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FROM THE EDITOR

After its pivot to insurgency, is the Islamic State losing power or preserving strength in Iraq? This is the research question posed by Michael Knights in this month's cover article. Attack metrics, he writes, "paint a picture of an insurgent movement that has been ripped down to its roots," but also one that is vigorously working to reboot by focusing "on a smaller set of geographies and a 'quality over quantity' approach to operations." Knights warns that "the Iraqi government is arguably not adapting fast enough to the demands of counterinsurgency, suggesting the need for intensified and accelerated support from the U.S.-led coalition in order to prevent the Islamic State from mounting another successful recovery."

Our interview is with Mark Mitchell, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations/Low-Intensity Conflict, who was among the first U.S. soldiers on the ground in Afghanistan after 9/11. Mitchell previously served as a Director for Counterterrorism on the National Security Council where he was intimately involved in significant hostage cases and recovery efforts in Syria, Yemen, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Somalia. He was also instrumental in establishing the framework for the landmark Presidential Policy Review of Hostage Policy.

Dan Joseph and Harun Maruf, the authors of the recently published book *Inside Al-Shabaab: The Secret History of Al-Qaeda's Most Powerful Ally*, explain why the group remains a significant threat inside Somalia. Amira Jadoon and Sara Mahmood examine recent plans circulated by the Pakistani Taliban under its new leader Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud to try to reverse the group's decline. Bennett Clifford and Seamus Hughes document the case of Aws Mohammed Younis al-Jayab, a returned foreign fighter to the United States who pleaded guilty in October 2018 to material support to a terrorist organization. His case sheds new light on cross-border foreign fighter recruitment networks in the United States and Europe, and the potential threat they pose.

Paul Cruickshank, *Editor in Chief*

The Islamic State Inside Iraq: Losing Power or Preserving Strength?

By Michael Knights

In addition to losing control of Iraqi cities and oilfields, the Islamic State has clearly lost much of the capability it developed within Iraq from 2011-2014. Quantitative attack metrics paint a picture of an insurgent movement that has been ripped down to its roots, but qualitative and district-level analysis suggests the Islamic State is enthusiastically embracing the challenge of starting over within a more concentrated area of northern Iraq. The Iraqi government is arguably not adapting fast enough to the demands of counterinsurgency, suggesting the need for intensified and accelerated support from the U.S.-led coalition in order to prevent the Islamic State from mounting another successful recovery.

It has been a year since Iraq's (then) Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi declared victory over the Islamic State on December 9, 2017.[1] Yet the Islamic State did not disappear in Iraq. According to the author's attack dataset,[a] in the first 10 months of 2018, the movement mounted 1,271 attacks (of which 762 were explosive events,[b] including 135 attempted mass-casualty attacks[c] and 270 effective[d] roadside bombings). As important, the Islamic State attempted to overrun[e] 120 Iraqi security force checkpoints or outposts and executed 148 precise killings of specifically targeted individuals[f] such as village *mukhtars*, tribal heads, district council members, or security force leaders.

In an August 2017 *CTC Sentinel* review of the Islamic State's transition to insurgency in Iraq,[2] this author noted an almost automatic shift back to insurgent tactics in areas where the movement lost control of terrain in 2014-2017.[3] As Hassan Hassan convincingly documented in his December 2017 study for this publication,[4] as early as the summer of 2016, the Islamic State had readied "a calculated strategy by the group after the fall of Mosul to conserve manpower and pivot away from holding territory to pursuing an all-out insurgency."[5] In another September 2018 study,[6] Hassan reiterated that the Islamic State sums up its strategy using three Arabic phrases: *sahraa*, or desert; *sahwat*, or Sunni opponents; and *sawlat*, or hit-and-run operations.[7] Based on the precepts of the Islamic State's own 2009 lessons-learned analysis—"Strategic Plan to Improve the Political Standing of the Islamic State of Iraq"—the plan is to return to the attritional struggle against the Iraqi state and Sunni communities that was executed so successfully by the Islamic State in 2011-2014.[8]

Metrics-Based Analysis of Islamic State in Iraq Attacks

So how is the plan working out thus far? This article is an update and an extension of the author's aforementioned August 2017 metrics analysis of known Islamic State operations in Iraq. The objective of the research is to track how the Islamic State is performing as an insurgent movement in a variety of Iraqi provinces. One output of the research is the benchmarking of current Islamic State operational activity against the metrics of 2017 and the years prior to the movement's 2014 seizure of territory. In August 2017, the author analyzed Islamic State attack metrics in liberated areas in Diyala,

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Dr. Michael Knights is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. He has worked in all of Iraq's provinces, including periods embedded with the Iraqi security forces. Dr. Knights has briefed U.S. officials and outbound military units on the resurgence of al-Qa`ida in Iraq since 2012 and regularly visits Iraq. He has written on militancy in Iraq for the CTC Sentinel *since 2008. Follow @mikeknightsiraq*

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a   All incident data is drawn from the author's geolocated Significant Action (SIGACT) dataset. The dataset brings together declassified coalition SIGACT data plus private security company and open-source SIGACT data used to supplement and extend the dataset as coalition incident collection degraded in 2009-2011 and was absent in 2012-2014. New data since 2014 has been added to the dataset to bring it up to date (as of the end of October 2018).

b   Explosive events include SIGACT categories such as Improvised Explosive Device (IED), Under-Vehicle IED (UVIED), vehicle-carried or concealed IEDs, all categories of suicide bombing, indirect fire, hand grenade and rocket-propelled grenade attacks, guided missile attacks, plus recoilless rifle and improvised rockets.

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c   Defined in the author's dataset as IED attacks on static locations that are assessed as being intended to cause multiple civilian or security force casualties.

d   Defined in the author's dataset as IED attacks on vehicles that are assessed to have struck the specific type of target preferred by the attacker, and to have initiated effectively.

e   Defined in the author's dataset as attacks that successfully seized an Iraqi security force location for a temporary period, or which killed or wounded the majority of the personnel likely to have been present at the site.

f   Inferred in the author's dataset by connecting the target type with circumstantial details of the attack to eliminate the likelihood that the individual was not the intended victim of the attack.

Baghdad's rural "belts,"[g] Salah al-Din, and Anbar. This new analysis will return to the above provinces (including a fully liberated Anbar) and also consider the newly liberated provinces of Nineveh and Kirkuk.

To achieve this, the author has updated his dataset of Iraq attack metrics up to the end of October 2018. The dataset includes non-duplicative inputs from open source reporting, diplomatic security data, private security company incident data, Iraqi incident data, and U.S. government inputs. The dataset was scoured manually, including individual consideration of every Significant Action (SIGACT) in the set, with the intention of filtering out incidents that are probably not related to Islamic State activity. This process includes expansive weeding-out of "legacy IED" incidents (caused by explosive remnants of war) and exclusion of likely factional and criminal incidents, including most incidents in Baghdad city. The author adopted the same conservative standard as was used in prior attack metric studies[9] to produce comparable results. As a result, readers should note that the presented attack numbers are not only a partial sample of Islamic State attacks (because some incidents are not reported) but are also a conservative underestimate of Islamic State incidents (because some urban criminal activity may, in fact, be Islamic State racketeering).

In the August 2017 CTC analysis of Iraq attack metrics, the author suggested[h] that analysts should focus more attention on the qualitative aspects of Islamic State attacks (such as targeted assassinations) to create a richer assessment of the significance of lower-visibility events. In this study, the author takes his own advice and not only breaks down incidents into explosive or non-explosive events, but also created four categories of high-quality attacks (the aforementioned mass-casualty attacks, effective roadside bombings, overrun attacks, and person-specific targeted attacks[10]). Though still highly subjective, the above filtering and categorizing of SIGACTs results in a more precise sample of Islamic State activity from which to derive trends. Immersion in manually coding the detail of thousands of geospatially mapped SIGACTs creates vital opportunities for pattern recognition and relation of trends to key geographies.

National-Level Indicators of Islamic State Potency

There can be no doubt that the Islamic State remains a highly active and aggressive insurgent movement. By the author's count, supported by "heat map" style visualization of Islamic State activity and historic operating patterns, the group maintains permanently operating attack cells in at least 27 areas[i] within Iraq. As a movement, it generated an average of 13.5 attempted mass-casualty attacks per month within Iraq in the first 10 months of 2018, as well as 27.0 effective IEDs per month, 14.8 targeted assassination attempts per month, and 12.0 attempted overruns of Iraqi security force checkpoints or positions per month.[11] At the very least, the Islamic State remains active, trains its fighters in real-world operations, and does not allow the security environment to normalize.

All this being said, the Islamic State appears to be currently functioning at its lowest operational tempo (at the national aggregate level) since its nadir in late 2010. In 2018, combined totals of Islamic State attack metrics for six provinces (Anbar, Baghdad belts, Salah al-Din, Diyala, Nineveh, and Kirkuk) averaged 127.1 per month.[12] In comparison, during 2017 combined totals of Islamic State attack metrics for just *four* provinces (Anbar, Baghdad belts, Salah al-Din, and Diyala) averaged 490.6 per month.[13] This suggests the Islamic State attacks in 2018 averaged less than a third of their 2017 monthly totals, a huge reduction in operational tempo within Iraq. The 2018 monthly average of 127.1 attacks is also much lower than the six province averages (Anbar, Baghdad belts, Salah al-Din, Diyala, Nineveh, and Kirkuk) from 2013 (518 incidents per month), 2012 (320 incidents per month), and 2011 (317 incidents per month).[14] Though SIGACT reporting could have declined somewhat since 2017, there are no indications of a blackout of reporting that would create a two-thirds reduction in reported incidents. To the contrary, ever-improving social media reporting by security force members and SIGACT or martyrdom aggregators has arguably led to a slight improvement in visibility.[15]

Assuming that greatly reduced attack metrics reflects reality, analysts are faced with a very consequential and tricky exam question: Is the Islamic State unable to mount more attacks in Iraq, or is it marshaling its remaining strength and striking more selectively? If the former, the drop in attack metrics might suggest that Islamic State attempts to hold terrain on multiple fronts in Iraq and Syria resulted in such heavy losses to leadership, personnel, and revenue generation that the Islamic State has emerged more damaged than it was after the Sahwa (Awakening) and the U.S. "Surge."[16]

However, this does not satisfyingly explain how a fairly high number of attacks could continue in late 2017, only dropping off from the second quarter of 2018 onwards. (Overall attacks dropped by 19% between the first and third quarters of 2018, with "high-quality attacks" (mass casualty, overruns, effective roadside bombs, and targeted killings) dropping by 48% in the same comparison.)[17] One explanation that might be consistent with Hassan's description of the Islamic State's "calculated strategy by the group after the fall of Mosul to conserve manpower"[18] is that the group is focusing its efforts on a smaller set of geographies and a "quality over quantity" approach to operations. A tour around the six main

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g   The rural districts bordering Baghdad but not within the city limits (amanat) include places like Taji, Mushahada, Tarimiyah, Husseiniyah, Rashidiyah, Nahrawan, Salman Pak, Suwayrah, Arab Jabour, Yusufiyah, Latifiyah, Iskandariyah, and Abu Ghraib.

h   The author noted that "analysts of insurgency in Iraq should ... look beyond quantitative trends to spot qualitative shifts that may be of far greater consequence" such as "high-impact, low-visibility violence." The author underlined the disproportionate value of "rich on-the-ground data that allows analysts to understand whether a shooting is a criminal drive-by versus a carefully planned intimidation attack on a key sheikh, for example." See Michael Knights, "Predicting the Shape of Iraq's Next Sunni Insurgencies," *CTC Sentinel* 10:7 (2017), p. 21.

i   In the author's view, these are in the following areas: Al-Qaim, Wadi Horan/ Rutbah and Lake Tharthar/Hit/Ramadi in Anbar province; the southern Jallam Desert (southern of Samarra), Baiji, Sharqat, Pulkhana (near Tuz), and Mutabijah/Udaim in Salah al-Din province; Tarmiyah, Taji, Rashidiyah, Jurf as-Sakr/Latifiyah/Yusufiyah, Jisr Diyala/Madain, and Radwaniyah/ Abu Ghraib in the Baghdad belts; Hawijah, Rashad, Zab, Dibis, Makhmour, and Ghaeda in or near Kirkuk province; Muqdadiyah, Jawlawla/Saadiyah/ Qara Tapa, and Mandali in Diyala; and Mosul city, Qayyarah, Hatra, and the Iraq-Turkey Pipeline corridor southwest of Mosul, Badush, and Sinjar/ Syrian border in Nineveh.

Northeastern Iraq (Rowan Technology)

provinces with a strong Islamic State presence provides a set of case studies to test the explanations of reduced Islamic State operational tempo.

Weak Insurgencies in Anbar and Salah al-Din

The author's August 2017 *CTC Sentinel* article noted that Anbar and Salah al-Din were the scene of weak insurgencies in 2017 that were characterized predominately by low-quality harassment attacks, such as mortar or rocket attacks or victim-operated IEDs not focused on specific targets.[19] Attacks metrics from 2018 suggest that the Islamic State is still not generating powerful campaigns of attacks in these provinces and has even weakened in both areas.

In predominately Sunni Anbar, the Islamic State averaged just 9.1 attacks per month in 2018, versus 60.6 attacks per month in 2017 (when Al-Qaim district was excluded from statistics as it was still under the Islamic State) or versus 66.0 attacks per month in 2013 (counting attacks in all of Anbar).[20] Forty-nine percent of attacks in 2018 were "high-quality" types, an increase against the 30% of high-quality attacks in 2017.[21] Nevertheless, the small scale of the insurgency's attack activities in Anbar means that better quality attacks were limited to an average each month of one overrun of an outpost plus one targeted killing and a pair of effective IEDs.[22] Almost no tribal or local community leaders were killed in Anbar (four in 10 months in 2018), and only three mass-casualty attacks

were attempted.[23] These are very low figures, both historically and considering that Anbar is Iraq's largest province, perhaps pointing to a de-prioritization of Anbar by the Islamic State as an attack location at this stage of the war. As in 2017, there is very little evidence of attack activity in Anbar cities like Ramadi and Fallujah.[24]

Salah al-Din also saw a steep year-on-year reduction in attacks, with a monthly average of 14.2 in 2018 versus 84.0 in 2017.[25] (The 2018 average for Salah al-Din is just below the 19.0 and 15.0 per month averages for the province in 2012 and 2011, respectively.[26]) Sixty percent of attacks in 2018 were 'high-quality' types, an increase against the 42% of high-quality attacks in 2017.[27] Again, due to the small overall scale of the local insurgency, the raw numbers of quality attacks were low: just six targeted killings in 10 months, an average of 2.1 overrun attacks on outposts each month and 3.6 effective roadside IEDs per month.[28] For a province that contains Iraq's north-south military supply corridor, the scene of an average of 90 roadside bombings per month during the U.S. military presence, current Islamic State attack activities in Salah al-Din stand out as anemic. With the exception of the ruined refinery town of Baiji and the adjacent Sharqat, the Islamic State is only slowly starting to attack Salah al-Din cities like Samarra, Tikrit, Dour, Balad, and Tuz Khurmatu.[29]

Islamic State inactivity in Anbar could be explained by a number of factors, including the temporary disruptive effect of the full

recapture of the province in late 2018, but it is harder to rational-ize why Salah al-Din has become even quieter than during 2017. Perhaps the Islamic State invested its resources elsewhere due to overwhelming pressure from 'outsider' (mainly Shi`a) Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) working closely with predominately Sunni, locally recruited PMF brigades 51 and 88.[30] In 2017, this author assessed that predominately Sunni Anbar and the predominately Sunni parts of Salah al-Din might resist a strong resurgence of the Islamic State if they became a "partnership zone" where Sunnis felt demographically secure and Sunni communities actively partnered with the Iraqi security forces.[31] A key question for analysts is wheth-er depressed Islamic State attacks in Salah al-Din mark the success of an unlikely partnership between Shi`a PMF factions and Sunni tribes, and, if so, whether such arrangements are sustainable.

Islamic State Setbacks in the Baghdad Belts

The author's August 2017 *CTC Sentinel* article sounded a note of alarm about large numbers of Islamic State IED attacks on markets and shops in Baghdad's rural belts and outer urban sprawl.[32] This trend continued throughout the first quarter of 2018, when there were 65 attempted mass-casualty incidents in the Baghdad belts or projected into Baghdad via the rural districts.[33] Thereafter, the bombings dropped off sharply, with just 16 in the second quarter and 15 in the third.[34] Overall, attacks in 2018 dropped to an average of 29.3 per month versus 67.3 in 2017 and 60.0 in 2013, dropping to about the 2011 average of 35.0 attacks per month.[35] Confirming the anecdotal impression of many Baghdad residents and visitors, in the years since 2003, Baghdad has never witnessed fewer reported salafi jihadi terrorist attacks than it did in 2018.[j] Total attacks halved from an average of 45.3 per month in the first quarter of 2018 to 20.3 in the third quarter, with quality attacks dropping from 65% of all attacks in the first quarter to 46% of all attacks in the third.[36] The monthly average of 3.6 effective roadside IED attacks in 2018 is still remarkably low for an area of Baghdad's size, with such a concentration of security force patrols.[37] (The comparative figure in 2013 was 23.0 effective roadside bombs per month.[38]) Though some of the 2.3 monthly assassinations in the Baghdad belt include political figures, the area has witnessed almost no reported targeted assassinations of local Sunni leaders in 2018, in stark contrast to other areas like Kirkuk and Nineveh.[39]

A likely factor in the reduction of Islamic State attacks in Bagh-dad is the disruptive counterinsurgency operations and perimeter security improvements[40] launched by the Baghdad Operations Command, in cooperation with neighboring commands and with intense intelligence support from the coalition.[41] These have been focused on the northern and southern belts, which are the most intensely attacked. The northern arc, including hotspots like Tarmiyah, Rashidiyah, and Taji, witnessed 9.7 attacks each month on average in 2018 (i.e., more than Iraq's largest province, Anbar), including 72% quality attacks.[42] The southern belt, centered on the former insurgent stronghold of Jurf as-Sakr and adjacent Latifiyah and Iskandariyah, suffered an average of 8.3 attacks per month in

2018 (almost equaling the whole of Anbar), but a lower proportion (56%) of quality attacks.[43] The western and eastern belts witnessed exactly the same average in 2018—5.7 attacks per month, half of which were high quality.[44]

Deadlock in Diyala

Diyala was the first place where the Islamic State mounted a strong insurgency after it moved to a terrain-holding model in 2014, and in some respects, this is because Diyala was never decisively overrun by the Islamic State in 2014 and thus the local militant cells never ceased being insurgents.[45] In the author's 2016 and 2017 analyses, Diyala and adjacent parts of Salah al-Din were identified as the most fertile ground, at the time, for an Islamic State sanctuary.[46] Yet the 2018 attack metrics indicate that either the Islamic State shift-ed its weight elsewhere (i.e., to nearby rural Kirkuk and southern Nineveh) or the Islamic State has been fought to a standstill and reduced in capability within Diyala, perhaps temporarily.

As in Anbar, Salah al-Din, and the Baghdad belts, the raw num-bers of reported Islamic State attacks in Diyala have greatly reduced in 2018, despite no concomitant loss of reporting or social media coverage of operations and casualties. The average number of Is-lamic State attacks in Diyala in 2018 was 26.2 per month, versus 79.6 per month in 2017 and 50.3 per month in 2013.[47] The Islamic State's war in Diyala is an interesting 50-50% weave of high-quality attacks and broader harassment of civilians. In 2018 in Diyala, there were 31 targeted killings[48] of district council members, *mukhtars* (village headman), tribal leaders, and Sunni PMF commanders. Among the half of attacks in Diyala not categorized as high-quality was a preponderance of terrorization attacks on 'enemy civilians' (Shi`a or Sunni), including kidnap-murders, mortar attacks, de-struction of rural farming infrastructure, and other efforts to over-awe or displace potential civilian opponents.[49][k]

It may be that Islamic State brutality is driving predominately local Sunni tribes into partnership with Shi`a PMF and Iraqi mili-tary forces, though such tribes have to cooperate with PMF in order to be allowed to resettle in their towns in any case.[50] In Diyala, as in Salah al-Din, there is a case for taking a closer look at whether PMF actors and allied Iraqi Army units are undertaking more effective operations and coordination with local Sunnis than expected, or whether a different causal factor has depressed Islamic States at-tacks in 2018 down to a third of the levels reported in 2017.[51]

Focus on Southern Nineveh

Nineveh was not included in the August 2017 *CTC Sentinel* arti-cle because it was only liberated as the analysis went to press. But now—15 months after the liberation of Mosul and 14 months after Tal Afar was recaptured—there is a sufficient dataset to compare to other provinces and to the pre-2014 Islamic State insurgency in Nineveh.

The Islamic State mounted an average of 17.1 attacks per month

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j   The 2013 monthly average of 60 Islamic State attacks per month was the lowest recorded aggregate of Baghdad attacks prior to 2018. In 2011, as the insurgency reached its nadir, the monthly average was still 101. In 2006, the worst year of the war, Baghdad attacks regularly topped 1,500 per month. All incident data is drawn from the author's geolocated Significant Action (SIGACT) dataset.

k   A close reading of all the 262 Islamic State attacks in Diyala in 2018 paints a vivid picture of no-holds-barred warfare between the Islamic State and all other actors. Even filtering out likely Sunni-on-Sunni and Sunni-Shi`a tribal incidents, there are regular murders of shepherds and farmers on agricultural land, booby-trapping of farm roads and canal crossings, mortar attacks on farms, destruction of irrigation and power lines, plus the assassination of local leaders. All incident data is drawn from the author's geolocated Significant Action (SIGACT) dataset.

Diyala province, Iraq (Rowan Technology)

in Nineveh in the first 10 months of 2018.[52] This is minuscule compared to the average of 278 attacks per month in 2013, the 77.0 per month in 2012, or the 60.3 per month in 2011.[53] The key reason for the dramatic comparative reduction is the almost complete cessation of Islamic State attacks in Mosul city, which was always the engine room of insurgent attacks in Nineveh.[54] At the nadir of Islamic State operations in 2010, the number of Mosul city attacks still averaged 56 per month.[55] This increased to 218.5 average monthly attacks in 2013 and 347.0 monthly attacks in the first half of 2014.[56] In comparison, Mosul city averaged 3.0 Islamic State attacks per month in 2018, a remarkably low level of activity in the largest Sunni-majority city in Iraq.[57] Equally stunning is the manner in which Tal Afar—a long-time Islamic State base—now witnesses practically no visible insurgent activity at all,[58][l] denying the movement of its second historic hub in Nineveh.

The Islamic State has instead focused on rural insurgency in Nineveh in the year since it lost Mosul. Focus areas include the desert districts south of Mosul such as Qayyarah, Hatra, Ash Shura, the southwestern outer urban sprawl of Mosul city (Atshana,

Sahaji, and Tall Zallat), and the desert located between the Baghdad-Mosul highway and the Iraq-Turkey Pipeline—the so-called "Jurn Corridor" (named after two notorious villages in the area).[m] Though small in scale at this point, the Islamic State rural insurgency is marked by the very high quality of the effort, with 62% of attacks in 2018 coded as quality attacks.[59] In particular, 37 targeted assassinations of local leaders[60] were undertaken in the first 10 months of 2018 within these various focus zones, which make up a 40 by 40-mile area, including 17 village *mukhtars*[61] and the publicized beheading of a Tribal Resistance Force leader.[n] Twenty-eight attempted overrun attacks on Iraqi outposts were undertaken in the same area in 2018 as well as 32 effective roadside bombings of security force vehicles.[62] At the time of writing in the last quarter of

l   There were 0.3 Islamic State attacks in Tal Afar per month on average in the first 10 months of 2018: two roadside IEDs and one attempted suicide vest attack on a Shi`a procession.

m   The author worked episodically in Nineveh during 2006-2012, during which time the villages of the Jurn corridor were viewed by U.S. and Iraqi forces as notorious al-Qa`ida in Iraq and Islamic State of Iraq launchpads. The villages—Jurn 1 and 2—are located 15 miles southwest of Mosul city and just five miles west of the highway.

n   On March 20, 2018, the Islamic State undertook a surge of targeted killings in Mosul city, killing four mukhtars and kidnapping and beheading pro-government Sunni militia leader Udwan Adnan Muhammad in the Rajim al-Hadid area in western Mosul. All incident data is drawn from the author's geolocated Significant Action (SIGACT) dataset.

Vehicles used for suicide car bombings, made by Islamic State militants, are seen at Federal Police Headquarters after being confiscated in Mosul, Iraq, on July 13, 2017. (Reuters/ Thaier Al-Sudani)

2018, the Islamic State is beginning to employ heavily armed, technical-mounted raiding groups in southern Nineveh, akin to special forces, capable of out-gunning isolated outposts and making highways and village access roads too dangerous to use.[63]

Kirkuk: The Strongest Wilayat

The Islamic State still physically controlled the rural Kirkuk farmbelts when the August 2017 study was written, but now—one year after Iraqi security forces reentered the area—attack data has accumulated to allow an early analysis of the insurgency in Kirkuk. The most obvious trend is that Kirkuk was the Islamic State's most prolific attack location in Iraq in the first 10 months of 2018. Kirkuk saw an average of 33.0 attacks per month, versus 29.3 in Baghdad, 26.2 in Diyala, 17.1 in Nineveh, 14.2 in Salah al-Din, and 7.3 in Anbar.[64] (In comparison, Kirkuk saw an average of 59 monthly attacks in 2013, 44 monthly attacks in 2012, and 26 monthly attacks in 2011.[65]) With 45 attacks in October 2018 and indications of higher levels in November,[66] the Islamic State insurgency in Kirkuk has quickly rebooted to 2013 levels.

The strong insurgency was apparent from the very beginning of the year (first quarter average monthly attacks were 38.0),[67] underlining the running start that the Islamic State achieved as soon as Iraqi forces entered Kirkuk. During the first 10 months of 2018, there were 85 effective roadside bomb attacks and 41 overruns on Iraqi outposts[68]—nearly doubling the numbers in adjacent Nineveh. In one notorious and widely publicized example in February 2018, Islamic State fighters dressed as PMF troops established a fake vehicle checkpoint at Shariah bridge, near Hawijah, and executed 27 PMF volunteers.[69]

As in Diyala and southern Nineveh, the Islamic State is also trying to make life as miserable and dangerous as possible for 'enemy civilians'[o] and pro-government Sunni militias in rural Kirkuk. The Islamic State undertook 35 targeted assassinations of local leaders in the first 10 months of 2018,[70] spread across the 80 by 40-mile Kirkuk farmbelts. As important, Islamic State fighters roam at will at night through the farms, killing farmers, burning houses and crops, destroying irrigation systems, and blowing up tractors and electrical towers.[71 p] The effort appears to be intended to drive pro-government tribal leaders out and to depopulate key areas where the Islamic State wants to increase its operational security and take over farming enterprises.[q] Christoph Reuter, a rare journalist to visit communities in the Kirkuk farmbelts, painted a vivid picture of the deadly dilemma facing civilians in a Der Spiegel Online report released in March 2018.[72]

Anecdotal reporting[r] from Iraqi military contacts, Iraqi civilian contacts, and journalists with local access to the Kirkuk farmbelts suggests that the predominately Shi`a Federal Police garrison of rural Kirkuk is failing to protect civilians. This is in part because

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o   The author refers here to tribes that the Islamic State views as enemies, either due to their sector (in the case of Sunnis) or their opposition to the Islamic State.

p   Attacks on electrical towers have been prolific in 2018, and seemingly largely to discomfort locals as opposed to theft of copper wiring (as most images show lines left in place). For an open-source reference, see Mohammed Ebraheem, "Iraq's Hawija turns dark as Islamic State continues to target electricity pylons," Iraqi News, October 1, 2018.

q   These kinds of incidents are thickly strewn throughout the author's geolocated Significant Action (SIGACT) dataset. Sunni villages are being evacuated as close as 10 miles from urban Kirkuk due to repeated intimidation attacks. For an open-source reference, see "Residents Of A Village In Hawija Displaced Due To Threats Received From Daesh," National Iraqi News Agency, August 9, 2018.

r   The author regularly pre-briefs journalists moving through Iraq, and then debriefs them afterwards. This generates rich detailed reporting that often fails to make it into news coverage of Iraq because it is considered by editors to be too niche for the general reader to appreciate.

the Islamic State is successfully intimidating the security forces to remain within their bases at night and to only operate *en masse* in large, easily avoided daytime clearance operations.[73] Local Sunnis tend not to trust the Federal Police, who are largely recruited from the Shi`a populations in Baghdad, southern Iraq, and southern Salah al-Din.[74] When Federal Police come to the aid of attacked villages, they are often too late to help civilians and then arrest or disarm the wrong people.[75] Despite these failings, the heavy concentration of Federal Police brigades in Kirkuk may have complicated the operational environment for the Islamic State. In the first quarter of 2018, there were 39 average monthly attacks in Kirkuk (including 21 quality attacks), dropping to 30.6 attacks (including 15.3 quality) per month in the second quarter and 25.3 attacks (including 13.3 quality) per month in the third quarter.[76]

The question is whether this downturn is sustainable: there were 45 attacks in Kirkuk in October 2018, nearly double the monthly average of the third quarter.[77] Similar steep month-on-month increases were also visible in Nineveh, Baghdad, and Anbar in October.[78 s] As weather and visibility deteriorate in Iraq during the winter months, Islamic State attacks tend to become more numerous and more ambitious, with the militants suffering less from aerial surveillance and airstrikes.[79] Attack metrics are likely to rise in the final quarter of 2018, raising annual averages across the board.

Tactical Trends

Out of 1,271 Islamic State attacks in the first 10 months of 2018, 54% were quality attacks (mass casualty, overruns, effective roadside IEDs, or targeted killings), leaving 46% as less lethal or less carefully targeted harassment-type attacks.[80] Thus, the movement still spends a good deal of its time mounting ineffective attacks for show, or to keep up momentum, or to practice skills and tactics.

The Islamic State is not running out of explosives yet. Fifty-nine percent of attacks were explosive events, with this 10-month average dropping to 48% in the third quarter.[81] High-explosive main charges using military munitions are still widely available and turn up in large numbers in cleared caches.[82] Islamic State cells spent considerable time creating and hiding high-explosive caches, yet military explosive use in IEDs has declined and homemade explosive production has increased across the different Islamic State cells in Iraq.[83] This may suggest that insurgents cannot readily access their caches or cannot transport munitions, possibly due to patrols and checkpoints, and instead prefer to make new homemade explosives at their hide sites using readily available farming materials.

Suicide vests are found with great regularity,[84] but suicide vest attacks are still rare (2.3 per month on average in the first 10 months of 2018 versus 10.3 per month in 2017).[85] This suggests either a lack of suicide bombers or a deliberate withholding of the tactic and valuable suicide bombers. The Islamic State appears to make up for the small explosive yield of many attempted mass-casualty attacks by 'boosting' them in some manner: detonating at a gas station or in a less-secure crowded area such as a rural market or mechanic's garage.[86]

Penetration of hardened facilities such as police stations or military headquarters is very rarely attempted at this stage of the Islam-

ic State insurgency.[87] Instead, the Islamic State seems to recognize the vulnerability of linear infrastructure like highways, electricity transmission lines, and pipelines.[88] Fake vehicle checkpoints and roadside ambushes allow the Islamic State to be unpredictable and utilize mobility to reduce its casualties. Attacking roads provides a fruitful means of finance for the Islamic State via carjacking and boosting cargoes,[89 t] and has proved effective in terms of catching and killing what the Islamic State see as high-value targets such as militia commanders and tribal leaders while they are lightly protected.[u]

The nocturnal assassination of local community leaders has proved another extraordinarily effective tactic, killing one man in order to intimidate thousands. As in 2011-2014, murder remains the Islamic State's most effective and efficient tactic, and it has focused its murder campaign like a laser on the terrain where it has consolidated its presence.[90] In southern Nineveh, rural Kirkuk, and northern Diyala, there were 103 targeted assassinations in the first 10 months of 2018 (75% of all Islamic State assassinations during that period).[91] Using a basic calculation of Islamic State attack locations in 2018, the movement concentrated 75% of its assassinations in an area representing 10% of the terrain it routinely operates within.[v]

The roadside IED is also making a comeback, though not yet in great numbers and rarely involving advanced devices attended by IED triggermen or media teams.[92] Most explosive devices encountered thus far in 2018 are built around five-gallon jerry cans or cooking gas cylinders loaded with homemade explosive slurry.[93] Most devices are victim-initiated via pressure plate triggers, though command wire is also found in many caches, suggesting the potential for command detonation.[94] More advanced explosive designs and initiation methods may not be viewed as necessary due to the paucity of Iraqi route clearance efforts and the use of unarmored pick-ups and buses by many Iraqi forces.[95] In every province, the Islamic State seems to retain some residual expertise in roadside bombing tactics. One widely distributed tactic is a 'come-on' wherein the militants draw in the security forces with an action (an attack on civilians or security forces, or even the theft of property and livestock), then initiate one or more follow-up roadside IED attacks and ambushes.[96 w]

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t   The seizure of trucks and their cargo appears to be a key source of gaining access to money (threat finance). East of Tuz Khurmatu, for instance, truckers were repeatedly stopped, killed, and buried in mass graves before the disappearances were recognized as a trend. For an open-source reference, see "Mass grave containing the remains of 20 truckers discovered," Baghdad Today, February 7, 2018.

u   One example of this is Highway 82, which links Diyala's governorate center at Baquba to the Mandali district on the Iran-Iraq border. Among seven attacks on the road in the first 10 months of 2018, three targeted high-value targets such as tribal leaders and Iraqi MPs. All incident data is drawn from the author's geolocated Significant Action (SIGACT) dataset.

v   The author used heat-mapping of SIGACTs and then made a rough square mile calculation: 75% of assassinations happened in a 6,640 square mile area, while all Islamic State attacks were spread out across a 60,636 square mile area in Iraq in 2018.

w   In all the provinces covered in this study, the Islamic State mounted occasional 'double tap' IED attacks (one initial attack, plus a follow-up on first responders and security reinforcements), and in Kirkuk and Nineveh, there were even some 'triple tap' attacks with multiple layers of follow-on attacks.

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s   In Nineveh, attacks jumped from 21 in September 2018 to 30 in October 2018. Baghdad attacks increased from 20 in September to 35 in October. Anbar saw a month-on-month increase from three attacks in September to 10 in October.

Implications for Counterinsurgents

SIGACT metrics are only ever a partial sample, often representing a more complete sample of high-visibility types of attack behavior (like explosive events and high-quality attacks), while often representing a less complete sample of low-visibility attacks such as racketeering, kidnap and shooting, or indirect fire incidents in rural areas. Nevertheless, the basic trends observed in the author's dataset give a strong indication of Islamic State retrenchment and rationalization of its insurgency in 2018. There were 490.6 Islamic State attacks per month in Iraq in 2017, counting only Anbar, Baghdad, Salah al-Din, and Diyala. In the first 10 months of 2018, now including Nineveh and Kirkuk as well, there were 127.1 attacks per month. The insurgency in 2018 was thus in these combined areas less than a third of the size it was previously in 2017. In certain areas—Anbar, Baghdad, and Salah al-Din—the insurgency seemed to stagnate, significantly deteriorate, or even be abandoned for the present. In Diyala, the Islamic State fought hard to survive. In Nineveh and Kirkuk, the post-liberation insurgency started strongly.

The exam question posed in this paper concerned whether the Islamic State is *incapable* of raising its operational tempo or has *chosen* to rationalize its operations, as Hassan's observations of Islamic State communiques suggests.[97] SIGACT metrics seem to support the theory mentioned earlier that the Islamic State is deliberately focusing its efforts on a smaller set of geographies and a "quality over quantity" approach to operations. The Islamic State seems to have denuded or failed to reinforce areas such as Anbar, the Baghdad belts, southern Salah al-Din, and southern Diyala, and has instead concentrated its operations in the best human and physical terrain it can defend: southern Nineveh, rural Kirkuk, and the Hamrin Mountains on the Diyala/Salah al-Din border. As this author noted in August 2017:

> *"The coalition [has] been clearing outward toward the north and the west, but in the coming year Iraq must turn inward to remove the internal ungoverned spaces in Hawijah, Hamrin, Jallam, Anbar, and eastern Diyala. This will mean learning how to rewire command and control of operations to allow the Iraqi security forces, PMF, Kurds, and [Combined Joint Task Force Operation Inherent Resolve] to work together in a shared battlespace."[98]*

This inward clearing of Iraq has begun, but with more determination than skill. The clash between Baghdad and the Kurds over the independence referendum and Kirkuk has been a damaging distraction since September 2017.[99] Iraqi forces *have* complicated the Islamic State's efforts at recovery and some progress has been made to draw Sunni militiamen into the security campaign.[100] Now, there are strong arguments for more locally led and locally recruited forces to be developed, and full cooperation restored between all the anti-Islamic State factions.[101] There may now be new openness by Diyala's key Shi`a political bloc Badr toward the involvement of the U.S.-led coalition[102] in areas previously off-limits due to the profusion of Iranian-leaning PMF units, including locations such as northern Diyala. Likewise, the counterinsurgency would be aided by the reintegration into the fight of Kurdish intelligence capabilities in Nineveh, Kirkuk, and Diyala.

Iraq also needs to reequip for counterinsurgency. Without increasing force protection capabilities (i.e., fortified bases, mine-resistant vehicles, route clearance, quick reaction forces, and intelligence), the Iraqi counterinsurgency force is far too vulnerable to

patrol effectively in rural areas or maintain defensive outposts.[x] In areas like rural Kirkuk, southern Nineveh, Diyala, and even areas near Baghdad like Tarmiyah, the reality is that the Islamic State still rules the night, meaning that key parts of the country have only really been liberated for portions of each day.[103] This places stress on the need for night-fighting capabilities and training. It may only be with these steps that key provinces like Diyala, Nineveh, and Kirkuk can begin to resemble a "partnership zone,"[104] where Sunnis can attain command of local police and paramilitary forces, and where U.S.-supported Iraqi forces have the resilience and back-up to disrupt Islamic State insurgents.

Though the Islamic State has gone 'back to the desert' (or at least rural strongholds), this is not out of choice but rather because cities such as Mosul, Ramadi, Fallujah, and Tikrit—all ruinously affected by the Islamic State—are currently inhospitable operating locations for the movement. In 2008, Islamic State of Iraq Emir Abu Omar al-Baghdadi succinctly noted, "We now have no place where we could stand for a quarter of an hour."[105] This is true once again in urban areas, but the Islamic State can now stand for much longer than that in rural areas, especially at night, and indeed held four hamlets near Tall Abtah (in south Nineveh) for a whole night on November 19-20, 2018.[106] Yet while the Islamic State needs rural sanctuaries, such areas may not satisfy the movement for long. An exclusively rural insurgent movement in Iraq risks fading into irrelevance and losing support. The Islamic State is likely to seek to return to regular high-profile bombings in locations that have international prominence, most obviously Baghdad, quite probably via the relatively unprotected eastern flank of the city and its adjacent Shi`a neighborhoods.

Being out of the cities also means being poor or having to work much harder to make money. As RAND's 2016 study of Islamic State finances noted,[107] rural areas such as Diyala and Kirkuk were among the poorest income generators for the movement, requiring an external cash cow (principally Mosul city) to generate economic surpluses that might be spent in cash-poor *wilayat*. Today, there is no urban cash cow. This may drive the Islamic State to try to quietly return to Mafiosi-type protection rackets in the cities and towns[108] and/or to focus a greater proportion of its operational activity on rural money-making ventures. Identifying the Islamic State's 'soft reentry' into cities is a priority intelligence requirement but a difficult challenge. In this vein, it may be worth looking at the metrics for Islamic State attacks on markets and garages with a critical eye, as these may partially represent protection racketeering or might evolve into such schemes, particularly in the Baghdad belts.[y] Outside the cities, the Islamic State may turn to traditional ventures such as encouraging and taxing trade flows and running trucking ventures, as opposed to the practice seen in 2017 and 2018 of killing truckers on the Baghdad-Kirkuk road[109] and thus depressing trade. New money-making ventures may also emerge: commandeering

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x   These impressions were formed from a synthesis of the author's dataset and review of many hundreds of images of ISF, PMF, and Kurdish troops moving and operating.

y   Kidnap for ransom is a phenomenon that analysts need to monitor and where intelligence collection needs to differentiate pure criminal activity from Islamic State fundraising. However, kidnap for ransom is risky and manpower-intensive. It is useful for small groups in chaotic environments, but it cannot fund major insurgent groups or replace the rent that can be drawn from urban intimidation or road taxation networks.

larger agricultural ventures in Diyala and Kirkuk, for instance.

In the longer-term, the Islamic State's expansion back toward a terrain-holding force may not be the movement's preference and is restrained by the absence of a number of drivers that aided its rise in 2011-2014 but which are presently lacking. First, the Syrian civil war gave the Islamic State an expanding sanctuary and access to military equipment, high explosives, manpower, and finances.[110] Today, the Islamic State is under severe pressure in Syria and has lost most of its territory.[111] Second, the Iraqi security forces were decimated by corruption and poor leadership in 2011-2014, while today they are well-led and recovering their capabilities, even factoring in the strain of continuous operations year after year.[112] Third, U.S. forces were absent from Iraq from November 2011 to August 2014, whereas today the partner nations of Combined Joint Task Force Operation Inherent Resolve continue to pursue the enduring defeat of the Islamic State,[113] and the coalition continues to enjoy the consent of the Iraqi government to operate on Iraqi soil. If any of these three factors change, however, the long-term outlook for the Islamic State in Iraq might brighten considerably, making them key strategic signposts to watch.   CTC

Citations

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2   See Michael Knights, "Predicting the Shape of Iraq's Next Sunni Insurgencies," *CTC Sentinel* 10:7 (2017).

3   Ibid. See also Michael Knights and Alexander Mello, "Losing Mosul, Regenerating in Diyala: How the Islamic State Could Exploit Iraq's Sectarian Tinderbox," *CTC Sentinel* 9:10 (2016).

4   See the excellent piece: Hassan Hassan, "Insurgents Again: The Islamic State's Calculated Reversion to Attrition in the Syria-Iraq Border Region and Beyond," *CTC Sentinel* 10:11 (2017).

5   Ibid.

6   Ibid., p. 1.

7   Ibid., p. 2.

8   Ibid., pp. 4-6.

9   See Knights, "Predicting the Shape of Iraq's Next Sunni Insurgencies," and Knights and Mello, "Losing Mosul, Regenerating in Diyala."

10   See footnotes c-f.

11   All incident data is drawn from the author's geolocated Significant Action (SIGACT) dataset.

12   Ibid.

13   Ibid.

14   Ibid.

15   For an example of a very capable SIGACT and martyrdom aggregator, see the Twitter account @TomtheBasedCat

16   On the Sahwa and "Surge" phenomena, see Stephen Biddle, Jeffrey Friedman, and Jacob Shapiro, "Testing the Surge – Why Did Violence Decline in Iraq in 2007?" *International Security* 37:1 (2012): pp. 7-40. See also Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "Assessing the Surge in Iraq," *Middle East Review of International Affairs (MERIA) Journal* 15:4 (2011): pp. 1-14, and Ed Judd, "Counterinsurgency efforts in Iraq and the wider causes of pacification," *Australian Defence Force Journal* 185 (2011): pp. 5-14.

17   All incident data is drawn from the author's geolocated Significant Action (SIGACT) dataset.

18   Hassan, p. 1.

19   See Knights, "Predicting the Shape of Iraq's Next Sunni Insurgencies," p. 17.

20   All incident data is drawn from the author's geolocated Significant Action (SIGACT) dataset.

21   Ibid.

22   Ibid.

23   Ibid.

24   Ibid.

25   Ibid.

26   Ibid.

27   Ibid.

28   Ibid.

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30   For a breakdown of Sunni PMF units, see "Iraqi Security Forces and Popular Mobilization Forces: Order of Battle," Institute for the Study of War, December 2017, p. 46.

31   See Knights, "Predicting the Shape of Iraq's Next Sunni Insurgencies," p. 17.

32   Ibid., p. 20.

33   All incident data is drawn from the author's geolocated Significant Action (SIGACT) dataset.

34   Ibid.

35   Ibid.

36   Ibid.

37   Ibid.

38   Ibid.

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40   For a description of Baghdad's perimeter security requirements, see Sajad Jiyad and Michael Knights, "How to prevent sectarian backlash from Baghdad bombings," Al Jazeera English, May 26, 2017.

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42   All incident data is drawn from the author's geolocated Significant Action (SIGACT) dataset.

43   Ibid.

44   Ibid.

45   The 2014-2016 history of the insurgency in Diyala is described in detail in Knights and Mello, "Losing Mosul, Regenerating in Diyala."

46   See Knights, "Predicting the Shape of Iraq's Next Sunni Insurgencies," and Knights and Mello, "Losing Mosul, Regenerating in Diyala."

47   All incident data is drawn from the author's geolocated Significant Action (SIGACT) dataset.

48   Ibid.

49   Ibid.

50   Knights and Mello, "Losing Mosul, Regenerating in Diyala," p. 6.

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52   Ibid.

53   Ibid.

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56   Ibid.

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62   Ibid.

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74   Ibid.

75   Ibid.

76   All incident data is drawn from the author's geolocated Significant Action (SIGACT) dataset. The author is indebted to Iraq security expert Alex Mello for cleverly matching the sharp (but temporary) month-on-month declines with the arrival of each tranche of Federal Police reinforcements to rural Kirkuk.

77   Ibid.

78   Ibid.

79   See Peter Schwartzenstein's excellent report on the Islamic State's use of weather: "'ISIS Weather' Brings Battles and Bloodshed in Iraq," *Outside*, October 6, 2016.

80   All incident data is drawn from the author's geolocated Significant Action (SIGACT) dataset.

81   Ibid.

82   Ibid. The author's dataset includes large numbers of described cache contents.

83   Based on the author's conversations with U.S. intelligence officers working on Iraq, second and third quarters of 2018. Names and places of interviews withheld at request of interviewees. Almost every cache is reported as including one or more suicide vest, suggesting they were provided to most fighters for potential use during operations or to avoid capture.

84   The author's dataset includes huge numbers of described cache contents.

85   All incident data is drawn from the author's geolocated Significant Action (SIGACT) dataset.

86   Ibid. Qualitative observations drawn from the dataset.

87   Ibid. Qualitative observations drawn from the dataset. In Anbar, for instance, there were only two known efforts by suicide vest attackers to penetrate guarded government buildings in the first 10 months of 2018, one of which was a hospital.

88   Ibid. Qualitative observations drawn from the dataset.

89   Ibid. Qualitative observations drawn from the dataset.

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91   All incident data is drawn from the author's geolocated Significant Action (SIGACT) dataset.

92   Ibid. Qualitative observations drawn from the dataset. Almost all IED descriptions and finds describe fairly standard pressure-plate initiated devices. No references have been found to radio control arming or firing switches, passive-infrared triggers, or triggermen caught during IED incidents. This suggests to the author that the Islamic State today favors simplified IED tactics, perhaps a result of having moved to a more standardized, less inventive model of mass IED emplacement from 2014-2017.

93   Based on the author's conversations with U.S. intelligence officers working on Iraq, second and third quarters of 2018. Names and places of interviews withheld at request of interviewees. Almost every cache is reported as including multiple five-gallon (20-liter) jerry cans, plastic jugs, gas cylinders, or fire extinguishers.

94   Ibid. Drawn from conversations with U.S. intelligence officers and observation of the dataset. The author wishes to thank Iraq security expert Alex Mello for pointing to the presence of command wire in many caches.

95   Ibid. Drawn from conversations with U.S. intelligence officers and observation of the dataset.

96   Ibid. Qualitative observations drawn from the dataset.

97   Hassan, p. 1.

98   Knights, "Predicting the Shape of Iraq's Next Sunni Insurgencies," p. 20.

99   For an open-source reference, see Maher Chmaytelli and Raya Jalabi, "Iraqi forces complete Kirkuk province takeover after clashes with Kurds," Reuters, October 20, 2017.

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102   Based on the author's conversations with U.S. intelligence officers working on Iraq, second and third quarters of 2018. Names and places of interviews withheld at request of interviewees. The advise and assist efforts in Kirkuk, Diyala, and Nineveh will receive more focus and more intelligence, aerial, and special forces support in 2019.

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A View from the CT Foxhole: Mark Mitchell, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations/Low-Intensity Conflict

By Brian Dodwell

Mark E. Mitchell is a highly decorated U.S. Army combat veteran in the Special Operations community with extensive experience in the Middle East and South Asia and national-level defense and counterterrorism policy experience. Mitchell was among the first U.S. soldiers on the ground in Afghanistan after 9/11 and advised the Northern Alliance prior to the fall of the Taliban regime. He was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross for his actions in the November 2001 Battle of Qala-I Jangi in Mazar-e Sharif.

Mitchell is currently the Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations/Low-Intensity Conflict. In 2014, Mitchell served as a Director for Counterterrorism on the National Security Council where he was intimately involved in significant hostage cases and recovery efforts. He was instrumental in establishing the framework for the landmark Presidential Policy Review of Hostage Policy. As a colonel, he commanded 5th Special Forces Group (Airborne) and simultaneously commanded a nationwide, Joint Special Operations Task Force in Iraq in 2010-2011.

CTC: You've been involved in the SOF [Special Operations Forces] enterprise for more than 20 years, from the tactical level during the initial invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 to commanding a Special Forces group to now serving as the PDASD in SO/LIC. Broadly speaking, during that time, the role of SOF units in the CT fight has changed in a number of different ways. What are some of the most important changes that you've seen in the employment of SOF forces during the CT fight over the last 15-20 years?

Mitchell: I think the most obvious ones are that first of all, the SOF enterprise has, over the span of 17 years, almost doubled in size. We were around 40,000 total civilian and military across all of USSOCOM in 2001, with an annual budget then of about $2 billion. Today, the SOF enterprise stands at well over 70,000 people and an annual budget somewhere north of $13 billion. So there's been a remarkable growth not only in the size but also the resources devoted to the SOF enterprise. And importantly, I think that's a reflection of the role that SOF plays not just in counterterrorism but in all aspects of irregular warfare and conventional warfare. We've seen the SOF community and our forces become, instead of a peripheral player, a core element of many of our national security strategy and policy initiatives.

The downside, though, is what we refer to as the "SOF easy button." There's a tendency amongst some policy makers and some leaders—both civilian and military—to look to Special Operations to solve hard problems. And while we're very good at doing that, not every hard problem has a good SOF solution. Special Operations, while they are an important part of achieving our national security objectives, can very rarely be the sole solution. Every DoD effort, including Special Operations, needs to be integrated with our other instruments of national power. I think as we move forward, particularly as our focus shifts from CT to great-power competition, we're going to have to be mindful of that to ensure that we're taking on the right missions.

CTC: What is the role of your office in managing those transitions? Where does ASD SO/LIC fit into this?

Mitchell: ASD SO/LIC was created contemporaneously with U.S. Special Operations Command and was always envisioned to be like SOCOM, a dual-purpose organization. You have two main aspects for SO/LIC: the policymaking side and a Service Secretary-like resourcing and oversight function focused on SOF-specific funding—known as MFP-11—provided by Congress. But for a variety of reasons, particularly in the aftermath of 9/11, ASD SO/LIC became much more focused at a tactical level and on operations overseas, while the resourcing and oversight functions dwindled. Congress took note of that and decided that we needed to re-energize our role in the resourcing and oversight.

The 2017 National Defense Authorization Act included provisions intended to ensure that ASD SO/LIC had a stronger role in the resourcing and oversight functions. So that has caused a kind of fundamental transformation of a portion of the SO/LIC portfolio. We have received authorization to add additional personnel and are becoming more directly involved in issues related to the manning, training, equipping, and organizing functions of USSOCOM. SO/LIC also retained a broad policy portfolio that includes not only Special Operations and combating terrorism but also all aspects of irregular warfare, hence the low-intensity conflict, which is really a legacy from the '80s and the creation of SO/LIC. We also have humanitarian assistance, peacekeeping, disaster relief, global health engagement, counternarcotics, counter transnational organized crime, all forms of illicit trafficking, and counter-threat finance. We also have detainee policy. So we have a very broad portfolio of tasks, all of them relating one way or another to either Special Operations directly or irregular warfare.

CTC: With the recent shift in strategic focus back to great-power competition, how do we maintain an appropriate level of focus on the CT fight?

Mitchell: It's a great question. The good news, or bad news depending on how you want to look at it, is that our adversaries have a vote. The fact that they will continue to seek ways to attack our interests and people overseas and even here at home will force us to reckon with a continuing threat of terrorism. Within SO/LIC, within SOCOM, and even here within the Pentagon, everybody from the Secretary on down recognizes that the CT fight is not going away

Mark E. Mitchell (U.S. Department of Defense)

and that we need to remain engaged. The challenge is to find those opportunities where both the threat is sufficiently manageable and we have partners and allies that are willing to step up to contain that threat. Secretary Mattis has also challenged us to find more cost effective approaches to this problem and increase our overall readiness. The fundamental answer is we're going to have to remain very vigilant with our intelligence community and be prepared to reallocate SOF between great-power competition and CT as necessary to keep the threat at a manageable level.

CTC: Speaking more operationally then, have Special Operations Forces been appropriately applied in the CT fight? Or do you think more change is needed to balance the roles of SOF versus conventional forces versus other instruments of national power?

Mitchell: I think our role in CT has been very appropriate. We have two major roles: training and advising host nation forces in terms of developing their CT capabilities, and then being prepared when required to conduct our own unilateral operations to address the threat. I know there's been a lot of criticism over the years that Special Operations teams "do too much direct action," that they're supposed to be simply training host nation forces. What I think a lot of the critics fail to realize is that part of that training is actually going out with them and advising, assisting, and accompanying them as they conduct those operations. This allows us to coach, teach, mentor, and monitor their operations. Our presence also reassures them and reinforces our partnership. It's both necessary and appropriate.

One of the areas where I think we as the United States, as the Department of Defense have not been as successful as we could potentially be is in developing the institutions that support those CT forces. I remind people all the time that the CT forces—the tactical portion, the guys that are going to do the raids, kick down the doors—are the tip of the CT iceberg. In many of the countries

where there is a significant threat, the rest of that iceberg is below the waterline. This includes the legal foundation for criminalizing terrorist activities, the police function for maintaining control and policing communities, the justice system for trying and incarcerating terrorists and keeping them in jail with a robust correctional facility, the intelligence that supports the military operations, and various other forms of support, as well as broader institution-building in those countries to help address some of the problems that contribute to terrorist recruitment—whether it's poor governance, corruption, ethnic rivalries, etc. And those generally fall well outside the purview of the Department of Defense and all contribute to keeping the CT threat at a manageable level. It's not going away anytime soon. But we have lots of tools outside Special Operations Forces to combat terrorism, and we need to make sure they're fully engaged, particularly in the highest-priority areas.

Another key way that we can balance our commitment to the CT fight, and both Secretary Mattis and President Trump have put great emphasis on it, is getting our other partners and allies that have a vested interest in this CT threat, particularly our European allies, to step up and take a greater role and more responsibilities in these efforts.

CTC: For the general public, to use your analogy of the iceberg, the tip of the iceberg would be those very visual, kinetic aspects of what SOF does. But you're also responsible for a range of other activities in the CT fight, such as civil affairs and information operations. Are you able to comment on the role of these missions in the CT fight and your assessment of how effective we've been in those domains, especially given the priority our adversaries place on the information battleground?

Mitchell: I think it's fair to say that we've had limited success, at least in the CT fight, with our civil affairs efforts. It's not through a lack of effort. But our civil affairs capabilities, while very useful, are limited in value in the CT fight, mainly because a lot of the larger-scale efforts are done under the State Department and USAID. And at a tactical level, we can assist, and they can and do make a difference. But the types of efforts that are going to make lasting, long-term change are really outside the Department of Defense roles.

Now on the information side, I think we have done a much better job than many people realize, and I also think we could still do a lot better. We have been very effective at utilizing information at the tactical fight. I wish I could say a lot more about it publicly, but the nature of information operations is such that much of it remains classified. In terms of the public efforts, though, that we can talk about, I think our Special Operations Forces and our MISO/PSYOP[a] folks have been leading the way and helping not just on the actual CT fight but on the counter-radicalization efforts and giving alternative perspectives, and again, competing against the narratives that are put out there by the Islamic State and, to a lesser extent, al-Qa`ida, and working with our partners at the State Department. I think we've done a fairly decent job. But we can do so much more.

So we're looking at doing some different efforts. SOCOM will

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a   Military Information Support Operations/Psychological Operations

host a joint web ops center that will allow combatant commanders to conduct some of those influence campaigns. We at the Department of Defense and SO/LIC in particular are working with the State Department's Global Engagement Center on a variety of efforts—not just in the CT realm but also in the great-power domain—and we are using the expertise from both our civil affairs and our PSYOP communities to support those efforts.

CTC: Before we switch gears, I wanted to ask you about the expanding role of women in combat. What is the vision for female roles in the SOF enterprise?

Mitchell: We're still struggling to attract women to the Special Forces and SEALS. In the three years since all Special Operations career fields were opened to women, we've had a total of nine women volunteer to go through Special Forces Assessment and Selection. Only one has successfully completed SFAS. These small numbers are a byproduct, I believe, of the current paradigm for integrating women in the SOF enterprise at the tactical level. As a former Special Forces Group commander, I think our current paradigm of only allowing women to be a one-for-one replacement for male soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines is not the most effective use of the talents, skills, and interests that those women can bring to the Special Operations community. I think we need to fundamentally relook at how we are integrating women into SOF. There are numerous historical models like the OSS and British Special Operations Executive in World War II. We need to do this in a way that allows women to come into the force to fill roles that are genuinely complementary and expand our capabilities rather than a role that is simply additive. I believe we should reconsider the roles we expect women to play and the assessment and selection standards we apply to candidates. We also need to create career paths where women can come in, and not only gain experience but also build on that and have opportunities for long-term service in the Special

Operations community with added responsibility and rank. If we really want to reach our full potential and help these great American patriots reach their full potential in SOF, we've got to offer a better opportunity to them.

CTC: To switch topics slightly, in 2014 you served as a director for counterterrorism at the NSC where you were directly involved in significant hostage cases and recovery efforts in a variety of countries around the world. Can you describe some of the challenges that the U.S. government faced in those efforts while you were there?

Mitchell: Sure. First, organizationally and from a policy perspective, the governing policy was outdated. It had been written in 2002 and was largely based off of the hostage experience in the '70s, '80s, and '90s. And it didn't create the right type of organization to address the incredibly complex hostage situations that we encountered in 2014. They were multinational, particularly in Syria where we had hostages from probably a dozen different nationalities being held by the Islamic State, which adds a very complex dynamic to any policy decisions that we make as the United States. Second, there was nothing that was public about the policy, and so there was a great deal of misinformation about what it permitted and didn't permit. And because it was classified, we weren't in a position to share it with the families.

That caused a lot of consternation on their part because they didn't have a firm grasp on the policy. Moreover, we didn't have an organization in the United States government that was dedicated to providing them with the support that they needed. The FBI has their victims' assistance, and they are absolutely fabulous. But there was also a lot of other aspects of being a relative of somebody held hostage that even the FBI couldn't help with—for example, social media accounts or a bank account. Unless the hostages had left a power of attorney, their family members were unable to access

Colonel Mark Mitchell, then CJSOTF-AP Commander, with General Ray Odierno at Balad Air Base in Iraq in March 2010 (U.S. Department of Defense)

their bank accounts or social media accounts to see if there had been withdrawals or postings. So there were a lot of challenges, and again, there was no organization that was dedicated to, first, meeting with the families and helping set their expectations and, second, guiding them through the byzantine nature of the U.S. government, especially as somebody who has not served in government, trying to understand the various roles and responsibilities.

And at that point, too, it was very difficult, particularly in Syria. It was a confluence of so many different factors that made it a hostage situation unlike any we had ever encountered before. First of all, we had no diplomatic relations with the host nation. We had closed our embassy I think in 2012. And the nation, Syria, was obviously in the midst of a civil war. That had a tremendous impact on our ability both to work with the host nation and to gather intelligence within Syria. Prior to 2014 and the initiation of airstrikes, we weren't employing any of our ISR assets in the airspace over Syria, and on top of that, the Islamic State (and other terrorist organizations) had adopted technologies and communications procedures in the wake of the Snowden disclosures that neutralized some of our most effective intelligence-gathering tools against them.

So it presented a really difficult situation, and typically in a hostage situation, the ambassador and the country team has the lead. But in a country where we have no ambassador and no country team and there's a civil war raging, who's the right department to be in charge? Is it the State Department? Is it the FBI? Is it a foreign relations issue? Or is this a criminal conduct issue? And so frankly, we had a lot of tension in the interagency over roles and responsibilities and that was exacerbated, frankly, by the absence of a single point of contact for the families. Some families went from agency to agency seeking answers to their questions. They encountered well intentioned officials but some of the agencies were not willing to say, "The answer to that question is appropriately answered by another agency, and we can't help you." And again, it wasn't done out of malice. It was done out of truly a spirit of wanting to help the families, but it created confusion.

We also had a tremendous intelligence gaps about what was really happening on the ground, only sporadic communication from the hostage-takers, and a lack of transparency on our overall efforts. And so again, it made it incredibly difficult. And the hostage situations in Afghanistan, Yemen, and Somalia all encountered similar issues that made it an unprecedented situation.

CTC: As you were looking to address some of these issues, the President ordered a review of these policies and the structure. You were involved in that process. What were the most important changes that were made, and have you been able to see tangible impacts of those changes?

Mitchell: I actually wrote the charter for the hostage policy review that outlined its objectives and the goals. And I think it did make some very important changes. First and foremost, one of my main recommendations was that the hostage policy, PPD-30, that emerged from this be an unclassified document so that both our families and our adversaries would know exactly what our hostage policy was. We had a number of public documents from U.N. Security Council resolutions, G8 communiques, etc. that talked about hostage policy, but again, the 2002 policy was classified. And so the new policy was issued as an unclassified document with a classified annex. That went a long way towards helping alleviate confusion

about what our policy actually said.

Secondly, the creation of the Hostage Recovery Fusion Cell, hosted by the FBI, was an amazing step forward that has yielded tremendous results and allowed the interagency to have a single organization that was chartered specifically for hostage recovery and to bring all of the intelligence together in one place and ensure that it was shared and shared appropriately.

The third piece was to create an organization associated with the recovery cell that was dedicated to interfacing with the families and to provide a single point of contact for the families to make sure that they were getting a consistent message and the support that they needed and didn't feel like they were being bounced around. There was that one person who could serve as an ombudsman for them and with whom they could develop a relationship. It also created a special presidential envoy for hostage affairs, known as the SPEHA, which I think has been an important step forward in terms of our international relations with other countries in terms of hostage affairs.

CTC: Going back to your roots a little bit, and your time in Afghanistan in 2001: the use of unconventional warfare to depose the Taliban, which you were directly involved in, was highly successful. But the transition to the next phase was arguably less successful, given that we're still doing this today. Is supporting and stabilizing a regime inherently more difficult than overthrowing one? Or were there unique challenges in Afghanistan that might explain why we're still struggling to find a solution there?

Mitchell: I think at a fundamental level, having participated in the initial phases of both the Afghanistan campaign and the Iraq campaign, I can say it is much easier to topple a regime than it is to stand up a government in its wake. There are just so many aspects of creating an effective governance structure. By its nature, it is more difficult and takes a lot more time. I think we made a mistake in Afghanistan by attempting to create a strong central government in a country that really never had a strong central government. Given its ethnic and religious fragmentation, the involvement of its neighbors, and a whole host of historical, cultural dynamics, Afghanistan is just very ill-suited to a strong central government.

There's a reason why President Karzai was derided by some Afghans as the "Mayor of Kabul": his authority didn't extend much

Mitchell in Afghanistan in 2001

beyond the city limits. And so I think that's the first thing that I would point out. We rushed to create a central government that was really never set up for success.

Secondly, I think that we grossly underestimated the resilience of the Taliban and the depth of their commitment to reestablishing their emirate. I think today we still struggle with that. Another challenge of the Taliban is they aren't a monolith; there are a number of factions, and they all have slightly different goals and objectives and motivations. It makes it very difficult to come to any nation-level solutions. I also think that we simply did not invest enough in a political reconciliation with the Taliban. Granted, I have my doubts that the Taliban themselves could be effectively integrated into a democratic state. But there are other alternatives, and I don't think they were fully explored. For example, some sort of partition or federal system that would allow a semi-autonomous Taliban-run area.

But that seems to be their number one goal, the reestablishment of that caliphate, and, until this year, I don't think that we've invested enough in those political reconciliation talks. There's no guarantee they're going to work but it seems pretty clear to me that the situation in Afghanistan today does not have a strictly military solution, and our military efforts have to be in service of a larger, sustainable political solution--not just at the national level in Afghanistan, but all the way down to the local level. And that's where this type of conflict is won and lost, at that local level, which also happens to be where the Taliban have arguably enjoyed their greatest success.

CTC: This question of goals is an interesting one to conclude on. When you went in back in 2001, did you and your team have an image in your head of what a victory would look like? What was the goal at that time? How would you answer that question today? What does an acceptable end-state look like in Afghanistan?

Mitchell: For us, I think, when we first went in, especially given the numbers that we had, a successful end-state looked like us getting out of there alive. But really, overthrowing the Taliban regime and hunting down Usama bin Ladin and al-Qa`ida was our initial end-state. We hadn't given a whole lot of thought, at least from our level, on what came next. Now, 17 years later, looking back, the right end-state has got to be a political accommodation that is sustainable, that brings an end to the fighting. An end-state that allows not only our Afghan partners but the Americans that have fought and died over there to look back and say it was worth it in the end. It has got to provide Afghans an opportunity to live their lives productively without being a threat to their neighbors, without hosting terrorist organizations, and that is sustainable over the long-term. The current environment is not sustainable.

At some point, the American people and our leadership are going to tire of making that commitment there. We've got to get to something that we can sustain with a much smaller footprint. And again, I think it's got to be a political solution, not a military solution.   **CTC**

No End in Sight for the al-Shabaab Threat to Somalia

By Harun Maruf and Dan Joseph

There has been no turning point in the fight against al-Shabaab. The Somali group, affiliated with al-Qa`ida, has not been weakened in the past year as a terrorist force. Even though airstrikes have killed hundreds of al-Shabaab fighters, the group still has significant capability to carry out terrorist attacks. One reason for its resilience is its promotion of operatives with proven track records in military operations to senior positions. Another is its ability to finance its fighters. According to U.N. monitors, the group's taxation system has grown in sophistication and reach to the point where al-Shabaab is now likely running a budget surplus.

The Somali militant group al-Shabaab has never claimed responsibility for the truck bomb that obliterated Mogadishu's K5 junction on October 14, 2017, killing 587 people and wounding more than 300. The group's silence is likely self-protective; the government immediately blamed al-Shabaab for the attack,[1] and many ordinary Somalis did, too, sparking rare open protests against the militants that were attended by thousands of people.

The mood of the crowds was angry, and Somalia's President Mohamed Abdullahi "Farmajo" attempted to channel that anger. "We are telling [Al-Shabaab] that from now on, we are all soldiers and will come to you," he declared to one rally. "We will no longer tolerate a Somali boy being killed and a Somali girl being killed."[2] During visits to neighboring countries, the president reiterated his threats to attack al-Shabaab, vowing to defeat the group within two years if their leaders rejected peace.[3] But a year later, al-Shabaab appears to be paying no heed to the protests or Farmajo's vow. The group

Harun Maruf is a reporter and writer in Voice of America's Africa Division with an extensive experience in working in conflict zones. He has been covering security, extremism, piracy, human rights, politics, and other current affairs issues for nearly three decades. Prior to VOA, Maruf worked for BBC and Associated Press as a reporter in Somalia, and as a researcher for Human Rights Watch. Maruf is the co-author of the book Inside Al-Shabaab: The Secret History of Al-Qaeda's Most Powerful Ally. *He holds a Master of Arts in international journalism from the City, University of London. Follow @HarunMaruf*

Dan Joseph is head of the Africa desk in the Voice of America's central newsroom, a position he has held for 13 years. He is the co-author of the book Inside Al-Shabaab: The Secret History of Al-Qaeda's Most Powerful Ally *and holds a B.A. in journalism and political science from Indiana University.*

quickly claimed responsibility on November 9, 2018, when three bombs exploded outside a Mogadishu hotel, killing more than 50 people.[4] The previous month, the group said it was behind an attack on an European Union convoy in the capital that left two civilians dead,[5] an explosion in Kenya's Mandera County that killed two teachers,[6] and a suicide bombing at a Baidoa restaurant that claimed at least 20 lives. The group also publicly executed five men it accused of spying for the Somali government, Kenya, the United States, or the United Kingdom.[7]

The bombings and killings underscore how al-Shabaab and the forces arrayed against it—the Somali government, the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), and various international forces trying to train and/or support Somali army troops—remain locked in a stalemate.[8] Al-Shabaab lacks the strength to defeat AMISOM on the ground or compel the countries involved to withdraw their troops. But the forces backing the government are unable to destroy al-Shabaab or stop it from carrying out lethal attacks that damage efforts to stabilize Somalia and let its people finally live in peace, free from terrorism.

The latest report of the U.N. Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea, released in November 2018, acknowledges the group's continued potency. Despite an escalation in U.S. airstrikes targeting al-Shabaab leaders and groups of fighters, it stated "there has been no significant degradation of the group's capability to carry out asymmetric attacks in Somalia."[9] The most recent U.S. State Department's annual country reports on terrorism stated that "[in 2017] al-Shabaab ... retained safe haven, access to recruits and resources, and de facto control over large parts of Somalia through which it moves freely."[10] For years, analysts have predicted al-Shabaab was about to vanish or go into steep decline. But as 2018 draws to a close, the long-awaited turning point in the struggle against the militants is still nowhere in sight.

New Faces in Senior Leadership

In addition to mounting devastating terrorist attacks, al-Shabaab has experienced significant military successes in the past few years. The men credited for those successes were promoted in the early months of 2018, placing the group in position to achieve more battlefield victories. Abukar Ali Adan was appointed to a position near the apex of al-Shabaab's power structure, either as a senior advisor or deputy leader to emir Abu Ubaidah, while Moallim Osman was put in charge of the *Jabhat*, the group's army.[11]

Abukar Ali Adan has spent several years as al-Shabaab's military chief (a position he retains) and was also the previous leader of the Jabhat. He first came to prominence outside Somalia in January 2018, when the U.S. State Department designated him as a terrorist. But he has been involved with Somalia's Islamist militants since the early 2000s, when he was a businessman who helped to finance the Islamic Courts Union, the body that briefly seized control of Mogadishu in 2006 with help from al-Shabaab's future leaders.

Originally from Somalia's Hiran region, Ali Adan served as the al-Shabaab governor in Somalia's Lower Juba region in 2009 before getting involved with the Jabhat the following year.[12]

Moallim Osman's involvement in al-Shabaab goes back to the 1990s and the group's predecessor organization—al-Itihad. He gained new prominence after one of al-Shabaab's biggest victories, the assault on a Kenyan military base near the town of El Adde in January 2016. Osman was the architect and commander of the attack,[13] in which al-Shabaab forces stormed and overran the base, killing more than 140 Kenyan soldiers and seizing weapons and other materiel that the fleeing soldiers left behind.

How the promotions will affect al-Shabaab's internal power dynamics remains to be seen. Al-Shabaab already had one deputy leader, Mahad Warsame Qaley (better known as Mahad Karate), who lost a leadership contest to Ubaidah in September 2014, a few days after a U.S. missile attack killed the group's longest-serving emir, Ahmed Godane.[14] Karate reportedly sulked for months after the contest but has continued to run the Amniyat, al-Shabaab's intelligence and suicide bombing unit. Generally speaking, there have been fewer frictions within the group's top ranks under Abu Ubaidah compared to when Godane was in charge. Two sources who spoke to the authors for the book *Inside Al-Shabaab*—one an Islamic scholar, one a key aide to a former al-Shabaab deputy emir—say Ubaidah is a smart politician and administrator who tries to build consensus; the scholar said he is good at *itisal fardi*, or "man management."[15] That may prevent the kind of tensions among al-Shabaab leaders that characterized Godane's reign, tensions that led Godane to order the killings of several top rivals in 2012 and 2013.[16]

Military Capabilities

The last three years of Godane's reign saw al-Shabaab lose most of the territory it captured and ruled during its peak years of 2008-2010. A joint offensive by AMISOM and Somali government troops forced the group to retreat from all the major towns and cities it held—Mogadishu, Baidoa, Beledweyne, Afgoye, Kismayo, and Barawe, among others—as well as swaths of the countryside.

But in 2015, around the time Ali Adan became military chief, al-Shabaab halted its opponents' momentum, in part by targeting the remote military bases set up to help the government maintain control of newly captured areas. The first attack in this campaign, against a base manned by Burundian soldiers in the village of Leego, set the pattern. The attack began like many of al-Shabaab's hotel attacks, with a car bomb. But instead of sending in four or five gunmen to wreak havoc before committing suicide, the group deployed scores of well-armed fighters, directing intense gunfire and rocket-propelled grenades at the soldiers. Within a short time, the Burundians were overwhelmed. Al-Shabaab fighters killed more than 50 of them; the rest fled, enabling al-Shabaab to capture the base and steal all the military supplies. The fighters then withdrew before AMISOM could exact revenge.[17]

Al-Shabaab has used this general plan of attack at least a dozen times since then, with varying results. The most destructive assault to date was the one on Kenyan forces at El Adde. In that case, Kenya tried to deny the extent of its losses, but its efforts were undermined by an al-Shabaab propaganda video.[18] The video, recorded as the attack took place, shows fighters dressed in green fatigues and orange headscarves advancing on the base through fields and firing their way past the base's makeshift walls. In one particularly gruesome scene, an al-Shabaab fighter shoots dead a Kenyan soldier who is emerging from a disabled tank with his hands halfway in the air. At the end, dozens of blood-splattered bodies lie on the ground.

Somali military and intelligence sources have provided information that outlines how al-Shabaab prepares for the assaults:[19]

- When a target is picked, al-Shabaab scouts conduct surveillance of the base and prepare an outline of possible weak spots. The group's intelligence also tries to secure the co-operation of insiders. In the case of El Adde, al-Shabaab made contact with a contingent of 20 Somali troops who were stationed at the base. A former al-Shabaab member who took part in the attack says the troops provided information about the base; in exchange, al-Shabaab gave them a warning that allowed them to leave the base one day before the attack.[20]

- Once the intelligence is gathered, military commanders within al-Shabaab decide what the attack will require in terms of men and weaponry. Among other things, the commanders have to devise a plan on how fighters can move without being detected by the ever-present U.S. drones overhead. The plan must then be approved by the proper leaders in the al-Shabaab hierarchy.

- If the plan gets a green light, al-Shabaab's various units begin working in concert for the attack. The explosions unit prepares bombs and readies the appointed suicide attackers. Al-Shabaab medics usually set up a hospital between 20 and 30 miles away from the target. The men who will assault the base tend to be brought in from different regions by truck, though not directly to the base itself. Usually, they meet at points some distance away and walk toward the target during nighttime, which is always about 12 hours long in equatorial Somalia.

- If the base is overrun, fighters seize weapons, ammunition, trucks, and other useful items, then leave within a few hours to avoid retaliatory airstrikes. The vehicles are taken by al-Shabaab's transport department for repair and repurposing. Weapons and explosives are usually taken by the military and logistics department. Prisoners tend to be taken by al-Shabaab's intelligence service, the feared Amniyat, for interrogation.

Al-Shabaab's recent attack on a Ugandan military base in Bulo Marer, a town on the southern Somali coast, shows the continued extent of al-Shabaab's resources and planning abilities. The April 1, 2018, attack began with suicide bombers blowing up two trucks filled with explosives on the perimeter of the base. Then, as an estimated 100 fighters stormed the base, a bomb-laden mini-bus exploded outside another AMISOM base in nearby Golweyn village. Al-Shabaab fighters also launched simultaneous, smaller attacks on AMISOM and Somali National Army (SNA) positions nearby, evidently to prevent those soldiers from supporting the forces in Bulo Marer.[21]

The April 1 attack on the AMISOM bases did not pay off. All the assaults were repulsed, and Somali officials in Lower Shabelle said they collected the bodies of 53 militants. Al-Shabaab said it killed 59 Ugandan soldiers, but Somali security officials said the Ugandan death toll was closer to 20.[22] However, the fact that al-Shabaab could launch such a complex attack highlighted its significant capabilities and the danger it continues to pose.

A Somali military officer runs to secure the scene of a suicide car bombing near Somalia's presidential palace in Mogadishu, Somalia, on July 7, 2018. (Reuters/Feisal Omar)

Finances

Al-Shabaab can afford these kinds of operations because of a highly effective domestic fund-raising system. U.N. monitors stated the situation plainly in their November 2018 report, explaining their investigation found "the militant group generates *more than enough revenue to sustain its insurgency*."[23] (Italics added for emphasis.) The report noted al-Shabaab's use of a network of checkpoints on roads across southern and central Somalia—employing "mafia-style" tactics of violence and intimidation where needed—which it stated functions as a shadow government even in areas it does not directly control, collecting taxes on agricultural produce, livestock sales, charcoal exports, goods in transport, and vehicles using the roads.[24]

Al-Shabaab taxation is nothing new: the group generated millions of dollars per year from its control of port cities like Kismayo and Barawe during its peak years, and even took slices of the multi-million ransom payments Somali pirates used to receive.[25] Since then, however, the reach and sophistication of the group's taxation system has grown to the point where in the assessment of the U.N. monitors, it is more organized than those of the federal government or the federal member states. One al-Shabaab defector told the monitors that a single checkpoint on the road to Baidoa in the Bay region generates $30,000 per day for the al-Shabaab coffers, or about $10 million per year.[26] The U.N. monitors did not hazard a guess on the group's total annual income, but it is not hard to imagine the number being in the mid-tens of millions.

The money allows the group to pay for its insurgency expenses, including the purchase of guns and explosives, as well as bribes to officials. "Indeed, al-Shabaab is likely generating a significant budgetary surplus; money is not a limiting factor in its ability to wage its insurgency," according to the U.N. monitors, who are now investigating what al-Shabaab does with its excess revenue.[27]

U.S. Airstrikes

The United States has about 500 military personnel in Somalia,[28] tasked with training Somali troops so the army can eventually defend the government and the people. But its main counter-insurgent activity in Somalia continues to be airstrikes. Through December 5, the U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) had conducted at least 38 airstrikes in Somalia during 2018, killing more than 240 militants.[29] AFRICOM described some of the airstrikes as "self-defense" measures for U.S. soldiers or partner forces;[30] at least three others were called in to destroy vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices.[31]

U.S. airstrikes, whether from drones, sea-fired missiles, or warplanes, have killed many of al-Shabaab's top leaders over the years and cost the group hundreds, if not thousands of trained fighters. Somali security officials have long noted the group's leaders constantly travel to avoid easy detection, and more recently have begun to disperse its militias[32] in an effort to avoid catastrophic losses of the kind that happened in November 2017, when a single U.S. airstrike killed more than 100 militants gathered at a camp.[33]

Outlook

Airstrikes are not going to make a lasting difference without a successful ground strategy. Attacks like the one on El Adde have forced AMISOM and the SNA to abandon some of their forward bases, allowing al-Shabaab to retake areas it lost several years ago. The November 2018 U.N. monitors' report says the group is currently in direct control of territory along the Juba valley in southern Somalia, centered around the towns of Jilib, Jamame, Bu'ale, and Sakow, and in coastal areas around Harardhere and El Dher in central Somalia. The report also says al-Shabaab has a growing presence in the Golis Mountains of Puntland.[34]

Speaking during a May 2017 conference on Somalia in London, Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni addressed this problem. "Our concept of counter-insurgency is to have mobile forces to hit the

enemy and zonal forces to ensure that the enemy does not re-infest the area," he told dignitaries who attended the conference, including Somali President Farmajo. "It should be the Somali Army to provide these zonal forces."[35]

But the government, as always, is struggling to exert real power over security or political affairs in Somalia, crippled by corruption, clan rivalries, and a lack of funding. When President Farmajo promised to defeat al-Shabaab, Somali government troops and AMISOM were nowhere near ready to launch a large-scale offensive. In fact, an operational readiness assessment conducted by the government in 2017 found the SNA to be in no shape for counterinsurgency operations. The report said the majority of registered soldiers did not regularly report for duty, and said some 30 percent of SNA soldiers did not have any weapons. Many of those who were armed got the weapons from their clans.[36]

AMISOM, which has protected Somalia's fragile governments for more than a decade, appears uninclined to take the initiative against al-Shabaab. For the past three years, the countries contributing troops to the force—Uganda, Burundi, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Djibouti—have warned at various times they will soon pull out their men,[37] an act that would leave the Somali government and people to defend themselves. The SNA's weakness and the unenticing prospect of an al-Shabaab takeover have rendered those warnings hollow, and the United Nations Security Council has extended AMISOM's mandate through May 31, 2019—although it also slightly reduced the force's maximum troop strength to 20,626.[38]

In November 2018, AMISOM, Somali, and A.U. representatives met in Addis Ababa and drew up a new timetable for the mission. The "concept of operations" document envisions Somalia holding one-man one-vote elections in 2021, followed by a gradual transfer of security responsibilities from AMISOM to Somali government forces.[39] That timetable suggests AMISOM will stay active in Somalia for at least another four years—and could easily stay longer if Somalia proves unable to organize nationwide elections.

The lone positive development from the October 14, 2017, Mogadishu truck bomb was that it inspired the creation of a Somali army unit named after the day of the attack. Inaugurated in July 2018, the October 14th battalion was placed under the command of the Somali defense ministry. The following month, the battalion seized the port town of Marka from al-Shabaab, and have held it for three months, although al-Shabaab fighters remain on the outskirts.[40] It is one of the few places where Somali government forces have ever experienced tangible success against the militants.   **CTC**

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29   AFRICOM spokesman John D. Manley said in a November 28, 2018, email to Maruf that AFRICOM had carried out 36 airstrikes in 2018. The command announced two more airstrikes thereafter, bringing the tally to 38. The fatality total was reached by the authors adding up the deaths announced in 2018 AFRICOM press releases about airstrikes in Somalia. See https://www.africom.mil/media-room/press-releases

30   One example: "U.S. Conducts Airstrike in Support of the Federal Government of Somalia," AFRICOM, November 4, 2018.

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Fixing the Cracks in the Pakistani Taliban's Foundation: TTP's Leadership Returns to the Mehsud Tribe

By Amira Jadoon and Sara Mahmood

The death of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan's (TTP) leader Mullah Fazlullah in June 2018 was followed by a return of the group's leadership to the Mehsud tribe after nearly half a decade. But TTP's newly appointed leader, Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud, has inherited an organization experiencing a precipitous decline due to internal divisions, state-led operations, and competition from Islamic State Khorasan. An examination of a recent Urdu-language document, released by TTP for its members, reveals the new leadership's plans to reconfigure the group for a potential comeback. The document delineates remedial strategic and tactical level principles, which predominantly seek to reinforce central control and structure, while discouraging indiscriminate targeting and excessive brutality.

The death of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan's[a] (TTP) notorious leader, Mullah Fazlullah, in June 2018 in Kunar province, Afghanistan,[1] has generated cautious optimism about the imminent demise of TTP. The death of Fazlullah, whose leadership oversaw the group's brutal attacks against the Army Public School (2014)[2] and Bacha Khan University (2016)[3] in Pakistan is certainly a mark of progress in counterterrorism efforts against the group. But to what extent is Fazlullah's death a devastating blow to TTP? Amongst other factors, TTP's future trajectory depends partially on the leadership of Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud, the new leader appointed by TTP's Shura council after Fazlullah's death.

The return of the TTP leadership mantle to the Mehsud tribe after almost half a decade warrants examination to assess the future

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a   Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan is also commonly referred to as the Pakistani Taliban.

Dr. Amira Jadoon is an assistant professor at the Combating Terrorism Center and the Department of Social Sciences at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. She specializes in international security, economic statecraft, political violence, and terrorism. Follow @AmiraJadoon

Sara Mahmood is a senior analyst at the International Center for Political Violence & Terrorism Research of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University in Singapore. Her research focuses on insurgency and political violence in Pakistan and Afghanistan and the nature of women's involvement in terrorism. Follow @sara_mrana

direction of the group. This article briefly highlights some of TTP's current challenges and then delves into a 13-page, Urdu-language document released by TTP in September 2018, titled "The Code of Conduct: For the Mujahideen of Tehrik-i-Taliban." The "Code of Conduct," released on TTP's website, provides valuable insight into the group's intended plans under its new leadership as it discusses organizational strategy and structure, martyrdom operations, targets, and policies governing loot, prisoners of war, and defectors.[4] The document was released four months after the change of leadership, and indicates its authors' acute awareness of TTP's inherent weaknesses and the necessary corrective measures to prevent internal collapse. Drawing on the Urdu-language document, this article elucidates TTP's designs to remedy the cracks in its foundation.

TTP's Ongoing Woes

TTP officially emerged on the Pakistani landscape in late 2007 when a shura (leadership council) of about 40 senior Taliban leaders, belonging primarily to the Federally Administered Tribal Areas[b] (FATA) of Pakistan, formed an umbrella organization under the leadership of Baitullah Mehsud from South Waziristan.[5] TTP's stated objectives were to enforce sharia, fight NATO forces in Afghanistan, and, perhaps most importantly, unite against the Pakistani Army's post-9/11 military operations.

TTP gained regional and global notoriety through a series of prominent events. In 2007, it occupied parts of Pakistan's Swat Valley. May 2010 saw U.S. officials link TTP to the failed Times Square bomb plot in New York.[6] In October 2012, TTP was linked to the shooting of Malala Yousafzai.[7] But it was TTP's brutal attack on an Army Public School in Peshawar in December 2014 that stunned Pakistan. The attack resulted in the deaths of at least 141 individuals, including 132 children.[8] Indiscriminate violence against civilians, and especially children, played a significant role in rendering unprecedented countrywide support for the Pakistani army's operations against TTP.[9]

Despite being one of the gravest internal threats faced by the Pakistani state to date, TTP has long suffered from organizational dysfunction and operational degradation due to both internal and environmental factors. Externally, the group has faced a massive onslaught by the Pakistani Army in both urban and rural areas,[10] which has significantly undermined TTP enclaves, infrastructure, and recruitment ability. The Pakistani Army claimed to have killed approximately 3,500 militants in its Operation Zarb-e-Azab, launched in mid-2014, which targeted TTP operatives amongst others.[11] In Afghanistan and the tribal regions of Pakistan, U.S. drones regularly target TTP leaders.[12] Collectively, these efforts have resulted in a significant decline in terrorist attacks across Pakistan since

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b   The Pakistani parliament passed a bill in May 2018 to merge FATA with Pakistan's Khyber Pukhtoonkhwa region.

2013,[c] as well as in TTP-claimed attacks. Per the Global Terrorism Database, compared to the year 2014 in which TTP claimed 163 attacks, the group's total attacks in 2015 fell by 33% and were almost 42% lower than the 2014 figure in 2016 and in 2017.[13]

Internally, the appointment of a leader from outside the Mehsud tribe (i.e., Fazlullah in November 2013) created numerous fissures in the organization, and resulted in the emergence of splinter groups such as Jamaat-ul-Ahrar.[14] More recently, TTP suffered a substantial setback when several of its commanders defected to the Islamic State Khorasan (ISK) in late 2014 and Hafiz Saeed (TTP's Orakzai faction commander) was appointed as ISK's first emir.[15] The combination of battlefield losses due to counterterrorism efforts, warring factions, and competition from ISK poses an existential threat to TTP. Against this backdrop, the TTP shura's decision to appoint a member of the Mehsud tribe[16] as its new leader clearly reflects a strategy that seeks internal unity.

TTP's New Leader
Who exactly is Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud? Mufti Noor is a religious scholar and writer with significant experience in the jihadi sphere under his belt.[17] Hailing from South Waziristan, Noor Wali was reportedly heading TTP operations in Karachi as well as TTP's publication department, prior to being named the group's new leader.[18] He is known for his staunch opposition to polio vaccination campaigns and for endorsing violence against health workers in Pakistan.[19] Noor Wali also authored a 588-page book released in November 2017, entitled "The Mehsud Revolution in South Waziristan: From British Raj to Oppressive America," in which he claims that TTP was responsible for the Benazir Bhutto assassina-

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c   Overall, terrorist attacks in Pakistan dropped from a peak of 2,200 attacks in 2013 to about 700 in 2017, per the Global Terrorism Database. See Global Terrorism Database, National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), 2018.

tion in 2007. Noor Wali's book also discusses the controversial topic of TTP's internal power struggles in Karachi.[20]

Noor Mufti seems eager to make TTP's presence felt. Under his leadership, the group has already launched numerous provocative attacks. Shortly after the deaths of Mullah Fazlullah and his son in separate drone strikes in Afghanistan in March and June of 2018, respectively,[21] TTP immediately unleashed attacks against Pakistani politicians in July 2018. On July 10, the Awami National Party (ANP) leader, Haroon Bilour, was killed along with 12 others in a suicide blast in Peshawar.[22] Less than two weeks later, another political party's candidate, Ikram ullah Gandapur, was killed in a suicide attack in Dera Ismail Khan.[23] The surge in attacks against prominent politicians during Pakistan's election season was likely an attempt by Noor Mufti to establish his legitimacy as a leader and reinforce TTP's opposition to democratic voting process.

TTP's Code of Conduct
TTP's code of conduct, released on its website in September 2018, is largely directed toward its members. Divided into 67 points, the document sketches TTP's overall strategy, organizational design, policies regarding target selection and looting, and the management of prisoners and defectors.[24] Below, some of the prominent themes in the document are discussed and contextualized with regard to TTP's organizational and environmental challenges.

Theme #1: Reinforcing Central Control and Structure
First and foremost, the document embodies efforts to unite differing factions under TTP's central leadership, as obedience to the leadership (both the emir and shura council) is a principal theme in the opening sections of the document. The section titled 'Principles Governing Internal Matters Affecting the Mujahedeen' emphasizes the obligation of every fighter to obey the decisions of his factional *emir*, who in turn must submit to the decisions of the central emir.[25]

With regard to structure and discipline within the organization, various principles are provided at both the individual and group

Noor Wali Mehsud (center), the new leader of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan, is pictured in a screen capture from a video released by the group. "Interview with the Leader: Noor Wali Mehsud," Umar Media Video, Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan, July 2018.

level. The document endeavors to delineate clear lines of authority, responsibilities, and constraints on individual behavior to minimize intragroup conflict. For example, one of the principles emphasizes that every *mujahid* must treat all assigned responsibilities as essential duties, and warns against transgression of granted authorities or interference with the activities of another. Any individual who misuses his *mujahid* status or creates difficulties for his faction will be punished accordingly. At the factional level, several principles outline how to manage intra- and inter-factional disputes. Internal disputes within a faction, or 'constituency,' must be resolved locally. Failure to do so will result in the conflict being forwarded to the central shura council, which may then split disputing members across different constituencies. Thereon, such members will be prohibited from interfering with the business of their former constituencies and will not be assigned any major responsibilities in their new constituencies.

The next section lays out specifics about the internal organization and functioning for individual factions. Every locality is recommended to create its own shura council consisting of at least six members who can issue decision-making advice on important matters to the faction, and also maintain contact with the central shura council. The document provides further guidance on setting up courts and a 'corrective center' for members, with an emphasis on maintaining regular communication with TTP central. For example, one of the points specifies that the appointed *qazi* (judge) of each locality must provide the shura council with a record of all decisions made in the past six months.

The principles discussed above clearly demonstrate the new leadership's efforts, at least in theory, to reinforce the internal structure of the organization, minimize sources of in-house dispute, and circumvent further internal divisions. These efforts at centralization are not surprising given that TTP, as a conglomerate of various militant factions, has faced continuous fractionalization and defections since the appointment of Fazlullah in late 2013[26] and the arrival of ISK in late 2014.

Theme #2: Legitimate Targets and Martyrdom Attacks
The section 'On Targets' identifies broad categories of legitimate targets and those that members are prohibited from attacking. The guidelines in this section illustrate another attempt to unify the factions within TTP by providing a standardized target list, as well as resolving the controversy surrounding the permissibility of targeting children and educational institutions.

State institutions—including the military, police, judiciary, and civilian government—are identified as enemies and thus legitimate targets for attacks. This list of targets aligns with TTP's previous and current strategy of targeting all Pakistani state actors and retaliating against all military operations. The July 2018 suicide attack on the ANP, for example, was claimed by TTP as "revenge for the previous government."[27] Any militias "openly fighting with the Army against the mujahideen" are also presented as fair game. Revenge and reprisal attacks are a recurring theme in TTP propaganda since the military's counterterrorism operations, which were triggered in 2014 after the TTP bombing of the Army Public School. Revenge attacks targeting civilian and military representatives and infrastructure will likely continue unabated in the months ahead.

In what seems to be an effort to rebrand itself, and especially stop its association with indiscriminate attacks, TTP distinguishes between hard and soft targets and affirms that educational institutions will not be attacked. In addition, the document specifies that religious seminaries, public gatherings, and markets will be avoided as targets to prevent mass casualties and loss of civilian life.[28] Again, any disobedience in this regard warrants punishment for those held responsible. This explicit policy seems to be a direct outcome of the backlash TTP received after its attacks on Army Public School and the Bacha Khan University.[29]

However, not all civilian targets are out of the question. All NGOs and institutions that promote "obscenity" in the country are deemed to be legitimate targets of the group, although the criteria for obscenity appears to have been left intentionally vague.[30] The document also talks about attacks against groups or communities, which have been declared non-believers or *kafir*. In the past, the TTP has not hesitated in launching attacks on certain Muslim minority sects in Pakistan. The guidelines dictate that members of such communities may not be targeted simply on the basis of their association with the '*kafir*' group unless they are observed to be working in collaboration with the Pakistani state, or are guilty of insulting Islam in any way. In the past, TTP has attacked Shi`a, and in 2010, it claimed responsibility for coordinated attacks on two Ahmedi mosques in Lahore, which killed at least 80 individuals. Although TTP's attacks against minorities are likely to continue it is possible, given its attempts to pivot away from the blatant use of indiscriminate violence as discussed above, that TTP's attacks against minorities' places of worship will diminish in the future.[d]

The guidelines also dictate that martyrdom operations are reserved for "extremely important" targets and that this highest reward must not be wasted on non-valuable targets.[31] Although what constitutes an important target is not defined, it likely refers to attacks on hardened targets such as the military or police. Once again, in an attempt to retain control over the group's operations, the code of conduct states that "the right to select targets or plan attacks has only been accorded to the emir and deputy emir and any inappropriate targets will result in punishment for the mujahideen held responsible."[32] This could be a reference to the January 2016 attack on Bacha Khan University, where TTP commander Umar Mansoor claimed responsibility for killing 21 people. Subsequently, contradicting Mansoor's claim, the group's spokesperson Muhammad Khorasani and Fazlullah released a statement denying TTP involvement in the attack, revealing key internal differences about the acceptability of targeting youth in non-military educational institutes.[33]

Even though the document does not identify any specific countries, those that have an active alliance with and presence within Pakistan represent possible targets. The code of conduct sustains that "all non-Islamic partners of the state are viable targets."[34] In the past, U.S. interests have been strategic targets for TTP as U.S.

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d   TTP has increasingly adopted a more sectarian stance over the years, which has been partially influenced by its close ties to anti-Shi`a groups such as the Lashkar-e-Jhangvi. For its claim of responsibility for attacking the two Ahmedi mosques in Lahore, see Rizwan Mohammed and Karin Brulliard, "Militants attack two Ahmadi mosques in Pakistan; 80 killed," *Washington Post*, May 29, 2010. For an example of TTP attacking Shi`a, see Javed Hussain and Jibran Ahmad, "Bomb near mosque in northwest Pakistan kills at least 22, wounds dozens," Reuters, March 31, 2017. For a more detailed discussion, see Mona K. Sheikh, *Guardians of God: Inside the Religious Mind of the Pakistani Taliban* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016) and "Pakistan Security Report 2009," Pak Institute For Peace Studies (PIPS), January 2010.

drone strikes have killed several of the groups' key leaders. Presently, China's strong economic and military ties with Pakistan, coupled with the persecution of the minority Uighur population, could drive attacks on Chinese interests. In 2012, TTP claimed responsibility for killing a Chinese tourist and deemed it "revenge for the Chinese government killing our Muslim brothers in the Xinjiang province."[35]

Theme #3: Dealing with Prisoners, Spies, and Defectors
Lastly, the document incorporates guidelines regarding the group's stance on brutality and defections that differentiate it from ISK in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region. The code of conduct advises members against ruthlessness and vigilante justice when dealing with "enemy prisoners" or "spies," and urges all decisions regarding punishments to be directed toward the shura council. This distinguishes TTP from ISK's routine tactics of torturing and beheading prisoners. ISK has released multiple videos modeled after the Islamic State that show spies and other prisoners dressed in orange who are violently executed by ISK members.[36] The code of conduct concludes by stating that "no member is permitted to have an alliance or link with rival groups whose ideology conflicts with that of the TTP" and that doing so would result in an appropriate punishment.[37] Since TTP has experienced defections to ISK since 2014,[38] this overt statement reveals the group's concerns regarding a similar trend post-Noor Wali's appointment.

It is pertinent to note that similar to its code of conduct, TTP propaganda (videos, magazines, and statements) has largely been in Pakistan's national language, Urdu,[e] indicating that its primary audience is based across Pakistan.

This is also a reflection of TTP's transformation over the years from a predominately Pashtun movement to an ethnically diverse one, as it has worked closely with non-Pashtun groups and attempted to recruit from a broader demographic.[39] A recent exception was its English-language magazine entitled "Sunnat-e-Khaula," which was directed toward urban and educated women, in line with the Islamic State's efforts to recruit this demographic in Pakistan. While the magazine indicated TTP's willingness to evolve by bringing women into active combat roles, its code of conduct did not discuss women's roles. It remains to be seen whether the change of leadership will have any impact on women's participation in TTP's ranks.

Periodically, the group has released videos and statements discussing its stances, operations, and practices governing waging offensive and defensive jihad and negotiations with the government. However, this is the first code of conduct that TTP's media arm has released since the military operations against the group began in 2014. Releasing a code of conduct as the first publication after Noor Wali's appointment indicates that the group's priorities rest

on reiterating its *modus operandi* and strategy to ensure fusion across rival or competing factions. Overall, TTP's code of conduct seems to be an attempt by its new leadership to shift the locus of decision-making to the group's center. The guidelines in the document are designed to promote inter-factional cohesion and reinforce control over member factions' behavior and target choice. The discernible outcomes sought by TTP are to mitigate internal power struggles and minimize reckless attacks that have the potential to generate a backlash from the wider population. Notably, TTP's list of legitimate targets actively shifts away from targeting civilians in a bid to not only improve its own tarnished image of targeting vulnerable civilian populations, but also to differentiate itself from groups like ISK that regularly target mosques and schools. It remains to be seen whether this amounts to a meaningful change in TTP's choice of targets going forward. As such, while the code of conduct does not reflect a revolutionary change in the direction of TTP, it does indicate that the leadership of the group has a nuanced understanding of where TTP went wrong and what needs to be done for a revival.

TTP's Potential Comeback
Despite leader decapitation and defections of members to ISK, TTP's survival as an organization and its comeback cannot be ruled out. Firstly, TTP's relationships with the Afghan Taliban, Haqqani Network, and al-Qa`ida remain strong,[40] and may help the group to gain momentum. In July 2018, al-Qa`ida in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) released a statement showing solidarity with TTP by expressing condolences over Fazlullah's death.[41] This was followed by a video eulogy from Ayman al-Zawahiri in which he praised Fazlullah and expressed support for TTP.[42] Shortly after reports of Jalaluddin Haqqani's death emerged in September 2018, TTP issued a message praising him.[43] The continuity of a strong relationship between al-Qa`ida, TTP, and the Afghan Taliban minimizes the possibility of a strategic alliance between TTP and ISK. Conversely, the growing potency of ISK in the AfPak region presents an opportunity for its rivals[44] to form a closer network.

Secondly, TTP's media arm, Umar Media, remains active in dissemination of the group's ideology. TTP released its first official magazine in 2016, the most recent issue of which was released in February 2018.[45] This magazine focuses on reiterating the group's Deobandi ideology, *modus operandi*, and 'Islamic' debates on jihad. Some specific themes discussed include U.S. drone strikes, celebration of Pakistan's independence day, polio vaccinations, and women's support roles in jihad.[46] In one issue, the magazine discussed the "globalization of jihad," stating that the fight will not end in Pakistan, but extend to Kashmir and India. The extension of jihad into Kashmir and India parallels ISK's efforts to establish a Jammu and Kashmir chapter in February 2016.[47] Similarly to ISK, TTP likely recognizes the potential to radicalize and recruit from a young and aggrieved Kashmiri population. While outward expansion remains a long-term goal for TTP, it is likely presently focused exclusively on operational resurgence, internal consolidation, and revival within Pakistan.   **CTC**

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e   Some of TTP's statements and audios are concurrently released in Urdu and Pashto. However, given TTP's goals of challenging the Pakistani state and establishing sharia law, it positions itself an Islamist group rather than an ethnic movement, which explains its focus on Urdu-language propaganda.

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United States v. Aws Mohammed Younis al-Jayab: A Case Study on Transnational Prosecutions of Jihadi Foreign Fighter Networks

By Bennett Clifford and Seamus Hughes

The recent guilty plea in the criminal case against Aws Mohammed Younis al-Jayab, a resident of Arizona, Wisconsin, and California, makes public previously undisclosed information about a transnational jihadi logistical network with members located in Switzerland, Syria, Turkey, and the United States. The disclosures in related criminal cases in Chicago, San Francisco, and Switzerland shed new light on cross-border foreign fighter recruitment networks in the United States and Europe, and the potential threat they pose.

On October 31, 2018, Aws Mohammed Younis al-Jayab, a 25-year-old Iraq-born Sacramento, California resident, pleaded guilty in the United States District Court for the Northern District of Illinois to providing material support to Ansar al-Islam, a designated foreign terrorist organization, and making false statements in an international terrorism case.[a] Al-Jayab's guilty plea concluded a protracted legal process featuring indictments in two separate district courts, motions for a change of venue, and motions to suppress evidence gained from a FISA warrant and related proceedings against co-conspirators in a third district.[1] While investigating al-Jayab, law enforcement uncovered his links to a network of jihadi attack planners based in Switzerland who were connected to individuals in Syria, Turkey, and other countries.

Al-Jayab is amongst the rare few who returned to the United States after fighting for a jihadi organization in Iraq or Syria.[2] According to statistics compiled by George Washington University's Program on Extremism, al-Jayab is one of the 72 identified American "travelers" who successfully joined jihadi groups in Syria and Iraq. Of the 72, 24 (33.3%) are believed to have died overseas, and 31 more (43.1%) are ostensibly at large. For the latter, there is no credible confirmation of their deaths or reports on their current statuses.[3] Three of the 72 identified travelers are in the custody of foreign governments.[4] Meanwhile, 15 travelers (20.8%) have returned to the United States; of that number, the United States has publicly charged 12 with terrorism-related offenses.[5] Al-Jayab is the ninth known traveler to be convicted in a U.S. court.[6]

While lawyers and scholars are intrigued by the uniqueness of foreign fighter returnee prosecution in the United States, media and public interest in this case is sparked by al-Jayab's social media presence, looks, and background. In a marked departure from the austere mien of many of his American jihadi counterparts, al-Jayab's Facebook posts advertised a young man with a curated appearance. His profile pictures, which show al-Jayab's well-coiffed hairstyle and designer sunglasses, led several news outlets to dub him the "hipster terrorist."[7]

Another aspect of al-Jayab's persona drew the attention of lawmakers—his refugee status in the United States placed the young man within the crosshairs of an intensifying national security debate. After al-Jayab's arrest in January 2016, opponents of the Obama administration's vetting and visa processing programs highlighted al-Jayab's refugee status, using his arrest to argue that the programs were insufficient to prevent terrorists from entering the United States.[8]

Augmenting their argument by pointing to Iraqi refugee Omar Faraj Saeed al-Hardan, charged with terrorism-related offenses in the Southern District of Texas on the same day as al-Jayab, some in Congress used these two arrests to argue for stricter vetting procedures for refugees and visa applicants.[9] Commenting on both cases, House Homeland Security Committee Chairman Michael McCaul (R-TX) argued that "jihadists see [refugee and visa] programs as a back door into America and will continue to exploit them until we take action."[10] Others, in contrast to McCaul, used al-Jayab's arrest as evidence that the program could identify, detect, and arrest jihadis who were attempting to exploit U.S. immigration law.[11]

A review of Islamic State-related prosecutions in the United States, however, reveals that al-Jayab and al-Hardan's refugee statuses were anomalous. The vast majority of the individuals arrested for activities on behalf of the Islamic State since 2014 were U.S. citizens or permanent residents.[12] Narrowing the sample down to the 15 known American jihadis who returned to the United States after fighting in Syria and Iraq, al-Jayab was the only one known to have held refugee status at the time of return to the United States.[13]

The al-Jayab case is highly instructive for scholars and practitioners of counterterrorism who are interested in the dynamics behind foreign fighter logistics networks in the United States and how transnational connections allow for local and international mobilization. As detailed below, an extensive, transnational social network of jihadi contacts critically aided al-Jayab in building the group of contacts that assisted him in fundraising, logistics, and his eventual travel.

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a   Al-Jayab was not alleged to have plotted any jihadi attack in the United States. "Plea Agreement," United States of America vs. Aws Mohammed Younis al-Jayab, United States District Court for the Northern District of Illinois, 2018.

Bennett Clifford is a research fellow at the Program on Extremism at George Washington University. Follow @_bCliff

Seamus Hughes is Deputy Director of the Program on Extremism at George Washington University. Follow @SeamusHughes

Al-Jayab's Travel to and from Syria

In October 2012, Aws Mohammed Younis al-Jayab arrived in the United States from a refugee camp in Syria in which he and his

family were staying.[14] He received United Nations refugee status from an application his father filed on behalf of the family.[15] "From the moment he arrived in the United States," the U.S. government argued in an April 2018 motion, "the defendant began to plot his return to Syria to fight on behalf of terrorist groups there."[16] Indeed, weeks after moving to the United States, he was in contact with an associate in Iraq via Facebook Messenger, lamenting: "I want to go back, God is my witness … I'll go to Turkey and enter in smuggled to Syria … go with Ansar [al-Islam] or the Front [Jabhat al-Nusra] only."[17]

From October 2012 to November 2013, al-Jayab developed his plan to travel to Syria to join jihadi groups. Court documents present evidence from online conversations between al-Jayab and at least 16 members (labeled Individual A to Individual P) of an overseas logistics network responsible for arranging travel and supplies for interested jihadi foreign fighters.[18] During this period of the Syrian conflict, jihadi groups in Syria were in flux, with many cooperating in early operations against the Assad regime.[19] Some members of al-Jayab's logistics network identified as affiliates of Ansar al-Islam, a jihadi group founded by the Kurdish cleric Mullah Krekar (Najm al-Din Faraj Ahmad).[20] Others were fighting with the upstart Jabhat al-Nusra, which at the time was a project of al-Qa`ida in Iraq (AQI) to establish a foothold across the border in Syria.[21] Court documents claim that at the time of their conversations with al-Jayab, network members were located in several countries, including the United States, Syria, Turkey, Cyprus, and Indonesia.[22]

Only one individual, referred to in the criminal complaint as "Individual I," is known by name. Authorities revealed him to be Omar Faraj Saeed al-Hardan, a Houston, Texas-based Iraqi refugee charged on the same day as al-Jayab.[23] In April 2013, al-Hardan and al-Jayab discussed their idea of traveling to Syria to join either Ansar al-Islam or Jabhat al-Nusra on Facebook Messenger.[24] During this discussion, al-Hardan claimed to have fighting experience; he said he had participated in Ansar al-Islam operations in Iraq at the age of 16 and told al-Jayab the best ways to obtain a variety of firearms in Syria.[25] Both men made trips to shooting ranges—in Wisconsin and Texas, respectively—to train for fighting overseas.[26]

One major obstacle in al-Jayab's travel plan was his finances. In January 2013, al-Jayab had already spoken to a series of other network members in an attempt to gather enough money to buy plane tickets.[27] "Individual F," located in Syria at the time, sent two transfers of $231.00 and $450.00 to al-Jayab in Tuscon, Arizona, via Western Union.[28] This was not enough money for a plane ticket; after the transaction, al-Jayab told another network member that he was still in need of $400.00.[29] Along with this delay, other barriers arose. First, al-Jayab's contacts in Syria were worried that he would be detected in Turkey if he traveled to Syria with U.S. travel documents. They advised him to find an alternate path or way to conceal the purpose behind his journey.[30] Al-Jayab told them that he would declare himself at the U.S. Embassy in Turkey beforehand to avoid detection: "I'll say tourism, or I'll tell him my grandmother is sick in Turkey and I wanted to be with her."[31] With direction from network members after al-Jayab received the Western Union transfers, al-Jayab and al-Hardan decided that they would travel together to Syria. "It is better if we leave together when the Turkish route is open, so that if we are confronted by any resistance from the enemy, there is the two of us," al-Hardan argued. "I mean we would help each other."[32]

Planning travel in small groups is common practice for Ameri-

can jihadi travelers. For many, networked connections to other travelers are their best chance of reaching their destination by building "strength in numbers."[33] A majority of the American jihadi travelers in the Program on Extremism's database leveraged connections to like-minded individuals in their kinship and friendship networks to logistically support their travel attempts.[34] The downside of dependence on connection-building, as al-Hardan discovered, is that network expansion increases the risk of infiltration and discovery of plots by law enforcement.[35]

In 2014, al-Hardan began communicating with a person whom he believed to be a supporter of the Islamic State, but was, in reality, a confidential human source for the FBI.[36] Al-Hardan was arrested and later convicted by plea, and in December 2017, a judge in the Southern District of Texas sentenced him to 16 years in federal prison.[37]

Al-Jayab, unlike al-Hardan, did not have the misfortune of unwittingly communicating with a confidential human source, and by November 2013, he was on his way to Syria via Turkey. Ultimately, al-Jayab's winnings from a 2013 insurance settlement, in combination with the funds he received from donors in Syria, paid for his trip.[38] With the $4,500 he received, he immediately bought a plane ticket from Chicago to Istanbul, departing the United States by himself on November 9, 2013.[39] By the end of the month, he was in Aleppo, Syria, fighting with Ansar al-Sham.[40] Ansar al-Sham, which is not a designated foreign terrorist organization in the United States, fought alongside Jabhat al-Nusra and other Sunni extremist groups during raids against the Syrian army in the Aleppo governorate, according to al-Jayab's account.[41] Al-Jayab viewed Ansar al-Sham as "the same as Ansar al-Islam, just with another name."[42] Initially, his view of the organization that referred to itself as the "Islamic State" at the time was dim: "[they] have killed many from Jabhat al-Nusra and hundreds of mujahidin … this is the blood of Muslims shed at the hands of the State [referring to Islamic State]."[43] That notwithstanding, he claimed that he "would have been the first to join" the Islamic State if not for its penchant for intra-jihadi violence.[44]

As time progressed, jihadi infighting in Syria wrought by the Islamic State began to discourage al-Jayab. By January 2014, he had abandoned Ansar al-Sham for Ansar al-Islam.[45] Al-Jayab re-expressed his desire to join the Islamic State to friends and acquaintances, referring to the group as "our brothers" and detailing a joint operation his group conducted with the Islamic State.[46] Eventually, however, al-Jayab claimed that the Islamic State's stoking of intra-jihadi violence convinced him to leave Syria. "I did not come to fight [in Syria] for the sake of sedition," he explained to a Syria-based colleague referred to as "Individual M" on January 7, 2014.[47] Ten days after this conversation, al-Jayab was on a flight to Sacramento, California, where his family had recently moved.[48]

When al-Jayab filled out his customs form upon returning to the United States, he listed Jordan and the United Kingdom as the only countries he visited during his overseas travel.[49] This action prompted U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) to interview al-Jayab on several occasions between July and October 2014. During the first interview, he admitted his omission of a "vacation" to Turkey in January 2014 on his customs form.[50] During a subsequent interview, al-Jayab claimed he had no affiliation with any terrorist organizations. He stuck to his original story and told investigators that he went to Turkey to visit his grandmother.[51] After a four-month investigation, which included the use of collected

communications pursuant to Section 702 of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act, two juries in separate U.S. district courts indicted al-Jayab. In January 2016, he was indicted in the Eastern District of California for making a false statement involving international terrorism.[52] Two months later, a special grand jury in the Northern District of Illinois indicted al-Jayab for providing material support to a designated foreign terrorist organization.[53]

The Swiss Connection: Al-Jayab and the Baden-Schaffhausen Cell

Most of al-Jayab's co-conspirators are non-U.S. persons and are thus unnamed in the U.S. indictment. However, as U.S. law enforcement was exploring al-Jayab's activities in Syria, they also assisted foreign partners in uncovering the individuals within his logistics network.

In October 2015, federal prosecutors in Switzerland filed an indictment against four Swiss nationals, all natives of Iraq.[54] The Swiss indictment charges Mohammed Osamah Abed Mohammed (subsequently referred to as Abed Mohammed), Wesam al-Jbory, Mohammed al-Obaidy, and Abdulrahman Mohammed Tawfeeq al-Obaidy with participating and supporting a criminal organization.[55] The four men, who lived in the northern Swiss towns of Baden and Schaffhausen, traveled to Switzerland from Syria in 2012 with the intent of setting up a jihadi attack-planning cell in the country.[56] The Swiss indictment claims that the men leveraged a network of at least eight other Islamic State supporters, including one resident of the United States—Aws Mohammed Younis al-Jayab.

Swiss police identified several of these individuals, mainly by pseudonym or *kunya*, who stayed in contact with the cell in Switzerland via Facebook and Skype chat groups. The administrator of the chat groups, known only as "Abu Hajer," was assessed by Swiss law enforcement to be a senior Jabhat al-Nusra commander who was active in Damascus, Aleppo, and Ghouta before his defection to the Islamic State (then known as ISIL) at some point between August and October in 2013.[57] Abu Hajer was responsible for coordinating cross-border movement of foreign fighters from Turkey into Syria and vice versa.[58] The chat groups, alternately titled "Lions of Tawhid" and "You, the lions of the Islamic State," detail conversations between Abu Hajer and a group of Iraqis who had been active in Syrian jihadi groups but had since left to settle in other countries, including the four men who were later arrested in Switzerland.[59]

Two of the men who moved to Switzerland—Abed Mohammed and al-Obaidy—fought under Abu Hajer's command until 2012 while living in a shared apartment in Jirmanah, a suburb of Damascus.[60] A third man, Wesam al-Jbory, frequented the apartment in Jirmanah. The three men reconnected after they all moved to Switzerland. From the towns of Baden and Schaffhausen, they then coordinated the back-and-forth transfer of jihadi foreign fighters from Europe and the United States to the Syrian front, and later facilitated the passage of militants from Syria to Turkey and back into Europe.[61] In addition, between 2012 and 2013, Abed Mohammed, al-Obaidy, and al-Jbory made a series of trips between Switzerland and the Jirmanah apartment in Damascus.[62]

The Swiss indictment claims that on April 16, 2013, al-Jayab contacted Abed Mohammed, who at the time was staying in Jirmanah. To confirm his interest in attack planning in Europe, al-Jayab sent Abed Mohammed a cryptic message: "he works" spelled backward.[63] This detail parallels claims in the U.S. court records, which note that on the same day al-Jayab communicated with

"Individual J," who told al-Jayab that he was "also working in Jirmanah" and that he "[didn't] want anything in the world, just [for al-Jayab] to get to Syria safely and find you there … I am eager to see blood."[64] This statement raises the likely possibility that several of the unnamed co-conspirators in the U.S. court case against al-Jayab are also members of the Swiss cell.

In February 2014, one month after al-Jayab's departure from Syria, Abed Mohammed returned to Switzerland after a stint in Syria, looking for battle-ready volunteers to plan jihadi attacks in Europe. Prior to his return to Switzerland, Abed Mohammed had declared allegiance to the Islamic State. Many of his previous contacts from AQI, Ansar al-Islam, and Jabhat al-Nusra had also joined the Islamic State. Using baking analogies to refer to explosives construction, Abed Mohammed contacted his former commander in Damascus, Abu Hajer, asking him to send a "baker" with knowledge about synthesizing explosive material and fighting experience to assist in the Swiss cell's activities.[65] Abu Hajer recommended al-Jayab, who according to the Swiss documents, "belonged to Abu Hajer's faction [in Syria]." Al-Jayab was also was active in the pro-Islamic State Facebook and Skype groups administered by Abu Hajer.[66]

Ultimately, however, Swiss law enforcement interdicted the plot. Wesam al-Jbory traveled to Mersin, Turkey, from Switzerland in March 2014 to meet a contact who planned to transfer a flash drive of explosives-making instructions compiled by Abu Hajer.[67] Upon return to Switzerland, al-Jbory met Abed Mohammed and al-Obaidi at Abed Mohammed's apartment. After this meeting, Swiss police arrested the men and formally opened an investigation.[68] Undoubtedly, the arrests froze any plans for al-Jayab to travel to Switzerland to participate in the cell. They may have also set the stage for al-Jayab's prosecution in the United States.

It is unclear whether al-Jayab ever personally met the members of the Swiss cell prior to his 2012 arrival in the United States, while he fought in Syria, or during the planning stages of the attack plot being hatched in Switzerland. When news of the Swiss court proceedings referencing al-Jayab were first revealed in a U.S. court, his defense attorney was adamant that his client had never been to Switzerland but conceded that his client did have an aunt there. Interestingly, while his attorney claimed that "somebody" in a rural area of Switzerland between Bern and Zurich[b] accessed al-Jayab's email account in December 2013, he maintained that his client had no connections to anyone from the Swiss cell.[69]

During the run-up to al-Jayab's guilty plea, the American prosecutors sought to present documents from Switzerland at trial, but a judge delayed hearings on the motion.[70] Al-Jayab's guilty plea, which does not cover the allegations in the Swiss indictment, prevented the claims in the Swiss indictment from being presented to a U.S. jury. It remains to be seen if details of the Swiss case are discussed in the sentencing submission both the government and defense will submit to the court.

Two months after al-Jayab's 2016 arrest in the United States, a Swiss court found Mohammed Osamah Abed Mohammed, Wesam al-Jbory, and Mohammed al-Obaidy guilty of participating and supporting a criminal organization. They were each sentenced to approximately four years in prison.[71] After his October 2018 guilty plea, al-Jayab faces no more than 15 years in prison for his role in

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b   The town of Baden, where members of the Swiss cell lived during the commission of the attack plot, is located between Bern and Zurich.

the network.[c]

Assessment: American Jihadi Travelers, Transnational Dynamics

Al-Jayab's case highlights the role of social networks in influencing recruitment and foreign fighter mobilization. Rather than resorting to sweeping claims about "online radicalization," socio-economics, marginalization, or other factors, several in-depth examinations of recruitment suggest that the foreign fighter mobilization is more about "who you know."[72] Many reports note the geographically confined origin of those who traveled from various areas of the world to Syria and Iraq to join jihadi groups, with some (aptly) claiming that "all jihad is local."[73] This insight, however, should not come at the expense of understanding that extremist groups also represent transnational movements, and that the role of diaspora networks, migration, and digital connectivity can shape networks of jihadi recruitment. In al-Jayab's case, he was able to correspond with like-minded individuals who, despite living in several different states and countries, were able to coalesce around the shared goal of traveling to Syria to wage jihad, helping each other with finances, logistics, and know-how. At the time of al-Jayab's travel, barriers to foreign fighter travel into Syria were much lower than today (late 2018), and financial and logistical assistance from the network may have been sufficient to catalyze al-Jayab's aspirations for travel into an action plan.

Second, the flow of foreign fighters from Western countries to jihadi groups in Syria and Iraq has tapered substantially from its peak after the Islamic State's declaration of its caliphate in the summer of 2014. While jihadi groups' loss of territory in the region, especially in border areas necessary for receiving foreign fighters, is one major factor for the decline, the efforts of Western law enforcement and intelligence agencies in identifying, arresting, and prosecuting travelers and attempted travelers also proved critical.[74] The prosecution of al-Jayab reveals some of the tools that U.S. law enforcement has at its disposal to make a legal case against returning foreign fighters. Some involve intelligence collection protocols and procedures, such as FISA Section 702 and the ability to obtain search warrants for social media accounts. Others require law enforcement from several agencies—in al-Jayab's case, from FBI and USCIS—to use extensive monitoring and vetting procedures built into U.S. immigration law to full effect. Finally, international cooperation and intelligence sharing, in this case between the FBI and Swiss Federal Police, proved vital to building prosecution against foreign fighters.

The product of information sharing in this context appears to have resulted in not only the arrest of al-Jayab, but also the uncovering of a much broader network of jihadi sympathizers on three continents, some of whom were planning terrorist attacks. Besides a smattering of media reports and the Swiss documents assessed in this article, very little is known publicly about this Switzerland-based jihadi attack cell. According to Swiss police, this group appears to have made constant movements between Central Europe and the Levant, assisted two-way transit of foreign fighters between Syria, Turkey, and Europe, and was actively involved in plotting attacks in Europe at the time of its disruption. While details about this case continue to be gradually released to the public, it is a reminder of the near-constant efforts of jihadi groups to utilize recruits with access to Western countries to guide and direct attacks.   CTC

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c   Although he pleaded guilty to one count of providing material support to a terrorist organization, carrying a maximum sentence of 15 years in prison, and one count of making false statements in an international terrorism case, which adds eight years to his sentence, the plea agreement contains an unusual clause that caps the maximum sentence at 15 years. "Plea Agreement," United States of America vs. Aws Mohammed Younis al-Jayab, United States District Court for the Northern District of Illinois, 2018.

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