uncertainty over donors' interest in convening the conference.<sup>73</sup> More immediate action is needed to bridge the funding gap and ensure operational continuity, otherwise the ensuing security vacuum will create opportunities for al-Shabaab to exploit.

### ***Persistent Logistical Challenges and Force Generation Concerns***

The SNA continues to experience operational challenges that affect its offensive efforts in Somalia. As has been documented at length by several other studies, the federal government's offensive has and continues to experience various challenges, including ambitious timelines that stretch its limited resources thin; difficulties consolidating early territorial gains; problems holding and stabilizing recovered territory; an overreliance on special units; a force generation process that lacks a unified recruitment, training, and equipping process; and the absence of a comprehensive strategy that coordinates federal, member state, and clan forces.<sup>74</sup>

The SNA's recent military setbacks can also be attributed to what journalist Harun Maruf has identified as "dysfunctional command and control."<sup>75</sup> SNA troops have often been recruited, trained, and equipped, through separate bilateral programs funded by different external actors, such as the United States, Turkey, the UAE, European Union, Eritrea, and Uganda. The results are loosely integrated forces with limited central command. Integrating these various SNA units under a unified command has proved to be challenging. Furthermore, "unit commanders were constantly reshuffled over the years which disrupted stability, preparations and training."<sup>76</sup>

Compounding the command-and-control challenges is the government's failure to effectively secure clan engagement and mobilize Ma'awisley in advance of its offensive in Galmudug. Clan mobilization "has arguably been the most consequential for the government's initial gains against al-Shabaab" in Hiiraan and Middle Shabelle.<sup>ae</sup> The same momentum was not replicated in Galmudug, partly due to how quickly government forces expanded their offensive into the region, leaving less room to prioritize Ma'awisley fighters.

It is worth noting, however, that despite command-and-control challenges and al-Shabaab recovering much of the territory lost in Middle Shabelle, the government and local clan militia have managed to maintain control of some of their gains from 2022. In Hiiraan, clan militia are still holding areas of the countryside, while the government still retains some territory in Middle Shabelle, Hiiraan, Galgaduud, and Mudug.<sup>77</sup>

The A.U. mission's troop reduction over the past years has also contributed to recent setbacks. Under a drawdown process executed over three phases since 2023, ATMIS handed over 21 FOBs to Somali security forces and has withdrawn 9,000 troops.<sup>78</sup> Somali armed forces have assumed a much larger role in securing the country today than they have done in the past. However, as the

last few years have demonstrated, despite noteworthy progress in taking ownership of security in the country, Somali forces remain unprepared to fully replace ATMIS forces across several FOBs over a relatively short period of time.

As FOBs were being handed and A.U. troops drew down in Middle Shabelle, some SNA forces were still being trained and deployed to the field.<sup>79</sup> In some instances, this raised questions about whether government forces with only "about 3 months training" were ready to take over security responsibilities from A.U. forces.<sup>80</sup> In a recent TCC summit held in April 2025, the FGS made clear its plans to further "recruit community/local defence forces and mobile force in order to hold and consolidate the areas that were liberated." Meanwhile, TCCs during the same summit raised alarm over the deterioration of the security situation in the country.<sup>81</sup> All this emphasizes the reality that A.U. drawdowns have not been fully replaced with Somali security forces as planned, resulting in gaps that al-Shabaab have exploited to regain territory.<sup>82</sup>

### ***Al-Shabaab Resilience and Propaganda***

Lastly, although al-Shabaab's resurgence and attacks in Mogadishu are partly the result of political tensions, SNA's operational challenges, as well as the regional and international factors discussed above, a key factor is also al-Shabaab's resilience and propaganda. In its close to two decades of existence, the group has experienced and survived significant territorial and battlefield losses and endured through internal divisions, demonstrating a capacity to adapt and effectively deploy guerrilla tactics against larger and better resourced forces.<sup>83</sup>

Over the years, al-Shabaab has developed several advantages that have allowed it to remain resilient despite repeated military setbacks. Although it possesses fewer materiel and financial resources than the SNA and FGS, the group has successfully cultivated diverse and sustainable revenue streams, enabling it to finance its operations in a largely self-sufficient manner.<sup>84</sup> As Paul D. Williams noted in a 2024 net assessment in this publication, despite losing significant territory between 2011 and 2014, neither al-Shabaab nor the FGS has been able to "decisively break the strategic stalemate," and a clear military victory appears unlikely in the near term.<sup>85</sup> In contrast to the FGS—whose effectiveness is measured by its ability to reduce the threat from al-Shabaab, including through mediated efforts; deliver effective governance; and achieve political stability—al-Shabaab's ability to merely disrupt government counterterrorism efforts serves as a form of victory.<sup>86</sup> Accordingly, with its fewer fighters and resources, al-Shabaab benefits from maintaining a relatively low-cost force, especially when compared to the SNA, which is dispersed across numerous FOBs.

Lastly, one must also consider how effective al-Shabaab has been in controlling and shaping narratives around the conflict and taking advantage of the current political crisis to serve its propaganda. The primary focus of al-Shabaab's recent offensive efforts in 2025 appears to be reversing its territorial losses in Middle Shabelle. That is where most of its resources have been concentrated.<sup>87</sup>

However, the attacks in Lower Shabelle and in-and-around Mogadishu have not only served to distract and draw the government's attention from Middle Shabelle, they also reflect efforts by al-Shabaab to encroach closer to the capital at a time they perceive the government and its forces to be vulnerable. With the FGS facing a fragmented political landscape, increasing donor

ae It is worth caveating that in 2022, clan militia self-mobilized ahead of the government's offensive. See Muibu, "Somalia's Stalled Offensive Against al-Shabaab" and Muibu, "Operation Black Lion."

## **“Whether or not the militant group is ready, or capable, of capturing Mogadishu in the near term, al-Shabaab has seized the opportunity to undermine confidence in the government’s ability to secure the country, capitalizing on broader national, regional, and international developments.”**

fatigue, and uncertainty over AUSSOM’s future, these attacks have “amplified al-Shabaab’s narrative”<sup>88</sup> about Mogadishu failures, spurring media and social media chatter about the possibility of Mogadishu falling.

Whether or not the militant group is ready, or capable, of capturing Mogadishu in the near term, al-Shabaab has seized the opportunity to undermine confidence in the government’s ability to secure the country, capitalizing on broader national, regional, and international developments.

### **Takeaways**

Moving forward, political compromise between the FGS, FMS, and opposition stakeholders is necessary before any real progress can be made to meaningfully degrade al-Shabaab. As Horn of Africa analyst Omar Mahmood recently explained, a tension has always existed within Somalia between efforts to counter al-Shabaab, on one hand, and politics and electioneering, on the other.<sup>89</sup> This tension has been pronounced over the last year with the constitutional amendments and the FGS’ push for universal suffrage distracting from efforts against the insurgent group. Though the government is attempting to refocus its efforts to counter al-Shabaab, hard-won gains risk being reversed.

Compromises need to be made on the issues that have drawn the most political heat: the electoral framework and further constitutional amendments. On these two issues, it is incumbent upon the FGS to consider the merits of advancing its electoral

and constitutional vision<sup>af</sup> despite the lack of political and clan consensus. The FGS has responded to calls for national dialogue by convening the NCC in Mogadishu on May 6. However, with Jubaland and Puntland noticeably absent, the meeting has drawn criticism due to its lack of inclusivity, further undermining the unity needed to coordinate efforts against al-Shabaab.<sup>90</sup> Perhaps the most significant consequence of the political crisis of the last year and al-Shabaab’s recapture of territory in Middle Shabelle has been the potential loss of confidence in the government among the public. This is especially the case for those who stood alongside the government during the offensive.

The lack of sustainable and predictable funding for AUSSOM will continue to be a concern. Though Somalia is not in control of any external actor’s decisions to fund the force, the cycle of political tensions and fragmented politics in the country has contributed to the growing donor fatigue. It is within the power of Somalia’s political elites at the federal and state level to work toward genuine and lasting reconciliation and unity. If AUSSOM fails to secure funding or the mission is terminated, the FGS will need, more than ever, the political unity across member states and clans to coordinate efforts against al-Shabaab. In April 2025, Puntland’s president indicated an interest in sending troops to southern Somalia to support federal efforts against al-Shabaab.<sup>91</sup> But if al-Shabaab’s offensive gains momentum and Puntland forces decide to deploy, it may not be able to maintain the consistent and continued deployment of forces needed in the Bari region to sustain its fight against Islamic State-Somalia while also supporting federal efforts against al-Shabaab.

In the longer run, FGS and FMS attention should be focused on finalizing key aspects of the federal system through consensus. This would involve not only finalizing the provisional constitution through an inclusive process but also working out the finer details of the national security architecture. Doing so would help to better coordinate federal, state, and clan forces and provide an opportunity to develop a more combined, sustainable, and lasting approach to countering the dual threats posed by al-Shabaab and Islamic State-Somalia. **CTC**

af Despite lacking broad political and clan consensus, the FGS intends to hold local elections in June 2025, using the one-person, one-vote model, ahead of presidential elections scheduled for 2026. Furthermore, the federal government has pushed for a multi-party system in Somalia, announcing the new Justice and Solidarity Party (JSP), which critics argue was approved by presidential decree rather than through a political consensus, and serves as a move by the federal government to further consolidate power and undermine federalism. See Mohamed Sheikh Nor, “Somalia: President Mohamud’s new party could centralise power, critics warn,” *Africa Report*, May 21, 2025; “Farmaajo accuses President Hassan Sheikh of constitutional violations, warns of rising political crisis,” *Hiiraan Online*, May 15, 2025; and “Sixteen former leaders accuse President Hassan Sheikh of politicizing leadership, undermining federal unity,” *Hiiraan Online*, May 15, 2025.



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# A View from the CT Foxhole: Christine Abizaid, Former Director, National Counterterrorism Center

By Sean Morrow, Don Rassler, and Briar Bundy

*Christine Abizaid served as director of the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) from June 2021 to July 2024. She was the eighth Senate-confirmed Director and the first woman to lead NCTC, the primary U.S. intelligence organization that integrates, analyzes, and shares terrorism information. During the Obama administration, she was appointed by the Secretary of Defense as the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Central Asia and served on the National Security Council as both Director for Counterterrorism and Senior Policy Advisor to President Obama's Assistant for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism.*

*Christine began her career as a counterterrorism analyst at the Defense Intelligence Agency's Joint Intelligence Task Force for Combatting Terrorism where she focused on the Middle East and South Asia, deploying several times to the Middle East alongside the U.S. military.*

*She has received the National Intelligence Distinguished Service Medal; the Central Intelligence Agency Director's Award; the Office of the Director of National Intelligence Award; the National Military Intelligence Association John T. Hughes Award; and the DIA Meritorious Civilian Service Award.*

**CTC:** Before we begin, you have always been a great friend to the CTC, and we have such appreciation for the trust that NCTC put in us to share your team's vision of calibrated counterterrorism in this publication in August 2023.<sup>1</sup> So, thank you again.

**Abizaid:** Let me just say that the article we published through you guys was actually pretty game-changing for the NCTC cadre. We don't do a lot of stuff in public. We don't have our voice out there, and so thank you all very much for helping facilitate that. I think it's really important that an organization like NCTC, which is built to do information sharing, does it in public as well as on the classified side.

**CTC:** Starting with operations, what is your assessment of the jihadi threat in Africa, particularly the Sahel and in Somalia? Do you have concerns about the ability of that violence to be exported, or are those largely regional threats?

**Abizaid:** So, on the threat of terrorism in Africa, I will say that coming back to the counterterrorism world in 2021, after having done it for the better part of my career after 9/11 until I left the Department of Defense in 2016, the most striking change was the rise of terrorism in Africa, and in particular, the exploitation by both al-Qa`ida and ISIS in different parts of the African continent in a way that I think challenged a lot of our paradigms. We had

been dealing with the counterterrorism threat as a primarily Middle East/South Asia-based threat for so long, that seeing groups like JNIM spread and seeing al-Shabaab sustain itself, seeing ISIS form branches and affiliates in various parts of the continent, really just showed the degree to which those groups saw opportunity in undergoverned spaces and expansion on that continent. It's a challenge for us from a counterterrorism perspective that's different from what we had been dealing with in decades prior, in large part because our relationships are different on the continent. Yes, we had long-standing interest in and relationships in East Africa and I think we were better positioned there to understand the battle space. I think you see that even today in the kind of counterterrorism operations that are being pursued in Somalia against al-Shabaab, and, increasingly, ISIS. But in West Africa, we're dealing with a different operational environment, where partnership opportunities are increasingly limited because of the backsliding of democratic governments in that region.

And so when you look at the trends, particularly in the Sahel, and considering JNIM's territorial gain, the presence of ISIS affiliates there—sometimes in conflict with JNIM but still exploiting this undergoverned space—you look at the degree to which U.S. efforts in Niger, Burkina Faso, and Mali have been stymied by anti-West perceptions and changes in government. You just have a dynamic where I think over the next decade or so, we should be quite concerned about what could emerge from the growing terrorism foothold. And then the concern is always: Once terrorists have time and space and territory, what are they going to do with it? Will they stay regional, or will they go transnational? We saw in Syria that transnational aims eventually are born out of that time and space. We saw that in Afghanistan. And so, the concern, particularly around the Sahel, is what is currently a regional threat could become a transnational one, and that because our relationships are so frayed and our collection environment is so difficult, our ability to predict when that regional to transnational transition occurs is very limited. Unless we're ready to invest in significant intelligence infrastructure, a significant operational infrastructure in a part of the world that's vast territorially and where partnerships are at a very immature stage, I've got real concerns about what could emerge from there in the decades to come.

**CTC:** Shifting from operations to strategy, the Presidential Policy Memorandums and Presidential Policy Guidance during the Obama administration and the Biden administration regarding high-value targeting (HVT) outside of war zones had a significant impact on the CT fight. Could you share how those documents impacted policy and operations in your tenure?

**Abizaid:** I was part of exercising both administrations' policy process governing direct action operations against terrorist targets outside of areas of active hostilities. The theory in the Obama





*Christine Abizaïd*

administration and carried through in the Biden administration was that we have a global threat that needs addressing, but we need a disciplined and senior-level process to ensure we've carefully weighed whether our capabilities should be deployed outside of declared war zones against individuals that pose a continuing, imminent threat to Americans.

At the time the policy was first contemplated, al-Qa`ida, in particular, was a global threat, with operatives plotting from places where we were not actively at war, but we still needed to get after them. We had the capability, so it wasn't a question of whether we could, it was a question of whether we should. John Brennan, President Obama's CT Advisor at the time, was running point on these types of high-value-target decisions, and had a great sense of what the president should consider before green-lighting any operation. Eventually, the president challenged John to institutionalize his deliberative framework and put in place a policy that would make sure that we were thinking critically as national security professionals about what threats demand that we use our significant operational capability in non-traditional circumstances.

The policy has gotten criticism for being heavily process-oriented. There's a perception that it has slowed down operators from making decisions on the ground. But again, these operators were engaging outside of traditional war zones. For all of the criticism around the

policy process, it's actually something I think many of us in both the Obama and the Biden administrations are proud to have pursued because it required of us as a national security team a high level of discipline as we considered how to apply incredible capability against the most critical threats to the United States.

We'd ask ourselves key questions: How serious is the threat to the United States from this group and/or individual? Is there a capable partner force in the area who can help mitigate the threat? Does this require unilateral U.S. action? What kind of operation is necessary? Is it feasible to do a capture operation? Does it require an airstrike? Are there civilians in the area? How do we protect civilians during the operation? Can we credibly determine that those individuals that we are targeting present a continuing and imminent threat to the United States and can't be dealt with in any other way? I think the policy discipline, the level of analytic rigor that underpinned these discussions was some of the best work that the United States government did in our counterterrorism fight. Yes, it was frustrating for operators. But it never endangered them. It was always responsive to the threat, with built-in procedures for urgent circumstances. If you do it right as a policy community, you set operators up for more freedom rather than less, while still adhering to your principle of allowing policy debate and ensuring rigor behind your decisions. Balancing operational freedom while also having clarity from a policy perspective about why and what you are doing with the capabilities we have is, in my opinion, a really good use of national security time.

And so, for all the process frustrations that come with anything you have to do with the White House, I actually think that we created a framework that we can be proud of as Americans that balanced both operational need and sound policy decision making.

**CTC: The idea being that an operator might have to wait just a little bit longer, but knowing that the decision they'll get from our policymakers and leaders is reinforced with rigor and data and debate. I think that's something that makes them feel good in the long term, even if there's some short-term frustration. In a world of dwindling resources, you want to make sure that you've had that policy discussion grounded in rigor and that you're applying the highest ROI you can.**

**Abizaïd:** Absolutely. You had to have that conversation about what to pursue with limited resources, right? We didn't use only this process for that, but it certainly came up during those discussions. We have limited airborne ISR, we have limited strike capacity that can reach various parts of the world, we have a range of threat actors and associated plotting against the United States, and so this also becomes a cost-benefit analysis of how you use your precious resources to best effect when you're dealing with a diverse array of threats. That's a good conversation to have, and having a policy process to force a disciplined discussion, I think, is just good government.

**CTC: The whole community right now is thinking about what it means for cartels to be designated as foreign terrorist organizations (FTOs) and some of these policies about targeting in non-combat zones or non-conflict areas. Can you share some of your initial thoughts on how we pursue cartels in Latin America as terrorist organizations?**

**Abizaid:** My basic take on the FTO designation of cartels is that it's nice to have, but not necessary for any of the other kind of operational conversations you want to pursue. It certainly has a signaling benefit, and there are some additional and more widespread legal penalties or harsher criminal codes that you can apply to those that end up knowingly working with the cartels, and so there's benefit, but beyond that, the value is marginal. The cartels were already designated transnational criminal organizations, with many penalties mirroring what an FTO designation confers. While the FTO designation may signal an aggressive posture, it doesn't technically change your operational options in a material way. Now, separate from an FTO designation, there is a fair debate about how best to degrade cartels and their lethal fentanyl operations. Any decision to conduct unilateral operations in Mexico becomes really complicated, and based on what I've seen reported in the press, the current administration is wrestling with those complications. My own bias is that if you're going to undertake a long-term operational campaign to deal with a significant network threat in any country, then your best bet is to do that partnered with that country. Whether that partnership eventually includes any kind of kinetic capability is something that, ideally, you've engaged with the partner on. Unilateral U.S. kinetic operations should be a last resort.

In the cartel fight, I think there are a lot of steps that we can take in collaboration with our Mexican counterparts, who have been good CT partners over the years, to deal with a very different fentanyl threat. During the last administration, we spent a lot of time at NCTC, at the request of the DNI and the White House, looking at the ways in which our approach to the counterterrorism threat could inform the counternarcotics mission, in particular the fentanyl threat. Our work in CT has been heavily intelligence-driven, and there are a lot of lessons learned that can apply to the counter-fentanyl effort. Whether that's developing a common intelligence picture about the threat; examining the vulnerabilities that underpin threat networks; increasing information sharing across agencies; or producing assessments that then inform the operations that you would pursue to mitigate the threat. And so, I think there are a lot of good lessons learned embedded in our counterterrorism engagements over the last couple of decades that should and are being applied in the counternarcotics space.

**CTC:** There also seems to be some interesting literature from the terrorism studies side about leadership decapitation and the effect that might have on things splintering and what that might mean in a cartel context.

**Abizaid:** In my very surface-level look at this, the way that cartels operate—the attrition rate of senior level folks and then the ability to backfill them and continue on—it creates a resilience that raises questions about the efficacy of an HVT strategy. This fight is, in many ways, against an international logistics and business network. Whether leadership decapitation has a more meaningful impact than going after illicit finances, interdicting global precursor shipments, disrupting the logistics networks, and the like is a real question. My bias is there's a lot more impact from these other types of operations, rather than relying too heavily on a military HVT strategy.

**CTC:** A key priority when you were the director of NCTC that remains a key priority is the evolution of ISK as a threat. How

**do you assess it, and when you think about that network's evolution, what are your lessons with respect to how we've been trying to approach it?**

**Abizaid:** For me, the ISIS-K threat out of South and Central Asia was one of the most concerning developments over the tenure of my time at NCTC. I think there's a lot of speculation that this all flows from our withdrawal from Afghanistan, but I actually don't think that's right. I actually think the group got stronger outside of Afghanistan because of the pressure the Taliban put them under. It was pushed out of Afghanistan-based safe havens and then rebuilt in a way that coincided with a couple of things: They found new permissive environments in the region; they virtually connected in ways that are just very hard to detect given the ubiquity of today's encryption technology; they improved their propaganda in various languages—especially connecting with a wide diaspora Central Asians whose travel patterns were disrupted by the war against Ukraine. That combination of things in late 2023 and early 2024 resulted in ISIS-K being able to pose an increasingly significant threat. And that meant that 2024 was a really big year for us to get ahead of where ISIS-K was going. We saw the attack in Kerman, Iran, first of all, then another attack abroad in Moscow with the Crocus City arson and shooting attack. But then we also saw threats proliferate in Europe. We saw attacks and disruptions in Turkey of a similar nature. We had a lot of concerns around the Paris Olympics and whether we had a full understanding of how this threat was shaping up. And so, we redoubled our efforts against this widespread, largely virtual, but also physical network that ISIS-K was cultivating both in the region and globally. That included an investment in counterterrorism cooperation with South and Central Asian partners, with European partners. You saw press reporting about outreach to the Russians and the Iranians. We worked to build international attention on this latest version of an Islamic State threat. When I saw the arrest in Pakistan of Jafar (Mohammad Sharifullah), one of the individuals responsible for the HKIA bombing in 2021 that killed 13 U.S. service members and scores of Afghans,<sup>2</sup> that to me was a sign of the investment that we made in CT cooperation against this threat.

I don't know where we are in terms of the current state of the ISIS-K threat. I am always going to be concerned about how much they are able to go to ground and then reemerge given their special blend of virtual and physical collaboration across the globe. Their ability to tap into disaffected populations who have traveled to different parts of the world, whether that's in the United States or Europe or otherwise is something we've got to watch. ISIS-K is representative of why the United States requires a coordinated and sustainable approach to counterterrorism, a community that's always looking for the next version of the threat and finding ways to highlight that threat and really push the policy community to deal with that threat before it risks American lives.

**CTC:** When you think about technology and its intersection with terrorism, are there particular types of technologies or areas where you have concerns or are more concerned? On the flip side, when it comes to counterterrorism, given the time you spent in the community and your role at NCTC, where do you think we've been with respect to utilizing technology to evolve the counterterrorism enterprise and where do you see that going?

**Abizaid:** First, technology is always going to influence the threat. As technological capability becomes more available, becomes democratized, especially with the advent of general-purpose AI, drones, or other technologies, terrorists will be no different than the rest of society—they will seek ways to use it to their advantage. And so, understanding the specific ways in which they're trying to use them and then getting ahead of them is really an intelligence problem. Two specific technologies of concern, for example: drone technology and technology to improve the spread of propaganda. On drones, I had left the counterterrorism community at a time when we cornered the market on drone capability and drone operations; I came back at a time where drones were ubiquitous. The capability proliferated across a lot of different actors, legitimate and illegitimate.

Just look at the threat from the Iranians and their provision of their most sophisticated Group 3 drone capability to their proxies. That proliferation threatened Israel and the U.S. military footprint across the Middle East. Other less sophisticated groups were also getting better and better at capitalizing on Group 1 and 2 level drones for their own benefit, with no need for state-provided capabilities because generally available technology was enabling them to innovate and tailor drones for their own purposes.

Meanwhile, on the less kinetic side of things, I was very concerned about how technological evolution was being exploited by terrorists to produce more slick, sophisticated, and addictive content to recruit, radicalize, and mobilize the next generation. This was particularly problematic after October 7th, when certain individuals became more susceptible to extremist messaging. As much as we talked about al-Qa`ida or ISIS or Iranian-sponsored groups, today's threat is significantly characterized by the actions of individuals who are mobilized to violence after being exposed to horrific content online. I think it's really concerning and something we've got to stay on top of.

Now, you ask how the United States government should benefit from this technology in its fight against terrorism. There are certainly efforts across the intelligence community to make better use of information and technology to improve our understanding of the threat, aid in threat detection and discovery, and deter threats from terrorists worldwide. That said, I do not think we, as an intelligence community, are fully leveraging the opportunity that open source and commercially acquired information provides. As an IC, we should be thinking about precious resources and efficiently using our most sophisticated and exquisite intelligence capabilities on issues only we can service. We should avoid replicating what's already available in the open-source environment, while also leveraging it to enrich our understanding of the world at large. There's a lot of debate in the intelligence community about open-source information, about commercially acquired information, and there are good reasons to have debate, particularly given privacy and civil liberty issues. But we have got figure out how to better integrate the classified and unclassified environments. If we don't do it effectively, I think there is a real threat to the way we do business and our value proposition.

I was just at the International Spy Museum last night—I love that place—and they have just unveiled an open-source intelligence virtual experience about the war in Ukraine. It reinforces this idea of Ukraine as one of the first wars enabled by open-source intelligence and how important it has been that regular people are involved in helping understand the threat picture and informing

the way in which Ukraine has defended itself.

**CTC:** You have strong familiarity and understanding of Pakistan from your time as a Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense. Recently, India blamed Lashkar-e-Taiba for the massacre in Kashmir. This is a great reminder of how a VEO action could impact strategic competition. What's your assessment of the threat posed by LeT?

**Abizaid:** In my tenure as NCTC Director, LeT was not a dominant feature of our conversations, particularly because it was not a significant threat to Americans. LeT had become a much more regionalized threat, but also, my sense of the relationship between Pakistan and LeT was that it had changed quite a bit over time. But my reaction to the claim that LeT was responsible for the recent terrorist attack in Kashmir—an attack that almost launched a major conflict between two nuclear-armed powers—was that it was a reminder that as much as we want terrorist groups and non-state actors not to matter in a world of strategic competition, they can still significantly shape international affairs and derail the best laid plans of even the most powerful nation states.

It's not all that dissimilar to what happened after Hamas' October 7th attack. Here's another group that we didn't spend a lot of time on from the perspective of the threat it posed to the United States, and yet, all of a sudden it conducts an attack that draws us back into the Middle East in a significant way and distracts us, once again, from our pivot to Asia. Again, there is an enduring need to understand terrorism in all its forms because of the strategic surprise that can occur even after an unsophisticated attack. It is something that we've just got to be constantly vigilant of. We saw it on 9/11, we saw it with ISIS' reemergence in 2014 in Mosul; we saw it on October 7th; and we almost saw it here recently in Kashmir. We've just got to stay on our toes.

**CTC:** That's a theme we discuss with cadets so often here, that perhaps a group isn't going to pose a threat to our nation, to the survival of our nation, but it's certainly going to pose a threat to our attention, our resources, and our political will.

**Abizaid:** Yeah, it's this really hard thing that we tried to balance. We spent a lot of time trying to narrow our focus to only those most urgent threats to Americans. If a group wanted to conduct attacks against Americans, they were going to go to the top of our list. And yet, a group that wasn't necessarily interested in attacking Americans set off a chain of events in the Middle East that caused one of biggest strategic challenges for us as a country over the last couple of years. So, how you balance the clear-cut, near and present threats of today against the threats that could emerge in the future in a way that is unexpected is a really important piece of what the counterterrorism community is going to have to deal with over time.

**CTC:** We talked a little bit about this, but just to pick up on the Iran threat a little bit more. Iran, as a state sponsor of terrorism, continues to be a major concern for the U.S. government, and this is an evolving problem. How can the United States address the rising threat from state-backed, non-state actors, and are there any CT lessons learned from your time at the Defense Intelligence Agency, National Security Council, or NCTC about what's worked well for that particular type of threat?



**Abizaid:** My combined time in the counterterrorism world would tell you that as much as you think that the conditions are right for Iran to give up its ties to terrorist groups, as much as it's obviously in their interest to no longer back non-state actors who will use violence against civilians and other enemies, Iran is going to continue to do it. And actually, they're going to get more creative about how they do it and find new ways to hide their hand. And so, whether it's maximum pressure or nuclear negotiations or whatever incentive and punishment structure you pursue, Iran will keep as a mainstay of its strategy the idea of asymmetric warfare, meted out through intermediaries, proxies, surrogates, or whatever flavor of actor they find useful. We just can't be naive about the degree to which they'll continue their relationship with non-state actors.

Iran's proxies are, for the most part, in bad shape. Look at the degree to which the Israelis degraded Hezbollah. Hamas' leadership has been dismantled. The Assad regime's collapse in Syria complicates Iran's connectivity to proxies. The Iraqi Shi'a militants that Iran has cultivated are trying to figure out what operations are in their own interests, distinct from Iranian direction. On balance, the Iranians look to be in one of the worst states I've seen in a long time. And yet, I don't think their reliance on non-state actors as a tool of Iranian statecraft is going away anytime soon. Now, I think there are interesting mid-term questions about the trajectory of Iran's closest proxies. How will the post-October 7 environment influence the Houthis; what happens to Hezbollah after Nasrallah; etc. But the challenges do not mean that the Iranians are ready to give up on their asymmetric assets.

**CTC:** It might actually push them to rely more on some of these entities, just given their weaker position.

**Abizaid:** I think that's right. Take, for example, Iran's targeting of dissidents worldwide or former U.S. government officials blamed for the Soleimani assassination. They're kind of willing to work with anybody, right? Mexican drug cartels or Azeri criminal networks. We even saw some disruptions in Europe tied to Sunni extremists. They'll get more creative about how to distance themselves from the attackers so they can retain plausible deniability. But they are not likely to give up on state-sponsored terrorism as a core strategic lever.

**CTC:** Throughout the course of your career since starting in intelligence at the Joint Intelligence Task Force for Combatting Terrorism, after 9/11 through your last role as director of NCTC, what is the most significant change that you have seen in the terrorism threat landscape facing the United States?

**Abizaid:** I think it really is this domination of the threat environment by individual actors versus just the highly organized, hierarchical groups like al-Qa`ida and ISIS. It's made for less sophisticated attacks in many ways, but it's also made for attackers that are harder to detect and deter. You've seen this from actors espousing a diverse array of ideologies, all pursuing tactics that make it very difficult as an intelligence problem to track and get ahead of. And so, I think it is this rise of an empowered individual actor inspired by the kinds of things that they consume online that makes a higher number of threats present all at the same time. One of the things I was constantly trying to understand while at NCTC was not just how many attacks occurred in a year, but how many disruptions

occurred in a year and what did the disruption environment tell us about the sustainability of the threat, where it was highest, why it persisted, etc. The disruption environment is a really active indicator of what the threat is and what kind of international counterterrorism community is needed to keep the threat at bay.

**CTC:** Earlier, you referenced the International Spy Museum. Last fall, in your conversation with the museum's executive director, Chris Costa, you mentioned that after October 7th, many other terrorist actors might have opened up the potential for terror groups to work together and create convergence of ideologies in light of common adversaries.<sup>3</sup> Do you think the benefits to these groups are more in recruiting and fundraising, or in alliances or collectives?

**Abizaid:** I do expect that groups have benefitted in terms of recruitment and fundraising. I think there is also a possibility of greater collaboration, especially when groups are under pressure and need to find new ways to sustain themselves. Right after October 7th, the way that we saw different kinds of groups react to that singular event was really terrifying. I mean, whether it was racially or ethnically motivated violent extremists or al-Qa`ida or ISIS or other Palestinian terrorist groups, you just had a celebration and admiration across the board. And this exposure to a new audience of terrorism as an effective tool for political grievance, that really concerned me. And so, groups like ISIS, which always thought Hamas was full of apostates because they were aligned with Iran, were probably able to capitalize on the international attention from a terrorist attack to find people to recruit to their own cause. That attack created a whole new audience and the question for me is, what will be the lasting impact? What terrorist groups and actors will form after October 7th that didn't exist before it?

I think that October 7th will have a decades-long impact on the terrorism environment going forward. The specific way in which that shakes out, the formality of the alignments, the emergence of new groups, the degree to which new individuals are now exposed and then motivated to violence on their own, remains to be seen. But I think we're going to be living with the effects well outside of Israel and the Palestinian territories for years to come.

**CTC:** We've discussed a little bit about ISK, the threat from individuals, and we talked a little bit about cartels. Now we'd like to ask you about the June 2024 arrest of the eight Tajiks affiliated with the Islamic State here in the United States.<sup>4</sup> What lessons do you think we learned from that episode, and what lessons do you think we should be learning in terms of that development?

**Abizaid:** That development was probably one of the most concerning threats to the homeland over my tenure as NCTC Director. It was concerning for a couple of reasons, but one of the most important was the degree to which we didn't understand the ties to ISIS until they were already here in the country. There's always a lot of debate about how porous the southwest border is and whether terrorists are exploiting that border. Actually, in the history of terrorist threats to the United States homeland, the southwest border does not feature prominently as a major threat vector. This threat was the first time where the border seemed to have been exploited by these Tajik actors. Now, there are a lot of questions

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about their radicalization pathway and what exactly they were planning. And I mean, if you look at it, they were sent [back] to their home countries without terrorism charges, right? So, there’s still a lot of open questions about what depth of threat they represented. But given the rise of ISIS-K, given that outreach to particularly Central Asians through slick propaganda in their own hard-to-translate language, these individuals raised a number of concerns. The threat demanded that we collaborate as an interagency in ways we’d never collaborated before to make sure that we were bringing all available tools and authorities to protect against it.

If you think about it, a threat like this required FBI, DHS, CIA, NGA, NSA, DoD, NCTC, State, and various others to respond to the emergence of these individuals in the United States homeland not just from a homeland security perspective, but also from an international security perspective. To detect and counter the threat, we needed to operate as multi-faceted counterterrorism community that would do everything we could to deal not just with the threat that these individuals potentially posed inside the U.S. homeland, but also the international networks from which they were derived.

And so, the lesson learned from that is that your CT community not only has to be well resourced and engaged in constant vigilance against our threats, but they also have to be highly collaborative, and that collaboration is actually what enables you to detect and disrupt the threats. The CT business is still a needles-in-the-haystack business; it’s still one piece of information that can

open up a whole new threat network. You have to be digging into and accessing multiple sources of information, collaborating with multiple partners who see things in different ways, and if you’re not doing that, you’re not running your counterterrorism enterprise effectively. And so, the lesson learned after 9/11 was about collaboration and communication across a diverse set of community actors; that is just reinforced by the emergence of this most recent threat. It’s this collaboration, this understanding of how the enterprise can and should work together against terrorist threats that I’m most worried about atrophying in a time of reduced resources. Whoever is leading the counterterrorism effort in the future really needs to pay attention to how that system must work together to prevent the next attack.

**CTC:** That is a good segue to our closing question. Looking out at the next 10 years of possible terrorist threats, what actors, regions, or trends are you most worried about? Maybe even perhaps in the context of 2026 FIFA World Cup and LA 2028 Olympics, what are we well equipped to handle? And what do we still need to really improve on moving forward?

**Abizaid:** Well, we cannot be complacent. So no matter what, as much as strategic competition has to be the number-one national security priority, as much as we are concerned about 2027 and Taiwan and what that might mean for what is required in the United States, as much as we’re looking at major trends in the Middle East or war in Europe, we cannot take our eye off the ball from a counterterrorism perspective. We cannot get complacent. Even though terrorism isn’t the number-one thing we are focused on as a whole, the United States government, the counterterrorism community needs to be well-resourced and ever vigilant against a persistent threat.

That seems obvious to say to the community of CT practitioners most likely to read this, but it’s important to reinforce. There is a tendency in the United States government to shift resources away from every other priority in service of a main priority. But we need to walk and chew gum at the same time. Avoiding strategic surprise, protecting against that next threat, just requires a sustainable investment in a community of professionals whose only job is to focus on CT and to tell policymakers when it’s time to take action against our worst terrorist adversaries. That mission requires the constant vigilance and collaboration across a diverse community of good actors so we can prevent a diverse community of bad actors from harming Americans. **CTC**

## Citations

- 1 See NCTC’s Senior Analysts, “Calibrated Counterterrorism: Actively Suppressing,” *CTC Sentinel* 16:8 (2023).
- 2 Editor’s Note: Abubakar Siddique, “Pakistan’s Arrest Of Islamic State Operative Signals Renewed U.S. Cooperation,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, March 5, 2025.

- 3 “Spy Chat with Chris Costa - Guest: Christine Abizaid,” International Spy Museum, September 16, 2024.
- 4 See Julia Ainsley, Tom Winter, Andrew Blankstein and Antonio Planas, “8 suspected terrorists with possible ISIS ties arrested in New York, L.A. and Philadelphia, sources say,” *NBC News*, June 11, 2024.

# Hurras al-Din: The Rise, Fall, and Dissolution of al-Qa`ida's Loyalist Group in Syria

By Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi

Despite concerns about al-Qa`ida's influence in Syria, the organization experienced a reversal in its fortunes over the course of the Syrian civil war. This article traces the history of the rise of Syria's al-Qa`ida-loyalist outfit Hurras al-Din ("Guardians of the Religion"), its subsequent marginalization by the then dominant insurgent actor Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in northwest Syria, and its final dissolution following the fall of the Assad regime. The history of Hurras al-Din and HTS' own break from al-Qa`ida points to a major setback for al-Qa`ida in Syria, with any existing threat from al-Qa`ida's networks in Syria easily containable by U.S. strikes against its personnel with the acquiescence if not cooperation of the new Syrian government.

In popular discourse on the Syrian war, it is common to see Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) conflated with al-Qa`ida, with references (for example) to the 'al-Qa`ida HTS government' and 'the al-Qa`ida regime' in Syria. Such claims ignore the history of Syria's al-Qa`ida-loyalist outfit, Hurras al-Din, which emerged following the formation of HTS in January 2017 that constituted the full breaking of ties between Jabhat al-Nusra and al-Qa`ida. Always a minor faction during its existence in comparison with HTS, Hurras al-Din was subjected to an extensive crackdown by HTS beginning in 2020,<sup>1</sup> further marginalizing its role. The group's fade into irrelevance was exemplified by a statement from Hurras al-Din in January of this year announcing its formal dissolution.<sup>2</sup> However, the United States has continued to target those who were affiliated with the now dissolved group.

This article traces the history of al-Qa`ida loyalism in Syria in more detail, beginning with the initial controversy surrounding a split between al-Qa`ida and Jabhat al-Nusra through to the formation of Hurras al-Din and its conflict with HTS and marginalization by the latter, and to the final dissolution of Hurras al-Din after the fall of the Assad regime.

## The Split Between Jabhat al-Nusra and al-Qa`ida Clarified

When Jabhat al-Nusra's leader Ahmed al-Sharaa (Abu Muhammad al-Julani, now interim president of Syria) announced the formation of Jabhat Fatah al-Sham in July 2016, an entity that supposedly had no ties to any "external entity" and whose formation had supposedly been blessed by al-Qa`ida leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, it was often assumed that the rebranding was little more than a cosmetic move intended to advance al-Qa`ida's interests in Syria.<sup>3</sup> This impression was partly based on the video announcing the formation of Jabhat Fatah al-Sham, in which al-Julani extended thanks to al-Qa`ida's leadership, including mention of al-Zawahiri by name, for their supposed understanding and acceptance of the move.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, Abu al-Khayr al-Masri, identified as al-Zawahiri's deputy and present in Syria, had given his approval for the rebranding decision, issuing an audio message that was released by Jabhat al-Nusra just before the video announcing the formation of Jabhat Fatah al-Sham. In the audio message, he urged for the "appropriate steps" to be taken for the sake of Islam, Muslims, and the jihad in Syria.<sup>5</sup> Subsequently, nevertheless, the rebranding of Jabhat al-Nusra as Jabhat Fatah al-Sham has been interpreted as marking an actual break with al-Qa`ida.<sup>6</sup>

But what actually happened is more complex than both of these narratives. The best explanation lies in comparing the testimonies of HTS figures who supported the transition to the HTS project and the al-Qa`ida loyalists who opposed it. In particular, HTS' Abd al-Rahim Atoun explained that the July 2016 rebranding did not itself mark a break with al-Qa`ida. Rather, the idea behind it was to serve as an intermediary stage in which the link with al-Qa`ida would remain secret,<sup>7</sup> with the hope that the central leadership could then give its approval for a larger merger with other insurgent factions that otherwise objected to Jabhat al-Nusra's affiliation with al-Qa`ida and feared being internationally blacklisted. It was on the basis of maintaining the secret link with al-Qa`ida that some al-Qa`ida-loyalist figures such as Sami al-Oraydi, a Jordanian who had served as a senior cleric in Jabhat al-Nusra and would go on to become a leading figure in Hurras al-Din, initially agreed to the rebranding of Jabhat Fatah al-Sham.<sup>8</sup> Others such as Abu Julaybib (Iyad al-Toubasi, another Jordanian jihadi) rejected the rebranding early on, because al-Zawahiri had not in fact been consulted on the initiative and did not approve of it when he learned about it.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, owing to difficulties in communication with al-Zawahiri, it was not possible to inform him in advance of the rebranding plan, hence the decision to get approval initially from Abu al-Khayr al-Masri.<sup>10</sup>

When al-Zawahiri learned of the rebranding step, he vehemently rejected the idea and initially considered Jabhat Fatah al-Sham to be an actual breaking of ties. Despite receiving clarification about the nature of Jabhat Fatah al-Sham, al-Zawahiri then made clear that he found the concept of secret allegiance to al-Qa`ida to be unacceptable.<sup>11</sup> Although remarks he had once made were used by

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Jabhat al-Nusra to suggest that he would accept the possibility of a breaking of ties in order to realize a larger merger that could bring about an Islamic government,<sup>a</sup> a closer examination of al-Zawahiri's discourse on the matter suggests that he did not think such an option was realistic and would in fact lead to unacceptable ideological compromises too. In other words, what al-Zawahiri wanted all along was for Jabhat al-Nusra to be steadfast and intransigent in its loyalty to al-Qa`ida and commitment to ideological principles.<sup>12</sup>

Despite al-Zawahiri's rejection of the rebranding, the leadership of Jabhat Fatah al-Sham continued merger negotiations with other factions, especially Ahrar al-Sham, in the hope of realizing a larger entity that al-Zawahiri might approve of. As is apparent from the formation of HTS, such merger talks were only partially successful, with only a portion of Ahrar al-Sham joining HTS and HTS' backbone remaining the old Jabhat al-Nusra. Neither al-Zawahiri nor Abu al-Khayr al-Masri gave approval for this merger, and it is thus the formation of HTS itself that should be considered the true breaking of ties with al-Qa`ida, and not the rebranding of Jabhat al-Nusra as Jabhat Fatah al-Sham. This distinction was made by HTS' Abu Malik al-Shami, who explained that "the circle of jihad broadened, and thus the HTS project arose through the gathering of most of the factions under this group, and here the breaking of ties with the [al-Qa`ida] organisation was real."<sup>13</sup>

The understanding of the formation of HTS as the true break of ties with al-Qa`ida probably also explains why Hurras al-Din as Syria's al-Qa`ida loyalist branch only emerged after the formation of HTS, with Hurras al-Din not announcing itself until February 2018 but likely taking form during the middle and latter half of 2017, as illustrated by the fact that the disputes between HTS and al-Qa`ida loyalists on issues such as management of points of *ribat* (frontline points) were already taking place in late 2017.<sup>14</sup> Further, it should be noted that Sami al-Oraydi and Abu Himam al-Shami, who served as senior officials in Jabhat al-Nusra and became the two leading figures in Hurras al-Din, did not begin speaking out until after the formation of HTS.<sup>15</sup>

### The Initial Disputes and *Modus Vivendi* with HTS

The *raison d'être* behind Hurras al-Din was of course the belief that the interests of the jihad in Syria would be best realized through maintaining loyalty to al-Qa`ida, contrary to the contention of HTS' leaders that those interests required a breaking of ties with al-Qa`ida.

From the outset, however, Hurras al-Din faced the problem that the bulk of Jabhat al-Nusra's fighters maintained affiliation with HTS, despite Abu Himam's claim in December 2017 that "a large proportion of the Hay'a's [HTS] soldiers are still with you [HTS] on the basis that you are secretly affiliated with al-Qa`ida, for when you broke ties, your amirs convinced their soldiers that it was just a media cover-up and that the allegiance pledge secretly still remained"—an observation that might have been true when Jabhat al-Nusra rebranded as Jabhat Fatah al-Sham but not when

HTS was formed.<sup>16</sup>

In addition to the lack of manpower relative to HTS, the al-Qa`ida loyalists also lacked heavy weaponry and other significant military equipment. Accordingly, one of the first public disputes—besides that over HTS' breaking of allegiance to al-Zawahiri—concerned HTS' ownership of weapons that Hurras al-Din laid claim to. Unsurprisingly, HTS refused to relinquish weapons to Hurras al-Din: a state of affairs that was ratified in an agreement between the two groups in February 2019, illustrating that from the outset Hurras al-Din's position was much weaker than that of HTS.<sup>17</sup> However, HTS did strike an agreement with Abu Himam in January 2018 in which it committed to "arming some of the contingents of the second party [i.e., Abu Himam], whereby they will work militarily under the cover of the Hay'a and through it."<sup>18</sup>

This sort of commitment would in fact reflect HTS' initial approach toward Hurras al-Din. Namely, despite the disagreement over the initial allegiance to al-Qa`ida, it was willing to tolerate Hurras al-Din on the basis that it agreed to accept HTS' hegemony and abide by its terms, one of those terms being that they should not use Syria as a launching pad for external operations—a standpoint that is emphasized to this day with the new Syrian government under al-Sharaa. In return, HTS was willing to provide some support for the frontline points manned by Hurras al-Din and its allies. Hurras al-Din initially became known for its alliance with the independent jihadi group Ansar al-Tawhid, formed in April 2018 under the name of "Alliance to Support Islam."<sup>19</sup> But Hurras al-Din subsequently became better known for its alliance with the Iraqi-led jihadi group Ansar al-Islam and the Syrian jihadi faction Jabhat Ansar al-Din as part of the "And Rouse the Believers Operations Room,"<sup>20</sup> operating outside the framework of the HTS-led "al-Fatah al-Mubin" operations room but clearly subordinate to it. That HTS in the late 2010s was providing some logistical support for Hurras al-Din and its operations room was affirmed in a January 2019 interview between this author and a then notable online supporter of HTS called Abu al-Layth al-Halabi, who asserted that HTS covered food and ammunition costs for them.<sup>19</sup>

### The Crackdown on Hurras al-Din and its Marginalization

Despite HTS' consolidation of its hegemony in northwest Syria by early 2019 in multiple rounds of infighting with other factions that culminated in the defeat of the Nour al-Din al-Zinki Movement<sup>21</sup>

a In particular, Abu al-Khayr al-Masri's audio message quoted these remarks by al-Zawahiri: "The brotherhood of Islam between us is stronger than all the transitory changeable organisational links, and your unity and coming together and conciliation with each other are more important, dear and precious for us than any organisational connection ... those organisational party links should be sacrificed without hesitation if they conflict with your conciliation, unity and uniting of ranks."

b Ansar al-Tawhid ended its alliance with Hurras al-Din, clarifying the matter in May and June 2020. The alliance with Hurras al-Din had been conditional that no group in the alliance should conduct covert operations against other groups, and should not issue statements regarding disputes with other groups without consulting the other party in the alliance. From Ansar al-Tawhid's standpoint, Hurras al-Din violated these conditions by engaging in the public dispute with HTS regarding weapon ownership. In addition, a controversy arose regarding weapons that had been stolen from the insurgent group Faylaq al-Sham, but Hurras al-Din made no effort to work with Ansar al-Tawhid to rectify the situation. See "Why Ansar al-Tawhid Ended its Alliance with Hurras al-Din," aymennjawad.org, June 10, 2020.

c An operations room, in the context of the Syrian civil war, was essentially a command room to bring together the leaders of different factions and coordinate operations. Thus, operations in the field would be considered as being carried out in the name of the operations room.

d The group had joined HTS but split off, maintaining an independent fiefdom in the west Aleppo countryside. See "Al-Zinki withdraws from all its areas of control in west Aleppo for the interest of 'Tahrir al-Sham,'" Syria TV, January 5, 2019.



*Screen capture from a U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) video showing a precision CENTCOM airstrike on February 23, 2025, in northwest Syria that targeted and killed Muhammed Yusuf Ziya Talay, the senior military leader of the al-Qa`ida loyalist group Hurras al-Din (HaD). "CENTCOM Forces Kill the Senior Military Leader of Al-Qaeda Affiliate Hurras al-Din (HaD) in Syria," CENTCOM, March 1, 2025.*

and the other factions' acceptance of the Salvation Government,<sup>20</sup> the Assad regime and its allies continued to gain ground against the insurgents in the northwest region, launching a large-scale offensive in late 2019 and early 2020 that would likely have seen the entirety of the northwest fall to the regime. The crucial factor that staved off this possibility was Turkey's intervention with thousands of troops in a bid to block additional offensives, as Turkey assessed (correctly) that the regime's foreign backers would be unwilling to go to war with it for the sake of bringing the northwest back under regime control. Russia, keen to maintain its working relationship with Turkey over the Syria portfolio, negotiated a ceasefire deal for the northwest that succeeded in stabilizing the frontlines in March 2020.<sup>21</sup>

As the leading faction in the northwest, HTS chose to work with Turkey in enforcing the ceasefire in the sense of freezing the frontlines, not objecting to or hampering the Turkish military presence in the region. To some more hardline jihadis, however, such actions were seen as deliberately impeding the jihad against the regime and its allies. In other words, they saw HTS' policies as amounting to a commitment to enforcing the plans of foreign states for a frozen conflict in Syria and giving up on the struggle to depose the regime militarily. In retrospect, given HTS' rhetoric during the period 2020-2024 about one day liberating all of Syria from the Assad regime,<sup>22</sup> one now knows that HTS' leadership chose to abide by the frozen frontlines at the time because they knew they were still too weak to challenge the Assad regime's forces. They wanted to take advantage of what was effectively a Turkish security umbrella to rebuild their group's capabilities while watching the

Assad regime become increasingly hollowed out from within by the economic crisis caused, in significant part, by heavy sanctions and international isolation.

Such intentions, however, were not necessarily apparent to people on the ground at the time, many of whom also thought that the conflict's frontlines were frozen indefinitely.<sup>e</sup> They would have also not necessarily been apparent to Hurras al-Din and its allies, which in June 2020 chose to form an expanded operations room called "So Be Steadfast" with two factions led by defectors from HTS (namely, Abu al-Abd Ashida and Abu Malik al-Shami/al-Talli).<sup>23</sup> In its founding statement, the operations room declared that its purpose was "to repel the attack of the aggressors and to break the conspiracies of the occupiers." What this statement indicated was that a key motive behind the operations room's formation was a rejection of the perceived indefinite freezing of the conflict by the dictates and whims of international powers. This motive is itself confirmed in an account of the operations room's formation provided by a member of Ansar al-Islam.<sup>24</sup>

Immediately following the operations room's formation, HTS chose to crack down on it, initially by arresting al-Talli and Abu Salah al-Uzbeki (who had defected from HTS to Ansar al-Din), and then launching an assault on positions held by the Hurras-led operations

<sup>e</sup> This is apparent from, for example, the demonstrations that were held against HTS in 2024 prior to the fall of the regime. One of their demands was for the opening of the fighting fronts against the regime. See, for example, "Demands to bring down 'al-Julani' on 'Friday of dignity'...popular demonstrations sweep Idlib and west Aleppo," Shaam Network, March 8, 2024.

**“Despite the dissolution of Hurras al-Din, it would still be legitimate to consider the group’s members as part of al-Qa`ida’s global network and sharing its outlook of transnational jihad, making leaders and members of the now dissolved group an ongoing target for U.S. airstrikes.”**

room after the latter set up checkpoints in a bid to pressure HTS to come to independent arbitration on the matter. Overwhelmed by HTS’ superior military forces, the operations room was dismantled. Although Ansar al-Islam came to an understanding with HTS that allowed it to continue operating in the northwest,<sup>25</sup> Hurras al-Din effectively became an outlawed group, with its leaders and members becoming wanted by HTS’ security apparatus.

A common explanation offered for the crackdown at the time was that HTS saw the formation of the Hurras-led operations room as a threat to its authority and hegemony in the northwest. This explanation needs some refinement and elaboration. It is likely the case that HTS was concerned in particular that the operations room risked jeopardizing the freezing of the frontlines at a time at which its forces and the forces of its allies still needed to recover. The plausibility of this explanation is also clear when one now retrospectively reviews the aforementioned Ansar al-Islam member’s account of the events. According to him, the formation of the operations room did “not suit the orientation of the Hay’a [HTS] in this stage,” which was supposedly working to implement the international arrangements for the northwest region “on the pretext of the necessity of the stage and the state of weakness.”<sup>26</sup> What is now clear is that far from invoking these issues of weakness as a mere pretext, HTS’ leadership realistically understood that, given the losses they had faced in late 2019 and early 2020, it was too early to open up any frontlines against the regime.

As a result of the crackdown, Hurras al-Din lost its frontline points and its main strongholds in the northwest such as the village of Arab Sa’id in the al-Roj Plain, where HTS easily imposed its writ.<sup>27</sup> With its members and leaders being wanted by the HTS security apparatus and subjected to arrest and imprisonment, Hurras al-Din ceased to be a force of any relevance on the northwest frontlines, and instead tried to maintain its relevance by launching operations against the regime and its allies outside the northwest region, claiming an attack on the Russian presence in Raqqa province in January 2021 and then claiming a bomb attack in Damascus that targeted a bus carrying officers of the Republican Guard in August of that year.<sup>28</sup> The group continued to criticize HTS for what it saw as HTS’ role in freezing the conflict in collaboration with international powers. In its statement claiming the Damascus bomb attack, the group urged “the mujahidin on the land of al-Sham to return to the line of authentic jihad, for there is no solution with this regime except killing and fighting in the path of God, far removed from the international conspiracies.”<sup>29</sup>

Hurras al-Din senior leader Abu Himam made a further appeal for resolution of disputes with HTS through independent

arbitration, but this call was rejected by HTS, which noted in a statement in September 2021 that if he wanted to file any complaints and resolve them with HTS, he should do so via institutions of the Salvation Government, whose judicial authority Abu Himam had previously recognized. The statement also accused many members of Hurras al-Din of becoming involved in networks of ‘Khawarij’ (a general designation for extremists) seeking to disrupt security in the “liberated areas.”<sup>30</sup> As such, the HTS statement underscored the supremacy of HTS’ position over Hurras al-Din and also illustrated how HTS viewed Hurras al-Din as an ongoing threat to ‘public security.’

### The Fall of the Regime and Hurras’ Dissolution

Such was Hurras’ marginal status in recent years in the wider Syrian conflict that it had no notable role in the final HTS-led offensive in late November and early December 2024 that brought down the Assad regime. Commenting on the fall of the regime, Hurras al-Din senior leader Sami al-Oraydi had little of substance or relevance to offer and effectively tried to downplay the importance of HTS’ role, while making no mention of Hurras’ marginalization.<sup>31</sup> He asserted that one of the most important reasons for Assad’s fall was that God had bestowed a blessing on the people of al-Sham in the form of an “enduring believing contingent of the Ummah” that stood against the regime for decades, “waging jihad against it with their tongues, wealth and lives.” According to al-Oraydi, “it would be very wrong for us to forget the efforts of those first great ones” who fought against the regime (likely referring to the Islamist insurgency against the regime in the late 1970s and early 1980s). More generally, he framed the fall of the regime as part of wider conflict between “the people of falsehood” and “the people of truth” (a typical Islamist dichotomy). In conclusion, al-Oraydi asserted that with the fall of the regime comes “the stage of testing and examination of God’s servants” whereby God will see how they act after attaining this bounty. That is, for al-Oraydi, the next step should be the realization of an Islamic government.<sup>32</sup>

Risala Mojahid Media—the pro-al-Qa`ida outlet for which al-Oraydi wrote his article—published an article in January 2025 entitled “Advice and Guidance for the People of the Jihadist Movement in our blessed Sham,”<sup>33</sup> featuring a flag of Hurras al-Din on its cover and thus making clear the intended audience. The advice primarily suggested focus on *da’wa* work (i.e., religious outreach), urging the jihadis to “make people know something about the history of the jihadist movement in the Ummah, and spread the heritage of the mujahidin among them, and establish gatherings for the youth and the masses in which something of the blessed jihadist movement’s releases is put on display.”<sup>34</sup>

Finally, in January 2025, Hurras al-Din released a statement announcing its own dissolution.<sup>35</sup> The dissolution itself was framed as a “leadership decision from the general Command of the Qa`idat al-Jihad Organisation,” suggesting that the dissolution decision was the result of an order issued by al-Qa`ida’s central leadership. The likely reason for its dissolution was that with the fall of the regime itself, the group had lost its main purpose: namely, to wage jihad against the Assad regime in order to bring it down. In addition, unlike the Islamic State, Hurras al-Din and al-Qa`ida have never proclaimed HTS to be apostates, seeing them rather as fellow Muslims who are honestly mistaken and should be advised to take a different path rather than actively fought against, in contrast with the Islamic State’s commitment to fight the new ‘apostate’



government. Thus, in its dissolution statement, Hurra al-Din urged the new Syrian government (without naming al-Sharaa or HTS) to implement the rule of 'Islamic law,' while also urging the government to allow the Sunni population at large to retain its weapons in anticipation of future battles against the Jews and other "enemies of the religion."<sup>36</sup>

However, in affirming its dissolution, Hurra al-Din did not declare abandonment of the more general principle of transnational jihad, declaring that the group's members "will remain among the Ummah's soldiers who respond to any call for support and help in any part of the Muslims' abode." Thus, despite the dissolution of Hurra al-Din, it would still be legitimate to consider the group's members as part of al-Qa`ida's global network and sharing its outlook of transnational jihad, making leaders and members of the now dissolved group an ongoing target for U.S. airstrikes.<sup>37</sup>

These strikes do not necessarily mean that the individuals targeted posed an imminent threat at the time they were killed.<sup>38</sup> Rather, the strikes were likely undertaken both because the United States could target them and as a long-term pre-emptive measure, similar to the rationale behind Israel's repeated airstrikes against Iranian and Hezbollah-linked targets in Syria during the course of the civil war.

Although some jihadis have accused al-Julani of collaborating with the United States to help target Hurra al-Din members,<sup>39</sup> there is no definitive proof of these claims. However, it is clearly the case that HTS has not been obstructing the U.S. efforts to kill members of al-Qa`ida's network. In effect, one can see a convergence of interests. For HTS, the U.S. strikes eliminate members of a group and network considered problematic by HTS, while also allowing for HTS to present itself to the United States as a potential partner, especially at a time in which HTS needs U.S. sanctions on Syria lifted (as President Trump on his recent trip to Riyadh said they will be)<sup>40</sup> to jumpstart the Syrian economy. For the United States,

the strikes are part of its own global effort to degrade al-Qa`ida.

## Conclusion

The story of Hurra al-Din is indicative of how al-Qa`ida experienced a dramatic reversal of its fortunes in Syria. Whereas Jabhat al-Nusra was once considered a leading affiliate of al-Qa`ida such that al-Zawahiri had deputies in Syria, HTS fully broke ties with al-Qa`ida while al-Qa`ida's loyalists rallied around a group that could not lead the insurgency or challenge HTS' hegemony and authority, and was effectively made irrelevant to the internal scene in Syria from June 2020 onward.

The primary ongoing concern from a counterterrorism perspective is that regardless of Hurra al-Din's own weakness, individuals who were members of the group, particularly leading figures, may try to coordinate with other members of al-Qa`ida or other jihadis outside Syria for the purpose of organizing terrorist attacks abroad: for example, by playing a role in incitement through online communication, providing military and technical expertise on how to conduct operations, or wiring money. Such concerns have already played out previously on the Syrian scene regarding foreign fighters not formally affiliated with al-Qa`ida. Most notably, the earlier mentioned Abu Salah al-Uzbeki, who headed the Uzbek contingent of fighters affiliated with HTS (Katibat al-Tawhid wa al-Jihad) before defecting to Jabhat Ansar al-Din and then being arrested and released by HTS in March 2021, is accused of involvement in an attack on the metro in St. Petersburg in 2017 and an attack on a Chinese embassy in Kyrgyzstan in 2016. While the group he headed may not have been involved in the attacks, he could well have been involved in an individual capacity.<sup>41</sup> Ongoing U.S. efforts to target people who were members of Hurra al-Din probably reflect an attempt to pre-empt such scenarios, even if there is no imminent threat from a particular individual. **CTC**

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# Leaders, Fighters, and Suicide Attackers: Insights on TTP Militant Mobility Through Commemorative Records, 2006-2025

By Saif Tahir and Amira Jadoon

This study examines the geographical origins, mobility patterns, and demographic characteristics of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) militants through an analysis of 615 profiles from the organization's own martyrdom commemorative publications spanning 2006-2025. The findings reveal several important trends: the dominance of religious education among militants with identifiable educational data (120 profiles), particularly among commanders and suicide attackers; and the reemergence of new recruitment centers, particularly in Dera Ismail Khan in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) Province, which appears to have supplanted North Waziristan as a primary operational hub. The data also demonstrates TTP's strategic expansion beyond traditional strongholds in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa into southern Punjab, urban areas of Sindh, and specific regions in Balochistan. The study also finds that suicide operatives are predominantly from KPK districts Dera Ismail Khan, North Waziristan, Bannu, and Khyber. Role distribution analysis reveals commanders (38.2% of all profiles) were disproportionately represented in cross-border movements (56% of all cross-border movements), while suicide operatives were concentrated in inter-provincial deployments (17.3%). Most significantly, the data reflects increased cross-border mobility between Afghanistan and Pakistan, with KPK-born militants comprising 82 out of 84 Afghanistan-based casualty cases, illuminating the cross-border regional dimensions of this resurgent insurgency. While these insights are based on TTP's own materials, and therefore have limitations, the trends observed provide unique insights into TTP's ongoing operational evolution and highlight potential vulnerabilities in its recruitment and deployment architecture.

The Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) has unleashed a relentless wave of devastating attacks across Pakistan in recent years, revealing both its enhanced lethal capabilities and strategic expansion. In July 2023,<sup>1</sup> suicide bombers targeted a police compound in Bara, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province (KPK), killing four officers and wounding 11 others, and a month later in August, a suicide attack in the Jani Khel area of the Bannu district killed another nine soldiers.<sup>2</sup> This deadly momentum has persisted unabated into 2024 and 2025, with particularly brazen attacks in July 2024 and March 2025 on military bases in Bannu.<sup>3</sup> These deadly assaults are mere flashpoints in the TTP's notable resurgence in recent years.

Following the Afghan Taliban's return to power in 2021, the group has made a strong comeback, expanding its operational capacity and intensifying its violent campaign against the Pakistani state. Open-source data about TTP's violent campaign confirms that the TTP's violent footprint has grown significantly.<sup>4</sup>

Direct engagements or 'battles' between different TTP factions and the Pakistani state reveal the following numbers: Approximately 98 events were recorded in 2021;<sup>a</sup> 121 in 2022; 374 in 2023; and about 470 in 2024.<sup>b</sup> Indirect violence against civilians and other non-state targets (use of explosives, remote violence, or violence targeting civilians) reveals a parallel rise:<sup>c</sup> 26 events in 2021; 32 in 2022; 165 in 2023; and 247 in 2024. Other analysts and the TTP's own annual data revealed comparable or higher figures; for example, Sayed and Hamming's analysis shows that TTP's claimed attacks increased from monthly rates of 14.5 in 2020 to 23.5 in 2021 and 45.8 in 2022.<sup>5</sup> TTP's own infographics claim even more drastic trends: During 2021, TTP claimed to conduct 282 attacks, 367 in 2022, 881 in 2023, and 1,758 in 2024.<sup>6</sup> These multiple data sources collectively confirm a consistent pattern: TTP attacks have escalated sharply since 2021, to levels not seen since its prior peak years, with a particular escalation in direct confrontations with security forces.

The escalation in TTP's violent campaigns reflects not only the group's enhanced organizational capabilities, but also its

- a Based on ACLED, the authors restricted the data to events where 'actor 1' was recorded as a TTP faction (engaged in armed clash with state forces). The authors did not include TTP's engagements with other rebel groups or militias.
- b In terms of indirect violent engagements with state forces (use of explosives, remote violence) 25 events were recorded in both 2021 and 2022; 77 in 2023; and 64 in 2024.
- c Based on ACLED, the authors restricted the data to events where a TTP faction was noted as 'actor 1' and event type included various types including direct attacks through gunfire; suicide attacks; use of explosives, landmines, IEDs; as well as abductions. The authors did not include attacks on other rebel groups or militias to separate inter-group conflict.

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recruitment effectiveness and cross-border networks. The Taliban's governance in Afghanistan has provided the TTP with unprecedented strategic depth, allowing its leadership to operate with relative impunity while orchestrating attacks on Pakistani soil.<sup>7</sup> The TTP has undergone a significant organizational metamorphosis since its formal inception in 2007,<sup>8</sup> evolving not only in its structure and ideological articulation, but also in its patterns of operational focus. While KPK continues to serve as the epicenter of TTP-related violence, recent data reveals a geographic expansion that signals a shift in the group's strategy as it intensifies its campaign against the Pakistani state. Balochistan maintained a secondary presence throughout the period with fluctuating but relatively low numbers (between 5-24 attacks annually), while Punjab emerged as a new theater starting in 2023 (nine attacks), with attacks rising to 19 in 2024.<sup>9</sup> Sindh witnessed relatively fewer TTP-related incidents, with two incidents in 2023 and five in 2024, primarily in Karachi. TTP's widening operational footprint within Pakistan, albeit subtle, indicates its intention to expand to new regions.

Understanding TTP's multidimensional transformations and the geography of its attacks necessitates examining the human networks that enable them. The origins of TTP militants, their movement patterns, and their eventual operational deployment areas can reveal critical insights into recruitment pipelines, cross-border mobility, and the group's ability to project power beyond traditional strongholds. An important source for understanding the contemporary evolution of TTP is the group's own commemorative content, particularly its *Rasm-e-Muhabbat* ("Tradition of Love") tribute series. These commemorative materials, disseminated through TTP's Umar Media and affiliated channels, document the profiles of killed militants, offering insights into the organization's human capital and infrastructure. Unlike official state reporting—which typically announces militant casualties without further detail—*Rasm-e-Muhabbat* entries offer rich, first-person documentation of TTP's militant base. Each profile includes demographic characteristics such as religious education/professional degrees, place of birth and death, militant rank, and death circumstances. Collectively, these profiles offer a rare empirical window into the group's recruitment base, roles and hierarchy, and patterns of movement across Pakistan and Afghanistan.

The authors analyzed a comprehensive corpus of 615 TTP militant profiles compiled from the organization's own martyrdom commemorative publications spanning from 2006 to early 2025. In doing so, multiple variables are systematically coded for each profile, including demographic data (education type), geographic information (province and city of birth and death), and other characteristics such as militant rank. To identify educational backgrounds, the following approach was adopted: First, all militants' names and associated aliases (collectively referred to as titles by the authors) of the 615 militant profiles were captured into the dataset. While names were provided for all militants, aliases were listed for about 452 profiles. Next, using these titles, the authors coded a new variable 'education type' where either a militant's name or alias explicitly included a term that denoted the militant's educational background such as religious training or a professional degree. For example, profiles where titles included terms such as "Maulana," "Qari," "Mufti," "Hafiz," "Maulvi," or "Talib"—all of which are commonly associated with madrasa training and Islamic scholarship in South Asia—were coded as religious education. Similarly, titles that referenced professional or academic degrees (e.g., "Engineer,"

"Doctor") were categorized as professional education. For profiles with no such reference in their titles, the authors coded these as 'unknown.' The authors did not use any additional textual or visual cues from profile narratives or framing to code education type, as such information tended to be inconsistent, ambiguous, and prone to subjective interpretation. Based on this coding strategy (relying on titles alone), all 615 profiles were coded into one of the three categories (religious education; professional degree; and unknown). Overall, the authors identified educational markers for 120 out of 615 militants (approximately 20% of 615 profiles) through their titles. While this approach does not capture educational details for all profiles, it offers meaningful insights into both the educational backgrounds of TTP militants and the types of education the group chooses to emphasize across different ranks and operational roles. The fact that TTP chose to highlight religious or professional titles for only a subset of militants is itself telling: While one cannot assume that those in the 'unknown' category lacked education, the absence of such titles may reflect deliberate choices by TTP about which forms of education to emphasize—and/or which profiles to glorify or elevate. As such, while this approach does not allow for the development of a comprehensive profile of TTP militants' educational attainments, the findings provide insights into TTP's strategic messaging choices around its killed members.

It is important to note that these commemorative materials are produced primarily for propaganda purposes by the TTP and likely present a selective and idealized portrayal of militants. The profiles are likely curated by the group to shape specific narratives that serve TTP's recruitment and legitimacy goals. As such, while valuable, this data should be interpreted cautiously. The authors use birth and death locations to estimate mobility of militants, however it is possible that these individuals worked in multiple locations or were recruited from some other place they had settled in, creating a more complex mobility pattern than the binary birth-death locations suggest. While this binary birth-death location approach cannot capture the full nuance of militants' movements throughout their lifetimes, it nonetheless establishes important baseline patterns.

The article begins with a brief overview of TTP's historical evolution and recent revival in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region, before turning to an analysis of its militant profiles and then looking at the broader implications. Overall, the data comprises fighters (56.9%), commanders (38.2%), and suicide attackers (4.9%). The findings reveal several important trends. Among the 120 TTP militants for whom educational backgrounds could be identified through titles, religious education overwhelmingly dominates, accounting for 118 cases (98.3%). Among the 120 militants with identifiable religious or professional educational markers in their titles, nearly half were commanders (46.7%), followed by fighters (45.8%) and suicide attackers (5.8%). While this breakdown reflects the role distribution within the 120-profile subset, religious education is most frequently noted among commanders (24% of all 235 commanders) and suicide attackers (23% of all 30 suicide attackers) than among fighters (15.7% of all 350 fighters). This suggests that formal religious education may play a more significant role in facilitating leadership and martyrdom positions within the organization. Second, the data trends suggest the emergence of new activity hubs: The analysis reveals growing operational footprints in southern Punjab, urban areas of Sindh, and Balochistan. Third, the data indicates a geographical reconfiguration, with a shift away from historical bases in North Waziristan toward strategic nodes

## “Most significantly, the findings underscore increased cross-border mobility between Afghanistan and Pakistan, illuminating the cross-border dimensions of the insurgency.”

like Dera Ismail Khan—which appears to be transforming from a peripheral support zone during TTP’s formative years (2007-2013) into a critical operational hub following the Taliban’s Afghanistan.<sup>10</sup> The analysis also suggests that most TTP suicide operatives largely belong to districts such as DI Khan, North Waziristan, Bannu, and Khyber in KPK, with emerging recruitment areas in Balochistan. Most significantly, the findings underscore increased cross-border mobility between Afghanistan and Pakistan, illuminating the cross-border dimensions of the insurgency.

### The TTP’s Evolution and Resurgence

The Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan emerged in December 2007 as an umbrella organization uniting previously disparate militant groups operating throughout Pakistan’s tribal areas. Under the leadership of Baitullah Mehsud, a shura (council) of 40 senior Taliban commanders established the group in response to Pakistani military operations against al-Qa`ida-affiliated militants in the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA).<sup>11</sup> The organization initially brought together militant factions primarily from the seven agencies of FATA, but also from settled areas of KPK.<sup>12</sup> The TTP’s formation was precipitated by several factors—most importantly, by the Pakistani military’s operations in FATA in 2007—which created deep resentment among local Pashtun tribes who viewed these operations as an infringement on their autonomy.<sup>13</sup> The 2007 siege of Lal Masjid (Red Mosque) in Islamabad, which resulted in the deaths of numerous militants and civilians, served as a galvanizing event that accelerated the formation of the insurgency.<sup>14</sup>

The TTP’s ideology draws heavily from the Deobandi school of Islamic thought, which has been influenced by both the Afghan Taliban’s approach and al-Qa`ida’s global jihadi orientation.<sup>15</sup> Since its inception, the TTP has maintained several core objectives: removal of the Pakistani government from the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA);<sup>d</sup> enforcement of sharia law; resistance against the Pakistani military; opposition to Pakistan’s participation in the War on Terror; and support for the Taliban’s insurgency in Afghanistan.<sup>16</sup> Over time, while these objectives have shifted, the TTP’s battle with Pakistan security forces has only grown more aggressive. Under the current leadership of Noor Wali Mehsud, the TTP has positioned itself as a movement seeking autonomy in select areas.<sup>17</sup>

The TTP has undergone several leadership transitions since its formation, each marking distinctive shifts in the organization’s strategy and operational focus. Baitullah Mehsud (2007-2009)

established the TTP as a unified force opposing the Pakistani state and positioned it as an ally of both al-Qa`ida and the Taliban.<sup>18</sup> Hakimullah Mehsud (2009-2013) succeeded Baitullah, with his tenure marked by increased operational capacity and an expansion of the TTP’s targets to include international objectives. Mullah Fazlullah (2013-2018), also known as “Radio Mullah” for his fiery sermons broadcast over FM radio in Swat Valley, marked a significant departure from the previous Mehsud tribal leadership. His appointment created deep fissures within the organization, leading to factional splits and a decline in operational cohesion.<sup>19</sup> Under Fazlullah’s leadership, the TTP carried out some of its most notorious attacks, including the 2014 assault on the Army Public School in Peshawar that killed over 140 people, including 132 children.<sup>20</sup> All three leaders—Baitullah, Hakimullah and Fazlullah—were killed in U.S. drone strikes.<sup>21</sup> Noor Wali Mehsud (2018-present) returned the TTP’s leadership to the Mehsud tribe and has overseen what scholars describe as a strategic revival of the organization. A religious scholar and writer with significant jihadi experience, Noor Wali has implemented substantial reforms to TTP’s organizational structure and strategy. These include a reunification of splinter factions through a more “federal” approach to leadership while building more coherence through a centralized Taliban-style organizational/governance structure,<sup>22</sup> avoiding indiscriminate attacks,<sup>23</sup> and strengthening media operations to enhance the group’s public image and recruitment.<sup>24</sup>

The Afghan Taliban’s capture of Kabul in August 2021 has thus far proven to be a watershed moment for the TTP, providing it with unprecedented strategic depth and operational freedom. The release of detained members from Afghan prisons<sup>25</sup> and reintegration of splinter factions have further accelerated its momentum,<sup>26</sup> enabling the TTP to not only reestablish itself in former KPK strongholds but also expand into new territories in Balochistan, southern Punjab, and urban centers—a geographic extension that is likely designed to stretch Pakistani security forces thin. The tangible result has been a dramatic surge in operational tempo, with ACLED data revealing that TTP attacks increased significantly between 2021 and 2024, rising from 140 total events to 784 events across all categories, with direct confrontations with security forces increasing more than fivefold (90 to 470) and violence against civilians expanding tenfold (25 to 250).<sup>27</sup>

### Analysis of Militant Profiles

#### *The “Rasm-e-Muhabbat” (Tradition of Love) Series*

As the TTP has undergone a revival under the leadership of Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud, its expanded propaganda infrastructure has introduced various products including magazines in Urdu, English, and Pashto, a weekly Urdu newspaper, Nasheed (Islamic chants), press releases, video series, tribute posters, and audio and video podcasts. The media output represents a deliberate effort by the TTP leadership to curate its public image and enhance its appeal among potential recruits and sympathizers. Among these propaganda materials, the *Rasm-e-Muhabbat* tribute series offers particularly valuable data points for understanding TTP’s recruitment patterns, geographic mobility, and operational evolution.

The *Rasm-e-Muhabbat* tribute poster series features profiles of TTP militants and commanders killed on the battlefield. Each poster features a unique profile of a militant with demographic and operational details (e.g., region of birth and death, year of death), and a photograph. The materials were initially disseminated on

<sup>d</sup> Post-2021, the group has revised its territorial goals to be more pragmatic, limited to control of the regions along the Afghan border. See Abdul Sayed and Tore Hamming, “The Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan After the Taliban’s Afghanistan Takeover,” *CTC Sentinel* 16:5 (2023).

Umar Media and TTP-associated Telegram groups in August 2023, and subsequently distributed on TTP-affiliated X (formerly Twitter) accounts. The series has evolved to encompass tribute videos and now maintains its own Telegram bot and WhatsApp channel with over 500 followers. Each poster is marked by a distinctive numeric reference number.<sup>e</sup> While the informational content and overall layout has remained consistent, variations in the released posters suggest that the *Rasm-e-Muhabbat* has been produced by multiple design entities instead of a centralized production team, demonstrating the evolution and dispersion of TTP's technological capabilities within the organization.

Employing a content analysis approach, this study examines 615 poster profiles of TTP militants and commanders who were killed on the battlefield between 2006 and 2025 (February). The data



Figure 1: Rasm-e-Muhabbat poster featuring profile of a notable TTP commander Fareed Parakay posted on March 8, 2024, at TTP Telegram bot 'Rasm e Muhabbat'



Figure 2: Profile of a TTP suicide bomber killed in Lahore, Punjab, in 2017, posted on March 15, 2024, at Telegram bot 'Rasm e Muhabbat' and affiliated channels

corpus was systematically extracted from TTP official and associated Telegram channels, the Rasm-e-Muhabbat Telegram bot, and its WhatsApp channel. Biographical identifiers extracted included names, aliases, and geographic data captured province, birth city, and birth tehsil/district information. Educational backgrounds were coded into three categories: religious education, professional degree, and unknown. Classification was based on explicit textual references in the names or aliases of militants such as: *Maulana*, *Qari*, *Hafiz*, *Mufti* or similar identifiers, which were used to infer that the individual received a specific type of education or training. Operational contextual factors documented the month of death and death location details (city, *tehsil*/district, province, and country). Organizational elements included walaayat (sub-group) affiliations and hierarchical position classified as fighter, commander (mid-level commander, ranking commander), or suicide bomber, identified through visual analysis and textual designations such as "Commander" or "Fidai" (suicide bomber).<sup>f</sup>

### Roles: Commanders, Fighters, and Suicide Bombers

The overall rank distribution of the 615 TTP militants shows that the majority—56.9% (350 individuals)—were classified as fighters, forming the core operational segment of the group. Commanders, which include both mid-level and ranking leadership, accounted for 38.2% (235 individuals), indicating a considerable presence of tactical and strategic operatives among those killed. A smaller group—4.9% (30 individuals)—were identified as suicide bombers representing a specialized role within the organization.

### Educational Background

As noted above, education type was only recorded when it was referenced in the text or honorifics commonly associated with formal madrassa training or professional degrees. Table 1 shows the breakdown of these numbers, where educational background could be identified for 120 of the 615 profiles. Among these, 118 individuals (98.3%) had religious education, while two individuals (1.7%) held professional degrees. These educational patterns span TTP's operational structure: Among those with religious education, 47.45% of the 118 served as commanders, 46.61% as fighters, and 5.9% as suicide attackers. Both individuals with professional degrees were non-suicide operatives—one a commander, the other a fighter. While this verified subset does not capture the full picture, the consistency with which religious titles appear in TTP's commemorative literature—and the near-absence of secular educational credentials—reflects the group's intentional cultivation of religious legitimacy. Their absence in most profiles could indicate incomplete religious training (such as madrassa students who had not yet earned formal titles), or inconsistent documentation practices in TTP's commemorative materials.

When comparing TTP militants with explicitly stated religious/professional degree education to those without such references (the unknown category), the authors find that religious titles were more common among commanders (24% of 235) and suicide attackers

<sup>e</sup> If the reference numbers indicate release order, markings from March 2025 suggest TTP has produced over 844 to date. However, methodical examination reveals inconsistencies, including instances where identical reference numbers were assigned to distinct posters, indicating potential data fabrication or systematic numbering errors.

<sup>f</sup> The term "Fidai" comes from Arabic and Persian roots meaning "one who sacrifices." In TTP's usage, a "Fidai" may conduct various types of self-sacrificing operations beyond just suicide bombings, including high-risk guerrilla attacks, targeted assassinations, and operations where escaping alive is unlikely. See N. S. Jamwal, "Terrorists' Modus Operandi in Jammu and Kashmir," *Strategic Analysis* 27:3 (2003).



(23% of 30) than among fighters (18% of 350). In other words, fighters had the highest number of titles without any clear religious education identifiers in their names or aliases. This pattern suggests that religious training may play a more prominent role in facilitating leadership and martyrdom roles—or, at the very least, deemed more important by TTP to highlight in those roles as part of its narrative strategy. In contrast, the lower proportion of religious titles among fighters may reflect a broader, more opportunistic recruitment strategy for rank-and-file roles, where religious credentials are less critical to highlight.

*Table 1: Education Background  
(Based on Militant Name and Alias)*

<i>Education Type</i>	<i>Commander</i>	<i>Fighter</i>	<i>Suicide Attacker</i>	<i>Total</i>
Professional Degree	1	1	0	2
Religious Education	56	55	7	118
Unknown	178	294	23	495
<b>Total</b>	<b>235</b>	<b>350</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>615</b>

While education can only be captured in approximately 20% of the 615 profiles, the predominance of religious education in this subset aligns with the broader socioeconomic landscape of Pakistan's tribal regions, where access to formal education remains severely constrained by structural inequalities, ongoing conflict, and historical marginalization.<sup>28</sup> The presence of TTP militants with religious backgrounds (and minimal degree holders) reflects not only TTP's targeted recruitment patterns and Islamist ideology, but also the systematic educational deprivation characterizing these regions.<sup>29</sup> Within this context, religious seminaries often represent the only accessible educational institution, serving as both knowledge centers and social networks that can subsequently be leveraged for militant mobilization. Realizing the significance of the religious seminaries, TTP has established a religious board by the name of *Tehreek ul Madaris Al Islamia* under which 80 religious seminaries with more than 6,000 students are working (mostly in Afghanistan) and held its first graduation ceremony in January 2023.<sup>30</sup>

### ***Geographical Birth & Death Locations***

Analysis of the profiles reveals a strategic reconfiguration of TTP's operational geography and recruitment architecture. Based on the birth locations of the TTP profiles, the organization's primary recruitment corridors are concentrated in Dera Ismail Khan, North Waziristan, and Peshawar Districts, with particular recruitment density in the towns of Kulachi, Spinwam, Mir Ali, and Badaber, as shown in Table 2 below. These locations represent critical nodes in TTP's human resource pipeline, functioning as both ideological incubators and operational staging grounds. These towns not only account for high numbers but also show a notable presence of leadership roles, indicating that certain localities may serve as deeper ideological or organizational hubs within the TTP's structure. The prominence of Dera Ismail Khan (henceforth referred to as DI Khan) as a recruitment hub is particularly significant as it sits at the geographic intersection of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Punjab, and Balochistan provinces. While TTP activity during and after Operations Zarb-e-Azb (2014) and Raadul Fassad (2017) remained confined to the relatively isolated districts of the erstwhile FATA,<sup>31</sup>

TTP appears to be reemerging in urban centers,<sup>32</sup> and developing networks that enable the movement of fighters, resources, and operational capabilities across provincial boundaries.

*Table 2: Top 10 Birth Locations of TTP Militants  
(“Rasm-e-Muhabbat” Series)*

<i>Birth</i>	<i>Birth City</i>	<i>District</i>	<i>Fighters</i>	<i>Commanders</i>	<i>Suicide</i>	<i>Total</i>
KPK	Kulachi	DI Khan	39	16	2	57
KPK	Mir Ali	North Waziristan	14	12	1	27
KPK	Maddi	DI Khan	12	10	2	24
KPK	Looni	Tank	14	4	0	18
KPK	Daraban	DI Khan	11	5	0	16
KPK	Badhaber	Peshwar	9	5	1	15
KPK	Bannu	Bannu	7	4	3	14
KPK	Shawal	North Waziristan	5	8	1	14
KPK	Mardan	Mardan	7	4	0	11
KPK	Tank	Tank	10	1	0	11

Overall, and perhaps unsurprisingly, the data reveals that TTP militants overwhelmingly originate from KPK, with over 580 individuals born in the region. Other regions like Balochistan, Punjab, Sindh, and even Gilgit-Baltistan account for only a small fraction of the birth locations. In contrast, death locations tell a different story of operational dispersal. While KPK still reports the highest number of deaths, the spread is much broader with deaths recorded in Balochistan and Punjab, and notably, in Afghanistan, despite not being a source of birth data. This geographical disparity between births and deaths indicates that TTP militants are highly mobile, often moving from their home regions to engage in activities in other parts of the country and across the border in Afghanistan. As shown in Figure 3, KPK serves as a primary source for fighters, which form the bulk of its militant population. In contrast, other provinces such as Balochistan provide a relatively balanced mix of fighters and commanders, suggesting that evolution into leadership roles may be occurring more frequently among militants who operate in or migrate to different regions. In the deaths location data, Afghanistan notably shows a higher proportion of commanders relative to fighters, suggesting that militant leadership might be more active in that operational theater.

### ***Militant Movements: Intra-province, Inter-province, and Cross-border***

The complexity of militant movement patterns can indicate how capable an organization may be in conducting attacks that are not territorially bound—representing a more fluid, network-centric model. The mobility of militants is assessed by comparing their birth and death city/provinces, and categorizing this variable into four types: no movement (where birth/death province, city match); intra-province movement (where death/birth province match, city differs); inter-province movement (where birth/death province differ but country matches); and cross-border movement

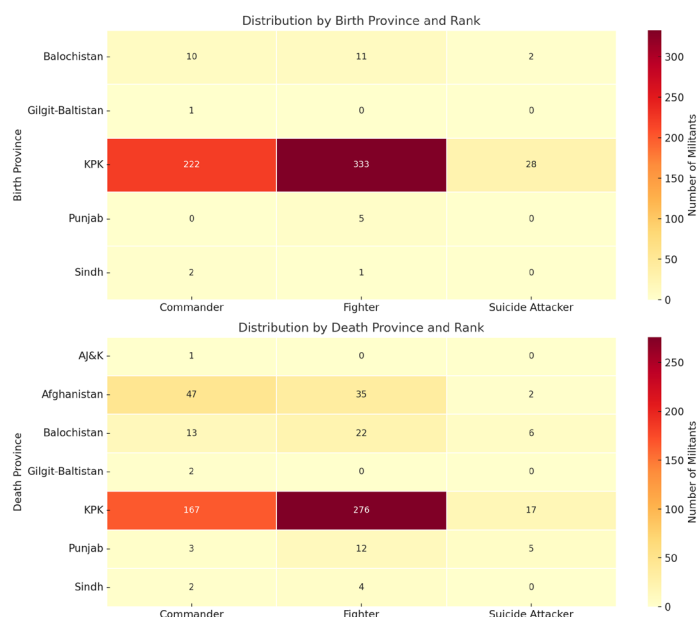


Figure 3: Roles by Location

(where birth/death country differs).<sup>g</sup> As shown in Table 3, of the 615 profiles analyzed, 273 militants experienced intra-provincial movement as their highest discernible level of movement, while 52 engaged in inter-provincial mobility as their highest recorded travel reach. Cross-border movement has also been observed, involving 84 militants—from Pakistan to Afghanistan. This indicates TTP's ability to expand beyond traditional strongholds with those who crossed borders further underscoring the group's regional access and the use of Afghan territory as a sanctuary. In contrast, 206 individuals showed no recorded movement, suggesting localized recruitment and deployment. Commanders were most heavily represented in cross-border movements (56% of those involved in such movements), followed by intra-provincial movements (38% of those involved in this category of movements), suggesting that senior operatives play a pivotal role in both transnational operations and localized command structures. Suicide attackers were most concentrated in inter-provincial movements (17.3%), with lower percentages in other types of movements (intra-province and cross-border) and only about 3% in the no-movement category—suggesting that TTP tends to deploy these operatives across provincial lines to target high-value installations.

In general, these movement patterns appear to align with the broader organizational changes observed within the TTP post 2021. Since then, the TTP has pursued a dual approach of consolidating its fragmented factions under a more centralized command structure while simultaneously forming smaller, more agile units to maximize operational flexibility.<sup>33</sup> The group's internal mergers and new guidelines issued by Noor Wali Mehsud indicate a desire to exert greater control over the TTP network, which likely contributed to improved coordination of localized and cross-border operations.<sup>34</sup> TTP's hybrid structure of central oversight combined with decentralized, mobile units<sup>35</sup> align with

the observed militant movement trends. The concentration of commanders among the cross-border cohort is perhaps reflective of the group's centralized coordination of cross-border activities from sanctuaries in Afghanistan, while the patterns of intra- and inter-provincial movement among fighters and suicide attackers mirror the decentralized deployment of smaller units tasked with local operations and strategic attacks across provincial lines.

Table 3: Militant Movements: Comparison of Birth & Death Locations

Highest Discernible Level of Movement	Commander	Fighter	Suicide	Total
Cross-Border	47	35	2	84
Inter-Province	12	31	9	52
Intra-Province	105	156	12	273
No Movement	71	128	7	206
All	235	350	30	615

#### KPK Recruits

To further assess TTP militants' movements, two Sankey<sup>h</sup> figures were created to illustrate key inter-city and cross-border movement patterns of militants. The first figure focuses on the directional flows from areas in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa—notably cities like Bannu, DI Khan, and Bajour—to other regions within Pakistan and provinces in Afghanistan such as Kunar, Paktika, and Nangarhar. To emphasize meaningful trends, only movement paths involving three or more individuals were included in this visualization, as shown in Figure 4. The thickness of the flow lines represents the number of individuals making each journey, with thicker lines indicating prominent corridors of militant movement. The second figure (Figure 5) shows militant flows from the rest of the provinces, outside KPK.

Within Pakistan, TTP movements from KPK were most frequently directed toward Balochistan (23 cases), followed by Punjab (16 cases) and then Sindh (five cases). In examining the specific KPK-to-Balochistan routes, the analysis shows that the top origin cities and towns in KPK for these movements are Khoi Bahara (four cases) and Looni (four cases), while the main destination cities in Balochistan are Sunbazi (six cases total), Gul Kech (three cases), and Zhob (three cases). For KPK-to-Punjab movements (16 total cases), the militants primarily moved from DI Khan (KPK) to Rajanpur, Mianwali, and the urban centers of Multan and Faisalabad (Punjab), followed by militants from Bannu, Swabi, Tank (KPK) to Mianwali, Lahore, and Rawalpindi (Punjab). KPK-to-Sindh movements were less frequent (five total cases), with destinations such as Karachi (two cases), Ghotki (two cases), and Sukkur (one case).

#### Cross-Border Movement

Additionally, Afghanistan appears to be a destination or fallback

<sup>g</sup> As noted in the methodology, the authors' binary birth-death location approach does not capture the full mobility patterns of TTP militants' movements throughout their lifetimes, but it helps establish baseline patterns.

<sup>h</sup> A Sankey diagram is a flow diagram used to visualize the movement or distribution of elements between different stages or categories. The Sankey diagrams in this study illustrate militant mobility between birth and death locations, created with Python.

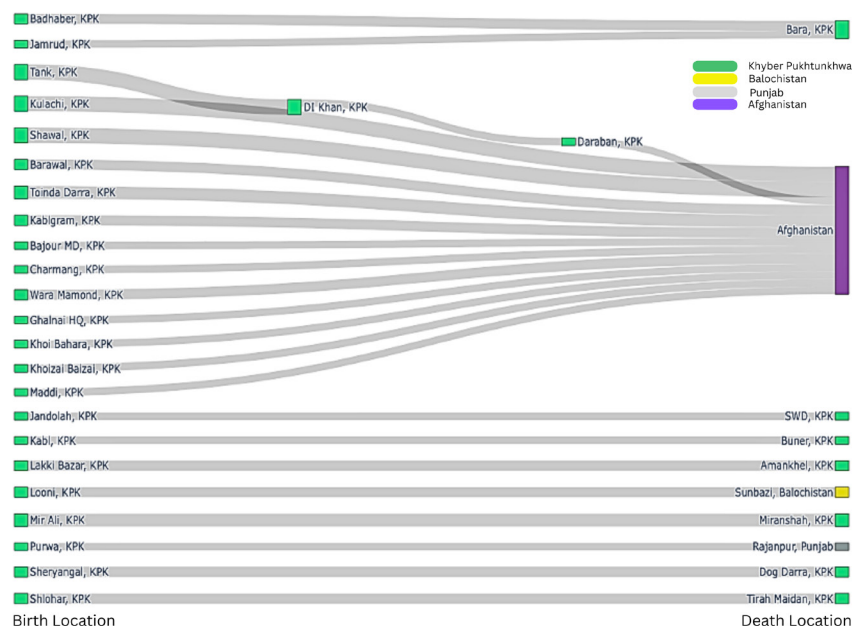


Figure 4: Movement of Militants from KPK Province (Birth locations on left, death locations on the right. The graphic shows flows of three or more militants.)

zone for militants primarily from KPK. Among militants who died in Afghanistan—often seen as a strategic fallback or sanctuary—KPK-born individuals make up 82 of 84 cases (two from Balochistan). At the same time, within Pakistan, 455 militants who died in KPK were also born there. These patterns strongly suggest that KPK functions not only as a geographic stronghold for the TTP but also as its principal recruitment and deployment zone, enabling both internal circulation and transnational extension of militant activity. Various reports by the United Nations and security think tanks have highlighted the support provided to the TTP by the Afghan Taliban,<sup>36</sup> which has been denied by the Afghan Taliban leadership.<sup>37</sup> This study's analysis of *Rasm-e-Muhabbat* commemorative posters provides further evidence of TTP militant presence in at least four of Afghanistan's provinces—Paktika, Kunar, Nangarhar, and Paktiya, with militants primarily originating from DI Khan, North Waziristan, and the former Mohmand Agency in Pakistan.

#### Non-KPK Recruits

As shown in Figure 5, militant movements originating from other provinces are predominantly localized. Out of Balochistan's 23 profiles, the majority of these remained within the province, while a smaller number extend outward—three to KPK and two to Afghanistan—indicating some interregional and cross-border dynamics. Punjab- and Sindh-born militants showed limited movement: from Punjab, there was one movement to the Islamabad Capital Territory (ICT), and another to KPK; from Sindh, there was one movement each to Punjab, and to KPK. These patterns suggest that, aside from Balochistan's modest outbound flows, militant activity originating in these provinces largely remains localized, reflecting a tendency toward intra-provincial rather than interprovincial mobilization. Overall, KPK-born militants exhibit the highest degree of interprovincial mobility in the dataset, serving as the primary drivers of TTP movement across Pakistan.

#### Operational and Seasonal Trends

The monthly distribution of militant deaths by rank (see Figure 6) reveals consistent operational engagement throughout the year, with noticeable surges in January, February, and July. Across all months, *fighters* consistently represent the largest share of fatalities, underscoring their frontline role in militant operations. *Commanders* also show steady losses, suggesting regular targeting or exposure of mid-level leadership. Suicide attackers, while far fewer in number, appear intermittently, with small spikes in May, July, and November. The data also reveals a shift in operational patterns between 2006 and 2025. In KPK, as noted above, there has been a notable transition away from earlier strongholds such as North Waziristan District, with DI Khan district reemerging as a key operational hub, especially from 2023 onward. As noted above, while the TTP had been active in DI Khan in prior years (2007-2013), its activities in this region declined significantly post 2014; however, in recent years, DI Khan appears to have reemerged as a critical operational hub following the Taliban's Afghanistan takeover in 2021.<sup>38</sup> Examining data from ACLED, restricting the data to direct violent engagements between state forces and TTP, the authors find support for this observation. Between 2010 and 2020, only 24 engagements are recorded in DI Khan. However, between 2021-2024, about 140 events are recorded peaking in 2023 at 65 events. In terms of violence against civilians and other non-state targets, we find a similar pattern. While a total of 13 attacks were recorded between 2010-2020, 33 attacks were recorded between 2021 and 2024, with attacks peaking in 2024 in DI Khan at 22 attacks. This shift is accompanied by rising activity in Khyber, Tank, and Lakki Marwat in KPK.

Balochistan, which initially recorded very few operations before 2015, shows increased numbers of TTP militant deaths in several cities such as Zhob, Sunbazi, and Quetta (five deaths noted between 2010-2015; 36 between 2016-2024 with the most notable increase in 2024 at 20). This change, beginning prominently after 2016, reflects an operational transformation in the province,



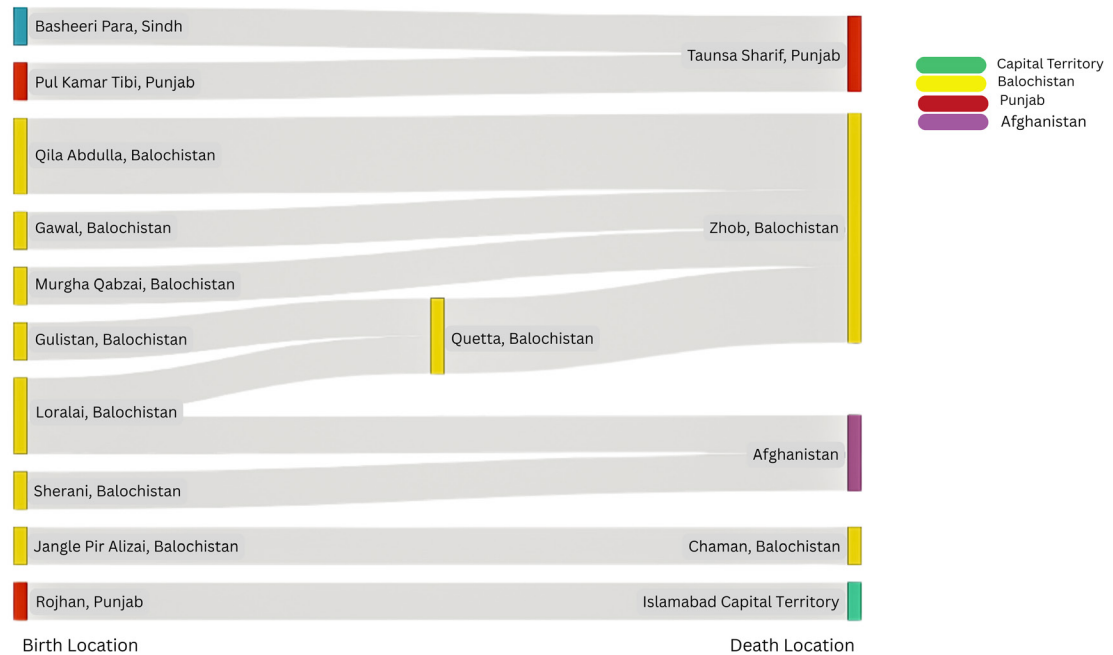


Figure 5: Militant Movements from Balochistan, Sindh, and Punjab  
(The graphic shows flows of three or more militants.)

and appears to align with TTP's 2016 declaration of Balochistan as its "next battlefield."<sup>39</sup> In Punjab, the data on militant deaths indicates a shift of operational activity toward Southern Punjab,<sup>40</sup> particularly toward the Rajanpur and Dera Ghazi Khan districts. These patterns are likely influenced by sustained counterterrorism pressure in central Punjab's urban hubs where earlier activity was concentrated.<sup>41</sup> In Sindh, operational deaths showed an increase from two cases (2013-2014) to four cases (2016-2025). Furthermore, based on death locations, it appears that the TTP is attempting to grow its operational footprint in the relatively stable and settled regions of KPK and Gilgit-Baltistan, including Nowshera, Karak, Kohat, and Diamir—areas previously considered outside the group's core zone of operations. These shifts illustrate a geographic recalibration in TTP's strategy, aimed at dispersing its footprint and testing the state's ability to respond across a wider terrain. The ACLED dataset (2021-2025) validates the operational trends analysis, showing both the geographic expansion and shifting patterns of TTP activity. While KPK remains the epicenter, the data confirms increased activity in Balochistan (state-TTP militants' clashes increased from four in 2021 to 19 and 14 events in 2023 and 2024, respectively), the emergence of Southern Punjab as a new front (armed clashes increased from two in 2021 to 13 and 27 in 2023 and 2024, respectively), and limited but strategic presence in Sindh in 2024.<sup>42</sup>

### Temporal Trends

Figures 7 and 8 illustrate key temporal and operational trends in TTP militant deaths based on role and movement type from 2006 to early 2025. The first figure disaggregates the number of militant deaths by role—fighter, commander, and suicide attacker per year, while the second figure categorizes militant deaths by movement type. The first figure highlights the growing share of both fighters and commanders in the TTP's profiles for those who died after 2021, underscoring the group's expanding manpower

and perhaps the rising exposure of leadership figures in clashes with security forces, including the death of TTP commander Bali Khyara in DI Khan<sup>43</sup> and Hafeezullah Mubariz Kochwan<sup>44</sup> near the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. The second figure shows that intra- and inter-provincial mobility increased steadily, and cross-border movements were notably concentrated between 2016 and 2019. This earlier pattern of cross-border activity is arguably one indicator that the TTP had already begun embedding networks across Afghanistan a few years prior to its resurgence in 2021.<sup>45</sup> However, these findings must be interpreted with caution. Since the data is drawn from TTP's own commemorative propaganda series, it likely presents a selective and idealized portrayal of the group's activities. Earlier years, especially before 2015, are likely underrepresented due to inconsistent media production and weak organizational infrastructure, making temporal comparisons imperfect.

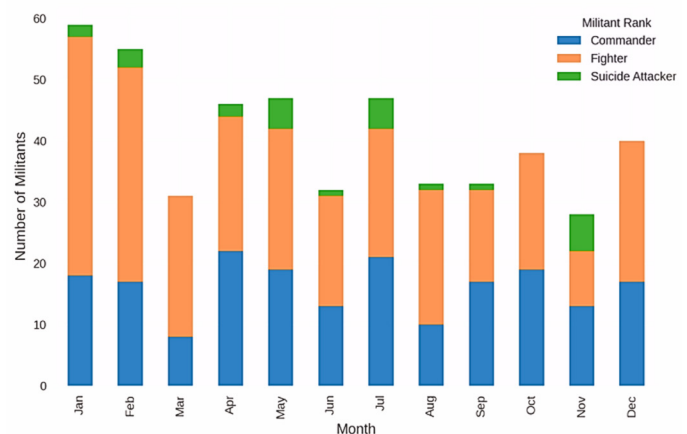


Figure 6: Seasonal Trends of TTP By Death Date  
(excluding unknown months)

## Broader Implications

The *Rasm-e-Muhabbat* profiles reveal significant organizational evolution within the TTP over time. The educational distribution across ranks indicates strategic human resource allocation, with leadership positions typically filled by marginally better-educated individuals. The dataset also reveals a calculated geographic expansion that extends well beyond TTP's traditional strongholds in the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). The shift from North Waziristan to Dera Ismail Khan district as a primary operational hub signals a strategic reorientation toward areas that facilitate cross-regional connectivity. DI Khan's position at the intersection of KPK, Punjab, and Balochistan provides TTP with unprecedented operational flexibility and access to new recruitment pools. The documented presence in Balochistan (particularly post-2016), southern Punjab, and urban centers in Sindh demonstrates a deliberate strategy to stretch Pakistani security forces thin across multiple fronts.

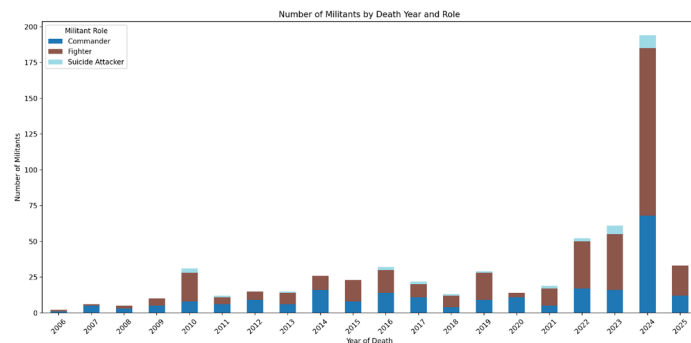


Figure 7: TTP Militants by Death Year and Role

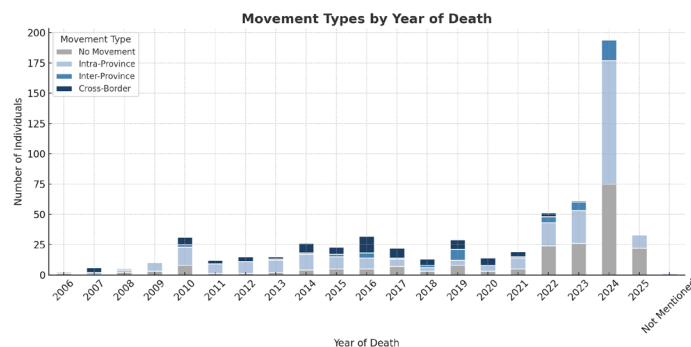


Figure 8: TTP Movement Type by Death Year

This geographic diversification serves multiple objectives: complicating counterterrorism operations, embedding the organization in more densely populated regions with greater resource accessibility, and facilitating recruitment across a wider demographic base. The cross-border movement patterns, particularly into Afghanistan's Paktika, Kunar, Nangarhar, and Paktiya provinces, further underscore TTP's cross-border operational framework and its ongoing, more than a decade-long, strategic exploitation of the porous Afghanistan-Pakistan border. The educational profile with religious education dominating the identifiable cases suggests that TTP's recruitment strategies likely exploit regions with limited formal schooling.<sup>46</sup> The concentration of recruitment in specific localities such as Kulachi, Mir Ali, and Badaber points to deep localized networks that facilitate continued replenishment of militant ranks despite ongoing security operations.

## Potential Vulnerabilities in TTP's Operational Model

Despite its resurgence, the TTP's operational model reveals several exploitable vulnerabilities. First, its heavy reliance on specific geographic recruitment corridors (particularly DI Khan, North Waziristan, and Peshawar districts) creates opportunities for targeted counter-recruitment initiatives. Focused socioeconomic development and educational programs in these areas could potentially disrupt TTP's human resource pipeline, especially in the long-term, as they can reinforce civilian populations resilience to extremism. However, education quality and content matters, rather than just years of schooling. As Afzal's study of Pakistan shows, higher education levels correlate with less favorable views of extremist groups, suggesting that expanding quality education access could gradually reduce the pool of potential recruits. However, this requires meaningful changes in educational curricula where it is carefully designed to foster an inclusionary identity and tolerance.<sup>47</sup> Second, the group's leadership structure appears potentially vulnerable to disruption, with commanders making up 38.2% of deaths in the dataset. This vulnerability is especially pronounced due to the decentralized operational structure of TTP divided into smaller units called "Wilayahs," despite centralized command and control. However, the TTP's sustained operational tempo despite these leadership losses indicates significant contingency planning and organizational adaptability, likely reinforced through its recent mergers, structural reorganization, and expanded media infrastructure.

Third, the seasonal patterns in militant deaths indicate operational rhythms that security forces could exploit. The notable surges in January, February, and July suggest potential planning cycles or operational windows that could be anticipated and countered. Finally, the group's expansion beyond its traditional ethnic Pashtun base into more diverse regions may strain its ideological coherence and organizational culture.<sup>48</sup> As TTP attempts to incorporate recruits from different ethnic, linguistic, and social backgrounds, it may face internal tensions that could be leveraged to promote defections or splinter group formation.

## Implications for Pakistani Security Forces

For Pakistani security forces, the data highlights several critical challenges. First, the geographical dispersal of TTP operations necessitates a counterterrorism approach, which is broad and multipronged yet carefully coordinated, taking into account provincial-level characteristics.<sup>49</sup>

The group's expansion into Balochistan<sup>50</sup> and southern Punjab<sup>51</sup> alongside its continued stronghold in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, underscores the urgent need for comprehensive inter-provincial security coordination. Historically, Pakistan's counterterrorism efforts have faced challenges due to fragmented inter-agency communication, lack of resources, and inconsistent policy execution.<sup>52</sup> The urgency of this coordination is underscored by

i Wilayahs are the district level administrative structures created by the TTP taking inspiration from Tehrik-i-Taliban Afghanistan. A *wilayah* typically includes administrative and intelligence heads followed by other officials including in charge of defense, political affairs and so forth that are appointed by the TTP leadership/Shura council. See "Inspired by Afghan Taliban, Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) creates administrative structure, names Pakistani districts as Wilayats, appoints governors and intelligence chiefs," MEMRI Jihad and Terrorism Threat Monitor, March 1, 2022.

current political polarization in the country and divisions between the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf-led KPK government and the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N)-led federal government.<sup>53</sup> These tensions have manifested in competing policy approaches; for example, the KPK government's decision in February 2025 to form a provincial *jirga* to negotiate with the Taliban was denounced as a "direct assault on the federation" by federal officials, rejecting the KPK government's negotiation plans again in 2025.<sup>54</sup> Similar discord has been observed in KPK Chief Minister Ali Amin Gandapur's challenge to the Afghan refugee expulsion policy and resistance to purely military-focused counterterrorism without concurrent development commitments.<sup>55</sup> These disagreements occur against the backdrop of Pakistan's deteriorating security environment, with rising levels of terrorism in part attributed to the failed 2022 negotiations with the TTP.

Recent institutional initiatives—such as the establishment of the National Intelligence Fusion and Threat Assessment Centre (NIFTAC),<sup>56</sup> the Provincial Intelligence Fusion and Threat Assessment Centers (PIFTAC), and the revival of the Peshawar Safe City Project<sup>57</sup>—are in the authors' view steps in the right direction toward enhancing real-time intelligence sharing and localized threat response. However, the effectiveness of these reforms will ultimately depend on sustained political will, resource commitment, and the ability to operationalize intelligence into proactive, on-the-ground counterterrorism measures across provincial lines. Historically, Pakistan's counterterrorism efforts have faced challenges due to fragmented inter-agency communication, lack of resources, and inconsistent policy execution.<sup>58</sup> Ensuring that initiatives like NIFTAC and the Safe City Projects are not only fully operational but also effectively integrated into the broader security framework is crucial.

Second, the geographic patterns (based on birth and death locations), along with available educational background of TTP militants suggests that military operations alone are unlikely to provide a sustainable long-term solution. Among the 120 profiles with identifiable educational data—representing approximately 20% of the sample—religious education overwhelmingly dominates, with commanders and suicide attackers more frequently represented in the subset (as a proportion of their overall numbers in the dataset), compared to fighters. This suggests that madrassa-based training likely plays a prominent role in shaping both leadership pathways and ideologically symbolic roles within TTP. Additionally, birth location data is heavily concentrated in underdeveloped areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, particularly in and around Dera Ismail Khan and North Waziristan. (See Table 2.) According to the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Education Sector Plan (ESP) 2020–25, these areas face significant challenges in access and equity in education, especially in the newly merged districts with KPK.<sup>59</sup> In such educationally disadvantaged regions where literacy rates remain low,<sup>60</sup> religious seminaries often represent the only feasible educational pathways.<sup>61</sup> This represents a structural reality that likely facilitates TTP's recruitment and influence among populations with limited exposure to non-religious education and potentially high susceptibility to ideological influence.<sup>62</sup> Without addressing fundamental socioeconomic grievances and public education deficits in affected regions, security forces will likely face

**“The demographic and geographic patterns uncovered in this study illuminate potential pressure points for calibrated counterterrorism/insurgency approaches—particularly in emerging militant hotspots to disrupt potential recruitment pipelines while simultaneously strengthening cross-provincial intelligence integration along key mobility routes.”**

a perpetual regeneration of militant ranks.

While Pakistan's counterterrorism approaches have historically been dominated by militarized responses, it recently approved the National Prevention of Violent Extremism (NPVE) Policy in December 2024, which introduces a “5-R” approach of revisit, reach out, reduce, reinforce, and reintegrate.<sup>63</sup> Again, the effectiveness of this new approach will depend on how well it can be integrated within existing security frameworks and commitment of state resources. Third, the cross-border movement patterns, particularly the significant number of commanders deaths in Afghanistan highlight the limitations of purely domestic counterterrorism approaches. Effective containment of TTP will require diplomatic engagement with Afghanistan's Taliban government to address sanctuary issues, notwithstanding the Taliban's public denials of support for TTP.<sup>64</sup> This regional dimension of the insurgency necessitates a coordinated approach that acknowledges the porous nature of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border and the historical connections between militant groups operating across this frontier.

As the authors' analysis of TTP militant profiles suggests, the organization appears to have developed a resilient insurgent infrastructure through what may be strategic recruitment patterns, deliberate exploitation of educational disparities, and calculated cross-border mobility. Confronting this multifaceted challenge demands moving beyond conventional security paradigms toward a combination of kinetic and governance-oriented interventions. For example, precision leadership targeting operations should be coupled with educational investments, community resilience building, and cross-border security cooperation that acknowledges the TTP's cross-border militant mobilization. The demographic and geographic patterns uncovered in this study illuminate potential pressure points for calibrated counterterrorism/insurgency measures. These include targeting emerging militant hotspots to disrupt recruitment pipelines while strengthening cross-provincial intelligence integration along key mobility routes. A multidimensional strategy, informed by granular understanding of militant networks, can help Pakistani authorities be more effective in countering the evolving threat that TTP represents today. **CTC**



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# The Evolution of the Islamist Terror Threat Landscape in Germany Since 2020

By Julika Enslin

Today, Germany is facing heightened security alerts due to Islamist terror threats at Christmas markets in the winter, Carnival parades in the spring, public festivals, pedestrian areas, protests, and at Israeli diplomatic missions and Jewish institutions. Over the last five years, authorities have seen younger perpetrators, new online spaces for radicalization, and new targets. Attackers are using familiar methods of attack and declaring support to well-known groups such as the Islamic State. This article provides an overview of the key developments in the Islamist terror threat in Germany between 2020 and 2025 by taking an in-depth look at all nine executed Islamist terrorist attacks and the 20 publicly reported thwarted attack plots during that time. It concludes with an analysis of the five most notable trends according to the data regarding attack vectors, terrorist profiles, propaganda and recruitment, the impact of October 7, and the role of foreign intelligence.

Since the October 7, 2023, attack against Israel, German authorities have warned of an increased Islamist threat in Germany. However, even prior to Hamas' terrorist attack, Germany had seen a resurgence in major Islamist terrorist incidents such as in Dresden, Nuremberg, and Duisburg. As Minister for the Interior Nancy Faeser stated in the Annual Report of the Office for the Protection of the Constitution for the year 2023: "Since the Hamas terrorist attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, the threat posed by Islamist terrorism has increased further. But even before that the threat level was high."<sup>1</sup>

So, what does this threat actually look like in Germany? How has the threat landscape evolved between 2020 and May 2025? What are the notable trends that can be seen in Islamist terror attacks as well as interrupted Islamist terror plots in Germany? Who are the perpetrators behind the attacks and are there commonalities across their radicalization processes? To find answers to these questions, this article is divided into three parts: The first section will analyze

the nine executed Islamist terrorist attacks in Germany between January 2020 and May 2025.<sup>a</sup> To broaden the base of information, the second part will look at the 20 publicly disclosed failed Islamist attack plots in Germany during the same timeframe.<sup>b</sup> The third section identifies key trends based on the information collected for all 29 attacks and attack plots detailed in the previous two sections. The piece ends with some concluding observations.

## Part One: Islamist Terrorist Attacks in Germany Since 2020

Between 2020 and May 2025, there have been nine executed Islamist terrorist attacks in Germany. As a foundation for the analysis of key trends and developments in the Islamist terrorist threat landscape in Germany, this article will first explore each of the attacks, looking at the target, the perpetrator, their radicalization, affiliation with any known terrorist groups, the weapon used, the subsequent trial, and any other notable information.

### *The April 2020 Waldkraiburg Terrorist Attack*

In April 2020, a series of attacks targeted Turkish-owned businesses and a mosque in the Bavarian town of Waldkraiburg.<sup>2</sup> The perpetrator, Muharrem D.,<sup>c</sup> a 27-year-old German citizen of Kurdish descent, carried out arson attacks against multiple locations including a Turkish supermarket, hair salon, kebab shop, pizzeria, and a local mosque. Although no fatalities occurred, four individuals suffered from smoke inhalation injuries during the fire. The perpetrator was found guilty of serious arson, 31 counts of attempted murder, and planning further attacks with firearms and explosives—including on the Turkish General Consulate in Munich.<sup>3</sup> He was sentenced to 9.5 years imprisonment and transferred to psychiatric confinement.<sup>4</sup> During the trial, Muharrem D. voiced remorse saying: "I really regret what I did. It was just tunnel vision."<sup>5</sup>

a The author is aware of the knife attack by Mahmoud M. in Bielefeld on May 18, 2025. An Islamist motive has been suggested in news reporting but not confirmed as investigations are still ongoing. As a result, the attack was not included in this analysis.

b The author acknowledges that because of the existence of mental health issues among attackers and plotters, it is sometimes not clear cut on whether an attack or plot should be coded as Islamist terrorist. The author adopted the following criteria in coding threat activity as Islamist terrorist in Germany during the time period January 2020 to May 2025: If an attack was reported as an Islamist terrorist attack or disrupted attack plot by the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution or by State Level Offices for the Protection of the Constitution, it was included in this analysis. In addition, for 2024 and 2025 in particular, the author also included credible reporting from major German news agencies for the most recent cases. This data was complemented by and cross-referenced with think-tank and NGO reports, court and trial documents as well as data from Europol and the Federal Criminal Police Office of Germany.

c In German media and legal documents, individuals involved in criminal or sensitive legal matters are typically referred to by their first name and the initial of their last name (e.g., "Muharrem D.") rather than their full names. This practice is rooted in Germany's privacy rights laws.

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The court determined that Muharrem D. suffered from schizophrenia, with the presiding judge concluding that “without the schizophrenia, the attacks by the accused would have been unthinkable.”<sup>6</sup> However, the court also emphasized that his jihadi radicalization was an equally necessary component,<sup>7</sup> noting that the defendant saw himself as an Islamic State member.<sup>8</sup> In 2017, Muharrem D. started becoming a follower of an Islamic State worldview. In addition, he developed a lasting hatred of the Turkish state and “all people of Turkish heritage”<sup>9</sup> in connection with his perception of the actions of the Turkish state in the Syrian conflict and its dealings with certain preachers in Turkey. The attacker for these reasons specifically decided to target people of Turkish descent.<sup>10</sup> He had initially planned to travel to Syria but was unsuccessful and instead started to plan his attacks in Germany.<sup>11</sup>

The terrorist attacks in Waldkraiburg highlights two persistent issues that security agencies have been confronting in recent years. One aspect is the role of mental health in cases involving jihadi ideology. Secondly, the use of explosives in Waldkraiburg for arson attacks stood out from the more frequently employed tactics of knife or vehicle attacks, emphasizing the need to focus on suspicious purchases of other dual use items as well.

### ***The August 2020 Attack on Berlin’s A100 Autobahn***

On August 18, 2020, a 30-year-old Iraqi man, Sarmad A., deliberately rammed his black Opel Astra into three motorcyclists on the Berlin highway, causing severe injuries to three people while three others sustained minor injuries.<sup>12</sup> After the crashes, the attacker reportedly shouted “Allahu Akbar,” claimed he was a “soldier of God,” and warned “nobody come closer or else you’ll die.”<sup>13</sup> He also rolled out a prayer rug on the street and started praying.<sup>14</sup> Prior to the attack, Sarmad A. had posted photographs of his vehicle on Facebook along with religious phrases and references to martyrdom.<sup>15</sup> The subsequent investigation, however, revealed a diagnosis of paranoid schizophrenia.<sup>16</sup> While the attack was listed as a jihadi attack in the 2020 Report of the Office for the Protection of the Constitution,<sup>17</sup> the court later stated that the attacker was mainly acting in a state of psychosis with only minor religious motives.<sup>18</sup>

The attacker had applied for asylum in Germany but was rejected and had remained in the country under a “tolerated stay” provision.<sup>19d</sup> He was known to authorities due to prior psychological problems, which led to incidents of physical violence.<sup>20</sup> The attacker reportedly told a doctor after his arrest that an “angel of death” had driven the car and that the “angel’s foot had been on earth and his head under the throne of the seventh heaven,”<sup>21</sup> suggesting religious delusions rather than coherent ideological motivation.<sup>22</sup> The incident was treated as attempted murder and not an Islamist attack.<sup>23</sup> Sarmad A. was judged to be exempt from criminal

responsibility because of his mental state at the time of the attack.<sup>f</sup> Instead of a prison sentence, he was committed to a psychiatric facility as the court stated that he was still a danger to society.<sup>24</sup>

The case of Sarmad A. again highlights the difficulty in determining the role of religious extremism in lone-actor attacks when the perpetrator simultaneously suffers from a mental illness. As noted, after an initial suspicion of a primary ideologically motivated terrorist attack, investigations into the perpetrators background showed that his schizophrenia was the primary driver.

### ***The October 2020 Dresden Terrorist Attack***

On October 4, 2020, 20-year-old Abdullah Al H. H. attacked two men in downtown Dresden, who were targeted specifically because of their sexual orientation.<sup>25</sup> This Islamist terrorist attack resulted in the death of one individual and serious injury to another. The two victims were a gay couple from North Rhine-Westphalia who were visiting Dresden.<sup>26</sup> The perpetrator attacked both men with two knives.<sup>27</sup> According to the psychiatrist who questioned Abdullah Al H. H., he planned to die as a martyr but saw it as a sign from God that he initially was able to escape, hoping to now prepare for “bigger things” either by traveling to Syria or killing more “unbelievers.”<sup>28</sup> Following a forensic investigation, he was arrested two weeks after the attack.<sup>29</sup>

The attacker had arrived in Germany in 2015 from Syria seeking asylum.<sup>30</sup> Abdullah Al H. H. was not raised in a strict religious household.<sup>31</sup> During the trial, he stated that his intention of coming to Germany had not been to carry out terrorist attack and that he had only “found Islam and his religious duties” after he had settled in Germany.<sup>32g</sup> Starting in 2017, according to the court psychiatrist, Abdullah Al H. H. had become “addicted” to jihadi content online.<sup>33</sup> He had little prior religious education and only few social contacts at the time.<sup>34</sup> In particular, he watched speeches by Sheikh Khalid Mohammad Hamad Al Rashid.<sup>h</sup> Because of his own “sinful” behavior, Abdullah Al H. H. became afraid of “hell” and thought a suicide attack would bring “him to the right path again.”<sup>35</sup> He also joined a chat group of Islamic State followers,<sup>36</sup> became interested in building explosive belts, and began close communications with one individual who encouraged him in his plan to commit a violent attack. When he also started posting jihadi content on Facebook, he was classified as a “Gefährder” (potential threat to public safety)

d Sarmad A.’s asylum claim was denied because he had previously applied for asylum in another E.U. country (Finland) and was rejected. His “obligation to leave the country” (*Ausreisepflicht*) was not enforced because of missing identification and travel documents. Landgericht Berlin, Verdict January 31, 2022 – Az. 521 Ks 1/21 –, BeckRS 2022, 1007.

e In the German immigration system, a “*Duldung*” (tolerated stay) refers to the temporary suspension of deportation for individuals who are legally required to leave the country but cannot be deported due to practical or legal obstacles, such as medical issues or lack of travel documents. It does not constitute a legal residence status and generally comes with restricted rights.

f In German criminal law, *Schuldunfähigkeit* (§ 20 German Criminal Code) refers to the absence of criminal responsibility due to a severe mental disorder, rendering the offender incapable of understanding or controlling their actions. If such a person poses a continuing danger, § 63 German Criminal Code allows for their indefinite confinement in a psychiatric hospital as a preventive measure.

g In 2014, Abdullah Al H. H. was stopped at an Islamic State checkpoint in Syria. The group found music as well as photos and videos of naked women on his cellphone and confiscated his memory card. Fearful of punishment, he left for Turkey and later with financial help from his father went through the Balkan route to Germany in 2015. Oberlandesgericht Dresden, Verdict May 21, 2021 – 4 St 1/21, BeckRS 2021, 11754.

h Sheikh Khalid Mohammad Hamad Al Rashid is a cleric from Saudi Arabia who was arrested in Saudi Arabia in 2005 for a sermon that called for protests in response to the Danish cartoons of the Prophet Mohammad. “Khaled Al-Rashed,” United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), accessed May 20, 2025.



*Police vehicles are parked in the city center of Solingen in North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany, on August 24, 2024, following an attack. (Thomas Banneyer/picture-alliance/dpa/AP Images)*

by security services.<sup>i</sup>

After his arrest in 2017, Abdullah Al H. H. was convicted in November 2018 of soliciting support for a foreign terrorist organization.<sup>37j</sup> He was released after a three-year sentence from juvenile detention just days before the attack on September 29. At the time of his release, he was under observation by the

authorities, had to check in three times a week with the local police,<sup>38</sup> and had attended 10 consultations with the organization Violence Prevention Network in 2020.<sup>39</sup> The Saxonian Office for the Protection of the Constitution, however, did not surveil him around the clock, and he was able to purchase his weapon for the attack: kitchen knives. After his arrest, Abdullah Al H. H. told the psychiatrist that he “plans to kill more people when he is released.”<sup>40</sup> He was sentenced to life imprisonment in May 2021.<sup>41</sup>

The terrorist attack in Dresden was the first recorded Islamist attack in Germany targeting someone who is gay. Overall, the attack underlines three key concerns for security services in Germany: Abdullah Al H. H. did not arrive as a radicalized jihadi but was radicalized online by Islamic State propaganda and an individual while he was already living in Germany. In addition, his attack was an example of how some groups—in this case, a same-sex couple—can be singled out as part of the overall category of “unbelievers.” Finally, Abdullah Al H. H.’s case raises questions of how to deal with dangerous individuals who are released from jail after serving their sentences. While he was prohibited after his release from owning or carrying stabbing weapons,<sup>42</sup> this excluded everyday items such as kitchen knives, which were used in the attack. Police check-ins, counseling, and partial surveillance did not prevent him from being able to carry out the attack.

i In German law, a “Gefährder” is a designation for an individual that security authorities consider potentially dangerous, particularly in the context of terrorism and politically motivated crimes. While the person may not have committed a crime, authorities believe there is a “concrete” likelihood they may do so, allowing for certain preemptive measures such as, for example, surveillance or an electronic ankle monitor. “Gefährder,” Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, January 13, 2020; “Legaldefinition Des Begriffes ‘Gefährder,’” Deutscher Bundestag, 2020.

j After the attack, research by the German media outlets NDR, WDR and SZ revealed that the German Foreign Intelligence Service (BND) had received a warning regarding Abdullah Al H. H. planning a terrorist attack in 2019 from a foreign intelligence service. The information was not passed on to the domestic intelligence service, the Office for the Protection of the Constitution, or any state-level intelligence. Analysis, however, also suggested that this warning would likely not have changed the assessment of Abdullah Al H. H., who at that point was already considered a radical Islamist by domestic federal- and state-level intelligence and imprisoned for soliciting support for a foreign terrorist organization, the Islamic State. Florian Flade and Georg Mascolo, “Attentäter von Dresden: BND Leitete Hinweis Nicht Weiter,” Tagesschau, October 29, 2020.



### ***The November 2021 ICE Train Attack***

In November 2021, the 27-year-old Abdalrahman A. launched a knife attack against four passengers aboard an ICE high-speed train traveling from Passau to Nuremberg in southern Germany.<sup>43</sup> The assailant was Palestinian, had lived in Syria, and came to Germany in 2014 as a refugee where he was granted asylum in 2016. During the attack, which was carried out with a 3.3-inch pocketknife, he attacked four male travelers, inflicting severe injuries on three of them. Directly after the attack, he reportedly told police “he was sick” and later added that he felt like he was being followed. After a two-month trial and investigations, the court rejected defense claims of paranoid schizophrenia and unaccountability. While a first assessment by a court psychiatrist had supported the claim, three separate reports later found no evidence of schizophrenia or any psychiatric condition.<sup>44</sup> Instead, the court ruled that the perpetrator was fully aware of his actions and was “simulating a mental illness.”<sup>45</sup> The court furthermore concluded that there was sufficient evidence of jihadi motivation behind the attack as investigators found Islamic State propaganda videos in his possession<sup>46</sup> and ideological posts he had shared on Facebook.<sup>47</sup> Abdalrahman A. also attended a mosque in Passau that is considered salafi by the German Office for the Protection of the Constitution.<sup>48</sup> Investigators did not, however, find any direct communications with known jihadi groups such as the Islamic State.<sup>49</sup> The judge sentenced Abdalrahman A. to a 14-year prison sentence for attempted murder and aggravated assault.<sup>50</sup>

The case highlighted three recurring challenges for German authorities: First, the attack was conducted with a small and easily accessible weapon, a pocketknife, which is difficult to restrict. Second, the attacker acted alone and never became a member of a terrorist organization, making his radicalization process much harder to uncover. And finally, the case was another example of the challenge of distinguishing between on the one hand genuine mental illnesses of individuals as the primary driver of the attack and on the other hand religious extremism.<sup>k</sup>

### ***The April 2023 Duisburg Double Attack***

While there were no executed Islamist terror plots recorded in 2022, another terrorist attack occurred in 2023 when a single 27-year-old perpetrator carried out two separate knife attacks in Duisburg, North Rhine-Westphalia.<sup>51</sup> On April 9 and April 18, the attacker, Maan D., killed one person and inflicted life-threatening injuries on four others across both incidents. He used a store bought 7.8-inch kitchen knife to kill “unbelievers”<sup>52</sup> and targeted individuals who had been drinking alcohol, were listening to music, and working out in a gym.<sup>53</sup> According to security services, the attacker had fled his home country (Syria) in 2015 in order to avoid conscription and was granted refugee status in Germany in 2016. Maan D. had grown up in a religious family but only started consuming salafi and particularly Islamic State propaganda in 2020. Trial evidence

showed that in 2023, he started seeing it as his duty to kill male “unbelievers” in Germany and was anticipating dying as a martyr during police fire.<sup>54</sup> According to the Office for the Protection of the Constitution, the attacker explicitly claimed that he had acted on behalf of the Islamic State.<sup>55</sup> Maan D. confessed to all of his attacks, showed no remorse, and threatened further crimes during the trial.<sup>56</sup> He was sentenced to life in prison<sup>l</sup> with particular severity of guilt<sup>m</sup> and additionally ordered preventive detention if he is ever released.<sup>n</sup>

The Duisburg attack featured an easily accessible weapon, a kitchen knife. Maan D. attacked the victims on the street and at the gym, two soft targets that unlike large gatherings at Christmas markets or concert and sport venues are not heavily guarded. Finally, the perpetrator’s radicalization process emphasizes the continued influence of the Islamic State’s propaganda despite its territorial defeat in the Middle East.

### ***The May 2024 Mannheim Market Square Attack***

On May 31, 2024, a 25-year-old Afghan national carried out a knife attack on Mannheim’s marketplace, targeting anti-Islam

<sup>l</sup> “*Lebenslange Freiheitsstrafe*” (life imprisonment) is the most severe form of imprisonment under German criminal law, entailing an indeterminate sentence without a fixed release date. While the law allows for parole after 15 years, this is contingent upon the absence of a determination of “*besondere Schwere der Schuld*” (particular severity of guilt) and a positive prognosis regarding the offender’s future behavior. Maan D. was sentenced to life due to the extreme gravity of his crimes, including multiple murders and attempted murders. “Nach Islamistischen Messerattacken in Duisburg: Urteil Gegen Maan D. Wegen Mordes Sowie Versuchten Mordes in Vier Fällen - Pressemitteilung Nr. 37/2023,” Oberlandesgericht Düsseldorf, Justiz NRW, December 19, 2023.

<sup>m</sup> “*Besondere Schwere der Schuld*” (particular severity of guilt) is a legal determination under German criminal law, typically made when imposing a life sentence. It indicates that the defendant’s culpability is so grave—due to factors such as the brutality of the crime, motives, or harm caused—that early release after 15 years (as otherwise permitted under §57a StGB) is generally excluded. In the case of Maan D., the court found such severity due to the number of victims, the malicious murder motive, as well as the considerable consequences of the acts for the injured, the court found that the defendant was particularly guilty. This finding makes an early release after 15 years extremely unlikely. “Nach Islamistischen Messerattacken in Duisburg: Urteil Gegen Maan D. Wegen Mordes Sowie Versuchten Mordes in Vier Fällen - Pressemitteilung Nr. 37/2023,” Oberlandesgericht Düsseldorf, Justiz NRW, December 19, 2023.

<sup>n</sup> “*Sicherungsverwahrung*” (preventive detention) is a legal measure in German criminal law ordered when a convicted individual is considered a continuing danger to society, even after serving their prison sentence. Unlike regular imprisonment, it is not based on the severity of the offense but on the offender’s assessed risk of reoffending. Courts may impose it when the person has committed severe crimes and shows lasting criminal tendencies or dangerous personality traits. In the case of Maan D., the court ordered preventive detention due to the defendant’s ongoing threat, rooted in his violent extremism, no remorse, continued threats, and therefore high risk of reoffending. “Extremismus: Messerattacken von Duisburg: Höchststrafe Für IS-Anhänger,” Zeit Online, December 19, 2023.

<sup>k</sup> Only a few months prior, in June 2021, a 24-year-old man from Somalia had fatally stabbed three women and injured seven others at a shopping center in Würzburg. While initial statements by the Bavarian Interior Minister mentioned a possible jihadi motive, the investigation later concluded that the perpetrator suffered from paranoid schizophrenia. No Islamist motivation was found, and the man was admitted to a psychiatric institution. “Tödlicher Angriff in Würzburg: Staatsanwaltschaft Will Messerstecher Dauerhaft in Psychiatrie Unterbringen Lassen,” *Der Spiegel*, July 25, 2022; Pirmin Breninek, “Urteil Zur Würzburger Messerattacke: Täter Muss in Psychiatrie,” BR24, July 26, 2022.



activist Michael Stürzenberger<sup>o</sup> during preparations for a right-wing demonstration. The assailant<sup>p</sup> also stabbed six individuals, including a 29-year-old police officer who later died from his injuries.<sup>57</sup> Eyewitness accounts and CCTV footage revealed the perpetrator specifically sought out Stürzenberger—a figure known for organizing “anti-Islamization” rallies—before turning his 11.8-inch hunting knife on intervening officers and bystanders.<sup>58</sup>

The attacker, Sulaiman A., came to Germany as a minor in 2013, and while he was not granted asylum, a halt on deportations for minors to Afghanistan allowed him to stay in Germany.<sup>59</sup> He was not known to security services prior to the attack and was seen as “well integrated” according to members of the community.<sup>60</sup> During the trial, Sulaiman A. recounted that he started turning to radical Islamist online preachers on YouTube in 2022 and started following links to Telegram channels. After the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, he became more and more interested in the Taliban government, but after a while, he decided they were not strict enough in their enforcement of ‘Islamic’ law and started turning toward the Islamic State instead.<sup>61</sup> Over Telegram, he was encouraged by a “religious teacher” in his plans for the attack.<sup>62</sup> He also stated that his “life changed when this Gaza war started”<sup>63</sup> and that “he cried every day” after seeing images of dead men women and children on Telegram.<sup>64</sup> During the trial, he also recounted the attack itself.<sup>65</sup> After the Mannheim attack, al-Qa`ida’s affiliate in Yemen, al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), declared Sulaiman A. a hero for defending Islam in its online publication Inspire Guide 8.<sup>66</sup>

The knife attack in Mannheim had four important characteristics: First, Sulaiman A. was unknown to security services prior to the attack and therefore not under surveillance by law enforcement. In addition, he specifically targeted a right-wing and anti-Islam activist instead of pursuing a more general attack on “unbelievers.” Third, the stabbing in Mannheim sparked a larger debate about potentially harsher anti-immigration measures. And finally, though Sulaiman A. was not affiliated with AQAP and had primarily consumed Islamic State propaganda, his attack was used as propaganda by AQAP to inspire others with a similar ideology.

### ***The Solingen August 2024 Festival Attack***

On August 23, 2024, 26-year-old Isaa Al H. launched a knife attack at a public festival celebrating Solingen’s 650th anniversary.<sup>67</sup> The attacker was a Syrian citizen who had come to Germany in 2022

to claim asylum.<sup>q</sup> He was not known to any security services as an Islamist extremist.<sup>68</sup> In the attack the assailant killed three people and wounded eight others.<sup>69</sup> Investigations uncovered that he had been in contact with an Islamic State member over a messaging app, who encouraged him to carry out an attack in the name of the group.<sup>70</sup> Isaa Al H. recorded videos of his loyalty pledge and an announcement of his attack and sent these videos to his contact prior to carrying out his plan.<sup>71</sup> The Islamic State quickly claimed responsibility in a statement to the Düsseldorf police,<sup>72</sup> characterizing the perpetrator as a “soldier of the Islamic State” who targeted “Christians” in revenge for “Muslims in Palestine and elsewhere.”<sup>73</sup> The attack in Solingen is the first terrorist attack in Germany for which the Islamic State has officially claimed responsibility since the truck attack on the Christmas market at Breitscheidplatz in Berlin in 2016.<sup>74</sup> The attack was later celebrated in Islamic State Khorasan (ISK’s) propaganda publication “Voice of Khorasan.”<sup>75</sup> The trial against Isaa Al H. started on May 27, 2025, and he admitted to the knife attack saying: “I have brought heavy guilt upon myself. I am ready to accept the verdict,” further adding “I killed innocents, not unbelievers.”<sup>76</sup>

The attack in Solingen sparked major debates in Germany regarding weapon laws and gaps in immigration procedures. In response, the government coalition presented and passed a security package<sup>77</sup> in parliament that created “knife free zones” in more public spaces and on public transportation and also gave law enforcement the ability to check for knives.<sup>78</sup> A second aspect of the debate in Germany focused on Isaa Al H.’s failed deportation to Bulgaria. This led to new legislation giving the Ministry for Migration and Refugees access to biometric data to check the identity of people seeking protection status. The German government also decided to end social security benefits for people—except minors—where it was determined that another European country had responsibility for them and had agreed to take them back.<sup>79</sup>

The attack in Solingen showed how terrorist groups such as the Islamic State not only continue to inspire individuals but are also still pursuing direct connections and outreach through operatives in Germany. The target this time was a large gathering of people, similar to Christmas markets or Carnival parades. As noted, the attack led to the adoption of legislation measures relating to immigration and the threat posed by knives.

### ***The February 2025 Munich Trade Union Protest Demonstration Attack***

In February 2025 just before the federal elections, 24-year-old suspected jihadi extremist Farhad N. drove a Mini Cooper into a ver.di trade union march near Munich Hauptbahnhof (main train station).<sup>80</sup> Munich was hosting the Munich Security Conference at that time, investigations so far, however, have not shown a connection to the event.<sup>81</sup> The vehicle-ramming killed a woman and her two-year-old daughter, while injuring at least 54 protesters.<sup>82</sup>

o Michael Stürzenberger is a German far-right activist known for his strong anti-Islam views. He is a leading figure in the Citizens’ Movement Pax Europa (BPE), a group that campaigns against what it sees as the spread of Islam in Europe. He was also involved in Pegida (“Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the West”), a protest movement known for its anti-Muslim rhetoric. Previously, he led the small right-wing party “Die Freiheit,” which dissolved in 2016. Due to his activities and inflammatory public speeches, he has been monitored by German domestic intelligence for suspected extremist tendencies. Nils Metzger, “Messerangriff in Mannheim: Wer ist Michael Stürzenberger?” ZDFheute, May 31, 2024; “Nach Tödlicher Messerattacke in Mannheim: ‘Pax Europa’ Will in NRW Auftreten,” WDR, June 2, 2024.

p The author follows the recommendations from the German “Pressekodex” (press code) and writes about an individual as a perpetrator “if they have confessed and there is evidence against them or if they have committed the offense in the eyes of the public.” “Pressekodex – Ziffer 13.1,” Deutscher Presserat, March 19, 2025.

q Because of EU Dublin regulations, Isaa Al H. was supposed to be processed by Bulgaria where he was already registered. When German authorities tried to deport him to Bulgaria in June 2023, he was not found at his refugee housing facility and the immigration office was not notified. As a result, the deadline for Bulgaria to keep the asylum claim expired and Germany took on the case in August 2023. His application for protection was granted in December. Manuel Bewarder and Florian Flade, “Solingen: Hat Der Tatverdächtige Falsche Asylangaben Gemacht?” Tagesschau, August 26, 2024.

Farhad N. had come to Germany in 2016 as an unaccompanied minor from Afghanistan seeking asylum.<sup>83</sup> While his asylum claim was denied in 2017 and an appeal rejected it again in 2020,<sup>84</sup> he was allowed to remain in Germany under a “tolerated stay” provision<sup>r</sup> because he was finishing his education at the time.<sup>85</sup> Munich authorities later granted Farhad N. temporary residency in 2021 under humanitarian provisions following the Taliban’s takeover of Afghanistan.<sup>86</sup> He worked as a store detective<sup>87</sup> and was also a bodybuilder and fitness influencer on Instagram and TikTok.<sup>88</sup> The public prosecutor said in a statement shortly after the attack that investigations suggested an Islamist religious motive, but that there were no indications that Farhad N. had been a member of the Islamic State or in direct contact with a terrorist organization.<sup>89</sup> In reaction to the attack, Bavaria’s state premier, Markus Söder, called on the German government to revisit the possibility of negotiations with the Taliban to ensure deportations for Afghans who have committed crimes in Germany.<sup>90</sup>

The Federal Public Prosecutor’s Office obtained a second arrest warrant for Farhad N.—replacing the previous one from February 2025—which states he is “strongly suspected of two counts of murder (...), 54 counts of attempted murder and bodily harm (...), and dangerous interference with road traffic.”<sup>91</sup> He remains in pre-trial detention. While more details and evidence—especially regarding Farhad N.’s radicalization process—are still unknown prior to court proceedings, the attack in Munich shows commonalities with other jihadi attacks in Germany. As in the case of the attacks in Mannheim and Solingen, the perpetrator was not on the radar of any federal or state level security services. Furthermore, vehicle ramming, in addition to knife attacks, has been another commonly used tactic by terrorists in Germany. While there were many changes regarding protection against vehicle ramming made after the Breitscheidplatz attack in Berlin in 2016, softer targets such as the union protest march in Munich remain difficult to protect.<sup>92</sup> Finally, the attack in Munich and the political reactions following it, are another example of the effect that terrorist attacks by individuals who applied for asylum in Germany have on the country’s public immigration debate.

### ***The February 2025 Berlin Holocaust Memorial Attack***

On the evening of February 21, 2025, an attack occurred at Germany’s central Holocaust memorial in Berlin, resulting in life-threatening injuries to a Spanish tourist.<sup>93</sup> The victim was attacked from behind with a knife while walking through the memorial.<sup>94</sup> After the attack, the perpetrator fled the scene but was apprehended by police three hours later. The attacker was identified as a 19-year-old Syrian refugee, Wassim Al M.,<sup>95</sup> who was living in refugee housing in Leipzig.<sup>96</sup> He had come to Germany in 2023 as an unaccompanied minor. In his backpack, police found a prayer rug, a Koran, a note with Qur’an verses, and the suspected weapon.<sup>97</sup> The Federal Prosecutor’s Office stated that he had acted out of a radical Islamist and antisemitic conviction and shared the ideology of the Islamic State.<sup>98</sup> A joint statement from the police and the Berlin public prosecutor’s office stated: “According to

initial investigations and current information, there appears to be connections to the Middle East conflict.”<sup>99</sup> The suspect reportedly had been planning for several weeks to “kill Jews.”<sup>100</sup> After initial investigations, there was no evidence to suggest a direct connection to a terrorist organization or a larger network and no initial signs of mental illness.<sup>101</sup> Wassim Al M. was also—according to early investigation’s results—not known as an Islamist extremist to security services.<sup>102</sup> An arrest warrant for Wasim Al M. was issued on February 28, 2025, accusing him of malicious murder, and he was ordered to pre-trial detention.<sup>103</sup>

The attack at the Holocaust memorial underlined three key trends that have emerged for jihadi attacks in Germany: The perpetrator was young (19 years old), he was not officially affiliated with a broader terrorist organization and network, and he specifically chose a location to target Jewish people.

All of the executed terrorist attacks provide important insights into the trajectory of the threat landscape in Germany. For a more complete picture of the Islamist threat environment, it is also important to take a look at interrupted terrorist plots between 2020 and May 2025.

## **Part Two: Failed Islamist Terror Plots in Germany (2020-2025)**

Unsuccessful terrorist plots can reveal important information about trends in targets, weapons, demographics of perpetrators, and radicalization. In December 2023, the Federal Criminal Police Office (BKA) announced that 18 Islamist terrorist attacks had been prevented since 2010.<sup>104</sup> Since then, there have been many additional arrests of individuals planning a jihadi terrorist attack. The following section will explore all publicly reported failed Islamist terrorist plots in Germany between 2020 and May 2025.

### ***The April 2020 Plot to Attack U.S. and NATO Facilities in Germany***

In April 2020, German authorities arrested four Tajik nationals accused of operating as a cell linked to the Islamic State.<sup>105</sup> The men—aged between 24 and 32 years old<sup>106</sup>—were suspected to have planned attacks on U.S. and NATO military facilities in Germany, including Spangdahlem Air Base and the AWACS site in Geilenkirchen.<sup>107</sup> According to investigations, the group had downloaded bomb-making instructions via Telegram and was in contact with Islamic State operatives in Afghanistan and Syria who were directing their plan.<sup>108</sup> Moreover, the cell had acquired weapons, ammunition, chemicals as well as explosives, and were involved in murder-for-hire schemes in Albania and Germany to fund their activities.<sup>109</sup> A prominent Islam critic in Neuss was also suspected to have been a potential target, and members of the group had started surveilling him.<sup>110</sup> The men received sentences between three years and eight months and nine and a half years.<sup>111</sup>

### ***The August 2021 Hamburg Bomb Plot***

On August 26, 2021, German authorities thwarted a planned Islamist terror attack in Hamburg by arresting 20-year-old Abdurachman C., a German-Moroccan national.<sup>112</sup> He had attempted to purchase a Makarov pistol, 50 rounds of ammunition, and a hand grenade via the Darknet, unknowingly negotiating with an undercover officer.<sup>113</sup> Following his arrest, investigators discovered bomb-making materials—including potassium nitrate, sulfur, charcoal dust, and hundreds of screws—in a Hamburg

<sup>r</sup> In the German immigration system, a “*Duldung*” (tolerated stay) refers to the temporary suspension of deportation for individuals who are legally required to leave the country but cannot be deported due to practical or legal obstacles, such as medical issues or lack of travel documents. It does not constitute a legal residence status and generally comes with restricted rights.

apartment.<sup>114</sup> According to the federal prosecutor's office, he was planning an attack along the lines of the 2013 attack on the Boston marathon.<sup>115</sup> His father, a known Islamist figure, had been involved with the Al-Quds Mosque, which had had connections to the 9/11 hijackers.<sup>116</sup> Abdurachman C. was also found to be a follower of al-Qa`ida's ideology and was sentenced to eight years in prison.<sup>117</sup>

### ***The September 2021 Hagen Synagogue Bomb Plot***

In September 2021, Oday J., a 16-year-old Syrian refugee in Hagen, Germany, was arrested for planning a bomb attack on the local synagogue.<sup>118</sup> The plot was uncovered reportedly following a tip from a foreign intelligence service,<sup>119</sup> leading to a police operation involving 200 officers.<sup>120</sup> Investigators found no explosives but discovered Islamic State propaganda videos<sup>121</sup> and that the plotter had been in contact via Telegram with an individual named "Abu Harb," who provided instructions on bomb construction and advised targeting the synagogue.<sup>122</sup> According to the court, the teenager had "wanted to be ready if Kabul had been bombed or civilians had died in an attack by Western allies on targets in Afghanistan."<sup>123</sup> The 16-year-old was not previously known to security services, but German authorities reportedly received a tip from a foreign intelligence service.<sup>124</sup> He was sentenced to one year and nine months' probation, with mandatory placement in a youth facility for three years.<sup>125</sup>

### ***The September 2021 Duisburg/Cologne Plot***

The German Federal Police Office stated that it thwarted another Islamist attack in 2021, "a planned gun attack in Duisburg or in the Cologne area" but gave no further details on the incident.<sup>126</sup>

### ***The January 2023 Castrop-Rauxel Chem/Bio Plot***

In January 2023, two Iranian brothers, age 25 and 32, Jalal and Monir J., were arrested in Castrop-Rauxel, Germany, on suspicion of planning an Islamist-motivated chem/bio attack using ricin or cyanide.<sup>127</sup> According to a media report, the plan was disrupted following a tip from the FBI,<sup>128</sup> which had apparently intercepted communications indicating the brothers were seeking instructions on producing the toxins.<sup>129</sup> The 32-year-old brother was released due to insufficient evidence, while the 25-year-old was sentenced to four years in jail.<sup>130</sup> Prosecutors alleged that he had been in contact with members of the Islamic State via messaging services on how to acquire substances needed to produce cyanide.<sup>131</sup>

### ***The April 2023 Sweden Church Plot***

In April 2023, German authorities arrested two Syrian nationals, 28-year-old and 24-year-old brothers Anas and Ahmad K. for planning a jihadi terror attack. Both had come to Germany in 2015 as refugees, and while the younger of the two, Ahmad, was able to integrate, finish school, and learn German, the older brother Anas struggled.<sup>132</sup> Investigations revealed that a church in Sweden was the focus of the perpetrators' plans. The planned attack was supposed to avenge Swedish "Quran burnings" but a specific church within Sweden had not yet been chosen.<sup>133</sup> The older brother had been

in contact with someone through a messaging app who claimed to be a member of the Islamic State. He then purchased chemical materials online via eBay to construct a homemade explosive belt intended for use against civilian targets.<sup>134</sup> The German newspaper *Der Tagesspiegel* reported that the U.S. National Security Agency (NSA) alerted the suspicious online shopping activities to the German authorities.<sup>135</sup> According to the court verdict, the younger brother (Ahmad K.) bought one of the supplies for the attack, but overall did not share his older brother's extremist convictions.<sup>136</sup> Anas K. was sentenced to four years and nine months in prison, while Ahmad K. received a one-year suspended prison sentence.<sup>137</sup>

### ***The October 2023 Duisburg Plot to Target a Pro-Israel Demonstration***

On October 24, 2023, 29-year-old Tarik S. was arrested in Duisburg for planning an attack on a pro-Israel demonstration.<sup>138</sup> The German citizen had previously joined the Islamic State as a foreign fighter under the name "Osama Al-Almani"<sup>139</sup> and had traveled to Syria in 2013.<sup>140</sup> He was featured in several Islamic State propaganda videos while he was in Syria. After his return, he was arrested and placed in juvenile detention between 2016 and 2021.<sup>141</sup> During that time, he participated in a deradicalization program and was certified a "successful exit."<sup>142</sup> A foreign intelligence service reportedly provided information about his attack plot.<sup>143</sup> For his plan to drive a van into a pro-Israel demonstration, he was sentenced to eight years in prison.<sup>144</sup>

### ***The November 2023 Christmas Market Plot***

In connection to terrorist attacks planned at German Christmas markets in 2023, there were multiple arrests. First, on November 21, 2023, a 20-year-old Iraqi asylum seeker was arrested in Lower Saxony, on suspicion of planning a terrorist attack at the Christmas market in Hanover.<sup>145</sup> German authorities reportedly received

s Investigators were not able to determine conclusively the identity and Islamic State membership of this individual, who went by "Emir." "Prozess Gegen Terrorbrüder: Hinter 'Emir' Verborgt Sich Eine Kontaktperson Des Islamischen Staats," *Die Welt*, December 14, 2023.

t In July 2023, authorities in Germany and the Netherlands arrested nine individuals, most of them from Tajikistan, who were suspected to be part of an ISK cell. All seven had come to Germany in 2022 claiming to be refugees from Ukraine. The prosecution alleged that three men had been surveilled while scouting the Cologne Deutz fair—a public festival—as a potential target for an attack. While no specific plan was discovered, investigators said that the group had been looking at potential locations for an attack, examined chemicals in Home Depot stores, and tried to acquire weapons. Other potential targets according to reporting by *Der Spiegel* included people of Jewish faith in Germany as well as the more liberal Ibn-Rushd-Goethe-Mosque in Berlin. The group also was in communications with another ISK cell in Germany, which was planning a terrorist attack on the Cologne cathedral on New Years Eve. With regard to judicial proceedings against the seven individuals, proceedings were closed after a few weeks for one individual, and he was deported back to Kyrgyzstan. Two men were acquitted after the trial and four were sentenced to between one and four years for supporting the Islamic State through donations. The judge emphasized that the group did not form a terrorist cell. "Medienbericht: Terrorverdächtige Sollen Kölner Kirmes Als Anschlagziel Ausgespäht Haben," *Der Spiegel*, January 3, 2024; Christian Wernicke, "Mutmaßliche IS-Mitglieder in Düsseldorf Angeklagt," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, July 30, 2024; "Deutzer Kirmes in Köln War Mögliches Anschlagziel," WDR, January 3, 2024; "BKA Gab Information Nicht Weiter: Polizei Wusste Nichts Über Kölner Kirmes Als Mögliches Anschlagziel," *Der Tagesspiegel*, January 5, 2024; Martin Höke, "Düsseldorf: Haftstrafen Und Freisprüche Im Terror-Prozess," WDR, April 9, 2025.



information from foreign intelligence services.<sup>146</sup> Evidence indicated that he was planning to commit a knife attack.<sup>147</sup> He had been in Germany since 2022, but his asylum application had been rejected the day he was arrested and was therefore close to being deported.<sup>148</sup> A spokesperson for the State Office of Criminal Investigation revealed that he had declared his support for the Islamic State and was willing to commit an attack for the group.<sup>149</sup> He was placed in preventive custody and later deported to Iraq on December 15, 2023, with a permanent Germany entry ban imposed.<sup>150</sup>

#### ***The November 2023 Leverkusen Christmas Market Plot***

Shortly after, on November 28, 2023, 16-year-old Rasul M. was arrested in Brandenburg as was his accomplice 15-year-old Edris D. near Leverkusen.<sup>151</sup> Rasul M. is a Russian citizen with Chechen origins, and Edris D. is a German Afghan dual citizen. Both met each other in a chat group of Islamic State sympathizers.<sup>152</sup> The crucial alert for the attack plot had reportedly come from a foreign intelligence service.<sup>153</sup> According to investigators, plans had been in the early stages as not all material had been purchased yet, but the two teens had specifically focused on exploding a van filled with gas cylinders at the Christmas market in Leverkusen.<sup>154</sup> Edris D. had shared a video in a chat group announcing the attack, and authorities arrested the two only a few days later.<sup>155</sup> Both were sentenced to four years of juvenile detention.<sup>156</sup>

#### ***The December 2023 Cologne Cathedral Plot***

In December 2023, 30-year-old Tajik national Mukhammadrajab B. was arrested for having scouted the Cologne Cathedral as a potential target for a terrorist attack.<sup>157</sup> He was later extradited to Austria in early 2024 where he was known to security services as it was also believed that he was planning an attack on the St. Stephen's Cathedral in Vienna.<sup>158</sup> Six individuals believed to be related to the plot were arrested as well but five were released hours later.<sup>159</sup> A 25-year-old man from Tajikistan who was considered an accomplice of Mukhammadrajab B. was ordered to be deported.<sup>160</sup>

#### ***The December 2023 Terror Plotting by Hamas Members***

On December 14, 2023, German authorities arrested four alleged members of Hamas, between 34 and 57 years old,<sup>161</sup> identified as Abdelhamid Al A., Mohamed B., Ibrahim El-R., and Nazih R.<sup>162u</sup> The group had tried to amass weapons and bring them to their weapons collection point in Berlin.<sup>163</sup> The prosecution stated that possible targets included the Israeli embassy in Berlin, the U.S. air base in Ramstein, and the area around the former airport Tempelhof in Berlin.<sup>164</sup> All four individuals were known to security services prior to their arrest<sup>165</sup> and were reported to have "had close ties to leaders" of the military wing of Hamas.<sup>166</sup>

#### ***The April 2024 North Rhine-Westphalia Plot Against Police and Places of Worship***

In early April 2024, law enforcement in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia arrested a 15-year-old girl from Düsseldorf, a 16-year-old girl from Iserloh, and a 15-year-old boy from Lippstadt who had planned an Islamist attack.<sup>167</sup> The fourth member of the group,

a 16-year-old boy from Ostfildern was also arrested in the state of Baden-Württemberg.<sup>168</sup> While the group had not settled on a specific target or location, they had decided to attack police stations or churches/synagogues during Ramadan to set people on fire with Molotov cocktails and to use firearms and stabbing weapons with the goal of killing as many people as possible.<sup>169</sup> The four teenagers communicated through the messaging apps Telegram, Session, and Discord.<sup>170</sup> Security services were alerted to the four teenagers because the 16-year-old from Iserloh consumed Islamic State propaganda and planned to travel to Syria.<sup>171</sup> According to the court, all four had become radicalized through Islamic State propaganda online.<sup>172</sup> The three from North Rhine Westphalia were sentenced to three years juvenile detention,<sup>173</sup> and the fourth member was sentenced to two years suspended juvenile detention.<sup>174</sup>

#### ***The May 2024 Heidelberg/Frankfurt Synagogues Plot***

In May 2024, authorities in Bad Friedrichshall and Weinheim arrested an 18-year-old German Turkish man (Ö.) and a 24-year-old German (Y.) for planning attacks on synagogues in Heidelberg or Frankfurt.<sup>175</sup> The older of the two had planned to travel to Syria to fight with HTS, but returned after a first stop in Turkey and was turned in by his family.<sup>176</sup> Through a chat, they had discussed their plan to use a knife to attack synagogues and later die a "martyr" death by being shot by the police.<sup>177</sup> During a search of his apartment, the 24-year-old attacked police with a knife and was shot at by the police.<sup>178</sup> Both, however, showed remorse during the trial, recounting "setbacks at school and professionally, receiving support from Islam and finally becoming radicalized on social media" as well as "being desperate and angry."<sup>179</sup> Y. was sentenced to six years in prison, and Ö. was sentenced to two years and 10 months in juvenile detention.<sup>180</sup>

#### ***The June 2024 Esslingen Explosive Drone Plot***

In Esslingen, on June 19, 2024,<sup>181</sup> authorities arrested 27-year-old Mahmoud A., an Iraqi citizen<sup>182</sup> who had planned to fly a drone with an explosive into a not-yet-defined target. He was going to detonate the explosive remotely with a car key.<sup>183</sup> When the suspect started buying different chemical components online, police arrested him.<sup>184</sup> According to investigations, Mahmoud A. had been an Islamic State member since 2016 in Iraq and had also fought for the group.<sup>185</sup> He then came to Germany in 2022 to prepare a terrorist attack.<sup>186</sup> He was sentenced by the court to five years and six months in prison.<sup>187</sup>

#### ***The September 2024 Attempted Munich Rifle Attack***

On September 5, 2024, an 18-year-old Austrian citizen, Emrah I., shot with a rifle at the Munich Documentation Centre for the History of National Socialism and wanted to attack the neighboring Israeli General Consulate in Munich.<sup>188 v</sup> In a confrontation with the police, the suspect was shot at the scene.<sup>189</sup> The perpetrator was stopped in his attack as he struggled to identify the General Consulate, which was also closed that day in memory of the attack at the Munich Olympics in 1972.<sup>190</sup> Emrah I. did not have any direct

u The trial began in February 2025, with trial dates scheduled until December 2025. "Kammergericht Verhandelt Bis Ende 2025: Prozess Gegen Mutmaßliche Hamas-Mitglieder Hat Begonnen," Legal Tribune Online, February 25, 2025.

v The Munich Public Prosecutor General's Office and the Bavarian State Office of Criminal Investigation presented their findings on March 14, 2025, and a trial has not yet started. "Anschlag Auf Das Israelische Generalkonsulat Am 5. September 2024 in München," Bayrisches Landeskriminalamt, March 14, 2025.

contact with terrorist organizations or operatives but investigators alleged that he was a supporter of by then disbanded group Jabhat al-Nusra.<sup>191</sup> He lived socially isolated and had watched many videos about the Israeli intervention in Gaza.<sup>192</sup> Authorities described his motive as primarily anti-Israel and that Islamist ideology had only played a minor role.<sup>193</sup>

#### ***The September 2024 Attempted Linz Police Station Attack***

On September 6, 2024 at 02:30 am a 29 year-old Albanian citizen stormed the Linz police station with an 18.5 inch machete.<sup>194</sup> His goal was to kill as many police personnel as possible but he was held up in the security gate area and later stopped by a specialized unit with a taser before he could injure anyone.<sup>195</sup> A witness stated that the attacker had said he was fighting for the Islamic State.<sup>196</sup> In a search of his apartment investigators found an Islamic State flag<sup>197</sup> and the court stated that he had radicalized online in Islamic State forums.<sup>198</sup> It was determined he had acted alone. He was sentenced to eight years in prison by the court.<sup>199 w</sup>

#### ***The September 2024 Wuppertal Plot Against Jewish Institutions***

On September 20, 2024, a 15-year-old male teenager in Wuppertal, North Rhine-Westphalia, was placed into preventive custody awaiting trial on suspicion of planning attacks on Jewish institutions.<sup>200</sup> Security services were alerted to him after the attack in Solingen in August 2024; investigations found no direct connection to that attack, however.<sup>201</sup> He had been in contact with another Islamist abroad through a chat and was encouraged by that individual to carry out a knife attack.<sup>202</sup> Moreover, he had posted content with Islamic State flags on TikTok and had become radicalized online.<sup>203</sup> According to the verdict in his case, “the teenager has fallen victim to pied pipers who know their trade as Islamist recruiters.”<sup>204</sup> The suspect confessed and was sentenced to two and a half years in prison.<sup>205 x</sup>

w On September 12, 2024, a 27-year-old Syrian man was arrested for allegedly planning attacks in the city center of Hof (Bavaria) specifically targeting German soldiers during their lunch break. Investigations quickly revealed, however, that there were no indications that “the accused had planned such an act or adhered to a radical Islamic ideology.” After the case was closed, the suspect was released in November 2024. Gregor Grosse, “Was Über Den Mutmaßlichen Anschlagplan in Hof Bekannt Ist,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, September 13, 2024; Anna Fries, “Terrorverdacht in Hof: Ermittlungen Eingestellt, U-Haft Beendet,” BR24, November 14, 2024.

x Another suspect arrested in October 2024 on suspicion of plotting an attack against the Israeli embassy in Berlin was later released after the investigation did not find any evidence and his charges were dropped. On October 19, 2024, a 28-year-old Libyan asylum seeker was arrested in Brandenburg, as it was suspected that he was planning an attack on the Israeli embassy in Berlin. The initial arrest warrant alleged that he communicated via a messaging platform with an Islamic State member, discussing plans to carry out a gun attack on the embassy. Investigations, however, did not find any credible evidence to support that accusation and the suspect was released. He had cooperated with authorities, giving them full access to his phone and claimed he was confused with someone else who participated in a chat group. “Geplanter Terroranschlag? Haftbefehl Wegen Geplanten Anschlags Auf Israels Botschaft,” *Legal Tribune Online*, October 21, 2024; “Offenbar Anschlagplan Auf Israels Botschaft,” *Tagesschau*, October 20, 2024; “Anschlagsverdacht Nicht Erhärtet: Terrorverdächtiger Libyer Wieder Auf Freiem Fuß,” *Der Spiegel*, January 13, 2025.

#### ***The November 2024 Schleswig-Holstein Rifle Attack Plot***

Authorities in northern Germany, in Schleswig-Holstein, arrested 17-year-old German citizen Emin B. on November 6, 2024, on suspicion of planning a terrorist attack with a truck or rapid-fire rifles.<sup>206</sup> The tip reportedly had come from foreign intelligence.<sup>207</sup> According to investigations, he was allegedly in contact and planning the attack with another person abroad and planning to “die as a martyr.”<sup>208</sup> According to the indictment, he was looking to kill “non-believers” and had been an Islamic State sympathizer on social media.<sup>209</sup> A friend of the suspect told reporters that Emin B. had been impacted by the situation in Gaza.<sup>210</sup> The trial started on April 25, 2025.<sup>211</sup>

#### ***The November 2024 Rhineland-Palatinate Pipe Bomb Plot***

On November 26, 2024, authorities arrested a 17-year-old in Rhineland-Palatinate who allegedly planned an Islamist terrorist attack using pipe bombs.<sup>212</sup> Prosecutors stated that he downloaded manuals for bomb making online, and in a search of his apartment, investigators found two bayonets and four pieces of pipe with caps on both sides.<sup>213</sup> He is suspected to have radicalized online as well as to have shared Islamic State propaganda content.<sup>214</sup> The suspect was indicted in late April 2025 and has been in custody pending trial since his arrest.<sup>215 y</sup>

#### ***The December 2024 Mannheim/Hesse Attack Plot***

On December 8, 2024, police arrested three men: two German Lebanese brothers aged 15 and 20 from Mannheim and a 22-year-old German Turkish man from Hesse.<sup>216</sup> All three were suspected of planning an Islamist terrorist attack together. Investigations alleged that they held sympathies for the Islamic State and were making attack plans.<sup>217</sup> In a search of the 22-year-old’s apartment, police found an assault rifle and ammunition.<sup>218</sup> The three men were placed in custody pending further investigations.<sup>219</sup>

#### ***The February 2025 Israeli Embassy Plot***

At the time of publication, there has only been one publicly disclosed failed Islamist terror plot in Germany so far this year. On February 20, 2025, police arrested an 18-year-old Russian citizen with Chechen origin in Brandenburg for planning an attack on the Israeli embassy in Berlin.<sup>220</sup> He was arrested at the Berlin airport and suspected of trying to travel to join the Islamic State, potentially in Somalia.<sup>221</sup> He was connected to a group of three Islamists in Berlin, two of whom had already traveled to Somalia to join the Islamic State’s branch there.<sup>222</sup> Information about his attack plans reportedly had been shared by a foreign intelligence service,<sup>223</sup>

y On December 4, 2024, police in Augsburg arrested a 37-year-old man from Iraq who was suspected of planning an attack on the local Christmas market. He was known as a potential risk to security services as a result of his social media posts. While he is still being investigated for allegedly financially supporting the Islamic State, according to the Bavarian minister of interior, there were no specific attack plans. The suspect was deported to Iraq in February 2025. Frank Jordan, Joseph Röhmle, Barbara Leinfelder, and Andreas Herz, “Anschlag Auf Augsburger Christkindlesmarkt Geplant?” BR24, December 6, 2024; “Zugriff in Bayern: 37-Jähriger Wegen Verdachts Der Terrorfinanzierung Festgenommen,” *Der Spiegel*, December 6, 2024; Katja Auer, Florian Fuchs, and Sebastian Beck, “Terrorgefahr in Bayern: IS-Sympathisant in Augsburg Festgenommen,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, December 6, 2024; Barbara Leinfelder and Andreas Herz, “Augsburger Gefährder per Charterflug in Den Irak Abgeschoben,” BR24, February 17, 2025.

and authorities found an “unconventional explosive device” in his apartment.<sup>224</sup> Investigations of the attack plot are being led by the Office for the Public Prosecutor General.<sup>225</sup>

### Part Three: Key Islamist Terror Trends in Germany

With the data from all executed as well as publicly disclosed failed Islamist terrorist attacks in Germany between 2020 and May 2025, the following section will look at five key trends that stand out.

#### ***1. Attack Vectors: Most attacks are low-tech, involving knives and vehicles, but these are not the only threat.***

Looking at the data of Islamist terrorist attacks in Germany since 2020, knife and vehicle attacks are the dominant attack vectors. Out of the nine executed Islamist terrorist attacks between January 2020 and May 2025, six were perpetrated by a knife, two by vehicles, and in one case arson. Although these statistics suggest that knives and vehicles are the predominant weapons used by Islamist extremists in Germany, they offer only a partial view of the broader landscape.

Taking into account the thwarted and intercepted Islamist attack plots during that same time period reveals that individuals and groups still consider other weapons and methods. Out of 20 failed Islamist terrorist plots in Germany between 2020 and May 2025, only three involved either a van, truck, or car and five included knives. Instead, at least eight cases involved explosive devices including pipe bombs, a drone with an explosive, multiple bombs, Molotov cocktails, and a homemade explosive belt. In seven cases, the attackers were planning to use firearms, which due to German weapon laws are much harder to obtain and often illegal. There was also notably a chem/bio attack plot involving the use of ricin or cyanide as a weapon. One explanation for these findings is that German security services are much more successful at intercepting attack plots that do not involve everyday items such as knives and cars. The purchase of certain components for explosives, firearms, or even chemicals is more likely to alert authorities to illegal activities. In some cases, the planning process itself, especially the procurement and use of explosives can be lengthier, giving law enforcement and security services more time to become aware of someone's plans.

This also highlights that while ISK celebrated the knife attack in Solingen and AQAP declared the attacker in the Mannheim stabbing attack “a hero,” terrorist organizations and operators affiliated with the groups also still widely distribute bomb-making instructions online and encourage using explosives. While the following analysis will look at the German response specifically to knife and vehicle attacks, security services nevertheless need to continue to guard against terrorist plots involving explosives and other attack vectors.

As knives were the most used weapon by terrorists in Islamist terror attacks in Germany between 2020 and 2025, they have been at the center of many security debates. One response by officials has been the call for more “weapon-free zones.” On a federal level, public events such as markets, sporting events, theaters, movie theaters, and public festivals are by law weapon-free zones.<sup>226</sup> Implementing additional permanent geographical weapon zones is up to the states in Germany, and many cities such as Berlin, Frankfurt, Hamburg,

Cologne, and Stuttgart have indeed created them.<sup>227</sup> However, the effectiveness of these weapon-free zones remains debated, and initial evaluations have presented mixed results.<sup>228</sup> As a prevention for crime and terrorist attacks, weapon-free zones alone cannot address the problem. Police have argued that enforcement often poses a challenge, especially considering a lack of personnel for controls or exceptions to some of the prohibitions such as for “barbecue and picnic equipment” in Berlin.<sup>229</sup> More generally, as criminologist Elena Rausch has argued, “if someone is planning an extremist act, they know they are not allowed to do it. Even a weapons free zone doesn't matter then.”<sup>230</sup>

The new German government under chancellor Friedrich Merz has looked at a potential legal tool for preventing knife attacks. The Coalition Agreement<sup>231</sup> proposes to include everyday items such as knives and vehicles in §89a of the German Criminal Code (“Preparation of a serious act of violence endangering the state”)<sup>232</sup> that currently focuses on firearms, explosives, radioactive substances, poisonous substances, and so forth. This law is used most in indictments against people planning an attack. Including knives and vehicles on the list will criminalize the planning of an attack using these attack vectors and allow for additional surveillance and investigative tools in these cases.<sup>233</sup>

The second-most used weapon in executed Islamist terrorist attacks between 2020 and 2025 in Germany were cars. Vehicle ramming attacks have been used by terrorist actors around the world.<sup>234</sup> As they are often perceived as being successful, they can inspire a copycat effect, in particular in the immediate time period following an attack.<sup>235</sup> Security services, as a result, in addition to general security measures, may have to increase their preventive efforts in the aftermath of such attacks.

After the 2016 Christmas market attack in Berlin, Germany changed and implemented a lot of security procedures to prevent vehicle ramming attacks, especially those targeting crowded events. Organizers of such events, together with municipal administrations provide security concepts with different kinds of barriers.<sup>236</sup> As targets for vehicle attacks, however, are not limited to larger public events, Director for Public Security at the German Ministry for Interior and Community Dr. Christian Klos recently noted in this publication: “We have to be honest, we cannot protect all our public spaces. It's impossible, especially with spontaneous gatherings. We have to look into this, but no 100-percent security is possible.”<sup>237</sup> This points to the limitations of hardened security as counterterrorism measures in the case of every day, dual-use items such as knives and cars.

Technological advances can potentially play a role for the type of weapon used in attacks, recruitment—in particular, communication—and online propaganda. For weapons, as seen above, Islamist terrorists in Germany continue to choose simple everyday items such as vehicles and knives in eight out of the nine

z Since 2023, Frankfurt, for example, has banned all weapons defined as such by German weapons law as well as all knives with blades over 1.5 inches in the borough surrounding the central train station. Furthermore, weapons and all knives (including kitchen knives) are prohibited on public transportation in the state of Hesse, where Frankfurt is located, as they are a “weapon free zone.” Police have the authority to conduct controls and confiscate weapons, with fines up to 10,000 euros for violations. “Waffenverbotszone,” Stadt Frankfurt am Main, 2024; “Neue Messer- Und Waffenverbotszone Im Öffentlichen Personenverkehr,” Hessisches Ministerium des Innern, für Sicherheit und Heimatschutz, February 7, 2025.



executed attacks and “old school” bombs or firearms in the case of the failed plots. A notable exception is the drone attack plot using explosives that was stopped in June 2024. Given the fact that most attacks are planned by a single individual or with one accomplice instead of larger cells, the level of attack planning might be limited to simpler methods. Most importantly, as knives and cars continue to be used successfully in terrorist attacks in Germany, Islamists planning a future attack might not see a reason to purchase more expensive or technologically advanced tools.

**2. Profiles: Most attackers carried out their attacks alone and did not have direct links to terror groups. A significant number of plotters are teenagers. Mental health challenges are a feature of some cases.**

One significant trend many practitioners and scholars have pointed out over the last couple of years is that the average age of Islamist terrorists in many countries, including Germany, has decreased.<sup>238</sup> While the average attacker in the executed attacks between 2020 and May 2025 was 25 years old, the trend toward younger radicalized individuals becomes especially visible when looking at the thwarted attacks. Half of the interrupted terrorist plots were planned by individuals who were 18 or younger. In 2024 alone, there were seven uncovered terrorist plots of people 18 or younger.

A shift in the demographic of terrorists has consequences for counterterrorism as well. Peter Neumann noted that younger individuals in Germany are increasingly undergoing full radicalization cycles online without the need for personal interaction, marking a recent trend in jihadi recruitment. Platforms such as TikTok are playing a key role in this shift, contributing to the emergence of a new generation of perpetrators.<sup>239</sup> Consequently, preventive programs and measures aimed at countering extremist content should be tailored specifically to this younger demographic. Additionally, educators and others working closely with youth, such as sports coaches, volunteers in community centers, or religious youth groups, could benefit from training to effectively identify early signs of radicalization.

For the executed and thwarted attacks between 2020 and May 2025, the analysis reveals a clear pattern of attacks by individuals with no direct links to terror groups. The majority of attackers were not official members of the Islamic State but were instead inspired by its propaganda and propaganda shared by the larger Islamic State online ecosystem, as seen in the November 2021 ICE train attack, the April 2023 Duisburg attack, and the May 2024 Mannheim attack.

The cases in Germany echoed a trend seen in other countries as well where those who carried out successful attacks tended to view themselves as part of the Islamic State's broader struggle, believing they were fighting for the group even without formal affiliation. A notable exception was the August 2024 knife attack in Solingen for which the Islamic State officially claimed responsibility and celebrated the event in its propaganda channels. While isolated incidents involving more structured coordination were uncovered—such as the December 2023 case involving four Hamas members closely tied to the group's leadership, the former fighter Tàrik S. in 2023, and the Tajik cell in 2020 linked to the Islamic State—the overwhelming majority of perpetrators had only consumed Islamic State propaganda or, like the brothers involved in the April 2023 Sweden Church Plot with explosive belts, maintained contact with individuals who were either Islamic State members or sympathizers.

Looking at the number of participants in each plot, it is notable that while all executed terrorist attacks involved only a single individual, the uncovered terrorist plots during that same time period also included smaller groups of two or four members. In fact, eight out of the 20 uncovered terrorist plots involved at least two potential attackers. It stands to reason that this is a function of the fact that as in the case of the four teenagers arrested in April 2024, communication between different individuals increases the chances of being discovered. When security services become aware of one member of a small group, this is likely to lead them to any other members.

Finally, it is notable that two attacks out of the nine executed terrorist attacks were carried out by individuals diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia. While it is dangerous, incorrect, and counterproductive to equate terrorism and radicalization with mental illness, there are cases where both may overlap as seen in Waldkraiburg and the Autobahn attacks in 2020. Here, it is important to exercise caution and acknowledge that there are cases that show a complicated connection of Islamist ideology and psychological disorders. This can be helpful for prevention efforts as well as security services when identifying violent individuals but cannot be generalized for every or even most jihadi terrorists in Germany.

**3. Propaganda and Recruitment: YouTube preachers and TikTok algorithms are fueling the threat.**

A 2025 report by the Federal Agency for Civic Education (bpb) on Islamist propaganda on social media in Germany identified three different groups of online propaganda.<sup>240</sup> First, individuals such as Pierre Vogel<sup>aa</sup> and Abul Baraa<sup>ab</sup> who present themselves as religious preachers. While religious teachings are the focus of this group of online jihadis, most have very little actual religious education, which does not keep their followers from seeing them as a religious authority.

The second group includes actors such as “Botschaft des Islam,”

aa Pierre Vogel, according to the North Rhine Westphalian Ministry of Interior, is “probably the most prominent representative and face of the Salafist scene in Germany.” Born in 1978, he converted to Islam in 2001 and has spread salafi jihadi propaganda on various platforms. While he is not aligned with the Islamic State, the Baden Württemberg Office for the Protection of the Constitution described him in 2020 “as a kind of gateway drug that gives women and men access to the Salafist ideology and scene.” He currently has 93,000 followers on TikTok and almost 70,000 subscribers on YouTube. “Sitzung Des Innenausschusses Am 26.09.2024 Antrag Der Fraktion Der SPD Vom 15.09.2024 ‘Aktivitäten Des Extremistisch-Salafistischen Predigers Pierre Vogel in NRW,’” Ministerium des Innern des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen, September 20, 2024; “Serie ‘Salafistische Netzwerke Im Wandel’ | Teil 1: Pierre VOGEL,” Verfassungsschutz Baden-Württemberg, July 1, 2020.

ab Abul Baraa is a 51-year-old German salafi jihadi preacher whose TikTok videos, among others, radicalized Beran A., the suspect of the Taylor Swift attack plot in Vienna in 2024. Baraa used to be the imam at Berlin's As-Sahaba Mosque, which was closed by the government in 2020. He is now a guest preacher at mosques in Germany and an influential preacher on social media who has been described as “the rock star of the Salafist scene in Germany.” He operates a YouTube channel but is also very active on TikTok where he has over 100,000 followers and posts popular short Q&A videos. “Serie ‘Salafistische Netzwerke Im Wandel’ Teil 10: Ahmad ABUL BARAA,” Verfassungsschutz Baden-Württemberg, December 13, 2022; Salma Abdelaziz, Florence Davey-Attlee, and Nina Avramova, “The ‘Rock Star’ Preacher Influencing Young People Online,” CNN, August 15, 2024; Nicolas Stockhammer and Colin Clarke, “The August 2024 Taylor Swift Vienna Concert Plot,” CTC Sentinel 18:1 (2025).

“Generation Islam,” “Realität Islam,” and “Muslim Interaktiv.”<sup>241</sup> They have a farther reach on social media—for example, on YouTube—and are more focused on political and societal aspects like spreading the narrative that German society is fighting against Islam.<sup>242</sup> The third group is made up of individual influencers especially on TikTok who do not clearly belong to a larger group. They are able to reach the largest audience in Germany, and many accounts have gained followers since the October 7, 2023, Hamas attack on Israel.<sup>243</sup> The intersection of TikTok and jihadi terrorism has therefore become a pressing concern for security agencies.<sup>244</sup> The platform’s algorithmic design, which promotes content based on user engagement, has facilitated the spread of extremist ideologies among younger people. Peter Neumann has explained that the presence and rise of online Islamist influencers is also a logical consequence of bans of in-person activities in Germany by jihadis groups, such as preaching in the street.<sup>245</sup>

Looking at Islamist terrorist attacks and failed plots in Germany between 2020 and May 2025, there are several cases that exemplify these trends. One example is the attacker in Dresden in 2020 who was influenced most by speeches of Sheik Khalid Al-Rashid and came in contact with other jihadis through the comment section of a YouTube video. He then joined a chat group where he and others shared Islamic State propaganda.<sup>246</sup> Another example is the case of the Duisburg attack in April 2023 where the attacker did not grow up in an extremist household and found the Islamic State through the internet. Or the May 2024 Mannheim attacker who adopted more radical views through listening to Islamist preachers on YouTube and then followed links to Telegram chats. An important pattern these cases share is the interest and initial introduction to Islamist content through mainstream platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok and later a transition to more private chat groups or channels such as Telegram or Discord that allow for interaction between likeminded individuals, often in encrypted online environments.<sup>247</sup>

In the thwarted attacks, other examples of online radicalization included the four teenagers in April 2024, the 17-year-old in November 2024, and the 15-year-old in September 2024. The last case specifically included a radicalization through TikTok. These examples show that content on mainstream social media platforms such as TikTok specifically targets and successfully reaches younger audiences.<sup>ac</sup> Moreover, it also demonstrates a pattern where minors connect online in virtual groups with connections to the larger Islamic State ecosystem.<sup>248</sup> These trends likely explain the significant number of teenagers getting involved in jihadi terror plotting in Germany (and farther afield). Overall, Islamic State propaganda online is highly decentralized with content being created and shared by smaller groups of supporters across the world.<sup>249</sup>

**4. The Impact of October 7: There has been a rise in threat activity and especially against Jewish institutions and Israelis.** Of course, it is still too early to tell the final impact of October 7, but there are a few trends that are notable and significant for

counterterrorism efforts. First, Jewish institutions and Israeli diplomatic missions have come under greater threat. There were no successful attacks on Jewish institutions or Israelis and only one failed plot (the September 2021 Hagen Synagogue Bomb Plot) in the 2020s prior to October 7, 2023. In the period since October 7, 2023 (despite it being a shorter time interval), there has been one executed terrorist attack at the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin in 2025 as well as seven unsuccessful attack plots that involved either synagogues, pro-Israel protests, the Israeli consulate or embassy, and Jewish institutions more broadly.

Between January 2020 and October 7, 2023, there were five successful Islamist terrorist attacks in Germany. Since then (as of May 2025), there have been four additional executed Islamist terrorist attacks. While this does not show a significant change in the number of attacks, there has been a notable increase in reported thwarted attack plots overall since October 7 (15), compared to the period between January 2020 and October 2023 (five). This, however, may also be due to other factors, and the final impact of October 7 on jihadi radicalization has to be the subject of further monitoring and research. One indicator to look at for this development is violent crime. The 2023 Report of the German Office for the Protection of the Constitution noted that in the category of “politically motivated crime because of religious ideology,” which also includes non-violent crime, antisemitic crimes increased dramatically mainly due to incidents after October 7, from 33 crimes (two of those violent) in 2022 to 492 crimes (22 violent) in 2023.<sup>250 ad</sup>

Third, as online propaganda, especially by the Islamic States, plays a significant role in the radicalization process of most terrorist attackers in Germany, it is crucial to point out that jihadi terrorist groups such as the Islamic State and al-Qa`ida—despite their differences from Hamas—have utilized the October 7 attack for their propaganda.<sup>251</sup> The head of the Office for the Protection of the Constitution Thomas Haldenwang said in November 2023 that “in the jihadist spectrum, we see calls for attacks and a ‘latch-on’ of ‘Al-Qaeda’ and IS to the conflict in the Middle East. This threat is now encountering highly emotionalized individuals inspired by trigger events ... The danger is real and higher than it has been for a long time.”<sup>252</sup> Early in 2024, the Islamic State published a video by its official spokesperson that, among other things, emphasized the events in Gaza and called for attacks with explosives in Western cities.<sup>253</sup> German jihadi online propaganda since October 7th has been rife with antisemitic messaging and content related to Gaza.<sup>254</sup>

Three examples of how this may impact the radicalization of individuals can be seen in the case of the terrorist attack in Mannheim in May 2024, as well as the two thwarted attack plots in Munich and Schleswig Holstein in September and November of 2024. In Mannheim, the attacker already held extremist views prior to October 7, and in the two other cases, additional factors may have played a role as well. Nevertheless, as noted before, the perpetrator in Mannheim stated in court that “the war in Gaza changed his life,”<sup>255</sup> the teenager in Munich consumed numerous videos of Gaza and specifically chose the Israeli Consulate as a target and a witness described the personal impact of the war in Gaza on the attacker in the case of the teenager from Schleswig Holstein. At the very least,

ac In 2023, the average age of a TikTok user was 24 years old with 10- to 19-year-olds taking up the largest share in demographics at 25 percent. Nic Dunn, “Top 23 TikTok Statistics & Facts You Need to Know in 2025!” Charle Agency, January 4, 2025.

ad This number does not include antisemitic attacks from right-wing extremists as they are reported separately.

the war in Gaza accelerated the radicalization of these individuals.

And finally, it is also important to point out the ways in which October 7 has not changed previously existing patterns: Christmas markets and other public festivals remain one of the most prominent targets for attacks. This includes the executed knife attack in Solingen in 2024 as well as at least two disrupted attack plots against Christmas markets in 2023. In addition, the Islamic State called for attacks at the European Soccer Championship in 2024<sup>256</sup> hosted by Germany and on Carnival parades in 2025.<sup>257</sup> ‘Soft targets’ such as pedestrian zones, shopping areas, gyms, and public transportation also remain popular targets.

### **5. Recent cases have underscored the importance of foreign intelligence and Germany’s dependence on it.**

According to the author’s data, in the first half of the 2020s, out of the 18 Islamist terrorist plots that were stopped before the perpetrator could start the attack,<sup>ae</sup> at least eight were reported to have relied on important information from foreign intelligence services. Between 2011 and 2021, out of the 13 attacks that were prevented by security services, in six cases information from foreign intelligence was “of essential importance for the prevention.”<sup>258</sup> The role of information by foreign security services in German counterterrorism represents a positive dynamic. Given the transnational connections of terrorist networks, especially online, international cooperation in counterterrorism is crucial. The data shows that Germany has good working relationships with other countries and in particular the United States when it comes to counterterrorism efforts. As Director General of Public Security at Germany’s Federal Ministry of Interior and Community Christian Klos recently stated:

*We are very thankful to our American partners to receive important information, which is sometimes or actually often, much more accessible for American colleagues than for us because of legal reasons and very different perceptions of privacy. Data protection plays a very big role—I would even say from my perspective, an exaggerated role in Europe. Of course, I wouldn’t go so far as fully endorsing the American approach but something in between for Europe and Germany would be much better. Therefore, we sometimes rely on information gathered in the online world by our American partners. It’s extremely worthwhile. We have prevented a high number of terrorist attacks in Germany due to such information—not only from the U.S. but a large part of this information has come from the U.S. agencies—and this is very important for us.*<sup>259</sup>

Still, there is some cause for concern. While CT cooperation in the European Union as well as with partners such as the United States is working well, the reliance on foreign information highlights the constraints Germany’s security services face.

Over the last three years, different German officials have called for legislative changes to address a lack of tools and access for security services because of privacy regulations. Thuringia’s head of the Office for the Protection of the Constitution, Stephan Kramer, argued in October 2024: “The good and trusting international cooperation is working. But it also shows that we finally need to have a fundamental discussion about the powers of the German intelligence services to collect information and data and draw conclusions.”<sup>260</sup> Similarly, Rainer Wendt, federal chairman of the German Police Union, stated in December 2024: “We urgently need to improve the technical and personnel conditions of our state security authorities and intelligence services. Their legal powers also need to be extended.”<sup>261</sup> Hesse’s Minister of the Interior Roman Poseck had previously said in October 2024: “We must strengthen our security authorities in order to become more independent of foreign intelligence services.”<sup>262</sup> He furthermore called for the ability to store and use certain data and IP addresses for counterterrorism as well as additional competencies on the darknet: “Terrorist activities are usually prepared there. Our intelligence services need the means to decrypt encrypted communications.”<sup>263</sup> Two former heads of the BND, Germany’s foreign intelligence agency, August Hanning and Gerhard Schindler, argued in August 2023 that “German services should once again become partners on an equal footing with other Western services.”<sup>264</sup>

The new Coalition Agreement acknowledges the challenges German security services face in light of data protection requirements and declares that the new government will “make full use of the scope provided by European and constitutional law to ensure the highest level of security for our citizens. The tension between security policy requirements and data protection regulations must therefore be rebalanced.”<sup>265</sup> It remains to be seen whether such rebalancing will occur.

### **Conclusion**

The terrorist threat landscape in Germany has evolved in the first half of the 2020s. A significant number of young perpetrators are being radicalized online, often inspired by groups such as the Islamic State. They are using the same simple weapons while seeking out new and familiar targets. At the same time, German authorities are seeing the effects of October 7 and are trying to find ways to stop the most successful methods of attacks with knives and cars. In addition, they are looking for innovative approaches to prevent teenagers from getting radicalized online while relying on outside information from foreign security services.

Closing gaps in the German counterterrorism toolkit will be critical to containing what is likely to be a persistent threat. The new Coalition Agreement promises to address some of these problems and hurdles encountered by the CT community by, for example, looking to include knives and cars in new criminal legislation regarding the planning of an attack, and adding enhanced investigatory and CT tools for security services.<sup>266</sup> In the end, while complete security is never possible, the attacks that got through over the last five years has shown that improvements are necessary in stopping Islamist terrorists in Germany. **CTC**

ae Of the 20 thwarted Islamist attack plots between January 2020 and May 2025, two failed attempts were interrupted right after they started.



## Appendix

### *Executed Islamist terror attacks in Germany between January 2020 and May 2025*

Date	Description	Perpetrator	Target	Weapon	Connection to Terrorist Group
April 2020	Waldkraiburg Terrorist Attack	27-year-old German of Kurdish descent, Muharrem D.	Turkish-owned businesses and a mosque	Arson	Consumed Islamic State propaganda, no direct communication to the group found
August 2020	Attack on Berlin's A100 Autobahn	30-year-old Iraqi man, Sarmad A.	Motorcyclists	Car	No connections to terrorist organizations
October 2020	Dresden Terrorist Attack	20-year-old Syrian refugee, Abdullah Al H. H.	Same-sex couple	Knife	Communicated with Islamic State sympathizers in chat group and consumed Islamic State propaganda
November 2021	The ICE Train Attack	27-year-old Abdalrahman A.	Four passengers (male)	Knife	No direct communication with a terrorist group found
April 2023	The Duisburg Double Attack	27-year-old Syrian, Maan D.	People in the street drinking and listening to music; in the gym	Knife	Consumed Islamic State propaganda, saw himself as fighting for the Islamic State
May 2024	Mannheim Market Square Attack	25-year-old Afghan, Sulaiman A.	Anti-Islam activist, officers, and bystanders	Knife	Consumed Islamic State propaganda
August 2024	Solingen Festival Attack	26-year-old Syrian, Isaa Al H.	Public festival	Knife	In direct contact with Islamic State member, attack claimed by Islamic State
February 2025	Munich Demonstration Attack	24-year-old Afghan, Farhad N.	Protestors	Car	No evidence of direct contact with Islamic State
February 2025	Holocaust Memorial Berlin	19-year-old Syrian refugee, Wassim Al M.	Tourist at Holocaust Memorial	Knife	No evidence of a connection to a terrorist organization found

### *Failed Islamist terror attacks in Germany between January 2020 and May 2025*

Date	Perpetrator	Target	Weapon	Connection to Terrorist Group	Alerted by Foreign Security Services?
April 2020	Four Tajik nationals 24-32 years old	U.S. and NATO military facilities	Bombs, guns, chemicals	Cell linked to Islamic State, in contact with Islamic State operatives	Not found
August 2021	20-year-old German Moroccan	Somewhere in Hamburg	Pistol, hand grenade, bomb	Al-Qa`ida follower, contacts with radical salafis in Germany	Not found
September 2021	16-year-old Syrian refugee	Synagogue	Bomb	Consumed Islamic State propaganda	Yes

January 2023	Two Iranian brothers, 25 and 32 years old	Not yet determined	Ricin, cyanide	In contact with Islamic State members via messaging apps	Yes
April 2023	Two Syrian brothers, 24 and 28 years old	Church in Sweden	Homemade explosive belt	In contact with someone claiming to be an Islamic State member	Yes
October 2023	29-year-old German, Tarik S.	Pro-Israel protest	Car	Fought for Islamic State in 2013, Islamic State member	Yes
November 2023	20-year-old Iraqi man	Christmas market Hanover	Knife	Had declared support for Islamic State	Yes
November 2023	16-year-old Russian of Chechen origin and 15-year-old German Afghan dual citizen	Christmas market Leverkusen	Van filled with gas cylinders	Consumed Islamic State propaganda, in chat with Islamic State sympathizers	Yes
December 2023	30-year-old Tajik man	Cologne Cathedral, St. Stephen's Cathedral Vienna	Not yet determined	Suspected member of Islamic State Khorasan cell	Not found
December 2023	Four Hamas members between 34 and 57 years old	Israeli Embassy Berlin, US Air Base in Ramstein, former Tempelhof airport	Among other items, Kalashnikov	Close ties to Hamas military wing	Not found
April 2024	Four individuals: 15-year-old female, 16-year-old female, 15-year-old male, and 16-year-old male	Churches/ synagogues	Molotov cocktails, firearms, and stabbing weapons	Consumed Islamic State propaganda	Not found
May 2024	18-year-old German Turkish man and 24-year-old German man	Synagogues in Heidelberg or Frankfurt	Knife	Wanted to join Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)	Not found
June 2024	27-year-old Iraqi man	Not yet determined	Drone with explosives	Islamic State member since 2016	Not found
September 2024	18-year-old Austrian man	Israeli General Consulate	Rifle	Supporter of Jabhat al-Nusra, no direct communication	No (attack started)
September 2024	29-year-old Albanian man	Police	Machete	Islamic State sympathizer	No (attack started)
September 2024	15-year-old male	Jewish institutions	Potentially knife	Had consumed Islamic State propaganda	Not found
November 2024	17-year-old male	Not yet determined	Truck or rapid-fire rifles	Sympathizer of Islamic State, consumed Islamic State propaganda	Yes
November 2024	17-year-old male	Not yet determined	Pipe bombs, bayonets	Consumed Islamic State propaganda	Not found

December 2024	Two German Lebanese brothers (15 and 20 years old) and a 22-year- old German Turkish man	Not yet determined	Assault rifle	Sympathizers of Islamic State	Not found
February 2025	18-year-old Russian man	Israeli Embassy in Berlin	Potentially explosives	Wanted to join Islamic State Somalia	Yes



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