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FEATURE ARTICLE

Developments in the Sahel

AN INTERVIEW WITH WASSIM NASR

A VIEW FROM THE CT FOXHOLE

Robert Kissane

FORMER SPECIAL AGENT IN CHARGE,
FBI NY COUNTERTERRORISM
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TASK FORCE

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FROM THE EDITORS

Developments in the Sahel so far this year have underscored the persistence and severity of the jihadi threat in Africa—chief among them, the January attack in Niamey, Niger, by Islamic State Sahel Province and Islamic State West Africa Province and the coordinated attacks across Mali in April by al-Qa`ida affiliate JNIM and the Tuareg rebel group Azawad Liberation Front. To better understand the strategic objectives of the groups in the region as well as their implications for the international community, we spoke with journalist and longtime analyst Wassim Nasr for the cover article of this month's issue.

Our interview is with Robert Kissane, former Special Agent in Charge of the Counterterrorism Division of the FBI's New York Field Office. Among other topics, the 23-year FBI veteran explains why one of his greatest concerns "is the convergence of the nation-state threat with traditional terrorism actors."

Crispin Smith and Michael Knights provide an in-depth profile of alleged Kata'ib Hezbollah senior operative Mohammad Baqer al-Saadi who was extradited to the United States earlier this month and has been indicted for terrorism-related offenses, including attacks conducted in the name of Harakat Ashab al-Yamin al-Islamiya (HAYI). "Drawing on U.S. Department of Justice filings, open-source intelligence, archived Arabic-language social media content, and interviews with Iraqi sources," they outline "al-Saadi's unusually trusted position within Iran-backed militant structures," including Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force.

Andrew Glazzard, David McIlhatton, and Paul Martin consider whether generative artificial intelligence will genuinely transform terrorist capability or if the risks are being overstated. Drawing on James J. Gibson's theory of affordance and acknowledging that Gen AI tools "can improve the efficiency, accessibility, and scale of certain terrorist activities," they argue there is "limited evidence that they fundamentally alter the nature of terrorism or significantly enhance operational capability."

Akonkwa Ghislaine and Caleb Weiss offer a rare glimpse into Islamic State Central Africa Province's (ISCAP) internal gendered structure and daily camp life through findings from almost 400 interviews conducted with returnees from ISCAP camps. "Women play a central role in sustaining the internal functioning of ISCAP," they find. "Far from occupying purely domestic roles, women participate in governance structures, logistical operations, and demographic reproduction that enable the organization to maintain resilience despite sustained military pressure against it."

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

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Cover: Soldiers wait for the start of the funeral

for Mali's former defense minister Sadio

Camara at the Military Engineering Parade

Ground in Bamako, Mali, on April 30, 2026.

(Boubacary Bocoum/AP Photo)

Developments in the Sahel: An Interview with Wassim Nasr, Journalist, France24; Senior Research Fellow, Soufan Center

By Don Rassler and Kristina Hummel

*Wassim Nasr is a French journalist who has been monitoring jihadi groups for more than a decade for the French news outlet France24 in French, English, and Arabic. He has conducted multiple investigations and interviews in this regard. Nasr is a senior research fellow at the Soufan Center and is the author of *État islamique, le fait accompli* (2016). He has also been a contributor to CTC Sentinel. X: @SimNasr*

CTC: This past weekend, on Saturday, April 25, JNIM (Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin) partnered with Tuareg rebels from the FLA (Azawad Liberation Front), and they conducted a coordinated, joint offensive against multiple cities in Mali. This included the recapturing of the town of Kidal, and it also resulted in the death of the Malian defense minister in a vehicle-borne suicide bombing. It would be a bit of an understatement to say that the offensive was transformative. Then on April 28, JNIM said that it was going to impose a total siege on the capital of Bamako and warned that civilians caught between its forces and the Malian armed forces will be targeted. Can you tell us about the offensive, about what JNIM and FLA achieved, and the significance of the operation?

Nasr: The most important change in behavior that we had is this open alliance between the FLA and JNIM. But that was expected. Because I broke the story of this deal between JNIM and the FLA a year ago, in March 2025, which makes me think that the deal was set in February. I confirmed this information by sources on both sides at the time, and I broke the story with France24, saying that they had agreed on many crucial things and that the man in charge of this 'rapprochement' is none other than al-Ghabass Ag Intalla, an FLA Tuareg figure and longtime companion of Bilal Ag al-Charif—a Tuareg figure himself and the actual head of the FLA. His mission was to reach out to his long-time acquaintance, Iyad Ag Ghali, the other Tuareg figure heading JNIM.

The most important things are the following: the MNLA, a major component of the FLA, which has a history as a secular rebellion for the independence of Azawad, and therefore the FLA, agreed to apply sharia law, which made it possible for JNIM to ally with them. But what sharia law are we talking about? It is like a 'customary' sharia law, as has already been implemented by JNIM since its creation in 2017. There's no more cutting heads off and cutting hands off and the public executions, as AQIM [al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb] did, for example, in 2012. But it is stated and admitted that sharia law would be respected and local judges would judge in respect to it, whether they are part of JNIM or not. Which, in a way, suits JNIM because they already maintain sharia in the areas they control, but they didn't have enough manpower to implement it themselves. So, they relied on local traditional

judges, which is in accordance with what is already implemented in those rural areas, even during the period of French direct military presence. This came after a period where the directive from the leadership was to avoid interfering in people's daily life, but the absence and inefficiency of Malian courts naturally drove people towards Islamic local judges and the only force capable of enforcing the judgments was JNIM. So, unless you go the full-blown AQ [al-Qa`ida] way like in 2012 or full-blown Islamic State Sahel Province (ISSP) way as is the case today in the areas they control in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, you are still in something very common and very acceptable for the locals. Moreover, until the takeover of Kidal, neither JNIM nor ISSP controlled urban, populated areas. Just to give you one example, a few months back, they caught 'roadcutters,' as they say—thieves that are on the roads—in the area of Timbuktu. Instead of killing them, JNIM gave them the choice to leave town for six months. As for the same crime, ISSP is cutting hands and feet in public places. It's all in the implementation.

So, why did the FLA accept it? While it wants the independence of the "Azawad" in northern Mali, JNIM came to them and told them, 'We have different programs and objectives. We had our wars and dogmatic differences.' They tolerated and fought each other periodically up to April 2024. Tens of dead on both sides on the Mauritanian border. 'We don't have the same objectives, but we have the same enemy.' The same enemy is the junta in Bamako, knowing that Bamako denounced the Algiers agreements (2015-2024) and labeled the rebels as 'terrorists,' JNIM said to the FLA, 'No country in the region and no international actor will accept to create a new country in Mali. But the countries in the region and the international community could accept the implementation of sharia law through Islamic governance.' A soft version. We had the Taliban—not soft—but still tolerated, as they distanced themselves from global jihad and kept AQ checked. We had Syria, recognized, delisted, sanctions lifted, and in the Coalition against the Islamic State. So, there were two prior examples [of the acceptance of the implementation of sharia law by former jihadi actors]. So why did they have to convince them of this? Because to put pressure on the capital and on central Mali, Fulani fighters are needed. And the Fulani fighters in the ranks of JNIM, like all fighters, won't fight for the 'independence of Azawad,' but they would fight for sharia law. So JNIM told the FLA, 'If you want some autonomy, instead of unattainable independence, if you want to break the Malian junta and to kick the Russians out, you need to accept sharia law for us to fight with you in the north and to put pressure on the military in the southern part of the country.' This was agreed to more than a year ago.

Another issue that was agreed upon, which is very important and we'll see if it's going to be applied properly or not, is that administration of urban areas will be by a joint venture between JNIM and FLA where the FLA will have the upper hand, and they even put in place de-confliction sharia courts. If they have



Al-Ghabass Ag Intalla, an FLA figure who is in charge of relations with JNIM, is pictured (middle, in glasses) in Kidal, Mali, on April 26, 2026.

problems with each other, instead of shooting at each other, they have recognized judges from both sides for peaceful conflict resolution. Another thing that is also in the agreement, which is quite important and was also established more than a year ago, is the exchange of assets and of capabilities. We saw it, for example, when the FLA used IEDs [improvised explosive devices] against the Russians—knowing that they don't have bomb manufacturers, so they took them from JNIM.

What happened lately, to go back to the heart of your question, is actually the application of the 2025 agreement on the scale of the whole country through a military plan. They fought together—not next to each other, but together—in Gao and Kidal. And the fact that they attacked on the scale of the country at the same time permitted them to take back Kidal and other towns and military facilities in the north. The Russian Africa Corps put up a fight in Kidal and they fought at the Bamako airport, but they have limited assets. In order to protect Kati Bamako, and sustain the ruling junta, they had to drop parts of the north. This is why they retreated. This FLA-JNIM coalition worked up to now, because the terms of the coalition are much clearer than what they were in 2012 [between AQIM and MNL] and because the inner structure of both actors have changed since.

But the big test, in my view, will come if they are able to keep Kidal and how they will govern Kidal and under what terms. If it is governed with respect to the agreement that was signed in 2025, it could work. The frictions between a number of prominent Tuareg leaders were put aside; they came together in this. Some of those local leaders have been sworn enemies for 30 years. They came together. And why did all those people come together and why did the FLA come with the JNIM? And why is even part of the Malian opposition leaning toward JNIM, as the only force capable of ousting the junta, leaning back to the imam Mahmoud Dicko who is in exile in Algiers? It's because Bamako took all the bad decisions that it could take by labeling everybody as terrorists, silencing the press, the NGOs, putting opponents in prison, pushing political opponents to exile in Algiers, the Ivory Coast, by making of all the countries around them enemies—Mauritania, Algeria, Ivory Coast, always accusing France, always accusing neighboring countries for their own failures. So actually, they created the conditions of

this outcome. A week ago, I talked to a Malian politician, Oumar Mariko. He's a Marxist, an early opponent of the junta, a three-time presidential candidate, a former representative. The 67-year-old man went all the way to Mali and crossed illegally to the territory of JNIM to negotiate the release of detained Malian military, which were abandoned by their own government. You cannot accuse him of Islamism or jihadism. And he succeeded in freeing four of them. In the coalition with Imam Dicko, known as CFR, one of the prominent faces of this coalition, is Etienne Fakaba Sissoko. Sissoko is Christian. Though, at this point, and despite the latest events, no new, clear political offer, either by the opposition or the ruling junta, is on the table.

Many people have been comparing the situation with Syria. It's not really comparable to Syria. Though the way JNIM is acting can be compared to HTS in a way, but also with the Taliban regarding diplomatic relations with the international community and former foes. Meaning in the first communiqué JNIM issued about the coordinated attacks, they called on Russia to drop its support for the regime in order to have "future good relations." Keep in mind that a week before, they released two Russian hostages, and actually, after this communication, the Russian Africa Corps was able to retreat from Kidal, Tessit, Tessalit, and Aguelhok* without being shot at. In the second communiqué about the attacks, they called on Mali's military to drop arms in order to go back home, as they released some of the captured military, so they are moderating their position. In the third very political communiqué, they renewed the call for 'a united front (with other political forces) to avoid chaos in Mali.' Though the comparison with Syria stops here. Al-Nusra Front had to break with AQ and create HTS, etc. It took them almost eight years. But I think that in Mali, it could go the other way around. JNIM is in a position where they can break with AQ de facto through governing. They allied with a secular group, they are calling for opponents of the Malian junta who are not at all in the jihadi sphere, so de facto, they are taking this path. They also have a chance to do it because they never plotted for AQ international, like the Nusra Front, but, if the break is chaotic and not justified religiously, it could empty their ranks, and fighters could defect to the Islamic state. Since 2019, the existential priority for them is the fight with the Islamic State.

CTC: Do you think that JNIM is on a path to break with al-Qa`ida then? On one level, that seems to make sense given what you've described, but on the other level, the association with al-Qa`ida, how is that potentially harming them at this time? There are cases to be made that it is, but it also seems that maybe it hasn't put the additional pressure on them that you would imagine it would. You could also make the case that maybe they'll do that over the longer term. But in this short term, what's the cost of the al-Qa`ida relationship?

Nasr: Coming from Iyad Ag Ghali himself, "breaking with al-Qa`ida isn't the priority of the day." But breaking with al-Qa`ida is on the table. When would it happen? I don't know. How would it happen? I don't know either, because their situation is much more complicated than the Nusra Front, meaning when the latter broke

a Editor's Note: Shortly after publication of this interview, it became clear that Russian forces who retreated from Tessalit to Aguelhok did not eventually leave the town.

with al-Qa`ida, the mother ship had a representative in Syria next to the Nusra Front leaders. If they want to break, who are they going to address? Zawahiri is dead; his death is yet to be acknowledged and a successor is yet to be declared. That's a very practical issue, on one hand. On the other hand, as I told you, if they break with al-Qa`ida without any 'legal shariatic' justification, a big part of the fighters, especially Fulanis, might defect to the Islamic State. This is why I am saying that the comparison with Syria stops here. If we make it a prerequisite of JNIM to break from al-Qa`ida before some kind of governing or getting into alliances which are acceptable to Mali—I'm not speaking to welcoming them to Washington or putting out the red carpet for them to go to Paris—but about tolerating negotiations in Mali between Malians and afterwards in the Sahel as a whole. A prerequisite will be much more damaging for them, and they won't be able to do it at this point in time. If they conceive it as weakening for them in the fight with the Islamic State, they won't do it. If we make another comparison with the Syrian example, al-Sharaa himself told me that when he broke with ISIS, he had to address AQ in order to keep the fighters he still had as most left for ISIS. The dilemma is apparent today as we speak; it's JNIM that is stopping the Islamic State from growing bigger and farther south. It's not local armies, it's not militias, it's not the Russians, it's JNIM.

CTC: Given recent events of this past weekend, in terms of JNIM's ability to have more influence and control of certain areas within Mali, will that speed up their efforts to compete more effectively against the Islamic State, or do you think it will slow them down?

Nasr: They challenged the Islamic State in Ménaka, Mali, and they lost, though they succeeded in other parts of Mali and Burkina Faso. So today, Ménaka, except the town itself, is being controlled by ISSP, because JNIM was the last to try to challenge the Islamic State there. The Malian authorities tried; they failed. The Russians tried; they failed. The Tuareg factions that are loyal to Bamako failed. The last to try was JNIM, and I can tell you, they put a real effort in it—human effort and assets. Still, they failed. So, the area is controlled by the Islamic State. The *town* is still controlled by Tuareg factions loyal to Bamako and by Africa Corps. But the *area* is controlled by the Islamic State, and they even attacked the town, profiting from the turmoil caused by FLA-JNIM attacks all over the country. And it is in Ménaka that three Western hostages are being held, all three were taken hostage in bordering Niger: an Austrian national, a Swiss national, both abducted in Agadez, and of course the American missionary pilot, who was taken in Niamey.¹ This being said, the areas of activity of JNIM are still the same. But what delayed the phase that you are seeing now is actually the war with the Islamic State. Once JNIM admitted they lost in Ménaka and they accepted the loss, they rebuilt their power against the Malian government, and they made alliance with the FLA. This is the time span between 2023 and 2025.

In the fight against the Islamic State, the highest number of fighters killed on either side are Fulanis. So, this is also a dynamic to challenge and to tackle and to be taken into consideration. Because even if we look at what's happening now—and this is why I think there will be a phase two of these most recent attacks—the coordinated attacks happened country-wide. In the north, we had coordination of JNIM, FLA, Tuareg, and Arab fighters, but

in the center and around Bamako, it's mostly Fulani fighters. And as we speak, the only perceivable political gain is for the Tuaregs in the north. So, if they want it to work, the Fulanis of the center should have something in return for fighting. So, if they have this 'something' through political bargaining and national negotiations, it could stop. If they don't, we will go into phase two. If JNIM gets a deal that is acceptable according to sharia, or at least if they get enough to answer some of the historic grievances of the Fulani populations, they will become more attractive than the Islamic State for these populations, and this will help achieve stabilization.

In Syria, al-Sharaa won the battle politically, ideologically, and militarily. So, he's more attractive. And this is why, under current conditions, the Islamic State will have a hard time resurging in Syria—though it might happen in Iraq, where Sunni populations don't have a political and economic horizon. In Syria, they have something else, a political system that they accept, and this is why, for example, most of the Arab fighters of the Syrian Democratic Forces left and Damascus took back the north almost without a fight. If JNIM has something to give for those Fulani-majority fighters, they will stick to them, and it will continue to be an obstacle to the Islamic State. If they don't, the Islamic State might have the upper hand. And of course, it's a dilemma for the countries of the region, for the U.S., for France—what is acceptable, what is not acceptable? What is tolerable, what is not tolerable? What are the real objectives? Is it a good idea, for example, to keep supporting the juntas, which are fueling the problem now? Many talk about avoiding state collapse in the Sahel, but isn't it already collapsed when you barely control your capitals and your territory? If you look at the last report of Human Rights Watch on Burkina Faso,² you see that the death toll of civilians by the hands of the military and of the militias is almost three times higher than of the death toll by jihadis. Out of 1,837 civilians killed from January 2023 to August 2025, 1,255 were killed by government forces and loyalist militias.

CTC: To go back to the offensive specifically, what do we know about the tactics and the weapons that were used?

Nasr: Nothing groundbreaking. Small arms, RPGs, technicals, machine guns mounted on motorcycles, monitoring the battlefield with FPV [First Person View] drones, nothing new. They are just getting better and better at command and control. Many people ask, 'How did they get the arms? Where did they get the arms?' They got the arms from military barracks, and sometimes from the black market, and they are getting better at command and control and fire support, etcetera. This is experience. The FLA is using explosive FPV drones in a better way than before. They are not masters in the art: The son of al-Ghabass Ag Intalla mentioned earlier was killed while manipulating an explosive FPV during an attack against an Africa Corps convoy in February.³ But they are managing to use what they have at hand in a better way. But the most important thing to me, as with the attack on the airport in Niamey by the Islamic State and as with the attack in Kati, they are monitoring the battlefield in a skillful way. With the assets they have, they are getting better at using the equipment they have. For example, to send the suicide bomber in Kati, they mapped the area using Google Earth. They didn't send him in blind; they mapped it. They knew exactly where to send him, what are the weak spots, how to occupy the army on this spot in order to let him go through. And they learned from previous failures in Kati. This is human skill. We

don't even see ATGMs [anti-tank guided missiles]. There's nothing groundbreaking with the weapons they are using.

CTC: There was a video yesterday that France24 highlighted that showed an FLA fighter using a Starlink terminal, which could be helping with command and control.

Nasr: Of course. I was specific on weapons, but of course, Starlinks. I published years ago a picture of the first Starlink I saw.⁴ It was JNIM taking over an Islamic State position and commander, and in the pictures they issued, there was a Starlink. But yes, Starlink is very important. They have it on their pickups. This is how they send out almost live footage. They are connected; the battlefield becomes connected. This is, of course, very important, but it's not new.

CTC: The offensive is reported to have impacted Russian-supported Africa Corp units and personnel operating in Mali. What do we know about this?

Nasr: I wouldn't overblow the impact on Russia-junta relations. Because as I told you, the Russians had to make a choice. They didn't have enough assets to protect all the military facilities stretched all over the country at the same time. They made the choice to focus, with helicopters, drones, etcetera, on protecting the regime, on protecting Kati and Bamako's airport. They partially failed because the minister of defense was killed, their main man Sadio Camara, but they protected the airport of Bamako. And they tried to put up a fight in Kidal, which ended in a deal because JNIM and the FLA opened the way for a deal and because they knew that they won't have military support in time to avoid another Tinzaouaten massacre.^b Remember, it was after that failure that Wagner Group was labeled Africa Corps and connected more strongly with the Russian Ministry of Defence. They could not afford something like that again, so they had to cut a deal, to leave Kidal. If you noticed, the first public appearance of [Mali's leader Assimi] Goïta since the offensive was with the Russian delegation and Africa Corps representatives. So, I don't think at all that it will damage the relationship.

On the contrary, I think it will consolidate the relationship because the objective of the relationship is to preserve the junta. The number one objective and priority was never to fight the jihadis. Otherwise, they wouldn't have sent Wagner and then Africa Corps up to the north against the rebels. They would have sent them around Bamako and farther south to prevent jihadis from growing on the borders of Cote d'Ivoire, Senegal, etcetera. At the end of the day, even if they lost Kidal—which was the jewel of the crown, the only success they had in Mali—I don't think that the junta will drop them because they don't have many other choices. France and the U.S. had major differences with the three juntas because they did not have the same priorities anymore. When you don't have the same priorities, you look for other partners. And that's what they did. But the strategy of focusing on consolidating their grip

on power backfired and not only in Mali, because in Burkina Faso, more than 60 percent of the country is under jihadi control and in Niger the capital is being attacked and because a 'corridor' is open between ISWAP and ISSP on their soil.

But still, their priority is to preserve power, and in this regard, Russia is a partner. The Russian investment in Western Africa and Mali is still so low cost and acceptable for Moscow, even with a relatively high death toll. That is why they won't leave. Because the strategic impact is still huge, with a very low-cost investment, added to the fact that they are being paid to be there. So, this should be really kept in mind, because even in the coverage today, the people are solely focusing on 'the Russians failed, they are not the good partner to fight jihadis.' But the main objective is not to fight jihadis; it's to keep the juntas in power and use the Sahel countries as an 'aircraft carrier' for Moscow's influence in West Africa.

CTC: What should we expect over the next several weeks in Mali? What impact might the recent offensive have on terrorism in neighboring countries and their stability?

Nasr: What I can say is that the sooner Malian political opponents, insurgents, and JNIM jihadis accept, and are allowed, to talk, the quicker we will have a viable answer for Mali and the region. The answer should not be, 'Let's try the juntas again.' Because many have been trying for years; it didn't work. So, if they are helped, again, to stay in power, it does not mean that they will be fighting jihadis. It will mean they will keep fighting to stay in power. This is why they ejected the most relevant partners, the most relevant international organizations, the most relevant NGOs, not to even talk about the press.

At the same time, the longer this process takes, the less JNIM has to make concessions. They are the most powerful military actor on the ground. So, if today they do not succeed in getting along with the political opponents and keep getting along with the Tuareg rebels, they can wait. They will not try to take Bamako with black flags and pickups. The only way for them to reach power is to get into coalition. If they go into a coalition, as I said earlier, it would mean that they will moderate their positions on many things. It won't be perfect. It won't be liberal; it won't be Switzerland. But it'd be something that will lower the death toll and bring some stabilization.

This should be tackled smartly. Power brokers, the international community should go back to counterinsurgency ways. Counterterrorism, as it was conducted for 20 years—meaning 'kill them all'—did not work. In my humble opinion, working on this issue for 15 years, decision makers should go back to counterinsurgency, where negotiation is part of the act, military is part of the act, intelligence is part of the act, in a combined way. Making something stable, even if it's an Islamic-inspired rule, in Mali could be part of the answer. If you look at countries like Mauritania, it's an Islamic republic. They were the first to be hit by AQIM in 2009. And then, not a single attack on their soil since 2011. If the international community encourages, for example, Mauritania to be the landscape for some negotiations, things could be put on track. Mauritians don't have means; they don't have assets. But they have an experience. I think decision makers should think a little bit outside of the box. When I got [senior JNIM leader Amadou] Koufa's answers to my questions in October 2024, he was talking about conflict resolution.⁵ So why should the West keep

^b Editor's Note: In July 2024, the Wagner Group and Malian forces sustained a significant defeat in a battle against separatists and Islamist militants (including JNIM fighters) in Tinzaouaten, Mali. In November 2024, *The New York Times* reported that it had "confirmed the deaths of at least 46 Wagner fighters and 24 allied Malian soldiers." Christiaan Triebert, Elian Peltier, Riley Mellen, and Sanjana Varghese, "How Wagner's Ruthless Image Crumbled in Mali," *New York Times*, November 1, 2024.

on going in a war with no perceivable end, while hardcore jihadis are moderating their positions and saying, 'We can go into conflict resolution. We accept negotiations,' having in mind the other examples that have occurred already in the world. When I went to Idlib in 2023 to meet Ahmed al-Sharaa, I had this in mind. I was like, 'This is a new blueprint. This is something that never happened before.' You had a listed jihadi group, HTS, controlling a territory and saying, 'We want to be out of global jihad. That was a mistake. This is why.' And we saw it working with the fall of Assad. I'm not saying it's going to work the same way in Mali—different country, different environment, different challenges, etcetera. And if you ask me what other countries should do, I would say that international power brokers should help create the right conditions for talks on local and regional levels. It should not be, as we say in football, 'You get a red card. You talk to the terrorists, you're disqualified.' No. Talk to them. If it works, good; if it doesn't, go back to the military option.

If we enlarge the scope of our reading, you know that other terrorist organizations, historically speaking, not Islamists or jihadists, like the IRA, like the ETA, like the PLO or others, at one point in time, they were hijacking planes, they were planting bombs. At another point in time, they accepted to negotiate, and they entered political processes with more or less success for each of these groups. The hardcore part of it vanished, was killed, or was eliminated. This should be part of the equation, because we should acknowledge that 'kill them all' doesn't work and that terrorism is political and is not an end per se as a long-term strategy.

CTC: When you think about this blueprint and to embrace counterinsurgency and different approaches to the region and the role of countries like Mauritania, do you think about figures like, the name that comes to mind is somebody like Abu Hafs al-Mauritani,⁶ who in certain circles is a credible person, used to be in al-Qa`ida but could play some type of role if we're thinking creatively about these things?

Nasr: Abu Hafs is a potential known figure in the region with appropriate 'credentials,' but other religious scholars accepted by all parties could play a similar role. The Malian imam Dicko that I mentioned earlier could play a role in this regard that goes beyond Mali to Burkina Faso. I met both of them twice over the years and the last time was in Nouakchott in February. Abu Hafs plays a role in Mauritania, and he could play a role in the Sahel crisis, but the Mauritians need to be empowered to allow this. They should be given a clear mandate; they cannot do this themselves. They are poor, they are not politically powerful enough, and being such a platform is a huge weight to handle. Look at the Qataris, for example. They are paying a very high price for playing this role again and again, despite the fact that each and every time it comes as a request from warring parties or the international community. So, it's a decision to be taken on the international level, to say, 'Okay, we accept to talk. Let's talk, let's partner with this country, with this NGO, or with this figure, and then let's see what the outcome will be.' This could work only if Western capitals decide about their priorities. Is the priority to see whiskey bars in Timbuktu? Or to see the pacification of decades-old war zones?

As I told you, JNIM can wait. They are fighting with the Islamic State; that's their priority. If you don't put anything on the table, they will keep growing. There's nothing to entice them to stop



An image of the Islamic State attack at Air Base 101 in Niamey, Niger, on January 29, 2026, taken from the 533rd issue of the Islamic State's Al Naba publication.

growing. And when I say growing, it's from the top and from the bottom. If at the top the decision is to stop the growing, they don't completely control what's happening on the ground in the outskirts of Burkina Faso or Benin. This is also part of the dilemma. If you let them get more centralized, they'll get more powerful politically, but you will have an identified counterpart capable of implementing agreements. But politically, they will grow more efficient and challenging. At the same time, you have an actor who doesn't want to negotiate, who's growing, and with real potential, which is the Islamic State.

CTC: We'd like to talk a little bit about Islamic State Sahel and its recent trajectory. In late January, as you know well, the Islamic State Sahel claimed responsibility for a coordinated surprise attack on the Niamey International Airport in Niger. What was the significance of that attack, and what does it tell us about the trajectory of the Islamic State's affiliate in the Sahel and West African regions?

Nasr: That was the last indication that actually the link between ISWAP and the Islamic State Sahel affiliate is consolidated. I wouldn't say it was *created*, I say *consolidated*, because it was already happening since 2022 and the battles of Ménaka that I talked about. And the most important part of this, in my sense, is not the weapons; it's again the human assets and the use of those weapons. It was a night attack monitored by drones with fighters going in with fire support from the outside, without fire support mistakenly killing their own fighters. They proved to be skillful.

We cannot say, militarily speaking, it's within reach of just anybody to plan and conduct such an operation. This is very important regarding the capabilities, and this is very important regarding the strategy they have, because it is the first time they attacked this way. Comparatively, the Bamako attack by JNIM in 2024 was conducted in a 'classical' way, meaning you put people in, they die fighting. Niamey's airport attack is something else. And the fact that the Islamic State succeeded in retreating is also very important.

Added, of course, the capacity to abduct people in Agadez, the U.S. missionary pilot in Niamey, enhancing the attacks in the area of Dosso in the race between them and JNIM to this new tri-border region between Niger, Nigeria, and Benin. This is vital for them because this is where they can reach for the south or not, remembering that the first occurrence of the Islamic State attack in the area was in Benin in 2022, and it was countered by JNIM. So they have potential there. And we saw also the defection of one commander—not a very important commander—in Burkina Faso, from the ranks of JNIM to the ranks of the Islamic State. They tried to make a fuss about it, meaning 'a leader with hundreds of fighters.' It's not true. It was one leader with his bodyguard. But still, it was a first.

JNIM is still dominant, but if you take out some figures like Ag Ghali, like Koufa, or Jaafar Dicko in Burkina Faso, and their seconds in command, middle-ranking commanders and fighters could see a better opportunity for them in the ranks of the Islamic State. So it's a growing force. They also have potential because of the enhanced link with ISWAP, because as you know, ISWAP is the most territorialized, most administrated 'province' of the Islamic state in the world. And they have manpower and human skills. I always emphasize, it's always more about the men than about weapons. It's about the men. Since the fall of [former Niger

President Mohamed] Bazoum, and ousting of French and U.S. forces from Niger, after Mali and Burkina Faso, there is almost a no-fly zone above those three countries and jihadi groups are free to roam in an unprecedented way. JNIM and ISSP recently had their first fight on the border between Niger and Burkina Faso, and another one in northwest Nigeria on the border with Benin. For me, those are the indications to follow to have a glimpse about what's going to happen next.

CTC: In that vein, what has the Islamic State Sahel been up to since that attack in January? What are you paying attention to? What concerns you?

Nasr: I'm following closely the attacks in Dosso and in this tri-border region with Nigeria and Burkina Faso. We are witnessing more and more attacks. They are trying to control the roads. I don't know if they are seeking to control the pipeline or not, because sometimes people tend to give them objectives they don't actually have. For example, after the Niamey airport attack, the talk of the media was about the yellowcake [uranium oxide concentrate] stocked there.⁷ They were not even aware that there was yellowcake in the air base. They knew it after the attack because everybody was talking about it. And they even put it in their magazine, *Al Naba*, to say, 'Okay, now you're talking about yellowcake. Next time, we'll take it.'

What I'm also following very closely is the situation in northwest Nigeria between the Islamic State, JNIM, and the bandits. This is very important because I think that if some bandits decide to openly take one side or the other, it would be a game changer. Because this is how it happened in Niger. **CTC**

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A View from the CT Foxhole: Robert Kissane, Former Special Agent in Charge, FBI NY Counterterrorism Division and NY Joint Terrorism Task Force

By Kristina Hummel and Don Rassler

Robert C. Kissane retired from the Federal Bureau of Investigation in April 2026 after 23 years of service with the Bureau. In his last role, Kissane served as the Special Agent in Charge of the Counterterrorism Division of the New York Field Office, where he also oversaw the New York Joint Terrorism Task Force. Prior to that, Kissane served as a section chief and acting deputy assistant director in the Counterintelligence Division at FBI Headquarters in Washington, and as the Chief of a China operations section in the Counterintelligence Division at Headquarters that covers intelligence services, technology transfer, and espionage. Kissane received the FBI Director's Award for Excellence in the human intelligence program for his role on the team that located an operative wanted for his role in the 2000 USS Cole attack. Before joining the FBI, Kissane served in the U.S. Army and worked in banking and finance.

CTC: You graduated from West Point in 1994 and served in the U.S. Army for a number of years. In 2003, you joined the FBI. What drew you to the work of the Bureau?

Kissane: I went to West Point and graduated in 1994. I spent five years in the Army, got out, and worked for four years at a bank from 1999 to 2003. And during that time, of course, the 9/11 attacks occurred here in the United States, particularly hitting New York City hard. I've always been a very patriotic person that enjoyed serving, and looking at the 9/11 attacks, where we were as a country, and looking at the threat environment, I made a very simple decision that I wanted to be on a team that was going to work to prevent attacks like that from happening again anywhere in the United States, certainly in New York City. And also to track down those individuals responsible, bring them to justice, and then provide some level of justice for the victims. That was the motivating factor for me to join a team that was dedicated to doing that.

In terms of the FBI, it's funny, a lot of people I work with, they wanted to be FBI agents from the time they were 10 years old. That just wasn't me; I never really thought about the FBI until after 9/11. I looked at the FBI, CIA, and a couple other places, applied to several agencies, and the FBI is what worked out. Twenty-three years later, I'm really glad it was the FBI that worked out because I wanted to be on a team that was focused on that mission. In all my years, I've never been in such a positive, energetic, impactful team environment as the FBI has been.

CTC: Over the course of your career at the Bureau, you held a number of critical assignments, including time investigating the terrorism threat emanating from East Africa, particularly while at the New York City Joint Terrorism Task Force. If

you had to compare what you were seeing then, in the 2009 timeframe, to the threats we see today emanating from East Africa in terms of terrorism, what stands out to you?

Kissane: Back in 2009, the focus was al-Shabaab and the remnants of al-Qa`ida in East Africa, and they were very much aligned and connected. In 2010, there was a significant attack, the Kampala attacks, during the final World Cup game in South Africa. There were several viewing parties in Kampala, Uganda, and [this was an] al-Shabaab-directed plot involving suicide bombers and other explosive devices that killed over 100 individuals, to include one American, Nate Henn. We responded to that. So, back then, it was al-Shabaab/al-Qa`ida East Africa.

When you look at the landscape today, it's changed significantly just as the landscape throughout the globe has changed. You had the rise of ISIS a few years later. And today, you've got ISIS branches all over Africa: ISIS Somalia, ISIS DRC, and others. You have senior leaders of ISIS Global that are in Africa, in Somalia specifically. You also had evolving technology, social media, other things, which has given groups the ability to recruit, encourage, and influence people to conduct attacks on their behalf from wherever they are. It's almost like a 'recruitment in place.' So, you have ISIS, al-Shabaab, others that are identifying individuals to do attacks in the United States, in Europe, anywhere. So, you go from mostly focused on directed plots to also focusing on those groups—ISIS and others—tapping into homegrown violent extremists, lone actors, and encouraging them to do things where they are. It's a much more dynamic and diverse threat environment today than it even was then in so many different ways. Back then, we had many people that were looking to travel—dozens of Americans traveling—to join al-Shabaab. Now we're more focused on people that are staying where they are, being radicalized and recruited to do things from where they are.

On a positive note, I would say that we had great relationships with our East Africa partners back then. But I think that the relationships are even deeper and more impactful today than they even were then. And those relationships are focused on countering that diverse and dynamic threat.

CTC: The New York City Joint Terrorism Task Force has prepotency for East African cases, right?

Kissane: That's right. The FBI looks at the globe and assigns OCONUS geographic areas to one of its four main field offices. New York has investigative responsibility for everything in Africa, Western Europe (including the U.K.), and Canada. Washington Field Office has the Middle East, Eastern Europe, and the Arabian Peninsula. Miami has everything to the south of the United States, and LA has everything in Asia.



Robert Kissane

CTC: In 2017, you were named the chief of a unit in the Counterterrorism Division at FBI headquarters focused on terrorism threats originating in the Arabian Peninsula as well as Africa. Which group in the Arabian Peninsula concerned you the most then? And is that different at all from the threat picture you see there today?

Kissane: So back then, the group that we were most focused on—and again, the Washington Field Office has main responsibility for Arabian Peninsula—was AQAP, al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula, arguably the most capable terrorist group at that point in time. A lot of their capability has been significantly degraded over the years. We've seen a rise in the Houthis since then. Both are of significant concern right now, the Houthis and AQAP, and one of the more concerning things is actually the convergence and the collaboration that we see between both those groups. They've historically been at odds for various reasons in terms of religious, tribal, and other differences. But we've seen significant increase in collaboration and cooperation among those groups, which poses significant challenges for the FBI, the U.S., and friendly agencies trying to prevent terrorism.

CTC: We recently published an article in *CTC Sentinel* in which the author describes how “the Houthis have deepened their relationships with AQAP and al-Shabaab, both of which have evolved into logistical partners that help move weapons components and other materiel through Horn of Africa smuggling corridors.”¹ When you look out into the future, do

you foresee more of those types of alliances developing, some that may be unexpected?

Kissane: We absolutely have. Historically, al-Shabaab and AQAP have been very close, have been very well connected—sharing intelligence, sharing training, fighters going back and forth, operatives going back and forth, bringing technology and various equipment. And now, we're seeing more of that with the Houthis as well. And that is very concerning. The Houthis are somewhat more advanced in terms of drone capability and other technology than some of the other terrorist groups. So, a significant concern is the proliferation of that drone technology and drone parts, but also that capability to other groups as well. It's a significant concern for the U.S., for the FBI, and for our partners.

CTC: In 2021, you were appointed chief of a China operations section in the counterintelligence division at FBI headquarters, specifically covering intelligence services, technology transfer, and espionage. From your perspective, what is the most significant threat that China poses to the U.S. domestically?

Kissane: Historically, I would say that the biggest threat from China to the U.S. has been tech transfer—technology that has been stolen or obtained through various means from the United States and from our allies; critical technology, sometimes very sensitive technology that they've been able to obtain in all manner of ways. Sometimes it's through espionage, targeting individuals with clearances at defense contractors and other places. Sometimes it's through talent programs and other platforms, targeting people that are working in research and development at universities or labs. China has used that for their economic purposes and putting a lot of U.S. companies out of business, which has had a significant negative impact on us economically, but also to advance their military over the years significantly. What that means, not just for the United States, but also for our allies is that the U.S. and allied militaries are outmatched in the Pacific. And that makes China a significant threat to the U.S. and our freedom-loving allies.

Going forward, we're also concerned about their ability to use espionage, talent networks, and other connectivity that they have or can develop to attack our critical infrastructure, whether it's through cyber-attacks or cyber-enabled human attacks, here in the United States and other places, as well as their ability to cause significant negative consequences for the United States economically and in other ways through their control of supply chains. It's particularly concerning when you look at the Russia-Ukraine conflict going on right now. You [also] have what an Iranian proxy, Hamas, did to Israel on October 7, 2023, and the ensuing Middle East conflict. As global conflict spreads, you think, “Where is the next conflict?” Well, I think a lot of people are rightly concerned about a conflict in Asia between the PRC and Taiwan. If that happens, the China threat to the U.S. domestically grows significantly. Again, China would likely step up their already brazen and aggressive use of espionage, talent networks, and other platforms to target U.S. critical infrastructure, supply chains, and other high-impact targets.

CTC: We mentioned convergence earlier. How closely are Chinese actors working with networks such as the Houthis or cartels and other criminal enterprises in Mexico and Latin America?²

Kissane: We've obviously seen technology going into China. And the concern when you look at the Houthis and cartels is technology and other things that are leaving China and then going to those groups to advance their objectives. The Houthis want military technology and drone technology so that they can advance their aims in the Middle East against the Saudis and others. And then you look at the cartels, they're mainly drug trafficking organizations, and certainly the massive flow of fentanyl from China and other places to the cartels significantly aids their objectives. I think there's a lot of pressure on China to curtail that proliferation of fentanyl that can aid cartels and technology that could aid terrorist groups. But certainly, it's had a significant impact here in the Western Hemisphere as well as in places like the Middle East. And the convergence of Chinese actors with cartels and terrorist groups will likely continue to have a significant negative impact globally.

CTC: We know that the threat to the U.S. homeland today is heightened given the ongoing war against Iran. There has been much in the news about the threat of so-called ' sleeper cells.'³ Can you help to clarify what the threat to the U.S. homeland from Iran is? Is it inspired attacks, sleeper cells, particularly when we're talking about terrorism, or both? How should the U.S. public be viewing this threat?

Kissane: Iran largely works through proxies against Israel as well as against the United States and others. Some of the most significant threats to the United States from Iran over the last several years have been very specific, very individualized assassination plots against current and former government officials, Iranian dissidents, prominent anti-Iranian voices, a lot of them being Jewish people. So that's been one of the most significant threats to the United States and people in the United States that we've seen. And a lot of that has been carried out not through Iranians, but through Iranians co-opting individuals. We've seen them co-opt Azeri organized criminal groups. We've seen them co-opt criminal networks and drug traffickers here in the United States and other individuals to try to carry out those assassination plots.

Historically, three of the most prominent and impactful Iranian proxy groups have been Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Houthis. In the United States, back in the 2017 timeframe, the New York JTTF arrested three individuals that were Hezbollah External Security Organization operatives here in the United States that were conducting pre-attack operational surveillance on critical infrastructure and prominent sites here in New York City—the Empire State Building, Statue of Liberty, and many other places as well.⁴ We use the term ' sleeper cells' a lot, but those individuals were in essence a sleeper cell. They were sent here, they had received training, they tried to fit into U.S. culture and society seamlessly and not stand out, and to a large extent, they did. We identified them [by] sharing intelligence and information with ourUSIC [U.S. intelligence community] partners and others. We identified those individuals and the team did an amazing job investigating and mitigating that threat.

Looking forward, one of the big things we've been increasingly concerned about over the last several years is the convergence of the nation-state threat with traditional terrorism actors. That's the idea that a hostile nation-state such as Iran, Russia, maybe China could co-opt or influence—wittingly or unwittingly—an individual, whether that individual is part of a traditional international terrorist

“One of the big things we've been increasingly concerned about over the last several years is the convergence of the nation-state threat with traditional terrorism actors.”

group, a domestic terrorist group, or the more recent emergent nihilist violent extremists that want to conduct violence. And direct or influence those non-state actors to conduct an attack. And again, they might not know who they're connecting with, but they could be influenced, encouraged, or directed to do something significant for that hostile nation-state. That convergence of threats concerns me the most in this dynamic threat environment.

CTC: You mentioned nihilistic violent extremism. NVE is increasingly at the fore of CT conversations, particularly here domestically in the United States, and it has manifested as a particular threat to minors and younger adults.⁵ Given NVEs' lack of a coherent ideology,⁶ but instead its commitment to criminal activity derived from “a hatred of society at large and a desire to bring about its collapse by sowing indiscriminate chaos, destruction, and social instability,”⁷ how difficult has it been for federal law enforcement to combat this type of threat? Does the CT community need to rethink our approach when it comes to something like NVE or do traditional tools serve us well?

Kissane: The traditional tools that we've used against al-Shabaab, al-Qa`ida, ISIS, for the most part, has been criminal legal process such as subpoenas and search warrants, national security tools such as FISA 702 for technical surveillance, and the federal criminal charge of material support of a Foreign Terrorist Organization for mitigation. Legal process, of course, still works well in NVE cases, but we can't use FISA 702 on domestic groups and NVEs are not foreign terrorist groups so the federal charge of material support does not come into play. And not being able to use the material support charge has made it difficult for federal law enforcement to combat NVEs. When you're talking about homegrown violent extremists, lone wolves, or now NVEs, it's a lot more challenging because they're not supporting a designated terrorist organization. So, the material support charge just really isn't there. You have to find some other criminal act that they're doing. And because of the First Amendment rights that we have, a lot of their speech and a lot of the things that are concerning about what they're saying or what they're doing online or in other places, sometimes it just doesn't rise to a charge right away. So that's a challenge.

The other significant challenge that we're having, not just with NVEs, but with any group or network, is the increasing use of encrypted applications to communicate, where law enforcement or other people we work with, are just flying blind. So, we might identify individuals that we're concerned about, throw a lot of resources at trying to learn more about them, investigate them, and try to mitigate them. But so much of what they're doing online, we just don't see. The other thing is, you look at a group like al-Shabaab, al-Qa`ida, ISIS, oftentimes, there's a hierarchical structure for these

groups. There's a leadership structure; there's command and control to some extent. When you're looking at NVEs, it's just very broad, very spread out. If they're affiliated, they're very loosely affiliated, and they're all over the place. It's much harder to track them and to have an understanding of who's a part of a group and what they're doing and who's influencing their activities. So, it's just much harder to track those NVE groups online and wherever else they might exist, and then to have an impact on them.

CTC: Does the fact that NVE involves a lot of minors and youth pose unique challenges for the FBI?

Kissane: Absolutely. Federally, we have significant challenges. Again, they skirt the line of criminality oftentimes. So, if somebody's supporting a foreign terrorist organization, providing money, anything else, it's something that we can focus on for investigation and developing charges. But an individual that's part of a nihilistic violent extremist group such as a 764, oftentimes they're skirting the line of criminal acts. And then you throw in the fact that a lot of them are young makes it much more challenging for us to use search warrants, criminal complaints, arrest warrants, to investigate or to mitigate them. But we work very closely with our local and state partners, who have closer relationships with schools and local medical resources to mitigate some of those threats from juvenile subjects. But also, one of the challenges is a young person that's part of 764, one day they might be a victim, two weeks later they might be the perpetrator. So that's a challenge as well.

CTC: On the NVE entities front, you mentioned 764. Can you talk about how insidious that threat is? How vulnerable are we as a society to its impacts? And finally, does law enforcement have the tools it needs to effectively combat it?

Kissane: It's pervasive. We have 764 investigations in 50 states. And I don't know that we could say 10 years ago we had ISIS investigations in 50 states. It's pervasive in that way and a very dangerous group. 764 members have encouraged multiple suicides, significant self-harm, and school shootings. So, it's incredibly impactful in a very negative way. But I think it's also particularly evil because they use and they prey upon some of our youngest, most vulnerable members of society. People in their teenage years often have a lot of confusion and are trying to figure things out. The most vulnerable teenagers are the ones that they seem to pick off and really focus on to victimize, but then also to turn them into perpetrators as well. It's incredibly insidious.

In terms of tools, the biggest challenge that we have is encryption. So, it's the ability of these groups to mask what they're talking about and who they're connecting with online. Gaming apps are a big challenge for us because you could have people that are having conversations, communicating, directing people, doing all kinds of things on these gaming apps and there's no record of it. It's very hard to investigate; it's very hard to monitor. One of the things we've been doing is not just talking to private sector, but also talking to schools around the country and informing them so they can inform parents of how the threat from these NVEs—764 and others—manifests itself and what precautions parents can take in dealing with their kids to try to protect them as much as possible.

CTC: This summer has a number of high-profile special

“We have 764 investigations in 50 states. And I don't know that we could say 10 years ago we had ISIS investigations in 50 states. It's pervasive in that way and a very dangerous group.”

activities happening across the United States: World Cup matches in major cities across the U.S. and then our 250th anniversary celebrations in Manhattan. What threats should we be most concerned about when it comes to these events? What keeps you up at night when you think about those big, well-attended, widely televised events?

Kissane: We're in a very diverse and dynamic threat environment in terms of the actors. We're still concerned about AQAP and ISIS, we're still concerned about al-Shabaab, we're still concerned about all the groups that we've been concerned about for a long time. And now we have the growth of nihilist violent extremists and a resurgent domestic extremist threat. We have hostile nation-states that we're in a state of war with. And all those groups use encrypted apps and have access to advanced technology such as AI and drones.

The evolution of drone technology is probably what keeps me up most at night. The use of drones has completely changed the face of warfare overseas. You look at Russia and Ukraine; it's completely changed the way groups fight wars. You look at what's happening with drones in the Middle East. It's only a matter of time before that comes to the United States in the form of an attack. We've certainly seen disruptions of potential drone attacks here in the United States. We've seen drones used to attack critical infrastructure. But certainly one of the biggest concerns that federal, state, local entities have preparing for these special events this summer, one of their biggest concerns is the threat from various threat actors and their ability to use drones—targeting large, open groups, whether it's inside of a stadium, at a viewing party, watching the beautiful tall ships come down the Hudson River. There will be large gatherings of people for multiple special events all over New York City and the surrounding area.

As we see conflict spreading throughout the globe and the increasing use of drones in those conflicts, the concern that our adversaries use drones to attempt an attack here in the homeland is significant. There's significant ongoing effort to try to get us in a better place. Legislation has been passed to make it easier for state and local entities to do drone detection and ultimately mitigation. The FBI has significantly expanded training for state and local entities to do drone detection and mitigation. Private companies are doing amazing things overseas in counter-drone defense, and increasingly working more closely with federal, state, and local partners domestically on cUAS. So, there's a lot of good things happening. But when you look at the way drones are being used overseas, we don't have any time to waste.

CTC: In your view, what else can we as a country be doing to stay ahead of that drone threat? Obviously, there's been some

important developments. There's the Safer Skies Act, which is now allowing state, local, tribal, territorial authorities to be able to at least have a pathway to be able to mitigate drones. But is there anything else that we can do to just try to proactively get ahead of it? Because we all know it's coming and we're doing things, but bureaucracies move slowly.

Kissane: You look at a place like New York City, it's a layered defense. It's the private sector. It's the NYPD. It's New York State Police. It's Port Authority. It's the FBI. We work incredibly closely together sharing information. We have counter-UAS working groups, and we're trying to pull information from the groups that protect the ports, that protect Hudson Yards, that protect different sites around the city, analyze what information they collect on drone activity with AI and other advanced software technology to try to find the anomalies, to try to find the individuals and the drones that we should be focused and concerned about. We're also working with international partners to identify the actors that are most likely to try to do something around the world, but specifically here in the United States: identify those individuals; find their connectivity here in the United States; work proactive, aggressive investigations to try to identify those people that are most capable of doing an attack here in the United States.

We also focus a lot on tripwires, just like we have over the years with IEDs, explosives, and other things. The challenge there is that with technology such as 3D printing and the ability to buy a drone that is right off the shelf [and] add on a delivery system that you buy from China legally off of an e-commerce site, it is increasingly difficult to stay ahead of the proliferation of potentially dangerous drone technology. We are working to expand our tripwire program with an increasing focus on drone technology. There's certainly more that we can do. Technology is moving fast, and we're working with some really good private sector partners to get ourselves in a better spot quickly.

CTC: This fall, the United States will mark 25 years since the attacks of September 11, 2001. As we get further and further

from that terrible day, how do we best ensure the accrued CT knowledge from the current generation is successfully passed to the next generation? How do we not allow that to atrophy?

Kissane: I joined the Bureau in 2003. First time I got to the JTTF was in 2009. Now it's 2026. And I look at the folks that are on the team now—the investigators, the analysts, the supervisors—and it's in great hands. I look at those people and I look at their commitment, their aggression, their competence, and their passion to protect New York City and the country. And I'm confident that those lessons have not been lost on the people that are still in the fight today. In terms of how do we continue to ensure that will not happen, it's education in schools and other places to make sure that people understand the threat environment, what's happened in the past, and how if we don't keep our guard up, and if we don't keep the right people focused on the right things, how it can happen again.

CTC: We talked about a lot of different threats. Is there a threat or threat area that you think we're not thinking enough about that keeps you up at night?

Kissane: The thing that I'm most concerned about is really the convergence of the nation-state actor with any one of those other actors, particularly an NVE. The NVE threat is so broad and so diverse. You have anti-government, anti-society, anti-very specific things, anti-ICE, anti-natalism. We had an attack out in California against a fertility clinic.⁸ You name the positive thing in society, there's an NVE group that wants to attack that and bring it down. The hostile actors, Russia and others, they understand the dynamic here in the United States, and they understand how to use that dynamic and tap into those people to do bad things here and in other places. That's probably my biggest concern: You have a threat actor, he might be somebody inspired by ISIS or somebody inspired by somebody in the NVE world, and they might be of limited capability. But then when you get a sophisticated Russian or other hostile actor that can tap into them, provide them information, increase their capability, that becomes very dangerous. **CTC**

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Mohammad Baqer al-Saadi: Profiling an IRGC and Iraqi Militia Operative

By Crispin Smith and Michael Knights

This article profiles Mohammad Baqer al-Saadi, an alleged senior operative linked to Kata'ib Hezbollah, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds Force (IRGC-QF), and wider Iraqi proxy militia networks. Drawing on U.S. Department of Justice filings, open-source intelligence, archived Arabic-language social media content, and interviews with Iraqi sources, the study demonstrates al-Saadi's unusually trusted position within Iran-backed militant structures. The authors trace a career rubbing shoulders with elite commanders of the Quds Force as well as a 'who's who' of Iraq's militia commanders, growing from a young fighter and staff officer to a businessman alleged to have engaged in weapons procurement while running assassination cells. His career may now have come to a grinding halt, after he played one of the key roles in coordinating attacks on the European homeland and in Canada (and having attempted the same on U.S. soil), acts which contributed to his arrest and extradition to the United States in mid-May 2026. Now at the heart of criminal and counterterrorism proceedings in the Southern District of New York, al-Saadi's case nevertheless exposes the potential for further IRGC-backed efforts to develop external terrorist capabilities—even as it creates new legal and strategic vulnerabilities for Iran and its proxy militias should others attempt to launch attacks beyond the Middle East.

This article takes a close first look at Mohammad Baqer Saad Dawood al-Saadi,¹ an Iraqi man who was detained in Turkey in early May 2026² and extradited to the United States on May 15, 2026, where the U.S. Department of Justice charged him with six counts of terrorism-related offenses for his activities as an operative of Kata'ib Hezbollah (KH) and Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).³ He was subsequently indicted by a New York grand jury on May 28, 2026, on each of the six counts along with two additional terrorism-related charges.⁴ In its press release and accompanying complaint, the U.S. government alleged that al-Saadi is “a high-level member of Kata'ib Hizballah, who also has close ties to the IRGC and Hizballah,” including close ties to very senior IRGC-Quds Force (QF) and *muqawama* (Iran-backed resistance) commanders.⁵ Of particular timely importance, the Department of Justice claims that al-Saadi “planned, coordinated, and claimed responsibility for at least 18 terrorist attacks in Europe,” including eight high-profile attacks in the United Kingdom, in addition to “two additional attacks in Canada,” all conducted in the name of “Harakat Ashab

al-Yamin al-Islamiya” (the Islamic Movement of the Companions of the Right Hand (HAYI or IMCR)) which the FBI characterizes as a front of Kata'ib Hezbollah⁶ and which, in the assessment of the authors, bears all the hallmarks of a *muqawama* ‘façade group’ operation, in which an online brand is used to partially conceal the real-world identity of an Iranian-aligned attacker.^a This early assessment now appears to be partially confirmed by al-Saadi himself: According to the Department of Justice, al-Saadi waived his Miranda rights while in custody and voluntarily admitted to being a leader within the “*muqawama*” (resistance) encompassing all of the IRGC, KH, (Lebanese) Hezbollah, and the Houthis while his statements and materials found by the United States on his phone demonstrate a role actively directing what al-Saadi describes as “psychological warfare” against the United States and Europe designed to “install fear and terror in civilians.”⁷

This article will examine publicly available evidence regarding al-Saadi. It will draw upon the Department of Justice press release⁸ and accompanying complaint,⁹ and supplement this information with a number of additional information streams. The first is a dense collection of Arabic-language social media images that existed online for numerous years and that have been archived by the Militia Spotlight team in order to support evidentiary analyses

a ‘Façade’ groups, in the terminology of the authors, are online brands used to claim kinetic attacks and make threats. The authors built the Militia Spotlight platform partially around the exploration of such façades and their linkage to real-world armed groups and individuals, in order to foster accountability. See Crispin Smith, Michael Knights, and Hamdi Malik, “Attributing the Erbil Attack: The Role of Open-Source Monitoring,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, February 24, 2021.

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such as this one.^b As well as validating^c and reviewing the images themselves and the strong terrorist associations they appear to prove, this study will analyze what is known about the online platforms carrying the images and accompanying text.^d The article also builds upon the numerous relevant entries and group profiles in the Militia Spotlight blog, which the authors founded and edited.^e Finally, this piece draws upon the same kind of detailed interview process with Iraqi subjects that underpinned prior *CTC Sentinel* studies undertaken by this author team, which have periodically detected Mohammad Baqer al-Saadi's operational activity in the years since 2020.¹⁰ All these layers have combined to create this article, which is a synthesized report based on feeds from social media intelligence, other open-source intelligence, and human intelligence gathered from non-government individuals with direct experience of Mohammad Baqer al-Saadi.

The overarching theme of this analysis is that al-Saadi has had a glittering career serving the IRGC-QF and Kata'ib Hezbollah, and has almost certainly enjoyed rarified trust and access in support of their operations. To make this case, the piece will first recap the key U.S. allegations that led to al-Saadi's arrest. Then, the online evidence linking al-Saadi to known terrorist actors will be reviewed in detail. Thereafter, the article will consider what al-Saadi's case may signal with regard to IRGC-*muqawama* relations and the potential deterrent effect if al-Saadi is successfully prosecuted.

- b Al-Saadi was first identified to one of the authors (Smith) during interviews conducted in 2021, at which time the Militia Spotlight team collected and stored limited information about his activities. Subsequent analysis of that material, material included in the DOJ complaint, and social media imagery and posts has included advanced reverse image searches, advanced imagery analysis, and interviews with sources familiar with al-Saadi's career and background.
- c In the current media landscape (and given the significant and sudden media attention that this case is now subject to), it is reasonable to consider the possibility of falsified testimonies and AI-generated or -edited imagery. The base of this analysis has been substantially conducted drawing on information obtained prior to 2026 (with a significant portion predating 2023, reducing the likelihood of AI manipulation in the imagery). Moreover, images used in this study have been closely analyzed for signs of falsification. Similarly, material derived from interviews substantially draws on information provided and archived prior to the al-Saadi case unsealing, particularly from an interview series conducted around 2021 and 2022. Where more recent interviews have been conducted, information has been cross-referenced against prior statements and earlier non-public Militia Spotlight archival materials.
- d For discussions of militia use of branded anonymous Telegram channels, see, for example, Michael Knights, Crispin Smith, and Hamdi Malik, "Discordance in the Iran Threat Network in Iraq: Militia Competition and Rivalry," *CTC Sentinel* 14:8 (2021), noting that "façade groups [use] Telegram and other social media to claim rocket and convoy attacks in the hours following an attack event. Often the façade's Telegram and social media platforms are created in the hours before the group's first claim, but pre-made unique iconography of each group and the rapid growth of their media following suggests pre-preparation of façade brands for later use. Some groups have been used to claim strings of attacks, while other groups appeared for one or two attacks only before the brand name and associated media accounts fall into disuse."
- e Militia Spotlight's online blog and group profiles were established to track this process in detail and produce evidentiary building blocks, using legal standards of proof and certainty. The project collects militia statements in Arabic and other languages, archives evidence that risks being taken offline at a later point, and uses a data fusion process to synthesize information and analyze trends. The Militia Spotlight blog is at <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/series/militia-spotlight> and the Militia Spotlight profiles page is at <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/series/militia-spotlight-profiles>

Al-Saadi: Arrest, Link to HAYI, and Exposure as a Senior KH Affiliate

The arrest of Mohammad Baqer al-Saadi is potentially important because, in the assessment of the authors, it is the clearest indication yet that the *muqawama al-islamiyya fil-Iraq* ("the Islamic Resistance in Iraq") and its component Iran-backed militias are trying to 'raise their game' as a military and terrorist partner to their key supporter: the IRGC and specifically its Quds Force. Iraq's Iranian-aligned militia groups played a major kinetic role during the latest phase of the U.S.-Israel-Iraq conflict, which began on February 28, 2026, and ended with the uneasy ceasefire of April 8. During earlier rounds of confrontation, the *muqawama* had appeared comparatively sidelined.¹¹ Analysts noted that previously groups such as Kata'ib Hezbollah (KH), Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba (HaN), and Kataib Sayyed al-Shuhada (KSS) played a far less visible role in Iran's running interstate conflicts with Israel and the United States than Hezbollah in Lebanon or Yemen's Houthis.¹² That changed dramatically in March 2026, when Iraqi militias launched hundreds of advanced drones, rockets, and missiles against targets across Iraq and the wider Middle East.¹³ (This military performance upgrade of the Iraqi *muqawama* is the subject of a forthcoming *CTC Sentinel* article.) In the assessment of the authors, this intensification of kinetic operations seemed designed to fill a gap left by Hezbollah, the Houthis, and Hamas, and to say to both Iran and Iran's adversaries: Iraq's *muqawama* is back, operating at unprecedented scale and tempo, and apparently acting in direct support of Iran's broader wartime strategy.

But 10 days into the conflict, the Iraqi *muqawama* appeared to take a significant step toward an even more novel and significant capability: that of long-range external operations in the form of terrorist attacks on geographically distant countries. On March 9, the Telegram channel "Alfaqaar" posted a statement by a new *muqawama* group, calling itself *Harakat Ashab al-Yamin al-Islamiyya* (the Islamic Movement of the Companions of the Right Hand (HAYI or IMCR)).¹⁴ (The FBI complaint unsealed in May would subsequently show that Mohammad Baqer al-Saadi had himself sent the same statement and associated iconography via his SnapChat account more than four hours before it first circulated in public—demonstrating his advanced and insider knowledge of HAYI's operations.¹⁵ And U.S. analysis of al-Saadi's phone—made public upon his indictment—demonstrates that he tactically directed at least some of the HAYI attackers in real-time via video call and coordinated directly with KH propagandists to maximize the media impact of HAYI's videos and photos.¹⁶) That first public HAYI statement itself revealed little. But Alfaqaar added its own commentary: "A resistance group calling itself the 'Islamic Movement of the Companions of the Right Hand' announced in an official statement the start of its military operations against American and Israeli interests worldwide."¹⁷ At least in the eyes of the propagandists behind the Alfaqaar channel, then, HAYI existed to take the fight to the United States and Israel—which in turn would have been understood by *muqawama* readers as being a part of the then still raging regional conflict between those countries and

f The statement shared by Alfaqaar includes an English translation; the version displayed in the FBI Complaint and shared by al-Saadi is only in Arabic. HAYI initially had its own Telegram channel, but this was shut down by Telegram in late March.

the Islamic Republic.

The assessment of the author team is that Alfaqaar has long functioned as part of Iraq's militia propaganda ecosystem.^g The channel was originally established in 2020,¹⁸ likely by supporters or affiliates of Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH), a core member of Iraq's *muqawama*.^h The channel had changed affiliation at least once by 2023, with its affiliations increasingly closely tied to KH by 2025.¹⁹ Many features of HAYI and its statements, including its language, iconography, and the pattern of affiliated channel reposts, further affiliated the group with KH and wider *muqawama* online infrastructure.ⁱ

Following its initial statement, HAYI claimed at least 18 attacks on targets around Europe, beginning with a claimed bombing in front of a synagogue in Liege, Belgium,²⁰ and including arson attacks, rudimentary bombings,²¹ and one possible stabbing at locations in the United Kingdom,²² Belgium,²³ France,²⁴ the Netherlands,²⁵ Greece,²⁶ and North Macedonia.²⁷ The last claim, the stabbing attack in London, came on April 29.²⁸

On Friday, May 15, 2026, the U.S. Department of Justice announced the arrest of an Iraqi man named Mohammad Baqer Saad Dawood al-Saadi,²⁹ charging him with six counts of terrorism-related offenses for his activities as an operative of Kata'ib Hezbollah and Iran's IRGC. In its press release and accompanying complaint, the U.S. government alleged that al-Saadi is "a high-level member of Kata'ib Hezbollah, who also has close ties to the IRGC and Hezbollah" including close ties to very senior IRGC and *muqawama* commanders.³⁰

The complaint and associated press releases further claim that al-Saadi and his associates "planned, coordinated, and claimed responsibility for at least 18 terrorist attacks in Europe" in addition to "two additional attacks in Canada, in the name of Harakat Ashab al-Yamin al-Islamiya," which the FBI characterizes as a front of Kata'ib Hezbollah.³¹ Based on additional details supplied in the documents, al-Saadi had consistent access to information and videos of HAYI's attacks before all other public media channels and on several occasions may have been the initial source for other *muqawama*-affiliated channels.³² Further, information contained in the FBI complaint indicates that al-Saadi coordinated at least

some of HAYI's attacks on Europe,³³ paid local criminals to conduct HAYI attacks,³⁴ and provided planning and targeting information to individuals carrying out attacks.³⁵ On May 28, 2026, a New York grand jury indicted al-Saadi on each of the six counts raised by the FBI complaint along with two additional terrorism-related charges. The accompanying DOJ press release revealed even more details into the case against al-Saadi. Notably, al-Saadi himself appears to have waived his right to remain silent, apparently confirming various details alleged in the earlier complaint. Notably, he described himself as a leader within the *muqawama* (resistance), which he uses to refer to all of the IRGC and its regional proxies. His statements and analysis of his phone also appear to confirm him as having played an important role directing and coordinating the HAYI attacks, liaising between Iraqi militias, running military intelligence operations rooms, and leading "media and psychological warfare" against the U.S. and European allies.³⁶

Al-Saadi: A Life in Pictures

Although the allegations against al-Saadi remain unproven in a court of law, substantial open-source material exists that supports the broader characterization of al-Saadi outlined by the FBI and DOJ. Additional information obtained by the authors through interviews conducted between 2022 and 2026 with Iraqi specialists and Iraqi government sources (exact names, dates, and locations withheld at the request of interviewees) further reinforces the assessment that al-Saadi operated as a significant *muqawama* figure as well as a trusted QF asset.³⁷

Born in 1993,³⁸ probably in Iran³⁹ to Iraqi parents,^k al-Saadi appears to be the child of exiled Shi'a Iraqis who left Iraq for Iran, possibly during the Iran-Iraq War.^l Al-Saadi's given name (Mohammad Baqer) is a 'compound name,' which is somewhat unusual and often used to honor a descendent or hero, in this case potentially Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, the Daawa Party leader executed in 1980 by Saddam Hussein's regime. (Interestingly, Muhammad Baqir's older sister, Amina, has the same name as Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr's sister, Amina Sadr bint al-Huda, who was executed alongside him in 1980.⁴⁰)

In the assessment of the authors, Mohammad Baqer appears to have grown up in a devout Shi'a Iraqi family that took part in the Iran-backed anti-Saddam resistance in the 1990s-2000s. This may

g First mentioned in the *CTC Sentinel* in 2021, the authors assessed at that time that the channel had ties to Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, but it subsequently appears to have adopted a closer affinity with other groups while going through at least one change of username. The original channel, also named "Alfaqaar" was replaced by a new Telegram handle on April 11, 2023, with a post stating "The New Alfaqaar Channel on Telegram – Established Following the Deletion of the Previous Channel: Our enemy's weakness has caused them to fear us even in the virtual realm; thus, they have resorted to deleting our accounts and channels in an attempt to undermine our resolve. Yet, how futile are their efforts! For the spirit of the truthful never wavers, and our struggle continues unabated in the arena of 'soft warfare' – God willing." Knights, Smith, and Malik, "Discordance in the Iran Threat Network in Iraq."

h Media pattern analysis conducted by the Militia Spotlight team in 2021, and corroborated by interviews with individuals with detailed insight into *muqawama* operations, strongly indicate that Alfaqaar was originally created by a team of individuals affiliated with AAH. The channel also is affiliated with a militia façade group known as *quwwat dhul-fiqaar* (the Zulfiqar Forces).

i Notable channels that frequently reposted IMCR content include Sabereen News, Qeyam.Post, Rasad al-Muqawama, Shabab al-Islam, Jihad Brothers, Unit 10000, all of which have ties to Kata'ib Hezbollah, and some of which have ties to Harakat al-Nujaba. See also "Harakat Ashab al-Yamin al-Islamia: A New Group or Part of a Broader Iranian-Aligned Network?" Dark Owl, April 16, 2026.

j Note that his passport lists Baghdad as a place of birth – this is not necessarily incompatible with a real place of birth in Iran: In many cases, passports issued to those born in Iran will still show the place of birth as a town or province within Iraq. See, for example, "Iraq: Knowledge Base profile," HM Passport Office, updated April 10, 2026.

k His father Saad Dawood and mother (named on his passport) is Hamida Jaafar Jawad (born 1967). Al-Saadi was not identified with an Iraqi birthplace in any interview or document consulted for this study. Multiple independent interviewees have identified Mohammad Baqer as having at least one Iraqi parent, backed up by the fact that he holds Iraqi citizenship. Author (Knights) interviews, individuals with knowledge of al-Saadi's career; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

l Al-Saadi was not identified with an Iraqi birthplace in any interview or document consulted for this study. Multiple independent interviewees (by both authors) place him living in Iran during his youth. His father Saad Dawood and mother (named on his passport) is Hamida Jaafar Jawad (born 1967). Multiple independent interviewees state with moderate confidence that they were Iraqi exiles living in Iran where they had their three children: a daughter Amina (born 1991), a son Mohammad Baqer (born 1993), and another daughter Fatima (born 1997).

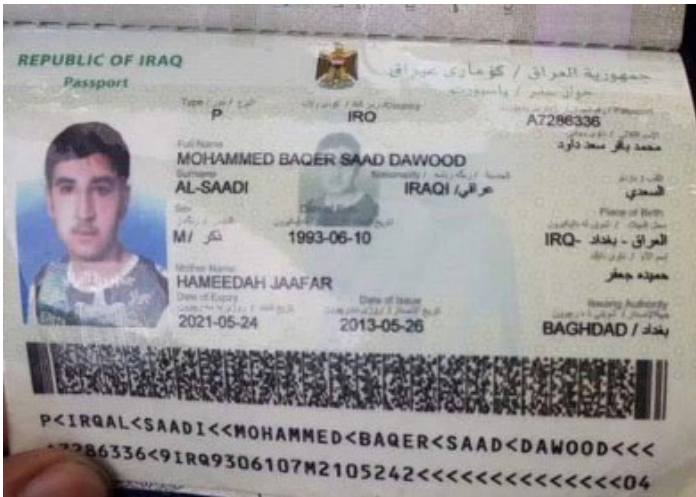


Figure 1: Image received from contact by author (Knights) showing the Republic of Iraq personal (non-government) passport A7286336 belonging to al-Saadi in the 2013-2021 period. Expired 2021.

be why one interviewee⁴¹ referred to Mohammad Baqer's family as '*mosafereen*,' a generation of joiners to the Badr movement, which was formed and controlled by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).⁴² The *mosafereen* were Iraqis deported from Iraq or otherwise driven out by the Saddam government.⁴³ It is assessed by the authors as likely that al-Saadi's father was a fighter in the Badr formation or an adjacent IRGC-backed Islamic resistance group of Iraqis.⁴⁴ This generation produced many of the founders and senior leaders of today's Iraqi *muqawama*, with decades-spanning ties to Iranian senior commanders in IRGC-QF.⁴⁵

Mohammad Baqer al-Saadi appears to have returned to Iraq after the fall of the Baathist regime in 2003. Ten years later, aged around 20, al-Saadi reportedly traveled to Syria as a fighter in support of Bashar al-Assad's regime, before returning to Iraq in 2014 to participate in operations against the Islamic State in Diyala Governorate.⁴⁵ Images available online show that al-Saadi was operating alongside Iraqi Shi'a Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) and the wider Iraqi military (i.e., unspecified Iraqi helicopter forces) from at least 2015.⁴⁶ These images show him in a range of contexts, particularly during the 2015 Samarra campaigns against the Islamic State.ⁿ Unusually for such pictures, however, al-Saadi almost never wears a military uniform, and the authors are not aware of any images existing of him wearing formal unit markings—this, despite frequently being pictured alongside Iraqi military and militia members, while often appearing with a range of American-pattern weapons. Unusually, he is not openly connected to any specific PMF brigade or any armed group (*faisal* in Arabic) in this period.⁴⁷

Photographic Links to Senior Commanders

In addition to these irregularities in the military images of al-Saadi, it was apparent from as early as 2015 that he was not a standard PMF volunteer or even a low-level *faisal* foot soldier. Instead, he was photographed since 2015 with a 'who's who' of senior IRGC and militia commanders that is unique in the experience of the authors.^o Multiple photographs exist showing al-Saadi with IRGC-QF commander Qassem Soleimani on at least two separate occasions. According to individuals with direct experience of al-Saadi, around this time al-Saadi was noticed by Soleimani and KH founder Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis and was given positions of trust within their retinues.⁴⁸ During the conflict with the Islamic State in Iraq (between 2014 and 2017), al-Saadi is described by multiple interviewees as having played a role in distributing weapons (i.e., light and medium weapons) to different militia groups and PMF units,⁴⁹ possibly explaining the extraordinary influence and access such a young fighter was able to command. A worthy topic for further study is discovering the origin of these weapons donations and which benefactors stood behind them.

Al-Saadi's first appearance in the public record (at least as identified by the authors^p) was in a social media post⁴⁹ from August 24, 2015. The post included four photos of al-Saadi (Figure 2), showing him standing with Soleimani, al-Muhandis, Badr's leader Hadi al-Ameri, and another picture of al-Saadi alone while holding a silenced pistol. The original Arabic caption reads "a man named Muhammad Baqir Soleimani, a resident of Kadhimiya in Baghdad, is leading groups involved in kidnapping, killing, and bombings in Diyala, and he openly declares this on Facebook."⁵⁰ These images show a man visually identical to the same al-Saadi who has been detained in the United States over 10 years later: On May 6, 2020, an X account associated to Mohammad Baqer al-Saadi and actively named in the 2026 FBI complaint⁵¹ posted both identical and visually similar images.⁵²

o In the authors' collective experience, it is highly unusual for so young a fighter to have such access to so many commanders from multiple different militias, nor is such a clearly intimate and close relationship with senior leaders such as Qassem Soleimani, Esmail Qaani, and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis either ordinary or commonplace.

p The authors have conducted a comprehensive review of open-source material relating to al-Saadi prior to 2026. In several cases, it is clear that certain images or statements still available in public are derived from now defunct, deleted, or hidden accounts. Moreover, at the time of publication, new photographs and screenshots of past messages continue to resurface. Except where noted, more recently resurfaced materials have been omitted from this study to minimize the risk of using misinformation generated following al-Saadi's public arrest. In several cases, however, this study makes use of online posts apparently made by Sunni activists and members of the Tishrini protest movement; particularly around 2019, al-Saadi attracted significant negative attention from members of these groups for his alleged role in suppressing protests and orchestrating assassinations.

q The Brigade Saddam, Facebook is a pro-Saddam/Baathist blogger, so it is very likely an anti-Shi'a and/or anti-Iran commentator. Nevertheless, as the information being drawn from this source is an image, the basic data is still considered valuable and able to be judged on its own merits, regardless of the source's motivations.

m These individuals – such as Abu Mustafa al-Sheibani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis – are discussed in detail in Michael Knights, "Back into the Shadows? The Future of Kata'ib Hezbollah and Iran's Other Proxies in Iraq," *CTC Sentinel* 13:10 (2020).

n Several images show al-Saadi in operational contexts in locations in and around Samarra, or with maps clearly showing geography in the Samarra and Diyala area.



Figure 2: Post by Brigade Saddam on August 24, 2015. The top left image is the same as the image posted by @bakr81950 in May 2020. The bottom left image depicts al-Saadi and IRGC-QF Commander General Qassim Soleimani. Comparison of the clothes worn by al-Saadi and the maps in the background of the image suggest that the photos including al-Muhandis and Soleimani were almost certainly taken in the same location, highly likely on the same day and time. The top right photo depicts al-Saadi with leader of the Badr Organization Hadi al-Amiri. The bottom left photo depicts al-Saadi holding a silenced handgun.

2016 Activity in Syria, Pseudonym, and Inaccurate Death Reports

Around 2016, al-Saadi appears to have traveled back to Syria to support fighting in and around Aleppo. At about that time, more online sources refer to al-Saadi as “Mohammad Baqir Soleimani” [emphasis added] in connection with photographs of al-Saadi;⁵³ in many cases, these photographs can also be matched to subsequent images posted after 2020 by al-Saadi himself,^r confirming that the two identities refer to the same individual. Several of these news articles from 2016 alleged—inaccurately—that Mohammad Baqir Soleimani (i.e., al-Saadi) had been killed in Syria, while noting his close connection with Qassem Soleimani.⁵⁴ The reports of the death seem to have begun after *muqawama* group Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH) announced his death,⁵⁵ then tweeted another photo of him with Soleimani to mourn his loss, stating “all of the factions of the Islamic Resistance mourn a group of martyrs, headed by their martyred commander Muhammad Baqir Soleimani in Aleppo.” (See Figure 3.) Al-Saadi later posted a message on one of his social media accounts confirming that he had not been killed after all.⁵⁶

At the time of his alleged death in Aleppo, a blog post titled “the killing of ‘Hajj Mohammad Baqir Soleimani’, the beloved guardian of the criminal Qassem Soleimani in Iraq and Syria and the commander of Asaib Ahl al-Haq + 42 photos” (posted on the website MessagefromIran) shared a carousel of 42 images depicting

r This is the same Telegram account named in the 2026 FBI complaint.



Figure 3: Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq mourns al-Saadi’s apparent death in 2016.

al-Saadi, including several images that would later be reshared by al-Saadi on social media.^s These images appear to show al-Saadi operating in the Samarra, Iraq, area alongside elements of the Iraqi military.^t There are also seven photos (Figure 4) of al-Saadi with Soleimani (some subsequently posted by al-Saadi himself) as well as the same photo with Hadi al-Amiri as was previously available on social media; a photo including Kata’ib al-Imam Ali (KIA)⁵⁷ commander Ayoub Falih Hasan Al-Rubayie (aka Abu Azrael; Figure 5) as well as several images depicting al-Saadi in Tehran. (At the time (2016), KIA was not a U.S.-designated terrorist entity, but its founder, Shibl al-Zaydi, was.)^u

Participation in Suppressing the 2019 Tishreeni Protests

According to interviews with individuals possessing direct knowledge of al-Saadi’s activities, al-Saadi participated in violence unleashed in Baghdad on the Tishreeni movement protestors in late 2019. These interviewees allege that al-Saadi personally participated in clashes around protester-occupied Sinek Bridge in November 2019.⁵⁸ Al-Saadi is also purported to have headed a cell charged with conducting assassinations in Baghdad.⁵⁹ One group of interviewees have identified al-Saadi as playing “a major role in assassinations through his own group, which is called Ali Imad al-Baqir.”⁶⁰ This group “specialized in carrying out assassination operations against activists who had a negative stance on Iran.”⁶¹

s Posts from the 2016 article were likely originally shared by al-Saadi himself on social media or privately. Photos that were subsequently reshared by accounts confirmed as belonging to Muhammad Baqer al-Saadi are as follows: (1) On May 6, 2020, @bakr81950 posted a tweet depicting al-Saadi stood in an embrace with Iraqi paramilitary leader and former chief of staff of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis; (2) On August 1, 2020, @bakr81950 posted a tweet depicting al-Saadi kneeling next to a table, conversing with Soleimani. This is the same photo as identified on MessagefromIran in 2016; (3) On November 17, 2020, @bakr81950 posted a tweet depicting al-Saadi kneeling next to a table, conversing with Soleimani.

t On April 21, 2021, @bakr81950 posted a tweet depicting al-Saadi sitting in front of a map of Samarra, Iraq, speaking to Soleimani.

u Shibli al-Zaidi was sanctioned by the United States on November 13, 2018, for acting on behalf of the IRGC-QF and assisting in, sponsoring, or providing financial, material, or technological support for, or financial or other services to or in support of, Hezbollah. See “Treasury Sanctions Key Hizballah, IRGC-QF Networks in Iraq,” U.S. Department of the Treasury, November 18, 2018.



Figure 4: Message from Iran post dated September 22, 2016, including photos subsequently shared in 2020 by al-Saadi's X account @bakr81950 (outlined in red). Note in the top lefthand picture, the black-turbaned Hamid al-Jazaeri, commander of Saraya Talia al-Khorasani (Khorasani Vanguard Companies, or STK), another muqawama faction.



Figure 5: Image depicting al-Saadi (left) and Abu Azrael (second from right) as shared by Message from Iran.

On December 7, 2019, a picture of al-Saadi holding a silenced pistol (Figure 7) was posted on a pro-Tishreeni Facebook account with the caption:

The criminal Muhammad Baqir Sa'd al-Saadi: A resident of Kadhimiya, he is a member of the Khorasani Brigades [NB. PMF Brigade 18]—specifically the unit tasked with protecting the criminal Qasem Soleimani—and serves as his personal bodyguard. He is an operative of the Quds Force, a branch of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Formerly a taba'iyā mosafir^v individual, he stands accused of murder, kidnapping, and carrying out silenced assassinations. He has issued death threats against the protesters. Where are the honorable men of Kadhimiya?

The image itself seems to originate from around 2018, posted by al-Saadi on his (likely now deleted) Facebook account. The post was



Figure 6: Examples of al-Saadi apparently on operations, likely alongside the Iraqi military, due to the configuration of the helicopter (i.e., the U.S.-sourced M240 General Purpose Machine-Gun mounted on Iraqi helicopters, which differs from Syrian helicopter armament). It is unclear if the LPG cannisters are just fuel or are small 'barrel bombs' readied to be used as urban bombardment munitions.

captured by an anti-government Facebook account, which noted:

Soleimani's aide—that "brat" [za'tout]^w known as Mohammad Baqir Soleimani—posted a veiled threat involving a silenced weapon just an hour ago. This comes right after the General [Qasem Soleimani] returned to Tehran this afternoon empty-handed, having failed to announce the formation of the "largest bloc" and, notably, having failed to even secure a meeting with Al-Abadi!^x

At some point previously, al-Saadi himself posted another similar image of himself (likely from circa 2015) brandishing a silenced

v As noted earlier, this refers to individuals who fled or were exiled from Iraq to Iran in the 1980s and 1990s (i.e., *mosafereen*). As noted in the authors' earlier assessment, this likely refers to his father's background. This is the assessment of the author team, based on their collective 34 years of close monitoring of the Iraqi militia scene.

w It may be worth noting that al-Saadi is periodically referred to by human sources in some variation of this manner – 'the spoiled child of Soleimani' or 'the spoiled son of Soleimani.' This seems to suggest a person not under the authority of Iraqi *muqawama* leaders, with some kind of unique 'top cover,' somewhat annoyingly from their perspective. Authors interviews, individuals with knowledge of al-Saadi's career; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

x This refers to then incumbent Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi.



Figure 7: December 2019 Facebook post accusing al-Saadi of (inter alia) assassination against protesters, reposting an image shared by al-Saadi himself in May 2018.



Figure 8: @ mutjahid_i, post on X, dated January 17, 2025, accessed May 18, 2026.

pistol, an assassination (not battlefield) weapon, accompanied by the following threats (Figure 8):

I will kill you, even if it takes time, you American dog! Yesterday you attacked Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, and today you are attacking Kata'ib Hezbollah. They taught you a lesson you will never forget. Just 15 mujahideen from the Silent Jihad humiliated the Baghdad Operations Command with its Humvees and aircraft... The result: 3 Kata'ib Hezbollah fighters were wounded... and 2 of the American dogs were killed and 8 wounded. The clash was stopped by the order of al-Abadi and with the direct intervention of Sheikh Abdul-Mahdi Karbalai^y

^y The official representative of Grand Ayatollah Sayed Ali Al-Sistani, the latter being the senior cleric in Iraq.

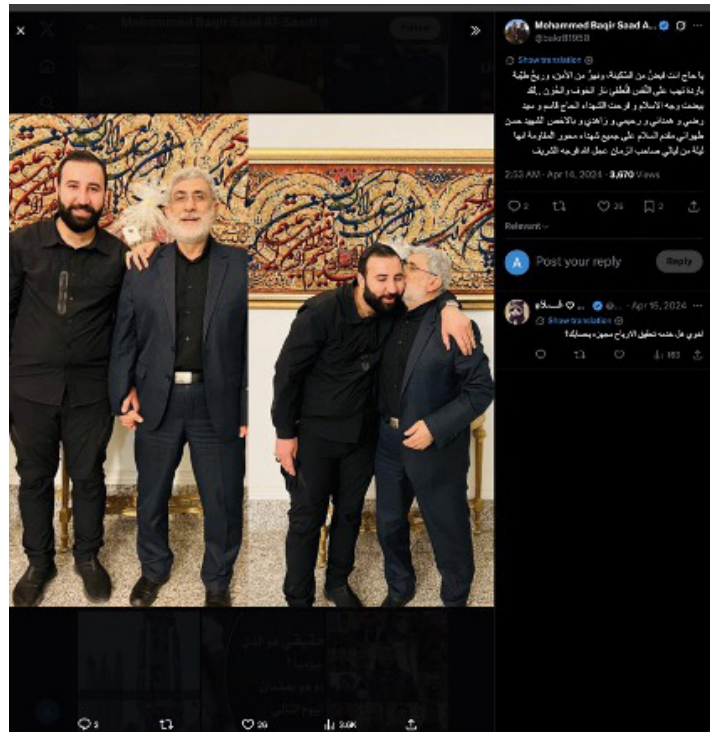


Figure 9: @bakr81950, post on X, dated April 14, 2024, showing him with Ismail Qaani. Accessed May 18, 2026.

And

To the American commander of Baghdad Operations: Know that Kata'ib Hezbollah is a red line, and any transgression against the Silent Jihad will be regretted, you American dog...

From at least 2019 onward, al-Saadi also became prolific in issuing death threats to opponents of Kata'ib Hezbollah, including against journalists,⁶³ members of Iraq's intelligence services, and then Prime Minister Mustafa Kadhimi and members of his administration.⁶⁴ These posts provide some support for claims that al-Saadi engaged in (or at least cultivated an impression of engaging in) assassinations and other sensitive criminal activities.

Later Relationships

Images available online show al-Saadi traveled to Lebanon shortly after the October 7, 2023, attacks against Israel, although the authors do not currently understand the extent of his activities there—though one interviewee claimed to the authors that al-Saadi developed closer ties with members of Lebanese Hezbollah after the deaths of his patrons Soleimani and al-Muhandis in January 2020.⁶⁵ Pictures were also released of al-Saadi with IRGC-QF commander Esmail Qaani (Figure 9). Al-Saadi appears to have enjoyed significant access at the funeral events of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah on February 23, 2025, with at least one image showing him standing in an area with Abu Fadak al-Mohammedawi (Chief of Staff of the PMF and a former KH secretary general).⁶⁶ It seems clear that despite Soleimani's death, al-Saadi continued to enjoy significant access to and trust with senior Quds Force and KH leaders around this time. For example, in mid-April 2024, an X user posted a photo that appeared to show two photos of al-Saadi with Qaani.⁶⁷ As the photos do not appear to have been seen online

prior to April 2024,^z they may show al-Saadi and Qaani during this crisis period, or at the very least are intended to show that al-Saadi had wartime access to Qaani at a time when such audiences would have been carefully limited and arranged, and when considerable risk would attach to both parties by meeting (Figure 9).^{aa}

Al-Saadi's Life in the Shadows

Al-Saadi was not so public about all aspects of his operational activities. In the following section, the authors will explore some carefully curated insights that have been drawn primarily from interviews with Iraqi persons with knowledge of al-Saadi's operational career.

Travel to Support Drone Procurement and Terrorist Activity

At some point in the early 2020s, al-Saadi became involved in drone procurement efforts by Iraqi militias.⁶⁸ It is assessed by the authors as likely that he leveraged his impressive personal networks with senior Iranian and militia commanders, and his prior experiences distributing Iranian weapons for militias and PMF units.⁶⁹ According to individuals with direct experience of al-Saadi, as part of this work, al-Saadi developed close ties with Lebanese Hezbollah.⁷⁰ He also began to travel more broadly, including to Europe, to secure component supply chains and arms.⁷¹ One group of interviewees have identified al-Saadi as a "drone mover" involved in securing attack drones for KSS in advance of the current 2026 U.S.-Israel-Iraq war (the interviewees believe these drones were subsequently used to attack U.S. and coalition bases in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq).⁷²

It is assessed by the authors as likely that at this time, al-Saadi began to develop contacts in both the Iranian and Iraqi diasporas in Europe, as well as in regional criminal organizations; these contacts likely formed the basis for subsequent networks through which he could find proxies to conduct attacks under the HAYI brand in 2026.⁷³ A passport image (Figure 10) provided by a contact of one of the authors (Knights) shows a Schengen area multiple-entry visa for passport number A18011426 that became active on September 7, 2023. This visa was revoked for an unknown reason between August 31, 2023, and August 7, 2024, apparently during a visit to Italy.

Concerningly, al-Saadi's freedom of movement appears to have been significantly enabled by the issue of a Government of Iraq special 'service passport' (passport number R00090048, Figure 11), further indicating al-Saadi's continued access and influence while raising questions about his links into the echelons of government as well as international legal questions related to Iraq's state responsibility for al-Saadi's actions.⁷⁴ The service passport identifies

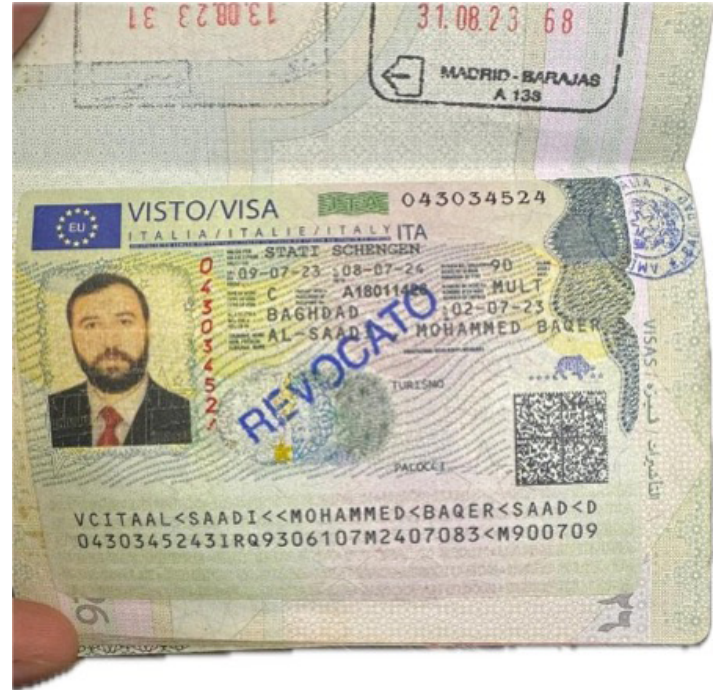


Figure 10: The Schengen visa page of a multi-entry passport held by al-Saadi in 2023 (passport number A18011426). The visa has been revoked, presumably on some date between the visa stamps above (in August 2023) and the end-date of the visa in July 2024. Note the apparent entry and exit stamps from Madrid, Spain, on August 13, 2023, and August 31, 2023, respectively.

him as an Iraqi government official.^{ab}

Penetration of Iraqi Intelligence Agencies

Another area of reported covert activities by Mohammad Baqer al-Saadi is the recruitment of Iraqi security officials to illegally provide Iraqi government classified information to the Iranian government and to Iraqi *fasail*.⁷⁵ How did this work? According to one reporting network in Iraq, considered credible by the authors,⁷⁶ al-Saadi's work is supported by the combined efforts of an IRGC-QF officer in Baghdad, KSS head Abu Alaa al-Wal'ai, and the head of Iraq's National Security Service, Abu Ali al-Basri (real name Abdal-Karim Abd-Fadil Hussein).^{ac}

z A detailed reverse image search – and the authors' own ongoing collection effort as part of the Militia Spotlight program – suggests to the authors that this piece was probably not available online prior to April 2024. This does not mean it was taken in April 2024, but it does suggest it was either taken in April 2024 or was released in April 2024 for a purpose.

aa During wartime, with IRGC leaders being assassinated on a regular basis by Israel, access to leaders like Qaani would logically be very constrained and limited to essential or important visits only. In the authors' collective assessment, by being photographed apparently standing next to Qaani at this dangerous time – or giving the impression of doing so – al-Saadi demonstrates access and dedication. This is all assessment of the author team.

ab While it is commonplace for powerful Iraqis to buy such a passport even if they are not, in fact, a government official, it is still incumbent on the Iraqi government to ensure that such passports are not granted to ineligible users. Author (Knights) interviews, individuals with knowledge of Iraqi passport and visa procedures exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

ac Abu Ali al-Basri (not to be confused with the deputy operations chief for the PMF, who has the same *kunya* or *nom de guerre*) is the legendary former head of the Falcons counterterrorism unit, and a Daawa member since the 1970s, with decades-spanning connections to the IRGC-QF and Iran's intelligence services. Abu Ali al-Basri is a long-term Daawa party clandestine resistance fighter who served alongside Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis on the side of Iran during the Iran-Iraq war, and who worked against the Saddam regime with IRGC-QF and other Iranian security agencies. For an entertaining, if very positive, account of Abu Ali al-Basri's life and times, see Margaret Coker, *The Spymaster of Baghdad: A True Story of Bravery, Family, and Patriotism in the Battle against ISIS* (New York: Dey Street Books, 2021). See also Michael Knights, Crispin Smith, and Hamdi Malik, "Discordance in the Iran Threat Network in Iraq: Militia Competition and Rivalry," *CTC Sentinel* 14:8 (2021).

to Jewish communities (synagogues, Jewish community centers, Jewish charities) or Israel (the Israeli embassy in London), while some may have been tied to U.S. economic targets (Bank of America office in Paris).⁹¹ No casualties are associated with the arson attacks or explosions, though the attacks could easily have caused injury or death, given the targeting of ordinary civilian locations.

Al-Saadi and his associates appear (in the interim assessment of the authors) to have adopted a tried and tested Iranian methodology discussed by Matthew Levitt in prior *CTC Sentinel* works.⁹² The IRGC-QF and the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) have long been known to recruit local criminal groups, teens, and other local actors to conduct sabotage, intimidation, and assassination of opponents on foreign shores.⁹³ Within this conspiracy—the FBI complaint suggests al-Saadi was supported by other associates⁹⁴—al-Saadi appears to have worked to recruit local proxies to carry out attacks,^{ad} run at least some of those proxies⁹⁵ while providing them with funds, targets, and direction,⁹⁶ directly received proof of the attacks, and then propagandized the deed by passing footage and associated HAYI claims to popular media channels.⁹⁷ Al-Saadi's professional background, as pieced together in this study, shows an individual well placed to develop and run these operations. Having worked to support IRGC-QF objectives for his entire adult life, and with the personal and professional networks in place that gave him access to strategic planners and resources in QF and the Iraqi *muqawama*, it is the authors' assessment that al-Saadi is almost certain to have at least enjoyed the support of his Iranian patrons and, more likely than not, was operating with their blessing or under their direction. His experience running assassination operations in Baghdad likely taught him how to run criminal networks, while his more recent penchant for foreign travel (on a government-issued passport) gave him opportunities to develop his own proxies.

What al-Saadi and his associates achieved in Europe could be written off as relatively insignificant. Very few casualties were sustained, and the attacks were sufficiently small scale that but for the HAYI claims some (though not all) might have been written off as petty crime. But with the concept proved, crude IED and arson attacks carried out by local criminals could have given way to more complex tactics and weapons.^{ae} Alternatively, had an Iraqi militia been seen to have successfully developed a new attack vector in support of Iranian objectives, other groups might have felt compelled to develop their own similar capabilities (either out

of a desire to collaborate or a need to compete—or both).^{af}

North America was clearly on HAYI's radar, starting in Canada, but the U.S. homeland would have been the ultimate prestige target for the movement and its backer, Kata'ib Hezbollah. For the Iraqi *fasail*, this war was a chance to get out from the shadow of Iran's more successful terrorist partners such as Lebanese Hezbollah and the Houthis in Yemen. If al-Saadi is viewed primarily as a *fasail* external operations specialist, his efforts in this war may have been aimed at vaulting an Iraqi-led effort into the front row of Iraq's terrorist partners by avenging the death of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei with the first-ever terrorist attacks launched on the U.S. homeland by an Iraqi Shi'a *muqawama* group. If al-Saadi is viewed primarily as a QF-operated asset, this may be an example of Iran's use of non-Iranians in external operations.⁹⁸

Either way, the payoff did not materialize yet. The HAYI effort failed—so far—to successfully penetrate the continental United States and only achieved limited results in Europe. In fact, IRGC-QF and *muqawama* associates of al-Saadi might well now be asking themselves whether low-level arson and crude-IED attacks have been worth the international scrutiny. The IRGC-QF and Iraqi militias (few of which are sanctioned in Europe) are now exposed as affiliated with (and likely directing) attacks on Western homelands. And should al-Saadi be shown to have been operating at the Quds Forces' direction, European policymakers will almost certainly be forced to adopt even tougher stances toward Iranian-inspired or -directed operations on the continent. In sum, the HAYI effort might also now appear to have been a counterproductive or inefficient use of militia or IRGC resources.

Can Iraqi Muqawama External Operations Be Deterred?

In addition to not generating very valuable results, the HAYI saga may also inflict significant costs on the Iraqi *muqawama* and their IRGC backers. To start with, al-Saadi, an influential militia figure, is in custody in the United States, having been arrested in Turkey before being turned over to the FBI and transported to the United States. He may know a lot about other aspects of Iraqi *muqawama* and Iranian operations, including information about leaders, sites, operational security measures, targeting, financing, procurement, and communications channels.

As important, al-Saadi's capture may have personal impact within the pantheon of Iranian and Iraqi *muqawama* leaders, and result in a loss of prestige. He appeared in the assessment of the authors to have been an important cog in the IRGC's machine in Iraq. Images show him meeting with Abu Alaa al-Wilai of KSS, the NSS director Abu Ali al-Basri, Abu Fadak al-Mohamadawi of KH, Hadi al-Ameri of Badr, Akram Kaabi of HaN, among

ad As of April 29, authorities had made at least 44 arrests in connection with HAYI incidents: 28 in the United Kingdom, 10 in the Netherlands, four in France, and two in Belgium. The majority of them were young men, including 11 boys aged 14 to 17; three women aged 47 to 59 have been arrested as well. At least 16 individuals have been formally charged: eight in the United Kingdom, four in the Netherlands, and four in France. All those charged are males—seven of them minors, the youngest aged 16. Adrian Shtuni, "Deniable, Disposable, Disruptive: Iran's Hybrid Warfare in Europe Demands a Proactive Response," Washington Institute, May 4, 2026.

ae Indeed, one of al-Saadi's last messages to a KH contact before his arrest read, "If God grants us success tonight, there will be a shooting at a restaurant"—an apparent escalation from earlier attacks. See "Dual Iranian-Iraqi National Indicted for Providing Material Support to Terrorist Organizations," U.S. Department of Justice, May 29, 2026.

af In the authors' experience, individual *fasail* within the *muqawama* are at once competitive and collaborative. One group demonstrating new capabilities or tactics often may subsequently lead to a proliferation of the capability as other groups either learn from or outdo the innovators. At least three possible examples of this activity can be observed over recent years: (1) the development and proliferation of one-way attack UAVs, (2) competitive propagandizing of claimed attacks against the United States in the early 2020s, and (3) UAV attacks against Saudi Arabia and the UAE (rare and specialist prior to 2026, but commonplace during the recent U.S.-Iran war).

other Iraqi leaders.^{ag} Iraqi government efforts to have al-Saadi instead extradited back to Iraq were unsuccessful, one of the first times that the Iraqi *fasail* have ever failed to return one of their lost commanders back into their hands and a soft form of house arrest or full release.^{ah} This is because they are no longer simply manipulating the Iraqi legal system into rendering the captive back to the PMF parallel judicial system or some other kind of release. In the international sphere, they have proven much more vulnerable. This alone may deter further overseas movements by Iraqi external operations cells. This deterrent effect would be particularly strong if al-Saadi and others are successfully prosecuted in high-profile cases.

Groups like KH and KSS potentially have a lot to lose inside and outside Iraq. In addition to raising the risk of senior leadership strikes by the United States or other aggrieved foreign powers, there is also the chance that such external operations could weaken the position of KH, KSS, and other factions in Iraq, where it operates at the highest levels of the PMF command structure,⁹⁹ draws on thousands of government salaries,¹⁰⁰ and even has MPs in parliament.¹⁰¹ At present, unless specifically sanctioned, most of these Iraqi factions are relatively free to travel in the Gulf, Turkey, the Arab world, Europe, and Asia.

For relatively little strategic or tactical value, al-Saadi—and by extension, KH and KSS—are now even more exposed at a moment when they are already in the spotlight: for likely involvement in high volumes of drone and missile attacks within and outside Iraq;^{ai} for kidnapping U.S. citizen Shelley Kittleson (in KH’s case);^{aj} and potentially for launching drone attacks on the UAE and Saudi Arabia after al-Saadi’s detention.^{ak} Al-Saadi may be in a position to shed light on all these issues, bringing the Iraqi *fasail* and their political offshoots under greater scrutiny from Iraq’s judiciary, the United States, and the Gulf States.

The United States and some Gulf States may be on the edge of kinetic action against KH and other Iraqi *fasail* following these provocations. European states, meanwhile, may now come under increased public scrutiny to proscribe Kata’ib Hezbollah (or even the IRGC) as terrorist organizations—something they have been reluctant to consider in the past. All this is arguably a bad omen for the Iraqi *muqawama* as a new prime minister, Ali al-Zaidi, settles into his role. Al-Saadi’s case shows that even less publicly exposed militia leaders will be subject to ever more severe scrutiny and legal or custodial risks outside of Iraq or Iran should they attempt to develop attacks on continental Europe, the United Kingdom, or the U.S. homeland. **CTC**

ag A reply (posted after al-Saadi’s arrest was publicized) to one of al-Saadi’s X posts from 2024 depicts al-Saadi traveling alongside Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada leader Abu Alaa al-Walaei. @sa199_kk, post on X, dated May 15, 2024, accessed May 18, 2026.

ah This is the authors’ assessment based on their collective 34 years of monitoring Iraqi *muqawama* groups use of the judicial system to mitigate negative outcomes on their captured members. To give some concrete examples, one might look at cases such as the 2020 detentions of KH rocketeers and later militia leader Qassem Muslih, and the later Iranian-Iraqi efforts to get an Iraqi-held IRGC-QF assassin released back to Iran. See Amir al-Kaabi and Michael Knights, “Kataib Hezbollah’s Escalating Feud with the Iraqi Security Forces,” *Militia Spotlight*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, May 19, 2023; “Muslih’s release likely part of deal compelling militias to stop anti-U.S. strikes in Iraq,” *Arab Weekly*, October 6, 2021; and Michael Knights and Crispin Smith, “Direct-Operated IRGC-QF Attack Cells in Iraq: Data Related to the Troell Case,” *Militia Spotlight*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, February 19, 2025.

ai This drone and missile campaign will be chronicled in depth in a forthcoming *CTC Sentinel* article by the authors and additional collaborators.

aj The U.S. State Department claimed that Kittleson was “kidnapped by members of the foreign terrorist organization Kata’ib Hizballah near Baghdad, Iraq.” See “Release of American Journalist Shelly Kittleson,” U.S. State Department, April 7, 2026.

ak On May 14-15, 2026, al-Saadi was transferred to U.S. agents and flown to the United States, with his arrest being publicly announced in the afternoon of May 15, Iraq time. On May 17, the UAE’s Barakah nuclear plant was attacked by three drones launched from Iraq, according to the UAE government. Three other drones entered Saudi Arabia from Iraq on May 17, according to the Saudi Arabian Ministry of Defense. See “UAE Strongly Condemns Terrorist Drone Attacks Targeting Barakah Plant Launched from Iraqi Territory,” UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs, May 20, 2026, and Seth Frantzman, “Saudi Arabia targeted by drones ‘from Iraq,’ condemns strike on UAE nuclear plant,” *Jerusalem Post*, May 18, 2026.

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- 17 Alfaqaar, post on Telegram, March 9, 2026.
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- 32 Ibid., paragraphs 12, 15, and 16.
- 33 Ibid.
- 34 Ibid., paragraph 16(e).
- 35 Ibid., paragraph 16(b)-(c).
- 36 "Dual Iranian-Iraqi National Indicted for Providing Material Support to Terrorist Organizations."
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- 38 Date of birth confirmed by, inter alia, authors interviews, al-Saadi's own Telegram handle (@MOHAMMED_BAQER1993), and images of his passport seen by the authors. Al-Saadi's passports (see Figures 1 and 11) show his birthdate as October 6, 1993.
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- 45 Author (Smith) interviews, individuals with knowledge of al-Saadi's career; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.
- 46 See, for example, <https://messagefromiran.com>. Many of these images can be directly associated with posts shared by al-Saadi himself.
- 47 This is the assessment of the author team, based on their collective 34 years of close monitoring of the Iraqi militia scene.
- 48 Author (Smith) interviews, individuals with knowledge of al-Saadi's career; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.
- 49 Author (Smith) interviews, individuals with knowledge of al-Saadi's career; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.
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- 51 Federal criminal complaint number 26 MAG 1622 states that al-Saadi is a user of X (formerly Twitter) account @bakr81590. This account has reportedly shared multiple photos depicting al-Saadi.
- 52 Post by @bakr81590, X, dated May 6, 2020, accessed May 18, 2026; reverse image search, Yandex, dated May 18, 2026, accessed May 18, 2026.
- 53 "[A military commander close to Qassem Soleimani was killed in the battles of Aleppo]," *sabr.cc*, September 24, 2016. See also "[The killing of 'Hajj Mohammad Baqir Soleimani', the beloved guardian of the criminal Qassem Soleimani in Iraq and Syria and the commander of Asaib Ahl al-Haq]," messagefromiran.com, September 22, 2016; "[Iraqi militia commander and 4 Iranian soldiers killed in Aleppo]," *Al-Arabiya*, September 24, 2016; and "[The Iraqi 'Tiger Brigade': Their weapons come from Syria, and their salaries from Baghdad]," *Asharq Al-Awsat*, September 27, 2016.
- 54 Amir Toumaj, "Iraqi Shiite militia commander close to Qassem Soleimani killed in Aleppo," *Threat Matrix*, FDD's Long War Journal, September 27, 2016.
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- 60 Author (Knights) interviews, individuals with knowledge of al-Saadi's career; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.
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- 66 Steven Nabil, "A photo of Mohammad Baqer at the funeral of Lebanese Hezbollah leader . . .," X, May 15, 2026.
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- 69 Author (Smith) interviews, individuals with knowledge of al-Saadi's career; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.
- 70 Author (Smith) interviews, individuals with knowledge of al-Saadi's career; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

- 71 Authors interviews, individuals with knowledge of al-Saadi's career; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.
- 72 Author (Knights) interviews, individuals with knowledge of al-Saadi's career; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.
- 73 Author (Smith) interviews, individuals with knowledge of al-Saadi's career; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.
- 74 "Dual Iranian-Iraqi National Indicted for Providing Material Support to Terrorist Organizations."
- 75 Author (Knights) interview, members of one reporting network with knowledge of the meeting; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.
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- 80 Author (Knights) interview, members of one reporting network with knowledge of the meeting; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.
- 81 Author (Knights) interview, members of one reporting network with knowledge of the meeting; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.
- 82 Author (Knights) interview, members of one reporting network with knowledge of the meeting; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.
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- 92 For an excellent overview of this, see Matthew Levitt, "Trends in Iranian External Assassination, Surveillance, and Abduction Plots," *CTC Sentinel* 15:2 (2022) and Matthew Levitt, "Tehran's Homeland Option: Terror Pathways for Iran to Strike in the United States," *CTC Sentinel* 18:8 (2025).
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Will Generative AI Fundamentally Change Terrorist Threats?

By Andrew Glazzard, David McIlhatton, and Paul Martin

This article examines whether generative artificial intelligence (Gen AI) represents a genuine transformation in terrorist capability or whether its risks are being overstated within contemporary security discourse. Drawing on affordance theory, it explores how terrorists exploit technologies in ways not intended by their designers and assesses the practical implications of Gen AI across propaganda, recruitment and radicalization, reconnaissance, and attack planning. The article argues that while Gen AI tools, particularly large language models, can improve the efficiency, accessibility, and scale of certain terrorist activities, there remains limited evidence that they fundamentally alter the nature of terrorism or significantly enhance operational capability. Instead, many anticipated threats remain hypothetical and are often shaped by speculative worst-case scenarios rather than demonstrated use. The article further argues that terrorists historically favor technologies that are cheap, accessible, reliable, and easy to adapt, rather than highly sophisticated innovations.

Technology is, for obvious reasons, a major focus for counterterrorism analysts. Modern terrorism originated in the second half of the 19th century partly from the convergence of developments in weaponry, such as the invention of dynamite (1867), and in communication technologies, such as electric telegraphy (patented 1837; first deployed 1844), steam-powered rotary printing presses (1843-47) and Linotype (1866).¹ The vast expansion of commercial aviation in the 1960s gave terrorists something new and spectacular to attack, while the arrival of television in people's homes at around the same time provided them with the means to provide the spectacle.² Digital technologies from the 1990s enabled terrorist networks to supersede closely knit organizations and achieve

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global reach; social media and smartphones allowed terrorist brands to exist virtually as well as on the ground.³ As various forms of artificial intelligence are now making real and, in some cases, profound changes to our lives, the public realm is becoming filled with discussion of their potential benefits and risks. It is therefore only to be expected that terrorism analysts have turned toward the potential downsides of these remarkable technologies, and of generative AI (Gen AI) in particular. This article considers the terrorist risk presented by widespread, freely available Gen AI tools, and specifically whether Gen AI offers, as some fear, a step-change in terrorist capability.

The Affordances of Gen AI for Terrorist Groups and Movements

Terrorism scholars have productively deployed the theory of affordance to explain how terrorists exploit technology. Affordance (a concept developed by the psychologist James J. Gibson) is what an environment provides that an animal or individual can use: A tree, for example, may be useful for escaping from predators, as a source of food, or as a vantage point for surveying a landscape.⁴ Applied to technology, affordances are what a tool enables an individual or group to do; affordance theorists make a subtle but important distinction between a tool's features, which are the elements of the tool itself, and affordances, which are the actions that can be performed with the tool.⁵ In this context, there is a subtle difference between a tool's purpose and how it is used: Affordances are not necessarily intended by the technology's designers.⁶ This apparently simple observation is at the heart of Relational Affordance Theory, which proposes that a tool's affordance does not derive exclusively from its inherent properties but emerges from a dynamic and iterative interaction between the tool and the humans (individuals, groups, societies) that use it.⁷ This is important in terrorism studies as most technologies are not designed for the purposes of terrorism: Terrorists discover the properties within technologies they find useful, irrespective of their intended purpose.⁸ One example is the Memopark timer, a Swiss-made 60-minute mechanical timing device intended to remind motorists of metered parking expiry times. The Provisional IRA (PIRA) discovered in the 1970s that the Memopark was an extremely cheap and reliable method of controlling the initiation of improvised explosive devices (IEDs), and the group used them frequently and to deadly effect in their time and power units.⁹ The inventors of the timer presumably had no idea that their tool could be used for such malevolent purposes.

One important and useful distinction, developed by Donald Norman, is between the *perceived* affordance and the *actual* properties of a technology, giving rise to the concept of hidden affordance (where the affordance is not easily perceived).¹⁰ Another distinction is between functional affordance (what a tool can do in the physical world) and cognitive affordance (what it can do mentally or informationally).¹¹ And these distinctions raise another

important consideration: A tool may appear to offer functional or cognitive affordance to the user, but this perception may be mistaken, either because the user has misperceived its function, or because the tool is ineffective or has a misleading design feature. This is known as false affordance.¹²

What are the affordances of Gen AI from the perspective of 21st century terrorists? More simply, what can terrorists do with Gen AI that they could not do yesterday? Most of the research and commentary on this has focused, unsurprisingly, on large language models (LLMs), the form of Gen AI that has captured the most attention and is making the most progress into our daily lives. A survey of recent papers suggests at least four areas of concern:

- **Propaganda:** Gen AI can enable terrorist/extremist groups to produce propaganda at scale and speed, to produce new kinds of content (such as highly credible but inauthentic synthetic content or ‘deepfakes,’ or immersive propaganda using extended reality applications), to target content more efficiently, and to evade existing countermeasures to moderate or remove terrorist content—all with the potential to accelerate and vastly expand their ability to recruit and to radicalize.¹³
- **Recruitment and radicalization:** Gen AI chatbots potentially increase the capacity of terrorists and extremists to engage with potential recruits, or even to guide attacks, without the need for a human in the loop, while self-starting, undirected ‘lone actor’ terrorists can potentially create their own radicalizers. Counterterrorism analysts (and the United Kingdom’s Reviewer of Counter-Terrorism Legislation) have drawn attention to the case of Jaswant Singh Chail, convicted in the United Kingdom for treason (rather than terrorism) after he was arrested at Windsor Castle with a crossbow on Christmas Day 2021; Chail had discussed his plan to assassinate Queen Elizabeth with his Gen AI ‘girlfriend,’ a chatbot named Sarai.¹⁴
- **Research and reconnaissance:** Gen AI enables terrorist/extremist groups to conduct research on potential targets and attack methods at a level previously unattainable using, for example, conventional search engines, while ‘hostile reconnaissance’ (obtaining information on a potential target), which can already be conducted remotely to an extent, could be made more efficient by Gen AI-enabled digital twins (digital representations of real-world artifacts or environments).¹⁵ Indeed, the United Kingdom’s National Protective Security Authority has brought forward guidance for government and businesses for mitigating the risks of this.¹⁶
- **Attack methodology:** Gen AI could theoretically be used by terrorist groups to develop innovative attack methods, overcoming a model’s guardrails (designed to prevent malicious misuse) and developing, for example, novel explosives or designing toxins or biological agents for use in weapons,¹⁷ or innovating with delivery methods such as connected and autonomous vehicles. Some forms of Gen AI could be used in the delivery of attacks (e.g., by creating and delivering malicious code into the computers and networks of their targets).¹⁸

Taken together, this suggests there is cause for worry. As Hauser and Dong note in their systematic review of the literature on terrorism and AI, “it is a matter of *when*, not *if*, terrorist organizations will begin to weaponize a broad range of AI

applications and services for malicious purposes.”¹⁹ If Gen AI can enhance terrorist capability in at least four ways, we should prepare ourselves for more (and more effective) attacks. And there should be no doubt that terrorists, like anyone with an internet connection, are using Gen AI and increasingly so. However, in assessing whether Gen AI will be a game-changer for the terrorist threat, one needs to look closer at its affordances from a terrorist perspective, and not merely construct hypothetical vignettes of imaginable possibilities. The following section analyzes the affordances of Gen AI for terrorist use.

Capability, Availability, and Effect

Terrorists do not use any and every tool that has an affordance from their perspective. There have been several attempts to identify what makes a technology appealing or useful to terrorists. Baele and Brace, drawing on affordance theory in their study of the value of AI to extremist movements, identify two factors in the actualization of technology affordance: consistency with social norms and values, and strategic considerations.²⁰ In other words, terrorists or extremists will consider not only the practical utility and costs of a technology in achieving their desired objectives, but also the extent to which the technology aligns with the movement’s morality and culture. A somewhat more elaborate framework, using Situational Crime Prevention theory to evaluate the attractiveness of attack methods, was developed by Clarke and Newman in 2007. The components of their MURDEROUS framework are: Multi-purpose, Undetectable, Removable, Destructive, Enjoyable, Reliable, Obtainable, Uncomplicated, and Safe.²¹ More recently, Cronin has proposed a similar (and overlapping) set of characteristics for the technologies with the greatest application for violent non-state users: They will be accessible, cheap, simple to use, transportable, concealable, effective, multi-use, mature, commercially available, and customizable.²² Neither framework has been empirically tested and validated, and several of the components proposed could be challenged. Despite these limitations, the two frameworks are at least a starting point for identifying what might be the more specific affordances of a technology such as Gen AI for a terrorist. Seen through the prism of affordance theory, the 19 components of these frameworks can be reduced to three categories:^a i) capability, by which we mean the actual properties and perceived affordances of the technology (including but not restricted to the capability in conducting an attack); ii) availability, meaning the ease (or perceived ease) with which the terrorist can exploit those affordances; and iii) effect, i.e., what the technology achieves both functionally (in the physical world) and cognitively—an important distinction as terrorists are in the business of creating or changing perceptions in their target populations.²³

How does Gen AI measure up against these three dimensions of capability, availability, and effect from the terrorist’s perspective? In terms of capability, Gen AI can certainly increase the efficiency of activities, such as propaganda generation or research on targets. For the former, numerous studies have demonstrated that generating extremist text and imagery is straightforward with only basic

a Mapping this taxonomy to Clarke and Newman and Cronin’s frameworks, capability comprises Multi-purpose/multi-use, Removable/transportable, Reliable, mature, customizable, concealable; availability comprises Obtainable/commercially available, Undetectable, accessible, cheap, Uncomplicated/simple to use and Safe; and effect comprises Destructive, Enjoyable, and effective.

prompt engineering or fine tuning. As a result of concerns such as these, the developers of LLMs in particular are keen to stress that their models come with ‘guardrails,’ protections that are aimed to prevent malicious or accidental misuse. However, as with almost any technological protective measure, it is possible to bypass or corrupt the guardrails, using specific prompt engineering (designing tailored inputs into the LLM to create outputs that the designers of the model did not intend or desire) or fine tuning (training the model on specific inputs so it adapts its outputs accordingly). Prompt engineering techniques include ‘prompt jailbreak’ (where an attacker constructs an input in such a way that it bypasses the restrictions built into the model’s algorithms), ‘prompt injection’ (where the attacker overrides the developer’s instructions, either directly using their own instruction or indirectly by injecting malicious code into the model’s data sources), and ‘prompt leaking’ (where an attacker extracts elements of the model’s architecture in order to replicate or corrupt it).²⁴ Experimental studies show that it is indeed possible to generate results useful to terrorists using prompt jailbreaks, though one study intriguingly shows that the success rate was almost as high without having to resort to prompt engineering (i.e., by simply asking the model to complete the task).²⁵

It seems clear, then, that Gen AI presents significant capability affordance in propaganda production in terms of efficiency by increasing scale/volume and speed while reducing costs. Set against those efficiency gains are risks identified by Baele and Brace: reduced quality (although they suggest that this risk diminishes as the power of Gen AI increases) and reduced legitimacy and authenticity (which are considered below under Effect).²⁶ As with the use of any system or service, they may also entail security risks for the terrorist in that their use of Gen AI may provide advance warning or evidence of terrorist activity.

Turning to research and reconnaissance, the efficiency gains of Gen AI for terrorists are equally clear, albeit curiously under-researched.^b If, for example, one imagines a terrorist group seeking to attack a well-protected site or individual, LLM-powered research has the potential to generate more and better information more quickly than relying on static information sources such as an official website or a Wikipedia entry. Further, one can infer that the benefits of Gen AI for legitimate open-source intelligence (OSINT) research—which have been amply demonstrated in, for example, the rapid processing by investigative journalists using LLMs of ‘data dumps’ and evidential material—are equally relevant to those with more nefarious objectives.²⁷ But in this use-case, LLMs are a tool to make better use of the rich information ecosystem already available through the internet and associated capabilities such as remote image capture. Terrorists have been able to conduct virtual reconnaissance from their laptops using existing data and commercial tools for many years, while uncrewed aerial vehicles (drones) offer opportunities to gather new and more granular reconnaissance data of specific locations.²⁸ Rather than enabling new kinds of planning and research, current and recent case studies show that Gen AI at this time offers efficiency gains rather than

novel capabilities, while the seemingly inescapable problem of Gen AI hallucination may also create problems for terrorist users.²⁹

For the other use cases identified in the literature, the gains of Gen AI are rather more speculative. Despite a degree of moral panic over internet-enabled radicalization at scale, the process of becoming a terrorist remains what it has always been: a complex, human-centric, socially embedded, variable and contingent phenomenon, in which various technologies may perform enabling roles (e.g., by exposing susceptible individuals to extremist influences) but are rarely causative in and of themselves.³⁰ At the other end of the scale is the fear that Gen AI tools, especially when combined with algorithmic audience segmentation, can more effectively micro-target radicalizing propaganda at susceptible individuals.³¹ However, studies are yet to provide evidence of terrorist groups or individuals using such techniques. ‘Radicalizing chatbots’ are conceivable, but the literature has yet to show how the messy and contingent process of radicalization can be automated.

Similarly, there is no shortage of scenarios in which Gen AI tools are used to create novel attack methods, but rather less research and evidence showing a viable pathway from an LLM prompt to a previously undiscovered method. Terrorists do experiment, and thereby develop novel approaches, but they rarely do so at the frontiers of knowledge.³² Rather, they are in the business of discovering hidden affordances in readily available items to people (like the Memopark timer). And for the more concerning applications, such as creating novel chemical, biological, or radiological (CBR) weapons, a great deal of skill and knowledge is still likely to be needed to create viable attack methods. Difficulties in manufacturing and deploying CBR weapons largely explain why we have seen them used so rarely. Even al-Qa`ida, which is known to have invested significant resources in its CBR research programs in the 1990s and early 2000s, and to have developed potentially viable chemical devices, has yet to demonstrate a serious, operational CBR capability.³³

Gen AI technologies are self-evidently available to terrorists irrespective of ideology and type of organization (lone actor, networked social movement, directed organization). Tools such as LLMs are extremely widespread, with models either available free of cost or for a modest fee, easy to use, often undetectable and safe to use (or perceived to be so), thus satisfying the availability criteria in Clarke and Newman and Cronin’s frameworks. Digital technology, however, is unevenly distributed and not quite as ubiquitous as might be assumed in the developed world: Internet penetration in 2025 was a mere 13 percent in Chad and below 20 percent in Mozambique, two countries facing severe terrorist threats.³⁴

Finally, there is the question of effect. Terrorists are already using LLMs to produce synthetic propaganda, as well as using LLMs to enable, for example, automated translation and transcription of existing material.³⁵ However, the real-world effectiveness of these activities is likely to be limited at least in the near term. Scenarios in which synthetic propaganda is created and circulated at scale are plausible. But the question remains whether such operations really would succeed in recruiting, radicalizing, and inspiring future terrorists at significantly greater scale and speed than before these

b Hauser and Dong’s systematic review of AI and terrorism identified 28 studies meeting their inclusion criteria, only one of which addressed the benefits to terrorists of increased information availability from AI tools, and this only did so in passing. The study was Ștefan Săvulescu and Lucian Ivan, “The Impact of Chat GPT on Cybercrime and on the Activities Carried out by the Law Enforcement Structures,” *Romanian Journal of Forensic Science* 136 (2023).

technologies became available.^c Terrorist efforts to leverage Gen AI for these purposes have, to date, been “predominantly low-stakes, low-impact” and limited in scale, despite the efforts of some propaganda outlets (such as Voice of Khorasan, the English-language magazine of Islamic State Khorasan) to encourage uptake of AI tools.³⁶ This may, in part, be the manifestation of two of the risks of terrorists investing in Gen AI identified by Baele and Brace: “legitimacy hazard” (the terrorist group or individual losing legitimacy in their supporters’ eyes because of their reliance on Gen AI) and “authenticity depletion” (the material or the producers being seen as inauthentic).^{37 d} These risks are likely to be particularly high for groups and movements, such as jihadis, which prize canonical sources of religious or spiritual authority and are therefore unlikely to regard algorithms as capable of representing the divine. There may be more practical reasons for the limited uptake of Gen AI tools, such as the limited utility of Gen AI tools in solving operational problems or security concerns that may arise from using applications that are potentially vulnerable to surveillance.^e

Another limitation on the persuasive and motivational effects of Gen AI tools derives from the fundamentals of communication theory. Human beings are not blank slates waiting to be persuaded to join the Islamic State, or a far-right extremist movement, by something they have seen or read on the internet, no matter how technologically advanced in its production. The hypodermic or ‘magic bullet’ theory of communication has been largely discredited as it fails to account for human frailties such as stubbornness and inattentiveness, and for the complex processes of selection, interpretation, and social mediation that occur when we do actually pay attention to something we read or see.³⁸ More complex and empirically supported theories of communication emphasize that people are often resistant to persuasion, filter information inputs through pre-existing beliefs and through social relations, and are highly selective in their attention, leading to relatively limited effects from exposure to media messages.³⁹ This is true even of the most precisely targeted communication, which perhaps explains why fears of social media algorithms enabling mass persuasion through micro-targeting have proved to be drastically overblown.⁴⁰ Communication theory also shows that information ecosystems shape the selection of messages, messengers, or channels,⁴¹ and here, the impact of Gen AI may serve to weaken rather than strengthen

terrorist influence: Studies speculating about the effects of Gen AI terrorist content consistently fail to address the informational context of the dramatic rise of Gen AI tools. The capability to produce vastly more content is now available to everyone looking to influence their target audiences, including those with counterterrorism objectives. But the important point here is not so much that Gen AI tools are actor-agnostic but that the information environment is changing radically with the exponential increase in machine-generated content. As Herbert Simon observed in 1971, when information is abundant, attention is scarce, and attention scarcity is likely to be as much of a problem for terrorists as for anyone seeking to influence and persuade populations.⁴² Some critics of big tech point to the increasing prevalence of ‘AI slop’—low-quality AI-generated content—in the information ecosystem.⁴³ Will adding quantities of terrorist AI slop make much difference to the threat?

Balancing Risks

Examining terrorist use of Gen AI with affordance theory suggests that the risks of terrorist misuse of Gen AI are often overstated, even though it is also clear that Gen AI has the potential to lower some barriers to entry and make some terrorist activities more efficient. But given that the stakes are so high—a terrorist bioweapon, after all, implies some deeply alarming scenarios—are terrorism analysts correct to focus on the risks posed by Gen AI, so that counterterrorism practitioners in government and industry can close them off? Focusing on high-impact, low-probability risks is, after all, a necessary part of the counterterrorism business given the rarity, at least in the West, of significant terrorist attacks.

Any risk is worth examining. But there are serious downsides to focusing on hypothetical catastrophes. The first is that doing so comes with an opportunity cost. Resources for governments and their security agencies are scarce. And attention—that most scarce resource in the Gen AI-enabled information economy—is an essential resource for national security decision-makers. Every pound, dollar, or hour spent on insuring the public against AI-enabled terrorism is a pound, dollar, or hour not spent on other counterterrorism measures. Furthermore, there are risks from Gen AI in other categories of malevolent misuse—such as those involving cyber-attacks by hostile states⁴⁴ or organized criminal networks⁴⁵—that are potentially far greater in terms of impact and likelihood than Gen AI-enabled terrorism, and so deserve greater resource and focus, even though the adoption of Gen AI by cybercriminals has not yet led to a significant disruption of the cybercrime ecosystem.⁴⁶

The second is the risk of creating what Kuran and Sunstein call an “availability cascade,” which they define as a “self-reinforcing process of collective belief formation by which an expressed perception triggers a chain reaction that gives the perception [of] increasing plausibility through its rising availability in public discourse.”⁴⁷ When public concern over the terrorist risks of Gen AI reaches a certain level, it may trigger a series of unproductive or counter-productive actions. Indeed, there are warnings from recent history that highlighting the capacity for terrorist misuse of novel technologies, based on speculation rather than evidence, risks incentivizing counter-productive behaviors in decision-makers. The fear that weapons of mass destruction (WMD) could fall into the hands of groups like al-Qa`ida was not the only issue that prompted the invasion of Iraq in 2003, but it was certainly a major plank of the war’s justification. Then-British Prime Minister Tony

c Some research suggests that exposure to online environments accelerates the radicalization process. See, for example, Michael Jensen, Patrick A. James, and Herbert Tinsley, “Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States - Foreign Fighters (PIRUS-FF): Infographics,” Report to the Office of University Programs, Science and Technology Directorate, U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2016, and “Overview: Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States-Foreign Fighters (PIRUS-FF),” National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, last accessed May 22, 2026. However, much of this research links speed of radicalization to online environments in general (and predates recent developments in Gen AI), and in the view of the authors, measuring the velocity of radicalization is fraught with problems of construct validity (the ambiguous status of ‘radicalization’), data availability (scarcity of longitudinal data and reliance on retrospective data), and temporal delimitation (the start-points and end-points of a radicalization journey are matters of interpretation).

d Going by the authors’ definitions, these two risks are, in the view of this current article’s authors, hard to differentiate.

e Thomas Hegghammer has observed that jihadis specifically appear not to be using Gen AI at present and has attributed this to a lack of operational need for them to do so. (Hegghammer, unpublished working paper, 2026).

“The transformative potential of Gen AI for terrorist threats can be seen as the latest iteration of a tradition of security rhetoric that elevates the novel over the established and the possible over the actual.”

Blair repeatedly expressed his fear that the proliferation of WMD, including to non-state terrorist groups, would be the defining security challenge of the 21st century: In a critical debate in the UK Parliament on the eve of the war, he condemned those who “dispute the link between terrorism and weapons of mass destruction, and dispute, in other words, the whole basis of our assertion that the two together constitute a fundamental assault on our way of life.”⁴⁸ A more sober and realistic assessment of terrorist capability might have induced greater caution. Once the WMD panic had subsided, terrorist use of cyber-weapons came into view, with President Obama in 2009 warning:

*Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups have spoken of their desire to unleash a cyber attack on our country -- attacks that are harder to detect and harder to defend against. Indeed, in today's world, acts of terror could come not only from a few extremists in suicide vests but from a few key strokes on the computer -- a weapon of mass disruption.*⁴⁹

Despite some false alarms, and a perception among researchers that the threat of cyberterrorism is actually increasing, there has yet to be a single instance of a destructive cyber-attack that can be confidently attributed to a terrorist organization.⁵⁰

The transformative potential of Gen AI for terrorist threats can be seen as the latest iteration of a tradition of security rhetoric that elevates the novel over the established and the possible over the actual. While presidents and prime ministers were warning of terrorist WMD and cyber ‘Pearl Harbors,’ actual terrorists were indeed busy—discovering the value in the information age of the most basic and mature technologies such as knives and vehicles. The technological developments of greatest importance were less in planning and executing the attacks and more in broadcasting them. Some counterterrorism researchers were indeed prescient in paying attention to developments such as livestreaming on social media: Their work has aged much better than those that warned of

the catastrophic potential of cyber weapons.⁵¹

Terrorism experts tend toward pessimism in their analysis of trends and possible futures. At a speech given when he was head of the United Kingdom’s domestic security agency, Jonathan Evans observed that “when intelligence folk smell roses they look for the funeral.” However, he went on to express skepticism about the notion that the problem grows inexorably worse:

*Those of us who are paid to think about the future from a security perspective tend to conclude that future threats are getting more complex, unpredictable and alarming. After a long career in the Security Service, I have concluded that this is rarely in fact the case. The truth is that the future always looks unpredictable and complex because it hasn't happened yet. We don't feel the force of the uncertainties felt by our predecessors. And the process of natural selection has left us, as a species, with a highly developed capacity to identify threats but a less developed one to see opportunity.*⁵²

That capacity is particularly highly developed among the cadre of terrorism analysts who have a record of seeing technological change as an enabler of greater terrorist capability. But what the history of terrorism and technology, going back to the 19th century, really teaches us is that terrorists are early adopters of communication technologies—such as newspapers in the 19th century, television in the 20th century, and social media in the 21st. Terrorism is a form of communication so we should not be surprised that terrorists are quick to seize on developments in communication technology. For attack methods, though, terrorist groups are still more likely to use what is at hand, what is cheap, and what is easy—and they will exploit the affordances of available, cheap, and easy-to-use technologies in ingenious and innovative ways. It takes a certain kind of what is sometimes called malevolent creativity to turn a pressure cooker into a weapon or use an acid-filled condom as a timer for an explosive device.⁵³

This article is not saying that terrorists will avoid using Gen AI or that technologies like LLMs lack affordances for terrorist use. It does, however, sound a note of caution about how researchers and practitioners talk about the implications of Gen AI for the terrorist threat and draw attention to the consequences of over-hyping the risks. Much is made of failures of imagination in counterterrorism, and the authors agree that imagination is an important skill for anticipating threats. But researchers and practitioners also need to restrain their imaginations by focusing on evidence, rather than entertaining themselves and others with scenarios of terrorist catastrophe. **CTC**

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The Women Inside ISCAP: Governance, Coercion, and Insurgent Sustainability

By Akonkwa Zawadi Ghislaine and Caleb Weiss

The Islamic State Central Africa Province (ISCAP), locally known as the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), remains one of the deadliest insurgent organizations operating in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo. Over the past decade, the group has carried out repeated attacks against civilians, expanded its territorial presence across parts of North Kivu and Ituri Provinces, and strengthened its ideological and operational links to the broader Islamic State network. While existing research has focused primarily on the organization's military activities, leadership structure, and ideological alignment with the Islamic State, far less attention has been devoted to the internal social systems, particularly among girls and women, that sustain the group's long-term resilience. This article draws on findings from almost 400 interviews conducted with returnees from ISCAP camps, offering rare first-hand insight into the group's internal gendered structures and daily camp life. Women are frequently portrayed as victims or as passive members of terrorist organizations. However, as this article shows in the case of ISCAP, this simplistic perspective obscures the broader set of functions women perform within the organization's internal governance, logistical systems, and demographic reproduction.

On April 7, 2022, a female suicide bomber detonated herself within a crowded bar on a military base in Goma, Democratic Republic of the Congo, killing eight people.¹ Though officially unclaimed, the bombing was in fact perpetrated by the Islamic State's Central Africa Province (ISCAP), known locally as the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), in the group's first, and to date only, case

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Bridgeway Foundation is a philanthropic organization dedicated to ending genocide and war crimes and is currently focused on helping to stop violence committed by the Islamic State's Central Africa Province.

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of deploying a female member of the group as a suicide bomber.² The use of a woman in this manner by a jihadi group, and indeed an Islamic State affiliate, is not uncommon, as seen in Nigeria,³ Somalia,⁴ and elsewhere.⁵

In fact, female members of jihadi groups play integral roles within such organizations. Scholars examining both al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State^a have shown that women often occupy roles extending beyond domestic responsibilities.⁶ Research on the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, for example, demonstrated that women participated in governance structures, ideological propagation, and social regulation within insurgent communities.⁷ However, the specific ways these dynamics manifest in African Islamic State affiliates remain significantly less documented. And this is especially true for ISCAP, where existing research has focused primarily on the organization's leadership structure,⁸ military operations,⁹ finances,¹⁰ media output,¹¹ and ideological alignment with the Islamic State,¹² with far less attention being devoted to the internal social systems, particularly among girls and women, that sustain the group's long-term resilience.

Much like in other jihadi groups, women within ISCAP are frequently portrayed primarily as victims of abduction or passive members of insurgent communities rather than active, enthusiastic members. Although abduction is indeed a central component of ISCAP's recruitment practices, this simplistic perspective obscures the broader set of functions women perform within the group's internal governance, logistical systems, and demographic reproduction. In this way, women within ISCAP largely mirror what has been documented of women inside the Islamic State elsewhere in the world.

Utilizing interviews with returnees from ISCAP's camps, this article seeks to examine more critically the various roles played by women inside the group.^b These testimonies provide rare insight into everyday life inside the camps, including internal hierarchies among women and the mechanisms through which the group incorporates both voluntary members and abducted civilians into its structures. Evidence drawn from these individuals suggests that women play a central role not only in sustaining daily life within ISCAP camps, but also in reinforcing the governance mechanisms that regulate behavior, social hierarchy, and ideological continuity within the insurgent community. In particular, the study identifies a key internal distinction between *bangwana* and *bazana*—terms used within ISCAP's camps to differentiate women who join voluntarily from those incorporated through abduction. This

a The authors use the term "Islamic State" throughout the article to specifically denote Islamic State central, or its global senior leadership. Specific global Islamic State affiliates are explicitly referenced otherwise.

b Returnees' identities are anonymized by utilizing accompanying witness numbers in order to protect their privacy and safety.

distinction provides an important analytical lens for understanding how ISCAP simultaneously combines ideological recruitment and coercive integration within its female cadres.

Terminology and Local Concepts

Before diving into the specific roles of women in ISCAP, it is first important to discuss several key local terms used by the group itself to distinguish between different types of women within the group. Interestingly, the group uses words originating in both Luganda and Swahili, representing both the core Ugandan component and lineage of ISCAP and the broader Swahili-speaking cultures in which it also exists. For instance, defectors frequently use the term *muzana* (plural: *bazana*), a word derived from Luganda, to refer to abducted women incorporated into the camps through coercion.¹³ In colloquial terms, the word means “slave,” reflecting the limited autonomy and restricted mobility these women experience within ISCAP’s camp system.^c These women are almost always Congolese.

By contrast, *munwana* (plural: *bangwana*) derives from Swahili and historically refers to a noble, honorable, or free person. Within ISCAP’s camps, defectors use this term to describe women who join the movement voluntarily and are recognized as so-called “legitimate” wives to male members within the insurgent community.¹⁴ These women are typically Ugandan or foreign fighters from regional countries, such as Rwanda, Burundi, Kenya, Tanzania, or from farther abroad. The linguistic contrast between *munwana* and *muzana* reflects a clear social hierarchy between women who enter the movement voluntarily and those incorporated through coercion or forcibly abducted, which in turn directly impacts one’s status, experiences, and overall treatment in the camps.

Another important term is *senga* in Luganda or *shangazi* in Swahili, both of which translate roughly to “aunt.” Though these are common terms used throughout Uganda and wider Swahili-speaking Africa for senior women who are widely respected, within ISCAP’s camps, these terms refer to those elderly or senior women who serve as intermediaries between camp leadership and the female population, particularly in matters related to marriage, social conduct, and the regulation of relationships within the insurgent community.¹⁵ A *senga/shangazi* is therefore an important, powerful woman inside ISCAP’s camps and is considered a leader among the female population.

That said, these terms are not explicitly static. Women can, over time, be reclassified, thus improving their status within the camps (or perhaps even decrease their status). Defectors described several cases in which a *muzana*, or slave, who has spent a long period of time in ISCAP’s camps and is judged to be religiously and ideologically aligned with the movement by the camp’s *sharia* official, can then be reclassified as a *munwana* following an additional assessment by senior women (the *senga/shangazi*) and approval by other camp authorities.¹⁶ Likewise, other defectors have stated that their status, or overall treatment within the camps, decreased when accused of acting in a non-Islamic fashion or wanting to defect.¹⁷ And to be clear, these terms have been utilized by ISCAP since before joining the Islamic State, though the ratio of *bazana* to *bangwana* women has increased exponentially since

joining the Islamic State in 2017. Understanding these locally used terms is therefore essential for interpreting the internal hierarchy among women inside ISCAP camps.

Methodology

This article draws on a broader body of qualitative data collected by the Bridgeway Foundation over a period of approximately five years (2021-2026), comprising almost 400 interviews with ISCAP defectors, detainees, or survivors of its violence. Some of the individuals interviewed were also members of the former ISCAP splinter group, the Pan-Ugandan Liberation Initiative (PULI), which was folded back into the mainline ISCAP faction in early 2023.^d All interviews include testimonies from men, women, and teenage children. These debriefs were carried out directly by Bridgeway (not through intermediaries) including in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, particularly in Kinshasa, Beni (North Kivu Province), and Bunia (Ituri Province). Additional interviews were conducted in Uganda, primarily in Kampala. Other information was gleaned from online communications with former ISCAP members who are now living as free citizens. The findings presented in this article are therefore based both on recurring patterns observed across a large body of qualitative data and on specific information detailed in testimonies from select interviews as cited throughout, allowing for wider depth in the authors’ analysis.

Bangwana and Bazana: Two Pathways for Women’s Integration into ISCAP

As outlined above, interviews with defectors reveal that women enter ISCAP through two primary pathways that shape their roles, status, and autonomy within the organization. These categories—known within the camps as *bangwana* and *bazana*—distinguish women who voluntarily join the movement from those who are forcibly abducted and integrated into its structures. This distinction represents a key organizing principle within the camp society. Women who join voluntarily often occupy more important positions within the internal hierarchy than those who are abducted. Their pathway into the movement frequently determines their labor responsibilities, marital autonomy, and proximity to authority within the camp structure. In practice, this distinction creates a gendered hierarchy of incorporation. That said, defector testimonies consistently indicate that these two categories are not necessarily evenly distributed across the entirety of ISCAP’s camp populations.

Across multiple interviews, the *bazana* appear to constitute the majority of the female population inside most ISCAP camps.¹⁸ Defectors have repeatedly described large groups of abducted women performing labor functions, including food collection, transport of supplies, and support during camp movements, often outnumbering both male combatants and voluntarily affiliated

c This is a common definition of the word *muzana* (plural: *bazana*), as attested to by almost all former ISCAP members and escapees spoken to by the authors.

d PULI was a relatively short-lived Ugandan jihadi group that splintered from ISCAP when it first joined the Islamic State; however, its leadership and overall membership were largely just a historical extension of the Jamil Mukulu-led Allied Democratic Forces prior to joining the Islamic State. As such, female members of PULI largely had the same experiences as a *bangwana* in the mainline ISCAP faction. For more on the formation, activities, and ideology of PULI, see Caleb Weiss and Ryan O’Farrell, “PULI: Uganda’s Other (Short-lived) Jihadi Group,” FDD’s Long War Journal, July 25, 2023.

women.¹⁹ This dual system mirrors patterns observed across other Islamic State provinces, where both ideological recruitment and forced integration contribute to sustaining insurgent communities.²⁰

Bangwana

As noted, the term *bangwana* refers to women who join ISCAP voluntarily and are considered ideologically and religiously aligned with the movement. Defectors frequently describe the *bangwana* as women who arrive in the camps with prior awareness of the group's objectives, religious ideology, and/or social environment of living in jungle camps.²¹ Many of these women have strong social or familial ties to the group before officially joining, thus helping solidify their positions as being seen as more religiously legitimate or trustworthy.²² Upon arriving at the camps, they are also formally welcomed and are immediately treated as full members of the camp society.^{23 e}

In living inside the jungle camps, the *bangwana* are generally regarded as religiously legitimate wives of male fighters, and marriage arrangements involving the *bangwana* typically follow a structured process overseen and approved by camp leadership.²⁴ For example, a male fighter may request a wife to the camp emir or other leaders in the camp. The emir or camp leadership then chooses among the single *bangwana* population to find a bride for the male. Before being handed to her new husband by her male guardian (either a father or other male family member), the woman is made to undergo an HIV test given the prevalence of the virus in the region.²⁵ Upon a negative result, camp leadership then approves the marriage in a formalized process with witnesses. A *bangwana* can also sometimes choose her own husband from the pool of eligible bachelors, in which case the subsequent marriage process still remains the same.²⁶ *Bangwana* may also initiate divorce proceedings from her husband, which can also be approved or rejected by camp leadership.²⁷

Defectors report that young girls may be requested from their families as early as age nine but are typically not transferred to the husband until adolescence, often around age 14.²⁸ This selection can even extend beyond ISCAP's camps, with some former female members reporting that the grooming process began in Uganda before being transported to the group's camps in Congo when coming of age.²⁹ Defectors indicate that marriage within the camps, in addition to being religiously fundamental within a jihadi group, also functions as a key intentional mechanism for inducing and stabilizing the male members within the group by providing them with wives that often lead to children. As such, these women are often directly assigned or offered to male fighters in order to encourage the latter's loyalty, reinforce social integration and norms within the camp, and reduce the likelihood of defection.³⁰ Even further, these women are socially encouraged to produce children

with their husbands in order to further populate the camps and therefore provide the next generation of members, a logic endemic to various jihadi organizations.³¹ These assignments indicate that, even among the *bangwana*, girls' autonomy remains heavily constrained by male camp and family authority.

As their presence is perceived as voluntary, *bangwana* typically occupy a higher social status within the camp hierarchy and often participate in religious study circles and community life within the camps. Though they may also participate in food and water collecting, as well as cooking for their husbands, more menial labor inside the camps is often relegated to the *bazana*. Similar dynamics can also be found in the Sahel, where full female members of al-Qa`ida's Group for Support of Islam and Muslims contribute to the group by cooking or washing clothes for their husbands or other male members.³² More locally, female members of various Mai Mai groups (communal militias found throughout eastern Congo mobilized for a multitude of reasons) are also oftentimes employed in domestic tasks for their group and effectively take care of the male members.³³ Female members of other Mai Mai groups are also expected to collect food, as well as oversee the group's supplies.³⁴

Bazana

In contrast, *bazana* refers to women who are incorporated into ISCAP's structures through coercion, such as being forcibly abducted, which remains one of the primary mechanisms through which ISCAP replenishes its internal population. These women are typically Congolese civilians captured during raids on farms, villages, or roads, or in some rarer cases tricked to join the movement and transported to camps located deep within forested areas.³⁵ Women captured during these operations are often forced to carry supplies looted during these same attacks before being transported through forested areas to established camps.³⁶ And as stated above, the *bazana* greatly outnumber the *bangwana* in the majority of ISCAP's camps.

Upon reaching ISCAP's camps, the *bazana*, who are typically Christian given Congo's demographics, are then assigned new Muslim names and outfits and integrated into the camp population.³⁷ Defectors report that these women, in contrast with the *bangwana*, have little control over marriage arrangements—often being forcibly “married” or given to a male fighter in a non-formalized process—or even over their daily activities.³⁸ Within the camps, the *bazana* are expected to participate in daily prayers and perform a wide range of labor-intensive tasks including food collection, cooking, construction of shelters, and transportation of supplies during camp movements (though *bangwana* may also carry supplies of their husbands and families). Defectors frequently describe camps where women and children significantly outnumber male combatants due to the number of *bazana* captured by that specific camp or transferred there from another one of ISCAP's geographically disparate jungle camps.³⁹

For instance, defectors indicate that marriage can be imposed on abducted girls at a very young age. In some testimonies, *bazana* may be assigned to older male members of the movement from approximately age nine onward, reflecting the extreme lack of autonomy governing abducted girls within the camp system.⁴⁰ And whereas male members of ISCAP are allowed up to four legitimate wives, which is consistent with Islamic traditions, they may also theoretically obtain an unlimited number of sex slaves taken from the *bazana* population.⁴¹ All *bazana*, like the *bangwana*, must also

e To be clear, available testimonies provide limited detail on whether formal vetting or screening mechanisms are systematically applied to the *bangwana*. While some defectors suggest that prior ideological alignment and existing social or familial connections to the movement facilitate immediate acceptance, it nevertheless remains unclear to what extent camp authorities conduct any structured verification of loyalty, perhaps behind the scenes. Author interviews with W-211 in Kampala, Uganda, July 2023; W-216 in Kampala, Uganda, May 2023; W-245 in Kampala, Uganda, May 2024; W-318 in Kampala, Uganda, August 2023; and W-324 in Kampala, Uganda, March 2025.



شعائر صلاة عيد الفطر في ولاية وسط إفريقيا

شوال 1447



CENTRAL AFRICA

A recent photo published by the Islamic State from ISCAP's camps during Eid al-Fitr in March 2026, which helps show the scale of women and children within the group's camps. Photo posted online by the Islamic State in March 2026.

pass a mandatory HIV test before being “approved” for marriage or given to a fighter as a sex slave or concubine.⁴² And much like with the *bangwana*, the divvying of *bazana* women among the male population of the camps serves an intentional purpose to reinforce social bonds within and loyalty to the group in order to stave off any potential defections, as many of the males within ISCAP are themselves also abductees or victims of coercive or deceptive recruitment tactics. In this regard, the allotment of *bazana* to male members of ISCAP is not dissimilar to women taken as slaves in other conflicts. For instance, in Sierra Leone, the Revolutionary United Front also utilized systematic rape of captured women to reinforce social bonds and loyalty among its male combatants, many of whom were also forcibly recruited.⁴³ Even more locally, several Mai Mai groups have also historically utilized rape of captured women in the same manner.⁴⁴

The taking of sex slaves is also consistent with wider Islamic State practice and teaching specifically from the time of its territorial caliphate in Iraq and Syria where the group took thousands of Yazidi women and girls as sex slaves and forced pregnancies were rife.⁴⁵ The Islamic State's leadership justified its sexual slavery of Yazidi women and girls under the pretext that they are *mushrikin*, or polytheists, and thus outside the scope of religious protections offered to so-called “People of the Book,” or Jews and Christians; there is little information on if it took Christian sex slaves in either Iraq or Syria.⁴⁶ That said, during the height of the Islamic State's territorial caliphate, it did issue a decree specifically on the taking of such slaves.⁴⁷ In it, Christian women and girls are indeed considered permissible by the Islamic State as sex slaves, provided they are among the *muharibiin*, or those Christians waging war against

the Muslims without any sort of protection arrangement with the Islamic State itself.⁴⁸

To be clear, ISCAP's sheikhs and religious leaders have continuously sanctioned the practice of taking Christian Congolese women as *bazana* even before the group joined the Islamic State in 2017.^f However, it is unclear how widespread the practice was and what religious justifications were given under the leadership of its first emir, Jamil Mukulu, as forced abductions did not occur as frequently nor was the taking of *bazana* a standing policy of the group at that time. What is clear to the authors is that today ISCAP's sheikhs and religious scholars are largely abiding by the Islamic State's teachings on how to treat Christians, which would theoretically extend to rulings on *bazana* taken from the Congolese community. For instance, after joining the Islamic State, ISCAP's leaders began utilizing the Islamic State's broader teachings to justify looting Christian property.⁴⁹ In more recent months, videos posted online featuring one of its Congolese sheikhs, Bonge La Chuma, explicitly underscore the common Islamic State line of pay *jizya*, or a tax paid by non-Muslims to a Muslim polity, convert to

^f For instance, the issues of *bazana* were also recorded during the leadership of ISCAP's (then known as ADF) first emir Jamil Mukulu. See “Letter dated 12 January 2015 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee established pursuant to resolution 1533 (2004) concerning the Democratic Republic of the Congo . . .,” United Nations Security Council, January 12, 2015, p. 5.

Islam, or be killed.^g In doing so, La Chuma makes clear that those Christians who refuse to either pay the *jizya* or convert to Islam are considered at war with the group and will suffer the consequences.⁵⁰ Reading between the lines, it is evident that ISCAP's scholars are potentially now using the aforementioned *muharibiin* clause earlier established by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria to perhaps retroactively justify the practice of taking Christian *bazana*. This logic can even be seen in operational attack claims in recent months, as ISCAP has begun to specifically disaggregate between those populations paying *jizya* and who are thus under a *dhimmi* (non-Muslims living under a Muslim polity with legal protections) pact that guarantees their safety, and so-called "*muharibiin*" Christian populations, or those villages refusing to pay the *jizya*, and/or are engaged in open conflict with the group.^h In doing so, the group is thereby mirroring the ideological rhetoric espoused by its parent organization on this matter.

As described, experiences within ISCAP mirror patterns consistent with gender-based violence within other insurgent and jihadi environments.⁵¹ Abduction, forced marriage, restricted mobility, and the belief that women meet reproductive expectations and work domestic labor tasks under coercive conditions explicitly constitute forms of gender-based violence directly embedded within the group's internal structure.

Governance and Social Control Inside ISCAP Camps

Like most other jihadi groups, or even other armed movements, ISCAP's camps are highly structured environments governed through a combination of religious authority, military hierarchy, and social regulation enforced by its *sharia* courts. Although the organization operates primarily as an insurgent force engaged in armed conflict, daily life inside the camps is organized through social systems that regulate marriage, labor responsibilities, religious conduct, and interactions between men and women. These practices allow camp leadership to manage a diverse population composed of male fighters, abducted male and female civilians, and other voluntary members while reinforcing the strict ideological norms promoted by the movement.

And like other jihadi groups, at the top of the individual camp hierarchies stands the emir, often referred to within ISCAP as simply "commander," who directly oversees both military operations and internal administration within his specific camp. Each camp emir, or commander, is directly subordinate to ISCAP's overall emir, Musa Baluku, and its overall military emir, Hood Lukwago, better known as Mzee Pierro. Defectors report that camp commanders are responsible not only for carrying out and directing armed attacks, but also for resolving disputes among members, approving marriages, and enforcing religious discipline within the community, along with his deputies and the Islamic judges in each specific camp.⁵² In this sense, the authority of each camp's leadership is such

that the specific camp commander to which one is assigned controls most of one's daily life inside the bush.

In this regard, marriage regulation represents one of the most important mechanisms through which camp authorities manage the internal population. As described above, defectors attest that formal requests for marriage for the *bangwana* are typically submitted through individuals responsible for overseeing women inside the camp.⁵³ These intermediaries then communicate with the senior leaders of the camp before marriages are officially approved by the camp commander (or emir) himself.⁵⁴ Through this system, the camp leadership maintains direct control over the formation of households within the insurgent community. Marriages between male fighters and *bazana*, or sexual ownership over them, is often handled by the male camp leadership themselves, including both the specific camp emir and Muhammad Kayiira (or simply Mzee Kayiira), one of ISCAP's top officials whose purview includes overseeing and recording marriages throughout ISCAP's disparate camps.⁵⁵

These practices reflect broader governance patterns observed in other Islamic State-affiliated or broader jihadi environments, where regulation of marriage and family life forms a central component of social control within insurgent territories.⁵⁶ Within ISCAP's context, however, these governance practices operate alongside systems of coercion and abduction, producing a hybrid structure in which ideological discipline and forced incorporation co-exist within the same social order.

Senior Women as Marriage Intermediaries

Within this governance system, the *senga* or *shangazi* play an important intermediary role between camp leadership and the female population. Defectors describe these women as senior members of the camp community who are considered religiously learned and/or socially respected among the wider camp population.⁵⁷ Most joined the group willingly and have been inside the camps for years, if not decades, and therefore developed closer relationships with senior commanders or religious authorities than other, newer members of the group.

The roles of a *senga/shangazi* are varied. These women may counsel newly abducted women about marriage expectations, perform HIV tests, explain camp rules and regulations, or prepare women for marriages arranged by the camp leadership.⁵⁸ In some cases, they also facilitate communication between male authorities and women when marriage proposals are being organized or other issues arise among the female population of the camp.⁵⁹ As communication between unmarried men and women is restricted within ISCAP's camps, the *senga/shangazi* are the main conduit by which female members can hope to have their voices and concerns heard within the camp.

Although these roles performed by a *senga/shangazi* remain overall subordinate to male leadership, they nevertheless illustrate how women can and do participate in maintaining internal social order within ISCAP's various camps. Through these intermediary functions, these senior women help translate the expectations of camp leadership to newly arrived or abducted women who may be unfamiliar with the social norms governing life inside the camps and also help to relay female issues and concerns to the male leadership. The importance of the *senga/shangazi* also reflects the incorporation of familiar local social roles into the governance structure of ISCAP: In many African societies and

g This refrain has since been repeated *ad nauseum* in various ISCAP videos, but it was first propagated by Bonge La Chuma in a video posted by ISCAP on YouTube in August 2025. Video on file with the authors. The video was released in Swahili, Lingala, and French – the three most common languages in eastern Congo – in a clear attempt to reach as many people as possible within its areas of operation.

h ISCAP has specifically claimed attacks on "*muharibiin*," or warring Christians, since December 2025. Prior to this, the group never used such verbiage to describe Christians it attacked or killed. This is based on authors' collation of ISCAP operational claims.

cultures, specifically in Congo and East Africa, figures such as the *senga/shangazi* traditionally advise younger women on matters related to marriage and family life. Within ISCAP's camps, this role thus appears to have been adapted to support the religious and ideological regulation of relationships and family structures inside the insurgent environment.

Female Enforcement Roles and Social Regulation

Beyond acting as intermediaries and helping with the marriage processes within the camps, defector testimonies also indicate that certain women inside the camps—often but not necessarily the *senga/shangazi*—perform enforcement roles linked to internal discipline and social regulation. For example, in ISCAP's camps, designated women may serve as Islamic policewomen (or *hisbah*) responsible for monitoring the behavior of other women and ensuring compliance with the group's strict interpretation of Islam and broader camp rules.⁶⁰ This includes religious infractions, such as missing a specific number of daily prayers, or even violations of a strict dress code. For example, defectors consistently, but perhaps unsurprisingly, describe strict expectations governing female clothing and modesty within the camps.⁶¹ Girls are often expected to begin wearing prescribed clothing, such as the *niqab*, from a very early age, between five to nine years old, in order to become accustomed to the camp's interpretation of Islamic dress norms.⁶² Compliance with these expectations is monitored closely, and violations may result in punishment imposed by camp authorities.

As such, women in these authority positions may report violations to male leadership and even assist in implementing disciplinary measures (or *hudud* punishments) ordered by camp leaders, such as jailings, lashings, amputations, or even executions and other types of punishment.⁶³ To note, these responsibilities undertaken by the female policewomen specifically focus on regulating the conduct of women within the camp rather than exercising authority over men, who are overseen by male policemen. The employment of female members in this manner is consistent with other jihadi groups. For example, the Islamic State had female enforcement wings for most locales and cities under its control,⁶⁴ wherein it also operated a specific all-female battalion that also offered firearms training to the female *hisbah* officers.⁶⁵ In Somalia, female members of al-Shabaab can also act as enforcers of the group's religious and social codes upon other women.⁶⁶

Additionally, women in ISCAP may also occupy specialized welfare and medical roles within the camp community. Defectors report the presence of female nurses responsible for treating injuries and illnesses among women and children, whereas male nurses and doctors treat the male population.⁶⁷ In rare circumstances, these women may be allowed to provide medical assistance to male fighters when male medical personnel are unavailable, although such interactions are still closely supervised due to strict gender segregation norms within ISCAP.⁶⁸

These practices demonstrate that women are incorporated into the mechanisms of governance and social regulation that structure everyday life within ISCAP camps. While ultimate authority remains concentrated in male leadership, female enforcement roles help regulate behavior among women and contribute to maintaining internal order within the insurgent community.

Fear as a Mechanism of Control

Even beyond such formalized governance and compliance

structures, there exists another important mechanism by which camp authorities maintain control over women inside ISCAP's camps: fear. Defectors report that newly abducted women, much like everyone else in its camps, are frequently exposed to narratives designed to discourage escape and reinforce dependence on the camp environment.⁶⁹ Members may be told that attempting to flee will result in severe punishment if they are captured, including execution via beheading or other violent retaliation against themselves or others, such as family members if they joined or were abducted together.⁷⁰ At the same time, members are frequently warned that if they escape and encounter external authorities, they may face imprisonment or harsh mistreatment outside the camp by either Congolese or Ugandan authorities.⁷¹

Such narratives thus create a climate of uncertainty that can discourage escape attempts, particularly among women who have been separated from their families or transported far from their communities. Over time, these messages may contribute to the normalization of camp life and reduce the perceived viability of escape, thereby reinforcing internal cohesion within the group's jungle camps. The use of fear in this way reflects broader patterns of coercion within conflict environments, where psychological control complements physical constraints on mobility.⁷² Within ISCAP camps, fear therefore becomes part of a wider system of governance that helps maintain order among abducted civilians integrated into the insurgent population.

Operational and Logistical Roles of Women

Perhaps most obvious, women also play an important role in sustaining the operational capabilities of ISCAP. As stated earlier in this article, women can be active participants in military operations, such as suicide bombings or providing assistance during active combat, or can participate in other operations that help sustain the group in the remote forest environment of eastern Congo.

For example, one of the most common responsibilities assigned to both *bangwana* and *bazana* women involves participation in food acquisition operations alongside male fighters. Defectors report that women are typically among the first to enter civilian farms and fields, carry out the harvesting of crops and other food, and process and transport crops and other supplies back to the camps, while the male fighters accompany them primarily to provide security and oversight.⁷³ In addition to the raids on civilian farms, women are also responsible for transporting food and other supplies delivered to 'RVs,' or rendezvous points, by external collaborators, to the camps, often carrying these supplies over long distances through the dense forest.⁷⁴ During these operations, women with young children are reportedly sometimes required to leave them behind in the camps for several days while they participate in food raids or RV collection operations.⁷⁵ This separation further reduces the likelihood of escape, as many women are unwilling to flee without their children and fear the consequences for those left behind.

Women also participate in offensive military operations undertaken by ISCAP. Though women are not typically at the front, defectors describe women as consistently accompanying the male fighters, typically their husbands, in support roles.⁷⁶ This includes carrying and loading ammunition, assisting and treating wounded fighters (if a male doctor is not available), and transporting looted

goods.⁷⁷ Although this direct participation in direct combat appears relatively limited, some defectors report that women still receive basic weapons training and may occasionally be expected to use firearms to defend the group if camps come under direct attack.⁷⁸ Some defectors have even stated that *bangwana* may also undergo training to manufacture improvised explosive devices (IEDs) if they so wish.⁷⁹ Women and girls can, on occasion, even actively participate in more extreme acts of violence, such as beheadings.⁸⁰ In this regard, ISCAP is more in line with other African insurgent groups, such as the Revolutionary United Front in Sierra Leone or the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda, wherein those groups utilized female members in such extreme acts of violence as both a strategic choice and as a means to help bound the women to the group.⁸¹

Additionally, ISCAP's expectation that women can participate in combat in a defensive manner is not dissimilar to women in other jihadi groups, including those living under the Islamic State's territorial caliphate, where women played an integral role in the group's attempts to defend Mosul from being recaptured by Iraqi forces.⁸² However, ISCAP's prohibition of women in offensive frontline roles specifically contrasts with other armed groups in Congo's militant landscape, mainly local Mai Mai groups, that often do deploy female combatants in this manner.⁸³

Women also play a significant role during camp movements within the jungle, as ISCAP frequently relocates its physical camps in response to military pressure from Congolese and Ugandan forces as part of the countries' joint Operation Shujaa.^j During these relocations, women—mainly the *bazana* and children—are often expected to transport a large portion of the camp's supplies, including food reserves, cooking equipment, and personal belongings of both themselves and their families, to the new camp positions.⁸⁴ Males are typically expected to provide security for the relocation and may only carry heavy specialized equipment, such as generators, heavy weaponry, or material needed for IEDs.^{85k} Overall, however, these responsibilities illustrate that women contribute directly to the operational resilience of ISCAP beyond domestic labor alone.

Women and Martyrdom Operations

As noted at the beginning of this article, ISCAP does not prohibit the use of women in suicide bombings, or what it would describe as “martyrdom operations.” The group believes women, just like its male members, have the opportunity to participate in such operations. In this regard, ISCAP is again consistent with other jihadi groups' use of women in this manner,⁸⁶ including the Islamic State, which utilized this tactic in the defense of Mosul in 2017, and its predecessor in al-Qa`ida in Iraq.⁸⁷ Still, like the other jihadi groups, ISCAP has yet to publicly claim the use of female suicide

bombers.^l

Nevertheless, ISCAP defectors describe the existence of internal lists of individuals willing to participate in suicide bombing operations or so-called “martyrdom operations.”⁸⁸ Each of ISCAP's camps takes note of such volunteers, whose names are then transmitted to ISCAP's main camp, referred to as Madina. There, the group's senior leadership approves or disapproves of a person's inclusion on the list.⁸⁹ Though ISCAP has not undertaken a suicide bombing inside Congo since 2022,⁹⁰ the group still maintains these lists in case it resumes such operations.⁹¹ And like male members of the group, females may freely volunteer and are not discouraged from doing so.

According to defector testimonies, participation in such operations is framed through religious narratives emphasizing martyrdom, divine reward, and immediate spiritual forgiveness for all prior committed sins.⁹² Individuals who volunteer for these operations may undergo additional religious preparation before being selected.⁹³ This is again not dissimilar to the process employed by other jihadi groups that make use of suicide bombings—the divine rewards expected for undertaking such an act being one of the most widely cited reasons for why one volunteers to participate in suicide bombings.⁹⁴ Although the number of women involved in suicide attacks within ISCAP's context is limited, the existence of such lists, with females also represented, reflects ideological narratives common across Islamic State-affiliated movements, where martyrdom is portrayed as a form of religious sacrifice and ultimate devotion to the cause.

Women and Long-term Sustainability

Much like women within the Islamic State at the height of its territorial caliphate in Iraq and Syria, women in ISCAP are expected to be mothers to the next generation of jihadis, which helps self-perpetuate the jihadi project.⁹⁵ As such, women in ISCAP also contribute to the long-term sustainability of the insurgent system through demographic reproduction.

Defectors consistently report that childbirth within the camps is wholly encouraged, for both the *bangwana* and *bazana*, with male members of the group often having children with both his legitimate wives and allotted sex slaves.⁹⁶ Male children born in the camps are then widely expected to become future fighters or religious authorities, while female children are integrated into the same gendered social structures governing adult women.⁹⁷ Children raised in these environments grow up immersed in the ideological system promoted by the movement. Defectors indicate that boys may begin receiving religious instruction and exposure to weapons training at an early age, while young girls shadow their mothers to learn the domestic and other expectations of women.⁹⁸

This process contributes to what several defectors describe as a “born in the bush” generation that grows up entirely within the insurgent environment.⁹⁹ For ISCAP, the birth and socialization of children within the camps represent an important mechanism for maintaining its population over time despite losses experienced

i This can also be seen in videos and photos of ISCAP attacks, wherein women and children can sometimes be seen assisting in battle by carrying weapons and ammunition, and/or collecting looted goods. Videos and photos on file with the authors.

j Operation Shujaa is the ongoing joint Ugandan-Congolese military operation against ISCAP, which was launched in late 2021 following ISCAP's triple suicide bombing in Kampala in November of that year.

k Men can also be seen carrying such equipment in photos and videos produced by ISCAP itself. Photos and videos on file with the authors.

l Though many jihadi organizations deploy women as suicide bombers, most of these attacks go officially unclaimed. This is likely due to the jihadi groups not wanting to alienate civilian populations who may be supportive of the group and/or dissuade future recruits from joining the group itself, as such attacks go against societal norms and gender expectation and could therefore harm the group's public support if officially claimed.

during military operations. This is the same concept as the Islamic State's infamous "Cubs of the Caliphate" mantra, in which children born under the territorial caliphate, or young children who grew up in that era, were promoted as the "next generation" of jihadis for the organization.¹⁰⁰

Conclusion

This article demonstrates that women play a central role in sustaining the internal functioning of ISCAP. Far from occupying purely domestic roles, women participate in governance structures, logistical operations, and demographic reproduction that enable the organization to maintain resilience despite sustained military pressure against it.

The distinction between *bangwana* and *bazana* reveals how the movement combines ideological recruitment with coercive abduction to maintain its population inside the camps. Women who join voluntarily often reinforce ideological cohesion within

the insurgent community, while abducted women provide the labor necessary to sustain daily camp life. At the same time, women contribute to the movement's long-term sustainability through childbirth and the socialization of children raised within insurgent environments to provide the next generation of ISCAP members.

Understanding these gendered structures is therefore essential for analyzing how insurgent organizations such as ISCAP maintain internal cohesion and survive prolonged counterinsurgency pressure. Greater attention to these dynamics is also essential for policymakers and practitioners seeking to design effective protection, disengagement, and reintegration strategies for women emerging from insurgent environments, particularly from other Islamic State groups. Examining these dynamics reveals that gender is not peripheral to insurgent organization but integrally embedded within the governance systems that sustain militant movements over time. **CTC**

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