FEATURE ARTICLE

From Insurgency to Statecraft: Syria's Foreign Fighters Test

Adrian Shtuni

A VIEW FROM THE CT FOXHOLE

Naureen Chowdhury Fink

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FROM THE EDITORS

Ahmed al-Sharaa's ongoing consolidation of power in Syria will depend to a great extent on the integration of the battle-hardened foreign fighters in the country, Adrian Shtuni writes in our cover article this month. He explains: "These foreign fighters—especially their ideologically driven leaders—represent a classic double-edged sword. While they currently remain valuable to al-Sharaa's project, the long-term viability of this relationship is far from assured. Their loyalty to him should not be regarded as unconditional; its future will likely depend heavily on al-Sharaa's continuing ideological evolution as well as practical considerations."

Our interview is with Naureen Chowdhury Fink, executive director of the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT), which works to prevent terrorists and violent extremists from exploiting digital platforms. In less than a decade, the organization has grown from four to over 35 members. "Working with different stakeholders teaches you a lot about how the same problem can look to different stakeholders and where you can actually find points of commonality," Fink says. "Divergence is easy to find. There's a lot of noise about where we all disagree on things, but finding that convergence, which *is* there, has been one of the most exciting parts of working with so many different stakeholders."

Peter Smith, Cat Cadenhead, and Clara Broekaert map the tiered online ecosystem that is the True Crime Community and situate it—when at its most extreme—within the nihilistic violent extremist landscape. "The TCC," they write, "illustrates a form of digitally mediated participation in which violence becomes a symbolic language rather than an ideological act. Its tiered structure shows how individuals may move from mainstream true-crime interest into more insular, transgressive subcultures that celebrate perpetrators and aestheticize harm."

Finally, Nuno Tiago Pinto—after reviewing more than 8,000 pages of court documents—describes in great detail how Portuguese authorities investigated, arrested, and successfully prosecuted two Iraqi brothers for their involvement with the Islamic State. It marked the first time Portugal had convicted an individual for war crimes. "The outcome," Pinto writes, "was made possible due to extensive and unprecedented international cooperation involving the Iraqi authorities; UNITAD – the Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes Committed by Da'esh/ISIL; ... and Operation Gallant Phoenix."

Don Rassler and Kristina Hummel, *Editors-in-Chief*

From Insurgency to Statecraft: Al-Sharaa and Syria's Foreign Fighters Test

By Adrian Shtuni

This article examines the evolving role and implications of foreign fighters in Syria's fragile post-war transition. It analyzes efforts to integrate these combatants into unified national security forces, while highlighting emerging tensions between President al-Sharaa's increasingly pragmatic governance agenda and the ideologically rigid positions of veteran jihadi fighters. Amid converging security threats, their integration tests the new leadership's ability to balance loyalty demands, international legitimacy concerns, and the consolidation of centralized authority within a multi-front security environment. Ultimately, the security challenges posed by foreign fighters are best understood and addressed within the broader regional equation of stability, counterterrorism, and geopolitical competition. Cautious, targeted engagement with al-Sharaa's government—through strict oversight, conditional incentives, and calibrated support—offers the most viable path toward fostering a Syria that denies safe havens to terrorist groups, mitigates regional instability, diminishes the influence of Russia and Iran, and aligns with the strategic and security interests of the United States, the European Union, and neighboring regional allies.

On December 1, 2025, Syria's President Ahmed al-Sharaa received a cordial handwritten note from U.S. President Donald J. Trump pledging American support and hailing him as a future "great leader."[1] This would have been unimaginable prior to al-Sharaa's dramatic pivot one year earlier from an insurgency commander who carried a $10 million U.S. bounty for his past al-Qa`ida ties[2] to a pragmatic West-leaning statesman who talks about inclusivity and institutional reform. What preceded this

transformation was a major Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)-led[a] offensive operation codenamed "Deterrence of Aggression" to overthrow the regime of Bashar al-Assad. After an 11-day blitz, the rebel leader—then known by his *kunya* Abu Muhammad al-Jolani—entered Damascus as Assad fled to Moscow. This rapid collapse ended nearly 14 years of civil war, over five decades of the Assad family's dynastic rule, and the deeply entrenched Russian and Iranian domination that had long propped it up. With HTS formally dissolving itself to enable a broader power-sharing arrangement, the upheaval also cleared the path for al-Sharaa's transitional government. Yet, it has also intensified international scrutiny and urgent policy debates over the opposition coalition's lingering extremist elements, particularly the thousands of battle-hardened foreign jihadi fighters who retain the most uncompromising global-jihadi agendas and, in some cases, persisting ideological ties to al-Qa`ida.[b]

Various options have been discussed and/or pursued to handle this cohort, including: repatriate and prosecute, integrate foreign

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a The coalition of rebel groups that participated in the operation "Deterrence of Aggression" was composed of HTS, Ahrar al-Sham, the National Front for Liberation, Jaish al-Izza, and Nour al-Din al Zenki. Other foreign fighter contingents participated in the offensive either as part of HTS or in the case of the Uyghur jihadi group Turkistan Islamic Party in Syria, with a hybrid status, namely autonomous branding and flag in combat, but embedded within the HTS coalition. "Who are Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and the Syrian groups that took Aleppo?" Al Jazeera, December 2, 2024.

b HTS – a name that means Organization for the Liberation of the Levant – was officially dissolved on January 29, 2025. This marked the end of the military formation as an independent armed faction and its integration into the new Syrian Armed Forces. HTS was the direct organizational and leadership successor of Jabhat al Nusra, first a branch of the Islamic State of Iraq and then al-Qa`ida's official Syrian franchise that operated under this name from 2012 to 2016. In 2016, Ahmed al-Sharaa – known at the time as Abu Muhammad al-Jolani – announced the dissolution of Jabhat al Nusra and its replacement by Jabhat Fateh al-Sham in a strategic attempt to break external ties with al-Qa`ida and rebrand his organization that in reality remained unchanged in terms of leadership, command structure, core fighters, and funding networks. In January 2017, Jabhat Fateh al-Sham merged with several smaller Islamist factions – Nour al-Din al-Zenki, Liwa al-Haqq, Jaysh al-Sunna, and Jabhat Ansar al-Din – to create the umbrella organization HTS. See Aaron Y. Zelin, "The Patient Efforts Behind Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's Success in Aleppo," War on the Rocks, December 3, 2024; Martin Smith and Marcela Gaviria, "The Jihadist," Frontline, June 1, 2021; "Tahrir al-Sham: Al-Qaeda's latest incarnation in Syria," BBC Monitoring, February 28, 2017; and "Thirty-sixth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2734 (2024) concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities," United Nations Security Council, July 24, 2025.

Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa attends a ceremony marking the anniversary of Aleppo's liberation from the Bashar al Assad regime's soldiers, at Citadel of Aleppo in Aleppo, Syria, on November 29, 2025. (Nabieha Altaha/Anadolu via Getty Images)

fighters[c] into Syrian security forces under strict oversight (as has been partially done, despite Western concerns), expel quietly, or risk allowing ideologically irreconcilable elements to regroup and destabilize the fragile post-war order. All these considerations are influenced by practical, historical, and ideological factors. This article examines these factors and the slow-burning tensions emerging between these hardline foreign veterans and al-Sharaa's bold Western-leaning nationalist agenda. Rather than treating the foreign fighter challenge in isolation, this analysis contextualizes it within Syria's converging security threats: recurring sectarian violence with Kurdish, Druze, and Alawite communities; persistent Islamic State activity; and continued Israeli airstrikes and ground incursions. Against this complex backdrop, the article assesses what lies ahead for the foreign fighter contingent in Syria and al-Sharaa's prospects for consolidating power and preventing multi-front volatility—including potential confrontation with hardline jihadi foreign fighters.

The Foreign Fighters in Post-Assad Syria

Although the Syrian insurgency began in 2011 as a popular uprising

against the Assad regime, it gradually attracted large numbers of foreign fighters. While the scale of this foreign presence has fluctuated over the years, it has remained a persistent and defining feature of the conflict. During the "Deterrence of Aggression" offensive leading to the fall of Assad's beleaguered regime, foreign-dominated groups were mostly organized into specialized battalions or units allied with, embedded in, or operating under the umbrella of HTS.[3] Key elements included:

- Turkistan Islamic Party (an al-Qa`ida-affiliated, ethnic Uyghur-led jihadi organization whose overall emir Abdul Haq is based in Afghanistan);[4]
- Mujahideen Ghuroba Division (also known as Katibat al-Ghuraba al-Turkistan; another ethnic Uyghur-led jihadi group);[5]
- Katibat Imam al-Bukhari (the largest primarily ethnic Uzbek fighting force in Syria, with ongoing ties to al-Qa`ida and the Taliban);[6]
- Katibat Tawhid wal Jihad (another Uzbek- and Kyrgyz-led jihadi militant group with ongoing ties to al-Qa`ida and the Taliban);[7]
- Jaysh al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar (also known as Liwa al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar, composed primarily of fighters from the North Caucasus, such as Chechens and Dagestanis)[8]
- Ajnad al-Kavkaz (a Chechen-led group);[9]
- Xhemati Alban (an ethnic Albanian-led jihadi group composed primarily of nationals of North Macedonia, Kosovo, and Albania);[10]
- Ansar al-Tawhid (an umbrella group for mixed local and foreign jihadis);[11]

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c   The post-Assad landscape in Syria features foreign nationals associated with multiple armed actors, including the transitional government in Damascus (led by al-Sharaa and other figures from the former HTS-led coalition), remnants or affiliates of the Islamic State, the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces, and various other militias. For the purposes of this report, however, 'integration of foreign fighters' specifically refers to the incorporation of non-Syrian nationals previously affiliated with the HTS-led coalition that overthrew the Assad regime into the new Syrian security structures (e.g., the Ministry of Defense and associated forces.)

- Firqat al-Ghuraba (a French-speaking group led by dual French Senegalese national Oumar Diaby).[12]

Thousands[d] of foreign fighters—many drawn to the global jihadi cause as evidenced by the overtly jihadi names of the units they joined—played a decisive role in securing al-Sharaa's victory through HTS and allied coalition groups.[13] Yet, in his victory speech on December 8, 2024, from Damascus' historic Ummayad Mosque, al-Sharaa conspicuously avoided any rhetoric of holy war or enforcement of sharia law. Instead, the address centered on themes of collective triumph, unity, and "purification" of Syria from sectarianism, oppression, criminality, and Iran's meddling.[14] Even his subsequent public statements, including his landmark September 24, 2025, speech to the United Nations General Assembly, consistently doubled down on his inclusive national renewal narrative.[15]

When asked during an interview on January 31, 2025, if Syria will become a democracy, al-Sharaa responded: "If democracy means that the people decide who will rule them and who represents them in the parliament, then yes Syria is going in this direction."[16] This carefully worded statement is quite significant. At face value, it endorses a core principle of popular sovereignty—namely, that legitimate political authority derives from the consent and choice of the governed rather than from divine mandate, clerical *diktat*, or an immutable religious hierarchy. If taken literally, the statement marks a striking departure from the foundational salafi-jihadi doctrine that has dominated the movement for decades, which insists that sovereignty belongs to God alone (*hakimiyyah lillah*) and that divine law (sharia) must be implemented in its entirety without submission to man-made systems or popular will, in order to escape the condition of pre-Islamic ignorance (*jahiliyyah*.)[e]

This sharp pivot from jihadi commander to a pragmatic, West-leaning statesman that prioritizes institutional reform, transitional justice, minority protections, elections, and U.S. security cooperation over ideological purity and imposition of sharia law has

begun to alienate hardline segments of his base, especially foreign fighters.[17] Some now openly brand him a "sell out."[18] Media reports of secret deals to forcefully repatriate them to their countries of origin, though denied by Syrian authorities,[19] have only deepened the resentment, layering personal safety concerns atop ideological frustration.[20] The firepower of foreign fighter elements was reported to be instrumental in toppling the old regime and remains critical to stabilizing a still-fractious Syria and consolidating al-Sharaa's grip on power.[21] Yet, the widening ideological divergence and mounting distrust risk turning what was once a loyal asset into a serious liability.

As of mid-February 2026, the foreign fighter landscape in Syria remained in flux, despite ongoing efforts to unify all armed forces under the Ministry of Defense. At the Syrian Revolution Victory Conference on January 29, 2025, transitional authorities ordered the formal dissolution of armed opposition factions—including HTS and many allied groups containing foreign fighter units—and their integration into a new national army under the Ministry of Defense.[22] In practice, however, this process has been partial and largely nominal rather than substantial.[f] Although the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) eventually signed an agreement in March 2025[23] to merge as a cohesive group into the national army, little was implemented, leading to increased tensions with Damascus.[24] Meanwhile, many former opposition groups have undergone a process of reflagging—replacing unit designations (e.g., as divisions, brigades, or battalions)—while retaining much of their original structure, personnel, and equipment.[25]

This rudimentary integration under the Syrian army's chain of command reflects ongoing distrust and tensions among factions, resulting in a fragmented force prone to disciplinary issues and sectarian frictions. Full, meaningful dissolution and professionalization would require years of investment in training, resources, and political reconciliation—steps the transitional government has only partially pursued amid competing priorities and international pressures.[26]

Foreign fighters have also been subject to this restructuring. Starting from June 2025, multiple sources reported that approximately 3,500 foreign fighters, primarily Uyghurs affiliated with groups such as the Turkistan Islamic Party as well as Chechens and Dagestanis who were part of Ajnad al-Kavkaz, were assigned to the 84th division of the new Syrian Armed Forces.[27] Regional media have also reported the integration of ethnic Albanians in this division.[28] Although there have been no official statements on this by Xhemati Alban,[29] the ethnic Albanian-led combat unit active in the Syrian civil war since late 2012, it is relevant to note that its tactical training arm, Albanian Tactical,[30] stopped posting its

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d   Determining the size of the pool of foreign fighters who fought with or alongside HTS under the leadership of al-Sharaa between 2012 and 2025 — as well as the number currently residing in Syria — is beyond the scope of this article. For context, however, some publications estimate the number of fighters remaining in Syria (originating predominantly from Central Asia, the Middle East, and Europe) to range from 3,500 to up to 10,000. Other more specialized publications cite estimates of about 5,000, which is likely a more accurate number. For the 3,500 estimate, see Timour Azhari and Suleiman Al-Khalidi, "Exclusive: US gives nod to Syria to bring foreign jihadist ex-rebels into army," Reuters, June 2, 2025. For the 10,000 estimate, see Omar Abdel-Baqui, "Foreign Jihadists Helped Syria's Rebels Take Power. Now They're a Problem," *Wall Street Journal*, April 30, 2025. For the 5,000 estimate, see Louisa Loveluck and Zakaria Zakaria, "Syrian leader faces challenge of foreign militants who helped him win power," *Washington Post*, May 31, 2025, and "Thirty-sixth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team."

e   *Hakimiyyah lillah*, usually rendered as "sovereignty belongs to God alone" or "governance/legislative authority is God's alone," is one of the most central and politically charged concepts in modern Islamist — especially salafi-jihadi — thought. The influential Islamic scholar Sayyid Qutb, widely regarded as the 20th century father of the contemporary salafi jihadism, developed the concept in depth in his extensive Qur'anic commentary "In the Shade of the Qur'an." In it, he argues that allowing human beings to legislate is to associate partners with God in His most exclusive right, insisting that there exists no sovereignty except God's, no law except the law revealed by God, and no legitimate authority to enforce anything other than what God has legislated. Qutb carried the idea to its radical conclusion in his famous manifesto "Milestones," in which he states plainly that anyone who acknowledges the right of human beings to legislate has taken other lords beside God and has thereby exited the fold of Islam entirely.

f   Media outlets reported that not all armed factions participated at the Syrian Revolution Victory Conference and that only 18 armed factions committed to disbanding and integrating. Notably absent were armed factions from Druze-majority province of Suwayda, the Southern Operations Room in the province of Daraa, and the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces. Ahmad Sharawi, "Ahmad al Sharaa's Victory Conference: Syria's new era and an exclusive translation of Sharaa's speech," FDD's Long War Journal, January 30, 2025.

activities on social media channels in mid-May 2025.[g]

The 84th division was established as a special forces unit, headquartered at the Naval Academy in Latakia, with a primary deployment focus on the mountainous area of northwestern Syria.[31] According to various reports, as of mid-2025, the unit was under the joint command of three prominent foreign fighters: Abdulaziz Dawood Khodabardi (also known as Abu Muhammad Turkistani), Omar Muhammad Jiftchi (also known as Mukhtar al-Turki), and Dhul-Qarnayn Zannur al-Basr Abdul Hamid (also known as Abdullah al-Daghestani).[32]

Both Abdulaziz Dawood Khodabardi and Omar Muhammad Jiftchi were promoted to the rank of brigadier general in the initial wave of military promotions issued by al-Sharaa in late December 2024.[33] The same high promotion was awarded to another foreign commander, Abdul Rahman Al-Khatib (also known as Abu Hussein al-Urduni), a Jordanian national who was appointed Commander of the Republican Guard.[34] These individuals are among at least 12 foreign fighters who have been appointed to high-ranking military positions within the Ministry of Defense.[35] Other nationalities represented include a Dagestani, an Egyptian, Tajiks, and an ethnic Albanian from North Macedonia.[36]

These promotions can be interpreted both as "tokens of recognition"[37] and as a means of keeping the leadership of these foreign jihadi units (and, by extension, their fighters) tethered to al-Sharaa's nationalist project or at least held in check. Alternatively, these appointments of non-Syrian loyalists to critical security roles—including command of the Republican Guard, responsible for al-Sharaa's personal protection—may be intended to safeguard the new head of state against potential coups and assassination attempts, as such commanders typically lack political ambition, a domestic power base, or tribal networks that could enable challenges to his authority.[h] Yet, beyond the legal and procedural issues surrounding non-Syrians becoming commissioned officers in senior positions within the Syrian Army, internal tensions—whether factional or ideological—are increasingly emerging.

Emerging Slow-Burning Tensions and Ideological Rifts

The Syrian government's directive of May 17, 2025, which mandated the integration of all militant factions, including non-Syrian combatants, into unified national military structures within a 10-day window, encountered non-compliance and factional resistance among some cohorts.[38] It also led to defections.[39] The Islamic State has sought to exploit and amplify these tensions, with Issue 495 of

its weekly newsletter Al Naba (released on May 15, 2025) explicitly urging dissatisfied non-Syrian fighters to defect and join its ranks instead.[40]

Arrests of foreign fighters have also reportedly taken place. On October 15, 2025, a statement signed "from your Uzbek brothers" was posted on social media channels affiliated with Uzbek foreign fighters in Syria. The statement, written in Arabic, claimed that Abu Dujana (also known as Ayyub Hawk and Abu Dujana al-Turkistani) and Islam al-Uzbeki had been arrested approximately two months earlier—sometime in August 2025—and were being denied visitation rights. The statement also claimed that their cases had not been brought before any military or civilian court for a fair trial. In a respectful but firm tone, the statement laid out demands to the Syrian government for how these two foreign individuals should be treated: They should be provided urgent medical examinations, family visits, and a fair and transparent trial as soon as possible.

On the same day, prominent American Islamist journalist American journalist and war correspondent Bilal Abdul Kareem, who reports from Syria, posted an interview on X with a fully veiled woman introduced as the wife of Abu Dujana.[41] In the interview, she raised similar concerns, emphasizing that her husband did not know why he was being held and that he should be released by Syrian authorities.[42] Abu Dujana is one of the most prominent Uzbek jihadi foreign fighters in Syria with a large following across multiple social media platforms, making him a notable jihadi influencer. His videos focus on tactical training and are infused with jihadi propaganda. As of mid-February 2026, his Instagram account had over 61,000 followers. Abu Dujana was previously affiliated with Tavhid va Jihod and served as the main trainer for Muhojir Tactical, a jihadi tactical training outfit.[43] As of mid-February 2026, the official reasons for his arrest remained unclear, and no formal charges have been publicly announced.

Kareem was also detained by the Syrian security forces on December 22, 2025, in al-Bab, northern Aleppo governorate.[44] As of mid-February 2026, no formal charges had been publicly announced against him. His detention followed shortly after he released a video on December 18, 2025, harshly criticizing al-Sharaa's decision to join the U.S.-led Global Coalition against the Islamic State and also raising concerns over a previous case of arrest and alleged extrajudicial execution of a Malaysian foreign fighter by HTS.[45]

Another significant incident involving foreign fighters occurred in October 2025 in the Harem region of Idlib Governorate, near the Turkish border. It centered on Firqat al-Ghuraba, a French-speaking jihadi group of around 50 fighters led by Franco-Senegalese Omar Diaby, also known as Oumar Omsen.[46] A former criminal turned preacher from Nice, France, Diaby is regarded as one of the main recruiters of French-speaking jihadis to Syria since 2012.[47] French authorities credit him with facilitating at least 200 departures.[48] According to France's National Counterterrorism Prosecutor's Office, he remains active in recruitment, with a half-dozen departures or attempted departures from France recorded since Assad's fall in 2024.[49]

On October 21, 2025, Firqat al-Ghuraba released an official statement on Telegram warning of an impending operation by Syrian security forces against its camp. The statement accused the Syrian government of collaborating with foreign powers (particularly France) against the Muhajirun and Ansar (foreign fighters and their local supporters) and defiantly declared that the

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g   The last pieces of content posted on Albanian Tactical's dedicated social media channels (on Telegram, X, and Instagram) date to May 2025. On May 6, a video captioned in English "Training on how to deal with an ambush" indicates that the training was for the benefit of the #SASF (Syrian Army Special Forces). On May 13, photos with the English caption: "Training session working weapon positions around the vehicle – angles, cover, movement. Always good to sharpen the edge." Although this does not confirm integration into the 84th Division, the lack of further posts and that the channels are not accessible likely indicates that Albanian Tactical is undergoing a transition.

h   Throughout history, rulers have often employed foreigners for their close protection not only for their military skills and personal loyalty, but also because their detachment from local politics minimized the risk of intrigue or betrayal. Roman emperors starting from Julius Caesar used *Germani corpore custodes* (Germanic bodyguards) from tribes like the Batavi. Byzantine emperors relied on the Varagian Guard formed from mainly Scandinavian mercenaries, while Ottoman Sultans used Janissaries, recruited from converted Christian youths from the Balkans, as their elite bodyguards.

group would resist any forced entry into the camp. The signature at the bottom of the statement indicated the group's affiliation with the 82nd division of the Syrian Army.

Not long thereafter, on October 21-22, 2025, Syrian security forces surrounded the fortified camp. They were reportedly motivated by complaints from local residents about abuses, including the alleged kidnapping of a young girl by Diaby or his group, whom they refused to return.[50] Armed clashes between the two forces, involving shelling and gunfire, erupted in the early hours of October 22. Government forces accused Diaby of using civilians as human shields and claimed he fired first. The fighting subsided by the afternoon of October 22, with a truce negotiated by October 23, mediated in part by other foreign fighter groups.[51] It is worth noting that a group of Uzbek militants arrived in the area in response to Diaby's call for reinforcements to defend the camp—a move that likely deterred a full-scale government assault and helped prevent a larger, deadlier clash between foreign fighters and government forces that risked triggering a broader chain reaction.[52]

Nevertheless, this incident marked the first publicly revealed direct armed clash since Assad's fall between the new Syrian security forces and foreign fighter elements that have been at least nominally integrated into the Syrian army. It underscored rising tensions over loyalties, autonomy, integration into state structures, and international pressure on Damascus to address the foreign jihadi challenge more decisively, especially in the case of designated militants who continue to recruit other foreigners from abroad.[53] It remains unclear whether the primary motivation for other non-Syrian jihadis to rally in defense of Diaby was a shared sense of camaraderie among fellow foreign fighters or shared ideological resentment toward al-Sharaa's pivot toward the West. Regardless, the episode highlights how tension and resentment between the new Syrian government and foreign fighter elements appear to be building.

Abu Qatada al-Albani's Signaling Statements

Abu Qatada al-Albani—whose real name is Abdul Jashari—is an ethnic Albanian militant and leader of Xhemati Alban, a small Syria-based jihadi group composed primarily of ethnic Albanians from North Macedonia, Kosovo, and Albania.[54] Experienced in guerrilla warfare from his participation in the Balkan armed conflicts in Kosovo and North Macedonia during the late 1990s and early 2000s, Jashari has long been one of al-Sharaa's closest and most trusted military advisors.[55] In the summer of 2014, al-Sharaa appointed him to lead Jabhat al-Nusra's military operations in Syria.[56] In early 2019, Jashari served on an HTS reconciliation council that helped broker an accord with Hurras al-Din, an al-Qa`ida loyalist faction that had splintered from HTS over ideological differences.[57] His experience and influence have also extended to training roles, including involvement in HTS-affiliated tactical and military programs at the military academy in Idlib for four years. Owing to his experience in asymmetric warfare acquired both in the Balkans and Syria, he was entrusted with establishing and leading the HTS military academy in Idlib.[58] On December 28, 2024, Jashari was promoted to colonel in Syria's restructured army—one of several foreign fighters elevated—highlighting his enduring influence in military, advising, mediation, and political roles within HTS.[59]

Jashari, designated a terrorist by the U.S. Treasury Department on November 10, 2016, has been frequently featured in Xhemati

Alban propaganda materials since 2016, though it was a long period before his face was revealed.[60] His face was first shown during an interview given to an Albanian media outlet on December 22, 2024.[61] This 'reveal' was followed by at least three additional interviews with Kosovo media outlets between January and March 2025. In these interviews, Jashari described fighting in Syria as "a moral and religious obligation" and explained that Xhemati Alban was established on this premise in "late 2012 and early 2013 by a group of 40 ethnic Albanians from the Balkans and the diaspora."[62] However, during these interviews, Jashari kept the actual size of the unit vague, describing it as "several tens of fighters, but not more than 100."[63]

When asked about the group's plans and whether it wanted to return home, Jashari responded: "We have no intention of returning, at least in the near future, because the war is not over yet. There's work to be done here."[64] When asked about the security situation in the Balkans, a seemingly well-informed Jashari responded: "The tense situation is clearly visible to us here as it is to you there. The situation between Serbia and the Albanians could escalate into war. In the event of war—and we pray to Allah that it does not come to that, though it is very possible—I believe that all of us who fought in Syria and have decades of experience would not only be welcomed but actively requested."[65] In one interview in March 18, 2025, when asked about Xhemati Alban's role in suppressing the Alawite uprising of March 2025 in the coastal region of Syria and whether his unit had exceeded the rules of engagement, he responded by confirming its participation in the operations and describing his unit as "disciplined and honest."[66] As of mid-February 2026, this was Jashari's last known televised interview.

While Jashari is disciplined and more discreet in his televised appearances—even attempting to project an image of moderation—he is far more unfiltered, radical, and overtly ideological in his social media posts and op-ed-style writings. For example, following the October 7, 2023, attacks in Israel, Jashari published an op-ed commentary on October 14, 2023, which he wrote himself and posted on his personal Telegram channel. In it, he praises the "bravery of the Palestinian offspring" and Hamas' Qassam Brigades while harshly criticizing those Albanians who publicly condemned them and hurried "to show the *kuffar*—led by the Jewish criminals"—whom they support. In another similar commentary on August 4, 2024, Jashari eulogized Isma'il Haniyah, praying that he is accepted as a martyr and attacked those who question his jihad and martyrdom.

The same pattern holds for official Xhemati Alban media channels online, which openly celebrate the anniversaries of the September 11, 2001, attacks in the United States and the October 7, 2023, attacks in Israel, while sharing quotes from Usama bin Ladin's speeches.[i] These posts by Jashari's group serve as a clear indication not only of violent extremist ideological continuity but also of a deliberate choice not to conceal it, which suggests

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i   Posts on official Xhemati Alban Telegram channels from September 11, 2025, read the same as any other year: "America and its followers will never forget our laughter while the tower was on flames;" "11 September and 7 October. Two historic dates." Numerous posts provide imagery or videos of the attacks with quotes from Usama bin Ladin speeches. Other posts from October 7, 2025, read: "their dead in hell ours in paradise," other reposts from the day of the attacks read: "may Allah be with our mujahedeen during this great attack," whereas other video posts with disturbing imagery are entitled: "Shoot on the Zionists," "Gifts for the believers in Gaza," and so forth.

confidence in the group's operating environment and no apparent concern for repercussions. This may not be all that surprising as HTS itself backed Hamas' October 7 attacks and eulogized Isma'il Haniyah and Yahya Sinwar.[67] On the other hand, the duality of Jashari (discreet in some mainstream media, overt in other partisan forums) highlights a calculated approach: moderation as a tool when useful, but radicalism as the core identity when addressing his base.

The same calculated approach applies to the media content disseminated by Xhemati Alban's channels on Telegram regarding certain high-profile activities.[j] For example, there has been increasingly subdued coverage of al-Sharaa's international activities, especially his visits to the United States, meetings with President Trump, al-Sharaa's United Nations speech, and so forth. These events are barely covered, and when they are, the reactions of the channels' users are almost entirely negative, which is indicative of an undercurrent of dissatisfaction.

Moreover, Jashari recently released two op-ed-style commentaries written by him personally on his Telegram channel with interestingly timed publication dates. The first, titled "The Reality of Democracy," appeared on Telegram on September 29, 2025. It was a fierce anti-democratic manifesto that portrayed democracy not as a legitimate political system but as a deliberate, satanic deception—primarily orchestrated by Freemasons—to destroy natural hierarchies, enslave peoples, and install corrupt, servile, and easily manipulated leaders. In the document, democracy is described as "legalized injustice," "the most filthy and manipulative system humanity has ever known," and the exact opposite of what it claims to be (power becomes powerlessness, equality becomes inequality, justice becomes injustice, and freedom becomes slavery). Notably, Syria held its first post-Assad parliamentary elections under al-Sharaa's government less than a week later, on October 5, 2025.[68] While Jashari's stance is unsurprising—given that elections and democratic participation are traditionally anathema to core salafi-jihadi ideology—the timing suggests it was a not-so-veiled rebuke and denouncement of al-Sharaa's embrace of a (limited) electoral process.

On October 7, 2025, Jashari posted on Telegram another commentary titled "Trump between peace and war." The cover image depicts President Trump standing before an American flag and pointing at the audience. Based on the accompanying text, his image appears to mimic the iconic Uncle Sam recruitment poster from the World Wars, which featured the caption "I Want You for U.S. Army" to encourage enlistment in the U.S. Army.[69] The commentary is deeply conspiratorial, portraying the U.S. president as a master of deception who employs a false pacifist facade to conceal aggressive military preparations—centered on nuclear capabilities—that are deliberately propelling the world toward World War III, with China identified as the primary adversary.

Jashari characterizes Trump's peaceful rhetoric as an "attempt to induce enemies into negligence." Once again, the timing of this piece is noteworthy. It followed a brief meeting on September 24, 2025, between al-Sharaa and President Trump on the sidelines of the U.N. General Assembly and preceded al-Sharaa's historic visit to the White House on November 10, 2025—the first ever by a Syrian leader.[k] Such a conspiratorial assessment of President Trump's motives reads less like a critique of him and more like a caution against—and strong opposition to—the rapprochement initiated by al-Sharaa.

Moreover, unlike the posts of Omar Diaby—which were released in both Arabic and French—Jashari's commentaries were published exclusively in Albanian, without any Arabic versions. This choice aligns with a calculated strategy of cautious audience selectivity in public communications. It can also be interpreted as an effort to signal to his broader audience, and especially to his unit, that he remains firmly committed to his fundamental convictions and opposed, although without spelling it out, to al-Sharaa's Western-leaning pivot, including emphasis on democracy, elections, and rapprochement with the United States.

Another noteworthy aspect of Jashari's public posture was his complete silence surrounding the first anniversary (December 8, 2025) of the fall of Assad's regime, on the day of the anniversary and the week that followed.[l] He issued no celebratory or congratulatory post, statement, or commentary, despite widespread national celebrations, military parades, and President al-Sharaa's official addresses framing the event as "Liberation Day." This conspicuous abstention during such a symbolically charged period is likely not accidental and indirectly underscores the ideological rift evident in his earlier commentaries. By withholding any statement, he effectively made one—signaling quiet dissent without overt confrontation.

For context on how significant Jashari's silence was, even Mazloum Abdi, the leader of the Kurdish-led SDF—a force that has repeatedly clashed arms with al-Sharaa's government forces throughout the past year despite the March integration agreement—issued a congratulatory statement,[70] albeit shortly after the Autonomous Administration had banned public gatherings and mass celebrations in all SDF-controlled areas, citing security concerns.[71]

Converging Security Challenges

Accurately assessing the scale of the challenge posed by government-aligned foreign fighters to Syria's transitional stability requires situating it within the country's broader security threats: recurrent sectarian violence, ongoing tensions over Kurdish integration in the northeast, persistent Islamic State activity, and Israeli airstrikes and ground incursions.

One of the deadliest outbreaks of sectarian violence in post-Assad Syria struck the coastal provinces of Latakia and Tartus in March 2025, the Alawite community's heartland. Triggered on March 6 by pro-Assad loyalist ambushes that killed dozens of government forces, the conflict escalated into brutal reprisals: Government-aligned militias, including foreign fighter factions,

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j   Xhemati Alban has consistently invested significant effort in its branding, messaging, and outreach to Albanian-speaking audiences. It pursues these activities through official social media channels and affiliated/satellite accounts across platforms, with Telegram as the primary focus in recent years. The group and its leader maintain an active and regular Telegram presence to share news, propaganda, operational updates, combat videos, op-ed-style commentaries, and official statements. Several affiliated channels (some emphasizing developments in Gaza or Afghanistan) form part of a wider ecosystem that supports Xhemati Alban's targeted outreach. These networks routinely cross-post material to boost visibility and engagement.

k   The initial meeting between al-Sharaa and President Trump had occurred earlier, in Riyadh on May 14, 2025.

l   This article's social media research cutoff date was December 15, 2025.

raided Alawite villages with house-to-house executions, looting, and arson based on sectarian identity. Monitors recorded more than 1,000 mostly Alawite civilian deaths—potentially war crimes—prompting thousands to flee amid collective punishment fears.[72]

A similar situation arose in the south several months later, involving another minority. In July 2025, intense clashes broke out in Druze-majority Suwayda province between local militias and government-aligned forces backed by Sunni Bedouin tribes. The fighting resulted in over 1,000 deaths, mostly civilians, further exposing deep interethnic fractures and challenging the transitional government's minority protections.[73]

In early January 2026, heavy fighting erupted in Aleppo between the Syrian government forces and the Kurdish-led SDF, resulting in fatalities and widespread displacement of tens of thousands of civilians from the Kurdish majority neighborhoods of Sheikh Maqsoud and Ashrafiyeh.[74] These clashes followed several failed negotiations to integrate the SDF into the national military. Government forces aided by tribal militia then launched a swift offensive against the SDF in northeastern Syria, capturing Raqqa city, all of Deir ez-Zor governorate, and other key areas east of the Euphrates by mid-January 2026—the most significant territorial shifts since Assad's fall.[75]

Under military pressure, the SDF agreed to a ceasefire and a 14-point deal on January 18, ceding military, administrative, and territorial authority over much of the northeast in exchange for gradual integration of its fighters into the Syrian armed forces and police as individuals.[76] It also agreed to hand over control of prisons holding over 8,000 Islamic State detainees, known to be vulnerable to breakouts.[77] However, implementation disputes have persisted, accompanied by outbreaks of armed clashes and the escape of about 200 Islamic State detainees from al-Shaddadi prison in Hasakah.[78] Although Syria's Ministry of Interior announced that 81[79] of these detainees were re-arrested shortly thereafter, this incident highlighted the vulnerability of the prisons under the current transitional dynamics, including contested control and ceasefire violations.

Heightened security concerns—and the risk that renewed hostilities could escalate into a full-scale armed confrontation between Damascus and a depleted SDF following the defection of Arab fighters from its ranks—prompted the United States to transfer by mid-February 2026 more than 5,700 Islamic State detainees from northeastern Syria to secure facilities in Iraq.[80] Admiral Brad Cooper, commander of U.S. Central Command, described the operation as "critical to preventing a breakout that would pose a direct threat to the United States and regional security" among ongoing instability in Syria.[81]

This move came against the backdrop of a resurgent Islamic State threat. In late November and early December 2025, the group surged its attacks,[82] claiming an ambush that killed four Syrian Ministry of Interior personnel in Idlib on December 14[83] and carrying out a suspected insider attack in Palmyra on December 13 that claimed three American lives.[84] Throughout 2025, U.S. and partner forces detained more than 300 Islamic State operatives in Syria and killed or captured over 20 in follow-on operations after major retaliatory strikes.[85] A broader clash between the Syrian government and the remnants of SDF (essentially composed of Kurdish People's Protection Units known as YPG forces) would severely undermine these counter-Islamic State efforts. It would also deepen ethnic divisions and likely spark an insurgency that

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would further jeopardize Syria's fragile post-Assad stability and create conditions ripe for Islamic State exploitation.

Lastly, Israel's airstrikes[86] and ground incursions[87] in Syria persisted throughout 2025, with increased intensity toward the year's end,[88] as Israeli forces occupied and expanded a southern buffer zone beyond the 1974 U.N.-monitored disengagement area.[89] These operations have caused reported civilian casualties, including at least 13 deaths (mostly civilians, including children) in the November 2025 Beit Jinn raid.[90] While providing immediate deterrence and border control after the Assad regime's collapse, prolonged occupation risks entrenching local resistance, provoking retaliation from jihadi groups, or triggering broader Syrian responses. However, at present, al-Sharaa's military—still in the process of consolidation and rebuilding—faces substantial asymmetries in capabilities that would make significant resistance to Israel's considerably more advanced forces highly challenging.

Although Syria and Israel reached a U.S.-brokered security agreement in Paris in early January 2026—establishing a joint mechanism for intelligence sharing, military de-escalation, and communication coordination to reduce border tensions[91]—as of mid-February 2026 Israel had shown no signs of withdrawal from newly occupied territories in Syria, with raids persisting despite international criticism.[92] Negotiations for a demilitarized zone could enable stabilization, but current trends point to sustained low-intensity friction.

Conclusion: What Next?

Amid escalating sectarian tensions and overlapping security threats, loyal and battle-hardened foreign fighters continue to offer significant value to Ahmed al-Sharaa's efforts to consolidate power—especially as his emerging national army, with an estimated strength of 100,000, works to achieve broader integration and cohesion.[93] As such, deepening rifts—whether ideological or organizational—and potential violent clashes, like those involving groups such as Firqat al-Ghuraba that place al-Sharaa's security forces in direct opposition to foreign fighters, could have profound secondary and tertiary consequences. These might undermine internal unity and operational effectiveness within his core forces, weaken his command authority, trigger defections, and encourage

sectarian militias, the Islamic State, and other adversaries to exploit the situation—potentially igniting broader, multi-front violence or even a relapse into civil war.

Thus, these foreign fighters—especially their ideologically driven leaders—represent a classic double-edged sword. While they currently remain valuable to al-Sharaa's project, the long-term viability of this relationship is far from assured. Their loyalty to him should not be regarded as unconditional; its future will likely depend heavily on al-Sharaa's continuing ideological evolution as well as practical considerations, particularly the handling of their status, citizenship, and integration within the army. In response to early 2025 pressure from the United States and other international actors to bar foreign fighters from senior military roles, the Syrian government reportedly announced a suspension of new senior-rank appointments for non-Syrians.[94] It did not, however, clarify whether previously granted promotions and appointments were revoked or remained in effect.[95]

In December 2025, the subject resurfaced in the U.S. National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2026, which repealed Caesar Act sanctions on Syria while mandating periodic reviews of progress on areas including the removal of foreign fighters from senior government and security positions.[96] In practice, this framework incentivizes the Syrian government to demote or limit the influence of foreign fighters in senior ranks to avoid risks and sustain benefits like continued sanctions relief, potential future aid, and improved bilateral ties. Yet, as the repeal was just passed, the short-term status quo may hold, but ongoing 180-day reviews will likely drive longer-term changes to ensure compliance.

The matter of citizenship is also in flux. During a press conference with French President Emmanuel Macron in May 7, 2025, al-Sharaa assured that these foreign fighters are committed to Syrian law and pose no threat to any country, adding that the decision on granting them Syrian citizenship would be determined by the future permanent constitution once it is drafted.[97] The interim constitutional declaration, signed on March 13, 2025, establishes a five-year transitional period, during which a new permanent constitution is to be prepared. This raises questions about whether the prolonged uncertainty over their legal status until at least 2030 could strain their integration in Syria or loyalty to al-Sharaa in the interim.[98] On the other hand, deferring the citizenship decision to a future legal framework may be a deliberate strategy and a natural filtering mechanism. It buys time for monitoring and gradual integration, encourages continued loyalty among the committed, and provides an exit ramp for those who grow irritated. Frustration surfaced in August 2025 when journalist Bilal Abdul Kareem[99] submitted a high-profile petition—on behalf of a group of foreign fighters and residents who had supported the opposition—to Syria's Ministry of Interior, demanding citizenship for their contribution to toppling Assad.[100] No significant grants of citizenship followed.

The patience of Syria's foreign fighters and their willingness to compromise on ideology remain uncertain, with the five-year citizenship deferral likely encouraging gradual attrition through voluntary departures. While some may leave for places like Afghanistan[101]—where the Taliban rule offers a welcoming environment for battle-hardened jihadis and some groups such as TIP maintain a presence—no major departures were reported as of mid-January 2026. Nevertheless, leaks or quiet exits could increase if frustration mounts or new opportunities arise for those favoring continued global jihad, echoing patterns among foreign fighters in past conflicts.

The case of Bosnia and Herzegovina provides a cautionary parallel. During the 1992-1995 war, an estimated 1,000-2,000 foreign fighters joined the conflict on the side of the Army of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina and were formally organized into the El Mudžahid detachment.[102] Many of these mujahideen veterans went on to fight in other conflicts, such as Chechnya, Pakistan, Afghanistan, even in Syria and Iraq.[m] Others became involved in terrorism, including two of the 9/11 hijackers (Khalid al Mihdhar and Nawaf al-Hazmi), Khalid Sheikh Mohammed (the mastermind of the 9/11), and numerous other al-Qa`ida operatives.[103]

Hundreds remained in Bosnia[104] after the war and were granted citizenship in recognition of their military contributions, despite the Dayton Peace Accords' explicit requirement to expel all foreign fighters.[n] Eventually, Bosnia's Citizenship Review Commission stripped citizenship from around 420 such individuals and deported them due to security risks.[105] Syria's trajectory—balancing rewards for loyalty against international demands—could follow a similar path of delayed resolutions and potential policy reversals.

An alternative for al-Sharaa would be to forgo senior promotions for foreign fighters and pursue a pragmatic integration approach—built on clear preconditions, measurable benchmarks, rigorous monitoring, and full transparency. It is impossible to predict whether this would succeed in transforming ideologically entrenched combatants into constructive, peaceful members of the inclusive society he envisions for Syria's future. Yet, how al-Sharaa addresses this challenge will rank among the most rigorous tests of his sincerity and ability in pivoting from jihadi commander to a pragmatic and constructive statesman deserving of international legitimacy.

So far, al-Sharaa has maintained effective control over potential dissent from hardline jihadi foreign fighters, and the likelihood of violent confrontation with any significant segment of them appears low. Besides a resurgent Islamic State—estimated by high-level Syrian and Iraqi officials to have significantly grown its force to between 5,000 and 10,000 fighters[106]—other primary flashpoints continue to be ethnic and territorial disputes. While al-Sharaa has achieved a notable short-term consolidation of power in the fragile post-Assad era, the long-term durability of his control remains

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m   Reda Seyam, a German Egyptian preacher who fought in Bosnia in 1994, joined the Islamic State and became the highest-ranking German member of the group, serving as 'emir of education' in the Islamic State-occupied city of Mosul where he was killed in 2014. See Adrian Shtuni, "New wave of Islamic State-inspired militancy in Europe very likely to continue in 2025," Janes, January 16, 2025; "Leading Islamist Wins Right to Name Son 'Djehad,'" Spiegel International, September 2, 2009.

n   The key provision is found in Annex 1-A (Military Aspects of the Peace Settlement), Article III, paragraph 2, which states: "The Parties shall ensure that all foreign forces, including individual advisors, freedom fighters, volunteers, and personnel of military training and support organizations, except for personnel referred to in paragraph 1 above [i.e., UN and IFOR/SFOR], withdraw from the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina not later than 30 days after the Transfer of Authority from UNPROFOR to IFOR." Additional reinforcing language appears in: Annex 1-B (Regional Stabilization), Article IV: Requires the withdrawal of all foreign forces from the territories of the Parties (Bosnia, Croatia, and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia). Annex 4 (Constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina), Article I, paragraph 4: Declares that Bosnia and Herzegovina "shall not permit the presence of foreign military forces on its territory except as provided for in Annex 1-A."

uncertain. Failure to meaningfully address deep-seated sectarian grievances—particularly among minorities such as Kurds, Alawites, and Druze who have faced reprisals, exclusion, and displacement—could erode this stability, leading to fragmented governance, renewed militia rivalries and separatist movements, and even a slide back into civil war.

Ultimately, the security challenges posed by foreign fighters form part of a much broader regional security and stability equation. A Syria at peace, free from oppression, stable, and prosperous would serve the core interests of the United States, the European Union, and neighboring countries—such as Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan—that have shouldered the burden of hosting millions of refugees. It would deny terrorists the ungoverned spaces and societal grievances they exploit for radicalization and plotting, while containing instability within its borders and safeguarding regional security. From a geopolitical perspective, keeping Russia and Iran sidelined in Syria would constitute a significant strategic victory for Western interests and modern Arab states. In this fragile post-Assad era, cautiously supporting al-Sharaa's transitional project through targeted engagement, rigorous oversight, and conditional incentives could yield the stability required to prevent terrorism from undermining peace and security across the region and beyond. CTC

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A View from the CT Foxhole: Naureen Chowdhury Fink, Executive Director, Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT)

By Don Rassler

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CTC: Some of our readers will be familiar with GIFCT and the work that you do. Others may not. Can you provide an overview of GIFCT and your mission, the work that you do, and some of the partnerships that you have, particularly with GNET, because we know that's an important one.

Fink: It's always great to be able to talk about GIFCT. Our mission is to prevent terrorists and violent extremists from exploiting digital platforms. It's a big mission, and we take it very seriously. GIFCT was started by industry. It started as a voluntary consortium established by industry—Facebook, Microsoft, YouTube, and Twitter—almost a decade ago, and yet, it was designed deliberately to foster multi-stakeholder engagement and to make sure that as an industry body, it was positioned to facilitate engagement with all the key sectors that help shape this space—governments, policymakers, academics, civil society. How do we deliver on this mission? What is it that we actually do? We do our work through four key tools. First, we have a hub for companies to be able to speak with each other, learn from each other, collaborate, engage. And through that, intra-company information-sharing, knowledge development is a key aspect of what we offer our members.

Second, we manage the hash-sharing database that allows us to create—for want of a shorthand—a digital 'fingerprint' of terrorist or violent extremist content. Member companies can then use that digital fingerprint to run matches against their own platforms and then act on it in accordance with their own policies. That hashing enables us to share information and raise awareness of terrorist or violent extremist content without actually resharing the content itself or without any of the private user information that is associated with it.

Third, we have an Incident Response Framework that allows us to work with our member companies to respond to online dimensions of offline violence, like the presence of perpetrator-produced content related to a terrorist or violent extremist attack. So, think of the Christchurch attack where you had perpetrator-produced content (livestreaming of the attack). We want to make sure that something like that, to the extent we can, doesn't happen again.

A fourth pillar of our work and one of our key tools is of course GNET, the Global Network on Extremism and Technology. That is the research arm of GIFCT. We invest heavily in GNET and the expert networks that are developed around it because it really helps us make sure that our members and stakeholders have access to cutting-edge global research and perspectives and analysis about what terror threats and counterterrorism solutions look like, where there are intersections of tech and counterterrorism and national security, through a global perspective.

As you may know, we have a very diverse membership. We've grown from four to over 35 companies. GNET helps to ensure that our members have access to subject matter expertise. We hope it also helps researchers and practitioners to understand the tech world a bit more and understand where the solutions and challenges come from on the tech side. So GNET, which is housed in King's College, London, is really a key part of our offering to our members.

CTC: You mentioned the growth of your membership at GIFCT. Can you help us understand what that membership universe looks like and the different types of companies that are members of GIFCT? And the types of challenges that you work through with some of your members?

Fink: Sure. We have grown from an initial four founding companies, which were at the time Facebook, Twitter, Microsoft, and YouTube, that established GIFCT as an independent non-profit to support industry members. Today, GIFCT is an organization with over 35 member companies that span from the big to the small and everything in between. We have a number of companies that are working on different types of content, different kinds of user engagement. And so, we range from our founding companies to TikTok to JustPaste.it and Pinterest and Airbnb, for example. It's really quite a range of companies, and I think that diversity is the key. We know that a lot of times, as terrorist and violent extremist groups have adapted to some of the measures that the big companies took early on, they have migrated, they have adapted to using different kinds of platforms. So, that diversity of size and type and geographies was really important and I think is a key aspect of that membership universe.

Becoming a GIFCT member is not necessarily easy, which is why we take great pride in this expansion. We have a set of membership criteria that companies have to look over and then decide if they're willing to make that commitment to join us. And we have a Membership Advisory Program now where if a company says, 'Look, I want to join, GIFCT, but I could still need some support in making sure we can be compliant with that criteria,' we will work with them for as long as it takes and as long as they'd like to work with us to make sure they meet that criteria. And at that point, they can become a member. So, growing in membership is not just a result of us looking at the map and the tech stack and saying, 'This is what we'd like.' It is actually a testament to the commitment of

industry to join us.

CTC: One of the things that I've always been curious about with GIFCT is that it was established by tech companies to be a consortium, to help facilitate knowledge exchange and information sharing exactly in the ways that you described. But how does GIFCT interact with governments? How does GIFCT engage with entities like the E.U.'s Internet Referral Unit or comparable places?

Fink: We have an Operating Board made up of tech companies. But we do also have an Independent Advisory Committee [IAC], which is made up of governments and civil society, and we have a rotating roster of governments which have included—the U.S., the U.K., Canada, the E.U., the Netherlands, and Australia—a number of countries have been there or rotated in, rotated out over the last number of years. We look to our IAC for advice, for support, for strategic perspectives on where things are happening and where we need to be. It also offers a forum for dialogue with GIFCT members, with GIFCT's board.

I would say, however, that we also host a number of multi-stakeholder events and engagements throughout the year that are deliberately designed to bring together governments and practitioners and experts with industry. At least once a year, we develop a strong regional partnership and we deliver a workshop, a training, whatever is appropriate to the region and is most helpful. We worked, for example, last year with the International Institute of Justice and the Rule of Law (the IIJ) in Malta and the government of Nigeria, and we put together a workshop with a focus on West Africa looking at regional threats and trends. [We brought] together practitioners, academics, GNET experts, gaming experts, CT folks, and that really allows us to dig deep into what's happening in a region. *What do we need to know? What do we need to take back to our members? But, also what do they need to understand about industry and CT trends?* And we do that at least once or twice a year.

So, government is one of the key sectors we engage with. They're definitely an active part of many of our multi-stakeholder events. The IAC also includes the European Union and the UN Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate. So, we have some international organizations there as well.

You had asked about the EU-IRU [Internet Referral Unit] of which we are active participants. We attend most of the meetings. We work with the technical groups on thematic issues, similarly with the U.N. and the GCTF [Global Counterterrorism Forum] and all those institutions, where we have sought to further both our substantive engagement with them, but also to make sure that what we learn and what we see there is something we can take back to our members and say, 'This is what you need to know about the threats and trends we're seeing globally.'

CTC: GIFCT sits at a very strategic and interesting vantage point where you're helping to convene different stakeholders focused around your mission, but you also get a sense of areas where public-private partnerships are working well and where they aren't. How do you evaluate the state of public-private partnerships to combat terrorist use of the internet and digital platforms?

Naureen Chowdhury Fink

Fink: The first metric I would look at is who we actually got to sit around the table. And I think that is a bit of a lesson learned for me. When I look back at the last two decades, I think there's been too little engagement with the private sector in talking about counterterrorism issues. For me, what has been a marker in the evolution of public-private partnerships is making sure we have the right players at the table. As you and I know, that's not easy to do. Getting someone to the table can be the tip of the iceberg after years of effort. But I think that is one of the key metrics. I don't underestimate how valuable that is. Once they're at the table, of course you need to have discussions and see where there is scope for collaboration and where there may be divergence, and work together. But I think a huge challenge has been that we haven't seen enough of public-private partnerships in the CT space, and that for me was a bit of a surprise. I thought in 20 years, we'd had all the sectors covered—certainly I think after the Christchurch attack, but certainly in the heyday of ISIS. It was a real shock that it was that hard of a step to climb.

I think the second marker of success [is] finding consensus and agreeing on the classifications and the harms that we need to address. That is, I think, the great underestimated success of all this because we take for granted that everyone believed that there was a harm that needed to be addressed and that there was something different sectors could do together. We know, on the government side, it took many years—sometimes decades depending where you want to start that conversation—for governments to realize

that there was a transnational threat that required a multilateral intergovernmental response.

I think similarly with public private partnerships, the consensus on the harm types has been hard won; as with state actors, it required collaboration and agreements among a wide range of industry actors to agree to some common understandings and classifications that allowed us to build collaborative tools and solutions. And I don't think we talk enough about that, how important it is to reach a common ground before developing solutions, which I think has been a big success.

CTC: Next year is a big year for GIFCT as the organization will mark its 10-year anniversary. When you reflect on what GIFCT has achieved, what its accomplishments have been over that period, what stands out to you? What do you think GIFCT should be the proudest of?

Fink: It's so exciting to be planning for that anniversary. It is hard won, and what I'm most proud of is the growth and the diversification of GIFCT's membership. It was a tremendous thing for four big companies to say, 'Hey, we need to actually work together and breakdown some of these silos.' But I think to get to nearly 40 companies—and as I shared, becoming a GIFCT member means making a commitment and making transformations internally to be able to join—that diversification and expansion really represents an important commitment of the sector to a certain set of norms and criteria that bind our efforts together.

Some of the things I'm also really proud of, especially since I joined, is that we've created an in-house Membership Advisory Program, which means we provide a lot more resources to our members and our candidates directly. We have also updated our Incident Response Framework to what is needed in this day and age. When the framework was developed, it was several years ago. Initially, the threat looked different, and the needs of member companies looked different. We have undergone a long multi-stakeholder process to get to a new Incident Response Framework, which means companies can get more support in responding to terrorist threats in terms of how they manifest today. We have developed a huge member resource portal. It's called Compass, [which allows members access to] the wealth of resources GIFCT puts together for them. So, these are some of the more tactical in-house things we have been able to do to get at that great strategic achievement, which I'm so proud of, which is the membership.

CTC: I'd like to pivot a little bit and talk about your own personal journey. We've known each other for a long time, and you have worked in various roles focused on national security and in the counterterrorism world. Can you talk a bit about your personal journey and some of the different roles you've had and how that's prepared you to serve in your current role?

Fink: Looking back on it, it's longer than I realized it had been, which makes me feel older! To give a little overview, I've worked with nonprofits and think tanks. I guess they would be called think-and-do tanks because we did research, we did analysis, we did publishing. But I've also delivered projects and programs in places as diverse as West Africa or Southeast Asia or Europe. [That] was really an eye-opener into how these issue sets and these norms develop around the world.

> **"Working with different stakeholders teaches you a lot about how the same problem can look to different stakeholders and where you can actually find points of commonality. Divergence is easy to find. There's a lot of noise about where we all disagree on things, but finding that convergence, which *is* there, has been one of the most exciting parts of working with so many different stakeholders."**

That work was complemented by work that I've done at the UN Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate, UN Women, and interestingly, I had a chance to represent the United Kingdom on counterterrorism and sanctions issues at the U.N., working with the Security Council, with the General Assembly, with governments, and with counterterrorism practitioners. When I look back on this two-decade journey, it comes down to people and partnerships. That's the main 'treasure chest' I feel like I've collected along the way because in working with governments, with civil society, delivering programs, writing for government, working on closed-door negotiations, I've really been able to get a 360-degree view on how these issues develop.

In addition to that substantive learning, which is huge, working with different stakeholders teaches you a lot about how the same problem can look to different stakeholders and where you can actually find points of commonality. Divergence is easy to find. There's a lot of noise about where we all disagree on things, but finding that convergence, which *is* there, has been one of the most exciting parts of working with so many different stakeholders.

CTC: How would you characterize the state of the terrorist activity online today and how extremists are using or attempting to use digital platforms? What does that landscape look like?

Fink: Over the past two decades, the state of terrorism activity online in some ways has mirrored our own activity online. [Whether] we're working, shopping, loving, living, everything is online, and we're all using multiplicities of apps and tools to do it. And that is very much what we're seeing about the threat: Adversarial actors are using multiple platforms for recruitment, for propaganda, for instructional support, for operational planning. In the early years, we sort of focused on single platforms or single usage, whereas now the threat has been not only cross-sector, but cross-platform. That is very much a characteristic of the contemporary landscape. We've seen a lot more multi-layered exploitation of the gaming and gaming-adjacent spaces. I think it's always good to remember that; it's not just the game, right? It's the social space and the environment that gaming produces that is vulnerable to exploitation.

We are also seeing a very worrying trend of increasingly young people not just as victims but sometimes as perpetrators as well. It's not a new trend. We've seen violent non-state groups—whether it's

the Lord's Resistance Army or Boko Haram or ISIS—target kids. But looking online, the volume and scale and the increasing focus on youth is really a worrisome trend, particularly as we're seeing groups like 764 really gain strength.

This leads to another aspect, which is also worrying, and that is terrorist groups are learning and adapting. So, as counterterrorism measures are successful, or they understand what is happening on one platform, they're able to adapt and evade—whether it's content moderation evasion, whether it's learning to use legitimate symbols, words, images to create that kind of meme culture or create that 'lawful but awful' content. The adversarial adaptation to CT is something we also have to grapple with so that we're not always preparing for 'September 10, 2001.'

CTC: One of those adversarial points of adaptation, as you know, and as GNET has published quite a bit about, is terrorist use of artificial intelligence and machine learning tools. Can you help unpack that a little bit for our readers? How are terrorists are using AI online? And alternatively, how are some of your members using AI to counter the threat?

Fink: If I had to sum it up in a sentence, it would be in many ways enhancing the volume and the scale of the content that we're seeing while lowering the threshold for entry. It makes it easier to produce more volume, more scale, at a greater scope. Generative AI tools, for example, have been used to augment and manipulate terrorist violent extremist content to avoid detection, to evade those content moderation efforts by making sure that AI can—at scale—produce content that is evasive. We have seen it in attack planning. We've seen the use of AI tools that can facilitate the planning and operationalization of attacks by widely sharing information regarding bomb making, 3D-printed firearms. The future potentials for use in chemical and biological weapon design is definitely something we're hearing a lot of concern about. AI has also been used to facilitate not just fundraising, but mobilization and incentivization through chat bots.

We used to talk about how important social networks were and one-on-one engagement for terrorist groups to recruit and mobilize. But now AI can do this at scale through a chat bot. You don't have to find a safe space for a conversation. You don't have to travel to meet an individual. We're hearing that chat bots are an attractive way to interact and develop relationships, particularly for young people, and I think that is going to be a very challenging and worrisome use of AI. In terms of recruitment and radicalization, we're seeing that AI can strengthen the capacities of violent extremist groups to personalize that effort to make sure that they can be linguistically more capable, that they can reach a larger number of people.

We have not yet seen attack perpetration through AI. So, I think we right now are looking at the recruitment, mobilization, incentivization, attack-planning phase, but not the perpetration phase just yet. But with developments in UAS and some of the other capabilities, it doesn't feel that far away.

We know that AI also presents immense opportunities. We are seeing many of our members prioritizing user privacy and safety, and recognizing that as AI evolves, it means they have to think about multi-layer mitigations right from product design to hardware function to content moderation. We are seeing many of our members talk about integrating AI considerations when designing and developing tools. It's sort of safety by design, which

is done by testing out risks through red teaming, deepening understanding of how AI is classifying information or content, and really understanding that pathway.

Ensuring tools that are developed can't be modified by malicious users or hard locks or other encryption safeguards is critical. One of the ones we talk about is Microsoft's Prompt Shields, which is an API within Azure AI Content Safety that helps safeguard large language models from adversarial misuse by detecting and blocking harmful or policy-violating prompts before the content is generated. So, some of these proactive built-in safety mechanisms are exemplifying how the industry can responsibly innovate while reducing risk. But we also know a lot of our members have been able to use AI to search, find, and help identify harmful content on their platforms and actually help enhance also the volume and scale of a preventive engagement.

CTC: What do you think governments can learn from the work of your members and how they have been utilizing AI and AI-related tools as part of their pipelines and processes to engage in and manage terrorist activity and content on their platforms? I ask because governments are investing heavily in this area, but I think if we're honest, they're a bit behind the curve than most of your members. So, there's probably a lot that governments can learn from the work of your members.

Fink: I think the greatest aspect I notice when working with governments versus working with our industry partners is speed. We know by nature, and for very good reasons, government just doesn't have the speed that the private sector has at its disposal. But I don't think it's going to be a choice any longer. We are going to have to figure out how government actors can adapt to the speed of [technological] innovation. I think one of the answers is more open multi-stakeholder engagement because, as I said, one of the sectors in 20 years of counterterrorism conversations that I think was underrepresented was the private sector, which means a lot of the initiatives, a lot of the investment didn't really go into working with the private sector. But the GenAI evolution is just at a speed that we cannot comprehend. So, I think for governments, the key lesson learned will have to be speed and flexibility and how to find a way to make that happen.

CTC: When you think about future terrorist use of the internet and digital platforms, what concerns you the most? We have talked about the current threat environment, extremist use of AI, but when you look out and scan the horizon, what concerns you?

Fink: What concerns me the most is the speed at which it all operates and the reduced friction—the lowered bars for entry—which means that you can have more and more individuals mobilizing at pace and unseen by law enforcement or intelligence or any other kind of community safeguard. That means we're seeing more and more kids get wrapped up in this, and that brings on a whole other responsibility to make sure that the rights and needs of children are protected while we're making sure we're doing effective counterterrorism. Speed and the lowering bar of entry for individuals is what worries me because it has so many repercussions for practice, for prevention, for risk mitigation.

"We know by nature, and for very good reasons, government just doesn't have the speed that the private sector has at its disposal. But I don't think it's going to be a choice any longer. We are going to have to figure out how government actors can adapt to the speed of [technological] innovation."

CTC: GIFCT has had to navigate different points of controversy and different points of view regarding its work. For example, X (previously Twitter) was a founding member of GIFCT but is no longer a member of GIFCT. Similarly, while TikTok is a current member, its application to join was previously not approved for controversial reasons. GIFCT has also been criticized for its lack of transparency, especially about its internal deliberations. As a leader of GIFCT, how have you been navigating through these issues and challenges, and how would you respond to some of them?

Fink: Well, X [Twitter at the time] was an important founding member. We really appreciate their contributions. They chose to conclude their membership with GIFCT to strengthen their internal trust and safety efforts. So, we are very grateful for the contributions while they were with us, and we look forward to collaborating again in the future. Since I joined, TikTok's gone through the membership process. They've worked closely with our teams to get to the point where they meet all the criteria, and it's been great to work with them both as a candidate company—while they were a candidate, they were active in many of our projects and events—and now since they joined us as a full-fledged member. We're really grateful to have them as a member.

I don't know if any of the spaces I've ever worked in have been without controversy. But we remain really deeply committed to working transparently and in a manner that fosters respect for human rights. GIFCT at the very early stages of its inception created a human rights impact assessment that was a foundational document. One of the things I'm really proud of is how we continue to make progress on many of its recommendations, which focus on transparency and making sure that the human rights lens is on all our work. We regularly seek feedback from our multi-stakeholder community through the workshops, working groups, consultations, and we have an annual transparency report where all our work is published.

Controversy is always going to be part of this work, and I think in many ways, that's good. There's a healthy tension. We work in a very important space that touches on very key considerations for different sectors. So, a healthy amount of tension and dialogue is what keeps us on our toes and aiming to be better.

CTC: Dealing with a multi-stakeholder environment, there are obviously always going to be points of tension that you have to navigate through. How has the tension between the United States and European governments regarding content

moderation activity, as guided by the Digital Services Act and other legislation in Europe, and disagreements about free speech and censorship impacted the work of GIFCT and its members.[1] For example, in late December of last year, it was reported that the U.S. State Department directed its consular staff to "thoroughly explore" the background of H1-B visa applicants who work in content moderation and trust and safety.[2]

Fink: We definitely continue to monitor all these developments and keep an open conversation going with our partners across governments, industry, and civil society. It is an ever unfolding and changing context. So, it is definitely one we are tracking closely.

Collaboration is such a key part of what we do, and I earlier described our Independent Advisory Committee. I think that is a really important forum for governments that have different perspectives on how these issues should be addressed and how they're working to provide input on GIFCT's priorities and work. We welcome those strategic recommendations and guidance. We continue to work with our international partners to better understand the entry points and opportunities for collaboration.

A key part of all this has been to make sure that our hash-sharing database has clear and agreed boundaries or taxonomies; these serve as formal guidance for how our hash-sharing database operates. To go down to the tactical level a little, although different member companies have slightly different operational definitions of terrorism or terrorist content, GIFCT's taxonomy at least represents a place of consensus about some high severity content among members, in terms of a common lexicon about the terrorist and violent extremist content that can be hashed through the database So, GIFCT's taxonomy give us that important point of convergence for different actors to be able to work together.

CTC: Over the past year, the Trump administration has designated at least 25 new foreign terrorist organizations (FTOs), and in the past, the FTO list and other designation lists have been utilized by some of your members to help guide some of their activity in terms of inclusion—what is terrorism, what is not. The expansion of the FTO list is a seismic shift for our community. How have your members been responding to those types of changes?

Fink: It's an ongoing conversation because many of our member companies are situated in countries which have their own lists and designations. So, we have always been working in a space with evolving designation lists and perspectives on terrorist groups. All our member companies, first of all, have their own policies regarding content moderation and their own approaches to lists and violent extremist organizations. But I will say that the way we operate, for example, our hash-sharing database and our IRF [Incident Response Framework] have the flexibility to adapt to evolving threats as well as boundaries. That's because we have a number of criteria that allow for labels in the hash-sharing database and that allow us to action different kinds of content. Some of the criteria emerged early from the U.N.'s 1267 sanctions list, which largely focused on ISIS and al-Qa`ida. But we also have a number of behavioral labels that categorize content by the type of harm and incident labels that are created from activations. So, that means that you don't just have to be a designated entity to activate the hash-

sharing database or an incident; you have to be sharing perpetrator-produced content that meets the criteria, which means we don't have a limitation on the kind of content that we action based on the perpetrator. [This] puts us in a position to adapt to the lists because we can action [terrorist and violent extremist] content by a range of perpetrators.

CTC: So, if I understand it right, by focusing on the behavior as a core indicator and those sort of signals, your members are already looking across and beyond the list in terms of what isn't being captured.

Fink: Exactly. That allows our members to have discussions about different kinds of perpetrators because we're focused largely on the action. Through GNET, through our regional consultations, through working with industry partners we are also facilitating ongoing conversations about how members are reacting to these changes [and] any lessons learned they have to share with their peers. And as you said, it is a big shift. We deal with countries with many different types of lists, but we do want to make sure our members always have a chance to talk to each other about how to respond.

CTC: What's the hardest part of your job? Given GIFCT's diverse membership, I would imagine that it's managing and navigating through different equities, but I don't know if that's right.

Fink: For me, the hardest part of the job is knowing that there's always more to be done, and as soon as we think we've succeeded in one aspect or think that we have understood one trend, [we always have to] be ready for the next evolution of the threat. When you look at the environment and the context where GIFCT was established versus what we're looking at now in terms of the threat, the solutions, the sectors involved, I think the hardest part is not ever feeling quite comfortable resting easy [on our laurels].

Another challenge we do need to think about is that as we continue to grow our membership and expand and improve the member resources, we also need to think about what our members need. If our members are going to be increasingly diverse and a larger group, we need to make sure that we are constantly introspective and make sure the tools we develop suit them. That is always an ongoing process.   CTC

Citations

1   For background see, Mark Scott, "Trump Squares Off with Brussels Over its Digital Rulebook," Tech Policy Press, August 28, 2025.

2   For context, see Shannon Bond, "State Department to deny visas to fact checkers and others, citing 'censorship,'" NPR, December 4, 2025.

True Crime Community: Understanding the Depths of Digital Fandom and Performative Violence

By Peter Smith, Cat Cadenhead, and Clara Broekaert

This article maps the proliferation of the online True Crime Community (TCC), a layered online ecosystem organized around the consumption, discussion, celebration, and—at its most extreme—emulation of violent perpetrators. Drawing on documented cases of violent attacks from 2024–2025, the authors outline how the TCC functions as a layered fandom culture in which mass-casualty perpetrators are researched, aestheticized, imitated, and ultimately incorporated into a shared mythos. They situate the TCC within the broader landscape of nihilistic violence and participatory memetic extremist networks, sustained by symbolism, references, and aesthetic call-backs that form a performative language understood by community insiders. By mapping the TCC's tiered structure and the porous boundaries between mainstream true-crime consumption, fandom spaces, violent sub-clusters, and offline attacks, the authors demonstrate why the TCC represents a self-sustaining threat vector. The article concludes with future considerations for researchers, platforms, and security practitioners confronting this threat.

On the morning of December 16, 2024, 15-year-old Natalie Lynn Rupnow arrived at Abundant Life Christian School in Madison, Wisconsin, in an Uber her father had ordered. Armed with a Glock 19, a Sig Sauer P322, loaded magazines, and ammunition concealed in her backpack, Rupnow photographed the tiled floor of a school bathroom, her combat boots, and her hand forming the "OK" symbol, posting the image to the social media platform X. Minutes later, she shared a link on the same account to what appeared to be a manifesto. Carrying one of the handguns into classroom C218, a mixed-grade study hall, Rupnow fatally shot fellow student Rubi Patricia Vergara, 14, and teacher Erin Michelle West, 42, while injuring six others. The shooting ended when the perpetrator took her own life.[1]

When Rupnow's alleged online boyfriend later shared a copy of her manifesto with a journalist,[a] it revealed Rupnow's intense self-loathing and deep resentment of people in her life and humanity more generally. The document is a screed of racism, anger, insecurity, and fixation on violence. Yet, what stands out most is Rupnow's longstanding fascination with mass killers, reflected vividly across the pages. Her manifesto includes images and brief profiles of perpetrators she appeared to idolize: Pekka Eric Auvinen, who killed eight at Jokela High School in Finland in November 2007 before turning his gun on himself;[2] Vladislav Roslyakov who killed 20 and injured dozens more in October 2018 in Kerch, Crimea;[3] and 18-year-old Arda Küçükyetim, who stabbed five people in a tea garden near a mosque in Turkey in August 2024.[4] Statements throughout the document point to years of research and preparation by Rupnow, with references suggesting that her interest in mass violence dated back as far as 2020, four years before the shooting.

In the immediate aftermath of the attack, Rupnow's online history, pictures, and social media accounts were swiftly documented, and dedicated archival websites were launched to preserve every detail of her digital footprint. For many of these amateur investigators, interest in Rupnow after her death was an attempt to better understand an act of wanton violence, but for a few, it was an act of admiration for someone continuing a lineage of infamous but exalted murderers.

This is not a unique phenomenon. Rupnow and her admirers exist as part of a larger fandom centered on perpetrators of mass shootings and similar acts of violence. Just as Rupnow was inspired by the shooters who came before her, her final act added to the same pantheon of death and has already been taken up by a community that uses her memory to motivate others to do the same.

A month after her attack, Solomon Henderson, a 17-year-old student at Antioch High School in Nashville, Tennessee, murdered

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a   In a December 2024 X thread, journalist Anna Slatz (@Slatzism) claimed to have obtained and verified the alleged manifesto of the Wisconsin school shooter through contact with an individual described as the shooter's online boyfriend, who Rupnow is not believed to have ever met in person. Excerpts of the manifesto repeated in a criminal complaint against Jeffery Rupnow, Natalie Rupnow's father, contain quotations that match the document. See Slatzism, "I have made contact with the alleged boyfriend of the Wisconsin shooter …," X, December 16, 2024.

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Cat Cadenhead is a Threat Intelligence Analyst at Tech Against Terrorism, where she conducts OSINT monitoring and analysis to help disrupt terrorist use of the internet. Her work includes producing intelligence-led threat reporting and alerting tech platforms to the presence of terrorist content on their services.

Clara Broekaert is a research analyst at The Soufan Center where she focuses on terrorism, foreign interference, and technology.

Abundant Life Christian School in Madison, Wisconsin, is pictured on December 17, 2024, the day after a 15-year-old shooter killed two individuals and injured six others there. (Scott Olson/Getty Images)

one student and left another wounded. Henderson repeatedly idolized Rupnow in his journals and delighted in the fact that one of her X accounts had followed him. When Rupnow had posted her last photo from the school bathroom, an account connected to Solomon responded: "Livestream it."[5]

Rupnow's influence cascaded further. In September 2025, Desmond Holly injured two students at Evergreen High School in Colorado before taking his own life. While Holly did not leave a manifesto or note, his social media account on TikTok was known for espousing antisemitic conspiracy theories and is littered with symbols associated with far-right extremist movements. On the same account, he attempted to recreate an image that Rupnow had posted before her death[6] and donned a shirt reading "wrath," a nod to the outfit worn by Columbine shooter Dylan Klebold.[7]

Rupnow, Henderson, and Holly were all part of the same informal online ecosystem, which self-identifies as the True Crime Community (TCC). While predominantly researched in the U.S. context, TCC-linked violence has metastasized globally, with documented cases across Europe, Asia, and Latin America. In November 2025, a bombing attack against a public high school in Indonesia injured 97 students as they gathered for afternoon prayers. The alleged perpetrator, a 17-year-old student at the school, detonated seven IEDs. Images from the attack show that he carried several replica rifles with him that day[8] that referenced previous attacks in Columbine, Christchurch, Quebec City, Macerata, and other locations. On TikTok, the perpetrator posted a video appearing to imitate Rupnow. In the video, filmed in a school bathroom, he makes the "OK" hand gesture and captioned it, "here it comes." Notably, the post included hashtags commonly used by the TCC to share content.

The true nature of these cases, often seemingly disparate in geography, target selection, and surface ideology, becomes fully intelligible only when analyzed through the lens of the TCC. What initially appears as random violence or isolated personal grievance reveals itself as participatory engagement in a transnational subculture where attacks function as symbolic contributions to a collective narrative.

This article proceeds in four parts. The first section defines the online community that is inspiring young attackers to commit acts of violence, situating this phenomenon within emerging research on nihilistic violence (NV) and participatory memetic violent extremism. The second section maps the layered structure of the TCC. As the TCC consists of a broad category of people, the different layers of engagement have been divided into tiers that range from mainstream true-crime content consumption to violent sub-clusters, and outlines how individuals can move through these tiers. The third section of the article explores recurring themes in the profiles of TCC-linked perpetrators. The final section considers what the structure, origin, and *modus operandi* of the TCC means for researchers, platforms, and security officials.

Defining the True Crime Community

The fluid, decentralized structure of the TCC complicates efforts to quantify it. Estimates of TCC-linked violent plots vary considerably, while available data remains fragmented across national and international jurisdictions, limiting comprehensive assessment. The Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) has counted at least 15 different attacks and plots between January 2024 and September 2025.[9] The authors' own dataset similarly identifies

21 TCC-linked attacks and plots across 2024-2025.[b] Of all violent attacks and plots ISD studied in 2024 within the United States, about two-thirds of victims (deaths and injuries) were inflicted by TCC-linked perpetrators.[10] Indications of the network's growth and influence beyond Western contexts has also emerged: The Head of the Indonesian National Police's Criminal Investigation Unit, Commissioner General Syahardiantono, highlighted that in 2025 the national police's anti-terror squad had dealt with 68 children exposed to violent extremist ideology through the TCC "with an action plan targeting the school environment and their colleagues."[11]

While these figures provide a partial indication of scale, a clearer picture emerges when examining how these plots are enacted. Violent acts linked to the TCC often refer and call back—explicitly or implicitly—to other violent acts that are TCC-linked or claimed as part of TCC lore, such as the Columbine High School shooting. Connections to the TCC are often signaled through manifestos that reference well-known perpetrators, online communications in TCC spaces prior to an attack, and the deliberate imitation of mannerisms, symbols, clothing choices, and inscriptions on weapons. These cues are rarely incidental; perpetrators make their affiliation with the TCC, or with a specific subcommunity within it, legible through a shared symbolic language.

Crucially, these signals are not primarily directed at external audiences; they are aimed inward, toward the TCC itself. Manifestos, symbols, and references such as gun inscriptions or clothing choices mimicking other perpetrators are only fully intelligible to those deeply embedded in these online communities. The meaning of the perpetrator's outfit choice, mannerisms, and symbols is often layered and requires onlookers to be 'in the know' about prior attacks and the collective mythos of the TCC. TCC-linked violent plots are thus deeply performative acts of violence, where recognition by fellow participants is fundamental to the execution of the act.

The participatory nature of TCC-linked attacks is not unique to this online subculture. Far-right extremist attackers have similarly explicitly positioned their violence within a chain reaction and as part of a larger narrative of a transnational far-right movement. One in-depth study of the Buffalo, New York, terrorist attack finds: "There is a kind of 'wiki effect' to these attacks, with each individual attacker contributing to the larger product of the far-right extremist movement."[12] Specifically, the Buffalo shooter copied large portions of the Christchurch manifesto and stated Brenton Tarrant "started everything you see here."[13]

The TCC can be situated within an emerging classification of violence often described as nihilistic violence (NV) or nihilistic violent extremism (NVE). This category encompasses individuals who encourage, glorify, investigate, disseminate, and ultimately commit acts of violence in the absence of a clear or distinct ideological motivation. Although such violence may appear senseless, it reflects the dynamics of a social ecosystem composed largely of young, disaffected individuals who elevate suicidal ideation with a final act of retributive memorialization. While the TCC draws on older gore and true crime fandoms that long predate online platforms,[c] its contemporary, networked form has become a significant vector for radicalization and violence.[14]

The referential component of violent acts linked to the TCC, and NVE milieus more broadly, has led some scholars to coin the concept of participatory memetic violent extremism, "a form of violence that is a symbolic statement of affiliation with or participation in groups that valorize violent or transgressive action, either as an end in itself or for its perceived social and cultural significance, in lieu of any clear strategic, political, or ideological goal."[15] TCC-linked acts can be understood as participatory, aiming to further expand the TCC patchwork of narratives and legends through the performance of violence. In this case, radicalization to offline violence signifies a shift from consuming and producing content to actively seeking to further the TCC.

Drawing on the authors' own dataset and previous analysis by ISD[16] of TCC-linked plots and attacks, a pattern of temporal clustering becomes evident. School shootings linked back to the TCC appear to inspire others to commit similar attacks, giving credence to the argument that participatory motivations are driving TCC-linked attacks. This recreative effort is not unique to the TCC; similar processes have been identified in other violent actors across a range of ideological contexts. Research employing "self-exciting" models to assess the occurrence of certain types of terrorist violence has noted that one attack increases the likelihood of another.[17] While this occurrence is not universal across all attack types and tactics, it speaks to a similar pattern of behavior observed within TCC and broader NVE communities.[18] TCC is thus dangerously self-sustaining; each TCC-linked violent attack prompts a new wave of fandom content and engagement, which in turn further fuels the legend of TCC, spurring on people seeking to participate, mimic, and expand it.

Scoping Out the Digital Phenomenon

Many of the behaviors observed in the TCC are not novel. Obsessive fandoms that venerate perpetrators and minimize their guilt predate the internet. Online, some of the most active and enduring fandoms of this kind developed around the Columbine perpetrators in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

Indeed, the "Columbiner" fandom can be thought of as a precursor to the TCC. "Columbiners" emerged on early message boards in the months after the April 1999 attack and expanded with

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b   The authors compiled a dataset documenting TCC-linked attacks and foiled plots observed since January 2024. As of January 1, 2026, the dataset contains 21 entries, nine of which were foiled plots, involving a total of 23 perpetrators or would-be perpetrators with a median age of 17. Across these incidents, the authors recorded 23 fatalities and 186 injuries. Geographically, 15 attacks or plots occurred in the United States, with additional cases in Malaysia (1), Indonesia (1), Russia (1), Austria (1), Ukraine (1), and Mexico (1). These figures should be understood as a minimum baseline rather than a comprehensive count. Two structural limitations contribute to the incompleteness of the dataset. First, media and law-enforcement reporting often does not employ the 'true crime community' (TCC) label even when cases exhibit characteristics consistent with TCC-linked radicalization, making systematic identification difficult. Second, many investigations remain partially or fully classified, limiting publicly available detail. For example, although the Indonesian police chief publicly stated that 68 minors were identified in 2024 for their involvement in TCC-linked violent plotting, the authors were unable to locate additional reporting or case-level information that would allow inclusion of these incidents in the dataset.

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c   The phenomenon of glorifying and romanticizing violent criminals, also known as "hybristophilia," has a long pre-internet history, particularly around serial killers and other mass casualty killers. The serial killer Ted Bundy received numerous love letters from women and had 'groupies' attend his trials. Sue Klebold, the mother of one of the Columbine shooters, indicated she was "receiving love letters to Dylan from young girls in the mail" after the Columbine High School shooting.

the growth of social media, effectively establishing a template for other shooter fandoms. It was later, with the growth of social media engagement among young people in the late 2010s, that the TCC emerged. While there is no date that signifies its creation, the TCC is part of what has been dubbed the online "edge sphere" that began to take shape between 2018 and 2020 and has become a multitude of misanthropic online communities that engage in the deliberate erosion of social norms and glorification of violence.[19]

TCC is a layered online fandom. As membership or affiliation is organized around shared fascination with crime and perpetrators rather than adherence to a single doctrine, the boundaries between benign interest, glorifying fandom, and violent advocacy are porous. This weak layering creates comparatively low friction pathways from casual engagement to ideological learning, emulation of TCC cultural practices, and, for a small subset of individuals, radicalization to violence. The following discussion outlines the visible, mainstream layer of the TCC, then traces the progression toward more insular and violent subcommunities.

Tier 1: Mainstream True Crime Consumption

At its most visible layer, the TCC is a popular media genre centered on interest in and investigation of real crime cases. Online content spans blogs, podcasts, videos, opinion pages, and documentaries that regularly reach mass audiences. Participants consume and produce deep-dive case analyses, timelines, "fact files," and reconstructions of how offenses were planned and carried out. Some spaces collate and repost primary materials such as court documents, crime-scene photographs, and, occasionally, perpetrators' manifestos. Their motivations are varied: curiosity, entertainment, an interest in forensic methods, or a desire to 'solve' unsolved cases. While these practices raise important ethical questions about victim privacy and the commodification of suffering, in the vast majority of cases, it does not serve as a gateway to extremist activity or radicalization.

Nonetheless, this hobbyist, mainstream TCC serves as the broad catchment area from which more concerning forms of engagement can emerge. Platform recommendation systems and user search behaviors can draw individuals toward more graphic and transgressive material.[20] What begins as an interest in historic cases or high-profile incidents can, for a minority of users, evolve into sustained engagement with perpetrator-centered narratives and highly visual depictions of violence. This phenomenon has previously been described as a "dark fandom" by the Information Network Focus on Religious Movements (INFORM), defined as "a group of people united by their fascination with individuals who carried out, and/or events that culminated in, an act of violence or atrocity."[21] While many fandoms, including dark ones, remain benign at an individual level, they are inherently participatory. Consumers of this material frequently become producers, contributing to a social environment that can, at best, offer a sympathetic and sanitized portrayal of perpetrators and, at worst, actively encourage others to emulate their actions.

Tier 2: Fandom and Parasocial Identification

The second, more concerning tier is characterized by a shift from analytical interest in crimes to fascination with, and sometimes admiration for, the perpetrators themselves. Participants form parasocial relationships with offenders, reframing them as misunderstood anti-heroes, tragic figures, or objects of romantic interest. The focus moves to understanding the logic of an offense

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and empathizing with the offender. Practices in this tier include the production and circulation of fan art, fan fiction, and aesthetic edits centered on perpetrators; the emulation of their clothing or personal style; attempts to contact them in prison; and the dissemination of their manifestos, diaries, or personal writings. By creating a fanbase around perpetrators, elevating them to celebrity status, the process of glorifying their actions is set in motion.

Online users in this tier often constitute the most visible and prolific posters in TCC spaces, generating the bulk of content associated with known TCC hashtags on platforms including TikTok and Tumblr. While the material is transgressive and celebrates individuals who caused mass harm, it rarely meets the threshold for imminent concern, as it typically lacks explicit intent or demonstrated capability, and is likely not to be acted upon by moderation or trust and safety teams.

As in many online subcultures, video games that include creative and world-building elements are used to construct digital spaces where members can interact and expand on their common interests. For the TCC, games popular with young audiences, such as Minecraft and Roblox, are used to recreate significant locations or events related to mass acts of violence. Gameplay of these recreations are frequently recorded and reshared on other social media platforms, complicating moderation efforts.[22] This tier does not explicitly engage in the promotion and encouragement of future shooters, but remains in close proximity to those who do, often circulating material created by those in more radical tiers.

Graphic footage is more prevalent in this tier, including livestreams of attacks, bystander footage, and photographs of victims or deceased perpetrators. There is significant overlap in the TCC with dedicated gore communities, and gore content is frequently shared among its members. At this tier, this material is often edited with filters and music, transforming documentation of atrocities into entertainment and tribute material. The accessibility of AI-enabled editing tools has amplified this production. These tools have enabled the rapid generation of multiple variants that evade hash-based content moderation systems, substantially

expanding the circulation of graphic footage across platforms.[23]

While content may at first glance appear distasteful but harmless, this tier warrants substantially greater scrutiny from trust and safety teams and violence prevention practitioners for several interconnected reasons. Firstly, the celebration and idealization of perpetrators fundamentally desensitizes users to the gravity of the acts undertaken. Content that would initially provoke shock or moral repulsion becomes normalized in the TCC ecosystem through repeated exposure, with some research suggesting that this could lead to reduced emotional reactivity and empathic responses.[24] Users apply invented attributes for perpetrators, fabricate relationships between them, create alternative narratives of their motivations, and humanize them through fictionalized portrayals, which helps to sanitize or minimize the horrors they inflicted. Furthermore, the average age of active participants is concerningly young, with evidence indicating considerable adolescent and even pre-adolescent engagement. Prior to content moderation interventions, the TCC tag on Tumblr featured numerous "introduction posts" where users presented themselves to the community. Monitoring conducted by the authors in November and December 2025 on Tumblr indicated that the majority of these users self-identified as under 18, with many explicitly reporting ages between 13 and 16. Matthew Kriner, the managing director of the Accelerationism Research Consortium, has reported similar numbers, stating that most individuals fall in the range of 13 to 18.[25] While this does not suggest the entire TCC comprises minors, it underscores that key online spaces hosting this content feature a high prevalence of young users who are then interacting with and forming identities around disturbing material in these instances.

An additional, often-overlooked feature of the TCC is that, in certain online spaces, it functions as an interactive and participatory community rather than a loose collection of individuals consuming the same media. Participants develop ongoing relationships, recognize familiar usernames, and attribute status to particular contributors. Based on the authors' observations, there are informal hierarchies and roles: Some users are known for producing the most detailed case analyses; others for creating the most visually striking edits, the most graphic content, or the most provocative commentary. For certain participants in the TCC, initial curiosity about crime or a single case may have drawn them into the TCC, but it is this sense of belonging, of having online friends or being recognized and validated, that keeps them there.[26] In environments where attraction to perpetrators or fascination with extreme violence would be stigmatized offline, the TCC offers a rare space where such interests can be discussed openly and even celebrated.

While Tier 2 participation does not inevitably lead to violence, it constitutes a critical intermediate stage in documented radicalization pathways.[27] Multiple TCC-linked school shooters progressed through fandom engagement before operational planning. Natalie Rupnow, for example, was known to members of the community and active in TCC fora,[28] and Damian Haglund kept a blog idolizing the Columbine perpetrators.[29] The volume and visibility of Tier 2 activity make it both the most observable manifestation of TCC culture and a critical intervention point.

Tier 3: Violent Sub-Clusters

The third tier consists of tighter-knit, more violent sub-clusters that overlap significantly with extremist spaces. Individuals in this tier continue to exchange violent material, often repackaged and

> **"Producing content that stands out often requires being more explicit, extreme, or transgressive than others. This leads to a social contest that encourages participants to push boundaries, leading to an escalation in the gore, cruelty, or intensity of posts. The result is a feedback loop in which the most extreme contributions are rewarded with attention and status, further pulling the normative center toward the margins."**

redistributed from video-streaming platforms that apply minimal or no moderation and are widely known for hosting gore content. These sites themselves have evolved into fringe social networks, providing follower systems, chat functions, and recommendation loops.[30] Users often seek out these spaces after determining that 'mainstream' TCC content is no longer violent enough.

This tier is also where private chats form on semi-closed platforms including Telegram and Discord, often splitting into invite-only or access-controlled channels where users feel a greater sense of anonymity and impunity. For instance, Dylan Butler, the 17-year-old suspect in the Perry High School shooting in Iowa, was part of a chatroom dedicated to discussing school shootings on Discord, which was flagged to law enforcement before the attack.[31] These spaces are much harder for researchers to observe, being small, tight-knit, and often closed communities. Within these spaces ambivalence about violence frequently emerges: Some members mock prospective attackers as "LARPers" (role-players) who will never act, while others explicitly encourage escalation and frame carrying out an attack as the only way to achieve status and authenticity. High-casualty attacks are held up as the ultimate legacy, and users pressure one another to prove commitment by moving from online performance into real-world action. Here, participation involves not only consuming and producing content but also actively negotiating thresholds between fantasy, threat, and intent.

These dynamics also create competitive pressures. In communities accustomed to graphic and shocking material, producing content that stands out often requires being more explicit, extreme, or transgressive than others. This leads to a social contest that encourages participants to push boundaries, leading to an escalation in the gore, cruelty, or intensity of posts. The result is a feedback loop in which the most extreme contributions are rewarded with attention and status, further pulling the normative center toward the margins. This same behavior has been observed in other extremist networks and is often a key feature of NV communities. Groups associated with NV child extortion networks, like the 764 Network or the Sextortion Com network, will goad one another into coercing victims into increasingly harmful and damaging practices of self-harm, zoosadism, creating child sexual

abuse material (CSAM), and even suicide.[32] The more graphic the material, the more it raises the perpetrator's standing among their peers. Another example can be found within certain branches of the left-hand path occult belief system referred to as the Order of Nine Angles (ONA). An American offshoot of the ONA, Tempel ov Blood, produced its own books and magazines through its publisher Martinet Press. Many of these texts contain graphic scenes that depict child sexual abuse, violence, and sexual assault. These texts were meant to desensitize readers against extreme violence.[33]

Of particular concern is that the authors have observed that some TCC-linked attacks no longer gain notoriety in these spaces, often when the perpetrator is deemed to be too performative, the attack is insufficiently lethal, or the perpetrator's profile does not fit the idolized norm. This narrow definition of what constitutes an act of violence worthy of being absorbed in the TCC mythos pressures perpetrators to design attacks that are at once more spectacular, lethal, and symbolically resonant.

While this third tier represents a small fraction of the total TCC, it is significant from a security perspective because it reflects intentional orientation toward action, not merely rhetoric. Although not all online expressions of intent culminate in actual attacks, the presence of such intent, combined with social reinforcement within tightly networked communities, may increase the likelihood of progression from thought to action. Effective mitigation therefore requires not only the identification of explicit threats but also a nuanced understanding of how community dynamics and the normalization of violence shapes the perceptions, motivations, and risk trajectories of susceptible users over time.

Tier 4: Escalation to Offline Violence
Tier 4 comprises an extremely small subset of individuals who progress from online participation, ideation, planning, and community encouragement into actual commission of violence. Ideology may feature into the escalation to offline violence but is not what binds TCC-linked perpetrators.

The TCC is an ideologically heterogeneous online community, bound more by fandom than by a common belief system. As such, it does not lend itself to a traditional lens of ideological radicalization to understand the pathways to offline violence. This does not mean that TCC-linked violence is entirely non-ideological; online extremist ideas circulate widely, and the influence of violent ideologically motivated networks on the TCC cannot be discarded from the assessment of the radicalization path of an individual perpetrator.

TCC-linked violent acts have been carried out by both ideologically driven individuals, such as neo-Nazis or white supremacists, and by perpetrators whose manifestos reflect extreme, wide-ranging hatred without a coherent, singular ideology.[d] An illustrative example is Solomon Henderson, whose writings reveal influences from multiple online subcultures and far-right figures, while expressing deep-seated animosity toward Black people, Jewish people, trans individuals, and Muslims. He credited certain far-right political pundits and conspiracy theorists as having shaped and "radicalized" him, though the sincerity of these claims should be viewed skeptically. However, it does demonstrate clearly how TCC-linked actors may draw on a patchwork of extremist ideas rather than a single ideological framework.

Within the fandom culture of TCC, the ideology of a specific venerated perpetrator is usually tangential to the fascination with the attack and perpetrator itself, including the theatrics of violence, the perpetrator's personal life and operational planning process, as well as specific mannerisms. Frequently, a shooter's ideology (coherent or not) is not the primary focus of fandom discussions and content disseminated after a new TCC-linked attack.[34] Instead, TCC participants start to identify and archive the perpetrator's digital footprint; reshare any diaries, manifestos, or footage; and generate content for the community's consumption. Mass shootings of all ideological stripes are incorporated into the TCC 'pantheon,' with attention often correlated more strongly with the scale of the attack than with its ideological content. Figures such as Anders Behring Breivik and Brenton Tarrant are idolized for the lethality of their attacks, but the 'success' of the action is not always measured in body count. Individuals like Rupnow and Henderson, by comparison to other perpetrators, failed to achieve their goals of killing large numbers of people. This does not diminish the tragedy of the attacks, and what has granted them significant status within the TCC is the media attention and messages they left behind.

Henderson's esoteric, meme-laden manifesto and his recreations of self-portrait pictures taken by other perpetrators have sustained his memory within the community and media. Similarly, a selfie taken in a mirror unrelated to her attack and the picture taken by Rupnow in the bathroom stall before her assault have been replicated repeatedly by other attackers.

In November 2025, a 17-year-old student detonated improvised explosive devices (IEDs) at a North Jakarta high school, injuring 96 people. In social media posts, the perpetrator used TCC-linked hashtags on their TikTok content in videos depicting the school. In a TikTok post, shared the day before the attack, the perpetrator posted a picture showing a hand making the "OK" sign and their boots, a likely homage to Rupnow and other past killers who created similar pictures.[35]

Recurring Themes in Perpetrator Profiles
Across the TCC, the focus on notoriety, spectacle, and emulation shapes not only the fandom culture but also patterns among the perpetrators themselves. Despite variation in ideology, certain characteristics and motivations consistently appear among the individuals who commit TCC-linked attacks. These patterns are evident not only from public investigations into violent acts, but also through analysis of manifestos, social media activity, and other digital traces left by the perpetrators. The following section is based on a review of the manifestos of TCC-linked perpetrators and would-be attackers as well as their digital footprint and information

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d   The manifesto of the Antioch High School shooter shows polylateral hate rather than a coherent ideology. See Marc-André Argentino, "Narrative Examination of the Antioch High School Shooter's Manifesto and Diary," From the Depths, January 23, 2025. However, the manifesto of the Moscow Oblast school attacker, who stabbed a 10-year-old Tajik student, clearly indicates a white supremacist worldview in which Christianity is under attack by Muslims, Jews, LGBTQ+ people, and leftists. See Nordirbek Soliev, "The Moscow Oblast School Stabbing: Understanding Hybrid Radicalisation and Transnational Online Subcultures," Global Network on Extremism & Technology, January 19, 2026.

released by investigators related to their cases.[e]

Misanthropy: In all manifestos and/or digital footprints reviewed by the authors, deep-seated misanthropy was present in the perpetrator and was positioned as the underlying motive and justification for committing violence. This hatred for humanity and society was sometimes tied to other ideological influences that seemed to have shaped the perpetrator, such as accelerationism or white supremacy, but was more often expressed as a self-contained belief, in which society and fellow human beings are portrayed as hostile and antagonistic to the perpetrator and therefore worthy of contempt and violence. While some perpetrators explicitly expressed this in their manifestos, others used dehumanizing language and displayed a general sense of hostile and sometimes self-imposed alienation from society.

Poor mental health and self-perception: In almost all cases, signs of poor mental health and self-perception were present. This aligns with psychology studies on the mental health of school shooters more broadly. According to one study, over 70% of school mass shooters had experienced some form of childhood trauma, which can include abuse, neglect, or household dysfunction.[36] The pattern of poor self-esteem also squares with the young age of the perpetrators, typically teenagers, going through major identity and physical changes.[f] Suicidal ideation was present in multiple attackers, who also admitted to self-harm. In the case of Henderson, there were specific references to his appearance and ethnicity in his manifesto, which he said undermined his confidence. Much of the hatred and frustration expressed toward society in their misanthropic statements are simultaneously directed at themselves. In Henderson's manifesto, he encouraged others not just to commit suicide but rather murder others first. This indicates the inwardly and outwardly destructive motives of TCC-linked acts.

Personal grievances and frustrations: Analysis of the manifestos, diaries, and digital footprints of perpetrators indicates that they experience deep personal frustration and see themselves as victims of unfair treatment. Multiple attackers bring up family issues, including accusations of neglect and abuse but also simple acknowledgments of an unstable home life. Grievances also emanated from experiences of isolation and social exclusion. In the case of the SMAN 72 school attacker in Indonesia, investigators indicate that bullying was likely a factor that drove the perpetrator to violence.[37] Other would-be attackers and perpetrators, including Damian Haglund and Dylan Butler, for example, were allegedly bullied. Haglund left various notes to be discovered by law enforcement and his family after he left for his middle school in Wisconsin in May 2024 with an air rifle and was neutralized before injuring anyone, one of which clearly hinted at his isolation, stating: "I never thought I'd be leaving a suicide note. 'Where was I on May 1st?' There's other kids out there like me too. Maybe, say hi to someone once in a while."[38]

Engagement with gore: Many of TCC-linked perpetrators engaged with gore websites, with multiple perpetrators active on the same website. NVE scholar Marc-André Argentino has identified the link between the TCC and gore communities, coining it the Gore Crime Community, indicative of the porous borders between these communities. In his analysis of the Annunciation Church shooting (described later), he writes that "gore communities seed raw files, while true-crime fandoms act as discovery engines that route curious viewers outward to less regulated hosts."[39] The symbiotic relation between these two parts of the "edge-sphere" may further explain the self-sustaining nature of TCC. Two female high school students were arrested on February 12, 2026, after it was revealed the pair had been allegedly planning a shooting at a Shelbyville, Indiana, high school. Alexis Pickett's mother reported her concerns to law enforcement after she began to suspect her daughter intended to harm herself or others. Pickett was an active participant in TCC social media. Her alleged accomplice, Melanie Little of Corinth, Mississippi, had received videos from Pickett showing the hallways of the school and they had begun to acquire firearms. Pickett was reported to be an active participant in the TCC on social media,[40] and to have been in possession of a "shit ton of gore."[41]

Linked to other harm and extremist groups: Perpetrators often have links to other online harm and extremist groups. Soyjack Violent Attacker Fandom (SAVF) is one such example: A cluster where predominantly young users share highly graphic memes, child sexual abuse material, and inside jokes that trivialize or celebrate extreme violence. SAVF is a community that emerged from an image board, similar in design to 4chan, and has participants on niche online spaces in most major social media platforms such as Bluesky, Discord, Instagram, Minecraft, Roblox, Stream, Telegram, Threads, TikTok, and X, according to some researchers.[42] Solomon Henderson, Arda Küçükyetim, and Natalie Rupnow have all been identified as having connections to SAVF, with Henderson making direct references to the community in his journal and manifesto.[43]

In sum, TCC-linked perpetrators of violent acts experience deep misanthropy, which often collides with personal grievances and feelings of exclusion. While various ideologies seem to have impacted perpetrators—notably, white supremacy, accelerationism, and neo-Nazism—the overarching motivation appears to stem from adding to the collective TCC mythos and gaining recognition within the community. The pull of TCC and participating in the expansion of the mythos is clearly tied to these perpetrators' deeply entrenched sense of exclusion and maltreatment, often coming from unstable households, struggles with mental health issues and experiences of social exclusion, leading toward a very individualistic, self-centered quest for notoriety rather than having an impact on any given ideological goal.

Future Considerations

The fluidity of the TCC makes it difficult to fit into traditional counterterrorism frameworks organized around discrete ideological categories. Individuals participate because they are fascinated by crime, violence, or particular perpetrators, not because they subscribe to a formal doctrine at the point of entry. Within the same online spaces, members may hold varying political views and fragments of multiple ideological traditions. Individuals also move in and out of TCC ecosystems, making the size and scope of the problem difficult to measure.

While TCC and participatory memetic violent extremism writ

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e   The authors' dataset (see footnote b) includes 21 documented plots and attacks involving individuals linked to the TCC. Of these 21 cases, six involved publicly available manifestos, diaries, or notes authored by the perpetrator or would-be perpetrator. The remaining profiles of perpetrators were assessed through their archived digital footprints and publicly available court filings or investigative documents.

f   The median age of perpetrators and would-be attackers is 17 according to the dataset compiled by the authors.

> # "The TCC illustrates a form of digitally mediated participation in which violence becomes a symbolic language rather than an ideological act. Its tiered structure shows how individuals may move from mainstream true-crime interest into more insular, transgressive subcultures that celebrate perpetrators and aestheticize harm."

large thus drastically differ from other forms of violent extremism, many primary, secondary, and tertiary interventions continue to be relevant. In the opinion of the authors, some of the main challenges to the study and prevention of TCC-linked violence include definitional fuzziness, inadequate content moderation and terms of services, and the under-exploitation of leakage (the tendency of prospective attackers to communicate their violent intentions prior to committing violence) as a key intervention opportunity.

Definitional Fuzziness
The definition of NVE used by U.S. law enforcement is, in the view of the authors, too broad to be useful in understanding and mitigating the harms posed by NVE communities. The FBI defines NVEs as "individuals who engage in criminal conduct in furtherance of political, social, or religious goals that derive from the hatred of society and a desire to bring about its collapse by encouraging social instability."[44] In the view of the authors, nihilistic violence should have a narrower and specific definition in order for it to be useful as a designation of a specific type of targeted violence—one that deprioritizes ideology as the primary motivator for targeted violence. As other researchers have indicated, this definition easily could encompass white supremacist movements, like far-right militant accelerationism, or jihadi terrorist groups.[45] Both harbor an intense hatred for society and seek to enact a political or religious goal through violence. Unlike belief systems that seek to support or carry out violent action as part of a broader goal or political aim— for instance, militant accelerationism seeks to exacerbate existing tensions in society in order to bring about a collapse that will lead to the creation of a new society—NVE seeks violence for its own sake, aiming to cause harm, earn recognition from their social ecosystem, and gain infamy from the public. This definitional overreach has practical consequences. If NVE is not clearly differentiated from ideologically structured forms of extremism, it becomes difficult for practitioners to identify the specific risk factors, mobilization pathways, and intervention points associated with violence that is not primarily ideology-driven.

Inadequate Content Moderation and Terms of Services
The authors' research finds that the volume and visibility of Tier 2 activity make it both the most observable manifestation of TCC culture and thus a critical intervention point. Currently, many TCC-affiliated accounts openly share violent material and have proven

adept at adapting to moderation efforts. The authors have observed users employing a range of tactics to circumvent platform controls, including applying filters or blurring effects to disguise livestreams of attacks, using coded language and slang to evade keyword and search-term blocks, and reproducing attack footage on gaming platforms.

This resilience to moderation is evident in the authors' observations from January 2026, when TCC-aligned accounts publicly expressed frustration that keywords and phrases associated with their network were being blocked in searches and related material was being removed on Tumblr.[46] In response, community members quickly adopted alternative signifiers, including emojis, altered spellings, and coded lexicons, to continue connecting and producing content despite heightened moderation. Resilience to moderation efforts is not unique to the TCC, with many of the evasion techniques used by TCC participants to continue its presence on its preferred social media platforms are tried and tested methods by online Islamic State supporters.[47]

To navigate and manage this dynamic, the authors suggest that platforms couple keyword filtering and human review with sustained trust and safety teams capable of interpreting layered, context-dependent messaging that is explicitly designed to evade automated detection. While banning tags and removing harmful fandom content are useful tools, moderation must be continuous and informed by a nuanced understanding of how tactics, language, and platform use evolve over time to remain effective.

In the view of the authors, platforms should also strengthen and consistently enforce terms of service that explicitly prohibit hosting, promoting, or monetizing gore content, including time-of-death imagery and material produced by perpetrators themselves. Clear prohibitions should extend to the re-uploading and remixing of such footage, closing the gap that currently allows users to circulate graphic material as aesthetic edits, memes, or tribute videos that evade moderation. Platforms should treat persistent dissemination of such material as a priority harm category rather than a peripheral policy issue. With reduced investment in trust and safety teams and technology, and slower detection systems, safeguards are currently behind the rapid spread of viral gore.[48]

In parallel, regulators and platforms should pay more attention to the ease with which young users can access dedicated gore websites, including through search engines and link-sharing in mainstream social media environments. Because TCC-linked radicalization pathways move users from relatively mainstream content to gore-heavy subcultures, platforms should treat patterns of outbound linking to known gore hosts as a warning signal, triggering human review, friction measures, and, where appropriate, referrals to specialist prevention services.

Under-exploitation of 'Leakage'
A critical phenomenon observed across multiple Tier 4 perpetrators is what threat assessment professionals term 'leakage': the tendency of prospective attackers to communicate their violent intentions, either directly or through disguised references, prior to committing violence. In multiple instances, teachers, parents, and caregivers have noted that prior to attacks, perpetrators of mass casualty attacks expressed subtle and explicit indicators of their intent. Robin Westman, the perpetrator of the August 2025 attack against the Annunciation Church and school in Minneapolis, Minnesota, gave such an indication in their own coded diary that they revealed

to the public via their YouTube channel: "I want someone to stop me, but they won't. No one sees it."[49]

This is particularly pronounced in the TCC due to the emphasis on community validation and being part of a TCC lineage of perpetrators who released manifestos and personal documents before their attacks. Leakage has already been responsible for mitigating planned attacks, allowing law enforcement to intervene before attacks can be carried out. On September 5, 2025, Ukrainian law enforcement, acting on intelligence provided by U.K. authorities, detained a 15-year-old student planning an attack at a secondary school in the Transcarpathia region (Zakarpattia Oblast). The perpetrator had posted detailed threat messages on social media platforms specifying his intentions to commit a knife attack and to livestream the assault.[50]

Conclusion

In conclusion, the TCC is a digital subculture that has grown out of a fusion of popular media and extremist communities. Proliferating online, individuals provide support in the finding, consumption, and potential radicalization through materials related to mass killers. The TCC illustrates a form of digitally mediated participation in which violence becomes a symbolic language rather than an ideological act. Its tiered structure shows how individuals may move from mainstream true-crime interest into more insular, transgressive subcultures that celebrate perpetrators and aestheticize harm. Although only a small fraction of participants progresses to violence, the participatory logic of the TCC, and specifically its emphasis on recognition and shared lineage, helps explain how certain individuals come to view violent acts as a form of self-expression within a broader narrative.

The authors' dataset of TCC-linked plots and attacks examined throughout this article reveal patterns that diverge from conventional models of radicalization. Rather than adhering to an ideological doctrine, TCC-linked perpetrators often operate within a hybrid environment where misanthropy, personal grievance, identity struggles, and online subcultural norms intersect to create a sense of the normalization of violence. Perpetrators frequently draw on prior attacks for meaning, creating a recursive cycle in which violence produces material that is then absorbed back into the community. This self-referential, Ouroboros-like cycle has effectively created 'chains' of TCC-linked perpetrators, where one incident inspires many others. This highlights the importance of understanding TCC-linked harm as a networked phenomenon.

The fluid boundaries of the TCC complicate efforts to determine its scale or define its contours. Engagement is not static or exclusive: Participants move between platforms and blend practices from adjacent online subcultures. Taken together, TCC-linked violence points to the need for conceptual frameworks that can account for a form of violence driven not by coherent ideology, but by the desire to contribute to a shared mythos of the TCC.   CTC

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Crime and Punishment: How International Cooperation Led to the Landmark Conviction of Two Islamic State Brothers in Portugal

By Nuno Tiago Pinto

In the summer of 2017, a simple photograph shared on Facebook, in Portugal, was enough for an Iraqi soldier to identify a former member of the Islamic State living in Lisbon as a refugee. This led to an investigation that lasted four years but was ultimately driven by the intense and unprecedented sharing of information with the Portuguese authorities by the Iraqi judiciary, UNITAD – the Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes Committed by Da'esh/ISIL, and Operation Gallant Phoenix. The result was a historic conviction of two members of the Islamic State with heavy prison sentences for joining a terrorist organization and for war crimes committed in Iraq. Based on a review of more than 8,000 pages of court documents, this article shows how the preservation of evidence, cooperation, and information sharing will be key to bringing the escaped members of the terrorist group to justice and bringing peace to their victims.

O n January 18, 2024, Ammar Ameen and Yasir Ameen, two Iraqi brothers living in Portugal as refugees, were sentenced by the Lisbon Judicial Court to 16 and 10 years in prison, respectively, for joining an international terrorist organization—the Islamic State—and committing war crimes in Iraq.[1] It was a historic ruling. Not only was it the first time that Portuguese justice had convicted an individual for war crimes, in this case committed in a third country, but the outcome was also made possible due to extensive and unprecedented international cooperation involving the Iraqi authorities; UNITAD – the Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes Committed by Da'esh/ISIL, established

through United Nations Security Council Resolution 2389 (2017); and Operation Gallant Phoenix, a U.S.-led multinational intelligence platform established in Jordan in 2013.[2]

The work of UNITAD investigators allowed the Portuguese State Prosecutor to obtain original documents from the Islamic State and files from a judicial case that was being conducted in the Court of Investigation in Terrorism Matters of Nineveh, in Mosul, Iraq, as well as the testimony (via video conference) of victims and eyewitnesses of the atrocities.[3] In their testimonies, some of these witnesses also reported details on how the population sought ways to resist the Islamic State during the group's occupation of Mosul.[4] Through Operation Gallant Phoenix, it was possible to obtain reliable digital evidence collected during a period of a conflict, which strengthened the prosecution's case.[5]

This article, based on more than 8,000 pages of judicial documents, shows how two former members of the Islamic State living in Europe as refugees were discovered almost by accident and how international cooperation and UNITAD's work in collecting and preserving evidence and testimonies were crucial for the investigation and imposition of significant prison sentences. The case is an important one to highlight as it shows how international judicial cooperation and battlefield intelligence can be leveraged to support successful prosecutorial outcomes in cases that involve both terrorism and war crimes suspects.

From Refugees to Suspects

"Ahmed"[a] arrived in Portugal in December 2015. Born and raised in Mosul, he had fled the city in the summer of that year after being whipped by the Islamic State's morality police, *Al Hisbah*, for wearing jeans and being caught with a pack of cigarettes. "My father asked me to leave [the country]. He had already lost two sons and told me he didn't want to lose a third," he later told the Portuguese authorities.[6]

In Portugal, he settled in a small city on the countryside. In the spring of 2017, a friend told him there were two Iraqis from Mosul in Lisbon and he should meet them. Ahmed agreed. He had not seen anyone from his hometown in a long time. They arranged to meet at the hotel where his friend worked as a cook, on the outskirts of Lisbon. The two introduced themselves as Ammar[b] and "Adam."[c] "We talked about Mosul. When they told me which neighborhood they were from, I recognized it immediately," he said.[7] When Ahmed

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a   Ahmed is the pseudonym chosen by the author to identify a protected witness in the judicial inquiry 99/17.0JBLSB. He is identified in court documents as "Witness L."

b   Ammar A. Mohammed Ameen, born July 24, 1987, Mosul, Iraq; also known as Ammar Abdullah Al-Kuyani.

c   Real name Yasir A. Mohammed Ameen, born July 2, 1989, Mosul, Iraq; also known as Yasser Abdullah Al-Kuyani.

suggested taking a photo for social media, Ammar refused. "He said he was wanted by the Islamic State because he was a journalist," Ahmed recalled.[8]

The three met a few times at immigrant gatherings in Portugal in the summer of 2017. On one of these occasions, Ahmed said, "a friend made a live video in which Ammar appeared singing. He [Ammar] confronted him and told him he had to delete it."[9] At another meeting, Ahmed actually took a photo with the friend he knew as "Adam." He shared it on Facebook, writing in the caption: "Me and Adam."[10]

Shortly afterward, he was surprised to discover that "Adam" had blocked him on social media. He was even more incredulous when an Iraqi soldier, identified as Salwan Al Hamdani, contacted him on Facebook and told him that Adam's real name was Yasir and that he used to be a member of the Islamic State. The soldier also mentioned that he knew Yasir and his brothers, Fouad and Ammar, well. "He told me that they had taken possession of the goods in his house as spoils," Ahmed recalled.[11]

Around the same time, Ahmed found the Facebook page N'Ina'Ah, Ninawa, Iraq, created by the organization Ahrar Naynawa – Saat al-sifr (The Freeman From Nineveh Brigade – Zero Hour) to disclose the identities of alleged members of the terrorist group that had subjugated the civilian population in that Iraqi province.[12] In one post, published on July 27, 2017, the organization disclosed information about Fouad Abdullah Al-Kuyani, former head of Islamic State security in the area between 11th and 17th streets in the Al-Zuhur neighborhood of Mosul. The same publication indicated that Fouad had recruited two of his brothers, Yasir Ameen and Ammar Ameen, to the terrorist group, identifying them by name and with photographs.[13] When Ahmed saw the images, he was astonished. "It was a shock. How was it possible that I had known them here and they were ISIS members," he told the Portuguese authorities.[14]

After chatting with Salwan Al Hamdani on Facebook, Ahmed contacted his brother, who was still living in Mosul and had friends in the police. His brother reached out to Colonel Mohammed S., who confirmed that the two brothers were wanted as members of the Islamic State, along with a third brother, Fouad Ameen.[15] Ahmed decided to alert the authorities and went to the regional office of Serviço de Estrangeiros e Fronteiras (SEF)[d] in Leiria to file a report.[16] The following month, the SEF shared the information with the country's Anti-Terrorist Coordination Unit, and on September 26, 2017, an investigation into the brothers was officially opened at the Departamento Central de Investigação e Ação Penal (DCIAP).[17][e]

The investigators began by preserving the information available on the Facebook page N'Ina'Ah, Ninawa, Iraq and collecting all data on Ammar Ameen and Yasir Ameen since their arrival in Portugal. Their administrative files showed that both had landed in Lisbon on March 29, 2017, coming from Athens, Greece, under the European refugee relocation program.[18][f] They gave different versions of their escape: While Yasir Ameen claimed to have left Iraq hidden in a coffin to Adana, Turkey, and then traveled by bus to Istanbul,[19] Ammar Ameen said that the entire trip was made by car.[20] In Istanbul, they took a boat to the island of Lesbos, where they stayed until they were transferred to Portugal.

Living in state-provided accommodation and receiving state support, Yasir and Ammar were placed under telephone surveillance and subjected to constant monitoring as soon as the investigation started. Judicial Police inspectors followed them through the streets of Lisbon, to meetings with friends, photographed them alone and accompanied. They listened to their conversations and investigated their contacts. They did this for four years, without finding any links between the two and the Islamic State.[21]

During this period, Yasir Ameen strove to integrate into Portuguese society. He learned the language, maintained a social life, including a boyfriend, and found a job in a restaurant managed by refugees that was frequently touted as an example of integration and, for that reason, visited by senior Portuguese politicians. While the investigation was secretly ongoing, he was photographed at his workplace with the Portuguese president, Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa, and then Prime Minister António Costa.[22][g] Unaware of the existence of the judicial inquiry, in September 2019, the administrative authorities granted him a residence permit for a period of three years.[23]

Ammar Ameen's situation proved to be more complicated. Right at the start of the investigation, on November 17, 2017, the Iraqi bought a one-way bus ticket to Stuttgart, Germany. According to what the German authorities reported to the Portuguese Judicial Police, he settled in a refugee center in Ellwangen, in the state of Baden-Wurttemberg, and expressed his desire to seek asylum there. He was then transferred to the city of Trier in Germany. However, he was eventually sent back to Portugal by the German authorities, without the reason for his trip to Germany being fully clarified.[24]

In Lisbon, Ammar caused several conflicts with employees of the Portuguese Center for Refugees, which was hosting him, and during a telephone conversation he even threatened to blow up the premises.[25] During a visit to the SEF facilities, faced with delays in obtaining a residence permit, he threatened the inspectors who were assisting him: "I've reached my limit, I'll kill myself. But I won't die alone. I'm serious." He reinforced his threat: "I'll kill myself here. The journalists will have something to film. I'm not joking. I've reached my limit."[26] His request for international protection was eventually denied by the Portuguese authorities and his expulsion from the country ordered in May 2019; appeals filed by his lawyers prevented it.[27]

Enter UNITAD

In October 2020, with the investigation at a standstill and fears

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d   At the time, Serviço de Estrangeiros e Fronteiras was the Portuguese Border Police and Administrative Authority for immigration matters. It has since been dissolved and its powers distributed among different entities.

e   The Departamento Central de Investigação e Ação Penal (Central Department of Investigation and Penal Action) is the Portuguese Public Prosecutor's Office responsible for coordinating and directing the investigation and prevention of violent crime, highly organized economic and financial crime, and crime of particular complexity.

f   Between January 1, 2016, and September 30, 2017, 1,507 refugees were relocated to Portugal through the European Union Relocation Program: 315 were relocated from Italy and 1,192 from Greece. Two out of five of those refugees left the country without permission to other E.U. states. "Portugal já recebeu este ano 1507 refugiados recolocados da Grécia e Itália," Lusa, November 15, 2017; "Dois em cada cinco refugiados recolocados em Portugal abandonam o país," Lusa, May 9, 2017.

g   Following his resignation, Costa was elected President of the European Council in June 2024.

that the brothers were part of a sleeper cell of the Islamic State, the Portuguese Public Prosecutor's Office and the Judicial Police turned to international cooperation mechanisms to try to substantiate their suspicions.[28] After contacting INTERPOL and EUROPOL without much success, investigators connected with officials from the United Nations Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes Committed by Da'esh/ISIL (UNITAD). An independent investigative team created in September 2017 at the request of the Iraqi authorities and unanimously approved by the United Nations Security Council, UNITAD's mandate was to collect, preserve, and store evidence in Iraq related to terrorism, war crimes, genocide, and crimes against humanity committed by the Islamic State in Iraq in accordance with the highest standards of quality so that it could be used in fair and independent trials.[h] One of UNITAD's priorities was precisely to investigate the crimes committed by the Islamic State in Mosul.[29]

UNITAD's Mosul Investigation team leader since 2019 was Paulo Irani, an investigator who had spent the previous 10 years working with the Chief Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court investigating genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity.[30] When he received the request from the Portuguese Judicial Police to assist its investigation in late 2020, he started analyzing UNITAD's database and gathering information from Ninewa's Investigation Court Specialized in Terrorism Cases, police, and the Iraqi government about Ammar Ameen and Yasir Ameen. He quickly realized that the Iraqi intelligence services' databases contained evidence indicating that the suspects' older brother, Fouad Ameen, was a commander of *Al Amniyat* in Mosul, for whom an arrest warrant had been issued.[31] In cooperation with the First Judge at the Court Specialized in Terrorism Cases, Judge Raed Hamid al-Musleh, Irani began a field investigation to ascertain whether the two brothers had indeed been Islamic State members.[32]

The Investigation in Iraq

Irani started by contacting the creators of the Facebook page N'Ina'Ah, Ninawa, Iraq to find out why the photos of the two suspects had been published.[33] The ensuing investigation, which lasted a year (between October 2020 and October 2021), eventually put him in touch with a resistance network against the Islamic State occupation, led by Mosul Police Colonel Mohammed S. According to Irani, the officer was part of a group of "police, and military personnel who, after their defeat in battle [in July 2014], fled and created the Free People of Nineveh Facebook page to publish photos of Daesh members."[34] The goal was to "make the young people of Mosul afraid to join the organization." Information about the terrorists' identities was obtained by undercover agents who remained in the city after the occupation. These agents also identified the location of minefields and Islamic State leaders, which Mohammed S. then forwarded to the international coalition fighting the terrorist group.[35]

In a lengthy statement later made via videoconference to the Portuguese authorities, Mohammad S.[36] noted how, when the Islamic State took Mosul in the summer of 2014, he and many others fled to Erbil, where he joined the Iraqi resistance against the terrorist group. "When Mosul fell, we had a meeting with the

then National Security Advisor, Farih Al Fayyadh,[i] and with the judicial authorities. We then formed an intelligence and sources network, called the Free Men of Nineveh, for which I was given responsibility. The initial goal was to expose those who had joined the Islamic State by publishing their photos, to dissuade anyone who was thinking of joining and to protect citizens," he said.[37]

The Free Men of Nineveh brigades were organized by geographical area. "Each one was named after its leader and consisted of groups of five to seven people. Their duties were divided between gathering intelligence about targets, the terrorist organization, and to find information about individuals and confirm whether or not they had joined the Islamic State," Mohammed S. said.[38] Members of these brigades also carried out subversive actions such as raising the Iraqi flag in the city, writing slogans on walls, distributing leaflets, setting fire to places used by the terrorist group, and photographing certain areas.[39]

This information was passed on to the international coalition fighting the Islamic State. "I had weekly meetings with the representative of the Norwegian forces. I also met with the representative of the French forces. As for the Americans, our meetings were fortnightly … I would give them targets and they would ask for locations to observe or GPS coordinates. Thanks to this intelligence, several military sites belonging to Islamic State were hit, as well as leaders of the organization in Mosul," Mohammed S. testified.[40]

In addition to the information gathered by police officers who remained in Mosul, Mohammed S. also stated that during the occupation, he maintained contact with "13 people who had

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h   UNITAD's mandate ended on September 17, 2024.

i   Born in Baghdad, on March 27, 1956, Farih Al Fayyadh was the Iraqi Prime Minister National Security Adviser until July 2020 and chairman of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), an Iranian-backed paramilitary umbrella group. In January 2021, he was sanctioned by the U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control as PMF leader for his connection to serious human rights abuse during the October 2019 protests in Iraq. He is the chairman and founder of the political party Ataa Movement.

infiltrated the organization, one of whom was a leader, the seventh or eighth member in the hierarchy. After liberation, they received a special pardon from the prime minister for collaborating with us."[41]

When he received information that someone belonged to the Islamic State, Mohammed S. would ask one of his agents to confirm the details. This is what he did when a neighbor of Ammar Ameen and Yasir Ameen reported them. Their older brother, Fouad Ameen, was an old acquaintance of Mohammed S. "I knew him as one of Al Qaeda's executioners," Mohammed S. stated.[42] "I sent Ammar R. to the Al Zuhur neighborhood to confirm it with his own eyes."[43]

Ammar R.[44] is a police officer who led of one of the Free Men of Nineveh brigades scattered throughout the city. When Mosul fell, he was unable to leave in time. To survive, he began using his younger brother's identity.[45] In order to go unnoticed and gather the information he was asked for, he wore simple clothes and even slept on the streets. Known by the *kunya* Al Qa'Qa, he told the Portuguese authorities via videoconference what happened at the time: "In 2014, I was asked by the colonel to investigate three people: Yasir, Ammar, and Fouad. I went to the Al Zuhur neighborhood and learned from my sources that Fouad had belonged to Al Qaeda and that when the Islamic State entered Mosul, he joined ISIS [intelligence services] *Al Amniyat*. Ammar worked at *Al Hisbah* [the morality police]. As for Yasir, I saw him wearing the *kandahari* costume. He swore allegiance to the Islamic State, entered the combat training course, but was expelled.[46]

To gather information, Ammar R. said he spoke to "seven or eight people" over the course of a week. Their statements matched. He then saw the brothers in person at "the Sayyidat Al Jamila roundabout, in the Al Zuhur neighborhood, where they carried out their duties"[47] and sent a report to Mohammed S. "Yasir was not armed. I saw Fouad and Ammar armed with pistols and machine guns. I also saw Ammar checking the length of people's pants and beards," he added.[48] Mohammed S. then published the information about Fouad, Yasir, and Ammar on the Free Men of Nineveh Facebook page, emphasizing that their remaining eight brothers had not joined the Islamic State. "I took Yasir's photo from a video in which he appeared handling a gold coin," Mohammed S. said.[49] The propaganda video in question was published by Amaq Agency and showed the alleged joy of Iraqis with the arrival of the gold dinar, the Islamic State's new currency. In the video, Yasir Ameen appeared in civilian clothes, happily smiling and holding a coin for a few brief seconds before passing it along to other enthusiastic Islamic State supporters.[50] "There was another [Islamic State] publication where he appeared congratulating himself on the conquest of Al Ramadi," Mohammed S. added.[51]

With the information provided by the Iraqi police colonel, UNITAD investigator Paulo Irani went to the Al Zuhur neighborhood to find out what the neighbors knew about Yasir and Ammar Ameen and their family.[52] He traveled there alone and was later joined by Nashwan A.,[j] the Mukhtar of Al Zuhur, who was appointed to this task by the judge from the Nineveh Investigation Court Competent in Terrorism Cases. During these visits, several people confirmed that Ammar Ameen and Yasir Ameen belonged to the Islamic State. One of them said he had been robbed, kidnapped, and tortured by the brothers. These witnesses told Judge Raed Hamid al-Musleh what they knew, and it was on the basis of these statements that an arrest warrant was issued on February 8, 2021, against Yasir and Ammar Ameen by the Federal Appeals Court of Nineveh.[53]

A Concerted International Effort

In February 2021, Paulo Irani shared his findings with the Portuguese Judicial Police.[54] It was then that DCIAP State Prosecutor, Cláudia Porto, formally requested the cooperation of the Iraqi authorities by issuing a Mutual Legal Assistance Request addressed to the head of UNITAD, Special Adviser Karim Asad Ahmad Khan.[k] In this letter, Porto requested the "cross-checking search against UNITAD evidentiary holdings in relation to" Ammar Ameen and Yasir Ameen; the "identification of witnesses" and the "potential collection of testimonial evidence;" the "provision of material held by UNITAD relating to" Ammar Ameen and Yasir Ameen; and, lastly, to "transmit the original of the criminal case (with all the evidence and arrest warrants issued) in progress at court in Mosul-Iraq against" the brothers.[55] The request was essential for the data collected to be used as evidence in Portuguese court.
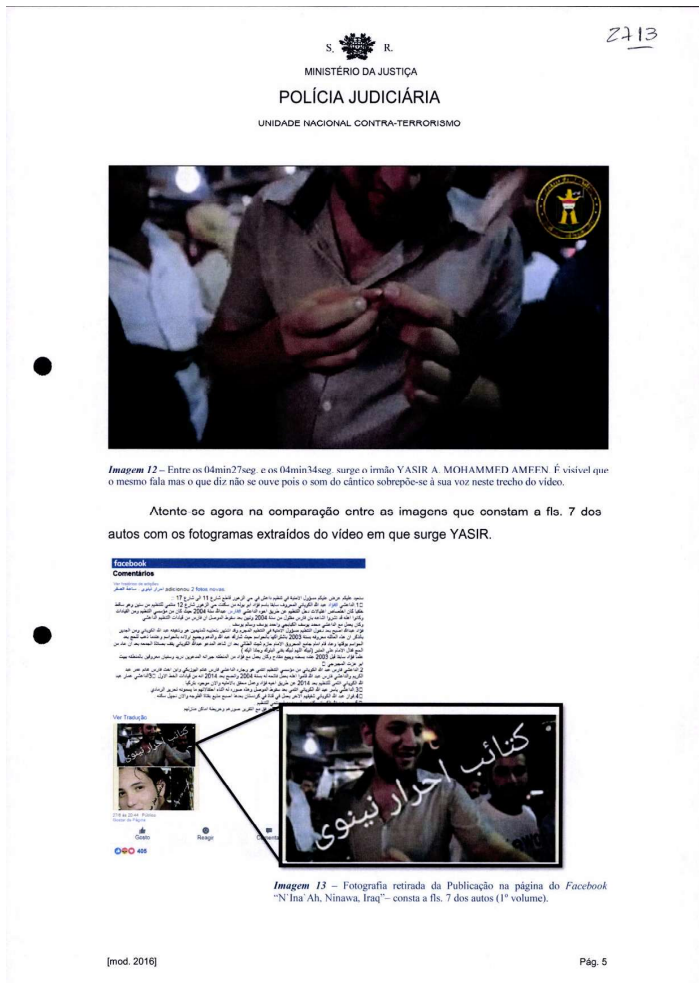
UNITAD's supportive response, dated July 29, 2021, represented a definitive breakthrough in the case after nearly four years of investigation. In that letter, UNITAD's officer in charge, Sareta Ashraf, wrote that the organization had "identified eleven documents" responsive to the request that would be sent "by secure electronic means" along with translations from Arabic into English.[56][l] The documents consisted mainly of certified copies of witness statements, arrest warrants issued by Judge Raed Hamid Al Musleh, and personal data on Ammar Ameen and Yasir Ameen. "In addition, one document provides information concerning a now-closed Facebook page that may have relevant

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j   In his testimony, Nashwan A. told Portuguese authorities that he was elected Mukhtar of the Al Zuhur neighborhood on April 16, 2018. His primary function was to take care of administrative issues regarding marriages, divorces, ID cards, house and business rentings as well as security-related issues. "The security authorities ask me to investigate certain individuals and I present them the informations I collect," he said. Departamento Central de Investigação e Ação Penal, judicial inquiry 99/17.0JBLSB, Appendix DMF, p.192-206

k   In June 2021, Karim Khan took office as chief prosecutor of the International Criminal Court. Three months later, he dropped the investigation about U.S. use of secret prisons in Poland, Romania, and Lithuania. In early 2023, he applied for an arrest warrant against Vladimir Putin for war crimes committed in Ukraine. In May 2024, he issued arrest warrants against Hamas leaders Yahya Sinwar, Mohammed Al-Masry, and Ismail Haniyeh, as well as against Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Israeli Minister of Defense Yoav Gallant. On February 13, 2025, Karim Khan was sanctioned by the U.S. government due to ICC investigations of Israel. Marlise Simons, "Who is Karim Khan, the I.C.C. Prosecutor," *New York Times*, May 20, 2024; Stéphanie Maupas, "Le procureur de la CPI suspend l'enquête sur les tortures dans les prisons secrètes de la CIA," *Monde*, September 28, 2021; "Statement of ICC Prosecutor Karim A.A. Khan KC: Applications for arrest warrants in the situation in the State of Palestine," International Criminal Court, May 20, 2024; Jennifer Peltz and Fatima Hussein, "US hits international court's top prosecutor with sanctions after Trump's order," Associated Press, February 13, 2025.

l   The letter also stated that "the foregoing materials are provided solely for the Public prosecution Service ongoing investigation as referenced in the request for judicial cooperation of 24 March 2021 cited above, and any criminal proceedings that may arise therefrom. UNITAD's written approval is required for any other use of these materials, and nothing in or relating to this exchange of correspondence may be understood as a waiver, express or implied, of any of the privileges and immunities enjoyed by the United Nations, including UNITAD. This information may not be shared with any authority of any other State." All the documents and translations were gathered in Appendix D, pp. 1-114.

Frames from the Islamic State video in which Yasir Ameen appears holding a gold coin and an old photo of Ammar Ameen as shared on the Free Men of Nineveh Facebook page

information."[57] UNITAD also asked to be informed in advance if any of the information was to be used in legal proceedings so that consultations could be held to ensure it would be: "handled in a manner consistent with the UNITAD's Terms of Reference and the privileges and immunities enjoyed by the United Nations. Redaction of some information prior to its submission in criminal proceedings may be requested to ensure, inter alia, that the identity of specific witnesses or individuals is not made publicly available, or to enhance witness protection."[58] Finally, UNITAD stated that it had "received oral confirmation" that the witnesses authorized the "transmission of their statements to the Portuguese authorities, and that this consent will be re-confirmed by UNITAD in due course."[59]

The response came at a crucial moment, as Portuguese investigators were running out of time. After exhausting all avenues of appeal against the rejection of his application for international protection, Ammar Ameen could be deported from the country at any moment, which would make it impossible to continue the investigation. In addition, a reference to the criminal investigation in the administrative proceedings alerted Ammar Ameen to the fact that he was being investigated on suspicion of terrorism.[60] It was on the basis of data gathered from open sources and official documents transmitted by Iraq through UNITAD that the Public Prosecutor's Office decided to proceed with the arrest of the two brothers and

request the hearing of Iraqi witnesses for future reference, which was approved by a criminal investigating judge on August 20, 2021.[61]

Arrests and Testimonies

Both men were arrested on September 1, 2021, in Portugal. But when they appeared before the criminal judge overseeing the case, the brothers took different stances. While Ammar Ameen chose not to make a statement and exercised his right to remain silent,[62] Yasir Ameen decided to answer the magistrate's questions in an interrogation that took place between 8:37 p.m. and 10:04 p.m. on September 1, 2021.[63] During that interrogation, Yasir denied any connection to the Islamic State and claimed that he only appeared in the video with the gold dinar coin because he was working in a restaurant when the terrorist group's film crew showed up. "I couldn't say no, or they would have taken me away to kill me," he said.[64] But his main argument of defense surprised the court. "I left Iraq to escape the war. I am homosexual. [...] They throw homosexuals off buildings, but they didn't know I was one. I was afraid of them, they are monsters. They kill children, old people, everyone," he added, saying he had been whipped for smoking. He stated that he was not religious and that he was happy in Portugal: "I have a boyfriend, a cat. I was thinking of getting married. I got my driver's license and was thinking of buying a car." However, he became entangled in confusing explanations about his life in Mosul during the Islamic State occupation and how he managed to escape the city with his brother (Ammar) via Al Raqqa, a route controlled by the terrorist group. The judge also did not believe Yasir when he stated that he did not know whether his brothers joined the Islamic State or not. At the end of the evening, the two brothers were both placed in preventive detention, in line with the State Prosecutor's request.[65]

A month later in October 2021, the Public Prosecutor's Office had another breakthrough. On October 15, UNITAD reported that it could share seven additional documents related to the case.[66] These were original Islamic State documents issued by the so-called Department of Justice and Complaints of the Mosul Religious Court, which served to corroborate the testimony of a witness who said he had been kidnapped by the Ameen brothers. This included a marriage contract, receipts for the delivery of gold, and court summons.[67]

In late November 2021, the witnesses located by Paulo Irani in Mosul traveled to the U.N. offices in Duhok, Iraq, to testify via videoconference in the Portuguese proceedings, so that their testimony could later be used in trial. Despite UNITAD's request that their identities remain confidential, the Public Prosecutor's Office requested them to identify themselves before the judge. With the investigation based on witness testimony, this was the only way to obtain a future conviction, as Portuguese law prevents a conviction from being based "exclusively or decisively on the testimony or statements produced by one or more witnesses whose identity had not been revealed."[68] The witnesses agreed to the stipulation.[69]

The first to testify were Nafee A.[70] and his father, Abdul A.[71] With the help of a translator, the former recounted that during the Mosul occupation, he married a woman, who lived opposite the family home of Yasir and Ammar Ameen in the Al Zuhur neighborhood, through a religious contract—one of the documents sent by UNITAD. One day in 2015, upon discovering that her husband

(Nafee) had photos of another woman on his cell phone, his wife took the device and gave it to her father, Ahmed J. who filed a complaint with *Al Hisbah*.

However, the case was transferred to *Al Amniyat* on suspicion that Nafee was spying for Iraqi forces. "The next day, Fouad [Ameen] came to my house. He showed me my cell phone. He told me that [the device] contained my personal information, the names of police officers and army officials with whom I was in contact and to whom I provided information," Nafee told the Portuguese judge. "Then he [Fouad] asked me to pay. He wanted gold, not money."[72] He also demanded, at gunpoint, that Nafee hand over his identification documents, as well as the property records for the house where he lived with his parents, wife, and siblings, and for a family plot of land. The goal was to prevent Nafee and his family from fleeing. "Without documents, we couldn't leave Mosul," Nafee explained.[73]

The next morning, Abdul A. explained that Fouad, Yasir, and Ammar Ameen returned to look for his son, who was not at home. "On that occasion, I asked Fouad for our documents. He told me that he had given them to his brother Yasir, who worked in the real estate department" at the University of Mosul, Abdul told the Portuguese judge.[74] In the afternoon, Fouad Ameen and a group of *Al Hisbah* members went to the watch shop where Nafee worked, beat him, blindfolded him, and took him by car to an old church that served as a prison, torture chamber, and execution site. Abdul assured the judge that Yasir was part of that group.

Nafee spent 11 days in an Islamic State prison in Mosul. He was questioned about the photos he had on his cell phone. Then he was taken back to the cell. On the walls were televisions showing images of executions. Some of the victims had been detained with him. "I saw Ammar in prison. I didn't see Yasir," Nafee said.[75] One morning, he was taken to an open field, forced to his knees, and told he was going to be executed. They fired three shots beside him before taking him back to prison.[76]

During those days, Abdul A. tried everything to free his son. He ended up paying $15,000 to two foreign members of *Al Hisbah*, a Frenchman and a Chechen, so that Nafee would not be executed.[77] When he was brought before the Islamic State judge again, Nafee was sentenced to 120 lashes, which were immediately administered. It took him two months to recover.[78]

Unhappy with the outcome, Ahmed J. (Nafee's father-in-law) filed another complaint against Nafee, which led to case no. 78 in the Department of Justice and Complaints of the Islamic State Religious Court. Ahmed J. accused Nafee of passing information to the Iraqi authorities, not being good to his wife, and stealing gold and money. When the families attempted a reconciliation, Ammar and Yasir were present. Following the failure of an agreement, the Islamic State court ordered Nafee to pay seven million Iraqi dinars in gold, divided into three installments. For each delivery, a receipt stamped by the Islamic State was issued—these documents were also sent by UNITAD to Portugal.[79]

The third witness was Ali A., a resident of Al Zuhur who had known the Ameen brothers since adolescence. He told the Portuguese court that he saw Ammar Ameen wearing the *kandahari* outfit worn by members of the Islamic State. "I saw him wearing *Al Hisbah* clothing, walking around the neighborhood, inspecting people's clothes and the length of their beards," he said,[80] adding that at one point Ammar wanted to call for prayer at the Mohamed Al Amine Mosque and was prevented from doing so.
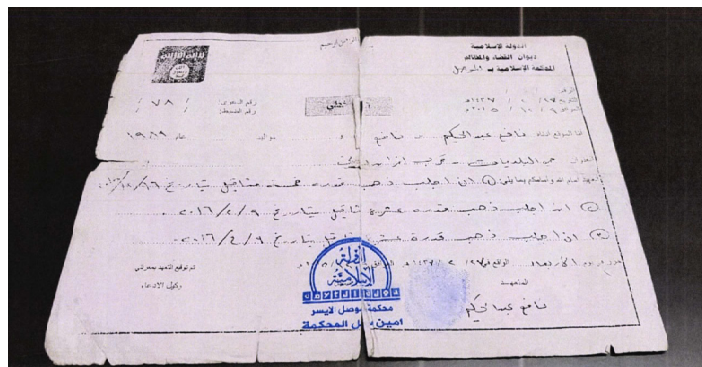
One of the original Islamic State documents sent to Portugal. According to the translation, in this document Nafee promises to make three deliveries of gold to the court: one in December 2015, one in February 2016, and another in April 2016.

"Then he got a document from ISIS that forced those who worked at the mosque to let him make the call," Ali A. stated. As for Yasir Ameen, Ali A. said that he did not see him wearing "Afghan clothing or carrying a weapon," but said he did not know if he had another role in the organization.[81]

Ali A. left the U.N. premises after testifying in the early evening of November 26, 2021. He arrived in Mosul at 9:30 p.m. and went to bed. But at 11:15 p.m., he was awakened by his brother because two men were at the door insisting on speaking with him. According to a report[82] sent by UNITAD on November 29, the witness went outside the door of his home to meet two brothers of Ammar and Yasir Ameen. "The visitors asked the witness why he had testified against their brothers and told him that their brothers had not done anything wrong. The visitors added that they had borrowed a lot of money to get their brothers to Europe, a debt they continue to repay." One of them was "polite," Ali A. testified, but the other had a threatening tone, saying that Ali A. "would be held responsible" if "anything happen to their brothers."[83]

The discussion lasted about 10 minutes. Back home and "frightened," Ali A. sent a message to investigator Paulo Irani. "The witness added that he had not told his family or anyone else about his testimony, before or after it took place," because his family would disapprove of the risk he was taking. After requesting psychological support, Ali A. appeared "worried and regretted having gotten involved with his testimony."[84]

Incriminating Evidence

Despite the intimidation attempt, in early March, UNITAD reported that it had identified six more witnesses willing to testify.[85] Some testimonies were indirect, such as that of Mohammed S. The most relevant was that of Othman K., who in 2015 worked in a toy store 30 meters from the Sayydat Al Jamila roundabout in the Al Zuhur neighborhood, where the Islamic State had set up an information point. Like other witnesses, Othman said he had seen the brothers there, where propaganda and execution videos were shown. "Yasir used to be at the information point. But I didn't see him armed. He monitored for the organization, to see what we were doing," Othman told the Portuguese judge.[86] "He was a secret watchman. I saw him get into an ISIS car."[87]

As for Ammar Ameen, in addition to seeing him armed and handing over a CD with a recording that was shown on the television screens (at the Islamic State information point at the

Sayydat Al Jamila roundabout in Al Zuhur), Othman recalled how one day, when he had his shop open during sunset prayer to serve a customer, Ammar (then a member of *Al Hisbah*) and another terrorist named Abu Muslim put him in a van to be punished for the offense. "I was the first to get in. Then they picked up 12 more people in the area. They saw who was smoking, who wasn't going to the mosque for prayer, and ordered them into the car," Othman said.[88] Ammar drove them to the Al Zuhur mosque. Othman recounted the terror he felt at being taken. "It was the feeling of someone walking straight to death. I didn't know what was going to happen to me: whether they were going to whip me, whether they were going to arrest me, what my fate would be."[89]

Outside the mosque, the 13 men were lined up in a row. "When people came out, they said we were negligent, renegades, that there were smokers among us. Then we were whipped in front of everyone."[90] Othman received 33 lashes on his back. "With each lash, I writhed, feeling a rage that I had to swallow. I wanted to fight back, but I controlled my nerves."[91]

Othman was released at the end of the day and was unable to work for a week. When he returned to the shop, he was visited by Nafee, and it was then that he learned that they had been taken by the same person. "A vehicle stopped and Ammar got out. Then [Nafee] told me that it was Ammar who had taken him along with Yasir, and I told him that it was him who had taken me too."[92] Due to the trauma, he sold the store and left Mosul.[93]

In total, the investigation conducted by UNITAD in Iraq led to the identification of 11 witnesses who provided incriminating evidence of the conduct of Yasir Ameen and Ammar Ameen.[94] In addition to Ali A., two other witnesses were intimidated by relatives of the brothers. The first was Nashwan A., a retired police officer, who was contacted by a 60-year-old man and two cousins of the suspects who asked him to withdraw the allegations against Ammar and Yasir—which Nashwan A. refused to do.[95] The other was the Mukhtar of Al Zuhur, Nashwan A., who was visited at his house by Ammar and Yasir's parents and one of their brothers on the eve of his deposition. With them were four defense witnesses who tried to convince him that the suspects were innocent.[96]

On April 6, 2022, Ammar and Yasir's parents went to the UNITAD premises, where they asked to speak to "Interpol officials" about their sons' case. The next day, Judge Raed Hamid al-Musleh summoned Ammar and Yasir's parents and siblings to court and warned them that "they would be arrested for interfering with the course of justice if they contacted any more witnesses." According to the UNITAD report, the family showed "remorse and promised to stop."[97]

An Exemplary Example of Cooperation

The case's international judicial cooperation went beyond UNITAD. Through the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), the Judicial Police learned that Operation Gallant Phoenix (OGP) had found the original propaganda video produced by the Islamic State in which Yasir Ameen appears holding a gold coin.[98] Although OGP's initial focus was to monitor the flow of foreign terrorist fighters to Syria and Iraq—as well as their return to their countries of origin—one of its objectives was also to "collect and make available" to the countries participating in the mission "photographs, documents, files, or computer media" that could constitute evidence for judicial investigations.[99] To ensure the chain of custody of evidence, OGP houses representatives from U.S. government agencies, namely the

> **"The cooperation with UNITAD was particularly significant. Without it, Portuguese authorities likely would not have been able to obtain the evidence needed to arrest and convict two former members of the Islamic State."**

Department of Justice, represented by the FBI.

In January 2022, the FBI sent to Portugal a copy of a device containing the video originally released by the Nineveh Information Agency. "In early 2019, Coalition Forces received media from suspected fighters, ISIS family members, and other non-combatants fleeing the ISIS enclave and other parts of the Middle Euphrates River Valley. Items collected include electronic devices, hard copy documents, and other personal property."[100] Documents obtained by OGP had been used in terrorism cases in Europe. This was the case in the trial that led to the conviction of Hicham El Hanafi[101] in France, and in the trial of individuals involved in the Bataclan attack in Paris.[102]

The video, along with documents obtained by UNITAD, victim statements, and testimonies from those who recognized Ammar Ameen and Yasir Ameen as members of the Islamic State, were fundamental to their indictment and their January 2024 sentencing to 16 and 10 years in prison, respectively, for the crime of joining an international terrorist organization and war crimes committed in Iraq.[103]

The cooperation with UNITAD was particularly significant. Without it, Portuguese authorities likely would not have been able to obtain the evidence needed to arrest and convict two former members of the Islamic State. The way in which the documents were obtained and the testimonies recorded complied with all the necessary legal requirements to ensure that the validity of the evidence and statements would be unassailable in court. "This ruling is Portugal's first conviction of a perpetrator on charges of war crimes. It marks a milestone along the path made possible thanks to the unique partnership between UNITAD and Iraq. The Iraqi Judiciary and the [UNITAD] Team have been extending crucial support to accountability processes in third states with competent jurisdictions to prosecute international crimes committed by ISIL in Iraq," said Special Adviser and Head of UNITAD, Christian Ritscher, in March 2024.[104]

UNITAD also played an important role during the trial. Judge Raed Al-Mosleh "facilitated for the defense witnesses to testify remotely, during the proceedings, from his courthouse in Mosul, which was the first time for the Iraqi judiciary to arrange remote witness testimonies using video conferencing. In addition, UNITAD's lead investigator gave key expert testimony during the trial before the Portuguese court."[105]

The conviction in Portugal was the latest in a series of cases supported by UNITAD in cooperation with the Iraqi authorities. "The Team supported 17 cases in third state jurisdictions that were under investigation and led to indictments. Fifteen of these cases

ended in convictions of ISIL members or affiliates."[106] [m]

The End of the Mission

Despite successful collaboration with third countries, relations between UNITAD and the Iraqi authorities grew increasingly tense over the years. The country does not have a law that allows convictions for so-called "international crimes"—such as crimes against humanity or genocide—and the parliament has not passed legislation to that effect. Since Iraq uses the death penalty as a form of punishment, which goes against U.N. policy, UNITAD was also reluctant to share the evidence it had obtained during its mandate with Iraqi authorities due to fear that evidence would be used to sentence convicted suspects to death.[107]

With the relationship at an impasse, on September 5, 2023, Iraq asked the U.N. Security Council to renew UNITAD's mandate for only one more year and to order the handover of the evidence gathered so far to the Iraqi judicial authorities,[108] "including witness testimony and information related to enhanced evidence detection and analysis and to the use of technology."[109] In a letter addressed to the President of the Security Council, Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs, Fuad Mohammad Hussein, also requested that the Investigative Team abstain from sharing "evidence with third countries" during the transition period and "to disclose to the Government the nature of the evidence" it has "shared with third countries."

UNITAD's mandate ended on September 17, 2024, with Special Adviser and Head of UNITAD Ritscher lamenting that he did not have time to complete the mandate given when the organization was created. "Is the work done? Not yet, this is pretty clear," he said.[110] "We will not achieve a completion of all investigative lines," nor other projects such as creating a central archive for millions of pieces of evidence.[111] This ultimately affected "the overall accountability efforts that the Team was created to support."[112] Between 2017 and 2024, the organization investigated 67 mass graves in areas previously controlled by the Islamic State in Iraq, collected testimonies from survivors, and digitized more than 15 million pages of documents. The volume of data reaches 40 terabytes.[113]

From Iraq's perspective, UNITAD had not successfully cooperated with Iraqi authorities and was no longer needed. "In our view, the mission has ended and we appreciate the work that has been done and it's time to move on," said Farhad Alaaldin, foreign affairs adviser to the prime minister, in March 2024. The official added that the mission "didn't respond to repeated requests for sharing evidence."[114]

Conclusion

In February 2025, the Lisbon Court of Appeal upheld the prison sentences imposed on the two Iraqi brothers.[115] [n] Both sides—the Public Prosecutor's Office and Yasir and Ammar—appealed to the Supreme Court of Justice, and the case is waiting for a final decision. At the same time, the Portuguese case has been highlighted by international experts as an example of judicial cooperation. Portuguese State Prosecutor Cláudia Porto presented it at the Eurojust/United States/Genocide Network Meeting on Battlefield Evidence held in April 2024;[116] at the NATO Battlefield Evidence Working Group in March 2025; and at the Council of Europe Committee on Counterterrorism (CDCT) Secretariat and the International Institute for Justice and the Rule of Law in October 2025,[117] which was hosted by Germany's Federal Ministry of Justice with the support of the U.S. State Department's Bureau of Counterterrorism. As recently as December 2025, the case was discussed at a United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism conference in Istanbul, Turkey,[118] as a model form of cooperation.

This case is a clear example of how international judicial cooperation will be crucial in ensuring that victims of crimes committed by members of the Islamic State can find peace in the knowledge that justice has been done. The courage shown by victims and witnesses who, even under threat, agreed to tell their stories to Portuguese authorities and contributed to the administration of justice, is a powerful example for all those who fear exposing what they have been through to society.

The case is also a warning to all members of the terrorist group who managed to escape from Syria and Iraq to Europe and, probably, to other parts of the world where they continued their lives, hiding in plain sight. Organizations such as UNITAD and operations such as OGP have dedicated—and at least in the case of OGP continue to dedicate[119]—time and resources to collecting and preserving information obtained in conflict zones so it can be used as evidence in court. It may take years before other members of the Islamic State are discovered, making it important to develop—and maintain—an international campaign to identify these individuals. It is also important for countries to continue to deepen judicial cooperation and share knowledge and practical examples.

The case also shows how it will be necessary to engage Iraqi authorities in future cases that involve historical Islamic State activity in the region. With the end of UNITAD's mission in Iraq and the handover of the huge volume of data collected over the last few years to Iraqi authorities, countries interested in prosecuting former members of the Islamic State will have to obtain cooperation and data through Iraq's courts.

The type of data and records discussed in this article will be of the utmost value to police and intelligence services from other countries that are dedicated to identifying former or current Islamic State members resident in or with ties to their nations. The evidence gathered by UNITAD—and by OGP—will likely remain crucial resources in ongoing or future Islamic State investigations. Those same records will also be relevant to historians and researchers seeking to reconstruct the dark years of contemporary history when a terrorist group exercised effective control over a large swath of territory between Syria and Iraq.   CTC

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m   In 2021, the first conviction of an Islamic State member for committing genocide against the Yazidis was issued by the Higher Regional Court in Frankfurt, Germany. Islamic State member, Taha Al-Jumailly was found guilty of war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide following a 19-month trial. Other significant convictions, which UNITAD's support contributed to, include a conviction by the Swedish district court in 2022 of an Islamic State female member for her failure to protect her 12-year-old son from being recruited and used as child soldier by the Islamic State. Also, in June 2023, the German Higher Regional Court of Koblenz convicted an Islamic State female member, Nadine K., a German national who was found guilty of aiding and abetting genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes for the enslavement and abuse of a young Yazidi woman in Iraq. The Yazidi victim, who was enslaved by the Islamic State couple for three years, participated in the case as a co-plaintiff, and thus, witnessed her day in court. "A Triumph for Accountability Efforts: How Iraq and UNITAD supported Portugal's First Conviction for International Crimes," United Nations, March 3, 2024.

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n   The whereabouts of the third brother mentioned in this article, Fouad Ameen, were unknown, and he remained the subject of an arrest warrant issued by the Iraqi authorities.

Citations

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2   Ibid.

3   Departamento Central de Investigação e Ação Penal, judicial inquiry 99/17.0JBLSB, p. 6,211-6,214.

4   Ibid., Appendix DMF, Vols. 1 and 2.

5   Ibid., pp. 6,215-6,216.

6   Departamento Central de Investigação e Ação Penal, judicial inquiry 99/17.0JBLSB, Appendix DMF Vol. 2, pp. 255-274.

7   Departamento Central de Investigação e Ação Penal, judicial inquiry 99/17.0JBLSB, Appendix DMF Vol. 2, pp. 255-274.

8   Ibid.

9   Ibid.

10   Ibid.

11   Ibid.

12   Departamento Central de Investigação e Ação Penal, judicial inquiry 99/17.0JBLSB, Vol. 1, pp. 3-6.

13   Ibid.

14   Departamento Central de Investigação e Ação Penal, judicial inquiry 99/17.0JBLSB, Appendix DMF Vol. 2, pp. 255-274.

15   Ibid.

16   Departamento Central de Investigação e Ação Penal, judicial inquiry 99/17.0JBLSB, Appendix C, p. 16; Tribunal Administrativo e Fiscal de Sintra, judicial inquiry 1448/19.2BELSB, p. 16.

17   Departamento Central de Investigação e Ação Penal, judicial inquiry 99/17.0JBLSB, Vol. 1, pp. 3-6.

18   Departamento Central de Investigação e Ação Penal, judicial inquiry 99/17.0JBLSB, Vol. 1, pp. 3-6.

19   Departamento Central de Investigação e Ação Penal, judicial inquiry 99/17.0JBLSB, Appendix G-1, pp. 40-43.

20   Departamento Central de Investigação e Ação Penal, judicial inquiry 99/17.0JBLSB, Appendix G-2, pp. 45-49.

21   Departamento Central de Investigação e Ação Penal, judicial inquiry 99/17.0JBLSB, Vol. 1 to Vol. 8.

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28   Departamento Central de Investigação e Ação Penal, judicial inquiry 99/17.0JBLSB, Vol. 21, p. 5,996.

29   Resolution 2379 (2017), adopted by the Security Council at its 8052nd meeting, on September 21, 2017.

30   Tribunal da Relação de Lisboa, judicial inquiry 99/17.0JBLSB, December 30, 2024, p. 250.

31   Ibid., p. 258.

32   "UNITAD investigation report, FIU-3 (Mosul Team)," Departamento Central de Investigação e Ação Penal, judicial inquiry 99/17.0JBLSB, Vol. 20, pp. 5,754-5,756.

33   Tribunal da Relação de Lisboa, judicial inquiry 99/17.0JBLSB, December 30, 2024, p. 258.

34   Ibid., p. 255.

35   Ibid., p. 256.

36   Mohammed S. testified on March 24, 2022. Departamento Central de Investigação e Ação Penal, judicial inquiry 99/17.0JBLSB, Vol. 16, pp. 4,457-4,458; Appendix DMF, pp. 144-172.

37   Departamento Central de Investigação e Ação Penal, judicial inquiry 99/17.0JBLSB, Vol. 16, pp. 4,457-4,458; Appendix DMF, pp. 144-172.

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44   Ammar R. testified on March 24, 2022. Departamento Central de Investigação e Ação Penal, judicial inquiry 99/17.0JBLSB, Vol. 16, pp. 4,456-4457; Appendix DMF, pp. 124-143.

45   Ibid.

46   Ibid.

47   Ibid.

48   Ibid.

49   Departamento Central de Investigação e Ação Penal, judicial inquiry 99/17.0JBLSB, Vol. 16, pp. 4,457-4,458; Appendix DMF, pp. 144-172.

50   Departamento Central de Investigação e Ação Penal, judicial inquiry 99/17.0JBLSB, Vol. 10, pp. 2,709-2,716.

51   Departamento Central de Investigação e Ação Penal, judicial inquiry 99/17.0JBLSB, Vol. 16, pp. 4,457-4,458; Appendix DMF, pp. 144-172.

52   Tribunal da Relação de Lisboa, judicial inquiry 99/17.0JBLSB, December 30, 2024, p. 259.

53   Tribunal da Relação de Lisboa, judicial inquiry 99/17.0JBLSB, December 30, 2024, p. 259.

54   Departamento Central de Investigação e Ação Penal, judicial inquiry 99/17.0JBLSB, Vol. 8, p. 2,305.

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