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FEATURE ARTICLE

Iran's Power Player

Qassem Soleimani's unique regional strategy

ALI SOUFAN

A VIEW FROM THE CT FOXHOLE

Patrick Skinner

POLICE OFFICER IN SAVANNAH, GEORGIA
AND FORMER CIA CASE OFFICER

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FROM THE EDITOR

In our cover article, Ali Soufan profiles Major General Qassem Soleimani, the long-serving head of Iran's Quds Force who the U.S. government has accused, among other things, of support for terrorism and involvement in a 2011 plot to assassinate the Saudi ambassador to the United States. Soufan outlines how Soleimani has masterminded Tehran's efforts to project its power across the Middle East using a unique strategy of blending militant and state power, built in part on the model of Hezbollah in Lebanon. Soufan argues that with nationalist sentiment on the rise in Iran in the wake of the U.S. withdrawal from the nuclear agreement and the ongoing regional tussle with Saudi Arabia, Soleimani's popularity would make him the natural front-runner if Iran chooses to adopt a military presidency.

Our interview is with Patrick Skinner who during the decade after 9/11 worked in counterterrorism for the CIA in Afghanistan and Iraq. Last year, he began working as a police officer in his hometown of Savannah, Georgia, in an effort to make a difference closer to home. Skinner reflects on how lessons learned from his time as a CIA case officer and as a local police officer could apply to counterterrorism and counterinsurgency strategy and tactics overseas.

Drawing on thousands of pages of judicial documents and investigative files, Nuno Pinto outlines the alleged key role played by two Portugal-based extremists in a transnational Islamic State network whose alleged attack plans were thwarted by arrests in Strasbourg and Marseille in November 2016. The case raises concerns that European countries in which security services are less geared up to confront terrorist activity are being used as logistical hubs by jihadi terrorists. In the wake of the Islamic State's deadly attack on Western tourists in Tajikistan in July 2018, Damon Mehl examines the threat the group poses to the country. With the Islamic State having lost almost all of its territory in Syria and Iraq, Michael Munoz looks at how the group's propaganda efforts may evolve in the future.

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CONTACT

Combating Terrorism Center

U.S. Military Academy

607 Cullum Road, Lincoln Hall

West Point, NY 10996

Phone: (845) 938-8495

Email: sentinel@usma.edu

Web: www.ctc.usma.edu/sentinel/

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Cover: Iranian Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani attends Iranian supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's meeting with the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) in Tehran, Iran, on September 18, 2016. (Press Office of Iranian Supreme Leader/ Anadolu Agency/Getty Images) (Design by Larisa Baste)

Qassem Soleimani and Iran's Unique Regional Strategy

By Ali Soufan

In recent years, Iran has projected its power across the Middle East, from Lebanon and Syria to Iraq and Yemen. One of the keys to its success has been a unique strategy of blending militant and state power, built in part on the model of Hezbollah in Lebanon. The acknowledged principal architect of this policy is Major General Qassem Soleimani, the long-serving head of Iran's Quds ("Jerusalem") Force. Without question, Soleimani is the most powerful general in the Middle East today; he is also one of Iran's most popular living people, and has been repeatedly touted as a possible presidential candidate.

Despite its ongoing economic woes, today's Iran has fashioned itself into one of the premier military and diplomatic powers in the Middle East—and Saudi Arabia's principal rival for hegemony over the entire region. It has achieved this with a mix of policies—among them, deft diplomatic maneuvering; a tactical alliance with Vladimir Putin's Russia; and the provision of arms, advice, and cash to Shi'a militias across a variety of countries. In the latter case, Iran has pioneered a seemingly unique strategy that combines insurgent and state power in a potent admixture—a strategy that is evident today in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen.

One man is recognized as the principal architect of each of these policies: Major General Qassem Soleimani, long-time chief of the Quds Force, a crack special forces battalion of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Although revered in his home country and feared on battlefields across the Middle East, Soleimani remains virtually unknown in the West. Yet to say that today's Iran cannot be fully understood without first understanding Qassem Soleimani would be a considerable understatement. More than anyone else, Soleimani has been responsible for the creation of an arc of influence—which Iran terms its "Axis of Resistance"—extending from the Gulf of Oman through Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon to the eastern shores of the Mediterranean Sea. Today, with Assad's impending victory in his country's calamitous civil war, this Iranian alliance has become stable enough that Qassem Soleimani, should he be so minded, could drive his car from Tehran to Lebanon's border with Israel without being stopped. And, as the Mossad chief Yossi Cohen has pointed out, the same route would be open to truckloads

Ali Soufan is the chief executive officer of the Soufan Group. As an FBI special agent, he served on the frontline against al-Qa`ida and became known as a top counterterrorism operative and interrogator. His most recent book, Anatomy of Terror: From the Death of Bin Laden to the Rise of the Islamic State, was published earlier this year. Follow @Ali_H_Soufan

of rockets bound for Iran's main regional proxy, Hezbollah.¹

This article reviews Soleimani's career and assesses his contribution to Iran's regional ascendancy.

"Come, we are waiting for you:" Hamdan, Iran, 2018

On a normal day, the most powerful soldier in the Middle East shies away from bluster; indeed, he typically tends toward self-effacement. In meetings with everyone from local warlords to Ayatollahs to the Russian foreign minister, Major General Soleimani prefers to sit quietly in a corner and take it all in.² When he speaks, he does so politely and simply in a pillow-soft tenor, rarely raising his voice.³ He deprecates all attempts at hero worship, refusing, for example, to allow admirers to kiss his hand.⁴ One American journalist who has profiled Soleimani calls him "almost theatrically modest."⁵

Physically, he is unprepossessing. His face gently frosted with a close-cropped white beard, his dreamy eyes seeming to shine with the recollection of a fond memory, he bears more than a passing resemblance to mid-career Sean Connery, circa *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*. He is short in stature—a fact he has been known to highlight, dubbing himself "the smallest soldier."⁶

One day in the summer of 2018, Soleimani's modest façade dropped—to be replaced, albeit briefly, by righteous anger. The source of his ire was one to which many Americans might relate: a furious tweet from President Trump. On this particular occasion, the object of Trump's wrath was Soleimani's nominal boss.

*"To Iranian President [Hassan] Rouhani: NEVER, EVER THREATEN THE UNITED STATES AGAIN OR YOU WILL SUFFER CONSEQUENCES THE LIKES OF WHICH FEW THROUGHOUT HISTORY HAVE EVER SUFFERED BEFORE. WE ARE NO LONGER A COUNTRY THAT WILL STAND FOR YOUR DEMENTED WORDS OF VIOLENCE & DEATH. BE CAUTIOUS!"*⁷

During a speech in Hamdan, a city 200 miles southwest of Tehran, Soleimani tore into Trump with unusual bombast. He scowled. He wagged his finger. And he yelled, despite the half-dozen news microphones clipped to the lectern in front of him—a relatively modest crop, given Soleimani's celebrity status in his home country.

*"The U.S. president ... made some idiotic comments on Twitter. It is beneath the dignity of the president of the great Islamic country of Iran to respond, so I will respond, as a soldier of our great nation. You threaten us with a measure that the world has not seen before. First of all, it has been over a year since Trump became U.S. president, but that man's rhetoric is still that of a casino, of a bar. He talks to the world in the style of a bartender or a casino manager."*⁸

Soleimani's audience responded in kind. Where typically they would hear his words in reverent silence, occasionally interjecting pro-forma Islamic revolutionary slogans, on this occasion they laughed and clapped and whistled and hollered and even heckled as if watching a standup comic.

Then came the threat.

“Mr. Trump, the gambler! [...] You are well aware of our power and capabilities in the region. You know how powerful we are in asymmetrical warfare.⁹ Come, we are waiting for you. We are the real men on the scene, as far as you are concerned. You know that a war would mean the loss of all your capabilities. You may start the war, but we will be the ones to determine its end.”¹⁰

If anyone is in a position to make such brazen threats, it is Qassem Soleimani. One American commentator compares him to John LeCarré’s ubiquitous yet invisible Soviet spymaster Karla.¹¹ Another calls him “Iran’s real foreign minister.”¹² Both have a point. Although practically unknown to the U.S. public, Soleimani in fact manages vast swathes of Iranian foreign policy almost single-handedly. For the best part of 20 years, he has enjoyed the unmediated ear of his country’s supreme leader, Grand Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who calls Soleimani, uniquely among all the Islamic Republic’s heroes, “a living martyr of the Revolution.”¹³ Abroad, he has made himself the confidant of political leaders in Damascus, Beirut, Baghdad, and even Moscow.

The international community has taken note. The United Nations Security Council sanctions Soleimani for supporting terrorism and selling Iranian weapons overseas.¹⁴ The U.S. government brands him a nuclear proliferator, a supporter of terrorism, a human rights abuser, and a leading suspect in the 2011 plot to assassinate the Saudi ambassador to the United States by bombing a Washington, D.C., restaurant.¹⁵ While most Americans and Europeans may never have heard the name Qassem Soleimani, their intelligence services might wish it came up less often.

Soleimani has become the leading exponent of a uniquely Iranian style of insurgency. Typically, militias define themselves against governments, fight them, and seek to sweep away all vestiges of their power. Those under Soleimani’s control, by contrast, have tended more often to work with the grain of government power, and thus to co-opt governments from within, fusing militant and state power into a formidable whole. Lebanon’s Hezbollah is the most prominent example; but, as this article will note, it is far from the only one.

The Goat Thief: Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, 1953-2002¹⁶

Little in Soleimani’s personal background could have hinted at the power he would one day wield. He hails from a village in the mountains of Kerman Province, a region in Iran’s southeast, not far from the borders with Afghanistan and Pakistan.¹⁷ In Kerman, tribal politics traditionally have held far more sway than any edict of the central government 500 miles away in Tehran.

Owing to a botched land reform introduced by the Shah as part of the “White Revolution,” Soleimani’s father, a small-time farmer, wound up owing the government around 9,000 rials. This debt, which was only on the order of \$100, seems to have brought the family to the brink of ruin. In order to help pay down the debt, Soleimani left school at 13 to labor on construction sites in the provincial capital, Kerman City. By the time the Islamic Revolution erupted in 1978, he had become a technician with the municipal water authority.¹⁸

Prior to that point, the young Soleimani had shown little, if any, interest in politics; but he joined the IRGC shortly after it was founded in April 1979. He found his calling. At any rate, he must have impressed someone, for immediately after completing basic

training, he became an instructor of new recruits.¹⁹ That was the moment Qassem Soleimani began his remarkable upward trajectory.

In many ways, Soleimani’s rise from provincial obscurity to the heights of power parallels Iran’s regional ascendancy over the past 40 years. His frontline career began in the turmoil that followed the Islamic Revolution, when his unit was sent to the northwest to quell a Kurdish separatist uprising—a mission regarded to this day as a badge of honor within the IRGC. (It was in the course of that effort that Soleimani, just 22 years old, first encountered a 23-year-old political operative named Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, then acting as an adviser to the regional government. Nearly 30 years later, Ahmadinejad would go on to serve as one of the Islamic Republic’s most hardline presidents—with vocal support from Soleimani.²⁰)

In September 1980, Saddam Hussein’s Iraq opportunistically invaded its neighbor, hoping to capitalize on the post-revolutionary chaos. Initially, Soleimani was sent back to Kerman to raise and train troops, but he soon found himself redirected to the front, where he volunteered to spend extra time. Soleimani served throughout the war in almost every part of the front, from the retaking of Bostan in December 1981 to the invasion of Iraqi Kurdistan in 1987, during which Saddam’s forces attacked his unit with chemical weapons, to the climactic expedition to the al-Faw Peninsula in April 1988, whose failure helped precipitate the ceasefire that ended the war.²¹

Soleimani developed a reputation for treating the men under his command well. He made a habit of returning from behind-the-lines reconnaissance missions with live goats and other provender to feed his men, earning him the admiring sobriquet “the Goat Thief.”²² On many occasions, he publicly questioned the decisions of his commanding officers, culminating in a shouting match in which he told his commander-in-chief, Mohsen Rezai, “We don’t have any plan for the war!”²³ But this insubordinate streak did not prevent him from rising to leadership of the IRGC’s crack 41st Division, nicknamed Tharallah—Vengeance of God—an alias of Imam Hussein, grandson of the Prophet and one of the key figures in Shi’a Islam.²⁴ He was starting to attract attention from the very top; a photograph from the period shows Soleimani seated on the floor, enjoying a meal at the right hand of then-President Ali Khamenei.²⁵

Following the close of hostilities with Iraq in 1988, Soleimani was sent back home to Kerman to wage war on the drug gangs threatening order in the region. Like the United States’ own “War on Drugs,” it was a bloody campaign; but within three years, forces under Soleimani’s command had pacified the province, earning him the lasting gratitude of its residents.²⁶

Little is known about the next six or seven years of Soleimani’s life, but by March 1998 at the latest, he had risen to become commander of the Quds Force, the lethal special forces unit of the IRGC tasked with bolstering pro-Iranian regimes and militias abroad. (“Quds” comes from the Farsi name for Jerusalem.²⁷) As the remainder of this article will show, Soleimani excelled at this task, establishing or strengthening contacts with Shi’a militias and political parties across the region, as well as the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Damascus.

At the same time, the then-newly installed administration of Mohammed Khatami put him in charge of managing Iran’s burgeoning confrontation with the upstart Taliban movement in neighboring Afghanistan.²⁸ Not for the first or last time, Soleimani’s inborn familiarity with tribal culture and politics would stand



Iranian Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani (center) attends Iranian supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's meeting with the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) in Tehran, Iran, on September 18, 2016. (Press Office of Iranian Supreme Leader/Anadolu Agency/Getty Images)

him in good stead.

In August 1998, a few months into Soleimani's tenure at the head of the Quds Force, Taliban forces swept into the northern Afghan city of Mazar-i Sharif, home to a substantial community of ethnic Hazaras—Farsi-speaking Shi'a Muslims. The Taliban initiated a brutal pogrom against members of the minority, trashing homes, raping women and girls, and massacring hundreds of Shi'a men and boys.²⁹ Among the dead was a group of nine Iranians: eight diplomats and a journalist.³⁰ At this naked provocation, factions on both sides turned white-hot for war; the IRGC's overall commander at the time, Yahya Rahim Safavi, requested Supreme Leader Khamenei's permission "for the punishment of the Taliban, to advance to Herat [a city in western Afghanistan], annihilate, punish, eliminate them."³¹ Iran began massing an invasion force of almost a quarter-million soldiers along the Afghan border. Reportedly, it was Soleimani who stepped in and defused the situation without resorting to further violence. Instead of confronting the Taliban directly, Soleimani opted to throw increased Iranian support behind the opposition Northern Alliance, personally helping to direct the group's operations from a base across Afghanistan's northern border in Tajikistan.³² It was a model of proxy warfare to which he would return again and again.

In the months after 9/11, Soleimani saw an opportunity to defeat the Taliban once and for all by unconventional means—namely, cooperation with the United States. Early in the war, he directed Iranian diplomats to share intelligence on Taliban military positions with their U.S. counterparts. The Americans, in return, told the Iranians what they knew about an al-Qa`ida fixer hiding out in eastern Iran.³³

For a brief moment, it seemed as if this contact might lead to a more general thawing of relations between Iran and the country its

leaders refer to as the "Great Satan." Indeed, back in Tehran, behind closed doors, Soleimani was pronouncing himself "pleased with [the] cooperation," and musing at the highest political levels that "maybe it's time to rethink our relationship with the Americans."³⁴

This cooperation came to an abrupt halt in January 2002, however, after President George W. Bush used his State of the Union address to throw the book at Iran, branding it a nuclear proliferator, an exporter of terrorism, a repressive state, and part of an "Axis of Evil." Soleimani, predictably, was apoplectic, and canceled future meetings with the Americans—a huge setback.³⁵

Worse was to come.

"When we say no, he makes trouble:" Iraq, 2003-2011

The Islamic Republic's relationship with Syria's Assad regime has deep roots, extending back as far as the Iran-Iraq War when Bashar al-Assad's father, Hafez, closed a key oil pipeline in a bid to harm the Iraqi economy. In 2003, the U.S. invasion of Iraq pushed Syria and Iran still closer together, as both regimes realized that if the Americans succeeded in Iraq, they could be next. To damage the U.S. occupation, Soleimani helped Syrian intelligence create pipelines for funneling Sunni jihadis into Iraq. Once there, the jihadis attacked U.S. forces, often using roadside bombs supplied by Soleimani's Quds Force from factories inside Iran.³⁶

Soleimani soon intervened more directly in Iraq, too, sending in Shi'a militias as proxies. Under his leadership, the Quds Force stood up a number of militias for the express purpose of attacking U.S. and allied troops. Collectively, these organizations were responsible for hundreds of coalition deaths. One of them, Asaib Ahl al-Haq (League of the Righteous), claimed more than 6,000 such attacks between its creation in 2006 and the U.S. withdrawal in 2011—an average of more than three per day, every day, for five years.³⁷

In 2006, at the height of the bloodshed in Iraq, Soleimani took a break from managing Asaib and its sister groups in order to supervise another Iranian proxy, Hezbollah, in its escalating war with Israel.³⁸ During his absence, U.S. commanders in the Green Zone noted a sharp decline in casualties across the country. Upon his return from Lebanon, Soleimani wrote to U.S. commanders, "I hope you have been enjoying the peace and quiet in Baghdad. I've been busy in Beirut!"³⁹

Following the reestablishment of government in Iraq in 2005, Soleimani's influence extended into the country's politics as well. Under prime ministers Ibrahim al-Jaafari and Nouri al-Maliki, one of Soleimani's militant proxies, the Badr Organization, was allowed to become, in effect, an arm of the state when the interior and transport ministries came under the control of its political wing.⁴⁰ Iraq's president from 2005 to 2014, Jalal Talabani, had benefited from IRGC help (as well as that of the CIA) when he served as a leader of Kurdish resistance to Saddam in the 1990s, and Soleimani took full advantage of that history.⁴¹ Dexter Filkins of *The New Yorker* quoted an intelligence officer as saying that he had never seen the normally formidable Talabani "so deferential to anyone. He was terrified." No wonder; the same profile quoted one of Talabani's fellow Kurdish officials as saying, "When we say no [to Soleimani], he makes trouble for us. Bombings. Shootings."⁴²

In early 2008, Soleimani sent General David Petraeus, then the most senior U.S. commander in Iraq, an imperious message:

"Dear General Petraeus: You should be aware that I, Qassem

*Soleimani, control Iran's policy for Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Gaza, and Afghanistan. And indeed, the ambassador in Baghdad is a Quds Force member. The individual who's going to replace him is a Quds Force member.*³³

This was conveyed to General Petraeus via a text message to Talabani's personal cellphone—effectively relegating Talabani to the role of Soleimani's mailman. The symbolism was not lost on anyone. Legend has it that Petraeus' piquant reply read, "Dear General Soleimani: Go pound sand down a rat hole."⁴⁴ Privately, however, the U.S. State Department appears to have concurred with Soleimani's assessment of his own bailiwick, describing him as "the point man directing the formulation and implementation of [his country's] Iraq policy, with authority second only to [Supreme Leader Ali] Khamenei."⁴⁵

Soleimani's habit of taunting U.S. officials did not end with the American withdrawal in 2011. As recently as 2017, then-CIA Director Mike Pompeo wrote to Soleimani again, warning him to restrain militias under his command from attacking U.S. interests in Iraq. The response from 'Karla?' "I will not take your letter nor read it and I have nothing to say to these people."⁴⁶

"We must witness victory:" Syria and Iraq, 2011-present

When the Arab Spring began in late 2010, Soleimani was quick to recognize the potential benefits for Iran, declaring in a May 2011 speech in Qom that the uprisings "provide our revolution with the greatest opportunities ... we must witness victory in Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria. This is the fruit of the Islamic Revolution."⁴⁷ In the months that followed, Soleimani made himself even more indispensable to the regimes in both Damascus and Baghdad—by deploying militants under his command.

On battlefields in both countries, Qassem Soleimani made himself ubiquitous. One might see him standing on the hoods and flatbeds of trucks, surrounded by fighters jostling and shushing each other to hear and see better.⁴⁸ His rapt audiences consist of Shi'a militiamen from various countries who fight in support of the Assad regime or against the Islamic State group, but there is never any doubt as to where their principal loyalty lies. Not only do these groups sing songs about Soleimani, they produce music videos featuring militants doing parkour stunts and saluting the general's image.⁴⁹

Following the outbreak of civil war in Syria in 2011, Soleimani ordered some of his Iraqi militias into Syria to defend the Assad regime.⁵⁰ For the same purpose, he also set up additional Shi'a militant groups; these included a group of Afghans resident in Iran, the Fatemiyoun Division, and a Pakistani outfit, the Zeynabiyoun Brigade.⁵¹ The very names of these groups announce Iran's sectarian intentions: Shi'a Muslims accord Fatima, the daughter of the Prophet, a status comparable to that of the Virgin Mary in Catholicism; while Zaynab, Fatima's daughter, was the sister of Hussein, whose death at the Battle of Karbala formed a pivotal moment in the Sunni-Shi'a schism. Forces under his command were instrumental in many major offensives of the Syrian war, including the recapture of Qusayr from rebels.⁵² True to form, Soleimani has sought to blend state and insurgent power as seamlessly as possible; the staff at his secret headquarters in Damascus reportedly includes Lebanese and Iraqi militia chieftains working alongside generals from both Iran and Syria.⁵³





In June 2014, Islamic State forces captured Mosul, a city of near-

ly two million in northern Iraq. In the face of the jihadi advance, tens of thousands of Iraqi troops and federal police doffed their uniforms and melted away.⁵⁴ By October 2014, the Islamic State had reached the outskirts of Baghdad and was lobbing mortar rounds at the city's main international airport.⁵⁵ In the absence of a credible Iraqi army, someone had to save the capital, and Soleimani's Shi'a proxies—alongside other militias drawn from other communities—were only too happy to oblige. Soleimani now ordered some of the Iraqi militias tasked with defending Assad to cross back over the border to rescue the Iraqi state.⁵⁶ The militants participating in the defense organized themselves into the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), an umbrella organization for coordination with the govern-

Highlights in Qassem Soleimani's Career Timeline



Select List of Iranian Proxy Groups Qassem Soleimani Helped to Develop

| Group Name | Country Where Active |
|---|---|
| Asaib Ahl al-Haq Badr Organization |  IRAQ |
| Fatemiyoun Division (Afghan unit) Zeynabiyoun Brigade (Pakistani unit) |  SYRIA |
| Hezbollah |  LEBANON & SYRIA |
| Houthi Movement/Ansar Allah rebels |  YEMEN |

(Graphic by Larisa Baste)

ment in Baghdad. Most of the PMF's constituent groups are Shi'a, and most of those are aligned in some way with Iran, although not all fall under Soleimani's direct control.⁵⁷ But Soleimani's forces are among the biggest, and have seen much of the most intense fighting—often benefiting from U.S. military support to Iraqi troops on the ground. For example, they were pivotal to the retaking of Tikrit in early 2015, during which Soleimani himself was frequently pictured on the frontlines.⁵⁸

Speaking later that year at the World Economic Forum at Davos, Switzerland, Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi thanked Iran for its “prompt” deliveries of arms and ammunition, “without even asking for immediate payments.” He reserved particular praise for Qassem Soleimani, calling him out by name as one of Iraq's most important allies in the fight against the Islamic State.⁵⁹

Today, the Islamic State no longer holds any meaningful territory in Iraq. But the PMF has not gone away. As of early 2018, its strength was being estimated at around 100,000 to 150,000 fighters, most of them aligned with Iran.⁶⁰ Long after the Islamic State's defeat became an inevitability, Prime Minister Abadi was referring to the PMF as “the hope of the country and the region.”⁶¹ Indeed, Abadi's government further entrenched the PMF's power, making it an independent security force reporting directly to the prime minister's office—a position that, by longstanding convention, is always held by a Shi'a Muslim.⁶² While some PMF groups have indeed integrated their command structures under the prime minister's office, others—including prominent militias with close ties to Tehran—have refused to do so, preferring to retain their independence.⁶³ The Abadi government's attempts to bring these groups into line met with resistance, denunciations, and in some cases violence, suggesting that future administrations will need to tread carefully when dealing with the PMF.⁶⁴

Meanwhile, PMF groups have themselves become a force at the ballot box. In 2018, several of the larger militias loyal to Soleimani, including the Badr Organization and Asaib Ahl al-Haq (both of which battled Western troops during the U.S. occupation) formed a political coalition, the Fatah (Victory) Alliance, which won 48 seats in Iraq's parliament in the May 2018 elections.⁶⁵ In the political negotiations that followed those elections, Tehran initially identified Hadi al-Amiri, leader of the Badr Organization and the Fatah Alliance, as one of its preferred candidates for prime minister (the other being former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki).⁶⁶ Al-Amiri has acknowledged his friendship with and admiration for Soleimani in effusive terms.⁶⁷ As transport minister in the al-Maliki government from 2010 to 2014, he allegedly permitted supply flights from Iran to Hezbollah to overfly Iraqi airspace at Soleimani's behest.⁶⁸

Soleimani's own role in Iraqi politics also persists. Prior to the retaking of Kirkuk from Kurdish peshmergas in the fall of 2017, Soleimani personally traveled to Kurdistan on at least three occasions to deliver veiled threats to the Kurdish leadership on behalf of then-Prime Minister Abadi.⁶⁹ No doubt these warnings factored heavily into the Kurds' eventual decision to yield the city almost without a fight. Wily as ever, Soleimani positioned his own militias so that they would wind up in control of key sites around the city.⁷⁰

It remains to be seen how Iraq's new prime minister, Adel Abdul Mahdi, will handle the PMF. Now a political independent, Abdul Mahdi came to prominence during the Saddam years as a leader in the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq—a political party-in-exile created by (and indeed, in) Tehran in the early 1980s.⁷¹ However, he also worked productively with U.S. officials

following the 2003 invasion.⁷² The Fatah Alliance, together with other Iran-aligned political groups, initially opposed his candidacy, while other influential Shi'a figures, including the clerics Moqtada al-Sadr and Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, backed him.⁷³ Given this eclectic background, Abdul Mahdi's nomination has been seen as representing a compromise, both between the two major Shi'a political blocs and, on a wider level, between U.S. and Iranian interests in Iraq.⁷⁴

In the near term, Abdul Mahdi's government will have little room to curb the power of the PMF; as long as the Islamic State retains any presence in Iraq, the militias will remain essential to the country's security.⁷⁵ Even after the Islamic State is fully eradicated (if that day ever comes), the PMF's influence, militarily and politically, has reached the point that no successful government will be able to ignore its wishes for the foreseeable future; indeed, amid a slate of cabinet nominees comprised largely of moderates and technocrats, Abdul Mahdi also nominated the Chair of the PMF, Falih al-Fayadh, to serve as his interior minister.⁷⁶

Summoning the Bear: Moscow, 2015

By mid-2015, things were not going exactly to plan for Soleimani back in Syria. Assad's forces were plagued by defections, leaving Iranian-backed militias from Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, among other countries, almost single-handedly fighting Sunni rebels for control of Syria's largest city, Aleppo.⁷⁷ They needed the backing of a larger outside power, one with formidable air capabilities, and the natural broker for the deal was the top general on the scene—Qassem Soleimani. In July 2015, despite peremptory U.N. sanctions prohibiting him from travel outside Iran, Soleimani flew to Moscow (reportedly on a commercial flight) for talks with the Russian defense minister and, reportedly, President Putin himself.⁷⁸ A few weeks later, Soleimani was back in Syria, spearheading a coordinated offensive against rebel and jihadi groups, under cover of a massively stepped-up Russian air campaign. Putin's intervention turned the tide decisively in Assad's favor. By December 2016, Soleimani was pictured touring the remains of Aleppo's historic heart, a few days after his militias, fighting alongside Syrian regulars, retook the city.⁷⁹

Iranian forces have made significant sacrifices in Syria. Soleimani's IRGC has an active presence, and they have not held back from the thick of the fight. Accurate totals for Iranian personnel deployed to Syria are hard to come by—Assad himself, naturally enough, claims the number is zero—but the Washington Institute for Near East Policy estimates that the number generally deployed there at any one time has been around 700, except during the height of the Russian air campaign in the second half of 2015, when it ballooned to perhaps 3,000.⁸⁰ According to one October 2017 analysis in *The Washington Post*, at least 349 Iranian soldiers died in Syria and Iraq between February 2012 and August 2017, suggesting a high casualty rate.⁸¹ The same analysis showed that the dead included at least 39 of Soleimani's fellow IRGC generals.⁸²

But Soleimani evidently calculates that the cost justifies the expense, and he has a point, given Tehran's current strategic priorities: as long as it remains under the control of the Assad family, Syria lies at the western end of an arc of Iranian influence stretching from the western borders of Afghanistan to the shores of the Mediterranean—a crimp on Iran's regional rivals, Saudi Arabia and Turkey.

Tehran also sees economic reasons for cultivating this “Axis of Resistance,” not least the fact that it will need its cooperation if it

is ever to build a long-planned overland pipeline to the Mediterranean from the giant South Pars–North Dome gas field on the Persian Gulf. The Iran-to-Lebanon crescent has already transformed the geopolitics of the Middle East; backed up by petrochemical power, it would truly be a force to reckon with.

The Cat's Paw: Lebanon and Syria, 2011-present

Tehran's biggest concern, however, is maintaining the supply corridor to its most important regional and global proxy, the Lebanese militant group Hezbollah (Party of God). Hezbollah was established in its current form in 1985 with funds and training from Soleimani's IRGC; its manifesto of that year proclaimed the group's ultimate allegiance to then-Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.⁸³ Hezbollah has evolved since then. In 2009, the group adopted a new and less stridently Khomeinist manifesto. But Iran remains its principal backer. Hassan Nasrallah, the group's secretary general, said in June 2016:

"Hezbollah's budget, salaries, expenses, arms and missiles are coming from the Islamic Republic of Iran. Is this clear? This is no one's business. As long as Iran has money, we have money. Can we be any more frank about that?"⁸⁴

This support is almost as important to Iran as it is to Hezbollah itself; Hezbollah is probably the most important non-state actor in the Middle East today. Without it, Soleimani's Quds Force could not operate abroad in the way it does; and without a strong Quds Force, Iranian power in the region would not be nearly as formidable. To sustain Hezbollah, Iran must maintain supplies to its most significant proxy, but weapons shipments directly into Lebanon are risky at best because of Israel's naval and air patrols in the region. Thanks to Iran's alliance with Assad, however, Iranian supply planes have *carte blanche* to land at Damascus International, where their cargo is loaded onto trucks for transshipment over the mountains to Lebanon's Beqaa Valley—a Hezbollah stronghold.⁸⁵ Were the Syrian government to fall into the hands of the country's Sunni majority, those planes would be turned back, and Iran would be left with a significantly diminished card to play in the Middle East's most symbolically significant fight. This is Iran's—and Hezbollah's—most important reason for being in Syria.

Over the years, Soleimani himself developed a particularly close bond with Imad Mughniyah, the Hezbollah military chief whom Western and Israeli officials identify as the mastermind behind the 1983 bombing of the U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut, attacks on the U.S. embassies in the Lebanese capital and in Kuwait City, also in 1983, the 1985 hijacking of TWA flight 847 in which a U.S. Navy diver was beaten and murdered, and the bombings of the Israeli embassy and a Jewish community center in Buenos Aires in 1992 and 1994, respectively.⁸⁶ (Mughniyah's ability to destroy large buildings with truck bombs later became the template for al-Qa`ida's 1998 attacks on two U.S. embassies in East Africa.) Mughniyah went into hiding around 1995, but Mossad tracked him down more than a decade later when he was passing through Damascus. In February 2008, Mossad reportedly had an opportunity to assassinate Mughniyah, but held back because at the crucial moment the target was hugging a longtime friend whom the agency was not legally authorized to kill—Qassem Soleimani.⁸⁷ Mughniyah was killed in a second attempt later that day; but, under Soleimani's close guidance, Hezbollah has continued to operate a highly effective paramilitary wing.⁸⁸

Hezbollah's recent history follows Tehran's strategy of seeking to blend insurgent and state power. Since 1992, Hezbollah has been

active in Lebanese national politics, and since 2005, it has held seats in the cabinet.⁸⁹ Today, thanks to its parliamentary caucus, its seats in cabinet are guaranteed, and it holds veto power over cabinet decisions. Meanwhile, Hezbollah justifies retaining its private army (not to mention an effective parallel state with its own hospitals, schools, welfare programs, and propaganda wing) on the basis that it is the only group capable of defending Lebanon against attack from Israel—and with the war raging in next-door Syria, against incursions by Sunni extremists. In this regard, its leaders speak of a tripartite "golden formula"—the resistance (i.e., Hezbollah itself), plus Lebanon's army, plus the Lebanese people.⁹⁰ Lebanon's president, Michel Aoun, a Christian former supreme commander of the armed forces whose mother was born in New Hampshire, has endorsed this view. In an interview with the French daily newspaper *Le Figaro*, Aoun rejected calls for Hezbollah to disarm, saying that its forces "ensure our resistance against the State of Israel."⁹¹ Recently, Hezbollah has been working still more closely with the military. Over the summer of 2017, Hezbollah and the Lebanese armed forces participated in joint operations against al-Qa`ida-aligned militants along the Syrian border; after the success of these initiatives, Hassan Nasrallah publicly praised the army as an "essential" partner.⁹²

The exact extent of Iran's support for Hezbollah remains unclear, but in 2010, the Obama administration estimated that it amounted to between \$100 million and \$200 million per year.⁹³ In 2009, the Israeli navy interdicted a vessel carrying arms apparently bound for Hezbollah from Bandar Abbas, Iran's main seaport—a shipment that included 3,000 rockets, 9,000 mortar rounds, 20,000 hand grenades, and over half a million rounds of small-arms ammunition.⁹⁴ It is worth bearing in mind that these potential measures date from before the outbreak of violence in Syria, during which, it is safe to assume, Iran would have increased its support for Hezbollah. Indeed, in early 2018, U.S. officials speaking to *The Washington Post* estimated that Iran's financial support had mushroomed to around \$700 million per year.⁹⁵

In Syria, Hezbollah has proved invaluable to its sponsors in Damascus and Tehran. It began by sending military advisors to Soleimani's other Shi`a militias, but its fighters soon became actively involved in some of the bloodiest fighting, especially near the Lebanese border.⁹⁶ Hezbollah has undoubtedly changed the balance of the Syrian conflict in favor of Assad, and therefore of Iran, but it has come at a terrible cost: the group's estimated nearly 2,000 dead in Syria may represent as much as 10 percent or more of its global fighting strength.⁹⁷ The dead have included some very senior figures. At one point, Soleimani was overseeing a crack Hezbollah unit and mentoring one of its most prominent members—Jihad Mughniyah, the 23-year-old son of Soleimani's old friend, the terrorist mastermind Imad Mughniyah. The younger Mughniyah was reportedly killed in an Israeli airstrike along the Golan Heights, along with a high-ranking Hezbollah commander and an IRGC brigadier general.⁹⁸

Soleimani has not been slow to demonstrate his gratitude for Hezbollah's sacrifice. He makes a point of visiting the graves and families of the fallen, treating them with the same hushed reverence he shows toward Iranian dead. In January 2015, he was pictured reading the Qur'an alone at the flower-scattered tombs of Hezbollah fighters, including Jihad Mughniyah.⁹⁹

Despite these losses, on balance Hezbollah's involvement in the Syrian civil war has strengthened the organization. Hezbollah has acquired a range of advanced weaponry, including drones and an-

ti-tank weapons, from Iran.¹⁰⁰ The IRGC is reportedly helping the group to develop underground weapons factories inside Lebanon.¹⁰¹ Hezbollah has laid the groundwork for a more permanent presence in Syria—a presence with Iranian support.¹⁰² It has gained experience fighting adversaries other than Israel, including the Islamic State, and in coordinating operations not just with its IRGC overlords but with the armed forces of Syria and Russia.¹⁰³ By providing training and guidance to other Shi`a militias, it has expanded its network, not just in Syria but in Iraq and as far afield as Pakistan.¹⁰⁴ No wonder, then, that Hezbollah's deputy leader has said, "In the end, we consider the results that we reached in Syria much greater than the price, with our respect to the great sacrifices that the young men of the party put forward."¹⁰⁵

Playing the "Great Game:" Yemen, 2015-present

Soleimani's plans for regional hegemony do not end with Syria, Iraq, and Hezbollah, however. At the southern end of the Arabian Peninsula, he has doubled down on Iranian support for another armed Shi`a faction—Yemen's Ansar Allah rebels, better known as the Houthi movement.

As the Middle East analyst Michael Knights has pointed out, the Houthis' ideology bears a striking similarity to that of the Islamic Republic, as is apparent from the militia's creed (which it calls "the scream"): "Death to America, death to Israel, curse upon the Jews, victory to Islam."¹⁰⁶ At first, however, Iranian support for the Houthi was, in the words of commentator Peter Salisbury, "speculative."¹⁰⁷ It consisted of small shipments of arms and cash, together with limited training from Hezbollah and a handful of advisers provided by Hezbollah and Soleimani's Quds Force. A shipment of Iranian arms seized from a dhow in January 2013 suggests the type of material support on offer during this period: the consignment included shoulder-launched surface-to-air missile systems, Soviet-era rocket artillery, RDX explosives of the type commonly used in terrorist attacks, and relatively crude anti-vehicle land mines.¹⁰⁸

Presumably, Tehran's intention in this phase of the conflict was to stick a thorn in Saudi Arabia's side rather than to force a strategic showdown. But that changed in 2015 when Saudi Arabia stepped up its own intervention, more or less openly dubbing itself the Middle East's "Sunni protector" in the face of Iran's "Shi`a meddling." From the beginning, this Saudi-led campaign of aerial bombardment has benefited from U.S. support in the form of aerial surveillance and resupply.¹⁰⁹ Geopolitically, the Saudis hoped to end the war quickly and remove a distracting regional irritant along their exposed southern flank, but that plan has failed in spectacular fashion. In fact, it has only entrenched and prolonged the fighting.

First, the conflict has divided Yemeni society along sectarian lines like never before. When the author was in Yemen in the early 2000s investigating the bombing of the *USS Cole*, most Yemenis barely knew whether they were Sunni or Shi`a (and in fact, the Zaydi school of Shi`a Islam indigenous to Yemen is almost as distinct from the Iranian Twelver school as it is from Sunni Islam). Today, it has become commonplace for the two sides to refer to one another derisively as "Persians" or "Daeshites" (Islamic State supporters).¹¹⁰

Second, the escalation has created a humanitarian disaster second only to that in Syria. By June 2018, almost 10,000 civilians had been killed since the bombing campaign began, and there are indications that the casualty rate has increased still further since then.¹¹¹ A U.N. investigation published in August 2018 found atrocities on all sides, but blamed Saudi-led bombing for a majority of the documented civilian deaths.¹¹² U.N. reporters recorded airstrikes that hit

homes, hotels, marketplaces, funerals, weddings, prisons, fishing boats, and clinics—many of which had been specifically placed on no-strike lists ahead of time.¹¹³ According to another independent monitor, the Yemen Data Project, nearly a third of all coalition strikes have hit non-military targets.¹¹⁴ That is not to mention the chronic fuel shortages cutting off power to hospitals and food distribution facilities, nor the famine threatening 12 million people, nor the raging cholera epidemic that now infects more than 10,000 additional Yemenis every week.¹¹⁵

This catastrophe plays into Soleimani's hands. While the Saudis pour untold billions into a brutal air campaign—Middle East analyst Bruce Riedel estimates that the Kingdom spends "at least \$5-6 billion a month" on bombing—Iran's relatively low-tech investment in the Houthis costs it pennies by comparison.¹¹⁶ Soleimani has a wealth of experience exploiting sectarian tensions, and a presence on the ground, in the form of Hezbollah and IRGC advisers, through which to do so. And the more civilian casualties Saudi bombing creates in Yemen, the more support the Houthis will attract; indeed, the foreign nature of the intervention is a pillar of the Houthis' recruitment propaganda.¹¹⁷

Yet Saudi policy toward Yemen is unlikely to change in the near future, in part because of palace intrigue in Riyadh. The escalation is a signature initiative of Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MbS), the King's favored son. When the bombing began in 2015, MbS was Saudi Arabia's newly appointed defense minister. As well as a means of confronting Iran, the policy was widely seen as a deliberate attempt to stoke Saudi nationalism at home, in a bid to shore up flagging support for the House of Saud.¹¹⁸ In June 2017, MbS engineered a palace coup, displacing his rival, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Nayef, who had been more moderate on Yemen.¹¹⁹ As the new crown prince and effective head of government, MbS has staked his reputation on Yemen, and is unlikely to back down unless he can find a face-saving way of doing so.¹²⁰

At the time of writing, it was unclear how, if at all, the crisis over the murder of the Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi might affect the Saudi intervention in Yemen. In light of the Khashoggi murder, the international community has been vocal in its critique of Saudi Arabia and MbS, threatening the stability of diplomatic and financial relations crucial to MbS' domestic ambitions and aspirations for the Saudi economy.¹²¹ Should the crisis ultimately lead to a more permanent diminution in MbS' power, there is a chance that the political pendulum in Riyadh may swing back toward a more measured approach to the war.

In some ways, the Houthis represent the apotheosis of the Iranian model of state and insurgent power. They did not seek to destroy the government. Instead, they made an alliance with former president Ali Abdullah Saleh, who previously had been in the Saudi camp. Saleh, having been president of a unified Yemen for over two decades—and of North Yemen for a dozen years before that—still had loyalists in all the key government institutions, especially in the armed forces. When its forces entered the Yemeni capital, Sanaa, in September 2014, the Houthi-Saleh alliance was able to take control of the whole administrative apparatus of government almost without firing a single shot.¹²² The Houthis, in turn, began embedding their own "overseers" in government departments, their own operatives in the intelligence apparatus, and their own commanders in the military, creating in effect a "shadow government."¹²³ They abolished military units, such as the Republican Guard, that remained loyal to Saleh alone (one side-effect of this practice being an increased need for assistance from the IRGC and Hezbollah).¹²⁴

Here, another version of Hezbollah's "golden formula" has become apparent, knitting together the army, the resistance—in this case, the Houthis themselves—and the people—meaning the Zaydi sect to which Houthis belong and which forms a majority in the territory currently under Houthi control. Saleh failed to understand the power of this arrangement; in December 2017, he tried to flip his support back to the Saudis, assuming he could do so with impunity. He was wrong, and he paid for the error with his life.¹²⁵ Saleh's return to the Saudi camp, had it succeeded, might have opened up the tiniest of windows for ending the conflict with a political settlement. But with his death, that window slammed shut.

In March 2017, Soleimani convened a meeting of senior commanders in Tehran to discuss ways of further "empowering" the Houthis.¹²⁶ Following the meeting, one anonymous Iranian official told a Reuters correspondent that "Yemen is where the real proxy war is going on ... winning the battle in Yemen will help define the balance of power in the Middle East."¹²⁷ Another said that Iran's plan was now "to create a Hezbollah-like militia in Yemen to confront Riyadh's hostile policies."¹²⁸ In keeping with this strategy, Iran has begun providing the Houthis with an array of increasingly complex weapons, to include anti-tank rockets, sea mines, airborne and sea-going drones, and long-range ballistic missiles.¹²⁹ Since April 2017, the Houthis have carried out an average of six strikes per month using unmanned aerial vehicles, and have used Iranian Shark-33 drone boats to mount attacks on a Saudi frigate and oil terminal in the Red Sea.¹³⁰ Some of their larger Iran-sourced missiles have been fired over the border into Saudi Arabia itself, including a Scud variant that narrowly missed Riyadh's main airport in November 2017.¹³¹ The speed with which the Houthis have adopted these weapons, sophisticated far beyond any system the movement had hitherto fielded, indicates that training and support has been provided alongside the weapons themselves, presumably by some combination of IRGC and Hezbollah personnel.¹³²

The Postponed Enemy: Al-Qa`ida, 2001–present

In May 2018, a few weeks before unleashing his all-caps broadside against Rouhani, President Trump took to the podium in the White House Diplomatic Reception Room to offer a more substantive critique of Iranian foreign policy. His remarks read, in part: "The Iranian regime ... supports terrorist proxies and militias such as Hezbollah, Hamas, the Taliban, and al Qaeda."¹³³ But does al-Qa`ida belong in the same category as Hezbollah? Is Qassem Soleimani pulling its strings the same way he commands Hezbollah fighters in Syria? Hardly.

There are significant impediments to any sustained relationship between Iran and al-Qa`ida. First, it bears repeating that al-Qa`ida is a Sunni militant group that exists, ultimately, to lay the groundwork for a Sunni Islamic state in which Shi`a Muslims would be, at best, second-class citizens. Al-Qa`ida members routinely slander Shi`a Muslims as "rejectionists" and "apostates." Iran, by contrast, has set itself up as the defender and protector of Shi`a communities around the world. Second, Soleimani's Shi`a militias are, today, fighting two of al-Qa`ida's most significant aligned groups, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in Syria and al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in Yemen. In Syria, Soleimani's own IRGC troops directly engaged HTS' predecessor, al-Nusra, taking heavy casualties in the process.¹³⁴ It is safe to assume that Iranian troops have not held back from fighting HTS itself since the reorganization that brought HTS into being.

Neither of these hurdles would make cooperation impossible for entities with a Machiavellian streak, but they would make a close long-term relationship difficult to sustain. And indeed, the relationship between Iran and al-Qa`ida, when it has existed at all, has been an extremely rocky one. The first documented contact took place in the early 1990s, during al-Qa`ida's period of exile in Sudan. IRGC elements in Khartoum brokered an arrangement by which some al-Qa`ida operatives apparently traveled to Lebanon to receive training from Imad Mughniyah, the Hezbollah commander and close friend of Qassem Soleimani—expertise they later put to deadly use in the 1998 bombings of two U.S. embassies in East Africa. But the arrangement proved short-lived; rank-and-file al-Qa`ida members simply could not overcome their revulsion toward their Shi`a trainers.¹³⁵

After 9/11, al-Qa`ida members initially sought refuge in Pakistan, historically a haven for the group. But the regime of Pervez Musharraf, appalled by the carnage bin Ladin had inflicted, agreed to cooperate with the United States to hunt down jihadis in its territory. Pakistan was no longer safe. In response, many al-Qa`ida members, including some of the group's most senior leaders, migrated to the one remaining country in the region that America could not reach—the Islamic Republic of Iran.¹³⁶

Abu Hafsa al-Mauritani, formerly al-Qa`ida's leading cleric, headed the first wave to flee into Iran. In December 2001, al-Mauritani reportedly met Soleimani in person, only for the general to turn down his offer of cooperation against America.¹³⁷ This, as we have seen, was the period during which Soleimani was sharing intelligence with the United States and contemplating an overhaul in relations with the "Great Satan," and part of his motivation for doing so, according to one of the American diplomats involved, was the opportunity to destroy al-Qa`ida, as well as its Taliban hosts.¹³⁸ Recall that the quid pro quo for Soleimani's cooperation with the United States was information from U.S. intelligence on the whereabouts of an al-Qa`ida fixer in Iran, who was swiftly arrested and handed over to the U.S.-backed authorities in Kabul.¹³⁹

Over the next few years, al-Qa`ida members living in Iran faced successive waves of arrests, detentions, and deportations, during which they were frequently kept incommunicado.¹⁴⁰ As one very senior al-Qa`ida leader put it, the unpredictability of these actions "confused us and foiled 75 percent of our plan."¹⁴¹ Different groups of jihadis at different times went through periods of relative freedom, house arrest, or detention in prisons run by Soleimani's Quds Force—facilities that ran the gamut from relatively comfortable to utterly squalid. According to one former detainee (Usama bin Ladin's son Saad), harsher treatment sometimes involved untreated grave illness, beatings serious enough to require hospitalization, or even the deaths of women and children.¹⁴² The detainees often responded to privations imposed by their captors with riots and prison breaks.¹⁴³

Nevertheless, Soleimani seems to have realized that having large numbers of jihadis under lock and key could be a strategic asset. Of the four al-Qa`ida members released during this early period, three held European passports; it is possible they were considered more likely to be able to wreak havoc against Iran's adversaries in the West.¹⁴⁴ By the same logic, around the fall of 2002, the Iranian authorities offered to send certain Saudi al-Qa`ida members for training with Hezbollah, on condition that they would use the training to mount attacks in Saudi Arabia; however, it seems that they all refused this offer.¹⁴⁵ (Perhaps their ingrained enmity toward

Shi`a Muslims was still too powerful.)

Al-Qa`ida detainees, particularly bin Ladin family members, could also be used as bargaining chips. In July 2004, Soleimani's people attempted to make contact with Usama bin Ladin himself in order to request the al-Qa`ida leader's intercession to curtail a vicious campaign against Shi`a holy sites in Iraq by the Jordanian militant Abu Musab al-Zarqawi—the implied quid pro quo being better treatment for detainees and possibly unspecified “material support.”¹⁴⁶ Terrorism studies scholar Nelly Lahoud has raised the possibility that this request factored into bin Ladin's decision to accept al-Zarqawi's pledge of *bay`a* (allegiance) in the fall of 2004, and into subsequent (unsuccessful) attempts to shame al-Zarqawi into curbing his more murderous impulses.¹⁴⁷

Bin Ladin was often preoccupied by the well-being of al-Qa`ida members in Iran, not least because some of them were members of his family—including, at one point, his favorite wife (Umm Hamza) and at least four of his sons, together with their own wives and children.¹⁴⁸ In letters to lieutenants who remained at large, he agonized about the “horrors” and “tragedies” that had befallen the detainees, arguing that “we need to act quickly to save them.”¹⁴⁹ Around the second half of 2009, he instructed his then-deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri (now al-Qa`ida's overall leader), to pen an open letter “to the wise in the Iranian administration,” urging the release of all jihadi prisoners or, failing that, better treatment for the ones who remained. Bin Ladin's writing prompt included the following:

“What is Iran's interest in demonstrating its harsh hostility against the Sunni people by acting in an inhumane way? [Iraqi Shi`a cleric] Muqtada al-Sadr was forced to leave the battlefields against the Americans in Najaf and Karbala; he entered your homeland, but the brothers did not see him in prison with them. Similarly, if Hassan Nasrallah was forced to come to you, you would not put him in jail. So why all this resentment and ill will against the Sunni people?”¹⁵⁰

Later, al-Qa`ida acquired bargaining chips of its own. In 2010, it exchanged a kidnapped Iranian diplomat for several bin Ladin family members, including one of bin Ladin's favorite sons, Hamza, now an al-Qa`ida leader in his own right.¹⁵¹ Five years later, al-Qa`ida traded another Iranian diplomat for three of the most significant members of al-Qa`ida's pre-9/11 governing council.¹⁵² One of the latter, Abu al-Khayr al-Masri, would later be killed in Idlib province, Syria, where he was helping to direct the operations of the al-Qa`ida-aligned group there, then known as Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (JFS).¹⁵³

As this history suggests, the relationship between Iran and al-Qa`ida is one of precarious balance. On certain matters, their interests align; clearly, both seek to weaken the West and its allies in the Gulf. Beyond that, Iran's priority is to prevent attacks on its soil and, if possible, against Shi`a Muslims elsewhere. By holding al-Qa`ida leaders, Iran gets what the scholar Assaf Moghadam calls an “insurance policy against al-Qa`ida attacks directed at it.”¹⁵⁴ Al-Qa`ida, for its part, seeks to maintain the only feasible corridor between its heartland along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border and the battlefields of the Middle East—what bin Ladin himself, in a 2007 letter to a senior associate, called its “main artery for funds, personnel, and communication.”¹⁵⁵ (It should be noted that in the same letter bin Ladin also took care to remind his correspondent to be delicate with Iran because it still held al-Qa`ida members and their families as “hostages.”)

To keep this lifeline open, al-Qa`ida is willing to forgo opportu-

nities to attack Iran; on the flip side of the coin, if Iran chose to shut it down, the chances are high that it would find itself a target. Hence the uneasy truce under which Iran turns a blind eye to al-Qa`ida's operation of what the U.S. State Department calls “a core facilitation pipeline through Iranian territory.”¹⁵⁶

Far from a “proxy” relationship, this could perhaps better be characterized as an arrangement of mutual blackmail. Clearly, there is very little trust involved: when the Iranians released bin Ladin's favorite wife, in 2010, bin Ladin counseled her on the steps he felt were needed to ensure that no GPS tracking device could have been placed in her belongings or even injected into her body by her jailors.¹⁵⁷ Al-Qa`ida has trained couriers carrying sensitive information through Iran to commit suicide rather than be captured.¹⁵⁸

Years after Iran became al-Qa`ida's “artery for funds, personnel, and communication,” there was still no love lost between the jihadis and the Islamic Republic. Soon after his release by Iran in fall 2010, Abu Anas al-Libi—an alleged plotter in the 1998 embassy attacks, who later died awaiting trial in New York—wrote a private letter to bin Ladin in which he vented his anger at Tehran, calling Iranians “enemies of God” and “people whose mannerisms resemble those of the Jews” and praying that “may God seek revenge on them” and “their evil leader Khamenei ... I ask God to humiliate them and aid us in seeking revenge against them.” He added what for a committed jihadi may be the ultimate insult: “Israel ... was probably more worthy than they were.”¹⁵⁹

It is not surprising, therefore, that no convincing evidence has ever been adduced showing cooperation between Iran and al-Qa`ida on specific operations or attacks. A senior jihadi who was once detained in Iran wrote that both the United States and the Islamic Republic are enemies of al-Qa`ida; the difference being that, whereas the United States is the “current enemy,” Iran is merely the “postponed enemy.”¹⁶⁰ In the meantime, Iran and al-Qa`ida find themselves in what former Director of National Intelligence James Clapper has aptly called a “shotgun marriage.”¹⁶¹ The divorce, if and when it comes, will be messy.

Shunning the Limelight, Or Courting It? Soleimani's Public Image, 2015-present

Even as his portfolio has sprawled well beyond the strictly military into the realms of intelligence and diplomacy, Soleimani has insisted on playing the world-weary warrior, a role that fits him to a T. Most of his public appearances take place at events honoring Iranian war dead, of whom he speaks in reverent tones.¹⁶² “When the war ends,” he has said, “the honest mujahid clasps his hands sorrowfully. We lost, and the martyrs won.”¹⁶³ As his power grows, he has continued to maintain this unassuming public persona—except, perhaps, when roused by social media needling from the president of the United States.

Yet this pious image has not stopped Soleimani from becoming a cult figure in his own country, as omnipresent on Iranian state television as he is in the Twitter feeds of his Shi`a militias. According to one report, there exist at least 10 Instagram accounts dedicated to burnishing his brand.¹⁶⁴ The Instagram account identified by the Middle East Media Research Institute as belonging to Soleimani himself—under the handle “sardar_haj_ghasemsoleimani”—is slick and garish and includes messages in English as well as Farsi. One recent post shows a composite image of Soleimani apparently calling in a missile strike on the south front of the White House, accompanied by the slogan “We will crush the USA under our feet”

in English. The same account made an internet meme out of pictures and quotes from Soleimani's July 2018 speech denouncing President Trump.¹⁶⁵

Nor is Soleimani's fame limited to personal or official channels. His portrait is revered everywhere from political rallies to body-building contests.¹⁶⁶ In 2016, one of Iran's most respected movie directors, Ebrahim Hatamikia, made a film, *Bodyguard*, whose lead character is a dead ringer for Soleimani. When the film won awards, Hatamikia dedicated the gongs to the Shadow Commander, proclaiming himself "the earth beneath Soleimani's feet."¹⁶⁷

Soleimani's runaway popularity naturally raises the question of whether he might seek political office—perhaps even the presidency itself. On the one hand, since his appointment as Quds Force chief, Soleimani has not been afraid to involve himself in politics at crunch moments. In 1999, he was among the most prominent signatories of an open letter more or less explicitly threatening a coup against the reformist government of Mohammed Khatami should it fail to crack down on student protests.¹⁶⁸

Toward more conservative politicians, Soleimani has been conspicuously better disposed. After the 2009 election, which Khatami's hardline successor, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, is widely believed to have stolen through a combination of intimidation and ballot-stuffing, Soleimani publicly went to bat for Ahmadinejad.¹⁶⁹ As the architect of Iranian battlefield victories in Syria and Iraq, moreover, his credentials among hardliners are all but impeccable.

Add to that the opportunities thrown up by the current chaos in Iranian politics. In recent months, the rial has all but collapsed; by September 2018, according to Reuters, the black market demanded 128,000 rials to the U.S. dollar, an all-time high.¹⁷⁰ The financial crisis has created misery for millions of Iranians, with spiraling prices for food, pharmaceuticals, and other necessities, in the face of which Supreme Leader Khamenei has taken the rare step of publicly pinning the crisis on the Rouhani administration.¹⁷¹ On August 26, 2018, the economy minister was impeached, and two days later, President Rouhani himself was summoned before parliament to answer pointed questions about the economic situation—only the second time in history that Iran's legislature has used this power. "Certainly, we made mistakes," Rouhani admitted when he addressed the session.¹⁷²

In the wake of U.S. withdrawal from the nuclear accords and the ongoing regional tussle with Saudi Arabia, Iranian citizens are becoming increasingly nationalistic.¹⁷³ Having rejected the hardline approach to nuclear negotiations pressed by Ahmadinejad, the Iranian public now appears equally ready to jettison the conciliatory "heroic flexibility" of Rouhani, who cultivated an image as the "diplomat sheikh."

An historic realignment of Iranian politics may therefore be in the cards, and there is strong evidence that Iranians are increasingly willing to consider a third path: a military president.¹⁷⁴ If so, Soleimani would be the natural front-runner. A recent University of

Maryland poll found that almost 65 percent of Iranians hold a "very favorable" view of the general, giving him a commanding 28-point lead over his nearest rival, Foreign Minister Javad Zarif.¹⁷⁵

However, Soleimani himself shows little outward interest in a political career. He does not appear to have sought to capitalize on Rouhani's troubles; indeed, the speech he gave in Hamdan in July 2018 was, in part, a staunch defense of his president. In previous election years, Soleimani has repeatedly denied having designs on the presidency. Responding to calls for him to run in last year's election, he said he "will keep serving the Islamic Republic and the Iranian nation as a soldier until the last day of his life."¹⁷⁶

There is, of course, a strong sense in which it doesn't matter whether Soleimani seeks political office or not. He is already one of the most popular and powerful figures in Iran, without the need to delve into the cutthroat world of Iranian politics. Rouhani's fate, and that of Ahmadinejad before him (also brought low by an economic crisis), would seem to confirm that the presidency can be a poisoned chalice, especially in hard times. So why choose to drink from it? The more likely future seems to be one that continues the current trajectory, in which Soleimani continues to grow his military and diplomatic empire in the shadows.

Conclusion

In his July 2018 Hamdan speech calling out President Trump, Soleimani boasted of his country's prowess in asymmetric warfare. Following a similar vein, both Soleimani's deputy, Brigadier General Esmail Qaani, and Soleimani's (nominal) boss, IRGC commander-in-chief Major General Mohammed Ali Jafari, have recently trumpeted the advent of what they call "international basij." Basij, which translates as "mobilization," was a term used to refer to citizen militias raised in support of the Islamic Revolution.¹⁷⁷ These are no idle claims. Soleimani—who himself reportedly holds a black belt in karate—practices a brand of martial art, tempting bigger opponents to make moves that count against them. In Iraq, the U.S. invasion of 2003 created a power vacuum that Iranian proxies were more than happy to fill, eventually obliging the U.S. military to leave the country entirely; later, with the rise of the Islamic State, the United States was forced to choose what may fairly be called the lesser of two evils, giving rise to the bizarre and unsettling spectacle of U.S. jets in effect providing air cover for Soleimani's militants as they battled the Islamic State.¹⁷⁸ Today, in Yemen, Saudi Arabia's multi-billion-dollar air campaign, designed to destroy Iran's proxies there, has instead arguably become their most effective recruiting sergeant.

Iran's "Axis of Resistance" has been built on the efforts of proxies controlled by Soleimani in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen—and on the marriage between state and militant power that Iran has been able to broker in each of those countries. The success of this model will have repercussions across the Middle East for years, if not decades to come. **CTC**

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A View from the CT Foxhole: Patrick Skinner, Police Officer in Savannah, Georgia, and Former CIA Case Officer in Afghanistan and Iraq

By Paul Cruickshank

Since 2017, Patrick Skinner has worked as a “beat cop” in Savannah, Georgia. He is a former CIA case officer, with extensive experience in source handling and source networks, specializing in counterterrorism issues. After leaving the CIA, he worked as Director of Special Projects for The Soufan Group. In addition to his intelligence experience, he has law enforcement experience with the Federal Air Marshal Service and the U.S. Capitol Police, as well as search and rescue experience in the U.S. Coast Guard. Follow @SkinnerPm

Editor’s note: Patrick Skinner is not speaking in any capacity for his police department. The views he expresses are his alone and do not necessarily reflect those of the U.S. Government.

CTC: Earlier this year, *The New Yorker* ran a profile of you entitled “The Spy Who Came Home,” which outlined how you went from working for the CIA on counterterrorism in the decade after 9/11 to becoming a beat cop in Savannah, Georgia. The article described how you applied lessons learned working in intelligence and counterterrorism to local policing. It would be great if you could speak to that, but we’d also like to focus on the other side of the equation and discuss insights you may have gained from police work at the community level that may be applicable to counterterrorism and counterinsurgency.

Skinner: The response to that *New Yorker* profile, from my fellow beat cops and people in other agencies and departments, continues to be amazing. I perhaps have an odd view point, as a [former CIA] case officer having seen places where the badge means nothing while the gun means everything. Yet, now I still see such places, but instead of a failed state—whatever that means—it’s a few houses in a block or two in an American city.

In my new life as a local cop in my hometown, I’ve spent the last year or so trying to apply whatever lessons I tried to learn as a CIA Operations Officer (OO, though usually still called a Case Officer) working in the Counterterrorism Center (CTC). Some of those lessons have proven immediately and consistently invaluable: embracing the truth that I don’t know much about a scene I have been sent to; asking more questions than making statements; trying to understand the motivations of the people with whom I engage in times of tremendous stress; writing clear reports on what actually happened and not what I wanted to happen. The tools of the trade for a case officer are in many ways the tools of the trade for a local beat cop. Daily, I see how my time with CIA shapes my time with my police department.

I can only speak from my limited experience in trying to apply our counterterrorism strategy overseas as a case officer and now trying to apply our ‘community policing’ strategy in my hometown, and I don’t have academic research to support my observations and my personal lessons learned. But I feel that we are trying to do the

same thing in both instances with the same ill-fitting tactics, and we don’t see this because we use such very different rhetoric when describing efforts at home and overseas. We attempt (meaning we plan, fund, and execute) campaigns overseas that we would never, ever try here at home. Yet, both are the same side of the coin, only looked at from different angles. If I had to sum it up in one sentence, I would say that in our overseas CT and COIN endeavors, we are constantly retrying the impossible at great cost and greater negative consequences. I think that for both local policing and overseas CT and COIN, it is only by examining challenges at a hyper-local level that progress can be achieved.

CTC: What prompted you to make such a big career change and join your local police department?

Skinner: After leaving the CIA, I returned to Savannah and worked as an analyst in the private sector examining counterterrorism and security issues. It was all important work, but I was writing about places I hadn’t been to in a while. And it dawned on me that I had little sense what was happening in my hometown. We have a crime problem like most American cities, especially in the South. After working so long on issues affecting far-off places, I wanted to do something that made a difference in my local community.

CTC: How has your CIA training helped you as a beat cop?

Skinner: Let me give you just one example. It was emphasized during our training that one should try not to make a verbal mistake. Whatever you do, don’t screw up by saying something wrong. If you don’t know what to say, don’t say anything. The Agency taught you [to] never disrespect somebody. Always be respectful at all times. Listen. Don’t be rude. Don’t be arrogant. And so I do that now as a beat cop in Savannah, with every single call. And it’s paying off, so far anyway.

CTC: What parallels are there between your counterterrorism work and fighting crime?

Skinner: In some respects, it’s exactly like terrorism. There are a handful of network-based people that commit most of the crimes in our city, and so I approach my work accordingly. It’s almost counterinsurgency, even though this is my hometown. I will not disrespect anybody that’s a criminal. If we did that in counterinsurgency [overseas], we probably wouldn’t be having the problems we have.

CTC: Because it’s about getting the local community on your side?

Skinner: Yeah, or at least not against you. With many criminals, they know their job is to break the law and your job is to catch them.

When you make arrests, you don't have to gloat. Just put the handcuffs on them and talk to them about whatever they ate for dinner or whatever. I arrest a lot of people, and I see them a week later, or a month, it depends on the crime.

One of the things I learned at the CIA was the importance of area familiarization. But I've now moved past that and realized that I need to know area familiarization from the people who live there, and that's almost impossible to do as a tourist. The way we operate in a lot of places where we're doing COIN and CT operations, we're tourists at best. In fact, we're walking around with the word "outsider" written all over us. It's hard to do here because I've literally got police written on me, but it's even harder to do overseas.

CTC: One of the things you mentioned in the *New Yorker* article was that the CIA had taught you to realize how much you did not know. How key is such humility to both policing and counterterrorism work overseas?

Skinner: It's such an important thing to realize when you're crafting your objectives. If you understood not just that you don't know a tremendous amount, but that you can't know it, your goals would be very, very different. And you would more clearly see the things you should and could do. When I listen to people in Washington D.C., and even sometimes when I hear our police leadership, start talking grand strategies or demanding more intelligence, I'm very, very aware now of how difficult that is.

Being a beat cop in Savannah has made me keenly aware of the difficulties in fighting crime, even here at home, and that has transformed the way I view CT overseas. Let me preface this by saying there are things that work like targeted raids, which are really effective in keeping network-based groups off balance. This is the case for both policing at home and CT work overseas. Raids based on solid intel (or warrants based on solid probable cause) are very effective at disrupting known threats. The issue is when those raids become the strategy because nothing else works. If you get lucky enough to get a decent source, you can wreck these network-based groups.

But when it comes to larger, almost nation-building type efforts and counterinsurgency, I've become worse than pessimistic. Today, as a beat cop, I see how difficult it is to get information for people in one block, two houses on one block in my hometown with home field advantage, speaking the same language, with unlimited time. And very often, we can't do it. Yet, you'll get somebody coming up with a white paper and say, "All you need to do is to get the Shi'a in this half of a country on your side. We just need to know more insight into this community." And that's insane. I've worked on gathering intelligence like that, and a lot of people I know still do, and you don't really see how insane that is until you have to do that in one row of houses here in America.

If we understand that, then we can maybe shape more realistic policies instead of repeating hollow mantras like "we're gonna win hearts and minds." I don't even know what that means. My experience so far as a police officer tells me we can't even do that here. And we have unlimited time here. We live here. But when it comes to overseas, it's the reverse situation: they live there, and we have very limited time and very limited mobility, limited resources. But despite all this, we ask more of the CT and counterinsurgency staff overseas than we would ever ask here.

For those who say, "Oh, we just gotta win hearts and minds," I'll

put it this way: if in roll call here in Savannah, my sergeant said, "OK, Skinner, you've got *one* week to figure out what's going on in these two blocks. You gotta know these people's hopes, aspirations, fears, political leanings, and then get them to tell you where the criminals are," you know what the result would be? Despite no language limitations and even if I was allowed to wear plain clothes, I would fail miserably, and it would almost certainly be counterproductive because I would try to rush it. We do that overseas all the time, except we do it by provinces and even entire countries rather than two blocks. The unbelievably large scale of what we were/are trying to do overseas in our CT/COIN endeavors is really clear to me now as a beat cop responsible for a few blocks in my hometown. I find that humbling, looking back and looking ahead.

CTC: What challenges did you face in obtaining intelligence when you worked in counterterrorism for the CIA?

Skinner: When I was focused on Afghanistan, we were going after some pretty big people, always going after the next number three or four in al-Qa`ida. I was in a lot of different places, but in the east, we were working right along the Afghan border, so it was usually a high-level target. And that's such a weird problem to work because you're not really getting the local community involved in that because they're not going to support you no matter what. Even if they agreed with you, they can't [help you] because they'll get killed. By definition, we were invaders.

We had a lot of successes that didn't mean a lot. Or they were, at best, temporary. I had no problem with that. If we could keep a group off balance by continually knocking out mid-level management, well, that was my job and that was fine. And we were pretty good at it. Critics refer to it as whack-a-mole, but it *did* contain the problem to some degree, even if it did nothing to address the larger issues behind the threat. That's the point I was making earlier about raids. They're good, but they're not a strategy.

A war zone is not really clandestine. I mean, everybody knows who you are. If you're in these locations—and I spent significant time in Afghanistan and Iraq—you're limited in the way you move. And you can't fool yourself; it's not clandestine. What you do is barely espionage. We were using espionage-lite tactics to basically get leads.

I was focused on AQI in Iraq back in 2009, 2010. In 2009, the year before there was a big fall off in their operations, they were really active, and we were in a we-need-to-stop-the-next-car-bombing mode because they were just devastating. We spent a lot of time working with just a handful of sources where you're just running them as skillfully as you could, relying on them. It was getting the information on the intentions of small cells.

It was in hindsight very myopic. We were looking through the wrong end of the telescope because we had little idea about what was going on around these cells, and we likely inflated their importance because we happened to know about [their existence]. The massive problem was that we were doing CT in the middle of a quasi-war. That's insane. But we did it because we didn't have a lot of options.

Our biggest problem was you couldn't move around very well. That was always the biggest issue. It was obvious [I was an] American spy overseas anywhere I went in a war zone. I had a great beard, but I'd be burned before I even got out of the car. So we were getting played because we couldn't move around. We only knew what the

people who were already telling us stuff were telling us, and so you could fall into the whole feedback loop. You had no idea what was going on.

The sheer pace of operations—and this was very much like local police where the 9-1-1 calls are relentless—you going to fall back into what seems to work, and you're going to do it every single time. Before you have a chance to reflect and assess, you're onto the next operation.

CTC: What are the lessons you've learned as a beat cop in Savannah that you think could be applied to counterterrorism and counterinsurgency?

Skinner: I know from my police work that a small fraction of criminals commit a large fraction of the crime. In the United States, we call them gangs. Overseas, some of these criminals are labeled terrorist groups. In both cases, it's network based, based on families or neighborhoods or other forms of connections. It is small cells. And so investigators—case officers overseas or detectives here in the United States— need to focus on those [networks or cells]. And you need to be very, very, targeted.

One track is avoiding mistakes. I'm very aware at work every day of the potential consequences of doing something wrong to someone, for example humiliating or disrespecting them. The damage is so immediate. One bad impression will overcome 10 good experiences. I'm hyper aware of the fact that I am acting in the name of the state. And I am very, very, very hesitant to use that power until I know that I'm right. And does that mean that I'm a hesitating cop? Well, no, but it probably means I'm not gonna make a lot of mistakes. I do not want to make a mistake in the name of the state, using the power of the state. But overseas, we do that a lot. It's not our intention. We call it collateral damage, but it's killing innocent people or it's raids based on bad intel. You want to avoid kicking in doors in the wrong house, which we did overseas all the time. And we kind of just missed the very large impact that has on people. I would say, exercise more caution than you think you should. You really don't want to make mistakes. I can't stress this enough. Mistakes made in law enforcement or CT are devastating to individuals. Mistakes in law enforcement and CT made repeatedly are devastating to communities and entire systems of justice.

Another track is trying to put people at ease. As a cop where you go out and are chatting to people, you are putting people at ease and you're getting a lot of baseline information. You're building goodwill or at least you're building the absence of ill will. I'm not fooling myself that I'm winning hearts and minds so much as seeking in the moment I have with a person to make some connection. And then build on that every chance I get.

This community based-approach to policing cannot be just based on individual ad hoc efforts. It has to be systematically ingrained through training. The problem is that it's virtually impossible for outsiders to successfully do this in a place like Iraq or Afghanistan. The only way this approach can really pay dividends overseas is if it's locals—whether it be Iraqis or Yemenis or Afghans—who are the ones doing it. But their law enforcement at times barely existed, and that's where things fell apart. Because we were just relying on raids and drone strikes with limited ground collection because we didn't have the community policing. And in that situation, you're going to start making a lot more errors because your intel is bad. And that's going to generate a loop of failure.



Patrick Skinner

What I really came to believe in is most of the problems we faced were because of the collapse of local law enforcement and also more importantly, local governance. It was this collapse that allowed ISIS to go from a criminal gang to taking over large parts of Iraq and Syria.

The lack of local governance and fair, accountable, transparent, decent, non-heavy handed, local policing causes network-based cells to metastasize. We can't really do anything until we fix that, and sometimes we can't because these places are so broken. But despite this, we keep on coming up with grand strategies to "improve governance" and deluding ourselves they will work.

CTC: So what's the alternative?

Skinner: The alternative is you want to begin whatever your big plan is with the absolute, overwhelming understanding and embrace of the fact that these issues are hyper, hyper local in a way you can't possibly understand. And then see how you can address that. And that'll scale back your ambitions and make you tailor your resources in a more targeted way. The U.S. military got it right in a few places in Iraq. They were not in a position to fix Baghdad or the central government, but they did have the capacity to fix one city block and build some goodwill there. In theory, you can then build that goodwill block by block. You need to have a grassroots counterinsurgency. But while it may sound easy, my entire point is it's almost impossible to do as a foreign government on foreign soil with a lack of cultural, linguistic, and local knowledge. The surge in Anbar worked because it was a local effort supported by the U.S.; but it wasn't supposed to win the war. It was supposed to buy time for social and governmental reforms and improvements that never happened. We see this a lot with law enforcement and community outreach in the U.S.; a good idea or something that works in a particular situation becomes 'the solution' writ large and of course it can't be. We rely too heavily on any one thing when the

point I'm making, poorly and at length, is there is no *one* thing, and it is precisely that drive for 'the one thing' that wrecks progress. We don't solve life; we live it. We don't end crime; we address it. And we should address it in the Hippocratic Oath sort of way of first do no harm to the community.

CTC: All this suggests that it's only by partnering up with local governments that significant progress can be made on winning hearts and mind and gaining information. Building up the capacity of partner governments and providing training continues to be a key part of the U.S. counterterrorism strategy.²

Skinner: The problem is a lot of those funds in places such as Afghanistan are wasted because of corruption.

CTC: And then there's the issue of governments in some parts of the world using repressive practices, which might tamp down terrorist activity in the very short term but create bigger problems in the medium to long term.

Skinner: That's exactly right. I get why we embrace certain governments. Because we like stability. We embrace tyrants with terrible human rights records. That's not a secret. Nothing new either. But working with unsavory governments can generate a lot more ill than successes. Like fishing with dynamite. We would have a revolution in the streets tomorrow if we tried one-tenth of the tactics we're enabling some of our partners to use overseas.

CTC: How can resources be better allocated in counterterrorism and counterinsurgency overseas, and what can be done to make them more impactful?

Skinner: I get waste, but it's the amount of money we apply to stuff that we know is counterproductive. And then we cry poverty for stuff that doesn't take a lot of money but has massive impact. You want to help a community? Build a park. Fix the roads. You don't need to do all this complicated stuff. And overseas, you definitely don't want to do it where we build massive, incredibly advanced medical facilities that fall into disrepair because of corruption and the lack of underlying infrastructure and training, which is what has happened in Iraq.³

We have relied far too much on so-called "agents of influence." Here [in the United States], we call them community leaders. And at every stage, they tended to inflate their actual influence and their

ability. People who speak for communities here [in the U.S.], they do have some influence, but it's a self-selecting audience, almost an echo chamber of sorts. They have reach but perhaps not with the true target audience, the people not listening to what the government or even 'community leaders' have to say. Overseas in CT work, it was pretty bad. We would work with people because they were easy to work with or had some influence, but then we just kept going back to them for everything. In my limited lane of CT work overseas, I was always less than impressed at the agents of influence we worked with. Now as a beat cop, I try to be that agent of influence on every call and earn that influence the only way it really can work, every day. It's frustrating but I keep harping on this: these issues, the persistent challenges of CT and law enforcement, they resist grand gestures. They require the opposite of grand gestures. They require countless small gestures.

CTC: *The New Yorker* noted that over the last 20 years, more than \$5 billion of military gear has been transferred to state and local police forces.⁴ What's your concern over the potential militarization of the police?

Skinner: In some countries overseas, the police are the military, especially in the Middle East. They literally are the military. Their CIA is the FBI, which is the military. It's all the same thing. So they patrol in the literal sense. The danger is when we do that here. I think the militarization of police is insane. Cops should not dress like soldiers. Dressing the part matters. But they shouldn't talk like soldiers. I get that need to have that equipment, and that equipment can be kept somewhere for when you need it. But the heart and soul of a police department needs to be community-based policing and not just the rhetoric of community. It has to be the mentality. It's not semantics. It has to be the philosophy. It has to be at the center of every single thing you do.

As a member of the community in Savannah and as a police officer here, I use the term neighbor, and I use it all the time. But I use it because it's actually true. I live four minutes from my precinct police station. If you don't feel like part of the community, your operations risk being counterproductive. That was the case for some of the CT raids and COIN operations carried out overseas in recent years. Imagine coming home and there's pretty significant police activity in your neighborhood, and it looks like you've been invaded. And then it happens the next month or it happens the next day, and you get pulled over in your driveway every single day. Imagine what would happen if that were happening in your hometown. **CTC**

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The Portugal Connection in the Strasbourg-Marseille Islamic State Terrorist Network

By Nuno Tiago Pinto

In November 2016, French authorities arrested seven men in Strasbourg and Marseille on suspicion of planning a terrorist attack in the Paris region. During the following months, a total of 14 people were arrested in five different countries in relation to the plot. The arrests were the result of a large-scale investigation that saw cooperation between Portugal, Spain, France, Germany, and Morocco. Information obtained by the author from judicial documents and interviews with intelligence and security officials sheds new light on how this network spread throughout Europe; how it was linked in various ways to the Islamic State network behind the November 2015 Paris and March 2016 Brussels attacks; how the network financed itself through credit card fraud; and how it used encrypted communication apps to receive instructions from Syria. Behind it all were two men who entered Europe through Portugal posing as political refugees. With Portugal previously being used as an operational base for the Basque terrorist group ETA, the case raises concerns that countries in which security services are less geared up to confront jihadi terrorism are being used as logistical hubs by Islamic State networks.

On November 21, 2016, French Interior Minister Bernard Cazeneuve announced that a large-scale terrorist attack in the Paris area had been foiled following the arrest of seven men on the night of November 19-20 in the cities of Strasbourg and Marseille.¹ Five were kept in custody: Yassine Bousseria, Hicham Makran, Sami Ben Zarroug, and Zacaria M'Hamedi, all French nationals, were detained in Strasbourg, and Hicham el-Hanafi,² a Moroccan with a resident permit issued in Portugal that had been previously flagged³ by a partner country, was detained in Marseille.

Initially, public attention was focused on the group of four detained in Strasbourg. According to information provided by Paris prosecutor François Molins, two of them had traveled to the bor-

der region between Turkey and Syria, and following their return to France, they received instructions through encrypted communication devices from Syria. "The Strasbourg cell had instructions to get weapons, given by a commander in the Iraq-Syria zone," Mr. Molins said.⁴ During searches of their apartments, authorities found guns and a 12-page notebook with manuscript references to jihad and the Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.⁵ French police believed they had uncovered a sleeper cell waiting for orders.⁶

During the following months, however, judicial and intelligence cooperation between several European countries led investigators to revise their thinking. They came to believe that the most important suspect was the man detained in Marseille, Hicham el-Hanafi. Their detailed analysis of his activities, travels, contacts, and finances revealed what seemed to be an undercover network of Islamic State operatives that spread throughout Europe and was financed through a credit-card fraud scheme.⁷

El-Hanafi, they concluded, had direct contact with previously identified members of the Islamic State's external operations department as well as links to the network responsible for the November 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris.⁸ Two years later, he is still awaiting trial.

This article is the result of months of joint investigative reporting by a group of journalists from four European countries^a and is based on thousands of pages of judicial documents, investigative files, interviews with key witnesses, and several counterterrorism and intelligence officials. It reveals how European cooperation led to the dismantling of a network that was preparing an attack in France, and examines the loose ends that are still under investigation, including the alleged role of Abdesselam Tazi, a mysterious man currently held in Portugal.

Entry to Europe

Hicham el-Hanafi was born in Fez, Morocco, on July 16, 1990.⁹ Up until his early 20s, he showed no signs of radicalization nor was he particularly religious: he drank with friends, smoked, had girlfriends, and worked as a chef in a Turkish restaurant.¹⁰ According to his family, he started to change in 2013 when he met Abdesselam Tazi, a then 59-year-old former policeman.¹¹ They bonded and together left Morocco on September 8, 2013.

El-Hanafi's brother Amine recalls meeting Tazi as the duo was

Nuno Tiago Pinto is an investigative reporter and executive editor at Sábado news magazine. He authored the books Os combatentes portugueses do Estado Islâmico (The Portuguese fighters in the Islamic State); Heróis Contra o Terror: Mário Nunes, o português que foi combater o Estado Islâmico (Heroes Against Terror: Mário Nunes, the Portuguese that went to fight the Islamic State); and Dias de Coragem e Amizade - Angola, Guiné e Moçambique: 50 Histórias da Guerra Colonial (Days of Courage and Friendship - Angola, Guinea and Mozambique: 50 Stories from Portuguese Colonial War). Follow @ntpinto23

a The result of this investigation was published simultaneously on August 9, 2018, in Portugal, Spain, Belgium, and Germany. Nuno Tiago Pinto, "Como Portugal ajudou a desmantelar uma rede jihadista europeia," *Sábado*, August 9, 2018; Daniel Montero, "Estado Islámico ocultó a terroristas como exiliados políticos para organizar desde España atentados en Francia," *El Español*, August 9, 2018; Guy Van Vlierden, "Netwerk niet opgerold na aanslagen Brussel: Belgen waren geldkoeriers voor nieuwe terreur IS," *Het Laatste Nieuws*, August 9, 2018; Miguel Helm, "In letzter Sekunde," *Die Zeit*, August 8, 2018.

about to depart. “It was the first time I saw him. He told me not to worry because he would take care of my brother the best way possible,” Amine told the author.¹² Tazi and el-Hanafi took a bus to Agadir and then proceeded to Mauritania, Senegal, and finally Guinea-Bissau. There, on September 23, 2013, they boarded a TAP flight to Portugal using forged documents.¹³ El-Hanafi carried a Romanian residence permit under his own name while Tazi had a French passport under the name of Pascal Fernand Joseph Dufour.¹⁴

Questioned by the border patrol agents at Lisbon airport, each of them immediately asked for asylum, saying they had been persecuted in Morocco for their political views and activities in support of the February 20 movement,¹⁵ b which was calling for democratic reforms. According to authorities, the two never mentioned that they knew each other.

For a week, they stayed at temporary facilities at the Lisbon airport. They were then sent to the Refugees Housing Center at Bobadela, on the outskirts of Lisbon. In late November 2013, they were dispatched to a social security installation in the district of Aveiro in northern Portugal and received provisional resident permits that allowed them to travel freely. Their permanent residence authorization was issued in September 2014, valid until October 2019.¹⁶

For months, they managed to keep themselves under the radar. They rented a room in Aveiro¹⁷ and traveled freely to several European countries, mostly Spain, France, and Germany.¹⁸ They also seemed to have financial resources not compatible with their refugee status, as a part of which they received a small monthly allowance of 150 euro.¹⁹

It was only in early 2015 that their activities came to the attention of Portuguese authorities, following a complaint submitted by Hicham el-Hanafi’s brother, Amine.²⁰ The two had not seen each other for almost two years. But when he moved to Lisbon, Amine immediately realized that his younger brother had changed: Hicham was strictly following what he saw to be his religious duties; he refused to greet his female cousin because she was not properly dressed, and every conversation would inevitably end in a discussion about jihad and the war in Syria.²¹ Amine’s suspicions quickly became certainties. First, there was a long conversation he took part in with other Moroccans at Porto airport in which Hicham el-Hanafi and Abdesselam Tazi made clear that they believed that every Muslim had an obligation to perform jihad. Second, Hicham revealed to Amine that he had spent two months in Syria receiving “military training from Islamic State affiliated groups” in late 2014.²² “I tried to persuade him, but it was too late,” Amine told the author.²³ But it was only when Amine became aware that Hicham had managed to convince their mother and four younger sisters to travel to Syria that he decided to contact Portuguese authorities.²⁴ Amine also testified that Abdesselam Tazi was responsible for his brother’s radicalization and that both had managed to convince at least two other Moroccan refugees in Portugal to join the Islamic State in Syria.²⁵

On July 30, 2015, Portuguese Judiciary Police opened an official investigation into the activities of Hicham el-Hanafi and Tazi

for suspicion of terrorism.^c The investigators quickly realized that both men had been spending most of their time outside Portugal, and authorities issued a request for discreet surveillance under the Schengen Information System.²⁶ Nothing came up to indicate their whereabouts for three months. Then in October 2015, the pair popped up in the city of Wuppertal, Germany, when they used their bank cards to withdraw the 150 euro they received that month from Portuguese social services.

In the following months, their presence was detected in several European towns and cities: Paris, Amsterdam, Hamburg, Frankfurt, Bremen, Dusseldorf, Hagen, Brussels, Manchester (where they were prevented from entering the United Kingdom at Manchester airport due to the use of false documents and were sent back to Germany^d), Istanbul, Athens, and Tirana. They also made a mysterious journey to South America where Tazi visited Brazil, Nicaragua, Guatemala, Panama, Honduras, and El Salvador.²⁷

Each time they returned to Portugal, Tazi and el-Hanafi were the subject of close surveillance by teams of the Unidade Nacional de Contra Terrorismo of the Judiciary Police and also from Serviço de Informações de Segurança (SIS), Portugal’s domestic intelligence agency. When back in Portugal, the two men frequented the northern region, where they spent thousands of euro on mobile phones, clothes, and shoes, and had medical treatments they paid for with forged credit cards.²⁸ According to Portuguese authorities, the two used the money obtained from the sales of those goods to finance the successful travel of two Moroccan nationals who had obtained asylum in Portugal—Abderrahmane Bazouz and Abdessamad Anbaoui—to Syria, where they joined the Islamic State.²⁹

International cooperation also started to produce results. In early 2016, Belgian authorities informed the Portuguese police that in April 2015, Tazi had received two wire transfers: one for 3,295 euro was sent by a certain Chakhir Haddouchi and another for 1,445 euro was sent by a man named Salaheddine Lechkar.³⁰ Haddouchi’s address in Brussels was the same as that of two Belgians included in the list compiled by Belgian authorities of jihadis who traveled to Syria: Aberkan Abdelhouaid and Aberkan Abdessamad.³¹ According to information provided to the author by intelligence and counterterrorism officials,³² Chakhir Haddouchi is the brother of Anouar Haddouchi,³³ a Belgian jihadi whose bank account in the United Kingdom was the source of 3,000 British pounds withdrawn between May and June 2015 and handed in July 2015 to Mohamed Abrini³⁴—the so-called “man in the hat” in the March 2016 Brussels airport bombing who has been charged for his role in the Islamic State cell behind that attack and the November 2015 Paris attacks.³⁵ Salaheddine Lechkar, for his part, is considered a person of interest by European authorities because of his possible connections to

b According to the Portuguese Asylum law n.º27/2008, June 30, all similar requests have to be evaluated and the applicants housed until there is a final decision.

c On July 22, 2018, all terrorism charges against Abdesselam Tazi were dismissed. The Public Prosecutor in charge of the investigation appealed that decision to a higher court, which has not yet ruled on the matter. At the time of writing, Tazi is still detained in a high-security facility.

d On March 31, 2016, Tazi and el-Hanafi took a Ryanair flight from Stuttgart to Manchester. They were prevented from entering the United Kingdom due to the use of false documents: Tazi had a forged Finnish passport under the name of Tomas Engelbrechtsen and Hicham el-Hanafi a false French passport under the name of Florian Tesoro. The following day, they were deported to Stuttgart on another Ryanair flight. Departamento Central de Investigação e Acção Penal, judicial inquiry 78/15.2JBLBSB, pp. 7,249 and 7,250.



A view of a street in Lisbon, Portugal (Patricia de Melo Moreira/Bloomberg via Getty Images)

an Islamic State financial middleman based in Turkey.³⁶ Lechkar's current whereabouts are unknown to authorities.³⁷

An Undercover Operation in France

In the summer of 2016, the Portuguese investigation came to a halt. For months, there had been no sign of Tazi and el-Hanafi. Due to a lack of communication among European Union member states, the Portuguese did not learn until November 2016 that in June 2016 Tazi and el-Hanafi had been detained in Germany for credit card fraud.³⁸ This was despite the existence of an alert regarding both men in the Schengen Information System. After being arrested in Germany, Tazi remained in custody due to prior felonies related to false documents³⁹ while el-Hanafi was released two days after their arrest. He then traveled to Italy, Spain, and later to France.³⁹

According to French judicial documents, on November 14, 2016, the Direction Générale de la Sécurité Interieure (DGSI) received a warning that two residents of Strasbourg—Yassine Bousseria and Hicham Markan—were hatching an imminent attack.⁴⁰ The documents do not mention who provided the warning to the DGSI, but according to European intelligence officials, the alert came from Israeli intelligence and stated that the cell was under direct instructions from high-profile Islamic State members in Syria.⁴¹

These same French judicial documents mention that on November 17, 2016, another preliminary inquiry was opened in France regarding an imminent attack in the south of France.⁴² That information was shared by the DGSI, which received it from an infiltrated source who himself was receiving instructions from a high-profile member of the Islamic State in Syria “through the encrypted com-

munications app Threema.”⁴³ That confidential source shared print screens of his conversations with the Islamic State fighter who, on November 15, 2016, instructed him to “retrieve 4000 euro” to finance the purchase of two Kalashnikovs.⁴⁴ Two days later, the organizer in Syria instructed him to house an Islamic State operative for one evening in Marseille.⁴⁵ On November 20, 2016, Hicham el-Hanafi was arrested when he “presented himself at the meeting point. He was in possession of 4.281 euro.”⁴⁶

What also ultimately contributed to the French understanding of the terrorist conspiracy was a trap set months before by French investigators.⁴⁷ According to French judicial documents regarding the investigation of the Strasbourg and Marseille plots, between March and July 2016, an undercover operation was conducted under the instructions of the Paris Prosecutor during which at a certain point a box with four Kalashnikov machine guns and several magazines with ammunitions were buried in the forest of Montmorency, in the northern region of Paris.⁴⁸ As part of the sting operation, the GPS coordinates of this cache were provided to a member of the Islamic State in the Iraqi-Syrian zone who was looking for weapons that could be used by one or more would-be attackers in France.⁴⁹ The police put the box under heavy surveillance for months in the hope someone would take the bait. But the conspirators were arrested before they could retrieve the arms cache.⁵⁰

According to the French judicial documents, after the arrest of Yassine Bousseria and Hicham Makran in Strasbourg in November 2016, French authorities were able to establish that not only had both men been in contact with Islamic State members in Syria/Iraq since 2013, but also that the attack sponsor in Syria/Iraq had supplied them with the GPS coordinates of the Kalashnikovs hidden in Montmorency.⁵¹

Hicham el-Hanafi's arrest—simultaneously with the arrest of four suspects in Strasbourg—ignited a joint European effort between intelligence and security services. A few days later, a DGSI team traveled to Portugal to assist the Judiciary Police during the searches conducted of the apartment that el-Hanafi and Tazi main-

e On November 4, 2015, Abdesselam Tazi was identified by the Dusseldorf Police in possession of a false Finnish passport in the name of Adam Amir. On March 31, 2016, Abdesselam Tazi tried to enter the United Kingdom with a false Finnish passport under the name of Tomas Engelbrechtsen. Departamento Central de Investigação e Acção Penal, judicial inquiry 78/15.2JBLSB, pp. 7,212-7,213.

tained in Aveiro.⁵² Simultaneously, French forensic teams began an analysis of el-Hanafi's mobile phone, which allowed them to track his movements in the weeks prior to his arrest and to identify several key contacts in France, Spain, and Germany.⁵³ They also managed to establish how he obtained the 4,281 euro found in his possession. More importantly, they identified his contact in Syria: Walid Hamam,⁵⁴ a close associate of Boubaker el-Hakim,⁵⁵ a senior French-Tunisian Islamic State external attack planner whose subordinates^f helped facilitate the November 2015 Paris attacks.⁵⁶

Born in Gonesse in the northeastern suburbs of Paris in 1984, Walid Hamam traveled to participate in jihad in Syria in December 2013.⁵⁷ He became part of Katibat al-Muhajirin, a magnet for francophone volunteers to the Syrian jihad and whose members were involved in several plots in Europe.⁵⁸ One year later, posing as a Syrian refugee, he went to Athens where he stayed in the same apartment that was previously occupied by Abdelhamid Abaaoud,⁵⁹ the November 2015 Paris attacks ringleader. Back then, "Turkey and Greece were used as major facilitation and command hubs" for attacks but also as "gateways to return from Syria."⁶⁰ The Belgian investigation into a terrorist conspiracy coordinated by Abaaoud thwarted by a gun battle in the eastern Belgian town of Verviers in January 2015 showed that Hamam was supposed to be one of the Islamic State attackers in the operation they were planning.⁶¹ For that, he was sentenced in absentia to five years in prison.⁶² From 2015, he was considered a key online recruiter for the Islamic State, focusing mostly on recruiting extremists from the French town of Trappes.⁶³ He was killed by a drone strike in Raqqa on December 4, 2016.⁶⁴

According to judicial documents, in October 2016, Walid Hamam contacted from Syria a former neighbor in Trappes, Mohamed Amraoui, via the Telegram messaging app and asked him to obtain 4,100 euro: 2,000 from Amraoui's own personal savings; 1,000 that would be given by Hamam's mother; and another 1,100 from Abou Sy, an old friend of Walid Hamam.⁶⁵ Hamam instructed Amraoui to then deliver an envelope with the money to someone who was supposed to call him.⁶⁶ Amraoui collected the money, but when he received a call from a German mobile number, he got scared, decided he wanted out, and gave all the money to Abou Sy.⁶⁷

Under the instructions of Walid Hamam, Abou Sy delivered the envelope to a man that he described to the police officers who later questioned him as being from North Africa, 1.80 meters tall, and barely able to speak French, according to the judicial documents. Abou Sy met the man twice: on November 17 and 18, 2016, in Trappes.⁶⁸

Abou Sy, according to the documents, identified him as none other than Hicham el-Hanafi.⁶⁹

The forensic analysis of el-Hanafi's mobile phone also allowed French investigators to establish that four days before collecting the money, he was very close to "the cache of weapons [hidden in] Montmorency, whose GPS coordinates he knew, without visibly succeeding"⁷⁰ in finding it. In the following days, between November 14 and 17, 2016, he went to Trappes where he got "the money

to buy the guns in Marseille."⁷¹ Questioned by French authorities, el-Hanafi denied all accusations.⁷²

Arrests in Spain and Morocco

With the arrest of Hicham el-Hanafi, European counterterrorism agencies significantly intensified their information exchange. Portuguese Judiciary Police reminded their Spanish counterparts that el-Hanafi and Tazi had traveled to San Sebastian in the summer of 2014 and 2015, that in August 2016, after Tazi's arrest in Germany, el-Hanafi took a flight from Italy to Barcelona.⁷³ They also mentioned that on October 19, 2016, el-Hanafi was identified in Guipúzcoa by two police officers as being in the company of Yahya Nouri,⁷⁴ a Moroccan who entered Spain illegally when he was a child and who took part in a program designed to help disadvantaged youth through boxing.⁷⁵ Following instructions from el-Hanafi, Nouri took a flight to Turkey a few days after their October 19, 2016, meeting.⁷⁶

The reasons for this travel would only be known in late November 2016, when at the request of Spanish and French authorities, Yahya Nouri was arrested upon his return to Morocco from Turkey and remains in custody.⁷⁷ On November 29, 2016, Nouri was questioned by the local police and confessed to having met the "Salafist-jihadist" Hicham el-Hanafi for the first time in July that year.⁷⁸ According to his testimony, the two first spoke in the company of a common friend and later alone, mostly about jihadism, because they "shared the same convictions adopted by ISIS."⁷⁹ They watched propaganda videos together on el-Hanafi's personal computer.⁸⁰ While they were in a vehicle together during one of those meetings, they were approached by Spanish police and questioned for three hours before being released. After that, according to Nouri's testimony, el-Hanafi told him that he was under surveillance in Portugal because he "had two Moroccan friends that had immigrated to Syria"—one of them was named "Abou Ahmed al-Andaloussi" and was based in Homs; the second, Abderrahmane, had been killed in the same region.⁸¹

Around October 2016, at a time when their relationship had been "consolidated," Nouri said el-Hanafi proposed to him that he take part in a plan that was being put in place to attack Paris. "I accepted his proposal without hesitation," he later told Moroccan police.⁸² "Hanafi told me that the ISIS leaders attributed great importance to the French capital and tried by all means to attack it ... [because] it's considered a symbol of secularism, corruption and deprecation of morals, under the cover of individual freedom and human rights."⁸³ For that attack, according to Nouri, he (Nouri) and el-Hanafi would have Kalashnikov machine guns at their disposal.⁸⁴

In his testimony, Nouri explained that in October 2016 Hanafi ordered him to travel to Turkey. The plan was to cross into Syria in order to meet a Moroccan Islamic State operative called Abou Ahmed al-Andaloussi, receive military training, and then return to France through Germany.⁸⁵ Nouri boarded a plane in Bilbao to Ankara on October 19.⁸⁶ Upon his arrival in Turkey, Nouri bought a SIM card to maintain contact with his mentor through Telegram, the encrypted communications app, and also via Facebook under false aliases.⁸⁷ During his time in Turkey, Nouri received a total of 255 euro sent by el-Hanafi and another 133 euro from a friend named Mehdi Kacem.⁸⁸

Following el-Hanafi's instructions, on November 11, 2016, Nouri went to the Turkish town of Gaziantep near the Syrian border. On his second day there, Nouri, according to what he told Moroccan

f The subordinates in question were the French Islamic State operative Salah Gourmat and the Belgian Islamic State operative Sammy Djedou. "Statement by Pentagon Press Secretary Peter Cook on Coalition Strike Against ISIL External Attack Operatives," December 13, 2016; Jérémie Pham-Lê, "13-Novembre: qui sont les deux jeunes émir de Daech éliminés à Raqqa?" *L'Express*, December 13, 2016.

authorities, received a message through Telegram from someone who claimed to be a Saudi Islamic State fighter acting on behalf of the aforementioned al-Andaloussi.⁸⁹ Because entering Syria would be “difficult,” the Saudi said, someone would meet him in Gaziantep.⁹⁰ Later that day, al-Andaloussi himself explained to Nouri the new plan over Telegram: an envoy of his would give Nouri a memory card and Nouri’s mission would be to deliver it to Hicham el-Hanafi.⁹¹

That handover took place on November 18, 2016, during a meeting that lasted about four hours.⁹² It started with al-Andaloussi’s Syrian envoy demanding that Nouri swear allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, which he did. In the end, the fighter gave Nouri the memory card and told him to wait until they were able to provide a false passport and the necessary money for the journey back to Europe.⁹³ Later, al-Andaloussi transmitted to Nouri some security measures to adopt and advised him not to look into the memory’s card content.⁹⁴

The next morning, Nouri, according to his own later account, received a message from el-Hanafi, congratulating him for his success.⁹⁵ It was the last time both men talked. On November 20, 2016, Nouri received a message on Telegram in which the Syrian fighter he met told him about el-Hanafi’s arrest in France.⁹⁶ The fighter also advised him to be careful and to get rid of the memory card. Later, Nouri received similar instructions from al-Andaloussi.⁹⁷

According to his testimony, the next morning Nouri did the opposite and opened the memory card through his mobile phone. He told the Moroccan police that inside the memory card there were two folders. One had a speech of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and a picture of their target in Paris—a specific café also identified by its GPS coordinates.⁹⁸ The second folder had three French phone numbers. After seeing the memory card content, Nouri threw it in the sewer at the Gaziantep train station, from where he took a train to Istanbul.⁹⁹ From Istanbul, he returned to Morocco where he was detained.

Around the same time in late November 2016, Moroccan police detained Mehdi Regragui, a firefighter working for the Civil Protection in Fez who had a close relationship with el-Hanafi.¹⁰⁰ In his interrogation, Regragui confirmed he was aware that el-Hanafi had joined the Islamic State and that in 2014, el-Hanafi had been in Syria. He also told investigators that el-Hanafi sent him mobile phones and other devices that el-Hanafi bought in Europe through credit card fraud for him to sell them in Morocco. He would keep a percentage for himself and return the remaining money to el-Hanafi.

Two months after the arrests in Marseille and Strasbourg, the National Police in Spain initiated Operation Haram. On January 17, 2017, Spanish authorities arrested Medhi Kacem, 26, a Moroccan boxer linked to el-Hanafi and Nouri. Though Kacem publicly presented himself as an example of integration through sport,¹⁰¹ according to Spanish judicial documents, he was suspected of leading an underground cell that recruited disadvantaged young people to the Islamic State.¹⁰²

Investigation in Germany, Prosecution in Portugal

Meanwhile in The Hague, judicial authorities from France, Portugal, and Germany (Morocco declined an invitation to join) gathered at Eurojust headquarters on January 17, 2017.¹⁰³ The exchange of information between the three countries led investigators to conclude that the credit card frauds committed by el-Hanafi and Tazi were related to terrorism financing. Accordingly, a new investigation was

opened in Germany,¹⁰⁴ where both men had been arrested before without raising terrorism suspicions.

The investigations that followed revealed that during their time in Germany, both men had used more than 47 false identities and had obtained more than 73,000 euro through credit card fraud.¹⁰⁵

On December 12, 2016, Tazi was sentenced by the district court of Dusseldorf to one and a half years in prison for fraud. The sentence was suspended on probation. But the LKA (State Criminal Police) arrested him again in the courtroom on the basis of a European arrest warrant issued by both Portugal and France.¹⁰⁶ Believing that Tazi had more chances of being prosecuted in Portugal, both countries agreed that he should be sent to Lisbon,¹⁰⁷ where he arrived in March 2017.

One year later, Tazi was charged in Portugal for eight crimes related to terrorism.¹⁰⁸ According to the Public Prosecutor, he was responsible for the radicalization of Hicham el-Hanafi and had, through the use of false credit cards, obtained thousands of euro that he used to finance terrorism-related activities.¹⁰⁹ While in prison awaiting prosecution and a possible trial, Tazi denied any connection to terrorism and claimed to be the victim of a revenge organized by other Moroccans living in Portugal.¹¹⁰ Tazi admitted to all of the credit card fraud, but argued that it was his only way of surviving because he was not able to get a job.¹¹¹ He never justified his connections to—or money transfers received from—known jihadis.¹¹²

Tazi’s Portuguese lawyer contested all terrorism charges in the pre-trial judicial phase of the case (“instrução”) that took place in July 2018. The judge in charge of the case dismissed all terrorism-related crimes, ruling that there was not enough evidence to send him to trial on that basis.¹¹³ But the judge made clear that he did not take into account the documents, interrogations, and evidence sent to Portugal by the French, German, Spanish, and Moroccan authorities. He considered that the Public Prosecutor had not complied with the legal proceedings necessary for the documents to be legally accepted.¹¹⁴ The Public Prosecutor appealed that decision to a higher court, which has not yet ruled. For now, the 64-year-old Moroccan is under trial for credit card fraud.¹¹⁵ His lawyer, Lopes Guerreiro, believes he might be released soon, unless the Judiciary Police arrests him again on the basis of the European arrest warrant that was issued by France in late 2016.¹¹⁶

In total, 14 people were arrested in five different countries and the case is not close to an end. Hicham el-Hanafi remains in custody and under investigation, and of the group arrested in Strasbourg, only Yassine Bousseria and Hicham Makran remain in prison due to terrorism charges, while Zacaria M’Hamedi, Sami Ben Zarroug, and Hamdi Brini were convicted for illegal arms possession.¹¹⁷ In Spain, Medhi Kacem is still subject to investigation,¹¹⁸ and in Germany, there is an ongoing investigation on terrorism financing focused on the activities of Hicham el-Hanafi and Abdesselam Tazi.¹¹⁹

Takeaways

The case of Hicham el-Hanafi and Abdesselam Tazi highlights the danger posed by jihadi extremists manipulating European asylum laws to enter Europe posing as political refugees. The duo used European Union freedom of movement to create a recruitment network based on personal connections that spread throughout at least five different countries. They helped weave and were part of a complex spiderweb of terrorist connections. The Strasbourg-Marseille network was truly transnational with nodes across Europe

connected to Islamic State attack planners in Syria and others involved in previous terrorist conspiracies targeting European countries. From Portugal, Hicham el-Hanafi and Abdesselam Tazi were able to travel freely—mentioning to their known acquaintances that they were looking for business opportunities or simply doing tourism in Spain, France, and Germany. Because authorities did not know about their alleged connections to terrorism, they were able to keep themselves under the radar, even though they were eventually identified for document fraud.

The case highlights the key role played by document fraud in jihadi networks in Europe. According to the allegations, document fraud played a key role in el-Hanafi and Tazi's terrorist enterprises. False identities helped both men to enter Europe and allowed them to obtain tens of thousands of euro through credit card fraud, which authorities believe was used to finance terrorism-related activities.

Encrypted communication apps like Telegram were important to their network, allegedly allowing Islamic State operatives to transmit instructions to their associates in Europe on how they should proceed to obtain the necessary resources to commit terrorist attacks. The thwarted attack was yet another case of terror by remote control from Syria/Iraq. As in other terrorist conspiracies against the West in recent years,¹²⁰ Islamic State operatives were allegedly pulling the strings from overseas, including target selection.

The case also highlights the importance of cooperation between European agencies given the transnational nature of the threat. What helped unravel the Strasbourg-Marseille network was an exchange of information between European countries. The case was one of the first to benefit from a cooperation platform created in late

2016 in The Hague to share terrorism-related information among European Union intelligence services.¹²¹ According to the head of Portuguese domestic intelligence, in 2017 alone this platform was instrumental in helping European Union authorities foil 12 terrorist attacks and arrest 30 terrorism suspects.¹²²

Finally, the case raises concern that European countries like Portugal and Greece¹²³ in which security services are less geared up to confront jihadi terrorism are being used as logistical hubs by Islamic State networks.

There is some precedent for this. Portugal was used as a logistical hub by the Basque terrorist group ETA. According to the Spanish judge Baltazar Garzon, Garikoitz Azpiagu, the leader of the Basque Terrorist Group ETA, deployed two operatives to Portugal between 2003 and 2008 to study the possible creation of logistical hubs and to establish a permanent base of operation.¹²⁴ Once stationed in Lisbon, the operatives rented apartments, stole documents and vehicles, and prepared false license plates.¹²⁵

For several years, Portugal became a hub of ETA activity. In June 2007, a car rented in Quarteira, in the south of Portugal, was found abandoned in Ayamonte with 115 kilogram of ammonium nitrate and detonators.¹²⁶ In August that same year, a group of ETA terrorists used a vehicle with a Portuguese license plate to commit a terrorist attack against the Guardia Civil in Durango headquarters.¹²⁷ In January 2010, two terrorists were detained in the village of Moncorvo while transporting 10 kilograms of explosives, three firearms, and a pack of French license plates.¹²⁸ And in February that year, the Judiciary Police uncovered a house in the region of Óbidos containing hundreds of kilograms of explosives.¹²⁹ **CTC**

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Converging Factors Signal Increasing Terror Threat to Tajikistan

By Damon Mehl

A confluence of factors signals an increasing terrorism threat to Tajikistan from the Islamic State in the near future. In late July 2018, Islamic State attackers conducted the group's first attack in Tajikistan. An Islamic State Tajik spokesman threatened to increase attacks in Tajikistan the following week. Loss of Islamic State territory in Iraq and Syria may force the movement of the significant numbers of Tajik citizens fighting there. Separately, the Tajik group Jamaat Ansarullah reportedly pledged allegiance to Islamic State Khorasan, providing Islamic State Tajiks fleeing Syria a base in Afghanistan to join.

In July 2018, four Western cyclists were killed in an attack conducted by five Tajikistani nationals south of Dushanbe, Tajikistan. The Islamic State-claimed attack¹ is the first known attack on foreigners in Tajikistan.² It brings focus to several factors that signal the likelihood of an increasing terrorism threat to Tajikistan in the near future. These factors include an established Central Asian Islamic State node in Afghanistan subordinate to Islamic State Khorasan, the Islamic State's loss of physical territory in Syria and Iraq, and the prospects for those still alive among an estimated 1,300 to 2,000³ Tajikistan citizens who have been fighting there to return home or flee to other battlefields, such as Afghanistan.

Other factors fueling the threat are reports of the Tajikistan government's continued repression of political rivals⁴ and likelihood of military operations in the Gorno-Badakhshan region⁵—actions that could serve to galvanize opposition against the Tajik government and, in turn, be exploited by jihadis to rally support for resources and fighters. Additionally, Tajik jihadis have increased their stature among global terrorist groups over the past two decades, thus

a The July 2018 attack was the first Islamic State-claimed attack in Tajikistan and the first documented terrorist attack against foreigners in Tajikistan.

Damon Mehl is a senior analyst with the U.S. Department of Defense and previously served with the 75th Ranger Regiment, Joint Special Operations Command, and U.S. Central Command. He has nearly eight years of combat experience, primarily in Afghanistan. Since 2001, Mr. Mehl's research experience has focused on South and Central Asia security issues and transnational terrorism. Follow @DMehlDC

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making assistance from larger terrorist organizations or a renewed jihadi focus on Central Asia increasingly probable.⁶ This article argues that despite the Islamic State's loss of territory in Syria and Iraq, the group maintains the ability to communicate and to direct external operations in regions such as Tajikistan and, likewise, that such conditions make it increasingly likely that Tajik elements of the Islamic State will make good on their promise to increase operational focus in their home country. On a broader level, this article also seeks to dispel the common misperception that liberating Islamic State-held territory is commensurate with winning the war against this group.

Framing the Threat of Foreign Fighter Outflow

The Islamic State's physical territory in Syria and Iraq continues to collapse, as coalition operations are ongoing against the group's last stronghold in the Euphrates River Valley in Syria and near the Iraqi border.⁷ The fight will undoubtedly continue to shift to an asymmetric war, an environment to which local Iraqi and Syrian Islamic State fighters can easily adapt by blending back into the local population. For the Islamic State's remaining foreign fighters, however, this is not likely an option. While many Islamic State foreign fighters have been killed, a senior U.N. official estimated in August 2018 that there could be approximately 20,000 foreigners still alive in the Islamic State's ranks in Syria and Iraq.⁸ Tajikistan and Uzbekistan are two of the larger per capita global contributors of Islamic State foreign fighters. An estimated 1,300 to 2,000 Tajikistan citizens have reportedly traveled to Syria and Iraq to join the Islamic State and other jihadi groups. Those Tajik jihadis who have survived could either continue to fight with groups there, chose to return to Tajikistan, or opt to travel to other conflict zones like Afghanistan where one Tajik and several other Central Asian terror groups are established.^b

b Research into attacks carried out in the West between June 2014 and June 2017 indicated that although 18 percent of attackers were known foreign fighters, the attacks they conducted were among the most lethal, leading to an average of 35 deaths per attack. Lethality is a more readily measurable statistic to demonstrate the threat of returning Islamic State foreign fighters. Returning foreign fighters have also acquired unique military and jihadi skills during their time with the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. Skills, credibility, and potential connections with a global Islamic State diaspora could also increase returning foreign fighters' ability to remain connected to the Islamic State and support radicalization, recruiting, fundraising, and facilitation activities. Lorenzo Vidino, Francesco Marone, and Eva Entenmann, "Fear Thy Neighbor: Radicalization and Jihadist Attacks in the West," Program on Extremism, George Washington University, Italian Institute for International Political Studies, International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague, 2017; "The Challenge of Returning Foreign Terrorist Fighters: Research Perspectives," United Nations Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate, March 2018; Richard Barrett, "Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees," Soufan Center, October 2017.

Should Tajik jihadis decide to return home, the Tajikistan government has created an easy path for them to do so. In 2015, the government updated a law allowing authorities to pardon Tajikistan citizens returning home with the stipulation that they are remorseful and did not participate in violence.⁹ In 2017, Radio Free Europe's Farangis Najibullah provided unique insight into the story of Tajik citizen and former Islamic State recruit Furqat Vatanov who was successfully reintegrated following his arrest and extradition from Turkey.¹⁰ The updated law was probably a genuine initiative by the Tajik government to stem the flow of its citizens to conflict zones and create a peaceful pathway for their return. However, the reported repressive nature of the Tajik government may make Islamic State members who want to go home fear reprisal. This lack of trust and uncertainty may encourage them to seek other options.

Additionally, there are probably larger segments of Islamic State foreign fighters who plan to continue fighting even though the environment in Syria and Iraq grows increasingly inhospitable to their presence. Afghanistan may serve as an alternate location for Central Asian jihadis fleeing Syria and Iraq who want to continue their fight. Conveniently, Afghanistan is already home to several Central Asian terror groups. In summer 2018, the United Nations released a report stating that up to 1,000 fighters, including nationals of the Russian Federation and Central Asian States, were making their way to Afghanistan where 750 nationals of Central Asians—mainly from Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan—were already located.¹¹ These fighters were believed to be comfortable enough to relocate among Afghans of Uzbek and Tajik ethnicity.¹² Islamic State Khorasan integrated the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) into its ranks in 2015,¹³ and the Tajik group Jamaat Ansarullah reportedly merged with Islamic State Khorasan in 2017.¹⁴ According to an internal Islamic State communiqué to Islamic State Khorasan that was captured in Afghanistan, another group in Tajikistan—apparently separate from Jamaat Ansarullah—sought to merge with the Islamic State in 2016.^c

Tajik foreign fighters less ideologically aligned to the Islamic State could be integrated into one of two groups in Afghanistan. The first of these groups is the al-Qa`ida-aligned and predominantly Uzbek Islamic Jihad Union in Afghanistan, which has been largely quiet since 2014. The second possibility is the Afghanistan-based wing of the predominantly Uzbek Imam Bukhari Battalion,^d which fights under the banner of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham in northwest Syria and also provided details on its website in 2016 and early 2017

regarding operations in Jowzjan Province.¹⁵ e Though other groups exist in Afghanistan, Jamaat Ansarullah is probably the more likely group to integrate Tajik foreign fighters departing the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq and traveling to Afghanistan.

Jamaat Ansarullah

Jamaat Ansarullah,¹⁶ an Afghanistan-based Tajikistani terrorist group, was formed in 2010 with likely fewer than 100 members and has since received support from the IMU, the Taliban, and al-Qa`ida. The group's stated mission is to bring an 'Islamic' government to Tajikistan.¹⁷ Beginning with its foundation, Jamaat Ansarullah sporadically published videos and disseminated messages through its website,¹⁸ which has been inactive since 2016. The group's leader Amriddin Tabarov¹⁹ was killed in Afghanistan in December 2015 and Tabarov's son-in-law Mavlavi^f Salmon was appointed as the new leader by the end of 2016.²⁰

In 2014, Jamaat Ansarullah sent some of its members to fight in Syria with Jabhat al-Nusra, an al-Qa`ida-aligned group now known as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham.²¹ At a point in 2014 or 2015, some Jamaat Ansarullah members ended up fighting alongside the Islamic State. The Islamic State subsequently began financially supporting Ansarullah according to Afghanistan expert Antonio Giustozzi, citing a Jamaat Ansarullah commander.²² This support reportedly caused fissures between Jamaat Ansarullah and al-Qa`ida, and by 2015, Ansarullah received 50 percent of its financial backing from the Islamic State.²³

In October 2014, a Jamaat Ansarullah member going by the name Mansur stated on the group's website that Jamaat Ansarullah considered the Islamic State a jihadi organization, but had paused its decision on whether to accept the Islamic State's claim of being the caliphate.²⁴ Responding to criticism that Jamaat Ansarullah had denigrated the Islamic State, Mansur stated that Shaykh Abdul Wali, an alias for then Jamaat Ansarullah leader Amriddin Tabarov, had met with and discussed Jamaat Ansarullah's potential allegiance to the Islamic State several times with a certain Shaykh Abul Hudoyi Sudani.²⁵ Shaykh Abul Hudoyi Sudani is very likely a reference to Abu Huda al-Sudani,^g who in 2014 was one of the first Wazirstan, Pakistan-based al-Qa`ida members to split from al-Qa`ida and join the Islamic State.²⁶ Jamaat Ansarullah reportedly negotiated a merger with the Islamic State Khorasan in February 2017, according to Giustozzi, citing a source in the IMU and another in Jamaat Ansarullah.²⁷ Jamaat Ansarullah's reported merger with the Islamic State Khorasan provides Tajiks fighting with the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq a foundation of their own countrymen to integrate into should they travel to Afghanistan.

The July 2018 Islamic State Claimed Attack

On July 29, 2018, five Tajik fighters who had pledged allegiance to the Islamic State conducted a vehicle and knife attack against a

c This is based on an internal Arabic letter to Islamic State Khorasan from the Islamic State's Administration of the Far Wilayahs, dated 15 Rajab 1437H (December 29, 2016) (Harmony document NMEC-2017-417387). In the letter, the Islamic State let Islamic State Khorasan know that it was informed about an individual named Abu-Mu'waiyah al-Tajiki—who is the emir of a battalion called Katibat Ma wara' an-Nahr (Beyond the River Battalion) located in Tajikistan—who wanted contact with Islamic State Khorasan. Katibat Ma wara' an-Nahr is also known as Mawarannah, in English as Transoxiana, or in Arabic as Bilad ma-Wara'al-Nahar and translates to "land beyond the [Oxus] river." This is the ancient name used for the portion of Central Asia corresponding approximately with modern-day Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, southern Kyrgyzstan, and southwest Kazakhstan. The predominantly Uzbek Imam Bukhari Battalion and the Uzbek faction of Islamic State Khorasan call themselves Mawarannah mujahideen.

d Aka Imam Bukhari Jamaat and Imam Bukhari Brigade.

e It is important to note that both the Imam Bukhari Battalion and the former Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan members integrated within Islamic State Khorasan also offer Uzbeks fighting in Syria alternate organizations to merge into in Afghanistan that are respectively aligned with al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State.

f Mavlavi is a religious title/honorific.

g Al-Sudani is a reference to Abu Huda being either of Sudanese citizenship or ethnicity.



A view of Dushanbe, the capital of Tajikistan (Yegor Aleyev/TASS via Getty Images)

group of Western cyclists in Danghara District south of the capital city of Dushanbe. The attack killed two Americans, a Swiss, and a Dutchman, and was the first known attack against Westerners in Tajikistan.²⁸ The Islamic State's Amaq news agency circulated a Russian-language video with Arabic subtitles the next day on social media depicting the five attackers in front of an Islamic State flag pledging allegiance to Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.²⁹

Casting doubt on the attackers' claim of Islamic State affiliation, the Tajikistan government blamed elements of the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT)^h and downplayed the Islamic State link as a ruse. Insightful reporting from Radio Free Europe indicated the attack ringleader and sole survivor Hussein Abdusamadov confessed to the attack and claimed to have received "ideological and military-sabotage training" in 2014-2015 in Iran, where he "joined the IRPT extremist group" and met with an individual named Qori Nosir.³⁰ Qori Nosir (aka Norirhoja Ubaidov) was described as a Tajik cleric who encouraged the attackers via WhatsApp to target Westerners as a means for gaining increased media attention.³¹ The IRPT denied conducting the attack.³²

The Islamic State claimed the attack through its official media outlet and disseminated a prior-to-the-attack recorded video of the attackers pledging allegiance the following day, which suggests the attackers had a clear line of communication with Syria- and Iraq-based Islamic State leaders prior to the attack. No available evidence indicates any of the attackers had traveled to conflict zones in Syria, Iraq, or Afghanistan, suggesting the attack may have been directed remotely through the internet. Radio Free Europe reported many of the attackers, to include Abdusamadov, had worked in Russia³³—a radicalization pathway³⁴ common among Central Asian jihadis in Syria and Afghanistan.

These dynamics indicate the Islamic State's media apparatus continues to operate and is able to claim credit a day after an attack. It is also likely able to continue inspiring attackers virtually around the globe despite its loss of physical territory in Syria and Iraq.

The Islamic State's Tajik Frontman

In early August 2018, a week following the attack on the cyclists, a nine-minute, Tajik-language audio message from Islamic State member Abu Usama Noraki threatened Tajikistan president Emomali Rahmon.³⁵ Abu Usama Noraki is very probably synonymous with a Syria-based Islamic State member whom Tajik authorities identified as 31-year-old Tojiddin Nazarov in March 2018.³⁶ Tajik authorities stated Abu Usama was from Norak, located in Khatlon province southeast of Dushanbe, and called him the "Islamic State's most dangerous recruiter among Tajiks."³⁷ According to the same Tajik authorities, Abu Usama Noraki joined the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq in 2014, previously worked with the IMU, and was radicalized when he was a migrant laborer working in Russia.³⁸ Noraki is a prominent Islamic State spokesperson to a Tajik-language audience³⁹ and since at least 2015 has frequently disseminated audio speeches through an Islamic State-affiliated, Tajik-language Zelloⁱ channel that now has approximately 15,000 subscribers.⁴⁰

Noraki's early August 2018 message regarding the Tajikistan president was likewise disseminated via Zello and social media sites. Noraki stated Rahmon was acting against Islam and that Islamic State mujahideen would soon move to Tajikistan and overthrow the government. Noraki claimed the killing of foreigners, an obvious reference to the July 29, 2018, attack, was the "first bell" for future jihad and attacks in Tajikistan. Noraki also called on Tajik government officials to join Islamic State ranks and praised a certain Shaykh Abu Malik for providing the Islamic State with Ta-

^h The IRPT was the primary opposition during the 1992-1996 Tajikistan civil war. The IRPT was given representation in the government until the group was banned in 2015.

ⁱ Zello is a mobile voice and text communications application.

jik military insight. Shaykh Abu Malik is the *nom de guerre* of the former commander of Tajikistan's OMON (Special Purpose Police Unit) Colonel Gulmurod Khalimov who defected to the Islamic State in 2015, was appointed Islamic State War Minister in 2016, and may have been killed in 2017.^j

In February 2018, Noraki released an audio message through the same Zello channel threatening that “the United States, France, Germany, Belgium, Russia, Sweden, and other countries can count on, but do not know when, the Islamic State could attack.”^{k1} Noraki also sought to dispel rumors of Khalimov's death in another audio message from August 3, 2017.^{k2}

Through online communication applications like Zello, Noraki's audio speeches serve as a primary mechanism for the Islamic State to recruit, radicalize, mobilize, and guide operatives, and possibly coordinate financial support from a global Tajik-speaking diaspora. Tajik authorities believed Noraki has over the years recruited over 100 Tajik nationals from Russia to the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq.^{k3} Specifically, in 2015, Noraki was believed to have recruited 14 individuals from Norak. Later, in 2017, Noraki's audio messages motivated another seven individuals to travel to Afghanistan to wage jihad.^{k4}

Noraki is also known to Swedish and Russian authorities as being the Islamic State leader responsible for directing attacks on their soil. On April 7, 2017, ethnic Tajik and Uzbekistan citizen Rakhmat Akilov drove a stolen beer truck into a crowd of shoppers in Stockholm, Sweden, killing five and injuring 15.^{k5} Akilov was arrested several hours later and admitted to Swedish authorities that he was in direct communication with and acted under the direction of high-level Islamic State representatives in Iraq. According to Swedish police, Akilov shared a picture of himself on Zello in the cab of the hijacked truck prior to the attack.^{k6} Akilov also communicated with Abu Usama Noraki and told Swedish investigators that Noraki was “the amir in our state” and “it was he who ruled my actions.”^{k7}

In August 2017, Noraki was again implicated in leading an Islamic State external operation in Moscow, Russia. Russian authorities disrupted the Islamic State plot and arrested three Tajik nationals—Sovovush Davronzoda, Davlator Hojiev, and Sulaymon Burhanov—for planning suicide attacks. The would-be attackers identified a certain Abu Usama Noraki^{k8} to Russian authorities as the individual who prepared and directed them to conduct the attack in Moscow. Tajik officials subsequently identified Abu Usama Noraki as the aforementioned Tojiddin Nazarov.^{k9} Russian authorities reportedly arrested one Russian and three individuals from Central Asia—a group that reportedly included an Islamic State emissary, an explosives expert, and two suicide bombers.^{k10} The group was directed by two senior Islamic State militants in Syria who hailed from the “former Soviet Union” and planned to target public transit and shopping areas in Moscow.^{k11} No details were released on how Noraki prepared and directed the attackers, though he probably used online messaging applications.

The Khalimov Factor

While Noraki is lesser known to Central Asia and terrorism watch-

ers, the aforementioned Gulmurod Khalimov is a well-known player. Khalimov is the highest-profile Tajik citizen to have joined the Islamic State and continues to be the subject of a \$3 million bounty offered by the United States.^{k12} The current whereabouts and disposition of the Islamic State's War Minister and defected Tajikistan OMON commander remain a mystery. Conflicting reports since 2017 have indicated Khalimov is dead and also alive. In September 2017, Russia's Ministry of Defense reported Khalimov was killed in a Russian military airstrike in Deir ez-Zor, Syria, though his death has not been confirmed.^{k13} In September 2018, two sources—a Tajik opposition leader and an Afghan intelligence official^{k14}—reported that Khalimov was alive and had moved from Syria and Iraq into Afghanistan where he was making preparations to enter and fight in Tajikistan.^{k15} Khalimov was additionally focused on recruiting Tajik migrant laborers in Russia.^{k16}

Khalimov's role in the Islamic State was likely focused more on directing on-the-ground operations in Syria and Iraq and less on external priorities, based on his 2016 appointment as Islamic State's war minister. Nonetheless, three days before the Stockholm attack on April 4, 2017, the attacker Akilov sent a message to someone using the online moniker “Anas Abu Malik,” a known alias for Gulmurod Khalimov.^{k17} Though the content from these conversations has not been released, it does suggest Khalimov communicated with Akilov before an operation. The report of Khalimov traveling to Afghanistan to prepare for future operations in Tajikistan shares the same theme as Noraki's early August 2018 message threatening an increased Islamic State focus against Tajikistan.

Conclusion

The late July 2018 attack in Tajikistan against the Western cyclists serves as an important “first bell,” as Noraki warned in early August 2018, to indicate a growing terrorism threat to Tajikistan. Additional factors supporting an increased threat to Tajikistan are the collapse of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq and the potential resulting outflow of Tajik foreign fighters located there to their home country, or possibly Afghanistan; Jamaat Ansarullah's reported merger with Islamic State Khorasan; and Gulmurod Khalimov's possible relocation to Afghanistan to increase Islamic State efforts against Tajikistan.

What would the threat to Tajikistan look like, and what indicators might signal the materialization of this forecast? The appointment of a Tajikistan-focused leader by the Islamic State coupled with an increase in Islamic State media messaging against Tajikistan would likely serve as an indicator of coming attacks. While Noraki's early August 2018 warning serves this purpose, he lacks a known leadership position, which would bring increased responsibility, attack focus, and operational intent. Likewise, the appointment of a Tajikistan representative within the Islamic State or Islamic State Khorasan would signal operational intent to increase attacks and the development of a concerted strategy. An increase in Islamic State attacks would likely range from a sporadic campaign of high-level media-generating attacks against significant targets, like the late July 2018 cyclist attack, to low-level attacks against Tajik government authorities, or a combination thereof. Tajik Islamic State attackers would likely employ tactics oft seen in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan—from coordinated suicide and small-arms attacks involving multiple attackers down to lower-level operations with small arms. An attack campaign based exclusively or near exclusively on high-profile attacks, particularly against strategic Tajikistan

j OMON stands for Otryad Militsii Osobogo Naznacheniya or Special Purpose Police Unit, subordinate to Tajikistan's Ministry of Interior.

k Alternative kunyas for Abu Usama Norak are Abu Usadoor Noraki, Abu Usadr Norak, and Abu Usatoor Noraki.

government or Western targets, would indicate the Islamic State is making good on its threats but is not yet well organized. Conversely, if the Islamic State begins to conduct frequent lower-level attacks inside Tajikistan, this would likely demonstrate a more focused strategy and the potential use of a Tajik-based support node.

The Tajikistan government's reported repression of political rivals and threat of conducting military operations in sensitive areas like the Gorno-Badakhshan region may calcify opposition against this government. Jihadis could exploit such opposition as a means for rallying resources, popular support, fighters, and increased op-

erational focus. Though it has a propensity to be heavy handed, the Tajik government maintains the ability to manage an insurgency on its soil as long as the factors stabilizing the country remain unchanged. The government does, however, clearly lack the ability to prevent its citizens from joining groups like the Islamic State and also to mitigate threats to its homeland posed by Tajik citizens in exile. The confluence of factors building in favor of the Islamic State against the Tajikistan government is just one important aspect of the growing security challenge Tajikistan could face in the near future. **CTC**

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Selling the Long War: Islamic State Propaganda after the Caliphate

By Michael Munoz

As the Islamic State's self-declared caliphate crumbles, it is reverting to insurgency in Iraq and Syria and refocusing its media narrative from its triumphs to its commitment to a 'long war' against its enemies in which it will ultimately prevail. In this new phase where it controls less territory and has fewer battlefield successes, the Islamic State's media network will be important in selling this long-war narrative and trying to rally support among Sunni Muslims locally and worldwide by enflaming sectarian animosity. Although greatly diminished from its peak, the Islamic State media network remains dangerous, continuing to spread its message to sympathizers across the internet and among Sunnis in territories where it maintains a presence.

As its territorial control dwindles, the Islamic State will likely rely on its media network to retain support among Sunni Muslims locally and globally. Despite significant losses among its media cadre, the network remains resilient and continues to publish new propaganda. The Islamic State appears intent on following a strategy of insurgency in Iraq, Syria, and elsewhere, coupled with a worldwide terror campaign against Western interests, as evidenced by recent attacks by sympathizers in Europe and the United States. Reflecting this strategic shift, a new 'long-war' narrative is emerging in Islamic State propaganda that portends the media network's future trajectory.^a This narrative incorporates the following themes that are likely to be featured in the future:

- The Islamic State is embarked on a long guerrilla war of attrition in which ultimate victory is guaranteed by God. Territorial control is not necessarily important.
- Attacks against coalition and local forces, particularly in Iraq

a In conducting research for this article, the author examined the Islamic State's official propaganda releases from 2014 to 2018, public Islamic State propaganda on social media, and other open source information about the Islamic State's propaganda apparatus.

Michael Munoz, Ph.D., is a special agent with the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) working on counterterrorism issues. He completed his B.A. in Political Science at Princeton University and received his Ph.D. in Political Science from the University of California, Los Angeles. Dr. Munoz has previously served as an infantry officer in the reserve components of the U.S. Army. The views expressed in this article represent those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the FBI, Department of Justice, or U.S. government.

and Syria, will be highlighted to portray an unrelenting insurgent campaign.

- The Islamic State's presence in other regions, such as Yemen and the Philippines, shows that it retains global appeal and cannot be defeated.
- Supporters should make *hijrah* to more accessible areas, such as the Afghanistan-Pakistan region.^b
- The coalition will become exhausted and leave Iraq and Syria, and the Islamic State will rise again and be unstoppable.
- Continuation of calls for terror attacks in the West and the provision of attack guidance. Every attack—even failed attacks—will likely be publicized to maintain the appearance of an unceasing campaign.
- The Islamic State is the vanguard of Islam and the only group that will defend Sunnis against oppression.
- Sunni Muslims are under attack by apostate sects that seek to oppress and annihilate them in Iraq and Syria. Alleged atrocities by local forces in liberated areas will likely receive great emphasis.
- Cooperation with regional governments or coalition-backed forces will lead to the subjugation of Sunnis by sectarian adversaries. Sunni tribal militias that fight or collaborate against the Islamic State are traitors and will be dealt with accordingly unless they repent.
- Allegations of civilian casualties caused by the coalition will continue to be highlighted.

The Long War

The Islamic State's long-war narrative portrays an image of a strong movement headed toward an inevitable victory guaranteed by God. When the group was expanding, its media conveyed images of conquests in Iraq and Syria. Now that the tide has turned against it, the Islamic State claims to be waging a war of attrition in which it will outlast its adversaries. It has shifted to widespread guerrilla operations in much of Iraq and Syria while its forces in other regions continue to operate as guerrillas. In a November 2016 speech, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi stated that God was with those with patience and that the Islamic State, though outnumbered, would prevail in the end.¹ Where once Islamic State media trumpeted reports of battlefield victories, in recent months, simply surviving is heralded as success by the Islamic State. Its propaganda emphasizes that losses of cities or leaders will only strengthen its fighters' resolve.² In August 2018, al-Baghdadi cemented this shift in narrative with a speech titled "Give Glad Tidings to the Patient," in which he stated: "The scale of

b For example, an Islamic State propaganda video in August 2018 urged followers to join its affiliate in Afghanistan. "Featuring Disabled Fighters, IS' Khorasan Province Urges Immigration for Jihad in Video," SITE Intelligence Group, August 14, 2018.

victory or defeat with the mujahedeen, the people of faith and piety, is not tied to a city or a village that was taken.”⁷³ He further remarked that the United States had celebrated its “so-called victory in expelling the [Islamic] State from the cities and countryside in Iraq and Syria, but the land of God is wide and the tides of war change.”⁷⁴

Islamic State media now focuses on demonstrating the group’s persistence in Iraq, Syria, and elsewhere, and the toll it is inflicting on regional governments and factions. At the peak of the Islamic State’s power, its propaganda focused as much on selling the idea of its caliphate as on battlefield developments.⁵ Now, the focus is almost exclusively on combat and terror operations.⁶ Media outlets provide daily reports of guerrilla operations to make it seem that the Islamic State is inflicting terrible losses on its enemies and demonstrate that local security forces cannot maintain security in liberated areas. Videos show the indoctrination of youths and the training of new generations of fighters. Media products ignore defeats, highlighting instead the capture of minor villages, tactical counterattacks, and attacks against government or sectarian targets. Islamic State propaganda and online supporters discuss how the group previously was thought to have been defeated in Iraq and waged a guerilla campaign until it reemerged and established the caliphate.⁷ In February 2018, the Islamic State’s Al Naba newsletter announced the group had resumed its “war of attrition” in Libya.⁸ Recent media releases have claimed the United States is becoming exhausted by fighting the Islamic State.⁹

Seeking to deflect claims of its decline, the Islamic State maintains the façade of its self-declared caliphate despite no longer controlling a significant amount of territory in Iraq or Syria. It continues to claim divine authority over all Muslims and demands that other Sunni extremist groups accept its leadership. Islamic State media once routinely published idealized pictorials of life in its territory in online montages and monthly magazines like Dabiq and Rumiya, showing aspects like religious education, governance, agriculture, and charitable activities. Now such pictorials are infrequent, reflecting the loss of much of its territory in Iraq and Syria. The few such products that are released tend to focus on religious celebrations and enforcement of religious laws (like destroying opium plants and cigarettes) rather than economic or governing activities.^c With its caliphate largely dismantled in Iraq and Syria, the Islamic State is placing greater emphasis on publicizing operations by branches in other regions, like the Sinai and Afghanistan, to make it seem that it remains powerful and determined to continue a worldwide struggle. For example, in the spring of 2017, the Islamic State trumpeted news of militants aligned with it in the Philippines storming the city of Marawi, publishing videos of its fighters battling government forces there for months. Since 2017, Islamic State propaganda has claimed a resurgence by its branch in Libya and an emerging presence in Somalia by emphasizing operations conducted by its

c For example, in spring 2018, the Islamic State’s Khorasan Province branch released photos of men and children in Afghanistan celebrating Eid al-Fitr at the end of Ramadan and Islamic State fighters destroying opium plants. Terrmonitor.org, “#IslamicState’s Khorasan Province (#ISKP) Releases Images Showing #Eid Celebrations In #Afghanistan,” Twitter, June 20, 2018; Terrormonitor.org, “#IslamicState’s Khorasan Province (#ISKP) Releases Propaganda Pictures Shows Destroying Narcotic Plants in #Kunar,” Twitter, May 18, 2018. In August 2018, Islamic State media released photos of religious education classes for children in eastern Syria. Nidalgazau, “#Syria: Despite the massive loss of territory, the Islamic State is still launching ‘Dawah activities’ in which children learn Quran and the ‘True Islam’ somewhere in eastern #Shadadhi villages,” Twitter, August 3, 2018.

fighters in those countries, even titling Somalia a “wilayah” (province) in its recent releases.^d

Transitioning to a guerrilla force within Syria and Iraq requires the Islamic State to shore up support among local Sunnis and its fighting force and puts additional pressure on its media wing. Seeking to deter dissent among the populace, Islamic State media publicizes gruesome executions of spies and rebellious tribesmen.¹⁰ Media products are also aimed at maintaining the morale of its fighters and distributed to them by Islamic State media teams.^e Articles warn fighters against abandoning jihad and implore them to obey their commanders, have patience, and persevere through hardships.¹¹ Islamic State propaganda tells fighters that true victory lies in attaining paradise through martyrdom rather than controlling cities.^f

Needing to replenish its ranks, it can be assumed Islamic State media will continue efforts to recruit new fighters. It releases products in a multitude of languages exhorting Muslims to join its caliphate, claiming that *hijrah*, emigration from non-Muslim lands to the Islamic State, and jihad are obligatory because Muslims are being attacked by the disbelievers.¹² The frequency with which Islamic State media releases products has diminished dramatically since its peak in 2015, with the decline beginning as early as 2016 as the group suffered increasing military setbacks in Iraq and Syria.¹³ Media production declined even further as the Islamic State lost much of its territory there in 2017 and early 2018. Even in its

d In late 2017 and the first half of 2018, the Islamic State claimed credit for a series of attacks in Libya, including twin suicide bombings against the Libyan Elections Commission in Tripoli on May 2, 2018, that killed 15 people. The Islamic State’s Amaq News Agency released a statement claiming credit shortly after the bombing. In February 2018, the Islamic State’s Al Naba newsletter announced the resumption of its “war of attrition” in Libya. “Exclusive in IS’ Naba 120 Reports Resumption of ‘War of Attrition’ in Libya, Attacks in Sirte, Including Suicide Bombing,” SITE Intelligence Group, February 22, 2018. On December 26, 2017, Islamic State media released its first official video attributed to its branch in Somalia that was titled “Hunt Them O Muwahhidun,” which threatened the West and showed Islamic State fighters in Somalia. “ISIS Somalia Calls for Terror Attacks During the Holiday Season: Designated Targets Include the Pope, Major Western Cities,” MEMRI, December 26, 2017. Amaq News Agency released numerous statements and a video claiming attacks against Somali police officers and government officials in the winter and spring of 2018.

e An internal Islamic State leaflet outlining the structure of the media organization listed the duties of the “publishing and distribution team” to include delivering “media materials that have been produced to the soldiers of the Islamic State in headquarters, camps, ribat points and others.” Daniel Milton, *Pulling Back the Curtain: An Inside Look at the Islamic State’s Media Organization* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2018), supplemental document “Organizational Structure of the Media Office,” <https://ctc.usma.edu/app/uploads/2018/08/Organizational-structure-of-the-media-office.pdf>

f For example, the 13th issue of Rumiya featured the third part of an essay written by the late al-Qa’ida in Iraq leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi titled “Important Advice for the Mujahidin,” which emphasized that the mujahideen have sold their lives to God in exchange for paradise and that they must “favor aqidah over life.” Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, “Important Advice for the Mujahidin, Part 3,” Rumiya, Issue 13. The foreword of the 12th issue of Rumiya claimed that “the believer sees dunya as a prison and instead looks for relief in obedience towards Allah, and in the Battle of Mosul many of our brothers and sisters were liberated from this prison whereby they attained—by Allah’s permission—shahadah in the cause of Allah.” “Foreword,” Rumiya, Issue 12. The foreword to the 11th issue of Rumiya sought to inspire Islamic State fighters in Mosul after eight months of battle for the city, exhorting them to annihilate the enemy or die trying, in which case they would “succeed as the companions of the ditch succeeded and profit in the abode of the Hereafter.” “Either We Exterminate the Mushrikin or Die Trying,” Rumiya, Issue 11.



An image posted by Islamic State propagandists on Telegram around early 2017.

diminished capacity, however, it still attempts to attract new members, both foreign and local. Islamic State propaganda still features foreign fighters.⁸ Videos and articles extoll their virtues and show them smiling as they prepare to conduct suicide attacks. With travel to the Islamic State's remaining pockets in Iraq and Syria now very difficult, media products encourage foreign supporters to make *hijrah* to join the Islamic State in more accessible regions such as Sinai, Afghanistan, and the Philippines.^{14 h} In September 2017, Islamic State media released a video urging Muslims to travel to join its branch in the Philippines.¹⁵ In August 2018, the Islamic State claimed that a Moroccan fighter had carried out a suicide bombing against a military checkpoint in the Philippines.¹⁶ In March and August 2018, the Islamic State Khorasan Province released videos that advocated for Muslims to travel to Afghanistan if they could not make it to Syria or Iraq.¹⁷

It seems likely that an essential component of the Islamic State's long-war strategy will be to continue a terror campaign against Western countries and regional governments in retaliation for their participation in operations against the group. A plot in which the group allegedly air-mailed bomb components to a terrorist cell in Sydney in summer of 2017 and directed them via long distance communications to blow up a passenger plane is a case in point.¹⁸ Islamic State media will likely serve as a terror weapon to try to weaken its enemies' resolve to continue military operations against

the group. It has released an ongoing stream of videos and articles calling for Muslims to attack Western citizens worldwide, promising rewards for the attackers in the afterlife.¹⁹ In January 2018, Al Hayat Media released an English *nasheed* video titled "Answer the Call" that aimed to incite lone-wolf attacks in the West.²⁰ In the fall of 2017 and spring of 2018, pro-Islamic State media sources released a stream of threats against the 2018 FIFA World Cup in Russia, including calls for sympathizers to kill players and fans at the tournament.²¹ In March 2018, Islamic State media claimed that an attacker who carried out a deadly hostage attack at a supermarket in southwestern France was one of its soldiers. Islamic State propaganda implores Muslims to assassinate 'apostate' rulers of Muslim coalition states. Al-Baghdadi's August 2018 speech called on followers "in the countries of the crusaders, in Canada, Europe, and elsewhere" to carry out attacks against Westerners, saying that one attack in the West was equal to 1,000 in Iraq or Syria.²² In addition, he called for Sunnis in the Arabian Peninsula to "shake off the dust of humiliation" and fight against the Saudi government.²³

Media products like Rumiya have provided instructions for target selection and simple attacks using knives, firearms, and vehicles.²⁴ No new issues of Rumiya have been published since September 2017, but past releases of Rumiya and other media products containing attack guidance continue to be recirculated online. Even as the raw number of Islamic State propaganda products has dropped sharply, the emphasis on calls for attacks and provision of technical guidance is likely to remain a centerpiece of official and unofficial propaganda as the Islamic State attempts to compensate for diminishing military power. Al-Baghdadi even assumed the role of terrorist mentor in his August 2018 speech, offering advice for extremists in the West to "carry out an attack that breaks their heart, and rip them apart ... either with gunfire, or a stab to their bodies, or a bombing in their countries ... do not forget about running people over on the roads."²⁵ With a decline in official media releases, unofficial pro-Islamic State media groups, such as Wafa Media Foundation, and online supporters have taken up some of the slack in urging terror attacks, providing tactical advice and identifying targets.²⁶

Islamic State media will most likely try to maintain the image of an unrelenting terror campaign against its enemies. The goal is to "make examples of the Crusaders, day and night, scaring them and terrorizing them, until every neighbor fears his neighbor."²⁷ As evidenced by calls for attacks during the 2016 U.S. and 2017 French elections, Islamic State media will post threats related to important events and holidays in the West.²⁸ In the fall of 2017, a media group aligned with the Islamic State threatened to strike the West during Christmas, publishing posters of American and European cities in flames.²⁹ Islamic State media points to terror attacks against the West as evidence of its continued global influence, even claiming unsuccessful attacks that fail to kill or injure anyone. Islamic State propaganda will continue to glorify perpetrators of such attacks as

g In 2018, the actions of foreign fighters remained highlighted in Islamic State propaganda releases. For example, on February 11, 2018, Islamic State media released the photo a Turkish suicide bomber who carried out an attack against Syrian Democratic Forces in Deir ez-Zor province, Syria. On March 14, 2018, Islamic State Khorasan Province announced the death of a Kashmiri foreign fighter who was killed in battle in Afghanistan.

h In the foreword of the fourth issue of Rumiya, the writers instructed that "whoever is unable to perform hijrah to Iraq and Sham, then he should perform hijrah to Libya, Khorasan, Yemen, Sinai, West Africa, or any of the other wilayat and outposts of the Khilafah in the East and the West." "Foreword," Rumiya, Issue 4, p. 3.

i On June 19, 2017, the Islamic State claimed credit for an unsuccessful attack by an Islamic State-inspired individual crashing a car filled with weapons and explosives into a police car in Paris, killing only the driver. James McAuley, "Driver Dies after Ramming Car into Police Vehicle on Champs-Élysées in Probable Terrorist Attack," *Washington Post*, June 19, 2017. The Islamic State claimed credit for an unsuccessful knife attack in Brussels, Belgium, on August 25, 2017, that left the perpetrator dead and a Belgian soldier slightly injured. Steven Erlanger and Milan Schreuer, "Belgian Soldiers Kill Knife-Wielding Man in Brussels," *New York Times*, August 25, 2017.

heroes and urge Muslims to follow their examples.³⁰ As shown by its spurious claims that the Las Vegas shooter who killed 58 people in October 2017 had pledged allegiance to al-Baghdadi, Islamic State media will claim credit for violent actions it did not conduct to provoke fear and portray an ability to strike anywhere.

With Islamic State forces conducting guerrilla operations, the media network will likely seek to intimidate local security forces and to sow instability to discredit local governments. It continues to produce videos and pictorials of gruesome executions of Syrian and Iraqi soldiers and anti-Islamic State militia fighters. Islamic State videos show sniper attacks, drone attacks, or assassinations of security force personnel to sow fear in their ranks and sap their morale by showing that death could come at any time and from anywhere. Such media releases will no doubt continue as the Islamic State attempts to drive local security forces out of areas to establish new safe havens. In the weeks leading up to parliamentary elections in Iraq in May 2018, Islamic State media released several products publicizing its threats and attacks against election workers and facilities.^l Recent announcements and photos of Islamic State operations in liberated areas of Iraq and Syria—such as Kirkuk and Raqqa, respectively—appear intended in part to discredit local government and paramilitary forces' claims of control over those regions.³¹

Having alienated many local Sunnis with its brutality and intolerance, the Islamic State is trying to rebuild support by enflaming sectarian tensions and presenting itself as the protector of Sunnis against oppression and annihilation by 'apostate' regimes and paramilitary forces. It has long painted Assad's Alawite regime and the Shi'a-dominated Iraqi government as apostates seeking to exterminate Sunnis. The Islamic State media machine has produced numerous products detailing the alleged apostasy of Shi'as, as well as alleged current and historical crimes by Iran against Sunni Muslims.^k Recent Islamic State releases have highlighted operations against Iranian forces and Shi'a paramilitary elements. Most notable was a September 2018 video, complemented by an infographic, in which the group claimed credit for an attack by several gunmen on an Iranian military parade in Ahvaz, Iran—an audacious attack in the heart of Iran.³² The Islamic State has accused the Syrian military—and its Russian allies—of widespread destruction of civilian buildings and of killing women and children.^l Kurdish and other Syrian opposition groups are likewise painted as apostates, secularists, and Western or Iranian proxies. The goal of this campaign is to dissuade local Sunnis from supporting regional governments or coalition-backed forces, stoke Sunni anger worldwide, and demonstrate that Sunnis need the Islamic State to protect

them. A prime example of this theme was a speech by Islamic State spokesman Abu al-Hasan al-Mujahid on April 24, 2018, in which he claimed that Iran was taking over Sunni areas of Iraq, executing Sunni women in Iraq, and using Hezbollah and Shi'a militias to purge Sunni Muslims from Syria and Iraq.³³

Moreover, the Islamic State has consistently characterized Sunni tribal militias who cooperate with the Shi'a-led Iraqi government, the coalition, or opposition forces, as traitors and *murtaddin* (apostates), labeling them as *Sahwa* (a pejorative reference to the Sunni "Awakening" militias that turned against the Islamic State in Iraq in the late 2000s).³⁴ At the same time, the message of the Islamic State, reiterated in al-Baghdadi's August 2018 speech, is that Sunni militias will be offered forgiveness if they repent from their opposition to the Islamic State before the group captures them.³⁵ To be an insurgent force, the Islamic State must be able to take sanctuary in Sunni areas, and thus it is likely to continue propaganda efforts to peel Sunni tribes away from the Iraqi government or the coalition.

Seeking to enflame the anger of Muslims and undermine public support in coalition countries, the Islamic State makes allegations of civilian casualties and damage resulting from coalition operations. The Islamic State's propaganda arm Amaq frequently publishes announcements of civilian casualties.^m During the battles for Mosul and Raqqa, Islamic State propaganda alleged that coalition aircraft used white phosphorus munitions against civilian areas and published photos of damaged schools and hospitals. In the spring of 2017, Islamic State media spread false stories that coalition strikes had seriously damaged a major dam over the Euphrates River.ⁿ The viral success of such fabrications among online audiences make it likely that the Islamic State will utilize such tactics in the future.

Outlook

As the Islamic State transitions to a long-war strategy of insurgency and terror, its media network will be essential for it to remain relevant and retain support among Sunni Muslims. It will likely be its media operators' responsibility to spin events on the ground in a positive light to give hope to its supporters, woo would-be recruits, and terrify its enemies. As the Islamic State persists in its insurgent efforts in the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia, look for the media network to double down on its long-war rhetoric, framing everything the group does—every IED attack, every ambush of local security forces, every terror attack against Westerners or sectarian rivals—as part of the war of attrition that will pave the way to ultimate victory.

Having lost its strongholds in Iraq and Syria and suffered major losses to its media personnel, the Islamic State will likely need to

j On May 4, 2018, the Islamic State newsletter *Al Naba* released an infographic detailing a series of election-related attacks in Iraq. On April 28, 2018, Amaq News Agency published a video showing Islamic State militants executing two "election advocators" in al-Tarmiyah, Iraq. "Islamic State releases video showing execution of Iraq 'election advocators,'" Reuters, April 27, 2018.

k For example, *Dabiq* Issue 13 was titled "The Rafidah: From Ibn Saba' to the Dajjal." This issue featured a lengthy article detailing what were held to be the "deviant" practices and beliefs of Shi'a Muslims dating back to the 7th century and accusing them of being in league with the Dajjal (the antichrist) and waging a "hidden war" against Muslims.

l On May 1, 2018, Amaq News Agency released a video showing damage to buildings in the Yarmouk camp area of southern Damascus that was allegedly caused by Russian and Syrian aircraft bombing the area with napalm.

m Recovered Islamic State documents detailing media structure and instructions confirm that Amaq News Agency is an official Islamic State media organization, despite pretenses to the contrary. Milton, *Pulling Back the Curtain*, pp. 3-4.

n On March 26, 2017, the Islamic State's Amaq News Agency released announcements claiming that the Tabqa dam was threatening to collapse due to U.S. airstrikes. On March 27, 2017, Amaq released a video showing alleged damage to the dam caused by U.S. bombing. Jack Moore, "Raqqa Residents Panic as ISIS Spreads Rumors of Euphrates Dam Collapse," *Newsweek*, March 29, 2017.

reconstitute its media cadre and ensure that its message gets out.^o It could seek to find new talent locally or recruit extremists from outside to assist remotely. Arrests of Islamic State media and cyber operatives and supporters in the United Kingdom, Kuwait, Germany, and elsewhere illustrate the group's ability to use extremists outside of Iraq and Syria for media and hacking activities.³⁶ Pro-Islamic State groups have posted announcements seeking individuals to assist in media production.³⁷ Research by Charlie Winter and Jade Parker has revealed that as official media production has dwindled, the Islamic State is relying more heavily on a "virtual caliphate" consisting of unofficial *munasir* networks of online supporters to sustain its propaganda efforts. These networks run channels and unofficial media organizations, such as Nashir News, to amplify official propaganda and produce their own unofficial releases.³⁸ The proliferation of threats to the recent World Cup and events in the West published by unofficial pro-Islamic State groups, such as Wafa Media Foundation, seems to add further credence to this trend.³⁹

^o Islamic State media has announced the deaths of several of its media operatives in Syria and Iraq over the past three years. From the second quarter of 2015 to the second quarter of 2018, Islamic State media announced the deaths of 91 "media martyrs." Daniel Milton, *Down, but Not Out: An Updated Examination of the Islamic State's Visual Propaganda* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2018), p. 6. U.S. Central Command press releases show a consistent campaign to degrade Islamic State media, announcing the destruction of numerous Islamic State media centers and the killing of a large number of Islamic State media operatives. For example, on May 27, 2017, U.S. Central Command claimed that coalition air strikes had destroyed four Islamic State media centers. "May 27: Military airstrikes continue against ISIS terrorists in Syria and Iraq," U.S. Central Command, Release No: 17-202, May 27, 2017. As another example, on July 27, 2017, a U.S. Central Command press conference outlined how the coalition had "targeted and killed several senior ISIS propagandists and facilitators in Iraq and Syria" and that "the removal of these key ISIS leaders disrupts ISIS's propaganda production, distribution and the ability to fund their activities." The briefing then listed six senior Islamic State media officials, including the founder of Amaq, who had been killed over the preceding four months. "Department of Defense Press Briefing by Colonel Dillon via Teleconference from Baghdad, Iraq," U.S. Central Command, July 27, 2017.

Islamic State media continues to seek out new online vectors for propaganda. It maintains multiple channels on Telegram and proliferates numerous links for every propaganda release to ensure its message gets out.⁴⁰ Despite frequent deletions of content, the group remains persistent in publishing videos and other products on a wide array of media and file-sharing sites, such as YouTube, Archive.org, and Justpaste.it, to name a few.⁴¹

While Islamic State media production has been slowed to a relative trickle, there is a danger the taps may open again as the group attempts to regenerate in a post-caliphate environment and sell 'the long war.' Combating the group's media network needs to remain a priority for the international community. Sustained military pressure against media operatives in combat theaters is important for continuing to suppress official media organizations. The potential use of extremists outside of Iraq and Syria will require cooperation among security services worldwide to track them down. That said, completely shutting down Islamic State propaganda is not a realistic goal.

The coalition must counter the Islamic State's long-war narrative with public and concrete actions. The long-term solution lies with creating a political arrangement in liberated areas that confers greater economic and political power to Sunnis. This cannot be accomplished overnight, but publicizing tangible steps toward a post-Islamic State arrangement inclusive of Sunnis—such as raising local Sunni security forces—could undercut the Islamic State's theme of protecting Sunnis from oppression and help convince local Sunnis that siding with the Islamic State is a dead end. Acknowledging abuses by Iraqi security forces could reduce the resonance of Islamic State propaganda among Iraqi Sunnis, especially if public punishments are administered upon those responsible. Allegations of civilian casualties will have less impact if the coalition is upfront in admitting mistakes and outlining measures taken to avoid casualties. In the end, coalition governments must be committed to a long campaign involving coordinated military, intelligence, and law enforcement efforts to disrupt the Islamic State's media network and counter its messages. **CTC**

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