



COMBATING TERRORISM CENTER AT WEST POINT

# CTCSENTINEL

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FEATURE COMMENTARY

## Counterterrorism Challenges for the New Administration

BRUCE HOFFMAN AND JACOB WARE

A VIEW FROM THE CT FOXHOLE

## David Lasseter

DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF  
DEFENSE FOR COUNTERING WEAPONS  
OF MASS DESTRUCTION

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## FROM THE EDITOR

The violent storming of the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, has heightened concerns about the threat posed by far-right extremism in the United States. In examining the wide range of terrorism and counterterrorism challenges facing the incoming Biden administration in this month's feature commentary, Bruce Hoffman and Jacob Ware write that "the January 6 events at the U.S. Capitol offered a stark, frightening picture of the powerful forces fueling a conspiratorial mindset eschewing both the country's foundational democratic values and the rule of law" and "serves as a salutary and timely reminder of the danger of potential violence to come." Given the continued threat posed by "a stubbornly resilient Islamic State and an implacably determined al-Qa`ida," they write that "it may be that as the United States and its allies enter the third decade of war against international salafi-jihadi terrorism, we need to recalibrate our immediate expectations away from 'winning' and 'losing,' toward 'accepting' and 'managing' this conflict. Such an admission would not be popular, but it would be a fairer reflection of the current state of the fight against terrorism, and a more honest prediction of what to expect over the next four, or more, years."

Our interview is with David Lasseter, the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction. He notes that "advances in synthetic biology and other related biotechnologies hold the potential for both promise and peril in their application. And so we've got to be cognizant of how such technological shifts can alter the threat landscape [and] impose new defense and security challenges. We've heard it said that biological weapons are 'a poor man's nuke,' given the potentially enormous impact of their usage. I think COVID-19 has further accelerated this mindset. The U.S. has had a watchful eye on bio threats and has elevated bio threats as a core national security priority over the past several years."

In an assessment that has far-reaching implications for the U.S. military mission in Afghanistan, Jonathan Schroden finds that if the United States were to withdraw the remainder of its troops from the country, the Taliban would have "a slight military advantage" over Afghanistan's security forces, "which would then likely grow in a compounding fashion." Nodirbek Soliev examines the Tajik connection in an Islamic State plot against U.S. and NATO air bases in Germany thwarted in April 2020.

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Cover: *The American flag flies at half-staff at the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C., on January 11, 2021. (Joshua Roberts/Reuters)*

# Terrorism and Counterterrorism Challenges for the Biden Administration

By Bruce Hoffman and Jacob Ware

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**As the Biden administration starts work in January, it will face a new raft of national security challenges. Counterterrorism, as with the previous three administrations, will once again be a central concern. The administration will be forced to grapple with old threats, including from the Islamic State and al-Qa`ida, as well as a rapidly changing—and deteriorating—domestic terrorism landscape. Despite 20 years of the so-called war on terror, the battle for the safety of the American homeland remains fraught with challenges and risks. Managing this war will require enduring vigilance and energy, as well as a new set of counterterrorism policies, to more effectively address the totality of the new terrorism threat.**

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**P**lus ça change, plus c'est la même chose," goes the famous 19<sup>th</sup>-century epigram by Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr. The more things change, the more they stay the same. The same might be said about both the new and ongoing terrorist threats President-elect Joe Biden and his incoming administration faces as it attempts to fashion an effective counterterrorism strategy.

Four years ago, an analysis assessing these same dangers for newly elected President Donald J. Trump identified three main challenges:

- The fact that the Islamic State had fundamentally changed the global terrorist landscape during its brief incarnation as a self-proclaimed "State" and that, regardless of its then-imminent defeat, the threat it posed would not disappear;
- That al-Qa`ida, despite its prolonged quiescence, had taken advantage of the global coalition's preoccupation with the Islamic State and was therefore quietly rebuilding and marshaling its resources to carry on the struggle against the United States; and,

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- That America's adversaries had deliberately enmeshed us in a debilitating war of attrition that we lacked an effective strategy to counter, much less defeat.<sup>1</sup>

That this assessment should have proven prescient and retained its relevance is testament to the highly parlous situation in which the United States again today finds itself—with the same international terrorism threats continuing unabated, but now joined by a salient and profoundly unsettling domestic dimension.

This article assesses the threat to homeland security posed by non-state actors; accordingly, it deals less with state-sponsored threats, as well as proxy warfare around the world. First, the article will briefly summarize the counterterrorism strategies pursued by the Trump administration. It then assesses the enduring threats posed by the United States's most persistent terrorist enemies of the past two decades, the Islamic State and al-Qa`ida. Finally, the article provides an in-depth analysis of the current domestic terrorism threat, assessing dangers posed by both far-right and far-left extremists, before concluding with policy recommendations for the incoming administration. An important caveat: this is not intended to be a comprehensive overview of the entire landscape of terrorist threats confronting the United States and the new Biden administration. Rather, it reflects the authors'—albeit, perhaps, idiosyncratic—view of the most salient and compelling threats the United States faces as a new presidential administration takes off—and the war on terrorism continues unabated.

## One Step Forward, Two Steps Back?

To its credit, the Trump administration put forth a highly creditable *U.S. National Strategy for Counterterrorism* in October 2018. This was the fourth iteration of this planning guidance since the war on terrorism commenced nearly two decades ago. Significantly, it was the first not concerned exclusively with al-Qa`ida. In contrast to the 2003, 2006, and 2011 versions, the latest iteration identified the Islamic State as well as Iran and Iranian-backed Shi`a militias, domestic violent far-right and far-left extremists, and militant single-issue organizations as all presenting significant security concerns.<sup>2</sup>

The most tangible manifestation of the Trump administration's implementation of this strategy was the old made new again: the continuance of the high-value targeting of top terrorist leaders that had dominated both the Bush and Obama administrations' respective approaches to counterterrorism. Accordingly, the elimination of a succession of senior Islamic State and al-Qa`ida leaders followed. Foremost among these was the killing of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the Islamic State's emir, in October 2019.

Even further inroads were made to al-Qa`ida's senior leadership. In September 2019, President Trump confirmed that Usama bin Ladin's youngest son and presumptive heir apparent, Hamza, had perished as a result of a U.S. "counterterrorism operation in the Afghanistan/Pakistan region" at least two months before.<sup>3</sup> Five

months later, the president reported the elimination of Qassim al-Rimi, the leader of al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP),<sup>4</sup> and in June 2020, U.S. Africa Command provided intelligence and other support that enabled French military forces in Mali to kill the leader of al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Abdelmalek Droukdel.<sup>5</sup> Later that same month, a U.S. missile strike claimed the life of Khaled al-Aruri, the de facto commander of Hurras al-Din, al-Qa`ida's closest ally in Syria.<sup>6</sup> And, in August 2020, Abdullah Ahmed Abdullah (aka Abu Muhammad al-Masri), believed to be al-Qa`ida's second-highest leader, was assassinated in Tehran, reportedly by Israeli operatives, perhaps with U.S. assistance.<sup>7</sup> The United States also cited its counterterrorism strategy to justify the killing of Iranian Major General Qassem Soleimani in January 2020. "Under my leadership," President Trump declared afterward, "America's policy is unambiguous: To terrorists who harm or intend to harm any American, we will find you; we will eliminate you."<sup>8</sup>

But as tactically successful as the elimination of these terrorist commanders and their many predecessors were, they have proven insufficient to stem the continued growth and geographical expansion of salafi-jihadi and Shi`a radicalization worldwide. There are four times as many salafi-jihadi groups designated as terrorist organizations by the U.S. State Department today than there were in 2001.<sup>9</sup> And much of Iran's regional foreign policy, including its manipulations of the war in Syria, has relied on mobilizing Shi`a proxy forces from Yemen to Pakistan, compiling upward of 150,000 fighters.<sup>10</sup> Any optimism that we are approaching the end of the war on terror is, therefore, likely misplaced.

A very different conclusion and message, however, has been repeatedly expressed by the Trump administration. On successive occasions the president, vice president, and secretary of state among others have declared the defeat of both the Islamic State and al-Qa`ida.<sup>11</sup> Such declarations fit well with Trump's 2016 campaign pledge to end the "stupid endless wars"<sup>12</sup> whereby even the modest numbers of U.S. military and intelligence personnel deployed overseas to support either host-nation or local indigenous counterterrorism operations principally in Syria, Afghanistan, and Africa are further reduced if not eliminated completely.

Yet, as the opening paragraph of the most recent report from the United Nations Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team tracking the Islamic State and al-Qa`ida operations states: the former "remains resilient" and has actually increased attacks in Iraq and Syria, while the latter has "ingrained itself in local communities and conflicts." The United Nations' overall assessment of the vitality of the Islamic State and al-Qa`ida is thus at odds with the Trump administration's claims. "Both organizations and their global affiliates and supporters," the report argues, "continue to generate violence around the world, whether through insurgency tactics, the direction and facilitation of terrorism or providing the inspiration for attacks."<sup>13</sup>

## The Islamic State

Indeed, the Trump administration's own national counterterrorism

strategy statement is more closely aligned with the U.N. analysis than with the administration's assertions. The most recent statement of U.S. counterterrorism strategy, for instance, was explicit in its caution that despite the Islamic State's catastrophic military setbacks in Syria and Iraq, "The group's global reach remains robust, with eight official branches and more than two dozen networks regularly conducting terrorist and insurgent operations across Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Middle East."<sup>14</sup> Since that time, the Islamic State's operations have expanded to the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Cameroon, Chad, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, and Mozambique.<sup>15</sup> Hopes that al-Baghdadi's killing would have undermined the group's resiliency were dashed when in quick succession Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi (real name Amir Muhammad Sa'id 'Abd-al-Rahman al-Mawla<sup>16</sup>) was named emir and issued a renewed, blistering call to battle.<sup>17</sup> Without exception, every one of the Islamic State's more than two dozen branches and networks fell into line pledging *bay`a*—the oath of allegiance and fealty—to al-Qurashi.<sup>18</sup>

Moreover, the Islamic State is still able to call upon an estimated 20,000 fighters worldwide. The vast majority—10,000—remain entrenched in Syria and Iraq; with 3,500 more in Nigeria; another 3,000-3,500 in Mozambique; 2,200 in Afghanistan; and 400 in Libya.<sup>19</sup> With this many men-at-arms, the Islamic State was able to surge attacks in Syria over this past spring's Ramadan and escalate its operations in Iraq. In the latter, for instance, attacks almost doubled between the first quarter of 2019 and the first quarter of 2020.<sup>20</sup> But perhaps the Islamic State's greatest achievement has been its spread to Mozambique.<sup>21</sup> Over the past three years, the group has successfully allied with local Ansar al-Sunna to kill over 2,000 persons.<sup>22</sup> In one single incident in November 2020, more than 50 people were beheaded in an attack on villages in Mozambique's northernmost province, Cabo Delgado.<sup>23</sup> As one observer notes, "they are not bandits anymore. They are well-trained fighters."<sup>24</sup> The Islamic State's expansion into southern Africa demonstrates that it can still transform a toehold to a foothold even in regions where it hitherto has not been active.

The 2019 Easter Sunday suicide bombings underscore the Islamic State's undiminished allure to extremists even in places where the group previously had little to no presence.<sup>25</sup> Sri Lankan authorities, for example, attribute the six simultaneous attacks on churches and luxury hotels that claimed the lives of 259 persons and wounded twice that number to two local groups—the National Thowheeth Jama'ath (NTJ, or National Monotheism Organization) and Jammiyathul Millathu Ibrahim (JMI, Organization of the Faith of Ibrahim). Neither had any known, prior connection to the Islamic State nor had they evidenced a capacity for the magnitude of violence they unleashed. The NTJ had previously been linked to the vandalization of Buddhist statues following anti-Muslim disturbances in 2018; with the JMI having emerged from complete obscurity.<sup>26</sup>

According to a 2019 United Nations report, the attacks were apparently carried out without the knowledge or approval of the Islamic State's senior leadership.<sup>27</sup> This only deepens the mysteries of the operation's genesis; the surprising rapidity with which both groups acquired the expertise to construct the devastatingly effective improvised explosive devices (IEDs); and the operational and logistical mastery required to execute coordinated attacks.<sup>28</sup> Typically, suicide bombings evidence an extensive logistical "tail," including recruiters and radicalizers who ensure the commitment

a The allegedly growing and alarming ties between the Iranian regime and al-Qa`ida was the focus of remarks given by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on January 12, 2021. Lara Jakes, Eric Schmitt, and Julian E. Barnes, "Pompeo Says Iran Is New Base for Al Qaeda, but Offers Little Proof," *New York Times*, January 12, 2021.

of the bomber-martyrs; skilled bomb makers; and intelligence assets to conduct surveillance of possible targets. The undertaking is no small task, and is typically achieved by existing organizations or networks deploying accomplished operators.<sup>29</sup>

Planning for so complex a terrorist operation took time. The fact that two entirely local collections of militants, with a hitherto limited capacity for violence, saw advantage in allying themselves with the Islamic State—despite the group’s declining fortunes—establishes a worrisome precedent that is unlikely to prove unique. A key dimension of the attacks may have been the terrorist cell’s ability to harness the experiences of at least one member who reportedly had left Sri Lanka in 2014 to join the Islamic State.<sup>30</sup> Jameel Mohammed Abdul Latheef, according to some reporting, traveled to Raqqa, Syria, in 2014, where he is believed to have come into contact with the infamous British Islamic State commander Mohammed Emwazi, also known as “Jihadi John”—the person responsible for the mistreatment and ultimate beheadings of American journalists James Foley and Steven Sotloff that same year.<sup>31</sup> That said, it should be noted that there are conflicting accounts about whether Latheef actually made it to Syria to train with the Islamic State or whether he only got as far as Turkey.<sup>32</sup> Although the United Nations Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team believes that at least some of the bombers were trained by the Islamic State in Syria,<sup>33</sup> the U.S. intelligence community has found no corroborating evidence that would prove such a connection.<sup>34</sup>

Regardless of Latheef’s disputed odyssey, the survival and escape from Syria of many Islamic State fighters is well-established. Only about 10,000 of the 40,000 foreign fighters who came to fight with the Islamic State in the Levant and Iraq in fact were killed. Perhaps as many as 15,000 were reportedly able to flee the caliphate before its collapse. Of those, about 5,000 returned home and, of those, only about a third have been imprisoned or are under active monitoring by law enforcement or intelligence agencies. All the rest, according to National Defense University terrorism analyst Dr. R. Kim Cragin, “remain a potential threat for either participating in an ISIL-directed attack locally, an al-Qaeda attack, or creating local terrorist cells of their own.”<sup>35</sup>

The 2018 trial in Denmark of a former foreign fighter who is alleged to have ties to the Islamic State cell responsible for the previous year’s suicide bombing of a Manchester, England, concert venue underscores the challenges that security and intelligence services and law enforcement agencies face in tracking these individuals. This person was born in Somalia, lived in Britain, held a Finnish passport, went off to fight with the Islamic State in Syria, but then was arrested in Denmark during a police roundup of illegal immigrants, in which he was inadvertently swept up.<sup>36</sup>

The odyssey that eventually led this former foreign fighter to Denmark suggests that the European network of the Islamic State’s external operations arm is still active. It was organized at least two years before the November 2015 Paris attacks, having been created by the Amniyat Khalifa—also known by its Turkish acronym, Emni, and its Arabic one, Amni—the secretive Islamic State unit serves as both its internal security force and the unit responsible for external operations. In the latter context, it appears to have continued to function despite the Islamic State’s declining military and territorial fortunes.<sup>37</sup>

In sum, despite battlefield defeats and the death of its leader, the Islamic State remains emboldened, and we should be wary of complacency and overconfidence that we understand the group better

than we did when it first emerged.<sup>38</sup> The 2015 Paris attacks and 2019 Sri Lanka bombings should be taken as particular warning signs: both occurred with no advance warning, and in defiance of conventional wisdom that the Islamic State was either incapable of such operations or defeated.<sup>39</sup> In 2015, the Islamic State also for the first time in over a decade was able to circumvent the security measures that had thwarted previous terrorist attempts to successfully target commercial aviation. Over 200 persons perished when a bomb exploded shortly after take-off aboard a Russian charter jet. That this incident was undertaken by the group’s comparatively less-technologically sophisticated Sinai Wilayat (province), and not by core Islamic State, points to the longstanding capacity of the movement’s branches to independently execute highly consequential terrorist attacks regardless of senior leadership guidance or direct orders.<sup>40</sup> And in April 2020, authorities disrupted an Islamic State-coordinated plot to attack U.S. military installations in Germany, in a plot that EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator Gilles de Kerchove called evidence “that the threat does not come only from individuals who are inspired by terrorist propaganda online and act independently.”<sup>41</sup> These incidents suggest caution in precipitously declaring the Islamic State “100% defeated”—as President Trump himself admitted in October 2019.<sup>42</sup>

Finally, according to the Department of the Treasury, the Islamic State has at least \$300 million in cash reserves (the United Nations, however, puts the figure at a third of this amount) to fund its continued terrorist operations. The Islamic State is able to continuously replenish its coffers through extortion of the local population; human trafficking; income from the businesses that it has seized and still controls; investments in legitimate commercial enterprises such as hotels and real estate; cryptocurrency trading; scams in personal protective equipment; exploitation of the illicit tobacco markets in Pakistan and Afghanistan; and continued donations.<sup>43</sup>

As General Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr., the commander of U.S. Central Command, lamented in August 2020, “The conditions are as bad or worse than in those [conditions] that spawned the original rise of ISIS ... I think that is very concerning, we should all be very concerned about that.”<sup>44</sup> Few long-term efforts to either promote more sustainable anti-radicalization measures in Syria and Iraq or cripple the group’s ability to inspire attacks in the West have been undertaken, at least with any evident success. In his final Instagram post, the November 2020 Vienna attacker Fejzulai Kujtim posted a photograph of bullets spelling out “Baqiya”—which is the Arabic word for “remaining” and is used by the Islamic State as a rallying cry.<sup>45</sup> Kujtim was the latest in a lineage of Islamic State-inspired attackers to rain terror on Western cities, and there is no reason to expect he will be the last. As General James N. Mattis, then commander of U.S. Central Command, observed in 2013: “No war is over until the enemy says it’s over. We may think it [is] over, we may declare it over, but in fact, the enemy gets a vote.”<sup>46</sup> Our enemies have chosen to continue this war.

### Al-Qa`ida

On March 6, 2020, the day after senior ministerial representatives from over 50 countries had gathered in Marrakech, Morocco, for a two-day conference as part of the Warsaw Process Counterterrorism and Illicit Finance working group to discuss “the ever-changing threat posed by al-Qa`ida and its affiliates,”<sup>47</sup> Secretary of State Mike Pompeo declared that the group is a “shadow of its former self.”<sup>48</sup> The reality is that al-Qa`ida today is numerically larger and

present in more countries than at any other time in its history.

From northwest Africa to southeast Asia, al-Qa`ida has maintained a global movement of some two dozen local networks. Among the movement's estimated 20,000 or so men-at-arms are some 3,500-5,000 hardcore loyalists in Syria belonging to al-Qa`ida's main stalking horse in that country, Hurras al-Din.<sup>49</sup> Longstanding al-Qa`ida loyalists like al-Shabaab in Somalia and al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in Yemen each command approximately 7,000 men, with several hundred associated with al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). There are estimated to be at least 400-600 al-Qa`ida fighters in Afghanistan.<sup>50</sup>

Although the Islamic State has galvanized much of the world's attention over the past half decade, al-Qa`ida's comparative quiescence does not mean that it has been inactive. Instead, it embarked on an ambitious strategy to protect its remaining senior leadership and unostentatiously consolidate its influence in new and existing theaters. Al-Qa`ida's highest priority was to effect the safe transfer from South Asia of the movement's most important surviving senior leaders and commanders.<sup>51</sup> Since 2012, al-Qa`ida has worked to ensure that the movement remains impervious to a single, knockout blow of its entire senior leadership. Accordingly, these key personnel have dispersed to Syria, Iran, Turkey, Libya, and Yemen with only a hardcore remnant left in Afghanistan and Pakistan.<sup>52</sup> Advances in digital communication have according to al-Qa`ida Central opened up the possibility of almost daily contact between al-Qa`ida Central's communications department and senior figures in al-Qa`ida's far-flung franchises.<sup>53</sup> Indeed, al-Qa`ida still presumably seeks to position itself to exploit the Islamic State's weakened military position and leadership losses and to reclaim its place at the vanguard of the violent salafi-jihadi struggle.

Both groups remain committed to a set of principles first articulated by Palestinian scholar Abdullah Azzam over 30 years ago: that Muslims everywhere have an obligation to come to the defense of their religious brothers and sisters, wherever and whenever they are threatened. To Azzam's mind—as to Usama bin Ladin's, current al-Qa`ida leader al-Zawahiri's, and al-Qurashi's—an aggressive war is being waged against Islam by its infidel enemies—most notably Western democratic liberalism, but also repressive Western-backed local regimes in states like Jordan; Shi`as; and other Muslim minorities. In this “inevitable” clash of civilizations, only a global jihad can defeat the enemy.<sup>54</sup>

This core ideology undermines the Taliban's commitments regarding al-Qa`ida at the heart of the United States' credulous negotiations with its long-time adversary. These talks have continued despite escalating terrorist attacks in Afghanistan<sup>55</sup> and, at one point in 2019, incredibly involved an invitation to the leaders of a movement that was complicit in precisely the tragic events commemorated on September 11th for talks at the presidential Camp David retreat just days before that anniversary.<sup>56</sup> The Taliban, in fact, had reportedly met with Hamza bin Ladin in the spring of 2019 “to reassure him personally that the Islamic Emirate would not break its historical ties with Al-Qa`ida for any price.”<sup>57</sup> It is thus worth quoting at length the most recent United Nations' assessment of the negotiations:

*The senior leadership of Al-Qaida remains present in Afghanistan, as well as hundreds of armed operatives, Al-Qaida in the Indian Subcontinent, and groups of foreign terrorist fighters aligned with the Taliban ... Relations between the Taliban, especially the Haqqani Network, and Al-Qaida remain close,*

*based on friendship, a history of shared struggle, ideological sympathy and intermarriage. The Taliban regularly consulted with Al-Qaida during negotiations with the United States and offered guarantees that it would honour their historical ties. Al-Qaida has reacted positively to the agreement, with statements from its acolytes celebrating it as a victory for the Taliban's cause and thus for global militancy. The challenge will be to secure the counter-terrorism gains to which the Taliban have committed, which will require them to suppress any international threat emanating from Al-Qaida in Afghanistan.*<sup>58</sup>

Evidence that al-Qa`ida and its franchises have not abandoned prospects of reinvigorating their campaign of international terrorism with some new, dramatic, and spectacular attack may be deduced from the reports that twice this past year, al-Shabaab operatives have been arrested while taking flying lessons: one in 2019 in the Philippines and the other earlier this year in an undisclosed African country.<sup>59</sup> The former had researched skyscrapers in the United States and aviation security as well as taking flying lessons in a plot that is believed to have commenced in 2016.<sup>60</sup> Furthermore, at least two key al-Qa`ida commanders killed in Syria over the past two years—Abu Yahya al-Uzbeki and Safina al-Tunisi—were reportedly involved in external operations planning and capacity-building for al-Qa`ida.<sup>61</sup> There is also evidence of al-Qa`ida affiliates growing more creative in their efforts to strike the West. The December 2019 shooting at Naval Air Station Pensacola in Florida was not only the first deadly terrorist attack on U.S. soil coordinated by a foreign terrorist organization since 9/11, it was perpetrated by an individual embedded within the Saudi Air Force, with whom AQAP had been in contact while he was on U.S. territory, up to and including the night before the attack.<sup>62</sup>

Al-Qa`ida and its affiliates have not laid down their arms, nor do they have any intent to spare the United States in their ongoing jihad. Accordingly, they likely see themselves poised to benefit from any diminishment or indeed the complete withdrawal of U.S. military forces from Afghanistan, Africa, and elsewhere.

## Domestic Terrorism

“This is worse than anything anyone's ever seen,” President Donald J. Trump asserted in July 2020, reacting to the nationwide protests, some of which had turned violent, in Portland and Seattle and Chicago.<sup>63</sup> Not only is this not the case, but according to the Department of Homeland Security's October 2020 Homeland Threat Assessment, among domestic violent extremists it is “racially and ethnically motivated violent extremists—specifically white supremacist extremists” who are “the most persistent and lethal threat in the Homeland.”<sup>64</sup>

Fifty years ago, at a similarly profoundly unsettled time in U.S. history, the country was indeed worse. Throughout 1970, for instance, politically motivated bombings, arson, and other attacks were in fact a daily occurrence. Moreover, in contrast to the mostly disorganized and uncoordinated violence that has occurred over the past months in Portland, Seattle, Chicago, New York, and other cities, the 1970s variant was planned and premeditated—orchestrated by a bewildering array of actual, identifiable domestic terrorist organizations. The nearly 500 terrorist incidents collected by the University of Maryland's Global Terrorism Database for 1970 alone were perpetrated primarily by left-wing terrorists in groups like the Weather Underground, the Jonathan Jackson Brigade, and



*An explosion caused by a police munition is seen while supporters of U.S. President Donald Trump gather in front of the U.S. Capitol Building in Washington, D.C., on January 6, 2021. (Leah Millis/Reuters)*

the Revolutionary Armed Task Force; militant black nationalists in organizations like the Black Liberation Army and Black Panthers; Latinx extremists belonging to the Chicano Liberation Front; anti-Castro Cuban exiles such as Cuban Action; Puerto Rican *Independistas* in groups like the Fuerzas Armadas de Liberación Nacional; and longstanding white supremacist movements such as the Ku Klux Klan.<sup>65</sup> With the exception of the Cuban groups and Ku Klux Klan, however, radical, left-wing revolutionary terrorism predominated. Today, the situation is reversed with violent, far-right extremism posing the greatest terrorist threat in the United States.

This is not to imply that there have not been highly disturbing incidents of violence committed by persons associated or affiliated with or claiming allegiance to a variety of causes that have been championed by self-described antifa members or anarchists or Black Lives Matter activists. The torching of the Minneapolis Police Department's Third Precinct building in May 2020 is one especially disquieting example. As were the fires set in downtown Washington, D.C., near the White House, at the AFL-CIO headquarters and in the basement of the historic St John's Episcopal Church that same month.<sup>66</sup> But, to date, incidents that might be defined as bona fide acts of domestic terrorism perpetrated by far-left extremists have been few. Most notably, there was the murder of a pro-Trump demonstrator in Portland by a gunman claiming self-defense, but whom then-U.S. Attorney General William Barr described as an "admitted antifa member" (who was then killed by law enforcement officers while trying to arrest him).<sup>67</sup>

The evidence of any kind of coordinated, much less concerted, campaign of domestic terrorism from antifa, anarchists, or Black

Lives Matter, either in this case or indeed others, however, are scant.<sup>68</sup> A 28-year-old Illinois resident, for instance, was arrested in June 2020 after he bragged on social media about possessing homemade bombs that he intended to use against law enforcement targets and commercial property in Minneapolis.<sup>69</sup> That same month, police apprehended an 18-year-old Worcester, Massachusetts, man with anarchist views who decided to attend a Black Lives Matter protest armed with several Molotov cocktails.<sup>70</sup> Also in June 2020, a Lubbock, Texas, resident showed up at a counter-demonstration with a semi-automatic rifle, shouting that "President Trump must die" after threatening on social media to "off racists and MAGA people." He was arrested and charged with possession of illegal drugs and a firearm as well as "making interstate threats."<sup>71</sup> The following month, a person of Latino heritage intentionally swerved his pickup truck into the path of a Caucasian motorcyclist on a New Mexico roadway. Charged with murder, the driver explained to police that he believed everyone who rode Harley Davidson motorcycles are "white racists."<sup>72</sup> Finally, police cars in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh have been spray painted with profanities, and in a more serious incident earlier in the summer of 2020, two lawyers threw a Molotov cocktail into an unoccupied New York Police Department vehicle.<sup>73</sup>

Despite this handful of—indeed, in some cases, tragic—incidents, President Trump has argued that the threat is both more extensive and organized. "We have antifa, we have anarchists, we have terrorists, we have looters. We have a lot of bad people in those groups," the president declared.<sup>74</sup> In point of fact, however, the violence that has recently afflicted America has nothing in common with what we have previously experienced. The respected Armed

Conflict Location & Event Data Project, for instance, reports that of the more than 10,600 demonstrations and protests held throughout the United States between May and August 2020, more than 10,000—nearly 93%—were peaceful, with demonstrators not engaging in violence.<sup>75</sup> In other words, the violence that has occurred at protests and demonstrations across the country since May 2020 is at a much lower level and is arguably far less organized than has been claimed. Additionally, in many cases, the persistent brawling that has occurred in many cities between the extreme far-right so-called Proud Boys with self-proclaimed anarchists, antifa, and Black Bloc adherents hardly rises to the either lethal level or highly consequential dimensions of what is commonly regarded as terrorism.<sup>b</sup>

Antifa, as is now well-known, is the anagram of the Anti-Fascist Movement. The movement consciously emulates the anti-fascist groups that fought street battles in Europe during the 1920s and 1930s against growing, government-implemented repression in fascist Italy and Nazi Germany.<sup>76</sup> This tradition of resistance resurfaced in Europe in the 1960s and came to the United States in the 1980s. Anti-Racist Action, for instance, was a network that surfaced to confront demonstrations by white supremacists and racist skinheads. Brawling and street fights erupted. But this community of far-left extremists and anarchists largely fell into desuetude until Donald Trump's election and the concomitant surge of alt-right and white nationalist activities.<sup>77</sup>

These collectives—which indistinguishably included self-proclaimed anarchists and members of the so-called Black Bloc, thus further underscoring the movement's overall lack of organizational structure and the amorphous and permeable nature of antifa itself—demonstrated at President Trump's January 2017 inauguration, where more than 200 persons were arrested. The authorities ultimately decided not to try these persons on charges of vandalism, assault, and other disorderly behavior.<sup>78</sup> As a result, federal law enforcement authorities were already concerned that this decision might embolden militants of all perspectives with regard to the 2020 presidential election—and lead to increased violence<sup>79</sup>—as has occurred.

The problem that U.S. law enforcement, intelligence, and Department of Justice officials face in countering the threats emanating from antifa, anarchists, the Black Bloc, and others is that there is little evidence that this presents a calculated, premeditated plan implemented by the type of hierarchical, top-down, command-and-control terrorist organizations that previously accounted for extreme far-left violence in the United States. The vandals, arsonists, fire-bombers, and others responsible for the generally modest incidence of extreme far-left political violence occurring today, unlike their counterparts of half-a-century ago, generally do not belong to any known kind of actual, existing organization with an identifiable leader or leadership cadre, or clear chain of command. According to University of Pittsburgh scholar Michael Kenney, who has studied antifa and interviewed anti-fascists and anarchists associated with it, this deliberately amorphous entity is best described as a “broader movement of individuals and groups who support antifascist ideals and share a common culture.” In terms of its organization, Kenney sees antifa as “a loose network

of ‘affinity groups’ that coordinate their antiracist activism in different local areas.”<sup>80</sup> Another description was offered in an anarchist network's own tactical analysis of the dramatic May 2020 siege of Minneapolis's third police precinct: “The subject of our analysis is not a race, a class, an organization, or even a movement, but a *crowd*. [...] The agency that took down the Third Precinct was a *crowd* and not an organization because its goals, means, and internal makeup were not regulated by centralized authority.”<sup>81</sup>

Accordingly, President Trump's repeated promises in the spring of 2020 that “The United States of America will be designating ANTIFA as a Terrorist Organization”<sup>82</sup> were never likely to be kept. Legally, only the Secretary of State can designate a terrorist organization. And then it has to be a foreign and not domestic entity. Antifa, for all the reasons noted above, is a particularly dubious candidate for this distinction. It is, by and large, not an organization, and has little identifiable leadership or command and control structure or finances—in other words, the specific, longstanding terrorist organizational attributes that designation is designed to undermine and dismantle. In sum, there is no legal way, at least for now, that antifa can be designated a terrorist organization—nor is there any practical reason why any such designation would help the United States fight terrorism.

Despite President Trump and his former attorney general's focus on anarchist collectives like antifa, the most worrying warning sign of a potential escalation of extreme left-wing terrorism occurred when a Senator Bernie Sanders supporter unleashed a hail of bullets at an early morning baseball practice attended by Republican politicians in Alexandria, Virginia, in June 2017.<sup>c</sup> Then-House Majority Whip Steve Scalise was gravely wounded, but the Congressman's security detail likely prevented a far more serious atrocity, returning fire and killing the gunman before any lives were claimed. If not for the Capitol Police, the shooting “would have been a massacre,” in the words of one Congressman targeted in the attack.<sup>83</sup> And, in another incident, a self-professed anarchist tried to firebomb a Tacoma, Washington, Immigration and Customs Enforcement facility in July 2019, before being shot dead by responding officers.<sup>84</sup> In neither instance did the perpetrator belong to an identifiable, existing terrorist organization on whose behalf the violence was claimed, much less perpetrated—nor was either man following or carrying out the orders of any identifiable terrorist commander.

The fact of the matter is that the United States is challenged by violence emanating from both the extreme far-right as well as the extreme far-left. Each have issued repeated calls utilizing the internet and social media. Thus, while the influence, much less involvement, of either end of the political spectrum remains uncertain, calls for violent confrontation have not been confined to one or the other, but have been issued by both.<sup>85</sup>

However, given the recent disruption of an extreme-far right militia domestic terror plot by over a dozen men to kidnap the Michigan governor, which included back-up plans to take over the Michigan Capitol building and broadcast the executions of public officials and burn down the Michigan state house leaving no survivors,<sup>86</sup> as well as recent reports that there are as many as 15,000 to 20,000 well-armed and often militarily trained members of some

b The “Black Bloc” refers to a tactic used by some protestors who wear black clothing and face coverings both to conceal identity and for protection during brawls. The tactic is often used by militant anarchists.

c Sanders acknowledged that the gunman had volunteered for the campaign, and called the act “despicable.” See Jose Pagliery, “Suspect in congressional shooting was Bernie Sanders supporter, strongly anti-Trump,” CNN, June 15, 2017.

300 different militia groups in the United States—some of which are militantly anti-government and espouse racist and seditious views<sup>87</sup>—the extreme far-right should elicit far more concern than the threat posed by alleged antifa adherents and anarchists.<sup>88</sup>

Also worrisome are the outright calls for revolution and sedition by the so-called boogaloo bois—an anti-government movement best known for congregating at protest sites in brightly colored Aloha shirts, often heavily armed. This unique faction of America's radical underground actively promises a new American civil war—and the movement's associated violence is often intended to accelerate that end. Social media has only recently taken steps to address the growth of such movements online. Boogaloo presence on Facebook peaked at 125 such groups with over 73,000 followers before Facebook removed and henceforth banned these pages.<sup>89</sup>

And with good reason. In May 2020, the FBI issued a warning to law enforcement across the United States that channels on the encrypted communications application Telegram were intent on fomenting chaos and disorder and triggering the “boogaloo” (civil war). Two days later, a DHS advisory cautioned state and local authorities to be aware of the possibility of “incidents of domestic terrorists exploiting First Amendment-protected events.”<sup>90</sup>

These are not idle threats. In May 2020, for instance, police in Denver intercepted a vehicle full of boogaloo bois armed with assault weapons en route to a “Reopen Colorado” demonstration.<sup>91</sup> The following month, three men were arrested in Las Vegas on charges of plotting to incite violence at an anti-racism rally by committing attacks with Molotov cocktails that would be blamed on legitimate protestors.<sup>92</sup> And, in California, a U.S. Air Force sergeant was arrested after murdering one Federal Protective Service officer and in a second incident killing a sheriff's deputy. The word “boog” was found scrawled in blood on a car that the wounded killer had stolen in an attempt to escape a police dragnet.<sup>93</sup> The Michigan plot to kidnap Governor Gretchen Whitmer as well as Virginia Governor Ralph Northam was also partially inspired by boogaloo militancy.<sup>94</sup>

Most seriously, on January 6, 2021, the day Congress met to certify electoral college votes, scores of protestors rioted and breached the security lines at the U.S. Capitol. Inspired by President Trump's refusal to accept the election's outcome and encouraged by his speech earlier that day, where he said, “if you don't fight like hell, you're not going to have a country anymore,” the rioters briefly occupied the U.S. Capitol building, besieging the House and Senate chambers, ransacking the office of the Speaker of the House, and committing serial acts of theft and wanton vandalism.<sup>95</sup> “We're storming the Capitol, it's a revolution!” one protestor proclaimed after having been maced by police and forcibly ejected from the building.<sup>96</sup> In what many have variously termed a failed insurrection or attempted coup d'état, the January 6 events at the U.S. Capitol offered a stark, frightening picture of the powerful forces fueling a conspiratorial mindset eschewing both the country's foundational democratic values and the rule of law. The mayhem and tragic loss of life that occurred that day serves as a salutary and timely reminder of the danger of potential violence to come from those who might continue to contest the 2020 presidential election and oppose President Biden and his administration in the years to come.

Beyond the militia and anti-government landscape, imminent threats remain from white supremacists and neo-Nazis. Warnings of a coming tide of extreme far-right violence had emerged before Trump's 2017 inauguration—a twin attack in Norway in 2011, as well as Wade Michael Page's attack at a Wisconsin gurdwara (Sikh

place of worship) and Dylann Roof's assault on Charleston—but the annals of terrorism scholarship will remember the Trump years for an explosion of white supremacist and neo-Nazi violence, perpetrated by a movement also perhaps emboldened by how they interpreted some of the president's rhetoric. Violence from far-right extremists impacted communities both in the United States—at Pittsburgh, Poway, and El Paso—as well as Canada, Germany, New Zealand, and elsewhere. Places of worship, most notably mosques and synagogues, were particularly targeted as part of a broader assault on Western liberalism's commitment to freedom of religion.

Law enforcement has performed admirably in breaking up larger collectives—such as the Atomwaffen Division and the Base—before either was able to embark on campaigns of organized violence, although lingering threats from both networks remain.<sup>97</sup> Perhaps the most serious recently intercepted plot, the militia plan to kidnap governors of several Democratic states in the weeks leading up to the 2020 election, was a timely, and alarming, reminder of the dangers that still abound. The “leaderless resistance” model of terrorism also provides serious challenges, as intelligence agencies and law enforcement are left merely to monitor a sea of extremists, in the hope those legitimately plotting violence betray their plans before any action is carried out. Some do—and it is only through indefatigable law enforcement and intelligence work, not lack of intent, that more bloodshed has been avoided.

In addition to an existing array of threats, President-elect Biden may also find himself dealing with violence from the American right's more conspiratorial fringe—not least QAnon, a movement which has already inspired violent threats, murder, and terrorist activity including threats of violence against then-candidate Biden.<sup>98</sup> Most notably, two Virginia QAnon adherents were arrested in Philadelphia in November 2020 after traveling with weapons to monitor vote tallying at the Pennsylvania Convention Center.<sup>99</sup> QAnon's ideological tenets are closely tied to President Trump's political fortunes—essentially, adherents believe Trump is saving the world from a cabal of Satan-worshipping, child sex trafficking Democrats—and Trump's defeat at the ballot box may continue to be interpreted by at least some in the movement as a coup demanding a violent response. Indeed, persons visibly demonstrating their support of the conspiratorial fantasies peddled by QAnon were in evidence at the January 6 storming of the U.S. Capitol.<sup>100</sup>

The Anti-Defamation League has reported that more than three-quarters of the 435 terrorism-related deaths recorded in the United States between 2010 and 2019 were perpetrated by violent, far-right extremists. By comparison, their left-wing counterparts accounted for only three percent. In 2019 alone, that disparity was even greater. Of the 42 deaths attributed to terrorists in the United States that year over 90 percent were committed by far-right and anti-government extremists.<sup>101</sup> Accordingly, the source of the most serious terrorism threat in the United States is obvious.

## Conclusion and Policy Recommendations for the New Administration

Any counterterrorism strategy is only as good as the next attack it fails to prevent. Accordingly, the perennial question of “how much is enough?” has long bedeviled the formulation, resourcing, and implementation of any response to terrorism. Clearly, deploying tens of thousands of U.S. forces overseas to invade and occupy countries was an unsustainable, and largely unsuccessful, strategy. But equally so is one where the default is either zero or some ineffectually low

number of troops overseas that negates the ability of the United States' friends and allies to counter terrorist threats on their own. Striking the right balance—in terms of popular support, political viability, and funding constraints—will be the foremost challenge the Biden administration will face in crafting an effective counterterrorism strategy. The challenge is only amplified by ongoing pressures to shift to great power competition, which may dramatically cut counterterrorism resources.<sup>d</sup>

The November 2020 all-hands memorandum from the new acting Secretary of Defense, Christopher Miller, to Defense Department employees reflected the weariness of a war that has lasted over 19 years and the desire to “transition our efforts from a leadership to a supporting role. We are not a people of perpetual war,” Miller wrote,

*“it is the antithesis of everything for which we stand and for which our ancestors fought. All wars must end. Ending wars requires compromise and partnership. We met the challenge; we gave it our all. Now, it's time to come home.”<sup>102</sup>*

But, in terrorism and counterterrorism, the admonition attributed to Winston Churchill, along the lines of General Mattis's previously quoted observation, that, “However absorbed a commander may be in the elaboration of his own thoughts, it is sometimes necessary to take the enemy into consideration”<sup>103</sup> needs always to be kept in mind. Except for the scoring of political points, it is difficult to see how the 5,200 U.S. troops stationed in Africa—the majority of whom are out of harm's way in Djibouti—representing approximately 0.3 percent of Defense Department personnel and expenditure<sup>104</sup> is an extravagance that the United States can ill afford. Fears that the United States might withdraw the 700 special operations personnel deployed to Somalia to bolster indigenous counterterrorist operations there prompted that country's president in October 2020 to tweet how critical “continuous security partnership and capacity-building support” from the United States is to containing al-Shabaab—an organization that has repeatedly displayed an ambition to expand its operations beyond just Somalia.<sup>105</sup> Similarly, the strategic logic of reducing the number of U.S. military personnel in Afghanistan from the current level of 8,600<sup>106</sup> to 4,500 or perhaps even 2,500<sup>107</sup> at a time when Taliban attacks have increased by 50 percent<sup>108</sup>—and while negotiations with the United States continue—is at best specious.<sup>109</sup>

The most pressing question for the new administration will be whether our counterterrorism strategy is truly synchronized to the threats we face from a stubbornly resilient Islamic State and an implacably determined al-Qa`ida. To be sure, counterterrorism targeting during the Trump years has yielded an impressive list of successful assassinations, including the leaders of the Islamic State, AQAP, AQIM, and Hurras al-Din, as well as al-Qa`ida's alleged number two and its heir apparent. And yet, as General McKenzie presciently remarked in June 2020: “This threat is not going away. There's never going to be a time when either ISIS or whatever follows ISIS is going to be completely absent from the global stage.”<sup>110</sup> The same can indeed be said of al-Qa`ida given that August 2020 marked its 32nd anniversary. A terrorist organization cannot last more than a year, let alone six years or five times as long without

## “Twenty years into the global war on terror, we have not won. But we also have not lost.”

possessing a capacity for change and adaptation; adjustment to even the most consequential governmental countermeasures directed against it; and a viable plan of succession. The December 2019 shootings by a Saudi Air Force officer who was also an AQAP sleeper, which claimed the lives of three sailors and wounded eight others,<sup>111</sup> coupled with the aforementioned accounts of al-Shabaab personnel taking flying lessons underscore an ongoing, albeit diminished, threat to the U.S. homeland requiring ceaseless vigilance, attendant effort, and sufficient resourcing.

The challenge is exacerbated by the need to anticipate—and mitigate—the next global terrorist hotspot. Central Asia, for instance, remains an ever-present specter in the battle against salafi-jihadi extremism, with one analyst recently arguing that fighters from Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and nearby India now form the “forefront of global jihad.”<sup>112</sup> Elsewhere, the security situation in the Sahel is rapidly deteriorating, with states including Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Nigeria, and Chad increasingly forced to grapple with a growing terrorism threat.<sup>113</sup> In fact, 41% of all Islamic State-inflicted killings in 2019 occurred in sub-Saharan Africa, with the region hosting seven of the 10 countries suffering the greatest increase in terrorism deaths that year.<sup>114</sup> The head of the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel recently described the security situation in the region as “extremely volatile,” in the face of rising attacks, militant child recruitment, and refugee flows.<sup>115</sup> The Islamic State's growing presence in Mozambique, too, bears watching closely with concern. Should it hold, the ongoing but subtle shift in counterterrorism toward sub-Saharan Africa will present new challenges for the U.S. military and its intelligence agencies, and demand new alliances and renewed energy to ensure Americans remain safe from violent extremism.

Countering the local footholds that both the Islamic State and al-Qa`ida have frequently turned into regional footholds will be critical to a new U.S. counterterrorism approach that recognizes how targeting terrorist leaders or groups and even their ideologies have had mostly nugatory effects or certainly no decisive ones. In the absence of any more viable strategy, one that resists the current bipartisan fashion to declare victory and disengage completely but retains modest levels of U.S. military special operations forces and intelligence assets is the most likely approach that will over time further build local capacity and thus continue to degrade and diminish the strength and capabilities of our foreign terrorist enemies.<sup>116</sup> It would be bolstered by a long-term political strategy that seeks to undermine extremist ideology and the allure of extremist groups, both in new theaters and old—an effort that often has plenty of rhetorical support, but has rarely been backed by sufficient finances and expertise.

Twenty years into the global war on terror, we have not won. But we have also not lost. Which, as the previous assessment of terrorism challenges for a new administration in 2016 opined, is precisely the strategy our adversaries have embraced: to lock us in a debilitating war of attrition. Declaring victory and wishing away

d The trade-off, however, is not necessarily zero-sum. For more, see Todd Harrison and Nicholas Harrington, “Bad Idea: Conflating Great Power Competition with High-Intensity Conflict,” *Defense360*, December 15, 2020.

“endless wars” when confronted by resilient, protean enemies contributed directly to the Islamic State’s emergence and rise as well as to al-Qa`ida’s stubborn longevity. And it may be that as the United States and its allies enter the third decade of war against international salafi-jihadi terrorism, we need to recalibrate our immediate expectations away from “winning” and “losing,” toward “accepting” and “managing” this conflict. Such an admission would not be popular, but it would be a fairer reflection of the current state of the fight against terrorism, and a more honest prediction of what to expect over the next four, or more, years. Indeed, any expectation that international terrorism will not once again be a significant issue during the 2024 election season is naïve.

For now, domestic terrorism presents the more pressing concern, and by comparison, the United States almost has to start *de novo* in countering domestic challenges. For the past two decades, the United States has rightly been intently focused on the threat from salafi-jihadi and Islamist organizations like al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State. Meanwhile, social media has weaponized domestic violent extremism and given new impetus to both sides of the political spectrum. The mass shootings in 2018 at a Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, synagogue, where 11 worshippers were killed, and in 2019 at an El Paso, Texas, shopping center, where 23 persons perished,<sup>117</sup> coupled with the aforementioned serious terrorist plots foiled in Nevada and Michigan, underscore domestic terrorism’s growth and lethality. The law has not kept pace with either technology nor the power and reach of social media, much less with the threat.

The most glaring deficit is the absence of a federal domestic terrorism statute. Legislation is needed to create a domestic terrorism legal category to standardize and better collect, collate, and analyze data across states and localities throughout the United States, which does not exist in any uniform fashion now. This legislation would also hopefully bring greater equity to sentencing. This past year, for instance, a Virginia man belonging to the extreme far-right terrorist group, Atomwaffen, was sentenced to a year and a day in prison on charges of possessing firearms while a drug user. He had participated in the infamous 2017 Charlottesville “Unite the Right” rally, and when arrested had over a dozen firearms in his home along with 50 loaded magazines. He had previously been arrested as a juvenile for firing a weapon at a moving car during a botched drug deal.<sup>118</sup> By comparison, according to the Program on Extremism at George Washington University, the average sentence for those convicted in the United States of providing material support to the Islamic State is 13 times longer (13.2 years).<sup>119</sup>

The list of Specially Designated Global Terrorist entities should also be expanded. In April 2020, the U.S. State Department applied this distinction—a step below Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) designations—to a transnational, violent far-right extremist group, the Russian Imperial Movement.<sup>120</sup> No further extreme far-

right groups have been addressed in this manner since. Accordingly, the State Department should be instructed to move strategically to press for the inclusion of other obvious candidates: especially the Feuerkrieg Division in the Baltics, National Action in Britain, the Nordic Resistance Movement in Scandinavian countries, and the Azov Battalion/National Corps in Ukraine.<sup>121</sup>

Far-right extremist groups are also deliberately targeting teenagers and both active members of the U.S. military and veterans for recruitment. Social programs are needed to educate youth in this country and build their resilience to these entreaties. More research is also needed into the role played by mental health conditions in domestic extremist recruitment. Similarly, both violent far-right and far-left extremists are actively seeking to recruit current service personnel and veterans because of the expertise in combat, logistics, and counterterrorism and counterinsurgency that can be applied to new battles in the homeland. This was also a serious problem in the 1980s, when the U.S. military stood up programs to actively counter white supremacist recruitment efforts.<sup>122</sup> Indeed, some of the preeminent figures in this movement at that time were Vietnam veterans (Louis Beam, Bo Gritz, Randy Weaver, and Frazier Glenn Miller, among them).<sup>123</sup> Those programs need to be revisited and resurrected—both by the military itself as well as the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Finally, in tackling both domestic and international terrorism, governments around the world need to take bolder steps to counter the free rein of extremist movements online. The center of gravity in the counterterrorism war has shifted from Helmand Province and the skies above the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region toward Facebook, Twitter, Telegram, and other popular social media platforms—all of which have been far too slow to acknowledge their critical role in the fight. The ongoing refusal to take bolder steps against extremism and radicalization online is not only a grave weakness in the war on terror—it is an almost-criminal dereliction of our duty to protect vulnerable members of our society from lies promulgated by nefarious actors in cyberspace, and requires urgent addressing. Steps to deplatform QAnon after its role in the storming of the Capitol mark an important first step.

This year brings with it both the 20-year anniversary of 9/11 and the 10-year anniversary of the July 2011 Oslo attacks. Both are defining moments in the history of terrorism, and reminders of the perils of ignoring warning signs and insufficient investment in the fight against violent extremism in all its forms. As the Biden administration takes office, a committed strategy, combining tried and tested methods as well as an array of newer measures, is needed to effectively tackle the escalating domestic terrorism threat, while continuing to keep Americans safe from the dangers of international terrorism. For those reasons, counterterrorism will likely remain a central priority for President Biden and his administration. **CTC**

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# A View from the CT Foxhole: David Lasseter, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction

By Stephen Hummel, Paul Cruickshank, and Don Rassler

*David F. Lasseter serves as the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction (CWMD). In this role, he supports the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy and Assistant Secretary of Defense For Homeland Defense & Global Security by developing and overseeing the implementation of strategies and policies of all Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction policy issues, to include preventing the proliferation of WMD-related materials; the DoD Cooperative Threat Reduction (CTR) Program; and Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear (CBRN) defense; and overseas Oceans Policy for the Department, which includes advancing global mobility through freedom of navigation policy.*

**CTC: Can you briefly summarize the work of your office and the responsibilities of your role and position?**

**Lasseter:** Sure. As you know, I'm the DASD for CWMD, and have been in this position since December 2019. My office supports the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy (USD(P)) and the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Homeland Defense and Global Security (ASD HDGS) by developing and overseeing the implementation of strategies and policies of all CWMD policy issues. The Office of USD(P) is responsible for advising the Secretary on the formulation of the national security and defense strategy policy and assisting the oversight of its execution. Specifically for my office, CWMD Policy, we're responsible for such things as: interagency communication on WMD arms control, such as the nuclear non-proliferation treaty as well as chem and biological weapons conventions; also WMD interdiction support and helping shape and implement CWMD-related elements of UNSCRs (United Nations Security Council resolutions); reducing WMD threats against U.S. interests, which includes working with partner nations to reduce and respond to nuclear, chem, and biological threats via our DoD Cooperative Threat Reduction [CTR] Program, which you'll probably hear me talk a fair amount about; and also responding to international CBRN incidents and coordination with international partners, both bilaterally and in multinational forms.

With respect to bio threats, the DoD CTR Program focuses on activities to prevent, detect, and respond to high-consequence biological incidents, regardless of origin. We continually consider the tools that we can bring to bear to mitigate threats from naturally occurring infectious disease outbreaks; accidental or deliberate release of especially dangerous pathogens; biological weapon development, proliferation, and usage; and then lastly, state and non-state actor interest in or deployment of biological agents.

My office coordinates quite closely with the U.S. interagency, as you can imagine, across the gamut—from DOJ, DHS, obviously throughout the IC [intelligence community]. The State Department is one of our close partners. And we also coordinate with international partners to ensure that biological threat reduction

efforts are deconflicted and leveraged to maximize our U.S. investments while achieving the greatest threat reduction impact possible. So something we've focused on, especially over the last few years, is maximizing those investments and then endeavoring to get the greatest threat reduction impact we possibly can. On the international front, we participate in international forums like the Global Health Security Agenda (GHSA)<sup>1</sup> as well as the G7 Global Partnership Against the Spread of Weapons and Materials of Mass Destruction.<sup>2</sup>

**CTC: What strategic guidance informs your CWMD priorities and decision making?**

**Lasseter:** Our priorities are informed by the 2018 National Defense Strategy. And I'd also highlight that [then] Secretary of Defense [Mark Esper] issued [a] strategic guidance document—it came out [in October 2020]—and it's titled "The Guidance for Development of Alliances and Partnerships."<sup>3</sup> The GDAP is a first-ever DoD-wide internal strategic guidance intended to align focus and synchronize DoD priorities for planning and assessment, as well as engagements and activities, messaging, and then also resourcing to implement this NDS [National Defense Strategy] Line of Engagement (LOE) 2. It's a playbook really for approaching collaboration with allies and partners. We're already using it regularly in discussions, whether it's internal to the building here or in the interagency. Broadly speaking, the GDAP sets forth a coordinated DoD strategic approach and [as] I mentioned, common methodology guidelines for improving this LOE 2 performance in an era of strategic competition. [It] informs our near-term security cooperation and longer-term strategic and force planning with allies and partners. It's used across a wide range of these LOE 2 activities, and in several instances, includes CWMD programs and initiatives. This guidance will help inform how we prioritize CWMD threat reduction activities with allies and partners, and better synchronize CWMD and the broader DoD toolkit.

**CTC: It would be a bit of an understatement to say that the COVID-19 pandemic has had major disruptive effects and has been an issue that all countries have had to navigate. Given the responsibilities that you just explained regarding your role, when you evaluate the COVID-19 pandemic in both its current and longer-term effects and implications, what are the most important insights and takeaways that you and your office have learned?**

**Lasseter:** That's a good question. We're undertaking an internal lessons-learned effort; the objective is to produce a list of lessons learned during the COVID-19 pandemic. It's been worked on for a number of months. It's quite robust. From my vantage point, I think there are three big lessons we've learned across the biothreat

reduction space. First, we must recognize that while bio threats have significant health and economic impacts, they also have real security implications, so we must continue to engage partner defense sectors, work to bridge the divide between military and civilian counterparts, and probably most importantly, I'd say, promote whole-of-government efforts towards biological threat reduction efforts.

Second, given the dual approach to biological threats, it's imperative that DoD works in close coordination with interagency and international partners. While DoD has global reach, we cannot do everything. We constantly remind our friends of that. In addition to working closely with other U.S. departments and agencies, we must cultivate a strong network of like-minded nations to pool resources and share responsibilities for common biological threat reduction goals. This includes working through international forums like the G7 Global Partnership Against the Spread of Weapons and Materials of Mass Destruction and the Global Health Security Agenda.

And third, I'd say that the Department must continue focusing on preparedness and preventive efforts in order to mitigate the impact of the next biological event, whenever that may occur and by whatever means. By helping partner nations build their biosafety, biosecurity, and bio surveillance capabilities and ensuring—this is important—that the nations are able to fully own, sustain, and operate such capabilities on their own, we reduce long-term reliance on DoD and, in turn, the U.S. government and, at the end of the day, build a network of capable partners able to address emerging biological threats collectively.

**CTC: You just mentioned security implications, and the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the vulnerability of the United States to biological threats. What is your assessment of the biological threat landscape moving forward? And what threats do you see as most concerning?**

**Lasseter:** In my view, it seems we're closer to an inflection point where the threat landscape could overcome our prevention/detection response capabilities. This pandemic has demonstrated the wide-reaching and destabilizing impact that infectious disease outbreaks can have on the world [and] may result in greater interest by non-state actors and terrorist organizations in developing biological threat weapons. More generally, and equally impactful, the current pandemic may erode norms around the development and deliberate use of biological agents. Although international norms condemn these type of weapons, witnessing the impact of a pathogen of pandemic potential first-hand has the chance to embolden state or non-state actors to pursue and use biological agents.

There also may be an increase in interest by terrorists and non-state actors in exploiting security vulnerabilities of laboratories housing especially dangerous pathogens. Facilities that lack appropriate biosecurity measures could allow actors who wish to do harm to acquire or divert pathogen samples. Adding to this problem are the increasing number of high containment facilities worldwide that house the most dangerous pathogens; some of those facilities lack suitable security measures to protect their stockpiles.

I believe that [the] biological threat landscape is diverse and frightening. We all now know first-hand the impacts of highly infectious, naturally occurring outbreaks. What most concerns me are lethal, man-made, or genetically altered agents whose source is difficult to attribute. Relatedly, ambiguity will also characterize

**“The current pandemic may erode norms around the development and deliberate use of biological agents. Although international norms condemn these type of weapons, witnessing the impact of a pathogen of pandemic potential first-hand has the chance to embolden state or non-state actors to pursue and use biological agents.”**

the biological threat landscape moving forward. We have to accept that. When people start getting sick, it won't be immediately clear whether we're under attack or experiencing a natural outbreak. As advances in biotechnology allow bad actors to craft these novel agents, things will only become more ambiguous. Regardless of the source, we have to act quickly. We've got to leverage all of DoD's resources to respond effectively. The DoD organizations that traditionally deal with public health and those that traditionally deal with bioweapons defense have to come together, as well as working with our international and interagency partners. We work together now; we've got to continue doing so, and thus leveraging internal [forums] such as the CWMD Unity of Effort Council<sup>4</sup>—that's an internal DoD forum—and international ones, like the GP [G7 Global Partnership Against the Spread of Weapons and Materials of Mass Destruction] and even GHSA.

In the response category, DoD likes to be well prepared—to know what it's dealing with before responding—and strategic guidance helps with deliberate planning. We sequence political decisions and political determinations before operations, but in the realm of bio threat response, the Department, and perhaps the broader national security community, may need to reconsider the established processes when confronted with an active bio threat. Putting operations before politics and strategy is uncomfortable—it takes us out of the processes and procedures we are accustomed to—but the operational response to disease is the same regardless of its origin, and acting quickly is critical. It doesn't mean the Department would act alone or of its own accord in a crisis; it just means it's unlikely that anyone will be able to tell us right away whether we're dealing with a natural disease or attack and then respond accordingly. So, discerning the origins of the threat will need to occur in parallel with the operational response.

**CTC: The 2018 National Strategy for Countering WMD Terrorism<sup>5</sup> noted that “in contrast to chemical, radiological, and nuclear weapons, some biological agents are contagious and may thus spread in an uncontrolled manner. Furthermore, such agents are the only other class of WMD that has the potential to match nuclear weapons in the scale of casualties they produce.” However, Hamish de Bretton-Gordon, the former head of NATO's CBRN Battalion, recently noted in this publication, “for years, biosecurity has been the poor relation of the ‘other’ securities for one simple reason: policymakers and**

analysts failed to grasp just how devastating a highly transmissible new virus in a highly interconnected world could be, and viewed a devastating global pandemic or catastrophic bioterror attack as very unlikely.”<sup>6</sup> And recently in this publication, General Michael Nagata (Retired), said that “During my career as a CT operational practitioner, all the way through my final years as the senior CT strategist at NCTC [National Counterterrorism Center], the amount of energy, focus, and resourcing devoted to bioterrorism is a small fraction of what is still given today to more conventional threats.”<sup>7</sup> Given all that, are there assumptions about the likelihood or impact of bio-threats by your community that have changed as a result of the pandemic, or that you think still need to be further scrutinized?

**Lasseter:** The biggest change of perspective we need in the broader national security construct is that threats from a biological agent are real and nobody is immune from them or their potential impacts. Biological threats are national security threats. As such, they need to be planned for and have appropriate protections against them. The processes that the Department has in place to allocate the money necessary from a budgetary standpoint ensure the Department is prepared to counter the threats that we face, to include bioterrorism. Understanding, back to the beginning, that the threats from a biological agent are real and their impacts can be tremendous.

**CTC:** We are now in a period of budgetary pressures in many aspects of CT,<sup>8</sup> and with the COVID-19 pandemic and the economic downturn, those pressures may increase. How can the United States ensure that it continues to protect against bio threats in the decade to come?

**Lasseter:** We’ve got to continue to resource effectively. We’ve seen tremendous resourcing from the Congress and the taxpayers at the end of the day and reallocation of resources at the executive branch into combating COVID, including creating these vaccines in record time. We have processes in place to ensure the necessary funding is there. We will just need to continue to properly resource biodefense capability, to include research in engineering, detection capabilities, countermeasure advancements, and so on.

**CTC:** In recent testimony, you noted that “emerging biotechnologies, including gene editing and synthetic biology, may reduce the barrier to biological weapon development as they become more readily accessible by the general public.”<sup>9</sup> In the August 2020 issue of *CTC Sentinel*, West Point scientists assessed that advances in synthetic biology and widening access to the technologies involved “is leading to a revolution in science affecting the threat landscape that can be rivaled only by the development of the atomic bomb.”<sup>10</sup> Synthetic biology is an enormous force for good, but as the 2018 U.S. strategy for countering WMD Terrorism noted, “advances in biotechnology could theoretically allow even a single individual working in a laboratory to engineer pathogens that could have catastrophic effects.”<sup>11</sup> What is your view on the transformative potential of threats from this sphere, and what can be done to prevent a bad actor from engineering a pathogen more virulent and even more transmissible than the virus which causes COVID-19?

**Lasseter:** This is an important question and will be critically im-

portant going forward. You’re correct in your assumption that advances in synthetic biology and other related biotechnologies hold the potential for both promise and peril in their application. And so we’ve got to be cognizant of how such technological shifts can alter the threat landscape [and] impose new defense and security challenges. We’ve heard it said that biological weapons are ‘a poor man’s nuke,’ given the potentially enormous impact of their usage. I think COVID-19 has further accelerated this mindset. The U.S. has had a watchful eye on bio threats and has elevated bio threats as a core national security priority over the past several years—as I mentioned earlier, including the release of the 2018 National Biodefense Strategy. The NBS has created a cabinet-level Biodefense Steering Committee for executing and directing the strategy.

But that said, work remains. We must continue to build upon the work of the NBS, work in close coordination with interagency and international partners, and seek to establish stronger norms and enforcement mechanisms when it comes to the proliferation and usage of dual-use technologies that could potentially aid a bad actor seeking to engineer a novel pathogen. It’s incumbent upon freedom-loving countries and the biotechnology industry, frankly, to stay ahead of those threats. This requires monitoring intellectual investment in detection and diagnosis, and medical countermeasures, but also timely, accurate, and fulsome information flow among public and private sector entities.

**CTC:** We’ve talked about and you’ve shared some of your thoughts about aspects of the future biological threats that you’re concerned about. We’d like to drill down a little bit about the future, potential bio threats from terrorist groups. No terrorist group has come close to carrying out a significant biological attack. Even the well-resourced Aum Shinrikyo cult in Japan in the 1990s fell well short.<sup>12</sup> However, the landscape appears to be shifting in relation to this area, as in 2018, German police thwarted an alleged plot in Cologne in which a jihadi terrorist in the West for the first time successfully produced the toxic biological agent, ricin.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, in light of the impacts of COVID-19 and the lowering “education training costs, time, and equipment threshold required to modify and employ pathogenetic organisms as biological weapons,”<sup>14</sup> there’s concern a rogue scientist could help/be recruited into a terrorist group, decide to act alone, or that a terrorist group might develop the capability to engineer a deadly pathogen ‘in house.’ In your assessment, what types of terrorist threat actors or groups are the most cause for concern when it comes to weaponizing biology?

**Lasseter:** It’s been publicly reported that al-Qa`ida and ISIS, among other extremist organizations, have had interest in acquiring WMD. We also know through public acknowledgment by the State Department that the U.S. government cannot confirm Russian or Chinese compliance with the BWC [Biological Weapons Convention].<sup>15</sup> That shouldn’t surprise anyone, as we all know how the Russian Federation and PRC flout and disregard international norms and laws, even those treaties which they ratify or to which they accede. However, in general, one significant concern we have is what we refer to as pathogens and toxins of security concern, and these are biological agents based on HHS [Health and Human Services] and USDA [U.S. Department of Agriculture] select agent and toxins lists. These biological agents and toxins are deemed to

have the potential to pose a severe threat to both human and animal health and may have the potential for weaponization by nefarious actors. This is why we continue to push for a strong international posture on biosecurity, and we'll continue to work with our inter-agency counterparts in the biodefense arena.

**CTC: How does your office view the international do-it-yourself bio community and the potential of a deliberate or accidental threat emerging from these non-state actor communities?**

**Lasseter:** Do-it-yourself bio is a very real concern, and we need to be attuned to the democratization of biotechnology and how it will provide opportunities for non-state actors to do great harm with really very few resources. There are limited opportunities to interdict these threats because the technologies involved are dual-use and commercially available. That said, when we look at the full spectrum from WMD threats, this is not the one that keeps me awake at night. That may change as biotechnologies become even more accessible down the road. COVID-19 should make it clear to all [that] the transmission of infection by naturally occurring viruses can occur quite easily, and that could also be the case [with] those produced and deliberately released by individuals.

**CTC: Can you elaborate a bit more on the role of your office in preventing, detecting, and responding to high-consequence biological incidents, whether they're natural outbreaks like COVID-19 or the result in the future of the malicious development and release of especially dangerous pathogens?**

**Lasseter:** As we talked about, my office focuses on activities to prevent, detect, and respond to high-consequence biological incidents regardless of origin, and in one team within my office, the Cooperative Threat Reduction, or CTR, program specifically works to reduce the proliferation of biological weapons and biological weapon components and biological weapon-related technologies and expertise. This team is also charged with facilitating the detection and reporting of diseases caused by especially dangerous pathogens, regardless of whether they are naturally occurring or the result of accidental or deliberate release.

The CTR program works with international partners to accomplish its threat reduction mission in three key ways. First, we assist partner nations in developing sufficient capabilities to counter biological threats, most notably by working to improve biosafety and biosecurity and biosurveillance capacities, really with the goal, as I mentioned earlier, of transitioning ownership and sustainment of these capabilities to the host nation. By doing so, CWMD policy is reducing long-term reliance of partner nations on DoD assistance and is building a network of capable partners able to address emerging biological threats collectively. If we're going to provide the resources and capabilities, they've got to be able to endure those or sustain them after we finish providing that assistance. The key aspect to our support to partners is for the partner nations to gain an independence that is sustainable and not completely reliant on our support.

Second, [with] the CTR program, we promote cross-border collaboration between partner nations to encourage regionalized, networked approaches toward biological security and actively encourage partner nations to assume regional leadership roles in this space. This includes data-sharing regarding outbreaks of especial-



*David Lasseter*

ly dangerous pathogens; promoting the biosafety, biosecurity, and biosurveillance best practices within a region; fostering international scientific research engagements; [and] integrating national biosafety, biosecurity, and biosurveillance capabilities into regional efforts, thereby leveraging the collective assets to advance shared threat reduction objectives. A lot of that is the information flow. It's great if one country in Southeast Asia for example knows information, but if they're not able to share it or they don't share it in a timely manner with their regional friends and partners and even beyond, then it's harder for the region. And now in the global environment we're in, it's harder for the global environment to get that information.

Finally, we work with other donor nations to pool resources and share responsibilities for common biological threat reduction goals. I mentioned we work through international forms like the G7 Global Partnership and Global Health Security Agenda to identify mutual threat reduction objectives, align in deconflict activities, and then pool resources. That's a little snapshot of what CTR does and how they do it.

**CTC: Picking up on this thread, you mentioned technical assistance and technology as being an important component of the work of the CTR team as well as your office more broadly. What has the current pandemic taught us about the use of technology to detect, identify, track, and manage the spread of pandemics, whether the result of national, natural, or malicious forces in the future?**

**Lasseter:** It's an intriguing question. COVID-19 has taught us that

the global threat of a biological agent is significant and can occur without warning. And this is a novel virus. While we can and should research and study those naturally occurring viruses, it's impossible to predict or know the certainty of what viruses might emerge. What we need are flexible platforms to identify and respond to a biological incident. This will need to be a team effort between the public and private sectors, and with international allies and partners. Healthcare, pharmaceutical, information, technology sectors are routinely at the cutting edge of societal advancements, and so improvements have been made this year as a result of the pandemic and their collective innovation, often teamed with U.S. government agencies as we've seen over the course of 2020. Through information sharing and coordination, these networks that are in place with international partners and the interagency will be stronger for having worked so hard in responding to this pandemic. We will need to dedicate ourselves to continuous improvement, and this improvement will start with awareness and monitoring and needed to prevent future pandemics.

**CTC:** You recently testified that “there also may be an increased interest by terrorists and non-state actors in exploiting security vulnerabilities of laboratories housing especially dangerous pathogens. Facilities that lack appropriate biosecurity measures could allow actors who wish to do harm to acquire and/or divert pathogen samples. Adding to this problem are increasing number of high containment facilities worldwide that house the most dangerous pathogens; some of these facilities lack suitable security measures to protect their pathogen stockpiles.”<sup>16</sup> As recently noted in *CTC Sentinel*, “there are now around 50 Biosafety Level 4 facilities around the world, where the deadliest pathogens are stored and worked on, and this figure is set to increase in the next few years. This is a large increase over the last 30 years, creating bigger risk of a breach. Of equal, if not greater concern are the thousands of Biosafety Level 3 labs globally, which handle deadly pathogens like COVID-19.”<sup>17</sup> What is the U.S. government doing to protect against dangerous biological materials being stolen or accidentally released both at home and overseas? And to what extent are concerns about cyber issues and potential cyber vulnerabilities a part of that work?

**Lasseter:** Yes, these are genuine concerns, and DoD works closely both within the Department and with interagency partners to help protect against dangerous biological materials being stolen or accidentally released from facilities housing such samples. My office primarily accomplishes this task through the work of the CTR program that I mentioned, specifically the Biological Threat Reduction Program line, BTRP. More generally, the CTR policy team is tasked with developing strategic guidance for the DoD CTR program, which involves a rigorous prioritization to determine where we need to focus DoD CTR programs, [a] unique mission set, to tackle this challenge, and as I mentioned earlier, the DoD CTR program works with partner nations to improve their biosafety, biosecurity, and biosurveillance capabilities. The key component of this is working with partner nations—either [to] construct new laboratory facilities or renovate existing facilities that currently face significant capacity, safety, or security concerns.

The CTR program has a standing policy of opposing the proliferation of high containment laboratories [HCLs] that house the

most dangerous and virulent pathogens and require the highest level of associated biosafety and biosecurity practices and standards to ensure pathogens are not accidentally or deliberately released. The construction of these high containment laboratories and proliferation of related equipment technologies is further regulated by several U.S. government-wide policies, including the high containment laboratory policy. These policies provide stringent oversight and review by the U.S. interagency into any proposed activity that would proliferate HCLs or provide capabilities that would upgrade a lower level BSL facility into a higher level.

A related component of BTRP's policy toward laboratory construction and renovation is promoting the consolidation, sequencing, and destruction of pathogen samples. A significant threat vulnerability is the proliferation and substandard storage of EDP [especially dangerous pathogens] samples in several laboratories throughout countries, which frankly lack proper safety and security measures. These samples are then vulnerable to accidental release or theft or even diversion by individuals seeking to use a sample to inflict harm. When BTRP helps construct or renovate laboratory facilities, it does so with the intent [that] the country will then use the facility as one of the primary—most times the only—central repository for pathogen samples, so this consolidation policy involves physically transporting EDP samples from smaller facilities scattered throughout the country to the central facility in order to minimize the number of sites holding dangerous cultures.

Another interesting capability [that] BTRP provides comes in assisting countries with procuring genetic sequencing equipment. This type of technology allows scientists to use their existing especially dangerous pathogen samples to create a digital blueprint of the pathogens' genetic makeup. This negates the need for a laboratory to store the physical EDP sample and can allow for the destruction of the sample. Doing so greatly reduces the risk of the release of the physical pathogen sample due to accidental or deliberate actions, and sequencing brings the added benefit of assisting with more rapidly and precisely identifying pathogens than traditional laboratory methods or [what have] been traditionally methods, which then provides greater insight into disease transmission and virulence.

We're now exploring in greater detail the issue of cyber security. That's been of great interest across many sectors, but now even more so with these facilities that store digital genetic information of dangerous pathogens, including those facilities that we partner with to help sequence and destroy physical pattern samples.

**CTC:** We want to shift gears for just a moment and ask a question that looks at the intersection between commercially available technology or other related technologies and the future threat potential in the bio arena. You recently testified that “advances in drone technology may aid in targeted dissemination of biological threat agents.”<sup>18</sup> How is your office working to counter this threat?

**Lasseter:** It's a fear of mine, given that the use of drone technology is becoming more rampant. We're actively analyzing how drone technology as well as other emerging technologies, like you mentioned, will impact the bio threat landscape. We're also exploring where there are tools in our toolbox in CWMD or the appropriate mechanisms for addressing such threats. Any of these emerging technologies, whether drones or synthetic biology or additive man-

ufacturing [3D printing],<sup>a</sup> is not the responsibility of one department or agency. We would be failing if all of us weren't involved. We've got to work collectively with our interagency and international partners to address such threats. We're already holding regular dialogues with interagency colleagues, including the Department of State, about exactly this. Other DoD programs such as our colleagues in the JPEO CBRND—the Joint Program Executive Office for CBRN Defense<sup>19</sup>—are also working in this space to help posture for advance early warning of potential biological attacks including such things as standoff detection<sup>20</sup> and improved sensor technology.

**CTC: The COVID-19 outbreak has demonstrated how essential biological countermeasures, in particular vaccines, are to responding to dangerous viral outbreaks. There is hope that two “next-generation” mRNA vaccines—the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines—will help bring the current pandemic under control, and some experts believe it may be possible to develop a universal coronavirus vaccine using the mRNA platform so that “the next time this happens, we’ll have a vaccine already made, ready to be shipped out, and used very quickly to prevent the next pandemic from taking over.”<sup>21</sup> Does funding for vaccine research need to be a national security priority? And how can the U.S. government and the private sector work together in this space?**

**Lasseter:** I'm definitely pleased to see the success of Pfizer and Moderna and the others. [It's] wonderful to see the emergency use authorizations. There are so many incredible people working on vaccines for COVID-19, and their remarkable work will be a foundation on which we can build future vaccine development. The Department allocates money for vaccine development through our chemical and biological defense program, and this program has done great work in creating vaccines for anthrax and other biological threats of concern. There's a very good working relationship with our defense programs and the private sector; I think you've seen this through Operation Warp Speed.<sup>b</sup> This relationship [is] going to need to continue in the protection of our national security for years to come. There's great work that the community is doing to enhance platforms that will further expedite the creation of vaccines now and into the future.

**CTC: Pivoting a little bit, you previously mentioned that GDAP, and you've stressed that international cooperation and capacity building is critical in preventing, detecting, and responding to biological threats.<sup>22</sup> In a recent issue of *CTC Sentinel*, one analyst stated that “unless countries around the world develop a comprehensive biosecurity strategy and coordinate their efforts, pandemics (either natural or engineered) could devastate the planet every decade.<sup>23</sup> What key precepts need to guide the United States' bio security strategy moving forward, and how can the United States bolts bolster international partnership**

a Editor's note: Additive manufacturing is “the industrial production name for 3D printing, a computer controlled process that creates three dimensional objects by depositing materials, usually in layers.” “What is Additive Manufacturing? Definition and Processes,” TWI.

b Editor's note: “Using the resources of the federal government and the U.S. private sector, Operation Warp Speed (OWS) will accelerate the testing, supply, development, and distribution of safe and effective vaccines, therapeutics, and diagnostics to counter COVID-19 by January 2021.” “Coronavirus: Operation Warp Speed,” U.S. Department of Defense.

**capacity building, information sharing, and norms against the use of chemical and biological weapons?**

**Lasseter:** First, I think we need to expect the worst and plan for the worst. Also, we must have coordination, as I said, among the United States government, private sector, even academic institutions, and the international community. It's vital that we have investment domestically, internationally in biosafety, bio security, and bio surveillance by both public and private sectors, and additionally prevention, detection, and response capabilities need broad application and continued advancement. As I discussed, it's necessary that we have a global understanding of the need for top-notch security of laboratories that are working on biological agents and toxins of concern. International partnerships are absolutely essential. The coordination my office does through the CTR program and with our partners and allies is absolutely vital. It's got to continue, and improve frankly.

**CTC: Stanford professor and biosecurity/synthetic biology expert Dr. Drew Endy recently warned in this publication that in the future, non-nuclear nation-states may try to develop catastrophic biological weapons to deter nuclear powers.<sup>24</sup> Do you share this concern? What is your view on the transformative potential of bio developments for issues like deterrence?**

**Lasseter:** It's definitely possible, and I've known bioweapon capability might be effective at deterring invasion or aggression. The fact that states can more easily hide biological weapon program versus nuclear or even chemical weapons programs might make this option more attractive. And as we've talked about, the barrier to entry is lower. However, the threat of bioweapons attack would have to be credible really in order to function as a deterrent, and it may be difficult to prove one has an effective and deliverable bioweapon, let alone without showing other states exactly what it is and therefore allowing them to try to develop a countermeasure against it. I think the risk of miscalculation also seems high if you tell adversaries that you have a bioweapon and are willing to use it if necessary, and then an adversary suffers a serious natural disease outbreak, that adversary might believe you've attacked them and retaliate. So there would be interactive dynamics there that could create friction and then response. Finally, bioweapons programs aren't replacements for nuclear programs; nuclear programs impart a certain prestige. I think we all recognize that, seeing what some countries have tried and will continue to try to do to develop programs. Showing the world that a state has advanced capabilities should be taken seriously, is also a component of that. So I'm not convinced that a biological weapons program would be viewed the same way, so the incentive to pursue nuclear weapons still exists.

**CTC: When you look at the full spectrum of WMD threats, what potential scenario or development keeps you up at night?**

**Lasseter:** I've had a career as a Marine and in intelligence and other things, but this job has broadened my aperture of concern. There are several threats across the CBRN spectrum that are of particular concern and that my office monitors closely. Start with China: lack of transparency on nuclear modernization as an issue, and as I referenced earlier, the inability for the free world to verify compliance with the BWC. For Russia: violations of international arms control

agreements, lack of transparency on nuclear modernization, serial user of chemical weapons. In North Korea, WMD development; nuclear, chemical, biological capabilities and delivery systems; a history of proliferation and aggressive rhetoric against the United States. And North Korea poses threats by WMD proliferation development and use. For Iran, it's the continued advancement of launch capabilities that could be used for long-range missile systems, missile proliferation, and expansion of its nuclear capabilities and knowledge. [With regard to] India and Pakistan, we all know that the conventional escalation leading to potential nuclear conflict is of great concern. I referenced the Russia Federation's chemical use, but erosion of norms against CW use gives me great concern

going into the future. I'm concerned about emerging biological and chemical threats, for example dual-use biological or even pharmaceutical-based agents<sup>c</sup> conceivably being weaponized. The potential of gene editing and genomic sequencing using precision medicine, or biotechnology to do bad things, is a real concern to me. **CTC**

- c Editor's note: "Pharmaceutical Based Agents (PBAs) are a subset of incapacitating agents and mostly comprise chemicals that have been designed for medical pharmaceutical use but which in overdose, or certain exposure contexts, can cause either incapacitation, permanent injury or death." D. J. Heslop and P. G. Blain, "Threat potential of pharmaceutical based agents," *Intelligence and National Security* 35:4 (2020): pp. 539-555.

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# Afghanistan's Security Forces Versus the Taliban: A Net Assessment

By Jonathan Schroden

**A key question for the future of Afghanistan is if the United States withdraws the remainder of its forces from the country, would Afghanistan's security forces or the Taliban be stronger militarily? According to a net assessment conducted by the author across five factors—size, material resources, external support, force employment, and cohesion—the Taliban would have a slight military advantage if the United States withdraws the remainder of its troops from Afghanistan, which would then likely grow in a compounding fashion.**

In the November/December 2020 issue of this publication, Seth Jones examined the ideology, objectives, structure, strategy, and tactics of the Afghan Taliban, as well as the group's relationship to other non-state actors and sources of state support.<sup>1</sup> In concluding his study, Jones considered the implications of the current situation in Afghanistan and wrote that:

*... without a peace deal, the further withdrawal of U.S. forces ... will likely shift the balance of power in favor of the Taliban. With continuing support from Pakistan, Russia, Iran, and terrorist groups like al-Qa`ida, it is the view of the author that the Taliban would eventually overthrow the Afghan government in Kabul.*<sup>2</sup>

This is a critically important judgment for the future of U.S. policy on Afghanistan, and one that deserves more rigorous attention than Jones was able to dedicate in the concluding remarks of his paper. In addition to Jones' article, there have been numerous recent, detailed works on the Taliban's history,<sup>3</sup> social resources and adaptations,<sup>4</sup> political trajectory,<sup>5</sup> and perspectives on peace negotiations.<sup>6</sup> There are also various U.S. government reports that periodically give a wealth of information on the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF).<sup>7</sup> Yet, a formal assessment of how Afghanistan's security forces compare to the Taliban's fighting forces in the context of U.S. troop withdrawals is lacking. In this article, the author therefore seeks to answer the question: If the

United States withdraws the remainder of its forces from Afghanistan,<sup>8</sup> would the ANDSF or the Taliban be stronger militarily?

To do this, the author will conduct a net assessment of the two sides' military forces in the projected absence of U.S. forces. In this context, net assessment refers to the practice of considering the strategic interactions of "blue" (friendly) and "red" (adversary) forces through the use of data that are widely available, in order to create strategic insights that lead to decisive advantage.<sup>8</sup> While there are many elements that could be focused on while conducting such an assessment and there is a great body of literature about which are most important,<sup>9</sup> the author examines five here: size, material resources (i.e., money and technology), external support, force employment, and cohesion. The first four are included because they address the fundamental inputs to military effectiveness: people, things, and the ability of people to use those things. The author includes cohesion because it speaks to the will of both sides to fight<sup>10</sup> and because it is particularly important in the context of the war in Afghanistan and efforts to end it via a negotiated settlement.<sup>11</sup> Of note, the author does not consider the possible impacts of the novel coronavirus COVID-19 due to a paucity of reliable data and no clear indication that its consideration would change the results of the assessment. This article now examines each of these factors for both sides, then conducts a net assessment of the five factors, before providing an answer to the central question along with some of the implications.

## Size

### Taliban

The number of people in the Taliban's fighting forces is difficult to determine precisely, but a variety of sources give an estimate of 60,000 core fighters, give or take 10-20 percent.<sup>12</sup> <sup>b</sup> The most systematic public study of the Taliban's size (from 2017) concluded that the group's total manpower exceeds 200,000 individuals, which includes around 60,000 core fighters, another 90,000 members of local militias, and tens of thousands of facilitators and support elements.<sup>13</sup> These numbers are considerable increases over official U.S.

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- a The author assumes that U.S. troops will either withdraw in accordance with the terms of the U.S.-Taliban agreement (which states all U.S. troops must depart by May 1, 2021, if the Taliban meet their obligations) or within a single six-month extension as has been recently suggested. "Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban and the United States of America," U.S. Department of State, February 29, 2020; Barnett R. Rubin, "How Biden can bring U.S. troops home from Afghanistan," Responsible Statecraft, January 11, 2021.
- b It is typically not clear whether these estimates include the number of personnel in the Haqqani network, which has at various times been considered separate from, or integrated with, the Taliban.

estimates of around 20,000 fighters that were provided in 2014<sup>14</sup> and illustrate the group's ability to recruit and deploy new fighters in recent years. They also illustrate the Taliban's ability to withstand significant casualties—estimated to be in the range of thousands per year.<sup>15</sup> As a Taliban military commander recently commented, “We see this fight as worship. So if a brother is killed, the second brother won't disappoint God's wish—he'll step into the brother's shoes.”<sup>16</sup>

### ANDSF

Afghanistan's security forces have an authorized total end-strength of 352,000 personnel.<sup>17</sup> Yet, the country has never been able to fill all of those billets. As of July 2020, the Afghan Ministry of Defense (MOD)—which includes the army, air force, and special operations forces (SOF)—had 185,478 personnel. The Afghan Ministry of Interior (MOI)—which includes a variety of police forces—numbered 103,224. This gives a total of 288,702 security force personnel, or 82 percent of total authorized end-strength.<sup>18</sup> While analysts have greater confidence in these numbers now than in the past as a result of a new biometric manpower system in Afghanistan that was implemented to address the phenomenon of “ghost soldiers,”<sup>19</sup> they nonetheless represent an upper bound on the true size of the fighting force—they are merely the number of filled billets. A 2014 study of the Afghan army found that its force structure was about 60 percent combat personnel,<sup>20</sup> but the number of soldiers showing up for duty each day is even lower (since some soldiers are always sick, on leave, etc.). One official U.S. reference quoted an on-hand percentage of about 90 percent.<sup>21</sup> Using these figures together (and subtracting the roughly 8,000 personnel in the Afghan Air Force (AAF)<sup>22</sup>) gives an estimated on-hand army fighting force of about 96,000 soldiers. The Afghan police are a much leaner force, with only about 11 percent as administrative and support personnel for the 89 percent that are patrolmen.<sup>23</sup> Assuming a 90 percent on-hand rate for the police as well gives about 83,000 patrolmen. All told then, the ANDSF are likely fielding a fighting force in the vicinity of 180,000 combat personnel each day.

## Material Resources

### Taliban

There is no consensus on the Taliban's yearly revenue total. Official United Nations, government, and some independent estimates range from \$300 million to \$1.6 billion per year,<sup>24</sup> with the United States estimating that up to 60 percent of these totals comes from Taliban involvement in the drug trade.<sup>25</sup> These numbers are disputed, however, by David Mansfield's detailed work on illicit economies and drug production in Afghanistan, which suggests that the

Taliban's share of drug proceeds is significantly less than popularly understood and therefore the group's annual revenues are much less as well.<sup>26</sup>

What is clear is that the Taliban have for years generated some amount of funding from the drug trade (e.g., via taxes and protection payments),<sup>27</sup> whether on opiates,<sup>28</sup> hashish,<sup>29</sup> or more recently, crystal methamphetamine.<sup>30</sup> In recent years, the Taliban have also greatly diversified their portfolio of funding sources.<sup>31</sup> The most notable expanded source is illegal mining (e.g., precious stones,<sup>32</sup> talc,<sup>33</sup> and rare earth minerals<sup>34</sup>), which some reports now put near or at the same level of revenue for the group as drugs.<sup>f</sup> The Taliban also actively tax the areas they control (e.g., on infrastructure, utilities, agriculture and social industry<sup>35</sup>), and generate additional revenue from smuggling,<sup>36</sup> extortion,<sup>37</sup> kidnapping for ransom,<sup>38</sup> and private donations.<sup>39</sup>

The Taliban have traditionally relied on some degree of centralization of revenue collection, such as that from formal taxation, alongside a redistributive resource model.<sup>40</sup> But in recent years, the group has given local commanders more leeway in generating revenue (e.g., via war booty) and expending resources to maintain its war machine. Recent interviews with Taliban recruitment officials and commanders suggest that the group does not pay its fighters regular salaries, but rather covers their expenses: “we take care of their pocket money, the gas for their motorcycle, their trip expenses. And if they capture spoils, that is their earning.”<sup>41</sup>

The Taliban have also, in recent years, increasingly benefitted from overruns of vulnerable Afghan security force checkpoints and installations, which has afforded them a wealth of armaments mostly procured by the United States, including armored vehicles, night-vision devices, Western rifles, laser designators, and advanced optics.<sup>42</sup> And while the Taliban have been using commercial drones to conduct aerial surveillance for years, they have only recently begun routinely weaponizing them for attacks against ANDSF positions.<sup>43</sup>

### ANDSF

Over the past five years, the ANDSF have been funded at around \$5-6 billion per year.<sup>44</sup> The United States has provided about 75 percent of this funding via the Afghanistan Security Forces Fund (ASFF) and has generally dictated how that money is spent, with another \$1 billion or so coming from international partners and the Afghan government contributing roughly \$300-400 million more.<sup>45</sup> In fiscal year (FY) 2020, Congress appropriated \$1.6 billion for the Afghan Army, \$1.2 billion for the AAF, \$728 million for Afghan special security forces (ASSF),<sup>g</sup> and \$660 million for the police.<sup>46</sup> International donors provide funding for the ANDSF either bilaterally or through one of two multilateral channels: the NATO

c This number does not include 30,000 Afghan Local Police, which are in the process of being disbanded due to discontinuation of funding from the United States.

d There are an additional 10,741 civilians working in the ministries.

e The Afghan Personnel and Pay System was implemented over the past several years to identify and remove ghost soldiers from the rolls of the ANDSF, which had been estimated to be as high as 40 percent of the reported strength in some areas. See John F. Sopko, “Assessing the Capabilities and Effectiveness of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces,” Testimony Before the Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, Committee on Armed Services, U.S. House of Representatives, February 12, 2016.

f The Taliban's own Stones and Mines Commission has stated the group earns \$400 million per year from mining. See Matthew Dupee, “The Taliban Stones Commission and the Insurgent Windfall from Illegal Mining,” *CTC Sentinel* 10:3 (2017); Hanif Sufizada, “The Taliban are Megarich—Here's Where They Get the Money They Use to Wage War in Afghanistan,” Conversation, December 8, 2020; and Frud Bezhan, “Exclusive: Taliban's Expanding 'Financial Power' Could Make It 'Impervious' To Pressure, Confidential Report Warns,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, September 16, 2020.

g ASSF include Afghan Army SOF, the AAF's Special Mission Wing, and various special police units.

ANA Trust Fund or the Law and Order Trust Fund Afghanistan.<sup>47</sup>

These sources of funding cover all of the expenses of the ANDSF, though international sources have typically been used to cover salaries, procurement of end-use items (e.g., weapons, vehicles, communications equipment, aircraft), maintenance and sustainment of those items, and training on how to use them. Afghan government contributions have typically been used for food and uniforms.<sup>48</sup>

As a result of tens of billions of dollars of international expenditures, the ANDSF today have an air force consisting of 174 aircraft (a mix of transport and attack helicopters, and transport, surveillance, and attack fixed wing platforms), some of the region's best SOF, and an army that boasts heavy artillery, mortars, thousands of armored vehicles and personnel carriers, tactical drones and technical intelligence capabilities, military grade communications gear, and Western weapons and munitions (including technology to operate at night).<sup>49</sup>

## External Support

### Taliban

The Taliban are the beneficiaries of support from a number of external actors. Al-Qa`ida has been a long-time ally for the group,<sup>50</sup> providing “mentors and advisers who are embedded with the Taliban, providing advice, guidance and financial support.”<sup>51</sup> The relationship between al-Qa`ida and the Haqqani-led portion of the Taliban is particularly strong.<sup>52</sup> The Taliban also receive funds, arms, and training from Iran.<sup>53</sup> Taliban sources have openly admitted to this support, as well as to the receipt of military supplies from Russia.<sup>54</sup> Private donors from within the Gulf Arab states have also been a consistent source of funding for the Taliban.<sup>55</sup>

The most significant source of external support for the Taliban, however, comes from Pakistan.<sup>56</sup> In his book on the subject, Steve Coll discusses at length the nature of this support, which includes sanctuary for senior Taliban leaders, but also Pakistan army and intelligence service support to recruitment and training of Taliban fighters in areas near the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, support to deployment of those fighters into Afghanistan, and support to their rest and recuperation (including medical support) back inside Pakistan.<sup>57</sup> Pakistan has also provided the Taliban with military materiel, as well as strategic and operational advice for the group's operations in Afghanistan.<sup>58</sup> While Pakistan took great pains to hide this support for years, the amount of reporting on it today is voluminous, and a former Director General of Pakistan's intelligence agency recently admitted to supporting the Taliban “in any way he could.”<sup>59</sup>

### ANDSF

As discussed in the prior section, the ANDSF receive over 90 percent of their funding from international sources, which pays for nearly everything the force needs except for food and uniforms. They also receive training and advisory support from international forces. Most of that training occurs in Afghanistan, though the United States has also been training Afghan pilots at Moody Air Force Base in Georgia.<sup>60</sup>

## Force Employment

### Taliban

Since the mid-2000s, the Taliban have been executing an “out-

side-in” military strategy.<sup>61</sup> In this approach, they first used sanctuaries in Pakistan (and to a lesser extent, Iran<sup>62</sup>) to generate military manpower and materiel, which they used to seize rural areas in Afghanistan.<sup>63</sup> They then used their control of those areas to generate funding (as described above) and additional manpower, which they have used to seize adjacent territory. More recently, they have been using consolidated tracts of rural territory to project military power into areas surrounding Afghanistan's district and provincial capitals, with the goal of seizing and holding them in order to undermine the political control and popular standing of the government. Ultimately, the Taliban's military forces would like to follow this strategy to pressure and seize control of Kabul, at which time the group could claim military victory and political control of the country.<sup>64</sup>

To advance this strategy, the Taliban use a wide variety of tactics, on which they provide regular training for their military forces (with external support, as described above).<sup>65</sup> These include guerrilla tactics (e.g., ambushes, raids, hit-and-run attacks);<sup>66</sup> conventional tactics (e.g., massed assaults, multi-prong attacks);<sup>67</sup> terrorist tactics (e.g., car and truck bombs);<sup>68</sup> intelligence activities;<sup>69</sup> intimidation (e.g., targeted assassinations, kidnappings, night letters, death threats);<sup>70</sup> influence and information warfare (e.g., media and information operations, shadow diplomacy, destroying communications infrastructure);<sup>71</sup> and criminal activities (e.g., drugs, smuggling, protection rackets, kidnapping for ransom).<sup>72</sup> To implement these tactics, the Taliban use primarily Soviet-style small arms and improvised explosive devices (IEDs), though they also have limited numbers of heavy machine guns, heavy mortars, anti-armor weapons, and sniper rifles.<sup>73</sup> In recent years, the Taliban have been able to overrun numerous ANDSF checkpoints and installations, affording them more advanced gear such as up-armored vehicles, night-vision devices, and laser optics.<sup>74</sup> The group has used this advanced equipment to conduct assaults on hardened ANDSF facilities<sup>75</sup> and to arm its relatively new “Red Unit,” which is an elite infantry unit (estimated to number from several hundred to a thousand members) used to spearhead and support attacks against particularly important or sensitive targets across the country.<sup>76</sup>

### ANDSF

For years, the ANDSF's strategy for defending the country from the Taliban relied primarily on two main elements: establishing heavy presence (a “ring of steel”) in and around major population areas and conducting large-scale (e.g., division- or corps-sized) clearing operations to try and retake areas that had been seized by the Taliban.<sup>77</sup> More recently, at the behest of the current U.S. commander in Afghanistan—and as a result of significant growth in these forces as part of President Ashraf Ghani's “ANDSF Roadmap” initiative<sup>78</sup>—the ANDSF have moved away from this model and relied far more heavily on the destructive and disruptive power of the AAF and ASSF in a move away from a counterinsurgency-centric strategy and toward one based on military pressure and attrition. In this mode of operations, elements of the ASSF like the Afghan Commandos conduct direct action raids (often enabled by the AAF) and generate intelligence to cue strikes by the AAF against Taliban

h This military strategy complements the Taliban's political strategy. See, for example, Kriti M. Shah, “The Taliban's Political Strategy,” ORF Raisina Debates, September 19, 2020.



*Afghan National Army (ANA) officers march during a training exercise at the Kabul Military Training Centre in Afghanistan on October 7, 2015. (Ahmad Masood/Reuters)*

targets.<sup>79</sup>

Despite all of its technical capabilities and the preferences of U.S. military leadership in Afghanistan, the preferred mode of operation of the country's army and police remains wide-area security via the use of over 10,000 static checkpoints.<sup>80</sup> This is largely the result of the ANDSF's major shortcomings, which have persistently included poor leadership, high attrition and inability to effectively manage personnel, rampant corruption, and poor sustainment, maintenance, and logistics practices.<sup>81</sup> These shortcomings—along with the desire of Afghan political actors to have a visible ANDSF presence in their areas of influence and the checkpoints' role in extorting local populations<sup>82</sup>—have made them the lowest common denominator and easiest mode of operation for the ANDSF. The U.S. military has been trying for years to change this dynamic, mostly unsuccessfully.<sup>83</sup>

## Cohesion

### Taliban

The military scholar Jasen Castillo cites military cohesion as a dependent variable consisting of two factors: staying power (the ability of a military force to hold together and fight even as the odds of military victory diminish) and battlefield performance (the willingness of units to fight with determination and flexibility).<sup>84</sup> He then relates these factors to two independent variables: degree of regime control and degree of organizational autonomy.<sup>85</sup>

The Taliban—which exhibit a high degree of control over their fighters and the communities in the areas they control,<sup>86</sup> and a high

degree of organizational autonomy via their regional *shura*, *mahaz* (front), and *qet'a* (unit) structures<sup>87</sup>—constitute what Castillo calls a “messianic military.”<sup>88</sup> This type of military is characterized by strong cohesion, reflected in strong staying power (a military that “collapses only when an adversary possesses crushing material superiority”) and strong battlefield performance (whereby “most units fight with determination and flexibility”).<sup>89</sup>

This observation based on Castillo's theory is backed by recent studies employing other methods. For many years, analysts studying the Taliban have commented on perceived issues with the group's cohesiveness and possibilities of fragmentation.<sup>90</sup> As evidence, they have cited events such as infighting among Taliban commanders,<sup>91</sup> the emergence of rival regional *shuras*,<sup>92</sup> widespread disillusion among rank and file with Taliban leadership, and the direction of the seemingly endless war.<sup>93</sup> Yet, recent detailed studies of the Taliban's structure, history (e.g., the group's reaction to the announced death of Mullah Omar), and evolution in the context of studies on insurgent group cohesion have concluded that the Taliban are today a relatively cohesive group.<sup>94</sup> This cohesion likely stems from four major sources: strong vertical and horizontal ties within and

i Note that Castillo only applies his theory to state (national) militaries, and some would rightly question this author's application of it to the Taliban (nominally a non-state group). However, the Taliban today control—and govern—significant swaths of Afghanistan's countryside; have their own governance, diplomatic, military, and information structures; levy taxes; and in many ways act like a pseudo-state. The author therefore finds it instructive to extend Castillo's theory to the Taliban's military component.

across the entirety of the movement and the communities in which it operates;<sup>95</sup> strong and continuous internal socialization of key issues (e.g., peace talks) and focus on obedience and cohesion;<sup>96</sup> the group's organization for, and perceived successes on, the battlefield and in negotiations;<sup>97</sup> and its strong base of material resources.<sup>98</sup>

### **ANDSF**

The Afghan government, on the other hand, maintains a relatively low degree of control over the areas supposedly under its protection,<sup>j</sup> and it affords its military a very low degree of organizational autonomy.<sup>k</sup> This results in the ANDSF being what Castillo calls an “apathetic military.”<sup>99</sup> This type is characterized by a low degree of cohesion, reflected in weak staying power (a military that “collapses quickly as probability of victory decreases”) and weak battlefield performance (whereby “only the best units fight with determination and flexibility”).<sup>100</sup> Examples of weak ANDSF staying power, as defined by Castillo, can be seen at the micro level—in the form of near-daily Taliban overruns of poorly defended ANDSF checkpoints<sup>101</sup>—and at the macro level—in the form of the near-collapse of the Army's 215th Corps in 2015<sup>102</sup> or the collapse of ANDSF defenses around Ghazni in 2018.<sup>103</sup> Examples of weak battlefield performance can be seen in the government's increasing reliance on the AAF and ASSF as the most capable units within the ANDSF.<sup>l</sup>

In addition to these structural examples of weak cohesion, at the individual level, the ANDSF have been plagued with a high level of attrition (on the order of 30 percent per year) for many years, with the primary factor being so-called “dropped from rolls,” or soldiers and police that desert their unit and do not return within 30 days.<sup>104</sup> Such desertions accounted for 66 percent of Afghan army and 73 percent of police attrition in 2020.<sup>105</sup> According to the U.S. Department of Defense, desertions “occur for a variety of reasons, including poor unit leadership, low pay or delays in pay, austere living conditions, denial of leave, and intimidation by insurgents.” The single greatest contributor to desertions is poor leadership,<sup>106</sup> which a former U.S. commander in Afghanistan also called “the greatest weakness of the Afghan security forces.”<sup>107</sup>

### **Net Assessment**

Having discussed size, material resources, external support, force employment, and cohesion for both the Taliban and the ANDSF,

j Examples of this include both the frequent attacks that occur inside Afghanistan's major cities, the ongoing nationwide campaign of targeted assassinations, and the fact that the Taliban are able to project their own governance activities into areas nominally under government control. See Emma Graham-Harrison, “In Afghanistan, Fears of Assassination Overshadow Hopes of Peace,” *Guardian*, November 21, 2020, and Ashley Jackson, “Life Under the Taliban Shadow Government,” Overseas Development Institute, June 2018, p. 5.

k This can be seen in the frequent reach of the most senior Afghan security officials (e.g., the Ministers of Defense and Interior) to tactical levels—for example, by directing tactical operations of security forces directly via cell phone from Kabul. Author discussions with U.S. military personnel, 2008-2020, and “A Force in Fragments: Reconstituting the Afghan National Army,” *Asia Report* 190, International Crisis Group, May 12, 2010.

l In 2017, the U.S. commander in Afghanistan stated that the ASSF conducted 70 percent of all Afghan army offensive operations. See John W. Nicholson, “Statement for the Record by General John W. Nicholson, Commander U.S. Forces – Afghanistan Before the Senate Armed Services Committee on the Situation in Afghanistan,” February 2017, p. 13. This proportion has steadily increased since that time. “Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan,” U.S. Department of Defense, June 30, 2020, p. 9.

the author now conducts a net assessment of those factors in the projected absence of U.S. forces.

### **Size**

A glance at commonly cited numbers would leave the impression that Afghanistan's security forces far outnumber the Taliban, by as much as a factor of four or five (352,000 to 60,000). A more nuanced comparison, however, suggests a different story. Most estimates put the number of Taliban frontline fighters around 60,000. The comparable number of Afghan soldiers is about 96,000. The only detailed public estimate of the Taliban's militia elements—its “holding” force—is around 90,000 individuals.<sup>108</sup> The comparable government force is the police, which has about the same number of people (84,000) in the field. Thus, a purely military comparison of strength shows that the government's fighting force is only about 1.5 times the strength of the Taliban's, while the two sides' holding forces are roughly equivalent.<sup>109</sup> *Assessment: Slight ANDSF advantage.*

### **Material Resources**

The Taliban have a much leaner (i.e., fewer administrative and support elements) and less technically sophisticated fighting force than the Afghan government—lacking an air force, heavy artillery, a fleet of armored vehicles, and the like. As such, the group's military element costs significantly less than the ANDSF. A calculation of the total cost of the Taliban's fighting force relative to the group's revenue was impossible given a lack of reliable data. What is clear is that the Taliban have a significantly diversified portfolio of funding streams and there has been no significant reporting in recent years of the group suffering from financial deficiencies.

The ANDSF, on the other hand, are vastly more advanced than the Taliban in terms of technical capabilities. But they also cost far more than the Afghan government can afford.<sup>110</sup> The United States and its allies have thus far been willing to pay the multi-billion dollar per year price tag for the ANDSF—and have committed to providing some degree of security assistance through 2024 (though the scope of that assistance is to be determined).<sup>111</sup> The ANDSF are thus heavily reliant on just a few sources of funding, and there is little reason to think the Afghan government will reach fiscal self-sustainability anytime soon.<sup>112</sup> Afghanistan's gross domestic product (GDP) has only averaged 2-3 percent growth in recent years, and decades of war have stunted the development of most domestic industries.<sup>113</sup> Afghan government funding for its security forces (which is only about 8-9 percent of their total cost) is equivalent to roughly two percent of its GDP and one fourth of total government revenues—levels that are already extremely high for a developing country.<sup>114</sup> The United States' own assessment is that “given the persistence of the insurgency and continued slow growth of the Afghan economy ... full self-sufficiency by 2024 does not appear realistic, even if levels of violence and, with it, the ANDSF force structure, reduce significantly.”<sup>115</sup>

Critically, the ANDSF will continue to be reliant for the foreseeable future on contract logistics support for aircraft, vehicles, and other technical equipment.<sup>116</sup> For example, sustainment costs make up nearly 64 percent of the AAF budget, and sustainment of the AAF alone is just over 13 percent of the total amount of U.S.-provided funding.<sup>117</sup> The U.S. Defense Department has assessed that without this funding, “the AAF's ability to sustain critical air-to-ground capability will fail and the fleet will steadily become inoperable.”<sup>118</sup> Without these capabilities, ground units will not be able to execute operations in locations where the terrain prohibits the use

of traditional ground transportation, thereby limiting operational effectiveness.<sup>119</sup> *Assessment: Strong Taliban advantage for funding relative to requirements; strong ANDSF advantage for technical capabilities.*

### External Support

As just discussed, the Taliban appear to have a sustainable, diversified funding model for their fighting forces. Thus, while the group benefits from external support from the likes of Russia, Iran, and even al-Qa`ida, it does not appear to require any of this support to continue its operations in Afghanistan. Pakistan's support to the Taliban, however, has been essential to the group's success to date.<sup>120</sup> While the Taliban could, in theory, attempt to fully move their organization into areas they control in Afghanistan, doing so would be not only a serious logistical undertaking (e.g., since many of the group's recruitment efforts and training locations are centered in Pakistan's border areas) but would also expose the group to persistent threats of attack by the ANDSF (most notably, by air). Taliban leaders are thus quite reliant on sanctuaries in Pakistan for their own safety and comfort. While this has occasionally made them vulnerable to pressure by Pakistan (the arrest of Mullah Baradar is an important case in this regard<sup>121</sup>), this pressure has thus far not been significant enough to warrant the group completely decamping to Afghanistan.

The ANDSF are similarly reliant on external support, though critically in different ways. Costing many times what the Taliban's fighting force costs, the ANDSF are almost entirely reliant on foreign funding, most notably for salaries and the costs of procuring, maintaining, and sustaining the force's technical capabilities. The continued provision of this funding is at risk in the absence of U.S. advisors to provide oversight of the billions of dollars in aid such support requires.<sup>122</sup> Even if it were to continue with no U.S. troops on the ground, there are other important roles played by advisors that would end. For example, only a fraction of the funding provided by the United States and its allies for the ANDSF is given to the Afghan government directly (as "on budget" funds), with the rest being spent "off budget" by U.S. military entities in Kabul.<sup>123</sup> The Afghan Ministry of Defense and Ministry of Interior persistently struggle to spend even the on-budget amount, averaging only about a 60 percent execution rate.<sup>124</sup> U.S. advisors have been getting around this by doing their own procurement for goods and services down to Army corps and provincial headquarters levels—a practice that would disappear in the absence of those advisors.<sup>125</sup> *Assessment: Draw; both forces have significant external dependencies.*

### Force Employment

At the strategic level, the Taliban have consistently employed their "outside in" strategy since the mid-2000s, and have steadily eroded the government's territorial control since then.<sup>126</sup> This is roughly the same strategy that was successfully employed by the mujahideen against the Soviet occupation and by the Taliban in its initial conquest of Afghanistan.<sup>127</sup> The Afghan government, on the other hand, has vacillated in its strategic approach since the end of the U.S. surge in 2014. In the 2015-2018 timeframe, the ANDSF implemented what was called a "hold-fight-disrupt" strategy. As described by the commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan at the time:

*This methodology designated areas which the ANDSF would "Hold" to prevent the loss of major population centers and other strategic areas to the enemy, those for which the ANDSF would immediately "Fight" to retain and those areas where*

*they would assume risk by only "Disrupting" the enemy if they appeared. The ANDSF designed their phased operational campaign plan, called Operation SHAFQA, to anticipate and counter the enemy's main and supporting efforts. This prioritization caused them to concentrate forces in more populous areas and remove forces from more remote, sparsely inhabited areas.<sup>128</sup>*

It is perhaps not surprising then that the last reported official U.S. assessment of territorial control (in October 2018) showed the government in control of 54 percent of the country's districts, with the Taliban in control of 12 percent and the rest contested.<sup>129</sup> In 2015, the same source had assessed the Afghan government as being in control of 72 percent of districts.<sup>130</sup> The dramatic decrease in government control (from 72 to 54 percent) was commensurate with both the introduction of the "hold-fight-disrupt" strategy and the dramatic increase in estimates of Taliban strength (from 20,000 to 60,000) over roughly the same timeframe.

By late 2018, the new U.S. commander in Afghanistan shifted to an attrition strategy, featuring offensive operations by the ASSF and AAF, with the rest of the ANDSF largely in supporting roles (e.g., attempting to hold ground via checkpoints).<sup>131</sup> This shift increased the number of Taliban casualties through more aggressive air and SOF targeting of Taliban fighters, and there are indications that the Taliban wanted that bleeding to stop.<sup>132</sup> But overall, it failed to stem the Taliban's steady encroachment on Afghanistan's major cities. Today, approximately 16 of the country's 34 provincial capitals are effectively surrounded by Taliban-controlled or -contested areas.<sup>m</sup> *Assessment: Slight Taliban advantage.*

### Cohesion

Application of Castillo's theory of military cohesion to both the Taliban and the ANDSF shows the former to be a more cohesive fighting force than the ANDSF. This theoretical conclusion is supported by independent analyses of the Taliban in the context of theories of insurgency cohesion, as well as by observations of ANDSF manpower trends. *Assessment: Strong Taliban advantage.*

### Summary

Table 1 summarizes the comparative discussion of each factor and presents a net assessment of each. As the last row indicates, *the net assessment of these factors tilts slightly to the advantage of the Taliban*. While the ANDSF field a slightly larger fighting force and have vastly more technical capabilities than the Taliban, they are almost entirely reliant on external funding (75 percent from the United States)—most critically, for salaries, procurement, and sustainment of those technical capabilities. They have also not been able to identify an effective strategy, and they are aptly described by Castillo's theory as an "apathetic military."<sup>133</sup> The Taliban, on the other hand, field a slightly smaller and far less technically sophisticated fighting force than the ANDSF. But that force is cohesive and

m U.S. forces in Afghanistan no longer produce assessments of district control in Afghanistan, but FDD's Long War Journal has continued to do so via independent means. FDD's current assessment shows the Afghan government in control of 133 (33 percent) of the country's districts, with the Taliban in control of 75 (19 percent) and another 187 (47 percent) contested. (The last three districts are unconfirmed.) See Bill Roggio and Alexandra Gutowski, "Mapping Taliban Control," FDD's Long War Journal. The author calculated the number of provincial capitals surrounded by Taliban controlled/contested areas by comparing FDD's map to a political map of Afghanistan.

appears to be financially sustainable, and is employing technologies that are sustainable and a strategy that has been proven to work in Afghanistan. Those advantages are evident in tangible successes of the Taliban’s military machine on the battlefield, most notably in the steady erosion of government control since the end of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission in 2015.

<i>Factor</i>	<i>Advantage</i>	<i>Comments</i>
<b>Size</b>	Slightly ANDSF	The ANDSF have a slight (1.5x) advantage in fighting forces over the Taliban, though holding forces are roughly equal.
<b>Material Resources</b>	Funding: Strongly Taliban Technical Capability: Strongly ANDSF	The Taliban’s fighting force appears to be financially sustainable, but has far less military technology than the ANDSF.
<b>External Support</b>	Draw	Taliban are heavily reliant on Pakistani support. ANDSF are heavily reliant on international funding and sustainment.
<b>Force Employment</b>	Slightly Taliban	ANDSF have tried multiple strategies since 2015 with steady erosion of government control. Taliban utilizing same strategy employed by two previously successful insurgencies in Afghanistan. ANDSF control of the air and better SOF are mitigating factors.
<b>Cohesion</b>	Strongly Taliban	Taliban organization is more cohesive, and individual fighters show greater will to fight than individual members of the ANDSF.
<b>Net Assessment</b>	Slightly Taliban	While slightly smaller and less technologically sophisticated, the Taliban’s fighting forces are cohesive, financially sustainable, employing sustainable technologies and a proven strategy, with tangible results.

Table 1: A net assessment of ANDSF and Taliban’s military strength in the projected absence of U.S. forces

### Conclusion and Implications

The author set out in this article to address the question: If the United States withdraws the remainder of its forces from Afghanistan, would the ANDSF or the Taliban be stronger militarily? Having conducted a net assessment of the Taliban and ANDSF in the projected absence of U.S. troops across five factors—size, material resources, external support, force employment, and cohesion—the author concludes that the answer is slightly in favor of the Taliban. This finding has numerous implications, but this article now focuses on two immediate suggestions for improving the military balance in Afghanistan.

First, the ANDSF would be well served by significantly increasing its focus on recruitment. While authorized for an end strength of 352,000 soldiers and patrolmen, the ANDSF has never approached that figure and is currently about 63,000 personnel short. In other words, the ANDSF are missing a cadre roughly the size of the Taliban’s entire fighting force. Growing the ANDSF to their approved end strength would give the force a much stronger size advantage than it currently enjoys. While size is not everything, in an attrition war of territorial control—which the war in Afghanistan has steadily become—it is a critical factor. Having a larger force may also help mitigate the risk of increased desertions or defections by members of the ANDSF if U.S. advisors depart or if the Taliban continue to gain territory.<sup>134</sup>

Second, the U.S.-led advisory mission since 2015 has not been helping the ANDSF to win, so much as it has been slowing the ANDSF’s losses<sup>n</sup> by improving the force’s technological advantages over the Taliban. As this analysis shows, that advantage is today quite large. However, it has come at the expense of dependency—the ANDSF are currently far too complex and expensive for the government to sustain. This has been mitigated for years by advisors who have been directly performing critical support and sustainment functions of the ANDSF. If the United States fully withdraws those advisors, as stipulated in the U.S.-Taliban agreement,<sup>o</sup> the Taliban’s slight military advantage at that point would begin to grow, as a result of at least two factors: (1) the ANDSF’s technical advantage will erode as maintenance and support functions currently performed or overseen by advisors slow down or cease; and (2) the ANDSF’s major vulnerability—its dependence on foreign funding—will increasingly be at risk, since without U.S. troops in Afghanistan, the United States would have limited ability for oversight of security assistance and less “skin in the game.” Both factors portend likely declines in U.S. security assistance funding (which may be exacerbated by continued corruption in Afghanistan’s Ministry of Defense

n This is most evident in the goal of controlling 80 percent of Afghanistan’s territory within two years that was stated by the U.S. commander in Afghanistan in 2017. Not only was that goal not achieved, the Afghan government has demonstrably lost ground since it was stated. See “Department of Defense Press Briefing by General Nicholson via Teleconference from Kabul, Afghanistan.”

o The agreement stipulates that, subject to the Taliban meeting their obligations under the agreement’s terms (which include not allowing terrorist groups like al-Qa`ida to use Afghanistan to threaten the security of the United States and its allies), the “United States, its allies, and the Coalition will complete withdrawal of all remaining forces from Afghanistan” within 14 months of the agreement’s signing (which is generally accepted to be May 1, 2021). See “Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban and the United States of America.”

and Ministry of Interior<sup>135 p</sup>). Further, the resultant increase of the Taliban's military advantage is likely to be non-linear. This will result both from increasing overuse and cannibalization of technical capabilities (e.g., helicopters) and from the ANDSF's general lack of "staying power" as predicted by Castillo's theory.<sup>136</sup> To stem the rate of this possible future decline, the United States would be wise to immediately do everything it can to decrease the complexity of

ANDSF equipment and systems, and increase the sustainability of the force. This would ideally include significant adjustments to both force structure and force employment.<sup>137</sup>

In conclusion, the author finds that if the United States were to withdraw the remainder of its forces from Afghanistan, the Taliban would enjoy a slight military advantage that would increase in a compounding manner over time. While the Taliban's chief spokesman recently "said that the group's primary goal is to settle the issues through talks and that a 'military solution' would be used only as a last resort,"<sup>138</sup> the results of this analysis suggest that the United States and government of Afghanistan would be wise to vigorously pursue negotiations while U.S. forces remain and avoid tempting the Taliban to exploit the military advantage it would have in their absence. **CTC**

p It is noteworthy that Congress has now required the Defense Department to withhold 5-15 percent of ASFF funding for the ANDSF if certain conditions (e.g., pertaining to corruption) are not met by the Afghan government. See "William M. (Mac) Thornberry National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2021," Section 1521, 116<sup>th</sup> Congress of the United States of America.

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# The April 2020 Islamic State Terror Plot Against U.S. and NATO Military Bases in Germany: The Tajik Connection

By Nodirbek Soliev

**An alleged terror plot by a Tajik Islamic State cell to attack U.S. and NATO military bases in Germany, which was thwarted by German police in April 2020, highlights the counterterrorism challenges posed by the radicalization of a small proportion of Central Asian migrants in Europe. It also demonstrates that despite its territorial defeat in Iraq and Syria, the Islamic State retains the ambition and ability to generate plots by mobilizing clandestine cells in Europe. The arrested cell members developed contacts in transnational organized crime and became involved in unusual methods of fundraising, such as bounty hunting and murder-for-hire operations. The case sheds light on the evolving networking between Central Asian and Chechen radical and criminal elements in Europe.**

In mid-April 2020, German authorities detained four Tajik nationals over an Islamic State-linked terror conspiracy to attack a variety of targets including U.S. and NATO military facilities and personnel stationed in the country. According to the Federal Public Prosecutor's Office, the arrested men were members of a terrorist cell that was in regular contact with two senior Islamic State militants—one of whom was based in Syria and the other in Afghanistan—from whom they received instructions. Allegedly, the cell members initially considered an attack in Tajikistan, but ultimately switched their focus to Germany after being convinced by their Islamic State contact and mentor in Syria, an operative known as “Abu Fatima,” to “God willing, perform the jihad in the area where you are!”<sup>1</sup>

It is alleged Abu Fatima issued this order to the ringleader of the cell through a voice message sent through the messaging app Telegram before the ringleader was arrested in Germany in March 2019.<sup>2</sup> Reportedly, Islamic State “leadership” rejected a plan by the cell members to travel to Syria, and urged them to fight in Europe, describing it as a “place of evil.”<sup>3</sup>

While the attacks were not planned for the immediate future, at the time of their arrest, the cell members had already allegedly

ordered (but not yet received) bomb parts online,<sup>4</sup> and were stocking up on firearms, precursor chemicals, and ammunition.<sup>4</sup> Their alleged plan was to attack the U.S. air base in Spangdahlem and the NATO AWACS<sup>b</sup> air base near Geilenkirchen,<sup>5</sup> possibly with remote-controlled drones or paragliders armed with explosives.<sup>6</sup> The wife of one suspect had reportedly called a flight school in Bitburg, a town in Rhineland-Palatinate, which is about 12 kilometers away from the Geilenkirchen air base, and expressed her interest in attending paragliding courses.<sup>7</sup> <sup>c</sup> The plot against the air bases was just one of several attacks the group was plotting. As outlined below, the other plots reportedly included setting off a gas explosion in a specially rented residential apartment and two separate murder-for-hire operations in Albania and Germany.

It is alleged that in the course of their attack plotting, the cell members downloaded several bomb-making manuals from Telegram channels allegedly linked to the Islamic State.<sup>8</sup> With those manuals and the ammunition and detonators that they allegedly had already ordered online but had not yet received, they were exploring various ways of making and using homemade explosives for their alleged planned attack.<sup>9</sup> However, the plotters did not have sufficient skills and expertise on how to properly put together the necessary components.<sup>10</sup> In order to troubleshoot, they reportedly planned to conduct tests on their explosives in the deep forest once all the ingredients were available.<sup>11</sup>

It is alleged that the suspects were learning from the downloaded online manuals about how to carry out an assassination by

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- a According to the court indictment, the cell's ringleader had obtained instructions on how to prepare explosives and detonating mechanisms, and some of the components required for this had already been purchased online. See “Anklage gegen mutmaßliches Mitglied einer Terrorzelle der ausländischen terroristischen Vereinigung ‘Islamischer Staat (IS)’ erhoben,” an official indictment issued by the Public Prosecutor Office of Germany, July 27, 2020, and “Ermittler heben IS-Zelle in NRW aus: Fünf Männer in Untersuchungshaft,” *Schweriner Volkszeitung*, April 15, 2020.
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poisoning and looked into chemical artillery shells and dropping munitions from drones.<sup>12</sup> Their online purchase orders reportedly included a gas pressure regulator and welding glue.<sup>13</sup> It was reported that the cell was planning to heed recent online propaganda calls by Islamic State leadership for supporters to carry out gas explosions in specially rented apartments and kill as many victims as possible.<sup>14</sup>

The arrestees are also accused of raising and channeling funds to the Islamic State's core organization in Syria. Motivated in part by this fundraising drive, the quartet had reportedly planned to assassinate Amir Masoud Arabpour,<sup>15</sup> an Iranian-born Christian convert 'vlogger' in the German North Rhine-Westphalia city of Neuss, whom they deemed to be a public critic of Islam.<sup>16</sup> Reportedly, the assassination plan was hatched to earn a bounty for the victim's murder by his Islamist enemies.<sup>17</sup> In addition, the cell members are suspected of conspiring with Russian-born Chechens from Austria<sup>18</sup> to murder a businessman in Albania for USD\$40,000, which was offered by an unidentified person from Sweden. Ultimately, both alleged murder schemes failed.<sup>19</sup>

Four of the suspects, who have only been partially identified as Azizjon B., Muhammadali G., Farhodshoh K. and Sunatullokh K. in accordance with German legal tradition, were arrested in April 2020 during a series of raids conducted by tactical police units at multiple locations in the western German state of North Rhine Westphalia.<sup>20</sup> The counterterrorism operation, codenamed "Takim,"<sup>21</sup> involved as many as 350 police officers<sup>22</sup> (Since then, the plotters have been referred by German authorities as the "Takim cell."<sup>23</sup>) Around two weeks later, Albanian security agencies arrested another Tajik citizen, Komron Zukhurov, in Tirana and subsequently deported him to Germany under an international arrest warrant issued by a German federal court in connection with his alleged involvement in the terror plot.<sup>24</sup> On September 22, 2020, the alleged ringleader was brought before the Higher Regional Court in Düsseldorf to start trial proceedings, with a verdict expected in late January 2021. The other defendants are set to be tried in a different procedure.<sup>25</sup>

Commenting on the thwarted plot in an interview published in the August 2020 issue of this publication, the European Union's Counter-terrorism Coordinator Gilles de Kerchove stated that "this plot shows, once again, that we should remain vigilant about the threat of Daesh [Islamic State] attacks in Europe and that the threat does not come only from individuals who are inspired by terrorist propaganda online and act independently. Daesh continues to seek contact with potential attackers in Europe whenever it spots an opportunity to do so, to guide them in their attack plans."<sup>26</sup>

There are several interesting aspects of the disrupted Islamic State plotting in Germany that are worth analyzing. But, as this article will outline, the most striking feature is that the attack cell in Germany was allegedly operating under the guidance of the same Tajik and Russian Islamic State senior operatives who authorized and directed the April 2017 truck-ramming attack in the Swedish capital of Stockholm from their hideouts in Syria. A more detailed study of the Stockholm attack and the Central Asian threat nexus can be found in an article published by Damon Mehl in the November 2018 issue of this publication.<sup>27</sup>

Similar to the Stockholm case, the suspects in this recent set

of arrests were Tajik-speaking Central Asian migrants<sup>d</sup> who had been residing in Germany for quite a while, with no travel history to conflict zones. Although the attack plans in Germany were discovered and thwarted successfully, the attack in Sweden, unfortunately, was not prevented.

Drawing on a wide range of local and foreign news sources as well as German court documents and reports about trial proceedings, this article provides a case study of the Takim cell by first examining the links between the alleged cell and Islamic State operatives in Syria and Afghanistan. It then analyzes the alleged cell's pathway to terror, its links to previous terrorist activity within Germany, and the extremist environment in which the Tajik cell emerged and operated. Next, the article looks at the likely reasons why Germany was the target of the plot. The article then examines the alleged cell's transnational web of jihadi and criminal contacts and its alleged attempts to finance its activities by involving itself in contract killing. The article concludes by highlighting how the Islamic State is eyeing Muslim migrant communities to expand its presence and fundraising activities across Europe.

### Links to Islamic State Operatives in Syria and Afghanistan

The alleged ringleader of the Tajik Cell was arrested more than a year before the others. German prosecutors reportedly believe a Tajik national, identified by Radio Free Europe as "Ravshan Boqiev," was the leader of the cell and a contact person between the cell and the Islamic State.<sup>28</sup> The 30-year-old Boqiev has been in pre-trial custody since police discovered two firearms in his apartment in the city of Wuppertal on March 15, 2019.<sup>29</sup> Prior to his arrest, he had reportedly downloaded several bomb-making manuals from Islamic State-related channels on Telegram and distributed them to his accomplices.<sup>30 e</sup>

According to the author's review of German court documents and various news reports on the case, it appears that much of the plotting had already come together by the time of Boqiev's arrest. However, in mid-March 2019, investigators reportedly knew only part of the cell's structure, plans, and its connections.<sup>31</sup> German authorities stated that many details about the Takim cell and their plotting were revealed to them after Boqiev began to cooperate with investigators in December 2019.<sup>32</sup> They also managed to extract significant data from Boqiev's personal mobile phone, including audio and text messages that he exchanged with Abu Fatima and others, as Boqiev had not been able to delete them before his arrest.<sup>33</sup> After Boqiev's arrest and subsequent police investigations of his potential accomplices, other cell members reportedly became extremely cautious and secretive,<sup>34</sup> but they allegedly continued to pursue their attack plans while spying out for potential targets (the U.S. and NATO air bases), booking paragliding courses and waiting for the

d It should be noted that while the perpetrator of the Stockholm truck attack was a Tajik-speaking Uzbek national, the disrupted Islamic State cell members in Germany included only Tajik citizens.

e It should be noted that in January 2021, German media reported that prosecutors had dropped charges against Boqiev relating to terrorist financing and the procurement of instructions for a terrorist attack. The reasons for that decision are not clear. He still faces the more serious charges relating to plotting terror attacks and murder. "Mehrere Jahre Haft für mutmaßlichen IS-Terroristen gefordert," *Westfälische Nachrichten*, January 11, 2021.



*A sign of the U.S. Air Force Spangdahlem Air Base is seen near the main gate in the Eifel region in Spangdahlem near Bitburg, Germany, on July 30, 2020. (Wolfgang Rattay/Reuters)*

delivery of bomb parts that they ordered online. However, based on publicly available information, it remains unclear whether after the cell ringleader's detention, the cell still maintained contacts with its Islamic State handlers in Afghanistan and Syria.

Boqiev had reportedly been in regular contact with the Islamic State since he first communicated with Abu Fatima via the encrypted messaging app Telegram in January 2019.<sup>35</sup> Soon afterward, reportedly upon the instructions of Abu Fatima, Boqiev brought together at least four like-minded associates from his Tajik social circle and formed a cell. He also reportedly pledged allegiance to then Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.<sup>36</sup> As German press has noted, Boqiev was probably the only person within the Takim cell with whom Abu Fatima was in contact, and the two were conducting all their communications through Telegram since their first connection via the same digital platform.<sup>37</sup>

Abu Fatima is known to be the *nom de guerre* of Arsen Mukhazhirov, a 33-year-old Islamic State operative from Russia's Dagestan republic, whose name appears on Interpol's wanted list.<sup>38</sup> He has performed a prominent role in the Islamic State hierarchy. The Swedish newspaper *Svenska Dagbladet* reported that, as a Russian-speaker, Abu Fatima has been in charge of recruitment of new members among Russian-speaking online communities, including Central Asians.<sup>39</sup> He has also reportedly run fundraising drives on various cyber platforms.<sup>40</sup> Swedish authorities established that Abu Fatima recruited Rakhmat Akilov, an Uzbek national of Tajik origin, for the attack in Stockholm.<sup>41</sup> According to news reports, Abu Fatima in coordination with two jihadi comrades from Tajikistan in Syria, namely Tojiddin Nazarov, guided the Stockholm truck attacker Akilov throughout the operation via online communication

apps Telegram and Zello.<sup>42</sup>

Abu Fatima is known to operate under the hierarchy of Gulmurod Khalimov,<sup>43</sup> Tajikistan's former police special operations commander, who defected to the Islamic State in May 2015 and replaced Abu Omar al-Shishani (killed in July 2016) as the group's "War Minister" in Syria.<sup>44</sup> According to Tajik security authorities, Khalimov once commanded a unit of 200 fighters in Syria, including 50 Europeans, that was in charge of carrying out attacks in Europe and Central Asia.<sup>45</sup> Given his high-ranking position in the terrorist network and connections to Abu Fatima and the above-mentioned Tojiddin Nazarov and Farhod Hasanov in Syria, there is good reason to assume that Khalimov might have authorized the German plot as well. As Damon Mehl has noted, "Khalimov is the highest-profile Tajik citizen to have joined the Islamic State."<sup>46</sup> In September 2016, the U.S. State Department designated Khalimov as a "specially designated global terrorist" and announced a USD\$3 million reward for information on him.<sup>47</sup>

There have been conflicting reports on the fate of Khalimov since he last appeared publicly in an online propaganda video about four years ago. In January 2019, security authorities in Tajikistan assessed that Khalimov and some of his associates had relocated to Afghanistan's northeastern province of Badakhshan.<sup>48</sup> However, a United Nations report from July 2019 indicated that Khalimov was in Syria's Idlib province with 600 Tajik fighters under his command but had lost his position as the "minister of war."<sup>49</sup> Recently, in August 2020, Tajikistan's Minister of Internal Affairs, Ramazon Rahimzoda Hamro, stated that some Islamic State Tajik fighters who had returned home from Syria testified to his ministry that Khalimov and his family had been killed in an airstrike in Syria. The

minister highlighted that in accordance with existing legislation, without hard evidence that is obtained through methods such as identification of human remains, such testimonies are not sufficient to officially announce someone dead.<sup>50</sup> So, whether Khalimov has actually been killed or is hiding elsewhere will only become clear with time. If Khalimov really did relocate, it raises the question over whether he might be the senior Islamic State operative in Afghanistan who German authorities stated was communicating with the cell.<sup>51</sup>

There are reasons to be skeptical of this. German prosecutors have described the cell's contact in Afghanistan as a high-ranking Islamic State member and "religious preacher," who gave a series of radical lectures to the Tajik cell via the encrypted communication platform Zello.<sup>52</sup> According to court documents, this militant issued "specific guidelines" for "the attack" planned by the cell in Germany.<sup>53</sup> The description of the cell's Afghan contact as a "religious preacher" would suggest Khalimov is not the Islamic State operative in Afghanistan in question. As a professional military sniper, Khalimov rose to lead the police special forces and has never been known to have religious training or engage in preaching activities.

Although there is no open-source information that Takim cell's interlocutor in Afghanistan was Tajik, it is worth noting some Tajiks have risen to senior roles in the Islamic State in Afghanistan. A United Nations report from July 2019 identified Sayvaly Shafiev (alias "Mauaviya" or "Jalolobodi") as the commander of the main unit of 200 Central Asian fighters that fight under the umbrella of the Islamic State's Afghanistan-based affiliate, Islamic State Khorasan (ISK).<sup>54</sup> While operating from ISK's major stronghold in the eastern Afghan province of Nangarhar, Shafiev is also believed to be a member of the ISK executive council, or *shura*. In addition, he is known to have recruited other Tajik fighters for ISK as well as taking part in online propaganda and fundraising activities.<sup>55</sup>

Most recent official estimates indicate that about 2,000 Tajiks have left for Syria and Iraq to join various jihadi groups.<sup>56</sup> Of the total reported number (2,000), about 1,000 Tajiks have been killed on the battlefield,<sup>57</sup> 163 have voluntarily returned home,<sup>58</sup> and 500 others, including their families, have been captured (or surrendered) and placed in detention facilities across Syria and Iraq.<sup>59</sup> Tajik authorities have so far repatriated 90 minors from Iraq.<sup>60</sup> However, the fate and location of a sizable proportion of the surviving fighters remains uncertain. It also should be noted that as most Tajik and Central Asian militant groups are based in Afghanistan and Syria, such organized entities presently have no visible operational foothold in much of Tajikistan. Nevertheless, what the United Nations reported about the emergence of a large Central Asian unit within ISK under the command of a Tajik militant and Khalimov's possible relocation to Afghanistan raises concerns about an increased terror threat to Tajikistan.

## Pathway to Terror

Although all the suspects are Tajik citizens who were residing in Germany as migrants, much remains unclear about their exact path toward radicalization. What *is* known is that none of the arrested plotters had ever traveled to jihadi conflict zones. Investigations have revealed that Boqiev and his accomplices were exposed to radical ideologies, in part through their personal interactions with some radical elements within Syrian refugee and Turkish immigrant communities in Germany.<sup>61</sup> Boqiev was born and grew up in the Tajik capital of Dushanbe prior to leaving for Russia, probably

as a migrant laborer, several years ago.<sup>62</sup> He relocated to Germany in 2011 with his mother and brother as an asylum seeker. While in Germany, Boqiev reportedly became addicted to gambling, which eventually led his wife to divorce him. According to *Die Welt*, the divorce, as a traumatic event, might have played some role in his radicalization.<sup>63</sup>

According to *Der Spiegel*, Boqiev (identified by the news magazine as Ravsan B.) had first appeared on the radar of German intelligence services a few months before his arrest. While tapping into the cell phone of a crime suspect from Moenchengladbach, a city in North Rhine-Westphalia, in December 2018, the local criminal police detected a suspicious conversation between certain Syrian refugees and Turkish individuals in Germany. Over the phone, the men talked about founding a "soccer team," which would become a "martyr for faith." Decoding the conversations revealed that they were talking about a different terror plot (henceforth this particular plot is referred by the author as "soccer team" plot), for which Boqiev and other Tajik fanatics were supposed to provide firearms, *Der Spiegel* reported.<sup>64</sup> The men used the name of the Real Madrid football club as a synonym for the Islamic State.<sup>65</sup>

## The Swiss Connection

There are close similarities between the "soccer team" plot and a plot in Germany reportedly described by a senior Swiss Islamic State operative during an interrogation. The interrogation was conducted with a Swiss-born Islamic State fighter Daniel D. after his capture by Kurdish forces in eastern Syria in June 2019.<sup>66</sup> Considered a dangerous operative, Daniel D. was once part of the external operations arm of the Islamic State in Syria.<sup>67</sup> He reportedly stated in an interrogation that in December 2018, the Islamic State had deployed a team of 11 fighters to Turkey, from where they were supposed to travel to Germany posing as refugees for cover, to carry out attacks there. The German newspaper *Kölnner Stadt-Anzeiger* reported that the leader of the dispatched team probably had already established close contacts with the Takim cell, which was apparently spying out potential targets.<sup>68</sup> Although no other details about the fate of the 11-man cell in Turkey have been revealed, and it is not publicly known whether they reached Germany, the Swiss Islamic State operative's reported claims point toward the Islamic State cell deployed to Turkey having some links to the "soccer team" terror plot, which allegedly involved Syrian refugees and Turkish individuals as well as Boqiev and some of his associates.

## Violent Extremism within the Tajik Diaspora

To understand the alleged radicalization to violence of the Takim cell, it is important to discuss the Islamist extremist milieu that likely influenced them and the wider challenge posed by radicalization within Tajik diaspora communities in Europe.

In recent years, radical ideologies have been gaining a greater foothold in Germany, in particular within immigrant and refugee communities. The country has accepted in more than one million refugees since 2015.<sup>69</sup> German authorities have warned that some of these refugees are at risk for radicalization by 11,000 individuals in Germany assessed to be Islamist radicals as of April 2020, with 680 of these extremists assessed to be "particularly dangerous" because of their inclination toward violence. For the latter category, this was a five-fold increase since 2013.<sup>70</sup> It is notable that the German state with the highest number of salafis is North Rhine Westphalia,<sup>71</sup> where the alleged Tajik "Takim" plotters were operating.

German security agencies have long been aware that Islamist extremism was gaining traction among some members of the 6,300-strong Tajik migrant community and have worked to prevent potential threats from such individuals.<sup>72</sup> In March 2019, police conducted anti-terrorism raids focused on Tajik migrants. As part of the operation, which came after a 19-year-old Tajik citizen slammed his car into a pedestrian area zone in the city of Essen, 11 individuals—predominantly Tajik citizens—were arrested at multiple locations in North Rhine-Westphalia and Baden-Württemberg, but all of them were subsequently released after the prosecutors did not find sufficient evidence warranting their further detention.<sup>73</sup>

There have also been cases in which battle-hardened Tajik Islamic State militants have entered Germany posing as refugees after fighting in Syria. A case in point was the June 2016 arrest by German authorities in North Rhine Westphalia of Mukhamadsaid Saidov, a Tajik national who had traveled to Germany from Syria.<sup>74</sup> Although Saidov was not implicated in any specific attack plot in Germany, federal prosecutors alleged that he was a close associate of the senior Tajik Islamic State leader Gulmurod Khalimov.<sup>75</sup> In July 2017, the Higher Regional Court of Düsseldorf sentenced Saidov to five years of imprisonment for fighting in the ranks of the Islamic State in Syria.<sup>76</sup>

According to the press release issued by the court, Saidov had traveled to Syria through Turkey in February 2015. There has been conflicting reporting on which country he started his journey to Syria from. According to Focus Online, a German-language news magazine, when Saidov started his trip to Syria, he had already been residing in Germany since his arrival from Tajikistan in February 2014. The news magazine reported that after Saidov's application for refugee status was rejected by German authorities in July 2014, he and his wife ultimately decided to move to Syria through Turkey.<sup>77</sup> However, another German newspaper *Kölner Stadt-Anzeiger* stated that Saidov's journey to Syria was from Tajikistan via Turkey.<sup>78</sup>

In Syria, after completion of his ideological and military training, Saidov was deployed to perform guard duties in the areas that the Islamic State then controlled in the northern city of Raqqa. Saidov later was injured in one of the combat operations. Allegedly unfit for the fight, he then took on administrative tasks, while also appearing in several extremist propaganda videos calling on his compatriots to join the terrorist group.<sup>79</sup> His case was a demonstration of the potential security risk posed to Europe by bogus asylum seekers.

In Europe, Germany, along with Poland, is among the top destination countries for Tajik migrants. Currently, Germany hosts about 5,600 Tajik migrants.<sup>80</sup> Some have already been registered as refugees while others, such as Boqiev before his arrest, are classed as asylum seekers.<sup>f</sup> Some Tajiks, including one of Boqiev's associates who was arrested in April 2020 in connection with the plot against U.S. and NATO military bases, Sunatullokh K., have moved to Europe in search of better economic and education opportunities. It should be noted that like all other Muslim migrant communities in

Europe, the overwhelming majority of Tajik migrants are law-abiding and peaceful and do not have any association with terror groups and activities.

The 24-year-old Sunatullokh K. was born to and raised in a family with limited means in Tajikistan's Khatlon province. In 2016, he decided to settle down in Germany after making several business trips there between 2012 and 2016 for the purpose of importing automobile parts to sell in a shop in Dushanbe. After relocating to Germany, Sunatullokh K. married a local German, who converted to Islam and changed her name. He also started attending a language teaching center to learn German. Until his arrest, Sunatullokh K. was still sending car parts from Germany to his business partner to sell in Tajikistan.<sup>81</sup> While in Germany, the cell members apparently had no permanent job with stable income; they did mostly odd jobs, like working in a scrap yard.<sup>82</sup>

According to Tajik authorities, during the time they previously lived in Tajikistan, the Germany plotters had not shown any visible signs of radicalization.<sup>83</sup> In the case of Boqiev, one question concerns whether his radicalization might have started when he lived in Russia before moving to Germany. Studies suggest that the Islamic State and other militant groups have long focused on radicalizing and recruiting among Central Asian migrant workers in Russia that include Tajiks.<sup>84</sup> Official estimates from Tajikistan suggest that nearly 500,000 Tajik nationals visit Russia annually as seasonal foreign laborers.<sup>85</sup>

Tajik jihadis have become implicated in terror plotting in other countries besides Germany and Sweden. On May 7, 2020, security services in Poland detained four Tajik nationals who allegedly sympathized with the Islamic State and attempted to recruit Polish and Ukrainian converts to Islam to carry out attacks in Poland.<sup>86</sup> In June 2020, the country's Internal Security Agency (*Agencja Bezpieczeństwa Wewnętrznego/ABW*) in coordination with foreign counterparts detained and brought back a fifth suspect who had fled to an unspecified country in December 2019.<sup>87</sup> The fifth suspect was allegedly planning to travel to Syria to join the jihadi fighting and establish a contact with a member of an al-Qa`ida-linked terrorist organization there. On September 28, 2020, all five of the Tajik detainees were deported to their country of origin, and their reentry to Poland and other Schengen Area member-states has been banned.<sup>88</sup> To date, no suggestion has been made that the detainees in Poland had any links to the Takim attack cell in Germany. Stanislaw Zaryn, the spokesperson for Poland's minister for the coordination of special services, said that the Tajiks detained in Poland "were inspired by ISIS ... but they were not a part of the organisation."<sup>89</sup>

### Why Was Germany a Target?

Germany has been a target for both the Islamic State and al-Qa`ida, as well as their sympathizers, in particular because of its military alliance with the United States and involvement in international counterterrorism missions in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan. The Islamic State has repeatedly called on its members and supporters to strike international coalition countries fighting against the group in the Iraqi-Syrian theater as well as Tajikistan's secular government.<sup>90</sup>

In recent years, Germany has seen several attacks linked to the Islamic State. The deadliest was in December 2016 when a Tunisian man drove a truck through a crowded Christmas market in Berlin, killing 12 people.<sup>91</sup>

The Islamic State has sought to attack the United States and its allies wherever possible. On July 29, 2018, five Tajik men killed four foreign cyclists—two Americans, a Swiss, and a Dutch national—in

f "An asylum seeker is someone who claims to be a refugee but whose claim has not been evaluated. This person would have applied for asylum on the grounds that returning to his or her country would lead to persecution on account of race, religion, nationality or political beliefs. Someone is an asylum seeker for so long as their application is pending. So not every asylum seeker will be recognized as a refugee, but every refugee is initially an asylum seeker." "Refugees, Asylum Seekers & Migrants: A Crucial Difference," Habitat for Humanity Great Britain.

a car-ramming attack, accompanied by an on-foot gun and knife assault in the Khatlon province of Tajikistan.<sup>92</sup>

It is worth mentioning that plots with links to Central Asian networks of some sort date back to the “Sauerland-Group” (named after a region in North Rhine-Westphalia where it was operating), an attack cell that planned to bomb U.S. targets in Germany in September 2007, including Ramstein Air Base.<sup>93</sup> Some members of the cell had been trained by the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU), an al-Qa`ida-linked Central Asian jihadi group that ran a training camp in the border region between Afghanistan and Pakistan back in those days. Notwithstanding the fact the thwarted IJU plot was hatched in a terrorist training camp in Pakistan,<sup>94</sup> German authorities described it as a “home-grown jihadist threat” as the plotters were local German and Turkish residents.<sup>95</sup> As has been noted by scholars, the Sauerland plot constituted both local and global threat dimensions: although the instructions to prepare the attack came from the militants based in Pakistan, the plotters themselves were in many ways examples of domestically radicalized individuals.<sup>96</sup>

### Contract Killing

The alleged Tajik cell in Germany, which as outlined was connected to the Islamic State in Syria and Afghanistan, were linked to a blend of individuals from jihadi circles and organized crime circles in, or from, Albania, Austria, France,<sup>97</sup> Russia, and Sweden.<sup>98</sup>

In order to finance the plot against the air bases, Boqiev allegedly involved his team as the hit men in a contract killing to assassinate a wealthy businessman for 36,000 euros (USD\$40,000) in Albania.<sup>99</sup> It is alleged that in late February 2019, Boqiev and his alleged associate in the Takim cell, Farhodshoh K., traveled to Austria where they met up with two Russia-born Chechens they knew, who provided them with a weapon with a silencer for the hit and helped transport them to Albania.<sup>100</sup> But the operation fell apart because once they got to Albania, the hitmen failed to locate the victim, and they returned to Germany.<sup>101</sup> Data recovered from Boqiev’s cell phone showed that the person who hired his team for the assassination had called him from Sweden.<sup>102</sup> The caller from Sweden reportedly asked via voice message whether Boqiev could “bury a dirty man” for him. He also explained that half of the money would go “for the brothers,” by which he reportedly apparently meant Islamic State militants in Syria, but the rest could be kept by Boqiev and his companions in Germany.<sup>103</sup> Boqiev accepted the contract. However, as of July 2020, investigators had not identified the caller from Sweden.<sup>104</sup>

As already noted, the Takim cell had a further connection to Albania. On April 30, 2020, one of the alleged members of the cell, the 24-year-old Tajik citizen named Komron Zuhurov, was arrested by Albanian anti-terrorism police in Tirana for alleged involvement in the plot in Germany. He had moved to Albania in February 2020 after living in Germany for two years.<sup>105</sup> Authorities have not made clear what they believe his role in the attack network was. According to his lawyer, Zuhurov was visiting his paternal aunt who lives in Tirana.<sup>106</sup>

The Takim cell appears to have placed considerable value in (attempted) contract killing in order to try to raise funds to finance its activities in Germany as well as to funnel them to the Islamic State’s residual core organization in Syria. *Kölner Stadt-Anzeiger* reported that one of the reasons for the cell to conspire to murder Amir Masoud Arabpour, the aforementioned Iranian-born ‘vlogger’ from Neuss, was to earn a bounty of 5,000 euros, put up by his enemies.<sup>107</sup> Arabpour has reportedly received numerous death threats

in the past from Islamists deeming him a public critic of Islam and Muslims.<sup>108</sup>

The money appears not to have been the only motivation for the Takim cell members to get involved in this particular murder plot. According to Germany’s Public Prosecutor Office, the order for the plot came from their Islamic State mentor in Afghanistan,<sup>109</sup> who had asked them to take pictures of the victim’s corpse after the execution of the murder plan and upload it online as a warning to “infidels.”<sup>110</sup>

It was reported that on March 14, 2019, Farhodshoh K. observed Arabpour as part of preparations for the murder plot, but lost track of him in a chase.<sup>111</sup> As the security services were already tapping into the Takim cell members’ phone conversations, right after Farhodshoh’s surveillance of Arabpour, they manage to detect hints about the ongoing preparations for the potential murder scheme and immediately alerted a special task force to stop it.<sup>112</sup> On the same evening, a special task force conducted a raid in Boqiev’s apartment and arrested him and an accomplice<sup>g</sup> and seized two firearms (Norinco 45 ACP and Zastava 32 ACP pistol models),<sup>113</sup> thwarting the alleged assassination plan that would have involved shooting with those firearms.<sup>114</sup> Authorities have also revealed that one of the weapons seized from Boqiev’s apartment was the pistol that they had brought along from Albania (it was the same firearm that was given by their Russian-born Chechen accomplices from Austria).<sup>115</sup>

During the raid and search of the Boqiev’s house on his day of arrest, investigators discovered evidence they deem sufficient to prove that the cell had transferred nearly 1,000 euros in two tranches to Abu Fatima<sup>116</sup> through a financial agent in Turkey.<sup>117</sup>

The Takim cell also allegedly solicited funding from migrant workers in Germany. It is reported that many Chechens from France were working on a construction site in Stuttgart-Zuffenhausen, where the Porsche automobile company wanted to dismantle a paint shop over the turn of the year 2019/2020. One of the members of the Takim cell, through his relative who worked as subcontractor at that construction site, reportedly raised funds for an “imprisoned brother” from about 60 workers, many of whom were Chechens from France.<sup>118</sup> Investigations have reportedly established that the recipients of the money were two Islamic State-linked individuals serving prison sentences in Austria who were acquaintances of one of the members of the Takim cell. One of those prisoners was reportedly a Chechen who was jailed after his attempts to travel to Syria, the other one was, according to authorities, the leader of an Islamic State cell in Austria.<sup>119 h</sup> A United Nations report from July 2020 sees the evolving networking between Central Asian and Chechen radical and criminal elements in Europe as a “source of ongoing concern.”<sup>120</sup>

Boqiev’s alleged involvement in the “soccer team” plot in Germany as a weapons supplier and his team’s later procurement of firearms from Chechens in Austria for the alleged murder plots in Albania and Germany show the Takim cell’s access to criminal networks through which these weapons can be acquired.

Notwithstanding existing strict gun regulations, Europe’s free borders make it difficult to stop the flow of illegal firearms, par-

g German authorities have not revealed the identity of the person who was arrested along with Boqiev.

h Authorities have not revealed the nationality/ethnicity of the imprisoned Islamic State cell leader in Austria.

ticularly from the Western Balkans, where up to six million small arms left over from the conflicts that raged there in the 1990s are reported to be in circulation.<sup>121</sup> The culprits of the November 2015 Paris attacks acquired their rifles through criminal networks from the Balkans.<sup>122</sup>

## Conclusion

The disrupted plot to target U.S. and NATO air bases and subsequent arrests in Germany and Albania makes clear that the Islamic State maintains clandestine cells across Europe that are in communication with Islamic State terrorist operatives abroad. This case study of the Takim cell suggests the group continues to eye recruitment opportunities among migrant communities to help drive and sustain its terrorist activities in Europe. The Islamic State has accordingly invested in online propaganda and recruitment efforts directed at segments within Central Asian and Russian (including Chechen) Muslim communities both in and outside their home countries, that might be vulnerable to radicalization.<sup>123</sup>

The Tajik attack network was a mix of two different dynamics: the Takim cell members were self-radicalized Islamic State supporters, and there were Islamic State terrorist operatives directing the cell's activities from Afghanistan and Syria. The participation of members of diverse ethnic communities and nationalities in this network demonstrates that the multi-ethnic and transnational character of Islamic State networks in Europe. The case sheds light on how networks have formed between Tajik- and Russian-speaking foreign fighters (the Khalimov-Mukhazhirov tandem) within the Islamic State wing in Syria.

The Islamic State's territorial defeat in Syria in March 2019 and the capture of aforementioned external operations planners such as Nazarov<sup>i</sup> and Daniel D., among others, have further weakened the group's ability to mount large-scale attacks outside Syria and Iraq. Nonetheless, the Tajik attack and murder plots in Germany and Albania show that the Islamic State remains connected to its base of supporters and sympathizers abroad, and is still able to direct and inspire them to carry out attacks, providing the necessary operational guidance through dedicated online tutorials and communications via encrypted applications, particularly Telegram and Zello. Given the ultimate fates of Khalimov and Mukhazhi-

rov remain unknown, there is need for strengthening cross-border cooperation and intelligence-sharing to track down and catch them if they are still alive. The attempted murder plan against Amir Masoud Arabpour shows that the plotters had a fairly significant operational security problem as their communications were being closely monitored by security services.

German investigators have conceded that it was difficult for them to find translators for recovered chats and telephone calls.<sup>124</sup> The presence of large-scale Central Asian diaspora communities in Europe is a relatively new phenomenon. Thus, not all European countries appear to have sufficient understanding of languages, cultural sensitivities, grievances, and vulnerabilities of Central Asian Muslim minorities.

Given the fact that the Central Asian international diaspora is expanding, a risk of radicalization of a small minority of them poses long-term security concerns. Rising right-wing extremism and anti-immigration/Islamophobic sentiments in parts of Europe may also act as a radicalization driver in these communities, as narratives promoted by extreme right-wing and Islamist extremist actors may fuel extremist sentiments, societal divisions, and a vicious cycle of extreme right-wing and jihadi violence.<sup>125</sup> Without proper understanding of such dynamics, efforts to integrate these communities into a broader society may suffer setbacks. It will also significantly degrade states' ability to contain radicalization and to timely detect potential terror activities.

In his interview with *CTC Sentinel* in August 2020, the European Union's counterterrorism coordinator de Kerchove stated that in the light of recent surge in cases of radicalization and terrorist attacks and plots involving Central Asian individuals in the West, the European Union has prioritized the development of stronger counterterrorism cooperation with Central Asian countries. According to de Kerchove, as part of such commitment, the European Union has supported a number of United Nations projects and also deployed a counterterrorism expert in the region.<sup>126</sup>

The problem set posed by the radicalization of individuals within Tajik and Central Asian diaspora communities in Europe and the transnational jihadi networks with links to organized crime they are plugging into requires significant attention from policymakers. It is important to develop contextualized and long-term preventive strategies against migrant radicalization. An important step is to adequately understand how Islamist extremist milieus sustain jihadi networks across Europe's geographically and ethnically distinct Muslim migrant communities. Without a concerted policy response, the threat could grow. The thwarted Islamic State plot against U.S. and NATO air bases in Germany should be a wake-up call. **CTC**

i In January 2020, Tajik prosecutors revealed that Tojiddin Nazarov was being held in prisons in Syria, along with several other Tajik Islamic State militants, following capture by Kurdish forces. "Genprokuratura: iz tyurem Sirii v Tadjikistan ekstradiruyut terroristov-verbovshchikov" ["Prosecutor General's Office: terrorist recruiters to be extradited from prisons in Syria to Tajikistan"], Sputnik Tochikiston/Tajiki, January 28, 2020.

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