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FEATURE ARTICLE

Lessons from the Berlin Pride Attack

ADRIAN SHTUNI AND NICOLAS STOCKHAMMER

FEATURE COMMENTARY

Militant Social Inheritance and the Limits of Counterterrorism Assessment in Afghanistan

WAHID GULRANI

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FROM THE EDITORS

On July 25, a 21-year-old German man conducted a vehicle-ramming and machete attack at the Christopher Street Day Pride celebration in Berlin, killing one and injuring 31 others. The perpetrator was later killed in a confrontation with police. In our cover article this month, Adrian Shtuni and Nicolas Stockhammer examine the details that have subsequently emerged about the attacker, including several interactions with the German judicial system, and what they reveal about gaps between warning and response. “The warning indicators,” they find, “were unusually dense—foreign intelligence, prior convictions, jihadi travel attempts, extremist family and network ties, and a formal high-risk assessment. The threat was recognized, but the institutional response did not match the known level of risk.”

In our feature commentary, Wahid Gulrani considers what happens to the “militant social inheritance”—relational, infrastructural, and symbolic assets—left behind when militant organizations in Afghanistan are degraded or eliminated. These assets “are transferred, lie dormant, or are repurposed on a slower clock than the one by which counterterrorism measures success.” This longer horizon, Gulrani argues, means militant groups’ remaining “social estate” is often “invisible ... [to] the instruments pointed at it,” which he contends has implications for counterterrorism assessment.

Amira Jadoon, David Reas, and Natalie Tarby provide a close examination of the doctrine of the Balochistan Liberation Army’s suicide wing, highlighting that it “justifies its violence not through religion but through secular rationalism.” Furthermore, they write, “its martyrdom doctrine, which is not linked to any religious doctrine, represents a stark deviation in the broader Afghanistan-Pakistan militant landscape.”

Utilizing 10 years of data on African park ranger deaths, Christian Jokinen examines what attack patterns against these rangers can reveal about “shifts in territorial contestation, insurgent penetration, and the evolving security dynamics in protected areas,” which “often mirror broader trends in armed conflict, banditry, and weak state control.” “Rangers,” Jokinen writes, “occupy a particularly exposed position at the intersection of conservation, state authority, territorial control, and access to natural resources. Their casualties are therefore not peripheral to the conflict environment; they are, in important cases, an expression of how that conflict operates within protected areas.”

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CONTACT

Combating Terrorism Center

U.S. Military Academy

752 Thayer Road, Mahan Hall

West Point, NY 10996

Phone: (845) 938-8495

Email: ctc@westpoint.edu

Web: www.ctc.westpoint.edu/ctc-sentinel/

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Cover: The vehicle of the perpetrator of the terrorist attack at the Christopher Street Day celebrations at Berlin's Tiergarten is pictured on July 26, 2026. (Nordphoto/Engler/picture-alliance/dpa/AP Images)

Bridging Warning and Response: Lessons from the Berlin Pride Attack for German and European Counterterrorism

By Adrian Shtuni and Nicolas Stockhammer

On July 25, 2026, Abdul Ballout drove a van into the Christopher Street Day (CSD) Pride parade in Berlin and then attacked bystanders with a machete, killing one person and injuring 31 others. This article examines the attack as a critical test of Germany's counterterrorism architecture. Despite having been assessed as a high-risk individual capable of serious politically motivated violence (*Gefährder*),¹ with two documented attempts to join the Islamic State, two recent convictions that carried prison sentences, and active police monitoring, he was still able to rent a van and strike a high-profile soft target in central Berlin. The article argues that the attack was less an intelligence failure than a structural failure of response: authorities accurately identified the severity of the threat, yet legal, judicial, and operational measures did not align with that assessment and gave insufficient weight to Ballout's proven commitment to jihadi violence. By tracing Ballout's risk profile, missed intervention points, and the disconnect between intelligence warnings, court decisions, deradicalization measures, and surveillance practices, the article situates the case within a wider pattern of leniency and under-response in German jihadi terrorism cases over the past decade. It concludes by assessing the broader implications for German and European counterterrorism policy and outlining practical considerations for closing the gap between threat assessment and preventive action.

On July 25, 2026, around 10 pm, a Citroën SpaceTourer van was driven onto the Ahornsteig pedestrian path in Berlin's Tiergarten park during Christopher Street Day (CSD) Pride celebrations, hit several pedestrians, and then crashed into a tree.² The driver, emerging from the crashed van, reportedly attacked and injured several people with a stabbing weapon before fleeing the scene.³ One person, a 65-year-old Polish woman, was killed and 31 others were injured.⁴ The suspected perpetrator was identified within hours as belonging to the "Islamist scene of Berlin" and a wanted notice with his physical description and photo was issued by the police.⁵ The Federal Interior Minister Alexander Dobrindt at his press conference near the scene shortly after the attack identified him as 21-year-old Abdul Ballout,^a a German citizen of Lebanese family background who was born and raised in Berlin.⁶

a This is unusual as the practice of German law enforcement agencies is to only provide the first name and the initial of the last name.

Investigators noted the passenger-side airbag in the attack van had deployed, which briefly raised the question of a second occupant. An Iranian man was reportedly detained that night as a possible passenger but later released. While authorities continued investigating the possibility of a second suspect, they treated Ballout as the main perpetrator.⁷ After an intense 20-hour manhunt, the German investigators tracked him down to a shed on a garden plot in Berlin-Spandau in the late afternoon of July 27.⁸ During the raid, Ballout allegedly attacked officers of the Berlin Special Forces SEK with a bladed weapon. They returned fire, fatally wounding him.⁹

The Perpetrator

Other details about the perpetrator emerged in the days that followed. Ballout, who was born in Berlin on July 2, 2005,¹⁰ was known to the police as a repeat offender and Islamic State supporter. Prior offenses included assault and robbery as a teenager for which he was found guilty on February 9, 2022, by the juvenile court at the Tiergarten District Court and received a non-custodial juvenile court directive requiring him to complete 40 hours of community work.¹¹ On May 12, 2026, he was sentenced to one year and 10 months in juvenile detention by the same district court for preparing a serious violent offense endangering the state and two violations of the Associations Act for disseminating Islamic State propaganda.¹² According to the Attorney General's Office, he had intended to join the Islamic State in two instances—once via Turkey to Mauritania and the other via Turkey to Lebanon.¹³

More specifically, Ballout had been detained on May 16, 2025, at Nouakchott airport in Mauritania while reportedly attempting to join the Islamic State branch in the Sahel known as ISSP.¹⁴ His Mauritanian contact, who was reportedly supposed to help plan the route, was also arrested as part of a long Mauritanian intelligence investigation and infiltration of Islamic State networks.¹⁵ Mauritanian authorities reportedly transmitted the information to Germany and deported Ballout to Berlin via Istanbul on May 17, 2025.¹⁶ According to the flight itinerary, he departed Nouakchott on May 17 and was scheduled to arrive in Berlin in the early morning of May 18.¹⁷

On May 20, 2025, after spending about two days in Germany,

Adrian Shtuni is CEO and Principal Consultant of Shtuni Consulting LLC. He is also an Associate Fellow with the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism in The Hague. X: @Shtuni

Nicolas Stockhammer is Director of the Center for Terrorism and Extremism Research at Danube University Krems (Austria), Senior Research Fellow at The Soufan Center, and Non Resident Fellow at the Counter Extremism Project. X: @Nic_Stockhammer

Ballout reportedly traveled again from Berlin Brandenburg Airport via Turkey to Lebanon with the intent to reach Syria and join the Islamic State.¹⁸ He was arrested in Lebanon on July 23, 2025, and sentenced by a military court to three months in prison and a fine of 800,000 Lebanese pounds^b for “incitement to religious and sectarian conflict.”¹⁹ He was sent back to Germany on November 17, 2025, where he was arrested on arrival.²⁰ Despite being 20 years old at trial, his case was heard by the juvenile court at the Tiergarten District Court because the offenses were committed when he was 18 or 19.²¹

The court concluded in the main hearing that, in moral and intellectual development, Ballout stood equivalent to a juvenile. It based that finding in part on the fact that, at the time of the offense, he had no vocational training and was still living with his mother, and in part on the impression he made during the trial.²² Although he was sentenced on May 12, 2026, to one year and 10 months detention for preparing a serious violent offense endangering the state and disseminating Islamic State propaganda, the court ordered a preliminary or deferred probation.^c He was therefore released from juvenile detention the same day and ordered to attend a deradicalization program, which consisted of 26 sessions.²³ The judgment, which was not yet final, was appealed by the Attorney General’s Office who found it excessively lenient. Ballout remained free until July 25, 2026, but in over 10 weeks, he only attended two intake phase evaluation sessions with the deradicalization specialists at Violence Prevention Network (VPN). A third and final evaluation session to decide whether he would even be accepted into the full program was scheduled for the Monday after the Pride attack.²⁴

The Investigation

The post-attack inquiry has so far found no crime-relevant traces of anyone else in the attack van.²⁵ While he may have acted alone, that does not mean the path to the attack was solitary. For years, Ballout was close to a radical preacher whom German authorities believe spread extremist ideology; he had systematically pursued contacts with salafi-jihadis in Mauritania, Lebanon, and Syria and had close family ties to a high-profile terrorism convict and to foreign fighters affiliated with the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq.²⁶

According to media reports citing investigation files and law enforcement reports, from at least 2024 Ballout was in continued contact with German-Egyptian preacher Amir al-Kinani, also known as Abu Azma, a familiar name to the German domestic intelligence services.²⁷ Al-Kinani is described not only as Ballout’s religious mentor²⁸ but also as his close confidant by Berlin’s State



Police officers walk along a path in an allotment garden colony in Berlin-Spandau, Germany, on July 26, 2026, after a terrorist attack during Christopher Street Day celebrations in Berlin. (Michael Kappeler/picture-alliance/dpa/AP Images)

Criminal Police Office (LKA).²⁹ ^d Born in Berlin in 1996, al-Kinani gave lectures at a mosque closely monitored by German authorities in the district of Neukölln.³⁰ Starting from late 2021, he became a regular guest preacher at the German-speaking Muslim community (*Deutschsprachige Muslimische Gemeinschaft*, or DMG) in Braunschweig alongside figures such as Pierre Vogel, Abul Baraa, and Ibrahim al-Azzazi, long known as promoters of political salafi ideology in the German-speaking space. In 2022, the Lower Saxony counterintelligence service formally identified al-Kinani as a salafi preacher in the state’s official yearly account of extremist and intelligence threats.³¹

DMG was officially banned and dissolved by the Lower Saxony Ministry of the Interior in June 2024 due to its aggressive promotion of parallel societies, the superiority of sharia law, and antisemitic rhetoric.³² Lower Saxony’s minister of the interior and sport, Daniela Behrens, described the ban on the DMG in a statement as “a hard blow to the Salafist scene in Lower Saxony and beyond. By banning the scene, we are depriving German-speaking Salafist preachers of their most important platform for spreading their extremist ideology.”³³ In September 2024, shortly after the dissolution of the DMG, al-Kinani left Germany and moved to

^b This was the equivalent of \$8.92 USD at the time of sentencing.

^c In German law, *Vorbewährung* – preliminary or deferred probation – is a youth-court device under the Youth Courts Act. A prison sentence is imposed, but the court postpones the decision on whether to suspend it. That is possible if the conditions for suspending the sentence on probation are not yet met, or otherwise if the court is not convinced that the convict will refrain from reoffending. The decision on probation is then postponed for a period of six months. During that waiting period, the person is free under conditions. Afterward, the court either formally suspends the sentence or orders it to be served.

^d The *Landeskriminalamt* (LKA), or State Criminal Police Office, is a central state-level law enforcement agency operating within each of the 16 German states, subordinate to the respective state’s ministry of the interior.

Mauritania.³⁴

The physical distance does not appear to have weakened the mentor-mentee relationship between Ballout and al-Kinani. In November 2024, the two traveled together on pilgrimage to Medina in Saudi Arabia.³⁵ In May 2025, the two men reportedly exchanged 15 voice messages discussing Ballout's planned relocation to Mauritania.³⁶ In those messages, published in German media, al-Kinani offered to help him find an apartment and urged him to come.³⁷ Ballout's detention at Nouakchott airport on May 16, 2025, shows that he did act on a plan to travel. The purpose of the plan was revealed in a subsequent German interrogation, where Ballout said he had gone to Mauritania to join the Islamic State.^{38 e} That account formed part of the case at his later trial on the foreign-travel charges.

Al-Kinani was far from Ballout's only link to radical Islamist circles. Ballout came from a family with direct ties to international jihadism. His paternal aunt, Hanan, is married to Omar Bakri Muhammad, also known as Omar Bakri Fustuq,³⁹ a Lebanese preacher long known in Britain and the Middle East as a leading figure in the Islamist scene and a founder of the U.K.-based salafi-jihadi network al-Muhajiroun.⁴⁰ After living in the United Kingdom for two decades, Omar Bakri Muhammad left in 2005 and was barred from returning.⁴¹ In 2010, a Lebanese military court sentenced him to life in prison for terrorism offenses but later released him on bail pending retrial.⁴² He was imprisoned again on terrorism charges in 2014 and released in 2023.⁴³

Two of Omar Bakri Muhammad's sons, and Abdul Ballout's cousins, joined the Islamic State.⁴⁴ One cousin, Bilal Omar Bakri, was killed fighting for the Islamic State in Iraq in 2015.⁴⁵ The other son, Muhammad, is described in Lebanese investigative files as having been held in prison in Iraq.⁴⁶ According to the German State Criminal Police Office investigative reports, Ballout regarded Bilal as a role model.⁴⁷ Files seized from his phone after he was deported from Lebanon included more than 100 photos of Bilal, and German investigators later found he had posted a picture of the cousin as a WhatsApp status in October 2024.⁴⁸ In one photo taken during his 2024 trip to Medina with al-Kinani, Ballout is seen standing in front of the Prophet's Mosque holding up a smartphone that shows a picture of his deceased cousin.⁴⁹

Investigations show that Ballout treated his family ties to the two Islamic State fighters as both a source of openly expressed pride—especially in his glorification of his deceased cousin—and a resource he sought to mobilize in his efforts to join the organization. According to a report transmitted by Lebanese investigators to the German Federal Intelligence Service BND following his arrest in Lebanon in July 2025, Ballout, who was using the *kunya* “Abu Ibrahim al-Qahtani,”⁵⁰ contacted individuals suspected of affiliation with the Islamic State through encrypted messaging applications and requested assistance in traveling to Syria.⁵¹ In those exchanges, he stated that he had been recommended by his two cousins, Bilal and Muhammad. Lebanese investigators assessed the claim as genuine rather than as a fabrication meant to secure access to the group.⁵² While Bilal, killed in 2015, could not have recommended him in 2025, the workable reading is that Ballout invoked the name of his dead fighter-cousin, and that of a second cousin, as a

“In assessing the failures that preceded the Berlin CSD attack, it may be tempting to search for a single decision point at which a different course of action might have altered the outcome. That framing is insufficient. The failure is not attributable to one discrete omission, but to the convergence of mutually reinforcing factors that together produced a systemic breakdown.”

reference.

Even though Ballout initially denied having any active operational plans or intentions to join the Islamic State and commit terrorist acts, once deported from Lebanon, German authorities officially seized his smartphone. Forensic analysis revealed that starting from July 2025, Ballout had initiated contact with alleged Islamic State members via Telegram, explicitly stating “I want to fight, not just sit around” and using the family connections to prove his ideological commitment and bolster his aspirant jihadi credentials.⁵³ Another revealing piece of digital evidence recovered from Ballout's smartphone was a photo in which he posed with a covered face and a firearm in one hand while raising the index finger of the other in the *tawhid* gesture.^{54 f}

How Ballout obtained the firearm in Lebanon, and whether he sent the photo to any alleged Islamic State contact to signal his combat readiness before crossing into Syria, remains unclear. What investigations established after the attack is that he was in contact with a Syria-based Islamic State associate, to whom he sent a video pledging allegiance to the group shortly before the attack.⁵⁵ The contact was Sharmeena Begum, a British woman who left London for Syria in 2014, at age 15, to join the Islamic State.⁵⁶ After the group collapsed, the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces detained her.⁵⁷ She escaped from Al Hol camp in northeastern Syria in 2022 and then lived in hiding under a false name.⁵⁸ How Ballout first reached her is not clear. What investigators established is that the two exchanged messages before the attack and that he sent her the allegiance video, which was meant to be released through Islamic State channels afterward.⁵⁹ The German Federal Criminal Police Office (BKA) found no sign that she directed the attack. Syrian

e What role, if any, the preacher played in Ballout's decision to join the group—and whether al-Kinani knew of that stated purpose—remains unclear.

f The raised index finger in that photo is the *tawhid* gesture. On its own, the finger can simply mean “one God,” including in ordinary Muslim contexts. More specifically, in salafi-jihadi usage, especially by Islamic State militants, it stands for the belief in the absolute oneness of God and is treated as a public sign of allegiance to that creed and to the group's cause. Islamic State fighters and supporters have used it repeatedly in propaganda photos and videos, often while armed, masked, or in front of a flag, so that the gesture functions as both a religious statement and a marker of affiliation. When the *tawhid* gesture is paired with a firearm and concealment, as in the case of Ballout's picture, it matches the visual language Islamic State and aligned fighters have traditionally used to signal commitment.

security forces arrested her in September 2026.⁶⁰

Where Did the System Fail?

In assessing the failures that preceded the Berlin CSD attack, it may be tempting to search for a single decision point at which a different course of action might have altered the outcome. That framing is insufficient. The failure is not attributable to one discrete omission, but to the convergence of mutually reinforcing factors that together produced a systemic breakdown. These factors were neither exceptional nor narrowly case-specific; rather, they reflected routine features of the existing institutional architecture and point to broader structural deficiencies.

Gaps in Converting Intelligence and Risk Indicators into Effective Disruption

One of the most consequential failures preceding the attack was the inability to translate timely intelligence into effective disruption of a high-risk individual's violent extremist activity, a recurring problem in recent European terrorism cases.⁶¹ In Ballout's case, the issue was especially stark: He was not an unknown foreign national, an individual of irregular status, or someone whose recent arrival might have limited the authorities' visibility. He was born and raised in Germany, was already known to law enforcement, and had generated multiple risk indicators. The problem, therefore, was not the absence of warning. Intelligence from several agencies, domestic and foreign, had already identified him as a serious threat.

Before Ballout left Germany in May 2025 for Mauritania, the BND intercepted communications showing his initial plans to join the Islamic State.⁶¹ They officially alerted the Federal Criminal Police Office BKA on May 9, 2025. However, no action was taken, and on May 16, 2025, Ballout boarded a flight out of Berlin to Mauritania via Istanbul. After being denied entry in Mauritania, on May 20, 2025, he took a second flight from Berlin to Beirut. The German Federal Police only issued his border search warrant on May 28, 2025, 19 days after the original BND notification. This bureaucratic delay allowed him to leave German soil twice despite the BND having flagged his Islamic State travel plans on May 9.

The contrast became especially striking once Ballout reached Mauritania. Authorities in a comparatively low-capacity Sahel state appear not only to have obtained actionable intelligence on a German citizen seeking to join the Islamic State's Sahel branch, but also to have acted on it effectively. They detained him at Nouakchott airport, transmitted the case information to Germany, and deported him.⁶² Germany, by contrast, despite jurisdiction over its own citizen and far greater institutional resources, did not convert that warning into effective restriction or disruption. After his return to Berlin, Ballout was still able to leave Germany again within days, this time for Lebanon, despite the documented nature of his intent. His subsequent arrest and conviction by a Lebanese military court added a second foreign warning point. By the time he was returned to Germany in November 2025, the record reflected

“Foreign and domestic intelligence repeatedly identified Ballout as a committed Islamic State supporter, yet that knowledge did not produce timely restrictions on his mobility or freedom of action. The failure was therefore not informational but translational. Warning was available, but disruption was not commensurate with the risk it revealed.”

not only extremist intent but repeated efforts to reach Islamic State-linked environments abroad.

In the period before the attack, Ballout's own public online activity further reinforced this risk profile. While on conditional release and aware of being under active LKA surveillance of his phone, social media, and home entrance, he posed with a weapon on social media. This led to an apartment search on July 3, 2026, that recovered only a toy pistol.⁶³ Even though the weapon was not real, the photo itself showed a willingness to publicly flaunt armed imagery while under active monitoring and subject to deradicalization conditions, underscoring ongoing risk and disregard for the constraints placed on him. The cumulative picture was therefore not ambiguous: Multiple intelligence, law-enforcement, and digital indicators pointed in the same direction.

Taken together, these episodes expose the core operational shortcoming. Foreign and domestic intelligence repeatedly identified Ballout as a committed Islamic State supporter, yet that knowledge did not produce timely restrictions on his mobility or freedom of action. The failure was therefore not informational but translational. Warning was available, but disruption was not commensurate with the risk it revealed.

Reversed Order of Prioritization

A related failure lay in how the courts prioritized Ballout's case once they had convicted him. In May 2026, he was found guilty of preparing a serious violent offense endangering the state and of disseminating Islamic State propaganda. His broader risk profile had also been formally recognized by the security authorities. Yet, the court placed greater weight on largely subjective factors that supported a softer rehabilitative approach. These included his partial confession, claimed distancing from the Islamic State, and mandatory participation in deradicalization contact sessions. In effect, the official risk assessment was displaced by a preference for conditional release and behavioral correction.

That emphasis sat uneasily with the operational record. By May 2026, Ballout had made repeated and concrete efforts to reach Islamic State-linked territory, had been arrested abroad, and had generated both foreign and domestic warnings. Treating such a profile primarily as a deferred probation and rehabilitation case, rather than as evidence of a high-commitment security threat, reversed the appropriate order of priorities. The problem was one of sequencing. Rehabilitation could reasonably form part of the

⁶¹ As Peter Gill's analysis of 52 jihadi attacks across eight European countries between 2015 and 2018 shows, the preventive difficulty often stems not from a lack of intelligence warning but from the disconnect between fragmented or institutionally dispersed knowledge and the timely action needed to stop an attack. Peter Gill, "Explaining Intelligence Failure: Rethinking the Recent Terrorist Attacks in Europe," *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence* 33:1 (2020): pp. 43-67.

response, but only after the immediate risk to public safety had been adequately contained. Prosecutors immediately appealed the decision on preliminary or deferred probation, arguing that it underestimated the danger he posed, but pending that appeal, Ballout remained at liberty under probationary supervision.⁶⁴

Following the attack, Interior Minister Alexander Dobrindt publicly called the court's May 2026 decision to release Ballout incomprehensible for someone with that level of radicalization and risk classification.⁶⁵ In response, the federal government adopted a 10-point plan in September 2026, presented by Dobrindt and Justice Minister Stefanie Hubig, aimed at improving protection against Islamist terrorism.⁶⁶ The plan proposed to explicitly strengthen the statutory weight of the public's security interest in probation and deferred-probation decisions and to require clearer justification when juvenile law is applied to 18- to 20-year-olds. Hubig, while acknowledging the value of deferred probation in some cases, also affirmed the appropriate order of priorities, noting that "the law must clearly state that a deferred probation may only be ordered if it is justifiable with regard to the public's security interests."⁶⁷

Soft Sentencing Culture and Weak Post-Release Oversight

A comparison of terrorism sentencing practices across several European jurisdictions suggests that Germany's approach to terrorism-related offenses is comparatively lenient, with sentences for preparation or terrorist-organization membership often in the three- to four-year range, or around five years when combined with other offenses, compared with roughly five to six years in Belgium, around seven years in the United Kingdom, and seven to eight years or more in France.^h Ballout's sentence went further still. The court applied juvenile criminal law to a 20-year-old defendant and imposed a prison term that fell below even the already modest German baseline, further softening the sentence with an order for preliminary or deferred probation. Even Ballout's defense lawyer expressed surprise at the judge's decision to release his client from detention.⁶⁸ Such outcomes raise concerns that too much leniency toward defendants who have already demonstrated operational intent can create preventable gaps in public safety.

This pattern has appeared in several recent German cases in which known or repeatedly flagged Islamist extremists moved from clear risk indicators to serious violence despite prior convictions, police monitoring, detention, deportation efforts, or post-release supervision. Anis Amri, a Tunisian national whose asylum claim had been rejected, carried out the 2016 Breitscheidplatz Christmas market attack after prior convictions, radicalization indicators, classification as a *Gefährder*, and months of surveillance linked to Islamist contacts and suspected weapons-seeking. Deportation efforts stalled over documentation issues, surveillance ended in

September 2016, and he killed 12 people and injured dozens a few months later with a truck.⁶⁹ Official reviews later highlighted repeated failures in surveillance intensity, threat assessment, and interagency coordination.ⁱ

The October 2020 Dresden knife attack by 20-year-old Abdullah Al Haj Hasan raised similar questions about post-release risk management. He had been convicted under juvenile criminal law for supporting the Islamic State and planning a suicide attack, remained in Germany under tolerated-stay status because deportation to Syria was blocked, and was classified as a *Gefährder* after release. Although placed under post-release supervision, required to report to police, subject to observation, and having attended VPN deradicalization sessions, he stabbed two tourists five days later, killing one and seriously injuring the other.⁷⁰

The 2024 Solingen festival stabbing by Issa Al Hassan revived the same issue in the context of failed removal, radicalization monitoring, and terrorism-linked risk assessment. His asylum claim had been denied and his transfer to Bulgaria was ordered under the Dublin rules,^j but he evaded removal and remained in refugee accommodation. Investigators later found that he had shared Islamic State material, contacted Islamic State-linked channels, and received attack guidance shortly before the assault, which killed three people and injured at least eight. The Islamic State claimed the attack.⁷¹

The common thread of these cases is not identical fact patterns, but a recurring mismatch between observable warning signs and the legal and operational responses that followed. When sentences fall short of the preventive threshold—or when monitoring, detention, and removal fail to compensate for that shortfall—the result is not merely a question of proportionality. It is a question of whether the criminal justice system is prepared to treat demonstrated readiness for terrorist violence as the concrete public-safety risk it has repeatedly proven to be.

Misunderstanding and Misuse of Available Tools

Ballout's track record at the time of the trial, together with the official assessment of the security authorities, pointed to a high-risk individual displaying a sustained commitment to the Islamic State rather than an early or superficial stage of radicalization. Against that background, the court appears to have mistakenly treated compulsory participation in a deradicalization program as a substitute for detention instead of as a conditional, evidence-based measure. Ordering a preliminary probation release before the VPN had even assessed whether Ballout was suitable for the program,

h Terrorism expert Peter Neumann has summarized functional equivalents as follows: German sentences for §89a StGB (preparation of a serious state-endangering violent act) or terrorist-organization membership typically fall in the three- to four-year range (or around five years when combined with other offenses). By comparison, Belgian practice often starts at a five-year minimum for participation-type offenses and averages around six years in published judgments; U.K. averages for membership/involvement in a banned terrorist organization run around seven years; French sentences for terrorist association offenses are regularly seven to eight years and frequently higher. See Peter R. Neumann, "1/ Weil es Nachfragen gab: Wie hoch sind Strafen für Terrorismusdelikte im internationalen Vergleich? ...," X, August 1, 2026.

i The 2021 final report of the Berlin House of Representatives inquiry committee (*Untersuchungsausschuss "Terroranschlag Breitscheidplatz"*) concluded that the sum of mistakes and failures by police (especially LKA Berlin), domestic intelligence, and other agencies—including insufficient surveillance intensity, understaffing, the incorrect assessment that Amri had cooled off due to drug dealing, incomplete investigation of his network, and poor interagency information exchange—made the 2016 attack possible or facilitated it, as summarized by chairman Stephan Lenz. "1. Untersuchungsausschuss 'Terroranschlag Breitscheidplatz,'" Abgeordnetenhaus von Berlin, August 9, 2021.

j Under the Dublin rules, an asylum claim must generally be examined by the one E.U. member state designated as responsible—here, Germany—so Issa Al Hassan's claim was rejected there and he was ordered to be transferred back. But because he evaded removal, he remained in refugee accommodation. See "Regulation (EU) No 604/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council," Official Journal of the European Union, June 26, 2013.

while treating participation as a key condition for later suspending the sentence,⁷² shows a basic misunderstanding by the court of what these tools are and how they work.

Programs designed to help people exit radicalization and violent extremism can be valuable, but they are not for everyone, and their value depends on how and when they are used.⁷³ They are narrow instruments for testing and supporting disengagement over time, not shortcuts around detention. They tend to succeed more often with lower-commitment or less ideologically hardened cases, and with people who are actively seeking support to leave, when those efforts include strict conditions and ongoing evaluation.⁷⁴ More importantly, such programs are most effective when engagement is voluntary, as genuine disengagement cannot be compelled.⁷⁵ They are not a default alternative to detention for someone already showing high operational intent. Treating them that way creates a record of measures taken while the actual risk remains largely uncontained.

In Ballout's case, the limited nature of his engagement with the deradicalization program made that distinction especially important. He claimed to have distanced himself from the Islamic State and promised to live lawfully, but those assurances were thin when set against the rest of the record. Wiretapped conversations suggested continued caution and concealment when discussions moved toward radical content, raising the possibility that he was engaging in deceptive tactics rather than genuinely working to disengage.⁷⁶

Operational Response Not Fully Aligned with High-Risk Rating

Ballout's case exposes a consequential disconnect between formal threat classification and operational follow-through. In May 2026, Ballout was reassessed by Germany's Joint Counter-Terrorism Center (GTAZ)^k Risk Management Working Group using the BKA's RADAR-iTE^l instrument and placed in the highest-risk, or "red," category.⁷⁷ Yet, that designation produced only limited operational consequences. Because intensive surveillance in the preceding weeks had yielded no concrete indications of attack planning, physical observation was discontinued and only limited technical monitoring remained in place.⁷⁸

This outcome points to a structural weakness in Germany's risk-management architecture. RADAR-iTE is a rule-based prioritization tool, not a predictive instrument. It can aggregate known risk factors and help allocate surveillance resources, but it cannot determine when an individual will move from extremist commitment to attack planning. That limitation creates a prevention dilemma: Authorities may correctly identify a high-risk individual while still treating the absence of immediate operational indicators as a basis for reducing intrusive measures.

Despite Ballout's established risk profile, operational measures

“In Ballout's case, the warning indicators were unusually dense—foreign intelligence, prior convictions, jihadi travel attempts, extremist family and network ties, and a formal high-risk assessment. The threat was recognized, but the institutional response did not match the known level of risk.”

were scaled back before the risk had been adequately contained. The later discovery that Ballout in fact possessed three cell phones, while only one was known to or monitored by authorities, further underscores the fragility of the operational posture.⁷⁹ It suggests not only an intelligence blind spot, but a practical mismatch between the level of risk formally assigned to him and the scope of monitoring actually applied.

Lastly, scaling back close surveillance after only about 10 days,⁸⁰ while resources are limited and the number of high-risk Islamist cases in Berlin alone already runs into the mid-double digits,⁸¹ acknowledges the real constraints on capacity. Continuous, around-the-clock monitoring of these individuals in both the physical and digital domains is inherently difficult to maintain. Courts and authorities need to take those limits into account. Issuing release or probation orders that depend on intensive monitoring that cannot realistically be sustained creates a risky gap between the threat assessment and the practical response.

Implications and Considerations for German and European Counterterrorism

The Berlin CSD attack illustrates a broader challenge for German and European counterterrorism: Authorities may identify a high-risk individual yet still struggle to translate that knowledge into timely, legally sustainable action. In Ballout's case, the warning indicators were unusually dense—foreign intelligence, prior convictions, jihadi travel attempts, extremist family and network ties, and a formal high-risk assessment. The threat was recognized, but the institutional response did not match the known level of risk.

At the German level, the case exposes weak links among intelligence assessment, criminal justice decisions, probation supervision, deradicalization programming, and police monitoring. At the European level, it shows how attacks can develop through transnational pathways involving foreign travel, warnings, cross-border contacts, and post-attack links abroad. Addressing these vulnerabilities requires an integrated approach that connects domestic risk management with Schengen mobility controls, Europol-supported analysis, and terrorism-related alerts.

These gaps do not point to a single remedy or a uniform response across jurisdictions. Instead, they highlight areas where German and European authorities could better align existing legal, judicial, and operational tools with documented terrorism risk. The considerations below are intended to inform that assessment rather than prescribe a fixed model.

^k Established in 2004 in response to the security paradigm shift triggered by the 9/11 attacks, the GTAZ serves as Germany's central interagency coordination and communication platform for countering Islamist terrorism, facilitating the systematic exchange of intelligence and operationally relevant information across federal and state security authorities.

^l Developed by the German Federal Criminal Police Office (*Bundeskriminalamt*, or BKA) in cooperation with forensic psychologists from the University of Konstanz, it is a structured risk assessment and actuarial tool designed to evaluate and prioritize known Islamist extremists and potential attackers (*Gefährder*) in Germany.

Binding escalation protocols for high-risk terrorism cases. Germany could consider clearer legal and operational consequences when an individual is placed in the highest terrorism-risk category. A red-level assessment could prompt an interagency review of available restrictions, including passport and travel measures, reporting obligations, residence restrictions, electronic or technical monitoring, and renewed judicial consideration of detention or custody-compatible alternatives. This would preserve judicial discretion while helping courts and agencies consider the full operational significance of the assessment when making release or supervision decisions.

Requiring multi-agency terrorism-risk statements before release, probation, or sentence suspension. In cases involving support for a terrorist organization, foreign-fighter travel, attack preparation, or repeated indicators of extremist violence, courts could receive a structured assessment prepared jointly by police, intelligence, prison, probation, and intervention specialists. It could address the defendant's operational risk, monitoring feasibility, limits of available deradicalization measures, and consequences of noncompliance. This may reduce the likelihood that rehabilitation claims or courtroom impressions outweigh a documented pattern of operational intent.

Treating deradicalization as a complement, not a substitute, for custody or control. Before relying on a deradicalization program as a condition of release, a court could seek a provider assessment of the individual's motivation, possible deception or false compliance, and suitability for the program. Participation could then form part of a broader risk-management plan rather than serve as evidence that the risk has already diminished.

Aligning surveillance expectations with operational capacity. Before ordering release or probation in a high-risk terrorism case requiring intensive physical and digital surveillance, a court could request confirmation from the responsible police authority that the monitoring can be sustained. If not, the court could reconsider custody or an alternative arrangement. Any reduction in surveillance should follow a documented review of whether the remaining measures adequately cover the person's movements, contacts, devices, and accounts. State interior authorities could then assess whether sufficient resources remain available for the contemplated monitoring plan.

Strengthening mobility restrictions for demonstrated foreign-fighter aspirants. Repeated attempts to reach Islamic State-linked environments abroad should prompt rapid travel-disruption measures, including border alerts, legally permissible passport restrictions, and Schengen-wide notification. Germany could consider clearer timelines for converting credible travel intelligence into border action, while the European Union could assess how related warnings are shared across relevant border, police, and migration systems.

Improving domestic and European handling of foreign warnings and subsequent security hits. German systems could treat foreign terrorism alerts as grounds for timely, structured reassessment by the responsible federal and state agencies rather than as background information. At the E.U. level, alerts in the Schengen Information System, Europol analytical channels, and interoperability tools could help ensure that a border, airport, or police hit rapidly reaches the competent national counterterrorism authority. Clearer workflows may also be needed to specify who would act, within what timeframe, and under which legal authority.

Developing a European standard for post-conviction management of terrorist offenders. Although E.U. member states retain different sentencing, prison, and probation systems, the risks posed by terrorist offenders increasingly cross borders. The European Union could explore minimum standards covering specialized probation, pre-release information exchange, validated risk-assessment tools, structured prison-to-community transitions, and independent evaluation of rehabilitation programs. These standards could distinguish lower-risk radicalization cases from individuals with operational intent, foreign-fighter aspirations, or direct terrorist-network ties.

Taken together, these measures cannot eliminate the threat of lone-actor or low-tech attacks; no democratic counterterrorism system can. They can, however, reduce a more preventable failure: cases in which authorities recognize both extremist commitment and operational intent but do not align intelligence, judicial decisions, custody, supervision, and disruption accordingly. The central test is not whether every threat can be stopped, but whether credible warning leads to timely, proportionate, and enforceable action. **CTC**

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Feature Commentary: Militant Social Inheritance and the Limits of Counterterrorism Assessment in Afghanistan

By Wahid Gulrani

Counterterrorism in Afghanistan was often effective at degrading militant organizations and removing their leaders, but far less attentive to what outlived them. This article introduces the concept of militant social inheritance: the process by which the relational, infrastructural, and symbolic assets that an armed group accumulates—kinship ties and brokerage relationships, sanctuaries and financial channels, names and narratives—survive the group’s degradation, or a shift in the political order around it, and pass to allies, successors, or rivals. Drawing on the examples of the Haqqani network, al-Qa`ida-Taliban ties, the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan, and Islamic State Khorasan Province, the article shows that these assets are transferred, lie dormant, or are repurposed on a slower clock than the one by which counterterrorism measures success. It argues that inheritance is conditional rather than automatic, and that post-operation assessment should ask not only whether an organization was degraded but what survived it and who was positioned to take it up.

Twenty-five years after the September 11 attacks, one of al-Qa`ida’s most durable assets is not a training camp, a commander, or even a functioning headquarters. It is a surname. Usama bin Ladin has been dead since 2011. His son Hamza, once promoted by al-Qa`ida as a possible heir, was declared killed by the United States in 2019.¹ Al-Qa`ida’s central organization has been severely degraded, its senior leadership repeatedly targeted, and its ability to operate from Afghanistan as it did before 2001 sharply reduced. Yet, the bin Ladin name still circulates in jihadi propaganda and still carries political value. Recent assessments describe al-Qa`ida as a far more decentralized and attenuated organization than the one that planned 9/11, but one that continues to trade on inherited prestige and historical memory.²

That a name can outlast the network that made it famous points to the central argument of this article. Counterterrorism in Afghanistan was often successful at degrading organizations and removing individuals, but much less attentive to what happened to the relationships and symbolic assets those organizations had accumulated. An armed organization is not only a command

structure and a roster of operatives. It is also a web of trust, kinship ties, brokers, sanctuary arrangements, financial channels, operational knowledge, reputations, names, and narratives. These assets do not necessarily die when the organization that assembled them is weakened, and they can change hands when the political order around it shifts. Some are destroyed. Others remain embedded in people and places. Still others pass into the hands of adjacent networks, successor groups, former allies, or later generations. I call this process militant social inheritance.^a

The distinction I want to draw is not between counterterrorism success and failure but between two different objects of analysis: the organization and the social estate around it. By social estate, I mean the accumulated, transferable assets an armed group builds over years of operation and that are distinct from the group itself. Three kinds are worth separating. The first is relational: kinship ties, brokerage relationships, patronage, and the personal trust that lets people vouch for one another across otherwise closed worlds. The second is infrastructural: sanctuary geographies, financial channels, smuggling and travel routes, and the operational knowledge possessed by the people who ran them. The third is symbolic: names, reputations, martyrdom narratives, and claims to historical significance. Organizations are relatively easy to see and target. Their estates are not, and the three kinds of inheritance travel by different rules. Symbolic assets are the most portable: a name or a narrative can be claimed by almost anyone. Relational assets are the most durable but the least transferable, because they live in particular people and places and pass mainly to those already inside the relationship. Infrastructural assets sit between the two: routes and sanctuaries are tied to geography, but they can change hands among those who know how to use them.

These distinctions have a temporal dimension that assessment easily misses. Organizations operate on the clock of operations—a

a The term is the author’s own, but the concept draws on several bodies of work. Pierre Bourdieu’s treatment of social capital as an accumulated, convertible, and transmissible resource, and his account of symbolic capital, inform the notion of a social estate; see Pierre Bourdieu, “The Forms of Capital” in John G. Richardson ed., *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* (New York: Greenwood, 1986), pp. 241-258, and Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990). Max Weber’s account of the routinization of charisma addresses how authority is transferred once a founding leader is gone; see Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich eds. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978). On how pre-existing social networks shape the formation, cohesion, and collapse of armed groups, see Paul Staniland, *Networks of Rebellion: Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014). On the persistence and remobilization of wartime networks after armed organizations formally disband, see Sarah Zukerman Daly, *Organized Violence after Civil War: The Geography of Recruitment in Latin America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), and Anders Themnér, *Violence in Post-Conflict Societies: Remarginalization, Remobilizers and Relationships* (London: Routledge, 2011).

Dr. Wahid Gulrani is a political sociologist and security researcher whose work focuses on Afghanistan, migration, security, and irregular warfare.

raid, a strike, a capture, each with a visible before and after. Estates operate on a slower clock. A kinship tie is formed over a generation and can lie dormant for years before it becomes useful again. A sanctuary geography can outlast several of the distinct groups that shelter in it over time. A name can wait a decade for an heir. Because inheritance unfolds on this longer horizon, it rarely registers in the after-action assessment of any single operation, which is precisely the window in which counterterrorism has trained itself to measure success. The social estate is invisible not because it is hidden but because it often moves too slowly for capture by the instruments pointed at it.

None of this is to say that leadership targeting is futile. The scholarship on decapitation has already shown why that claim is too simplistic. Jenna Jordan has demonstrated that older and more locally embedded groups are often resilient after the removal of their leaders,³ while Bryan Price has shown that decapitation can shorten the life of some organizations, particularly younger and more centralized ones.⁴ Both findings matter. But both largely ask what happens to the targeted organization itself. The more neglected question is what happens to the social estate around it after that organization is degraded, fragmented, or gone.

That question matters because relationships survive differently from organizations. A command post can be destroyed in an afternoon. A kinship tie cannot. A leadership council can be dismantled. A financier who has worked with the same intermediaries for 20 years may still know whom to call. A safe-house network may change users without changing geography. A cleric who once vouched for one armed actor may later vouch for another. Sarah Parkinson's work on militant networks shows how informal social structures can preserve mobilization even when formal organizational structures are disrupted.⁵ The Afghanistan case suggests a further possibility: Those social structures can sometimes persist beyond the organization itself in its original form and become useful in new settings or to someone else.

The Haqqani network illustrates the point. Its power was never reducible to the number of fighters it commanded. For decades, it operated as a brokerage nexus, connecting insurgents inside Afghanistan, actors in Pakistan, Arab militants, religious institutions, financiers, and cross-border sanctuaries. Vahid Brown and Don Rassler's history of the network shows how deeply its authority depended on personal ties, family relations, and its ability to connect otherwise separate worlds.⁶ The United States targeted that network relentlessly. Senior figures were killed, pressured, or forced underground. Yet, the relationships around the network proved harder to eliminate than any individual leader. By 2021, Sirajuddin Haqqani was not merely the head of an insurgent network; he had become acting interior minister under Taliban rule. A brokerage system built outside formal state institutions had been repositioned inside one of the most powerful institutions in the country. This is relational and infrastructural inheritance at its most consequential: a group that refused to die, but also a web of connections that changed address, carried from an insurgent network into the institutions of a state.

The continuing relationship between al-Qa`ida and the Taliban is a less clean, but still revealing case. Nelly Lahoud's reading of the documents recovered from bin Ladin's compound complicates the mythology of al-Qa`ida as an omnipotent organization and shows a leadership that was often isolated and frustrated.⁷ Yet, some of the relationships built during the 1990s survived the death of bin Ladin

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and the degradation of al-Qa`ida's central apparatus. Personal ties, religious obligation, shared memory, and sanctuary arrangements can retain value even when one partner becomes far weaker than the other. Recent assessments continue to describe al-Qa`ida's presence in Afghanistan as limited but enabled by a permissive environment under Taliban rule.⁸ What survives is less a powerful organization than a relationship that outlived the organization's strength.

The Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) shows why organizational boundaries are not enough to understand this inheritance, and it is also a case in which counterterrorism plainly degraded its target. U.S. drone strikes killed the group's founder, Baitullah Mehsud, and his two successors, and a 2014 Pakistani military operation destroyed its sanctuaries in Waziristan, forcing it into Afghanistan, where it survived by embedding itself in the Afghan Taliban's insurgency.⁹ The TTP is not the Taliban movement in Afghanistan, and it pursues a different political project. Yet, when Kabul fell in August 2021, the estate it had sheltered in became available to it in concrete form. Hundreds of TTP members, among them founding deputy emir Maulawi Faqir Muhammad Bajauri, were freed from Afghanistan's prisons; fighters and families already settled on the Afghanistan's side of the border no longer faced the strikes and arrests they had faced while U.S. forces were present; and monthly TTP-claimed attacks roughly tripled between 2020 and 2022.¹⁰ The organizations remained distinct; the sanctuary, the cross-border relationships, and the freedom of movement did not. This is exactly the kind of outcome conventional metrics can miss: One movement may achieve its own victory while relational and infrastructural assets built over years of insurgency become useful to another actor. The scholarship on terrorist alliances has long shown that armed organizations seek one another out for capabilities, access, protection, and legitimacy.¹¹ The Afghanistan case suggests that some of those assets can remain available even after the organizational configuration that first produced them has changed.

These cases suggest that estates pass on in more than one way. Some assets are handed over deliberately, as when a network shares a route, a financier, or an introduction with an ally it judges useful. The Haqqani network's long role in hosting foreign militants and connecting them to partners in Afghanistan and Pakistan is a case of such deliberate transfer. Others simply lie dormant, a sanctuary or a kinship tie that no one is using until circumstances make it valuable

again. The cross-border sanctuary and relationships that sustained the Taliban in Pakistan after 2001, when the movement appeared defeated, show how much can wait in dormancy for a change in circumstances.¹² Still others are repurposed by actors who never belonged to the original organization and may even have fought it, picking up a narrative, a reputation, or a local accommodation and turning it to their own ends. The TTP's invocation of the Taliban's 2021 victory as vindication and model for its own campaign against the Pakistani state is one such repurposing.¹³

Deliberate transfer, dormancy, and repurposing leave very different traces, and none of them looks like the destruction of an organization. This is part of why inheritance is so easily missed: It is not a single event with a date but a set of quiet transactions that can unfold long after the organization that generated the asset has left the field. Infrastructural inheritance runs through each of these cases rather than standing apart from them. The Haqqanis' cross-border sanctuary and financial channels, the safe haven al-Qa`ida retains under Taliban rule, and the border geography from which the TTP operates are all estates of this kind. Because routes, sanctuaries, and financial channels are held and operated by people, infrastructure tends to pass along the same channels as relationships, which is why the two are treated together here.

Symbolic inheritance is easier to overlook and, in some ways, harder to defeat. The bin Ladin name is the clearest example. Its value does not depend on al-Qa`ida retaining the organizational strength it possessed in 2001. Indeed, its symbolic utility may become more important as centralized control weakens. In September 2026, al-Qa`ida marked the 25th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks with a video that repeatedly featured Hamza bin Ladin, whom U.S. officials declared killed in 2019. Sara Harmouch and Bruce Hoffman argue that the renewed use of Hamza allows an increasingly decentralized al-Qa`ida to draw on the authority and founding mythology of the bin Ladin lineage even as the organization leaves its formal succession unresolved.¹⁴ Whether Hamza is alive is therefore less important analytically than the fact that his image, voice, and surname remain usable. The organization may lose a person while retaining the symbolic asset attached to him.

The earlier effort to cultivate Hamza as an heir was an attempt to convert family lineage into organizational legitimacy. His reported death did not eliminate that asset. Seven years after the United States declared him killed, al-Qa`ida could still place him before a new generation of supporters as a bridge to its founder. This is precisely why the distinction between organizational survival and symbolic inheritance matters. A group can lose leaders, operatives, territory, and command capacity while retaining a name, a story of sacrifice, or a claim to historical significance. Symbolic capital can travel without the organizational structure that originally produced it.

The Taliban's return to power in 2021 created another symbolic asset: the claim to have outlasted and defeated a superpower. That narrative has mobilizing value well beyond the Taliban itself. Rival groups have tried to reinterpret it, appropriate parts of it, or deny the Taliban ownership of it. Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) illustrates the gap between symbolic and relational estates, and the limits of inheritance itself. Rather than inheriting the Taliban's claim to victory, ISKP has tried to devalue it, casting the Doha agreement that preceded it as a surrender to the United States rather than a triumph of jihad, while advancing its own claim to the

“A campaign can succeed against an organization and still leave behind a social estate capable of sustaining future militancy in another form.”

jihadi mantle in the region.¹⁵ A symbolic asset that a rival cannot inherit, it can still contest.

ISKP has recruited defectors from other militant formations and inherited the globally recognizable Islamic State brand, but it has not inherited the dominant local relational estate held by the Taliban and the Haqqani networks. Amira Jadoon and Andrew Mines describe an organization able to build alliances and rivalries across the region while remaining locked in violent competition with the Taliban.¹⁶ The contrast is useful: Symbolic capital may be relatively portable, while local trust, protection, and kinship-based networks are far harder to inherit. Even a brand confers little until the people it seeks to recruit or coopt accept the claim. An outsider can adopt a brand; they cannot simply adopt a valley.

The three forms of inheritance differ in how they travel, but all of them depend on a further condition, and it is here that the argument also meets its limits. If inheritance implies heirs, then the crucial variable is the match between an available estate and an actor able to use it. An asset with no capable claimant is inert; a capable claimant with no accessible asset gains nothing. The Haqqani estate found its heir in a movement already positioned to absorb it; the bin Ladin name has repeatedly sought heirs and only partly found them; the local relational world in Afghanistan has so far refused to be inherited by the Islamic State. Assessing risk after an operation therefore means asking not only what survived but who in the vicinity has the standing, the proximity, and the credibility to take it up. And inheritance is not automatic. It is a claim that must be recognized by the people in whom the asset actually lives.

The concept of militant social inheritance only earns its place if it also explains failure, and here Afghanistan is also instructive. Not everything survives. Counterterrorism can destroy relationships as well as organizations. After 2001, parts of the foreign-fighter infrastructure that had operated from Afghanistan were shattered. Fighters were killed, captured, or dispersed; some networks resurfaced in other theaters, while others ceased to function at all. Where the human carriers of relationships are scattered far enough, where sanctuary disappears, or where potential heirs are rejected by the local networks they hope to join, there may be little left to inherit. Displacement is central to this dynamic and cuts both ways. Forced movement can sever or weaken the very ties that make inheritance possible, dispersing the people in whom trust and knowledge are stored; under other conditions, it can carry those ties into new settings and reconstitute them among the displaced. Militant social inheritance is, therefore, a conditional process. It is more likely when relationships are deeply embedded in kinship, locality, religious institution, or durable cross-border community, and less likely when repression and displacement break those ties themselves.

This leads to the most important policy implication. Assessment systems privilege what can be counted, and organizations lend

themselves to counting in a way their estates do not. A leader removed, a cell rolled up, a camp destroyed, a document seized, each is a discrete, auditable event that fits a metric and a briefing slide. A broker who still knows whom to call, a valley that still offers shelter, a name that still recruits, these have no natural unit of measure. What cannot be counted is not thereby unreal, but it tends to fall outside the frame through which success is judged, and a frame applied for 20 years becomes a way of seeing. Reviewing two decades of U.S. involvement, the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction returned repeatedly to a mismatch between what institutions could quantify and the political and social realities that actually determined outcomes.¹⁷ Projects that completed their required tasks, the report found, were often deemed successful whether or not they advanced the broader goals they were meant to serve; one senior U.S. official quoted in it recalled trying troop numbers trained, violence levels, and control of territory as measures of progress, only to conclude that “none of it painted an accurate picture.”¹⁸ Counterterrorism assessment was never only a matter of counting. Intelligence and military analysts produced network studies, atmospherics, and strategic assessments that engaged directly with kinship, patronage, and local politics.¹⁹ The difficulty lay less in the absence of such knowledge than in how it was weighed. A removed leader could be reported as a result; a surviving broker, a kinship tie, a sanctuary arrangement, or an inherited narrative was harder to translate into a finding on which a decision could turn, harder to assign a likelihood of ever being acted upon, and easier to set aside when it complicated a record of progress.

This imbalance between what was known and what was privileged has grown more consequential, not less, since the 2021 withdrawal. With no declared forces on the ground, Washington now relies on an over-the-horizon posture built around remote intelligence and precision strikes. That posture is, if anything, even better suited to the organizational unit of analysis: It can find and remove a named commander from a great distance. What it cannot easily do is watch a brokerage relationship reconstitute

itself, register that a sanctuary has changed hands, or notice that a name has found a new claimant. The instruments have become sharper at seeing exactly what counterterrorism already saw well, and no better at seeing what it always missed. A strategy that measures itself strictly by the organizations and individuals it can reach risks mistaking the reach of its weapons for the reach of its understanding.

The corrective is not to abandon the metrics that worked but to add a second set of questions to them. After a successful operation, assessment should not end with, “Was the organization degraded?” It should continue with: Which relationships survived the operation? Which brokers remained in place? Which routes, financial ties, and sanctuary arrangements still functioned? Which names and narratives kept their mobilizing value? And who was positioned to inherit them? These questions do not diminish operational success; they make its measurement more complete. A campaign can succeed against an organization and still leave behind a social estate capable of sustaining future militancy in another form.

Afghanistan’s 25-year counterterrorism experience should therefore be read neither as a simple story of victory nor as proof that counterterrorism failed. It is a lesson about the unit of analysis. The United States became highly capable of dismantling visible militant organizations. What it did not solve was the problem of their social afterlife. Organizations die more easily than the relationships and symbols from which they are built. Some of those relationships disappear with them. Others wait, embedded in families, institutions, routes, memories, and reputations, until another actor can put them to use.

Twenty-five years after 9/11, the question that should guide the next generation of counterterrorism analysis is no longer only whether an organization survived. It is what survived the organization, who inherited it, and what they did with it. Until assessment systems can answer that question, they will keep seeing the death of organizations more clearly than the inheritance that outlives them. **CTC**

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Dying for the Nation, Not for God: Inside the Doctrine of the Balochistan Liberation Army's Suicide Wing

By Amira Jadoon, David Reas, and Natalie Tarby

In the Afghanistan-Pakistan militant landscape, where suicide attacks are overwhelmingly justified through religion, the Balochistan Liberation Army stands apart: It asks its bombers to die for a secular nationalist cause. This article examines how BLA makes that case, drawing on two of its own publications: Tojeel, the 2024 training manual for its suicide wing, the Majeed Brigade; and Dhak, its 2025 annual review of operations. Tojeel builds a secular genealogy of self-sacrifice, drawing on the history of the kamikaze, the Tamil Tigers, and the PKK, and borrowing selectively from Just War theory and the strategic thought of Sun Tzu, Mao, and Che Guevara to situate itself within a global tradition of nationalist resistance. Dhak reproduces the manual's secular nationalism faithfully in its eulogies and its portrait of a disciplined national army, yet its account of the year's fighting departs from the restraint the manual professes: prisoners executed after ad hoc trials, "agents" killed, mine workers threatened, and a suicide wing spent on mass-casualty strikes against troops rather than selective targets. The article closes with implications for Pakistan's counterinsurgency strategy, for counter-messaging against a non-religious insurgency, and for U.S. interests in a region where American-financed projects now sit inside the BLA's declared target set.

In August 2025, the U.S. State Department designated the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) and its suicide wing, the Majeed Brigade, a foreign terrorist organization (FTO). The separatist militant organization, based in Pakistan's southwestern province of Balochistan, rejected the designation via its annual review magazine, Dhak,¹ asserting that the BLA is "an organized military force" that operates in compliance with "Common Article III of the Geneva Conventions," which prohibits the targeting of civilians. Its message went further, arguing for the United States to recognize it as an ally: "If the United States seeks genuine stability, grounded relations and lasting regional interests, it must recognize its natural allies—the Baloch nation, with its modern and principled resistance, and the Baloch Liberation Army, committed solely to the liberation and justice of its motherland."

That response highlights a much-overlooked characteristic of the BLA: While much has been written about the group's escalating capabilities and aggressive operations, from coordinated multi-district offensives, the seizure of towns, to the March 2025 hijacking of the Jaffar Express passenger train in Pakistan, far less has been said about the ideas that drive it. The BLA's ideology does not rest on religion, an anomaly in a militant landscape where others

like the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), al-Qa`ida in the Indian Subcontinent, and the Islamic State Khorasan ground violence and self-sacrifice in jihad. This raises two related questions. First, what ideological principles motivate BLA fighters, especially those associated with the Majeed Brigade, the BLA's suicide wing whose members must be persuaded not merely to fight but to die? Second, how consistently does that doctrine appear in the BLA's outward account of itself? Together, these questions examine both the sources of the BLA's internal motivation and the extent to which that ideology survives in its public self-presentation.

This article explores these questions by drawing on primary materials, specifically two of the group's own documents. The first is Tojeel (meaning justification in Balochi), a training and indoctrination guidebook for the Majeed Brigade published by the BLA's media wing, Hakkal, in August 2024. The second is Dhak (meaning blow or strike in Balochi), the group's 2025 annual review, an account of its operational activities during the year. The article proceeds in four parts. First, it briefly traces the wider Baloch insurgency's origins and evolution, highlighting the role of the BLA within the movement, before turning to an examination of the ideas and guidelines embedded within Tojeel, highlighting the group's constructed genealogy of self-sacrifice, its philosophical framework, and organizational doctrine. The article then explores the doctrine against the group's own record of 2025. The article concludes with the implications, both for regional counterterrorism and for U.S. interests.

The Evolution of the Baloch Insurgency

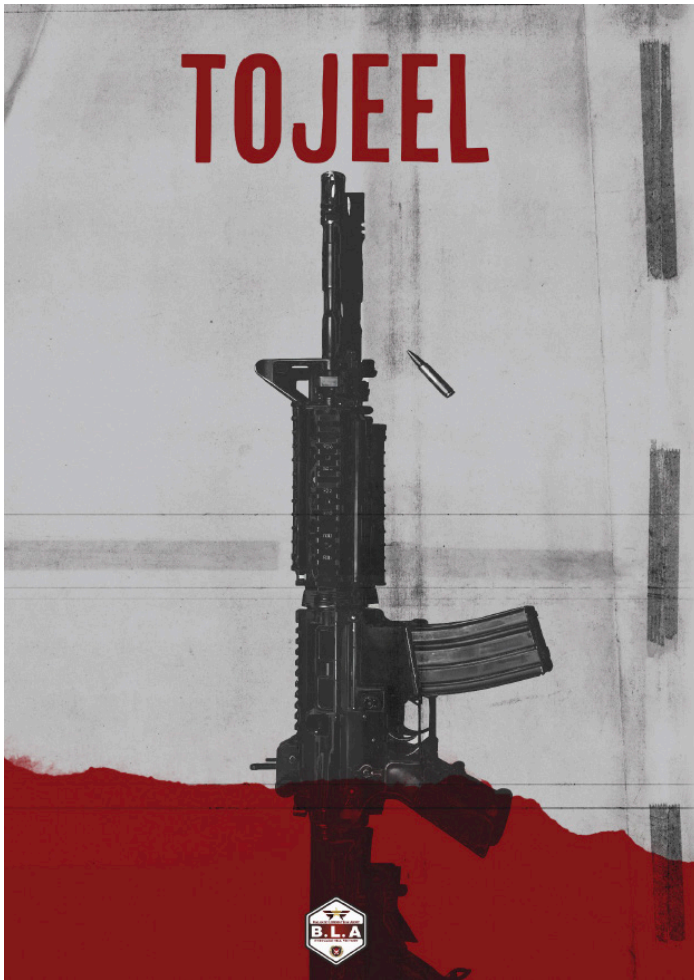
While the Baloch insurgency has existed for decades in Pakistan's Balochistan province, its current level of activity represents a

Amira Jadoon is an Associate Professor of Political Science at Clemson University and a Harry Frank Guggenheim Distinguished Scholar. She specializes in international security, terrorism and violent extremism, and the strategic dissemination of disinformation.

David Reas is a Rising Practitioner at American University's Repository for Open Source Research and Analysis (AURORA) and holds an M.S. in Terrorism and Homeland Security Policy from the university's School of Public Affairs. His research focuses on jihadist organizations worldwide.

Natalie Tarby is a graduate student at American University's School of Public Affairs and Chief of Staff at its Repository for Open Source Research and Analysis (AURORA). Her research focuses on terrorism and South Asian security.

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Cover of *Tojeel*, A BLA Majeed Brigade Guidebook, Hakkal Media, August 2024 (Source: Telegram)

notable resurgence in its overall trajectory, often labeled as its fifth wave since 1948. The origins of the insurgency are rooted in the contested accession of the princely state of Kalat, which covered much of present-day central and southern Balochistan. Upon the departure of the British from the Indian subcontinent in 1947, which was partitioned into the independent states of India and Pakistan, Kalat declared its own independence.² This was short-lived, as Kalat acceded to Pakistan in March 1948 under conditions characterized as coercive by Baloch nationalists.³ The manner of the accession became a founding grievance, one sustained over the decades by politicians and tribal leaders through narratives of resource exploitation, and adopted by Baloch militants more broadly. That narrative has a material basis: While Balochistan has supplied Pakistan with natural gas for decades, holds large reserves of copper and gold, and hosts a critical stretch of the China-

Pakistan Economic Corridor, it remains one of the country's poorest and most underdeveloped regions.³

Prior to its current resurgence, Baloch militancy has ebbed and flowed in four earlier waves. Arguably, each wave was triggered by state actions that were perceived by Baloch nationalists as an attack on their autonomy (from a forced accession, to increased military presence and the dismissal of the provincial elected government) and met by state force rather than through peace talks and negotiations.^b The insurgency's ideology has also shifted with each wave. The first two were dynastic and tribal, where revolts were framed in defense of princely sovereignty, and the tribal leaders' authority.⁴ The third introduced Marxism-Leninism ideas, which were further reinforced during the fourth wave, with Khair Bakhsh Marri's fighters regrouping in Afghan exile under Soviet patronage as the Baloch People's Liberation Front.⁵ The fifth wave of Baloch militancy, generally dated from the mid-2000s to the present period, differs from its predecessors in character as well as intensity. Not only has the secular ethnonational militancy increasingly sought to draw support from an educated, middle-class sector of the Baloch population (incorporating women into its ranks to broaden that base), it has also shifted its ideological ground.⁶ The BLA, the largest and one of the deadliest of the Baloch militant groups, offers a clear case of this transformation. As its own publications show, the group justifies its violence not through religion but through secular rationalism, comparing its fighters not to jihadi movements but to the kamikaze, the Algerian National Liberation Front, the Tamil Tigers, and the Kurdistan Workers' Party, among others. Its martyrdom doctrine, which is not linked to any religious doctrine, represents a stark deviation in the broader Afghanistan-Pakistan militant landscape.

The BLA's Rise Within the Current Insurgency

Revived in the mid-2000s, in part as a reaction to military ruler Pervez Musharraf's plans for Pakistan's Gwadar port and new army cantonments, the current wave is dominated by two organizations: the Baloch Liberation Army and the Baloch Liberation Front (BLF).⁷ The BLA, historically strongest in the Marri-Bugti tribal belt and the central Bolan-Kalat-Khuzdar corridor in Balochistan, now operates across the province and into Karachi, while the BLF remains the strongest in the Makran coastal belt.⁸

The BLA itself grew out of the Marri tribal leadership, and is generally understood to have emerged in the late 1990s among followers of Nawab Khair Bakhsh Marri, the Marxist tribal chief who was the leader of the 1970s revolt.⁹ It turned to violence

a The accession followed a series of events: a vote by Kalat's assembly against joining Pakistan, the separate accession of its feudatory territories, and the movement of Pakistani troops into the Makran coast that were seen as coercive actions by Baloch nationalists. See Yaqoob Khan Bangash, *A Princely Affair: The Accession and Integration of the Princely States of Pakistan, 1947–1955* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2015) and Martin Axmann, *Back to the Future: The Khanate of Kalat and the Genesis of Baloch Nationalism, 1915–1955* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2008).

b The first followed Kalat's accession in 1948, when the Khan of Kalat's (Ahmed Yar Khan) younger brother, Prince Abdul Karim, led a brief revolt against the accession his brother had signed. The second, in 1958–1959, was Nawab Nauroz Khan's uprising against the One Unit scheme that had dissolved Balochistan's separate status. The third wave, from 1963 to 1969, was led by the tribal leader Sher Muhammad Marri, whose guerrilla campaigns employed a Marxist-Leninist ideology, characterizing the tribal-nationalist movement as a class war against state exploitation, rather than as simply a tribal grievance. The fourth and largest wave, from 1973 to 1977, was triggered by the dismissal of Balochistan's elected government by Bhutto's government, drawing in a full army campaign. Each wave, tribally led, was largely confined to the region and ultimately contained. For further information, see Paul Titus and Nina Swidler, "Knights, Not Pawns: Ethno-Nationalism and Regional Dynamics in Post-Colonial Balochistan," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 32:1 (2000): pp. 47–69; Ayush Verma, Imtiaz Baloch, and Riccardo Valle, "The Baloch Insurgency in Pakistan: Evolution, Tactics, and Regional Security Implications," *CTC Sentinel* 18:4 (2025).

after Marri's arrest on murder charges in 2000, and as the state responded with crackdowns and military operations in subsequent years. Two moments shaped the BLA's trajectory, one external to the group and one internal. First, the 2006 killing of Nawab Akbar Bugti, the chief of the Bugti tribe and a former chief minister of Balochistan who had taken up arms against Musharraf's government, reinforced widespread grievances against state coercion of the Baloch population.¹⁰ Around this time period, the BLA grew more diffuse after Khair Bakhsh's son, Balach Marri, was killed in November 2007, and his other son Hyrbyair Marri lived in exile in London.¹¹ However, the more important turn came a decade later, inside the BLA itself. Its 2017 split (between the exiled, tribally rooted leadership of Hyrbyair Marri and the ground commanders led by Aslam Baloch) produced two factions: BLA-Azad, under Marri, and Aslam's faction, known as BLA-Jeeyand (or BLA-Achu), which became the dominant BLA.¹² It was this faction that transformed the Majeed Brigade, its suicide unit, into the group's signature weapon.¹³

For years, the BLA, like the other Baloch groups, had fought as a classic guerrilla force, relying on ambushes, roadside bombs, and attacks on pipelines and rail lines. Since 2024, however, their tactics and methods have shifted notably, especially the scale and coordination of its operations. The BLA's Operation Herof in August 2024 struck dozens of locations across more than a dozen districts,¹⁴ and the March 2025 hijacking of the Jaffar Express, the first hijacking of a passenger train in Pakistan's history, demonstrated an unprecedented level of coordination and control.¹⁵ At the center of this escalation is the Majeed Brigade, the BLA's *fidayee* wing.^c Founded in 2010, the unit was dormant until Aslam Baloch revived it in August 2018, with his own son as the bomber in an attack on Chinese engineers in Dalbandin.¹⁶ Since then, it has carried out the BLA's most consequential operations such as the 2018 assault on the Chinese consulate in Karachi,¹⁷ the 2022 Karachi University bombing by Shari Baloch¹⁸ (the group's first female suicide attacker), and the Jaffar Express hijacking itself.

By late 2025, temporarily seizing and holding towns had become a signature tactic rather than a one-off,¹⁹ and by January 2026, the template matured into Operation Herof 2.0: simultaneous attacks across at least nine districts involving hundreds of fighters.²⁰ The group's arsenal has modernized alongside its tactics: Reports indicate that the insurgency has acquired American weapons left behind in Afghanistan,²¹ and in 2026, the BLA announced aspirational drone and naval wings.²² The targeting has shifted in parallel, increasingly toward economic warfare against actors engaged in mineral extraction and transportation routes.²³ After the 2025 U.S. designation of the BLA (and the Majeed Brigade) as an FTO, in December 2025, the U.S. Export-Import Bank approved \$1.25 billion in financing for the Reko Diq copper-gold mine in Chagai, inside the insurgents' declared target set.²⁴

The aggregate picture is stark: Pakistan recorded a 34 percent rise in terrorist attacks in 2025, over 95 percent of them concentrated in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan,²⁵ and in the 2026 Global Terrorism Index, the country ranked for the first time as the country most affected by terrorism globally.²⁶

The BLA's Messaging Machine: Fighters, Sympathizers, and the World

Over the last several years, the BLA has also professionalized its messaging apparatus, largely through its media wing, Hakkal, that now produces pre-recorded final statements from suicide attackers, battle footage shot on helmet cameras and drones, tributes to fallen fighters, and infographics tallying monthly and yearly attacks, alongside annual reviews.²⁷ These are typically released in Balochi, Urdu, and English and distributed through various social media apps.^d The two documents analyzed in this article appear to be directed at different audiences. Tojeel, published by Hakkal Media in August 2024, is an inward-facing text, a doctrinal manual written to shape the fighter before the attack. Dhak, the group's 2025 annual review, faces outward: an account of the year's operations addressed to sympathizers and adversaries alike. When read together, they show both what the BLA tells its recruits and how it portrays its results.²⁸

Though existing analysis has documented the group's operations and profiled its attackers, it has rarely focused on the doctrinal messaging employed by the group to motivate its attackers, especially those who are a part of its Majeed Brigade. The brigade is the sharpest test of that messaging as its members must be persuaded not merely to fight but to die for a cause that offers no promise of an afterlife. What ideas then does the BLA draw upon? And how does the group present that same violence to the outside world?

Inside Tojeel: Indoctrination of a Suicide Operative

In the preface of Tojeel, the BLA's training and indoctrination guidebook for its elite *fidayee* (suicide-attack) unit, the Majeed Brigade states the manual's purpose plainly: to teach recruits "the history and philosophy of different nationalist and secular Fidayee units like Majeed Brigade." The rest of the manual is organized in three parts. Part One traces a global history of *fidayee* attacks in an attempt to situate the Majeed Brigade among other secular and nationalist precedents. Part Two lays out the "philosophical fundamentals," justifying self-sacrifice through rationality, symbolic resistance, cost-benefit, and asymmetric-warfare logic, focusing on nationalism and collective identity. Part Three covers the Brigade itself: its origin story, its selection and training procedures, its rules, and its chain of command. Each part is discussed below.

The Sacred Without the Divine: Holy Language in the Service of the Nation

The preface borrows the language of religion but carefully avoids any explicit religious content. Self-sacrifice is "deeply embedded in sacredness;" the *fidayee*'s death is "a holy pledge" and "a sacred trust;" to honor the fallen is "to recognize the divine in human courage, to respect the holy bond that connects the individual to the collective." The language also reaches for the agricultural imagery common to martyrdom literature across traditions: The *fidayeen* "enrich the soil of the nation's heritage and make it fertile for the seeds of hope and growth," and their sacrifice will "nurture the roots of freedom and justice" so that "the nation's tree" may "blossom

c *Fidayee* (plural *fidayeen*; Arabic *fidāʾī*, "one who sacrifices himself") denotes a fighter on a mission where there is no expectation of survival. The BLA uses the term for Majeed Brigade members and its suicide attacks generally.

d While much of its publications featuring biographies and training guidelines appear to be targeted inwards, toward recruits and other sympathizers, others carry messages that appear specifically directed toward journalists, diaspora, and foreign governments.

under the sun of freedom.” Yet, nowhere does the preface invoke God, scripture, or an afterlife. The sacred object is the nation itself, and the reward for dying is not paradise but what is left behind: land, sustained by sacrifice. Though appropriating the vocabulary of the holy, the manual places *fidayee* attacks within a self-consciously secular ethnonationalism.

Placing the Baloch Fidayee Outside the Jihadi Tradition

Part One, *History of Fidayee Attacks*, constructs a genealogy for the Majeed Brigade, discussing 12 historical precedents for self-sacrificial attacks drawn almost entirely from secular and nationalist movements. The omissions are as revealing as the inclusions: The manual passes over every jihadi or Islamist organization most associated with modern suicide bombing (the Taliban, Tehrik-i-Taliban, al-Qa`ida, Hamas, and Hezbollah), naming none of them. Even in the case of Palestine, it cites only the secular, nationalist organizations: the Marxist-Leninist Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and al-Fatah’s al-Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigades while noting only in passing that “various factions of religious groups used such attack tactics.” The selection clearly appears to be deliberate, as it situates the Baloch *fidayee* in the context of secular anti-colonial resistance and, pointedly, apart from the jihadi groups that dominate its own immediate environment.

The section cites several historical precedents for *fidayee* attacks: the Sicarii, Samurai and *seppuku*, the Jewish Revolts culminating at Masada, Russian revolutionaries, Japanese kamikaze pilots, the Algerian War, the Tamil Tigers, Palestinian nationalism, the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), Chechen separatists, the Irish Republican Army (IRA), and the Basque Independence Movement. Not all of these precedents hold up: Some of the movements the manual claims never carried out suicide attacks, revealing a genealogy chosen more for its secular pedigree than for its precision.

The section opens with the Sicarii, a Jewish faction in Roman-controlled Judea, whom it presents as the earliest *fidayeen*. In the manual’s telling, a Sicarii operative would approach a Roman commander in disguise, stab him in the neck, and then kill himself with the same dagger to escape capture by Roman forces. The act is framed as “one of the earliest examples of sacrifice for a nationalist cause.” Arguably, this misrepresents the group. The Sicarii (named for the *sica*, the concealed dagger they carried) used assassination to incite revolt against Roman rule,²⁹ striking officials and collaborators in crowded settings and then blending back into the crowd to escape.³⁰ Mass suicide entered their history only at the Siege of Masada in 72 AD, as a last resort against capture rather than a standard method.³¹ The manual, in this case, overstates suicide as a routine Sicarii tactic.

In its account of the Algerian War of Independence (1954–1962), Tojeel credits the National Liberation Front (FLN) with a campaign of “suicide bombing and *fidayee* attacks” against the French. This, too, misrepresents the group. In fact, the FLN did not lean on the use of suicide tactics. Its operatives planted bombs and escaped rather than intending to die in the attack, while the broader campaign relied on guerrilla warfare and targeted assassinations.³² The genuinely comparable case of female suicide attackers appears elsewhere, the Chechen “Black Widows,” widows of separatist fighters killed in the war with Russia, who did conduct suicide bombings.³³ The section then turns to the Russian revolutionary group Narodnaya Volya (People’s Will), whose 1881 assassination

of Tsar Alexander II, carried out by a bomber who died in his own blast, is presented as the origin of the modern *fidayee* attack.³⁴ It then notes two Japanese cases: the samurai, whose Bushido code prescribed ritual suicide (*seppuku*) over the disgrace of defeat or capture, and the kamikaze pilots of the Second World War, who flew explosive-laden planes into Allied ships.³⁵ From these, the manual draws the “spirit of nationalism” in sacrificing oneself for one’s nation.

Tojeel also draws on a cluster of secular armed movements that adopted suicide bombing: the Tamil Tigers’ suicide wing, the Black Tigers, and the secular Palestinian factions including the PFLP, Al-Fateh’s Al-Aqsa Brigade; and the PKK. In each case, the manual treats suicide bombings not as a spiritual act, but as a calculated instrument of nationalist resistance. On the Irish Republican Army (IRA), the manual draws a comparison between IRA members’ hunger strikes^e and self-sacrifice. Similarly, the Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA), which fought for an independent Basque state in Spain and France, never used suicide attacks; however, Tojeel characterizes ETA operations as missions with “no chance of survival,” and therefore as self-sacrificial acts for independence.³⁶ In both cases, the manual redefines self-sacrifice broadly enough to absorb tactics that fall outside actual suicide attacks.

Across these 12 cases, a pattern emerges: The manual is less concerned with historical precision than with pedigree, assembling a lineage that links the Baloch *fidayee* to a global secular tradition of national sacrifice, rather than any religious one. The manual next turns from history to theory, in order to establish the justification for *fidayee* attacks.

The Intellectual Scaffolding of Sacrifice: Sartre, Sun Tzu, and Just War

Part Two, *Philosophical Fundamentals of Fidayee Attacks*, opens by naming the misconception the manual exists to correct—that suicide attacks “are usually considered to be linked to religious extremism.” After four short framing sections on rationality, symbolism, moral status, and political messaging, the section unfolds in three chapters: “Strategic Considerations,” “Ethical Considerations,” and “Psychosocial and Cultural Dynamics” that draw on guerrilla strategists, Just War theory, and the existentialist philosophy of Sartre and Camus. Yet, as the following section shows, the manual cites these thinkers more for intellectual credibility than for genuine guidance.

Fedayeen Attacks and Guerrilla Warfare

The manual connects the BLA’s use of *fidayee* attacks to the guerrilla warfare described in Mao Zedong’s *On Guerrilla Warfare* and Che Guevara’s *Guerrilla Warfare*. Yet, its view of *fidayee* attacks as “the epitome of asymmetric warfare” and “the most effective form of guerrilla warfare” sits uncomfortably with what these works advocated. Neither Guevara nor Mao treated the self-sacrifice of trained fighters as the highest form of guerrilla struggle; both, in different ways, cautioned against it.

Guevara’s model of guerrilla warfare rested on preserving fighters, withdrawing to fight another day rather than confronting

e In 1981, imprisoned IRA members staged a hunger strike that killed 10 of them, while dozens more died in the wave of street violence that accompanied it. See Sara Relli, “IRA Hunger Strike: What Were the Prisoners’ Demands?” The Collector, August 31, 2026.

a superior enemy head-on, treating deliberate self-sacrifice as an exception. He allowed attacks on individuals only “in very special circumstances” that would eliminate a key opponent, and cautioned against expending “specially trained, heroic, self-sacrificing” fighters on lesser targets whose deaths might invite reprisals against the whole movement.³⁷ Where Guevara sought to conserve his fighters, the Majeed Brigade is built around their planned, certain death, making self-sacrifice not a last resort but the unit’s defining method.

The manual’s invocation of Mao is looser than its use of Guevara. Mao did not see guerrilla warfare as capable of winning on its own, but as one phase during conflicts. In *On Guerrilla Warfare*, guerrilla operations are viewed as auxiliary to conventional ones, meant to complement regular forces rather than replace them, with guerrilla units expected to eventually evolve into conventional formations.³⁸ Tojeel borrows Mao’s authority as a theorist of asymmetric warfare, without offering an account of how self-sacrifice attacks fit into any such longer strategic progression.

Of the strategists the manual invokes, Sun Tzu is the closest fit. Tojeel cites *The Art of War* under the heading of psychological warfare, noting that it “advocates strategies that weaken the opponent’s will to fight.” An even closer parallel, though, lies in a concept the manual does not name: Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War* discusses the concept of “desperate ground,” a battlefield condition where troops are surrounded and must fight to avoid death. This resembles the logic of *fidayee* attacks more than anything else the manual reaches for. Per Sun Tzu, “Throw your soldiers into positions whence there is no escape, and they will prefer death to flight. If they will face death, there is nothing they may not achieve ... Soldiers when in desperate straits lose the sense of fear. If there is no place of refuge, they will stand firm.”³⁹ Although soldiers fighting on desperate ground are expected to survive rather than intentionally sacrifice themselves, the political and psychological logic of *fidayee* attacks bears some similarities to Sun Tzu’s concept. Through these attacks, the Majeed Brigade seeks to demonstrate its willingness to inflict enemy casualties and break enemy morale, much as Sun Tzu describes.

Justifying Fidayeen Attacks

Just War theory is conventionally divided into two sets of principles: those governing when a war may justly be initiated (*jus ad bellum*) and those governing how it must be fought (*jus in bello*).⁴⁰ Each contains criteria, some of which Tojeel addresses. The manual invokes the *jus ad bellum* criteria of just cause and last resort, along with proportionality. Yet, it engages the framework selectively, without deliberating on how the BLA’s insurgency meets the standards of a just war. In effect, it claims Just War theory’s permissions while passing over its constraints, taking an ends-justify-the-means approach in which *fidayee* attacks are defensible simply because the goal is independence. That gap becomes clearer in practice, as discussed further below.

Existential Considerations: The French Connection

Generally speaking, existentialism is a philosophical tradition centered on individual freedom: the idea that life has no meaning given in advance, and that each person must create meaning through their own choices and actions.⁴¹ The BLA reaches for this tradition to justify Majeed Brigade’s self-sacrifice. In a single, brief passage, the manual groups Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre together as authorities on “the ethics of suicide,” reasoning that because

existential ethics emphasizes “individual freedom and the creation of meaning through action,” the *fidayee*’s self-sacrifice becomes “a deep assertion of their freedom” that gives “meaning and purpose to life.” However, in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus opposed suicide, viewing it as a way to escape life rather than face it.⁴² In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, he argues that the right response to life’s absurdity is not to end one’s life but to keep living in defiance of it.⁴³ The manual also mislabels him: Camus rejected the “existentialist” label.⁴⁴ Sartre is a more complicated case. In *Being and Nothingness*, he treats suicide as an act of freedom but denies that it can create meaning.⁴⁵ Because suicide is the final act of a life, it is cut off from the future that alone could give it significance. Death, for Sartre, is “that which on principle removes all meaning from life.”⁴⁶ The manual, by contrast, claims that the *fidayee* makes his own life meaningful through the act of dying, by choosing self-sacrifice for Balochistan.

The Illusion of Choice: Discipline and Control in the Majeed Brigade

Part Three, *Majeed Brigade*, has five chapters. “Introduction” opens with a quote from BLA commander Bashir Zeb framing the Majeed Brigade as “the most modern form of Baloch resistance.” “History” dates the unit’s founding to March 17, 2010, its first operation to December 2011, and its “revival” to the August 2018 attack on Chinese engineers from the Saindak mine. “Selection Procedure” covers the vetting of applicants, and “Rules and Regulations” is the most granular chapter, which notes a minimum age of 18 and a voluntariness requirement. The part closes with “Operations of Majeed Brigade,” which describes three named campaigns launched between 2019 and 2024.

Any BLA member (at least 18 years of age), regardless of gender, may put their name forward for a *fidayee* attack, but the final decision rests with the BLA’s central command. The manual presents the *fidayee* as retaining considerable agency over the act itself: When “an ideological militant gets to decide when, how and where to sacrifice himself,” he becomes “more dangerous than the enemy’s most advanced weaponry.” Although Bashir Zeb frames the *fidayee* as free to decide “when, how and where” to strike, the brigade’s own rules describe something closer to the opposite. The volunteer’s only real choice is whether to join the Majeed Brigade and whether to accept a given mission; target, timing, and purpose all remain with central command, and a fighter may wait years for the leadership to settle on an operation. Joining guarantees no immediate mission: The central command may withdraw its decision or assign the volunteer elsewhere while they wait, and they may step away before an operation’s details are disclosed—but at this stage, the volunteer is largely passive, with their agency limited to the right to withdraw. When the leadership does decide on an operation, the volunteer may accept or refuse it.

Overall, Tojeel describes a doctrine that is coherent in its aims but uneven in its foundations. It gives the Baloch *fidayee* a secular lineage, assembled more for pedigree than for precision; it dresses self-sacrifice in the authority of strategists and philosophers, and it grants the fighter a rhetoric of agency while reserving every consequential decision to central command. What the manual establishes clearly though is the *kind* of movement the BLA

f Camus famously states, “No, I am not an existentialist. Sartre and I are always surprised to see our names linked.”

understands itself to be: secular, nationalist, disciplined, and lawful in its own eyes. Whether the group fights the way it teaches is a separate question, and the next section turns to it by reading Tojeel against Dhak, the BLA's own account of its operations—a self-serving source, but one whose contradictions with doctrine cannot be attributed to external biased reporting.

A Window Into Doctrine Against Practice: BLA's 2025 Annual Review

To gain a perspective on whether the commitments Tojeel lays out are reflected in how the BLA portrays its own fighting, the manual is reviewed against the group's own record of its operations. Each year, the BLA's media wing publishes a review of the year's fighting; the 2025 edition of Dhak catalogues the year's attacks, casualties, and losses alongside the group's political messaging. Reading the two together provides a window of insight into whether the group honors that code in its own telling. The answer is mixed. As a propaganda document, Dhak captures what the BLA is willing to claim about itself, curated to serve the organization, rather than providing an objective account of its activities. As such, the group's compliance with its own code cannot, of course, be confirmed from its own output. However, if the group's self-portrait diverges from its doctrine, the divergence is its own admission rather than an outside accusation, and reality is unlikely to sit closer to the code than the group's own account of it.

In the document, the BLA claims 521 attacks in 2025, more than 1,060 enemy personnel “eliminated” and 556 wounded, 75 “agents” killed, and 15 special operations run through its named units: four by the Majeed Brigade, six by the Fateh Squad, five by the Special Tactical Operations Squad, all coordinated, it reports, by its intelligence wing, Zypher Research and Analyses Bureau (ZIRAB). Further, it records its own dead: 72 fighters “attained the status of martyrdom,” among them 11 Majeed Brigade *fidayeen*. An account this granular, complete with admitted losses, appears intended to be read as the after-action report of a disciplined national army, and as such, seems to illustrate Tojeel's central claim to institutional discipline. Dhak presents the Majeed Brigade's operations of 2025 as organizationally directed and intelligence-led, aimed at what the group describes as military targets. Whether or not the portrayal is accurate, publishing the record in this form is itself a performance of that discipline, seeking to shape perceptions of the BLA as a legitimate armed force.

Legitimacy Performance: Claiming the Laws of War

The 2025 review adopts the language of the laws of war (the international rules, set out in the Geneva Conventions) that govern how fighting may be conducted. The group presents itself as “an organized military force” that operates “in strict compliance” with “Common Article III of the Geneva Conventions,” which it describes as protecting the rights of combatants and the safety of civilians. Yet, set against the group's own account of its operations, the claim does not hold, and the review itself supplies the evidence:

- **Jaffar Express executions.** In March 2025, Majeed Brigade fighters stopped a passenger train in Balochistan and seized its passengers. The review states that the fighters “safely released all women, children, the elderly, the sick and civilians on the first day,” keeping only soldiers, whose “service cards fully identified them.” Told this way, the operation looks exactly like what the laws of war require,

sparing civilians and holding only enemy combatants. But the same account then undoes it. Of the soldiers held at Jaffar Express, the review says 214 were taken prisoner and that “all the hostages were executed.” The review also outlines a deliberate process preceding the executions: a death sentence from a “Baloch National Court,” an offer to exchange prisoners, and a 48-hour deadline, with the captives executed only after Pakistan refused to negotiate and moved against the fighters. But under the very rule the BLA invokes, that sequence is no defense. Common Article III forbids by name the taking of hostages, the killing of captives, and executions carried out without judgment from a regularly constituted court.⁴⁷ It allows no exception for an enemy's refusal to bargain, nor is a militant group's ad hoc tribunal the regularly constituted court the article requires.

- **Release by ethnicity, not status.** The laws of war distinguish between combatants and civilians; the review shows the BLA drawing a different line. On several occasions during the year, fighters captured personnel of the Levies—a state security force—and, in the review's own words, “released [them] after ... warning, as they were Baloch.” Whatever the group's stated commitment to the rules of war, its mercy in practice tracked ethnicity rather than legal status: The deciding question was not whether a captive was a combatant, but whether they were of Baloch ethnicity.
- **Executing “agents.”** Over the year, the BLA reports killing 75 “agents:” locals it accuses of working for the Pakistani army or its intelligence services, some of whom were “arrested in raids and sentenced to death by Baloch National Court after confessing.” The review justifies these killings with accounts of torture cells, drug networks, and enforced disappearances the accused are said to have aided. But regardless of the allegations, these are extrajudicial executions of non-combatants, precisely the category the laws of war are meant to shield.
- **Threatening mine workers.** The same tension runs through the group's economic warfare campaign. Companies working the Saindak and Reko Diq mining projects are, in the review's words, told to leave Balochistan or “face more fierce attacks.” The threat is aimed not at soldiers but at the civilian employees of commercial ventures, the very category the BLA insists it never targets.

Fidayeen Attacks Appear to Serve Mass-Casualty Strikes More Than the Exceptional Targets the Doctrine Describes

Tojeel presents the Majeed Brigade as a precision instrument. Its purpose, in Bashir Zeb's words, is to reach “targets that are not possible in traditional guerrilla warfare;” its attacks are “more for political success than military” and its fighters may wait months or years for the critical target at the critical time. Additionally, the manual emphasizes that a *fidayee* attack is simultaneously rational, symbolic, and political. It is a cost-effective means of demonstrating “commitment” that can win “wider support for a cause;” it is symbolic as the “ultimate commitment to the nationalist cause,” fostering collective identity and purpose; and finally, it serves as a political message that conveys “strength and resilience,” while delegitimizing “the opponent's authority.”

The 2025 review shows the *fidayeen* served some of these

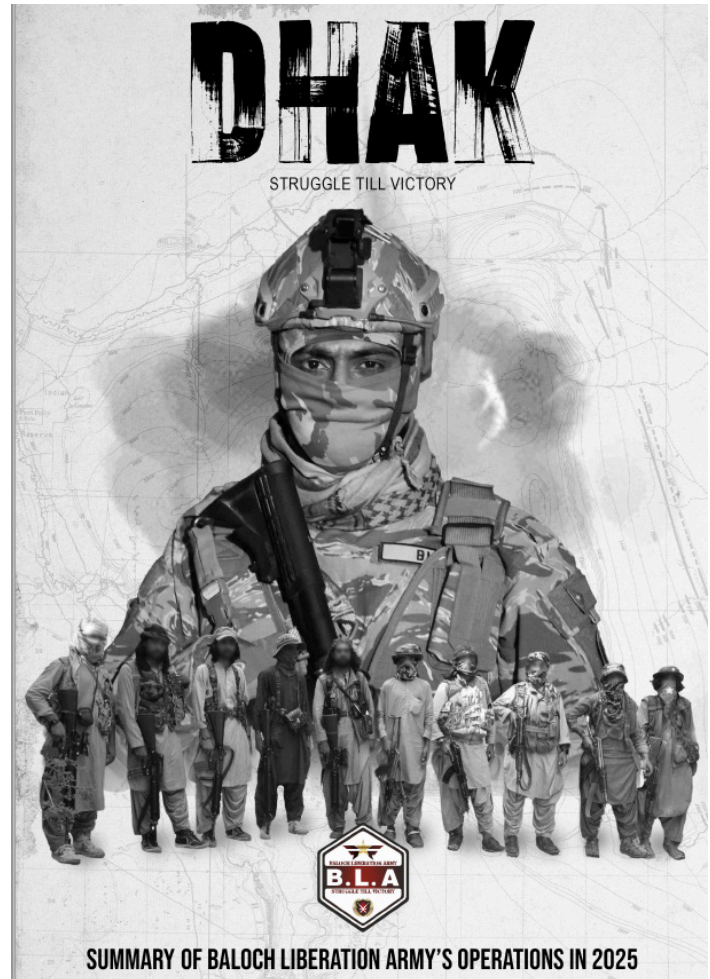
purposes, but not others, with success reported largely in casualties figures. The review accounts for more than 1,060 enemy personnel killed over the year, “over 354” in the single week of Operation Dara-e-Bolan, and each *fidayee* strike tallied by its dead. Some operations are framed in Tojeel’s terms, as demonstrations of capability and as political messages: The March 2025 hijacking of the Jaffar Express as proof of the emergence of a “professional, disciplined and national military force” in Balochistan, and the September 2025 army convoy attack at Dasht as a response to Pakistan’s failed bid to have the BLA listed as a terrorist organization at the United Nations. However, the accounts of the Turbat and Noshki attacks consist almost entirely of casualty figures with little political framing.

The year’s Majeed Brigade operations appear to be, above all, mass-casualty strikes on soldiers in transit: a vehicle-borne bomb driven into a convoy of buses carrying troops to the Frontier Corps headquarters in Turbat, which the review says killed 47 and wounded more than 30, and a *fidayee* attack on eight army buses at Noshki, which it credits with more than 90 dead. While Tojeel claims to reserve *fidayeen* attacks for targets beyond the reach of conventional guerrilla methods, the record arguably indicates it is a tactic used to maximize casualties among rank-and-file troops. The BLA might consider mass-casualty strikes on troop concentrations to be precisely what conventional methods cannot achieve, but the manual’s own precedents point toward selective targets rather than scale.⁸

Doctrine in the Eulogies

The review’s commemorative content is where Tojeel’s ideology appears most faithfully. Dhak carries dozens of tributes to fighters killed during the year, each in a standardized form, “Martyr Sangat” (comrade), a *nom de guerre*, home village, year of joining, and operations fought. Three doctrinal echoes stand out.

The first is secularism. Across more than a hundred references to martyrdom, the eulogies never invoke God, paradise, or jihad; “Allah” and “Islam” appear only in place names and a university’s title. The fallen die for the “motherland,” and their reward is the nation’s memory. This is Tojeel’s preface enacted, and it suggests the manual’s secular framing is the group’s working language for its own dead. The second is the “philosophy of the last bullet.” Tributes praise fighters who, facing capture, “chose the status of martyrdom with their own hands,” and the Jaffar Express *fidayeen* are said to have “embraced martyrdom with their last bullets” once their ammunition ran out. The third is the educated recruit. The eulogies foreground schooling as a virtue (e.g., an M.Phil in political science, a master’s in social work, a physics undergraduate, several who came to arms through the Baloch Students Organization) and praise one fighter for having “transformed political consciousness



Cover of *Dhak*, Hakkal Media, January 2026 (Source: Telegram)

into combat skills.” This is a depiction of the Tojeel’s “conscious,” volunteer fighter and the group’s shift toward educated recruits.

Implications: A Doctrine That Shapes Identity but Not Restraint

Together, Tojeel and Dhak answer both questions this article set out to address. On the first, what motivates the BLA’s fighters in the absence of religion, the manual is unambiguous: a secular ethnonationalism that borrows, however imprecisely, the authority of Just War theory, guerrilla strategists, and existentialist philosophy, promises no afterlife, and asks the *fidayee* to die for the nation. On the second, whether that doctrine survives in the group’s outward account of itself, the answer is divided.

Where the doctrine concerns what the BLA is, Dhak reproduces it faithfully: secular in its commemoration, educated recruits, and centrally directed operations. Where it concerns how the BLA fights, the outward account contradicts the inward teaching: The restraint it professes does not hold in practice, and the selectivity it claims for its suicide wing gives way, on the group’s own record, to mass-casualty strikes on troops. The principles the BLA instills in its fighters, in short, shape its identity and its self-presentation, but does not necessarily define the limits of its violence. The doctrine, in short, is a reliable guide to what kind of group the BLA is, but an unreliable guide to what it will refrain from doing. Three implications follow.

⁸ Tojeel does not define which targets lie beyond “traditional guerrilla warfare” or what constitutes a “critical target.” The only guide is the lineage and the operations the manual claims for the Majeed Brigade. As lineage, it cites the 1974 grenade attack on Zulfikar Ali Bhutto by Majeed Langove, decades before the BLA’s formation, as the first Baloch *fidayee* attack. As the Brigade’s own operations, it lists the 2011 bombing of Shafiq Mengal’s residence in Quetta, the 2018 attack on Chinese engineers at Dalbandin, Operation Zirpahazag’s strikes on Chinese personnel and on intelligence and naval installations in Gwadar and Turbat (2019–2024), the 2022 assaults on Frontier Corps camps in Panjgur and Nushki, and the 2024 seizure of Mach. Most are political figures, foreign nationals, fortified installations, or territorial seizures. (See Tojeel, Part Three).

The first concerns the Pakistani state. Islamabad's response has remained overwhelmingly kinetic, accompanied by enforced disappearances that the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan describes as producing a climate of fear.⁴⁸ The BLA's own eulogies show how repression feeds the movement, tracing fighter after fighter's path to arms through detention, torture, or a disappeared relative.⁴⁹ A strategy that answers grievances with force and repression, and frames the insurgency as an Indian proxy war, further fuels the group's propaganda while mobilizing its sympathizers.⁵⁰ In the views of the authors, the Pakistani state would benefit from reopening political space for peaceful dissent, giving Balochistan a real stake in the projects built on its resources, and offering accountability mechanisms for disappearances and extrajudicial killings.

The second is with respect to counter narratives. The counter-messaging toolkit developed over two decades against violent jihadi extremism, since the start of the War on Terror, transfers unevenly to the Baloch insurgency. While theological rebuttals have little relevance for BLA, the toolkit's most durable element, exposing the gap between the ideals a group espouses and its conduct in practice, applies directly. BLA's vulnerabilities lie exactly where its

doctrine and its conduct diverge: A group that claims compliance with the laws of war while executing prisoners, threatening mine workers, and killing "agents" after ad hoc trials undercuts its own legitimacy narratives. Any such effort must be designed for the audience BLA addresses: a younger, more educated population drawn not by religious conviction but by grievances over enforced disappearances, resource extraction, and political marginalization.

The third concerns the United States. The U.S. FTO designation was rejected by the BLA, a posture that it seems adamant to sustain. The Reko Diq mine, financed by the U.S. Export-Import Bank four months after the designation, sits inside the target set the BLA has declared. The lineage the BLA venerates is instructive here: The Tamil Tigers were prolific users of suicide attacks and built naval and air wings (the BLA has announced maritime and drone ambitions of its own). If the BLA continues to follow that trajectory, U.S.-financed projects in the province, including American companies and/or citizens, are likely to face an elevated risk. Washington therefore has a direct stake in how Islamabad manages the conflict, with its financing providing it leverage to attach conditions to its investments. **CTC**

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Terrorist and Insurgent Threats to Protected Areas in Africa: What Ranger Fatalities Can Reveal

By Christian Jokinen

Protected areas in Africa are increasingly becoming contested security spaces rather than merely sites of conservation governance. Across several regions, jihadi organizations, separatist movements, militias, and other violent non-state actors use national parks as sanctuaries, transit corridors, logistical hubs, and sources of revenue. Consequently, attacks on park rangers should not be understood solely as conservation-related crime. Instead, patterns of ranger fatalities may reveal shifts in territorial contestation, insurgent penetration, and the evolving security dynamics of protected areas. These patterns often mirror broader trends in armed conflict, banditry, and weak state control. As protected areas become increasingly embedded within wider ecosystems of violent non-state conflict, terrorism emerges as one important dimension of this transformation, highlighting the under-recognized intersection between conservation and political violence.

While armed conflict and protected areas have attracted increasing scholarly attention, terrorism-specific analysis of threats to conservation remains limited.¹ Existing literature has focused more on civil conflict, insurgency, and contested claims about wildlife trafficking as a source of terrorism financing² than on the broader strategic use of protected areas by violent extremist groups. In the conservation science and policy field, there is an emerging realization that the threats from violent extremism to protected areas are increasing with significant implications for local people, conservation efforts, and wildlife populations.³

This article argues that ranger^a fatalities are an often overlooked and underused indicator of changing insecurity in and around Africa's protected areas. Drawing on the Game Rangers Association of Africa (GRAA) Honour Roll for 2017-2026, it makes three claims. First, targeted violence constitutes a major share of recorded ranger deaths. Second, a significant proportion of these fatalities are linked to violent non-state actors, even if the responsible organization often cannot be identified precisely. Third, case evidence from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Benin, Mozambique, and Nigeria suggests that protected areas continue to be embedded

within wider conflict systems and, in some cases, are being used strategically by insurgent and terrorist groups.

The article first examines the GRAA dataset as a source for scholarly inquiry, followed by an in-depth analysis of what the Honour Roll reveals about ranger fatalities in contexts where violent non-state actors constitute a significant cause of ranger casualties. It then turns to the conflict contexts of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Benin, Mozambique, and Nigeria, in which these fatalities occur, to identify potential cross-cutting factors and dynamics underlying ranger deaths.

Data and Methodological Considerations

Founded in 1970, the Game Rangers Association of Africa is the oldest and most representative ranger association on the continent.⁴ Since 2017, it has published an annual Honour Roll to coincide with World Ranger Day on July 31. The Honour Roll^b records rangers who died while performing conservation duties, from injuries sustained in the course of duty, and in some cases from other causes while serving as rangers.

The database is compiled from reports submitted by protected area authorities, ranger associations, employers, conservation organizations, and the International Ranger Federation.^b Each entry typically includes the ranger's name, country, and recorded cause of death. Causes are described in non-standardized terms such as "killed by poachers," "killed by militia," "killed by assailants," "vehicle accident," "wildlife attack," or "snake bite."

The dataset has important limitations. GRAA explicitly acknowledges that many ranger deaths are never formally reported, especially in remote conflict-affected areas. Reporting standards differ between countries, definitions of who qualifies as a ranger are not always consistent, and information on perpetrators is often incomplete. Editions even include a symbolic "Unknown African Ranger" entry to recognize unrecorded deaths. The Honour rolls

b The International Ranger Federation (IRF) is a global organization that represents and supports rangers and ranger associations working to protect wildlife, ecosystems, cultural heritage, and communities. It promotes professional standards, training, welfare, recognition, and international cooperation among rangers and the organizations that support them. See the International Ranger Federation's website at internationalrangers.org

Dr. Christian Jokinen received his doctorate from the Department for Contemporary History at the University of Turku in Finland. He specializes in researching political violence and terrorism.

The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of his current or former employers.

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a A ranger is a person who protects and manages Africa's protected areas and natural resources, including wildlife, forests, habitats, and the communities that depend on them. The terminology is not completely uniform. For example, national wildlife authorities, forestry departments, community conservancies, and NGOs may use different titles for people performing similar conservation functions.

also include a section that acknowledges previously not recorded ranger fatalities. For these reasons, the Honour Roll should be treated as a minimum verified count rather than a complete census. These limitations matter for interpretation. The dataset is useful for identifying broad patterns and trends, but it is less suitable for precise causal attribution. In particular, generic categories such as “militia,” “insurgents,” “terrorists,” “assailants,” or, in the 2025 edition, the umbrella category “homicide,” often obscure important distinctions between poaching-related violence, organized criminal attacks, communal conflict, and ideologically or politically motivated violence.

To make the data analytically usable, this analysis groups fatalities into six broad categories by the stated cause of death and perpetrating actor given as follows (see also Appendix I):

- violent non-state actors, described as “militia,” “rebels,” “insurgents,” or “jihadis;”
- poachers and other resource-related offenders, including illegal loggers, miners, cattle rustlers, and armed herders;
- non-attributed willful attacks, including assailants, criminals, bandits, mobs, and similar descriptions;
- accidents;
- wildlife-related incidents; and
- illness, suicide, or other causes.

These groupings are interpretive and do not eliminate ambiguity. In some settings, particularly eastern DRC and parts of the Sahel, the line between terrorist insurgency and resource-related offenders is blurred. The findings should therefore be read as indicative rather than definitive.

Ranger Fatalities in Africa, 2017-2026

Between 2017 and 2026, the GRAA Honour Roll recorded 792 verified ranger fatalities across Africa. Of these, 133 deaths, or 16.8 percent, were attributed to violent non-state actors such as “militias,” “rebels,” “insurgents,” or “jihadis.” A further 132 deaths, or 16.7 percent, were attributed to non-attributed willful attacks by “assailants,” “criminals,” “bandits,” or “mobs.” Together, these categories account for 33.5 percent of all recorded ranger fatalities. (See Appendix II.)

If deaths caused by poachers and other armed resource offenders are included, deliberate violence rises to 43.2 percent of all verified ranger fatalities during the period. By comparison, accidents accounted for 19.4 percent, wildlife incidents for 9.9 percent, and illness or other causes for 27.5 percent. The central finding is therefore clear: Deliberate human violence constitutes the most common occupational threat facing African rangers. This is an important departure from the conventional image of ranger work as being defined primarily by wildlife encounters, harsh terrain, and accidental injury.

There is also evidence, albeit requiring caution, that fatalities linked to violent non-state actors became more prominent in the later years of the dataset. In 2022, the militia/insurgent/jihadi category accounted for 24 percent of all recorded ranger deaths; in 2023, it accounted for 25 percent. These were the highest proportions in the period under review. The rise coincides broadly with the spread of jihadi and insurgent violence across parts of the Sahel, the Lake Chad basin, northern Mozambique, and continued instability in eastern and southern DRC. In 2024 and 2025, ranger fatalities linked to armed non-state actors seemed to decline dramatically, with only three reported fatalities in 2024 and

none in 2025. However, this was almost certainly due to a change in categorizing, as the category of “willful, non-attributed attacks” correspondingly increased notably in the same years. In the most recent Honour Roll of 2026, fatalities linked to armed non-state actors returned to the pre-2024 level.

At the same time, attribution remains a major weakness in the GRAA dataset. Only a small proportion of fatal incidents identify a specific armed organization, with only four named organizations appearing explicitly: Mai-Mai,^c M23,^d al-Shabaab,^e and Boko Haram.^f Using open-source reporting as corroboration allows tentative attribution in some additional cases, particularly to Islamic State Mozambique Province in northern Mozambique, but most incidents remain unattributed.

This means the data supports a careful rather than maximalist conclusion. It shows that rangers are increasingly exposed to deliberate violence and that a substantial share of this violence occurs in environments shaped by armed non-state actors. They do not always allow firm identification of whether a given incident was driven by terrorism, insurgency, local militia conflict, retaliatory criminal violence, or some combination of these.

Interpreting the Geography of Violence

Violent non-state actor-related ranger fatalities were recorded in at least 11 African countries during the study period. The distribution is heavily concentrated on the DRC, with 68.4 percent of all ranger fatalities in this category taking place in the country. (See Appendix III.) Moreover, in the DRC, ranger fatalities show a remarkable continuity, with almost annual ranger fatalities throughout the examined 10-year period.

The DRC is followed by states in the greater Sahel, including Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad, and Benin, counting together

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- c Mai-Mai is a broad term used in the DRC for various locally based armed groups, often organized around particular communities, leaders, or territories. The term does not describe a single unified organization; Mai-Mai groups have had different political aims and have been involved in both resistance and conflict, including in eastern DRC. Franck van Acker and Koen Vlassenroot, “Les ‘mai-mai’ et les fonctions de la violence milicienne dans l’est du Congo,” *Politique Africaine* 84 (2001/4); Judith Verweijen, “Inclusion amid fragmentation: the Mai-Mai in the DRC,” *Accord* 28 (2019).
- d The March 23 Movement (M23), or the *Mouvement du 23 Mars* in French, is an armed group that operates in eastern DRC, where it has become the most active non-state armed group and often fights alongside the Rwanda Defence Force (RDF). For analysis on M23, see Ladd Serwat, “The enemy of my enemy is my friend: How armed group alliances are shaping the battle for South Kivu,” ACLED, March 27, 2026.
- e Al-Shabaab is an internationally sanctioned armed Islamist extremist organization based primarily in Somalia and active in parts of East Africa. It is affiliated with al-Qa`ida and has carried out insurgency, terrorist attacks, and other forms of violence, particularly in Somalia and against regional and international targets. “Al-Shabaab,” UN Security Council, October 29, 2014.
- f Boko Haram refers to an Islamist militant organization originating in northeastern Nigeria. Founded in the early 2000s, the group is also known as *Jama’atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda’awati wal-Jihad* (“People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet’s Teachings and Jihad”). The group is listed by the UN Security Council under its ISIL (Da’esh) and Al-Qaida sanctions regime. Boko Haram had historical links to al-Qa`ida; in March 2015, it pledged allegiance to the Islamic State, after which the al-Barnawi faction became Islamic State-West Africa (ISWAP). Following a 2016 split, the remaining Shekau faction continued under the name Boko Haram. “Jama’atu Ahlis-Sunna Lidda’awati wal-Jihad (Boko Haram),” UN Security Council, May 22, 2014; “Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP),” UN Security Council, February 23, 2020.



An Albert National Park sign is pictured on December 10, 2016, in what is today Virunga National Park, in North Kivu, Democratic Republic of the Congo. (Jrgen B'tz/picture-alliance/dpa/AP Images)

22.6 percent of ranger fatalities of the dataset. New countries appear over time: Mali in 2017, Chad in 2018, Burkina Faso and Niger in 2021, Benin and Mozambique in 2022, Uganda in 2024, and Nigeria in 2026. This pattern broadly mirrors the territorial expansion of armed Islamist and insurgent violence across West, Central, and Southern Africa.

The DRC is the single most complex case. Labels such as “militia,” “rebel,” “insurgent,” and “Mai-Mai” often overlap in reality. “Mai-Mai” itself is not one organization, but a broad term applied to various community-based militia formations, especially in eastern Congo.⁶ These groups operate alongside foreign insurgent organizations, criminal networks, and movements, often pursuing overlapping objectives related to territory, local authority, taxation, and access to mineral resources. In such settings, fine-grained categorization is inherently difficult.

The Sahel presents a different but related problem. In countries such as Burkina Faso and Niger, protected areas have increasingly become part of cross-border jihadi operating environments. The security situation in the Sahel rapidly deteriorated from 2019 onwards, with the geographical spread of Islamic State affiliate groups in sub-Saharan Africa leading to a surge in terrorism in many countries in the region.⁷ This was especially true with the W-Arly-Pendjari complex, spanning a vast territory cross the border area of Burkina Faso, Niger, and Benin. Yet, the dataset likely understates this because fatalities are often attributed only to “assailants” or “bandits.” For example, Burkina Faso’s wider security context would suggest that at least some unattributed attacks on rangers in the years 2018–2023—in total, nine ranger fatalities due to “assailants,”

“kidnapped and murdered,” or “missing on anti-poaching patrol”—may have occurred within jihadi theaters of operation, but the available data does not permit confident reclassification. That possibility should therefore be treated as informed inference rather than established fact.

Case Studies from DRC, Benin, Mozambique, and Nigeria: Conservation in Wider Conflict Systems

Democratic Republic of the Congo

Within the GRAA dataset, the Democratic Republic of the Congo provides one of the clearest examples of protected areas operating within a long-running, armed-conflict environment. Across the country, large, protected areas overlap with territories contested by armed groups, weak state authority, and competition over natural resources. In this context, conservation personnel are exposed to violence through several distinct pathways: They may be directly targeted because of their institutional role (including when preventing or intervening in illegal activities), killed while responding to attacks against local communities, or become casualties of armed confrontations and ambushes conducted within protected areas. The concentration of ranger casualties from violent non-state actors in the DRC therefore represents not an isolated pattern, but a continuum of conflict-related exposure.

The experience of Upemba National Park (UNP) in southeastern DRC illustrates how conservation infrastructure can become directly implicated in local political and armed conflict. The park—once called “the Triangle of Death”⁸—operates within a contested political

landscape shaped by the interaction of conservation governance, central government authority, and armed local movements. Among the most significant of these are the *Bakata Katanga*, also known as *Mai-Mai Kata Katanga*, a Katangese separatist movement that has challenged the authority of the central government in Kinshasa.⁹ The Bakata Katanga infiltrated the park in 1998.¹⁰

The history of violence against Upemba's rangers and civilian personnel predates the most recent escalation. In December 2012, the park's chief warden, Atamato Madrandele, was killed in an ambush. The loss contributed to a prolonged period in which the park lacked sufficient resources and capacity to secure its operations.¹¹ In June 2023, a ranger was killed while on patrol.^g In January 2024, a four-person ranger patrol was attacked by approximately 16 suspected members of the Bakata Katanga militia; one ranger was killed and another wounded.¹² Another ranger was killed in June 2024.^h In November 2024, two trackers working for the park were abducted and killed by a Mai-Mai militia.¹³ These incidents demonstrate that ranger casualties in Upemba have emerged through repeated encounters between conservation personnel and armed actors.

In this pattern, the March 2026 assault on the park headquarters represented a significant escalation.¹⁴ On March 3, seven people including rangers and conservation personnel were killed during an assault on the park headquarters, marking the deadliest single event in African conservation since 2020.¹⁵ The attackers temporarily took control of the headquarters before looting weapons, ammunition, food, and other supplies.¹⁶ According to witness accounts, the attackers also sought the park's director, Christine Lain, and communicated demands that the park should cease its activities against armed groups and poachers and should stop its recruitment of rangers.¹⁷ It is noteworthy that the attackers appeared to distinguish between foreign and Congolese staff.¹⁸ According to witness accounts, the attackers seemed to avoid the targeted killing of foreign nationals.¹⁹ This could be interpreted as pointing to a localized agenda of the attackers and to an attempt to mitigate the risk of negative international repercussions.

Reporting has attributed the assault to fighters linked to Bakata Katanga, although another Katangese movement, the *Mouvement Debout Katanga pour la Libération du Congo* (MDKC), also claimed involvement.²⁰ The precise attribution of the attack therefore remains uncertain. The DRC government's public statements sought to associate the attack with M23, although the precise nature of the alleged connection has not been clearly established.²¹ This competing attribution is important because it illustrates the difficulty of assigning responsibility for violence in a fragmented conflict system where armed movements, splinter groups, and local militias may operate across overlapping territorial and political networks. The analytical significance of the Upemba attack does not, however, depend entirely on resolving the question of attribution. Regardless of which armed faction ultimately bears responsibility, the assault demonstrated that conservation infrastructure can itself become relevant to armed actors' political and territorial objectives.

The attack also illustrates several ways in which conservation can become incorporated into conflict dynamics. The headquarters contained weapons, ammunition, food, and other supplies, making it a potential source of material resources. At the same time, the attackers' reported demands concerning park operations indicate that conservation enforcement itself had become politically salient. By regulating access to protected land and restricting activities such as poaching, conservation institutions can affect the interests and freedom of movement of armed groups and other actors operating within the park. In this sense, the park's institutional presence represents both a material resource and an expression of territorial authority.

Eastern DRC presents an even more entrenched pattern. Virunga National Park, internationally known for its mountain gorillas and a UNESCO World Heritage site, remains one of the world's deadliest protected areas for conservation personnel. More than 200 rangers have been killed there since the park's creation in the year 1925.²²

The pattern of casualties in recent years demonstrates that ranger exposure occurs through multiple pathways rather than through a single form of deliberate targeting. In April 2018, a ranger unit traveling in a vehicle was ambushed in Oro, killing five rangers and one civilian driver.²³ In March 2020, a Mai-Mai militia attack on a ranger post near Nyamilima killed one ranger.²⁴ The following month, on April 24, fighters associated with the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR) killed 13 park rangers and four civilians.²⁵ In this case, the rangers were reportedly not the primary targets of the assault; they were killed while responding to an attack in defense of the surrounding population.²⁶ This distinction is analytically important. It demonstrates that conservation personnel can become casualties of conflict even when armed groups are not specifically seeking to attack the conservation institution itself or symbols of it.

Further attacks during 2020 and 2021 demonstrate a different pattern. In October 2020, another ranger was killed in an attack on a ranger post, with local reporting attributing the incident to the FDLR splinter group Rally for Unity and Democracy (FDLR-RUD).²⁷ In January 2021, six rangers' on patrol were killed in an ambush attributed to Mai-Mai militia.²⁸ In February 2023, a suspected Mai-Mai attack killed another ranger,^j while a series of attacks²⁹ attributed to the Mai-Mai in May 2023 resulted in the deaths of seven rangers and a civilian employee.^k

These incidents indicate that patrols and fixed conservation positions can expose personnel to direct armed attack, particularly where armed groups maintain access to protected areas and where conservation patrols intersect with their activities. The pattern

g The ranger was named as Banze Mupafu Erasme. "The High Cost of Conservation in the DRC," Upemba National Park, June 16, 2024.

h The killed ranger was named as Mukambilwa Bunia Mustapha. "The High Cost of Conservation in the DRC," Upemba National Park, June 16, 2024.

i The six rangers were identified as Burhani Abdou Surumwe, Kamate Mundunaenda Alexis, Maneno Kataghalirwa Reagan, Kibanja Bashekere Eric, Paluku Budoyi Innocent, and Nzabonimpa Ntamakiriro Prince. "Virunga Rangers Killed In an Ambush," Virunga National Park, n.d.

j The ranger was identified as Tulinabo Fatakanwe Pascal. "Tulinabo Fatakanwe Pascal," Virunga National Park, February 7, 2023.

k The killed rangers were identified as Kakule Nzonda Djiku, Ngerageze Kamzungu Daniel, Paluku Kiyana, Paluku Mahamba Ovide, Musubao Mubulya Justin, and Muhindo Kasay Nickson. "Déclaration du Parc National des Virunga sur les attaques récentes," Virunga National Park, June 12, 2023.

has continued into 2026. On May 21, two Virunga rangers^l were killed when an unidentified heavily armed group attacked the Kamuhororo ranger post.³⁰ The perpetrators were not conclusively identified, again demonstrating that uncertainty over attribution does not eliminate the broader evidence of conflict-related exposure among conservation personnel.

Farther northeast, the Epulu National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage site, was recently infiltrated by the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), an armed group operating in eastern DRC that pledged allegiance to the Islamic State in 2019 and has since been recognized as its Central Africa affiliate, known as Islamic State Central Africa Province (ISCAP).³¹

Like Upemba and Virunga, the Epulu National Park has a history of non-state armed group attacks against its rangers. On June 24, 2012, the Epulu Conservation and Research Center was attacked by the “Mai-Mai Simba” militia, which killed at least six people, including two rangers, and 13 rare okapis.^{32 m} Five years later, on July 14, 2017, an attack, likely perpetrated by Mai-Mai rebels, killed five local reserve employees (four wardens and a tracker).³³ In June 2023, one ranger was killed in the vicinity of “Mondial,” an illegal mining site established in the central sector of the reserve.³⁴

In December 2024, the UN Group of Experts on the DRC warned the UN Security Council that a joint military offensive by the DRC and Uganda against the ADF had pushed the group into areas with minimal state security presence in Ituri and North Kivu provinces.³⁵ The experts warned that the leader of the ADF, Musa Baluku, had the intention to find refuge in the Epulu forest inside the Okapi Wildlife Reserve, a densely forested area with difficult access and without Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (FARDC) and Uganda People’s Defence Force (UPDF) presence and outside the officially agreed area of the joint operation “Shujaa.”³⁶ A year later, the 37th report of the ISIL and Al-Qaida Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team stated that Musa Baluku and his Madina Camp were now located in the Epulu National Park.³⁷ In March 2026, a local Congolese NGO continued to warn about the presence of ADF in the park.³⁸ Then, in the beginning of October, the ADF attacked the Nduye Patrol Substation in the Okapi Wildlife Reserve, resulting in the death of one ranger.³⁹

The threat posed by the ADF to protected areas is not limited to Epulu National Park or indeed the DRC. On October 17, 2023, two foreign honeymooning tourists and their local guide were killed in an attack in Queen Elizabeth National Park in southwestern Uganda (close to the border to DRC) that was carried out by ADF fighters.³⁹

Taken together, the Upemba, Virunga, and Epulu cases

“Rangers ... occupy a particularly exposed position at the intersection of conservation, state authority, territorial control, and access to natural resources. Their casualties are therefore not peripheral to the conflict environment; they are, in important cases, an expression of how that conflict operates within protected areas.”

demonstrate several distinct mechanisms through which protected areas become embedded in armed conflict. First, their territorial extent can provide armed groups with areas in which state presence is limited and movement is difficult to monitor. Second, conservation personnel represent an institutional presence associated with territorial governance and, indirectly, the authority of the state. Third, park facilities can contain material resources that armed actors seek to capture or loot. Finally, conservation enforcement can directly affect armed groups’ access to land, wildlife, and other natural resources, creating incentives for groups to resist or disrupt park operations.

The Congolese cases therefore suggest that ranger casualties should not be understood simply as an incidental consequence of violence occurring around protected areas. Rangers may become exposed because of the functions they perform within contested territories. Their patrols, ranger posts, headquarters, supply routes, and enforcement activities can intersect with armed groups’ territorial and economic interests. At the same time, as the 2020 Virunga attack demonstrates, rangers may also be killed while responding to violence against surrounding communities rather than because they were themselves the intended targets.

This distinction is important for understanding conservation in conflict environments. Protected areas are not merely landscapes in which armed conflict happens to occur. In some circumstances, they function as institutional, territorial, and resource arenas within the conflict itself. Rangers consequently occupy a particularly exposed position at the intersection of conservation, state authority, territorial control, and access to natural resources. Their casualties are therefore not peripheral to the conflict environment; they are, in important cases, an expression of how that conflict operates within protected areas.

Benin

The W-Arly-Pendjari complex (WAP), spanning Benin, Burkina Faso, and Niger, provides a particularly important example of a protected area system becoming integrated into a regional jihadi theater. The W and two adjacent national parks, Pendjari and Arly, comprise West Africa’s largest protected wilderness with 1.7 million total hectares. Since 2019, jihadi groups, especially those linked to JNIM and the Islamic State Sahel Province (ISGS), have increasingly operated in and around parts of the complex, using it as a sanctuary and corridor for cross-border movement.⁴⁰

^l The killed rangers were identified as Kasereka Valyathire Baraka and Munguakonkwa Mihigo Jacques. “Two Rangers Killed in Armed Attack at Kamuhororo,” Virunga National Park, May 21, 2026.

^m The intentional killing of protected species as a form of “ecological terrorism” is not limited to this single case. In May 2007, a Mai-Mai militia threatened to kill all remaining mountain gorillas in Virunga National Park if government forces continued military operations against the group following the killing of park rangers. In July 2007, several gorillas were killed. “DR Congo rebel threat to gorillas,” BBC, May 21, 2007; Mark Kniver, “Missing DR Congo gorillas ‘dead,’” BBC, August 17, 2007.

ⁿ The ranger was identified as Jean Tandu Koliwa. “Mambasa: un écogarde de la RFO tué lors d’une attaque ADF,” 7sur7.cd, October 1, 2026.

The security implications of this development became particularly visible first in Burkina Faso, where state forestry officers were among the first targets of jihadis looking to establish a foothold in the WAP complex, both to eliminate prying eyes and to capitalize on local resentment over regulations that prevented hunting and cattle grazing inside the parks.⁴¹ The deteriorating security situation made international headlines on April 26, 2021, when an ambush against a joint army, police, and forestry anti-poaching patrol in the Arly area killed two Spanish journalists and an Irish conservationist.^o The victims were traveling with the unit when jihadi militants on motorcycles and pickup trucks ambushed them.⁴²

The conflict subsequently became increasingly visible also in Benin, where the expanding presence of JNIM and Islamic State Sahel Province jihadis brought sustained violence against rangers and park staff. The GRAA dataset recorded the first conflict-related ranger casualties in Benin in 2022.⁴³ However, the first major security event predated these when in Pendjari a local guide was killed and two French tourists were kidnapped on May 1, 2019.⁴⁴ Fearing that the hostages would be handed over to the *Macina Liberation Front* (FLM), a jihadi group formed in 2015 and aligned with al-Qa`ida in the region, a French-led Special Forces operation succeeded in rescuing the two French hostages along with an American hostage and a South Korean hostage being held by the same group.⁴⁵ The incident marked an early indication that the deterioration of the security in Sahel was extending into Benin's protected areas.

Violence against park rangers intensified thereafter. In February 2022, coordinated improvised explosive device attacks in Pendjari killed four African Parks^p rangers, two drivers, one French instructor, and one Beninese soldier, while injuring 12 others.⁴⁶ In September 2023, one ranger was killed during a ranger patrol after a confrontation with unidentified individuals. In the same clash, two Beninese military personnel were killed, while one ranger and two other military personnel sustained injuries.⁴⁷ In July 2024, five African Parks rangers and seven members of the Beninese armed forces were killed near the Mékrou River in W National Park.⁴⁸ While the attribution of individual incidents varies and should not automatically be assigned to a particular jihadi organization, the cumulative pattern demonstrates the increasing exposure of conservation and security personnel to armed violence within the WAP. Here, the February 2022 attacks are noteworthy as rangers were ambushed using improvised explosive devices, indicating a certain level of technical and tactical sophistication^q beyond the more common threats of ambushes and armed confrontations.

The significance of these attacks lies not only in their lethality but

in their intended strategic effect. Rangers perform functions that are directly relevant to territorial control: They patrol remote areas, gather information, monitor movement, and provide a continuing state or quasi-state presence in areas where government access is otherwise limited. By targeting ranger patrols and conservation infrastructure, armed groups can degrade surveillance, restrict state mobility, and create more permissive conditions for operating with greater freedom and assert control over communities living in or close to protected areas. The WAP should therefore be understood not simply as a location in which jihadi violence occurs, but as a contested operational environment in which the erosion of conservation and state capacity can potentially facilitate militant mobility and territorial consolidation.

The Benin example also reflects the interaction between jihadi activity and pre-existing disputes over access to natural resources. In and around Pendjari and W National Park, tensions have existed between park authorities and sections of surrounding communities over restrictions on hunting and access to land and natural resources. Jihadi groups have reportedly sought to exploit these grievances by establishing relationships with local hunters and people living near the Pendjari and W national parks. Reports since at least 2019 indicate forms of cooperation between jihadis and some Beninese hunters.⁴⁹ Jihadis reportedly authorized hunters to operate in the WAP complex, claiming to defend an alleged divine right to kill animals that no government can deny from anyone.⁵⁰ The jihadis imposed numerous conditions, including the conversion to Islam and the delivery of supplies in turn for the right to hunt in areas under jihadi control.⁵¹ After establishing their presence in the WAP, the jihadis welcomed herders to live inside the park: These growing ties to local communities can undermine efforts of the Beninese military as well as park rangers to protect the security and ecology of the park.⁵²

Mozambique

As in Benin, northern Mozambique shows how protected areas may become both operational targets and prospective sanctuaries for jihadi groups. In the dataset, Mozambique emerged for the first time in 2022. The Niassa Special Reserve, Mozambique's largest protected area, borders Cabo Delgado, where an Islamist insurgency first aligned with and then incorporated into the Islamic State as its Mozambique Province (IS-M) has operated for several years.⁵³

The Niassa Special Reserve became increasingly exposed as insurgent activity crossed into the province in late 2021. The first major incursions into Niassa occurred in November and December 2021 as insurgents dispersed westward from areas of Cabo Delgado under pressure from Mozambican, Rwandan, and Southern African Development Community (SADC) forces. On November 25, armed men intercepted and burned a vehicle carrying salaries of employees of the Niassa Special Reserve near Gomba in Mecula district, killing at least one police officer. Subsequent attacks occurred within and around the reserve, including an assault on Naulala in which five people were killed with a ranger among the victims.⁵⁴

Initial interpretations described these raids as opportunistic resource-gathering operations by the Cabo Delgado-based IS-M jihadis.⁵⁵ Later analysis suggested that insurgents may also have been probing the reserve as a potential zone of influence or sanctuary.⁵⁶ The role of Maulana Ali Cassimo, the alleged leader of the infiltrating force, could further illustrate the interaction between insurgency,

o The victims were Spanish journalists David Beriain and Roberto Fraile, and the Irish wildlife activist Rory Young, director of the Chengeta Wildlife Foundation. "Rory Young tribute," Chengeta Wildlife Foundation, n.d.; "Burkina Faso ambush: Spaniards and Irishman killed after abduction," BBC, April 28, 2021.

p African Parks is South Africa-based nonprofit conservation organization that partners with governments to manage and restore protected areas across Africa, focusing on wildlife conservation, habitat protection, anti-poaching efforts, and community development.

q The only other example was when an IED attack by al-Shabaab caused one ranger fatality in Kenya. The death of ranger Ali Hamza Kimango in an IED-attack on November 1, 2021, was recorded in the GRAA Honour Roll of 2023. "Ranger killed, driver and student injured in Lamu IED attack," Star, November 2, 2021.

“Ranger fatalities cannot be understood solely through the lens of wildlife crime. Instead, a substantial proportion of targeted violence occurs within broader contexts of political or ideological conflict, in which protected areas and their personnel become entangled in wider patterns of armed violence.”

local grievances, and the conservation landscape. Cassimo, whom Mozambican authorities identified as one of the principal insurgent figures in Niassa, had previously worked as an agricultural officer in Mecula and was known locally for his advocacy on behalf of artisanal miners and grievances concerning their treatment in the Niassa Special Reserve.⁵⁷ Thus, it is plausible that Cassimo planned to instrumentalize these existing tensions surrounding access to the Niassa Special Reserve for propaganda and recruitment purposes, in a similar manner as jihadis did in Benin. Cassimo was killed in an encounter with Mozambican government forces in late 2021.⁵⁸

The 2021 incursion was relatively short-lived, with insurgents remaining in Niassa for less than two months. A renewed push came in April–May 2025, when Islamic State Mozambique fighters crossed again into Niassa, attacking sites near the Lugenda River and the Mariri Environmental Centre, killing guards and four park rangers, abducting civilians, looting supplies, and burning infrastructure.⁵⁹ The Islamic State, which claimed the attack via its Amaq News Agency propaganda outlet, justified the targeting of the Mariri Environmental Centre by claiming it to have been “an important Christian tourist site” and framing the attack as part of its “war against Mozambique’s Christians, government and economy.”⁶⁰ The Islamic State published pictures from the attack and claimed the deaths of Mozambican soldiers.⁶¹ Some Mozambican military (FADM) members were indeed killed, with estimates ranging from at least four to possibly six,⁶² but IS-M mischaracterized all killed as soldiers, while four of the fatalities were in fact rangers.⁶³

The attack against the Mariri Environmental Centre illustrates the difficulty of consistently identifying and classifying conservation casualties within fragmented conflict environments. The GRAA dataset acknowledged the death of the four park rangers^r in its Honour Roll of 2025 but categorized their deaths as resulting from “homicide.”⁶⁴ This classification issue is important for interpreting the GRAA dataset. If ranger deaths resulting from insurgent attacks are coded as “homicide” rather than as conflict-related killings, the apparent scale of violent non-state actor perpetrated violence against conservation personnel may be understated as it is distributed across different categories. Furthermore, if the ranger casualties would have been categorized more specifically as resulting

from an insurgent attack, in the country-by-country comparison Mozambique would have moved up, reflecting statistically a comparable situation with Niger and Chad. The threat posed by Islamic State Mozambique to the Niassa Special Reserve continued into 2026: On September 3, jihadis attacked a tourist hunting^s camp near Nanlixa village, inside the Niassa Special Reserve. Two camp staff of the Marangira Game Reserve were killed; other staff fled, while three American tourists who were away from the camp were subsequently evacuated. The attackers burned the camp and took at least two vehicles, which were later abandoned.⁶⁵

The attack against Marangira Game Reserve was assessed to have been motivated by a desire to challenge the perception of state control, disrupt logistical resupply of security forces, cause economic damage, and generate international publicity.⁶⁶ At the same time, the attack highlights an interesting paradox: The conservation sector is simultaneously a potential target of IS-M and an important component of the security architecture protecting the reserve, as security forces in Niassa rely partly on the aircraft, helicopters, and trained rangers associated with tourism and conservation organizations for their counterinsurgency efforts.⁶⁷

The Niassa case consequently illustrates two related but distinct developments. First, protected-area infrastructure can become an operational target because it offers a concentration of personnel, equipment, supplies, and institutional authority. Second, remote reserves can provide armed groups with operational depth: space in which they can move, conceal themselves, interact with local networks, obtain supplies, and temporarily evade state pressure. Mozambique is an important example of another type of relationship that can exist between conservation and armed conflict. In the DRC, protected areas have become deeply embedded in long-running struggles over territorial control, state authority, and resources. In northern Mozambique, the Niassa case instead demonstrates how conflict can spill into protected areas that were not initially central to the insurgency. Once that occurs, conservation infrastructure and personnel can acquire strategic significance of their own.

Nigeria

In the GRAA dataset, ranger deaths in Nigeria—30 fatalities between 2017 and 2025 due to targeted violence—were reported variously as “homicides” or perpetrated by “herdsmen,” “assailants,” “bandits,” “cultists,” or “mobs.”⁶⁸ Nigeria thus illustrates how protected areas can become embedded in hybrid security environments where insurgency, banditry, and transnational pastoral violence overlap. This trend continued in 2026: On January 6, armed attackers killed five rangers^t at a National Park Service outpost in Old Oyo National Park. Initial reporting attributed the assault to bandits,⁶⁹ while later reporting suggested possible links to jihadi elements displaced southwards by military pressure in other parts of the country.⁷⁰ Subsequent investigations indicated that the immediate

^r The casualties included the rangers Carlitos Cuteiua, Pires Tahane, Fernando Wirson, and Domingos Daude. “Reflections from Niassa: One Year after the Insurgent Attacks,” WCN, June 15, 2026.

^s Hunting tourism is permitted in designated areas of the Niassa Special Reserve under Mozambique’s sustainable-use conservation framework. It is conducted through licensed concessions and government-approved species quotas, with revenues intended to support conservation management and provide benefits to local communities.

^t Identified as Moses Areo, Mukthar Ajiboye, Ololade Hassan, Akinade Alawode, and Solomon Ajiaa. Nurudeen Akewushola, “Retaliatory attack by armed herdsmen triggers brutal massacre at Oyo park,” International Center for Investigative Journalism, February 14, 2026.

trigger may instead have been the detention of armed herders who had entered the park illegally.⁷¹ In the Honour Roll of 2026, all five rangers have been categorized as fatalities of Boko Haram.⁷² The exact perpetrator's identity remains uncertain.

What the incident demonstrates more clearly is that the park had become part of a wider zone of armed contestation in which several types of violent actor operated or were feared to be operating.⁷³ In such settings, rangers are vulnerable not only because they enforce conservation rules, but because they represent one of the few visible forms of state authority in poorly governed forest terrain.

This pattern is not unique to Old Oyo. Sambisa Forest in northeastern Nigeria, a protected area, became Boko Haram's most important sanctuary after 2013 when the group was dislodged from Maiduguri town by military forces.⁷⁴ The security guards staffing the gate were killed and the remaining staff fled for their lives.⁷⁵ The terrorists then set up various camps in the forest, which stretches across multiple Nigerian northeastern states, including Borno, Yobe, Gombe, and Bauchi, and is also relatively close to the borders of Chad and Cameroon.⁷⁶ The Sambisa Forest remains strategically relevant to both Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province.⁷⁷ The broader implication is that forested protected areas in Nigeria can function as refuge zones, transit routes, and operational spaces for both insurgent and criminal actors.

Conclusion

While the GRAA Honour Rolls are subject to limitations and contain some inaccuracies, they nevertheless provide a useful basis for identifying broader patterns in ranger fatalities and, more specifically, for examining the actors and motivations associated with targeted violence against African park rangers. The data underscores the extent to which ranger work takes place within a highly violent security environment. Breaking down fatalities according to the apparent identity and motivation of perpetrators also reveals important differences in this violence. Most notably, the dataset indicates that at least 39 percent of rangers killed in targeted acts of violence were killed by organized, politically or ideologically motivated violent non-state actors. This suggests that ranger fatalities cannot be understood solely through the lens of wildlife crime. Instead, a substantial proportion of targeted violence occurs within broader contexts of political or ideological conflict, in which protected areas and their personnel become entangled in wider patterns of armed violence. The relatively consistent occurrence of fatalities attributed to such groups further distinguishes this category from violence perpetrated by poachers and other armed resource offenders.

At the same time, the dataset highlights the difficulty of establishing perpetrator motivations. In 38.6 percent of recorded ranger fatalities caused by violence, the motivation for targeting the ranger remains undetermined. This limits the extent to which observed patterns can be confidently attributed to particular forms of violence. The GRAA Honour Rolls should therefore be understood as indicative of broader patterns rather than as a definitive account of the motivations underlying ranger fatalities.

The high proportion of cases for which motive remains unknown also underscores the need for more systematic collection and verification of information concerning ranger deaths.

For violent extremist groups, protected areas can offer a combination of strategic, political, and economic advantages. Many protected parks are in remote and contested areas characterized by limited state presence and longstanding struggles over governance and territorial authority. In areas such as Virunga and Upemba, protected areas are embedded within broader conflicts over territorial control and political authority. The developments in Benin illustrate how jihadi organizations can exploit protected areas for their strategic value while also capitalizing on local grievances surrounding conservation restrictions by presenting themselves as defenders of local livelihoods against the imposed restrictions. Conservation disputes can consequently become embedded within broader struggles over governance, identity, and political authority. The jihadi attacks in Niassa, in turn, demonstrate how park facilities can become sources of supplies or targeted for propaganda purposes. Taken together, these cases suggest that the strategic value of protected areas lies not in any single characteristic, but in the combination of difficult terrain, difficult seasonal conditions, weak state presence, valuable resources, local grievances, and opportunities for mobility and concealment.

This context helps explain why rangers become strategically important targets. Rangers are not merely wildlife custodians; in many remote protected areas, they function as agents of territorial governance by monitoring movement, gathering intelligence, restricting illicit access, and representing state or para-state authority. For armed groups seeking freedom of movement or control over territory and resources, rangers can therefore constitute direct obstacles to their activities. Attacks against rangers can consequently have effects extending beyond the immediate casualties. Killing or intimidating rangers weakens surveillance, reduces patrol coverage, discourages personnel from operating in high-risk areas, and can create opportunities for armed actors to establish camps, smuggling routes, or temporary safe havens. Ranger fatalities may therefore also indicate broader changes in the security environment, including the gradual penetration of remote areas by armed non-state actors.

These dynamics have important implications for conservation and security policy. Strengthening ranger capabilities through improved intelligence sharing, surveillance, communications, and emergency medical support remains important, but conservation agencies cannot substitute for effective security institutions where violence is rooted in broader conflicts over territory and governance.

Ultimately, the evidence suggests that, in parts of Africa, park rangers increasingly operate at the intersection of struggles over territory, resources, governance, and political authority. Recognizing protected areas as contested strategic spaces, rather than simply ecological landscapes, is therefore essential to understanding ranger insecurity and developing more comprehensive approaches to conservation, security, and counterterrorism. **CTC**

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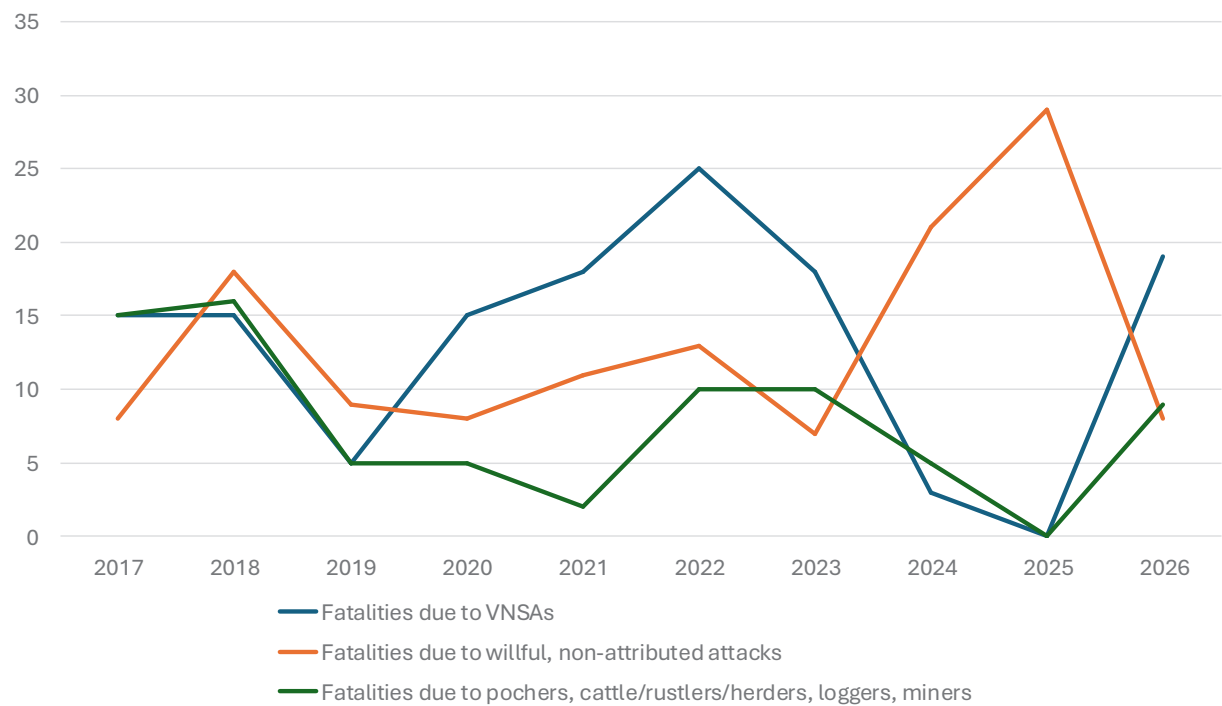
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Appendix I: Dataset of Ranger Fatalities (2017-2026), based on the GRAA Honour Rolls

Year	Deaths in Total	Militia/ Rebels/ Insurgents/ Jihadis	Poachers/ Cattle herders/ Loggers/ Miners	Willful attack, non-attributed (assailants/ criminals/ bandits/ mob/ occultists)	Accidents (vehicle, drowning, accidental discharge, air crash, lightning, falling tree)	Wildlife (elephant, buffalo, rhino, hippo, lion, leopard, snake, crocodile)	Other (illness, suicide, unknown)
2017	68	15	15	8	18	4	7
2018	79	15	16	18	11	6	13
2019	65	5	5	9	17	7	22
2020	64	15	5	8	11	2	23
2021	92	18	2	11	15	13	33
2022	100	25	10	13	14	8	31
2023	74	18	10	7	17	7	15
2024	84	3	5	21	16	11	28
2025	83	-	-	29	17	11	26
2026	83	19	9	8	18	9	20
Total	792	133	77	132	154	78	218
%		16.8%	9.7%	16.7%	19.4%	9.9%	27.5%

Appendix II: Ranger fatalities due to targeted violence (2017-2026), by category



Appendix III: Ranger fatalities by country, caused by VNSAs

