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FEATURE ARTICLE

Crime as Jihad

Developments in the crime-terror nexus in Europe
RAJAN BASRA AND PETER R. NEUMANN

A VIEW FROM THE CT FOXHOLE

Lisa Monaco

FORMER ASSISTANT TO PRESIDENT
BARACK OBAMA FOR HOMELAND
SECURITY AND COUNTERTERRORISM

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FROM THE EDITOR

In our October cover article, Rajan Basra and Peter Neumann explore the strong nexus between crime and jihadism in Europe. With a significant proportion of European foreign fighters having criminal backgrounds, they outline how the Islamic State is going out of its way to depict crime as helpful to its cause and to recruit criminals for terrorist enterprises. Our interview this month is with Lisa Monaco, President Obama's chief counterterrorism advisor during his second term.

In July, police in Sydney, Australia, discovered alleged plots by two brothers to detonate a bomb on a passenger jet and release poison gas on a target such as public transportation. Andrew Zammit outlines why it set off alarm bells in counterterrorism agencies worldwide. An Islamic State cybercoach in Syria allegedly arranged for a partially constructed bomb with military-grade explosives to be air-mailed to the plotters from Turkey and provided sufficient instructions for them to build a fully functioning device. This 'IKEA-style' approach to terrorism could be a game-changer because untrained Western extremists have hitherto found it difficult to make high explosives. The Islamic State cybercoach also transmitted know-how on making a poison gas dispersal device to the Australian cell.

Columb Strack looks at the evolution of the Islamic State's chemical weapons efforts in Syria and Iraq and the possibility that the group could export chemical terror to the West. John Mueller examines the degree to which the cybercoaching of terrorists should be cause for concern, arguing that in many cases cybercoaches have little control over their amateurish charges.

Finally, Derek Flood, recently back from the frontlines, outlines how the capture of Hawija, the Islamic State's last remaining urban stronghold in northern Iraq, exposed faultlines between Baghdad and Erbil, which set the stage for the dramatic events unfolding in the Kirkuk area.

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Cover: A bullet impact is pictured on a window in the entrance hall of a building on the Champs-Élysées avenue in Paris on April 21, 2017, a day after a gunman opened fire on police on the avenue, killing a policeman and wounding two others in an attack claimed by the Islamic State just days before the first round of the presidential election. (Philippe Lopez/AFP/Getty Images)

Crime as Jihad: Developments in the Crime-Terror Nexus in Europe

By Rajan Basra and Peter R. Neumann

Throughout Europe, criminal and extremist milieus are merging, with many jihadis and ‘foreign fighters’ having criminal pasts. An individual’s criminality can affect his process of radicalization and how he operates once radicalized. The Islamic State’s recent propaganda suggests that the group is aware of this reality. It has positively framed the crime-terror nexus by encouraging crime ‘as a form of worship,’ and has been lauding those from criminal backgrounds. This has been reflected on the streets of Europe, where perpetrators have used their criminal ‘skills’ to make them more effective terrorists. While understanding of the crime-terror nexus has developed, there are many knowledge gaps that have practical implications for countering terrorism.

On July 26, 2017, officers from the United Kingdom’s SO15 counterterrorism command arrived at an address in East London to arrest a man for disseminating propaganda. Through several online platforms, Nourdeen Abdullah had been publishing jihadi content. Yet when searching his home and car, police found crack cocaine. Abdullah was charged with two apparently contradictory offenses: disseminating terrorist propaganda and possession with intent to supply Class A drugs.^{1a} His case reaffirms a pattern seen throughout Europe—as detailed in the authors’ 2016 report “Criminal Pasts, Terrorist Futures”—of criminals, both former and current, becoming involved in jihadism.²

The trend is apparent throughout Europe. From Germany, 66

a Abdullah’s two charges are being processed through the criminal justice system, and therefore, the authors cannot disclose their open-source investigation of his social media footprint.

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percent of foreign fighters had police records prior to traveling, according to Federal Police analysis of 778 jihadis.³ In the Netherlands, 64 percent of 319 jihadis—comprising foreign fighters, failed travelers, and those identified as potential travelers—have been subject to criminal reports, according to a study undertaken by a National Police researcher.⁴ From France, 48 percent of jihadis were already known to the police for delinquency, as per a Coordination Unit of the Fight Against Terrorism (UCLAT) analysis of 265 jihadis from that country believed to have died in Syria and Iraq.⁵ Meanwhile, from the United Kingdom, at least 47 percent of converts who traveled to Syria had previous criminal convictions, according to a previously unpublished study by a serving Metropolitan Police Officer using official Police National Computer records.^b Similarly, a United Nations report highlights the prevalence of criminality among foreign fighters from Austria,⁶ and officials from Norway told the authors that “at least 60 percent” of their country’s jihadis had previously been involved in crime.⁷ In short, criminal and extremist milieus routinely overlap.

Is this a new phenomenon? Longitudinal data suggests that criminals-turned-jihadis have existed for over two decades. Marc Sageman’s analysis of al-Qa`ida-affiliated jihadis between the early 1990s and 2003 highlights a Maghreb Arab cluster involved in crime such as theft, trafficking in false documents, and credit card fraud.⁸ Building upon Sageman’s empirical approach, Edwin Bakker researched 242 jihadis involved in 31 cases of terrorism in Europe from September 2001 to October 2006. He discovered that 52 individuals (or over 21 percent) had a criminal record, with many more being involved in crime yet evading convictions.⁹ Similarly, Olivier Roy’s database of jihadis in France between 1994 to 2016 shows that almost 50 percent had criminal pasts.^{10c} Whether this is a new phenomenon or not, it is clear that the nature and dynamics of this crime-terror nexus have been under-researched and poorly understood. There is virtually no academic literature on the subject. On the contrary, until recently, any link between terrorism and crime was routinely dismissed.

The central point is not *just* that they are criminals, but that their criminality is *relevant* to their extremism, as it can affect how they radicalize into violence and how they operate once they are radicalized. The authors’ 2016 analysis of 79 European jihadis with criminal backgrounds revealed four themes. Firstly, jihadism can offer redemption from past sins, as well as legitimize further

b This is of 36 converts that traveled to Syria, identified using open-sources. Jeremy Moss, unpublished 2017 University of St. Andrews MLitt Dissertation (supervised by Dr. Mark Currie), used with the permission of CSTPV and the Metropolitan Police Service.

c Roy’s database contains “about one hundred people involved in terrorism in mainland France and/or having left France to take part in a ‘global’ jihad between 1994 and 2016.” Roy does not state whether there has been a recent increase in the numbers of jihadis with criminal pasts.

crime. Secondly, prisons offer an environment for radicalization and networking between criminals and extremists. Thirdly, criminals develop skills that can be useful for them as extremists, such as access to weapons and forged documents, as well as the psychological ‘skill’ of familiarity with violence. And finally, white-collar and petty crime is often used to finance extremism. Events since the release of the authors’ 2016 report have reaffirmed these conclusions.

The Islamic State has been embracing these overlaps between criminality and terrorism. The streets of Europe have seen the results of this, with many perpetrators of recent terrorist attacks having criminal pasts. This article examines these developments in three parts: 1) how the Islamic State has been encouraging ‘regular’ crime; 2) cases of criminals-turned-jihadis since the release of the authors’ “Criminal Pasts, Terrorist Futures” report; and 3) developments in the study of the crime-terror nexus.

Embracing the Crime-Terror Nexus

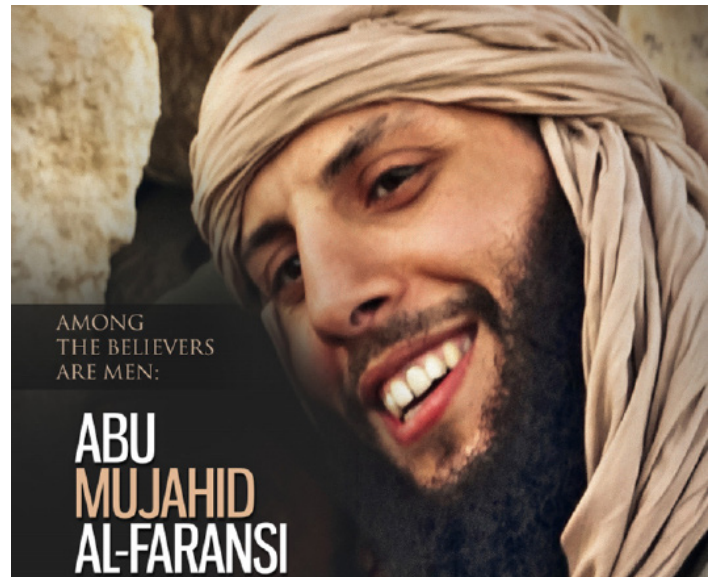
The Islamic State’s magazine *Rumiyah* has both exalted criminals-turned-jihadis and encouraged the use of crime for jihad. This past summer, its semi-regular obituary feature—titled “Among The Believers Are Men”—lionized a fighter, Macrème Abrougui, after his death on the battlefield in Syria.¹¹ This is typical fare for the magazine. What makes its eulogy of Abrougui unique, however, is just how positively it frames the crime-terror nexus.

The obituary describes how Abrougui—using the *kunya* Abu Mujahid al-Faransi—was allegedly drawn to jihad from a life of crime. It praises Abrougui for his character even while living as a criminal, transforming from a “fierce gangster” and a “man whom people would fear” to beginning “a new life as a true Muslim.”¹² As a prolific criminal, he is said to have amassed “an enormous amount of money through numerous raids on the wealth of the mushrikin [polytheists].”¹³ It also lays bare his stance toward the authorities: “He wouldn’t care about France’s police officers, as he would have shootouts with them and succeed in escaping from them during his robbery campaigns or when selling drugs.”¹⁴ And despite his “indulgence in disobedience and sins,” Abrougui was still “generous in nature and noble in his manners.”¹⁵ After all, “he wasn’t afraid of confrontation, nor would he run from a fight.”¹⁶ The Islamic State, it seems, not only admires the criminal skillset, but makes it aspirational.

In recounting Abrougui’s first operation with a group of jihadis, the Islamic State also highlights the blurred distinctions between crime and jihadism. In search of money to fund its jihadi activities, the group—“French youth who supported the mujahidin”—located a drug dealer who had apparently hidden €200,000 in his house.¹⁷ They stalked the location for days, planning a home invasion with the aim of stealing the cash. For all its similarities to an ‘orthodox’ criminal operation, the Islamic State explained why it was different:

*“With most of those possessing experience in this field, it was due to their having entered into the world of robbery and gangs in their previous lives, but the assault this time differed as it was a form of worship by which they sought to draw closer to Allah, not as a means to increase in indulgence in disobedience and corruption.”*¹⁸

Here the Islamic State seems to be saying to criminals ‘you do not need to change your behavior, only your motivation.’ This could prove to be an incredibly powerful message, as it promises immediate gratification, as well as spiritual legitimation for criminal behavior. It appears as though the group has calculated that for a



Purported photo of Macrème Abrougui (aka Abu Mujahid al-Faransi) in Rumiyah magazine, Issue 11

criminal questioning his lifestyle, this could be a tempting offer, and perhaps explains why many criminals involve themselves in jihadism. It shows the Islamic State as an equal opportunity employer to would-be jihadis, both accepting of past excesses and offering redemption for them. As highlighted in the authors’ 2016 report, these narratives can resonate with criminals.¹⁹ In the same way, the Islamic State is in tune with both its members and those it wishes to recruit. The point is not necessarily that Abrougui’s life played out as detailed in the eulogy—there are almost certainly embellishments and omissions—but that the Islamic State acknowledges how relevant the crime-terror nexus is to how many of its would-be recruits operate.

The Islamic State also recognizes the potential for skill transfers between criminal and extremist lifestyles, an effect of the crime-terror nexus highlighted in the author’s 2016 report.²⁰ Simply put, criminals may develop skills and networks that make them more effective as terrorists. Abrougui is a prime example:

*“He was administrative-minded and organized, and therefore, he would not devise a plan except that he had prepared for it its means and studied its outcomes and its consequences, and so he would employ this characteristic of his in his operations in an effective way, not breaking into a residence until he had monitored the property thoroughly, and thus if he were to raid the premises he would have considered the worst outcomes and prepared for himself ways to escape from being killed or arrested.”*²¹

The applications of this to an insurgency or terrorist campaign are clear. Such skills transfers continued once in Syria, with Abrougui apparently aiding the Islamic State’s external operations, offering “all his effort, wealth, and information in any jihad-related work that targeted the Crusaders in France.”²² His criminal network and experience would have proved useful for the Islamic State.

In praising Abrougui’s generosity, the Islamic State further acknowledged the use of criminal networks. His eulogy explicitly states that Abrougui would secure forged passports for would-be jihadis who were prohibited from traveling.²³ It notes that he himself used a forged passport to travel to Syria.²⁴

Using his street fame and reputation, Abrougui also engaged in outreach, or *dawah*. In particular, he focused on the youth, “many of whom used to look up to him as an example, due to his previous fame in the criminal world.”²⁵ Despite his use of criminal means to acquire funding, Abrougui warned against involvement in crime: “He would advise them to avoid the path of delinquency, and warn them from getting involved in the affair of drugs—frightening them with Allah’s punishment—and calling them to adhere to Islam and embark upon the straight path.”²⁶

Aside from lauding criminals-turned-jihadis, the Islamic State has also been encouraging crime for the sake of jihad. Another recent issue of *Rumiyah* heavily encouraged the taking of *ghanima* (wealth taken through force; i.e., ‘the spoils of war’), *fay* (wealth taken without force), and *ihthab* (wealth taken through fraud and deception).²⁷ This current in jihadi thought is an echo of Anwar al-Awlaki’s exposition in *Inspire* magazine on the use of *ghanima* for jihad. The worldview is simple, as outlined by al-Awlaki himself: “Rather than the Muslims financing their jihad from their own pockets, they should finance it from the pockets of their enemies.”²⁸ This economic war is not only a means to finance jihad, but is seen as an end in and of itself: “It is a must on every muwahhid [monotheist] to expand the scope of his jihad to include waging war on the kuffar’s [non-believer’s] wealth.”²⁹ Simply put, jihadis are encouraged to commit crime and steal.

Curiously, it may be unnecessary to finance jihadism with criminal proceeds, given the low costs of terrorism.³⁰ Rudimentary attacks, such as stabbings and vehicle rammings, have very low financial ‘barriers to entry.’ As a result, using crime to raise funds—with its associated risks of detection—is not necessary. As Emilie Oftedal from the Norwegian Defence Research Establishment found, personal assets such as salaries and savings are most frequently used to fund terrorism in Europe, in what is a “remarkably ordinary picture.”³¹ Yet at least 23 percent of jihadi plots between 2014 and 2016 involved the use of crime to raise funds.³² The authors’ research suggests that radicalized individuals with criminal pasts often continue using the same methods as during their criminal lives. Yet with the Islamic State encouraging crime as the *preferred* means of raising funds, it can be hypothesized that criminal funding will increase.

Criminals-Turned-Jihadis in Recent Terrorist Plots

Since the release of the authors’ 2016 report, the crime-terror nexus has manifested in several cases on the streets of Europe. The continent has seen both former and active criminals involved in attacks (e.g., Khalid Masood and the March 2017 Westminster attack³³) and individuals arrested for both crime and extremism (e.g., Mohamed Lamsalak, for connections to the 2016 Brussels attacks and drug offenses³⁴). This year has also seen the high-profile French ‘Cannes-Torcey’ trial of a network of criminals involved in jihadi plots in 2012, led by Jérémie Louis-Sidney, a drug trafficker turned jihadi.³⁵ These manifestations often mirror the twin themes of redemption and crime as a form of worship as espoused in the Islamic State eulogy for Abrougui.

Today’s terrorist threat in Europe is unprecedented. There are spontaneous attacks by volatile individuals, as well as carefully planned operations by organized cells. The high number of potential perpetrators, with the mobilization of thousands of Europeans to Syria, means that transnational networks are often involved. There is also no uniformity among perpetrators, with attackers ranging

from a 40-year-old Ph.D. student³⁶ to three women alleged to have been plotting knife attacks in London.³⁷ The use of technology, for both encryption and propaganda,³⁸ is a further complication, as is the prevalence of firearms in continental Europe.³⁹ The presence of former and active criminals only adds to the threat.

Two attacks during the last year have shown the impact that criminals-turned-jihadis can have: the December 2016 Berlin Christmas market attack and the April 2017 Champs-Élysées attack.

On December 19, 2016, Anis Amri deliberately drove a truck into the Breitscheidplatz Christmas market in Berlin, killing 12 people and injuring 56 others. He was a criminal with a history of convictions for theft and violence and had been imprisoned in Italy for an arson attack. During his incarceration, Amri’s violent behavior led to him spending 70 days in solitary confinement⁴⁰ and being transferred to three other prisons.⁴¹ His behavior in the run-up to the attacks contradicted many stereotypes of a religious fundamentalist. Under surveillance, he was seen dealing drugs in a Berlin park, and during Ramadan, he had taken cocaine and drank alcohol.⁴² As Georg Heil’s illuminating research into Anis Amri and the Abu Walaa network has shown, this “appears to have led German police to mistakenly conclude that he no longer posed a threat.” That was a fatal miscalculation, as Amri went on to pledge allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and was later celebrated by the Islamic State’s Amaq news agency.⁴³

Amri was the product of a jihadi network in Germany that encouraged crime. Its head was Abu Walaa, whose associate, Fifen Youssouf, is alleged by Lower Saxony police to have committed burglaries encouraged as *ghanima* for the sake of jihad.⁴⁴ Amri himself had been involved in crimes such as fraud and theft.⁴⁵ This legitimization of crime is a perfect mirror of what the Islamic State encourages, and it is a familiar pattern. It has perhaps been most effectively used by Khalid Zerkani in Brussels—responsible for mobilizing up to 72 foreign fighters that traveled to Syria—who told his recruits that “to steal from the infidels is permitted by Allah.”⁴⁶ Zerkani led a network of criminals, who would rob tourists and commit street crime in Brussels and then use the proceeds to fund their travel to Syria.⁴⁷ Certainly, this phenomenon is not restricted to the Islamic State—it has antecedents in the Armed Islamic Group’s (GIA) operations in France and the United Kingdom in the 1990s—though the harmony between theory and practice is a noticeable development seen on European streets.

The crime-terror nexus also highlights the potential for ‘skills transfers’ from the criminal world. Karim Cheurfi is a case in point. On April 20, 2017, Cheurfi opened fire on the Champs-Élysées in Paris, killing one police officer before he himself was fatally wounded. In his possession was a note professing support for the Islamic State. His criminal past included robbery and attempted murder, and suggests a highly volatile individual that was familiar with violence. In 2001, Cheurfi was driving a stolen car when he clipped another car, which happened to be driven by a trainee police officer. After a high-speed chase where both cars ended up in a ditch, Cheurfi shot the officer (as well as his passenger-brother) in the stomach. In custody two days later, Cheurfi then seized the gun of an officer who came into his cell and shot him three times before being subdued.⁴⁸ For these attempted murders, he was sentenced to 15 years. He would see three more convictions: two for violence in detention and one for burglary upon his release.⁴⁹ He later spoke of his desire to kill police officers to avenge Muslims killed in Syr-

ia.⁵⁰ His volatility made the authorities' appraisals of his behavior difficult. While his radicalization trajectory is uncertain, his proven ability and will to harm others with deadly violence was a 'skill transfer' that he brought over from his criminal career, which may have shortened his mobilization into extremist violence.

Knowledge Advancements and Knowledge Gaps

Just as jihadism has evolved over the past year, so too has understanding of the crime-terror nexus. Of note is the study by David Pyrooz, Gary LaFree, Scott Decker, and Patrick James published in May, comparing 1,473 individuals involved in violent extremism—from across the ideological spectrum—in the United States (from the PIRUS⁵¹ database) with 705 gang members (from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth dataset).⁵² They found that only six percent of the domestic violent extremists were also involved in gangs, suggesting minimal overlap between the two. Although the American study focuses on gangs rather than all forms of criminality, this brings up the possibility the crime-extremism nexus may be less pronounced in the United States than Europe. More research is needed to assess the degree to which criminal and extremist milieus have merged in the United States.

Yet despite the increased attention to the connections between involvement in both crime and terrorism, empirical works are rare, and much remains outstanding.⁵³ There exist knowledge gaps in three key areas: 1) the process of radicalization; 2) the importance of converts; and 3) the role of prisons.

It is not entirely clear how the process of radicalization affects involvement in crime: does it curtail, cease, or escalate criminality—and what shapes this trajectory? With the Islamic State encouraging crime such as fraud and robbery, it is plausible that an individual's radicalization will see an escalation in criminality, though this dynamic is far from certain. The poor availability of data means that it



Propaganda poster posted on Facebook by the British Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant grouping *Rayat al-Tawheed* (ICSR foreign fighter database, March 2014)

is not always possible to compare criminal records before and after involvement in extremism. The situation in Germany, nevertheless, may be indicative of the trend. German Federal Police have released summary statistics on 189 foreign fighters for whom this comparison is possible, revealing that “politically motivated crime” occurs more frequently during the course of their radicalization than prior to their engagement with extremism.⁵⁴

Converts^d have long been recognized as playing a disproportionate role in jihadi movements, yet few empirical undertakings have analyzed this subset of extremists.⁵⁵ The same is true of converts among criminals-turned-jihadis.^e An unpublished study by Jeremy Moss, a serving Metropolitan Police Officer, offers an invaluable insight.⁵⁶ The study analyzes the criminality of 143 converts to jihadism from 1992 to 2016, exhaustively identified via open-source research. Their criminal backgrounds were then researched using official Police National Computer (PNC) records. Each individual had a connection to the United Kingdom, whether through citizenship or residency.

The vast majority are male (129 individuals, or 90 percent of the dataset), with few females (14, or 10 percent). As can be expected in a majority-Christian country, 137 (96 percent) of the dataset converted from Christian backgrounds. Just over half were non-white or non-European (78, or 54 percent). The majority traveled, or attempted travel, for terrorist purposes (82, or 57 percent), with the Syrian jihad mobilizing the greatest number (49 completed/attempted travel to Syria, or 37 percent). Foreign nationals feature heavily in the dataset, and so it is likely that additional offending may have taken place elsewhere. The PNC does not always formally record such overseas offending, and so these statistics should be considered as under-reporting the rate of criminality.⁵⁷

The results are fascinating. In terms of criminality, 75 individuals (52 percent) received at least one crime-related conviction, caution, or a penalty notice for disorder for a criminal matter (i.e., not related to extremism). When extremist activities^f are included in this measure, the number rises to at least 126 (88 percent). There was a significant contingent of persistent offenders who had over 10 convictions each (24, or 17 percent). Due to difficulties in estimating *when* a person radicalized, it is often impossible to know whether criminality curtailed, ceased, or escalated during an individual's radicalization process. Moss estimates that in most cases, petty criminality ceased upon radicalization and was replaced by

d It is important to distinguish between a convert (an individual who embraces Islam after originally practicing a different faith, or no faith at all) and a revert (an irreligious Muslim that 'returns' to his/her faith). The police researcher looked at converts only, and so this section is not referring to reverts. This was the definition used by Moss, though the authors accept there may be other interpretations.

e Converts featured prominently in the authors' crime-terror nexus database. For more, see Rajan Basra and Peter R. Neumann, "Criminal Pasts, Terrorist Futures: European Jihadists and the New Crime-Terror Nexus," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 10:6 (2016): p. 27.

f Here "extremist activities" refers to terrorism-related or political violence convictions. The PNC lists each conviction in terms of the offense and circumstance, and so Moss assessed each conviction to see if they were extremism-related. For example, while Dhiren Barot was not convicted of a terrorism offense (he was convicted of conspiracy to murder), his activities were related to a terrorism plot. Similarly, some assaults for religiously motivated offenses (e.g., the so-called 'Sharia patrols') were classified as extremist activities, as were violent disorder or affray offenses related to public demonstrations (e.g., al-Muhajiroun activities).

extremist activities, though the anonymity of the data makes this difficult to verify.

A significant proportion (51, or 36 percent) spent time in prison for ‘conventional’ criminal matters, though it is unknown what exact role incarceration had on their radicalization process. Not only have inmates been radicalized in prison, but they have also established connections and networks that have persisted upon release.

The radicalization of Michael Coe, a member of the proscribed U.K. pro-jihadi al-Muhajiroun organization, is illustrative. He had an eventful criminal career. In 2006, Coe was sentenced to eight years for threatening police with a sawed-off shotgun.⁵⁸ During this episode, he was already on parole following an earlier conviction for a knifepoint car-jacking and robbery.⁵⁹ It was while incarcerated that he met an al-Qa`ida-inspired jihadi, Dhiren Barot—himself a convert—who was imprisoned for planning a series of terrorist attacks. Coe radicalized, and did so quickly: “Within [the first] week, the dawah that he gave me, it hit me where no else’s dawah hit me.”⁶⁰ He changed his name to Mikaeel Ibraheem, and upon release he spoke of his transformation. “When you haven’t got a cause for your life, your life is just like any of these other kuffar—we get up, try to make as much money, sleep with as much women as we can, and do whatever else we can. I have a cause. I want to see the establishment of Khilafah [the caliphate]. I want to see Islamic State.”⁶¹ Coe’s example is a confluence of many issues: criminals embracing extremism; radicalization within prisons; and the formation of networks behind the prison walls. Prisons clearly merit closer attention.

The increasing number of extremists passing through the criminal justice system further complicates this issue. In Europe, the number of individuals tried in court for terrorist offenses has steadily increased over the last three years, from 444 individuals in concluded court proceedings in 2014 to 513 in 2015 and 580 in 2016.⁶² Of those convicted last year, the average sentence in the European Union was only five years.⁶³ With more individuals being processed, and given relatively short sentences, the reality is that evermore extremists will be released from prison. Therefore, the effectiveness of extremist offender management must be examined. There are a host of unresolved questions here.⁶⁴ What, for example, are the best practices in risk assessments, post-release, and probation arrangements? What is the most effective way to mitigate prison radicalization? And given that European countries are increasingly separating extremist offenders from the general population, how

can prison ‘networking’ be minimized?

Conclusion

Many of today’s European jihadis are no longer middle-class intellectuals but petty criminals and former gang members who have spent time in prison and carry convictions for violent crime. All over Europe, criminal and terrorist milieus have merged, producing a crime-terror nexus whose different facets and implications this article has sought to describe.

The existence of this nexus and its associated dynamics should compel researchers, analysts, and policymakers to re-think long-held ideas about how terror, crime, and radicalization have to be countered. At the most basic level, it is worthwhile reexamining easy assumptions about how jihadi radicalization correlates with religious behavior. This echoes the comments of Alain Grignard from Brussels Federal Police, who noted that many of the new generation of jihadis that Belgian and European security agencies were dealing with were radicals *prior* to their adoption of jihadism.⁶⁵ Their prior criminality meant they were already accustomed to rebellion against mainstream society and violence against the authorities. This may make their ‘jump’ into political violence that much quicker than would otherwise be the case, and this volatility is worthy of attention. Many of the jihadis studied by the authors were smoking cigarettes, drinking alcohol, or taking drugs after becoming committed to the cause. Many continued to engage in crime. In short, the adoption of the religious worldview of jihadism is no guarantee that criminal behavior has stopped, while acting like a gangster does not preclude involvement in terrorism.

All this means that there are strong arguments for broadening efforts at countering terrorist finance to counter all potential sources of funding, including small-scale and petty crime such as drug dealing, theft, robberies, and the trade in counterfeit goods. Law enforcement agencies need to become more effective at sharing relevant information across departments and “disciplines,” reaching out beyond traditional partners, and making appropriate changes that reflect the new—and multidimensional—nature of the threat.

The new crime-terror nexus that the authors first described in their 2016 report is among the most significant drivers of jihadi radicalization and recruitment today. Recognizing this is key in understanding the nature of the jihadi threat in Europe. **CTC**

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A View from the CT Foxhole: Lisa Monaco, Former Assistant to President Barack Obama for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism

By Paul Cruickshank

Lisa Monaco served as Assistant to the President for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism from March 2013 to the end of the Obama administration. Prior to the White House, Monaco spent 15 years at the Department of Justice, the majority of that time serving as a career federal prosecutor, and in senior management positions in the Justice Department and the FBI. During this period, she served for three years as counsel to and then Chief of Staff at the FBI, helping then Director Robert Mueller transform the FBI after 9/11 into a national security organization focused on preventing terrorist attacks on the United States. From 2011 to 2013, she served as Assistant Attorney General for National Security, the first woman to serve in that position. Monaco is currently a distinguished senior fellow at the Center on Law and Security at the New York University School of Law and a senior national security analyst for CNN.

CTC: How do you see the threat from global terrorism evolving?

Monaco: We have, for some time now, rightly focused on ISIS and its various manifestations. I have, in the past, described it as taking multiple forms. They have, in one respect, been an insurgent army, and they're clearly on their back foot in that manifestation. They've also been a semi-classic terror group in terms of planning and dispatching attackers for attacks like we saw in Paris, Brussels, etc. And then of course there has been what I call the social phenomenon of ISIS manifested in their use of and abuse of social media platforms to recruit, radicalize and mobilize individuals to violence.

At the same time, we cannot lose sight of the potential still for a catastrophic 9/11-style attack given what we're seeing, particularly from al-Qa`ida in Syria. We, in the Obama administration, were very focused on that even while we were focusing on ISIS. A group of al-Qa`ida veterans who had decamped from Afghanistan to Syria seeking safe haven, known as the Khorasan Group, were among the first set of targets in Syria in the summer of 2014 at the same time that the United States began the anti-ISIS campaign in Iraq. And I think that threat, particularly of aviation-style attacks—whether it's from al-Qa`ida in Syria or AQAP, which remains very persistent, or indeed from ISIS—is something we can't take our eye off.

We're also going to have to continue to pay very close attention to the threat from foreign fighters—particularly those from Europe and other western passport holders dispatched as operatives both to Europe and to other Western countries.

CTC: The enduring threat from al-Qa`ida is, of course, very concerning, especially because there are now up to 20,000 fighters¹ affiliated with al-Qa`ida-aligned groups in Syria. In 2015, however, we had al-Qa`ida's leader in Syria Abu Muhammad al-Julani claiming in an Al Jazeera interview² that Ayman al-Zawahiri had put a moratorium on launching attacks against

the West from Syrian territory. How does that complicate the threat picture?

Monaco: The exhortations from Zawahiri in general and to Julani specifically was something we watched quite closely when I was in government. It is true, Jabhat al-Nusra—al-Qa`ida in Syria, however you wanted to call them—have long been focused on the fight against Assad. I think they're obviously now the biggest force, most capable force fighting the Assad regime. That said, I think the more they contain or grab hold of a safe haven in Syria, the greater potential threat they become.

Based on what we saw with regard to their whole purpose in going to Syria two, three years ago they were decamping from Afghanistan to Syria precisely so they'd have this more hospitable environment, which they continue to enjoy. I just think we can't discount that some element of the focus remains on plotting against the far enemy—withstanding Zawahiri's exhortations, whether that's for public consumption or not—and that the more they feel safe in the area that they do occupy—whether it's Idlib or otherwise—the more threat they will pose. We can't lose track of their potential to plot attacks from there on the U.S. homeland.

CTC: With regard to the so-called Khorasan Group plotting against the West in 2014, as the intelligence picture matured on that, was it more of a case of a group putting itself in a position to launch attacks against the West, or were there actual preparations for a specific plot?

Monaco: I'd say both. And in fact, those 2014 strikes were against bomb-making factories in Syria. That's why—we said this publicly at the time—we included those targets in addition to the ISIS targets at the start of that campaign.

CTC: Bomb-making facilities specifically tailored to launching attacks on Western aviation?

Monaco: Western targets and Western aviation.

CTC: Then after that came the al-Zawahiri moratorium. But from a counterterrorism practitioner point of view, you can't take any chances given the history of the group.

Monaco: Correct. The one thing I think CT professionals certainly agree on is having physical space that either has periodic pressure or not sufficient pressure placed on it is a quintessential element of a threat picture that we're going to be worried about. So their capability of continuing to have that territory in Syria, growing it, is something that you're always going to be worried about as a main ingredient to attacks on the West.

CTC: When it comes to the threat from al-Qa`ida in Yemen, they appear to have grown in terms of their manpower, resources, and territorial footprint since attempting to blow up a U.S. passenger jet over Detroit on Christmas Day 2009. Ibrahim al-Asiri released a statement last month threatening more attacks against the United States.³ How concerning is AQAP, as part of the threat matrix?

Monaco: It was always at the top of our list of concerns when I was in government. They continue to grow their manpower. They have benefited from the chaos in Yemen. The Houthi rebellion has done nothing but, I think, feed their ranks. And we've seen them be the most persistent terrorist group when it comes to aviation plotting. That's just by the numbers. It's quite clear going back certainly to the so-called Christmas Day bomber and then the printer cartridge plot of 2010 and on and on. And as you rightly point out, Asiri remained, at least by the time I left government, still at large and somebody we were quite concerned about, because of concern he was continuing to hone his craft and training up apprentices or sharing the benefit of his knowledge with other terrorist groups, whether it's al-Qa`ida in Syria elements, whether it's ISIS elements. The proliferation of his knowledge is something we were quite concerned about.

CTC: In July, Australian police arrested two brothers in Sydney who allegedly plotted to blow up a passenger jet and were in the very early stages of trying to build a poison gas dispersal device.⁴ The plot got a lot of attention because the Islamic State allegedly air-mailed a partially constructed device, including high-grade explosive, for final assembly in Australia, which I've called an IKEA-model of terrorism. How much of a wake-up call was this plot?

Monaco: Like you, I worry this is a sign they're innovating. We've seen that with attempts to build non-metallic devices and ever smaller devices in order to evade detection, but that can still be deadly if placed in a particular place on an airliner. I'm very worried that they're "going to school" on the aviation measures we've taken to date and that we're in a race about who's going to innovate more, in terms of us on the detection end and them on the explosives end. We've seen them continuously adapting, whether it's trying to get an explosive on an airliner or reacting to the steps the West has taken to harden the whole air travel supply chain. We saw that in the Brussels airport bombing in the departures area of the airport. They know we can't push out our secure areas further and further, so they're looking to strike just beyond that last point of defense.

So whether it's in trying to attack the soft target areas of the airline industry, whether it's in, as you say, using the logistics supply chain to their advantage with this IKEA-style of terrorism, all signs point to terrorist actors trying to innovate but still seeing the airline industry and airline services as a very attractive target because of economic repercussions and the quintessential effect of terror—to make people afraid of going about their daily lives and doing routine things.

CTC: With the Islamic State having launched a significant number of sulfur mustard attacks in Syria, what level of concern did you have while in the White House, and do you have now, on the chemical terror threat posed by the group?

Monaco: I think you rightly point to access to facilities, material, and expertise due to the amount of time and free reign ISIS has had in places like Mosul, which is the academic seat in Iraq—the Mosul university, Mosul hospital—and all that time spent there is something we were very, very concerned about. We can't discount that they've learned a fair bit and have gotten some of that expertise [into] their ranks. As is well documented they've carried out a spate of the sulfur mustard attacks in Syria and Iraq. Actually carrying out an attack involving operatives dispatched to Europe or the United States with this material would add another layer of difficulty for them because you're talking about getting material, people, know-how into the West. One of the biggest concerns in this regard is the 7,000 European passport holders who traveled into the region as part of the overall 40,000 travelers into the conflict. The worry is some will have significant know-how and skills that have been burnished in places like Mosul.

CTC: The numbers of foreign fighters are staggering. As Lieutenant General Michael Nagata of the National Counterterrorism Center stated in April,⁵ the 40,000 figure refers to the approximate number who have been identified so far.

Monaco: Yes, that 40,000 represents identities known. We've amassed a lot of information with our partners. But the most worrying thing is that number that hasn't been identified. And while I think we've gotten better and there's been a growing amount of information sharing and coupling that with other intelligence from security and law enforcement services across the West as well as in our broader partnerships, we can only have so much confidence in that 40,000 number. It's very hard to tell you what that unknown number is. I don't think we have a good sense of even just the scale of what we're not seeing.

CTC: So far, we have not seen a single terrorist plot on U.S. soil involving Islamic State recruits dispatched to this country. Rather, the threat has come from Islamic State sympathizers, some of whom were virtually directed by Islamic State operatives in Syria. In examining those charged in terrorism-related cases, as well as the small number of terrorists killed during attacks, a study published last month by the Center on National Security at Fordham Law found there were 15 individuals involved in "ISIS cases"^a in 2014, 73 in 2015, 39 in 2016, and 17 in the first seven months of 2017. What do those figures tell you about the evolution of the threat?

Monaco: The 2015 uptick may be due, to a significant degree, to the real focus by the FBI on investigations and arrests and prosecutions for material support in the form of travel to join ISIS. The large number in 2015 may also be a function of a very aggressive

a The study categorized "ISIS cases" as individuals charged in federal court with Islamic State-related offenses; individuals accused of violating other statutes that are not inherently associated with terrorism, where the investigation alleges some kind of a link to the Islamic State; and individuals who were killed by law enforcement while attempting an Islamic State-related attack inside the United States. See Karen J. Greenberg (ed.), "The American Exception: Terrorism Prosecutions in the United States: The ISIS Cases March 2014 – August 2017," Center on National Security at Fordham University Law School, September 2017, p. 5.



Lisa Monaco briefs President Barack Obama in April 2013. (Pete Souza/The White House)

use of online undercover operatives to make sure law enforcement can identify radicalization and mobilization to violence that is going on online. The other factor at play here is that these 2015 numbers should be seen against the backdrop of the [September 2014] Adnani direction for supporters to act wherever they are. That produced a significant challenge for law enforcement because the individual deciding in his own mind to follow Adnani's direction is a lot harder to detect than somebody talking to somebody else in a chat room who turns out to be a member of law enforcement.

CTC: The number of Islamic State-related cases has declined since its 2015 peak. Does that suggest the Islamic State message is losing its resonance in the United States? Is the threat picture ameliorating?

Monaco: I don't ever recall feeling content that a threat had crested. I'm loathe to put all that together and say the ISIS messaging—whether it's to join the fight in Iraq and Syria, whether it's to act where you are—has lost its resonance to a point where I'd be comfortable. In the run-up to the election in 2016, we were very, very concerned about what we were seeing coming out of some of the main ISIS messaging platforms about attacking the election or polling places as gatherings of potential soft targets. Now, what I think you can say with more certainty is that it's probably getting harder to carry out attacks, given the very forward-leaning stance the FBI has taken in its ISIS investigations. But the fact remains, this new phenomenon of individuals inspired to act because of what they are seeing online is a real challenge for law enforcement to detect and disrupt.

CTC: There's been a significant reliance on sting operations

here in the United States.^b One could argue these sorts of investigative tactics, while they have no doubt thwarted dangerous plots, have inflated the number of terrorism cases in the United States because individuals are more likely to move forward with plans if they believe others are part of the conspiracy. Given the unease in the Muslim community over sting-operations and how important information from the community is in alerting authorities to potential terrorist activity, is there a danger in overrelying on sting operations?

Monaco: I've seen this debate evolve over time, and when I was the head of the national security division at the Justice Department, it was, and continues to be, a very important tool. I would defend the use of that tool overseen as it is, by definition, by our court system. In those cases in which plotters are operating in what I call a "closed system," this approach is key. The Boston bombers are a perfect example. They were talking to each other and viewing, passively, Awlaki videos. Unless you were somewhere in that conversation stream between the two brothers or watching them watching those al-Qa`ida videos, which we didn't have a basis to do at the time, how else are you going to detect when something goes wrong in their mind and turns them to action?

Now, I do think we need to have a discussion about what form getting *into* that conversation can take. It can be an undercover agent or it can be a member of the community, maybe a relative or friend or teacher who says, "I realize that you're starting to talk in a way that is making me very concerned about what your intentions might be. Let's sit down and figure out what's going on here. Let's bring in some other trusted community member, whether it's law enforcement, whether it's a parent, whether it's somebody else."

^b In 2014, 33 percent of the Islamic State-related cases involved government informants or undercover agents, with the share increasing to 65 percent in the years since, and 83 percent of the 2017 cases. See Greenberg.

We absolutely need to find ways to empower the community to help. I also think we have to honestly have a discussion about what potential off-ramps there could be for some of these individuals—whether it's through a community organization, a community group, a community member, whether it's through some type of diversion program as we've used in the past for gang members and the like. There are all sorts of complications for that in the terrorism scenario, but we need to be having that conversation.

So yes, there has been a significant use of sting operations by law enforcement as a way of disrupting something that is on its way to going bad because there is a zero tolerance for any missed threat. But at the same time, sting operations are one tool in a very limited tool box for this type of threat. So we need to be having a conversation about developing more tools, including potentially off-ramps working with members of the community.

CTC: In June, the new administration granted \$10 million to 26 organizations working on CVE [countering violent extremism], but it also rescinded funding for a number of organizations, including the Muslim Public Affairs Council and Life After Hate, an organization that works to counter far-right extremism.⁶ What would your advice be to the new administration in how best to empower the Muslim community to take on jihadi ideology?

Monaco: One of the things I heard most often from Muslim community members and from others when the subject turned to CVE was “why do you, Obama administration, only see this radicalization and terrorism as a Muslim problem?” I think we went to great lengths to make very clear that terrorism, extremism, violence in all its forms from all sorts of ideologies is unacceptable. But it's very hard to get that message through, and you really undercut your ability to build trust and relationships with the Muslim community, if you're not very clearly showing that you're concerned about all forms of extremism and terrorism, including far-right extremism, neo-Nazis, white supremacists, sovereign citizen movements. So the move to rescind the grant to Life after Hate, for example, just sends both the wrong message and substantively undercuts the approach to get after all forms of extremism.

So my advice would be firstly, put your money where your mouth is and make clear that you are defining extremism broadly. And then secondly, we've seen a diminution for the focus and support for the counter-messaging efforts that we worked very hard in the Obama administration to revamp. Nobody who worked on these efforts in the Obama administration would tell you that we were perfect in this. In fact, we arguably had a few false starts. But by the last several years of the Obama administration, we had really taken on the expertise and guidance from experts in counter-messaging and branding and the technology industry to really revamp the efforts coming out of the State Department. In creating the State Department's Global Engagement Center, we decided to have the federal government not act as the messenger. Instead we acted as a convener to encourage collaboration between tech industry companies and legitimate voices in the NGO sector and beyond to amplify the impact of those best placed to counter ISIS messaging. This involved getting on board the likes of YouTube, as well as the Sawab Center in the UAE, which has become a regional node for confronting extremist messaging.

I am concerned that in the last nine months there has been a

real diminution in those efforts. The Global Engagement Center still doesn't have a director. And the talent that we spent a long time trying to recruit into government from Silicon Valley and the like is leaving because they don't see a lot of uptake for these efforts.

CTC: In late September, citing national security threats, the Trump administration banned most travel to the United States from seven countries, all of which have Muslim majorities except North Korea.⁷ It was the third iteration of an order that has caused significant controversy. What are the national security rationales for such measures?

Monaco: It remains to be seen just how this third iteration is going to be operationalized, but certainly with respect to the first two versions, they do not operate from a threat-based, intelligence-based, targeted approach to vetting, which I think is how you should approach it. James Clapper⁸ and I and a bipartisan group of national security officials have signed onto briefs that have said there are no national security grounds for blanket bans and that there ought to be rigorous vetting and it ought to be threat-based, intelligence-based.

It is not that any one of the national security experts I've talked to about these issues *doesn't* think that there can't or shouldn't be more done in terms of vetting. In fact, the vetting process ought to be constantly evaluated in relation to the threat picture and to the intelligence picture. But a blanket, country-based, wide-swath approach is not only ineffective, but it's also counterproductive because it's going to hurt the very relationships we need counter the terrorist threat and feed into a recruiting narrative that the United States is at war with an entire religion. Not only can this be exploited by groups like al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State to push their worldview, but it can really undermine the partnerships that we need to get after a whole host of threats. You saw that with the Iraqi reaction to the very first iteration of the travel ban.

CTC: There have been a number of calls from politicians for platforms such as WhatsApp to create backdoors to address the issue of terrorists “going dark” because of encryption. But Aaron Brantly argued in the August issue of this publication that such measures would be futile because terrorists users would migrate to other platforms and because the code behind end-to-end encryption is already available on the internet making it possible for terrorists to build their own platforms and “worse than futile” because such backdoors would damage the ability of millions of Americans to communicate securely.⁹ We seem to be in a situation in which terrorists are increasingly using encryption in plotting attacks, but it has become very difficult, perhaps impossible, to do much about it. Is that a fair assessment?

Monaco: I think that it certainly describes the landscape as had been developed by the time I left government. It's important that we break this problem down a little bit. It's something we tried to do in talking with the tech firms and experts when I was in government, because for a long time we were talking past each other with law enforcement saying: “It's not impossible for you to give us this information. You've been doing it for years in responding to lawful process. And the tech industry would say, “No, it's impossible. We can't give that to you,” because of course the technology had been constructed such as to make it impossible.

We need to break this into two streams. The first stream are the password-protected phones in the hands of investigators, like we saw with the San Bernardino attacker's iPhone. The second stream is the end-to-end encryption concerns for communications in transit. I continue to think that our innovation and entrepreneurial culture is such that we ought to be able to find a solution if not to both streams, then at least to the first stream—the mountains and mountains of devices that are coming into lawful possession of law enforcement without them being able to access their contents pursuant to lawful process from a court.

CTC: The San Bernardino attackers' iPhone was eventually cracked¹⁰ suggesting, as you say, that there may be technological solutions in extracting data in those cases, but when it comes to the second stream of terrorists using end-to-end encryption, short of shutting down their access to the internet, this seems very hard to stop.

Monaco: That's right because as you point out, users could migrate to other platforms, which may be even more difficult for intelligence services to monitor, and the code is out there for end-to-end encryption. My worry is, given what I see right now, I don't see dialogue between government and the tech industry improving under the current administration.

CTC: The cell dispatched by the Islamic State which carried out the Paris and Brussels attacks were communicating via encrypted apps with senior Islamic State operatives in Syria. Belgian investigators found audio briefings recorded by the Brussels cell for their superiors in Syria on a laptop used by the cell in which they were discussing attack planning. The last briefing was recorded a day before the attacks and made clear an attack was about to be launched.¹¹ None of this was picked up in real time by signals intelligence agencies. How much more difficult is end-to-end encryption making it for the NSA or GCHQ to thwart plots?

Monaco: There's no doubt that it has made identifying and disrupting plots more difficult because you need a starting point to then develop the intelligence further, and you won't get that starting point, so as to flesh out that network, if all the communication is being done on encrypted platforms. It's going to be harder and harder—and sometimes impossible—to get that critical insight which is going to allow you to develop the intelligence picture.

CTC: Turning to the nature of the terrorist threat from Iran and Iranian proxies, in 2011 as Assistant Attorney General for National Security, you helped oversee the investigation that thwarted a plot by Mansour Arbabsiar directed by elements of the IRGC^c to assassinate the Saudi Ambassador to the United States.¹² How has the threat from Iran-sponsored terrorism evolved?

Monaco: Arbabsiar was in communication with handlers from the IRGC. We alleged and he pled guilty to a plot against the then Saudi ambassador [now foreign minister] Adel al-Jubeir to take

place by bombing the Cafe Milano restaurant in Georgetown while he was there. The plot itself was extremely worrying both because of the violence of trying to assassinate an ambassador, but also it evinced to us a new threshold that the IRGC seemingly was willing to cross. That's why you saw a whole-of-government response to that plot. And so on the day that we announced the indictment, myself, FBI Director Bob Mueller, the U.S. Attorney in Manhattan Preet Bharara, and the Attorney General Eric Holder made a joint public statement to make very clear that we saw this as the Quds force^d basically crossing this threshold. At the same time, we sanctioned a number of members of the Revolutionary Guard under the Treasury's authorities. We were kind of pulling out all elements of national power to say this type of purported escalation in the form of this plot was not going to be tolerated.

I think the case blew the lid a little bit off the notion that there might be some sort of restraint being imposed on the Quds force. At the very least, it was clear that whatever restraint was being imposed was not being heeded by the elements who were perpetrating this plot and who we named in the indictment.

CTC: What are the continuities and changes you've seen in the counterterrorism strategy of the Obama and Trump administrations?

Monaco: I think we've seen a fair bit of continuity in terms of the counter-ISIS campaign. Contrary to there being some new secret plan to counter ISIS, what we've seen is basically a continuation of the playbook that the Obama administration was executing to greater and greater effect and in a more, more aggressive way, particularly over the course of 2016. I think a change that you've seen between the last administration and the current one—at least that's been reported, although not necessarily explained by the new administration—is this idea of delegation of certain operational decisions down further and further to commanders in the field, so as to increase the tempo of operations in the counter-ISIS campaign. So continuity with some change in this respect, but largely a continuation of the strategy and the campaign that the Obama administration had been putting into effect, vis-à-vis countering ISIS in Iraq and Syria.

CTC: Last month, *The New York Times* reported the Trump administration¹³ is considering relaxing two rules in targeting terrorists. "First, the targets of kill missions by the military and the CIA, now generally limited to high-level militants deemed to pose a 'continuing and imminent threat' to Americans, would be expanded to include foot-soldier jihadists with no special skills or leadership roles. And second, proposed drone attacks and raids would no longer undergo high-level vetting." According to the article, "the changes would lay the groundwork for possible counterterrorism missions in countries where Islamic militants are active but the United States has not previously tried to kill or capture them." How do you view these proposals?

Monaco: It remains to be seen what actually is going to be approved. If the reporting is correct, what is being proposed would have some pretty significant continuity in terms of the maintenance

c Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps

d The Quds Force is the paramilitary arm of the IRGC.

of the *near-certainty* standard—near certainly of no civilian casualties—and a continued distinction between areas of active hostilities, i.e., traditional battlefields, versus areas outside of active hostilities, which was of course a framework that the Obama administration used. The departure from the *continuing imminent threat* standard is significant and maybe more significant in terms of how our partners react and how they will, or will not, chose to work with us in areas outside of active hostilities in going after threats to the United States and to our allies and partners, if they do not believe that the framework that we are operating under is consistent with international humanitarian law.

Although having a continuing imminent threat standard does not end debate about these operations, having that threat standard was valuable as both a discipline for our operations and as a way to bring our partners on board. So we'll see how our partners react to these reported proposed changes. But by and large, if the reporting is correct, we've seen some significant continuity in the framework that President Obama announced in 2013. Seeing that institutionalized in our counterterrorism operations would be a good thing.

CTC: What worries you most when it comes to the challenges ahead for U.S. counterterrorism agencies?

Monaco: One of the greatest benefits since 9/11 and one of the greatest continuing challenges I think is to build and maintain robust partnerships to detect, deter, and disrupt terrorism threats. Will we have and are we fostering partnerships—whether it's with our European and NATO allies or whether it's across the board—to keep the type of pressure on safe havens and emerging safe havens that we need to do to keep the lid on the kind of catastrophic attack that we started our conversation with? That remains to be seen, for example, when it comes to information-sharing with the Europeans for those who are traveling out of Iraq and Syria and whether they feel confident that this administration is one with which they can work. Working at those partnerships is a continuing challenge, particularly on the European front where I think they need to do more with and amongst themselves when it comes to information-sharing between the intelligence and criminal sides of their respective houses. Are we, in the United States, postured to help them and foster good relationships? We'll see.

The other challenge, even as we talk about physical safe havens,

is the virtual safe havens that ISIS and other terrorist actors are amassing. Are we poised to address the continued proliferation of virtual safe havens? We're going to need to do a lot more work with the private sector and the tech industry, and that gets to the question of the relationship and trust. I haven't seen a lot from this administration about trying to do the necessary outreach to do that.

We also need to keep on paying attention to the cyber capabilities of terrorist groups. The Ardit Ferizi case^e shows that ISIS is using criminal actors and hackers to amass information for kill lists. In that case, the names of former and current military were fed to ISIS for a kill-list exploitation. What that shows you is a hybrid approach of sorts—in which ISIS was outsourcing the hacking effort and then exhorting its followers to go after these named individuals.

CTC: The Islamic State, of course, has nothing like the capability of hackers allegedly sponsored by states like Russia, but the worry presumably is that terrorist groups may develop the capability in the future to disrupt critical infrastructure by getting into computer systems.

Monaco: Indeed. What the Ferizi example shows you is they don't have to build that capability in-house. They can outsource that. We see state actors doing that, for example, in creating cutouts by using criminal hacking capability to attempt to create deniability. Non-state actors can do the same. **CTC**

^e Editor's note: Ardit Ferizi, a Kosovo citizen arrested in Malaysia, admitted that in June 2015 "he gained system administrator-level access to a server that hosted the website of a U.S. victim company," which contained "databases with personally identifiable information (PII) belonging to tens of thousands of the victim company's customers ... Ferizi provided the PII belonging to the 1,300 U.S. military members and government personnel to Junaid Hussain, a now-deceased Islamic State recruiter and attack facilitator ... on August 11, 2015, in the name of the Islamic State Hacking Division (ISHD), Hussain posted a tweet that contained a document with the PII of the approximately 1,300 U.S. military and other government personnel." "This case represents the first time we have seen the very real and dangerous national security cyber threat that results from the combination of terrorism and hacking," Assistant Attorney General John Carlin stated after Ferizi was sentenced to 20 years in prison. "ISIL-Linked Kosovo Hacker Sentenced to 20 Years in Prison," United States Department of Justice, September 23, 2016.

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New Developments in the Islamic State's External Operations: The 2017 Sydney Plane Plot

By Andrew Zammit

In late July, Australia uncovered a suspected terror plot that was distinctive among Islamic State plots discovered within Western countries in three key ways. The first was that the Islamic State mailed the alleged plotters a package that amounted to a bomb-making kit, overcoming the dilemma of how to enable untrained individuals to construct explosive devices. The second was the targeting of an international airliner, which the Islamic State had previously only attempted within the Middle East region. The third was that it involved an attempt to use an improvised chemical dispersion device containing hydrogen sulfide, after the airliner attempt was aborted. Each of these methods highlight evolutions in the Islamic State's approach to external operations.

On the afternoon of July 29, 2017, members of the New South Wales Joint Counter Terrorism Team arrested four men.^a This was not unusual; counterterrorism raids have been common in Australia for over three years. Ever since former Islamic State spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani's September 2014 global call to arms, Australia had experienced a rapid succession of terror plots that were often unsophisticated efforts involving knives and firearms.¹ However, this time, as new security measures at airports delayed passengers for hours and details began to emerge of hidden explosive devices and a plan to produce poisonous gas, it quickly became clear that the authorities were dealing with a suspected plot that was dramatically different than earlier ones.²

After two of the suspects were charged on August 4, Australian Federal Police Deputy Commissioner Michael Phelan and New South Wales Police Deputy Commissioner David Hudson held a joint press conference. They outlined a plan for terror that was more

a The New South Wales Joint Counter Terrorism Team is a combined federal and state counterterrorism unit, which includes members of the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation, the Australian Federal Police, the New South Wales Police, and the New South Wales Crime Commission.

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ambitious than any of Australia's earlier Islamic State plots and that differed significantly from other Islamic State plots in Western countries. The police alleged that the suspects had hidden an explosive device in a meat grinder and tried to place it on an Etihad airplane flying from Sydney to Abu Dhabi.³ After that failed, the suspects allegedly tried to build a chemical gas device, intending to kill a large number of people in an enclosed place.

This article examines the alleged plot and the implications of its distinctive features: how it was organized, the targets, and the intended weapons. In doing so, it highlights potential changes in the Islamic State's external operations approach and how the threat to the West has evolved.

The Alleged Plot

Of the four suspects arrested on July 29, police charged two over the alleged plot.^b Two brothers, 49-year-old Khaled Khayat and 32-year-old Mahmoud Khayat, were each charged on August 3 with two counts of "acts done in preparation for, or planning, a terrorist act."⁴ They appeared in Parramatta Court on August 5 and were denied bail.⁵ Police were told to prepare a brief of evidence by October 27, and the two accused terrorists are next due in court on November 14.⁶

The two accused men are entitled to the presumption of innocence, and it is currently unclear how they will plead. This means that this analysis is based on allegations that have not yet been tested in court. The following paragraphs outline what the suspects are alleged to have planned, based primarily on the August 4 press conference, complemented by other sources.^c The subsequent sections examine the plot's significance if the allegations are accurate.

According to the allegations, Khaled Khayat was contacted in Sydney some time during April 2017 by one of his brothers, Tarek Khayat, who was fighting in Syria for the Islamic State.⁷ Tarek connected Khaled to a senior Islamic State figure, who police described

b Another of the suspects, 50-year-old Abdul Merhi, was released without charge on August 2. The remaining suspect, 39-year-old Khaled Merhi, was charged with possession of a prohibited weapon (a taser) and released on August 6. Rachel Olding and Rachel Browne, "Man arrested over 'Sydney Terrorism Plane Bomb Plot' Released Without Charge," *Sydney Morning Herald*, August 2, 2017; Rachel Olding, "Khaled Merhi Pleads Not Guilty to Weapons Charge After Sydney 'Bomb Plot' Raid," *Sydney Morning Herald*, August 24, 2017.

c Usually, little information is available on terror plots in Australia immediately after suspects are charged, aside from media reporting whose reliability can vary depending on the individual journalists and their sources. More information becomes available as the court process proceeds, which can take several years. However, in this case, significant information is available as the press conference provided unprecedented detail on the allegations. This unusual step was taken due to the seriousness of the alleged plans and to dampen the widespread media speculation following the arrests.

as the “controller.” Khaled remained in contact with the controller and conspired over several months to carry out a terrorist attack, along with his younger brother Mahmoud.⁸ No details have been publicly revealed about the controller’s identity, other than his nationality is not Australian.

The controller instructed Khaled and Mahmoud to build an explosive device to be hidden inside a meat grinder. They did not have to source the material themselves as an Islamic State operative in Turkey mailed the explosive substance and other components through international air cargo.⁹ This was sent in one package, which amounted to a partially constructed improvised explosive device (IED) that “was fairly well advanced but not enough to be a fully initiated device.”¹⁰ The exact type of explosive is unclear, though police described it as “high end” and “military grade.”¹¹ They reportedly consider it to be pentaerythritol tetranitrate (PETN).¹²

At this point, Australian authorities were unaware of the plot and the bomb’s construction. Neither Khaled nor Mahmoud had been of significant interest to authorities, except that the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) had interviewed Khaled shortly after Tarek arrived in Syria.¹³ Consequently, the plotters managed to build a “fully functioning IED” without being disrupted.¹⁴

On July 15, Khaled Khayat took another of his brothers to Sydney International Airport. Khaled had brought the explosive device with him, intending to place it in the baggage of his unsuspecting brother who was boarding an Etihad flight to Abu Dhabi.⁴ However, Khaled aborted the plan at the last minute, leaving with the bomb while the brother boarded the plane without his luggage.¹⁵

It is unclear why they abandoned the plan at the airport. One possibility the police are investigating is that the luggage concealing the IED exceeded the weight limit.¹⁶ Regardless of the reason, Khaled took the device home and disassembled it with Mahmoud.

Khaled and Mahmoud then received instructions from the controller for a new attack, this time with a poisonous gas rather than an explosive. They began to experiment toward building an “improvised chemical dispersion device” that would release “highly toxic hydrogen sulfide.”¹⁷ The controller gave some advice on targets, focusing on “crowded closed spaces, such as public transport.”¹⁸ The Khayats obtained precursor chemicals and some components, and also undertook some experiments, but were “a long way from having a functional device” when authorities intervened.¹⁹

On July 26, a foreign intelligence partner (reportedly the United States or the United Kingdom) alerted Australia about the plot, activating the country’s federal and state counterterrorism machinery.²⁰ The New South Wales Joint Counter Terrorism Team quickly placed the suspects under surveillance and undertook an investigation leading to the plot’s disruption three days later.²¹

Provided the above allegations are accurate, the plot is distinctive among Islamic State plots within Western countries in three key ways: the manner in which the Islamic State provided logistical support, the targeting of an international airliner, and the subse-

quent intention to use a chemical device.^e

Logistical Support

Khaled and Mahmoud Khayat allegedly acted under direct instructions from a senior Islamic State figure but without having themselves traveled to Syria or Iraq to join the group. This makes the alleged plot an example of what have been described as *virtually planned* or *remote-controlled*.²² This refers to when Islamic State figures—usually based in Syria’s Raqqa province—guide external plots by communicating through online platforms with supporters in other countries. These virtual planners have guided plots in Europe, North America, Australia, Southeast Asia, and elsewhere. They provide Islamic State supporters with advice on targets, by designating venues to attack or even giving the name and address of an individual to murder, and on tactics, by advising how to maintain operational security, build a bomb, or carry out a beheading. The Islamic State’s virtual planners also help to assuage plotters’ doubts, sometimes providing emotional support up until the moment of attack, and ensure publicity by instructing perpetrators to send a martyrdom video or written statement for the Islamic State to release after the attack.²³

A small proportion of virtually planned plots have gone beyond advice and involved the remote orchestration of logistical support. Sometimes virtual planners assisted these plots by sending money. Bahrun Naim, an Indonesian Islamic State operative based in Syria, wired money to finance operations in Indonesia.²⁴ U.S.-based plotter Mohamed Elshinawy received money from the Islamic State sent through fraudulent eBay transactions.²⁵ Sometimes logistical support was organized by contacting other individuals in the same country to provide equipment. For an intended attack in Hyderabad, India, the Islamic State arranged for the plotter to find a bag of pistols tied to a tree.²⁶ The Islamic State similarly arranged for Sid Ahmed Ghulam, who planned a shooting attack against a French church in 2015, to find a bag of automatic weapons left for him in a parked car.²⁷

In this case, the Islamic State did not use a contact already within Australia to support the Khayats. They instead used the postal service to send the necessary explosive substance and other components. It previously may have appeared that the Islamic State would only provide direct logistical support for centrally planned plots like the Paris attacks.²⁸ The alleged Sydney plot demonstrates that the Islamic State has an interest in providing direct support even for virtually planned plots.

This method allowed the controller to overcome a dilemma

d The police emphasized that they believe that this brother had no knowledge of the plot. “AFP and NSW Discuss the Two Sydney Men Charged over Alleged Terrorist Acts,” Australian Federal Police National Media press conference, August 4, 2017.

e There is also another version of these events. In late August, Lebanon’s Interior Minister Nohad Machnouk gave a press conference presenting an account of the alleged plot that was different from the Australian version in several ways. It was claimed that the brother whose luggage was to conceal the bomb was, in fact, aware of the plot; that the bomb would likely have gotten past security if not for the weight limit; that there was also an attempt to hide a bomb in a Barbie doll; and that the Lebanese government had been monitoring the suspects for at least a year. Australian authorities have refused to comment on these claims. For this article, the author decided to go with the August 4 Australian Federal Police/New South Wales Police press conference account of these events, as this is the version put forward by those closest to the investigation and the version that will be tested in court. Rachel Olding, “Lebanese Authorities Monitored Australian Bomb Plot Suspects: Minister,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, August 22, 2017; “Aust Coy on Lebanon’s Terror Plot Claims,” SBS News, August 22, 2017.



Police guard the passenger security check area at Sydney Airport on July 30, 2017, in Sydney, Australia, after an alleged terror plot that involved blowing up an aircraft. (Brook Mitchell/Getty Images)

faced by both the Islamic State and al-Qa`ida: how to enable untrained operatives to construct explosives. Aspiring jihadis are not always able to access training camps to learn such skills, which is one reason why they have often used blades, firearms, or more recently vehicles. Recognizing the value of bombing attacks, jihadi organizations have attempted to overcome this dilemma in various ways. They have produced bomb-making videos and instruction manuals that have proliferated widely online, and online jihadi forums like Shumukh al-Islam have hosted e-learning courses such as “Special Explosives Course for Beginners.” But bomb-making remains difficult for untrained plotters.²⁹

The Islamic State’s virtual planning approach can assist bomb-making efforts by allowing for personalized instruction. In a plot uncovered in Melbourne in May 2015, Raqqa-based British jihadi Junaid Hussain instructed a Melbourne-based teenager in building IEDs, helping him to almost finish constructing several pipe bombs before his arrest.³⁰ However, the alleged Sydney plot represents a newer and bolder method, which Paul Cruickshank described as an “IKEA model of terrorism.”³¹ The Islamic State mailed the alleged terrorists a package that was in effect a bomb kit and provided sufficient instructions for the recipients to finish construction.³² This represents a new development in the Islamic State’s virtual planning.

Targeting Aviation

Another of the attack’s notable features was the target. No earlier jihadi plot in Australia is known to have targeted aircraft. Islamic State plots in the West have rarely targeted aviation, with the main exception being the bombings at Brussels Airport in March 2016.³³ The rarity of such attacks is likely due to the difficulties posed by

airport security. Robert Liscouski and William McGann have argued that it is highly unlikely for bomb-laden luggage to go through modern security procedures and fail to be detected. Despite innovative attempts by terrorists to design better bombs, the sophisticated explosives-detection tools used at airports in most developed countries, along with the layered security approach of integrating multiple methods (X-rays, sniffer-dogs, and sensors that detect explosive traces at a molecular level), make an undetectable explosive unlikely.³⁴

Liscouski and McGann highlighted several vulnerabilities that terrorists targeting aviation would likely seek to exploit. One was for a bomb to be smuggled through a developing country’s airport with less sophisticated detection technology. Another was for a device to be missed by less rigorously trained staff. The third scenario was for a bomb to be placed via insider assistance at an airport. The al-Shabaab terrorists who smuggled a laptop bomb onto Daallo Airlines Flight 159 leaving from Mogadishu airport in February 2, 2016, exploited several of these vulnerabilities. On February 1, an airport worker sneaked the device through a gate reserved for employees and handed it to the suicide bomber, but the bomber’s flight was cancelled. The next day, the laptop was brought through an X-ray scanner, which staff failed to detect due to a lack of skills and experience. The bomb exploded on board but did not bring down

the plane.^f Another case of insider assistance was the destruction of Metrojet Flight 9268 from Sharm el-Sheikh to St. Petersburg in October 2015, killing 224 people. The device was reportedly planted by an EgyptAir mechanic whose cousin joined the Islamic State.³⁵

The alleged Sydney plot demonstrates an ambitious plan by the Islamic State to destroy an international airliner without exploiting any such vulnerabilities. The alleged plotters pursued a high-risk plan. Intending to smuggle the bomb through Sydney International Airport's screening process, and without any apparent help from the inside, their prospects were likely never high. The Australian Federal Police believe that the device would not have escaped detection. During the investigation, they created a replica of the device and tested at multiple airports whether it could get past security. On every occasion, it was detected.³⁶

It is possible that the controller (the Islamic State virtual planner behind the alleged plot) underestimated the difficulty of getting past Sydney International Airport's security measures. However, it is equally plausible that this was known to be a high-risk plan, but was judged as worth pursuing because aviation represented such a valuable target. Airlines have strong symbolic value, as they represent a country's modernity and prestige. They have economic value, as an attack on aircraft can disrupt air travel and cause enormous economic damage. They also have publicity-generating value, particularly as such an attack impacts multiple countries. These factors have long made airlines a favored target for terrorists.

In the last decade, al-Qa`ida's affiliate in Yemen (AQAP) has made a concerted effort to target planes. In 2009, AQAP operative Umar Farouk Abdulmuttalab smuggled a PETN bomb in his underwear on to a flight from Amsterdam to Detroit, but failed to detonate the main charge. In 2010, AQAP managed to get PETN bombs on board cargo flights, hidden in printer cartridges. They attempted a similar attack to the underwear bomb attempt in 2012.³⁷ As outlined above, in February 2016, an al-Shabaab terrorist smuggled a laptop bomb through Mogadishu airport and detonated it on Daallo Airlines Flight 159, blowing a hole in the plane but only killing himself as the flight had not reached cruising altitude. A month later, there was an attempt to smuggle another laptop through a different Somali airport, but it exploded at a checkpoint.³⁸

There have been constant efforts to make aviation a harder target. Billions of dollars have been spent on measures such as air marshals, body-scanners, and explosive trace detection. These measures have had substantial success and saved many lives, but they have not stopped planes from being attractive targets and have possibly made them a more tempting prize. Terrorist groups can point to any successful attack as a supreme example of penetrating the enemy's defenses, and groups like AQAP celebrate even foiled plane plots such as the printer cartridge plot.³⁹

The Islamic State showed less interest in targeting aviation, until

recently. Its Sinai affiliate claimed to have bombed Metrojet Flight 9268, flying from Egypt to Russia, making clear that the Islamic State viewed aviation as a valuable target.⁴⁰ Around early 2017, Israeli intelligence reportedly discovered that the Islamic State was working on explosives intended to get past airport security by appearing to be laptop batteries.⁴¹

Therefore, the alleged Sydney plot provides another example of the Islamic State's interest in targeting aviation, continuing down the path established by al-Qa`ida and a range of earlier terrorist groups. While it may have earlier appeared that the Islamic State had far less of an interest in targeting aviation than al-Qa`ida, recent developments such as its laptop bomb ambitions could suggest this is changing and that the Sydney arrests provide further evidence toward this.

Chemical Weapon Use

A final feature of the plot was the planned use of poisonous gas. The Islamic State and its predecessors have long had an interest in chemical weapons. Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi's pre-9/11 training camp in Herat, Afghanistan, included the creation of crude chemical weapons in its curriculum.⁴² When the U.S.-led coalition invaded Iraq in 2003, the only place it found active production of chemical weapons was in the district of Khormal, within the autonomous Kurdish zone of Northern Iraq, at a facility run by al-Zarqawi's network.⁴³ From 2006 to 2007, the Islamic State of Iraq loaded chlorine canisters and explosives into trucks, and used them on the streets of Ramadi.⁴⁴ From 2014 onward, Islamic State reportedly used chlorine in roadside bombs and mortars.⁴⁵ By 2015, these chemical weapons efforts had expanded to include mustard gas, which they are believed to have used in both Syria and Iraq.⁴⁶

These developments raised international concern. Australia's Foreign Minister Julie Bishop warned in June 2015 that:

*"Apart from some crude and small-scale endeavors, the conventional wisdom has been that the terrorist intention to acquire and weaponize chemical agents has been largely aspirational. The use of chlorine by Daesh and its recruitment of highly technically trained professionals, including from the West, have revealed far more serious efforts in chemical weapons development."*⁴⁷

The potential for these methods to be used in the West has been noted by scholars such as Petter Nesser, Anne Stenersen, and Emilie Oftedal, who posited that "IS [the Islamic State] has developed certain tactics on the ground in Syria that may, or may not be transferred to Europe. The most worrying development is IS's active interest in, and use of, improvised chemical weapons such as chlorine bombs and mustard gas."⁴⁸ However, noting the difficulty of smuggling a chemical weapon into Europe, Nesser, Stenersen, and Oftedal suggested it was more likely that "that IS bomb-makers devise a way to make improvised chemical bombs from available materials."⁴⁹ This appears to have occurred in this case, as hydrogen sulfide can be produced from consumer products.⁵⁰

Hydrogen sulfide is a toxic gas that interferes with cells' ability to use oxygen. It is colorless and at high concentrations can cause immediate death. It is most commonly known for being used in suicides.⁵¹ A wave of such suicides began in Japan in 2008, with over 500 people killing themselves with hydrogen sulfide that year.⁵² This technique then spread to the United States and elsewhere, but was far less common.⁵³ The toxicity of the gas has meant these suicides often caused wider harm. In one case, an individual in Japan

f Colonel Hassan Ali Nur Shute, the chief prosecutor of the military court that prosecuted the suspects, blamed the security breach on the lack of skills by airport security personnel and that the technique used was not known by them. "They fitted the explosives in the laptop with sophistication," he said. "It was difficult for the staff to detect. They have not seen that kind of technique used before." Harun Maruf, "Officials: Mogadishu Flights Safe from Laptop Attacks," VoA, April 25, 2017. See also Robert Liscouski and William McGann, "The Evolving Challenges for Explosive Detection in the Aviation Sector and Beyond," *CTC Sentinel* 9:5 (2016).

using hydrogen sulfide to take her life caused 90 other people in the same apartment complex to become sick.⁵⁴ Emergency responders have sometimes been hospitalized after attending the scenes of these incidents, due to exposure to the vapors.⁵⁵

Whether hydrogen sulfide could be used effectively as a weapon for mass carnage is unclear. It has rarely been used as a chemical weapon, though the British did use it briefly in World War I.⁵⁶ It has almost never been used in a terrorist plot, with one possible exception being a thwarted 1997 Ku Klux Klan plot in Dallas, Texas. Four Klan members planned to bomb a chemical factory, which contained tanks of hydrogen sulfide, as a diversion to carry out robberies.⁵⁷ There has been little public evidence of jihadi interest in this gas, with the significant exception of a manual posted on an al-Qa`ida in Iraq website in 2005 that included instructions for producing hydrogen sulfide, though Sammy Salama and Edith Bursac note that the manual did not outline a credible method for dispersing it.⁵⁸ There has been some jihadi experimentation with dispersal devices for chemical attacks away from the battlefield. In the mid-2000s, jihadi websites shared instructions on constructing a chemical dispersal device called al-Mubtakkar for another gas, hydrogen cyanide.⁵⁹ In 2003, a Saudi Arabia-based al-Qa`ida affiliate reportedly planned to use the device in a terrorist attack against the New York City subway before Aymen al-Zawahiri called it off.⁶⁰ So while there have been some blueprints circulating among jihadi groups for chemical dispersal devices, it is not clear that there have been any optimized for hydrogen sulfide. It is unclear what sort of dispersal device the Khayats were allegedly planning to build, and their prospects for success may not have been high. Police have not alleged that the suspects came close to actually creating the gas or the dispersal device. At the press conference, they emphasized that “to make hydrogen sulfide ... it is very difficult and very dangerous to get to the final product” and that the suspects were “a long way from actually doing that.”⁶¹

Conclusion

Australia is not new to terror plots inspired or guided by Islamic State. The country had experienced around a dozen such plots since September 2014, as well as five violent attacks, the most recent being a siege in the Melbourne suburb of Brighton in June 2017.⁶² However, the alleged Sydney plot indicated a plan for terror more ambitious than jihadi activity experienced earlier by Australia.

The alleged plot had three distinctive features, making it stand out from other Islamic State plots in the West. The first was that it was a virtually planned plot with direct logistical support, as the Islamic State effectively mailed a bomb-making kit, which has not

been seen in other virtually planned plots. The second was that it was to be an attack within the West targeting an international flight. The third was that it was to be an attack within the West using a chemical device. It should not be assumed that this plot represents a new model, as one incident does not demonstrate a trend. However, what makes this plot have broader significance is that none of these three key features came out of nowhere. Each of them built on earlier developments in Islamic State tactics.

The first feature, direct logistical support for a virtually planned attack, represents a gradual evolution. In multiple earlier cases, Islamic State virtual planners had remotely orchestrated logistical support by wiring money or arranging for in-country contacts to provide weapons. Supporting plotters by directly sending a package containing the explosive substance and other necessary components was a logical step. It was also a potential game-changer, as it overcame the dilemma of how to enable untrained aspiring terrorists to construct explosives. The second and third features were a sharper break, as earlier Islamic State plots within the West had not involved attempts to bomb an airliner or use a chemical device. However, there had been evidence of Islamic State plans to smuggle bombs through airports in the Middle East and evidence that it used chemical weapons in Syria and Iraq. Therefore, the allegations that the Khayats targeted a plane and attempted to build a chemical device suggest that Islamic State has ambitions to use within the West tactics it previously used in the region.

This means that the alleged Sydney plot is unlikely to be an anomaly, and it can be anticipated that some of these features may appear in future plots. The Islamic State's loss of territory within Syria and Iraq is unlikely to change this because virtually planned plots do not have to be run by individuals based within Islamic State territory. Virtual encouragement or direction has been provided to plotters in the West by individuals in Somalia, Libya, and the United Kingdom.⁶³ Importantly, the alleged plot also demonstrates limitations faced by the Islamic State. The likelihood of getting a bomb through airport security was not high, and the plans for hydrogen sulfide do not appear to have progressed far. Therefore, allegations made against these two accused terrorists point both to the Islamic State's ambitions for attacks in the West and the practical difficulties involved in carrying such ambitions out. Given the implications for how Islamic State's approach to external operations is evolving, the case will be worth following closely.^g **CTC**

g The author would like to thank Katrina Zorzi of Monash University for her helpful advice on this article.

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The Evolution of the Islamic State's Chemical Weapons Efforts

By Columb Strack

The Islamic State is the first non-state actor to have developed a banned chemical warfare agent and combined it with a projectile delivery system. However, it appears to have been forced to abandon its chemical weapons production after the loss of Mosul in June 2017. The absence of chemical attacks outside of Mosul after the city became cut-off from the rest of the 'caliphate' earlier this year indicates that the group has not established alternative production facilities. But U.S. intelligence believes that a new chemical weapons cell has been set up in the Euphrates River Valley.

In late July 2015, the Islamic State fired several mortar bombs at Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) positions near the city of Hasakah in northeastern Syria. A statement released by the YPG after the attack described how the explosions had released "a yellow gas with a strong smell of onions," and that "the ground immediately around the impact sites was stained with an olive-green liquid that turned to a golden yellow after exposure to sunshine."¹ Soldiers exposed to the substance reportedly suffered from nausea and burning sensations. U.S. officials later confirmed that samples taken from the site of the attack had tested positive for a small amount of mustard agent, in low concentration.² This was not the first time the Islamic State or one of its predecessors had used chemicals as a weapon, but never before had a non-state actor developed the capability to combine production of a banned chemical warfare agent with a projectile delivery system.

The attack near Hasakah marked the culmination of nearly two decades of experimentation by Sunni jihadi groups, leading to the establishment of a dedicated chemical weapons (CW) program in the Iraqi city of Mosul, following the declaration of the Islamic State's self-proclaimed 'caliphate' in June 2014. In the last three years, the Islamic State carried out attacks using chemicals on at least 76 occasions, according to IHS Markit's Conflict Monitor open-source dataset. The graphic on the following page (Figure 1) shows the distribution of these recorded events, which were gathered from a range of local news reports and social media.^a

The Islamic State's use of chemical agents in Iraq and Syria is

a Given the nature of the source material, many of the reported incidents have not been independently verified.

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characterized by three phases. During the initial phase, which encompasses the first year of the caliphate's existence (between June 2014 and June 2015), chemical attacks drew on tried and tested techniques, adapted to include widely available industrial chemicals—mainly chlorine and phosphine—from stockpiles captured as part of the group's territorial expansion. These attacks were carried out using crude delivery mechanisms, in most cases adding canisters of chemicals to roadside or vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (IEDs). The second phase, from July 2015 to January 2017, represents the enhanced capability the group had achieved by combining the production of sulfur mustard agent with the means to deliver it using projectiles, such as mortar bombs and improvised rockets. During this period, chemical attacks were carried out simultaneously across the caliphate, from Syria's Aleppo province in the west to Iraq's Kirkuk province in the east, indicating the existence of multiple operational units with the required expertise. Attacks peaked in April 2016, with eight separate recorded chemical attacks in one month. The third phase began with the last recorded chemical attack in Syria on January 8, 2017, and ended with the Islamic State's apparent abandonment of its CW production following the loss of Mosul in July 2017.

A History of Intent

The Islamic State's CW program builds on nearly two decades of experimentation by other Sunni militant groups based out of Iraq. The Jordanian jihadi Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi showed an interest in developing CW as early as 1999. He initially established a jihadi training camp in Herat, Afghanistan, where his followers experimented with the production of toxins,³ but later moved this to Khurmul in northeastern Iraq after the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. The Khurmul facility was captured by U.S. coalition forces in 2003, which reportedly found equipment and manuals for the production of CW, as well as traces of ricin and other poisons.⁴ In 2004, another laboratory linked to al-Zarqawi's network was discovered in Fallujah, Anbar province, suggesting that the group had developed a rudimentary capability to build chemical IEDs.⁵ Other Sunni militant groups were experimenting with the use of CW at the same time. These include the al-Abud network, which also operated in the Fallujah area, and another unspecified group operating a laboratory discovered in Mosul, which contained more than 6,000 liters of chemicals.⁶

The most elaborate attempt to use chemicals in an attack during that period came in April 2004, when the Jordanian government announced it had thwarted a plot by al-Zarqawi's network against the headquarters of the General Intelligence Directorate (GID) in Amman. The plot involved the intended use of three large trucks as vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIEDs) and up to 20 tons of mixed industrial chemicals. The mix of these chemicals was designed to enhance the explosive power of the IEDs and create a toxic cloud that would spread around the city, aimed at causing

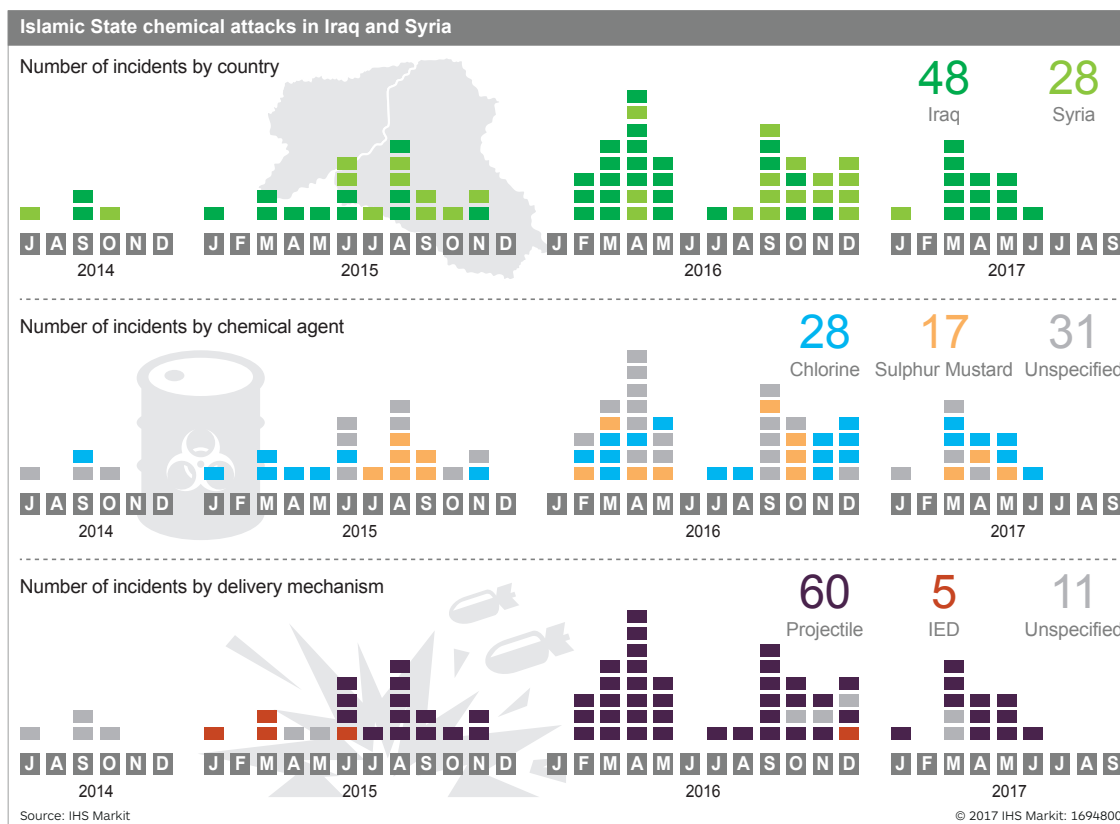


Figure 1: Timeline of Islamic State chemical attacks in Iraq and Syria

mass civilian casualties.⁷ Before his death in a U.S. airstrike in 2006, al-Zarqawi pledged allegiance to Usama bin Ladin, forming al-Qa`ida in Iraq (AQI), which later became the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) and eventually formed the core of the Islamic State.

Al-Zarqawi's network continued with the development of chemical IEDs and was widely assumed to be behind a series of chlorine VBIED attacks in Anbar province, beginning in October 2006.⁸ However, these had limited effect, as the containers designed for the safe transport and storage of chlorine were sub-optimal for its explosive dissemination by IED. The relatively low toxicity of the chemical was further decreased by the heat and blast pressure.⁹ In practice, the addition of chlorine did not increase the lethality of the IEDs beyond that of the conventional explosives. The psychological and political impact, however, attracted the attention of U.S. coalition forces, to track down and eliminate any individuals believed to be involved.¹⁰ The chlorine attacks stopped in 2007 after the arrest of a 'key leader,' believed to be Umar Wahdallah Dod al-Zangana,¹¹ and no further reports of Sunni jihadis using chemicals emerged until June 2013, when Iraqi forces disrupted an ISI cell of five men who had set up three makeshift laboratories with the reported intent of manufacturing chemical agents and releasing them with remote-controlled helicopters.¹²

Expertise and Sourcing

Although the intent to develop a CW capability had existed for some time, it was the security of unchallenged territorial control, access to laboratory equipment in Mosul, and the relatively unrestricted availability of precursor chemicals—afforded by the establishment of the caliphate—which gave the Islamic State the opportunity to

do so. Publicly available information on individuals killed or detained by the U.S. coalition in connection with CW suggests that the Islamic State assembled at least one dedicated team of technical experts to develop its CW program, using improvised laboratories hidden in Mosul's residential neighborhoods to avoid U.S. coalition airstrikes.¹³ Available reporting suggests the group drew upon a combination of foreigners from Chechnya and Southeast Asia with relevant technical expertise who had migrated to the caliphate¹⁴ and those who had previously been involved in CW research for AQI and other Iraqi jihadi groups prior to the establishment of the Islamic State.¹⁵

Several Islamic State members killed or detained by U.S. forces for their involvement with CW in the last few years were reported to have been employed in Saddam Hussein's CW program in the 1980s. One such individual, Abu Malik, who was killed in a coalition airstrike on January 24, 2015, was a chemical weapons engineer who worked at the Muthanna CW production facility before joining AQI in 2005.¹⁶ However, the level of expertise these individuals provided, and the importance of that expertise to the success of the Islamic State's program, is sometimes overstated. None of the individuals reportedly killed or captured by the coalition were confirmed to have been senior members of Saddam's program. The relatively low level of expertise demonstrated by the Islamic State suggests that those individuals recruited by the group, if they were in fact employed under Saddam, would likely have been lower-ranking members of the program.¹⁷ It is telling that no evidence has come to light publicly that the Islamic State has succeeded in producing more lethal chemical warfare agents, such as sarin or other nerve agents. The types of chemical agents

used by the Islamic State, including low-grade mustard agent, do not require a high level of technical expertise to produce, and the knowledge is widely available.

There has been speculation over whether the Islamic State could have sourced CW from existing stockpiles belonging to the Iraqi or Syrian governments, both of which ran extensive CW programs in the past. The large number of CW munitions stockpiled in Iraq under Saddam Hussein and poor government documentation mean that many of these remained unaccounted for after the United Nations Special Commission's (UNSCOM) process of reconciling the number of agents and weapons manufactured with what was consumed and remained. Even a one-percent margin of error would have resulted in thousands of abandoned or forgotten munitions.¹⁸ In fact, the CIA-led 'Operation Avarice' reportedly purchased 400 CW munitions between 2005 and 2006 that had found their way onto the black market.¹⁹ In Syria, interviews with army defectors suggest that some refused orders to deploy CW against civilians and buried their weapons stocks. For example, defected General Zahir al-Sakit claimed in an interview with Al Arabiya in 2013 that he had been ordered to use CW against the Syrian opposition near Houran in southwestern Syria, but he instead "ordered all chemical weapons to be buried."²⁰

During its period of rapid territorial gains in 2014, the Islamic State seized control of military sites where chemical munitions could have been hidden, abandoned, or lost. When the Islamic State took control of Saddam Hussein's largest CW production and storage facility at Muthanna in July 2014, the U.S. Department of State acknowledged that a limited amount of CW precursors remained there.²¹ UNSCOM inspectors dismantled all CW production facilities and removed all equipment from Muthanna in the 1990s, with the exception of two bunkers, which were sealed by UNSCOM in 1994. Bunker 13 contained 2,500 sarin-filled 122mm artillery rockets, which were partially damaged or destroyed in a U.S. airstrike on the first night of the 1991 Gulf War. Leaking munitions, unstable propellant, and explosive charges made it too hazardous for U.N. inspectors to enter. Nearby, Bunker 41 was used to bury contaminated materials left over from the UNSCOM destruction program.²² When Iraqi forces regained control of the facility in late 2014, Iraq's Deputy Foreign Minister Mohammad Jawad Al-Doraki stated that neither of the sealed bunkers had been penetrated by the Islamic State.²³

The Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) removed the last of Syria's declared CW precursors and agents from the country in June 2014. But the lack of any overt process to verify the Syrian declaration led to speculation that Syria may have retained CW capability in some form, particularly compared with pre-declaration intelligence estimates.²⁴ In May 2015, the Syrian local news channel All4Syria quoted a defecting army colonel, identified as 'Ziad', who claimed that the government retained CW stocks at Sayqal Air Base, around 80 kilometers north-east of Damascus.²⁵ When the same air base came under attack by the Islamic State in April 2016, government forces reportedly used sarin against them to avoid being overrun, according to a senior Israeli official quoted by *The Telegraph* newspaper.²⁶

Although the Syrian government almost certainly retains stockpiles of CW,²⁷ there is no evidence in the pattern of the Islamic State's recorded use of chemical agents to suggest that the group acquired anything beyond rudimentary precursor chemicals. The precursors required for the production of chemical agents that have

been used as weapons by the Islamic State, primarily chlorine and sulfur mustard, were, however, also available at industrial plants located in the territory of the caliphate. These include, for example, the Misraq chemical plant and sulfur mine, around 30 miles south of Mosul, which is believed to have held thousands of tons of sulfur and hydrogen sulfide,²⁸ as well as numerous water treatment and fertilizer production plants, which tend to store large quantities of chlorine.²⁹

Degradation of Capability

There were no recorded chemical attacks by the Islamic State in Iraq or Syria between June 2017, when it lost control of Mosul, and the time of writing in October 2017. Although there have previously been periods in which no chemical attacks were recorded for several weeks, a three-month break is unprecedented and is especially notable given that the group faced an existential threat to its core territory, including the city of Raqqa, during that time. The last chemical attack (at the time of writing) carried out by the Islamic State in Syria was on January 8 at Talla al-Maqri in Aleppo province. This compares with 13 such attacks in Syria over the previous six months, which were concentrated in the same area of Aleppo province. All other recorded attacks in 2017 were in Iraq, with 11 in Mosul and one near al-Atheem in Diyala province. The concentration of chemical attacks in Mosul after it had become cut-off from the rest of the caliphate in late 2016 suggests that the blockade on Mosul by Iraqi forces prevented the transfer of those weapons to Syria and that no further production sites were established elsewhere to compensate.

The Islamic State's CW capability had already been significantly degraded before the loss of Mosul, as a result of U.S. coalition airstrikes against individuals and facilities associated with the program. A major breakthrough for the U.S. coalition came in February 2016, when U.S. Special Operations forces captured Suleiman Daoud al-Bakkar (aka Suleiman Daoud al-Afari) in Badoosh, a village north of Mosul. He was a leading figure in the group's CW program and a reported former expert in chemical and biological weapons under Saddam. Al-Bakkar was interrogated for about a month and gave the United States unprecedented insight into the nature of the Islamic State's program, including the names of key individuals and locations at which chemical agents were being produced and stored. The information led directly to a number of airstrikes against the program.³⁰

The U.S. coalition's success in disrupting the Islamic State's CW program meant that the effort required to conceal and keep it running increased significantly in relation to the impact the weapons were having. In addition, the utility of CW on the battlefield is likely to have been displaced to some extent by the development of other weapons systems that achieved a similar psychological effect. In early 2017, the Islamic State began systematically using unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), primarily from the Phantom series of quadcopters produced by the private company DJI, to drop IEDs on enemy troop concentrations up to several kilometers behind the front line. In much the same way that the Islamic State used the release of chemical agents in Mosul to halt enemy advances by forcing them to take countermeasures, the presence of potentially armed UAVs had a similar impact. Due to the absence of reliable UAV countermeasures, Iraqi forces in most cases would be forced to take cover and engage the UAV with small arms fire.³¹ For the Islamic State's UAV attacks, as for its chemical attacks, the psychological

and harassing effect was far greater than the actual lethality of the weapons system, which did not exceed that of conventional indirect fire weapons. UAVs are cheaper and easier to use than chemical projectiles for that purpose, as the latter require specialist operators and equipment, which were in limited supply, and presented high value targets for U.S. coalition airstrikes.

Although the Islamic State appears to have abandoned the use of CW on the battlefield, it has most likely retained the aspiration, and at least the expertise, if not the equipment and precursor materials, to produce small batches of chlorine and low-grade sulfur mustard agent. Experts involved in the Islamic State’s CW program are likely to have been evacuated from Mosul to Syria alongside other senior members of the organization before it became isolated in late 2016. According to a U.S. official quoted by CNN in May 2017, the Islamic State was assembling a new chemical weapons cell in the Euphrates River Valley, somewhere between Mayadin and al-Qaim on the Syria-Iraq border.³² Although U.S. intelligence at the time assessed that the cell was seeking to consolidate its CW capabilities to support the defense of its remaining strongholds, that had not yet materialized at the time of writing.

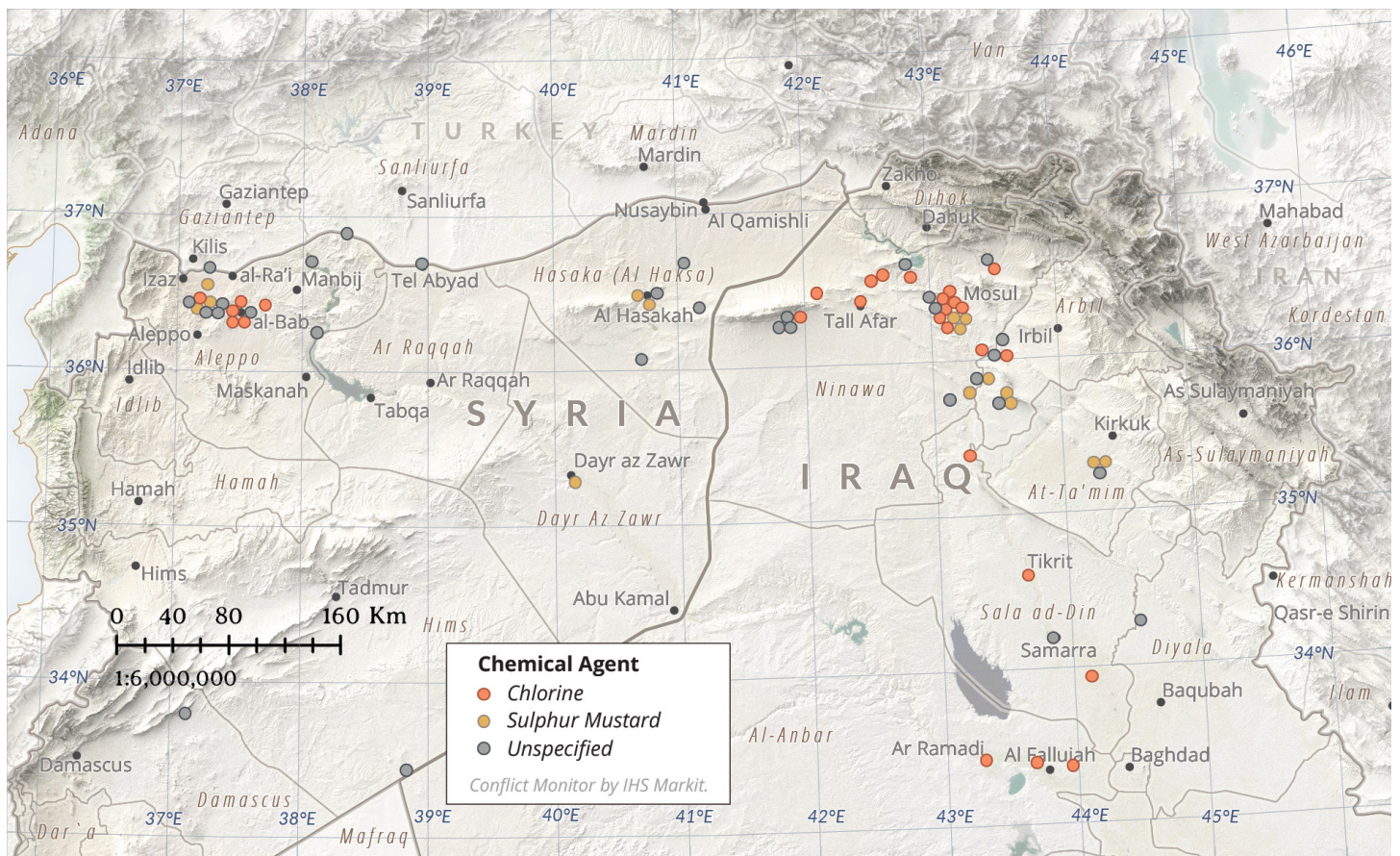
As the remaining core of the Islamic State’s caliphate in the Euphrates River Valley comes under increased military pressure in late 2017, the group will be looking to transfer key figures, particularly individuals with high-value expertise—including in IED-making and the manufacture and use of CW—out of Iraq and Syria to other safe havens, most likely in Libya and the wider Sahel. This is likely to be enabled by the extensive people-smuggling networks that op-

erate out of Kurdish-held territory in Iraq and the rebel-held Idlib pocket in Syria, bordering Turkey’s Hatay province.³³

Threat to the West

There have been several Islamic State plots to carry out chemical terrorist attacks elsewhere, drawing on the expertise developed in Iraq and Syria. Australian authorities in Sydney disrupted a plot in July 2017 by two brothers, Khalid and Tarik Khayat, to deploy a device designed to release hydrogen sulfide, a toxic gas used briefly by the British Army, with limited effectiveness, as a chemical weapon in WW1.³⁴ According to the Australian police, instructions on how to construct the device came from an Islamic State ‘controller’ in Syria. Military-grade explosives had been shipped to the pair with air freight via Turkey for a separate aborted plot to bomb a passenger jet. The brothers had also acquired in Australia some of the precursor chemicals for the poison gas plot, although they were reportedly “a mile and a half away” from constructing a viable chemical dispersal device.³⁵ The plot illustrates how the Islamic State has the capability not only to transfer the know-how to produce toxic chemicals via secure online communications to operatives already living in target countries, but also to ship materials, including explosives, undetected.

Germany’s Federal Criminal Police Office (BKA) published a report in January 2017 highlighting the risk of chemical contamination of the water supply or food in grocery stores in Europe.³⁶ The Islamic State has published English-language guides on its Wilayat Furat Telegram channel, such as the ‘Knights of the Lone Jihad’ se-



Recorded allegations of Islamic State chemical weapon use by location and chemical agent between July 2014 and mid-October 2017. Each circle represents a single alleged incident. (Rowan Technology)

ries, which details how to do so by injecting groceries with cyanide poison or widely available pesticides, such as strychnine.³⁷ However, most self-radicalized individuals carrying out attacks in the West have so far selected methods that are likely to result in their own death, or martyrdom, at the hands of the security forces. This partly explains the use of fake suicide belts and the combination of knife attacks with vehicle-impact attacks. The ‘anonymous’ poisoning of food and water supplies is likely to be a less attractive option for such individuals.

There is no publicly available evidence to suggest that the Islamic State has transferred sulfur mustard agent or other chemical weapons developed in Iraq and Syria to Europe. Although the Sydney plot demonstrates that the group has been able to ship explosives to a Western country undetected, it is far less likely that

ready-made chemical weapons, such as sulfur mustard agent, could be shipped this way. The highly corrosive nature of such agents, and the highly controlled environments they must be stored in, mean that they are very difficult to transport over long distances without leaking.³⁸ For that reason, the Islamic State would probably need to develop the agents shortly before they intend to deploy them, most likely in the target country.³⁹

If the Islamic State were to organize a chemical attack in a Western city, the logistical challenges of transporting CW manufactured in Iraq and Syria and the generally low level of expertise the group has demonstrated suggest that an attack using widely available toxins or industrial chemicals would be far more likely than the use of blister or nerve agents like sulfur mustard or sarin. This significantly limits the potential lethality of such an attack. **CTC**

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The Hawija Offensive: A Liberation Exposes Faultlines

By Derek Henry Flood

Earlier this month, the Iraqi government announced the Islamic State had been driven from the small city of Hawija in Kirkuk Governorate—the Islamic State’s last remaining urban stronghold in northern Iraq. While this marked the culmination of a campaign by a diverse on-the-ground coalition to drive the group from urban areas in the region, the removal of the Islamic State also eliminated a unifying cause between the Kurdish peshmerga and the Iraqi military and federal police along with their Shi`a militia allies. With Iraqi forces now moving to take control of the oil rich region around Kirkuk away from Kurdish forces, escalating tensions in the region risks widening the faultlines between Iraq’s competing ethnic and sectarian power centers.

On October 4, 2017, Iraqi Security forces, along with pro-Iranian Shi`a militias known as Hashd al-Shaabi, entered the small city of Hawija in northern Iraq’s Kirkuk Governorate. Following a two-week-long offensive backed by coalition airstrikes, the jihadis were evicted from an area they had administered since June 2014.¹ By that afternoon, Hashd al-Shaabi’s media arm released a statement that the city had been freed of Islamic State control.² Iraq’s Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi and U.S.-led coalition partners confirmed the end of the Islamic State occupation there the following day.³

The Hawija campaign was initiated on September 21, 2017, when a constellation of Iraqi forces—including the army’s 9th Armored Division, the Emergency Response Division, Iraqi Special Operations Forces known as the Golden Division, elements of the Federal Police, and Iranian-backed Shi`a militias—began an offensive from the southwest⁴ to remove the Islamic State from a pocket of territory around the small city of Hawija in the western reaches of Kirkuk Governorate. Hawija had been the group’s last significant urban territorial holding in Iraq. In the second week of the coalition-supported Hawija campaign, according to official press releases, the United States carried out a total of 23 airstrikes in

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support of the Hawija operation between September 28 and when the operation for Hawija city largely concluded on October 5.⁵

After Iraqi troops and their Hashd al-Shaabi paramilitary counterparts moved in, some Islamic State militants fleeing Hawija moved toward the Kurdish-held district of Dibis, where several hundred fighters surrendered to Kurdish forces with some being transferred to Kirkuk city for interrogation.⁶ The fall of Hawija was more akin to that of Tal Afar, where Islamic State militants also fled. Militants and their families slipped out of Tal Afar northwest, ending up in the village of Sahil al Malih where approximately 150 fighters surrendered to Kurdish forces,⁷ in contrast to the grueling battle for Mosul where many detonated suicide vests as defeat approached rather than give themselves up.

In October 2016, Iraqi forces marching northward toward Mosul had bypassed Hawija because leaders in Baghdad had prioritized liberating Iraq’s second-largest city. This year, the inability of authorities in Baghdad and Erbil to agree on a political settlement for Kirkuk Governorate further delayed an offensive. There was no consensus as to precisely who should rebuild and govern the territory once the Islamic State was inevitably ousted. It was only after the speedy recovery of Tal Afar in the late summer that Iraqi forces finally focused on Hawija.

Before the offensive began, an estimated 1,000-1,200 Islamic State fighters remained in the Hawija pocket according to interviews with peshmerga fighters conducted by the author in August and September on the then static frontlines in Kirkuk Governorate.⁸ The pocket had been surrounded by a complex array of state and non-state forces, which greatly outnumbered the Islamic State. Most of the areas to the north and east were (and are) dominated by Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK)-affiliated Kurdish peshmerga, with the exception of some Hashd al-Shaabi forces evidently loyal to the Iranian-born Iraqi cleric Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani,⁹ including in Taza Khurmatu and south of Daquq town in Kirkuk Governorate.¹⁰ By contrast, there was no peshmerga presence to the south or west of Hawija. It is from this direction that Iraqi security forces and Shi`a militias, fresh from their victories in Mosul and Tal Afar, pushed eastward toward Hawija.

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- a The author encountered some of these Hashd al-Shaabi forces in late summer 2017. Although they refused to comment on the matter when asked by the author, they appeared to be aligned with the Ayatollah Sistani-influenced faction of Hashd al-Shaabi that supports an Iraqi national agenda while emphasizing the defense of the holy shrines of Najaf, Karabala, and Khadimyya. Author observations, Kirkuk city and outside Taza Khurmatu, August 2017. The Hashd al-Shaabi forces that stormed Hawija were allied to the pro-Iranian camp. Author correspondence, Iranian source, September 2017.
- b Peshmerga stationed nearby along the Daquq front told the author they had virtually no interaction with the nearby Shi`a militias before the operation began in September. Author interview, peshmerga Lieutenant Colonel Salam Omar, Daquq front, August 2017.



Northeastern Iraq (Rowan Technology)

The Hawija operation was mostly completed in two fairly short phases. The first phase initially focused on liberating the town of al-Shirqat in neighboring Salah ad-Din Governorate and then dozens of villages in the vicinity of Hawija in a bid to ultimately liberate the city of Hawija itself. The next phase claimed Rashad Air Base 20 miles south of Hawija, which the Islamic State had used as a training center and logistics hub since mid-2014.⁹ Iraqi Army Lieutenant Colonel Salih Yaseen stated Baghdad intended to rebuild the damaged airbase, which would provide state security forces with a stronger foothold in order to “maintain security in the north.”¹⁰ This set the stage for Iraqi forces in mid-October to push up into Dibil district, where there is a large peshmerga presence.¹¹

The sudden absence of Islamic State control in and around Hawija has exposed Iraq’s deeply entangled ethnic and sectarian fissures. Just days after the Islamic State abandoned Hawija, Qais al-Khazali, commander of Asaib Ahl al-Haq—an aggressively pro-Iranian Hashd al-Shaabi paramilitary outfit—gave a speech in Najaf stating he intended for forces under his command to capture Kirkuk and the governorate’s disputed territories from the Kurds in the near

term. Iraqi forces, augmented by Hashd al-Shaabi fighters, have since moved into the area, pushing Kurdish forces out of the city.¹²

A Nexus of Ethnic and Sectarian Strife

Almost 15 years after the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, the future of the fiercely contested, hydrocarbon-rich Kirkuk Governorate is still uncertain. Baghdad claims Kirkuk is an integral part of the Republic of Iraq while Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) authorities portray the city and its surroundings as an inseparable geographic component of Kurdish identity. The late Iraqi President and PUK leader Jalal Talabani once described Kirkuk as the “Kurdish Jerusalem” during a public address in Suleimaniyah in 2011.¹³ The KRG held a controversial vote in Kirkuk on September 25, 2017, as part of a referendum for Kurdish independence from Iraq despite intense criticism from Arab and Turkmen political actors, such as the Iraqi Turkmen Front, who fear communal fragmentation if Iraq is formally split in the disputed territories.¹⁴

The vote was tallied at 92.73 percent in favor of independence, with a turnout calculated to be at 72.61 percent of the registered



A peshmerga fighter in rural Dibis district at what was the Kurdish frontline against the Islamic State in September 2017 (Derek Henry Flood)

electorate.¹⁵ The United States and others involved in the international anti-Islamic State coalition had pleaded unsuccessfully with KRG President Massoud Barzani to postpone the vote, with the offensives in Hawija and al-Shirqat then ongoing and with the Islamic State still present in parts of al-Anbar Governorate.

Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi reacted to the referendum by demanding the KRG's airports and borders with Turkey and Iran be put under federal control.¹⁶ He also demanded the KRG hand over its oil revenues,¹⁷ dramatically escalating the situation and setting the stage for Iraqi and Shi`a militia forces to retake Kirkuk.

Kirkuk Governorate, in which Hawija is located, has long acted as an incubator for conflict in Iraq because of its complex sectarian and ethnic mix of Kurds, Turkmen, Arabs, and several ancient Christian sects. The killing of some 50 Sunni Arab protestors by government forces during a violent crowd dispersal raid in Hawija in April 2013 allowed the Islamic State (then calling itself the Islamic State of Iraq, or ISI)¹⁸ to exploit communal grievances and anger over the sectarian policies and corruption associated with then Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and to engage disgruntled Sunni Arab tribesmen, helping set the stage for the group's territorial takeover the following year.¹⁹

Disputed Demography

The population in Hawija city has historically been majority Sunni Arab, though some peshmerga field commanders along the Dibis and Daquq fronts dispute this claim.²⁰ Villages astride the north-south highway between Tuz Khurmatu in Salah ad-Din Governorate and Kirkuk city have had a significant Shi`a minority

historically, many of whom are Turkmen.²¹ According to an official census conducted in Iraq in 1957, Turkmen were the majority in Kirkuk city while Kurds were the overall majority in the governorate, with Arabs ranking the third most numerous group in the city and second in governorate.²²

Among both Kurds and Turkmen from Kirkuk, there is a deep sense of historical grievance over the Ba'ath Party's "Arabization" campaign in the governorate during the Saddam Hussein era, which was an attempt by the Ba'athists to suppress Kurdish or Turkmen challenges to their Arab nationalist hegemony. This included population transfers and the gerrymandering of Kirkuk Governorate's boundaries, whereby Arab-majority districts like Hawija and Dibis northwest of Kirkuk city were attached to Kirkuk Governorate while heavily Turkmen Tuz Khurmatu was annexed to Salah ad-Din Governorate to make Kirkuk Governorate more Arab in its overall demography.²³ Lieutenant Colonel Salam Omar, an ethnic Kurdish commander with the Kakai Battalion along the Daquq front, told the author that he and many Kurds held the view that Hawija had historically been a Kurdish majority area but was now unequivocally Arab in character because of the Saddam Hussein Arabization program and the fact that three years of Islamic State occupation had resulted in any Kurds that remained fleeing northward.²⁴ Now as homeless Sunni Arabs continue to flee out of what was Islamic State-held territory in the Hawija area and as Hashd al-Shaabi militias encroach on the area, there is concern in some Kurdish circles that this displaced population will further alter Kirkuk's demography.²⁵

The Role of Hashd al-Shaabi

According to peshmerga fighters who interviewed internally displaced persons (IDPs) who had fled Hawija and surrounding Islamic State-controlled villages in the summer of 2017, Sunni Arab civilians feared communal reprisals from Hashd al-Shaabi based on their ethno-religious identity coupled with home geography.^{26c} Worsening conditions in Hawija city compounded such worries as the Iraqi security forces (ISF) and Hashd al-Shaabi began closing in late September. IDPs who made it to peshmerga-controlled access points along the frontline spoke of malnutrition and high infant mortality as the Islamic State clung to power in its final months in Hawija.²⁷

The involvement of Shi`a militias in the offensive to liberate Hawija was particularly troubling to a population that witnessed the killing of 50 Sunni protestors in 2013 by heavily Shi`a security forces at the behest of then Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. The Hashd al-Shaabi militias of Soraya al-Khorasani and the Badr Organization, among others, were integral in the operation by fighting closely alongside the Iraqi army to free Hawija.²⁸

The involvement of Hashd al-Shaabi militias also worried prominent Kurdish leaders, such as former Iraqi Minister of Foreign Affairs Hoshiyar Zebari in Erbil and the late Iraqi president's son Bafel Talabani in Suliemaniyah, who fear a post-Islamic State collision with Shi`a paramilitaries as well as proper Iraqi state forces.²⁹ In early October 2017, these concerns were not allayed despite a five-point agreement reached between the Iraqi military and peshmerga leaders four days into the Hawija offensive, which hammered out force cooperation aimed at defeating the Islamic State.³⁰ The agreement carefully avoided addressing the contentious issue of who should control the governorate's disputed territories.³¹ Tensions between the peshmerga and Hashd al-Shaabi began ratcheting up immediately after Islamic State militants were ousted.³²

A peshmerga commander at the Dibis front told the author he was highly skeptical of the agenda of Hashd al-Shaabi militias, which he believed were using the Hawija operation as a pretext to advance a Shi`a Arab agenda aimed at curbing Kurdish territorial claims. His worry was Shi`a Turkmen from the region would be mobilized to clash with peshmerga forces and eventually end Kurdish control of the Kirkuk region. The takeover of Kirkuk city and an increasing part of the region by Iraqi and Shi`a militia forces will no doubt have multiplied such concerns.³³

Kirkuk's Burning Wealth

The high-stakes competition between Iraqi power centers over the future of Hawija and the broader region has had much to do with Kirkuk region's immense oil wealth that can produce an estimated 150,000 barrels per day depending on current security conditions and political stability.³⁴ These energy resources were deftly exploited in recent years by the Islamic State, which had petroleum engineers extract valuable crude often by makeshift means. As the group cemented its gains in Iraq, oil smuggling in places like the Hamrin Field in the contested northern reaches of Salah ad-Din Governorate near Hawija became a substantial revenue stream.³⁵

As Iraqi forces and their Hashd al-Shaabi allies moved closer to the Hawija pocket in late September, Islamic State militants employed scorched-earth tactics by setting fire to infrastructure and croplands.³⁶ This included torching oil wells in the Hamrin Field's Alas Dome southeast of the shrinking pocket in order to delay their opponents from economically benefiting from recaptured territory.^d The oil well fires serve doubly as physical cover for the militants on the move from coalition aircraft above and advancing Iraqi and Shi`a militia forces.³⁷

Iraqi forces in mid-October seized a number of oilfields near Kirkuk city. No matter how the oil wealth of the region is divided, it will not be easy to restore the degraded oil extraction and production facilities, which will likely continue to be the focus of insurgent attacks.³⁸

A Poisoned Chalice

The freeing of Hawija city has resulted in the Islamic State losing its last significant urban territorial holding in Iraq, bringing relief to a population that has been under the group's control for three straight years. The conflict resulted in many fleeing the city. It was estimated prior to 2014 that the wider Hawija district had approximately 500,000 inhabitants, but at the time of its liberation, the United Nations estimated that at most some 78,000 civilians remained in the city itself.³⁹

Though it has been pushed out of its last significant city, the Islamic State is not yet completely out of the Iraqi sector of the theater. At the time of this writing, the group still controls remote Euphrates River Valley towns of al-Qaim and Rawa in al-Anbar Governorate, although Baghdad has proclaimed "the total defeat of Daesh is imminent."⁴⁰ Peshmerga field commanders believe that a significant number of Islamic State fighters will retreat into the countryside and blend into the civilian population to fight an asymmetric war.⁴¹

The removal of this jihadi pocket will also bring relief to peshmerga and Shi`a militias, which had withstood repeated Islamic State attacks on positions in Daquq, Taza Khurmatu, and Tuz Khurmatu orchestrated from inside the Hawija pocket as well as the Jebel Hamrin range.⁴² During the author's visit to Hashd al-Shaabi's base outside the village of Basheer just to the southwest of Taza Khurmatu in the late summer, incoming sniper rounds from a nearby Islamic State-held village was met quickly by return fire from Shi`a fighters from the al-Abbas brigade.⁴³

By dislodging a common enemy, the collapse of the Islamic State's control in Hawija removed the primary unifying cause upon which the diverse Iraqi coalition fighting the Islamic State could agree. With the region's oil and gas wealth eyed by all sides, coupled with the Kurdish referendum having rocked northern Iraq's fragile political status quo, the liberation of the Hawija pocket quickly escalated inter-ethnic disputes between Arabs, Kurds, and Turkmen, sectarian tensions between local Sunnis and various Shi`a armed groups, and between Baghdad and Erbil. **CTC**

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The Cybercoaching of Terrorists: Cause for Alarm?

By John Mueller

A few Islamic State operatives have been contacting sympathetic prospective jihadis abroad via the internet to supply them with instruction and practical advice for carrying out terrorist acts. Some analysts have called this a “game-changer.” However, the cybercoaching enterprise is fraught with difficulties. Above all, cybercoaches have little or no control over their charges who are very often naïve, voluble, incautious, gullible, incapable, and/or troubled. Moreover, the advice of the cybercoaches has often been anything but sagacious, and law enforcement operatives have often been able to enter the plot to undermine the effort entirely.

As the Islamic State retreats in the Middle East, it has become exceedingly difficult for the group to attract foreign fighters to travel to join its ranks in Iraq or Syria.¹ Moreover, infiltrating trained fighters back home to do damage—once a top concern—has proven to be difficult as well, though not impossible.

In consequence, a few Islamic State operatives have been contacting sympathetic prospective jihadis abroad via the internet. The primary goal of this process is not simply to inspire them or to urge them on—that, after all, has been going on for a long time, in particular in response to the influential online speeches and sermons of the late Anwar al-Awlaki of the al-Qa`ida branch in Yemen.² Rather, cybercoaches are different in that they not only urge their contacts on, but supply them with instruction and specific practical advice.

The most common take on cybercoaching is to envision it as a new threat, or “a critical terrorist innovation.”³ In this, cybercoaches are seen to “offer would-be terrorists all the services once provided by physical networks.”⁴ They “draw from and advise a population of supporters abroad who have expressed an interest in carrying out attacks, but who may lack the technical or operational knowledge to do so.”⁵ In an examination of the phenomenon in this publication, Seamus Hughes and Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens conclude that it constitutes “a game changer” that poses “a complex challenge to counterterrorism authorities.”⁶

Concern and watchfulness are certainly justified, but, as will be suggested in this article, the experience thus far suggests that the cybercoaching enterprise is fraught with difficulties. Above

all, cybercoaches have little or no control over their charges who are very often naïve, voluble, incautious, gullible, incapable, and/or troubled—qualities that are often underappreciated, and sometimes even unacknowledged, in official, journalistic, and academic accounts.⁷ It is not at all clear how distant coaches can make up for, or even fully appreciate the extent of, these inadequacies. Moreover, their advice has often proved to be anything but sagacious, and it is entirely possible—and in many cases, not particularly difficult—for law enforcement operatives to uncover and enter the plot, not only to further complicate the task of their devious counterparts abroad, but to undermine their efforts entirely.

The Cybercoaching Record

In its Sunday, February 5, 2017, edition, *The New York Times* presented on its front page a lengthy article, “Not ‘Lone Wolves’ After All” by Rukmini Callimachi that seeks to demonstrate “How ISIS Guides World’s Terror Plots From Afar.”⁸ Callimachi argues that “in several, a pattern has emerged.” In this, a supporter “initially tries to reach Syria, but is either blocked by the authorities in the home country or else turned back from the border. Under the instructions of a handler in Syria or Iraq, the person then begins planning an attack at home.”

Callimachi does an excellent job discussing the cybercoaching phenomenon, which she reported had become a critical focus of counterterrorism officials on both sides of the Atlantic. However, the evidence in the article also suggests that the effort thus far has been an abject, even almost comedic, failure. The article is centered on an effort by Islamic State cybercoaches over no less than 17 months to get the apparent leader of a small band of sympathizers in India to commit some violence in its name. Apparently working with a congenial criminal network in India, one of the coaches was able to supply the distant conspirators with two rusty pistols and 20 bullets that were accordingly unusable.

The *New York Times* piece later reveals that police, through wiretaps, were able to close down the whole scheme shortly after the conspirators found they could not fabricate bombs—out of materials surreptitiously supplied by their handler—by following the YouTube instructional video sent to them by their handler. “We could not succeed in making powder, as it became jellylike paste,” one lamented. The plotters proved to be anything but dedicated jihadis. Once arrested, they cooperatively told the authorities all they knew about their plans and connections.

The article is peppered with similar tales of failure and inequity. One of the coached accidentally shot himself in the leg. Another was supposed to drive over people but attacked with an ax instead because he did not have a driving permit. A third detonated a bomb, prematurely killing only himself. The explosive in another’s suicide vest proved insufficiently lethal even to smash a nearby flowerpot.

About the only “success” for the cybercoaches seems to have been

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the slitting of the throat by two teenagers of an 85-year-old priest in northern France.⁹

The only example of cybercoach work in the United States that is dealt with in detail in the Callimachi article is a case in Rochester, New York, in which 25-year-old Emanuel Lutchman, looking for ways to get to Syria, was encouraged by his Islamic State handler to conduct a local terrorist attack to demonstrate his devotion to the cause. Their idea was to launch a machete attack in a bar on New Year's Eve, somehow killing, in the extravagant words of his distant coach, "1000000s of *kuffar* [infidels]."¹⁰

Additional information available on the case strongly suggests that Lutchman was rather inadequate for the mission.¹¹ He had spent most of the previous 10 years in prison for various offenses, the first of which was robbing a man of such items as his cell phone, baseball hat, bus pass, library card, and cigarettes. He was also mentally ill and was apparently no longer taking his prescribed medication. He had tried to commit suicide several times, most recently by stabbing himself in the stomach. He had no money, job, or resources, and he was given to picking up cigarette butts outside the targeted bar from which he had repeatedly been shooed away by its irritated owner who described him as an "aggressive panhandler."

Lutchman attracted the attention of the FBI when he posted favorable commentary about violent jihad and about the Islamic State on the web—rather foolish because he soon found himself—first on the internet and, then in physical reality—at the center of what he believed to be a terrorist cell of four. The other three members were all what the FBI calls "confidential sources." As part of their sting operation, they provided \$40 Lutchman didn't have to buy a machete and other items from a local Walmart. Any terrorist "threat" presented by the hapless Lutchman and his remote cybercoach, then, was pretty modest.

In their article in this publication on the cybercoaching phenomenon, Hughes and Meleagrou-Hitchens assess the American cases relying substantially on court documents—which are, of course, mostly materials put out by the police and prosecutors. The article is well constructed and informative. But it, too, supplies quite a bit of information that can be taken to highlight the inadequacies both of the coaches and the coached.

Although their discussion includes efforts to get Americans to go abroad to fight with the Islamic State in the Middle East, they particularly focus on terrorist plots to do damage within the United States in which cybercoaches were involved. They find six of these in 2015 and only one in 2016—a positive trend, but one, they warn, that "may change."¹²

In the United States at least, the available evidence suggests that counterterrorism authorities have thus far met any challenge presented by the cybercoached quite well and that any value added to a plot by the coaches has been modest at best.

Among the six 2015 cases, there is, of course, Lutchman. Another is from Cincinnati where 21-year-old Munir Abdulkater, yearning to join the Islamic State in Syria, connected with an Islamic State cybercoach—a displaced British national named Junaid Hussain—who aided him in putting together a plot that was wildly improbable, if "chilling" in the characterization of the sentencing memorandum.¹³ In this, the eager young man would raid a local soldier's home, behead him, record the deed, and send the recording to the Islamic State. Then Abdulkater would dress in the soldier's uniform (a specific suggestion of his cybercoach) and go to a police station where he would throw pipe bombs and engage the police in

a shootout until death. In preparation, he visited a shooting range and handled a gun apparently for the first time in his life, which he described as a "whole new experience ... I love it!"¹⁴

Additional information in the sentencing memorandum indicates that Abdulkater had attracted the attention of the FBI by tweeting nearly daily about his admiration for the Islamic State and his enthusiasm for beheadings. An FBI confidential source communicated with Abdulkater and the distant cybercoach about a plot to carry out an attack, in which he (the source) would participate. He also accompanied Abdulkater when he shopped for a suitably sharp knife at Walmart, planning to return to buy it after he had shaved his beard so he would look less "suspicious." Abdulkater was under full FBI surveillance at the shooting range, and he was arrested after purchasing an AK-47 rifle in a sting operation.¹⁵ It apparently never occurred to cybercoach Hussain that the other participant in the plot might be an FBI informant.

Another case involves two men who drove from Arizona to Garland, Texas, to shoot up an anti-Muhammed cartoon contest that they presumably knew would have special security. They were rather well prepared: they had six guns and were wearing body armor. But when they opened fire, they were dispatched in 15 seconds by a traffic cop armed only with a pistol. The only other casualty was an unarmed security officer who was wounded in the ankle. The perpetrators seem to have had some encouragement from afar, and they exchanged over 100 encrypted messages on the morning of the attack—messages that may have urged them on, but did not, it certainly seems, improve their effectiveness.¹⁶ As it happens, what could be interpreted as encouragement came from an undercover FBI special agent. Court documents revealed in mid-2016, a year after the Garland attack, that the agent had been communicating with at least one of the Arizona terrorists and, a few days before the attack, had urged them to "Tear up Texas." The operative, based in Ohio, even drove to Garland and took a picture of the event. The U.S. government argued the communication did not amount to incitement.¹⁷

There is also the case of a three-man conspiracy in New England to behead the woman who had organized the offensive cartoon contest. As Hughes and Meleagrou-Hitchens note, it was, in part, their contact with distant cybercoach Hussain that alerted the police. They also consider the plot to have been in the "advanced stages," and indeed the conspirators had purchased some knives through Amazon.¹⁸ Beyond this, however, about all they had done was to talk and conduct some internet searches about, for example, firearms, flammable chemicals, what tranquilizer puts humans to sleep instantly, and how to start a secret militia. And any input from Hussain was soon abandoned when one of them, saying he couldn't wait any longer, decided to "go after" the "boys in blue" instead.¹⁹ When he was approached in a parking lot by a group consisting of a Boston police officer and no less than five FBI agents who had been surveilling him, he moved toward them brandishing his knives and was shot dead.²⁰

A somewhat similar pattern was found in a case in New York. Some Islamic State-inspired men were in various early stages of plotting some terrorist attacks, and the FBI received a tip about their efforts from a "confidential human source" who had talked to one of the loose-lipped conspirators.²¹ The FBI then launched a search, and one of its agents was repeatedly stabbed by one of them with a large kitchen knife that failed to penetrate his agent's body armor. As Hughes and Meleagrou-Hitchens note, there seems to



A member of the FBI Evidence Response Team investigates the crime scene outside of the Curtis Culwell Center after a shooting occurred the day before, on May 4, 2015, in Garland, Texas. (Ben Torres/Getty Images)

have been little or no cybercoaching in this case, except that Hussain gave his blessing to the endeavors from afar and asked for a martyrdom video when the conspirators were ready to spring into action.²²

Then there is the case of the shy and socially awkward 18-year-old Justin Sullivan in North Carolina who spent his time alone in his room with his computer and phone. It was there that he discovered the Islamic State at a time when it seemed to be very much on the rise, and that led him to Islam. “I liked IS from the beginning then I started thinking about death and stuff so I became a Muslim.”²³ He was especially drawn to Islamic State videos featuring immolations and beheadings.²⁴ When his parents were away, Sullivan murdered a disabled 74-year-old recluse in the neighborhood, possibly to get money.²⁵ Later, his father alerted the police when his son began destroying “Buddhas, and figurines, and stuff,” sometimes by pouring gasoline on them. Sullivan was soon being watched by the FBI online. As part of the investigation, an FBI undercover employee posing as a potential recruit to the cause got in touch with him electronically and worked his way into the young man’s confidence. Sullivan was also in contact with encouraging and supportive Islamic State cybercoaches abroad, in particular Hussain.²⁶

Harboring a grandiose scheme to set up “The Islamic State of North America,” Sullivan discussed various plans for committing a terrorist attack in the United States with what he thought were his two cyber accomplices. He soon settled on shooting up a nightclub or a concert with an assault rifle, and reckoned he would need about 20 bullets, possibly coating them with cyanide, to kill off his

estimated 25 to 50 victims.²⁷ When a package arrived from the FBI undercover employee containing a silencer for the yet-to-be-purchased rifle, his parents demanded an explanation. Sullivan became “aggressive” and later contacted the FBI undercover employee, urging the FBI agent to kill his (Sullivan’s) parents—or as he called them, “the people I live with.”²⁸ At some point, Sullivan also texted Hussain in Syria, saying he would “very soon” be “carrying out 1st operation of Islamic State of North America.” Hussain responded, “Can u make a video first?” Sullivan said he would not do the video because this was not a suicide mission, but only the opening salvo in his planned campaign to halt “satanic” American airstrikes on his beloved Islamic State. “For major attack we will film, not this.”²⁹ Judging from the information available, this may be just about the only ‘coaching’ Sullivan’s distant cyber contact ever did. Triggered by Sullivan’s death threats against his parents as communicated to his other cyber collaborator, the FBI arrested him. Some two months later, Junaid Hussain was killed in an airstrike in Syria.³⁰ It seems that Sullivan and the FBI undercover employee never actually met face-to-face.³¹

Finally, in the lone case from 2016, the cybercoach unwittingly connected an extremist with an agent working for the other side—any value he added to the plot was, therefore, negative. A former national guardsman in his mid-20s from Virginia, Mohamed Bailor Jalloh ventured to Africa with the notion of joining the Islamic State in Libya. He decided he was not ready to fight yet, but connected with an Islamic State cybercoach willing to help him conduct ji-

a Hughes and Meleagrou-Hitchens note that Sullivan once said it was his desire to kill up to 1,000 people. Seamus Hughes and Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, “The Threat to the United States from the Islamic State’s Virtual Entrepreneurs,” *CTC Sentinel* 10:3 (2017), p. 3. His plan, far-fetched like those of so many other prospective jihadis in the United States, was to carry out this attack and “then leave” to carry out further mayhem later on until, presumably, he had reached his extravagant goal. *United States of America v. Justin Nojan Sullivan*, Factual Basis, p. 8.

had back in the United States. Unaware that he was doing so, note Hughes and Meleagrou-Hitchens, the coach connected Jalloh with a contact who happened to be an FBI informant.³² Eager to be led, the ex-guardian said, “I will support with whatever you need from me, I need the reward from Allah and my sins to be forgiven.” He was arrested in a sting orchestrated by the FBI after he purchased an assault rifle in a gun shop for the planned deed.³³

There appears to have been more Islamic State cybercoaching in Europe than in the United States. Petter Nesser and his colleagues tally 38 “well-documented” planned or launched plots there between 2014 and November 1, 2016, that “involve some kind of IS-link.” Of these, they say that 19 “involve online instruction,” though three of these involve people with foreign fighter experience.³⁴ The cybercoaching cases are not clearly laid out in the article, but in its appendix, some 13 plots are described with the words “instructed online” or “instruction online” or “likely instructed online” or “online contacts in Syria, possible instruction” or “had online IS contacts, possible instruction?” or “told friend she had received instruction from higher-ups in IS.”³⁵ (These cases overlap with the ones discussed by Callimachi, of course.)

In contrast to the seven American cases in which no one perished (except, in some instances, the terrorists), casualties were inflicted in some of these European plots. However, with the exception of the murder of the elderly French priest, it is less than clear that cybercoaching, in the sense of providing key information and direction, played a substantial role in fatal attacks.

There are two other cases in the set in which fatalities were inflicted. One was a knifing at the home of a Paris policeman in which two were killed by a man who was suspected of being influenced by a cybercoach.³⁶ And the other was the violence inflicted by Amedy Coulibaly who killed a French policewoman and then four hostages in a Jewish supermarket in early 2015. The degree to which Coulibaly was a neophyte in need of instruction is questionable, however. As Nesser and his colleagues point out, he had been part of a jihadi network in France that went back to 2003.³⁷

Beyond these cases, there is the truck attack at a Christmas market in Berlin that killed 11 in December 2016 (after the article by Nesser, Stenersen, and Oftedal was published). The culprit, a high school dropout with an attraction to drugs and alcohol, had been part of a network in contact with Islamic State operatives for some time, and he also had jihadi mentors and friends in Germany. The degree to which cybercoaching may have played a role in this case is, to say the least, unclear. According to Georg Heil’s study in this publication, there is “the possible presence of external attack plotters” in the case, and “remote control guidance” was “possibly a feature” of the attack due to “suspected communication with Islamic State operatives in Libya.”³⁸ Another account indicates that the truck attacker had been thinking about carrying out a “project” in Germany for a year or more, had searched for information on the internet concerning the construction of bombs, and had been in contact with members of Islamic State in Libya (possibly with relatives who had joined the group there).³⁹ However, as with the Heil article, there is no specific information that cybercoaching played a role in the specific planning for the eventual attack that took place.

In contrast, as Nesser and his colleagues point out, the vast majority of the deaths perpetrated by terrorists in Europe in the 2014–2016 period were accomplished in three attacks that were carried out in two instances by cells trained and dispatched by the Islamic State and in one instance (the Nice attack) in which no evidence

has yet publicly come to light about communications with terrorists overseas.⁴⁰ That is, no cybercoaching was apparently involved.^b

There seems to be little indication that cybercoaching, or even much connection to the Islamic State, was involved in any of the three lethal terrorist attacks in England in 2017 or in the several plots disrupted there over the same period. The largest of the attacks killed 22 with a bomb—the first to be successfully set off in Britain by terrorists since 2005—and the attacker may have had some training on visits to his native Libya.⁴¹ Although there are suspicions about an Islamic State connection to attacks in Catalonia in August 2017, there is little evidence of this thus far, and none at all about cybercoaching.⁴²

However, cybercoaching, or a form of it, does seem to have played a role in terrorism plotting in Australia in 2017. Information about the case is still limited and subject to sometimes contradictory statements by Australian and Lebanese officials, but it centers on four Lebanese-Australian brothers. One of them had been in Syria for years and had become an Islamic State commander, and consequently, the Lebanese intelligence services began monitoring the telephones of all four men in 2016, according to the version of events provided by Lebanese officials.⁴³ In April 2017, as the Islamic State was increasingly under siege, the Islamic State brother contacted the others and urged them to conduct some diversionary terrorism in Australia. When they agreed, they were put in touch with an Islamic State cybercoach in Syria, and explosive materials, disassembled bomb components, and instructions were sent to them by the Islamic State from Turkey.⁴⁴

On July 15, one of the brothers, say Australian police, was set to board an airliner to the Middle East with one assembled bomb in his luggage.⁴⁵ However, the Lebanese interior minister said there were two bombs—one of them in a meat grinder and the other in a large Barbie doll.^c The intent, he alleged, was to detonate one or both of them 20 minutes into the flight when the plane was still over Australia. However, he said, the luggage was well over the weight limit allowed on the airline—a rather elemental consideration the scheming brothers and their distant handlers had apparently not pondered earlier.⁴⁶ ^d Whatever the reason, the plot was aborted, and the brother boarded the flight unencumbered while one of the others took the bomb (or bombs) back and disassembled them.⁴⁷ According to Lebanese authorities, the traveling brother told authorities he was going to Lebanon to have a wedding at the family home there. Because he had used the same reason in several earlier trips, he was pulled aside for questioning when he arrived in Beirut, and he soon spilled information about the plot.⁴⁸ In their press

b It should also be pointed out that however terrible the outrages committed in Europe in the period, far more people on that continent perished yearly at the hands of terrorists in most years in the 1970s and 1980s. Chris York, “Islamic State Terrorism Is Serious But We’ve Faced Even Deadlier Threats In The Past,” *Huffington Post*, November 29, 2015. See also Daniel Byman, “Trump and Counterterrorism,” *National Interest*, January/February 2017, p. 67 and Jeremy Shapiro, “Why we think terrorism is scarier than it really is (and we probably always will),” *vox.com*, March 28, 2016.

c The use of the meat grinder seems to make little sense. Unlike a pressure cooker, it is open at one end, allowing the blast pressure to be released. Author correspondence, Mark Stewart, academic, September 2017.

d Australian police stated they were looking into whether the plot was aborted because the luggage was too heavy. Australian Federal Police, Press Conference, Sydney, August 3, 2017, available at <https://twitter.com/AusFedPolice/status/893244987315331072>

conferences soon after the plot became public, Australian police, however, said they did not believe he knew about the plot.⁴⁹

Intelligence information forwarded to Australian authorities was enough not only for them to surveil and then to arrest the brothers, but also to put together a mock-up version of the explosive. They concluded that, although the brothers had built a “fully functioning IED” (improvised explosive device), the explosive would never have made it through security. “We had a 100-percent success rate in terms of our mock IED being picked up”⁵⁰ ... and “we are extremely confident that ... that IED would have been picked up by security.”⁵¹ However, since the bombs had been disassembled, the police presumably were not in a good position to evaluate the would-be terrorists’ handiwork.⁵²

The brothers were arrested as they, urged on by their handlers, turned their attention for some reason from bombs to fabricating a device to disperse the poison gas hydrogen sulfide. But, the Australian police stress, they were a very long way from completion.⁵³

The Australian case differs from the others in that the cybercoaches did not pick up their distant collaborators more or less randomly on the internet but connected because they were personally known by (and related to) a senior Islamic State operative. But there were, nonetheless, many blunders in carrying out the mission. Most important was that the brothers, following instructions and using materials supplied by the coaches, fabricated a bomb that was apparently too heavy to go onboard, and that, according to Australian police, had a 100-percent chance of being detected even if it had been put through airline security.

Impact, Difficulties, and Perils of Cybercoaching

Overall, it certainly seems that Brian Michael Jenkins’ summary assessment of Islamist terrorists in the United States applies as well to the cybercoached both there and in Europe: “Their numbers remain small, their determination limp, and their competence poor.”⁵⁴ Cybercoaching scarcely seems to be much of a game changer or a critical terrorist innovation.

Cybercoaches can urge their charges on and stress glorious reward in this life or in one after. But that scarcely differentiates them from a wide array of Islamic State propagandists on the web or from instances in the past when some local jihadis managed to get in direct contact with supportive terrorists abroad (or with FBI informants and agents pretending to be so). Any effort by cybercoaches to go beyond this, to actually supply their charges with information and resources that are materially helpful—to guide the “world’s terror plots from afar,” in the words of the *New York Times* headline—is fraught with difficulties.

The distant cybercoaches obviously do not really know the territory, and the lack of face-to-face contact impedes efforts to assess the dedication, and particularly the capabilities, of the coached. Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Madeleine Blackman do acknowledge that “the lack of in-person training is a disadvantage.”⁵⁵ However, this seems to be a considerable understatement. Although even the hopelessly inadequate can sometimes get lucky, Michael Kenney finds that would-be terrorists characteristically are operationally unsophisticated, short on know-how, prone to make mistakes, poor at planning, and limited in their capacity to learn.⁵⁶ Accordingly, he suggests, there is no substitute for direct, on-the-ground training and experience.⁵⁷

Moreover, the advice and assistance tendered by the cybercoaches has often been of questionable value. If an apparent authority

figure tells his confidante to “go out and stab somebody,” that may provide a degree of motivation in some cases. But it scarcely seems like a substantive contribution. And, as noted, the cyber assistance in the Australian case generated bombs that likely would have been detected by airline security even if they had not been too heavy to take on board.

In addition, there is a great danger that the plot will come to the attention of the police. Although communications can be encrypted as the plot develops, they cannot be at the outset if there is not already a connection. For the most part, coaches must find their charges, and the charges must find their coaches, out in the cyber-open. This effect is amplified by the widespread tendency of American jihadis to advertise their passions and often their violent fantasies on open social media like Twitter and Facebook. There have been many cases in which the would-be perpetrator used chat rooms or Facebook or Twitter to seek out like-minded individuals and potential collaborators, and usually they simply connected to the FBI.⁵⁸ Indeed, as Daniel Byman and Jeremy Shapiro and others have pointed out, the foolish willingness of would-be terrorists to spill their aspirations and their often far-fetched fantasies on social media has been, on balance, much to the advantage of the police seeking to track them.⁵⁹ The internet, it can be argued, has facilitated the counterterrorists far more than the terrorists.

Interestingly, in five of the seven cybercoach cases in the United States identified by Hughes and Meleagrou-Hitchens, the would-be jihadis attracted not only the attention of a cybercoach from “afar,” but also one—or, in the case of Lutchman, three—informant(s) or undercover agent(s) from the FBI. Indeed, police and intelligence operatives have sometimes even been able to connect with the distant Islamist cybercoaches directly. And in each case, the cybercoach naively assumed, because his charge was also duped, that the FBI interloper was actually a legitimate co-conspirator. In fact, in one case, as noted, the Islamic State coach actually put his charge in contact with an FBI informant in the United States who the coach thought was on the Islamic State’s side.

And people working for the FBI on such cases have tremendous advantages over their distant rivals. They can actually materialize if necessary, and they are likely to know the local territory in detail—or can find it out by contacting local police.

It also appears that being a cybercoach is a perilous occupation. As Hughes and Meleagrou-Hitchens note, four of the most influential cybercoaches were killed in 2015 and 2016, and a fifth was arrested.⁶⁰

Back in the summer of 2016, Harry Sarfo, a German criminal who had joined the Islamic State in Syria, told *The New York Times* in a prison interview that “they have loads of people ... hundreds definitely” who were “living in European countries and waiting for commands to attack the European people.”⁶¹

Sarfo suggested, however, that it was more difficult to get operatives into North America. Therefore, for that venue, the group was going to rely on cybercoaching: “For America and Canada, it’s much easier for them to get them over the social network, because they say the Americans are dumb—they have open gun policies ... they say we can radicalize them easily, and if they have no prior record, they can buy guns, so we don’t need to have no contact man who has to provide guns for them.”⁶²

It has not been that easy. **CTC**

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